

## Kansas Patriotism and the Tang of the Moon

by Tim Barnes

*Kansas Poems of William Stafford: Poems, Essays, & Interviews.* Second edition. Edited by Denise Low. Woodley Memorial Press, 2010.

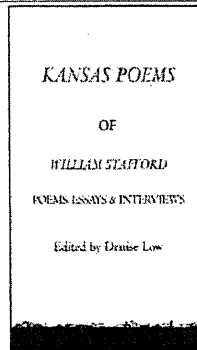
His Kansas patriotism saturated our childhoods. Any topic that arose in family conversation would—like water seeking the sea—arrive eventually at some comparison with Kansas...My father's Kansas legends were behind all we did as a family, the places we went, the people we met."

—Kim Stafford, *Early Morning: Remembering My Father*

Bill's Kansas roots and moons go deep. For proof, we can return to 1990 when Woodley Press published a collection of Bill's Kansas poems. In her introduction to the first edition, Denise Low, a poet laureate of Kansas, writes that the poems collected were "mostly connected" to Bill's Kansas beginnings. Now, twenty years later, Woodley Press, "the only literary press in the nation devoted to Kansas themes and Kansas authors," has come out with a much-expanded edition that adds salt and savor to the claims of the Kansas connection. This second edition adds seven poems to the original forty-nine and also includes essays, interviews, reminiscences, tributes, and poems relating to Bill by others. This is a thicker, substantially changed book, glowing with material for people interested in Bill's life and work and, as well, for those who would like to meet him.

In this reader's humble opinion, this edition of *Kansas Poems* is a significant contribution to the understanding and appreciation of Bill's contribution to American literature and Kansas culture. Thomas Fox Averill's essay, "The Earth Says Have a Place: William Stafford and a *Place of Language*," has as its thesis the centrality of Kansas to Bill's poetic sensibility. We find Averill saying, "Stafford's use of language is like the landscape of Kansas, spare but incredibly full of subtle beauty and the remnants of the historical past." Or, "his unique way of looking at the world is spoken like a Kansan." Averill places Bill's love of Kansas at the heart of what readers find so satisfying in his poetry: "His lifelong celebration of little things, common things, real things, comes from a deep respect for the place he grew up." It is at the heart of Bill's gift for making poems out of anything, of being able to lower his standards with such equanimity: "Being satisfied with humble materials is part of what the earth says in Kansas." Thank god for Kansas, one is tempted to say. In the third and final section ("Stafford as Place") of this substantial and insightful essay, Averill makes an interesting leap. It would seem that the seed that is the Kansas sensibility flowered so profoundly in Bill it enabled him to create a poetic landscape that readers now recognize as Kansas, the real Kansas. Kansas has created Kansas. As Averill says, "in some way, he has become Kansas, his life and work are a kind of landscape." I think of Robert Frost's New England, Gary Snyder's Sierras, Robinson Jeffers' Big Sur, and John Steinbeck's California.

As Low suggests in her introduction, there are some poems that don't seem to be that firmly connected with Kansas but most are. You can feel it in the way the words *Cimarron*, *Cheyenne*, and *Coronado* weave through the first sections ("The Land Would Hold Us Up" and "Back Home") of the book and in the mid-western scenes in poems like "Out Through a Church Window," "In a Country Cemetery," and "Prairie Town." The latter poem, the last poem in the second



section, begins, "There was a river under First and Main" and continues, "At the north edge there were the sand hills. / I used to stare for hours at prairie dogs." In these poems, the reader is taken to the places in the Kansas of Bill's richly felt life.

The third section, "At the Family Album," has a number of family poems, including a fascinating depiction of his mother, "How My Mother Carried On Her Argument with the World." Here one gets a sense of how Bill might have developed his famously withering surmise of self-aggrandizing sorts: "She thought the aggressive were losers. They had to use / methods only the desperate would use." This section also contains "Thinking for Berky," not in the first edition, with its wise line: "Justice will take us millions of intricate moves."

