

Maxine Kumin



HOW IT GOES ON

Today I trade my last unwise
ewe lamb, the one who won't leave home,
for two cords of stove-length oak
and wait on the old enclosed
front porch to make the swap.
November sun revives the thick
trapped buzz of horseflies. The siren
for noon and forest fires blows
a sliding scale. The lamb of woe
looks in at me through glass
on the last day of her life.

Geranium scraps from the window box
trail from her mouth, burdock burrs
are stickered to her fleece like chicken pox,
under her tail stub, permanent smears.

I think of how it goes on,
this dark particular bent of our hungers:
the way wire eats into a tree
year after year on the pasture's perimeter,
keeping the milk cows penned

until they grow too old to freshen;
of how the last wild horses were scoured
from canyons in Idaho, roped, thrown,
their nostrils twisted shut with wire
to keep them down, the mares aborting,
days later, all of them carted to town.

I think of how it will be
in January, nights so cold
the pond ice cracks like target practice,
daylight glue-colored, sleet falling,
my yellow horse slick with the ball-bearing
sleet, raising up from his dingy browse
out of boredom and habit
to strip bark from the fenced-in trees;
of February, month of the hard palate,
the split wood running out,
worms working in the flour bin.

The lamb, whose time has come, goes off
in the cab of the dump truck, tied to the seat
with baling twine, durable enough
to bear her to the knife and rafter.

O lambs! The whole wolf-world sits down to eat
and cleans its muzzle after.



I will try just impressionistically now to talk about *How It Goes On*
got written, with one eye on the questionnaire and one eye on the checklist.

The poem was initiated by a fact: I had of a pair of lambs (South-
down ewes, named Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas), and the older one
strangled to death in a freak accident, leaving this one to be disposed of
somehow before the winter snow. Up until the very last worksheet the

poem was called "The Lambs." This was the theme, but the simple narrative did not seem to be enough to sustain the poem, nor indeed suit my very dark and depressed mood of those winter months. Thus the poem began—it was to be a poem of lambs, of going off to slaughter, and I had intended to make a parallel with the suicide of a close friend. I couldn't do it. It didn't work; the two sets of facts refused to intersect in a sensible way and eventually I discarded everything but the first two stanzas and the ending and put the poem away.

I don't remember how long after, but certainly several weeks, I picked up the worksheets again and began fiddling—you might call it free associating—and what came back into my consciousness was the terrible memory of the slaughter of the wild horses in Idaho. I suppose you might say that for me animals in general and horses in particular represent a kind of lost innocence in our technological society and they often stand as a symbol for mute suffering. And little by little the other details arrived and were fitted together to prepare for the ending, those last two stanzas, which I had had from the very beginning. As is so often the case, the ending seemed quite clear to me before the poem was properly begun.

The poem went through about twenty drafts, if you can call each addition and subtraction on a fresh piece of paper a draft. There's always a lot of material that doesn't fit in and has to be pulled out of the poem. I don't think I ever consciously use anything that can be called a principle of technique. It is hard to answer a lot of the items on the checklist because these items seem to me to presuppose a much more conscious process of creation than I am aware of. Indeed, I am afraid to inquire too closely because I don't want to meddle with whatever it is that happens, whatever it is the muse brings forth. Obviously, though, I rely heavily on free association, trying to let everything come that will come and then building around selected items. In the drafts I would say that the poem expanded rather than shrank, the structure stayed quite constant—an informal kind of long rhyming narrative stanza—theme and tone remained constant and practically everything in the first two stanzas as well as the last six lines came through every rewrite almost unscathed. The changes that took place were not so much in the areas you list, but were changes in substance and in direction.

My line breaks are pretty simpleminded. I end-stop fairly strongly and I lean on rhyme when it is feasible, rhyme including a lot of slant

or off variations. The rhythm is largely iambic, as I think befits this sort of conversational tone of voice, or melancholy disquisition on the state of things.

As far as sound repetition goes, I don't have any principles. I try to stay away from heavy alliteration and other pyrotechnics because I think they detract from the sense of the poem and blur the imagery.

I would prefer this poem to be read aloud. Never to musical accompaniment.

On metaphor: well, metaphor is the language of poetry, it is the informing thrust of the language and practically everything is a metaphor, while at the same time pretending to be simple everyday speech. I am quite conscious of this and want all of my literal statements of detail to intensify metaphorically when I can.

