

Classic Poetry Series

William Stanley Merwin
- poems -

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William Stanley Merwin(September 30, 1927)

William Stanley Merwin (born 30 September 1927) is an American poet. He made a name for himself as an anti-war poet during the 1960s. Later, he would evolve toward mythological themes and develop a unique prosody characterized by indirect narration and the absence of punctuation. In the 80s and 90s, Merwin's interest in Buddhist philosophy and deep ecology also influenced his writing. He continues to write prolifically, though he also dedicates significant time to the restoration of rainforests in Hawaii, where he currently resides.

Merwin has received many honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (in both 1971 and 2009) and the Tanning Prize, one of the highest honors bestowed by the Academy of American Poets, as well as the Golden Wreath of the Struga Poetry Evenings.

In 1952 Merwin's first book of poetry, *A Mask for Janus*, was published in the Yale Younger Poets Series. W. H. Auden selected the work for that distinction. Later, in 1971 Auden and Merwin would exchange harsh words in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*. Merwin had published "On Being Awarded the Pulitzer Prize" in the June 3, 1971 issue of *The New York Review of Books* outlining his objections to the Vietnam War and stating that he was donating his prize money to the draft resistance movement. Auden responded in his letter "Saying No" published in the July 1, 1971 issue stating that the Pulitzer Prize jury was not a political body with any ties to the American foreign policy.

From 1956 to 1957 Merwin was also playwright-in-residence at the Poet's Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts; he became poetry editor at *The Nation* in 1962. Besides being a prolific poet (he has published over fifteen volumes of his works) he is also a respected translator of Spanish, French, Italian and Latin poetry, including Dante's *Purgatorio*.

Merwin is probably best known for his poetry about the Vietnam War, and can be included among the canon of Vietnam War-era poets which includes such luminaries as Robert Bly, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg and Yusef Komunyakaa. In 1998, Merwin wrote *Folding Cliffs: A Narrative*, an ambitious novel-in-verse about Hawaiian history and legend.

Merwin's early subjects were frequently tied to mythological or legendary themes, while many of the poems featured animals, which were treated as emblems in the manner of William Blake. A volume called *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960) marked a change for Merwin, in that he began to write in a much

more autobiographical way. The title-poem is about Orpheus, seen as an old drunk. 'Where he gets his spirits / it's a mystery', Merwin writes; 'But the stuff keeps him musical'. Another powerful poem of this period is 'Odysseus', which reworks the traditional theme in a way that plays off poems by Stevens and Graves on the same topic.

In the 1960s Merwin began to experiment boldly with metrical irregularity. His poems became much less tidy and controlled. He played with the forms of indirect narration typical of this period, a self-conscious experimentation explained in an essay called 'On Open Form' (1969). *The Lice* (1967) and *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970) remain his most influential volumes. These poems often used legendary subjects (as in 'The Hydra' or 'The Judgment of Paris') to explore highly personal themes.

In Merwin's later volumes, such as *The Compass Flower* (1977), *Opening the Hand* (1983), and *The Rain in the Trees* (1988), one sees him transforming earlier themes in fresh ways, developing an almost Zen-like indirection. His latest poems are densely imagistic, dream-like, and full of praise for the natural world. He has lived in Hawaii since the 1970s, and one sees the influence of this tropical landscape everywhere in the recent poems, though the landscape remains emblematic and personal. *Migration* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005) won the 2005 National Book Award for poetry. A life-long friend of James Wright, Merwin's elegy to him appears in the 2008 volume *From the Other World: Poems in Memory of James Wright*.

