

William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" examines the killing of a pregnant doe by a hit-and-run driver, a subject that would no doubt be treated sentimentally by a lesser poet. One of nature's exquisite creatures has been slaughtered and callously left on the road, unburied, unmourned, potentially to cause future accidents. Stafford, thankfully, avoids the trap of this topic by presenting the poem's events objectively with an almost reporter-like, semi-detached eye. His attitude toward this common tragedy is sadness but also resignation.

The repetition of the title in the opening phrase states the narrator's literal experience but suggests much more. It conveys the conditions of the accident. The road death is fresh, so the driver who had hit the deer was presumably also driving in the dark, and because nothing was done about the accident, for the sake of the deer or the safety of others, the driver's inaction suggests moral darkness. The darkness also suggests the narrator's confusion about what to do with the deer. "Traveling through the dark" also suggests the uncertainty of the of the speaker's quick decision. Is he doing the right thing? This poem is more than just a narrative of a man pushing a dead deer into a canyon for the benefit of others; it is about making instant decisions in difficult situations. This is where the poem becomes the reader's.

The poem's opening line creates for the reader a false first impression: the surprising appearance of a deer, usually an occasion for happiness. However, the first word of the next line, "dead," immediately reverses this impression, more so by its delay. Following the pause at the end of line one and at the beginning of line two, "dead" receives extra emphasis. Placed where it is in the poem, the word can hardly be pronounced without producing a dull, flat, thud; in this context it is more than surprising, it is appalling, like the experience of a driver negotiating a mountain bend and seeing a dead deer for the first time. Stafford's traveler quickly assesses the scene and understands its moral implications.

It is his duty to roll the deer "into the canyon . . . to swerve might make more dead." The word "swerve" here means neglect of duty, but it also suggests the kinetic image of a swerving automobile, the event that killed the deer.

The second stanza examines the dead deer more closely under the harsh glare of tail-lights: an eerie, infernal scene that links the traveler's vehicle with that of the hit-and-run driver. The deer is called a "heap," no longer a being, a cold and stiff thing that can be dragged off. Then we learn that it is a pregnant doe, a detail that moves our emotions from sympathy to the brink of pathos. However, Stafford's language is precise and controlled; he doesn't want to be inflammatory. Understating the situation, he simply says, "she was large in the belly."

The third stanza offers an unhappy paradox. The traveler feels the doe's underside and finds that it is still warm; it contains a fawn waiting to be born. In death the traveler discovers life, but not normal life that emerges from the womb into the world, for the fawn is "never to be born." This unhappy realization causes the traveler to hesitate. His mind, as pregnant as the dead doe, is filled with muddled emotions: pity, anger, frustration, and confusion about how to act. He may even wonder if the fawn can be saved, but knows all along what he must do. The reader understands from the first stanza. The traveler's hesitation, therefore, may be seen as simply a moment of silence, a secular prayer before performing his inescapable task.

The fourth stanza draws a closer parallel between the traveler's car and the dead deer. The car with its parking lights jutting forward mimics a beast staring into the darkness, and like the heart of a mammal its engine "purred." The traveler stands in its "warm exhaust turning red," no doubt from the glare of the tail-lights but also from heated emotions pumping blood to his face. The red glow, moreover, cannot help but suggest the deer's blood.

The traveler senses the wilderness witnessing (and perhaps censuring) the drama of "our group": the dead deer, the fawn, never to be born, the car only mechanically alive, and himself.

In the final couplet the traveler thinks hard for "us all," not just for the group, but for every being in creation, for all who suffer and face death - a natural prayer brought on by the moment. The pause was his "only swerving" he says, nothing more could be done. Finally he pushes the deer into the river, a shock even though the poem has prepared us for it. The reader has known from the beginning that this is what the traveler will do to save more lives, but this knowledge cannot eliminate a feeling of helplessness, nor a sense of waste.

Stafford's poem might have worked the reader into a frenzy of hate for the hit-and-run driver, but "Traveling Through the Dark" is not about hatred. It is about the sadness that accompanies each traveler on the longer journey of life and toward the inevitability of death, so that when we encounter a misfortune on the road, we hesitate before we move on. Stafford's somber scene is a small tragedy, but in his simplicity, in his directness without swerving, he creates a metaphor for life.