

Poetry Series

Franz Wright

- poems -

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Franz Wright(18 March 1953 --)

Franz Wright is an American poet.

Background

Wright graduated from Oberlin College in 1977. He and his father James Wright are the only parent/child pair to have won the Pulitzer Prize in the same category.

Wheeling Motel (Knopf, 2009), had selections put to music for the record "Readings from Wheeling Motel". Wright stepped down as the Jacob Ziskind Visiting Poet-in-Residence at Brandeis University in May 2009. Wright wrote the lyrics to and performs on the Clem Snide song "Encounter at 3AM" on the album Hungry Bird (released in February 2009). His most recent book, is Kindertotenwald (Knopf 2011), a collection of sixty-five prose poems concluding with a longish lyrical poem to his wife.

Wright has been anthologised in works such as The Best American Poetry 2008 as well as the late Czeslaw Milosz's anthology of favorite poems, Bearing the Mystery: Twenty Years of Image, and American Alphabets: 25 Contemporary Poets

In 1999 he married the translator Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright.

Criticism

Writing in the New York Review of Books Helen Vendler said "Wright's scale of experience, like Berryman's, runs from the homicidal to the ecstatic ... His best forms of or originality: deftness in patterning, startling metaphors, starkness of speech, compression of both pain and joy, and a stoic self-possession with the agonies and penalties of existence." Novelist Denis Johnson has said Wright's poems "are like tiny jewels shaped by blunt, ruined fingers--miraculous gifts." The Boston Review has called Wright's poetry "among the most honest, haunting, and human being written today. Critic Ernest Hilbert wrote for Random House's magazine Bold Type that "Wright oscillates between direct and evasive dictions, between the barroom floor and the arts club podium, from aphoristic aside to icily poetic abstraction." Walking to Martha's Vineyard (2003) in particular, was well-received. According to Publishers Weekly, the collection features "[h]eartfelt but often cryptic poems...fans will find Wright's self-diagnostics moving throughout." The New York Times noted that Wright promises, and can deliver, great depths of feeling, while observing that Wright depends very much on our

sense of his tone, and on our belief not just that he means what he says but that he has said something new...[on this score] Walking to Martha's Vineyard sometimes succeeds."

Poet <http://www.poemhunter.com/jordan-davis/>Jordan Davis, writing for The Constant Critic, suggested that Wright's collection was so accomplished it would have to be kept "out of the reach of impulse kleptomaniacs." Added Davis, "deader than deadpan, any particular Wright poem may not seem like much, until, that is, you read a few of them. Once the context kicks in, you may find yourself trying to track down every word he's written"

Some critics were less welcoming. According to New Criterion critic William Logan, with whom Wright would later publicly feud, "[t]his poet is surprisingly vague about the specifics of his torment (most of his poems are shouts and curses in the dark). He was cruelly affected by the divorce of his parents, though perhaps after forty years there should be a statute of limitation... 'The Only Animal,' the most accomplished poem in the book, collapses into the same kitschy sanctimoniousness that puts nodding Jesus dolls on car dashboards." "Wright offers the crude, unprocessed sewage of suffering", he comments. "He has drunk harder and drugged harder than any dozen poets in our health-conscious age, and paid the penalty in hospitals and mental wards."

The critical reception of Wright's 2011 collection, *Kindertotenwald* (Knopf), has been positive on the whole. Writing in the Washington Independent Book Review, Grace Cavalieri speaks of the book as a departure Wright's best known poems. "The prose poems are intriguing thought patterns that show poetry as mental process... This is original material, and if a great poet cannot continue to be original... In this text there is a joyfulness that energizes and makes us feel the writing as a purposeful surge. It is a life force. This is a good indicator of literary art... Memory and the past, mortality, longing, childhood, time, space, geography and loneliness, are all the poet's playthings. In these conversations with himself, Franz Wright shows how the mind works with his feelings and his brains agility in its struggle with the heart."

