



# friends of WILLIAM STAFFORD

A Journal & Newsletter For Poets & Poetry  
Volume 23, Issue 2 Fall-Winter 2020-2021

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

CHAIR: DENNIS SCHMIDLING

TIM BARNES

PATRICIA CARVER

MARTHA GATCHELL

JOAN MAIERS

SUSAN MCKEE REESE

HELEN SCHMIDLING

ARMIN TOLENTINO

## NATIONAL ADVISORS

Marvin Bell

Robert Bly

Li-Young Lee

Fred Marchant

Paul Merchant

Paulann Petersen

Chris Merrill

Naomi Shihab Nye

Gary Snyder

Leslie Ullman

## WILLIAM STAFFORD AND POPULAR MODERNISM

By James Armstrong

William Stafford is usually grouped with the postmodern poets who rose into prominence in the 1960s, especially the Deep Image poets Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, and James Wright. Although he was more than a decade older, Stafford has all the hallmarks of the younger poets: his poems are in the “low style,” employing colloquial diction and eschewing learned allusions. He treats form very loosely, hovering between a sonnet-length, vaguely pentameter poems with occasional rhyme—Richard Tillinghast refers to the “light touch with which partial rhymes and a flexible meter are used in many of these poems, which are as plain as Shaker furniture” and free verse, even prose poems on occasion. His poems are often in the first person and focus on particular moments of the mind experiencing the world. He privileges spontaneity over polish—his are poems of process. He shows a powerful interest in the natural world, and in encounters with animals. He is critical of American jingoism and American conformism. He is interested in Native Americans and seems to emulate their religious view of the world. He takes as his subject the American landscape, and is not interested in European culture or history. These are all elements of the postwar generation, the postmoderns who formed their poetics in reaction to the New Critical consensus.

On the other hand, Stafford is different from the postmodern poets in key ways. He did not claim allegiance to the “Deep Image” aesthetic of Bly, Wright and Merwin, despite critics having lumped him in with them; he was certainly not “theosophically inspired” like Robert Bly, nor was he influenced by Spanish surrealism or Georg Trakl or Thomas Tranströmer. He resembles Frank O’Hara in terms of writing process, but Stafford did not, like the New York School, take inspiration from modern painting and French poetry. Although he did display an interest in William Carlos Williams and in Alfred North Whitehead, and was sympathetic to some of Charles Olson’s ideas about projective verse, Stafford was not indebted to Objectivism or the Black Mountain

School. Nor was he inspired by either Buddhist or Hindu thought (as were Snyder and Allen Ginsberg). Stafford lacked the countercultural caché of the younger postmoderns—he didn’t wear a poncho or prayer beads or tribal masks; he did not experiment with drugs or ecstatic sex. Stafford lived in a suburban ranch house outside of Portland and taught English literature and composition at Lewis and Clark College for 40 years. His spiritual center was not Tibet: it was Kansas. He regularly filled lecture halls and auditoriums across America, reading to long-haired, blue-jeaned students who bought his books alongside those of Bly, Snyder, and Merwin. He published thousands of poems, many with small literary magazines and independent, avant-garde presses. Yet Stafford seems to come to a postmodern position from an utterly different direction, from sources unrecognizable in the literary histories of the postmodern moment.

Chronologically speaking, Stafford belongs with second generation modernists like Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman—poets who were born in the second decade of the 20th century and came into their own in the early 1940s. David Perkins describes them thus: “Patting each syllable diligently into place, these young writers composed formal, impersonal poems, suitable for close explication. The world to which their complexities were a response was kept at a distance” (76). Had Stafford been more in step with his contemporaries, he would have embraced the formalism of W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot; he would have conformed his taste to the critical writing of Eliot, I.A. Richards, and the southern Fugitives (Perkins 92; 75). He would have labored to write the “compressed,

(cont. on p. 2)



“Birds fly here without any sound”  
by Barbara Stafford.

*Friends of William Stafford is a non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness of poetry and literature in the spirit of the legacy, life, and works of the late award-winning poet William Stafford.*

(cont. from p. 1)

packed, and ironical” poem this criticism demanded—probably demonstrating his Metaphysical wit and his classical learning (76).

But Stafford’s poetic taste seems to have been formed by what Perkins has called “Popular Modernism,” the modernism championed by Harriet Monroe in her 1912 founding of *Poetry Magazine*. This earlier stage of modernism was notable for its openness and eclecticism; John Timberman Newcomb points out that in her description of *Poetry’s* editorial policy Monroe “used the metaphor of the ‘open door,’ which recast the role of editor from a gatekeeper looking for excuses to exclude everything not conforming to immutable traditions into someone continually listening for new voice and willing to sponsor them even when their experiments might lead to controversy or even ridicule” (16). Newcomb gives as an example of *Poetry’s* tremendous range the fact that the most “important and distinctive poets” Monroe published in the early years of the magazine were Carl Sandburg and Wallace Stevens—poets diametrically opposite in both style and content (17).

The result was surprisingly popular. In the years between 1912 and the rise of the New Critics, poets like Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Frost and Amy Lowell “garnered a sizeable and passionate audience” (Newcomb 20). This expansive early version of modernism was typified by “formal experimentation and the expansion of poetic subject matter,” and was hungry to express the modern experience of American culture (21). In fact, it became emblematic of a new American attitude towards culture in general. As Newcomb states, this was a tectonic shift in American taste from the “reassuring analogical demonstrations of Christian benevolence” which typified the work of the Fireside Poets of the previous century (15). American modernism “was a paradigm shift in the way people saw poetry, not as a pleasant evening’s diversion or as something to fill out a magazine page, but as a central form of knowledge, discovery, and commentary on every aspect of their lives” (22).

Not all early modernism was so idealistic. According to Walter Sutton, modernism was from the outset an amalgam of both conservative and revolutionary tendencies. He claims the two greatest influences on modern poetry were Symbolism and Imagism. Both movements rejected the immediate Victorian past, but the former, championed most powerfully by Eliot, “fostered a conservative regard for older tradition” (Sutton 38). Symbolism claimed that the poet “could express his unique sensibility only through a special language which depends upon symbolic images rather than direct statement,” and often these images are expressed “through a ‘medley of metaphors’ or sequence of apparently dissociated images” (35). Symbolism was a French movement of the fin-de-siecle, and its adherents kept their sense of belonging to European culture; Eliot championed the idea that the symbolist method was a reunification of thought and feeling which were sundered in the 17th century. Therefore, Eliot could be modern and yet interested in “traditional themes and measures” and cultivate a special interest in the English

Metaphysical poets who could “feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose,” as Eliot put it (qtd. in Sutton 36-7).

The Imagists, on the other hand, wanted a cleaner break; they “insisted on complete freedom of individual expression through the development of experimental free verse poems” (38). They believed poetry should be “distinguished by a classical hardness and precision, objectivity, economy of language and freedom of form” (33). If they identified with European tradition, it was the Europe of Sappho and Anacreon—and they found ready soil in the naturally rebellious American ethos. Symbolism had a stronger hold in London, but in Harriet Monroe’s Chicago the “dominant mood of the war and postwar years was revolutionary” (43). The *Poetry* version of “New Poetry” was more experimental, more thematically diverse, and more radical in its politics than the version of modernism later foisted upon the academy by the New Critical consensus. Moreover, in the wake of *Poetry’s* success a number of avant-garde little magazines

sprang up in America and

. . . provided an outlet for poets as original and various as Williams, Pound, and Stevens, and for the experimental writing of Gertrude Stein. In these magazines, the practice of the newer poets was supported by essays and manifestoes setting forth the creeds of a whole series of post-Imagist movements including Dadaism, Surrealism, and Objectivism. The general spirit of experimentation fostered an unusual number of gifted, highly individualistic American poets. (Sutton 43)

This brand of Modernism was influenced by “popular music and jazz” and was eager to explore the American idiom—including the “idiomatic language of the blues,” which meant that Langston Hughes was one offshoot of this wing of Modernism (44-45). The work of midwestern poets Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg championed a democratic belief that American poetry ought to distance itself from the influence of Europe and from literariness in general and turn its attention to the possibilities of regional subject matter.

The result was what Perkins terms “Popular Modernism.” He states, “The ‘new’ poetry was, on the whole, direct and accessible; it was often agreeable or interesting in setting and in the stories it told or implied; the personality of the speaker was likely to be attractive. It had potential appeal to a large public” (*From the 1890s* 296). This did not mean a soppy poetry: the new poets took their cue from the novelists of the time, who were using the tenets of naturalism to draw a true (if sometimes bleak) picture of American society. “The better poets were not sentimental; neither did they go in for the uplift of the Genteel Tradition,” says Perkins; “If one had to label the attitude many of them shared, one might call it a stoic pessimism” (296).

Yet it was a poetry of tremendous energy: “‘our American Risorgimento . . . will make the Italian Renaissance look like a tempest in a teapot,’ Pound told Harriet Monroe in 1912—there was so much confidence and zest in the renovation of poetry, in throwing off conventions and making new explorations, that this attitude was communicated to readers” (qtd. in *From the 1890s* 296). The excitement felt in the new poetry “often had its chief source in



William Stafford at the University of Kansas, ca. 1935.

their relation to their own art, but it was felt by them and conveyed to readers as a general attitude toward life,” said Perkins: “Some of these poets claimed moments of mystical communion. Others, notably Lindsay and Sandburg, voiced a huge, unfocused faith in American democracy. And most took an interest in life—in types of character, scenes, experiences, sensations, imaginations—which was, relatively speaking, itself affirmative” (296).

As a result, the “new” poetry, Perkins says, “continued not only to be appreciatively read but to form the stock idea of ‘modern’ verse. In American high schools, colleges, and reading clubs in the thirties the notion of contemporary poetry was likely to be the short, free-verse poem of tender impressionism, such as Sandburg’s ‘Fog’ or ‘Cool Tombs’ or Amy Lowell’s ‘Meeting-House Hill.’ Poems in meter, such as Lindsay’s ‘The Flower-Fed Buffaloes,’ or the cinquains of Adelaide Crapsey, or Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ are, apart from the versification, of the same kind” (qtd. in *From the 1890s* 297).

Stafford was undoubtedly familiar with this version of popular modernism because it filled the libraries in the small towns in Kansas where he grew up. In an autobiographical account of his early reading, Stafford says, “There was always an edge to town,” beyond which there were rivers and fields—but “in the center of town was a library, another kind of edge, out there forever, to explore” (*You Must Revise Your Life* 3). The Carnegie libraries of Hutchinson, Wichita, Liberal, Garden City were “packed with dynamite books,” he said, “we raided them every week” (3). One of the striking aspects of his reading history was how much it was a family affair. He states “My parents were not progressive—they did not try to encourage their kids . . . No, my parents were jealous; they grabbed the books first” (3-4). He mentions when the family would be “reading around through some [poetry] anthology, passing it along,” his mother would “insist on her favorite and resent my reading it before she had a chance” (4). The poem referred to was Henry Holcomb Bennett’s “The Flag Goes By,” published in Stedman’s *An American Anthology* (1900), but the family also had decidedly modern tastes in poetry: “We would recite from *Spoon River Anthology*,” Stafford said, as well as Robinson Jeffers (6-7).

That the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters and Robinson Jeffers was readily available in a small city in the middle of Kansas should not seem remarkable. Newcomb says Master’s book was a “hit” from the moment it was published:

Like Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* and many other less-remembered novels of the period, *Spoon River Anthology* spoke to the restiveness of an increasingly secular and urban populace impatient with the narrowness and hypocrisy of small-town America. That it did so in verse that was both strikingly innovative and readily accessible struck readers as all the more remarkable. (19)

The fact that the members of a lower-middle-class family in Hutchinson, a town that could easily be a stand-in for Spoon River, were reading these poems and agreeing with their critique is a testimony to the real revolutionary moment the New Poetry represented. The Stafford family taste in literature could be pretty sophisticated: Stafford recounts that he and his mother loved the novels of Willa Cather, Edna Ferber, and Sinclair Lewis—“I remember my mother laughing till she cried when she read Elmer

Gantry, though she was quite respectful of the clergy” (4).

For Stafford, then, modern poetry was both, as Newcomb put it, “strikingly innovative” and “readily accessible” (19). The poetry of the early moderns included a great variety of forms—from free verse to high formalism. It was not afraid to be critical of society, or to address the issues of the moment. It was not divorced from the average reader’s experience. And it was widespread: Perkins says of the short free-verse modern lyric that “Class after class of schoolchildren were set to memorize such poems . . . and it seems likely that in some minds such poems came to represent the stock idea not only of “modern poetry” but of poetry per se, displacing the Romantic nature lyric” (Perkins *From the 1890s* 297).

