William the Gentle, the Fierce, the Prophetic

by John Daniel

It's good to see you all, and how appropriate it is to be celebrating Bill Stafford’s life and work in a library. Bill, of course, was an aficionado of books and libraries. He claimed he could find his way around the Lewis & Clark Library just by the smell of the books. “Books from Britain smell different from American books,” he said, in his not-quite-entirely-kidding way. And he went on, “Some people judge writing by how it sounds or looks. I judge it by how it smells. I want that total experience of language.”

I’m a lifelong book sniffer myself. I smelled my wife’s Kindle when she got it a year ago Christmas, and it didn’t smell like anything. I don’t know that Bill would have been happy about the advent of the electronic reader. He was a pragmatist as well as a sniffer, though, and anything that got and kept people reading probably would have eventually found his favor.

I’m going to rove and ramble for thirty minutes or so in the territory of William Stafford’s poetry, his personal qualities, and his personal significance, as man and writer, to me. This is both a privilege and a pleasure. I was not a close friend of Bill’s, but I did know him for the last fourteen years of his life. I met him—and began to read him—in 1979, when a friend and I organized a writers conference down in Klamath Falls and were lucky enough to secure Ken Kesey as our fiction writer and William Stafford as our poet. I was trying to be a fiction writer then, but partly from reading and hearing Bill’s poems—I was writing what I hoped were poems myself, and Bill evidently saw enough in them to serve as a reference when I began to seek poet-in-the-schools jobs and eventually when I applied for a Stegner Fellowship in Poetry down at Stanford.

We corresponded a little. Once, when I’d found funding for Bill to give a reading and visit my undergraduate poetry workshop, he stayed with Marilyn and me in our 300-square-foot cottage, adamantly refusing our bed. “I’ve slept in coal cars,” he said, taking his pad on the living room floor. Once we were back in Portland, in 1988, we went to Bill’s readings and visited with him and Dorothy from time to time. Along with Paulann Petersen, we were to have dinner at the Staffords on August 28, 1993. When Dorothy called, I heard Marilyn say, “Oh, Dorothy. What can we do?”

“Think of us,” she said.

We did and we do, as I know all of you do in your various ways. I always felt re-aligned with the authentic after being around Bill. His poems had their often-fertile ambiguities, but the man himself, to me, was a rock. In his presence I felt cleansed of my own career hungers and envies and ego-centricities. He must have had some of those himself, but I never saw them. (Though once, at a party, after Kim had gotten an advance for a coffee-table book on trees, Bill kind of grunted and said to me, “I just keep going back to Harper with my little tin cup.”)

There was a criticism I used to hear or see in print, frequently enough to notice, when Bill was alive and writing, and I still hear it occasionally now. It had two versions: “He writes too many poems,” or, “He publishes too many poems.” This seemed odd to me. What’s the matter with writing and publishing a lot of poems? I wondered. I wanted to write and publish a lot of poems myself. Did he make writing poems look too easy? Did he violate some covenant that poetry can only come from long, intense, and preferably painful labor?

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Bill did publish a lot, and not all of his poems that found print were his best. This is unremarkable. Now and again I read through the collected poems of Emily Dickinson, one of my two favorite poets. There are many slight poems, many obscure poems, many fragmentary poems. I don't like her any less on that account. Her good poems and her best poems rise off the page against the background of her lesser ones, and reading her lesser ones, in my opinion, gives you a fuller sense of her habits of thought and feeling, her moves as a poet and an appreciation of how they work and sometimes don't work. To “get” Emily Dickinson, it helps to read a lot of her. The same is true of William Stafford.

A writer's weaknesses are often closely related to his or her strengths. That's certainly true of Walt Whitman, my other favorite poet. Once he won some acclaim and started imitating his own voice, he wrote and published some truly awful poems, litanies of exclamation-marked excesses of unconvincing enthusiasm. Do these diminish his achievement? Do they somehow dilute his good and great work? Not remotely. He's still Walt Whitman, his pomposities right there on the page with his genius, somehow still tottering along in print after all these years.

Bill's work will totter along too, I think, despite the complaints of the fussy and fastidious. Think of a poetry collection, by anyone, that you happen to like. How many poems of that forty or sixty or so do you really like? I think many readers must have nodded their heads in relief a few weeks back when Martin Amis wrote, in the Times Book Review, and I paraphrase: “When we say we love an author's work, we really mean we love about half of it.” If even that much, I would say. If I love ten poems in a collection, even five, I’m a happy reader.

Bill was fond of saying, “If you write a bad poem, good. You’ve got it out. Now, let's see what's next.” He certainly worked on his poems, as any poet must, but poetry for him was not the studied, laborious creation of a few fine edifices, to be deconstructed and interrogated by brooding graduate students who rarely see the light of sun. Poetry for Bill was a habit of attention to, and faith in, the voice, he wrote and published some truly awful poems, litanies of exclamation-marked excesses of unconvincing enthusiasm. Do these diminish his achievement? Do they somehow dilute his good and great work? Not remotely. He's still Walt Whitman, his pomposities right there on the page with his genius, somehow still tottering along in print after all these years.

If someone asked at what age he began writing poems, Bill sometimes asked right back, “When did you quit?”

When I first heard Bill read, at that writers conference in 1979, he read a poem called “Things I Learned Last Week,” which is sort of an anthology of small sayings. It includes this brief stanza:

Yeats, Pound, and Eliot saw art as growing from other art. They studied that.

A dig, to be sure, against the scholarizing of poetry that came with high Modernism. But he wasn't arguing that poems come not at all from the poetry we read and study. He knew that everything we read contributes to the compost of our verbal imagination, in ways we are aware of and ways we're not. Bill was taking a stand that poetry can and should come from so much more, from the speech, the people, the communities, the landscapes, the wildlife, the beauties and oddities and horrors of our daily experience. In this respect he resembled the American Modernists who stayed home and paid attention to where they lived, particularly William Carlos Williams and Robinson Jeffers and Robert Frost, much more than the Pounds and the Eliots who shipped out to Europe.

Bill wrote his share of slight poems, but what does that tag mean, anyway? Another poem Bill read that evening in 1979, he himself called slight. “Some poems are built on next to nothing,” I think he said. The poem is titled, “The Little Girl by the Fence at School”:

Grass that was moving found all shades of brown, moved them along, flowed autumn away galloping southward where summer had gone.

And that was the morning someone's heart stopped and all became still. A girl said, “Forever?” And the grass: “Yes. Forever.” While the sky—

The sky—the sky—the sky.

(In Bill’s reading, those repetitions of “the sky” stepped down in volume, and the last one he merely mouthed.) Is that a slight poem? I don’t know. It doesn’t have the substance or ambition of “Ask Me,” one of his best known and best, which appeared in the same collection on the very next page. But I’ve carried that little girl poem and Bill’s reading of it—the two inseparable in my memory—for thirty years and more. I read it aloud just now, in the Beaverton City Library in 2012. It has stuck with me, a kind of open question inviting my re-attention. I’m not willing to call it a slight poem.

As I grow starts of poetry and prose from my own compost, once in a while I’ll catch a conscious whiff of the influence of a mentor. I'll read you a poem in the writing of which I caught the sure scent of Bill Stafford's voice, spirit, and preoccupations. While writing it, I couldn't trace the scent to any particular Stafford poem, but since then I've found a good candidate. I'll read you Bill's poem first:

At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border

This is the field where the battle did not happen, where the unknown soldier did not die, This is the field where grass joined hands, where no monument stands, and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound, unfolding their wings across the open.

