

FRANK STANFORD FEATURE (CONTINUED)!!!

WHERE THERE'S A WILL: THE MOON RETAKES THE STAGE

By klipschutz

What About This: Collected Poems of Frank Stanford

Michael Wieggers, ed.

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Hidden Water: From the Frank Stanford Archives

Michael Wieggers and Chet Weise, eds.

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“SHY AND SWEET AND FRAGILE”

Why can't an audience find a poet the way we did, through thirst and curiosity, even accident? Back when you didn't outsource your taste to a syllabus. When you crashed on a friend's couch and woke up early, and chanced on a skinny paperback on the orange crate that passed for a coffee table—and ingested it in one horizontal session lost in time before thinking to see who wrote the poems you'd been looking for all winter without knowing it: Frank something. Then you borrowed the book without asking.

The Mississippi-born, Arkansas-bred author of those poems is back—with reinforcements—in *What About This: Collected Poems of Frank Stanford*, 745 pages gathered from nine short-run chapbooks and fattened out with extras. Stanford's death in 1978, two months shy of his thirtieth birthday, had stopped the flow of his *duende*-drenched, deeply American poems, but a cadre of fans continued to seek the chapbooks out, knowing little about the man behind them. As late as 1991, Leon Stokesbury's introduction to *The Light the Dead See: Selected Poems* left it at this: “[H]is somewhat involved personal life took a considerable psychological toll.”

We now know Stanford died, as musician Dan Stuart succinctly put it, from “three in the chest,” self-inflicted. His wife and girlfriend had compared notes and confronted him. What we can't know is why he reacted as he did, with consequences seen through one lens in a lurid, tabloid light, and through another as an unimaginable tragedy for surviving family and friends.

Twenty years after his death, Stanford's widow, Ginny Crouch, still vividly remembered their initial meeting. He was “descending the staircase . . . dressed in a blue-and-white striped knit short-sleeved

shirt, white cotton duck overalls, and lace-up boots with the laces untied . . . He seemed shy and sweet and fragile.” Just back from Europe, Crouch, a painter on a short layover in her native Arkansas, with a plane ticket to New Orleans already purchased, decided on the spot “not go to New Orleans and totally do a one-eighty.”¹ His effect on her was not unprecedented. Women were drawn to him, by what Hemingway or Fitzgerald would have called his “animal magnetism,” which moved *The Oxford American* to declare him the “Last Panther of the Ozarks,” after one of his unpublished titles.

“A MATCH ON A TOMBSTONE”

He didn't have a whore's chance
 In heaven
 You can't touch
 The wife of the Law
 And expect to getaway
 With it hell
 The paper's bound to be against you

(ending of “Fair Trial”)

Inevitably, readers will come to the *Collected*, finally available through complex arrangements between executors, in the context of Stanford's biography, and myths that have reached critical mass during his literary afterlife. Nothing wrong with that, necessarily; mystique opens books.

Editor Michael Wiegiers may be more familiar with Stanford's mountain of writing than Stanford was himself. In an interview, Wiegiers sought the key to its appeal: “I am continually struck by his command of the line and the image . . . Mix that impulse with writing that is by turns regional, international, direct, surreal . . . Stanford was a narrative poet. He told stories.”² Some of Stanford's titles feel more complete than other people's poems, as in “Humming This Song Trying to Remember the Way Another One Goes.”

Till now, Stanford's poems have stayed in circulation by word of mouth, his very name exerting a magnetic pull upon mere readers. At the time of his death, according to Leon Stokesbury, he was “the best poet in America under the age of thirty-five.” With the publication of the *Collected*, the keepers of the canon—who have been busy burnishing the reputations of Jorie Graham and Louise Glück, W.S. Merwin and Galway Kinnell—are about to run out of excuses to ignore this outlier from the Ozarks whose poems are anything but provincial. Echoing a question posed to Leonard Cohen between comebacks, critics can now ask, “Frank, we know you're great, but what we don't know is, are you any good?” Cohen fielded the query from a twenty-five-year-old record company exec while sitting in a tower of anything but song. Stanford, his major work at last in print, is in no position to be sitting across a desk from anyone.

