

EBSCO Publishing Citation Format: MLA 9th Edition (Modern Language Assoc.):

NOTE: Review the instructions at http://support.ebsco.com.ezproxy.metrolibrary.org/help/?int=ehost&lang=&feature_id=MLA and make any necessary corrections before using. **Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates.** Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

Works Cited

Stafford, William, and Clark Mayo. "Traveling Through the Dark." *Traveling Through the Dark*, June 2011, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.metrolibrary.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=prf&AN=67051479&site=prc-live>.

<!--Additional Information:

Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.metrolibrary.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=prf&AN=67051479&site=prc-live>

End of citation-->

"Traveling Through the Dark"

William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" is a short poem of eighteen lines, divided into four quatrains and a closing couplet. The title clearly describes both the literal and the figurative situation in the poem as well as its governing metaphor: The speaker himself is traveling through the dark on a narrow mountain road, and by extension, so is everyone. Stafford uses personification effectively to indicate and insist that all creatures are in the world together; human responsibility is finally a communal as well as an individual one.

Author Supplied Keywords: Animals; Automobiles; Deer; Mountains; Nature; Night; Roads, streets, or highways; Traveling or travelers

"Traveling Through the Dark"

Author: William Stafford

Born: January 17, 1914; Hutchinson, Kansas

Died: August 28, 1993; Lake Oswego, Oregon

Country: United States

Culture: American

Type of Poem: Lyrics

Appears In

Traveling Through the Dark by William Stafford

William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" is a short poem of eighteen lines, divided into four quatrains and a closing couplet. The title clearly describes both the literal and the figurative situation in the poem as well as its governing metaphor: The speaker himself is traveling through the dark on a narrow mountain road, and by extension, so is everyone.

The poem is written in the first person, giving an immediacy and directness to the experience; the reader is there with the poet, though he tells the story in the past tense. Many poets choose to speak through a created voice, or persona, but one senses in this poem that Stafford is speaking directly from his own experience. By sharing his personal experience so vividly, Stafford gives it an immediacy, authority, and power that helps one make it a part of one's own.

The first stanza begins with a description of the setting and the context of the events which follow. The speaker is traveling at night on a narrow mountain road and comes upon the body of a dead deer. Because the road is so narrow, he realizes that the dead deer is a hazard to other drivers, who might swerve suddenly to avoid it and drive off the road into the river canyon and be killed.

Stanza 2 shows him getting out of the car to look at the deer; he discovers that it is a doe, only recently dead. As he drags it off the road, he realizes that its belly is unusually large. In stanza 3, he discovers the reason: Inside the dead doe is an unborn fawn, still alive. He hesitates, not sure what to do. Should he try to save the fawn? Is there some way to rescue it, although its mother is dead? Should he be more concerned with the safety of other travelers in the dark and the fact that the dead deer is a dangerous road hazard?

While he hesitates in stanza 4, he notices the car, which seems animal-like to him as it aims its parking lights and purrs its engine. He stands in the glow of the taillights and watches the exhaust of the car turn red. Around him, the car, the doe, and the unborn fawn, he hears nature listen, waiting for him to make a decision.

In the final couplet he makes his decision, the only one he can possibly make if he acts responsibly for all involved; he pushes the doe over the edge of the canyon and into the river. The decision is difficult because he has realized humankind's responsibility for the whole natural world, especially the animal world. It is, however, the only possible decision, because even if he had the instruments to do a cesarean section, he could not keep the fawn alive, and to leave the deer there on the road might cause others to die as well; in their swerving to avoid the deer, they might veer off the narrow canyon road and crash down into the river.

Stafford uses poetic form with startling effectiveness in this poem. His quatrains use an abcb slant rhyme pattern ("road" with "dead," "killing" with "belly," "waiting" with "hesitated," and "engine" with "listen") with great effectiveness; the slant rhyme undercuts any romanticized notion that being in nature is an unadulterated delight. He also uses the sound reinforcements of assonance and alliteration; in stanza 1, for example, there is "dark," "deer," and "dead"; "river," "road," and "roll"; and "might," "make," and "more." The repetition of sounds, as subtle as it is, intensifies the nuances of the speaker's experience and helps to lead him (and the reader) to the final action,

which must be done without any "swerving." Stafford also builds an effective movement from external to internal action, and from physical to moral responsibility; he emphasizes this process with the pause in the middle of the poem (line 12) in which he hesitates in order to decide the best course of action to take. Another important poetic device is the use of puns, or wordplay, here intensely serious rather than comic. Besides the dual meaning of "swerving," for example, there is the dual meaning of "still" (line 11): The fawn continues to live, but it is quiet as well (as is the speaker).

