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"Bright Fragments Wrenched from Darkness":
Nature and Human Nature in the Poetry of Abbie Huston Evans

By JUDITH P. SAUNDERS

It would be difficult to point to a single poem by Abbie Huston Evans, out of some two hundred published during her lifetime, in which nature does not figure, directly or indirectly, as subject matter. While the human psyche, together with its complex yearnings, engrosses Evans throughout the body of her work, her consideration of such typically human concerns as love, death, and art is unusual in that she resists exploring these in social environments. Her poems situate human striving in the context of elemental processes instead, probing relationships among phenomena she presents as discrete, yet fundamentally interconnected. The physical universe is the manifestation of "conglomerate glory," that is, a composite of precisely, indeed, amazingly, differentiated forms of being ("Sunup in March" 189). Human life and experience are not to be understood as separate, or different, from the rest of nature, but rather as an integral part of "the baggage of the universe," contributing to a vast and heterogeneous coherency ("The Sycamore in Winter" 151).

Although her work earned notice and praise during her lifetime, Evans's name is far less familiar today than are those of many of her contemporaries. Due to her longevity (1881-1983), it should be noted, her period of productivity as a poet overlapped with the careers of writers ranging from H. D. to Elizabeth Bishop. She published poems in highly regarded periodicals such as Poetry, The Nation, and The New Yorker, and her books were issued by well-known commercial presses in 1928, 1938, and 1960. Collected Poems was brought out in 1970, capping a substantial oeuvre. She was in addition the recipient of significant prizes and honors, most notably the Guarantors' Prize.

from *Poetry* in 1931 and the Loines Award in 1960. Poets representing several generations publicly lauded her poems, for example, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Bogan, Richard Wilbur, Maxine Kumin. In the course of her career, Evans saw her work included in a variety of collections of poetry identified as “new” and edited by figures such as Harriet Monroe, Donald Hall, and Edward Field.

Why her reputation then failed to grow and, instead, diminished, possibly can be explained by the pervasive “sexual politics” noted by Kumin as a factor limiting the careers of women poets through the late sixties (quoted in Little 253). Yet women scholars failed to bring Evans’s work to public attention during the seventies and eighties, when major publishers began to include in their anthologies a host of women writers previously not featured in such venues. Not only was her work omitted through the nineties from anthologies of American literature and collections of English-language poetry directed toward audiences of high school and college students, it unaccountably failed to make an appearance in Gilbert and Gubar’s *Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985 and 1996). After 1979, even the smaller anthologies focusing on contemporary poets devoted no space to Evans. Her strong interest in closed forms, coupled with her predilection for oblique disclosure over confessional self-revelation, perhaps contributed to this decline in attention. Whatever the reasons for neglect of her work during a renaissance of enthusiasm for women’s writing, the appearance since 2000 of a few of her poems in college literary handbooks and, significantly, in a two-volume anthology of twentieth-century American poetry suggests that a resurgence of interest in her work may be underway. The increasing influence of New Formalist poets and critics, combined with burgeoning interest in ecocritical modes of inquiry, seems likely now to win a receptive audience for her poetry.

I. Overview of the Environment in Evans’s Poetry

Evans’s poems depict a vividly detailed natural world. They emphasize precisely rendered outdoor settings, never specifically identified by place names but recognizable on the basis of landscape and vegetation as part of northern New England. “My roots are deep in Maine, and from it I have drawn both conscious and unconscious sustenance,” she explains in one prefatory note, adding, “to me there is no substitute for such an elementary and enduring relationship with one background” (Foreword 108). She offers further biographical details never explicitly revealed in her poems, for example, that she

2. Millay wrote the introduction to Evans’s first book, *Outcrop*, and Wilbur presented the Loines award to her in 1960, offering a formal tribute to her work on that occasion. Praise from Bogan and Kumin is quoted in Little’s essay (247, 253).

