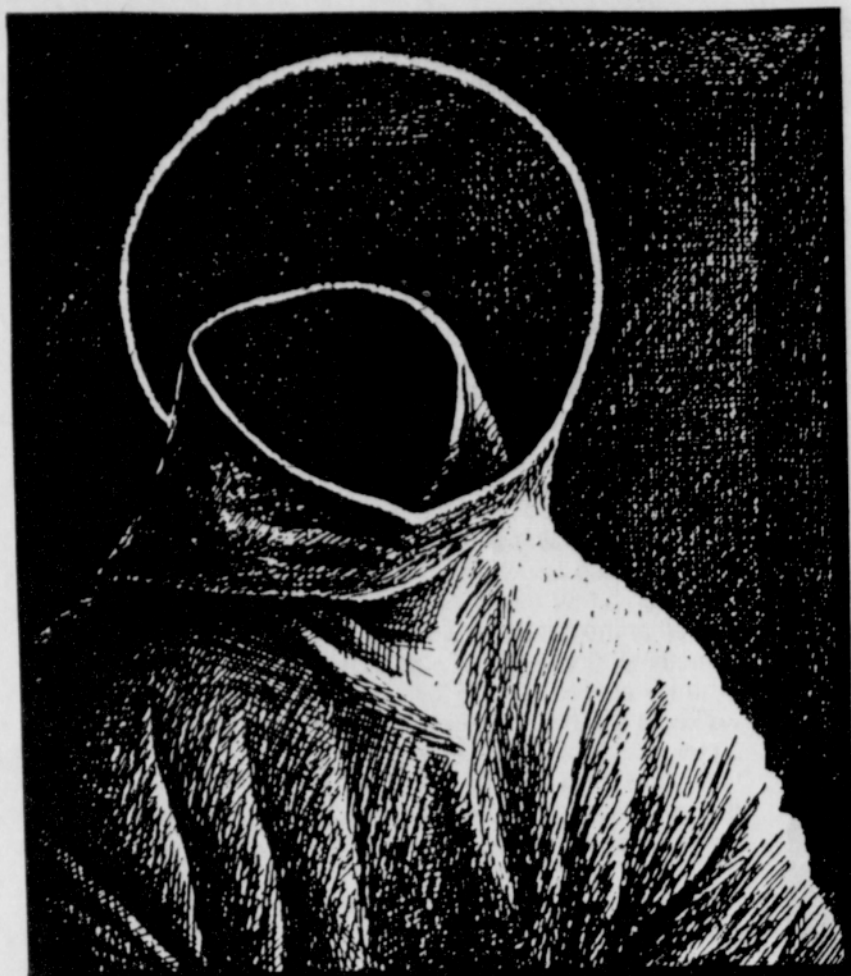




IGOR KOPELNITSKY

THE TROUBLE WITH READING

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

So some time let's discover how the ink feels, to be clutching all that eternity onto page after page. But maybe it is better not to know, ignorance, that wide country, rewards you just to accept it. You plunge; it holds you. And you have become a rich darkness.

~WILLIAM STAFFORD

THE WAY I WRITE

In the mornings I lie partly propped up the way Thomas Jefferson did when he slept at Monticello. Then I stop and look away like Emily Dickinson when she was thinking about the carriage and the fly.

When someone disturbs me I come back like Pascal from those infinite spaces, but I don't have his great reassurances of math following along with me; so somehow the world around me is even scarier.

Besides, the world on fire of Saint Teresa surrounds me, and the wild faces of Dante awakened on his descent through those dark forbidden caverns. But over my roof bends my own kind of sky and the mouse-nibble sound of now.

The sky has waited a long time for this day. Trees have reached out, the river has scrambled to get where it is. And here I bring my little mind to the edge of the ocean and let it think.

My head lolls to one side as thoughts pour onto the page, important additions but immediately obsolete, like waves. The ocean and I have many pebbles to find and wash off and roll into shape.

"What happens to all these rocks?" "They become sand." "And then?" My hand stops. Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson, Pascal, Dante - they all pause too. The sky waits. I lean forward to write.

~WILLIAM STAFFORD

MY FATHER'S PLACE

BY KIM R. STAFFORD

A few days after my father, poet William Stafford, died last August, I was sleeping alone at the house of my parents, when something woke me at around 4 a.m. My mother, who was away, had told me of this effect, for she, too, had been awakened since his death at my father's customary writing time. As I opened my eyes, the moon was shining through the bedroom window. But that wasn't it. The house was still, the neighborhood quiet. The house wanted me to rise. It was the hour, a beckoning. There was a soft tug. Nothing mystical, just a habit to the place. The air was sweet, life was good, it was time.

I dressed, and shuffled down the hall. In the kitchen, I remembered how he would make himself a cup of instant coffee, and some toast. I followed the custom, putting the kettle on, slicing some bread my mother had made, letting the plink of the spoon stinging the coffee be the only sound, then the scrape of a butter knife. And then I was to go to the couch, and lie down with paper. I pulled the green mohair blanket from the closet, turned on a lamp, and settled in the horizontal place where my father had greeted maybe ten thousand mornings with his pen and paper. I put my head on the pillow just where his head had worn through the silk lining.