As for abstract language, etc., you might say damn tootin I try at all costs to avoid. I hate them.

Nothing conscious about sentence structure.

As for reference and allusion, I am leery of literary allusions unless they are pretty readily accessible—biblical, say, or mythic—as I dislike esoterica in poetry. I would especially want to stay away from private allusive stuff directed at fellow poets, I avoid poems that are about the poetic process for the most part, even though they are very tempting to write.

As for principles of structure, I guess I almost invariably follow a sort of psychological order as in dreams or free association.

And I invariably look for a fairly conclusive ending. My pet peeve is the poem that leaves me turning the page in search of its ending—only to discover it *has* ended.

The persona is me. Why not?

I do try to stay far from cliché unless there is a way to shave it.

To appeal to the reader's eye, I like to make stanza breaks that leave a little white on the page; if a poem is all in a block, one hesitates to read it.

The tone of this poem is deliberate, reflective, brooding.

Yes, it can be paraphrased, by anybody. I don't think it's very different from my other work unless it is a little darker in tone. I don't think poets can consciously help what they write or what tone they take. I don't visualize any particular reader, I just hope the perfect audience of one is out there somewhere and I don't write for anyone in particular. In fact, I don't even write because I want to, but more because I have to.

William Stafford



ASK ME

Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come in their slow way into my thought, and some have tried to help or to hurt—ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look at the silent river and wait. We know the current is there, hidden; and there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us. What the river says, that is what I say.

DRAFT 1

Some time when the river is ice, ask me ~~the~~ mistakes, ^{all have made.} Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come

William Stafford

in their slow way into ^{my} ~~the~~ thoughts, And some have tried to help or to hurt.

Ask me what differences their strongest ^{hate} ~~efforts~~ ^{or love has} ~~have~~ made. You and I can then turn and look at the silent river and wait.

We will know the current is there, hidden, and there are comings and goings miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us. If the river says anything, whatever it says is my answer. ^{I will listen to what you say.} ^{What the river says is what I say.}

DRAFT 2

Some time when the river is ice ask me ~~ask me~~

mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come in their slow way into my thoughts, and some have tried to help or to hurt. Ask me what difference their strongest hate or love has made.

I will listen to what you say.

You and I can turn and look at the silent river and wait. We know the current is there, hidden, and there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us. What the river says is what I say.

DRAFT 3

ASK ME

Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether

what I have done is my life. Others
 have come in their slow way into
 my thought~~s~~, and some have tried to help
 or to hurt: Ask me what difference
 their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
 You and I can turn and look
 at the silent river and wait. We know
 the current is there, hidden; and there
 are comings and goings from miles away
 that hold the stillness exactly before us.
 What^{over} the river says is what I say.



1 My poem started from amid random writing I was doing in my usual morning attempts to scare up something by putting anything down that came to mind. I was at a country place; it was early morning; I was all alone, and feeling that way—in a pleasant way, with a fire in the Franklin stove, the dark outside. It was winter, and I guess the cold made me launch in the way I did, “Some time when the river is ice . . .”

2 This poem stayed in much its original order—more so than most of mine. Writing it was like getting a lock on a feeling and just letting the feeling lead me from one part to the next. This is not to say that the elements mentioned stayed the same, but the changes were themselves (the changes of topic, I mean) were just a following of the feeling.

3 My impulse is to say that I had no principles of technique at all in mind. As I look back over the first draft, I do realize, though, that I was getting satisfaction out of syncopating along in the sentences; that is, I find

some pleasure in just opening and closing sentences—starting and then holding before myself a feeling that the measure and flow of utterance will lend itself to an easy forwarding of what I am saying. I guess I am trying to own up to a pervasive *security* in language, but the feeling is not consciously based on use of a technique in any sense I have known others to define it.

4 As in almost all of my writing, I was not aiming toward any reader: my entry into the process was through inward satisfactions I felt as the language led me onward. If I quiz myself now, I am able to assume that I was *accompanied* by a sense of being able to tell someone, sometime, something like what I was putting down; that person would not necessarily be congenial—maybe someone I was going to *tell off*. But that person would also be participating in the steady unfolding of what was said.