3. Saul and Little both comment on the relative neglect, both popular and critical, from which Evans’s reputation has suffered, speculating about its likely causes (Saul 3; Little 253-54).

spent the bulk of her childhood and early adulthood near Camden, where her mother’s family had since the eighteenth century owned property (108; Little 249). In the poem “Hill-Born,” she affirms that her identity has formed itself in intimate conjunction with the natural environment in which she was born and raised: her “spirit” has been “shaped by these five hills and this edge of sea” (12). The sea serves as an integral feature of the landscape, most frequently in counterpoint with pastures, hills, and cliffs abutting it; small, offshore islands provide settings for some poems. The Atlantic assumes little importance for recreation or for livelihood, as almost no mention is made of swimming, boating, or fishing. It is, rather, a constant presence, the effects of its “salt-edged” air everywhere evident (“The Mountains” 5). Functioning as an “incessant-shaping” agent of powerful transformation, it is identified as a primordial source: “blood is still salt from the sea” (“Pebbles from Sister Island” 187; “From an Offshore Island” 157).

This coastal region is rural rather than wild; the poet describes herself as roaming through weedy pastures in rocky hill country. There is evidence of long-term human habitation and agriculture, for example, pasturage, cattle, grain crops, escaped fruit, garden flowers. There is no suggestion of dangerous wildlife. Except for the occasional cow, creatures larger than squirrels or woodchucks rarely are observed, the most frequent references being to small birds and to insects. Weather and astronomical phenomena are frequent topics, and numerous poems examine the inorganic world of rock and soil. In addition to the mountains, cliffs, outcrops, and sea-washed stones abounding in her poems, she writes compellingly of the subterranean world of geological pressures and shiftings: “dark workings” of “earth’s core” far beneath the “pasture green” (“The Mineral Collection” 98; “Pegmatite” 163).

Plant life, ranging from trees to lichens, receives careful attention; Evans’s familiarity with the flora of the region, both wild and cultivated, is extensive. Her poems devote no space explicitly to gardens or gardening, so that she considers flowering or fruit-bearing plants primarily in and for themselves rather than as products of human labor. She distinguishes many different varieties by name, evincing considerable knowledge of their life cycles. “The Great Bull-Thistle,” for example, follows that indigenous weed from one spring’s growth to the next, describing seasonal changes in its anatomy (61). Among trees, Evans names the locust, hazel, pine, birch, fir, scrub oak, maple, cedar, willow, ash, laurel, moosewood, poplar, hemlock, juniper, and alder. Fruits, particularly wild fruits, claim considerable notice, for example, wild apple, wild grape, huckleberry, bunchberry, chokecherry, boxberry. The list of flowering grasses and shrubs mentioned in the poems is longer still, encompassing Eurasian interlopers as well as indigenous species: lambkill, catkins, hawkweed, tansy, yarrow, blue-bell, arbutus, columbine, larkspur, fennel, lady’s slipper, sea-lavender, hardhack, wild aster, orchis, sorrel, sassafras, chicory, meadow rue, field lily, blue vetch, charlock, grass pipe, pond lily, buttercup, sweet fern, rockweed, and more. Often a reader cannot be certain whether Evans is referring to wild or cultivated varieties of a particular plant as, for instance, in the case of morning-glory, gentian, marigold, or honeysuckle.
The deliberate invoking of such botanical variety indicates knowledgeable affection for the life forms indicated. It offers, in addition, clues to the geographical location of a region the poet chooses not to specify. No state, city, town, village, or road names are mentioned, nor are those of mountain ranges, coves, bays, or other natural landmarks. Such omission effectively universalizes the poet’s relationship to the natural world. Delineating that portion of the earth known particularly to her, while rejecting the restrictiveness of mapped boundaries and names, she salutes nature in its vastness and entirety. The repudiation of labels derived from human occupation implies, moreover, that these fail to communicate the essence of a place. That essence is inherent, rather, in the composition of surface and substrata, in the distribution of flora and fauna, in the minutia of climate and topography. The poet’s relationship to her environment is detailed, intimate, and primal. She writes from the perspective of an insider, a native inhabitant, reveling in terminology that highlights individual species, geological forms, and elemental processes.

