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Fighting Fires with William Stafford: The Tillamook Burn

By James Armstrong

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The Tillamook Burn is an area in the Coastal Range mountains 50 miles west of Portland, where, in the dry summer of 1933, a wildfire in a logging camp raged out of control and destroyed about 5 million trees—most of them between 150 and 400 years old. The trees stood 250 feet tall and represented

“truly the best virgin stand of timber in the State of Oregon,” as one writer put it (qtd. in Wells 7). According to Gail Wells, in her study of the Burn, “Smoke from the fires rose 8 miles high. People in Yellowstone Park could see it. It darkened the skies and rained ashes and charred pine needles on towns, farms and beaches. Ash fell onto the decks of shops 500 miles at sea. Cars turned on their headlights in midmorning. Chickens roosted at noon.” (10). In the aftermath the Burn stood as a hellish landscape of charred timber. Wells says, “The Tillamook country looked like the end of the world . . . a moonscape of cinders and ash. . . a viewer could look north and south and see nothing but blackened earth and ghostly snags. It was a grievous sight” (Wells 11). And the fact that this scarred landscape kept re-igniting every 6 years worsened the Burn’s significance as an emblem of carelessness, waste and destruction.

But the Burn was not only an icon of destruction. By the mid 1950s it was also beginning to be a symbol of regeneration. After the Burn went up in flames for a third time in 1945, the State of Oregon decided to do something about the problem. In 1948 the people of Oregon passed a constitutional amendment to allow the state to issue bonds specifically to finance

the “fire-proofing” of the Burn through construction of firefighting infrastructure. More importantly, it funded the replanting of the Burn, beginning the nation’s most ambitious reforestation project. As Wells puts it,

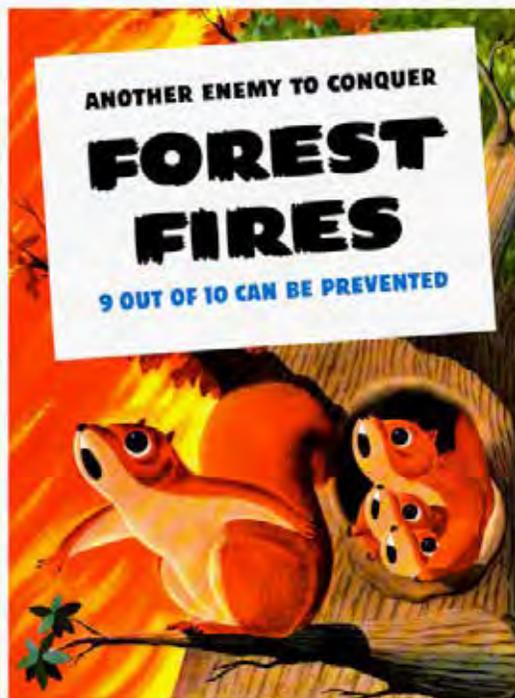
Beginning in November of 1949, forestry crews planted more than 108,000 acres of the Burn with 72 million two-year-old Douglas fir seedlings. . . . Volunteers, many of them children, planted trees. Each spring for 20 years, fleets of yellow school buses and chartered Greyhounds from Portland

and smaller towns nearby would bring grade-school and high school students out to the Burn. The children would carry hoedads—a tree planting tool—and lunch buckets. Special tracts were set aside for these plantings; most of them lie next to the Wilson River Highway just west of Forest Grove. (16).

So, for any Oregonian in 1955, the Tillamook Burn was already not just history, but a powerful legend (7). The point of the legend was that nature is subject to human control, both for good and for ill: the Tillamook Burn was caused by human negligence and would be repaired by human diligence. Wells says “The

Tillamook story stresses the heroism of the firefighting, the swift decisiveness of the reforestation experts, the people’s faith in scientific forestry, their agreement about what this created forest was for, and the social blessings that would surely flow from the carefully managed tree farm that the Tillamook was expected to become” (47). This lesson was formalized on July 18th, 1973, “when Governor Tom McCall dedicated the Burn as the new Tillamook State Forest, saying “Around us we see the result of our lending a helping hand to the natural process. . . the trees will grow, and suffer our harvest again” (17).

(cont. on p. 2)



A Forest Service poster of the post World War II era.

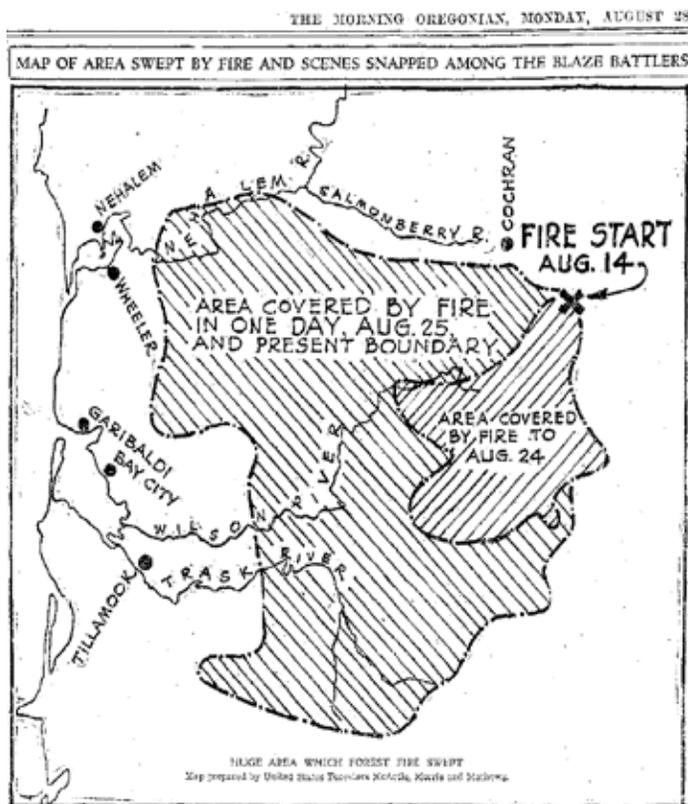
(cont. from p. 1)

When Stafford came to write his poem “The Tillamook Burn” in 1955, he was 41; he had been teaching English at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon since 1948—with a two-year hiatus when he left to get his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. Given Stafford’s deep interest in the natural world around him, it is not surprising that he would have written about the Tillamook Burn, which he often drove through on his way to teach extension classes in the city of Tillamook. But Stafford’s connection to forest fires was hardly casual: he had been a Conscientious Objector in World War II and had served four years of Civilian Public Service, during which he fought fires with the U.S. Forest Service in California.

Stafford’s poem, read in the context of the Tillamook legend, shows a very different interpretation of the Burn’s significance. In the opening stanza, Stafford makes reference to the fact that the fires began in a logging camp, but in Stafford’s version human carelessness is not the cause—in fact humans are not mentioned:

These mountains have heard God;
they burned for weeks. He spoke
in a tongue of flame from sawmill trash
and you can read His word down to the rock.

Stafford’s use of the word “God” needs to be set in context.



In Stafford’s poems, God is usually not a personal God but a personification of natural force: He is, as Judith Kitchen puts it, “simply there, unaware of opposition; indifference characterizes His attitude toward humans” (52). This is in line with Stafford’s overall view of nature; as Stephen Fesmire states, “Stafford is always aware that nature has at its disposal forces far greater than any that man could summon—earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, even so simple a thing as winter, which he often uses as a metaphor for the coming

of death or for the death state itself” (Fesmire 173). When Stafford evokes “nature’s power to destroy” in his poems, Fesmire continues, “the lesson is one of humility for mankind” as “even the strongest of man’s devices pale to a powerless insignificance” (175). In this sense, Kitchen says, God stands for the “endless, persistent otherness of things outside the human consciousness” (Kitchen 52). Another way of putting this is to say that Stafford has a fully naturalized metaphysics, in which natural process is the non-transcendent ruling force, with which one must come to terms to realize oneself as a natural being.

In this poem, of course, it is not the reader or the poet who confronts God: it is the surrounding mountains that have heard Him. Stafford’s naturalism is predicated on a strict nondualism, and his poems present landscapes in which all agents are recognized. The mountains are active—they listen—but they, too, have to submit to the ultimate reality of natural process. When God speaks, they burn. Any person venturing into the Burn can read the text of that burning, written on the rocks—much as the reader might read this poem, which is also a result of the Burn—another text telling of God’s action.

The second stanza begins a different narrative. Stafford shifts from the forest to the salmon that spawn in the rivers flowing out of the Burn:

In milky rivers the steelhead
butt upstream to spawn
and find a world with depth again,
starting from stillness and water across gray stone.

Stafford presents the steelhead as another example of natural process, and by juxtaposing this to the Burn, he invites the reader to compare the act of spawning to the destruction of the Tillamook forest. Of course, spawning signifies rebirth, regeneration. This aspect is especially clear if we look at the first manuscript version of Stafford’s poem:

where

In the milky rivers the steelhead
upstream ~~upstream to~~ toward
butt their way ~~hunting~~ pools

to lay their eggs and rebuild a world the ~~and the~~ upper
in mountain holes still
starting from water and stone ~~all over~~ again.

The seasonal return of salmon to the upper waters of the coastal rivers will “rebuild a world,” just as, we might assume, the fire regenerates seedlings in the forest, thus the regrowth of the forest starts the world “all over again.” But Stafford revises this section of the poem away from the obvious message toward something more paradoxical: in his final version, the salmon

. . . find a world with depth again,
starting from stillness and water across gray stone.

Speaking literally, salmon returning upstream find their world getting shallower: by the time they spawn there are often only partially submerged. What does Stafford mean by claiming this act is akin to finding “depth”? Salmon go upstream not just to reproduce, but also to die: the reader is asked to consider that life in this extremity is more existentially “deep” for them, as they draw nigh to both death and rebirth.

Referring to what she calls the “religious moment” in Stafford’s poetry, Kitchen says “Something exists beyond human comprehension; imagination puts us in touch with that larger possibility” (16). That imaginative connection to a larger, transhuman process Stafford often refers to as a “dream,” a “‘perpetual dream’ in which each individual participates” and which he sometimes also calls God; “Whatever else, this suggests some sense of an eternal,



sustaining force which implies as well an ultimate purpose; the dream persists even after death: “When I die, the dream is the only / thing left” (16). In Stafford’s work, death is the ultimate moment of that realization—as a person brings to death “his own sense of the ‘deep of that dream’” (53). In the shallows, at the moment of their death, the salmon have found that depth. If the first draft of the poem stressed rebirth, as most Oregonians did when thinking about the Tillamook Burn, the rewrite puts more emphasis on death, finding its homophonic relationship with “depth.” Furthermore, Stafford deletes the fecund image of salmon eggs in his first rough draft and replaces it with the inorganic elements of water and rock: “stillness and water across gray stone.” This depicts life coming out of nothingness. The result is to distance the message of the poem even farther from human agency, deeper into the inhuman. The final stanza completes this thought. What is emphasized is not the rebirth of the forest, but the rebirth of destruction.

Inland along the canyons
all night weather smokes
past the deer and the widow-makers—
trees too dead to fall till again He speaks,

Mowing the criss-cross trees and the listening peaks.
Stafford depicts fire as an inevitable part of the environment. He could not believe, as so many Portlanders did, that the Tillamook Burn had been forever “fireproofed,” and that humans were now able to control the Burn. This does not preclude the idea of rebirth—but it places it out of human hands. Fire has become a sublime force, not simply a problem of human mismanagement. Fire is God’s final word.

