



William Stafford

(1914-1993)

Traveling through the Dark (1960)

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.

ANALYSIS

Wednesday nights, late, I drive 75 miles home over the Coast Range, after teaching an evening class in Tillamook. Thursday morning at breakfast my children—Bret, Kim, Kit, Barbara---ask, “What did you see last night, Daddy?” And one Thursday morning I found myself telling them an incident, just a routine event on that narrow mountain road. Amidst the story, while they listened wide-eyes to Daddy’s far, late adventure, I realized that the world had offered to me again an event which could not be held small: a story had happened, regardless of whether we wrote it down or called it so. Like Cassandra, we felt the past and the future come to bear on the present, and with that triple weight of realization the creative event had occurred, in a flash, without management, just from helpless participation and then willed assent, as often before: an experience unfolds the depth any experience may conceal till it is touched and sprung into its poem or story.

For nothing in life exists without implications, potentials. To live is to travel landscapes with connotations, to meet people and things with millions of relatives, to find yourself reacting to anything new with all the weight of your past crystallizing into what is before you. In a sense, any account you make becomes a documentary in which you cannot write or tell fast enough to find your way out of the story you carry along. My story that Thursday morning carried in it a multitude of influences which hovered and cried for engagement.

Watching the children, I saw the account reflected, and saw it come to life. The language cocked their attention—that animal so poignantly named, a deer; the dark night, the wild mountains, the narrow road, the sound of rushing water; and then—our faithful automobile. And standing in that emergency, far from their sleeping selves—their father, at a loss, confronting a framed, stopped, meaningful picture. With a jolt we felt the usually disguised imminence of first and last things.

It would be possible to trace the decisions in the writing of this already formed poem—the lines, the insistent part-rhymes. There were decisions forced on the writer, inherent in the meaning, such as the need for absolute confrontations early—“dead,” “killing,” “stiffened,” “cold”—as a firm assertion of what must be faced without swerving at the end. There are discoveries, for instance that the tail light makes a red cloud in the cold night as the steady exhaust signals readiness. There are a host of participating details begging to enter the poem, but there is also the hesitant writer and doer of the action, afraid to blur what he glimpsed, awkwardly selecting one part at a time and counting on the hearer to participate where distractions might threaten whatever potential there is in the minimum telling.

Once a poem like this is started, there are many ways to intensify; and there are a myriad of nuances to be accepted by the writer or to be sacrificed. But what looms in such a documentary is that the main effect depends on concurrence of event and implications. Writing the poem becomes a process of discovering what elements contribute adequately to the distinction of the event—this time such elements as the lone traveling, the darkness, the soft animal, the road that led onward. My mission as poet was simply to tell others how it was to travel that road: in their learning about my experience they would be reading back from the event into the many aspects of their own experience which were shadowed forth by the very simplicity of my encounter. Almost any reaction I had—in a local, physical way—to the experience with the deer would deliver for the reader something of the loneliness and the minimum scope for action we all have in extreme situations.

Two other considerations deserve emphasis in accounting for this poem. The first is that telling it consisted from the first in simply delivering how it was to stand there in the dark with the deer; not till the account took shape did I become aware of patterns which could be identified as symbolic. My first impulse was toward narrative: once I saw the parallels looming along the narrative thread, I did not deny nor try to avoid them, but my only guide in the telling was to grope for *how it was*. The other consideration is about form, and in a sense about wording—about intensifying the verbal voltage of the poem: much of the syllable-help, the sound-reinforcement, arrives with the thought in the telling; but any regularizing of the pattern (second and fourth lines with near rhyme, for instance) comes from a kind of non-desperate, even confident juggling. All such decisions offer themselves to the writer, and he can welcome gains and give

up certain sacrifices with an almost relaxed feeling of consideration—a process different from the more adventurous and hazardous feel of the first telling and discovery of the main narrative.

This kind of poem is a sure kind. It may not be spectacular, but it can always possess the validity of reporting something. It can be intensified in the writing, but its most significant value derives from the relevance and the pervasiveness of it as a metaphor. If it catches many experiences in its pattern, it can be very powerful. One may be struck at any time by this kind of ghostly accompaniment, the symbolic reinforcing inherent in the way we have to think, and inherent in the language our past offers us when we use it for today's purposes.

Even after telling the story of traveling through the dark I cannot rid myself of its hold over me, nor could I that Thursday morning, as I pushed the children—Bret, Kim, Kit, Barbara—out on their road to school, and then went on my own way to work, where I had to be, ready for the next encounter, the next poem, and so on...

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(Harper & Row 1960)