James Wright was born in Martins Ferry, Ohio. He served in the U.S. Army during the Second World War before entering Kenyon College, where he received a B.A. He went on to the University of Washington for an M.A. and Ph.D. Wright studied under John Crowe Ransom and Theodore Roethke. He worked at several universities, including the University of Minnesota—Minneapolis, Macalester College, Hunter College of the City University of New York, and State University of New York at Buffalo.