

for Marion's Retirement Event Raylene Hinz-Penner

Our theme tonight, celebrating human ties, seems appropriate both for the work of the Humanities Council as I have known it these past decades, and for the way in which Marion Cott has held that theme before us. So often, given that we're talking about Kansas, civility, history, politics, we've needed to look for the ties that bind us, keep us human.

Our great Kansas poet, William Stafford, was especially good at lifting out the essences of "characters" and helping us to recognize our ties to them:

For example, "A Family Turn," about his aunt:
All her Kamikaze friends admired my aunt,
Their leader, charmed in vinegar,
A woman who could blaze with such white blasts
As Lawrence's that lit Arabia.
Her mean opinions bent her hatpins.

We'd take a ride in her old car
That ripped like Sherman through society:
Main Street's oases sheltered no one
when she pulled up at Thirty-first
and whirled that Ford for another charge.

We swept headlines from under rugs, names
all over town, which I learned her way, by heart,
and blazed with love that burns because it's real.
With a turn that's our family's own,
she'd say, "Our town is not the same"—

Pause—"And it's never been."

Or, how about one of my all-time favorites, STafford's, "Aunt Mabel,"
which provides the classic line I've used now for years—
This town is haunted by some good deed
that reappears like a country cousin, or truth
when language falters these days trying to lie,
because Aunt Mabel, an old lady gone now, would
accost even strangers to give bright flowers
away, quick as a striking snake. It's deeds like this
have weakened me, shaken by intermittent trust,
stricken with friendliness.

Our Senator talked like war, and Aunt Mabel
said, "He's a brilliant man,
but we didn't elect him that much."

Everyone's resolve weakens toward evening
or in a flash when a face melds—a stranger's, even—
reminded for an instant between menace and fear:
There are Aunt Mabels all over the world,
or their graves in the rain.

("He's a brilliant man, but we didn't elect him that much . . .")

Kansas character and Kansas characters . . . our human ties: