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Calling for Harmony: Looking at Humanity and Nature in the Poetry of William Stafford

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CALLING FOR HARMONY: LOOKING AT HUMANITY
AND NATURE IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM STAFFORD

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Mr. David Allan Evans
Thesis Advisor

Dr. George West
Head, English Dept.
for the memory of
Papa Aldrick Beans
a man who taught me
much
with few words
and many actions

and

for my father
who taught me
to appreciate
nature
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On an unseasonably warm Saturday afternoon in mid-January 1989, I drove from my home in Wagner, over to nearby Fort Randall Dam on the Missouri River, with the intention of observing a group of Bald Eagles wintering near the dam, sustaining themselves on small fish snatched from the surface of the water. A week earlier, in minus twenty degree below zero Fahrenheit windchill factor, I had spied on a group of five mature and immature eagles circling repeatedly, winding in slow spirals to the surface of the river to snatch small fish in talons, and in one smooth motion swing the legs and beak to meet each other at the junction of talons and fish. They did this--circling, swooping to water, feeding and circling continuously for nearly forty-five minutes--all in flight. They seemed to be in nearly perfect cohesion with their environment. Literature about the dam stated that roughly 120 eagles wintered in the area. I wondered whether this union was a direct result originating from the construction of the dam or whether this winter gathering of bald eagles was a perennial event occurring on the Missouri long before the white man, his explosives, concrete, and steel.

The artificial dam and record-warm temperatures attracted a large number of people fishing or sight-seeing. There were no eagles to be seen. Discouraged as they may have been by the droves of people, I too fled away from the din of kicker motors, the
waffling of human discussion, cursing and laughter, and automobile
tires scrunching steadily on dry gravel--to a nearby wooded area
well away from roads, but still civilized as evident in the "Game
Production Area" sign and litter from a recent oil change; an old
discarded oil filter and five empty plastic quart containers stained
the earth. The tracks of hiking boot and athletic shoe were
imprinted on the soil of a narrow dusty path which snaked from the
graveled and rutted driveup area into the woods.

I followed the path into the wooded area--a mixture of
deciduous and fir trees, native grasses, and glacial rock. The
combination of a temperature nearing the sixty-degree mark with a
complete absence of any breeze created a surrealistic effect for the
January afternoon in South Dakota. The day could have easily passed
for Indian summer but for the barren trees, tawny grasses, and the
decaying, rotting, brown and blackened moist leaves littering the
ground. Soon the leaf matter would have decomposed enough to
return its minerals to the soil.

Eventually I neared a very small stream winding its way
through the trees to the Missouri. Its four-to-five-feet breadth was
frozen; but in the warm January thaw, a sheen of water slithered
down the ice to meet its destination, the river, precursor to the big
thaw of the distant spring season.

I stepped hesitantly onto the ice--the thin layer of water was
not deep enough to overlap the soles of my boots--and found the ice
secure. I walked quickly across, my heels breaking through on the
last two steps, startling a slinking mink hunting near the creek. My eyes strained to catch a clear glimpse of him as he bounded away into the woods. I was the intruder here. I didn't belong.

I move quietly for a human. Even more quietly when I am exploring woods and prairies and trying to watch and listen for wildlife before I am sensed. Yet by far the loudest noises I heard were made by my own locomotion. The supreme stillness of the day amplified all sound so that even the fluttering of a winter sparrow disturbed the air.

The earth rose again after I crossed the crick and I soon found the trees giving way to open prairie grasses amid yucca on rolling buttes overlooking the Missouri. I spied a close high hill and marked its summit as my destination. For the next twenty minutes, I thought of little else other than my sweaty body, my tiring legs, and reaching the top.

At last I reached my goal; I had conquered the hill. But as I scanned the 360-degree view from the top, I realized once again how strikingly distant I was from a true union with the setting. Typically, I had set out to "conquer" rather than attempt a harmony with nature.

Later, as I was on my way down the hill, I took a slightly different route and found the bleached skull of a deer. Only the top part of the skull and two broken prongs of antler stubs remained, the rest having long been recycled to the earth either through decomposition by sun, heat, moisture, and cold, or through
decomposition in the digestive tracts of mammals in need of calcium. When my body ceases to function, more than likely some relative will secure me in a steel and wooden casket, drop me into a hole in the ground, slop the dirt on top of me and my box, supposedly "returning me to the earth from whence I came." But I will lie there for years--even dead I will be far from uniting with nature, for the walls of my casket will keep me from ever completely returning to the earth. Perhaps, though, a century or two later, the casket walls will finally break down, releasing me back to the earth--a process which took only months for this deer.

My little trek into nature concluded abruptly when I climbed into my old Dodge pickup and reluctantly slammed its door. The loud, tinny noise sounded unnatural and artificial, further distancing me from the earth. The door slam almost seemed an intrusion into the otherwise still air.

I have always been a student of nature--an amateur naturalist if you will--but I first began to consider seriously the harmony of people and nature in late 1982 while attending Western Oregon State College. During that time I met William, a full-blooded Yup'ik Eskimo from Mt. Village, Alaska. During our long walks together at nearby Basket Slough National Wildlife Refuge, we shared many thoughts on the relationships between wildlife, humans and the mechanical world as well as the differences between Anglos' and Native Americans' attitudes towards nature. But it was not
until the summer of 1984, when I went to Alaska with William to live and work with him and his family at their summer fish camp on the lower Yukon River, that I began to realize the strong differences between his and my cultures in our relationships with the natural world.

William and his family regarded the river with reverence—as if it were their very lifeblood. Even in the 1980's, they depended on the river for most of their income, through commercial fishing, and 100% of the protein in their diet, from subsistence fishing of whitefish, char, and blackfish, four species of salmon, and subsistence hunting of moose, duck, goose, beaver, and swan. William's father felt such a close tie to the river that when the family moved from their tiny, drafty home on a cliff overlooking the Yukon to a much larger modern house on a small hill several miles from the river, the old man was homesick for the little shack on the river even though it lacked functional indoor plumbing.

Papa Bean's lifetie to the Yukon River, by which he had lived right on or very near to, all of his seventy years, was most clearly made evident during his visit to Oregon for William's college graduation in 1985. While in Oregon, he became ill with no symptoms other than extreme fatigue. William estimated that his father missed the river and would feel better when he got home to the river. And he did.

Before Papa Beans died of lung cancer in 1988, he had left me a lasting image of a man who was closer than anyone I had ever known
to harmony with nature. He did not just take from nature, exploiting it like so many so-called "outdoorsmen." The family preferred to reside during the summer months at their summer fish camp on the Yukon River. They needed to harvest fish but also they could live away from the village, thus away from other people and the usual entrapments of civilization, even though that meant they would be without the conveniences of civilization such as electricity and running water or even an outhouse.

The greatest honor I've ever received in my life was to be called "grandson" by Papa Beans, and to be given a Yup'ik name—Wichimaluq—which literally means "was awake for a long time" and metaphorically means "a wise one." But even with these honors, I will never be able to achieve the relationship with nature that they have, especially Papa Beans, since I have been reared in the mechanical-technological world of the Anglo.
INTRODUCTION

During the spring of 1985, William Stafford came to my college campus in Monmouth, Oregon, which is only some forty miles from his home in Lake Oswego. He read some of his poetry--appropriately at an outdoor theater. I remember Stafford as a short man, older than I expected, yet vital despite his quavering voice. Since then I have remained fascinated with his poetry. In many of his poems, Stafford seems to be contemplating, in various forms, harmony of people and nature and the requirements and difficulties associated with that harmony--a topic I had been discussing for several years with my Yup'ik Eskimo friend, William Beans. Until I had observed William's father interact with the ecosystem of the lower Yukon River in Alaska, harmony between people and nature had only been an idea to me, a concept. But Stafford's reading of his poetry, coming a short while after my trip to Alaska, and along with actually seeing harmony between a living man in Papa Beans and Nature, served to push me harder to think, research, and read about the relationship between people and Nature. This motivated me, several years later, to write my thesis on the relationship of humanity and nature in the poetry of William Stafford.

During the initial months, I titled this project, "The Cohesion of Humanity and nature in the Poetry of William Stafford." I soon discovered, however, that only a few of Stafford's poems actually discuss a relationship between humanity and nature that can be
labeled as "cohesive." I thought of "cohesion" and "harmony" as synonyms for each other. But after comparing definitions for both words in dictionaries, I learned that there are indeed differences between the two words. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (referred henceforth as OED) defines cohesion as "the action of cohering, cleaving or sticking together" (450). *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (referred henceforth as RHD) lists virtually the same definition for "cohesion" as the OED, adding the word "uniting" as a synonym for "cohesion." RHD entries for "cohesion" also include: "union of one part with another (401).

*The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* states that cohesion first came into the English Language in 1678, and was borrowed from the Latin word "cohaesionem" which means "to stick together" (187). The root definition "stick together" is also the first entry given for cohesion in volume I of *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (310).

Whether "cohesion" is viewed as "uniting as one" or "the act of sticking together," neither definition is an appropriate term for describing the ideal relationship between modern humanity and Nature. Perhaps long ago, when people huddled under animal furs and skins around an open fire, they were united or were a cohesive part of nature. The sole purpose in life, back then, was to survive. nature was the enemy--a force to fight and fear--bringing illness, violence, natural disaster, disease, and dangerous animals. But nature was also a friend and provider: Fire protected people, kept
them warm, and enabled them to make tools and weapons; caves and wood from the forests provided them with shelter; clothing and some tools came from the animals they preyed upon. Fire, caves, forests, and animals in the forest are parts of nature. And as dominant predators in their environment, people were an integral part of nature also. They cohered with nature.

But somewhere over the millennia, as people gradually grew apart and away from a cohesion with nature, they forgot that nature was a friend and a provider and only thought of nature as an enemy to be controlled. After people first learned to control fire, controlling the world around them became a driving force in their lives. In efforts to control, people removed themselves from nature and created their own artificial, unnatural world of steel, concrete, and plastic. Today nearly every aspect of people's lives is manufactured--made, changed, altered from its original, natural state by people whether it be their own hair, their food, or the landscape. However, even though today humans can control many things, they still can not control all aspects of nature.

Because many of us have mostly removed ourselves from nature and placed ourselves in our own artificial world, we can never be in cohesion--united, as one with nature, again. Yes, there are, even today, in remote places of the world, people who actually are one with nature, and a few of Stafford's poems include brief moments whereby humans are in cohesion with nature, but the rest of us, including both this writer and this paper's readers, are
perhaps too dependent on our artificial, self-made world of automobiles, air conditioning and electric blankets to ever again be cohesive with nature. But we can attempt a harmony with nature.

"Harmony" is a better word than "cohesion" to describe the desired modern relationship between humanity and nature. Entry one in the QED defines "harmony" as the "combination or adaptation of parts, elements, or related things, so as to form a consistent and orderly whole" (1125). RHD synonyms for "harmony" include: "unity, peace, amity, and friendship" (873). Both the QED and Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary state that "harmony" comes from a Greek word that means "joint" or "joining together" (1125 and 554). The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology defines "harmony" as coming from the Greek word "harmós," which means "arm" (466).

In many of Stafford's poems, a requirement for people attempting a harmony with nature is the touch of the hand with nature. Therefore, remembering that the word "harmony" comes from a Greek word which means "arm," "harmony is nearly a perfect word for describing the ideal modern relationship between humanity and nature. I have included the word "nearly," here, because the "arm" is certainly not the part of the body that we typically think of as "touching" something. But the human arm does "join together"--to use a common definition of "harmony"--the hand with the body. Therefore, "harmony" works on two levels when discussing the relationship between humans and nature: first, during the act of touching, the human hand joins nature with the human arm.
Secondly, the arm joins the hand—the part of human anatomy that touches nature—with the human body. In other words, the unit of the human arm and the human hand work together to join the human being with nature. Humans can learn to exist harmoniously and peacefully with nature.

Nevertheless, in spite of this discussion on why "harmony" is a better word than "cohesion" for describing the ideal relationship between modern humanity and nature, I cannot ignore "cohesion" when discussing Stafford's poetry. Indeed, there are some of Stafford's poems, as we'll see in the fourth chapter, where the human persona and nature do, however briefly, unite as one. "Cohesion," then, in these few instances, is a more appropriate word than "harmony." Further, in this paper, "cohesion" and "harmony," are not viewed as separate and differing terms; I view "cohesion of humanity and nature" where people and nature become united as one body as an extreme of "harmony of people and nature," where people and nature join and live side by side in peace.

With the exception of the poem, "A Quiet Day at The Beach," which comes from Stafford's collection of poems titled, Smoke's Way, all of the poems studied in this paper come from Stafford's Stories That Could be True: New and Collected Poems, which contains all of the poems in the following collections: Stories That Could be True (1977), West of Your City (1960), Traveling Through the Dark (1962), The Rescued Year (1966), Allegiances (1970), and Someday Maybe (1973).
In the first chapter, "The Animal that Drinks up Everything," I will deliberate upon those poems whereby Stafford announces the necessity for concern for the continued existence of nature. In the second and third chapters, "Touching Nature" and "Traveling Through the Dark," I will discuss those poems in which Stafford highlights encounters, whether accidental or intentional, of people nearing harmony with nature. I will also disclose here some difficulties and criteria needed for harmony of people and nature including: the touch of hands as a means of reaching harmony, and humility as a requirement of people attempting a harmony with nature. When I endeavored to conquer the hill near the Missouri River, I was trying to control, not harmonize with nature; I was not exhibiting humility. Papa Beans had great respect for the fish, mammals, and birds he took from nature for his subsistence. The carcasses of all animals consumed were buried so that their souls could return to the earth, their origin. Papa Beans had humility when approaching nature. In the third chapter, "Traveling Through the Dark," I will also include some arguments about the poem, "Traveling Through the Dark," mainly with Stafford's alleged discomfort as a poet with his new region, the Pacific Northwest, and Stafford's attitude towards animals and humans. In the fourth chapter, "Celebrating the harmony," I will discuss those poems where humans, although briefly, reach a harmony with nature.
Chapter One
The Animal that Drinks up Everything

Although there has been little written about Stafford's poetry, what criticism there is deals mainly with his regionalism. Stafford lived in two regions of the United States that have profoundly influenced his art: Kansas and Iowa of the Midwest and the upper Willamette Valley of western Oregon, which is located between the Cascade Mountain range to the east and the Coastal Mountain range to the West.

This paper explores the Pacific Northwest, namely the western Oregon regional poetry of William Stafford—and in these poems—his ponderings of humanity's mature relationship with nature. It is in the poetry of this area that Stafford makes his loudest cries for the necessity of a harmony between humanity and nature.

With downhill skiing available nearly year around at ski meccas in the Cascades, with some of the most exciting sport fishing in the United States found on the Willamette and Columbia Rivers as well as great steelhead fishing on their tributaries, with hiking through beautiful forests and around magnificent waterfalls, and with the rugged Oregon Coast some sixty-five miles to the west—where sightings of whales, seals, sea-lions, and rare sea birds are common—the Portland, Oregon area is ideally located for those people wishing to make a good living, wishing to have access to the best shopping, entertainment, and medical facilities in the
state, and for those outdoor enthusiasts wishing for an escape from harried city life on the weekends and holidays. And apparently many people are attracted to this environment; roughly two-thirds of the entire population of Oregon live in the extreme western fourth of the state with populations centering in and around Portland, Salem, and Eugene with many smaller towns surrounding each metro area.

It is in one of these small towns, Lake Oswego, that William Stafford made his home while he taught at Lewis and Clark College in Portland.

Environmental issues are on the minds of nearly every Oregonian as Oregon has been one of the country's leaders among states concerned with the preservation of the natural environment. These issues can directly or indirectly affect nearly everyone living in western Oregon. Most will readily chose one of two opposing sides: either the environmentalist, "save-the-wilderness" side or the economist, "save-jobs-industry-and-business" side. Further, with its natural beauty and opposing technological industry such as logging and paper products, metallurgy, and electronics, Oregon is an ideal setting for William Stafford to see the struggle between humanity and nature and to ask why such a struggle is necessary. Wouldn't an attempt at harmony be much more beneficial to both people and nature? First, though, Stafford must point out to us the necessity for the harmony.

Stafford wrote "The Animal that Drank up Sound" after hearing some American Indian Legends; he wanted to make up his own legend
"in which the elements of the natural world were used as characters in a story of human significance" (Holden 30). Larger than that, the resulting poem can be viewed as Stafford's signaling of humanity's tendency for destruction of the environment. The "animal" is people---more specifically people's eyes (31)---with a great hunger to consume everything seen---similar to people destroying forests, grasslands, and wetlands for their own self-centered purpose. The "animal"---human eyes---has a tremendous drive to "drink up sound"---the beautiful natural cohesive world.

What happens when everything is consumed?
He drank till winter, and then looked out one night at the stilled places guaranteed around by frozen peaks and held in the shallow pools of starlight. It was finally tall and still, and he stopped on the highest ridge, just where the cold sky fell away like a perpetual curve, and from there he walked on silently, and began to starve.

When the moon drifted over that night the whole world lay just like the moon, shining back that still silver, and the moon saw its own animal dead on the snow, its dark absorbant paws and quiet muzzle, and thick, velvet, deep fur. (Stories 146)

But Stafford has hope; there is a survivor, who has escaped the glance of the animal, a cricket that has one the boldest and lively
sounds in the natural world. Perhaps Stafford hopes that shortly before the consuming of the natural environment is complete, we will be forced to clarify, to see clearly, finally recognizing the value of the natural land. At that moment harmony can begin to occur.

