



friends of WILLIAM STAFFORD

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Reports from Far Friends

By Tim Barnes

A few months ago this editor received a message from a far place, Winona, Minnesota. It was an email from a professor at Winona State University, James Armstrong, who had taught a seminar in William Stafford. His students, he said, were very excited to write about Stafford because his work has not been “gone over and over.” “They felt,” Armstrong wrote, that “they were making an original contribution by studying him.” (for more with Armstrong, see p. 4) In my response, I mentioned that if any of the students’ papers seemed “insightful and original,” he might ask them to send them to this publication. Armstrong did more than that, forwarding fourteen papers, half of them thematic and half focusing on a single poem. I found the essays both fascinating and encouraging because they explore Stafford’s work in fresh and furthering ways. Reading them, I felt a jolt of excitement, reminding me of when I first discovered Stafford’s work back in the seventies.

As I wrote to Armstrong, “[these essays] make me realize once again what a complex and deeply beautiful thinker Stafford is, a poet and philosopher with a democratic bedrock of common sense about the commonwealth.” They represent a kind of renewal because through them readers can meet William Stafford again. This is one of the possibilities inherent in the work of significant and original writers—their work has many mansions and rewards the imagination. Reading a Stafford poem thoughtfully opens complex vistas, generous perspectives. These reports from afar affirm that claim. They befriend Stafford in ways that enhance the friendships others made a long time ago with his deep and resonant vision.

One of my favorites of the thematic essays (the kind of essay I will focus on in this essay, this focused appraisal) is Kaysey Price’s “Stafford’s Deliberate Ambiguity: ‘Maybe’ and ‘Some.’” It shows Stafford’s consistency, the intricate interweave of his poetics and his pacifism. Stafford’s political convictions have rhetorical manifestations. Diction and conscience intertwine. Stafford uses, Price tells us, *some* and *maybe* in his phrasings “to acknowledge the alternative stances that are not directly stated.” Their use also gives Stafford’s poetry a tenor of

“uncertainty.” Their rhetorical employment nurtures alternatives and an open-ended wavering. Stafford probably developed this tactic in the 30s and 40s, maybe earlier. He was enormously affected by World War I, the war to end all wars. Something in his imagination loved the idea of dismissing war from available human endeavors. Stafford’s rhetorical choices, his diction, further inclusivity and reconciliation. Means are ends—of this Stafford was certain.

Perhaps as a consequence, Stafford held a deep distrust of anger. He knew, as his son Kim says in his memoir of his father, *Early Morning*, that “certainty, and its anger, can kill—even a little at a time” (qtd. in Price). This reminds me of how in “The Mob Scene at McNeil” chapter in *Down in My Heart*, the uncertainty about whether poetry has to rhyme diffuses the belligerence of the mob encircling the COs. That chapter begins with the question, “When are men dangerous?” Stafford felt that they are dangerous when certain because certainty precludes alternatives, maybes, options, reconciliation. One of his aphorisms in *Sound of the Ax* is “I wish more of my friends said ‘and’ rather than ‘but.’” Because he was a poet, he thought very hard about how language might say and mean *and* more. Anger and certainty correlate this way in Stafford’s understanding according to Price: “As a pacifist Stafford wanted to encourage conversation between opposing sides and any ‘certainty’ seemed linked to anger in his mind.” Anger does seem to close down the mind, its reflective part.

Stafford had an epic calm. In his (cont. on p. 2)



This painting by Amy Livingstone is based on one of the last poems Stafford wrote, “Walking the Borders.”

(cont. from p. 1)

essay, "Reflections on the Mystery of William Stafford" (printed in issue 16.1 of this publication), Dennis McBride remembers asking Dorothy Stafford "if he ever lost it, got really mad." She responded, "No, he never did," but added with a secretive whisper, "we sometimes wished he would." That calm was part of his consistency. He belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation for fifty years. He didn't turn and run to war during WWII, joining what some call the "Greatest Generation." That's how deep he saw and that insight is foundational in his poetry, his thought, his art. Perhaps what Price says here can help:

He does not want to discredit anyone's experience, but he does want to express his own feelings and judgments. These things are exceedingly difficult to do simultaneously, and I suspect doing both of these things is the heart of Pacifism, as well as the heart of Stafford's poetry.

This quotation makes me think of "Some Arguments Against Good Diction" and the democracy of the syllable. The idea that choice is in each sequence of speech, though things will tend certain ways, is democracy in diction, word choice, freedom of speech. Stafford's poetic has its real definites, its certainties. Stafford was, Price writes, "clearly frustrated with people who couldn't see the multiple sides of a situation."

Seeing multiple sides of things might apply to Stafford and god in Leah Perri's essay "'Truth Seeker': William Stafford and God." About god, Stafford was not particular, as Perri tells us: "When it came to recognizing a certain god, Stafford didn't hold any solid convictions or not." He had some archetypes, though, some models. There's the passive god who comes under occasional criticism ("Religion Back Home," "Meditation"), the arbitrary god of the natural world ("Walking the Wilderness," "Tillamook Burn"), and the god of the moral life, the good life ("Our Home," "On a Church Lawn").

Since god is only one letter from good, a quirk of English Stafford probably enjoyed, we might find Stafford's god in Fred Marchant's characterization of The Fellowship of Reconciliation in his introduction to *Another World Instead* (qtd. in Perri's essay). It is, Marchant writes, "composed of men and women who recognize the essential unity of mankind and have joined together to explore the power of love and truth for resolving human conflict." The manifestation of this belief, Perri would call, "following a moral code and being a good person." It could just be part of the "dandelion faith" he finds, as Perri notes, in "On a Church Lawn": If you listen to "their deaf little" cries, the music from the church service "won't have to happen." If Stafford was religious, it was secular and transcendental, like Emily Dickinson, "a Bobolink for a Chorister... an Orchard for a Dome." Perri observes that Stafford's central faith, "in place of organized religious doctrine," must be in the act of "listening deeply," his "true north." Though he "can sway... be confused," he says in *You Must Revise Your Life*, "north is still there." Perri shifts the focus slightly on this a moment later by quoting Kim Stafford in *Early Morning*, "his religion was thinking," which makes me think of the Stafford family mantra, "only connect."

"On a Church Lawn" ends with these lines, a quotation from the truly faithful, "those little saviors": "God is not big; He is right." Perri uses this poem to exemplify Stafford's sense of god representing the good life, Stafford's beliefs in "peace and morality." We are gently

skewered, however, in this poem by the Job dilemma. Perri phrases it this way: "God is either both large and powerful and evil, or he is small and morally good." In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamasov*, the death of innocent children in war and disaster raises the same issue: how could an all-powerful god do something like that and still be considered good? In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner takes on the Book of Job and the issues of theodicy it raises in terms of whether an omnipotent god can be all good: "But if we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible." As the dandelions say, "God is not big; He is right." God is not all-powerful but is, rather, the locus of good, which is one letter from god. He has wavering views on god, as Perri notes, but this sense of god as complex *and* limited is true north for Stafford.

Stafford held a deep distrust of anger.

We find Stafford's shifting of perspectives and eagerness for alternatives in Hanna Larson's essay, "William and Earl Stafford: Inheriting a Sense of Heroism." Larson acknowledges Stafford's father Earl's influence on the "prevalence of the wilderness, nature imagery, and listening" in Stafford's poetry,

but focuses on how Earl instilled an alternative sense of heroism and bravery in Stafford in both positive and negative ways.

One of the poems Larson focuses on is "Mouse Night: One of Our Games," in which his father says to his young son when they are caught outside in a thunder storm, "Duck and cover! It takes a man / to be a mouse this night." This poem Larson tells us, "informs the reader that being a man is more about doing the smart thing rather than doing the 'heroic' thing, and Stafford thought his father as a hero for that." It reminds me of that saying, "Discretion is the better part of valor" or even my mother's favorite, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Both sayings reverse standard expectations and are subversive in certain ways. Larson speaks of Stafford learning to be "brave in the sense of his awareness of the world, a different kind of heroism." We cannot deny that Stafford's stance as a conscientious objector in World War II was heroic, but not in a traditional, martial sense. One only has to read "At the Un-national Monument Along the Canadian Border" to grasp this idea. This poem and "Mouse Night" and what Stafford learned from his father about heroism and bravery remind me of a Nasreddin story. Nasreddin, the medieval Turkish trickster/wiseman/fool, was walking along a river when someone on the other bank yelled across, "How do I get across to the other side?" Nasreddin yelled back, "You are on the other side." Earl helped his son make a bit of a trickster move in terms of relocating the boundaries, the banks, of heroism. If one is awake, heroism can be quite humble, calibrated by "the right amount of fear."