Those already on board hope Wieggers is correct, that a thirst for the genuine remains in an age when the prospects of poetry aren't pretty—between selfies, robots, climate change, and grad schools that mint poets by the score: Ashbery-flavored, Alt.Lit, or Flarf, pick your poison. On high, Anne Carson and Frederick Seidel reign like irrelevant monarchs. Stanford's oeuvre, a long life's work jammed into a short time on earth, constitutes a badly needed corrective to all that.

Since its release in early 2015, the *Collected* has seen some major ink. The *New York Times* wrote it up, although such is poetry's pariah status that the reviewer felt he had to lead with the Lucinda Williams connection (a romantic one; Stanford's musical tastes ranged from classical and opera to blues and jazz). *The New Yorker* weighed in too, a hundred words that hit all the bullet points: "huge output," "shot himself," "cult status," "by turns earthly and visionary."³ In *Men's Journal*, the poet was handy with a knife and fond of whiskey.

In 1981, Richard Eberhart scored a bullseye when he pegged Stanford's poems as "incurable." He continued: "all of his lines are typical, typically his own. This is easy to say now but hard to realize how he could be so good in so relatively short a time. Not a word out of place."

I am not drawn to Eberhart's poems, but when it came to spotting talent, he could. Among establishment figures, he was a lone voice in immediately grasping the significance of *Howl*. Of my favorite Stanford poem, "Between Love and Death," he simply states, "all you have to do is read it. It does not invite the kind of criticism practiced in the academies."⁴ Take that, Marjorie Perloff and Helen Vendler!

"Between Love and Death," published the year after Stanford's own, opens:

I watched the woman in the room.
She moved in her misery
Like a pine in the wind.

The narrator trails his subject with the precision of a private detective; sees her "sweeping her floor / Boiling roots, and drinking milk."

I could watch the woman
Turning the tap of her bath
Through the hole in the wall.

In short order, the poet-sleuth repents:

God I was crazy for not
Going to her door,
Tapping on her window,
Following her to the river,
Where her dory grew wet like the moon.

He concludes:

She bled through the walls
 Into my side of the house,
 And they came with their lights
 Asking did I know the woman,
 And I said no, not I.

These excerpts highlight the tortured empathy (“A bird sick of its tree, I despair,” the narrator interjects), what a poet can transmit in simple words, declarative sentences, plainspoken music, and pinpoint, inspired imagery. Stanford’s lyrical tell, the moon, might seem a strained simile out of context.

Another poem in the same vein bears the Folk-Art-Meets-Yeats title “A Milk Truck Running Into a Crazy Maid at the Corner of Getwell and Park.” Again, the subject is an apparent suicide. What motivates both poems is our response to tragedy, which when it happens to someone we don’t know we shrug, if not laugh, off, and soon forget.

Through a succession of film-like images, detail-on-detail reportage, Stanford doesn’t so much give dignity to a poor maid’s undoing as convey the absurdity laced with pathos. Bear in mind that not much actually *happens* in the poem. A chanced-upon calamity, the maid already dead. People react, repeat what she said before she ran out into traffic, and the poet’s lens alights from scene to scene:

The cats from Memphis State are sitting on the bench
 Talking about the new Ornette Coleman album
 Waiting for the bus

Earlier in the poem, we learn that the victim “worked everyday / And was carrying a sack / Of newspapers and a carton of eggs.” And that before she ran into the street, she:

shouted,
 When a cow drinks water we get milk
 When a snake drinks water we get bit.

Then:

She lifted her white dress
 And waded out into the intersection
 Like it was a river.

Matter-of-fact specifics. There’s more, with a twist: “And the servants of the people are pulling out of parking lots / And into their driveways.” Those servants of the people go on to eat their suppers, as they do (as we do). Afterwards, in bed, sureties evaporate:

They think of toes being slit
 And blood that can be heard like a bad tap.
 They draw their coats over an old woman’s eyes
 And think about standing in a warm pool

A white sheet wrapped around them
 An old woman holding them
 Taking them down into water.

Dissolve. Back to your life, reader, enjoy your weekend! Stanford is not trying to impress. He writes as if unaware of the reader, a hard trick to pull off, let me tell you.

