Classic Poetry Series

James Arlington Wright

- poems -

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James Arlington Wright (13 December 1927 – 25 March 1980)

James Arlington Wright was an American poet.
Wright first emerged on the literary scene in 1956 with The Green Wall, a collection of formalist verse that was awarded the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Prize. But by the early 1960s, Wright, increasingly influenced by the Spanish language surrealists, had dropped fixed meters. His transformation achieved its maximum expression with the publication of the seminal The Branch Will Not Break (1963), which positioned Wright as curious counterpoint to the Beats and New York schools, which predominated on the American coasts.
This transformation had not come by accident, as Wright had been working for years with his friend Robert Bly, collaborating on the translation of world poets in the influential magazine The Fifties (later The Sixties). Such influences fertilized Wright's unique perspective and helped put the Midwest back on the poetic map.
Wright had discovered a terse, imagistic, free verse of clarity, and power. During the next ten years Wright would go on to pen some of the most beloved and frequently anthologized masterpieces of the century, such as "A Blessing," "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," and "I Am a Sioux Indian Brave, He Said to Me in Minneapolis."
Technically, Wright was an innovator, especially in the use of his titles, first lines, and last lines, which he used to great dramatic effect in defense of the lives of the disenfranchised. He is equally well known for his tender depictions of the bleak landscapes of the post-industrial American Midwest.
Since his death, Wright has developed a cult following, transforming him into a seminal writer of ever increasing influence. Each year, hundreds of writers gather to pay tribute at the James Wright Poetry Festival in Martins Ferry.
Wright's son Franz Wright is also a poet. Together they are the only parent/child pair to have won a Pulitzer Prize in the same category (Poetry).

Life

Poetry

Wright's early poetry is relatively conventional in form and meter, especially compared with his later, looser poetry. His work with translations of German and South American poets, as well as the influence of Robert Bly, had considerable influence on his own poems; this is most evident in The Branch Will Not Break, which departs radically from the formal style of Wright's previous book, Saint Judas. In addition to his own poetry, he also published loose translations of René Char's hermetic poems.

His poetry often deals with the disenfranchised, or the outsider, American; yet it is also often inward probing. Wright suffered from depression and bipolar mood disorders and also battled alcoholism his entire life. He experienced several nervous breakdowns, was hospitalized, and was subjected to electroshock therapy. His dark moods and focus on emotional suffering were part of his life and often the focus of his poetry, although given the emotional turmoil he experienced personally, his poems are often remarkably optimistic in expressing a faith in life and human transcendence. His seminal 1963 volume The Branch Will Not Break is one example of his belief in the human spirit.
His 1972 Collected Poems was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In addition to his other awards, Wright received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Works:

<B>Published in his lifetime</B>
The Green Wall (Yale University Press, 1957)
Saint Judas (Wesleyan University Press, 1959)
The Branch Will Not Break (Wesleyan University Press, 1963)
Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio -- Broadside (1963)
Shall We Gather at the River (Wesleyan University Press, 1967)
Collected Poems (Wesleyan University Press, 1971)
Two Citizens (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973)
Moments of the Italian Summer (Dryad Press, 1976)
To a Blossoming Pear Tree (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977)
Published posthumously
This Journey (1982; completed in 1980)
The Temple at Nîmes (1982)
James Wright, In Defense Against This Exile. Letters To Wayne Burns., edited with an introduction by John R. Doheny (1985)
Above the River - the Complete Poems, introduction by Donald Hall (1992)
Selected Poems (2005)
A Wild Perfection: The Selected Letters of James Wright (2005)
The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters Between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright., edited by Anne Wright and Joy Harjo (2009)

A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more, they begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

James Arlington Wright

A Mad Fight Song For William S. Carpenter, 1966

Varus, varus, gib mir meine Legionen wieder

Quick on my feet in those Novembers of my loneliness,
I tossed a short pass,
Almost the instant I got the ball, right over the head
Of Barrel Terry before he knocked me cold.

When I woke, I found myself crying out
Latin conjugations, and the new snow falling
At the edge of a green field.

Lemoyne Crone had caught the pass, while I lay
Unconscious and raging
Alone with the fire ghost of Catullus, the contemptuous graces tossing
Garlands and hendecasyllabics over the head
Of Cornelius Nepos the mastodon,
The huge volume.

At the edges of Southeast Asia this afternoon
The quarterbacks and the lines are beginning to fall,
A spring snow,

And terrified young men
Quick on their feet
Lob one another’s skulls across
Wings of strange birds that are burning
Themselves alive.

James Arlington Wright

A Note Left in Jimmy Leonard's Shack

Near the dry river's water-mark we found
Your brother Minnegan,
Flopped like a fish against the muddy ground.
Beany, the kid whose yellow hair turns green,
Told me to find you, even if the rain,
And tell you he was drowned.

I hid behind the chassis on the bank,
The wreck of someone's Ford:
I was afraid to come and wake you drunk:
You told me once the waking up was hard,
The daylight beating at you like a board.
Blood in my stomach sank.

Beside, you told him never to go out
Along the river-side
Drinking and singing, clattering about.
You might have thrown a rock at me and cried
I was to blame, I let him fall in the road
And pitch down on his side.

Well, I'll get hell enough when I get home
For coming up this far,
Leaving the note, and running as I came.
I'll go and tell my father where you are.
You'd better go find Minnegan before
Policemen hear and come.

Beany went home, and I got sick and ran,
You old son of a bitch.
You better hurry down to Minnegan;
He's drunk or dying now, I don't know which,
Rolled in the roots and garbage like a fish,
The poor old man.

James Arlington Wright

A Poem About George Doty in the Death House

Lured by the wall, and drawn
To stare below the roof,
Where pigeons nest aloof
From prowling cats and men,
I count the sash and bar
Secured to granite stone,
And note the daylight gone,
Supper and silence near.

