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# Poetics of the Heartland: The Lyric Voices of James Wright and Stanley Plumly

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Poetics of the Heartland: The Lyric Voices of James Wright and Stanley Plumly

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department or Program of English

Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

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Lewiston, Maine

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### A Trip To Martins Ferry

I reached the top of Rearview Cemetery after a steep climb in my aunt's Subaru through the hill of graves. Parking beside a memorial to the town's native sons who had fought in the Second World War, I stepped out into the heat to behold Martins Ferry from its highest point. The air was thick with humidity that seemed to rise from the river valley below. I could see down river, to the large bridges that crossed into Wheeling, West Virginia. Passing cars and trucks along Route 7 echoed in the hills. I sat in the dry grass between gravestones trying to cherish a moment that I had anticipated since deciding to come to this place. It was an ideal spot to look down at the small town nestled up next to the wide Ohio River.

I'd geared myself up for a journey to find something intrinsic about the Midwest, to identify what it is that made this place inescapable for two poets of this country, Wright and Plumly. Leaving Cleveland in the early morning, I headed southeast on a busy six-lane highway with native plates that concealed my identity as a foreigner. I remember craving the pastoral Ohio country, the rolling hills and haystacks. I was looking out for tall silos and grazing cows. The Grateful Dead's "American Beauty" seemed a fitting soundtrack for a place I thought I was heading. In making my way towards Martins Ferry, I was consciously attempting to distance myself from the present and to reach for a specifically American vibrancy that I thought this land might hold. It was an effort, in part, to suspend myself from reality, from an academic investigation. I certainly had an expectation of what a journey into the Heartland entailed. But as I began exiting from the various central highways of Ohio, I couldn't ignore the fact that where I was heading was not a place frequently visited by outsiders, and I felt oddly uncomfortable. Signs for Wheeling, West Virginia and Martins Ferry made me anxious; I was about to come upon what I perceived as hallowed land, with only my familiarity in James Wright's poetry as a guide.

I had decided to come to Martins Ferry months ago, but I had little idea of what I was really looking for. I came into the busy intersection in Bridgeport, across the bridge was Wheeling, and left would take me up river toward Martins Ferry. These were all places that I had read about in the lines of Wright's poems; I had made it to his country. I felt nervous entering a town with a name that had been percolating in my head for a couple years. In my eyes, Martins Ferry had not been a town but it had been a label, a signifier for a facet of James Wright's past. In

some way, it seemed like I was entering a fictional place. Martins Ferry had been detached from any sense of reality, only existing within the pages of Wright's poetry. I was about to enter this physical place that had so long been a construct of Wright's recollection. Route 7 or the "Ohio River Scenic Byway" is 300 miles long and follows the river from southern Indiana all the way to eastern Ohio. This stretch, the two or three miles between Bridgeport and Martins Ferry, didn't seem to live up to the roadway's name. The way is lined with gas stations, fast food places and run-down, out of use warehouses. Traffic moved slowly in the midday heat, but soon enough I reached my turn: a left at McDonald's. The town was more of a turn-off, a stop along a busy road, than I had expected. The scenic byway cut right through it and continued along. If you weren't looking for Martins Ferry, you'd no doubt miss it.

Although I couldn't say exactly what I was looking for, the Ohio River stands as a staple of Wright's poetry had helped me build a conception of his home. The river is portrayed, called upon or envisioned in many of his poems, and I wanted to look upon its great body mindful of its effect on the poet. The river hadn't left my mind on the drive down. It stood as the only sure thing I'd recognize in Martins Ferry. I was imagining the slow moving dirty-green water, the hanging trees that lined the banks. Since coming into Bridgeport I had only caught glimpses through the thick and tangled roadside bushes. I could see the steel framed bridges that crossed into Wheeling. The impressive structures recalled the city's prosperous days, and seemed to stand for what had been. The Wheeling suspension bridge was the first to cross the Ohio River, and at one point the largest of its kind in the world. Wheeling showed traces of once booming industry, but a certain gloom and longing for better days was palpable.

I rolled to a four-way intersection a block above the McDonald's. This square was probably the busiest in town. The red light allowed a moment to look around. The downtown was mostly older brick buildings from what I could tell. It was around 1:00 pm, there were few cars and fewer people on the streets. The light turned green and I went straight before turning right at the next stop. There was a car behind me, and I felt the need to pretend like I knew where I was headed. I continued straight and after about a minute I had reached the end of town, a dead end, and pulled into a small parking lot. Sitting in the car, I remember feeling anxious about what I *should* be doing. I had made it. This place had transformed from two words in a poem on a cold winter's night in Maine to the town where I now sat on a 90-degree afternoon. I assured myself

that my goal would be to drive around a bit, and simply explore the streets on which Wright had walked.

The transition from the imagined to the actual was both affirming and disorienting, as the town no longer existed only in startling and evocative poems. This was not the Martins Ferry of the mid-century, and I hadn't expected that the town would be preserved in the state that Wright communicates, but Wright began to feel not so distant. It is hard to determine whether I forced myself to see Wright on the streets, walking into the Laundromat or the general store, or whether I unconsciously entered this mindset. Either way, Wright's presence and his influence showed in a series of ways that afternoon in Martins Ferry. I drove slowly through the quiet streets, reading signs and looking into shop windows. South 5<sup>th</sup> street took me past Redman's Bingo Club, where a sign with a striking blood-red image of a Native American man welcomed customers. The Martins Ferry Public Library stood next door. I came to the next intersection and that South 5<sup>th</sup> street sign had another above it, "James Wright Place." I felt that I was on to something. Wright had been remembered with a street, an accompanying name to South 5<sup>th</sup>. Diagonally across the intersection on the corner of Walnut and South 5<sup>th</sup>, there stood a brick building with small plain white lettering that read, "Heslop Funeral Home." I knew the name. Wright's poem, "Willy Lyons" recalls the death of his uncle, and mentions the funeral home in an imaginative narrative that follows his uncle's body to the ground. This was better than a street sign. Reading those letters on the odd brick facade served to not only connect Wright as a man of Martins Ferry, but grounded his poetry. His words clung to this place. These discoveries began to shape my lens.

I was still after the river so I made my way back to the McDonald's and across Rt. 7. The road turned and came to an end at the train tracks that ran parallel to the River; my only option was to continue to the left, up river, to find a point of access. I wanted a good look at its water. But I quickly discovered that this part of town was home to the industry and factories that still stood, and held the remains of those that were no longer. I passed Stoney Hollow Tire, a tire supplier housed in a large turquoise warehouse. Further down was Matheson Valley Gasses, a large provider of chemical gasses and equipment. In the midst of this part of the town dedicated to industry, I came upon the Martins Ferry High football stadium. It wasn't more than a couple years old. The complex stuck out in this industrial park. The bleachers were large, the artificial turf clean and crisp. I pulled the car over, got out and approached the tall chain-linked fence that surrounded the stadium. Wright's words arose again, as I recalled "Autumn Begins in Martins

Ferry, Ohio.” Shreve High was now called Martins Ferry High school, and Wright’s Shreve High football stadium had become this grand stage. I thought of Martins Ferry’s sons “galloping terribly against each other’s bodies” on that new turf. I thought of grand stands filled to the brim, and of tall lights that shined down on crisp autumn nights. As I looked upon it, Wright’s words rang through the empty stadium. Wright’s words had consecrated this place, and this place had authenticated his poetry. Stepping foot in Martins Ferry, I felt that I had found a place where his poems truly hover.

Looking back up towards town, I saw past the buildings and houses that receded back into the hillside. Where the houses ended and the forest began, a large section of the hill had been cleared for the Rearview Graveyard that stretched to crown the town. I thought that this might be a place to situate Martins Ferry as a river town, an opportunity to look upstream and down. I couldn’t find a reason not to do so, for I certainly hadn’t captured all of Martins Ferry. I climbed back in the car, followed the train tracks, crossed Route 7, passed McDonald’s and headed up through the neighborhood perched right beneath Rearview’s gates. My entrance into Martins Ferry had been characterized by an uneasiness about my journey, a questioning of my purpose. Sitting under the sun and above the town, watching the water move steadily under the steel bridges, I knew that I wouldn’t again be able to approach Wright with the same sensibilities. I had been introduced to his homeland, certainly not the same Martins Ferry where the poet grew up and left, but the same Ohioan town on that river.

I first came across the poetry of James Wright in the winter of 2013, and his poems haunted me; I couldn’t leave them alone. So often in his poetry, he clearly addresses or hovers around home in recollection or remorse. Wright relies upon a sense of home, and a portrayal of Ohio, in the constructions of his poems and foundation of his voice. I saw that Wright could not be severed from these roots and began to question whether I could fully grasp the poet’s work without paying a visit to Martins Ferry. I had never visited Ohio. If I were to begin a project about James Wright, I couldn’t rely upon a contrived common notion of an Ohioan landscape or even his vividly particular portrayals. It was Wright’s habitual return to home and to Ohioan imagery that forced me into the decision to make the journey. After reading both *The Branch will Not Break* (1963) and *Shall We Gather at the River* (1968), I gained a certain familiarity with Wright’s Ohio. The landscapes are often bleak and void of a vital energy. His poems present the economic depression of a post-industrial society. With most every poem I read, I attempted to



add another piece to my developing understanding. Wright's Ohio became my constructed and fantasized vision of a place, until my travel showed me the remains of the same Martins Ferry that Wright knew in *The Heslop Funeral Home*, the football stadium, the dirty waters of the Ohio. The town that Wright both resisted and cherished seemed to possess, at least in these physical structures, the remains of the Martins Ferry that Wright left so long ago.

A central concern in this project is to investigate a relationship between place and its poetic presentation, and how it prompts poetic response or informs an imaginative effort. Wright has consumed memories whole and digested the experiences tied to his persistent past. I didn't go to Martins Ferry to see what it was that kept the poet from escaping; that question seems unanswerable. I could step into Wright's shoes for the sole purpose of walking his streets, but in no way could I trace precisely how Martins Ferry molded Wright, for he doesn't spell it out so clearly. I couldn't look upon it the way he does, and the Ohio River will never look to me like it did for him. But my journey gave me the chance to piece together an understanding of Wright's affinity for Martins Ferry. In an effort to identify how Wright's poems circle back to the Ohio River valley, I gave myself a reality to recall. My memories and visions and recordings of Wright's homeland effectively complimented my reading of his poetry. No matter the workings of his imagination, or the motives informing how Wright has constructed his Ohio, I've at least seen the site of that construction. A visit to his home allowed me to see a piece of the reality to which his meditations and expression are responding.

I elected to bring Plumly into this thesis in an effort to simply engage with another Ohioan poet. It certainly has allowed me to investigate that connection between these poets, but it has allowed me to discover much more about their shared and differing sensibilities. In what began as a project seeking to trace these poets' roots in the Heartland, the thesis became a comparison of two poets who exhibit a particularly masterful way of relating memory and imagination, of traveling through time and space, and of inhabiting both clear consciousness and perceptive dream. By examining two books from each poet that proved instrumental in defining their respective characteristic styles, I'm hoping that a series of discussions and explications of several poems will help readers, both familiar and distant to their work, grasp where Ohio has impressed upon their poetry, but perhaps more importantly, how their obsession with the past figures in all the places and spaces their poems travel. By turning to Wright first, we can identify

the primary elements of his stylistic method and characteristic sensibility, which was manufactured and initiated in *The Branch will Not Break*.

*The Branch Will Not Break*

James Wright's third book displays a stark departure from his first works, *The Green Wall* (1957) and *Saint Judas* (1959), for *The Branch Will not Break* (1963) leaves behind the poet's classical technique and the traditional sound that characterizes his earlier two books. Known for his diligence in meter and rhyme, Wright's stylistic shift and altered sensibilities surprised and even discouraged critics. However Wright's break from his poetic tendencies would inform a sustained movement away from the habits of earlier books, and the poet carved out a new space for his work. *The Branch Will Not Break* proves a crucial moment in the poet's celebrated career. In fellow poet and close friend Donald Hall's introduction to Wright's collected poems, *Above the River* (1990), he explains that "it is difficult for people, even today, to love both sides of James Wright"(xxxiii). *Branch* initiates, quite strikingly, Wright's forging of another "side" to himself and his poetry.

Although readers and critics alike took up *Branch* with uneasiness, Hall offers an interesting bit of history that, if not explains, at least provides important details about the transformation:

After *Saint Judas*, James submitted a collection of poems called *Amenities of Stone* that included old-style James Wright iambic poems as well as early surreal free verse. It was perhaps confused but it was powerful: Wesleyan's editors were unanimous in accepting it. Then, just after the Minnesota gathering, on 29 July 1961—with the book already scheduled for publication—Jim withdrew it. If the book had been published it would have shown Wright's transformation in process, almost in slow motion (xxxii).

The bridge was cut out, and *Branch* is made all the more powerful by the sharp turn it takes from the earlier books. Wright begins to rely upon the "Deep Image" method of conveying and attaching significance to visions, often associated with Robert Bly. His poems rely heavily upon a connection and a concern for situating self and man within and in comparison to the natural world. Although we may not place him with the likes of Frost or Wordsworth in how they turned to the natural world, Wright considered himself a Nature poet.

In an interview with Dave Smith and Gibbons Ruark in 1979, Wright spoke on his relationship with nature: "It comforts me more and more to realize and to observe and to feel the

great self-restoring power that the creatures in Nature have while we humans are making such a mess of things”(36). He certainly shows this affinity and desire to both present and access this power in several poems. In the short poem, “In Fear of Harvests,” Wright’s deep image grants significance to the actions and preparations of animals come harvest time, effectively fixing our gaze on the animals’ world alone, extracting meaning from these simple and subtle movements, and distorting or altering an observation:

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.

At other times, Wright is intent on describing and recalling a certain intimacy between himself and these creatures, as in “A Blessing” with the ponies, or in the second part of “Two Hangovers,” a joyous narrative that features the namesake of the collection:

In a pine tree,  
 A few yards away from my window sill,  
 A brilliant blue jay is swinging up and down, up and down,  
 On a branch.  
 I laugh, as I see him abandon himself  
 To entire delight, for he knows as well as I do  
 That the branch will not break.

But Wright is not only interested in situating himself and humans in the face of the natural world’s wonder and inspiration, for *Branch* also deals with Wright’s complicated relationship with home and Ohio. His Ohioan experience persists, not necessarily in his recollection of specific anecdotal memory, but in his observations and portrayals of the land and its people. Although the poet never returned to Martins Ferry, his poetry illustrates and reconfigures that which he left behind; silo shadows and horses, wheat fields and slag piles. Wright will, at times, engage directly with creatures or dive deeply into an imagined narrative, but he also often plays the role of the quiet and honest observer. His varying method informs the way the poet accesses home and places Ohio. Turning to “From a Bus Window Just Before a Thunderstorm” we can examine how even Wright’s short poems and brief illustrations can carry such implications for his stake in communicating his Ohio.

Although short and localized, this poem lends itself to a consideration of how Wright operates as both an honest observer, but also an assembler of deep images. We trust these snapshots and narratives are crafted from Wright's memory and experience, but the visionary aspect of the effort must be considered. The poem demonstrates Wright's familiarity and fascination with his Ohioan landscape, but there is also a sense of reluctance. He seems to approach this articulation at a certain distance, and that distance is informed by the way that Wright situates the perspective of the speaker in the title, for he is looking from a moving window. Due to the brevity of the poem, we're forced to consider the title as an integral preface to the lines that compose it. I propose that the title situates the reader in three primary ways. First, the title places the speaker physically in the scene and thus informs the sketch that the following lines present. We're able to both contextualize the moving lens and understand its reach. The title also reveals a geographic location in "Central Ohio." It isn't specific like the Atlas-Hazel glass plant, or Heslop funeral home, but Wright grounds us in his country and the evocation of the state validates a consideration of Wright's experience in the images. And lastly, mention of the coming storm suggests an impending occurrence on the scene, and in this way Wright's moment of observation becomes essential.

The first couple of lines relay the landscape of farmland that characterizes central Ohio, and Wright's poem also seems to be communicating thundershowers as another staple occurrence of this region. The poem traces the preparations for the foul weather, and as the sky and weather move, Wright sees motion in all aspects of this poem: "Cribs loaded with roughage huddle together / Before the north clouds." The speaker is treating inanimate cribs of roughage with autonomous action. Metonymy appears his strategy in conveying the farm, for the cribs stand in for all that would comprise the vision. They "huddle" as if they too, like the farmer and the animals, must prepare for the storm. "The north clouds" are the first signs of the weather within the poem, and this image provokes the first measures taken by the huddling cribs. While the clouds aren't defined by apparent action, Wright does introduce the wind, another essential element to the storm, with certain vitality. Unlike Wright's opening image, the following is not as strange. But Wright does continue to personify the landscape with verbs like "huddle." In the action he associated with landscape, we're reminded of Dickinson's "There Came a Wind like a Bugle," where she too animates that which the wind touches. Wright's observation is coming at a particular moment, he is witnessing the storm's soft beginning:

The wind tiptoes between poplars.  
 The silver maple leaves squint  
 Toward the ground.

To “tiptoe” suggests gentleness and calmness, a cautious passage. In this way, the wind is not whipping through the trees, but softly suggesting its arrival. However the next line does appear to carry greater implications of a looming storm. Wright sees the same wind affecting the silver maple leaves, but the maple is not acted upon like the poplar is, rather Wright grants action to the leaves. Wright has applied human reactionary verbs to the element’s landscape, as “squint” is a verb that we would associate with the human eye.

After examining some of this imagery, we can begin to think about the significance of the bus window as not only physically grounding Wright, but also providing a distance from, and a framing, of the storm. Wright doesn’t seem intent on declaring these images his simple observations, for we see his imaginative process at work. He is reading into the land in a way that defies the conception of a mere reflective sketch. He gives life to the lifeless, he sees the slightest motion of the storm in the details of the surrounding. The storm appears as much Wright’s creation as it does an occurrence of the natural world. He frames his vision through the window, allowing for his own curating, and the glass creates a distance from the reality that exists outside. The glass not only serves to separate Wright from the wind and the trees, but the bus provides shelter from the storm. Wright need not take heed of the clouds, or the blowing wind, he is able to simply observe, or create.

The last action and image the poem displays is a farmer, a man of this land. The lines are more personal, intimate, in that our speaker is describing another human in a landscape that appeared void of human presence. The farmer takes our attention from the storm, and although he too is preparing for its arrival, the farmer himself comes into greater focus:

An old farmer, his scarlet face  
 Apologetic with whiskey, swings back a barn door  
 And calls a hundred black-and-white Holsteins  
 From the clover field.

Just as the articulation of the scene is confirmed by Wright’s familiarity with an Ohioan landscape, this figure is also tied to Wright’s past and his connection with not only the land, but

the people of this place. Wright knew the laborers of his country, from the factories to the fields, and this old farmer and his “scarlet face” appear the representations of memory and of Wright’s understanding. The phrase, “apologetic with whiskey” also fits a facet of the Ohio Wright knew. Raised in times of economic depression, Wright saw alcoholism take hold of many around him. To return to the notion that Wright is looking using the window to frame this image, it seems that we can take the poet as both describing as well as painting a picture. In a bleak scene, Wright adds colors to his palette: The result, a composition of both landscape and portrait, from the “hundred black-and-white Holsteins” to the “scarlet face” of the farmer.

Although a seemingly simplistic sketch, it becomes clear that “From a Bus Window in Central Ohio, Just Before a Thunder Shower,” is weighted by the burdens that Wright brings to most all his poems that hover about Ohio. He can’t escape these visions and impressions, and in turn, they inform his imagination. During a visit to Country College of Morris in New Jersey as a part of the Distinguished American Poet Series in 1976, Wright prefaced his reading of poem by saying that he would read “some poems I suppose you could call nature poems. It’s as good a term as any. Actually they’re just descriptions.” Then again, right before he begins: “Here’s a little poem, it’s just a description.” But critics and readers alike refuse to take them simply as such, for Wright’s method of constructing the scene, calling attention to and articulating the odd yet provoking details is masterful. This shift in sensibility and technique began to characterize many of his later poems. Effectively converging experience and imagination, his “descriptions” are to be taken as much more.

