

Umbilical

for William Stafford

Eight dollars was too much for
a book of poems—yours or any other—
in graduate school, a baby on the way.
Lifelines are seldom free.

In the end I used the week's
bus fare, remembering
my grandfather stringing ropes
in Midwest blizzards—

intricate webs, house
to barn to shed and
back—like stars to a sailor, a child's
trail of white pebbles in moonlight.

And all week I walked, even the day you
came to class and read aloud lines
I'd marked: lines about maps,
bells, the whine that links

puppy to wolf—*a banner of woe*, you
called that cry. It was a winter
Wednesday, rain
freezing like glass, smooth as

the pen you used to
sign my book. Edging home
that night, I was shell brittle,
glazed with ice;

but your words were the cord that
pulled me, howling, through the storm,
and, wet and slippery,
delivered me.