

The Ends of the Earth

Essays

W.S. MERWIN

Shoemaker & Hoard, \$26.00 cloth, ISBN 1-59376-030-2

W.S. Merwin's new collection of essays reads like an explorer's journal written with such grace and wit that a reader might be forgiven for stopping now and then to copy passages with a favorite fountain pen for the simple pleasure of seeing the words of a master flow from the nib.

Here is an example, the opening paragraph of "The Winter Palace," the first of two essays set in the mountains of southwestern Mexico:

A few yards away, in the tall fir trees beyond a shallow fold that ran up the mountainside, there were thirty-five million butterflies. The dark boughs of the evergreens were bent under the breathing swarms as though weighed down with the black and gold snow that went on blowing in flurries through the trees, glinting in the afternoon sunlight. Pulsing sleeves of butterflies furred the limbs and parts of the trunks. Clusters hung from the drooping ends of branches like nests of orioles. A sound came from them, rising and falling. A breeze echoing. An exhalation without end.

William Stanley Merwin, who lives in Hawai'i and turns 77 in 2004, is the author of 18 books of poetry, six books of prose, and 20 books of translation. He is mainly known for his poetry, which over five decades has evolved from formal poems inspired by the medieval troubadours to poems unattached to the page by punctuation that seem to flow toward the light from preverbal origins.

Most of the major literary awards, except for the Nobel, have come his way, beginning with the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize, awarded in 1952 for his first poetry collection, *A Mask for Janus*. He received the Pulitzer in 1971 for *The Carrier of Ladders* and in recent years has been honored with the Tanning, Bollingen, and Ruth Lilly poetry prizes.

Not surprisingly, the prose of such an accomplished poet playfully conveys the curiosity and Zen-like attention that Merwin brings to all his explorations.

In addition to butterflies in Mexico, his subjects in *The Ends of the Earth* include a longtime friendship with an older man in New England, the cranky editor of *The Nation*, George Kirstein; the dwindling population of monks on Mount Athos; disappearing snails on Hawai'i; traces of prehistoric man in France; and intimate portraits of two 18th century explorers, Sydney Parkinson, a naturalist and artist who died on Captain James Cook's first circumnavigation of the earth, and Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse, who disappeared at sea trying to duplicate Cook's accomplishment for the glory of France.

In each case, Merwin investigates what is passing away now or has already passed away long ago, such as the Neanderthal humans who buried their revered leaders alive more than 35,000 years ago in southern Europe.

It is not clear whose fault it is that the Neanderthals passed away; perhaps the Cro-Magnons who appeared out of the

Near East were to blame. For more recent disappearances, the culprits seem clearer to Merwin, and they call forth fierce writing.

Exploring Mount Athos on foot, he mourns the passing away of religious life in the face of a Greek government tourist office "impatient to break the monasteries, round up the remaining monks and get them out of the way, and turn the buildings into museums and hotels." The disappearance of snails in Hawai'i and migrating butterflies in Mexico is hurried along by business apologists whose arguments are "the usual ones based on the assumption that of all the species on earth only one has a right to exist."

This final stanza of a poem titled "Learning a Dead Language," from Merwin's 1956 collection, *Green With Beasts*, can help us appreciate his longtime affinity with the past:

*What you remember saves you. To remember
Is not to rehearse, but to hear what never
Has fallen silent. So your learning is,
From the dead, order, and what sense of yourself
Is memorable, what passion may be heard
When there is nothing for you to say.*

This poem also shows Merwin early in his career exploring another frontier, the one between language and silence, a place of continuing fascination for him ever since.

In his consideration of Sydney Parkinson in this latest book, Merwin muses on how European explorers struggled to convey the truth of South Pacific islands in language completely foreign to those places and cultures. The German-born Dutch naturalist Rumphius attempted this a century before the Cook expeditions.

He translated what he saw into European terms, insofar as that was possible. He would have been doing something of the kind, though, in any language, since that is the way language works: on the one hand to evoke and identify, and on the other to be about something else, to stand in its stead, to take its place and so to interfere. It is a kind of knowledge that at once informs seeing and impairs it. It exists because of a knowledge of separation, and in partially healing the separation, it confirms it, perpetuates it, proves it. It is at once a power and an indication of helplessness, incompleteness, necessity.

In addition to pondering language and the passing away of life, these essays contain many intimate pleasures and even some humor. This is particularly the case with the opening piece, recalling Merwin's friendship with George Kirstein, who often took his younger friend sailing off New England:

George liked to listen to the ball game, mid-afternoon. I am so without interest in organized sports that I usually do not even know what kind of game is being referred to, and the elaborately excited nasal gabble of the sports commentator seemed a terrible intrusion on the quiet of the coast, the shushing of the waves, the voices of birds and seals. It brought back a world of barber shops.

In addition to reading and publishing poems in *The Nation* when he lived in Boston, Merwin used to pick up a tabloid called the *Mid-Town Journal*.

The content of this crusading sheet eddied around the nefarious

doings of the metropolitan area, and focused, with lubricious righteousness, on the functionings of the underworld. . . . A single headline remains with me intact. No number of the paper was complete without its account of a raid on a house of ill-repute, and the regular rhetoricians must have been taxed to find new ways to announce the latest triumph of decency. This one, in large letters, trumpeted, "Bags Brothel Boss And Babes."

From Brothel Boss to Neanderthal elder buried alive in France, all that Merwin evokes from his explorations is passing away and will one day be forgotten. We are thus placed in kinship with the Neanderthal whom Merwin imagines lying alive in his grave hearing chants for a while, before he stops hearing anything. And then,

After many thousands of winters the last descendants of the people he had known would stop breathing, just as he had done, and the last of the animals they had hunted would be gone, and his entire way of recognizing the world would no longer be known.

At this point, we have arrived at the end of *The Ends of the Earth*, where we find the author back in France, listening to a train in the region of the Neanderthal's resting place.

After the distant rumble of the train crossing the bridge over the river down there, no sound reaches me from the valley. The silence of the morning is reassuring, as I have often found it to be here. It is all of a piece. It is where the morning is coming from.

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