

Memory and Landscape  
in the Work of  
James Wright



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## Chronology

- 1927 James Arlington Wright born December 13, the second son of Jessie and Dudley Wright, in Martins Ferry, Ohio.
- 1946 Graduates from Martins Ferry Senior High School; enlists in United States Army.
- 1946–1947 Serves tour of Army duty in Japan.
- 1948 Enters Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio.
- 1952 Marries Liberty Kardules, February 10, in the Greek Orthodox Church in Martins Ferry; completes degree at Kenyon; first poem published in *Western Review*; Fulbright scholar at the University of Vienna.
- 1953 Son Franz Paul born in Austria in March; begins graduate study at the University of Washington, Seattle.
- 1954 **The Green Wall** chosen for the Yale Series of Younger Poets.
- 1957 Accepts teaching appointment at University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; **The Green Wall** published; first important critical essay, "The Stiff Smile of Mr. Warren," appears in *Kenyon Review*.
- 1958 Initiates contact with Robert Bly; son Marshall born.
- 1959 **Saint Judas**.
- 1962 First marriage ends in divorce.
- 1963 **The Branch Will Not Break**; "Afterword" for Thomas Hardy's **Far From the Madding Crowd**.
- 1964 Teaches at Macalester College; translates **The Rider on the White Horse and Selected Stories** by Theodor Storm.
- 1965 Guggenheim fellowship, travels in California, Ohio, Minnesota, and New York.
- 1966 Accepts position in English department at Hunter College, New York.
- 1967 Marries Edith Anne Runk in New York.
- 1968 **Shall We Gather at the River**.
- 1970 Selects and translates **Poems** by Hermann Hesse.
- 1971 **Collected Poems**; fellowship in American Academy of Poets.

- 1972 Pulitzer Prize for **Collected Poems**; collaborates with son Franz on translation of Hesse's **Wandering**; travels in Europe.
- 1973 Death of father; **Two Citizens**.
- 1974 Death of mother; nervous breakdown.
- 1976 **Moments of the Italian Summer**.
- 1977 **To a Blossoming Pear Tree**.
- 1978 Guggenheim fellowship, travels in Europe.
- 1980 Dies in New York, March 25.
- 1981 **The Summers of James and Annie Wright**.
- 1982 **This Journey**.

“Seen up close, they are hideous and incomprehensible; seen from a distance, they are incomprehensible and hideous.” [Lora] “They seem arbitrary, unorganized; the images don’t combine to make poems. . . . I hope that he soon returns to the business of trying to make things add up in verse.” [Rubin]

Léon de Lora is speaking of Camille Pissaro’s work in the third showing of Impressionist paintings in 1877—the Impressionists in opposition to the *Salon* or *academic* painting of the time: taking on new subjects in new ways that seemed incomprehensible (and hideous). Painting has yet to be the same again.

Rubin is speaking of the **The Branch Will Not Break** [J. Wright; 1963], James Wright’s first collection of poems written in his new, less academic style. James Wright is well-known for a dramatic change: from a formal, rhymed, metric, rhetorical, distanced style to free verse and personal deep imagery. Wright was not the first to use this style, but since Wright adopted it, poetry has yet to be the same again.

Wright’s change is a journey of escape from Martins Ferry, Ohio—his hometown—during which he found the Italian landscape, the poetry of Trakl, Lorca, and Vallejo, Martins Ferry once more, his life, and himself.

In this essay we will look at Wright’s use of memory and landscape as it evolved over his writing career. In examining this evolution we will focus on the craft elements of form and point of view.

## 1. Introduction

James Wright was born and raised in Martins Ferry in the Ohio River Valley in Ohio. His childhood in this blue-collar, post-Depression landscape never escaped him though his (stated) goal was to escape it. He never could. He tried to substitute liter-

ary memory for these specific and personal memories in his poetry: Allusion, trope, figurative language, and formal and rhetorical devices in place of inner landscape. Because at the time there was really no alternative, he became an *academic* poet. In academic poetry the form is strict and classical, the voice is distanced and perhaps represents a persona, an important element is the use of irony, and typically the subject matter is social commentary. This is the way poets in Wright's generation wrote and what Wright's teachers taught.

But his memories of Martins Ferry were too strong, and the poetry he wrote early in his career was too stifling for him. Over his career he consciously struggled to find a way to address these memories, and as he did, his poetic strategies changed. With good advice and happenstance he managed to find a way to allow those memories to create a landscape for him from which he could make his experiences real for his readers and to change his point of view from a distanced and impersonal one to an immediate and personal one.

In this essay the terms *memory*, *landscape*, *point of view*, and *form* are central and deserve some discussion.

## 1.1 Memory

Memory is a curious set of brain mechanisms, curiously fragile and subject to frequent failures. Nevertheless, it is the only source of reality we have—every fragment of the physical world has its only reality to us through our memories of experiences in it.

This is a scientific fact, but in Wright this fact has poetic impact. W.H. Auden, in his introduction to **The Green Wall** [J. Wright; 1957], writes:

*[I]n Mr. Wright's poems, as in nearly all modern poetry, the present is not unhappy but unreal, and it is memories, pleasant or unpleasant, which are celebrated for their own sake as the real past.*

...

*Given the circumstances of modern life, the feeling that only memories are real is to be expected. When a man usually lived in the house where his father and grandfather had lived before him, the past still existed in the present, not just in his memories but objectively about him. Today when men change not only their house but their part of the world every few years, their present circumstances become more and more impersonal, subjective memories more and more important.*[Auden; 1957]

James Wright had no choice but to be subject to the realities of memory. If so, we can expect that what we learn from his work is what the protagonist, Maxwell Kosegarten, learned in Matthew Stadler's aptly named novel **Landscape: Memory** when he was painting a landscape he had seen several years earlier. The painting develops slowly, over time, as Maxwell recalls and explores his memory. As he paints, he confronts the discrepancy between the view of memory as a static reproduction and what his own experience is telling him. He writes:

*. . . if my memory ought to be an accurate replica of the original experience, if that was so, my painting was hopelessly inaccurate. It was a bad painting of a fuzzy memory. But I preferred to think that memory is never frozen, nor should it be. My painting was a successful rendering of the dynamic memory that had simply begun with the original event. . . . My painting, I figured, was so very accurate in its depiction of this memory that it would inevitably look wrong when compared to the original model.*[Stadler, p. 144]

## 1.2 Landscape

Landscape and place were very important to Wright; he says:

*D. H. Lawrence has a very beautiful essay about "The Spirit of Place." He is talking in particular of American places but I think that what he says is true of all places. There is a spirit of place. Virgil was aware of this. I think that he uses the word *imago*, which isn't simply image but is also presence. We still speak of the genius of a place. I believe James Dickey, in a wonderful poem of his which is plainly the idea for his novel **Deliverance**, speaks of a man who appears, a country person, a redneck I guess you'd call him, by the side of the Coosawattee River; he suddenly appears when Dickey and some friends in their canoes have got into*

*some trouble. One has hurt himself I think. They come over to the bank of the river and the man appears there. Dickey calls him the presiding genius of the place. There is such a genius of place, a presence, and because there is, people's feelings accumulate about it. You can share in that feeling when you become aware of particular historical events and the significance of monuments and so on.*

*The American Indians, the Sioux, had such a sense of place. Fred Manfred, a wonderful midwestern novelist, pointed this out to me, that the Sioux and other Indians as well had a sense that certain areas were holy ground. He said that more than once in writing his novels and in wandering around and doing research the way he does, not just reading old books but trying to get the feel of places he would write about, he realized that there was something special about certain areas of southern Minnesota. He later discovered the Indians considered it sacred ground. I think that this is, for some writers, an important way of participating in the life around them. I'm not saying that the value of poetry depends on writing about a place or not writing about a place, only that there is a kind of poetry which is a poetry of place. It appeals to me very much. There are so many different ways that language can come alive or be brought alive that it is silly to limit the kinds of poetry there could be. I think it is enough to say that there is, in our lives, a genius of place and so, appropriately, we sometimes value a poetry of place.*

[A. Wright, p. 194]

Landscape is not limited to physical setting but includes people, events, ideas, concepts, principles, words, works, and just about anything subject to memory. Because all experience is filtered through memory, memory becomes landscape.

Landscape serves at least two functions in poetry: Landscape provides the descriptive material of many poems, and it provides a way for the poet to return to the nurturing soil of the psyche. Though in some poems landscape may serve merely to set the scene in an almost cinematic sense, the choice of details to show, the use of the landscape to provide the image part of metaphors, the painting of tone and mood over a poem by the tone and mood of its description, and the tagging of specifics in a scene by mood, attitude, time, and desire provide strategies for a poet to evoke a particular response or



set of responses from the reader. On the other hand, landscape memories serve as the wellspring of reflective life, which forms the basis, in the strictest sense, of poetry.

These two views of landscape form a spectrum which Wright traverses from his early writing career to its end. The academic poet explicitly trying to create an effect in a reader uses landscape to create poetic effects that “go off” in the reader’s head. The feeling poet implicitly trying to mine or further react to experiences uses the internal landscape provided by memory and emotional reactions to it as an emotional Petri dish.

Using James Wright as an example, the Ohio River Valley and Martins Ferry, Ohio, provide a landscape that Wright uses throughout his poems, from the earliest work in the late ’50’s through his last work in the late ’70’s. People and events from his childhood in Ohio form a persistent, even obsessive, set of topics, and the landscape of that valley is constantly popping up, even in passing, from his first collection to his last.

With Wright we have an excellent opportunity to see how his work evolved by observing how his treatment of the landscape of the Ohio River Valley changed as his style and approach to poetry changed and as his experiences with other landscapes broadened—through his experiences in the river valleys of Italy and through his experiences of other types of poetry by such writers as Lorca, Vallejo, Neruda, and especially Trakl. Each of these poets use (deep) images as a primary structuring form—the ordering of images and the movement in the mind of the reader following and integrating them as well as their resonances form a structure as meaningful as rhyme and meter in more explicitly formal poems.

In Wright’s early work, he sometimes tried to make reasoned points in a distanced, highly rhetorical and formal style, using the landscape of the Ohio River Valley as a source. In his later work, through occasionally deep and surrealistic imagery, a James Wright emerges as a close-up, engaged speaker and observer, the layers of rhetoric and

formality are washed away, and all that's left is the emotional experience for the reader to react to in whatever way is appropriate. This change mirrors a change in Wright and in the culture. The change in Wright was to accept his memories and dormant landscape and to live with and in them as a source of emotional material, to work with them as a living part of himself rather than as objects to be used or places and events to regret. The change in the culture was from the stifling '50's through the aggressive '60's to the melancholic '70's; in general, poetry moved from formal to free, and from academic to confessional.

Most importantly, though, the change going on that most affected Wright was his maturing into a grown man who wrote poetry, a poet who could write the lines: ***Suddenly I realize/That if I stepped out of my body I would break/Into blossom.*** ["A Blessing"; 1963]

### 1.3 Point of View

Point of view is the position—metaphorical, literal, and attitudinal—from which the speaker of the poem speaks. The **Longman's Dictionary of Poetic Terms** defines *point of view* this way:

*the physical, mental, or personal perspective an author maintains toward the events he recounts. The physical p.ov. is the angle of view and time frame from which a story is told. The mental p.o.v. is the perspective of consciousness and emotional attitude an author maintains toward his story. If the story is told in the first-person, the speaker is a participant and has emotional, subjective power of an involved witness. The second person allows more distance, thus more objective freedom, and carries a demanding, sometimes accusatory tone. The third person offers different kinds of freedom:(1) that of the omniscient in which the speaker freely roams around his characters and their thoughts and actions, either intruding with editorial comments or remaining impersonal; and (2) that of limited p.ov. in which the speaker limits himself to the view of one character's thoughts and actions, sometimes reporting objectively the state of consciousness of that character. [Myers]*

A point of view for a particular poem is determined by all the materials available in the poem and to some extent those outside it. Therefore, a point of view takes into account who is apparently speaking, who is actually speaking, who is performing actions talked about and described, who is listening, who can hear, and what is being said. This sounds complex, but often a reader will immediately disentangle it.