Close to the wall inside,
Immured, empty of love,
A man I have wondered of
Lies patient, vacant-eye.
A month and a day ago
He stopped his car and found
A girl on the darkening ground,
And killed her in the snow.

Beside his cell, I am told,
Hardy perennial bums
Complain till twilight comes
For hunger and for cold.
They hardly know of a day
That saw their hunger pass.
Bred to the dark, their flesh
Peacefully withers away.

The man who sits alone,
He is the one for wonder,
Who sways his fingers under
The cleanly shaven chin,
Who sees, in the shaving mirror
Pinned to the barren wall,
The uprooted ghost of all:
The simple, easy terror.

Caught between sky and earth,
Poor stupid animal,
Stripped naked to the wall,
He saw the blundered birth
Of daemons beyond sound.
Sick of the dark, he rose
For love, and now he goes
Back to the broken ground.

Now, as he grips the chain
And holds the wall, to bear
What no man ever bore,
He hears the bums complain;
But I mourn no soul but his,
Not even the bums who die,
Nor the homely girl whose cry

Crumbled his pleading kiss.

James Arlington Wright

A Secret Gratitude

1
She cleaned house, and then lay down long
On the long stair.

On one of those cold white wings
That the strange fowl provide for us like one hillside of the sea,
That cautery of snow that blinds us,
Pitiless light,
One winter afternoon
Fair near the place where she sank down with one wing broken,
Three friends and I were caught
Stalk still in the light.

Five of the lights. Why should they care for our eyes?
Five deer stood there.
They looked back, a good minute.
They knew us, all right:
Four chemical accidents of horror pausing
Between one suicide or another
On the passing wing
Of an angel that cared no more for our biology, our pity, and our pain
Than we care.

Why should any mere multitude of the angels care
To lay one blind white plume down
On this outermost limit of something that is probably no more
Than an aphid,
An aphid which is one of the angels whose wings toss the black pears
Of tears down on the secret shores
Of the seas in the corner
Of a poet's closed eye.
Why should five deer
Gaze back at us?
They gazed back at us.
Afraid, and yet they stood there,
More alive than we four, in their terror,
In their good time.

We had a dog.
We could have got other dogs.
Two or three dogs could have taken turns running and dragging down
Those fleet lights, whose tails must look as mysterious as the
Stars in Los Angeles.
We are men.
It doesn't even satisfy us
To kill one another.
We are a smear of obscenity
On the lake whose only peace

Is a hole where the moon
Abandoned us, that poor
Girl who can’t leave us alone.

If I were the moon I would shrink into a sand grain
In the corner of the poet’s eye,
While there’s still room.

We are men.
We are capable of anything.
We could have killed every one of those deer.
The very moon of lovers tore herself with the agony of a wounded tigress
Out of our side.
We can kill anything.
We can kill our own bodies.
Those deer on the hillside have no idea what in hell
We are except murderers.
They know that much, and don’t think
They don’t.
Man’s heart is the rotten yolk of a blacksnake egg
Corroding, as it is just born, in a pile of dead
Horse dung.
I have no use for the human creature.
He subtly extracts pain awake in his own kind.
I am born one, out of an accidental hump of chemistry.
I have no use.

2
But
We didn’t set dogs on the deer,
Even though we know,
As well as you know,
We could have got away with it,
Because
Who cares?

3
Boissevain, who was he?
Was he human? I doubt it,
From what I know
Of men.

Who was he,
Hobbling with his dry eyes
Along in the rain?

I think he must have fallen down like the plumes of new snow,
I think he must have fallen into the grass, I think he
Must surely have grown around
Her wings, gathering and being gathered,
Leaf, string, anything she could use
To build her still home of songs
Within sound of water.

4
By God, come to that, I would have married her too,
If I'd got the chance, and she'd let me.
Think of that. Being alive with a girl
Who could turn into a laurel tree
Whenever she felt like it.
Think of that.

5
Outside my window just now
I can hear a small waterfall rippling antiphonally down over
The stones of my poem.

James Arlington Wright

A Way To Make A Living

From an epigram by Plato

When I was a boy, a relative
Asked for me a job
At the Weeks Cemetery.
Think of all I could
Have raised that summer,
That money, and me
Living at home,
Fattening and getting
Ready to live my life
Out on my knees, humming,
Kneading up docks
And sumac from
Those flawless clerks-at-court, those beautiful
Grocers and judges, the polished
Dead of whom we make
So much.

I could have stayed there with them.
Cheap, too.
Imagine, never
To have turned
Wholly away from the classic
Cold, the hill, so laid
Out, measure by seemly measure clipped
And mown by old man Albright
The sexton. That would have been a hell of
A way to make a living.

Thank you, no.
I am going to take my last nourishment
Of measure from a dark blue
Ripple on swell on ripple that makes
Its own garlands.
My dead are the secret wine jars
Of Tyrian commercial travelers.
Their happiness is a lost beginning, their graves
Drift in and out of the Mediterranean.

One of these days
The immortals, clinging to a beam of sunlight
Under water, delighted by delicate crustaceans,
Will dance up thirty-foot walls of radiance,
And waken,
The sea shining on their shoulders, the fresh
Wine in their arms. Their ships have drifted away.
They are stars and snowflakes floating down

Into your hands, love.

James Arlington Wright

A Winter Daybreak Above Vence

The night's drifts
Pile up below me and behind my back,
Slide down the hill, rise again, and build
Eerie little dunes on the roof of the house.
In the valley below me,
Miles between me and the town of St.-Jeannet,
The road lamps glow.
They are so cold, they might as well be dark.
Trucks and cars
Cough and drone down there between the golden
Coffins of greenhouses, the startled squawk
Of a rooster claws heavily across
A grove, and drowns.
The gumming snarl of some grouchy dog sounds,
And a man bitterly shifts his broken gears.
True night still hangs on,
Mist cluttered with a racket of its own.