“Lying in A Hammock at William Duffey’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” also develops a description that ranges in scope. As perhaps Wright’s most anthologized poem, “Lying in Hammock” is made famous by the most criticized, debated, lauded and perplexing line that the poet wrote. The closing sentiment, “I have wasted my life” suddenly culminates and opposes the series of descriptive yet remarkably strange observations that precede it. Every critic that has written on Wright has taken a stance on the poem’s closing. Robert Bly, who was essential in Wright’s development of the style, particularly in his use of deep image, remarks in an introduction to Wright’s *Selected Poems* (2005): “It is the last line that drove critics mad, and still does. When he has written such beautiful poems, how can he even suggest he has wasted his life! What can one say?”(xx). The contrast between the satisfaction, calmness and imaginative wonder that Wright displays in the poem and the stark closing expression accounts for the

concern. Wright affords himself the dynamic lens and travelling scope of “From a Bus Window...” and other “descriptions,” but here Wright displays a self-consciousness and personal stake that some of his other poems avoid or resist.

Although the last line is the speaker’s most alarming and existential remark, his situating of self in this poem characterizes the poet’s intimate relation to his surrounding. The title initiates our understanding of the speaker’s perspective as “From a Bus Window...” does, but here the speaker remains continually conscious of his position, repeatedly remarking on his proximity to his observations: “Over my head, I see...” “To my right,” “I lean back.” Wright conveys a certain physical awareness within the scene he is illustrating. Thus the poem becomes an expression of present experience, not a distanced or imagined narrative that is grounded in familiarity or speculation (“From a Bus Window,” “Two Hangovers”). The experience does hinge upon the activities and presentation of creatures and plants, but nonetheless, the speaker is immersed in this world and in this moment:

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.

Wright’s depiction does depend upon the liberty to travel imaginatively beyond his resting place on the hammock “down the ravine behind the empty house,” but the range of sensory detail, and the speaker’s willingness to engage with what the surrounding world is offering characterizes his direct involvement. His images are wonderfully and typically Wright and only get more so as the poem progresses, but it’s his treatment of color in these early visions that sells the reader on the speaker’s attention: “the bronze butterfly, / asleep on the black trunk,” the “green shadow.” He employs metonymic portrayal of animals in articulating the “cowbells” on the move across time and space. The speaker is not only immersed in but in tune with the progress of this afternoon.

When the speaker situates himself once again, reminding us of his physical awareness, he enchants with even more fantastically strange detail of this moment. Again moving his lens, he brings to focus the old droppings of horses:

To my right,  
In a field of sunlight between two pines,



The droppings of last year's horses  
Blaze up into golden stones.

The surrealistic expressions of the former images seem to culminate with these feces turned “golden stones,” which grabbed almost as much attention as that last line has. Alan Williamson, in a chapter from *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* entitled “Language Against Itself: The Middle Generation of Contemporary Poets,” shows particular interest in how time is functioning in this poem:

The image of the horse droppings offers a far more complicated, but still serene, sense of temporal process – one involving continuity (“last year’s”), transmutation into mineral permanence (“golden stones”) but also beautiful consumption (“Blaze up”). Insofar as one can paraphrase at all, the poem sees in a process – even a decay – that is continually productive of new beauty, the kind of visionary perfection we habitually associate with permanence alone (70-71).

Williamson calls our attention to the speaker’s concern for and the relationship between permanence and impermanence in the host of observations the speaker’s position offers. Although these descriptive images seem suspended in this afternoon, time is passing, and Wright communicates a consciousness of that reality. The strange chemical process that Wright relays seems to provide a reason for his attention to an everyday and uninteresting element of a pasture. Paul Breslin, in “Ohio and the Collective Unconscious: The Dilemma of James Wright,” a chapter from *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties* labels this process as the “natural alchemy of sunlight” and relates it to the “bronze butterfly,” pointing the reader to Wright’s attention to metallic comparison (170-171). He, like Williamson, is also concerned with temporality, yet Breslin does not detect a threat to the permanence of the beauty that Wright is perceiving and articulating: “The mention of ‘Last year’s horses’ gently disturbs the illusion of temporal suspension, but time remains a benign force; it has taken away the odor of the horse droppings, cleansing them of their rankness and preparing them for their transformation into ‘golden stones’”(171). But as we approach the final image of the poem, time does seem to carry real implications for the speaker’s experience. The speaker’s consideration of time appears more than “benign,” for the approaching evening will command very different associations.

Wright again reminds us of his physical state: “I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.” It would seem presumptuous to immediately associate concern or harm with disappearing sunlight and emerging darkness, however the afternoon is indeed slipping away

from the speaker. The visions and observations made available by or even dependent on sun—the “the green shadow” and the “field of sunlight”— aren’t sustained. While we recognize the speaker is immersed in this world throughout the poem, the images only seem to last as long as their expression, thus the butterfly disappears when Wright moves “down the ravine” and so on. Time, as well as Wright’s lens, seems to be the source of that movement. By the end of the poem, night is arriving but Wright is still intent on taking in the scene: “A chicken hawk floats over, looking home.” We can categorize the preceding descriptions as Wright’s employment of surrealist and deep image, perhaps signifying an effort to responsively engage with surrounding rather than assign meaning. However the chicken hawk exemplifies a turning point in the poem, where Wright displays a consideration of self that goes beyond the natural world with which he has been engaging. Robert Bly comments on the observation’s effect: “The poet leans back, goes deeper into himself. A glimpse of a chicken hawk reminds him that he has found nothing in his life to be sure of, that he has arrived nowhere, that he is still floating”(90). There also seems some significance in Wright’s assumption of a search for home, for the poet often actively returns and resists Ohio in his poetry. Bly’s assertion that Wright “goes deeper into himself” is important, and supports a reading that this succession of observations allows or pushes the poet to confront and consider his own existence with a grand gesture: “I have wasted my life.”

Rejecting Thom Gunn’s reading, which claims that “the final line is perhaps exciting because we are surprised to encounter something so different from the rest of the poem, but it is certainly meaningless,” Bly declares that Gunn simply “does not understand the poem, or rather, it’s not the poem he doesn’t understand, but the emotion”(90-91). The sentiment does seem to arrive from a particularly emotional leap. Gunn’s distinction that the line is exciting because it is “so different from the rest” is simplistic and doesn’t approach the implications of Wright’s thorough and dynamic engagement while on the hammock. Bly points to an essential question that the poem “never directly asks:” “How is it possible for there to be so many spiritual emblems, signs, reminders of the path, everywhere, and yet for the man who sees them to have gotten nowhere, to have achieved none of the spiritual tasks that those emblems suggest?”(90). Bly is confident that the assemblage of observations carries these essential “emblems” and “signs”. Whether we’re willing to put that much stake in where Wright directs his scope or not, the “bronze butterfly,” the “cowbells” and the “golden stones” do seem to build towards the closing remark. Kevin Stein reads the speaker as confronting “a natural almost spiritual order:”

“The speaker’s attention to the seemingly spiritual orderliness of the natural world brings him, then, to a discomfiting realization”(56). By understanding the speaker’s state and realizing his position within and grappling with the surrounding world, we can make absolute sense of the line. *The Branch will Not Break* has characterized Wright as a poet who makes unforeseen leaps and arranges seemingly disconnected descriptions and perspectives. Bly, in the same essay, calls for a movement away from rationalism when dealing with some of Wright’s poetry; emotion should be given greatest consideration. At times, we’re tempted to approach his poems with a set of logical conceptions, but Wright has a knack for this disruption. “Stages on a Journey Westward” presents an orderly movement and trajectory, yet employs the deep imagery and imaginative tendency that destabilizes those conceptions. Just as Wright makes an effort to place himself within and gauge himself by the natural world, “Stages” can be read as the poet’s effort to situate westward expansion through a reimagining and retelling of that narrative.

A primary ambition of this poem seems to evoke an unrestrained, yet localized, movement through both time and space. As the title suggests, the poem is broken down into four stages, as Wright moves from his birthplace in Ohio west. Before making sense of each of the ways that these four stanzas are functioning, and what they may be after respectively, we can consider the overall trajectory of the poem. The title suggests the general geographic direction of the journey. Although Wright seems to assign geographic location in each section, his journey doesn’t move laterally from East to West, but it does seem intent on considering the concept of the western United States. It is a concept that is at times detached from geography and rather supported by historical and cultural notions of exploration, of frontiers, of beginnings and endings. In this way, Wright is not only crossing land, but also crossing time. There arises a certain tension between Wright’s freedom and the physical and historical confines of America. He moves through spaces and times, but the poem is complicated with Wright’s imaginative and dream-like method, which is grounded in the physical landscape of America. But as much as western America serves as a platform, the America of this poem is Wright’s alone. Moving to the first stanza, Wright seems to be asserting that not only he and his journey begin in Ohio, but a fundamental aspect of America does as well

The first two lines of the poem operate to introduce a starting point of the journey to follow, and to firmly establish his roots: “I began in Ohio, / I still dream of home.” The verb “begin” functions as both Wright’s initiation of this journey westward and a statement of his

birth. Before westward expansion, Ohio was the western border of the United States. Wright seems to be playing off this history of his home state as the edge of the frontier and the beginning of the new America. It doesn't seem that this journey will function as an extended metaphor for his life, but nevertheless he is intent on establishing his roots in Ohio. His inability to escape Martins Ferry and his constant return arise in his honest expression: "I still dream of home." He remains equally attached and tortured by the images and relationships that can be traced through his poems. In an interview with Dave Smith in 1979, Wright spoke of his relationship with Ohio: "I have a peculiar kind of devotion to Martins Ferry, although I haven't gone back there in at least twenty-five years. I still have a brother there and I have friends from childhood who are still in the Ohio River Valley. I feel that I am stuck with it. It is my place, after all. My feelings about it are complicated"(20). Wright hadn't returned and yet the place never seemed to leave in his poetry; he returned through reimagining landscapes, but also through his entrance into dream. The lines that follow seem dream-like portrayals that work to construct his sense of home.

"I still dream of home" sets off Wright's expressions of the dreams he has, but also initiates his wrestling with these visions and memories. He addresses the physical distance from Ohio as well, and we're tasked with understanding how Wright is treating time and space. He begins with an illustration of Ohio's farmland: "Near Mansfield, enormous dobbins enter dark barns in autumn, / Where they can be lazy, where they can munch little apples, / Or sleep long." Following the declaration that he dreams of home, Wright seems to relay a dream with a narrative that is both oddly specific, yet distanced from a specific incident. The description, touched with a similar technique to "From a Bus Window..." is simply another shade of Wright's Ohio. Yet in the same interview with Smith, the poet speaks on farm life and indicts the lifestyle: "I'm anti-pastoral. I've worked on farms and I would never work on another one. I've got up at four o'clock in the morning and shoveled the cow manure of the barn and bailed away the horse urine. The hell with it"(21). For a poet this is "anti-pastoral" Wright often returns to these images and this statement reminds that, as he said, is "stuck with it." Whether Wright has fond or bitter memories of life on a farm doesn't seem to matter, for his familiarity with and proximity to that life informs his inability to escape. What complicates this sentiment is that this image of the dobbins is intimate, and doesn't seem attached to any negative association with farming culture in Ohio. We're forced to ask where these images come from. They don't

necessarily seem grounded in reality, especially when we consider Wright's own words. But horses figure the exception in Wright's pastoral farmland references, for they act as totemic and talismanic creatures in his poems, both displayed in apparent experience ("A Blessing") and in dream, as they do in this poem. It is his dreams that lead him back home, and the dream-like imagery that comprises this first stanza's construction.

In his next dream-like articulation of the first stanza, Wright introduces himself physically, and his placement establishes the time and space that he is crossing. He distinguishes between dream and reality, but this dream is further grounded in the past than the "enormous dobbins." Wright introduces his father, and the connection to his father figures as central to the journey's initiation as the geographical location of Ohio. The first stanza not only addresses Ohio as the place of departure, but Wright is also intent on establishing a departure and or distance from his father:

But by night now, in the bread lines my father  
Prowls, I cannot find him: So far off,  
1500 miles or so away, and yet  
I can hardly sleep.

Wright is dreaming at a distance from home, and the portrayal of his father arises from this blending of dream and memory. "Now" functions to bring the reader to the present, and confirms Wright's current state of dreaming. The poet seems to have placed himself inside the memory or dream and thus, "I cannot find him" reveals Wright's dream of losing track of his father in the breadlines, and Wright's inability to place him comfortably in his mind. His treatment of time and space complicates in these lines, for he establishes a physical distance from his resting place and from Ohio, "So far off, / 1500 miles or so away, and yet / I can hardly sleep," and a distance from his past. Time spent with his father is distant, but the memories and dreams cross years past and miles to keep him awake.

The following image of Wright's visiting father is strange but supports this notion of Wright's proximity to past. He seems to be blurring the line between reality and dream, present and past. It is certainly a bizarre image, but it is unclear where Wright is situating his relation to it, "In a blue rag the old man limps to my bed, / Leading a blind horse / Of gentleness." Wright's memory and dreams are informing a vision of his father at his bedside, and the two enter a shared space. But his father is not young or strong here, he "limps" toward Wright in a desperate

state. However nightmarish the vision, it has implications for Wright's reality in that he can't sleep, and these dreams disturb in the same way that the physical presence of his father would. But we're not only given Wright's father, he's wearing a blue rag and strangely accompanied by a "blind horse of gentleness." Here his often used and comfortable equine symbol or image is twisted, altered in this nightmare. The image is troubling, and it seems to amplify the disturbance in his father's appearance as well.

The image is sealed by the closing lines of the stanza, which seem much more grounded in Wright's past and experience. Just as "1500 miles" convinces the reader of a state of reality, the year, 1932, serves to do the same here. And in a stanza that floats around between dream and reality, past and present, these closing lines seem to recall a specific memory: "In 1932, grimy with machinery, he sang me / A lullaby of a goosel. / Outside the house, the slag heaps waited." Where Wright's memories or visions of his father were troubled or disconcerting, this seems to come from a place of love, of warmth. Home from a day at the factory, Wright's father is intimately putting Wright to sleep. The sentiment contrasts directly with the memories and dreams of his father keeping Wright awake, leading the blind horse, for this memory is one of peace and comfort. The last line of the poem serves to highlight the safety of this space: "Outside the house, the slag heaps waited." The inside of the home is holding a moment between father and son, where the outside is waiting, with implications of the imminent decay of these comforts and this love. Set to embark westward, we understand that Wright has been distanced from Ohio for some time, but this stanza exemplifies his difficulty in mentally departing from Ohio. In order to proceed, Wright must circle back to his country. It serves as the launching point, and now Wright can begin to head west, but not without first wrestling with the memories and dreams that have worked to delay or derail that journey.

The second part of the poem begins the westward movement as Wright establishes himself in Minnesota. If we understood the first section to hover above Wright's home and serve as the place of departure, this second stanza advances the poem forward into a different and new space. The speaker is moving from a place grounded in familiarity and in memory to an articulation of a frontier. Although the physical space is changing, and Wright is relaying a physical movement, this next section is also characterized by sleep and by dream. In this way, Wright does not depart from the dream-space he inhabits in his consideration of Ohio. We understand that Wright is moving westward in some of the imagery and sentiments he employs,

but it seems that sleep and the texture of his dreams begin to establish a central and dynamic method of meditation for Wright. Sleep and dream allow for his journey and the movement that the poem traces.

Just as in the first section, Wright names a physical location and then recalls sleep, paralleling the method that we observed in the first. Again the poet is playing with the difference between physical mobility and spatial reality, and the movement that his dreams are permitting: “In western Minnesota, just now, / I slept again. / In my dream, I crouched over a fire.” Along with the formulaic opening lines, there are several other connections that we can make relating these first two stanzas. Wright uses “now” in the first part as well, and it appears to support this notion of the speaker’s return to dream and to sleep as a space he inhabits continuously through these sections. “Now” serves to bring us back to Wright’s current dream sequence. By opening these stanzas with the suggestion of dream-space, Wright forces the reader into uncertainly making sense of the following images and portrayals. But unlike the first section, this stanza remains entirely within Wright’s dream; we’re not asked to sift through memory or locate experience. But it is important to note that there is a historical dimension evoked in the semi-specified detail, as Wright recalls Minnesota as the frontier.

The second stanza is far less personal in its aim, literally and physically close to home, for Wright recalls a dream of an imagined frontier. In this way, his westward journey continues through dream. He does clarify the contents of his dream: “In my dream, I crouched over a fire.” This description isn’t thorough, but Wright seems to be establishing a connection between his dreams and the ensuing imaginative conception of a place. This reading complicates our understanding of Wright’s dream-space, for it becomes a space that is affected by where he sleeps. In Ohio, Wright’s dreams informed a recollection of home. In Minnesota, his dreams situate him on the frontier. It’s a fantasy that seems to yearn after the unknown, the distant, and interestingly enough Wright speaks to this physical space in Smith’s interview. The poet discusses his understanding of what lies beyond Ohio: “You have to go to the other side of Minnesota to start to get a hint of what the western United States is like. Then you run into the huge mountain region and on the other side of that is a vastness”(21). This section begins on that other side of Minnesota and appears in that the imaginative technique he employs is attempting to get this “hint” of the West.

Rather than tracing Wright's real experiences in and beyond Minnesota, the rest of the stanza relays Wright's imaginative construction from this "hint," and also begins to touch on the implications of this mysterious and ominous "vastness." From the image of his crouching around the fire, and the supporting lines, we can read the speaker's solitude. The image of a man crouched over a fire, taking in its warmth, staring at the flames, conjures the notion of one trying to survive the night. His lonesomeness is reinforced in the following lines, and Wright also fills the "vastness" with Native American peoples:

In my dream, I crouched over a fire.  
 The only human beings between me and the Pacific Ocean  
 Were old Indians, who wanted to kill me.  
 They squat and stare for hours into small fires.  
 Far off in the mountains.  
 The blades of their hatches are dirty with the grease  
 Of huge, silent buffaloes.

Although we've accepted the ambiguity in what is dream, vision or recollection for Wright, the rest of the stanza as written may suggest alternate readings and understandings. Wright introduces the dream in a reflective voice, using the past tense to articulate the outline. If past tense is used to recall the dream, then we can understand the next two lines to exist within the dream. Thus the last four present tense lines serve Wright's imagined and accepted truth about this place, about the Native peoples that inhabit the plains and the western United States. He comes out of the dream and back to the "now" of the opening line. But the reality is informed by the dream. Wright's situating of the Indians, "far off in the mountains" with their dirty hatchets articulates a scene that predates westward expansion, and adds a threatening element to the vastness.

Thus in this dream-space, he fears for his life. He sees an end to the "vastness" in the Pacific Ocean, but establishes that space between as holding only danger. Wright's classification of "old Indians" is worth note. Although complicated with the wars between Euro-Americans and Native peoples, it recalls a connection to the land, and respects Native Americans' ancient inhabitation of this soil. He also gestures toward a spiritual connection between humans and the land they inhabit. As a poet continually concerned with place, Wright's ambition seems not only to relay how the speaker is belonging to place, but how its characters are as well. Smith's interview proves useful once again, as Wright, in a discussion about the power and presence of



place, talks about his understanding of the Sioux and other peoples' "sense of place." He cites the midwestern novelist Fred Manfred's observations and shares a fascination for Native peoples' declaring of "sacred ground" in Minnesota. Wright also asserts that, for poets, looking for value in place, attempting to perceive its presence is an "important way of participating in life around them"(20). Mindful of Wright's observation of the Sioux and how he reads their connection to place, "old Indians" is a recognition of their claim to this land and their rightful position in this territory that Wright is encroaching upon.

