

World's Guest—William Stafford

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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.¹ First, the essential, piety toward the earth. Has it been *fully* felt by anyone in America (except Thoreau!) since the Indian? 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:

Under the killdeer cry
our people hunted all day
graying toward winter, their lodges
thin to the north wind's edge.

Watching miles of marsh grass
take the supreme caress,
they looked out over the earth,
and the north wind felt like the truth.

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

(“Our People,” RY, 50)

Aided by the aptness of the bird's name, the opening lines imply much: hunters signalling with bird calls (a thin and piping sound, always on the verge of fading out), and an occupation that not only supported life but was life for them. They see the land as animate, receiving the caress which may be that of the wind, or of God. It is a supreme caress because it is the last, presaging winter, which is also the winter of their culture. “Fluttering in that wind” implies their exposure and vulnerability to wind and cold, and a kind of insubstantiality in themselves, about to fade from history. “Clenched in their own lived story,” they have lived their time and sense it; “clenched” expresses tautness and completion. And the

¹ Stafford has published five volumes of poetry to date: *West of Your City* (1960); *Traveling Through the Dark* (1962); *The Rescued Year* (1966); *Allegiances* (1970). The last three are abbreviated in my citations as TD, RY and A. (The best poems of *West of Your City* are reprinted in *The Rescued Year*.) His most recent volume is *Someday, Maybe* (1973).

poem completes itself by returning to its opening, in keeping with the cycle of the seasons and of their lives which it implies. Half-rhyme and regular stanza form contribute to a sense of the ceremonial and elegiac, providing a formal dignity which combines with clear images to avoid the easy sentimentality.

Stafford's fullest image of a completely natural man, whose identity is inseparable from the earth on which he lives, is found in "The Concealment: Ishi, the Last Wild Indian." The last survivor of his tribe, living his primitive life in early twentieth-century California, Ishi succeeded for years in hiding all traces of his existence:

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.

(RY, 56-57)

in which he is the exact opposite of modern man, especially modern California man.

With beautiful economy the poem presents the physical elements of Ishi's life and his relationship to them:

Erased
footprints, berries that purify the breath, rituals
before dawn with water.

Here is an attitude that transcends the utilitarian—berries purify, water is sacramental as well as thirst-quenching. While Stafford is no primitivist, he sees the life of natural man as significantly more than "nasty, brutish, and short." Discovered and uprooted from his world (though humanely treated), Ishi soon died. The poem is suffused with pathos, both for this archaic and doomed survivor and by implication for ourselves, who have lost what he had.

To be rooted means also to be rooted in one's own past, and in poem after poem Stafford discovers, recreates, and accepts his parents, his relatives, his high school classmates, his town, the farms around it. "The Rescued Year" (a phrase that sums up the intent of much of Stafford's work) is the title both of a book and of a poem that explores a year from the poet's boyhood. In a pair of images it creates the Depression on the prairie:

That Christmas Mother made paper
presents; we colored them with crayons
and hung up a tumbleweed for a tree

and culminates in a remembrance of the father: "In all his ways I hold that rescued year."

The memory of the father, a man close to the earth ("He lived by trapping

and hunting/wherever the old slough ran”—“Some Shadows,” A, 4), in but not quite of the prairie towns in which the family lives, dominates many of these poems. Adolescent rebellion is absent; the father appears not as rival or oppressor, but as teacher, initiator, gift-bearer, and the gift he brings is a way of perceiving or of being in the world:

My father could hear a little animal step,
or a moth in the dark against the screen,
and every far sound called the listening out
into places where the rest of us had never been.

(“Listening,” RY, 27)

It is a poem about perception, not as a passive receiving but as a search (the listening goes out), and the father seems a kind of primordial poet, whose own perceptions remain un verbalized. “Inviting the quiet by turning the face,” he scents and he hears the easily overlooked, the small and the distant.

