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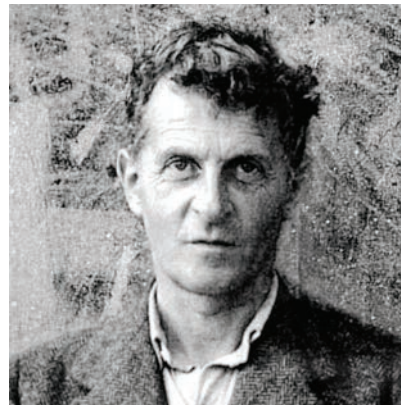
## Kindred Spirits: Stafford, Bouwsma & Wittgenstein

By Tony Wolk & Shelley Reece

“Reading Wittgenstein is intellectual catnip”  
(From the daily writings of William Stafford, 23 July 1972)

### PREFACE

I’ve made up my mind.<sup>1</sup> I will not allow myself to become befuddled as I write this paper. It should be as easy as looking at rainbows or stacking measuring cups, though I’m the only one in my family who does that. All I have to do is say a bit about what the later Wittgenstein was like, how he viewed language, not as a mystery, but as something ordinary, something that works for grocers, for children, even for college teachers occasionally. Then show how William Stafford thought of language in the same way, though he admitted that in revision a poem could get a little gamey so that you had to look twice at it. Then show how when he first read Wittgenstein, or saw how Bouwsma and Wittgenstein talked when they went for a walk in the woods, talking philosophy sometimes, sometimes not, he was riveted to the page. And how Stafford saw that that kind of talking, and Wittgenstein’s writing the bits and pieces in the *Philosophical Investigations*, was like eating candy. And along the way, as he read Bouwsma’s *Wittgenstein, Conversations, 1949-1951*, he felt love in his heart for this courageous dying man. That’s all I have to do. That, and show how Stafford’s use of language in his poems was like Wittgenstein’s use of language in what is known as “ordinary language philosophy.” I just recalled the way Stafford said sometimes he’d do readings: that he’d be talking about how he wrote a certain poem and, without your knowing it, he’d slip into reading the poem. And you couldn’t tell the difference between talking and poetry. That’s all. And as you’re



Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1889-1951

PHOTO BY BEN RICHARDS

reading this paragraph, you’re waiting for the essay to begin.<sup>2</sup>

### I. THE CHAIN

It’s really quite simple: Wittgenstein>Bouwsma > Kenny Johnson>Stafford.

Best to begin with the words of William Stafford. First, a passage from an interview with Steven Ratiner in 1991 (*Christian Science Monitor*, August 21, 1991):

The kind of education I am interested in, the kind of education I think I have profited from has been the welcoming process, allying the self to what is available to *that self*... at *that* time. But there are many people who teach in the University who are *professors* of writing, not writers. There are professors of philosophy, not philosophers. Wittgenstein made a big distinction. When I first read him it was like a breath of fresh air, by the way, and I thought: Yes! [There is a way] for forwarding the explorations of the individual soul in this life.

In the balance of the passage Stafford speaks of two ways of approaching a classroom, one where the teacher tries to be “invulnerable, to put on the armor, to wear your Phi Beta Kappa button and lecture others”; the other where the professor “would listen in a kind of limber way as

conversation was going on, and they would embrace the possibility of confessing to whatever ignorance they felt.” (*Crossing Unmarked Snow*, 29).

Now for the next two links in the chain. In 1951 O. K. Bouwsma, after being with Ludwig Wittgenstein on and off for the two years before Wittgenstein’s death, writes Kenny (hereafter “Kenny”) Johnson a letter—

[... saying that in Wittgenstein] I saw what struck me as the height of perspicuity, the most intellectual activity, the swiftest and keenest mind I have ever met. It was like a miracle. His words were like a beam of light through a fog in almost any conversation.<sup>3</sup>

(cont. on p. 2)

(cont. from p. 1)

Note that Johnson had been teaching English at Lewis and Clark College since 1946, and by 1948 will be sharing an office, known as “the engineering hut,” with William Stafford. Meanwhile, Bouwsma, who was taking careful notes from his time with Wittgenstein, will be writing up those conversations, probably not long after Wittgenstein dies (in late April, 1951). Those notes Bouwsma will share with his students and friends, with an injunction not to copy them—though of course that’s exactly what happens. And not until 1986, eight years after Bouwsma’s death, will they be published as *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949-1951*.<sup>4</sup> It’s hard to believe that Kenny Johnson would not have received a copy of the Notes—and then shared them with Stafford.

Back to Bouwsma, again from the *Conversations*: “I have found W. a great tonic, like a purge. And how I need it. How solid with the habits of long nonsense! I must do what I can to subject myself to his drubbing and to learn to speak freely so that I may expose my rags to him. If only I can speak!” (8).<sup>5</sup>

It’s vital to note that the editors of *Conversations* acknowledge Kenny Johnson for his help in preparing the Introduction. By 1966 (3 October) Stafford in his daily writing will explicitly reference how useful Wittgenstein can be to “sustain a passing fancy and let it have its imaginative way.”

Now for a passage from 9 July, 1972, from Stafford’s daily writings:

Throw yourself into some extreme, at least momentarily: what if darkness printed a film? how would a bird dream? suppose the sound of evening should imprison some truth? where would home be if we left the earth?

In some ways, this procedure is no other than accepting seriously—that is, *wholly*—for a time some focused possibility in the mind.” [Marginal note: “Use Wittgenstein”]

Here I will intrude briefly, since the second paragraph seems rather gnomic. As I read it, Stafford is reminding himself to accept the unusual, the fantastic, to find a context for it, then give it free rein. With luck it will become a poem. Where then does Wittgenstein fit in? Well, that’s the question that lies at the heart of this inquiry. The word *use* (in “Use Wittgenstein”) is a vital clue: Wittgenstein isn’t an eighth wonder of the world to visit, photograph and place in a family album. No, as Kenny Johnson says, he’s there to be useful, for a philosopher, for poet, for a teacher, for you the reader? For me.<sup>6</sup>

For us, having come to Wittgenstein via O. K. Bouwsma at the University of Nebraska in the early 1960s, we wondered by what path did Wittgenstein find a kindred spirit in William Stafford; then comes the question of just when did Stafford draw that “breath of fresh air”? Think of us as sleuths.

To back up, our own history is vagabondish. In 1962 Paul Olson, a young professor in the English Department at the University of Nebraska, wisely told Tony Wolk’s office-mate Les Whipp to take a

class with Bouwsma. Whereupon Les asked Tony to join him for the semester in Bouwsma’s Descartes doctoral level seminar, given that all the other seminarians were working on philosophy degrees and Les wanted a compatriot to talk things through after class. Note that with Bouwsma, no matter what a course was titled, the effect was



O.K. (Oets Kolk) Bouwsma, 1898-1978

to shine the light of Wittgenstein on the subject, notably the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, published two years after Wittgenstein’s death.<sup>7</sup> The effect on Wolk and Whipp (and before long, Reece) was much like the breath of fresh air for Stafford, both in terms of the notion that the meaning of a word lies in its use, as well as for the teaching style of Bouwsma, who mostly just listened, taking notes on a ruled yellow legal pad, and letting his grad students hold forth. Though on occasion Bouwsma would appear the next week with copies of a small Wittgensteinian paper wrestling with the issues of the previous class.<sup>8</sup>

Along the way, in January, 1975, there was a handwritten letter from Bouwsma sent to Wolk, in reply to Wolk having sent Bouwsma (who by then was at the University of Texas) his article using the

*Investigations* to refute two apologists arguing, for instance, that “Black English ... is not a satisfactory medium for communication of precise *information* or the development of clear ideas.”<sup>9</sup>

Jan. 11. 1975

Dear Wolk,

Of course I remember you. I used to see you quite regularly when, together with a few others, we were doing important things. ... I am glad to see you still quote W. I do the same.

Have you ever had occasion to meet Kenny Johnson who teaches at Lewis and Clark? He and I were good friends years ago at Nebraska, in the thirties. He too teaches English....

Yours,

Bouwsma

P. S. If you can’t read my writing do not hesitate to substitute other words, little ones.

Alas, Wolk didn’t follow up on Bouwsma’s implicit suggestion. Not till later, having seen the many explicit references to Wittgenstein in *Crossing Unmarked Snow* and *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains* (more on that later), did we tighten our belts and come up with a preliminary version of Stafford’s interest in Wittgenstein for the annual meeting of the Oregon Council of Teachers of English, the Stafford strand (March 1, 2014).

## II. CONVERSATIONS, BRIEF NOTES, SOMEWHAT LIKE AN ABSTRACT

William Stafford acknowledged that when he first “read him [Wittgenstein] it was like a breath of fresh air.” When and what might that first reading have been? A hypothesis: William Stafford’s office-mate Kenneth Johnson had studied philosophy at the University of Nebraska in the late 1930s with O. K. Bouwsma, who in turn was an intimate of Ludwig Wittgenstein in the two years before Wittgenstein’s death in Cambridge at the age of 62 on April 29, 1951. Add to these two fixed events that Stafford, in the words of his son Kim, “often mentioned Wittgenstein in conversations about topics of all kinds” (private communication). Those broad events highlight the trail from Wittgenstein to Stafford. What can we glean from following this thread? What was the effect of Wittgenstein—Wittgenstein and Bouwsma—upon William Stafford as poet, as a teacher?

One obvious question: When did William Stafford “first read Wittgenstein?” A second question: the “breath of fresh air,” to what effect? The second question seems easier to answer than the first. Stafford, by nature (his family, his years in the C.O. camps—see his memoir from those years, *Down in My Heart*) was already the kind of person/professor/writer who was “vulnerable.” In Wittgenstein he recognized a kindred spirit. And so across the span of his later life he read in and around Wittgenstein. The second question is rich and provokes a smile.

Let’s begin with Kenneth Johnson, born in 1913, hired at Lewis & Clark College in 1946, two years before William Stafford. By then Johnson had earned his M.A. in Philosophy at the University of Nebraska (1939), having worked with O. K. Bouwsma. Bouwsma, known for his work on G. E. Moore, in 1949 earns a Fulbright Fellowship and accepts an invitation from Norman Malcolm at Cornell University. By then Wittgenstein, again at Malcolm’s invitation, is also at Cornell. Across those two years Bouwsma, besides Cornell, is also a visiting professor at Smith College (the fall of 1949) and in 1950 is at Oxford to deliver the John Locke Lectures. In an entry dated January 16, 1951 (a Tuesday), Bouwsma describes visiting Wittgenstein the previous weekend, his entries going back and forth across the two days, though there is a reference to “yesterday” when “Miss Anscombe [later the translator of the *Investigations*] said that he was growing weaker.” To which Bouwsma adds, “No one says a word about cancer.” The last entry in *Conversations* is a short paragraph: “On Sunday, he also talked about his down comforter.” (It’s impossible not to weep at this quiet sentence, reflecting the depth of Bouwsma’s fondness for W, and vice-versa.)

Certainly, the *Conversations* present a vital portrait of Wittgenstein in his last years, when he was at the height of his powers. Reading them, as published, and with a full introduction, provides “The best thing written on him [Wittgenstein]”, this judgment from

Wittgenstein’s nephew, Thomas Stoneborough (*Conversations*, xxxi). Certainly, Bouwsma, who was viewed by Wittgenstein as the one philosopher who best understood what he was getting at, presents a vital portrait, if not the finest, of Wittgenstein as a philosopher, or later in Bouwsma’s words, as a “prophet,” this word going very deep for Bouwsma.

## III. THE BLUE BOOK

Another possible beginning for this exploration would be Stafford’s short typewritten essay “Where the Words Come From,” dated in Stafford’s hand, “Corvallis, 14 Oct 66”; both provided by Paul Merchant and Vincent Wixon [see note 6]: Here it is in full:

Where do the words come from?

“A student may go to a carpenter and say, ‘Teach me to be a carpenter.’ But there may be a different situation: the student may have no idea of what the art is that he would be taught, and perhaps no idea that whatever it is can be taught. Instead he might come thinking that the teacher would answer questions; so, the teacher, unlike the carpenter, has not simply to teach students an art with which they are well-acquainted, but he has to introduce them to an art of which they had not heard and for which they have felt no need.” —O.K. Bouwsma in reviewing Wittgenstein’s “The Blue Book.”<sup>10</sup>



Kenny Johnson, 1913-1991. Photo by William Stafford

Using Bouwsma’s slant further, but applying its remarks to writing rather than to the engagement with philosophy, we could say: To accomplish the creative life one must be cured of a certain short-circuiting of thought that occurs in the “educated” person’s normal processes. An educated person passes painlessly but blankly through certain recognitions en route to certain predetermined or pre-sought conclusions, whereas the writer lives by the stray overtones and nuances that occur in the course of proceeding; he becomes a “kind of detective,” piecing together the clues that come along to him; he learns where he is going. He is not investigating “what happened,” or marshalling arguments: he is relieving strife among words and putting into each into

its most helpful context. And he does not learn how to do this, he just learns that it can happen and that by trying he is likely to encounter again and again the opportunities that enable the building of a literary work. It takes a change of heart....

