

**QUERENCIA: A STUDY OF ORIGINS, TRAVEL,
AND HOME IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM
STAFFORD**

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QUERENCIA: A STUDY OF ORIGINS, TRAVEL, AND HOME
IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM STAFFORD

An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Deborah Rhoads Griffey
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ABSTRACT

The theme of home is central in the poetry of William Stafford. The sub-themes that are concerned with Stafford's concept of home are welded together in many of his poems. They may be separated, however, in order to show the movement that takes place in a man's search for home.

The search begins in the origins of the home town and the family. Within the structures of the town and the family, there is innocence, nature, and simplicity. There is also a barrier that prevents one from experiencing the harsher aspects of the world. The origins are important in the adult life as well as in the life of the child. The adult living in a mechanized world can re-experience the simplicity of his origins through mental and physical journeys home.

The complex world is the second leg of Stafford's journey. It is necessary to leave the protection of the home town and to travel through the unknown in life. This traveling is the only way to a final destination of self-discovery and self-knowledge.

The final part of the journey in Stafford's poetry is the discovery of querencia. One discovers home within himself. He finds, once more, the peace of the home town and is able to appreciate it because of his experience of traveling.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Deborah Rhoads Griffey entitled "Querencia: A Study of Origins, Travel, and Home in the Poetry of William Stafford." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lewis C. Tatham
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Edward E. Irwin
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Mrs. Jana Bienvenue introduced me to the poetry of William Stafford. She gave me the materials to begin my study and her enthusiasm for his poetry became my own.

The typing was done by Mrs. Gerry Tatham. I appreciate her great patience and perseverance. The excellence of her typing has been a great asset to this thesis.

My gratitude must, most of all, go to William Stafford, who took time out from a busy schedule to answer my letter and to grant me a personal interview. His comments have proved to be invaluable in stimulating some of the basic ideas in this thesis. It was a great honor to meet and talk with Mr. Stafford, one of the most impressive poets writing in America today.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

William Stafford is one of the most prolific poets of the mid-twentieth century. He is lauded by his fellow poets such as James Dickey and Robert Bly, but he has received relatively little critical attention. Professional recognition began in 1960 with his first volume of poems, West of Your City. Stafford received the National Book Award for Poetry in 1963, and since that time several articles exploring his poetry have appeared in literary journals. These articles have dealt rather superficially with his poetry and have served only as basic introductions to his style and themes. It is the purpose of this paper to delve more deeply into the poems themselves and to determine Stafford's major themes and their development.

This thesis will present and examine the theme of home in the poetry of William Stafford. Because the concept of home is, in his words, "central to my poetry"¹, it merits the close attention given it in this study. The poetic sub-themes that comprise the major theme of home are found throughout Stafford's poetry. This paper will attempt to separate the sub-themes from one another and to analyze their relationship to one another. The theme of home will be examined in four major sections: the origins in the home town and the family (Chapter II), the origins as a psychiatric tool to one seeking home (Chapter III), the leaving of the origins and the quest in a world of experience (Chapter IV), and the

¹ Interview with William Stafford, Bowling Green, Kentucky, April 21, 1973.

achievement of the final destination of the internal home (Chapter V). It is hoped that by this study a logical progression toward the ultimate goal of home will be evident in the poetry of William Stafford.

Before examining the poems, it is desirable to look at the poet and his background and style. Twentieth-century poets have been concerned with the search for identity. Alienation from a disordered world has been the answer for many. Stafford's poetry is atypical of much of twentieth-century poetry in that it reflects a positive attempt to come to terms with the world. He seeks unification rather than alienation. His own quiet affirmation, apparent in his poetry, separates him from many of today's readers. He is unconventional in that he is a subjective poet whose personality is clearly seen in his poems. As the speaker in almost all of his poems, he is a bit too plain for people who are conditioned to read more complex and negative poetry. D. Nathan Sumner says that his positive attitude will prevent Stafford from becoming a leading poet of this day.

. . . he writes poetry of the land in an urban society; he writes of beauty with beauty in a stark and barren age; he not only writes poetry of great meaningfulness, but poetry of great meaningfulness not obscured to the margin of inscrutability at a time when, seemingly, a poem must give the appearance of inscrutability in order to be given the chance of recognition as a viable product.²

In a time of complexity, Stafford's poems offer a positive simplicity. He makes the reader aware of a more uncomplicated life.

The apparent simplicity of the themes in his poetry is reinforced by the language he uses. Stafford shuns the overly poetic phrase. He

²Nathan Sumner, "The Poetry of William Stafford: Nature, Time, and Father," Research Studies, 36 (September 1968), 195.

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seeks communication and sees this as possible only with ordinary language. The basic and real language he uses brings an aura of authenticity to his poems. In a statement about the poetic voice he said,

When you make a poem, you merely speak or write the language of everyday, capturing as many bonuses as possible and economizing on losses; that is, you come awake to what always goes on in language, and you use it to the limit of your ability and your power of attention at the moment.³

Stafford's forthright language seems to be a direct product of his Kansas upbringing. Born in 1914 in the midst of a secure family, Stafford grew up in small towns of the Midwest. He lived with the wilderness at his fingertips, and thus the creatures and situations of nature presented in his poems are real and tangible. He writes about the landscapes of the Midwest, but they have universal aspects which make them appeal to people from all parts of the country. Stafford consciously tries to keep his poems from becoming too regional. He looks for situations that "derive from immediate relation to felt life."⁴ He sees this as the essence of poetry and all art.

"It is this immediacy that distinguishes art. And, paradoxically, the more local the self that art has, the more all people can share it, for that vivid encounter with the stuff of the world is our common ground."⁵

³William Stafford, "A Poet's Voice: an Approach through Prose," The Distinctive Voice, ed. William L. Martz (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966), p. 190.

⁴William Stafford, Tennessee Poetry Journal, 1 (Fall, 1967), 4.

⁵Ibid.

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Thus, the fact that Stafford writes of the Midwest, rather than the South or the East is of little significance. He writes about human experiences and situations that are common to us all.

CHAPTER II

ORIGINS

The Home Town

One has his origins in the place he spends his childhood. For William Stafford this place is the small town of the Midwest. The towns of his childhood evoke a familiar response in the readers of his poems because the experience of the home town is a universal one. Almost all people look back to the place in which they spent their childhood as an uncomplicated area in their lives. Even if one is reared in a large city, the feeling about the home town that is connected with the innocence of childhood is still present. In Stafford's poetry the home town forms the base of his development of the theme of home. The home town is primary. It is a link to the childhood experience of being close to nature and feeling a part of rather than separate from the plan of the universe. It is a time of belonging rather than alienation. The home town, as a part of nature, provides the strength that lies behind many of Stafford's most powerful poems.

The poem "One Home" describes this background of the small town which is so essential in his poetry.

Mine was a Midwest home--you can keep your world.
Plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.
We sang hymns in the house; the roof was near God.

The light bulb that hung in the pantry made a wan light,
but we could read by it the names of preserves--
Outside, the buffalo grass, and the wind in the night.

A wildcat sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July
When he was cutting plum bushes for fuel,
before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky.

To anyone who looked at us we said, "My friend";
 liking the cut of a thought, we could say, "Hello."
 (But plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.)

The sun was over our town; it was like a blade.
 Kicking cottonwood leaves we ran toward storms.
 Wherever we looked the land would hold us up.¹

These lines reflect the ambiguous nature of Stafford's home town. It is at once as simple as the preserves in the pantry, and as complex as the dogma of the religious sect it held. The "black hats" in the first stanza refers to the Church of the Brethren. When Stafford was a child, this church with a pacifist creed ruled his town. The church served a dual role. It imposed limitations in a dogmatic way; but at the same time, because of its very nature it allowed the people to have close relationships to one another. The people of the town were a community. There was an ease of communication so one could say "My Friend." The plain black hats in the fourth stanza, through their restrictions, allow these relationships. The gentleness that the church preached would foster this easy acceptance of one's neighbors.