The prairie town itself, the town of an adolescent boy, appears typically in “Garden City.” Given that title, we expect irony or sentimentality; Stafford provides neither:

That town, those days, composed grand
arching pictures down by the river.
A cloud or a girl strayed by. Any storm
was temporary. Those hills to the south
rush into the lens, emboss the world;
and I can see so well that the hawks grow
pin feathers. Our class picnic
blossoms in ribbons and watermelons.

(A, 38)

This is an active rather than a passive vision. Verbs animate the landscape, give life to the stanza; the hills “rush” and “emboss the world.” That unexpected “emboss” provides a roughness of texture that the poem requires to save itself from its own charm. But the world of class picnics, ribbons and watermelons, seen without mockery or condescension, is part of Stafford’s rescued past.

The prairie culture receives definitive statement, and full comprehension, in “One Home,” a key poem in the Stafford canon:

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.

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.

A wildcat sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July
when he was cutting plum bushes for fuel,
before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky.

To anyone who looked at us we said, "My friend":
liking the cut of a thought, we could say, "Hello."
(But plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.)

The sun was over our town; it was like a blade.
Kicking cottonwood leaves we ran toward storms.
Wherever we looked the land would hold us up.

(RY, 18-19)

There's not only a statement of theme but a gesture of defiance in the opening line, no doubt in recognition of the long-continuing Revolt Against the Prairie in American literature. The poem deliberately avoids fashionable literary clichés, at the risk of falling into old-fashioned, sentimental ones: "We sang hymns in the house," or "To anyone who looked at us we said, 'My friend.'" It's saved by the directness and simplicity of its language (which is yet witty and unexpected in "before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky"), by that grotesquely appropriate detail of the wildcat's spring—on the Fourth of July!—and above all by one line, "Plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code." For all its absolute simplicity of diction, the line is richly suggestive, both of stereotypes and of realities. The monosyllables are appropriate to the culture as a whole and to the tradition of Western taciturnity. The cowboy is implied, but without glamour; the plain black hats connote starkness of life and of thought.

In the repetition at the end of the fourth stanza, "but" makes all the difference, instantly suggesting the limitations of thought, belief and action implied by the image, and showing that the poet is quite as well aware of them as we are. With that reassurance, and with the harshness of "blade" and "storm," we can accept the sense of oneness with the land, and resulting security, given by the final line. This poem offers something better than a drearily predictable rebellion—it offers understanding.

"Stafford country" includes the farms and little towns of the plains during the Depression (the period is important; his attitude differs radically when dealing with contemporary America) and also the Northwest where he has lived since 1948, teaching at a small college in Portland, Oregon. His region, in fact, is simply the American West with its plains and deserts and mountains and rivers, its farms and its towns (but rarely its cities), its highways and railroads, its animals and its plants, and its people from the Indian to contemporary man.

"At Cove on the Crooked River" states the relationship between modern man and the Western scene:

At Cove at our camp in the open canyon
it was the kind of place where you might look out
some evening and see trouble walking away.

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

We stood with wet towels over our heads for shade,
looking past the Indian picture rock and the kind of trees
that act out whatever has happened to them.

Oh civilization, I want to carve you like this,
decisively outward the way evening comes
over that kind of twist in the scenery

When people cramp into their station wagons
and roll up the windows, and drive away.

(TD, 81)

A cove is a harbor, a place of rest and refuge, and these connotations are important. "Crooked" is unexpected, and the alliteration of "Cove" and "Crooked" adds a harshness of sound that's apt for the desert setting. Syntax is leisurely and colloquial ("At Cove . . . it was the kind of place"). Diction too is colloquial, appropriate to the homely personification of "and see trouble walking away." The first stanza is raised above the prosaic by only a few details: the hard c's and emphatic rhythm of the opening line, the faint image of the third. In stanza 2, simultaneously the images become more particularized and the scope of the poem expands to show the course of the river from its beginning. The "Indian picture rock" and the "trees that act out whatever has happened to them" are (like this poem) records of and responses to the setting; they introduce a human continuity between past and present as well as a continuity between the human and natural response to the environment. They also provide models for the poet to follow, as shown by "carve" in the next stanza.

