

# friends of WILLIAM STAFFORD

A Newsletter For Poets & Poetry  
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## Of Earthen Beasts and Other Muses

Editor's Note: *The following interview was published in Alchemy, a San Francisco State University literary magazine, in 1975. It is excerpted from a longer piece called "Of Earthen Beasts and Other Muses: Interviews with William Stafford, Vern Rutsala, and William Everson," which lay at the bottom of a cardboard box at Portland Community College's Sylvania campus for thirty-five years. I found it there last spring when I was doing some reorganizing of the room where the PCC Sylvania campus literary magazine, also called Alchemy and in existence since around 1975, is produced as part of a class, Advanced Creative Writing, Editing and Publishing, which I teach. The magazine was probably sent because it has the same name or perhaps it was an exchange. I just don't know.*

*Sometime in 1975, Cathy Lenox drove from San Francisco to Oregon in her Volkswagon to interview Bill and his colleague at Lewis and Clark, Vern Rutsala, interested in the relationship between the environment and poetry. Though Everson's inclusion in Lenox's piece appears prescient, she seems unaware of the fact that Everson and Stafford were fellow COs, interested only in their use of landscape as metaphor. Her name is listed as one of twenty-three staff members of Alchemy. The issue features prose, poetry, and art. Kay Boyle, a noted expatriate writer of the '20s and '30s, has two poems in the issue. I don't know if it was a class or a group of interested students. Even the year of publication is uncertain because the masthead carries no date.*

*Paul Merchant of the Stafford Archives at Lewis and Clark tells me he has never seen this interview. Bill did many interviews and a number have been reprinted in Writing the Australian Crawl, You Must Revise Your Life, Crossing Unmarked Snow, and The Answers are Inside the Mountains. This one, though, was lost and now it is found.*

There is a poetry of rocks and streams, of mountains and landscapes which gives voice to the elements in life and nature not normally heard, which gives sound to the soundless. There is the human eye which focuses, the human ear which listens, senses amplified, open to the Muse. It is the still strong beat which continues to pulsate. Quietly. Its sound is wet wood creaking in your grandmother's damp house late at night. Barn owls cooing, their eyes round

and bright through shadow. Rivers pulling over mud banks after a storm. The tear of roots. The memory of it. It is the matrix of experience, our environment of sense, both experiential and subliminal, conscious and unconscious. The poet takes the conscious and makes it subconscious. The external environment becomes internal metaphor. The memory of torn roots can be pain of separation, or continuance of life. The poet's world is alive through association. He makes visible through image and metaphor our own relationship to the world.

There are some poets who search beneath the ground to find its source, in order, through association with it, to discover our own source as humans. To them, waking life is made dream in poems. Their poetry is the spoken dream pulsating under the sounds and structurings of an ordered technological world. It speaks in a voice of earthen beasts and other muses.

The narrow road reaches through pine and thin  
(cont. on p. 2)

### Peace Walk

We wondered what our walk should mean,  
taking that un-march quietly;  
the sun stared at our signs—"Thou shalt not kill."

Men by a tavern said, "Those foreigners . . ."  
to a woman with a fur, who turned away—  
like an elevator going down, their look at us.

Along a curb, their signs lined across,  
a picket line stopped and stared  
the whole width of the street, at ours: "Unfair."

Above our heads the sound truck blared—  
by the park, under the autumn trees—  
it said that love could fill the atmosphere:

Occur, slow the other fallout, unseen,  
on islands everywhere—fallout, falling  
unheard. We held our poster up to shade our  
eyes.

At the end we just walked away;  
no one was there to tell us where to leave the  
signs.

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(cont. from p. 1)

white aspen, pressing into a thick fir forest studded in clearings and shingled houses. One such clearing opens into Lewis and Clark College, its Tudor-style buildings stately in stone and dark wood. Sun breaks into patches of leaves on the ground. Catches on tops of trees. Auburn. Gold. Burnt orange.

William Stafford's office is a small cubicle, stacked with books and numerous photographs, a Royal typewriter from the twenties stands against one wall, and a bicycle leans against the other. We walk in, and he motions toward the typewriter.

"The school tried to give us new ones, but I like the old Royals," he says, positioning himself in a swivel captain's chair. He leans back into it, watching me calmly. We talk, and his features animate, lighten, then still.

"The focus of my interview," I say, "is an interest in the poet and the ways in which he may or may not use the environment as metaphor in his work. I've seen what could be that kind of focus in your work, and that's why I was particularly interested in talking with you."

His face textures as he smiles, its square chin rounding. Leaning forward he says, "I'm sure a lot of that must come crowding into the writing ... it seems to me it would come crowding into the writing of anybody. I'm sure it would come into mine."

Q: "Are there particular images and sounds in the environment you respond to more than others which elicit an internal response?"

A: "If I respond to this question immediately, my feeling is of wanting to be the kind of person who hears the sound back of the other sounds or the ordinarily overlooked things ... so I don't know if this is true, but it might be indicative I want it to be true that I see things like the little dog that I saw when I came up the hill today that had been hit and was lying beside the road ... dead ... and I noticed the copper beeches that are coming on along the road ... things like that. In fact, recently, I found myself writing a whole collection I thought of calling 'Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People' ... I have a feeling that one of our problems as human beings is to get things into perspective ... we are like some kind of wide angle lens: we let things balloon close to us that are fairly near. I have this feeling of wanting to go telescopic, you know, of wanting to turn up the volume and send my ear way out there in the pasture or way out in the woods so as to pick up what gives some kind of vista; oral vista or visual vista, and just bring in more. As a writer, I feel there is a limit of focus, and I would like to get it out there. In fact, I have a poem, I think the title is 'Notice What This Poem Is Not Doing' ... it hasn't done a lot of things, of course, but the thing I was thinking of it never had mentioned a person, it never mentioned 'I,' the viewer or hearer ... it had just been about the things that were out there."

Q: "Do you feel the things out there are made expressible by the 'I'?"