(This is used after reading such poems as “Near,” “A Gesture Toward an Unfound Renaissance,” and “Reaching Out to Turn on a Light.” [sic, no end parenthesis])

Our sense of this version of “Where do the words come from?” is  
(cont. on p. 4)

(cont. from p. 3)

that it's Stafford's reminder to himself to explore the broader domain of a philosophy, and specifically a philosophy of teaching, when doing readings. Note that both Bouwsma and Wittgenstein come into play with this union of philosophy and writing. Such a union, or congruence, I believe, goes to the root of Stafford's fascination with Wittgenstein, and hence to his conduit, O. K. Bouwsma, not forgetting the role of Kenny Johnson.

#### IV. READING BOUWSMA'S *CONVERSATIONS*, AS MARKED BY STAFFORD

Here again our source is Paul Merchant and Vincent Wixon, thanks to their culling out four passages (plus the title page) where Stafford left a mark like a quarter circle in the margin from his copy of Bouwsma's now published memoir, *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949-1951*.

(At the end of this section, I'll offer a description of how *Conversations* is structured, or moves along, though of course it varies, especially with Wittgenstein's poor health.)

October 11, 1949, at Smith College:

Later, walking in the hills, he returned to the way in which we borrow—hints. He had seen a play, a third-rate, poor play, when he was twenty-two. One detail in that play had made a powerful impression upon him. It was a trifle. But here some peasant, ne'er-do-well says in the play: "Nothing can hurt me." That remark went through him and now he remembers it. It started things. You can't tell. The most important things just happen to you. [46]

September 25, 1950, at Oxford:

W. talked too about his own work. "It's not important but if anyone is interested I'm good at it and I may help. I don't recommend it. It's for people who can't leave it alone." So this is not important. What is important must fall outside. And suppose there is nothing outside! Poor souls! [68]

October 2, 1950, at Oxford:

Here are a few sentences from W.:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In it there is no value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so, [it] must lie outside the world.<sup>11</sup>

Ethics and aesthetics are one.

The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy. The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time. [68]

November 28, 1950, at Oxford:

[This passage calls for a context. Picture Bouwsma struggling to show the essence of how Wittgenstein works, trying to make sense where sense seems absent. If the meaning lies in the use, then the context will be crucial where you can't seem to sort it out. *How can X possibly have said Y?* Here Wittgenstein will work

to find a way to make sense of Dostoevski. And the reader will just have to puzzle along with Bouwsma's reconstruction. When Stafford finally draws his quarter circle in the margin, it's at the crux of the argument, a paradox.]

[To proceed: Wittgenstein has just asked Bouwsma if he had done any reading?] Yes, *Notes from the Underground*. [Yorick] Smythies had directed me to it. W. had read them a few years ago but he did not know what to make of them. He was puzzled that a man who could so clearly see and understand his own humiliation should not change. One could imagine a man who acted as he did but who never reflected, should continue in the same old rut. But not him. Such a man would at least come to adjust himself, even by some sort of technique, to avoid such misuses.

**When I first  
read him it was  
like a breath  
of fresh air, by  
the way, and  
I thought: Yes!  
[There is a way]  
for forwarding  
the explorations  
of the individual  
soul in this life.**

We got around to discussing Smythies' suggestion that the author of the *Notes* was trying to give himself a character. W. could understand that. That would be like trying to give oneself a style. And so there might be such a thing as a style of living. A young English boy goes to a local school and then to Eton. He cultivates a style of living. He is trained to become angry on certain occasions, etc. This was not much to the point though it was a nice explanation of giving oneself a style. Usually someone else gives one a style. We finally did get to distinguishing between the two parts of the *Notes* and then talking about the first. In the first part then, the author is trying to write about himself and this is where Smythies' interest lies. Here we have a study of a man writing about himself. And here, W. said, there is bound to be a certain falsity. Of course, one can certainly tell the

truth about what happened, but here one's attitudes towards one's own actions and the explanation of them are certain to introduce the false note. I said that Smythies apparently meant that when the author said, "I am a spiteful person," he was posing. W. said: Yes, even though he certainly was a spiteful person. There might be a way of saying what is true truly and a way of saying what is true falsely. [Note that it is these lines that Stafford marks with his semi-circle, the two ways of saying what is true, one true, one false.] It appears, accordingly, that what the author is trying to do is this: He is trying to give an account of himself and to maintain a consistent attitude toward that account. [68-72]

Bouwsma's account continues for a couple of pages, a rich illustration of how Wittgenstein works to make sense where sense seems lacking. My own marginal note reads, "We must become outside." A notion I picked up from the passage from October 2: "The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time."

Finally, my gleaning is that Wittgenstein's way of reading Dostoevski may well be how Stafford approaches his own poems, witness "Traveling through the Dark" and "Serving with Gideon," two examples out of perhaps thousands, of the paradox of saying "what is true truly and what is true falsely."

There's one more passage I'd like to cite, though Stafford didn't mark it. It's from the last day Bouwsma met with W. (and on the next-to-last page of the book).

January 16, 1951, at Oxford:

[Regarding a visit to New York in 1939]: Only one person he liked, an Italian boy in Central Park who shined his shoes twice. The boy hoped to shine shoes in a better location. He was genuine. W. paid double for his shine. [74]

Clearly Stafford regarded Bouwsma's *Conversations* as a precious portrait of a writer he admired. That said, the way that much of that book worked was in the tradition of the peripatetics from the days of Socrates. Strolling in the woods around the Cornell University Campus and later at Oxford, Bouwsma was the one Wittgenstein chose for these one-on-one conversations. Frequently the conversation would begin with Wittgenstein inviting Bouwsma to suggest a topic, such as *cogito, ergo sum*, or "pleasure vs. pain," whatever. Then Wittgenstein without hesitation would launch the discussion, as though he had already prepared for it. Well, in many senses, a lifetime as a philosopher had prepared him for these set topics. But Bouwsma's sense was that Wittgenstein was not relying on past consideration, but like the best of teachers, was treating every question as new.



Kenny Johnson and Stafford reading at Johnson's house

PHOTO FROM STEVEN JOHNSON COLLECTION

Stafford then describes the professors he has "valued" and the kind "who would listen in a kind of limber way as conversation was going on, and they would embrace the possibility of confessing to whatever ignorance they felt." Unlike the ones who "put on the armor" and "wear [their] Phi Beta Kappa button and lecture others." [29]

In *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life*, once more there is a direct reference to Wittgenstein in the long *Paris Review* interview with William Young, "The Art of Poetry." Young says, "You've said you believe that language is social. Is this related to your interest in Wittgenstein's notions of language?"

Stafford replies,

Oh yes, everything makes a difference in reading: the kind of ink it's in, where it starts on the page, everything. I feel like a scanner programmed to pick up whatever is on the page when I read. Wittgenstein had an abiding interest in language, so it's natural that a writer would be interested in what he said. I certainly am. But that's just as a human who is curious. I don't read these people in order to write. I don't believe in reading so that I'll be well-read

and a better writer. [30]

#### V. TRACES OF WITTGENSTEIN IN STAFFORD: THE FOUR "POETS ON POETRY" COLLECTIONS

The third and the fourth "Poets on Poetry" volumes, *Crossing Unmarked Snow* and *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains*, were both assembled and edited by Paul Merchant and Vincent Wixon, 1998 and 2003, that is, after Stafford's death. Both have explicit references to Wittgenstein. I'll begin with *Crossing Unmarked Snow*.

The first reference is from "Opening the Moment: A Conversation with Steven Ratiner" (See the opening of section I) in which Ratiner picks up on Stafford's unease with people who "talk about not having time to write," which leads Stafford to describe a different kind of education that is a "welcoming process, allying the self to what is available to *that self*...at *that time*." Having made this distinction, Stafford then invokes Wittgenstein:

But there are many people who teach in the University who are *professors* of writing, not writers. There are professors of philosophy, not philosophers. Wittgenstein made a big distinction. When I first read him it was like a breath of fresh air, by the way, and I thought: Yes! [There is a way] for forwarding the explorations of the individual soul in this life. That is different from the [tradition] that says: Now I give you the standards, now I will give you the marks to shoot at. Recently, I read someone's article that said, "You can't be a writer now, if you haven't read..." and then he named off a certain bunch of our own peers, you know current fashionable writers. And I thought, "Poor Sophocles!" [28-29]<sup>12</sup>

The paragraph ends with Stafford saying, "And I don't want anyone to read me as a duty, for heaven's sake." In passing, catch how Stafford in both of these passages applies Wittgenstein's observations about philosophy to writing. That will be a constant association for Stafford; and for us, Reece and Wolk: where Wittgenstein is never more than a moment away from how we read, write, and teach. And live.

Now to take a step back to the first two "Poets on Poetry" volumes, *Writing the Australian Crawl* (1978) and *You Must Revise Your Life* (1986), where Wittgenstein is never referenced directly. Our sense is that Stafford was responsible for the structure of the two books, as he would be for a collection of his poems. Fortunately, Stafford himself tells us what that is like in *Crawl*: "When I was collecting the poems together [for *Traveling through the Dark*]<sup>13</sup>—and this is true for every book I've done—I did have some sense of a pattern or a *program* in the book. It doesn't have to be very strong, though, and maybe it's just in my own mind." [*Crawl*, 115].

*Writing the Australian Crawl* has a short "Preface" where Stafford writes, "It seems all right if the pieces eddy around recurrent topics and bring up issues roughed around in other pieces." [ix] The bit that follows is our turning the current back on itself, eddying around with Stafford's dream-inspired "What It Is Like," the title an invitation to a simile: "What *it* is like?" where *it* is "poetry." Given that our mission is to hold up two spirits, Stafford and Wittgenstein, one possibility might well be to compare Stafford's notion of *poetry* to *philosophy* as practiced by Wittgenstein in the later part of his life.

(cont. on p. 16)

## Peter Sears, A Friend, May 18, 1937—July 20, 2017

By Tim Barnes

Peter Sears was a remarkable poet, “an heir to Frank O’Hara and Kenneth Koch,” according to Dorianne Laux. He was also a delightful, erudite, and inspiring teacher; a literary activist, an organizer, and a powerful advocate for the arts as intrinsic to community. There is good reason, as well, to believe, because he was a co-founder of The Friends of William Stafford, that without him I would not be writing these words. He was an original and true Friend of Bill’s legacy.

Peter was born in New York. His father was an inventor and architect; his mother trained in modern dance. “Creativity” and “imagination,” Sears remembers, were family values. Peter, unlike Bill, went to the best schools, Phillips Academy, Princeton, and, as did Bill, the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, though many years apart. Bill came from a working class, free-thinking, prairie family. His father was a handyman and contract worker with mechanical gifts. Peter and Bill were very different and a generation apart. They shared, though, a healthy, natural love for poetry and the endeavors that pertain to it.

As I think of them together, side by side, because they’re both gone and because Peter’s role in founding the Friends of William Stafford, which quietly celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2017, and the creation of this publication, which was at first, my friends, a double-sided sheet, their differences occur along with their correspondences. I want to explore those as a way of appreciating them both, particularly Peter, who, like Bill, was a friend. In truth I knew Peter a bit better than Bill. We played sports together. Bill shunned sports except for a bit of archery, and he did compare poetry to ju-jitsu, a sport I was fascinated with as a child.

As public figures, they may have stood side by side since Peter came to Oregon to be the poet-in-residence at Reed College around the time Bill was appointed Oregon Poet Laureate. Peter’s time in the eighties as the community service organizer for the Oregon Arts Commission surely brought them together. If you saw them standing together then, as I do at this moment, you would see a tall, handsome, blond with a boyish effervescence and Ivy League charm beside a shorter, dark haired, sturdy framed man with a craggy face and pleasant, alert expression. If you listened to them converse, you would see that Peter was the more loquacious, a talker with a funny loopy brilliance and Bill more the listener with

a penchant for measured response. But their way of being poets and with poets was equally open, generous, supportive, and seemingly innate. Besides co-founding The Friends of William Stafford and serving a year as its director, Sears co-founded Cloudbank Books. He also created the Oregon Literary Coalition, an association of writers and organizations for networking and advocacy. As editor of this publication, I often went to the biannual meetings of the OLC. Peter lead those gatherings and the knowledge, intelligence and organizational savvy he offered was legion. His feats of connectivity could seem like a magic show. The OLC disbanded without him. A terrific litserv, however, remains at [olc@lists.oregonstateedu](mailto:olc@lists.oregonstateedu). Sign up at <http://lists.oregonstateedu/mailman/listinfo/olc>.