With the invocative "Oh civilization," the poem heightens in emotion and generalizes in significance. "Carve" simultaneously implies the hardness of the landscape and refers back to the incised pictures on the rock. It means both to carve an image of the poet's civilization and to carve the civilization itself into the desired shape. Evening ends the day and the poem as stanza 4, not self-contained like the earlier ones, flows into the final couplet with its ironic image of visitors "cramping into their station wagons and rolling up their windows," shutting out everything the poem has presented before they escape it completely by driving away. "Cramping" is immensely suggestive.

"The Move to California," a sequence of five poems in *The Rescued Year*, presents a modern version of the archetypal American experience—the journey West, including visions of heaven and hell. The tone is neither illusioned nor disillusioned; the poet is equally aware of promise and reality. The move begins with "The Summons in Indiana" (a casual, modern summons by "an angel of blown newspaper") and reaches an unclimactic climax, the Great Divide, in "At

the Summit.” Instead of the sweeping vista of cliché, the reader is offered the unexpected image of “a little tree just three feet high” that “shared our space between the clouds.” The true climax occurs in the fourth poem, “Springs Near Hagerman”:

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

The startlingly active opening (“water *leaps* from lava”), the strongly rhythmical five-beat lines, the careful alliteration of r’s and hard consonants (d’s and t’s), and the fusion of mass, energy and sound in “reverberating tons of exploding shock” communicate enormous power. In the final stanza the springs offer a vision and a promise: “At work when I vision that sacred land . . . I go blind with hope.” The word “sacred” is rare in Stafford, and gains force accordingly.

But the paradisaical vision is instantly balanced by an infernal one, in “Along Highway 40”:

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.

There is a movement from water to drought, from hope to satire, although the final stanza offers escape: “I crossed the Sierras in my old Dodge . . . and slept in the wilderness on the hard ground.” That rough contact with physical reality is necessary, after the tourists who insulate themselves completely from it.

The title of the last poem, “Written on the Stub of the First Paycheck,” ironically indicates arrival, the goal achieved.

Gasoline makes game scarce.
In Elko, Nevada, I remember a stuffed wildcat
someone had shot on Bing Crosby’s ranch.
I stood in the filling station
breathing fumes and reading the snarl of a map.

Anticlimax? Undoubtedly. Betrayal of the American dream? Hardly anything so melodramatic. “Gasoline makes game scarce” sums up the development of the modern West, while the vanished Old West is commemorated by the stuffed wildcat, shot on a movie star’s ranch. The conclusion is deliberately ambiguous, passing no judgment. “We moved into a housing tract”—the ultimate flatness and boredom of modern America. But “every dodging animal carries my hope in Nevada,” so at least dodging animals and hope survive.

“In California,” published in *The Southern Review* (Spring, 1971) provides a sequel and an allegory of modern America.

Someone is running.
Someone has to get somewhere.
He is running to stay the same.
The rest of the world runs with him.
Women are taking turns to be with him,
to try to be real.

Each of them runs and then finds
It is another man she is with.
They all run faster and faster.
It is America, and everyone
is finding Today somewhere in the sound
or breath or touch of Tomorrow.

They all tell each other their dreams,
then draw slowly apart. All their
dance adds to a solemn sway in their cities.
Away out in the evening the orchards
and fields hold still and grow. Their steady
green follows the sunset down.

