

# Poetry II

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Final Portfolio

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## *Character Sketches*

### (1) Bring a Character to Life

Johnny tapped his fingers nervously on the mahogany table. He watched the water cooler hum merrily away as he waited. Behind those big wooden doors his future potentially lay in wait. Johnny stood up to fidget with his tie and tug his sports coat free of wrinkles. This interview might literally change his life. Johnny was a writer, always had been, and through a friend of a friend of a brother's father – you know how it goes – he was possibly getting recruited to help write what he pictured would be the next big blockbuster.

He smiled at the receptionist, when she looked up. They said nothing, and Johnny paced around the room. Suddenly something outside the window caught his eye, and he walked over to the glass. Just a bird, or maybe something else. Who cares? He quickly wiped a bead of sweat from his eyebrows with his forefinger. Rubbing it dry on his pants he reminded himself to stay cool. He resumed pacing around the room, whipping around, when he heard the door open.

### (2) Character through a place

The whole apartment is 300 square feet. It's a studio apartment. A kitchenette is in the back corner across from the bed. A house plant, browning and leaves slightly curled from lack of water, stands next to the front door. The walls, white, are sparsely decorated, a painting next to the windows and a Green Day poster over the bed. His table is littered with notebooks and sheets of papers, notes of all his phone conversations and interview meetings. Boxes of texts books and his senior thesis still sit stacked against the wall, unopened from his college days, not oh so long ago.

# Original Poems

## *Nick*

What about that time he had embarrassed himself?

Nick didn't care.

What about that time he had talked of killing himself?

Nick listened.

What about that time he had fought mean-spirited?

Nick forgave.

He sat in that coffee shop, his fingers  
drumming merrily away as he waited. Looking around,  
he noticed the red lampshades casting  
a homey appeal, a nice touch, he thought.  
The tacky paintings on the wall,  
too much, too fake.

The door jingled, he looked up.  
There was Nick. They hadn't talked in years.  
They had never even met.  
He stood up to meet him for the first time.  
They held out hands,  
but all he could think to say was,  
"I always thought you were taller."

## *Chicago*

The snow is falling all around, soft,  
Without a sound.  
The asphalt roads are covered  
In asphalt colored slush that sprays me  
As the cars drive by.  
I stare at the red tail lights,  
Half crusted with ice and I wonder  
Where needs you so bad  
You need to rush  
on ice.

I walk underneath a street lamp,  
Its florescent light glowing Balefully  
on the glistening snow.  
We pass each other on the salt-laden sidewalk.  
You're buried under a plethora  
Of scarves and coats – I can't see your face  
Only your eyes, not even the  
cherry tip of your nose.

And I wonder where you're from  
That you hide so thickly from the world.  
Overhead the sky is gray, though the  
Sun has set. You can tell.  
The trees lining the side are half  
Caked with three-day-old stale snow,  
though it looks just as beautiful.  
The birds are silent, the sky is silent,  
And without a sound,  
The snow is falling all around, soft.



## *Home*

With the cold trickle of dread  
crawling down his neck like a bead of sweat,  
a man walked into his dark house that night.

Tattered curtains flutter feebly  
against the shattered window.

Shards of glass stand en garde,  
embedded in the brand-new carpet  
and glinting silver in the moonlight  
like tears of pain.

The stained-glass lamp is knocked over,  
cracked in a dozen different places like a mosaic  
of a weepy old man crying over his grave.

All the picture frames lie smashed on the floor,  
empty, like a new moon.

The bedroom door hangs open,  
squeaking as it swings gently back and forth.

In the closet, the hangers are bare,  
those not littering the floor,  
a final, malicious gesture.

It does not matter that the TV is gone,  
nor the dining room table, nor the fridge,  
nor even love. But the security, the man thinks,  
isn't this supposed to be the last safe place?



## *The Joshua Tree*

I see you there. In your clusters.  
All together. You wildflowers and cacti  
and tumbleweed lost in the wind.  
I'm weird. Yes, I know it.  
You don't need to remind me.  
But maybe,  
I'm damn proud of it.  
Your words, they don't hurt me.  
They bounce off my twisted, knotted bark  
like skittles on a tiled floor.  
Or maybe like frozen pellets  
that smash into a thousand shards.  
I don't need you  
or your words.  
I don't need your flowers  
or your beauty.  
I'm doing just fine,  
thanks for not asking. I'll just stand here,  
twisting and bending into shape,  
crying on the inside.

## *The summer you drowned*

The ocean waves crashed against the cliff,  
the sand baked  
in the sun's blistering heat.

We ran along the shore,  
collecting sea shells  
and rocks that glittered.

You used to laugh  
whenever I suggested  
that we wrestle.

We danced  
among the waves, throwing each other  
down, with our masculine strength.

Afterwards, we would  
sprint across the shore,  
racing towards the rocks.

Usually you won,  
and your smile  
would make it worth losing.

We would sit on my towel  
until the stars shined in the black night  
or the sky blushed pink.

Sometimes we might kiss  
until the sun rose,  
but more often,

we would walk back to my house,  
hand in hand,  
whispering "I love you" when it was time to leave.

I stood on my darkened porch,  
watching you walk off in the night,  
wishing you could be with me.

The shadow of your absence  
smothered me, as the chimes  
whispered in the wind.

## *The Truth*

### *Red*

I want to punch you, to pummel  
you. I want you to suffer  
and suffocate and cry  
the tears of fire that I drop  
every day.

### *Orange*

You make me sick,  
or so I'm told.

### *Yellow*

I am heat, like the pinpoint  
of a candle on a table  
at night.  
I am day light, peeking around  
every shadow.

### *Green*

You can find me in the mold,  
fuzzy and cuddly. Won't you join me?  
You can take me as your wealth,  
but I'll take all your friends.

### *Blue*

There are those days I wonder  
why you told me I deserve to burn in hell.  
Some days I just cry.

### *Purple*

When you see me, I am royalty.  
Bow down to me.  
Kiss my...

### *The Rainbow*

Sometimes red is angry, sometimes  
he just wants a hug. Purple is lonely,  
and only wants a friend.  
Green wants to make a positive change  
for once,  
and blue is super mellow,  
when you get to know him.

Orange won't make you sick,  
he's good for you in fact,  
and nobody can see yellow anyway,  
so he wonders why any of it matters.

After all, we're just the same person.  
Yes, I'm angry and jealous,  
rich and proud,  
sad and visible.

But so are you.

# Revised Poems

## *Home*

The man walks slowly into his house,  
treading carefully on the carpet,  
over the scattered debris.

His mother's favorite curtains,  
the last memory she left behind,  
now tattered,  
flutter feebly against the shattered window.

The shards of glass lie  
on the floor, their cruel edges  
glinting in the silver moonlight  
like tears of pain.

The man's throat constricts  
as he finds the stained-glass lamp,  
given to him on his father's last Christmas  
knocked over, cracked, in a dozen different places  
like a mosaic of a weepy old man  
crying over his grave.

The man does not see the TV is gone,  
nor the dining room table.

He has eyes only  
for the missing wooden owl  
his brother had made for him,  
before he died of leukemia.

The security of home, the man wonders,  
isn't this supposed to be the last safe place?

## *The Joshua Tree*

I see you there.  
You pink and yellow wildflowers  
together like best buds.  
You cacti and tumbleweed blowing  
lost in the wind.  
There's another Joshua in the distance  
and another there. It might help  
if I could say hi,  
though only if I wanted friends.  
I'm weird. Yes, I know it.  
Maybe, I'm damn proud of it.  
Your words, they don't hurt me.  
They bounce off my twisted, knotted bark  
like frozen pellets  
shattering into a thousand shards.  
I don't need your flowers  
or your beauty.  
I'm doing just fine,  
thanks for not asking.  
Every time I bloom, a part of me dies.  
But a new branch will grow,  
so I'll just stand here  
twisting and bending into shape,  
crying on the inside.

# Craft Essay and Poems



## *Craft Essay on C.D. Wright*

To consider the technique C.D. Wright uses for her poems, I will be taking a look at two different eras of her publishing career. The first two poems are *Tours* and *Bent Tones*, both of which were published in 1983. My second two poems are *Lake Echo*, *Dear* and *Flame*, both of which were published in 2002, almost 20 years later. Examining the poems, I found the difference to be at the sentence level: that in the older works each line typically either was, or could be, its own sentence whereas in the more recent works, each line was usually a sentence fragment or individual word.