Stafford’s conclusion—that fire is an inevitable part of the landscape, and not a problem primarily caused by, or alleviated by, human agency—is not one he would have learned from the Forest Service. From its origin in 1905, the Forest Service was primarily a

fire-fighting institution; fire was seen as the main challenge of forest management. Stephen Pyne, in *Fire in America*, states, “firefighting tapped an enthusiasm almost moral in its fervor . . . Before it entered WW I, America went to war against fire,” building an infrastructure of “roads, trails, telephone lines, lookout towers, and ranger stations” represented a “colonization by government agents on par with that by military posts and roads” (32). The New Deal only increased this government presence, as the Civilian Conservation Corps, primarily a fire-fighting citizen army, was deployed in camps across America. In 1935 the Forest Service announced its “10 am” policy, ordering that “every fire should be suppressed by 10 am the day following its initial report” (Pyne 35). WWII increased the urgency of the “war on fire,” both because the Japanese were launching fire balloons in an attempt to set the Western forests ablaze, explicitly militarizing firefighting, and because wood was desperately needed for the war effort. When the war ended, “an obsession with controlling large fires—“mass fires,” as they became known—dominated thinking” in the Forest Service; “The old military analogy revived, and war surplus equipment allowed fire agencies to mechanize quickly” (35). By the mid-1960s, “the Forest Service had more or less achieved its original ambitions. It had a virtual monopoly over firefighting resources, over fire research, and over policy” (45).

But change was coming. A small number of foresters had always insisted that fire could be useful, and they began to make themselves known. In 1962, the Tall Timbers Research Station in Georgia commenced a series of conferences on fire ecology. In 1963, the Secretary of the Interior commissioned a report on the use of fire restoration of elk habitat in Yellowstone. The Leopold Report, named after A. Starker Leopold, son of Aldo Leopold, one of the key authors, “identified fire’s restoration as a critical task for making the parks “vignettes of Primitive America” (46). The passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act raised the profile for this recognition of fire’s ecological role, and by 1968 the National Park Service had jettisoned the 10 am policy. The Forest Service itself would be very slow to



School kids setting out to plant trees.

follow suit—but by 1969, says Pyne, significant elements of the fire community “thought fire belonged on many lands, that prescribed burning was useful and necessary, and that forestry was inadequate to the task. The cost of fire exclusion had grown too great” (46).

(cont. on p. 4)

(cont. from p. 3)

In the Pacific Northwest, this would create a new understanding of the Tillamook Burn. According to Wells, “Douglas fir does not grow well in shade—its own or that of any other tree species—and it germinates best on a duff-free, mineral-soil surface. . . .” Researchers began to conclude that “Natural large, periodic fires thus set the stage for the vast, even-aged Douglas fir forests that the early European explorers and settlers found when they got there” (57). To the people of Tillamook “Fire represents the antagonist in the Tillamook legend, the adversary over which human effort and skill finally won a great victory” (58). But ecologists soon had to conclude that “The 1933 fire was not an aberration, but a continuation in a long-standing, though unpredictable, pattern of disturbance.” (58). Humans may have touched off the fires of 1933, but they didn’t cause them. (60)

How was it that Stafford was capable of this insight in 1955?

One obvious response was that he was a pacifist. If the aim of the pacifist is to refuse to participate in war in any form, Stafford clearly would be skeptical of a war on fire. When he entered Civilian Public Service as a CO in 1942, he was a conscript in a firefighting army, living in barracks and subject to quasi-military discipline, much as CCC workers had been. His supervisors were rangers in an organization which for 50 years had treated fire-fighting as the “moral equivalent of war,” and who fully internalized the swaggering, aggressive masculinity associated with soldiers and frontiersmen. In *Down In My Heart* Stafford describes the hostility of the rangers to the C.O.s they were in charge of; he states “I myself overheard one man, . . . say in the ranger station, ‘I wish I was superintendent of that camp; I’d line ‘em up and uh-uh-uh’—he made the sound of a machine gun” (28). Stafford’s pacifism put him in a unique position to question how this deeply entrenched aggression might warp Forest Service policy.

A second point might be that Stafford’s pacifism itself sprang from his naturalism. The lesson he seems to have taken from his thorough acceptance of himself as a natural being was one of intellectual fallibilism. Human fantasies of control over nature, of transcendence over death, of rationalism and reductionism, were just that. For the most part, as Peter Stitt put it, “the position of mankind generally in the modern world in Stafford’s poems is probably best expressed by the title of one of his books—we are *Traveling Through the Dark*, . . . perpetually and ignorantly *In Medias Res*, as one section of that book is subtitled.” (173). If we so little understand the world, making war on it, or on each other, will be unlikely to have the results we hope.

Stephen Pyne, in the opening chapter of *Fire in America*, makes the astounding point that fire is profoundly biological: fire needs oxygen, and organic matter, to exist. Chemically speaking, fire “undoes what photosynthesis binds together.” It is coexistent with life. The modern myth of fire is Promethean: fire is the great tool which we control. But we forget that fire was stolen from the gods; fire can expose our hubris, and our ignorance. Beneath our human stories lie the prehuman—and perhaps posthuman-- stories. I leave you with the last lines of Stafford’s poem “Bi-Focal”:

As fire burns the leaf
and out of the green appears
the vein in the center line
and the legend veins under there,

So the world happens twice—
once what we see it as;
second it legends itself
deep, the way it is.

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Beyond the John Haines Place

A traveler we met in that cold
said over and over one word:
“Fire, fire, fire, fire.”

Back of the traveler we saw
land so still it glowed ---
the suave snow combed forever.

In the traveler’s eyes we saw
fear that the wind had left.
We offered what we had --- food, religion.

To the sea, to the sky, to the land,
the traveler bowed in turn,
then bore away his precious treasure:

“Fire, fire, fire, fire.”

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Editor’s Note: This poem appeared in *Open Places* 24, Fall/Winter 1977, and has never been printed in any Stafford collection.

Counting for the Apparition of William Stafford

One

On evening news the handstanding bridegroom
has flipped from the ferryboat's railing
into the realm of wounded manatees
and never surfaced, the panicked cries
of the wedding guests unheard
inside the river's gloom,
down where *the disappeared*
hold their breath for the count of ten,
and then do their lives over again.

Two

The television counts to itself
all night in the lobby I pass through
on my way to meet the shade
of William Stafford, lingering
by a tree-lined city creek.
Leaves swish past our shoes.
The stream where he appears
has come through the forty year
underground coal mine fires,
from the fractured aquifers
of Kansas, past falling songbirds.

Three

The acreage of logged forests,
the declining tally of barn-door skates
tangled in gill nets, the shrinking number
of tiger preserves, the total of rhino horns
in a mound man-high, the sum of kestrels
killed in the spill, the dwindling
leatherback turtle census, the count
of salmon ascending the ladder, the blur
of animal icons spun in a slot machine.

Four

From a storm of quarks
beside me at the urinals
manifests a self-effacing man
with mild, brown eyes
and perfect poetic pitch
who hums a tune to himself.

I would love to be lulled but
have to look up the monk
whose penance was to inscribe
Eleven Deadly Sins on the heads

of seven dozen pins.
I must click the link to the Black Sox
who threw the World Series
for a shoebox full of crisp bills.

Must stare at the stream of celebrities
grinning on screen, share in the pulse
of a nation of shamechasers,
become one of the numberless motes
of cosmic and commercial dust
exposed by the searchlight
for the used car sale.

Something in William's humming
brings back my dream—
an Irish elk was pleading in Gaelic.

Five

William Stafford's image
among the Douglas firs
implies with a glance
perhaps I should count
falling leaves, or note
propeller scars on manatees,
or travel the aural labyrinth
of a beached porpoise.
Of his deer who died of headlights
or his bomb test lizard
that gripped the quaking desert
what more can be recounted?

Stafford's shade declines to say
whether I should be clicking
on my abacus of grief
the number of butterflies
in an acre of torched rainforest,
or reckoning desperation
in the eyes of the orangutan.
When I ask whether I should be naming
the masks of avarice
or counting whooping cranes,
William's apparition
gives a wry smile.

DONALD LEVERING

Stafford: In Production

By Ginger K. Hintz

We had just pulled off a deserted I-90W to take refuge from a thunderstorm. I had miscalculated its distance across that endless prairie horizon. We waited out the storm in an empty parking lot in Blue Earth, Minnesota. Bordered by an iconic 55-ft Jolly Green Giant statue and a gas station that sold cheap pizza and cold beer, you read William Stafford's "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" to me. Rain poured hard and thick from a dark sky.

I still remember the exquisite detail of how my breath, in concert with yours, expanded into one timeless moment. This specific memory does not have a year attached without much difficulty (late 1990s is close) nor can I remember the time of day it occurred. I do know that hearing "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" was the first time I experienced the poetic affect of William Stafford.

That detour, which probably lasted no longer than an hour before we got back on the Interstate, forms the shadowed edges of my poetics inquiry of William Stafford.

Last October, two decades after that thunderstorm, I spent nearly 22 hours at the William Stafford Archives. I structured this poetics inquiry similar to my first where I explored how Audre Lorde creatively bridged racial and gender differences by teaching poetry and organizing readings in a 1984 militarized West Berlin.¹ The Audre Lorde Archive, a joint project of the University Archive of the Free University of Berlin and the John F. Kennedy Institute, is organized around Dagmar Schultz & Ika Hügel-Marshall's documentary, *Audre Lorde - The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992*. In the film, Lorde is credited for catalyzing the Afro-German movement and expanding the edges of what we now call intersectional feminism.

I study poetics – the relationship between poetry's affect on how we see and relate to others through the intersecting lenses of politics, culture/nature, and identity – because this fragile sequence (to borrow a phrase from "A Ritual to Read To Each Other") is a sublime response to carving out a creative life. Using a poetics inquiry method allows me to wander curiously, without predetermined outcomes, into how a poet weaves their writing practice into an embodied habit. A habit that can also be described as creative integrity.

I spent four days at the William Stafford Archives to experience *how* Stafford's daily writings cleaved to his ethics of honoring a creative spirit.

I believe the deep creative integrity found in Stafford's teaching and writing is a result of an affect of attention, an embodied identification with the smallest moments of conscious awareness and activated perception. Applying affect theory is one attempt to describe what being witness to Stafford's practice of daily writing felt like. "Affect's contribution to the empirical unfolds as an aesthetic or art of dosages: experiment and experience. Feel the angles and rhythms at the interface of bodies and worlds."²

Or as Stafford wrote on 23 July 1975: "If all eyes close, the world will disappear. We call it back; we find it with our tongues."³

My initial dive into Stafford's daily writings were based on family and friend's requests that correlated to their dates of birth and the year my mother turned 20 (the year before I was born). Other years were chosen for different, but equally significant, connections: the year Audre Lorde taught poetry in Berlin¹ (1984), Stafford's death (1993), and first archived year of writings (1950).

Nearly every page of Stafford's daily writings was handwritten, slanted cursive in black pen—most during early morning hours—and marked by date, month, and year. Many captured a dream, or a series of them. Tigers were noticed as early as 1951. His repetition was seductive. A rhythm visualized into meditative language that demonstrated "...all living things are afraid (20 June 1975)" and a steady truth that "your hope keeps you awake (20 May 1975)."

In his daily writing, I noticed quiet marks of frustration were phrased as questions and often expressed in his dream notes:

19 February 1951: "Making a decision around here is like swimming in molasses."

21 June 1975: "The days go by. Hearts do not change."

27 May 1983: "To work at something you no longer believe in, and then to succeed – that's the real bitterness. I dreamed this sentence just before waking."

13 January 1984: "A dream: I was growing feathers. They were like arrows."

28 March 1984: "Let my rage find its animal."

12 May 1993: "How does one kindly lean away?"

I could see the echo of Stafford's decisions to begin an idea and when that idea came to an end: "At the speed of living – real time – a cloud is soft. (13 December 1975) His politic felt similar to what I had learned about Lorde's poetics practice, what she called a "poet's way." It also followed what I knew from integrating Stafford's methods from *You Must Revise Your Life* and *Writing the Australian Crawl* in my own writing practice. This curation of thought felt similar as knowing the pace of my own breath.