That anonymous “someone” instantly establishes tone and theme. In his anonymity, he is the representative modern man; his running, seeming to exist purely for its own sake, gives the effect of a looking-glass race. The stanza moves by jerks, with almost every line a complete sentence; diction is the simplest possible. The effect is of primer-style, of the Dick and Sally of a first-grade reader (individualized only in their names) nominally grown up. The search is for Reality, or Identity, doomed from the start because the goal is placed outside the self, in the non-existent: “finding Today . . . in the sound/or breath or touch of Tomorrow.” The answer would be to find Today in today, and this is a function of poetry—to restore us to the present, which is all that can exist. Those who “live in the future” are of course living in the present (they cannot live anywhere else) but are living in fantasies and abstractions. If the human movement, seen from a distance, appears to gain solemnity from its sheer mass, it’s promptly placed by the reference to orchards and fields (which both hold still and grow, unlike the humans who do neither) and to their “steady green”—the only steadiness present. The poem ends with the colors of life—green and the red of the sunset—and the natural cycle of the sun replacing the futile running of the earlier stanzas.

“Our car was fierce enough;/no one could tell we were only ourselves” (“The Trip,” TD, 72). The modern American seeks his own reality in possessions and in the image of himself that possessions create. Even the prairie town has changed, and its present condition requires almost surrealistic metaphors:

Here in our cloud we talk
baking powder. Our yeast feet
make tracks that fill up with fog.
Tongue like a sponge, we describe
the air that we eat—how it has its own
lungs, inhales many a stranger.

The images have a nearly metaphysical consistency, but lack the metaphysical rationality. It is suggestion that counts—suggestions of unreality, ineffectuality, softness, blurredness, loss of clarity, all somehow devouring. Beneath the softness, violence proceeding from fear. The poem concludes with a double explosion:

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

That explosion, at least, is real.

Modern poets habitually deal in apocalypse and Stafford is no exception, though his are characteristically quiet—“soft apocalypses,” one might call them, yet they can be sweeping, too. “The Epitaph Ending in And” suggests a total, not merely a human, destruction:

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,
a clear spring bent close too often
(that Earth should ever have such wings
burnt on in blind color!), this will be
good as an epitaph:

Doves did not know where to fly, and

The soft and the hard, the weak and the strong, the gentle and the cruel—all these contrasts are implied in the contrast of hawks and doves, and are reinforced by their fates. Verbs beginning lines (“blast,” “driven,” “wracked,” “burnt”) suggest an irresistible destructive force, with a resulting delicate pathos: “The earth should ever have such wings/burnt on in blind color” (in which line division works interestingly, as the wings seem momentarily to belong to the earth). The poem leaves one with questions. “Doves did not know where to fly”: to escape destruction? Does the statement apply to all past time? The ending is tantalizing, frustrating—but there is no more to say, as one realizes after trying to say it.

But the pure apocalyptic stance is rare in Stafford, perhaps because it seems

to require a self-dramatization that's alien to him, perhaps because in its purity it tends to be completely destructive; "From the Gradual Grass" (which might have been called "The Two Voices," if Wordsworth hadn't pre-empted the title) contrasts the apocalyptic in this sense with the affirmative. The first voice seems to exist only to announce itself ("Imagine a voice calling,/ "There is a voice now calling' ") and to create the conditions it prophesies ("Walls are falling!'/as it makes walls be falling"). The theme is suggested by form as well; circularity is created by repetition as the voice does what it announces. The poem continues, to proclaim a second voice "from the gradual grass . . . making words, a voice:/ Destruction is ending. . . *That voice is calling.*" Indeed it is, it is the voice of Stafford's poetry.

"Apocalypse" need not be always or only destructive, a fact which those who use the word freely often forget. It implies also a making new or a seeing of all things as new, and Stafford's "Summer Will Rise" presents this regenerative process with a dionysiac abandon unique in his work:

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

People will listen but will not hear.
Eyes will wizen to find a friend.
When no one is watching the candleflame
this is the town where the wind will come.

The trees will hear, farther than winter,
over the town a coming of birds.
What great wild hands will reach for them?
—and for all who are here when those wanderers come?

It's a poem that gains from being read in context; only then can one appreciate, for example, the startling contrast of "purple, the banished color" to Stafford's favorite grays and browns.