In addition to religious elements of the town, there is also the element of nature. The phrase "the roof was near God" relates the town and the home to nature, as does much of the rest of the poem. One finds that mechanized civilization is not much a part of that Midwest home. Man lives in harmony with nature, and the mechanization of the civilized world is slight. The light bulb in the second stanza made, suitably, only a "wan" light. And that light only serves to point out the simple

¹William Stafford, The Rescued Year (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 18. Additional references to this source will be given in the text using the abbreviation "RY."

things--the preserves in the pantry. The town was so much a part of nature as to be vulnerable to the forces within it. It was not much protection against the natural elements. The wind was always in the night, and a wildcat was lurking near.

The last stanza of "One Home" echoes the first in intensity. The sun over the town again points out the town's proximity to nature. Like a blade, its power could be a devastating one. Recognizing their role in nature, the people of the town were exhilarated by this pure sense of life. They "ran toward storms" instead of rejecting the natural way. The town is a part of the landscape. "One Home" closes with the statement of affirmation that "wherever we looked the land would hold us up" (RY, p. 18). Man as a part of his origin, the town in nature, can survive.

The positive feeling of "One Home" is also seen in the poem "Returning." The town is looked upon in an ambiguous manner. The speaker enters the town and easy derisions are made. He seems to be a callous young man who tries to reject any note of sentimentality as he says,

"Aphrodisia"
 you call the English teacher, and when
 we come to the minister there is
 a torrent of names ending with "Isaiah
 Throttlebottom."²

A more somber mood envelops the speaker as he actually enters the town. The voices grow more quiet, and a pervading feeling of satisfaction and comfort replaces the raucous voices. The callous shell disappears and

²William Stafford, Tennessee Poetry Journal, 2 (Spring, 1969), 8.

the speaker accepts his true feeling concerning home. The immediacy of feeling is a sensation "like a thousand flavors at once mixed in raspberry jello."³ With this overpowering sensation he puts away the coarse remarks and realizes the truth, "Then I open my mouth to a word that brings/ us far in under the dashlight: 'Home.'"⁴

The almost-too-sweet concept of the home town presented alone in "Returning" is usually linked with the harsher elements of nature or of civilization. There are two seemingly diametrically opposed forces at work in the town presented in "Quiet Town." The first two stanzas of the poem celebrate the town as a place of peaceful existence. The mundane, calm life of a town where knives are used by children to toast marshmallows and where the guns of bank robbers are kicked into the gutter is contrasted to the destructive bombers that glide overhead. The speaker shows the attitudes of the townspeople with the phrase, "For our gestures, feathers are emphatic/ enough."⁵ He says that "Our town balances,/ and we have a railroad" (A, p. 33). There is a balance of technology and natural simplicity. The town functions as a link between the two. The poem's last stanza, however, presents the town as one either intentionally or blindly ignoring the destructive forces of a war-like world.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵William Stafford, Allegiances (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 33. Additional references to this source will be given in the text, using the abbreviation "A."

No one is allowed to cross our lake at night.
 Every Christmas we forget by selective remembering.
 Overhead planes mutter our fear
 and are dangerous, are bombs exploding
 a long time, carrying bombs elsewhere to explode.
 (A, p. 33)

The town seems to live a cocoon existence, rejecting violence within its own bounds and ignoring that violence which occurs elsewhere. The town is seen as a child might see it. It is a place where there is no change and no harm.

One of several poems which link the town to nature is "Remember." In an interview, Stafford stated that the small town was an integral part of nature and the world.⁶ Because of the proximity, indeed the blending, of the town and the natural forces around it, there is a feeling of total being. One is a true participant in experiencing life.

Out there beyond grasp was the air,
 and beyond the air was a touch
 any morning could bring us--
 any morning.

(A, p. 26)

By viewing the town from the perspective of nature, the speaker gains personal identity. Both are a part of him; "that instant belonged to the world./ We were there" (A, p. 26). The town and nature are not only fused, they both gain from the fusion. The town takes on a glorious quality, a moment of ecstasy. Nature also gains from the combination: "the horizon gained something/ more than color" (A, p. 26). The town and the elements live in complementary existence, and together they bring the special "touch" that echoes the word "home" from the poem "Returning."

⁶ Interview

The equality of nature and the town is expressed quite succinctly in "The Rescued Year." These lines integrate the forces of nature and humanity beautifully. The poem compresses the good nostalgic things of time past in the words, "We had each day a treasured unimportance;/ the sky existed, so did our town" (RY, p. 10). The two elements are of equal importance. Their union in a time when the speaker could see beauty in the ordinary and treasure simplicity, again points to the idea that the small home town is very close to what is basic in life.

Both "Boom Town" and "Walking West" concern the reclamation of the town taken over by oil wells. Stafford uses the image of the snake to pit the natural against the artificial. A snake uneasily thrusts his tongue in and out when anything foreign or alien is around. The snake, putting out his tongue at the force of industrial progress, is uneasy at the encroachment of civilization. The oil wells upset the balance of nature in the small town; however, nature is the triumphant force. As the speaker returns to the town, "only one hesitant pump, distant,/ was remembering the past."⁷ In the last stanza the town is given back to nature. The snake's tongue is withdrawn and normality resumes with the lines,

Often it faltered for breath
to prove how late it was;
the snakes, forgetting away through the grass,
had all closed their slim mouths.

(WYC, p. 46)

"Walking West" echoes the same theme of reclamation. It is a quiet poem reflecting a sense of the past in the grayness of the land.

⁷William Stafford, West of Your City (Los Gatos, California: The Talisman Press, 1960), p. 46. Additional references to this source will be given in the text, using the abbreviation "WYC."

Gray is the color Stafford uses most often to describe himself: "(Gray shirt for me.)"⁸ The soft colors of gray and brown are a sturdy foundation for all that exists in the man. Gray and brown are natural colors of the earth, and Stafford is a man of nature. The color gray is an equalizer of sorts. It is normality captured and held in time by nature. The final stanza of "Walking West" talks of the town's final loss of mechanization, and its movement toward the gray of nature.

The railroad dies by a yellow depot,
town falls away toward a muddy creek.
Badger-gray the sod goes under
a river of wind, a hawk on a stick.

(RY, p. 47)

One of the more humorous poems dealing with the small town is "A Letter." The poem is written in the form of a letter to the governor of a state. It is about a town which "has no needs" (A, p. 34). The speaker lauds the town's simplicity. It has only three streetlights which stir no one. He suggests that the governor think about this place annually as "a place where we have done no wrong" (A, p. 34). The town, like the one in "Quiet Town," is isolated from the destructive forces of life. "We must manage the ultimate necessary withdrawal/ somehow, sometimes let the atoms swirl by" (A, p. 34). The essence of that town is captured in the last stanza of the poem.

So, this time, please keep on being the way
you are, and think of that town. A locust tree
put its fronds, by the way, quietly into the
streetlight; repeated breaths of river wind
come up-canyon. Let that--the nothing, the no one,
the calm night--often recur to you.

(A, p. 34)

⁸William Stafford, Traveling through the Dark (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 33. Additional references to this source will be given in the text, using the abbreviation "TTD."

In this last stanza, the speaker points to the dominance of nature in the town. The fronds in the streetlight and the river wind coming up-canyon both show the intrusion of nature. The letter appears to be an admonition not only to the governor but to all who are too concerned with progress for progress' sake. The final line emphasizes this theme of the poem--that of quiet, peaceful co-existence with nature.