Popular modernism is perhaps best represented by Louis Untermeyer’s *Modern American Poetry*, first published in 1919 and revised and republished every few years throughout the century. In his preface he describes the arrival of *Poetry Magazine*—first championing its ecumenical intention “to introduce the work of hitherto unknown poets and to herald, with an eager impartiality, the various groups, schools and “movements” (Untermeyer). He then listed what was for his time the pantheon of modern poets—none of whom would have been approved of by the New Critics, except perhaps Frost:

For three years the skies continued to discharge such strange and divergent phenomena as Vachel Lindsay’s *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* (1913), James Oppenheim’s *Songs for the New Age* (1914), the first anthology of *The Imagists* (1914), *Challenge* (1914), Amy Lowell’s *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), Lindsay’s *The Congo and Other Poems* (1914), Robert Frost’s *North of Boston* (1914), Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), John Gould Fletcher’s *Irradiations* (1915), Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems* (1916).

“By 1917,” Untermeyer says, “the ‘new’ poetry was ranked as ‘America’s first national art’; its success was sweeping, its sales unprecedented.” The democratic accessibility of the poetry met Untermeyer’s enthusiastic approval: “People who never before had read verse, turned to it and found they could not only read but relish it.” This was in part because modern poetry had jettisoned the elitist, Euro-centric trappings of the genteel poets of the previous generation. New readers “discovered that for the enjoyment of poetry it was not necessary to have at their elbows a dictionary of rare words and classical references; they no longer were required to be acquainted with Latin legendry and the minor love-affairs of the major Greek divinities. Life was their glossary, not literature.” Modern poetry embraced the demotic speech and common experience of the American people: “The new product spoke to them in their own language. And it did more: it spoke to them of what they had scarcely ever heard expressed; it was not only closer to their soil but nearer their souls” (Untermeyer).

Stafford’s university experience reinforced this general version of modern poetry. In the fall of 1941, his last year of graduate work at the University of Kansas, Stafford took “American Poetry of the 20th Century” from William Savage Johnson. Johnson was a Yale Ph.D. who had come to KU in 1908. His specialty was 19th British literature; he published a book on Thomas Carlyle and had edited

(cont. on p. 4)



Stafford as student in the 30s.

selections from the prose of Matthew Arnold. But contemporary poetry was a deep interest—he was himself a published poet and he was very interested in early British modernism—on a trip to Europe he had dined with Yeats, managed to visit Thomas Hardy, and had become a friend of the Irish poet A.E. (who actually visited Johnson at Lawrence). Johnson was a meticulous lecturer, and his lecture notes are preserved in the Spencer Archive at KU. We have no way of knowing how complete these are, but they give us a reasonable sample of what Stafford would have heard. Savage began with an impassioned paean to Walt Whitman, “the greatest single force inherited from our own past and felt in American poetry today and in the poetical literature of the whole western world” (Johnson). He also gave a moving and very personal account of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. There are careful, balanced considerations of E. A. Robinson, Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters. A prosodic analysis of lines by Archibald MacLeish is preserved. T.S. Eliot is mentioned briefly, but not Pound. Robinson Jeffers is also mentioned—and it is worth noting that Johnson’s final scholarly project was an analysis of Jeffers’ use of Christ symbols in his work.

But even as the popular modernists were clearly dominant in the schools, literary journals and homes of America by the early 1920s, “other more avant-garde strains of modernism were developing among poets who would gradually supersede them in terms of critical reputation” (Newcomb 21). In fact the eclectic, accessible version of American modernism was exactly what the New Critics were out to destroy. When Robert Lowell first visited Allen Tate in 1937, he found Tate sitting beside a stack of books: “All the English classics, and some of the Greeks and Latins were at Tate’s elbow.” The older poet seems to have regaled Lowell with an impromptu lecture: “He maneuvered through them, coolly blasting, rehabilitating, now and then reciting key lines in an austere, vibrant voice. Turning to the moderns, he slaughtered whole Chicago droves of slipshod Untermeyer Anthology experimentalists.” So much for Untermeyer’s democratic, inclusive ethos. Tate said, “He felt that all the culture and tradition of the East, the South and Europe stood behind Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Yeats and Rimbaud. I found myself despising the rootless appetites of middle-class meliorism” (“Visiting the Tates” 558).

According to Perkins, “In the years immediately following *The Waste Land*, the modern movement split. Poets such as Cummings, Williams, Sandburg or Marianne Moore essentially continued in the way of the 1910s; younger poets generally responded to the influence of Eliot” (*From the 1890s* 296). Tate was just such a younger poet (he was 23 when Eliot published *The Waste Land*). Along with his fellow Fugitives, Tate would help enshrine this alternative modernism in the academy. Perkins says, “By the end of the 1930s the ‘modern’ in poetry was identified in university circles with the poetry of Eliot as its prototype” (*From the 1890s* 296-7). Untermeyer had declared that readers no longer needed “to have at their elbows a dictionary of rare words and classical references”; this new group of poets and critics would reinstate that requirement.

By the end of World War II, James Breslin says, “a particular phase

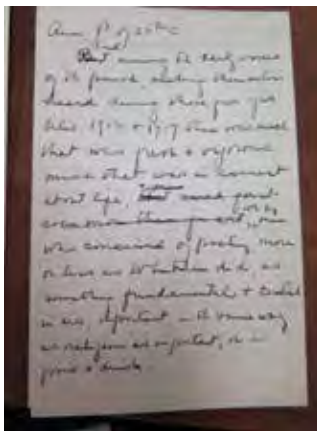
of modernism—that identified with Eliot and the New Criticism in America—had achieved a powerful hegemony which successfully domesticated modernism” (13). If modernism had begun as a revolt against the orthodoxy of late-19th-century genteel tradition, the New Critics returned that modernism to academicism and gentility by essentially excluding its populist wing. According to David Antin,

Allen Tate provides a standard list of “masters” in a 1955 essay that was reprinted as an introduction in his part of *An Anthology of British and American Poetry, 1900-1950*, which he compiled with David Cecil. It includes Frost, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Marianne Moore, Ransom, Cummings and Crane, and is more or less typical for the period during which it was given and for the kind of critic making it. (100)<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this truncated version of modernism ignored free verse, and it ignored both the optimism and the social progressivism of poets like Carl Sandburg; it also ignored the Midwestern regionalism of both Sandburg and Masters. Frost’s New England was grudgingly allowed, but the Midwest and the West were not poetic subjects for the New Critics. “Many of the new critics . . . talked as if they were completing a revolution,” says Breslin, “what they actually accomplished was what Howard Nemerov called ‘a Napoleonic reversal and a Bourbon restoration.’” (26).

The consequences of this revanchist approach to poetry were sometimes aesthetically thrilling—the second-generation moderns wrote many excellent poems—but could also be personally devastating. Donald Hall writes, “Stafford was born in 1914, the same year as Weldon Kees and Randall Jarrell and John Berryman, three suicides. . . How wonderfully the survivor contrasts. What makes him so different?” (147). It’s an interesting question. Stafford was exempt from many of the personal problems that plagued the second generation of moderns, and the fact that he was not indoctrinated with the New Critical program until long after he had matured to adulthood may have had something to do with it.

Hall alludes to the fact that the second-generation moderns often lived difficult lives. Majorie Perloff puts it bluntly: they lived lives “peppered by enormous doses of alcohol and adultery, and, in Lowell’s case (as in that of Theodore Roethke and Delmore Schwartz) by repeated bouts with insanity that resulted in repeated hospitalization” (Perloff 32). Perloff’s explanation is that the poets of this generation were, in part, victims of the “myth of the poet as it was disseminated in the decades following World War II” (*ibid.*). This myth she defines as the “doctrine, codified by the New Criticism, of the rigid separation of art from life.” Inspired in large part by the critical writings of T.S. Eliot, in which he expressed the notion that the “extinction of personality” was necessary in the service of art. This could have unpleasant psychological consequences, Perloff implies; she quotes Berryman as saying to his psychiatrist that his inability to remember his childhood stemmed from two causes: “(1) my old belief in the perfect separateness of Life & Art, the poet’s life being negligible & to-be-lost” and “(2) a real indifference to my own past life, partly because of my habit of looking back on myself



William Savage Johnson’s lecture notes.

as a hopeless fool prior to the present moment” (33). James Breslin adds a further nuance to this, noting that the “high incidence of alcoholism, mental breakdown, and suicide” among this generation “suggests that historical pressures worked to exacerbate private conflicts” (4). The pressure, Breslin claims, was created by a sense of belatedness—of living in the shadow of the first moderns, who were all still alive and working in the 1930s. “The poets of this middle generation seemed to have been haunted alternately by grandiose expectations and by the fear that in the end they were mere epigoni,” says Breslin (9). This combination of fear and grandiosity made poetry an especially stressful enterprise: second generation moderns both courted the approval of the moderns they worshipped and had to figure out how to supplant them by doing something original of their own.

This quandary was exacerbated by the fact that much of their poetic practice was being informed by New Critical theory, which had taken T.S. Eliot’s essays and elaborated their precepts into a fully developed analytic industry (Ransom actually called it “Criticism, Inc.”). They dictated their own very selective version of the history of modernism and claimed that it reached its apotheosis in the dense, formal, symbolist poem. New Critics or their disciples controlled many prestigious literary journals and by 1938 they had even produced a college textbook.<sup>2</sup> Ambitious young poets were eager to meet the high standards of the New Critics: John Berryman, for example, admitted that his poetry was a “natural product of an elaborate, scrupulous and respected literary criticism.” (qtd. in Perkins *Modernism and After* 408). Poems that resulted from these well-articulated demands, says Perkins, were

. . . compressed, complex, and ironic. Influenced by the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, they were witty, punning, and paradoxical. The speaker in their poetry was a “persona,” and was not to be confused with the poet, and the subject matter did not reveal or necessarily arise from the poet’s life. The “hardship” was felt by the poet in composing and by the reader in appreciating the poem, for the style imposed minute conscious attention to nuances, and had to be achieved slowly with innumerable revisions. (*Modernism and After* 407-8)

The rewards for conforming to this aesthetic program were substantial. Poets who met the standards found doors opening immediately at the journals the New Critics were associated with. Perkins puts it, “Lowell, Berryman, Nemerov, and many another starting out were trying to create great poems to fit a taste that already existed” in universities. “To the extent that they succeeded, recognition came instantly,”—the result of an “agreement between the producers and consumers of a style” typical of academic art (*Modernism and After* 80). But again, this created an anxious environment for the poets—making them simultaneously cautious and aggressive. As Robert Lowell said in an interview with the *Paris Review*, “You think three times before you put a word down, and ten times about taking it out. And that’s related to boldness; if you put words down they must do something, you’re not going to put clichés. But then it’s related to caution; you write much less.” (“Art of Poetry”).

What difference would it have made if the New Criticism had not captured the teaching of poetry in the more prestigious American universities and journals? Would we have had a “tragic generation” of moderns? It is impossible to know, but Stafford’s account of how he wrote his first poem is instructive. It was, he says, during study hall when he was a senior at the University of Kansas. Stafford writes:

It was winter; a strange violet light was in the sky—a color typical of clear prairie evenings when the air is freezing. Something about the light, and the quiet library, and my being away from home—many influences at once—made me sit and dream in a special way. I began to write. What came to me was a poem, with phrases that caught the time, my feelings. I was as if in a shell that glowed. All the big, dim reading room became more itself and had more meaning because of what I was writing.

(*You Must Revise Your Life* 10).

It is notable that the “influences” Stafford refers to are not either criticism or literature—the two permissible catalysts for a poet



Stafford in floppy hat with a circle of students, maybe at Port Townsend.

of his generation—but what James Breslin calls, referring to the poetics of the succeeding generation of postmoderns, “the literal reality of a physical moment” (60). From the start, his poetry is grounded in “a poetic imagination willing to acknowledge an immediate external reality,”

one that stimulates him to attempt to find a way of capturing it (ibid). His method, that is to say, is more Imagist than Symbolist. Like the postmoderns he will be associated with, Stafford’s poetic reaches back to an early period of the modern revolution—one that Eliot himself was not divorced from, one that Pound helped to birth, but not one approved by the New Critics. Lowell, in his recounting of his first encounter with Allen Tate, says that Tate told him “as that a good poem had nothing to do with exalted feelings of being moved by the spirit. It was simply a piece of craftsmanship, an intelligible or cognitive object” (“Visiting” 558). Stafford would never agree to this dictum.