*Tours* is a very moving poem charged with emotion. This is in part because it is a character poem. It tells the story of a young girl observing the aftermath of her parents fighting. Part of what makes the poem what it is, is the selection of the point in time, that it takes place *after* the noise (the fight), which is significant to the rest of the poem. What drives the poem is the portrayal of noise, and the lack of it. The violent beginning is what starts it, while the individual, distinct images that come each line are what carry it. Upon closer examination, each couplet alternates portraying sound and portraying silence. The first two images are a piano standing in the dark, and a boy standing with an orchid. The next two are of the girl playing a presumably simple song on the piano, and the turning of the lamp on (and the associated click that comes with it). Next is just still images: the piano music spread out, like brochures. And finally the last two are of hearing the father run, running through the leaves. This alternation of sound and silence, but no words, is what makes the poem so heavy. Given that alternation is crucial to this poem, from a technique stand point, the poem's structure plays a role in delivering the alternation. The couplets are largely responsible for the emotion, but emphasis is drawn to

the first and last stanzas because they break the couplet pattern. These stanzas offer the implications of the action in the poem, before and after the heavy emotion is relayed.

*Bent Tones* is a similar poem stylistically, though is quite different in its deliverance. It is also a character poem, telling the story of a woman, and presumably two different men. This interpretation is based on the fact that at the beginning of the poem the man is referred to as “a man” and at the end is given by name “Floyd Little,” which could imply two different people. Putting emphasis on the lines “Bad meat on the counter”, “When the local hit the trestle everything trembled”, and “Light next door – with her fast eye/She could see Floyd Little/Changing his shirt for the umpteenth time” the sense that not all is well with the first man, and that there is either a fantasy or an actual affair going on with Floyd. The purpose of this examination is to show that it is once again the distinct images that drive this poem. Skipping down the sidewalk in a “clean” dress is an innocent gesture, and mixed with “bad meat” and “broken glass” it becomes an interesting image, until you reach the end and suddenly it becomes something much more sinister, and not quite so innocent. Examining how this is portrayed, it is clear that once again the use of couplets and then breaking that pattern influences the emphasis of the poem. What is also important to note is that there are enjambments across sentences, but each line could be its own sentence, which is not the case for Wright’s later poems.

*Lake Echo, Dear* is one such example of having shorter enjambments. The first stanza, the last line is “at what is written.” On its own, this is a sentence fragment, though the whole stanza still a complete sentence, though is quite different if compared to this line from *Tours*, “The piano stands there in the dark” which is able to stand on its own as both a sentence and a line. This slows the pace down a little compared to her older poems, because now it takes three lines to ask one question, rather than one line to say a whole thought. What drives this poem

however are the questions that come one after the other. This is part of the reason I identify this poem as a poem of address. In the fourth stanza, Wright addresses a “you” – presumably the reader – in regards to the characters she just talked about; by addressing the characters, the “you”, and the bottle on the window sill as questions, it comes across that the reader – as a “you” to the speaker – is being personally addressed. The reader wants the answer to these questions, but instead of getting answers, she ends the poem with three statements, which draws attention to them, again by breaking the existing pattern.

An example of a completely different style of poetry, is her poem *Flame*. What type of poem it is I am not completely sure. If narrative poems are a category, I might consider it that because this poem seems to be completely based on the story it is telling, rather than any characters in or outside of the poem. I would certainly group this under the category of minimalist writing. What drives this poem is specifically the rapid pace, even more so than *Tours*. Whereas in *Tours* there were complete images – a piano in the dark like a child with an orchid – here, there is just “trees” or “vineyard”. The reader does not have time to think about an action or a thought. There is no time to interpret this poem. Given that this poem is a list of words, the craft of this poem comes in the careful and purposeful selection of which words to use, and where to place them. The two lines, “the breath the trees the bridge/the road the rain the sheen” is an example of this. Apart, the six nouns are just that – nouns. However, together, and in this order and this placement between two lines, the reader gets a clear image of being on a road, on or near a bridge with trees around and it is raining, giving the world (what seems like by this point) a mystical sheen. Finding this poem, I also found a commentary on it where someone said they assumed it must be about a car crash. I disagree with that assumption. Definitely it is easy to see where that interpretation comes from, but taking note of the two lines “the steps the

lights the door/the mouth the tongue the eyes” I got the sense it was a poem about the road trip over to the house of a lover, and the title refers to someone’s flame, a synonym for a lover. The point is not to get into a debate over the meaning of the poem, but to show that the words were clearly intentionally placed, for any other placement could easily lead to completely different interpretations than already exist.

These last two poems were more recent works, both being published in 2002. I personally admired her older works more. I appreciated the fact that a complete thought was placed with each line, rather than spread out over three lines, or given in snippets over the course of a line. Looking at these poems, I discovered how pacing is controlled through use of stanzas and not just their length, but how spread out their complete thoughts are. I found personal preference for complete thoughts given in a shorter amount of time, and is what I will keep in mind for new poems and revisions.

## *Bent Tones*

BY C. D. WRIGHT

There was a dance at the black school.  
In the shot houses people were busy.

A woman washed her boy in a basin, sucking  
a cube of ice to get the cool.

The sun drove a man in the ground like a stake.  
Before his short breath climbed the kitchen's steps

She skipped down the walk in a clean dress.  
Bad meat on the counter. In the sky, broken glass.

When the local hit the trestle everything trembled —  
The trees she blew out of, the shiver owl,

Lights next door — With her fast eye  
She could see Floyd Little  
Changing his shirt for the umpteenth time.

Copyright © C. D. Wright. From *Ploughshares* (Fall 1983).

# *Flame*

BY C. D. WRIGHT

the breath	the trees	the bridge
the road	the rain	the sheen
the breath	the line	the skin
the vineyard	the fences	the leg
the water	the breath	the shift
the hair	the wheels	the shoulder
the breath	the lane	the streak
the lining	the hour	the reasons
the name	the distance	the breath
the scent	the dogs	the blear
the lungs	the breath	the glove
the signal	the turn	the need
the steps	the lights	the door
the mouth	the tongue	the eyes
the burn	the burned	the burning

C.D. Wright, "Flame" from *Steal Away: Selected and New Poems* (Copper Canyon Press, 2002).

# *Lake Echo, Dear*

BY C. D. WRIGHT

Is the woman in the pool of light  
really reading or just staring  
at what is written

Is the man walking in the soft rain  
naked or is it the rain  
that makes his shirt transparent

The boy in the iron cot  
is he asleep or still  
fingering the springs underneath

Did you honestly believe  
three lives could be complete

The bottle of green liquid  
on the sill is it real

The bottle on the peeling sill  
is it filled with green

Or is the liquid an illusion  
of fullness

How summer's children turn  
into fish and rain softens men

How the elements of summer  
nights bid us to get down with each other  
on the unplanned floor

And this feels painfully beautiful  
whether or not  
it will change the world one drop

C. D. Wright, "Lake Echo, Dear" from *Steal Away: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright © 2002  
by C. D. Wright.

# *Tours*

BY C. D. WRIGHT

A girl on the stairs listens to her father  
Beat up her mother.  
Doors bang.  
She comes down in her nightgown.

The piano stands there in the dark  
Like a boy with an orchid.

She plays what she can  
Then turns the lamp on.

Her mother's music is spread out  
On the floor like brochures.

She hears her father  
Running through the leaves.

The last black key  
She presses stays down, makes no sound,  
Someone putting their tongue where their tooth had been.

C.D. Wright  
Back Into Tongues  
State University of New York Press



# New Poems

## *The day the sun fell*

The whisper lingers in the breeze,  
phantom shadows scratch  
at the crumbling walls.  
The sand blows eerily  
into the night.

Days before – hours –  
when the sun was still up,  
this used to be a bustling town,  
men dressed in rough cut wool  
and women with drab-colored hijabs  
carrying baskets, with the sound  
of children's laughter  
darting all around them.

Down by the market,  
men stood around shouting and laughing,  
speaking in a smooth, gliding  
foreign language.  
The women stayed dutifully  
behind the men.

Then the sun fell,  
and as night rose,  
the ghastly nightmare  
illuminated itself in the flashes of the  
drone strikes.  
Men, women ran screaming,  
children sat crying with limbs blown off,  
replaced by bleeding stumps,  
or otherwise dead bodies whose  
sightless eyes only reflected  
the bright flames  
of burning buildings.

The full moon climbed up the sky,  
revealing a bloody sight  
of crumbled buildings and broken bodies.  
The wind moaned, carrying the lost stories  
of the dead voices never heard.

## *Your friend with the black hair*

I remember the day  
you used to look at me like that.  
You grinned and your eyes  
lit up – your smile lingers, but I can see  
the distance in your eyes now.  
They settle on the new kid,  
you know, the one  
with the bright blonde hair and  
the flashy smile, his perfect teeth  
blindingly white.