Part of their generosity and enthusiasm for the writing life involved writing books about writing. Bill’s *Writing the Australian Crawl* is one of the finest and most encouraging books on writing and the writing life I’ve ever read. I open any of my copies of his books of prose and find marginalia everywhere. I open Peter’s *I Want to Be a Crowd: Poems & Commentary* and find the same. Take this sentence, for instance, from an essay in the prose half of the book, “Poetry is simply a mode of expression.” I used this phrase or something close to it, “Poetry is a way of using words,” when I worked in the Artists-in-Education Program in Oregon as a poet. I said it to hundreds of classrooms, thousands of kids, just as I told them what William Stafford said when asked when he became a poet: The question is when did other people stop? I said this to suggest that poetry was innate, inside them—stop worrying about spelling, punctuation, rhyming, and write (a version of lower your standards). My file drawer full of kids’ poems testify to something that Peter and Bill shared—poetry as an indwelling, holistic, and natural activity.

Peter wrote two books on poetry and the writing of it, both aimed at young people, two and a half if one includes *I Want to Be a*

*Crowd*. He worked for *Scholastic Magazine* in the sixties and in the nineties Scholastic, Inc. published *Gonna Bake Me a Rainbow Poem: A Student Guide to Writing Poetry*, an anthology of prize-winning poems of students from grades seven to twelve. In it Sears discusses the essentials of poetry and in his lively, personal, perceptive, low-key style, treats the poems themselves as adults because poetry is, as Stafford says in several places “anything said in such a way or put on the page in such a way as to invite from the hearer or the reader a certain kind of attention” (pp. 61, 80, *Writing the Australian Crawl*).

Peter’s second book on poetry writing, *Secret Writing: Keys to the Mysteries of Reading and Writing*, published by the Teachers & Writers



This photo of Peter was taken by Stafford.

Collaborative, may derive from his three years, 1959-62, serving as a linguist for U.S Army Intelligence (Peter a spy, a blonde James Bond!?). In *Secret Writing*, Sears uses codes, ciphers, petroglyphs, languages and symbol systems to examine the complexities and puzzlements of poetry. It's a fun, fascinating, challenging book geared for high school students. In a very affectionate paragraph, he thanks poet Ron Padgett, then publications director for the Collaborative. It is Padgett's poetry that Adam Driver writes in Jim Jarmusch's recent and very beautiful movie, *Paterson*.

I had a conversation at Peter's Memorial Service on October 29<sup>th</sup> at Reed College with an old Princeton friend of his who was an opposing quarterback in touch football. Peter could motivate a team, call a good play, and throw a pass, though he was a little slow on his feet. Peter loved sports and organizing games. He was a jock and wore his tennis sweater tied across his chest. He was a serve and volleyer with wicked spin. He often wrote about sports and the physicality of living played a vital part in his work. *Green Diver*, *Luge*, *Bike Run* are three of his books. In this they were different, though Bill did write of his morning runs.

Stafford published over sixty books in his lifetime and Peter around ten, four of them full length, including *Brink*, 1999, which won the Peregrine Prize and a Western States Book Award in 2000. Bill won that award in 1991 for *My Name is William Tell*. Bill also received more prestigious awards (US. Poet Laureate) but these matters weren't crucial to either one of them, though certainly not unwelcome. What seems important to say is that the poetry of each of them had a quality of freshness and friendliness. Stafford could get austere and Sears a bit zany but their poems reached out a metaphorical hand to the reader and the handshake was sincere and followed by resonant interchange. Peter felt that voice was an essential element in poetry and his voice was distinctive—lyrical, colloquial, profound, and wonderfully wacky. He was and is a joy to read and his last book, *Small Talk: New & Selected Poems*, published by Lynx House Press's Northwest Masters Series is terrific, bouncing along with radiant zest.

They were hard working poets, robust in a way, publishing often and in many places. Bill was famous for keeping poems in the mails and published over four thousand. I don't know Peter's output, but hundreds for sure and in some excellent places: *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Rolling Stone*. He tells the story of receiving an acceptance that said something like "Even though [ ] didn't like these poems, we did." He'd taken a batch of poems out of an SASE and stuffed them into an outgoing submission without removing the rejection slip. Maybe it was one of those tiny slips of colored paper some little magazines used to use and maybe a slip of them still do. It's a good Peter Sears story, funny, characteristic, and instructive.

Both of them were also Oregon poets laureate. Stafford for fifteen years, 1975-90, and Sears for two. 2014-2016. His project as laureate was "Expanding Voices," the goals of which was to grow the reach of poetry in Oregon by holding readings with poets of diverse linguistic heritages—Somali, Latino, Native-American, Slovenian. His goal was "to bring more people into humanities and poetry." One of Bill's rationales for his conscientious objection to fighting in World War II was that he could not find a national location for virtue. Peter was trying to counter locating virtue in

one language over another in a world of diversity. Both of them knew that respecting other languages and literatures is a powerful way we honor the other, the stranger, and ourselves. Both Peter and Bill were, I think, one-worlders, perhaps in the tradition of Henry Wallace, one of FDR's vice-presidents. As the graphic on the back of this issue says, "The sky is bigger than any country."

I thank Peter for making it possible for me to say these things here on these pages. I'm sure the rest of the Friends and way beyond join me in this. He got the organization rolling through the force of his personality, his generosity, and his love of poetry. He is an essential reason why this publication exists. In a piece he wrote for this publication ten years ago on the occasion of its tenth anniversary, he spoke of his dream of "establishing a William Stafford Center somewhere in the Portland metropolitan area." Peter loved Stafford's work, his poetry, his legacy, as so many of us do.

Both of them were friends of mine, of many of you, and friends to poetry, and friends to amicable ways. Peter, for whom these I hope somewhat elegiac memorial words are primarily directed, was a delightful person, just plain fun to be with, a fine poet, a force for good in literature and the world, a pal, a friend and a Friend. At this time when he is ghosting into being after being, I would like to say that he will be deeply missed and profoundly unforgotten.



#### DREAM OF FOLLOWING

*with a nod to David Romtvedt*

I am following my father and mother,  
following them although I don't much like  
the idea, and I don't much like

that the distance to them grows smaller,  
so small I'm catching up to them. You'd think  
we'd have much to say to one another.

We don't. My father motions me  
to look back over my shoulder.  
There's my daughter following me.

That's mean of him. I want to hail her,  
tell her to slow down.  
But I don't. I turn back, they're gone.

*Printed with permission from "Small Talk," by Peter Sears,  
for the Friends of William Stafford, September 2015.*

This broadside was printed for the Friends of William Stafford in 2015. The poem can be found in *Small Talk: New & Selected Poems*.

## The Brinkmanship of Dawn: William Stafford and the “Feeling of the West”

By James Armstrong

The title of one of William Stafford’s Methow River poems asks “Is This Feeling About the West Real?” The poem was one of a group commissioned by the U.S. Forest Service and later put up as signs along a scenic valley in the Cascade Mountains of northern Washington, so the question had a very real context. But it is a question central to understanding Stafford’s poetry, which from very early on asserted the importance of this feeling. For Stafford, the West represents a space where the human community is still porous to influence from the nonhuman. It is a space that challenges modern American civilization—the apex of the modern industrial/agricultural complex—with a glimpse at a pre-agrarian and largely animist world.

In Stafford’s West, things impinge on the edge of human settlement: wild animals are encountered, extremes of weather and exigencies of the terrain lead to hazardous but illuminating experiences because they provide a larger context for what it means to be human. “Is This Feeling About the West Real?” begins:

All their lives out here some people know  
they live in a hemisphere beyond what Columbus discovered.  
(*The Way It Is* 175)

Both the querying title and the first lines point to the destabilizing power of the West—the way in which Europeans found the West a provocation to their world view, one that caused them to either fantasize about where they were (India? China?) or admit that they were not at all where they thought they were (they are in “a hemisphere beyond”). The “West”—whether in Columbus’ sense of the term, as the westward route to the Indies, or in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American sense of the term as the “frontier,” or in the 20<sup>th</sup> century sense of a diminishing remnant of wildness—is both a seduction to fantasize and a sublime rebuke to all fantasy. Stafford captures this in the next few lines:

These people look out and wonder: Is it magic? Is it  
the oceans of air off the Pacific? You can’t  
walk through it without wrapping a new  
piece of time around you, a readiness for a meadowlark,  
that brinkmanship a dawn can carry for lucky people  
all through the day. (175)

The “magic” and “wonder” of the West is captured in myriad calendar photos of Yellowstone or Yosemite or Monument Valley. But what about “a new piece of time?” What is “readiness for a meadowlark?” Why is this feeling about the West “brinkmanship”—a word with particularly sinister connotations in the 1950s and 1960s?<sup>1</sup>

In Stafford’s first book, the West invites contact with the nonhuman—sometimes in threatening, sometimes in soothing ways. The book is in fact titled *West of Your City*—and the phrase comes from the initial poem, “Midwest,” in which Stafford asserts

that,

*Cocked in that land tactile as leaves  
wild things wait crouched in those valleys  
west of your city outside your lives  
in the ultimate wind, the whole land’s wave.  
Come west and see; touch these leaves. (Stories That Could Be True  
30)*

It is significant that the West is from the outset posed in dialectic with urban spaces, although the word “city” in the book’s title is a little misleading. Stafford’s most common setting is a small town, one resembling the Kansas communities of his boyhood. What is striking about these towns is the degree to which they are vulnerable. The landscape looms over them. The sky is depicted as dominating, even threatening—as he says in his early poem “One Home,” “The sun was over our town; it was like a blade.” At the edge of such towns there are wild spaces which are at once accessible and yet still feral enough to call to mind a different regime from that of Main Street: “outside, the buffalo grass, and the wind in the night . . .” the poem continues (*Stories That Could Be True* 29). The children of these Western towns are drawn to the chaotic forces of that wildness: “Kicking cottonwood leaves we ran toward storms”—but also to its steady nonhuman presence: “Wherever we looked the land would hold us up” (30)

Stafford’s poems rarely concern wilderness for its own sake; the wild is defined in juxtaposition to the human, so it exists as a point of contact. This contact is abrupt and ubiquitous in the West; people read books in libraries and attend church and shop on Main Street—but in the midst of their human tasks they are confronted by sublime prairie skies, or looming mountains, or terrible storms; at the end of the street runs the river that comes from and goes back to the unregulated outlands. People may go out into the wild to trap muskrats, or hunt quail; they may drive over the mountains through the dark—but these are forays, traverses. For Stafford the human condition is more sharply defined by the larger and less knowable nonhuman world, and the “feeling about the West,” which contact with the wild creates, provides confirmation of that point of view.

This can be confusing for critics who pay attention to Stafford’s poems about “nature” but struggle to put these together with his social themes—politics, family life, adolescence. As Peter Stitt has said, Stafford is not “a traditional nature poet, one whose chief goal is to describe and venerate nature.” Stafford is

. . . a wisdom poet who uses the world of nature as a means to an end—he is in pursuit of a truth higher than those customarily perceived by ordinary men leading ordinary lives. Thus, in those poems mentioned above wherein nature’s power to destroy is emphasized, the lesson is one of humility for mankind—in the face of tornadoes, earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, the numbing cold of winter, even the strongest of man’s devices pale to a powerless insignificance. (Stitt 175)

Yet in poems like “Thinking for Berky,” or “Serving With Gideon,” human moral questions are not “insignificant.” Unlike Mary Oliver or John Haines—or Robinson Jeffers, the American poet who in some ways best fits Stitt’s description—Stafford writes with critical insight as well as with real affection about the human community.



*The poem along the Methow*

PHOTO BY DENNIS SCHINDLER



But the communities Stafford describes are not urban. Stafford is “a poet, not of the city, but of the small town and the countryside,” Stitt says, and this is unusual in an era when poems tended to gravitate to the city and its troubles (174). This can also be confusing to critics because the choice of small town life as a subject can seem like something of a throwback to the early “prairie moderns” like Edgar Lee Masters, whose Midwestern village settings reflected a pre-war ethos when the American population was much more dispersed. Indeed, Stafford can seem closer to works like *Winesburg Ohio* or *Our Town* than to *Howl* or *Lunch Poems*. Poet and critic Richard Hugo has read Stafford’s Kansas poems as a reaction against “regression”—claiming that the impulse of the poems is against the “drab and barren world of Stafford’s childhood,” and this was indeed the attitude of most serious literature in the twentieth century, especially in the Midwest, where the “revolt from the village” carried the day (Hugo 116; 114).<sup>2</sup>

But that doesn’t seem to square with the reader’s experience of Stafford’s poems. Even Hugo admits “we are touched constantly in the poems” about Kansas—sometimes because of the human drama, but also because of a sense of the sublime power that seems to penetrate the towns from beyond (Hugo 115).

