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The Forgiving Landscape: the Poetry of William Stafford.

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THE FORGIVING LANDSCAPE:
THE POETRY OF WILLIAM STAFFORD

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................... iv

Chapter I: Introduction ............................ 1
Chapter II: The Nexus of Images: The Bestiary .... 5
Chapter III: The Nexus of Images: The Forgiving Landscape ....................................... 48
Chapter IV: The Poetry of Statement: The Socio-Political Landscape ................................. 108
Chapter V: Allegiances and Connections: Some Thematic Patterns .................................... 171
Chapter VI: Poetry as Process: Considerations of Style ................................................. 200
Bibliography ........................................ 241
Vita .................................................... 249
ABSTRACT

There is a wholeness and a sanity in William Stafford's vision that arises out of his allegiance to the authentic elements of our experience. These elements include the vital but continually imperiled wilderness, the human landscape of the past comprised of family, friends, and lovers, and the eternal and inescapable rhythms of time, death, mutability, and terror. In his own words, Stafford is seeking to embody in his work "the unanalyzed impressions of holiness" that the world thrusts at him.

By temperament and by choice, Stafford is alienated from the so-called confessional school of poetry. Instead, he writes in the tradition of the concerned poet who gives voice to the urgent concerns of society. His social and political interests are three-fold. He is a pacifist by conviction, and therefore opposed to war, nuclear proliferation, and to all the destructive consequences of an increasingly sophisticated technology. He is also in the great tradition of the naturalist poet, observing and incorporating natural phenomena into his work, and committed to preserving the mystery of the wilderness. In
this respect he is in the Romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Finally, Stafford is still profoundly moved by the "idea" of America, and his poems are an attempt to grasp the essence of the land. The last, doomed symbol of this quintessential and "original" America is the American Indian, whom Stafford takes as preceptor and guide.

In poetic technique, as in every aspect of his work and life, what is of supreme importance to Stafford is the process itself. Poetry is process, and it is foolish to formulate preconceived notions of order and impose them on reality. The form of a poem arises naturally out of the poetic experience itself. Thus his poetry shows some technical affinities to the projective verse of the Black Mountain School of poets. But ultimately Stafford's poetry cannot be labelled. He is the least dogmatic of poets. He happily uses a great variety of verse forms and is a skilled craftsman, but he habitually denies a preoccupation with form.

He is significant because his work is permeated by a social and political awareness of the world and by a rich particularity of details. This particularity has waned over the years, and his latest volume occasionally gets mired in abstraction and prosiness. But the controlling vision of an essentially benevolent landscape still persists.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The question that was most commonly asked of me when I decided to study the poetry of William Stafford for the purposes of my dissertation was "Why Stafford?" I interpreted this query to mean: "Why should an Indian be so obviously drawn to the work of William Stafford?" The question was most natural under the circumstances, and in my attempt to answer it coherently, I was propelled in many useful directions. We who grew up in India did not witness the complete separation of a poet from his society that is so evident in England and in America. For better or for worse, the poet rejected the isolationist stance, denied himself a hermetic existence, and tried to integrate his poetry into the life of his community. Even today there is a strong tradition of the committed poet, committed not only to a political ideology but also to the larger concerns of society. Poetry readings in the vernacular are widely attended, and not only by the intelligentsia. The poet is seen as a spokesman, a performer, an intellectual, even as a lovable fool, but always as an
accessible and passionately feeling being.

Separate from the conception of the poet but linked to it is the nature of the poetry that is demanded. In India where the horror of existence is daily forced upon one's consciousness and there are few buffers to cushion the shock of discovery, we are naturally impatient with a poetry that is part escapist fantasy and part obsessive self-disclosure. We reject the lilacs and the "metaphysics muffled in poppies" that Pablo Neruda has scathingly written of. We demand the "bite" of reality; we insist on a poetry with a cutting edge. I believe that this is also true of Latin American cultures as well as of certain European countries, in other words, wherever people live and die amid a more politicized reality.

Stafford approximates the Indian ideal of the poet at ease with his material and with his role as the voice of his community. He addresses himself to issues that go beyond private pain and narcissistic reverie. His poetry is marked by a recoil from the confessional mode as practiced by John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and other contemporary poets. It is also distinguished by a reluctance to embrace obscurity for its own sake. It is a poetry permeated by an awareness of the poet's cultural, social, and emotional roots.

My dissertation is organized as a thematic study
designed to reveal Stafford's poetic vision in its totality. The second chapter is a discussion of the subjective image and the role it plays in Stafford's oeuvre. Particular attention is paid to his striking use of animal imagery, a special feature that is reminiscent of the poetry of Theodore Roethke, Pablo Neruda, D. H. Lawrence, and Ted Hughes. In the third chapter I develop the metaphor of the forgiving landscape and examine Stafford's treatment of the human landscape of the past as well as the quest motif, by looking closely at the imagery. Chapter IV is an examination of a seminal issue: the relationship between politics and poetry. It is also a critique of Stafford's poetry of statement. The fifth chapter is an analysis of one of the major thematic patterns in his work, that of the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Finally, in the last chapter, I look at Stafford's poetic techniques in the light of his own dictum: poetry is process.

Stafford, who published his first volume of poetry in his forties, after a rather painstakingly long apprenticeship, has received much critical attention in the last ten years. His work is also the subject of a full-length book, Jonathan Holden's A Mark to Turn. Honors and prizes, including the National Book Award for Traveling Through the Dark, have come at a steady pace. In spite of this, I have noticed a frequent tendency among teachers
and students of poetry (though not among professional poets themselves) to treat him as a competent but rather simplistic poet, and therefore unexciting.

My contention is that this opinion is based on a superficial evaluation of his poetry. Partly it is a consequence of Stafford's deliberate choice to separate himself from the "fashionable" centers of writing and publishing in the East. Partly it arises out of taking Stafford's self-deprecating pose too literally. I believe that his famous "flaunted non-sophistication" belies a genuine complexity. He has avoided obscurity without sacrificing complexity, tension, and surprise. This explains why, though not always a "fashionable" poet, he is always a deeply satisfying one.
It seems to me that the greatest tradition of all modern poetry, and of the avant-garde for a century has been the heavy use of images.

When one considers the towering figures of twentieth-century European and American poetry, the centrality of Robert Bly's statement is immediately borne out. Here is Pablo Neruda creating a world where false teeth, sulphur-colored birds, the dry leaves of autumn, a woman's breasts, iguanas and jaguars, and bread and salt move in surreal profusion, a world where "death is waiting, dressed like an admiral." Here is Lorca with his impassioned but pure poetry of horses, winds, roses and blood; T. S. Eliot with his disturbing evocations of sterility and despair, made concrete in the sputtering streetlamp, the stony rubbish, the dry rock, the lonely cry of gulls. Yeats builds a complicated poetic structure out of the archetypal images of swan, tower, Byzantium, sea-riders, Fools and Blind Men, and dancers. Dylan Thomas packs his poetry dense, with astonishing cosmic connections: images of "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower" are linked
to the chilling image of the hangman's line. Wherever we look, at Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, or American poetry (consider the powerful imagery of Robert Lowell's work, for instance), we see evidence that the most fertile tradition of modern poetry involves the consistent and heavy use of images.

This generalization, however useful, must be weighed against the widespread feeling that American and British poetry of this century has often been loaded down with abstractions, and limited by a too rigid belief in form, technique, and restraint. It is only in the last twenty-five years that American poetry has demonstrably moved towards a greater emphasis on the vital image. A variety of critical definitions shed light on this special use of the image. Stephen Stepanchev calls it "the subjective image"; Robert Kelly uses the term "image poem" or borrows Jerome Rothenberg's "deep image"; and George Lensing and Ronald Moran have referred to it as "the emotive imagination." The implications are the same: somewhere out of the depths of the unconscious mind, an image rises to the surface and illuminates the world of the poem. The subjective image, a term I shall adopt and use for the rest of this chapter, is a signal from the depths and also an index of the profound irrationality and creativity that attend the birth of a poem.
Imagism was the only movement in modern American poetry that concentrated solely on the image. This Anglo-American movement which involved T. E. Hulme, Richard Aldington, Ezra Pound, H. D., and Amy Lowell, among others, emphasized "concentration, exactness, the vocabulary of common speech, absolute freedom in the choice of subject, and the value of the image or the concrete particular." But, as Robert Bly and other critics have pointed out, the image of the Imagists was, properly speaking, only a picture. "Imagism was largely Picturism." A picture, as Bly explains, "is drawn from the objective, real world." An example would be Pound's "petals on a wet, black bough." Not so an image. An image is born of the imagination; not the real world but a created one is its native element. It may be intuitive, irrational, mysterious, surreal. The deep or subjective image is not concerned with the objective representation of reality.

We can readily observe the difference between the objective image of the 1920's and the subjective image of the 1960's by looking at the poetry of William Carlos Williams. "No ideas but in things" was his life-long dictum. This implies a desire to deal exclusively with objects, natural or otherwise. It is admirable if it forces us to focus our attention on the particulars and specifics of our world, and if it expels all haziness and
fuzzy sentimentality from the poem. In other words, the objectivity of Williams helped to revolutionize the "rather blurry, messy ... sentimentalistic mannerish" poetry being written at the turn of the century. But this emphasis on objectivity also has the harmful effect of narrowing our attention to the physical contours of our world. It denies the poetry of the unconscious life; it denies the importance of dreams. There can be no doubt that Imagism was in many ways the beginning of modern poetry, and that its doctrine of precise, clean, and clear images can be traced in nearly all the major poets of our time. After all, Imagism (and William Carlos Williams) made modern poetry a poetry of experiences more than ideas. However, despite its undoubted influence on the course of modern poetry, it does not encourage what Rilke calls "this turning inward, this sinking into your private world," a difficult journey that yields the poem.

The greater subjectivity of contemporary poetry has been the subject of much critical attention. Donald Hall in his excellent introduction to *Contemporary American Poetry* speaks of a new kind of imagination which is manifesting itself in recent American poetry. Acknowledging the debt owed by these poets to European masters such as Pablo Neruda and Georg Trakl, he goes on to say: "This imagination is irrational, yet the poem is usually quiet
and the language simple; there is no straining after apoca-
lypse. There is an inwardness to these images, a pro-
found subjectivity." This subjectivity need not neces-
sarily lead to the extravagant outpourings of "confessional"
poetry. In fact, as Hall and other critics have pointed
out, there is a distinction to be made between the auto-
biographical and the subjective. As Hall says, the new
movement "reveals through images not particular pain but
general subjective life. This universal subjective cor-
responds to the old objective life of shared experience
and knowledge." 

It is useful to begin my discussion of the nexus
of images in Stafford's poetry with this brief introduc-
tion to the "new subjectivism" for he is a leading repre-
sentative of this movement. In general, it is a mistake
to characterize him too rigidly, for his work shows a
receptiveness to widely eclectic influences, from the
philosophy of meliorism to the concepts of Edmund Burke
to the predominant Romantic theories of the imagination
derived from Wordsworth. Stylistically, too, he is capable
of great variety; he ranges from free verse to experi-
mentation with traditional sonnet forms. However, in
spite of this flexibility of form, and receptiveness to
diverse philosophies, Stafford's work contains the vision
of a highly consistent imaginative world.
Broadly speaking, it is a benevolent vision, though not a sentimental one. The central belief is that of man being made whole by immersion into the various patterns of nature. "The poetry of William Stafford is rooted in a series of natural pieties rare in contemporary life or literature: piety toward the earth itself, toward the region, the home, the parents, toward one's total past." From this sense of natural pieties arises the metaphor of the forgiving landscape which pervades his work. He habitually sees the prairies and mountains and lakes of the American wilderness in a redemptive light. He bears witness to the rejuvenating powers of this natural landscape. "Wherever we looked the land would hold us up," he says in "One Home." Perhaps this arises out of a feeling of being comfortable in the world. In an interview with Cynthia Lofsness, Stafford tried to articulate this feeling: "... it's like feeling at home in the world... I do feel at home in the world... it's like assuming good will on the part of other people... I tend to do that."  

In order to define the contours of Stafford's imaginative world I am going to examine the three broad categories into which his images fall. In the present chapter I will look at the images derived from the natural world with special attention paid to his extraordinary use of animal imagery. In Chapter III, I will examine the images
derived from the human landscape of the past, as exempli-
fied in the figures of the poet's father, various family
members, and the American Indian; I will also study a group
of metaphysical or quest images, such as the images of
time, home, deep, dark, and journey, which taken together
constitute what we may designate the symbolic shorthand
of Stafford's poetry. The critic R. W. B. Lewis has
written: "A vision of life can be articulated in rational
thought—but it may also find its form in a recurring
pattern of images." Thus, by focussing on recurring
images in Stafford's work we may hit upon the major themes
that inform his work.

Perhaps the title of Stafford's latest collection
of poems, Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People,
best describes his controlling vision of the wilderness.
The poet is merely a witness to the natural dramas that
are being enacted, to the interplay between animals, water,
rock, and prairie. He tries to be an unobtrusive witness:
the qualities he must develop in order to discern the
great and subtle patterns in nature are stealth and con-
cealment. That is why he admires Ishi, the last wild
Indian, a man who shows a proper reverence for the mysteries
of the wilderness:

A rock, a leaf, mud, even the grass
Ishi the shadow man had to put back where it was.
In order to live he had to hide that he did.

(CP, 136)

There is in Stafford's poetry an attempt to put human
striving and human achievements in their proper perspec-
tive. In "A Survey," man's attempt to master, dominate,
and chart the wilderness meet with abject failure:

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 boat crew,
but the river surged at night,
and ripped the map in two.

(CP, 35)

The wilderness will not be violated. Only the wildcats
that are sent out, after the men fail, know how to step
on the ground with "finesse." Thus they are entitled to
inherit the earth. In another poem, "Outside," coyotes
and wolves are "walking the edge of our comfortable earth,"
though we may be completely unaware of them. The poet
reminds us that

[For] all we have taken into our keeping
and polished with our hands belongs to a truth
greater than ours, in the animals' keeping.

(CP, 49)
Thus Stafford often makes implied or explicit statements in his poetry, about man's arrogance, his obsession with his technological mastery, and his insensitivity to the processes of nature. In a powerful polemical essay on ecology, Stafford asserts his beliefs:

> For what we do not know, human interchange cannot prevail. We hear each other but we do not hear the world. Outside our councils the world is beginning to speak. It will never finish; no person can interpret it fully. But it is there, and that it has something to say, we are beginning to be convinced.  

That Stafford is primarily a "nature poet" is a critical commonplace but one that requires some qualification and clarification. He is, of course, predominantly the poet of earth and its topography. His poetry reverberates with images drawn from the flat prairie lands of his native Kansas, and the hidden mountains and lakes and blizzards of the Western United States where he now lives. Stephen Stepanchev has called him "a poet of Existential loneliness and Western space." One glance at the table of contents of Stafford's *Collected Poems* is proof of the importance of the wilderness theme in his oeuvre. In *West of Your City* (1960), we have "West of Your City," "In the Deep Channel," "At the Salt Marsh," "The Farm on the Great Plains," "By the Snake River," "Sayings from the Northern Ice," and "In


Frontier," "A Hand in Water," "Crossing the Desert," "The Dialectic of the Mountains," "A Place in the Woods," and the title poem "Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People." I have dared to make such a lengthy catalogue of the titles of his poems to show that we are in the presence of a passionate preoccupation with the wilderness. We can go a step further and call it an obsessive theme in Stafford's poetry; his pervasive use of the wilderness motif is not the scaffolding supporting his poetic structure but the structure itself. For readers of contemporary American poetry, Stafford is the pre-eminent poet of the American wilderness, just as Robert Frost is the chronicler of rural New England, Robinson Jeffers is the visionary of the harsh and forbidding aspects of our environment, and Theodore Roethke is the tender witness to the small, the detailed, and the inexhaustibly vital flora and fauna of the American landscape.

In the same context, an unusual progression is evident in Stafford's work. His first volume, West of Your City, shows a great emphasis on concrete particulars: "In the Deep Channel" or "At the Salt Marsh" are vivid Imagistic accounts of a special situation, which in the former poem happens to be the act of setting up a fishing line in the dark waters of the channel, and in the latter, a hunting expedition (a duck shoot) where large numbers of teal are killed. "In the
Oregon Country" is even more concrete, as it catalogs place names and the names of the old Indian leaders; it also shows an accumulation of adjectives: "stinking fish tribes," "thieving whites," "twitching hands," "fluttering eagles" (CP, 37). Very few poems in this volume deal with man in society or with his personal relationships.

Traveling Through the Dark is still a celebration of the spirit of the wilderness, but people, both individually and collectively, begin to assume a greater importance. We are witnessing a slow movement from the non-human to the human. There are poems addressed to the poet's father ("Elegy" and "In Medias Res"); increasing satire and wit ("The Poets' Annual Indigence Report" and "The Only Card I got on my Birthday was from an Insurance Man"); and even poems of deeply felt social and political concern ("Thinking for Berky," "Fall Wind," "Returned to Say," and "Vocation"). Thus this volume marks a movement towards a greater involvement in the human community. Now the poet feels a responsibility not just towards the preservation of a threatened wilderness but towards our continued existence as a civilized people.

The Rescued Year continues in the same vein, including as it does several poems addressed to his family members ("My Father: October 1942," "Uncle George," "Aunt Mabel"); poems of scathing social satire ("A Documentary from America"
and "Our City is Guarded by Automatic Rockets"); and the profoundly lyrical poems inspired by the wilderness ("The Animal That Drank Up Sound" and "Sophocles Says").

With Allegiances we notice a demonstrable movement towards predominantly human concerns. As the title of the book suggests, it is now Stafford the family man, and friend, and student, and teacher, who confronts us, not just Stafford the keen and subtle observer of the wilderness. In poem after poem, he expresses his tenderness, his remembered passion, his sense of loss, and his amazement at the lives and actions of his fellow human beings. In poems such as "The Girl Engaged to the Boy Who Died," his tone is reminiscent of Edgar Masters' Spoon River Anthology, in which the ordinary lives of ordinary people are revealed in rich detail, so that we may witness the irony and the unexpected heroism of their lives:

And the whole sky sprang onto her blue umbrella she held over her head when she ran home alone, after graduation, and saw the yard and the dingy door of her house, and the weeds in the drive, for years.

(CP, 162)

Certain "characters" inhabit these poems, such as Ella, Ellen, Ruth, Althea, women he has desired and lost; Sublette, the reluctant hero of "In Sublette's Barn," who let "one deed at a time take him"; or Logue, the modern-day saint
of "Montana Eclogue." Of Logue we are told:

Earth took
the old saints, who battered their hearts,
met arrows, or died by the germs God sent;
but Logue, by being alone and occurring to us,
carries us forward a little . . .

(CP, 168)

This volume contains a large number of "personal poems":
the poet is now advocating an organic, inclusive concept
of "world" to denote both natural and human connections.
As he says in "Earth Dweller":

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

(CP, 196)

And towards the end of the book, in a poem entitled "Alle-
giances," he reminds us that:

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.

(CP, 193)

Stafford's 1973 collection, Someday, Maybe does not
exhibit any radical break in choice of subject or in the
techniques employed. There is a greater emphasis on the
figure of the American Indian, who is emblematic of our
last remaining links with the wilderness. In poems such as
"Indian Caves in the Dry Country," "People of the South
Wind, "Report to Crazy Horse," "Sioux Haiku," and "The Eskimo National Anthem," the poet bears witness to the moving lyricism and desperate pathos of their history.

*Stories That Could Be True* (1977) marks a distinct change of poetic direction, for now Stafford introduces a note of greater abstraction. The wilderness theme still prevails, but the poet substitutes the frequent use of personification for the earlier concrete description. Thus in an earlier phase he could write:

Water leaps from lava near Hagerman,  
piles down riverward over rock  
reverberating tons of exploding shock  
out of that stilled world.  

*(CP, 46)*

In contrast, the use of personifications weakens the emotive force of the later poems:

I am the wind. Long ago  
high in the mountains I had a home.  

* * * * *

When my brothers meet  
we wrestle out over the sea  
and they break away. I love their faces.  

*(CP, 8)*

or:

Brother of Air, Brother of Sun,  
please tell our story, that we  
may live in the brief wind.
Wherever I stand I hear the trees petition so.

(CP, 3)

There is an absence of poems addressed to specific persons, as well as a tendency to discursiveness, perhaps because these poems are indeed "stories that could be true." This in turn often results in the kind of prosiness shown in "Wovoka's Witness":

My people, now it is time
for us all to shake hands with the rain.
It's a neighbour, lives here all winter.
Talkative, yes. It will tap late
at night on your door and stay there gossiping.

(CP, 6)

It is hard to detect any poetic quality in these lines; the banality is overwhelming. The poems in this volume illustrate a change towards less imagistic, less sharply etched writing. I believe that it is a change for the worse; I find the humble details of the earlier poems preferable to the abstractions and the seeming "wisdom" of the later ones.

With his most recent collection, Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People (1980), we enter a world where paradoxically people are conspicuous by their almost total absence. We have come full circle and returned to familiar Stafford territory. A rock rolling down a road in the wilderness or the tracks left by an animal in the snow become objects of profound contemplation. The poems deal with
snowflakes, wind, rocks, wolves, water, and desert in the familiar Stafford style. But the tendency to abstraction and prosy statements persists, together with a new emphasis on metaphysical concerns; many of the poems deal with the nature of truth and knowledge ("Places That Will be Saved" and "Explanation"). In his latest volume, then, Stafford stands more detached from purely human concerns. He seems to focus on the wilderness as our last refuge and our last hope of salvation. He distrusts the merely human.

I begin my examination of the wilderness imagery in Stafford's work by outlining his three major responses to this wilderness. First, there is a heightened awareness of, and sensitivity to, the confrontation between civilization and the wilderness. The consequences of this conflict can be seen everywhere. Second, there is a very sure sense of the stability and eternity of the earth and of all the natural processes connected with it. It is the "unwaveryness" of the earth that powerfully counterpoints our ephemeral and essentially "secular" quests for fame, wealth, and power. Third, there is a deeply felt, reverential appreciation of the mysterious otherness of nature. A coyote or a prairie dog can become emblems of this otherness which we can respect, but can hardly hope to penetrate. This is often expressed as a belief that the wilderness is always "happening," is continually speaking to us, and is, in fact,
a continuum of processes, but that we are too absorbed to listen to it. It is possible that technology has deprived us of the capacity to listen. Whatever the cause, we get glimpses of this natural drama only infrequently. Some human figures, such as the poet's father, who had a highly developed sense of hearing, or the American Indian, whose natural religion taught him affection for the wilderness, are more privileged than the rest of us to be witnesses to this mystery.

These three responses constitute the basic framework around which Stafford has erected his imagistic structures concerning the wilderness. One of the most pervasive image groups in his poetry is that of animal imagery. These images recur with such regularity and force that they deserve special attention. It is, of course, one of the oldest literary devices, as old as Aesop's Fables. I am referring to the emblematic use of animals to personify human characteristics, to point out a moral, or to heighten mood and atmosphere. Any poet writing in the Romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Coleridge will be attentive to the flora and fauna of a landscape. Likewise, any poet writing in the pastoral tradition (for example, Robert Frost) will also tend to populate his poetry with various animal figures. In this century, at least three major poets, D. H. Lawrence, Theodore Roethke, and Pablo Neruda, have
demonstrated a striking use of animal images; the animals chosen are not decorations in a landscape but point to the important thematic concerns of the poetry.

For purposes of comparison, let us briefly look at the animal imagery employed by Lawrence, Roethke, and Neruda. Lawrence felt an intense identification with all forms of life, and he insisted on the primacy of these created beings. In his magnificent "Whales Weep Not," we have an evocation of the "hottest blood of us all, and the wildest, the most urgent." He sees the mating experience of the whale in a religious light; while "the great bull lies up against his bride," "the burning archangels under the sea keep passing, back and forth/ Keep passing archangels of bliss." The size, power, and vastness attach a cosmic dimension to the experience; Lawrence connects the rocking of the whales "through the sensual ageless ages" to the universe itself. Robert Bly in an article entitled "The Dead World and the Live World" reflects on the difference between "poetry that is locked inside the ego, and poetry that reaches out in waves over everything that is alive." He goes on:

Some writers bring us "news of the human mind." Arthur Miller is a perfect example. To say that nature was missing in his work would be an understatement--what is missing is the universe. The Heart of Darkness is
different. The Heart of Darkness, like the poems of Roethke and Whitman, brings us "news of the universe."

It seems to me that Lawrence uses his animal symbols to bring us news of the universe, to remind us of our cosmic connections. Stafford resembles him in this respect. Lawrence's "Swan," which speaks of "the swan within vast chaos, within the electron," is close in spirit to two of Stafford's poems: "Ceremony," which celebrates the mystical marriage between the poet's blood and the waters of the ocean, and "Connections," which speaks of the delicate "thread" that binds the whole universe. In both we see an intense struggle to search for the unifying principle of creation.

In Lawrence, we see yet another interesting use of animal imagery. He uses various animals in a recurring and totemistic way:

At the base of all American religions we find totemism; and the totem is an object, a being, a force of Nature, which is generally looked on as the ancestor of a group or clan or an individual, who take its name and identify themselves with it. In exchange for the totem's help and protection, all its representatives owe it a certain amount of deference and worship, rather as if it were an ancestor. Lawrence uses the snake in the poem of the same name as a totemistic figure, referring to it as a god and remarking
on its dignified movements. As soon as he hits it, he thinks of Coleridge's albatross, another animal which takes on mythic (and totemistic) proportions. Stafford uses several animals of the West and of the Midwestern prairies in this fashion. The wolf is the most important of the totemistic animals, and Stafford repeatedly refers to the close identification that exists between wolves and American Indians. The coyote performs the same function and is seen as the guardian of the truth in a community ("Outside"). In Stafford's poetry, wolf and coyote and prairie dogs have access to the "underground existence" of the wilderness.

Theodore Roethke, a major American poet, recurrently uses catalogues of animal images to create an imaginative world in which the poet's Self confronts and then merges with the natural world. A passionate identification takes place: "By swoops of bird, by leaps of fish, I live./... A light wind rises: I become the wind" ("Her Becoming"). In Stafford's poetry, man and nature are finally separate. We may get glimpses of the spirit of the wilderness, but this is only a temporary access. Stafford seems to be saying that one cannot merge with nature; at the most we meet it on equal terms, and with a respectful stance.

The emblematic animals that appear in Roethke's poetry are characteristically small: lemmings, moths, frogs,
owls, wasps, muskrats, snakes, turtles, and fieldmice; or they are characteristically hidden: worms, crabs, clams, oysters, fish; or shy and lyrically beautiful:

Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,
The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across the highway,
The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting for its fly,

With these I would be.

("Meditation at Oyster River")

He shares these traits with Stafford, for Stafford too disregards the obviously powerful and apocalyptic beasts (lions, tigers, elephants, whales) and concentrates on the small and stealthy animals that he knows best and can describe realistically. Like Roethke, he too evinces tenderness for the small and unprotected animals; his recurring use of prairie dogs would be an example.

In his collection of critical essays, *Babel to Byzantium*, James Dickey writes of Roethke: "Roethke's poems make you remember and rejoice in Lawrence's magnificent little jotting: 'We don't exist unless we are deeply and sensually in touch/ with that which can be touched but not known.'"¹⁷ The quotation can very well be applied to Stafford's poetry for there are many moments of mystic communion between poet and the wilderness. "Ceremony," which concerns the poet's struggle to understand the "marriage" between his blood and the river in which he dips his hand,
is an example that comes to mind. The difference in approach between the two poets is this: Stafford tries to "know" the universe and its creatures "deeply" but never as "sensually" as Roethke can. Roethke's animal imagery evokes a greater sense of the physicality of natural processes. The poet's senses are completely attuned to the wilderness; the mind does not intervene to interpret events. Thus Roethke can write:

Over the low, barnacled, elephant-colored rocks,
Come the first tide-ripples, moving, almost without sound, toward me,
Running along the narrow furrows of the shore, the rows of dead clam shells;
Then a runnel behind me, creeping closer,
Alive with tiny striped fish, and young crabs climbing in and out of the water.

("Meditation at Oyster River")

In a few poems such as "In the Deep Channel" Stafford comes close to evoking the same sense of mystery through detailed description. However, for the most part, a characteristic Stafford description is no more specific than:

And the river there meant something always coming from snow and flashing around after shadow-fish lurking below the mesa boulders.

