

From *Writing the Australian Crawl* by William Stafford

What It Is Like

Poetry is the kind of thing you have to see from the corner of your eye. You can be too well prepared for poetry. A conscientious interest in it is worse than no interest at all, as I believe Frost used to say. It's like a very faint star. If you look straight at it you can't see it, but if you look a little to one side it is there.

If people around you are in favor, that helps poetry to *be*, to exist. It disappears under disfavor. There are things, you know, human things, that depend on commitment; poetry is one of those things. If you analyze it away, it's gone. It would be like boiling a watch to find out what makes it tick.

If you let your thoughts play, turn things this way and that, be ready for liveliness, alternatives, new views, the possibility of another world—you are in the area of poetry. A poem is a serious joke, a truth that has learned *jujitsu*. Anyone who breathes is in the rhythm business; anyone who is alive is caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with the triumphant certainty, of poetry.

Introduction to *Since Feeling Is First*

When language breaks loose like this—

Now that the moon is out of a job, it has an easy climb,
autumn nights, over empty farms where a family could live,
or down city streets, or wide over the forest—all the still
violins before they are carved—, on those paths only air ever
uses...

—when it rambles along with words and pictures homogenized in the mind's blender, strange things happen. Lines on the page may blunder into each other's sound, and even modern readers may their breath into paths our parents followed before we were born.

It is as if the ordinary language we use every day has in it a hidden set of signals, a kind of secret code. That code can touch into life a pattern in our feelings, a pattern not ordinarily roused by events that just *happen*, because what just happens is too random to bring about sustained feelings. But some language may start experiences that resonate with the self, with the being we have become amidst our apparently random encounters with this alien world.

Poems don't just happen. They are luckily or stealthily related to a readiness within ourselves. When we read or hear them, we react. We aren't just supposed to react—any poem that asks for a dutiful response is masquerading as a poem, not being one. A good rule is—don't respond unless you have to. But when you find you do have a response—trust it. It has a meaning.

About that lucky or stealthy quality in poems, it is easier to assert that there must be some profound relation between the reader and the poem than it is to prove what that relation is; for

human responses may be teased forth so originally, so variously, that we do not need to know at first—nor do we actually have to be sure, ever—what the connections “really” are. The important thing is the feeling, not the points that we can list to account for how we feel.

For a poem is not the end, but the beginning, of an excursion. Back and forth we go—scenes, impressions, ideas. All sorts of quick glimpses occur to a hearer or reader. Some of those glimpses are quickly dismissed as random or uninteresting, but some lead richly onward. And the initial attitude toward those reading-glimpses is an attitude of welcoming: there must be some reason for whatever occurs to you.

Writing and Literature *Some Opinions*

A writer is a person who enters into sustained relations with the language for experiment and experience not available in any other way.

An editor is a friend who helps keep a writer from publishing what should not be published.

A reader is a person who picks up signals and enters a world in language under the guidance of an earlier entry made by a writer.

Literature is not a picture of life, but it is a separate experience with its own kind of flow and enhancement.

Anyone enters that world of writing or literature by writing or reading, venturing forward part by part, unpredictable part by unpredictable part.

So flowing and ongoing is this way of entry that one could become a writer merely by little additions to ordinary language—adding a paragraph to each you normally write could lead you by little steps into increments of correspondence and induct you into a writing career.

The literary word is a community in that one interchanges with others naturally and becomes an insider, not by deals and stealth, but by a natural engagement with the ongoing work of other writers, editors, and publishers.

What one has written is not to be defended or valued, but abandoned: others must decide significance and value.

Other thoughts from Stafford

Writers are persons who write; swimmers are (and from teaching a child I know how hard it is to persuade a reasonable person of this—swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence.

You start [writing] from an assumption of relation, and your experience with the language is a continuous experience with more or less similar sounds.

Consider some implications in writing and in interchanging about it; for instance, a student brings something to discuss, saying, "I don't know whether this is really good, or whether I should throw it in the wastebasket." The assumption is that one or the other choice is the right move. No. Almost everything we say or think or do—or write—comes in that spacious human area bounded by something this side of the sublime and something above the unforgivable.

We must accustom ourselves to talking without orating, and to writing without achieving "Paradise Lost." We must forgive ourselves and each other much, in our writing and in our talking.

I now ask you how to write a poem, and you begin to explain. You send forth many speculations and reasons; you watch them go. No matter how fast and how far they go, it is never enough. They never catch the actual poem, and they never come back...

I'll try several blunt statements about that process [the creative state of mind and writing], always realizing that it is too odd for neat formulation:

First—intention endangers creation. True, intention seems to work well in some kinds of projects, where we want to prevail in a hurry, where we are competing.

Second—It's like this: how you feel can lead to a closure not related to any other end than its own satisfaction. I'm not sure the phrasing is helpful, but "periphery of justice" is my groping attempt to establish some kind of terminology for that feeling you have when you go along accepting what occurs to you and finding your way out somewhere to the rim where you are ready to abandon that sequence and come back and start all over again.