There's a potentially frightening movement as the unknown and the repressed invade the town—the area of the human—and take possession. But perhaps what comes is akin to the human, or a part of the human which the town has banished. The invasion therefore is joyful, a joy communicated by the lilting anapests of the refrain. After the initial, shriveled response implied by "wizen," the poem reaches its emotional climax in the last stanza as the rising current is embodied in the "coming of birds." What hands?—or whose?—one might ask—but should not. It's enough that they reach for trees, for birds, for townspeople, for "all who are here" to shelter and protect.

Again and again the poems approach a moment of intense realization, hinting at a possible Reality that we could reach—or that could reach us—if only we

would open ourselves to it. In "Remember" the goal is nearly attained in the unlikely setting of a "sheep town, say, in Nevada":

That was almost, through quiet, the time:
the world stilled for dawn.

As the poem admits, "Nothing was new," yet "the horizon gained something/more than color." What was gained, if not a true epiphany, was a realization of its possibility that is in itself transforming. The poet achieves escape from the ego, from the daily routine, into a sense of something beyond the self, or perhaps in the self—a different way of perceiving.

And what would the world be like, if we could once realize it fully? "Earth Dweller" gives an answer:

It was all the clods at once become
precious; it was the barn, and the shed,
and the windmill, my hands, the crack
Arlie made in the axe handle. . .
.....
. . . somewhere inside, the clods are
vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing
for the saints forever, the shed and windmill
rear so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.

The experience is of ecstasy, the ecstasy that results when, as Blake writes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "My senses discovered the infinite in everything." Gaining power from the unexpected "shudders," the last two lines reach an intensity of affirmation unequalled anywhere else in Stafford's poetry. In its imagery the stanza may suggest Thomas, or Traherne in his *Centuries of Meditation* ("The corn was orient and immortal wheat. . . The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold. . . Eternity was manifest in the light of the day"). But the conclusion is pure Stafford in its sober naturalism:

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

As Stafford has written in prose, "We hear each other but we do not hear the earth." The poet opens his senses to the influences of the earth, he speaks for it, he comes as one "Representing Far Places" (to borrow the title of a poem from *Traveling Through the Dark*) to remind us of winter and cold and storm and dark, and of something more too. He faces those storms for us, strengthens us to face them ourselves. Stafford is a traditional poet, in the basic Romantic tradition of the last century and three quarters. Poetry not only shares its perceptions with us, but teaches us to perceive, or to induce perception: "inviting the quiet

by turning the face.” The image of the father in that poem (“Listeners”) must also be an image of the poet:

More spoke to him from the soft wild night
than came to our porch for us on the wind;
we would watch him look up and his face go keen
till the walls of the world flared, widened.

That incredibly compressed final line simultaneously presents a perceiving in all its elements and identifies perception with the world itself—a world actively created for each of us by his own senses. Which is not to say that reality is arbitrary or capricious. “The world speaks everything to us,” and it can only speak through the senses.

But if Stafford writes in a Romantic tradition, he lives in an unromantic age, as he’s very well aware. In “Near” he characteristically deals with the predicament of the modern poet by exemplifying it:

Walking along in this not quite prose way
we both know it is not quite prose we speak
and it is time to notice this intolerable snow
innumerable touching, before we sink.

It is time to notice, I say, the freezing snow
hesitating toward us from its gray heaven:
listen—it is falling not quite silently
and under it still you and I are walking.

Maybe there are trumpets in the houses we pass
and a redbird watching from an evergreen—
but nothing will happen until we pause
to flame what we know, before any signal’s given.