I witnessed Stafford's anticipation as he wrote about wanting snow in August, finding silence in seasonal light, and the importance of listening to shadows.

I recognized a devotion to that particular somatic pleasure derived from the physical act of writing. "Sometimes my hand will open, because of a thought that comes." (19 February 1983) Both poetics inquiries of Stafford and Lorde explore mutual desire within the temporal space of a poem. That physical sense identified and translated through bodies – between reader and poet (and curious independent scholar). As a distinct location, the body is often overlooked as its own landscape where scripts of justice—and their lack—concentrate.

In "Thinking For Berky," Stafford moves the embodied reader towards possibility:

We live in an occupied country, misunderstood;
justice will take us millions of intricate moves.

On my final day at the archive, I focused my time on exploring how Stafford's personal correspondence made visible his work ethic. His correspondence was prolific and with a swath of individuals so wide I had to pick a direction to move towards.

I narrowed my attention by looking for poets I was most curious about in relationship to Stafford: Caroline Kizer, Denise Levertov, Ursula K. Le Guin, Adrienne Rich, Margaret Atwood, Louise Glück. Typed pages and telegraphed replies wove into threads about weather anchored to landscapes I've been fortunate enough to call home: Ohio, South Dakota, the Pacific Northwest. There were many strategic discussions about how to move the poetry establishment away from authors "already on the Eastern Seaboard Grants and Gravy Train." (Carolyn Kizer, 1967) In these echoing conversations, Stafford made a living as a poet.

In between rejection letters, requests to judge submissions, and solicitations for travel reimbursements, I discovered love letters from his wife Dorothy – even a handmade Valentine. I found Stafford's well-worn paths through the mundane activities of financially supporting a creative life.

Stafford made countless references to "convergence" when time and place facilitated adding another leg of travel and the inevitable "swirl" of being overcommitted. He often admitted his "chores" at home needed to be done before committing to more readings, teaching workshops, and advising.

Stafford was generous in sharing the stage. In a letter dated 29 March 1971, he responds to the poet Raymond Patterson about a poetry festival. Stafford suggests June Jordan fill the role and calls attention to "overlooking excellence in the pursuit of some currently classroom-linked reputations."

He even took time to respond to an 11th grader in Montana on the tension of science and the poetics of a deer and fawn's death in his infamous poem "Traveling through the Dark."

It is an uncommon privilege to spend one's earned vacation days at an archive whose weekday hours are the heart of an average working day, 9:30-3:00pm. The William Stafford Archives is a treasure of evidence to see exactly how Stafford spent his life embodying ideas beyond dominance and competition. I recognized the parade of our mutual lives.

It is these anchors of time and work that have reminded that I know only what brought me to today: a poem, a ritual, that has not broken the line.

Notes

¹ See <https://cacheculture.com/poetics-inquiry-audre-lorde-berlin/> for more information

² Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J., editors. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010.

³ From the daily writings of William Stafford. ([William Stafford Archives](http://www.williamstafford.org/), Estate of William Stafford)

⁴ See <https://cacheculture.com/poetics-inquiry-audre-lorde-berlin/> for transcripts of Lorde teaching the sessions "The Poet as Outsider" and "Black Women Poetry".

Choreographer

*To be a mountain you have to climb alone
and accept all that rain and snow
If a forest*

grows, you care;

--William Stafford ("Silver Star")

To be a pond, you must be immodest as a mirror.
You must effortlessly reflect all that is above you
and beside you. You reveal without opinion
while being pelted with stones and
small shiny round things
heavy with hope.

The humans will stare at you longingly
with unfinished visions. They will ask you
for direction and completion
in hushed tones. They will
ask you for
clarity in love.

Of course, you are zen.
Your answers are unclear
and so quiet.
They will hardly hear you.
But still they will adore you.

You are a pond.
You are always polite.
And like wood or stone, your hard brothers
you only suggest. You will
make them assume.

To be a pond, you will gorge on rain.
You will ripple and glint.
You will cool the rocks and
cradle the leaves and feathers as they
float by to die.

This is your life.
If you are lucky, people will clap
adoring your soft lapping.

LEANNE GRABEL

Seeds from a Seminar

By Tim Barnes

Every few years, readers of this publication will know, Dr. James Armstrong of Winona State University in Minnesota along the Mississippi River teaches an upper division seminar, “William Stafford and American Poetry.” As readers also know, he has sent scholarship from that class this way, two examples of which have appeared on these pages (see issues 21.1 & 21.2). Other essays were considered in these same issues.

In his piece in FWSJ&NL 21.2, “Teaching a Seminar on William Stafford,” Professor Armstrong tells us he thinks William Stafford’s life and writing can shed a particularly illuminating light on “the arc of twentieth century poetry from the waning of High Modernism to the rise of Postmodernism” and query as well the role of the poet in America, the relationship of poetry to politics, and the components of poetic fame and a poetic career. Stafford is an especially apt poet for this because he was, Armstrong notes, “at once at the center and the periphery of American poetry.” Armstrong also, we find, tells his students that Stafford has not garnered the scholarly attention his contribution to American poetry would merit, in contrast to his contemporary Robert Lowell, and that their work has a chance of being “primary scholarly work.” In service of this, he asks them to do two presentations and two formal papers. For a more complete sense of his expectations, please return to Armstrong’s piece.

Last year, Armstrong sent along six essays from the most recent seminar. I would like to consider those essays now because I think there are insights and perceptions of Stafford’s poetry that contribute to discerning its dimensions and importance. The list of sources Armstrong makes available to these young scholars is broad and deep (see list below) and they used it to explore creatively and thoughtfully. The essays discussed here seem to circle around the way Stafford works with time, its dimensions and cycles and depths.

Daniel Duquette’s essay, “Remembering the World: Sensing Time in the Poetry of William Stafford,” begins with Judith Kitchen’s observation that for Stafford time is cyclical and layered, reminding her of Henri Bergson’s sense of the “inner duration” of time as it lives in the memory. Duquette goes on to quote from an interview with Stafford in Jonathan Holden’s *The Mark to Turn* in which Stafford says, “For me, the past and the present and in fact to make a claim, the future, all seem simultaneous.” The way Stafford does this in his poetry, Duquette tells us, is through the senses—sound, sight, touch. He offers part of “Touches” as an illustrative example:

There are stones too quiet for these days,
old ones that belong in the earlier mountains.
You put a hand out in the dark of a cave and
the wall waits for your fingers. Cold, that stone
tells you all of the years that passed without knowing.

Duquette calls this “the interaction of the senses with elemental time.” Elemental time is the simultaneous, layered, cyclical time that Stafford is so good at evoking by deepening through language the reach and depth of sensory images.

With sight, the visible world, Duquette tells us that Stafford sets up “a series of binaries that enable him to transcend the visible,”

often employing the binaries of “light” and “dark.” In a blog post about an advanced poetry class she recently offered, Denise Low writes that Stafford “can write about 2, 3, 4 time frames in a single poem.” Duquette presents “Meditation” as a case in point:

Animals full of light
walk through the forest
toward someone aiming a gun
loaded with darkness.

That’s the world: God
holding still
letting it happen again,
and again and again.

Here we see the continuous present—now (animals walk toward someone aiming), time frozen as forever (God holding still), and cyclical, layered time (it happening again and again). Duquette is onto something important about Stafford’s work. Stafford senses what is called “deep time,” geologic time, the vast arc of non-human history that formed this world into the present tense. *The Ecotopian Lexicon*, a book I discovered at the ASLE conference, has an entry entitled “Plant Time,” which “honors the difference between human time and vegetal temporalities...the slower, cyclical time-lives that our vegetal kin inhabit.” This is a concept I believe Stafford intuited.

We see Sajda Omar reflect on this intuition of Stafford’s, the depth of binary, cyclical relationships, in the essay “Our Streets, Her Cancer: An Analysis of ‘Bess’ by William Stafford.” Omar tells us that “the symbiotic relationship of life and death” meet in Bess as Stafford describes the last year of her life. The polarities join in her and embody an eternal cycle, revealing a difficult truth—death is alive in us, a cancer is a growth, a deadly flourishing.

We find Morghan Lemmenes’ essay “William Stafford’s ‘Holding the Sky’: A New Critical Analysis” making a similar observation about how Stafford slips between past and future polarities. And in “Holding the Sky,” between space and time: “We were traveling between a mountain and Thursday.” These kinds of slippages have, ironically and figuratively, the effect of connecting disparate things, making for surprise and insight, even epiphany, a goal of poetic metaphor.

Armstrong asks his students to go to the Stafford Archives website and look at Stafford’s drafts, which are, as you may know, available for his first two books: *West of Your City* and *Traveling through the Dark*. By going to “Holding the Sky” from the latter, Lemmenes found an example of a revision that shows what an effective reviser Stafford was. He changes the line from “Against those dark mountains it all wavered” to “Those dark mountains have never wavered.” In all fairness, a scratch mark makes it hard to see if “it all” is what was erased but making the mountain unwavering instead of an “it” or and “I” works with a sense of deep time, deepening the poem, and seem consonant with Stafford’s vision.

“The Philosophy of ‘Maybe’: William Stafford and the Hypothetical,” also by Sajda Omar, finds a parallel point about time to explore Stafford’s “mysticism of possibility.” This mysticism connected to how Stafford “entangles the concrete with the hypothetical” with his frequent use of the word *maybe* teaches his

**Stafford “can
write about
2, 3, 4 time
frames in a
single poem.”**

readers “to understand the nature of the world, that the present is happening at all times and the present opens itself up to many different things.” “Maybe,” Omar says, “. . .the world finds ways to speak to us, to communicate its own selfhood with us through a bird’s call,” as in “Our Way Those Days Before These Days”:

And sometime if tomorrow comes maybe a bird
will call through the woods again and it will be
autumn, with blue and clouds, a breeze from the ocean
where dreamers go forth looking for selfhood.

Omar sees Stafford’s use of maybe as part of his asking “What if the world is saying something? What if the world is offering new possibilities? Maybe the world is more than we know?” This reminds me of Stafford’s aphorism, “About the pessimists: how can they know so much?” Maybe the world *is* trying to speak. Any self-respecting animal would have to at least say “maybe” and cock an ear.

And if it was speaking, what might be its language? Arich Herrmann, in “An Examination of Immanentism in William Stafford’s Work as an Ontological Model for Navigating an Individualist and Modernist World,” tells us that “a common theme in William Stafford’s work is human consciousness adapting to the models provided by natural landscapes.” The way this language is learned, grasped, intuited, is through what Herrmann call prehension, “a break away from rationalism and empiricism,” which involves the “connection between oneself, [the] body, and the earth attained through touch and listening.”¹ We are back to those vital aspects of Stafford’s sensibility, touch and listening. Touch, as we know from previously discussed essays, is, Herrmann tells us again, “A conduit for direct perception of the world” and through prehension, provides “a model of thought derived from the world’s agency.” That agency is linked to immanentism, “the idea that the earth and everything in it is alive and interconnected.” The earth, then, is an “ontological template.” Ontology is the study of the nature of being and a template is a guide, a model, a map. Herrmann suggests that Stafford’s poetry leads us, through seeing the immanent nature of the world of the earth’s being as a guide, to the recognition of the interdependence of all things.

Herrmann goes a step further, claiming that this recognition, this epiphany, posits an alternative to individualism and Modernism, which has through technology, globalism, and though he doesn’t use the words, consumer capitalism, alienated us from our true selves. Those of us who know how good it feels to be touched by authentic meaning and to touch through time other ways of being appreciate the help of these students in exploring and elaborating Stafford’s understandings. Their overlapping observations on Stafford’s complex and sensory awareness of time truly expands and extends our evaluation of his power as a poet.