#### 1.4 Form

When we think of form we first think of devices such as meter and rhyme. Early Wright (**The Green Wall** [1957] and **Saint Judas** [1959b]) is largely written in a rhymed iambic, which labelled Wright a formal poet. As his career progressed, Wright loosened the grip of meter and rhyme to the extent that his transformation from formal to free verse was studied and celebrated. This change was conscious though perhaps not entirely planned, and in this essay we'll look at some of the reasons for his change. Each of the interviews with Wright in **Collected Prose** [A. Wright] contains questions about his change of style. Nevertheless, Wright maintained that his attentiveness to form never wavered and that the so-called freedom of free verse required additional attention to form lest the work degenerate into

*bad prose hacked into arbitrary line lengths. It seems to me, as I look around whatever little magazines are sent to me, that we are practically inundated with bad prose hacked into such lines.* [A. Wright, p. 206]

Wright felt he never gave up writing formally. He says:

*I don't think I've dropped traditional forms. That is, I tried in some later poems to make further experiments in the formal possibilities of the American language. But I think that all poetry is formal. Images are always fairly sparing; I've never written a richly metaphorical poetry. My own ideal, which I've tried to accommodate to whatever abilities I have, is really a neo-classical one. I believe in the kind of poem which does have a single effect, and I try to subordinate whatever I know about language to one single effect, every time.* [A. Wright, p. 134]

In claiming neo-classicism, Wright is claiming to adhere to the

*17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century revival of Greek and especially Latin stylistic qualities of balance, decorum, polish, thoroughness, and accuracy, as espoused in Horace's "Ars Poetica." Neo-classicism holds that poetry should focus on social man as its subject; it should be written in strict forms such as the closed couplet; and it should be used to instruct and delight. [Myers]*

When asked what form is, Wright answered as follows:

*I don't mean form in the abstract. I mean what anyone would mean when he talks about rhetoric. I mean the proper words in the proper places. That's all. We have mentioned Robert Creeley's idea that form is no more than an extension to content. I think I follow what Creeley is saying and as far as I follow it, I think it is sound. [A. Wright, p. 216]*

Note that this echoes Horace's words:

*Of order, this, if I mistake not, will be the excellence and charm that the author of the long-promised poem shall say at the moment what at that moment should be said, reserving and omitting much for the present, loving this point and scorning that. [Horace]*

Wright's movement from strict formal devices to a looser formality—to accede to his own evaluation—seems accompanied by a movement closer to the person behind the poetry; we begin to see the poet more closely as the point of view becomes clearer and more clearly centered on Wright himself. With this clarity of point of view, this better attunement of the words and form to the material supplied by memory, and a less heavy-handed use of landscape, we see Wright's poetry clarify to what he himself preferred to think of as clear, plain speech. On the topic of clarity, Wright says:

*What I hope to write is a poetry which is consecutive and clear. Sometimes I have written obscurely and sometimes I have written limply. But in these cases I know I have just written badly. That is not what I was trying to do or hoped to do. . . . Eliot . . . argued that poetry has been most vital when it has been closest to good prose and yet has been able somehow to retain its own character. I take it that its*

*own character finally has something to do with rhythm, a regularity of rhythm or a clear variation on regularity. [A. Wright, p. 206]*

Wright continues:

*I would like to write something that would be immediately and prosaically comprehensible to a reasonably intelligent reader. That is all. That is all I mean by being clear, but it is very difficult for me. This is a Horatian idea. It is the attempt to write, as one critic said once of the extraordinarily and beautifully strong writer Katherine Anne Porter, so that “every one of her effects is calculated but they never give the effect of calculation.” We read a story like her **Noon Wine** and it is what we call seamless. It is almost impossible to pick that story apart and find her constructing a beginning, middle, and end. When you read the whole thing you do realize, and not just with your feelings but with your intelligence, that what you have just looked at is a living thing. It has a form. She hasn’t written in bulk, never in such bulk as, say, Edward Bulwer-Lytton. And yet, her work has a certain largeness about it because it is so alive. I think that she has thought very clearly and carefully about the need to make things clear to a reasonably intelligent reader of good will. As for other kinds of readers, well there are fools in the world, and bastards. [A. Wright, pp. 215–216]*

In striving for the clear, single effect, Wright uses rhyme, rhythm, parallel images, and rhetorical structure to lead the reader in a particular direction. In his later work Wright was accused of being surrealistic, and his use of images can be confusing, but each contributes to at least an overall mood, which is sometimes the topic of Wright’s poems. In responding to criticism of “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota,” from **The Branch Will Not Break** [J. Wright; 1963], Wright says:

*[I] think that the poem is a description of a mood and this kind of poem is the kind of poem that has been written for thousands of years by the Chinese poets. . . . And that poem, although I hope it is a description of my mood as I lay in that hammock, is clearly an imitation of that Chinese manner. It is not surrealistic. [A. Wright, p. 221]*

## 2. Why Did Wright Change?

In the introduction we saw numerous references to Wright's change in style and approach to poetry. We could simply catalog the change and trace the source of inspiration for each technical and formal alteration—which poets influenced him at which points. But none of that would make any statement about why Wright made this change—and one of Wright's most significant legacies is that he made such a dramatic change.

We probably don't know all of Wright's personal motivations—such things are essentially unknowable—but we can gather some clues. The first is in an essay by Robert Bly called “The Work of James Wright.” Bly was a friend of Wright's, and they translated a number of Spanish, South American, and German poets together. Bly writes:

*During a year's stay in Vienna in 1952–53, he had come to know Trakl's poems. Comparing Trakl's poems to his own, he came to the conclusion that his own work was not actually poetry; it had not helped anyone else to solitude, and had not helped him toward solitude: “Mother of roots, you have not seeded/The tall ashes of loneliness/For me. Therefore/Now I go.” He felt the discrepancy enough so that he decided to stop writing poetry entirely.*

*American criticism in the fifties had been almost worthless in helping the younger poets to get a clear view of their work. Mr. Wright's work, even the weakest of it, was praised to the skies, along with everyone else's. One of the first attacks came from James Dickey, when he reviewed *New Poets of England and America* in 1958 for the *Sewanee Review*. Dickey ripped the book to shreds, lumping Wright in with the others of the “school of charm,” and referred contemptuously to his “plodding sincerity.” Wright replied. The *Sewanee Review* undertook to print an exchange of letters, lengthy and angry on both sides. The exchange was finally canceled when Wright decided that those who had criticized his work harshly, Dickey among them, were right. He had already concluded that the poetry he had written so far was not poetry, but verse, and if it were possible for his generation to write only verse, it would be better to write nothing at all. [Bly; 1990, p. 100]*

In a letter to Theodore Roethke, dated August 5, 1958, Wright says:

*I have been depressed as hell. My stuff stinks, and you know it. . . . What makes this so ironically depressing, as I say, is that I am trapped by the very thing—the traditional technique—which I labored so hard to attain. . . . I work like hell, chipping away perhaps one tiny pebble per day from the ten-mile-thick granite wall of formal and facile “technique” which I myself erected, and which now stands ominously between me and whatever poetry may be in me. [Elkins, p. 80]*

Finally, Donald Hall, in the introduction to **Above the River**, writes (note that “At The Executed Murderer’s Graves<sub>J</sub>” refers to the **Saint Judas** version of “At The Executed Murder’s Grave”—there are two other versions we will examine):

*If Saint Judas was the best he could attain to, in the old mode, it was also the end of it. In 1958, in July, he wrote me a letter (I’m sure similar letters went to others) in which he announced that he was through writing poems. Another poet had mildly assaulted Jim in a review of the first New Poets anthology, and Jim’s first reaction had been thirty scurrilous epigrams and an insulting letter . . . but now he turned his violence upon himself. In this letter he spoke of “denying the darker and wilder side of myself for the sake of subsisting on mere comfort—both academic and poetic.” The first issue of Robert Bly’s magazine, *The Fifties*, which he read at this crucial point, arrived like a reproach. (He did not yet know Bly.) He told me: “So I quit. I have been betraying whatever was true and courageous . . . in myself and in everyone else for so long, that I am still fairly convinced that I have killed it. So I quit.” In the letter he called himself “a literary operator (and one of the slickest, cleverest, most ‘charming’ concoctors of the do-it-yourself New Yorker verse among all current failures). . . .” James Wright’s readers will recognize that he is about to write “At the Executed Murderer’s Graves<sub>J</sub>.”*

*A day later he wrote again, admitting that “I can’t quit and go straight. I’m too deep in debt to the Olympian syndicate. They’d rub me out.” (This is Roethke talk, who during mania often alluded to *The Mob*.) Later he said, “It was my old, shriveling, iambic self that struck. . . .” He continued to write iambic as he attacked his old iambic self; he was at the same time the fox and the hounds, turned upon himself in the corrosive iambics of “At the Executed Murderer’s Graves<sub>J</sub>” neatly berating himself for neatness—and of course beginning to find his way out. It was a way out, not really from iambic—arrangements of softer and louder syllables are guiltless— but from associations of diction and thought with iambic. [Hall; 1990, pp. xxix–xxx]*

It is one thing to encounter poetry so different and so differently moving from one's own as it was for Wright to encounter Georg Trakl, but when one is attacked in print for what one thinks is good work—work “praised to the skies” in prestigious corners—it requires little effort to defend first and perhaps only later consider. Were Wright not thoroughly a poet, defensiveness and a thrilling public exchange over whether one's work is good or bad would be an excusable indulgence, but Wright was poet enough to see that with the example of such a powerful poet as Trakl on one hand and criticism on the other pushing for such work as Trakl's, it was worth examining his own work and his approach to it.

The young Wright was an academic poet, a poet who wrote poetry that “[emphasized] . . . conventions, manner, and decorum instead of feeling, spontaneity, and sincerity.” [Collier, p. xxvii] In “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” Robert Bly writes:

*Our recent poetry is also a poetry in which the poem is considered to be a construction independent of the poet. It is imagined that when the poet says “I” in a poem he does not mean himself, but rather some other person— “the poet”—a dramatic hero. The poem is conceived as a clock which one sets going. This idea encourages the poet to construct automated and flawless machines. Such poems have thousands of intricately moving parts, dozens of iambic belts and pulleys precision trippers that rhyme at the right moment, lights flashing alternately red and green, steam valves that whistle like birds. This is the admired poem. Richard Wilbur, for all his ability, fell a victim to this narrow conception of the poem. His early “Water Walker,” written before this oppressive concept of the poem penetrated him, remains his most personal and freshest poem. Robert Lowell in **Lord Weary's Castle** constructed machines of such magnitude that he found it impossible to stop them. Like the automated, chainreacting tool of the sorcerer's apprentice, the poems will not obey. The references to Mary or Jesus that end several of them are last-minute expedients, artistically dishonest and resembling a pile of cloths thrown into a machine to stop it.*

*The great poets of this century have written their poems in exactly the opposite way. In the poems of Neruda, Vallejo, Jiminez, Machado, Rilke, the poem is an extension of the substance of the man, no different from his skin or his hands. The*



*substance of the man who wrote the poem reaches far out into the darkness and the poem is his whole body, seeing with his ears and his fingers and his hair.* [Bly; 1982, pp. 23–24]

When we look at Wright's movement from an academic poet to an informal one, we'll see some of these caricatures at work—especially we will observe that in early Wright it sometimes is difficult to see who the speaker is aside from a constructed person, and memory and landscape are sources of ideas for intellectually inspired arguments or declarations. In later Wright we see the influences of Trakl, Neruda, and others, and we see the distance from Wright diminish at times to zero, and we will see Wright use the Ohio River Valley and his Italian landscapes as sources of nurturing for his poetic self-examination.