No people killed—or were killed—on this ground hallowed by neglect and an air so tame that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

And here's my poem:

Dependence Day

It would be a quieter holiday, no fireworks or loud parades, no speeches, no salutes to any flag, a day of staying home instead of crowding away, a day we celebrate nothing gained in war but what we're given—how the sun's warmth
is democratic, touching everyone,
and the rain is democratic too,
how the strongest branches in the wind
give themselves as they resist, resist
and give themselves, how birds could have no freedom
without the planet's weight to wing against,
how Earth itself could come to be
only when a whirling cloud of dust
pledged allegiance as a world,
circling dependently around a star, and the star
blossomed into fire from the ash of other stars,
and once, at the dark zero of our time,
a blaze of revolutionary light
exploded out of nowhere, out of nothing,
because nothing needed the light,
as the brilliance of the light itself needs nothing.

Now, that metaphysical tangle at the end of my poem isn't very
Staffordian, but the poem as a whole has something of his pacificist
spirit, his preference for joining over dividing, his allegiance to the
good things of ordinary life: grass, sun, birds, wind, rain. Even
the titles use the same trick, a reversal of a common phrase into
its opposite: “At the Un-National Monument…”, and not “Independence
Day” but “Dependence Day.”

Of the many aspects of William Stafford and his work worth discussing—
Stafford the humorist, Stafford the artful
rhymer, Stafford the slippery shape-shifter, Stafford the nature poet,
Stafford the teacher, to name just a few—I'm going to go a little
further in the direction set by his Un-National Monument poem.
Back when I first knew Bill and first read him, I was surprised to
find Robert Bly writing that Bill considered himself a disciple of
Robinson Jeffers. William Stafford, with his humanity, his welcoming
spirit, his wit, his poems about old schoolmates and his Midwestern
beginnings and his family, gentle William Stafford in the lineage of
the cold and austere Jeffers, who in his scientific detachment related
to rocks better than people and would, except for the penalties,
sooner have killed a man than a hawk?

Oh yes, I soon discovered. William the Gentle is also one of our
fiercest American poets, and, like Jeffers, very much a prophetic poet.
I mean not that he tried to foretell the future, but that he bore
uncompromising lifelong witness, in his actions and in many of his
poems, against what he saw as the unjust and destructive tendencies
in our culture. Poetry, to Bill, was not just an aesthetically pleasing
construct of phrases or a means of showing off his sensibility, not just
verbal art. He did not shrink from the poet's ancient responsibility
to, in a phrase from one of his best-known poems, “think hard for us
all.”

The Un-National Monument poem is Stafford in his milder
prophetic tone. Here's something a little stouter, a poem that rises
up at the end and smacks the reader in the face:

Thinking for Berky

In the late night listening from bed
I have joined the ambulance or the patrol
screaming toward some drama, the kind of end
that Berky must have some day, if she isn't dead.

The wildest of all, her father and mother cruel,
farming out there beyond the old stone quarry
where highschool lovers parked their lurching cars,
Berky learned to love in that dark school.

Early her face was turned away from home
toward any hardworking place; but still her soul,
with terrible things to do, was alive, looking out
for the rescue that—surely, some day—would have to come.

Windiest nights, Berky, I have thought for you,
and no matter how lucky I've been I've touched wood.
There are things not solved in our town though tomorrow came:
there are things time passing can never make true.

We live in an occupied country, misunderstood;
justice will take us millions of intricate moves.
Sirens will hunt down Berky, you survivors in your beds
listening through the night, so far and good.

Note that Stafford, in the first three lines of the poem, implicates
himself in the second-person indictment he delivers at the end. He
too is listening to the sirens safe
in his bed. We all need to think
hard, he's saying, and our thoughts
must include those strata and
sectors of society that we are more
comfortable not thinking about.

And then there's this one, one of his best-known:

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

So many of Bill's poems have to do, one way or another, with
thought and language and communication. So many are hints,
nudges, or outright pushes from an awake man to fellow persons

(continuation on page 4)
sufficiently awake to hear him. Robinson Jeffers had given up on humanity. His advice was to withdraw, as best one could, from the general catastrophe of civilization. His pessimism may have been warranted, but it’s also a very easy position to take. Nothing is easier than cynicism. William Stafford knew the deepest flaws of humankind, but he didn’t give up on us. The sirens are sounding, he said. We may interpret them by our own lights, but awake people need to do more than merely notice them and go back to sleep. We need to speak our values clearly and work together on some of those millions of intricate moves that justice requires of us.

Here’s one more poem of William the Prophet, this one about as direct as any he ever wrote. Maybe this one is especially appropriate to read, in that William Stafford Month in Oregon is also Black History Month, and that another January birthday boy is Martin Luther King, Jr. This is called “Serving with Gideon”:

Now I remember: in our town the druggist prescribed Coca-Cola mostly, in tapered glasses to us, and to the elevator man in a paper cup, so he could drink it elsewhere because he was black.

And now I remember The Legion—gambling in the back room, and no women but girls, old boys who ran the town. They were generous, to their sons or the sons of friends. And of course I was almost one.

I remember winter light closing its great blue fist slowly eastward along the street, and the dark then, deep as war, arched over a radio show called the thirties in the great old U.S.A.

Look down, stars—I was almost one of the boys. My mother was folding her handkerchief; the library seethed and sparked; right and wrong arced; and carefully I walked with my cup toward the elevator man.

The speaker of a poem, of course, is not necessarily the author of the poem. Somehow I don’t think William Stafford himself was ever in danger of becoming “one of the boys” in his Kansas town. He knew himself to be marked for a different future from an early age. But he also knew how easy it is for awake persons to slip back into sleep.

One of the smartest brief comments about William the Prophet was spoken by my mother, Zilla Hawes Daniel, some twenty years ago. We had brought her from Maine to live with us in Portland, and most evenings I read aloud to her in the living room. Once, after I read from Bill’s book Someday, Maybe, my mother said, “He tells us things we need to know, without preaching.”
Frank’s Stones
*Who Did What the City Knew to Need*
Lake Oswego, 19 April 2006

Something glittered in the City Council’s eyes—a dream, a plan, a poem in budget form, and the wild design began ...

Lava rivered over open land-stalled, pooled, crystallized into packed, hot splines in the realm of fire. Eons. At Moses Lake

Frank met the scarp, chose those stones that spoke to him—pried loose, suspended, struck hammer blows to ring clear: BURING

Trucked them all to Issaquah to be cradled, sawn open face to face, polished, pored over, fingered for crack or flaw.

Skin can know what the eye can’t see: a tablet for what we needed someone to say. William, gone, might whisper into basalt.

Trucked them all to Lake Oswego, Pittsburgh of the West, for the path where pilgrims hunger for right words:

a grandmother walking alone, a seeker among appearances, local soul rich in questions, and foggy time at dawn, noon, dusk.

Upright companions today, tomorrow—spring, summer, autumn, winter we stood where these stones stand for you, and you, and you.

Sandblast with garnet, little jewels to scorp each letter deeper than rain until the thought you need is firm—your stone wish.

Someday, they may find these stones again, say “What were those people thinking when they hanged their old stones upright by the river in Oregon?”

KIM STAFFORD

The Stafford Stones

A white yacht moves like a swan
Upstream toward Oregon City.
What would you say, Bill,
About the river in March?
There are crows in the trees
And geese along the footpath.
You sit watching it all
With a tradesman’s eye:
Couples braving the season,
Children outrunning their parents.
“The river always finds the right way”
Is etched on the smooth side
Of a towering stone.
What the day needs to be
Is not what you would say here.

JAMES FLEMING
Hello everyone. I’d like to thank Joe Soldati and William Stafford for giving me this opportunity. Without them I wouldn’t be here. I’d be in my recliner reading Peanuts.

As a high school English teacher, I have used Mr. Stafford’s poems in a variety of ways. I’ve also used them in my own life. I’m going to start with a poem and end with a poem. It’s always good to use your best at the beginning and the end. In that regard it’s like a good date.

