

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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Separation

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.

W. S. Merwin¹

☞ Reflections

W. S. Merwin, a practicing Buddhist now in his 90s, has written over the course of nearly seven decades about a single recurring theme: man's separation from nature and thereby man's separation from the divine. Of course, prolific writer that he is, his work has evolved and changed stylistically, tonally, and formally over the years; the subject, however, has remained rooted in an essential belief that our destructive habits are not only disastrous to the earth but to our humanity as well. I love many of Merwin's poems, but this one is particularly moving.

One semester as we were discussing this particular poem, a student of mine, puzzled, said, "I don't know how to feel. Is this a sad poem, or not?" I treated it as a very serious question. After all, rarely do we feel but one thing at a time and how interesting that a poem of this brevity might lead us into a lifelong query: is this whole human endeavor sad, or not? How *are* we supposed to feel?

Two asides: In a famous literary and political scandal, Merwin, after winning his first Pulitzer Prize (in 1971, for *The Carrier of Ladders*), donated the prize money to the draft resistance movement and outlined his objections to the Vietnam War in a controversial essay published in the New York Review of Books. Secondly, one of his most well-known collections, *The Lice*, published in 1967, is often read as a condemnation of the Vietnam War. I mention these asides as a way of stitching together one interpretation of "Separation." As the poet and critic Reginald Shepherd has said, "Merwin has always been concerned with the relationship between morality and aesthetics, weighing both terms equally. His poems speak back to the fallen world not as tracts but as artistic events." As *Wellspring* has been interested these last few weeks in engaging the early chapters of Genesis, "Separation" is an interesting poem to place under the lens of the Old Testament, whose stories keep circling the same theme: human frailty and the misuse of freedom, from Adam and Eve to Cain, from the

¹ "Separation" by W. S. Merwin from *The Second Four Books of Poems*, Copper Canyon Press. Used with permission by the press and The Wylie Agency, LLC.

people of Noah's generation to the people of the Tower of Babel. That is, from humanity's earliest days, we have been navigating a beautiful albeit morally ambiguous world, separated from God by our human failings and restored to God by divine grace.

So, is this poem a sad one? I think so. But is it despairing? I think not. The color of thread might very well be the color of hope. As Merwin himself has said:

...there's a kind of desperate hope built into poetry now that one really wants, hopelessly, to save the world. One is trying to say everything that can be said for the things that one loves while there's still time. ... We keep expressing our anger and our love, and we hope, hopelessly perhaps, that it will have some effect. ...One can't live only in despair and anger without eventually destroying the thing one is angry in defense of. The world is still here, and there are aspects of human life that are *not* purely destructive, and there is a need to pay attention to the things around us while they are still around us.²

A needle and thread is sometimes all it takes to put something back together and to hold something in place; and, a single stitch is sometimes all that is needed to keep one thing connected to another. In this case, separation from the beloved (or, perhaps, the Beloved) is as much an absence as a presence. The signs of that pain are everywhere and in everything, but so are the signs of that healing, however tenuous. For me this is as much a poem about separation as it is reparation, as much about what has come undone as what has been made whole.

✂ About the poet

W.S. Merwin (b. 1927) was born in New York City, raised in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and has spent his later life (from the 1970s on) on a restored pineapple plantation in Maui, Hawaii. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Merwin is a practicing Buddhist whose subjects in poetry include a passion for the natural world—not simply descriptions, but condemnations of the destruction of landscape from the felling of trees to the extinction of species. He has won nearly every award available to an American writer including the National Book Award and two Pulitzer Prizes. He is the author of numerous collections of poetry, translations, and books of prose, and served as the 17th United States Poet Laureate. He is recognized as a principal contributor to arts and letters in the 20th and 21st centuries. At 91, he continues to write prolifically and remains dedicated to the preservation of Hawaii's rainforests.



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² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-s-merwin>