¹ **Editor’s Note:** In my essay, “The Immanent Stafford,” (21.2) which looks at a set of essays from a previous Stafford seminar, I cover similar territory as Herrmann. However, Herrmann’s use of “Ways to Live” and his originality of thought and expression make that fact secondary.



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The American Teenager is Unstuck in Time (Don’t Know Much About History)

The student reading a William Stafford poem mistakes the 1930’s for The Civil War in America—when, you know, there were electric elevators. The first impulse, if only inside of a thought bubble, is to make fun, but the second, more reflective response is a deep sadness. The kid is unstuck in time and unstuck in culture, has no idea when the Civil War took place, probably believes the elevator man in Stafford’s poem was a slave, and countless other pieces missing altogether, the result of more days of school missed than attended, and the ones attended, for her, ill suited, and who knows what else in her life and the lives of her family prevented her from learning the most basic fundamentals of American history. I don’t hold it against her. Instead, I am angry about the circumstances that lead to this kind of ignorance, feel that she has been cheated in some significant and grievous way against which I am totally ill prepared and unsupported to do meaningful battle in her defense.

MICHAEL JARMER

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W.S. Merwin (1927-2019)

by Tim Barnes

W.S. (William Stanley) Merwin, FWS national advisor and preeminent American poet, died on March fifteenth of this year at his home near Haiku-Pauwela, Hawaii. Merwin's poems were a marvelous and numinous tribute to our covenant with the natural world and the piercing evanescence of life. Like Stafford, he was a poet laureate of the United States and winner of the National Book Award. Merwin, moreover, was our national laureate twice and won two Pulitzers. They both won many awards, further listing of which I will spare you. Like Stafford, as well, he was a conscientious objector, though he realized it only after he joined the navy at seventeen during World War II, subsequently spending nearly a year in a psychiatric ward at a Boston naval hospital. Unlike Stafford, success came early when he won the Yale Younger Poets Prize (judged by W.H. Auden) for his first collection, *A Mask for Janus* (1952). Over the years he published over twenty books of poetry and nearly as many of translation. *Carrier of Ladders* won the 1971 Pulitzer for poetry and he donated the prize money to the Vietnam War draft resistance movement.

After living in London and the south of France, Merwin moved to Hawaii in 1976 to study Buddhism with the Zen master Robert Aitken. There he restored a former pineapple plantation with hundreds of species of palm trees and lived in what one writer called "blissful near solitude" with his third wife Paula Schwartz (who died in 2017), "refusing to answer the telephone." In *Feeling at Home*, Dorothy remembers that in their early lives together, when they moved frequently, she and Bill alternated the decision whether to have a telephone. When it was his turn, Bill declined.

Though they did not know each other well and their correspondence is minimal, they did intersect. They appear to have met at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)



conference in Houston, Texas, in 1966. Stafford coordinated the "Houston Festival of Contemporary Poetry" and was responsible for inviting Robert Bly, Donald Hall, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Carolyn Kizer, Galway Kinnell, Merwin, and some other important American poets to read. A couple of controversies arose,

one having to do with the responsibility of poets to address the war in Vietnam, and another revolving around the importance of teaching poetry in the schools. Merwin's advice was "Don't teach it unless you like it," a position Stafford fully supported. [note: info from Loretta Johnson's unpublished manuscript, *Rivers of Ink: A Biography of William Stafford*].

Stafford's famous picture of Carolyn Kizer flirting with Merwin (from which the picture of Merwin above, who is looking directly at Stafford, is cropped) was taken in Houston. Stafford sent him that photo and Merwin responded in a letter dated the eighth of January 1967 and sent from the Dordogne village of Loubressac in southern

France. In it he writes:

I've been reading over *The Rescued Year* since I got back. You're not remotely like anyone else, and among other things I come away from poem after poem with a feeling of gratitude. My own feelings about our country (in any sense) are, for one thing and to put it at its least, so tangled—your poems seem to confirm in me something that's mine—and I'm not talking now about writing, as I'm sure you're aware.

I read this as a declaration of admiration and shared political sensibilities but not of, as anyone who knows the punctuationless later poetry of Merwin, a shared poetics.

Their paths crossed, mostly in print, in some interesting ways. In 1983 Paleamon Press, headed by editor, publisher, and translator Stuart Wright of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, published a portfolio of broadsides, *Northern Lights*, by twenty prominent American poets, Merwin and Stafford among them. Others included Mark Strand, John Ciardi, James Merrill, and Howard Moss. Stafford's poem was "Arrival," which appears in *Oregon Message*. Merwin's was "Berryman," a tribute to the inspired teacher and anguishingly brilliant poet's response to a young student's question:

I asked him how can you ever be sure
that what you write is really
any good at all he said you can't

you can't you can never be sure
you die without knowing
whether anything you write was any good
if you have to be sure don't write

They found themselves together again in print in a remarkable book (discussed in 20.1 of this publication) *Ghazals of Ghalib*, edited by Aijaz Ahmad. Ahmad provided literal translations and commentary, and seven poets, Adrienne Rich, Mark Strand, David Ray, Thomas Fitzsimmons, William Hunt, Merwin and Stafford, took them into finished translations. Stafford did fifteen, Merwin eighteen.

After Stafford's death in 1993, Merwin brings them together three more times. First in an anthology he edited, the beautiful *Lament for the Makers: A Memorial Anthology (Counterpoint, 1996)* Here, with a photo, brief biography, and one poem, Merwin salutes the work of twenty three poets who died during his lifetime, from Dylan Thomas and Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, through Sylvia Plath and Theodore Roethke, to Elizabeth Bishop and James Wright, Stafford among them. In Stafford's case, it's "At the Bomb Testing Site." The anthology opens with a long poem by Merwin, "Lament for the Makers," modeled after Scottish poet William Dunbar's sixteenth century poem, "Lament for the Makaris" (c. 1505), a poem written in quatrains, each of which ends in the refrain, "Timor mortis conturbant me" (How the fear of death dismays me) and mentions Chaucer and John Gower, and a number of other poets whose work is either obscure or lost. Merwin's quatrain to Stafford goes like this:

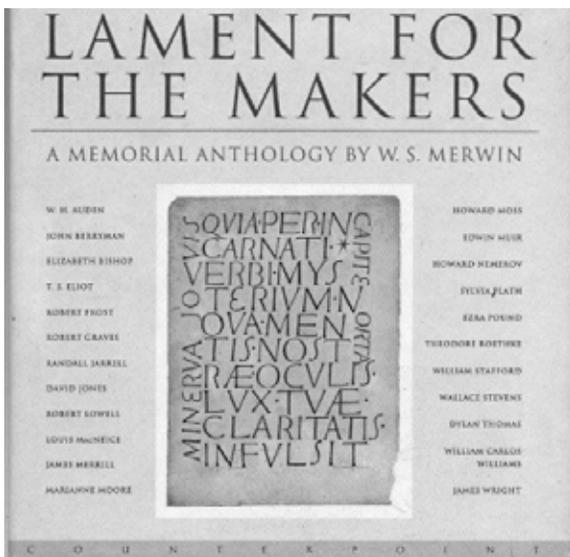
Stafford watched hand catch the light
seeing that it was time to write
a memento of their story
signed and is a plain before me

Not long after that he writes on the back cover of *The Way It Is*, "I think his work as a whole will go on surprising us, growing as we

recognize it, bearing witness in plain language to the holiness of the heart's affections....” Here, I think, Merwin expresses why FWS still exists. There are surprises still to be recognized in Stafford’s work, arising from what he cared for, wholeness, integrity, connection, that have the spirit of holiness in them.

Perhaps this is why in 2001 in the *American Poetry Review* Merwin selected “Earth Dweller” to be one of the five poems in “Fore an Undersea Library” that would be placed on a Trident nuclear submarine, to be available to those to whom the fate of humanity on earth might befall. The wonder of being alive in this world is deeply and richly embedded in that poem and Merwin knew it, felt it because of a sensibility they shared. Go back to issue 6.3 of this publication and read what Patty and Vince Wixon wrote about the *APR* essay or to the FWS Poetry Month reprint that came out soon after. Or read “Earth Dweller” again and think of those true friends to poetry and the earth, William Stafford and W.S. Merwin.

The two were brought together a fourth time by filmmaker Haydn Reiss in his 2009 film *Every War Has Two Losers: A Poet's Meditation on Peace*. As the film closes, Merwin reads quite beautifully the first and last stanzas of “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” (Maxine Hong Kingston, Robert Bly, and Naomi Shihab Nye say the middle stanzas) and finishing goes on to speak of the implication of the line, “For it is important that awake people be awake.” He tells a story of the Buddha being asked by Mara, the goddess of death, who he thinks he is, God? an angel? a saint? No, the Buddha responds, awake. He doesn’t say, by the way, woke. Merwin and Stafford shared an essential and sustaining wakefulness and left it for us.



Editor’s Note: The painted inscription on the cover of *Lament for the Makers* is by David Jones, poet and essayist, painter and draughtsman, whose poem, “The Tutelar of the Place,” is the second longest selection in the anthology, exceeded only by T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding.” Jones’ High Modernist poems were praised by Eliot, Yeats, and Auden. He served as an infantryman in World War I and his poetry was influenced by that, Welsh mythology, and the Bible. The horizontal words read in English, “For the mystery of the word made flesh the light of thy brightness has shone anew in the eyes of our mind.” The vertical words translate, “Minerva has sprung from the head of Jove.” The phrase is from a mass from which they were disallowed in the nineteen fifties. Jones lamented this because they “provided a liturgical link between the World made Flesh in the stable and what is made present at the mass.” My modest research tells me Jones’ reputation has had a renaissance in the last few years.

For the Anniversary of My Death

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what

W.S. MERWIN

Place

On the last day of the world
I would want to plant a tree

what for
not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit
is not the one that was planted

I want the tree that stands
in the earth for the first time

with the sun already
going down

and the water
touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead
and the clouds passing

one by one
over its leaves

W.S. MERWIN

FWS at AWP and ASLE

By Tim Barnes

This year, in the interest of William Stafford's legacy, the value of his vision, the worth of his way, the FWS attended two conferences, AWP, the annual Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference, the largest writing conference in North America, held at the Portland Convention Center, March 27th-30th, and, ASLE, The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment conference, a biennial event, held at the University of California Campus at Davis on June 26th-30th.

Given the stature of the AWP conference and its location in Portland, the FWS felt it vital to be involved in some way, booking a table for the event early on. This editor was also involved, along with several others, James Armstrong, Leslie Ullman, Fred Marchant, and Abayo Aminishuan, in proposing a panel entitled "William Stafford and the Poetics of Community, An Appreciation," which was not accepted. Only a third of proposed panels are, but it was



PHOTO BY LIKA KUZNIK

The main floor of the 2019 AWP Conference in Portland.

disappointing nevertheless, for obvious reasons. There was also talk of an off-site event, something very popular at the AWP, but funding became problematic. And so we had a table, T6077, among the over eight hundred tables (see photos) at the bookfair. There were over two thousand presenters and five hundred and fifty different events at the overall conference. The keynote speaker was Colson Whitehead, winner of the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for *The Underground Railroad*. The latest issue of *The Writer's Chronicle*, the Association of Writing Programs & Writing Programs journal, features, "I Have Been on a Fried Chicken Journey," a thoughtful, amusing talk that blends culinary creativity and the writer's craft. The list of other literary luminaries was impressive to say the least, among them, Maxine Hong Kingston, Tess Gallagher, Ilya Kaminsky, Lidia Yuknavitch, Erica Jong, Cheryl Strayed, Martin Espada, Jessamyn Ward, Tayari Jones, and Jericho Brown.

