“There is something about the form and occasion of a letter,” James Wright once wrote to a friend, “—the possibility it offers, the chance to be as open and tentative and uncertain as one likes and also the chance to formulate certain ideas, very precisely—if one is lucky in one’s thoughts.” This month, Farrar, Straus and Giroux will publish *A Wild Perfection: The Selected Letters of James Wright*, coedited by Wright’s widow, Anne, and Saundra Rose Maley. The volume contains nearly three hundred letters to fellow poets Robert Bly, James Dickey, Donald Hall, Galway Kinnell, Mary Oliver, and Theodore Roethke, among others, that illustrate Wright’s openness, uncertainty, and willingness to reconsider his ideas about poetry.

Anne spent six years sorting through thousands of carbon copies, as well as gathering letters from the attics and file cabinets of friends. “It’s really like an autobiography,” she says of the collection. “[It] offers a chance to see what the life of a writer was like and to see how he came through bad times and pulled himself together.” The “bad times” involved the poet’s struggles with alcoholism and depression, as well as his struggle to evolve as a writer.

Wright, the author of ten books of poetry, including his 1972 Pulitzer Prize–winning *Collected Poems* (Wesleyan University Press), was a pioneer of American poetry. His first book, *The Green Wall*, was chosen by W.H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1957. The poems in this collection are written in a highly formal style that reflects the influence of his mentors John Crowe Ransom and Roethke. In 1963, Wright’s third book, *The Branch Will Not Break* (Wesleyan University Press), startled his readers—and many reviewers disparaged it—because of its nearly wholesale dismissal of that formal style, in favor of taut, spare lyrics and simple images that embody a tension between life and death. In his last two books, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) and *This Journey* (Random House, 1982), Wright combined his earlier, classical concerns with a love of the American vernacular, incorporating into his poems difficult and ugly aspects of modern life.

In addition to providing a biographical and an aesthetic history of the poet, the letters in *A Wild Perfection* offer an
insider's view of the contentious politics of midcentury American poetry. It was a time when young American poets were trying to shake off the influence of Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and T.S. Eliot and explore the natural rhythms of the American idiom. Wright stood on the divide between these two poetic streams, wrestling with the implications of both.

James Wright was born in 1927 in the small, working-class town of Martins Ferry, Ohio. His father worked for fifty years at the Hazel-Atlas Glass factory; his mother left school at fourteen to work at a laundry. As Donald Hall wrote in "Lament for a Maker," his introduction to Wright’s <i>Above the River: The Complete Poems</i>, "Jim’s whole life was compelled by his necessity to leave the blighted valley, to escape his father’s fate, never to work at Hazel-Atlas Glass. In his poems, Martins Ferry and its sibling valley towns blacken with Satanic mills along the river and under the green hill."

In 1943, when he was sixteen, Wright lost a year of high school to a nervous breakdown—throughout his life he struggled with depression as well as with alcoholism. After graduating in 1946, Wright joined the peacetime Army and was stationed in Japan for a year. Upon his return to Ohio, he enrolled at Kenyon College, where he graduated with high honors in English. His thesis was on Thomas Hardy. After completing his graduate studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studied under Roethke, Wright moved to Minneapolis and taught at the University of Minnesota and then Macalester College in Saint Paul. In 1966 he moved to New York City, where he taught at Hunter College and met Edith Anne Runk, who became his second wife, in 1967. The two were avid travelers, visiting Paris, Tuscany, and Hawaii, among other places. In 1979, while traveling in Europe, Wright developed a sore throat, which was later diagnosed as cancer. He died of the disease at a hospital in New York City in 1980.

Wright started writing poetry in his early teens, nurtured by his English and Latin teachers at Martins Ferry High School. As early as 1946, when Wright was nineteen, he was writing letters to explore his ideas about poems with classmates and teachers, and it is with these that the selection in <i>A Wild Perfection</i> begins. In a letter written to classmate Susan Lamb in 1949, he explains his theory on the function of poetic form. "Language is as much architectural as musical—possibly more the former. Therefore it is not a matter of singing straight off and irresponsibly the surface feelings of one’s consciousness. It is a matter of patiently constructing and rebuilding. One ought, in writing a composition of words, to build the cathedral first, and support it with buttresses of meditation and reason. The music comes later, with emotional maturity.” Wright worked at that kind of mastery, fashioning his cathedral on the classical sonnet form.

As a student at Kenyon College, Wright focused on writing iambic verse—ten-syllable lines of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables—under the tutelage of both Ransom and Philip Timberlake. But, as his letters during this time reveal, he also considered other possibilities. Shortly after graduating, he wrote to Donald Hall, who initiated their correspondence when he solicited poems from Wright for the <i>Paris Review</i>. "We must realize that the metaphysical lyric, though gloriously demonstrated in the age just past, cannot be rewritten a thousand times.... On the other hand, our alternative is not necessarily to reestablish the more rationalistic grace of the heroic couplet.... We have a chance to do a million things Rilke and the rest couldn’t do. We can be funny and gross and graceful, all of these; but we can get deeper than the lyric itself.”