Stafford’s concern with the “small town and the countryside” causes Stitt to classify Stafford as a “pastoral” poet. But the pastoral is always an urban genre—it is a city fantasy about country life, concerning itself with shepherds and milkmaids and other “rural swains.” Stafford’s subjects are not lounging in rural *otium* in the shade of oak trees, they are walking down elm-lined streets past frame houses to go to the drugstore—they are not in Arcadia but in towns like Liberty and Lawrence. While Stafford does take up country subjects, he is no Robert Frost. His farms are often abandoned or isolated and he doesn’t revel in the chores the way Frost does.

In a sense, Stafford’s great model is Thoreau, for whom wildness began a mile away from home. Concord had long been settled, yet Thoreau managed to find in the swamps and thickets and cut-over woodlands a critical distance from which to regard his town, and a set of principles different from those of his peers. Stafford finds the same, only the greater contrast which existed between town and country in his Western landscapes only intensified the dialectic.

This is based on Stafford’s childhood experience. The towns he grew up in Kansas were market towns whose purpose was to provide services for the surrounding small-hold farms, whose fields began immediately where Main Street ended; the connection between town and country was visible everywhere. Moreover, the connection between countryside and wilderness was remembered. The breaking of the prairie sod was only a generation away. As Stafford says in “One Home,”

A wildcat sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July  
when he was cutting plum bushes for fuel,  
before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky.  
(*Stories That Could Be True* 29)

The pre-agricultural world was still vividly present in people’s memories—along with the people who inhabited that world for millennia.

For Stafford, the American wilderness represents a critical encounter between a triumphant European agricultural/industrial complex with a radically different space: a non-anthropocentric

space in which agrarian humans had been edging out of existence since the dawn of the Neolithic.

For ninety-eight percent of its history, the *anthropos* was a hunter and gatherer, living in small bands of around one hundred. The wilderness sowed, the human tribes reaped. To survive, they had to be mobile, alert to nuances in the environment; they had to work as a team and share all in common. Leadership was consensual and charismatic, not inherited. Humans were kin to the animals around them, through totem relationships, through myth and song—there was no distinction between the human and the nonhuman (Harari 46-52).

Ten to fourteen thousand years ago the *anthropos* became something different. Having discovered how to domesticate animals and to grow and store calories from plants, humans settled down into villages, then towns, then cities. Stories about the origin and destiny of humans began to change as well: the original impetus of agriculture was to reframe the world as a human garden, where we would choose what plants would live, and what animals would be useful—this gave rise to a cosmos centered on design and human purpose. It gave rise to a distinction between nature, those things

outside human control, and culture, those things that profit from human control—and to a belief in the superiority of the latter (Harari 102-118).

But always there was an outside, an edge. In the stories of Eden or of Arcadia, humans kept in mind that other garden where they were not in charge. And those sorts of places still existed, beyond the last farm field. The early agricultural state lived as a clearing in the wilderness. The Greek city state,

for example, was organized in concentric circles of human control, centered on the *agora*, the central market square that was the site of political and economic activity that made the surrounding city, the *polis*, possible. Surrounding the city was the *khōra*, the countryside, which was a network of family farms; beyond this were religious shrines, whose grounds were left uncultivated (McInerney 38). Then came pastoral land—a wild commons used for grazing animals, for woodcutting and foraging. The Greek city, with its temples to justice and learning, was in dialogue with the wilderness, which was under the jurisdiction of Pan and his entourage of nymphs and fauns—and the agricultural fields of the *khōra* served as a kind of middle ground (ibid.). But as the success of the human agricultural project mounted, the nonhuman world was driven to the margins; the *polis* grew, the *khōra* became vast fields of monocultures harvested by machines. By the beginning of the twentieth century it seemed the world was destined to become one vast city.

Yet the American West—a very mobile designation, meaning first the lands of the Northwest Territories, then the lands across the Mississippi, then finally the lands beyond the Rockies—existed as a continual stay to this urbanizing project. The American West, unlike the East, was never entirely suitable to agriculture, at least not the kind of agriculture northern Europeans wanted to practice. The west was too dry, its climate too extreme and too stochastic, to provide a stable basis for the agrarian society which was the aim of the Northwest Ordinance and the Homestead Act. Most of the farms in the West were destined for failure from the outset—because dry land farming on the Great Plains would require very different

(cont. on p. 10)

## the wild spaces of the West have a distinct spiritual effect

(cont. from p. 9)

geographical and political arrangements than those which had been successful east of the Appalachians; besides, the deserts and mountains of the West were never going to be farmland. As a result, in the West Americans encountered a landscape that was resistant to assimilation.

This meant the Western frontier revealed modes of human organization, and types of human interaction with the biome which intensive agriculture and the industrial expansion of the city had all but obliterated. The feeling of the West, then, is the feeling that comes when hearing the nonhuman in full voice: the plenum, the rich network of networks which anthropologists label “animism” (Harari 54). Animism describes the pre-agrarian worldview that all phenomena have agency: rather than sorting the world via the post-Cartesian duality, which posits a “nature” that is mechanical and inanimate and a human being that is the locus of will and freedom, animists experience “other animals, plants, rocks, geographic features such as mountains or rivers or other entities of the natural environment, including thunder, wind and shadows” as having something like intentionality (Wikipedia). This is a feeling unavailable, or at least very diminished, in landscapes completely tamed by modern agricultural/technical civilization—and it is a feeling that is still palpable in the “empty” spaces of the West.

In his essay “William Stafford: 1914—,” Stafford describes the seminal moment when this became apparent to him: “It was like an Indian vision-quest. I was in Liberal High School, and one autumn afternoon on a weekend I got on my bike with a camping pack . . . and rode ten or twelve miles to the Cimarron River northeast of town.” He climbed the bank above the river and surveyed the “open country.” “On that still, serene day I stayed and watched,” he says, “No person anywhere, nothing, just space, the solid earth, gradually a star.” He goes to sleep to the sound of a coyote, waking once when a train passes. He concludes, “That encounter with the size and serenity of the earth and its neighbors in the sky has never left me. The earth was my home; I would never feel lost while it held me” (*You Must Revise Your Life* 7-8).

The idea that the wild spaces of the West have a distinct spiritual effect is central to Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous “Frontier Thesis,” which held that the frontier experience formed the American character:

The Western wilds, from the Alleghanies to the Pacific, constituted the richest free gift that was ever spread out before civilized man. To the peasant and artisan of the Old World, bound by the chains of social class, as old as custom and as inevitable as fate, the West offered an exit into a free life and greater well-being among the bounties of nature, into the midst of resources that demanded manly exertion, and that gave in return the chance for indefinite ascent in the scale of social advance. (Turner 261)

For Jackson, the most important feature of the frontier confrontation was its fostering of the twin American ideals of freedom and individualism: “that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.” This was an interpretation of the West suitable to the ideology of the time when European invasion of America had finally fulfilled its “manifest destiny” and the Robber Barons were busily

erecting the infrastructure of the great industrial economy that was to follow. Jackson’s essay had an elegiac tone, because the frontier was closed now:

Never again can such an opportunity come to the sons of men. It was unique, and the thing is so near us, so much a part of our lives, that we do not even yet comprehend its full significance. The existence of this land of opportunity has made America the goal of idealists from the days of the Pilgrim Fathers. (261)

Even though Jackson includes the Pilgrims as well as the cowboys in his reference, he admits that there was something different about the West proper—meaning lands west of the Mississippi. In Jackson’s view, this Western experience was qualitatively different: “With all the materialism of the pioneer movements, this idealistic conception of the vacant lands as an opportunity for a new order of things is unmistakably present” (261).

But for Stafford, the West is not redolent of a “new order”—it is evidence of an older order. Nor are those lands “vacant.” His epiphany on the Cimarron River that “The earth was my home; I would never feel lost while it held me,” is not the coziness of the farm landscape, or the anthropomorphic assurance of an urban landscape, but a more ancient sense of the human animal’s relationship to the world as personal and spiritual. The West, as Stafford says in “Is This Feeling About the West Real?” was a place where

European Americans could discover  
a readiness for a meadowlark,

that brinkmanship a dawn can carry for lucky people

This implies both an interest in the non-human and an acceptance of the contingent and its bracing challenges. A world full of animals, and one not subject to human regulation; a world full of risks, but also full of deep connection. This is the world of the pre-agrarian forager, ever alert to the environment and to the animals and plants in it, a world continually unfolding in its novelty.

Of course in some ways Stafford’s poem can seem to confirm Jackson’s thesis. His poem contrasts this readiness of “lucky people” with those for whom the feeling of the West doesn’t really exist, or is “unreal”:

But if you don’t get it, this bonus, you can  
go home full of denial, and live out your years.

Great waves can pass unnoticed outside your door;  
stars can pound silently on the roof; your teakettle  
and cozy life inside can deny everything outside—  
(*The Way It Is* 175-6)

There is some echo of the early twentieth century notion of the effete Easterner, unused to the outdoor manliness of figures like Theodore Roosevelt. There is some of Jackson’s anxiety that the manly call to freedom and individuality will fade, when we tame the West and live “cozy lives” and “deny everything outside.” But Stafford concludes the stanza with a catalogue intended to give examples of what he means by “everything outside”:

whole mountain ranges, history, the holocaust,  
sainthood, Crazy Horse. (176)

Again, the reference to time (“history”) and to the West’s outsized geography (“whole mountain ranges”), but then the puzzling inclusion of “the holocaust,”—what could he mean by this? The words that follow, “sainthood, Crazy Horse,” imply that he may

**Perhaps “sainthood”  
and “Crazy Horse”  
are meant to go  
together.**

in part refer to the genocidal wars Europeans waged against the Indians. Perhaps “sainthood” and “Crazy Horse” are meant to go together. This is not the same lesson that Turner was preaching. The West teaches a counter-narrative to the official, manifest destiny of the United States. Turner, after all, was trying to make the frontier a defining characteristic of the American people, in largely positive terms.

Western democracy through the whole of its earlier period tended to the production of a society of which the most distinctive fact was the freedom of the individual to rise under conditions of social mobility, and whose ambition was the liberty and well-being of the masses. (266)

Stafford’s poem does not brag about the political and cultural achievements that have come because of the confrontation with the Western frontier. It instead seems to rebuke the results of that confrontation—the “well-being of the masses” did not include the original inhabitants.

From the Pequot War onward, European Americans had encountered occasional violent resistance to their westward march. The usual solution was forcible relocation—Westward. In the East, Indian removal was so successful that Indians lingered only as memories, increasingly romanticized. But the American West was the place the Indians remained as a political and social reality. They survived as a lingering critique to European hegemony—and as a reservoir of alternative ways of being on the land.

This is another connection between Stafford and Thoreau. For Thoreau, Indians—whom he largely knew about from historical accounts—represented a counterpoint to the European agrarian world of his upbringing. The tribes of the eastern seaboard, while having developed agricultural practices, were still semi-nomadic and relied on wild game, fishing and plant collecting. Their egalitarianism and their mobility fascinated Thoreau, serving as a rebuke to the materialistic hierarchies of his New England culture of the nineteenth century. Stafford was similarly fascinated with Native Americans, primarily because of the sense of steady contact with the nonhuman which they embodied. But for Stafford, not only were Indians still alive in the West—they were still speaking. What they had to say was that the ancient animist sense of the world was not dead either. For example, in Stafford’s poem “Wovoka’s Witness,” the anonymous speaker—a follower of the Paiute religious leader Wovoka, and therefore one of the West’s “saints,” in Stafford’s view—takes on the identity of an Indian who has been brought on as an extra in a cowboy movie. The speaker is addressing his or her tribe (“My people”), saying “we must let the others make movies / of us,” and imploring them

. . . Be brave. Charge into their cameras  
and bring them alive. They too may dream. They too may find  
the ghost dance, and be real. (Stories 5)

Here the feeling of the West’s reality is best revealed in a dream—the sacred dream of the ghost dancer, which, if it can be shared with whites, may reveal what is real, in the sense of true and significant.

This begins to help us read what Stafford might mean in asking “Is This Feeling About the West Real?” The white European version of what the West meant—that it was the last stage in a manifest destiny resulting in modern America—was the prevailing feeling at the time Stafford was writing. “Westerns” filled the cinemas and the

television sets of Americans in the ‘50s and ‘60s as Americans sought narratives that justified their material and political power (MGM’s 1962 Cinerama offering, “How the West Was Won,” was typical: it ended its star-filled sweeping narrative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century frontier with a view of a freeway exchange and the Golden Gate Bridge). Stafford’s version of what the West meant was decidedly different—and many would question its reality. The “feeling” Stafford refers to seems to hint at something ineffable, something that hovers out of reach: a “hemisphere beyond” the cultural definitions of the West more commonly given. The last stanza drives this home.