("CP, 99")

The key word to describe Stafford's apprehension of the natural world would be "mystical" rather than "sensual."

The third poet I am using for purposes of comparison is Pablo Neruda. He creates a world in which everything
exists, everything has a name, and in which everything is finally integrated: notary publics, glacial rocks, iguanas, and corpses. The animal images seem to emerge from the unconscious. Robert Bly has called Neruda's earlier poems (written between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one) "the greatest surrealist poems yet written in a Western language." This is so because Neruda is "a new kind of creature moving about under the surface of everything. Moving under the earth, he knows everything from the bottom up (which is the right way to learn the nature of a thing) and is therefore never at a loss for its name."

The animal images in Neruda's poems very often have a sexual force, as in "Gentleman Without Company" in which "the hoarse cats that cross my garden in the dark," "a necklace of throbbing sexual oysters," colts, bees, and the "adulterers who love each other with a real love" are all part of an "immense forest, entangled and breathing" which hedges the poet. The sexual connotations of animal emblems are simply left unexplored by Stafford. His animals are emblematic of wisdom, harmony, and mystery, but not of sexual passion. (The element of sexual passion is curiously lacking in all of Stafford's poetry, even in the few poems ostensibly addressed to women. There are no love poems, as the term is understood.)

Neruda's bestiary is an exotic and startling one,
very different from Theocritus' literary one. These are not literary animals, and certainly not domesticated ones. These are animals of the night, symbols of the unconscious mind. Thus, in "Some Beasts" Neruda catalogues the monkeys, the alligators, the jaguar, the puma, the iguana, the llama, the badgers, and the enormous anaconda. These beasts arise out of "pure night," out of primordial slime. They are symbols of our underground existence. Stafford, too, uses animals best known for their stealth, cunning, and independence: coyotes, wolves, muskrats, raccoons, badgers. These animals are symbols of a wilderness which, to Stafford, is finally untameable and mysterious. And pervading Neruda's poetry, as well as Stafford's, is a sense of the ceaseless activity of the wilderness, an unending flux and fecundity to which man, in his self-absorption, may be totally inattentive.

There is one other interesting point of comparison between the two poets. There is in Neruda's poetry an unusual sense of the "geological hour," a perception of the vastness of the universe and the eternity of the historical forces which have shaped us. In his Canto General, which is a geological, biological, and political history of South America, we have a cosmogony, "a Nerudian vision of the origin and creation of the world and American man."20 Neruda is re-enacting that important moment when he
confronted a wilderness that had yet to be shaped by man. Often he focusses on the monuments of primitive man; thus he describes the stones of Rapa Nui on which

The faces of man appeared
issuing from the matrix of islands,
born from the empty craters
their feet entwined in silence.

They were the sentinels and they closed
the cycle of the waters that surged
from all the wet domains.
("Rapa Nui")

The same sense of timeless time, and of cosmic continuity, is evoked in the last lines of "Rapa Nui":

Only the eternity in the sands
Knowing the words:
the sealed light, the dead labyrinth
the keys to the submerged bowl.

This belief in man's insignificance in the vast stretches of time and space is shared by William Stafford, particularly in his last two collections of poetry. In "A Hand in Water" from his latest collection Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People, Stafford writes:

They know headfirst those aeons when
Earth leaned on a bell and no one heard.

*               *               *               *               *

Put a hand
in water, there where time goes: the sea
acts out a requiem, that loom feeling, the years.

(TTH, 22)
This evocation of primordial earth and time, of the sweep of continents before man set foot on them, is an imagistic and thematic concern of both poets. Their poetry is full of cosmic silences. They both bring us "news of the universe."

* * * * *

Stafford's bestiary is a full and interesting one. He uses animals as emblems or archetypes; that is, the animal, whether natural or supernatural, assumes a didactic or ethical significance and conveys suggestions of universal human behavior. Sometimes he uses the animals as the "Other," trying to discover and express the essence of various animals as well as their permanent mystery. Very infrequently, Stafford also uses animals as creative symbols. Eliseo Vivas, who prefers to use the term "constitutive symbol," calls this "a creative synthesis of empirical matter in one commanding image," which brings with it a newness of perception.

Stafford's animals are not the literary beasts that have come down to us through Theocritus. On the contrary, they are creatures of the American wilderness and, more specifically, of the American West: cougars, coyotes, and wolves. The following animals (and birds) constitute an incomplete list, but demonstrate Stafford's pervasive use
of animal images: wolf, owl, cougar, wildcat, muskrat, channel cat, teal, badger, killdeer, lizard, coyote, snake, bat, antelope, raccoon, doe, deer, cheetah, tiger, prairie dog, penguin, geese, and bear. These are not domesticated or docile animals, but creatures that live by their wits. They are often emblems of concealment and stealth. The wolf appears very frequently in Stafford's poetry and is often the totemistic animal of the various Indian tribes that he mentions. The wolf is an example of the animal as "Other": he brings to man messages from the Unknown. In "Sitting Up Late" Stafford writes:

Beyond silence, on the other side merging deep in the night, a wolf call lifted slowly teasing farther than air extended, thrilling into one pinpoint across the ice.

The rest of my life there never comes a simple feeling, or warmth, or success, for always mingled in the world is what I knew then crystalized into a dark faith, absolute, between one breath and the next. (CP, 22)

The cry of the wolf resonates through the poet's life as an article of pure faith.

In another poem, wittily entitled "A Treatise: Influence of Howls on the Frontier," Stafford contrasts the false, swaggering "macho" code of the West with the
simple harmony that existed between the American Indians and the wolves:

Wolf howls alone devastated the West, put a scare over the landscape, reared snags against a faint moon; and people with guns spraddled around, in falsetto boasts giving their least cowardly boaster the name hero;

Meanwhile flowing lightly around their cozy night, wolves and their friends the Indians pawed for scraps, offered each other the jewels of their eyes, and occasionally did a job of howling for fun.

(TTH, 21)

The wolves could "devastate" a society that was not in harmony with the wilderness, but the tender intimacy between man and beast in the second stanza indicates that this harmony can exist. The dispossessed Indians and the outcast wolves are both struggling to survive ("pawed for scraps"), but they have not lost their capacity for joyous abandonment. The image of the glowing dark eyes of the Indians and the mysterious shine in the wolves' eyes is counterpointed with the "faint moon" of the frontier man's landscape.

In "Learning Your Place" Stafford says of the wolves: "They have other studies in their eyes/ than anyone, the wolves that pace their bars,/ priorities afar, and bonuses/ no zoo-goer comprehends" (TTH, 18). The zoo-goer is rational
and civilized and therefore incapable of plumbing the wolves' mystery. The self-sufficiency of the wolf is evident: "They own you once when you arrive,/ then give you away for good: no elaborate/ trial--a glance--you don't exist" (TTH, 18). "You don't exist": the wolf's response underscores the animal's completeness and its natural superiority to doubting men.

Cougars are primarily symbols of silence and concealment. In "Midwest," we are reminded that west of our city, and just outside of our self-absorbed and often trivial concerns, "the shape of game fish tapers down/ from a reach where cougar paws touch water" (CP, 29). In the same poem Stafford speaks of the "wild things [that] wait crouched in those valleys" (italics mine). The kinetic tension of the verb "crouched" is connected with the secret energy of the cougar, waiting to spring.

The wildcat of "One Home" that "sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July/ When he was cutting plum bushes for fuel" is a reminder of a time when men lived on the edge of the wilderness and could have comic or brutal confrontations with wild creatures in the most unexpected ways. The folksy colloquialism of the diction here prevents the confrontation between Grandpa and beast from being an unhappy or too serious one.

Elsewhere, the conflict is total. In "A Survey,"
modern technology and the wilderness are at war:

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

(CP, 35)

So the wildcats are sent out, "printed with intricate lines
of fur" because they alone know how to "put their paws with
such finesse/ the ground was unaware." Now "only the wild­
cats know it." They have become the guardians and keepers
of the wilderness.

The channel cat also illustrates the theme of the
animal as "Other." One of the most lyrically beautiful
poems in West of Your City is "In the Deep Channel," a poem
about setting a fishing line in deep water, after sundown.
The poet remembers that sometimes a "secret-headed" channel
cat would appear. The following lines show the inhumanly
alien nature of the cat:

Eyes that were still eyes in the rush of darkness,
flowing feelers noncommittal and black,
and hidden in the fins those rasping bone daggers,
with one spiking upward on its back.

(CP, 31)

A landscape full of watching eyes: we are not sure if the
eyes refer to the cat's eyes, the eyes of the fish, or to
both. But the eyes are the signs of a vigilant landscape,
one from which man is completely excluded.
The mystery of these eyes is paralleled by the eyes of the "little animals" in "Crossing the Desert" (TTH, 28) where a ditch at night "is a church/ where eyes burn their candles/ mile after silent mile/ to meet whatever comes, whatever comes." The eyes, and by extrapolation the creatures themselves, are prepared for their destinies.

There is often, in Stafford's poetry, an expression of tenderness and even protectiveness towards small animals. The badger is one such animal, an animal that burrows into the earth and symbolizes our own burrowing for meaning. In "Walking West" we are told that anyone "with quiet pace," that is, anyone with the required sensitivities, "may hear a badger underground where/ in deep flint another time is/ Caught by flint and held forever,/ The quiet pace of God stopped still" (CP, 35). In the same poem the very earth is described as "badger-gray," and in this remote land "badgers dig their little lives." In another poem, "Willa Cather," we hear of a badger that "dug a den wisely." The tenderness that Stafford feels towards small animals is so pervasive as to constitute a recurrent theme. In "Crossing the Desert," "little animals call/ us, tiny feet whisper"; the poet is shaken by this affinity:

The next time this world is ours
we'll cry out from the ditch
to find our cousins there safe
offering us their paws and letting
the light we bring return from their eyes
to shine forth, part of our own.     (TTH, 28)

In his famous poem of portent, "At the Bomb Testing
Site," a lowly lizard becomes a significant witness to
history. The poet envisions a bare and forbidding con-
tinent, stripped of all incidental details:

There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.     (CP, 41)

And in the heat of the noonday desert, the lizard is
found,

... looking at something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.

The lizard's vision is that of a destructive apocalypse.

In "Boom Town," an argument against technology and
in favor of the wilderness, the image of the snake appears
as a symbol of extreme fragility. Since Stafford's snake,
like Lawrence's, is a "lord of the underworld":

Into any sound important
a snake puts out its tongue;
so at the edge of my home town
every snake listened.     (CP, 49)
The snake, like the cougar and the wildcat, is also a symbol of stealth and concealment. The oil well engines in the poem "went talking into the dark," and with every syllable and every beat, one more snake dies. The poet recalls one hesitant pump in the distance that proclaims how it was for the snake and for all the denizens of the wilderness. In the beautiful elegiac image at the close of the poem we mourn the snakes who "forgetting away through the grass/ had all closed their slim mouths." The poet is moved by their defenseless beauty.

The same tenderness and compassion are evinced in "At the Salt Marsh" in which the poet questions his motives for hunting wild birds and seeks justifications for his behavior. He is aware that

Those teal with traveling wings
had done nothing to us but they were meat
and we waited for them with killer guns
in the blind deceitful in the rain.  

(CP, 31)

In an image such as the following:

They flew so arrowy till when they fell
where the dead grass bent flat and wet

or:

I touched the soft head with eyes gone
and felt through the feathers all the dark
Stafford comes very close to Roethke's concern for small, unprotected animals. The terrifying, fierce, and dominant animals that occur in Blake's poetry have no place in Stafford's work. Stafford's chosen animals are wise, gentle, silent, subtle.

The teal destroyed by deceitful hunters is not the only bird that appears. In "A Bridge Begins in the Trees" we meet an owl:

In an owl cry, night became real night; from that owl cry night came on the nerve.

(CP, 23)

In "The View from Here," the "small, sad, black" penguins become the objects of the poet's compassionate understanding. The poet feels the cold bite over the birds but is unable to help:

Penguins, we can't help you; and all that cold hangs over us too, wide beyond thought. We too stand and wait.

(CP, 77)

In the poignant "Our People," an entire race (of American Indians) hurtles to its doom under the shadow of the cry of the killdeer:

Fluttering in that wind they stood there on the world, clenched in their own lived story under the killdeer cry.

(CP, 36)
Sometimes Stafford conceives of the animals of the wilderness as allegorical symbols of man's behavior. Nathan Sumner thinks that the cheetah of "With One Launched Look" "represents modern man at a time of full strength and confidence, propelling himself with all his energy toward a goal, with the nature of the goal unquestioned once momentum has been established. The deer symbolizes man accepting his fate with calm resignation, since unleashed force permits no choice here."²²

The cheetah levels at one far deer rejecting all others in his charge, connecting toward the chosen throat --a dedicated follower.

It is that choice that quells the deer, Such a fateful diagram: bisecting all the irrelevant world --one launched look and its afterward. (CP, 76)

"Launched" conveys the same kinetic force as the verb "crouched" discussed earlier; once the animal is launched, all that matters is the trajectory of its forward movement. Everything else becomes "irrelevant."

Stafford's imagistic concern with the role of animals as judges and witnesses to history is demonstrated repeatedly. In "Prairie Town," the prairie dogs with their folded paws (folded in an attitude of dignity, and perhaps even holiness) become the judges of the whole historical
The poet first addresses the pioneers, whom he has betrayed by moving away from his prairie roots; he then addresses the prairie dogs as representatives of the vanished spirit of the pioneers. By leaving his prairie town, he has cut himself off from "a wealth of sun and wind."

The celebrated doe of "Traveling Through the Dark" is also an example of the allegorical use of animal figures. Here, she is the focus of an allegory about the confrontation of the wilderness with modern technology. The poet swings into the collective at the end of the poem, and, speaking for all of us, makes explicit both the conflict—the swerving—and the necessity for decisive action.

The last animal image I will consider is that of the coyote. The coyote, like the wolf, is a symbol of the other, of strange forces in nature that are inexplicable to us, and of the darkness of our subconscious life. Here is the poem "Outside" quoted in full:

The least little sound sets the coyotes walking, walking the edge of our comfortable earth.
We look inward, but all of them
are looking toward us as they walk the earth.

We need to let animals loose in our houses,
the wolf to escape with a pan in his teeth,
and streams of animals toward the horizon
racing with something silent in each mouth.

For all we have taken into our keeping
and polished with our hands belongs to a truth
greater than ours, in the animals' keeping.
Coyotes are circling around our truth.

(CP, 48)

The poem is full of the silence that begins when all our
inconsequential babble has ceased. The second stanza is
almost surreal in the images it evokes. The vision of a
world taken over by hordes of wild beasts is not a menacing
one: "silent" is most often equated with "good" in Staf­
ford's poetry, and thus the animals with "something silent
in each mouth" are not apocalyptic beasts of destruction,
but the guardians of the truth. The coyotes, emblems of
stealth and cunning, are continually circling our "comfor­
table earth." They are eternally watching our actions.
They, too, like the badger and the panting lizard and the
prairie dog, are witnesses to history. We may have intruded
upon the wilderness and "polished it," that is, altered its
contours, but the animals are its real custodians. The
timeless watch kept by the coyotes is also a reminder that
the processes of nature are ceaselessly carried on, although
we pay them no heed.

The pre-eminent position occupied by birds and animals
in Stafford's poetry, thus, arises not only from his emotional attachment to the wilderness, but from his deeply felt conviction that the animals of the wilderness possess the wilderness, own it, guard it, and perpetuate it, and that man must adopt a similar stance or perish. Stafford's poetry contains an implied warning that if we do not stop our depredations on nature, soon enough the lizard, the coyote, and the badger may be witnesses to the "End of the Man Experiment" (TTH, 15).

Stafford's wilderness is not always a place of harmony, though. The poet cannot ignore the signs of a fierce Darwinian struggle for survival. There is also a perception of the capricious and transitory spirit of the wilderness. Under a moon white "like chalk," and therefore evocative of sterility and death, all forms of life journey toward winter. Each season brings with it its legacy of suspicion and fear: in March, life is a "scar"; in summer it is "a green alarm/ a foxfire of fear," nothing more significant than "a little eggshell/ burst." In autumn:

the birds fell to the ground and crawled away to the rocks. (CP, 127)

Finally, in winter man leaves his home and runs towards a "snowy interior" where the "hurt birds" wait for him.

In "Requiem," a powerful imagistic poem, Stafford
speaks of "suicidal gestures of nobility driven to the wrist" amid the whizz of "the razor birds" (CP, 88). A similarly sinister image occurs in "Believer" when the poet finds himself sleepless, in a motel, wondering about his children's future: "And scared as I am with my blood full of sharks" (CP, 122). In "Chickens the Weasel Killed" the precise moment of capture is frozen forever in memory: "I couldn't help seeing the weasel/ fasten on the throat" (CP, 88). In "Jack London" the wolf menacingly advances:

Teeth meet on a jugular, pause and bite:
all the world turns red but the falling snow.

( CP, 135)

Finally, in "Love the Butcher Bird Lurks Everywhere," the world explodes in violence:

Down the steady eye of the charging bear
a gun barrel swerves—intention, then flame.

( CP, 91)

The image shows an interesting variation on the point of view: the trajectory of the bullet is seen from the eyes of the bear, not from the perspective of the man who is firing the gun.

These disturbing, sinister, and often violent images remind one of the poetry of the nineteenth-century mad poet John Clare. Robert Pinsky has written of Clare's work that "in these poems the emotional resonances of natural
images are used to manage dark, aberrant materials. In most of them the basic fiction is small and violent: various forms of animal life struggle for a precarious, often treacherous shelter." Stafford, as a keen and unsentimental observer of natural processes is not blind to the violence of these struggles, and his animal imagery frequently has sinister undertones. In one of his latest poems, "An Address to the Vacationers at Cape Lookout," all the elements of nature seem to be crushing one another. The violence resonates in the air:

The whole weight of the ocean smashes on rock;  
the sun hounds the night; gulls ravel the edge.    
(TTH, 35)

In this cold, stark, uninviting universe, men should not be required to "writhe in regret/ or twist in the torture bush." The appropriate response should be the familiar Staffordian stoicism. Even the indifference of this violent universe can teach us something. We learn that "something big lifts us/ outside, scorns our bravery or fear" (TTH, 35).

Stafford, who is the pre-eminent poet of the open spaces, even more than of the open road, lives by such affirmations.
CHAPTER II—NOTES


7. Hall, p. 32.


CHAPTER III
THE NEXUS OF IMAGES:
THE FORGIVING LANDSCAPE

Only second in importance to the varied uses of animal imagery in Stafford's poetry is the group of images derived from his perception of the "unwaveryness," that is, the eternity and the stability, of the wilderness. There is a constant emphasis on the permanence, the gigantic force and the energy of the earth. For Stafford, the greatest value of the earth is that it "endures." Some of his favorite images concern "rock" and "flint," both emblems of the earth's "unwaveryness." In "Holding the Sky," the poet, traveling by train in Colorado, is suddenly moved to admit: "Those dark mountains have never wavered" (CP, 68).

The expansiveness of the Western landscape is invigorating:

There is a reward here--maybe the mountains, maybe only the sense that after what is must come something else always. (CP, 129)

Often, the sense of eternity that the mountains evoke is linked to a larger sense of timelessness, of freedom from the temporal or inconsequential. In "Flowers
at an Airport," the essentially ephemeral and even trivial nature of politics is mocked by the poet:

This is the Governor's man, to
take the Governor home. What picks
us off is time: Martin Luther
King, soldiers on patrol, kids
protected at home, the young,
the old, Lurleen.

(CP, 173)

But the poet is acutely aware of another dimension; beyond the clamor and the rush, he senses concerns that are purely timeless:

This is our time. We stand
inside a curve, inside long lines
that make a more secret curve.
We hear wind through the grass.
Shadows that live in these roses fall
through thorns and become
shares in what lasts and lasts.

Stafford's poetry is full of gratitude for this bounty that never ends, and that is why I use the term "forgiving landscape" to describe his essentially benevolent world-view.

Often, the rock-like stability of the earth is overwhelming to man:

Like a little stone, feel the shadow of the great earth;
let the distance pierce you till you cling to trees.

(CP, 180)

The great earth teaches us sanity and humility. In

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"Allegiances," Stafford insists that it is "time for all the heroes to go home" and for "all of us common ones" to "locate ourselves by the real things/ we live by" (CP, 193). This can be done by swearing allegiance to the earth:

Suppose an insane wind holds all the hills while strange beliefs whine at the traveler's ears, we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love where we are, sturdy for common things. (CP, 193)

Sometimes, however, man refuses to be attentive to the lessons of the forgiving landscape. In "Deerslayer's Campfire Talk," the poet uses the familiar images of mountain and rock to convey the permanence of nature:

At thousands of places on any mountain, exact rock faces lean a strong-corner slant, balanced: the whole country stays by such dependable sets and shoulders--which endure unnoted. (CP, 194)

We are supported by the "shoulders" of this wilderness, but are oblivious to it. Stafford is moralistic and harsh when he compares this unpretentious stability with the hollowness of those people "who talk too much, the ones who/ do not care, just so they take the center/ and call the plans." In the same poem he talks of the "silent/ unnoted clasp of the rock," representative of the quiet strength of the land.

Another recurring idea suggesting the enduring
quality of the earth is that of "holding up the sky." In "Friend" the poet declares with his customary compassion that for most people "the years are a sufficient storm." The friends who walked with him through that storm are long gone. But something of value persists:

What the sky can hold
it holds, by day by day . . .

*   *   *   *   *

From human loss, from gravel, from stone,
after years, one holds what one can.

(CP, 220)

One of the clearest statements of the poet's stance towards the earth is in the poem simply entitled "The Earth":

When the earth doesn't shake, when the sky is still, we feel something under the earth: a shock of steadiness.

(CP, 231)

The paradoxical "shock of steadiness" suggests the jolt of recognition and awareness on the part of the poet. He feels gratitude and humility at the thought that instead of the millions who had to die or "crawl away," he has been chosen to breathe, and to enjoy the earth:

When the storm is gone,
when the air passes, we feel our own shudder--the terror of having such a great friend, undeserved.

(CP, 231)
The poet's response is a celebration:

We come, we
celebrate with our breath, we join on the curve
of our street, never lost, the surge of the land
all around us that always is ours,
the beginning of the world and the end.

(CP, 231)

The last image carries Biblical echoes of "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" and also of "In my end is my beginning." Further, the image can be linked to the ancient Hindu symbol for time: the serpent Sheshnag, who sits coiled with its tail in its mouth, signifying the continuum of creation.

In "The Whole Story" the sky becomes the agent of eternity:

I am the sky. After everything ends
and even while the story goes on
I accept all that is left over.

(CP, 236)

The same idea is expressed in "Being Still," from his latest collection. The mountains are trying to teach us a very valuable lesson: how to wait. Our desires, and our failure to fulfill them, make us frantic and driven creatures. But "Beyond your hearing, a voice— it murmurs/ and goes by: oh, where you are going/ no one can lift the great silence of the sky" (TTH, 37).

"Answerers," one of the best poems in the new
collection, expresses a sense of a languid unfolding of
time and space, the twin dimensions between which man is
suspended:

There are songs too wide for sound. There are quiet
places where something stopped a long time
ago and the days began to open
their mouths toward nothing but the sky.
(TTH, 13)

The same sense of eternity expressed in Neruda's
"the geological hour" can also be seen in the title poem
of the new collection, "Things That Happen Where There
Aren't Any People":

Plenty of
things happen in deserted places, maybe
dust counting millions of its little worlds
or the slow arrival of deep dark.

And out there in the country a rock has been
waiting to be mentioned for thousands of years.
(TTH, 25)

In Stafford's poetry, the sky and the hills are used
almost interchangeably as agents of eternity. They both
"hold" something permanent, and provide us with a buffer
against the shocks of ephemeral events. The poet asserts:

You can't give away, or buy
or sell, or assign these hills--
they hold what they always held.
(TTH, 30)
Even when the land is bare, uninviting, hostile, barren or harsh, it is still transcendent. It reminds us of the brevity and absurdity of our lives. "Unavoidable/hills have made me stern, determined not to be wavery." Elsewhere "A storm bends by that shore and/one flake at a time teaches grace/even to stone."

The abundance of images and symbols derived from the natural world has often led to Stafford being labelled "a nature poet." In a recent interview he was asked if he felt akin to Frost because both poets seemed "to manifest agrarian roots in an exploration of the sublimities of nature and the poet's search for uniformity in nature."¹ Stafford replied:

I can think of all sorts of reasons to get linked with Frost. After all, partly it's just age. We come from a time when America was more rural. When I was growing up we were a stone's throw, and we often threw them, from the fields, and the animals in the fields, and the fish in the streams. These are just the conditions of life. Now if people throw stones they end up on the pavement. Stones weren't as plentiful as clods in Kansas. I have always liked to read nature writers, Wordsworth and Cooper, and so on. I think it's a ready and handy part of life. You can see nature creeping in toward us here, the grass, and vines peeking in the window. Oregon--you let it go untended for a couple of seasons, and you're in the jungle. So you don't have to reach very far to be a nature poet. Maybe Frost was like that.²
In his own words, there is such an emphasis on nature in his poetry because "these are just the conditions of life." Even when we are most oblivious of its processes, "nature just keeps on happening." As he says in "Montana Eclogue,"

We try to know, all deep, all sharp, even while busy here, that other: gripped in a job, aimed steady at a page, or riffled by distractions.

Finally, we reach recognition:

we break free into that world of the farthest coat--air.

(CP, 167)

* * * * *

In Stafford's poetry it is not only the natural wilderness that is evoked as a forgiving landscape. The human landscape of the past--the people who populate this past--is also viewed with the same clear-eyed compassion. As John Lauber writes: "The poetry of William Stafford is rooted in a series of natural pieties rare in contemporary life or literature: piety toward the earth itself, toward the region, the home, the parents, toward one's total past." This fidelity to the small-town verities of his native Kansas and his sense of rootedness in the past can
be seen throughout his work, but especially in the pages of *The Rescued Year* (1966). There he is driven by nostalgia for a simpler life, lived closer to the rhythms of the land. In *Traveling Through the Dark*, *The Rescued Year*, and *Allegiances*, we see an intense and penetrating nostalgia; the poet struggles to go back in time and space, to revisit the scenes of his childhood, to possess the past, and, by possessing it, to understand its meaning. Thus Stafford is our pre-eminent poet of memory and reminiscence. Like Wordsworth and Roethke, he is interested in re-creating an Edenic childhood. There is often in Stafford's poetry a vivid, often visual, and even an auditory sense of the stretches of memory, of the expanse of land, and of the vistas of time. And as time and space slowly unfold in his poems, the poet makes a discovery of the self. R. W. B. Lewis in his classic work *The American Adam* calls his first chapter "The Case Against the Past." But if that is the theme of nineteenth-century American literature, then twentieth-century American literature refutes it. We are no longer in a stage of adolescent rebellion against the past but are seeking for ways to rediscover and integrate it into our present lives.

In general, Stafford's *personae* fall into three categories: relatives, especially his father and mother; school friends, emblematic of a lost innocence; and the
very important figure of the American Indian, whether it is the Shawnee of "Boone Children" or the Cree of "Returned to Say." The human drama involving these characters is enacted in the familiar Stafford country of the Midwestern prairies and the mountains, lakes, and rivers of the American West. If one were to draw a map of the Stafford country, one would begin in the geographical heart of the United States, in Kansas, and gradually move west to Montana and Utah, and farther to Oregon (where the poet now lives) with occasional forays into California. The whole of the Northeast is conspicuous by its absence. Stephen Stepanchev has described Stafford as a poet of Western spaces and existential loneliness "who views life as a narrative process moving to some fundamental identity." Stafford's preference for the value systems of the Midwest (and the far West) is obvious: "Mine was a Midwest home--you can keep your world," but there is only one disparaging remark about the Northeast that I can find in all his recorded conversations. While speaking with Richard Hugo, a fellow poet, Stafford remarked that "in New York friends are disposable. Another comes along every minute." The poet is continually attracted to the unspoiled world of his own familiar West. Richard Howard in his book Alone with America has said that the West of Stafford's poetry is a "focus of judgement." Stafford himself has
written: "For me, West is a valued word; it is a good word. To be outside looking in at national life is a pretty good vantage point. . . . For instance, one of my books is called West of Your City, and I think it's sort of like what Frost did when he said 'North of Boston.' It's a vantage point from which to look inward and make an analysis." 7

A glance at the titles of the poems will show the importance of the Western myth: "West of Your City," "The Farm on the Great Plains," "Walking West," "In the Oregon Country," "Prairie Town," "Across Kansas," "Letter from Oregon," "Out West," "Montana Eclogue," and "Sunset: Southwest." In a private letter to George Lensing, he has described the discovery of myth through the Western outdoors: "For me, myth comes at you in the way it did before it was formulated by anyone else. It comes from the influences on us all the time--gravity, wind, time, the immediacy of near things, and the farness of far things--everything that touches you." 8

The references to place are sometimes important for their own sake, and sometimes in the larger context of the poem. In "In the Oregon Country," the romance of the frontier is evoked through the iteration of place-names:

From old Fort Walla Walla and the Klickitats
to Umpqua near Port Orford, stinking fish tribes massacred our founders, the thieving whites.

