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Book Review for *Caribou*

By Emily Moran

Charles Wright is one of the most famous and renowned American authors in the world. Wright was born August 25th, 1935 in Pickwick Dam, Tennessee. He attended Davidson College as well as the Iowa Writer's workshop before serving in the U.S. military for four years. While he was stationed in Italy, Wright began to read and experiment with writing poetry. After his time in the army, Wright became a professor at University of Virginia and has won many awards including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award of Poetry; he is also a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. This September, Charles Wright became the United States Poet Laureate at the age of seventy-eight.

Wright has written and published over twenty poetry collections and has steadily increased in fame and reputation since the 1970s. A notable theme in Wright's work is his reference to Southern ideals and geographical features that he gathered growing up in Tennessee. Wright has been called the "master of the plain style," his works portray concrete and personal aspects that are often used to reflect and summon old memories. Dr. James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, explained his choice for Poet Laureate stating; "His combination of literary elegance and genuine humility – it's just the rare alchemy of a great poet." Some recurring themes seen throughout Wright's poetry are memories, reflection on the past, considering different states of being, nature, and the spiritual world, and the individual's place in the world.

In Wright's most recent collection of poems, *Caribou*, he continues to pursue the irreplaceable relationship between humans and nature. The book is split into several parts titled: "Echoes," "End Papers," and "Apocrypha." Each section contains poetry that echoes Wright's traditional themes: nature, reflection, remembrance and the relationship between the human world and spiritual world. Wright's older age is also used to add weight to his reflections on his life and past, adding a personal yet slightly witty edge to his poems. Wright's poems lack irrelevant filler words that can make any story dull; what remains is raw and potent.

One of the most profound and honest poems found in *Caribou* is "Ancient of Days." Twenty-nine lines long, this poem contains metaphors, hyperbole, irony and rich imagery. The title "Ancient of Days" immediately gives the poem a wise and slightly intimidating tone. Wright reflects on natural elements that are relatable yet surprisingly foreign and beautiful, such as: "There is a kind of sunlight, in early autumn, at sundown / That raises cloud reflections / Inches above the pond water" (16). Wright's appraisal of a sunset is an example of his rich yet simple manner of describing his surroundings. Despite the somewhat serious tone of his description, Wright is able to laugh at himself and appreciate his age. He writes, "This is an old man's

poetry, / written by someone who's spent his life / Looking for one truth. Sorry, pal, there isn't one" (16). Wright's ability to seamlessly move between topics without losing or depreciating their importance is impressive and inspiring.

In another selection from *Caribou*, titled "Across the Creek is the Other Side of the River," Wright uses a simple scene, a creek, to question and explore the inevitability of death. He also mentions a choice a person makes during their lives, to be both strong and brave or turn away and accept defeat. In the first two lines Wright states, "No darkness steps out of the woods, / no angel appears" (3). Wright immediately sets the tone as slightly fearful and alert; the speaker is aware of his age or mortality and is wary of the untold future. The imagery of "darkness stepping" personifies and morphs the shaded woods into a formidable creature. Wright also mentions the lack of an angel's presence, signifying the importance of spirituality and faith, not just within this piece but within Wright's other writings as well. The narrator is aware of a choice that not all humans are aware of or able to make. He says, "I can wait, or I can climb, / Like Orpheus, through the slick organs of my body" (3). The reference to Orpheus, the famous musical figure in Greek mythology, implies that the struggle to climb would be all consuming and nearly impossible. The vivid imagery throughout this poem is powerful and intense, matching its strong tone.

Another profound poem from this collection is titled "Road Warriors." True to the tone and form found throughout *Caribou*, the narrator in "Road Warriors" contemplates the subject of recalling past experiences and memories, and the difficulties and emotions that are often involved. Wright mentions the complications and intricacies involved with tracing memories back, "I've been on my way for a long time / Back to the past, / That irreconcilable city" (22).

The comparison of the past and the city show that this is not a journey easily taken, and that it requires something as vast and complicated as a city to include all of the details he would have to confront. Wright goes on to use alliteration and repetition to consider that he is not the only one faced with this immense task, "Narrow road, wide road, all of us on it, unhappy, / Unsettled, seven years short of immortality / And a yard short of not long to live" (22).

Wright's stress on "not long to live" is important in understanding the fear of mortality and vulnerability that are commonly associated with death and aging. The idea of being "a yard short of not long to live" shows that life may not be as long as humans think they are guaranteed; the fragility of life can be forgotten in the daily motion of life. Although the tone sounds bleak and dismal at first glance, it shifts to optimism and embraces the uncertainty of life and the natural way that humans make mistakes but do not readily accept defeat.

Caribou is a strong and beautifully constructed book of poetry. Charles Wright has successfully embraced simplistic writing, similar to the writing style during the British Romantic Period, and it is no wonder that he has become such a celebrated and renowned poet.