



friends of WILLIAM STAFFORD

A Journal & Newsletter For Poets & Poetry
Volume 24, Issue 1 Summer-Fall 2021

Near to the City of David

By William Stafford

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

CHAIR: DENNIS SCHMIDLING

TIM BARNES

PATRICIA CARVER

MARTHA GATCHELL

JOAN MAIERS

HELEN SCHMIDLING

ARMIN TOLENTINO

NATIONAL ADVISORS

Robert Bly

Li-Young Lee

Fred Marchant

Paul Merchant

Paulann Petersen

Chris Merrill

Naomi Shihab Nye

Gary Snyder

Leslie Ullman

On the east edge of Pawnee City, along the spur track that crosses the old slough, there still clings a little farm of weedy acreage and small buildings near a wispy hedge of mulberry trees. I saw the place last week while accompanying our Christian Endeavor group to the state meeting. The people I knew at that farm are gone now, but I remember vividly a winter adventure when I came through the snow to find a mother and baby there, and helped in a Christmas play, and was sorry.

That winter when I got home for the college holidays I called up the Crothers. It was Wiley Crothers' first year as pastor of the Pawnee Methodist Church; and it was largely from him (may I be to others as he was to me!) that I learned about the rewards—and the penalties—of being a minister. And I also learned the care it takes to do right, and the irony that lurks in the doing. Like in that Christmas adventure.

Gladys Crothers answered the phone, told me that holiday troubles were piling high on the parsonage, but that if I could go with them for a drive the three of us could have a visit, and could get to see some people she thought I'd be interested in.

It was a clear, cold day, and we were hilarious, driving out from the Crothers'. Wiley, always able to throw his spirits high, was talking fast, explaining what had been going on in the home town, asking me about courses at school, discussing professors we both had had. He drove carelessly along, and gayly hushed his wife's cautions when he swerved toward a jackrabbit by the road and shouted "Hey!" to see it run.

"We're having a Christmas play, 'The Flight into Egypt,' Bert. And here's the great thing—" he slapped the steering wheel—"Mrs. Donaldson, dear Mrs. Donaldson, is playing Mary, with her baby as the infant." He nodded with satisfaction, and Gladys turned to me to explain.

"It's good because now she feels right

toward the program, and we've been afraid she'd not like us. You know she caused trouble at the church before Wiley came."

I did know. Mrs. Donaldson was the driving force in women's work; and her mother was one of the top figures in Pawnee City society. Mrs. Donaldson was a good person to have on the minister's side.

We had turned by the water tower, off the highway, and I asked where we were going. "To the Woosters'," Wiley said. "They're the loneliest people in town, Bert; and we have become great friends. He closed his jaw and set his chin in a gesture I knew. There was something impulsive and appealing about that look. Wiley thought he saw a wrong, and he was out to right it.

"If it's the last thing we do," he went on,

"Gladys and I are going to make them a part of this town."

I knew the Woosters; everyone did. But I had never visited them; no one ever did. As soon as I saw Wiley's gesture, though, I felt ashamed; and I wondered why I had never thought of doing what he was doing. The Woosters, you see, were Negroes, the only Negroes in our town; and as I looked ahead at their little house leaning there by the mulberry hedge,



Flight into Egypt by Doré

I saw, through the Crothers' attitude and through a searching of my own soul, how lonely the place was. The measure of that loneliness was the effort it took us to make the visit. It took the force of a new minister and his young wife, sensitive as no native townsman could be, to perceive the possibility of going down the Woosters' road for any reason other than to inquire the way to somewhere else.

As we turned in beside their house, I saw Mr. Wooster's rattly lumber wagon down by the barn. I had seen it often in town, where Abe Wooster picked up garbage and hauled it to his farm. He fed pigs; and he had a few cows. Now and then I had seen his wife beside him—a small neat woman, riding with dignity, having a place in our town, but a place I hadn't thought about. As we stopped now, she came out of the house and along the walk of boards, calling out, "Hello, hello. We're glad to see you again!" She gently pushed a cat

(cont. on p. 2)

(cont. from p. 1)

aside with her foot, opened the gate, and restrained with her hand a gangly puppy that was jumping at her side.

She and Gladys Crothers, old friends, went up the walk ahead of us; and at the door Mrs. Wooster turned and called, "Abe, oh Abe!" in a high clear voice. "He'll come on up to the house," she said. "Come on in, out of the cold; we have a surprise for you."

In the front room, by a wood stove with a fire fluttering inside, was a young woman, holding a baby. "This is my daughter Virginia, Mrs. Virginia Crane," Mrs. Wooster said. "She's up from Texas for Christmas and to show the old folks her baby."

"Here, honey." Mrs. Wooster held out her hands to the baby and took it over by Gladys. The daughter, Virginia Crane, and Wiley gossiped about the Negro college in Texas where Virginia's husband was a teacher.

The visit was an adventure to me. You see, the Woosters were the only Negro family in the area. I'm sure the visiting was a new experience for them too. I soon got over feeling strange; and by the time Mrs. Wooster and I had gone down to get the cows, while Virginia Crane and Gladys had gone to feed the chickens and Abe and Wiley had stayed by the fire, I felt at home. I was eager to compensate for my reticence at first, and I believe Mrs. Wooster understood.

By the barn gate she stopped and called the cows. Over the barnyard her voice, clear and young, carried to the small pasture, and the cows came in. During intervals of our talk she spoke to the cows, with a kindness I hadn't heard before. "Hello, Pretty, you good old thing; come on now, Brownie; ohhh you Sally girl. Now, come on in, honeys."

Standing with a shawl over her head, a brown coat thrown around her, rubber boots on her feet, she called out her evening ritual. And the cows in their slow way responded, came from the cold field, and ambled into the barn.

We milked and talked like old friends and went up to join the others. When the Crothers and I drove away, with the lights on now, for it was dark, the Woosters came out on the back porch to wave, and from the lighted window Virginia Crane held up the baby and waved his hand.

The next day, the day before Christmas, the sequel came. While I was helping nail up scenery for the "Flight into Egypt," to be given that night, Gladys came into the church hall and beckoned Wiley away from his job of holding the framework of one of the pyramids. The two talked for a while and then stood in thought. I left the volunteer workers and strolled over in time to hear Gladys say, "Oh, she'll probably be all right—she's a big healthy child." She turned to me. "Mrs. Donaldson's baby isn't feeling well, and we are planning what to do if we have to find another."

"We could get Gale Jackson," she said, turning to Wiley.

"Too big," Wiley said. "Too big, and cries all the time."

He stopped, considering.

"Come on in to lunch," Gladys said.

All through the lunch, which I ate with the Crothers in their kitchen, they talked about the play.

"If Joan Donaldson is too sick, we could substitute a big

doll," Gladys said. "But in the last scene it would be much better to have a real baby." She looked out the window. The sky was overcast. "I hope the weather won't stop our program," she said.

"No," said Wiley, "we'll have our program, all right; but I have just been thinking about it. You know, there's a baby we can't even consider for the part, and it makes me wonder."

"I thought of that right away," Gladys said. "And of course we can't, even on Christmas Eve, but we can get the Woosters to come to the program at least, and the baby will enjoy the lights."

"Do you think they'll come?" asked Wiley.

"Yes," Gladys said, "I'll get them to come."

That night they sent me in the Crothers' car to pick up the Woosters and Mrs. Crane and the baby. "I just told them that we'd like them to see our play," Gladys said. "I didn't need to say anything more. Virginia Crane will come, and try to bring the old folks too."

It was dark at the farm. The day had been cold, and now it was beginning to snow. As I turned into the yard my lights picked out the barn and the old wagon out by the fence.

Inside, all were by the front-room stove; and Virginia Crane was ready to go. She bundled up the baby, let the grandparents give it a last look and then went out ahead.

"We're not going," Mrs. Wooster said. "Too cold for us old folks."

"My place is here by the fire," Abe said. "These cold days gets into my bones."

At the door of the parsonage Gladys came out to meet my passengers and to wave me on. I had last-minute scene-shifting to do.

No matter what else may be said for that first Christmas of the Crothers at the Pawnee Methodist Church, we can remember a good play and a good snowstorm. By seven o'clock there were little eddies of snow at the window; the walks were covered. And the wind was beginning to blow. I was busy inside, but people arriving talked of the storm.

And the play went well. Joan Donaldson was well enough to come—I saw Mrs. Donaldson bring her in, all wrapped in blankets. After everything was set backstage, I went around and came in the back of the church to watch. Virginia Crane was near the back; I could see her turned-up, round hat and her velvet collar; and just as the curtain was raised, Mrs. Wooster herself came quietly in, saw me, raised her finger to her lips, and sat down quickly by the door. No one looked around, and she sat there intent, leaning forward, her hands on the back of the pew ahead of her.

In the middle of the play, when Joseph catches the baby away from the Roman soldiers, the baby gave a satisfactory little yawning cry. The rest of the time she was quiet. I saw Virginia Crane hold her baby up to look. All through the play Mrs. Wooster sat with her hands on the pew ahead and with her eyes turned toward the stage, except when she glanced around now and then to where Virginia sat holding her baby.

