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The One Life You'd Have Wanted to Live: Reading William Stafford, Carl Dennis, Louis Simpson, and America

[William Slaughter](#)

1.

"Who's your favorite poet?" I'm often asked. And I must confess that I find it a more difficult question to answer than I once did. I find that I am reluctant to commit myself to the whole of a poet's work over time. Too often, the notion that poetry is a career is hiding somewhere behind the asking of the question. And I'm reflexively on guard, ready to argue against that



notion: not that poetry, the writing of it, is never a career (because it sometimes is) but that it shouldn't be. Poetry should be part of life, not the whole of it. The poems should come from the living, not the living from the poems. Believing that, as I do, I'm more than likely to answer the "favorite poet" question by turning it away and naming, instead, my favorite poems, which change as often and as much as I do.

In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge gives us language to describe what happens when we let ourselves go . . . and lose ourselves in poem or play. "The willing suspension of disbelief," he calls the loss that is a gain, "for the moment that constitutes poetic faith." I recognize that kind of (liminal) consciousness in myself, and I yield to it often enough. But I call that kind of letting go and loss of what passes for "self" by a different name; I call it *escape*. When a literary text of whatever kind "transports" me (Longinus' verb), when it takes me somewhere I haven't been before, either in or out of language, I think I love it most.

Even at the moment of transport, though, and perhaps especially at that moment, I still know that another text might prove itself entirely capable of moving me in the opposite direction—toward the world, not away from it. "Vacation," a poem by William Stafford, is one such text. You can find it in his first book, *West of Your City* (1960).

One scene as I bow to pour her coffee: —

Three Indians in the scouring drouth
huddle at a grave scooped in the gravel,
lean to the wind as our train goes by.
Someone is gone.
There is dust on everything in Nevada.

I pour the cream.

Stafford's poem doesn't prompt me to escape the world by suspending, either willingly or unwillingly, anything like disbelief. Rather it prompts me to engage more fully the human world. It reminds me that nothing human is, or ought to be, alien to us.

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[Biography of William Stafford at Academy of American Poets](#) (with poem in RealAudio)

[Modern American Poetry Site](#): Interview with William Stafford; bibliography; criticism; biographical material

[Biography of Louis Simpson at Academy of American Poets](#) (full poem texts; links to audio)

[Audio interview with Carl Dennis](#), with link to biographical information

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I intend, here, to put "Vacation" to work in such a way that it will help set up and frame my reading of the life of the Man on My Porch who makes "me" an offer in Carl Dennis's poem of the same name. Stafford's poem is hieroglyphic, a kind of picture writing. The way he breaks the scene down and apart and puts it on the page contributes powerfully to its effect.

"Vacation" takes place, has its geography, in Nevada where "there is dust on everything." But the "I" in the poem, its "speaker," is ensconced with a traveling companion in the dining car of a train—the Southern Pacific?—that is passing through the "scouring drouth."

The poem's "one scene"—what it's about—is positioned between Stafford's carefully matter-of-fact opening and closing frames. Between the pouring of the coffee, which includes a formal and ironic "bow," and the pouring of the cream, the poem happens. Three anonymous Indians "huddle at a grave scooped in the gravel." They remain there, forever, "lean[ing] to the wind as our train goes by." The "I" in the poem and his traveling companion are not part of that scene. Already they are beyond the ceremony they have witnessed. As they drink their coffee *with cream*, they are leaving all that behind.

"Someone is gone." Not only the fourth Indian, the dead one, is gone, but also the "I" in Stafford's poem and his traveling companion are gone, moving on to whatever promise the next state—California?—on the map of their vacation holds out to them. They might not be part of the "one scene" framed in the poem itself, but they are part of the framing scene—the readers' scene, our scene. In the midst of life, we are in death. Stafford's poem argues against nonchalance, the inattention of its "speaker" and his traveling companion to what has just taken place outside the train's window. Stafford's poem urges—*forces* would be too strong a word—us not to escape from the world but to engage it.

Implicitly, "Vacation" enjoins us to live in the same uninsured world that includes the fourth Indian whose name, by the way, is Death—to be part of that world rather than apart from it, separated by the train's window, artificial glass. Death is to be seen, made visible, and recognized, not distorted or distanced. Sympathy is everywhere and always to be given, here to the three anonymous surviving Indians who are, of course, themselves, but who are also "huddling" and "leaning" for what is needy in all of us. The moral imperative—I'll risk being that direct, why not?—in Stafford is this: "Don't look and turn away; don't be gone. Take both heart and action. Break the window. Stop the train."

2.

