

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2001

The Earth Says Have A Place William Stafford And A Place Of Language

Thomas Fox Averill

Washburn University, tom.averill@washburn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Averill, Thomas Fox, "The Earth Says Have A Place William Stafford And A Place Of Language" (2001).
Great Plains Quarterly. 2181.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2181>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE EARTH SAYS HAVE A PLACE

WILLIAM STAFFORD AND A *PLACE* OF LANGUAGE

THOMAS FOX AVERILL

In the spring of 1986, my daughter was almost four years old and my wife and I were to have poet William Stafford to dinner during a visit he made to Washburn University. I searched for a short Stafford poem our daughter might memorize as a welcome and a tribute. We came across this simple gem, and she spoke it to him at the table.

KEY WORDS: Robert Bly, Steven Hind, Kansas, poetry, Richard Hugo, William Stafford

Thomas Fox Averill is Writer-in-Residence and Professor of English at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. He is author of Secrets of the Tsil Cafe (BlueHen/Putnam, 2001) and editor of What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth Century Writers on the Sunflower State (University Press of Kansas, 1990).

GPQ 21 (Fall 2001): 275-86)

NOTE

Straw, feathers, dust—
little things

but if they all go one way,
that's the way the wind goes.

—William Stafford, "Note,"
The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems (1998)¹

Later in his visit, Stafford told a story about "Note." He traveled extensively all over the world. Once, in Pakistan, he opened his bags for a customs official. "Books," the man observed.

"I am a poet," said Stafford.

"And these are your books?" The official pulled *Allegiances* from a suitcase and turned to "Note." He read the poem to Stafford, then closed the book. "I like it," he said. "Very nice. You may go."

Stafford liked that story because it confirmed his belief in the vibrant, living connection provided by language. Words, after all, are the little things of "Note." When they all go one way, they reveal the big thing—wind, place, poem, human connection.

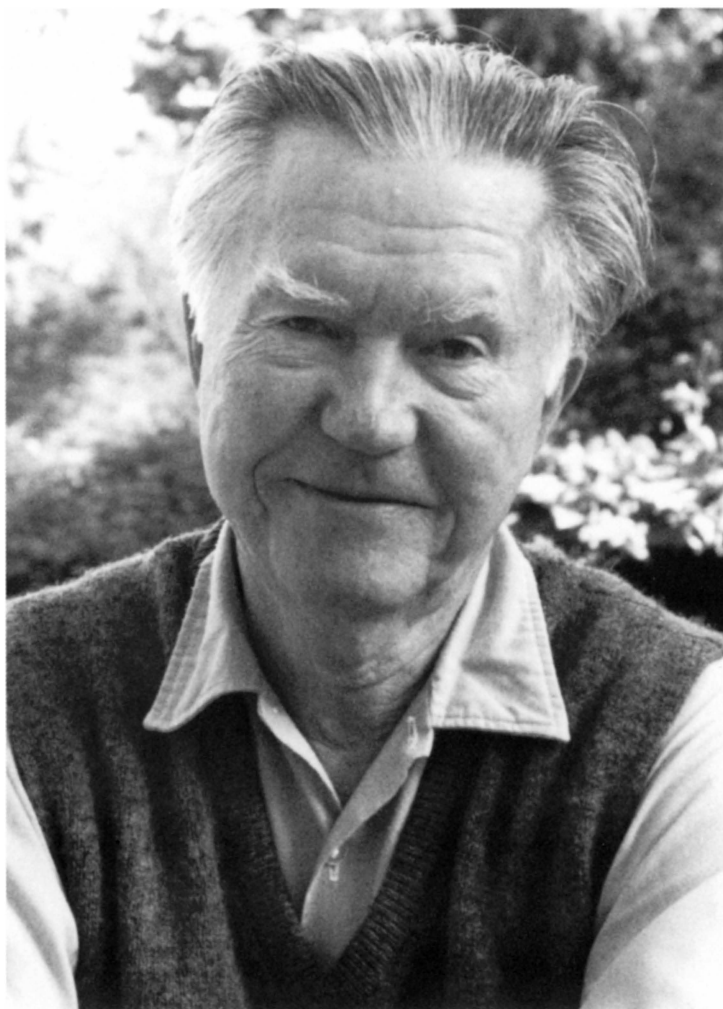


FIG. 1. *William Stafford*. Courtesy of William Stafford Archive, Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon.

STAFFORD AND THE PLACE OF LANGUAGE

I can say without any problem that the language is what I live in when I write.