Now on the mountainside,
A little way downhill among turning rucks,
A square takes form in the side of a dim wall.
I hear a bucket rattle or something, tinny,
No other stirring behind the dim face
Of the goatherd's house. I imagine
His goats are still sleeping, dreaming
Of the fresh roses
Beyond the walls of the greenhouse below them.
And of lettuce leaves opening in Tunisia.

I turn, and somehow
Impossibly hovering in the air over everything,
The Mediterranean, nearer to the moon
Than this mountain is, Shines. A voice clearly
Tells me to snap out of it. Galway
Mutters out of the house and up the stone stairs
To start the motor. The moon and the stars
Suddenly flicker out, and the whole mountain
Appears, pale as a shell.

Look, the sea has not fallen and broken
Our heads. How can I feel so warm
Here in the dead center of January? I can
Scarcely believe it, and yet I have to, this is
The only life I have. I get up from the stone.
My body mumbles something unseemly
And follows me. Now we are all sitting here strangely
On top of sunlight.

James Arlington Wright

As I Step Over A Puddle At The End Of Winter, I Think Of An Ancient Chinese Governor

And how can I, born in evil days
And fresh from failure, ask a kindness of Fate?

-- Written A.D. 819

Po Chu-i, balding old politician,
What's the use?
I think of you,
Uneasily entering the gorges of the Yang-Tze,
When you were being towed up the rapids
Toward some political job or other
In the city of Chungshou.
You made it, I guess,
By dark.

But it is 1960, it is almost spring again,
And the tall rocks of Minneapolis
Build me my own black twilight
Of bamboo ropes and waters.
Where is Yuan Chen, the friend you loved?
Where is the sea, that once solved the whole loneliness
Of the Midwest?Where is Minneapolis? I can see nothing
But the great terrible oak tree darkening with winter.
Did you find the city of isolated men beyond mountains?
Or have you been holding the end of a frayed rope
For a thousand years?

James Arlington Wright

At the Executed Murderer's Grave

Why should we do this? What good is it to us? Above all,
how can we do such a thing? How can it possibly be done?

--Freud

1.

My name is James A. Wright, and I was born
Twenty-five miles from this infected grave,
In Martins Ferry, Ohio, where one slave
To Hazel-Atlas Glass became my father.
He tried to teach me kindness. I return
Only in memory now, aloof, unhurried,
To dead Ohio, where I might lie buried,
Had I not run away before my time.
Ohio caught George Doty. Clean as lime,
His skull rots empty here. Dying's the best
Of all the arts men learn in a dead place.
I walked here once. I made my loud display,
Leaning for language on a dead man's voice.
Now sick of lies, I turn to face the past.
I add my easy grievance to the rest:

2.

Doty, if I confess I do not love you,
Will you let me alone? I burn for my own lies.
The nights electrocute my fugitive,
My mind. I run like the bewildered mad
At St. Clair Sanitarium, who lurk,
Arch and cunning, under the maple trees,
Pleased to be playing guilty after dark.
Staring to bed, they croon self-lullabies.
Doty, you make me sick. I am not dead.
I croon my tears at fifty cents per line.

3.

Idiot, he demanded love from girls,
And murdered one. Also, he was a thief.
He left two women, and a ghost with child.
The hair, foul as a dog's upon his head,
Made such revolting Ohio animals
Fitter for vomit than a kind man's grief.
I waste no pity on the dead that stink,
And no love's lost between me and the crying
Drunks of Belaire, Ohio, where police
Kick at their kidneys till they die of drink.
Christ may restore them whole, for all of me.
Alive and dead, those giggling muckers who

Saddled my nighmares thirty years ago
Can do without my widely printed sighing.
Over their pains with paid sincerity.
I do not pity the dead, I pity the dying.

4.

I pity myself, because a man is dead.
If Belmont County killed him, what of me?
His victims never loved him. Why should we?
And yet, nobody had to kill him either.
It does no good to woo the grass, to veil
The quicklime hole of a man's defeat and shame.
Nature-lovers are gone. To hell with them.
I kick the clods away, and speak my name.

5.

This grave's gash festers. Maybe it will heal,
When all are caught with what they had to do
In fear of love, when every man stands still
By the last sea,
And the princes of the sea come down
To lay away their robes, to judge the earth
And its dead, and we dead stand undefended everywhere,
And my bodies--father and child and unskilled criminal--
Ridiculously kneel to bare my scars,
My sneaking crimes, to God's unpitying stars.

6.

Staring politely, they will not mark my face
From any murderer's, buried in this place.
Why should they? We are nothing but a man.

7.

Doty, the rapist and the murderer,
Sleeps in a ditch of fire, and cannot hear;
And where, in earth or hell's unholy peace,
Men's suicides will stop, God knows, not I.
Angels and pebbles mock me under trees.
Earth is a door I cannot even face.
Order be damned, I do not want to die,
Even to keep Belaire, Ohio, safe.
The hackles on my neck are fear, not grief.
(Open, dungeon! Open, roof of the ground!)
I hear the last sea in the Ohio grass,

Heaving a tide of gray disastrousness.
Wrinkles of winter ditch the rotted face
Of Doty, killer, imbecile, and thief:
Dirt of my flesh, defeated, underground.

James Arlington Wright

At The Executed Murderer's Grave

for J.L.D.

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Heaving a tide of gray disastrousness.
Wrinkles of winter ditch the rotted face
Of Doty, killer, imbecile, and thief:
Dirt of my flesh, defeated, underground.

James Arlington Wright

Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

In the Shreve High football stadium,
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,
And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,
Dreaming of heroes.

All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home.
Their women cluck like starved pullets,
Dying for love.

Therefore,
Their sons grow suicidally beautiful
At the beginning of October,
And gallop terribly against each other's bodies.