Cultural critic for the Chicago tribune Julia Keller says that *Kindertotenwald* is "ultimately about joy and grace and the possibility of redemption, about coming out whole on the other side of emotional catastrophe." "This collection, like all of Wright's book, combines familiar, colloquial phrases--the daily lingo you hear everywhere--with the sudden sharpness of a phrase you've never heard anywhere, but that sounds just as familiar, just as inevitable. These pieces are written in closely packed prose, like miniature short stories, but they have a fierce lilting beauty that marks them as poetry. Reading 'Kindertotenwald' is like

walking through a plate-glass window on purpose. There is--predictably--pain, but once you've made it a few steps past the threshold, you realize it wasn't glass after all, only air, and that the shattering sound you heard was your own heart breaking. Healing, though, is possible. 'Soon, soon,' the poet writes in 'Nude With Handgun and Rosary,' 'between one instant and the next, you will be well.'

Awards

2004 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, for *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*

Whiting Fellowship

National Endowment for the Arts grant

PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry

1989 Guggenheim Fellowship

Alcohol

You do look a little ill.

But we can do something about that, now.

Can't we.

The fact is you're a shocking wreck.

Do you hear me.

You aren't all alone.

And you could use some help today, packing in the dark, boarding buses north, putting the seat back and grinning with terror flowing over your legs through your fingers and hair . . .

I was always waiting, always here.

Know anyone else who can say that.

My advice to you is think of her for what she is:
one more name cut in the scar of your tongue.

What was it you said, "To rather be harmed than harm, is not abject."

Please.

Can we be leaving now.

We like bus trips, remember. Together

we could watch these winter fields slip past, and never care again,

think of it.

I don't have to be anywhere.

Franz Wright

Bees Of Eleusis

<i>Unless a grain of wheat goes into the ground and dies, it remains nothing but a grain of wheat.

—John 12:24</i>

The ingredients gathered, a few small red tufts of the dream spoor per sheaf of Demeter's blonde wheat, reaped in mourning, in silence, ground up with the pollen and mixed into white wine and honey. These stored forms of light taken under the ground. Taken by mouth. First those who by birth hold in secret the word; then placed on the tongues of the new ones, into whose ears it is meant to be whispered. Word murdered, forgotten so long ago, placed as a kiss on the lips of the soon-to-be-no-longer breathing who mean to enter death with open eyes, with mouths saying Death, what death? We have no word for it in our country where the bride of a brighter oblivion reigns. Not the purple-haired god but the child queen, the raped girl, come back from the dead hand in hand with the child she conceived there, returned in a resurrected virginity, wind through green wheat. Present-day site of a minor refinery in Christ. Although by the tenth generation already the children of light ("in their dark garments") had trampled and smashed and generally raped the two thousand years of this precinct and its holy meal, intolerable mirror. Men who'd designed and bowed down to a law derived from the sayings of one who appeared here to say that the law is abolished, it is too late, all that is over with. Men who bungled their way through the next eighteen centuries before finally descending into the earth themselves, and what they found there they used, and we thank you for destroying the destroyers of the world. And here at the end this is as good as any other entrance to the underplace, journey of the fallen leaf back to the branch, to the bees of Eleusis among olive blossoms, untroubled among crimson wildflowers. Four thousand years later: same flowers, same bees.

Franz Wright

Blade

If I stare into it long enough, the point comes when I don't know what it's called,
a condition in which lacerations are liable to occur, like a slip of the tongue; when
a dropp of blood might billow in a glass of water, blooming in velvet detonation
and imparting to it the colorless, tasteless and originless fear in which I wake.