—William Stafford, *Kansas Poems of William Stafford* (1990)²

Stafford wrote a great deal about his writing method, especially in the two books of prose, poetry, and interviews published by the University of Michigan Press in their Poets on

Poetry series. *Writing the Australian Crawl* and *You Must Revise Your Life* are full of apt metaphors.

For example, Stafford is starting a car on ice, developing a “traction on ice between writer and reader,” making the reader enter a poem because “the moves . . . come from inside the poem, the coercion to be part of the life right there.”³

Or Stafford is dreaming, and making fun of those who treat dreaming (poetry) as a business: “You extract from successful dreams the elements that work. Then you carefully fash-

ion dreams of your own. This way, you can be sure to have admirable dreams, ones that will appeal to the educated public."⁴

Or Stafford is swimming:

Just as the swimmer does not have a succession of handholds hidden in the water, but instead simply sweeps that yielding medium and finds it hurrying him along, so the writer passes his attention through what is at hand, and is propelled by a medium too thin and all-pervasive for the perceptions of nonbelievers who try to stay on the bank and fathom his accomplishment.⁵

Or Stafford is rehearsing: "Maybe it is all rehearsal, even when practice / ends and performance pretends to happen . . . Maybe your stumbling / saves you, . . ." ⁶

Or Stafford is revising your life:

We can all learn technique and then improvise pieces of writing again and again, but without a certain security of character we cannot sustain the vision, the trajectory of significant creation: we can learn and know and still not understand. Perceiving the need for that security of character is not enough—you have to possess it, and it is a gift, or something like a gift.⁷

Or Stafford is climbing a cliff in the dark with scratched, numb hands, muscles cracking. But he makes it to the top, to the finished poem, and shouts, "Made it again! Made it again!"⁸

These metaphors come out of Stafford's relationship to language, the paying attention to something bigger, becoming aware of what is big by paying attention to its "little things" and nudging forward based on his listening.

Nothing shows his relationship to language more than the manner of his own writing. He woke early each morning to write, because, as he says in "Freedom," "most places, / you can usually be free some of the time / if you wake up before other people."⁹ He sat in the dark, reclining on his couch, filling journal after

journal. He was not writing poetry, he was writing. He was not crafting poems, he was listening. And what he listened to best was the language itself.

Other writers have witnessed to the same thing. Joyce Thompson wrote what I as a writer believe. Stafford might agree with much of it:

The language is often smarter than I am, than the writer is. I often feel like an idiot savant when I'm writing. It's a very intuitive process. There is a certain abrogation of ego, and it happens through the agent of language. It's difficult to explain that and I'm not sure it's the same for all writers. I know some people feel that composition is a real act of arrogance, and assertion of the ego, but I find that when the writing is going its best, it's a real absorption of the ego in the task, a laying aside of it. It's a pretty direct exchange between the language and whatever envisioned reality there is. I think that's one reason that I like doing it so much. I don't get in my own way nearly as much when I write as I do in some of the other things I do in life. There's something beyond individual self and I think, to an extent, I write to experience that.¹⁰

Language is the big sea for human beings. We swim in it, as Stafford said. We trust it, and it holds us up, sustains us. It is so much bigger than we are, and it is eternal—having a long life before us and a long life after us. We do not master it anymore than we master the water when we swim. But we do get to know it well, to use its strength, to hone our own efforts into an efficiency that makes us powerful because it is powerful. Sometimes it is even more powerful than we are. I once asked Stafford if he'd ever written anything he didn't believe, if sometimes the poem dictated he move in a direction that wasn't quite right for him as a conscious person but was right for the requirements of the poem. He didn't just answer yes, he answered, "Of course." As he wrote in "Some Arguments Against Good Diction,"

For people, the truth does not exist. But language offers a continuous encounter 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.¹¹

The requirement of the poem—to be influenced by language—brings one to truth. Writing what the poem requires is different from manipulating language away from fact or truth. As a writer, Stafford was aware of that sad manipulation. In fact, he had a suspicion of idle conversation. He once said that in a dialogue he liked to leave with the feeling that “I listened better than he did.”