(CP, 37)

The names of individual Indian chiefs, the names of various tribes and the names of places are juxtaposed for dramatic effect:

Chief Rotten Belly slew them at a feast; Kamiakin riled the Snakes and Yakimas; all spurted arrows through the Cascades west.

Sometimes place-names are catalogued to evoke a sense of the remote loneliness of the Western prairies. An example can be found in "Weather Report":

Light wind at Grand Prairie, drifting snow. Low at Vermilion, forty degrees of frost. Lost in the Barrens, hunting over spines of ice, the great sled dog Shadow is running for his life.

(CP, 39)

Further, we are all exhorted to "pray for the frozen dead at Yellow Knife." In its picturesque quality, this passage reminds us of the haunted and doomed, tragic quality of the winterscape in Bret Harte's Western tales.

The place-names can function in a variety of ways. Often, the poet seems to take relish in the musical or exotic quality of the name. There are two poems on the Tillamook mountains: "The Tillamook Burn" and "The Museum at Tillamook." Sometimes the poet seems to be asserting
the value of small and unknown towns in the Midwest. "Holcomb, Kansas" is one such place. "What I Heard Whispered at the edge of Liberal, Kansas" contains yet another reference to one of those towns that are important to the poet because of the quality of the experience he undergoes there (in this case a mystical identification with grass). "Montana Eclogue" contains references to High Valley, Stone Creek, Long Top, Clear Lake, and Winter Peak, all of which are rather unimaginative, even prosaic place-names. Most often, Stafford's use of place-names demonstrates the concrete particularity of his poetry. There is an insistence on locating and identifying the precise geographical center of his experience. In "Witness" he writes:

```
This is the hand I dipped in the Missouri above Council Bluffs and found the springs.
       *     *     *     *     *
On top of Fort Rock in the sun I spread these fingers to hold the world in the wind.
(EP, 242)
```

Stafford's use of place-names contributes not only to the occasional musicality of his verse but also to the authenticity of the re-created landscape.

The single most important figure in Stafford's poetry is that of his father. Earl Ingersoll Stafford
worked for Bell Telephone and K-T Oil Company before his death in 1942, and he appears in dozens of Stafford's poems as a guide, an initiator, and a loving presence. Most often the poet talks of him in the past tense but always as an abiding influence in his son's life. He is an important part of the forgiving landscape that surrounds his son.

Stafford totally rejects the demonic image of the father that is projected in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. For Plath, the Freudian scapegoat of the father became a source of conflict, terror, and anxiety. But Stafford's father figure emerges as a strong but compassionate person. In this respect, Stafford is closer in spirit to Theodore Roethke, another poet who cherishes the memory of his father. In his well-known "My Papa's Waltz," his larger-than-life and drunken father is evoked in images of great tenderness:

   The whiskey on your breath
   Could make a small boy dizzy;
   But I held on like death:
   Such waltzing was not easy.

   Interestingly enough, the note of conflict and of adolescent rebellion is completely absent in Stafford's references to his father. In an interview with Cynthia Lofsness, he said:
Well, I feel very positive in favor of my father. I've talked to quite a number of writers who have felt rebellion. My father was always very sympathetic and helpful, and sort of a level, equitable person throughout my life, steady with counsel, but not intruding. All my life long I've had a feeling of . . . not of rebellion, because there was no oppression . . . there was a kind of interest and even surprise and delight, but no oppression at all. I feel very positively about him and I suppose it shows up in the poetry.

It is Stafford's father who introduces him to natural mysteries; in this respect he is akin to Sam Fathers, who initiates Isaac McCaslin into the meaning of the ritualistic hunt in Faulkner's great short story "The Bear." In "Listening" we have a picture of a man possessed of an extra sensitive perception of nature. The images are delicate and tactile:

My father could hear a little animal step, or a moth in the dark against the screen.

* * * * *

More spoke to him from the soft wild night than came to our porch for us on the wind. (CP, 33)

The father is completely attuned to his environment, and years later his son cherishes these lessons. In "Elegy" Stafford praises the ability of his father to give life and vivacity to ordinary experiences:
I hear a voice in the other room
that starts up color in every cell:
   Presents like this, Father, I got from you,
and there are hundreds more to tell.

One night, sound held in cornfield farms
drowned in August, and melonflower breath
creeping in stealth—we walked west
where all the rest of the country slept.
I hold that memory in both my arms—

(CP, 62)

The heroic dimensions of the father image are repeatedly referred to. In "Mouse Night: One of our Games," the sound of thunder turns the young Stafford into an abject fieldmouse. With his customary commonsense, his father advises his son to "duck and cover" because "It takes a man/ to be a mouse this night" (CP, 66). The adjective used to describe him here is "tremendous."

"Some Shadows" is an unusual Stafford poem: it is terse, even tense, like a clenched fist. The speaker is a stoic, a man who has had to weather many storms. Lensing and Moran have spoken of the Oedipal pattern in the father-son relation that is evident in this poem.10 The mother in this poem is regarded with a special gentleness; her harsh life is evoked in startling images:

When Mother was a girl Indians
shadowed that country, the barren lands.
Mother ran to school winter mornings
with hot potatoes in her hands.

(CP, 111)
In this austere and difficult environment, she is not very much at home. In fact, she is frightened and skittish.

Then

a lean man, a cruel, took her.
I am his son.

He was called Hawk by the town people, but was an ordinary man. He lived by trapping and hunting wherever the old slough ran.

(CP, 112)

Jonathan Holden in his useful study of Stafford's poetry has cautioned against taking these autobiographical references too literally. Stafford's father did not live by trapping; and "given Stafford's propriety—the strictness with which he avoids sordid, personal confession in his poems—it would be astonishing were he to refer to his own father as a 'cruel man.'"11

In "The Rescued Year," the west is specifically referred to as a myth:

Take a model of the world so big
it is the world again, pass your hand,
press back that area in the west where no one lived,
the place only your mind explores. (CP, 116)

The stability and rootedness of that rescued year also has a legendary quality; perhaps such things never did happen:

Time should go the way it went

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that year: we weren't at war; we had each day a treasured unimportance; the sky existed, so did our town;  

* * * * *  

every day at school we learned and sang, or at least hummed and walked in the hall.  

(CP, 116)

In this vision of security and peace steps the image of his father with "his wonderfully level gaze." A recurrent image of his father is that he taught Stafford to savour the world. The poem proceeds through the use of two rather complicated conceits, both illustrating his father's ability to enjoy and to understand the world:

Like him, I tried. I still try,  
send my sight like a million pickpockets  
up rich people's drives; it is time  
when I pass for every place I go to be alive.  

(CP, 117)

His father teaches him to use his senses to plunder the world of its richness and color. Again:

Around any corner my sight is a river  
and I let it arrive: rich by those brooks  
his thought poured for hours  
into my hand.  

(CP, 117)

This instruction is a valuable one, for it teaches the son that "the greatest ownership/ of all is to glance around and understand."

Throughout these poems the father emerges as a man
who is secure and strong, at peace with himself and his world:

He wanted me to be rich
the only way we could,
easy with what we had.

And always that was his gift,
given for me ever since,
easy gift, a wind
that keeps on blowing for flowers
or birds wherever I look.

(CP, 157)

Yet even this extraordinary man is unable to handle the world at all times:

There never was a particular he
couldn't understand,
but there were too many in too long a row,
and like many another he was overwhelmed.

(CP, 67)

He is so strong and self-sufficient that his son feels he cannot always use him as a model. He himself wants "to have the right amount of fear,/ preferring to be saved and not like him, heroic" (CP, 67).

Finally, the father's death is evoked in images of sterility and darkness. In Stafford's poetry the chalk-white moon is a symbol of the denial of life. "The night my father died the moon shone on the snow." Waiting in the shadow, the son feels the "great dark" of his father's impending death. His mind travels back to a childhood
incident when his father had parked the car in a storm, and son and father "stood together while the storm went by." They knew that "we stood calm in ourselves, knowing we could go home." But now, in adulthood, Stafford must face the complete deprivation of this source of comfort and security. He is nakedly alone: he is standing "on the skull of the world." Henceforth life will be painful and solitary:

[I] knew that I leased a place to live with my white breath. (CP, 32)

His father's death has brought home to him the realization that all is transitory and insecure—even his life is not fully his own; he has merely "leased" a place to live.

Other characters that frequent Stafford's poems include relatives such as Aunt Mabel and Uncle George, or old school friends such as Ella and Althea. "A Family Turn," one of the few attempts by Stafford to use pure humor, depicts an aunt "charmed in vinegar,/ a woman who could blaze with such white blasts/ as Lawrence's that hit Arabia." The grandiloquent image of Lawrence of Arabia's radiance is then comically juxtaposed with an image straight out of small-town America:

Her mean opinions bent her hatpins. (CP, 114)
"Aunt Mabel" gives us an idealized portrait of a kind-hearted woman, a woman so generous that she would accost even strangers to give away flowers "quick as a striking snake." The poet wittily admits that

\[
\text{It's deeds like this have weakened me, shaken by intermittent trust, stricken with friendliness. (CP, 120)}
\]

Aunt Mabel's charity is coupled with a wisdom that grows out of simplicity. Because her Senator "talked like war," Aunt Mabel comments, "He's a brilliant man/ but we didn't elect him that much."

In "The Preacher at the Corner" we meet a preacher who "talked like an old gun killing buffalo/ and in what he said a giant was trying to get out." Stafford finds this man by chance:

\[
\text{for the way I found him is the way I like: to wander because I know the road, and find stray things, wherever they come from. (CP, 163)}
\]

This preacher has known all the old fears and insecurities of humanity, has often wanted to shrink into a hole "and pull the hole in after me." But he has unerring instinct, and even when he appears to be lost, he emerges in the right direction. Stafford appears to be learning a lesson:
those of us who follow the natural laws of process may eventually come out better than those of us who follow rigid pre-conceptions of things.

"Bess" contains an interesting conceit; when Bess was stricken with cancer, pain, her enemy, sought her:

Pain moved where she moved. She walked ahead; it came. She hid; it found her. No one ever served another so truly; no enemy ever meant so strong a hate.

(\textit{CP}, 152)

But Bess knows how to give happiness, and she remembers "where joy used to live."

Very often the poems addressed to friends and relatives from the past, such as "Aunt Mabel," "Uncle George," "Monuments for a Friendly Girl at a Tenth-Grade Party," "A Gesture Toward an Unfound Renaissance," "Remembering Althea," "The Preacher at the Corner," and "The Girl Engaged to the Boy Who Died," remind us not only of the portraits in \textit{Winesburg, Ohio}, but also of the stories that unfold from the epitaphs of \textit{Spoon River Anthology}. There is a tragic loneliness that has gathered itself into these characters. Fred Chappell has written of these figures:

How forcibly I am reminded in Stafford of the figures of the sculptor Giacometti! Those splindly, elongated, rubble-textured figures, are they not men and women whose lives have crumbled away, been bitten away?
And what is left to them? A strong purity of outline, a singleness of identity, a sense of personal destiny. They stand pure in the impure weathers that have so harshly shaped them, and stride alone through the vast echoless spaces that their presences make more lonely.

The emotion that Stafford reserves for these weather-bitten and time-eroded characters is compassion. In "Monuments for a Friendly Girl at a Tenth-Grade Party," Ruth, who has died serving the natives of Garden City, is blessed by the poet:

> for you the crows and hawks patrol the old river. May they never forsake you, nor you need monuments other than this I make.

(CP, 153)

In "A Gesture Toward an Unfound Renaissance," he is moved by the memory of "the slow girl in art class,/ less able to say where our lessons led: we/ learned so fast she could not follow us." (CP, 154). A miserable small-town drama, fit subject for soap operas, and yet poignant in its universality, is enacted in the famous "Thinking for Berky." The poet thinks of the austerities and the grim realities of Berky's life:

> her father and mother cruel, farming out there beyond the old stone quarry

* * * * * *
Early her face was turned away from home
toward any hardworking place.

But Berky is a survivor. Her soul is alive, waiting "for
the rescue that--surely, some day--would have to come."
The poet prays for Berky's deliverance and for her well-being, since he is aware that we all live trapped in an age in which "justice will take us millions of intricate moves." The poet isn't even sure that Berky is still alive, and with every ambulance or patrol siren screaming through the streets, the poet touches wood and prays for Berky's safety.

There are at least three poems involving the character called Ella; Jonathan Holden has written that when he asked Stafford who Ella might be, "he insisted that, although he had known in his youth a girl named Ella, the Ella of his poems was a fictional composite of many girls that he remembered." In its nostalgia, tenderness, and wry wit, "At the Old Place" is strongly reminiscent of some of John Crowe Ransom's poems, particularly "To Janet, Waking." In Stafford's poem, a homely, farmyard image, "The beak of dawn's rooster pecked/ in the sky" inaugurates a loving tribute to Ella, the spirit of the past. The poet wishes that he could

wake at once to more than day--
to Ella always.
In another poem addressed to Ella, "homecoming," the poet goes back to his hometown, meets old friends, and searches in vain for Ella. "Every voice yells in my ear, 'She's married or dead!'" (CP, 15-16). The poet reproaches the revelers of the town for having forgotten Ella, even though she had once brightened their class. And now, so many years later, the past dates and jobs and events of their divergent lives seem to be "flickering into revolving doors." In "Carols Back Then: 1935" the poet wants to arrest the passage of time—a dominant trait in all Romantic poetry—and forever hold this rescued year in the palm of his hand. Ella is the spirit of "that quicksand year," the last image suggestive of time rapidly trickling through his fingers. That year was magical, clean, full of song. "I stand on the curb and remember it all" (CP, 160). The magic of deserted streets on a winter night is still the abiding truth that the poet insists on. And in his last breathless cry to Ella—"Ella, our town is all filling with snow!"—we hear the rapt voice of discovery.

Stafford's human landscape of the past is peopled by an astonishing number of American Indian figures. The poet feels admiration for their wisdom and compassion for their vanished tribes. John Lauber writes: "White American man has cut himself off from his past, racial as well as personal, and from the earth—maybe you cannot possess one
without the other. To discover that past, to find man at one with the earth in America, Stafford must turn to the Indian."\(^{14}\) One of the most lyrically beautiful poems which chronicles the demise of their culture is "Our People." The images are all evocative of death: the Indian tribes were "graying toward winter"; their lodges were vulnerable to "the north wind's edge"; this sharp, biting north wind "felt like the truth" for it brought to them tidings of the death of their way of life. "Fluttering in that wind" they stand naked, defenseless, and ephemeral. They are "clenched in their own lived story." Lauber has written that "clenched" implies "tautness and completion,"\(^{15}\) and "lived story" connotes that their lives are now past history, that they have already been lived out. The simplicity of the images contributes to the poignancy and pathos of the poem.

The American Indian figure also corresponds to the father in Stafford's poetry. The Indian feels a piety toward the earth, and he is unusually sensitive to natural rhythms. Like the poet's father, the Indian can hear and perceive the faintest sound, the lightest caress. Like the poet's father, he is dead, and likewise he must impart his wisdom to his children and survivors through the poem. In "Boone Children," the aged Shawnees give permission to the Boone children to travel through their territory. The
chief is paternal and wise; he is also an integral part of the landscape:

When the children said yes, he let them go, and went back into the leaves.

He disappears into the wilderness as naturally as he appears. The poem contains two striking images of time: "You can hear the calendar munching leaves in autumn" and "the calendar moaned away through the trees," the one signifying the devouring qualities of time, and the other suggesting the melting away of all the artificial barriers of time.

"In the Oregon Country" is a violently rhetorical, bitterly articulated, and angry poem about the disappearance of the Indians. The verbs are piled on top of each other: massacred, slew, riled, spurted, twitching, dashed, explode, gorged. The poem is very interesting for its uncharacteristic lack of restraint; there is no sense of reserve here. Who are we to blame—the "stinking fish tribes" or "the thieving whites"? The Western Cascades became a battleground littered with dead bodies; the pathos of this destruction does not escape the poet's attention:

These tribes became debris on their own lands. (CP, 37)
Stafford summons up the eloquent image of "the most splendid" of all Indian chiefs, Nez Perce Chief Joseph, who was brutally captured:

Repeating rifles bored at his head,

while in another part of the same territory, the Modoc women of Captain Jack lie "dead with twitching hands."

The destruction is complete. Once the furious noise of battle is over, and the annihilation is complete, all that is left is the silence of the Northwest mountains. This was once the natural habitat of the Indians; the mountains are "gorged with yew trees that were good for bows." Though the human element has been forcibly removed, the landscape endures. In poem after poem about the American Indian, Stafford emphasizes the doomed heroism, and therefore the ultimate helplessness, of this people as they are caught and twisted by the circumstances of history. This feeling pervades "Our People," in which the Indians hear the heart-rending cry of the killdeer, and standing alone on the skull of the world, see their impending destruction but are helpless to avert it.

The Indian is remarkable to Stafford not because of his prowess in war, and his ferocity, but because of his stealth and concealment, qualities that grow out of his profound reverence for the wilderness. These are
precisely the same qualities that Stafford admires in the wild animals of the West, such as the wolf and the coyote. This silence and this cunning, which are not sinister but only natural, have also been celebrated in the poems of James Wright, a contemporary of Stafford. In Wright’s "Stages on a Journey Westward" we are told:

In Western Minnesota, just now,
I slept again.
In my dream, I crouched over a fire.
The only human beings between me and the Pacific Ocean
Were old Indians, who wanted to kill me.
They squat and stare for hours into small fires Far off in the mountains.
The blades of their hatchets are dirty with the grease
Of huge, silent buffaloes.17

Both Wright and Stafford have emphasized the symbolic patterns and rituals which give meaning to the existence of the Indian. The solitude of the Indian is emphasized; he has never been and he will never be a part of the white man's civilization. In Stafford's "The Concealment: Ishi, the Last Wild Indian," it is imperative that Ishi, the "shadow man," the last survivor of his tribe, live in hiding:

A rock, a leaf, mud, even the grass
Ishi the shadow man had to put back where it was.
In order to live he had to hide that he did. (CP, 136)
We are warned that "If he appeared, he died." This does come to pass, and with his death the ritualistic way of life also comes to an end. These rituals are defined in lovely images reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning." Stafford's poem refers to "Erased/ footprints, berries that purify the breath, rituals/ before dawn with water." This pagan sense of delight in the physical world also animates Stevens' lines:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail Whistle about us their spontaneous cries; Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness; * * * * * 

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make Ambiguous undulations.

The American Indian in Stafford's poems feels the wealth of the natural world, but is unable to hold onto it. Stafford cannot resist a didactic statement about preserving the land:

    even the dogs roamed a land unspoiled by Ishi, who used to own it.

For such a people, even death is sweet, surrounded by meaningful ritual; Ishi's aunt and uncle die and their "old limbs bound in willow bark finally/ stopped and were hidden under the rocks, in sweet leaves." Stafford mourns the "premature suicide" of Ishi and his tribe.
The same note of poignant loss is struck in "The Last Day," in which Geronimo, a spiritual brother to Ishi, has to learn a bitter truth: the truth about his evanescent mortality. Geronimo has believed in the stability of the earth: "To Geronimo, rocks were the truth/ water less, air not at all" (CP, 156). But Geronimo is vulnerable in the face of the onslaught of the white man's culture:

but the opposite he had to learn:  
his hollow hand, his nothing breath—  
they filled the world when all his loss  
was a place to hide.  

(CP, 156)

In his 1973 volume Someday, Maybe, Stafford has included a sequence of nine poems under the general title of "Wind World." The poems are thematically unified by the evocation of the cave dwellers of the West, and by a perception of the past lives of the Indians. The presence of these dead Indians is palpable and vivid. In "Report to Crazy Horse," a member of the Sioux clan laments the passing of the old vision in an imaginary conversation with Crazy Horse:

No one remembers your vision  
or even your real name. Now  
the children go to town and like  
loud music. I married a Christian.  

(CP, 225)

The Indian feels no hostility towards the white man. When
he salutes the white man's flag he is reminded "how we depend/ on a steady pulse together." He echoes Ishi's sense of nostalgia for the physical riches of the world:

> The chokecherries along our valley still bear a bright fruit. There is good pottery clay north of here. I remember our old places. When I pass the Musselshell I run my hand along those old grooves in the rock. (CP, 227)

One of Stafford's most successful treatments of the theme of the vanished Indian is "A Stared Story." The poet is re-inventing the saga of the Indians by "staring" at "cutbanks where roots hold together." The Indians followed certain established rituals: they "rode into the winter camp" and "feasted till dark in the lodge of their chief." They lived in an uncomplicated harmony with nature: "Into the night at last on earth their mother/ they drummed away." We are their survivors, and we can construct their story only by "pretending/ that stared story" (CP, 64). The circumstances of our lives are different; we are "slung here in our cynical constellation" and can only recover the world if we "live by imagination."

The poem contains some interesting images:

> Over the hill came horsemen, horsemen whistling. They were all hard-driven, stamp, stamp, stamp. Legs withdrawn and delivered again like pistons. (CP, 64)
The staccato rhythms suggest the regularity and the recurrent actions of their lives. Stafford, in commenting on this poem, writes: "Those early, primitive people, no matter what happened, it was all done in circumstances that for them were meaningful, and they were part of this drama that was going on." The syntactical ambiguity of "stared story" and the flawless music that Richard Hugo has spoken of, give this poem its extraordinary quality.

In addition to the images derived from the natural landscape and from the human landscape of the past, we can recognize a whole cluster of recurrent images derived from the poet's metaphysical concerns: the journey motif, the quest motif, and the images surrounding "deep," "dark," "far," "near," "storm," and "home." Viewed together, they constitute a kind of symbolic shorthand that we can use as a key to our understanding of much of Stafford's work. Jonathan Holden writes: "Paradoxically, however, the stark, abstract terms from which Stafford constructs his poems, while their surface simplicity invites the reader into an apparently artless world, comprise a highly specialized vocabulary in which certain words recur with a cryptic and figurative significance." He goes on to say that Stafford makes a very consistent use of words such as "deep," "dark," "storm," and "home" as "components in that set of interlocking metaphors which defines his vision of the world."
The first cluster of images revolves around Stafford's use of "cold," "wind," and "storm." All three words carry powerful connotations of sterility, isolation, and loneliness. They evoke man's insignificance in the face of an indifferent universe. They emphasize the denial of human community and remind us that our connections are tenuous indeed. They also symbolize disintegration, breakdown, and finally death. Holden sees another aspect to Stafford's use of cold: "Coldness is thus, like distance, a metaphor by which Stafford measures his sense of Nature's otherness." The cold aspect of the world is threatening because it is indifferent to human life.

In "Fall Wind," the cold is equated with winter, which is, in turn, equated with death:

Pods of summer crowd around the door;  
I take them in the autumn of my hands.  
Last night I heard the first cold wind outside;  
the wind blew soft, and yet I shiver twice:

Once for thin walls, once for the sound of time.  
(CP, 95)

The cold wind is a premonition of the poet's death and a reminder to him of his mortality.

Often the cold is one feature of a forbidding and inhospitable landscape. In "Weather Report," the poet creates an atmosphere reminiscent of the stories of Bret Harte: stark tales of survival and doom set in frozen and
desolate settings. The weather report informs us that there is "light wind at Grand Prairie, drifting snow" and "forty degrees of frost" in Vermilion; then in a dramatic metaphorical leap we learn that:

Lost in the Barrens, hunting over spines of ice, the great sled dog Shadow is running for his life. (CP, 39)

The poet evokes a sense of community among all those of us who are "caught in this cold, the world all going gray." The cold becomes an enemy to life and to all human effort.

The cold is also equated with the loss of human relationships. In "Broken Home" an empty cup in the kitchen awakens a perception of "all the cold mornings, all the cold years." Here the use of "cold" is associated with the absence of affection and the breakdown of warmth and community. The remembrance of the "cold years" leads the poet to despair:

How alone is this house!--an unreeled phone dangling down a hall that never really could lead to tomorrow. (CP, 21)

"Cold" carries the same sinister connotations in "Long Distance," in which Stafford speaks of "the way the sun turned cold on spires/ in winter in the town back home/
so far away." Since "cold" implies an absence of fruitful contact between people, it is fitting that one often hears ghostly voices on the telephone:

> You think they are from other wires. 
> You think they are.

*(CP, 97)*

In the skepticism, or even cynicism, of the last line we see a reflection of the poet's belief that perhaps we can no longer connect with other people, not even on the telephone.

Perhaps better than any contemporary poet, Stafford can describe the absolute stillness and desolation of a winter landscape. We may almost say that the wintry landscape is a character or a figure in his poetry. In "Willa Cather" we have sharply defined images of the cold:

> Far as the night goes, brittle as the stars, 
> the icy plain pours, a wolf wind over it, 
> till white in the south plunge peaks with their cold names, 
> curled like wreaths of stone with blizzard plumes. 

*(CP, 40)*

The wind scours the land and reminds the poet of the Sioux, who had to contend with "winter riding their backs in the folds of their robes." This wintry wind

> carved the land for miles, and in the wind 
> an old man was calling a language he barely knew,
calling for human help in the wide land.  
(CP, 40)

We feel that all of our cries "for human help" are being drowned out by the enormity of this cold wind.

Stafford sometimes equates stoicism and the ability to face suffering with the metaphorical ability to withstand the cold. In "The Trip" he descends to a rather jejune use of sarcasm when he describes the false splendor of a drive-in:

A waitress with eyes made up to be Eyes brought food, spiced by the neon light.

In contrast, the poet admires his "fierce" car and the reality of the road:

When we got back on the road we welcomed it as a fierce thing welcomes the cold.  
(CP, 96)

The ability to maintain his identity in a world of harsh winds is a sign of the "unwaveringness" of the poet's character. A bleak scenario is evoked in "Acquaintance":

Because our world hardened while a wind was blowing mountains hold a grim expression and all the birds are crying.

I search in such terrain face flint all the way,
alert for the unreal
or the real gone astray.  

Thus, the harsh wind both purifies and hardens us: it makes us more impatient of the fake and the pretentious, and more desirous of the real. The poet's "flint" face is a recurring image that is linked with his stoicism.

The wind, or a cold wind, is also used interchangeably with the cold and serves the same symbolic functions. It is a harbinger of mortality, and it points towards death. The north wind caresses the wide expanse of prairie in "Our People" and "the north wind felt like the truth." The Indians are painfully vulnerable to the onslaught of history; they are pitifully heroic figures as they stand "fluttering in that wind" which brings to them a premonition of the end of their race.

The wind can also be an agent of affirmation, since it is part of the continuum of nature. In "Whispered into the Ground" Stafford insists that when "it rained, we grew," except for those who hold themselves aloof from the earth, "which always starts things." Here is the wind as teacher:

The wind keeps telling us something
we want to pass on to the world:
Even far things are real.  

Stafford's poetry is full of such personifications of
wind and stars and water.

In an interesting allegorical poem called "End of the Man Experiment," the wind becomes the agent of a destructive apocalypse. In the North, which is itself a symbol synonymous with "cold" and "winter," "a great wind lived/ its mighty hand/ scoured a kingdom out/ and formed the last snowman" (TTH, 15). All the efforts of man are leveled by this great wind, till finally nothing exists on the earth but the storm. Man has only been an experiment; when he vanishes without a trace, the "whole bowed world" is united by the storm.

"Storm," linked symbolically with "rain" and "wind" and "cold," is often used as "a trope for loss, for the slipping away of connections." Stafford attains an almost Shakespearean grandeur and simplicity in "A Story That Could Be True":

> When the great wind comes
> and the robberies of the rain
> you stand on the corner shivering.
> (CP, 4)

The subject of the poem is a man without name or identity. The echoes of Lear's "unaccommodated man" are powerfully present; and in these lines of Stafford we think of nothing so much as the storm-tossed heath in King Lear and the mocking refrains of the Fool's songs. In another poem, "You Night Men," Stafford ends with the line:
"Funneled out, lost in the storm of the world." The storms of the world are those conflicting and painful adventures of the soul which the poet must endure. The storm signifies deprivation, loss, and hardship; it symbolizes struggle of every kind.