### 3. How Did I Get Here?

The advice I received for how to select an essay topic was to think of a poet whose work I felt passionate about. When I was annotating Wright I had selected one of his collections but read it in his collected works. For reasons I didn't understand at the time, I read the entire collected works, starting with **Shall We Gather at the River** and spiralling outward. Perhaps it was because Wright's work taken together is one large, long poem—almost an autobiography.

As I read more of and about Wright, I noticed that I was at the same place he was when his work was criticized and he realized he was stuck in the academic tarpit. Though I am not a published, admired poet as Wright was when he saw the need for a turning, like Wright when he saw that need, I am entrenched in the idea of what the form of poems ought to be, and I use conscious, plotting thought to construct something like what that image dictates. There is a distance to the voice in my poems, landscape and memory are used as fodder for arguments or constructed emotional

situations, and there is little poetry in the beautiful verses I put together. The similarities with Wright are more striking than this: I grew up in the deeply blue-collar Merrimack River Valley in Massachusetts in the 1950's and 1960's when all we could think about was escape (and my father, like Wright's, did not escape), that landscape and events from that place form an obsessive set of topics for me, and I have written a long poem (or series of poems) about a well-publicized set of murders (though they took place elsewhere in another landscape that obsesses me).

By studying Wright's transformation I hope to begin one myself. The stakes are high because marrying the inner landscape of memory with the outer one of place to form a coherent point of view requires an inner discovery that perhaps I am too entrenched as a person to do.

## 4. The Works

In this essay we look at a total of 7 poems—5 essential poems and two earlier versions of one of them. The poems are as follows:

- “A Poem about George Doty in the Death House,” from **The Green Wall**  
[J. Wright; 1957]
- “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” three versions, from **Botteghe Oscure, Poetry,**  
and **Saint Judas** [J. Wright; 1958, 1959a, 1959b]
- “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” from **The Branch Will Not Break**  
[J. Wright; 1963]
- “The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” from **Two Citizens**  
[J. Wright; 1973]
- “Above San Fermo,” from **This Journey**, [J. Wright; 1982]

These poems form a spine through Wright’s work, serving to demonstrate his movement from metered rhymed verse written through the dark landscape of the Ohio River Valley to free verse written through the light landscape of Italy. Even in the last poems, Wright keeps on using the Ohio landscape, but his attitude toward it and his approach to poetry changes significantly from beginning to end.

### 4.1 “A Poem about George Doty in the Death House”

In the 1950’s, a (possibly) retarded taxi driver from Belaire, Ohio, named George Doty picked up a young woman, made a pass at her which she rejected, then raped and murdered her. He was put on trial and eventually executed. Something about this man and these events caught hold of Wright because he wrote “A Poem about George Doty in

the Death House” and, a few years later, three published versions of “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave” about Doty and his fate. As Wright puts it himself:

*I was preoccupied with that because it startled me for a while, the whole notion of how little we human beings understand one another. I was preoccupied with how, back in Ohio, a taxi driver named George Doty from Bellaire, drove a girl out in the country and made a pass at her, which she resisted, so he banged her in the head with a tree branch and killed her. I was convinced that he didn’t really know what in the hell was happening. He had stumbled into something evil, a murder he had committed, but I don’t think that he understood anything about the legal proceedings. Many people in that community thought he was terribly wicked, but he did not seem to me wicked. He was just a dumb guy who suddenly was thrust into the middle of the problem of evil and he was not able to handle it. I thought it was ridiculous to execute him and, further, I thought that murder is murder whether the state commits it or some stupid, retarded taxi driver. That is what I was trying to say. [A. Wright, p. 211]*

In these poems Wright was concerned about the relationships between good and evil, living and dying, us and them, inside and outside, judge and judged, heaven and hell, and Martins Ferry and escape from there. He also seemed to be struggling to find how to write poems that used his memories of childhood in Martins Ferry without using them merely as props or fodder but to somehow get at the essential experiences behind them.

The poem is reproduced on the next page.

This is an academic poem: The form is strict and classical, the voice is distanced and perhaps represents a persona, an important element is the use of irony, and the subject matter is social commentary.

#### 4.1.0.1 Form

The first thing to notice about the poem is its shape. The poem is tall and thin like the wall that encloses Doty. We don’t know whether this is the primary effect Wright in-

tended when he chose the iambic trimeter line or whether the primary effect was a sense of urgency that the short lines produce. But, the word *wall* appears 5 times in the poem. The poem itself forms a wall between Wright and the reader through abstraction, distance, and its overbearing form.

**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-eyed.  
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 in hears the bums complain;  
But I mourn no soul but his,  
Nor even the bums who die,  
Nor the homely girl whose cry  
Crumbled his pleading kiss.

The poem comprises 6 8-line stanzas, each stanza is a pair of In-Memorium quatrains (rhymed *abba*), all in iambic trimeter. This is an appropriate though ironic choice for the subject matter: The In-Memorium quatrain is frequently used for (longer) elegiac works—ironic because Doty was alive when the poem was written. The only apparent major variation in the trimeter—and in the logical flow of the poem—occurs in the 5<sup>th</sup> line of the last stanza (*But I mourn no soul but his*).

In choosing this form, Wright, as he did in much of his early work, demonstrates his expertise with traditional forms and his thoroughness at exploiting the form: Neo-classicism executed in high academic style.

The In-Memorium quatrain forms an envelope or enclosure, which meshes (perhaps a little too neatly) with the theme of this poem which centers on the incarceration of Doty by those who would simply find the symbolic cancerous part of themselves and society and cut it off, forgetting that what is thus removed is as human as what remains.

In looking at the strengths of the form, we note that the first such quatrain is, in some ways, the strongest:

*Lured by the wall and drawn  
To stare below the roof  
Where pigeons nest aloof  
From prowling cats and men,*

It demonstrates the connection between the purpose of the poem and the structure of the quatrains by showing that the pigeons, **aloof** (alone at the top of the wall), are safe from the predation of **cats and men** while still being held captive by them—their safety requires them to roost in particular places, which shows that their predators control them. The “us” versus “them” dichotomy is thereby established, a theme persistent in Wright’s work.

The incidental rhyme of **lured** (first stanza) and **immured** (second stanza) leads us to expect an exciting intertwining of the quatrains and stanzas, but none appears.

One could argue that the last quatrain is the strongest, but this is perhaps merely the aura of surprise:

*But I mourn no soul but his,  
Not even the bums who die,  
Not the homely girl whose cry  
Crumbled his pleading kiss.*

The inner couplet here contains syntactically parallel phrases (**Not . . . who . . . / Not . . . whose . . .**) and repeated sounds and denials in **But . . . but . . . . Not . . . . Not**, and the boldness of statement is intriguing. However, the bold statement is bold only as a real-world statement—as the end of a poem with this form it is no surprise at all.

The second line of a couplet in an In-Memorium quatrain—the third line overall—receives additional strength. This makes the terrible rhyme (**Immured, empty of love / A man I have wondered of**) of **love** and **wondered of** particularly awful. This and the dense

rhymes in this couplet (*empty of, love, wondered of*) makes one suspect the poem is either over-clever or not entirely serious—maybe it's just technical showing off.

The In-Memorium stanza in iambic trimeter locks out emotion because the rhyme scheme is so dominant in such short lines, and the trimeter is so forceful in its sing-songiness that what emotions emerge are pantomimes.

Finally, the poem is built around the irony of the word *pleading* in the last line. Pleading is what Doty was doing in trying to assert his humanity to a young woman in the Ohio River Valley—and what he did after his pleas were rebuked (rape and murder) and where it landed him (in the death house) are the ironies Wright seeks to elaborate. The last line (*Crumbled his pleading kiss*) clicks closed as neatly as is possible to do.

#### 4.1.0.2 Point of View

The speaker is aloof, and the point of view is one of an abstract observer who emerges, if at all, through statements of observation. He is lured to the scene. He describes the prison vaguely and the events of Doty's downfall in sketch only, and speaks of the bums in terms only of their hunger, cold, and peaceful withering. After describing the horrific physical and psychological/ontological state of Doty, Wright declares that he mourns for Doty more than anyone else. The speaker comes through only in the way he chooses to describe the scenes, because all he really does in the poem is *count* and *mourn*. Most precisely, the point of view is objective through the persona of a speaker. The diction is distancing and preaching, sometimes melodramatic. It is the diction of an argument or a speech aimed at converting. There is so much distance from the speaker, from the perfunctory *I* in this poem, that readers have difficulty believing his empathy for Doty.

#### 4.1.0.3 Landscape, Memory, and the Overall Poem

The landscape is barren: walls, enclosures, *granite stone*, *daylight gone*, silence, *empty of love*, *vacant-eyed*, *darkening ground*, snow, twilight, hunger and cold, withering away, *barren wall*, *daemons beyond sound*, and *the broken ground*. The gestures of hope in the poem are *cleanly shaven chin*, *he rose/For love*, and the *pleading kiss*, all of which are rejected or come to a bad end. In revealing these details, the speaker has revealed himself without much hope or optimism.

What seems repeated are dichotomies: inside/outside, us/them, the authorities/the people, clean/dirty, life/death, heaven/hell. There is little of the poet in this poem, and little about the landscape of his home. The poem is an intellectual exercise not an emotional or revelatory one.

Finally, let's consider the poem from the point of view of content. We learn from the title that the poem is, on the surface, about a particular man who is going to be executed. We learn that the speaker is outside the walls of the prison and get a very brief sketch of the events of the crime. Then we get a comparison with some other convicts and an abstract or mythological explanation of how Doty came to be the way he is and what he was trying to do. Finally there is a confession about how the speaker feels about the situation.

There is no reason for a reader to sympathize with Doty—the details of the crime are too abstract—nor is there a reason for the speaker to. All we get is a carefully controlled formal structure (which lends little to the progress of the poem). In the end, the success of the poem depends on the outrageousness of the speaker's sympathy for Doty and the irony of his pleading kiss. But in the frame of the poem, sympathy is almost demanded by the structure and flow of argument.



## 4.2 “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave”

Not content with his treatment of Doty, Wright wrote another poem, called “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” which he published in three different versions. The first was in *Botteghe Oscure*, the second in *Poetry*, and the last appeared in *Saint Judas*. We will look at the earlier versions to see the development toward the final version, which represents a dramatic break from the objective, distant, academic poetry we saw in “A Poem about George Doty in the Death House.”

### 4.2.1 “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave<sub>BO</sub>”

#### At the Executed Murderer’s Grave<sub>BO</sub>

Reflective calm, you tangle, root and bone,  
Fang, fist, and skull, that huddle down alone.  
Sparrows above him, sneaking like police,  
Peck at the lawn, the hedge, the careful trees.  
Man’s wild blood has no heart to overcome  
Vengeance and summer and the lily’s bloom.  
Henceforth, so long as I myself shall live,  
Earth will be torn, the mind be fugitive.  
My shadow flees me over matted stone:  
Father and citizen, I killed this man,  
This man who killed another who might kill  
Another who might slay another still  
Till the tall shadows of mankind are cast  
Bodiless on the empty stars at last.  
Rage and destruction trouble me, and fade.  
The casual flocks of sunbeam round my head  
Flutter away to dusk, and I am dark,  
Peering between the granites for his mark.  
Slow hills away, the milch-cows pause and yawn,  
Wondering when day will go, and man be gone:  
That one man, angry at the heart’s release,  
This brutal pastoral, this unholy peace.

The first and shortest of the three versions was published in *Botteghe Oscure* [J. Wright; 1959a]. It is reproduced to the left.