I once had responsibility for Stafford when he visited the University of Kansas. I picked him up, took him to a party, and returned him to where he was staying. I followed him around at the party, a slightly fawning neophyte before the “great man.” Two-thirds of the way through the evening, I realized my hero had just told the same story for the third time. I was aghast. He was supposed to be the great listener, the swimmer, the one finding the next curve, the one most sensitive to nuance, to what might be unique in each question, each possible conversation. Most of all, this original man should have been original. This was my first experience separating the man from the poet, the party-goer-out-of-obligation from the self-disciplined listener to the earth. I was later reassured by one of Stafford’s poems:

AT THE CHAIRMAN’S HOUSEWARMING

Talk like a jellyfish can ruin a party.
It did: I smiled whatever they said,
...
And my talk too—it poured on the table
and coiled and died in the sugar bowl,
twitching a last thin participle
to flutter the candle over its soul.
...
Oh go home, you terrible fish;
let sea be sea and rock be rock.

Go back wishy-washy to your sheltered bay,
but let me live definite, shock by shock.¹²

How wonderful, at the reading the next night, when Stafford’s poetry lived definite, shock by shock, when the jellyfish of talk was replaced by the richness of language.

Stafford liked the experience of language so much he gave language and voice to most everything around him. His poems go beyond personification, that mere literary term, in the same way belief goes beyond technical explanation. When Native Americans, for example, pay attention to animals, to grass, to wind and leaf, we don’t call it personification, we call it religion. I don’t know what to call this same attention in Stafford’s work, but it lives in lines like:

air contains all. After
we fall it waits. At the last
it is frantic with its hands
but cannot find us.
Was it a friend? Now,
too late, we think it was.

That’s why we became grass.¹³

Or,

“Be alive,” the land says. “Listen—
this is your time, your world, your pleasure.”¹⁴

Or, in “On a Church Lawn,” dandelions assert a deaf cry: “If you listen / well, music won’t have to happen” and “God is not big; he is right.”¹⁵

The grass is always saying “forever.”¹⁶ Seeds blown to the earth “quietly wait. / The wind keeps telling us something / we want to pass on to the world: / Even far things are real.”¹⁷ The dogwoods say, “Even if the sun doesn’t come, we’ll come.”¹⁸ And the moth: “It hurt to be told all the time / how I loved that terrible flame.”¹⁹

Coyote’s life is baroque, and, he asserts, he “wouldn’t trade it for yours.” Quail learn to

“just / be there—be the evening.” And at a gathering of animals, Black-footed Ferret speaks “for us all: ‘Dearly beloved,’ it said.”²⁰

For Stafford, everything, big and little—like straw, feathers, and dust—has importance, has a name. Even the little seed that meets water in “B.C.” speaks its stature: “Sequoia is my name.”²¹

From little things, big things always grew. Over and over Stafford witnessed to his willingness for what came, no matter how small. “To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me.”²² Or, “most of what I write, like most of what I say in casual conversation, will not amount to much.”²³ And, “Any little impulse is accepted, and enhanced.”²⁴

Stafford accepted and enhanced so much of his journal writing into poems, and he published so prolifically, that some critics chastised him for not being more selective. But he was prolific not because he was a poor critic of his own work, nor because he needed publication, nor because he was popular. He simply worked hard, shared enthusiastically, and believed more strongly in the process of writing than in the product of writing. His wise voice, his eager sharing, and the dailiness of his writing were always with him when he gave readings from his work.

At any William Stafford reading, everyone felt centered—in place, in language, in sensibility. He shared his work with humble enthusiasm, often giving a little tilt of his head at the end of a poem, as if to say, “What do you think of that?” He punctuated poems with talk, commentary, notes on composition, and then, halfway into a sentence, his audience would realize he wasn’t talking anymore, he was reading the next poem. This gave witness to his definition of poetry: the ear of the reader shifts into attention. I never attended a Stafford reading when he didn’t read from something he’d written that very morning, in the dark, reclining in a motel room. He engaged the world through language, constantly, and had amassed thousands of poems, his “notes,” by the time of his death in August 1993. His last poem, titled “Are you Mr. William Stafford?”

written 28 August of that year, the day he died, shows how true he was to language and to himself until the end. Some lines: “You can’t tell when strange things with meaning / will happen. I’m [still] here writing it down / just the way it was.”²⁵

THE LANGUAGE OF PLACE

The world speaks everything to us.
It is our only friend.

—William Stafford, *The Way It Is*²⁶

. . . You turn your head—
that’s what the silence meant: *you’re not alone.*

The whole wide world pours down.

—William Stafford, *The Way It Is*²⁷

William Stafford sparked my interest in Kansas literature when I first heard him read at the University of Kansas in the early seventies. His voice, his profound simplicity, his respect for our landscape, his desire to live by common things, his uncommon perspective on the world—he made these things Kansas.