Having departed from his homeland, the Ohio of the first stanza, he has become an intruder. Perhaps Wright is also ironically invoking the 19<sup>th</sup> century American ideal of Manifest Destiny; the continent was for the taking, colonists just had to get through the Indians that inhabited the "vastness." Wright's assertion that he is on the brink of the frontier alone, vulnerable to these Indians, speaks to this conception. And in his shift to the present, to the "now," he establishes a distance between the Native Peoples and himself: "They squat and stare for hours into small fires / Far off in the mountains." In Wright's dreams, he expressed an immediate fear and concern for his life, but this return to the present shows the imagined sense of reality and a distance between himself and Native peoples. This seems a commentary by the poet on both colonizers' limited understanding of Native peoples in America and their understanding of place. Even though we have emerged from Wright's dream, this articulation is still attached to an imagined perception of both a social and physical landscape. It is clear that the poet is attempting to evoke a historical perspective as well, and we return to the poem's crossing time and space seamlessly. He is on a journey Westward, but once again this section strays from a steady move west. He switches tenses and positions from sleeping in Minnesota to a vision of "far off mountains," he moves from his solitary fire to the fire of the Native Americans. Wright is able to establish distances but he is also able to cross them, and these movements all seem a result of the space that Wright continually inhabits through the first two sections of the poem. This imagined dream-space and the movement it permits provide the poet with steady bridges that slowly gravitate westward.

The last image of the section is climactically gruesome and perhaps the most detailed of the stanza. They function to reveal Wright's dedication to an illustration of the "old Indians." They do not only serve as distant inhabitants of the land, or as death threats, but Wright is intent on an eerie presentation of Indians by a fire. Although the description is not of the Indians

themselves, Wright moves his lens to the blades, figuring them as both weapons and as tools. The irony of America westward expansion develops, as Wright appears to offer commentary on the depletion of the buffalo population. Euro-American guns nearly drove the species to extinction, not the hatchets of Indians. It becomes clear that Wright is progressing geographically through an imaginative process and within a dream-like space. Nonetheless the speaker is coming to terms with the physical spaces beyond his home, while also toying with historic conceptions of westward expansion.

In moving to the third section, we're reminded of the trajectory of this poem. We've understood the poem to contain both geographic travel as well as the passage in and out of dream. Where we have seen the first two stanzas convey the speaker's sleeping, dreaming and portrayal of night, this stanza confronts the morning. Dawn figures as a natural and sequential stage, but is also rendered as an unfavorable reality:

It is dawn.  
I am shivering,  
Even beneath a huge eiderdown.  
I came in last night, drunk,  
And left the oil stove cold.

Wright brings us out of his dream-space and away from the surreal, deep images. The entrance into this stanza also reads as an escape from this synthesized cycle of dream and memory and imagination that marks the first two stanzas. "It is dawn" is Wright's first establishment of a concrete time or state, for only the assumption of night has accompanied Wright's dreaming. However, this dawn functions as an absolute for speaker, carrying implications greater than a rising sun. Rather than grounding the stanza in Ohio and Minnesota, the speaker initially establishes himself as simply awakening.

Although we can consider some of the implications of this cold morning, it reads as a regular occurrence for the speaker. It is no mystery why he is cold. In his drunkenness, he simply forgot to turn on the stove. For perhaps the first time in the poem, the reader has little doubt that Wright is speaking from unaltered experience. Wright was known for his drinking. The opening lines of this section remind us of Wright's "Two Hangovers," and his method of reaching beyond the window is employed in both poems. There is an air of resignation in the speaker's hung-over state, an acceptance of his frequent drinking and drunkenness. The speaker, although hung-over

and shivering beneath a blanket, displays a clear consciousness on this morning and is not consumed with dream or imagination. In the first stanza, Wright lay restless in his bed and in the second he crouched over a fire. Despite failing to turn the wood stove on, the speaker, in stage three, reaches a level of literal clarity yet to be afforded on his journey.

In the prior stanzas, sleep inspires mobility and provides the means to travel. Conversely, in this section, the speaker's lens moves while he is awake. Ruminating beneath the blanket, he is able to consider the weather outside his window:

I listen a long time, now, to the flurries.  
 Snow howls all around me, out of the abandoned prairies.  
 It sounds like the voices of bums and gamblers,  
 Rattling through the bare nineteenth-century whorehouses  
 In Nevada

The speaker is relating his cold state within the home to what he observes out the window. Interestingly he perceives the snow outside sonically and not through his vision. He twice emphasizes the noise of the storm, rather than its sight, communicating the storm's severity through only the sound of the wind. We've remained within the home, but the speaker's consideration of what lies beyond and "abandoned prairies" turns us back toward the spatial implications of this landscape. The emptiness beyond the speaker's seat serves to isolate him geographically. The wind not only chills Wright, but the howling wind, and the hallucinatory "voices of bums and gamblers" in the whorehouse characterizes this stop on the journey westward.

Rather than beginning the third section with a geographic placement in America as he does the first two parts, here Wright's closing lines presents the American historical and cultural concern. Even before the reference to Nevada, it seems that we can read Wright's position— cold, under a blanket, and alone on these empty prairies— as containing history and recalling a cultural moment. The lines remind us of the passage through the "wide open spaces," in the movement to "settle" the west. The speaker is waking up to a place that has been traveled across, that has established a cultural identity as this in-between space. This reading allows us to view Wright as affirming his place in the journey that this poem is tracing. It is not clear how the reader should consider Wright's odd simile for the wind, but "Bums and gamblers" immediately connote Nevada. If they were the conventional attendees of 19<sup>th</sup> century whorehouses, then

Wright seems intent on keeping an American cultural framework relevant in the continued journey. We are also forced to question the implication of Nevada, for the language and the sentiment of the stanza don't attach crucial implications to the state itself. However it serves as another grounding in this journey, bringing us closer to the coast.

The final section of the poem brings the journey to a close as Wright reaches the west coast. There are several elements of this part of the poem that differ from the prior stanzas. It retains some of Wright's surrealist tendencies that characterized the first two parts of the poem, however, unlike the first lines of the prior stanza, it begins at a distance from the speaker. Rather than expression of self-location, or of personal observation, Wright begins with a local sheriff: "Defeated for re-election, / The half-educated sheriff of Mukilteo, Washington, / Has been drinking again." In the fashion that the poem has established, Wright grounds this final frame with a geographic location. But instead of personal experience, he begins with anecdotes of place. He fixes his lens void of personal connection, and his choice establishes an odd specificity and reality about place. In the prior sections, Wright seems to use place as touchstones in his journey westward. Place is essential to the prior three stanzas, but the meditation does not necessarily hinge upon the place as it does in the last stanza, for we learn a bit about this sheriff and are granted a small window into Mukilteo.

Wright's characterization of the sheriff makes him a figure essential to an understanding of this place. We take the sheriff as a sort of Genius Loci, for he not only carries a spirit of the town, but also serves as a guide for the speaker. There is a set of cultural implications attached to his defeat in the local election, his incomplete education, and his return to drinking. Where in the first stanzas, Wright relayed cultural sentiments that nod towards a perceived American identity, these circumstances in Mukilteo don't appear to stray far from small town realities. This seemingly real articulation of place and of a believable character provides stark contrast to the surrealism that has thus far arisen in the progression of this poem. However Wright's introduction of himself into the setting serves to re-initiate the surrealist aspect of the poem and leads the narrative away from the sense of normalcy that these early lines establish. The physical movement of the speaker and the sheriff also seems to inform a departure from any real life we could perceive in Mukilteo, for Wright appears to return to his dream-like expressions,

He leads me up the cliff, tottering.

Both drunk, we stand among the graves.  
 Miners paused here on the way up to Alaska.  
 Angry, they spaded their broken women's bodies  
 Into ditches of crab grass.

The speaker aligns himself with his guide in their drunkenness, and this shared state suggests how the meeting occurred. It also serves to present a powerful contrast as these two drunken men approach and enter a graveyard. Our acceptance of the sheriff as the Genius Loci prompts questions of why he is leading the speaker here and why has the speaker followed. It seems that the speaker could not appreciate this place either alone or sober. Wright is imagining that this spirit of Mukilteo is showing how this town, this spot, figures in the American narrative. The graveyard is place of loss, of death, but also a place of history.

Wright has indirectly communicated a significant history in Mukilteo. He not only displays a settled American town, but also recalls a historic moment of westward expansion. His image of the miners burying their wives embodies an imagined and mythical sentiment. The lines capture the practice of attaching legend to place, stories that come to define spaces and become chapters of an American tale. Wright is working this graveyard into the America he has remembered, imagined, dreamt and crossed. If this place did serve as a stopping point for miners seeking new found gold in Alaska in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wright suggests a dark history in his disturbing image of men burying their wives. He brutalizes the burying of these women, and the action of these miners seems to suggest domestic dispute, or the crumbling of an American domestic ideal. Wright's images add detail and context to the history and also seem to call into question the way that Americans crossed this country and how they told and re-told the stories. Alongside the sheriff and in this graveyard, the speaker is confronting that which was lost and a part of the journey that was buried.

After conveying this history and the perceived energy that this graveyard atop a cliff possesses, the speaker lays himself down. "I lie between tombstones," on a literal level suggests a tired drunken speaker resting in this space, however the language suggests a submission. He is joining the dead, in some ways, aligning himself with those lost on the journey. In a poem that begins "I began in Ohio," this lines serves as the narrator's last personal statement. Having reached the coast, Wright closes his journey in the graveyard. The closing lines of the stanza, and the poem, have greater implications for Wright's understanding of America,

At the bottom of the cliff

America is over and done with.  
 America,  
 Plunged into the dark furrows  
 Of the sea again.

After the speaker lays himself down and recognizes the end of a journey, he realizes the edge of America and nation itself ends as well. Wright seems to be harkening back to a relationship between humans and place, but the end of the continent also informs the end of cultural ideals or an American identity. Wright's poem suggests that the character of America is, in part, defined by expansion through exploration and supposed discovery. It retells the history America, remaps westward expansion, and traces Wright's personal movement and familiarity with this land as well. In finding the edge of the country, Wright has found a definitive end to the fantasized and mythical American narrative. He has toyed with these fantasies and myths throughout the poem, but there seems no reimagining of this end, just graves and the dark sea below.

The last line complicates our reading of this ending, as it suggests cyclical nature and that this sequence is applicable for more than this journey alone. In this way, the parties that spread through America told different stories and informed alternate narratives. However, at some point, the dead had to be buried, and traces of those journeys were left to be remembered, forgotten, or picked up again. Wright's poem reconciles with what was lost, and re-imagines what was found. "Stages on a Journey Westward" masterfully and subtly conveys the construction and crumbling of American identity through the movement of its people. Wright's personal journey is crucial to framing this cultural consideration, and his ability move through time and space enables the poet to reach from Ohio to Washington. We can close a discussion of *The Branch Will not Break* by circling back to Ohio, and fixing our focus again on one of Wright's most celebrated poems, "Autumn begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," where he is reconciling with home in a perceptive sociological method.

As one of Wright's most anthologized poems, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" serves, most basically, to relay the bleak condition of Wright's home. Although the poet is piecing specific imagery together and tracing a certain narrative, we understand this portrait as cyclical and bound to repetition. The title suggests this much, for the poem stands as an expression of the beginning of a season. Mindful of this notion, we must approach the poem in consideration of what in Martins Ferry is cyclical besides the season. There's an implication of

change but also of stagnation in the society that Wright is demonstrating. Football comes in the fall, but the blast furnace at Bentwood presumably fires throughout the year. There is the reality of certain decline, an air of eternal misery. These cycles and sentiments construct a vision and an understanding of Martins Ferry. Wright's effort seems in part to express how misery informs these crucial aspects of livelihood, in the workplace and the household. It's an investigation of both why and how the people of Martins Ferry conduct their lives.

From the first line, we immediately ask where the speaker, or Wright, situates himself. There seems a tension between Wright's direct involvement in the practices he details and his ability to escape Martins Ferry and create a certain distance. He establishes himself in the Shreve High football stadium, presumably watching his alma mater play the state's beloved game. Wright played football for Martins Ferry thus he has a connection to the spectacle. But the poet is not necessarily interested in clarifying his own relationship with football as a way into this portrait of the town. He effectively grounds the reader in the specificity of place:

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.

Wright moves from his seat in an enclosed football stadium to an expression of that which lies just beyond the stands. He's establishing the breadth of these experiences, not only situating the speaker in the stadium, but contextualizing Martins Ferry with geographic and socio-economic implications of eastern Ohio. David Caplan, in "'Overview of Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio'" asserts that this "wealth of regional detail" helps to establish Wright's "interest in the particularity of experience"(1). It appears that Wright's "interest" or knack for this method of detail informs how he constructs place. He is not only after particularity, but intent on relaying certain intimacy.

The speaker's verb choice in "I think" doesn't immediately communicate a profound contemplation, but Wright presents images weighted with the misery and economic depression that plagues his hometown. These snapshots seem to capture a multi-faceted conception of this region. Wright gestures towards the different ethnicities that constitute the labor force, and attaches these identities to specific place and industry. The presentation of these identities appears to directly depend upon their labor and work in the factories. The "Polacks" take refuge

in their drinking, as they draw out the time off the job. The “Negroes” wear their work on their faces in front of the furnace. Labor serves as a signifier for these portraits of men, as Wright can’t disconnect the people of this place from the factories and mills. They wear the burden of their labor. The intimate imagery seems a result of both an imaginative process on Wright’s part to communicate this sentiment, but also an expression of his own experience. Kevin Stein’s “‘A Dark River of Labor’: Work and Workers in James Wright’s Poetry” approaches the issue of the representation of Martins Ferry’s poor working class. He notes that we must consider Wright’s own experience in reading this poem: “(He) experienced first-hand the hard life of American’s working poor. He saw the physical, emotional, and spiritual toll exacted on his father by years of labor at Hazel-Atlas Glass, where he once worked himself”(49). Wright doesn’t enter this stanza claiming, “I remember,” but his memory is certainly aiding these portrayals. Although he’s not explicit about his experience nursing beers, “I think of” is well grounded in familiarity of such practice.

Along with the “ruptured watchman,” these three figures of Wright’s construction are not only bound by their labor but also by their, “dreaming of heroes.” The last line in the stanza is odd, but it serves as slight departure or a release from these lives. It appears to be Wright’s expression of an effort on the part of these laborers to create distance from a harsh reality. But tragedy lies in the dream being framed as unattainable. The line relays a state of desperation in the men’s conception of self. It also seems to function as Wright’s entrance into the household and into the family dynamic that he sees as affected equally by the misery. Dreams of prosperity are intertwined with those of a happy homestead, and Stein reads the concept of the “American Dream” in Wright’s passage from the factory to the home. The prospect of wealth and financial success is far out of reach for these husbands and fathers and the “residue of their grinding, physically debilitating work carries over to the home front”(50). If we understand this contrived notion of success as involving both economic prosperity and a happy homestead, Wright is detailing a stark antithesis. Moving into the second stanza, we begin to see how Wright is structuring a sequence and causality in his formation of the narrative.

Factory workers become fathers, and the men’s burden seems to grow heavier in Wright’s snapshot of home life. The short stanza encompasses the poet’s vision of the way in which this misery and hopelessness manifests in the homes of Martins Ferry. Home doesn’t provide a space of comfort or escape, but rather a similarly miserable environment. We’re



reminded of the refuge that the “Polacks” take in “nursing long beers,” for any time that these men could have before enduring a shameful return home. “Proud fathers” carries the implication that a return home forces the men to come to terms with their perceived failures. Assuming their role in the household serves as a reminder of the impossibility of the “American Dream.” Caplan supports this notion and declares that this difference between reality and their dreams “intensifies their sense of shame”(1). This exposes some of the complications that compose the workplace as opposed to home. Where the factory is grounded in harsh realities but also holds the distant dreams of these men, the reality of home realizes that difference and invokes shame. The shame lies in the fathers’ inability to provide for their families, and their reluctance to face them. Wright’s short stanza is after the emotional strain that this father and husband identity places on the home.

The women of the household, the mother and wife, are described as “starved pullets” and Wright articulates them as yet another extension of these men’s struggles. The poem establishes the women’s dependency upon the men, yet upon return the men can’t seem to satisfy. Hopeless days render them unfit for heading the household. Caplan sees that this issue of shame has implications for the power dynamic in the house: “Instead of the ‘heroes’ they dream of, the men see themselves as powerless. Their sense of embarrassment and disgrace makes them less capable of love”(2). His reading supports the notion that shame not only has implications for embarrassment or sense of disgrace, but it functions to leave the men powerless. Wright illustrates these women as “dying for love,” forcing to us to accept that the erosion of these men has consequences for the home’s survival. In this dismal narrative that Wright has traced, even love in the home is distant, growing unattainable. In this way, fantasies and dreams of a better life act to diminish what pleasures exist in reality. Football serves to provide some solace in Martins Ferry, but Wright’s last stanza ties the sport to a set of implications and consequences that portray it as more than a game.

The first line of the last stanza is a single word in “Therefore,” and critics have taken this connector as perhaps the most essential element in the construction of the poem. It concludes Wright’s illustration of the causes and introduces the consequences of the depressed economy and the strained household. Tony Robins, in “With the Cheated and the Weak: The Poetry of James Wright,” insists simply that the word “implies that the destructive violence of the sons is a consequence of the failure of the parents”(50). Robins’ reading seems to be gesturing towards an

additional regionalist facet of this poem, for football works as another cultural element of Martins Ferry that is intimately tied to the depression that plagues the town. The violent game is played because it proves suitable for this landscape that Wright has portrayed. Caplan comments that “Therefore” exemplifies a more “elevated style” than that which precedes it, and urges a consideration that there is more at stake in this last stanza (2). We shift from the men, whose lives have played out and who are bound to the factory, to young boys who are the products of these households. He also holds that Wright is connoting a certain logic in the poem. The poem becomes causal in that because the men work in factories, their households crumble and their sons play football.

Wright’s method in describing the game is artfully crafted: “Their sons grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October, / And gallop terribly against each other’s bodies.” These lines portray the result of the former stanzas. But the language expresses a tension between the boys’ binding to this life and their distance from the fate of their fathers. Wright is certainly attempting to add football and, by extension, these sons, to the miserable cycle. The verb “grow” suggests that this process is ongoing, continues as these boys grow up in these households. The football field, for Wright, is the place to behold the spectacle. The misery isn’t private or as personal as nursing beers and delaying a return home, a domestic strain or inability to love. These boys are on display and they carry an inherited misery. Caplan traces the dreaming of the first stanza to this description, seeing these sons as “trying to live these fantasies” and that Wright’s language invokes a “heroic struggle”(2). Fantasy and dream are working on two levels. Caplan describes the sons “like figures from a classical epic engaged in quests,” and we understand Wright to be removing them from the reality of the first two stanzas. Football becomes a cultural tradition that is both woven into the fabric of Martins Ferry and elevated to a higher status. This reverence for the game is responsible for the other way in which fantasy is operating here: like the misery, the fantasies and dreams of a better life are inherited as well, and can be realized through the game.

Football operates as an essential part of the narrative surrounding Martins Ferry, and fits into a trajectory of the livelihood for young men, but Wright is also relaying that it operates as opportunity to escape the cycle. The “American Dream” is not going to be achieved through any other course. Wright is suggesting that football can be understood in a similar fashion to the factory, father and son are both bound to a grueling practice. However, with football, these sons

have at least a glimpse of breaking the cycle and disrupting the narrative. Kevin Stein claims that this notion of football serving as a prospect for escape can't be understated, and in fact, has a history in the Ohio River Valley: "The boys seize football as the last chance to elude their fate—whether by earning adulation that accompanies football heroes through adulthood, or by literally escaping the region through a college football scholarship"(50). The men of the first stanza who "dream of heroes" support this notion. They may dream of what once was, what they were, or what they could have been on the football field. But they couldn't escape, and thus the assertion of adulation in the context of Wright's Martins Ferry could be read as problematic. In consideration of the men's lives that Wright has crafted, it appears that the legacy of a high school football standout would wear down in the face of this dispirited climate. Thus, past greatness doesn't provide an escape necessarily, for they remain in a cycle. However, Stein's reading of football as a possible escape is grounded in the region's surprisingly rich history of renowned athletes. He cites *Sports Illustrated* and lists the likes of Pro Football Hall of Fame kicker Lou Groza, Basketball legend John Havlicek and an eight-time Gold Glove winner in Bill Mazerowski among others (50). His observation helps make sense of Wright's epic depiction of the game, for it does indeed have high stakes: it's a battle for a better livelihood and a resistance to the cycle.