Third—when I said that I would go back and dismantle the lines of my poem, it might sound as if I were discrediting what the lines said. No, I feel that I was somehow affirming those lines, discovering their real, internal source.

The spirit back to all I've said is this: an intentional person is too effective to be a good guide in the tentative activity of creating.

A poem today is anything said in such a way or put on the page in such a way as to invite from the hearer or reader a certain kind of attention.

The role of the writer or reader is one of following, not imposing.

The action of writing, for instance, is the successive discovery of cumulative epiphanies in the self's encounter with the world.

Poetry locates with the individual and in the individual's own choices and responses.

A Way of Writing

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. That is, he does not draw on a reservoir; instead, he engages in an activity that brings to him a whole succession of unforeseen stories, poems, essays, plays, laws, philosophies, religions, or—but wait!

Back in school, from the first when I began to try to write things, I felt this richness. One thing would lead to another; the world would give and give. Now, after twenty years or so of trying, I live by that certain richness, an idea hard to pin, difficult to say, and perhaps offensive to some. For there are strange implications in it.

One implication is the importance of just plain receptivity. When I write, I like to have an interval before me when I am not likely to be interrupted. For me, this means usually the early morning, before others are awake. I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window (often it is dark out there), and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble—and this is where receptivity comes in. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me.

Something always occurs, of course, to any of us. We can't keep from thinking. Maybe I have to settle for an immediate impression: it's cold, or hot, or dark, or bright, or in between! Or—well, the possibilities are endless. If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen.

If I let them string out. . . . Along with initial receptivity, then, there is another readiness: I must be willing to fail. If I am to keep on writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards. I must get into action and not let anything stop me, or even slow me much. By "standards" I do not mean "correctness"—spelling, punctuation, and so on. These details become mechanical for anyone who writes for a while. I am thinking about such matters as social significance, positive values, consistency, etc. I resolutely disregard these. Something better, greater, is happening! I am following a process that leads so wildly and originally into new territory that no judgment can at the moment be made about values, significance, and so on. I am making something new, something that has not been judged before. Later others—and maybe I myself—will make judgments. Now, I am headlong to discover. Any distraction may harm the creating.

So, receptive, careless of failure, I spin out things on the page. And a wonderful freedom comes. If something occurs to me, it is all right to accept it. It has one justification: it occurs to me. No one else can guide me. I must follow my own weak, wandering, diffident impulses.

A strange bonus happens. At times, without my

insisting on it, my writings become coherent; the successive elements that occur to me are clearly related. They lead by themselves to new connections. Sometimes the language, even the syllables that happen along, may start a trend. Sometimes the materials alert me to something waiting in my mind, ready for sustained attention. At such times, I allow myself to be eloquent, or intentional, or for great swoops (Tracherous! Not to be trusted!) reasonable. But I do not insist on any of that; for I know that back of my activity there will be the coherence of my self, and that indulgence of my impulses will bring recurrent patterns and meanings again.

This attitude toward the process of writing creatively suggests a problem for me, in terms of what others say. They talk about "skills" in writing. Without denying that I do have experience, wide reading, automatic orthodoxies and maneuvers of various kinds, I still must insist that I am often baffled about what "skill" has to do with the precious little area of confusion when I do not know what I am going to say and then I find out what I am going to say. That precious interval I am unable to bridge by skill. What can I witness about it? It remains mysterious, just as all of us must feel puzzled about how we are so inventive as to be able to talk along through complexities with our friends, not needing to plan what we are going to say, but never stalled for long in our confident forward progress. Skill? If so, it is the skill we all have, something we must have learned before the age of three or four.

A writer is one who has become accustomed to trusting that grace, or luck, or—skill.

Yet another attitude I find necessary: most of what I write, like most of what I say in casual conversation, will not amount to much. Even I will realize, and even

"Skill" is in the organization of the piece

at the time, that it is not negotiable. It will be like practice. In conversation I allow myself random remarks—in fact, as I recall, that is the way I learned to talk—so in writing I launch many expendable efforts. A result of this free way of writing is that I am not writing for others, mostly; they will not see the product at all unless the activity eventuates in something that later appears to be worthy. My guide is the self, and its adventuring in the language brings about communication.

This process-rather-than-substance view of writing invites a final, dual reflection:

1. Writers may not be special-sensitive or talented in any usual sense. They are simply engaged in sustained use of a language skill we all have. Their "creations" come about through confident reliance on stray impulses that will, with trust, find occasional patterns that are satisfying.

2. But writing itself is one of the great, free human activities. There is scope for individuality, and elation, and discovery, in writing. For the person who follows with trust and forgiveness what occurs to him, the world remains always ready and deep, an inexhaustible environment, with the combined vividness of an actuality and flexibility of a dream. Working back and forth between experience and thought, writers have more than space and time can offer. They have the whole unexplored realm of human vision.