The Shadow of Sirius, published in 2008 by Copper Canyon Press, was awarded the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

A Codex

It was a late book given up for lost
again and again with its sentences

bare at last and phrases that seemed transparent
revealing what had been there the whole way

the poems of daylight after the day
lying open at last on the table

without explanation or emphasis
like sounds left when the syllables have gone

clarifying the whole grammar of waiting
not removing one question from the air

or closing the story although single lights
were beginning by then above and below

while the long twilight deepened its silence
from sapphire through opal to Athena's iris

until shadow covered the gray pages
the comet words the book of presences

after which there was little left to say
but then it was night and everything was known

From 'The Shadow Of Sirius'

Publisher: Copper Canyon Press (September 1, 2008)

William Stanley Merwin

A Letter To Ruth Stone

Now that you have caught sight
of the other side of darkness
the invisible side
so that you can tell
it is rising
first thing in the morning
and know it is there
all through the day

another sky
clear and unseen
has begun to loom
in your words
and another light is growing
out of their shadows
you can hear it

now you will be able
to envisage beyond
any words of mine
the color of these leaves
that you never saw
awake above the still valley
in the small hours
under the moon
three nights past the full

you know there was never
a name for that color

From 'The Shadow Of Sirius'

Publisher: Copper Canyon Press (September 1, 2008)

William Stanley Merwin

Air

Naturally it is night.
Under the overturned lute with its
One string I am going my way
Which has a strange sound.

This way the dust, that way the dust.
I listen to both sides
But I keep right on.
I remember the leaves sitting in judgment
And then winter.

I remember the rain with its bundle of roads.
The rain taking all its roads.
Nowhere.

Young as I am, old as I am,

I forget tomorrow, the blind man.
I forget the life among the buried windows.
The eyes in the curtains.
The wall
Growing through the immortelles.
I forget silence
The owner of the smile.

This must be what I wanted to be doing,
Walking at night between the two deserts,
Singing.

William Stanley Merwin

Another River

The friends have gone home far up the valley
of that river into whose estuary
the man from England sailed in his own age
in time to catch sight of the late forests
furring in black the remotest edges
of the majestic water always it
appeared to me that he arrived just as
an evening was beginning and toward the end
of summer when the converging surface
lay as a single vast mirror gazing
upward into the pearl light that was
already stained with the first saffron
of sunset on which the high wavering trails
of migrant birds flowed southward as though there were
no end to them the wind had dropped and the tide
and the current for a moment seemed to hang
still in balance and the creaking and knocking
of wood stopped all at once and the known voices
died away and the smells and rocking
and starvation of the voyage had become
a sleep behind them as they lay becalmed
on the reflection of their Half Moon
while the sky blazed and then the tide lifted them
up the dark passage they had no name for

William Stanley Merwin

Any Time

How long ago the day is
when at last I look at it
with the time it has taken
to be there still in it
now in the transparent light
with the flight in the voices
the beginning in the leaves
everything I remember
and before it before me
present at the speed of light
in the distance that I am
who keep reaching out to it
seeing all the time faster
where it has never stirred from
before there is anything
the darkness thinking the light

William Stanley Merwin

Before The Flood

Why did he promise me
that we would build ourselves
an ark all by ourselves
out in back of the house
on New York Avenue
in Union City New Jersey
to the singing of the streetcars
after the story
of Noah whom nobody
believed about the waters
that would rise over everything
when I told my father
I wanted us to build
an ark of our own there
in the back yard under
the kitchen could we do that
he told me that we could
I want to I said and will we
he promised me that we would
why did he promise that
I wanted us to start then
nobody will believe us
I said that we are building
an ark because the rains
are coming and that was true
nobody ever believed
we would build an ark there
nobody would believe
that the waters were coming

William Stanley Merwin

Beggars And Kings

In the evening
all the hours that weren't used
are emptied out
and the beggars are waiting to gather them up
to open them
to find the sun in each one
and teach it its beggar's name
and sing to it It is well
through the night

but each of us
has his own kingdom of pains
and has not yet found them all
and is sailing in search of them day and night
infallible undisputed unresting
filled with a dumb use
and its time
like a finger in a world without hands

William Stanley Merwin

December Night

The cold slope is standing in darkness
But the south of the trees is dry to the touch

The heavy limbs climb into the moonlight bearing feathers
I came to watch these
White plants older at night
The oldest
Come first to the ruins

