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William Stafford and the Dawn of the Space Age

By James Armstrong

On October 4th, 1957, at around 6 pm Eastern Standard Time, the Soviet news agency Tass announced that the Russians had launched Sputnik 1 into orbit around the earth. The news of the world's first man-made satellite spread rapidly on evening radio and television news and was the lead story in American newspapers the next morning. According to historian Roger D. Launius, writing on NASA's history site, Americans immediately sensed this was a watershed event and they reacted to it very emotionally: "The only appropriate characterization that begins to capture the mood on 5 October involves the use of the word hysteria" (Launius).

One person who wasn't hysterical was William Stafford. On that Saturday morning he was up early, as usual, and his daily writing directly addressed this new astonishing reality (which he must have known about from the broadcast news reports the night before). On a loose sheet of typing paper (his usual medium), Stafford noted the date and then made a list of three items:

- 1) Russian moon
- 2) Each person a prisoner of his self—and I alone watching a performance I used to think a play, but now know a chess game.
- 3) Go forward but never catch before
Chief Joseph gave up; but another chief
got away. (Stafford 5 October)

Stafford does not usually enumerate his entries, so it is reasonable to assume in this case he's implying a connecting between these three phrases—though exactly what this relation might be is not clear. Do the numbers indicate order of importance? Are they steps in a syllogism? He doesn't elaborate. But by considering Stafford's numbered comments carefully, and by looking at the entries that follow in his daily writing for the month of October, we may get some sense of how Stafford reacted to the dawn of the Space Age.

Stafford's first phrase, "Russian moon," is simply a statement of fact: the earth has a new moon now, and it is owned by our cold-war enemies. This is of course what caused Americans to greet the launch of Sputnik with such anxiety. The "cold war" between

the two superpowers had been steadily ratcheting upwards since the late 1940s. America detonated the first hydrogen bomb--500 times more powerful than an atomic bomb--in 1952, and the Soviets had followed with their own hydrogen bomb in 1955. Just a month or so previous to Sputnik the Russians launched their first intercontinental ballistic missile, and this gave Americans a new sense of vulnerability. The fact that a Soviet satellite was whizzing overhead—even though its purpose was claimed to be scientific—made Americans feel even more frightened; it also made them feel their government had been caught off guard.

In addition, America was fearful of betrayal from within. Although by 1957 the Supreme Court was beginning to reign in the excesses of the House Un-American Activities Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy's power was waning, the "red scare" was still in full bloom. The "Hollywood Blacklist" is well known, but many ordinary people had lost jobs or even faced imprisonment during this period. One in five employees in the U.S. were required to undergo loyalty tests by the late '50s. It is in this context of

(cont. on p. 2)



"At the Bomb Testing Site." B. G. Dodson. Acrylic/Mixed media on an 18"x24" wood panel. 2014. Inspired by Stafford's poem of the same name.

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

(cont. from p. 1)

a climate of fear and paranoia that we must read Stafford's acerbic comment, "Russian moon."

Stafford's second observation: "Each person a prisoner of his self—and I alone watching a performance I used to think a play, but now know a chess game" must also be considered in context. The notion of the self as "prisoner" has a long pedigree in Western thought—for Christians it often refers to the soul's helpless captivity in the sinful body. As the apostle Paul puts it, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7.24). Modern philosophy—meaning philosophy from the 17th century on—transformed this conflict into one between the reasoning mind (the agent of the Enlightenment, as it would come to be deemed) and the irrational physical body. John Locke's notion of the mind as "tabula rasa," or blank slate, implied the self could only be built from its observations and memory; his description of the process implied a passive intelligence, watching through the keyhole of the senses and inductively building its identity through its observation of Nature. Because Nature in Locke's time was considered to be logically ordered by Newton's laws, the properly-conducted induction would lead one to develop a self not unlike the ideal scientist: dispassionate and logical. The purpose of Locke's epistemology was to safeguard the individual from irrational forces of political and religious enthusiasms—but it had the side effect of greatly increasing individual isolation. Because the self was now completely identified with rational thought, Westerners became prisoners of their own minds and at odds with their bodies, whose instincts and emotions were to be disregarded. As Stephen Toulmin says in *Cosmopolis*, his explanation of the foundational beliefs of Modernity, the duality of mind and body is a central tenet of the 17th century: humans live "mixed lives," because

. . . as creatures of Reason, their lives are intellectual or spiritual, as creatures of Emotion, they are bodily or carnal . . . Emotion typically frustrates and distorts the work of Reason; so the human reason is to be trusted and encouraged, while the emotions are to be distrusted and restrained. (Toulmin 109-110)

For Moderns this seems self evident—note our constant use of the word "objective" to mean "dispassionate" and therefore more discerning. As passive and isolated Lockean intelligences, we are watching the world as if watching a performance. But Stafford further characterizes that performance as a "play"—implying that he viewed it as something socially constructed, something imaginative. Stafford did not fully share in either the sin/soul or the mind/body antitheses—as a poet, his philosophical roots were in the Romantic Era, which arose in opposition to the inadequacies of the Enlightenment version of the self. For the Romantic, the prison-house self is more apt to derive from an identity or role that society impresses upon the individual. It is this social self that Stafford is attacking in "A Ritual to Read to Each Other," for example. In this poem, which would appear in his first book, *West of Your City*, Stafford posits a situation where both the speaker and the reader are opaque 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

(*The Way It Is, TWII, 75*)

This mutual opacity leads to acquiescence to a socially prevalent error—and the result will be a perpetuation of that error: "following the wrong god home we may miss our star."

In some ways the first half of "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" can be construed as a paranoid call to "vet" one's neighbor: *what kind of person* is your neighbor, anyway? What if the *pattern* that prevails is Soviet communism? Many politicians were calling for Americans to "wake up" to the threat of communist infiltration—the *wrong god*. Yet the inauthentic self that Stafford is warning against is not socialist man, but the social conformist Emerson, for example, is railing against when he says, in "Self Reliance,"

Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity.

Human society, Stafford claims, looks like a line of elephants, each holding the other's tail—the speaker in his poem admonishes that we must vigilantly watch over the "parade of our mutual life" so that "if one wanders, the circus won't find the park." We have a choice to be "awake" or to be complicit in a kind of mutual misleading. How do we wake up? Stafford's method for resisting this conformity seems similar to that recommended by Emerson and his Transcendentalist circle (who are taking their cue from German Romantic philosophers like Kant and Fichte): by listening to an authentic moral intuition inside oneself, a more universal (transcendental) solution may arise. Stafford says:

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk . . .

So when Stafford says, in his daily writing, that he is "alone watching a performance" he is referring to a performance which must be critiqued, resisted. In Stafford's great moral and political poems, he often plays the role of the one who is "alone" and outside the situation, watching: as the boy with the paper cup walking toward the elevator man, in "Serving with Gideon," the boy who was "almost one" of the "old boys who ran the town," but was awakened at the last moment as "right and wrong arced" (TWII 213). As a pacifist who served as a CO in World War II, Stafford was well aware of the powerful compulsion society has over people. The solution to this is neither "reason" (as the Enlightenment would have it) or ideological action (as the political movements such as communism and socialism were urging), but a combination of listening to oneself and others, trying to discern that "shadowy" voice that might then act in subtle ways, might make signs which others may detect. As he says in another poem of that same period, "Thinking for Berky,"

We live in an occupied country, misunderstood;
justice will take us millions of intricate moves. (TWII 80)

But in Stafford's entry he claims he no longer sees this social performance as a "play." He realizes now it is a "chess game"—implying the self now plays on a strategic grid, to rules that are competitive: winner take all. One can see, perhaps, the link between the personal and the political. The late 1950s was a time of chess games—as the world's great superpowers squared off over the chessboard of the globe. This Manichean opposition plays out locally

in political witch hunts and globally in belligerent geopolitics. The space race itself would play a part in that game, as the public fears of Soviet domination of space would be exploited for political gain by the Democrats in the Kennedy election and would, in turn, be used to convince Congress to make massive investments in research and development that would bring America to a new level of military and industrial sophistication. One reading of Stafford's statement is that he is realizing the cold war has turned the "human comedy" into a deadly conflict played by rules that are seemingly rational but fundamentally destructive. One example of this would be the doctrine of "Mutually Assured Destruction," which hopes to forestall the possibility of war by guaranteeing that both sides have the capacity to utterly annihilate each other.

The first two items on Stafford's enumerated list are assuredly in the framework of mid-century American concerns: the threat of war, the isolation of the individual in modern society, the fear that technology may hasten both factors. But the third item is more enigmatic:

Go forward but never catch before

Chief Joseph gave up; but another chief
got away.

The first line points in many possible directions: couched in the imperative, it seems to offer advice, but there is a great ambiguity about the word "before." Is it a preposition, as in "look before you leap"? If so, does it mean progress should beware of apprehending anything in advance of its own arrival? Or should progress beware of grasping the fruits of its advance prior to their achievement? Or is "before" used as a noun, in which case does the noun mean "that which has happened before" or "that which is before us, ahead of us"? That is, "as one moves forward, one never apprehends what happened in the past" or else "as one moves forward one never grasps what lies ahead"? There is a dizzying array of interpretations, all of which (perhaps) may work to undermine the certainty of the future that is unfolding at the moment of the arrival of the space age.

However, the next phrase shows the way in which Stafford has a very different framework for Modernity. When he says "Chief Joseph gave up; but another chief/got away," he leaps from the Cold War to the story of the Nez Perce War of 1877. During the latter conflict, through a combination of white settlers' greed and U.S. military might, the Nez Perce were driven from their lands in the Wallowa valley in eastern Oregon. Stafford is qualifying his previous phrase "Go forward but never catch before" by evoking a specific "before"—he knows that October 5th is the 80th anniversary of the surrender of the Nez Perce to the U.S. Army at Bear Paw Mountain. On the first day of the Space Age, Stafford is evoking one of the final moments of the European takeover of America's aboriginal world.

To put this in context, we might consider how Chief Joseph appears in a significant Stafford poem from this decade. "In the Oregon Country" was written, or at least was completed, in 1951 (Stafford's earliest "documentary copy" of this poem bears the date "1 Jan. 1951."). The poem retells the tragedy of white relations with Oregon's Indian tribes, beginning with a rather cynical summary:

"stinking fish tribes/massacred our founders, the thieving whites."

The result of this was (alas) predictable:

Those tribes became debris on their own lands:

Captain Jack's wide face above the rope,
his Modoc women dead with twitching hands. (TWII 66)

By contrast to this sordid narrative, Chief Joseph enters the poem as "The last and the most splendid . . . fluttering eagles through Idaho" on his "pony-killing getaway." Contemporary narratives of the conflict tended to center on Joseph, who was touted as the "Red Napoleon" because of his purported military genius. According to white narratives he had defied and thus garnered the respect of his conquerors; Joseph's stirring surrender speech was printed and widely disseminated as evidence of his natural nobility. This was typical of the immediate reaction to the "pacification" of native America—as soon as America had won its Indian wars and relocated the surviving tribes, Americans began to sentimentalize and romanticize the people they had put down. What is original about Stafford's poem is not the general trope of the noble savage as sentimentalized victim, but his focus on the technological source of their defeat:

They got him. Repeating rifles bored at his head,
and in one fell look Chief Joseph saw the game
out of the spiral mirror all explode. (TWII 66)

The Winchester repeating rifle Stafford refers to is called a "rifle" because of the helix of grooves which are cut into the barrel's bore so that they impart a spin to the bullet (rifle derives from Old French *rifler* "to scratch or groove"). This spin stabilizes the bullet and greatly increases its accuracy and range. Knowing this helps us understand what Stafford means by "spiral mirror"—Joseph is literally looking into the gleaming barrel of the rifle and envisioning the explosion of the cartridge. His conclusion is that in the face of this kind of technology

surrender is his only option.

