
Pax Femina: Women in William Stafford's West

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In "Things That Come," a poem in *A Glass Face in the Rain*, William Stafford's speaker questions a critic: "You think that my poems are soft? That there isn't / a wolf in them? Listen." In these brief lines, Stafford provides a synecdoche for an interesting problem in his poetry: a problem, that is, for the reader sympathetic to the concerns of women. Lacking the political, experimental edginess of many of his post-modernist contemporaries and confessing openly in print that trust in one's poetic voice is more important than rigorous poetic discipline, Stafford was often viewed by critics and colleagues as a soft, perhaps minor, poetic voice. This sense is compounded by other traditionally feminine archetypes that Stafford embraces. His pacifism as a conscientious objector in World War II, his ambivalence about the effects of technology and industrialism on the earth, his environmentalism, and his tender concern for his children combine to form an image that a contemporary cultural feminist would feel very much at home with. Yet Stafford's creation of women characters and voices is troubling. Having accessed his so-called feminine side in his politics, Stafford demonstrates great ambivalence when dealing poetically with women. The women who populate Stafford's poems are very limited, one-dimensional figures: fearful, pathologically timid mothers; slow, promiscuous or otherwise impaired romantic teens; or small-town sirens whose soft voices linger liquidly in the memories of male speakers. In all cases, Stafford's personae use the female figure to cathect or catalyze the anger of the male speaker or to illustrate the kindness and virtue of the speaker to the less fortunate woman. Stafford's defensive insistence on the existence of the wild "wolf" in his poetry is a symbol of how Stafford's so-called feminine sensibilities about nature and culture are embedded with a personal ambivalence about women. Stafford's speakers insist on *man's* peaceful coexistence with his fellow *men* and with nature, but cannot seem to make peace with the women around them.

Although a modern psychoanalytic critic might go spelunking in the dark recesses of Stafford's psychosexual past to find clues to this paradox, the answer lies in a much more bounded geographical terrain. From his first book *Down in My Heart* (1947), a series of poignant vignettes of his life in a camp for conscien-

tious objectors to World War II, through his last book, Stafford thoughtfully interrogates an American man's relationship with the land, God, and family, as well as with development, violence, and technology, very often speaking specifically about the Rockies and the Pacific Northwest. Using the West as a backdrop, Stafford skillfully embraces the troubling binaries of the twentieth century and reminds us that the grey areas show the most promise for resolving these seemingly black and white dilemmas. In this respect, Stafford is what Jane Tompkins would consider a classic Western man. In her book *West of Everything*, Tompkins describes the Western man as one who strives to

depict a world of clear alternatives -- independence vs. connection, anarchy vs. law, town vs. desert -- but [he is] just as compulsively driven to destroy these opposites and make them contain one another. (48)

Aided by what biographical critic Judith Kitchen calls a high "sense of moral and spiritual responsibility" (3), Stafford is an environmentalist, a pacifist, and a believer in free and democratic communication. He is tolerant of the failings of himself and others as poets, and an exuberant and patient coach to beginning writers. So why does he seem uninterested in or unwilling to investigate one of the most obvious questions facing the liberal modern thinker of either gender: the sometimes difficult relationship between men and women? Stafford is not anti-female or anti-feminist by any means, yet his general yearning to close the gaps between men and wilderness, men and their fathers, men and their history, and men and technology does not seem to extend specifically to the gap between men and women.

Feminist critic Nina Baym ("Melodramas of Beset Manhood") suggests that one of the primary paradoxes facing male American writers, especially writers of the West, is the dual role in which they cast the female sensibility: on the one hand, women are associated with the hearth and the stultifying effects of society that men are escaping West to avoid, while on the other women are allegorically associated with the beckoning virgin land that these men are journeying toward (75). Women are either bossy mothers or seductive, passive virgins awaiting the cultivation of the Adamic explorer. Speaking specifically of the Western as film, Tompkins enlarges on this point. She suggests:

There are two choices [for the Western man]: either you can remain in the world of illusions, by which is understood religion, culture, and class distinctions, a world of fancy words and pretty actions, of "manners for the parlor" ... or you can face life as it really is -- blood, death, a cold wind blowing, and a gun in the hand. (48)

The interior, fussy female space that limits by its trivial, constructed rules or the law of the gunfight: these are the only alternatives within this genre, which is not surprising considering the obviously mythic quality of Westerns. Yet despite his otherwise progressive, liberal, environmentalist philosophy, Stafford seems caught in the same kind of dilemma.