The fourth section seems the least connected to the physical actualities of Kansas. Instead, these poems enact the plain-spoken personification that seems so intrinsic to Bill's style and his Kansas roots and moons. In the final poem in the book, "Oak," there is this line, "the long wind coming home." That is how the poems in the final section feel. Indeed, reading the first half of this book, the poems gave me a sense of returning to the source, of visiting the home from which first rose that long wind of quiet inspiration that is the poetry of William Stafford.

As wonderful as the journey through the poems is, the back matter—the four essays, three interviews (one with Bill, one with Kim, and another with Robert Day about Bill), the ten reminiscences and tributes (could these be called witnessings? one of Bill's frequent phrasings)—is the reason this book is such a treasure. This is a serious, significant, and delightful contribution to understanding Bill Stafford. Some of the material came out of the William Stafford Memorial Rendezvous, held in and around Hutchinson in April 2008, probably where the idea for the book was born. Essentially, this is a group of Kansas poets (with a few outliers) writing about a Kansas poet. They do it very well, enriching the rest of us.

Ralph Salisbury, Eugene poet, outlier, and old friend of Bill's, reminisces about him in "Bill Stafford and the Mutton Chop." Salisbury touches on one of the puzzles of Bill's background, his Indian ancestry, his professed connection to the Crowsfoot tribe. In *Early Morning*, Kim says his father was Native American by conversion, by fascination, but Salisbury did some research and, indeed, there was a band of Seneca called the Crowsfoot who came from near where Bill's father grew up in upstate New York. Bill had Native-American blood, Salisbury contends, and writes that, though "writing as an Indian" was only an aspect of Bill's writing, "it does [connect] with the themes of social justice and harmony with nature" that are so vital to his work.

Low weighs in on this issue in her 2010 afterward to the second edition, quoting from a letter she received from Bill, "Yes, my father told me we do have Indian ancestry . . ." Low writes that Kim told her the Native American relatives were part of some eastern tribes that came west to Ohio during the mid-nineteenth century. It would seem that Bill did have some Indian blood. Salisbury tells us that Robert Bly's response to his research was to note that Bill's face did not seem totally European.

A discussion of Bill's poetry often turns to his use of personification. Averill raises it in his essay: "His poems go beyond personification..."

in the same way belief goes beyond technical explanation." He then offers a slant but telling gloss on the question of Bill's Indian ancestry: "When Native Americans, for example, pay attention to animals, to grass, to wind and leaf, we don't call it personification, we call it religion." Perhaps Bill's numinous and pervasive use of personification comes from something in an ancestral spirituality. Or it might be a conversion that took a strong hold. Like Kim, I waver, but lean toward the former.

Another motif in the new material in *Kansas Poems* involves a family story that I've always loved. Robert Day's short reminiscence of Bill is called, "Talk to Strangers and Stop on By," referring to two of Bill's favorite bits of advice. Bill and Dorothy would encourage their children to do the opposite of what most parents advise. "Talk to strangers," they would say. In his interview with Kirsten Bosnak, Kim explains, "[I]f you don't talk to strangers, how can you find your way, how can you learn anything?" When we are lost, we stop and talk to a stranger, asking for directions to help us find our way. Plus, if you talk to strangers, they could become friends. This bit of advice has resonated with lots of people, including several in this book. It may have its roots in the friendly wave of a Kansan or it may be a practical application of pacifist principles of reconciliation, probably both.

The second edition of *Kansas Poems of William Stafford* is a serious contribution to William Stafford scholarship. It does the kind of thing that scholarship should do—explore the possibilities presented by a writer's work. Robert Stewart's essay, "On Swerving: The Way of William Stafford," links Bill's humility, his welcoming stance, and his enthusiasm, to the "directness and emotional restraint" associated with Taoism, the Chinese philosophy presented in *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, often called The Way. Stewart writes that "The way of William Stafford starts with excitement, as a spiritual way of engaging in the world." It is, though, a certain kind of excitement, one "that values discovery over certainty, wonder over wanting." The Way is like water, one of Bill's favorite symbols; it swerves and yields. Stewart doesn't claim Bill as a Chinese Taoist but says that "the struggle of a human being to illustrate our connection to the harmonious oneness of the universe" is a Taoist impulse that resonates rather profoundly with Bill's poetic vision, the river of his imagination. To this reader, the Taoist connection seems quite intriguing, and Stewart's essay surveys some of this rich territory.

