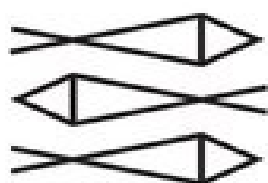


# A WILD PERFECTION

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF JAMES WRIGHT

EDITED BY ANNE WRIGHT  
AND SAUNDRA ROSE MALEY  
WITH JONATHAN BLANK



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# A Wild Perfection

The Selected Letters of James Wright

Edited by Anne Wright and Sandra Rose Maley,  
with Jonathan Blunk

Farrar • Straus • Giroux / New York

**To the Memory of Elizabeth Lyons, James's Beloved Grandmother**

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**To the Memory of W. Milne Holton**

**To the Happy Family**

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## Foreword

When we were married in April of 1967, James brought over a small suitcase of clothes and a huge suitcase of books, papers, and letters from his room at the Regent Hotel to my railroad apartment on East Eighty-fifth Street. Once we were settled in what became “our” apartment, we bought a filing cabinet for our combined papers, most of which were James’s. I organized all correspondence, drafts of poems, and various notes for our teaching jobs and tried to keep up with the rapid growth of additions.

Then, in the spring of 1973, Robert Bly sent thirty-four boxes of James’s papers, which had been stashed away on the Bly farm for a good ten years. First we put the boxes in our storage unit, a former coal bin, and later, after a move across the street, on the fire stairs of our new apartment. James had full intentions to examine and sort the contents of each and every box, but never did.

James worked at my old desk in the screened-off portion of our bedroom in the railroad flat. When we moved, he finally had a study of his own, as well as a large, old-fashioned office desk left behind by former tenants. We even bought a second filing cabinet.

Mail was very important to James. I would come home from work to find the dining room table covered with opened letters. Often there would be penciled messages for me on the envelopes, such as “A good letter from our niece Karin,” or “What can I do about this student? He breaks my heart,” or “It’ll be a cold day in hell before I read at this place!”

James made a great, if spasmodic, effort to keep in touch with good friends as well as young writers who sent their poems to him and asked for advice. He was particularly moved by a letter from a seventeen-year-old Janice Thurn, who, in April of 1975, struck by his Minneapolis poems—that was the city where she lived—sent him copies of her work. They were to exchange many letters over the next four years.

However, there were still tall piles of unanswered letters in both his in- and out-boxes. To think of answering all the demands contained in such a voluminous amount of mail was impossible. It would have been an overwhelming task. James did what he could; he felt guilty when he couldn’t reply to all the letters and happy when he did.

I was usually at my teaching job when James tackled work at his desk, so I did not have a good opportunity to observe the ritual involved in the writing of poems and letters until we traveled to Europe. During those trips he would spend several hours after breakfast at the desk in our hotel room while I did some sightseeing. Then we’d meet at a café, have a cappuccino, and plan the rest of the day. Usually he’d arrive carrying a sheaf of answered letters in his hand, which he waved in the air to show me what he’d accomplished.

We traveled with a portable Olivetti, carried in a small blue suitcase nicknamed “the traveling desk.” Beside the typewriter were small notebooks used as journals, carbon and typing paper, and a big brown envelope of mail. James kept a special notebook for carbon copies of all letters he wrote. I couldn’t imagine why he wanted to keep copies, but now I know. Thank goodness he did!

After James’s death in 1980 I had to go through the contents of all the boxes we’d stored on the fire stairs and the top of the study closet. I was fortunate to have the incomparable help of two graduate students, Keelin Curran and Nicholas Gattuccio. They loved James’s work and respected each and every scrap of paper scattered across the floor of my living room. There seemed to be a million pieces of paper; most were drafts of poems, but many were letters. As I assimilated the contents of all the boxes, I discovered a different side of James from the man I had been married to for thirteen years.

learned new facts about his childhood and family and gained further insight into the important years at Kenyon College and the University of Washington in Seattle as well as his close friendships with fellow students and poets. I was exposed to both familiar and brand-new thoughts and ideas of James on life, poetry, teaching, and politics, not to mention his own particular brand of witty and bawdy humor.