Perhaps only someone born and raised in central Kansas would say, “Mine was a Midwest home—you can keep your world.”²⁸ Or, in giving voice to the subjects of Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*: “If we see better through tiny / grim glasses, we like to wear / tiny, grim glasses.”²⁹

His wisdom, profound and simple, came in lines like: “Our Senator talked like war, and Aunt Mabel / said, ‘He’s a brilliant man, / but we didn’t elect him that much.’”³⁰ Or in “A Letter,” when he writes the governor about a little town that neither demands nor is afraid. He suggests, “You could think of that place annually / on this date, for reassurance—a place where we have done no wrong.”³¹ Stafford’s wise pacifism—which has, I think, a corollary in his writing process and is contained in so many poems—makes no demands, but asserts itself quietly in poems like “At the Un-National Monument along the Canadian Border”:

This is the field where the battle did not
happen,
where the unknown soldier did not die.

...

No people killed—or were killed—on this
ground
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame
that people celebrate it by forgetting its
name.³²

Our landscape dwelled within him: “some-
where inside, the clods are / vaulted mansions,
lines through the barn sing / for the saints
forever, the shed and windmill / rear so glori-
ous the sun shudders like a gong.”³³ Or, “My
self will be the plain, / wise as winter is gray, /
pure as cold posts go / pacing toward what I
know.”³⁴ Landscape and language and Stafford
are all inseparable here.

His lifelong celebration of little things,
common things, real things, comes from a deep
respect for the place where he grew up. His
poem “Allegiances” begins, “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.”³⁵ Every poem
seemed to turn on seeing the depth in what
was near: “In the yard I pray birds, / wind,
unscheduled grass, / that they please help to
make / everything go deep again.”³⁶ And
“World, I am your slow guest, / one of the
common things / that move in the sun and
have / close, reliable friends / in the earth, in
the air, in the rock.”³⁷

And his unique way of looking at the world
is spoken like a Kansan. His poem “Being an
American” starts, “Some network has bought
history, / all the rights for wars and games.”
And ends, “Maybe even yet we could buy a
little bit of today and see how it is.”³⁸ His
outsider critiques of contemporary life—as in
“Have You Heard This One?”—would make
any Kansan smile:

A woman forged her face.
(It was one she found in a magazine.)
Using it, she got a job on an airline.
One day a passenger said, “Haven’t I seen
you everywhere before?” (He had been reading

Ring Lardner.) They got married
that very night in a motel.

This is a true story.
It happened in New York
and Los Angeles
and Chicago
and . . .³⁹

Also very Kansan is Stafford’s desire—in
the collections of poetry and in his readings—to
put his reader-audience at ease. Note how
many poems he wrote that introduce or say
farewell, that create a climate of companion-
ship. His first book, *West of Your City*, begins
with the poem “Midwest,” which invites the
reader to “Come west and see; touch these
leaves.”⁴⁰ The final poem of that collection,
“Postscript,” asks, “You reading this page, this
trial—/ shall we portion out the fault?”⁴¹ Other
poems of greeting and departure include lines
like, “Reader, we are in such a story: / all of
this is trying to arrange a kind of a prayer for
you.”⁴² *Allegiances* begins with “This Book”:
“Quiet as all books, I wait,”⁴³ and ends with
“So Long.” The first poem of *Someday, Maybe*
begins, “Look: no one ever promised for sure /
that we would sing.” The collection ends with
a typical Stafford line: “You know who you
are: / This is for you, my friend.”⁴⁴ In these
kinds of poems, Stafford is not only creating
companionship, he is writing with the lan-
guage of conversation and he is engaging the
reader into his way of writing and thinking
about poetry. These poems are courteous be-
ginnings, fond farewells: they speak to
Stafford’s theories of poetry and to his Kansas
upbringing.

Stafford wants an engaged, rather than a
pressured, reader. He also strived for engaged,
not pressured, poems. Stafford rarely pushes a
poem in any one particular place: no flashy
beginnings, no endings with hammering clo-
sures. As my colleague Jim Hoogenakker said,
“No rhyming couplets at the ends of sonnets
in Stafford.”⁴⁵ In fact, Stafford frequently wrote
lines like “What the river says, that’s what I
say,” even though it’s not a statement, it’s a
metaphor. He never tells us what the river

