

*Traveling Through the Dark* Stafford's second collection, *Traveling Through the Dark*, established his reputation and won the National Book Award in 1963. Themes from the first collection reoccur, the subject matter is again straightforward, and the tone is gently conversational. Stafford's voice here is less tentative, more sure, but still it asks questions, encouraging the reader to travel past the everyday world of light into the dark wilderness where the real journey takes place. His image of darkness is firmly established here, and it is not a negative one. He associates darkness with depth, silence, and intuition, the edges toward which life always progresses, the edges beyond which greater understanding of the self may be found.

In this volume, Stafford transcends the boundaries of time and space, of past and future, and explores what he finds in the gaps. He moves beyond what he can see, to listen for what language has to tell him. The poem that gives the volume its title is one of Stafford's most famous works and has been frequently anthologized. It is characteristic of Stafford in that its form and narrative are simple, yet underneath lies more complexity. While driving a mountain road at night, the speaker in the poem comes upon a dead deer. He stops and gets out, confident that he should roll the animal over the edge of the cliff to clear the narrow road for cars that will follow his. As he comes closer and touches the deer, however, he finds that there is an unborn fawn waiting, still alive. The man begins to have doubts about what is the right action. Should he do what might seem to be best on the surface — push the doe over the cliff and avoid further accidents on the road? Or is it possible to save the fawn? If so, would it be the right thing to do? Described with characteristic understatement, the moment of decision is swift: He decides to push her off.

"Traveling Through the Dark" has been read as a poem of conflict between nature and society, symbolized by the car. The speaker clearly sympathizes with the fawn, which "lay there waiting,/ alive, still, never to be born." However, he accepts the forces of technology that caused the problem and realizes that the safety of the next passersby — in cars again — depends on his clearing the road. It has been noted that the personified car, which "aimed ahead its lowered parking lights" and under whose hood "purred the steady engine," is actually the most alive thing in this poem. This may be the ironic voice of a pragmatist who sees nature as something for human beings to use as they please. A more expanded reading, however, would bridge the nature-society dichotomy somewhat by allowing nature to include the car and, by extension, society as well. From such a perspective, the car is both a symbol of death (a significant theme of subject-object unity in Stafford's poetry) and a symbol of life, a part of "our group" in the road. The poem uses the word "swerve" twice. Once the meaning is literal, the anticipated physical movement of further cars coming upon the carcass in the road. The second time, though, it is the speaker who swerves, and his swerving is internal. Having "thought hard for us all — my only swerving," he makes a decision, but what is he swerving toward, or away from?

It may appear that the speaker's dependence on progress is greater than his ability to control it. Even so, for the moment that he considers saving the fawn, he swerves away from society toward nature. However, perhaps the swerve is in the opposite direction. Perhaps he is swerving from a more simplistic view of nature toward an understanding that encompasses the interests of society within its purview. From his upbringing and especially as a result of his years doing conscientious objector service during World War II, Stafford characteristically considers all sides of his questions. Perhaps the speaker in this poem comes to recognize his own part in the process of the narrative. Is he only the man who finds the dead deer, or does he also bear part of the responsibility for the killing? Underlying the obvious choice to be made — what to do with the deer — may be a suggestion that longing to return to the old ways and escape from society is not really much different from embracing progress without a firm connection with the simplicity and order of nature at its base. There is also the suggestion that Stafford himself may still be making his decisions. When asked about this poem, Stafford responded, "Choices are always Hobson's choices. All you have to do is get a little more alert to see that even your best moves are compromises — and complicated."

The poem does, however, end on an optimistic note. There is still time to prevent further disaster, the speaker decides, and he pushes the doe "over the edge into the river." It is interesting that the poem ends on the image of the river, which, in Stafford's linguistic shorthand, is consistently used as a metaphor for the changing nature of life.

Stafford's voice has been criticized as being simply his real-life "I" speaking normally but in a privileged position, and "Traveling Through the Dark" has been cited as a representative example of the poet firmly in control of all meaning. In refuting this attack, Dick Barnes agrees that Stafford does speak normally, but suggests that artists such as Stafford speak out of a solitude that others can barely imagine, "where the self is dead and the soul opens inward upon eternity. What makes [the artist's] act complete is that, speaking that way, he listens at the same time, and in listening joins any others who may be hearing in a kind of causal communion." Barnes uses "self" here in a relative sense: With death of the self, the individuality that keeps one localized to time and space is no longer restricting the soul.

Stafford, in his wilderness quest, may be in search of something even greater than mere removal of restriction. His death metaphor represents a creative force, a unity of subjectivity and objectivity. A reading of Stafford's work from the perspective of growth of consciousness might suggest that the death of the "self" is first found in the transcendental experience of unbounded awareness that is beyond the limitations of the relative states of consciousness — waking, dreaming, and sleeping. Repeated direct experience of this state of pure consciousness is the basis for the individual's growth toward higher states of consciousness. The "self" rises to the value of the "Self," providing the stable foundation for the eventual unity of subject and object that Stafford is seeking in his poetry.

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**Works Cited**

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