Stafford, though, was suspicious of heroes, especially the kind who are not awake to "the right amount of fear." His father was suspect in that category in a particular way connected to the desire for certainty, something Stafford resisted for profound reasons. In "Parentage" he doubts his father for thinking that because he could master certain particulars (machines, tracking, home repairs, a job, etc.), that he could fathom the depths of the world with certain generalities: "There was never a particular he couldn't understand, / but there were too many in too long a row, / and like many another he was overwhelmed." That's heroism tilting wrong for Stafford.

That particular kind of human arrogance, even though his father's, Stafford felt called to question. It's the presumptuousness of the machine age, the age of reason, the empirical model of the universe. It may translate into the arrogance of algorithms in our own.

Stafford's poem from *Allegiances*, "Allegiances," begins with "It is time for all the heroes to go home / if they have any, time for all the common ones / to locate themselves by the real things / we live by." By heroes, sometimes Stafford is talking about the men in "Drop Out," "Grundy and Hoagland and all the rest who ganged / our class and wrecked the high school gym for fun—" You know the type, "Hoagland / came home to a job with the FBI." These kinds of people are trying to "charm" the world with muscle, mechanism, and cocksure belief systems. Stafford saw beyond that rather early in his life, maybe all of it. It reminds me of what he would say when asked when he became a poet, "It's not when I became a poet. Everybody else just stopped being one." Or something like that. Children do have very perceptive senses of judgment. They like fairness and Stafford was a poet in the Romantic tradition in that way.

Kaysey Price's essay takes a linguistic angle; Leah Perri's tends toward the theological, and Hanna Larson's seems more textually grounded, though she dips into biography, referring to Stafford's autobiographical writing in *You Must Revise Your Life* and Kim Stafford's *Early Morning*. Elissa Herber's "Stafford as Elegist: Attempting to Understand His Grief," of all these essays, immerses itself most deeply in the biographical. Herber focuses on Stafford's elegies and generously employs *Early Morning* to explore them. Elegies, we learn, are often written in response to a death and "lament, praise...console" and respond to "the experience of loss." Stafford wrote elegies for his father ("Elegy," "Father's Voice," "Circle of Breath"), his brother Bob ("At the Grave of My Brother," "At the Grave of My Brother, Bomber Pilot"), and his mother ("A Memorial for My Mother"). But he seems to have written the most and darkest elegies for Bret, his son who committed suicide in 1988, five years before Stafford's own death. In *Passwords*, published three years after Bret's death, Stafford includes a section called Elegies, containing thirteen poems. Interestingly enough, Bret's name appears only once, which Herber thinks is because Stafford did not want Bret's name "directly associated with his skepticism and bitterness." Though Stafford wrote elegies throughout his career, Herber contends, "his grief comes full force in *Passwords*." She notes, however, that "In terms of consolation, Stafford offers very little in his elegies." "Consolations," for example, ends: "They say that hurt is good for you. It makes / what comes later a gift all the more / precious in your bleeding hands." That's a dark ending, almost angry, ironical for sure.

Herber, as she focuses on understanding Stafford's elegies, finds herself spending a good deal of time with the elegies connected to Bret. They are, after all, where Stafford's elegiac aspect flourished. In *Early Morning*, Kim writes that after Bret's death "one kind of courage in him [his father] died." But even though he rarely talked about it with his family, retreating behind the door to his study to read Wordsworth, Stafford found himself at fault in his poems. The deaths of others, his father, and especially his alcoholic brother because he felt somehow responsible, amplified his response to Bret's

death. Kim writes in *Early Morning*, "The shadow of my brother's death never quite left our father's face."

Herber looks at Stafford's 1992 poem, "A Memorial: Son Bret" and finds the lines describing an encounter with Bret: "You turned to me once to tell me something / but then you glimpsed a shadow on my face / and maybe thought, Why tell what hurts?" What seems significant here is silence. Stafford's interpersonal response to anger was to be silent and to skirt people who showed signs of it. In crowds, he stood to the back. I'm told his relationship with his wife Dorothy was marked by bouts of silence, their response to being angry at each other. Everybody feels anger. Kim, though, reports in *One Hundred Tricks Every Boy Can Learn* that he and his brother never fought. Where did the feelings of anger go? Though Stafford would not talk with the family about Bret's death, Kim asked him once, "How come I survived and Bret did not?" Stafford said this to his surviving son, "You're too mean, and that's good. Bret was a saint. Don't be a saint." Someone said that suicide is anger turned inward. Stafford's calm could almost be called a tragic calm in connection to Bret. In the poem, Stafford sees the failing. Someone said that tragedy is when our strengths fail us; our best move doesn't work in a crucial time. Herber's essay raises biographical questions about an important American poet, the kind of question that literary history loves to explore.

In Kim Schneider's "William Stafford and his Unexplored Poems: The Lyric Sequence," we learn that Stafford wrote a number of poems with sections, thirty in the books Schneider examines. Schneider tells us what kind of poems they usually are: "list poems, poems of address, narrative poems" and "wisdom poems" and that they are stitched together by title, "rhetorical indications," and imagery. Among the poems she uses to illustrate is "Atavism. I print "Atavism" (see p. 13) here because it is such a wonderful poem, moving out into nature and back into evolutionary time. It also shows something that a number of critics have noted, Stafford's use of sonnet-like structures. In his lyric sequences, Schneider tells us, "each individual section is usually sonnet length." The first section of "Atavism" is ten lines but the second, though, is fifteen lines, ending with a closing couplet, as do many of Shakespeare's, and is very close to being a sonnet. Stafford makes some very modern moves when it comes to the sonnet, using the asymmetrical trajectories of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms (8:6, 12:2) and their volta or turn with facility, sensitivity, and creativity. For more on this I refer you to issue 20.1 of this publication and my discussion of Leslie Ullman's essay, "A Spiral Walk through the Golden Mean: A Foray into the Structure of Thought and Invention." I do this as well to bring up another of her essays, "Press, Send: Risk, Intuition, and the Transparent Poem," which appears in *The Writer's Chronicle* 48.4, February 2016. In each of these essays from far places, both printed in *The Writer's Chronicle*, Ullman, a former Yale Younger Poet Prize winner and Professor Emerita at the University of Texas-El Paso, shows a deep understanding of Stafford's work and of his position in American literature. In her most recent essay, Ullman links the New York School poets, the Black Mountain poets, and the Abstract Expressionist painters with William Stafford through describing a kind of poem she calls the "transparent" poem.

(cont. on p. 4)

Ullman begins by talking about going to a reading given by New York poet Ron Padgett, who describes his “swift and unpremeditated writing process.” Ullman looks at his poem “Walking with Walt” and connects him to one of the originals of the New York School, Frank O’Hara, whose poetry she calls “frenetically transparent.” This leads her to a definition of a transparent poem. I think readers will agree, it sounds a lot like a Stafford poem:

[T]he transparent poem can be disarming, conversational, and to a degree easy to grasp in one sitting, but rich with implications and reverberations that expand during subsequent readings.... [It] takes what is at hand, which more often than not is the accessible stuff of quotidian life, and makes it fresh... [It] appears to be written by someone, or at least a persona, unencumbered by prior assumptions, unconscious baggage, or the sort of ennui that can paralyze—someone motivated by curiosity and often daring.

Readers may be reminded of the time a woman in the audience burst out after Stafford read a poem, “I could have written that!” Immediately after the definition above, Ullman discusses Stafford, praising *The Way It Is* as “classic and warming” and “proof of what can bloom when a poet disengages from the nearly continuous cacophony of doubts, fears, and the voices of others, and simply falls in with the pleasures and rhythms and provocative open-endedness of the work itself.” She presents Stafford’s “A Little Gift” as evidence and goes on to say how much her students have appreciated his essay, “A Way of Writing,” and thoughts like “To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me,” claiming it “the clearest prose statement I have found about how it feels to write a transparent poem.”

The transparent poem, Ullman thinks, may have its origins in the Abstract Expressionist movement of the post World War II era and the work of Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and others. Abstract Expressionism, also called “Action Painting,” is notable for the place of bodily movement in the making and appreciating of the painting. The viewers sense how Pollock “danced around the huge canvases he spread on the floor...flinging paint.” The act of making, of saying, discovery, shapes the work of art, the poem. The event of the poem is part of the poem, the spontaneous feelings that arise from syllable to syllable are welcomed into the work, not revised out, and help complete it. Motherwell taught at Black Mountain College in the 50s and met Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley, who uttered the famous free-verse dictum, “Form is an extension of content.” Brush strokes, line breaks, the mind/body in motion, perceptions in space, unite Abstract Expressionism, Black Mountain poetics, the New York School, and the transparent poem. The Confessional poets (Plath, Snodgrass, Sexton) are also linked, according to Ullman, with the transparent poem because of the “use of personal experience as a primary medium,” as well as the Deep Image poets to which Stafford is linked through Bly for their use of the “subconscious as medium.”

Toward the end of her essay, Ullman returns to Stafford, recommending a number of poems, including “How These Words Happened,” “A Course in Creative Writing,” and “Report from a Far Place,” as examples of what it is like to live by writing the transparent poem. She praises the writing of what Stafford calls “expendable efforts” and points to why Stafford’s work can be so deeply furthering for writers as human beings:

It is easy for us...to forget the freedoms by which Stafford lived

and wrote so well—to let our sense of what may or may not be in fashion, what our audience may or may not like, the pressure to be ironic and so on, drive a wedge between ourselves and what I have called elsewhere the “sacred space” we inhabit in the privacy of our explorations.

I think sometimes people lose track of what writing is for. It is for us, to see and feel the fluid resonance of the world as it occurs to us as we listen and respond. The transparent poem listens to the process of making and accepts its surroundings. It believes in the making of itself and the poem as a soul-making entity.

William Stafford’s devotion to the transparent poem, a phrase he might have liked but didn’t use, connects him, according to Ullman, to schools of American poetry and art that would not appear obvious. Ullman, however, knows her poetry and knows Stafford, finding the fluid current of his poetry and poetics in a vein where one can feel the pulse of much of American poetry.

In the essays discussed here, we find a way forward in furthering the legacy of William Stafford. In a seminar at a university in Minnesota, taught by a thoughtful professor and poet, students found in Stafford’s work trails to follow to fresh vistas. These essays stand as proof that Stafford’s work welcomes the imaginations of scholars and poets. William Stafford was a deep and agile thinker and a serious and resourceful poet. His vision and his poetics are rich and complex. He played, as Leslie Ullman demonstrates, a vital and central part in the making of twentieth century poetry and poetics. This exploration, immeasurably helped by the Stafford archives, offers grounds for literary friendships for many years to come and keeps alive those things for which Stafford so firmly and generously stood.

Editor’s Note: The student essays discussed above can be accessed in full at <http://www.williamstaffordarchives.org/studentprojects/>

Teaching a Seminar on William Stafford

By James Armstrong

The course was an English 470: Seminar in American Literature for our upper level English Majors. It could also be taken for graduate-level credit in our MA program, and I had two graduate students in the class. The course subtitle was “William Stafford and American Poetry,” and my course introduction stated that I hoped to “use the poetry and the biography of William Stafford to talk about the arc of 20th-century poetry from the waning of High Modernism to the rise of Postmodernism.” My reasoning was that students could get a broad overview of this period through articles and representative works from the most important poets, as well as a deep look into the work of a particular poet. But I had another purpose, which was to examine larger questions, such as: “What is the role of the poet in America? What is the relationship of poetry to politics? What constitutes poetic fame and a poetic career?”

William Stafford seemed to me an appropriate fulcrum for these issues because he is at once at the center and at the periphery of American poetry. As I put it: He was a deeply beloved poet and

an influential teacher; he was a special consultant to the Library of Congress and a key figure in the Vietnam War protest-poetry movement. Yet he has not gathered the kind of attention from scholars that his resume would seem to deserve.

Louis Simpson remarked in 1961, reviewing William Stafford's debut book, *West of Your City*, "Is Stafford really so far inferior to Robert Lowell that Lowell should be treated as a classic, and Stafford virtually unknown? . . . What a concatenation of critics, what sheer ignorance, must control the American literary scene, for such a disparity to exist!" The mention of Robert Lowell is not trivial: during the time Stafford was publishing, Lowell was the most widely-known poet in the postwar era: Lowell's portrait even appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1967 (can one imagine a poet on the cover of *Time* these days?). Lowell scholarship is something of a cottage industry, churning out scores of book-length books of criticism and countless PhD theses, whereas there are only a handful of scholarly books on Stafford. This is not a reflection on Stafford's popularity or status in the poetry community—he was ubiquitous, both in his publications—he authored more than sixty books—and in his public life as a prolific giver of readings, lectures and workshops. His critical writing on poetry and poetics now runs to four volumes in Michigan's "Poets on Poetry" series. So why is he currently ignored by academia?

To take William Stafford seriously as a major poet is to confront all the interesting antitheses which energize and sometimes cripple 20th-century American verse: the antithesis between formal and free verse, the antithesis between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture, the antagonism between the East Coast and the Mid- and Far West, the antithesis between "Paleface" proponents of New Critical poetics and "Redskin" expositors of Whitmanic originality and experimentation. Stafford's career straddles these dualities in fascinating ways. His lineage is not the high modernism of Eliot and Pound but the prairie modernism of Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg—many of his poems depict small towns and their lonely tragedy and heroism in the manner of Sherwood Anderson or Thornton Wilder. Or else they step into the forests of the Pacific Northwest, claiming a place somewhere between Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder. Also, Stafford's political poetry puts him in good company with Lowell, Denise Levertov and Robert Bly.

Stafford's poetics were precocious: from the very beginning he was opposed to the New Critical claim that a poem should be a "well-wrought urn," constructed in lapidary fashion, torqued to maximal tension. Stafford's work is defiantly "Western"—approachable, egalitarian, informal, laconic. He was claimed as a partisan by the anti-formalist crowd in the 1960s and in his prose he disdains the workshop notion that "writing is rewriting." Yet many of his poems are haunted by the sonnet in both size and architecture. His favorite stanza is the slyly slant-rhymed quatrain, and it is clear that Stafford's lifelong formal allegiance was to the wild experiments of Emily Dickinson. His devotion to daily writing as an aesthetic discipline should be regarded in its own right; as with conceptual artists like On Kawara, the repetition itself is a powerful meta-statement about the nature of art. Yet because Stafford is pigeon-holed as "regional," or as a "nature poet" (though he never once uses the word "nature" in his poems), he is often accused of being either sentimental or just

simple-minded. The cold skepticism of a poem like "Ask Me," or the existential terror enacted in his most famous poem, "Traveling through the Dark," should cause the perceptive reader to pull up short and reconsider, of course. The fact that Stafford claimed as his intellectual influences Pascal, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein should also intrigue the scholar. But literary dismissals—common as they are in literary history—are hard to overcome until the poet gains new readers.

How did we explore these ideas in my class? We read all of Stafford's poetry we could get our hands on, meaning both the selected works in *The Way It Is* and the early work published in *Another World Instead*; I also put on reserve as many individual (out-of-print) volumes of Stafford's work as I have in my personal possession. We read a selection of Stafford's prose writing from his many Poets on Poetry volumes from the University of Michigan—especially *You Must Revise Your Life* and *Writing the Australian Crawl*—and we read *Down in My Heart*. In addition, Tom Andrews' anthology of critical writings, *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*, and Judith Kitchen's *Writing the World* were required to provide a critical perspective. We also relied on Kim Stafford's memoir *Early Morning* for biographical information. An invaluable final resource was the William Stafford Archive, which we used to access manuscript versions of Stafford's poems as well as publishing history.

Because this was a seminar class, each student was required to give two presentations and to write two formal papers. The presentations were divided between explorations of poetic and critical movements, or else presentations on poets other than Stafford—these were intended to give the class a sense of historical context—and presentations on specific ideas and issues found in Stafford's work (the latter were really rehearsals for the final paper).

[Editor's Note: A paragraph describing the one-poem textual criticism essays is omitted and will be included in the next issue along with a discussion of those essays.]

