**Westerly**
Volume 62 Number 1, 2017

**Notice of Intention**
*Westerly* has converted the full backfile of Westerly (1956–) to electronic text, available to readers and researchers on the *Westerly* website, www.westerlymag.com.au. This work has been supported by a grant from the Cultural Fund of the Copyright Agency Limited.



**Contact**: westerly@uwa.edu.au

*Westerly* acknowledges all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Australians. We celebrate the continuous living cultures of Indigenous people and their vital contributions within Australian society.

*Westerly*'s office, at the University of Western Australia, is located on Whadjak Noongar land. We recognize the Noongar people as the spiritual and cultural custodians of this land.

**Publisher**
Westerly Centre, The University of Western Australia, Australia



**Production**
Design: Chil3
Typesetting: Lasertype
Print: UniPrint, The University of Western Australia

**Front cover**: Nina-Marie Thomas, *Ten*, 2017.


*Westerly* is published biannually with assistance from the State Government of WA by an investment in this project through the Department of Culture and the Arts and from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. The opinions expressed in *Westerly* are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.




Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Culture and the Arts**

This project has also been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

**62.1**

**New Writing from Western Australia**
Fiction
Poetry
Essays
Reviews

# Westerly

# *Travelling Through the Dark:* Six Weeks in Oregon

Caitlin Maling

**Caitlin Maling is the author of two collections of poetry, *Border Crossing* (2017) and *Conversations I've Never Had* (2015), both out through Fremantle Press. She is currently pursuing a PhD in comparative ecopoetics at the University of Sydney.**

> 'William Stafford's complete works constitute a testament to living' (Kitchen, *Understanding William Stafford* 9).
>
> 'For a poem is not the end, but the beginning, of an excursion' (Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl* 5).

It was coming to the end of my time in America. PhD applications still ongoing, I didn't know where I was going but the movers were booked, the cars and furniture in the process of being sold. It was back to that space of deciding what is necessary and what is easy to replace. I had done a lot, seen a lot, been twenty-something across twenty-something states, tried out their names in my mouth. I liked the South, the long vowels and how the rusting history on every street hung low, like a flag off a pole.

It was November on the Pacific Coast. It was cold. When I flew into Portland, I realised the clothes I had brought were not enough. My bags fell off the cart in an indictment of their useless contents. So many books and not one truly warm pair of pants. I drove into the centre of Portland to shop, not knowing what I would find further south on the coast. Portland was sleet and rivers. I wandered in and out of Foyles without buying anything. The Portland of *Portlandia*, of Foyles, of coffee and artisanal practices, left-leaning indie companies and expat Australians, is a place I am meant to like if not immediately sink into and declare myself at home. But it was sleeting and the Wholefoods I entered was like all the other Wholefoods I've found myself in city to city. Except this one checked my ID before allowing me to buy kombucha.

It was like under everything there was this sadness. There's a Franz Wright line (via Basho), 'When I hear the dawn gulls cry/ even in New York/ I long for New York—' (62) that I take with me everywhere. It's in the absence when I think to listen for my heart. In Wright's poem, a person sits still while aching for the places the train moves through. One of the ways I start to write a new poem is to ask a question. Day after day when I lived in the UK I asked myself, how is a poem like a train? My fiancé caught them through the sleet and snow to work and back, leaving and returning in darkness. Right now in Sydney, as I'm writing this sentence, the barista starts to say 'every Australian I've ever known has said it's too dark in the UK, the sun rising at 11 and setting at 3'.

It was a two-hour drive from Portland through hills to the SITKA Center for Art and Ecology where I was to spend six weeks on the Oregon Coast. As I made my way further south, lanes emerged and narrowed through towns growing smaller with the road. The night was coming in fast when I hit the big trees and curves outside of Otis. When night falls heavy over unfamiliar roads, I always get a keyed up feeling similar to when we would take dexies (Perth after dinner-mints) in Freo to study as teens. In both situations I sense that there's some danger and I won't be sleeping that night.

It was late in the day to be arriving at the residency. The property manager showed me around generously with a hushed rush. My house was away from the central complex. A rich artist's summer place. A high loft bedroom, small bathroom and a large open space, walls sparsely populated with masks and sculptures. A leather couch and the real versions of the leather chair and footstools that IKEA recreates in mass. Out the uncovered windows there were views I couldn't see. With lights on, the cape unpopulated in winter, I was the only bulb nestled in the dripping pines.