I had to hurry around to the side door at the end of the last act; and I found snow all over the ground. I hurried backstage

and folded the curtain away from the hot light-reflectors. Mrs. Donaldson, with her coat on over her long costume, was picking up blankets from a chair by the door, and her baby was propped in the cradle used in the play. Gladys at that instant came backstage, holding the dark, round-eyed Wooster grandchild, and she knelt down by the Donaldson baby and presented the two—the dark and the light babies—to each other. She pushed back the blankets and the two stared. She leaned over the cradle and pressed her hand to the baby's forehead, turning at the same time to exclaim, "I believe Joan is all right, Mrs. Donaldson."

Mrs. Donaldson hurried over and snatched up Joan.

"Why, what's the matter?" Gladys went on. "Everything is all right."

"All right, yes," Mrs. Donaldson said, "I suppose everything is all right, but--." She looked at the dark baby Gladys was holding close and patting on the cheek, but didn't say any more, and I was glad; for as I turned to the side door I saw that Mrs. Wooster had come around the church and was waiting to take the baby. As if she had not noticed anything, she held out her arms, smiling.

"My pretty one," Mrs. Wooster said. "Come, my pretty one." She turned to Gladys. "Wasn't the baby in the play good?" she said, and then speaking to her child, "Wasn't the baby in the manger a good child for the long journey?" Mrs. Wooster looked at Mrs. Donaldson, who turned away.

I was going to drive the Woosters home, though I wondered about the drifts at the edge of town; but Mrs. Wooster, walking carefully and drawing her brown coat over the baby, said that Abe and the wagon were out in front. "He couldn't stay home when his boy's out in the snow," she said. "He couldn't no more stay home than he could fly. He's got the coal oil stove and blankets."

"Here's your little boy," she called out to the wagon, which Abe had pulled over to the curb. There was a lantern glowing by the bench in front. The two old horses were stamping and steaming.

Abe beat his hands together and got down slowly. Snow was drifted on his shoulders, and he bent with a kind of snow-bowed care over the child, lifting it up to Virginia Crane, who had scrambled to the seat.

Gladys came hurrying out with a goodbye; and as Abe started the horses, Wiley broke away from the little haloed group saying good night at the lighted church door, and shuffled through the snow to the wagon. We stood and waved as the rickety wheels of the garbage wagon crunched away down the street and the old horses, slow and steady, rocked their heads up and down in the light of the diminishing lantern. Then we turned to each other by the light from the church door and wished each other a merry, merry Christmas.

As I remember it, we did have a merry Christmas, and my holiday was all too short that year. I felt that perhaps the Crothers has succeeded in bringing the Woosters into Pawnee's Christmas celebration. Joan Donaldson's illness turned out to be scarlet fever, and Mrs. Donaldson wasn't able to get around during the holidays; so I didn't get to learn how she felt about the guests at the church program. Her feelings would do much toward deciding the people's

attitude about the Crothers' action.

I remember that Abe Wooster stood at our back door on New Year's Day and said, "Millicent had me bring you these strawberry preserves, Mr. Bert. And she thought you might give this other jar to Mrs. Donaldson—good tastings for a sick girl."

I passed the jar along to the Crothers, for them to send along to the Donaldsons.

The whole Christmas experience would have been not too unusual, I know, and long forgotten, but for a final scene—the one I remembered clearest last week when I saw the old farm from the train.

On the day I was to go back to school, Gladys phoned just before the train time and said that Abe had stopped to tell them that Virginia Crane's baby had died, down in Texas, of pneumonia. No, not as a result of the trip, but after the arrival home. Yes, she and Wiley were going out that evening. She just thought I'd like to know.

I left the house at once and checked my suitcase at the station, and walked out the railroad track to the Woosters' place. The mulberry hedge was a thin protection for that little house. The sky was gray above the prairie. Though most of the snow had melted, the air was cold.

The wagon was not in the yard, and I knocked till the gangling puppy ran down from the barn. Mrs. Wooster was up there, and I walked to where she stood in the barn door. She responded to my hello, but her smile was gone, and she pushed the puppy down with hands that moved without direction.

"The Crothers phoned me," I said. She nodded and just leaned against the door of their old barn and looked at the ground before her feet.

"This came yesterday," she said, taking from her coat pocket an envelope already old and creased. She put the note back into her pocket. "I saw that woman Christmas Eve," she said. "She thought her baby was too clean to touch our baby."

"She didn't really mean it," I said. "What you saw was just a quick action she did, and she didn't really mean it."

"No," Mrs. Wooster said, "I know that." She put her hands on the door frame beside her, and I thought of how she had sat in church.

The chickens clucked from the pen nearby; and I could hear a pig grunting and scratching himself on a board. The cold wind cut past the edge of the barn.

We stood in that cold wind and talked for a long time; and our talk was mostly about Pawnee City and its people, and about my going to school, and about everything but the news in the note. I wanted to explain that I thought the Crothers would feel especially bad about the news, and I hinted at my concern.

She hesitated and took the note from her pocket again, turning the envelope over and over in her hands. Then she said, "Mrs. Donaldson's baby was sick that night."

I nodded.

"That's all right," she said. "Virginia doesn't know that." Speaking in a low voice and almost stopping several times, she went on. "Mrs. Donaldson's baby had scarlet fever, they found out later, and she's getting well now—I'm glad."

(cont. on p. 4)

(cont. from p. 4)

Suddenly she turned to me and said, "There is one thing Abe doesn't know. His eyes are bad—I read things to him. He doesn't know that our baby died, not of pneumonia, but of scarlet fever." She held out the note, and I read it. Four days after getting home, the baby had taken sick, and had died two days later, of scarlet fever.

"I know you can't be sure about such things as that," Mrs. Wooster said. She spoke slowly and held the note tightly against her side. "But I just had to tell someone what the note said."

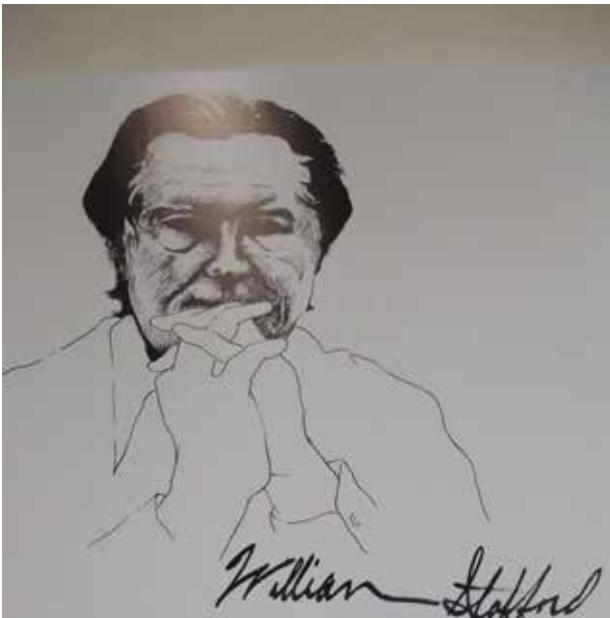
"No, you can't tell, of course." My voice sounded thin to me, and I spoke louder. "You can't tell at all, of course. But I-- No, but how will the Crothers feel, too?"

"I can't tell them," Mrs. Wooster said. "And I told Abe wrong because of how he might feel. No, I'm not ever going to tell anyone, nobody in this town." She put the note far into her side pocket.

After I left her I looked back, and she waved from the barnyard. She kept one hand in that side pocket; and as I turned away I heard her calling the cows.

It's long ago, and I left Pawnee City that afternoon for college, and shortly afterwards left the town for good and all; but I remember how lonely Mrs. Wooster was back there, with the note in her pocket. And last week when I saw that old farm from the train I thought at once of the baby on Christmas Eve, and of Mrs. Wooster standing alone in the barnyard. I remembered how she sounded when she said, "So, Pretty, you good old thing," in the compassionate voice that had said to me, "No, I'm not ever going to tell anyone, nobody in this town."

Editor's Note: Stafford sent this previously unpublished story, which seems to have been written in 1947 or 48, to two publications, *Atlantic Monthly* (7/7/48), and *Ladies Home Journal* (8/6/48). His typed sheet, "Writings at Work: Short Stories and Their Travels," record that he received a "warm note" from *Ladies Home Journal*.



Sketch by Stephen Henslin

A note on William Stafford's story of leaving Kansas

by Kim Stafford

As a short story, "Near to the City of David" is beautiful, intriguing, sentimental in a way, the work of an earnest beginner. As a document, however, the story reveals essential elements of William Stafford's character and life-direction. The story's narrator, Bert, reports the drama of the idealist minister, the prejudiced white woman, and the winsome outsiders who are Black. It's Christmas in Kansas, time for a ritual of exclusion in the name of the nativity. The central irony of the story—that the imperious white character fears contamination from Black people, but real contamination goes the other way—results in the narrator departing with a memory of good people hurt and poor, defeated, while a representative of the town's top society remains unrepentant in ignorance. The story anticipates poems of witness like "Serving with Gideon," and parallels the defeat of the good in his story *The Osage Orange Tree* (where a lonesome tree stands sentinel at the heroine's remote farm, just as the mulberry recalls what once was beautiful in "Near to the City of David"). Throughout his work, as in this story, William Stafford is a seeker, a wanderer, in some sense an exile, an outsider observing what E.M. Forster called 'the true aristocracy of the plucky and the good.' His life-long stance was what he once described as his difficult philosophy: "the bitter habit of the forlorn cause is my addiction." He looks back to what Kansas might have been, what America might have been. As readers of this story in the era of George Floyd, we are called to consider what we might yet do to make things right.