A: "They deserve their say. If I could, I'd be at the side introducing things out there to readers here. I know that people are involved in poetry, in reading and writing poetry, but not necessarily in the context of poetry. One of the restivenesses or disquiets I get is the reading of poems that make it sound as if the center of things is the recorder. The recorder is not the center of things ... other things are happening. I feel like a secretary for the things that can't speak ... a representative. I've come to think all sorts of things like this show up in my poetry. One of the volumes is going to be called ... 'Report

... Report from a Far Place' or something like that. I've felt a lot of these things could be reporting things that happened away from what ordinarily is reported. I remember having poems, for instance, about what happens on the Copper River in Alaska in the autumn ... all sorts of ... cool things. 'Report from a Far Place' was going to be a purposeful turning away from what our time is trying to get us to focus on in order to focus on something else. Partly for me poetry is an attempt to re-establish a different focus, to keep from getting overwhelmed by what is trumpeted as contemporary. 'Report from a Far Place' was a deliberate invitation to listen in on something other than the election, or whatever the national purpose is now."

Q: "So the far away place is the person as he relates to the natural environment or the environment itself?"

A: "The environment itself if I can make it that way."

Q: "My interest in asking you about the 'I' or the personal is an interest in the notion that people have an interior environment similar to the landscape around them."

A: "I find that a congenial idea ... it's partly trying to let the place where you are or the self that you are become realized without interference from the purposes that are forced upon you. If you can be still enough and unambitious enough, then all sorts of adventures will occur that are much more various than anything you could plan. So the good of the wilderness, the good of unprogrammed inner life, is that you get surprises, bonuses, all kinds of benefits. You don't have to scheme to be a certain kind of person ... you'll be a certain kind of person without trying. The world around you is not organized by you ... you are an adventurer in something that is pretty big and pretty interesting ... inner and outer."

Q: "Do you have a particular method to your writing?"

A: "I don't set out to write a certain kind of poem. I set out to let the experience that is happening at the time be so immediate that it will influence where the poem goes. I've heard people talk about writing, about the arts, as if they plan everything, and then the interesting part is putting words around it, but I don't feel that way at all. I feel the interesting part is before you've planned it ... while you're letting it happen. Writing a poem is like an experiment: the language, the events that occur to you are immediate. You pay attention to what's happening at the time you're writing, and time is full of surprises."

Q: "Do you find your writing carries its own form?"

A: "Yes, I find that it does, and this is one of the spooky things about it. You get it reaffirmed again and again. Will it come out right? Yes, it will come out right. Did I plan it that way? No. Then what made it come out right? I don't know. You're sustained by more than your purpose itself. The poems prove to be coherent, and I wouldn't be restive at all if someone said they're typical. Maybe they are typical, but they aren't intended to be typical, just experimental. They turn out to be whatever all the influences together converge to make them be."

Q: "I was wondering what you meant by 'giving voice to the elements which can't speak ...'"

A: "I read a book by Ortega y Gasset. It's called *Meditations on Quixote*. He says if you look at a forest, you just see a line of trees, but if you know it's a forest, it feels different because you know it goes on, you know it's the deep world. He says if you say it's 'faded blue,' your eye doesn't see faded blue, it just sees a certain tint. To say it's faded blue takes on a certain human feeling. If you say 'barn' to me,

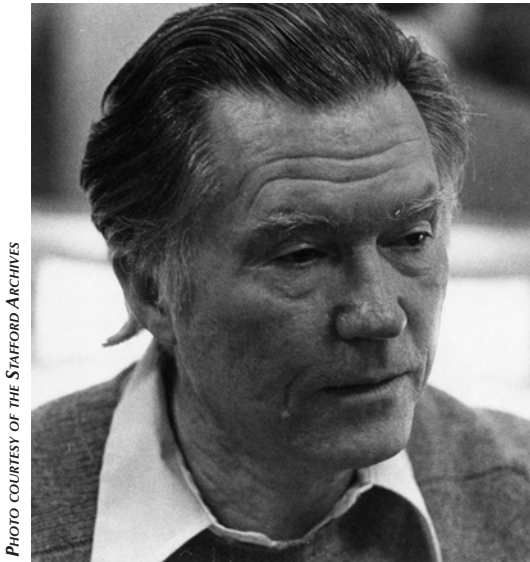


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE STAFFORD ARCHIVES

A photo taken on December 8, 1975, at the YMHA Poetry Center in New York by Mara Pilatsky

'barn' is not just a certain kind of structure ... it's a hay mound, all those smells, cows moving ... and it's the sunlight coming through the cracked shingles, and so on. Ortega, in *Meditations on Quixote*, is writing what he calls 'Salvations.' What surrounds us is there and operative to the extent that we lend our attention to it. The condition or the relation between the individual and the world is like a more or less thing. It almost makes the world be more or less depending on how you are with it. So he gets these salvations by paying a lot of attention to certain things .... Sometimes I feel a poem can come about just by paying a lot of attention to what's out there. It's like developing photography. The world develops by the attention of people who are willing to give the time and energy to let it develop."

Q: "Do you ever use dream material as reference for poems?"

A: "I'm writing the dream I'm having while I'm writing it, not writing the dream I had the night before, or any other night. Writing is so much like dreaming already that I don't feel the need to drop back to the dreams, though sometimes I write down my dreams because people tell me it will make me have them or remember them more. But mostly the dreams are written-down dreams. The poems are written dreams. In fact, I have a poem called 'Dreams to Have.' I think it was published in the *Iowa Review*."

Q: "Do you remember the dreams that were in it?"

A: "Well, I'll drop back and say I remember why it was. I got a letter from our daughter and she said something like 'have good dreams,' so I began to think about this ... so I wrote the dreams to have before I had them. Then I didn't have to have them. In fact, sometimes my wife has said, 'You don't need to have dreams because you write poems,' and I've sometimes thought about that since. Your life isn't tied up ... it doesn't have time to get tied up, maybe, because you anticipate the need for dreams by letting your psyche work itself out in the poems beforehand."

Q: "It's said sometimes that the dream gets us closer to subconscious life. Do you think the poem gets you in that way closer to natural life?"

A: "I feel it does. I have the feeling of being available to things below the level of consciousness. Maybe this is my ideal way to write ... to get rid of any threshold so that whatever occurs is

forgiven. I anticipate forgiveness for what I'm going to think of, so I think of anything and write it down. As a consequence maybe a lot of those poems, or at least the material from which I dredge out parts from which to make poems, a lot of the material is low-tension meandering. To make a poem I may have to take more high-voltage parts of all those low-voltage dreams. The feeling is of being available to where your attention goes. It does seem a lot like dreaming. It's not so much intentional as it is overhearing the self. It's like saying to the muse, 'Talk louder, I can't quite hear you ... you're always talking, but speak a little louder, please.' I think if you are accepting enough, you'll have variety in your life because life is various ... but if you have a program or if you have some kind of commitment, then you're lost down that tunnel whichever way it goes."