Franz Wright

Circle

Say I had no choice, this weightless finger touched my tongue and told me to, it taught me; when kinder and more subtle methods failed, it put a gun to my head, a zero seared coldly in one temple, electrode glued chill to the other, the sniffer dogs rooting and snuffling in my crotch, the small white doorless room, the laser flashlight in one eye. You can't hear the voice when it utters let there be speech, yet I faithfully spoke what I thought I was supposed to, inspired idiot, or dummy on that lap of language, the words themselves more real than I, words here before we were and when we are not again. So I blurted it out, my initial soliloquies, what I could catch through the static, giving my head a good thump now and then like one of those black-and-white TV sets, and projecting, those were some vast stadiums, the first row of faces as far as near stars if there at all, never having the faintest idea what it meant, the microphone dead, I did my best, tell them. Inch-thick rope for ascot, eyes put out, chained to my oars, all the others long vanished: the first minute of death is so long, like the first minute of consciousness there in the infinite darkness of somebody weeping, you never arrive, never reach shore, never mind with what clarity you seem to hear with your lips distant roar of surf breaking. I pulled too for those who'd come later, I'm guessing, singing in their names as well, sort of lip-synching but singing twice as loud, strapped to the mast, earways cleared, though I heard nothing but nothing, blue. Making up what I couldn't make out, and all that uproarious and pitiless derision I had to raise my voice above, I mere link—out on that unknown ocean beating at my ears, just as at the beginning, the mother's heart booming softly; from nowhere it came, like me, months before I arrived to take up the sorry job of being me, whatever a month was, whatever I was then, blind little dolphin with a thumb in its mouth, whatever a mouth was; poor mother mourning her own mother's dying, over the actual ocean she lay, a strong stone's throw from the Ohio or that poisoned ghost of it. Mother of my mother dying away from this world just as I was about to die into it. I see them there, up to their knees, gathered as for a baptism, cross traced in hydrochloric acid on a tiny forehead, right there at the dead water's edge a scythe of moon, a meteor in arc of falling axe of gold for the severing of hairy umbilical rope, hear me out! I saw they were standing watch over her, and my mother's conspicuous absence, wincing at the constant cough; and I saw her whom I would never meet, nearing peace in the scarlet Magdalenean ceremonies, clenching lightly between thumb and skeletal forefinger the scarlet egg, and the wide river's sundering undertow sucking to its breast her shrunken body, fetal in her narrow bed, nothing but a huckleberry craft by now just vanishing around the first bend, more and more lost from sight by my mother, twenty-two, unaided by lunatic male she'd been sentenced to, from Goethe-phase to Trakl-phase. And she breaks down in her

hotel room, in bullet-pocked Vienna, helplessly swept down the blind unwept
current still flowing, sadness's chemistry, horror's and guilt's, to this day through
my veins. Months before we met, I listening to her crying, it went on forever,
how not hear it, how not be fed it, in a shoreless darkness of sorrowing I
listened, still listen, now watch this and pay close attention: nothing else there,
only a listening called me, no name even, till they grave it in stone. Until we
finally met, I watched her face rise on the horizon. Then there was some loud
mutual screaming in the even more terrible blindness called light. Long before I
invented the first word it taught me, it told me the others, so many. So only
what was never mine is mine; and when no one is listening I sing what it means
to me, even now, hearing my voice through my own disappearing, farther away
every day, my mother's mother's fate and mine now one as I board the ocean
liner at three months of age and arrive in New York, filled with space and time.

Franz Wright

Dedication

It's true I never write, but I would gladly die with you.
Gladly lower myself down alone with you into the enormous mouth
that waits, beyond youth, beyond every instant of ecstasy, remember:
before battle we would do each other's makeup, comb each other's
 hair out
saying we are unconquerable, we are terrible and splendid—
the mouth waiting, patiently waiting. And I will meet you there
 again
beyond bleeding thorns, the endless dilation, the fire that alters
 nothing;
I am there already past snowy clouds, balding moss, dim
swarm of stars even we can step over, it is easier this time, I promise—
I am already waiting in your personal heaven, here is my hand,
I will help you across. I would gladly die with you still,
although I never write
from this gray institution. See
they are so busy trying to cure me,
I'm condemned—sorry, I have been given the job
of vacuuming the desert forever, well, no more than eight hours
 a day.
And it's really just about a thousand miles of cafeteria;
a large one in any event. With its miniature plastic knives,
its tuna salad and Saran-Wrapped genitalia will somebody
 please
get me out of here, sorry. I am happy to say that
every method, massive pharmaceuticals, art therapy
and edifying films as well as others I would prefer
not to mention—I mean, every single technique
known to the mouth—sorry!—to our most kindly
compassionate science is being employed
to restore me to normal well-being
and cheerful stability. I go on vacuuming
toward a small diamond light burning
off in the distance. Remember
me. Do you
remember me?
In the night's windowless darkness
when I am lying cold and numb
and no one's fiddling with the lock, or