The last poem to be considered in conjunction with the idea of Stafford's origin in the small town is "Prairie Town." Many of the same ideas that have been previously discussed are also found in this poem. The town is a part of nature, and its organization is mirrored in the town of the prairie dogs found just beyond a fence. Basically, the poem is a lament for the loss of the security the town once offered. The question is posed, "what kind of a trip can I make, with what old friend/ever to find a town so widely rich again?" (TTD, p. 24). His separation from nature, what the town represented, is seen in the last stanza.

Pioneers, for whom history was walking through dead grass,
and the main things that happened were miles and the
time of day--
you built that town, and I have let it pass.
Little folded paws, judge me: I came away.

(TTD, p. 24)

The speaker laments his loss of that which the pioneers had built. The simplicity the town connected with the prairie dogs has been deserted, but the influence of its existence remains in the poetry of William Stafford.

From the poems presented in this section, one can see that the primary importance of the home town is its involvement with the natural world. The town is the roots that Stafford clings to. His gray, brown existence is founded in the small town where nature was at his fingertips and security was in his life.

The Family

The small town and the surrounding landscape provided security and stability to Stafford's origins. Even more important in affording stability, however, were his father and his mother. In an interview Stafford told me that his family group was like a sheltering cabin that protected him from the evils of the world. War and poverty and dishonesty could only peek in through the windows.⁹ The idea behind this idea of the family being Stafford's greatest foundation is borne out by the fact that his family moved a great deal when he was a child. Thus the members of the family were the only permanent elements in his life. This fact becomes evident in his poetry. Stafford says, "the voice I most consistently hear in my poetry is my mother's voice."¹⁰ The voice, or language, does reflect the soft manner of the mother, but the father emerges as the dominant figure, through his philosophy of life, in Stafford's poetry. His depiction of his father is bare and positive. Stafford's mother is characterized as a quiet, accepting, yet fearful, woman.

The roles of the father and mother are very clearly defined in Stafford's poetry. The father is the explorer, the quester. In "A Scene in the Country by a Telegraph Line," he "staggers to act it all out."¹¹ He is the teacher of his children, and he experiences life with them. In the same poem the mother is presented in a less-active role. "The mother is not there. She is at home/ to be where they can call, alone,

⁹Interview

¹⁰William Stafford, Contemporary Poets of the English Language, ed. Rosalie Murphy and James Vinson (Chicago: St. James Press, 1970), p. 1043.

¹¹Stafford, Tennessee Poetry Journal, 2, p. 11.

together. or lost, or near, or far, anytime."¹² She waits to do whatever is required of her. A symbol of stability, she is the constant unmoving force in the family. The children venture out into the world with their father, and return to the stationary strength of their mother.

These roles, one active and one passive, are also seen in "Some Shadows." This poem is significant in that it talks of the mother-father relationship and its formative powers on the son. The mother is shown in her youth as someone quiet. She is not seen as an acutely perceptive girl. "She could not hear very well;/ the world was all far. (Were the others laughing?/ She never could tell.)" (RY, p. 4). She seems to stand away from the things happening around her rather than participating in them. The central stanza of the poem links the mother, the father, and the son.

Later, though she was frightened,
she loved, like everyone.
A lean man, a cruel, took her.
I am his son.

(RY, p. 4)

These lines yoke two people with opposite characteristics. The mother, frightened, is joined to a man described by words that make him seem harsh. The hard strength of the father is seen through the son in the powerful words, "I am his son" (RY, p. 4). The adjectives, "lean" and "cruel," are softened later in such lines as, "He was called Hawk by the town people/ but was an ordinary man" (RY, p. 4). He was the hunter, the man who faced nature. The mother and father offer an interesting contrast in a complementary relationship. Stafford gains his quiet words from his mother and his strength of purpose from his father.

The mother in "In Fear and Valor" is presented in the same vein as she is in "Some Shadows." She is shown to be a woman in whom fear dwells. This fear has become part of her son. "My mother was afraid/ and in my life her fear has hid" (TTD, p. 79). The fear she felt is coupled with a sympathetic feeling. She suffers and identifies with the problems of the world: "my mother, weeping, suffered/ the whole world's wrong" (TTD, p. 79). The view of the son in the last stanza of the poem is one of duality. His mother's fear "claimed a place in my every limb" (TTD, p. 79). She is his conscience and is totally integrated in his own character. The ambiguity which results from this integration is seen in the last two lines, "my mother, lost in my stride, fears Death,/ as I hunt him" (TTD, p. 79).

The second consistent characteristic of the mother is her role as the stationary force in the lives of the members of the family. This role, expressed in "A Scene in Country by a Telegraph Line," is also seen in "In the Old Days." This quiet poem paints a picture of the mother speaking "from her corner" (A, p. 71). The mother is aware of what goes on in "the wide field" (A, p. 71) around the home. The father is shown bringing the "news of the wide field" (A, p. 71). This field, or the world apart from the family, is a threat to the family unity. She predicts the time when the children will be called beyond the window shades, "away through the wide field" (A, p. 71). Her voice contains the warning of what the world beyond the family is, and the children realize her fear to a certain extent: "we knew that the night she had put into a story was real" (A, p. 71).

An abiding respect for the father is seen in William Stafford's poetry. His multiple moods and traits are seen by Nathan Sumner in

his article, "The Poetry of William Stafford: Nature, Time, and Father." Sumner says,

This father was a man fond of nature, tuned to all of life, seer and hearer of things commonly unseen and unheard, elevated above most men in his fullness of life, yet always sensitive to the spirit of those around him. He taught his son this sensitivity by a subtle 'witnessing' to its influence over his own actions.¹³

Stafford did gain a sensitivity from his father, and he seems quite aware of this debt in his poetry. He openly identifies with his father in the poem "Fall Journey." In this poem the speaker enters an old shack and awakens a memory of the past. "My father's eyes were gray" (TTD, p. 54). As stated earlier, gray is the prevalent color in Stafford's poetry. It is the color he most often applies to himself, as "In Response to a Question": "The earth says where you live wear the kind/ of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)" (TTD, p. 33). Thus the unobtrusive, natural color of gray links the father and the son.

Two poetic tributes to Stafford's father are "A Thanksgiving for my Father" and "Elegy." In the first, Stafford expresses a complete reverence for all that his father represented. He acknowledges him as the quester in life. "Oh father, you always found the way," (RY, p. 54). He senses his diminished stature beside his father as he continues with "But even Doris--I've never found her" (RY, p. 54). The second poem, "Elegy," presents flashing pictures of scenes that included Stafford's father. The speaker's capacity for acutely feeling comes from the father.

¹³Sumner, p. 191.

I hear a voice in the other room
that starts up color in every cell:
Presents like this, Father, I got from you,
and there are hundreds more to tell.

(TTD, p. 13)

The "presents" Stafford gained from his father are catalogued in several poems. The poem "The Rescued Year" offers a nostalgic look at what Stafford considers to be a perfect year. In looking back, Stafford can see and understand his father's powers of observation. This is evident in the lines, "and going home his wonderfully level gaze/ would hold the state I liked, where little happened/ and much was understood" (RY, p. 10). This gift of observation is present in Stafford, the poet. He sends his "sight like a million pickpockets/ up rich people's drives" (RY, p. 10). He practices his father's creed: "the greatest ownership/ of all is to glance around and understand" (RY, p. 11). His father was a man "who spent his life knowing,/ unable to tell how he knew--" (RY, p. 11). Truth came to him as naturally as the forces of nature operated around him. He was a believer in the triumph of truth.

"I've been sure by smoke, persuaded
by mist, or a cloud, or a man:
Once the truth was ready"--my father smiled
at this--"it didn't care how it came."

