

Friends of William Stafford
Call for Papers

WILLIAM STAFFORD AND THE ANTHROPOCENE: TOWARD A POETICS OF THE
“EARTHBOUND”

Bruno Latour has claimed, first in his Gifford Lectures, and then in the recent *Facing Gaia* (2017), that the existential crisis of the Anthropocene will require a reconceptualization of the Earth and our place on it. Latour suggests we must exchange our identity as Moderns—leaving behind the dream of inevitable expansion-- and accept a new identity as which he calls the “Earthbound.” This name has a doubleness to it—it designates those who are bound *to* the Earth, who are limited by it, but also those who are bound *toward* the earth in the sense of a journey of discovery. Latour states:

What is certain is that, while humans of the modern species could be defined as those who always emancipated themselves from the constraints of the past, who were always trying to pass through the impassable Pillars of Hercules, conversely, the Earthbound have to explore the question of their limits. Whereas the Humans had “*Plus ultra*” as their motto, the Earthbound have no motto but “*Plus intra.*”

The advantage of accepting this identity is that it is not a retrenchment or limitation but a call to a new kind of exploration and innovation:

We are still dealing with space, with the earth, with discovery, but it is the discovery of a new Earth considered in its *intensity* and no longer in its *extension*. We are not stunned spectators witnessing the discovery of a New World at our disposal; we are rather witnessing the obligation to relearn completely the way we are going to have to inhabit the Old World!

What would the poetry of the “Earthbound” be like? Latour’s work implies it would be a poetry of ecstatic limits, of space defined by intensity rather than by emptiness—a poetry that accepts our fate as a natural kind, but without the grimness of literary Naturalism—a poetry that resists transcendence, but also seeks to build relations. In other words, it would resemble the poetry of William Stafford.

One of the distinguishing aspects of William Stafford’s poetry is its friendliness, its companionability in relation to the natural world: animals, plants, rivers, forests, mountains. In his poetry “little bushes nod” and the “wilderness listen[s].” His is a poetic of inclusive reanimation, enriched by a gift for metonymy. He used the concept of a “golden thread” to illustrate the idea that the poet can tug on anything, the smallest, most insignificant thing, and discover it connected by that thread to a complex web of relations and the whole world. Stafford says, in his poem “Earth Dweller,”

If I have not found the right place,
teach me; for, somewhere inside, the clods are
vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing
for the saints forever, the shed and windmill
rear so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.

Now I know why people worship, carry around
magic emblems, wake up talking dreams
they teach to their children: the world speaks.
The world speaks everything to us.
It is our only friend.

Stafford's poetry has ecological implications and conceptual suggestions for humans living in the Anthropocene, an age in which humankind needs to listen, as a friend might, to the earth to learn again how to be an "earth dweller."

The Friends of William Stafford welcome papers connecting Stafford's work to the Anthropocene. These papers might reflect on, but are not restricted to, ways in which Stafford can be connected to recent work on the Anthropocene by authors like Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway, Dipesh Chakrabarty, etc. Connections to ecocriticism, to eco-poetics, to other recent work on the Anthropocene being done in the social sciences and in philosophy are also welcome. Comparisons with contemporary poets who are working in a similar vein would likewise be considered.

Please direct your 250 word proposal and a short professional bio to Tim Barnes, editor of *The Friends of William Stafford: A Journal and Newsletter for Poets and Poetry* at tim.barnes63@gmail.com. Proposals are due January 15. Papers should be limited to 15-20 minutes.

Works Cited

Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Polity Press, 2017.
Stafford, William. *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*. Graywolf Press, 1998.