No Praise, No Blame

What have the clouds been up to today? You can't blame them, you know. Their edges just happen, and where they go is the fault of the wind. I'd like my arrival to be like that, alone and quiet, really present but never to blame.

And I'd never presume or apologize, and if anyone pressed me I'd be gone, and come back there only some harmless, irresistible presence all around you, like the truth, something you need, like the air.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

All in A Glass Face in the Rain

By Erik Muller

Any single volume of William Stafford's poetry, from *West of Your City* (1960) to *My Name Is William Tell* (1992), provides material for discussions of the collection itself or its connections with other collections, preceding or following. *A Glass Face in the Rain* (1982) is a middle volume, yet the discussion here will be limited to characterizing its mood and tracking the occurrence of one diction item.

No other poetry book title of Stafford's is as chilling as *A Glass Face in the Rain*, not even *Traveling through the Dark*. The mood expressed in the title poem is found throughout: haunted, unsettled, mortal. The *you* that the poem addresses will walk all night, be gone from the day, won't be there to see anymore. The glass face will come to those who remember well. It will be invisible but real, all night outside in the rain.

Without citing any of the almost one hundred poems, since all we examine is contained between two covers, it's clear the speaker is fading, falling for years from a faint life with little done, never again to touch, all alone and sad, lost in the snow all night, the world not caring who we are, in the cold of the universe. While the speaker is the one with the fears, brought into this terrible world, he or she takes a wavery journey that might reach the other world, another country, where there is connection with the past and future, with human warmth. All right, that's the way it is.

The poems themselves are sparse, all but one a single page, without the rich and surprising metaphors or turns of plot present in preceding books. Maybe the use of a transparent language, maybe of glass, makes even clearer the multiple uses of one diction item. That item is the word *all*. Such a small item, yet a serviceable one, whose frequency is noticeable: In fifty-nine of ninety-eight poems (60%) and eighty-five occurrences in all, some poems having two or three uses of *all*.

What about this? Is Stafford's repetition of *all* a habit an editor should call out? Is the word *all* particularly telling in these chilly poems? Isn't *all* employed in a variety of ways? A dictionary suggests the word's complexities. Stafford offers several takes on *all*.

One *all* denotes a full category, a totality. We are telling all the stories, we all looked, all the air in the world poured, all my life groped inside to find a little jewel, all that they thought they had, it all came to be, it is all there is, all that doesn't exist anymore, that's all.

Obviously, categorical statements leave no room for shadings, blends, even unsure naming. Whatever the details of this book's world, here are sweeps of similar things, containments, delimitations. How does this declarative use of *all* fit with fading signals on a wavery journey?

Another use of *all* denotes vastness, full size. Yes, a totality may be vast, but not necessarily. Check your wallet! Here the speaker has clear sight to appreciate dimensions: I crave expression as pure as all the space around me, it all came on to be, who grew up and saw all this and recorded it, I give you the rain—its long hollow room all the

way down to the streetlight, with a whirl of my head I'll see it all tilt.

Again, the speaker exercises force and control, managing great extent with confidence.

So with the *all* of time, its duration, inclusion, beginning and end. The collection explores all the while, to make obsolete all the past, all through those long nights, your world won't last all day, lost in the snow all night, all of my life I have noticed.

The speaker can hold chunks of time, chunks which seem to maintain one condition: making, watching, noticing, being lost. A firm grip, indeed.

In seeing *all* as a topped-off container, a vast space, a measure of uniform time, both thoroughness and intensity are implied. Yet some uses of *all* are especially inflected. No center at all, for the first time in all my life, through all that swoop down from the mountains my quiet breath comes, all up and down these roads, it is all right, not being noticed at all, their lives they'll just have to take care of all alone, it was all sad to me, people are all dead, maybe I've been all wrong, we have to embrace all we are, does it make any difference at all what you're thinking? none at all, without any promises at all.

Again, the speaker deals with the subject with energy, using *all* for emphasis, calling for attention. The statements are a degree more urgent, a degree more difficult to dismiss.

A great majority of the collection's uses of *all* fit into the four varieties just examined. More could be added by looking at related words—almost, always, already, every, everyone, everything, whatever, whenever, never, whole—but this is enough illustration.

In closing, here is an answer to the question, What does Stafford's book gain or lose by eighty-five uses of *all*?

This is a question of craft. My answer is drawn from two observations, the insecurity of the persona and of the world depicted and the sure handling of materials exhibited in the uses of *all*. Here's an apparent paradox. Where's the imitative fallacy that urges an author to write nervously about nervousness or decidedly about convictions?

Well, maybe in this book Stafford's convictions are bleak. The pared down verse texture may be an intended effect. However, another way to settle this disjunction between content and style may be to consider *all* as a defensive redoubt, from which the speaker has a commanding view of a devolving world. Emerson cautions that we should not pity a person with clear sight. That includes whatever that person sees.

At the front lines, the firing-off of eighty-five rounds of *all* does a great deal to lift *A Glass Face in the Rain* from a depressing vision to a vision vigorously expressed. That energy, even secreted in a small caliber word, has power. All in all, this is a powerful collection, though it must be read understanding the moves that call out softly, all part of the book's hidden-in-view strategy.

Note: *Wavery* is Stafford's word choice, not *wavering*.

No other poetry
book title of
Stafford's is as
chilling

Uncollected Poems from the Editor's Archive

Lone Rider

Leaving behind the slow wagons,
outprinting the dogs' feet over the last crossing,
dashing among a rush of wild horses,
he pushed along when spring was raging.

Because no one would want what he wanted—
the wilderness that got in the pioneer's way—
he singlefooted into history,
was individual and, in dealing, gunned.

Just another who turned at the Cimarron cutoff,
that veined pivotal rock where every traveler
had to be himself or sorry, Prairie dogs burrowed
while he carved "I passed by here."

That pilgrim met some kind of flint ending;
that old hunter is lying under his own trail.
But he outhammered with smoke moccasins all
these tracks we make in tame furrows.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, *INLAND* 3.2 (AUTUMN, 1959)

A Thought that is Real

You came in my thought. Wind blew. Rain...
You stayed the same. Then in my thought
you went away. In all the world
nobody cared. Nobody spoke
in all the world. They opened their mouths
and no sound came. They touched my hand
but I never felt. Then I knew this: we live
a dream and all else is lost
when we wake to the dark. But some things
we think make real all the rest.

All the world faded when you left my thought.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, *NEW LETTERS* 51.3 (SPRING 1985)

Leaving Home

What you leave is the front porch in the evening,
dove sounds, the way you felt leaning back
in the squeaking swing, how your mother
pushed her hair back while ironing.

This isn't anyone's intention—you didn't decide
to be dutiful and remember your home. It's like a big
hook that reaches for you and you're caught in your
breath.

But you just go on and no one can tell you how you feel.

Somebody says, "Did you like your family? Were you
happy at home?" Now it's your turn to keep
anyone from knowing how those days were the
whole world,
and that now it's ended. You look away and say yes.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, *LEFT BANK* 3, (WINTER 1992)

The Way It Is Out Here

Big bowl of day, no one in charge, just
waiting; one bird urging summer on "Right here!
Right here!" Inside each tree a shadow is always
ready; a birch, white, is being, being...
Near the woods, you think your way in. Hear the water?—
it's dark and cool. Somewhere above, a current
thrums the limbs—and below, a temendous quiet.

For awhile, you're a squirrel, then an egg; at noon
you're a sound, following sun rays deep
into the forest and slanting down. At the end of day
you open your eyes and it's evening. Some great
galaxy of summer is drifting past the world.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, *OREGON EAST* 11 (1980/81)

In the Slant of My Hat: Composing Principle, William Stafford's Democratic Poetics

By Tim Barnes

"It's not the voting that's democracy, it's the counting."

--Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers*, 1972

"Some people are so much in favor of free speech that they don't give you a chance to talk."

--William Stafford, "Workshop Insights," *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life*, 2003

I begin with these quotations because I think William Stafford composed his democratic poetic around the principle of empathetic listening with egalitarian ears attuned to the essential promise and ethic of democracy—equality and the rights that it requires. A poetic is a system or body of theory about poetry and the principles and rules of poetic composition. Stafford's poetics are foundationally and fundamentally rooted in democratic principles.

To compose is to create, form a whole, as in the arranging of parts. A composing principle would be the concept that enables the generation of a composition, the causal proposition that serves as a basis for a system of belief, a linkage of reasoning, a thread



First National bank in Hutchinson

to follow. So, one part of my argument here is that for certain reasons, the idea of equality and the principles associated with it seeped early into Stafford's sensibility providing the bedrock for his compositional process, his poetics. The Kansas of small towns and farms and level horizons must have something to do with it. But it also has something to do with libraries and the reckless thinking the Stafford household was known for in those years, the twenties and thirties. In an autobiographical piece that begins *You Must Revise Your Life*, he speaks of libraries: "in the center of town was a library . . . forever, to explore. Those Carnegie libraries packed with dynamite books, we raided them every week" (3).

The idea of the library is a theme in Stafford's poems, an intriguing one, and so it's a good place to begin to think about the source of Stafford's ideas on democracy and composing a democratic poetic. In "A Visit Home," written in the early fifties, just after Stafford finished his course work at Iowa, he imagines a return home to Kansas, let's say Liberal because the irony of Liberal not being liberal works with the conflict of the poem, one of Stafford's angriest. Central and Main, though, could be almost anywhere in America and clearly symbolic. However, he is more likely referring to Hutchinson because that is where his father lost his battery business to someone who appears to have been an oilman.

