

April 7, 2000

"The skin over a young girl's wrist ..."

Remembering James Wright



I will be 50 in July, and my boyhood poet days are flown. But there was a time when it was my desire to crush the world in my poetic embrace. And I was so fortunate to have the American poet James Wright, if not as an outright mentor, then as an abiding

example of what words could do, and as a personal friend.

You see, he was my uncle, sort of.

When my mother remarried in 1965 I acquired a stepfamily. Within that stepfamily my stepfather Richard had a stepmother, Elsie. Elsie had a sister named Elizabeth. And Elizabeth was James Wright's English teacher in high school, and for a brief period, his legal guardian.

Wright, of course, lived in southern Ohio, in Martin's Ferry. I lived in the north, 30 miles outside Cleveland. But when I visited my step-grandmother Elsie's house in the 60s, so full of weird bricabrac -- I especially remember a shelf of Herb Alpert records -- I was very

taken by two of Wright's Wesleyan University Press titles, *Saint Judas* and *The Branch Will Not Break*. I was 15.

Elsie loaned me the books, and they proved to be a portal for me to a world that was both as real as the Hazel-Atlas Glass plant where Wright's father worked and as imaginative as the ghostly jungle shore along the Ohio River at midnight.

If you know this work, you know how intensely emotional Wright was. He was our Vallejo, a giant in the heart who could wring tears from grass. He was phenomenally gifted -- and vulnerable.

These early books of his, along with *Shall We Gather at the River*, my favorite, reveal him as a poet of heartbreak. His work was naturalistic and everyday. Yet certain moments had the power to suck you into a vortex of feelings, generally elegiac.

The poems had a profound impact on me. I was a teenager, which automatically made me susceptible, but I was also struggling with the death of my older sister Kathleen, who died of heart complications at age 15. Her passing devastated my family, me as much as anyone.

Wright's poems put me in touch with my own pain. There was so much sorrow in them, and so much hunger for love and reconnection. It was a good transition from the weepy mystical adolescent fiction I was reading at the time, like Herman Hesse's *Demian*.

But see for yourself. Listen to the gentleness of Wright's voice in a 1963 poem, "A Blessing," about two Indian ponies he stopped to touch, "just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota." This is one of his best-known poems. If it does not send a sharp shaft of feeling through you, I wonder what is wrong with you.

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long
ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

This is poetry that makes one want to weep and pray. It soothed the wound that was still in me from my sister's death. I began to see the calamity that befell my family as itself a kind of blessing. In my reading, the line about "the skin over a young girl's wrist" was always Kathy's wrist.

It surfaced a sense of the preciousness of the things we love, especially the fragile things that don't last long in the world. And it fired me to want to put my own stories, my own poems, down.

I showed some of my writing to Elsie, who picked up on the resemblance to Wright's work. So she arranged a car trip to New Concord, where Wright's parents lived. James and his wife Annie would be there, and I would have a chance to meet them. Elsie was doing in a small way for me what her sister Elizabeth had done for Wright.

Wright was there with his wife Annie. She was tall and strong and sympathetic. He was soft and sweet and genial, full of gentle quips and funny stories. He didn't put on a show for me. But he communicated to me in a respectful way that words could be part of a life.

What struck me immediately was his voice. It was incredibly soft and un-mean. And there was no fussing or high-faluting or show-offy about him. He knew I was a young dabbler, but he neither patronized me by offering to read my work, nor dissed me in any way. He treated me like a young colleague, a student perhaps. He respected me, and it rocked me.

After lunch we walked in his mother's vegetable garden, and he showed me the cabbages and zucchinis he helped put in. And he talked about the German poems he was translating, by Theodor Storm -- and surprisingly, by Herman Hesse -- that were knife-deep with the pangs of young wanting.

I bristled with pride that I already knew the name Theodor Storm. He was the heartsick poet Thomas Mann quoted in his novela *Tonio Kroger*, about the hapless lot of sensitive young poets. All I knew about

him was the Mann connection, but I pressed it to Wright. Who was either impressed, or forgave me -- both great.

And he asked if I had seen the new movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He and Annie had seen it the night before, on the big screen in Columbus.

"You really should see it," he said. "And listen to the voice of Hal, the computer on the Jupiter spacecraft. In all the loneliness of space, his is the only human voice. I don't know -- I found it very touching."

And he told me that the secret of cantaloupe is the sweet smell at the stem. "With watermelons, you go by sound. With muskmelon," he said, "it's all smell."

And that was my day with James Wright. I rode back to Cleveland with Elsie feeling I had had an important meeting in my life. I fantasized about hitchhiking to New York City and offering my meager skills as handyman to Annie, whose Montessori school in Morningside Heights needed painting. Anything to keep the fresh bond alive.

I didn't, praise god. Even I was catching on that my surprise visits were more of a burden than a gift. But I did go to see *2001*, and I too was moved by the character of the computer. The voice, by the way, was identical to the soft tones of Wright's own voice, reaching out to the emotionally detached astronauts:

"Your drawing is definitely improving, Dave."

I don't think that was what Wright wanted me to notice. But there it was, unmistakably, the most human thing in the empty reaches of space -- an encouraging voice.

Truth is, I think I wrote him once, to tell him how much my afternoon with him, and his work generally, meant to me. But I did not want to be a pest. Or I did, but -- well, you know.

So it was with such regret, in 1980, that I snatched an AP report from the teletype machine at the newspaper I worked for, and read that James Wright had succumbed to cancer of the tongue in New York. God, what an ironic affliction for a poet as sweet-spirited as him.

I hoped -- and I think I was right -- that his life with Annie was a near-reversal of the difficult years he had spent before her, years of drunkenness, depression, and getting fired from the English faculty at the University I would eventually attend -- another minor coincidence -- in Minnesota. Healing came big time, and I understand he let it happen to him.

It may be what I liked best about him, that he could know the full meaning of sadness and still be on the lookout for joy.

Wright at his best legitimized something I hear many poet peers railing against -- self-pity. I often hear writers condemn another writer for obsessing about personal suffering. Writing about one's own hurting is

suspect -- unmanly, and "stuck" in its own sorrow, not providing movement away from grief.

When I say he legitimized self-pity, I mean he found a way to love oneself in writing, to feel genuine sorrow for one's situation, not out of selfishness or self-absorption, but out of forgiveness. How can we have compassion for what is outside us if we can't have compassion for what we know best? Not that we wallow in this feeling, either -- this sorrow is a necessary interim stage, like "hitting bottom," to a return to living. Angry, but not bitter; sorrow, but not despair.

Wright was the sort of poet who could, with a false turn here or there, have wound up as one of our poet suicides. What an execrable fate (and awful example) that would have been. And how grateful I am that he did not.

Wright was part of the confessional school, but he was bigger than it. Though his estimate of himself was humble, he wound up being important. He helped introduce us to great Latin and European writers. And he altered the poetic landscape, away from the owlsh academicism of the 1950s and toward something much more personal and passionate and alive. And his books live on as testament to a life felt fully and appreciated.

But I will remember him as a man who looked on a confused up-and-comer as someone worth a kind word or two. Thank you, Uncle Jim ... or whatever.

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