

W. S. Merwin – “The whole secret of poetry is listening”

*I think it is essential to recognize the probable result of what we have done and are doing, but when we have seen that and its roots in human motives, the menaced world may seem more to be treasured than ever. Certainly the anguish and anger we feel at the threat to it and the sleepless despoiling of it can lose their tragic complexity and become mere bitterness when we forget that their origin is **a passion for the momentary countenance of the unrepeatable world.** --Merwin*

W.S. Merwin (1927–2019) was an incredibly prolific writer with nearly 50 books of original poems and translations and 8 books of prose nonfiction & fiction to his name. He was a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Literature and the U.S. Poet Laureate in and 2010–2011.

NOTE: I want to credit the source of much of this syllabus—a five-week on-line class that I took entitled *Comet of Stillness: a Short Course on the Poetry of W.S. Merwin*, taught by Matthew Zaprunder and Victoria Chang for Community of Writers.

I. Early Years (1927–1967)

- Born William Stanley Merwin, 30 Sept. 1927 in New York City; raised in Union City, NJ and Scranton, PA. Son of a Presbyterian minister, began writing hymns as a child.
- Attended Princeton University on a scholarship, where he studied poetry with R.P. Blackmur and John Berryman and was a classmate of Galway Kinnell.
- Toward end of WWII, he left Princeton to enlist in the navy; quickly realized his mistake and announced himself a conscientious objector, which earned him a year in a psychiatric ward. Afterward returned to Princeton.
- In 1946 he married his first wife Dorothy Jeanne Ferry; the marriage did not last long. Graduated from Princeton in 1948 but spent an additional year there studying Romance languages.
- Then traveled through Europe translating poetry and working as a tutor, including the son of poet Robert Graves. There he met Dido Milroy, a British socialite and 15 years his senior, whom he eventually married. While traveling in France, he first saw the famous farm house. It had been long unoccupied but the owner didn't want to sell to speculators. He offered her \$800 and a promise to actually live there. Over the years he gradually remodeled it. This farm had a deep influence on his writings then and later. He was learning to grow his own food. Spent time there off and on all the way into the 2010s.
- His first poetry collection, *A Mask for Janus* (1952), was selected by W.H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, for its technical virtuosity and its focus on classical imagery and myth. He was inspired by classical poetry, Biblical stories, the medieval poetry he was translating, etc.
- In 1956 received a fellowship from the Poets Theater in Cambridge, MA and for a period bounced between London, France and Boston. In the States, he became part of the circle of poets around Robert Lowell and began to focus on poetry. Experienced a new engagement with American themes, meaning and values. His poetry at this time began to exhibit important shifts in style and perspective; he began to experiment with irregular forms, enjambment and interruption of syntax.
- In the early 1960s, he and Dido moved back to Europe and lived in London and the south of France. Were close friends of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes who were also moving away from poetic formality to a more colloquial style and personal subject matter.

- Other books published during this time: *The Dancing Bears* (1954), *Green With Beasts* (1956), *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960), and *The Moving Target* (1963).
- [see “The Drunk in the Furnace” and “The Poem”]

II. *The Lice* (1967) Merwin’s 6th book, written when he was 40 years old, and viewed as a major turning point in his poetry. It remains one of the most-read volumes of his poetry. The title choice seems a purposeful conjuring of the muck of existence, the underbelly, an infestation.

- *By the end of the poems in **The Moving Target** I had relinquished punctuation along with several other structural conventions, a move that evolved from my growing sense that punctuation alluded to and assumed an allegiance to the rational protocol of written language, and of prose in particular. I had come to feel that it stapled the poems to the page. Whereas I wanted the poems to evoke the spoken language, and wanted the hearing of them to be essential to taking them in.* -- Merwin
- A time of change in American poetry—Beat Poets, Black Mountain, confessional poets.
- A lot of personal tumult during this time of his life. In 1968, he separated from Dido . For 10 years the house in France was divided between them. He spent some time living in Mexico and New York City, where he was poetry editor for *The Nation*.
- A time of great political and cultural upheaval—per a Preface Merwin wrote to a collection of several of his volumes from this time—creeds of flower children, proliferation of nuclear weapons, the rise of the civil rights movement, assassinations of MLK and the Kennedys, a growing ecological consciousness and the Vietnam War.
- So apropos today: *Wild aspiration and vertiginous despair existed not alternately but at once . . . we knew a kind of willful desperation. and . . . the Vietnam War led many poets of my generation to try to use poetry to make something stop happening. We will never know whether all that we wrote shortened the nightmare by one hour, saved a single life or the leaves on one tree, but it seemed unthinkable to many of us not to make the attempt and not to use whatever talent we had in order to do it.* -- Merwin
- He was getting rid of the unnecessary. Themes—eco-poetry, the apocalypse, the political. *The Lice* was critically acclaimed and was often read as a response to the Vietnam War, although not all agreed with this. Most was written in present tense, the diction is plain-spoken, line breaks interrupt syntax, but follow the rhythms of speech, surrealism and strangeness, the use of general pronouns like “we” and “men” depersonalize.
- [see “For a Coming Extinction” and “The Asians Dying”]

