

The Emperor of Ice-Cream⁵

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.⁶
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress

5. In 1933 Stevens wrote to William Rose Benét: "I think I should select from my poems as my favorite the Emperor of Ice Cream. This wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems to me to contain something of the essential gaiety of poetry; that is the reason why I like it." In a later letter to Benét, he continued: "I do not remember the circumstances under which this poem was written, unless this means the state of mind from which it came. I dislike niggling, and like letting myself go. This poem is an instance of letting myself go. . . . This represented what was in my mind at the moment, with the least possible manipulation" (*Letters*, pp. 263-64).

6. Literally, lustful milk solids. Stevens wrote, however, that "the words 'concupiscent curds' have no genealogy; they are merely expressive: at least, I hope they are expressive. They express the concupiscence of life, but, by contrast with the things in relation in the poem, they express or accentuate life's destitution, and it is this that gives them something more than a cheap lustre" (*Letters*, p. 500).

As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.⁷
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,⁸
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails⁹ once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

7. ". . . the true sense of Let be be the finale of seem is let being become the conclusion or denouement of appearing to be: in short, ice cream is an absolute good. The poem is obviously not about ice cream, but about being as distinguished from seeming to be" (*Letters*, p. 341). "Finale": the concluding section of a musical composition, often loud and full of flourishes. Also, the final end, catastrophe.

8. Plain, unfinished wood.

9. ". . . the word fantails does not mean fans, but fantail pigeons . . ." (*Letters*, p. 500).

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