Although the environment the poems celebrate is in no way a wilderness, it is quite empty of actual human beings. Signs of human presence are generally oblique, for example, encountering cattle, readers may infer a farmer; observing a marigold or a morning glory, they may imagine a gardener. Evans sketches virtually no architectural interiors, no domestic spaces or furnishings. She hints, indeed, that she finds life “indoors” problematic and confining: “Better go outdoors now, shut the door on trouble,” she advises (“First Concerns” 23). “Care hides in house corners, but has little use / For a hummock pasture full of sun-burnt spruce” (23). The poems focus, consequently, on natural spaces and on phenomena discoverable only outside the boundaries of house and hearth. Evans likewise depicts no neighborhood community and identifies no companions on her rambles. Except for isolated encounters with rural residents and a few tributes to family, she evokes a largely depopulated world. Political and economic events, social issues and controversies, predictably find no place in her work. A reader could not guess, for instance, that the poet served as a Red Cross worker in Europe during World War I, that she completed two degrees at Radcliffe College, or that she earned her living as a teacher for over thirty years (Little 249, Saul 31). No poems are set in urban or suburban environments, and none address directly her student life in Cambridge (e.g., teachers, fellow students), her working life (e.g., colleagues, pupils), her travels, or her residence in places other than the one she celebrates as native and self-defining.5 Persistently her poetry presents the solitary self in existential communion with the multiform natural world in which it finds itself.

5. Morse claims in his brief 1979 essay that Evans’s poems “reveal insights from her long experience at the Settlement Music School and the College Settlement of Philadelphia” (50), but he offers no illustrative examples to support this assertion. Morse’s claim appears to be valid only if the term “insights” is understood in the broadest possible sense. Certainly no specific pedagogic, institutional, or collegial context provides a rhetorical framework for any poems, whether explicit or implicit.
Poems expressing ardent love or friendship—and the *Collected Poems* includes a substantial number of these—may at first glance seem to pose exceptions to Evans’s typical thematic preoccupations and rhetorical stance. Her love poetry is curiously bare of social situation, however, providing none of the specifics readers might anticipate, for example, where and when the two parties met, occasions they shared, conversations they held, reactions their relationship inspired. Details of a loved one’s identity and appearance also are missing. Focus remains on the poet-speaker’s emotions and, almost always, on the parallels she finds between human attachment and natural processes in the world outside herself. Thus even the expressions of tenderest intensity, although addressed to another human being, do not create the sense of a social universe in Evans’s poetry. The reader observes two individuals confronting each other in a context that is elemental rather than societal. Passionate connections play themselves out in the larger theater of natural forces and cycles, against a backdrop of rock, hill, sea, and shrub.

II. Nature and Human Nature

Understanding the cosmos as an intricately interconnected whole, Evans persistently acknowledges kinship among seemingly disparate realms. This kinship is based on shared origins, including the corollary that all matter is formed from common components, typically identified in her poetry as “dust” or “primeval dew” (“Jones’s Pasture” 103):

Whereof are we; we, and the red-cup moss,
The blowing tree, the boulder, and the fly
in amber under water; quick and slow
Braided in one; one indeterminate life
Riddling the dust. Show me one mote inert.

The Mineral Collection” (98)

Deliberately in these lines the poet names examples of animal, vegetable, and mineral forms, capping them with the image of a fly preserved in amber. This is a wonderful instance of an enduring conjunction, the insect enclosed and petrified in a tree’s resin uniting the three kingdoms yet preserving the distinguishing characteristics of each. Repeatedly Evans draws attention to category-defying affinities, portraying herself, for instance, as “a fleck / Of mica burning / … on a cliff’s face,” or as simply “one more of the beasts of the field” (“Face to Grass” 78; “Under Cover” 68). She declares that she was “spawned by the earth,” which is her “next of kin” (“Meadow’s Edge” 102; “Next of Kin” 14). This sense of a universal relatedness enables her to identify with a host of elemental processes, from plant pollination to glacial erosion and galactic gravitation. Captured in the wild ravages of an ocean gale, she asks: “How shall I / … not make answer, / I with my bones of rock-dust hardly knitted / And my blood still salt from the sea?” (“From an Offshore Island” 157). Not only is self firmly rooted in elements representing polar oppositions, for example, “rock” and “sea,” it extends beyond the surface of
the home planet into space: “I in this body carry / The rhythm of the moon” (“Out of the Wave” 95).