This is nowhere more evident than in the poems in which he actually discusses mothers and their relationship with their children. Writing about Stafford's early life, Kitchen suggests that Stafford derived his personal sense of justice from his father and his sense of fairness from his mother (4), a statement that falls along fairly traditional gender and cultural stereotypes. Yet the mothers in Stafford's poetry would suggest something different. In his first book, *West of Your City* (1960),¹ mothers are conspicuous by their absence. There are several fathers in this book but no mothers. "Circle of Breath" details the speaker's despondency at the death of his wise father. The speaker recalls a childhood lesson in which the father took him off into a dark field to show him that calm was possible even when alone in the dark if he had a good sense of himself and where he belonged. "A Visit Home" expresses a similar nostalgia as the speaker hopes to capture the security of youth by buying a hat and wearing it "as my father did. / At the corner of Central and Main." The poem "Listening" associates the father again with wisdom, this time adding prescience as the father hears more "from the soft wild night / than came to our porch for us on the wind." These fathers are wise and strong and almost mythic Western men, seeing and hearing and knowing things that the young speakers cannot.

The first image we have of a mother paints a very different picture. In the poem "In Fear and Valor" from *Traveling Through the Dark* (1962), the speaker tells us "My mother was afraid / and in my life her fear has hid." While the speaker resists this fear with images of wildness and strength associated with the previous poetic fathers, the mother is "vanquished and trembling" and "cringes." Even more insidious, the mother has "claimed a place in my every limb," handicapping the speaker with fear that he will spend his life trying to overcome. "Vocation," from the same book, makes the speaker's dilemma even more explicit as the father shows the family a path westward, "a groove in the grass" that represents the Oregon Trail, while the mother "called us back to the car: / she was afraid; she always blamed the place, / the time, anything my father planned." The speaker in this poem is literally standing between his parents, "both of them a part of me," while his mother tries to hold him back with her fear and the father wisely points out a path and intones, "Your job is to find what the world is trying to be."

This pattern of weak, emotionally crippled mothers and wise and wild fathers, a trend noted by critic David Carpenter, continues in subsequent books. "Vacation Trip," from the significantly titled *Allegiances* (1970), tells us "the loudest sound in our car / was Mother being glum." Her sullenness is associated metaphorically with the sound of the "chiding valves" in the car, the "deep chaos" of the internal combustion engine, and the huge, metaphoric trailing balloon slowing the car's progress, filled with the words "I wish I hadn't come." The mother's sullenness is deeply embedded, literally a part of the engine that moves, or in this case impedes the family. From the book *A Glass Face in the Rain* (1982) come even more didactic statements. "Our Kind" tells us "Our mother knew our worth -- / not much. To her success / was not being noticed at all." Again, the focus on withdrawal and creating obstacles is associated with the mother. This is amplified in the ironically titled "My Mother Was A Soldier": "'No harm in being quiet' / my mother said: 'that's the sound that finally wins.'" The anxiety of the earlier poems, it seems, has produced a sort of agoraphobia in which safety is associated with staying home and silent. If you are not out in the world and you never speak, nothing can threaten or harm you. Yet the word "wins" implies a subversive, passive-aggressive power in all of this insular silence.

An Oregon Message (1987) attempts to make an uneasy peace with the mother figure, but the speaker's ambivalence wins out. "A Memorial for My Mother" connects the speaker with the mother directly as the speaker returns home at his mother's death and says,

We knew if they knew our hearts they would blame.
We knew we deserved nothing. I go along
now being no one, and remembering this --
how alien we were from others, how hard we chewed
on our town's tough rind. How we loved its flavor.