This concept of individual departures from Martins Ferry forces us to consider where Wright fits into this narrative and where he situates himself. James Wright left this place, although not through football. He was the first in his family to attend college and can be viewed an exception in this community, but his poetry shows that he clearly has not escaped. Much of Wright's poetry exemplifies his inability to depart from Martins Ferry, and this poem displays that reluctance but also his struggle to place himself. He seemingly grounds himself physically in the stadium, and we're led to believe that his observation informs his recollection. We've understood his knowledgeable assertions about the place to be grounded in his own experiences, but he complicates his position with some of his language, "their women" and "their sons." Throughout the poem, Wright toes the line between inclusion and exclusion of himself. Wright is presumably addressing the players on the field and their fathers and mothers, which would warrant these possessives, but he's after an articulation of the town and of multiple generations. Stein credits this to Wright's privileged perspective, which is simply "not available to the locals"(50). His poem identifies these cycles and cultural implications that have constructed

Wright's conception of the town, but his use of "their" still suggests a distance. Perhaps then we conclude that this construction of Martins Ferry is Wright's alone. He can't say "ours," for he is not a part of the cycle, he has broken it. This space that Wright inhabits allows him to look upon kids playing the game he did, observe parents cheering them on, detached from the physical connection. He shares Martins Ferry with them, but his connection and his claim are informed by memory, not current reality, communicated through a lyric stance.

Wright certainly struggled and grappled with Martins Ferry long after his departure, but he no longer faces the immediacy of the misery, he no longer awaits the coming of autumn. This distance that Wright has been afforded manifests in the construction of football, a tradition so cherished. His words are poignant in the expression of the boys as "growing suicidally beautiful," for Wright reveals a somber recognition that the beloved and dangerous game is fraught with implications of the town's broken state. Football serves as a chance for greatness, a stage for heroism, but it now looks different to Wright, who stands on the outside and is forced to come to terms with a place that he left. It is these conditions of Martins Ferry that bring Wright back, and that he turns into narratives and constructions of both commonality and personal experience. "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" proves useful in an investigation of Wright's articulation of his home, for it reads as not only as a recollection but also a direct response to the culture in which he was raised. The poem is complicated by Wright's obsession with Martins Ferry and his refusal to leave it alone. His body too "galloped" upon the field against the others, he saw shame in the face of his father. It doesn't seem a poem of regret, for Wright avoided the fate of so many, but it seems to actively contest the premises. The poem exhibits his characteristic circling of Martins Ferry, but this work clearly reveals that Wright is both haunted by his past, and more so, by the reality that Autumn still comes every year in Martins Ferry, Ohio, and to hundreds of towns across America.

*Shall We Gather at the River*

Critics have often coupled *The Branch will not Break* (1963) and *Shall We Gather at the River* (1968) for in the latter Wright continues to develop the style and technique that marked the former. His surrealist tendency and deep images even serve to widen the world of *Branch*, as Wright locates himself and his poems in Minnesota and in North Dakota. Part of the widening of his vision and sensibility depends upon the host of characters that emerge in his poems. His use of pathos marks this engagement with the downtrodden and the suffering, but also the victims of suicide enter the poems. His dealing with these narratives displays a speaker who desires both to share their suffering and even join them in death. In the first poem, “A Christmas Greeting,” an odd poem in italics that breaks Wright’s developed style with rhyming couplets, the speaker addresses Charlie, who has taken his own life:

*What Should I pray for? what can they forgive?  
You died because you could not bear to live,  
Pitched off the bridge in Brookside, God knows why.  
Well, don't remind me. I'm afraid to die,  
It hurts to die, although the lucky do.  
Charlie, I don't know what to say to you  
Except Good Evening, Greetings, and Good night,  
God Bless Us Everyone One. Your grave is white  
What are you doing here?*

After summoning the deceased, the speaker breaks the rhyme and closes the poem by asking this question. It is this resistance and obsession with the dead, this pondering of suicide that characterizes *Shall We Gather at the River*. At times, Wright imagines that it has already happened, that he has joined the other world and exited this one, as in, “The Life:”

Murdered, I went, rise,  
Where the murderers are,  
That black ditch  
Of river.

The river, the great Ohio, begins to define our method in approaching this book. The title seems to suggest it a place to gather and pray, but it primarily functions as place of death, resurrection, and rebirth, and also as a primary means of travel for the speaker. All water runs into the grand Ohio in *Shall We Gather*, as Wright relays the Minnesota rising “to flood stage again,” Hungry men “dreaming / Of suicide” on the shores of the Mississippi, and even questions the river’s presence in his own blood in “Living by the Red River:”

Blood flows in me, but what does it have to  
With the rain that is falling?  
In me, scarlet-jacketed armies march into the rain  
Across dark fields. My blood lies still,  
Indifferent to cannons on the ships of imperialists  
Drifting offshore.

While playing on the name of a river that runs through both North Dakota and Minnesota, this short poem displays Wright’s consciousness of his own vitality amidst his enthrallment with the lost and with those of the other world. It is the persistence of the river that defines these worlds for Wright, and he figures its power in a variety of narratives. But it is almost always used as a point of access, not only geographically, as he traces the water in the rain and in other rivers to come back to his Ohio, but also as a means to travel back in time and into memory. Before thoroughly examining a couple of Wright’s river poems, we can begin with the poems in this collection that situate a self-conscious and solitary speaker in the world of the living.

In “Outside Fargo, North Dakota” Wright displays his tendency in using a location for a title, assembling and relating odd images and placing himself among them. The convergence of memory and imagination has been crucial for our understanding of both Plumly and Wright, how they construct that space and inhabit it. But here Wright appears intent on raising the stakes of his experience and heightening the implications. He does so not only through his employment of deep images, but also in the consciousness of the poetic process he shows. It is a poem that both relays a brief narrative and expresses how that experience is recorded and re-conjured.

The geographic location is odd but nonetheless we trust the speaker’s familiarity with the place. Throughout his poetry Wright shows a fascination for these peripheral spaces to which he often returns, empty fields and old train tracks. He has a knack for writing about, making use of, or wrestling with the overlooked. In “From a Bus Window,” we recall Wright’s consideration

from a distance, but here his call to a location is a place that Wright allows himself to return. It doesn't serve as a vantage point for observation, rather a place Wright enters. Yet we take this engagement differently than "Lying in a Hammock..." for the speaker appears more cautious here, wary of his exploration, and intent on limiting the detail of the scene:

Along the sprawled body of the derailed  
Great Northern freight car,  
I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly.  
No wind.

Wright is interested in this derailed freight car as the remains of the industry and commerce that shaped the Midwest. The language evokes a carcass, as he calls the car a "sprawled body." Wright is placing himself here, by that which was discarded and left behind. The poet's imaginative method relies upon relating these familiar visions or places with the immediacy of the present. The entirety of the poem is the present tense, and it reads as if each action of the poem is essential and building the moment: "I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly." The repetition of the adverb seems strange, perhaps redundant, but it has an effect in establishing the loneliness and emptiness of this poem. "No wind" adds to the emptiness, as the speaker gives us no more than a lit match and an old freight car.

As he often does, Wright jumps to another vision, bringing us away from the freight car and to an image of three horses. We've addressed the prevalence and significance of horses in Wright's poems, and always the strength of these images depends upon rich language: "Beyond town, three heavy white horses / Wade all the way to their shoulders / in a silo shadow." The horses are slowly descending into the darkness of a shadow. There is something somber about this action, as shadow is treated like water, and the horses are willingly entering the cold and the dark. Just as we understand Wright attaching narrative to the sight of an abandoned Great Northern Railway car, he is attaching intention and implication to a vision of horses passing the afternoon in a silo's shadow. We begin to think about this poem as relaying the process in which Wright finds poetic inspiration and attaches meaning, for in the final stanza the speaker recalls that process.

The third and final stanza of the poem returns to the freight car, and the pace and energy of the poem immediately shifts. By picking back up with the freight car, the poet extends the

narrative and helps us situate the speaker. Wright's aim in this imagined sequence becomes clear, as these drawn out images conclude with a startling discovery:

Suddenly the freight car lurches.  
The door slams back, a man with a flashlight  
Calls me good evening.  
I nod as I write good evening, lonely  
And sick for home.

The sudden opening of the door acts as a disturbance for the reader as well, for Wright breaks the silence of the poem with active verbs and jarring actions: "lurches," "slams back," and "calls." The flashlight outshines the match of the first stanza and counters the silo's shadow. The speaker's exploration of this scene culminates in his discovery of another man, and the disturbance affirms the narrative significance of the poem. Oddly he doesn't respond to the man, rather he acknowledges and records the man's greeting. Wright seems to be exemplifying how he responds to experience, and how he constructs his presentations of place. His response shows the dialogue that the poet enters when writing his poems. The detail that he found somebody in the car doesn't figure as important as the fact that Wright has found experience to record. In this way, by the nature of his role as poet, he detaches himself from the real implications of this space and the interaction. He doesn't respond to the man in speech, but in written word, and the response is accompanied by the confession that he is "lonely / And sick for home."

These concluding expressions have become staples of Wright's developed style, not only in the famous "I have wasted my life," but in more subtle presentations as well. In "To Flood Stages Again," Wright ends: "I open my eyes and gaze down / At the dark water." He often leaves the reader suspended with these sorts of proclamations. "Late November in a Field" is a poem that seems to complement our reading of this poem, for it too reveals Wright's process of looking upon the world and considering its poetic use. It also concludes with an evocation of reflexivity, and a suggestion of the speaker's challenge in making sense of experience. Both titles and opening lines situate the reader comfortably in approaching the poems, but Randall Stiffler, in his essay, "The Reconciled Vision of James Wright" calls our attention to important implication of this method: "Invited into the poem by conversationality of its title, lulled into a false sense of security by the orienting lines, the reader is rendered speechless when the coordinates established are suddenly revoked"(78). Although the revoking doesn't come at the



hands of a discovery of a man in a boxcar, In “Late November in a Field,” the poem shifts its direction and its sentiment, and the “false sense of security” depends upon Wright’s initial display of Frostian affinity.

Frost and other poets enthralled by the natural world’s work are often characterized by an effort to connect with or extract meaning from the surrounding landscape, from the animals encountered there. Wright’s poem takes on these conceptions, but of course, distills them into the elements inherent to Wright’s style and concerns. Approaching a poem that inhabits such a poetic tradition, we are inclined to ask what Wright is taking from this experience, where his concerns lie. The poem opens with the speaker unfolding the experience before the reader with no hesitation or strain. His observation begins as rather matter-of-fact: “Today I am walking alone in a bare place, / And winter is here.” The present tense allows the reader to accompany the speaker on this walk, and the lines read like a journal entry. We understand that he is “alone in a bare place,” and the speaker’s solitude becomes important in our consideration of the following meditation. Wright also gestures towards a peculiar time of the year, when winter arrives in late November. The seasonal change gives the timing and the occasion of the walk greater importance and an essential element, similar to the approaching storm in “From a Bus Window.” Without much description, the poet present a clear sense of this “bare place,” and the behavior of the squirrels serve to further illustrate the scene.

Not only observing, but also singling out and considering the specific actions of an animal is a defining characteristic of the naturalist poet. When Wright comes to the pair of squirrels, we’re reminded of Frost’s technique in “The Most of It” or “The Wood-pile.” Wright’s lines on these squirrels are indeed Frostian, touched with similar curiosity and wonder:

Two squirrels near a fence post  
Are helping each other drag a branch  
Toward a hiding place; it must be somewhere  
Behind those ash trees.

The speaker is willing to press his consideration of the animals beyond his certainty. He is assigning intention to their actions, not just recording their activity. The method displays Wright’s effort to make sense of winter’s arrival, and the poem turns to the perhaps more serious and drastic implications of this time: “They are still alive, they ought to save acorns / Against the cold.” Wright frames the squirrels’ behaviors as preparations for the cold, and in what reads as

perhaps an ironic or humorous gesture, he raises the stakes by introducing winter's imminent hardship. The greatest image in the poem reminds of how Wright has treated some of the downtrodden characters in his poem, but gives this treatment to the squirrels: "Frail paws riffle the trough between corn stalks when the moon / is looking away."

This concern for the winter takes hold in the rest of the poem, and Wright's walk turns to a consideration of himself in relation to the seasonal change. Moving away from the squirrels and a meditation on animal tendencies to his solitary place, on the cold ground, he considers where he stands both physically and metaphorically:

The earth is hard now,  
The soles of my shoes need repairs.  
I have nothing to ask a blessing for,  
Except these words.  
I wish they were  
Grass.

In the last lines of the poem, we move from the speaker's journal-like observation to direct and overt reflection. Beginning the poem by framing winter's effect on the natural world, he comes to consider its personal immediacy. The hard earth exposes his faulty soles, and this sentiment seems to hold more than simple discomfort. The blessing comes at this time of change, of approaching cold, shorter days and darkness. But although Wright may appear to be looking upon the changing season and wishing he could delay winter's coming, the blessing and desire lies in a wish that his words were a part of this natural world, grass. Poetic response through deep image and intent observation is Wright's principal method of engagement with the world around him, yet the words don't prove enough. We're reminded of Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," an effort that Wright believes he can't emulate or rival with his own poetry. "Outside Fargo, North Dakota" and "Late November in a Field" display Wright's signature perceptions and sensibilities to the surrounding world, but are also fraught with a sentiment of inadequacy. Despite such thorough engagement, the world around only alienates the poet further.

"In Response to a Rumor That the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia, Has Been Condemned" departs from some of the technical and stylistic methods we've examined thus far in the book, but prominently displays Wright's use of the river as an agent for a return home. Wright seems to use the river here for its geographic and physical implications, but also in an effort to continue his metaphoric associations with its water. But the river, figured as the Styx

in most of these poems, is treated with certain lightheartedness. Retaining the connotation of the river in hell, the narrative is touched with the poet's dark humor, which sustains through the narrative. It is only by the end of the poem, where the speaker delivers the punch line, that he attaches a serious consequence to the joke.

The humor in this poem begins in the long and specific title describing a peculiar rumor to which Wright sees the need for a response. As we've noted, specific titles of place are common in *Shall We Gather at the River* but this title functions as a particular sort of prompting, as its specificity and occasion are quite unique:

I will grieve alone,  
As I strolled alone, years ago, down along  
The Ohio shore.  
I hid in the hobo jungle weeds  
Upstream from the sewer main,  
Pondering, gazing.

The first line seems the simple and sarcastic response: "I will grieve alone," for Wright quickly plunges into younger days on the familiar shore. The speaker immediately becomes more interested in the personal memory of and experience with the whorehouse in Wheeling than a present consideration of its closing. Whether we treat the initial sentiment of grieving as a sarcastic gesture or not, solitude is established once again, and serves as a connection to past: "I will grieve alone, / As I strolled alone." It's unclear whether the young Wright hid in the "hobo jungle weeds" to stake out and wait for the women to exit the whorehouse or if he was taken by surprise, but his "pondering" and "gazing" seem to imply the latter, that he is driven to hiding by the astonishing sight. The first stanza also establishes a crucial element in Wright's clarification of the two shores, and the speaker's placement on one of them.

The speaker's response and reactions are made all the more effective in that he doesn't deliver the source of his wonder until the second stanza. His description of his vision is comprised of precise detail that further emphasizes Wright's concern for place: "At Twenty-third and Water Streets / By the vinegar works." The specific location serves to authenticate Wright's experience, yet it also helps to advance the surrealist method at work in the poem. The reader does not doubt Wright's familiarity with the whorehouse, or even that he's seen the women exit its door, so when the poet re-imagines that exit and illustrates a cleansing or a baptizing: "Swinging their purses, the women / Poured down the long street to the river / And into the

river,” we’re able to imagine the women simply plunge into the river. In typical Wright fashion, the strange actions of his poems are relayed as rational, matter-of-fact or consequential. Out the door, into the street and into the river is portrayed as a simple progression. By the next stanza, the speaker addresses the sequence with familiarity and relays the repetitive nature of this action. Wright here reveals the content of the “pondering” that he described in the weeds:

I do not know how it was  
 They could drown every evening.  
 What time near dawn did they climb up the other shore,  
 Drying their wings?

The speaker considers and questions the very event that he has created, but in the middle of this poem, not only the visionary logic of his surrealist method becomes clear, but the metaphor that hinges upon the river does as well. Daily these women depart from the whorehouse to “drown every evening,” to experience a baptized rebirth. The sacramental metaphor derives from a trick of urban perspective, as the women seem to disappear from Wright’s view. He can only wonder when they rise again after their transformation, drying their angel wings.

Wright’s river certainly has a connotation of moral cleansing, but he carries an evocation of the Styx as well. The nature of this dark humor is muddled with both care and disdain for the Ohio River valley and for home. Much like “Autumn Begins...” this poem reveals the complicated relationship with the past that persists in his poetry, and again he appears adamant about the depressed atmosphere of this place. The poem concludes by returning to the two shores, which confirm an association the poem seems to have been hinting, to the mythic river bordering Hell:

For the river at Wheeling, West Virginia  
 Has only two shores:  
 The one in hell, the other  
 In Bridgeport, Ohio.

And nobody would commit suicide, only  
 To find beyond death  
 Bridgeport, Ohio.

In these last stanzas, Wright is intent on conveying both banks as unbearable, that on either side a chance for a pleasant life is simply unattainable. By asserting this position with a logic derived

from the poem's initial vision of the women pouring into the river, Wright takes some of the weight off a harsh comparison. His method is clever, for he seems intent on condemning Wheeling, not Bridgeport and his home state. However he ends the poem by placing Bridgeport where he sees it, a place far worse than hell. Even the women who have to cleanse and drown themselves every evening would rather "climb up on the other shore" than find themselves in Ohio. By the end of the poem, we see that this response to the rumor becomes a point of access for Wright to not only travel back and make an attempt at humor, but to resist, however subtly, his familiar shore.

This treatment of the river can be read as sociological expression, an effort on behalf of the poet to respond to and make humorous a memory and recollection of home in the Ohio river valley. But elsewhere in this book, Wright treats the Ohio as the Styx with greater stake, and also relays his disturbed obsession with the river as an inaccessible yet desired world, a place inhabited by his beloved Muse. In "To the Muse," the river is figured as the resting place for Wright's muse, Jenny, who resides in the waters and can't be reclaimed. The river begins to function on much different set of premises, as we shift from the humor and irony in which Wright treats the Ohio, to its much more personal, darker and desperate effect on the poet.

In the poem that closes the book, Wright appears the most vulnerable and intimate with his subject. This isn't Wright observing from a distance or inhabiting an imagined space, rather the poet is outwardly and convincingly approaching the subject of this address, Jenny, with clear emotional attachment. Before coming to this closing poem, the reader of *Shall We Gather* has already encountered Jenny. She's the subject of the poet's desperate search in "Speak" and she too may bear the "Unhappy face" that hurries past the speaker in "To Flood Stage Again." In a hypercritical discussion of Wright's fourth book, Edward Butscher views Jenny as yet an alternate embodiment of Wright's common man, categorizing Wright as a poor man's Whitman: "He possesses neither Whitman's eloquence nor his gigantic soul, and his particular perception of America is as narrow as his limited characters" (265). But I contend that Jenny in both "Speak" and specifically in "To the Muse" must be taken with greater consideration, that Wright is not after the common man that is found within *Shall We Gather*.

If the reader is struggling to locate or doubtful of Jenny's appearance in the preceding poems, her identity or Wright's treatment of her becomes clear in the poem's title: "To the Muse." We've addressed the reflexive element of Wright's poetry and the way his lines display

consciousness in process, and here once again he seems to be alluding, quite clearly, to his poetic process. Critics have offered a host of attempts to articulate the nature of Wright's muse, but all seem to agree on her presence throughout the book and in many poems. Peter Stitt, in "James Wright: The Garden and the Grime" calls her a "persistent ghost of the entire book" and labels this poem "her grandest and most-heart wrenching appearance"(84). Robert Hass calls her a "wonderful act of imagination:" "She is the secret inside the word *secret* which appears so often in the book: the discovery of his spirit and of the beauty of the body and of the desire for love which grew up in Ohio and was maimed there"(213). In this way, the poem and the invocation of the muse is not only an ultimate call to home, but a full exposure of that secret, of Jenny. She is not gestured towards, but takes center stage and the subject of the poet's turn back to Ohio, and to the river, where she resides. There also seems a clear mythic dimension to this poem in its echoes of Orpheus and Eurydice. The speaker is attempting to call Jenny back from the depths of the river, back to a world that can be shared.