Q: "Do you feel it's possible to get lost down that tunnel in writing?"

A: "I think it's possible. I think many poets are seduced by the success of certain kinds of poems and as a consequence their dream life is distorted in the direction of the market and they've really got to dream hard, I mean really dream ... nightmare their way out of it, in sleep ... but if you can stay uncommitted to the market then your writing and all of your life, those two things can help each other. I believe that some people's lives are wrecked by their art, or so it seems ... I don't know. I think of this partly because just the other day I was going to meet a class ... it's called 'Diving into the Wreck' and it's about Adrienne Rich. Here's a picture I took of her ... so I printed this picture and took it to class."

As he hands me the portrait, his eyes pass over it, the glance both warm and sad. The photo forms around her wide brown eyes, strong chin, and the tender line of her mouth.

Q: "That's beautiful."

A: "Isn't that good? Well, diving into the wreck, you know, Adrienne Rich just can't get that wet, black suit off of her. That's the image in her poem. She puts on that black suit and she can never get it off. I say ... come back ... come back to the surface ... it makes intense poems ... but ... they're killing her ... they killed Berryman, they're killing Adrienne Rich, they killed Anne Sexton maybe I'm making this up. . . ."

Q: "I don't know ..."

A: "Go dive again, Adrienne! ... they say ... but I say ... no ... come back .... Partly it's that part of life is that way ... then, there's another part. In that same book I read the beginning of a poem to the class. It said something like, 'images of age surround us' or something else... it goes down, down, spiraling down. I said to the class, 'Do you know where this is? Yosemite ... it's that beautiful place.' You can turn that way, but you can also turn another way."

Q: "I think that is true of much contemporary poetry."

A: "Well, dolphins swim both ways. I'd like to be a dolphin. I think that people are naturally like that ... a variety happens but you can become specialists. So I think part of the value of environment and relating to it is like the part of the environment people like about wilderness. It finds its natural balance. If you don't organize it too much it'll save you."

Q: "Perhaps the structure and voice in contemporary poetry is reflective of the society in which it's being written."

A: "We may, even in our rebellion, be symptoms ... a part of the problem, you know, and not part of the solution." (cont. on p. 4)

(cont. from p. 3)

Q: "I want to refer back to what you were saying earlier about photography and Ortega y Gasset's 'Salvations' ... to take it one step further. Do you think your poetry and photography tend to coincide?"

A: "Well, about ten years ago I began to do photography. I saw this second-hand old Nikon in the drugstore of Lake Oswego and that wonderful big eye looking at me when I went by, and so I began to talk to the fellow about how much it might cost me. I found you could take a picture of anything you could see and some things you couldn't see ... I was just wildly ambitious to do that. Ever since I've just taken a lot of pictures. This thing that's on top of the microphone [motioning to a book] has some pictures of mine of Alaskan writers on the back of it. The connection I'm not sure of ... I just know I like to take pictures. I like to save what's around me. I like to look at it again and try to do different things with it. I'm beginning to talk myself into the idea that it is a lot like poetry: bringing certain things out, subordinating other things, trying to get the essence of things. I think there is a connection, but I didn't take it up because I was aware of the connection. Now that you say it, I guess maybe that's one of the reasons I took it up. If you'd like to see Lake Oswego, we'd like to have you to lunch tomorrow."

Q: "I'd love to."

The road to Lake Oswego winds down through leafy cottonwood, red maple, and black-limbed copper beeches, settling at the driveway of William Stafford's house. Brown-shingled, it stands in the center of two yards verdant in foliage and trees. Sycamore. Hemlock. Ponderosa and Scotch pine. Port Orford cedar. Vine maple. Oregon grape. Fire thorn. False Solomon's seal. Geraniums. Tomato plants. Red oak. He has planted them all perennially.

In the kitchen, his daughter, Kit, prepares tomato soup with green onions, homemade bread, cheese, and crisp sliced pears. She is light-boned, with a toss of dark hair. Her wide smile is quick ... her laugh sporadic. We eat lunch together from round ceramic bowls. Vermeer's painting *The Milk Lady* frescoes a woman pouring milk from an earthen jug on an adjacent wall. Outside, Lief, an enormous blue-eyed husky, paces expectantly in front of a large plate-glass window.

"He just wants to play," says Stafford.

William Stafford's study is simple in wooden walls. One large window in front of a hardtop desk looks out on the yard. *Horizon* magazines stack against one wall. Assorted tapes of readings. Books friends have written. A Royal typewriter. *The New Naked Poetry*. More pictures.

"I took pictures of Merwin for *The New Naked Poetry* ... lots of writers have me take pictures for them. That's a picture of Dorothy, my wife, and me running down a path in Norway through the trees. Kit took that."

The afternoon sun is cutting over the tops of the trees, shedding the outer garden with light. His darkroom, a shingled hut nestling against the hemlock, darkens blacker in shadow.

"That darkroom used to be a playhouse. Some day I'm going to paint that darkroom yellow," he says, musing in a slow smile.

## Old Glory

No flag touched ours this year.  
Our flag ate theirs. Ours cried,  
"Banner, banner," all over the sky—  
the sky now ours, the sea this year  
our pond. "Thus far," we said,  
"no farther," and the storm advanced,  
or stopped, or hovered, depending.

We won, they say. They say good came:  
we live in the shadow of our flag.  
We fear no evil. Salute, ye people.  
That feeling you have, they call it glory.  
We own it now, they say, under God,  
in the sky, on earth, as it is in Heaven.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

This poem appeared in *After the Storm* (1992), a Gulf War anthology that is discussed in *Behind the Lines*.

## Stafford, Sandburg, and the Aphorism

by Paul Merchant

Having written in the previous issue about William Stafford's first page of daily writing, it seems appropriate now to speak of probably his last piece of formal prose, written on August 11, 1993: his review of Carolyn Forché's anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* in *Hungry Mind Review* 28 (reprinted in *Crossing Unmarked Snow*, 76-80). In the review, with characteristic independence, Stafford pronounces himself "wary of living on the emotional high of atrocity hunger," and in the next sentence introduces a contrarian notion: "Carl Sandburg mentions somewhere the value of having 'a good forgettery.'" The "somewhere" was Sandburg's collection *The People, Yes*, a lively assemblage in prose and verse of witty comments, jokes in current circulation, "sayings and yarns," and aphorisms, quoted and invented.