#### 4.2.1.1 Form

The lines are loosely iambic with between 4 and 7 stresses per line, rhymed in couplets. Rhymes establish an important relationships: Two rhymed words are equal or equivalent, or at least are parallel in some dimension. Examples include *live/fugitive* (to live in society is to be a fugitive), *stone/man* (men are as valued as stones or ought to be as stones, emotionally, to escape the horrors of society), and *release/peace* (the only peace is in the release of death). There is also internal rhyme (*tangle/fang*, *calm/lawn*, *henceforth/earth*, *father/another*), but of these only *father/another* seems to have any nontrivial significance toward the purpose of the poem. *Ell* sounds are repeated, especially in the center of the poem (*lily, live, killed, killed, kill, slay, still*,

*till, tall*), intensifying the formal music of the poem. The form is relatively simple—problematic only in placing rhetorical distance between the speaker and the reader.

#### 4.2.1.2 Point of View

The point of view is more complex than the overall form, particularly because of the beginning move of a false second person point of view: *Reflective calm, you tangle, root and bone, / Fang, fist, and skill, that huddle down alone*. The remainder of the poem is a meditative monologue in which the identity of the speaker smears into a universal I (*Father and citizen, I killed this man*) that represents society (or Belmont County)—society, not a particular person, executed Doty.

The point of view is restrained because the tone is flatly rhetorical, though there are other tones—for instance, the lines *Henceforth, so long as I myself shall live, / Earth will be torn, the mind be fugitive* are Old-Testament biblical, and the lines *Casual flocks of sunbeams round my head / Flutter away to dusk, and I am dark* reveals a distant passion which Wright adopts in many of the poems in **The Green Wall** and **Saint Judas**. In places, the tone is explicitly apathetic as where he says *Rage and destruction trouble me, and fade*. Perhaps this reveals an attitude toward the concepts presented, but as the prevailing tone, it alienates the reader. Whatever strong passions there might have been become—through helpless contemplation—harmlessly dark, a darkness which pervades Wright's early work:

*The casual flocks of sunbeam round my head  
Flutter away to dusk, and I am dark*

Rhetorical detachment and self-consciousness of the poetic diction can be seen in the line *My shadow flees me over matted stone*. The scene is simple: The speaker is walking through the cemetery and his shadow is moving along the ground and up and over gravestones. Of course, there is a metaphorical intent behind the choice of words, but

the overall effect is a kind of obscurity or puzzle that makes the reader work (too) hard for what is gained. The diction is high poetic—the phrase *mattocked stone* is sonically beautiful, and *mattock* might require a trip to the dictionary.

What emerges from listening to the diction and looking at the form is that there is a lot of energy pent up in the poem, and its form contains the energy only because Wright applied intense thought and extravagant poetic mechanics. The result is a restless speaker artificially contained by the poem. The other two versions of this poem are much longer and expansive, which is a measure of the tightness in this version.

#### 4.2.1.3 Landscape, Memory, and the Overall Poem

The landscape is stark: a cemetery, some sparrows, roots, trees, a lily, stars, and the final image of cows on a nearby slow hill sleepily awaiting mankind to annihilate itself, mankind represented by one angry man. This is the landscape we come to associate with Wright's view of his childhood Ohio as revealed by this and other poems. However, this view is a poetic landscape cobbled together from actual memories of his childhood home and landscapes from other, earlier poets—Yeats and Auden come to mind. It is a sort of figurative landscape, not yet an emotional resource *directly* accessible to Wright.

In this poem, landscape emerges as an overall mood or background feeling, as an attitude toward Wright's topic and generated by that topic and its connection to his memory of Ohio and the incident of Doty's case. We will see it more clearly in the other versions of this poem, but Wright's stance toward Doty's case is that the Ohio River Valley created a hell with particular rules to follow to survive, and no one was given a choice about whether to follow them or not. When Doty was unable to follow those rules—rules inherently unfair for anyone let alone someone with Doty's limitations—

he was punished by being cut off from humanity and life, and Wright feels that humanity has no business judging people that way, especially when the consequences are so absolute. Such judgment is reserved only for God in the last days, in Wright's estimation, but mankind has taken it upon itself to pass such judgments.

#### 4.2.2 "At the Executed Murderer's Grave"

Wright published a second version of the poem in *Poetry* [J. Wright; 1958]. Considerably longer than the *Botteghe Oscure* version, it is more ambitious. It is reproduced at the top of the next page.

##### 4.2.2.1 Form

In form this version is considerably looser than the BO version, though the first stanza is a variably tight iambic pentameter. The second stanza loosens up considerably in its rhyme scheme, and the third stanza regains some regularity.

Within each stanza there are some interesting moments. The first stanza starts out rhyming in couplets (*bone/alone, police/trees, dumb/bloom*) and then there is a sequence of three rhymes in a row (*grave/live/fugitive*). Next we get another pair of couplets (*dead/mad, lullabies/eyes*), and finally a string of 7 rhymed lines (*stone/citizen/man/stone/down/down/stone*) with the last pair of couplets forming a very tight envelope.

The second stanza starts out in couplets and then becomes a bit chaotic in its rhyming pattern, though sounds hark back and there is some internal rhyme (*slime/quicklime* stands out).

The last stanza returns to a more regular rhyming pattern: couplets or quatrains (*abab*)—in 14 lines, it's a kind of oddball sonnet (*aabbccdadbbaba*). The last line of the

## At The Executed Murderer's Grave

To Kathryn Pratt

*What shall we say who have knowledge  
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act  
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave  
In the house? The ravenous grave?*

Allen Tate

Bewildering calm, you tangle blade and bone,  
Fang, fist, and skull that huddle down alone.  
Sparrows above him, gay as young police,  
Line-up the lawn, the hedge, the fearful trees.  
The fierce blood of the dead lies smitten dumb  
Under the vengeance of a lily's bloom,  
And I have come to pacify this grave—  
Too late: while I and all man's killers live,  
Night shall electrocute that fugitive  
My mind, who damned the living to the dead  
Like one of those forlorn, bewildered mad  
Yanked, staring, to the dark, murmuring their lullabies.  
The dusk beams down. I cannot lift my eyes.  
My shadow flees me over matted stone,  
And cannot abide me. Father and citizen,  
Myself, I killed this man:  
For the blind Judges in my heart cried *Stone,  
Stone the murderer down!*  
So the blind murderer in my heart bowed down;  
I flung my stone, and now myself turn stone.

My fear, my justice bleed away, and fade.  
The moulting flocks of sunbeam round my head  
Mother a brood of dusk, and I am dark.  
I peer between the granites for his mark  
Surely the kind earth will console his name,  
Cluster his grave with ivy and gentle briar,  
The slow forgiving growth  
That knows not man, to trouble why man came  
Crested and poised and mournful, out of slime  
Slinging his quicklime fire into the eyes  
Of his damned, of his dead.  
I woo the grass to rise and be the veil  
For a man's defeat and shame.  
But this grave's festered gash I cannot heal  
Till the last day, when my own face turns pale,  
Uplifted, on the bone-diamonded shore  
Where Nineveh's spendthrift sailors sigh for the bale  
Unloosed and ravelling, out of reach, on the swell  
Of the last sea, when graves are emptied forth  
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 all my bodies—father and child and criminal  
Blanch with the livid scars  
Of my poor crimes, under God's pitying stars.  
Staring and staring, they will not mark my face  
From his, the killer hurled in this place  
Where the light sparrows flock and laugh in trees.  
How can they tell, the stars or sparrows tell,  
How, in God's name, that killer's face from mine?  
Have we not hallowed life by naming life,  
Not shaped the vacant air with the stars' names,  
Lucifer, Venus, out of our savage grief,  
Out of our stupid shames?

Are we not one with valley, with lawn? are we not vineyard, and hill?  
And all the great hills shall melt on the last day,  
And lose their wine,  
And the hooded stars demand to learn of me  
Which of my bodies has not trod the dark  
With sneering angels and the innocent snake.  
All, all of me must die, whichever fiend I take.  
Our lonesome, gutted graves the sea must fill.  
We shall stand up to pray for love at last.  
One man, one mercy-naked man we are,  
One judge, one murderer, one victim there,  
Lipless and crying for the heart's release  
Till the wind soothes our hands, our burning face.  
Killers of killers, we shall be healed at last,  
The stars relieve our pitiless wounds at last:

But my grammatical cries provide small time,  
Small hope for naked victims dropped in lime.  
Far hastier surgeons sewed this pious wound,  
This grave of man, and stitches scar the ground.  
Doty, the rapist and the murderer,  
Rots in a ditch of fire, and cannot hear.  
And where, through earth or hell's unholy peace,  
The dying flesh goes free, God knows, not I,  
Or those gay sparrows laughing through the trees  
Or the local stars I cannot even trace  
By name or body, as I leave this ground.  
But I will weep, by God, before I die,  
Into my bitter dungeons without sound,  
Though here the county's quicklime tears are dry.

poem (*though here the county's quicklime  
tears are dry*) stands out because it is purely  
iambic in a poem full of iambic variations  
and substitutions and it appears to be an  
iambic construction rather than being a  
natural iambic.

Wright uses several words repeatedly: *last*  
(including the phrase *at last* three times,  
once as a rhyme pair), *stars/staring, stone,*  
*down,* and *trees*, for example. These serve to  
link parts of the poem together and to em-  
phasize certain images. *Last* and *at last* em-

phasize that in the end such differences are insignificant as exist between ordinary  
citizens and Doty. This formal argumentation combines with the feeling of distance

that the references to stars brings up—that God is distanced, judgment is distanced, that the speaker is at some distance as well. Stars also represent a distant, though sometimes cold and essentially fruitless, hope.

Stars, in fact, are prominent images in this poem, as are, in a lesser way, sparrows. In the poem, stars are stars, judges (*And the hooded stars demand to learn of me/Which of my bodies has not trod the dark/With sneering angels and the innocent snake*), and stand-ins for eternity; they are alternately global and local. Stars act (to *relieve our pitiless wounds at last*) and show pity; we see a hint that the stars are formerly human as the reference to local stars indicates (the speaker cannot trace the names of bodies of local stars as he leaves the cemetery). Sparrows are identified with police, a group whom Wright seems to hold in low regard.

The rhyme sequence of *stone/citizen/man/stone/down/down/stone* sets up an equality of sorts, a technique Wright uses frequently. In this version, Wright is setting up several equivalences: that of the speaker with all people and that of all men/citizens with killers and judges. Here the emphasis on *citizen* is to emphasize the political—that perhaps if men (people) acted as nature and God would have it and not as government and established strictures would, there would be far less killing of the sort Wright abhors. This point is made by reference to the *ivy and gentle briar/the slow forgiving growth/that knows no man*. Note that *briar* and *growth* are a pair of unrhymed end words, bringing some attention to them. Repetition of *trees* reinforces this view as does the line *are we not one with valley, with lawn? are we not vineyard, and hill?* This line packages a passionate outcry within a formal, almost biblical diction, creating a bombast more than an impassioned cry.

Repetitions are an essential tool for Wright: We see its use in phrases like *blind Judges/ blind murderer, bewildering calm/bewildered mad*, and *one man/one mercy-naked man/ one judge/one murdered/one victim*.

In this poem Wright lets some of the arbitrary constraints of traditional form go loose. Form rules when there is nothing stronger to influence, but any stronger force overrules the need to follow form. In itself this is a passionate move. Because of this, at least, the poem is more clearly written by a speaker who was compelled to write it whereas the BO version is intellectually conceived for the purpose of making a conscious point. The restlessness of the speaker in the BO version and the tight containment of the form has burst loose in this version, and not only is the poem more expansive but it is in a looser form, a form more appropriate to the material, more organic though still formal.

#### 4.2.2.2 Point of View

We learn the most about Wright's transformation by looking at point of view and diction. The point of view of this poem is considerably more complex than the BO version, but not quite as complex as in the **Saint Judas** version. First, we see a more engaged speaker than in the BO version, who feels passionately about the events, though that passion is expressed with restraint within a strong form and using rhetoric that includes mythological references—these create distance. The language is beautiful but also distances. Throughout, the speaker is actively trying to merge himself with all people, all judges, and all killers. A speaker cannot emerge when the poem's energy is making that speaker an everyman.