The Dream of Now
When you wake to the dream of now from night and its other dream, you carry day out of the dark like a flame.

When spring comes north, and flowers unfold from earth and its even sleep, you lift summer on with your breath lest it be lost ever so deep.

Your life you live by the light you find and follow it on as well as you can, carrying through darkness wherever you go your one little fire that will start again.

It’s an excellent poem, unless given to an overly literal pyromaniac. Actually, this is my favorite poem of William Stafford’s. I use this poem in the hope that its first stanza about waking up will convince students to think about waking up to the dreams that might come true if they take advantage of their educational opportunities. Or at least get their heads—off of their desks. It’s no longer the deep night of slumber. It’s no longer okay to stay in your metaphorical bed and push the snooze button until your mother yanks the blankets off of you. I hope the poem implores them to light up their intelligence and to discover and share their gifts.

The second stanza does not carry as much educational significance to me, but the figurative language is so beautiful, that I want students to figure out what it says to them. Especially the line about lifting summer on with your breath. I ask them: “How would you do that?” The class clown says: Very carefully. But some of the students nod, and some of them look confused, and some of them stare at the clock. That darn stubborn small hand seemingly stuck. But if that line clicks, and it often does, it sends students’ minds churning; it intrigues them that they have the power to lift summer on with their breath. And if they can do that, they think, what kind of power might I have over the clock.

It’s the third stanza that I find most beautiful and instructive. We discuss how it is important to use those things that can help you to find your way through life. Teenagers are filled with drama. The pain and confusion comes in lightning strikes. We decide as a class that the one little fire inside them is worth taking care of at all times.

Not to be blasphemous, but I’m thinking of using this poem as a hall pass. It’s a quick read has a relevant message, and since high school students feign a need to visit the water closet on a regular basis—somehow their bladder shrinks when they enter a school building—I hope that by June they will have memorized this one poem.

One of Stafford’s greatest gifts to the classroom was his ability to ask deep moral questions. This gives high school students an opportunity to consider their values. Beneath the noise of tattoos, low-cut tank tops, sagging pants, chest thumping athletes and the text messages that crush a student one minute and buoy them the next, many students are, when given the opportunity—seekers, especially when they hear there are free doughnuts in room 254. Part of the high school curriculum includes Emerson and Thoreau. Topics such as self-reliance, nature and civil disobedience are parsed. Morals are discussed. Like those Transcendentalists, William Stafford’s poetry opens a great golden door, a gateway as it were, to plumb the depths of the teenage mind, soul and heart. It’s a tough mind to penetrate, especially when there’s a sale at the Gap or everyone’s buzzing because Johnny and Susie have broken up three times since the first bell. Yet the setup in several of Stafford’s poems elicits the tension created by any moral dilemma and gets the students interested. High school students are much more idealistic than the corroded adult who thinks he’s seen it all, and in doing so has developed a cynicism that Ambrose Bierce would be proud of. Luckily, many students see the world with fresh eyes, and a desire to do what’s idealistic, not necessarily expedient. “Traveling Through the Dark” is a poem that offers such an opportunity to explore their values:

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

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

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

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

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

So to push the deer over or not to push the deer? The class argues life versus safety. Someone says, “But pushing the deer into the canyon is also about life.” “How?” someone says. “A driver could lose their life if they hit the deer.” But what about the baby deer? This is said by the girl who will someday live with four chickens in a Pearl condo. “I knew you’d say that,” a boy says. “So what?” she replies. “I care about animals, is that wrong?” After some spirited back and forth, I ask students to consider the last two lines.

“I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—, then pushed her
over the edge into the river.” Then we discuss other hard decisions. How people swerve from one concept to another concept before making a choice. It’s a debate in their minds, and the choices are theirs. Now if only their parents would be so rational when discussing curfew. Some students discuss peer pressure—should I cut class, should I smoke pot or drink, are grades important? Beneath these choices I know some students are asking deeper questions. Should I have sex? Should I get an abortion? Should I report that my father beats me? Their swervings are real and dramatic. It makes poetry applicable. It makes poetry relevant. It is about life, and like all adolescents, it’s about their lives, which, coincidentally, is their favorite topic.

And while they meander towards that diploma, they are growing up. There are many coming of age books in literature: *The Outsiders*, *West Side Story*, *Ricochet River*… *Peter Rabbit*.

But one of Stafford’s poems turns that moment into a single image, an image and a dilemma that required a mere twenty-one lines to create. I like to think that Stafford made it twenty-one lines to signal the legal age of adulthood. That’s another beauty of poetry. Each poem becomes whatever the reader wants it to mean. This allows the student to take ownership, and ownership is something a student enjoys, too. The twenty-one line poem I’m alluding to, like so many seminal moments in life, has an adolescent facing a dilemma, one in which the right thing to do collides with a counter desire; it’s much like someone on a diet parking in front of a Dairy Queen, except in the poem the consequence could lead to a rap sheet. The poem is titled “Fifteen.”

South of the bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road and stood with that
companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back farther in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale—
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me a good man, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.

Of the William Stafford poems I have used in class, “Fifteen” generates the most discussion. The narrator is fifteen, just like some of my students. The opportunity to ride the motorcycle runs counter to what is morally right, and yet it is so tempting. Also, the poem is fraught with literary devices that help students understand how figurative language is used to enhance a poem. Symbols, imagery, metaphor, similes, personification and alliteration are all taught to the students, often in the context of reading a Stafford poem. The next step is for students to use these devices in their own writing. Stafford’s word choices demonstrate their ability to make a poem powerful and beautiful. So when the motorcycle is personified: “On the bridge we indulged / a forward feeling, a tremble.” The students and I discuss whether or not the motorcycle is an accomplice for the boy. Does the motorcycle engage in a form of peer pressure? How do people resist such peer pressure? What type of battle is waged—man versus man, man versus society, man versus nature or man versus himself? There are other instances of imagery and metaphor, but they are not used to show off; they are used to enhance. Stafford’s writing is accessible, and his use of figurative language does not obscure. This accessibility allows students to engage in finding meaning rather than decoding a text.

And that’s one other thing I love about Stafford’s poetry. To find meaning students don’t have to run to Dictionary.com, a trip that includes two visits to iTunes and an email to the person sitting next to them. Instead they can go straight to their minds to discern the poem’s meaning as a whole, whether the poem is about achieving their potential by using their gifts or making decisions that will determine the person that they will become. Mr. Stafford ensures students will at least understand the words. As for the meaning, the reader gets the joy of deciding that. And there’s nothing more that a teenager likes than to reach his own conclusions. I know this every time students complain when I make up a seating chart. Which makes me wish Stafford, who was a teacher, had written a poem called “The Seating Chart” or for that matter “Detention for the Cell Phone.”

Before I finish, I must share another of my favorite poems. After all, Stafford’s poetry transcends high school. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here. It is a poem that was read at my wife’s and my wedding. The poem is titled: “Our Story.” I think about it in an ironic way whenever—at my wife’s bidding—I take out the garbage on a rainy Portland night. Actually, I share it because I hope that someday my students will read a poem to commemorate a special event.

Remind me again—together we
trace our strange journey, find
each other, come on laughing.

Some time we’ll cross where life
ends. We’ll both look back
as far as forever, that first day.
I’ll touch you—a new world then.
Stars will move in a different way.

We’ll both end. We’ll both begin.
Remind me again.

One of Stafford’s greatest gifts
to the classroom was his ability
to ask deep moral questions.
And that’s why we’re here, also. To remind us again of William Stafford’s lyrical and insightful poetry. A gift to adults. A present to high school students willing to learn about the beauty of language and ponder the dilemmas that life affords. Thank you Mr. Stafford. And happy birthday.