We filed all the letters to him in appropriate folders and examined several notebooks filled with carbon copies of his own letters. Apparently, James did keep a careful record of his correspondence from time to time, despite his inconsistency in answering mail.

For the last two years of his life, however, James was steadfast in his exchange of letters with the Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko. Their correspondence is rich with discussions of the problems and pleasures of writing, family relationships, and reflections from the past. “A poem is a very odd duck,” he explained to Leslie. “It goes through changes—in form and color—when you leave it alone patiently, just as surely as a plant does, or an animal, or any other creature.” Leslie was a splendid storyteller, James an attentive listener who gave advice and encouragement.

In a letter from Bruges, Belgium, James described the small city and enclosed a lace-edged handkerchief, with these words:

Sometimes I wonder about things like lace, things that human beings make with their own hands, things that aren't much help as shelter from the elements or against war and other kinds of brutality ... Nevertheless the art continues to survive.

The Wright-Silko letters were published by Graywolf Press. The title, *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace*, reflects the above passage.

Once *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace* was published, I decided to compile a more extensive collection of letters with another book in mind. I was greatly inspired by a gift from Susan Lamb Graham, a friend and classmate from Martins Ferry High School, of James's early letters. The letters date from 1946, when he joined the peacetime army and served in Japan, until 1950, when he was a student at Kenyon College. The letters themselves were as touching as the fact that Ms. Graham had saved them all those years.

At first I was overwhelmed by the gigantic amount of work it would take to edit such a book. Fortunately, Sandra Rose Maley, an English professor from the Washington, D.C., area, was also interested in such a project, and we decided to become co-editors. I first knew Sandra when she was writing her Ph.D. thesis, *Solitary Apprenticeship*, on James's German translations. Ours was a wise and happy decision, for we work very well together. My respect and admiration for her written work, her constant enthusiasm, and her dedication to and love for James's work have continued to grow.

We had notebooks of carbon copies, the Wright-Silko letters, and those from Susan Lamb Graham for an excellent start. A number of friends and family members sent us copies of their letters from James. Among those who made this contribution are Sheri Akamine, Nicholas Crome, Liz Esterline, Roland Flint, Jack Furniss, Edward Harvey, Eugene Pugatch, Gibbons Ruark, Ann Sanfedele, Deborah Thomas, Janice Thurn, and Helen Wright. James's letters to Theodore Roethke are part of the Roethke collection in the University of Washington Manuscript Department, while his letters to Wayne Burnson, his friend and thesis adviser from that university, had already been published as *In Defense Against This Exile: Letters to Wayne Burns*, edited by John Doheny and published by Genitron Press in 1985.

A majority of the letters came from the Manuscript Division of the Elmer L. Andersen Library at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where James's papers are housed. We will forever be indebted to Alan Lathrop, curator of manuscripts at the Andersen Library, for his interest and support. Barbara Bezat, his assistant, gave us invaluable help in searching out innumerable letters and was responsible for having them copied and sent to me in New York, always with great cheer and enthusiasm.

Wherever they came from, each batch of letters brought surprises similar to the ones I experienced when examining the long-stored collection of James's papers back in 1980. Most important was the story of James's life, which threaded its way through so many of the letters. Now I had a better understanding of dark times from the past and was reassured when reading of the pleasure he took in our travels, particularly through Italy. There were many examples of his raucous humor and irreverent comments for comic relief.

The highlight of our work on this volume came with the arrival of letters to Robert Bly, James Dickey, and Donald Hall. Mr. Chatham Ewing, curator of the modern literature collection in the Department of Special Collections at Washington University in St. Louis, supplied us with copies of James's letters to James Dickey. Donald Hall requested Mr. Roland Goodbody, curator of special collections at the University of New Hampshire Library, to send him his copies of James's letters, which, in turn, he sent to us. There are well over two hundred of these letters. Such a magnanimous gift reflects both Mr. Hall's valuing of their close friendship and his great interest and generosity.

In the summer of 2002, after a trip to Minnesota, Jonathan Blunk brought back three dozen letters from James to Robert Bly. Then, in time for Christmas, Robert himself discovered a box of more than sixty letters from James tucked under the eaves in his attic. We all celebrated.