The central device of the poem, however, is the use of action as metaphor. The decision of one person is exemplified and amplified to represent a decision for all people, in any time and place. The decision is also a specific answer in a specific situation to the question of one's individual and communal responsibility to the environment in which one lives. Because Stafford has deliberately understated his case, both through an objective point of view (he tells what he thinks, but not what he feels, about the situation) and a slant rhyme scheme, each of which avoids the obvious in sense and structure, he has allowed readers to make their own emotional responses, without any poetic sentimentality.

"Traveling Through the Dark" asks readers to examine in a profound way the implications of their actions and the connotations of their thoughts and words. To live in the modern world, Stafford suggests metaphorically, is to travel through a variety of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual landscapes, some of which may be cast in light, but others of which are in shadow. Every individual, at one time or another, will go over (figuratively, at least) narrow and dangerous mountain roads on dark nights, and one must discipline oneself to go as responsibly and self-consciously as one can. How can one prepare oneself to deal with the unexpected? To act rather than to ignore, suggests Stafford; to be a participant rather than merely an observer, because physical situations can provide the context for moral and ethical choices.

"Traveling Through the Dark" focuses on the parallels between physical swerving (line 4) and mental swerving (line 17), between a literal loss of control and a figurative loss of mental control caused by doubt. Coupled with this is the connection between the human (and even mechanical) world and the animal world. In the fourth stanza, for example, the car "aimed" its headlight; its engine "purred"; and "the warm exhaust turn[ed] red," suggesting a mingling of breath and blood. As the speaker expands his consciousness of the world from himself to the doe, fawn, and himself ("our group" in line 16) and then further to all society ("us all" in line 17), he extends his thematic perceptions from the individual to the communal: The reader is asked to make a decision with him. The decision has to do with what is, in any particular situation, the humane act as well as the just thing to do; what it means to be responsible, not only for oneself, but for one another and for the environment.

The questions suggested by the poem are many, and they concern each individual's particular responsibility for the environment as a whole (air, land, and water) as well as for the other creatures that inhabit it. Stafford uses personification effectively to indicate and insist that all creatures are in the world together; human responsibility is finally a communal as well as an individual one.

For Further Information

Brehm, John. "William Stafford." *Magill's Survey of American Literature*. Revised Edition. Pasadena: Salem Press. EBSCO *Literary Reference Center Plus*. Web. 15 March 2011.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.metrolibrary.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331MSA12889830000287&site=lrc-plus>.

---. "Traveling Through the Dark." *Magill's Survey of American Literature*. Revised Edition. Pasadena: Salem Press. EBSCO *Literary Reference Center Plus*. Web. 15 March 2011.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.metrolibrary.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331MSA25819830001580&site=lrc-plus>.

Fulton, Jean C. "William Stafford." *Critical Survey of Poetry*. Second Revised Edition. Pasadena: Salem Press, 2003. EBSCO *Literary Reference Center Plus*. Web. 15 March 2011.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.metrolibrary.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331CSP15920160000247&site=lrc-plus>.

McFarland, Ron. "William Stafford." *Cyclopedia of World Authors*. Fourth Revised Edition. Pasadena: Salem Press, 2003. EBSCO *Literary Reference Center Plus*. Web. 15 March 2011.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.metrolibrary.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331CWA30689810001654&site=lrc-plus>.

Bibliography

Andrews, Tom, ed. *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. Print.

Holden, Jonathan. *The Mark to Turn*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1976. Print.

Kitchen, Judith. *Writing the World: Understanding William Stafford*. Corvallis: Oregon State UP, 1999. Print.

Pinsker, Sanford. "William Stafford: 'The Real Things We Live By.'" *In Three Pacific Northwest Poets*. Boston: Twayne, 1987. Print.

Stafford, Kim. *Early Morning: Remembering My Father, William Stafford*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2002. Print.

Stitt, Peter. "William Stafford's Wilderness Quest." *In The World: Hieroglyphic Beauty: Five American Poets*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985. Print.

~~~~~

By William Stafford

Essay by: Clark Mayo

---

Copyright of Traveling Through the Dark is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use. For reprints and permission requests, contact [proprietarypublishing@ebSCO.com](mailto:proprietarypublishing@ebSCO.com).

**Source:** Traveling Through the Dark

**Accession Number:** 67051479