The other thing Tate tells Lowell is that “he always believed each poem he finished would be his last” (“Visiting” 558). It was a corollary to his belief that the poem was “simply a piece of craftsmanship.” By believing “poetry must . . . be tinkered with and recast until one’s eyes pop out of one’s head,” as Lowell puts it, Tate has made the composition process seem utterly exhausting, even self-destructive. How often can one gather the strength to endure “the tortured joy of composition to strike the impossible bull’s-eye”? (“Visiting” 558). Stafford, by contrast, continually strives to make the composition of poetry seem a joy, something he could approach “the way other people approached jogging” (Tillinghast). As a result of the pleasure of writing his first poem, Stafford says, “My writing picked up momentum in those years in Lawrence . . . my habit of daily writing began” (*You Must Revise Your Life* 10). He kept at it, publishing in student magazines, the KU yearbook, a small Missouri journal called *The Bard*. In 1941 he won the University’s annual Carruth award, netting him \$100—an astounding windfall at a

(cont. on p. 16)

## Coping with the Dark Side: The Exorcisms of Theodore Roethke and William Stafford

By Allan Chavkin

In two poems with similar titles, Theodore Roethke and William Stafford reveal how they cope with the nightmare side of existence. That dark side for both poets is expressed in similar ways; the nightmare realm threatens to overwhelm them, but through poetry they are able to cope with and ultimately overcome what threatens their psychic balance. By writing about the bad dreams that threaten to overwhelm them, they are able to transform their night terrors into something positive. Yet the exorcisms of the nightmare side of existence take different forms and ultimately reveal the different kinds of poets that Roethke and Stafford are.

Roethke suffered with a manic-depressive illness through much of his adult life. Although there were long periods of relatively normal living, there were episodes in which he suffered intense mental anguish. As Kay Redfield Jamison remarks, during these episodes the poet endured “an almost unbearable pain” (27).<sup>1</sup> In his poem “Elegy,” he bluntly states how difficult it is for him to cope with his manic depression:

I have myself an inner weight of woe  
That God himself can scarcely bear<sup>2</sup>

The most vivid description of the ordeal that Roethke had to face because of his illness can be found in his poem “The Exorcism” (CP 147). The poem evokes the nightmare world in which Roethke finds himself when an episode of his manic-depressive illness comes on and threatens to overwhelm him and drive him completely mad.

In an introduction to his volume of poems *Words for the Wind* (1958), Roethke states that the third part of the volume, which includes “The Exorcism,” (see p.21) “consists of poems of terror, and running away— and the dissociation of personality that occurs in such attempts to escape reality.”<sup>3</sup> Roethke’s “The Exorcism,” a poem of 28 lines, portrays the increasing disintegration of his identity as the poet experiences an array of disturbing sights and sounds in quickly shifting scenes. Grey sheep appear, and “half in flame,” he runs away and asks his father who dares confront “the thing he is.” In his nightmare world inanimate objects seem to speak to the poet, and a shape cries from a cloud. But suddenly he is in other places, “down long corridors” and then “babbling in urinals.” Next, he is in a dark wood, his identity fragmented as he is experiencing a dissociative episode in which he witnesses his several selves come running from the leaves and then scuttle under stones. And then he, “A cold God-furious man,” is continually turning upon his spine.

Writhing until the last  
Forms of his secret life  
Lay with the dross of death.

Suddenly he regains his sanity; apparently, he has been able to exorcise the nightmare terrors that threaten to engulf him. Roethke helps underscore this return to sanity by separating this line from the rest of the poem:

I was myself, alone.

In the final lines of the poem, the poet is perspiring after his ordeal and breathing more slowly now, but he has endured and overcome the threat of complete psychological disintegration:

I broke from that low place  
Breathing a slower breath,  
Cold, in my own dead salt.

He has exorcised the night terrors after the hallucinatory excursion into the mental abyss and achieved a kind of victory. In fact, Roethke believed that as a consequence of surviving the horrific experience that he evokes in “The Exorcism” and in some of his other poems, he is a better person for it—to paraphrase Nietzsche, what does not kill him makes him stronger. And surviving the psychotic episode that he describes in “The Exorcism” is not only valuable for revealing his resilience but also for other compensations. While his psychotic episodes of manic depression were terrifying, Roethke believed that they conveyed definite advantages such as greater visionary power and heightened emotional responses. Moreover, Roethke argues, “Dissociation often precedes a new state of clarity” (SP 41). After nearly psychologically disintegrating, the poet believes that the arduous struggle results in his spiritual renewal. “The marsh, the mire, the Void, is always there, immediate and terrifying. It is a splendid place for schooling the spirit. It is America” (SP 40). What would be for many people with manic depression only senseless suffering, Roethke’s hallucinatory excursion into the abyss is an experience that he considers to be meaningful and ultimately affirmative. Roethke regarded his poetry and his manic depression as inextricably connected. He believed that descending into the psychological mire while terrifying enables him to achieve greater imaginative power and keener insight than he would have had if were not a manic depressive. For Roethke, poetry was the only way for him to manage and make some kind of sense of his mental illness. Despite the agony that his manic depression forced him to experience at times, his outlook is, ultimately, affirmative; he bluntly expresses his positive outlook in “The Moment” (CP 238):

What else to say?  
We end in joy.

In a 1973 discussion between Richard Hugo and William Stafford, printed in *The Northwest Review* and reprinted in *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life*, Hugo, who was, like Roethke, a manic-depressive, as well as being one of his stellar students, says to Stafford, “I believe that writers do that ...we play back our losses: this is the source of poems.” Stafford responds in part, “[that] makes me uncomfortable.” “Me too,” Hugo answers, “because it’s just not healthy. But I also know it happens. Well, I guess it isn’t supposed to be healthy, is it? Art isn’t.” Stafford answers: “That’s what bothers me, though—I believe it is” (46).

Roethke’s poetry is different from that of Stafford’s. Roethke’s poetry focuses almost exclusively on a single subject: the self, its trials, its tribulations, and its triumphs. His introspective poetry does not explore social or political matters. In this regard, Roethke is different from Stafford, whose poetry does explore the interior life,

which so preoccupies Roethke, but also reveals a social conscience, though at times subtly.

Stafford's sonnet entitled "Exorcism" (see p. 8) underscores the difference between the two poets. Stafford's poem has been unfairly neglected. It was originally published in *Tri-Quarterly* and not reprinted in his collections *Stories That Could Be True: New and Collected Poems* (1977), *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (1998), or *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford* (1993).<sup>4</sup> As Tim Barnes suggests, Stafford had an affinity for the sonnet form, and often used it in an intuitive, organic way (13). "Exorcism" is highly interesting in both its content and its unconventional form. Stafford revises the traditional Petrarchan sonnet by reversing the usual order of octave and sestet and by abandoning the traditional rhyme schemes for this kind of fourteen-line poem. "Exorcism" is a free verse sonnet in which he presents the problem to be explored in the first part of the poem, the sestet, and then presents his answer to that problem in the second part of the poem, the octave. The spacing that he employs to help clarify his thematic concerns is also unusual in part. He not only separates the sestet and octave with a space, which one finds in some sonnets, but also he leaves a space between the thirteenth and fourteenth lines of the sonnet, a departure from the usual conclusion of the Petrarchan sonnet. He is challenging the "common sense" assumption that war is inevitable, and therefore it is appropriate for him to re-envision the traditional form of the sonnet and embody his belief in the need for a change of attitude in an unconventional form. Implicitly the poem suggests that we should challenge the status quo, follow a different path than the one we have been following, and create new art forms.

Stafford's "Exorcism" reveals his attitude toward life and indicates one of the primary purposes of his poetry. In the first part of this unconventional sonnet, the sestet, he describes a horrible dream in which two armies kill each other. He reveals that he must write about this dream-- hence the existence of "Exorcism" -- or he will be consumed by the nightmare, his life then becoming an escape from reality, or as he explains in the poem:

Lest a dream I have make my life  
a dream, I write it here: somewhere far  
two armies join and by their virtue kill  
each other,

Although "by their virtue" could be merely an idiom, in this particular context it is likely that Stafford is using the phrase ironically to help describe the dream in which two armies destroy each other. Virtue originally meant "valor" or "manliness" but later referred to behavior of high moral standards. Stafford likely has the multiple meanings of virtue in mind. The two armies who battle and kill each other regard themselves as virtuous--that is, they see themselves as manly, courageous, and morally superior. Yet Stafford's dream of this battle suggests otherwise, for he sees the absurd horror and pointlessness of all this "virtuous" bloodshed, with only one man surviving the slaughter. This man who survives the horrific carnage addresses Stafford with this command, which concludes the first part of the sonnet:

"We are survivors, you and I;  
remember me, everywhere you go, this day."

In the sestet, Stafford has vividly expressed the problem of war that threatens the existence of civilization, and in the second part of his sonnet, the octave, he presents his response to the challenge of the lone survivor who has instructed him always to remember him, with the implication that he should not simply accept the status quo and assume nothing can ever be done to change the way things are. As in the traditional Petrarchan sonnet, the first line of the second part of this poem reveals the *volta* or turn which marks the beginning of Stafford's response to the challenge that the survivor has thrust upon the poet in the sestet. In traditional sonnets the second part of the poem often presents a clear solution to the problem, or a firm resolution, or cathartic release of the emotional tension evoked in the first part of the sonnet. In Stafford's unconventional sonnet the resolution is ambivalent with the surprising final line forcing the reader to reconsider the poet's thoughts in the octave.

In the first part of the octave, the poet responds to the survivor's command:

So, one person at a time, I serve as neighbor,  
father, peacemaker, an occasion for thought  
about our age; and all the time I perform  
in the living world as my own self: survivor,  
dreamer, teller of the dream and its projected  
vision.

While it would be easy to ignore the survivor's command with the rationalization that the problem of war and other difficult problems that afflict society are too big for one individual to try to solve, Stafford rejects that kind of thinking and instead will help one person at a time in his various roles as neighbor, parent, and peacemaker, as his own self without social masks. The implicit idea here is expressed in the film *Schindler's List*, that "whoever saves one life, saves the world entire," a belief from the Talmud. Moreover, Stafford as survivor and dreamer will write poetry that will demystify our lives and examine social problems that plague us. By writing about his nightmare he transforms a dream of death into a poem that challenges us to think about what needs to change.

By turns of thought I create  
in dreams of death a life, to illuminate our lives.

For emphasis Stafford in this unconventional sonnet separates the last line from the rest of the poem.

And those armies I can't save die every day.

The final line of the poem might be considered another *volta* or turn, and the isolation of this line from the rest of the poem emphasizes its importance. The poem concludes with his sober acknowledgment that despite all his efforts described in the octave, he cannot prevent the mass slaughter that is occurring daily. The final line of the poem suggests his ambivalence in which there is a feeling of futility that he lacks the power as peacemaker to save the people who are dying "every day" and the opposite feeling that because these people *are* dying daily it is imperative for him to do what he can to prevent or at least reduce the carnage. He recognizes the limits of poetry in attaining immediate political goals, but he understands, too, that it is important to take the long view and do what we can do in the hope that the future will be more peaceful than the present.

(cont. on p. 8)

(cont. from p. 7)

Stafford rejected the notion of poets as sick people trying to heal themselves. In Stafford's view, poetry is not so much dramatic performance as it is witness or testimony. In his poem, "Exorcism," Stafford testifies to his dream in the sestet, "I write it here." In the following octave he attests to his response to the dream's warning: war is human annihilation. Being a "neighbor, / father, peacemaker, an occasion for thought / about our age" and a survivor, a "dreamer" and "teller of the dream and its projected / vision" is his way of trying "to illuminate our lives" and keep the light of a peaceful, thriving world alive.

In Stafford's poem, the dream is internal, but its subject and response to the problem it presents are external. The poem reminds one of Stafford's aphorism, "the wars we haven't had have saved many lives," and his belief in pacifism. An exorcism is the expulsion or attempted expulsion of an evil spirit from a person or place. Roethke's poem does the first, exorcizes the evil from a person, the poet. Stafford's does the second, exorcizes evil from a place, the world. And the poem exorcizes the dream of Armageddon from him, "Lest a dream make my life / a dream." Stafford's poem has two exorcisms. Roethke's has only one exorcism unless one sees "the Void" as America, a mystifying association of manic-depressive hallucinatory descent into the psychological depths with American society.

Roethke and his student Hugo meet their counterpoint in Stafford. For Stafford great art does not draw attention to itself or necessarily aggrandize the poet; in fact, great art might well efface the poet. He did not believe, as Hugo did, that the source of a poet's writing is unhealthy obsessions, and he rejects the assumption that the price of creativity requires suffering from aberrant mental states.

Comparing Roethke's "The Exorcism" with Stafford's "Exorcism" reveals their different conceptions of the purpose of poetry. With his almost exclusive focus on his own self as the subject of his writing, Roethke's highly introspective poetry eschews social and political issues and exhaustively explores his interior life, which was marked with bouts of mental illness throughout much of adult life. Stafford's poetry is also introspective, but his strong social conscience results in some poems such as "Exorcism" that challenge the status quo and seeks change in the hope of a better world.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For information on Roethke's manic depression, see Jamison, Orr, and Seager.

