

“The world sorely needs ethical witness of the Stafford caliber...”

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If I can — and maybe I can't— gather my thoughts at this moment in recollection of Bill and his work. Maybe only parts of this may be quotable or notable.



William Stafford at an early OILA event ...
photo David Milholland © 2012

William Stafford always had such integrity in his writing and in his person. His poetry seemed almost effortless in its spare and colloquial feeling. It left the reader with this Zen-like quality of ineffability, of less than more being said. Not my style at all. Things were hinted at, and left to the reader to surmise. It seemed the several occasions of my hearing Stafford read out loud that the reading, and his presentation, was like a mountain lake, with its waves lapping on the surface, but there was so much more in the man and his work which was bottomless — without depth, clear, lucid, and reassuring.

Quite frankly, the state of American poetry is abysmal, so much of it — so much derivative, so many MFAs in poetry and creative writing have been given out, so many disciples of name-brand poets. And yet a true poet has an original voice, which brooks no imitation. Stafford was that true one. I would hate to see a school of Northwest poetry founded after him. He deserves to be the one of a kind which he uniquely was.

Don't clone William Stafford, damn it! I'm sure no one can. But don't try — please. In his own way, he's better than Bly, Hugo, Roethke, though he himself would never have said so.

One last anecdote — When we of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission were gathering statements of approval, I asked Bill to give us something. Seeking a good word for our Hazel Hall Memorial project and placing her home on the National Historic Register. Well, he admitted that he didn't know her work that well, he would only do so after reading some of it. So I took him my copy of *The Cry of Time* [Hazel Hall, E.P. Dutton, 1928]. He kept it and read it. Only then did he say something laudatory. That's called intellectual *integrity*. Bill had such old-fashioned consciousness in spades. The world sorely needs ethical witness of the Stafford caliber, whether or not they become poets.

W.C. Feb. 10 '94

The Stafford – Curtis Papers

English
Lewis and Clark College
Portland, Oregon 97034
23 July 1971

Dear Walt Curtis,

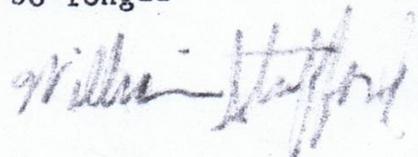
Thanks for the book and the message. Oregon has a special advantage I find, after a year in the East:-- we have few enough people to be aware of them. There aren't many of us pursuing the edge of things with words out here.

It seems to me that you already know how to find outlets and how to put together a book. I am still randomly sending out bunches of poems, to magazines I happen upon and find congenial. Have you seen Vi Gale's report on the Portland Area Literary Scene, by the way? It is in the current Northwest Review, or due out there I believe. (She showed me a copy of the text.) She surveys the various circles of writers hereabouts.

You probably have a hunch about what poems I prefer in your book. I believe my preferences derive more from a sense of the total effect of the communication than from any measure so simple as "bad" words. It is true, though (and maybe an indication that my judgment of myself is faulty) that I like best such poems as "Wildeflecken" and "Lost Glasses."

I write this quickly, poised to go to a couple of writers' conferences. Hope to be seeing you. Meanwhile-- good luck on the writing. I heard, by the way, that Henry Carlile, at PSU, won a big prize and will have a collection of poems published by U of Mo. press.

So long--



“blessings from the majestic height of that heavy laureateship”

1050 Sunningdale
Lake Oswego, Oregon 97034
2 Dec 83

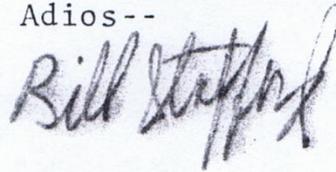
Dear Walt,

Meeting with you and your class was a great time--
we had a lot of bounce that night!

And your letter gives me a chance to rebound and
say so: I enjoyed your analysis of the literary scene
in Oregon and around, and your Neruda poems help me to
confirm a feeling that Neruda deserves respect every-
where--maybe we can include Chile in our Oregon feelings?

I'll be looking forward to seeing you again, and
maybe even daring to do the KBOO deal if your time and
mine harmonize soon. Meanwhile, ~~xxx~~ blessings from the
majestic height of that heavy laureateship....

Adios--



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WHEN POETS DIE

for Bill Stafford & Penny Avila

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When poets die —
the woods grow unusually quiet for a moment.

When poets die —
the dogs bark backwards,

When poets die —
Common objects glow in the dark!

Doesn't language grow less? No, words
increase; imperceptibly like moss on old stones.
The stock of ideas blossoms
because of their lives.

Was Penny grandly garrulous? Yes.
Was Bill, pacifistically powerful? Yes.

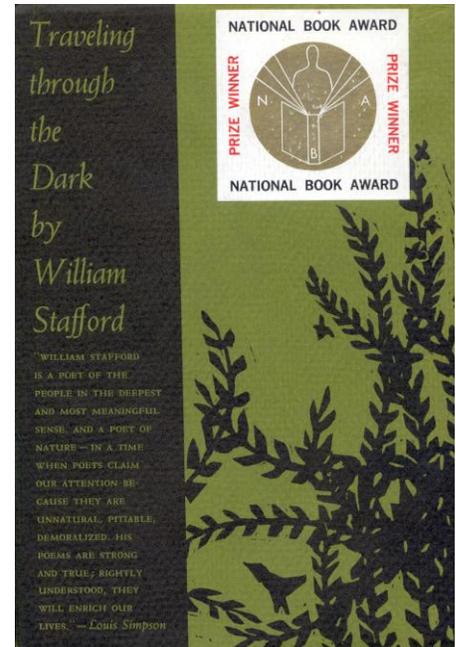
At the end, she asked for her handbag.
At the last, he bent over to clean up
a spill on the kitchen floor.

When poets die, there's no great loss
for wordsmiths are more reproductive
than bankers or morticians, than farmers
or manicurists. Why? Because poets
care more, stimulate thought, loved
language, ethics, and imagery.

When poets die — Pegasus returns
their generous spirits to Hippocrene,
that bubbling, fountain beyond Mt. Ida.
From which poets ever inspire
The rest of us poor barren mortals.

When poets die — other poets write eulogies.
Too late, I might adds because the dear ones
are already among the elect.

Skulls open; rocks think; consciousness expands
because of them, in honor of their work.



Vi at the dictionary

W.C. Sept. 20 '93