

An Interview with Kim Stafford by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg and Stafford's Poem, "Daddy"

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg (CMG): *You're both executor of your father's writing, and a fine writer in your right — I loved Early Morning: Remembering My Father William Stafford and 100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do about your brother, and I also find a great deal of meaning and inspiration in your poetry. What have you learned about balancing your dual role as holder of both your own and your father's writing?*

Kim Stafford (KS): On a good day, I feel like my father and I are a family guild sharing the craft—the calling, really, of writing as witness. In this spirit, I remember hearing an African folk musician say of his instrument, inherited from his father, “When I play the Gaa, I remember my father, and I *am* my father.” In this spirit I remember the time I asked my father in my mind, “Daddy, have I done enough for you [as literary executor]?” And in my mind, he replied, “Years ago you did enough.” And I asked him “How will I know whether to do your work, or my work?” And he replied, “Do the thing that’s most alive. Some days that will be my work; most days that will be your work...and eventually you won’t know the difference.”

At the same time, there was only so much my father could do. He wasn’t a singer, or the kind of essay-storyteller I am. His way was more reticent, though he did note “You wouldn’t want too reserved a speaker.” He tended to deliver his lyric imaginings in spoonfulls, while I dish it out with a ladle—or a shovel. So we’re different, and that’s good. There is a certain, perhaps inevitable qualm I can feel when someone says to me, “You’re Kim Stafford? I love your father’s poetry.”

“So do I,” I say. “That’s why I’ve worked with others to publish twenty books by and about William Stafford since his death.” That’s all good, but it’s a lot. So, as I can, I return to my own writing.

CMG: Both your dad and you write in ways deeply infused with sense of place. Is place a kind of character in all this work or the ground on which this work walks or something else?

KS: If an artist lives in both body and mind, then earth-place as well as the human intellectual world will serve as tributaries to the river of creation. Living in this body, in this place, or any particular place, I am kin to weather, season, plant, bird, insect, tide, and the myriad elements of where I am. In a sense, where I am is who I am, or at least part of what I do as a writer: speaking about place and speaking for place. To live only in mind would be a slow starvation.

CMG: Obviously, we in Kansas claim your dad as our first and unofficial poet laureate, a kind of spirit guide for many of Kansas writers. Likely, people in Oregon also feel like your dad is theirs too, especially considering how he probably spent more years in the Northwest than the Midwest. Add to this that you grew up in Oregon but have been back to Kansas numerous times, and Kansas is likely a mythic home ground for you and your family too. So I know this is a very general and mysterious question, but what is Kansas to you and/or how does this state (and state of mind) live in you?

KS: My father was exiled from Kansas, as I understand it, because of his pacifism following World War II, and he wrote 59 of his 60 books while living in Oregon. But those books are filled with stories from Kansas, a kind of homesick bounty that causes places like Hutchinson, El Dorado, Liberal, Lawrence, Garden City, the Flint Hills, the Ninnescah, Cow Creek, and other elements of the Kansas glory to be bedrock to my childhood, wherever we lived. He loved Kansas to the end, and one of his last poems was a recollection of skating on a prairie pond as a child.

For me, this resulted in a kind of enriching double Eden in my own childhood: Oregon was the magic land, Kansas the mythic. When I return to Kansas, and walk out into the Sand Hills, or just about anywhere, I feel the tug of that other home ground.

CMG: Where are you being led these days as a writer and human?

KS: On a walk last week, I remembered an old thought: “I need to forgive myself for being Kim.” I have long considered myself an insufficient human being, not doing enough for the human project. But then I thought of this in a different way: “I need to change who I am ... I need to renew my sense of vocation.” Since then, when I’m writing, this has become my agenda: How can what I write, the way I write, and where I send what I write be my best part in the human conversation toward peace and reconciliation?

CMG: When people ask me why I write, I think, "Because I have to." I know I turn into a very off-balanced mess of a person without touching base with the page, which is kind of a hybrid emotional-spiritual-ecological practice for me (and sometimes a very messy practice). What is writing to you, and why do you write?

I recently received a message from a former student that answered this question better than I can: “This is how I relate to writing...like the friend who is always there, like a welcoming practice that helps me find my way in the world. Who knows why life is so complex, so mystifying...? Writing is often a tiny 8 ½ x 11 inch life raft, and this pen is an oar. I keep it moving and trust a current.”

Daddy

In that river my blood flowed on.

~ William Stafford, 1914-1993

Rub my thumb in the empty hollow of your milkweed pod.
Listen me into wind. I close my eyes in your Flint Hills.

Feed me the old family remedy for homesick: sky, school,
girl, ground, find, storm, home, war, scar, farm.

The clink of flint underfoot, butterfly opens on coyote scat
packed with mouse fur, by the creek the long-legged
spider carrying a lizard tail into the deep mud shadow
of a turtle track. I reach my hand for what you knew.

Lead me by bark Braille into the grove at dusk: honey locust,
sycamore, cottonwood, burr oak, catalpa, redbud, black
walnut, Kentucky coffee tree, American elm, red cedar, red
mulberry, hackberry, willow wands in the river sand.

Whisper me home to mangled windmill, Ruby's grave.

At the cut bank where the Kaw camped I can almost smell
your smoke, embers sinking low from a hunting fire.

Where Kansas rhymes with cousin, heartbreak with home, C.O.
with so long, the prairie wind brings you whispering back.

My willow stick taps our code at the library step, refinery flame,
river bank, at Hutch and El Dorado, Ninnescah and Wichita,
Garden City, Lawrence, the Sand Hills, every subtle
eminence and declivity in the open country I can find
that whispers *Daddy*. Turn and listen.

They call it milkweed pod. I call it pharaoh boat, ghost vagina,
moon purse, meadowlark song bag, thumb pillow,
yearning's white mane. Open the wind.

Comanche's farrier scrawled at the end *in memory of old Veteran
horse Who Died at 1:30 oclock With the colice in his stall
While I had my hand on his pulse and looking him in the eye
this night long to Be Remembered*. I stare into your sky.

The warriors of the plains valued most the act
of disarming an enemy without injuring him at all
using the lightest possible weapon. As a feather, you wielded

a hawk's glance, an owl's word — Lame White Man, Kicking Bear, Hump, One Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall, Rain in the Face, Crow King, Black Elk, Comes Again, Iron Hawk, Little Soldier, Sitting Bull, Two Moons, Law Dog, Bloody Mouth, Hollow Horn Bear.

I went out over the prairie seeking you, your softest voice.
And there, Nietzsche said, "Some persons are born posthumously."

I asked the wrinkled mind of the Osage tree, I asked the glance of shrike,
asked the restless seething spiral of the whip snake cornered
in a rut, asked all that travels over prairie: cottonwood
scent, rain damp, tangle of meadowlark and wind, pungent
colors of grass where the sun goes low.

I went out over the prairie to visit a single tree — faint trail far
through buffalo grass, a few frantic minnows where the pool
had almost dried. Daddy, in the shade of shocked willow.
Daddy, in flint strata where the flood scoured. Daddy,
on the open land a river through civilized places
shifts and sustains its own, traveling freely as wind,
as dark, as sky — through static human systems
a thicket of the living wild, just there where the field
ends, the cut bank drops away. Daddy, the raveled
edge of all they have made. Daddy, how my hand
through silk dust, prairie grass, milkweed gone found you.

~ Kim Stafford

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Kim Stafford directs the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College, and is the author of a dozen books of poetry and prose, including *Having Everything Right* and *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do: How My Brother Disappeared*. His poetry chapbook *How to Sleep Cold* is

forthcoming in fall 2016 from Limberlost Press. He has taught writing in Scotland, Italy, and Bhutan.