<sup>2</sup> *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, p. 144; hereafter abbreviated as *CP* and appearing parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, p. 58; hereafter abbreviated as *SP* and appearing parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> "Exorcism" can be found in the "Issue Archive" at: <https://www.triquarterly.org>

#### Works Cited

Barnes, Tim. "Threads in the Cloth, Part 2." *Friends of William*

- Stafford: A Journal & Newsletter For Poets & Poetry*. 20.1 (Spring/Summer 2015): 13-14.
- Jamison, Kay Redfield. *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: Free Press, 1994.
- Orr, Gregory. *Poetry As Survival*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002.
- Roethke, Theodore. *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*. Ed. by Ralph J. Mills, Jr. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965.
- Seager, Allan. *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.
- Stafford, William. *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life*. Eds. Paul Merchant and Vincent Wixon. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford*. Ed. Robert Bly. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Exorcism." *Tri-Quarterly* (Fall 1964), 49.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Stories That Could Be True: New and Collected Poems*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998.

## Exorcism

Lest a dream I have make my life  
a dream I write it here: somewhere far  
two armies join and by their virtue kill  
each other, save one man, who looks at me  
and says, "We are survivors, you and I;  
remember me, everywhere you go this day."

So, one person at a time, I serve as neighbor,  
father, peacemaker, an occasion for thought  
about our age; and all the time I perform  
in the living world as my own self: survivor,  
dreamer, teller of the dream and its projected  
vision. By turns of thought I create  
in dreams of death a life, to illuminate our lives.

And those armies I can't save die every day.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, PUBLISHED IN *TRI-QUARTERLY* I (FALL 1964)



# Losing and Finding William Stafford

By Erica Goss

I came across William Stafford's *Passwords* one early spring evening in the San Jose State University library. I'd recently read his poem "Ask Me" in a textbook that included the work of poets from the 1960s on. To me, who grew up reading the Imagist poetry of the early 20th century, many of the poems in the book seemed long, tedious, and—well—prosy. I loved Lucille Clifton but couldn't make heads or tails of Albert Goldbarth.

And then I found "Ask Me." The first line drew me in immediately: "Some time when the river is ice ask me." The next phrase, "mistakes I have made," brought to mind mistakes were made, "the artful dodge of the impersonal apology" (William Safire). In replacing "were" with "I have," however, Stafford owns those mistakes, inviting the person he addresses into a dialogue. "Ask me whether / what I have done is my life," the poem continues, hinting at further depths. As to the people who come and go in our lives—"ask me what difference / their strongest love or hate has made."

I also noted, at least in this poem, that Stafford doesn't ask for forgiveness. In stating he's made mistakes, he confirms that those mistakes are not to be dismissed, explained, or glossed over, but contemplated, as he contemplates the river current with its "comings and goings from miles away."

Those words had a powerful effect on me. At that time, I was in my mid-forties, married close to twenty years, working on my MFA while raising my sons and trying to help my husband's and my aging parents. I felt torn, exhausted, and constantly apologizing for having let someone down. The poem gave me permission to live with my mistakes without explanation or justification. I found that incredibly liberating.

I took *Passwords* from the shelf. So many phrases delighted me: "The ocean and I have many pebbles / to find and wash off and roll into shape"—"Willows never forget how it feels / to be young"—"Junkyard crucifixes, voluptuous / discards." I turned the book over and read Stafford's short bio on the back, which ended with "He lives in Lake Oswego, Oregon." I had no idea where Lake Oswego was, but it sounded like a good place for a poet to live. It was 2005, and I never imagined that one day I too would live in Oregon.

Over the next few months, I read my way through the library's Stafford collection: *The Rescued Year*, *You Must Revise Your Life*, *Writing the Australian Crawl*, *An Oregon Message*, *Going Places*. Many if not most of the books had the same bio as the one I'd read on the back of *Passwords*, with the same photo of Stafford almost-smiling in front of some wooden planks, his head cocked to one side. He had the young-old look of so many aging poets—the "old soul" sensibility we associate with certain children.

Shortly after I found *Passwords*, I suggested to my graduate advisor that the university invite William Stafford to be a visiting writer. He looked at me curiously. "You know he's dead, right?" I was shocked. "But it says here he lives in Lake Oswego," I said, pointing to the back of one of the Stafford books I'd checked out of the library. "Lived," my advisor said. "He's been dead for a long time. Twelve years, I think."

"Oh," I said, trying to laugh off my ignorance. "That's what happens when you read old bios." But I was more than just embarrassed. I felt

personally wounded. Over the next few months I grieved. I'd never be able to tell Stafford how much his poems meant to me, especially how "Ask Me" had helped me understand the peculiar emotions that accompany middle age. There would be no anticipating a new collection, no looking for new poems in journals, no hearing him read.

I kept a copy of "Ask Me" in my wallet for years. By the time I finally threw it out, the paper crease fuzzy and the words blurry, I'd read most of Stafford's poems. Not all of them grabbed me with the force of "Ask Me," but they were always worth the effort. A few years ago I went back to my poetry textbook, the one where I'd found "Ask Me," and reread the poets who'd befuddled me: Berryman, Ammons, Ashbery, Ignatow, Voigt. They were still difficult, and I still struggled with some of the work, but I made important discoveries while reading them. Stafford's poems taught me the patience to stay with a poem until it revealed itself to me, no matter how long it took.

In 2017, I moved to Eugene, Oregon, with my husband and grown sons. I now count among my friends many people who knew Stafford personally. Although I'm curious about what kind of a person he was, I don't ask for particulars. I prefer to know him through his poems, which continue to enrich my life.

## The Ghost of William Stafford

One day, as I watched a waterfall ripple like Rapunzel's hair,  
I felt as if something were about to happen.

At least, that's what I'll say if you ask me.  
I didn't really see the waterfall until I drove

a long time through farmland and found myself at the edge  
of a town. The town ended the farms like the farms ended

the waterfall. At the stop sign I closed my eyes  
and there I was, a startled prince,

the receiver of an unexpected gift: a cascade dissolving  
into mist. My hands grasped the steering wheel.

ERICA GOSS

**Sightings:** *Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners*, by Naomi Shihab Nye. New York: Green Willow Books, 2018.

*The Writing Party*, by Ken Waldman. Wimberly, TX: Mexcalita Press, 2020.

By Tim Barnes

Both of these books declare allegiance in different ways to William Stafford in their introductions. Both of these poets have been significantly influenced by him and his work. These books came into my hands because I share that allegiance to Stafford's poetry and sensibility.

In December of last year, Christmas shopping, I was in Annie Bloom's bookstore in Multnomah Village. As usual, I found myself in the poetry section where I discovered a copy of *Voices in the Air*. Seeing mention of Stafford, I bought it. The purchase led the bookstore clerk to inform me that Naomi would be giving a reading the coming January 13<sup>th</sup> (2020) in Lake Oswego at a small private school, Arbor School. Because Naomi is a wonderful poet, one of FWS' national advisors, and was a close friend of Stafford's, I vowed to attend. Naomi's affection for Bill can be seen on the pages of this publication in a feature in issue 7.2 where she tells the story of Bill attending one of her workshops at a writing conference in San Antonio. At the workshop, she held up a small book ("about one inch tall") given to her by some Latvian educators. It had to be small so it could be hidden during the Cold War years. Bill raised his hand and asked if he could hold the book for a while. Naomi told this story in the context of having recently driven by the chain hotel where the workshop took place and having a "warm feeling" for "one of those ugly hotels that changes its name a lot" due to that memory of Bill. Bill's desire to hold the book whose tiny stature witnessed the value of literature in difficult times speaks volumes to his character and Naomi was moved by that.

In her introduction to *Voices in the Air*, Nye speaks of "all the voices ever cast out into the air still floating around in far ethers," and talks about a number of writers, Galway Kinnell, Freya Stark, Peter Matthiessen, Townes Van Zandt, and William Stafford, who she calls a "great twentieth-century American poet and teacher, tireless encourager of dialogue and nonviolence," who "is still speaking in the slant shadows falling across the path. If we only know how to listen better, he said, even the grasses by the roadside could help us live our lives."

In her introduction, Nye discusses a word she learned in Japan, *Yutori*, which means "life-space," saying "writing poetry gives us more *yutori*—a place to stand back to contemplate what we are living and experiencing. More spaciousness in being, more room in which to listen." I think this is true and that William Stafford's poetry presents a profound witness to the truth of this. *Yutori*, of course, is what writing poetry can give to us all.

Many of the poems in this book have epigraphs and in the poems themselves Nye mentions a number of people, the "voices in the air." To enhance this richness of her allusions to these various people, she offers biographical notes at the end of the book, a rather entrancing aspect of the book, saying about Stafford that he is "one of the most

essential voices in the twentieth century" and that his book, *Every War Has Two Losers*, "should be chained to a pedestal in the oval office."

*Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners* is a delightful, warm, humane book and the same must be said of her reading at Arbor School. The audience of parents, teachers, and children was completely charmed and warmed by her grace and wit and kindness. Former FW board chair Shelley Reece said of Naomi after her talk at the fifth annual William Stafford Symposium, "She finds human resonance in ordinary things," a complement that chimes with the title of the University of Michigan's book of scholarship on Stafford, *The Worth of Local Things*. One certainly feels the sensibility of William Stafford echoing in any room where Naomi Shihab Nye speaks.

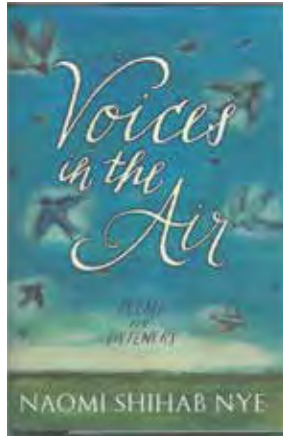
*The Writing Party* sailed into my hands through the mail because Waldman sent it to me after I asked him if I could reprint two of his poems about Stafford that appeared in *Terrain.org*, an online journal whose poetry is edited by Derek Sheffield (see Editor's Note). *The Writing Party* is a combination of writing handbook, poetry collection, and autobiography. A free-flowing, eclectic mixture of sour grapes and self-effacing/self-aggrandizing in which Waldman describes himself as a teacher, musician and performer. *The Writing Party* begins with this statement of allegiance: "I sometimes say I'm of the William Stafford school, which has meant I've aimed to be inclusive rather than exclusive as a writer, as a teacher, and as a human." Waldman then goes on to summarize Stafford's life and poetic principles, concluding that the lesson would be "we'd be best served by getting started, and trusting ourselves." For Waldman being of the Stafford school means "being open to wherever a piece of writing may take me." And it must be said, *The Writing Party* follows this advice,

covering Waldman's vocational life from his tennis-playing and coaching college days to his career as a poet/fiddler to the publication of his Trump sonnets, all loosely organized around various poetry prompts that often segue into aspects of his career, including serious criticism of some of his teachers in the MFA Program at the University of Alaska, professors A & B.

For example, Chapter Two, "Creating Character: Names from A-Z," uses a prompt offered by professor E (one of the good profs) called "A portrait in words." Discussing this prompt leads Waldman to talk about his experiences teaching writing as an adjunct and the various ways people write, "There's never one way to write or teach writing," he says and in exploring

approaches, mentions Stafford's practice of waking up early to write before beginning "his familial and professional responsibilities." As is his custom in this book, Waldman hauls Stafford into his ramble, trusting in his own self direction, gliding over Stafford's way of typing up poems in the afternoon or any other complexities,

A similar thing happens in chapter eight, which is organized around the prompt of using common objects as triggers. Here Waldman refers to Stafford's poem, "What's in My Journal," an example he tells us he often reads in class along with prose by Nicholson Baker and Marcel Proust.



In a chapter toward the middle of the book, “Holiday and Family,” a bit of a shaggy-dog chapter, Waldman wanders from his time working with *The Sun Magazine* in North Carolina to his tendency to find time to write during the holiday season to his residency at the Virginia Center for Creative Arts to his estrangement from his parents and the poems he has written about this estrangement, rationalizing the “harshness” about which he has written of his parents through Stafford’s “process of creation” in which “he didn’t censor himself.” Waldman closes the chapter with the assignment to write a poem in the form of a letter to one’s mother or father.