(RY, pp. 11-12)

The father's creed in "The Rescued Year" involved seeing, and discerning the truth in what was seen. A different emphasis is placed in "Listening." In this poem the father is seen in communion with nature. His sharp ability to hear and understand the voices of nature puts him into a class distinct from those who do not listen. The intensity of his listening allows him "into places where the rest of us had never been" (RY, p. 27). One cannot help contrasting this acute sense of hearing and awareness to the deafness of the mother in "Some

Shadows." She remains still and lets life be brought to her while he seeks out truth in life, using all of his senses. He is the sensitive man with the soul of the poet. He is the true participant and observer of life. His children realize his vibrancy and wait "for a time when something in the night/ will touch us too from that other place" (RY, p. 27).

Stafford's father was a man closely associated with nature. He was more than an observer of nature; he was part of nature. He invited his son to be very aware of the world around him. In "Across the Lake's Eye," the father asks, "why close what eyes we have?" (RY, p. 69). He presents his son with the idea of a "left-hand world" (RY, p. 69) that exists in life. As a true observer of life, he saw the necessity of facing this negative concept of the world. The other world that he shows his son does not make the natural world an undesirable place. He contends that "The world has character" (RY, p. 69), and expresses faith in the universe.

"Father's Voice" is a poem central to what Stafford gained from his father. The poem contains lines rich with feeling about the harmony of co-existence with nature.

"No need to get home early;
the car can see in the dark."
He wanted me to be rich
the only way we could,
easy with what we had.

And always that was his gift,
given for me ever since,
easy gift, a wind
that keeps on blowing for flowers
or birds wherever I look.

World, I am your slow guest,
one of the common things
that move in the sun and have
close reliable friends
in the earth, in the air, in the rock.
(A, p. 12)

The father's gift appears to be the gift of poetry. He has given his son the ability of vision in life among nature. The last stanza particularly emphasizes the continuing influence of the father. J. Russell Roberts in his article "Listening to the Wilderness with William Stafford" also links the last stanza with Stafford's role as a poet. He said, "He knows what he is, and his friends in the earth, in the air, in the rock determine his identity."¹⁴ This identity can be attributed to the father because he taught his son to live in nature.

Stafford does not always see his father as an indomitable force. In at least two poems, he reveals frailties that at once bring the father closer to humanity. In "Parentage" he noted that although "There never was a particular he couldn't understand" (TTD, p. 20), when there were too many in a row, he was overwhelmed. Stafford prefers a more passive role in life than his father had. He wants to "have the right amount of fear,/ preferring to be saved and not, like him, heroic" (TTD, p. 20). Stafford, a man who belongs in history, prefers passivity to the overt action of his father, in this poem. He says, "I'd just as soon be pushed by events to where I belong" (TTD, p. 20).

The second poem that reveals the father as less god than man is "Mouse Night: One of our Games." This poem, which comes immediately

¹⁴J. Russell Roberts, "Listening to the Wilderness with William Stafford," Western American Literature, 3 (Fall, 1968), 225-226.

before "Parentage" in the Traveling through the Dark volume, points to a flaw in his father's image which at once makes the reader aware that "Hawk" was truly a fallible human being. The father cowering in a storm shows a human weakness. But even in this weakness he shows wisdom and humor with the line, "It takes a man to be a mouse this night" (TTD, p. 19).

The roots of William Stafford may be found in the mother and father. From his mother he gained a sense of abiding security. From his father, he gained the ability to truly see the world around him. The poem which most clearly shows the influence of his parents in his poetry is "Vocation." The reader drifts back with Stafford to his origins, the Midwest, and his parents. The first stanza points out the role of the father as a teacher: "my father showed us all" (TTD, p. 94). The second stanza revives the theme of the mother's fear and her role as the constant in his life. From these two very separate personalities has come a man who is strengthened by their union. Stafford takes his mother's fear and his father's sense of exploration, and begins to take tentative steps toward being a poet. This union within him is seen in the last stanza of "Vocation."

Now both of my parents, the long line through the plain,
the meadowlarks, the sky, the world's whole dream
remain, and I hear him say while I stand between the two,
helpless, both of them part of me:
"Your job is to find what the world is trying to be."
(TTD, p. 94)

CHAPTER III

RECOIL

Thomas Wolfe's phrase, "You can't Go Home Again," does not apply to the poetry of William Stafford. Stafford expresses the idea in his poetry that it is both physically and mentally possible to return home and to recapture, however temporarily, the feeling of roots in one's home town. He is not unaware of the change that is always present in any visit home, but he looks beyond the facade of progress and uses his memory and landmarks to evoke a familiar response to his surroundings. This ability to go home is the psychiatric salve for a man living in an increasingly industrialized and stilted society. The remembrance of home awakens the true man within and connects him with the natural, rather than the artificial forces of life.

A physical return to home is seen in the poem "Back Home." The speaker recognizes the difference in the appearance of the town since he was a child and its appearance when he is an adult. The thing most changed in the town is the religion. There were "dependable walls" (RY, p. 7) in the church when he was a child. He saw the church at that time as a structure separate from the religion of nature. After he left the town to explore the "dark," a change took place. Religion of the "Black Hats" became more natural, and the church questioned its old dogma. The rigid structure of the church, like the girl who sang in the choir, had crumbled. His attitude toward the change that had occurred seems mixed. He appears to be happy for the triumph of nature. He is sad for the destruction of the girl in the choir, but has little

regret about the demise of the structure of religious dogma. Both of these attitudes are seen in the last stanza of the poem.

When I went back I saw many sharp things:
the wild hills coming to drink at the river,
the church pondering its old meanings.
I believe the hills won; I am afraid
the girl who used to sing in the choir
broke into jagged purple glass.

(RY, p. 7)

Change in the home town is also seen in "A Visit Home." In this poem the speaker wishes to return to the simplicity that the town had held for his father. The speaker who will "buy a hat/ and wear it as my father did" (WYC, p. 18) finds that crass civilization has taken over the town.

For calculation has exploded--
boom, war, oilwells, and, God!
the slow town-men and the blue serge luck.

(WYC, p. 18)

Despite this commercialization the speaker finds a landmark on which to tie his memories. His link with the past flavor of the town and his father is found at the library. This place, frequented by the Stafford family in the past, allows him to "put my hand on buckshot/ looks" (WYC, p. 18) and recalls the emotions that the town had held. "There will be many things in the slant of my hat/ at the corner of Central and Main" (WYC, p. 18).

The curative aspect of the return to the home town is seen in "Return to Single-Shot." The poem reveals the people who try to reject their origins. They "refuse to touch/ what has been theirs" (A, p. 25). They attempt to walk through the town with an objective air, pretending that it all belongs to someone else. These people encounter a landmark that pulls them back to their original nature. "'This is my house, and I am still myself.' And that restarts the town" (A, p. 25). The town

becomes what it once was to the person returning. The awareness stimulated by the landmark awakens the impulse toward nature and unadorned life. "Their fingers find again the grain of wood;/ they memorize the promise of the land" (A, p. 25). They harken back to simplicity, "the single-shot."

One aims a single-shot and hears the muffled past
interject that old, flat, simple sound--
the name of Daniel Boone's psychiatrist.

(A, p. 25)

The simplicity of the home town is a key to a healthy attitude toward life. In an interview, Stafford told me that before the complexities of our time there was no need for psychiatrists.¹ The "single-shot" is a symbol for the simplicity we have all lost to a great extent. It is this simplicity that we may capture in a physical or mental return to the home town and childhood.

It is not necessary to return physically to the home town in order to rescue oneself from the chaos of modern life. These mental journeys home help one recapture his basic self while operating in a false and stilted society. "Representing Far Places" records the doubleness of life that many people lead. They operate and function in a manner necessary to the world in which they live, but they are also very much the people they were molded to be in the home town. This remembrance of things past prevents one from being drowned in the complexities of modern life.

