



WILLIAM EDGAR STAFFORD (1914-1993)



William Stafford is my first choice for the exemplary Kansas poet. His work exhibits the language, values, and experience of the Great Plains. He describes the sky's drama: its Milky Way swirls, wind-churned clouds, and limitless space. His poems also pay attention to the expansive earth below sky: its animals, plants, peoples, and histories. When I met Stafford we shared stories about childhood rambles along edges of town—creeks and pastures—and how these influenced us as adults. His words take us on outdoors walks.

However, Stafford does more than describe landscape; rather, he shows it is a stage for human inquiry into the nature of existence. His poems are riddles. Each asks questions about not just the human condition, but about the condition of the cosmos itself. He was a person of great faith, yet his poems are not preachy. He leads us to a hillside to ponder with him, and his inquiry becomes a tool of belief.

This poem begins at the edge of a town, where civilization becomes subject to time's passing. Look for shifts in Stafford's poems or pivotal words, such as "but" and "sage" in this poem. At the end, the poem shifts to the point of view of the sage, which appears to "flash" or wave to the onlooker. And notice the balance of the last line, both the "Yes" and the suggestion for "no."

FOR A DISTANT FRIEND

***Where Western towns end nobody cares,
finished things thrown around,
prairie grass into old cars, a lost race
reported by tumbleweed.***

***And hints for us all stand there, small
or shadowed. You can watch
the land by the hour, what hawks overlook,
little things, grain of sand.***

***But when the right hour steps over the hills
all of the sage flashes at once,
a gesture for miles to reach every friend:
Yes. Though there's wind in the world.***

Education: William Stafford, born in Hutchinson, graduated from Liberal High School, and received a BA (1933) and MA (1947) from University of Kansas. He received a PhD from University of Iowa (1954).

Career: Stafford taught at Lewis and Clark College 1948 to 1980. Until his death he traveled widely speaking about poetry and writing. He won a National Book Award (1963) for *Traveling Through the Dark*. In 1970 Stafford was Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, now the U.S. Poet Laureate position. He was poet laureate of Oregon.