The final term paper required students to take either a particular literary theme or device or formal strategy in Stafford's work, or else a group of poems which seemed in some way connected to each other, and produce a scholarly work that could potentially be of use to future Stafford students. I encouraged them to think of themselves as explorers; I pointed out that since so little has been written about Stafford from an academic perspective, they were actually doing primary scholarly work. I encouraged them to utilize the Stafford Archives to help them unearth original versions, alternate versions, or hard-to-find original publication pages for poems or possibly relevant correspondence (Zachariah Selley was indispensable in this). In general I treated all the students as promising literary scholars.

Overall their reaction was very enthusiastic. It proved not hard at all to convince my students that William Stafford was a poet well worth the effort expended to get to know him. Perhaps because they were all from the upper Midwest, my students were very partial to Stafford's voice: they understood understatement and slyness. They

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*[H]e is at once
at the center and
at the periphery
of American
poetry.*

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also lived in small towns, most of them, and that meant they found the subject matter of many poems agreeable. But they also easily made connections to the larger literary-historical patterns, which I was attempting to trace; it was helpful to understand how Stafford fit in the great arguments over poetic form and poetic process, as well as the philosophical and political discussions which energized the 20th century. They were intrigued by the biographical dimension, and all praised Kim Stafford's book for its candor and insight. Many of my students are budding poets themselves and have taken poetry writing classes with me, and this brought another interesting dimension to the class. They could engage Stafford from the standpoint of their own practice; most had in fact been required to apply Stafford's "poem a day" discipline to their own work.

Listening to a Storyteller

--In Memoriam: William Stafford

Yaguchi:

In an Ainu house and old Ainu
Woman's recital was flying like bees.

Bly:

Her voice brought honey into the room,
And the bees were preserved in that honey.

Yaguchi:

Honey tastes of wildflowers, out of which
The songs of the bush-warblers come flying.

Bly:

There is water dripping in the deep forests;
And the gods eat the cries of the bush-warblers.

Yaguchi:

There is a deep well covered by grasses;
And I remember the womb I was in.

Bly:

No one knows the silence of the high peaks.
But I sometimes hear Stafford's voice in the bushes.

Yaguchi:

Suddenly silence flies up in the form
Of a bird from a bush nearby.

Bly:

I think the dead spend a lot of time
During the day in the nests of shy birds.

YORIFUMI YAGUCHI & ROBERT BLY
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Daily Writing in the Spirit of William Stafford

By Tim Barnes

At the end of January, Kim Stafford asked me to join his online class, *Daily Writing in the Spirit of William Stafford*, offered by the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark. I did and for five weeks I wrote for several hours a day. The basic commitment for the class was to write daily and to exchange work and comments with two other writers, in my case, a poet and memoirist.

I found the process satisfying and enlivening, especially the daily writing. The workshopping was also interesting. I have been in plenty of workshops over the years, but never online. I was able to read some wonderful work and be warmly reminded of my tendency to overwrite endings and hammer certain things home a little too hard.

Kim's goals for the course were to experience the practice of writing everyday, explore how the process worked for Bill, and read some of Bill's writing that came from the process. It was first offered in 2014 during the William Stafford centennial.

The electronic apparatus for the course is extensive and engaging, offering much to stimulate thought and writing. Kim begins the course with explaining his father's four-part process of negotiating with the blank page each morning. Many readers know it well but here is a short reprise based on Kim's brief video talks. 1. Write the date. 2. Make a journal-type entry, notes on a recent experience, a dream. 3. Write an aphorism, an idea, thought, question. 4. Write something like a poem, "a foray into the lyric urge." The three introductory videos were filmed along Catherine Creek on the Columbia Gorge in the winter of 2014 and are quite charming, rustic, and helpful.

The lesson plan/orientations for each week include a number of supplemental short videos filmed by Kim. Many of them are quite delightful and thought-provoking, often featuring sprightly mandolin and guitar music played by Kim and Jan DeWeese. There's a three-part video entitled "Stories About My Father" in which Kim talks about how his father began to write early in the morning and a number of "gossipy" (Kim's word) and interesting things, some of which friends of Stafford may have heard and some they may not have heard. A student in this class, if they didn't know much about William Stafford, would feel very differently after the class was completed.

A number of the videos are of the natural world. A group of them have to do with water: "Sonata for Stones & Water," "Lullaby for Falling Water." The two-minute "Water Is the Music of Light," dedicated to his daughter Rosemary, is stunning in its beauty and

Editor's Note: This poem was part of the materials offered in Kim Stafford's online class, *Daily Writing in the Spirit of William Stafford*.

simplicity—images of moving water, the loveliness of its rippling, cellular flow. Others have to do with trees and grasses. I'll list a few more of the titles to give readers a sense of them: "Grass at the Lake," "Old Rain Temple, after Tu Fu," "Rune," "Perspective of the Bead," "Peace Breaks Out," and the marvelous "Sermon on Eve, for Fred Marchant." You can view them, though not in the context of the class, by typing in [Kim Stafford Vimeo](#) in your browser. These videos are something Kim has been doing in the last four years or so and are just plain exquisite.

The apparatus also includes videos of Bill Stafford reading, copies of certain poems, holographs from the Stafford archives, excerpts from some of Kim's books, and some material produced just for the class. Many of the Stafford poems included, I must say, have a Chinese, Tang Dynasty, feel: "Any Morning," "Just Thinking," "Why I Am Happy" and are very encouraging, as many of you know. Kim also includes a helpful electronic handout, "The Craft of Persistence: some ways to revise your draft, tinker, enrich, enliven...." Another handout is called "Kim Stafford's aphorisms on the benefits of daily writing...." I think Kim will forgive me if I disclose two of them. "By writing each day I join memory to wonder." "As days fall away, each life gathers an archive of the interior." To see course handouts, readers will have to take the class, which I highly recommend.

I write the above to suggest that the material offered through the class is rich and furthering. Viewing all the material, though, is not required, only the daily writing and the exchanging of work with a small group. I also write what follows to say the course reawakened me to the benefits and bonuses of daily writing, which I have continued to do to this very day. I think this is because, to quote Leslie Ullman, the course guides the student, the writer, toward what made Stafford's daily writing practice so vital for him—it was focused on "the 'sacred space' we inhabit in the privacy of our explorations." Stafford's daily writing was, as he says in recalling its beginnings in the CO camps of World War II, "repair work on my integrity." Integrity has to do with wholeness and to be whole one needs to see connections, webs of significance. One could, as well, see it as *centering*, which contains the lovely meaning, my *New Oxford American Dictionary* tells me, of "*framing in order to support a dome or arch*." (My italics) One of Stafford's aphorisms in *Sound of the Ax* is "The sky is bigger than any country." Stafford wrote daily to support that arch of wisdom, that dome of wholeness. He did not write every morning to become, and I paraphrase one of Kim's class talks, *skillful, successful, or publishable*. Though those things came, he wrote, as he says in "When I Met My Muse," to discover his "own way of seeing things," which can become "a sort of salvation."

For some who take on the task of writing everyday, the ambitious poets in any one of the thousands of MFA programs in this country, this can easily be forgotten. What is the purpose of writing? There are many, but for William Stafford, it was to be a seeker, someone trying to understand, connect, discover, and be whole. That's an alternative kind of success, perhaps a salvation, and Kim Stafford's daily writing class in the spirit of William Stafford is engagingly and truly loyal to that.

On Buying a Deacquired Book of William Stafford's Poetry Advertised on the Internet

When a poet dies, his books
are the last to hear it:
this one stood on the loading dock,
stoic, in its *lightly used* jacket,
in *good condition*,
wearing the rubber-stamped name
of its abandoner—
The Multnomah County Library.
Dismissed as an orphan, a vagrant,
the book lived a kind of half-life
in warehouses, ramshackle storefront
bookstores owned by men with thick glasses
or women in cat-hair cardigans
who like the smell of mildew and old paper
and the swamp light of failure.
It waited to be summoned,
to be loaded into a truck.
to travel the dark interstate
past fields and small towns the poet loved,
past distant farms,
barns haloed in yard-light.
It swam like a salmon
up an ever-narrowing source,
and landed on a front porch,
swaddled in bubble wrap.
Freed at last, and brought in
under the circle of a reading lamp,
it fell readily open,
displayed its *minimal markings*—
a small grease spot in the margin,
a faint pencil line
beneath a word—
which let you know
others had held it once
in open palms,
and drank from its quiet sounds.