In the title alone, "The Animal that Drank up Sound," Stafford blends five sensory images into one metaphor; he omits only one sense: olfactory. As stated earlier, "the animal" is symbolic of human eyes; therefore in this line, "the animal" implies the sense of sight. The word "drank" alone suggests two sensory images: tactile and gustatory. "Up" hints of kinesthetics and dimension. "Sound," of course, implies the auditory sense. Eyes drinking up a beautiful sight is a very common metaphor, almost to the point of achieving the status of a cliche, but eyes drinking up sound is a strikingly new metaphor and one that can easily be used to describe humanity's destruction of the environment.

Ever present in Stafford's mind, as he contemplates humanity's drinking up the sound of the natural world, is the threat of nuclear holocaust; especially horrifying are missile silos and bomb-testing sites dotting the otherwise natural landscape in some regions. Not only are we seemingly bent on attempting to drink up the environment with technology and industry, but we appear bent on a violent destruction of the remaining world.

In music, "harmony" is the blending of musical notes, either simultaneous or successive, to produce pleasing sounds. The sounds
in nature also blend together; the producers of these sounds—birds, wind, and wind rushing through vegetation—are musically in harmony with each other and their environment. But humanity's initial approach to nature, like my attempt to conquer the hill by the Missouri River, is to control nature. In trying to control, people create disharmony between themselves and nature and disharmony within nature. For instance, the annihilation of the wolf by humans in many ecosystems has created disharmony. Without their major predator, the deer population becomes so large that they overpopulate themselves to the point of mass starvation.

Often in Stafford's poetry, animals are not only more in harmony with the natural environment than humans, but they also have an ability to understand or see the horrible consequences of the future that humans, too consumed by greed, fail to acknowledge. Nature is represented by the lowly, simple lizard in "At the Bomb Testing Site."

At noon in the desert, a panting lizard waited for history, its elbow tense, watching the curve of a particular road as if something might happen.

It was looking at something further off than people could see, an important scene acted in stone for little selves at the flute end of consequences.
There was just a continent without much on it under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert. (Stories 41)
The entire poem is symbolic of the destruction of the earth. The lizard, a small, seemingly insignificant creature, "waits for history"-- which with its bombs will annihilate him (Holden 44). But the lizard is a cohesive member of the desert ecosystem and in harmony with the environment. Insects and spiders provide food for him. He, in turn, unconsciously protects the environment by checking and controlling the insect population. And in time, his body will provide nourishment for a coyote, rattlesnake, or roadrunner. All these natural members of the desert are in harmony with each other and their environment.

The bomb-testing site and the people controlling it, however, are nowhere near a harmony with the desert. They are aliens. The lizard views them from a distance and can see something they can not see simply because he is in harmony with the desert, while they are not. Therefore the lizard's harmony with the desert enables him to be able "to look at something further off than people could see": the destruction of the natural world (Holden 44). Anticipating the change and the scant time left of the natural world, the lizard readies himself, with "hands gripping hard" on the desert--perhaps holding onto what is left of it.
Similarly, "Our City is Guarded by Automatic Rockets" also has a reluctant animal observer of the approaching doom. The cat in this poem, however, is much more active than the lizard in "At the Bomb Testing Site." The poem shows that we are diverted away from what is right or good according to the laws of the universe by our denial of the natural process. This denial is present in the first lines of the first stanza:

Breaking every law except one
for Go, rolling its porpoise way, the rocket
staggers on its course; its feelers lock
a stranglehold ahead; (Stories 121)

The rocket is symbolic of our denial of the natural process; we are "breaking every law except one for go": technological progress. The rocket also symbolizes that progress. Stafford ends the first stanza with "power is not enough." We want more than power; we want to consume everything; we want to control.

The second stanza offers a possible solution if we take time to look to nature for an answer:

Bough touching bough touching . . . till the shore,
a lake, an undecided river, and a lake again
saddling the divide: a world that won't be wise
and let alone, but instead is found outside
by little channels, linked by chance, not stern;
and then when once we're sure we hear a guide
it fades away toward the opposite end of the road
from home—the world goes wrong in order to have revenge.

Our lives are an amnesty given us. (121)

Water, historically a symbol of rebirth, flows from lake to river to lake again, but it ultimately finds its destination through a trial and error process—"Nature corrects itself" (Holden 45). Further, water, as a part of the natural world, is a link between humanity and nature in that we need to consume water in order for our bodies to survive. Besides this basic need, we enjoy being near bodies of water, not just for the sports of boating, swimming, and fishing, but also for the sensual enjoyment of watching the water undulate and listening to it. Who can resist the sensual pleasure of listening to the tide of the ocean, the roar of a large waterfall, and the tinkling of stream water over rocks? Listening to these sounds causes us to reflect; we can't help but consider nature as an entity we must harmonize with when we hear the sounds of water in nature. Indeed, Stafford calls water a "guide": "and then once we're sure we hear a guide it fades away toward the opposite end of the road from home." The sounds of water in nature lure us toward a reconciliation with nature. And that may be away from the typical approach to nature we had in the past: to control. Water calls for us to harmonize with nature.

To be sure, we have made the mistake in the past of trying to control rather than harmonize with nature, but we may have to make mistakes—trial and error—in order to find the right approach to nature: "the world goes wrong in order to help revenge." Because we
continue to "live and learn from our mistakes," we are forgiven by nature if we learn to try to harmonize rather than control: our lives are an amnesty given us."

In the last stanza, the cat, like the lizard in "At the Bomb Testing Site," readies itself for the future. But while the lizard is merely a reflective onlooker, the cat has an active role. For a few moments, the persona is the cornered cat spitting life while guarding the last thicket. In this way, Stafford brings us back to the warning of the first stanza: "I think our story should not end or go--on in the dark with no one listening." Stafford will be there until the end spitting calls for the necessity of our harmony with the natural environment.

Stafford's spitting calls can also be seen in "Watching the Jet Planes Dive," where he begins by asserting "We must go back and find a trail on the ground back of the forest and mountain on the slow land" and seek out "wild beginnings." And later, "we must find something forgotten by everyone alive and make a fabulous gesture"--similar to worship--"like ritual" (Stafford, Stories 44 and Carpenter 18).

Lensing and Moran state in their book, Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination: Robert Bly, James Wright, Louis Simpson, and William Stafford, that this is one of Stafford's most explicit poems on the necessity of pursuing a harmony with nature: "Only such 'wild beginnings' will counter the frantic and eccentric patterns of modern life." The authors assert that Stafford calls for a return to a
life that we have forgotten—that has even a closer relationship with nature than that of the English Romantic's noble savage (Lensing 212). In this sense, "cohesion" may be a better word than "harmony." In another poem, "Level Light," Stafford sums up both the trial- and-error theme of the second stanza of "Our City is Guarded by Automatic Rockets" and the return not to "aboriginal sources, but a forgotten past more intimately connected with the land" (Lensing 212) theme of the last stanza of "Watching the Jet Planes Dive" with three lines printed in italics: "It is too late now for earlier ways / and now there are only some other ways / and only one way to find them—fail" (Stafford, Stories 50).

Often Stafford uses various forms of water—lakes, rivers, streams, and marshes—as a symbol of approaches to nature, as we have seen in "Our City is Guarded by Automatic Rockets." Water is also used as a symbol of a meeting place with nature which we'll see with "Ceremony" in the next chapter. Water historically has been referred to as one of our most basic elements, along with earth, wind, and fire. So the presence of water in Stafford's poems, particularly those discussing harmony between humans and nature, is not accidental. And, as I pointed out earlier, water can serve as the call from nature to humanity for harmony. Sometimes Stafford uses water to make a very direct point about the necessity for harmony between humanity and nature: "When a dirty river and a clean river come together the result is/ a dirty river." Lesson: Keep all rivers clean so they won't dirty each other.
Dirty water encroaching on clean water is not the only
waterborne symbol of humanity's destruction of the environment;
Stafford's poems also speak of violent physical destruction and
obstruction of life on waterways. Stafford, as stated before, is
concerned for the welfare of nature, especially in that first
awkward and often violent contact when certain means of our
technology might endanger the natural patterns of the wilderness--
in this case, the waterlife of the Columbia River separating the
states of Oregon and Washington. The poem is called "The Fish
Counter at Bonneville."

Downstream they have killed the river and built a dam;
by that power they wire to here a light:
a turbine strides high poles to spit its flame
at this flume going down. A spot glows white
where an old man looks on at the ghosts of the game
in the flickering twilight -- deep dumb shapes that glide.

So many Chinook souls, so many Silverside.

(Stories 43)

In this poem, Stafford presents the dam as the initial violent
encounter with nature: "They have killed the river and built a dam."
The representatives of nature in the poem, the fish, are portrayed as
"ghosts of the game." "Flickering twilight" suggests the uncertain
future of the fishes' existence. "Dumb" in "deep dumb, shapes" has a
double meaning in the word "dumb": one, the fish are mute, they can not voice their protests, and two, the fish may be ignorant and cannot understand the complexities of technology.