It was hanging, the precipice of feeling I needed to write. I was very tired. My first book had been all adolescent feeling, abandon and music. I was mealy mouthed and adult now. The back of my throat felt closed. I sucked cough lozenges and rested. I had been resting for the six months since I had finished my MFA. Resting my way across America, in RVs, cheap motel rooms, residencies and my home in Houston. 'I just need more sleep,' I kept saying.

It was to be my second book. Whatever I made of the MFA thesis I had just spent the past 3 years living in Texas completing. I was at SITKA to finish it. I had written in my application that I wanted to write about place outside of my places. Which were Western Australia, the Turquoise Coast, coastal dry and desert. A poet whose name I've lost, writes about how all her poems bring the same few words (*bone, white, empty*) together in different orders. In bed, I twist mine like rings around my fingers: *dune, rust, dust, red, sand, dirt, sky, stone* and *river.*

It was clear I needed a new way of writing. What wasn't clear was if I could find one.

It was not to be my first time reading William Stafford. Like everyone who has ever studied American poetry, I was familiar with his poem about a man coming across a pregnant deer hit roadside. His 'only swerving' 'to think hard for us all' before he pushes the deer over the edge (Stafford, *The Way It Is* 77). Twisting through mountains where the rules of Australian roads—point straight and keep going no matter what—have no reality. I said those words to myself like a contract. In WA, I'd never driven on a road where it was possible to push anything off, just to nudge it in the heat from blistering tarmac onto yellow sand.

It was after waking in the late morning light of my first Oregon dawn and wrestling the artist's irascible coffee maker into submission that I made my way up the wet hill to the main campus library. It did not include much of interest but there was a complete collection of Stafford's work donated by his daughter who had spent much time in residence, Stafford being an Oregonian for the second half of his life. This being his place, I took the collection back and placed it on the mantle. In the light I could see out the windows to where a sliver of river wound its way in between the capes.

It was like how once I'd returned to Australia I would read deeply about Stafford, like it was a way of returning to that place and time. Judith Kitchen writes that '[t]he willingness to be part of the world and, at the same time, the recognition that the world is a cold, indifferent place to be forces Stafford to find a world of his own' (20). When I travel and miss the place I am, I think I am missing this world of my own. Poetry is a strange way of world building. Like mapping roads for cities never built.

It was not an easy choice to be leaving Texas. I liked its ugly freeways and loved its oil-rigged plains backing up against the Rio Grande and Mexico, the sense as you travelled across it that you were negotiating contested borders. Here was one history and there another lay on top. At the Alamo, men still cry, hats off heads, in the small and dank sandstone building where Santa Anna had come and Texas briefly had fallen. In 2017, in response to an elected despot, the President of Mexico will say they will pay for a wall across the border if the part of Texas seized in 1845 is returned. I would still love Texas if it were Mexico, when it was Mexico, when it was Spain, when eventually the hurricane hits the gulf again and Galveston is given back to the ocean.

It was the second afternoon of my time in Oregon; I picked up the chair and moved it to where it faced the window. I bought the Stafford down from the mantle and read



> Sometimes in the evening a translator walks out
> and listens by the streams that wander back and forth
> across borders (*The Way It Is* 7).

I wrote it down, the first of many notes and inscriptions from Stafford that would become tangled in among my own poems. I read about how Stafford wrote, each morning when it was still dark. From then on I faced ocean in the early morning and waited for it to show. 'I reminded myself to be alert, to be aware of the now-ness of things—the feel of the day, the temperature, the kind of room, the people what they said.' (Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl* 47) Pacing myself through Stafford's poems, I would read in the dark and when it was light I would write what I could see, what I could feel.

It was like beginning each morning as though it was a new morning and a continuation of the one before and the one after. It was like how 'one doesn't learn how to do art, but one learns that it is possible by a certain adjustment of consciousness to participate in art' (Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl* 48).

It was opening the book and opening the Pacific Northwest. Poems that travelled even as they stayed still. Me in my room. Stafford back in his. My life in Texas. My husband in Texas. My family in Western Australia. The borders of my body thickened at these places. My fingers opening pages and slowly unbinding words. I was alone but less lonely. I worked each day towards being a person who knew how 'to stand utterly alone and let the heart of the world shudder through' (Lieberman 32).

It was in how Stafford said, insisted, the word *dark* poem after poem and it meant both the night and what was beyond it. And *rain*, *wind*, *water*, *hill* and *earth* (Heldrich 7). I started to count down his words on my fingers among my own salt country ones, listening to the creatures in the chimney, the branches on the roof at night.

