

## On One Aspect of William Stafford's Poetry

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William Stafford often uses verbs appealing to the five senses. There are verbs which are related to smelling and testing. The poem "At Missoula" is a good example :

We hunted bitterroot over the patient mountain,  
*tasted* hundreds of kinds of flowers, bruised  
and *smelled* and *nibbled* stalk, root, leaves,  
our need some radical, corn, blossom, or stem—  
to *eat* flesh on the mountain, *hear* the thread of our  
summer  
hum past wild rose or dozing rock. And lodged  
on the hillside in the wild rose thicket we found  
a tiny song so subtle the air goes back  
and forth to find it again, and hunting so, makes it. (All  
italics here and in other poems added except in "Al-  
ways".)

But the verbs of smelling, tasting and eating are rather minor in his poems, and the verbs of seeing are very important. And perhaps more important are verbs of hearing. This paper studies Stafford's use of the senses in order to understand one aspect of his poetics.

First I would like to examine his verbs of seeing. He uses such verbs as "see", "look", "watch", "find", "seek", "view", etc. Let me quote some :

We'll both *look* back/as far as forever, that first day.  
("Our Story")

You people, *my eyes are taking your picture*/and putting  
it on a ribbon that winds inside my head. ("Wovoka's  
Witness")

You remember a ruined face you *saw*/lost in the passing  
crowd: ("Some Evening")

You happy beings, *watch* every face *for* those/you pass  
caught in the midst of life/by some horror, their souls  
gone dim, cursed/or unlucky, exiled under a stone.  
("Some Evening")

I am *looking* under leaves *for* someone,/examining  
everything in the world,/combing fields. ("Heard  
Under a Tin Sign at the Beach")

I will listen to what you say./You and I can turn and  
*look/ at* the silent river and wait. ("Ask Me")

This river is what tawny is and loneliness,  
and it comes down with a wilderness of power  
now and then begging along a little green island  
with lush water grass among the rocks  
where I have *watched* it and its broken shells.

The desert it needs *possesses* too *my eyes*  
whenever they become most themselves to *find*  
what I am, among sights given by chance  
while I *seek* among rocks, while the deep sturgeon move

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in this water I lift pouring through my hands. ("By the Snake River")

The subject is almost always 'I', and even when it is something else, the image of the poet is doubled up with it. And the objects of his eyes are some common things in nature. Sometimes they are dead deer, and sometimes rivers, but always they are such common things or common places as represented by the "At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border":

This is the field where the battle did not happen,  
where the unknown soldier did not die.  
This is the field where grass joined hands,  
where no monument stands,  
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

'Any' place, 'any' animal, 'any' thing at 'any' time. Colors are brown or grey. So, if we don't watch or look for it with concentration, we often overlook it. And it seems that one of the most typical poems of this sort is "The Tulip Tree":

The Tulip Tree

Many a winter night  
the green of the tulip tree  
lives again among other trees,  
returns through miles of rain  
to that level of color  
all day pattered, wind-wearied,  
calmly asserted in our yard.

Only pale by the evergreen,

hardly distinguished by leaf or color,  
it used to slide a little pale from other trees  
and—no great effect at our house—  
it sustained what really belonged  
but would, if severely doubted,  
disappear.

Many a winter night  
it arrives and says for a moment :  
“I am still here.”

The color of this tulip tree has no distinctive feature. It is “calmly asserted”. It is “hardly distinguished by leaf or color”. So, if we severely doubt it, it would disappear out of our sight. But if we watch it carefully, we can see it and hear what it says.

As I mentioned already, the sense of hearing seems to be more important than that of seeing. He uses the verbs in the following ways.

Wherever I stand I *hear* trees  
petition so. By *listening*  
I know I'm born. (“Always”)

They *miss the whisper* that runs  
any day in your mind, (“A Story That Could Be True”)

*My ears capture your voice*  
to hold for lonely years. (“Wovaka's Witness”)

Far off/*there's a call*. You are the only one/*who hears*.  
It is the spin of the world. (“Whenever It is”)

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Into any sound important/a snake puts out its tongue; /  
so at the edge of my home town/every snake *listened*.  
("Boom Town")

As in case of seeing, the objects of hearing are any common things in nature at any time. Sometimes they are near, and sometimes they are far. But they almost always are small sounds or voices such as a river, a scatter of rain raking the desert, insects calling animals, trees and very often the wind. And if we don't concentrate on them, we miss them. It seems the typical example of it is a poem on his father who could hear very well.