And I hear magpies kept awake by the moon
The water flows through its
Own fingers without end

Tonight once more
I find a single prayer and it is not for men

William Stanley Merwin

Echoing Light

When I was beginning to read I imagined
that bridges had something to do with birds
and with what seemed to be cages but I knew
that they were not cages it must have been autumn
with the dusty light flashing from the streetcar wires
and those orange places on fire in the pictures
and now indeed it is autumn the clear
days not far from the sea with a small wind nosing
over dry grass that yesterday was green
the empty corn standing trembling and a down
of ghost flowers veiling the ignored fields
and everywhere the colors I cannot take
my eyes from all of them red even the wide streams
red it is the season of migrants
flying at night feeling the turning earth
beneath them and I woke in the city hearing
the call notes of the plover then again and
again before I slept and here far downriver
flocking together echoing close to the shore
the longest bridges have opened their slender wings

William Stanley Merwin

End Of A Day

In the long evening of April through the cool light
 Bayle's two sheep dogs sail down the lane like magpies
for the flock a moment before he appears near the oaks
 a stub of a man rolling as he approaches
smiling and smiling and his dogs are afraid of him
 we stand among the radiant stones looking out over
green lucent wheat and earth combed red under bare walnut limbs
 bees hanging late in cowslips and lingering bird cherry
stumps and brush that were the grove of hazel trees
 where the land turns above the draped slopes and the valley
filled with its one sunbeam and we exchange a few questions
 as though nothing were different but he has bulldozed the upland
pastures and the shepherds' huts into piles of rubble
 and has his sheep fenced in everyone's meadows now
the smell of box and damp leaves drifts from the woods where a blackbird
 is warning of nightfall Bayle has plans to demolish
the ancient walls of the lane and level it wide
 so that trucks can go all the way down to where the lambs
with perhaps two weeks to live are waiting for him at the wire
 he hurries toward them while the sun sinks and the hour
turns chill as iron and in the oaks the first nightingales
 of the year kindle their unapproachable voices

William Stanley Merwin

For A Coming Extinction

Gray whale
Now that we are sending you to The End
That great god
Tell him
That we who follow you invented forgiveness
And forgive nothing

I write as though you could understand
And I could say it
One must always pretend something
Among the dying
When you have left the seas nodding on their stalks
Empty of you
Tell him that we were made
On another day

The bewilderment will diminish like an echo
Winding along your inner mountains
Unheard by us
And find its way out
Leaving behind it the future
Dead
And ours

When you will not see again
The whale calves trying the light
Consider what you will find in the black garden
And its court
The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas
The irreplaceable hosts ranged countless
And fore-ordaining as stars
Our sacrifices
Join your work to theirs
Tell him
That it is we who are important

William Stanley Merwin

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 traveller
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

William Stanley Merwin

Green Fields

By this part of the century few are left who believe
in the animals for they are not there in the carved parts
of them served on plates and the pleas from the slatted trucks
are sounds of shadows that possess no future
there is still game for the pleasure of killing
and there are pets for the children but the lives that followed
courses of their own other than ours and older
have been migrating before us some are already
far on the way and yet Peter with his gaunt cheeks
and point of white beard the face of an aged Lawrence
Peter who had lived on from another time and country
and who had seen so many things set out and vanish
still believed in heaven and said he had never once
doubted it since his childhood on the farm in the days
of the horses he had not doubted it in the worst
times of the Great War and afterward and he had come
to what he took to be a kind of earthly
model of it as he wandered south in his sixties
by that time speaking the language well enough
for them to make him out he took the smallest roads
into a world he thought was a thing of the past
with wildflowers he scarcely remembered and neighbors
working together scything the morning meadows
turning the hay before the noon meal bringing it in
by milking time husbandry and abundance
all the virtues he admired and their reward bounteous
in the eyes of a foreigner and there he remained
for the rest of his days seeing what he wanted to see
until the winter when he could no longer fork
the earth in his garden and then he gave away
his house land everything and committed himself
to a home to die in an old chateau where he lingered
for some time surrounded by those who had lost
the use of body or mind and as he lay there he told me
that the wall by his bed opened almost every day
and he saw what was really there and it was eternal life
as he recognized at once when he saw the gardens
he had made and the green fields where he had been
a child and his mother was standing there then the wall would close