The linking of the organic with the inorganic, the human with the nonhuman, is nowhere more evident than in the ongoing processes of creation and destruction to which Evans draws repeated attention. Everything on earth (or above or beneath it) is subject to powerful integrative and disintegrative forces, engendering a seesawing movement between flux and form. “I know,” Evans states, “that time wears down the stubbomest rock / To soil again; it makes of flint a seed-bed” (“Bleak Frontiers” 133). Sun and rain similarly work on “earth’s intractable carbon” until it must “liven into leaf” (“Under Sun-Beat” 203). Wind, snow, and ice batter at that same plant life, withering each new season’s growth and at intervals demolishing even the largest trees: “able to make what’s upright creep, / Cancel direction” with “one mad fling” (“Apostate” 106). The pace of change in the inorganic realm is much slower but follows the same pattern, agents of erosion building and unbuilding whole mountain ranges:

Dwindling mountains are they on a dwindling planet,
These that look so solid, these that show so fair;
Wind and rain and frost and hail set tooth to the granite,
It wastes like smoke into air.

“The Mountains” (5)

“Interminably washing,” “granite’s grinders” polish once jagged surfaces “to velvet,” while aeons of pounding carve out whole islands “from the glass floor of the sea” (“Pebbles from Sister Island” 187). All around her, the poet observes the effects of change and dissolution, each new instance serving as further proof of a universal tendency. Watching a burning barn, she sees “annihilation getting in its work” and asks: “Hay-barn or planet—does it signify?” From star to midge, from hugest mountain to frailest shack, everything that exists is destined to “become a puff of smoke; given back, at one ... ” (“The Passing of the Hay-Barn” 119).

Each separate entity—whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, whether earthly or astral—emerges from “the vast unquiet All” into triumphant, though temporary, individuation (“Arc-Light Shadow” 39). Relatively speaking, a constellation proves no stronger than a seedpod, “the terrible whorl of the Milky Way” no less fragile than “the silky sweetness of a full-blown thistle” (“Time’s Cap-Poem” 152; “Slow Gain” 153). “Mites as we are,” we achieve identity “in the maelstrom” against the odds: “on our acorn shook from the Oak we ride out the dark” (152). In the poem “Anonymous Once,” Evans articulates her sense of good fortune simply to be alive, given “the risk of not being” that prevails:
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The chances were all against it, but out of the dark
I was singled and came:
Anonymous once, elected into life
To a form of my own, no longer flotsam of dust
Adrift on the void, become particular,
A pointed star with a number and a name.

(195)

Her words here seem to echo Whitman's when he declares that he has been "struck from the float held forever in solution" and "receiv'd identity by [his] body" except that, in contrast to Whitman's easy confidence that his existence has been specifically anticipated ("immense have been the preparations for me"), Evans expresses "trembling" amazement at her brief emergence from the anonymity of "the dark" and "the void" ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" 62, 63; "Song of Myself" 44: 1157).6

In fact, the whole spectrum of natural forms that renders the universe rife with particularity is achieved only by means of urgent counter-impulses exerted against the unceasing operations of "annihilation" ("The Passing of the Hay-Barn" 119). "On either hand," Evans declares, things strive to maintain shape and being, "centre-engrossed against disintegration" ("The Dark-Blue Morning-Glory" 110). "Not one" leaf or bird or berry "but has its urgency upon it" to become "singular": "— In deep, at the pith ... it sits, / The I, the me, the myself, of the cherry" ("To a Forgotten Dutch Painter" 113). The smallest constituent particles of matter demonstrate the never-ending struggle to achieve self-definition. Evans observes the inorganic world resisting "incipient demolition," for example, in geologic processes "too slow for any swirl to break the surface," the gradual formation of crystals and ores providing particularly remarkable evidence of "that obstinate impulsion launched / Against the opposition of the dust" ("Fact of Crystal" 191-92; "The Mineral Collection" 98). Taking place over the course of "dragging ages," such activity in the realm of supposedly inert matter illustrates with especial aptness the ubiquitous striving for identity: "these mounting shapes from formlessness arriving" at distinctly defining patterns, "their glorious axes / In at the center fixed" around "pivots of pure selfhood" ("Fact of Crystal" 191, 192). In each mineral deposit and crystalline spar, Evans observes "not-life making try at growth," its anatomical symmetry a "flung-down fact" bravely defying the forces of formlessness, "its pattern worked out to a T" (191, 192). Thus is "chaos inched back, worsted" for a brief, glorious moment, by a desire for differentiation that manifests itself even in cold stone and in subterranean regions "with none to note it" (192). Very much like sentient forms of being, tourmaline, cinnebar, and malachite are shaped from "earth's uncreated dust," the "stern-decreed geometry" of their structures successfully defying the centrifugal tendencies of a maelstrom-like All (195, 191). Rejoicing in the completed designs of these "bright fragments wrenched from darkness," Evans

6. In section 44 of "Song of Myself," Whitman goes on to emphasize his certainty that "all forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me, / Now in this spot I stand with my robust Soul" (1167-68).
triumphantly declares that here “august form stands delivered!” (“The Mineral Collection” 98; “Fact of Crystal” 192). “Here’s most diffuse most pointed, peaked, compacted, / Here’s most amorphous grappled into jewel” (192).

Unsurprisingly, she claims that human art mimics and enacts the universal quest for centered form; a poem or picture or melody represents another sort of “jewel” grappled from amorphism. The artist scrutinizes, treasures, and records the hard-won individual shapes of things. “You love the thing / Itself,” Evans asserts in a poem of praise focusing on the visual arts (“To a Forgotten Dutch Painter” 113). “In twenty ways you make me know / You dote on difference.” To observe and record distinct identity, even among “‘nigh-identical’” objects, not only honors singularity of being but also helps to preserve it from disintegration “for a while,” past the temporal boundaries of its own existence:

Though all must be whelmed under, yet on the brink
These keep a slippery foothold for a while;
Safe still your darling seed-wafers, drupes and umbels.
Your purpling gooseberry hung by a hair
Has faced down doom; doom looked twice, and went by ....
The thing loved well carries the mark upon it.
It outbeams radium. And time lets it be.

(113)

Treasuring individual forms of being, the artist rescues these from an immediate return to the oblivion that is their start- and end-point. The works of art that accomplish such acts of preservation thus forge an important refuge for human beholders, listeners, and readers. Describing the effects of a concert, Evans explains how the “crying / Together of the instruments” creates “a lighted hollow in the dark,” a “momentary shelter found / Amid on-rushing Suns” (“A Niche from the Blast [Dell Concert]” 193). The audience is conscious of “the firmament . . . around about,” feeling simultaneously “at peace” and “set free” by the music that builds a bulwark against swirling uncertainties and vacancy.

“Children of the formless,” we live “on the curve-edge of oblivion” and “in the shadow of extinction,” but even in these precarious circumstances the human spirit is capable of “relishing life, sucking the honeycomb,” through concentration on the teeming particulars of the phenomenological world (“On the Curve-Edge” 188). Working with the sounds, shapes, colors, and textures of musical, literary, or visual media, the artist celebrates resistance to the void by re-creating in symbolic designs—like “digits of a code”—the myriad forms populating the universe (“Martian Landscape” 205). In poetry, for instance, Evans writes of “consonants and vowels / Echoing and chiming, / Form and pattern honored” (“Welsh Blood” 176). The chains of parallels and antitheses created by the device of rhyme translate into human language principles governing the structures of tangible objects such as corals and crystals, flowers and insects. More abstractly, but just as decisively, words may be “wrought on . . . / As gold by goldsmiths” (176). Evans likens the “com-
PELLING” force of metaphor to the life-giving “ardors of the sun” itself: “under
the sun-beat of great metaphor / ... stony fact / ... yields up ... its locked-in
sustenance” (“Under Sun-Beat” 203). Thus she claims that art can do more
than merely transcribe or mimic “stoney fact.” By facilitating enriched discern­
ment—perception of one “fact” in terms of another—it teases from the seem­
ingly “intractable” realities around us significance ordinarily “locked-in,”
hidden from human appreciation (203).7

The artist honors form most, moreover, not by ignoring its opposite—the
chaos against which it asserts itself—but by confronting apparent “hugger­
mugger” and cosmic “havoc” boldly (“Clearing After Rain” 164; “Havoc”
182”). “Try the knife edge between two voids,” Evans urges the would-be
poet (“To a Poet Yet Unborn” 175). “Bring back some word of wordlessness
if strength enough is in you.” Conscious of “dizzying things,” the poet must
attempt with “small implacable digits” to “delimit” and “subdue” them (175).
To cherish and to create defining patterns, while remaining fully conscious
of the universal tendency toward chaos, is to achieve a brave and difficult bal­
cance: “Ride formlessness, word wordlessness. Be not aghast. Be poet” (175).