Stafford apparently wrote this poem in the early '50s while pursuing his graduate studies at the University of Iowa. The circumstances of its composition are preserved in comments he typed on a "questionnaire" given to him as part of a radio program appearance in 1967. Stafford says, of the genesis of the poem, "I remember once looking at a map of the northwest: it was enough to get a poem going, just sort of peeling it off the map."

In fact the poem ends with direct reference to the map:

Back of the Northwest map their country goes,
mountains yielding and hiding fold on fold,
gorged with yew trees that were good for bows.

Stafford conflates the map itself with the topography of the Wallowa Valley: both are seen as "yielding and hiding fold on fold." The verbs "yielding" and "hiding" tell us the Wallowa is still a good place to disappear into, a place for defensive retreat; the landscape maintains the potentiality that made it a homeland for the Nez Perce. The last line of the poem claims the valleys are still "gorged with yew trees that were good for bows"—a conclusion that is at the same time nostalgic and also full of potential. The yews are still there, should the Nez Perce come back and wish to use them again.

With this in mind we might turn to consider what Stafford means

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Drawing Connections in William Stafford's "Connections"

By Elissa Herber

William Stafford is commonly known for his ability to integrate nature into the conversation of his poetry. Sometimes his inclusion of nature in his work is overt, while other times the reader has to analyze a poem in order to see his commentary on nature and natural elements. Stafford is known to many as a "poet of nature" and in calling him this, his readers mean it "in the deepest and most meaningful sense" (Simpson 6). Stafford does more than just write beautiful nature poetry; he draws readers into his frame of mind so we can see things from his perspective. Peter Stitt explains in his essay "William Stafford's Wilderness Quest" that "Nature serves many functions in Stafford's poetry, appears in many guises, some of which also go to show... 'that the world can be a frightening place'" (173). Stafford isn't the kind of poet who only focuses on the positive aspects of the world. He has no qualms about entering into a conversation about the scary aspects of the world around us.

In *Early Morning*, Kim Stafford explains that while in the company of friends, Stafford "could treat the 'terribly cold, innocent spin' of the world with humor," but when he was by himself, "this cold could hold a darker tone" (249). While Stafford isn't afraid to address this darkness in his poetry, "he felt those around him preferred to pretend life is a smooth, uncomplicated story" (249). Looking at his poem "Connections" (See p. 7) from his book *West of Your City*, the reader can see Stafford exploring the darkness that lies within our personal connections with the world around us.

William Stafford's first conception of his poem "Connections" appears in his writing from the 23rd of September in 1953 and is accepted by *The Talisman* four years later. Looking at the original document from the William Stafford Archives, we can see the initial thought that eventually transformed into the musings that lead to "Connections." The first thought that Stafford has written on this day's specific entry is: "Many times I have stayed in a cold office after the others have gone." This feeling of isolation about being in a cold office alone might have caused Stafford to consider the ways in which we are connected to other people and the world around us, even when we don't recognize it, or feel like we are part of a network.

The raccoon included in this poem originates in the first draft of the poem when Stafford writes, "the raccoon puts his hand in, gazing/thru his mask for the tendril that will hold it all." In fact, a lot of ideas originate from this draft. The discussion of purifying the pond appears similar to how it appears in the published copy, when Stafford says, "When they purified the pond the lilies died." Not being able to find the thread or connection is also featured in the first draft: "No touch can find that thread,/it is too small; it does not lead, it comes behind." The line "thru evidence no court allows" appears exactly in the published draft as it does in the original draft. The only difference is that Stafford changes his shorthand of "through" after this copy. The idea of not being able to find the surface of the pond also comes up in the first draft when Stafford writes, "But little things we find directions out:/By ways without a surface we can find." We can see the influence that these early ideas have on the final, published version of the poem, and are able to track the

developmental progress Stafford makes across each draft.

As Stafford continues work on the poem, the second draft is titled "Connections" showing that Stafford already has an idea of where he wants to take the poem. Comparing the first draft and the second draft, it is easy to see that Stafford has already cut a lot of the things that he found unnecessary in the first draft. At the same time, we begin to see that writing "Connections" has led him to begin writing what looks to be a second poem at the end of this draft of "Connections." This shows that at some point over the course of writing "Connections" he was struck with inspiration to write a poem that he titled "Whenever I See Rock or Steel."

Another transformation that takes place within the second draft of the poem is that we see the first stanza taking its final shape. The biggest difference between the first stanza of draft two and the first stanza of the published copy is the change of "lost" to "low." In fact, it takes a couple more drafts of the poem until Stafford makes the change. We can also see that Stafford has written additions to the fourth and fifth lines of the first stanza that are maintained in the published copy. In fact, most of what Stafford writes in on this draft is carried through the drafting process and is included in the published copy. The biggest additions we see to this draft are the lines "By ways without a surface we can find/when they purified the pond the lilies died." In the published copy these lines are split up, but still kept relatively the same when Stafford says "But ways without a surface we can find," and he chooses to end with "And if we purify the pond, the lilies die." While Stafford chooses to slightly alter and divide the additions he made to the second draft of the poem, we can see that he is getting a clearer idea of what he wants the poem to do for the reader.

One inconsistency we can see in the second draft is the change in point of view. The first line gives readers the sense that the poem will be in plural first person, but then he switches to second person when the speaker says "But you can learn its course." Then, even with Stafford's additional notes, the point of view changes to the plural subjective third person when he says, "when they purified the pond the lilies died." The change in point of view could simply be a result of Stafford experimenting to figure out which point of view he would prefer for this poem.

The third draft of the poem is sandwiched between two other poems Stafford is experimenting with as well: "On the Coast" and "Whenever I See Rock or Steel." This draft contains several minor differences from the published copy of the poem. Where the third draft says, "Ours is a lost," the two final versions of the poem say, "Ours is a low" in the first line. We also see a change in "But you can learn its course" after the third draft. We can see that Stafford decides to change this line to "Sometimes we think we learn its course" in this draft, which is reflected in the final drafts of the poem.

The other notes Stafford has added to the margins of this draft are lines that he alters in order to come to the final version of the poem. From these notes, we can see that Stafford is not only altering some of the words, but has also decided on a plural first person point of view over the course of evaluating his third draft. We also see his choice to change the final line of the poem from "when they purified" to "And if we purify." This change makes the final version of the last line an active voice in first person, instead of the passive voice in third person.

Draft four of this poem is labeled the “Documentary Copy” and contains very few deviations from the published copy of “Connections.” This version of the poem has the words just as Stafford wants them to be in the final copy. The only alterations he adds in by hand is punctuation in the first line, and a note to add a space before the final line of the poem. On this draft, we can see that Stafford submitted this poem to twelve magazines, and was accepted by *The Talisman* on February 7, 1957, shortly after he submitted the poem to the publishers in January of 1957.

“Connections,” in its final version, gives readers a lot to consider about the relationships we have in life. The use of natural elements as an extended symbol implies that Stafford is using the poem to comment on human relations with the environment, and also on interpersonal human relationships. Based on the belief that Stafford is commenting on human relationships with the environment, considering the poem as whole, one can assume that he is asking humans to leave nature as it is in order to honor the connection they share with it. With the raccoon serving as a symbol of a human in this poem, Stafford is attempting to communicate that while humans look for “tendrils” or connections that we share with nature, the connections we may find are purely circumstantial, and is therefore “evidence no court allows.” Humans gain so much from nature that enables them to survive, without nature impacting our livelihoods a great amount. Stafford is essentially saying, through this poem, that we should return the favor to nature by letting the pond continue to stay the way it is—murky and mysterious. This is shown very clearly in the final line when Stafford says, “And if we purify the pond, the lilies die.” He believes we owe nature enough to leave it alone, at the very least.

The final line of the poem “And if we purify the pond, the lilies die” best communicates the message Stafford is sending about honoring our connection to things outside of ourselves. Much like lilies thrive in a pond of murky and muddy water, human bonds thrive on the mystery of our interconnectedness. Judith Kitchen explains that these connections Stafford is referencing “are fragile, and they must be honored” (35). Lilies are interconnected, much like humans, in complex networks. Taking these ideas to mind, one can see that Stafford is trying to communicate to the reader that clarity isn’t always necessary, or healthy in any form of relationship, whether it be human or environmental. In terms of clarity, sometimes it is difficult to disentangle all of the connections that lilies or humans make, and trying to do so can injure the connection and negatively impact the health of the lily, or person. Stafford is implying that it is best to let complexity thrive in the murkiness of the water, for our own good. We all want knowledge about the ways in which we are all connected, but we need to accept the unknowable complexity of our relationships because in the end, all of our connections thrive on the unknowable. There are some questions that are better left unanswered about our relationships.

The raccoon in the poem not only serves as a means for Stafford to comment on our relationships with each other and nature, but also as a symbol of a human in this poem. We can see the human qualities in its hands, a raccoon’s tendency for curiosity and greed, and the mask. The mask of the raccoon connects back to the sense of

mystery of the pond. Stafford doesn’t repeat much throughout this poem, but the mask is one of the few words he chooses to use more than once, which enhances the sense of mystery. Stafford chooses to reference the raccoon’s mask because it is closely related to the idea of a person masking their identity. The mystery of connections is that sometimes we don’t know a person we are connected to on a personal level, and that aids in our human fear of the connections we share. Humans value certainty in life, and we fear that which we do not understand or know. We try to “look under the surface for a larger meaning” (Kitchen 35) like a curious raccoon, but humans fail to see the true beauty in the mystery, or are disappointed with what we find. This also connects back to the pond in that we want to “purify” that which we do not understand, but in the end, it can be harmful to do such a thing. At the same time however, humans strive to have as much as possible, whether it be connections to other people, or possession and control over the environment.

While we can see Stafford’s concerns clearly from a literal and figurative perspective, he also uses linguistic ambiguity when he says “it” throughout the poem. This ambiguity first appears in the line “that will hold it all together.” The ambiguous “it” could be the particular connection the raccoon is searching for in the water. Stafford again uses the ambiguous “it” in “Sometimes we think we learn its course” despite the small size of the connection. Stafford takes away the hope of understanding our connections in saying, “through evidence no court allows.” This implies that everything we think we understand about our connections is circumstantial and doesn’t bring us the closure we desire. This idea is supported by Kitchen who points out that a reader “looks under the surface for a larger meaning” (35) and goes on to reference Stafford’s line “a sneeze may glimpse us Paradise” by saying a sneeze is a “close-to-death” experience in that it is “all-consuming, transitory, illusory” (Kitchen 35). Kitchen is arguing that Stafford says our understanding of the connections we share with the world around us are as fleeting as a sneeze, and we don’t even get a complete view of them. We only get a “glimpse” of what it all means in a context outside of ourselves.

Through his poetry, Stafford often asks us to look beyond ourselves. His use of vivid and descriptive language aids in this task. According to Kitchen, Stafford’s poetry usually has “at least one word that shimmers with difference” (101). Looking at this poem from the perspective that Stafford is using unique language, we can find interesting diction in the words “curst,” “under-swamp land,” “tendrils” and “flash.” The archaic spelling of “curst” that Stafford uses in the first line demonstrates his tendency “to make certain words leap from the page” (Kitchen 101). In choosing this spelling, Stafford makes the word and the line interesting to the reader. “Under-swamp land” is also featured in the first line and serves as a reference to what takes place below the surface of the water, and the earth. In the context of this poem, Stafford is most likely referencing the human desire to understand the “inter-connections of life on this planet” (Kitchen 35) that thrive under the surface of society.