The "we" in this poem represents the speaker's bonding with the mother figure in their common lack of self-esteem, their fear of discovery and censure. They are tenuously connected in their mutual sense of alienation and their greedy consumption of the social scraps flung at them by an unsympathetic town, but this is an ambivalent connection at best. The speaker wants to make peace with the memory, but the mother's legacy of fear and insecurity intrudes. This is magnified by the other two poems in this volume that deal directly with mothers. "Mother's Day" presents two small children who pick out a hideous candy jar as a gift for their mother. It stands for them on a table as a symbol of their love for her, which seems an uncharacteristically positive treatment of the mother by Stafford, at least until the poem's ending.

Now Peg says, "Remember that candy jar?"
She smooths the silver. "Mother
hated it." I am left standing
Alone by the counter, ready to buy what
will hold Mother by its magic, so
she will never be mad at us again.

This sad childhood memory of the mother's lack of "motherly" appreciation obviates the uneasy truce the speaker attempts in the earlier poem. Construction paper turkeys, hand-prints in clay, or even adult extravagances have no power to mollify the mother's slow-burning anger. This sense of maternal doom is cemented in "My Mother Said," in which the mother is metaphorically associated with a miner's canary who willfully "withholds its song," sending the miners to stumble and crawl their way to safety. Only a small leap is required to see the scrambling miners as the children, young and old, in the previous poem, crawling and scraping to try to break the sullen silence of the perpetually disappointed mother. In the symbolic universe of this poem, motherly love and attention is like oxygen to the children buried alive by the mother's indifference.

The non-maternal women in Stafford's poetry don't receive the unsympathetic treatment that the mothers do, but they are similarly limited. The young women in Stafford's canon are either slow, pitiable girls that the speakers treat with a sort of pathetic nostalgia, or friendly, sensual idols that the speakers remember with palpable erotic nostalgia. "Thinking for Berky" from *Traveling Through the Dark* presents us with Berky, a character from the pitiable category, a girl whose poverty and cruel parents kept her "looking out / for the rescue that -- surely, some day -- would have to come." Associated with crises and sirens and disaster, Berky, in the speaker's mind, is doomed. She is ominously unfocused, untamed, and has "terrible things to do." He says,

Windiest nights, Berky, I have thought for you,
and no matter how lucky I've been I've touched wood.
There are things not solved in our town though tomorrow came:
there are things time passing can never make come true.

The speaker obviously has sympathy for Berky's past and her limited future, but his concern is tinged with a patronizing arrogance. He does not think *of* Berky, he thinks *for* her. She is associated with wildness and sexuality and the body, and he implicitly deems her unable to think for herself. He superstitiously knocks wood and ominously warns in the final stanza that "justice will take us millions of intricate moves" before the Berkys of the world get the opportunities they deserve. He is safely distant from her predicament, however, looking down with moral and

intellectual authority and going through the rote and abstract action of thinking for her. The girl in "Back Home" from *The Rescued Year* (1966) receives similar treatment. She is a girl who used to sing in the church choir and who "had a slow shadow on dependable walls." She is slow where Berky is wild but they are both seen as handicapped by their respective speakers. Unlike the enlightened speaker, the people of the town are able to know only "a kind of Now." They represent a danger to this girl, symbolized by the insane, insistent song of the insects as the speaker and the girl pass, as well as by the deep darkness that is only partially quelled by the lights of the town. When the speaker returns to the town after a life apart from its limitations, he imagines the girl as "broke into jagged purple glass," shattered by the narrowness of the town and their intolerance for her slowness. The image of the purple glass suggests not only the speaker's romantic, and therefore distanced opinion about this girl, but also the "colored" lens through which he evaluates both her and the people of the town. In "A Gesture Toward an Unfound Renaissance," "the slow girl in art class / less able to say where our lessons led," yet romantic in her "rich distress, knowing almost enough / to find a better art inside the lesson" is given much same treatment. Again, there is sympathy in these speakers, and they are ostensibly more enlightened than the small town denizens they are describing, but their poignant nostalgia is marred by their disdain and their pity.