Stanford's name-checking of a jazz giant jumps out precisely because he often inclines in the opposite direction, away from contemporary and popular culture. That element of his work can evoke Greil Marcus's "old, weird America," seeming to occur in a preindustrial age. *Huckleberry Finn* comparisons spring to mind especially in river raft poems such as "The Burial Ship":

Jimmy's wolf died
 it wasn't nothing but a cub
 O.Z. built a coffin ship
 he made it so the head could look out the prow

There are noir poems too, notably "Freedom, Revolt, and Love," in which a couple caught in their bathrobes are murdered by culprits identified only as "them."

One of them shot her.
 She leaned over the table like a schoolgirl doing her lessons.
 She thought about being beside him, being asleep.

A scene out of Jim Thompson, refracted through the prism of Hemingway's "The Killers."

And for Stanford's visionary strain, Lorenzo Thomas dubbed him "a swamprat Rimbaud." I'm forgetting who said he wanted to convey the feeling of being asleep and awake at the same time. It may have been Stanford himself. Early comparisons to James Dickey strike me as a misfire. Cormac McCarthy, who lacks Dickey's showboat baggage, is a more useful touchstone, especially in his monumental swan song to the South, *Suttree*. Both men are firmly rooted in the physical, lyricize violence, and share a primal connection with water and sense of awe before the Absolute; but in contrast with McCarthy's gold-star vocabulary, Stanford works basic words hard as did Robert Bly, James Wright, and John Haines, the so-called Deep Image poets.

An observation: His short poems—ten lines or under—rarely achieve liftoff, much less land. He needs more space: a beginning, middle, and end. An exception found in his papers, and one of the few pieces from the *Collected* reprised in its companion volume *Hidden Water*, issued by Jack White (of The White Stripes), is to my taste a standalone gem better yet for lack of a title:

Baby one night somebody
 Going to strike a match on a tombstone
 And read your name.

Poets who have not struck a devil's bargain at the crossroads are strangers to the restraint and release of the initial two lines, the abrupt impact of the third. Regional usage ("somebody / going to") lifts the triad to the gates of glory.

"COOKING THAT WILL REMIND HIM OF HOME"

It's hard for me to love a writer who isn't funny at least sometimes. (Dostoevsky is downright silly in *The Eternal Husband*.) I flag the issue because the poems discussed above, as I'm sure you've noticed, swirl around death. And yet, they are not uniformly dire. The cats on the bench discuss jazz. "The Burial Ship" depicts a funeral service, which after all, must have music: "I was on Ace Comb and Stage Plank wrapper," the narrator chimes in. (The tombstone lines are funny too—if you're young and immortal.) Life and death, feeding off each.

So when it comes to humor, Stanford has me covered. He can be hilarious when he wants to. Here, let me explain my usage of "narrator." Stanford tries on first-person voices like hats, while steering clear of the nakedly confessional. His contemporary, the multiracial poet Ai, wrote exclusively in voices. Her first book, *Cruelty*, is a disturbing classic, with fragmentary monologues that plumb brutal sex and sudden unspeakable violence toward women, and share affinities with Stanford's approach. (His title "Wishing My Wife Had One Leg" could have been one of hers.) Persona poets channel something we all feel, but have trouble admitting: "the terror / of being just one person—one chance, one set of days."⁵

Aficionados recognize Stanford poems by their Southern, riverine settings, recurrent cast, and lyrical obsession with death—personified, in "Death and the Arkansas River," as driving a forklift, a truck, and a Cadillac; of wanting "cooking that will remind him of home," and being "fond of the double entendre."⁶ To the uninitiated, we can resemble a cult, trading private information, theories, and far-fetched connections that can't be coincidence. Buried in the comments below Ben Ehrenreich's extended, engaging piece on Stanford ("The Long Goodbye"⁷), a reader breaks the case:

Has no one noticed the date of his death? The third of June, the day "Billie Joe McAllister" jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge. Wasn't it Bobbie Gentry that sang that song?⁸

Early readers were spared such riddles. By now the Stanford myth threatens to overshadow the work itself. Scratch the surface of that myth and versions and obfuscations abound. Even the oft-repeated number of bullets he fired into his own heart is apocryphal; both the cop on the scene and the coroner tally one shot, with a second due to recoil. At the time of his death, both his wife and poet C.D. Wright (his girlfriend) were in the house with him. As close as I can tell, he lived remotely with Crouch, and because land surveying took him on a wide circuit, had a room in town, in a house with Wright, with whom he had started Lost Roads Press. According to

As a Friend (New Directions, 2008), Forrest Gander's memoiristic novella, Stanford had assured his wife that his roommate was a "militant lesbian."⁹ Stanford's will, executed a week before his suicide, named both women executors, jointly, of his writings. Almost forty years later, they have set their differences aside to shepherd the *Collected* and *Hidden Water* into print.