After his first book, <i>The Green Wall</i>, was published, in 1957, Wright became
frustrated with the limits of formalism. Even after his book had received favorable reviews, in 1958 he wrote to Roethke, “I have been depressed as hell. My stuff stinks and you know it. It stinks because it is competent.... For style in your own work has not been only a technical matter, but rather primarily self-discovery, self-conquest, self-revelation.” Wright already felt that mastering poetic form was not sufficient. But he hadn’t yet found his way out of the iambic line.

He began work on his second book, the largely formal _Saint Judas_, while teaching at the University of Minnesota. His disillusionment with his poetry boiled over in a letter he wrote to James Dickey. In reviewing an anthology of new poets, Dickey had written a single sentence about one of Wright’s poems, calling it dull and flat, and it obviously touched a nerve in the young poet. He writes, “I understand perfectly well that, as far as you are concerned, I am a bad poet, probably not a poet at all in any sense that you would care about or believe in.” He calls Dickey’s criticism—which was known for being exacting and rigorous—destructive to “everyone who gives a damn about poetry, and who realizes that its best ally right now would be a courteous and judicious criticism.”

Dickey responded to Wright’s attack with a stark admonishment, and Wright answered that with a gushing apology, calling his virulent letter a product of his insecurity. “You simply said that I was not a poet. This remark of yours only confirmed what—obviously enough—is a central fear of mine, and which I have been deeply struggling to face for some time,” he wrote. “My explanation will sound so childish and silly that it is painful to write it down, but somehow I have got to face it: I have always wanted I think as much as I could want anything in the world, to be a poet, because I felt that poets, especially the real poets of the modern world, were great and admirable men.... I looked into _The Green Wall_ and knew at once that it contained merely competence, and that competence alone is death.”

But Wright was still unable to rise above what he thought was mere competence; he had not yet discovered an alternative to formal verse. Part of the problem was his isolation. “I am friends with very, very few current poets, and most of them are students,” he admitted to Dickey. But that isolation was about to end.
On July 22, 1958, while reading the first issue of The Fifties, the literary magazine edited by Robert Bly and William Duffy, Wright was “absolutely fixed with concentration for more than an hour...wondering at the weirdness of it all.” In that issue, Bly laid out his vision for the “new imagination” and attacked formal poetry: “...the iamb came back into poetry and settled itself with a vengeance, like an occupying army returning on a people that had temporarily evicted it.” Bly called for clearing away formal hurdles to uncover deeper truth, and laid the groundwork for what he called the “deep image.” That afternoon, Wright wrote a fevered note of admiration to Bly. “When I was young, I wanted to be a poet like Walt Whitman, and I hated the Goddamned place where I was born (Ohio) enough to try at least... In America I have had an impossible time even trying to get anyone to admit that Whitman existed...and in the face of mockery, I deserted Whitman, whose book was a holy book for so long. I deserted him in order to learn to write little tetrameter couplets.”

The next day, Wright composed another letter to Bly, analyzing his Fifties essay. Wright was excited by the call to arms, but he was uncomfortable with the wholesale dismissal of iambic verse because, despite his disillusionment with it, he still admired the formal poetry of his early mentors. In his letter to Bly, he writes, “I want to ask you if you do or do not think it is possible to build a new and original rhythm on the basis of iambic meter.” Despite this ambivalence, Wright was ready, as he wrote to his friend Wayne Burns a month later, to “deliberately set about smashing, obliterating if possible, all the techniques that I took so long to learn, and then start all over again.” He continued writing to Bly and began visiting him and his wife, Carol, on their farm in western Minnesota, entering a period of prolific writing and examination of his own work.

In the midst of the disintegration of his first marriage, to Liberty Kardules, and the manifestation of alcoholism, Wright published Saint Judas in 1959. Written mostly before his friendship with Bly began, the book is formal, yet it shows Wright’s growing interest in the power of the image. In “The Morality of Poetry,” he writes, “I stood above the sown and generous sea / Late in the day, to muse about your words: / Your human images come to pray for hands / To wipe their vision clear.”

Wright had mastered formal techniques well enough to use them naturally, but he remained conflicted. He wrote to Hall that he was “really divided as on the blade of a sword—between my loyalty to those of my contemporaries who were trying to write with intellectual grace and intelligence and to those, far more disturbing and ruthless, who were raising hell and demanding greatness.” He swung between “cracking...my dead and dull iamb to pieces” and basking in “the force and grandeur the iambics can have also.”

This divide was evident in Amenities of Stone—what would have been Wright’s third book, had he not pulled it from publication in 1960 after being hospitalized for his second nervous breakdown. Many critics have since written that his pulling the book was proof of Wright’s rejection of formal techniques and of his embrace of Bly’s ideas. A 1961 letter to British editor Michael Hamburger reveals a different picture. “The book was in two sections, and I realized finally that they were so different from each other in style and tone as to break the book in half,” he writes. “I realized that the second section...was actually the basis of a new book in itself.” Far from rejecting the first section of iambic verse, he suggested publishing those poems along with a selection of pieces from The Green Wall and Saint Judas. Because this project never came to fruition, readers were shocked at the poems in The Branch Will Not Break, published in 1963. In these vernacular poems, Wright wrote vivid images that were at once unrelentingly dark and ecstatic. Barely a scrap of the iambic line remained.
Wright maintained a fierce independence, insisting to Bly that “the growth of one’s imagination requires not only courage to break away but also the patience to let the green roots of the water find their own channels.” This independence is evident in *The Branch Will Not Break*. The most successful poems grow out of the influence of deep imagery, but out of Wright’s Ohio vernacular. In “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” he writes, “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.”