The storm is sometimes a test of human character and of the strength of certain relationships. Even though the storm symbolizes uncertainty and hostility towards man's achievements, the "plain black hats" that made up the ethical code of the poet's Midwest home enable him to face the storms:

The sun was over our town; it was like a blade. Kicking cottonweed leaves we ran toward storms. Wherever we looked the land would hold us up. (CP, 30)

The sense of security offered in the last line is overwhelming; the stability of the land is an effective counterpart to the transient force of the storms.

In "Circle of Breath" the poet recollects the manner and moment of his father's death. He goes back in time to a magical moment in his childhood when his father and he had experienced a storm and had deliberately "walked into a field/ to know how it was to be cut off out in the/ dark alone." Buoyed up by his father's strength, the child could stand calmly and watch the storm go by. Here Stafford
is successful in evoking a sense of the charmed circle of love created by the father's wisdom and affection; outside this circle there is a howling wind and the scent of death. At his father's death, the poet is suddenly forced into insecurity and aloneness, but by recollecting his father's strength and calm, he is better able to feel the security of knowing that he could find his way home (CP, 32).

With characteristic compassion, Stafford writes in "Friend":

For anyone, for anyone,
the years are a sufficient storm.  (CP, 220)

Storms signify not only instability and suffering but also a world of contingencies. In "The Wanderer Awaiting Preference" we are told:

In a world where no one knows for sure
I hold the blanket for the snow to find:
come winter, then the blizzard, then demand--
the final strategy of right, the snow
like justice over stones like bread.  (CP, 107)

Stoicism is the appropriate attitude to adopt in storms. In the same poem the poet resolves to "calm the private storm within myself." In "Found in a Storm" Stafford again hints at the contingencies that the storm symbolizes.
After having experienced a gale in the mountains, he decides that sometime in the future he will "go/ by plan through an unplanned storm,/ disappearing into the cold,/ meanings in search of a world" (CP, 102).

In addition to the image-cluster of "cold," "wind," and "storm," we have an equivalent metaphor in "north." The "north" is suggestive of frozen lands and barren wastes, of a harsh landscape inimical to most human efforts. In "Birthday," a short allegory about the present moment to which the poet is chained, "the weather is telling Here a north story." ("Here" is a dog who is half-tame and half-bitter.) The "north story" is one of loneliness and loss of direction:

Someone is lost in a waver of peaks in snow, and only he gets the signal, tired; has to turn north, even to teeth of the wind--that is the only road to go, through storm dark, by seams in the dark, peering, Someone is always calling out in the snow. (CP, 94)

Turning north is entering the "teeth of the wind"; it is exploring a dangerous road; it is choosing to explore.

Another example of Stafford's metaphorical use of "north" is to be found in "Bring the North":

Mushroom, Soft Ear, Old Memory, Root come to Tell the Air: bring the Forest Floor along
the valley; bring all that comes
blue into passes, long shores
around a lake, talk, talk, talk,
miles then deep. Bring that story.

*   *   *   *   *

Mushroom, Soft Ear, Memory,
attend what is.
Bring the North.

(CP, 224)

The world's legend is deep and all-inclusive; it includes
everything and assimilates everything. If "north" is
synonymous with "cold," and "cold" is synonymous with the
"otherness" of nature, then "Bring the North" is an exhor-
tation to understand and enter into the "otherness" of
the world.

A related image but one that has not received much
attention is Stafford's recurrent use of "snowflake." The
snowflake is connected with the perfection and the sterility
of death; in Lawrence's Women in Love, the dazzling white-
ness of the snow slopes where Gerald Crich meets his death
is a perfect symbol of the denial of life. Stafford's
snowflakes are also perfect:

Late snowflakes come drifting down,
alone and perfect, never the same.

(TTH, 12)

In "Walking the Wilderness," each snowflake becomes "God's
answer":

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Snowflake designs lock; they clasp in the sky, hold their patterns one by one, down, spasms of loneliness, each one God's answer. (CP, 138)

Often a snowflake is seen as a symbol of the ephemeral and the gentle in nature:

To walk anywhere in the world, to live now, to speak, to breathe a harmless breath: what snowflake, even, may try today so calm a life so mild a death?

(CP, 197)

But a snowflake can also represent the suppressed fury and power in nature. In "Quiet Town" we see a small town living under the nightmare cloud of atomic holocaust, a deceptively simple human landscape simply waiting to explode. In such an environment of dormant violence, even mild gestures take on sinister meaning:

For our gestures, feathers are emphatic enough; a snowflake smashes through revealed rock.

(CP, 170)

The kinetic force of the image is striking.

The second cluster of images we notice in Stafford's work consists of "journey," "far," "near," "deep," "dark," and "surface." These metaphors are often interwoven to evoke the poet's metaphysical quest. "Far" and "near" are both part of a commonly employed distance

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metaphor; "deep" is opposed to "surface" and is associated with that which is "dark." "Dark" is associated with the invisible and the intuitive aspects of our experience, with experiences that lie outside the ken of our rational minds. "Dark" and "deep" correspond to that obscurity which, throughout Romantic poetry, and particularly in the poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge, liberates the imagination and allows it free play.  

A good example of Stafford's symbolic use of "deep" and "dark" can be seen in his poem "In the Deep Channel":

Setting a trotline after sundown
if we went far enough away in the night
sometimes up out of deep water
would come a secret-headed channel cat,

Eyes that were still eyes in the rush of darkness,
flowing feelers noncommittal and black,
and hidden in the fins those rasping bone daggers,
with one spiking upward on its back.

We would come at daylight and find the line sag,
the fishbelly gleam and the rush on the tether:
to feel the swerve and the deep current
which tugged at the tree roots below the river.

( cp, 31)

Here "deep" is used associatively with "secret-headed": they both suggest realms of experience beyond ratiocination. They represent the Unknown, or perhaps the Unknowable element in our lives. We catch sight of this experience only if "we went far enough away in the night," since this "deep water" is "far" away from our daily routines. The
"darkness" is an active thing, a living force. In the second stanza we have several kinetic images: the rush of darkness; the flowing feelers; the rasping daggers, one of which is "spiking upward." The poem continues in the same vein, with a piling of one verb on another: sag, gleam, rush, swerve, and tugged. There is a pervasive eerie quality to the poem. We do not know whether the "eyes" of line five belong to the fish or to some other creature that has come up along with the fish. The "deep current" here also shares in the mysterious otherness of nature.

It is in poems such as "In the Deep Channel" and "Bi-focal" that Stafford comes close to some of the mystical and poetic beliefs of D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence believed that there are two ways to get to the truth of an experience; either formulate a kind of rational, objective truth about the experience, or try to "penetrate to the essence of an object through a process of mystical attention."25 I am not suggesting that Stafford is a devotee of the Lawrencian blood-consciousness. What I am suggesting is that in the poems mentioned above and in others as well, Stafford is using the metaphors of "deep," "dark," and "far" to describe events or experiences that, like the events in some of Lawrence's poems, cannot be understood by intellectual awareness alone. Stafford observes, and observes very carefully, for the details in
"In the Deep Channel" are very concrete indeed. But he, and the reader with him, is puzzled by the meaning of this experience.

In "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" Stafford addresses our sense of community and exhorts us to support one another "lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark." Here "dark" carries a negative connotation: it is opposed to the communal effort; it is something that we have to guard against:

For it is important that awake people be awake, or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep; the signals we give—yes, or no, or maybe—should be clear: the darkness around us is deep. (CP, 52)

The "sleep" is the slumber of the spirit; the poem makes a plea for moral vigilance so that we are not devoured by the deep darkness around us.

In "Sophocles Says," a meditation on the nature of God, Stafford refers to the "hidden meanings" of history which are "written closely inside the skins of things." In the same poem a man "suffers, himself, the kind of dark/that anything sent from God experiences" (CP, 144). The "dark . . . sent from God" is the inexorable path of human destiny. In "Right Now" Stafford explains how this dark is shown in himself:
Led by my own dark I go  
my unmarked everlasting round  
frozen in this moment.  

*(CP, 139)*

His path is "unmarked" but his progress is inexorable; it is an "everlasting round."

In a recent poem, "Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People," Stafford evokes a sense of timelessness:

Plenty of  
things happen in deserted places, maybe  
dust counting millions of its little worlds  
or the slow arrival of deep dark.  

*(TTH, 25)*

The languorous rhythms only help to accentuate the oppressive sense of the enveloping darkness. It is also a permanent state, after a slow arrival.

"Deep" and "dark" (because they refer to the unknown and the invisible), force us to use our imagination. "Far" functions in the same way. Since we cannot see that which is "far," we must imaginatively apprehend it. "Far" also connotes distance, especially distance between the poet and the world he perceives. An important lesson is "Whispered into the Ground":

The wind keeps telling us something  
we want to pass on to the world:  
Even far things are real.  

*(CP, 25)*
This is an exhortation to us to exercise our imaginations and to try to grasp objects and events that are distant from us. But "far" also has associations with "coldness" and "death" and with the loss of human relationships. In "Long Distance," the afternoon light is associated with distance and, by a further symbolic connection, with the death of somebody else:

Sometimes when you watch the fire ashes glow and gray the way the sun turned cold on spires in winter in the town back home so far away.

Sometimes on the telephone the one you hear goes far and ghostly voices whisper in. You think they are from other wires. You think they are.

(CP, 97)

This is a poem about memory; the telephone is a metaphor for our links to the past. (Telephone wires are a recurring image in Stafford's poetry for our struggles to overcome the obstacles of time and distance.) The use of "ghostly" may suggest that the voice one hears is of someone already dead. "Far" is here not only a metaphor for distance, but also a metaphor for time. In other words, it has a spatial as well as a temporal dimension. "Far" also carries with it connotations of penetration; the voices one hears reach us through a fog of time and distance.
Sometimes "far" represents "invisible" as in "Representing Far Places." The poem begins with an imaginative reconstruction of a canoe wilderness. We make a leap back to the present, with the poet caught in the superficialities of society and of witty talk:

> Often in society when the talk turns witty you think of that place, and can't polarize at all; it would be a kind of treason. The land fans in your head canyon by canyon; steep roads diverge. Representing far places you stand in the room, all that you know merely a weight in the weather. (CP, 96)

The poet's sense of separation from this society is total; it is clear that his affinities lie with the "far places" which fan out in his head. Somehow the "far places" are in antithesis to the values of this smart society and are more real to the poet.

The journey metaphor is quite closely linked to the use of "deep," "dark," and "far." The journey is undertaken in order to approach or understand that which is "far," and it often involves a dangerous or intimate experience of the "deep" "darkness" that surrounds us. There are no definite markers or sign-posts on this journey; the poet must make his way as he goes along. "Journey" is here associated with Stafford's allegiance to "process," a concept that I will discuss more fully in Chapter VI.
"Process" is the natural "bent" of an individual; it is the means by which an individual is true to his "essential" nature. The search for human identity can only be defined in terms of the process, or movement, which brings us closer to it. "Journey" and "path" are both symbolic of this process. "Watching the Jet Planes Dive" illustrates the journey motif. The journey is tentative; the seeker finds by seeking; there are very few absolutes along the way. Jonathan Holden writes that the "form of this poem is an iterated chant. Its movement describes a series of slow circles, a shamanistic dance. 'We' are the tribe, and Stafford is the shaman." The poem is a celebration of process. "We must go back and find a trail on the ground" implies that the time has come for us to renounce our present modes of living and try to recover something that we have lost. The path may be inconspicuous, merely a trail. The movement must be tentative, adventurous, unfettered, perhaps experimental. "By such wild beginnings without help we may find/ the small trail on through the buffalo-bean vines" (CP, 44). The search is going to involve arduous labor. "We must go back with noses and the palms of our hands,/ and climb over the map in far places, everywhere." If no prescribed rules or guidelines are available, then we must improvise: "If roads are unconnected we must make a path." In the crucial last
stanza of the poem we are told that "we must find something forgotten by everyone alive,/ and make some fabulous gesture when the sun goes down."

The ideal "path"--and the desired receptivity to process--has been denied and forgotten by most people; we must recapture it. The "fabulous gesture" required of us relates to the regenerative power of ritual and symbol in our lives. Certain cultures (as exemplified in the "little Mexican towns" of the poem) have not lost this sense of the importance of living by faith and imagination. "The jet planes dive: we must travel on our knees." The jet planes are the menacing symbols of destruction; they are symbolic of our arrogant, process-denying technology. Our appropriate stance should be humility; we will find the path only if we travel on our knees, hugging the earth for its many secrets and lessons.

A journey of another kind is described in "The Move to California." The poet is making a journey west, from Indiana, where he received "the summons," to California, where the future awaits in the form of a job. This is the archetypal American journey and it involves a discovery of the quintessential America. The amplitude of the American Midwest is immediately invoked: "Think of the miles we left,/ and then the one slow cliff/ coming across the north" (CP, 45). "Past the middle of the continent," they
are forced to "face the imminent/ map of all our vision,/ the sudden look at new land." There is a vision of complete joy and affirmation "near Hagerman." Whenever he imagines "that sacred land," the poet goes "blind with hope." From this heaven of clear, cool, natural beauty, the poet plunges into the depraved and unwholesome reality of Nevada. He remembers the gamblers--martyrs to a cause--"wracked on an invisible cross/ and staring at a green table"; he evokes the sordidness of the "unbelievable cars" and the men in "green glasses" who lose "pale dollars" under "violet hoods." The poet escapes from this vision of hell and sleeps "in the wilderness on the hard ground." He recovers his sanity and his perspective through this physical contact with the earth. It is a cleansing ritual and a necessary part of this modern-day Odyssey. It would have been a triumphant journey had it come to an end here; but ahead lies the "new West," a travesty of the frontier dream. Tersely the poet states that "gasoline makes the game scarce." The ambiance of this new frontier is derived from the movies: the poet remembers the "stuffed wildcat/someone had shot on Bing Crosby's ranch." John Lauber states that the line "We moved into a housing tract" symbolizes "the ultimate flatness and boredom of modern America." But the poet does not abandon all hope: "Every dodging animal carries my hope in Nevada." So long
as some of the natural rhythms of life can be maintained, and some of the wild animals elude the hunter's grasp, the poet has cause for hope. The journey west has also been an initiation; it has been an education in reality; and it has revealed to the poet the contours of the "new" West.

Sometimes, as can be expected from a poet of memory like Stafford, the journey involves going back in time to a happier, simpler, or more Edenic past. This may take the form of a physical journeying back to the hometown or to one's childhood school. In "Time's Exile," Stafford records one such journey; back in his hometown in Kansas he relives the bright moments and daily routines of his past life. He is rich with reminiscence: "I bring things back from everywhere" (CP, 92). Heavy with nostalgia, he is attentive to every small detail in the town: "I am like a man who detours through the park," so that he can savor his surroundings. He remembers the presumably blind man whom he used to meet in the park when he was a child. This man could find his way "by sunflowers through the dark." This journey back in time has taught him to immerse himself completely in his surroundings. The detour through the park may have been impractical, but in his case it was necessary.

It is not surprising that a poet of memory like
Stafford should make a consistent use of images of time. Very often there is a sense of pathos evoked by lost time or time that is inexorably passing away. Stafford is very sensitive to the "relentless progression of time." The typical Stafford scenario consists of the poet or a poet-like figure returning to his old home, or long-lost hometown, or schoolyard, or old friends, and then trying to make of the past a living thing. The most pervasive mood is one of nostalgia. In "When I Was Young," the poet recalls a childhood in which high spirits were mixed with the usual but magical illogicality, and "horses told fences/the story of Black Beauty, and smelled of the good manger." But much has intervened between then and now:

Those times tested the pre-war clocks, and cold mornings they rang and rang. I haven't recently seen rivers flow backwards or animals that remember. The clocks, though, still pursue what they endlessly loved. (CP, 126)

The verb "pursue" has the precise connotations of our being held captive by our mortality. We could substitute "fate" or "destiny" for "clocks" and convey the same sense of the inevitable.

Stafford uses a striking image of mutability in "Time":
The years to come (empty boxcars waiting on a siding while someone forgets and the tall grass tickles their bellies) will sometime stay, rusted still. (CP, 196)

This is a good example of the subjective image of Bly and Neruda; it is a passionately sad evocation of decay. In "A Gesture Toward an Unfound Renaissance," the object of the poet's compassionate glance is "the slow girl in art-class" who is isolated because she is slow: "We/ learned so fast she could not follow us." The poet is moved to tenderness; later at night, lying in bed listening to the "rumbly bridge at Main Street," he relives the events of the day:

I would hear that one intended lonely sound,
the signature of the day, the ratchet of time
taking me a step toward, here, now and this
look back through the door that always closes. (CP, 154)

The "ratchet" of time, with its raspng and insistent sound, is evocative of the progression of time.

In conclusion, we can look at some valid generalizations about Stafford's use of images. There is a conspicuous absence of images of the city or of the metropolis. This is consistent with Stafford's rejection of the value systems of urban culture. In this respect, he is deviating from the great tradition of urban poetry as practiced by
Eliot and Pound. The city with its menacing landscape simply does not stir his imagination. Instead, he is in the great Romantic tradition of Blake and Wordsworth, and like them he mentions cities and aspects of our so-called "civilized" society, only in order to dissect and critique them.

Second, even though we occasionally come across a startling image in Stafford's poetry (e.g., "my blood full of sharks"), his is a poetry of unostentation, a poetry of ordinary surfaces. In an interview with Cynthia Lofsness, Stafford admitted that though he enjoyed Yeats, he had no real affinity for him: "Yeats seems foreign to me... I'm excited by a lot of those violent encounters of images and so on, that he cultivated in his mind. But that kind of recklessness with images for the sake of firework displays in poetry is just foreign to my nature."²⁹

Finally, even though Stafford's poetry shows evidence of a highly imaginative use of images and symbols, he is not an Imagist in the strictly technical sense of the term. In the many published interviews with him to which we have access, Stafford mentions Hardy, Frost, and Jeffers as influences and kindred spirits, but never the Imagists. Stafford pays close attention to detail, especially in his nature poems, but he is too committed to people, places, and causes to maintain the scientific
objectivity of the true Imagist. Nathan Sumner writes: "His use of bold imagery is designed to provide a springboard from which to launch a larger comment." Thus the images, however beautiful, touching, or profound, are not a poetic end in themselves. They exist in order to convey a larger statement about the world we live in. That is why the poet is compelled to speak out:

For it is the world that speaks in us, and we are the world that we have to sing:

... ...

The best things hide until they're said: and that is why we talk these things, to say out what informs our lives.

("The Speaking Trance")
CHAPTER III--NOTES


12. Fred Chappell, "Two Views of the Lone Man," The Small Farm, 9 & 10 (Spring & Fall 1979), p. 54.

13. Holden, p. 3.

15. Lauber, p. 88.


23. Chappell, p. 52.


27. Lauber, p. 93.


29. Lofsness, p. 100.

CHAPTER IV
THE POETRY OF STATEMENT:
THE SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

There is no such thing as the state
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

W. H. Auden, Sep. 1, 1939

There has long been a tradition in English poetry of the committed writer, of the poet who speaks for all of us, of the artist who feels a passionate identification with the destinies of all of humanity. From John Donne's insistence that no man is an island, solitary and unconnected, to William Blake's raging social concern, to Shelley's socialist sympathies, to the ironic observations of W. H. Auden, we witness the phenomenon of the poet operating in a social and political context and acknowledging his identity as a social and a political animal. Thomas Mann once stated that "in our time the destiny of man presents itself in political terms." The poet recognizes that, however apolitical his inclinations may be, he is intimately and integrally a part of the greater
social issues of his day. When he incorporates this belief in his work, he usually gives rise to what I shall call a poetry of statement.

A poetry of statement is by definition what we usually call "political poetry." But what is political poetry? In the traditional sense, the term would imply poetry written within a narrow ideological framework or poetry written to express and explain a political point of view. Thus, we might speak of the Marxist poetry of Pablo Neruda or of Vladimir Mayakovsky in his post-Revolution days. This is not to discount their great achievement in any way, for an artist like Neruda will finally transcend all categories, even the categories of his own convictions. More often, we associate the term "committed poetry," "committed verse," or "political poetry" with lesser and narrower talents, in whose work the politics finally overshadows the poetry. This is especially true of much of the Marxist or "proletarian" writing of the 30's.

I propose to use the term "political poetry" in a very different context, however. I propose to use "politics" in the widest sense of the word, as that sphere that deals with our public and communal existence. By "political poetry" I mean any poetry that takes as its subject the relations between men in the wider community. In a recent article in Harper's, Terrence Des Pres writes:
By politics I mean acts and decisions that are not ours but which nonetheless determine how we live; events and situations brought about by brute force or manipulations of power; whole peoples ruined by the dictates of government, of the military, of the big multinationals. Politics, then, as the condition we find ourselves in when, without consent, we become the means to others' ends—politics as endured by the victims, as seen by the witness, as beheld by the poet. . . . politics comes to mean simply what happens, the intense brutality of history itself.

Thus, political poetry is distant in spirit from the so-called confessional poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. It is not necessarily loud or doctrinaire; in fact, fairly introspective poets like Muriel Rukeyser and William Stafford, poets whom we associate with quiet and steady convictions, rather than with hysteria or emotional excesses, have consistently written a poetry full of political and social statements.

Therefore, "political poetry" is any poetry in which the poet tries to express his convictions about how life should be lived. Any strong belief will manifest itself in a poetry of statement. In this context, William Stafford writes:

I do think that my poems are loaded with implied statements about how life should be lived. To me poetry lives to a large extent by its embodiment of experiences (as opposed to its topic or avowed message). In many ways I think that all my poems are political, or religious, or whatever term you might want
to use to indicate a relation to life and its conduct and decisions.

Relationship to life and its conduct and decisions: I shall use "political poetry," or "a poetry of statement," to signify precisely these aspects of our experience.

Before we focus our inquiry on William Stafford's poetry of statement, let us briefly examine the great question of the relationship between politics and poetry. No matter how remote, ethereal, or impractical a poet's concerns may seem, the poet has always had the prerogative of exercising a public function. As Matthew Arnold reminded us more than a century ago: "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." Shelley referred to poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." In our time, the critic Stephen Stepanchev writes that "In reality they [the poets] serve an important public function in maintaining the vitality of the language and the morality of the state." William Carlos Williams has written along the same lines: "To write badly is an offense to the state since the government can never be more than the government of words. If the language is distorted crime flourishes."

It is a common observation that the greatest political poetry of our century has been written in Europe and
in Latin America. Osip Mandelstam, Alexander Blok, Mayakovsky, and Andrei Voznesensky in Russia, Lorca, Miguel Hernandez, and Neruda in Spanish, Quasimodo and Ungaretti in Italy, and George Seferis in Greece have all written as committed poets who dramatize their social and political concerns in poems in which abstract ideas are fleshed in sensuous imagery. In America, there has long been a tendency to believe that political ideology contaminates poetry, chokes it with ideas, and makes it "impure," even though as Pablo Neruda reminds us in his essay "Towards An Impure Poetry," a poet must see "the confused impurity of the human condition" and include everything in his poetry, including political loyalties. In a recent article on Seamus Heaney in Harper's, Terrence Des Pres writes: "For to judge from most recent American poetry, we stick to flowers and sidestep the rage, ignoring what we know or turning it to metaphor merely. We presume, against experience, that poets need not be social creatures, that between the self and history no necessary link exists." By and large, modern American poets have preferred to remain disengaged. Ezra Pound is the towering exception to this generalization. T. S. Eliot, though, believed in the separation between the man and the poet, and also between the poet and his work. The poet's function was to record experience but always with the proper aesthetic
distance. During the Spanish Civil War, Eliot opposed the taking of sides for or against the Republic: "I still feel convinced that it is best that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated, and take no part in these collective activities." 9 In America, Allen Tate called out for a similar division of interests. He argued for a split between a man's poetry and his politics: "A political poetry, or a poetical politics, of whatever denomination, is a society of two members living on each other's washing. They devour each other in the end. It is the heresy of spiritual cannibalism." 10

It is only in recent years that we have seen a resurgence of the classical belief that one cannot separate a man's work from his politics, or compartmentalize his existence into narrow categories. This may well be a reaction against the influence of the confessional school of poetry whose leading representatives were Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton. Now many American poets realize that "all poetry is unavoidably political in its very choice of form." 11 Thus, the ebullience of Whitman's catalogues seems to emerge out of his unbridled faith in a new democracy, just as the controlled rhythms of eighteenth-century poets are linked to their political and social worldview. In his study of American poetry on the Vietnam War, James Mersmann has included the most extreme definition
of political poetry: "Some poets argue that every poem is political, for its very existence implies something about how the world should be shaped and governed." Galway Kinnell concurs. He believes that "all poetry is rightly political just as all poetry is religious because it attempts to break through, rend, or transcend the barriers and veils that separate men from one another and from the divine." Though I can see the validity of these definitions, I consider them to be too general and too broad for my purposes. Hence, I will adhere to my definition of political poetry, as cited earlier.

In general, there is not the same strong tradition of "engaged poetry" in England and America as there is in Europe and Latin America. American poetry of the last forty years has often been introspective to a fault and preoccupied with good craftsmanship and technical concerns. It has tended toward a "vision, apart and solipsistic." In an extreme form, among the poets of the "confessional school," the poetry has become almost exclusively inward-looking, taking as its subjects extremely private episodes of personal history, as well as minutely observed and recorded mental aberrations. Doubt, anxiety, frustration, and suicidal ideation dominate the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and to some extent John Berryman. These poets do not show man as part of a relentless historical process,
or even man as a part of an intricate social web. The dominant feeling is of man trapped in a hell of his own making: the hell of a tortured consciousness. Stephen Stepanchev has written of the generation of American poets who came to maturity after World War II: "The ultimate source of value, for most contemporary poets, is neither God, nor society, but the imagination." For many of these poets, the emphasis on the power of the imagination to reorder reality has led to a retreat from involvement with the political and social issues of the day. As a result, we can no longer draw sustenance from our poets.

The whole question of politics in poetry is linked with the issue of the nationalistic impulse in literature. Ben Belitt has written of Neruda: "Whoever touches his work touches Chile." This passionate and total identification with his country makes a poet especially sensitive to the nationalistic concerns of his day. The American poet, as Warner Berthoff tells us, must contribute "to that renewal of the mythic promise of American life." This expansive intention can be demonstrated in the works of Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. We see in these writers a desire to try to express the profound nationalistic stirrings and conflicts of an America only lately come to maturity. It is possible that this is what John Berryman was referring to when he wrote
that one of the chief motives for a serious poetry was a certain shared "jealousy for the national honor."

In our time Robert Lowell has made a brilliant use of these nationalistic concerns. It is my thesis that William Stafford is similarly concerned with the idea of the shared fates of all Americans, as well as with the American past and all its consequences and ramifications. In Stafford's poetry, America is the protagonist, and he returns to his explorations of the landscape and the people, time and time again, with a mixture of profoundly felt love, anger, and disbelief at some of the transformations he witnesses. In his poetry we feel a quiet, dignified, but determined indictment of the plastic values of the new America. But his vision is not entirely satirical; he may begin with anger but he ends in hope. Everywhere in his poetry we can see a proposed alternative, a new solution, and a new perspective on old problems. Pervading it all is a genuine sense of delight in experiencing and discovering America, whether it is driving across the Western plains, or watching a deer loping away into the American wilderness, or learning from American Indians. The relationship of the self to the "idea" of America is always in the foreground.