says. In "Put These in Your Pipe" he writes, "I think of something to end with, / but I'm not going to write it down."⁴⁶ In "Notice What This Poem Is Not Doing" he uses that line as a refrain, then ends with the line "Notice what this poem has not done."⁴⁷ At the end of "Inscribed on a Prayer Wheel and Spun" Stafford asserts, "In this, the water of Now, we swim. Our path / closes in crystal behind us; ahead it glistens. / Listen: nobody knows any more than ever."⁴⁸ There is a deliberate lack of profundity, what some have called simple profundity, in lines like "My gypsy attention continues its years-long / wandering. It will return. It will find / my mouth saying, 'Oh,' as the ocean / rises and falls."⁴⁹ For me, Stafford's poetry is full of this kind of withheld meaning. As in "How the Real Bible Is Written"—when he writes about the "inspiration in an old badger's shoulder / that bores for grizzled secrets in the ground"⁵⁰—Stafford is always digging rather than telling.

Some of his work is almost underdone, as in poems like "Things I Learned Last Week," where he sets these two stanzas against each other:

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

If I ever die, I'd like it to be
in the evening. That way, I'll have
all the dark to go with me, and no one
will see how I begin to hobble along.⁵¹

This quality of the underdone and understated is also part of Stafford's unwillingness to assert beyond the self. As such, there is a sort of Kansas definite indefiniteness that is kin to privacy. When he ends "The Farm on the Great Plains" with the line "pacing toward what I know,"⁵² the reader realizes that something is being withheld. What is he pacing toward? Why won't he say? He will say—he'll say what the river says. What the stone posts know. And no more.

Stafford's use of language is like the landscape of Kansas, spare but incredibly full of subtle beauty and remnants of the historical

past. Part of that past is pioneering. In "One Home" he writes, "To anyone who looked at us we said, 'My friend'; / liking the cut of a thought, we could say 'Hello.'"⁵³ This is still the code in western Kansas, where a wave is returned, where anyone near is better than nobody. "American Gothic" ends, "Poverty plus confidence equals / pioneers. We never doubted."⁵⁴ Stafford's work has that same pluck: humble materials plus confidence equals poetic innovation.

The humble materials are simple words, simply used. But, as Stafford writes in "How These Words Happened," "I found these words and put them / together by their appetites and respect for / each other. In stillness, they jostled. They traded / meanings while pretending to have only one."⁵⁵ Being satisfied with humble materials is part of what the earth says in Kansas. Stafford's "In Response to a Question" has a litany: The earth says "have a place, be what that place / requires;" "have a ranch / that's minimum: one tree, one well," "wear the kind / of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)"; and yet for all the simplicity, the poem asserts the riches and loss of this flat place, with its "flat evening," its "sparrow on the lawn," its "wind," its "ritual for the wavering," its "sermon of the hills," its "highway guided by the way the world is tilted." And the end comes with lack of assertion: "Listening, I think that's what the earth says."⁵⁶ The "I think" of that last line mirrors what I tend to think of as the Kansas affection for qualifiers, at least I kind of think it does, pretty much.

Remember, too, that Stafford doesn't want the perfect poem. He cultivated imperfection by giving himself over to language rather than trying to control it. As he says at the beginning of "At the Fair": "Even the flaws were good—."⁵⁷

Stafford had a healthy mistrust of technique:

When I'm writing, I'm not at all trying to fit in any forms, . . . That doesn't seem to me the crucial or essential thing. . . . [My] composition . . . is not a technique, it's a kind of stance to take toward experience,

or an attitude to take toward immediate feelings and thoughts while you're writing. That seems important to me, but technique is something I believe I would like to avoid.⁵⁸

Tradition was suspect:

Even those of us who are critics, teachers, scholars, have always trafficked in something much more precious than our rules could identify; and now with the help of kindergartners, protesters, joshing conversationalists, and disporting scholars, we have glimpsed how language belongs to all of us, and poetry does too. . . . Poetry today grows from a tradition that is wider than just the sequence of poems we inherit. The language all speakers use is the tradition.⁵⁹

Even meaning was something to avoid. Stafford didn't want poems that could be explained by what he called "the explainers," but poems defined by the attention of the reader. The first stanza of "The Trouble With Reading" speaks to the difference between paying attention and dissecting for meaning:

When a goat likes a book, the whole book is gone,
and the meaning has to go find an author again.
But when we read, it's just print—deciphering,
like frost on a window: we learn the meaning but lose what the frost is, and all that world pressed so desperately behind.⁶⁰

Stafford's definition of poetry is reader-based. In the essay "Making a Poem/Starting a Car on Ice," he calls a poem "anything said in such a way or put on the page in such a way as to invite from the hearer or reader a certain kind of attention."⁶¹

In "You and Art," Stafford wrote,

Your exact errors make a music
that nobody hears.