James Arlington Wright

Beginning

The moon drops one or two feathers into the fiels.
The dark wheat listens.
Be still.
Now.
There they are, the moon's young, trying
Their wings.
Between trees, a slender woman lifts up the lovely shadow
Of her face, and now she steps into the air, now she is gone
Wholly, into the air.
I stand alone by an elder tree, I do not dare breathe
Or move.
I listen.
The wheat leans back toward its own darkness,
And I lean toward mine.

James Arlington Wright

Bologna: A Poem About Gold

Give me this time, my first and severe
Italian, a poem about gold,
The left corners of eyes, and the heavy
Night of the locomotives that brought me here,
And the heavy wine in the old green body,
The glass that so many have drunk from.
I have brought my bottle back home every day
To the cool cave, and come forth
Golden on the left corner
of a cathedral's wing:

White wine of Bologna,
And the knowing golden shadows
At the left corners of Mary Magdalene's eyes,
While St. Cecilia stands
Smirking in the center of a blank wall,
The saint letting her silly pipes wilt down,
Adoring
Herself, while the lowly and richest of all women eyes
Me the beholder, with a knowing sympathy, her love
For the golden body of the earth, she knows me,
Her halo faintly askew,
And no despair in her gold
That drags thrones down
And then makes them pay for it.

Oh,
She may look sorry to Cecilia
And
The right-hand saint on the tree,
But
She didn't look sorry to Raphael,
And
I bet she didn't look sorry to Jesus,
And
She doesn't look sorry to me.
(Who would?)
She doesn't look sorry to me.

She looks like only the heavy deep gold
That drags thrones down
All day long on the vine.
Mary in Bologna, sunlight I gathered all morning
And pressed in my hands all afternoon
And drank all day with my golden-breasted

Love in my arms.

James Arlington Wright

Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk Toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me

Relieved, I let the book fall behind a stone.
I climb a slight rise of grass.
I do not want to disturb the ants
Who are walking single file up the fence post,
Carrying small white petals,
Casting shadows so frail that I can see through them.
I close my eyes for a moment and listen.
The old grasshoppers
Are tired, they leap heavily now,
Their thighs are burdened.
I want to hear them, they have clear sounds to make.
Then lovely, far off, a dark cricket begins
In the maple trees.

James Arlington Wright

Fear Is What Quickens Me

1

Many animals that our fathers killed in America
Had quick eyes.
They stared about wildly,
When the moon went dark.
The new moon falls into the freight yards
Of cities in the south,
But the loss of the moon to the dark hands of Chicago
Does not matter to the deer
In this northern field.

2

What is that tall woman doing
There, in the trees?
I can hear rabbits and mourning dovees whispering together
In the dark grass, there
Under the trees.

3

I look about wildly.

James Arlington Wright

Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium

Dark cypresses--
The world is uneasily happy;
It will all be forgotten.
--Theodore Storm

Mother of roots, you have not seeded
The tall ashes of loneliness
For me. Therefore,
Now I go.
If I knew the name,
Your name, all trellises of vineyards and old fire
Would quicken to shake terribly my
Earth, mother of spiraling searches, terrible
Fable of calcium, girl. I crept this afternoon
In weeds once more,
Casual, daydreaming you might not strike
Me down. Mother of window sills and journeys,
Hallower of searching hands,
The sight of my blind man makes me want to weep.
Tiller of waves or whatever, woman or man,
Mother of roots or father of diamonds,
Look: I am nothing.
I do not even have ashes to rub into my eyes.

James Arlington Wright

Having Lost My Sons, I Confront the Wreckage of the Moon: Christmas, 1960

After dark
Near the South Dakota border,
The moon is out hunting, everywhere,
Delivering fire,
And walking down hallways
Of a diamond.

Behind a tree,
It ights on the ruins
Of a white city
Frost, frost.

Where are they gone
Who lived there?

Bundled away under wings
And dark faces.

I am sick
Of it, and I go on
Living, alone, alone,
Past the charred silos, past the hidden graves
Of Chippewas and Norwegians.

This cold winter
Moon spills the inhuman fire
Of jewels
Into my hands.

Dead riches, dead hands, the moon
Darkens,
And I am lost in the beautiful white ruins
Of America.

James Arlington Wright

Hook

I was only a young man
In those days. On that evening
The cold was so God damned
Bitter there was nothing.
Nothing. I was in trouble
With a woman, and there was nothing
There but me and dead snow.

I stood on the street corner
In Minneapolis, lashed
This way and that.
Wind rose from some pit,
Hunting me.
Another bus to Saint Paul
Would arrive in three hours,
If I was lucky.

Then the young Sioux
Loomed beside me, his scars
Were just my age.

Ain't got no bus here
A long time, he said.
You got enough money
To get home on?

What did they do
To your hand? I answered.
He raised up his hook into the terrible starlight
And slashed the wind.

Oh, that? he said.
I had a bad time with a woman. Here,
You take this.

Did you ever feel a man hold
Sixty-five cents
In a hook,
And place it
Gently
In your freezing hand?

I took it.
It wasn't the money I needed.
But I took it.

James Arlington Wright

In Memory of the Horse David, Who Ate One of My Poems

James Arlington Wright

In Response to a Rumor That the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia, Has Been Condemned

I will grieve alone,
As I strolled alone, years ago, down along
The Ohio shore.
I hid in the hobo jungle weeds
Upstream from the sewer main,
Pondering, gazing.

I saw, down river,
At Twenty-third and Water Streets
By the vinegar works,
The doors open in early evening.
Swinging their purses, the women
Poured down the long street to the river
And into the river.

I do not know how it was
They could drown every evening.
What time near dawn did they climb up the other shore,
Drying their wings?

For the river at Wheeling, West Virginia,
Has only two shores:
The one in hell, the other
In Bridgeport, Ohio.

And nobody would commit suicide, only
To find beyond death
Bridgeport, Ohio.