and around him again were the last days of the world

William Stanley Merwin

Identity

When Hans Hofmann became a hedgehog
somewhere in a Germany that has
vanished with its forests and hedgerows
Shakespeare would have been a young actor
starting out in a country that was
only a word to Hans who had learned
from those who had painted animals
only from hearing tales about them
without ever setting eyes on them
or from corpses with the lingering
light mute and deathly still forever
held fast in the fur or the feathers
hanging or lying on a table
and he had learned from others who had
arranged the corpses of animals
as though they were still alive in full
flight or on their way but this hedgehog
was there in the same life as his own
looking around at him with his brush
of camel hair and his stretched parchment
of sheepskin as he turned to each sharp
particular quill and every black
whisker on the long live snout and those
flat clawed feet made only for trundling
and for feeling along the dark undersides
of stones and as Hans took them in he
turned into the Hans that we would see

William Stanley Merwin

It Is March

It is March and black dust falls out of the books
Soon I will be gone
The tall spirit who lodged here has
Left already
On the avenues the colorless thread lies under
Old prices

When you look back there is always the past
Even when it has vanished
But when you look forward
With your dirty knuckles and the wingless
Bird on your shoulder
What can you write

The bitterness is still rising in the old mines
The fist is coming out of the egg
The thermometers out of the mouths of the corpses

At a certain height
The tails of the kites for a moment are
Covered with footsteps

Whatever I have to do has not yet begun

William Stanley Merwin

My Friends

My friends without shields walk on the target

It is late the windows are breaking

My friends without shoes leave
What they love
Grief moves among them as a fire among
Its bells
My friends without clocks turn
On the dial they turn
They part

My friends with names like gloves set out
Bare handed as they have lived
And nobody knows them
It is they that lay the wreaths at the milestones it is their
Cups that are found at the wells
And are then chained up

My friends without feet sit by the wall
Nodding to the lame orchestra
Brotherhood it says on the decorations
My friend without eyes sits in the rain smiling
With a nest of salt in his hand

My friends without fathers or houses hear
Doors opening in the darkness
Whose halls announce

Behold the smoke has come home

My friends and I have in common
The present a wax bell in a wax belfry
This message telling of
Metals this
Hunger for the sake of hunger this owl in the heart
And these hands one
For asking one for applause

My friends with nothing leave it behind
In a box
My friends without keys go out from the jails it is night
They take the same road they miss
Each other they invent the same banner in the dark
They ask their way only of sentries too proud to breathe

At dawn the stars on their flag will vanish

The water will turn up their footprints and the day will rise
Like a monument to my
Friends the forgotten

William Stanley Merwin

Remembering

There are threads of old sound heard over and over
phrases of Shakespeare or Mozart the slender
wands of the auroras playing out from them
into dark time the passing of a few
migrants high in the night far from the ancient flocks
far from the rest of the words far from the instruments

William Stanley Merwin

Separation

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

William Stanley Merwin

Shadow Hand

Duporte the roofer that calm voice
those sure hands gentling weathered tiles
into new generations or
half of him rising through a roof
like some sea spirit from a wave
to turn shaped slates into fish scales
that would swim in the rain Duporte
who seemed to smooth arguments by
listening and whom they sent for
when a bone was broken or when
they had a pig to kill because
of the way he did it only
yesterday after all these years
I learned that he had suddenly
gone blind while still in his sixties
and died soon after that while I
was away and I never knew
and it seemed as though it had just
happened and it had not been long
since we stood in the road talking
about owls nesting in chimneys
in the dark in empty houses

From 'The Shadow Of Sirius'

Publisher: Copper Canyon Press (September 1, 2008)

