

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

June 8, 2020

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



For the Anniversary of My Death

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what

W. S. Merwin¹

Reflections

W. S. Merwin, a Buddhist poet who died just over a year ago, wrote over the course of nearly seven decades about a single recurring theme: man's separation from and violence against nature and thereby man's separation from and violence against the divine. Of course, prolific writer that he was, his work over the years evolved, circled, veered; the subject, however, remains rooted in an essential belief that any disregard for one another is disregard for sanctity itself. He was committed to "hearing the wren sing.../and bowing," and committed in every way that metaphor can be put to work.

I love many of Merwin's poems and this one, among his most famous, is particularly moving and I feature it not only because the first anniversary of Merwin's death was eclipsed (even if appropriately) by the global catastrophe that is COVID-19 but also because Merwin continues to inspire many: one of the things I increasingly admire is that he seemed unapologetic in his criticisms and unwavering in his belief that one must advocate, even if surely dismissed or derided, for what one loves, for what one believes worth every risk.

In what became literary 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

¹ "For the Anniversary of My Death" by W. S. Merwin from *The Second Four Books of Poems*, Copper Canyon Press.

York Review of Books. One of his best-selling collections, *The Lice*, would come to be—and still is—seen as one of the most sobering condemnations of the Vietnam War and of modern man’s inevitable undoing by his insatiable appetite for violence. It is, I am realizing with some despair, a timeless and perhaps tireless theme.

In this time of pandemic and in this moment of national outrage against police tactics used across the nation to brutalize human beings, especially black men and women, I am asking myself all kinds of questions—how to be a better listener, how to be a faithful disciple, how to behold and promote sanctity, how to be a proclaimer of good news and a citizen of good deed, and all in the midst of a cruel and gut-wrenching reality that is life in America right now. I once heard the poet Terrance Hayes say, “When the wound is deep, the healing is heroic. Suffering and ascendance require the same work.”

To understand the wound is important work. And it is distinct though inextricable from the work for its healing. I am finding that it is as large a task to advocate for what we love as it is to fight that which we despise. It is one thing to hear. Quite another to bow. And I have so much to learn about both.

W. S. Merwin died on March 15, 2019, an anniversary date he passed 91 times. I share to his honor his response to a question—why poetry?—which rings true, somehow, even now.

...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.²

Onward we go, dear reader.

✧ About the poet

W.S. Merwin (1927-2019) was born in New York City, raised in Union City, New Jersey, and Scranton, Pennsylvania, and spent his later life (from the 1970s on) on a restored pineapple plantation in Maui, Hawaii. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Merwin was a practicing Buddhist whose subjects in poetry include a passion for the natural world—not simply descriptions, but condemnations of the destruction of landscape. He won nearly every award available to an American writer, including the National Book Award and two Pulitzer Prizes, and he is the author of numerous collections of poetry, translations, and books of prose. He served as the 17th United States Poet Laureate and is recognized as one of this century’s principal contributors to arts and letters.



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