Fellow board member Armin Tolentino co-personed the FWS table with me in the huge hall at the convention center, where one might think that the world of literature is immense and every writer in the world had just published a book and was signing it right there and then. And indeed Armin spent some time signing his new book, *We Meant to Bring It Home* at the Alternating Current Press table, a pocket book's throw or two from the FWS table. To

our right was Archipelago Books of Brooklyn, New York, a not-for-profit publisher of international literature in translation in exquisite editions, from which I bought several beautiful collections of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish, the great Palestinian poet. On our left was Black Heron Press of Seattle, run by Jerome Gold, a publisher of mostly literary fiction. Gold led me to a short chapter in his book of fiction, *A Yankee Family in the Segregated South*, which has an epigraph by Stafford. The chapter, "Tragedy in the Desert," tells of a boy frightened by a rattlesnake while hunting and shooting it to shreds. The epigraph reads: "Some of the impulses and actions we regret result from qualities we have to possess in order to live." I'm not sure the precise source; maybe some reader knows.

Down a bit farther, *Orion Magazine*, whose editor, Chip Blake, came up to our table to chat with Kim Stafford while he was signing books. A little farther down the other way, Finishing Line Press, where Leah Stenson and Don Colburn, former FWS board members have published books. Farther down and across an aisle, Tavern Books, publisher of Stafford's Iowa Ph.D. thesis *Winterward* and many other fine books.

At our table we had books, CDs, and cards, as you might know from the News, Notes, and Opportunities section of the last issue, as well as plenty of *FWSJ&NLs* to give away. Kim was there for an hour on Thursday to sign *Down in My Heart, Peace Witness in War Time* (the fourth edition of Stafford's 1947 memoir of being a CO in World War II), and *The Osage Orange Tree*. He also brought along his new book of poems published by Red Hen Press, *Wild Honey, Tough Salt*, which is a lovely and unsparing book that features two poems toward the end that reflect on his relationship with his father, one of which you will find on page eighteen of this publication.

Later Thursday afternoon, this editor signed the children's book he designed and produced, based on a poem by Stafford, *Everyone Out Here Knows: A Big Foot Tale* (illustrated by Angelina Marino-Heidel). Leslie Ullman, poet, essayist, teacher, and new FWS national advisor (see *FWSJ&NL* 22.2, p. 20), whose book *Library of Small Happiness*:



PHOTO BY LIKA KUZNIK

Ingrid Wendt, Tom (husband of Erica Goss), Erica Goss, Martha Gatchell, Tim Barnes, Armin Tolentino, Jim Armstrong, Michael Jarmer.

Essays, Poems, and Exercises on the Craft of Poetry has a number of essays that discuss Stafford's poetry (see *FWSJ&NL* 22.2, pp. 4-7), signed that book. On Friday morning, Vince Wixon, co-editor with Paul Merchant of *William Stafford: Crossing Unmarked Snow, Further Views on the Writer's Vocation* and *William Stafford: The Answers Are*

Inside the Mountains, Meditations on the Writing Life, signed copies of *The Sound of the Ax: Aphorisms and Poems by William Stafford* (edited with Paul Merchant) and the videos, *William Stafford: Life & Poems* (done with Mike Markee), *William Stafford: Last Reading—August 13, 1993*, and *The Unknown Good in Our Enemies: William Stafford Reads Poems of Reconciliation*. Wixon was there, of course, with his wife Patty, the first FWS board president. He was followed in the early afternoon by Fred Marchant, emeritus professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston and new FWS national advisor (see FWSJ&NL 22.2, p. 20), who signed copies of *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford, 1937-1947*.

The FWS table also featured Paper Crane Press broadsides and something new, gift cards and framed photographs by Ilka Kuznik, wife of this editor, which have her photos paired with a quotation by Stafford (see the back of this publication for an example). Also at the table were copies of *The Methow River Poems* and thanks to Zach Selley of the Lewis & Clark Archives, *Feeling at Home: An Interview with Dorothy Stafford*.

There was an off-site event connected to Stafford organized by his son, a visit to the Stafford Archives. A group of ten or so people traveled to the Lewis & Clark Watzek Library Special Collections and were given an orientation by Kim and Zach Selley, the archivist of the collection of twenty thousand pages of daily writing, manuscripts, correspondence, publications, videos, photographs, broadsides, and other resources there. Participants were given a special, limited edition of an unpublished Stafford short story, "Held Level," featuring an afterward by James Armstrong and this editor. The story is set in Cimarron country in the late nineteenth century and is a pacifist revision of the western genre that touches on the Cheyenne exodus from their Oklahoma incarceration led by Dull Knife and Little Wolf.

The presence of the signers and those who came to have books signed or just stopped by because they knew of Stafford's work or were just curious made for lively hours. Though, of course, many people just walked right by, there being just too much to see; giving each of the eight hundred tables its due would be a life's work. A few like Jim Stewart, a friend of Kim's from Gearhart, kept cycling through as if the table were a lodestone. Ingrid Wendt graced the table for a while. Erica Goss, former poet laureate of Los Gatos, stopped by to express her admiration for Stafford. Jim Armstrong sat with us and filled in as cashier when needed. FWS board members Martha Gatchell and Susan Reese sat at the table and chatted up anyone who lingered long. Denise Low, who knew Bill and has written very thoughtfully about him, came by and made our day, though I forget which one. Low is the editor of the two editions of *Kansas Poems*, the second of which was reviewed in this publication (16.1). She also has a chapter on Stafford in her book *Natural Theologies: Essays about Literature of the Middle West*, "William Stafford's 'Small' Legacy to Writers (and Readers)." A visit from Catcher Kemerer and his father brought us Catcher's poem, "William Stafford," printed on p. 15. Anyone who spent time at the FWS table will tell you that the comment heard the most from people who stopped by for any amount of time was, "He changed my life."

FWS attended the ASLE conference for the same reason as the AWP, Stafford's legacy, but in a different form and for an aspect of his legacy

that looks toward something in the partially unrealized. As is suggested by its name, ASLE is an organization concerned with, as one panelist said, "Literature as an ecological force." Its vision statement says that it "seeks to inspire and promote intellectual work in the environmental humanities and the arts." ASLE encourages interdisciplinary research and discussion about the relationships between people and nature. As readers, students, and scholars of Stafford's work have discovered again and again, he had a profound sense of the natural world; as his most famous poem suggests, he was listening to the wilderness. Over and over again in his poems, one finds him "representing far places," seeing "fish in the lake leap arcs of realization," recognizing that "the



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Loretta Johnson giving her presentation at ASLE.

world speaks everything to us," listening to "what the earth says," "for what small deer know." Stafford sensed, to borrow the title of our ASLE panel, "a truth greater than ours, in the animals' keeping." He had an ecological, empathetic, animistic sensibility. This is what brought FWS to the ASLE conference and

is an aspect of Stafford's vision that merits further exploration, elucidation, and discussion because it is what we need to develop and sustain a natural relationship with the nonhuman world. The theme of this year's conference was Paradise on Fire, a theme chosen before flames engulfed Paradise, California (the organizers had to issue a disclaimer). The selection of the theme was a response to the wave of wildfires California and the West have experienced in the last few years. FWS went in the form of a panel organized by Jim Armstrong and this editor. The panelists were the aforementioned and Loretta Johnson, a Lewis & Clark English professor and author of an as yet unpublished biography of Stafford, *Rivers of Ink*. As readers may know from the last News, Notes, and Opportunities, the panel was called "In the Animals' Keeping: Fighting Fires with William Stafford." Johnson's presentation was "Thinking Hard for Us All: Applying 'Veer Ecology' to William Stafford's 'Swerve.'" This editor's was "Beaver's Fire: William Stafford's Ecological Ethics." You will find the full text of these at williamstafford.org. Armstrong's presentation, "Fighting Fires with William Stafford: The Tillamook Burn," heads this issue.

I found the conference fascinating and very helpful in thinking about Stafford's work. Our panel presentations intersected with aspects of a number of the other panels I attended. In a panel on the first day, "On Fire: Pyric Practices" we learned about the Australian Firehawk, which picks up burning sticks from fires and flies them out beyond the fire and drops them to scare up prey, and of fire-following flowers that grow and bloom only after fires. There was talk of fire as a companion species, which connects with Jim Armstrong's contention that "fire is an inevitable part of the environment." Another panelist spoke of fire as refusal "to be colonized" and of

(cont. on p. 14)

(cont. from p. 13)

the “ethics of fire.” The panel veered, to use Loretta Johnson’s term, into some new territory for me, though I based my talk on a Nez Perce myth that tells how Beaver gave fire to the trees, a tale that naturalizes fire. Another panelist spoke of the morphogens in petrol that are like fire seeds, calling minute attention to the residuals of fossil-fuel capitalism.

In a panel called “Seeing Past the Nature/Culture Dualism,” we heard talk of “composing a plural collective” and a “parliament of things,” a phrase that originates with Bruno Latour, the French philosopher of science, and I was led to a book called *Animal Subjects: An Ethical Reader in a Posthuman World*, which asks readers to rethink hierarchies and our relationships with animals and plants, calling “into question,” as the back page blurb says, “the boundaries that divide humans from animals,” escaping separation between nature and culture, something Stafford’s “horizontal ethics,” a phrase that floated up from somewhere at the conference, imagines, “little folded paws, judge me” (“Prairie Towns”).

Gary Snyder, a FWS national advisor taught at U.C. Davis for a number of years, maybe still does, and I did see him walk by the registration area, but he was gone before I could gather my wits. In the next panel I went to, however, “Breaking Down the Walls: New Directions in Environmental Thinking in the Anthropocene,” he reappeared in a panelist’s talk about Snyder’s seminal book *Turtle Island* and reminded us that, as Snyder writes in “Control Burn”:

(Manzanita seeds will only open
after fire passes over
or once passed through a bear)

In March I was at the High Desert Museum outside of Bend and was reminded that Lodgepole Pines and many other conifers reseed after fires. This seems connected to the myth of Beaver’s Fire and the



PHOTO BY IKA KUZNIK

Jim Armstrong and the editor responding to questions after the Stafford ASLE panel presentations.

complex nature of our relationship to fire and forests and growth. Our thinking may have to veer into considering fire as a companion species in order to understand the nature of our relationship. And it may have to do with a sense of animism, of the beingness of nonhuman life. The long history of this kind of thinking in western culture cycled through again in a panel called “Beyond Retreat: (Re) thinking Pastoral Landscape in the Posthuman Turn,” in which one panelist spoke of Margaret Cavendish’s poem “A Dialogue between an Oake and a Man Cutting Him Downe,” written in 1653. After several pages in which the man tells the oake it could be a ship and “traffick on the *Maine*” or a “*Stately House*,” the oake tells the

man that like him, it “would live, not dye,” the man concludes, “If you, as man, desire to *Gods* to be, / I’le spare your *Life*, and not cut downe your *Tree*.” The recognition of commonality with the tree in its spiritual nature, using the identificational act of personification, seems consistent with Stafford’s vision.

This insight, this recognition, involves ecognosis, the understanding, which seems one of Stafford’s essential intuitions, that matter has agency in an immanent world that the goal-beguiled self cannot see. It reminds me of the line from “The Tillamook Burn” about the world finding its depth again in “stillness and water across gray stone.” The concept of ecognosis arose in a panel called “Anthropocene Thoughts” in which a panelist redrew the rewilding concept, which so often focuses on apex predators, wolves, tigers, with a discussion of watercress and the watercress festivals of the Chalk stream area of southeastern England. Would not attention to the return of the watercress to its original habitat be as valuable a rewilding as focusing on marquee animals? I think Stafford would have found that notion delightful.