The complexity of the point of view increases with the lines *But my grammatical cries provide small time/Small hope for victims dropped in lime*. Here the speaker is clearly the

poet and he is talking about writing poems that argue or lament or decry the situation he finds outrageous. This is the first time in the poems we've looked at that we've seen a point of view that reveals something about the speaker which is not or could not be the result of a rhetorical stance. In the BO version and "A Poem about George Doty" we saw speakers who could have been mere mouthpieces for an intellectually conceived point of view more suitable in an essay. Here we begin to see that the poet is the speaker behind the statements, and he feels that his small words and small efforts will come to small results.

Wright's diction runs counter to the more engaged stance of the poet in this version. Wright's diction is still highly poeticized, as in *grammatical cries, dropped in lime* (a poetical death), *the fierce blood of the dead lies smitten dumb*, and *far hastier surgeons sewed this pious wound*. Wright uses complex language, heavy adjectival phrases, and complicated, dissociated images. The diction is rhetorical because Wright is still trying to make a point—a point he cares a lot about, but a point nevertheless. All of this counteracts the opening up of form and the burst-forth restlessness compared to the BO version.

#### 4.2.2.3 Landscape, Memory, and the Overall Poem

The landscape in this poem has become active: The ivy and briar cover and forgive Doty, the stars pity, stare, demand, and relieve, the sparrows do police-work on the lawn, hedges, and trees, who *flock and laugh*, the grass rises and veils, and the hills melt, the winds soothe. Wright sets up the dichotomy of natural and man-made scenes, created by a *far hastier* surgeon than Wright himself: the *festered gash* of Doty's grave lined with quicklime to disintegrate the body fast. Though Wright repeats this image over and over, he doesn't really go to great lengths to speak directly of its horror—that offi-



cial vengeance and hatred would go so far as to go on punishing beyond death, almost as if the crime were committed by life itself.

In this version, Wright is mining the BO version of the poem and using literary memories to break out of its confining form. We can see borrowed phrases, lines, and images that have been pulled apart and rebraided differently and with other images. Ohio itself does not emerge—the event of George Doty’s execution is all, there is no poetically and emotionally nurturing Ohioan landscape—and the details of the landscape are shown only in small but vivid scraps. The landscape is pushed into the background and the images of final judgment come more to the fore. Here, memories of literary myths and stories are emphasized.

A crucial difference between “A Poem About George Doty in the Death House” and the various versions of “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave” is that Doty is alive in one and dead in the others. His execution, which is what Wright wishes to rail against, opens up the possibility of marking as murderers both Doty and the society that executed him. Wright’s (intellectual) rage can break out, and he can draw on images, stories, and myths from the literature. Elegiac forms, conventions, Judgment Day, stars, and fate can all be brought to bear, because wrongful death is a subject thoroughly treated in classical poetry.

It is clear Doty’s execution bothered Wright enough to create this obsession, but the obsession was not enough even with the instruments of formal poetry and previous models of academic writing to break Wright loose of the fetters that held his true feelings in check.

#### 4.2.3 "At the Executed Murderer's Grave<sub>SJ</sub>"

The version most people know is in the collection **Saint Judas** [J. Wright; 1959] which is reproduced in **Above the River** [J. Wright; 1990]. It was written as a separate poem from the earlier two in the sense that Wright did not have the previous versions in front of him when he wrote first drafts of it:

*The previous version [the P version] of it was very, very overblown and rhetorical. That version had appeared in Poetry. When I came to try and put it into St. Judas I was completely dissatisfied with it, so I sent it to Jim Dickey. He and I had had a misunderstanding and a disagreement earlier, followed very rapidly by an exchange of letters. We became good friends and have been so ever since. I sent him the Poetry version of the poem. It was a mess, full of mythological and biblical references and so on, very Victorian. He made comments all over it and sent the poem back. I studied his comments in Minneapolis. Then I had to go up to Seattle to defend my Ph.D. dissertation, which I did, and on the way back, on the train, I didn't have his comments with me but I remembered them. I didn't have the poem either. So I sat there and rewrote it without looking at the previous version, from the beginning, and rewrote it as straight and direct and Robinsonian as I could make it. That is the way it came out. It was important to me. I felt as if I had shed something. [A. Wright, pp. 213–214]*

The final version of the poem is remarkably different from the earlier two versions; it is reproduced at the top of the next page. And though it is different we can recognize it as within the sequence that starts with the BO and P versions.

##### 4.2.3.1 Form

First, the form is quite different. The poem is in 7 unequal sections, each a stanza long. The cadence is roughly a natural iambic. Though there are romps into traditional strict form, they are rare, as is rhyme. There are occasional rhymed couplets and the odd end-rhyme here and there. Sometimes when such couplets occur, there is some heightened semantic linkage: *grave/slave* indicate a particular type of slavery, and

## At the Executed Murderer's Graves<sup>1</sup>

for J. L. D.

*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

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 nightmares 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 unpitied 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.

*unhurried/buried* remarks on the leisure of death. But other places there is less significance: *the past/the rest, lime/time*. etc.

In terms of form, this is a watershed for Wright as he said. He has removed the strict structure of traditional forms and dissociated images in favor of a (formed) free verse, a clear narrative structure, and, most interestingly, a voice and point of view that is not abstract or academic—it's downright Ohioan, direct, unencumbered nonintellectual.

One can only imagine what James Dickey said to him in his criticism of the P version, but the results stem from those comments and self-examination based on them. The SJ version is dedicated to James Dickey (J. L. D.) and sports a determined self-criticism.

#### 4.2.3.2 Point of View

Whereas the two earlier versions veiled the speaker, this one proclaims who is speaking: It is James A. Wright. And for the first time in his work we find out something about him and his life. We see Martins Ferry, we see his father and his family's economic circumstances, and we learn of Wright's attitude toward Ohio and where he grew up. About this he says:

*My feeling about the Ohio Valley is, again, complicated. I sometimes feel a certain nostalgia about the place. At the same time I realize that as my friend Tom Hodge, now a surgeon in California, wrote to me a few years ago our problem when we were boys in Martins Ferry, Ohio in the industrial area enclosed by the foothills of the Appalachians on both sides, near that big river, was to get out. It has become plain to me that football helped many people to get out. And many of these people come from desperately poor families. [A. Wright, p. 195]*

Wright is speaking of his earlier ways of writing poetry when he says *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 croon my tears at fifty cents a page, and alive and dead, those giggling muckers who / Saddled my nightmares thirty years ago / Can do without my widely printed sighing / Over their pains with paid sincerity.* Wright is telling us that in his early poetry he adopted a dead man's voice—the voice of earlier poets—and a false sincerity and perhaps form; he had hidden himself and would now endeavor to speak with his own voice and point of view which he explicitly acknowledges by introducing himself by name.

The diction is remarkably different from the earlier poems we've looked at: *Nature-lovers are gone, To hell with them, The hair, foul as a dog's upon his head, / Made such revolting Ohio animals / Fitter for vomit than a kind man's grief*, and *Order be damned, I do not want to die*. There are no stars to sit in judgment or observe, no princes on Judgment Day—the police are police and not sparrows (*Drunks of Belaire, Ohio, where police / Kick at their kidneys till they die of drink*). No more *grammatical cries* or *mattocked stone*.

The old figure *Small hope for naked victims dropped in lime* has become *Clean as lime, His skull rots empty here*. The new figure is clear, requiring less thought by the reader—the language is direct rather than poetic.

Wright turned the elaborate diction and confusing images of the P version into direct statements about himself and his memories. In the P version:

The fierce blood of the dead lies smitten dumb  
 Under the vengeance of a lily's bloom,  
 And I have come to pacify this grave—  
 Too late: while I and all man's killers live,  
 Night shall electrocute that fugitive  
 My mind, who damned the living to the dead  
 Like one of those forlorn, bewildered mad  
 Yanked, staring, to the dark, murmuring their lullabies.

Notice the difference  
 these pairs of words  
 make

In the SJ version:

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.

Even in simple word choices we can see the language loosening. In the P version he writes *Father and citizen, / Myself, I killed this man*, while in the SJ version he writes *And my bodies—father and child and unskilled criminal*. The first version uses the more abstract word and concept of *citizen* while the second uses *child*, and the syntax of the first is poetic and complex (“x and y, z”) while the second is simple and direct (“x and y

and z”)—perhaps in the first Wright is trying to draw a closer identity between the *father/citizen* and *myself*.

Wright knows that his earlier work was couched in academic deceit in hiding himself and his past from his readers; he says, *Now sick of lies, I turn to face the past*.

#### 4.2.3.3 Landscape, Memory, and the Overall Poem

The difference between this poem and earlier versions and “A Poem about George Doty” is that here we see the poet directly speaking about his memories of where he grew up and why Doty holds his attention. Further, we see a change of view about the landscape. Before, we saw trees and grass, sparrows, a quiet graveyard, perhaps desolate and detached, but recognizable only as an abstract natural setting. Here the landscape becomes real and specific, and it switches to the factory, to *Dead Ohio*, to the *Hazel-Atlas Glass* factory, the *dead place*, the *St. Clair Sanitarium*, *revolting Ohio animals*, to *earth is a door*, and to *the last sea in the Ohio grass*, */Heaving a tide of gray disastrousness*, and we hear the harsh, unpoetic voice of phrases like *the grave’s gash festers*, quick similes like *clean as lime* and his *skull rots empty here*, whereas earlier efforts would (over)elaborate. The landscape is the real Ohio, revealed and informed by his actual memories of it—it is the Ohio he escaped (*I return/Only in memory now. aloof, unburied/To dead Ohio*): Martins Ferry, Hazel-Atlas Glass, St. Claire Sanitarium, Be-laire, and Belmont County.

He makes a number of the same arguments he made in the earlier Doty poems, but he seems to take the opportunity of revealing himself to also disavow some of his more direct claims to sympathy or empathy or even identity with Doty, which, after the earlier poems, earned him some scorn. Nevertheless, even this version of the poem re-

ceived criticism, not so much from literary critics, but from ordinary folks about his retained sympathy for Doty.

Wright deliberately rejects his earlier version's appeal to nature to heal all. In the P version he writes:

*I woo the grass to rise and be the veil  
For a man's defeat and shame.  
But this grave's festered gash I cannot heal  
Till the last day, when my own face turns pale,*

while in the SJ version he rejects:

*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.*

In this second passage, Wright sees himself as a (former) nature lover who used the landscape to hide behind and who concealed his memories and true desires behind adopted dead mans' voices (are these the **clods**? or are they the veil of grass?). More significantly, the high poetic diction of the P stanza which hides the a lurking **I** is replaced by the line ***I kick the clods away, and speak my name***, as if the **clods** were the poetic and rhetorical phrases he used before.

Even though this version of the poem strikes readers today as the "best" in the sense of directness, self-revelation, and a hint about how to live one's life, at the time it was viewed as a rejection of the intellect in poetry, that thinking and reflection were given over to self-indulgence—though Wright himself considered the fully confessional poet a "pain in the ass."

As we look at each successive version, we can see threads that were dropped and others left behind, so that the final version of the poem is actually oddly constructed: Is it a poem about Doty, about Ohio, about the dark but pure marginal people of the world,

about Wright searching for himself, or about writing poetry? Can a relatively short poem successfully be about all these things? Without our knowledge of the three versions and of the events on which the poem is based, it is likely that the information is confusing and inadequate to make full sense, despite the fact that the language is finally clear.

One cannot help feeling that in his early poems Wright constructed a set of techniques that distance himself—perhaps deliberately—from his work, so that finding the poet within the poem is difficult if not impossible—the elaborate language, the slavery to form, the use of landscape as setting or an opportunity for showing off language skills in descriptions, and the use of memory and history as a source of things to write about all conspire to make Wright a beautiful poet, but maybe not an honest one, or one whose insights are unavailable to view.