"At the Salt Marsh" also shows a violently destructive contact with nature. The persona is hunting teal with "killer guns" in a "blind deceitful in the rain." After some ducks are shot, he "scatters my asking" "to come tell me why it was all right." He ponders while holding the duck head "how broken parts can be wrong but true."

In the midst of the "progress" of humanity drinking up the remaining but rapidly diminishing natural world, of bomb testing sites, of huge river dams, polluted water, automatic rockets, and other violent, uncaring encounters with nature, Stafford remains optimistic and calls for us to look to nature as a solution.

In Response to a Question
The earth says have a place, be what that place requires; hear the sound the birds imply and see as deep as ridges go behind each other. (Some people call their scenery flat their only picture framed by what they know: I think around them rise a riches and a loss too equal for their chart -- but absolutely tall.)

The earth says every summer have a ranch that's minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape that proclaims a universe -- sermon
of the hills, hallelujah mountain,
highway guided by the way the world is tilted,
reduplication of mirage, flat evening:
 a kind of ritual for the wavering.

The earth says where you live wear the kind
of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)
and by listening with the same bowed head that sings
draw all into one song, join
the sparrow on the lawn, and row that easy
way, the rage without met by the wings
within that guide you anywhere the wind blows

Listening, I think that's what the earth says.

(Stories 75-76)

Here again Stafford displays the natural world as a model for human activity or process. In the first stanza, Stafford calls for us to become so intimately involved, partially through the senses, with a natural place that we can critically understand what the birds may be speaking to us and to see what the earth displays far beyond what is visually understood.

The first two lines of the second stanza, "the Earth says every summer have a ranch that's minimum: one tree, one well, one landscape" echo Thoreau's "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity." Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary gives a definition of "minimum" as "the least quantity assignable, admissible, or
possible" (756). Connotations of "minimum" in this poem allude to humility. By "have a ranch that's minimum" Stafford could be suggesting, "have a humble life." As we'll see in the next chapter, Stafford believes that one of the qualities that we must adopt to attempt a harmony with Nature is humility.

The third stanza repeats the call for simplistic observations of the first stanza as well as the call for a humble minimum of the second stanza. Again, Stafford calls attention to bird songs--this time for us to join in song with the sparrow on the lawn. He suggests that we be satisfied with the simple humbleness--"the Earth says where you live wear the kind of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)." "In Response to a Question" ends by mentioning that "listening" is "what the earth says." The ever hopeful Stafford concludes a later poem, "Earth Dweller" with "the world speaks everything to us. It is our only friend."
Chapter Two

Touching Nature

A major theme of the English Romantic Movement during the early eighteenth century was that people and nature were not or should not be two forces determined to see the destruction of the other, but rather that people and nature were complementary of each other and could live harmoniously. The American Romantics carried this concern a bit further. Thoreau emphasized simplicity in everyday living. William Stafford employs a combination of those two most basic Romantic tenets by viewing Nature as uncorrupted and primitive--and as a wellspring of wisdom and love.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Stafford is concerned with those human forces which endanger the wilderness. He believes that when we removed ourselves from nature to hide in our own steel and cement world of artificiality, we began to lose touch with the real world. Through indifference, Stafford believes, we have lost our sense of position of being part of the greater whole. In this failing, our perception of significance became dissolved into a measurement of our materialistic, technological achievements.

Stafford believes that we can reconcile ourselves with nature only by learning to respond to life with curiosity and understanding rather than through indifference and a materialistic focus. Like Robert Frost, he calls for an exploration of the simple, ordinary experience of everyday living that is too often taken for granted.
Only by seeking out the ordinary, the simple—through a reconciliation with nature—can we ever find peace within ourselves.

In the last chapter I explored those poems in which Stafford has signaled the necessity of a harmony between nature and ourselves, and pointed out our pernicious need to "drink up all the sound." In this chapter I will be exploring those poems whereby Stafford discusses encounters, whether accidental or intentional, in which humans approach a harmony with nature along with the difficulties and requirements needed for harmony between humans and nature.

In "Ceremony," Stafford displays a Frostian talent for focusing on a small instance of time, and through the use of metaphors, making time wholly relevant:

On the third finger of my left hand under the bank of the Ninnescah a muskrat whirled and bit to the bone. The mangled hand made the water red.

That was something the ocean would remember: I saw me in the current flowing through the land, rolling, touching roots, the world incarnadined, and the river richer by a kind of marriage.

While in the woods an owl started quavering
with drops like tears I raised my arm.
Under the bank a muskrat was trembling
with meaning my hand would wear forever.

In that river my blood flowed on. (Stories 30)

Here, Stafford drives home his belief that we must come in close contact with nature in order to achieve reconciliation, then finally come to a peace with ourselves. The persona, who has been exploring along the banks of the Ninnescah River in Oregon, is bitten on a finger by a muskrat. While observing his blood coloring the water, the persona reflects on the union of himself (his blood) with nature (the river) and how the river will take his blood--"I saw in me that current flowing through the land, rolling, touching roots" (30). A Wordsworthian mature relationship with nature—the spiritual union between humans and nature—can be recalled in "the world incarnadined," and the river richer by a kind of marriage." As Edward Garner states in an essay about William Stafford in Critical Survey of Poetry, "He became one with the river, the ocean, a vast stream flowing through all life" (2723). In this sense, the persona has achieved unity—a cohesion with nature.

The muskrat, too is affected by the violent, brief union "under the bank of the Ninnescah"; for afterwards he sits "trembling with meaning my hand would wear forever." "Trembling" has a double meaning: the wild animal could be trembling with afterfright because of the contact with the human persona as well as trembling
at the possibilities of humans interacting, perhaps even sharing, his habitat. Considering this, the narrator has made two contacts, however brief, with nature: one with the river and one with the muskrat. No doubt some residue from the biting muskrat's saliva is left in the wound of the persona; thus another kind of mingling of fluids occurs. What Stafford doesn't mention here in the poem is the background of the metaphor found in: "and the river richer by a kind of marriage." Not only does the violent bite of the muskrat cause the man's blood to mix with water and "flow on through the land," but it also causes human blood and muskrat saliva to join as one in the body of the human.

The background in "Found in a Storm" is violent weather. The characters are camping in a tent on a mountainside when a storm unexpectedly comes up. Another accidental encounter with nature appears in the lines, "the persuaded snow streaked along, guessing the ground." Like "Ceremony," in which the persona is in a place where the muskrat does not expect him and is scared enough to bite him, here in "Found in a Storm," the storm and snow do not expect to find the campers where they are: "the snow streaks along guessing the ground" (Stafford, Stories 102).

As in the first part of "Ceremony," the narrator of "Witness" encounters nature with his hand dipped in the water. This incident, nevertheless, is far less physical and violent than the one in "Ceremony":

This is the hand I dipped in the Missouri
above Council Bluffs and found the springs.
All through the days of my life I escort
this hand, where would the Missouri
meet a kinder friend? (242)

By focusing on a simple, ordinary incident here, as he did in "Ceremony," Stafford implies one of the requirements for a harmony between people and nature: humility, just as we saw in "In Response to a Question" in the previous chapter. The hand is important to the narrator—it is a symbol of the contact with nature. That contact can be both destructive or, as in this poem, "a kinder friend."

In the second stanza, the narrator, while pondering his hand, has another small contact with nature: "On top of Fort Rock in the sun I spread / these fingers to hold the world in the wind;" and later "I grubbed in the dirt / for those cool springs again" (242).

Stafford could not have chosen a better object than the hand to express the contact with nature. The adaptive flexible hand when combined with the human brain serves to separate us from all other animals, enabling us to perform tasks no other creature is capable of doing. With those attributes comes a forbidding responsibility: we can be both destructive or beneficial to nature. We have the choice. To touch nature is the simplest way of expressing a contact with nature. As infants, our first contact with the unknown world around us comes from a reach and a grasp with the hand. With our sight, hearing, and smell, we are mere observers; but with our hands touching and mouths tasting, we become participators intimately
involved with the world. Our hands are our best means of attempting a harmony with nature—if I had not stopped to bend over and pick up the broken old deer skull on my way down the butte overlooking the Missouri River last January, I would never have experienced the fleeting, reflective moment of contact with nature. The roots of this thesis paper may never have taken hold. Stafford’s persona may not have been forced to "scatter his asking" in "At the Salt Marsh" had he not been holding the duck head.

The gustatory sense is only secondary to the tactile one in our participation of the world. In order to taste, we must use our hands first to bring the object to our mouths. Therefore we touch before we taste, we often touch without tasting, but taste is always preceded by touch; our hands are the initial contact with nature. Even as adults, when confronted by an interesting object or something textually pleasing, such as fine wool cloth, we are not satisfied by drinking in the encounter with our eyes alone; we must reach for a feel, a touch. Our need to feel the world around us is so strong that objects of very great monetary value are displayed with warnings such as "look but don't touch."