Editor’s Note: Bob Balmer gave this talk at the Portland Central Library on Jan. 29th. He is a high school English teacher who has used William Stafford’s poetry in his classes and a writer whose work has appeared in print and aired on radio and television.

A Memory of William Stafford

It was the early 80s and William Stafford came to Olympia, the state’s capital, to take part in a poetry Event that I heard about at the last minute But decided to scratch out a poem and attend, because Of an article on the great man in the local newspaper.

Anyone who felt obliged could turn in a poem with A corresponding number, so that the panel of poets Could choose some to read by content only. Stafford read mine and I was blown away!

The poem, which has been lost over the years, Was about government workers and how they grasped Security in exchange for their dreams and a Certain complacency set into their souls.

William Stafford read the work as if it were his own With great passion . . . and suddenly a woman in the Audience jumped up protesting: That’s not fair! I’m a single parent; I need health insurance; I thank God for my job . . . yadda yadda yadda.

Stafford eyed her compassionately and looked out Into the audience and said: This is a perfect example Of what good art can do, evoke an emotional response. The woman sat down placated by the softness of His demeanor, while I sat there like a cat that ate a finch because it was My poem and Stafford had implied that it was good Art and I was a struggling single parent, too But I wasn’t whining . . . and William Stafford read My poem, out loud, in front of hundreds of people And I felt safe in my anonymity just a few feet from The woman I had offended . . . and William Stafford read My Poem to the world!

RAINY KNIGHT
VANCOUVER, JAN 31ST

Sightings


This is a beautiful book for several reasons. The first is that it is beautifully printed, as are all of the Limberlost chapbooks. The second reason is that the poems are lovely and haunting. The third is that the photographs included show Dorothy’s parents, Harrison and Lottie Franz, to be a remarkably handsome couple.

Prairie Prescription is letterpress printed on archival paper. The cover is a rich, sod-colored paper with a silhouette in silver of prairie grass. The contents are handsewn with white thread and include end sheets of thin rag paper with fibrous swirls. The typeface, Kenntonian, lends the text an early twentieth century look, which is complemented by the sepia-toned photographs of Dorothy, Bill, and their parents. This book is a treasure to hold in one’s hands, much less read.

The poems, as Kim tells us in his short introduction, were impelled by an invitation to read poetry in Omaha, Nebraska, with Ted Kooser, a U.S. poet laureate and Nebraska resident. A wave of poems having to do with his parents’ Midwestern roots swept through Kim and he wrote them down. Written in long lines and regular stanzas, mostly tercets and quatrains, the poems tell stories of the old days—his mother’s birth, his grandfather’s call to God, his father’s childhood wanderings, visits to Nebraska relatives. “Blue Brick from the Midwest,” though, is about entering his father’s study just after he died and finding the last words he wrote. These narrative poems feel like oral history, sonorous yet intimate, structured like hand-made furniture, old-fashioned in the best sense—fashioned from the old. I think of the sloped silhouettes of old barns and the beauty of old farm machinery rusting in fields of grass stirring in the sunlight.

Perhaps, though, the most surprising and moving element of the book is the photographs of Dorothy’s mother in 1902. Her loveliness—intelligent, sculptural, amused, pure as a tassel of wheat—is a revelation, Ceres herself.
Mainly, translating, like cross-cultural understanding, involves composing, composure, as in creating and arranging. Reading and writing can compose one to empathetically imagine other cultures. This is what “For the Unknown Enemy” is about. In this poem, this poetic composition, Bill creates the attitude, the composure, that leads to cross-cultural empathy. I’m sure this is why Ingrid Wendt’s essay “The Unknown Good in Our Enemies: The Poetry of William Stafford and Poetry from the Middle East” uses that poem to lead toward discussion of a number of Middle Eastern writers: Rumi, Mahmoud Darwish, anonymous Afghan women. This editor’s essay “Imaging the Enemy: Caring Through Literature,” which grew from a talk given at the Tigard Library January Stafford birthday celebration, has a similar impulse. In it I talk about how the imaginative and empathetic aspect of literature lead to my pacifism and explore how I have used Bill’s poems and life in my PCC classes to help students learn to imagine and care about the felt life of people from other cultures, particularly ones we vilify.

Kim Stafford’s piece “Friend: Download this Free Proclamation for Local Use” might sum up the value and purpose of this issue of Oregon English. One of his poems is translated into four languages: French, Estonian, Chinese, and Arabic. With the French, one can still recognize cognates, the Latin roots, even with the quirky accent marks. With the Estonian, it’s still the Latin alphabet, but the cognates are gone and umlauts have joined the accents. The Chinese, though still read from left to right, is a dense thicket of ideograms in which attractively cryptic images seem latent. Arabic, read from right to left, seems like a mixture between design and dance. To look at the non-alphabetic writing systems is to be drawn to the beauty of otherness. One feels the essential humanity of difference—in the way the stroke of the hand that writes literature crosses the borders of writing systems, of cultures, charming and disarming the caring gazer.

For the Unknown Enemy

This monument is for the unknown good in our enemies. Like a picture their life began to appear: they gathered at home in the evening and sang. Above their fields they saw a new sky. A holiday came and they carried the baby to the park for a party. Sunlight surrounded them.

Here we glimpse what our minds long turned away from. The great mutual blindness darkened that sunlight in the park, and the sky that was new, and the holidays. This monument says that one afternoon we stood here letting a part of our minds escape. They came back, but different. Enemy: one day we glimpsed your life.

This monument is for you.

WILLIAM STAFFORD


Oregon English, published by the Oregon Council of Teachers of English (OCTE) is devoted to reflecting on the theory and practice of the language arts in Oregon. It has, therefore, a long association with William Stafford, including a 1994 retrospective issue that featured essays on Bill by Glen Love, Anita Helle, Marvin Bell, Shelley Reece, and this editor. A 1998 issue contained an essay by Paul Merchant and Vince Wixon, “Harder Than It Looks: The Teaching Legacy of William Stafford.” Stafford’s teaching ideas have made him a regular subject of pieces in Oregon English, this latest issue included.

The focus of issue 26.1, guest edited by Tim Gillespie, is the possibilities and benefits of reading the literature of other cultures. The eighteen pieces included (mostly essays) are divided into four sections: Literature as a Passport Across Borders, On Translation as Border-Crossing, Teaching Ideas and Resources for Helping Students Cross Borders, and Poems That Cross Borders. Two of Bill’s poems are reprinted here, “Walking the Borders” and “At the Un-National Monument along the Canadian Border.” Several others are quoted and discussed, particularly “For the Unknown Enemy.” Indeed, it could be seen — “the unknown / good in our enemies” — as the coda for the issue.

Overall, the readings encourage understanding and humane attitudes by claiming value for cross-cultural awareness through reading and writing. Or, as the Arab scholar Dr. Salma Jayyushi puts it: “If we read one another, we won’t kill one another.” Though the need for cross-cultural awareness seems self-evident, Americans and American education seems to have doubts about this. In her essay on translation, “Between the Lines,” Joanne Mulcahy tells us that three percent of the books published in the U.S. are translations, whereas in Europe, it is over twenty-five percent. In various ways, the essays and poems here focus on that problem and its solution. Bill Bigelow’s essay “Borders and Book Bannings: From Tucson to Cape Town” draws a comparison between the curriculum-cutting, book-banning law in Arizona, HB 2281, and the apartheid laws in South Africa. Jim Webb’s essay “Teaching Contemporary Literature from the Arab World” and Paul Gregorio’s “Global Literature K-8” offer solutions in the form of reading approaches, book summaries, and reading lists. Other essays like “I Am Not: Dismantling Borders Through Poetry” by Renée and Dyan Watson (sisters) present writing ideas that foster cultural awareness.