He begins with a surgical description that only grows more bizarre and grotesque. From the opening lines, the poet presents an equally vulnerable and not so self-assured speaker:

It is all right. All they do  
Is go in by dividing  
One rib from another. I wouldn't  
Lie to you. It hurts  
Like nothing I know. All they do  
Is burn their way in with a wire.  
It forks in and out a little like the tongue  
Of that frightened garter snake we caught  
At Cloverfield, you and me, Jenny  
So long ago.

The language used to describe this unspecified procedure is poignant and sharp, touched with apparent concern. The beginning of the poem sets an almost private tone, and the reader immediately feels as if they are eavesdropping. The seemingly casual address becomes deeply personal with the medical narrative and the specific memory that help construct an intimate dynamic: "It forks in and out a little like the tongue / Of that freighted garter snake we caught / At Cloverfield." These allusions to specific experience and imagery are typical of Wright, and they function to situate Jenny, or Wright's muse, as a lover or an entity that Wright is not only confronting presently but that he can trace through his lifetime. This act of reclamation extends

beyond the present mediation. Stitt also observes that the speaker displays a certain understanding of this process, “especially its painfulness, from the inside”(81). He knows that “It hurts / like nothing I know,” as he relays the specifics of the surgery.

The second stanza further situates Jenny, but not before the poet demonstrates the vulnerability and utter honesty that pervades the poem. Where the speaker proclaims that “I wouldn’t / Lie to you. It hurts / Like nothing I know,” just lines later he admits “I would lie to you / If I could.” His uncertainty come to constitute the authenticity of the poem and his indecision grants the reader access to Wright in rare form. But we begin to understand Wright’s hesitancy as a form of desperation:

But the only way I can get you to come up  
Out of the suckhole, the south face  
Of the Powhatan pit, is to tell you  
What you know:

You come up after dark, you poise alone  
With me on the shore.  
I lead you back to this world.

Just as he has followed the waters back home, he finds his Muse, Jenny, stuck in a familiar suchkhole. Wright alludes to a suck hole in “Miners” and again in, “The River Down Home,” where Hobie Johnson drowns and Wright can’t recall, or won’t confront his “obliterated face.” Hass accounts for this reoccurrence in viewing Wright’s poetry, especially in these later books, as “compressed with self-reference, with recurrent mediation on these images and themes”(215). The astute observation asks us to think about how Wright reconfigures these images and employs them. By contextualizing the suckhole, we are able to treat “To the Muse” as the poet’s most prominent reconciliation with this muse, and by relation, the river. We’ve examined Wright’s multiple uses of the Ohio River, as a means of travel, a divide, and a place of both death and resurrection. He seems after the latter here, and intent on raising Jenny from the river’s depths. Tracing the presence of the myth alongside our reading, “I lead you back to this world,” remind us of Orpheus leading Eurydice, trusting that she is indeed behind him.

He tells her what she already knows; his repetition and self-consciousness reminds us again of his uncertainty, but to bring her up from the river and from the past means facing the surgery that Wright continues to detail. The speaker seems almost obsessive about the process and the logistics of the procedure, and his desperation becomes clear. Wright displays not only

an immediate anxiousness but also a thorough knowledge of this odd medical practice that carries though two stanzas. In another classical reference, he also seems to briefly evoke the three fates as the only doctors that can bring Jenny back:

Three lady doctors in Wheeling open  
 Their office at night.  
 I don't have to call them, they are always there.  
 But they only have to put the knife once  
 Under your breast.  
 Then they hang their contraption  
 And you bear it.

It's awkward a while. Still, it lets you  
 Walk about on tiptoe if you don't  
 Jiggle the needle.  
 It might stab your heart, you see.  
 The blade hangs in your lung and the tube  
 Keeps it draining.  
 That way they only have to stab you  
 Once. Oh Jenny.

He continues with the sharp descriptions that conjure unsettling images in the reader's mind. The uncertainty with which Wright addresses Jenny shows in his elaboration of the procedure as well: the hanging contraption, the needle that may jiggle and may stab the heart, and the blade that hangs. While Wright appears committed to the cause, locating its necessity is perhaps the greatest challenge that the reader faces. It seems to stem from Wright's desire to call upon the Muse through precise and careful resurrection. There is a certain fragility that Wright evokes in the details of the surgery through his consideration of the pain and the proximity of the blade to the heart.

Although Wright is suggesting that there are "three lady doctors in Wheeling" that are "always there" to perform the surgery, the speaker seems to display control in his familiarity with the unsettling procedure. This notion of control and desire to overcome the uncertainty and insecurity that we've traced through the poem arises in the next stanza: "I wish to God I had made this world, this scurvy / And disastrous place." But it also comes accompanied with recognition of the resurrection's impossibility. Stitt goes as far to say that, "the speaker comes to recognize that his desperation is verging upon insanity" (84). The sentiment invites us to think



about how Wright is relating his call to the Muse and his lack of control or dissatisfaction with the world around him. He admits that he can't bear his world: "I don't blame you, sleeping down there / face down in the unbelievable silk of spring, / Muse of black sand, / Alone." Wright has used both the shores and the depths of the river to establish different worlds and realities. The world that Wright can access has always been on the shore, as it is in a multitude of poems and earlier in this one: "You come up after dark, you poise alone / With me on the shore. / I lead you back to this world." Nonetheless he has remained obsessed with that world of "black sand" that comprises the riverbed, with that resting place "in the unbelievable silk of spring." The complicated surgery belongs in Wright's world, while his Muse is of the other. The poem ends with Wright's admission of this truth, and a last call to his Muse, who is now named and perhaps has always been his love:

I don't blame you, I know  
 The place where you lie.  
 I admit everything. But look at me.  
 How can I live without you?  
 Come up to me, love,  
 Out of the river, or I will  
 Come down to you.

Wright's desperation culminates in his resignation and acceptance that she can't come up from the suckhole or rise from the black sand. Wright has never accessed the Muse on the shore, despite his recollection of the snake at Cloverfield. She stays in the river, the same river that calls Wright to recollect, but to which the poet never physically returned.

Despite the choice that he gives the Muse: Come up, or I will come down, we don't trust that he will, or that he can. The possibility of this Frankensteinian surgery remains in Wright's nightmare of Jenny, the rebirth isn't complete, and Wright appears to come to terms with that truth. Edward Lense, in "*This is What I Wanted: James Wright and the Other World*," holds that the concluding sentiment includes a suicide threat for the speaker "can find no help in this world or the other world." He also views the speaker's hopelessness as an attempt to defy an accepted notion: "The poem is not really about resurrection, but rather about the futility of hope in resurrection, and the permanence of death"(253). He was never going to be able to raise her from the river, the intricate surgery is considered and explained all for naught. Lense's placement of speaker between two worlds reminds us of "In Response to a Rumor..." for the speaker is in a

world where both sides of the river are Hell. But unlike that poem, the river in “To the Muse” is a place of rest, not resurrection, and a source of torture for Wright, not humor.

## Up to Barnesville

When I decided that I would circle back through Barnesville en route to Cleveland, I knew little about Stanley Plumly as a poet, let alone, his hometown. I'd approached his poems, but not nearly to the same extent that I had Wright's. I was drawn to Martins Ferry because of the way it figured in Wright's poetic expressions, how he is incessantly drawn back. I had not once come across Barnesville in Plumly's work. My decision to make that trip wasn't driven by specific intention, by a desire to situate myself in the world that Plumly constructs, but if I were going to do a project of comparison, it seemed just that I pay Barnesville a visit. What Barnesville held for me was unclear, as I wasn't sure how it would figure in this project, or inform my perspective on Plumly's poetry. It isn't on the roaring Ohio, or a part of a community that desperately depends on an industry in decline. You have to climb out from the valley, leave behind the factories and slag heaps and the river below to reach the farm country. The steep slopes that form the banks of the river plateau into rolling hills in the higher country. But it appeared the journey, the transition that I experienced from industrial landscape to pasturelands, that marked this detour as both thoroughly interesting and useful for thinking about these two poets' Ohioan roots.

It is Plumly's own words that caused me to reconsider that passage I made on a hot June afternoon with greater attention, for he addresses this difference, one that he sees as essential, in the two poet's backgrounds. Coming across this fruitful interview with David Biespiel and Rose Solari, I felt lucky to have seen the opposing Ohio's that the poet describes:

Well, Wright is a river poet, and his landscape is juxtaposed immediately to the river in terms of river communities, river economy, river industry, river pollution of all kind. River cultures are very dark culture, and they have tremendous—I don't know how to say it—they're on the edge of the urban in perhaps not flattering ways. There's even a seediness, a tackiness, about them. I grew up in a Quaker part of the county; it's called up county, very pastoral; raspberry farmers. It sounds like a different—well, it is a different—world. And in fact, the people I grew up among condescend to go down to the river and across to Wheeling, West Virginia, to do anything. They would only do it if they couldn't find what they needed elsewhere. I'm more of a country poet than Wright really is. In fact, most of his poems that are strictly of countryside I don't care for that much (49).

Plumly has a lot to say on the matter and doesn't restrain in his assertion of these disparate beginnings. We need not put too much stake in his privileging of his Quaker country over Wright's "dark culture" by the river, but there appears an effort on the part of the younger poet to carve out his own space the canon and conversation of Ohio poetry, about the region's poetic sensibilities.

The poets almost fit within the same generation, as Plumly just misses the first wave of American Post-modern poets, a space that Wright shares with the likes of Lowell and Bishop. Due to their roots, the fact that their two hometowns are but 30 miles apart, Plumly has often been viewed as a predecessor to the older Wright, and naturally the two are compared regularly. My project of comparing and conversing with these two poets' poems derived from the notion of shared Ohioan experience. As I've insisted, that critical angle has sought to draw affinities and alternate methods that relate to a treatment of Ohio, but are by no means limited to that space alone. By turning now to Plumly, and his consecutive works, *Out-of-the-Body-Travel* (1977) and *Summer Celestial* (1983), we can attempt to locate Wright-like tendency in Plumly's poems, but we must do the work of distinction, similar to that which the poet expresses to Biespal and Solari, and examine how he has developed a particular and rich style of his own.

*Out-of-the-Body Travel*

In an interview with the *Kenyon Review* in 2007, Stanley Plumly told editor David Baker that his second book was “when I found my voice and a sense of direction; found a way of admitting the silences and the spaces in-between things in my poems.” The silence and pauses are indeed carefully managed, as are the poems themselves. In *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, Plumly not only establishes a voice but also crafts fine-tuned poetry gathered in a methodically composed collection. Plumly’s effort can be characterized as a conscious construction and arrangement of a family history, a study of family psyche. The poet accesses the past to re-imagine and portray domestic experience. He effectively reconstructs his mother and father’s house and re-inhabits that space, lingering in its halls, and stepping over the cold kitchen floor. Just as the poems are carefully arranged in this collection, his memories and experiences are articulated to fit within the walls of the house.

But Plumly’s recollection and relaying of experience also depend upon his willingness to employ a method of imagination. Just as we observed a dreamscape or space that Wright develops and works within, Plumly is developing his own method in *Out-of-the-Body Travel*. In an interview with Lisa Meyer, he comments on the title of book and its implications for his several modes of travel: “What I’m talking about is flight in all ways, a running away and a flying to. Human beings have always wanted to hover above their experience. Dreaming is like that. It is kind of afterlife in one sense, but also a way of traveling.” Plumly’s poems are a response to this human desire, and he certainly presents not only different modes of travel, but varying levels of engagement to assemble this history. In “Say Summer/For My Mother,” the poet presents a beautiful poem that fondly reflects upon what Plumly’s mother had given him:

I could give you leaf back, green  
grass, sky full of rain, root  
that won’t dig deeper, the names called out  
just before sundown: *Linda back, Susy back,*  
*Carolyn.*

Perhaps it's useful to think about these poems as not only seeking an exchange with the past, but to consider the poet as responding to these voices now, from a great distance.

Plumly has spoken on how much his mother, and his father especially, appear in *Out-of-the-Body Travel*. In poems like "Such Counsels," "After Grief" and "Linoleum: Breaking Down," the poet attempts to inhabit a younger consciousness, reflect from a distance, or to imagine a narrative of their past. His travel begins to manifest in these modes. In the portrayal of his parents, Plumly effectively blends how they appeared with what their presence means to him now, at a distance from their pain but also from their touch. There is no doubt that an aim in this book is to wrestle with these past relationships and persisting images. He's intent on settling back into his home and picking up and reframing narratives. More important than Plumly's effort to re-imagine those spaces within the home is his effort to engage with and touch again the family that those walls held. We can begin to think of the house to which Plumly returns and that he constructs as operating in a similar fashion to Wright's river. Both elements grant access, and hold memories and associations that command certain reconciliation.

Plumly's descriptions and recollections are often articulated with habitual language, thus his travel and effort relies upon a recognition and expression of repeating and recurring images: his father playing violin or walking from the barn, his mother calling him home and his grandmother in the garden. Plumly not only reconstructs the home, but he also traces his family's roots in a poem dedicated to his grandmother, "Ruth" and a poem on his grandfather's foundry "December, 1945." In "The Tree," Plumly recalls locating his family on a map of his lineage:

It looked like oak, white oak, oak of the oceans,  
oak of the Lord, live oak, oak if a boy could choose.  
The names, like ganglia, were the leaves, flesh

of our fathers. So Sundays I would stand  
on a chair and trace, as on a country map,  
back to the beginnings of cousins...

Although the speaker is explicit about his memory and experience in "The Tree," at times, Plumly refrains from clearly articulating how these experiences impressed upon him.

Just as we've done with Wright, we can turn to Plumly's "Wages" as a starting point for an initial exploration of another Ohioan's relation to and method in articulating home. Although we remain focused on how Plumly is constructing and operating within the family home, this

poem displays how he is situating that home geographically and historically. Plumly articulates the exterior issues that both help to construct and to permeate the interior of the house. In this way “Wages” also offers opportunity to examine how Ohio figures in Plumly’s reimagining and constructing of home. Whereas Wright’s imagination often stretches to the far corners of the Midwest and beyond, into isolated barns in open fields and silo shadows, Plumly seems intent on using the more confined conception of the house and the implications of home to illustrate his Ohio. He renders the Depression and the historical moment as crucial to an understanding of his past, and his inherited pain.

Plumly himself is distanced in this poem, and the speaker is generally after the dynamic between mother and father. The verb-less construction of the first two lines establishes shared experience, but also conveys a clear distinction in the speaker’s separate understandings of mother and father. They are coupled to assemble a home, but Plumly establishes them as different elements. He begins, “My Depression mother in a tin house. / My Depression father in a tin box.” The speaker labels both his parents as of the Depression era. The classification comes with a number of implications but Plumly’s straight and candid declaration carries a dark weight. These aren’t just parents, they are Depression parents, and the language suggests that the economic hardship of the Great Depression is essential to Plumly’s memory and understanding of both his parents. These lines establish a translation and transfer of the depressed economy to the depressed individuals and their home.

The label of “Depressed” creates a shared space for the speaker’s mother and father, but the lines force us to consider the differing implications of a “tin house” and a “tin box.” In the way that it recalls a construction of home, the poem seems after a connection between work and home. It is a connection palpable in Plumly’s memory of his home. Plumly seems to be relaying that his home, even before he entered the picture, was defined by the economic climate, and both the “tin house” and “tin box” are products of the economy. But he situates his parents differently in how they function in this depressed state. The “tin house” suggests the domestic placement and role of Plumly’s mother in the home, while the “tin box” carries a less clear physical implication. Perhaps we can view the “tin box” as Plumly articulation of his father’s inability to break through the walls of an economic status, or a metaphoric expression of a vessel to carry the little possessions that family owns. Either way he is trapped in this box or hardship. Plumly’s use of tin, a cheap and flimsy mass-produced material, not only connotes the production of such

materials that came out of the factories and mills of Plumly's homeland, but also the fragility of his family's state.

The first lines of the poem establish commonality and difference in his parents, but in the closing lines of the first stanza, he extends an articulation of his home to an expression of Ohio. Plumly declares, in a similarly deadpan tone, that "Nobody wants to get / out of bed, nobody wants the morning dark." The lines apply to his parents, to the lives they face in both the "tin house" and the "tin box," but we also recognize Plumly's aim in relating this figurative construction of his home to many in Ohio. In this way, he categorizes the plight of his family as an Ohioan struggle. Darkness not only describes the time before the sun rises, but implies a bleakness that hangs over these households, who must face another day. It is this cycle that helps construct the walls of the "tin box." This expression of what Ohioan folks must do versus what they want to do, what they have and what they seek, introduces a struggle and a tension that Plumly traces throughout the poem.

In the second stanza Plumly begins to approach the complications of the dynamic within the home. The two images; his mother speaking and his father crying are both supported by auditory memory or imagination. His mother's voice comes through the repetition of a striking and intimate simile, "*Her voice like money in a tin cup / Her voice like money in a tin cup.*" Emotional concern and consideration begin to characterize the following lines, as we move within the walls of the house and are exposed to the effects of the depression. The repetition of the line implies the persistence of this reality and the constant pressure on Plumly's father to support the home. The lines also function to tie Plumly's construction of the home to the economic climate. His father's work insures the survival of the home, but his inability or failure to continue to work jeopardizes and destabilizes the family. Plumly employs tin once again in the "tin cup," an unreliable vessel for his father's income, and a vision that reminds of a beggar's cup.

The closing line of the short stanza, "My father wept who would not work" introduces the complications of his father's position and the state of the laborer. We understand the sadness, the depression of the speaker's father, but Plumly does not explain a particular set of circumstances that occasion his weeping. But the dark mornings, low wages and familial pressures suffice for our acceptance of his presentation. We're reminded of Wright's father, in a poem like "Two postures beside a fire" where he describes his father worn down by years of labor at Hazel-Atlas



Glass in Wheeling, West Virginia. The line also introduces Plumly's use of Biblical language and the Gospel in the poem and as a tool to understand and construct his narrative. The epigraph of *Out-of-the-Body Travel* reads, "he who will not work shall not eat / and only he who was troubled shall find rest," and the line arises later in this poem as well. Plumly picks up the sentiment in this poem, and aligns his father with the suffering and the starving.

The third stanza shifts from inside the house back out to Ohio. There also appears progression in the historical narrative, as Plumly brings us into the post-depression era and consequently, the time he was born (1939). The stanza carries certain economic optimism with implications for domestic livelihood:

All over Ohio the mills are warming up  
And the whole grain in Kansas burning.  
Nobody's starving, nobody's going to die.  
We're sleeping till sunlight this morning.

The mills are starting up again, and production is back on course. This expression seems Plumly's effort to channel the mindset of his parents who have made it past the depression. Although he had previously labeled them "depression" mother and father, the country is rebounding in a new era. Plumly often relays the voices of others and of his parents in this book, he seems to be doing the same in these expressions: "Nobody's starving, nobody's going to die. / We're sleep till sunlight this morning." Plumly has flipped the image and connotations of dark mornings and early rises. He brings us from a father who weeps and doesn't work to the assurance that no one will starve. The contrast of this stanza is quite sharp, but does not sustain, for Plumly plunges right back into hardship and back within the walls of the "tin house."

The last stanza returns to the moral or the teaching of the poem in the Gospel-like language: "But who will not work shall not eat." It is a simple expression of reality and consequences for those who do not work. We move quickly from the optimism of the former stanza and confront Plumly's father once again. It reads as if Plumly is citing a rule that does not waiver in varying economies, an unbending truth: One must work for food. He describes the aphorism as a "truth" in the presentation of his mother. Even if he understands his father's hardship and family strife through a consequential rule, he ends the poem by channeling once again the voice of his mother: "Even my sleepwalking mother tells / this truth, cursing the cost of living." Ultimately this last line speaks for the entirety of the poem in that the home lies not far

from the mills, and the tin home's survival depends on his father. Aphorisms begin to function prominently in this book as touchstones for specific memory and also as a narrative device for distilling a childhood experience and entering a passed consciousness. We come to recognize them as inherited, overheard or taken from the voices of Plumly's parents. In "Linoleum: Breaking Down," Plumly fully displays how he employs the device, and how the aphorism initiates the sentiment and the expressions of the poem.

