

## from Judith Kitchen's *Writing the World* *Understanding William Stafford*

For the first poem we will read, William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark"; read the following excerpts from Judith Kitchen's *Writing the World Understanding William Stafford*. The selection "Some Right Song Traveling Through the Dark" explicates "Traveling Through the Dark." While reading the selection, get a feel for the kind of observations that professionals make about the poems and poet, the kinds of sources she draws upon and the way that she closely reads the poems she refers to (in addition to how she offers examples and refers to elements in poems).

If writing a summary of this article, do not include the questions and exercises offered at the close of the article or the comments to the left (these are my additions and do not belong to the original text).

*The following is an excerpt from chapter three of Judith Kitchen's Writing the World Understanding William Stafford.*

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### **Some Right Song Traveling Through the Dark**

In 1962 Stafford published the book that won him a national reputation. *Traveling Through the Dark* was chosen for the National Book Award in 1963. Here the themes apparent in his first book recur, adding depth to an already established vision. The poems are filled with familiar images and phrases, but the exploration of these images takes the reader into new territory. The voice in this book is surer, less questioning, but the questions are there, nevertheless. The quietly conversational tone pulls the reader in, the subject matter is fairly straightforward, the poems appear to be accessible. But under the surface, the current is often dangerously deep, and the undertow makes them richly complex.

The title poem, "Traveling Through the Dark," is an example of this mixture of accessibility and complexity. Its form on the page is simple—four four-line stanzas and an ending couplet—and its narrative line is easy to follow. A careful reading, though, unearths the contradictory impulses that make this an important poem:

Traveling through the dark I found a deer  
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.  
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon  
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more

dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car  
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;  
she had stiffened already, almost cold.  
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the  
reason—  
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,  
alive, still, never to be born.  
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;  
under the hood purred the steady engine.  
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;  
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,  
then pushed her over the edge into the river. 1

A reading of this poem should serve as a method for studying much of Stafford's work. So many things work simultaneously in the poem that to look at them separately is artificial. But the reading must start somewhere. This particular poem has a strong narrative line, so the first assessment is of the story. A man is driving on a narrow mountain road when he comes upon a dead deer. Without hesitation he stops to do what he considers his duty—roll it over the edge into the canyon. As he leaves his car he has no doubts. But then—the doe has an unborn fawn—suddenly there is (at least for the speaker) a conflict. He is faced with a decision. Could he save the fawn? Should he save it if he could? Very little time is given to the decision in this poem, and yet time hangs heavy with expectation until the final, quick turn when he does as he originally intended. The thought that precedes that action is the subject of this poem, just as it was the triggering impulse for the poem in the first place.

Did this event really happen? Does it come from the writer's life? Those might be the first questions. This cannot be known—or rather, it is not important to know. What is important is that the reader believe that it happened. Belief comes easily in this case because Stafford names the road (the Wilson River Road) and because of the easy, conversational tone he adopts ("It is usually best . . ."), which draws the reader into the poem as if to share with its speaker some communal knowledge, a way of doing things. We follow his directions, thinking from inside. The reader experiences the discovery of the deer, and the speaker's dilemma, with somewhat the same emotions as the writer. The speaker conveys a sense of mental agitation; he clearly doesn't want to make the decision by himself. Caught between worlds, he invokes a "group" as though it could be a communal decision—"around our group I could hear the wilderness listen." The group appears to be the man, the deer, the unborn fawn, and, by extension, all of nature. This is

understood. But the group also seems to include the car. The car is, very possibly, the most alive thing in this poem. It is active; it 'aims its parking lights'; it glows, it is warm, almost breathing. The car (and the human who invented it) is both the instrument of death and representative of life. It is the occupants of other cars that he would be saving on that narrow road. The poem becomes immediately complex by introducing this paradox. The poet's decision is not now so much a matter of the life and death of one particular fawn as of our whole relationship to nature. That the speaker doesn't come to an easy decision is clear; there is hesitation, the hard thoughts, the "swerving." This word takes on weight by virtue of its being used twice. In the first stanza, it is used literally. The second time the word is used, the "swerving" is internal; it takes place in the poet's mind, a mind forever altered because of the decision he has been forced to make. If he got out of the car with confidence, he gets back in full of doubt.