Writing the Australian Crawl

Our daughter Kit, six years old, stands by the lighted dashboard talking to Daddy as he drives home from a family trip to the beach. The others have gone to sleep, and Kit is helping—she talks to keep me awake. The road winds ahead, and she bubbles along, composing with easy strokes, imagining a way of life for the two of us.

We'd have a old car, the kind that gets flat tires, but inside would be wolfskin on the seats and warm fur on the steering wheel, and wolf fur on all the buttons. And we'd live in a ranch house made out of logs with a loft where you sleep, and you'd walk a little ways and there'd be the farm with the horses. We'd drive to town, and we'd have flat tires, and be sort of old.

This artless bit of talk is a cue for my contention that the writer, like the talker who finds his best subject and responds eagerly with his whole self, can easily pour out a harmonious passage; writing, like talk, can be easy, fast, and direct; it can come about through the impulsive following of interest, and its form and proportion can grow from itself in a way that appears easy and natural.

The Practice of Composing in Language

Composing in language is done by feel, rather than by rule. Yes, many critics, and many writers too, will discuss the process and often settle for statements that identify pattern results; but back of summary statements there hovers a whole ocean of tentatives in the consciousness of the writer.

Anything we say or anything we write comes to us sequentially with a host of moving, hobbing opportunities. The practice of writing involves a readiness to accept what emerges, what entices. The sound of words and phrases, the associations of those sounds and syllables in words, the emerging trajectory of thought and feeling, that background of conditioning wrought by earlier writers, the individual bite, or whine, or snarl, or whatever, of the local family dialect—all of these and no doubt many others—influence the results. A writer coasts into action with willing involvement, always ready for something to happen that may be a first time, not a repetition of something already accomplished.

Ready for adventure, the writer waits, in the presence of the impending language: many things happen. The encounter with the language is too individual to be

From *Agenda*.

typed, helpfully, as “English” or “American”—the writer’s own voice, the voice of his family, the voice of the neighborhood—those successively larger areas of relation bear on the feeling at the moment of composition; but large influences, national tendencies, or tendencies of a period in literature have much less significance than do close, local nudges from day-to-day life. Rhythm of speech will suggest enhancements of rhythm; some degree of symmetry—or pleasing asymmetry—will influence how the words go on the page. Each line will be a venturing forward from the left margin toward the right, with options for breaks or for continuity contending for recognition. The farther toward the right margin the line gets, the more crucial the passing of each option—and the length of proximate lines will also be influencing the writer.

Placement—the end of a line, for instance—makes a difference, but sometimes the difference is small; even if no pause, or little pause, occurs, the forward feeling of the poem will sustain a syncopation. Similarly, the close of a verse paragraph or stanza will invite its own cluster of options—definite closing, hovering motion leading to the next stanza, or possibly even a felt leap without a pause. But even to violate a usual pause is one kind of experience. The writer will be working in the presence of all sound effects. There is no escape from such effects, in either direction—toward a pattern that appears to limit choices, or away from a pattern that seems to neglect sounds. They are there; they make a difference.

But to live your writing life by assuming that certain “norms” have been established and thereby made operative for any writer—such a stance reverses the actual: writers recognize opportunities; if a group or a tradition recognizes certain opportunities and makes

Yes!
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that recognition into a "norm," the range of options is not changed. Anyone may come along and move into composing the language by means of hints and hunches that occur to an individual. All of our friends have norms and other habits; but the part of an artist is to make any present action the occasion for emergence from present potentials. Norms are for talking about art; opportunities are for artists. And back of any "norm" is speech; how talk goes will live—whether neglected by intent or not.

Any break at a line, any caesura, any surfacing of natural syllable intonation—these are all a total of language-feel that the writer orchestrates according to what comes along in the act of composing. There is no syncopation impossible; the total effect in the experience of the writer at the moment is totally in command.

So, everything makes a difference: a word at the end or beginning of a line is different from a word elsewhere in the line; any syllable that customarily gets slurred in speech carries at least the ghost of that slurring into the most formal context; any emergency in the throat is an event in the poem. To change anything—the length of a line, the sequence of pronunciation of syllables by reversing words—anything—will influence the feel of the language.

In such an ocean of mutual influences, the trajectory of acceptance for certain practices—pentameter, the vogue of it, for instance—will vary in steepness and significance. Pentameter will not come or go away just at the whim of a writer, who may do lines by fives or not by fives, but continues to engage with readers who will put the pentameter overlay onto anything heard, or will shy from that overlay. And rhyme—no one can escape similar sounds, or make hearers accept patterns

beyond their hearing readiness. One who composes in language moves in the presence of sound, more or less similar sounds; moves in the presence of speech sequences; breathes with a set of muscles that will clutter or enhance the ever-varying physical presence of language effects.

One who composes in language confronts opportunity too varied for fixed rules, or for violation of rules: from the emergency of the encounter emerges the new realization, the now poem.