In attending these conferences FWS fulfills its mission. By going to the largest writing conference in North America and offering books, journals, CDs, cards, and broadsides, FWS shared Stafford’s work and also made a little money to support its mission. At the ASLE conference, the Stafford panel shared the spirit of his teaching, his deeply democratic and ecological vision. In addition, by going to other interesting panels, trails for further considerations of the depth and relevance of Stafford’s work were blazed. Questioning the borders of the self and exploring the immanence and animism of the world are two areas where ASLE and Stafford overlap and interweave and signal new paths for growth and connectedness.

Notes from an ASLE conference

Written after a talk by Melissa K. Nelson

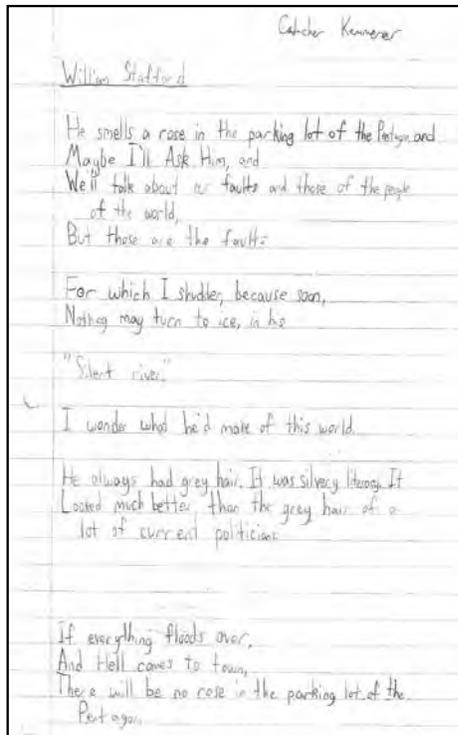
We wrestle with fire
on storied landscape, Sutter Butte
the singing lands, the songscapes
of the round houses, the oak maidens

Water is out of balance
with fire, our relative
part of the polyculture
the ethical space of engagement

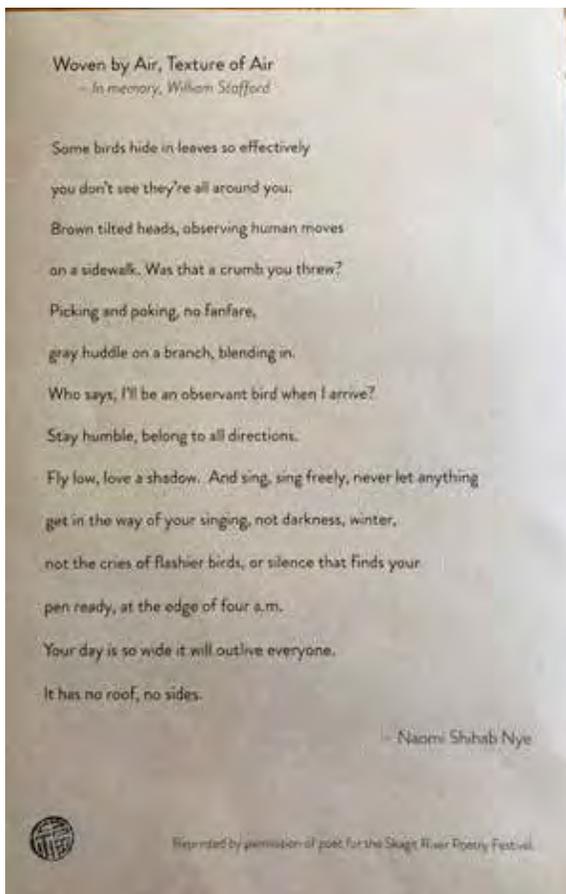
Pele creator, Kali destroyer
fire as global herbivore
internal external fire
eternal combustion

treaties with creation
imagination and the land

TIM BARNES



Catcher Kemerer signing his poem at the AWP.



Editor's Note: Molly McNulty of the Skagit River Poetry Festival sent this broadside to the FWS after stopping by the Stafford table at the AWP. It is reprinted from Naomi Shihab Nye's book, *Voices in the Air, Poems for Listeners*, (Greenwillow/HarperCollins, 2018).

William Stafford

He smells a rose in the parking lot of the Pentagon, and
 Maybe I'll Ask Him, and
 We'll talk about our faults and those of the people
 of the world,
 But those are the faults

For which I shudder, because soon,
 Nothing may turn to ice, in his

"Silent river."

I wonder what he'd make of this world.

He always had grey hair. It was silvery literacy. It
 Looked much better than the grey hair of a
 lot of current politicians.

If everything floods over,
 And Hell comes to town,
 There will be no rose in the parking lot of the
 Pentagon.

CATCHER KEMERER

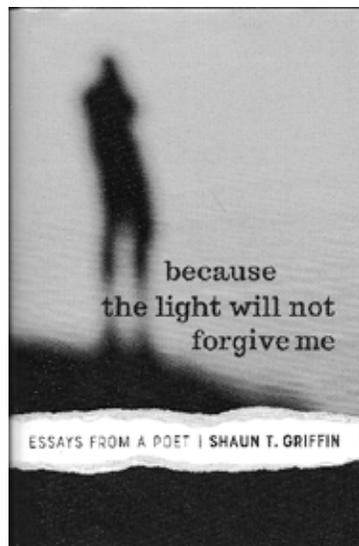
“Looking for William Stafford on the Yard” by Shaun T. Griffin, Part Two

By Tim Barnes

In the fall of 2012 (issue 17.2), the *FWSJ&NL* published “Looking for William Stafford on the Yard,” an essay by Shaun T. Griffin. For over thirty years Griffin has been teaching a poetry workshop once a week at Northern Nevada Correctional Center and his essay talks about this experience, using Stafford’s work in prison, and about Tom Ferté, the Western Oregon College professor and editor of *Calapooya Collage* who introduced Griffin to Stafford’s work and to a number of Northwest poets: Paulann Petersen (one of those to whom the book is dedicated), Carlos Reyes, Vern Rutsala, Ingrid Wendt, Ursula Le Guin, Joe Soldati, among them. He writes of Stafford’s “Practice of observation and careful movement beyond description” and “the deceptively uncertain quality” of the revelations in his lines. He says that “to write poetry in prison is just as radical a choice as [Stafford] made to choose peace over war.” Teaching Stafford, Griffin writes, allows him to ask his students at the prison, “whose allegiance they serve, and for what purposes.” [Please visit the FWS website under Archives if you don’t have a copy of that issue]

This summer, while browsing at the ASLE book exhibit, I happened across a University of Nevada catalogue and saw that Griffin had just published a book of nonfiction, *Because the Light Will Not Forgive Me*. I sent for it and found the essay *FWSJ&NL* had printed. I found, as well, that Griffin had added another section. I print that section below. It is one of 26 essays divided into three sections: “Coming into the American West,” “Most of What I Believe Was Found in Poetry’s Ancient Hands,” and “What Border to Cross.” The essay on Stafford falls in the second section.

I must say that I enjoyed this book immensely. There are essays about living in the West, the high desert country, and about fire and water and snow. There are essays of travel in Mexico, Alaska, Andalucia, and Africa. The essays are meditative and joyful, and sometimes dark. His piece about his stay in Grenada, Spain, despite being set in the town where Federico García Lorca was shot, is beautifully sunny. His visit to South Africa, though fascinating, is darkened by the starkness of the injustice that surrounds him. I’m not writing a review of this book. I’m praising it and what I would praise the



most are the essays in which Griffin talks about other poets, all of them gone now. Along with Stafford, Griffin thinks about the Nevada poet Joanne de Longchamps, the Native-American poet Adrian C. Louis, the Arizona poet and teacher Richard Shelton. In one chapter he talks about four poets who died in 1997 and

what he learned from them: Denise Levertov, James Laughlin, Allen Ginsberg, and William Matthews (sending me back to reread him). Griffin spends significant time with several other poets, all his friends and correspondents: Vassar Miller, Carolyn Kizer, Donald Hall, and Hayden Carruth. All of them are vitally reborn in Griffin’s portrayals. I find myself pulling down these poets’ work from my shelves (or vowing a trip to the bookstore), rediscovering them, aided by Griffin’s love and understanding of their work. I was especially captivated by his writing on Hayden Carruth, the poet, essayist, editor, reviewer, semi-recluse, and New England farmer—a writer of depth, dignity, range, and heart.

What Griffin has done for some of these poets, de Longchamps, Miller, Carruth, is champion the legacy of poets who were neglected by the literary establishment, the critics and the prize bestowers. The argument he makes for their work, their reputations, is convincing and valid, as my rediscovery of Carruth suggests. I also find myself hoping that this publication serves William Stafford in a similar way, whose work seems to be slipping into curious obscurity as those people who knew him pass on. Like Carruth and others, Stafford’s work is sturdy, revelatory, and relevant as it ever was. To write deeply, honorably, and honestly seems a matter where poetry and deep time intersect. This is why we still read Tu Fu and Li Po, Sappho and Homer. The country behind us tells a lot about the country ahead of us. Ancient hands hold us in literature.

Looking for William Stafford on the Yard, Part Two

By Shaun T. Griffin

More than once I left the workshop with a contradiction. Out of their desire to understand the first steps to write there was an overwhelming need for order, something that Stafford simply wouldn’t give. I tried to assuage their uneasiness with his process, insisted that reading and time would be the greater teachers. One poem, in particular, seemed to be the greatest contradiction. How could a pacifist write this poem? How could Stafford be so certain about this instrument when it stood for the very thing he opposed? I had no answers to their puzzled expressions. We just read the poem, “.38,” over and over, until we could find a way into the duality that so often accompanies his art.

This metal has come to look at
your eye. Look at its eye—that
stare that can’t lose.

There’s no grin like a gun—
as if only its calm
could soothe your hand.

But metal is cold,
cold. In the night, in the risk,
it’s a touch of the dead.

It’s a cold world.

This poem from *My Name Is William Tell* required no transcription. I didn’t share it because it was a prison trope; I shared it because

Stafford opened the revolver to consider just how far it had traveled, how it did not judge its reader, how it chose indiscriminately. These are things a pacifist sees; these are stories a pacifist hears. A pacifist learns to walk alone. A pacifist intuits risk as an advantage: having no things foreshadows poetic vision. That is how Basho wandered and why Su Tung-p'o was exiled. Without the lens of perfection, they could not be something else. Stripped to its essence, poetry comes into the world like light and leaves even less visibly and its practitioners expect the light to be sufficient.

Why is this necessary to practice? Without concern for its place in the world, poetry has purchase in the intrinsic activity of being present. Stafford did not wait for intention to write. Stafford wrote to affirm the particulars of a pacifist's journey: isolation, resolution, and forbearance, living, as it were, without comfort. Stafford's work was inclusive of others—the viewpoints, aspirations, and divisions—and able to set things apart from what divides as in these lines from “Scenes of Rain in the Mountains”:

You hear the lake and you fall and are saved,
again and again, in the kind eye,
deep and gray, millions of times.

Deceptively direct and complex, Stafford's poetry was vision for a world beyond a limited range of seeing. Every day he returned to the well of being alone to see things, to record their existence.

To reflect and write like this is almost beyond comprehension in a prison. It has no place where violence begets violence, which is why I share Stafford's poetry. I ask the men to emulate his vulnerable stance, to let down their guard and walk with him. This takes years; trust is not easily found. They distrust my intention, initially fearing what it might mean: I'm weak, I can't cope, or I put on a strong face. Poetry requires none of this, only that you look inside.