Even in the third stanza of Stafford's poem, the narrator continues exploring the world with a hand. The poem ends with: "when we all tremble and lose, I will reach / carefully, eagerly through that rain, at the end-- / Toward whatever is there, with this loyal hand" (242). The hand, then, is the "witness"—the observer—the contact with nature.
The hands in the last stanza of "A Look Returned" are not the appendages of human but rather a metaphor for nature touching man (Kyle 200). But these hands of nature do clutch in a humanlike manner:

But that state so north it curled behind
the map in the hands of snow and wind,
clutching the end of no place--
I hold that state before my face,
and learn my life. (Stafford, Stories 103)

Raccoons are animals that, like humans, have very flexible hands and use them to grasp and clutch objects. In "Connections," a raccoon puts its hand in the swamp attempting to find, as Lensing and Moran point out, a "manifestation of the vital undersurface life of the wilderness" (206). It searches "for tendrils that will hold it all together" (Stafford, Stories 53). Yet, it fails, as line five explains: "No touch can find that thread, it is too small." But the remainder of stanza two suggests "Sometimes we think we learn its course--/ through evidence no court allows / a sneeze may glimpse us Paradise" (Stafford, Stories 53)--there may be an unorthodox or even a simple, obvious way of achieving the connection, the harmony with the environment, one we have overlooked. Like the raccoon, the human cannot "put his hand in to locate the thread." Nevertheless, "ways without a surface can be explored" (Lensing 206).
The poem contains two levels of connections. First, the man and the raccoon are on the same level, both individually seeking connections to the "undersurface life of the wilderness" (206). Both the man and the raccoon fail. In the third stanza, however, the raccoon becomes a connection to wilderness for the man. The raccoon is a wild, cohesive member of the swamp land and like humans, by having hands that can touch and hold, and an expressive face like humans, it is a good mediator, the "thread" between humanity and the swamp land wilderness. The "raccoon smile" of the third stanza is the connection, here, between human and nature.

The last line of the poem--"and if we purify the pond, the lilies die" warns us that if we seek to control, we will kill. People and nature may always be separated because we are too self-centered, too controlling; we lack the necessary characteristic for harmony: humility.

Stafford exhibits a humble attitude in "Sauvies Island." He writes:

What do we gain on Sauvies Island? I can tell you in the space of this one little block: neglect.
We don't expect or give anything--we just go hunting. It's a wild spot, and little is expected. (43)

Lying on the Columbia River in Oregon with the urban sprawl of Portland to the west and the huge hydroelectric dams, including Bonneville of "The Fish Counter at Bonneville" to the east, Sauvies Island is more than just a geological formation--it is a solitary
island surrounded by a sea of human technology exploiting nature. Stafford concludes the poem with "My life has become counted on by too many nice people; I going back I hunt little surprises, and Sauvies Islands." There is only one Sauvies Island, but here Stafford pluralizes "Island" because he is constantly searching for those places that have not been "drunk up" by greedy human eyes. These places require little of him and even the chance to experience "little surprises" (Carpenter 17).

The same focus on a place or item of neglect is found in "Glimpses in the Woods" and "Deerslayer's Campfire Talk." Each poem centers on a small thing--a yew tree in the middle of a forest in "Glimpses in the Woods," and rock in "Deerslayer's Campfire Talk"-which endures unnoticed and unimportant. "Deerslayer's Campfire Talk" concludes with: "the dim arch above us we seldom / regard, and--under us--the silent, / unnoted clasp of the rock." The yew tree in "Glimpses in the Woods" is described as "that hermit" . . . "useless for lumber, not even a weed, / a millionaire of disregard" (Stafford, Stories 137). Also here, as in "Sauvies Island," and "In Response to a Question," Stafford seeks the simple, the ordinary, the humble: "let me be remembered only for the mud on my hands"--again hands touching, feeling, holding the earth in an attempt for harmony with nature. This time the hands contact humbling mud.

For Stafford, the yew tree represents "self-containment," and "he views it as a symbol of 'that neglect the wilderness pours into the sky / lacking any viewer after Labor Day'" (Carpenter 34). The
mention of the holiday, with its suggestions of the hordes of people traveling into the wilderness and thereby destroying what they seek, suggests that poem’s persona has failed to learn what he came into the forest for: humility and "indifference" (34).

Finally, in the sixth stanza, Stafford comes close to a goal of learning humility: "I fall, freed on a new / level--beginning to learn for my life!" He ends the poem with:

Let any feather or branch on the wind occur, and a wind that polished the stars teach me indifference. I have known with an edge too clear. Yew tree, make me steadfast in my weakness: teach me the sacred blur.

(Stafford, *Stories* 137)
Chapter Three

Traveling Through the Dark

The Wilson River flows southeasterly from the Wilson River Summit, which is located in the interior of the Tillamook State Forest, to Tillamook Bay on the Oregon coast. The Wilson River Summit, lying in the coastal mountain range in western Oregon, is typical of most mountains with streams filled with snow runoff cascading and winding down its sides. Interestingly, one of these streams achieved river-naming status prior to the naming of the mountain of its origin: the Wilson River Summit.

The area, with many place names of Tillamook Indian origin, is steeped in Indian lore and legend. It is into this area, and on Oregon highway #6, better known in American poetry as the Wilson River Road, that William Stafford happened to be driving sometime during the early 1960's, and which inspired him to write his most famous poem, "Traveling Through the Dark"--one of the best known Twentieth Century American poems.

I have never driven on highway #6, which runs from U.S. highway #26 out of Portland southwesterly to the town of Tillamook near the coast and roughly paralleling the Wilson River, but I have driven on many quiet Oregon mountain highways late at night. These roads wind from curve to curve, round and round, back and forth, zigzagging down--or up, depending on the direction you are traveling--the mountains among tall pine and fir trees crowding the road's edge. Sometimes one side of the road has sheer canyon dropoffs with solid
walls of rock on the other. These roads, requiring complete alertness, judgement, and good reflexes, are a driving enthusiast's dream, and a nervous driver's nightmare. Having to swerve to avoid a frightened animal or the carcass of an animal, such as the freshly-killed doe in "Traveling Through the Dark," is not uncommon:

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 the 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,
avive 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.

(Stafford, *Stories* 61)

This poem is William Stafford's most anthologized poem. Nearly every essay, review, or dissertation on Stafford and his poetry includes it. The poem represents all of the notable elements in Stafford's poetry and characterizes his style.

"Traveling Through the Dark" has four quatrains and concludes with a couplet that serves to tie the poem together; Stafford seems to prefer this form, as many of his poems are written in quatrains. Sound devises are used throughout the poem to help emphasize a certain mood and action. In the first two lines, the punching alliteration of "d" sounds lends a crisp feeling to the reality of death. Stafford further stresses the reality of death by playing with the syntax. The narrator does not find "dead deer on the edge of the Wilson River road;" instead he finds "a deer dead on the edge . . . " with a line change between "deer" and "dead."

Stafford continues with crisp consonants, this time, however, slowing the pace a bit with the lateral and liquid consonants of "glow," "tail-light," "killing," "large," and "belly." Still we find "stiffened," "stood," "back," "heap," "dragged," and "stumbled."

Richard Hugo, another famous Pacific Northwest poet, believes that by choosing the word "stumbled," Stafford, the transplanted midwesterner who grew up in the rolling, nearly treeless prairies of Kansas with straight roads and big sky--a region that one can see
curve and a grand snow-covered mountain you never expected will bang your eyes. (Hugo 36)

Hugo claims that because of the oppressive feeling a Midwesterner experiences when transplanted in the Pacific Northwest, Stafford's early Oregon poems are overly sentimental. He does not own the places he tries to use for poems, and so he can only try to use them. The obsessive quality of ownership is missing. It is essential; the external must be possessed, not just observed. This failure to reach out and make the "new world" his, to treat the pines, the gulls, mountains, and streams as if he were the first man to see them, leads Stafford to resolve early Far West poems with overly-public "poetic" statements: "So many Chinook souls, so many Silverside." (36-37)

Later Hugo states that in spite of Stafford's problems of relating to his new region, he succeeds as a Northwest poet in "Traveling Through the Dark." Nevertheless, shortly thereafter Hugo points out a line in the second stanza--"I stumbled back of the car"--as further evidence of Stafford's initial discomfort with his new region.

The elements of the Pacific Northwest are there: the night-dark limit on vision contrasted to the unlimited views of bright, open Kansas plains (sometimes the Midwest is brighter at night than the Northwest during the day), the surprise you can't plan for because you can't see
that he would have been found on a mountain road late at night--let alone stopping to remove a deer carcass to prevent "mak[ing] more dead." "Stumbled" is both an honest and appropriate word as it shows the action of Stafford moving back to the deer as well as displaying his confused and questioning state of mind. He may, of course, have actually physically stumbled. The curves on mountain roads always slope away from the canyon side down towards the side of the mountain--the outside edge, the canyon edge, can be a good two to four feet higher than the mountain side of the road. After driving for some time, you tend to be stiff when getting out of the car. Then you find yourself walking on a road where one side is higher than the other forcing you to lift one leg higher, and you stumble. You stumble also because you are squinting, with only the "glow of the [red] tail-light[s]" as a light source, at a fresh dead deer carcass instead of on the place where your feet should be landing. "Stumbled" is a perfect word choice to imply both Stafford's physical locomotion and his possible state of mind.

Perhaps the popularity of this poem is a result of its direct sensory imagery which places the reader almost right in the poem with the persona and the confrontation with the dead deer. The blending of differing sensory images into metaphores--synaesthesia--is a characteristic of Stafford's poetry; his world of nature is more real and and believable because of this mixture of sensory images. The imagery in "Traveling Through the Dark" does not seem as abstract as it does in other poems of Stafford. The
The poem is full of sensory imagery, with major emphasis placed on tactile, visual, and kinesthetic images. The first line blends kinesthetic imagery in the word "Traveling" with visual imagery in "dark." "Edge" in the second line hints of tactile images. In the third line, Stafford brings us back to the opening, kinesthetic sense with: "roll them into the canyon." Then visual imagery again is found in "narrow," and kinesthetic in "swerve."

The second stanza continues with this emphasis on the visual ("glow," "heap," "stiffened," and "large") and the kinesthetic ("stumbled," "dragged"). "Glow," "stiffened," and "large" are also suggestive of touching, feeling; the tactile sense is even more obvious in the word "cold" at the end of the third line.

Tactile imagery dominates the third stanza. Here again, Stafford is very direct about the concept of hands touching as the initial human contact with nature in "my fingers touching her side brought me the reason-- / her side was warm, her fawn lay there waiting, / alive still, never to be born." These lines, with their strong tactile images, serve as the pivot point in the poem. The first two stanzas merely establish tone and setting. After these two lines, Stafford will describe the persona's struggle with the dilemma of whether or not to attempt to save the fawn--the "hesitation" and the persona's decision not to try.

The fourth stanza begins with visual imagery in "car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights." "Light" by itself suggests visual imagery; we can visualize a beam of light penetrating the darkness.
But "parking lights is also suggestive of the color red, especially when we read further in the third line, "the warm exhaust turning red." "Red" suggests blood and the dead deer. Also, in the fourth stanza, we find for the first time, imagery other than kinesthetic, visual and tactile. First in the second line, we find, "under the hood purred the steady engine" which suggests sound. And later, in the fourth line, which works as the climax for the poem, auditory images prevail: "around our group I could hear the wilderness listen."

In the concluding couplet, kinesthetic and tactile imagery dominate as in the earlier part of the poem, with "swerving" and "pushed" suggestive of movement and "edge" hinting of tactile. But the line "then pushed her over the edge into the river" implies sound; we can almost hear the body of the deer thumping on rocks as it bounces down to the inevitable splash into the river.

The human contact with nature in "Traveling Through the Dark" involves a dilemma, one which the reader can understand. The dead doe lying on the road could cause a car accident--"to swerve might make more dead." Her carcass must be removed--pushed "over the edge into the river." But she is pregnant--the warmth of the living fawn inside her can be felt by "touching her side." What to do? Saving it would require the skills of a surgeon--and luck. The poem suggests many thoughts without actually stating them, and ends with the only possible solution:
I thought hard for us--my only swerving--,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

Ronald K. Giles, a professor of English at East Tennessee State University, concludes in a brief essay on Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark," that "swerving" in the first line of the concluding couplet does more than show the poet's physical action of moving his car around the carcass. He believes that "swerving" is more than a suggestion of the awkwardness of the dilemma, as well as more than a "self-incriminating complicity in the deer's death."

Rather, the revelation, "my only swerving," echoes the fourth line ("to serve might make more dead") and implies a moral attitude. The speaker mentally swerved to consider the unborn fawn but now realizes that he jeopardized human life in a compassionate, but ill-advised contemplation of animal life. (Giles 45)

Then, referring to an interview of William Stafford printed in the spring 1985 issue of The Iowa Review, Giles concludes with:

Commenting on this poem, Stafford himself says, "I can't help feeling a little bit closer to people than to animals."

And this, finally, is the attitude of the speaker in the poem--an attitude which has behind it the force of an experience reflectively and dramatically considered. (45)

In a rebuttal, of Giles' conclusions, in a later issue of The Explicator, J. Gill Holland, a poet and professor of English at Davidson College in North Carolina, finds Giles' interpretation
"unconvincing on the grounds of both internal and external evidence."
In order to get the full meaning of Stafford's quoted words in The Iowa Review interview, I will print the passage here as Holland did in his rebuttal to Giles.

C.L.: The question that I probably can't phrase as well as I'd like to concerns the commitments you mentioned awhile back . . . commitments, as I see them, to the human family, to civilization. Whether one calls it commitments or appropriately the title of your new book Allegiances, it's probably as strong or stronger in your work as can be found in the work of any poet writing today. At what time were you conscious that that was the fork in the road that you took?

W.S.: Well, I'm not sure I've been conscious of that as a commitment. To me it's more like . . . the book doesn't say commitments, it just says Allegiances and this more like something that comes naturally to a person. It's like feeling at home in the world . . . I do feel at home in the world. It's like assuming good will on the part of other people--I tend to do that. It's like a kind of level look at every day's experience as it comes at you and welcoming it. I feel that . . . you know . . . not alienation not resentment, or rebellion, but a kind of acceptance and even
a hopeful acceptance that enjoys being part of the human family . . . something like that.

C.L.: Your poem, "Traveling Through the Dark," seems to speak more of a commitment, however. Especially the line "I thought hard for us all."

W.S.: Yes. You know that is not a poem that is written to support a position that I have chosen, it's just a poem that grows out of the plight I am in as a human being.

C.L.: But it is definitely to people as versus animals and the world of nature, that your allegiances lie.

W.S.: I can't help feeling a little bit closer to people than to animals.

C.L.: Have you ever felt in agreement with Whitman in his "Song of Myself" when he states that he feels as though he could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self-contained . . . not a one of them gripes . . .

W.S.: They're not whimpering and so on. Yes, of course I've felt that but that's just a part of myself that springs out of some temporary feeling of pique or perception or human
encounter. I would have that feeling in an extreme of thinking, but I wouldn't have it as a set policy . . . mostly I'd rather live with people. (Lofness 96)

Holland goes on to observe that Giles has placed much emphasis on the quotation from the interview for his argument. But as Holland states, there is scant evidence from Stafford's quoted words "that the poet is siding with humans against or at the expense of other animals or that the contemplation of the situation of the unborn fawn is 'ill-advised'" (Holland 57). Also, as Holland points out, it is the interviewer who is trying to maneuver Stafford into choosing sides (57). And Stafford, a long-time college professor and lecturer, and who is keenly interested in people, says, when backed into a corner, "I'd mostly rather live with people." Holland continues:

Of course the writer is a member of the human race, though he sometimes shares Whitman's primitivism. Nevertheless, his words preceding Giles' quotation suggest a wider, not narrower, kinship with all life, a kinship of all creatures who live and die: " . . . it's just a poem that grows out of the plight I am in as a human being." (57)

Yes, Stafford might prefer the company of people over animals, but that statement would not necessarily lead one to conclude, as Giles does, that Stafford, a man who has devoted sheaves of poems to animals, has a "moral attitude" and that he has "an ill-advised contemplation of animal life" (Giles 45). Holland points out:
On the contrary, the poem implies that it is well advised to pause before pushing the dead carcass holding the living fetus over the edge, perilous though it be to "think hard" for long on a narrow road of blind curves or to leave an obstacle by the side of that road. To do otherwise would seem to be less than fully human. (Holland 57)

And finally:

The normal reaction of swerving, which "might make more dead," becomes contemplation, which amplifies the speaker's sympathy for the unborn fawn into thoughts "for us all." Moreover, the fuller reading of "us all" includes not only the living beyond this scene but "our group" and the listening wilderness also. (57)

Stafford's ability to focus on simple and ordinary instances, such as an encounter with a dead deer on a mountain, is rooted in his deliberate approach to daily living. Most people, trapped in their own little passions, unconcerned "for us all," would simply drive on around, purposely avoiding any contact with nature. But Stafford's persona, unhurried and thinking of the safety of those that follow, stops his car so that he can move the deer carcass out of the path of future oncoming travelers.

Almost by chance, he touches the deer in a place on her stiff body that leads him to the realization that she is pregnant, which steers him to the dilemma. In those brief monumental moments, he
feels a union between himself, the dead deer, her fawn, and the anticipating woods. He has reached a Wordsworthian mature encounter with nature, where human and nature are in near spiritual cohesion.

around our group I could hear the wilderness listen
I thought hard for us all -- my only swerving

The narrator (Stafford) in "Traveling Through the Dark" would never have reached the mature encounter with nature, would never have experienced that brief interchange with nature, had he not stopped and made an effort to prevent a "swerve that might make more dead." Instead, he reaches out of the shackles of a servitude to Time, out of the narrow focus of egocentricity to attempt to grasp the simple reality of the situation. And as a result, he comes closer to nature. Therefore, in "Traveling Through the Dark" Stafford suggests--through the narrator performing a somewhat unusual and humble act of interrupting his routine to stop and remove the deer from the road, again implying humility--that we can reach a spiritual union with nature only when we slow down and make deliberate attempts to do so. Again, we need to approach nature with humility.

In all of the poems examined in the last two chapters, "Touching Nature" and "Traveling Through the Dark," with the exceptions of the brief raccoon smile in "Connections," all of the contacts with nature have either been through people attempting a harmony with nature or through an accidental encounter between
human and nature: the muskrat biting the narrator's hand in "Ceremony," the snowstorm "guessing the ground" in "Found in a Storm," and a dead deer lying on the edge of the Wilson River Road. According to Stafford, we have found that we must learn to humble ourselves in order to achieve harmony with nature. Many of Stafford's poems suggest that the human hand is perhaps the single best way to initiate a contact. In one particular poem, however, Stafford writes of nature attempting a harmony with humanity. The poem, "Things that Happen," ends with these important lines: "Oh I thought, how hard the world has tried / with its wind, its miles, its blundering stumbling days, again and again, to find my hand" (178).

With these components in mind---humility in human, touching with hands as the initial physical contact, and the mutual need of both human and nature for a harmony, we can now turn to the topic of William Stafford's celebration of the harmony between humanity and nature.
Although William Stafford has written many poems dramatizing the relationship between humans and nature— from the deep concern for the continued existence of the natural world, as we saw in chapter Two, "The Animal the Drinks Everything" to contacts made with nature, whether accidental or intentional in the poems studied in Chapters Three and Four—he has written very few poems that celebrate the harmony. And for most of these poems, the celebration of harmony is a mere fleeting moment—a glimpse, to use a favorite word of Stafford's—not unlike the brief harmonious moment in the line "around our group I could hear the wilderness listen" of "Traveling Through the Dark," or "I saw me in the current flowing through the land" in "Ceremony." Stafford knows that for most of us, perhaps himself included, the harmonious moment with nature will be very brief. Very few humans will ever reach a point where they achieve relationship with nature that is both harmonic and lasting. If there are any such lucky souls, their existence as well as their modes of living would be hermit-like, seldom seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted by the rest of humanity. As a beneficial member of an ecosystem, they would have no need to record their lives on paper and communicate them to the rest of us. Their existence would be nature; writing on paper would be a distraction away from that relationship.
For the rest of us who continue to live with our dependance on fossil fuels and material goods, brief significant encounters with nature serve to remind us to continue to strive for harmony with nature. For those who have never experienced a mature encounter with nature there are the writings of Thoreau, Wordsworth, Stafford, Aldo Leopold, Barry Lopez, and others to remind us that it is possible and may be necessary for all of us to at least attempt a harmony with nature: in fact necessary for the whole world, both industrial, technological, and natural, in order to continue to exist. The continued existence of nature is necessary for the continued existence of the world. Stafford warns us in "Always": I live as a friend of trees: *Listen together; be ready* (3-4).

In the first stanza of "From Eastern Oregon," Stafford calls for us to "leave the world's problem and find / your own kind of light." Stafford uses the word "world" often in his poems; here the word has a double meaning. In one sense, "world" refers to other people besides yourself--civilization in general. With that in mind, "leave the world's problem and find your own kind of light" suggests that we need to abandon the typical approach of most people of the world and use our own approach. "World" can also refer to the planet Earth. "Problem of the world" is singular--one problem. The last stanza ends with "For days your friends will be juniper, but / never again will material exist enough, clear-- / not any day, not here." "Material," here, suggests man's passion for materialism--one of the
underlying motives for man to want to drink up everything. This materialism is the "world's problem" at the beginning of the poem.

In "Eastern Oregon," one of Stafford's best poems about harmony between human and nature, the persona walks inside a "desert cave," almost as one with the earth. The walker harmonizes with his surroundings—even though "the eye says it is dark," "the pool" "glows far back"—he can still sense his surroundings. And "on the cave wall / you make not a shadow," for shadows intrude, "but a brightness," for a glowing represents the warmth of the harmony. Again the initial physical contact with nature occurs through the sense of touch: "your hands the carved story now forgotten or ignored / by the outside, obvious mountains" (139).

In the second stanza the relationship between humanity and nature becomes more than harmonious. The two become united as one, and also cohesive: "Your eyes an owl, your skin a new part of the earth, / you let obsidian flakes in the dust discover your feet." The space between human and nonhuman collapses (Carpenter 35). Even when the human character exits the cave into the lighted world, there still is no separation between him and the earth:

You climb out again and, consumed by light, shimmer full contemporary being, but so thin your bones register a skeleton along the rocks like an intense, interior diamond. (Stafford, Stories 140)
Even the title "A Walk in the Country" suggests an attempt at a harmony with nature. The narrator experiences a spiritual, almost religious encounter with nature while walking in the country late at night. In the second stanza he remarks," I felt a burden of silver come: my back had caught moonlight pouring through the trees like money." Here "silver" carries two connotations: first a silver of truth, anagrammatic of "sliver of truth," but Stafford wishes to have the visual imagery of "silver" for the second connotation: the visual allusion to the metallic appearance of money.

The foreshadowing in the second stanza, of the coming spiritual encounter with nature, hits the narrator hard in the third stanza:

That walk was late, though.
Late, I gently came into town,
and a terrible thing had happened:
the world, wide, unbearably bright,
had leaped on me. I carried mountains. (197)

Similarly, "In the Deep Channel" features an almost spiritual convergence with nature. Here the experience is almost supernatural, as in "A Walk in the Country." The first stanza opens with a mundane chore and concludes with the presentation of a catfish, usually an ordinary animal, in a mysterious manner:

Setting a trotline after sundown
if we went far enough away in the night
sometimes up out of deep water
would come a secret-headed channel cat. (31)

As the emergence of the creature becomes more visible, its physical
description becomes more vivid:
Eyes that were still eyes in the rush of darkness
flowing feelers noncommittal and black,
and hidden in the fins those rasping bone daggers
with one spiking upward on its back.

And finally, in the last stanza, the brief contact with nature is made:
We would come at daylight and find the line sag,
the fishbelly gleam and the rush on the tether:
to feel the swerve and the deep current
which tugged at the tree roots below the river. (31)

The poem contains much beyond its denotative meaning. The
words "deep" and "darkness" can be taken for their literal meaning;
but the opening line of the second stanza, "Eyes that were still eyes
in the rush of darkness," suggests that even in a place that is
typically muted, dark, shadowed and clouded, the channel cat can see. "See" can also suggest that the creature understands us.
Intertwined with these double connotative meanings of "see" is the
word "still" which also has double meanings. As an adverb, "still"
means that even in the clouded water the catfish can see. Also
"still" describes the eyes as unmoving, carefully studying the narrator's eyes (Holden 14).

The poem contains a strong sense of "Nature's otherness," to borrow from Jonathan Holden in his book, A Mark to Turn (14). The channel cat is referred to in the poem as "secret-headed," which could mean the unknown characteristics of the creature's head or the unknown destination of the fish. "Secret-headed" could also imply that the catfish's head contains secrets. The unknown destination of the creature's path suggests that the animal is "set apart" from humans.

Holden further states that the idea of "Nature's otherness" is repeated in the word "noncommittal" of the sixth line and further portends, "the degree of difference which Stafford feels here between himself and the natural world is relatively great," and further points out evidence of this in the word "far" of the second line: "if we went far enough away in the night" (Stafford, Stories 31). "Although the line," Holden states, "has a literal meaning in context, on the symbolic level it suggests: 'if we imagined a dramatic enough difference between ourselves and the natural world'" (15).

However, in the third and final stanza, the physical contact with nature is made, although it may be violent to some observers, as is the bite of the muskrat in "Ceremony." The fish is caught on the trot line; the catfish is no longer presented in a mysterious manner in this final stanza: "the fishbelly gleam and rush on the
tether." "In the Deep Channel" suggests that nature may seem set apart from us, nearly aloof and mysterious, as we see here in the channel cat of the first two stanzas. But when a physical contact is made, the mysterious quality disappears.
Conclusion

Stafford's poems which seem to prescribe a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature are rooted in his deep concern for the continued existence of both. He appears to be saying that we must learn to live in harmony with nature. In order for us to live harmoniously with nature, we must have humility. We cannot continue to approach nature with the intent to control it. As we saw in Chapter One, our indifference to the value of nature has led us to become too materialistic and to forget that the preservation of all aspects of life is critical to the survival of our world. We cannot continue to try to conquer nature, as I did when I felt compelled to conquer the hill by the Missouri River. We must approach nature with respect and humility.

