

He will learn pain. And, as for the bird,  
It is always darkening when that comes out.  
I will putter as though I had not heard,  
And lift him into my arms and sing  
Whether he hears my song or not.

## 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.

- James Wright

## But Only Mine

I dreamed that I was dead, as all men do,  
And feared the dream, though hardly for the sake  
Of any thrust of pain my flesh might take  
Below the softening shales. Bereft of you,  
I lay for days and days alone, I knew  
Somewhere above me boughs were burning gold,  
And women's frocks were loose, and men grew old.  
Grew old. And shrivelled. Asked the time of day.  
And then forgot. Turned. Looked among the grass.  
Tripped on a twig. Frightened some leaves away.  
Children. And girls. I knew, above my face,  
Rabbit and jay flocked, wondering how to cross  
An empty field stripped naked to the sun.  
They halted into a shadow, huddled down.  
Rabbit and jay, old man, and girl, and child,  
All moved above me, dreaming of broad light.  
I heard you walking through the empty field.  
Startled awake, I found my living sight:  
The grave drifted away, and it was night,  
I felt your soft despondent shoulders near.  
Out of my dream, the dead rose everywhere.  
I did not dream your death, but only mine.

## At the Executed Murderer's Grave

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

## Saint Judas

When I went out to kill myself, I caught  
A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.  
Running to spare his suffering, I forgot  
My name, my number, how my day began,  
How soldiers milled around the garden stone  
And sang amusing songs; how all that day  
Their javelins measured crowds; how I alone  
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.  
  
Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,  
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope  
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:  
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,  
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,  
I held the man for nothing in my arms.

from

## The Branch Will Not Break

Clarity, uttermost strength:  
My soul is fulfilled in you.

SOME BEASTS  
(from the Spanish of Pablo Neruda)

It was the twilight of the iguana.  
From the rainbow-arch of the battlements,  
his long tongue like a lance  
sank down in the green leaves,  
and a swarm of ants, monks with feet chanting,  
crawled off into the jungle;  
the guanaco, thin as oxygen  
in the wide peaks of cloud,  
went along, wearing his shoes of gold,  
while the llama opened his honest eyes  
on the breakable neatness  
of a world full of dew.  
The monkeys braided a sexual  
thread that went on and on  
along the shores of the dawn,  
demolishing walls of pollen  
and startling the butterflies of Mucho  
into flying violets.  
It was the night of the alligators,  
the pure night, crawling  
with snouts emerging from ooze,  
and out of the sleepy marshes  
the confused noise of scaly plates  
returned to the ground where they began.

The jaguar brushes the leaves  
with a luminous absence,  
the puma runs through the branches  
like a forest fire,  
while the jungle's drunken eyes  
burn from inside him.  
The badgers scratch the river's  
feet, scenting the nest

whose throbbing delicacy  
they attack with red teeth.

And deep in the huge waters  
the enormous anaconda lies  
like the circle around the earth,  
covered with ceremonies of mud,  
devouring, religious.

THE HEIGHTS OF MACCHU PICCHU, III  
(from the Spanish of Pablo Neruda)

The human soul was threshed out like maize in the endless  
granary of defeated actions, of mean things that happened,  
to the very edge of endurance, and beyond,  
and not only death, but many deaths, came to each one:  
each day a tiny death, dust, worm, a light  
flicked off in the mud at the city's edge, a tiny death  
with coarse wings  
pierced into each man like a short lance  
and the man was besieged by the bread or by the knife,  
the cattle-dealer: the child of sea-harbors, or the dark  
captain of the plough,  
or the rag-picker of snarled streets:  
everybody lost heart, anxiously waiting for death, the  
short death of every day:  
and the grinding bad luck of every day was  
like a black cup that they drank, with their hands shaking.

TRUMPETS  
(from the German of Georg Trakl)

Under the trimmed willows, where brown children  
are playing  
And leaves tumbling, the trumpets blow. A quaking  
of cemeteries.

- James Wright, trans.

Banners of scarlet rattle through a sadness of maple  
trees,  
Riders along rye-fields, empty mills.

Or shepherds sing during the night, and stags step  
delicately  
Into the circle of their fire, the grove's sorrow  
immensely old,  
Dancing, they loom up from one black wall;  
Banners of scarlet, laughter, insanity, trumpets.

#### DE PROFUNDIS

(from the German of George Trakl)

It is a stubble field, where a black rain is falling.  
It is a brown tree, that stands alone.  
It is a hissing wind, that encircles empty houses.  
How melancholy the evening is.

Beyond the village,  
The soft orphan garners the sparse ears of corn.  
Her eyes graze, round and golden, in the twilight  
And her womb awaits the heavenly bridegroom.

On the way home  
The shepherd found the sweet body  
Decayed in a bush of thorns.

I am a shadow far from darkening villages.  
I drank the silence of God  
Out of the stream in the trees.

Cold metal walks on my forehead.  
Spiders search for my heart.  
It is a light that goes out in my mouth.

At night, I found myself in a pasture,  
Covered with rubbish and the dust of stars.

In a hazel thicket  
Angels of crystal rang out once more.

#### ★ THE RATS

(from the German of Georg Trakl)

In the farmyard the white moon of autumn shines.  
Fantastic shadows fall from the eaves of the roof.  
A silence is living in the empty windows;  
Now from it the rats emerge softly

And skitter here and there, squeaking.  
And a gray malodorous mist from the latrine  
Follows behind them, sniffing:  
Through the mist the ghostly moonlight quivers.

And the rats squeak eagerly as if insane  
And go out to fill houses and barns  
Which are filled full of fruit and grain.  
Icy winds quarrel in the darkness.

#### A WINTER NIGHT

(from the German of Georg Trakl)

It has been snowing. Past midnight, drunk on purple wine, you leave  
the gloomy shelters of men, and the red fire of their fireplaces. Oh the  
darkness of night.

Black frost. The ground is hard, the air has a bitter taste. Your stars  
make unlucky figures.

With a stiff walk, you tramp along the railroad embankment with huge  
eyes, like a soldier charging a dark machinegun nest. Onward!

Bitter snow and moon.

A red wolf, that an angel is strangling. Your trouser legs rustle, as you  
walk, like blue ice, and a smile full of suffering and pride petrifies your face,

Μνασέσθαι τινα φαιμ υστερον αμμεων  
(Sappho)

AS I STEP OVER A PUDDLE AT THE END OF  
WINTER, I THINK OF AN ANCIENT CHINESE  
GOVERNOR

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

—Written A.D. 819

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

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

— James Wright

GOODBYE TO THE POETRY OF CALCIUM

*Dark cypresses—  
The world is uneasily happy:  
It will all be forgotten.*

—THEODOR STORM

Mother of roots, you have not seeded  
The tall ashes of loneliness

## In Fear of Harvests

It has happened  
Before: nearby,  
The nostrils of slow horses  
Breathe evenly,  
And the brown bees drag their high garlands,  
Heavily,  
Toward hives of snow.

## Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

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

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

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

- James Wright



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

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

- James Wright

The Jewel

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

## Tall Nettles

Tall nettles cover up, as they have done  
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough  
Long worn out, and the roller made of stone:  
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.

This corner of the farmyard I like most:  
As well as any bloom upon a flower  
I like the dust on the nettles, never lost  
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.

- Edward Thomas

## Haymaking

After night's thunder far away had rolled  
The fiery day had a kernel sweet of cold,  
And in the perfect blue the clouds uncurled,  
Like the first gods before they made the world  
And misery, swimming the stormless sea  
In beauty and in divine gaiety.  
The smooth white empty road was lightly strewn  
With leaves—the holly's Autumn falls in June—  
And fir cones standing up stiff in the heat.  
The mill-foot water tumbled white and lit  
With tossing crystals, happier than any crowd,  
Of children pouring out of school aloud.  
And in the little thickets where a sleeper  
For ever might lie lost, the nettle creeper  
And garden-warbler sang unceasingly;  
While over them shrill shrieked in his fierce glee  
The swift with wings and tail as sharp and narrow  
As if the bow had flown off with the arrow.  
Only the scent of woodbine and hay new mown  
Travelled the road. In the field sloping down,  
Park-like, to where its willows showed the brook,  
Haymakers rested. The tosser lay forsook  
Out in the sun; and the long waggon stood  
Without its team: it seemed it never would  
Move from the shadow of that single yew.  
The team, as still, until their task was due,  
Beside the labourers enjoyed the shade  
That three squat oaks mid-field together made  
Upon a circle of grass and weed uncut,  
And on the hollow, once a chalk pit, but  
Now brimmed with nut and elder-flower so clean.  
The men leaned on their rakes, about to begin,  
But still. And all were silent. All was old,  
This morning time, with a great age untold,  
Older than Clare and Cobbett, Morland and Crome,

## Archaischer Torso Apollos

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,  
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber  
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,  
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,

sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug  
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen  
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen  
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz  
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz  
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern  
aus wie ein Stern: denn da is keine Stelle,  
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

## Archaic Torso of Apollo

We never knew his head and all the light  
that ripened in his fabled eyes. But  
his torso still glows like a candelabra,  
in which his gazing, turned down low,

holds fast and shines. Otherwise the surge  
of the breast could not blind you, nor a smile  
run through the slight twist of the loins  
toward that center where procreation thrived.

Otherwise this stone would stand deformed and curt  
under the shoulders' invisible plunge  
and not glisten just like wild beasts' fur;

and not burst forth from all its contours  
like a star: for there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.

- Rainer Maria Rilke  
Edward Snow, trans.

## UNTERGANG

An Karl Borromaeus Heinrich

Über den weissen Weiher  
Sind die wilden Vögel fortgezogen.  
Am Abend weht von unseren Sternen ein eisiger Wind.

Über unsere Gräber  
Beugt sich die zerbrochene Stirne der Nacht.  
Unter Eichen schaukeln wir auf einem silbernen Kahn.

Immer klingen die weissen Mauern der Stadt.  
Unter Dornenbogen  
O mein Bruder klimmen wir blinde Zeiger gen Mitternacht.

## DOWNFALL

to Karl Borromaeus Heinrich

Above the white pond  
Wild birds have flown away.  
In the evening, an icy wind blows from our stars.

Above our graves  
Night leans down with its shattered forehead.  
Under the oaks, we rock in a silver skiff.

The town's white walls keep ringing.  
Beneath the arches of thorns,  
O my brother, we are the blind hands climbing toward midnight.

- George Trakl  
Daniel Simko, trans.

## THE FLYING EAGLES OF TROOP 62

Ralph Neal was the Scoutmaster. He was still a young man. He liked us.

I have no doubt he knew perfectly well we were each of us masturbating unhappily in secret caves and shores.

The soul of patience, he waited while we smirked behind each other's backs, mocking and parodying the Scout Law, trying to imitate the oratorical rotundities of Winston Churchill in a Southern Ohio accent:

"Ay scout is trusswortha, loll, hailpful, frenly, curtchuss, kand, abaydent, chairful, thrifta, dapraved, clane, and letcherass."

Ralph Neal knew all about the pain of the aching stones in our twelve-year-old groins, the lava-swollen halfway between our peckers and our nuts that were still green and sour as half-ripe apples two full months before the football season began.

Socrates loved his friend the traitor Alcibiades for his beauty and for what he might become.

I think Ralph Neal loved us for our scrawniness, our acne, our fear; but mostly for his knowledge of what would probably become of us. He was not a fool. He knew he would never himself get out of that slime hole of a river valley, and maybe he didn't want to. The Vedantas illustrate the most sublime of ethical ideals by describing a saint who, having endured through a thousand lives every half-assed mistake and unendurable suffering possible to humanity from birth to death, refused at the last moment to enter Nirvana because he realized

that his scruffy dog, suppurating at the nostrils and half mad with rabies, could not accompany him into perfect peace.

Some of us wanted to get out, and some of us wanted to and didn't.

The last I heard, Dickey Beck, a three-time loser at housebreaking, was doing life at the State Pen in Columbus.

The last I heard, Dale Headley was driving one of those milk trucks where the driver has to stand up all day and rattle his spine over the jagged street-bricks.

The last I heard from my brother-in-law, Hub Snodgrass was still dragging himself home every evening down by the river to shine, shower, shave, and spend a good hour still trying to scrape the Laughlin steel dust out of his pale skin. He never tanned much, he just burned or stayed out of the river.

The last I heard, Mike Kottelos was making book in Wheeling.

I have never gone back there down home to see Ralph Neal. My portrait hangs on one of the walls of the Martins Ferry Public Library. Ralph Neal would think I've become something. And no doubt I have, though I don't know just what. Scribbling my name in books. Christ have mercy on me alive; and after I'm dead, as Pietro Aretino of Florence requested of the priest after he had received extreme unction on his deathbed, "Now that I've been oiled, keep me from the rats."

When I think of Ralph Neal's name, I feel some kind of ice breaking open in me. I feel a garfish escaping into a hill spring where the crawdads burrow down to the pure bottom in hot weather to get the cool. I feel a rush of long

fondness for that good man Ralph Neal, that good man who knew us dreadful and utterly vulnerable little bastards better than we knew ourselves, who took care of us better than we took care of ourselves, and who loved us, I reckon, because he knew damned well what would become of most of us, and it sure did, and he knew it, and he loved us anyway. The very name of America often makes me sick, and yet Ralph Neal was an American. The country is enough to drive you crazy.

- James Wright

## WHAT DOES THE BOBWHITE MEAN?

*To Jimmie East*

I don't know  
Yet, I, too, have walked down there  
In that place where the green  
Acacias get dark before your eyes.  
That place: wherever it is,  
Only you know.

As for me, as for mine,  
We have held each other's hands alone, each alone,  
And felt the green dew turn dark gold, brilliants  
In the darkness outside.  
A town called Fiesole.  
What can the name of Fiesole mean to you?  
What does the bobwhite mean?

I have heard the katydid counting out syllables  
Over and over on the side of mountain water  
In the darkness outside  
Minnewaska. Minnewaska?  
What will your loneliness mean to me?  
What does the bobwhite mean? I don't know  
Yet, but I have  
A pretty good twilight.

And around you a twilight is gathering in good faith  
The solitary armadillos together in Florida,

## The Continental Can Company at Six O'Clock

The faces fall down the ramp into the yard  
Beside the river.  
Headlights roil over the water,  
And the faces divide into drops of blood,  
That fall over the high voltage wires of the fence  
Into the river.  
The water darkens to red fire.  
And the blast furnaces of Benwood are lunging at the sky,  
Animals blinded with anger.  
Suddenly the faces flood into one dark red face.  
The hood of each car is a dark sloop bearing a coffin  
Toward the river.  
This is October, the restless flames of dead blow torches have  
scarred  
the wind.  
Men are dying without ever knowing it.  
America, America,  
It is raining  
In the river.

James Wright, 5 March 1961 version of Amenities of Stone