Often in society when talk turns witty
you think of that place, and can't polarize at all:
it would be a kind of treason. The land fans in your head
canyon by canyon; steep roads diverge.
Representing far places you stand in the room
all that you know merely a weight in the weather.
(TTD, p. 75)

¹Interview

This mental visit home isolates the individual and allows him to be free. It assures him that "It is all right to be simply the way you have to be,/ among contradictory ridges in some crescendo of knowing" (TTD, p. 75). It prevents one from becoming caught in the plastic stereotype of a role that is not true, and it restores the perspective of simplicity to the individual.

The perfection that the word home recalls to mind is sometimes colored by what one would like to remember and is embellished by nostalgia. "Garden City" presents this kind of view of the home town. Included in this view of perfection is the absence of trouble ("Any storm/ was temporary") (A, p. 38); the presence of nature ("Those hills to the south/ rush into the lens, emboss the world") (A, p. 38); and the presence of innocence ("Our class picnic/ blossoms in ribbons and watermelon") (A, p. 38). These elements coupled with the people and the landmarks of the home town are soothing in the midst of more complex times. The speaker says,

. . . But sometimes
Main Street at midnight flashes its fin,
or for a moment, over our days, over such
indignities as time gave us all for our share,
the monstrous blue fender of Stocky's old Hudson
reels down the white line toward home.

(A, p. 38)

There are two poems in which Stafford achieves "recoil" by writing a letter home. Both "Letter from Oregon" and "The Thought Machine" turn back in time in order to find assurance in an alien time. They center on a mental journey back to the familiar scene of the home town. "The Thought Machine" describes the process by which the programmed mind of one in a complex world clicks back in order to preserve the identity of the speaker. The dialogue within the mind is like telling one's

troubles to a psychiatrist. By telling, the past becomes real again.
The telling frees the speaker from the "Now."

for your town and for the world; --it was
and you are back there, listening again: it was for . . . --
the little eye goes kind; the forehead
has the noble look that hill had.

(TTD, p. 18)

The flash to the home makes the speaker realize his actual situation: he is a part of, not above, everything in nature. He looks back to basic things, "touching only important things;/ you see that all machines belong;/ the deer are safe;/ a letter has reached home" (TTD, p. 18).

The journey home in "Letter from Oregon" is one filled with shadow and doubt. Relocated in a new state, the speaker follows a thought wave to his origins. He does not seem sure that thinking "back through Wyoming where I came from" (RY, p. 22) is such a good idea, because he realizes that even one's home has imperfections, as in the line, "Mother, even home was doubtful" (RY, p. 22). Nevertheless, the recoil-instinct calls him back and he realizes the origin within himself. "I felt the beat/ of the old neighborhood stop, on our street" (RY, p. 22).

Perhaps the strongest statement of the simplicity of home as "Daniel Boone's psychiatrist" is found in the poem "Recoil." This short poem, which involves a mental return to the origin of a man, says very succinctly what all of the other poems have indicated.

The bow bent remembers home long,
the years of its tree, the whine
of wind all night conditioning
it, and its answer--Twang!

To the people who would fret me down
their way and make me bend:
By remembering hard I could startle for home
and be myself again.

(RY, p. 80)

This small poem, which relates a bent bow to a man conditioned and bent by a demanding society, offers Stafford's solution to those who would change another person. The individual identity is behind the mask that one is made to wear in special circumstances, and whatever a person pretends to be, there is the original self lurking behind the costume. It is through a conscious effort that one is able to "Recoil," to find his origin, and to "startle for home/ and be myself again" (RY, p. 80).

CHAPTER IV

TRAVELING

The home town and one's origins are important in the life of the individual. The cocoon existence, life within familiar limits, is not enough, however, for a man's complete development. This development is attained through a movement away from the familiar to the unknown. The movement Stafford records in his poetry is called traveling. Stafford's choice of terms is particularly significant. One does not rove or wander. The course is not an aimless or nomadic one; it is one of purposeful movement toward a destination. This destination is one of self-realization and self-acceptance. The traveler moves along the journey, facing the unknown, the dark and the cold in order to know himself. These elements he encounters are harsh but necessary in one's journey.

The traveler begins his trip into life from the place he holds most dear. He must abandon those to whom he is most attached in order to break away. This necessity is seen in "In Dear Detail, by Ideal Light." The speaker sees that he must leave the elements and people of home in order to find home finally within himself.

One's duty: to find a place
that grows from his part of the world--
it means leaving
certain good people.

(TTD, p. 91)

The shelter offered by these good people and what they represent can be a confining force. It serves as protection, but continuous protection can be crippling to individual growth. Like Blake, Stafford deems it

imperative that a man leave the state of innocence and face the storms of reality, even if that reality is harsh. A poem that expresses the movement from the protection of familiar structure is "Found in a Storm." The speaker momentarily rejects the movement away from home, but he sees it as an inevitable course he must someday take. The entrance in to traveling carries the intensity of a storm.

A storm that needed a mountain
met it where we were:
we woke up in a gale
that was reasoning with our tent,
and all the persuaded snow
streaked along, guessing the ground

We turned from that curtain down.
But sometime we will turn
back to the curtain and go
by plan through an unplanned storm,
disappearing into the cold,
meanings in search of a world.

(TTD, p. 86)

The speaker in "Winterward" is more anxious to begin his journey. He finds that facing life away from the home, the place of security, is as difficult as leaving the "good people" who care about us. The town, however, becomes a place uncomfortable for one who needs to grow. It is "mostly quiet" with "no sleep at night for anyone" (RY, p. 36). The separation from the town and the thrust into the storm is an almost violent one, yet the call to leave is irresistible.

Now we hear the stars torn upward
out of the sky; the alarm
shadows us as we run away
from this fact of a life, our home.
Oh winter, oh snowy interior,
rocks and hurt birds, we come.
(RY, p. 36)

Facing the storm is facing the unknown, the harsh, and the unexpected in life. It is a constant struggling toward a reconciliation with nature and with oneself. Stafford told me that the traveling seen in his poetry is a "record of my experiences."¹ The manner in which he faces these experiences is described quite well in "With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach." Observing an ocean storm from atop a sand dune, the speaker and his daughter wonder at such a scene. Her question, one that applies to traveling, is "'How far could you swim, Daddy,/ in such a storm?'" (A, p. 3). His answer exemplifies his philosophy of facing life and traveling; "'As far as was needed,' I said,/ and as I talked, I swam" (A, p. 3).

After one has left the safety of the home town or family, he travels through the storm of life. The journey is not one of warmth and sunshine. It is a trip through the dark, the cold, and the unknown. The uncertainty of the fate which awaits one who travels, however, is preferable to hiding from these elements of nature. The traveler constantly tries to grasp, with an exploring hand, the essence of the world. The strength gained by this grasp is shown in these lines from "Witness." The speaker is determined, "Even on the last morning/ when we all tremble and lose, I will reach/ hungrily through that rain, at the end--/ To whatever is there with this loyal hand."²

The decisions one makes when he travels are not always easy ones. They sometimes involve dilemma and compromise. They are many times made

¹Interview

²Stafford, Tennessee Poetry Journal, 2, p. 12.

in the "dark", the uncertainty of right and wrong. The "dark" is an element that all who travel must face. The journey takes one suddenly into difficult situations, and the light one may take with him only reveals the dangers as they occur. One has no preparation for the things he must face. One of Stafford's most celebrated poems is "Traveling through the Dark." In this poem the speaker, driving home late at night, finds a deer dead on the highway. The doe, recently killed, "was large in the belly" (TTD, p. 11). The fawn still alive inside the doe causes the dilemma in the dark. In order to make the road safe for other travelers, the speaker must, in effect, commit murder. He is "swimming" as he thinks "hard for us all" (TTD, p. 11) and finally pushes the doe over the cliff. In an article explicating this poem, Charles Greiner says, "The speaker is literally traveling through the dark, and, in another sense, he and all of us crawling about on this spinning mudball forever asking ourselves, 'Why?' are traveling through the dark."³ Abhorring the violence, yet seeing its necessity, the speaker is judged by the wilderness in which he moves.

