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 **Up on the Ridge: Charles Wright's Childhood Home in Kingsport, Tennessee**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Up on the Ridge
Charles Wright's Childhood Home in Kingsport,
Tennessee

Scott Honeycutt (bio)

Rising above the city of Kingsport, Tennessee, Chestnut Street provides some of the finest winter views in all of Sullivan County. Old Stage Road belts across the top of the ridgeline, and to the north Clinch Mountain dominates the scene as it hangs over a valley peppered with outlines of farmsteads, church steeples and shops, and **[End Page 98]** the ever-present billow of Tennessee Eastman's chemical plant. On the other side of the road, looking south toward Washington County, the scene drops into an undulated map of brown hills, interrupted with neighborhoods and fields. In the distance, back walls of the Blue Ridge stand up and highlight familiar profiles of Holston and the Iron Mountains along with the high knob of Roan Mountain, fading deep against the horizon. It is a beautiful place, and driving along the ridgetop it is easy to understand how such a scene could infuse itself into one's personal geography, locking down the landscape for a lifetime. As I drove along Old Stage Road in December of 2014, I was searching for more than views, I was hunting down memories; however these were not my own recollections, but the memories of another, a renowned writer who grew up along this lane seventy years ago.

The former United States Poet Laureate Charles Wright's early years are well documented. He was born in Pickwick Dam, Tennessee, on August 25th, 1935. His father, Charles Penzel Wright (1904-1972) was a civil engineer who worked on a variety of construction projects for TVA and was even employed on the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge during the early 1940s. By the end of World War II, the 40-year-old elder Wright would relocate his family east to the bustling town of Kingsport. There he took employment with Eastman Chemical Company and would later operate his own small construction firm. Along with his wife, Mary Winter Wright (1910-1964), he would raise three children: eldest son Charles, known at the time as Chuck, middle son Winter, and a daughter named Hildegard (1941-1991). Chuck would attend Kingsport's Lincoln Elementary before he was sent to private religious schools in the North Carolina mountains. After high school, Wright attended Davidson College, north of Charlotte, earning a history degree in 1957. According to Wright, however, he did **[End Page 99]** not begin to compose verse until 1959

when he was stationed with an Army Intelligence unit in Verona, Italy. "I found the lyric poem," Wright explains in a 2005 interview, "I was reading the selected poems of Ezra Pound, and I found a poem about the place where I was, Lake Garda, Sermione Peninsula."¹ He expands:

*I started writing in Italy when I was in the Army because I was taken by what I was seeing; it was so different from what I was used to seeing in Appalachia—east Tennessee and western North Carolina where I grew up. Then for several years I wrote out of that experience; and then suddenly one day I realized that I had a past and a childhood, and it all came sort of flowing into me, through me, and out of me, I guess [...] It brought back the landscapes of my childhood.*²

Throughout his long career, Wright's poems have probed and illuminated the multiple landscapes of lived experience: from the Italian countryside to the blue California coastline and from a summer home in Montana to his own backyard in Charlottesville, Virginia. However, for me, Wright's most poignant poems are the ones that are set among the landscapes of his childhood in Kingsport, those Appalachian snapshots of a time long past but still quite accessible in the present. Critics have noted how autobiographical landscapes would come to play a central role in forming his canon. One of Wright's first ventures into these autobiographic tropes appeared the 1973 poem "Dog Creek Mainline." This poem captures imagistic [End Page 100] shards of memory arising from his youngest recollections while living in Hiawasse Village, North Carolina. Wright has admitted, "that a shift occurred" with the publication...

UP ON THE RIDGE

CHARLES WRIGHT'S CHILDHOOD
HOME IN KINGSFORT, TENNESSEE

SCOTT HONEYCUTT

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Up on the Ridge: Charles Wright's Childhood Home in Kingsport, Tennessee, as we already know, the modality of the utterance transforms the original radiant.

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