The Man on My Porch, toward whom I now lean, as reader, belonged to Carl Dennis before he belonged to me. All I know of Carl Dennis is what I've read on the dust-jackets that his books wear—born in St. Louis in 1939, lives in Buffalo where he teaches at the State University of New York, that kind of thing—and what I've been able to gather from reading his poems, one of which is a favorite of mine. It's in his book *The Near World* (1985), and it's called "The Man on My Porch Makes Me an Offer."

"Above all houses in our town
 I've always loved this blue one you own
 With its round turret and big bay window.
 Do you dream about it the way I do?
 Wouldn't you be just as happy
 On a street with more trees
 In a larger house, whose columned porch
 Impresses every passer-by?
 Does it seem fair that you've won the right
 To gaze from these windows your whole life
 Merely because you saw them first,
 And consign me to a life of envy?
 I'll gladly assume more than your mortgage,
 More than the new brickwork and roof repair.
 Often I've noticed your wife and daughter
 Waiting on the porch, peering down the street
 For your car, a handsome, modest pair,
 And I'm sure I can make them happy,
 Happier than you can,
 You who have other projects to work on.
 I would live for you the one life
 You'd have wanted to live, had you stayed,
 And you can walk free, away from town,
 Out beyond the suburbs, to that quiet place
 Where the small voice of your true self
 May be heard, if anywhere, and each day
 You can wake up feeling your powers
 Still increasing, which is happiness,
 While I lose myself in the life you made
 And did not want enough,
 Happy when the space you left is filled."

"The Man on My Porch Makes Me an Offer" is a favorite poem of mine because it stops me, the train of my life, every time I read it. I have my own desert, a private Nevada, inside me. Dennis's poem makes me go there, won't let me forget it.

The generic properties of a dramatic monologue, which Dennis's poem is, must include: a person who "speaks" it, a person (or persons) to whom it is "spoken," and a situation that is either typical or critical. The Man on My Porch of Dennis's title "speaks" the poem, or rather "offers" it, to the man who owns the house—"above all houses in our town," the blue one with the round turret and big bay window—and the porch on which the offer is made. The situation, I'd say, is both typical and critical. Because the poem represents the dailiness, the ordinariness, of the lives of the two men on the porch and two women—the wife and daughter of the man who owns the house, "a handsome, modest pair"—the situation is typical. A passer-by on the sidewalk glancing, "peering" even, at the men on the porch would be unlikely to see anything out of the ordinary. But the situation is critical too, inasmuch as there is more drama on that porch than meets the eye. The monologue that constitutes Dennis' poem, in my overhearing of it, suggests the possibility that all is not well in the lives that it dramatizes, which is why I've decided to spend time with it, read my way into it and, hopefully, out of it again.

So far I've been referring to the Man on My Porch, the one who makes the offer, as if he were real, as if he had a body of his own, because that's how Carl Dennis introduces him, but nothing in my reading, even my first reading, of the poem depends on it. And on a second or third pass by that porch, I begin to see the two men differently. I begin to see them, in split focus, as one man, the same man, who is profoundly divided within and against himself. Suddenly I'm constructing, out of the materials that Dennis has given me, a different poem: not a dramatic monologue at all but an interior monologue, a poem that grants its reader privileged access to a man's mind—"the dialogue of the mind with itself" (Matthew Arnold)—even as it insists on its own silences. So from here on out, there's only one man on the porch in Dennis's poem and in my essay. He's sitting there alone, lost in thought, as the sun goes down on the life he

already has but does not want "enough."

Rather than being about the American Dream, Dennis's poem, in my reading of it, is about the American Dreamer, also known as the Man on My Porch; how his dreaming has, ironically, hollowed him out and emptied his life of meaning. The house in the suburbs, his family, the car he presumably drives to work that doesn't matter—"Do you dream about it the way I do?"—that's the package, and we all know what isn't in it, no matter how it's wrapped.

"Was he happy?" We can ask the Man on My Porch the same question that W.H. Auden asks of the Unknown Citizen at the end of his eponymous poem, and we can answer it the same way he did. "The question is absurd." The Man on My Porch is profoundly divided within and against himself. He's definitely not a happy man, although the word "happy," in one or another of its inflections, does appear, ironically, several times in the text of Dennis' poem. Rather, the Man on My Porch is a confused man. What kind of help, if any, can we give him? Do we have it in our power to un-confuse him?