Sound reinforces meaning in the heavy clumping of accents on the last four words of the opening line. The first and second lines pair off, one concerned with the rhythm of poetry, the other with its content. That content is a world of blurred imprecision, an effect reinforced by the snow that follows. The abstract modifiers “intolerable” and “innumerable” heighten emotional intensity, raising the stanza above the prosaic, and imply the symbolic nature of the poem. The first two stanzas offer a world of gray (the only color named), of cold, of “not quite.” Even the snow doesn’t do anything as forceful as falling; it is only “hesitating toward us.” The trumpets enter as abruptly as in Eliot’s “A Cooking Egg” (“Where are the eagles and the trumpets?/ Buried beneath some snow-deep Alps”). But the poem is no pastiche; the image of the redbird in the evergreen (colors of life again) belongs to a poetic world very different from Eliot’s. Only in the last line is there a really active verb, “flame”—both destructive and life-giving. “To

flame what we know”—that is, in unsatisfying abstract terms, to affirm our individuality, our desires, our tie to the earth, our *life*, and to do so spontaneously (“before any signal’s given”). Nothing could be more remote from Eliot, or indicate more clearly Stafford’s essential romanticism.

Understatement no doubt reflects the poet’s personality. It is also strategic; Stafford seems to hold a Wordsworthian distrust of “rhetoric.” He would surely accept Wordsworth’s opinion (so much more true of our age!) that “a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and . . . to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor,” and the conclusion that to rouse the mind from its savage torpor is a major function of poetry. This arousal is to be achieved by encouraging the mind to exert its powers of subtle discrimination and of response to delicate stimuli through a poetry of calculated understatement.

The result is a style that might be called “minimum writing,” corresponding exactly to the “minimum living” recommended by the poetry:

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

(“In Response to a Question,” TD, 33)

Verse forms approach the traditional (Stafford has even written a few unrhymed sonnets), rhyme appears occasionally, rhythms tend to be clearly patterned. Images draw attention to themselves by their rightness to the occasion and their precision of detail rather than by the shock of surprise. The diction itself is remarkably “pure”; that is, nontechnical and unspecialized, neither highbrow nor lowbrow, neither aggressively contemporary nor “literary” and conventional. In other words, *central*. Not the language that educated people speak, but the language one wishes they spoke. It’s likely to sound surprisingly modern to readers of the twenty-first century. Syntax too has an air of disarming simplicity but may conceal a good deal of artfulness, as with the suspended structure and meaning of the opening participial phrase in “Near,” or the careful progression of “walking,” “touching,” “freezing,” “falling.”

Asked by an interviewer whether he saw any “recurring patterns of ideas” in his own work, Stafford answered that “one of the elements is not a pattern of ideas, but a feeling of coziness 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.” That final clause brings to mind Frost’s famous definition of a poem as “a momentary stay against confusion,” but here confusion, rather than clarity, is seen as the temporary state. The unknown, the nonhuman, are constantly present, and their power is admitted, but the poetry does not assume that they are finally inimical. As Stafford has put it, in his closest approach to a prose poetic (the essay “At Home,” *Hudson Review*, Autumn, 1970): “In the world where what is outside man extends into mystery, awe, worship, respect, reverence—poetry, *the stance that accepts*, may be salvational.

The psyche may depend on limitation, recurrence, stability, as do organic processes.” But acceptance is no good if it’s not believable. To be more than a platitude, it must include and give full weight to both sides: winter-spring, darkness-light, cold-warmth, transience-permanence, separation-unity. Stafford’s poetry does, and doing so constructs an image of man at one with himself and with the earth (and everything that word implies), feeling toward it an awe and a reverence, and extending that piety toward his own nature—refusing to mutilate himself by uprooting himself from his past or by cutting his ties to the earth and living in machines and abstractions. It’s not surprising to hear Stafford say that poetry comes easily, that there is never a morning when he can’t write. Making poetry, for him, is a matter of opening the self to the self and to the world (denying any final separation between them) and of trusting the impulse that follows. The result is a poetry at once completely personal and uniquely free from egotism, a poetry that places man firmly within the world and finds its hope in that.

World, I am your slow guest,
one of the common things
that move in the sun and have
close, reliable friends
in the earth, in the air, in the rock.