We must now return to our earlier generalization that the idea that poetry should have a public function,
that it should be "engaged" and that it must enter into the national culture, is one that has not always come naturally to most American poets. It is possible that they have felt the rightness of these ideas but are unable or unwilling to embody them in their own work, to contaminate their own poetry, so to speak. It is in Latin America that the idea of poetry as part of the national culture is most flourishing. There are several reasons for this. In an interview with Pablo Neruda, Robert Bly asked the poet: "Why has the greatest poetry in the twentieth century appeared in the Spanish language?" Neruda's reply was that the generation of poets including Lorca, Alberti, and Aleixandre was "coincident with the political awakening of Spain as a republic, the awakening of a great country that was asleep. Suddenly they had all the energy and strength of a man waking." Later in the same interview, Bly posed the following question: "You have fought many political battles, fighting seriously and steadily like a bear, and yet you have not ended up obsessed with political matters like Tolstoy, or embittered. Your poetry seems to become more and more human, and affectionate. Now how do you explain that?" Neruda's reply is extremely relevant to our discussion of political poetry in general:

You see, I come from a country which is very political. Those who fight have great
support from the masses. Practically all the writers of Chile are out to the left—there are almost no exceptions. We feel supported and understood by our own people. That gives us great security and the numbers of people who support us are very great. As poets we are really in touch with the people, which is very rare. I read my poems everywhere in my country—every village, every town—for years and years, and I feel it is my duty to do it.

I have quoted this exchange of ideas in such detail because it contains many of the germinal ideas necessary to the successful writing of political poetry. One, that great poetry receives an infusion of vigor and originality from the political awakening of a country; two, that the political writer writes for a large public which bestows upon him love and fellow-feeling; three, that the truly committed writer feels it to be his obligation and duty to take his art "out of closed rooms" and into the streets, thus making his work accessible to a wide public audience.

In America there has been a persistent and tragic division between the poet and the masses. In fact, the poet is not writing for the masses, but for a select group of fellow-poets, critics, and students of literature. There is no passionate identification of the poet with the common man; not only is the "man in the street" not observed carefully; after Carl Sandburg, he has not even been romanticized and glorified. Because the American poet cannot hope to reach a wider audience, he lacks the
security that arises out of the belief that he is essential to society. Poets in America are dispensable, and, consequently, so is much of their poetry.

The emergence of a distinctively political strain of poetry, as exemplified in the work of Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Patchen, Robert Bly, Philip Levine, and William Stafford, is proof that American poets of the last twenty years are reacting with anger, fear, and resentment to some of the historical changes of our age. More than a century earlier, Emerson had jubilantly announced in his Journals: "Here's for the plain old Adam, the simple genuine self against the whole world." R. W. B. Lewis wrote of the Adamic myth that it embodied the "authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history." Further, the Adamic hero was "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources." The literature of the period reflected this enthusiastic and unbridled individualism: Walden reflects it, and so does Huckleberry Finn and Moby-Dick. The sense of being overwhelmed, defeated, or threatened by powerful and organized
social forces had not yet pervaded the literature of the time. (Bartleby the Scrivener is a very successful exception.)

In our age, the little man as the beleaguered hero takes on mythic proportions. It is no longer enough to believe in the power and glory of the individual will. The heroes of our poetry often become anonymous—as in the work of W. H. Auden. The Adamic myth cannot sustain us; it is impossible to believe that the individual can be "emancipated from history." We are suddenly and shatteringly overtaken by history. We feel twisted and manipulated by historical circumstances. The two global wars, the Jewish holocaust, Hiroshima, Vietnam: it is impossible to avert our eyes or our minds from the consequences of these events. Robert Jay Lifton, writing as a psychiatrist on the survivor's syndrome in Hiroshima, has described the impairment of all the symbolic modes of immortality that was effected by the bomb: all life became transitory, impermanent, subject to the whims of others.

This sense of the powerlessness of the ordinary man most obviously moves a poet like Neruda to anger and to anguish. It also motivates American poets like Stafford and Levine to speak out for others. This sense of community with a larger group of people is at the very heart of the political impulse in poetry. R. W. B. Lewis has
stated that the Adamic ideal is too simple to survive in these more complicated times. "Ours is an age of containment; we huddle together and shore up defenses; both our literature and our public conduct suggest that exposure to experience is certain to be fatal." This feeling of passionate identification with a larger group, this huddling together and shoring up of defenses, contributes to the writing of political poetry. It is a vindication of Auden's outcry: "We must love one another or die." We are no longer helpless when we speak and exist in the collective sense. As we shall see later, Stafford's poetry is full of explicit and implicit statements about the necessity of taking a public stand on behalf of one's community. The issues may vary from the conservation of wilderness to the tragically exhausted drama of the American Indian, but what catches our ear and arrests our imagination is the urgency of the stance.

As stated earlier, even though American poetry of the last fifty years or so does not generally reflect highly politicized sensibilities on the part of the poets, yet we do have evidence of a body of political poetry in the works of Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Kenneth Patchen, Ginsberg, Philip Levine, and William Stafford. Lowell is the most striking of these voices. He is a public poet in that he deals with public themes "like Vietnam and the Presidency
Patrick Cosgrave in The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell quotes John Holloway as saying that Lowell raises the whole position of the poet as not simply moralist, but moral historian: as bringing his sense of values to bear not simply on the immediate sensuous pabulum of direct experience, but on that as it has grown from its remote past—history. The moment that a poet, or anyone else, attempts to exercise the moral sensibility in this way, he employs a new fundamental idea, one we have almost ceased to think of in the context of poetry. The immediacy of our experience is personal. What is personal may also be expressed, so that the result is universal. "This man" becomes Everyman. But the emergence, over history, of men's present from their past is neither of these. History is not the realm of the personal, nor the universal: it is the realm of the public.

I have quoted this in detail because I think it is relevant to William Stafford, particularly to his finely developed sense of the tragedy and pathos of the life of the American Indian, and in his moral stance on issues such as the shrinking of the wilderness and nuclear destruction. Warner Berthoff has called American literature of the last twenty-five years "a survivor's literature." Poets like Lowell and Stafford seem to be driven by the desire to testify, to bear public testimony to the crippling injustices of the day. They symbolize our grasping need for reassurance in a world in which the threat of atomic warfare has permanently altered our consciousness. Both
Lowell and Stafford demonstrate a wariness at the monstrous and total concentration of power in the hands of our governments. Berthoff has spoken of a "pervasive apprehensiveness" that dominates our national temper. Fredric Jameson in his critique of the "whole unprecedented modern situation" spoke of the "fear and revulsion" and the "profound split between public institutions and private experience." This split naturally gives rise to the widely observed anomie and helplessness of the small man. If the American literature of the last twenty-five years has been a survivor's literature, it has also seen the rise of the hero as victim, the little man created and destroyed by the ironic twists and turns of history. The desire to testify means "acknowledging the pain and degradation implicit in [those] shared conditions of life." With a poet like Allen Ginsberg or Adrienne Rich, we have "a posture of accusatory public testimony." Their purpose is clear: it is to jolt their audience out of an attitude of smug complacency. Adrienne Rich announced in the middle of her career that poetry would no longer be merely an aesthetic concern of hers, but that henceforth she would "bear witness to a peremptory consciousness of human need." Her voice is strident and rhetorical; so is the poetic voice of Ginsberg. Stafford is often driven by the same desire to bear witness to the "degradation" of
modern life, but he is incapable of the same stridency. He does not shout, and he never orates; his political poetry is proof of the power of understatement. His convictions move us because of the quiet dignity with which they are proffered. Nevertheless, Stafford is one of those poets who would support Auden's statement that we need a "poetry that makes something happen."

In conclusion, we may generalize and say that all political poetry arises out of the poet's dissatisfaction with his social and cultural environment. This dissatisfaction may lead to anger and to the fiery anguish of Patchen or Levine, or it may lead to an attempt at reconciliation with the world, as in the work of William Stafford. Political poetry differs in intent and execution from the so-called confessional poetry; it arises out of an engagement with the world, not only out of an encounter with the self. It enables the poet to emerge from solipsism and introspection; it liberates the poet and widens the scope of his concerns. All of these generalizations are relevant to the work of William Stafford. Now we can turn to a detailed examination of the poetry of statements as exemplified in Stafford's work.

In a letter to the author, Stafford has written: "I do make statements in my poems, and they usually come right out of my beliefs; further, I suspect that even when
the statements wander, they tend to reinforce a consistent point of view." In another letter he writes (as I have quoted previously): "I do think that my poems are loaded with implied statements about how life should be lived . . . In many ways I think all my poems are political or religious, or whatever term you might want to use to indicate a relation to life and its conduct and decisions." 

The first statement he makes in his poetry is his consistent and total support of pacifism. During World War II Stafford was a thorough conscientious objector and worked with the Brethren Service Committee, representing one of the three peace churches. That marked the beginning of his involvement with the peace movement. He has mentioned in one of his letters to me that he was strongly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence. He also mentions his Quaker background as being instrumental in making him a pacifist. Discussing his political beliefs, he writes: "I have generally been active in such social causes as race and class justice, [and] opposition to war; but as my way is the way of non-violence, I have not related to political movements that espouse or in my opinion lead to violence." Elsewhere, he makes a very significant point: "Generally, I would say also that I am a meliorist, not an activist or push type of agitator."
Stafford's pacifism is so well known that it is often the topic of discussion in the many interviews that he grants. In the interview with Cynthia Lofsness, Stafford asserts that he wants to "take meaningful stands on essential things." With reference to his refusal to serve in World War II, he says simply: "There are some things that one should never do." He goes on to explain his decision to become a conscientious objector:

And I suppose family background had some part in it and a kind of feeling of assuming good will on the part of other people, and being puzzled about how a line on a map kept people over there from being also people of good will ... And I just could not come down to nationalistic location for virtue. So I was a conscientious objector.

In the same vein, Stafford says of war that "a long term cold war, or a cold anything, is to foster among us a paralysis of those qualities on which we commonly and ultimately have to rely." He said that in 1962; later, when the Vietnam War came along, he reiterated his beliefs:

I mean a long enduring conflict has brought us to feeling suspicion among ourselves, and divisiveness, and it's very hard to maintain the sense of community that seems to me to be necessary for the health of the country or in a society when we are torn.

Violence is anathema to this prophet of reconciliation;
it shatters connections and makes harmony between man and the wilderness impossible. It invades brutally:

At noon in the desert a panting lizard waited for history; its elbows tense, watching the curve of a particular road as if something might happen.

*   *   *   *   *

There was just a continent without much on it under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert.

(CP, 41)

The lizard has become a witness to history; it has seen the transformation of the world into a desert. The violence that is implied here is clearly the ominous threat of nuclear annihilation. It is a chilling look into one of our possible futures, as well as a powerful Imagistic poem. Even though the lizard is tense, and is gripping the desert with an implied desperation, the change that it seeks will never come; we have reached the end of an apocalyptic cycle of destruction. In this poem, and in countless others, man stands indicted by an innocent or neutral witness to history.

In "The Gun of Billy the Kid," Stafford makes explicit mention of his pacifism and of his abhorrence of violence:

But over the wall of the world there spills each lonely soul,
and snapping a gun won't help
the journeys we all have to go.

In the iron of every day
stars can come through the sky,
and we can turn on the light
and be saved before we die.

Now I once handled firearms
but I handed them back again,
being a pacifist--
then why do I sing this song?

(CP, 38)

Violence is pathetically ineffective: we still have to
endure our long journeys on which stoicism would probably
be a more appropriate response.

Sometimes the violence that inheres in us becomes
deified as special code of ethics. Stafford observes this
in the "macho" code of the Old West. In "A Treatise:
Influence of Howls on the Frontier," he caustically com-
ments on this false code:

Wolf howls alone devastated the West,
put a scare over the landscape, reared
snags against a faint moon: and people
with guns spraddled around, in falsetto
boasts giving their least cowardly boaster
the name hero.

(TTH, 21)

The key word here is "falsetto," signifying a corrupt and
meretricious sense of values. He contrasts this with the
beautiful harmony that exists between the Indians and the
wolves who "offered each/ other the jewels of their eyes."

The threat of imminent nuclear destruction is also
the subject of "Our City is Guarded by Automatic Rockets."
The poet feels the horror of the unfeeling and unwavering path of the rocket:

Breaking every law except the one for Go, rolling its porpoise way, the rocket staggers on its course.  

(CP, 121)

The poet meditates on the senseless destruction of the natural landscape and concludes bitterly that "the world goes wrong in order to have revenge./ Our lives are an amnesty given us." Beyond the reality of the automatic rockets, beyond the illusions of progress and the promise of nuclear deliverance, there is another reality: in the wilderness a "cornered cat,/ saved by its claws" is "now ready to spend/ all there is left of the wilderness, embracing/ its blood." The emblem of the defiant cat moves the poet to declare that he too will "spit/ life, at the end of any trail where I smell any hunter." An opposition is set up, that between the ordered harmony of the wilderness and the unthinking violence of modern civilization. This opposition can be discovered in poem after poem.

Blind progress, unresponsive to the deeper needs of the community: that is the enemy in "Boom Town." "All night those oil well engines/ went talking into the dark;/ every beat fell through a snake,/ quivering to the end."
The delicate ecological balance has been shattered forever. When the oil is depleted and only "one hesitant pump, distant" is working in the distance, the poet realizes "how late it was":

the snakes, forgetting away through the grass, had all closed their slim mouths. (CP, 49)

"Forgetting away through the grass": the phrase evokes the graceful melting away of these animal lives, their evanescence as well as their helplessness. "Slim mouths" is a sad image, fraught with pathos. The tone is elegiac and elegant. The poem is an excellent example of the kind of implied statements that are present in Stafford's poetry.

Stafford's poems against war are not doctrinaire, but nevertheless they arise from deeply felt positions. "Like Robert Lowell, Stafford protests the war, energetically, but rarely mentions it directly in his poems." Stafford's attitude towards the war differs greatly from that of a poet like Denise Levertov. Levertov's bitterness about the Vietnam War and "the state of the American soul" moved Stafford to comment:

Denise Levertov, to move to another different kind of protester I like to talk with, but I find myself differing with her--my impulse, even in protest, is toward some kind of redemptive move toward the
opposition, and I do not detect that readiness to find common ground in some protesters, and I guess Denise would represent the intransigent position, or the unforgiving position.37

However, as we have seen above, war is the moving force in "Our City is Guarded by Automatic Rockets" and "At the Bomb Testing Site." In "Watching the Jet Planes Dive," the poet uses the metaphor of the trail and the journey to symbolize our arduous journey toward the self. The poem is overshadowed by the clouds of war. Man must continue his lowly journey, putting his faith in the regenerative power of ritual:

The jet planes dive: we must travel on our knees.  
(CP, 49)

The poem evokes a sinister sense of the encroachments of war. The threat of imminent warfare hangs like a cloud over the deceptive social surface of "Quiet Town." This is archetypal small-town America: "Our town balances/ and we have a railroad." But the lives of the inhabitants are overshadowed:

Overhead planes mutter our fear and are dangerous, are bombs exploding a long time, carrying bombs elsewhere to explode.  
(CP, 170)

In "Peace Walk" a group of anti-nuclear demonstrators carry signs that read "Thou shalt not kill" and the poet comments
with a quiet irony that the sound truck blared its message: "it said that love could fill the atmosphere." The poet immediately thinks of what really fills the atmosphere: nuclear fallout:

Occur, slow the other fallout, unseen
on islands everywhere--fallout, falling
unheard.  

(CP, 24)

In the satirical "Evening News," Stafford laments the fact that television trivializes everything, even war (presumably the war in Vietnam). It makes everything distant and unreal; we view the world at a remove:

That one great window puts forth
its own scene, the whole world
alive in glass. In it a war happens,
only an eighth of an inch thick.  

(CP, 183)

The destruction is inexplicable, mysterious:

Some of our friends have leaped
through, disappeared, become unknown
voices and rumors of crowds.

War is a denial of natural process, and the poet turns in desperation to the "normal" routines of his life; he wants to celebrate

birds,
wind, unscheduled grass,
that they please help to make
everything go deep again.
"The Whole Story" is yet another of Stafford's frightening fables of apocalyptic annihilation. The poem begins with an echo of Hiroshima and nuclear holocaust:

When we shuddered and took into ourselves the cost of the way we had lived,
I was a victim, touched by the blast.
Death! I have death in me!
No one will take me in from the cold.

(\textit{CP}, 236)

Only the children survive amid the ruins, under the eternal gaze of the sky. The poet reaches out towards these survivors.

The implied menace of the Cold War and its potential for disaster pervades "Report to Crazy Horse," ostensibly a long report on the modern ways that have been adopted by most of the surviving Sioux. Actually it is a sly critique of our whole civilization, which is tainted by fear and suspicion. The modern representative of the Sioux addresses his long dead chief:

Crazy Horse, it is not fair to hide a new vision from you. In our schools we are learning to take aim when we talk, and we have found out our enemies. They shift when words do; they even change and hide in every person.

(\textit{CP}, 226)

Stafford creates a world of nightmarish expediency, a world resting on shifting sands because it has lost its...
capacity for peace and trust. Again, war and its psychological consequences stand indicted in plain view.

The feeling that we are helplessly impelled along a determined trajectory towards our final doom is a pervasive one in many modern poets. Yeats's interpenetrating gyres, heralding the cycles of destruction and regeneration exemplify this belief. James Mersmann has stated that "the best 'poem of portent' is William Stafford's 'Report of an Unappointed Committee." Stafford captures here the gut-twitching suspense and expectancy as well as the uncertainty and ambivalency [sic] about what is building behind the scenes, and makes the reader feel the power and awesomeness of whatever it is that is about to spring, lurch, or flood upon the world." We are biding our time before the apocalypse:

The uncounted are counting
and the unseen are looking around.

This is surely a forewarning of the coming revolutionary upheaval when the small men, the victims, the uncounted and unseen men will rise to assert themselves. Stafford talks of other portents:

In a room of northernmost light
a sculptor is waiting.

Elsewhere, "In the back country a random rain drop/ has
broken a dam." This is an indication of the tremendous incipient power that is waiting to unleash itself upon the world.

It is interesting to observe that Stafford claims to be protesting even in poems that do not appear to be overtly political in content. In this context he includes even poems like "B. C." or "On a Church Lawn" which do not seem to be protest poems but which to me are witnessings for a way of life that implies the anti-war stance. Maybe what I am drifting toward saying is that many fairly quiet, off-the-target poems are motivated and guided by impulses that to me are the very central elements in what real, effective protest could be. Some protest is an image of what is protected against, but a change requires something other. 39

Mersmann adds: "Any poem that elevates truth, beauty, spirit, is in such an understanding a protest against war." 40

In "B.C.," "the seed that met water spoke a little name." This was two thousand years ago, before the time of Jesus, a time when ostentatious flowers were in bloom. "Great sunflowers were lording the air that day." Since then history has taken its course: the great sunflowers are dead and gone, but the small seed with the little name has survived: "Sequoia is my name" (CP, 76). The small seed with a small name has asserted its existence and has become a magnificent Sequoia. Here we have the poet's
implicit support of the small or the lowly, of the underdog who finally asserts himself. It is a political poem in that it contains a statement of support for the struggles of the lowly person.

"On a Church Lawn" shows the heroism of dandelions; they are as brave as soldiers, this "dandelion cavalry, light little soldiers." Even though they are so light and powerless that they "baffle the wind," they surround a church and make their statement:

If you listen well, music won't have to happen. (CP, 14)

Then they disperse into the world to spread "their dandelion faith"; they proclaim "God is not big; He is right." The tone of the poem is evocative of "B. C."; in both poems we see the contrast between size and arrogance on the one hand, and the confident assertions of small, ostensibly powerless beings on the other.

In "Deerslayer's Campfire Talk," the poet talks of all these marvelous and intricate processes of nature that go unnoticed because we are so immersed in our ephemeral concerns. "The whole country stays by such dependable/sets and shoulders—which endure unnoted." He is full of admiration, not only for the beauty and complexity of these "small" things, but also for the quiet assertiveness of
"small" men:

Tribes, or any traveling people,
will have some who stoke the fire
or carry the needed supplies—but
they take few great positions; hardly
anyone cares about them.

(CP, 194)

Instead, the men who are celebrated in this world are the
loud men, the "talkers," "the one who/ do not care, just
so they take the center/ and call the plans."

Stafford feels a revulsion for this stance; he is
overwhelmed by tenderness for the small man. This in
itself is a political stance:

When I see these things, a part of my
mind goes quiet, and by a little turn
of my eyes I favor what helps, and ordinary
men, and that dim arch above us we seldom
regard, and—under us—the silent,
unnoted clasp of the rock.

(CP, 194)

To Stafford the eternity and stability of the earth is
linked with the silent strength of the lowly men, the men
who are genuine and essential, who perform necessary func-
tions but are nameless members of society. Stafford's
admiration and sympathy for the real and unpretentious,
and his moral recoil from the fake and meretricious, have
always struck me as being genuinely political stances. In
an often-quoted comment on "The Farm on the Great Plains,"
Stafford writes of his affinity for "an appearance of moral
commitment mixed with a deliberate—even a flaunted—non-sophistication." In the poem quoted above, we see evidence of both.

Another aspect of Stafford's poetry of statement is a habitual stance he takes, which is the stance of a pastor speaking out on behalf of his congregation. His congregation is all of mankind, and he speaks with the responsibility and authority of an involved human being. For want of a better term, I shall use the term "pastoral stance" to indicate the moral obligation that a poet like Stafford feels to speak out as the conscience of his community. I spoke earlier of the modern poet's desire "to testify to the degradation implicit in modern life" and to bear testimony to the significant events of his age. Stafford demonstrates this capacity, and it is an integral part of his poetry. He seems to be embodying Rilke's great comment that we should be able to feel the connection of the poet with his whole living generation.

When Stafford the poet also becomes Stafford the pastor, he is in good company indeed. The marked strain of public poetry in American literature begins with that most bardic of poets: Walt Whitman. Whitman's injunctions and curses, his urgent and hot-blooded asides, his prescriptions and formulae, his tone of intimacy with the reader, and above all his moral judgments make him in every
sense of the word a "committed" and a "political" poet. Stafford is more reticent and less bardic than Whitman, but the central impulse is the same. He most resembles Whitman when he rejects moral relativism and does not hesitate to make moral judgments. People are either good or bad because of what they do. Sublette, the reluctant hero of "In Sublette's Barn," is incapable of telling a lie; his eyes hold a level gaze; and his "fate was righteousness" (CP, 158). Bess, dying of cancer, lives with joy even though she is wracked with pain (CP, 152). Stafford celebrates the extraordinary heroism of the ordinary person: Bess is good because she is not egotistical and defeatist. Ishi, the last wild Indian, is a hero of another kind. Stafford praises him for his commitment to the wilderness, an attitude manifested in his stealth and concealment and in his ability to move through a wilderness without marking or defacing it in any way. Stafford's moral positions are clear and unambiguous, but he is not sacrificing complexity in the interest of a simplistic black-and-white vision. There is the greatest moral delicacy and tact in his poems but also ever-present ethical standards.

The key word in Stafford's poetry of statement is "responsibility," and this responsibility arises out of his concern with the way man is living, and the daily choices that he is making. In his introduction to the
Achievement of Brother Antoninus, a poet whose work he has edited and admired, Stafford writes:

We are accustomed today to accept for the duration of a literary experience all kinds of moral reversals, anti-universes, and ordinarily outrageous assumptions. . . .

However, a generation ago, or longer, an author was a sage, sometimes almost a prophet, a model of some kind. Brother Antoninus is in that tradition, and his poems take on a prophetic, oracular tone. What he presents, he presents as an insight, a truth, not merely as an exercise of the imagination. In his work, his voice is direct; he does not turn aside to flirt with fancies and baffling temporary allegiances; there is no Emperor of Ice Cream in his poetry, no Raven saying "Nevermore" to enhance a temporary feeling chosen for literary exercise. Brother Antoninus sets up to be a thinker and guide, a statesman of letters. His stance is that of responsibility.

The same attitude is present in Stafford's work, though Stafford himself is too understated and unpretentious ever to be "oracular."

The most famous illustration of Stafford's pastoral stance can be seen in his anthology piece "Traveling Through the Dark," a poem which for most readers is the most closely identifiable of Stafford's poems. The poem concerns a journey through the night culminating in the poet's discovery of a dead doe, the victim of a collision with an automobile. The theme is the confrontation between the wilderness, symbolized by the dead doe and her still warm fawn, and the encroaching technology, symbolized by the
invading and destroying automobile. The poet is thrown into the difficult position of making a choice: is he to leave the animal lying there, or is he to roll it "into the canyon"? The poet assumes responsibility for all of us, the poem swings into the collective sense, and the decision is made: he rolls her into the river. He has been guided by the most obvious of practical concerns: "to swerve might make more dead." But as he hesitates before taking action, he can hear the wilderness listen, and he realizes that the doe with its stillborn fawn is part of that larger life of Nature. The pastoral stance is made evident in the last stanza:

I thought hard for us all.  
(CP, 61)

In "Believer," he writes:

I am the one  
to live by the hum that shivers till the world can sing:  
May my voice hover and wait for fate,  
when the right note shakes everything.  
(CP, 123)

Continuing in the same pastoral vein, he writes in "A Farewell in Tumbleweed Time":

I'd hold out the unfinished years of our life  
and call for the steadfast rewards we were promised.  
I'd speak for all the converging days of our town.  
(CP, 124)
Sometimes Stafford addresses his audience as children, taking on the stance of a benevolent, wise old father. In the Imagistic poem "For the Grave of Daniel Boone," he writes:

children, we live in a barbwire time
but like to follow the old hands back—
the ring in the light, the knuckle, the palm,
all the way to Daniel Boone,
hunting our own kind of deepening home.
From the land that was his I heft this rock.

Here on his grave I put it down. (CP, 143)

The poet as pastor is compelled to make significant gestures on behalf of his congregation. Like any wise and loving father, he is full of apprehension for all of us caught in the tensions of a "barbwire time." This is a favorite image of Stafford's, and it conveys very well the confinement, unexpected brutality, and the tenuous quality of our lives.

In "Thinking for Berky" the poet's empathy and compassion for ill-fated Berky make him cry out for her safety:

Windiest nights, Berky, I have thought for you,
and no matter how lucky I've been I've touched wood.
There are things not solved in our town though tomorrow came:

*     *     *     *     *
We live in an occupied country, misunderstood;
justice will take us millions of intricate moves.  
(CP, 64)

"Occupied country" has the same emotive force as "barbwire
time": they have acquired the symbolic undertones of wars
and concentration camps.

In "Answerers," a poem from his most recent col­
lection Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People,
he talks of the responsibility of those who are alive:

We live
in place of the many who stir only
if we listen, only because the living
live and call out. I am ready
as all of us are who wake at night:
we become rooms for whatever almost
is. It speaks in us, trying. And even if
only by a note like this, we answer.  
(TTH, 13)

The watchful stance, "I am ready/ as all of us are who wake
at night," is that of a man sensitive to his communal respon­
sibilities. The lives of those who are dead, those who
died for us, take on a meaning only if we bestow this
meaning on them. Otherwise, their lives and deaths have
been in vain. We must answer; that is, we must be respon­
sive to the meaning of their lives.

The poet as pastor, oracle, or prophet has an obli­
gation not merely to observe dispassionately, but to make
moral judgments on the social or political landscape.
Stafford's poetry is alive with his indictments of the

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plastic values of modern-day America. His satire is scathing and acute, but his voice is never as shrill or strident as, say, Allen Ginsberg's. In Stafford's poetry the satire hits home with an economy and a restraint that we miss in the loud vituperations of some of his contemporaries. The violent rhetoric of the Beat poets is alien to Stafford's work. Lines such as the following:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,

from Ginsberg's Howl convey an anger at society that is too large to be contained by the words. The words seem to spill out of the poem into the streets and marketplaces and ghettos of America. Stafford is incapable of such howling. His voice is that of a reasonable and concerned citizen; he does not shout but his voice rings with a quiet authority that arises from his deeply felt positions. It is a mistake to think of Stafford's poetry as having less passion than the more overtly emotional verse of Ginsberg or Kenneth Patchen.

The satirist's vision is always divisive; the true satirist is acutely sensitive to the distance between the two worlds of the real and the ideal. Stafford's vision is too conciliatory to permit of a consistently satirical
point of view. Nevertheless, when the satire is present, it is incisive. Often it is directed at the invasion of small-town America by unscrupulous commercial interests. In "A Visit Home" the "town-men" bring their corrupt ways to disturb an idyllic society:

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

(CP, 33)

These slightly reptilian representatives of Progress (with a capital P) had cheated the poet's father in 1929. The poet contrasts their philosophy of expansion and expediency with the mature wisdom of "Dewey, Parrington, Veblen." His preference is clear.

Often, in the process of traveling and discovering America, the poet is dismayed by what he finds. In his long account of "The Move to California," the poet is unforgiving in his judgments:

Those who wear green glasses through Nevada
travel a ghastly road in unbelievable cars
and lose pale dollars
under violet hoods when they park at gambling houses.