One of the places to begin solving the problem of cross-cultural illiteracy is with the deadly half-truth uttered by that old curmudgeon Robert Frost, “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” Tim Gillespie takes on this matter in his essay “Crossing Borders of Language: Talking with Students about Translation.” On the way he pauses at Stafford’s poem “Tillamook Burn” to point out that there are some words like “widow maker” for which there is no direct translation. It is, Gillespie would hope students recognize, “an act of composing.”
Winter News: The Birthday Celebrations

Tigard, OR—Jan. 7th
by Tim Barnes

Sue Einowski hosted this event in the spacious Tigard Library auditorium. The featured readers were John Morrison, former head of the Writers in the Schools Program (WITS) in Portland and Steve Sander and Leanne Gabel, the performance duo. The latter two read their own poems, performed several of Bill’s together on voice and keyboard; they also read a couple of poems by Marty Christensen, the madly gifted Portland poet who died in January of this year. The theme of the reading was Stafford’s poetry and philosophy in the classroom today, and so the readers offered Staffordian writing prompts to the assembled.

The serendipity, though, of this celebration was Nancy Tracy, a student of Bill’s at Lewis and Clark. After the scheduled readers, she got up, saying it was the first time, at 87 (?), that she had ever done so. Before reading “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” she remembered being in a writing class of Bill’s. The book he used in the class was The Process of Creative Writing: Growth Through Self-Understanding. Mr. Stafford never wrote on people’s papers but had a way, Nancy remembers, “of lifting your sights.” She explained that she had written a composition in which she described a goat’s fur as a “fine buff.” Bill looked at the line and asked her, probably pretending to written a composition in which she described a goat’s fur as a “fine

Welches, OR—Jan. 15th
by Sharon Wood Wortman

It was a great day in Welches, despite a few inches of snow and predictions for more. Sandra Palmer, owner of the Wy’east Bookstore, and Josh Baker, a Welches-area volunteer firefighter, 7th grade teacher, and poet, did a fine job welcoming and hosting. Featured poet Chris Doyle, who works for the Forest Service, read two Stafford poems and read two poems of his own. Songwriter and musician Suzan Lundy, new to the Stafford fold this year, played guitar and sang a Stafford poem and then sang one of her own. Lindy Delf and Tony Wolk, last year’s featured readers, kicked off the open microphone. They each read a Stafford poem and talked about Bill’s influence on their lives as teachers. A half-dozen folks shared during the open microphone. Because we were gathered in the Wy’east Bookstore, this meant we all sat in a kind of semi-circle and spoke from where we were seated. For my part, I talked about wondering about the genesis of “Lower your standards.” I then read an email from Kim (see below). One woman told a story about growing up next door to the Staffords in Lake Oswego. She remembered sitting at Bill’s feet in the Stafford home. She remembered how welcoming he was not just to her, but to all of the neighborhood children. There were eighteen of us today, not counting the bookstore cat.

Kim Stafford’s email: I think the first saying of this idea by my father is in his book Writing the Australian Crawl, but I don’t have a copy with me and so can’t confirm.

You are right that this idea has traveled widely. The best iteration I can find on the web at the moment is from an article on the OHS website: “If you are writing and you get stuck, lower your standards and keep going. When it gets hard, don’t stop—it’s hard because you are doing something original.”

But I can’t tell if this is quoting my father or quoting me quoting my father, perhaps from my book, Early Morning.

This is the basic idea, though. And maybe the point is that the notion has traveled so far from its original home, it now belongs to everyone who wants to write.

Hood River, OR—Jan. 15th
by Leah Stenson

We had a great turnout in Hood River...probably around forty people or more and Susan Crowley, one of the organizers, presented some Stafford poems which have never been published. FWS Board Chair, Dennis Schmidling, who was also in attendance, said he could really feel Stafford’s spirit. It was so gratifying to see how this event has grown over the past four years and how the Stafford spirit has taken root and grown in the Gorge. All of the newsletters were snapped up and I sold three broadsides. We had carrot cake, Bill’s favorite, after the reading. We owe special thanks to Barbara Young and Althea Hukari for organizing this event that truly deepened the heart to heart connection of all in attendance.
We had a delightful event, beginning with Ann Staley’s writing workshop related to the theme poem, “Climbing Along the River.” Twenty-three people attended the workshop. We then had three third graders read as did their teacher, followed by Mary Van Denend, Roger Weaver and Clem Starck. They were all a joy, reading Bill’s poems and their own. The audience reading was fun as well, with some reading Bill’s poems, some reading what they wrote at Ann’s workshop. Approximately fifty people attended overall.

Portland, OR, In Other Words Feminist Community Center—Jan. 17th
by Tim Barnes

This celebration was part of the Figures of Speech Reading Series and hosted by Constance Hall and Steve Williams. There were two featured readers: FWS board member Leah Stenson and Lewis and Clark assistant professor of literature Mary Szybist. Other readers’ names were pulled out of a jar and among the many enthusiastic readers were Judith Arcana, Thomas Lavoie, and Teal. Also available and part of the format of the reading series were cookies, writing prompts, and complimentary chapbook-broadside designed by Williams. These slender, four-page poetry booklets are quite attractive. There is a drawing of a Portland bridge on the cover page and opens on to a spread with a poem by each of the two featured readers on each side. This is done for each Figures of Speech reading. The writing prompts, called a word salad, were a bowl of words or phrases, gathered from books and poems, from which you are invited to take five and use them to make a poem. Another basket contained lines of poetry from poetry collections. The idea here is to take two and weave them into a poem. Here is an example: “She consumed the gorilla that was sitting on my chest.” A third prompt, the one for January, was a version of mad libs, a fill-in the blanks with a line or phrase. Needless to say, the active writer would be quite happy at this community center and the assembled certainly seemed so.

Corvallis, OR—Jan. 21st
by Linda Gelbrich

We had a great Birthday Celebration here yesterday, in the hospital chapel! Everyone in Pastoral Care was still abuzz about it today. Highlights included several original poems by hospital staff. One read a pair of poems about the deaths of her mother and father. Two young African-American men—one from IT, one from the lobby café—each independently performed a spoken-word piece picked for the occasion. Maybe the most remarkable: An outpatient psychiatric patient read a poem which he wrote in a therapy group. He introduced himself saying, “I’m a psych patient here. I’ve never said that in public. Thanks for a making a space where I feel safe enough to do that.” Amazing. Wonderful things from NYC.

Lake Oswego, OR—Jan. 21st
by Joan Maiers

Well wishers gathered in Lake Oswego at the Holy Names Heritage Center to attend a unique multi-sensory program in honor of William Stafford’s 98th birthday. The afternoon event featured a screening of What the River Says by Michael Marke, co-producer of the two-part film series. Michael provided a commentary about the history of this film project, as well as a photo-collage presenting key images from Stafford’s life. In addition, internationally reknowned cellist, Daniel Sperry, from Ashland, OR, performed his original compositions inspired by Stafford texts. The celebration concluded with poetry readings by Patricia Carver, FWS board member, and Joan Maiers, program host. In keeping with the birthday tradition, guests brought poems and anecdotes to share. Refreshments were provided by Moonstruck Chocolates for all to enjoy while browsing and acquiring poetry broadsides, Stafford film DVDs, and Daniel Sperry’s music CDs.

Waldport, OR—Jan. 21st
by Drew Myron

I’m happy to report that heavy rains, high winds and flooding did not deter determined poets. Even with chunks of Hwy 101 slipping away, we had an enthusiastic crowd of 45 people. The room was filled with poets and poet appreciators, and a great deal of audience participation. (In fact, it was such a chatty group, after the reading they shared and shared and shared . . . y’know writers—we’re quite introverted until we’re among our “tribe”). Martha Gatchell and her partner were kind and brave enough to travel hill and dale and washed out roads, providing us with FWS representation. And, as they say, a good time was had by all.