III. Middle Period (1970–1996)

- In 1970 he published *The Carrier of Ladders*, which won the Pulitzer Prize. It continued his engagement with American themes and nature and includes a series of poems on American westward expansion. In a letter to the New York Review of Books, he declared his intention to donate the \$1000 from the Pulitzer Prize to antiwar causes as a protest against the Vietnam War. For this he was criticized by W.H. Auden.
- In the 1970s his work seems to have left behind a previous rage and anguish, replaced with the rhythms and stories of a landscape (France) and seasons. He also collaborated with other scholars on English translations of works in Chinese, Japanese, Greek and Russian and his poetry shows the influence of the Eastern writers he translated.
- In 1976 he moved to Hawaii to study Zen Buddhism with Robert Aiken. His subsequent practice and environmentalist influenced much of his later work. In 1978 he was divorced from Dido. She continued living in the farmhouse in France til her death in 1990.

- In 1983 he married Paula Dunaway, a children’s book editor who he’d met in New York City, and they designed and built a home on Maui on 19 acres of tropical forest that they restored from overuse over many years.
- In late 1970s and early 1980s his life and poetry moved back and forth between the city (NYC) and the country (France and Hawaii). During this time both of his parents died.
- Other books published during this period included: *The Miner’s Pale Children* (prose - 1970), *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment* (1973), *The Compass Flower* (1977), *Houses and Travellers* (prose - 1977), *Opening the Hand* (1983), *The Rain in the Trees* (1988), *The Lost Uplands: Stories of Southwest France* (1992), *Travels* (1993).
- Another acclaimed book wraps up this period—*The Vixen* (1996). In this book he used a single form for all the poems. A long line followed by an indented following line, sometimes enjambed and sometimes independent of the previous line. Almost all the poems are set in the south of France where he lived for many years. He was remembering back 30 years; it was written in the 1990s about the 1960s. He was living in Hawaii but I think was occasionally going back to the farm in France after Dido died. From Katherine Young’s retrospective piece – “The poet’s concern with the land, its history, its current state, and its preservation informs the entire collection. Merwin doesn’t just observe, but asks what it means to see, and also whether seeing implies responsibility.”
- *I have certainly moved beyond the despair, or the searing, dumb vision that I felt after writing **The Lice**; 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. And you know, in a way, if you don’t pay that attention, the anger is just bitterness. -- Merwin*
- [see “The Garden of Zuñi,” “Thanks,” “Place,” “White Morning,” “Vixen”]

IV. The Later Years (1998–2019)

- He continued writing and publishing prolifically even though he was in his 70s and then beyond; books included: *The Folding Cliffs: a Narrative* (1998), a verse narrative of Hawaiian history and legend, *The River Sound* (1999), *The Pupil* (2001), *Present Company* (2005), *The Moon Before Morning* (2014), and *Garden Time* (2017).
- After “The Vixen” he experimented with more formal techniques. In last few books—shorter poems, candid language, unstuck in time, simpler, more internally focused.
- In 2008 he published *The Shadow of Sirius*, which won a second Pulitzer Prize. Viewed as his most autobiographical, dealing with childhood & memory, death & wisdom.
- He lived the rest of his life in Maui. Dan Chiasson commented that Merwin “planted and tended a palm forest that is now permanently protected and open to the public. His poems, like that forest, are a kind of time preserve.”
- Merwin maintained a disciplined writing schedule, writing for several hours in the morning. Paula protected his writing space and time and was his first editor, until she became too ill. But he spent the rest of his time/energy on preservation issues and restoring the habitat around their home (planted thousands of palms), a former pineapple plantation near the town of Haiku. He and Paula founded the Merwin Conservancy to preserve their home as a haven for writers, artists and activists and to support those pursuing a more sustainable way of life. Their land hosts one of the greatest collections of palm species on Earth (more than 800 horticultural varieties).
- Merwin was an accomplished translator of poets as varied as Osip Mandelstam and Pablo Neruda and continued these efforts during this period. Dante’s *Purgatorio* (2000) and the