Your straying feet find the great dance,
walking alone.

And you live on a world where stumbling
always leads home.⁶²

After his oldest son, Bret, committed suicide in November 1988, I wrote a letter to Stafford expressing my dismay and my best wishes to him. He wrote back, "True, we did suffer a grievous blow; it was a jagged event. But the little things, and letters like yours, have brought us around. I see things differently, hear music better, and value friends even more than before."⁶³ As in art, the stumbling, the straying, the errors, all converge into meaning. Not the big meaning of philosophy but the small meanings of a life lived.⁶⁴

I consider Stafford's respect for the flawed, for error, as well as his disrespect for technique and tradition, to be part of his nature as a Kansan. We Kansans joke that our lives are "pretty good," our state "not bad," our towns "fair to middling." Of course, we know how profound our experience is, how much we are a part of a natural world that signals to us each day. We live under a huge sky, and, as a people with roots in agriculture, we learn to accept what is and take what comes. Survival is not a philosophy, it's our activity, and it teaches us a kind of humility. That's the landscape we live in. Look at one of my favorite Stafford poems:

PASSING REMARK

In scenery I like flat country.
In life, I don't like much to happen.

In personalities I like mild colorless people.
And in colors I prefer gray and brown.

My wife, a vivid girl from the mountains,
says, "Then why did you choose me?"

Mildly I lower my brown eyes—
there are so many things admirable people
do not understand.⁶⁵

A lot of people might not understand Stafford's affection for Kansas—anyone's affection for Kansas, for that matter. I trace mine to my parents' love of the place they made home and family. In 1997 I met Stafford's second son, Kim, for lunch in Oregon. We had much in common—both second-born sons of good fathers recently lost, the same number of siblings, the recent birth of a child. I shared a piece of writing my psychiatrist father had done. In his article, he described the importance, in the therapeutic process, of what he called the "lost good object." He defined that as a person, place, or relationship that, if remembered and explored, would affirm the best in life, would create positive movement, would lead to healing and sanity.⁶⁶ I sent Kim the article. Later, we spoke on the phone: "Kansas was my father's lost good object," Kim said.⁶⁷ Others might call Kansas Stafford's inspiration, or touchstone, or grounding. But, in part because of William Stafford, Kansas has become a richer, more celebrated place.

STAFFORD AS PLACE

Without a shield of hills, a barricade
of elms, one resorts to magic, hiding
the joker well behind the gesturing hand.

—Richard Hugo, "In Stafford Country,"
*Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected
Poems of Richard Hugo* (1984)⁶⁸

For Kansas poetry, after Stafford—his first book was *West of Your City*, 1960—William Stafford became "the way it is." He was and still is the profound influence. Like the landscape itself, Stafford inspired writers. Because, in some ways, he has become Kansas, his life and work are a kind of landscape.

Stafford traveled a great deal and met many writers. His letters were full of what he variously called the "academic swirl," the "circuit," or "zigzag jaunt," the "swirls of sociability," the "good encounters" and "engagements."⁶⁹

Almost every writer I've met has a Stafford story. Ohio poet Grace Butcher visited Washburn University a couple of times. I was pumping her for exercises to use with young writers in the classroom. She suggested one she'd done recently: take an experience from the past in which you behaved badly and re-write yourself as a decent person, doing the right thing. "William Stafford did that one with us once," she said. "It's in *A Glass Face in the Rain*." I looked up "One Time," a poem about a blind girl Stafford finds on the schoolground in the darkening evening. He hears things as she hears them, a "great sprinkler arm of water" finding the pavement, "pigeons telling each other their dreams." He writes that he said,

... "Tina, it's me—
Hilary says I should tell you it's dark,
and, oh, Tina, it is. Together now—"

And I reached, our hands touched,
and we found our way home.⁷⁰

Both Grace Butcher and I wondered what Bill Stafford was rewriting—what slight was he making up for in his encounter with that blind girl? Or was he rewriting an imagined moment that lived only in the language?

Not too long ago, Washburn University brought in a candidate for a poetry position. He was expected to conduct a class, and since he was in Kansas, in Stafford country, he reached back into his own experience with Stafford. He gave us an exercise in personification to do. Then he read a fire poem—one written from the point of view of fire—that someone had written in response to the exercise, in Michigan, years before. Then he asked us who we thought the writer was. Stafford, of course, was the correct answer. The exercise was good, the poet was a pleasure to interview, the Stafford poem was a highlight. But the writer didn't get the job. Of course, we hired another admirer of Stafford. If you're going to teach somewhere, you should teach where you can admire the Stafford landscape.