JAMES ARMSTRONG

Editor's Note: This poem originally appeared in *Â Ritual to Read Together: Poems in Conversation with William Stafford*, Becca Lachman, ed. (2013)



January Celebrations

Peregrine Literary Series: Brian Doyle

By Joan Maiers

On Sunday evening, January 17, 2016, Brian Doyle contributed with zest to the celebration of William Stafford's 102nd birthday. The program took place at the Holy Names Heritage Center in Lake Oswego as part of the Peregrine Literary Series, in collaboration with Friends of William Stafford.

Brian Doyle edits *Portland*, the award-winning alumni publication for the University of Portland. He is also the 2016 Oregon Book Award author of *Martin Marten*. Some of his earlier books include *Mink River* and *The Grail*. The second half of the event, hosted by FWS board member Joan Maiers, featured Stafford anecdotes, like Don Colburn's recollection of meeting Stafford at a Sitka writing conference.

Audience members brought favorite Stafford poems to share, and Leah Stenson made available for purchase broadsides of Stafford's poems. The evening was characterized by conversations between longtime friends and new acquaintances, so typical of William Stafford gatherings.



Brian Doyle at the Holy Names Heritage Center.

William Stafford 102nd Birthday Gala and Forum

By Joanie McClellan

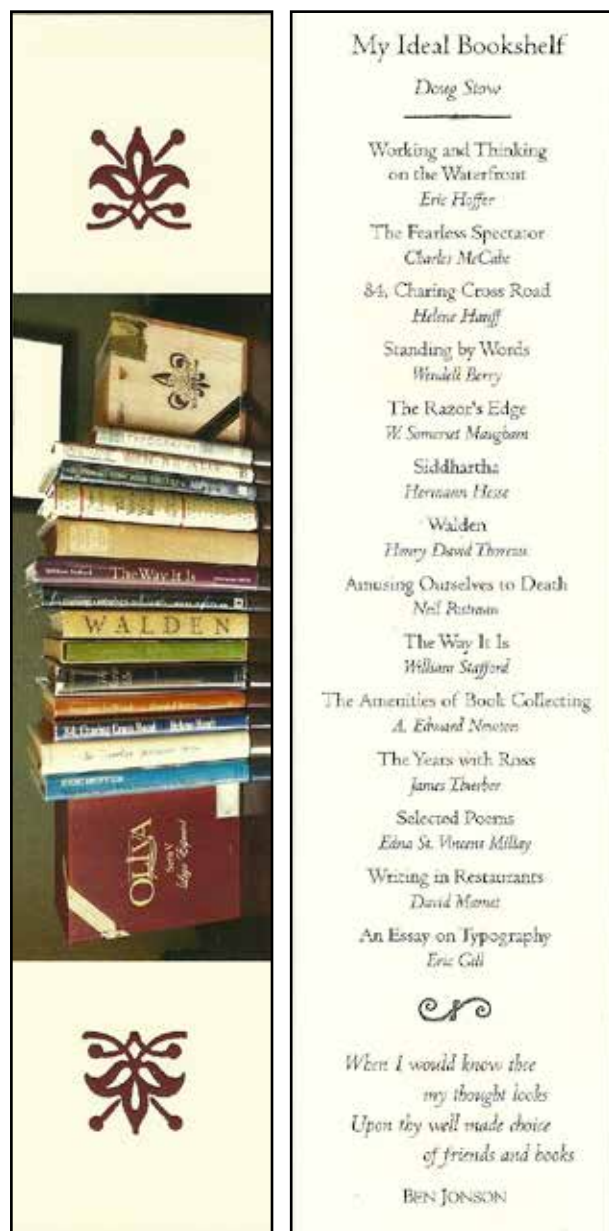
"Here's how to count the people ready to do what's right: One. One. One..."

-- William Stafford

The sanctuary of the Kairos United Church of Christ was filled with more than spiritual fervor on Sunday afternoon, January 17th, as devotees of William Stafford gathered for the poet's 102nd Birthday Gala sponsored by the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Tim Barnes, who served as the Forum's discussion group leader, and Ilka Kuznik, who distributed the latest issue of the FWS's Journal & Newsletter, enthusiastically highlighted Stafford's life and writings as well as features describing the Stafford Grove and events such as Kairos's Summer 101.5 Stafford birthday celebration organized by Joanie McClellan, Chair of the Portland FOR, who again organized this event.

Barnes, a member of the Board of Trustees, talked about his lead article. Acknowledging that Stafford was neither a Taoist nor a Buddhist, Barnes argued that Taoism might be understood through Stafford's poetry. It was a lively discussion.

An informal exhibition featuring portraiture and FWS broadsides as well as children's artwork of his aphorisms had been assembled at the rear of the church. After participants read favorite selections from Stafford's poetry, the group left the gala occasion with good cheer, lines of beautiful verse in their memory and homemade cupcakes, as the sun broke forth in celebration of his life and gifts to the world (and universe).



Editor's Note: This bookmark was given as a keepsake at Doug Stow's memorial on March 12, 2016. As most readers know, Stow's Paper Crane Press prints the annual Stafford broadside.

Elementary Lesson

Miss Miller, gentle wisp, my teacher
in grade four told us one afternoon
of the Fertile Crescent, the map's
green place between blue threads,
Tigris and Euphrates—the cradle,
she said, of civilization, and my
love for her became affection
for lavish words like Mesopotamia,
Hanging Gardens of Babylon,
Eden, Arabian Nights, and Ur.

*If we don't get the story right,
she said, Scheherezade will die.*

In war, the maps don't show this.
How can we get the story right,
one more chance to get it right
in Green Zone, Shock and Awe,
Depleted Uranium half-life doom
of a thousand and one nights of war.

Miss Miller, tell me what you
told us then: *Between the waters,
people learned to get along.
Alphabets, and grain, and stories
were the money of those days.
Children, find in your big hearts
that place where we began.*

KIM STAFFORD

Editor's Note: Kim read this poem at the Lake Oswego Public Library's William Stafford birthday celebration held on January 19th.

One Poet, One Byrd, & One More

It snowed today
In William Stafford's
Backyard

He use to
Live here
Yuh know

When I was a young man
I used to be
A songwriter

Until I figured out
That no one
Was listening

Now I leave it
To Gene Clark
He's up in heaven now....

With William Stafford
One was a famous folk/rock singer
One was a famous poet

They were both
Kansas boys
Who died two years apart

I met Gene Clark backstage
From California
But I never met William Stafford in my own backyard

He used to live next door
To a fool
Who just wrote songs

And Gene wrote:
"To my brother up yonder."
—Gene Clark

TIMOTHY M. OTTO

Editor's Note: Gene Clark (1944-1991) was a singer and songwriter who was a founding member of the Byrds. He was a vital figure in popular music from the sixties until his death due to a bleeding ulcer. Among the music genres he worked in were psychedelic rock, baroque pop, country rock, and alternative country. He was born in Tipton, Missouri, but graduated from Bonner Springs High School in Bonner Springs, Kansas, in 1962. Tim met Gene Clark, who was on a Reunion tour with the Byrds, backstage at Starry Night in Portland in 1985. Tim read this poem at the Pond House in Milwaukie, Oregon, on January 9th.



Kim Stafford after the reading.

PHOTO BY IKA KUZNIK

Introductory Rites and Final Blessings: The First and Last Poems in William Stafford's Collections of Poetry

By Clara Richter

The way in which William Stafford arranges the poems within his published collections is fairly systematic. He “tries to keep poems that are near each other from detracting” (Stafford, *Crawl* 115). Stafford is clear about the fact that he arranged poems in certain ways. The first and last poems in William Stafford's collections of poetry have a clear connection between them. When the poems are read in conjunction with one another, it is clear that they all serve the same purpose for the collections in which they can be found. The first poem welcomes readers in, inviting them to take part in the experience of reading the poems, or introducing them to Stafford's writing process. They encourage readers to read more and to investigate the poems within the collection for hidden meanings. The final poems send readers out, with a blessing or a mission. Readers are called to reflect on their shared humanity, thus connecting themselves with Stafford and with the rest of the world, and then given some sort of job or task. Thus, the first and last poems in the collections of William Stafford can be read as the introductory rites and the final blessings for Stafford's particular volumes of poetry, which serves to emphasize the idea that reading his poetry is a sort of ritual.