This was a high point of our work, and, together with the letters written to James Dickey and Donald Hall, these splendid and amazing documents make up the bulk of the section titled "The Fire of the Daemon." I doubt if there is another body of correspondence comparable to that of the four poets, who wrote to one another long before they actually met. The use of a typewriter and the postal system was common in the late fifties and early sixties, for it was an era long before E-mail and fax when one still hesitated to call long-distance.

"I have never, thank God, regarded a poem as an absolutely finished thing," wrote James to Robert Bly. "I think critics who think a poem is absolutely finished once it appears in print are morticians."

In a letter to James Dickey, James pays tribute to the first meeting he had with Robert Bly and James Dickey in 1959: "I can't really describe what it meant to feel free to emerge into the tremendous, ample sunlight of noble and heroic men with whom I spent those three days, drinking the great green waters of the first and last seas."

Years later, in 1970, on our first of many visits to Paris, James sent a card to Donald Hall bearing this message: "Here I am—sitting in a café in Paris, happily writing to a beloved friend, just as I need and want to do."

"I'm a lousy correspondent," James once complained to Robert Mezey. "Write and stimulate me into prose." It was true. There were still stretches of time when James didn't answer letters but his mail pile up and spill over his desk. Then he'd experience a burst of renewed strength and enthusiasm and I would hear the typewriter clatter away for several hours until he emerged from the study pleased and relieved by all he had accomplished. He might even quote his father, Dudley Wright, with the comment "blessed work." For to him, too, work was a blessing.

"There is something about the form and occasion of a letter," he wrote to a friend, "—the possibility it offers, the chance to be as open and tentative and uncertain as one likes and also the chance to formulate certain ideas, very precisely—if one is lucky in one's thoughts." I feel James was usually very lucky in his thoughts, both spoken and written, and I am well aware how lucky I was

read and hear these thoughts for thirteen years. My life certainly changed when I met him and continues to change in abundant and wonderful ways as I do what I can to help his work go on. As we were rarely apart, I have only a few letters from James but many, many little notes. One such note was written to me after James finished reading a new book from our close friend Gibbons Ruark. He described how shaken he was by the work: "This man is real. So he's a real poet. There is no other kind."

The note ended with what might be construed as a poem:

Poets pass on a chill spring  
and a dying fire to one another,  
but poetry is not a cheap trick.  
It is the true voice. It isn't an  
ornament flung random on life. It's  
the flowering of life, as Guillén said.

James Wright was a real poet who wrote real letters. He took the opportunity to be "open and tentative and uncertain" and to "formulate certain ideas, very precisely." We are all very, very lucky he did.

Anne Wright  
Westerly, Rhode Island  
Summer 2000

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## Introduction: The Great Conversation

In a man's letters, his soul lies naked.

—Samuel Johnson

James Wright was an immensely influential poet—he was also an omnivorous reader with photographic memory. He loved discussing and quoting the writers he was devouring. Plato, Aristophanes, Dostoevsky, the author of *Beowulf*, Thomas Wolfe, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Sterne, Dickens, Ortega y Gasset, Cather, and Orwell appear in these letters, as do poets from across the ages: Catullus, Horace, Sappho, Herrick, Heine, Edward Thomas, Rilke, Goethe, Whitman, Robinson, Hardy, George Trakl, César Vallejo, Jorge Guillén, Roethke, Louise Bogan—the list goes on. Wright read and wrote poetry for his very sustenance. That need had its origins before he entered Kenyon College and began his formal study of poetry in the late 1940s. Nick Crome, a classmate and lifelong friend, described the atmosphere at Kenyon, where Wright, who was several years older than most of his fellow undergraduates, was at the center of the Great Conversation, in which stories and poems and those who love them talk eternally with one another.