Sapporo, Japan—Jan. 28th
by Yorifumi Yaguchi

I just want to tell you that we had a beautiful meeting on January 28th in spite of a heavy snowfall. Several people read from The Darkness Around Us Is Deep. They read both the original and the Japanese translations with comments.
The Guesthouse in the Monastery:
On the Spirit of William Stafford

by Daniel Skach-Mills

It has been my great privilege over the years to be a featured reader at the William Stafford birthday events throughout the Portland area. The guidelines for the readings are simple and straightforward: read a couple Stafford poems, along with one or two poems of your own that are in the "spirit" of William Stafford.

But what is this spirit? The guidelines here are fuzzy, if not downright elusive. In my reading this year at Annie Bloom's Books in Portland, I used excerpts from the introduction to my most recent manuscript, In This Forest of Monks—a collection of poems based on my nearly six years in a Trappist monastery—as pointers to what this Stafford-ine spirit might be.

After the reading, FWS Board member Tim Barnes asked if I would be willing to send in my presentation to the FWS newsletter. What follows is an adapted version—both of the book's introduction, and my reading at Annie Bloom's.

It's March, 1990. And, after three years in monastic formation, I'm taking my first vows as a Trappist monk. As is traditional, I'm standing in the church facing the abbot who is seated in front of the altar. The monastic community is gathered on either side. I have written my vows in my own hand—vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of manners (which includes poverty and chastity)—and am waiting for him to address me with a short talk.

I have no idea what he is going to say. The past year has not been easy. The monastic honeymoon is over, and I have started to question him on how decisions affecting the community are being made. I have become increasingly aware of cracks in the life that—armed with my spackle bucket of thirty-three-year-old idealistic zeal—I am trying to fix rather than accept. I am creative, artistic and, as the abbot and others in the community know, a poet.

And so, when he looks straight at me and declares, "Our life here isn't poetry, it's prose," I can already hear the death knell of my monastic life ringing in his words. Unbidden, and in silent response, the words of an author whose name I can't remember run through my head: "God deals strictly in poetry; man turns it into prose."

The abbot expelled me from the community in 1992. But in spite of this (or perhaps because of it), I have been struck throughout the years by parallels between the monastic and poetic life which, at first glance, may not be apparent. For example, William Stafford kept a daily vigil of rising at four am in order to listen and wait for the light of poetic inspiration to appear out of the darkness. The monastic Office of Vigils, held before dawn, is carried out in a similar spirit.

Waiting For God

This morning I breathed in. It had rained early and the sycamore leaves tapped a few drops that remained, while waving the air’s memory back and forth
over the lawn and into our open window. Then I breathed out.

This deliberate day eased past the calendar and waited. Patiently the sun instructed shadows how to move; it held them, guided their gradual defining. In the great quiet I carried my life on, in again, out again.

To ease “past the calendar,” with all its demands and distractions, and wait in “the great quiet” presupposes a certain quality of aloneness. The root of the word monk comes from the Greek word monos, which means “alone.” And this aloneness (not to be confused with loneliness) goes deeper than simply turning your back on the human ego-driven world and heading for the proverbial hills. It isn’t aloneness for aloneness’ sake, but for humanity’s sake. Sanity’s sake.

A young monk once asked an elder: “What does it mean to be a monk?” Pausing briefly, the old monk quietly responded, “To wake up every day asking yourself that question.” Similarly, I can imagine asking William, “What does it mean to be a poet?” and being given the same answer.

Arising out of solitude, genuine aloneness could be described as inner silence or openness, receptivity or pregnant emptiness. It is an intellectual state of not-knowing in which both monk and poet abide, wait, and out of which they move in response to the promptings of life—not as separate from who and what they are, but as life responding to itself. Or, as Stafford says in his poem, “Writer in Residence,” they allow the moment to be “carried wherever the world has to move.”

At first when I wrote it was daylight in a room with others, and I was being “a writer.” Later I moved into a room alone and sat by a window to look out. But many distractions came, and I began to get up early, before anyone moved. My pen, though, made a noise. I found smooth paper, and a quiet pen. Writing on a solid board, by candlelight, in a room by myself, I went inward for that silence found only by moving where your thoughts meet you, with no difference between the moment and your easing forward with it as a silent witness, carried wherever the world has to move.

Being “carried” implies a certain poverty of spirit; an obedience to whatever form the moment takes; and, ironically, a stable attentiveness to wherever it is you’re standing. To stay rooted in what is happening right here and now: in this place, this community, this family, this situation. Breathing in again, out again. For the poet, even chastity could be defined as that simple, pure, and unencumbered way of seeing, being, and listening that characterizes Stafford’s “silent witness.” True, a poet doesn’t vow him or herself to these principles the way a monk does. But, “there are things, you know, human things,” says Stafford in Writing The Australian Crawl, “that depend on commitment; poetry is one of those things.”

Being A Person

Be a person here. Stand by the river, invoke the owls. Invoke winter, then spring. Let any season that wants to come here make its own call. After that sound goes away, wait.

A slow bubble rises through the earth and begins to include sky, stars, all space, even the outracing, expanding thought. Come back and hear the little sound again.

Suddenly this dream you are having matches everyone’s dream, and the result is the world. If a different call came there wouldn’t be any world, or you, or the river, or the owls calling.

How you stand here is important. How you listen for the next things to happen. How you breathe.

Monk and poet stand the way trees in a forest stand—together, alone. In a culture conditioned not to listen deeply, they sough quietly from the margins, inviting us to step out of the cultural mainstream’s arrhythmic pulse, back into the quiet beating of our own hearts. A monk does this, first and foremost, through the example of his own life; and, secondly, via a retreat or guesthouse where people from all walks of life can slow down and share in this deep listening.

Poetry can create a similar space. This is why so many of William’s poems continue being “guesthouses” for me and countless others. They are inviting places, away from the hubbub and noise, where you can step in and be present again—to yourself, life, and the natural world. To yourself as life and the natural world. To the quiet bell that is this moment calling you to “come back and hear the little sound again.” To be aware of “how you breathe.”

Editor’s Note: Daniel Skach-Mills’s poems have been published in numerous journals and anthologies. He is the author of three books: a chapbook, Gold: Daniel Skach-Mills’s Greatest Hits, 1990-2000 was published by Pudding House in 2001; The Tao of Now (Ken Arnold Books, 2008), was listed as one of the “…150 outstanding Oregon poetry books” in 2009; and The Hut Beneath the Pine: Tea Poems is a 2012 Oregon Book Award finalist. Daniel lives with his partner in Portland, Oregon.
My mother was a fan, she met Bill and Dorothy a time or two, and we have on our shelves two books that Bill inscribed to her. In the last year of her life I read to her from Passwords, Bill’s then most recent collection, and she kept that little hardback by her bed, where she spent most of her hours as she declined with Alzheimer’s and congestive heart failure. Her eyes were still good, she read doggedly, and most everything she read was new to her, even if she had read it the day before. Going through her few possessions after she died, I noticed torn strips of Kleenex marking pages in the book. Five lines of one of the marked poems had been bracketed in wavery pencil:

But just when the worst bears down
you find a pretty bubble in your soup at noon,
and outside at work a bird says, “Hi!”
Slowly the sun creeps along the floor;
it is coming your way. It touches your shoe.

Exactly the kind of solace available to a largely immobile, largely housebound, largely solitary being. The consolation of little things, the comfort of the ordinary.

Such lines helped my mother live her last months, and I believe they helped her die. She had circled in pencil the title of a poem about waking at night in the forest with a sense of ghostly figures floating among the trees. The poem ends:

Some night I will breathe out and become
part of the silent forest, floating as they do
toward the thin lids of dawn,
and like them, unknown.