In a chapter on resources, “A Party of Resources (Two Books, Six Websites, Thirty-four Poems),” one of the books Waldman talks about is *Writing the Australian Crawl*, saying that he includes a copy of the essay “A Way of Writing,” in any workshop he “facilitates,” reading as well, from other books in the University of Michigan series, those by John Haines, Galway Kinnell, Philip Levine, and Stafford’s other book *You Must Revise Your Life*. I am reminded here of the battered copy of *Stories That Could Be True* that I carried in my briefcase to all my residencies when I did poetry-in-the-schools in the seventies and eighties. For Waldman and myself, William Stafford is an essential traveling companion. Waldman also mentions Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town* (on my shelf and also a bit battered) as well as Addonizio and Laux’s *The Poet’s Companion* and Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*. Websites he likes are those connected with *Poets & Writers Magazine* and the Association of Writers and Writers Programs, the AWP. Of the thirty-four poems Waldman mentions in his chapter heading, all having to do with writers and writing, you will find several connected to Stafford in these pages. Waldman closes his paragraph on Stafford as resource with the well-known section of “A Way of Writing” that includes the advice, “I must be willing to fail.” The mixed nature of Waldman’s writing career, as it is recounted in *The Writing Party*, makes it abundantly clear that this charming and plucky poet/fiddler, is very willing.

The allegiances these two poets have with Stafford certainly make for interesting reading for various reasons, all of which would raise a grin on Stafford’s visage, I’m sure. For Nye, the Stafford school leads to listening and finding wonderful voices in the air of the white page. For Waldman, it leads to letting his self censor loose with a genuine trust in readers being good party goers and patient listeners as well.

**Editor’s note:** Derek Sheffield did a wonderful interview in *The Seattle Review* 15.1 (2002) with the Stafford family, “Talking Recklessly,” which can now also be found at *Terrain.org*.



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Naomi Shihab Nye showing the FWSJ&NL to the audience at Arbor School.



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Naomi signing FWSJ&NLs for Arbor students.



PHOTO BY BYSTANDER

Ilka Kuznik, Naomi, and the editor.

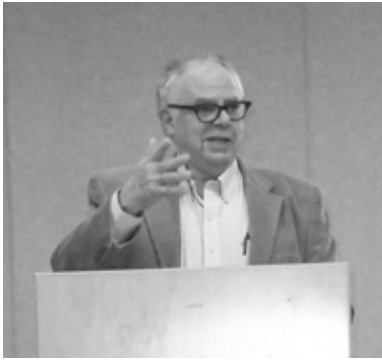


PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

## Joe Soldati, 1939-2019

By Tim Barnes

As a number of Friends know already, poet, professor, and former FWS board member Joe Soldati passed away on Dec 31 of last year. One can find several obituaries for Joe online and I hope Friends will visit them to remember this rather marvelous human being. In those obits readers will find, if they didn't already know, that Joe was a Vietnam Vet who earned a Ph. D. at the University of Washington, and professor of English at Western Oregon University for many years. He was, as well, one of the finest and most energetic board presidents the Friends of William Stafford ever had, presiding over some of its most prosperous years, which included many lovely January Stafford birthday celebrations (Paulann Petersen was on the board during much of his tenure), the traveling exhibit of poetry broadsides (many of them Stafford's), *How The Ink Feels*, and the *Paper Crane* broadside series (initiated by Patty Wixon, a previous board chair). Joe joined the board of The Friends of William Stafford in 1999 and became its chair not long after, writing a delightful and vital column each issue in this publication called "Notes from the Chair." A short piece in this publication (3.2) tells us that he became friends with William Stafford through Columbia River Watch, an organization of scientists, artists and environmentalists that organized a series of poetry readings in various towns to which Joe and Bill often drove together, though Joe may have become acquainted with Bill's work earlier through his co-editorship, with Tom Ferté, of *Calapooyia Collage*, which published many of Bill's poems and photographs.

For a list of the books he published and the anthologies he edited I refer you to his obituary, published in Oregon Live and to his website, which is still extant. There you will find that Joe wished any donation in his memory go to the Forest Park Conservancy and the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee, and that trees be planted in his honor through Eco-Friendly Memorial Trees (see his obit for more information). As a way of honoring Joe, we reprint two of William Stafford's tree poems, both published in *Calapooyia Collage* and in *The Long Sigh the Wind Makes*, which was published by Adrienne Lee Press, an imprint of Joe's *Calapooyia Collage* co-editor and Western Oregon University colleague, Tom Ferté.

When I first joined the FWS board, Joe was still on it and I remember vividly the buoyancy and warmth he brought to those meetings. I might mention, as well, that he left a small legacy to the FWS in his will, for which, in these difficult times, we are very grateful.

## Old Growth

They never found the grove, But  
sometimes a lone leaf drifted by  
lost from a legend. Then  
even the legend ended, or at least  
no more leaves—and the people  
who lived by the trees.  
They thought it was owls we were saving.

WILLIAM STAFFORD



This wood engraving by John De Pol is placed between two stanzas of Stafford's poem, "At Bryant's Grave," in *Under Open Sky: Poets on William Cullen Bryant*.

## The Shape of an Oak

In the open an oak makes no mistakes,  
but up against a wall it spreadeagles out,  
a frightened victim. Only the thoughtful admire it.  
In that same pursuit of what passes for sunlight,  
in my world I have arrived where I am.

Not my words only, but others—and  
spaces between them—can identify  
my kind of tree or person, and the wall  
or lack of it I grew beside, and  
the stress that bends the obvious.

Only years can reveal the hidden design.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

## Notes on the Legacy

### Amy Fleury:

Q. Are there any favorite authors who have influenced your work?

A. There are so many that if I listed them I'd inadvertently leave some important ones out! Rather than do that I'll just mention a poet whose work was an early influence on me and has remained a strong and constant influence in my writing life: William Stafford. His were some of the first contemporary poems I read when I was in college, and I loved how lucid and startling and wise they were. Then I learned that he was a born and raised Kansan like myself. It always seemed to me that poets were either dead or from New York, and here was one who was neither, and his poems were about my world. I have always admired the humility and honesty in Stafford's work, and his voice echoed that of any of my good uncles. Almost daily some relevant Stafford line surfaces in my thoughts. His poems keep me excellent company.

Q. Do you have a personal favorite among your published poems?

A. There are a few poems that I feel have more significance than others, but none that I would say is a favorite. I'll lean back on a trusty Stafford quote here. When asked which of his poems was his favorite he said, the next one.

from interview in Map of Kansas Literature, a website

### Krista Tippet:

I love a line of a poem titled "Vocation" by the late William Stafford. He wrote:

"Your job is to figure out what the world is trying to be."

I'd extend that a little bit: Your job is to figure out what the world is trying to be, whether it knows it or not. You could make a compelling case that the world is doing its best to turn inwards and hurtle backwards. But this poetry breaks my heart open. That's one of the things a heart is for.

And this is one of the things poetry is for. In society after society, across human history, poetry rises up in times of crisis, when official language is failing us and we must reach anew to give voice to what is deepest and truest about ourselves and the world. Poetry is rising in our country and our world now, driven in part by your generation. So, by the way, congratulations on graduating from a college with a poet at its helm.

from Krista Tippet's Commencement Speech at Middlebury College, May 26, 2019.

### Anis Mojgani:

When Mojgani sits down to write poetry, he keeps his mind clear and focused on nothing and then his fingers start to punch the computer keys as data begins to download from his brain. It's his way and, as an acclaimed poet and now Oregon's Poet Laureate, it sure works.

"If I start with a goal in mind, they become the most challenging things to write or things that don't finish themselves," Mojgani said, "or they lack freshness or energy that might be there otherwise."

Years ago, Mojgani read some quotes from William Stafford, the late poet and father of the most recent Oregon Poet Laureate Kim Stafford, and they stuck with him. It referenced how "a writer is not writing necessarily for something to say, but to step forward into action when something might come about."

from a piece by Jason Vondersmith in *The Portland Tribune*, "Pitching the Powerful and Possible," about Oregon's latest poet laureate, Anis Mojgani, Oregon's 10th Poet Laureate.

### Caitlin Maling:

"Is an Ecopastoral Possible: Pastoral in the Work of Stafford and Stow"

This paper assesses what role pastoral plays in the work of mid-century American William Stafford and Australian Randolph Stow. In both American and Australian literature the pastoral is posited as a central ideology or mode by which the nation is defined. Pastoral is a contested space in ecopoetics, often used pejoratively to refer to previous anthropocentric approaches to nature. Yet there are critics such as Joshua Corey who leave space for a contemporary pastoral that re-engages history and textuality. There is also the permanency of pastoral to be considered, with Buell proposing pastoral as a fixed, not necessarily negative, ideology, that must be reconciled with ecocritical thinking. He specifically calls for pastoral analyses between the US and other ex-European colonies such as Australia.

Stafford and Stow have been overlooked due to accusations of regionalism, but in a time of what Rigby terms "mass deplaciation" their work offers a particular orientation akin to the bioregionalism practised by contemporary ecopoets. This type of bioregionalism is proposed as an access point to 'Dwelling' and there are antecedents for linking 'Dwelling' to pastoral in analyses of Romantic pastoral/pastoral writers, such as John Clare. My intent is to extend such analyses into the 20<sup>th</sup> century colonialists Stafford and Stow. Through assessing the pastoral in both poets' work, points of difference will be developed and analysed to show whether they are revelatory of a particular national sensibility. As part of this, questions will be raised regarding the ecological efficacy of a specifically localised ecopoetry and whether Stafford and Stow are too insular to contend with our

(cont. on p. 14)

(cont. from p. 13)

### Notes on the Legacy, cont.

current, more global understanding, of environment. Can there be a pastoral of the global? What form might its poet-shepherd take?

This is an abstract of a paper given by Caitlin Maling at the International Ecopoetics Conference: Dwellings of Enchantment, Writing and Reenchanting the Earth, held in Peripigman, France, in June 2016.

Amy Fleury is a native of Nemaha County in rural northeast Kansas, and graduated from Nemaha Valley High School. She earned her bachelor's degree and her M.A. from Kansas State University, Manhattan, and her M.F.A. from McNeese State University. Fleury's work has appeared in *American Life in Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *North American Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *Laurel Review*, *21st*, and *The Yalobusha Review*. Southern Illinois University Press published her first collection of poetry, *Beautiful Trouble*, in 2004.

Krista Tippett is an American journalist, author, and entrepreneur. She created and hosts the public radio program and podcast *On Being*. In 2014, Tippett was awarded the National Humanities Medal by U.S. President Barack Obama. Krista has published three books at the intersection of spiritual inquiry, social healing, science, and culture: *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*; *Einstein's God*, drawn from her interviews at the intersection of science, medicine, and spiritual inquiry; and *Speaking of Faith*, a memoir of religion in our time.

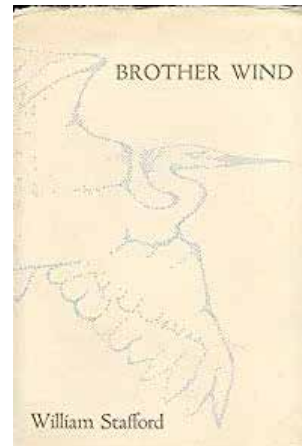
Caitlin Maling is the author of two collections of poetry, *Border Crossing* (2017) and *Conversations I've Never Had* (2015), both out through Fremantle Press. She is currently pursuing a PhD in comparative ecopoetics at the University of Sydney.

Anis Mojgani is Oregon's current Poet Laureate of Oregon, succeeding Kim Stafford, and the author of five books of poetry. His work has appeared on HBO, NPR, and in journals *Bat City Review*, *Rattle*, *Buzzfeed Reader*, *Thrush*, and *Forklift Ohio*, amongst others. He is a two time National Poetry Slam Champion and winner of the International World Cup Poetry Slam. His latest collection is *In the Pockets of Small Gods*.

## Bill Stafford, 100

Bill Stafford would never claim perfection,  
the neat round number. Rather, he was about  
edges, observation, lingering doubt,  
the stuff of happenstance and reflection,  
ease and mystery. He'd ask sly questions,  
answer with a slight shrug or nod. No shouts.  
Lines might include mountain, wind, button, trout,  
family. He was without pretension.  
If he were still alive at one hundred,  
I'd guess him still alert, sturdy enough  
to jot a few dozen early morning words.  
To acknowledge the day, he might have said,  
For the sky, a century's not so tough.  
Then he'd take pen, write of cloud, weather, bird.

KEN WALDMAN



The cover of *Brother Wind* (Honeybrook Press, 1986) drawing by Donnell Hunter.

## For the Birds

Why Not?—Dorothy Stafford's late-life motto

Why aren't you filling your feeders these days,  
my mother asks—the birds are disappointed,  
they keep landing on the feeder and flying away  
looking sad. And I thought about our lives,  
days crammed full of doing—so many messages,  
do they feed us or make us fretful?  
May be the birds are messages  
too. But saying what? We watch them landing,  
ruffling succulent soft brown layered wings,  
wearing snazzy yellow beaks  
and I haul out a sack of seeds.