One part of the Man on My Porch has made an "offer," a chance at a new life, to another part of the Man on My Porch. (Remember now: he's one man, the same man, profoundly divided within and against himself; he's one actor, the same actor, playing two very different parts.) The part of the Man on My Porch who makes the offer in Dennis's poem can be thought of as his "auxiliary ego," a term borrowed from the vocabulary of psychodrama, a form of therapy—or "help" by a friendlier name—that seems useful here. A relationship suggests itself between the interior monologue, "the dialogue of the mind with itself," as a form of language behavior and psychodrama as a form of therapy. The "auxiliary ego" functions in psychodrama as a "helper" in the emotional and relational life of the "ego" or subject of analysis—in this case, the Man on My Porch, the text of whose life we are reading. In Dennis's poem, the Man on My Porch embodies and acts out, gesturally and linguistically, what ails the "ego," and the climax of his performance is his "offer" or challenge.



Should the Man on My Porch accept or reject that offer or challenge? What will follow from his decision, or indecision, as he moves on to the next part of his life, if indeed he does move on? Either he will take both heart and action . . . either he will break the window and stop the train of his life . . . either he will change everything . . . or he won't. In which case, he might spend his time and energy shoring up the fragments of his old life against his ruin—plotting new defensive strategies, struggling to maintain the status quo. But that won't happen—at least not in my reading of Dennis's poem—because I

would like to take responsibility to Dennis, as his reader, is to begin reading his poem precisely where he ends it. Thus, his last line—"Happy when the space you left is filled"—becomes my first line. And my "happiness," as both reader and man, will be decided by how, and with what, I fill "the space" that he has left for me between the lines of his poem and in the margins of his page.

The Man on My Porch Makes Me an Offer" is testament to what I call home truths. Either Dennis's man will change everything, or he won't. But what does it mean to change everything? It means, I think, to fundamentally change one's "self" so that one's "self" comprehends—includes without irony, if that is thinkable—an "other." The home truths in the life of the Man on My Porch are these: He doesn't value "the one life" he has; he doesn't want it "enough," because he has "other projects to work on." In a manner of speaking, his house—the blue one with the round turret and big bay window, with his wife and daughter,

that "handsome, modest pair," in it—is falling down around him. His life doesn't make sense to him; he is experiencing it as hollow and empty, meaningless. How far he is from who he is and how he wants to live!

I've always thought that having only one life to live is such poverty—a fact, if it is fact, that ought to be moaned. No one else is holding him; Dennis's man is holding himself hostage in his "one life" which is, if not a mistaken life, at least an insufficient one as he's living it. It is, after all, a "mortgaged" life, and in need of restoration at that. "I'll gladly assume more than your mortgage, / More than the new brickwork and roof repair." But there are, indeed, other forms of "life" than the one Dennis's man lives in the harness of a routine that is, by all signs, not good for him.

For example, the dream life: "Do you dream about it the way I do?" Or the reading life, as in my reading of Dennis's poem. I find myself thinking about "that quiet place" in any life—a place that is, by definition, always somewhere else, "out beyond the suburbs," a place that is not on any map I've ever seen. To go there is to "walk free." To go there is to hear "the small voice of your true self." To go there is to escape the gravity of your life, such as it is, wherever you are. The Man on My Porch will win his argument with himself because there's no losing it; he's arguing both sides of the question: to go or not to go? Dennis's man—still sitting there, alone and lost in thought—is immobile but not immobilized. He knows that if he stays he will be consigning himself—"consign" is, for me, the strongest verb in Dennis's poem—to "a life of envy." Why? Because, as his auxiliary ego, his second (other) self, says, he doesn't want "the one life" that he has already made for himself "enough."

3.

"In The Suburbs," a poem by another contemporary American poet, Louis Simpson, can be found in his book *People Live Here* (1983). Reading it alongside Dennis's poem causes, for me, a kind of reverberation effect. Simpson's poem echoes the offer that the Man on My Porch is making. It challenges "this middle-class life."

There's no way out.
You were born to waste your life.
You were born to this middle-class life

As others before you
Were born to walk in procession
To the temple, singing.

Perhaps the unspoken but not unheard—unsung—truth of Dennis's poem is this: By the end of it, his Man on My Porch has come to know himself differently, as if he were an "other." Perhaps the reason for him to "walk free," out beyond his "life in the suburbs," is to achieve a certain distance, metaphysically, from himself, to gain perspective so that he will come to see his one life, which is indisputably middle-class, as not wasted.

If he does manage to do that, the Man on My Porch will have prepared himself "to walk in procession," as it were, not "to the temple" but through the front door of his own house "above all houses." And what a homecoming it will be! Unrecognizable as himself but looking just the same, never having been away, he will fill the space that he left by never really being there; he will inhabit it totally. With his "powers / Still increasing, which is happiness," he will embrace his wife and daughter—"that handsome, modest pair"—as if for the first time. With "the small voice of his true self" he will speak, if not sing, his desire. He will engage "this middle-class life," the one that has been given him; he will want it "enough." At least that's what I would have him do. There are, of course, other possible endings.

DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

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