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.

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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
W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. 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

W.S. Merwin