In my sixties I will buy a hat

and wear it as my father did.

At the corner of Central and Main.

There may be flowers by the courthouse windows
and rich offices where those town-men
cheated him in 1929.

For calculation has exploded—
boom, war, oil wells, and, God!
the slow town-men eyes and blue-serge luck.

But at the door of the library I'll lean my cane
and put my hand on buckshot
books: Dewey, Parrington, Veblen...

There will be many things in the slant of my hat
on the corner of Central and Main.

There are many ways a democratic ethic shows itself in Stafford's poetry, but I want to establish some of its American roots. "[B]uck shot books" has a real farmer justice, Shay's Rebellion, double-barreled, populist feel to it, but it's the weapon of ideas, the dynamite of ideals, that Stafford the pacifist embeds into his conception of poetry and how to compose it. He's saying, looking at you now "Town-men," he calls them "hellhounds" in the early drafts, I judge you with the ideas of John Dewey, Vernon Parrington, and Thorstein Veblen. Remember "Serving with Gideon," where the speaker moves toward the black elevator man as the library "seethed and sparked" and "right and wrong arced." Stafford was a serious thinker and the American roots of his democratic poetic can be found in these writers—a philosopher, an historian, and an economist.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an educational theorist in the pragmatic tradition, the "learning by doing" guy. He believed in process and experimentation, that knowledge is based on experience, as did Stafford. Dewey defined freedom "as the capacity to act on one's best judgments for worthwhile purposes" and thought "democracy to be the political system best suited for this endeavor"



John Dewey (1859-1952)

(*World of Ideas* 102). Compare these two passages. The first is from Dewey, the second from Stafford. Dewey's quotation comes from an address, "Democracy and Educational Administration," he gave to the National Education Administration in 1937, and is collected in *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy*:

While what we call intelligence may be distributed in unequal amounts, it is the democratic faith that it is sufficiently general so that each individual has something to contribute and the value of each contribution can be assessed only as it enters the final pooled intelligence constituted by the contributions of all. (403)

Stafford's quotation is from a trenchant short piece first published in the *New York Quarterly* in 1971 and not reprinted often enough, though it does appear in *Writing the Australian Crawl*, called "Some
(cont. on p. 8)

(cont. from p. 7)

Arguments Against Good Diction”:

... let the language itself begin to shape the event taking place by its means. If it happens that at this time in history and at this place in our experience we happen on a word with a syllable that reverberates with many other syllables in contexts that reinforce what that immediate word is doing, we have “powerful” language. (59)

Syllables are elemental and common, the people, the sounds of the populace of language. Equate the individual and the syllable and these two statements have similar arguments.

In an unpublished essay aptly called “Every Syllable Can Vote,” Stafford writes, “Literature yields itself to a kind of readiness in using and encountering its materials; its elements work by artesian principle to deliver us more life than the separate parts would give.” Water in an artesian well or spring flows to the surface under its own pressure like the pooled intelligence of a functioning democracy.

Vernon Parrington (1871-1929) wrote *Main Currents in Modern Thought: American Literature from the Beginning to 1920*, a three-volume study that followed American history through literature and letters, presenting adversarial positions. Parrington was a Jeffersonian who stood for the yeoman farmer and democratic equality and was critical of the excesses of capitalism. In the last volume of his opus, “The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920,” Parrington writes, “The principles of Jeffersonianism—of democracy as a human social order, serving the common well-being . . .with . . . its antipathy to a money economy, its love of local autonomy, has been buried in the potter’s field” (xxiv-xxvii). Stafford, also sympathetic



Vernon Parrington (1871-1929)

with Jeffersonian values, has a prose poem, most likely written in the late sixties, called “New Letters from Thomas Jefferson,” in which George Washington is the recipient. Relevant lines read: “Hidden by time there lives this extra advantage, coiled and elegant. Our choices now disguise, wait for what the world wants—old courtesy, new strategy. We follow by going ahead of what we know is coming.” Democracy has gotten complicated, he seems to be saying, so it is time to listen for new ways to the old values of equality and dignity. I might be reading too much into those lines but when Stafford writes, “wait for what the world wants,” he could be talking about a participatory whole, the demos, the Greek word for people. There is a think tank called Demos, I ran into it googling around, whose slogan is “an equal say and equal chance for all.”

In the poem “Allegiances” Stafford begins with these lines:

It is time for all the heroes to go home
if they have any, time for all of us common ones
to locate ourselves by the real things
we live by.

The poem ranges out into the “north” and “far streams, touched by gold” and then closes, “we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love / where we are, sturdy for common things.” I find a congruence between these lines and some of his ideas on composition articulated in “Some Arguments Against Good Diction” in which he questions

the idea of “le mot juste,” the precise word perfectly placed. He pictures the practitioner of the “le mot juste,” a notion propounded by Gustave Flaubert, author of *Madame Bovary*, plucking perfect words from their cubbyholes and placing them precisely in the proper places, little heroes doing their jobs and coming to save the sentence and therefore the poem or the novel, Flaubert’s in particular.

Stafford was not having any of this. His poetics are less aristocratic, more democratic: “a syllable . . . reverberates with many other syllables in contexts that reinforce what the immediate word is doing” (*Writing the Australian Crawl* 59). Words volunteer themselves, nudged by others, if the writer listens and lets them gather their own consensus:

Le mot juste does not exist. . . . But language offers continuous encounters with our own laminated, enriched, experiences, and sometimes those encounters lead to further satisfactions derived from the cumulative influences in language as it spins out. (*Crawl* 60)

Those cumulative influences express a democratic sense of composition. Stafford is listening to the constituency of the poem in the making—syllables, sounds, the community of words, their collective will, “their futures” (*Crawl* 59). A poet believes in what words can do individually and together; a democracy believes in what all the people will do when each person has his or her say. Dewey thought: “The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature, faith in human intelligence and in the power of pooled and coöperative experience” (*Intelligence in the Modern World* 420).

Closely connected to this is Stafford’s diction, his plain style and conversational phrasing. It is a Midwestern, middle American voice talking quietly to another person or to a small group of equals awake to the way language gets lucky when the imagination listens, tuned a certain way. Judith Kitchen in *Writing the World: Understanding William Stafford* writes that Stafford was “so receptive to the colloquial and the spoken language that his emphasis was on finding the poetic within an ordinary speech pattern” (107).

That may explain Thorstein Veblen, author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), a book that takes aim at the conspicuous and wasteful consumption of the rich. Remember that Stafford studied economics at the University of Minnesota for a while. *Sources of the American Republic: A Documentary History of Politics, Society, and Thought* characterizes Veblen’s thesis this way: “the more money an individual spends and the more useless and conspicuous his expenditure is, the more honor and prestige accrue to him” (23). Like a good democrat, Stafford was uncomfortable with conspicuous consumption, ornamentation, fancy and overwrought phrasings, ostentation of any kind:

The earth says every summer have a ranch
that’s minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape
that proclaims a universe . . .

The earth says where you live wear the kind
of color that your life is (gray shirt for me). . . .

(“In Response to a Question”)

Conspicuous consumption is evidence of inequalities in income distribution, the division between the rich and the poor. This is what Stafford saw during the Depression and even more so on the corner of Central and Main after the Second World War.

Stafford, as I think you know, wrote lyric poetry. The lyric,

Harmon and Holman tell us in *A Handbook to Literature* “is perhaps the most broadly inclusive of all the various types of verse . . . not so much a form as a manner of writing” that “contains subjectivity, imagination, melody, emotion” (299). It is the cry of the individual heart assuming the right to speak of its concerns, its cares, its loves. Stafford’s lyrics are often short, easily grasped, and employ recognizable forms informally handled. He was “fond of using . . . an organized form cavalierly treated” (Heyen 122). He liked stanzas, the quatrain (the shape of the ballad stanza) and sonnet-like forms. He liked slant rhyme not exact rhyme. Strict formality is not democratic. In his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman, the great poet of democracy, writes, “The poetic quality is not marshaled in rhyme or uniformity...” (*Leaves of Grass* 10). And interestingly enough, Stafford’s popularity coincides with what Jonathan Holden in *The Fate of American Poetry* calls the “democratization” of American



poetry, something that occurred in the 1960s and 70s, which was a time of free verse, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* and Beat poetry, but also the time of poetry in the schools or PITS, as we used to call it, and the proliferation of MFA programs. It was a time in which Stafford’s words, “a writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought if he had not started to say them” (*Crawl* 17), found many receptive ears, including my own. Dewey writes in “The Democratic Form,” a chapter in *Intelligence in the Modern World*, “Universal suffrage, recurring elections, responsibility of those in power to the voters, and other factors of democratic government are means that have been found expedient for realizing democracy as a truly human way of living” (400-401). Stafford believed that poetry was one of the truly human activities. In *Writing the Australian Crawl*, he says, “Poetry... is something that everyone is caught up in early, and a few keep on doing” (48). I used this thought many times when I worked in PITS programs in Oregon and Washington, telling students what William Stafford said when asked how he became a poet: “It’s not when I started, it’s when everyone else stopped.” In terms of poetic composition, this is a very democratic perception. And it seemed to be quite convincing, judging from the wonderful work I received. Everyone is a poet. Everyone has a right to participate in the act. In *Writing the Australian Crawl*, he says

Art will, if pursued for itself and not for adventitious reasons or by spurious ways, bring into sustained realization the self most centrally yours, freed from its distortions brought from greed, or fear, or ambition

Art has its sacramental aspect. The source of art’s power is one with religion’s: the discovery of the essential self and the cultivation of it through the act of its positive impulses. (51)

Stafford’s words seem almost a translation of Dewey’s words: “Democracy is a means, the best means so far found, for realizing ends that lie in the wide domain of human relationships and the

development of human personality” (*Intelligence and the Modern World* 400). The goals of poetics for Stafford seem to align with Dewey’s sense of democracy—the fully realized self and the fully realized nation or community.

But I have strayed far from Stafford’s formal concerns, which in terms of democracy appear to equivocate between free verse and formal verse, which seem entirely appropriate since, as Patrick Redding points out in his fascinating essay, “Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912-1931,” there is a “democratic justification for traditional metrical poetry” in its “capacity for memorization” (679). That being noted and surely Stafford did, Jonathan Holden makes the claim in *The Old Formalism* that “in the domain of both sound and sense then, we note the following tendency, in accentual-syllabic poetry, the effects manifested both by prosody and metaphor tend to be global. In free verse, on the other hand, such effects tend to be local” (66). Stafford, ever the champion of local things, seems to have intuited this, democracy being based on the local and the measuring of it.

Each poem has a right to be what it wants to be; form, to paraphrase Robert Creeley, should be an extension of content. Stafford uses slant rhyme, alliteration, internal rhyme, chiming syllables to create a score for each poem that is unique but also employs formal elements that make it readable, available, shapely, friendly to the common reader. Consider this poem, “Artist, Come Home”:

Remember how bright it is,
the old rabbitbrush by the hall light?

One of the blackberry vines has
reached all the way to the clothesline

There isn’t any way to keep
the kitchen window from tapping

The tea kettle had one of its meditative
spells yesterday.

I am thinking of that old
plan—breakfast first, then the newspaper.

They say maybe they won’t have
that big war this year after all.

A frog is living under the
back step.

This poem doesn’t rhyme and is certainly written in free verse, but it has fourteen lines like a sonnet, though written in couplets, the last couplet of the poem has a kind of Shakespearean closure, a quick tuck, like a tied knot. There are a number of internal rhymes: *light*, *rabbit*, and *bright* in the first couplet; *vines* and *line* in the second; in the fourth, *kettle* and *meditative* chime with their Ts. Of rhyme Stafford says, “all words rhyme, sort of; that is, all sounded words are more like each other than any word is like silence” (*Crawl* 28). Stafford is right here and seems to have formed a compromise in his

(cont. on p. 10)

poetics, an essentially democratic one, between those who claim formal, metrical rhyming, accentual/syllabic verse is more democratic than free verse because of its memorable, song-like qualities.” Artist, Come Home” has music and is memorable. Coleman Barks recites it in *Every War has Two Losers*. In that compromise, he leans toward something he may have learned from Louis Untermeyer, the anthologist he most likely read in his youth, editor of a number of collections of American poetry, some which must have been in the Carnegie libraries the Staffords raided in his early years, wrote in his book, *Poetry Since 1900*, published in 1923, “[P]oetry has suddenly torn away from its self-imposed strictures and is expressing itself more in terms of democracy. It is no longer composed chiefly by scholars for scholars. It is democratic in the sense that a great part of it is written of the people” (qtd. in Redding 682). Patrick Redding speaks of this as a democratization of language. Whether Stafford read Untermeyer or not, surely he read Sandburg and Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology*. Stafford’s plain style, natural diction has this democratic impulse. In *You Must Revise Your Life*, he says, “Democracy is a situation in which you don’t try to overwhelm each other” (60). This is, it would seem, the “poetic within the ordinary speech pattern,” that Judith Kitchen writes about in *Writing the World*.

In an essay in *Writing the Australian Crawl*, “Making a Poem / Starting a Car on Ice,” Stafford says, “If the reader or listener enters the poem, I want the moves to come from inside the poem, the coercion to be part of the life right there.” Stafford was loyal to the individuality of the poem, that was what he was listening for—what the poem was trying to be. And so we arrive at one of his most famous lines from the poem “Vocation,” a poem about the stance of being a poet: “Your job is to find what the world is trying to be.”

This word *world*, as many of you know, was one of Stafford’s favorite words. It is a holistic word. If I had to choose what kind of democracy Stafford would have liked to live in—industrial, liberal, Christian, bourgeois (there are many more)—I think he would have chosen a participatory democracy, the form of government in which the citizenry itself makes legislative decisions instead of delegating that power to elected representatives—like Athens or the New England town hall or the tribal unit in indigenous societies. In his poetry the participants are the local, the ordinary. His subject matter was nature, family, friends, common things—animals, houses, rivers, stones—and occurrences—looking out the window, a dead animal on the road. One of the reasons “Traveling through the Dark” is so appealing (his annotated bibliography tells us that it has been anthologized 146 times) is that the dead animal in the road is an archetypal American experience, immediate and local, and Stafford believed in the local, the felt life of the individual in a place. The U. of Michigan collection of essays on Stafford is subtitled, *The Worth of Local Things*. This is his democracy, and what Stafford seemed to feel about it was welcome, vote, have your say. Here is a stanza from a poem Stafford read to a session of the Oregon House in 1987:

Only the people voted, but the animals too are there
and the salmon testing silt in their home rivers.
Even the trees deserve a place, and the hills

maintaining their part, while the rocks are quietly
mentioning integrity.

This brings us to his method of composition, his composure, his state of mind. He got up every morning at around four and wrote for a couple of hours, letting in old, new, or in-between thoughts, memories, impressions, experiences, words, lead him into writing what often became a poem or several poems, perhaps with some aphorisms thrown in. Stafford believed in what he called the golden string or thread. This is the idea that any detail set down in language can lead to the center of things, to “amazing gifts,” to quote Bill’s friend Robert Bly (*The Darkness Around Us Is Deep* vii). All strings are equal and Stafford believed in giving them all an opportunity. How do you give equal opportunity? Well, many of you know what comes next: you lower your standards and keep on writing. You stop thinking one idea, notion, impulse, association is better than another. Here is what he says in “The End of the Golden String,” an essay in *Writing the Australian Crawl*: “the artist is not so much a person endowed with the luck of vivid, eventful days [heroes] (brackets mine), as a person from whom any immediate encounter leads by little degrees to implications always present for anyone anywhere” (39). Anyone can be awake; it’s an equal opportunity proposition. The poem “You Reading This, Be Ready,” is often used to convey this sense, but here is “Any Morning,” a cavalierly Shakespearean sonnet:

Just lying on the couch and being happy.
Only humming a little, the quiet sound in the head.
Trouble is busy elsewhere at the moment, it has
so much to do in the world.

People who might judge you are mostly asleep; they can’t
monitor you all the time, and sometimes they forget.
When dawn flows over the hedge you can
get up and act busy.

Little corners like this, pieces of Heaven
left lying around, can be picked up and saved.
People won’t even see that you have them,
they are so light and easy to hide.

Later in the day you can act like the others.
You can shake your head. You can frown.

Each day is equal and each impulse is given a chance to cast its ballot at being a poem or part of one. William Heyen, a poet and English professor who interviewed Stafford, wrote about him, and wrote a wonderful book called *Crazy Horse in Stillness*. Like many people, he thought that maybe Stafford took “the democracy of poetry and poets a few shades too far,” but Stafford’s democratic poetic was committed and comprehensive.

In his introduction to *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep*, Robert Bly writes that “Of all the American poets of the last thirty years, I think William Stafford broods most about community—the ‘mutual

life' we share" (xiii). How do we live as equals, respecting each other's right to be realized human beings? Stafford's poetry returns to this theme again and again. "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" is a good example of this, "though we could fool each other, we should consider— / lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark," but it is so familiar, consider then "For the Unknown Enemy":

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

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

This monument is for you.

How do we behave democratically? We respect others, even distant others by letting our imaginations listen to them, by using our imaginations equitably and ethically when it comes to strangers, strange ways, and different cultures. Equality and empathy have a relationship. Literature knows this and so did Stafford. I am reminded of what Alison Hawthorne Deming says in her book *Zoologies*, "All art is empathy" (209). This sense of empathy, of democracy, this holistic, full sense of the world drew his poetry to the natural world. Animals, plants (grass in particular), trees, stones, rivers, clouds, and the sky that unites us all, all are part of the participatory democracy of his poetry: "I could hear the wilderness listen." It's Whitmanesque, "I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals," "a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars," and Dickensonian, "a boblink for a chorister— / an orchard for a dome—" It's transcendental and democratic. Maybe each one of us is just part of one big soul, to paraphrase Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Here is a stanza from "Globescope"

But grass is our flag, with its little song
carrying a breath, and a pause, and a breath
again, a voice in the world like a mother
holding her child in its cradle and caring—
the song of life that all things utter
to the world's people.