“Tendrils” appears in the third line of the poem, and while it might appear to be a reference to nature at first, one must consider the different meanings or contexts in which the word can be used. For instance, tendrils are often compared to “thread-like” substances.

(cont. on p. 6)

**we want to
“purify” that
which we do not
understand**

(cont. from p. 5)

The reader is able to connect the third line to the fifth line where Stafford says, “No touch can find that thread.” In this way, we can see Stafford attempting to vary his language to make the poem seem more rich and variant on a linguistic level. However, tendrils can also be used in contexts that are less uplifting, and are often connected to things that are dark or mysterious. The dark or mysterious quality of the “tendrils” is elicited with the “touch of mud” in which the raccoon finds the connection for which it has been searching. Through his choice to use different words to reference the connections the raccoon is looking for in the first and second stanzas, Stafford is “testing each shade of meaning” (Kitchen 102) of the word “tendrils,” while also creating a poem with rich language.

While “flash” doesn’t appear to be a complex word in the context of “But ways without a surface we can find/flash through the mask, only by surprise,” one can’t help but consider whether Stafford is saying there is a flash of surprise, or a flash of an epiphany. One could understand that the “flash” is a flash of surprise because the raccoon finally latched onto the connection or “tendrill” that he was looking for in the pond. Otherwise, it could be a flash of an epiphany for the reader because we are beginning to grasp onto what Stafford is trying to tell us about our connections in this poem. However, we understand this moment of understanding is only a “flash” due to the way that Stafford chooses to end the poem.

By concluding the poem with “And if we purify the pond, the lilies die,” Stafford is proving to the reader that no one can completely understand our connections. There is always more to know beneath the surface, and while we would like to believe we know based on intuition, we will really only gain partial understanding. Kitchen points out that Stafford has “a somewhat characteristic ending, which goes against the grain of expectation” (110). This supports the idea that Stafford purposefully makes the reader believe understanding that the connection is possible for us, but then chooses to end by saying “And if we purify the pond, the lilies die.” As previously stated, lilies belong to a complex network with other lilies. One can assume that removing a lily from a pond, like the raccoon is doing, would also be considered a way to purify the pond. By removing even one of the lilies, the lily that has been removed will die because it has lost its most important connection. We can also assume that Stafford is also discussing the muck that the lilies float in as an important life source for the plant. We can’t begin to understand the impact we would have on pond life if we began purifying all of the ponds with muck and lilies in them. This type of ending is common of some of Stafford’s poetry in that it demonstrates “a condition of partial knowledge” (Kitchen 110). The partial knowledge that Stafford is bringing to light here is our partial knowledge of the ways in which we connect to the world, and the feeling we experience when we feel isolated from those connections. Humans like to think we have a complete understanding of how everything is inter-related, while Stafford is pointing out that we don’t know, and we’ll never truly know.

Structurally, this ending is similar to many of the endings of his

poems in that it is a “line set off from the rest of the poem” (Kitchen 110). In the final version of the poem, the ending appears as:

But ways without a surface we can find
flash through the mask only by surprise --
a touch of mud, a raccoon smile

And if we purify the pond, the lilies die.

This structure draws the reader’s attention to the end of the poem and places emphasis on what Stafford is attempting to communicate in the line. It also serves as a structural representation of the isolation that one feels at the end of the poem when we learn that we will never actually understand the ways we are connected to each other, and the environment.

Another characteristic of “Connections” that Stafford often includes in his poetry is the use of the dash. In “Connections” specifically, we can see he uses caesura at the end of the lines: “Sometimes we think we know its course—” and “flash through the mask, only by surprise—.” The dashes at the end of these lines make the reader pause, and allow for a feeling of rhythm, or as Stafford calls it “syncopation” (109), making the poem sound more natural to the ear of the reader. Stafford doesn’t include the dashes in “Connections” until the documentary copy, implying that somewhere in the act of revising the third draft to create the documentary copy, Stafford found the caesura to be a necessary addition. Stafford’s authorial decision to include dashes at the end of his lines could serve as a reflection of Emily Dickinson’s influence on his writing.

The last characteristic that is apparent throughout *West of Your City* and appears in “Connections” is Stafford’s use of first person. In the case of “Connections” he chooses to use the plural first person, which forces the reader into an active role, but also gives the reader the sense that they aren’t alone in their search. As readers, we are given a responsibility to consider the ways in which we are connecting to other people and the environment, and how we impact both of those things. In order to remind the reader who is doing the acting in the poem, Stafford says “raccoon” in line two, and then repeats it again in line eleven. While this reminds the reader who is doing the acting in the poem, the use of “we” in the final line, reinforces the reader’s feeling of responsibility right up until the end.

In the context of *West of Your City*, the use of first person in “Connections” helps it fit in with the rest of the collection. Kitchen supports this in saying that “The poems often use the first person, both singular and plural” (29) in *West of Your City*. She also explains that Stafford and the persona that he creates in the poem “are nearly identical,” however there is an extension into Stafford’s “personal experience to include others” (29). Stafford most likely extends his poetry into his personal life in order to make the poem more realistic for the reader, which is especially important if Stafford is making a commentary on the way that people are, and how they should change.

Readers can see throughout *West of Your City* that Stafford is making an attempt to use his personal experiences to help them understand what he is trying to communicate to them. In using

experiences that readers can recognize as personal, Stafford is making his poetry more accessible to the reader. Kitchen also comments on this when she explains that Stafford is making an “attempt to find correspondence between the individual life of the writer and the shared life of the community” (29-30). Stafford believes that in order for his poetry to make the difference he wants it to, the reader must be able to understand what he is doing when he extends the poem to things outside of the human. Throughout *West of Your City*, we can see Stafford believes that “Community extends to the natural world, especially animals” (Kitchen 30). Kitchen is explaining that Stafford uses personal experience and specific points of view to force readers to understand the community they belong to also includes the natural world. He wants us to understand the ways in which we connect with the natural world, in the way that he understands.

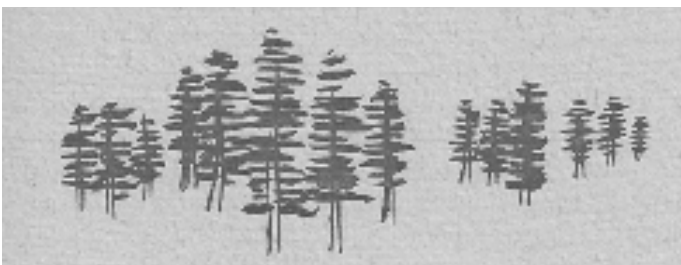
The idea that Stafford is trying to connect with his reader on a personal level in order to get them to understand the ways in which they are connected to nature is fitting, considering the message in “Connections.” In writing “Connections,” Stafford puts a raccoon in the acting role, but puts the reader in charge of deciding whether or not he or she can accept the mystery of our human and environmental connections and the implications of such relationships. If readers choose to not accept the mystery, Stafford warns that nothing good will result, and connections of all kinds will be severed.

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Editor’s note: At my request, Elissa Herber sent along this biographical note:

Elissa Herber grew up on a small dairy farm in rural Minnesota and fell in love with literature at a young age. She attended Winona State University where she enrolled in a Senior Seminar course that helped her discover the wonder of William Stafford’s work. After graduating with her B.A. in English with a Writing Emphasis in 2015, Elissa moved to Hastings, Minnesota, to peruse a career in Human Resources. In her free time, Elissa can be found reading a book or writing poetry.



Connections

Ours is a low, curst, under-swamp land
the raccoon puts his hand in,
gazing through his mask for tendrils
that will hold it all together.

No touch can find that thread, it is too small.
Sometimes we think we learn its course—
through evidence no court allows
a sneeze may glimpse us Paradise.

But ways without a surface we can find
flash through the mask only by surprise—
a touch of mud, a raccoon smile.

And if we purify the pond, the lilies die.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Answer to a Passing Remark

He prefers dull colors
still he is far from gray. . .
more like deep purple I would say:
and though he likes flat lands
wherever he stands Himalayas loom.
A quiet life suits him best
yet, in his mind
things are happening all the time!
And while his thoughts to shadows
cling—thoughts cut through
like a laser beam.

PATRICIA BANTA

Editor’s note: Patricia (Gow) Banta died in March of last year at the age of 92. She was a teacher, a well-published poet, and former president of the OSPA.

Obelisk Inscription

On the last Tuesday in September of last year, the poem “With Neighbors One Afternoon” was inscribed on Frank Boyden’s basalt obelisk in Stafford Grove. Across the street from the Sunningdale house in which the Stafford family lived for fifty years, Stafford Grove is a small wedge with seven tall and distinguished fir trees, some large bushes, a swath of lawn, and two stone pillars; one pillar has the name of the place, Stafford Grove, and a larger one, farther in, bears the poem.

Among the people at the event were Sarah Selden, a senior city planner from Lake Oswego, and Carole Ockert, the chairwoman of the First Addition-Forest Hills Neighborhood Association, whose community activism was instrumental in the creation of the grove. Frank Boyden, the sculptor, was there, as were Kim Stafford and Dan Bronlewee of Elite Granite and Marble, the company in charge of sandblasting the poem into the stone, and his assistant Greg Gnos.

Boyden told some of us that the obelisks were columnar basalt from around Moses Lake in the Palouse country of Eastern Washington and cut into their current shape with a large diamond saw. Bronlewee informed me that the font for the lettering of the poem was ColumnaSolSCD. Columna, created in 1955, is the only typeface designed by the noted Swiss book designer Max Cafisch. This classical Roman inspired typeface, originally a private type of the Benteli publishing house in Switzerland, is noted for its open capitals and ranging figures. Another characteristic of this typeface is small, thin serifs, which Boyden told us makes Columna ideal for sandblasting into stone.

Those present were able to witness the process of inscription—the stenciling, the sandblasting with ground up garnet, the spray painting to enhance highlights, and the cleansing with solvents. Stafford Grove is open to the public, and I’m told a bench will soon be placed in the grove. Carole Ockert suggested to me that an annual tea might take place in years to come.



Frank Boyden and Kim Stafford admiring the finished product.



Dan Bronlewee and Greg Gnos cutting the stencil for “With Neighbors One Afternoon.”



Greg Gnos sandblasting the poem into the stone.



The obelisk at the front of the grove.

The Immanent Stafford

By Tim Barnes

In the last issue of this publication, I discussed a number of thematic essays on William Stafford written by the students of Dr. James Armstrong of Winona State University. As I mentioned in “Reports from Far Friends,” he also sent essays focused on a single poem. I take up those essays now because, as with the previous essays, they offer insights and understandings that open inward and outward an appreciation of William Stafford’s legacy, the gifts he left for all of us, which make his work so resonant and useful. We also see how helpful and available the archives at Lewis and Clark can be in enabling Stafford scholarship, the study of his textual being, those things his poetry, pedagogy, and pacificism animate. In addition, one can find those aspects of his work that offer ways through to what another world than the one presently elected might mean.

In one of the essays, I encountered the vibrant concept of immanence, an idea developed by Charles Altieri in his book *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (1979). First, let me present a paragraph I cut from Armstrong’s essay in the last issue, “Teaching a Seminar on William Stafford,” in which he explains what he asked his students to do in these essays, the first of two assigned in the class:

The mid-term paper was an exercise in textual criticism: students were to pick a Stafford poem from the on-line manuscripts available on the Stafford Archives website; they had to transcribe the first manuscript version of the poem into a typed facsimile and then trace the major changes the poem underwent on its journey to the final published version. They also had to place the poem in context: describing where the poem appeared, how it could be placed in Stafford’s career, and what thematic and stylistic connections they saw with poems of the same period.