William Stanley Merwin

Shore Birds

While I think of them they are growing rare
after the distances they have followed
all the way to the end for the first time
tracing a memory they did not have
until they set out to remember it
at an hour when all at once it was late
and newly silent and the white had turned
white around them then they rose in their choir
on a single note each of them alone
between the pull of the moon and the hummed
undertone of the earth below them
the glass curtains kept falling around them
as they flew in search of their place before
they were anywhere and storms winnowed them
they flew among the places with towers
and passed the tower lights where some vanished
with their long legs for wading in shadow
others were caught and stayed in the countries
of the nets and in the lands of lime twigs
some fastened and after the countries of
guns at first light fewer of them than I
remember would be here to recognize
the light of late summer when they found it
playing with darkness along the wet sand

William Stanley Merwin

Some Last Questions

What is the head

A. Ash

What are the eyes

A. The wells have fallen in and have
Inhabitants

What are the feet

A. Thumbs left after the auction

No what are the feet

A. Under them the impossible road is moving
Down which the broken necked mice push
Balls of blood with their noses

What is the tongue

A. The black coat that fell off the wall
With sleeves trying to say something

What are the hands

A. Paid

No what are the hands

A. Climbing back down the museum wall
To their ancestors the extinct shrews that will
Have left a message

What is the silence

A. As though it had a right to move

Who are the compatriots

A. They make the stars of bone

William Stanley Merwin

St Vincent's

Thinking of rain clouds that rose over the city
on the first day of the year

in the same month

I consider that I have lived daily and with

eyes open and ears to hear

these years across from St Vincent's Hospital
above whose roof those clouds rose

its bricks by day a French red under
cross facing south

blown-up neo-classic facades the tall
dark openings between columns at
the dawn of history
exploded into many windows
in a mortised face

inside it the ambulances have unloaded
after sirens' howling nearer through traffic on
Seventh Avenue long
ago I learned not to hear them
even when the sirens stop

they turn to back in
few passers-by stay to look
and neither do I

at night two long blue
windows and one short one on the top floor
burn all night
many nights when most of the others are out
on what floor do they have
anything

I have seen the building drift moonlit through geraniums
late at night when trucks were few
moon just past the full
upper windows parts of the sky

as long as I looked
I watched it at Christmas and New Year
early in the morning I have seen the nurses ray out through
arterial streets
in the evening have noticed internes blocks away
on doorsteps one foot in the door

I have come upon the men in gloves taking out
the garbage at all hours
piling up mountains of
plastic bags white strata with green intermingled and
black

I have seen one pile
catch fire and studied the cloud
at the ends of the jets of the hoses
the fire engines as near as that
red beacons and
machine-throb heard by the whole body
I have noticed molded containers stacked outside
a delivery entrance on Twelfth Street
whether meals from a meal factory made up with those
mummified for long journeys by plane
or specimens for laboratory
examination sealed at the prescribed temperatures
either way closed delivery

and approached faces staring from above
crutches or tubular clamps
out for tentative walks
have paused for turtling wheel-chairs
heard visitors talking in wind on each corner
while the lights changed and
hot dogs were handed over at the curb
in the middle of afternoon
mustard ketchup onions and relish
and police smelling of ether and laundry
were going back

and I have known them all less than the papers of our days
smoke rises from the chimneys do they have an incinerator
what for
how warm do they believe they have to maintain the air

in there
several of the windows appear
to be made of tin
but it may be the light reflected

I have imagined bees coming and going
on those sills though I have never seen them

who was St Vincent

William Stanley Merwin

Term

At the last minute a word is waiting
not heard that way before and not to be
repeated or ever be remembered
one that always had been a household word
used in speaking of the ordinary
everyday recurrences of living
not newly chosen or long considered
or a matter for comment afterward
who would ever have thought it was the one
saying itself from the beginning through
all its uses and circumstances to
utter at last that meaning of its own
for which it had long been the only word
though it seems now that any word would do