What stands out immediately in "Linoleum: Breaking Down" is the poem's presentation on the page, and how Plumly has assembled two longer stanzas divided by a single line. The structural choice is important to our reading of the poem's narrative method, for there are several parallels and pieces of imagery in both stanzas that suggest Plumly's effort to communicate a telling and a re-telling. The stanzas are of equal length and both sequences of childhood memories associated with cold mornings in the house. The central figure in the poem, although manipulated differently in both stanzas, is Plumly's mother. Plumly has often talked about how his father "looms" in the poetry of *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, that he is "omnipresent" and even a muse in his poetic process. Compared to his father, Plumly describes his mother's presence as at the "periphery" of this book. Yet "Linoleum: Breaking Down" is a poem that positions Plumly's mother as the subject of the poem's action, and seems very much a source of concern and anxiety from a child's perspective. Plumly is communicating his memories and impressions of his parents' habitual actions, and it becomes clear that the poet inhabits a child's consciousness in these observations. But before Plumly brings us to the recollection of his mother, he makes use of another aphorism: "Poor is cold feet in the morning, cold floor." The line effectively introduces the setting and transports the reader by relaying a specific physical sensation. Plumly is able to communicate a state of the family and the condition of the home through aphorism, yet it is strengthened by the implication of sensory memory. We not only think of the family's poverty, but also Plumly's young feet scurrying across the floor. Thus the aphorism also serves to certify what follows as experienced evidence, framing the recollections.

Two essential elements of his method in unfolding the scene lie in the poet's choice to delay a first person presence and his refusal to label his mother. We soon learn that this narrative is about his mother, but the opening lines don't clarify this truth, and consequently Plumly's mother's introduction conveys a curious sentiment:

She would come out of her bedroom  
 with nothing on and say that her arm  
 was sore or that her leg was numb  
 or that her heart hurt her so much  
 she would have to lie down on the floor  
 right there and go to sleep. Go cold.

The habitual language stands out in the verb tense in “would,” and also in the multitude of possible injuries driven by “or.” Plumly is speaking with certain familiarity and clarifies that his mother’s emergence from her room with an injury was a regular occurrence. From the perspective of the speaker, these are lines of observation rather than interaction. It seems that this passiveness and reluctance to clarify “She” as mother helps create an authentic child’s viewpoint. The histories that Plumly’s poems give often do not include him, and his absence from these lines typify that tendency. “Linoleum: Breaking Down” is another poem that helps to construct a vision and an impression of Plumly’s home, and these lines communicate both the cold and the pain. Cold, throughout the poem, is treated as a persisting feeling or state of the home and provides a setting or a backdrop. The speaker emphasizes the varying potential pains his mother may be experiencing, and although she will return to sleep, “Go cold” seems to contain the threatening intimation of her death as well.

This vision of the naked mother emerging from her room and complaining of bodily pains is disturbing enough that we feel Plumly may be relaying dream rather than memory. Even the habitual language could point to a recurring dream where the child sees his pain stricken mother walking naked in their cold house. But we trust that Plumly is relaying memory, however strange and disturbing, for the experience is defined by not only his mother’s actions but also by his and his sister’s reactions. Where the first lines are more odd and mysterious, Plumly closes the first stanza by establishing a connection and describing an interaction:

And we would lie down with her, my sister  
 and I, and she would tell us not to worry,  
 that it was all right, this is what happens,  
 like a bruise in time, body rich, body  
 poor, nothing is sure, nothing. And

The strangeness of the moment continues as he and his sister lie down with their depressed mother, but it becomes a narrative of treating pain and coping with life’s ailments. Plumly gives

a voice to his mother, not through the use of dialogue, but in an intimate summary of conversation. Craftily Plumly is able to take on her voice as well, and the reader is able to hear her consoling: “this is what happens.” The mother of this first stanza is animated in the way that Plumly depicts her presence, simultaneously filled with pain and love. And in the way that Plumly begins the stanza, he closes it with another invocation of a mother’s teaching through another aphorism: “body rich, body / poor, nothing is sure, nothing.” It again conveys the socio-economic status of the family, and through this haunting chant Plumly underlines the fragility or endurance of the home and body.

The last word of the stanza begins a sentence suspended as a line between the two stanzas. Plumly exits the first by not only adding another detail of the moment, but by also attaching certain power in the presentation of resetting the scene: “outside it is just about to snow, and”. Where the first stanza remains in the home, Plumly takes the reader outside for but a brief moment. The lone line feels like a breath in its break from an intense memory, and we also wonder about the implications of a coming storm. The line is suspenseful with the expectation of snowfall, and later in the poem, that snow becomes significant. Plumly’s choice in leaving the line on its own and attaching this implication adds a certain cinematic quality to the poem. He transitions from the hall of the cold house to the weather outside, effectively widening his lens only for a couple of frames. Part of the brilliance in the poem is the way that Plumly re-enters the home and returns to that space. He resets his narrative by switching tenses and changing the speaker’s perspective, but he also gestures towards a retelling.

Sticking with a cinematic analogy, he seems to be shooting a similar scene from a different angle in the second stanza. Plumly isn’t repeating the actions of the former stanza, but he is reworking an articulation of his mother and her pain. However Plumly’s direct involvement is much more present in this stanza, by the nature of his first person perspective. As in the first stanza, he begins again in the morning, and he reestablishes the sensory details of the cold floor and cold feet: “I am up, sitting on the edge of the bed / my feet almost flat on the floor, cold / as two coins dropped on marble.” The speaker’s use of the present tense and firm stake in this moment brings the reader into the house more so than the first stanza. Where Plumly recalls the habitual actions of his mother in the first stanza, he travels to home here. We’re reminded of the book’s title, and Plumly employs a clear narrative from another childhood event. Rather than using his aphorisms, the poet offers this personal account to set the scene.

The first stanza begins with a depiction of a woman presumed to be his mother, the second is precise in placing the family in the home. The speaker identifies his mother by calling her so, and the interaction between son and mother is of a much different nature. She is not emerging from her room complaining of pain, but she is commanding, even if vacantly, the attention of the speaker:

My mother  
is dressed now, I am called out to see her  
in her captain's chair. She has nothing  
to say. She looks at me as if she were  
looking at something. I feel I am standing  
on her grave.

Plumly's interaction with his mother appears strange and emotionally charged. He presents his mother in the first stanza as active in her movement and her articulation of physical and emotional pain. She is more passive in this stanza, made so by verb choice: "My mother is dressed" and "I am called out." Action is done on her accord, not by her. The notion creates a colder persona, a less intimate interaction sustained through the way that she looks upon the speaker. In the first stanza she is wearing nothing, and in the second she is saying nothing. Plumly seems to be carrying this thread of a chilling and eerie sentiment in the absence of both clothes and words. He also emphasizes her physical presence not through potential bruises or aches, but we're able to imagine his dressed mother sitting stoically in her "captain's chair." Where Plumly shares physical and emotional closeness with his mother and sister by lying on the floor, separation and distance categorize this moment. He responds to his mother saying "nothing" with the line, "She looks at me as if she were / looking at something." He communicates his mother's scrutinizing glare, and we're able to read her pain in this alternate portrait. "I feel I am / standing on her grave" is the pinnacle of the description and recollection and portrayal of pain that Plumly delivers in the poem.

The poet William Meredith wrote of Plumly's book that it appears a "direct confrontation of the poet with his parents, a steady exercise in understanding and compassion"(32). This poem supports that notion as Plumly clarifies the impressions that his suffering parents left on him at a young age. Concerning "Linoleum: Breaking Down," Meredith also simply states that Plumly "shares his mother's acceptance of her suffering." We read the acceptance through the aphorisms and in his mother's words as Plumly recalls them. The suffering is the poet's as well, and it is not

until the closing of the poem that we are fully exposed to his acceptance. The entirety of the poem relays the suffering as shared, but in the closing lines Plumly brings the moment and experience close to himself alone. He moves from the tense moment between mother and son and returns to the observation that begins the poem, where he describes his mother's emergence from her room. But at the end, he is fittingly describing her departure:

Winter is one long morning.  
 She will get into the car, it will be  
 snowing, the car will go from here  
 to there, in time, the car's tracks,  
 like the scuff marks on linoleum,  
 will outlast a little traffic, then disappear.

The tenses again become important, for Plumly switches from language of the subjunctive to the present and now, to the future. He describes a certain future. In the same way that he expressed knowledge of what his mother "would do," he now is describing with assurance what she "will do." It certainly derives from the same sentiment of familiarity with his mother's emotions and actions. But the voice in these last lines and the use of this future tense can also be read as the hopeful thoughts and expectations of a child. The lines communicate the speaker's reliance on familiarity and routine, but also the anxious in a child's hope that his mother will return soon.

He finally comes to linoleum and the implication of the poem's title, and it appears that Plumly is crafting a poem that is as much about the function of memory as it is about suffering. The poem is concerned with the way that suffering lingers in the memory, and Plumly's acceptance hinges upon his recollection. He seems to be addressing the tendency of memory to fade like tracks, like scuff marks, but clearly his memories of home and experiences in the house do not "outlast a little traffic, then disappear." Perhaps Plumly is flipping his childhood dependency on the fading of tracks and scuffmarks in this poem. He now has the perspective to know that they will not all fade. His poetry in *Out-of-the-Body Travel* reads as attempt not only to communicate the shared suffering of his family, but to reconcile with what remains. His method of travel is memory and his destination, more often it seems than not, is within the walls of the house and alongside his mother and father. The linoleum may begin to break down, but the cold floor remains, and Plumly continues to walk upon it.

Although Plumly devotes this poem to an articulation of and a narrative about his mother, his father's presence is amplified throughout this book. There are too many poems in the

collection to give a full reading, including the beautifully elegiac “Now that My Father Lies Down beside Me,” and the closing poem “After Grief,” that ends the book with the following address:

This is the dream that holds the planet  
in place.

And you, my anonymous father,  
be with me when I wake.

Plumly’s portraits and addresses to his father range in the book, and we can turn to two poems that display this varying degree of engagement and alternate methods of accessing a vision or a narrative. In “Such Counsels,” Plumly is less interested in relaying direct sensory experience than he is in creating a portrait of his father. The possessive in “My father” is all that the poem offers in terms of the speaker’s involvement, and his reluctance to ground himself seems to stem from Plumly’s effort to simply hover above this narrative or this moment. We characterize this travel as less direct for the speaker isn’t attempting to situate himself in the past as in “Small Dark Streets” or the addresses to loved ones: “For Esther,” and “Ruth.” These poems hinge upon Plumly’s recollection and presence in the narrative, where “Such Counsels” is interested in the speaker’s father as a solitary figure, as commanding the attention of the poem alone. In the Meyer interview, he elaborates on the profound presence that his father carries in his poetry: “Whereas my father, whenever he is present, he is not just omnipresent, he’s in front.” In this poem Plumly has certainly afforded his father this presence as he delivers a short narrative that forms a particular portrait for the reader. Despite its brevity, or its lack of personal investment on behalf of the speaker, we take this poem as Plumly’s attempt to display and understand a persisting vision of his father’s farm labor.

Plumly begins by establishing the actions of his father as habitual, displaying the intimate familiarity that provides a foundation for many of these poems. He is not only trying to present his father sincerely, but to also suggest that his memories, and at times his dreams, are defined by his father’s repetitions:

My father would always come  
back from the barn  
as if he had been in conference.  
He had farm in him the way  
some men have pain.

The poem displays narrative that arises from the speaker's memory, yet Plumly remains reluctant to revisit this place, to ground himself. He simply reflects rather than re-imagines experience, and his effort arrives in the form of a distanced portrait. The speaker is constructing a window into the past, but not stepping into it. He seems content on the outside. Tense becomes important when considering how we understand the proximity of the speaker to the subject. He is at a distance, and reflecting back to his childhood rather than entering it, but there are traces of an aspect of Plumly's method in displaying memory. The specifics of the action and the declaration: "He had farm in him the way / some men have pain" convey the broader, wider considerations of the poem. Although there is a clear narrative and an expression of imagery, reflection figures more prominently than recollection.

Plumly's awareness or memory of his father's alcoholism runs alongside his memory of his farming. It seems that a part of the aim in the poem is to convey the closeness of these practices. His drinking was a part of his farming, and we take them as inseparable in the poem. In this way, we take the notion that he "had farm in him" as riddled with complications and uncertainties. The last line of the first stanza relays his father's dependence on farming, and implies that it is his farming that gets him through: "Every night the feed, the one / thing to get him home straight." The line is a strong declaration on his father's care for the farm. The speaker relays that it is the chore of feeding the animals, not his role as father that ensures his father's return. While this portrait is intimate, Plumly is also communicating the distance and strain that drinking put on the family and the poet's vision of his father. His drinking was crippling, but Plumly also seems to suggest that his obligation to the farm brought him back and insured his safety on another intoxicated passage home. He declares his farming duties "the one thing" that did so, and this language carries a difficult sentiment, for the speaker comes to terms with his father's tendencies, and how he could see his drinking habits.

The second stanza of the poem fully confronts his father's alcoholism. Plumly has not shied away from the subject when speaking on his poetry; the poet has called his father an addict and alcohol his drug. In the Meyer interview he called his father's drinking a "Jekyll and Hyde situation." The poem clearly addresses this history but Plumly doesn't fully confront his memory in the poem, he doesn't seem interested in returning to a painful place. Nonetheless, the brief image he does present is poignant and telling. The metaphor works to convey his father's



physically crippling habit: “Still, he was a one-armed man, / toting his bottle / like a book of hours.” The lines simply expose his father’s condition, and for the first time in this poem, the reader can see the father through a young Plumly’s eyes, and feel the pain of this memory. To return to the notion of habit and repeated memories, Plumly closes the poem by expressing another ritualized event; how his father “could sleep standing.” The last lines of the poem continue this association between farming and drinking in that he could sleep like an animal in a stall, and in the fact that he had to drink to slaughter the cattle. The ending of the poem is marked by a certain darkness both in Plumly’s confronting of his father’s drinking and the toll that slaughter took on him: “he had to drink a week in a day / to stay cold sober.”

The poem that directly precedes “Such Counsels,” the namesake of the book, “Out-of-the-Body-Travel” also displays Plumly’s effort in portraying his father, and an examination of both grants us the ability to see how his approach to his father alters and how his method differs. We emphasized the distance that separates the speaker and subject in “Such Counsels,” and in an opposite mode, “Out-of-the-Body-Travel” is one of the most intimate and acutely sensitive poems in the book. Where “Such Counsels” only portrays a father’s suffering, and shies away from confronting pain, “Out-of-the-Body-Travel” enters a space where the speaker not only confronts but shares suffering. In the first part of the poem, Plumly travels back to see his father play violin, to hear the music fill the room. Clear and honest illustration doesn’t seem aided by imagination, for the speaker has successfully accessed the space, and taken a seat amongst listening relatives:

I

And then he would lift this finest  
of furniture to his big left shoulder  
and tuck it in and draw the bow  
so carefully as to make the music

Almost visible on the air. And play  
And play until a whole roomful of the sad  
Relatives mourned. They knew this was  
Drawing of blood, threading and rethreading

the needle. They saw even in my father’s  
face how well he understood the pain  
he put them to—his raw, red cheek  
pressed against the cheek of the wood . . .

The language of habit again helps construct the narrative, and although he isn't relaying experience from the present tense, the speaker certainly isn't removed, his access isn't inhibited. Familiarity and memory enable the specific sensory detail that strengthen the scene: "he would lift this finest / of furniture to his big left shoulder / and tuck it in and draw the bow," the music "almost visible on the air," his father's "raw, red cheek / pressed against the check of the wood." The method is painterly in its thorough presentation a father's playing and a crowd's reaction. Yet, the implications that Plumly attaches to this playing exemplifies his willingness to confront his father and take on the undertones of this concert. The player is not only sharing music, and filling the air with "visible" melody, but he is sharing pain and that too becomes visible on the "sad relatives" who "mourn." Beauty and pain are rendered inseparable, and pain becomes the result of this process: "They knew this was drawing of blood, threading and rethreading / the needle." The surgical metaphor suggests that the physical act of playing opens his father up and lets out his pain. His father directs this procedure aware of its effect: "They saw even in my father's / face how well he understood the pain / he put them to—." The relatives mourn because his father's pain couldn't be clearer, delivered through hauntingly beautiful music.

The title of the poem becomes relevant as we enter the second part of the stanza, and Plumly brings us to a narrative with no apparent or direct relation to the former. However although we no longer reside in a room with his music, the father's pain remains and can be read in his butchering of an animal:

And in one stroke he brings the hammer  
down, like mercy, so that the young bull's  
legs suddenly fly out from under it . . .

Where his violin playing is slower in pace, beautiful and solemn, Plumly introduces a brief and sudden action with this illustration. In this way, Plumly's travel is not only characterized by memory and reflection, or by leaping imagery, but by alternating the tempo of his narrative as well. The image is disturbing for the speaker, and Plumly is displaying yet another memory of his father that haunts and persists. The poem begins to trace the different ways in which Plumly's father appears. He communicates a dream as alternate place where the speaker is locating his father: "While in the dream he is the good angel / in Chagall, the great ghost of his body like light over the town." The sentiment seems to resist the disturbing association of his father bringing the hammer down as Plumly dreams of him as a "good angel" in a Chagall painting.

The violin playing and the butchering appear clear and honest memories, but Plumly introduces the way in which dream functions as both another place to find his father, and also a place to resist real and painful experience. His father is recast in dream.

The speaker also quickly gestures back to the violin, reminding of its use as both an outlet for pain and a reminder. However painful its implication Plumly recognizes the function of the violin as more than an instrument, but as the voice of his father's undeniable sorrow. In "Such Counsels," his father's carrying of the bottle played signifier, but here Plumly seems much more intent on using the violin in a sharper metaphor. In the closing sentiment Plumly is addressing this notion that his father indeed "looms" in the world of this book. He appears in conscious memory and in dream, but also in the natural future proceedings of the speaker's experience:

Either way, I know if I wake up cold,  
  
And go out into the clear spring night,  
still dark and precise with stars,  
I will feel the wind coming down hard  
like his hand, in fever, on my forehead.

He expresses a certainty of his presence that can be read as both dependability and comfort for a son. His father's hand is situated into a natural order and logic about the night: a "clear spring night," "precise stars," and "strong wind." His appearance comes with the force in an odd coupling of strength and tenderness. The last sentiment clarifies the proximity of father to son, that he is never far whether in dream or reality. The gesture also carries the important implication that *Out-of-the-Body* travel is not the poet's alone, but he perceives his father as crossing these distances as well.

For a last poem in our discussion of this book, we can take up "Early Meadow-Rue," a short yet remarkable poem that isn't bound by any serious narrative or emotional sentiment, it merely conveys another way in which Plumly is carefully managing memory and imagined travel. In a review of *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, Peter Stitt remarks on this particular poem: "If Stanley Plumly can do this much with this little, imagine what he does with much more potent scenes and situations used elsewhere in the book"(962). There are richer and longer poems in the book no doubt, but as Stitt observes there is something to pick up in this brief articulation of a

morning commute. We've taken this book as an autobiographical project, an attempt to reimage and reconcile with past, yet "Early Meadow-Rue," appears to stray from clear personal narrative, and the poem resists any notion of experience or memory. More so than many of these poems, "Early Meadow-Rue" appears built upon a distinct imaginative effort. The narrative is not bound to the same reality of other poems that comprise this collection, and its form deviates from the book's conventions as well. It's an appropriate poem to move our focus, for Plumly is not only "doing this much with this little" but also displaying an alternate mode of the travel that characterizes the collection. Rather than clear re-entering a space or recalling experience, the speaker hovers here, refusing to ground himself in the narrative.

It appears that elements of Wright's characteristic method arise in this poem as well: stark leaps from image to image, odd associations of imagery, plain and heavy expressions of solitude. Plumly is emulating elements of Wright's style, perhaps just as much as he purposefully does in Summer Celestial's "Lapsed Meadow," a poem dedicated to his fellow Ohioan. The poem relays a morning commute complicated with questions and anxieties of the wandering mind. Plumly refuses to limit his scope or display a quiet car ride and a cup of coffee.