Middle English epic **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** (2004) and the *Collected Haiku of Yosa Buson* (2013).

- When he wrote *Garden Time*, he was suffering from macular degeneration. He wrote on a clip board and then his assistant helped. Its original title was *Gardening in the Dark*.
- Paula died in 2017; Merwin died in 2019.
- [see “To the New Year,” “Rain Light,” “The Morning” and “Wish”]

Awards

- National Book Award for *The Moving Target* (1963)
- PEN Translation Prize (1969) for *Selected Translations 1948–1968*
- Pulitzer Prize for *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970)
- Shelley Memorial Award (1974) Poetry Society of America
- Bollingen Prize for American Poetry (1979) for *Feathers from the Hill* (1978)
- Aiken Taylor Award for Modern American Poetry (1990) from *The Sewanee Review*
- Wallace Stevens Award (1994), Academy of American Poets
- 1st recipient of Tanning Prize for Mastery in the Art of Poetry (1994)
- Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize (1998)
- Special Consultant in Poetry (1999–2000) for Library of Congress’ 200th Anniversary (along with Rita Dove and Louise Glück)
- National Book Award (2005) for *Migration: Selected Poems 1951–2001*
- Pulitzer Prize for *The Shadow of Sirius* (2009)
- U.S. Poet Laureate (2010–2011)
- 1st recipient of Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award (2013) in Poland
- Harold Morton Landon Translation Award (2014) for *Selected Translations* (2013).

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Merwin Poems

The Drunk in the Furnace

For a good decade
The furnace stood in the naked gully, fireless
And vacant as any hat. Then when it was
No more to them than a hulking black fossil
To erode with the rest of the junk-hill
By the poisonous creek, and rapidly to be added
To their ignorance,

They were afterwards astonished
To confirm, one morning, a twist of smoke, like a pale
Resurrection, staggering out of its chewed hole,
And to remark then other tokens that someone,
Cosily bolted behind the eyeholed iron
Door of the drafty burner, had there established
His bad castle.

Where he gets his spirits
It's a mystery. But the stuff keeps him musical:
Hammer-and-anviling with poker and bottle
To his jugged bellowings, till the last groaning clang
As he collapses onto the rioting
Springs of a litter of car seats ranged on the grates,
To sleep like an iron pig.

In their tar-paper church
On a text about stoke holes that are sated never
Their Reverend lingers. They nod and hate trespassers.
When the furnace wakes, though, all afternoon
Their witless offspring flock like piped rats to its siren
Crescendo, and agape on the crumbling ridge
Stand in a row and learn.

-from *The Drunk in the Furnace*

The Poem

Coming late, as always,
I try to remember what I almost heard.
The light avoids my eye.

How many times have I heard the locks close
And the lark take the keys
And hang them in heaven.

- from *The Moving Target*

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 word to theirs
Tell him
That it is we who are important

-from *The Lice*

The Asians Dying

When the forests have been destroyed their darkness remains
The ash the great walker follows the possessors
Forever
Nothing they will come to is real
Nor for long

Over the watercourses
Like ducks in the time of the ducks
The ghosts of the villages trail in the sky
Making a new twilight

Rain falls into the open eyes of the dead
Again again with its pointless sound
When the moon finds them they are the color of everything

The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed
The dead go away like bruises
The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands
Pain the horizon
Remains
Overhead the seasons rock
They are paper bells
Calling to nothing living

The possessors move everywhere under Death their star
Like columns of smoke they advance into the shadows
Like thin flames with no light
They with no past
And fire their only future

-from *The Lice*

The Gardens of Zuñi

The one-armed explorer
could touch only half of the country
In the virgin half
the house fires give no more heat
than the stars
it has been so these many years
and there is no bleeding

