

Classic Poetry Series

David Wagoner

- 6 poems -

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David Wagoner (5 June 1926)

David Russell Wagoner is an American poet who has written many poetry collections and ten novels. Two of his books have been nominated for National Book Awards.

Early Life

Born in Massillon, Ohio and raised in Whiting, Indiana from the age of seven, Wagoner attended Pennsylvania State University where he was a member of Naval ROTC and graduated in three years. He received an M.A. in English from the Indiana University in 1949 and has taught at the University of Washington since 1954 on the suggestion of friend and fellow poet Theodore Roethke.

Career

Wagoner was editor of Poetry Northwest from 1966 to 2002 and his play An Eye For An Eye For An Eye was produced in 1973. Wagoner was elected chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1978 and served in that capacity until 1999. One of his novels, The Escape Artist, was turned into a film by executive producer Francis Ford Coppola. He currently teaches in the low-residency MFA program of the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts on Whidbey Island.

The natural environment of the Pacific Northwest is the subject of much of David Wagoner's poetry. He cites his move from the Midwest as a defining moment: "[W]hen I came over the Cascades and down into the coastal rainforest for the first time in the fall of 1954, it was a big event for me, it was a real crossing of a threshold, a real change of consciousness. Nothing was ever the same again."

Works:

Poetry collections

Dry Sun, Dry Wind (1953)
A Place to Stand (1958)
Poems (1959)
The Nesting Ground (1963)
Staying Alive (1966)
New and Selected Poems (1969)
Working Against Time (1970)
Riverbed (1972)
Sleeping in the Woods (1974)

A Guide to Dungeness Spit (1975)
Collected Poems, 1956–1976
Who Shall Be the Sun? (1978)
In Broken Country (1979)
The Hanging Garden (1980)
One for the Rose (1981)
Landfall (1981)
First Light (1983)
Through the Forest (1987)
Walt Whitman Bathing (1996)
Traveling Light (1999)
The House of Song (2002)
Good Morning and Good Night (2005)
A Map of the Night (2008)

Novels

The Man in the Middle (1954)
Money, Money, Money (1955)
Rock (1958)
The Escape Artist (1965)
Baby, Come On Inside (1968)
Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight? (1970)
The Road to Many a Wonder (1974)
Tracker (1975)
Whole Hog (1976)
The Hanging Garden (1980)

Edited volumes

Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke (1972)
(selected and arranged by David Wagoner)
The Best American Poetry 2009

At The Door

All actors look for them-the defining moments
When what a character does is what he is.
The script may say, He goes to the door
And exits or She goes out the door stage left.

But you see your fingers touching the doorknob,
Closing around it, turning it
As if by themselves. The latch slides
Out of the strike-plate, the door swings on its hinges,
And you're about to take that step
Over the threshold into a different light.

For the audience, you may simply be
Disappearing from the scene, yet in those few seconds
You can reach for the knob as the last object on earth
You wanted to touch. Or you can take it
Warmly like the hand your father offered
Once in forgiveness and afterward
Kept to himself.

Or you can stand there briefly, as bewildered
As by the door of a walk-in time-lock safe,
Stand there and stare
At the whole concept of shutness, like a rat
Whose maze has been rebuffed overnight,
Stand still and quiver, unable to turn
Around or go left or right.

Or you can grasp it with a sly, soundless discretion,
Open it inch by inch, testing each fraction
Of torque on the spindles, on tiptoe
Slip yourself through the upright slot
And press the lock-stile silently
Back into its frame.

Or you can use your shoulder
Or the hard heel of your shoe
And a leg-thrust to break it open.

Or you can approach the door as if accustomed
To having all barriers open by themselves.
You can wrench aside
This unauthorized interruption of your progress
And then leave it ajar
For others to do with as they may see fit.

Or you can stand at ease
And give the impression you can see through
This door or any door and have no need
To take your physical self to the other side.

Or you can turn the knob as if at last

Nothing could please you more, your body language
Filled with expectations of joy at where you're going,
Holding yourself momentarily in the posture
Of an awestruck pilgrim at the gate-though you know
You'll only be stepping out against the scrim
Or a wobbly flat daubed with a landscape,
A scribble of leaves, a hint of flowers,
The bare suggestion of a garden.