(CP, 47)

The whole landscape is distorted by these tourists in green glasses; they violate the road by driving their "unbelievable cars," and when they lose money it is in the form of "pale
dollars." The cheapness and tawdriness of the tourist and gambling areas of Nevada fill him with disgust. He is impatient to escape from this contamination:

While the stars were watching
I crossed the Sierras in my old Dodge
letting the speedometer measure God's kindness,
and slept in the wilderness on the hard ground. (CP, 47)

There is something a little self-righteous in his assumption of an ascetic stance, but the polarity is unmistakable: the rotten underbelly of commercial America, the America of unnatural people and "pale dollars" is counterpoised by the cold, clean air of the Sierras and the lean men who embrace the rigors of the wilderness by sleeping on the hard ground.

In section six of the same poem, Stafford maintains his accusatory tone. He begins with a masterly aphorism: "Gasoline makes game scarce." What have we done to the American West? Stafford is pained by the decimated animal populations:

In Elko, Nevada, I remember a stuffed wildcat
someone had shot on Bing Crosby's ranch.

The same mindless commercialism has reduced these animals to the status of stuffed curios. Later in the poem, the poet prays for the survival of the remaining wilderness.
Every dodging animal carries my hope in Nevada.

(Stark, 47)

We have noticed earlier that there is a conspicuous absence of urban imagery in Stafford's poetry. One poem in which the cityscape does play a role is "Two Evenings." Stafford's gentle but probing irony works well here:

Counting the secretaries coming out of a building there were more people than purposes.

(Stark, 51)

In "Thinking for Berky" the incipient terror of urban life is evoked in images of fear:

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

(Stark, 64)

Stafford's indictment of the plastic values of the new America sometimes degenerates into a labored sarcasm. In "The Trip" he pokes fun at the denizens of a drive-in, where "Citizens were dining." He makes certain observations:

A waitress with eyes made up to be Eyes brought food spiced by the neon light.

* * * * *
Watching, we saw the manager greet people—hollow on the outside, some kind of solid veneer. (CP, 96)

Feeling the same recoil that he describes in "The Move to California," he embraces the rigors of the road "as a fierce thing welcomes the cold."

Two of the most overtly satirical poems in Stafford's Collected Poems are "A Documentary from America" and "The Star in the Hills." About the former, Paul Ramsey has written: "It is the poem of television and politics that everyone has intended to write; now it's been done." Lensing and Moran have called it "Stafford's best poem on the artificiality of modern life." The poem is the account of a political rally at which a Presidential candidate is going to give a speech. Stafford lays bare the hollowness of the whole political process; what lies beneath the vain posturings is a philosophy of manipulation of whole peoples. When the candidate arrives in town, "he had used up his voice, but he delivered a speech/written by a committee." The audience discovers that the television coverage has contrived to make them look like avid supporters. Later, the poet watches the rally on television. He satirizes commercials: "In the midst of a commercial we had democratically/elected and now found delivered forever on the screen." It is a powerful statement on the power that the media wield in our lives. The
commercial is interrupted so that an announcement can be made: "we had just won a war/ certified by experts to be correct," even though we know that for a man of Stafford's pacifist convictions, no war is ever correct. As the poet resumes watching the rally, he is interrupted by an interviewer who invades his motel:

"Oh God," we said, "we were watching us, watching us." And in a terrible voice he roared, "Quick, be smiling; you are on the air again!" and--a terrible thing--we said just as he said, "How do you do."

(CE, 128)

He has been manipulated and duped a second time; he has been forced into compliance. The poem is a powerful parable on the corrupt marriage of politics and the media.

"The Star in the Hills" is a comment on the absurdity of bureaucracies. Unlike Kafka's dark and morbid reflections on the subject, Stafford's is a humorous approach. The poem has a simple narrative framework. In this amusing little story, a star falls in the hills behind the poet's house. "Meteors have hit the world before, but this was near,/ and since TV." The official ruling on the matter is that since the state of California owns that land "any stars/ that come will be roped off and viewed on week days 8 to 5." A guard who is assigned to watch over the star is proud of his association with the government; he is both officious and naive when he tells the poet that he would
have to take an oath and have a clean record if he aspired
to the job. The poet playfully answers:

"I'd promise to be loyal to California
and to guard any stars that hit it," I said,
"or any place three miles out of shore,
unless the star was bigger than the state--
in which case I'd be loyal to it." (CP, 78)

The guard is not amused; the state will not tolerate such
heresy. "We are not amused." The poet makes a retraction
and presumably admits that nothing can ever be bigger than
the state. The poem is a good-natured examination of the
blind fatuousness of governments and of the men who per­
petuate its follies.

This survey of Stafford's poetry of statements shows
that the poet is very aware of his responsibility as a
human being to point out the brutal and dramatic tensions
that lurk beneath the surface of contemporary American life.
War, corruption, hypocrisy, political manipulation, mind­
less commercialism, the depredations of a plastic culture:
the poet does not avert his eyes from any of these. Are
we to conclude that Stafford's poetic vision is therefore
doomed to pessimism and bitterness? The answer is that,
quite to the contrary, instead of being defeated by what
he witnesses, the poet advocates a stoic retreat to a
reality that he has painstakingly created for himself. It
is a world in which he tries to live by the values that he

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has salvaged from his small-town boyhood, from his father, and from his idealized conceptions of American Indians. His poems are "poems of desperate retrenchment." His real desire is to "live definite, shock by shock."

There are two important aspects of Stafford's philosophy that account for the ultimate affirmation in his work. This is a cautious affirmation, but it nevertheless pervades his work. These two aspects are Stafford's adherence to the philosophy of meliorism and his affinity for the political beliefs of Edmund Burke. In a letter to me, Stafford comments: "Generally, I would say also that I am a meliorist, not an activist or push type of agitator. Though it is from a time back, and might seem strange to many now, my actual political insights link fairly closely to Edmund Burke." Meliorism is derived from the Latin word melior, meaning "better." The Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion defines it thus:

[it is] the doctrine that man, while incapable of perfection, is capable of an indefinitely extending series of improvements. This applies both to the individual man and to the race. It is difficult to locate the doctrine in the history of philosophy. It relates to the doctrine of human perfectibility.

This philosophy of hope and affirmation does not lead to a facile or shallow optimism. The poet is well
aware of the enemy; he knows the dangers we are up against. But he often projects into the future in hopeful terms. In "A Dedication," the industry of war and destruction invades the peace of a small town:

Freights on the edge of town were carrying away flatcars of steel to be made into secret guns; we knew, being human, that they were enemy guns. * * * * *

But tomorrow, you whispered, peace may flow over the land. (CP, 87)

In "Places That Will Be Saved," a poem from his latest collection, the poet is expectant and alert:

Sometimes a touch of wind passes ahead of time when the rock rolls down. The world and I go on.

Sometime the truth will come. (TTH, 11)

This is classic meliorist sentiment.

The other influence on Stafford's political thought is the philosophy of Edmund Burke. What is relevant to our study is Burke's belief that "society and state make possible the full realization of human potentiality, embody a common good, and represent a tacit or explicit agreement on norms and ends." Further, political participation should always "exclude aggressive self-interest and allow
expression of rational self-interest compatible with the
good of the whole." 49 What is the function of revolutionary
impulse in this scheme of things? "Social change is not
merely possible but inevitable and desirable. But the scope
and the role of thought operating as a reforming instrument
on society as a whole is limited." 50 It should not involve
"extensive interference with the stable, habitual life of
society." 51 The key concepts here are two. One, that we
must work toward a common good using methods that have been
agreed upon. Two, that blind, unthinking revolutionary
impulse, the impulse to make radical changes in a short
period of time, is destructive to the stability of society.
Everywhere in Stafford's poetry we have a sensitivity to
the common good:

Our duty is just a certain high kind of waiting;
beyond our hearing is the hearing of the community.
(CP, 88)

It is also clear that what he favors is not the "macho" code
or the "falsetto" violence of our revolutionary methods, but
a conciliatory and melioristic stance. Most of the time,
we are advised to wait rather than act upon hastily.

Who in America is presently writing political poetry?
For an answer, it will be instructive to compare the poli-
tical strain in Stafford's poetry with the sociopolitical
statements in the work of Kenneth Patchen, Allen Ginsberg,
and particularly of the brilliant polemicist Philip Levine. This is not the central tradition in the American poetry of the last fifty years, but that is because the poet is not viewed or accepted by the majority of the people as a public figure with a public voice. The poets I mention above have dared to make this assertion. They are in recoil from the confessional mode of poetry as practiced by Sexton, Plath, and Berryman. As Louis Simpson writes:

For some time American poets have been writing almost exclusively about their personal lives. We have become accustomed to poets' telling us what they are doing and thinking at the moment. The present moment is everything—there is no sense of the past. Nor is there any sense of a community. If poetry is the language of a tribe, it seems there is no longer a tribe, only a number of individuals who are writing a personal diary or trying to "expand their consciousness."^52

William Stafford would probably agree with him wholeheartedly. He would also concur when Simpson states: "It seems, however, that we are coming to an end of a period. After the life studies, the case histories ... We are tired of looking in mirrors. Every year there is a new style in personalities. Everyone exhibits himself, we try to draw attention to ourselves ... and soon, what does it matter? No one is listening."^53 A poet like Stafford rejects this ego-centered playing with mirrors; he wants to address himself to the human condition and
write about the infinitely complex texture of our lives.

This has always been an urgent concern of the European poet. In Neruda, the passion and the politics cannot ever be separated:

You are going to ask: and where are the lilacs?
and the poppy-petalled metaphysics?

* * * * *

Treacherous generals:
see my dead house
look at broken Spain:
from every house burning metal flows
instead of flowers

* * * * *

Come and see the blood
in the streets!
("I'm Explaining a Few Things")

The same declamatory tone and evocation of horror is seen in Andrei Voznesensky's justly celebrated "Goya":

I am Goya!
The enemy flew like ravens over my appalling field: picked out my eye sockets.
I am sorrow.
I am war's own voice, I am cities fired in the storms of nineteen-forty-one.
I am hunger-horror.

There is nothing like this in contemporary American poetry, but some of our poets do make a serious attempt to convey the same compressed sense of horror. Here is Louis Simpson
(a naturalized American) and his "A Story About Chicken Soup":

In the ruins of Berchtesgaden
A child with yellow hair
Ran out of a doorway.

A German girl-child--
Cuckoo, all skin and bones--
Not even enough to make chicken soup.
She sat by the stream and smiled.

Then as we splashed in the sun
She laughed at us.
We had killed her mechanical brothers,
So we forgave her.

This bitter and mocking intensity of tone is lacking in Stafford; as he himself says, his constant movement is toward the redemptive or the salvational stance, away from bitterness and self-hatred. Of such a poem, we can rightly say that history is an ever-present unnamed, unseen, but powerful character; so that the poem is about an emaciated German girl but also about history, waiting in the wings. Stafford shows a similar heightened awareness of history.

As in the poetry of Stafford, the real protagonist of Allen Ginsberg's poems is America itself, "the greatest poem of all." Using the technique of a passionate spewing forth of lists, or cataloguing à la Whitman, Ginsberg writes of Greyhound Bus stations, supermarkets in California, drug-crazed blacks, railroad journeys, jails, jazz, butchers,
and bombs. It is a desperate attempt to grasp the essence of America:

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.

* * * * *

America when will we end the human war?

* * * * *

America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your clothes?
When will you look at yourself through the grave?

* * * * *

America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?
("America")

Stafford, unlike Ginsberg, does not write poems to be declaimed or proclaimed. He lacks the "prophetic fervour." When he tries to get at the essence of America, it is usually through a recapitulation of his idyllic Midwestern childhood, or by emphasizing the validity of an ever-diminishing wilderness. His search for America is also a search for the concrete and an impatience with false or inessential things:

Mine was a Midwest home—you can keep your world.
Plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.
We sang hymns in the house; the roof was near God.

(CP, 29)
The prophetic voice pervades the work of Kenneth Patchen, whose poetry has often reminded critics of the visionary and prophetic books of Blake. Again, like Blake, he is consumed by a vision of a new world that must be ushered in when our present world is gone. He is consistently rhetorical:

O pity the backward ape who has no flute, who has no Christ,
who has no civilization and no poison gas to protect it with;
pity those in asylums whose fists cannot reach faces to smash;
pity the dead for their weight is not measured in military pounds ("The Hunted City")

The helplessness, rage, and frustration of the little man caught in the State's machinery are the same emotions that the soldier in Randall Jarrell's "Death of a Ball-Turret Gunner" must have felt when they washed him out with a hose. Stafford, too, feels overwhelmed by compassion and support for the little men, the quiet men, the unostentatious men, but he is not capable of Patchen's declamatory power.

Another characteristic of Patchen's work is his apocalyptic cataloguing:

And that city where the innocents were mercifully slaughtered
And that grace of walk which puts birds singing between a man's thighs
And that far-heralded feast where girl children were raped and eaten.  
("The Journal of Albion Moonlight")

This method stands and falls on the power of the individual images and is just as likely to fail under the weight of a belabored image. The theme of the apocalypse is present in Stafford's work, but not the apocalyptic technique.

Finally, we can briefly consider the political poetry of Philip Levine, a poet who shows some affinity with Stafford. In a recent issue of Life magazine, Levine admits to his political leanings: "My aim has been to write for the people for whom there are no poems. It's also partly a reaction against the extraordinary elitism of poets I read, like Pound and Eliot. . . . Working people don't read poetry. It's too bad. I am very political, and I write poetry to change things." In my opinion, Levine is the most successful "committed poet" we have writing today; that is, his politics seem to grow naturally out of his blue-collar, urban boyhood in Detroit and always seem to be an integral part of his poetry. He admires characters who have tenacity, who rebel, or who strike out against confining circumstances. The prize-fighter, Baby Villon, is one such character. Even though he stands "116 pounds, five feet two/ No bigger than a girl," he has endured a lifetime of loss, deprivation, prejudice, and pain, to come out on top:
Everywhere and at all times, and he fights back. 
("Baby Villon")

There is the man in "By Animals, By Men, and By Machines" who has been mangled in a motorcycle wreck. There is something inside him, "something/ which is his and has never been touched--/ not even by the horn in his eye, or the slug smearing out half his teeth and mangling his tongue." This undefeated core of him enables him to survive; when the doctors "pass him from hand/ to hand," he can be found "singing that he was born." In the much anthologized "To P.L.," the woman in the poem finds a dead man, strips him of his boots and his knife, and crawls away. Levine does not indulge in useless sentimentality, but the position is clear: he is for life against death, for everything that promotes and sustains life.

In an interview with Irv Broughton, Levine praises the letters of Keats for their "incredible awareness of the world he lived in, its injustices, its passions, its pains." (Interestingly enough, Keats's poetry does not show the same awareness.) The same awareness can be detected in Levine's own work--he speaks of the dispossessed, the pathetic, and the lost, of the convict in "Heaven" who built "a network of golden ladders" so that a canary he found "could roam/ on all levels of the room"; of the midget in "The Midget" who boasts and brags of his power
and sings for the poet; and of nameless factory workers, unemployed auto mechanics, impoverished Jews and angry blacks. Levine is one of our few urban prophets: he looks upon the valley of junked cars, rusting iron, and graveyards and feels impelled to speak with anger and compassion.

His long poem "Silent in America" begins with an epigraph from Whitman: "Vivas for those who have failed."

His panoramic eye takes in the whole sweep of the country, and he weeps:

For a black man whose name I have forgotten who danced all night at Chevy Gear & Axle,
for that great stunned Pole who laughed when he called me Jew Boy, for the ugly who had no chance, the beautiful in body, the used and the unused, those who had courage and those who quit.

His compassion is all-encompassing and reminds me strongly of Stafford's benevolent vision. Stafford too is moved by the slow learner in class in "A Gesture Toward an Unfound Renaissance":

There was the slow girl in art class, less able to say where our lessons led: we learned so fast she could not follow us. But at the door each day I looked back at her rich distress, knowing almost enough to find a better art inside the lesson.

(CP, 154)
He mourns for Bess, dying of cancer; he remembers Althea, forgotten for a while in his home town, while the poet sought "cities, glory"; in "Monuments for a Friendly Girl at a Tenth-Grade Party," he addresses an old schoolfriend, Ruth, now dead, "serving among the natives of Garden City,/ Kansas." Both Levine and Stafford recoil from the meretricious and false; they have no patience with titles and class snobberies. Just as Levine celebrates the unknown and unsung black man of "Silent in America," Stafford consoles the dead Ruth:

Ruth, over the horizon your friends eat foreign chaff and have addresses like titles, but for you the crows and hawks patrol the old river. May they never forsake you.

( CP, 153)

It seems to me that Levine is a master of the surreal and apocalyptic image. I think that "They Feed They Lion" is one of the most powerful, compressed, apocalyptic visions of America that we have had in American poetry in the last twenty years:

Out of burlaps sacks, out of bearing butter, Out of black bean and wet slate bread, Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar, Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies.

They Lion grow.

This is not just the mythical beast of the Apocalypse,
Yeats's monster "slouching towards Bethlehem," but the emblem of a vast urban anguish and rage, specifically the rage of the dispossessed Blacks:

From the oak turned to a wall, they Lion,
From they sack and they belly opened
And all that was hidden burning on the oil-stained earth
They feed They Lion and he comes.

This Lion is growing day by day, feeding on the "grey hills/ of industrial barns," on "pig balls," on "the reeds of shovels," till finally he will be ready to devour. The black dialectical locutions in "they feed they lion," and the references to black life--burlaps sacks, black beans, tar, and creosote--locate the lion as being an apocalyptic symbol of Black deliverance.

In contrast, Stafford's vision of apocalypse is more muted, less deafening, less terrifying:

Summer will rise till the houses fear;
Street will hear underground streams;
purple, the banished color, will flare.
This is the town where the vine will come.

When no one is watching the candleflame
this is the town where the wind will come.

The whirlwind of destruction will destroy and purify, just as the Lion of rage will deliver us from our miseries.

Lion, vine, wind: both poets make use of the familiar
Biblical symbols of apocalypse.

Finally, we can look at the pastoral voice in Levine's poetry. He too will sing out for other people; like Stafford, he too will assume a stance of social responsibility. But his voice is more genuinely bardic and lyrical than Stafford's; he takes greater risks, and as a consequence he often soars:

And I, I am the silent riser in a house of garrulous children. I am Fresno's dumb bard, America's last hope, sheep in sheep's clothing. Who names the past name me, who sleeps by my side shall find despair and happiness . . .

*     *     *     *     *

I am everything that is dishonest, everything under the sun.
("Silent in America")

This passionate identification with humanity is pervasive in Stafford as well, but here a distinction can be made. Levine's hard, uncompromising verse is not always written from a meliorist viewpoint. He cannot see evidence for the infinite improvement in our capacity to grow, love, and learn. Instead he says with a defiant fury:

And I say "balls"
The time will never come
nor ripeness be all.
("Silent in America")

Platitudes do not suffice in a world distorted by human misery.

In conclusion, it is clear that both Stafford and Levine use statements, implied and explicit, in their poetry, and that in the truest sense of the word they are essentially political poets. It is also evident that Levine's is the more abrasive and aggressive of the two voices.

My intention in this chapter was to explore the sociopolitical landscape of Stafford's poetry and see his poems in the light of a comment he recently made: "I think of myself as political... [because of] my assumption that my thought and action always have multiple social effects." It is a mistake to categorize Stafford as a simplistic nature poet, a bard of the Northwestern wilderness, a singer of the Midwestern prairies, or as a latter-day Wordsworthian figure singing his paeans to the glory of mountains, lakes, and trees. He is all this and more, much more. His is a voice, alert and aware of the historical circumstances that surround us. He is sensitive to the encroachments of the machine on our already imperiled individualism. He believes in the collective existence. Only a poet with a highly developed sense of social reality
could write a poem like "Certain Cities":

In windows now we see it, our
city, with soldiers springing up.

But everywhere, bayonets or wheatfields,
all are subject under a wind,
velvet under the hot sun,
pressed flat without thought,
soft under a big, smooth, stroking hand.

Signs of warfare mushroom around us, and we are all ephemeral and naked, exposed to the wind and the hot sun. Elsewhere, out of sight, and without regard for all of us who are "pressed flat without thought," Power is insinuating itself into our lives. "The big, smooth, stroking hand" can alter our lives, destroy our destinies. In more than one sense, "our lives are an amnesty given to us."
CHAPTER IV—NOTES


2. Letter from Stafford to me, dated 1 July 1980.


15. Stepanchev, p. 3.


21. Lewis, p. 5.

22. Lewis, p. 196.


27. Berthoff, p. 47.

28. Letter from Stafford to me, dated 8 February 1981.

29. Letter from Stafford to me, dated 1 July 1980.

30. Letter from Stafford to me, dated 17 March 1980.

31. Letter from Stafford to me, dated 1 July 1980.


33. Lofsness, p. 103.

34. Lofsness, p. 103.

35. Lofsness, p. 103.

37. Mersmann, p. 111.


46. Letter from Stafford to me, dated 1 July 1980.


53. Simpson, p. 332.


56. Letter from Stafford to me, dated 1 July 1980.

CHAPTER V

ALLEGIANCES AND CONNECTIONS: SOME THEMATIC PATTERNS

The most significant theme in the work of William Stafford is the theme of the interconnectedness of all forms of life. The poet makes it clear that these connections are so vital and imperative that our survival depends on them. The connections between human beings are expressed in the sustaining relationships of family, region, and country, and, more important, in our sense of a communal existence. The connections between man and the wilderness, often tenuous and brutally interrupted, become the subject of our ecological, and even of our religious, concerns. The message is unambiguous: individual man, societal man, and the surrounding wilderness are linked so integrally in a web of connections that we can disturb this balance only at peril to ourselves.

This responsiveness to the interdependence of Man, Society, and Cosmos arises from a specific orientation on the part of the poet. Robert Bly, quoting the psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck, calls this orientation "Gott-natur" (the holy-nature) and describes it as being "an additional
energy" within the poet which impels him to bring all of  
creation inside his art. Thus the poet would move from  
specifically and "merely" human interests towards an explora-
tion of this "holy nature" within all living things. Bly  
points out that "what results is a calmness."2 Bly's  
observations seem to be very relevant to Stafford's work  
because of the latter's insistence on the immersion of man  
in communal relationships, as well as in the complex web  
of nature. It is also true that Stafford's poetry seems  
to emerge not out of frenzy but out of calmness. When  
Cynthia Lofsness asked Stafford in the course of an inter-
view whether he could talk of "any pattern of ideas recur-
rning" in his work, Stafford replied: "Well, one of the  
elements is not a pattern of ideas, but a feeling of one-
ness or a feeling of being at home. It's like the delight  
of having shelter in a storm or it's like the feeling of  
becoming oriented where you've been temporarily disoriented  
. . . or something like that."3 This sure sense of security  
and stability arises out of Stafford's recognition of his  
place in the web and of his dependence on it.

In general, Stafford's thematic concerns are the  
great ponderable ones: the transforming power of the ima-
gination, the sustaining value of love, the destructive  
power of war and of modern technology, the tragedy of a  
shrinking wilderness overwhelmed by the encroachments of
man, and finally, mutability, terror, and the mystery of the "unknowable infinite." He broods on the history of the American Indians and reminds us of the lessons we may derive from their lives. He celebrates the memory of his father, who remains the central human figure in his poems. He is shaken by nostalgia as he looks back at his boyhood in the Midwest, at his schoolmates, friends, sweethearts, relatives. As Paul Ramsey writes: "He speaks of many relevant things in his poems, but he keeps returning to some things: to childhood, to the land, to the stretch of memory and the mysterious blankness of time, to American mixings of the permanent, the local, and the transient." By far the best statement about his thematic concerns has been made by Stafford himself. In an interview with Sam Bradley, he said that the discernible themes in his work were: "our daily lives, feelings, thoughts, friendships, actions, impulses, analyzed impressions of holiness, and whatever. And these are our guides for whichever religion, principle, world-policy, and whatever, that we hold. These things, as I say in the poem 'Our People,' are 'clenched in their own lived story.'"5

"Unanalyzed impressions of holiness": this holiness (a Wordsworthian concept) inheres in the harmonious internal arrangements of nature. The poet sees it only in flashes but is nevertheless reverential. Into this well-ordered
wilderness steps the disrupting agent: man. Stafford is unequivocal in his indictment of man's blindness to the delicate balance of nature. Thus, the conflict between the wilderness and civilization is one of the pervasive themes in his poetry. Stafford's ecological concerns are passionate and sincere; he is genuinely disturbed by the loss of the wilderness. As he writes in "Doubt on the Great Divide": "Mountains that thundered promises now say something small" (CP, 126).

The first realization that we are forced to make is that we are part of an ecological web. The evidence for these connections is all around us. Consider the muted violence and the commonplace incidents of "Ceremony." Presumably while on a fishing trip, the poet is bitten on the third finger of his left hand by a muskrat. "The mangled hand made the water red." Watching his blood swirl and mingle with the water, he sees the incident as a symbolic marriage between man and the elements of nature; he knows that his blood will eventually reach the ocean, permeate the land, and touch the "roots":

That was something the ocean would remember:
I saw me in the current flowing through the land.
rolling, touching roots, the world incarnadined,
and the river richer by a kind of marriage.
(CP, 30)

The Shakespearean echoes of "incarnadined" and the conceit
in "a kind of marriage" give the verse a density of texture. Meanwhile all of the wilderness seems to be participating in this marriage: an owl quavers in the distance, and the muskrat is still trembling from the encounter. The poet concludes:

In that river my blood flowed on.

This is a statement about the mystical communion with nature that Stafford experiences.

Some of the interconnections in nature, as any biologist knows, are extremely complex and subtle. "Connections" tries to map the complicated affinities between the various elements of the wilderness and the human observer:

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

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

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

And if we purify the pond, the lilies die. \(\text{(CP, 53)}\)

The poem is significant because of the theme of connections that it exemplifies and also because it is one
of Stafford's most delicately lyrical attempts. There are three discrete elements in the poem: the pond covered with water-lilies, the raccoon, and the human observer, "we."

The inquisitive raccoon enters this marshy landscape and thrusts his hand into the pond to look for "tendrils/ that will hold it all together." He is searching for the unifying principle, the key to the mystery. But this mystery cannot be penetrated: "No touch can find that thread, it is too small." The raccoon fails. But the raccoon himself is a mystery to the human onlooker: his face is a mask, his actions ambiguous, his smile enigmatic. The poem plays with the idea of surfaces versus hidden reality; the pond has a surface and an under-surface, and the raccoon has two faces. The poet realizes that he can "know" the wilderness only in flashes, momentary visions, or small signs. As he says wittily: "a sneeze may glimpse us Paradise." It is not possible to penetrate the surface of the wilderness at will; this is as futile as the raccoon's forceful thrust into the pond. The lessons are two-fold: one cannot "force" one's human presence on the wilderness and expect to unlock its secrets; and the elements of the wilderness are so closely meshed that interfering with one can jeopardize the harmony of the whole.

George Lensing argues that the poem demonstrates that "the separateness of the three elements of life is absolute"
and that "this separation must remain." I disagree. I think that the poem is concerned with a mutual interdependence between the elements that is complete and should be left complete. Taking out any element or manipulating it will end in irrevocable disaster. There is an almost religious sense of the mysterious cross-currents and undercurrents of life, and a sense of wonder that such a finely balanced mechanism could be set into working. Overriding it all is the sense of the fragility and vulnerability of these connections.

The imperilled wilderness is also the subject of "Islands," a poem from one of his recent collections (Stories That Could Be True, 1977). Stafford insists that our actions have effects that we may never see. He writes of islands so remote that no one can ever find them, of "islands you desecrate/ even by thinking them--/ so delicately they cling/ to their thin horizon." With overt sarcasm he lashes out at people "who rule by forgetting islands," but he warns us in ominous tones: "one should never neglect/ anything, anything" (CP, 21). It is not a very successful poem, but the point it makes is emphatically clear.

In "Witness," the poet's hand becomes the agent of reconciliation between man and wilderness:

This is the hand I dipped in the Missouri
above Council Bluffs and found the springs.
All through the days of my life I escort
this hand.