While I stayed at Papa Bean's fish camp on an island in the middle of the lower Yukon River in Alaska, I made the mistake of hanging my soggy wool socks in the fish house to dry. The fish house is a small shed made of corrugated aluminum, with holes punched in the sides to allow for air circulation, and where strips of salmon are hung on poles. Underneath the hanging salmon strips, and in a pit in the bare, sandy floor, cottonwood logs burn continuously for two-weeks until the drying salmon reaches its maximum flavor. The resulting product is similar to what we call "smoked salmon." After the two-week period of drying is complete, the salmon are taken down from the poles and packed tightly inside wooden barrels that are lined with a thick gauge of plastic bag. These barrels are stored
in cool places for the winter. "Dry-fish" is a major source of subsistence food for the Aldrick "Papa" Beans family during the winter months.

Most everyone hung their wet clothing to dry around the small cast-iron wood-burning stove in the tiny kitchen tent. Often, with many other articles of clothing hanging to dry, there wasn't enough room to hang my wet garments. Once, while the fire was burning and drying the fish, I hung my wet socks in the hot, dry, fish house, but was careful to hang them well away from the open fire so that they would not burn, and well away from the fish so that the strips would not be contaminated by my stinking foot odor and perspiration.

While hanging my socks, I wondered why no one else had considered the nifty idea of using the fish house as a place to dry wet clothing.

Several hours later, I was eating a lunch of salmon stew in the kitchen tent with my college friend, William, and his father, Papa Beans, when William's sister burst into the tent bellowing: "Who put their socks in the fish house?"

"I did. What's wrong, Annie?"

She replied with great animation of hands and facial expression,"We never, never, EVER, never put clothing in the fish house!"

Papa Beans added in his broken English, "No clothing in fish house."

When I asked "why?" Annie repeated her "never, ever" speech. I failed to receive an explanation. At first I thought that they were
concerned that my socks would contaminate the fish. But after looking around the inside of the kitchen tent and noticing wet and drying socks, hats, gloves, and jeans hanging in such close proximity to open bags of potatoes, rice, and Sailor-Boy Pilot Bread crackers that clothing and food practically touched, this thought was immediately dismissed.

It wasn't until later, back in Oregon, that I learned, while reading a book on Yup'ik Eskimo culture, that the Yup'iks have tremendous respect for the subsistence they reap from nature. The act of hanging my dirty, soggy, stinky socks in a shed of drying salmon was an act of disrespect for the salmon. The Yup'ik Eskimos have humility in their approach to nature; without the harvesting of salmon, both for the purpose of selling to commercial buyers, and for winter subsistence in the form of "dry-fish," they might not be able to survive. Yet they have survived in a very harsh climate for millennia mostly because they approach nature with humility and respect. The rest of us need to learn to approach nature with humility.

Perhaps the simplest, most humble approach to nature is through touching, as I discussed in Chapter's Two and Three. Touching puts us in direct physical contact with nature and forces us to think of nature--perhaps consider a harmony with nature. My humble act of stopping and stooping to touch with my hands, picking up the bleached, deer skull, encrusted with drying soil and bits of decaying vegetable matter, put me into direct physical contact with
nature and forced me to consider a harmony with nature--forced me to consider a paper on harmony with nature.

All of us must, very soon, consider a harmony with nature. The earth's natural resources are disappearing at an alarming rate: ten to twenty percent of the earth's plants and animals are predicted to disappear forever by the year 2025 (Boorman).

Nevertheless, William Stafford remains optimistic. The second and final stanza of the concluding poem of "Stories That Could be True," the first collection in the book by the same title, reads:

Here now spread low, flat on this precious part of the world, we miss those dreams and the strange old places we left behind. We quietly wait.
The wind keeps telling us something we want to pass on to the world:
Even far things are real. (25)

And later in "The Earth" of "Someday Maybe," the last collection in Stories That Could be True:

We know the motions of this great friend, all resolved into one move, our stillness.
Why is no one on the hills where they graze, the sun and the stars, no one clamoring north, running as we would run to belong to the earth? We come, we
celebrate with our breath, we join on the curve of our street, never lost, the surge of the land. all around us that always is ours, the beginning of the world and the end. (231)

Stafford believes that we will eventually come to understand the importance of preserving the natural earth. In his lifetime, the poet has observed tremendous technological changes from horse and buggy days when humans still lived somewhat close to nature to the ability to put humans and litter on the moon. Let us hope, with Stafford, that we learn to live harmoniously with nature before it is too late.

**A Quiet Day at the Beach**

Gulls hit the silence and come through--designs the wind offers to islands that have no past or future but wind.

Down under the bridge the current is talking. Pencils of sunlight are marking this year along carefully faded boards.

A few of the minnows left over from scenes before World War II explore what might have happened if . . . .

In the slack tide I see a minnow so young
I can look through it and see the sand of a world we are all beginning to love.

(Stafford, *Smoke's Way* 61)
NOTES

1 Also initially, I attempted to use the word "man" as a generic-plural to include both sexes, men and women, of the human species. The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing by Casey Miller and Kate Swift, states that "man" was once a true generic" but that the word today is a false generic, therefore indicating that "man" is an inappropriate and sexist synonym for people, humanity and human beings (11). Therefore, in all instances, I have avoided the sexist, false, generic word, "man" and have chosen instead: humanity, people, humans or human population.

2 During the months of research and gathering of data, I grew increasingly frustrated as I found little criticism written about William Stafford and his poetry. I maintain that Stafford is a very important Twentieth Century American poet and someday will be considered one of the greats of the last part of this century; the lack of a large quantity of criticism exiting today is perhaps due to the fact that Stafford is still living and still writing poetry. His evolution as a writer and poet is still in the making. No matter what critics write about Stafford today in 1990, we cannot discuss his "last chapter" because it has not yet been written. Nevertheless, most of the criticism that I did find discussed only the poem, "Traveling Through the Dark." I failed to find any existing comprehensive bibliography of the poet. A search with the ERIC
system turned up only several sources, and these dealt mainly with Stafford's approaches to the teaching of writing. These articles were probably spawned by Stafford's book on teaching writing, Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation. I judged these articles to be irrelevant to my topic, as I found most others were, and did not include them on the cards of my working bibliography.

An online computer of the Arts and Humanities Index and MLA, revealed the sources I have used in Chapter Three, "Traveling Through the Dark," namely the articles by Richard Hugo, Ronald Giles, J. Gill Holland, and Cynthia Lofness' interview of Stafford.

Briggs Library does not own some of the periodicals that I wanted to review. Accordingly, I have spent time locating and reviewing articles in the Libraries at the University of South Dakota, Northern State University, and Augustana College.

Two books kept reoccurring on bibliographies of journal articles: The Mark to Turn, by Jonathan Holden and Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination by George Lensing and Ronald Moran. A system search with the online catalogue at Briggs showed that neither of the books existed in the statewide library network. The search did reveal a book, William Stafford, by David Carpenter, located in the Augustana Library.

Carpenter's book turned out to be a short fifty page pamphlet which was a general overview of William Stafford's poetry. I copied the entire book on the copy machine at the library. It did, however,
have some criticism I found useful in this paper. More importantly, the book contained the most comprehensive bibliography on William Stafford I found during the entire research process and included twenty-three sources. When this bibliography also included Holden's book *The Mark to Turn* and Lensing and Moran's *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination*, I felt certain that these two books would be the key--the most important sources--to my paper.

I could have obtained the books through an out-of-state interlibrary loan, but I needed the books much longer than three weeks; I did not have a chunk of three weeks time to explore the books and write my thesis. So in September of 1989, I asked Waldenbooks in Sioux Falls to order these books for me. But by early November, Waldenbooks told me that they were unable to receive the books. So I ordered the books directly from their publishers, sending money for price and postage, and received the books in the mail within three weeks. And, as it turned out, the books are indeed crucial sources for anyone writing a paper on William Stafford; I have used these sources more than any others. In all, I gathered a scant thirty-five secondary sources for my working bibliography; most of these I decided were irrelevant to my particular focus on William Stafford.

Jonathan Holden, author of *The Mark to Turn*, received his Ph.d in English from the University of Colorado in 1974. He won the 1972 Devin Award for Poetry for his book of poems, *Design for a House* and currently teaches literature and writing at Stephens College. George
S. Lensing, co-author of *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination*, is an Associate Professor of English and the Assistant Dean for Honors at the University of North Carolina. Ronald Moran, also author of *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination*, is the Head of the English Department at Clemson University, South Carolina.

This blending of differing sensory images into a metaphor is termed, synaesthesia (Deutche 176). A jazz musician might talk about "blue notes," blending sight / color with sound. A phrase for the well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace" is "how sweet the sound," blending the gustatory sense with the auditory sense. Synaesthesia is popular with poets; a line from one of Edith Sitwell's poems reads: "the creaking empty light," blending sound and movement in "creaking" with dimension in "empty" and sight in "light."

Synaesthesia is common in Stafford's poetry; in this paper I discuss the blending of differing sensory images into metaphors in the poems, "The Animal that Drank up Sound" in Chapter One and "Traveling Through the Dark" in Chapter Three.
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