

Dear Poets,

Happy New Year! Today's teaching takeaway examines James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" (*Above the River: The Complete Poems and Selected Prose*, Wesleyan University Press, 1990). Get your lakes in gear.

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

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.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

A closer look at the poem's sonic qualities:

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
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A second look, from the prepositions' POV:

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
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How It's Put Together

Whenever a lengthy, captivating poem title comes along, I'm compelled to break it down:

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

Verb + preposition + article + noun + preposition + person's name + noun + preposition + geographic location.

Lines 1-3 Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.

Alliterative observation that begins with a preposition. Lines two and three continue the observation assisted by a simile and an impossible color. *Green* is an unexpected choice, flying in the face of what we typically expect of shadow coloration. It guarantees we'll remember the image in the same vein as Paul Celan's "Black milk of morning" ("Death Fugue"), which skews our ideas about dairy.

Lines 4-6 Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.

Wright achieves his location with two closely placed prepositions (*Down, behind*). Line five shifts to a sonic observation that's continued in the following line.



The second image that appears when you google “Minnesota ravine.”

Lines 7-10 To my right,
 In a field of sunlight between two pines,
 The droppings of last year’s horses
 Blaze up into golden stones.

Graceful pivoters, those sparks of Wright’s preposition engine (*To, In, of, between*). *Two pines* precedes manure’s alchemical pinnacle. The verb *blaze* serves as the bow on the gift that is adjectival color.

Lines 11-13 I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
 A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
 I have wasted my life.

The passage of time, while *lean* reminds us of the speaker’s hammocked state. Wright’s penultimate line is derived through skygazing, the poem’s conclusion a gut-wrenching statement.

Prompt

Write a poem strung together from nature observations central to your surroundings. Pay attention to the compositional pivots afforded by your preposition engine. Include one impossible color and an instance where a verb choice works in concert with an adjectival color. Consider sentence lengths similar to Wright’s (Sentence 1 = 3 lines, S2 = 3, S3 = 4, S4 = 1, S5 = 1, S6 = 1). Aim for a longer title that encapsulates your location.

Happy Poeming,
 Jon