The title of the poem on the facing page is “Security.” It too was circled, and this last stanza bracketed in pencil:

So to you, Friend, I confide my secret:
to be a discoverer you hold close whatever
you find, and after a while you decide
what it is. Then, secure in where you have been,
you turn to the open sea and let go.

My mother died in the summer of 1992, and William Stafford a little over one year later. I miss them both, but mostly I am glad I knew them, and glad, in Bill’s case, that his poetry and prose live on. I go back to his work again and again. It’s even finding its way into the novel I’m writing, which is narrated by a teenage boy from rural western Oregon who was born the year Bill died. He doesn’t read many poets, but—encouraged by his mother—he does read William Stafford and is proud that Bill was an Oregonian. My narrator doesn’t get all the poems, but then neither do I. He undergoes some awful troubles in the course of the story. He takes comfort from Bill’s poems, and one of them, which he can’t quite remember in its entirety, won’t leave him alone as he tries to lose himself in the backcountry of the Oregon Coast Range.

I’d read you that passage, but there isn’t time. Thanks for being here today. It’s time for me to sit down and for you who have brought a Stafford poem to stand up and read it. I’ll sign off with a poem I’ve been working on:

A Word with William Stafford

You can’t tell when strange things with meaning will happen. I’m [still] here writing it down just the way it was.

—William Stafford, handwritten unsteadily the morning of August 28, 1993, the day he died.

Bill Stafford, you shifty old stalwart,
you never would tell me if my poems were good. Yes, you vouched for me
when I wanted work or a fellowship,
and I’m pretty sure your word helped.
I wondered, though—was it my poetry
you liked, or only my good intentions,
my sincere but unseasoned striving?
It would be years before I understood
the generosity of your silence.
A poet writes poems, you didn’t say,
his best might be born tomorrow,
and praise for what’s already written
serves that birth no better than scorn.
Stay alert, you said. Be ready. Practice
the little ways that invite good fortune.
Old maker, thank you for your answer,
and here is my confession and pledge:
I still believe less in what I have written
than in what I hope still to write.
And so, like you, I will follow this pen
right into that day when my scrawl skips
and stutters like a shaky seismograph
and skids out of language off the page.

Editor’s Note: Poet, essayist, and naturalist, John Daniel gave this talk at the Beaverton City Library on Jan. 22nd.

Flight Instruction

When I heard William Stafford say “You can load all sorts of things onto a poem but it won’t be aerodynamic,”
I opened my notebook, uncapped my pen and copied down
what he’d said, but what he said next was already flying away—fragile glider, wings bent just so,
auditorium air sliding over them, lifting, lifting—and I had to let it go.

JOSEPH GREEN
Dorothy's Birthday!

Kim Stafford reading from Prairie Prescription

Primus St. John, Joe Soldati, Bill Stenson, Shelley and Mary Reece

Barbara Stafford

Paulann Petersen reading birthday poem. Greg Simon and Ralph Salisbury listening

Barbara Stafford
A Remembrance of Brian Booth
Given at Oregon Book Awards, 23 April 2012
by Kim Stafford

A story Brian Booth loved was the account of the Tillamook Flyer, that maverick train that punched through the coast range along a provisional track in a state of constant repair. Holbrook reported that when the train was stopped by fallen trees (this happened often), all passengers were dealt axes to join in chopping through the blowdown to get the train on through. That was Brian's spirit with any and all obstacles to moving the freight of cultural good. He waded in with an ax and cleared the way.

Brian had friends in high places. But like Hank Williams, Jr., he also had friends in low places. Lowly writers toiling in obscurity had a friend in this great man. Moving easily from the halls of power to mingle with the denizens of street poetry, to the rain-windowed winter of the solitary writer Brian built tunnels, secret passages, public thoroughfares like the Oregon Book Awards, and immediate contacts of all kinds between the grand institutions of our state and the artistic path that, as my father said, is “one person wide.”

Brian's connection between power and expression forged for us the true democracy of art.

We gather in the House of Words that Brian built. This is but one of many houses Brian raised (Parks, Hospitals, Commissions), but this is the castle that holds our Oregon books, the true wealth of who we are, a treasury not daunted by economic woe, and in fact a literary force that rises to trouble and looks it in the eye. Through the windows of this house we survey an Oregon that Brian changed, deepened, made more ready for the future. And when we walk forth from this House of Words tonight, we take up the work he left us.

A Friend’s Memorial for Brian Booth, 1936-2012
By Tim Barnes

In the literary arts community in Oregon, there were few degrees of separation between any writer and Brian Booth. Booth, who died of cancer on March 7th, seemed to know or know about almost everybody, contemporaneous and historical, many readers of this newsletter included, I’m sure. He was a good friend of the Friends of William Stafford.

The Friends of William Stafford was, Peter Sears, an early Friend, Peter Sears tells me, Brian’s idea. He was, to be sure, one of the original board members and part of a group that met for a little while at Dorothy Stafford’s until the quest for nonprofit status lead Brian to advise official separation from the family. As a founding partner in the law firm of Tonkon, Torp, Galen, Marmaduke, and Booth, Brian was responsible for helping FWS attain its 501(c)(3), nonprofit status. Patty Wixon, an original board member, remembers “he denoted Jeff Cronin” of Tonkon Torp to be legal counsel for the Friends. It took seven years. (Former FWS board president Joe Soldati, describes the process in issue 8.1 of the newsletter.) Patty also remembers that he helped organize the first annual gathering of the Friends at Lewis & Clark in the summer of 1997 and that, as chair of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Commission, he was instrumental in the development of the Gales Creek Overlook Interpretive Center, which features Bill’s poem, “Tillamook Burn.”

In a memorial piece called “Enigma and Anomaly—Brian Booth and his Deep Impact on Oregon Creative Life,” David Milholland, president of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission (OCHC), compares Brian to the legendary Charles Erskine Scott Wood, the lawyer, poet, artist, art patron, and Renaissance man. At his memorial, his friend Gary White called Brian, “a Renaissance man from Roseburg,” an oxymoron Brian is said to have enjoyed. It was Wood and Brian’s Renaissance interests that brought Brian and me into zero degrees of separation.

I had become immersed in Wood’s life and work. (For a byte of information I refer readers to my essay in the Oregon Encyclopedia.) That lead to taking a class at PCC from Portland’s unofficial poet laureate Walt Curtis about Oregon writers of the past. It was discovery at its best—treasure in your midst: Joaquin Miller, Sam Simpson, H.L. Davis, Hazel Hall, John Reed, Louise Bryant. Walt invited Bill to a class and he came and was quietly encouraging. Someone in the class asked Bill if Walt wouldn’t make a good official Oregon poet laureate and Bill, who was laureate at the time, said something diplomatic about Walt’s skills being better used otherwise. Bill was so quiet (or Walt so loud) that I had to be reminded, years later, that Bill had actually come to the class.

This swell of interest in Oregon literary history lead a group of us—Milholland, Curtis, David Horowitz (PSU history professor), Rick Rubin (who later wrote Naked Against the Rain: The People of the Lower Columbia River, 1770-1830)—to organize a centennial celebration in 1987 for John Reed at Pioneer Courthouse Square. Brian attended that event, as did some anti-communist protesters. Soon after, Brian met with Milholland and Curtis at the Vat and Tonsure, that dark-paneled, wine-rich, opera-drenched watering hole for Portland artists and bohemians that is no more. Along with talking about Brian’s plans for a literary arts institute, the idea for the OCHC was born.

I was a founding member of the OCHC, and we met regularly in a conference room in Brian’s firm on the sixteenth floor of the Pioneer Tower building. The views were spectacular, and we did some exciting things—the Hazel Hall Memorial, the John Reed Bench, the C.E.S Wood bust by Olin Warner installed at the
downtown library, and symposia on John Reed and Wood. Brian did not attend the meetings but often dropped by for a moment to chat and encourage.