shining flashlights in my eyes,
although I never write, secretly
I long to die with you,
does that count?

Franz Wright

Entry In An Unknown Hand

And still nothing happens. I am not arrested.
By sonic inexplicable oversight

nobody jeers when I walk down the street.

I have been allowed to go on living in this
room. I am not asked to explain my presence
anywhere.

What posthypnotic suggestions were made; and
are any left unexecuted?

Why am I so distressed at the thought of taking
certain jobs?

They are absolutely shameless at the bank——
You'd think my name meant nothing to them. Non-
chalantly they hand me the sum I've requested,

but I know them. It's like this everywhere——

they think they are going to surprise me: I,
who do nothing but wait.

Once I answered the phone, and the caller hung up——
very clever.

They think that they can scare me.

I am always scared.

And how much courage it requires to get up in the
morning and dress yourself. Nobody congratulates
you!

At no point in the day may I fall to my knees and
refuse to go on, it's not done.

I go on

dodging cars that jump the curb to crush my hip,

accompanied by abrupt bursts of black-and-white
laughter and applause,

past a million unlighted windows, peered out at
by the retired and their aged attack-dogs—

toward my place,

the one at the end of the counter,

the scalpel on the napkin.

Franz Wright

Home For Christmas

Fifteen years later the old tollbooth keeper is still at his post but cannot break a twenty, regrettably, his brains blown out, or provide the forgotten directions. I did phone, what do you think? Before I can blink I am parked out front of the unbelievably small, unlighted house. I've got my finger on the buried bell, nothing. For hours I've been walking around, and I hate to be the one to tell you this, but no one is home in Zanesville, Ohio. My dusty toothbrush waits for me, of this I feel quite sure, my teenage image in the dust-dimmed mirror waits. Only now I'm afraid I'll be forced to disturb the slow fine snow of dust that's been coming down, year after year, on my blanket and hair, and put on my dust-covered clothes, and walk without making a sound, trailing my eternal lunar footprints, down the windless hall, and down the stairs at last. It's not going to happen overnight. But one of these days I'll arrive; I will go down to sit with the father. The elderly father, strictly speaking, of never really having been there. I will sit down and eat my bowl of dust like all the rest.