The cold is another harsh element of traveling. Not only does one face the "dark," the unknown, one also has to experience and accept the extremes in life. The cold represents these extremes. In "Uncle George" the traveler is coming very close to the ultimate identification of self with nature. The speaker says, "I spend on and on, fainter and fainter/ toward ultimate identification, joining the air/ a few breaths at a time" (RY, p. 16). The strenuous effort put forth allows the man

³Charles Greiner, "Stafford's 'Traveling through the Dark': A Discussion of Style," English Journal, 55 (November 1966), 1017.

to come to terms with the severe factors in nature. He resigns himself to life's limitations and resolves to keep traveling.

The cold of Uncle George's farm I carry home in my
overcoat, where I live reluctantly one life at a time;
like one driven on, I flutter, measure my stream
by many little calls: . . .

(RY, p. 16)

By traveling and facing the dark and the cold head-on, one is allowed to "own" more, to be more nearly complete. One who actively participates in life has the ability to be more successful. Traveling allows one's perception to change. It is the force by which we "move" mountains. The poem, "Where We Are," discusses both "much travel" and "slow travel" (A, p. 70). Of the two, "slow travel" is preferable. "Much travel moves mountains large/ in your eyes," (A, p. 70) but the complexity of bringing too much to light at once provides little understanding, and "the expeditions often get lost" (A, p. 70). One can not savor the experiences gotten by going too fast in the world; one cannot learn at such a rate. "Slow travel moves mountains best--" (A, p. 70). It allows one to comprehend that which he faces and to gain perspective. The mountains "pivot with dignity and bow/ after you pass" (A, p. 70). The slow travel affords the opportunity to move carefully around all which comes into one's view. The slow observation is more profitable to the traveler.

Stafford portrays the travelers as people who have the ability to gain happiness. In "Strangers," a couple travels through the countryside examining road maps and exploring the roads. It is on these roads that they become real. ". . . On the/ checkered map they find themselves, and their/ car is enough audience, their eyes enough/ to know" (A, p. 20). The speaker in the poem envies these two in their journey.

They have found the way to be happy--the way of exploration and self-acceptance. "They are something of us, but I think better,/ lost back there in our old brown car" (A, p. 20). The last line reveals that the speaker is talking about something within himself and someone else. The urge to travel within all of us, the part inside which longs to have the experience, is available to everyone. These people are not truly "lost"; they are in the process of finding.

As said previously, the person who travels owns more. He owns unpleasant as well as pleasant experiences. He faces laws of nature and ultimately the law of death. Stafford's father was a man who was a true participant in life. He lived his creed: "the greatest ownership/ of all is to glance around and understand" (RY, p. 11). He faced forward and gently accepted whatever he found. "My Father: October 1942" records the circumstances surrounding his father's death. It is inevitable and "he holds it easily, and/ nothing can take it from his firm hand" (RY, p. 6). One pays a price for traveling. When one elects to participate in life he must accept that price.

Any time anyone may pick up something
so right that he can't put it down:
that is the problem for all who travel--they
fatally own whatever is really theirs,
and that is the inner thread, the lock,
what can hold. If it is to be, nothing breaks
it. Millions of observers guess all the
time, but each person, once, can say, "Sure."

Then he's no longer an observer. He isn't right,
or wrong. He just wins or loses.

(RY, p. 6)

The traveler is presented in these lines as one who is nothing extraordinary. He is an ordinary man who must face what life deals him. But even if he loses, it seems he has gained from owning and living in an active way. He gains insight into the world. He can say, "Sure" (RY, p. 6).

The traveler's journey has a destination. That destination is home, self-acceptance and reintegration with nature. It is an identification with one's origins tempered and made wise by experience. The urgency of finding the natural way, forgotten with the advent of mechanized civilization, is seen in "Watching the Jet Planes Dive." In order to find ourselves, we must journey away from the comfortable things in life. It is not an easy journey.

We must go back with noses and the palms of our hands,
and climb over the map in far places, everywhere,
and lie down whenever there is doubt, and sleep there.
If roads are unconnected we must make a path,
no matter how far it is, or how lowly we arrive.

(WYC, p. 37)

This stanza points to the necessity of relearning to use our senses in our exploration. We must face doubt rather than avoid it. We must be pathfinders, and "We must find something forgotten by everyone alive" (WYC, p. 37). The traveler must deal basically with life in order to own it. While "The jet planes dive," "we must travel on our knees" (WYC, p. 37).

In this return to familiar and original parts of one's life, one does not view his origins in the same way he once did. The traveling widens the scope of observation and insight. In "Observation Car and Cigar," Stafford shows how "authentic" (A, p. 13) scenes fade. The fading does not hurt these scenes. In fact they "become/ priceless, never to be exchanged" (A, p. 13). The traveler brings new insight and understanding into those things he had been close to before. The traveling has enhanced their beauty.

Like a camera that believes, he follows an arch into faded authentic scenes that bring something presented again and yet all new: traveling, our loves are brought before us and followed securely into a new evening.
(A, p. 13)

A man who travels finds himself brought closer and closer to nature. Through his travels he gradually sheds the trappings of false society and changes to his original real self. He becomes "authentic" again. When this change takes place, it is once again possible to return to what has been his. Stafford clearly expresses this thought in "Allegiances."

But once we have tasted far streams, touched the gold,
found some limit beyond the waterfall,
a season changes, and we come back, changed
but safe, quiet, grateful.

(A, p. 77)

The last stanza of the poem indicates that once a traveler has come to this point of reconciliation, he is free from the questions that surrounded him as he traveled. "While strange beliefs whine at the traveler's ears,/ we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love/ where we are, sturdy for common things" (A, p. 77).

"For the Grave of Daniel Boone" is a poem that clearly connects the concept of traveling presented in this chapter to Stafford's concept of home to be discussed in the following chapter. The traveler in this poem is not only searching for home, he is building it as he moves. All that he touches, lives with, experiences, becomes a part of himself and thus a part of his home.

The farther he went the farther home grew.
Kentucky became another room;
the mansion arched over the Mississippi;
flowers were spread all over the floor.
He traced ahead a deepening home,
and better, with goldenrod!

(RY, p. 70)

The tradition of movement in the growth of a "deepening home" (RY, p. 70) seen in Daniel Boone's journey is applicable to the journey anyone might take. Daniel Boone was a man extremely close to nature. He faced his wilderness, and the speaker exhorts us to face ours. He encourages us to look beyond the "barbwire time" and "to follow the old hands back" (RY, p. 70). He urges us to use our natural senses and abilities to find ourselves. In this way we can be "hunting our own kind of deepening home" (RY, p. 70).

The traveler seen in Stafford's poetry is one who is willing to leave the comfort and security of the original home. He is one who can face the experiences that are encountered on a journey. He walks directly into the dark and the cold. He learns to cope, "to carry cold home" (RY, p. 16) in his overcoat. He learns to face whatever comes and to "fatally own" (RY, p. 6) whatever is his. It is through this acceptance of nature and the reversion of man away from civilization to his natural senses and emotions that he is able to recapture his true self. The authentic scenes, and all he has gained through his traveling, bring him to the concept of a "deepening home" (RY, p. 70).

