

Fifteen by William Stafford

South of the bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road, and stood with that
companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back farther in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale—
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me good man, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.



William Stafford (1914—1993)

- Stafford was born in Hutchinson, Kansas into a “highly literate” family.
- He was very close to his parents; Stafford said his mother was his most significant literary influence.
- In 1941, at the age of 27, he was drafted into the US armed forces. However, he was a pacifist and so performed alternative services until 1946.
- While in California, he met and married Dorothy Hope Frantz at the age of 30.
- Stafford taught at Lewis and Clark College from 1948 until he retired in 1980.
- He published more than 65 volumes of poetry and won many awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Western States Lifetime Achievement Award in Poetry.

As an adult, William Stafford wrote this poem about a vivid memory of something that occurred when he was fifteen. The whole experience took place in less than 10 minutes, yet it embodied so many things for Stafford—at first excitement and adventure, then realization of his own youth and inexperience.

The repetition of the line “I was fifteen” helps us to imagine the thrill of a young man discovering a motorcycle—a ticket to adventure—lying in the grass. When Stafford changes that line slightly at the end “I stood there, fifteen.” we feel Stafford’s disappointment as he realizes that the excitement and adventure is not his, but is, in fact, being enjoyed by an older, tougher guy.

Think of the years of your life. Does any moment stand out in your mind as a defining one? The discovery of the motorcycle was an epiphany for Stafford, a moment of revelation. Perhaps you mastered something and you knew, in that moment, that you were good at it. Write a poem about that moment. How old were you? Maybe you learned a lesson that changed your way of looking at yourself or the world around you. Write your poem about it, and repeat your age at the end, as Stafford did. Notice that Stafford’s lines do not rhyme. Periods occur in the middle of lines. Use this form for your poem.