While the letters here give details of James Wright's life, they also tell the story of a deep thinker. Some letters read like crafted essays and reveal a side of Wright that he brought to the classroom, both as a student and later as a teacher. On his college entrance application, Wright wrote that he wanted to be a philosopher. Readers of his poems are aware of their startling images and idiosyncrasies, especially in *The Branch Will Not Break* and *Shall We Gather at the River*—the most frequently anthologized poems are taken from these books. Some may know the uneven power of the clipped and angry poems of *Two Citizens*, or the gentler, more narrative turn his poems took in *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, *Moments of the Italian Summer*, and *This Journey*, his final volume. These letters give us a vivid picture of the craftsman behind those poems who both agonized and reveled in his work.

Jorge Luis Borges once said that his idea of heaven was an enormous library full of books. Wright's heaven, too, there are books, but there are also comfortable chairs for him and his friends to sit in as they converse. I am sure there are roomy armchairs for the writers already mentioned, and special places for his high school teachers Helen McNeely Sheriff and Elizabeth Willerton Esterly; his Kenyon teachers John Crowe Ransom, Philip Timberlake, Andre Hanfman, Philip Blair Rice, and Charles Coffin; his colleagues and friends at the University of Washington, Theodore Roethke and Wayne Burns; and those he knew and loved at the University of Minnesota, and later at Hunter College.

In my earlier study of Wright's work, I discovered the expanse of his intellect and craft; in these letters, I am most touched by his generosity of spirit. While working with Anne Wright to select from the hundreds we had collected, I had the opportunity to meet Wright in more intimate and startling ways. Keats wrote that he was "certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination." Wright's letters brim with these qualities.

James Wright may be among the last generation of poets whose letters we will have. In these years of the Internet, E-mail has fast become the common mode of writing. Once read, the communications are lost forever with a click of the Delete key. Fortunately for us, we have many of Wright's letters—full, expressive, and exploratory letters that document his part in the Great

Conversation—what he calls in one letter to Miss Willerton “an open argument” that includes a poets, living and dead. Wright had this to say to Miss Willerton of his own letter writing:

I suppose this letter, before it really gets finished, will run to many pages, and be typed on odd kinds of paper, all different. Some of it may be done on this lined stuff, some on typing paper, with various kinds of type, or composed in long hand with varying colors of ink or lead. On the other hand, the letter may end after a mere page or so. But you know the inconsistency of form to be found in my correspondence. I like to write spontaneously. Letters can be very close to conversation; and hence they can be valuable.

As we read these letters, we pull our chairs into the circle and listen to both Wright’s serious and comedic discussions of the relationships and rivalries of one of the great generations of American poets—with Wright at its center, where he belongs.

James Wright’s initiation as a letter writer came naturally, as it did to many young men of his generation, when he joined the armed forces. When Wright enlisted in the army right out of high school and left the Ohio valley for the first time, World War II had just ended. During his training, he was selected for engineers’ school and was stationed at various posts around the country until he eventually became part of the occupation forces in Japan. His letters home to family, friends, and teachers show a young man determined to continue the education he began at Martins Ferry High School. He read widely and wrote daily, mostly sonnets, while enduring the rigors of army life. In December 1946, a letter to Susan Lamb, a high school friend, suggests the breadth of his reading while at the same time it gives us an example of his humor and his ability to blend the mundane and the majestic: “Will you be patient with the brevity of my letter? I am in the latrine, only a few moments ago having beaten the last line of Ovid to the floor.”

In the course of working on this collection, Anne and I read hundreds of letters that came to us from various sources. We met several times a year, most often in Anne’s light-filled living room in Manhattan or at her cottage in Rhode Island, where we worked our way through the letters chronologically. We would sit together, each with our own copies, stopping at predetermined points to discuss selections. More often than not, we agreed; when we didn’t, we discussed a letter’s merits and lack thereof.

Our criteria for selection were simple. We chose letters of literary and biographical importance, for their intrinsic interest, and, as our editor Jonathan Galassi counseled, for their readability as part of a narrative. We also wanted to include representative letters to as many correspondents as we could from Wright’s wide circle of friends and acquaintances. The underrepresentation or absence of letters to some close friends—John Logan and David Ignatow come to mind—is not an oversight; owing to the fact that they lived in New York, Wright saw them frequently. Wright’s letters demonstrate the care and concern he had for the work of his fellow poets. When friends, and even strangers, sent him their poems, he would respond with detailed and meticulous comments and critiques of their work, and when he closed a letter with the words “send poems,” as he often did, he meant it.

Anne writes in her Foreword of our excitement at the arrival of more than sixty letters that Robe



Bly found in his attic in the fall of 2003, including the first letter Wright had written to him in July 1958. I had wanted to see that letter since I met with Bly in 1987 to discuss his and Wright's collaborative work in translation. I had learned of the letter from an interview in which Wright mentioned writing to Bly out of sheer exhilaration at having seen the name of Georg Trakl in the first issue of Bly's magazine, *The Fifties*. Wright described his letter as "sixteen pages long and single spaced." I asked Bly then if he still had the letter, and he said he would look for it when he returned to Minnesota. It was not until 2003 that Bly finally found the box after being spurred to the nether reaches of his attic by a visit from Jonathan Blunk. After many years I had the opportunity to read the feverish first letter to Bly—"the one that almost got away." It was not as long as Wright remembered but it was worth the wait. Anne and I had many such surprises. Another splendid moment came when we read a letter to Bly in which Wright mentions that Anne had come up with the title *To Blossoming Pear Tree*—she had completely forgotten about that!

Wright's letters pull us into the heart of American poetry in the decades following World War I and show us his and his generation's struggles with the formalism of the New Critics, the great shadow cast by the Moderns, and their own desire to break new ground. Like many of his contemporaries, Wright knew his forms. He defends the iambic to Bly and talks of his attempts to bring the image into the iambic line. Writing to Donald Hall, he characterizes his vacillations between artistic poles in a prose that is intense and passionate, not to say hyperbolic:

The two American poets who mean the most to me as an individual human being are, for God's sake, Whitman and Robinson! Now, stylistically they are as far apart as two men could be and still write in the same language. I have never known how to fuse them; and so, as you are undoubtedly aware, having endured the very genuine hysterics of my correspondence for some years, I have helplessly and nauseously swung back and forth terrified by great space on the pendulum from the one to the other. Now, there was nothing wrong with this, and there was a time for me—as there was, inevitably, for every young poet writing in America right now—to commit himself to the traditional syntax and the traditional meters of English verse; for many of the writers who preceded us were so sloppy, that we had to begin not by revolting against competence and restriction, because except for a few writers there was no competence, but rather to begin by creating *our own* competence. Thus, the next step—the really terrifying one, the appalling one, the one that drains the blood, the real red blood, out of one's veins, is to move through and beyond that necessary competence into individual creation.

Wright also wrote tender, philosophical, and instructive letters that are often at their most revealing when he was traveling. The distance gave him the quiet space he needed to express deep feelings. Early letters to Susan Lamb, for instance, read like love letters; they included poems he had written for her. But Susan told Anne that on one visit to her house when he was on leave from the army, Wright sat in her living room without speaking a word.

So we have the letters to fill the silent spaces. When I first read Wright's poems, I was drawn to their searing rightness and simplicity by a magnetic force. Over the years, and in these letters, I have come to know and appreciate the magnitude of the mind and spirit behind that force. The letters collected here reflect a fraction of what James Wright wrote. Though some have been lost

destroyed and others may surface in the future, we are confident that this collection offers a wellrounded picture of Wright's life and his thoughts on poetry, friendship, his country, and literature.

I have dedicated my part in this work to the late W Milne Holton, professor of English at the University of Maryland. It is to him that I ultimately owe the privilege of co-editing these letters. Nearly twenty years ago I waltzed into his office to discuss my choice for a dissertation topic. I had scribbled three names on a scrap of paper. Professor Holton quickly dismissed them. Then I timidly suggested James Wright, whose poems I had been introduced to in the late sixties in a course on poetics with Rod Jellema. Holton, who had the most expressive eyebrows I've ever seen, sat forward in his chair, eyebrows lifted nearly to his bald pate, and said excitedly, "Yes, James Wright! Get out there and see what you can find and come back to see me next week!" Well, the weeks turned into years and I kept going back. Though I cursed him many times over, Holton held my feet to the fire and I'm grateful that he did. Although the work on the dissertation took much longer than I expected, the journey led me into the heart of James Wright's poetry, and fortunately, too, it led me to Ann Wright. Thank you, Professor Holton!

