

## College Guild

P.O. Box 6448, Brunswick, ME 04011

# POETRY CLUB II

## Unit 6 of 7

Poems by William Stafford

This unit contains a selection of poems by William Stafford. He was born in Kansas in 1914, and during World War II, he spent four years in a conscientious objector camp. He was a poet laureate and received the National Book Award for a collection of his poetry. He is quoted as saying that his aim in poetry is to “follow the golden thread” leading to the mysterious center where creatures, humans, and angels live in harmony. [Taken from the cover of Stafford’s collection, *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep*.] Notice his poem about Wallace Stevens and his mention of T.S. Eliot; both poets appear in College Guild courses!

**1. Carefully read each poem. Select four and discuss them.**

**2. Write four original poems of your own.**

### HOW TO REGAIN YOUR SOUL

Come down Canyon Creek trail on a summer  
afternoon  
that one place where the valley floor opens out.  
You will see  
the white butterflies. Because of the way  
shadows  
come off those vertical rocks in the west, there  
are  
shafts of sunlight hitting the river and a deep  
long purple gorge straight ahead. Put down your  
pack.

Above, air sighs the pines. It was this way  
when Rome was clanging, when Troy was being  
built,  
when campfires lighted caves. The white  
butterflies dance  
by the thousands in the still sunshine. Suddenly  
anything  
could happen to you. Your soul pulls toward the  
canyon  
and then shines back through the white wings to  
be you again.

## ULTIMATE PROBLEMS

In the Aztec design God crowds  
 Into the little pea that is rolling  
 out of the picture.

All the rest extends bleaker  
 because God has gone away.

In the White Man design, though,  
 no pea is there.

God is everywhere  
 but hard to see.

The Aztecs frown at this.

*How do you know He is everywhere?  
 And how did He get out of the pea?*

## 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.

## IF I COULD BE LIKE WALLACE STEVENS

The Octopus would be my model -  
 it wants to understand; it prowls  
 the rocks a hundred ways and holds  
 its head aloof but not ignoring.  
 All its fingers value what  
 they find. "I'd rather know," they say.  
 "I'd rather slime along than be heroic."

My pride would be to find out; I'd  
 bow to see, play the fool,  
 Ask, beg, retreat like a wave –  
 but somewhat deep I'd hold the pearl,  
 never tell. "Mr Charley,"  
 I'd say, "talk some more. Boast again."  
 And I'd play the banjo and sing.

## VACATION TRIP

The loudest sound in our car  
 was Mother being glum:

Little chiding valves  
 a surge of detergent oil  
 all that deep chaos  
 the relentless accurate fire  
 the drive shaft wild to arrive

And tugging along behind in its great big  
 balloon,  
 that looming piece of her mind:

"I wish I hadn't come."

THINGS I LEARNED LAST WEEK

Ants, when they meet each other,  
usually pass on the right.

Sometimes you can open a sticky  
door with your elbow.

A man in Boston has dedicated himself  
to telling about injustice.

For three thousand dollars he will  
come to your town and tell you about it.

Schopenhauer was a pessimist but  
he played the flute.

Yeats, Pound, and Eliot saw art as  
growing from other art. They studied that.

If I ever die, I'd like it to be  
in the evening. That way, I'll have  
all the dark to go with me, and no one  
will see how I begin to hobble along.

In the Pentagon one person's job is to  
take pins out of towns, hills, and fields,  
and then save the pins for later.

CLIMBING ALONG THE RIVER

Willows never forget how it feels  
to be young.

Do you remember where you came from?  
Gravel remembers.

Even the upper end of the river  
Believes in the ocean.

Exactly at midnight  
Yesterday sighs away.

What I believe is,  
All animals have one soul.

Over the land they love  
They crisscross forever.

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*Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes*