



Above the River: The Complete Poems

James Wright, Donald Hall (Introduction)

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One of the most admired American poets of his generation, James Wright (1927-80) wrote contemplative, sturdy, and generous poems with an honesty, clarity, and stylistic range matched by very few--then or now. From his Deep Image-inspired lyrics to his Whtimanesque renderings of Neruda, Vallejo, and other Latin American poets, and from his heartfelt reflections on life, love, and loss in his native Ohio to the celebrated prose poems (set frequently in Italy) that marked the end of his important career, *Above the River* gathers the complete work of a modern master. It also features a moving and insightful introduction by Donald Hall, Wright's longtime friend and colleague.

Above the River: The Complete Poems Details

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Auntjenny says

How can you not love Wright's poetry? He gives us everything a poem should be-- he says what most of us cannot express in words-- and he's hopeful.

Jessie says

Sipped from this book--breathtaking in parts though sometimes the formal feel tends toward the sentimental; JW seems to write with tears always welling up (maybe that's my attraction!): from "Spring Images":

Two athletes
Are dancing in the cathedral
Of the wind.

A butterfly lights on the branch
Of your green voice.

Small antelopes
Fall asleep in the ashes
Of the moon.

Jenny says

One of the best poems --

A Winter Day in Ohio
PWT died in late Spring, 1957

Clever, defensive, seasoned animals
Plato and Christ deny your grave. But man,
Who slept for years alone, will turn his face
Alone to the common wall before his time.
Between the woodchuck and the cross, alone
All afternoon, I take my time to mourn.
I am too old to cry against the snow
Of roots and stars, drifting above your face.

William2 says

Read *Shall We Gather at the River*, an outstanding work of black brooding and mortal obsession. Considered by many--Robert Bly among them--to be a seminal work of twentieth-century American poetry. It's one of six or seven volumes collected here from Wright's too-brief career.

Oh the voice lovelier was
Than a crow's dreaming face,
His secret face, that smiles
Alive in a dead place.
Oh I was lonely, lonely:
What were the not to me?

The not were nothing then.
Now let the not become
Nothing, and so remain,
Till the bright grass birds come
Home to the singing tree.
Then, let them be.

(From "For the Marsh's Birthday")

Kent says

If only all the poems could have been in Ohio. Lord, when the man makes even the slightest allusion to his home, the poem is immediately grounded. And textured. Otherwise, well, watching the colorized version of Ted Turner classics I get the idea what the movie is about, and what it must mean. But I just can't quite settle into everything.

Kris says

True greatness. Wright was not unlike Picasso, a master (in poetry, as opposed to painting) whose true genius became evident only when he freed himself from the constraints of form and broke new emotional and linguistic ground in free verse. This is a book to treasure and re-visit again and again.

Jeff says

James Wright and Richard Hugo are my favorite poets, so you read poems by them, and then we can start a gang

Scott Reeves says

When he gets it right, as he often does, James Wright is among the finest of American poets. Hugely intelligent, lyrical, and unsentimentally touching his best poems are among the very best of the 20th Century. This book presents the work of his lifetime and as such includes his lesser work. Even so, it ranks among my six or seven favorite volumes of poetry. Wright is a hugely underrated Midwestern genius. Time spent reading him is time well spent indeed.

Sunni says

James Wright is a perfect poet for lush descriptions, celebration of the socially forgotten, and killer ending lines. In the forward, Donald Hall says that Wright's poems are weaker when they try to be pretty but masterful when they are beautiful. I would have to agree. This collection has many of both, but overall it reflects a man who lived close to the vein and was honest, witty, and real in his work and in his life.

Eric says

Rapidly, and especially because of this collection, James Wright has become one of my favorite poets, if not the poet I currently want to most emulate. Refined, raw, brilliant, formal, structured, free, and dripping with natural imagery and reverence. A splendid (tragic) poet with much to offer us through his many decades of poetic creation.

Gerry LaFemina says

The fact is, like all complete poems, there are some bad poems in this collection--but our ability to see the body of work of this American master is worthwhile. We can see him develop as a poet, and watch him hone his skills to mastery.

Meredith says

much of james wright's work alternates between elation at the beauty of the natural world and depression resulting from the ugliness of the human world. i can relate all too much to this bipolar cycling, but i read his work not so much for the full cycle but for the elation, for the beauty, for his identification with the small things, and for the feeling of breaking open with the blossoming of the world.

Laura says

Two Postures beside a Fire

1

Tonight I watch my father's hair,
As he sits dreaming near his stove.
Knowing my feather of despair,
He sent me an owl's plume for love,
Lest I not know, so I've come home.

Tonight Ohio, where I once
Hounded and cursed my loneliness,
Shows me my father, who broke stones,
Wrestled and mastered great machines,
And rests, shadowing his lovely face.

2

Nobly his hands fold together in repose.
He is proud of me, believing
I have done strong things among men and become a man
Of place among men of place in the large cities.
I will not awaken him.
I have come home alone, without wife or child
To delight him. Awake, solitary and welcome,
I too sit near his stove, the lines
Of an ugly age scarring my face, and my hands
Twitch nervously about.

My Grandmother's Ghost

She skimmed the yellow water like a moth,
Trailing her feet across the shallow stream;
She saw the berries, paused and sampled them
Where a slight spider cleaned his narrow tooth.
Light in the air, she fluttered up the path,
So delicate to shun the leaves and damp,
Like some young wife, holding a slender lamp
To find her stray child, or the moon, or both.
Even before she reached the empty house,
She beat her wings ever so lightly, rose,
Followed a bee where apples blew like snow;
And then, forgetting what she wanted there,
Too full of blossom and green light to care,
She hurried to the ground, and slipped below.

Sheila Dane says

Wonderful book. Lyrical, gritty, moving. Wright's poetry is deeply personal, yet universal, a sort of every man's struggle to find himself. We follow him from his Ohio blue collar roots all the way to Italy where he for the first time, finds a sort of peace (having much to do with his marriage to Anne Wright) that had eluded him for the greater part of his life. This collection was put together by his wife, Anne Wright and contains a thoughtful foreword by Donald Hall. It also includes prose written by Wright later in his life. This book is one of the few collected works I have read cover to cover and had difficulty putting down. His unforgettable style is best shown in his own words: "Suddenly I realize/That if I stepped out of my body I would break/Into blossom." Must read for poets.

Bradley Harrison says

"Two haunches of whales / Slope into whitecap doves, / It is hard to drown here. // Between two walls, / A fold of echoes, / A girl's voice walks naked. // I step into the water / Of two flakes. / The crowns of white birds rise / To my ankles, / To my knees, / To my face."

an excerpt from, "Snowstorm in the Midwest"