"THE LEVEES THAT BREAK IN MY HEART"

Stanford's mother was an independent woman who married late. His sister Ruth adored him, and his father brought him to the levee camps, where he mixed, unsupervised, with laborers, all blacks. He began writing well before his teens, and attended Subiaco Academy, "a Catholic, college preparatory boarding and day school in the Benedictine tradition for young men in grades 7-12."¹⁰ When his father's death led to the revelation that he shared blood with neither parent nor his sister (also adopted), he never fully recovered. Thereafter, the word "orphan" crops up in his poems.

By 1964, at the advanced age of eighteen, he had completed the largely lost *St. Francis and the Wolf*, condensed and reworked into a fifteen thousand-plus-line poem, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*, published the year after his death and clocking in at 542 pages in the first edition.¹¹ En masse, *Battlefield's* margin-to-margin unpunctuated lines, minus section breaks, defeat most readers; to a contemporary sensibility, it is almost as dense visually as Latin block-printed in *scriptio continua* (words absent spaces between). Excerpts from his doorstopper appear at intervals in the *Collected*. No doubt, additional wonders reside within its bulk.¹² I'd bet money that pre-*Battlefield*, Stanford absorbed Kenneth Patchen's *The Journal of Albion Moonlight*.

He spent 1966 to 1970 at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, a literary hotbed at the time, where the creative writing program drafted him away from civil engineering, into what Sharon Doubiago calls "the brilliant, revolutionary, soul-rooted poetry and consciousness of the 60s-90s, when many of us were educated not by our parents, but by free state colleges and the free presses."¹³ While no one can take sole credit for "discovering" him, writing program kingpins Miller Williams and James Whitehead recognized his talent.¹⁴ Williams also performed yeoman's service as a translator of Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, and as the father of Lucinda Williams, a figure in Stanford's mythos, as he is in hers. James Whitehead has been singled out as an important teacher by Barry Hannah, one of few contemporary prose masters to underscore his love of poetry. In our age of specialization, that bears mentioning. To close the circle, the *Collected's* section of "Unpublished Manuscripts" includes early Stanford experiments, among them *Smoking Grapevine*, a sheaf with the epigraph "after Nicanor Parra." (At 101 years old, Parra must have more pressing worries than the Nobel Committee's glaring oversight.)

A natural, Stanford's lines seem spun off effortlessly (the endless permutations about the moon, and water), which comes with the risk of spooling poetry out by the foot, yard, or mile: image-mongering, poetry without a poem at root. Many of his passages that I see quoted for their "poetic" qualities are from poems that go adrift, unmoored from either shore. As stated, what gets under my skin most often is directness, in poems that keep in harness the unbroken horse of imagery he rides at will.

Poems from *The Singing Knives* (1971) date back to his sixteenth year. "The Blood Brothers" kicks off both that book and the *Collected*, with a crew whom readers will meet repeatedly: Born In The Camp With Six Toes, Baby Gauge, Ray Baby, and Charlie B. Lemon. Its charms are cumulative; the poet plays ringmaster, spotlighting each member of the troupe. Two noncontiguous stanzas (note the atypical rhyme):

There was Ray Baby
 He stole the white man's gold tooth
 He knocked it out with a two-by-four
 He rode the moon-blind horse

There was Bobo Washington
 A rat crawled in the bed
 And sucked the blood
 Out of his baby's head

The narrator takes over to close:

It was the summer of the Chinese daughter
 I danced on the levee

A first book lead-off like that could get a guy called a prodigy. The poem's strength is its lack of irony, with classical lyricism reserved for the steed. I don't know what a moon-blind horse is but don't doubt that Stanford did. These are clearly characters with much to say. (When traveling by bus, Stanford would miss a connection if someone on a nearby bench had a story that needed to be told.) Eccentrics, misfits, oddballs, albinos, and both midgets and dwarves populate his writing—a regional inheritance.