Later he climbs on to a rock and spreads his fingers to
"hold the world in the wind." Exploring the cliffs, he
comes across an old cave where men had once lived. As he
digs in the dirt of the cave, he feels the thrill of con­
nections with his long-vanished ancestors. The hand
searches for history and enables him to make leaps in
time. The hand reaches cautiously toward the future:

I will reach
carefully, eagerly through that rain, at the end--

Toward whatever is there, with this royal hand.
(CP, 242)

Sometimes desecration of the wilderness moves the
poet to adopt the stance of a scolding pastor, and the
verse becomes trite and prosy:

My own people, now listen--if we fail
all the trees in the forest will cease
to exist, or only their ghosts will stand
there fooling everyone. The wind will
pretend and the mountains will step back,
through their miles of drenching fake rain.
(CP, 6)

If we fail in our obligations, we will be surrounded by an
artificial wilderness "with fake rain." The sentiment is
genuine, but the metaphor of the fake forest is too obvious
to be poetically interesting.
In the poems that deal with the confrontation between the wilderness and civilization, Stafford is most successful when the anger that moves him to make an indictment is blended with, and softened by, an elegiac mood. In "The Fish Counter at Bonneville," the poet hits home with a forceful statement:

Downstream they have killed the river and built a dam.

The staccato rhythms of the poem emphasize the mechanical savagery of the act: "a turbine strides high poles to spit its flame/ at this flume going down." The poem suddenly moves into a gentler, more introspective mood:

A spot glows white where an old man looks on at the ghosts of the game in the flickering twilight—deep dumb shapes that glide.

(CP, 43)

"Ghosts of the game": presumably, once this landscape was alive with wildlife; the elegiac mood is dominant as we visualize the twilight of the wilderness, the end of the cycle for these "deep dumb" creatures. The poet then makes a connection between the decimated animal populations and the vanished Indian tribes. "Ghosts of the game" could refer to either. The invasion by the dam has altered the natural and human landscape at Bonneville, and the poet mourns the loss of "So many Chinook souls, so many Silver-side."
The polarity between urban society and the rural wilderness is constantly nagging at our consciences; on the one hand is the miraculous hush of the canoe wilderness where:

branches wait for winter;
   every leaf concentrates; a drop from the paddle falls.
Up through water at the dip of a falling leaf
to the sky's drop of light or the smell of another star
fish in the lake leap arcs of realization,
hard fins prying out from the dark below.  
(CP, 96)

All the senses of the poet are almost preternaturally attuned to the wilderness; together with the fish, he too is making "arcs of realization." Every element in this environment--leaf, water, sky, star, fish--follows a pre-ordained pattern. (We also have here an example of the use of detail which is so "dear" to the poet.) On the other hand, far away, out of sight, are the machinations of witty society. We feel the poet's tremendous distance from it:

Often in society when the talk turns witty you think of that place, and can't polarize at all: it would be a kind of treason. The land fans in your head

   canyon by canyon; steep roads diverge.
Representing far places you stand in the room, all that you know merely a weight in the weather.  
(CP, 96)
The landscape that he has known is too complex and rich for "witty" talk; it is too large ("The land fans in your head"); and finally it simply is—that is, it makes a statement by just existing. It does not require man's validation or his theorizing.

The discrepancy between polite society and a distant reality is again the subject of "Vacation." The poem is Imagistic in method and terse in style. When he is deeply moved, Stafford instinctively moves toward understatement rather than toward angry denunciation. The poem begins with the poet participating in the games of polite society, but as he bows to pour coffee for an unnamed companion, he immediately makes a mental leap to the huddled figures of Indians, who are consistently seen as the victims of history:

Three Indians in the scouring drouth
huddle at a grave scooped in the gravel,
lean to the wind as our train goes by.
Someone is gone.
There is dust on everything in Nevada.

I pour the cream.  

The heat, the dust, the figures huddled at a grave, and their pathetic vulnerability as they "lean in the wind": all these images have been triggered by the word "bow" in the first line: "One scene as I bow to pour her coffee."
The result is an uneasiness, a kind of niggling
dissatisfaction with our social selves.

Stafford is moved not just by the conflict between society and the wilderness in general terms, but specifically by the unfair battle being daily fought between progress and technology on the one hand and an increasingly frail environment on the other. "At the Salt Marsh" depicts the poet as a troubled hunter, questioning his motives, and looking for self-justification as he participates in a duck shoot:

Those teal with traveling wings
had done nothing to us but they were meat
and we waited for them with killer guns
in the blind deceitful in the rain.

(PP, 31)

The trajectory of their destruction has been determined by the hunters; there is no escape. The birds fall with the inevitability of rain:

They flew so arrowy till when they fell
where the dead grass bent flat and wet.

Later, while examining a duck head, the poet wonders "how broken parts can be wrong but true." The birds are dead—that is a fact and is true. But is it wrong?

There is no question about the moral stance the poet adopts in "Boom Town." Once, at the edge of his hometown, the darkness was alive with snakes. (For Stafford, as for Lawrence, the snake does not carry connotations of
malignancy or evil; instead it is admired for being clever, stealthy, and "kingly." Then the oil-drilling companies moved in and "every beat fell through a snake,/ quivering to the end." The elegiac mood is again evident:

the snakes, forgetting away through the grass, had all closed their slim mouths.  

(CP, 48)

It is abundantly clear that the poet believes in the sanctity of the connections between man and the wilderness. In this respect Stafford is solidly in the tradition of the Romantics poets. However, it is a mistake to think of Stafford as a dewy-eyed naif or a simple-minded worshipper of nature. His concept of nature is more complex, more "dark." Sometimes nature is unexpectedly hostile:

A wildcat sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July when he was cutting plum bushes for fuel.  

(CP, 29)

There is an evocation of natural forces, lurking in the wings, waiting to spring on unwary man. There is little doubt that nature can be "red in tooth and claw." In "Chickens the Weasel Killed," the violence is explicit, as we read about the weasel that fastens on the throat of a chicken. Often nature is neither beneficent not hostile; it is impartial in its favors. Most often, however, the
wilderness is inscrutable. Its workings are enveloped in mystery. It resists all our efforts to "read" it. When the government in "A Survey" invades the wilderness in order to "map that country," there is swift retaliation: "the river surged at night/ and ripped the map in two" (CP, 35). The same sense of mystery is evoked in the lyrical "In the Deep Channel." Laying out fishing lines in the dark, the poet would sense the presence of a "secret-headed channel cat":

Eyes that were still eyes in the rush of darkness, flowing feelers noncommittal and black, and hidden in the fins those rasping bone daggers, with one spiking upward on its back. (CP, 31)

Stafford is successful in evoking the sense of a "living" wilderness.

This perception of the unknowable wilderness has the effect of making men huddle for security and comfort. When confronted with the mystery of the universe, they respond with fear and awe. Patrick Kelley, a nephew of William Stafford, has written an engaging account of the legends and rituals which dominated their family in rural Kansas. He writes:

I have already mentioned the legend of the land beyond the towns. I have said that it was a dark place, and this darkness is important. It was not the darkness of evil, but that of nature. Beyond the towns was
country where men again became frail animals. Cut off from society, men had to grope for understandings of their place in the natural world. To those who could learn nature's terms, and accept them, it was a place of great beauty.

Some of the same sense of awe at the continental amplitude of the land, as well as a realization of the necessity for human community, can be seen throughout Stafford's work.

The urgent need for fulfilling human connections is expressed in the many poems addressed to the poet's father, to his schoolfriends, and to long-lost sweethearts. Family traditions are lovingly recounted and analyzed. "The Rescued Year" portrays the rich sense of rootedness in a region, and the stability and joy of the family; in spite of the fact that the Depression has deprived most families of their livelihood, there is still room for meaningful ritual:

That Christmas Mother made paper presents; we colored them with crayons and hung up a tumbleweed for a tree. (CP, 117)

In Chapter III, I have discussed the full significance of the human landscape of the past as it appears in Stafford's poetry. Here I am trying to emphasize the importance of the societal web as a sustaining force in our lives. The word "allegiance" comes up in this context, for it is the poet's allegiance, or commitment, to the
past, to the preservation of the wilderness, and to a
canmon existence that is the chief thematic concern of at
least two of his collections: The Rescued Year (1966) and
Allegiances (1970), just as the theme of connections
between man and the wilderness had been the focus of West
of Your City (1960) and Traveling Through the Dark (1962).

"The Farm on the Great Plains" is a poem about the
most impossible of all our journeys: our journey to the
past self that we have left behind. Discussing the poem
briefly, Stafford writes: "And the things here--plains,
farm, home, winter, lavished all over the page--these
command my allegiance in a way that is beyond my power to
analyze at the moment." His affinity is consistently for
the authentic aspects of our existence; he has no patience
with heroes and with talk:

It is a 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.

(3P, 193)

He contrasts these "real things," that is, the commonplace
truths by which we conduct our daily lives, with the lure
of the exotic and faraway: "elves, goblins, trolls, and
spiders." But "once we have tasted far streams," we
yearn to return to the familiar and the known. These
allegiances keep one sane and balanced while an "insane
wind" blows about one's ears:

we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love
where we are, sturdy for common things.

(CP, 193)

Is Stafford a religious poet, or a poet with largely
religious themes? This is a question that has often in­
trigued students of his poetry, and it seems to be a very
natural query. Given Stafford's benevolent vision, his
reverence for the created world and his insistence on the
salvational stance, it is tempting to assume a deeply rele­
gious motive on his part. After all, as Patrick Kelley
reminds us, when Stafford was growing up, the religion
that pervaded the small towns of the Midwest was a "simpler
kind of Christianity."9 "The family took the Bible at its
word, believed in it, and practiced its teachings."10
Elsewhere we are told of Stafford's Quaker background.
However, nowhere in his poetry can I detect any trace of
religious orthodoxy. God does appear in many of his poems
but in a tantalizingly ambiguous way. The Christianity
of his boyhood seems to have left him with a clear standard
of decent behavior, but this is not to imply that he is a
Christian poet.

Stafford has often discussed the significance of
"God" in his poetry. In an interview published in Prairie
Schooner, Stafford was asked why the word "God" occurred
so frequently in his poetry. Stafford replied:

Does it come up so often? If so, it could be because I'm slovenly and can't really get it all said, so I just decide to short circuit this way. I don't wish to deny religion, or a religious feeling, but neither do I seek it.

In other words, "the terminology of religion becomes sort of a metaphor." 12

In another interview, published in the Sam Houston Literary Review, Stafford was asked whether God was involved in his quest for the "final truths." Stafford's reply was characteristic: "I don't presume to know what I'm doing. I mean, language is full of emergencies and the term God helps you pass some of them." 13 He continues: "it's a reference to the concept of greater power," 14 and "a handy concept." 15 He uses an analogy to explain his tentative approach:

I suppose an ocean would have to conceptualize a shore in order to have a place to stop, and I think human beings are like that. So far as I am concerned, I am out in the middle of the ocean and I haven't seen the shore. 16

Above all, Stafford is not a dogmatic poet. Dogma of any kind is anathema to him. As he says:

I have been identified sometimes as a religious poet or a writer of religious poems. And that seems all right to me. On the other hand, if I try to be as much on the level as possible,
I have to say that orthodoxy of any kind is something that I just don't have any kind of feeling about at all. I don't even feel enough committed to deny it.

Accepting the fact that Stafford denies religious orthodoxy, we are still confronted with a number of poems that include references to God. Sometimes "God" is identified as a gigantic force and an awesome power that pervades the universe. "The Tillamook Burn" introduces us to an Old Testament God, a God of fury and destruction:

These mountains have heard God;
they burned for weeks. He spoke
in a tongue of flame from sawmill trash
and you can read His word down to the rock.

* * * * *

Inland along the canyons . . .
trees too dead to fall till again He speaks,
Mowing the criss-cross trees and the listening peaks.  

This is both a stern God and a God of the apocalypse speaking in a "tongue of flame."

There is a marked pantheistic strain in Stafford's poetry, that is, a recognition that God often manifests himself as a natural force or a vast energy. This energy animates the wilderness:

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 boat crew,
but the river surged at night
and ripped the map in two.

(CP, 35-36)

In a series of philosophical meditations entitled
"Following the Markings of Dag Hammarskjöld," Stafford
links God with the mysterious otherness of nature. (We
have already examined the concept of the otherness of
nature in Chapters II and III.) God is not merely indif-
ferent to, but even hostile to, human concerns:

God is never sure He has found
the right grass. It never forgets Him.
My mother in a dream dreamed
this place, where storms drown
down or where God makes it arch to mountains,
flood with winter, stare upward at His
eye that freezes people, His zero breath
their death.

(CP, 138)

God is awesome physical energy; he is the spirit of storms
and mountains and winter. His baleful eye "freezes people."
Stafford goes on to state that "God never notices opposi-
tion," so all our efforts to stave off the cold are puny
and doomed to failure. The "cold," as we have examined in
Chapter III, is a metaphor for the inhuman aspects of our
environment, those that are inimical to our lives. The
last stanza concludes:

Warm human representatives may vote and
manage man; but last the blizzard will dignify
the walker, the storm hack trees to cyclone
groves, he catch the snow, his brave eye
become commands, the whole night howl against
his ear, till found by dawn he
reach out to God no trembling hand.

(CP, 138)

The opposition here is between the "warm human representa­
tives," those social institutions which sustain us, and
the loneliness of the searching man who is a "walker"
trapped in a storm. "God" is again the agent of furious
destruction: he presides over blizzards, cyclones, and
howling night winds. When this walker is found in the
morning, he is dead and can no longer reach out even a
"trembling hand" to God.

An important aspect of the Staffordian "God" is
that He is often identified as the harmonizing principle
in the universe. Some force is maintaining order and grace
in the natural world; it may as well be God. This God
creates a distinction between the hidden or "deep" meaning
of the world, and the surface contours that we see. He
is the God of the double vision, of the "bi-focal" glance.
As we are told in "Bi-focal,"

So, the world happens twice--
one what we see it as;
second it legends itself
deep, the way it is.

(CP, 48)

These legends are the stories that God is telling:
History is a story God is telling
by means of hidden meanings written closely
inside the skins of things.

(CP, 144)

The "skins" are the appearances of things, and the hidden meanings have been "written," that is, deliberately created and ordered. "Sophocles Says," the poem quoted above, is remarkably close in content and imagery to "The Tillamook Burn." Here, too, man is seen as a vulnerable wanderer, suffering, touched by "the kind of dark/ that anything sent from God experiences." Here, too, man's path toward his "home" is as definite as a snowflake's patterned rendezvous with the ground.

Perhaps Stafford comes closest to a kind of religious mysticism when he feels his spirit united with the spirit of the wilderness. In "Ceremony" (CP, 30), a poem I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the "marriage" that he envisions between his blood and the water in the river carries with it full religious undertones. It is the expression of a spiritual yearning to enter into the harmony of the cosmos. In poem after poem he conveys the power of a brooding spirit in the natural world, as well as a healing and beneficent one. The resultant joy and exhilaration may well be defined as part of a religious experience.

"A Walk in the Country" describes a transcendental
experience evoked in religious terms:

I felt a burden of silver come:
my back had caught moonlight
pouring through the trees like money.

That walk was late, though.
Late, I gently came into town,
and a terrible thing had happened:
the world, wide, unbearably bright,
had leaped on me. I carried mountains.

This is similar to the "oceanic experience" that the psychologist Abraham Maslow has written of; it is a moment of cosmic unity and a feeling of being suspended in time. In other words, an archetypal mystic experience.

The presence of God in Stafford's poetry leads quite naturally to the theme of the apocalypse. Given our sense of being overwhelmed by the events of history, and our fear of imminent nuclear annihilation, it is no wonder that this is a dominant theme in the poetry of many post-World War II poets such as Robert Lowell, James Wright, Robert Bly, and Allen Ginsberg. Stafford has a number of poems that portend the end of the world. "The End of the Man Experiment" is a narrative poem in the Imagistic mold. It tells the story of a "great wind" that lived in the North ("north," being associated with the cold, is therefore emblematic of death) and created a whole kingdom of ice and snow. This is the wind of the destructive apocalypse, the "whirlwind" of the Old Testament, and when it is
through with its furious ragings across the world, nothing is left to inhabit the barren expanse,

Till only the level wind
lived in that land,
the whole bowed world
one storm.  

(TTH, 15)

This echoes the famous Frostian dilemma: "Some say the world will end in ice/ some say in fire."

"The Epitaph Ending in And" is another expression of the apocalyptic stance:

In the last storm, when hawks blast upward and a dove is driven into the grass, its broken wings a delicate design, the air between wracked thin where it stretched before,

* * * * *

this will be good as an epitaph:

Doves did not know where to fly, and

(CP, 127)

The deliberately incomplete last line implies that the destruction that was imminent has overtaken the dove and abruptly cut off its existence. The poem is full of traditional emblems of the Apocalypse such as the war-like hawk and the gentle dove. The verbs convey the compressed violence of the imagery: the hawks "blasted" upwards, the dove "driven" into the grass, the air "wracked" thin. It
is as though the earth could not have survived one more ounce of pressure: the air that is stretched taut is going to boomerang outward with all the force of its long-repressed energy. We get an impression of the destructive eddies swirling around in this "last storm."

"At the Bomb Testing Site" presents a post-apocalyptic panorama. This is the stillness after the storm:

There was just a continent without much on it under a sky that never cared less. (CP, 41)

The panting lizard, its "hands gripped hard on the desert," is confronted by an indifferent continent and an indifferent sky. The "change" it is waiting for will never arrive: we are now at "the flute end of consequences" where all movement, all action, and all change are equally irrelevant.

Not all apocalypses are destructive; occasionally Stafford depicts a joyful world that has emerged from the ashes of apocalyptic destruction. "From the Gradual Grass," a poem highly praised for its syntactical complexity and its moving lyrical quality, is an example of a constructive apocalypse:

Imagine a voice calling, 
"There is a voice now calling,"
or maybe a blasting cry:
"Walls are falling!" as it makes walls be falling.
Then from the gradual grass,
too serious to be only noise—
whatever it is grass makes,
making words, a voice:
"Destruction is ending; this voice

"Is promising quiet: silence
by lasting forever grows to sound
endlessly from the world's end
promising, calling."
Imagine. That voice is calling.  
(CP, 98)

This poem, which Paul Ramsey has called "One of the few
great lyrics of this century," is an expression of the poet's hope that once the "blasting cry" and the "falling walls" of the apocalypse are behind us, the natural rhythms can assert themselves again and we can have a peace without end. The poem also exemplifies the Romantic faith in the power of the Imagination: if we imagine a voice crying for peace or promising the end of destruction, then we will indeed witness peace and the end of destruction. By the end of the poem we no longer have to imagine anything: that voice is actually calling out to us.

Ultimately the poet's vocation is to try to "find what the world is trying to be." When Cynthia Lofsness questioned Stafford about his commitments or allegiances "to the human family, to civilization," Stafford replied:

... the book doesn't say commitments,
it just says Allegiances, and this is more like something that comes naturally to a
person ... it's like feeling at home in the world. ... I do feel at home in the world ... it's like assuming good will on the part of other people ... I tend to do that. It's like a kind of level look at every day's experience as it comes at you and welcoming it. I feel that ... you know ... not alienation, not resentment, or rebellion, but a kind of acceptance and even a hopeful acceptance that enjoys being part of the human family.

The operative word here is "hopeful"; even his vision of the Apocalypse can be carried past the destruction by his hopes for a final harmony. There is hardly another poet writing today who is more sane, more rooted to "real things," and, finally, more charitable than Stafford. The secret lies in his clearly chosen allegiances and in his "accepting stance." As he writes in the impassioned ecological polemic of "At Home on Earth":

In the world where what is outside man extends into mystery, awe, worship, respect, reverence—poetry, the stance that accepts, may be salvational.20

This attitude lies at the heart of Stafford's humanity.
CHAPTER V--NOTES


2. Bly, p. 3.


5. Sam Bradley, "Reciprocity vs. Suicide: An Interview with William Stafford," Trace, 46 (Summer 1962), p. 223.


12. Turco and Fitzgerald, p. 130.


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CHAPTER VI

POETRY AS PROCESS:
CONSIDERATIONS OF STYLE

The truth is that every piece of work is a realization, fragmentary but complete in itself, of our individuality; and this kind of realization is the sole and painful way we have of getting the particular experience—no wonder, then, that the process is attended by surprises.

Thomas Mann

The feel of composition is more important than any rule or prescribed form.

William Stafford

William Stafford is the high priest of the tentative. In content and in form, his stance is consistently exploratory. Throughout his career, both in his poetry and in his criticism, he has tirelessly repeated what to him is the first principle of poetic activity: poetry is not the finished product that one sees; it is the process of finding the words to communicate one's intellectual and emotional responses to a situation. Poetry is a movement towards a synthesis; it is a groping forward towards a resolution. It is an encounter with language arising out of an encounter
with the world. It does not have to conform to any preconceived notions of technique or form. This is not to imply that Stafford himself follows the bizarre, disjunctive rhythms of much of our modern poetry, or that he is advocating anarchy with respect to form. He happily uses all kinds of verse forms and rhythms from the casual rhythms of free verse to the tightly controlled cadences of a sonnet. What Stafford does emphasize is a "kind of readiness to accept and use the feel of the language." This readiness makes the writer most receptive to all the impulses that will flow from his encounter with an experience.

It is well worth our while to examine Stafford's numerous statements on the necessity of being open-minded and tentative in the context of a poetic encounter. They are revealing of his mind-set and his poetic method. In an interview with Sanford Pinsker, reprinted in Stafford's collection of essays entitled Writing the Australian Crawl, Stafford insists that every poem is an "experiment," "an exploration," and "a discovery of process." He says:

I don't see writing as a communication of something already discovered, as "truths" already known. Rather, I see writing as a job of experiment. It's like any discovery job. You don't know what's going to happen until you try it . . . I certainly had the feeling of going out at the end of Traveling Through the Dark, of leaving things on an open-ended note."
This open-ended feeling in many of Stafford's poems arises from his belief that to decide on one's poetic aims beforehand is to show signs of arrogance. As he says in an interview published in *Crazy Horse*: "For one thing I don't know what I'm trying to achieve. I just write and find out what happens." He readily admits to charges of naivety because "the contrary attitude of feeling that you have solved things beforehand seems a false stance. That is, what unfolds from time cannot be anticipated and the naive stance toward it is the only realistic stance to take. You don't know what's going to happen. Nobody does."

Stafford's basic belief about the composition of poetry is that language is not just the medium for expressing ideas that have already been conceptualized, but a process through which ideas, content, and form crystallize into the complete poem. The crystallizing will take place if we are receptive to the process, that is, if we are "willing to start letting it happen."

What, then, is the importance of technique in Stafford's work? If technique implies a set of prescribed rules and a framework into which the poet must fit his impressions, then Stafford does not believe in technique. In the interview with Cynthia Lofsness, he says:

When I'm writing, I'm not at all trying
to fit in any forms, though I think it's easy to do . . . it's not a technique, it's a kind of stance to take towards experience, or an attitude to take . . . That seems important to me, but technique is something I believe I would like to avoid.

It would be easy to confuse this refusal to accept rigid concepts of technique with the free-form verse of the Beatnik poets or the projective verse of the Black Mountain School of poetry. The Beatniks went back to William Blake in their emphasis on the instantaneous impression and the holiness of the moment. They wrote impassioned poetry out of immediate experience and did not show much appreciation for the qualities most prized by the New Critics: ambiguity, irony, tension, and paradox.

The Projectivist poets like Charles Olson and Robert Creeley have formulated an elaborate poetic theory based on physiological responses (the breath-conditioned line) as well as the pure consciousness produced by Zen Buddhism. Projective verse or Field Composition is influenced by two poetic theories: Ezra Pound's decision to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome," and William Carlos Williams' to write verse in "variable feet." For Olson, all regular meter contributes to a "closed poetry"; the lines of varying length and the unusual placing of words on a page that characterize his projective verse are signs of a poetic liberation.
Ultimately projective verse is the child of the organic form preached by Emerson and practiced by Whitman a hundred years ago. In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote: "The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush." The organic form of a poem is thus determined by the mind, heart, and consciousness of the poet at that moment in time. Stafford does not approve of pre-conceived notions of technique, but he does not make the error of supposing that there is any such thing as a formless poem. All poems have form, even the most hysterically discursive and longwinded polemics of Allen Ginsberg. What Stafford does believe is that in all our insistence on meter, technique, and form, we may lose the immediacy of contact with the experience that we wish to write about: "It is far better to stay right close to that experience as you go along, instead of learning a technique and imposing it on an experience that you have given yourself in order to be a poet." Since Stafford believes that immersion in the particular experience is necessary, it is only natural that he repeatedly compares the act of writing to swimming and to fishing. This implies that writing also involves a visceral response, an engagement of all the senses. (It
is consistent with Stafford's unpretentious stance that he would use the homely, commonplace metaphors of swimming and fishing while discussing his critical theories. He is incapable of ivory-tower theorizing.) Intuition and instinct also play a significant part in the process. In his article "Writing the Australian Crawl," he develops his analogy further:

> Just as any reasonable person who looks at water, and passes a hand through it, can see that it would not hold a person up; so it is the judgment of commonsense people that reliance on the weak material of students' experiences cannot possibly sustain a work of literature. But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any pre-judgments about the specific gravity of the topic—will result in creative progress. Writers are persons who write; swimmers are... persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence.

I have quoted this passage in such detail because it seems to contain most of Stafford's seminal ideas on the composition of poetry. The most important step is to relax and rid the mind of preconceptions; the act of writing a poem then becomes akin to meditation, for meditation also demands the emptying of the mind as a precondition. Stafford has told us that his poems begin with simple words or "aimless" clauses that lead by a "natural dog-paddling"
technique to phrases and impressions that result in a poem. The second observation he makes involves ideas and sound patterns. Stafford insists that all people, "even the 'shallowest,' do have ideas; ideas spring from motion, and the mind is always in motion." The writer's duty is to move instinctively with this free flow of ideas, not resist it. As he is propelled by the medium, he may find the relevant ideas crystallizing in his consciousness.

In an interview published in Sam Houston Literary Review, Stafford further developed the comparison between swimming and writing:

You're going through an element that non-swimmers or non-writers think must be full of intuitions or electric shocks, or something to propel you forward. No, no, there's something there. It's a kind of feeling about language; you get a . . . I think the swimmers call it the . . . well, I forget what they call it, but their stroke begins to get just right in the water. Swimming is a headlong kind of motion through a medium that some people wouldn't recognize. But it'll hold you up if you recognize it.

The poet emphasizes the importance of ease with the poetic material; the process involves a kind of surrender to the experience and a strict withholding of judgments. Stafford does not write glibly or with no concern for form. Instead, he says, he has "total concern." But this concern for form is not isolated from the total process; concern
for form is integrated with concern for diction, development of ideas, images, and so forth. "The process of doing a poem is much more one-hundred percent involvement than being alert to rhyme."  

Another metaphor that Stafford uses to explain the process of composition is that of fishing. Fishing is like meditation: it involves a receptiveness to the flux of events, an immersion in the present, and a Zen-like concentration. Describing his own method, Stafford writes: "I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window, and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble— and this is where receptivity comes in. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me . . . the possibilities are endless." Elsewhere he compares making a poem with "starting a car on ice"—a tricky business requiring full concentration. To use a cliché, in both situations it is imperative to "get a feel of the situation." Whatever the analogy he employs, the conclusion is the same: a poem has an organic shape that rises out of the poet's encounter with an experience, the process of composition has its own internal logic that is ineffable and should not be tampered with, and concern with form is inextricably bound with concern for content.

Poetry, then, is a process, and interfering with or denying this process is to commit what for him is the
ultimate sin: the sin of perverse pride. There are several poems that deal with the denial of process in our everyday lives. "It is the Time You Think" carries an indictment (implied, of course) of all those thinkers who put their faith in the faculty of reason as a guide in human conduct:

Dead to process, alive only to ends,  
Such are the thinkers around me, the logical ones. (CP, 55)

These rationalists want to force their theoretical framework on the reality that surrounds them. The poet wants to live differently:

I am too local a creature to take the truth unless and until by God it happens to me.

He will not "take the truth"; that is, he will not force a realization, but wait till he is overtaken by it.

Another example of Stafford's disapproval of the "thinkers" mentioned above is "Deerslayer's Campfire Talk" in which he contrasts the "tribes, or any traveling people" who live an essential life but "take few great positions" with the inveterate planners who destroy the naturalness of the process. The simple people, the tribes, move in harmony with the natural world and, like the rocks and mountains of their landscape, "endure unnoted." In contrast, Stafford deplores the tendency to "call the plans" too rigidly and too far ahead:
Wherever I go they quote people who talk too much, the ones who do not care, just so they take the center and call the plans.