The way in which Stafford has arranged the poems in a volume is careful and thoughtful. It is a process that, for him, is important because it can keep readers interested longer, and can help emphasize certain points that Stafford believes are important.

Well, I think there are some general principles that might apply. For example, I try to keep poems that are near each other from detracting. Partly it's a negative consideration: Be sure not to have a sequence in which one poem might sabotage another or create some unintentionally ludicrous effect. I'm always scared about that. I don't know if it's very important, but it is one of the superstitions I have. Certainly the first poem of the book—“Traveling through the Dark”—and the last one—“Vocation”—were carefully chosen. (Stafford, *Crawl* 115)

You can see here that Stafford is not only explaining that he does consider a system of arrangement of poems in his books, but also that he has considered the importance of the first and last poem. This indicates that there is a deliberate thought process behind the way Stafford chooses to arrange his poems. His comments about the first and last poems in the book are also significant because it means that those poems are chosen with special consideration. Therefore, Stafford's principles of arrangement can be applied to his other books, not just *Traveling through the Dark*, and this can help us understand the significance of the first and last poems as a whole.

In order to understand the ritual-like qualities of Stafford's poetry, it is helpful to familiarize ourselves with what Stafford felt could be viewed as a religious, or ritual-like experience. This is not to say that the ritual of reading Stafford's poetry is a religious one, but it certainly

could be viewed as spiritual. Stafford was very noncommittal when it came to expressing which religious views he most firmly adhered to. He refers to himself in *You Must Revise Your Life* as “not a WASP, or a WASC, I would settle for being a mixed UN-itarian” (67), adding, “Every religious experience I recall that impressed me greatly has been in the presence of influences that combined several senses—no merely verbal experience, in church, has provided a full religious experience. The most impressive such experience I recall was on the banks of the Cimarron River in western Kansas one mild summer evening, when the sky, air, birdcalls, and the setting sun combined to expand the universe for me and to give me the feeling of being sustained, cherished, *included* somehow in a great, reverent story. (68-69)

Thus, for Stafford, anything that makes him feel “sustained, cherished, included” is a profoundly religious or spiritual experience and can have almost a ritual-like quality. Stafford's poems take on this quality, as they seem to include readers in a “great, reverent story.” The first and last poems in the books indicate this ritualistic quality by participating in this idea in several ways.

There are several themes, motifs, and recurring images or ideas that appear throughout the poems. When all of the first and last poems are read in conjunction with one another, these recurring devices help to indicate to readers that the first and last poems all work in a similar way across all of Stafford's books. The connection between all of the poems is too similar to suggest otherwise. These recurring devices can all point to the idea of being “sustained, cherished, included somehow in a great, reverent story” that Stafford discusses, therefore indicating a sense of ritual. This time, of course, the feeling applies not to Stafford, but to us, the readers.

The first of these recurring motifs is religious terminology. Several of the poems contain religious terminology, or reference to religious ritual. These terms are often secularized, or used outside of a religious context, but this serves to further emphasize the point that everything is sacred.

These poems are often the ones that close out the book, which not only suggests that there is a ritual to reading Stafford's poetry, it also suggests that there is something fundamentally sacred about that which Stafford is trying to convey. “Read to the Last Line” from *The Rescued Year* uses religious terminology, making an explicit reference to prayer:

So you in turn begin a story,
but then you stop—what goes on?
“I'll not tell nor be told what I think,” you cry,
“None of it's true, anyway.”

And all the time it's your own story,
even when you think: “It's all just made up, a trick.
What is the author trying to do?”

Reader, we are in such a story:
All of this is trying to arrange a kind of prayer for you.

Pray for me. (Stafford, *Rescued* 81)

Stafford not only answers the question, “What is the author trying to do,” he also asks readers to do the same for him. If they should fail to

[W]hat he
is asking is
important, vital,
perhaps sacred.

read the last line, you will not know what Stafford is asking of you, and what he is asking is important, vital, perhaps sacred.

“Vespers,” which closes out the book *Someday, Maybe* is another poem that uses religious terminology. Traditionally, vespers are the evening prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours in the Catholic and Eastern and Greek Orthodox Churches, though the term has been adopted by several Protestant denominations, such as Presbyterians and Methodists, to signify evening services. Vespers traditionally thank the Lord for the day and invoke His protection for the night. Though not a poem about the traditional saying of vespers, the poem is about the end of day. The opening image suggests prayer with the line, “As the living pass, they bow / till they imitate stones.” The living, then, are almost bowing in prayer. We know that this is a poem about evening from the second stanza, which begins, “And at the end of the day / when every rock on the west / claims a fragment of sun...” At the end of the poem we have the coupling of the words “evening” and “prayer” in the line, “the slowed / evening carried in prayer...” thus indicating to readers the vesper-ic, to coin a term, nature of the poem. However, as with much of Stafford’s use of religious imagery, it is turned on its head in the final lines: “You know who you are: / This is for you, my friend” (Stafford, *Someday* 86). Thus, Stafford is really writing the poem, or saying the prayer, for us, the readers. Just as in “Read to the Last Line,” we are included in the poem, the ritual.

Another common theme running throughout the first and the last poems is the work speaking for itself, or the writer speaking for his poetry. Often, in doing so, the work itself invites us in and encourages us to read further. “Keeping a Journal” from *An Oregon Message* and “An Introduction to Some Poems” from *Someday, Maybe* are all poems which signal to readers what they are doing, or how they are doing it. Like the poems with religious imagery, the titles often serve to give us an idea of what Stafford is up to with these poems.

“An Introduction to Some Poems,” published in *Someday, Maybe*, is a good example of the poem speaking for itself as a poem and inviting readers to read on, to engage in the ritual:

The authentic is a line from one thing
along to the next; it interests us.
Strangely, it relates to what works,
but is not quite the same. It never
swerves for revenge,

Or profit, or fame: it holds
together something more than the world,
this line. And we are your wavery
efforts at following it. Are you coming?

Good: now it is time. (2)

These lines, the closing two stanzas of the poem, do several things. First, the reference to a thread is reminiscent of what Stafford says about William Blake’s “golden thread” in *Writing the Australian Crawl*, and elsewhere including throughout his poetry. The golden thread is a “little thread [that] leads onward” and “only the golden string knows where it is going, and the role of the writer or reader is one of following, not imposing” (*Crawl* 43). The “authentic” line, which appears in the first line of the second-to-last stanza, could be a reference to the golden string which Stafford is attempting to

follow. The “we” to which he refers to in the third-to-last line when he says, “And we are your wavery / efforts at following it” would then indicate that Stafford’s poems are his own way of following the golden string. In ending the poem with “Are you coming? / Good: now it is time,” Stafford invites readers along on the journey. The first poem, and by extension Stafford, is asking us to enter the world, the ritual, of his poetry.

Stafford encourages us to enter the world of his poetry in another way as well. He does this by including dedications which also function as poems. Books are generally dedicated to people, or a group of people, who are specific to the author. More often than not, readers skip over the dedication page because it has little or nothing to do with them, or with the rest of the book. Stafford’s dedications, however, serve to include readers, or speak to ideas that readers are going to understand, and therefore more fully understand what Stafford is speaking about. If they feel a connection with the poet, they may be encouraged to read further.

The dedication in *A Glass Face in the Rain*, “Smoke Signals – A Dedication” is to “anyone,” or so Stafford says, as the first line of the final stanza is, “This book intends to be for anyone” (5). However, the poem is not exactly for everyone. It begins:

There are people on a parallel way. We do not
see them often, or even think of them often,
but it is precious to us that they are sharing
the world. Something about how they have accepted
their lives, or how the sunlight happens to them,
helps us to hold the strange, enigmatic days
in line for our own living. (5)

Though the book is “intend[ed] to be for anyone,” it is most especially for a certain group of people, the people mentioned at the beginning who are on a “parallel way.” The poem serves as a “smoke signal, unmistakable but unobtrusive” for those people (5). However, though Stafford does say that the book is for a certain group of people, the idea of people on the parallel way is a little vague. Anyone could be on the parallel way, and therefore, the book is potentially for everyone. This serves to invite all readers into the book, because even if they are not on the parallel way, or do not think they are on the parallel way, there is a chance that in reading the book they will discover that in reality, they are. Even in dedicating his book to a specific group of people, Stafford encourages everyone to continue reading because, in doing so, readers may find out that they are actually a part of that group. This emphasizes the idea of inclusion that is, for Stafford, so important to religious or spiritual experience. The sense of inclusion serves to draw readers into the book, and encourages them to read further. All people are encouraged to become a part of the ritual of reading Stafford’s poetry.

