

1972

# Letter to Stafford from Polson

Richard Hugo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hugo, Richard. "Letter to Stafford from Polson." *The Iowa Review* 3.4 (1972): 68-69. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1438>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

in natural steam. You have a choice  
of abandoned homes to sleep in.  
Motels constructed on the come  
went broke before the final board  
was nailed. Operative still:  
your tainted fantasy and the delux hotel.

You have ached taking your aches up the hill.  
Another battery of tests. Terrible probe  
of word and needle. Always the fatal word—  
when we get old we crumble. They wave  
from the ward and you creak back down  
to streets with wide lots between homes.  
When that rare tourist comes, you tell him  
you're not forlorn. There are advantages here—  
easy pace of day, slow circle of sun.

If some day a cure's announced, for instance  
the hot springs work, you will walk young  
again in Spokane, find startling women,  
you wonder why you feel empty and frown  
and why goodbyes are hard. You go out healthy  
on the gray long road and when you look back  
no one is waving. They kept no record  
of your suffering, wouldn't know you  
if you returned, without your cane, your grin.

#### LETTER TO STAFFORD FROM POLSON

Dear Bill: We don't know the new heavy kind of wolf  
killing calves, but we've seen it and it's anything but gray.  
We have formed a new heavy kind of posse  
and we're fanning the Mission range for unique tracks.  
The new wolf is full of tricks. For instance, yesterday  
he sat all afternoon in a bar disguised as a trout  
and none of us caught on. He's a wily one.  
He even went home drunk and of course weaving slow,  
passed two cars of cops and the Union '76  
the usually sharp reliable and somewhat sly one runs.  
I guess we're not observant. Aside from the wolf  
things go well. This is where you may recall you stood  
looking at Flathead Lake and uttered a Stafford line.

Impressed by the expanse you said something about going  
on and on. And that's exactly what we've done.  
We have a new club called the South Shore Inn,  
fair food, good drinks and a panoramic view  
of the mountains and lake. Also a couple of posh motels  
have been added, a new supermarket and in progress  
a mooring harbor for yachts. I personally think  
the wolf wants to be one of us, to give up killing  
and hiding, the blue cold of the mountains, the cave  
where he must live alone. I think he wants to come down  
and be a citizen, swim, troll all summer for Mackinaws  
and in autumn snag salmon. I have to close now.  
The head of the posse just called and two more calves  
with throats cut were found this morning one mile south  
of the garbage dump. Our chief said this time  
we'll get him. This time we plan to follow his howl  
all the way to the source, even if it means scaling cliffs  
and beating our way through snow. Why does he do it?  
He doesn't eat what he kills. I hope we find out. I hope  
he breaks and spills all the secrets of his world.  
By the way, it turns out he's green with red diagonal stripes  
and jitters in wind like a flag. Take care, Bill. Dick.

---

## How Poets Make a Living

*Richard Hugo*

Question: You worked for 13 years in the real world before you went into academia? What are the differences for a poet?

I dread that question but by now I've developed some replies the audience might find funny. How do you answer it seriously? I hate that phrase 'the real world.' Why is an aircraft factory more real than a university? Is it? At Montana we have people in school on a state 'work-study' program. They were in the state mental hospital at Warm Springs, and some of them are desperately trying to hang on, to remain stable enough to pass the courses, to avoid being sent back. At The University of Iowa, I knew ex-convicts on parole. I've met drug addicts (not just pot heads, real addicts), homosexuals, alcoholics, a variety of the forlorn. Not people you usually meet in industry, at least not in the offices. In some ways the university is a far more real world than business.

Really, what difference does it make what a poet does for a living? Or how he lives his life? Sometimes these preoccupations can become absurd.