CHAPTER V

QUERENCIA

The traveler in William Stafford's poem is moving toward a destination of home. The home he finds is not a place. It is, rather, an internal instinct, a feeling of comfortableness with everything around. In an interview, Stafford said that his concept of home may be best expressed in the Spanish word querencia.¹ The word may be defined as a "love of home"², but Stafford attached a larger meaning. He said that querencia expresses a feeling that home is wherever one goes. It is something that one carries with him and applies to whatever place he may inhabit.³ Being at home means accepting the cold, the dark and the unknown. Richard Hugo says that Stafford "carries his world within him for good, and no matter how foreign the external landscape, he will travel through its darks and find his poem."⁴ This approach to life is brought out in a discussion at the Spring Poetry Festival in Martin, Tennessee in 1971. In the discussion, Stafford talked about place--the regionalism in poetry. He says that even though he writes about the Midwest, "It's not anything local. It's something that is local for any

¹Interview

²Spanish and English Dictionary, ed. Edwin B. Williams (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 476.

³Interview

⁴Richard Hugo, "Problems with Landscapes in Early Stafford Poems," Kansas Quarterly, 2 (Spring, 1970), 38.

of us wherever we happen to be."⁵ The exchange that followed Stafford's remark about locale is significant:

Mooney: I would like to try something. I'm going to say the word 'tree.' You just think of tree. Where is it?

Stafford: At your house. The one with birds nesting in it.

Mooney: I said 'tree.' What did you see, Robert?

Bly: I see a tree in northern Minnesota. A wonderful pine tree.

Mooney: I see a pecan tree that I grew up with. What did you see, Bill?

Matthews: I see two maples in my front yard.

Mooney: David Verble?

Verble: Two magnolias on the farm.

Mooney: He grew up on a farm in Covington, Tennessee. It looks from what we chose, though--

Matthews: The trees are imported. In talking about location, we all brought our trees from home. But Stafford has his tree here.

Stafford: I'm glad I live here.⁶

Stafford, like the speakers in his poems, lives wherever he happens to be. Even in a place far from Oregon and far from the Midwest, he finds his "tree," the home he carries within.

One finds this inner feeling of home by leaving his original home and traveling. In his traveling he meets many experiences, some of them

⁵William Stafford, "Discussions During the Spring Poetry Festival, Martin, April 16-17, 1971," Tennessee Poetry Journal, 4 (Spring, 1971), 18.

⁶Ibid.

harsh and cruel. The perfection gained by this traveling is seen in the poem "Right Now." "Led by my own dark I go/ my unmarked everlasting round/ frozen in this moment" (RY, p. 64). The speaker captures the sought-after feeling. He is at once all-knowing with his feeling of home. ". . . I know/ so well nothing moves, arrived;/ my glimpse, this town, our time" (RY, p. 64).

Essentially the same theme is found in "Sophocles Says." This poem is important because it shows man traveling through a nature permeated with God. The traveler passes through the time of isolation in the dark, only to find home. His journey is the journey of all God's creatures who travel.

he goes, and he suffers, himself, the kind of dark
that anything sent from God experiences,
until he finds through trees the lights of a town--
a street, the houses blinded in the rain--
and he hesitates a step, shocked--at home.

(RY, p. 76)

The suffering of the traveler is replaced by a primeval feeling of oneness with the world. He credits God with the reintegration of his being with nature and the realization of home. The last stanza clearly shows that a man who lives within the world as a participant, a searcher, will find, after some hesitation, an inner security.

For God will take a man, no matter where,
and make some scene a part of what goes on:
there will be a flame; there will be a snowflake form;
and riding with the birds, wherever they are,
bending the wind, finding a rendezvous
beyond the sun or under the earth--that man
will hesitate a step--and meet his home.

(RY, p. 76)

Cold and dark are part of the shaping of man's concept of home, but love is also an essential ingredient. Both the first and the last poems in Allegiances approach the part of home that is fashioned out of love. "This Book" tells of one coming in from the cold. The speaker

quietly welcomes him and is part of home for both of them. The depth of the speaker's feeling and his total identification with the traveler allow him to benefit from the returnee's travels. "You see/ the reason for time, for everything in the sky./ And into your eyes I climb, on the strongest/ thread in the world, weaving the dark and the cold" (A, p. ix). The dark and the cold are woven into a fabric of love that covers the speaker in his concept of home. The last poem in the volume is "So Long." The speaker is "at home/ with all I touch, at the level of love" (A, p. 82). He realizes that one must accept the life around him and love what is near. A search for an ideal drains love away, while by living in the "Now," even in the cold, one can be whole.

No one can surface till far,
far on, and all that we'll have
to love may be what's near
in the cold, even then,

(A, p. 82)

In order to achieve querencia, one must move back to his roots. He leaves the town he was born in and searches for something real. The reality he finds is most often himself reflected in nature. It is by a reintegration with nature that he becomes truly a part of the world. He becomes a part of nature and nature becomes a part of him. Stafford recognizes the force of nature. He says in "Earth Dweller," ". . . the world speaks./ The world speaks everything to us./ It is our only friend" (A, p. 79). The world spoken of in this poem is a world filled with simplicity and lacking artificiality. It is a world of "the barn, and the shed,/ and the windmill, my hands" (A, p. 79). He pleads for anonymity in his communion with nature, "Oh, let me stay/ here humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all" (A, p. 79).

As a man very concerned with nature, Stafford seeks an escape for all those caught up in the artificial mundane world. He sees this avenue of escape toward home through nature as the poet's responsibility. These lines from "The Gift" reflect this philosophy:

We give them scenes like this:
a tree that blooms in a gale, a stone
the gale can't move, a breath song
against the pane from outside,
breathing, "Some day tame (therefore lost) men, the wild
will come over the highest wall, waving
its banner voice, beating its gifted fist:
Begin again, you tame ones; listen--the roads
are your home again.

(A, p. 22)

Through listening, using the senses, and experiencing life, the writer or any man can find the "home he salvages from little pieces/ along the roads, from distinctions he remembers,/ from what by chance he sees-- his grabbed heritage" (A, p. 22). He reaches forward toward the ultimate identification with nature and with the internal part of himself that rebels against being "tame." Stafford sees as a primary goal for man, the finding the "wild" again, and being an integral part of the design of nature.

The traveler follows a trail leading to natural life in "Hunting." The speaker finds himself brought close to resolve with nature, but in this poem he hesitates before he takes advantage of the opportunity. He sees within the woods the calm place that he seeks, but he also understands that it will always be there for him to return to.

Bugles that fade are still bugles;
birds that sang wait still;
deep in the woods is that far place
once near, and our own, and real.
(RY, p. 71)

Man becomes totally a part of nature in "Believing What I Know." The speaker sees the constant change that is always occurring in nature. "Many things that were true/ disappeared, grew up in grass,/ and now hide from flowers that stare" (A, p. 69). It is from this change that man in his relationship to nature learns to adjust to the complexities and the difficulties he finds in life. By adjusting to change, he achieves a total integration with nature. As he becomes a part of nature, it becomes an integral part of himself.

I learn from the land. Someday
like a field I may take the next thing
so well that whatever is will be me.
(A, p. 69)

Perhaps the best statement concerning the relationship of nature to home is found in "In Response to a Question." The word "home" is not found in the poem, but the concept is clearly present. The poem presents Stafford's philosophy of man's role on earth. The three stanzas all begin with an admonition of what the earth says one should be. They also are all filled with images of natural simplicity and wild scenery. The first stanza shows that man should become a part of his surroundings. "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" (TTD, p. 33). These lines indicate the adjustment one must make when he lives in a world such as this. The second stanza emphasizes the importance of man's closeness to nature. Each man should become a part of a complete scene around him. "The earth says every summer have a ranch/ that's minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape/ that proclaims a universe" (TTD, p. 33). Again, adjustment to the situation is necessary. The highway is "guided by the way the world is tilted" (TTD, p. 33).