Sandra Rose Maley  
Washington, D.C.  
Fall 2000

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# Beginning

1946–1953

James Wright, circa 1946



I began in Ohio.  
I still dream of home.

—from “Stages on a Journey Westward”

At Fort Lewis, Washington,

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Twelve years ago, when I was eighteen,  
We fired all day long at practice targets  
And wounded one of our own men.  
When I ran to help him,  
I saw a whole gray earth  
Opening in a vein of his cry:  
From full green to emptiness,  
A mile's field of dead fir stumps  
High as the level of adolescent waists,  
Low as a man's knees.  
We had mown a grove down.  
I was one of the State's gardeners.

—from “The Trees in Minnesota”

As far as the school proper is concerned, Jack and I both are supremely satisfied. The caliber of the teachers is evidently very excellent, and consequently the requirements are stiff. We shall be expected to wrestle with the books often and with energy if we want to retain our feeling of intelligence.

—from a letter to the parents of Jack Furniss

February 29, 1946

The earliest of James Wright's letters to be found were written in the spring of 1946. One is to his high school English teacher, Elizabeth Willerton, and the other is to her friend Professor James McCreight. In each letter James discussed plans to enlist in the service and presented personal views on Latin poetry, his great love.

James enlisted in the army that summer. After completing basic training, he served with the peacetime army in Japan. He continued to read, study, translate the works of Catullus, and admire not only Latin poetry but poetry in general. He also wrote to his parents, Jessie and Dudley Wright; Susan Lamb; and Elizabeth Willerton.

Susan Lamb, later Graham, was a classmate from Martins Ferry High School. She and James had worked together on the yearbook staff of the 1946 *Ferrian*, he as editor and she as assistant editor. His letters often included a sonnet or translation in his letters to her. Elizabeth Willerton, later Esterly, was portrayed by James as a teacher who “introduced her high school students to literature with a clarity and intelligence, a kind of summons to enter whatever nobility there is in the human race, with something very like genius.”

After he was discharged from the army, James returned to his family, who had moved from Martins Ferry to a farm at nearby Warnock. “As for home,” he wrote Susan Lamb, “I am situated on a farm plopped down in the wilderness about fifteen miles out of Bellaire. The atmosphere suits me famously. I have music for passivity, books for activity and a free-thinking mother for conversation.”

James met Jack Furniss, a young man from Ohio, while in the army. Furniss recommended Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, to James, and they both were accepted, enrolling as freshmen in January 1948. James formed close friendships with many fellow classmates, including Albert Herzing, E. V. Rieu, Doctorow, Roger Hecht, Robert Mezey, and Eugene Pugatch. Equally strong bonds were formed with his teachers John Crowe Ransom, Philip Timberlake, and Andre Hanfman. Most of these friendships were to last throughout his life.

The letters written during his four years at Kenyon reveal James's scholarship, growing interest in music, and broadened exposure to literature. After graduating from Kenyon in January of 1952, James married Liberty Kardules, a fellow student at Martins Ferry High School. The young couple went to Center Point, Texas, where James taught for a semester at the Tenney School, and then sailed for Europe that fall, as James had been accepted at the University of Vienna in Austria as a Fulbright Scholar. Their son Franz was born there on March 18, 1953.

In the spring of 1953 James sent a highly detailed six-page letter to Robert Mezey. It was handwritten in the cramped but neat style that James would employ throughout his life. The first few pages contain extensive comments on a group of Mezey's poems, including one very long one. The last two pages, which are included here, offer both advice and encouragement to Mezey. The end of the letter divulges James's own thoughts on Vienna and America as seen from a new and distant perspective. The letter closes with loving words about his new son.

## To James L. McCreight

Martins Ferry, Ohio  
Spring 1953

Dear Professor McCreight:

Of course, by this time, you have forgotten our discussion of Latin and English poetry. Still, ponder a moment and recall me as the rather wild-eyed young man whose conception of the Muses stirred you to send him a volume of Catullus.