Steven Hind, a quintessentially Kansan poet, and an attendee of the 2008 William Stafford Memorial Rendezvous, has three pieces in *Kansas Poems*, two of prose ("William Stafford Memorial Rendezvous & Other Writings" and "The Road to Conviction: William Stafford") and a 1984 interview he did with Bill for the *Cottonwood Review*. In all three, the name of Gerald Heard, a British writer, philosopher, novelist, educator, and pacifist, appears. Bill and several other conscientious objectors from the Civilian Public Service camps spent a week at Trabuco College in California in January 1943, where Heard was teaching. Bill writes about his stay with Heard in the "We Built a Bridge" chapter of *Down in My Heart*. Hind talks about Heard's idea of the "specious present," "the notion that an individual cannot be expected, nor expect himself, to enter into the moment's irresistible momentum and redirect an inevitable disaster not of his own making." In the interview, Bill discusses the "specious present" in relationship to his most famous poem, "Traveling Through the Dark." He tells Hind,

Well, you know the idea of the "specious present"?...the

example I heard someone say is, you're standing on board the *Queen Mary*. It's going full speed. About fifty yards from the dock the captain turns to you and says, "You take over." (Laughter) According to some people's way of thinking, okay, there's time to do something. But the Captain knows and you know and God knows there is no time. It's all over. So it was all over for the deer.

It could be said that a conversation with Gerald Heard lies at the heart of that wrenching aspect of "Traveling Through the Dark" that has caused readers such anguish but is, as well, intrinsic to the poem's power. In "The Road to Conviction," Hind writes that "the basic tenets of his stance through a great many poems, among them some of the best known poems of our time," are found in the "We Built a Bridge" chapter of *Down in My Heart*.

A number of fascinating moments shimmer out of the memories of the contributors to the new material in the second edition of *Kansas Poems*. Kim tells Kirsten Bosnak that his father's first word was moon. In Ingrid Wendt's "New Doors: Lessons from Bill," we see him reach up into a light fixture at a restaurant and unscrew an uncomfortably bright light bulb. In her afterward, Low remembers that in the thirties Bill and a friend had a truck farm. When their mule died, Bill strapped himself into the harness and pulled the plow. These moments and a number of others make this book delightful, illuminating reading.

Affirmed here, as well, are some areas worth exploring. William Stafford, as it is with great writers, offers whole territories, entire watersheds, for discovery. There's the Native American influence, the Taoist aspect, the influence of Gerald Heard, and the seminal role of the "To Build a Bridge" chapter in *Down in My Heart*. Perhaps the trail most clearly blazed in this second edition of *Kansas Poems* is the Kansas connection, of which Steven Hind writes: "In person, in his advice and counsel on writing, and in the spare, modest, and often witty brilliance of his work—Stafford raised the Plains voice, let us say, to a level of authentic expression that places him among the best American voices." This is a fine claim and one supported by this book. *Kansas Poems* also explores crucial aspects of Bill's endeavor, his sense of personification, his sense of place and diction, his teaching, his pacifism, and, perhaps most satisfying, the way he continues to influence lovers of his work to think, feel, write, and simply be more human—the tang of the moon he first saluted in Kansas.

### Stafford Ball Back Home

We never report our scores.  
No one in our league does.  
Our uniforms are camouflage  
jerseys and shorts. We play  
in the old cow lot and change  
the rules, once we know them.  
It's exciting, in a curious way.  
The lazy give up and go pro,  
if they're big enough. Sometimes,  
we all get a trophy: Least Valuable  
Player. I won again last week.

STEVEN HIND