One of my closest friends in the workshop was paroled. He had been out five years when he threw a rod in his pickup. He was sitting on the side of the road when a highway patrolman asked him if there was anything wrong? He insisted on showing him his identification, said it was a requirement of parole. The patrolman asked how he survived prison? My friend said it was a poetry class: “One of poetry's first requirements is that you examine yourself.” Not a small lesson but one Stafford understood and wrote about for sixty years. He is not without his faults, nor are the men in the workshop. They just aspire to learn such lessons. Inside or out, it matters not. The hard work, breaking open a vein to affirm allegiance to a line of poetry, happens everywhere. I've asked them repeatedly whose allegiance they serve, and for what reasons. Stafford answers in the dark. No one chooses prison any more than they choose hunger. Poetry is the medium through which they pass to the outside, even if it is only imagined. Stafford knew this. He passed through to the outside as a conscientious objector and his beliefs became secondary to their presence in his poetry. I hear him every time I read him—“Awaken, awaken, you have much to be startled by (my parenthesis).” In the workshop that is like announcing the sun has risen. Reading him permits expansion; they rise in small stanzas, give credence to an ally of warmth. That's why it's such a mystery—no one believes it's possible.

Here are some questions, in no particular order, the men posed to Stafford:

Can you bend the rules?
Can you surrender to anonymity?
Can you start over as a child—every day?
Can you believe what's around you?
Can you survive poetry's unintended clues?
Can you live alone with your thoughts?
Can you recommend the art form to the warden?
Can you sit without answers?
Can you suffer the indignity of having no success?

Here are some answers they may have intimated:

And if
Because
I don't know
I cannot
Go away.

Letter to Paulann at Los Prietos

Of William Stafford's seven decades
on this earth, she scoops from the patina

of his pacifist years, hands cupped
to remember the poet in the pre-dawn hour:

smoke from a woodstove, the early foment
of words to paper, how he sat before the face

of Dorothy, and then, off to work in the oaks,
digging footpaths in the Santa Barbara hills.

This is how he resisted the urge
to fight, what he did with the soil,

scrub jays, and chaparral. All this effort
to be alone with thought like prayer—

that she releases in a letter
to my own desert—so far from peace,

from any hint of release, now that the war
is done and the broken soldiers return

to scuff the story of their lives,
these voices in the dust held out to me.

SHAUNT. GRIFFIN

This poem is from Griffin's latest collection, *The Monastery of Stars*, Kelsey Books, 2020.



American Gothic (1930) by Grant Wood.



Dorothy and Bill Stafford.

American Gothic

If we see better through tiny,
grim glasses, we like to wear
tiny, grim glasses.
Our parents willed us this
view. It's tundra? We love it.

We travel our kind of
Renaissance: barnfuls of hay,
whole voyages of corn, and
a book that flickers its
halo in the parlor.

Poverty plus confidence equals
pioneers. We never doubted.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Editor's Note: *The above was inspired by Stafford Seminar scholar Alexis Prowizor's essay, "A Look at William Stafford and Grant Wood."*

Ten Years After the Last Words

Ten years after my father, as he helped my mother
clean the kitchen when the blender had exploded,
scattering lime pie filling everywhere, said,
Better get another spatula . . .
and then fell dead to the floor,
I am standing at the wall with the sheetrock trowel
battered with finish mud to cover the dimples
of the nails, the panel seam snug against the stud,
and I ask my father in my mind, "Daddy,
have I done enough for you?"

His voice blooms in my mind:
Years ago. Years ago you did enough.

"How can I choose between your work and mine?"

Again, his voice, fine as dust:
*Do the work that is most alive.
Some days it may be mine,
Most days it will be your own.
And finally you won't know the difference.*

With one stroke I close the seam.

KIM STAFFORD



Poetry post in the Laurelhurst neighborhood in Portland offering Stafford's "A Course in Creative Writing."

PHOTO BY IJKA KUZNIK

Notes for William Stafford's Birthday, 20 Jan. 2019

By Lex Runciman

We're here this Sunday in January to remember William Stafford and celebrate his birthday, which was actually 3 days ago. He was born Jan. 17, 1914. I knew Bill Stafford a little bit, ate dinner once with him and Dorothy at Barbara Drake's and Bill Beckman's farm in Yamhill, saw him read several times, including one literally life-changing (at least for me) appearance with Robert Creeley and Richard Hugo at Oregon State University, and in the mid-1970s he visited the graduate workshop I was then enrolled in at the University of Montana. But rather than speak of these occasions, I thought I'd use my time this afternoon to focus on three good reasons that more than justify our gathering today: 1) Stafford's success was – and remains – national and international in scope, and this was precedent-setting for Oregon writers and readers, 2) His work – that is, the poems themselves – are numerous if not uncountable, which means that in addition to revisiting what we love, it's likely that we've not read them all – much less fully engaged them, and 3) Stafford's work and his example as a conscientious objector encourage us to examine our own understandings of what it means to be a human person, a citizen, a reader, and, for some of us, what it means to be a writer.

One of William Stafford's principal achievements was and is his visibility, that is, his insistence (simply by doing it) that the Pacific Coast of these United States could be the setting for not just political, not just agricultural, not just commercial discussions and contracts, but also for literary and linguistic examination and meditation. A perusal of titles alone makes this clear: "In the Oregon Country," "The Fish Counter at Bonneville," "The Tillamook Burn," "At Cove on the Crooked River," "At the Klamath Berry Festival" – you get the idea. In short, Stafford's work and his success show that someone based here could successfully and legitimately command a national audience and national recognition, including publication by a prestigious New York publisher.

My own first introduction to Stafford came via an anthology that was one of the textbooks in my junior year of high school. Stafford's lone entry, "Traveling through the Dark," was not required for the course: the syllabus gave no indication the teacher wished us to read it much less discuss its actions and their implications. More likely we were reading and discussing Robert Frost or Edna St. Vincent Millay – fine writers, but seemingly from another and more literary country.

In any case, one afternoon as the teacher droned on and various other, more eager students encouraged the lecture by asking obvious leading questions, I busied myself by reading the short biographies of those whose works were included in the book. It was not difficult to do this and also half listen. Those few sentences on each author were arranged alphabetically at the back. Two-thirds of the authors, as I learned, were dead; half were British and dead; 80% of were white men, though that's a discussion for another day. And other than Robinson Jeffers, most were from locations well east of the Mississippi. Then there was William Stafford. "He lives [so the short bio read then] in Lake Oswego, Oregon and teaches at Lewis and Clark College."

As a Portlander, this got my full attention, and so I turned to the poem itself. I should note at this point that I'd gotten my driver's license months earlier, and because I had a little brother who sometimes needed ferrying from one place to the other, my parents let me drive the car for an hour or so on Sunday afternoons – as practice, so long as I stayed well west of Portland's downtown and so long as I didn't get entirely lost. As I read the poem, I realized that on one of those Sunday excursions, I'd actually found myself on OR Hwy 6, the Wilson River Road. That made the poem all the more interesting. Here it is:

Traveling through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

While the action in this poem is clear enough, no more so than in its ending, it's that "thinking hard for us all," that makes us pause. What was this narrator thinking? Whatever it was, it justified what followed. Poems often leave things out on purpose – which is either maddening or part of the fun, or both. William Carlos Williams's poem about the red wheelbarrow is maybe the most famous example. You might remember it:

The Red Wheelbarrow
by William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

The obvious question here is why – why does so much depend on such a mundane and, frankly, inconsequential view? The question isn't much help. Maybe better to ask when – when would a simple, inconsequential view of everyday objects (yes, rain-wet and hence shining, sort of) but still just an everyday view – when would that

(cont. on p. 20)

(cont. from p. 19)

view ever be as important as the poem says? It helps to know that William Carlos Williams was a family doctor and pediatrician in the time before penicillin, a time when any bacterial infection could be fatal and he couldn't stop it. It's not too far-fetched to imagine Williams tending to a patient he knows will die soon. Tired (he's been up all night) and deeply frustrated (the patient is only 9 but has developed pneumonia), he turns away from the sick room, looks out a window, and in that moment feels deeply grateful that he holds no responsibility for either that rain-shiny, red wheelbarrow or for those white chickens. They simply are. Seeing them restores, for a moment at least, a sense of balance.

In contrast, Stafford's poem leaves us unbalanced – at least it leaves me feeling that way. That is, even as I understand at least some of this narrator's hard thinking and the conclusive action it leads him to, I wish it were otherwise. "Traveling through the Dark" offers us actions but not full explanations. We have to come to those for ourselves. And actually it's that one poem that demonstrates the three good reasons for celebrating William Stafford's birthday. "Traveling through the Dark" is of course the title poem for a collection that won the National Book Award in 1963, Stafford being the only Oregon poet so recognized until 50 years later, when Mary Szybist also won. Stafford's win remains precedent-setting: it's possible to live in Oregon and win a National Book Award. As a poem, it certainly rewards our rereading and re-engagement. And it unavoidably asks us to think of our actions in a moral context. As for the poem itself, I wonder what Bill Stafford thought of it – he must be on record discussing it somewhere.¹ It's curious, interesting, to me that I never heard him include it in a reading. More often he'd choose poems more directly affirming, such as the justly famous, well-loved (yet far from reassuring)

With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach

We would climb the highest dune,
from there to gaze and come down:
the ocean was performing;
we contributed our climb.

Waves leapfrogged and came
straight out of the storm.
What should our gaze mean?
Kit waited for me to decide.

Standing on such a hill,
what would you tell your child?
That was an absolute vista.
Those waves raced far, and cold.

'How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?'
'As far as was needed,' I said,
and as I talked, I swam.

But then, there's this poem, which so far as I can tell was printed in *The New Yorker*, then later in a book edited by Robin Skelton called *Five Poets of the Pacific Northwest*, but maybe nowhere else.² The poem I'm referring to is titled "An Address to the Vacationers at Cape Lookout," and it goes like this:

The whole weight of the ocean smashes on rock;
the sun hounds the night; gulls ravel the edge.

Here it is better to allow for what happens, all of it –
the part assumed, the lie that keeps a rendezvous
with proof, the wickerwork that disguises the iron.
This place is too real for that blame
people pin on each other, for honor or dishonor.

Have you noticed how uninvited
anything pure is? Be brave – there is such a thing
as helping history get on with its dirty work.

When the home folk tell you goodbye,
they shouldn't bid you goodbye that corrupted, wise way,
or burden you with too great a gift; and I
wouldn't burden you, except with one great gift:
the cold, the world that spins in cold space –
to be able to walk away, not writhe in regret
or twist in the torture bush. After all,
there is such a thing as justice in friendship.

All of the time, we know how uninvited
anything pure is: here something big lifts us
outside, scorns our bravery or fear.

What disregards people does people good.

There's a fair amount going on in that poem, and I don't yet understand great swaths of it. Maybe it's not Stafford at his best. Even so, the title and the last line fascinate me. To try to fashion "An Address to the Vacationers at Cape Lookout" seems to me on the face of it an impossible, hence faintly ludicrous, task. The setting is clear enough and useful, but the "address" part seems almost bonkers – there's no occasion for such an address, except maybe in a poem. And that's part of the reason I'm drawn to it – just this title says, backhandedly, poems can do this. Whether the vacationers pay attention or not, this address to them knows they're in the presence of something huge, something that asks their response. And then there's the last line: "What disregards people does people good." There's a connection to William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow, a simple object that disregards everyone: it renders no judgment, does not alter according to human moods, it simply is.

I said at the start that I understood three good reasons to mark Stafford's birthday, and that the third had something to do with one's moral obligations as a human being, as a citizen. "Traveling through the Dark" certainly invokes and records a moral choice. The poem I just read, about Cape Lookout, talks about being able to walk away, "not writhe in regret." And Stafford's stance as a conscious objector defined his own moral understandings. His poems tell us that moral decision-making is an unavoidable element of human experience, essential to who we are in all of our many roles, including the parental one. It's hard, often enough, and there's no respite: "And as I talked, I swam." Stafford's poems don't make it any easier; they do, however, offer humane and generous company.