David Wagoner

For A Row Of Laurel Shrubs

They don't want to be your hedge, Your barrier, your living wall, the no-go
Go-between between your property And the prying of dogs and strangers. They don't

David Wagoner

The Junior High School Band Concert

When our semi-conductor
Raised his baton, we sat there
Gaping at Marche Militaire,
Our mouth-opening number.
It seemed faintly familiar
(We'd rehearsed it all that winter),
But we attacked in such a blur,
No army anywhere
On its stomach or all fours
Could have squeezed through our crossfire.

I played cornet, seventh chair,
Out of seven, my embouchure
A glorified Bronx cheer
Through that three-keyed keyhole stopper
And neighborhood window-slammer
Where mildew fought for air
At every exhausted corner,
My fingering still unsure
After scaling it for a year
Except on the spit-valve lever.

Each straight-faced mother and father
Retested his moral fiber
Against our traps and slurs
And the inadvertent whickers
Paradiddled by our snares,
And when the brass bulled forth
A blare fit to horn over
Jericho two bars sooner
Than Joshua's harsh measures,
They still had the nerve to stare.

By the last lost chord, our director
Looked older and soberer.
No doubt, in his mind's ear
Some band somewhere
In some music of some Sphere
Was striking a note as pure
As the wishes of Franz Schubert,
But meanwhile here we were:
A lesson in everything minor,
Decomposing our first composer.

David Wagoner

The Shooting of John Dillinger Outside the Biograph Theater, July 22, 1934

Chicago ran a fever of a hundred and one that groggy Sunday.
A reporter fried an egg on a sidewalk; the air looked shaky.
And a hundred thousand people were in the lake like shirts in
a laundry.
Why was Johnny lonely?
Not because two dozen solid citizens, heat-struck, had keeled
over backward.
Not because those lawful souls had fallen out of their sockets
and melted.
But because the sun went down like a lump in a furnace or a
bull in the Stockyards.
Where was Johnny headed?
Under the Biograph Theater sign that said, "Our Air is
Refrigerated."
Past seventeen FBI men and four policemen who stood in
doorways and sweated.
Johnny sat down in a cold seat to watch Clark Gable get
electrocuted.
Had Johnny been mistreated?
Yes, but Gable told the D.A. he'd rather fry than be shut up
forever.
Two women sat by Johnny. One looked sweet, one looked like
J. Edgar Hoover.
Polly Hamilton made him feel hot, but Anna Sage made him
shiver.
Was Johnny a good lover?
Yes, but he passed out his share of squeezes and pokes like a
jittery masher
While Agent Purvis sneaked up and down the aisle like an
extra usher,
Trying to make sure they wouldn't slip out till the show was
over.
Was Johnny a fourflusher?
No, not if he knew the game. He got it up or got it back.
But he liked to take snapshots of policemen with his own Kodak,
And once in a while he liked to take them with an automatic.
Why was Johnny frantic?
Because he couldn't take a walk or sit down in a movie
Without begin afraid he'd run smack into somebody
Who'd point at his rearranged face and holler, "Johnny!"
Was Johnny ugly?
Yes, because Dr. Wilhelm Loeser had given him a new profile
With a baggy jawline and squint eyes and an erased dimple,
With kangaroo-tendon cheekbones and a gigolo's mustache
that should've been illegal.
Did Johnny love a girl?
Yes, a good-looking, hard-headed Indian named Billie Frechette.
He wanted to marry her and lie down and try to get over it,
But she was locked in jail for giving him first-aid and comfort.
Did Johnny feel hurt?
He felt like breaking a bank or jumping over a railing
Into some panicky teller's cage to shout, "Reach for the ceiling!"