Art is a significant manifestation of human consciousness precisely because it
promotes a double awareness, an awareness on the “razor’s edge” between
“terror” and “peace,” between “threat” and “joy” (188). There is “power” to
be won in facing the void: like being emerging from non-being, or particular­
ity from amorphousness, occasional glimpses of “what’s at bottom” burst
upon us (“Deep Down It Dwells” 183). In such highly charged moments
of perception, “old puzzlements resolve themselves as if by some enchantment”
and “life assumes an outline; we have a hint to go by” (183). We recognize, if
only imperfectly (given inevitable “lapses” and “variants”), the immense
designs of nature in its entirety, the larger patterns of being to which innumer­
able individual entities contribute (“Clearing After Rain” 164). Artistic com­
positions of human making may help us to discern portions of such a complex
collective “outline.”

—And I see a poem, word by word assembled
In markings down a page flash into code,
And bring in sightings of another landscape
No eye has seen before.”

(“Martian Landscape” 205)

Like a space-age camera bringing us photographs of a distant planet, the work
of art utilizes a symbolic “code” peculiar to its medium to convey pictures of
a vast whole, from a necessarily remote perspective.

Evans evokes and interprets human emotion, too, in the context of the cos­
mic interconnectedness her poems repeatedly delineate, for the relationship
between self and nature precedes and underlies all others. In consequence of

7. The central metaphor in “Sun-Beat” may remind readers of that in “The Planet on the Table,” a poem
in which Stevens similarly compares the creative powers of nature (as epitomized by the sun) with those of the
human artist: “And his poems, although makings of his self, / Were no less makings of the sun” (8-9).
the kinship she asserts between rock and bone, between blood and sea, or between sentient and insentient phenomena, the natural world plays a meaningful role in her emotional life. Nature functions as more than a mine of validating analogies and parallels that assist her in expressing her deepest longings and apprehensions: it is in itself a source of powerful feeling. The expression of such feeling in her poetry, “though quietly controlled,” as one critic notes, is characterized by poignant intensity; frequently it “kindles … to … incandescence” (Saul 34). Evans characterizes her response to sensory immersion in her environment most often as one of heightened elation, for example, a state encompassing physical, emotional, and even metaphysical dimensions. Repeatedly she articulates profound appreciation for the multifaceted beauty and vital energy she perceives in the physical universe. To have won existence, however precarious, on this “wheeling planet,” this “inexhaustible earth,” is cause for rejoicing (“Arc-Light Shadow” 39; “The Back Pasture” 59). In poem after poem she exults in the sheer joy of being alive, “in a form of [her] own,” as part of a world crammed with countless other “mites” enjoying their brief moments of singularity (“Anonymous Once” 195; “Time’s Cap-Poem” 152).

She is nourished psychologically as well as aesthetically by the “spread table of the waves and stones”; taking in the details of a view including birds, trees, cliffs, sea, islands, and sky, she “feed[s] on beauty” (“The Spread Table” 13; see Saul 32). She finds that many of her most “fantastic needs,” including “blind bottom hungers like the urge in roots,” are met “deeply” and “passionately” by nature in its varied details, for example, a ledge “barnacled with lichen,” or “a great wave of juniper,” or “winter berries on the stone-gray bush / Beside the rock-pile” (“The Back-Road” 19). Even when “balked” or “unsatisfied” by her daily routine, she discovers that the overpowering intensity of natural colors and shapes effectively banishes all discontent (“Marigold” 30):

Clear shining orange, bottomless
And burning; nothing left to crave;
Orange to last me to the grave!
All hunger dropped away,
Peace swept me like a wave,
My heart cried, “Here’s enough!”

(30)

Such pure sensation delivered by the natural world, in this case, by a familiar garden flower, offers her exquisite fulfillment, even existential significance.