A small bit of evidence of this is the epigram, from Freud, which appears to speak of capital punishment—*Why should we do this?* But the quote is actually about the Golden Rule—do unto others, etc. Perhaps such a deception doesn't falsify the honesty and emotion of the poem, but Wright has deliberately misled the reader who looks to external truth.

Nevertheless, the poem is a turning point for Wright, and there is a clear difference between this poem and the earlier versions and "A Poem about George Doty in the Death House" (and the other poems in **The Green Wall** and many in **Saint Judas**). This difference at least reflects the beginning of an attempt to get beneath the veils he's created, that he's wooed to veil himself with. In the remaining poems we will see this start to come to fruition.



### 4.3 “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio”

“Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” (from **The Branch Will Not Break** [J. Wright; 1963]) is one of the first poems written under the obvious influence of Georg Trakl, the Austrian poet Wright discovered while in Vienna. Trakl’s poetry, which Wright and Robert Bly translated [Trakl], relies on the slow unfolding of images which connect the inner (mental, emotional) and outer (physical, natural) worlds. Trakl’s poems seem unconstructed in the sense that each poem is a series of images that seem, at first, unrelated, but as the images settle into the reader’s mind, the relationships become clearer, though perhaps not ultimately clear. About Trakl’s poetry Bly writes:

*The poems of Georg Trakl have a magnificent silence in them. It is very rare that he himself talks—for the most part he allows the images to speak for him. Most of the images, anyway, are images of silent things.*

*In a good poem made by Trakl images follow one another in a way that is somehow stately. The images have a mysterious connection with each other. The rhythm is slow and heavy, like the mood of someone in a dream. Wings of dragonflies, toads, the gravestones of cemeteries, leaves, and war helmets give off strange colors, brilliant and sombre colors—they live in too deep a joy to be gay. At the same time they live surrounded by a darkness without roads. Everywhere there is the suggestion of this dark silence:*

The yellow flowers  
Bend without words over the blue pond

*The silence is the silence of things that could speak, but choose not to. The German language has a word for deliberately keeping silence, which English does not have. Trakl uses this word “schweigen” often. When he says “the flowers/Bend without words over the blue pond”, we realize that the flowers have a voice, and that Trakl hears it. They keep their silence in the poems. Since he doesn’t put false speeches into the mouths of plants, nature has more and more confidence in him. As his poems grow, more and more creatures live in his poems—first it was only wild ducks and rats, but then oak trees, deer, decaying wall-paper, ponds, herds of sheep, trumpets, and finally steel helmets, armies, wounded men, battlefield nurses, and the blood that had run from the wounds that day.*

Yet a red cloud, in which a furious god,  
The spilled blood itself, has its home, silently  
Gathers, a moonlike coolness in the willow bottoms [Bly; 1961]

“Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” is reproduced at the bottom left. Before we look closely at it, let’s look at what Wright says about Trakl’s poems:

*I believe that patience is the clue to the understanding of Trakl’s poems. One does not so much read them as explore them. They are not objects which he constructed, but quiet places at the edge of a dark forest where one has to sit still for a long time and listen very carefully. Then, after all one’s patience is exhausted, and it seems as though nothing inside the poem will ever make sense in the ways to which one has become accustomed by previous reading, all sorts of images and sounds come out of the trees, or the ponds, or the meadows, or the lonely roads—those places of awful stillness that seem at the centre of nearly every poem Trakl ever wrote. [Wright; 1961]*

Patience is at the heart of Wright’s new way of writing—in his earlier work he used conventional academic styles and directed rhetorical diction to make sure the reader “got it” right away with minimal thought. In this poem the images and even structure settle in and do their work over time.

**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.

This poem is a series of images structured, on the surface, as a logical argument (*Therefore, / Their sons . . .*)—a sign of Wright’s retained neo-classicism. The poem is set in Wright’s childhood home (Shreve High School was Martins Ferry’s high school); the scene widens from the speaker’s per-

spective outwards: First the speaker is at the football game, then the speaker thinks of the fathers, then the mothers, then the sons, where the remarks about the sons are couched as the conclusion of an apparent logical inference. In the first stanza, each individual or group is accorded a single line for description, and each of those lines is as

long as it needs to be to complete the thought—the Polacks, the Negroes, and the night watchman each take a line. Thus the line is a unit of image, and the lines demonstrate organic form.

The second stanza generalizes the individuals in the first stanza into a statement about fathers and presents the image of women clucking *like starved pullets* in desperate and hopeless anger and disturbance.

The last stanza concludes the argument. The form of the poem implies that the form of the argument is  $A \& B \Rightarrow C$ , where *A* is the first stanza, *B* the second, and *C* the last three lines of the third stanza. Whether this is such a neat formulation of the argument is for the reader to determine, but we can say that the use of such an argument provides a strategy for approaching the images as they are presented. Moreover, on top of the relative stillness of the images, the logical argument's formal structure imposes some of Wright's retained restlessness from his earlier work. This creates a tension in the poem that reflects Wright's own tension about the Ohio River Valley.

The poem presents Wright's view of part of his experience of the Ohio River Valley and America itself as it is engulfed in the worst of its industry-oriented exploitation of human and natural resources, which was, to Wright, the prevailing situation in his youth. There was no real means for growing into one's dreams unless there was an escape—*dying's the best/of all the arts men learn in a dead place* [J. Wright; 1959b]. As autumn approaches, the only room for dreams for men lies in the football stadiums where their sons might ritualistically romp to glory at least on one afternoon or night—the last myth available to many modern American communities. In a football game, one team will win or at worst they will tie, whereas in life on the Ohio River there are few winners except for those who escape.

Meaning emerges from Wright's series of images and slight formal presentation. Form emerges from the images as the images emerge from Wright's memory and the landscape of the Valley. Aside from the *I think*, Wright merges with the images, so that his point of view is his attitude toward the fully internalized landscape of his youth's Martins Ferry. As Wright says of Trakl's forms:

*We are used to reading poems whose rules of traditional construction we can memorize and quickly apply. Trakl's poems, on the other hand, though they are shaped with the most beautiful delicacy and care, are molded from within. He did not write according to any "rules of construction", traditional or other, but rather waited patiently and silently for the worlds of his poems to reveal their own natural laws. The result, in my experience at least, is a poetry from which all shrillness and clutter have been banished. A single red maple leaf in a poem by Trakl is an inexhaustibly rich and wonderful thing, simply because he has had the patience to look at it and the bravery to resist all distraction from it. [J. Wright; 1961]*

However, Wright apparently does not (yet) trust in his images to do all the work. Its logical argument hinted by *[T]herefore* demands us to seek relationships between the images. By adding this slight bit of formal structure, Wright has added a tinge of drama to the poem, disturbing its potential Traklian stillness. Even without the *therefore*, the poem is not as still as Trakl's.

The last lines of each stanza form a parallel set of responses to the context for the poem, forming a precis of the argument: *dreaming of heroes, dying for love, and gallop(ing) terribly against each other's bodies*. The first stanza abounds in hard, long e sounds, but the other two stanzas are not dominated by particular sounds; the second stanza has the faint rhyme echo of *home/love*. The last stanza is unified sonically only by the *-ly* words and a few *ell* sounds. The first stanza contains a number of what could be called *echo pairs*: *Shreve High, long beers, gray faces, blast fur(nace), night watch(man), Wheel(ing) Steel*. An echo pair is a contiguous pair of words that share near-sounds and have two somewhat emphasized adjacent syllables. In this poem these echo pairs

serve to underscore the masculine industrial nature of the landscape and setting. That is, the clipped sounds of these echo pairs indicate the pounding existence of the Ohio River Valley.

The only other remarkable sonic effects are the slowing caused by the word pairs, *sui-cidally beautiful* and *gallop terribly*. Each of these pairs is so difficult to say (or hear) that the reader needs to pause after each one, and in the silent space after there is time to reflect on what the phrase means. Therefore, Wright seems to have implemented some of Trakl's use of deliberately keeping silent.

The diction is consistently informal and in concert with the common speech patterns of Martins Ferry except, possibly, for the two words, *stadium* and *therefore*.

The choice of a three-stanza form is appropriate to the poem for several reasons. First, as pointed out the argument is in three parts, reflected in the three stanzas. Second, there are three image sets: The fathers ashamed to go home, the mothers dying for love, and the sons galloping against each other. And third, the stanzas show the three points along the path from the fathers through the mothers to the sons. That is, the fathers, to gain heroes to root for, have to find wives who will help produce those heroes, and thus we can see the three points along the path in the stanza structure.

More interesting is the point of view. Unlike the Doty poems, there is little doubt that the speaker is engaged in the images in the poem, and there is no need to shout this fact, as Wright does in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave<sup>SJ</sup>." "Autumn Begins" is an occasional poem in which the poet introduces his consciousness and imbues himself with authority quickly by means of a simple *I think*; then he disappears within the energy of the images.

The presence of the speaker is shown in the diction and attitude toward the images: *nursing long beers, gray faces, ruptured night watchman, proud fathers are ashamed, starved pullets, suicidally beautiful, and gallop terribly.*

The point of view is of someone who has an opinion about what he sees, someone who has seen the entire ritual and arc of events described and implied in the poem. This person possibly feels superior and is telling the story from on high rather than as a participant, though the tender understanding of the last three lines argue against condescension. Hence, there is a distance from the subjects of the poem and its landscape. There is nothing especially pretty or appealing about the images, and we feel clearly that what we are seeing is filtered through the experience and memories of the speaker. We don't see the high rhetorical style of the earlier poems. In those poems Wright chose to make the argument part of the surface of the poems, giving them an argumentative feel, even in the final version of "At the Executed Murderer's Grave<sub>SJ</sub>." By contrast, in this poem Wright lets the images do the arguing with only the slightest amount of formal rhetoric.

Memory and landscape are intertwined subtly in this poem. We still can see Wright's hatred of where he grew up as measured by phrases like *ruptured night watchman*, but unlike the earlier poems we looked at, this hatred is buried in the images rather than presented as direct statements. Contrast the following two passages:

*... Dying's the best  
Of all the arts men can learn in a dead place.*

and:

*I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,  
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,*

The first, from "At the Executed Murderer's Grave<sub>SJ</sub>," leaves no doubt about how Wright feels, and the statement is directly made. The latter merely paints the picture

of a few people who suffer, by implication, from what Wright hates about the Ohio River Valley. Wright's memory of his childhood home is just as vivid and just as colored by his adult reflection on it as in "At the Executed Murderer's Graves," but he has married those memories with the image-making he saw in Trakl and perhaps learned from Bly while they were translating Trakl.

With Wright it makes sense to consider all of his work together as almost one long poem to learn of his attitude toward things in his life. That is, as with many poets, reading a poem in isolation is different from reading it after having read the poems before it in order, and also different from having read all of his or her other poems in a random order. With Wright there is great value in reading his poems in the order of publication. From doing this we can see enough of the landscape painted in earlier poems that even with small hints we can recall those images. In this poem the visual echoes of the Valley are clear enough, and one can believe that Wright is using our memories as well as his own to paint these pictures.

#### 4.4 "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio"

This poem, published in **Two Citizens** [J. Wright; 1973]—a volume Wright later artistically rejected—demonstrates a further turning in Wright's development as a poet and as a man.

In the poem, Wright tells the story of how he came to learn that he was emotionally alive rather than dead or dying for having grown up in the Ohio River Valley. The story tells of his father and uncles and others who built a swimming pool under the Work Projects Administration, which was a source of government-paid jobs during the Depression. One time when the speaker was in the pool (and we assume the speaker is Wright), a girl came up behind him and told him to *Take care now, / Be Patient and live.*

The thrust of the story is that even in a dead place like Martins Ferry, there is hope, love, life, and mystery. The poem is reproduced below.