The Singing Knives closes out with a sixteen-pager, "The Snake Doctors." It begins:

I was in the outhouse
 I heard somebody at the pump
 I looked out the chink hole
 It was the two fishermen
 They stole fish

and ends:

I was sleeping in the Negro's lap
 He was spitting snuff on my wounds
 Born In The Camp With Six Toes cut me with a knife
 Baby Gauge sucked the poison out
 Oh Sweet Jesus the levees that break in my heart

In between lies a story-poem, densely plotted, which repays attention manyfold. A narrative high water mark, set in the Ozarks, but with a “blue Andalusian rooster.” To imagine Tom Waits cribbing moves from Stanford is not a stretch. “I pulled on trouble’s braids,” anyone?

By his death, Stanford had appeared in magazines ranging from *APR* to *Field* to *The Nation*, and strangely, *Seventeen*. As well, he corresponded with poets he admired. He traveled the States, made experimental films, and moved to Manhattan for a minute, before returning to Arkansas to make a living as a land surveyor, which saw him following in the footsteps of his father, an engineer and designer of levees. *Hidden Water* supplements the *Collected* with two-hundred pages of overspill: poems share space with photos, drawings, letters, and whatnot. There is a business card for Frank Stanford, land surveyor; a vocabulary list; and a three-page typewritten “partial inventory” of his record collection: jazz interspersed with some blues.¹⁵ Co-editor Wieggers describes the contents as “a *fraction* of the material we were encountering.” (emphasis supplied)

Poet Alan Dugan’s correspondence with Stanford—long letters, often handwritten—comprises the most compelling thirty pages of *Hidden Water*. Before reading the letters, I had Dugan’s relationship with Stanford figured all wrong.¹⁶ In them, Stanford defers, but does not play the novice. (“You know what Borges has to say about precursors.”) For his part, the then-fifty-year-old, well-published Dugan is not one scintilla avuncular. He gives advice in passing, but prefers to complain about writer’s block and crow about his epic bouts of drinking; and to take the piss out of a famous peer: “I just received two letters from you, the postcard series (which is great) and the letter containing the letter from [Robert] Bly, which I enclose. Snotty, isn’t it . . . Sometimes I think that he is not a poet. See if you find the same lack of ear in his work that I do. I think he is a political philosopher who uses poetic forms as a vehicle for his arguments, nothing more, so I think he is out of line in criticizing you.”¹⁷

In other letters, Stanford describes to an editor what seems like an idyllic life with Ginny at a farmhouse, a kind of hardscrabble Garden of Eden, where they lived as cheaply as possible, growing fruit and vegetables. In one letter, he had “planted some early scarlet globe radishes, helped Ginny put up ten quarts of chard, greens, and so on.”¹⁸

“PISS ON THE SOUTHERN REVIEW”

“You probably think I’m fucked up with my “association” with blacks. This is the way I’ve always been; most of my life was not spent with white people. My experience, I took for granted. I was already in high school before it dawned on me I was probably one of the only white boys in the world who had done what I’d done. This was in 63, when my father died.”

—Stanford, letter to Dugan.¹⁹

There are all kinds of Southerners. Some, like Stanford, get their schooling from Benedictine monks in Paris, Arkansas, and develop a penchant for Godard, Cocteau, and Bertolucci films. His reading was wide, deep, and voracious; suffice it to say, he was conversant with “the tradition,” if not in thrall to the High Modernists, I’d venture, except Joyce. (Stanford once boasted that he would rather be Muhammad Ali than T.S. Eliot. Who wouldn’t?) Through his father’s work, he also had a close connection with blacks. Based on his poems, more than one editor assumed that Stanford was black himself.

In a hard-to-decipher scrawl from the letter to Dugan quoted above, Stanford broadcasts his literary leanings: “I say piss on the Neo-Fugitives . . . piss on the Southern Review.”²⁰ Further, while not politically minded in his writings, in a letter to Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, with whom he did drugs when they visited Fayetteville, he refers to a protest: “I was in Washington last week and everything was beautiful. I got gased [sic], but I didn’t get hit.”²¹

“DIDN’T I SEE YOU TALKING TO SOME WHITE FOLKS THE OTHER DAY”

Collecteds don’t tend to get carried around, or become *vade mecums*. I bow to no one in my allegiance to O’Hara; Patchen too—leaving their collecteds aside. The longueurs in both books put poems I want to be buried with in the shade, and I happily return to *Lunch Poems* or *Poems of Humor & Protest*.