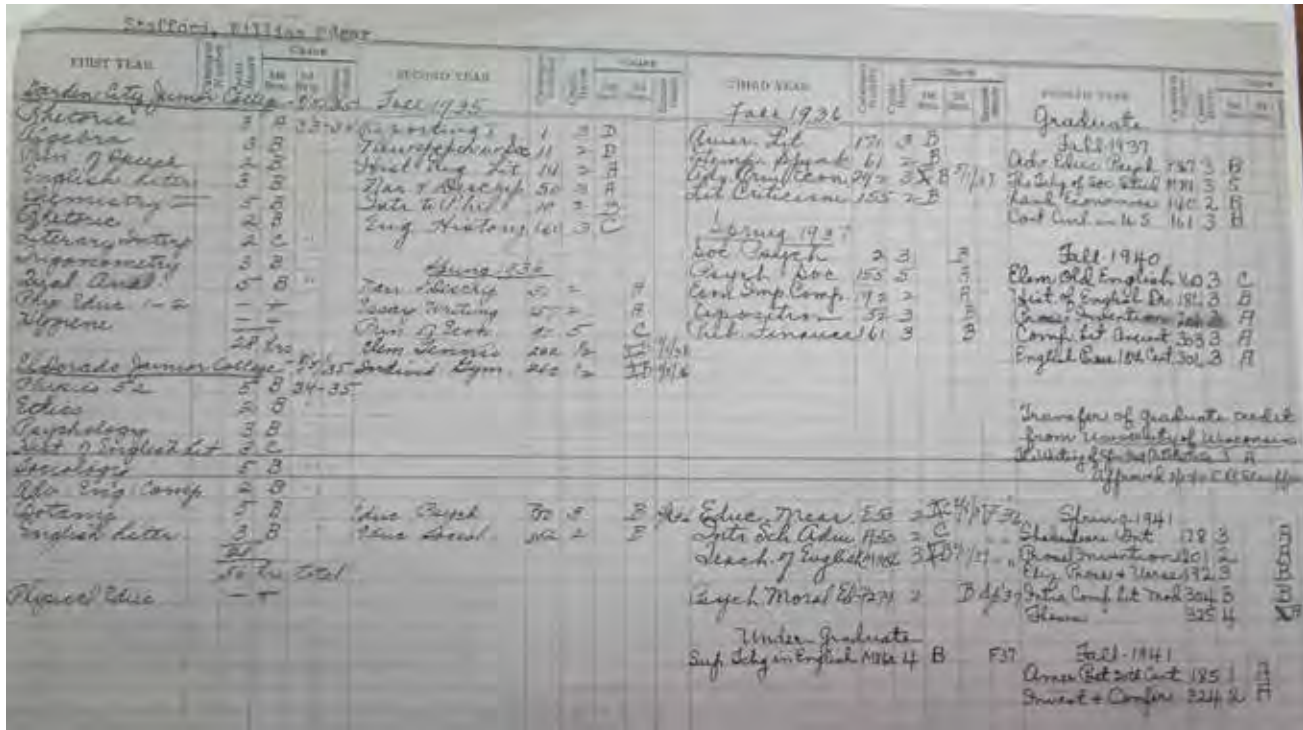
NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

# On Doubt and Bad Reviews

Doubt is easy. You welcome it, your old friend.  
 Poet Edward Field told a bunch of kids,  
 Invite it in, feed it a good dinner, give it a place to sleep  
 on the couch. Don't make it too comfortable or  
 it might never leave. When it goes away, say okay, I'll see you  
 again later. Don't fear. Don't give it your notebook.

As for bad reviews, sure. William Stafford advised no credence to  
 praise or blame. Just steady on.  
 Once a man named Paul called me "a kid." I liked kids  
 but I knew he meant it as an insult. Anyway, I was a kid.  
 I guess he was saying, why should we listen to kids?  
 A newspaper described a woman named Frieda being asked  
 if "I was serious" and "she whistled." What did that mean?  
 How do you interpret a whistle? This was one thing that bothered me.  
 And where did Frieda ever go?

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE



Stafford's transcripts from Kansas University.

PHOTO BY JAMES ARMSTRONG

(cont. from p. 5)

time when Stafford's budget for the entire school year was \$60. This would be the pattern all his life: Stafford would write for a certain amount of time in the morning, writing poems or beginnings of poems in his left-handed calligraphy; then he would type the likely results into manuscripts and put these in the mail. He seemed to feel no sense of the overbearing presence of great masters. He let the editors decide what was good.

In 1941 came "a twist that was to make a great difference" Stafford says: the outbreak of the war (*You Must Revise Your Life* 10). As a registered Conscientious Objector, Stafford was immediately ordered to report to Civilian Public Service. But the war did not stop him from writing; in fact it solidified his writing into an iron discipline that would last throughout his entire life. During his years in CPS forestry camps in Arkansas and California, Stafford got up at 4:00 in the morning so he would have time to write before working a full day cutting firebreaks and digging trenches. While "work" for most of the second-generation moderns meant the laborious writing and rewriting of New Critically-approved poems, for Stafford writing was a refuge from state-mandated physical labor. This created in him a deep conviction that the privacy of his creative moments was a kind of inviolable inner redoubt. He says of those years,

We were surrounded by challenges that had to do with that tension between open, ordinary daily life and the interior life that distinguishes individuals from each other. The two parts of my life that blended or clashed in making my writing were in constant alertness. I felt my mornings as maintenance work or repair work on my integrity. (*You Must Revise Your Life* 12)

It seems that for Stafford the war welded together those two elements, life and art, which the New Critics had tried to hold apart. His experience as a CO gave his practice of daily writing the private intensity of a religious rite carried out in secret defiance of a society inimical to his values. At the same time, it was also a literary practice carried out with an eye to publication. Even under the difficult conditions of a labor camp, Stafford managed to publish a number of poems in *The Illiterati*, a journal put out by fellow CO's in CPS camps in Oregon. When he returned to civilian life, he sent out poems he had stored up—five of them were published in *Poetry Magazine*; three of them were published in the *Ladies Home Journal* (ibid. 137-154). It did not appear to bother him that there was a disparity in prestige between the two journals—what he remembered was that *Poetry* paid him (*You Must* 13).

Why is there no overbearing presence of great masters? After four years in the camps, Stafford was not going to have anyone tell him what to do: "I wanted never to adjust my explorations to the anticipated expectations of others. Writing was enjoyable for the reverberation I got out of it, and reverberation had to be discovered, not planned" (*You Must* 15).

Predictably, the New Critical insistence on high standards seems to

have made students vulnerable to social conformity. Marjorie Perloff calls Stafford's generation the victims of a "new genteel tradition"; unlike their modernist predecessors, these poets were academics by training and profession; there was a uniformity of social status that constricted their experience and channeled their ambitions: This cozy world of tight connections meant that the second generation moderns were socially homogenous:

Both Lowell and Berryman were, in a curious way, perfect preppies. They had been to the right schools (St. Mark's for Lowell, South Kent for Berryman); they assiduously avoided Bohemia (see Peter Taylor's short story "1939" on this subject); and Lowell's brief "rebellion" against Harvard, which brought him first to Vanderbilt and then to Kenyon, should not obscure the simple truth that he was, like Berryman, the ultimate Ivy Leaguer, the educated, genteel intellectual who would spend a good portion of his life on campuses like Harvard or Princeton. (Perloff 33)

Yet in addition to this button-down image, there was a contrasting tendency to embrace a neoromantic idea of the *poet maudit*:

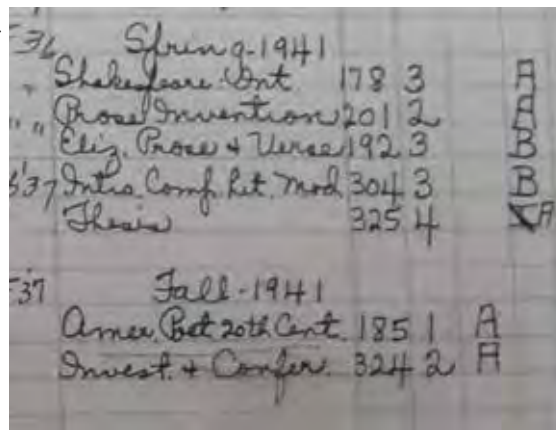
Yet the other side of the preppie portrait is that of the Wild Man - the physically violent, deeply neurotic, aggressively promiscuous macho poet, whose sensibilities are endlessly at war with the soft-spoken (think of Lowell's slightly Southern accent imposed on Beacon Hill), gentlemanly anti-self. (Perloff 33)

Stafford was as opposite to this as one might conceive. His undergraduate career was not only not Ivy League, it was Junior College; for his freshman and sophomore years Stafford attended Garden City and El Dorado Junior Colleges, only enrolling at the University of Kansas in his junior year.

He stayed on to get his master's degree in English (interrupted by four years as a CO in WW II). He did teach college for a living, but not creative writing: he taught English literature and composition at Lewis and Clark College, a struggling Presbyterian school that had only just regained accreditation in 1946 and whose library was in a former garage.

Perloff describes the poet of Stafford's generation as "donnish" in appearance: "the casually worn coat and tie, the stray wisp of hair that is otherwise neatly cut, the glasses, the extended hand holding a cigarette." In photographs from the '50s and '60s, Stafford wears the regulation coat and tie of a professor, but his longish hair is slicked back with hair oil, looking more Kansas than Harvard. There is no cigarette; he didn't smoke. This is all to say that Stafford was not donnish. This lack of "donnishness" only increased as Stafford's profile rose. When he was much in demand for readings and poetry workshops in the 1970s, Stafford had a tendency to travel with a single change of clothes in an old haversack, wearing a battered felt broad-brim that looked like something his father would have worn in the '30s. When Stafford arrived in Washington to become Special Consultant to the Library of Congress, he famously walked into town from the airport, just to get the lay of the land (*Early Morning* 236). It is difficult to imagine Lowell or Berryman doing this.

What's more anomalous, Stafford didn't drink much. The second generation moderns were notorious for hitting the bottle, it was



Closeup of Stafford's KU transcripts with his grade from professor Johnson's 20th century American poetry class, an A. See page 15 for full transcript.



part of their *poète maudit* alter ego; Lowell, Bishop, Schwartz, Olson, and especially Berryman, all had trouble with alcohol. Robert Bly reports, in the documentary *William Stafford and Robert Bly, a Literary Friendship*, that Stafford's advice to students at a literary conference they both attended was "First of all, don't drink." Stafford's own upbringing had been temperate: "Not till I finished my BA degree at the University of Kansas and went on to graduate school in another state did I ever see an adult drunk or enraged or seriously menacing" (*Writing the Australian Crawl* 9). He was perhaps referring to his sojourn at the University of Iowa, where there was plenty of drinking, most infamously at director Paul Engle's country house. Stafford once wrote a poem, "At the Chairman's Housewarming," which apparently hurt Engle's feelings because it satirized the conversation (the poem began with the line "Talk like jellyfish can ruin a party"). At any rate Stafford was far enough away from the "Bad-Boy-Professor tradition" (Perloff 102) that his son Kim recalls that Stafford once pleaded with his friend, the poet Marvin Bell, to not go drinking with students in a bar.

As for the tendency to be "physically violent," and "deeply neurotic," Stafford was a pacifist; his temperament was calm and friendly, though he could be morally fierce on occasions. Nor was Stafford-- a steadily-married father of four--an "aggressively promiscuous macho poet." He appears to have lived the way his family did back in Kansas: "Our lives were quiet and the land was very steady" (9).

Many of the "second generation" moderns became bridging figures, rejecting the "New Critical values of impersonality, formality, intellectuality, and self-conscious control" they were trained up in and they embraced the personal, confessional mode, open form, the idea of a process poem that eschewed aesthetic perfection in the interest of spontaneity and authenticity (Perkins 382). However, they tended to keep one foot in the prior world of pre-war criticism. They developed "a more casual and immediate way of writing, but they never relinquished their former standards" (382). Robert Lowell provides the supreme example; with his free-verse confessional poems of *Life Studies* in 1959 he broke decisively from the New Critical style—yet he spent the late sixties and early seventies endlessly revising the blank sonnets of *Notebook*. John Berryman, similarly, broke from the formalism of his early work to pen the jazzy, improvisatory *Dream Songs*, which embrace direct personal experience and contemporary dialects, "low culture" references, private references Perkins calls them "talk, sporadically rhymed" (401). Yet these poems also were stuffed with learned allusions and mostly described the social experiences of an academic poet.