The idea of inclusion is perhaps the most obvious in Stafford’s use of plural nouns and pronouns. He uses “we,” “us,” the plural “you,” or indicates that he is speaking to groups throughout the poems. These words surface throughout the first and last poems, but most especially in the final poems in the books. In “So Long,” which closes out *Allegiances*, Stafford ends with the phrase, “No one can surface till far, / far on, and all that *we’ll* have / to love may be what’s near / in the cold, even then” (82, emphasis mine). Other instances of

(cont. on p. 12)

the reference to groups occur in the phrases “O citizens,” “we live,” “our life,” “our past,” “we sing,” “The whole world is alive, waving together toward history.” These lines give the sense of community between all mankind. Everyone is included in Stafford’s poetry, and readers can sense that inclusion by Stafford’s use of plural nouns and pronouns.

The final poems often serve as a “Go little book” envoi. This sort of ending was fairly popular in medieval poetry and was used by Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer. The “Epilog” of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* presents us with a fine example of this sort of ending. At the end of 1785 lines of poetry, Chaucer writes, “Go, litel boke, go, liel myn tragedye.” The Epilog causes us to reconsider the way in which we view the tragedy of Troilus and Criseyde, leading readers to look at the entire poem that precedes it in a new light. Though the majority of the poem focuses on the love story of Troilus and Criseyde, the “Go, litel book” at the end causes a shift. It is still a love story, but the ending serves to show the reader that, while Earthly love is nice, Heavenly love is better. Stafford’s “go little book” invocations work in a similar way. They ask readers to consider not only the final poem of the volume, but also the volume as a whole and what it might be asking of them. There is also something to be said about the author him or herself addressing the book and sending it out into the world that makes the reader think more deeply about its message. It is an indication that the poems are, indeed, saying something important that we, as readers, must pay attention to. This causes us to reflect back on the poems to try to understand what that important thing is.

Not only does Stafford send the book out into the world, he also tasks his readers with the same thing. The final line of the poem gives readers something to do or asks them to do something. We see this in “Vocation,” as the poem tasks readers with finding out what the world is trying to be. The poem does not ask readers to reflect back on what they have just read; instead it asks them to take what they have read and go do something with it. Stafford discusses the poem in *Writing the Australian Crawl* and what the purpose of the poem, especially what the last line, is:

I see writing as a job of experiment. It’s like a discovery job; you don’t know what’s going to happen until you try it. All life is like that. You don’t make life be what you’ve decided it *ought* to be. You find out what life is *trying* to be. And I’m glad you feel the book’s last line is picking up some extra benefits. I certainly had the feeling of going out at the end of *Traveling through the Dark*, of leaving things on an open-ended note. (114)

Stafford, here, indicates that the choice to put this poem at the end of the book was deliberate because of the way in which it leaves readers with something to think about. Or shall we say, something larger to think about. The idea of sending readers out into the world with something to think about emphasizes the idea of the “great, reverent story” that Stafford mentions in his interview. Since readers are a part of the story, they must do their part in the story, and therefore, they are sent out on a mission.

The final poem in *The Rescued Year*, “Read to the Last Line,” is another good example of this concept because it says fairly explicitly what Stafford is trying to do, not only with the poem, but perhaps with the book as a whole. The final lines of the poem are as follows, “Reader, we are in such a story: / all of this is trying to arrange a

kind of prayer for you. / Pray for me” (81). Here Stafford sums it all up. He not only tells readers what he is attempting to do with his poetry, but he also gives readers something to do. He tasks readers with praying for him. If he is praying for readers, and readers are praying for him, then they are joined together with one another in a kind of communion of prayer. Stafford also tells readers what he is up to with this poem, or with all of the poems in the volume. All of them are trying to “arrange a kind of prayer.” Though speaking of his poems or his poetry is typically something he did in his first poems, Stafford has done it here in order to bring about the call to readers to pray for him. The final lines of the poem clearly indicate that there is a prayer-like quality to Stafford’s poetry, and therefore reading his poems in conjunction with one another can become a ritual – after all, most religious rituals are typically made up of a series of prayers.

Stafford’s first and last poems serve to give his poetry an overall larger purpose. Readers are asked not to be a passive recipient of the work, but to actually participate in the kind of ritual that Stafford is creating. The poems are not meant to simply be read. The messages in them are to be acted out and passed on. The introductory poems welcome readers in so that the messages are not left silent. After all, a poem can only speak when it is read. The concluding poems give readers a task, or something to think about beyond the poems. This emphasizes the ritual-like quality of reading Stafford’s poetry because in an ideal ritual, the participant is affected and changed by the experience. Stafford’s poetry asks us to change the way we look at the world. We must be willing to accept that we are part of something larger than ourselves and therefore we are required to be active participants in the “great, reverent story.”

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Editor’s Note: Richter wrote this essay in James Armstrong’s seminar on William Stafford. She delivered a shortened version at the Winona State University’s graduate symposium. She recently received her MA in English, writing her thesis on John Keats. She says of her essay, it “was written for a class on Stafford, a poet I knew little about, but grew to love.”



PHOTO BY IJKA KUZNIK

Stafford gravestone at Riverview Cemetery, looking west.

At the Gravesite

for Bill and Dorothy

Graves as flat to the grass as Kansas,
you two together again in what smoke

leaves. That smoke thins out and
leans toward the deep glimmer

of the lawn where two deer graze,
ears tilted toward the woods just

to the north. A little wilderness of
wind there wears your words folded

in the pocket of its blue shirt
down to a river hidden below

that sometimes says
your names along

with others
who listen well.

TIM BARNES

Atavism

1

Sometimes in the open you look up
where birds go by, or just nothing,
and wait. A dim feeling comes—
you were like this once: there was air,
and quiet; it was by a lake, or
maybe a river—you were alert
as an otter and were suddenly born
like the evening star into wide
still worlds like this one you have found
again, for a moment, in the open.

2

Something is being told in the woods: aisles of
shadow lead away; a branch waves;
a pencil of sunlight slowly travels its
path. A withheld presence almost
speaks, but then retreats, rustles
a patch of brush. You can feel
the centuries ripple—generations
of wandering, discovering, being lost
and found, eating, dying, being born.
A walk through the forest strokes your fur,
the fur you no longer have. And your gaze
down a forest aisle is a strange, long
plunge, dark eyes looking for home.
For delicious minutes you can feel your whiskers
wider than your mind, away out over everything.

WILLIAM STAFFORD



PHOTO BY IJKA KUZNIK

It is a long tradition to visit the graves of poets one loves.

News, Notes, and Opportunities

“Rebuild your confidence and don’t give up: Sun Images,” Maria Shine Stewart. Stewart is a counselor who teaches a writing group focused on writing and healing. She says this about Stafford’s desire not to take sides: “Stafford possessed a ‘fierce neutrality,’ —not wanting to take on the role of writing guru or ultimate judge.... [He] knew that he didn’t know everything and grasped the value of standing back, observing, waiting....Have you wilted under withering criticism? Would fierce neutrality have helped?” From Cleveland.com, a website that covers Northeast Ohio.

“Home Is the Place that Holds You,” Eric McHenry. McHenry is the poet laureate of Kansas and associate professor of English at Washburn State University. Noting that Stafford wrote about western Kansas for many years after leaving it, McHenry writes, “For Stafford the ideal landscape was mostly skyscape.” He recalls the lines from “One Home,” “Wherever we looked the land would hold us up.” The word hold, he says, is vital for Stafford’s poetry and sense of the world, quoting “One Evening,” and the epiphanic, maybe theophanic, moment along the Cimarron River from the memoir that opens *You Must Revise Your Life*: “The earth was my home; I would never feel lost while it held me.” This essay appeared on and in High Plains Public Radio, HPPR, on Feb 7, 2016.