(from *A Scripture of Leaves*)

As I mentioned, when asked when he became a poet, Stafford would respond that the question wasn't when he became a poet but

when most everybody else stopped being one. Everyone is a poet and poetry for him seemed as he says in *Writing the Australian Crawl*, "like conversation that has a lot of luck in it" (127). Anybody, as we know, can get lucky. "Anyone who breathes," he writes in "What It Is Like," "is in the rhythm business; anyone who is alive is caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with triumphant certainty, of poetry" (*Crawl* 3). Stafford's sense of what a writer is reflects this egalitarian tone: "A writer is a person who enters into sustained relations with the language for experiment and experience not available in any other way" (*Crawl* 12). A writer is not someone who is chosen, inspired, someone with something important to say, a hero. A writer is someone who humbles himself to the page and lets his pen turn up meaning. I heard some wise poet say once at a conference that what a poet does is stand in the storm and write and once in a while he gets struck by lightening and writes a great poem. Well, Stafford stood out in all weathers and wrote some bad ones, some good ones, and some great ones. He was democratic about that.

Stafford's pedagogy, his teaching philosophy, also has a democratic core. In his courses at Lewis and Clark, he gave no grades, though if a student really needed one he promised in his syllabus to go into a trance at the end of the term and supply one. He gave no specific assignments, and he did not mark papers. If asked what he thought about a piece of student writing, he would say, "If you like it, I like it," throwing the responsibility for being the authority back on the writer. His teaching philosophy was calibrated to place him on equal footing with the student, commoners learning together. Grades, assignments, criticism place the teacher above and over the student—not a democratic stance. Stafford wanted to be in the position to listen, respond, but not to judge but to help students discover what they didn't know, which sounds like the electoral process, discovering what the people actually want and that the polls may have been wrong.

His approach to poetry workshops and the poems he was asked to consider was no praise, no blame. No authoritarian judgments about what is good or bad, right or wrong. This did not sit well with some other teachers. If you want a perceptive gloss on this, read Tim Gillespie's "Words to a Writing Teacher: The Provocations of Bill Stafford," an essay published in *Oregon English* in 1994; it is also excerpted in the Friends of William Stafford newsletter, issue 18.1. In the *Oregon English* essay, quite a wonderful piece, Gillespie talks of Stafford's "truly radical democratization of his classroom," saying also that Stafford "believed that prescribed forms interfere with fresh insights, that orthodoxies chill the recklessness and freedom necessary to good writing," and that, at its heart, writing is "the act of celebrating one's own voice, viewpoint, experience, and home territory" (38,39,41). Stafford might offer thoughts on choice of persona, optimum line breaks, language tuning, but more important would be a response keyed by attentive listening to how the writer might engage more centrally and richly with a life in writing, how the writer might actualize his or her individuality in words. Stafford once taught at a poetry conference back east that was titled "Finding Your Voice," which really meant how to get published. Each invited poet gave a craft lecture. Stafford

(cont. on p. 12)

(cont. from p. 11)

began his with these words, “I don’t agree with anything that has been said this week. You already have a voice and don’t need to find one.” He wasn’t invited back. That’s a democratic position. Equality involves respect for the individual, listening to a voice, accepting it, not the accusation that it is not worthy, adequate or unqualified. Stafford was U.S. Poet Laureate (then called the Consultant to the Library of Congress in Poetry) in 1970-71 during the Nixon administration. At the time someone asked him what he would do if he ran into Nixon. “I’ll talk to anyone,” he said.

In an early draft of “A Visit Home” Stafford lists the three thinkers in a different order and then has an arrow placing Dewey first. Indeed Dewey’s faith in democracy, his sense of it being the fruition of a people’s impulses and intelligence intersected with Stafford’s sense of poetry belonging to everyone in a shared language. Dewey had faith in the demos, the body politic, and Stafford in the syllable in the compositional body of the poem and the body composing it. Both the poet and the philosopher are very encouraging about the realization and actualization of the artist and the republic. Parrington is important for his Jeffersonian belief in the individual and Veblen for his questioning of culturally mistaken importance but Dewey’s optimism about democracy and how it promotes a growth that enhances and fulfills the felt life of the individual intersects with Stafford’s belief that the unencumbered writing of poetry engenders a self most centrally ours. Democratic principles permeate Stafford’s poetry and poetics.

His method of composition—daily writing that welcomed the ordinary and extraordinary equally, willing fallibility, a sense of poetry as a common tongue tuned up a notch, an informal and friendly use of lyric forms—all these seem principled in a democratic stance, an egalitarian, life enhancing composure.

And then there is his teaching, his pedagogical position, his devotion to a non-judgmental listening geared to furthering the individual’s self actualization by transcending issues of quality for the prairies of commonality, equality, and community.

William Stafford was a thoughtful man, a penetrating thinker. His poetic poses a philosophy, a way of being a poet, a writer, a citizen and a human being. I think one of the things Stafford wanted the most was to live in a democracy. And so that is what he did—he lived one. And since he was a writer, he lived it as he wrote. This is why he is such an important literary figure. He had a vision, a way, and I think that converging with it, listening to it for a while, has the potential of helping us become more thoughtful teachers, more resonant writers, and fuller human beings cognizant of the essential nature of democracy and how to lean toward a better world.

Works Cited and Consulted

Andrews, Tom, ed. *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 1996. Under Discussion.

Bly, Robert. *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford*. Harper/Collins, New York, 1993.

Baritz, Leon. *Sources of the American Mind: A Collection of Documents and Texts in American History*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 1966.

Cowley, Malcolm, ed. *Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, The (1855) First Edition*. Viking Press, New York, 1959.

Deming, Alison Hawthorne. *Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit*. Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN, 2014.

Gillespie, Tim. “Words to a Writing Teacher: The Provocations of William Stafford.” *Oregon English Journal* 16.1 (Spring 1994) 37-41.

Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2000.

Heyen, William. “William Stafford’s Allegiances.” *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. Ed. Tom Andrews. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 1996. 121-131.

Holden, Jonathan. *The Old Formalism: Character in Contemporary American Poetry*. University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, AR, 1999.

—. *The Fate of American Poetry*. University of Georgia Press, Athens & London, 1991.

Kitchen, Judith. *Writing the World: Understanding William Stafford*. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, OR, 1999.

Parrington, Vernon. *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*. Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, 1927.

Merchant, Paul and Vincent Wixon, eds. *William Stafford: Crossing Unmarked Snow, Further News on the Writer’s Vocation*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1998.

Ratner, Joseph, ed. *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey’s Philosophy*. Random House, New York, 1939.

Redding, Patrick. “Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912-1931.” *New Literary History* 41.3 (Summer 2010), 669-690.

Rohman, Chris. *World of Ideas: A Dictionary of Important Theories, Concepts, Beliefs, and Thinkers*. Ballantine Books, New York, 1999.

Stafford, William. *Writing the Australian Crawl*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1979.

—. *You Must Revise Your Life*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1986. Poets on Poetry.

Editor’s note: This essay is a revision of a paper presented at an Oregon Council for Teachers of English Conference in 2014. Given the peril our democracy is under these days, this editor thought a rewrite might be timely.

Thinking of William Stafford in the CO Camp, Burning the Dead Limbs Thinned from the Flowering Cherry

For a rose of reasons, the central stem
breached into sky, the wooden hand
pulling a southern star to ground

and knew it was dead but went on
as if to turn the lathe on its
grain, its cracked skin.

There was nothing but leafless shadow,
a rhythm of reaching before
snow and the dark wild

sent it to silence. A calm in the middle
of an old precursor to death:
the dry insurrection of tissues—

papery tension, a tapestry of weakness.
Window to the stiff limbs without
the tiny parachutes of purple

leaves on the rocks and dirt. Until one
January day the limbs were cut
and stacked like serpentine bones

gnarled for flame and the trunk
fanned out to winter light,
spare and hesitant. A plume of smoke

circled to wind and another dark
crept on in the cherried ash
to a place of starting over.

SHAUN GRIFFIN

Letter to William Stafford

Dear Bill,

I wish we could talk again
the way we did
in the Minneapolis airport.
I'd tell you Frank Boyden
made a neo-Stonehenge
next to the Willamette,
named it the "Stafford Stones,"
and cut words from your poems
into black volcanic basalt.

And we'd commiserate that
your house on Sunningdale Road
has sold. Speaking honestly
I'd say Dorothy aged
and broke a bone or two
before her heart stopped.

When you gave me a skeptical squint,
I'd tell you how sturdy she stayed
to the last, how she laughed and loved chocolate,
how she lived like hope was her middle name.
She healed better than anyone could believe
and her bones held till her heart gave way.

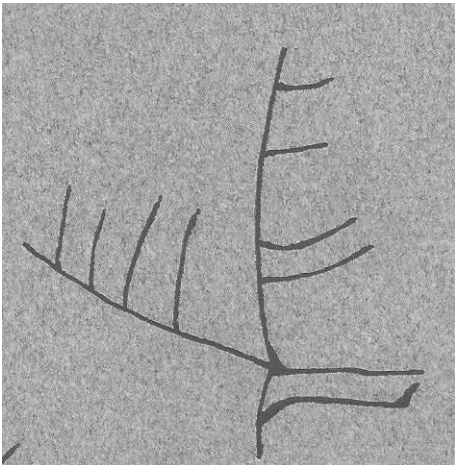
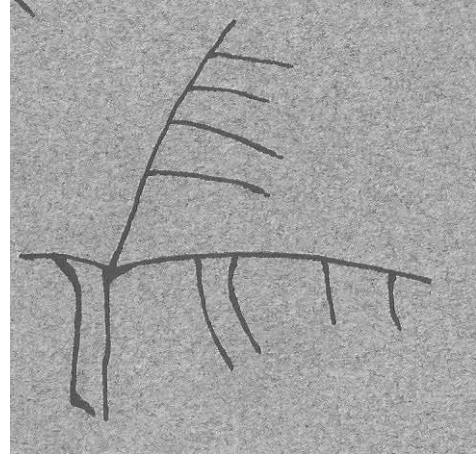
They sold your old couch too,
couch of twenty thousand poems,
too big for the front room without you
leaning back on it, writing at 4 AM,
and waiting for something to occur
in *the little mouse nibble of now*.
I see you reclining,
a pen in your left hand,
a sheet of paper ready.

