

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Citizen of Dark Times

Agenda in a time of fear: Be not afraid.
When things go wrong, do right.
Set out by the half-light of the seeker.
For the well-lit problem begins to heal.
Learn tropism toward the difficult.
We have not arrived to explain, but to sing.
Young idealism ripens into an ethical life.
Prune back regret to let faith grow.
When you hit rock bottom, dig farther down.
Grief is the seed of singing, shame the seed of song.
Keep seeing what you are not saying.
Plunder your reticence.
Songbird guards a twig, its only weapon a song.

Kim Stafford¹

Reflections

This coming Wednesday, the 22nd, is Earth Day—and it's the 50th anniversary of one of the planet's largest civic events, when millions of Americans took to the streets to protest environmental ignorance and to demand life-saving changes for the protection and preservation of our planet. Without a doubt, climate change is one of the biggest threats to the future of humanity and to the fragile, miraculous life-support systems on which our world and every creature in it depends.

Earth Day 2020 will look much different than Earth Day 1970, and much different than 2019 as well. This year there will be no public gatherings, no street campaigns or campus protests. But the challenges our earth faces are as dire as ever. And though we are understandably distracted by the pandemic threatening to all but undo us, the earth—its endangered arteries and oceans, veins and glaciers—still spins, I like to think, in hope. If it is true that the “well-lit problem begins to heal” and that “grief is the seed of singing,” then may we shine as bright a light as ever there was onto the problems of waste, pollution, disregard, and greed so that the world might be preserved and so keep singing.

¹ “Citizen of Dark Times” by Kim Stafford from *Wild Honey, Tough Salt*, Red Hen Press. Used by permission.

Since I have been homebound and working at a small desk in my bedroom, I have watched purple finches devotedly prepare a nest in a hanging basket on my front porch. Sometimes I wonder if they are aware of my gaze; though, if they are, they do not seem to mind, so dutifully do they work. I think about how they are supremely indifferent to our current crises, know only what their daily task is—to prepare a nest and keep it safe—and stay true to their present work. It is both strange comfort and beautiful instruction: the birds of the air and the lilies of the field know without consciousness nor defense exactly what they need to know. The songbird works twig by twig, “its only weapon a song.”

I was reading an interview with Kim Stafford recently in which he mentions a comment his then-teenaged son made about his father’s various art forms—Stafford is a photographer, songwriter, musician, essayist and poet—and with striking clarity and wisdom about our primal needs to communicate and engage, said, “We didn’t become humans when we invented tools. We became human when we looked at the person sitting across the fire and began to tell stories.”

In other words, maybe, we need each other—to see and listen to and talk with, to share some fire with. Song by song, gaze by gaze, story by story, and twig by twig, we make our home, we love what we love, and we attempt to keep safe what we cherish most. One small porch-nest. One home-fire. One wide globe.

I want to say to the birds at my window, be not afraid, sweet creatures, for while these are dark times, there is no harm here. But of course I cannot stop the hawk from swooping anymore than the finch can keep me from watching. Even still, I am sensing myself moving inward, sheltering in place, as it were, acutely aware of how vulnerable every living thing is and understanding anew how caring for the earth down to its small twigs and for one another, especially the least of these, is perhaps since time began the greatest responsibility—and gift—we have been given.

Forget the tools we have made; forget even the stories we can tell. Look at us, these singing birds: one day we’ll all abandon this place for another. Meanwhile, be careful; nothing stays this way forever.

✧ About the poet

Kim Stafford (b. 1949) is the founding director of the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College, author of a dozen books of both poetry and prose, and Oregon’s 9th poet laureate. Photographer, film-maker and singer-songwriter, he is also the literary executor of the estate of the poet William Stafford, his father. His work is deeply concerned with notions of geography, ecology, story-telling and belonging.



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