**The Old WPA Swimming Pool in  
Martins Ferry, Ohio**

I am almost afraid to write down  
This thing. I must have been,  
Say, seven years old. That afternoon,  
The families of the WPA had come out  
To have a good time celebrating  
A long gouge in the ground,  
That the fierce husbands  
Had filled with concrete.

We knew even then the Ohio River was dying.  
Most of the good men who lived along that shore  
Wanted to be in love and give good love  
To beautiful women, who weren't pretty,  
And to small children like me who wondered,  
What the hell is this?

When people don't have quite enough to eat  
In August, and the river,  
That is supposed to be some holiness,  
Starts dying,

They swim in the earth. Uncle Sherman,  
Uncle Willie, Uncle Emerson, and my father  
Helped dig that hole in the ground.

I had seen by that time two or three  
Holes in the ground,  
And you know what they were.

But this one was not the usual, cheap  
Economics, it was not the solitary  
Scar on a poor man's face, that respectable  
Hole in the ground you used to be able to buy  
After you died for seventy-five dollars and  
Your wages tached for six months by the Heslop  
Brothers.

Brothers, dear God.  
No, this hole was filled with water,  
And suddenly I flung myself into the water.  
All I had on was a jockstrap my brother stole  
From a miserable football team.

Oh never mind, Jesus Christ, my father  
And my uncles dug a hole in the ground,  
No grave for once. It is going to be hard  
For you to believe: when I rose from that water,

A little girl who belonged to somebody else,  
A face thin and haunted appeared  
Over my left shoulder, and whispered, Take care now,  
Be patient, and live.

I have loved you all this time,  
And didn't even know  
I am alive.

There are revealing things in this poem which we have not seen before. First, there is frequent mention of love and holiness. In the earlier poems we learned of dead Ohio, *dy-*  
*ing's the best art*, hopelessness, and shame.

Here,

*Most of the good men who lived along that shore  
Wanted to be in love and give good love  
To beautiful women, who weren't pretty,  
And to small children like me who wondered,  
What the hell is this?*

In this passage we see good men, love, good love, beautiful women, and small children—all potentially sentimental topics. Of course, the women aren't pretty, which means that their beauty is relative or apparent only to the men who live there. Nevertheless, such women represent hope or desire.

In the first stanza we see the families having a *good time celebrating*, and the happy sort of outlook seems new in Wright.

When the Ohio River is dying, a pool is a kind of rebirth, and Wright emphasizes over and over the linkage between holes in the



ground, swimming in the earth, God, Jesus Christ, and how this kind of hole is not like the holes that become merely graves. There is even the tenuous linkage of the analogy: The swimming pool is to the Ohio River as Christ is to God—that maybe God is dying but maybe Christ isn't or perhaps Christ represents an at least half-human way to cope with death. In making the linkage between holes (and holiness) in contrast to graves, Wright is playing on his earlier obsession with death and graves. But he so insists that the swimming pool is not a grave that we begin to think that, ironically, maybe it is. And in a sense, it is: the sort of grave from which rebirth or resurrection can happen.

Nevertheless, the linkage between holiness, hole-iness, and whole-iness isn't left to chance, though there are deliberate ambiguities, perhaps as a deflection from sentimentalism. For example, in the line *what the hell is this, this* probably refers to the pool so near the river which is the natural swimming hole, but syntactically it can refer to the *good men* who *wanted to be in love* and *give good love to beautiful women* and *small children*. Or it could just mean *what the hell is all this about?* Or in the passage,

*When people don't have quite enough to eat  
In August, and the river,  
That is supposed to be some holiness,  
Starts dying,  
They swim in the earth.*

the probabilities point to *swim in the earth* meaning *to swim in the swimming pool*, but it could also mean *to die*, that the alternative to starving and to witnessing the death of holiness is to voluntarily die. We can generalize this as follows: When the conditions of life become desperate and holiness appears to be faltering, some kind of radical transformation is needed.

In making these ambiguities, Wright not only avoids some sentimentalism, he provides a means to push the poem forward, keep the reader reading. This is not the only way that Wright moves the poem forward and dodges sentimentality.

One other way is to tackle sentimentality head-on. The first sentence is *I am almost afraid to write down/This thing*. By using the phrase *this thing* and by emphasizing it by the line break, Wright is saying it is an embarrassing story, and it at least risks sentimentality. But, possibly by acknowledging it this way, Wright can escape the accusation. **Two Citizens** was Wright's try at reporting his emotional discovery of America during his travels with his second wife, Annie, in France and Italy. Wright called it a book of love poems and throughout it he risks sentimentality.

Another way to tackle sentimentality is to appear to be avoiding the sentimental parts or by making them look overwhelmingly compelling. Looking at the structure of the poem as irregular stanzas of irregular lines, we see each stanza as a story-telling gesture. The stanza gestures are as follows, where each item corresponds to the stanza number:

1. The story is hesitatingly begun, admitting its sentimentality.
2. The story is deflected to a discussion of love and good men.
3. The story is deflected to a discussion of death.
4. The story resumes briefly in a 3-line stanza.
5. The story is deflected to a discussion of death.
6. The deflection to death is continued.
7. The story is deflected to a scene in which the speaker as a boy jumps in the water.
8. The speaker apologizes and resumes the story.
9. The heart of the story is finally told.
10. The punchline of the story is told.

Each gesture is a way to distract the reader from the fact that the poet is speaking honestly at the edge of sentimentality.

The poem, then, is constructed as a self-conscious avoidance in which the reader, at best, is eager to find out what is so compelling yet embarrassing to the speaker as to warrant such disingenuousness. Wright uses this strategy in other poems; for example in the poem “Inscription for the Tank” in **Shall We Gather at the River** [J. Wright; 1968], Wright starts out this way:

*My life was never so precious  
To me as now.  
I gape unbelieving at those two lines  
Of my words, caught and frisked naked.*

Despite his apparent shock at having written those two lines, he writes the same lines in the very next poem (“In Terror of Hospital Bills”):

*But my life was never so precious  
To me as now.  
I will have to beg coins  
After dark.*

It’s a constant theme in Wright’s poetry to gather the courage to reveal what is positive inside himself. In many of his poems, he has little trouble expressing what he hates and what makes him unhappy, but rarely can he speak of what brings him joy or what is light in the usual sense (in his early work, the word *darkness* prevails and typically refers to a pure darkness or a noble darkness—things good are dark, while *lightness* refers to evil things, like war planes and guns). His late work reverses the prominence of the words *light* and *dark*, and *light* refers to what we commonly think of as lightness.

In his new, more emotionally self-revelatory work, Wright was criticized for not making “things add up in verse.” [Rubin]. For the younger Wright, academic poetry was perhaps a safe haven where he could use his talents without putting too much of himself on the line, or possibly as a target, academic poetry urged him in this direction. But

forces that mattered to Wright, including forces within, pushed him to change and make his inner landscape a place where he could nurture his writing self.

Thinking about the probable character of Wright's youth, he must have experienced joy and hope in Martins Ferry; when his early work speaks of graves and death and hopelessness, that must represent a colored or filtered view. In this poem we see that when Wright, in his new mode, returns to Ohio, he is returning to what is really there, both the death and the life.

"Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," is a cousin of this poem in several ways. First, the names of the two poems both end "in Martins Ferry, Ohio," which shows that he is still ferreting out his reaction to his boyhood home. It also shows that Wright is using our memories of his earlier work to piece together his ultimate work, the complete poems. Second, both are about families and how they cope with living in the Ohio River Valley. In "Autumn Begins," the families hide from each other—the men in bars and the women at home—and the children provide all the transient hope. In "The Old WPA Swimming Pool," the *good men* are fathers who want to *give good love* to their women and *small children*. The *fierce husbands* of this poem are the grown-up sons who *gallop(ed) terribly* in "Autumn Begins." Further, the swimsuit that the speaker wears in this poem is nothing but a jockstrap [*his*] *brother stole/From a miserable football team*, a clear reference to "Autumn Begins." Therefore, we know that this is supposed to be the same place looked at differently in different circumstances and at a different time in Wright's life.

The religious theme of the poem is the real tale of the poem—the speaker's brush with what could be an angel. The speaker rises from the water, just as Christ rose again and as one rises from baptism, and a *little girl who belonged to somebody else*, tells the speaker to *Take care now,/Be patient, and live*. Finally, the speaker acknowledges that he is alive.

With all Wright's talk of death in other poems and his apparent belief that the only art to learn in Martins Ferry is to die, this is quite a revelation and in keeping with his admission that his life was at least at one point precious, though there as here he is hard-pressed to admit it.

As mentioned, the form is very informal with colloquial speech, which Wright later rejected. As Dougherty writes:

*When he tried to press to its limit his aesthetic, the "pure clear word," the poems became uneven and more obscure than those in the major volumes. Striving for complete lucidity of expression, Wright lost some of the subtlety and refinement of feeling on which the success of the earlier poems had depended.*

*Wright was fully aware of the price he paid for clarity. He often condemned **Two Citizens** as his worst volume of poems, and in one interview declared with characteristic hyperbole that he would never write another book: "I've never written any book I've detested so much. No matter what anybody thinks about it, I know this book is final." After he had in fact published finer books, Wright modified, but did not repudiate, his judgment of the volume: "The book is just a bust. I will never reprint it. . . . It seems to me a bad book because most of it is badly written. Obscure and self-indulgent, it talks around subjects rather than coming to terms with them. It is impossibly ragged. It is just unfinished." [Dougherty, p. 93]*

The form of the poem revolves around the informal diction resulting from Wright's passion to get at the "pure clear word," mentioned earlier. He uses word repetitions to stitch the poem together, especially repeating **hole** and **ground**, making a distinction between heaven and earth through the sound pair *hole/holy*. This poem is not laced together through strictly formal devices the way his earlier academic poetry was (**The Green Wall**)—a prose-oriented, narrative structuring device.

It is clear that the speaker is James Wright speaking in an almost embarrassed way about an experience while a boy. That is, the distance between the speaker persona and Wright is considerably narrowed compared to the high rhetoric style and diction of "A

Poem about George Doty” and early versions of “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave.” What distance remains comes from the speaker seeming to fake an aw-shucks kind of innocence about speaking of the incident. The effect appears to be a conscious rather than a natural hesitancy—it is an acting job. Though he is trying to temper the sentimentality of the primary scene—the appearance of the girl-angel—Wright risks adding to the sentimentality by using this technique.

We see the walls between the real James Wright and the various faces he’s used coming undone. The ultimate goal—which we can see by looking over his total work and by examining the vector of his changes—is to unite his memory and his landscape. That is, as in the great image poetry of Wright’s newfound heroes, Trakl, Lorca, and Vallejo, Wright appears to believe that genuinely passionate poetry comes from finding images that urge within rather than without, somewhat the opposite of Eliot’s *objective correlative* and Williams’s *no ideas but in things* (as pointed out by Bly [Bly; 1982]), from whom he learned it. Such images spring from the imagination and perhaps unconscious and then are worked into poems by the use of conscious technique—this combination is the difficulty of writing poetry: the marriage of the conscious rational mind with the unconscious imaginative mind. Wright’s early poetry is dominated by technical and rational poetry-making. With “Autumn Begins” we saw the imagistic influence take hold. Here Wright seems to have given up some of that approach for a more narrative one, perhaps, as he says, in an attempt to get to the “pure clear word” (as part of his program to produce the “poetry of a grown man” [“Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child,” J. Wright; 1971,]).

