

Classic Poetry Series

William Stafford
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

William Stafford (January 17, 1914 – August 28, 1993)

William Edgar Stafford was born in Hutchinson, Kansas, on January 17, 1914, to Ruby Mayher and Earl Ingersoll Stafford. The eldest of three children, Stafford grew up with an appreciation for nature and books.

During the Depression the family moved from town to town as Earl Stafford searched for jobs. William helped to support the family also, by delivering papers, working in the sugar beet fields, raising vegetables, and as an electrician's mate. In 1933 Stafford graduated from high school in Liberal, Kansas, and attended Garden City and El Dorado junior colleges, graduating from the University of Kansas in 1937. In 1939 Stafford enrolled at the University of Wisconsin to begin graduate studies in Economics, but by the next year he had returned to Kansas to earn his master's degree in English.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941 Stafford was drafted before he could obtain his degree. As a registered pacifist, Stafford worked in camps and projects for conscientious objectors in Arkansas, California, and Illinois. He spent 1942 to 1946 in these work camps and was paid \$2.50 per month for assigned duties such as fire fighting, soil conservation, and building and maintaining roads and trails. In 1944 while in California Stafford met and married Dorothy Frantz, the daughter of a minister of the Church of the Brethren.

Following the war Stafford taught one year at a high school, spent a year working for relief organization Church World Service, and finished his master's degree at the University of Kansas in 1947. His master's thesis, memoirs of his time spent as a conscientious objector, was published as a book of prose, *Down in My Heart* (Brethren Publishing House, 1947).

In 1948 Stafford moved to Oregon to teach at Lewis and Clark College. Though he traveled and read his work widely, he taught at Lewis and Clark until his retirement in 1980. His first major collection of poems, *Traveling Through the Dark*, was published when Stafford was forty-eight. It won the National Book Award in 1963. He went on to publish more than sixty-five volumes of poetry and prose. Among his many honors and awards were a Shelley Memorial Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Western States Lifetime Achievement Award in Poetry. In 1970, he was the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (a position currently known as the Poet Laureate).

Although his father appears more often in his poetry, Stafford has stated that his

mother's presence and behavior influenced his writing. His poetry was strongly influenced by both the people and the plains region of his youth and young adulthood.

Stafford's poems are often deceptively simple. Like Robert Frost's, however, they reveal a distinctive and complex vision upon closer examination. Among his best-known books are *The Rescued Year* (1966), *Stories That Could Be True: New and Collected Poems* (1977), *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation* (1978), and *An Oregon Message* (1987).

William Stafford died at his home in Lake Oswego, Oregon, on August 28, 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 dyke.

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.

William Stafford

Accountability

Cold nights outside the taverns in Wyoming
pickups and big semis lounge idling, letting their
haunches twitch now and then in gusts of powder snow,
their owners inside for hours, forgetting as well
as they can the miles, the circling plains, the still town
that connects to nothing but cold and space and a few
stray ribbons of pavement, icy guides to nothing
but bigger towns and other taverns that glitter and wait:
Denver, Cheyenne.

Hibernating in the library of the school on the hill
a few pieces by Thomas Aquinas or Saint Teresa
and the fragmentary explorations of people like Alfred
North Whitehead crouch and wait amid research folders
on energy and military recruitment posters glimpsed
by the hard stars. The school bus by the door, a yellow
mound, clangs open and shut as the wind finds a loose
door and worries it all night, letting the hollow
students count off and break up and blow away
over the frozen ground.

William Stafford

Across Kansas

My family slept those level miles
but like a bell rung deep till dawn
I drove down an aisle of sound,
nothing real but in the bell,
past the town where I was born.

Once you cross a land like that
you own your face more: what the light
struck told a self; every rock
denied all the rest of the world.
We stopped at Sharon Springs and ate--

My state still dark, my dream too long to tell.

William Stafford

After Arguing Against The Contention That Art Must Come From Discontent

Whispering to each handhold, "I'll be back,"
I go up the cliff in the dark. One place
I loosen a rock and listen a long time
till it hits, faint in the gulf, but the rush
of the torrent almost drowns it out, and the wind—
I almost forgot the wind: it tears at your side
or it waits and then buffets; you sag outward. . . .

I remember they said it would be hard. I scramble
by luck into a little pocket out of
the wind and begin to beat on the stones
with my scratched numb hands, rocking back and forth
in silent laughter there in the dark—
"Made it again!" Oh how I love this climb!
—the whispering to stones, the drag, the weight
as your muscles crack and ease on, working
right. They are back there, discontent,
waiting to be driven forth. I pound
on the earth, riding the earth past the stars:
"Made it again! Made it again!"