The opening line stands alone as a plain and comfortable observation of the early morning. But in between the space that divides from the second line, Plumly makes a Wright-like jump and a Wright-like declaration: "There never was an old country." We hear echoes of "I've wasted my life," as the speaker departs from certain level of observation thus destabilizing the reader. But the sentiment isn't nearly as personal, and it seems that we must take the line, the only complete sentence in poem as another aphorism that Plumly is relying upon. Perhaps the poem doesn't hinge upon the expression as much as "Wages" or "Linoleum: Breaking Down," but once again Plumly employs an old adage as a touchstone for memory and a useful poetic device. The poem begins to move inward, distancing itself from a consideration of the "fields in fog." He maneuvers from a naturalists' calming expression to a meditation that both rejects a pastoral conception and removes us from a recollection of experience. The poem's shift is disorienting and we're forced to follow the speaker as he pushes the reader's imagination further.

The leaping method of the poet and the deviation into a seemingly obscure meditation appear a result of the wandering mind of the commuter. Stitt is methodical in his understanding: "Then come two careful examples of the kind of privacy the poet has in the cab of the truck; the self alone with its thoughts"(962). But these two examples of privacy demand a closer look, as

they are careful and seem distanced from this speaker's familiarity. We question not only how the speaker manages the leap but also how Plumly arrives at these expressions. If the illustration of the foggy field initiates the morning commute, what follows is the anxieties of the solitary mind and body. "Only this privacy" manifests in a consideration of an inaccessible dream life and in a girl within the iron lung. The journey to work becomes anything but linear, as a consideration of privacy yields a poignant image:

Only this privacy, the dream life of the deaf,  
the girl looking into the mirror above her head,  
prone in paralysis.

This illustration conveys another jump on the speaker's part, as we move from a foggy morning to a polio ward. Polio arises elsewhere in this book, "The Iron Lung," but always at some distance from Plumly himself. Polio was escalating in Plumly's younger years, crippling and killing thousands of children across the country. Here as well, the speaker seems to be imagining the state of a girl confined in a machine and only able look up into a mirror, but not confronting its implications or realities. The poem travels to this girl but doesn't engage. The essential word in the mediation is "privacy" and it acts as a trigger into the evocation of polio. In this way, we see that images and memories in the poem are a function of subtle gestures. The other, which drives the following expression, is "loneliness."

In another leap, the next stanza brings the reader back to the realities of the commute, back in the car. Stitt reads a certain process of translation occurring: "The third stanza turns literal—translating privacy into loneliness, the poet describes the experience as it is." But in this third stanza, in that translation to the poet's loneliness, we're brought back to the speaker's reality:

And this one loneliness,  
poverty or purity of choice, driving cold  
in the general direction of the sun before dawn,  
coffee in the truck, and bread, the cab light on,  
and nobody, nobody else on the airstrip of the road,

The raw and straightforward manner in which Plumly returns to the reality of a commute highlights his ability to masterfully construct and oppose the imagery of this poem. The cab of truck goes from a vessel for imaginative and dream-like travel to the solitary car on a dark

morning, a vessel of physical travel. The specific, but not thoroughly detailed elements of the journey give just enough to enable the reader to feel this solitude, see the pieces of bread and the mug in the cup holder. The designation of “*this one* loneliness” is worth consideration as well, for Plumly is marking this memory with a haunting singular energy, not to be found elsewhere.

But perhaps the greatest power of the short poem lies in the final three words, set apart from these lines in a stanza of their own: “going to work.” To return once again to Stitt’s claim that Plumly is indeed doing a lot with a little in this short poem, these last words reflect how he has done so. “Going to work” is what the poem is about, yet Plumly has altered that ritual and re-imagined a consciousness through his poetic process. His assemblage of various substantive illustrations and carefully compiled lines produce a short but noteworthy piece of *Out-of-the-Body Travel*.

*Summer Celestial*

Where *Out-of-the-Body Travel* is a book that remains within Plumly's childhood home and within carefully confined memory and experience, the poet has broken some of those walls down and expanded his vision in *Summer Celestial* (1983). The book's primary movement is not only through memory, but the poems reach from Canada to Virginia Beach, and from Manhattan to Maine. He is exiting a dim lit home in the winter and turning his sensibilities outward to studying plants and animals, travelling to the mountains and oceans. His scope has become expansive. In a review by Judith Kitchen, she accounts for the shift between the sequential books: He has turned from a book that "examined time and memory – the effect of time on memory" to one that "explores space in a similar manner"(656). In *Out-of-the-body Travel* we noted how Plumly was constructing the past and how, at times, he attempted to intimately inhabit it. A crucial shift in approaching *Summer Celestial* seems to be the poet's willingness to exist in the present as well, and his desire to return to place rather than a prior state of consciousness. Returning again to Kitchen: "This need to fuse past and present is characteristic of Plumly's earlier work; now he has added the need to *locate*"(657).

If, in *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, Plumly did not clarify his affinity for engaging with flora and fauna, his pastoral Quaker country, he certainly does so in *Summer Celestial*. It appears a facet of his expanding lens, and his effort to reach memory and experience through evocation or images of plants and animals. There are several poems named for them, "Tree Ferns," "Wildflower," "Chinese Tallow" and, "Ground Birds in Open Country," among others. He demonstrates a fine ability in illustrating the particulars of these visions and rendering them in personal narrative, for example, in an excerpt from "Maples:"

In a wheat field, at evening, the wheat  
still green, and torn, a blown red maple  
eighty, ninety feet to the crown . . .  
The wind, you said, seemed to have crossed  
all of Canada to get there, had hit the tree hard.  
Leaves, limbs, almost a whole half gone.

But where Plumly does travel back to past, he does so with assured comfort and without noticeable effort to crystallize memory or formulate an essential narrative. Past no longer seems

to loom or to haunt as it does in the former book, and as a result, the book doesn't feel weighted, or confined to a certain trajectory. The poet takes liberties in the variety of pursuits that he takes on in *Summer Celestial*, and the book is marked by Plumly's ability to perceptively engage with the world around rather than attempt to evoke a world that can be only accessed through memory. By extending his sensibility to the natural world, Plumly develops strong metaphors that rest on natural processes, and his bridges to personal narrative are neither strained nor obscure. The result is poetry that breathes, and Plumly is able to simultaneously exercise his characteristic discipline, yet allow his meditations to arise from that what lies beyond his solitary mind.

The first poem in the book, "Tree Ferns" seems as good a place as any to start, for the poem carries several sentiments that serve to ground the reader and inform the methods and the trajectory of the book. Before taking to the road, Plumly centers us at home in Ohio. The first stanza is clearly an expression of home, and holds imagery and associations that Plumly seems to be employing metaphorically:

They were the local Ohio palm, tropic in the heat of trains.  
 They could grow in anything—pitch, whole grain,  
 cinders, ash and rust, the dirt  
 dumped back of the foundry, what  
 the men wore home.

The poem establishes the palm as a vehicle for understanding Plumly's Ohio. *Summer Celestial* is a book that is as much concerned with travel and location as it is with examining plants. Plumly begins his study with this first poem, and he chooses a common fern. The poet also situates Ohio in relation to the climates of the United States, granting Ohio a "palm" and playing on the heat of the tropics. The first line is indeed humorous, but he begins to attach real implications to the plant he is presenting. This fact about the plant's resilience, its ability to "grow in anything" reads as an expression of the men who wear it home. He is drawing on industrial Ohio, an Ohio defined by trains and industry. Yet the men, the laborers whose work is but briefly gestured towards, aren't used to exemplify Plumly's Ohio, it is simply the fern.

In thinking about how *Summer Celestial* travels, the train becomes significant in this first poem. Although Plumly doesn't hop on, and he remains in Ohio for now, its presence



acknowledges the movement to come, the places that will be visited. But in “Tree Ferns,” the trains function to pass by these plants, moving right along. The second stanza carries the notion:

Little willows,  
They were made to be brushed back by the traffic of boxcars  
The way wind will dust the shade  
Of the small part of a river.

It becomes more difficult to trace a metaphoric reading of these ferns as the poem progresses, but nonetheless Plumly’s interest in the relationship between the plants and trains remains. His language is not scientific yet his assertion further elaborates the nature and the environment of this plant: “they were made to be brushed back by the traffic of boxcars.” The sentiment in the poem begins to read as a justification and understanding of this poor plant’s placement and composition. The next stanza addresses the plants’ inability collect rainwater: “They were too thin / for rain—nothing could touch them.” It seems that the first half of the poem operates to not only introduce the fern but also account for why Plumly and his presumed childhood friends would take their knives to it. In light of the latter half of the poem, the former stanzas seem odd, not out of place, but they read as holding greater implication than introducing a weapon for children.

However, the poet begins to imagine the plants as providing a point of access. His tangible relationship with them has informed his familiarity with the ferns. Although they were as common as a palm, grew all over and anywhere, Plumly and his friends found specific use for the plant: “They were what they looked like. Horsewhip, whipweed. / they could lay on a fine welt if you wanted.” After describing the process of “cutting and whittling them down,” the language of the poem and surrounding the plants becomes language of engagement, and of fondness. The plant is introduced as a simple staple of Ohio, and then rendered with distinct memory and with sensory detail. The process is formulaic, for the tense in “we’d start with pocketknives” suggests, once again in Plumly’s poetry, habitual practice in turning the ferns to whips. Rather than re-entering his childhood home, Plumly is interested here in recalling external activities. This shift in expression and recollection of childhood experience is a fresh and sharp turn from *Out-of-the-Body Travel*. This poem relays the physical sensation that can inform memory, and in the last stanza the poet seems to be addressing this notion of what we carry with us:

And on a hot, dry day, July, they could all but burn.  
 At a certain age you try to pull all kinds of things  
 out of the ground, out of the loose gravel thrown by trains.

Or break off what you can and cut it clean.

Plumly is directly speaking to how we hold on to what we do, to what sticks with us from childhood and what doesn't. The train returns, persisting through the poem to remind us that this ground has been cut across by railroads. But this poem is concerned with what Plumly has taken from that ground, from the "loose gravel." He is treating memory as artifact, experiences to be excavated and reconsidered. The speaker communicates another nostalgic sensory action in the way that kids "pull all kinds of things out of the ground." He is relating a sort of education that all undergo in the introduction to the outside world, the impulse to pluck leaves from branches, or how mud cakes on our feet. The metaphor of memory here embodies the truth that much of that will be lost, and has been for Plumly. But what he has broken off and cut clean seems to comprise this book.

*Summer Celestial* reads as both the process and product of whittling down these ferns, for Plumly has compiled memory and experience by revisiting varying locations. Nature acts not only as metaphor for memory, but he begins to use plants as persisting physical reminders of the past. In this way, we accept his use of both plants and place as points of access, for Plumly is able to preserve them despite the passing of time. They are physical traces and remains of Plumly's experience, and this book grapples with the tension between what existed and what remains. The trains still blow by the ferns, and Plumly, although no longer a boy, continues to whittle away. We can look no further than the next poem in the book to continue to highlight the poems that best exemplify the poet's tendencies in *Summer Celestial*. The second poem in the book provides one of the more clear examples of how Plumly is accessing memory and past experience through alternate methods, for he uses a painting by Whistler to spur and frame a personal narrative.

Plumly's employment of an external source strays from the method of *Out-of-the-Body Travel* that generally commands the usual effort to reconcile or wrestle with the past. In "After Whistler," the poet has reached certain comfortably in confronting past, and doesn't demonstrate the obsessive need reclaim or reconfigure it. As in many of his poems, he does eventually approach narratives of past and memory, but not without a rather scholarly analysis of

“Whistler’s Portrait of Thomas Carlyle” to begin. The first stanza reads like an essay on Whistler’s methods:

In his portrait of Carlyle, Whistler builds  
 from the color out: he calls it an arrangement  
 in gray and black and gives it a number in order  
 to commit us to the composition—to the foreground  
 first, in profile, before we go on to a wall  
 that seems to be neutral but is really the weather.  
 Carlyle is tired, beyond anger, and beautiful,  
 his white head tilted slightly toward the painter.  
 he is wearing a long coat and rests his hat on his knees.

The speaker gives a detailed description of the painting, so that if one could not see it for oneself, the words serve to illustrate the composition quite accurately. He is methodical and thorough in his approach, working from the foreground back, and highlighting the subject’s position to the painter. He attempts to understand the emotional state of Carlyle, perceiving and describing him wonderfully as “tired, beyond anger, and beautiful.” In writing of his grandmother a little later in the poem, Plumly makes the connection between how he looks at this painting and how he is reflecting upon visions of her that he remembers. But what seems important to emphasize is Plumly’s attention to the detail of the subject’s position, his perceptive sensitivity to Carlyle’s state, and the organization of the colors. By prefacing his movement to memory and family narrative with a study of this portrait, he displays a method for thinking about snapshots of memory and the nature of capturing, portraying and preserving past moments.

As is more the custom in *Summer Celestial* than in *Out-of-Body Travel*, Plumly isn’t as interested in inhabiting past; he is content with viewing from a distance, or from the present. His relaying of memory here is communicated like a story, one that was told to him by his parents, or his grandmother. Plumly acknowledges his retelling as an attempt at the truth, and there are moments he can’t detail for he was a new-born, or a being-born: “The cord had somehow rotted at the navel— / I must have lain alone for hours before they would let / my father’s mother, the other woman there, give blood.” Plumly appears at peace with some of this uncertainty, or at least with relaying memory that is of him but not his. It’s a change from the poet who so often seemed after the sensation of his own perception through memory. He’s content with relaying

the family history passed down to him, and begins to engage with the traces of the story on his own body, and its implications for how the speaker remembers and sees his grandmother:

She still had red hair and four years to live.  
 The place on my arms where they put the needles in  
 I call my mortality scar. When I think of my grand-  
 mother lifting me all the way to the kitchen counter  
 I think of the weight by which we are double or more  
 through the lives of others.

The first line conveys Plumly's attempt to imagine his grandmother on the scene, and he also artfully gestures towards the amount of time that the two would spend together after his birth. We shift from a storytelling Plumly to recollecting and reflecting speaker, as he tells the reader where that story is physically written on his arms. He carries his grandmother's gesture his whole life, and along with the Whistler painting, it serves as another point of access to memory and reflection. Plumly's characteristic intimacy arises in this vision of his grandmother lifting him, as the speaker reminds us of what is shared within the family, of how our foundations are built upon those others.

In an interesting choice, Plumly directly explains the connection between how he looks upon Whistler's portrait and how he is remembering and visualizing his grandmother. If we understood the poet as illustrating his grandmother through family stories in the former stanza, here he firmly establishes his personal and individual familiarity with his grandmother: "I followed her / everywhere, or tried to." In the beginning of the poem, Plumly conducts an examination of the painting with what appears an experienced eye. We may be able to relate the thoroughness of his study and explication to the way he is thinking about a vision of his grandmother. But of course his study of his grandmother is touched with the admitted creativity and imagination that enters memory: "When I look at Whistler's portrait of Carlyle / I think of how the old survive: we make them up." In channeling a portrait painter, he is calling attention to the creative license taken in depiction, but also commenting on the painter's effort to preserve the subject. Plumly preserves his grandmother in the following recollection, and he employs painterly language in his attention to light and detail:

When I look at Whistler's portrait of Carlyle  
 I think of how the old survive: we make them up.

In the vegetable garden, therefore, the sun is gold  
 As qualified in pictures. She is kneeling in front  
 Of the light in such a way I can separate skin from bone.  
 She is an outline, planting or preparing the ground.  
 For all I know she will never rise from this green place.

Before illustrating his grandmother in the garden, Plumly relies upon and refers to family photographs. His imagined scene of the garden is “qualified” by photographic evidence. Pictures of the garden here function like the birth-stories for Plumly; he is able to create narrative from another entry into the past. Plumly’s aim in outlining this clear and simple portrait of his grandmother is motivated by his intention to help the “old survive.” Where Whistler does so through painting, Plumly seems to be making such an attempt with poetry.

The effort prolongs and finishes the poem as Plumly presents another scene with his grandmother holding him, but the first line of the last stanza appears to communicate the wonder and admiration with which we treat portraiture, but also the longing for the past: “Even the painter’s mother is staring into the future, / as if her son could paint her back into her body.” This is also an evocation of Whistler’s famous portrait of his mother, where she stares ahead blankly in similar fashion to Carlyle. Through the effort to create a portrait through poetry, the poet remains grateful and persistent about the fact that his grandmother’s blood saved him: “I was lucky. In nineteen thirty-nine they still / believed blood was family.” Returning to this truth, whether by looking down at his arms or through consideration of the life he has led, serves as the motive for Plumly’s illustrations of his grandmother. The first illustration was a portrait of her alone, but he closes the poem by seeing himself within the frame as well:

In a room real  
 with walls the color of buckwheat she would sit out  
 the afternoon dressed up, rocking me to sleep.  
 It would be Sunday, slow, no one else at home.  
 And I would wake that way, small in her small arms,  
 in the calendar dark, my head against her heart.

Because of Plumly’s inclusion of himself, he communicates this image with a great sense of intimacy, fondness and love. No one else is home, or in the frame, and the portrait distills the dependence that Plumly has upon his grandmother. The narrative communicates an essential quality. We seem to read that, because of her blood and her care, Plumly owes his life to this

woman. He encourages the sentiment by reinforcing and repeating the possessive in “hers.” The language of the closing lines is beautiful and warm and well-crafted: “I would wake that way, small in her small arms, / in the calendar dark, my head against her heart.” Although Plumly declares that he is “making up” these portraits to a certain extent, his effort comes from a sincere love and gratitude. In “making up” these scenes he is thus demonstrating memory as an act of imagination, a process that produces his vivid illustrations. Unlike Whistler, Plumly must create his subjects from memory, from family stories, and by entering a certain imagined state, he is able to produce such poetry.

In “My Mother’s Feet,” Plumly returns to his method in *Out-of-the-Body Travel* of deriving family narrative from experience. His invocation doesn’t rely upon an external source like a Whistler painting, and he doesn’t present memory as an act of imagination. But the common space that both these reflective poems share is in the pleasure that the speaker seems to take in deriving narrative from either imagination or memory. Although Plumly seems to have departed from the careful enclosure of his childhood home, his poetry returns to his parents, more prominently his mother, in *Summer Celestial*. He offers a couple of poems that bring his mother back to the forefront, but his aim differs greatly in that he isn’t reconciling with painful memory nor relaying a mother’s burden. Rather, at least upon an initial reaction, the poems seem to simply reflect more fondly. There is no doubt that a painful poem like “Linoleum: Breaking Down” relays a deep love between mother and son, but “My Mother’s Feet” is more interested in a celebration, in paying homage. Where in *Out-of-the-Body Travel* Plumly accessed visions and expressions of his parents through memory and a child’s consciousness, Plumly employs different modes of entry into this piece; the poem is aided by a photograph, and by the words of other family members. It makes for a more open, and rounded practice in love, a celebration of life. The reader gets the sense that “My Mother’s Feet” is not showcasing a son attempting to grapple with any strain or darkness in a relationship with his mother.

Plumly said that his father looms everywhere in *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, and it becomes clear that his mother plays a more prominent part in *Summer Celestial*. In his review of the book, David Wojahn accounts for this shifting dynamic: “Plumly has also changed his concept of the past and of ancestry. While the father of the earlier collection symbolized a past that must be struggled with and overcome, the past of *Summer Celestial*, usually represented by the presence of the mother, is a source of nurturing and continuity”(494). Wojahn’s reading helps us

understand that Plumly's method is not only changing as he approaches his mother, but his primary vehicle of memory relies upon her. She may not have the same grip on the book's narrative that Plumly's father has in *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, but "My Mother's Feet" warmly centers Plumly's mother, revealing this book's effort and its energy. Wojahn relays the poet's seemingly different approach to memory, which remains prominent in the latter book: "He has not denied the past's hold on him, but neither has he resigned himself to it"(494). The past and experiences persist and his poems react accordingly, yet Plumly has granted his memory and his perspective a freedom not afforded before.