The line quoted by Stafford appears on page 13 of Sandburg's volume, at the end of section 6:

"Revenge takes time and is a lot of bother," said a released convict who by the code of Monte Cristo should have shot twelve jurymen and hanged one judge and crucified one prosecuting attorney and hung by the thumbs two police officers and four prominent citizens.

"In my case," he added, "it pays to have a good forgettery."

Sandburg's book is filled with quotable (and often quoted) lines: "Somewhere they'll give a war and nobody will come." (page 43—an aphorism often wrongly attributed to Brecht); "You can fool all the people part of the time and part of the people all the time but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." (page 57); or "There

ain't no strong coffee, only weak people,' said one heavy on the java." (page 96). These examples give some sense of the volume's sardonic wisdom, and alone would explain Stafford's fondness for the collection, but a reading of the whole text suggests that *The People, Yes* could have been a direct influence in the development of Stafford's aphoristic mode, and in particular in providing a model for the Staffordian "list poem."

One could provide a multitude of examples, but two or three will suffice. Here is the beginning of section 30 (which later includes "You can fool all the people . . ."): "We'll see what we'll see. / Time is a great teacher. / Today me and tomorrow maybe you. / This old anvil laughs at many broken hammers . . ." Or from 32: "The cauliflower is a cabbage with a college education. / All she needs for housekeeping is a can opener. / They'll fly high if you give them wings. / Put all your eggs in one basket and watch that basket. / Everybody talks about the weather and nobody does anything about it. . . ." Or the end of 49: "Except in fairy stories the bashful get less. / A beggar's hand has no bottom. / Polite words open iron gates. / Be polite but not too polite." And one last example, the start of 94: "The sea only knows the bottom of the ship. / One grain of wheat holds all the stars. / The bosoms of the wise are the tombs of secrets. / When you must, walk as if on egg shells. / It looks good but is it foolproof? / Only a poor fisherman curses the river he fishes in. / I can read your writing but I can't read your mind. . . ."

I imagine every reader of these quotations will have been reminded of at least one of William Stafford's aphoristic poems, and almost every line of each quotation could have been studied for its relation to Stafford's philosophy of life. But another feature leaps out from these examples: Sandburg makes no effort to link the individual lines to each other. This was the essential permission given to William Stafford, if he needed it, for list poems to be assemblages, not arguments like a Shakespeare sonnet.

And he also had permission from another source, at least from the late 1960s: the Urdu ghazals of Ghalib, which Stafford was reworking from literal versions by Aijaz Ahmed (*Poems by Ghalib*, 1969; *Ghazals of Ghalib*, 1971). One example, poem V:

Even at prayer, we bow in our own image;  
if God didn't hold His door open, we'd never enter.

He has no image: outside, everywhere, so distinctly  
Himself that even a mirror could not reflect Him.

Held behind lips, lament burdens the heart; the drop  
held to itself fails the river and is sucked into dust.

If you live aloof in the world's whole story,  
the plot of your life drones on, a mere romance.

Either one enters the drift, part and whole as one,  
or life's a mere game: Be, or be lost.

With some small adjustments of subject-matter, it is easy to imagine this as one of Stafford's aphoristic list poems. It seems clear that these derive from a long and complex ancestry: from Pascal in the sixteenth century to Ghalib, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth, followed by Carl Sandburg and then by Stafford's own native wit and invention. Here as illustration is the first of the list poems assembled in his conversation with Michael Markee and

Vincent Wixon (*Crossing Unmarked Snow*, 39):

*The Sparkle Depends on Flaws in the Diamond*

Wood that can learn is no good for a bow.

The eye that can stand the sun can't see in shadow.

Fish don't find the channel—the channel finds them.

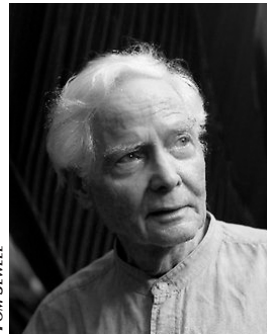
If the root doesn't trust, the plant won't blossom.

A dog that knows jaguars is no longer useful in hunting.

You can lie at a banquet, but you have to be honest in the kitchen.

And returning to Stafford's review of Forché's anthology, and to Sandburg's quote: *The People, Yes* was published in 1936, so it might well have been part of the wide-ranging conversations between conscientious objectors in the 1940s. If his association with Sandburg's book dates from its first publication, I relish the possibility that Stafford recovered the quotation about a "good forgettery" from as many as fifty years earlier, in his own excellent memory.

## FWS National Advisor Named U.S. Poet Laureate



TOM SEWELL

"You are not separate  
from the frog  
in the pond  
or the cockroach  
in the kitchen."

W.S. Merwin has been named the 17<sup>th</sup> poet laureate of the United States. One of the country's finest poets and author of over fifty books of verse, prose, and translation, Merwin has received a National Book Award and two Pulitzer Prizes, most recently for *The Shadow of Sirius* (2009).

Merwin, now 82, the son of a Presbyterian minister, was raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Union City, New Jersey. He attended Princeton on a scholarship, studying under the noted critic R.P. Blackmur and the poet John Berryman. His first collection, *A Mask for Janus*, was selected by W.H. Auden for the 1954 Yale Younger Poets' Prize.

Merwin moved to Hawaii in the 1970s to study Zen Buddhism. He lives there with his wife Paula on a former pineapple plantation which he has restored by cultivating more than 700 species of endangered plants, including the *Hyophorbe Indica*, a palm tree on the brink of extinction. Merwin is featured in Haydn Reiss' film on Bill's pacifism, *Every War Has Two Losers*.

He is a dedicated environmentalist and hopes to lend support to the literatures and languages of native peoples during his service as poet laureate. Laureates serve for a year and receive a stipend of \$35,000.

## The Pleasures of the Potluck

It was a beautiful day for a picnic, sunny and receptive. The tables were laden with delicious food and delicious poems—wonderful broadsides, including the Paper Crane collection, baskets of poetry books prepared by Paulann Petersen for the raffle, copies of a card designed by Dennis and Helen Schmidling of Bill and Dorothy's versions of "Passing Remark," and a basket of bookmark poems by many of Oregon's finest.



MARK THALMAN

Three members of Vox, a spoken-word chorus

Rich Wandschneider presided with his usual panache and dispatch, beginning with an award given to Shelly Reece in appreciation for the years he served so ably and thoughtfully as chairmen of the FWS board. Shelley spoke of following Bill to Oregon from San Jose State University, a move that seemed fated by good fortune. We reprint "B.C." here (p. 10) to honor Shelley who read it to the assembled.

