



Richard Eberhart

(1904-2005)

The Groundhog (c.1960)

In June, amid the golden fields,
I saw a groundhog laying dead.
Dead lay he; my senses shook,
And mind outshot our naked frailty.
There lowly in the vigorous summer
His form began its senseless change,
And made my senses waver dim
Seeing nature ferocious in him.
Inspecting close his maggots' might
And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick.
The fever arose, became a flame
And Vigour circumscribed the skies,
Immense energy in the sun,
And through my frame a sunless trembling.
My stick had done nor good nor harm.
Then stood I silent in the day
Watching the object, as before;
And kept my reverence for knowledge
Trying for control, to be still,
To quell the passion of the blood;
Until I had bent down on my knees
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.
And so I left; and I returned
In Autumn strict of eye, to see
The sap gone out of the groundhog,
But the bony sodden hulk remained,

But the year had lost its meaning,
And in intellectual chains
I lost both love and loathing,
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.
Another summer took the fields again
Massive and burning, full of life,
But when I chanced upon the spot
There was only a little hair left,
And bones bleaching in the sunlight
Beautiful as architecture;
I watched them like a geometer,
And cut a walking stick from a birch.
It has been three years, now.
There is no sign of the groundhog.
I stood there in the whirling summer,
My hand capped a withered heart,
And thought of China and of Greece,
Of Alexander in his tent;
Of Montaigne in his tower,
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.

ANALYSIS

“The sight of a groundhog lying dead ‘amid the golden fields’ of June triggers an outpouring of thought and emotion that shakes the walker of these fields to his depths. It is in June, the month of the longest days and the most sun, and by implication the most life, that the walker is suddenly confronted with maggots death. He realizes that he, too, will one day have to die. Now he is launched into a struggle to adjust his thinking and his feelings to this sharpened awareness of death.

Four times the walker visits the scene of death. The first time, early ‘in the vigorous summer,’ he is torn ‘Half with loathing’ at the ferocious invasion of the maggots already at work and ‘half with a strange love’ for the ‘Vigour’ (a suggestion of Deity?) and the immense energy at work in the universe and on the groundhog’s body. He pokes the groundhog with ‘an angry stick,’ thus projecting his anger, resulting from his unwillingness to accept death, onto the stick. But poking the groundhog had ‘done nor good nor harm.’ Then his ‘reverence for knowledge’--his memory that the impersonal processes of decay are preliminary to rebuilding and growth--brings some solace, some control. He prays for ‘joy in this sight of decay’ but apparently does not achieve joy as this first visit ends.

The walker returns in autumn and sees ‘The sap gone out of the groundhog.’ So, too, the original passion and fever have gone out of the walker himself. He has ‘lost both love and loathing,’ which are buried in intellectuality. Though he understands the cycle of decay and rebuilding as a scientist might, the dominant tone of this second visit is one of resentment at the dulling, with time and understanding, of the original intense reaction. The cool intellectual approach of this second visit leaves the walker still unsatisfied.

Summer returns again, and so does the walker for his third visit. Only a little hair of the groundhog is left on the spot, but the walker has enough perspective now to see that the ‘bones bleaching in the sunlight’ are ‘Beautiful as architecture.’ He is more relaxed; he cuts a stick, not an ‘angry’ stick this time but a walking stick; and the experience seems to be approaching its completion.

Suddenly there is a dramatic shift in tense (line 41) as the poem reaches its climax. On this fourth visit, three years after the first one, the groundhog is not there. No trace of him at all. The walker is confronted with vacancy, and he is left standing ‘there in the whirling summer’ with ‘a withered heart.’ He has been purged of his anger, of his scientific attitude toward death, and he is now ready to see that in the long perspective all things pass. He thinks of China and Greece, symbols of glorious civilizations now dead; of

the world conqueror, Alexander; of the philosopher, Montaigne; and of the mystic and writer, Saint Theresa--all of them dead. The poem ends, appropriately, not with scrutiny but on a note of 'wild lament.' He still does not philosophically accept death.

James M. Reid
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with Laurence Perrine

"Eberhart is concerned throughout his poetry with revealing an experience as if it were happening at that very moment and had to be set down in all its directness, unadorned complexity, and innate lyricism--or be lost. The reader is seldom allowed to believe that any poem by Eberhart is the result of passion reconsidered or emotion recollected in tranquillity; only in his later work do we find any evidence of such calm. Though a poem may ostensibly treat an experience of the past, the tense of the verb means little or nothing; it is a grudging concession to practicality, for the experience, related with the breathless fury of an immediate sensation, occurs in a timeless now--an imaginative moment and space untouched by external measurements--and has an urgency that abolishes our temporal distinctions.

This characteristic, so fundamental to Eberhart's writing, can be seen in his widely anthologized poem 'The Groundhog,' which gives the impression of a suspended present, though there are time lapses and shifts, and though everything has already happened... The discovery, departures and returns are all clearly indicated by the poet; and yet we scarcely distinguish between them because he never permits the overwhelming immediacy of the entire process of decomposition to escape our attention. We jump from one phase of decay to the next with hardly a pause; only near the end of the poem are we brought up short with the recognition of time's passage. And then it is just for an instant before the poet utters his passionate outcry of mind and heart engendered by this experience. Thus the breaks in the time sequence and the fact that the whole series of events belongs to the past are forgotten in the dramatic statement of experience in the poem. The occurrences of an Eberhart poem, however we locate them in our familiar temporal scheme, exist always in their own present tense too, the tense which is the poem's.

The rough and uneven character of Richard Eberhart's writing over the past thirty-five years, which has been so frequently remarked upon both by admirers and detractors, is the inevitable consequence of his approach to poetry and is rooted in his romantic, inspirational notion of the poetic act. Unlike Eliot, Pound, or even Dylan Thomas, he is apparently not a writer for whom exhaustive revision has much importance."

Ralph J. Mills, Jr.
Contemporary American Poetry
(Random House 1965) 9-12

Michael Hollister (2015)