Listen—something else hovers out here, not  
color, not outlines or depth when air  
relieves distance by hazing far mountains,  
but some total feeling or other world  
almost coming forward, like when a bell sounds  
and then leaves a whole countryside waiting. (176)

This is more a potential than an actual West. What is that “total feeling or other word” that is “almost coming forward”? Frederic Jackson Turner felt that the lasting significance of the West would have to be sought in the “realm of the spirit,” the “domain of ideals and legislation” as the closing of the frontier meant the end of the stimulus provided by those “vacant spaces.” Stafford seems to agree that the West’s ultimate use is spiritual—but not just to influence legislation. It serves as a last chance to remind the dominate civilization that the countryside holds the trace of the “other world,” the world on the brink of our own; the nonhuman, out of which we come, and toward which we journey.

## Endnotes

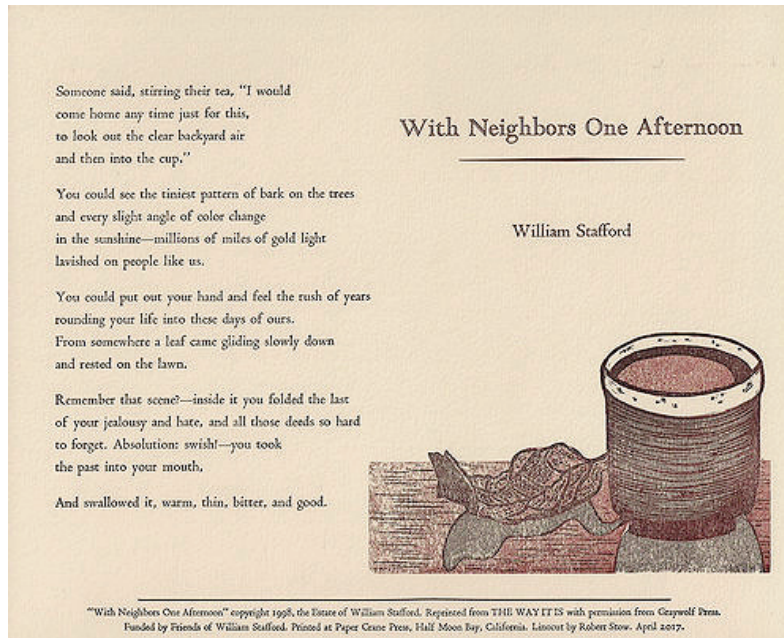
<sup>1</sup>The word first appears in a *Time Magazine* article describing John Foster Dulles’ cold war philosophy in early 1956. Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson subsequently criticized Dulles for “boasting of his brinkmanship—the art of bringing us to the edge of the nuclear abyss” (see the entry at <https://www.etymonline.com/word/brinkmanship>).

<sup>2</sup> See Carl Van Doren, “The Revolt from the Village:1920,” *Nation* 113 (October 12, 1921): 407-12

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## The Newest Paper Crane Broadside



*This broadside, designed by Robert Stow, son of Doug Stow, may be purchased at the FWS website ([williamstafford.org](http://williamstafford.org)) for \$20.*

### The Orphan

Oh! The dream, the dream!  
My strong, gilded wagon  
has collapsed,  
its wheels have scattered like gypsies.  
One night I dreamt of spring  
and when I awoke  
flowers covered my pillow.  
I dreamt once of the sea.  
In the morning my bed was rich  
with shells and fins.  
But when I dreamt of freedom  
spears surrounded my neck  
with mornings halo.

From now on you will not find me  
at ports or among trains  
but in public libraries  
sleeping head down on the maps of the world  
as the orphan sleeps on pavement  
where my lips will touch more than one river  
and my tears stream from continent  
to continent.

MUHAMMAD AL-MAGHUT, SYRIA  
TR. BY MAY JAYYUSI AND NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

*This poem was read by Paulann Petersen at a William Stafford Celebration on April 2, 2017, at the Kairos-Milwaukie United Church of Christ. The event was organized by Joanie McClellan of the Oregon Fellowship of Reconciliation.*

### The Fires

I fight two fights,  
both bright and blazing. Heat scorches earth.  
One: guns blaze and ring. The second: trees fall,  
shaking the ground.

One I fight with force, one with words.  
Only words can stop the guns barely heard.  
We stop and rebel and join camps to write,  
to stop others. I fight the fires we're supposed to fight.  
Not each other.

### Stafford in a C.O. Camp

Most wake up to the sounds of guards yelling.  
I get up at 4 am to write.  
Writing makes me feel free  
and helps me release my thoughts and anger.

My freedom is gone,  
but right after dawn  
I express my thoughts  
with paper and pencil.  
I am drowning in the sorrows of war.

*These two poems were written in a workshop for sophomores and juniors from Liberty Bell High School in Twisp, Washington, taught by Cindy Williams Gutiérrez. The workshop was part of a performance of her play Words That Burn, in which a character based on Stafford plays a key role. If the writers would like to claim their poems, I will reprint their poems in full with their names.*



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Jerry Gatchell, husband of FWS board member Martha Gatchell, died this September in his 75th year. He often read at the Stafford potlucks at Foothills Park in Lake Oswego, where this picture was taken. At one of them he read "Roll Call," the poem below. He was a loyal Friend.

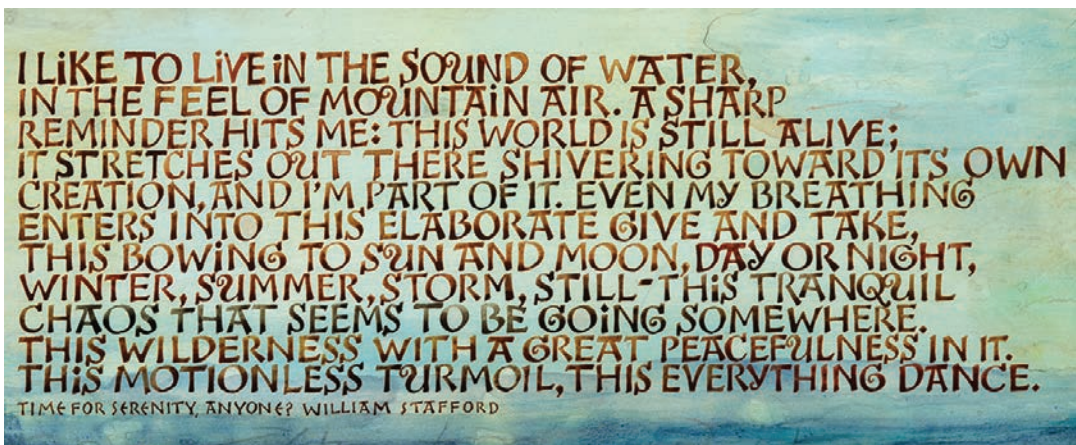
## Roll Call

Red Wolf came, and Passenger Pigeon,  
the Dodo Bird, all the gone or endangered  
came and crowded around in a circle,  
the Bison, the Irish Elk, waited  
silent, the Great White Bear, fluid and strong,  
sliding from the sea, streaming and creeping  
in the gathering darkness, nose down,  
bowing to earth its tapered head,  
where the Black-footed Ferret, paws folded,  
stood in the center surveying the multitude  
and spoke for us all: "Dearly beloved," it said.

WILLIAM STAFFORD



Ralph Salisbury, poet, professor, and pacifist, died this October at the age of 91. He and his wife Ingrid Wendt were dear friends of Bill and Dorothy's. Ralph studied at the Iowa Writer's Workshop with Bill. He told a delightful story at a FWS potluck about a gathering there that may have been the genesis for one of Stafford's most famous poems, "At the Chairman's Housewarming,"— "let me live definite, shock by shock." The photo above was taken by Stafford and appeared in a Northwest Review special issue on Stafford (13.3, 1973) in a section called "Faces Along the Way: Photographs of Writers and Friends by William Stafford."



This is part of a larger broadside by Rebecca Wild.

## The 2017 ALA and Beyond

By Tim Barnes

“His vision is as broad and as all-encompassing as that of Yeats or Whitman...as tightly woven and as imaginatively complex as that of Stevens and as sensitive to the inner landscape as Roethke’s.”

—Judith Kitchen, *Writing the World: Understanding William Stafford*

The Friends of William Stafford went to the annual American Literature Association conference in Boston in late May of 2017 in the form of a panel entitled “An Afternoon in the Stacks: Encountering William Stafford in His Archive.” The ALA is a coalition of literary societies devoted to the study of American authors. Founded in 1989, the purpose of the ALA is “the advancement of humanistic learning by encouraging the study of American authors and their works.” It does this by arranging conferences and other scholarly activities. The list of societies that attended this year’s conference is long, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to David Foster Wallace, from Emily Dickinson to Adrienne Rich, from the famous (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck) to the relatively obscure (Catharine Maria Sedgewick, Evelyn Scott, Rebecca Harding Davis). The curious might check the ALA’s directory at [americanliteratureassociation.org](http://americanliteratureassociation.org).

Needless to say, the conference is big (I hesitate to say huge for obvious reasons), almost as big as the AWP. It was held at the Westin Copley Place, May 25<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, in downtown Boston, a building with thirty-six floors, 803 rooms, and four restaurants. There were close to a thousand attendees, over 250 panels in twenty sessions over the four-day event. The meeting rooms, hallways, restaurants, and bars crackled with literary discussion. In addition, there were readings, society business meetings, receptions, and, above all, there was the pleasure of talking about writers and ideas, of engagement in considering the scripture of American literature—legacies, truth, the meaning of meaning.

The William Stafford panel happened on Saturday, May 27<sup>th</sup>, between 12:40 and 2:00, one of fourteen concurrent panels. The panelists were Fred Marchant, emeritus professor of Suffolk

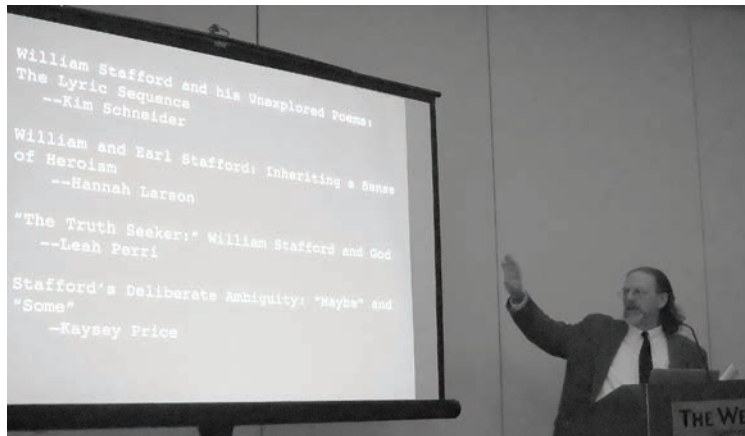
University in Boston and editor of *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford, 1937-47*; James Armstrong, professor of English at Winona State University in Minnesota whose essays and poems have appeared in recent issues of this publication; Clara Richter, a graduate student at Winona and author of “Introductory Rites and Final Blessings: The First and Last Poems in William Stafford’s Collections of Poetry,” which appeared in issue 21.1 of the *FWSJ&NL*. Your editor was the fourth panelist, replacing Zach Selley, associate head of Collections and Archives for Lewis & Clark College, who in the end was unable to travel to the conference.

A good portion of what was said by the panelists can be found on the pages of past issues of this publication. Clara Richter read her essay mentioned above, quite wonderfully, and most of Jim Armstrong’s fascinating presentation, “From Cursive to Digital: Using William Stafford’s On-Line Archive in the Classroom,” can be found in his essay “Teaching a Seminar on William Stafford,” which is in issue 21.1 of this journal. A goodly portion of Fred Marchant’s presentation, “Another World Instead: Editing the Early Poems of William Stafford,” can be located in the *FWSJ&NL* 20.2, “AWP: Nonviolence in the Creative Writing Workshop, Excerpts from the AWP Conference in Minneapolis in April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015,” (p. 13) and in his introduction to *Another World Instead* (pp. xxi-xxiii).

I would note, though, that Richter recognizes a graciousness in Stafford’s work, a decorum and ritual in the poems he chose for the beginnings and endings of his books. There is a hello and goodbye, a social ceremoniousness that Richter explores, contributing thereby to a deeper appreciation of Stafford’s sensibility. As the difference between the title of Armstrong’s essay in *FWSJ&NL* 21.1 and his presentation at the ALA suggest, he oriented his discussion of teaching a Stafford seminar toward the remarkable accessibility and excellence of the Stafford archives at Lewis & Clark College. Armstrong demonstrated this with a visual tour through the archive, something I hope our readers have endeavored. He also tailored his presentation to the East Coast audience of teachers and scholars by emphasizing the ability of students to do original scholarship because relatively little literary scholarship has been done on William Stafford when compared with Robert Lowell, a poet with equal literary credentials but whose scholarship has become a cottage industry in academia, a particularly salient point given Lowell’s Boston Brahmin connections. The contention that students can



Panel: Tim Barnes, James Armstrong, Clara Richter, Fred Marchant.



James Armstrong talking about the Stafford Archives.

do promising, original and distinctive scholarly work on William Stafford, assisted by one of the finest archives in America is vital to Stafford's legacy. The FWS should be grateful to Armstrong for making this so elegantly and vitally clear.

Fred Marchant, the closing presenter, was unfortunately cut short by the exigencies of time. He, however, managed his limitation with admirable grace. He returned succinctly to connections he made, as I mentioned, at the AWP and in *Another World Instead*. In Simone Weil's essay, "*The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*" (1939) she notices the failure of warriors to ever hesitate, to pause at times of physical conquest, of war. Marchant connects this to Stafford's use of grammatical pauses in his poetry—ellipses, parenthesis, and most characteristically, the dash. In Stafford's poetry, Fred seemed to be saying, punctuation becomes philosophy and is intrinsic to his pacifist poetic.

As the initial presenter, I attempted to map the areas of William Stafford's work that reward scholarly study, giving, of course, a biographical outline of his life to begin. We thought some our audience probably knew little of Stafford except perhaps "Traveling through the Dark," though some knew much more. Issues of this publication did vanish from display tables with gratifying dispatch.

When Zach learned he would not be able to attend the conference, he sent me an article the previous archivist, the wonderful poet and brilliant scholar Paul Merchant wrote for the *Lewis & Clark Chronicle Magazine*. Calling the Stafford archive "a national treasure," Merchant delineates several areas for further peregrinations: Stafford as poet, as teacher and scholar, and as pacifist. I would add another, Stafford as environmentalist, a poet with a unique gift for the appreciation and apprehension of place, of what Gary Snyder, one of the FWS's national advisors, has called "the earth household." One could turn alliterative and call these areas poetry, pedagogy, pacificism, and place.

In studying his poetry, his themes (the nature of community), his diction (plain style), his use of form (sonnet diversifications), his compositional approach (lower your standards, daily writing), his revision strategies (see the archives), his publishing approach (how did he publish all those poems and how did that affect the quality of his poetry, his career, and reflect his times?), are all good ground, all areas that have yielded and could yield rich scholarly harvests, thoughts worth thinking.

His pedagogy, which is characterized by listening, witnessing, and a Daoist resistance to judging invites study and has implications for the creative life and also the political life. The humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow coined the phrase *self-actualization* and Carl Jung wrote of *individuation*. Stafford's pedagogy roams these realms. In a statement he wrote for the National Council of Teachers of English in 1967, he says this, "The young of our times are hustled into activities and states of mind appropriate for aims other than their own." Stafford's pedagogy is based on principles that promote self-discovery, mindfulness, self-reliance, inner freedom, and reverence for life.



Fred Marchant talking about Stafford and *The Iliad*.

PHOTO BY IKA KUZNIK

Study of Stafford's pacificism could follow a number of paths, the biographical being one that is quite obvious (he went to the CO camps with a copy of John Woolman's journal)—the genesis and development of it and the way it informs his poetics. It can quickly become complicated and rich. Of his pacifist position in World War II, Stafford said that he "just could not come down to a nationalistic location for virtue." In his essay "Some Arguments Against Good Diction," he questions the idea of *le mot juste*, the perfect word in the perfect place. The writer, Stafford thought, does not select words and put them in the right slots; the writer, rather, lets the words, the syllables, volunteer for service and arrange themselves. This is

a non-authoritarian perspective and consistent with a pacifist poetic. The poet and scholar Jeff Gundy writes in *Walker in the Fog*, "The extent of Stafford's effort to question fundamental ways by which we organize and meet our experience has seldom been treated by critics." Here is where the poetry of Stafford intersects with the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, as Tony Wolk and Shelley Reece's essay in this issue suggests.

In his study of Stafford for the Boise State Western Writer's Series, David Carpenter writes, "Stafford believes that the individual's psychological and spiritual health depends on an almost religious identification with the relatively wild, nonhuman world." In Stafford's poetry, fish "leap arcs of realization" and "moss redeems the stone." These lines do something particularly Staffordian; they gently personify. In a strict sense, realizations and redemptions are associated with human behavior. In these personifications nature does human things, becomes aware and redeems. Stafford's vision of the deep vitality and immanent intelligence of the natural world has not been explored and appreciated nearly enough. It certainly has been recognized, as his publications in many collections with ecological leanings attest.

The FWS decided to go to the ALA conference in the interests of William Stafford's legacy. A legacy is a gift. Stafford's gift, now that he is no longer with us, is his work, his writing. His legacy is also his memory, and for a diminishing number of us, his friendship, his living character. But what will always remain alive about William Stafford, what new friends will meet, is his writing, his ideas, his way of being in words, in literature, in history. This is why we went, and why we're going to the ALA conference in San Francisco in May. The vitality and importance of what Stafford stood for, manifested in language, should go beyond people who knew him to people who didn't, to people for whom the vision he presents in his work is also affirming, renewing, true. This kind of afterlife is one of the essential elements of literature and William Stafford is a literary figure of genuine dimension and authentic power. We need his voice to make a world in which we can be together as friends in a tolerant, accepting, companionable and vital world.

(cont. from p. 5)

It's but three short paragraphs:

Poetry is the kind of thing you have to see from the corner of your eye. You can be too well prepared for poetry. A conscientious interest in it is worse than no interest at all, as I believe Frost used to say. It's like a very faint star. If you look straight at it you can't see it, but if you look a little to one side it is there.

If people around you are in favor, that helps poetry to *be*, to exist. It disappears under disfavor. There are things, you know, human things, that depend on commitment; poetry is one of those things. If you analyze it away, it's gone. It would be like boiling a watch to find out what makes it tick.

If you let your thought play, turn things this way and that, be ready for liveliness, alternatives, new views, the possibility of another world—you are in the area of poetry. A poem is a serious joke, a truth that has learned *jujitsu*. Anyone who breathes is in the rhythm business; anyone who is alive is caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with the triumphant certainty, of poetry. [3]

Given the implicit question of “What It Is Like,” let's break the three paragraphs down and see how *poetry* is like *philosophy*:

Poetry/Philosophy is ...

like something you see not straight ahead, but a little to one side;  
like a very faint star;  
like when people around you are in favor, that helps poetry and philosophy to *be*, to exist;  
like things that depend on commitment;  
not like something you analyze; then it's gone (which would be like boiling a watch to find what makes it tick);  
like the possibility of another world;  
like a serious joke;  
like a truth that has learned *jujitsu*;  
like the rhythm business;  
like anyone who is alive [and] caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with the triumphant certainty, of poetry and philosophy.

Recall that in his brief Preface Stafford tells us how “one piece [in *Writing the Australian Crawl*], ‘What It Is Like,’ came from dreaming about having to speak, unprepared, before a critical audience.” Which, I guess you could say is one more thing that poetry is like: like a dream. To which we might add one more simile: *Like* trying to capture the many ways William Stafford and Ludwig Wittgenstein are kindred spirits.

All right, as I turn these first pages of *Crawl* I realize I'm suffering from too rich a diet. My impression is that Stafford, as he's thinking what to include in this collection risks, like Thomas Aquinas, of dying from a surfeit, not of figs, but of Ludwig Wittgenstein. All of Section I, “Background, *Sententia*” is laden with a Wittgensteinian/Bousmanian perspective: “It is as if the ordinary language we use every day has in it a hidden set of signals, a kind of secret code. A

code which can touch into life a pattern in our feelings, a pattern not ordinarily roused by events that just *happen*, because what just happens is presumably too random to bring about sustained feelings. But some language may start experiences that resonate with the self, with the being we have become amidst our apparently random encounters with this alien world” [From Stafford's Introduction to James Mecklenberger and Gary Simmons, *Since Feeling Is First*; New York: Scott Foresman, 1971; p. 4 of *Crawl*]

About now I realize that we've not mentioned “Ordinary Language Philosophy,” three words commonly associated with the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (a notion the next section will explore further). Or how

the use of the word [game] is unregulated; the ‘game’ we play with it is unregulated.—It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard, yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too.

[*Philosophical Investigations*, #68]

And how *poetry* is another such *game*. As is *philosophy*. And how this notion of a game figures in a child's acquisition of its native language: “A child uses such primitive forms of language when it learns to talk. Here the teaching of language is not explanation but training” [*Philosophical Investigations*, #5].<sup>13</sup>

Remember (I hope I'm not sounding like the Ghost in *Hamlet*), our thesis in NOT that Stafford had Wittgenstein to thank for being the poet that he was—it's that Stafford found affirmation for the path that he followed as a poet and teacher. Of course Stafford's delight and appreciation of Wittgenstein was integral to Stafford's life. We are what we eat and we are what we read, especially if we are writers. Our metaphor of *kindred spirits* is best understood in this vein.

## VI. ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

Somewhere along the line the notion of “ordinary language philosophy” should arise (and already has), given its association with Wittgenstein and its essence in the poetry of William Stafford. David Pole, cited in the Preface, shows where Wittgenstein differs from traditional philosophers:

The widely acknowledged strangeness of certain of the questions philosophers pose themselves, the paradoxical sound of many of their traditional doctrines, may give some colour, at least, to a diagnosis. Something is wrong here—that is the suggestion. We must, however, look closer. To understand this breakdown of the machinery of language we must look first at its *ordinary* [my italics] functioning; we must see language at work, with work to do. It's easy to think of human language as if it were some gift of the gods, like Promethean fire; to give it a status that sets it apart from the rest of our doings and concerns. Wittgenstein says it differently. Language is part of the social behaviour of the species; it belongs to our natural history as walking, eating or drinking.... It operates against a background of human needs in

**I don't  
believe in  
reading  
so that I'll  
be well-  
read and  
a better  
writer.**



the setting of a natural environment. [Pole, 3; recall that Stafford had a copy of Pole's book.]

Compare this passage with the just quoted paragraph from the opening of *Writing the Australian Crawl* [4], in turn from the introduction to Mecklenberger and Simmons, *Since Feeling Is First*, that is that "some language may start experiences that resonate with the self, with the being we have become amidst our apparently random encounters with this alien world."<sup>14</sup>

Listen then to Stafford's next paragraph:

Poems don't just happen. They are luckily or stealthily [*stealthily*, a key word for Stafford, like *stumble* and *bump*] related to a readiness within ourselves. When we read or hear them, we react. We aren't just supposed to react—any poem [or philosophy] that asks for a dutiful response is masquerading as a poem, not being one. A good rule is—don't respond unless you have to. But when you find you do have a response—trust it. It has a meaning. [4]

So much is said here, via ordinary language, for instance about how we teach, for example, poetry. The "good rule" is to wait for *you* to have a *response*, not your teacher. The meaning comes from you. And we ask, nervously, at this rate, how are we ever going to bring this (ordinary) ship into harbor?<sup>15</sup>

## VII. FREEDOM FROM THE GAME

Did William Stafford read Wittgenstein's *Blue Book*? Well, he's reading Bouwsma's review of it in *Philosophical Essays*. There's no record that *The Blue Book* was in Stafford's library. But Kenny Johnson's library is just a holler away. Note that Bouwsma on the next-to-last page of his review of *The Blue Book*, speaks of "the criss-crossing of the grammar of the words we are interested in"—keeping in mind that "grammar" for Wittgenstein references not just how words match up in a sentence, but in the totality of our language. Bouwsma's "review" continues: "[It] is quite different from the coherence of words in a certain language game, in a story, or in an essay." ["The Blue Book," *Philosophical Essays*, 200]

Best to speak to Wittgenstein's notion of the *game*, such as chess, where the moves are prescribed, no matter how infinite the game may be. An instance of this is the freedom of Stafford's poetry from such a narrowed sense of *game*. Strangely, it's an analogy with the *game* of chess that Wittgenstein (in the *Conversations*) chooses to show how language is unlike the game of chess. Wittgenstein is trying to imagine a situation where someone would ask the odd question, "What is the meaning of *good*?"

Definition of good? What would one do with this? Law courts have a use for definitions. Physics has a use for definition.