Joe Soldati, another past board chair, introduced with singular grace and dignity, Dr. Pierre Rioux, a generous benefactor of FWS, responsible for funding the first Paper Crane broadsides and nominating FWS for the Whiting Memorial Award, which it received in 2001. He has recently continued his support by helping fund the restoration of the Methow River signs. Pierre spoke and then read his



MARK THALMAN

New board member Barbara Drake and her husband Bill Beckman

poem to Bill, "Tuned in Late One Night."

Following Pierre, Doug Stow of Paper Crane Press read the latest broadside, "Malheur before Dawn," which he designed and printed with his son Robert, who did a beautiful linocut of rivers, trees, and stars to accompany the poem.

Dorothy was not present but sent a recorded message of warm words which included a reading of "You Reading This, Be Ready."

Vox, a spoken-word chorus of six actors: Gary Brickner-Schulz, Adrienne Flagg, Robin McAlpine, Jamie Rea, John Vergin, and directed by Eric Hull, performed a medley of Bill's poems, among them "Vacation Trip," "The Light by the Barn," and "First Grade." Certain lines still ring in my head: "Oregon is insanely green. It is the light left over from Eden." "A stream is always revising. Water is always ready to learn." "The river keeps looking for the perfect stone."

Paulann Petersen, our poet laureate, came next. She talked about Bill's life, interspersing poems, including the haunting, "A Story that Could Be True." Paulann ended with an anecdote reprinted separately below.

The potluck concluded with the traditional open mic reading, which was, because of the abundant affection for poetry and Bill's work, the last but not least of the afternoon's pleasures.



MARK THALMAN

Audience (Don Colburn, George Staley) listening to open mic

### Not in the way you expect

by Paulann Petersen

In 1980, Bill led a workshop in Klamath Falls, where I was living and teaching in a public high school. He'd just given a reading in one of the auditoriums at OIT, a packed auditorium, and it was question and answer time. A woman, well known in Klamath Falls for her participation in a local fundamentalist Christian church, asked him: "Are you religious?" In her voice there was an insistence, a fervor and triumph, as if her question could somehow claim Bill, secure his commitment to that tribe where she was sure he belonged. "Are you religious?"

Bill answered: "Not in the way you expect."

And that way in which he answered her was so unexpected, so honest and yet respectful, that the question stayed answered, and the evening moved on to its other waiting questions.

Few truth-tellers have ever had such a soft, deft touch; few have ever told the truth as clearly as Bill, with such reverence for what we might not expect.

## Doug Stow and Paper Crane Press

Doug Stow of Paper Crane Press has been printing William Stafford broadsides for FWS since the turn of the century. The first was “A Ritual to Read to Each Other.” The most recent is “Malheur before Dawn.” Paper Crane Press is located at the back of a card and gift shop of the same name in Half Moon Bay, California, a lovely coastal town about half way between San Francisco and Santa Cruz. He and his wife Margaret started the store in 1985. It’s located on the main street among handsome storefront shops with an old west, Victorian ambience, just off Highway One. If you squint a little, it’s Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck country.



ILKA KUZNIK

The exterior of the Paper Crane shop

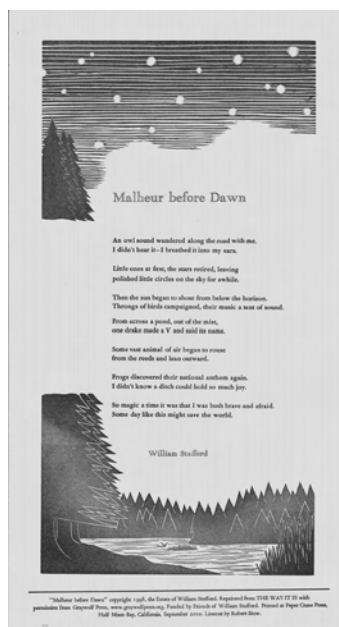
Doug was born in Indiana but grew up in Michigan. He came west to do his alternative service as a conscientious objector in the early '70s during the Vietnam War, serving as an orderly at the Christian Science Benevolent Association Hospital, working with the elderly and infirm.

Sometime in the mid '90s, a friend of his gave him a copy of *Stories*



ILKA KUZNIK

Interior, looking from the back of the shop to the street



*That Could Be True*. He struggled a bit with the poems until, on a visit to Portland, he bought the video, *What the River Says*. When he heard Bill’s voice reading, he sent for all the other videos and started collecting Bill’s work.

In 1998 he went to an antiquarian book faire in San Francisco and asked someone about Bill’s books. He was told to talk to Charles Seluzicki, a Portland bookseller who specializes in fine press books and rare editions. He went to Seluzicki’s booth and was introduced to Brian Booth, that champion of Oregon literature and founder of the Oregon Book Awards. Booth told him about FWS. Doug joined and

when he filled out that part of the form that asks about volunteer opportunities, he wrote the word *broadsides*. Patty Wixon, then board chair (I think), called him and the rest is, as we say, history, and a rather good one. Doug has been producing at least one exquisite Stafford broadside a year on his tabletop Chandler and Price Pilot letterpress ever since.



ILKA KUZNIK

Doug Stow printing

## A Certain Kind of Light: William Stafford and the Nonviolent Tradition

by Tim Barnes

*An Energy Field More Intense Than War: The Nonviolent Tradition and American Literature.* Michael True. Syracuse University Press, 1995.

*Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront Since 1941.* Philip Metres. University of Iowa Press, 2007.

*Walker in the Fog: On Mennonite Writing.* Jeff Gundy. Cascadia, 2005.

In his introduction to *Down in My Heart*, Kim Stafford remembers that whenever one of Bill's CO friends from the Civilian Public Service camps would visit, his father "felt a certain kind of light come into the room." That light shone because Bill belonged to a tradition that is sometimes ignored. Yes, he was a deep image poet of the Iowa school, along with Robert Bly. Yes, his poetry is in the pastoral tradition, along with Robert Frost. Yes, he is part of the Northwest school, along with Richard Hugo. He is also, and this is a glittering facet of each of these three books, an essential participant in the nonviolent, war resistance tradition in American literature.