James Arlington Wright

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

James Arlington Wright

May Morning

Deep into spring, winter is hanging on. Bitter and skillful in his hopelessness, he stays alive in every shady place, starving along the Mediterranean: angry to see the glittering sea-pale boulder alive with lizards green as Judas leaves. Winter is hanging on. He still believes. He tries to catch a lizard by the shoulder. One olive tree below Grottaglie welcomes the winter into noontime shade, and talks as softly as Pythagoras. Be still, be patient, I can hear him say, cradling in his arms the wounded head, letting the sunlight touch the savage face.

James Arlington Wright

Northern Pike

All right. Try this,
Then. Every body
I know and care for,
And every body
Else is going
To die in a loneliness
I can't imagine and a pain
I don't know. We had
To go on living. We
Untangled the net, we slit
The body of this fish
Open from the hinge of the tail
To a place beneath the chin
I wish I could sing of.
I would just as soon we let
The living go on living.
An old poet whom we believe in
Said the same thing, and so
We paused among the dark cattails and prayed
For the muskrats,
For the ripples below their tails,
For the little movements that we knew the crawdads were making
under water,
For the right-hand wrist of my cousin who is a policeman.
We prayed for the game warden's blindness.
We prayed for the road home.
We ate the fish.
There must be something very beautiful in my body,
I am so happy.

James Arlington Wright

On the Skeleton of a Hound

Nightfall, that saw the morning-glories float
Tendril and string against the crumbling wall,
Nurses him now, his skeleton for grief,
His locks for comfort curled among the leaf.
Shuttles of moonlight weave his shadow tall,
Milkweed and dew flow upward to his throat.
Now catbird feathers plume the apple mound,
And starlings drowse to winter up the ground.
thickened away from speech by fear, I move
Around the body. Over his forepaws, steep
Declivities darken down the moonlight now,
And the long throat that bayed a year ago
Declines from summer. Flies would love to leap
Between his eyes and hum away the space
Between the ears, the hollow where a hare
Could hide; another jealous dog would tumble
The bones apart, angry, the shining crumble
Of a great body gleaming in the air;
Quivering pigeons foul his broken face.
I can imagine men who search the earth
For handy resurrections, overturn
The body of a beetle in its grave;
Whispering men digging for gods might delve
A pocket for these bones, then slowly burn
Twigs in the leaves, pray for another birth.
But I will turn my face away from this
Ruin of summer, collapse of fur and bone.
For once a white hare huddled up the grass,
The sparrows flocked away to see the race.
I stood on darkness, clinging to a stone,
I saw the two leaping alive on ice,
On earth, on leaf, humus and withered vine:
The rabbit splendid in a shroud of shade,
The dog carved on the sunlight, on the air,
Fierce and magnificent his rippled hair,
The cockleburs shaking around his head.
Then, suddenly, the hare leaped beyond pain
Out of the open meadow, and the hound
Followed the voiceless dancer to the moon,
To dark, to death, to other meadows where
Singing young women dance around a fire,
Where love reveres the living.

I alone
Scatter this hulk about the dampened ground;
And while the moon rises beyond me, throw
The ribs and spine out of their perfect shape.
For a last charm to the dead, I lift the skull
And toss it over the maples like a ball.
Strewn to the woods, now may that spirit sleep
That flamed over the ground a year ago.
I know the mole will heave a shinbone over,

The earthworm snuggle for a nap on paws,
The honest bees build honey in the head;
The earth knows how to handle the great dead
Who lived the body out, and broke its laws,
Knocked down a fence, tore up a field of clover.

James Arlington Wright

Outside Fargo, North Dakota

Along the sprawled body of the derailed Great Northern freight car,
I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly.
No wind.

Beyond town, three heavy white horses
Wade all the way to their shoulders
In a silo shadow.

Suddenly the freight car lurches.
The door slams back, a man with a flashlight
Calls me good evening.
I nod as I write good evening, lonely
And sick for home.

James Arlington Wright

Rip

It can't be the passing of time that casts
That white shadow across the waters
Just offshore.
I shiver a little, with the evening.
I turn down the steep path to find
What's left of the river gold.
I whistle a dog lazily, and lazily
A bird whistles me.
Close by a big river, I am alive in my own country,
I am home again.
Yes: I lived here, and here, and my name,
That I carved young, with a girl's, is healed over, now,
And lies sleeping beneath the inward sky
Of a tree's skin, close to the quick.
It's best to keep still.
But:
There goes that bird that whistled me down here
To the river a moment ago.
Who is he? A little white barn owl from Hudson's Bay,
Flown out of his range here, and, if he wants to,
He can be the body that casts
That white shadow across the waters
Just offshore.

James Arlington Wright

Saint Judas

When I went out to kill myself, I caught
A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.
Running to spare his suffering, I forgot
My name, my number, how my day began,
How soldiers milled around the garden stone
And sang amusing songs; how all that day
Their javelins measured crowds; how I alone
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.

Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,
I held the man for nothing in my arms.

James Arlington Wright

Sappho

The twilight falls; I soften the dusting feathers,
And clean again.
The house has lain and moldered for three days.
The windows smeared with rain, the curtains torn,
The mice come in,
The kitchen blown with cold.

I keep the house, and say no words.

It is true I am as twisted as the cactus
That gnarls and turns beside the milky light,
That cuts the fingers easily and means nothing,
For all the pain that shoots along the hand.
I dust the feathers down the yellow thorns,
I light the stove.

The gas curls round the iron fretwork. the flame
Floats above the lace,
And bounces like a dancer stayed on air.
Fire does not rest on iron, it drifts like a blue blossom
And catches on my breath;
Coiling, spinning, the blue foam of the gas fire
Writhes like a naked girl;
Turns up its face, like her.

She came to me in rain.
I did not know her, I did not know my name
After she left to bed her children down,
To phone her husband they were gone asleep.
And she, lying, a pure fire, in the feathers,
Dancing above the ironwork of her bed,
Roaring, and singeing nothing.
She had not wound her arms about me then,
She had not dared.
I only took her coat, and smiled to hear
How she had left her purse and her umbrella
In the theater, how she was sopping cold

With the fall rain; and mine was the one light
In the neighborhood. She came to my gas fire
And lay before it, sprawled, her pure bare shoulders
Folded in a doze, a clear, cold curve of stone.