In studying Stafford's work, it is clear that he was never of his own generation. But it is also clear that he wasn't of the younger generation of postmodern poets either. His reference points are not the Beat generation, but Dust Bowl generation. He is as much a poet of the '30s as he is of the '50s and '60s. The American scene he writes about most often is that of hardscrabble small towns on the prewar Great Plains. He shares with Gary Snyder a love of the forested mountains of the American West, but filtered through his memories of Civilian Public Service camps he was assigned to during World War II. Like the postmoderns, Stafford took a strong stand against the Vietnam War, but his pacifism is not born in the antiwar

movement of the 1960s, or even the antinuclear movement of the 1950s, but in the antiwar movement of the 1930s, the pacifism of the Oxford Pledge, Norman Thomas, and General Smedley Butler—a pacifism which enjoyed a broad consensus in America up until Pearl Harbor. In fact we might be tempted to see Stafford as akin to Woody Guthrie: a man of the Old Left who woke up a darling of the New Left. But Stafford's political orientation was not derived from socialism or unionism; it seems to have been a mixture of the prairie egalitarianism of his Kansas upbringing, the low church nonconformism of his parents, the pacifism of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which he joined in college, and the New Deal Progressivism of his teachers at the University of Kansas.

Stafford is anomalous because he never wrote in the mannered academic style his contemporaries cut their teeth on; he seemed to always have been writing in open forms or in loose formal structures that employed everyday talk. This was because his exposure to poetry did not include an indoctrination in the New Critical canon. Stafford's apprenticeship in poetry occurred, not in Ivy League classrooms, but in backcountry Civilian Public Service work camps in the backcountry of Arkansas and California, where, as a CO, he worked for \$2.50 a month helping the Forest Service fight wildfires. As Fred Marchant has shown, Stafford spent those four years of internment rising early in the morning to experiment with poetry and during this time his voice was beginning to emerge—fairly short lyric poems that addressed his immediate thoughts in a variety of forms. One can hear echoes of Sandburg, Whitman, Jeffers and Masters in his poems, but also Dickinson, Frost and Robinson. Stafford writes in a variety of forms: long-line Whitmanic free verse, short-line free verse in the manner of Sandburg and Masters, as well as ballad stanzas, enveloped quatrains and pentameter couplets. He moves easily between the formalist and open styles, but his subject matter is more consistent in each; landscape plays a large role in providing the images, and a predominate mood is moral questioning of society and of the war. There is almost no sign of his taking Eliot, Pound or even William Carlos Williams as a model. His influences seem to be what Perkins calls the "Popular Moderns," a modernism that "sought concrete instances" and often "portrayed a particular region," such as the prairies and small towns of the Midwest and west (Perkins *From the 1890s* 302).

As Fred Marchant states, in his introduction to *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford*, the fact that Stafford's first book was published when the poet was forty-six meant that for most readers "Stafford seemed to spring full-grown onto the American literary scene," without an apprenticeship (*Another World* xii). But that apprenticeship had been there all along, in the poetry of popular modernism he had absorbed growing up in Kansas in the years before World War II. This was not the only factor behind Stafford's successful career, but it is an important one, long overlooked by scholars who have been inclined to take at face value the New Critical version of the history of American poetry.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A few years later (1962), Randall Jarrell "gives pretty much the same list in his essay "Fifty Years of American Poetry," but he includes William Carlos Williams and omits Crane and Cummings from the "masters" class"(100).

cont. on p. 18

(cont. from p. 17)

<sup>2</sup>*Understanding Poetry*, by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks

## WORKS CITED

- Antin, David. *boundary 2*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (autumn, 1972), pp. 98-133.
- Breslin, James E. B. *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-1965*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.
- Hall, Donald. "William Stafford: Eight Notions." *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. Ed. Tom Andrews. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1995. 147-149.
- Johnson, William Savage. Lecture notes. Personal Papers of William S. Johnson, Spencer Archives, U of Kansas, PP 74, Box 3.
- Lowell, Robert. "The Art of Poetry no. 3." Int. Fredrick Siedel. *The Paris Review*, Issue 25, (spring 1961) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4664/the-art-of-poetry-no-3-robert-lowell>
- "Visiting the Tates." *The Sewanee Review* 67.4 (autumn, 1959), pp. 557-559
- Newcomb, John Timberman. "The Emergence of 'The New Poetry.'" *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*. Ed. Walter Kalaidjian. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015.
- Perkins, David. *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979.
- *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Poets Maudit of the Genteel Tradition." *The American Poetry Review* 12.3, (May/June 1983) pp. 32-38.
- Stafford, Kim. *Early Morning; Remembering My Father, William Stafford*. St. Paul (MN), Graywolf Press, 2002.
- Stafford, William. *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford 1937- 1947*. Ed. Fred Marchant. St. Paul (MN): Graywolf Press, 2008.
- *You Must Revise Your Life*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1986.
- Sutton, Walter. *American Free Verse: The Modern Revolution in Poetry*. New York: New Directions, 1973.
- Tillinghast, Richard. "Poetry, Plain and Tattooed." *New York Times Book Review* 29 May 1994:10.
- Untermeyer, Louis (ed.). *Modern American Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921.
- [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/58992/58992-h/58992-h.htm#Page\\_76](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/58992/58992-h/58992-h.htm#Page_76)
- William Stafford and Robert Bly: A Literary Friendship*. Directed by Hayden Reiss, Magnolia Films, 1994.

## Bill Stafford

I saw him read one summer in Fairbanks,  
the patter between poems itself a poem  
because he was like that , fully at home  
with words. That lit June light he offered thanks  
for some gladness or other, and laid planks  
of language that formed a lucky bridge from  
one thought to the next. What might seem to some  
a plainness too simple for poetry—drank  
of poetry when he spoke. I reflected  
for years on his writing, could hear him chime,  
sly and instructive, as I connected  
with my work. The voice said to make time  
each morning, to begin early on task,  
to learn from failures, to ask and ask.

KEN WALDMAN

## Sestina for William Stafford

Of course, the trick to poetry  
is to have pen and paper. Words  
on a page will make song—  
the words can't help themselves. Plain  
ones say it better, or so I was taught  
by a man born and raised in Kansas,

who took plain Kansas  
with him in the poetry  
he later wrote. His parents taught  
him to honor both land and words.  
That wasn't so hard on the plains  
where the grass made an easy song

for a boy who listened well, for song  
sang everywhere first in Kansas  
and then beyond. The plains  
later became mountain and coast. Poetry  
didn't mind. The words  
spilled their magic, taught

him music, taught  
him, yes, writing was his song,  
that he could scribble gray words,  
not just shiny red ones. Kansas  
was good enough—and poetry  
would nod its head. Simple and plain

it was (though simple and plain  
could be profound). Poetry taught  
him, too, to question poetry  
and reinvent song,  
which made for a Kansas  
that he filled with words

like *sky, sun, wind*. Words  
that started on the plains—  
Hutchinson, Kansas—  
transported him to Oregon, and taught  
him to be. His enduring song:  
have pen, paper, and make poetry—

there are only words. He taught  
that plain and true made real song.  
A Kansas man. His avocation: poetry.

KEN WALDMAN

# Uncollected Poems from the Editor's Archive

## Scenes That Escaped from James Dickey Poems

One place — it's an island with a lake  
and an island; it's in the Pacific on  
the dateline where the tide goes "Today,"  
"Tomorrow," "Yesterday," just being  
arbitrary.

Another — a train whistle searches deep  
into woods every morning, its path  
across a pond where a turtle waits.  
The sound goes on, dimmed by the water  
to a sigh.

And — sunlight props up a mountain. It is brave  
to the eyes, but who knows how soft  
on the other side? And every night it  
moves its rocks a little, soaking up the dark,  
affirming the real tide.

WILLIAM STAFFORD,  
PUBLISHED IN *THE SOUTH CAROLINA REVIEW* 10.2 (APRIL  
1978)

## Inside Lincoln's Head in the Black Hills

Afraid the weight of time, that wristwatch  
on eternity, might slow that arm,  
we slipped from there to here, to  
this unchanging place, and are sustained  
like this—a tick that takes ten thousand years.

That arm the stars mark, that head  
with wind for hair, that thought that  
ours can dimly celebrate—these all  
stir toward autumn here. But hid by  
being ourselves, we dare the hillside, where  
God's autumn colors refine all things:  
our place has caught the world.

Let breath go forth proclaiming faith,  
our faith is in the stone.

WILLIAM STAFFORD,  
*OPEN PLACES* 24 (FALL/WINTER 1977)

## A Wedge of Oak

At Bryant's grave someone had chainsawed down an old oak. By  
counting rings in a wedge from the trunk I found that the tree had  
been living when Bryant was living there. This wedge I carried with  
me, and over the next few weeks it stayed on my desk and led to  
some notes, to many wandering speculations.

Just after that visit I find scattered phrases — "a poet with a lost  
voice... his waterfowl...his grave..." And days later an odd sequence  
about trees in my daily journal links back to the oak wedge, to the  
Bryant house with its paths overgrown and tangled: —

The shadow a tree has inside itself  
begins to touch my shadow. My shadow  
sways. Into the forest a whisper  
vanishes — less than the shadows, less  
than silence, but having devoured them.

Trees have swallowed their shadows. Through all  
the northland moonlight scours for silver.  
Even smallest branches hold still;  
voices have died. Where a voice will come,  
a great brightness begins.

They have retreated — the trees — from where  
they once were. Open to the sky, this place  
discovers its reason.

So many times the open trees have invited me  
and a river, coming from nowhere, has appeared,  
splashing for sunlight, and gone by....

WILLIAM STAFFORD,  
PUBLISHED IN *UNDER OPEN SKY*:  
*POETS ON WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT* (1986)

## This Year

In the open on a lawn someone's  
frisbee settled in the jello just as  
someone mentioned Henry Kissinger.  
Look—we spread out all our things, and then  
how fragile our arrangements are!  
We spin; we travel—here comes a planetary  
catastrophe. We fish it out  
and send it where it belongs, over  
somewhere else, tasting of strawberry.

WILLIAM STAFFORD,  
PUBLISHED IN *TENDRIL* 7-8 (SPRING/SUMMER 1980)

(cont. on p. 20)

## Three Stories from Inside James Dickey's Guitar

### 1. *Any Morning*

One morning you are a ghost. The world is heavy. People coming toward you have spirits bobbing above their heads. You turn aside and watch. More and more a strange glow burns from your eyes. You are afraid a gaze too long will ignite faces you love. You turn aside. You have become less friend than flame. All around you people are turning to stone — brave but unknowing, saved by not being able to see what you see. Before the others can grow afraid you let go of the world and fall upward alone: bright, bright home, dark dark sky.

### 2. *By a Late Fire*

It burns in the mind like juniper, steady, how last year one day — through miles only the wind would want — smoke hunted along through something less than a storm, letting drops outline trees in silver toward one last leafblade a drop could follow under a cliff, dry even in winter.

There is that way for smoke to go following history onward; and by watching the fire you can have someone again but this time in a spell that means they can't leave till both of you follow the day wherever it goes — the slow drops on the pines, the miles turning everything thinner and thinner away, away, away, all over the world.

### 3. *Afterwards*

High in an oak you listen quietly where the leaves are, their tree house, with rain coming through that airy room filled with bird talk. You wait: those fluttering selves have life around them so quick they'll never fall, so summer says. Sitting there, you think winter. Leaves touch you. Saved, you descend carefully branch by branch and lightly spring down, the way rain falls from each leaf and runs till it finds its way into the ground.

WILLIAM STAFFORD,  
PUBLISHED IN *THE SOUTH CAROLINA REVIEW* 10.2  
(APRIL 1978)

## The Child You Were

Once in leaves buried in a park  
a child hid. A game or a dream  
made it all dark.

That part of the world sailed easily on,  
calm, far, turning,  
where the sky touched a hill.

What the sky wants, it holds for a morning  
forever coming, open-eyed, still.

WILLIAM STAFFORD,  
PUBLISHED IN *TENDRIL* 1 (WINTER 1977-78)

## Textures

### 1.

The dwell of a sound for awhile  
will sometimes diminish all else  
and a whole forest lie down at night  
for hearing the moon, where the first  
tick and its tock are still waiting  
for what time it is.

### 2.

Morning color opens its eyes  
where it slept in the mountains.  
Oh, it's afraid! This might be  
the day when white comes all the way  
back from the sky where it went  
when color first came.

### 3.

And fur—of all the presence it is  
the most, a million touches  
at once, to assure, reassure,  
instruct our lives, like this: —  
Be here so well that even  
one time is often.

WILLIAM STAFFORD. PUBLISHED IN *THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW* 10.6 (NOV. & DEC. 1981) AND *LISTENING DEEP*, PENMAEN PRESS, 1984.

## The Exorcism

1  
The gray sheep came. I ran,  
My body half in flame.  
(Father of flowers, who  
Dares face the thing he is?)

As if pure being woke,  
The dust rose and spoke;  
A shape cried from a cloud  
Cried to my flesh out loud.