William Stanley Merwin

Thanks

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings
we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you
we are standing by the water thanking it
smiling by the windows looking out
in our directions

back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging
after funerals we are saying thank you
after the news of the dead
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators
remembering wars and the police at the door
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you
in the banks we are saying thank you
in the faces of the officials and the rich
and of all who will never change
we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us
our lost feelings we are saying thank you
with the forests falling faster than the minutes
of our lives we are saying thank you
with the words going out like cells of a brain
with the cities growing over us
we are saying thank you faster and faster
with nobody listening we are saying thank you
we are saying thank you and waving
dark though it is

William Stanley Merwin

The Burnt Child

Matches among other things that were not allowed
never would be
lying high in a cool blue box
that opened in other hands and there they all were
bodies clean and smooth blue heads white crowns
white sandpaper on the sides of the box scoring
fire after fire gone before

I could hear the scratch and flare
when they were over
and catch the smell of the striking
I knew what the match would feel like
lighting
when I was very young

a fire engine came and parked
in the shadow of the big poplar tree
of Fourth Street one night
keeping its engine running
pumping oxygen to the old woman
in the basement
when she died the red lights went on burning

William Stanley Merwin

The Love Of October

A child looking at ruins grows younger
but cold
and wants to wake to a new name
I have been younger in October
than in all the months of spring
... walnut and may leaves the color
of shoulders at the end of summer
a month that has been to the mountain
and become light there
the long grass lies pointing uphill
even in death for a reason
that none of us knows
and the wren laughs in the early shade now
come again shining glance in your good time
naked air late morning
my love is for lightness
of touch foot feather
the day is yet one more yellow leaf
and without turning I kiss the light
by an old well on the last of the month
gathering wild rose hips
in the sun.

William Stanley Merwin

The Nails

I gave you sorrow to hang on your wall
Like a calendar in one color.
I wear a torn place on my sleeve.
It isn't as simple as that.

Between no place of mine and no place of yours
You'd have thought I'd know the way by now
Just from thinking it over.
Oh I know
I've no excuse to be stuck here turning
Like a mirror on a string,
Except it's hardly credible how
It all keeps changing.
Loss has a wider choice of directions
Than the other thing.

As if I had a system
I shuffle among the lies
Turning them over, if only
I could be sure what I'd lost.
I uncover my footprints, I
Poke them till the eyes open.
They don't recall what it looked like.
When was I using it last?
Was it like a ring or a light
Or the autumn pond
Which chokes and glitters but
Grows colder?
It could be all in the mind. Anyway
Nothing seems to bring it back to me.

And I've been to see
Your hands as trees borne away on a flood,
The same film over and over,
And an old one at that, shattering its account
To the last of the digits, and nothing
And the blank end.

The lightning has shown me the scars of the future.

I've had a long look at someone
Alone like a key in a lock
Without what it takes to turn.

It isn't as simple as that.

Winter will think back to your lit harvest
For which there is no help, and the seed
Of eloquence will open its wings
When you are gone.
But at this moment
When the nails are kissing the fingers good-bye
And my only
Chance is bleeding from me,
When my one chance is bleeding,
For speaking either truth or comfort
I have no more tongue than a wound.

William Stanley Merwin

The River Of Bees

In a dream I returned to the river of bees
Five orange trees by the bridge and
Beside two mills my house
Into whose courtyard a blind man followed
The goats and stood singing
Of what was older

Soon it will be fifteen years

He was old he will have fallen into his eyes

I took my eyes
A long way to the calenders
Room after room asking how shall I live

One of the ends is made of streets
One man processions carry through it
Empty bottles their
Images of hope
It was offered to me by name

Once once and once
In the same city I was born
Asking what shall I say

He will have fallen into his mouth
Men think they are better than grass

I return to his voice rising like a forkful of hay

He was old he is not real nothing is real
Nor the noise of death drawing water

We are the echo of the future

On the door it says what to do to survive
But we were not born to survive
Only to live

The Ships Are Made Ready In Silence

Moored to the same ring:
The hour, the darkness and I,
Our compasses hooded like falcons.