(EP, 194)

"An Epiphany" is concerned with the same subject:

You thinkers, prisoners of what will work:
a dog ran by me in the street one night, its path met by its feet in quick unthought.

(EP, 182)

The implication is that the dog is completely faithful to the demands of natural process; the more profitable way of doing things is to do them "in quick unthought," without too much ratiocination.

The poems quoted above can be seen as parables not only about our daily lives, but also about the act of creating a poem. They are metaphorical accounts of the creative process. "Watching the Jet Planes Dive" is built around the metaphor of a trail. The trail represents the movement towards self-discovery. The poem emphasizes the importance of randomness, doubt, and flexibility in this forward movement:

We must go back with noses and the palms of our hands, and climb over the map in far places, everywhere, and lie down whenever there is doubt and sleep there. If roads are unconnected we must make a path, no matter how far it is, or how lowly we arrive.

(EP, 42)
Our openness to chance encounters and our ability to change our plans and improvise will aid us in poetry, as in life.

Stafford's is a poetry of genuine unostentation. This is not a question of false modesty. His unostentation is not a pose or a convenient attitude to adopt. It is integral to his personality and his work. His poetry does not dazzle us with verbal fireworks; and, as he himself says, his poetry is not meant to be declaimed or shouted from the rooftops, but to be read. He does not adopt the role of a homespun philosopher spouting small-town clichés. Instead, his is the voice of an educated man, reasonable, not arrogant, concerned, sometimes a trifle self-righteous, but on the whole remarkably sane. This unostentation in Stafford's style arises from his fundamental belief that the language of poetry should closely approximate the patterns of everyday speech.

The concept of fidelity to realistic patterns of speech is so widely accepted and practiced today that it is easy to forget that seventy years ago it was at the heart of a revolution in poetry. Modern poetry may not have started with the Imagists, but their influence on its later course is uncontestable. One of their major aims was to simplify the overwrought language of poetry and bring the rhythms of the marketplace into the rarefied air of the
drawingrooms where poetry had hitherto been confined. Robert Frost was one of the most extraordinary exemplars of this attempt to create a distinctive American idiom. His poetry introduces us to colloquial diction (and to a discerning use of dialect and dialogue), as well as to straightforward syntax. But he still keeps to the traditional framework of iambic meter and refuses to make a faddish use of free verse. Stafford's poetry has been strongly influenced by Frost and shows some of the same characteristics.

Stafford's unostentation, which he admits is almost a "flaunted nonsophistication," is also reflected in his belief that the language of poetry is very close to everyday talk. In the Prairie Schooner interview, he was asked whether poetry was literature or "an act of self-discovery." His reply is pertinent to our discussion: "To me poetry is talk that is enhanced a little bit. It's a linguistic thing rather than something larger." He denies our insistence on inborn poetic talent:

People keep saying that there must be the inborn talent. My own feeling is that every person I've ever met who could talk, could write. Writing is just paying attention to what occurs to you; what occurs to everybody.

Later on, in the same interview, he repeats his point: "... writing is very much like talking. It's easy.
We’re all adept at talking. But many of us have been stampeded into believing there’s some huge threshold to be surmounted before we can cross into writing.” Stafford is arguing for “a reduction of apprehension” about this process of moving from speech to poetry. He has often said that there is no such thing as writer’s block for him; he can write every day and he does. What is required is the readiness to wait for chance encounters with experience.

Stafford’s plain style, which is not as plain as it appears to be, emerges from a combination of many factors. There is the use of a simple vocabulary which is completely adequate for the poetic ends that it serves. As Stafford says, his is “the language we all use every day and forgive each other for.” There are the running sentence rhythms which approximate the rhythms of everyday speech. There are the references to archetypal American characters and places. There is finally the question of “voice” in poetry. Stafford admits to widely eclectic influences, ranging from Robert Frost to Robinson Jeffers, but the greatest influence on the sound patterns in his poetry has been his mother. He has written: "The influence I feel when I write, the voice I hear most clearly is that of my mother. . . . I don't really hear the voice of T. S. Eliot very much.” He explained this statement in the interview with Cynthia Lofsness:
when I notice little turns of speech, and attitudes towards events and people, I sense the presence of my mother's nature and her way of talking and a certain kind of not very assertive, but nevertheless, tenaciously, noncommittal judgmental element that was in her. Not to assert very much, but on the other hand, to assert what she felt.

This mixture of stubbornness and quiet dignity can be seen in much of Stafford's poetry.

Stafford's unostentatious style has its roots, first of all, in his deliberate choice of a simple vocabulary and a colloquial diction. In this respect, he reminds one most strongly of the poetry of Robert Frost. Both Frost and Eliot emphasized the use of natural speech and Frost called it "the most important things I know." This tonal quality in Frost prompted Robert Newdick to comment: "Frost has addressed himself for forty-odd years primarily to the fundamental problems involved in capturing in poetry the full range of tones in the speech of living men and women." This conveys the superficial impression that Frost's style is simply a matter of technical effects. However, no pattern of technical devices alone can account for the particular quality of a poet's style, for in the final analysis style and content cannot be profitably separated: "The style, then, is not distinct from the content of poetry; rather it is that part of a poem where
we see the meaning reflected in and symbolized by the
details of language." This link between style and
meaning is even more pronounced in a poet like Stafford
who obviously views poetry as a process in which the
technique arises out of a particular encounter with the
language.

The colloquial diction is pervasive and is one of
the chief characteristics of Stafford's poetry. John
Lauber calls the diction "remarkably 'pure': that is,
nontechnical and unspecialized, neither highbrow nor low-
brow, neither aggressively contemporary nor 'literary'
and conventional. In other words, central. Not the
language that educated people should speak, but the
language one wishes they spoke." This colloquial diction
should not be confused with the use of dialect; there are
no regional locutions in Stafford's work. Instead, he makes
use of a bare, often prosy Standard English. Here is an
example of his use of colloquial diction:

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

(CP, 52)

This conversational effect (indeed, the poet often
seems to be engaged in an intimate but serious conversation
with the reader) most obviously stems from the absence of a complicated or "literary" vocabulary. There is also the absence of obscure references to ancient myths and legends and the lack of any desire to appear erudite. Further, the conversational effect is heightened by the use of commonplace transitional phrases which keep the narrative line moving smoothly.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,

* * * * *

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail

* * * * *

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy

* * * * *

For it is important that awake people be awake. (CP, 52)

The transitional devices "For," "And as," "And so," "For it is" are completely traditional and common in patterns of everyday speech.

"A Visit Home" demonstrates the same conversational quality:

In my sixties I will buy a hat
and wear it as my father did.
At the corner of Central and Main.

* * * * *

But at the door of the library I'll lean my cane
The poetic surface is full of humble details, and the result is a perfect naturalness of rhythm.

One of Stafford's best-known poems, "Traveling Through the Dark," shows the strong influence of Robert Frost's colloquial diction. Charles Greiner, in his analysis of the style of the poem, compares it to Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and to "Mending Wall." In all three poems, some unexpected event set in the wilderness (or the countryside) triggers a meditation that is apparently perfectly simple and accessible, but is actually terse, compressed with meaning, and multivalent. Greiner thinks that the conversational tone is even more believable in Stafford's poetry, for the poet is truly at our own level and is not maintaining the stance of the wise old man or the prophet, dispensing his hard-earned wisdom to a crowd of the uninitiated. Greiner feels that Whitman, Frost, and Sandburg, three masters of the conversational style in poetry, "always seem to be great shadow-shapes hovering over their poems." Stafford makes his presence in the poem less obtrusive. This is consistent with Stafford's well-known affinity for understatement. He is constantly suspicious of "rhetoric," of rigid positions too strongly held and too loudly
proclaimed. Instead, he shows a readiness "to be the quiet of the land." The result is a style that can be called "minimum," for it combines economy of words with concreteness of imagery. The words are pared, but the resulting aesthetic surface is not dull or flat. There is the ever-present lyrical impulse operating beneath the surface, which gives rise to an extraordinary range and variety of images. The hard, bare, and matter-of-fact style corresponds to the ideal of an ascetic "minimum living" that is advocated in "In Response to a Question":

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

(CP, 75)

Throughout Stafford's poetry the central unit of measure is the line, and the style therefore depends on the various manipulations of the sentence rhythm. This technique differs radically from that of a poet like Hayden Carruth (to cite an example), in whose work the phrase and not the sentence would be the focus of the rhythm. In "This Decoration," Carruth writes:

Blue light, morning
glory color, driven
through green fir boughs,
bright as crow-caw
on the next to last day
of October.
The phrases are controlling the rhythm, just as in another poem by the same poet the rhythm is dominated by adjectives piled on top of each other, twisting the images into strange shapes:

Once more by the brook the alder leaves turn mauve, bronze, violet, beautiful after the green of crude summer; galled black stems, pithy, tangled, twist in the flesh-colored vines of wild cyclamen.

In contrast, Stafford's verse shows a highly dramatic use of various sentence rhythms:

There is a place behind our hill so real it makes me turn my head, no matter. There in the last thicket lies the cornered cat saved by its claws, now ready to spend all there is left of the wilderness, embracing its blood.

(CP, 122)

There is a smooth-flowing continuity of rhythm and a marked use of the comma to connect phrases and clauses. The use of the sentence as the fundamental unit of composition enables the poet to control the forward movement of the poem. In the poem quoted above, "There" flows without interruption into "in the last thicket"; the result is a sense of natural motion. Again, in the famous opening lines of "Traveling Through the Dark,"

Traveling through the dark I found a deer dead on the edge of the Wilson River Road,
the poet uses inversion of syntax ("deer dead" rather than "dead deer") to create suspense and emphasis.

Variety of sentence length is another technical device often found in Stafford. This variety arises from the juxtaposition of sentences of unequal length. The result is emphasis and dramatic tension. In "Answerers," a poem from his latest collection, Stafford begins with a precise statement, followed by a long, rambling, and meditative sentence:

There are songs too wide for sound. There are quiet places where something stopped for a long time ago and the days began to open their mouths toward nothing but the sky. (TTH, 13)

The slow contemplative rhythms convey a sense of the "unfolding" days and also a sense of vast stretches of time and space. The rhythms evoke eternity.

In "Our City is Guarded by Automatic Rockets," one long and winding sentence occupies the length of the stanza and is abruptly brought to a stop by a shorter sentence:

Bough touching bough, touching . . . till the shore,
a lake, an undecided river, and a lake again saddling the divide: a world that won't be wise and let alone, but instead is found outside by little channels, linked by chance, not storm; and then when once we're sure we have a guide it fades away toward the opposite end of the road from home--the world goes wrong in order to have revenge.
Our lives are an amnesty given us. (CP, 121)

The last, brief, chilling statement catches our attention instantly and reverberates in our minds with all of its aphoristic power. This passage also shows a characteristic Stafford technique of using phrases and clauses punctuated with commas and semi-colons to construct a stanza-length sentence, even when the presence of disparate ideas merit division into separate sentences.

Thus, in Stafford as in Frost part of the conversational tone arises from the use of sentences in irregular lines. It also arises from the looseness of the rhythms themselves: "They tend to be roundabout and vague in syntactical connection, since in conversation the speaker cannot attend too closely to matters of syntax."^24 There are numerous asides, the use of the dash as punctuation, and various rambling locutions; in "The Woman at Banff," we have a bemused Stafford telling an interesting tale:

While she was talking the trees above signalled—"Few," and the rock back of them—"Cold."
And while she was talking a moose—huge, black—Swam that river and faded off winterward

Up toward the Saskatchewan. (CP, 73)

The qualifiers "cold," "huge," "black" arrest the precipitate
forward movement of the verse and heighten the narrative effect.

The dramatic juxtaposition of long sentences with brief and compressed ones often gives rise to an interesting emotional effect. For want of a more precise terminology, I will use the word "epiphany" to describe the sudden moment of revelation or transfiguration that arrives at the end of several of these poems. This concept in poetry is no different from the prose epiphanies of James Joyce, or the moments of muted shock at the end of some of Katherine Mansfield's stories. The epiphany, stripped of its more obvious religious connotations, is a moment of profound synthesis. It is the central moment of the experience of the poem; the point at which all the elements of the poem coalesce into a significant revelation. The epiphany is not an explicit statement but it carries within it the cumulative significance of all the statements of the poem.

The epiphany depends on imaginative leaps and muted shock. The use of the epiphany can be seen in the poetry of many of Stafford's contemporaries. James Wright is one such poet. His most famous poem, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," begins with a dreamy, half-conscious meditation on the part of the poet. He watches the landscape in its minute details:
bronze butterfly, black trunk, horses, pines, chicken hawk. The reader has been given no warning for what follows: the poet's reverie is abruptly cut short by a recognition that touches him to the quick:

I have wasted my life.

The reader is first drawn into the poem by the accumulation of graceful images and then abruptly confronted with the epiphany. Timing is all important: the epiphanic technique works best in poems of less than average length. The epiphany itself, the source for the revelation, remains shrouded in mystery. Louis Simpson, who has himself used the method, has emphasized this element of the irrational and mysterious: "The elements of the image, however disparate they may be, have been brought together and fused in the depths, so that when the image comes to the surface we cannot perceive the separate elements or the manner of their joining." 25 "Vacation" juxtaposes the niceties of a social setting and the intimacy of a tête-à-tête, with the bitter reality of the dispossessed American Indians:

One scene as I bow to pour her coffee:--

Three Indians in the scouring drouth huddle at a grave scooped in the gravel, lean to the wind as our train goes by. Someone is gone. There is dust on everything in Nevada.

I pour the cream.  

(CP, 39)
The epiphanic leap takes place right at the beginning when the poet moves from what seems to be a polite drawingroom setting to the austere, uncompromising image of the huddled Indians. This seemingly illogical leap proceeds from an emotional association between "bow" and the image of the bent Indians.

In "Late at Night" the poet draws the reader into observing the nocturnal journeys of geese, their yelps, their faltering motion, their sweeping V-formations. Here we have a mediating link between the exposition at the beginning and the epiphany at the end. The shock of the recognition is softened:

Were they lost up there in the night?  
They always knew the way, we thought.  
You looked at me across the room:—  
We live in a terrible season.  

(CP, 86)

Even before we reach the chilling last line, we know that the geese are not the only creatures that are lost; we too always thought we knew the way, only to wake up and find ourselves lost.

"Fall Wind" is an excellent illustration of Stafford's use of epiphany:

Pods of summer crowd around the door;  
I take them in the autumn of my hands.
Last night I heard the first cold wind outside; the wind blew soft, and yet I shiver twice:

Once for thin walls, once for the sound of time. (CP, 95)

The seeming non-sequitur at the end transforms the poem and drives home the metaphysical significance of "autumn," "cold wind," and "thin walls." The Imagistic leap from "pods of summer" to "autumn of my hands" to "thin walls" to "sound of time" results in a painful knowledge of human transience. "The sound of time" is the recognition of our mortality.

Elsewhere, the epiphanic leap can result in a deeply felt pathos. In "Strokes" we hear of a paralyzed old woman:

The left side of her world is gone--the rest sustained by memory and a realization: There are still the children.

Going down our porch steps her pastor calls back: "We are proud of her recovery and there is a chiropractor up in Galesburg. . . ."

The birthdays of the old require such candles. (CP, 121)

The false comfort provided by the pastor and the details of the chiropractor in Galesburg cannot avert the pathos of the epiphany. The last sentence expresses all the inevitability, weariness, and sheer misery of old age.
The use of the epiphany is quite similar to the use of the conceit; they both carry with them a certain amount of risk, for there is always the possibility that dissimilar and unexpectedly coupled elements can lead to incongruity or disproportion. One remembers Dr. Johnson's definition of a conceit (in the Metaphysical sense of the word): "The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." When these witty and novel comparisons work, they greatly add to the verbal complexity of the poem. There is an occasional use of conceits in Stafford's poetry. "The Last Friend" is reminiscent of John Donne, especially in its metaphysical correspondence between "death" and "wedding." The bride hurrying to her moment of rapture (her union with her bridegroom) is also the poor body rushing to meet death in a final consummation:

A long romance curves down toward that marriage--
a radiant virus, a processional fever.
Hear the peals of reunion in the broken hearted aged!

Somewhere in a hall, hear the bride hurry toward a meeting of rapture to which all are
hidden--
poor body, poor lover, in one grave buried. (CP, 89)

The conceit of the marriage between body and death is well sustained: witness the oxymorons in "radiant virus" and "processional fever." The rapture of death is accessible
to all; all are bidden to this wedding feast. But the body, the lover of death, must finally confront the grave. The comparison is triumphantly sustained through the three stanzas, and the use of such conceits is ample proof that Stafford is capable of great complexity when called upon to do so.

The conceit, when inadequately developed, can fall short of its intended purpose. In "Answerers," Stafford writes:

I am ready
as all of us are who wake at night:
we become rooms for whatever almost
is. . . .

(TTH, 13)

The comparison between the vigilant "answerers" and "rooms" hinges on the idea of containment, and is neither as jarring (and therefore arresting) as some of Donne's conceits nor as fully developed. The result is triteness.

The typical method of surrealism involves the accumulation of images in a dazzling and unusual display. Thus the French poet Louis Aragon writes in "I Shall Devise for You the Rose":

I shall devise for you the rose beneath the porch
Of lovers who have no other bed but their arms
The rose at the heart of figures of stone dead
without confession
The rose of the peasant blown up by a mine in his field
The crimson scent of a discovered letter

* * * *

The rendez-vous to which no one has come

An army in flight on a day of high wind
A mother's step in front of a prison

A man's song at siesta time under the olive trees

trees.

The images are concrete but disparate; the connections have to be made in the reader's mind. In the hands of an inferior poet, this surrealist method of piling up images could lead to a specious "image for image's sake" kind of mentality. The finished product is often obscure, even incomprehensible.

Louis Simpson, a poet who greatly respects Stafford and feels a poetic affinity with him, has written a short essay entitled "To Make Words Disappear" in which he criticizes the surrealist technique:

A poem will move from one moment of intensity to another, and there will be a connection. This, I suppose, is where I part company with surrealism and with some of my contemporaries—they don't care about the connection, don't feel a need to get a narrative line in their work. They seem to think that it is enough to say that they are having a feeling—but they do not try to convey it in an image or a narrative line.

Stafford avoids the use of the surrealist trick of dazzling the reader with an accumulation of startling
images. Instead, his chief concern is to express the emotion in a narrative line. When he does use the surrealistic method, he is usually successful. In the autobiographical "Mornings," the leaps from image to image are consistent with the laws of association:

Can't the world see humility--my trance, my face, the sober and steady spokes of my bicycle? Many drive in piety and for the faith an old car. Bishops in garages care, and presbyters at the bank judge us--all that our shoes and their crossed laces confess; angels behind the counter inquire the name and send it up the dizzying tube. . . .

(CP, 188)

This is highly reminiscent of Neruda's earlier exercises in surrealism:

I have conquered the angel of dream, he of woe and allegory: his effort was tireless, his packed footstep comes wrapped in snails and cigars, marine, perfumed with sharp fruit.

Stafford inserts his surrealistic imagery in the middle of a longer poem which contains an exposition. Hence he avoids obscurity.

In a poet like Stafford who makes sentence rhythm the pivot of his composition, the narrative line is of obvious importance. But Stafford is not merely an adept practitioner of the narrative line; he is also a master of
the narrative method in poetry. By this I mean that his first impulse is to tell a story, create a fable, or construct an allegory: he is an inveterate storyteller.

"Narrative" may be defined as the "imparting to the reader a human event in time," and nearly all of Stafford's poems, even the briefest ones, have some kind of narrative sub-structure. This ensures that the reader is carried forward by the movement in the poem itself. It also makes for a poetry that is more concrete than abstract, since a story will invariably be founded on the use of at least some details: details of place, of time, or of character. Raymond Benoit has argued that the major trend in American poetry today is towards the concrete and that "truth is a matter of the whole person living his life at this time and in these circumstances, and it is not a matter of eternal mind." Donald Hall has called it the "poetry of experience" in contrast to a poetry of abstraction. The concreteness is very much part of the power of "One Home":

Mine was a Midwest home—you can keep your world. Plain black hats rose the thoughts that made our code. We sang hymns in the house; the roof was near God. The light bulb that hung in the pantry made a wan light, but we could read by it the names of preserves—outside, the buffalo grass, and the wind in the night. 

(CP, 29)
The scene provokes all our senses: we hear the hymns, see the small circle of light in the pantry, visualize the jars and bottles of preserves, and sense the loneliness of the prairie beyond the small towns.

Lack of concreteness leads to the boredom of abstraction, and abstraction, as Robert Bly reminds us, is a flight from true "inwardness" into "the efficient intellect." Some of Stafford's least memorable poems show a complete absence of physical objects. There is no trace of specificity, as in the following lines:

Freedom is not following a river.
Freedom is following a river, though, if you want to.
It is deciding now by what happens now.

(CP, 239)

This is not only not poetry; it is not good prose either, but merely a descent into banality.

Generally, however, Stafford is quite successful in his use of narrative methods in poetry. Some of the best examples are "Traveling Through the Dark," "A Stared Story," "A Survey," "Ceremony," "The Animal That Drank Up Sound," and "Elegy." In a conversation with the poet Richard Hugo, Stafford discussed the use of "childish invention" (Hugo's words) in a poem such as "One Home." Hugo felt that the line "before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky" is a "highly imaginative
explanation of how limits occur.29 Stafford agrees:

Well, yeah, but even in that poem it's almost as if I'm saying "And furthermore. . . ." They tell me a story, and it gets really wild—wildcat after grandpa . . . on the Fourth of July . . . before the Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky. When they told me those stories, they turned into really great stories.30

Two narrative influences are working on the poet: the oral traditions of small-town America, traditions which must have been especially rich when the poet was growing up before the advent of television and the mass media; and the impulse to prolong a story ("And furthermore. . . .") by the addition of improbable but fascinating details. This ability to tell a story well is clearly not limited to professional writers. Stafford is very clear on this point:

Even an illiterate, say an Eskimo, may find his way toward some wonderful reverberating story. He is still capable of telling a story, sensing what is potential in it, changing it a little bit for effect. He may not be able to write it down, of course, but for me the mechanical part of putting the language down on paper is a very small part of the creative process.

An excellent illustration of Stafford's use of a narrative structure is the much anthologized "Traveling Through the Dark." The poem is essentially a story about
finding a dead deer in the middle of a highway. Stafford has explained the circumstances that gave rise to the story:

This grew out of an actual experience of coming around a bend on the Wilson River Road near Jordan Creek in Oregon, and finding this deer, dead.22

But the poem did not crystallize until the poet narrated the event to his children:

As I was recounting the story to my kids the next day, I discovered by the expressions on their faces that I was arriving at some area of enhancement in the narrative. It wasn't until I saw their expressions that I felt my narrative itself helping to produce a kind of redoubling of experience.33

The poem follows the well-known dramatic structure of exposition (traveling at night on the Wilson River Road), complication (the sight of the dead doe with her fawn warm in her side), conflict (the poet's decision to roll the doe into the canyon or leave her in the road), and climax (the poet's decisive act of pushing the doe into the river). There is great specificity of detail (the narrow road, the "glow of the tail-light," the warm belly of the doe, the purring engine, the red glare of the exhaust), suspense (what will be the future course of action on the part of the poet?), and finally the swing into the
collective ("I thought hard for us all"), so that the poet can assume the pastoral role.

One of the most lyrical narrative poems is the allegorical "The Animal That Drank Up Sound." It is a beautifully developed fable as well as "a symbolic tale whose theme is the poetic imagination." Stafford told Jonathan Holden that he wrote the poem after he had heard some American Indian legends. In the poem the agent of destruction is the animal who descends on the earth to "drink" sound. A world without sound is a dead world, and soon all traces of activity cease: "A fish that jumped went back like a knife,/ and the water died" (CP, 145). We are reminded of Richard Hugo's phrase "childish invention" when we read of the fairy-tale details of this invasion. Stafford transports us to a land of fantasy and magic: the animal deprives the toad of his croaking voice and the grass of "all the little shiny noises grass blades make." When the desecration is complete, all that is left is the animal and the light of the moon. The moon, by association with "whiteness" and "cold," is a symbol of sterility, and it is appropriate that it should look down at a barren landscape. The world is lit by the moon's "dead light," and even the animal starves to death as it has "consumed" all the sounds of the earth. We are reminded of two Romantic poems: Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in which
the woeful knight is set in a landscape where:

The sedge has withered from the lake
And no birds sing

and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" with its haunting evocation of a "Death-in-Life," a state characterized by absolute silence.

But the story ends happily: if the animal that drank up sound is the "villain" of the piece, then the "hero" is a humble cricket who dares to utter its own name, and thereby restores the world to life and to sound. "It all returned, our precious world with its life and sound." The cricket is going to be vigilant and prepare for similar invasions in the future. The poem is an allegory about the failure of the imagination (a world without sound) and the subsequent regeneration of the poetic imagination. The cricket is a symbol of the regenerative powers of the imagination.

Stories lead naturally into myths, and Stafford frequently uses mythmaking techniques in his poems. In his own words: "If I could think of an image for myself, instead of domesticating the world to me, I'm domesticating myself to the world. I enter the world like water or air . . . everywhere. Mythologizing, yes. I'm writing the myth of the world, not the myth of me."35 These myths
are not always created deliberately or rationally, through the conjunction of narrative and image. It is possible to "stumble" across these mythic patterns. This is consistent with Stafford's belief in poetry as process. "Myth" is used in two senses in Stafford's poetry: one, in the classical Greek sense of "mythos" or story, whether it is true or false. Stafford's poetry contains many of these personal myths or stories. Two, "myth" is used as "archetype": a story or a pattern of ideas with relevance to a large group of people. The myth as archetype appeals to the Jungian collective unconscious. Occasionally, Stafford uses traditional Western myths and legends and creates meaningful comparisons with contemporary reality. Examples would be "In Medias Res" and "At Liberty School." More often, however, he wants to create new myths and legends. He explains his method in an interview with Turco and Fitzgerald:

The key word might be myth. Every now and then we find ourselves encountering some story or pattern that wields more power over us than we would expect. I suppose that if I refer to the Oedipus story, we'll immediately have a reference point here. Someone, Sophocles or whoever, blundered into this pattern, and it has a lot of power. My assumption is that these patterns lie all around us. But as a writer it's too abrupt and cheap of me to think that my job is to take a pattern that Sophocles found and drape what I write around it. Instead of that, I would like to stumble on
something new as Sophocles did. Of course such patterns are rare, I realize.

Stafford insists that he does not begin to write with a "larger purpose" but encounters mythic patterns of thought in the process of writing the poem. His concept of myth is linked with reverberations and resonance: "some of the experiences you have when you write or talk do turn out to have resonance with other experiences." He explains that when he was writing the satirical poem "At the Unnational Monument Along the Canadian Border," he was building a myth based in part on the reverberations created by Lincoln's Gettysburg speech. "All I want to plead for here is the possibility that around us, if we follow our tentative impulses outward, we may blunder upon one of these reverberating patterns." This is akin to the resonance of Japanese haiku, in which an image echoes in the mind long after the poem has been read. Turco distinguishes between the closed-ended poem, the open-ended one in which the poem simply hangs in the air, and the resonant one in which the poem's meaning is amplified. "'Traveling Through the Dark' has this quality; the poem just does not quit." This close examination of the stylistic devices in Stafford's work yields one conclusion: in spite of the poet's many statements to the contrary, there is a careful
attention to form. However, there is not a preoccupation with it. We would do well to remind ourselves, and surely Stafford would concur, that all our critical analyses cannot render the irreducible mystery of the finished poem. Technique, form, style: our criteria are inadequate in the most elemental sense. Literature eludes fixation in words, and the only final reality is the shaped loveliness of the finished work of art.
CHAPTER VI--NOTES


9. Stafford, Writing the Australian Crawl, p. 23.

10. Stafford, Writing the Australian Crawl, p. 25.


12. Ruffin, p. 53.


15. Turco and Fitzgerald, p. 130.

16. Turco and Fitzgerald, p. 130.
17. Lofsness, p. 93.


19. Lynen, p. 89.


22. Greiner, p. 1017.


24. Lynen, p. 87.


32. Turco and Fitzgerald, p. 132.

33. Turco and Fitzgerald, p. 132.


35. Crazy Horse interview, p. 36.
37. Turco and Fitzgerald, p. 125.
38. Turco and Fitzgerald, p. 126.
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