Many writers tip their hats to Stafford in direct and indirect ways. Denise Low, a Lawrence poet who teaches at Haskell Indian Nations University and who edited *The Kansas Poems of William Stafford*, wrote a poem for him, "Kansas Grasslands, for William Stafford." The last stanza:

This imperfect circle is Stafford's horizon,
a curved line to keep stars from spilling,
a line through air, a thatched edge—
the path he traveled skyward and back.⁷¹

Richard Hugo tried to capture the landscape of Kansas's great poet with "In Stafford Country":

... With homes exposed
no wonder people love. Farms absorb
the quiet of the snow, and birds
are black and nameless miles away.
...
Where land is flat, words are far apart.
Each word is seen, coming from far off,
a calm storm, almost familiar, across
the plain.⁷²

Poet Robert Bly, in "What Bill Stafford was Like," knew that Stafford was both a place, and a creator of place:

... The words weren't always comforting,

But calculated to nudge us along to that
place
—Just over there—where we would be safe
for the night.⁷³

In "Simple Courtship," poet Bill Myers shows how Stafford's presence echoes in our lives and in our poetry:

Hello old friend, it's me again,
whispering you forward the way rivulets
of wind
trickle through a streamside grove of cotton-
woods—
each leaf shimmering its own note of
light.⁷⁴

Flint Hills-bred Steven Hind, who teaches at Hutchinson Community College, tried for years after Stafford's death to pay tribute to Stafford—his language and spirit. He once wrote to me in an e-mail: "I woke up with a Stafford line in my head: 'What the river says, that is what I say.' ('Ask Me') And I scribbled out my own little confirmation of . . . what water does when it lands on earth."⁷⁵

DECISION

When our river had a change
of heart and gouged south,
saying so long to its last
northerly horseshoe, trees
sent descendants, and weeds
webbed the dark earth between
saplings under elders stirring
in the high breezes. And that
growth-choked channel where
our river wasn't wore a new
slogan: long live volunteers.⁷⁶

In another e-mail, Hind wrote, "You know that Bill Stafford's death has been under my skin. I think I've finally put that to rest with this one."⁷⁷

SUMMER NIGHT, TO BILL

On the road tonight under stars—
Milky Blur, I christen it, Bill—
traveling the dark with the trucks
and the skunks, I thought of you.
Near Abilene a stain passed under
my lights, apostrophe where some
deer met fate in confusion, and
your poem whispered again.

At two,
past all disasters that did not happen
tonight, I squat in a bath of breezes
under my cottonwood where a thousand
leaves believe in summer, saying be
true. You are. Old traveler, adios.

And for the 1996 Stafford conference at Kansas State University, Hind read one he really thought he got right:

A CHOSEN WAY

"... judge me: I came away."
from "Prairie Town"

This Bill of art and right paused at
a fence one day and saw prairie
dogs perched at their doors.

"Citizens," he heard the day saying
in its own strange way, "I grant
you rights to your town."

Then he turned back for the town
where he had slept the stretching
nights and cored the light in his way.

He followed to the river south of town
and felt the current in his fingers,
felt the trustworthy flow, baptizing
that hand chosen for life.⁷⁸

But my favorite of Hind's Stafford poems is
one in which he tries to capture the feel of
Stafford's "Being an American."

STAFFORD BALL BACK HOME

We never report our scores.
No one in our league does.
Our uniforms are camouflage
jerseys and shorts. We play
in the old cow lot and change
the rules, once we know them.
It's exciting, in a curious way.
The lazy give up and go pro,
if they're big enough. Sometimes,
we all get a trophy: Least Valuable
Player. I won again last week.⁷⁹

When we work with Stafford, we all win—
readers, poets, writers, scholars, Kansans.

Stafford visited Washburn shortly after
having been commissioned to write a poem
for a Portland restaurant. He was taken by the
request and came up with "Ode to Garlic,"
later published in *An Oregon Message*. He sent
me a broadside of the poem, inscribed, and it

hangs on my dining room wall. I was inspired
to write a garlic poem as well, though as part
of an exercise for my creative writing class. I
admired Stafford's admiration of garlic's in-
tensity:

... you learn
from garlic—how to taste the world:
the anticipation, the pleasure,
the living with it, always there,
in your every breath.