Finally, they had to make some connections to the critical articles they had read.

The reader can see that one of the things Dr. Armstrong asked the students to explore was Stafford’s process of revision. Since the examination of the revision process is such an important pedagogical tool for teachers of writing, and one would be hard-pressed to find an interview in which Stafford was not asked of it, it seems important to report that these essays confirm Stafford was a quick and efficient reviser, often finishing a poem in two or three drafts, the process being notable not so much for rewriting as for selecting, rearranging, and rewording. In her essay, “The Woman at Banff in Stafford’s Universe,” Clara Richter writes of how “Stafford has to comb them [the most important images] out of all the other images that are, perhaps, not as relevant to the poem.” In her essay on “Parentage,” Hannah Larson tells us, “Stafford didn’t so much rewrite when he went back to edit this poem so much as he selected the lines that best fit together.” The metaphor of “combing out” to describe Stafford’s process of revision seems particularly apt. Stafford combed out the knots and tangles from a first draft, allowing the depth of the conception to remain and resonate with its natural luster.

Combing enhances the innate body of hair. Combing wool is good for making high quality fabrics. It is a process that discovers as much as it alters and leads easily to immanence. Elizabeth Ladwig’s essay “William Stafford’s ‘Level Light’” defines the word so,

quoting from Altieri, “A symbolist poet ‘seeks to transform nature into satisfying human structures,’ while an immanentist poet looks toward the ‘discovery and disclosure of numinous relationships within nature.’” She uses this term to explain a shift in perspective in “Level Light,” a movement from the personal perception to an outward apprehension. The symbolist poet (think of Dante, Blake, Yeats, Pound) tries to create a coherent world ordered by the supreme intelligence of a poetic vision. The immanentist poet senses provisional and participatory coherences created by intuitions apprehended through engagements with otherness. Altieri cites early Wordsworth as a good example of this way of writing, noting,

Consciousness must be in contact with things, capable of expressing their mystery, and required as a complementary creative force that can fulfill meanings potential in nature.

The word *immanent* derives from a Latin word of the same spelling and means *stay* or *remaining in*. It can be used to contrast with the word *transcendent*, which means *to rise above* or *go beyond*. The two words can be confused, however, because the Transcendentalists saw God as *indwelling*, immanent, in nature. Among the poets from the 60s that Altieri discusses as immanentists are Robert Bly, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, W.S. Merwin, and Robert Duncan, who said, according to the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “the order that man may contrive upon things about him...is trivial beside the divine power or natural order he may discover in them.” I would place Stafford among this group and so it would seem do the writers of these essays, particularly Ladwig.

In the essay, “William Stafford’s ‘Level Light,’” the word “fail” takes on a fresh and enriched meaning by being connected with dusk: “fail // In one stride light takes the hill.” Altieri connects immanentist poets to “philosophers like Heidegger and Wittgenstein” who in the words of Robert Creeley, consider “a use of words [as] a definition of words.” I would mention here that Stafford’s closest colleague at Lewis & Clark, Kenny Johnson, studied at the University of Nebraska with O.K. Bouwsma, a disciple of Wittgenstein. In “Some Arguments Against Good Diction” Stafford takes this Wittgensteinian position on words:

For a writer, it is not the past or present of words that counts, but their futures, and those futures are approaching by means of influences too various for rules or derivations to control or predict.

In “Level Light,” as Ladwig shows, the thoughtful observation of a sunset leads Stafford to fulfill a meaning potential in nature and in language that both discovers and discloses.

The same could be said for the poem “Tornado,” which Leah Perri explores in “Explication and Situation of William Stafford’s ‘Tornado.’” In the poem a tornado tears through a house. Simple, of course, but not quite. Perri says this of the meanings potential in a tornado:

The form of Stafford’s “Tornado” reinforces this idea of attentive listening to the greater powers at hand...Stafford was not firm in one religious doctrine, however many of his poems explore this idea of spirituality and forces that move beyond our control.

Two things seem worth noting here. The first is Stafford’s sense of religion: “Stafford is open-minded to different religious doctrines and doesn’t identify solely with one, though he admits that his poetry as a whole contains [what he calls in *You Must Revise Your*

(cont. on p. 10)

(cont. from p. 9)

Life], ‘whiffs of religion.’” Stafford was devoutly ecumenical and the church in the poem is made of “ecumenical bricks.” Ladwig points out that in drafting the poem Stafford switches from the word *God* to the word *command*, seemingly to un-denominate the poem. This of course can be seen as a failure to any specific faith—Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, even Buddhist. I am reminded of a Salmon Rushdie story in which a very devout and wise Muslim king is told by his trusted spiritual advisor that he is only one god away from being an atheist. For Stafford, I think, a tornado speaks for a power that includes all beliefs. Those are the powers that unite us.

The second thing is, you guessed it, listening. Stafford’s immanentism is grounded in the lodestar of his poetic sensibility. Listening is at the heart of “The Woman at Banff,” which Clara Richter considers in her essay along with her lovely revising-as-combing metaphor. The poem begins with this line, “While she was talking a bear happened along....” The woman keeps talking and not listening to the bear or what the trees “signaled” or the rocks “back of them.” “Listening, for Stafford,” Richer tells us, “is equated with understanding” and so “if the woman is unable to listen, she is also unable to understand the signals or the beauty of the world around her.” Interestingly, Richter notes that the first draft of the poem is titled “The Woman from Vassar,” a clear comment on east coast, upper-class, academic life.

Richter also sheds light on the variance between composing and teaching. Using the Stafford archives electronically, Richer was able to contrast what Stafford said publicly about composing “The Woman at Banff” with how the composition of it looks in his daily writings. The way the archives are set up online, you can pour over Stafford’s drafts as if they were lying on your desk at home. Stafford speaks of the composition of the poem twice, once in print in the title essay of *Writing the Australian Crawl* and again in a three-minute video in the archive. In both cases he says something to the effect of I said this and then I said that and one thing just lead to another. In his first draft, the phrase “while she was talking” comes quite a ways down the page. It actually begins with what turns out to be the ending, “One of the rivers—The Saskatchewan—rinsed / so much rock its water cringed.” Then the woman from Vassar appears and then, at the fourteenth line (or thereabouts), comes the phrase that Stafford says on two occasions began the poem, “while she was talking,” which Stafford has revised from “while you were talking.” It seems to have been the line that could pull in the image that began the draft, and he appears to be trying to bring it back around because the word *Saskatchewan* appears in the ninth line of the draft, slightly indented. If you don’t believe me, go to the archive. It’s a couple of clicks away.

This is how teaching and composing diverge. The idea of saying one thing, adding a few things, and repeating that phrase and saying a few more things is called anaphora and is a wonderful compositional strategy, perfectly consonant with Stafford’s sense of just keeping going, letting things play out. The poem, though, doesn’t appear to have happened that way in the first draft. Subsequent drafts find the refrain but as the story of the origin of the poem, Stafford’s statements and his daily writing show a variance between what he said he did and what he actually did. As a teacher and poet, I completely understand and endorse this discrepancy.

The speaker of the poem, Richter observes, “Allows the natural world to create its own significance through its ‘speech,’” whereas the woman is not listening to that kind of speech. Richter uses a Vernon Shetly quote from *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*, to explain and in doing so presents him in a distinctly immanentist light:

Much of Stafford’s effort is devoted to breaking through our modern alienation from the natural, pushing aside the fog of concepts to arrive at receptivity attuned to the life of things.

To listen one must tune in rather than conceptualize, attend as well as talk. Richter goes to something Stafford says in *Writing the Australian Crawl* to deepen her position, connecting it to his intrinsic compositional position: “creating is something other than putting together materials into the service of a pre-selected goal.” The symbolist confirms; the immanentist seeks.

Hanna Larson confirms the preceding idea in her essay, “William

This is how teaching and composing diverge

Stafford’s Process and ‘Parentage,’ an Archival and New Critical Analysis.” In “Parentage” Stafford is gently critical of his father for being “heroic” in thinking he understood more than he really could” [empirically]: “There was never a particular he couldn’t

understand, / but there were too many of them in too long a row, / and like many another he was overwhelmed.” Stafford, though, like a true immanentist, allows “the world to guide him,” as Larson observes, “instead of imposing his own understanding on to the world.” “Parentage” ends “I’d just as soon be pulled by events to where I belong.”

The divergence between Stafford and his father can be seen in a poetic sense in Altieri’s contrasting of the Romantic Image and the Deep Image:

a romantic image, like Stevens’ “Jar in Tennessee,” which transforms the place in terms of a created order, gives way to the ideal of a Deep Image that abides in the place where psyche and world share a sense of “the interdependence of all things alive.”

The closing quotation is from an essay by Robert Bly, “The Dead World and the Live World,” first published in his magazine *The Sixties*, and reprinted in *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* as “the interdependence of all the beings in the world.” Robert Kelley, who originated the term *Deep Image*, wrote of it having “the superior rationality of the dream....” The Deep Image is associated with surrealism, particularly the Spanish variety, and with the interdependence of the conscious and the unconscious, the light and the dark, the human and the nonhuman. In “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” Bly says, “A poem is something that penetrates for an instant into the unconscious.” In her essay, “Deep Imagists: The Subconscious as Medium,” which specifically mentions Stafford, Leslie Ullman says of Bly’s sense of the spirituality in the Deep Image, it “derives its force from the natural world, from silence and solitude, and equips the writer to surface and fully confront the complexities of modern life.” This, I think, pertains to the quietist (See Sightings, p. 14) aspect of Stafford, who was a good friend of Bly’s. Altieri applies this idea to a “postmodern” (in Stafford’s case non-modern or a-modern) definition of the ego as “not a thing or a place for storing and ordering experiences” and “not a force transcending the flux of experience” but “an intense force deepening one’s participation in experience.” I think Stafford might go along with this definition, and

I know that is how reading Stafford's poetry makes me feel.

Elissa Herber's essay, printed on p. 4, "Drawing Connections in William Stafford's 'Connections,'" pulls some of the above thoughts together. First, she suggests one future for William Stafford, his sense of environmental alertness. Stafford's poetry witnesses for the intelligence, complexity, and deeply engaging mystery of nature, human and nonhuman. It's a vast, dark interdependence that won't be trapped or precisely mapped, no matter how we try.

A second future can be found in the way the poem, as Herber shows us, participates in experience and looks into the immanent and indwelling nature of things, what Herber calls, "the unknowable complexity of our relationships because in the end, all our relationships, thrive on the unknowable." Thrive is a good word here that takes its sustenance from the imminence of immanence, which are pronounced the same. It is about to happen—the numinous web of relationships can sometimes be glimpsed, felt, heard. The "ways without a surface we can find" lead Stafford to leap—and land, something Bly writes about in *Leaping Poetry* and is found in many poems of the Deep Image school, say Bly's "Surprised by Evening," or James Wright's luminous, "A Blessing," both of which have, like "Connections," an epiphanic last line.