William Stafford

Allegiances

It is time for all the heroes to go home
if they have any, time for all of us common ones
to locate ourselves by the real things
we live by.

Far to the north, or indeed in any direction,
strange mountains and creatures have always lurked-
elves, goblins, trolls, and spiders:-we
encounter them in dread and wonder,

But once we have tasted far streams, touched the gold,
found some limit beyond the waterfall,
a season changes, and we come back, changed
but safe, quiet, grateful.

Suppose an insane wind holds all the hills
while strange beliefs whine at the traveler's ears,
we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love
where we are, sturdy for common things.

William Stafford

American Gothic

If we see better through tiny,
grim glasses, we like to wear
tiny, grim glasses.

Our parents willed us this
view. It's tundra? We love it.

We travel our kind of
Renaissance: barnfuls of hay,
whole voyages of corn, and
a book that flickers its
halo in the parlor.

Poverty plus confidence equals
pioneers. We never doubted.

William Stafford

An Oregon Message

When we first moved here, pulled
the trees in around us, curled
our backs to the wind, no one
had ever hit the moon—no one.
Now our trees are safer than the stars,
and only other people's neglect
is our precious and abiding shell,
pierced by meteors, radar, and the telephone.

From our snug place we shout
religiously for attention, in order to hide:
only silence or evasion will bring
dangerous notice, the hovering hawk
of the state, or the sudden quiet stare
and fatal estimate of an alerted neighbor.

This message we smuggle out in
its plain cover, to be opened
quietly: Friends everywhere—
we are alive! Those moon rockets
have missed millions of secret
places! Best wishes.

Burn this.

William Stafford

Ask Me

Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

William Stafford

Assurance

You will never be alone, you hear so deep
a sound when autumn comes. Yellow
pulls across the hills and thrums,
or the silence after lightening before it says
its names- and then the clouds' wide-mouthed
apologies. You were aimed from birth:
you will never be alone. Rain
will come, a gutter filled, an Amazon,
long aisles- you never heard so deep a sound,
moss on rock, and years. You turn your head-
that's what the silence meant: you're not alone.
The whole wide world pours down.

William Stafford

At The Bomb Testing Site

At noon in the desert a panting lizard
waited for history, its elbows tense,
watching the curve of a particular road
as if something might happen.

It was looking at something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.

There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert.

William Stafford

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.

Birds fly here without any sound,
unfolding their wings across the open.
No people killed – or were killed – on this ground
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

William Stafford

Atavism

1

Sometimes in the open you look up
where birds go by, or just nothing,
and wait. A dim feeling comes
you were like this once, there was air,
and quiet; it was by a lake, or
maybe a river you were alert
as an otter and were suddenly born
like the evening star into wide
still worlds like this one you have found
again, for a moment, in the open.

2

Something is being told in the woods: aisles of
shadow lead away; a branch waves;
a pencil of sunlight slowly travels its
path. A withheld presence almost
speaks, but then retreats, rustles
a patch of brush. You can feel
the centuries ripple generations
of wandering, discovering, being lost
and found, eating, dying, being born.
A walk through the forest strokes your fur,
the fur you no longer have. And your gaze
down a forest aisle is a strange, long
plunge, dark eyes looking for home.
For delicious minutes you can feel your whiskers
wider than your mind, away out over everything.

William Stafford

Bess

Ours are the streets where Bess first met her
cancer. She went to work every day past the
secure houses. At her job in the library
she arranged better and better flowers, and when
students asked for books her hand went out
to help. In the last year of her life
she had to keep her friends from knowing
how happy they were. She listened while they
complained about food or work or the weather.
And the great national events danced
their grotesque, fake importance. Always

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 finally she pulled into a tiny corner
and slipped from pain, her hand opened
again, and the streets opened, and she wished all well.

William Stafford

Bi-Focal

Sometimes up out of this land
a legend begins to move.
Is it a coming near
of something under love?

Love is of the earth only,
the surface, a map of roads
leading wherever go miles
or little bushes nod.

Not so the legend under,
fixed, inexorable,
deep as the darkest mine
the thick rocks won't tell.

As fire burns the leaf
and out of the green appears
the vein in the center line
and the legend veins under there,

So, the world happens twice—
once what we see it as;
second it legends itself
deep, the way it is.