It was a week in which I started driving in the afternoons. Taking my car up and down the same coastal freeway. The other artists in residence seemed to care more about preserving things. They collected sounds, mushrooms, images, made their own tinctures. One day they took me to a beach in almost sub-zero temperatures to dig deep into the sand for pippies. I left early in my car for fries. It wasn't that they weren't friendly. Another night the property manager took me bowling with her meet-up group. It's hard to make friends in small places like this, she said. I tried to sit 'quiet and feel out what relation is possible between us and the frightening land buried under all that asphalt, and how such a peculiar people as ourselves can live together with something like dignity' (Burns 26). They were all earnestly seeking. I listened.

It was Oregon that Stafford found himself in at the end of his life. He was from Kansas but the home of his poems is in travel. 'We see the image of the road, the path, the line—it is the lot of the true poet to be homeless; his "home" is on the road, on which he travels toward his destiny and the world's' (Stitt 187). In Texas and in Oregon and on the I-10 in Florida, the Blue Ridge Pathway and the Natchez Trace and in the books I read: the true American Dream is to move and keep moving. In the manuscript, the poems, I was creating while sitting still—in Oregon it was this movement I chased.

It was *scop* in 'Widsmith' the oldest poem in English, or in Old English 'his weird [fate] is to be a wanderer:/ the poets of mankind go through many countries,/ speak their needs, say their thanks' (Howard 105).

It was Thanksgiving (or, to some, National Day of Mourning) and the eco-community the residency was located within filled slightly. I bought two pies and took them down to the community boat club. We went round and introduced ourselves. We said what we were thankful for. I was thankful for the words slowly travelling back, for Stafford's poems teaching me to be still even as my mind wandered out.

It was a lie, the poem 'February in Oregon' which ended up in my book.

It was like this. I took my notebook to the printmaker's studio I had been allocated one afternoon. The windows faced the main lawn where deer and elk would come at dawn and dusk, even in hunting season when the threat of death was more than a car in dark and fog. I typed up the pieces of Stafford, pieces of my daily poems. I cut them up. Mixed them on the floor. Highlighted the pieces that *shimmered*, cut them out. Took screen printing paper and spread it, one meter by two meters on the floor. I laid out the poem pieces by sound. My words by Stafford's words. I took a photo. Typed up the new thing. When it came to shaping it, I visited the ceramicist's studio. She told me how sometimes to make something appear whole you have to exaggerate proportions, give enough guidance so the unnatural becomes a piece of driftwood you found walking the beach.

It was what people didn't know about Stafford. That with his ordinary language he was smuggling what wasn't. That when you sat with the words, they travelled.

It was the first diary I ever made. Twenty-eight pieces of poem like a calendar of days of the Oregon coast. Some mine and some Stafford's. I called it February but really it was November and December. It was the end of my time in America. The sections of the poem mapped time in the future. Stafford's poems bought the past with them. I sat on the floor of my studio in the middle of both.



It was like '[a]ll of my writings are one long production. I break off pieces, smaller or larger, and send them out. Sometime I will get around to welding the pieces together. It's as if I am distracted in building a big house; I hurry over to prop up a wall with one piece of writing, then have to drop everything to save a joist somewhere else. This is just a feeling I have, not a claim. I'd like to connect big pieces together and have epics' (Young np).

It was summer in the Blue Mountains. I was bringing together the manuscript that would become *Border Crossing*. The pages of 'February in Oregon' lying atop the torn pieces of Texas, pieces of my body, roads like veins running poem to poem. In the summer Australian light of eucalypt oil and bushfire haze, I took down my Stafford again and read of the *dark*.

(It was not an accident that this essay is in twenty-eight sections like the poem, or like the month of February).

**Works Cited**

Burns, Gerald. 'A Book to Build On.' *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. Ed. Andrews, Tom. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. 25–26.

Heldrich, Phillip. 'William Stafford's Mythopoetic Kansas.' *The Midwest Quarterly* 43.2 (2002).

Howard, Richard. 'William Stafford "Tell Us What You Deserve", the Whole World Said' *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. Ed. Andrews, Tom. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. 104–12.

Kitchen, Judith. *Understanding William Stafford*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

Lieberman, Laurence. 'From "the Shocks of Normality".' *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. Ed. Andrews, Tom. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. 31–40.

Stafford, William. *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Graywolf Press, 1998.

——. *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1978.

Stitt, Peter. 'William Stafford's Wilderness Quest.' *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*. Ed. Andrews, Tom. Ann Arbor: University of Michgan Press, 1993. 165–202.

Wright, Franz. *Wheeling Motel: Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

Young, William. 'William Stafford, the Art of Poetry No. 67.' *The Paris Review*, 1993.