The ending of "Connections," "And if we purify the pond, the lilies die," is a Deep Image, uniting the inner and the outer. It is also a paradox, a conundrum, much like Stafford's refreshment of the meaning of the word *fail* in "Level Light," which occurs because he looks deeply into the image of the sunset and sees the word beyond its usual meanings into a future with more profound realms. Religion, as well, is gathered into its universal aspect in "Tornado," leaving behind all the blind faiths, all the quarrelsome gods. These insights, nurtured by a participatory ego, a sense of witnessing and listening, as we find it in "Parentage" and "The Woman at Banff," bring us to what Stafford offers to the days to come. In the Deep Image way of thought, the unconscious and the nonhuman combine because the unconscious is a being, a body of awareness, and the nonhuman is a complex of energies, an immanence, an indwelling essence that offers a wholeness, a home, another world that is before us and around and in us. William Stafford's poetry joins the reader with a sense of the inner vitality of the world. His witness of immanence, the deep and unfathomable complexity of being, is a renewing if not redeeming intuition.

2016 Election (In Two Movements)

1. November 8

4am: freight train
rattles the necklaces on
my wife's bureau.
I lie in bed, dreaming
of Tom Waits, who says:
we've torn up the earth
like an old Christmas card.

cont. above with stanza break

2016 Election (In Two Movements), cont.

4:45: on the news
a frac-caused earthquake
shakes Oklahoma. Eighty buildings
damaged, but "the refinery
is untouched."

6:30: at the fire station,
rubber boots, coats, hang
by the gleaming trucks.
Smell of oil and newly-painted concrete.
Middle-aged women at folding tables
with printouts, everyone polite
and feeling important. The ballot
flimsy like a high-school test,
little bubbles to darken. Stress
causes me to read it twice.
Three times. It's hard to focus
and stay in the lines.

3:30 pm: we drive through the late afternoon--
in the distant folds of the bluff
shadows grow
great violet rivers. The earth
turns its back on the sun, and
I am invisible from space,
as are the billions of cells
that I am made of—all of them
holding hands as the night comes on.
In the rooms of the forest, yellow leaves
glow like candles. Spectral light –
the gold of sacrifice.

7:30 pm: my "I Voted" sticker is curiously similar
to the one they gave me
when I donated blood.

2. November 13

7:00 p.m.: in the brand-new high school auditorium
in Kasson, Minnesota. It's the school play:
children in uniforms are onstage singing
these are a few of my favorite things.
The backdrop of Austria trembles.
A boy with a Nazi armband appears,
his face the stone mask of hatred.
In the orchestra pit, the woodwinds cringe.
Outside the building, the wind howls in the parking lot.
One of William Stafford's little prairie towns,
an island of street lights amid dark fields:
one of those places where anything can happen.

JAMES ARMSTRONG

Tomasz Misztal and The Wing Over the Shoulder

Tomasz Misztal is a visual artist who I met at the Stafford Grove event. We were introduced by Kim Stafford, who showed me on his phone a small sculpture Misztal had done of his father. It's a bust of Bill with his coat thrown over his shoulder. I asked Tomasz if I might do a piece on him for this publication and he agreed.

In late October, my wife Ilka and I drove to Misztal's studio in the woods at the edge of Tryon Creek State Park, a small forest away from Bill's Sunningdale house and Stafford Grove. It's a smallish space he rents on the grounds of the studio of Kate McFadden, another visual artist. There we found Misztal among a plethora of sculptures and paintings, and I asked him about his relationship with the legacy



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Tomasz Misztal in his studio.

of William Stafford. That sounds awfully formal but the story begins simply. Tomasz was walking along the Willamette and found the Stafford Stones at Foothills Park. Being a sculptor, he stopped. Misztal is from Poland, where he received a PhD from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk and taught there for ten years. Some twenty years ago he came to Los Angeles to visit a cousin for Christmas. The possibility of an art commission held him in LA and, in the end, he did not return to Poland, moving to Santa Ynez in California, and then to Bend, and finally to the Portland area. He lives in Lake Oswego with his eleven-year-old daughter. Over the years his work (see his website), paintings, drawings, prints, sacred art, azulejos, murals, and sculptures, have had many showings in many places, including the Vatican.

He does not have a gallery connection right now. "I commission myself things," he says, calling his approach "inside out work." After encountering Stafford's work last year through Frank Boyden's amazing obelisks, he became intrigued. He had not reached out to English poetry because of the second language problem, but he found he was able to understand Stafford, particularly liking "Ask Me" and "First Grade." Misztal feels that he resonated with who Stafford was, his learnedness, his pacificism, his spiritual depth; he thought, "I'm with this guy." He reached out to Kim Stafford, who offered him a number of photos. He found a full-torso photo as his model, liking the line of the tie and the jacket over the shoulder like a folded wing.

Having an affinity for religious art and iconography, Misztal thinks Stafford was a deeply religious person who had no commitment to organized religion. He thinks of Stafford as one of the sages, a holy man devoted to the life of understanding life. His poetry goes, Misztal says, to the core of the question of meaning, "a tree, a river, a

little boy." In this sense, he says, Stafford is a believer with a sense of the best values of all religions, "When you are deeply religious, you become open." Misztal believes that writing is a spiritual exercise and because Stafford was "immersed in the stream of his own life, he was able to write and live a good life."

Misztal showed us a number of sketches he did with ideas for a Stafford sculpture as well as a large bust of Stafford that will go on the full-size sculpture of the figure he selected and talked of the role of the artist in society and culture, which he equates to that of a priest in a religion. Artists, he believes, are unscientific antennae and should be cherished like Saint John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, though, of course, the value of art cannot be measured. Society, he thinks, wants artists to suffer: "Stop, look, listen. People don't want that. But somehow voices like Stafford's remain."

Misztal feels it is important to attach the voice and word to the man. Though he loves Boyden's sculptures, they are words on a stone, a tribute to his poetry. "A person wrote those poems," Misztal told me, explaining his thought that his sculpture might begin the walk toward the river and the Stafford stones, taking the path from the man to his work, making it clear a human being, a body, a man, created the poems on the stones.



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Tomasz Misztal's bust of William Stafford.



Misztal's idea board of photographs.



Stafford with his coat over his shoulder.



Sketch of Stafford from photo.

PHOTOS BY IKA KUZNIK



PHOTO FROM MISZTAL'S WEBSITE

Santa Ynez angel II.



Striking a Blow.

PHOTO FROM MISZTAL'S WEBSITE



PHOTOS BY IKA KUZNIK

Exploratory sketches for Stafford sculpture.

Sightings: Beaver's Fire: A Regional Portfolio (1970-2010). By George Venn. La Grande, OR: redbat books, 2016.

By Tim Barnes

In the myth of Beaver's fire, as George Venn tells it, Beaver steals fire from the pine trees and brings it to the other trees—willow, birch, cottonwood. A cedar on a ridge above the confluence of the Grand Ronde and the Snake tells the Ni-Mi-Pu, the Nez Perce, that that's where Beaver got away, "the wise one who gave our people fire." Venn tells this story at the beginning of his book to capture what his years of teaching and writing have meant to him. It is a Prometheus story with the gods as pine trees and the fire as literature. He places his retelling of the myth in the context of the quest, with a departure, initiation, and return with a gift that "makes life accessible and possible in the world of suffering people and animals" and so "the wise one becomes the vehicle of illumination."

Beaver's Fire, which collects an impressive variety of work that Venn has done over forty years—literary biographies, interviews, reviews, poems, translations, editing, and essays (personal, cultural, historical)—is a vehicle of illumination. Working backwards in time from 2010 to 1970, this collection/anthology/portfolio is a history of Northwest literature, based on the premise of the region as microcosm rather than province. To borrow a phrase from Venn, *Beaver's Fire* marks a magic circle. Among the writers, artists, and historical figures encircled are Ellen Waterston, Fred Hill, Minor White, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Wallace Stegner, Ursula Le Guin, Carolyn Kizer, Richard Hugo, Nard Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, John Haislip, Lisa Steinman, Kim Stafford, Chief Joseph, Madeline DeFrees, John Witte, Theodore Roethke, Bernard Malamud, Leslie Fiedler, Gary Snyder, Robinson Jeffers, Kenneth O. Hanson, Vi Gale, and William Stafford. We find here in Venn's story of carrying the fire some penetrating glances into William Stafford doing the same. There are twenty-six pieces in the book and seven of them touch on Stafford, two focusing mainly on him, a review of *Down in My Heart* and "William Stafford in Northwest Literature," an essay first published in *Oregon English* in 1997. George Venn is one of our most distinguished and learned writers, literary scholars, thinkers, and cultural documentarians. He is a gifted poet, essayist, editor, historian, and teacher and if you don't believe me, his praises go on for four pages at the beginning of the book, including some from 1976 in which Stafford calls Venn's writing "direct, clear, and cogent" and characterizes him as "a self-motivated scholar with great ability and authority." Stafford got that right, as the reader will discover.

Beaver's Fire is an important, if not essential, contribution to Northwest literary and cultural history. It is also important and vital in understanding William Stafford's work and his place in Northwest literature. I begin with the two pieces that focus primarily on Stafford. In 1998 Oregon State University published a reprint of *Down in My Heart*, Stafford's 1947 memoir of his CO experience during World War II, now subtitled, *Peace Witness in War Time*. In

this review, first published in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Venn focuses on the difference between George, a central character who articulates a number of pacifist and anarchist positions, and the more subdued, observant narrator, unnamed but clearly the writer:

while the narrator's patience, acceptance, imagination, and passivity have saved him, George has been destroyed by his intelligence, intolerance, conviction, aggression, passion to act. He becomes the narrator's foil—the pacifist turned rebel, criminal, anarchist.

At the end of *Down in My Heart*, things do not look good for George. The last the narrator has heard is that George is in solitary, two weeks into a hunger strike, about to be force fed. Venn writes, quoting from *Down in My Heart*, that George "has been trapped by 'exhilarations of the outlaw, his personal freedom, and his constant living with rebellion.'" Though the textual evidence for this is inconclusive, Venn writes that "George dies abstracted, isolated, self-destroyed...." I feel somehow a certain connection here with Stafford's doubts about that noisy and sometimes short-lived bunch, the Beats. In an interview printed in *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty*, he tells Peter Stitt, "I felt the same unrest as those people [the Beats] but preferred different tactics." I'm reminded of a line from his poem, "Influential Writers," "Some of them write too loud." I once asked him if he had ever run into Neal Cassady; he hadn't.

There's another aspect to this that says something about Stafford as an artist, a fictioneer. Memoirs and novels intersect and one of those places is in condensation of conflict and the clarification of it with dramatic consequences. *Down in My Heart* is a lyrical book and Stafford wrote it during difficult times. It turns out, interestingly enough, that Chuck Worley, the person George is based on, died just last May at the age of ninety-eight. Worley's book, *Out of Bounds: Poems and Letters from Prison by a Conscientious Objector to the Good War*, tells of the two years he spent in jail after he walked out of alternative service (See p. 18). It looked grim for Worley when Stafford wrote *Down in My Heart*, which Worley mentions in his book, telling his wife:

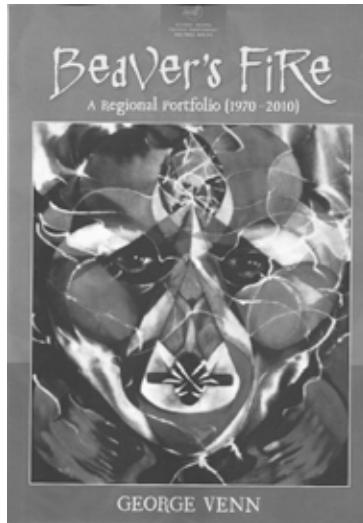
Bill wrote recently. He has just finished writing a book about his CO experiences as his Masters Degree project. I hope he gets it published—it's probably very cleverly written.

Part of that cleverness may have been Stafford's dramatization of George's situation. Venn's reading of it as a death accentuates Stafford's concern for Worley's situation as well as his belief that pacifism was a certain kind of rebellion, not a general one.

There is, clearly, a modestly didactic element to *Down in My Heart* and Venn finds it when he compares the book to *The Journal of John Woolman* (1774):

For ten chapters the reader learns how—among four years of other events—one man is saved and another lost—spiritual biography framed by implicit didactic intent in the tradition of Woolman and Aldridge.

Woolman is thought of as a gentle Quaker who became an American saint. He argued for abolition and people having a fair share of the



commonwealth.

Stafford took Woolman's journal with him to the CO camps. In *You Must Revise Your Life*, he remembers that "within two weeks" after Pearl Harbor, "carrying a copy of *The Journal of John Woolman* given me by my landlady, I was on my way to a camp for conscientious objectors in Arkansas." When asked about this in 1991 by *Friends Journal*, perhaps knowing his audience, he said, "My teacher gave me *The Journal of John Woolman* and when I read it, I saw."

Now I don't want to make too much of this but Woolman was connected, as were Quakers, to Quietism, which has heretical associations, being granted that status in 1687 by Pope Innocent XI, probably because it was closer to contemplation than meditation, too undirected and free to go where it would. George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends, imprisoned five times, also believed that god entered through silence. So did John Woolman, a man of very progressive political beliefs. In the mob scene chapter of *Down in My Heart*, before the COs are almost lynched, the narrator thinks, "we were in most ways the quiet of the land, and unobserved, we thought." It's a phrase he returns to in *You Must Revise Your Life*:

Imposing myself on language—or on a student, or on the citizens of a country—was not my style. I wanted to disappear as teacher, as writer, as citizen—be "the quiet of the land," as we used to designate ourselves in CO camps.

Just below this on the page he speaks of his quiet mornings in which, "Something is offering you a guidance available only to those undistracted by anything else." That's a Quietist stance to writing, writing as a kind of contemplation. The Quietists believed, according to my *Oxford World Encyclopedia* that "only in a state of absolute surrender to God was the mind able to receive the saving infusion of grace,"—otherwise known as silence, solitude, quiet, early mornings perhaps.

According to his introduction to "William Stafford in Northwest Literature," Venn read an early draft of this essay at the meeting of "The Original Stafford Group" that became the Friends of William Stafford. In it he compares Stafford with three other notable writers who came to the Northwest after World War II, the novelist Bernard Malamud (Oregon State University), the poet Theodore Roethke (University of Washington), and the critic Leslie Fiedler (University of Montana). He calls them "ambivalent sojourners" and Stafford "a settler, an insider, a local, *an immigrant become native.*" (my italics) Malamud and Fiedler eventually returned east and Roethke died in 1965, but Stafford "lived here long enough to make his way through all the psychological phases of immigrant life: initial euphoria, subsequent depression, slow and difficult accommodation, and ultimate acceptance." This allowed Stafford, in Venn's judgment, to create the "most inclusive and authentic—poetry we have after World War II."

In comparing Roethke and Stafford, Venn recalls a 1975 Northwest poetry symposium in which Stafford called Roethke "a great big exotic [who] slowed the Northwest school by being so significant and salient and un-Northwest." This prompted Richard Hugo, who was in the audience when Stafford said this, to shout, "Thank you, Martin Boorman," suggesting according to Venn that "Stafford's denial [of Roethke's significance for Northwest poetry] was equal to the denials by Hitler's secretary about Hitler." Audience members may have been unaware of the allusion and the insult doesn't seem to

have offended Stafford; it does, however, highlight some differences that Stafford had with Hugo and with what is known as Modernism. "Stafford rejected," Venn observes, "Roethke's Freudian stereotype of poets as sick people trying to heal themselves." He refers to an interesting moment in "The Third Time the World Happens: A Dialogue on Writing between Richard Hugo and William Stafford," published in a 1973 issue of the *Northwest Review* devoted to Stafford. In it Hugo talks about how poets "play back" their losses and it not being "healthy" but ok because "art isn't." Stafford responds that he is "uncomfortable" with that idea because he thinks "art is a healthy process." This is a key point about Stafford's approach—a poetic response to the world, to being, is natural, not a tortured reaction to psychic wounds. I am reminded of his response to the question of when he became a poet—most everyone else stopped. This is, as readers probably know, a tenet of the Romantics. Wordsworth wrote in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," "Trailing clouds of glory do we come... Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist when we grow up," is an aphorism attributed to Picasso.

"Stafford reminded readers over and over again," Venn reminds us, that, among other things, "writers should not let modernism—or any other literary precedent—determine what anyone else might want to say." A modernist perspective holds that human progress is self-evident, reason is superior to inspiration or intuition, nature is separate from culture, and art should be judged by modern criteria. "Theodore Roethke," Venn writes, "imported literary modernism—emotional volatility, outward aggression and inward division, self dramatization, confession, metrical lyricism" to the Northwest. Stafford, though, was doubtful about taking on the voice of literary modernism, as poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Dylan Thomas, and Anne Sexton, were not. This issue can be connected to the heresy of Quietism. Venn points out that "Stafford's pedagogy respected the silence at the center of all things, did not intend to dominate, or try to impose a whole universe." In his introduction to *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep*, Robert Bly remembers why Stafford was not invited back to the Bread Loaf Writers Conference:

The staff emphasized "finding your voice," which turned out to be a study of what the poetry establishment wanted at the moment. Every teacher gave one craft lecture. Stafford began, "I want to say that I don't agree with anything that has been said here this week. You already have a voice and don't need to find one."

Bread Loaf was, in a sense, advocating students meditate on finding a voice based on the current style, immediate standards; Stafford seems to be recommending contemplating what the quiet might leave the poet alone with—a good question. "In writing," Stafford said in one of his aphorisms collected in *Sound of the Ax*, "the trick is to give yourself good assignments."

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, the French philosopher Bruno Latour asks if in questioning modernism, "Will a different democracy become necessary? A democracy extended to things?" Latour asserts that one of modernism's essential dichotomies is the separation of nonhumans/nature from humans/culture. If Stafford believed that dichotomy, he couldn't have written, "I could hear the wilderness

(cont. on p. 16)

**"Poetry
is finally
subversive."**

(cont. from p. 15)

listen.” Nor could he calmly personify over and over again as he did or write “At the Un-National Monument along the Canadian Border.”

One of the finest and most significant pieces in *Beaver's Fire* supports the point just made. In “The Search for Sacred Space in Western American Literature,” Venn discusses the work of a number of writers essential to that notion: Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, Frank Waters, Vi Gale, and Stafford. Venn speaks of Stafford’s “search for sacred relationships with space” in which he is

conscious of the poet’s similarity to the mythopoetic predecessors in the West who not only saw ravens as birds, but who went far beyond the literal in establishing qualitative facts about the human spirit with Raven.

This line of thought or imaginative expansion of connection reminds me that Native Americans often referred to birds as cousins, that totem animals were part of their spiritual tradition, and they told stories about deer woman and the woman who married a bear. Personification creates a connection and the three Stafford poems Venn uses to illustrate Stafford’s “sacralization of space,” “Starting with Little Things,” “Weeds,” and “Bring the North,” all animate the human bond with the nonhuman world; the latter poem, for example, has these lines:

One way to find your place is like
the rain, a million requests
for lodging, one that wins, finds
your cheek: you find your home,
a storm that walks the waves.

The rain “requests” lodging and a storm “walks” the waves. This is a world in which the human and the nonhuman intertwine, live together. This poem, from *Someday, Maybe*, leads into the poem “Report to Crazy Horse,” which is about one of the “mythopoetic predecessors in the West” who seemed to have felt, as Venn says Stafford does, “a unity with things around him.” This is one of the great satisfactions of reading Stafford’s poetry and a sensibility sorely lacking in important places these days, it would appear.

Venn concludes this 1976 essay, first published in the *Portland Review* with these words: “If the voices of writers like Jeffers, Stafford, Abbey, Stegner, Snyder, and Waters are heard, their search for sacred space will become the headwaters for a future in both literature and society.” That subordinating conjunction at the beginning of the previous sentence hangs in the air rather resonantly these days, though the beaver’s fire in each of the names mentioned is carried glowing to us in this rather profound and important essay.

I would mention at this point that I was an advisory editor at the *Portland Review* when “The Search for Sacred Space in Western American Literature” was first published. I was also one of the seven readers who juried the selections for the contents of *Beaver's Fire* and have a laudatory but not inaccurate blurb in the front and back matter of the book. An interview I did with Carolyn Kizer, edited by Venn for *Oregon East*, appears in *Beaver's Fire*. And, finally, George and I share an interest in Charles Erskine Scott Wood (1852-1944), a poet, soldier, lawyer, artist and art patron, man of letters, and pacifist, who lived in Portland between 1884 and 1918. I co-wrote a book published by Oregon State University Press in 1997 called *Wood Works: The Life and Writings of Charles Erskine Scott Wood*. Venn has two pieces on Wood in *Beaver's Fire*, “Soldier to Advocate:

C.E.S. Wood’s 1877 Legacy” and “Chief Joseph’s ‘Surrender Speech’ as Literary Text.” Both pieces are literary biography of the first order—riveting, insightful, and diligently researched. The latter, an essay on the origins of probably the most famous item of Indian oratory in American history, is ended by Venn with a quote from Stafford: “Poetry is finally subversive.” I will leave the interested reader to discover why Venn chose this ending except to say that CES Wood was the man who put the speech down on paper and became a friend of Chief Joseph’s, sending his eldest son to spend two teenage summers with Joseph at the Nez Perce reservation in Colville, Washington. Wood was one of the very few men to call our wagon’s west romance what it also was, a “vivisection,” an imperialist devastation. It might be worth remembering that the Osama Bin Laden mission was code named Geronimo, the chief of the last free-roaming Native Americans in the United States; the second-to-last were the Nez Perce.

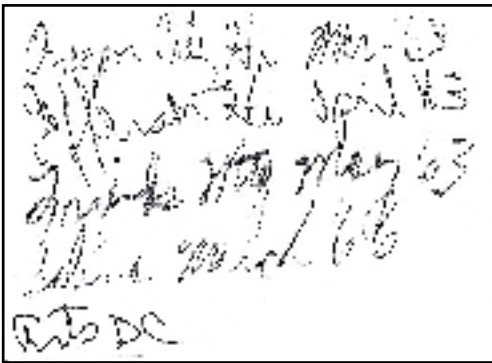
I would also mention another connection between Venn and this editor. I was on the board of the Oregon Council of Teachers of English (the OCTE) when Venn accomplished one of the most difficult, important, and beautiful tasks of editing in Oregon literary history, the six-volume Oregon Literature Series, completed in 1994. FWS board member Jim Scheppke, just appointed the state librarian, sponsored a celebration with Norma Paulus, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Governor Barbara Roberts to celebrate the event. I won’t go on about the Series, but it should be on the shelf of anyone interested in Oregon literature and/or Oregon life. I suspect it’s a collector’s item even now.

As *Beaver's Fire* comes to a close, and Venn’s literary and professorial career begin, there are two pieces that include Stafford and, interestingly enough, that other pillar of Northwest poetry in the seventies and eighties, Richard Hugo. Venn includes the transcript of a taped interview between Hugo and Ronald Bayes (see issue 19.2, p. 4), then teaching at Eastern Oregon University. In it Hugo says this of Stafford’s creative process: “Stafford works two hours every morning from 4 to 6 a.m., finishes about five poems a week, does not rewrite any of them, and simply has the mails flooded with them all the time.” This is the legend of how Stafford carried the fire. I heard, years ago, that he had ten batches of ten poems, one hundred poems, circulating at any given time. Ron Talney says it was 250 (See p. 22). Kim says in *Early Morning* it was “generally” fifty to one hundred. That he didn’t revise, of course, is Hugo hyperbole and is reflective of their other divergence—poetry as healthy, a spontaneous overflow, versus poetry as the healing of the wounded soul. Here, Hugo seems to be equating revision with suffering and, as Stafford’s manuscripts clearly show (Go to the archives and see!), misleads people about Stafford’s process, about how beaver carried the fire.