“Poet’s Notebook: On the love of books—and libraries,” Peter Meinke. A writer and professor, Meinke has published a number of books, including *The Contracted World: New & More Selected Poems*, 2006, with the University of Pittsburgh Press, the same press that published *Sound of the Ax*. This entry in Meinke’s blog tells how a book Bill once owned, *A Wordsworth Anthology*, ended up in his hands. Meinke also writes about Wordsworth, Laurence Houseman’s “radical and progressive” bookstore, and his brother the poet A.E. Houseman. Meinke recalls an encounter with Bill at a poetry festival in Abingdon, Virginia, maybe in 1970, while Bill was the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. Google the title of the blog post for more.

Stafford/Hall Award for Poetry. Carl Adamshick of Portland won the 2016 William Stafford/ Hazel Hall Award for the best book of poetry published by an Oregon writer, *Saint Friend*. Adamshick heads Tavern Books, which published William Stafford’s *Winterward* in 2013.

New Oregon Poet Laureate. Elizabeth Woody of Warm Springs and Portland was appointed by Governor Kate Brown as the eighth poet laureate of Oregon. As many readers know, William Stafford was the fourth, serving from 1974-1989. Woody will serve for two years with the option to serve another two if she wishes.

“William Stafford on Brexit and Common Demagoguery,” Dale Biron. This blog post by Biron, a poet, lecturer, and master story teller, discusses Britain’s exit from the EU and offers “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” as a “poem-tool” to counterpoise the alienation and demagoguery it discloses. You can hear Biron read it if you google Stafford-Biron. Browse a bit more and you can hear Biron read other Stafford poems. He has a talk on Stafford that is noted in the News, Notes, and Opportunities of issue 16.2 of this publication.



Alain Laboile’s photo from *The Sun*.

“Kids: they dance before they learn there is anything that isn’t music.” This aphorism, taken from the poem “Keepsakes,” appeared in the Sunbeams section of the February 2016 issue of *The Sun* magazine. The theme of the issue was parenting. Edited by Sy Safransky, *The Sun* is one of this country’s most thoughtful, independent, artistic, and readable magazines. The work of Brian Doyle, one Oregon’s finest and most versatile writers, is often found between its covers.

Board Resignations. Three FWS board member have recently resigned: Don Colburn, our secretary who made our minutes works of art; Leah Stenson, who handled so efficiently and cheerfully our broadside sales, and Nancy Winklesky, who oversaw the circulation of the traveling exhibition, *How the Ink Feels*. The remaining FWS board members are sorry to see these wonderful Friends of William Stafford go and wish them the very best in their future endeavors and pleasures.

Carole Ockert, the chair of the First Addition/Forest Hills Neighborhood Association, has informed the Friends of William Stafford that the association has received a grant from the city of Lake Oswego to finish the Stafford Stone project at the Stafford Grove kitty corner from his old home on Sunningdale Road. Frank Boyden, the sculptor, will engrave “With Neighbors One Afternoon” on the obelisk in September or October.

PERMISSIONS & THANKS

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The drawing by Barbara Stafford of William Stafford on the first page is from the cover of *You and Some Other Characters*, Honey Brook Press, 1987; the drawing on p. 6 is from a broadside done for the OCTE NW regional conference in 1997. Both are used by permission of the artist.

The essays by Tim Barnes, James Armstrong and Clara Richter are used with the permission of the authors.

The trees on p. 6 were done by Tree Swenson for *Sometimes Like a Legend: Puget Sound Country* (Copper Canyon Press, 1981).

Thanks to Kim Stafford for sending along the painting by Amy Livingstone and to Margaret Stow for sending along the bookmark.



BECOME A *Friend of William Stafford*

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

WHY JOIN?

By joining the Friends of William Stafford, you become part of an international community of poetry lovers and writers with broad access to other poetry organizations and events. As a Friend, you'll receive a subscription to our biannual newsletter, filled with poetry and poetry news. In addition, your contribution supports the annual William Stafford Birthday Celebration Readings, the annual September poetry and potluck picnic, maintains our web site, www.williamstafford.org, 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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Volunteer opportunities Organize poetry readings in your community; Event help; Distribute posters/flyers; Publicize events; Other (describe): _____

Welcome New Friends January–July 2016

Todd O. Peterson

Toni Doane

Jane Wintermute Gille

Tim Otto

Kevin Lay

Gail Chastain

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



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Please email comments, letters, news, and information on poetry events, awards, etc. to news@WilliamStafford.org

or mail to
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Reports from Far Friends
By Tim Barnes



Teaching a Seminar on William Stafford
By James Armstrong



Introductory Rites and Final
Blessings: The First and Last Poems
in William Stafford's Collections of Poetry
By Clara Richter

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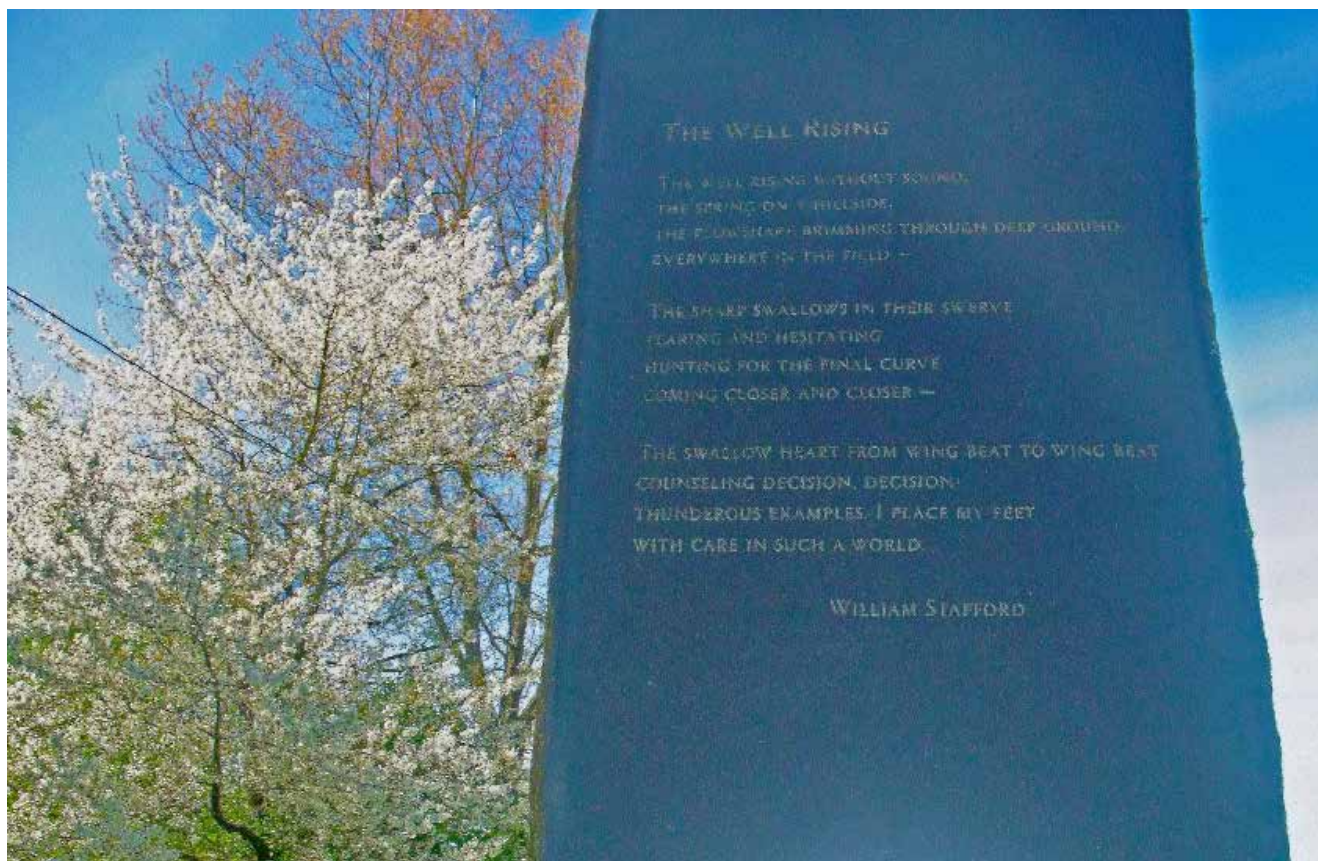


PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

This basalt column with Stafford's poem, "The Well Rising," is on the Luscher Farm property, just off Stafford Road on the southern edge of Lake Oswego.