I only leaned above the hair,
Turned back the quilt, arranged the feet, the arms,
And kissed the sleeping shoulder, lightly, like the rain;

And when she woke to wear her weathered clothes,
I sent her home.
She floated, a blue blossom, over the street.

And when she came again,
It was not long before she turned to me,
And let her shawl slide down her neck and shoulder,
Let her hair fall.
And when she came again,
It did not rain.

Her husband came to pluck her like an apple,
As the drunken farmer lurches against the tree,
Grips the green globe not long beyond its bloom,
And tears the skin, brutally, out of the bark,
Leaves the whole bough broken,
The orchard torn with many footprints,
The fence swung wide
On a raw hinge.

And now it is said of me
That my love is nothing because I have borne no children,
Or because I have fathered none;
That I twisted the twig in my hands
And cut the blossom free too soon from the seed;
That I lay across the fire,
And snuffed it dead sooner than draft or rain.

But I have turned away, and drawn myself
Upright to walk along the room alone.
Across the dark the spines of cactus plants
Remind me how I go—aloof, obscure,
Indifferent to the words the children chalk
Against my house and down the garden walls.
They cannot tear the garden out of me,
Nor smear my love with names. Love is a cliff,
A clear, cold curve of stone, mottled by stars,
smirched by the morning, carved by the dark sea
Till stars and dawn and waves can slash no more,
Till the rock’s heart is found and shaped again.

I keep the house and say no words, the evening
Falls like a petal down the shawl of trees.
I light the fire and see the blossom dance
On air alone; I will not douse that flame,
That searing flower; I will burn in it.
I will not banish love to empty rain.

For I know that I am asked to hate myself
For their sweet sake
Who sow the world with child.
I am given to burn on the dark fire they make
With their sly voices.

But I have burned already down to bone.
There is a fire that burns beyond the names
Of sludge and filth of which this world is made.
Agony sears the dark flesh of the body,
And lifts me higher than the smoke, to rise
Above the earth, above the sacrifice;
Until my soul flares outward like a blue
Blossom of gas fire dancing in mid-air:
Free of the body’s work of twisted iron.

James Arlington Wright

Small Frogs Killed On The Highway

Still,
I would leap too
Into the light,
If I had the chance.
It is everything, the wet green stalk of the field
On the other side of the road.
They crouch there, too, faltering in terror
And take strange wing. Many
Of the dead never moved, but many
Of the dead are alive forever in the split second
Auto headlights more sudden
Than their drivers know.
The drivers burrow backward into dank pools
Where nothing begets
Nothing.

Across the road, tadpoles are dancing
On the quarter thumbnail
Of the moon. They can't see,
Not yet.

Anonymous submission.

James Arlington Wright

The Jewel

There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds.

James Arlington Wright

The Journey

Anghiari is medieval, a sleeve sloping down
A steep hill, suddenly sweeping out
To the edge of a cliff, and dwindling.
But far up the mountain, behind the town,
We too were swept out, out by the wind,
Alone with the Tuscan grass.

Wind had been blowing across the hills
For days, and everything now was graying gold
With dust, everything we saw, even
Some small children scampering along a road,
Twittering Italian to a small caged bird.

We sat beside them to rest in some brushwood,
And I leaned down to rinse the dust from my face.

I found the spider web there, whose hinges
Reeled heavily and crazily with the dust,
Whole mounds and cemeteries of it, sagging
And scattering shadows among shells and wings.
And then she stepped into the center of air
Slender and fastidious, the golden hair
Of daylight along her shoulders, she poised there,
While ruins crumbled on every side of her.
Free of the dust, as though a moment before
She had stepped inside the earth, to bathe herself.

I gazed, close to her, till at last she stepped
Away in her own good time.

Many men
Have searched all over Tuscany and never found
What I found there, the heart of the light
Itself shelled and leaved, balancing
On filaments themselves falling. The secret
Of this journey is to let the wind
Blow its dust all over your body,
To let it go on blowing, to step lightly, lightly
All the way through your ruins, and not to lose
Any sleep over the dead, who surely
Will bury their own, don't worry.

James Arlington Wright

The Lambs on the Boulder

I hear that the Commune di Padova has an exhibition of masterpieces from Giotto to Mantegna. Giotto is the master of angels, and Mantegna is the master of the dead Christ, one of the few human beings who seems to have understood that Christ did indeed come down from the cross after all, in response to the famous jeering invitation, and that the Christ who came down was a cadaver. Mantegna's dead Christ looks exactly like a skidroad bum fished by the cops out of the Mississippi in autumn just before daylight and hurried off in a tarpaulin-shrouded garbage truck and deposited in another tangle of suicides and befuddled drunkards at the rear entrance to the University of Minnesota medical school. Eternity is a vast space of distances as well as a curving infinity of time.
No doubt the exhibition in noble Padova will be a glory to behold. But there is a littler glory that I love best. It is a story, which so intensely ought to be real that it is real.
One afternoon the mature medieval master Cimabue was taking a walk in the countryside and paused in the shade to watch a shepherd boy. The child was trying to scratch sketches of his lambs on a boulder at the edge of the field. He used nothing, for he could find nothing, but a little sharp pebble.
Cimabue took the shepherd boy home with him and gave him some parchment and a nail or a crayon or something or other, and began to show him how to draw and form lines into the grandeur of faces other than the sweet faces of sheep.
The shepherd boy was Giotto, and he learned how to draw and form lines into the grandeur of faces other than the sweet faces of sheep. I don't give a damn whether you believe this story or not. I do. I have seen faces of angels drawn by Giotto. if angels do not look like Giotto's angels, they have been neglecting their health behind God's back.
One of my idle wishes is to find that field where Cimabue stood in the shade and watched the boy Giotto scratching his stone with his pebble.
I would not be so foolish as to prefer the faces of the boy's lambs to the faces of his angels. one has to act his age sooner or later. Still, this little planet of rocks and grass is all we have to start with. How pretty it would be, the sweet faces of the boy Giotto's lambs gouged, with infinite and still uncertain and painful care, on the side of a boulder at the edge of a country field.
I wonder how long Cimabue stood watching before he said anything. I'll bet he watched for a very long time. He was Cimabue.
I wonder how long Giotto worked before he noticed that he was being watched. I'll bet he worked a very long time. He was Giotto. He probably paused every so often to take a drink of water and tend to the needs of his sheep, and then returned patiently to his patient boulder, before he heard over his shoulder in the twilight the courtesy of the Italian good evening from the countryside man who stood, certainly out of the little daylight left to the shepherd and his sheep alike.
I wonder where that boulder is. I wonder if the sweet faces of the lambs are still scratched on its sunlit side.
By God I know this much. Worse men than Giotto have lived