Franz Wright

Imago

From my cell I was staring at a cloud, a dog decaying in the woods, etc., as I took up the long-awaited sequel to my Confessions. By this time my hand was so far away that it looked like a small hairless spider whose progress I could hardly help but follow, from the corner of one eye, as it went on filling page after page in a notebook the size of a stamp with words too small for anyone to read. I looked up and noticed my bars had turned to gold. And before I forget, I'd like to be the first to congratulate everyone who has not committed suicide up until now. Camouflaged and lightless congregation, the world will never know your names, never know of its debt to you, or what you suffered; with what uncomplaining anguish you sacrificed the one thing all hold most dear, most have in common, the sense of being completely different from anybody else—it just vanished at some point, having attained its sexually mature and winged stage. You had a great vision about it, but told no one. We have misnamed death life and life death. You saw another world, and it was precisely the same as this one. This time you told everyone, until someone asked you very nicely to quiet down. And the weather—everything you have heard on that subject is a serious understatement. The scarlet horrors were preparing to file in for my ignominious obsequies, already they swarmed freely over my body. Then, there was no weather. I can't tell you how perfect that was. As it happens I had been gazing up at the dusk stars, as I can be found doing more or less day and night, for I like to think they are growing younger as I die, come by some time and tell me what you think. Under torture—some atrocious form of tickling, for example—I guess I'd describe myself as a fairly good egg in hot water. Family motto roughly translates, April wizards bring May blizzards. We tend to be apprehended eventually, after a futile but all the more spirited attempt at first degree self-impersonation; however, this is not the time for levity, we happen to be speaking of a serious medical goodnight kiss. Traditionally, we are then detained at a local mental facility known for its celebrated alumni, though in recent decades secret and permanent socialist elements in the government have seen to it that the lowest scum of humanity now appear to have open access to those once hallowed halls smeared with our shit and vomit. What I'm getting at is this: after a relatively brief stay, we are invariably released with some deranged doctor's or other's blessing, a mixture of relief and disgust on the part of the staff, and the secret eye-signal that will get you into any movie house in Milwaukee free for the next year. Some of us like to get together once a day, rain or shine, and gather furtively at the picnic grounds under those tall wavering candleflame pines, where neither moth nor rust can reach, nor faintest scream, and exchange ribald tales verging on satanic perversion, each drawing his iridescent injection from the same oceanic martini, very dry, about two tears' worth of vermouth, in an

unremembered dream.

Franz Wright

Morning Arrives

Morning arrives
unannounced
by limousine: the tall
emaciated chairman

of sleeplessness in person
steps out on the sidewalk
and donning black glasses, ascends
the stairs to your building

guided by a German shepherd.
After a couple faint knocks
at the door, he slowly opens
the book of blank pages

pointing out
with a pale manicured finger
particular clauses,
proof of your guilt.

Franz Wright

Our Conversation

Pure gaze, you are lightning beyond the last trees
and you are the last trees'
past, branching
green lightning
of terminal brain branches
numened densely with summer's
hunter color, as night comes on,
the ocean they conceal
gone berserk, wind still rising.
Pure seeing, dual vortex doors
to the blue fire where
sex is burned away, and all
is as it was and I am being offered
in your eyes, as in cupped hands,
the water of to never thirst again.
Again I turn away,
and the future comes, all at once
towering around me
on every side, and I am lost.
Pure looking, past pain
(this is promised):
we must have wed on poverty's most hair-raising day
delighting, flashing risk, risk
unfailingly lighting the way,
anything possible
in that dissolving of seam
between minds,
no more golden time—
each step I took
the right step, words
came to me finally and finding the place
you had set for them,
once again
wrote themselves down.
Till true word's anvil ring, and
solid tap of winged blind cane come,
I wish you
all the aloneness you hunger for.
That big kitchen table where you sit laughing

with friends, I see it happening.
And I wish that I could not be
so much with you
when I'm suddenly not; that
inwardly you might switch
time, to sleep
and winter while you went about
your life, until you woke up
well,
our conversation resumed.
Ceaseless blue lightning, this
love passing through me:
I know somehow it will go on
reaching you, reaching you
instantly
when I'm not in the way;
when it is no longer deflected
by all the dark bents, all
I tried to overcome but I could not—
so much light pulled off course
as it passed within reach, so much
lost, lost in me,
but no more.

Franz Wright

Postcard 2

Incomprehensible fate that sentenced my father to my mother. I can't blame him, I would have left the raving bitch myself, and would do so many many times in years to come. Then, of course, I came along. There is a limit to what one man can endure. So I suppose I am the reason he left, actually. I am the one to blame. And yet he did his best; he did all that he was capable of doing, and wrote me every year, like clockwork. He rarely remembered to mail what he wrote me, poor man (when I think of what I must have put him through), barely legible one-sentence postcards he sometimes worked at half the night; but as they all said the same thing, word for word, it wasn't that bad. He could be forgiven. The blizzard I visit your city disguised as will never be over and never arrive. I think what he was trying to say was that at some point I'd begin to notice I was freezing, wasn't dressed right, had nowhere to go, and was staggering into a blinding snow that no one else could see. I think he meant, the cold will make you what I am today.

