

MERWIN'S PROSE

Summer Doorways: A Memoir. W. S. Merwin. Shoemaker Hoard, 2005.

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A time apart: these are the watchwords of W. S. Merwin's memoir, *Summer Doorways*, which traces his first journey abroad, in 1948, when at the age of twenty-one he sailed for Europe. If in his nearly thirty volumes of poetry and prose he is honored for celebrating both the mythic underpinnings of daily life and the marvelous textures of places that seem to stand outside time, this is the work that proposes to tell us how that came to be—the doorway to a world, long vanished, of money and parties and travel, of shepherds and minstrels and traditional ways of life, where Merwin found his literary bearings.

His story begins one July morning on a Norwegian freighter, registered in Liberia, which seems to slip out of the New York harbor “enveloped in silence.” Merwin and his wife, Dorothy, and two teenaged boys in their charge, are making the Atlantic crossing—an improbable turn of events for the son of a Presbyterian minister, a scholarship student with a passion for languages and literature. Thus before entering the Straits of Gibraltar Merwin treats his readers to an extended excursion through his formative years—from an impoverished childhood, to a Presbyterian boarding school, to Princeton, and then to the Stuyvesant family estate near Hackensack, New Jersey, each stop of which is rendered in luxurious prose. This journey through memory, which takes up more than half the book, makes his introduction to post-war Europe all the more amazing.

It is no small thing to enter the social orbit of the rich and titled after a childhood in Depression-era Scranton, Pennsylvania, circumscribed by an ever expanding list of the forbidden. There was little levity in the Merwin household. His stern, aloof, hard-working father meted out harsh punishment in a capricious manner; his mother made do with scant resources, financial and emotional; his discontent pervades the opening chapters. He remembers a glimpse of the Hudson River from his earliest years, when he went with his father to the church that soon would no longer require his services:

One window of the study looked out over Hoboken and the harbor and the river, with the ferries coming and going, the freighters and liners catching the west light, and beyond them the jagged, gray, glittering skyline of New York, loom-

ing in its silent distance, its own dimension. I had been allowed to accompany him on those occasions “if I thought I could keep quiet while he worked on the sermon. Did I think I could?” I thought I could, and I knelt on the blue velvet cushion on the window seat, gazing out through the leaded panes, or through the open casements—though usually his windows were tightly closed—watching the river, without a word, utterly rapt in the vast scene out in front of me, hearing my father muttering words of scripture (“Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee”) somewhere far behind me. Whole trains were crossing the river on railroad ferries, all shades of orange in the sunlight. White puffs of steam climbed out of unseen whistles and horns, the distant sounds arriving, faint and faded, a long breath afterward. I was seeing something that I could not reach and that would never go away.

I have quoted this at some length to give a sense of Merwin’s prose style and to suggest the quality of his attention, which is especially alert to the things of the earth. Indeed his work may be described as a continual grasping for that which lies just out of reach: points of departure and arrival described with what can only be called love for the transitory nature of our time here. He is always on the lookout for what can be retrieved and registered—clearly and accurately, with a fullness of expression not often on display in contemporary letters—and much of the pleasure of *Summer Doorways* lies in the sheer bounty of its descriptions. This is a gorgeous book.

It is also revelatory. At Princeton, where he studied with R. P. Blackmur and John Berryman, he befriended the son of a French writer killed in the Resistance, who in turn introduced him to Alan Stuyvesant—and the larger world. Stuyvesant, a demon-haunted man, hired Merwin to tutor his nephew for a summer on his estate, where the young poet spent his free time exploring the wilds, and then invited him to do the same at his villa in the south of France. The rich are different, as a certain American writer noted, and Merwin records the differences in uninflected tones. Alan gets drunk at an after-dinner show and makes a scene. A neighbor’s wife attempts suicide. Things fall apart.

Much remains inexplicable, like the pair of ghost houses that Merwin saw once in his childhood and then could not find again—were they visions?—or the fact that his marriage seemed doomed from the outset. We learn tantalizingly little about Dorothy. The same holds for his friendship with Georges Belmont, a poet, novelist, and translator of Henry Miller, whom he visited nearly every day. Belmont, perhaps unbeknownst to Merwin, had been a high government official in the Vichy regime, an integral part of the Nazi machine; blacklisted after the war, he changed his name and reinvented himself—a story of compromise told in exemplary detail in

Vincent Giroud's essay, "Transition to Vichy: The Case of Georges Pelorson" (*Modernism/Modernity*, volume seven, number two, 2000). Merwin seems to intuit that something is amiss: the "chronic disappointment" of Belmont's wife is directed at her husband, who in Merwin's words is "somewhat at the mercy of his circumstances." Perhaps it is no coincidence that immediately after extolling Belmont's virtues Merwin introduces John Lodwick, an Irish writer and an authentic war hero tormented by his experiences in the Resistance. It is, to say the least, disconcerting to hear them discuss the Devil's bargain in Thoman Mann's *Doctor Faustus*.

In the last decade Merwin has published several volumes of poems, including *The Pupil* and *Present Company*; a book-length narrative poem, *The Folding Cliffs*; and a new and selected, *Migration*, which won the National Book Award. He has also brought out translations of Jaime Sabines, Dante's *Purgatorio*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as two works of prose, *The Mays of Ventadorn* and *The Ends of the Earth*—in short, another flowering by one of our most important, and innovative, literary artists. *Summer Doorways*, which is a kind of prequel to *The Mays of Ventadorn*, his meditation on the world of the Provençal poets, and to *The Vixen*, his acclaimed sequence of poems set near the farmhouse he restored in France, is essential reading.

At the end of the summer the Merwins joined the entourage of Comtessa Maria Antónia de Braganza, of the deposed Portuguese royal family, who orchestrated her return to her homeland in grand style. Once again Merwin found a magical place, which, alas, he had to leave all too soon. And it is this sense of the fleeting, integral to his poetry and prose, which finds its truest expression in the final paragraph of the book:

But when we left the quinta I had seen something that I was to come to in various forms before I was old enough to be able to look back and recognize it. The move away from the valley of the Ceira would lead through years in which, again and again, I would have the luck to discover, to glimpse, to touch for a moment, some ancient, measureless way of living, of being in the world, some fabric long taken for granted, never finished yet complete, at once fixed as though it would never change, and evanescent as a work of art, an entire age just before it was gone, like a summer.

The luck is ours that Merwin has repeatedly found literary measures for these ways, of being in the world. And the secret of his work is that he takes nothing for granted. He has a knack for recognizing what is about to disappear—light and love—and transforming it into memorable speech: light into love.