Or like kicking some vice president in the bum checks and smiling.
What was he really doing?
Going up the aisle with the crowd and into the lobby
With Polly saying, "Would you do what Clark done?" And
Johnny saying, "Maybe."
And Anna saying, "If he'd been smart, he'd of acted like
Bing Crosby."
Did Johnny look flashy?
Yes, his white-on-white shirt and tie were luminous.
His trousers were creased like knives to the tops of his shoes,
And his yellow straw hat came down to his dark glasses.
Was Johnny suspicious?
Yes, and when Agent Purvis signalled with a trembling cigar,
Johnny ducked left and ran out of the theater,
And innocent Polly and squealing Anna were left nowhere.
Was Johnny a fast runner?
No, but he crouched and scurried past a friendly liquor store
Under the coupled arms of double-daters, under awnings,
under stars,
To the curb at the mouth of an alley. He hunched there.
Was Johnny a thinker?
No, but he was thinking more or less of Billie Frechette
Who was lost in prison for longer than he could possibly wait,
And then it was suddenly too hard to think around a bullet.
Did anyone shoot straight?
Yes, but Mrs. Etta Natalsky fell out from under her picture hat.
Theresa Paulus sprawled on the sidewalk, clutching her left foot.
And both of them groaned loud and long under the streetlight.
Did Johnny like that?
No, but he lay down with those strange women, his face
in the alley,
One shoe off, cinders in his mouth, his eyelids heavy.
When they shouted questions at him, he talked back to nobody.
Did Johnny lie easy?
Yes, holding his gun and holding his breath as a last trick,
He waited, but when the Agents came close, his breath
wouldn't work.
Clark Gable walked his last mile; Johnny ran a half a block.
Did he run out of luck?
Yes, before he was cool, they had him spread out on dished-in
marble
In the Cook County Morgue, surrounded by babbling people
With a crime reporter presiding over the head of the table.
Did Johnny have a soul?
Yes, and it was climbing his slippery wind-pipe like a trapped
burglar.
It was beating the inside of his ribcage, hollering, "Let me
out of here!"
Maybe it got out, and maybe it just stayed there.
Was Johnny a money-maker?
Yes, and thousands paid 25¢; to see him, mostly women,

And one said, "I wouldn't have come, except he's a moral
lesson,"
And another, "I'm disappointed. He feels like a dead man."
Did Johnny have a brain?
Yes, and it always worked best through the worst of dangers,
Through flat-footed hammerlocks, through guarded doors,
around corners,
But it got taken out in the morgue and sold to some doctors.
Could Johnny take orders?
No, but he stayed in the wicker basket carried by six men
Through the bulging crowd to the hearse and let himself be
locked in,
And he stayed put as it went driving south in a driving rain.
And he didn't get stolen?
No, not even after his old hard-nosed dad refused to sell
The quick-drawing corpse for \$10,000 to somebody in a
carnival.
He figured he'd let Johnny decide how to get to Hell.
Did anyone wish him well?
Yes, half of Indiana camped in the family pasture,
And the minister said, "With luck, he could have been a
minister."
And up the sleeve of his oversized gray suit, Johnny twitched
a finger.
Does anyone remember?
Everyone still alive. And some dead ones. It was a new kind of
holiday
With hot and cold drinks and hot and cold tears. They planted
him in a cemetery
With three unknown vice presidents, Benjamin Harrison, and
James Whitcomb Riley,
Who never held up anybody.

David Wagoner

This is a Wonderful Poem

Come at it carefully, don't trust it, that isn't its right name,
It's wearing stolen rags, it's never been washed, its breath
Would look moss-green if it were really breathing,
It won't get out of the way, it stares at you
Out of eyes burnt gray as the sidewalk,
Its skin is overcast with colorless dirt,
It has no distinguishing marks, no I.D. cards,
It wants something of yours but hasn't decided
Whether to ask for it or just take it,
There are no policemen, no friendly neighbors,
No peacekeeping busybodies to yell for, only this
Thing standing between you and the place you were headed,
You have about thirty seconds to get past it, around it,
Or simply to back away and try to forget it,
It won't take no for an answer: try hitting it first
And you'll learn what's trembling in its torn pocket.
Now, what do you want to do about it?

David Wagoner

Wallace Stevens On His Way To Work

He would leave early and walk slowly As if balancing books On the way to
school, already expecting To be tardy once again and heavy With numbers, the
unfashionably rounded Toes of his shoes invisible beyond The slope of his
corporation. He would pause At his favorite fundamentally sound Park bench,
which had been the birthplace Of paeans and ruminations on other mornings, And
would turn his back to it, having gauged the distance Between his knees and the
edge of the hardwood Almost invariably unoccupied At this enlightened hour by the
bums of nighttime (For whom the owl's eye of the moon Had been closed by
daylight), and would give himself wholly over Backwards and trustingly downwards
And be well seated there. He would remove From his sinister jacket pocket a postcard
And touch it and retouch it with the point Of the fountain he produced at his
fingertips And fill it with his never-before-uttered Runes and obbligatos and
pellucidly cryptic Duets from private pageants, from broken ends Of fandangos
with the amoeba chaos chaos Couchant and rampant. Then he would rise
With an effort as heartfelt as a decision To get out of bed on Sunday and carefully
Relocate his center of gravity Above and beyond an imaginary axis Between his
feet and carry the good news Along the path and the sidewalk, well on his way
To readjusting the business of the earth.

David Wagoner