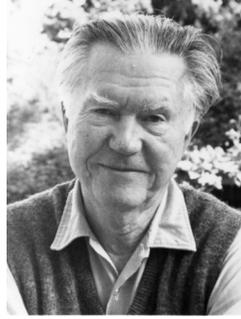


William Stafford (1914-1993)



A Ritual to Read to Each Other

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the
 world
and following the wrong god home we may miss
 our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of
 childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each
 elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the
 park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something
 shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should
 consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the
dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to
 sleep;
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

Something that Happens Right Now

I haven't told this before. By our house on the plains before I was born my father planted a maple. At night after bedtime when others were asleep I would go out and stand beside it and know all the way north and all the way south. Air from the fields wandered in. Stars waited with me. All of us ached with a silence, needing the next thing, but quiet. We leaned into midnight and then leaned back. On the rise to the west the radio tower blinked---so many messages pouring by.

A great surge came rushing from everywhere and wrapped all the land and sky. Where were we going? How soon would our house break loose and become a little speck lost in the vast night? My father and mother would die. The maple tree would stand right there. With my hand on that smooth bark we would watch it all. Then my feet would come loose from Earth and rise by the power of longing. I wouldn't let the others know about this, but I would be everywhere, as I am right now, a thin tone like the wind, a sip of blue light---no source, no end, no horizon.

You Reading This, Be Ready

Starting here, what do you want to remember?

How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?

What scent of old wood hovers, what softened
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world

than the breathing respect that you carry

wherever you go right now? Are you waiting
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this

new glimpse that you found; carry into evening

all that you want from this day. This interval you spent
reading or hearing this, keep it for life -

What can anyone give you greater than now,

starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

Waiting in Line

You the very old, I have come
to the edge of your country and looked across,
how your eyes warily look into mine
when we pass, how you hesitate when
we approach a door. Sometimes
I understand how steep your hills
are, and your way of seeing the madness
around you, the careless waste of the calendar,
the rush of people on buses. I have
studied how you carry packages,
balancing them better, giving them attention.
I have glimpsed from within the gray-eyed look
at those who push, and occasionally even I
can achieve your beautiful bleak perspective
on the loud, the inattentive, shoving boors
jostling past you toward their doom.

With you, from the pavement I have watched
the nation of the young, like jungle birds
that scream as they pass, or gyrate on playgrounds,
their frenzied bodies jittering with the disease
of youth. Knowledge can cure them. But
not all at once. It will take time.

There have been evenings when the light
has turned everything silver, and like you
I have stopped at a corner and suddenly
staggered with the grace of it all: to have
inherited all this, or even the bereavement
of it and finally being cheated!---the chance
to stand on a corner and tell it goodbye!
Every day, every evening, every
abject step or stumble has become heroic:---

You others, we the very old have a country.
A passport costs everything there is.