Now the memory of you comes aching in
With a wash of broken bits which never left port
In which once we planned voyages,
They come knocking like hearts asking:
What departures on this tide?

Breath of land, warm breath,
You tighten the cold around the navel,
Though all shores but the first have been foreign,
And the first was not home until left behind.

Our choice is ours but we have not made it,
Containing as it does, our destination
Circled with loss as with coral, and
A destination only until attained.

I have left you my hope to remember me by,
Though now there is little resemblance.
At this moment I could believe in no change,
The mast perpetually
Vacillating between the same constellations,
The night never withdrawing its dark virtue
>From the harbor shaped as a heart,
The sea pulsing as a heart,
The sky vaulted as a heart,
Where I know the light will shatter like a cry
Above a discovery:
'Emptiness.
Emptiness! Look!
Look. This is the morning.

William Stanley Merwin

The Source

There in the fringe of trees between
the upper field and the edge of the one
below it that runs above the valley
one time I heard in the early
days of summer the clear ringing
six notes that I knew were the opening
of the Fingal's Cave Overture
I heard them again and again that year
and the next summer and the year
afterward those six descending
notes the same for all the changing
in my own life since the last time
I had heard them fall past me from
the bright air in the morning of a bird
and I believed that what I had heard
would always be there if I came again
to be overtaken by that season
in that place after the winter
and I would wonder again whether
Mendelssohn really had heard them somewhere
far to the north that many years ago
looking up from his youth to listen to
those six notes of an ancestor
spilling over from a presence neither
water nor human that led to the cave
in his mind the fluted cliffs and the wave
going out and the falling water
he thought those notes could be the music for
Mendelssohn is gone and Fingal is gone
all but his name for a cave and for one
piece of music and the black-capped warbler
as we called that bird that I remember
singing there those notes descending
from the age of the ice dripping
I have not heard again this year can it
be gone then will I not hear it
from now on will the overture begin
for a time and all those who listen
feel that falling in them but as always

without knowing what they recognize

William Stanley Merwin

The Speed Of Light

So gradual in those summers was the going
of the age it seemed that the long days setting out
when the stars faded over the mountains were not
leaving us even as the birds woke in full song and the dew
glittered in the webs it appeared then that the clear morning
opening into the sky was something of ours
to have and keep and that the brightness we could not touch
and the air we could not hold had come to be there all the time
for us and would never be gone and that the axle
we did not hear was not turning when the ancient car
coughed in the roofer's barn and rolled out echoing
first thing into the lane and the only tractor
in the village rumbled and went into its rusty
mutterings before heading out of its lean-to
into the cow pats and the shadow of the lime tree
we did not see that the swallows flashing and the sparks
of their cries were fast in the spokes of the hollow
wheel that was turning and turning us taking us
all away as one with the tires of the baker's van
where the wheels of bread were stacked like days in calendars
coming and going all at once we did not hear
the rim of the hour in whatever we were saying
or touching all day we thought it was there and would stay
it was only as the afternoon lengthened on its
dial and the shadows reached out farther and farther
from everything that we began to listen for what
might be escaping us and we heard high voices ringing
the village at sundown calling their animals home
and then the bats after dark and the silence on its road

William Stanley Merwin

To Luck

In the cards and at the bend in the road
we never saw you
in the womb and in the crossfire
in the numbers
whatever you had your hand in
which was everything
we were told never to put
our faith in you
to bow to you humbly after all
because in the end there was nothing
else we could do
but not to believe in you

still we might coax you with pebbles
kept warm in the hand
or coins or the relics
of vanished animals
observances rituals
not binding upon you
who make no promises
we might do such things only
not to neglect you
and risk your disfavor
oh you who are never the same
who are secret as the day when it comes
you whom we explain
as often as we can
without understanding

William Stanley Merwin

To The New Year

With what stillness at last
you appear in the valley
your first sunlight reaching down
to touch the tips of a few
high leaves that do not stir
as though they had not noticed
and did not know you at all
then the voice of a dove calls
from far away in itself
to the hush of the morning

so this is the sound of you
here and now whether or not
anyone hears it this is
where we have come with our age
our knowledge such as it is
and our hopes such as they are
invisible before us
untouched and still possible