In Michael True's book, Bill is one of a long line of people, going back to William Penn and John Woolman, who engaged in the practice of peace through the power of the pen. This book reaffirms that tradition, a genealogy filled with the mostly forgotten names of people who believed in peace with all their hearts. Bill might see this book as a "lives of the saints," though humble about his prominent place in it. The lives of these saints of nonviolence and war resistance—

Woolman, Adin Ballou, Dorothy Day, Randolph Bourne, Elhu Burrit, Kenneth Boulding—make this book burn with a *certain* light, both meanings of that word intended.

Nonviolence arises in response to historical conditions and True's seven chapters follow how abolition, labor unrest, world wars, and civil rights shaped the issues and answers that these believers in peace articulate. In the chapter that discusses Bill's contribution, "Conscientious Objectors and Civil Rights, 1940-65," we learn how the work of COs influenced the civil rights movement because a number of key leaders in the struggle for racial equality served as COs in World War Two and brought their convictions and strategies to the movement.

*Behind the Lines* covers a much shorter span of time, decades not centuries, three wars—World War Two, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. Its concern is poetics, the lyric as a means of war resistance. Metres looks at the work of a number of poets—Robert Lowell, William Everson, Denise Levertov, John Balaban, June Jordan, Barrett Watten, and Bill Stafford, among others—clarifying how their use of the lyric as a form adapts as it confronts the shifting nature of war and, just as important, the way the media presents it.

Metres devotes his second of eight chapters to Bill's work. In "William Stafford's Lost Landmarks: The Poetics of Pacifism and the Limits of the Lyric," he calls *Down in My Heart*, "the most articulate and sustained literary work to grapple with and represent

war resistance during the Second World War." He feels it is an "ur-text" that helps illuminate and outline the "monological limits" (as in monologue) of Bill's body of poetry. Metres' focus on the poetics of the lyric, its limitations as a vehicle for resistance because of its subjectivity and the inherent isolation of the individual voice, lead him to see Bill's poetry as "the poetics of utopianism." If we read idealism for utopianism, then, though Metres is implying Bill's poetry lacks a certain Realpolitik, it does help explain that light in the room: "In Dear Detail, By Ideal Light."

Gundy's *Walker in the Fog* is a collection of essays that circle and loop toward an inductive definition of the nature of Mennonite writing, which, we should all be glad to hear, has had a flowering in the second part of the twentieth century. Stafford was not a Mennonite, but he was associated with a closely connected church in the Anabaptist tradition, the Brethren. Gundy's fourth chapter is called, "Almost One of the Boys: Marginality, Community, and Nonviolence in William Stafford." On the basis of Bill's renowned humility and careful distancing of his poetic persona from the larger culture, Gundy finds a place for Bill in the Anabaptist tradition of quietism and separation.

All three of these writers pause to consider the first chapter in *Down in My Heart*, "The Mob Scene at McNeil," where Bill tells the story of how he and two fellow COs were almost lynched because a group of locals thought a poem one of them was writing might be a message for the enemy. Their accommodating demeanor and the fact that Walt Whitman's poetry doesn't rhyme preserve them until the sheriff arrives. True sees this incident as presenting the issue of cooperation and resistance that characterize both the relations of COs with the general population and the conflicts within the CO community. The latter is exemplified in the tension between the narrator and his friend George, the non-cooperative absolutist. True sees the narrator in *Down in My Heart* choosing "a kind of *via media* between citizen involvement and total resistance." That *via media* seems a helpful key to seeing what gives Bill's poetry its particularly sparkling tension—the tension we see in, "The Star in the Hills" or "Representing Far Places."

Metres sees the incident as avoiding "easy caricatures" of pacifists and showing "the problematics of a dissenting patriotism." The COs are threatened by the mob because, as their camp director later tells them, "our government is spending millions of dollars and hiring the smartest men" to make Americans hostile to and suspicious of outsiders. The COs are reading (Walt Whitman), writing poetry, and painting, all things that should be part of the American way but come under suspicion as dangerous. Because as COs they are nominally legal, though, they are rescued by the sheriff. In this incident we see Bill's stance: he steadily presents his singular and dissenting vision

(a kind of utopian patriotism) to a culture spending millions to see things as dangerous that are perfectly American. One of the poems Metres offers in this chapter, "Peace March," illustrates this quite well.

Gundy moves "The Mob Scene at McNeil" in a different but complementary direction. The title of his essay comes from "Serving with Gideon," a poem which quietly celebrates a remove from a common set of American values, those of

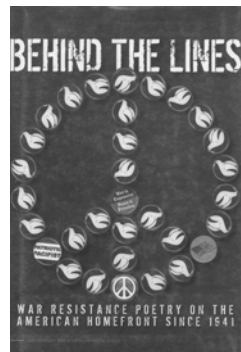
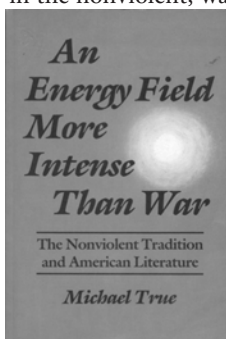






PHOTO COURTESY OF THE STAFFORD ARCHIVES

McNeil, Arkansas, just before the mob scene

“conventional complacency and prejudice” demonstrated by the good old boys of the town. The COs who are almost lynched have withdrawn into “a distinct society within but removed from the larger one” that holds somewhat utopian convictions, somewhat like the Mennonites who are, like the Brethren, a part of the Anabaptist tradition. “Anabaptists,” Gundy writes, “have long struggled with the questions of worldly involvement and withdrawal, of practical effectiveness versus ethical purity, that Stafford’s COs encounter.” A certain resistance combined with a certain humility characterizes the connection that Gundy wants to make between Stafford and the Mennonite tradition: “[Stafford’s] understated style itself models the calm humility Anabaptists have sought and the urge to find distance from the public world.” It is this tradition, one would think, that gave some of that light to the room when the COs visited.

In the first chapter of his book, True writes that the *Journal of John Woolman*, the eighteenth century Quaker “may be the most important literary text in this history.” Gundy tells us, quoting from *You Must Revise Your Life*, that Bill carried a copy of Woolman’s *Journal* with him to his first CO camp in Arkansas. This is how tradition works in our lives. And so Gundy’s connecting Bill with the Anabaptist quietism, also a Quaker trait, tells us something about Metres’ central criticism of Stafford, a criticism based on his keen evaluation of the lyric as a tool of war resistance. Stafford’s poetry, he writes, “tends to construct . . . collective statement in favor of parabolic lyric.” The parable is a brief tale with a moral. “Serving with Gideon” is one and so is another of Bill’s well-known anti-war poems, “Watching Jet Planes Dive.” This creates what Metres calls Stafford’s “vigorously miniature approach” that “opts for a smaller chronicle of forgotten ways.” Metres calls Bill’s poems “anti-epics.” Stafford’s humility, his “capacity to be less than heroic,” as Gundy describes it, limits the power of his poetry as a weapon of war resistance. The reason would seem to be partly inherent in the nature of the lyric and partly in the light Bill learned to live and write by, making the world again poem by poem, morning light by morning light.