For both Bly and Wright, rejecting iambics was about more than poetic technique; it indicated a decision to embrace one’s native idiom. As Wright explains to Bly, “I learned a discipline of classical verse—iambics. That was obviously a mere defense against the hell I grew up in.” Through his friendships with Bly, Hall, and Dickey, Wright came to see Ohio not only as the hell he grew up in but also as a place from which to draw inspiration, a place of both beauty and ugliness (but an ugliness that could be profound). This is evident in poems like “Ars Poetica: Some Recent Criticism,” from *Two Citizens* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973). He writes: “I gather my Aunt Agnes / Into my veins. / I could tell you, / If you have read this far, / That the nut house in Cambridge / Where Agnes is dying / Is no more Harvard / Than you could ever be.”

Despite Bly’s nurturing, Wright descended into depression and alcoholism. Shortly after he finalized his divorce from Liberty and was denied tenure at the University of Minnesota (in 1963, because of his drinking), he began teaching at Macalester College, where he remained until 1965. The letters from this period reflect his despairing mood but always return to issues of craft. He wrote voluminously to Hall and Bly, asking their advice on how to cut poems and pare down manuscripts. Wright’s psychological recovery began in 1966, when he moved to New York, met Anne, and found a degree of stability at Hunter College.

In New York, Wright began to move away from Bly and the ideas he presented in *The Fifties*. He writes that deep imagery is “actually just the confusion that results from bad writing.” In 1973 he wrote a long, reflective letter to Bly. “During the past few years it was necessary for me to take what strength I discovered in myself through you and your family and go try to find my own life.”

In his later books, *Two Citizens* and *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, Wright begins relying less on images and more on narrative. But this was by no means the final stage in his reinvention. In 1976 he wrote to Helen McNeely Sheriff, his former high school teacher. “Though I won a Pulitzer Prize (a nice but transient distinction), I still know that I am an apprentice in the art of poetry.”

A year later, in response to Lawrence Green, a teacher who had asked what inspired him to write poetry, Wright wrote, “I think what gives a poem ‘lasting’ importance is the truth by which a poet struggles to achieve the integrity—the wholeness—of his own soul. Since we really do have souls after all, everybody is constantly struggling to be true to his own. If a poet struggles hard enough and truly enough through his own words, others—they may live a thousand years after he’s dead—will hear the sound of that struggle, and take heart from it.” Rather than rely on categories of formal versus informal verse, Wright focuses on poetry’s ability to help us “find one another, before we die, through the truth of our language.”

The truth of Wright’s language can be found not only in his poetry but also in his letters. And his letters—indeed, his spirit—grew out of his relationships with his friends and fellow poets. Filled with vigorous debates, heartfelt pledges of support, and good-natured jokes, the letters in *A Wild Perfection* comprise, as Anne says, “a tribute to friendship.”

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"Frank O'Hara was my best friend," proclaimed the painter Larry Rivers at the poet's funeral in East Hampton, New York, in 1966. "There are at least sixty people in New York who thought Frank O'Hara was their best friend." In Robert Creeley's case there must be hundreds of people who feel they've lost a best friend and staunch ally after his death, on March 30, at the age of seventy-eight. Working until the very end, Bob seemed capable of carrying the entire poetry community on his shoulders while he traveled the world reading, speaking, making new friends—a talent that never deserted him—teaching, and acting as ambassador for poetry without pretense. A contemporary of Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and Charles Olson, he was the author of more than sixty books of poetry and a dozen books of prose. He died at sunrise in a hospital in Odessa, Texas, with his wife, Penelope, and their children, Will and Hannah, at his side.

Bob was born in Arlington, Massachusetts, on May 21, 1926. Before he turned five years old, his father died and he lost his left eye in an accident. His family moved soon afterward, settling on a farm in West Acton. He attended Harvard College, but left in 1944 to work for a year as an ambulance driver in the American Field Service in India and Burma. Though he returned to Harvard, he did not complete his degree, dropping out to pursue a writing life. His early work was galvanized by instructive correspondences with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and a long and well-documented correspondence with Charles Olson that began in 1950. In 1954 Bob was invited by Olson to teach at Black Mountain College, an experimental arts college in North Carolina, and also to edit the Black Mountain Review. Bob and Olson both sought a poetry that emphasized breath, body, and human action as the foundations of poetic measure, rather than a by-the-numbers formalism. While For Love, published by Scribner in 1962, is often cited as Bob's most influential book, the volumes that followed, particularly Words (1967) and Pieces (1969), were no less important to scores of writers and readers. Bob was often characterized as a minimalist, simply because many of his poems are short. He was in fact deeply engaged with exploring the mind's most difficult