This poem demonstrates the encroachment of mechanized society on the wilderness. It does not so much debate the right or wrong of the speaker's action as raise the questions of what is right and wrong under these conditions. Does one go against nature in order to honor it? Or does one acquiesce to an order larger than one man can devise? An underlying sense of guilt is shown in the progression of the words used to describe the deer—hear to do to killing—and the ordering of the words surrounding the fawn—alive, still (still alive?), never to be born (stillborn?). "Around our group I could hear the wilderness listen." There's a doubled listening—man and nature attentive to each other, each with something to offer, something to take. To listen to the act of listening is to be answered by silence.

This poem is a frame of mind, and part of its unsettled quality can be found in its rhymes. At first glance it does not appear to have rhymes. But an examination of the second and fourth lines of each stanza shows that road and dead are both one-syllable words ending in d. Killing and belly have two syllables each, with the double l in the center of each word. Waiting and hesitated share the long a and are similar in meaning. Engine and listen reverse their vowel sounds but share the n humming through them. Swerving and river not only have the central v in common, but the er sound. This slant rhyme suggests a lack of resolution, a feeling of "near miss." Stafford embodies his doubts as they are mirrored in sounds too close to be accidental but too different to be lulling.

What was originally merely a title that gives a set of circumstances—a man at night in his car—now gives much more. This journey is through the darkness of indecision, doubt, death. It is allegorical. Does he come out at the other side into light? The poem suggests that Stafford is still groping with the questions that the poem raises; it does not offer up easy answers. In fact, the unanswered questions add to, and are part of, its "darkness." When questioned about this poem in an interview with Sanford Pinsker, Stafford said, "Choices are always Hobson's choices. All you have to do is get a little more alert to see that even your best moves are compromises—and complicated." <sup>2</sup> This shows a man aware of what his action (or his poem) did not do, as well as what it did.

The slant rhymes, the rhythm, the cadence, all demonstrate what Stafford describes as

one of the forces playing on the writer. "You are always modulating along in sound. The writer and the speaker always live in one big chime."<sup>3</sup> It is this part of Stafford—the part receptive to the chime—that made him choose to say "deer / dead" rather than "dead / deer" in the first stanza. He was attuned to the developing slant rhymes, and to the life-affirming opening line, which then turns toward tragedy by the first word of the second.

Traveling Through the Dark helps to clarify the stance of the poet. In the title poem, Stafford's speaker is an involved participant, but the poem is rendered in the past tense, so that from the beginning the speaker is distanced from the act or the thought, able to assess and comment on his actions. Because of its simple language, the presence of the poet is not felt by the reader. This distance, which allows the poet to act as observer, is characteristic. In this way the poet can serve as a witness.

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The following are some guides and exercises to help you continue to think about Stafford's poem and to refine your explication skills.

Kitchen makes the following generalization about Stafford's poem:

Another recurring word in *Traveling Through the Dark* is fear. There is the fear of death, as seen in the title poem, and the accompanying greater fear of making a wrong decision. In fact, Stafford seems to give license to fear, making it an acceptable emotion for anyone to have. To admit it might be to tame it. But the fear seems, in the end, to be nameless—and pervasive. The image is often one of glancing backward, of being taken unexpectedly by something. Words such as danger, worry, terrible, separate, and change predominate. It is as if he is afraid of not knowing.

What elements of and examples from the poem support her observations?

Kitchen points out that several of Stafford's poems are obsessed with time, the passing of time is present in most of the pieces. How does time and its passing appear in the poem "Traveling Through the Dark"?