What should I write? There was no sign, only a feeling of generosity in the room. A streetlight brightened the curtain beside me, but the rest of the room was dark. I let my gaze rove the walls - the fireplace, the dim rectangle of a painting of a painting, the hooded box of the television cabinet, a table with magazines. It was all ordinary, suburban. But there was this beckoning. In the dark of the house it felt as if my father's death had become an empty bowl that was filled from below, like the stone cavern of a spring that brimmed cold with water from a deep place. There was grief, and also this abundance. So many people had written to us saying, "Words cannot begin to express how we feel..." They can't? I honored the feeling, for I, too, am sometimes mute with grief. But words can begin to express how it is, especially if they can be relaxed, brimming in their own plain way.

I looked for a long time at the bouquet of sunflowers on the coffee table beside the couch. I remembered sunflowers are the state flower of Kansas. I remembered my father's poem about yellow cars. I remembered how, the night before, we had eaten the last of his third summer planting of green beans.

For a time I thought back to the last writing my father had done at this place, the morning of August 28. As often, he had begun with a line from an ordinary experience, a stray call from an insurance agent trying to track down what turned out to be a different William Stafford. The call had amused him, the words had stayed with him. And that morning, he had begun to write:

"Are you Mr. William Stafford?"
"Yes, but...."

As often, he started with the recent daily news from his own life, and came to deeper things:

*Well, it was yesterday.
Sunlight used to follow my hand.
And that's when the strange
siren-like sound flooded
over the horizon and rushed
through the streets of our
town....*

But I wasn't delving into his writing now, only his writing life. I was inhabiting the cell of his habit: earlier than anyone, more ordinary in this welcome, simply listening.

The house was so quiet, I was aware distinctly of my breathing, my heart, how sweet each breath came into me, and the total release of each exhalation. I felt as if my eyes, too, had been "tapered for braille." The edge of the coffee table held a soft gleam from the streetlight. The jostled stack of magazines had a kind of sacred logic, where he had touched them. Then I saw how each sunflower had dropped a little constellation of pollen on the table. The pollen seemed to burn, so intense in color and purpose. But the house - the house didn't want me to write anything profound. The soft tug that had awakened me, the tug I still felt, wanted me to be there with myself, awake, awake to everything ordinary, to sip my bitter instant coffee, and to gaze about and to remember. I remembered how my father had said once that such a time alone would allow anyone to go inward, in order to go outward. Paradoxically, he said, you had to go into yourself in order to find the patterns that were bigger than your own life.

I started to write ordinary things. And then I came to the sunflowers, and the spirit of the house warned me this could be told wrong if I tried to make something of it. It's not about trying. It's not about writing poems. It's not about achievement, certainly not fame, importance. It's about being there exactly with the plain life of a time before first light, with breath, the streetlight on one side of the house and the moon on the other, about the worn silk, the blanket, and that little dusting of pollen from the sunflowers.

My head fit the dent in the pillow, the blanket warmed my body, my hand moved easily, carelessly with the pen. I heard the scratch on paper. If this was grieving, it was active in plain things. I found myself relishing the simplest words, mistrusting metaphor, amused by my own habits of verve with words, forgiving myself an occasional big thought:

*...to pause at the gate to take
off the one big shoe
of his body and step forward light
as wind...*

I could forgive myself because there was this abundance in time and place and habit. And then I had a page, I closed my notebook, and I rose for the day. There was much to do, but I had done the big thing already.

Who will take my father's place in the world of poetry? No one. Who will take his place in this daily practice of the language of the tribe? Anyone who wishes. He said once the field of writing will never be crowded - not because people can't do important work, but because they don't think they can. This way of writing beckons to anyone who wishes to rise and listen, to write without fear of either achievement or failure. There is no burden, only a beckoning. For when the house beckons, you will wake easily. There is a stove where you make something warm. There is a light that leaves much of the room dark. There is a place to be comfortable, a place you have worn with the friendly shape of your body. There is your own breath, the treasures of your recollection, the blessings of your casual gaze. What is this way of writing, of listening easily and telling simply? There is the wall, the table, and whatever stands this day for Kansas pollen in your own precious life.

William Stafford, Poet Laureate of Oregon, was born in Hutchinson, Kansas, in 1914 and died at his home in Lake Oswego, Oregon, in August 1993. He published several volumes of essays and nine collections of poetry including *Traveling Through the Dark* which won the National Book Award for Poetry. From 1970 he served as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford*, edited by Robert Bly, was published in December.

Kim Stafford teaches creative writing at Lewis and Clark College, in Portland. Like his father, he is a poet. "My Father's Place" is reprinted from the Winter 1993-94 issue of *Hungry Mind Review*, which is published in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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