William Stafford

For My Young Friends Who Are Afraid

There is a country to cross you will
find in the corner of your eye, in
the quick slip of your foot--air far
down, a snap that might have caught.
And maybe for you, for me, a high, passing
voice that finds its way by being
afraid. That country is there, for us,
carried as it is crossed. What you fear
will not go away: it will take you into
yourself and bless you and keep you.
That's the world, and we all live there.

William Stafford

Graydigger's Home

Paw marks near one burrow show Graydigger
at home, I bend low, from down there swivel
my head, grasstop level--the world
goes on forever, the mountains a bigger
burrow, their snow like last winter. From a room
inside the world even the strongest wind
has a soft sound: a new house will hide
in the grass; footsteps are only the summer people.

The real estate agent is saying, "Utilities . . .
easy payments, a view." I see
my prints in the dirt. Out there
in the wind we talk about credit, security--
there on the bank by Graydigger's home.

William Stafford

Hay-Cutters

Time tells them. They go along touching
the grass, the feathery ends. When it feels
just so, they start the mowing machine,
leaving the land its long windrows,
and air strokes the leaves dry.

Sometimes you begin to push; you want to
hurry the sun, have the hours expand, because
clouds come. Lightning looks out from their hearts.
You try to hope the clouds away.
'Some year we'll have perfect hay.'

William Stafford

Humanities Lecture

Aristotle was a little man with
eyes like a lizard, and he found a streak
down the midst of things, a smooth place for his feet
much more important than the carved handles
on the coffins of the great.

He said you should put your hand out
at the time and place of need:
strength matters little, he said,
nor even speed.

His pupil, a king's son, died
at an early age. That Aristotle spoke of him
it is impossible to find—the youth was
notorious, a conqueror, a kid with a gang,
but even this Aristotle didn't ever say.

Around the farthest forest and along
all the bed of the sea, Aristotle studied
immediate, local ways. Many of which
were wrong. So he studied poetry.
There, in pity and fear, he found Man.

Many thinkers today, who stand low and grin,
have little use for anger or power, its palace
or its prison—
but quite a bit for that little man
with eyes like a lizard.

William Stafford

In The Deep Channel

Setting a trotline after sundown
if we went far enough away in the night
sometimes up out of deep water
would come a secret-headed channel cat,

Eyes that were still eyes in the rush of darkness,
flowing feelers noncommittal and black,
and hidden in the fins those rasping bone daggers,
with one spiking upward on its back.

We would come at daylight and find the line sag,
the fishbelly gleam and the rush on the tether:
to feel the swerve and the deep current
which tugged at the tree roots below the river.

William Stafford

Just Thinking

Got up on a cool morning. Leaned out a window.
No cloud, no wind. Air that flowers held
for awhile. Some dove somewhere.

Been on probation most of my life. And
the rest of my life been condemned. So these moments
count for a lot--peace, you know.

Let the bucket of memory down into the well,
bring it up. Cool, cool minutes. No one
stirring, no plans. Just being there.

This is what the whole thing is about.

William Stafford

Lit Instructor

Day after day up there beating my wings
with all the softness truth requires
I feel them shrug whenever I pause:
they class my voice among tentative things,

And they credit fact, force, battering.
I dance my way toward the family of knowing,
embracing stray error as a long-lost boy
and bringing him home with my fluttering.

Every quick feather asserts a just claim;
it bites like a saw into white pine.
I communicate right; but explain to the dean--
well, Right has a long and intricate name.

And the saying of it is a lonely thing.

William Stafford

Monuments For A Friendly Girl At A Tenth Grade Party

The only relics left are those long
spangled seconds our school clock chipped out
when you crossed the social hall
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.

Now I learn you died
serving among the natives of Garden City,
Kansas, part of a Peace Corps
before governments thought of it.

Ruth, over the horizon your friends eat
foreign chaff and have addresses like titles,
but for you the crows and hawks patrol
the old river. May they never
forsake you, nor you need monuments
other than this I make, and the one
I hear clocks chip in that world we found.

William Stafford

Notice What This Poem Is Not Doing

The light along the hills in the morning
comes down slowly, naming the trees
white, then coasting the ground for stones to nominate.

Notice what this poem is not doing.

A house, a house, a barn, the old
quarry, where the river shrugs--
how much of this place is yours?

Notice what this poem is not doing.