(And yet I was not there,  
But down long corridors,  
My own, my secret lips  
Babbling in urinals.)

2  
In a dark wood I saw—  
I saw my several selves  
Come running from the leaves,  
Lewd, tiny, careless lives  
That scuttled under stones,  
Or broke, but would not go.  
I turned upon my spine,  
I turned and turned again,  
A cold God-furious man  
Writhing until the last  
Forms of his secret life  
Lay with the dross of death.

I was myself, alone.

I broke from that low place  
Breathing a slower breath,  
Cold, in my own dead salt.

THEODORE ROETHKE, *WORDS FOR THE WIND*,  
1969.

## Contributors' Notes

**Erica Goss** served as Poet Laureate of Los Gatos, California from 2013-2016. Her latest poetry collection, *Night Court*, won the 2016 Lyrebird Prize from Glass Lyre Press. She is the author of *Wild Place* (2012, Finishing Line Press) and *Vibrant Words: Ideas and Inspirations for Poets* (2014, Pushpen Press).

**Allan Chavkin** is Professor of English at Texas State University-San Marcos. His most recent articles are published in *Style*, *ANQ*, and *The Arthur Miller Journal*. His books include *Conversations with John Gardner*, *English Romanticism and Modern Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, *Conversations with Louise Erdrich*

and *Michael Dorris* (with Nancy Feyl Chavkin), *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*, and *Saul Bellow*.

**James Armstrong** 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.



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

*Helga Kuznik, Ilka's mother, has been stamping and addressing FWSJ&NLS for a decade but will be unable to do so this year because of the pandemic.*

## A Note to Friends

If you are reading this, we know that you remain interested in Stafford's legacy, his poetry, thought, and witness for peace, which is more important today than ever.

Friends of William Stafford continues in the form of this publication and the organization's website, [williamstafford.org](http://williamstafford.org), where you may renew your membership or make an additional donation. We also continue to offer his work in the form of high quality letterpress broadsides, available for purchase on our website. We have shifted our focus from organizing and publicizing readings and Stafford birthday celebrations held around the United States, and a host of other countries, to more scholarly pursuits. In lieu of public gatherings, we urge you to cultivate interest in the work of William Stafford through university and college level involvement with the Stafford Archives (available online) and publication of new works that include and explore his work. We also encourage you, if you are so moved, to follow in the Stafford way, and write a poem a day, contribute poetry or prose to this publication, and share your thoughts and poetry via social media.

William Stafford's belief in the world as one community and the reconciliation of difference through understanding the intricacy of connection and the web of relations remains a vital and furthering perspective and the FWS is committed to sustaining it. FWS hopes to advance that view in the future by presenting the work of people still discovering fresh perceptions and insights into Stafford and to continue presenting undiscovered material from his archive. Your support in this endeavor would be appreciated and heartening.

## News, Notes, and Opportunities

**Vocalisms:** “Poetry is your best remarks given an appearance of coherence.” “The main event in a stanza can be something as trivial as a change in tense.” These are some statements by Stafford in recordings issued by the University of Arizona Poetry Center under the title of Vocalisms. Other vocalisms feature Louise Glück, Sandra Cisneros, and Tess Gallagher. The AZU Poetry Center’s digital archive has an impressive list of readings, including four by Stafford.

**Far from the car near Harney Lake, I stood with my father** / to study a zigzag petroglyph tapered to a circle knob / held high. “Is it lightning?” I asked. He pointed behind me / where a rattlesnake slid slowly into a cleft. I pointed / behind him where another unraveled its coil to sidle / into shadow. By the prickle on the back of my neck, / I was learning to read.

This is the first stanza of a wonderful fifteen-stanza poem by Kim Stafford, “Learning Oregon Desert Autobiography,” which appeared in *The High Desert Journal* (Issue No. 29, Spring 2019) Google: the name of the magazine and Kim’s name to read it.

**Ada Hastings Hedges.** In her afterword to *The Collected Poems of Ada Hastings Hedges*, Ingrid Wendt writes, “All poetry is regional somewhere, William Stafford once wrote—and the ‘regional’ poems of Ada Hastings Hedges...encompass both the eastern and western parts of the state.” Hedges, who lived most of her life in Portland, except for some years in Juntura in eastern Oregon, is one of the finest Oregon poets of the mid twentieth century, published in many magazines, including *Poetry*. This volume includes poems in many of those literary journals and her only published book, *Desert Poems* (1930), an evocation of Eastern Oregon like no other, rivaling C.E.S. Wood’s *Poems from the Ranges*.

### “The Rhythm Business: Receptivity, Feeling, Craft, and Perspective in William Stafford’s *Writing the Australian Crawl*,”

This is the title of an essay by Tyler Robert Sheldon that appears in a recent issue of the *MockingHeart Review*, an attractive online magazine, edited by Sheldon. *MockingHeart Review* contains poems, interviews (a recent one with Ted Kooser mentions Bill) and reviews and is well worth a gander. Google the name of the magazine to read it.

### “Traveling Through the Dark: Six Weeks in Oregon” by Caitlin Maling.

This is a piece of creative nonfiction by an Australian scholar and poet about encountering William Stafford’s work at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology. It can be found in issue 62.1 (pp, 162-167) of *Westerly*, a literary magazine located in Western Australia at the University of Western Australia. Google the magazine and you can download a copy and read this fascinating piece by someone who has written scholarly criticism of Stafford that this editor has not been able to locate except in an abstract form (see Notes on the Legacy).

**The Stafford/Hall Award**, given at the annual Oregon Book Awards is also named after Hazel Hall, one of the outstanding poets of the American West who achieved distinction in the 1920s and 30s. Often compared to Emily Dickinson, Hall, a wheelchair-bound seamstress, wrote three books of poetry, all collected in *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, edited by John Witte, the former editor of *Northwest Review*. It was published in 2000 as a hardcover by Oregon State University Press but has now been issued as paperback with an updated introduction by Witte and an afterword by Anita Helle, Oregon State University professor and wife of the co-founder of FWS, the late Peter Sears.

### from “Tell Us All the Gossip You Know”

Robert Bly said writing a bad poem before breakfast every day is a good habit.  
He did it in honor of his old friend Bill Stafford (who also did it) after Bill died.  
The poems were never bad, by the way.  
They were great.  
There were a lot of them.  
You could work on them later, after you ate.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

## CREDITS & PERMISSIONS

“Exorcism” and “Old Growth,” “The Shape of an Oak,” “Scenes that Escaped from James Dickey Poems,” “Inside Lincoln’s Head in the Black Hills,” “A Wedge of Oak,” “This Year,” Three Stories from Inside James Dickey’s Guitar,” “The Child You Were,” and “Textures,” are reprinted with permission of the Estate of William Stafford.

The essays by James Armstrong, Allan Chavkin, Erica Goss, 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*, Honeybrook Press, 1987.

“Birds fly here without any sound,” the painting by Barbara Stafford is used by permission and was part of her March 2020 show, *Falling Green*, at the PDX Contemporary Art Gallery in Portland.

The poems “The Ghost of William Stafford,” “Bill Stafford, 100,” “Tell Us All The Gossip You Know,” “On Doubt and Bad Reviews,” “Bill Stafford,” “For the Birds,” and “Sestina for William Stafford,” are used by permission of the authors.

The feather on p. 8 was done by Donnell Hunter for *Fin, Feather, Fur*, Honeybrook Press, 1985.



# BECOME A Friend of William Stafford

**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](http://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.

### JOIN OR RENEW:

*(Please check ALL appropriate boxes)*

- New     Renewal     Gift
- Patron \$100/yr     Individual \$35/yr
- Family \$50/yr     Student \$20/yr
- Lifetime \$500     Institutions \$50/yr

Please add \$5.00/year outside the U.S.

Name\* \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Country\*\* \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Phone (    ) \_\_\_\_\_

May we list this information (or any part of it) in a "friends-only" directory of which you will receive a copy? \_\_\_\_\_

\*If this *friendship* is a gift, please add your name and address on the line below so that we may send an acknowledgement to the recipient and to you. \*\*If you reside outside the United States, please add any additional postal codes we may need to ensure that you receive your mail.

Giver's Name & Address: \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear of FWS? \_\_\_\_\_

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

Welcome New Friends

January 2020–December 2020

- Joan Northern
- Micheline J. Mosher
- Ron Carley
- Mark Collien
- Bruce Ryan
- Patricia Emerson
- Lonnie Buerge
- Abigail Krajewski



If you have any questions about your membership status, please contact Helen Schmidling, [helen@williamstafford.org](mailto:helen@williamstafford.org)

FRIENDS OF WILLIAM STAFFORD JOURNAL & NEWSLETTER©

is published two times a year.

EDITOR: Tim Barnes  
[tim.barnes63@gmail.com](mailto:tim.barnes63@gmail.com)

WEBMASTER: Dennis Schmidling

Special thanks to Ilka Kuznik

Please email comments, letters, news, and information on poetry events, awards, etc. to [tim.barnes63@gmail.com](mailto:tim.barnes63@gmail.com) or mail to  
Tim Barnes  
3733 SE Alder St.  
Portland, OR 97214

friends of **WILLIAM STAFFORD**

P.O. Box 1925 Sisters, OR 97759  
[www.williamstafford.org](http://www.williamstafford.org) | [friends@williamstafford.org](mailto:friends@williamstafford.org)

William Stafford  
and Popular Modernism  
By James Armstrong

∞ ∞ ∞

Coping with the Dark Side...  
By Allan Chavkin

∞ ∞ ∞

Uncollected Stafford Poems

---

Please notify sender of change of address

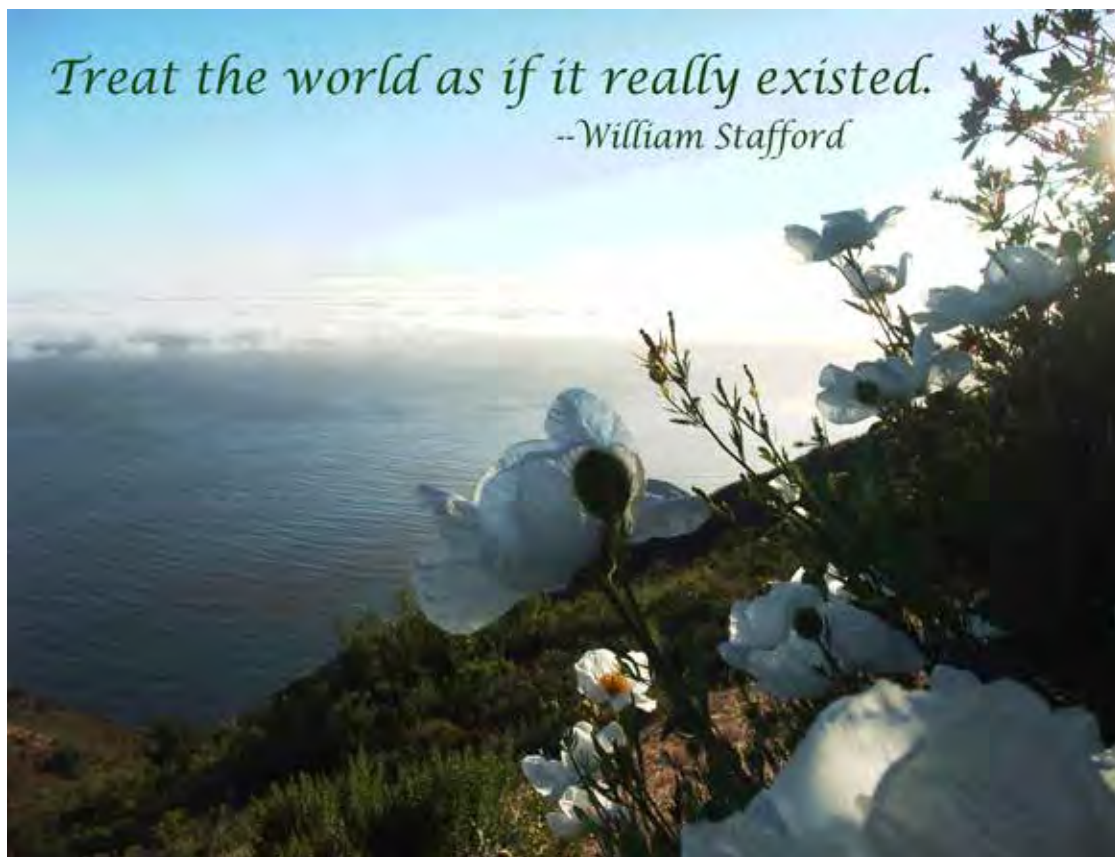


Photo & Design by Ilka Kuznik