In his earlier works discussed here, Wright recognizes that his boyhood Ohio is a part of him and his art that cannot be emotionally escaped the way he physically escaped the area. Therefore, he struggled with finding a way of using the Ohio River Valley or

at least coming to terms with it. In those earlier works we saw the landscape drawn as if from a source, and Wright's stance toward that landscape was that of a rational mind considering it. Though he approaches the landscape narratively, Wright here has more closely merged the landscape with his memory of it so that his memory begins to approach that of a method rather than a source. That is, the landscape is part of his memory and vice versa and merges with and emerges from his point of view—his poems are revealing this landscape—rather than the landscape being like a thing in his memory to which he refers when casting about for a topic to write about. In his early work, events and people from his childhood make appearances as part of an argument and the landscape is described cinematically or described only so that the choice of words reflect his conceived attitude in a rhetorical sense, in the same way a trained debater can sneer, for example, by the words he or she uses to caricature the opposition's argument. Thus, the *method* is to visit the memory's landscape and react to or reveal its mystery in the poem, while the *source* is merely a set of things to look up as if from an encyclopedia.

In this poem we still see him rattling against the landscape (both natural and human), but there is not the usual overarching hatred, and in the last 3 stanzas—starting *Oh never mind, Jesus Christ, my father*—the landscape falls into the story and is a necessary part of it but it isn't explicit or part of a rhetorical approach to the material: The river is still there and the people, and all that's described is the simple scene of the girl and Wright in the pool—Wright rising, and the girl whispering hope. The images speak for themselves and require no rhetorical or dictional veneer.

Despite the obvious faults of this poem and its new (narrative) approach, this poem shows movement in the task of drawing the reader into the emotion of the poet by

marrying landscape and memory in a less rhetorical, less formal, less distancing rational set of strategies.

#### 4.5 “Above San Fermo”

James Wright and his wife Annie started spending time in Europe sometime before he wrote **Two Citizens** (1973). Their time in Italy had a profound effect on Wright because poems written after these trips began showing an acceptance of his life and of life in general. One could generalize about his early work—**The Green Wall** and **Saint Judas**—by saying that it was the work of a youth who felt that his own history was representative of all history, that the fate of old men and women was somehow their fault for not taking advantage of the world by, perhaps, escaping constricting locales and situations, and that the forces of evil lightness—technology and the modern world—unfortunately fought and won over the forces of pure darkness, such as people like George Doty.

Italy, with its ruins of earlier civilizations, provides the lesson that people can survive with what they have, and if one life falls in ruin, later lives can thrive not only in the same place but also can gain sustenance from the ruins. As Wright aged and traveled, he saw that there were other possibilities than either to stay in a dead place and learn its best art or to escape it: One could stay in the dead place *and* find its life. In his last collection, **This Journey**, published posthumously, Wright seems to have come to terms with how to write the poetry of a grown man by becoming one.

The last poem we will look at is “Above San Fermo” (it is reproduced on the next page). The poem is a precis of Wright’s story: The first stanza talks of his awareness of his own life and possibly of his life as a poet; the second stanza tells of his childhood Ohio River Valley and how the black smoke, soot, and gravel are the true colors of winter,



### Above San Fermo

Somehow I have never lost  
That feeling of astonished flight,  
When the breath of my body suddenly  
Becomes visible.

I might be standing beside a black snowdrift  
in Ohio, where the railroad gravel  
And the mill smoke that gets everything in the end  
Reveal the true colors  
Of a bewildered winter.  
When I lit a match and breathed there,  
A solitary batwing sailed out of my mouth  
And hovered, fluttering.  
All the way over to West Virginia  
And beyond.

Even now,  
Abandoned beside the abandoned battlements  
Above the Adige, above  
San Fermo, a hand waves over my lungs.  
The demon leaps out  
And takes off his hand-me-down jacket.  
He strolls downhill  
In the warm Italian sunlight, as though  
He didn't care to choose between winter and spring.  
But spring will do him all right,  
For the time being.

but even at that age he knew there was something about his spirit that could escape; and the final stanza tells of his life at the time of writing the poem. In the final stanza, Wright explains that in San Fermo, above another river, the Adige, as if by magic (*a hand waves over my lungs*) the demon that dogged him since childhood about the Ohio River Valley has left him, but the demon proves less than demonic. Wright seems to be saying that this demon of his who bred his hatred of Martins Ferry really

needed only to see *the warm Italian sunlight* to choose spring over winter, life over death.

The first stanza echoes the ending of “A Blessing” [J. Wright; 1963]:

*Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into Blossom.*

The *hand-me-down jacket* in the third stanza of “Above San Fermo” might be the legacy that parents in Martins Ferry hand their children, as seen in “Autumn Begins,” or it could be *the railroad gravel and mill smoke that gets everything in the end*. Or it could be the non-spirit body of James Wright and the demon is really Wright’s spirit. Or, finally, the jacket could be that part of Wright that he wishes to abandon. The demon, moreover, doesn’t wish to choose—as Wright was continually willing to do in earlier poems—but was willing to take what was dealt him. Perhaps the demon is the real James A. Wright, and the jacket is the old abandoned shell of Wright that Ohio dumped on him.

The breath which becomes visible, of course, can be taken as Wright's poetry.

However we look at this poem, it is a poem of renewal, resurrection, and hope in the face of earlier rhetorical, angry poems in **The Green Wall** and **Saint Judas**. We don't see prostitutes and bums, murderers, and traitors raised to superior status. All we see is Wright walking above the Italian river.

There are echoes of earlier poems in this poem as there are in the collection overall. For example, *when I lit a match and breathed there* reminds us of "Outside Fargo, North Dakota." [J. Wright; 1968] The *solitary batwing* reminds us of the repeated references to a single wing in the first collections. That single wing could represent the half-divine nature of humanity or Wright left alone by the death of Jenny, or even the crippled essence of the poet and all people. Nevertheless, one wonders whether the demon is the other batwing finally emerging.

The point of view is that the speaker (*I*) is Wright the poet. The diction tells us that there is no distance between the speaker and the writer. Further, the *I* becomes a subject in the poem for the reader and an object for the writer. That is, the speaker is a topic of interest in the poem for the reader while the speaker is an object in the writer's (inner) landscape as much as any other. Wright, as he worked on this poem, knew he was dying and, in some ways, this poem is a summing up.

In form this poem is simple: Three stanzas where the first stanza sets up the argument or proposition with a somewhat mysterious general statement which the subsequent two stanzas illuminate—illuminated in turn from Ohio and from Italy. The diction is only slightly elevated but not rhetorical the way poems in **The Green Wall** are.

The first stanza is rhythmically interesting: The ratio of unstressed to stressed syllables is 19/12, and each of the first three lines include three unstressed contiguous syllables:

The first foot of the first line is a first paeon (´<sup>u</sup><sup>u</sup><sup>u</sup>), and the second foot of the second line is fourth paeon (<sup>u</sup><sup>u</sup><sup>u</sup>´), as is the second foot of the third. The stanza is very light and rhythmically weak (unforceful), as if Wright were trying to say that the grown man need not be manly in the “Autumn Begins” sense.

The choice of words based on initial letter of each word is interesting, though it is almost certainly coincidental: 14 different words begin with the letter *b*, and of those 7 begin with the string *be*: *be becomes, being, beside, between, bewildered, and beyond*. This is a poem of existence.

The two lines with noticeable formal significance are the lines:

*Abandoned beside the abandoned battlements*  
*Above the Adige, above*

The repetitions of ***abandoned*** in the first line and ***above*** in the second show the change in viewpoint from early life to later: doubly abandoned, doubly above. The last 4 lines of the previous stanza begin with the letter *a*, which might be taken as a signal to pay attention to *a*-words like ***abandon*** and ***above***. And notice how all the content words begin with *a, b, ab, aba, or ba*.

And it should not pass without notice that to be abandoned in an abandoned place ought to be a source of fear or ill ease, but it is not; rather it is a comfort to Wright. And ***the abandoned battlements*** refers to the Ohio River Valley.

Here the landscape and memory are the same: Wright’s memories of Ohio are as much a feature of the world as is the Adige and San Fermo. Wright has integrated the landscape of the world with the landscape of his inner, emotional life: There is no sense that Wright sometimes thinks “I’ll write a poem about me” and other times “I’ll write a poem about this river and a lizard sitting next to it” or “I’ll write about that

filthy Ohio River Valley of my youth.” Poems about rivers and lizards, through deep imagery, are about Wright.

In this poem the deep imagery learned from Trakl, Lorca, Neruda, and Vallejo is in evidence in the solitary batwing and the demon. Whereas other deep images in earlier poems were mysterious enough to have been labeled surrealistic, these images, though not totally clear, are clear enough to most readers. We can take the batwing to simply be his breath or the breath of his spirit or soul, whereas the demon can be simply one of those demons that we all have and must reject or learn to live with. There is no need to build up an elaborate system of symbols to “get it.”

Wright, incomplete as the *solitary batwing*, flutters across the Ohio into West Virginia—a more mountainous, wilder land across from the gentle rolling hills of Ohio which fall into a strip of dark industrial towns, like Martins Ferry, along the Ohio, and in Italy he is simply above the river Adige. That is the essence of his journey: to start incomplete and cross over to wholeness. As Wright says in the dedication, the place at the end of his journey is where *we* (Annie and he) *got well*.

Wright’s journey is complete.

## 5. Conclusion

Writing poetry takes more than talent and technique: It's a journey inward and takes gall to write about it—an impossible journey followed by an impossible task. Who can write what can't be said?—what the raw materials of words, sentences, and web of meaning never were supposed to express? Wright started with the talent, technique, and gall and a model of poetry that demanded only those things and an intellect to put them together. The poems he wrote in this mode are good, interesting, challenging, and reveal something more of Wright than perhaps he built into them.

Along the way forces converged to change him: criticism for the push away, models for the pull toward, advice, counsel, love, and nurture for survival along the way.

Wright's early work is academic poetry: formal, metered, rhymed, rhetorical, and distanced. The method of writing them was to dip into memory, pull out events and landscape, create a voice to make a point, and then make the point (using irony and formal, rhetorical devices). Wright's later work is imagist, still neo-classical, personal, and almost confessional. The method of writing them was to experience the inner landscape of memory and self, and emerge to recreate it. The result reflects the merger of landscape, memory, and point of view. The form is one primarily built of image structures and relationships. In his earlier work, things add up; in his later, things mount up.

His influences were Trakl, Neruda, Lorca, Vallejo, whom he translated; Dickey, who criticized him harshly; Bly who nurtured and taught him; Jenny, his lost love; Annie, his real love; Italy; and Martins Ferry.

Looking at the arc of his journey, we see in his beginnings the elements of poetry in isolation or as distinct pieces that are moved together to piece out a poem, and toward

the end the elements form a blended single source and poems flow from it. Throughout, Wright never lost his sense of the formal—he altered his view of the formal from words and structure to images and voice. Some might summarize his journey—with all the inaccuracies summaries embody—as one in which he sought and found his voice. Too simple; too misleading.

I believe that Wright did nothing less than discover what poetry is and how writing poetry is. It is the attempt at the impossible: Do what's impossible, write the unwritable. But . . . impossibility?



When I was younger I climbed rocks—cliffs, spires, boulders. There was a place in New Hampshire my father found: A steep cliff of rotten rock, a cave  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the way up—and a legend. The legend was that this was one of the gates to Hell. Many times, with ropes, chocks, and carabiners, I and my mountaineer friends tried to reach the cave—from above, from below, the sides. We were not skilled enough to make it. We lived in California, and attempts were costly in travel and time.

We talked to others who had tried and found written stories of other attempts. We heard that some had made it, and by accident one day I spoke to one who had. My friends and I still tried, and our attempts became better, we got closer, and our stories told more intriguing. The attempts were what they were, and my father, who was too old to climb, watched and helped tie the ropes.

One day we made it. What was there in the cave?: Nothing—a board and some wire where an earlier visitor had placed a sign. The cave was 4 feet deep and a rock-bound stream emptied into it.

We don't talk to people about the cave much, except when one of us drives past. We stop and point it out and tell how we tried to reach it—and the rock crumbling beneath our feet and the rope chafing on the sharp flinty edges—and how we finally succeeded. My father never talks about the cave anymore; I never think about the cave anymore, except to tell this story.

I loved that cave . . . the impossible one.

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