Every person gone has taken a stone
to hold, and catch the sun. The carving
says, "Not here, but called away."

Notice what this poem is not doing.

The sun, the earth, the sky, all wait.
The crowns and redbirds talk. The light
along the hills has come, has found you.

Notice what this poem has not done.

William Stafford

Objector

In line at lunch I cross my fork and spoon
to ward off complicity--the ordered life
our leaders have offered us. Thin as a knife,
our chance to live depends on such a sign
while others talk and The Pentagon from the moon
is bouncing exact commands: "Forget your faith;
be ready for whatever it takes to win: we face
annihilation unless all citizens get in line."

I bow and cross my fork and spoon: somewhere
other citizens more fearfully bow
in a place terrorized by their kind of oppressive state.
Our signs both mean, "You hostages over there
will never be slaughtered by my act." Our vows
cross: never to kill and call it fate.

William Stafford

One Home

Mine was a Midwest home—you can keep your world.
Plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.
We sang hymns in the house; the roof was near God.

The light bulb that hung in the pantry made a wan light,
but we could read by it the names of preserves—
outside, the buffalo grass, and the wind in the night.

A wildcat sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July
when he was cutting plum bushes for fuel,
before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky.

To anyone who looked at us we said, "My friend";
liking the cut of a thought, we could say "Hello."
(But plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.)

The sun was over our town; it was like a blade.
Kicking cottonwood leaves we ran toward storms.
Wherever we looked the land would hold us up.

William Stafford

Passing Remark

In scenery I like flat country.
In life I don't like much to happen.

In personalities I like mild colorless people.
And in colors I prefer gray and brown.

My wife, a vivid girl from the mountains,
says, "Then why did you choose me?"

Mildly I lower my brown eyes—
there are so many things admirable people do not understand.

William Stafford

Remembering Mountain Men

I put my foot in cold water
and hold it there: early mornings
they had to wade through broken ice
to find the traps in the deep channel
with their hands, drag up the chains and
the drowned beaver. The slow current
of the life below tugs at me all day.
When I dream at night, they save a place for me,
no matter how small, somewhere by the fire.

William Stafford

Report To Crazy Horse

All the Sioux were defeated. Our clan
got poor, but a few got richer.
They fought two wars. I did not
take part. No one remembers your vision
or even your real name. Now
the children go to town and like
loud music. I married a Christian.

Crazy Horse, it is not fair
to hide a new vision from you.
In our schools we are learning
to take aim when we talk, and we have
found out our enemies. They shift when
words do; they even change and hide
in every person. A teacher here says
hurt or scorned people are places
where real enemies hide. He says
we should not hurt or scorn anyone,
but help them. And I will tell you
in a brave way, the way Crazy Horse
talked: that teacher is right.

I will tell you a strange thing:
at the rodeo, close to the grandstand,
I saw a farm lady scared by a blown
piece of paper; and at that place
horses and policemen were no longer
frightening, but suffering faces were,
and the hunched-over backs of the old.

Crazy Horse, tell me if I am right:
these are the things we thought we were
doing something about.

In your life you saw many strange things,

and I will tell you another: now I salute
the white man's flag. But when I salute
I hold my hand alertly on the heartbeat
and remember all of us and how we depend
on a steady pulse together. There are those
who salute because they fear other flags
or mean to use ours to chase them:
I must not allow my part of saluting
to mean this. All of our promises,
our generous sayings to each other, our
honorable intentions—those I affirm
when I salute. At these times it is like
shutting my eyes and joining a religious
colony at prayer in the gray dawn
in the deep aisles of a church.

Now I have told you about new times.
Yes, I know others will report
different things. They have been caught
by weak ways. I tell you straight
the way it is now, and it is our way,
the way we were trying to find.

The chokecherries along our valley
still bear a bright fruit. There is good
pottery clay north of here. I remember
our old places. When I pass the Musselshell
I run my hand along those old grooves in the rock.

William Stafford

Returned To Say

When I face north a lost Cree
on some new shore puts a moccasin down,
rock in the light and noon for seeing,
he in a hurry and I beside him

It will be a long trip; he will be a new chief;
we have drunk new water from an unnamed stream;
under little dark trees he is to find a path
we both must travel because we have met.

Henceforth we gesture even by waiting;
there is a grain of sand on his knifeblade
so small he blows it and while his breathing
darkens the steel his become set

And start a new vision: the rest of his life.
We will mean what he does. Back of this page
the path turns north. We are looking for a sign.
Our moccasins do not mark the ground.