This *Collected*, however, is a horse of a different color. Even to a longtime Stanford reader, much of the material is new, some of it a revelation. And not many volumes of collected poems include flat-out prose, especially not prose as stellar as the thirty-seven-page tale “Observants.” That Stanford could write lively stories is evidenced by *Conditions Uncertain & Likely to Pass Away* (Lost Roads Press, 1990), fiction recognizably by the same writer, but which shows another side, more in the territory of Harry Crews and Barry Hannah than Lorca and Faulkner.

Still, nothing prepared me for “Observants.” In it, a teenage runaway, her gypsy lover, and a renegade monk—who happens to be an expert marksman with a crossbow—form an unlikely family unit. The lovers are hiding from the girl’s cruel, powerful father in a remote farmhouse, while the monk holes up inside a cave in nearby “Zero Mountain.” Two other characters narrate by turns: an evil

bounty hunter, Carl Squint (he calls the gypsy “a trick rider in a two-bit sideshow”) and an unnamed “slow-talking farrier” who spies on the trio to protect them.

Ultimately, the Eden-like farmhouse is abandoned and the trio takes refuge in the selfsame cave from which, a century ago, Confederate soldiers had prepared to mount a charge on Union troops. After discovering silver in the cave, the Rebels began to quarrel and hoard silver instead of using it to forge bullets; in consequence, they were decimated. Stanford’s storytelling is masterful, a kind of Southern magic realism, the cadence of the prose much like his poems: subject, verb, object, imagery. A dreamlike romantic quality reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and, in spots, *Blood on the Tracks*. Add in Barry Hannah’s absurdist streak, and you have a magic all its own.

Additionally, winning excerpts from *Battlefield* mortar the *Collected*, of note the Sonny Liston passage (pp. 362-370) and an extended riff on Jesus and his disciples (pp. 302-306). In that riff, Jesus and the boys jive around in run-on sentences that wouldn’t be out of place in Dylan’s genre-jumping book *Tarantula*. (They must have had many overlapping influences.) In Stanford’s telling, Jesus and his posse might just be black: “John the Baptist turns around he says to the one who has just slipped in boy didn’t I see you talking to some white folks the other day.”²²

Recalling Pound’s insertion of “frigidaire” in a translation of Sextus Propertius, Stanford puts references to Elvis, Big Boy Arthur, Hawaii, and “those fuckers in Washington D.C.” in the mouths of Jesus and company. The extended passage brims with spunk and trash talk that would send a fundamentalist from the heartland into lynch mode.

For spotlighting the previously unknown “Observants,” and the canny selections from *Battlefield*, Wieggers deserves special note. Assembling the poetry was journeyman work, and lots of it, but these selections enter the realm of inspired decision-making. Not only did Wieggers edit the *Collected*, but as executive director of Copper Canyon he helped make *Hidden Water* happen too.

“A FEW THINGS TO BE SAID”

Stanford found an early champion in little magazine editor Michael Cuddihy, whose influential *Ironwood* spanned the seventies and eighties. Its book publishing arm also issued Stanford’s final book, *Crib Death* (1979). Further, Cuddihy established a Frank Stanford Memorial Prize, and significantly, for *Ironwood* 17 (1981) compiled a sixty-five-page Stanford tribute, “A Few Things To Be Said”: poems, commentaries, letters, an interview by publisher Irving Broughton, and a reminiscence by prose stylist Joy Williams, who had known Stanford in his youth. (According to Stanford, she was once Faulkner’s lover.) The *Ironwood* tribute is a missing piece in the Stanford reclamation project, and could be imported into a future Portable to great advantage.

Figures like Cuddihy can be decisive to a young writer. His brisk memoir, *Try Ironwood: An Editor Remembers*, introduced by Robert Hass, reveals triumph over adversity. After contracting polio, He was confined to a wheelchair and not expected to live much into his thirties. He beat the odds twice over. Through thirty-two issues, *Ironwood* featured, among others, Ai, Tess Gallagher, Linda Gregg, Jack Gilbert, Robert Duncan, Bill Knott, George Oppen, Czeslaw Milosz, Gary Snyder, Robert Hass, C.D. Wright, and Denis Johnson. The memoir devotes only a handful of pages to Stanford, but he makes his mark.