Listening

My father could hear a little animal step,  
or a moth in the dark against the screen,  
and every far sound called the listening out  
into places where the rest of us had never been.

More spoke to him from the soft wild night  
than came to our porch for us on the wind;  
we would watch him look up and his face go keen  
till the walls of the world flared, widened.

My father heard so much that we still stand  
inviting the quiet by turning the face,  
waiting for a time when something in the night  
will touch us too from that other place.

Like his father, he tries to listen and to hear those small voices.

Those things which he tries to see and hear are so small and common that he has to watch and wait. Sometimes he has to go hunting. Thus, the images of hunting, watching and waiting are often used. "Some years ago I first hunted on Sauvies Island". ("Sauvies Island") And perhaps one of the best examples is "The View from Here".

### The View from Here

In Antarctica drooping their little shoulders  
like bottles the penguins stand, small,  
sad, black—and the wind  
bites hard over them.

Edging that continent they huddle to turn their eyes.  
Penguins, we can't help you ; and all that cold  
hangs over us too, wide beyond thought.  
We too stand and wait.

He waits till he will be able to see and hear. He puts his antennae high into the air. Everything is so still, quiet and calm. Then, his antennae catch still sound and sight. "An insect in the mesquite calls its name/and fills the land while all things chant their long/low selves this Texas night, soft as the warm/air after rain." ("At a Writer's Conference in Texas")

In connection with "seeing" and "hearing", he uses the word "touch". Seeing and listening lead him to "touching". Sometimes they are the same, but it often seems that "touching" implies the deeper communion with nature than seeing and hearing. When he touches something, or something touches him, then a new world opens :

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We'll both look back  
as far as forever, that first day.  
I'll touch you—a new world then.  
Stars will move a different way.  
We'll both end. We'll both begin. ("Our Story")

Wherever I stand I hear the trees  
petition so. By listening  
I know I'm born. By turning  
the forest back toward itself  
I live as a friend of tree:  
*Listen together; be ready.*  
*You may be born.* I touch the bark  
and call deep as I can:  
*Part of me.* ("Always")

What the sun touched glistens.  
Every shadow listens—  
long lines on the snow. ("This Town: Winter  
Morning")

My finger touching her side brought me the reason—  
("Traveling Through the Dark")

This touching brings him a revelation. What has been common becomes uncommon through this touching. Everything begins to be alive again. He lives in a new world. He is born again. Laurence Lieberman says in connection with Stafford's touching as follows: "It is the transcendent grace of the hand's gentlest touch, and of the listener's marvelously intense hearing, that achieves penetration into spheres of reality the mind cannot enter. The hand's touch can recover any lost world."<sup>(1)</sup>

And his poetry is to tell this experience to us. He says “The wind keeps telling us something/we want to pass on to the world:/ Even far things are real.” (“Whispered into the Ground”) He also says “What the river says, that is what I say.” (“One of your Lives”) He tries to tell us what he sees and what he hears and what he experiences by touching and being touched. He tells it to us quietly by common language. And when we try to listen to it, watching for it, we can hear his message which he received by seeing, by listening and by touching. Then, what seemed common to the reader before suddenly changes into a new, unusual thing. By touching his message, or by being touched by it, a new world opens to us. A revelation comes to us. It becomes really a shocking experience.

There is a group of poets called “the confessionals”. They write their own unusual experiences. There is also a group of poets who used to be called the Beats. One of their characteristics is to “howl”. On the other hand, Stafford’s voice is calm and quiet. And his materials are very common. But when his poem, his voice reaches to our hearkening ears, common things become new. The world is newly born and we experience a new birth. And I think this is the triumph of the calm voice of his poems.

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- (1) Laurence Lieberman, *Unassigned Frequencies*, pp. 276-277.

The text I used is *Stories That Could Be True* by William Stafford, published by Harper and Row, 1977.

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This paper tries to approach one aspect of William Stafford's poetry by examining his sensory verbal usage.