Submitted by Bakari Thomas

William Stafford

Security

Tomorrow will have an island. Before night
I always find it. Then on to the next island.
These places hidden in the day separate
and come forward if you beckon.
But you have to know they are there before they exist.

Some time there will be a tomorrow without any island.
So far, I haven't let that happen, but after
I'm gone others may become faithless and careless.
Before them will tumble the wide unbroken sea,
and without any hope they will stare at the horizon.

So to you, Friend, I confide my secret:
to be a discoverer you hold close whatever
you find, and after a while you decide
what it is. Then, secure in where you have been,
you turn to the open sea and let go.

William Stafford

The Light By The Barn

The light by the barn that shines all night
pales at dawn when a little breeze comes.

A little breeze comes breathing the fields
from their sleep and waking the slow windmill.

The slow windmill sings the long day
about anguish and loss to the chickens at work.

The little breeze follows the slow windmill
and the chickens at work till the sun goes down--

Then the light by the barn again.

William Stafford

The Well Rising

The well rising without sound,
the spring on a hillside,
the plowshare brimming through deep ground
everywhere in the field—

The sharp swallows in their swerve
flaring and hesitating
hunting for the final curve
coming closer and closer—

The swallow heart from wingbeat to wingbeat
counseling decisions, decision:
thunderous examples. I place my feet
with care in such a world.

William Stafford

Thinking For Berky

In the late night listening from bed
I have joined the ambulance or the patrol
screaming toward some drama, the kind of end
that Berky must have some day, if she isn't dead.

The wildest of all, her father and mother cruel,
farming out there beyond the old stone quarry
where highschool lovers parked their lurching cars,
Berky learned to love in that dark school.

Early her face was turned away from home
toward any hardworking place; but still her soul,
with terrible things to do, was alive, looking out
for the rescue that--surely, some day--would have to come.

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.

We live in an occupied country, misunderstood;
justice will take us millions of intricate moves.
Sirens will hunt down Berky, you survivors in your beds
listening through the night, so far and good.

William Stafford

This Life

With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach

We would climb the highest dune,
from there to gaze and come down:
the ocean was performing;
we contributed our climb.

Waves leapfrogged and came
straight out of the storm.
What should our gaze mean?
Kit waited for me to decide.

Standing on such a hill,
what would you tell your child?
That was an absolute vista.
Those waves raced far, and cold.

"How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?"
"As far as was needed," I said,
and as I talked, I swam.

William Stafford

Traveling Through The Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason--
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all--my only swerving--,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

William Stafford

Waking At 3 A.M.

Even in the cave of the night when you
wake and are free and lonely,
neglected by others, discarded, loved only
by what doesn't matter--even in that
big room no one can see,
you push with your eyes till forever
comes in its twisted figure eight
and lies down in your head.

You think water in the river;
you think slower than the tide in
the grain of the wood; you become
a secret storehouse that saves the country,
so open and foolish and empty.

You look over all that the darkness
ripples across. More than has ever
been found comforts you. You open your
eyes in a vault that unlocks as fast
and as far as your thought can run.
A great snug wall goes around everything,
has always been there, will always
remain. It is a good world to be
lost in. It comforts you. It is
all right. And you sleep.

William Stafford

Walking West

Anyone with quiet pace who
walks a gray road in the West
may hear a badger underground where
in deep flint another time is

Caught by flint and held forever,
the quiet pace of God stopped still.
Anyone who listens walks on
time that dogs him single file,

To mountains that are far from people,
the face of the land gone gray like flint.
Badgers dig their little lives there,
quiet-paced the land lies gaunt,

The railroad dies by a yellow depot,
town falls away toward a muddy creek.
Badger-gray the sod goes under
a river of wind, a hawk on a stick.

William Stafford

When I Met My Muse

I glanced at her and took my glasses off--they were still singing. They buzzed like a locust on the coffee table and then ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch, and knew that nails up there took a new grip on whatever they touched. "I am your own way of looking at things," she said. "When you allow me to live with you, every glance at the world around you will be a sort of salvation." And I took her hand.

William Stafford

With Kit, Age 7, At The Beach

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from there to gaze and come down:
the ocean was performing;
we contributed our climb.

Waves leapfrogged and came
straight out of the storm.
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Standing on such a hill,
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That was an absolute vista.
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'How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?'
'As far as was needed,' I said,
and as I talked, I swam.

William Stafford