longer than Giotto lived.
And uglier things than Giotto's wobbly scratches on a coarse boulder at the edge of a grassy field are rotting and toppling into decay at this very moment. By the time I reach Padova at fifteen minutes past four this afternoon, I wouldn't be a bit surprised to hear that Rockefeller's Mall in Albany, New York, had begun to sag and ooze its grandiose slime all over the surrounding city of the plain, and it will stink in the nostrils of God Almighty like the incense burned and offered up as a putrid gift on the altars of the Lord, while the King Jeroboam the Second imprisoned the righteous for silver and sold the poor for the buckles on a pair of shoes.
Giotto's boyish hand scratched the sweet faces of lambs on a coarse stone.
I wonder where the stone is. I will never live to see it.
I lived to see the Mall in Albany, though.
In one of the mature Giotto's greatest glories, a huge choir of his unutterably beautiful angels are lifting their faces and are becoming the sons of the morning, singing out of pure happiness the praises of God.
Far back in the angelic choir, a slightly smaller angel has folded his wings. He has turned slightly away from the light and lifted his hands. You cannot even see his face. I don't know why he is weeping.
But I love him best.
I think he must be wondering how long it will take Giotto to remember him, give him a drink of water, and take him back home to the fold before it gets dark and shepherd and sheep alike lose their way in the darkness of the countryside.

James Arlington Wright

The Last Pieta, in Florence

The whole city
Is stone, even
Where stone
Doesn't belong.
What is that old
Man's public face
Doing sorrowing,
Secretly a little,
A little above and
A little back from
What is that stone
Doing sorrowing
Where stone
Doesn't belong?

James Arlington Wright

The Minneapolis Poem

to John Logan

1
I wonder how many old men last winter
Hungry and frightened by namelessness prowled
The Mississippi shore
Lashed blind by the wind, dreaming
Of suicide in the river.
The police remove their cadavers by daybreak
And turn them in somewhere.
Where?
How does the city keep lists of its fathers
Who have no names?
By Nicollet Island I gaze down at the dark water
So beautifully slow.
And I wish my brothers good luck
And a warm grave.

2
The Chippewa young men
Stab one another shrieking
Jesus Christ.
Split-lipped homosexuals limp in terror of assault.
High school backfields search under benches
Near the Post Office. Their faces are the rich
Raw bacon without eyes.
The Walker Art Center crowd stare
At the Guthrie Theater.

3
Tall Negro girls from Chicago
Listen to light songs.
They know when the supposed patron
Is a plainclothesman.
A cop’s palm
Is a roach dangling down the scorched fangs
Of a light bulb.
The soul of a cop’s eyes
Is an eternity of Sunday daybreak in the suburbs
Of Juárez, Mexico.

4
The legless beggars are gone, carried away
By white birds.
The Artificial Limbs Exchange is gutted
And sown with lime.
The whalebone crutches and hand-me-down trusses
Huddle together dreaming in a desolation

Of dry groins.
I think of poor men astonished to waken
Exposed in broad daylight by the blade
Of a strange plough.

5
All over the walls of comb cells
Automobiles perfumed and blindered
Consent with a mutter of high good humor
To take their two naps a day.
Without sound windows glide back
Into dusk.
The sockets of a thousand blind bee graves tier upon tier
Tower not quite toppling.
There are men in this city who labor dawn after dawn
To sell me my death.

6
But I could not bear
To allow my poor brother my body to die
In Minneapolis.
The old man Walt Whitman our countryman
Is now in America our country
Dead.
But he was not buried in Minneapolis
At least.
And no more may I be Please God.

7
I want to be lifted up
By some great white bird unknown to the police,
And soar for a thousand miles and be carefully hidden
Modest and golden as one last corn grain,
Stored with the secrets of the wheat and the mysterious lives
Of the unnamed poor.

James Arlington Wright

The Secret of Light

I am sitting contented and alone in a little park near the Palazzo Scaligere in Verona, glimpsing the mists of early autumn as they shift and fade among the pines and city battlements on the hills above the river Adige.

The river has recovered from this morning's rainfall. It is now restoring to its shapely body its own secret light, a color of faintly cloudy green and pearl.

Directly in front of my bench, perhaps thirty yards away from me, there is a startling woman. Her hair is black as the inmost secret of light in a perfectly cut diamond, a perilous black, a secret light that must have been studied for many years before the anxious and disciplined craftsman could achieve the necessary balance between courage and skill to stroke the strange stone and take the one chance he would ever have to bring that secret to light.

While I was trying to compose the preceding sentence, the woman rose from her park bench and walked away. I am afraid her secret might never come to light in my lifetime. But my lifetime is not the only one. I will never see her again. I hope she brings some other man's secret face to light, as somebody brought mine. I am startled to discover that I am not afraid. I am free to give a blessing out of my silence into that woman's black hair. I trust her to go on living. I believe in her black hair, her diamond that is still asleep. I would close my eyes to daydream about her. But those silent companions who watch over me from the insides of my eyelids are too brilliant for me to meet face to face.