It is hard in any case to see what a definition here would be like. What one can do is describe certain aspects of the uses of the word "good".... But the use [of a word like "good"] is infinitely complex. The use of a word in such a case is like the use of a piece in a game, and you cannot understand the use of a queen unless you understand the uses of the other pieces. What you do with one sort of piece is intelligible only in terms of what you do with it in relation to what is done with the other pieces. So the word "good" is used in a terribly complex game, in which there are other such pieces as "ought to do," "conscience," "shame," "guilt," "bad," etc. And there are now no strict rules for any [other such pieces] and yet the uses are interdependent. [*Conversations*, 40-41]<sup>16</sup>

Back to Stafford in his essay, "Writing the Australian Crawl," where it's six year old Kit who is his model case: "how complex the writing can be viewed from the outside, when analyzed."<sup>17</sup> If a person looks at a group of words he can find ideas, sound patterns, all kinds of involuted accomplishments. They are there; human beings are so marvelous in their thinking and in their analyzing that there is no end to the complexity of what can be discovered." Naturally enough, Stafford will back away from this *extra-ordinary* aspect of language, even of poetry: "I want to plead for the ease of finding and expressing these patterns, these accomplishments which come *naturally* [our italics] to the mind. I propose that we start with the assumption that people, even the 'shallowest,' do have ideas; ideas spring from motion, and the mind is always in motion." [*Crawl*, 25]

We'd like to say—and will say it—"We rest our case." Though all we're trying to demonstrate is that Stafford and Wittgenstein are kindred spirits. And once you set your eye on it, you can't miss it. (My poor mind feels shredded about now: what just came to that mind is Leo Rosten's little joke, "If your eye falls on a bargain, pick it up"—from the wondrously titled *The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N*). We know we've not gotten to the *un*-hidden links between Wittgenstein and Stafford in *You Must Revise Your Life*, not to mention everything else under the sun. Hence our promise that in Part Two of this delicious project, Shelley Reece will talk about specific poems, such as the ones that Stafford referenced in his note to himself, "Where do the words come from?" "Quoted and adapted—adjusted toward use for writers"—its title:

Based on "The Blue Book," a review of Wittgenstein

by O.K. Bouwsma, in *Philosophical Essays*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965

Note Paul Merchant's or Vincent Wixon's handwritten note in the top left corner of the page: "Sent to Kenny Johnson on October 24, 1968, from Cincinnati." [Johnson papers, item 66]. Also see the

(cont. on p. 18)



O.K. Bouwsma in Kenny Johnson's kitchen.

PHOTO FROM STEVEN JOHNSON COLLECTION

(cont. from p. 17)

header at the top of the second page: “Bouwisma’s ‘Blue Book’—some points for writers.”<sup>18</sup>

### VIII. POSTSCRIPT: MUST I REVISE MY ESSAY, LET ALONE MY LIFE?

Wittgenstein’s ultimate point about philosophy is that it isn’t special: it is integral to life. Bouwsma in his essay on “Time” demonstrates the same notion. There is neither a mystery about time, nor is there a mystery about life. Both Wittgenstein and Bouwsma—and Stafford, so clearly Stafford—share this notion about language, about story, about poetry. And...

...and here I have second thoughts about stopping short of *You Must Revise Your Life*, given that this is where I began working on this essay in Pittsburgh while on a mission to see my older brother Jerry, as it turned out, five days before he died. So life—and death too—both have a place in this essay. Here then are the several passages that resonated for me as I read Stafford with Wittgenstein in mind, specifically in terms of “ordinary language” as Stafford perceives it in *Writing the Australian Crawl*, where there is no particular need to reference Wittgenstein, however he may be salient in Stafford’s life. Here then are those passages:

1. “Mostly it is right when a word goes by, to turn my head and watch it go into someone else’s ear and let them answer.”

[From “Where ‘Yellow Cars’ Come From,” a jotting from April 10, 1980; the essence of ordinary language.] [42]

2. “wherever the air moves through the dark and cold. I make a sound back, those times, always trying for only my place, one moving voice touching whatever is present or might be, even what I cannot see when it comes.”

[From “Breathing on a Poem”: “For a Daughter Gone Away”] To which Stafford adds, “Something you are writing, after it is done, or begins to feel close to done, you can lean over and breathe on it and try to bring its main moves, its trajectory, into the center of your attention.” [Again, the essence of ordinary language, and how it becomes less ordinary in a poem.] [49]

3. [Also from “Breathing on a Poem”: “For a Daughter Gone Away”] “And now here at the last of my breathing on this poem I realize that in a high-handed way I used the writing of it to arrive at a statement that is spookily [note *spookily*] central to my kind of writing and to the aim of my life—the attainment of ‘one moving voice touching

whatever is present / or might be, even what I cannot see when it comes.” [51]

4. A Course in Creative Writing

They want a wilderness with a map—  
but how about errors that give a new start?—  
or leaves that are edging into the light?—  
or the many places a road can’t find?

Maybe there’s a land where you have to sing  
to explain anything; you blow a little whistle  
just right and the next tree you meet is itself.  
(And many a tree is not there yet.)

Things come toward you when you walk.  
You go along singing a song that says  
where you are going becomes its own  
because you start. You blow a little whistle—

And a world begins under the map.

[From “Improving Your Dreams”: for “Dreams” read “Poems”: a comical rendition of the inadequacy of ordinary language.] [52]

5. “Ideally for me, poems are nothing special. They are just language without any mistakes. Of course, that is the way I would like to talk.... To me the language is social. I don’t invent it, they don’t invent it; it is something that comes about between us. Usually I don’t think of the reader at all. [From “A Witness for Poetry; for “nothing special” read “ordinary.”] [58-59]

6. “What is crucial is something else, some kind of spooky, ghostly thought, emotion or complex type of thing that goes on in poems.... It is a hard thing to identify; it is some kind of way you make progressions from one set of intimations to another. Something about how long you stay with one thing until you move to another, and how you move to another, and how you move. These things are hard to talk about, but it is easy to say, ‘Yakima, oh yes. I know where Yakima is.’”<sup>19</sup> [From “A Witness for Poetry”] [62]

7. [The language] is not so much like telling someone something that I have already decided to tell them. It is more like watching the language do it. It’s like standing by a river and seeing what comes around the bend....

“The language leads poets in many directions. It is not a deliberate thing, but more like where your attention is at a given time. If it goes one way, it doesn’t go another. It is not so much a grim focusing as it is being distracted in a positive direction. A poem is something that starts to be something and it keeps right on being that thing. You are



Jean and Kenny Johnson at the Staffords’ 25th wedding anniversary

PHOTO FROM STEVEN JOHNSON COLLECTION

willing to be channeled in the direction that you start in. You lend yourself to the immediate experience that you are having.” [From “A Witness for Poetry”] [62]

8. “You’ve got to step off the path if you’re going to explore new places; so I don’t want to learn so well that I’m not learning from the encounter of now with the language.” [From “Facing Up to the Job”] [80]

9. “I am a confessor, a priest. Not a judge. And about those sins, those floundering along in language—I practice them myself. [From “A Priest of the Imagination”] [96]

10. “Let’s face it, though—poetry will always be a wild animal.” [From “The Door Called Poetry”] [99]

11. “Part of my act was not to be an expert performer of poems. I might have been, but I tried to make it casual and to accommodate poetry to their everyday experience of the language. So I minimized the distance between them and the poem if I could. A very blunt, open way was not to talk about this poem as poetry, but to participate with them in being in the presence of what really was a poem, whether I called it that or not.” [From “Performing and Poetry”] [108]

12. “Poetry, it seems to me, comes right out of talk; and any extreme departure from the strength of daily conversation—though it may fascinate or excite for a time—will pall and finally strike us as mannered and weak.” [From “Performing and Poetry,” and notably the last page of *You Must Revise Your Life*] [117-118]

## IX. AN ENDING OF SORTS

The fourth of the “Poets on Poetry” books, *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditation on the Writing Life*, ends with a poem written by William Stafford on March 23, 1993, in the last year of his life.

### JUST THINKING

Got up on a cool morning. Leaned out a window.  
No cloud, no wind. Air that flowers held  
for awhile. Some dove somewhere.

Been on probation most of my life. And  
the rest of my life been condemned. So these moments  
count for a lot—peace, you know.

Let the bucket of memory down into the well,  
bring it up. Cool, cool minutes. No one  
stirring, no plans. Just being there.

This is what the whole thing is about.

[From *The Way It Is* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1998)]

### AFTERWORD

We’re done. This essay could have gone in many different directions, which it did in earlier versions. Meanwhile, what a privilege to try to harmonize along with O. K. Bouwsma, William Stafford and Ludwig Wittgenstein, three wisdom figures, three writers, different kinds of writers. Wittgenstein the eldest, passing the torch to Bouwsma, and on to the kid, William Stafford. Harmony.

We’ve had our brief moment, gathering the threads that bind these three men, as writers, as teachers, as though there are boundaries. Of the third, Wittgenstein, there Bouwsma showed us how to grasp what Wittgenstein was up to, which turned out to be something simple, if not obvious. And thanks to Bouwsma’s borrowed light, we might see William Stafford anew.

We’re struggling to draw a line here and find a sum for what this has all added up to. Maybe it’s that in the past three years there has been a deepening understanding of all three men, all three of them now like old friends we can depend on, as we write, as we read, as we teach, as we live. Now we see Wittgenstein through the lens of Bouwsma; William Stafford through that multiple lens, that’s something! Addition doesn’t get it, how about exponential:

(WS<sup>LW</sup><sub>OKB</sub>)

Stafford’s “Reading with Little Sister: A Recollection” echoes in my head:

The stars have died overhead in their great cold.  
Beneath us the sled whispers along. Back there  
our mother is gone. They tell us, “If you hold on  
the dogs will take you home.” And they tell us never  
to cry. We’ll die too, they say, if we  
are ever afraid. All night we hold on.  
The stars go down. We are never afraid.

So many of us aboard the sled, holding on.

Along the way I had fun, writing crazy footnotes, like #11: “I want this with a comma after “being so.” (If *wants* were like pickles, let’s hope they’re kosher.”). Which got sanitized by inserting a bracketed comma and the note to that effect. Yet I think Stafford would’ve smiled at the simile. A smile goes a long way. Tears too.

For two of these men, Stafford and Wittgenstein, we’ve heard their words when they knew the journey was about over: Stafford’s “Just Thinking” and Wittgenstein’s deep memory of the Italian boy in Central Park who shined his shoes twice. And just now I sense that same echo in Bouwsma’s mid-seventies letter to me where he wrote that he and Kenny Johnson were “good friends years ago, in the thirties.” *Ubi sunt*.

(cont. on p. 20)



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In all aspects of researching this project, both of us, Reece and Wolk, have worked together. The writing of this essay, however, is my primary responsibility, Tony Wolk. Yet there are moments when *we* and *our* happen along, I guess because it feels right. Note that there will be a follow-up essay where Shelley Reece looks into specific poems of Stafford, which exemplify traits of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, several of which were chosen by Stafford himself (see §3, The Blue Book, "Where do the words come from?").

<sup>2</sup> I owe this preface to David Pole, whose book titled *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (one of the several books on or by Wittgenstein that Stafford owned) begins so directly and clearly: "The greatest single influence on English Philosophy is unquestionably that of Wittgenstein; his disciples and debtors are everywhere, yet his own work and thought are not easy for an outsider of the movement to approach." (Section 6 of this essay will provide some background on Wittgenstein's "ordinary language philosophy" through the eyes of William Stafford.)

The books from Stafford's personal library are: O. K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949-1951*; Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*; Wittgenstein: *Lectures and Conversations*; David Pole, *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein*; Ludwig Wittgenstein: *The Philosophical Investigations: A Collection of Critical Essays*; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in the introduction to *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949-1951*, p. xv. Note that Bouwsma inevitably refers to Wittgenstein simply with the letter W followed by a period (W.), which makes sense, given that Bouwsma's notes were not for public consumption.

<sup>4</sup> The Kenneth Johnson archive does not include a copy of either the Notes or the *Conversations*; the latter is among the volumes from the Stafford library, housed in the Archive. Yet the Introduction to *Conversations* quotes a letter from Bouwsma to Johnson from 1961: "One thing I know is that one does not understand Wittgenstein until he is able, not to repeat what he says, but to work with his ideas. The latter requires long practice" (Introduction, xvii). Note that Johnson is acknowledged in the Preface to *Conversations* for help in preparing the Notes for publication, specifically the two letters cited above. I will add that not all of the Johnson materials are archived. Perhaps when Part 2 of this study is published, it will be able to remedy these lacunae.)

<sup>5</sup> Given that Stafford did have a copy of *Conversations*, having marked several passages, it's certain that he read the book from A to Z. More on the marked passages in a later section.

<sup>6</sup> These passages from Stafford's daily writings are thanks to the amazing work and play of Paul Merchant and Vincent Wixon, archivists, editors, documentary film makers and surely much more.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* [a bi-lingual edition], trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Macmillan, 1953). The "earlier" Wittgenstein was the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (commonly, the *Tractatus*), which Bouwsma

had read, though, as he noted in his notepads: "The Tractatus ... had never made much of an impression upon me" (Introduction to *Conversations*, xvii).

<sup>8</sup> Selections from those occasional papers appear in Bouwsma, O. K., *Notes of Wittgenstein's Philosophy, 1965-1975*, eds. J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Wolk, "Troubles with Mr. Charley: The Un-Ordinary Language Philosophy of Some Standard English Apologists" (*College English* 37.2, October, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> O. K. Bouwsma, *Philosophical Essays* (University of Nebraska Press, 1965); Stafford is paraphrasing Bouwsma's passage. Wittgenstein's *The Blue and Brown Books* (Basil Blackwell, 1958; also a Harper Torchbook, 1965), the only work of Wittgenstein's, aside from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, published in his lifetime. Sometimes thought of as a warmup for *Philosophical Investigations*.