Another ardent supporter was Irving Broughton, whose shoe-string Mill Mountain Press released six Stanford chapbooks, two in 1975 alone, and co-published the first edition of *Battlefield*. He and Stanford traveled together, filming interviews of poets, bonding over their interest in cinema. Along with Cuddihy, Broughton (who is still alive) rates a place of honor in the Small Press Hall of Fame, in the Talent Spotter Room next to Jon and Gypsy Lou Webb.

“I EVER CATCH YOU TALKING LIKE THAT WITH MY WIFE”

“The writer’s only responsibility is to his art . . . Everything goes by the board: honor, pride, decency, security, happiness, all, to get the book written. If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the ‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’ is worth any number of old ladies.”

—William Faulkner.²³

Did Faulkner, that old charmer, misspeak? In today’s social media environment, would he apologize through a spokesperson? (“The conversation took place in Manhattan, whose tall buildings and sea of humanity disoriented him.”) The Stanford who took pains to let Ginsberg know his politics created a world as real as it was imagined—à la Faulkner—a world wherein grotesques and dreamers stood and fell. In doing so, he gave voice to the dispossessed, victims of the legacy of Jim Crow, who had their own rich cultural inheritance, echoing Spain’s *gitanos* through whom Lorca made the English-speaking world aware of *duende* (blood-deep emotion transmitted through “black sounds”), a quality distinct from that of Homer’s muse. Lorca and Stanford both had privileged upbringings, but their temperaments differed greatly. Ultimately, each put poetry first, and answered with his life.

I can’t help wondering how Stanford would fare in today’s fractious, risk-adverse literary environment. Sexual relations have changed drastically since 1978, and male writers with his profile—charismatic liar, deceiver of women—have been targeted in an online cul-de-sac where public shaming is the rage.²⁴ Stanford’s album inventory has no entry for the Eagles, but I can’t shake hearing “Take It Easy” in his cassette deck (“Seven women on my mind / Four that wanna own me / Two that wanna stone me / One says she’s a friend of mine”) on heavy rotation. He was reputed to have been sleeping with six women around the time of his death.

Yeats was hopeless with women, and we can be grateful—it resulted in some of the most memorable love poems in the English language. Love poems, as opposed to erotic poems, are few and far between in Stanford's output. My hunch: He never had an unrequited crush. "Blue Yodel of Those Who Were Always Telling Me" is a smart-ass extended list poem of warnings he'd received throughout his life, from "What did you do last night / sleep in the fields" to "I ever catch you talking like that with my wife / I'll kill you you little shit."²⁵

Then there's the word "nigger," which appears over ten times in the *Collected*, almost always by black narrators.²⁶ I've read plenty about Stanford, and am confident that no hint of racial animus exists—other than toward Caucasians—but animus is only part of the equation. Some would have it that "appropriating" another's ethnicity is a lit-crime unto itself. His sensitive depictions of those otherwise invisible in poetry might not prove to be enough to save him. If you think I overstate the case, consider that no less a personage than August Kleinzahler, writing of John Berryman's fixation with black speech (albeit counterbalanced by an equal grounding in Thomas Nashe), notes: "Because of blackface Henry—who slips now and then into an old-fashioned minstrel show black speech—it's unlikely that *The Dream Songs* would find a publisher today, much less stand as one of the last century's most significant and admired poetic sequences."²⁷

To close another circle, Stanford traded letters with John Berryman. As it turns out, both men were adopted, and oddly enough, shared a birth surname, Smith.

"DARK MEDICINE"

Steeped in region and tradition, the world of Stanford's poems roughly parallels C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History*, first published in 1960, which foresees a day of reckoning for the U.S., and further, suggests that the South, already humbled on the battlefield, can offer bracing lessons to the country at large on dealing with defeat. All this packed into a slim book of closely argued essays that range from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement. Its second edition went to press with the North reeling from the summer of 1967's reminder that the Mason-Dixon line was not a firebreak for the nation's racial conflagration. A postscript mourned Dr. King's assassination.²⁸

Woodward also plays Nostradamus, with chilling accuracy: "[W]e have found that all our power and fabulous weaponry can be ineffective in a war with a weak and undeveloped nation torn by a civil war of its own. In the meantime the innocence and virtue with which we assumed American motives are natively endowed, especially in relations with other nations, had become a stock subject of jeers and ridicule even among our friends and allies."²⁹

Penned in 1968 about Vietnam, these words sound like they were written yesterday.