Speaking of that light, both True and Gundy consider Bill’s encounter with Gerald Heard, the British mystic, pacifist, and student of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. Bill writes in *Down in My Heart* of going with other COs on a week-long retreat with Heard and Aldous Huxley. The two, according to True, were important figures in the nonviolent movement of the time and also influenced some of the figures in the San Francisco Renaissance: Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. Gundy suggests that Heard’s influence on Bill should not be dismissed. A rereading of the relevant chapter in *Down in My Heart*, “We Built a Bridge,” would seem to confirm his point.

The light of Heard’s ideas, “alert passivity,” “the only way to pursue happiness is to pursue something else,” would seem to have retained their glow in Bill’s work.

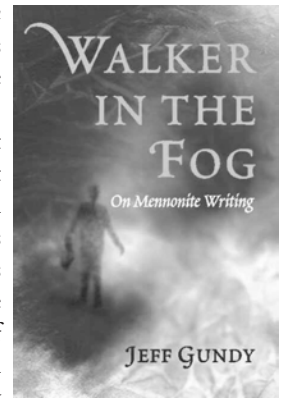
Metres takes his examination of the lyric’s usefulness into the poetry of a number of poets and three wars and so it would be remiss of me if I didn’t mention his discussion of Denise Levertov and the Vietnam War. Metres is quite critical of her lyric response to that war because it “lost sight of how a lyric resistance poetry—whose strength we see in the CO poetry from the Second World War” could reach across resistance. Levertov, therefore, “court[ed] blinding self righteousness.” Levertov’s poetry moves from protest to identification with the enemy in such a way she lost her audience and spoke only to the isolated community of the converted. At their worst, her intransigent Vietnam War poems, “separate peoples, delimit discourses” and polarize in a way that imitates the act of war. It is a problem Bill faces in a later poem (1987), “For the Unknown Enemy.”

Metres writes that in her Gulf War poems Levertov moves beyond her previously isolating stance in part because she acknowledges something Bill didn’t have to in *Down in My Heart* but does touch on in his poems that respond to the Gulf War. “[T]he military control of media access to war” wasn’t a cultural problem in the way it is now. Perhaps the most important insight in *Behind the Lines*, beyond its perceptive reading of Bill’s work, is Metres’ exploration of how the lyric has adjusted to the unreality of war that the Gulf War presented to civilians, us. If representations of war are so mediated that the idea of witnessing what actually happened is in question, it is difficult to be clearly oppositional. One has nowhere firm to stand. Lyric poetry, then, must recognize and incorporate in its creation the “interfered image” and “complicit/resistant subjectivity” that is part of writing war resistance poetry today. In “Entering History,” Bill writes:

You were there, on the telly, part of  
the military. You didn’t want to  
give it but they took your money  
for those lethal tanks and the bombs.

That is one of Bill’s attempts to respond to the issue that Metres raises so well. It is the latest dilemma the literature of nonviolence must grapple with, “truthiness,” as Steven Colbert has so cleverly called it.

Pacifism is a long and brilliant tradition, graced by people and faiths with values we need and Bill honored. It is a certain kind of light. In *An Energy Field More Intense Than War*, we see how the nonviolent have set the sails of their principles according to the winds of history. In *Behind the Lines*, we see how the lyric has done the same, especially since the mediated representations of war have called its realities into question. In *Walker in the Fog*, we see the influence of a particular kind of faith on certain writers. Bill, amazingly enough, intersects with all these histories, these traditions of principle, in which nonviolence is at the center. They are part of the light he saw, and we can understand that light and see it better now because of these three books.



## News, Notes, and Opportunities

**Bill and Dennis Hopper.** *The Nation Magazine* reprinted actor Viggo Mortensen's speech at Dennis Hopper's memorial in May of last year. Hopper was, like Bill, born in Kansas. Mortensen calls Bill "the finest and most honest poet that state has produced." He goes on to quote from a 1971 interview in which Bill speaks of "the hidden river" of his life; he closes his eulogy with Bill's poem, "For My Young Friends Who are Afraid." For Mortensen's speech go to <http://www.thenation.com/print/blog/remember-dennis-hopper> or google *The Nation* + Dennis Hopper.

**Stafford Poem on the National Mall.** A blogger named Poem Elf likes to tape poems by notable poets in significant places. This year he or she put "At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border" up on a small obelisk located on the National Mall, not far from the Washington Monument. For a picture and Poem Elf's posting, go to <http://poemelf.wordpress.com/2010/5/21/a-peaceful-day-on-the-national-mall/> or google Poem Elf + William Stafford.

**Erland Anderson remembers Bill.** One of the recent postings on the William Stafford Archives blog is Erland Anderson's moving and insightful recollection of his friendship with Bill that ranged over close to twenty years. Go to <http://williamstaffordarchives.blogspot.com/>. There is lots of fascinating material on the blog that Paul Merchant oversees as a part of his work with the Stafford Archives.

**Poems for Peace:** How to build a collection that moves beyond anti-war poetry. This article by Philip Metres, author of *Behind the Lines*, arose out of a discussion with Kim Stafford, Jeff Gundy, Fred Marchant, and Haydn Reiss during the Another World Instead: William Stafford Peace Symposium that was held at the First Unitarian Church in Portland in May of 2009. Metres discusses a number of poets with pro peace stances: Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, Wislawa Szymborska, Mahmoud Darwish, Naomi Shihab Nye, and, of course, Bill Stafford. He features the poem "Peace Walk" and calls Bill "perhaps the most important American pacifist poet." URL: <http://www.poetryfoundation/journal/article.html?id=240142>. Google: "Poems for Peace" + Metres.

**Los Prietos Interpretive Sign.** Poet, teacher and Friend Paul Willis sent the FWS board a copy of a letter to the Forest Service proposing the possibility of an interpretive sign in the Lost Prietos National Forest to mark the site of the Civilian Public Service Camp where Bill served. FWS board member Dennis Schmidling will visit the site this January to discuss the idea with Paul and the Forest Service.