5 I think my poem can be paraphrased—and that any poem can be paraphrased. But every pass through the material, using other words, would have to be achieved at certain costs, either in momentum, or nuance, or dangerously explicit (and therefore misleading in tone) adjustments. I’ll try one such pass through the poem:

When it’s quiet and cold and we have some chance to interchange without hurry, confront me if you like with a challenge about whether I think I have made mistakes in my life—and ask me, if you want to, whether to me my life is actually the sequence of events or exploits others would see. Well, those others tag along in my living, and some of them in fact have played significant roles in the narrative run of my world; they have intended either helping or hurting (but by implication in the way I am saying this you will know that neither effort is conclusive). So—ask me how important their good or bad intentions have been (both intentions get a drastic *leveling* judgment from this cool stating of it all). You, too, will be entering that realm of maybe-help-maybe-hurt, by entering that far into my life by asking this serious question—so: I will stay still and consider. Out there will be the world confronting us both; we will both know we are surrounded by mystery, tremendous things that do not reveal themselves to us. That river, that world—and our lives—all share the depth and stillness of much more significance than our talk, or intentions. There is a steadiness and somehow a solace in knowing that what is around us so greatly surpasses our human concerns.

6 This poem shares with many of my poems a tone of accepting what comes. Human affairs get perspectived by affairs other than human. This poem is much more serious, unrelenting, than most—but not all—of my other poems. It is *one of the ways* that occur to me. It is like almost all of my other poems, though, in a deep way—it comes about through willing entry into whatever mood or whatever opportunities a time and place and the chances of language offer me.

Some Reflections That Come from Reading Down the Checklist

This poem, like almost all my poems, came from free association, that is, free allowing of my impulses to find their immediate interest. I was aware of a steady forward cadence. This poem went through only about three complete drafts, and the first writing of the poem was much more clear and *set* than most; the changes were a teasing out of opportunities perceived in the first draft. And I believe the poem was essentially complete within three days (and I was of course not on it all that time). The structure, theme, and tone just kept on being what they started out to be—working on the poem was like telling it—“go ahead, be yourself.” My lines are generally just about equal; where a line breaks, though, means something to me, and some of the juggling was meant to preserve how definite the slash line is in such changeover sequences as *me/mistakes*, *have/done*, and *and/some*, etc. I was aware of current *is there . . . there are*, things like that—willingnesses to repeat, coasting the sounds. . . .

I would like my poem to be read aloud in a serious voice without any relenting, but silent reading by a person feeling it would be all right.

I did not consider metaphor at all. I know—and I suppose at the time I knew with an immediacy and a gusto—that “river is ice” for instance can’t just be present without an effect; but in writing I found my way forward to accepting the feelings and saying what occurred to me—metaphorical elements sweep into the utterance, but not by intent. In some ways, I now see, I was putting the reader into stern obligation to accept a forceful metaphor but without my revealing by any tremor that the metaphorical elements were anything other than *necessary* parts of what I was saying.

I ordinarily feel that I am not using abstract language; I am afraid to solicit the reader’s or hearer’s feelings—I yearn to hand him or her a situation or scene that will coerce human involvement, not request it.

One mannerism, I now see, is that this whole poem addresses another

person as if present; the poem maneuvers another person into being the one who demands the account given. I believe I was sliding away from that kind of poem that proclaims—I was indulging a prevalent yen of mine—to keep away from the appearance of elbowing in.

I was using the tug of narrative, a thing I like to do. And I was avoiding anything high at the end. The persona is a part of myself—one of my ways (at least in fancy)—understanding but grabbing. I was not jumpy about cliché—I usually like to be pretty close, as if willing to say any dumb thing (with a nudge that keeps it from quite that—I hope).

The poem is a lump—the reader is in for a block of something—“shape” on the page.

I assume that any human being, with the right context, would respond to the surface of this poem. I believe some would assume that it did not make enough claims. That conviction on their part would be a measure of their smugness or craving for sweets, and even they might have a faint hint of missing something.

William Stafford was born in 1914 in Hutchinson, Kansas. He lived and worked in that state (construction, oil refinery, sugar beet fields) and completed schooling there (M.A., University of Kansas), then studied at the University of Iowa (Ph.D., 1953). Since 1948, with intervals on leave or for teaching at other schools, he has taught literature at Lewis and Clark College, in Portland, Oregon, where he still thrives—works, writes, socializes with the family (wife and four children)—and sends out poems to many periodicals. Collections of his poems are *Traveling Through the Dark* (1962), *The Rescued Year* (1966), *Allegiances* (1970), and *Someday, Maybe* (1973).