Frank Stanford was a poet of his time and place; of ours; and ones to come. On one level a proud Southerner, devastated when news of his adoption stripped him of a lineage he had traced back to English royalty, he made poems that “hit the bedrock,” a crazy-quilt admixture of agrarian, Southern black folklore; European literary models; and the American grain out of Whitman. Thanks to his “dark medicine,” a nation whose poetry is as suspect as its political motives has enriched the stream of world literature immensely.

Endnotes

1. Trussell, Robert. *Kansas City Star*, January 16, 2012, but written in 1988.
2. *BOMB Magazine*, interview by Peter Mishler, April 23, 2015.
3. *The New Yorker*, briefly noted, July 22, 2015, p. 81.
4. Eberhart, Richard, quotes from *Ironwood 17* (1981), p. 138.
5. From “The Monk’s Insomnia,” by Denis Johnson.
6. Chas Hansen has observed that Stanford’s rogues’ gallery gradually dropped away, with Death increasingly in the role of leading man.
7. *Poetry* (Chicago), January 18, 2008. Meticulously researched, the article debuted online; a commendable use of the magazine’s inherited riches.
8. Not many songs retain the appeal of “Ode to Billie Joe”—what *did* they throw off the bridge? Added to which, Bobbie Gentry is herself a mystery, having walked away from show business, for good, in 1981. Regardless, song and poet share a humid, doom-struck intensity, locale, and erotic undercurrents to burn.
9. Please note: My reconstruction is partially based on fiction. To make matters more Möbius strip-like, Gander is C.D. Wright’s husband.
10. See subiacoacademy.us/history-and-philosophy. The website has a page devoted to Stanford.
11. I’m leaving that sentence in to show how I was almost hoodwinked by Stanford’s self-mythologizing. According to Wiegers, no evidence exists of the manuscript. A much shorter one by the same name has turned up, but it is not a precursor to *Battlefield*.
12. Christopher Smart’s *Jubilate Agno* (“Rejoice the Lamb”), discovered in 1939, 160-some years after his death, proved to be the repository of the *sui generis* “For I Will Consider My Cat Geoffrey.” Once unearthed, it entered the canon overnight. Parenthetically, “Geoffrey” was written in free verse—sixty years before Walt Whitman’s birth.

13. Interview with Julia Dougherty, sharondoubiago.com/blog, July 29, 2015.
 14. Miller Williams and James Whitehead were formalists with sufficiently broad tastes to not push their own approach on students. Conversely, California's Yvor Winters committed that sin with relish.
 15. Jazz diehard Jim Adams pronounced the list "full of heavyweights."
 16. Dugan was a sleeper, an eccentric miscast as an establishment poet. He published little other than his poems, which came out in books with the unprepossessing titles *Poems One*, *Poems Two*, etc., up to the indispensable *Poems Seven: New and Complete Poetry* (2002).
 17. *Hidden Water*, letter to Michael Cuddihy dated March 11, 1973, p. 178.
 18. *Ironwood 17*, letter dated September 1974, p. 120.
 19. *Hidden Water*, letter written circa 1972, pp. 165-66.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-67.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
 22. Long lines are set out here as prose. Line breaks in *Battlefield* are defined mostly by the width of the page.
 23. *Paris Review: The Art of Fiction*, no. 12, 1956.
 24. Several writers in a genre termed "Alt.Lit" have come under fire. If you Google "Gregory Shertl, Sandra Certa," you will find a depressing interchange. These aren't writers of Stanford's caliber, but still.
 25. *Hidden Water*, pp. 27-29.
 26. Stanford uses "Negroes" when in his own voice, and "blacks" in his letters. "Dreams of a River I Waded with Others Long Ago" includes the line "She died with the dead niggerlilies." Local usage?
 27. *London Review of Books*, vol. 37, no. 13, July 2, 2015.
 28. Woodward, C. Vann. *The Burden of Southern History*, second ed., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
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