Franz Wright

Spell

Some fish for words from shore while others, lacking in such contemplative tact,
like to go wading in up to their chins through a torrent of bone-freezing diamond,
knife raised, to freeze-frame incarnadine and then bid it as with hermetic wand
flow on again, ferociously, transparently, name writ in river.

Franz Wright

The Face

Is there a single thing in nature
that can approach in mystery
the absolute uniqueness of any human face, first, then
its transformation from childhood to old age—

We are surrounded at every instant
by sights that ought to strike the sane
unnumbed person tongue-tied, mute
with gratitude and terror. However,

there may be three sane people on earth
at any given time: and if
you got the chance to ask them how they do it,
they would not understand.

I think they might just stare at you
with the embarrassment of pity. Maybe smile
the way you do when children suddenly reveal a secret
preoccupation with their origins, careful not to cause them shame,

on the contrary, to evince the great congratulating pleasure
one feels in the presence of a superior talent and intelligence;
or simply as one smiles to greet a friend who's waking up,
to prove no harm awaits him, you've dealt with and banished all harm.

Franz Wright

The Mailman

From the third floor window
you watch the mailman's slow progress
through the blowing snow.
As he goes from door to door

he might be searching
for a room to rent,
unsure of the address,
which he keeps stopping to check

in the outdated and now
obliterated clipping
he holds, between thickly gloved fingers,
close to his eyes

in a hunched and abruptly
simian posture
that makes you turn away,
quickly switching off the lamp.

Franz Wright

Thoughts Of A Solitary Farmhouse

And not to feel bad about dying.
Not to take it so personally—

it is only
the force we exert all our lives

to exclude death from our thoughts
that confronts us, when it does arrive,

as the horror of being excluded— . . .
something like that, the Canadian wind

coming in off Lake Erie
rattling the windows, horizontal snow

appearing out of nowhere
across the black highway and fields like billions of white bees.

Franz Wright

To

Before you were I loved you
and when you were born
and when you took your first step
Although I did not know
good luck I want to say

lone penguin keep sturdily waddling
in the direction of those frozen mountains sister
of desolate sanctity
I want to scream
Although I did not know you

I loved you later on
as just a weedy thing
a little skeleton I loved
Both long pre-you a child myself
and as a man in retrospect

I loved and I was there
while they were raping you
I loved although
like God
that's all that I could do—

Franz Wright

To Myself

You are riding the bus again
burrowing into the blackness of Interstate 80,
the sole passenger

with an overhead light on.
And I am with you.
I'm the interminable fields you can't see,

the little lights off in the distance
(in one of those rooms we are
living) and I am the rain

and the others all
around you, and the loneliness you love,
and the universe that loves you specifically, maybe,

and the catastrophic dawn,
the nicotine crawling on your skin—
and when you begin

to cough I won't cover my face,
and if you vomit this time I will hold you:
everything's going to be fine

I will whisper.
It won't always be like this.
I am going to buy you a sandwich.

Franz Wright

Untitled

This was the first time I knelt
and with my lips, frightened, kissed
the lit inwardly pink petaled lips.

It was like touching a bird's exposed heart
with your tongue.

Summer dawn flowing into the room parting the
curtains—the lamps dimming—breeze
rendered visible. Lightning,
and then soft applause
from the leaves . . .

Almost children, we lay asleep in love listening to the rain.

We didn't ask to be born.

Franz Wright

Wheeling Motel□

The vast waters flow past its back yard.
You can purchase a six-pack in bars!
Tammy Wynette's on the marquee

a block down. It's twenty-five years ago:
you went to death, I to life, and
which was luckier God only knows.

There's this line in an unpublished poem of yours.
The river is like that,
a blind familiar.

The wind will die down when I say so;
the leaden and lessening light on
the current.

Then the moon will rise
like the word reconciliation,
like Walt Whitman examining the tear on a dead face.

Franz Wright