*Investigations*.

<sup>11</sup> The passage as printed reads "... and being-so. It must lie outside the world."

<sup>12</sup> Stafford is picking up on Bouwsma's *Conversations*, where Wittgenstein says, "Now suppose I knew the truth—white and hot—and could teach it to you. Would it follow that you too could teach it—now cold and warmed over? Of course not." Wittgenstein goes on to tell of several of his students where "he is now is fairly certain he did some good, [but] are not philosophers at all. One is a doctor... and several are mathematicians" (27-28). Note that W. never was Bouwsma's teacher per se.

<sup>13</sup> Stafford's library at the archives at Lewis

and Clark does NOT include *Philosophical Investigations*: our guess is that by "catnip" he was thinking of the *Investigations*. Of course Kenny Johnson had a copy of *Philosophical Investigations*, and his desk was but a holler away, given that, according to Stafford's son Kim, "they shared the Engineers" Hut which was a wood frame building with a very temporary feel situated in a ravine where the 4-story Miller Hall now stands (just east of the Library at Lewis and Clark)." Kim adds that "I can well imagine my father and Kenny conversing in each other's offices. The walls were so thin, though, you could carry on a conversation without leaving your desk" [Private communication, Kim Stafford, January 23, 2017].

<sup>14</sup> To see what fun a Wittgenstein question is see Bouwsma's "The Mystery of Time (Or, The Man Who Did Not Know What Time Is)," which begins: "The occasion of this essay is the remark of a student, which he made after a company of us had tried to assure him that he knew how to answer such questions as: What time is it? and when were you born? and are you going soon? and were you always lazy? etc., then you would also know what time is. I grant you it's tricky. You could reply like the student: 'that though he certainly did know all those things, he still did not know what time is.'"

## Communal Office Space

Bill and Kenny, along with others in the small English department shared intimate office space. The first office was a cottage in the woods on campus.

During the school year, at least when Bill was not traveling or had other academic posts, they had rituals including pep talks before facing students for the day.

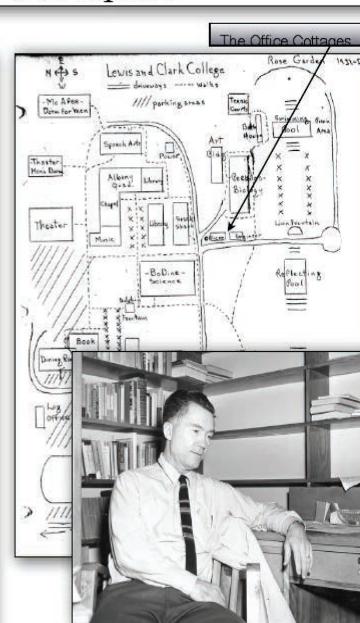
## Kenny's Office

At noon under the eighteenth century shelf a prof unwinds an orange into the wastebasket while he tells a sweet story: "so we danced on the books after the bookcase fell."

Pipe smoke is a fragile barrier, and talk; they all feel winter coming and work to do and student's hovering the hall. Rain taps on the window, dirty, under a dirty sky, but propped jauntily partway open by Wittgenstein.

William Stafford  
Poem in letter to Kenny, 10/24/1973

This graphic is from Steve Johnson's piece in the Stafford Archives, "Those Were the Days My Friend We Thought They Would Never End..." done for Kim Stafford's Stafford Studies class at Lewis & Clark in 2014. In case you can't read the poem here, Kenny Johnson's son's fascinating graphic memoir can be found under Scholarship>Student Projects at the William Stafford Archive ([williamstaffordarchives.org](http://williamstaffordarchives.org)).



Bouwisma's wondrous essay goes on for twenty-nine pages, and I almost wish it could've gone on eternally, had I world enough and time. Bouwisma could also have cut to the quick, though I doubt it would have changed the mind of the bewildered student, by saying, "If you know how to use the word *time* and having been using the word and all the notions of *time* (like *forever*, *always*, *now*) all your life, from the *moment* you were born, that it's for sure that notions of *time* should have presented no puzzle for you." Note that Bouwisma's essay ends on the same futile note: "There, now I think I know that this man who does not know what time is, does not know. He also did not get the drift." [*Philosophical Essays*, 1965; recall that Stafford had Bouwisma's book and referenced it in his note to himself, "Where do the words come from?"]

<sup>15</sup> Much is written on Wittgenstein's notion of "ordinary language." For example, an early collection of essays, *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (ed. Charles E. Caton, University of Illinois Press, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> In the context of language games, see below, *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains*, "but the game (to hark back to Wittgenstein) is not the information game—it is something else" [49]. For another hint at Wittgenstein's sense of "game," see Stafford's introduction to Jeremy Driscoll's *Any Day, Any Night* for another example of how NOT to play the game and thus to remain in an everlasting labyrinth: "Suppose whole generations could by degrees lose their vision, could harden themselves and gradually adjust to what they saw as a diminishing role for openness and adventure. Someone—Wittgenstein—speculated about how philosophers can adjust to their cell, where they hammer away at the walls and rattle the window bars; but if they would just turn around, the door is open."

<sup>17</sup> Note in the Stafford video *The Life of the Poem* how Stafford leads us through three poems, one of which is "Things I Learned Last Week," where he steers us through his journals with their manifold lines about a "sticky door," etc., then on to the published draft, "a process that feels so chancy; yet the poems in the video seem ultimately inevitable."

<sup>18</sup> A guess: the header seems to imply that Stafford sent out copies of "Some Points for Writers," not just to Kenny Johnson, but to others. It's thanks to the Johnson archive that we have this copy.

<sup>19</sup> My sense as I listen to this 6<sup>th</sup> passage is that I'm Bouwisma, listening to Wittgenstein.

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## For the Record

The great slow moving earth / molds each person  
To walk in patterns, / trampling flowers;  
But, Kindred, lost or forsaken, for whatever reason,  
Secretly this one prisoner / looks back and his last wish  
is not with his captors / or known to any man.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

**Editor's Note:** This early poem, not printed in *Another World Instead*, is from a handout Fred Marchant circulated at the ALA conference. It is an undated and probably from the Magnolia CO camp.

## News, Notes, and Opportunities

**Stafford's most famous advice**, local and national, small and large. In an article in *Coastweekend*, published by the *Daily Astorian*, David Campiche recounts a conversation with Robert Michael Pyle, author of *Where Bigfoot Walks*, Pyle's wife Florence Sage, Christian pastor Steve Caskey, and his wife Beth. It's a cups-of-coffee slow morning into afternoon on the coast that closes with talk of how people can't catch their breath with the fast pace of modern life. "Write a poem for God's sake! It need not be a masterpiece. Poet laureate William Stafford said that if you were having trouble expressing yourself, 'Just lower your standards,'" Campiche advises at the end. "He understood the power of commitment." For the full article, Google: Campiche close to home.

The latest *Poets & Writers* (Jan/Feb 2018), a national publication, features a piece by the poet Jane Hirshfield, "Reconnecting After a Silence," advice on how to get going after not writing for a while. Recommendation number five is "Say Anything." Hirshfield explains that this is "another version of William Stafford's famous advice, 'There's no such thing as writer's block; you need only lower your standards.'"

(cont. on p. 22)

## News, Notes, and Opportunities, cont.

**Website Update:** The FWS website ([williamstafford.org](http://williamstafford.org)) has been redesigned. It has a new look and is much more interactive. The membership and donation section is now active so people can update their memberships, purchase memberships, and donate. Broadsides are also available for purchase and the events calendar is active, showing a number of January events, including a William Stafford birthday reading at the Lake Oswego Library on January 16th hosted by this writer and featuring Andrea Hollander and Don Colburn. Issues of the FWS Journal and Newsletter are coming online as I write these words. The link to Join Us page is <http://www.williamstafford.org/join-us/>.

**Call for Papers:** The FWS has issued a call for papers for the 2018 American Literature Association (ALA) conference in late May in San Francisco: William Stafford and the Anthropocene: Toward a Poetics of the “Earthbound.” For the full text of the CFP go to the FWS website ([williamstafford.org](http://williamstafford.org)).

**Oregon Book Awards:** *Words That Burn*, a play by Cindy Williams Gutiérrez that features Stafford as a character based on his memoir *Down in My Heart* received the Angus Bowmer Award for Drama at the 2017 awards celebration.

Joe Wilkins of McMinneville received the 2017 Stafford/Hall Award for poetry at the same event for his book *When We Were Birds* (University of Arkansas Press).

**On Being and William Stafford.** Some readers will have listened to Krista Tippett’s NPR show *On Being*, originally called *Speaking of Faith*, in which Tippett interviews people of spiritual, ethical, moral, and philosophical dimension, exploring the essential human questions of what it is to be human and live authentically. *On Being* also has an award winning website that includes columns and commentaries. One of the featured columnists is Parker J. Palmer, founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal and author of many books, including *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. Palmer wrote introductions and forewords to three anthologies reviewed on these pages in issue 20.1, *Teaching with Fire*, *Leading from Within*, and *Teaching with Heart*, all of which featured poems by Stafford. In the last few years he has used Stafford’s poems a number of times in his short columns: “You Reading This, Be Ready,” “Cutting Loose,” “Deciding,” “Father’s Voice,” “The Way It Is,” and on October 31st, 2017, “Any Morning.” Google: Parker J. Palmer On Being.

**The Apollonia Poems by Judith Vollmer**, winner of the Four Lakes Prize, has a poem, “White Box Blue Lid” that interweaves lines from Stafford’s poem “Allegiances.” Vollmer’s poem ends “Today we // locate ourselves by the real things // Today I’ll scan for them / William Stafford’s masterpiece *Allegiances*”. For the rest you’ll have to buy the book; it’s quite a good one.

**Dorothy’s Roses:** Two rose bushes from the Stafford home on Sunningdale Road, one of which was outside the picture window of Bill’s office, were transplanted, before the house was torn down, to the grounds of the Lake Oswego Heritage House. For more on this, Google: Pamplin roses have stories.

**Stuart Friebert.** As a former editor of *Field Magazine*, poet and translator Friebert was responsible for publishing a number of Stafford’s poems. He said the following to Dsvinia Orłowsky in *Solstice: A Magazine of Diverse Voices*, who was interviewing him about his translations of the Austrian poet Elisabeth Schmeidel: “The ‘rhythm’ patterns of any writer are, as you well know, quite complex, so let me generalize, at best: a la William Stafford, I must write something every day, no matter how trivial, worthless on 3rd glance (later, sometimes much later!), or I’d be even harder to live with (ask Diane Vreuls, my anchor, who has saved me from many a whirlpool off my bow). An early riser, though unlike ‘Wild Bill’ Stafford, must first eat a hearty breakfast before putting a No. 2 pencil to yellow, lined ‘legal’ tablet – when Eudora Welty visited my workshop, she brought a cup of No. 2 pencils and, distributing them, memorably said, ‘No more motor-mouthing on your computers, please!’”

**David Bauman, the dad poet.** Bauman has written a lot about Stafford over the last few years. His website has seventeen posts, some of them quite thoughtful considerations of Stafford’s work. In a recent post he writes: “And finally, if you still think the man was simple, and just wrote whatever came to mind, and that what we have read of his is exactly as it first was written, then please go read the title poem of the collection [*An Oregon Message*], or better yet, go back and digest ‘A Ritual to Read to Each Other,’ and kindly explain to me what kind of super human could create such dense and beautiful metaphoric work without some serious time and effort, molding his words into the final product before it was published. I simply cannot imagine it.” Bauman’s thoughts, floating there in the blogosphere, are not a bad introduction to Stafford and witness the way he can enter people’s imaginations and live there.

**Richard Harrison, a Canadian poet**, received a Governor General’s Literary Award for his book *On Not Losing My Father’s Ashes in the Flood*. In an article by Jane Van Koeverden, he tells a story about a life changing moment when Stafford helped him realize something about his voice: “He tapped my book with his hand and said, ‘There’s a voice here.’ Then he moved his hand to my manuscript and said, ‘But it’s not here.’” For the full story, Google: How I wrote it Richard Harrison.

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Thanks to Steven Johnson and to the William Stafford Archives for the material from his graphic memoir *Those Were the Days My Friend We Thought They Would Never End...*

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

The leaping salmon on p. 19 is from the title page of *West of Your City*, Talisman Press, 1960.

Thanks also to Muhammad al-Maghut, the sophomores at Libery Bell High School, and Rebecca Wild for the use of their work.



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& Wittgenstein  
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The Brinksmanship at Dawn: William  
Stafford and the "Feeling of the West"  
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Peter Sears, A Friend  
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