As I told you, I discovered Catullus in a Caesar book during my second year of Latin, and the wild gush of nobility in his lines ate at me considerably. Perhaps his ability to create poetical images could not approach that of Virgil, or even that of the more sensible Horace, but his cries, such as:

*—nam tui Catulli;  
plenus sacculus est aranearum.*

—charged me with a weird hunger, such as that created by Chopin or Poe.

I have included with this letter a few translations, or paraphrases. They do not cling to his purity; no translation, however perfect, can do that, for a poet's balancing of his native tongue is shocked by translation, and can scarcely be reconstructed.

Your kindness in sending me the books has given me the courage to include, also, a work which I consider my most mature. The defects in my "Elegies" are very apparent. I am conscious, in my rereading of them, of a clumsy straining after effect. But in no other attempt have I so utterly succeeded in speaking for myself, and I am convinced that any originality which exists in them is valuable enough to overshadow their weaknesses. As you read them, you will be conscious of the absence of a syllable here and there, and even of the discarding of iambics altogether. I would rather sacrifice technical skill than sincerity. And I have let the rhythm of emotion govern many of the lines rather than the rhythm of Milton.

Within a few days I shall undergo a physical examination for the Navy. If I pass, I shall be two years removed from a formal education. However, I hope to become well situated, so that I may work

more with Catullus, and thus keep Latin alive within me.

If you will pardon the colloquialism, I don't understand why I continue my writing of these damned verses. I tell myself that I care little or nothing for people's opinions, but my vanity prods me toward attempts at publication.

Most likely, I shall starve, a degenerate.

Thank you again for your consideration in sending the poems of Catullus. His songs are pure gold and he will live forever.

Thank you  
Jim Wright  
Kuckuck Lane, Stop  
Martins Ferry, Oh

## To Elizabeth Willerton

Martins Ferry, Ohio  
Spring 194

Dear Miss Willerton:

Having nearly lost count of time and space, I have no idea when this letter may reach you. Yet, the thing must be written, and the boil must be squeezed.

John Harrison and I have been barred from the Navy, because of our eyesight. Whether or not we shall pursue the Army, I cannot say. For God's sake! I don't know where to turn. If I attempt to attend school, the draft will surely suck me up. Still, I am almost certain that I can scabble through one year on what I have saved. My longing for Latin is deeper than ever now, since I have assembled a vocabulary large enough to read the beautiful volume of Catullus not only with pleasure, but with a great deal of fire.

Among his lyrics I discovered a sweet little song which weighs the merits of a lovely Gallic maiden with the beauty of Lesbia. His hendecasyllables are without blemish, and so I used the same meter in my translation. The spondee, the dactyl, and the three sparkling trochees ripple quickly but in a loosely hung rhythm, like a flicker of light. Also I have paraphrased his "spring song" into iambic pentameter which hardly do justice to its purity. O for a tongue like Latin, full of thunder, each word being supported by its separate classical marble column!

You will be interested to hear that I have only recently completed the reading of Thomas Wolfe's novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. I have nothing to say. Only I would give my tongue for a chance to review it with you. It confirms a wild idea of mine: that Tom Wolfe and William Saroyan are two of America's greatest poets, although their genius ran, and is flowing, through the medium of prose.

I found Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy" as nauseating as you declared, but I turned thereupon to his sonnets, and again I found him to be what a low and ancient whisper had long before claimed: that regardless of any allusion to degeneracy, William Wordsworth was a noble poetic spirit, and his sonnets rank with any cry in their weird simplicity of effervescence. Damn the disillusion after the French Revolution! Damn the reversion to the Tories! Damn the "Idiot Boy"!

Wordsworth is alive.

Finally, I acknowledged Professor McCreight's gracious act in sending me the Catullus volume. In response to his invitation I sent him my nine "Elegies," together with a few translations from Catullus.

Forgive me for being so damnably self-centered in this letter, but this siege of walking the streets cursing through teeth, browsing nervously through the library, and speaking Latin into the wind which

riding in an automobile will wreck me thoroughly unless I speak.

