Ask Me

Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

William Stafford
in The Way it Is: New and Selected Poems

Autumnal

after a line from William Stafford

When the leaves are about to yellow and fall
ask me then how I tried to hold on to what was green,
how I thought perhaps I was different,
how everything I thought I knew about gold
turned brittle and brown. Ask me what it was like
to fall then. Sometimes the world’s workings feel transparent
and we know ourselves as the world. Sometimes
the only words that can find our lips are thank you,
though the gifts look nothing like anything
we ever thought we wanted. Sometimes, gratitude
arrives in us, not because we are willing,
but because it insists on itself, like a weed,
like a wind, like change.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer
in Naked for Tea
Ask Her

Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made.
William Stafford, “Ask Me”

She would have none of it. She wanted to break under ice to the dark flow of deeds. What else is a life but what we’ve done? she wanted to know.

The other students grew quiet, turned to watch the woman old enough to be their mother, who’d sat silent so long in the back of the room.

She hated that poem, and the man who wanted to cover and run. And at first I made the mistake of taking his side. I knew his Buddhist heart, but not only the kind wish to be known by inner lives. For her, no history or “persona” could salvage the lines.

She fought the current, built a dam against the poem’s seduction. It was clear she’d had enough comings and goings, alibis, and evasions.

Through her life some father or husband, brother or stranger must have run like a molten river. And no pacifist armed with a poem could make her back down. 

Mary Makofske in A Ritual to Read Together: Poems in conversation with William Stafford edited by Becca J.R. Lachman