At times Evans finds herself overwhelmed by the “insupportable weight of too much,” the sheer “richness of living” (“Overborne” 48). She is “bent” and “bow[ed]” by the “splendor” of ordinary but nevertheless glorious natural phenomena: “My burden is the tassel of the willow tree / And the white sleet of beauty on the ground,” she avers (48). In the sonnet “A Prayer for Less” she announces that nature’s most seemingly trivial features can exert upon her a beauty “terrible … in its power”: “There is more beauty in this field than
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one / Should be called upon to bear,” she announces, and so she lies “shipwrecked ... in this grass,” wondering in mock apprehension what “fiercer blaze” of loveliness may at any instant appear to “slay” her (66). “Back of each individual natural object and instance, always, “hangs the suspended whole” with its unimaginably vast, composite capacity to move her (66). Nature, in all its differentiated loveliness, “stabs deep,” as she notes in a poem addressed to Emily Dickinson (“E. D.” 93). Evans allies herself with her predecessor’s exquisite sensitivity to even the humblest of life-forms, the most ordinary of natural workings, enumerating examples ranging from hawkweed and elderberries to moon-rise and tidal shifting. “Here, take them, Emily,” she urges, assuring the dead poet that nature has not lost its capacity to stimulate responses of painful intensity: “Know all that hurt you once hurts still” (94).

The consciousness of mortality provides Evans with especially urgent impetus to engage with “cut-shape, color, chime”—the huge “galaxy” of things with which we briefly share “hooded energies,” “atom fire,” and “chance of change” (“Time’s Citizen” 83; “Alive This Night” (206). “Sun and green are made precious” by our anticipation of death (“The End That Awaits” 135). The brevity of human life, together with the fear that individual identity will be “unhoused” and “dispersed” (all the “unspent force” of self to be precipitated, perhaps, along some untraceable new “trajectory”), increases the immediacy of our connectedness with other forms of being and confirms the “utter worth” of earthly existence (“For One Without Fear” 194; “Main Roads” 116). Because existence is short and accidental, furthermore, a triumph in light of “the risk of not being we ... have all run,” human attachment assumes an extra measure of preciousness (“Anonymous Once” 195). Just as the emergence of any one individual “out of the dark,” or void, is an unpredictable and even improbable event, so the coming together of any two particular persons in the same small corner of eternity is an amazing coincidence (195). When two individuals meet by means of such cosmic lottery and discover themselves to be capable, in addition, of deep mutual affection, happy coincidence is elevated to awe-inspiring occasion.

In the poem “Well Met,” Evans offers thanksgiving for one such loving intersection of lives, couching her thanks in terms of amazement: “I marvel we live / Together in time,” she declares (124). “How easy it is” to miss encountering any one specific individual “in the jungle of time,” since our separate spans of existence are “sprinkled apart like stars in the dark” (124). She cries aloud her gratitude for the chance she has enjoyed to bond with an unnamed “you” who is, she asserts, “one of the few who matter”: “Whoever else has been missed in the dark—the true, / The bright, the deep-to-be-loved—it has not been you!” (124). For all the joy she experiences in her confrontations with nonhuman forms of being, evidently, Evans is not content to respond to her environment always in solitary ecstasy. She longs for a sympathetic human companion, “a hand to catch, an ear to listen, a heart to share” (“Overborne” 48).
She likens the experience of passion itself, moreover, to a struggle between form and formlessness, between order and chaos. “Tree in Night Wind” illustrates clearly the dichotomous nature of love, the poet-speaker comparing “the stress and drive of [her] own passion” to “the surging of the tree outside” her window (158-59). Personified throughout, the tree is subjected to “one great … / heave / After another,” its wind-tossed leaves and branches depicted in terms suggesting sexual excitement. The many sounds created by wind lashing vegetation are described as internal voices expressing protest, agreement, and “afterthoughts,” building to “full-voiced crying when the stress is on / Dying out to next to nothing.” After the windstorm has reached its peak, the tree mimics the aftermath of a human erotic encounter: “the passionate gust subsiding, the spent leaves / Unclapping, hanging down.” This seeming climax is followed by another, moreover, as the tree’s “crying” (“when passion departs”) is “brought again to top cry all surging together!” Very obviously describing the tree with vocabulary drawn from the realm of human sexuality, the speaker then goes on to assert that the forces inspiring such turbulence are not altogether uncontrolled. No matter how multidirectional the wind, no matter how strong its driving force, the tree’s boughs remain firmly “tied to the trunk and governed by that tie.” “Divergent plungings” notwithstanding, and despite all “buffeting and flailing” (or “tusslings” and “yieldings”), the wind-bucked branches “find and hold a center that can rule.”

The reader is left to imagine what aspect of human love might function as the equivalent of the tree’s “central-ru[ling]” trunk (158). Clearly the poem is a celebration of passion, which despite all attendant “stress” and agitation is the expression of utmost vitality: it “bring[s] the whole … alive.” Driven to the brink of physical and emotional frenzy, or loss of control, the human lover nevertheless feels at core secure. The description of the trunk as a “tie” suggests, further, that it is chiefly the “tie” of affection linking her with another human (who is at the same time, of course, the source of “seething” response) that provides all-important “balancing” or emotional center. Erotic abandon is safe in the context of strong affection, all potential anxiety alleviated by a mutual trust that is as central and unshakeable as the trunk of a tree. Thus the spiritual and intellectual aspects of love may be supposed to provide the “thread / Of pattern never snapping” that stabilizes and gives meaning to an experience of otherwise disorienting intensity.

This understanding of human love as a simultaneously organizing and disorganizing experience is reiterated more subtly in “The Dark-Blue Morning-Glory.” Once again turning to the plant kingdom for her central metaphor, Evans identifies this time with a flower, stating that “now” she knows how it feels (110; emphasis added). In this poem, however, the experience triggering the act of empathetic identification is not explicitly named; figurative language implies a context of romantic love. Evans personifies the morning glory, “motionless” in its “velvet first-hour” of existence, “pulled sunwards; so the top stands up on its toe / In one place, steady.” The flower’s motionlessness is not caused by inertia, but rather by vibrant, poised attentiveness, as
the new blossom stretches unerringly toward the sunlight causing its petals to open. “Surely,” the speaker muses, “these blue too-quiet flowers are whirlpool-centred.” She points to the color and shape of the morning glory, comparing its overlapping blue petals to a watery vortex, a pattern of rotational movement pulling inwards so as to create an image of simultaneous motion and stillness. The effect resembles that of storm-tossed tree-boughs “tied” to their central trunk, but here the poet’s chosen image is far more unusual and intriguing. To the human speaker overwhelmed by dawning love, the “whirlpool-centred” flower represents a sensation composed equally of excitement and security, the thrill of aroused passion balanced perfectly against the assurance of devoted tenderness. Just as the flower opens its petals in response to the sun, the human speaker in the poem opens herself in response to her lover and to feelings evidently without precursor. In a state of heightened emotion, that is, figuratively “up on [her] toe” like the sun-seeking flower, she feels herself made whole, “spun to a centre” (or “into one”), no longer “torn” by “deep divisions, multiplicities”: “as single as a flower, / I stand at rest ... full-blown.”

Such achievement of a finely balanced wholeness, such completion of identity, feels very like the emergence of self out of the void. The language Evans uses in this poem to describe passionate love echoes that which she draws upon elsewhere to celebrate the miracle of having been “elected into life” (“Anonymous Once” 195). Love, too, emerges from a vortex of sorts, “spun” like a gyroscope and stabilized by the physics of its own furious rotation (175). The lover balances, poised and amazed, on a point located precisely between “multiplicities” and “one[ness],” or between “whirlpool” and “centre,” steadied in the midst of the very feelings threatening to overwhelm and dissolve the integrity of self. In an eight-line aside, occupying the approximate middle of the poem and marked by dashes, Evans underscores these larger parallels, indicating that the morning glory illustrates the striving of all forms of existence to maintain identity in the face of impending oblivion, that is, to remain “centre-engrossed against disintegration.” Each blue blossom is like an “atom,” a small “dynamo[like]” with its whirling component petals, yet at peace in the center of its own being, “with slumber at the core.”

The suggestion of continuous motion effected by the arrangement of the morning glory’s petals is, in fact, crucial to the depiction of perfect equipoise. In order to stand “steady” and “in one place,” one must remain exposed, paradoxically, to perpetual, maelstrom-like force. And this is true in love as in art—indeed, as a condition of being itself. The very atoms composing the material universe are characterized by incessant interior activity; the stability of apparently solid objects is contradicted and, simultaneously, constructed by the “dynamo[like]” energy of their continuously moving components. Thus the creation of bonds of passion, like the creation of poem, picture, or symphony, represents the ecstatic assertion of form against flux, of being against non-being. Insistently comparing phenomena from disparate realms, Evans integrates the human arena of endeavor and emotion inextricably into patterns
manifest throughout nature. Together with other important human experiences, love takes shape at “the razor’s edge” between contrary impulses everywhere at work in the universe; it, too, is “wrenched from darkness” (“On the Curve-Edge” 188; “The Mineral Collection” 98).

Works Cited