A trio of poems in *Allegiances* provides a foil to the pitiable girls of the previous poems, but these idealized portraits are in their own way just as limited. In "Remembering Althea," the speaker tells of a girl so genuine and unaffected that she radiates light: "After the others / asserted, claimed their place, posed for / every storm, your true beam found all." She is above the trivialities of the schoolyard and the parlor and knows "delicately, through amber" the truth behind pretense. The image of amber echoes the purple shards of glass of the earlier poem and again suggests the tinted, if not distorted, perspective that colors the speaker's memory. "Bess" is the poetic sister of the previous girl, a woman whose bravery and cheerfulness in the face of fatal cancer make her similarly ideal.

Pain moved where she moved. She walked
ahead; it came. She hid; it found her.
No one ever served another so truly;
no enemy ever meant so strong a hate.
It was almost as if there was no room
left for her on earth. But she remembered
where joy used to live. She straightened its flowers;
she did not weep when she passed its houses;
and when she finally pulled into a tiny corner

and slipped from pain, her hand opened
again, and the streets opened, and she wished all well.

This is noble behavior, but it is presented from the outside in much the same way as the frailties of the pitiable girls. Idealizing this woman's forbearance and cheerfulness tells us nothing about her. She represents a moral ideal that is congruent with the speaker's moral universe and he approves of her, but he never empathizes with her pain or enters her world to show her coping with the pain. Similarly, in "Monuments for a Friendly Girl at a Tenth Grade Party," the speaker crystalizes a moment in which he locks eyes with a girl at a party and "we found each other alive / by our glances never to accept our town's / ways, torture for advancement, / nor ever again be prisoners by choice." They never speak. Later, the speaker hears that the woman, a community activist and volunteer, has died and decides to remember her with this poem: "May [your friends] never / forsake you, nor you need monuments / other than this I make." The memory is idealized, but it is as much about the speaker's liberal ideals being confirmed then and now as it is about the girl herself. She is a vehicle for the realization of the consistency of the speaker's ideals.

In his book *Writing the Australian Crawl*, Stafford says,

When you enter art, you may be allowing a self you have only partly, to enjoy its best choices. The action of writing, for instance, is the successive discovery of cumulative epiphanies in the self's encounter with the world. It would be too much to claim that art, the practice of it, will establish a "good," a serene, a superior self. No. But art will, if pursued for itself and not for adventitious reasons or by spurious ways, bring into sustained realization the self most centrally yours.... (51)

The self that Stafford discovers through his male personae speaking about women is a self plagued by serious ambivalence on the subject of women. Normally, Stafford embraces ambivalence. Nature and the pastoral are never a perfect alternative to technology. Man is never completely comfortable with the decisions he makes. The speaker in "Traveling Through the Dark" hesitates, ponders, listens and still isn't sure that pushing the dead pregnant doe into the ravine is the best solution for all concerned. Yet this willingness to explore the deep and complicated darkness of the human condition does not seem to extend to women.

Stafford's Native American heritage and its resulting pantheism and his personification of the land throughout his poetry aptly prepare us for the benign way that Stafford looks at the traditionally female figure of nature. Stafford is very comfortable writing poems in which speakers figuratively shield and explore the curving landscape and the womb-like darkness we connotatively read as feminine.

Going back to Baym's metaphors, he is comfortable with a static portrait of the passive virgin landscape symbolized by the various young women in the poems, but he is unwilling or unable to create a sympathetic portrait of the other half of that feminine metaphor: the mother, associated with the hearth and society. It is ultimately futile to question why Stafford couldn't write about women with the same empathy with which he viewed Native Americans, soldiers or nature, but it is curious that a poet skilled enough to translate for us what the river said cannot hear and record the voices that are much closer to home. ✱

Notes

¹ In 1977, Harper and Row published the book *Stories That Could Be True: New and Collected Poems*. This volume included *West of Your City*, *Traveling Through the Dark*, *The Rescued Year*, *Allegiances*, *Someday*, *Maybe*, as well as the title volume. When I quote poems from these books, this is the compilation to which I am referring. This book, although out of print, is much easier to obtain than the previous volumes. I have included the year of publication for the individual volumes for purposes of maintaining a sense of the chronology of Stafford's work.

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