

Traveling through the Dark

By William E. Stafford

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, "Traveling through the Dark" from *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*.
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Minnesota, www.graywolfpress.org.

Source: *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Graywolf Press, 1998)



Born in Kansas, Stafford lived with other conscientious objectors in work camps in Arkansas and California during the 1940's. He taught at Lewis and Clark College, Manchester College, and San Jose State College (now University). He also served as U.S. Information Agency lecturer in Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and held Oregon's Poet Laureate position from 1975-93. Stafford was a prolific writer and authored numerous books of nonfiction and poetry as well as edited several collections of poetry and prose and contributed to translations and anthologies.