**"William Stafford: Genius in Camouflage,"** an essay by Jonathan Holden published in *The Valparaiso Poetry Review* 2.1 (2000-2001) is now available online and really worth reading. Holden, author of *The Mark To Turn: A Reading of William Stafford's Poetry*, speaks of Stafford's genius, fierceness, coldness, gift for friendship, and death. URL: <http://www.valpo.edu/vpr/holdenstaffordessay.html>. While you're there, take a look at Ingrid Wendt's beautiful and timely essay in response to 9/11, "Turning to Poems," which discusses, among other poet's poems, "A Ritual to Read to Each Other."

**"Nostalgia, War, and Prophecy."** This is a short piece Kim Stafford wrote about both his father and his son that appeared in *Oregon*

*Humanities: A Journal of Ideas and Perspectives* in spring 2009. In the same issue, Ellen Santasiero has a piece called "Literary Legacies," in which she talks with archivists about the state of acquiring and preserving literary and historical archives with, among others, Paul Merchant of the Stafford Archives and his colleague, Doug Erickson, special collections librarian, both at the Lewis and Clark College Watzek Library.

*Oregon Quarterly*, winter 2010, has a poem by Kim Stafford, "Blue Brick from the Midwest," a recollection of entering his father's study just after he died. A head note to the poem tells us that it will be part of a chapbook of poems inspired by Stafford family stories called *Prairie Prescriptions* due out from Limberlost Press.

**Winter Fishtrap**, Feb 23-27. Winona LaDuke, Charles Goodrich, and Tammy Strobel headline this winter's gathering. Also attending will be Amy Minato and musicians Steve Einhorn and Kate Power. Register online at [www.fishtrap.org](http://www.fishtrap.org).

**Student Poetry Contest 2011:** Oregon State Poetry Association. Poems are being accepted for this contest until Feb 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. There are four divisions: kindergarten to second grade, third grade to fifth grade, sixth grade to eighth grade, ninth grade to twelfth grade. Go to [www.oregonpoet.org](http://www.oregonpoet.org) for more information.

### B.C.

The seed that met water spoke a little name.

(Great sunflowers were lording the air that day;  
this was before Jesus, before Rome; that other air  
was readying our hundreds of years to says things  
that rain has beat down on over broken stones  
and heaped behind us in many slag lands.)

Quiet in the earth a drop of water came,  
and the little seed spoke: "Sequoia is my name."

WILLIAM STAFFORD

We print this poem to honor Shelly Reece's services as chair of the FWS board. Shelley was a perceptive, gentle, and firm board chair who provided untold benefits to the community of those who believe in Bill Stafford's work. He is a true friend of Bill's. Much the same should be said of retiring board member Anne Staley, whose presence on the board will be greatly missed. The Friends thank these two people for their fine and dedicated work.

### PERMISSIONS

"Peace Walk," "Old Glory," "B.C.," "Little Rooms," © 1977, 1992, 1962, 1987 by the Estate of William Stafford. Reprinted from *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*, with permission from Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minnesota.



## BECOME A *Friend of William Stafford*

### MISSION OF FWS

IN THE SPIRIT OF WILLIAM STAFFORD, *we are committed to the free expression of literature and conscience. We seek to share Stafford's work and advance the spirit of his teaching and literary witness. We strive to provide ongoing education in poetry and literature in local schools and communities in ways that will encourage and enrich a broad spectrum of readers and writers. In doing so, we hope to contribute to William Stafford's legacy for generations to come.*

### WHY JOIN?

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

To join the Friends of William Stafford, renew your friendship, or make a donation, please fill out this form and mail to: FWS, P.O. Box 592, Lake Oswego, OR 97034. Checks payable to "Friends of William Stafford."

### JOIN OR RENEW:

*(Please check ALL appropriate boxes)*

- New     Renewal     Gift  
 Patron \$100/yr     Individual \$35/yr  
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May we list this information (or any part of it) in a "friends-only" directory of which you will receive a copy? \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

How did you hear of FWS?

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

### Welcome New Friends May 2010 – December 2010

Leon Aliski  
 Gail Barker  
 Judy Boyd  
 Patricia Brandt  
 Casey Emmerling  
 Wendy Erd  
 Debbie Kenyon  
 William & Jane Madill  
 Ed Stover  
 Jim Warren  
 Joanne R. Wilcox  
 John Sibley Williams  
 Jeanne R. Wilson

### FRIENDS OF WILLIAM STAFFORD NEWSLETTER©

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a year.

EDITOR: Tim Barnes  
 DESIGN ADVISOR: Susan Gillispie  
 WEBMASTER: Dennis Schmidling

Special thanks to Ilka Kuznik

Please email comments, letters,  
news, and information on poetry  
events, awards, etc. to  
[news@WilliamStafford.org](mailto:news@WilliamStafford.org)  
or mail to  
Friends of William Stafford  
P.O. Box 592  
Lake Oswego, OR 97034

### Renew Your Friendship!

Please take a look at the renewal date on your address label. If it is 2010 or earlier, that means your "friendship" contributions are past due. Your contributions help to sustain the mission of Friends of William Stafford, which is to promote the spirit of William Stafford through the annual Birthday Readings, maintain the web site, and other projects. Failure to renew at this time will result in being dropped from the roster, and you will no longer receive the newsletter and other member rewards.

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Of Earthen Beasts and Other Muses:  
A Lost Interview



Sandburg, Stafford, and the Aphorism



A Certain Kind of Light: Stafford and  
Nonviolence



Calendar of January Events

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Please notify sender of change of address



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*Bill pruning a tree at the Sunningdale house*

## Little Rooms

I rock high in the oak—secure, big branches—  
at home while darkness comes. It gets lonely up here  
as lights needle forth below, through airy space.  
Tinkling dishwashing noises drift up, and a faint  
smooth gush of air through leaves, cool evening  
moving out over the earth. Our town leans farther  
away, and I ride through the arch toward midnight,  
holding on, listening, hearing deep roots grow.

There are rooms in a life, apart from others, rich  
with whatever happens, a glimpse of moon, a breeze.  
You who come years from now to this brief spell  
of nothing that was mine: the open, slow passing  
of time was a gift going by. I have put my hand out  
on the mane of the wind, like this, to give it to you.

WILLIAM STAFFORD