“Northwest Poetry and the Land,” the second piece at the end of the book and beginning of Venn’s career, a panel discussion featuring Stafford, Hugo, Madeline DeFrees, Venn, and Kim Stafford, among others, contains thoughts on the role of place in the making of poems, a question important to establishing the unique quality of Northwest literature. Responding to this statement by Hugo, “I believe that where something happened is just as important as what happens there,” Stafford says, “Perception is selective. We create a background for ourselves: legends, stories, a way of seeing things....”

once Hugo moved to Montana, Montana changed. I mean for me it changed." Writers and literature create places: Thoreau's Walden, Jeffers' Big Sur, Hugo's Montana. Other imaginations influence us, how we see.

Beaver's Fire is also a selection of perceptions, of legends and stories, the literary and cultural vision of George Venn. It sees and creates a country, a glowing microcosm of space, the Pacific Northwest. It is his story of how he carried the fire of literature as a writer and scholar, a teacher and a student, for more than four decades. His story enlightens other stories, other fires—that of William Stafford. Stafford's legacy, which Venn thinks might be "the pacifist as heroic settler of conscience arrayed against *any* form of empire." He was a peaceable man and peace enjoys the quiet in which to write, to be. That's *one* William Stafford I find here. *Beaver's Fire: A Regional Portfolio*, is our return on a forty year investment made by George Venn carrying the fire of literature and is, to use a word borrowed from myth, a boon, a great boon, and if opened and read, warmed by your hands and eyes, will bring you the gift of light as it is found in literature, our literature.



Thinking of My Father, Long Gone, in the Era of the Billionaire

"Can you be a good citizen,"
my father asked, "of a bad country?
Can you be a good follower
of a bad leader?"

And here I am, without
my father, to answer with my life.

Thoughts, words, actions will be
the history we make in spite of any
swagger at the wheel. "Tyrants,"
my father said, "depend
on followers."

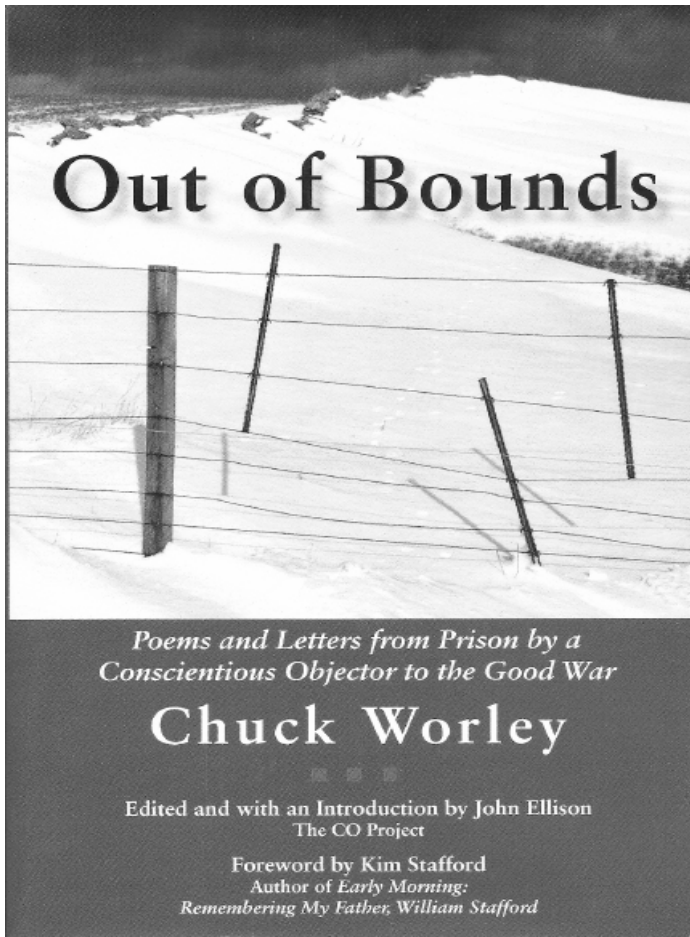
KIM STAFFORD

Below is a card from Stafford's lecture notes in the Lewis & Clark archives (see Jim Armstrong's works cited for the exact location). The back of the card (to the left) records that he read it three times in 1963, at Oregon City High School, Jefferson High School, a Friends meeting, and then again (as I read it) in Salinas, California, in 1966, and at Arts DC on a date not listed.

Chief Joseph--Surrender Speech

I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. Toohulsote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say no and yes. He who led the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are--perhaps they are freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs, I am tired. My heart is sad and sick. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.

(Joseph led his tribe 1300 miles through the wilderness in the cold, trying to get away to Canada.)



Out of Bounds was published in 2010 by Speak4Peace, with an introduction by Kim Stafford.



Chuck Worley, 1918-2016, poet, peace activist, and plumber. For more on Worley's life, google Chuck Worley conscientious objector.

Bill Stafford Says "So Long"

Most of us never have to live through a hurricane, tornado, earthquake, avalanche, not even a revolution, Thank God!

Bill's genius was to see the excitement of creation in little things, things anybody can see and enjoy. As he puts it, "On earth it is like this, a strange gift we hold, while we look around." And what he sees he sets down in words that are always fresh, sparkling with surprise, and yet so casual, nothing pretentious.

The way, for example, he anticipates in one poem his own obituary: "Clouds do a still-day dance called 'Disappear': They don't move—they're gone. And that's how I won't move, too. We'll have days, then comes that day. So long."

But in his own quiet way he has claimed, for all time, a little piece of the language. So long, Bill. Or as the Spanish say, (I like this way, too) Adios...

... a friend.

CHUCK WORLEY



Chuck and his wife Betsy, to whom the letters in *Out of Bounds* were written, in front of the White House in the late 1940s.

Birthday Reading in Winthrop, WA, Along the Methow River

Cindy Williams Gutiérrez sent this email to Paulann Petersen the day after the January 12th Stafford birthday reading at Trail's End Books in Winthrop, Washington. Paulann sent it along to this publication. Cindy later sent photos and comments, some of which can be found below.

"There were about 60 people at the reading last night! Half of them stood the entire hour and yet were entirely engaged. Some even sat in the kids' section of the bookstore on tiny little chairs in order to be close enough to hear. We had eight featured readers, including a high school sophomore doing an Honors project on William Stafford. Seven members of the audience read a Stafford poem or told a story about Bill, including a woman from Sisters, OR who knew Bill when she was a little girl (only she didn't realize who he was until she had grown up). A U.S. Forest Service retiree spoke about the Methow River poem plaques, reminding us where they all are and how they came about. People bought books and we served a delicious (professionally baked) cake (chocolate with raspberry filling and white chocolate-cream cheese frosting—Oh, my God!) decorated with the line: 'Don't ever let go of the thread.'

I am just thrilled! Some of the poets are already talking about next year. I billed it as the 'first-annual' for this very reason. I want it to live on. WA Poet Laureate Tod Marshall has offered to 'shine a light' on the reading on his Website, so I'm hoping to help make that happen."



Cindy Gutiérrez, the organizer of the Winthrop reading, told the audience that she discovered The Methow River Poems and William Stafford in the Trail's End bookstore sixteen years ago. She and her husband later gave the book as a gift at their wedding.



Ardis Bynum, a U.S. Forest Service retiree, spoke about the Stafford's poems inscribed on plaques in the Methow River Valley. She provided the names and location of each poem, along with the history of the project, the brainchild of former U.S. Forest Service Rangers Curtis Edwards and Sheela McLean.



Leo Shaw, a sophomore at Liberty Bell High School, fell in love with Stafford's poetry when he recited "Traveling through the Dark" as part of the Poetry Out Loud competition. His Honors project will focus on William Stafford.



Ken Bevis, a singer-songwriter, closed the reading with music he wrote to Stafford's poem "Watching Sandhill Cranes."

(cont. from p. 3)

by “Chief Joseph gave up; but another chief/ got away”—who might that chief be? Quite literally he is referring to White Bird, the Nez Perce war leader who escaped through army lines during the surrender and fled for Canada with about 50 followers. But on a more metaphoric level the statement has implications for the future. If we return to Stafford’s original imperative statement, “Go forward but never catch before,” we see the verb “catch” takes on a different resonance when it is read with the Nez Perce in mind. Who got caught? The Nez Perce. Yet they also got away (they were not exterminated). And the valleys are still full of yews. Something remains of aboriginal resistance to colonization. In the face of a relentless “progressive” notion of history, of which the idea of a “Space Age” will be the most recent and spectacular version, Stafford looks to a past that has not been extinguished, one that indeed might have a future of its own. This notion of an aboriginal future is present in a number of poems, including “Report to Crazy Horse” (TWII 138) where the speaker, an Indian, is telling the spirit of Crazy Horse about “the way it is now,” which is also “the way we were trying to find”—the speaker concludes by noting that the land still holds its potential:

The chokecherries along our valley
still bear a bright fruit. There is good
pottery clay north of here. I remember
our old places. When I pass the Musselshell
I run my hand along those old grooves in the rock.

A later, very brief poem, “Indian Caves in the Dry Country,” succinctly expresses this notion that the landscape stores a future for aboriginal life:

These are some canyons
we might use again
sometime. (TWII 138)

For Stafford, the vision of a coming Space Age during which humans will leave the earth and colonize the sky was not a compelling future; his interest is in reclaiming the relationship with the planet that pre-moderns had.

Stafford’s daily writing for October 5th does not end with his three-point list. He also pens a rough draft of a poem:

The rain-appointed morning by steps
across the hills from here
may bring you our cold
fire or another plan.
After emergencies when fear lived
under the logs and sniffed that evening air
we thought that similarity was a plan. (5 October)

Stafford’s little poem describes not the heavens of Sputnik, but local Portland weather; in fact it had been raining all that week, meaning that Portlanders were not able to see the “Russian moon” cross the night sky. In Stafford’s poem, the rain is depicted as bringing two possibilities to humans. It points us toward a choice: either “our cold/fire or another plan.” The significance of this is obscure (we don’t know exactly who the “we” of the poem is, or what “cold fire” might be), but one reading would be: the inclement weather will force us to confront a neglected or exhausted solution (hence “cold” fire) or it will urge us to try something else.

The next line: “After emergencies when fear lived,” evokes, in the context of Stafford’s previous entry, both the emergencies of the Nez

Perce, pursued across the Northwest by the U.S. Army in a hopeless bid for freedom, and the emergency of the present time, when a “Russian moon” threatens from above. Either way, community is threatened by technology and its notion of progress.