I remember the day  
we used to romp around,  
the blades of grass tickling  
the skin between our toes  
and the lush green trees would rattle  
in the sweet breeze.  
We laughed as we ran, laughing  
at nothing in particular;  
perhaps for everything good  
in the world, perhaps,  
just for the freedom  
under that blue summer sky.

Now I pass you in the hall,  
sometimes you say hi, though  
more often, you cling to  
his shoulder, pathetically  
crying with laughter. Some days  
I can still feel the grass  
between my toes, I can still  
remember the hot sun on my face,  
and I wonder, what is it that  
your new friend,  
the one with the brown hair,  
will remember about you?

## *The Phantom called Time*

As I stand here, I see the table  
where we used to sit, like a family,  
together, passing food, laughing,  
not thinking or caring about the world  
outside of our dimly lit circle.

I see the room that we used to  
run around in, and release the stress  
of the past week, pent up  
like a gasket about to blow.

I see your smiles, I hear your laughs,  
and I remember  
a time where our friendship  
seemed unshakeable, we were entangled  
in it, smothered in it,  
tight like a noose.

But now your voices recede to a faint echo,  
reduced to a memory.  
The chairs we used to sit at, coated with dust,  
the table growing cold with no one to eat dinner.  
Slowly the color dims, as if  
it were drained, and all that is left  
is that photo on the wall.

It's still filled with color,  
we still smile, our eyes are still bright.  
It is a reminder that there was a moment,  
even briefly, we were happy together.  
Over time, I watched each person  
frozen in that photo  
fade away slowly, until I was the only one left,  
and I wondered,  
why do we smile in photos,  
and I decided, it's because  
we want to remind ourselves in the future  
that there was a time  
when we smiled, because there was  
something worth being happy for.

## *Self-Evaluation Essay*

Over the course of this semester, I have spent quite a bit of time thinking about how comfortable I was with poetry coming into college and Poetry workshop I and comparing that to now. Back then, I was nervous around poetry and not too excited to delve into it, and now at the end of my second semester with it, have a much wider comfort level.

Specifically this semester, I spent time both experimenting with physical form, and working to refine which images I choose, and how I use them. The first came from exposure to other students' work, and being part of the discussion of how the very different forms they wrote in (stanzas vs. one long poem, prose-like vs. indented lines, etc.) and how those forms effected the poems. Those discussions challenged some assumptions I had made about poetry, especially regarding compression and compactness in poems.

More significantly however, the second, focusing on images, noticeably picked up after the craft essay that I wrote on C.D. Wright. Given how closely I examined her poems, and how many times over and over I read those poems to try and get as much out of them as I could, the next poem, which I tried to write in what I perceived to be the style of her poem *Tour*, I noticed the feedback from the group changed.

Suddenly I wasn't being asked as much to not veil so much in the poems, but to clarify and sharpen the emotion that was there. Especially in the poem *Home*, there were very distinct images, as one commenter noted that just about every image in the poem had to do with glass, but there was no emotion attached specifically to that portrayal. The type of detail needed was being hit upon, at least in moments, but I needed to focus more now on taking that risk.

That perhaps has been the most important advice to me all semester. With the repetition of writing poem after poem over the course of 15 weeks, the images gradually came into focus,

and some of them even became more intense, but the bulk of my attention in the last few poems has been focused on trying to take that risk.

When I was first told that to bring my poetry to the next level I would need to “take the risk and put the emotion there” I wasn’t quite sure I understood what that meant or what it looked like. I’m still not sure I completely do. But I had an idea, my idea of what that meant, and now I feel like I can start to see it in some of these rough drafts. One thing that’s really important to me is now after I finish a rough draft, I often have some idea of how I want to revise it or continue working on it. (i.e. *There’s a good spot to put more emotion... I’m not quite sure these images quite work together, but what if I thought about changing them this way... where can I make this even more intense? etc.*)

I think the difference at the end of this workshop from workshop I is that I have a sense of awareness of how my poems are a rough draft, and how I would physically go about to start improving it even more. The thing I would hope to accomplish next in my work of writing poems would be to take that awareness, and work on fine-tuning it in whatever way I could to start realizing how I *should* work on revising my poems to continue bringing them to the next level.