Stafford, like nature itself, was always will-
ing to share. He was so enthusiastic in person
and in letters that he buoyed those of us who
aspired to be writers. The final lines of "Ode
to Garlic" seem to be about more than garlic.
They speak to Stafford and his poetry itself:
"You walk out generously, giving it back / in a
graceful wave, what you've been given. / Like
a child again, you breathe on the world, and it
shines."⁸⁰ No poet could make the world shine
like Stafford could.

Two days before his death, Stafford wrote
"You Reading This, Be Ready." The final two
lines make a fit end for us as well: "What can
anyone give you greater than now, / starting
here, right in this room, when you turn
around?"⁸¹

"I would also like to mention aluminum."⁸²

NOTES

1. William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1998), p. 126.
2. William Stafford, *Kansas Poems of William Stafford*, edited and with an introduction by Denise Low (Topeka, Kans.: Woodley Press, 1990), p. vi.
3. William Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl, Views on the Writer's Vocation* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1978), p. 65.
4. William Stafford, *You Must Revise Your Life* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1986), p. 52.
5. *Writing* (note 3 above), pp. 25-26.
6. *Revise Your Life* (note 4 above), from "Practice," p. 34.
7. *Ibid.*, from "An Invitation to the Reader," p. ix.
8. *Ibid.*, from "After Arguing against the Contention That Art Must Come from Discontent," p. 28.
9. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 142.

10. From an interview with Joyce Thompson, in "Writer's Ask," Glimmer Train Press, Inc. (2001), no. 10.
11. *Writing* (note 3 above), p. 113.
12. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 113.
13. William Stafford, *Stories That Could Be True, New and Collected Poems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 179.
14. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 37.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
18. *Kansas Poems* (note 2 above), p. 47.
19. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 55.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-57.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
22. *Writing* (note 3 above), p. 17.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
25. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 46.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54.
28. *Kansas Poems* (note 2 above), p. 7.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
30. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 111.
31. *Stories* (note 13 above), p. 171.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 17. See also *Kansas Poems* (note 2 above), "How My Mother Carried on Her Argument With the World," pp. 31-32.
33. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 129.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
36. William Stafford, *Allegiances* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 58.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
38. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 217.
39. *Stories* (note 13 above), p. 245.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
43. *Allegiances* (note 36 above), p. ix.
44. William Stafford, *Someday, Maybe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 2, 86.
45. The English Department at Washburn University teaches Stafford's work in the Freshman Honors English course, and my colleagues Jim Hoogenakker and Robert Stein have studied Stafford's work with their students for years now. I thank them and my poet colleague Amy Fleury for their attentive suggestions as I put together these remarks.
46. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 20.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
54. *Kansas Poems* (note 2 above), p. 23.
55. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 251.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
57. *Stories* (note 13 above), p. 130.
58. *Writing* (note 3 above), p. 98.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 77, 79.
60. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 237.
61. *Writing* (note 3 above), p. 61.
62. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 7.
63. William Stafford, letter to author, 28 February 1989.
64. Stafford wrote a poem after his son's suicide. See "A Memorial: Son Bret," *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 16.
65. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 116.
66. Stuart Carson Averill, M.D., "Recovery of the Lost Good Object," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 61, no. 3 (summer 1997): 288-96.
67. Kim Stafford, phone conversations with author, February 1998 and March 2001.
68. Richard Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), pp. 91-92.
69. William Stafford, letters to author, 22 November 1974, 23 February 1976, 26 April 1976, 9 November 1976, 11 January 1978.
70. William Stafford, *A Glass Face in the Rain* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 106.
71. Denise Low, *New and Selected Poems, 1980-1999* (Lawrence, Kans.: Penthe Press, 1999), p. 8.
72. Richard Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On* (note 68 above), pp. 91-92.
73. Robert Bly, "What Bill Stafford Was Like," in *Morning Poems* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 66.
74. Bill Myers, "Simple Courtship," unpublished, shared with the author—along with several other Stafford-inspired poems—after conversations about Stafford's influence.
75. Steven Hind, e-mail to author, 25 January 1995.
76. Steven Hind, *In a Place with No Map* (Topeka, Kans.: Center for Kansas Studies/Woodley Press, 1997), p. 6.
77. Steven Hind, e-mail to author, 7 September 1995.
78. Steven Hind, letter to author, 15 March 2001.
79. Steven Hind, e-mail to author, 16 February 1996.
80. *The Way It Is* (note 1 above), p. 224.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
82. *Writing* (note 3 above), p. 140.