But in the next line, “fear” is oddly personified as a forest animal, one that lived “under the logs and sniffed that evening air.” As is often true for Stafford, human concerns are not separate in kind from animal concerns—despite Modernity’s triumphalist notion that humans are fundamentally separated from animals. Stafford often depicts humans as imbedded irrevocably in the folds of the planet, in material interchanges with other living things; fear and anguish are the same for all. In his poem “Ceremony,” for example, Stafford relates the experience of being bitten by a muskrat—he connects the “trembling” muskrat, the river “incarnadined” with his blood, and a “quavering owl” in the nearby woods as components of a unified experience remembered as a kind of “marriage.” In relation to the “reason vs. emotion” opposition, whereas, as we have seen above, Moderns believe human reason distinguishes us fundamentally from the animal world. Though we are (embarrassingly, from their perspective) akin to animals in our emotions, reason separates us irrevocably. But in Stafford’s poems emotion seems to unite the poem’s speaker with surrounding beings and with the environment. Just so, in Stafford’s little proto-poem of October 5th, the fear raised by human emergencies is palpable, feral, found under a log. Fear is reduced from an abstraction to a concrete, animal particular, situated in a local place.

The last line of this poem continues the syntax of the previous line—while fear was living under a log and sniffing the air, Stafford says, “we thought that similarity was a plan.” This can be read in many directions. Again, who are “we”? Similarity to what? In context this could refer to the surrender of the Nez Perce, for whom assimilation was a strategy for survival; it could refer to the white demand for that assimilation, meaning that the American plan for Indians was to make them into copies of white religious, cultural and economic organization. It could equally refer to the knee-jerk reaction of each Cold War superpower to actions taken by the other. The “space race” in particular would become an extremely expensive version of “similarity [as] a plan.” Either way, the implication of the poem is that we face a decision, our fear is animal-like, and we are likely to make the wrong choice through imitation.

When we take this entry as a whole, what is most striking is this: at the launch of Sputnik, while people all over the world were looking up in wonder and in fear, Stafford’s mind went to ground. As others were obsessed with an unknown future, he turned to an ignored but potentially reusable past; as others were staring up at a new mechanical moon, he was thinking of a “rain appointed morning” and wet logs.

There is another aspect of this which bears on Stafford’s pacifism. Stafford often stresses the importance of failing and surrendering—in both his peace activism and his art, he embraced an ethic of resilient vulnerability. The essence of being a conscientious objector, for him, was non-participation rather than violent opposition. As he says in “Freedom of Expression,”

My feet wait there listening, and when
they dislike what happens they begin
to press on the floor. They know when
it is time to walk out on a program. (TWII 174)

News, Notes, and Opportunities

The idea that “you need not/accept what’s given” is crucial to his experience. He knew that the work of peace requires a surrender of the ego to larger values: this requires also an acceptance of one’s fallibility. Perhaps one of Stafford’s most famous quotes about writing is “I must be willingly fallible to deserve a place in the realm where miracles happen” (*Oregon Message*). The surrender of Chief Joseph would have a special meaning for him. Joseph’s surrender oration was much disseminated in print as an example of grace and nobility in surrender. But to Stafford perhaps Joseph’s words would mean, in this context, surrender is not “defeat” so much as refusal to engage in Mutually Assured Destruction. Joseph surrendered in order that the Nez Perce might live another day.

In the William Stafford Archives is a 4x5 notecard with the entirety of Joseph’s surrender speech in typescript (Stafford “Chief Joseph”). On the back of the card Stafford has carefully noted events in the 1960s at which he read aloud from this card: readings at high schools, at a Quaker meeting house, at an arts event in Washington, D.C. We don’t know exactly in what context he read from the card, but we might surmise that this was part of his larger message in the decade when Americans were growing increasingly divided, when the Vietnam War and the Cold War were both ramping up. Perhaps he took comfort and courage from the resilient failure of Chief Joseph, who, though he surrendered on the battlefield, seemed to have lodged himself in the American imagination through the power of his words.

In Stafford’s poem, “For My Young Friends Who Are Afraid,” he says:

There is a country to cross you will
find in the corner of your eye, in
the quick slip of your foot—air far
down, a snap that might have caught.
And maybe for you, for me, a high, passing
voice that finds its way by being
afraid. That country is there, for us,
carried as it is crossed. What you fear
will not go away: it will take you into
yourself and bless you and keep you.
That’s the world, and we all live there. (TWII 183)

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The Friends of William Stafford will present a panel called “An Afternoon in the Stacks”: Encountering William Stafford in His Archive at the American Literature Association Conference in Boston, May 25-28th, of this year. This editor will chair the panel. Panelists and their topics are as follows: Zachariah Selley, Lewis & Clark College, “A Lifetime of Choices: Exploring the William Stafford Archives”; Fred Marchant, Suffolk University, “*Another World Instead*: Editing the Early Poems of William Stafford”; James Armstrong, Winona State University, “From Cursive To Digital: Using William Stafford’s On-Line Archive In The Classroom”; Clara Richter, Winona State University, “Introductory Rites and Final Blessings: The First and Last Poems in William Stafford’s Collections of Poetry.”

Elizabeth Bishop on William Stafford. Former FWS board member Don Colburn spent a month at Yaddo recently and sent along this excerpt from a 1981 *Paris Review* interview with Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop, who was consultant to the Library of Congress from 1949-1950, says this about Bill as she recalls a reading in which former consultants, now called poets laureate, were gathered together for a reading. “Stafford was good. I’d never heard him and never met him. He read one very short poem that really brought tears to my eyes, he read it so beautifully.” Bishop spent time at Yaddo and Stafford wrote “Traveling through the Dark” there in June of 1956.

Late poet’s voice honored his roots, mesmerized readers. This is the headline for an article by Kathy Hanks that was published in print and online in *The Hutchison News* on January 16th. Hanks presents these thoughts about Bill from the current Kansas poet laureate Eric McHenry: “Writing teachers always talk about ‘finding your voice,’ and I like it that Stafford rejected that idea: He believed that you’ve already got your voice; it’s already in you, and it just needs opportunities to speak. So he got up early every morning and wrote poetry, not necessarily expecting to produce a great poem every day, but knowing that, over time, the poems he needed to write would emerge.” Google Stafford birthday Hutch News for the full article.

Summer Fishtrap: A Gathering of Writers. July 10-16, Wallowa Lake, Oregon. The 30th annual event will feature Naomi Shihab Nye, Anis Mojgani, Luis Alberto Urrea, Kim Stafford, Scott Russel Sanders, Debra Magpie Earling, Jamie Ford, and more, offering workshops in fiction, memoir, and poetry. Visit fishtrap.org or call 541-426-3623 for more information.

Poetry in Honor of Stafford: On Tuesday, April 18 at 7pm the Lake Oswego Public Library and the Friends of William Stafford present an evening of poetry in honor of William Stafford. Featured readers are former Oregon poet laureate Paulann Petersen and Lake Oswego city planner and poet Scot Siegel. This program is sponsored by the Friends of the Lake Oswego Public Library. The library is located at 706 Fourth Street, Lake Oswego. For more information, contact Alicia Yokoyama at 503-534-4228 or ayokoyama@ci.oswego.or.us.

(cont. on p. 22)

(cont. from p. 21)

Oregon Book Awards. *Words That Burn* by Cindy Williams Gutiérrez, a play in which William Stafford is a character, is one of five plays nominated for the Angus Bowmer Award For Drama. The awards ceremony will be held on Monday, April 24th at the Gerding Theater at the Armory in Portland, Oregon.

Todd Barton, “For My Friends.” Barton composed an original piece of music to “For My Friends” that was performed at the William Stafford birthday reading in Ashland, Oregon, on January 17th. The three-and-a-half minute composition was performed by pianist Alexander Tutunov; the poem was read by Vince Wixon. Featured poets were Morgan Hunt, Jim Bronson, Alma Rosa Alvarez, Jay Schroder, Dylan Kistlin, and Joshua Boettiger. Google Stafford Barton Tidings for an article by Joe Zavala in the *Ashland Tidings*.

Performance: Words That Burn. This play, written by Cindy Williams Gutiérrez and nominated for an Oregon Book Award, featuring a character based on Stafford’s World War II memoir of being a conscientious objector, *Down in My Heart*, will be presented at the Merc Playhouse in Twisp, Washington, on May 26th and 27th. Google Merc Playhouse for further details.

“My World: Remembering a ‘very human’ William Stafford,” By Ronald Talney.

“Since Stafford’s death, there seems to have been a concerted effort, unfortunate in my view, to almost deify him, especially by folks who either didn’t know him or didn’t know him very well.”

“I have nothing but goodwill toward him and appreciation for his work. However, he was not a “poetry god,” as some seem to make him out to be, which is why I am concerned that this trend to almost deify him at times ultimately does him and his body of work a disservice.”

“He once told me he had approximately 250 poems circulating among editors of magazines at any one time. This was a poet who must have had editors all across the country and beyond seeking his work. However, when any poems were returned unused, he would immediately repackage them and send them out elsewhere. This was a monumental and time-consuming process. This was a man who I believe was driven by a substantial ego, an artist who vigorously sought public recognition for his creative efforts.”

“As a great admirer of Stafford and his work, I am encouraged by these acts that evidence his humanness. For me, they make his work even more meaningful and endearing. I want to know that he had an ego. I want to know that he could react in human terms. I want to know that he was not above the daily struggle. That he faced the same challenges I and every other writer or poet faces, and in the process, survives.”

These are excerpts from a piece Talney wrote for the *Lake Oswego Review* last August, around the anniversary of Bill’s death. Talney, a poet, lawyer, and Friend of William Stafford, makes an important point. Stafford’s sense of personal identity was connected with his self esteem and sense of self importance, his ego. His approach to publishing reflects that. In *Feeling at Home: An Interview with Dorothy Stafford*, she remembers that the occasion of his first acceptance in *Poetry* in 1948 “was a great cause for rejoicing.” She also says

in the same paragraph, “Bill didn’t go around much showing his work.” Stafford liked very much the quiet of sending out poems in envelopes and seeing how they fared. Stafford made himself available to the muse and his musing available to literary magazines. He could also type quite fast. Indeed his gift for generating many poems and publishing them widely is quite remarkable, involving discipline and organization. Two of his archivists, Doug Erickson and Jeremy Skinner, write in “‘A Rich Darkness’: Discovering the William Stafford Archives at Lewis & Clark College,” an essay published in *The Oregon Historical Quarterly*, that the archives are “surprisingly well organized, mostly according to Stafford’s original order,” calling him a “meticulous record keeper.” Stafford, it would appear, was enchanted by most parts of being a writer and quite good at them, and had like all of us an ego, as is evident in that enchantment.

Talney’s piece offers only one group who might be responsible for the “almost deification” of Stafford, for trying to make him a “poetry god” and that is the Friends of William Stafford, which in his words, “sponsors poetry events around the literary world.” This group, though “formed in our city,” seems to contain “folks who either didn’t know him or didn’t know him well,” and who are doing his legacy “a disservice.” It is not clear what Talney means by this. He does not name those disservices but, instead, supports his point by a claim of authority—I knew him better than you. One of the ways he says this is true is that Stafford once judged a poetry contest that Talney won, a not insignificant one. The logic here is that sponsoring events deifies a writer, specifically Stafford. The cause and effect chain here is weak, a slippery slope at best, and also flawed at the premise. There are many groups who sponsor writers: I belong to the Robinson Jeffers Society, The John Steinbeck Society, and the Willa Cather Society. There are thousands of them in the world, one of the biggest being the Jane Austen Society; dozens of them will be at this year’s American Literature Association Conference, including a panel sponsored in part by The Friends of William Stafford. If this is deification, then thank goodness for small gods.

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friends of **WILLIAM STAFFORD**

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William Stafford and the Dawn
of the Space Age
By James Armstrong

∞ ∞ ∞

Sightings: George Venn's
Beaver's Fire

∞ ∞ ∞

The Immanent Stafford
By Tim Barnes

Please notify sender of change of address

PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK



*"And if we purify the pond, the lilies die."
--William Stafford*