The very emptiness of the park bench in front of mine is what makes me happy. Somewhere else in Verona at just this moment, a woman is sitting or walking or standing still upright. Surely two careful and accurate hands, total strangers to me, measure the invisible idea of the secret vein in her hair. They are waiting patiently until they know what they alone can ever know: that time when her life will pause in mid-flight for a split second. The hands will touch her black hair very gently. A wind off the river Adige will flutter past her. She will turn around, smile a welcome, and place a flawless and fully formed Italian daybreak into the hands.

I don't have any idea what his face will look like. The light still hidden inside his body is no business of mine. I am happy enough to sit in this park alone now. I turn my own face toward the river Adige. A little wind flutters off the water and brushes past me and returns.

It is all right with me to know that my life is only one life. I feel like the light of the river Adige.

By this time, we are both an open secret.

Verona

James Arlington Wright

To a Blossoming Pear Tree

Beautiful natural blossoms,
Pure delicate body,
You stand without trembling.
Little mist of fallen starlight,
Perfect, beyond my reach,
How I envy you.
For if you could only listen,
I would tell you something,
Something human.

An old man
Appeared to me once
In the unendurable snow.
He had a singe of white
Beard on his face.
He paused on a street in Minneapolis
And stroked my face.
Give it to me, he begged.
I'll pay you anything.

I flinched. Both terrified,
We slunk away,
Each in his own way dodging
The cruel darts of the cold.

Beautiful natural blossoms,
How could you possibly
Worry or bother or care
About the ashamed, hopeless
Old man? He was so near death
He was willing to take
Any love he could get,
Even at the risk
Of some mocking policeman
Or some cute young wiseacre
Smashing his dentures,
Perhaps leading him on
To a dark place and there
Kicking him in his dead groin
Just for the fun of it.

Young tree, unburdened
By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms
And dew, the dark
Blood in my body drags me
Down with my brother.

James Arlington Wright

To the Muse

It is all right. All they do
Is go in by dividing
One rib from another. I wouldn't
Lie to you. It hurts
Like nothing I know. All they do
Is burn their way in with a wire.
It forks in and out a little like the tongue
Of that frightened garter snake we caught
At Cloverfield, you and me, Jenny
So long ago.

I would lie to you
If I could.
But the only way I can get you to come up
Out of the suckhole, the south face
Of the Powhatan pit, is to tell you
What you know:

You come up after dark, you poise alone
With me on the shore.
I lead you back to this world.

Three lady doctors in Wheeling open
Their offices at night.
I don't have to call them, they are always there.
But they only have to put the knife once
Under your breast.
Then they hang their contraption.
And you bear it.

It's awkward a while. Still it lets you
Walk about on tiptoe if you don't
Jiggle the needle.
It might stab your heart, you see.
The blade hangs in your lung and the tube
Keeps it draining.
That way they only have to stab you
Once. Oh Jenny.

I wish to God I had made this world, this scurvy
And disastrous place. I
Didn't, I can't bear it
Either, I don't blame you, sleeping down there
Face down in the unbelievable silk of spring,
Muse of the black sand,
Alone.

I don't blame you, I know
The place where you lie.
I admit everything. But look at me.
How can I live without you?
Come up to me, love,

Out of the river, or I will
Come down to you.

James Arlington Wright

To the Saguaro Cactus Tree in the Desert Rain

I had no idea the elf owl
Crept into you in the secret
Of night.

I have torn myself out of many bitter places
In America, that seemed

Tall and green-rooted in mid-noon.
I wish I were the spare shadow
Of the roadrunner, I wish I were
The honest lover of the diamondback
And the tear the tarantula weeps.
I had no idea you were so tall
And blond in moonlight.
I got thirsty in the factories,
And I hated the brutal dry suns there,
So I quit.

You were the shadow
Of a hallway
In me.

I have never gone through that door,
But the elf owl's face
Is inside me.

Saguaro,
You are not one of the gods.
Your green arms lower and gather me.
I am an elf owl's shadow, a secret
Member of your family.

James Arlington Wright

Trying to Pray

This time, I have left my body behind me, crying
In its dark thorns.
Still,
There are good things in this world.
It is dusk.
It is the good darkness
Of women's hands that touch loaves.
The spirit of a tree begins to move.
I touch leaves.
I close my eyes and think of water.

James Arlington Wright

You And I Saw Hawks Exchanging The Prey

They did the deed of darkness
In their own mid-light.

He plucked a gray field mouse
Suddenly in the wind.

The small dead fly alive
Helplessly in his beak,

His cold pride, helpless.
All she receives is life.

They are terrified. They touch.
Life is too much.

She flies away sorrowing.
Sorrowing, she goes alone.

Then her small falcon, gone.
Will not rise here again.

Smaller than she, he goes
Claw beneath claw beneath
Needles and leaning boughs,

While she, the lovelier
Of these brief differing two,
Floats away sorrowing,

Tall as my love for you,

And almost lonelier.

Delighted in the delighting,
I love you in mid-air,
I love myself the ground.

The great wings sing nothing
Lightly. Lightly fall.

James Arlington Wright

Youth

Strange bird,
His song remains secret.
He worked too hard to read books.
He never heard how Sherwood Anderson
Got out of it, and fled to Chicago, furious to free himself
From his hatred of factories.
My father toiled fifty years
At Hazel-Atlas Glass,
Caught among girders that smash the kneecaps
Of dumb honyaks.
Did he shudder with hatred in the cold shadow of grease?
Maybe. But my brother and I do know
He came home as quiet as the evening.

He will be getting dark, soon,
And loom through new snow.
I know his ghost will drift home
To the Ohio River, and sit down, alone,
Whittling a root.
He will say nothing.
The waters flow past, older, younger
Than he is, or I am.

James Arlington Wright