**His poems tell us that
moral decision-making is
an unavoidable element
of human experience**

Editor's Notes:

¹ The William Stafford Archive has a video, commentary, and an interview in which Stafford talks about the poem in Books: *Traveling through the Dark*. "Traveling through the Dark," as well as all the drafts. There is also a reprint of a piece Bill originally wrote on the poem in *Reading Modern Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (1968), Engle & Carrier, eds. in *Crossing Unmarked Snow: Further View on the Writer's Vocation*, Merchant & Wixon, eds., pp. 86-89.

² "An Address to the Vacationers at Cape Lookout" was published in the Aug. 22, 1964, edition of *The New Yorker*. It also appears in *Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People*, published by Boa editions, collected by Al Poulin, a small press publisher of the early nineteen eighties. That wonderful last line, "What disregards people does people good," seems close to the thought of Robinson Jeffers. A scholarly article in *A Literary History of the American West* by J. Russell Roberts closes with reference to the poem but never deals with the implications of that last line. Roberts likes the line, "there is such a thing as justice in friendship," but doesn't quite grasp who the friendship needs to be with. Stafford seems to be suggesting that we need to befriend that which is not interested in our friendship.



Contributors' Notes

If you have read these pages sequentially, you already know something about **James Armstrong**. If not, I'll tell you he is a Professor of English at Winona State University in Minnesota who regularly teaches a Stafford and American literature seminar. He has spent time in the Stafford Archives and is working on a book of essays on Stafford's work. He is also the author of several books of poetry, including *Blue Lash*, published by Milkweed Editions in 2006.

Leanne Grabel, M.Ed., is a writer, illustrator, performer & special education teacher (almost retired). Currently, Grabel is teaching graphic flash memoir to adults in several arts centers and retirement communities throughout the Pacific Northwest. In love with mixing genres, Grabel has written & produced numerous spoken-word multi-media shows, including "The Lighter Side of Chronic Depression"; and "Anger: The Musical." Her poetry books include *Lonesome & Very Quarrelsome Heroes*; *Short Poems by a Short Person*; *Badgirls* (a collection of flash non-fiction & a theater piece); & *Gold Shoes*, a collection of graphic prose poems, **GOLD SHOES: Graphic Prose Poems**. Grabel has just completed *Tainted Illustrated*, an illustrated stretched memoir, which is being serialized in *THE OPIATE*. She is working on a compilation of 45 years of illustrated writing. She and her husband Steve Sander are the founders of Café Lena, Portland's legendary poetry hub of the 90s.

Shaun T. Griffin has dedicated his life to creating a caring community. In 1991, he and his wife, Deborah, founded Community Chest, a nonprofit organization that directs more than thirty programs for northern Nevada including hunger relief, service learning, drug and alcohol counseling, and art and social justice projects. Throughout this time he has taught a poetry workshop at Northern Nevada Correctional Center, and published a journal of their work, *Razor Wire. This Is What the Desert Surrenders: New and Selected* was published by Black Rock Press in 2012. In 2013 the

U. of Michigan Press published *Sorrow's Well—The Poetry of Hayden Carruth*. In 2014 he was inducted into the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. He and his wife live in Virginia City in the shadow of Walter Van Tilburg Clark's former house.

Ginger K. Hintz is a self-taught, working poet originally from the prairies of western South Dakota. William Stafford's *You Must Revise Your Life* and *Writing the Australian Crawl* are the roots of her writing practice. She is an independent scholar and action philosopher who publishes weekly on cacheculture.com. She earned a BA in Environmental Policy and an MA in American Cultural Studies at Bowling Green State University.

Michael Jarmer holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from Warren Wilson College and has taught high school English in Milwaukie, Oregon for 30 years. This poem is from the manuscript *Fail Better: An American English Teacher Makes a To-Do List*.

Donald Levering was born in Kansas City and grew up there and in Oceanside, New York. He has worked as a teacher on the Diné reservation, groundskeeper, and human services administrator. His MFA in creative writing is from Bowling Green Ohio State University. He has volunteered with Earthwatch and Enkosini as a species preservation activist and currently volunteers as a US citizenship tutor with Santa Fe Literacy Volunteers. Father of a son and daughter, he is married to the artist Jane Shoenfeld and lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Recent collections include *Any Song Will Do: New and Selected Later Poems* (2019), *Previous Lives: New and Selected Early Poems* (2018), *Coltrane's God* (2015), *The Water Leveling With Us* (2014), all from Red Mountain of Santa Fe, New Mexico. "Counting for the Apparition of William Stafford" is from *The Water Leveling With Us*.

Levering told me this when responding to my request to reprint his poem: "I was a groundskeeper at Lewis & Clark when I met Bill Stafford. I think I used our mutual Kansas connexions to introduce myself, though he was, as you know, a very approachable person and did not seem surprised that a mere groundskeeper could talk poetry with him. Sadly, I don't remember the specific content of conversations I had with Stafford. After I left Portland we exchanged a few letters and I probably still have them somewhere in my files of pre-computer days correspondence. What I do remember is his affect—open, generous, curious, and self-effacing. The latter was especially refreshing in an era where big name poets would sometimes appear to be more interested in projecting a persona than connecting with audience members. At the time I lived in the Portland area, my poetry was more influenced by Rutsala than Stafford. Then I moved to Bowling Green to go to graduate school and my office-mate, Marti Mihalyi, worshipped Stafford's work. She got me to delve more closely into the little conundrums of his poems, and to appreciate how his poems are as open-ended as he was in person."

Lex Runciman has published anthologies, college textbooks, and six collections of poems, one of which won the Oregon Book Award. His most recent book, *Salt Moons: Poems 1981-2016*, was published by Salmon Poetry in 2017. Now retired, he taught at Oregon State University for eleven years and at Linfield College for twenty-five. In the spring he will be lead a Soapstone study group on two novels by Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees* and *Prodigal Summer*.

News, Notes, and Opportunities

The Osage Orange Tree in the 8th Grade. *Chalkboard*, a newsletter published by the Oregon Council of Teachers of English (OCTE), an organization that knew William Stafford well, has a short teaching essay by Lynette Gottlieb, an English teacher at Ashbrook School in Corvallis in which she describes using *The Osage Orange Tree* in her eighth grade class. “The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far from the Tree: The Staffords in *The Osage Orange Tree*” tells us that since receiving a grant during the Stafford Centenary (2014) for a set of books, Gottlieb has been teaching it. She compares it to Steinbeck’s *The Red Pony*, stories by Eudora Welty, and talks about the other books connected to that time and place, the Dustbowl Depression, she uses, including Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*. Also included are a few heuristic questions and a short bibliography. The essay appears right under a photo of Kim Stafford and the announcement that he is to be the keynote speaker for the annual OCTE conference (held on Oct. 12, 2019). Go to www.octe.org to read the whole essay.

Stafford Poems in Vocal Recital in Lawrence, Kansas. Karen Leigh-Post, a music professor at the University of Kansas, where Stafford received his A.B. and M.A., gave a recital on Nov. 3, 2019, at the Lawrence Memorial Chapel, a place where Stafford may have sat. The recital contained two of his poems, “Ask Me,” and “Quo Vadis.” Other poems included: “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by Walt Whitman and “Prayer” by Langston Hughes, who was born in Lawrence.

Freewill Astrology—Stafford Horoscope. The *Anchorage News* in Anchorage, Alaska, published this horoscope written by Rob Grezny for Capricorn (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) on May 16th, 2019: “Capricorn poet William Stafford articulated some advice that I think you need to hear right now. Please hold it close to your awareness for the next 21 days. ‘Saying things you do not have to say weakens your talk,’ he wrote. ‘Hearing things you do not need to hear dulls your hearing.’ By practicing those protective measures, Capricorn, you will foster and safeguard your mental health. Now here’s another gift from Stafford: ‘Things you know before you hear them—those are you, those are why you are in the world.’”

Poem of the Month in Davis, CA. James Lee Jobe, the poet laureate of the city of Davis, selected Stafford’s poem, “Why I Am Happy” and it was reprinted in the *Enterprise*, a newspaper that covers Yolo County. Jobe mentions Stafford’s CO experience in WWII, his daily writing practice, and goes on to say, “His ability to capture the ingredients of life and his poems is second to none.” The poem appeared on page B5 of the November 24th, 2019, edition.

FWSJ&NL and the Lake Oswego Public Library. In anticipation of the two conferences the FWS attended this year, we printed extra copies of the last issue of this publication. After giving as many away as we could, we still had a number left. In order to distribute the excess, I left copies at Literary Arts, Inc. downtown and at the Belmont Library (close to home). I thought, as well, that the Lake Oswego Library, Stafford’s home library, might appreciate copies. In late summer, my wife and I drove to the library and asked if we could leave some for interested patrons. We were told, “The library doesn’t do that sort of thing.” Stunned, we left, and after shaking our heads in disbelief for a while, drove to Annie Bloom’s bookstore

in Multnomah Village where a friendly clerk who knew of Stafford found a place for them.

January Celebration Events.

Saturday, January 11th, 2:00-4:00 pm—Milwaukie
Milwaukie Poetry Series
St. John the Evangelist Church
2036 SE Jefferson St.

Thursday, January 16th, 6:30-8:00 pm—Oregon City
The Oregon City Library
606 John Adams St.

Sunday, January 19th, 3:00 pm—Lake Oswego
Peregrine Literary Series: Paulann Petersen
Stickman Pub, 40 North State St.

Tuesday, January 21st, 7:00 pm—Lake Oswego
The Lake Oswego Public Library
Hosts: Susan Reese and Tom Hogan
706 Fourth St.

Please see the Contacts page on the FWS website to post information about January William Stafford birthday events.



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The essays by James Armstrong, Ginger K. Hintz, Lex Runciman, Shaun T. Griffin, and Tim Barnes are used with the permission of the authors.

The drawing by Barbara Stafford of William Stafford on the first page is from the cover of *You and Some Other Characters*, Honey Brook Press, 1987.

The leaping salmon on p. 22 is from the title page of *West of Your City*, Talisman Press, 1960.

The poems “Counting for the Apparition of William Stafford,” “Choreographer,” “The American Teenager is Unstuck in Time (Don’t Know Much About History),” “Notes from an ASLE Conference,” “William Stafford,” “Letter to Paulann at Los Prietos,” “Ten Years After the Last Words,” “Woven by Air, Texture of Air,” are used by permission of the authors.

The poems by W.S. Merwin are reprinted from *Migration: New & Selected Poems*, published by Copper Canyon Press in 2003.

The feather on p. 9 was done by Donnell Hunter for *Fin, Feather, Fur*, Honeybrook Press, 1985.

The Kansas landscape on p. 21 is by Tony Allard and is from *Kansas Poems of William Stafford* (1990), edited by Denise Low.

This editor would like to thank Zach Selley and the staff at the William Stafford Archives for all their help.



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MISSION OF FWS *Our mission is to share William Stafford's work and further the spirit of his teaching.*

WHY JOIN? BY JOINING THE FRIENDS OF WILLIAM STAFFORD, you become part of an international community of poetry lovers and writers with broad access to other poetry organizations and events. As a Friend, you'll receive a subscription to our biannual newsletter, filled with poetry and poetry news. In addition, your contribution supports the annual William Stafford Birthday Celebration Readings, the annual September poetry and potluck picnic, maintains our web site, www.williamstafford.org, and helps initiate new projects. We always welcome your volunteer services.

To join the Friends of William Stafford, renew your friendship, or make a donation, please fill out this form and mail to: FWS, P.O. Box 1925, Sisters, OR 97759. Checks payable to "Friends of William Stafford." Or you can renew or join online at the FWS website.

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Volunteer opportunities Organize poetry readings in your community; Event help; Distribute posters/flyers; Publicize events; Other (describe): _____

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- Zita Seiple
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- Elaine Chapman
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- Donald Morrison
- Derek Sheffield
- Thomas Averill
- Travis Poling

If you have any questions about your membership status, please contact Helen Schmidling, helen@dsagroup.net

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