The third stanza stresses the necessity for one to be true to himself. He must not betray himself. "The earth says where you live wear the kind/ of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)" (TTD, p. 33). The three linking ideas, that man should adjust to his surroundings, integrate himself with nature, and remain an individual, culminate in the idea that man must remain a questing searcher, a participant in life who uses all of his senses. The poem ends with the single line that is an expression of Stafford's quiet acceptance of life. "Listening, I think that's what the earth says" (TTD, p. 33).

The primitive acceptance of nature is tempered by the community spirit of those who find home. The towns they live in are part of the large plan of nature. They are not over-industrialized megalopoli of uncertainty and concern. There is a type of solidity upon which these towns are built. The simplicity inherent in these towns mocks the doomsday predictions of a crumbling civilization. "Universe is One Place" tells of such a philosophy of home. Its message is clearly optimistic. The speaker rejects the idea of a crisis when the world is still so complete to him.

We think--drinking cold water
water looking at the sky--
Sky is home, universe is one place.
Crisis? City folks make

Make such a stir.
Farm girl away through the wheat.
(TTD, p. 43)

"Conservative" continues the theme of optimism for the people who live in the small towns. The speaker laments the fact that so many people caught up in the technological world lose sight of what is really home. "All you that live your city way:/ you cannot hold thought ways to hold/ the old way steady" (TTD, p. 26). They cannot commune with nature

and "know what glaciers told" (TTD, p. 26). The pessimism that seems to be present in these lines dissolves into a cautious optimism. The speaker has faith that the natural, the simple in life, will triumph. He sees the real beneath the costume of civilization, and he hopes that the costume will be shed.

Your years--these rifles atoms made--
and your map river-carved

Conceal a map new glaciers plan,
and there are rivers yet to come,
wide lakes again, and maybe hands
to dip like mine, a voice to say:
"For towns, I'll take this one."

(TTD, p. 26)

The future, though clouded by uncertainty, seems not so bleak to William Stafford because he believes in the primacy of nature and its essential hold on the inner man. The loss of the feeling of home and its return are seen in "The Old Hamer Place." The three stanzas of this poem present three stages in the search for querencia. In the first stanza there is an overpowering sense of the wilderness and nature as an integral part of life. The second stanza is a record of the time after the leaving of such a place and before the finding of home. The speaker becomes segregated from what was his home. "All this had got lost from my mind" (TTD, p. 29). He wanders and slowly the hope for another home establishes itself within him. This new home will be a change from what he experienced in Stanza One, but it will provide him with the substance he needs to fill the gap in his development.

. . . A place that
changed is a different place, but
A whole town might come shuddering back, that had
disappeared
when a dark animal began to overcome the world
and a little bird came to sing our walls down.
(TTD, p. 29)

The poem that most fully expresses Stafford's journey and his search for home is "The Farm on the Great Plains." In this poem we see all the elements central to the poetry of William Stafford. There is the childhood reminiscence, the facing of the cold, and the final acceptance of the home within oneself.

A telephone line goes cold;
birds tread it wherever it goes.
A farm back of a great plain
tugs an end of the line.

I call that farm every year,
ringing it, listening, still;
no one is home at the farm,
the line gives only a hum.

Some year I will ring the line
on a night at last the right one,
and with an eye tapered for braille
from the phone on the wall

I will see the tenant who waits--
the last one left at the place;
through the dark my braille eye
will lovingly touch his face.

"Hello, is Mother at home?"
No one is home today.
"But Father--he should be there."
No one--no one is here.

"But you--are you the one. . . ?"
Then the line will be gone
because both ends will be home:
no space, no birds, no farm.

My self will be the plain,
wise as winter is gray,
pure as cold posts go
pacing toward what I know.

(RY, p. 26)

It is readily apparent from this magnificent poem that the home that one had as a child is not the same as the home one discovers as an adult. The striving for what has been left behind is, however, a way to the new home. The pull is strong to one's roots and it is difficult to

break away. The telephone line is the physical symbol of the link to the past. This link must be severed in order to foster complete individual growth. But the speaker keeps waiting for some answer to his call. He knows that there will be a night that is the right one. It is a moment of climax when the phone is answered. There is an immediate identification of the speaker with "the tenant who waits." The questions in the next stanza seem to answer themselves. The speaker is giving a last weak attempt at strengthening the link before he becomes fully cognizant of what home really is. At the moment of "But you--are you the one. . . ?" the speaker understands that the "you" is himself, and immediately "both ends will be home." The speaker has found home. He has come to the realization that the past has become a part of him, just as the present is. He sees that he is home: "My self will be the plain." He is what he has been seeking. As an individual, a participant in life rather than an observer of things past, he is at home within himself. He has found peace.

Once a person has discovered that home is an internal rather than an external reality it is possible to be totally in harmony with the world. That person becomes a part of everything around him and like Stafford can find his 'tree' anywhere. The concept of Querencia develops, and man can return to the simple and saving thought that he is "at home/ with all I touch, at the level of love."

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Although William Stafford is one of the most widely published poets in America today, he has been given relatively little critical attention. The few articles written about his poetry have dealt rather superficially with his major themes. This study is meant to delve more deeply into the pattern that much of his poetry reveals. It is in this pattern, the search for home, that one finds most of his major ideas.

Stafford reveals through his poems the route he thinks necessary to the full development of the individual. Like William Blake, he sees the beginning of the journey in a state of innocence. This innocence, for Stafford, involves a close relationship with the people and the landscape of the small home town. The town is a symbol of simplicity. The individual lives close to nature, using his instincts in an invigorating world. His parents are a part of this state of innocence. The mother clings to him, trying to prevent him from leaving the natural state. The father, however, provides the impetus to the next step in the growth of the individual. He is the quester who leads his son and shows him how to touch, listen, and understand the world around him.

When an individual is taken away from the simple existence in the small town, he has to learn to cope in an artificial, mechanical society. For the sensitive man, the only way to survive in such a world is to "recoil" and re-experience those primitive feelings that were a part of his past. These mental journeys home permit him to function in a complex and difficult world.

The complex world is the second leg of Stafford's journey. This state of "experience," as Blake would say, is also necessary to each man's development. In Stafford's poetry the experience is gained by traveling. The traveler faces reality in a harsh world. He leaves the protection of the mother and father and the home town, and turns to the cold and the dark of life. The home town is no longer satisfactory to a man who must experience all facets of life whether they be good or bad. The journey of the traveler is one in which his destination is self-discovery and self-knowledge. He seeks a replacement for the security of the home town he has deserted.

The final part of the journey in Stafford's poetry is the discovery of Querencia. The man discovers home within himself. It is not an external reality, but an internal truth. The individual leaves the simplicity of the town to travel in a complex world. He loses his communion with nature and finds it necessary to keep moving until he learns to use his senses once again to experience life fully. He becomes re-integrated with nature and partially with his former self. He finds, once more, the peace of the home town and is able to appreciate it because of his experience. He has reached a stage, like Blake, of higher innocence. He has found strength and satisfaction within himself.

Stafford's poetry cannot be separated from the man himself. His poems are quiet and affirmative, and they truly reflect his personality. Not flamboyant or eccentric, as poets are popularly conceived, he is an observer of life. He is a genuine man who reinforces the realistic views we see in his poems. He does not romanticize nature; he just presents it as real. A man of wry wit and soft language, he shows a way of life not untrue in this complex world, but perhaps only ignored by

most of us. With the people and the situations in his poems, he strikes a hidden vein of truth in all of us. His poems make us re-experience and feel again the basic human tendencies that have been covered over by sophistication. His poetry, as a record of his experiences, echoes our own, and we, as readers, are at home with William Stafford.

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