SHELLEY REECE

DECEMBER 8 (thinking of William Stafford)

It's neither a famous nor an infamous day.
 It follows the line of other days
 the way elephants enter a town, calmly holding
 each other's tails. The way, if you are traveling
 with a blind man, he puts his hand on your shoulder
 out of practicality. Nobody gets lost. But
 people do. Like those Japanese soldiers
 on remote atolls: they were faithful to the cause
 and to the stars, hearing only the drumbeat of surf.
 People admired their fortitude—thirty years camping out.
 But how did these soldiers feel when found?
 The day after Pearl Harbor was bombed,
 William Stafford didn't want to fight.
 The government put him in a camp,
 made him dig trenches, cut brush.
 His supervisor wanted to shoot him.
 The sound of wind in the trees was kind of like surf.
 He felt a hand on his shoulder each day
 after that.

JAMES ARMSTRONG



By P. Ian Kaminski

A Place for Words

"It is not the past or present of words
 that counts, but their futures."

--William Stafford

Any word has a future,
 places to be, sentences, stanzas,
 where it can pioneer a new stance
 among others. In such company

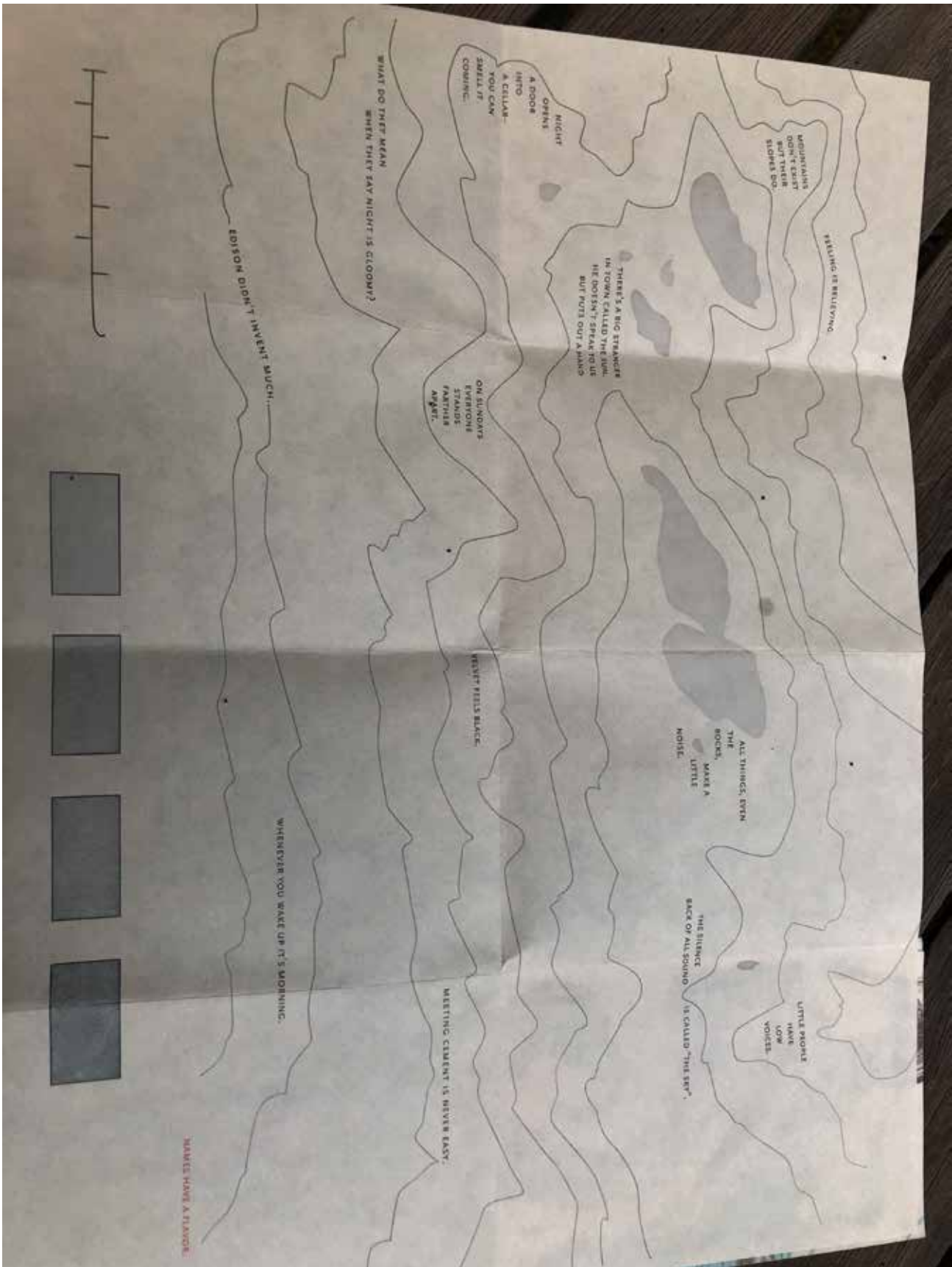
it sees itself differently,
 a connotation occurs
 as it reflects in the mirror
 others lend to a new

life of meaning. It's not
 good to stereotype
 a word, it thinks, shaking
 out its hair, deepened now

by a new shade, a sense
 of belonging to a body
 bearing it through the poem
 into another being.

TIM BARNES

The Map inside an artist book by Roni Gross using Stafford's poem, "Sayings of the Blind."



Uncollected, cont.

Serious Separate Things

Getting used to being a man
I walk like purpose and look down
bowing my head to hear the tone
offered by serious separate things.

Needing grace I meditate
through the siren of immediate,
trying hard to hesitate,
offered a million quick new worlds.

Instants pass, each with light,
fireflies fluttering through the night,
buried streams that flit from sight,
getting faster toward the end.

Down wild canyons under the surface
fish men gape their gills; their wharves
embark toward thicker streams than ours.
The Universe rolls toward a limit of know-
ing.

In this year of candle flame
instants lost won't come again;
force of choice makes us alone
hundreds of times in any day.

Learning to be a man I walk
hearing the tone of separate things.

WILLIAM STAFFORD, NORTH-
WEST REVIEW
2.3 (SUMMER 1959)



Weather by Jack Beal

Contributors' Notes

Erik Muller has lived in Oregon most of his life. Born in New York City and educated at Williams College, he earned an MA in English at the University of Oregon in 1965. After some teaching and further graduate study away from the Northwest, he began a career of teaching in Oregon community colleges, Southwestern (1969-1986) and Lane (1986-2000). At the University of Oregon and in Coos Bay respectively, he edited a student magazine and a chapbook series. Later, he was one of the three who founded *Fireweed: Poetry of Western Oregon* and then edited Traprock Books, poetry titles by Oregon poets. In 2001, Literary Arts awarded him the Stewart H. Holbrook Award for service to Oregon's literary community. He is the author of *Durable Goods: Appreciations of Oregon Poets* (2017), a rather wonderful book which looks at the work of Richard Dankleff, Barbara Drake, Kenneth O. Hanson, Paulann Petersen, Clemens Starck, and Lex Runciman.



Barbara Stafford

Shaun T. Griffin has dedicated his life to creating a caring community. In 1991, he and his wife, Deborah, founded Community Chest, a nonprofit organization that directs more than thirty programs for northern Nevada including hunger relief, service learning, drug and alcohol counseling, and art and social justice projects. Throughout this time he has taught a poetry workshop at Northern Nevada Correctional Center, and published a journal of their work, *Razor Wire. This Is What the Desert Surrenders: New and Selected Poems* was published by Black Rock Press in 2012. In 2013 the U. of Michigan Press published *Sorrow's Well—The Poetry of Hayden Carruth*. In 2014 he was inducted into the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. He and his wife live in Virginia City in the shadow of Walter Van Tilburg Clark's former house.

Contributors' Notes cont.

Shelley Reece taught in the English Department at Portland State University for many years, serving as department chair for several. He was one of this editor's teachers, and he has the fondest of memories and deep thanks for Shelley's grace and thoughtfulness. Shelley also served as a vital board President of The Friends of William Stafford. His poem, "Tracking Stafford," appears in *Stafford's Road, An Anthology of Poems for William Stafford* and in *Oregon English* 16.1, and he has made some invaluable contributions to this publication. Shelley has a chapbook, *Nature's Mind* coming out in 2022.

James Armstrong teaches poetry, environmental literature and film at Winona State University in Winona, Minnesota. He is the author of two poetry books, *Monument in a Summer Hat* (New Issues Press, 1999) and *Blue Lash* (Milkweed Editions, 2006) and is the co-author of a book of essays, *Nature, Culture and Two Friends Talking* (North Star Press 2015). He is working on a critical study of Stafford's work. He has also recently published a chapbook of poems, *Plague Year*. Interested parties may inquire about its availability at jarmstrong@winona.edu.