He is long dead with his five fingers
and the sum of their touching
and the memory
of the other hand
his scout

that sent back no message
from where it had reached
with no lines in its palm
while he balanced
balanced

and groped on
for the virgin land

and found where it had been

-from *The Carrier of Ladders*

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
standing 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

-from *The Rain in the Trees*

Place

On the last day of the world
I would want to plant a tree

what for
not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit
is not the one that was planted

I want the tree that stands
in the earth for the first time

with the sun already
going down

and the water
touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead
and the clouds passing

one by one
over its leaves

-from *The Rain in the Trees*

White Morning

On nights toward the end of summer and age of mist
has gathered in the oaks the box thickets the straggling
eglantines it has moved like a hand unable to believe
the face it touches over the velvet of wild thyme
and the vetches sinking with the weight of dew it has found
its way without sight into the hoofprints of cows
the dark nests long empty the bark hanging along the narrow
halls among stones and has held it all in a cloud
unseen the whole night as in a mind where I came
when it was turning white and I was holding a thin
wet branch wrapped in lichens because all I had thought
I knew had to be passed from branch to branch through the empty
sky and whatever I reached then and could recognize
moved toward me out of the cloud and was still the sky
where I went on looking until I was standing on
the wide wall along the lane to the hazel grove
where we went one day to cut handles that would last
the crows were calling around me to white air
I could hear their wings dripping and hear small birds with lights

breaking in their tongues the cold soaked through me I was able
after that morning to believe stories that once
would have been closed to me I saw a carriage go under
the oaks there in the full day and vanish I watched animals there
I sat with friends in the shade they have all disappeared
most of the stories have to do with vanishing

-from *The Vixen*

Vixen

Comet of stillness princess of what is over
high note held without trembling without voice without sound
aura of complete darkness keeper of the kept secrets
of the destroyed stories the escaped dreams the sentences
never caught in words warden of where the river went
touch of its surface sibyl of the extinguished
window onto the hidden place and the other time
at the foot of the wall by the road patient without waiting
in the full moonlight of autumn at the hour when I was born
you no longer go out like a flame at the sight of me
you are still warmer than the moonlight gleaming on you
even now you are unharmed even now perfect
as you have always been now when your light paws are running
on the breathless night on the bridge with one end I remember you
when I have heard you the soles of my feet have made answer
when I have seen you I have waked and slipped from the calendars
from the creeds of difference and the contradictions
that were my life and all the crumbling fabrications
as long as it lasted until something that we were
had ended when you are no longer anything
let me catch sight of you again going over the wall
and before the garden is extinct and the woods are figures
guttering on a screen let my words find their own
places in the silence after the animals

--from *The Vixen*

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

-in *Present Company*

Rain Light

All day the stars watch from long ago
my mother said I am going now
when you are alone you will be all right
whether or not you know you will know
look at the old house in the dawn rain
all the flowers are forms of water
the sun reminds them through a white cloud
touches the patchwork spread on the hill
the washed colors of the afterlife
that lived there long before you were born
see how they wake without a question
even though the whole world is burning

— from *The Shadow of Sirius*

The Morning

Would I love it this way if it could last
would I love it this way if it
were the whole sky the one heaven
or if I could believe that it belonged to me
a possession that was mine alone
or if I imagined that it noticed me
recognized me and may have come to see me
out of all the mornings that I never knew
and all those that I have forgotten
would I love it this way if I were somewhere else
or if I were younger for the first time
or if these very birds were not singing
or I could not hear them or see their trees
would I love it this way if I were in pain
red torment of body or gray void of grief

would I love it this way if I knew
that I would remember anything that is
here now anything anything

-from *Garden Time*

After the Dragonflies

Dragonflies were as common as sunlight
hovering in their own days
backward forward and sideways
as though they were memory
now there are grown-ups hurrying
who never saw one
and do not know what they
are not seeing
the veins in a dragonfly's wings
were made of light
the veins in the leaves knew them
and the flowing rivers
the dragonflies came out of the color of water
knowing their own way
when we appeared in their eyes
we were strangers
they took their light with them when they went
there will be no one to remember us

-from *Garden Time*

Wish

Please one more
kiss in the kitchen
before we turn the lights off

-last poem in *The Essential Merwin*