And so it happened that Brian and Gwyneth invited the board to their house for dinner. I was able to spend an hour or so in his library, which housed the best collection of Oregon literature in the state. The walls of the house were deep with paintings by Oregon Artists—Charles Heaney, the Runquist brothers, C.S. Price, George Johanson, Wood, among them, if I remember correctly. Brian did seem to have created his own version of heaven.

At the time, I was the leader of the Heavenly Discoursers, a group of people—Steve Sander, Rick Rubin, Ilka Kuznik, Mike Marino, and more—who did dramatic readings from C.E.S. Wood’s 1920s book of satirical playlets, *Heavenly Discourse*. We eventually put on two full-scale productions of *Wood Works* in the mid 1980s with the Columbia Theater Company, which Brian attended. These were exciting times for me, and Brian’s enthusiasm for Oregon’s cultural history was central to it. My book, *Wood Works: The Life and Writings of Charles Erskine Scott Wood* (co-written with Edwin Bingham) and Brian’s book, *Wildmen, Wobblies & Whistle Punks: Stewart Holbrook’s Lowbrow Northwest*, came out in the 90s from OSU Press in the same series, Northwest Reprints.

Brian Booth’s assistant at OILA (the Oregon Institute for the Literary Arts, now Literary Arts) was Karen Reyes, a good friend of mine through poetry circles. She had written a master’s thesis at PSU called “Finding A New Voice: The Oregon Writing Community Between the World Wars,” which Brian appreciated. And so it happened that we were at the first awards ceremony in 1987. I don’t remember much except I exchanged pleasantries with Ken Kesey, who really did glow as he stood smiling at the reception that followed. I found out years later that Kesey, Phil Knight (who was a close friend of Brian’s), and Brian all were at U of O together.

For the awards ceremony, Brian had put together a set of slides using Bill’s photos. Brian had talked with Bill about the idea of OILA early on and Bill was on the first board. These ran on a screen as people came in, smoozed, took their seats. There was one of me that Bill took, unbeknownst to me, at a party at Penny Avila’s house. I am laughing, appearing gloriously happy. I look as if the literary life was filled with joy.

For Brian, I think, it was. He had a warmth and naturalness about this drive to remember writers and to make writers to remember, right here in River City. Between Brian and the love of the art and culture of Oregon, there were no degrees of separation. I benefitted from it as his friend and the Friends benefitted from it, the state benefitted from it and so did lots of writers. Someone told me that Literary Arts has given $700,000 in grants to writers in its more than twenty-five years of existence.

I read that Brian once said, “One of the purposes of life is to create something and leave the world with something you helped create.” Brian helped create the Friends of William Stafford and Oregon as we know it. His granite star at the Performing Arts Center reads, “Champion of Oregon Parks, Art and Literature.” We can find our way through the darkness around us better for the stars Brian placed in our cultural skies.
News, Notes, and Opportunities

Stafford in the Oregon Encyclopedia. The Oregon Encyclopedia is an online location for general information on the culture, places, institutions, important events, and people that have shaped this state. Sponsored by Portland State University, the Oregon Council of Teachers of English, and the Oregon Historical Society, the encyclopedia describes itself as “a comprehensive and authoritative compendium of information about Oregon’s history and culture.” Until recently, that claim was suspect because there was no entry on William Stafford. Thanks to Paul Merchant, director of the Stafford Archives and Special Collections Associate at Lewis and Clark, this doubt has disappeared. You can find the entry on Bill under the literature section, right below Kim Stafford and above James Stevens, not far from Gary Snyder and C.E.S. Wood. A ramble around the encyclopedia, prompted by a read of Merchant’s fine entry, could make for an informative, even exciting, few hours. Google Oregon Encyclopedia Project to get there.

“Deeper Understanding: Poetry, Community, and William Stafford’s Birthday.” This is a thoughtful piece about Bill and his birthday celebrations by Robert Gray and published in Shelf Awareness, an online book review magazine. Gray writes, “Stafford has, suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, become my winter poet.” He quotes Paulann Petersen and, as well, includes the Stafford/Henk Pander broadside of “Ask Me.”

Carl Adamshick wins the Stafford/Hall prize for poetry at the 2012 Oregon Book Awards for Curses and Wishes, published by Louisiana State University Press. Marvin Bell selected Adamshick’s manuscript for the 2011 Walt Whitman Award for American poets who have not yet published a book of poems. As many of you know, Bell taught for many years at the Iowa Writers Workshop and was a dear friend of Bill’s. Poetic justice can be found here.

A Separate Luminous Being is the title of a blog post on the Oregon Cultural Trust’s website, which supports the Oregon poet laureateship. Paulann Petersen, FWS board member and current poet laureate, writes here about the history of the January Stafford birthday celebrations, something she knows about since she created them. She also says a few luminous things about Bill’s work. A number of people have posted comments, some of whom I suspect readers will recognize. URL: www.culturaltrust.org/blog/separate-luminous-being.

Walt Curtis on Bill Stafford. The Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission (discussed in the Brian Booth memorial, p.16) has an interesting website. Under Other Projects, Walt Curtis Legacy Initiative-Walt Curtis William Stafford, you will find a tribute to Bill written by Walt, author of Malo Noche and founding member of the OCHC, in 1994. You will also find a poem, “When Poets Die,” (dedicated to Bill and Penny Avila), and two letters from Bill to Walt, one written just after Bill visited Walt’s Oregon literature class at PCC (also mentioned in the Booth memorial in 1983).

Vince Wixon Interview. Poet, Stafford scholar, and film maker, Wixon talks about his work with the Stafford archives, Bill’s influence, and his own work on a website called Literary Ashland, The Literary Life in Southern Oregon. URL: literaryashland.org.

Poetry Potluck. The sixth annual Friends of William Stafford Poetry and Potluck will take place on September 16th at Foothills Park, location of the Stafford Stones, in Lake Oswego between noon and five. All those who have been moved and furthered by William Stafford’s life and work will find congenial company among others who feel the same.

Apricot Irving was awarded the 2012 Friends of the Lake Oswego Library William Stafford Fellowship.

Stafford Stamp Proposal. The U. S. Postal Service turned down the FWS application for a William Stafford postage stamp. We can, though, be consoled somewhat by the fact that the Postal Service has recently issued a set of stamps paying tribute to ten of the “most admired” twentieth century poets: Elizabeth Bishop, Joseph Brodsky, Gwendolyn Brooks, E.E. Cummings, Robert Hayden, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. I am sure Bill would be very pleased for all of them and to find poets so admired.

William Stafford Centennial Celebrations: FWS hopes to make the 100th anniversary (January 2014) of William Stafford’s birth an inspiring festival of appreciation, recognition, and insight. Interested organizations are encouraged to imagine, plan, and enact events and projects that further the art and ideas his work embodies. Contact Dennis Schmidling, FWS board president, with any questions you might have: 503-680-9480, dennis@dsagroup.net.

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Vignette of William Stafford on pages 13 and 15 is from the title page of You and Some Other Characters, Honeysuck Press, 1987, and used by permission of the artist, Barbara Stafford.

Editor’s Note: This issue should have been in Friends’ hands a couple of months ago. You have my apologies. The photographs of the celebrations were taken by Ilka Kuznik, my wife, and me unless otherwise noted. The titles of the celebration essays, which were delivered as talks, were supplied by this editor in order to enhance the reading experience and because they came in blazes of light. I hope the writers and readers enjoy them.
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.”

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Sandra Gravon

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Webmaster: Dennis Schmidling

Special thanks to Ilka Kuznik

Please email comments, letters, news, and information on poetry events, awards, etc. to 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 2011 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.
Celebration Essays: John Daniel, Bob Balmer, Daniel Skach-Mills

Winter News:
The 2012 January Readings

Brian Booth Memorials

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