A Survey

Down in the Frantic Mountains
they say a canyon winds
crammed with hysterical water
hushed by placid sands.

They tried to map that country,
sent out a field-boot crew,
but the river surged at night
and ripped the map in two.

So they sent out wildcats, printed
with intricate lines of fur,
to put their paws with such finesse
the ground was unaware.

Now only the wildcats know it,
patting a tentative paw,
soothing the hackles of ridges,
pouring past rocks and away.

The sun rakes that land each morning;
the mountains buck and scream.
By night the wildcats pad by
gazing it quiet again.

WILLIAM STAFFORD,
WINTERWARD, 1954, 2013

News, Notes, and Opportunities

Traveling Through the National Darkness

This is the title of an online presentation sponsored by Elizabethtown College given by professor Steve Nolt and Fred Marchant about Stafford and his CO experience in WW 2. Nolt is a professor of history and Anabaptist studies at Elizabethtown, and Marchant is professor emeritus of English at Suffolk University in Boston, editor of *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford, 1937-1947* and a FWS national advisor. Nolt's part of the talk involved giving the background on the CO system and CO camps Stafford went into at the beginning of the war. Marchant read several Stafford poems, "Traveling through the Dark," and two from *Another World Instead*, "Prison Camp," and "Shall We Have that Singing in the Evening," pointing out the pauses and hesitations, the waverings, often marked by parenthesis and dashes and the particular Staffordian punctuation, the colon and the dash (:—), making the claim that it is in these places that Stafford's poetics and pacifism meet. He included in his talk the French philosopher Simone Weil's wonderful essay, "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," (written around the time Stafford was in the CO camps) in which Weil says that there is an important moment that warriors, because enthralled by force, do not engage, "a halt, a pause, and interval of hesitation wherein lies all our considerations for our brothers in humanity." Stafford's poetry seems, Marchant thinks, to incorporate this moment in its structuring. Interested readers can find more about this in issues 20.2 and 22.1 of this publication. To view the presentation, google <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8m-euepsdc>.

"Roll Call" in *Teaching in the Anthropocene*

"What Good is a Poem when the World is on Fire" is the title of an essay written by Maya T. Borhani and Adrian Downey that incorporates Stafford's poem, "Roll Call." Borhani, a graduate student at the University of Victoria studying poetic inquiry, tells me the essay will be in a collection of essays edited by Alysha Farrell, Candy Skyhar and Michelle Lam called *Teaching in the Anthropocene* to be published by Canadian Scholars Women's Press of Toronto with an expected release date of April, 2022. The anthropocene, as many of you know, is the name for our current geological age, so called because human activity has been the dominant influence on the climate and the environment. Borhani and Downey's essay makes the case that the teaching of aware poetry can help guide us in healing the planet and ourselves in these precarious times.

Times of Day with William Stafford

In this craft talk included in *Glassworks* 12 (Spring 2016), Christina Seymour considers three Stafford poems, "Artist, Come Home," "Just Thinking," and "Waking at 3 am." Among things Seymour observes are "When I read Stafford, I feel aware of what matters," and "Stafford picks up on the energy of even inanimate things." Google [Glassworks spring 2011](#) for a look at this thoughtful piece and interesting literary magazine.

News, Notes, and Opportunities, cont.

FWS board member selected poet laureate of Clark County

Armin Tolentino, FWS board member and author of the poetry collection, *We Meant to Bring It Home Alive*, was selected to be the Clark County, Washington, poet laureate for 2021-2023, to promote the art of poetry and literature throughout the county. Google [Clark County's new poet laureate seeks wisdom](#) for an article in *The Columbian* about Tolentino, who lives in Vancouver and works in Portland as a community-service program specialist.

Sylvia Plath & William Stafford

Don Colburn, noted Portland poet and former FWS board member sent along news of an interesting discovery. Reading Heather Clark's new biography of Sylvia Plath, *Red Comet*, he came across mention of Stafford. In 1961, Plath was asked to edit a brief anthology of American poets as a supplement to a British journal named *Critical Quarterly*. Plath selected three Stafford poems, "In Oregon Country," "The Well Rising," and "A Survey." (see p. 17) Among the other poets included in *American Poetry Now: A Selection of the Best Poems by Modern American Writers* were W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, Howard Nemerov, W.D. Snodgrass, and Robert Creeley.

Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds and "The Way It Is"

This editor's old and dear friend, Dr. Richard Godfrey, informed him that Dr. Paul Farmer's new book, *Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds: Ebola and the Ravages of History*, begins with Stafford's poem, "The Way It Is." Farmer, a renowned physician and anthropologist, is the chair of the department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. The book tells the story of the struggle to control the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, considering also the legacy of colonialism, the slave trade and racism there.

No Praise, No Blame

This is the name of a new record album, EP, by Porlolo, a Fort Collins, Colorado, band led by song writer Fran Roberts. In an article, "Porlolo stays independent with No Praise No Blame," by Casey Van Divier about the band and the album, published in Westworld, a "free, independent" digital news site. Van Divier tells us the title of the album comes from a Stafford poem (see p.4) that "highlights the balance of staying humble but never apologizing." Google [Porlolo Westworld](#) for the article.



Cover of Porlolo album

We Need Your Support!

Please check the date shown on the address label for this newsletter. That is the last date you renewed your annual membership dues. Your support is very important to sustain this journal exploring the life and work of William Stafford. Please consider renewing your membership online for 2021. It will make all the difference in insuring William Stafford's legacy. Just go to <https://www.williamstafford.org/join-us> and renew today.



PERMISSIONS & CREDITS

"Lone Rider," "A Thought That is Real," "Leaving Home," and "The Way It Is Out Here," "Serious Separate Things," "A Survey," and "Near to the City of David" are printed with the permission of the Estate of William Stafford.

The note by Kim Stafford and the essays by Erik Muller and Tim Barnes are used with the permission of the authors.

The drawing by Barbara Stafford of William Stafford on the first page is from the cover of *You and Some Other Characters*, Honeybrook Press, 1987. The drawing by Barbara Stafford of William Stafford on pages 16 & 18 is from the cover of *History is Loose Again*, Honeybrook Press, 1991. The figure on p. 19 by Barbara is from the title page of *You and Some Other Characters*.

Weather by Jack Beal is from the cover of *Weather*, ThPrshble Prss Lmd, 1969.

The poems "Thinking of William Stafford in the CO Camp, Burning the Dead Limbs Thinned from the Flowering Cherry," "Letter to William Stafford" "December 8," and "A Place for Words," are used by permission of the authors.

"No Praise, No Blame" is reprinted with the permission of Graywolf Press.

The sketch of William Stafford by Stephen Henslin on p. 4 is from a publicity poster collected in the Stafford archives at Lewis & Clark.

The line drawings by P. Ian Kaminski on p. 14 are from the cover of *Stories and Storms and Strangers*, Honeybrook Press, 1984.



BECOME A *Friend of William Stafford*

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

WHY JOIN?

By joining the Friends of William Stafford, you become part of an international community of poetry lovers and writers with broad access to other poetry organizations and events. As a Friend, you'll receive a subscription to our biannual newsletter, filled with poetry and poetry news. In addition, your contribution supports the annual William Stafford Birthday Celebration Readings, the annual September poetry and potluck picnic, maintains our web site, www.williamstafford.org, and helps initiate new projects. We always welcome your volunteer services.

To join the Friends of William Stafford, renew your friendship, or make a donation, please fill out this form and mail to: FWS, P.O. Box 1925, Sisters, OR 97759. Checks payable to "Friends of William Stafford." Or you can renew or join online at the FWS website.

JOIN OR RENEW:

(Please check ALL appropriate boxes)

- New Renewal Gift
 Patron \$100/yr Individual \$35/yr
 Family \$50/yr Institutions \$50/yr
 Lifetime \$500

Please add \$5.00/year outside the U.S.

Name* _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ Country** _____

Email _____ Phone () _____

May we list this information (or any part of it) in a "friends-only" directory of which you will receive a copy? _____

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

Giver's Name & Address: _____

How did you hear of FWS?

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

Welcome New Friends
January 2021–July 2021

Shaun & Debby Griffin

Allison Moran

Mary de Palma

Stephen Paul

Samuel Parish

Dallas Lee

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



FRIENDS OF WILLIAM STAFFORD
JOURNAL & NEWSLETTER©

is published two times a year.

EDITOR: Tim Barnes
tim.barnes63@gmail.com

Note: Anything in this newsletter that does not have a byline was written by the editor.

WEBMASTER: Dennis Schmidling

Special thanks to Ilka Kuznik

Please email comments, letters, news, and information on poetry events, awards, etc. to tim.barnes63@gmail.com or mail to
Tim Barnes
3733 SE Alder St.
Portland, OR 97214

friends of **WILLIAM STAFFORD**

P.O. Box 1925 Sisters, OR 97759
www.williamstafford.org | friends@williamstafford.org

“Near to the City of David,” an
unpublished story
by William Stafford

∞ ∞ ∞
In the Slant of My Hat: Composing
Principle, William Stafford’s
Democratic Poetics
By Tim Barnes

∞ ∞ ∞
All in A Glass Face in the Rain
by Erik Muller

Please notify sender of change of address



In the dark we are equal. And in the brightest light.
--William Stafford

Photo & Design by Ilka Kuznik