Plumly is accessing memory and its persistence primarily through place and plants, but his mother's feet are able to function similarly in their specificity. Instead of engaging with a natural process or an observation to engage past, Plumly turns to a distinct memory of his mother. The hands and feet of parents most always become familiar to children, and remain touchstones for memory and recall a distinct sensory consciousness. Yet again here Plumly seems content with reflecting from the present. He doesn't inhabit his past, or bind himself to a confined memory:

How no shoe fit them,  
and how she used to prop them,  
having dressed for bed,  
letting the fire in the coal-stove blue

and blink out, falling asleep in her chair.  
How she bathed and dried them, night after night,  
and rubbed their soreness like an intimacy.  
How she let the fire pull her soft body through them.

Plumly's method becomes apparent early; the portrait is synecdochic as the feet begin to illustrate a portrait of his mother. The first two stanzas of the poem are characterized by the repetition of phrases beginning with "How she..." It creates the fond sentiment that marks the poem and helps establish the speaker's temporal relationship with these actions. We clearly have Plumly reflecting upon how his mother put her feet up by the fire years ago. However the lines are strengthened by the specifics in the language and detail, especially in the first stanza. The first line is peculiar and endearing, recalling an odd detail that only a loved one could recall. He paints a picture of her by the fireside, simply describing an accessible vision. The short verbs "prop" and "blink out" inform the subtle actions of the otherwise peaceful and still image. And

once again, as we have come to expect, Plumly's memory is supported by expressions of habit, of familiarity.

It is not until the last stanza that Plumly says "feet," for in these first two stanzas "them" is used in continued reference back to the poem's title. Coupled with the repetition of "How," the choice creates a rhythmic effect on our reading. It also seems to grant a greater emotional prominence to the actions and the practices that dictate and characterize the mother's feet. Plumly frames his mother's care for her feet in a way that reads as strangely beautiful, as she "rubbed their soreness like an intimacy" and "let the fire pull her soft body through them." He has effectively made something more of his mother's feet, something almost religious or spiritual. It appears that Plumly is recalling Jesus' washing of the feet in the gospel of John by recalling mother's ceremonial and nightly bathing. He has not only used feet as a point of access for memory, but he has attached significant stake to how feet can metaphorically carry day-in and day-out experience.

Plumly begins to amplify his memory, and his approach to portraying his mother begins to widen in scope. Although we recognize his employment of some of the imaginative tendencies in *Out-of-the-Body Travel*, imagination is here used more intimately in loving reflection:

She was the girl who grew just standing,  
the one the picture cut at the knees.  
She was the girl who seemed to be dancing  
out on the lawn, after supper, alone.

Just as we highlighted Plumly's use of repetition in the first two stanzas to create a certain rhythm and musicality to the poem, he does so again by the anaphoric "She was the girl who..." Plumly introduces the way his mother appears in a picture, an old photograph perhaps. He delivers a different angle of portrayal that doesn't seem to come from his own memory, but rather an image that physically exists from a time that the poet did not. His use of imagination shows his desire to reach beyond his own childhood and to his mother's younger years. Plumly is depicting "the girl" rather than "my mother." He seems concerned with a portrait that goes beyond his own experience with her, searching for where those familiar feet have walked or danced before. So he creates an image of his mother dancing that is perhaps the most joyful sentiment in the poem, and also reminds of his grandmother kneeling in the garden in "After



Whistler.” It is filled with vitality and contrasts quite clearly with the reclined and retired mother by the fire.

Plumly carries his young mother into the next stanza, as he returns to his memory and what he himself has seen. He comes back to a reflective tone and also continues the repetition, “I have watched her...” and “I have seen her...” This stanza remains interested in his mother’s movement, as Plumly recalls her climbing the “militant stairs.” He gives us her climbing, and conquering, but also her falling, and the ground going “out from under her.” He describes her in a way that matches the affection for the mother sitting by the fire: “I have seen her on the edge of chances— / she fell, when she fell, like a girl.” The sentiment seems to have greater implications than a physical fall, for the phrase “on the edge of chances” carries a bit more weight than simply slipping. By continuing to refer to his mother as girl, he gives her youth and life, communicating that this girl still exists in the woman by the fire, in the woman with whom he hasn’t shared a roof in years. An objective of this poem seems to be to portray his mother as she was for her son, but also as she was before him.

As Plumly travels from girl to mother and back, his mother’s feet serve to connect these visions. When he employs the voice of another, it functions to strengthen the portrait, to add support to the endearing project: “Someone who loved her said she walked on water.” He once again associates his mother with Christ, and the suggestion is clear that his mother played this miraculous role for him and for others. He closes the poem by returning to his childhood and returning to his mother with her feet “propped:”

I would rise in the half-dark of the house,  
from a bad dream or a noisy window,  
  
something, almost, like snow in the air,  
and wander until I could find those feet, propped  
and warm as a bricklayer’s hands,  
every step of the way shining out of them.

The ending of this poem sounds like it could fit into *Out-of-the-Body Travel* in the way that Plumly seems to be re-inhabiting his childhood consciousness, retracing his steps in the dark halls of the home. The setting is similar to what we’ve seen, dim light, poor weather, bad dreams, yet the poem ends with the appreciation, wonder and magic the poet has attached to “those feet.” The simile with the “bricklayer’s hands” continues the sentiment of his mother’s feet embodying

her experience, her work, struggle, and the house she's built. The poem is one of admiration, as Plumly wonderfully illustrates his mother through a careful portrait of those familiar feet.

The title poem of that book is one that departs from the recollecting portraits that characterize "After Whistler" and "My Mother's feet," or the clear stance on memory that Plumly takes in "Tree Ferns." It proves the most challenging to orient oneself within, and the most difficult to explicate but also the most beautiful in the collection. "Summer Celestial" seems to gather and culminate the concerns and the sentiments of the poems that comprise the collection. Plumly does move beyond confined memory or experience here and the poem emanates a certain freedom, yet we detect traces of his methods from *Out-of-the-body Travel* in the dream-like elements that arise and space he constructs. The poem conveys sequences of dream and then reconfigures them, returning to images and rendering them differently. When Plumly does emerge from a dreamscape, he remains in a state of wonder, thinking about the world with an imagined gaze. He never appears to ground himself in firm reality, or in this world. The title of the poem suggests a summer's starry night sky, a visionary experience that invites this sort of enchantment and mystery, but also unfathomable distance.

Throughout the poem, there are several principal concerns or motifs to which Plumly continually returns; the night sky and its stars, water, and money. But because his mother looms large and is central to this book, we find her woven into and affected by these persisting images and forces. Plumly begins by establishing himself in a position of uncertainty for himself and for the reader:

At dusk I row out to what looks like light or anonymity,  
too far from land to be called to, too close to be lost,  
and drag oar until I can drift in and out of a circle,  
the wind up a little and down, building against the air,  
and listen to anything at all, bird or wind, or nothing  
but the first sounds on the surface, clarifying, clear.

As we've come to expect, Plumly assumes the first person as the speaker, and he brings us along in what seems his Wordsworthian rowboat excursion. But Plumly's position in the boat becomes about the only thing we are sure of in this stanza. The first line of the poem sets the tone, or seems to allow for the uncertainty to follow, for Plumly has to question his bearing, heading towards "what looks like light or anonymity." The language of the stanza is filled with uncertainties and possibilities located amid binaries: "too far from land to be called to, too close

to be lost,” “in and out of a circle,” “the wind up a little and down.” Every line is constructed in this way, and its effect leaves the reader disoriented and equally enchanted by the place where Plumly floats, and what he is after. We’re tempted to label this opening narrative as dream-like, or suspended between dream and waking experience, because of the speaker’s inability to firmly judge his surrounding and the ambiguous sensations: “nothing named, nothing now to see,” “or nothing / but the first sounds on the surface, clarifying, clear.” The stanza ends with the latter sentiment, and by the end of this long, at times, disorientating sentence, we feel calmness and at peace with where speaker has positioned himself.

If we understand the first stanza as at least briefly introducing us to the omnipresence of water, and the night in this poem, the beginning of the next stanza introduces money. Money appears to operate and derive from a couple of sources. Upon its introduction to the poem, Plumly seems to be making the connection between the sight and appearance of dollar bills and how they remind him of moonlight:

Once, in Canada, I saw a man stand up in his boat and pass  
Out dollar bills. It was summer dark. They blew down  
On the lake like moonlight. Coming out of his hands  
they looked like dollar bills.

The beginning of this stanza situates the speaker as the observer. We have moved from the poet rowing his boat to his viewing of another man in his. The setting is odd, and we certainly have questions concerning the location in Canada as well as why the man is handing out money and to whom. However we can begin to align these narratives of boats floating below a summer night sky. Interestingly the language of uncertainty, of Plumly’s inability to make firm declarations, persists in his description of the dollar bills. After stating that the man was passing out the dollar bills, in the next line he reaffirms that “coming out of his hands / they looked like dollar bills.” The poet feels the need to insist that what he perceived as dollar bills were indeed verified by his eyes.

Another seemingly important gesture in these lines is Plumly’s expression that the bills “blew down / On the lake like moonlight.” As we’ve noted, he affirms that the dollar bills looked like dollar bills, so rather it must have been this motion that reminded him of moonlight. The passage figures light in a manner that destabilizes the items compared—moonlight and dollar bills, in effect inviting the reader to associate them imaginatively. Even if the dollar bills still look like dollar bills, they move like moonlight does and this perception leads Plumly to shift his

observing lens from the lake to the sky. We move from a reflective Plumly back to the present only for a brief moment, in which he reveals that it is the vision of the stars that conjures the memory of this man and his boat in Canada:

When I look up at the Dippers,  
the whole star chart, leaves on a tree, sometimes all night,  
I think about his balance over cold water, under stars,  
standing in a shoe, the nets all down and gathering.

Plumly is suggesting that he returns to this man as a sort of talisman, and he introduces Eugene Field's "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod." The bedtime story or nursery rhyme begins to function prominently in this poem as a point of reference and response, and its introduction through the shoe as the boat, and the nets, makes the reader reconsider the earlier lines. Plumly's invocation of Field's popular poem allows us to contextualize his initial paddle out into the lake, and appears a strategy of inducing dream or obscuring conscious states. It also provides a framework for approaching the issue that the poem later addresses: the speaker's mother's inability to sleep.

"Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" is read to help close children's eyes, yet in a reversal of concern or familial role, Plumly expresses a desire, a "wish" as he writes, that his mother would fall asleep. Plumly returns to the intimacy that characterizes his relationship with his mother both in *Out-of-the-body Travel* and in this book, but it seems to remind us more of the previous book, for the sentiment also holds equally characteristic pain. It appears in the socio-economic hardships, which Plumly frames as a disturbance in sleep: "My mother still wakes crying do I think she's made of money. /—And what makes money make money make money?" Although the line does carry that pain it also stands as one of the more entertaining, well-crafted and rhythmic lines in the poem. As Plumly does both often and well, he effectively voices the words of others in his lines. Having heard her, we can see his mother. We also feel pain in the images and intimation of death in the following lines:

I wish I could tell her how to talk herself to sleep.  
I wish. She says she's afraid she won't make it back.  
as in a prayer, she is more afraid of loneliness than death.  
two pennies for the eyes, two cents: I wish I could tell her  
that each day the stars reorganize, each night they come back new.

These lines appear a type of proto-elegy for his mother. Kitchen, in her review of the book, observes that Plumly "is haunted not by the actual death of his father (as he was in *Out-of-the-*

*Body Travel*) but by the eventual death of his mother”(658). Plumly’s anxiousness about his mother’s death alters our understanding of his “wishes.” Though he expresses certain helplessness, we wonder why he can’t tell his mother. The issue of sleep becomes the issue of rising again, of living another day: “She says she’s more afraid of loneliness than death.” The image of the “two pennies for the eyes, two cents” is chilling as the poet recalls the payment for the ferry that crosses the river Styx. The line is brilliant in invoking and suddenly deepening the prominent themes and concerns of the poem that we’ve identified in boat travel, money and Plumly’s mother’s death. Without directly recalling the ferry that escorts the dead, Plumly gestures back towards the speaker’s vessel in the opening lines of the poem as well as the fishermen Wynken, Blynken, and Nod.

A significant shift in the voice and the address of the poem occurs in the third stanza, as Plumly turns to his mother and confronts her fear of water, of sinking below the surface. Plumly is crafting an intricate web of both his anxieties about his mother and her fears and concerns, all the while aligning death with sleep and with water. The framework of “Wynken, Blynken, and Nod” continues to allow Plumly to make such connections and relations. The stanza is about his mother’s discomfort, about her anxieties as her son sees them. As Plumly investigates his mother’s state, once again the language turns dream-like. He appears to curate this space before entering it and guiding both his mother and reader through it: “Outside tonight the waters run to color with the sky. / In the old water dream you wake up in a boat, drifting out. / Everything is cold and smells of rain.” He positions his mother where she least wants to be, ambiguously floating about the water, and in some ways the vision recalls the reader to the first lines of the poem, where Plumly is proceeding into the lake. Ambiguity and uncertainty of dream continues here: “Somewhere back there, in sleep, you remember weeping,” and “someone is holding on.” With Plumly’s narrowing in on his mother and her role in this space, the intimacy and concern returns:

And at this moment you think you are about to speak. But someone is holding on, hand  
Over hand, and someone with your voice opening and closing.  
In water you think it will always be your face that floats  
to the surface. Flesh is on fire under water.

In this address to his mother, Plumly articulates a set of stressful circumstances that perhaps encapsulate his understanding of his mother’s anxieties. But this intimacy seems to be striking a

different chord as it often does with Plumly, for the speaker is confirming that although he understands his mother's pain, he cannot share or rationalize it. By the end of the stanza, he simply declares that sentiment: "For my mother, who is afraid to sleep, / for anyone afraid of heights or water, all of this intolerable." Plumly is addressing the nature of fear and trying to illustrate it to the best of his ability with sensations of constricting water and burning flesh.

Directly following that vision of "flesh on fire," Plumly returns to the story of "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" and seems to use the story as antidote to his mother's anxiety. He describes the story of the fishermen quite romantically, highlighting their success: "In the story, the three Dutch fishermen sail / out for stars, into the daylight hours, so loaded with their catch / it spills." The story takes on the role of not only establishing a framework to think about sleep and the stars and the water, but of opposing the anxiety of Plumly's mother. Plumly's retelling of the poem is pleasant and warming, for the fishermen are rich in their catch and will dry their nets for the next day. It was most likely read to him as a child, and has a place in his fonder memories of childhood as a story that sparked imaginative wonder and spurred restful dreams. But the poet also seems to be playing with a certain irony in saying that even these characters that are supposed to put children to sleep are able to rest themselves. In this way, it is not only the pain and thought of submerging in water that the poet's mother can't tolerate, she can't tolerate the old nursery rhyme either.

The poem undergoes a last great shift, and besides holding on to some of the images of the night sky and the lake and the money, it holds a different nature of address. The speaker conveys an address, a dialogue, a confronting between lovers in the second to last stanza that informs the closing sentiments of the poem:

Look, said the wish, into your lover's face. Mine over yours.  
In that other life, which I now commend to you, I have spent  
the days by a house along the shore, building a boat, tying  
the nets together, watching the light go on and off on the water.

The preceding narrative of imagined visions and dreams and a tortured mother are of "that other life," as the speaker now faces another defined by an intimate partnership. There seems suggestion that these closing expressions are about marriage, about a commitment to forge that partnership, in the language of sacrifice, and of both admitting and addressing a past that will affect this relationship. Persistence of image and dream has figured in almost every poem

discussed by both Wright and Plumly, the latter seems to be relaying that accompanying anxiety here. The imagery and the narrative that close the poem contain the water, the money, the boat, the light and dreaming. There is language of exchange in: “water is paying / back water,” “I know, I know this is a day and the stars reiterate, / return each loss, and each witness.” Exchange figures in the speaker’s gesturing back to the rendering of money as well: “So I lie down / in a dream of money being passed from hand to hand in a long line. / It looks like money—or hands taking hands, being led out to deeper water.” He channels Wynken, Blynken, and Nod: “I have spent / the days by a house along the shore, building a boat, tying / the nets together.” The speaker communicates the persistence of these processes of exchange and these dreams, as Plumly continues to circulate in this world defined by these terms and images. And the closing sentiment too is bound to this repeated exchange and remains within the water:

And that always in the room next door  
 someone is coughing all night or a man and a woman make love,  
 Each body buoyed, even blessed, by what the other cannot have.

But this exchange isn’t between money, or the sea and stars, or mother and son, it is about the nature of lovers in bed. The line is prefaced with the speaker’s expression, “I know, I know,” thus the sentiment is delivered with a certainty that opposes the obscurity that marks the poem’s beginning. In a poem that moves in and out of dream and disorients through out, Plumly leaves us with his faith in the exchange and blessing of a lover to another, but wary of the “other life” with its collection of associations and looming dream-space.

“The James Wright Annual Festival”

The James Wright Poetry Festival started in 1981 as an event to remember and commemorate Martins Ferry’s Pulitzer Prize winner, but has been suspended since 2007. For 26 years poets and readers and locals alike gathered for a weekend in the spring to celebrate his life and his work, and to carry on a living memorial of the poet who returned so often to this place. In the same year, Bruce Henricksen compiled a book of elegiac poems in dedication to Wright entitled: “From the Other World: Poems in Memory of James Wright.” It features a number of Wright’s cotemporaries: Bly, Galway Kinnel, W.S. Merwin, who so greatly felt his loss, and book appears to verify Wright’s place among the ranks of his era and of his moment.

After attempting to present work that engaged these two poets together, and making an effort to both connect and distinguish Wright and Plumly’s poetic styles and sensibilities, it seemed right to conclude this thesis with a prose poem that Plumly wrote in honor of Wright and that appears in Henricksen’s collection. The poem recalls Plumly’s trip to the second annual festival. When I stumbled upon it, I was reminded of my trip there, as Plumly explores Martins Ferry in a similar fashion that I had. In the same interview with Biespiel and Solari, Plumly commented bluntly:

I’ve always had ambivalent feelings about James Wright. In fact, I feel better about him the way I felt better about my father. They seem to me to be more lovable figures after death. In a way I feel free from a burden (29).

This poem, “The James Wright Annual Festival” appears, in some measure, Plumly’s “feeling better about” Wright, as he confronts Martins Ferry in an effort to share Wright’s visions and perceptions, and acknowledge his history. Despite Plumly’s expressed distaste for this river community, the poem conveys a poet willing to embrace this territory, and willing to linger in Wright’s immense shadow at its deepest; on the shores of the Ohio:

The night we flew into Pittsburg where Tom Flynn met the plane to drive us back to Ohio just over the river into Belmont County where we were to meet Galway and the hosts of the Second Annual James Wright Festival for supper and the chatter of a late night before the first day of readings. What I remember from the long ride in from the airport—a new spring night with constellations broken and the blurred edges of the foothill building against the wind in a wall up from the river—is the dark and how it



came into the car at a speed we understood, how it filled in the small lights going out everywhere behind us, how it moved on our faces; how later, after dinner, all of us tiring, it touched all our faces. What I remember from Galway's face that night is how the next day he talked about the work, up until the end, on the last book, or didn't talk but got lost in the moment of the last poem of *that Venice morning many times since*, and how he waited there, in thought, with the many sources. On the Sunday I spent the empty early morning wandering too, lost in Martins Ferry, where down the street from the library the Heslop Brothers were still in business and farther still the WPA Swimming Pool Project plaque shows like a war memorial object. And I walked down to the water, the beautiful Ohio, Depression-wide all the way to Wheeling, and saw that whatever the working terrors are they are worse over there, on the other side, laid off, sabbath or dead-time on the line, where hell is still a foundry and a glassworks and an icehouse filled with coal, where they take you, out of pity, in the morning before daylight and bring you back in the evening, fire in the sun, white-of-the-eye-of-the-moon; and that even the pretty farmers, our fathers, had come down from the farms to cross. James Wright, Galway would finally say, had gone to the end of the table, which we will earn, as we earn the daily bread set before us, and could see the winter daybreak poem take form, in a whole other country, in high gulf Mediterranean air but lifted here like stone or lumber flat above the river.

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