William Stanley Merwin

Unknown Bird

Out of the dry days
through the dusty leaves
far across the valley
those few notes never
heard here before

one fluted phrase
floating over its
wandering secret
all at once wells up
somewhere else

and is gone before it
goes on fallen into
its own echo leaving
a hollow through the air
that is dry as before

where is it from
hardly anyone
seems to have noticed it
so far but who now
would have been listening

it is not native here
that may be the one
thing we are sure of
it came from somewhere
else perhaps alone

so keeps on calling for
no one who is here
hoping to be heard
by another of its own
unlikely origin

trying once more the same few
notes that began the song
of an oriole last heard

years ago in another
existence there

it goes again tell
no one it is here
foreign as we are
who are filling the days
with a sound of our own

William Stanley Merwin

Vehicles

This is a place on the way after the distances
can no longer be kept straight here in this dark corner
of the barn a mound of wheels has convened along
raveling courses to stop in a single moment
and lie down as still as the chariots of the Pharaohs
some in pairs that rolled as one over the same roads
to the end and never touched each other until they
arrived here some that broke by themselves and were left
until they could be repaired some that went only
to occasions before my time and some that have spun
across other countries through uncounted summers
now they go all the way back together the tall
cobweb-hung models of galaxies in their rings
of rust leaning against the stone hail from Rene's
manure cart the year he wanted to store them here
because there was nobody left who could make them like that
in case he should need them and there are the carriage wheels
that Merot said would be worth a lot some day
and the rim of the spare from bald Bleret's green Samson
that rose like Borobudur out of the high grass
behind the old house by the river where he stuffed
mattresses in the morning sunlight and the hens
scavenged around his shoes in the days when the black
top-hat sedan still towered outside Sandeau's cow barn
with velvet upholstery and sconces for flowers and room
for two calves instead of the back seat when their time came

William Stanley Merwin

When You Go Away

When you go away the wind clicks around to the north
The painters work all day but at sundown the paint falls
Showing the black walls
The clock goes back to striking the same hour
That has no place in the years

And at night wrapped in the bed of ashes
In one breath I wake
It is the time when the beards of the dead get their growth
I remember that I am falling
That I am the reason
And that my words are the garment of what I shall never be
Like the tucked sleeve of a one-armed boy

William Stanley Merwin

Whenever I Go There

Whenever I go there everything is changed

The stamps on the bandages the titles
Of the professors of water

The portrait of Glare the reasons for
The white mourning

In new rocks new insects are sitting
With the lights off
And once more I remember that the beginning

Is broken

No wonder the addresses are torn

To which I make my way eating the silence of animals
Offering snow to the darkness

Today belongs to few and tomorrow to no one

William Stanley Merwin

Wish

The star in my
Hand is falling

All the uniforms know what's no use

May I bow to Necessity not
To her hirelings

William Stanley Merwin

Yesterday

My friend says I was not a good son
you understand
I say yes I understand

he says I did not go
to see my parents very often you know
and I say yes I know

even when I was living in the same city he says
maybe I would go there once
a month or maybe even less
I say oh yes

he says the last time I went to see my father
I say the last time I saw my father

he says the last time I saw my father
he was asking me about my life
how I was making out and he
went into the next room
to get something to give me

oh I say
feeling again the cold
of my father's hand the last time

he says and my father turned
in the doorway and saw me
look at my wristwatch and he
said you know I would like you to stay
and talk with me

oh yes I say

but if you are busy he said
I don't want you to feel that you
have to
just because I'm here

I say nothing

he says my father
said maybe
you have important work you are doing
or maybe you should be seeing
somebody I don't want to keep you

I look out the window
my friend is older than I am
he says and I told my father it was so
and I got up and left him then
you know

though there was nowhere I had to go
and nothing I had to do

William Stanley Merwin