~~I still have two of your books in my possession, and somehow I must return them. Speaking of books, I have obtained a copy of Housman's posthumous poems. Among them is included a review of Housman by Christopher Morley~~

Please, O please be patient with the two or three sonnets I send. They are weak, but I cannot escape writing them.

And please write to me. Touch me with your beauty, the longedfor, the sought-for, the found beauty; for it is an ancient beauty, such as a man, being a diluted poet, may scarcely come upon in a world like the one into which I have fallen.

Your warm friend  
Jim Wright

## To Jessie Lyons Wright

Fort Lewis, Washington  
July 28, 1944

Dear Mother,

Since this is the weekend, and since I passed yesterday's inspection all right, I'll write again today. I just returned from church, and I am enclosing the bulletin. The chapel here is a beautiful building built just like any simply constructed church. The men fill it for every Sunday morning service.

Weariness and fatigue are rapidly losing their grip on me, and only the quick, heavily striking tiredness remains. But this tiredness comes only in spasms. We go to sleep after a rough day, thinking that in the morning we shall be so damned stiff that we won't be able to make reveille, and yet, when the CQ charges and gallops through the barracks at 5:30 a.m., beating his gums and blaring his various screams, we leap from bed, dress, wash up, sweep, mop, make beds, and fly out to formation and get our chow in such a crazy hurry that we forget that yesterday we were tired. By that time, it is too late. After healthy exertion, sleep seems to charge a man's battery.

I hope things are fine at home. My mail is beginning to seep through a little, but I could use more. You must understand how much even one flimsy letter means, after hearing the soft purrings of the drill corporal.

I'll write again later. I just wanted to let you know that everything is fine.

Love to everyone  
Jim

PS. Get Jack and Pop to write.

PPS. Don't forget to tell Marge to write, too.

PPPS. And, most important, you write!!

Fort Lewis, Washington  
August 5, 1944

Dear Mother,

I received letters from you and Pop today, and in yours you told me to ask for anything I wanted. My wishes are still for the same things: Miss Willerton's address and the poems of Gerard Manley



Hopkins. Don't forget that, if you cannot find that particular poet, I want you to send my copy ~~*Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning~~. These would certainly make me feel much better.

Don't misunderstand. Physically and mentally I am in fine condition. I can toss the heavy rifle around now like a toothpick. But, being my mother, you know that I am a little off balance, and that I require vast chunks of fuel to sate my imagination, which very often rushes hot as a furnace.

I see Sebastian about every night, and we surely have enjoyable talks.

I must hit the sack now. Please write soon, and tell the others to do the same. I would write to each of them, but my minutes are jammed completely full.

I am sending Sunday's Chapel bulletin.

Love  
Jim

## To Susan Lamb

Fort Lewis, Washington  
August 7, 1944

Dear Susan,

Finally I have torn away from the company area, for the sake of writing in peace. To sit in the Service Club Library is a relief, because my bones still ache from today's detail. The First Sergeant caught a few of us who had hung up our trousers without buttoning them, and he had us scrub-down the outside of the barracks. Next time I'll remember.

Susan, have you ever read the poems of Thomas Chatterton? He lived just before the time of Keats and he wrote some lyrics that are marvelous. But the fact that shocked me sharply was that he was only *seventeen* years of age at his death! John Keats was devoted to his writing, and dedicated an exquisite sonnet to him.

This afternoon I sat alone in the barracks behind my bed near the wall, and I was just weary enough to permit remembrances of beauty [to] flood over me. I was so lonely and lost, and so desperate for love of Something unknown, misunderstood, that I thought of Keats—not of the poet of sensual color, but of John Keats, the confused little boy who loved his life, but was more passionately devoted to his death.

He said:

Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,  
But Death intenser; Death is Life's high meed.

And suddenly I wanted to see him, to talk the whole mess over with him, for he would understand. But I called, and he was dead.

Susan, will you please read my sonnet?<sup>1</sup> I am conceited and self-centered with no justification, but please hear my outpouring.

And will you write soon?

Jim



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