

## The New York Times

# *W.S. Merwin, Poet of Life's Evanescence, Dies at 91*

By **Margalit Fox**

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W. S. Merwin, a formidable American poet who for more than 60 years labored under a formidable poetic yoke: the imperative of using language — an inescapably concrete presence on the printed page — to conjure absence, silence and nothingness, died on Friday at his home near Haiku-Pauwela, Hawaii. He was 91.

His death was confirmed by a spokeswoman for his publisher, Copper Canyon Press.

Mr. Merwin was one of the most highly decorated poets in the nation, and very likely the world. He was the United States poet laureate from 2010 to 2011; won two Pulitzer Prizes, a National Book Award and a spate of other honors; and was lauded for his volumes of prose and translations of poetry from a Babel of languages.

He was also one of the most prolific poets of his generation, his work appearing often in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine* and elsewhere. After the release of his first collection, when he was in his mid-20s, he went on to publish nearly three dozen volumes of poetry, along with essays, short fiction, memoirs and translations of Dante, Pablo Neruda, Osip Mandelstam and other poets.

In later years Mr. Merwin was equally known for his work as a conservationist — in particular for his painstaking restoration of depleted flora, including hundreds of species of palm, on the remote former pineapple plantation in Hawaii where he made his home. He had lived there, in blissful near-solitude, since the 1970s, refusing to answer the telephone.

Mr. Merwin's ardor for the natural world took frequent root in his poetry. But while for many poets nature begets odes, for him it was far more likely to inspire elegies. In "For a Coming Extinction," part of his acclaimed 1967 verse collection, "The Lice," he wrote:

*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*

Stylistically, Mr. Merwin's mature work was known for metrical promiscuity; stark, sometimes epigrammatic language; and the frequent use of enjambment — the poetic device in which a phrase breaks over two consecutive lines, without intervening punctuation.

“It is as though the voice filters up to the reader like echoes from a very deep well, and yet it strikes his ear with a raw energy,” the poet and critic Laurence Lieberman wrote, discussing “The Lice,” a collection whose bitter contents were widely understood as a denunciation of the Vietnam War. He added:

“The poems must be read very slowly, since most of their uncanny power is hidden in overtones that must be listened for in silences between lines, and still stranger silences within lines.”

The themes that preoccupied Mr. Merwin most keenly were those that haunt nearly every poet: the earth, the sea and their myriad creatures; the cycle of the seasons; myth and spirituality (he was a practicing Buddhist); personal history and memory; and, above all, life and its damnable evanescence.

Yet there was about his work an intensity of purpose — heightened by a formal style not quite like anyone else's — that, his champions maintained, gave it a fervor often described as oracular. A “post-Presbyterian Zen poet and channeler of ancient paradoxes,” The Los Angeles Times called him in 2007.

In “Leviathan,” from his 1956 collection, “Green With Beasts,” Mr. Merwin evokes the epic verse of old through his strategic use of alliteration, the central organizing principle of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse poetry:

*The hulk of him is like hills heaving  
 Dark, yet as crags of drift-ice, crowns cracking in thunder,  
 Like land's self by night black-looming, surf churning and trailing  
 Along his shores' rushing, shoal-water boding  
 About the dark of his jaws; and who should moor at his edge  
 And fare on afoot would find gates of no gardens,  
 But the hill of dark underfoot diving,  
 Closing overhead, the cold deep, and drowning.*

Some critics indicted Mr. Merwin's later work for trafficking in a level of abstraction bordering on the obscure. It was rendered even less accessible, they complained, by the fact that by the late 1960s he had jettisoned punctuation almost entirely. (Mr. Merwin had his reasons, which spoke to the very heart of his lifelong poetic program.)

## Language Distilled

But most reviewers praised his relentless deployment of poetry as a talisman against the void; the emotional ferocity beneath the cool, polished surface of his lines; and his use of language so pure and immediate that it could attain translucence.



An undated photograph of the poet in his youth. He would go on to publish nearly three dozen books of poetry, along with essays, short fiction, memoirs and translations of other poets. Dido Merwin

“The intentions of Merwin’s poetry are as broad as the biosphere yet as intimate as a whisper,” Peter Davison, the longtime poetry editor of *The Atlantic*, wrote there in 1997. “He conveys in the sweet simplicity of grounded language a sense of the self where it belongs, floating between heaven, earth and underground.”

Though the stylistic hallmarks of Mr. Merwin’s work changed appreciably over time, his abiding preoccupations — dissolution, absence, loss — remained nearly constant from the beginning.

This bewildered some early reviewers. Elegiac poetry, they argued, was no fit subject for a man not yet out of his 20s. What, after all, could the young Mr. Merwin have to be elegiac about?

A great deal, as it turned out.

## Weight of Childhood

William Stanley Merwin was born in New York City on Sept. 30, 1927. (He chose to be known by his initials at the start of his poetic career: It seemed to him to be, à la Auden and Eliot, what poets did.)

His mother had been orphaned very young. She later lost her brother and her first child, Mr. Merwin’s older brother, who died shortly after birth.

The weight of those losses, Mr. Merwin said long afterward, pervaded every aspect of the family culture. As he wrote, making a rare foray into rhyme, in “Testimony,” from his 1999 volume “*The River Sound*”:

*those were her deaths before my day  
by that time she could turn to hear  
outside the voices on her way  
a stillness only partly here  
and whatever she would hold dear  
giving herself up to its care  
she looked beyond it without fear  
toward what she felt was waiting there*

Young William was reared in Union City, N.J., and Scranton, Pa., where his father, a Presbyterian minister, preached. Besotted with language from a very young age, he wrote his first verse, hymns for his father’s congregation, at 5. (“I was very disappointed that they weren’t used in church,” Mr. Merwin told *The Paris Review* in 1987.)

To their son’s early dismay, his parents were possessed of incurious minds and unpoetic souls. As Mr. Merwin wrote in “*Native Trees*”:

*Neither my father nor my mother knew  
the names of the trees  
where I was born  
what is that  
I asked and my  
father and mother did not  
hear they did not look where I pointed  
surfaces of furniture held  
the attention of their fingers  
and across the room they could watch  
walls they had forgotten  
where there were no questions  
no voices and no shade*

Worse still, the elder Mr. Merwin was capricious and cold.

“During my early childhood he had been distant, unpredictable and harsh,” Mr. Merwin wrote in his memoir “Summer Doorways” (2005). “He had punished me fiercely for things I had not known were forbidden, when the list of known restrictions was already long and oppressive. I was told regularly that I loved him, as I was told that I loved God and Jesus, and I did not know at the time that the names for much of my feeling about him were really dread and anger.”

Small wonder, perhaps, that the son grew up to become an explorer of absence and a repairer of dissolution and ruin — on his Hawaiian homestead; of a derelict stone farmhouse in southwest France, where he lived at midcentury with his second wife, Dido Milroy; and, to the extent that the medium affords such redress, in poetry.

At 16, Mr. Merwin entered Princeton on a scholarship. There he began to read and write poetry in earnest, studying with the poet and critic R. P. Blackmur and his teaching assistant, a young poet named John Berryman.

At 17, during World War II, Mr. Merwin enlisted in the Navy but realized immediately that he had “made a terrible mistake,” as he told NPR in 2008. A pacifist, he declared himself a conscientious objector and was consigned for about a year to the psychiatric ward of a Boston naval hospital.

Returning to Princeton, he received his bachelor’s degree in 1948; married his first wife, Dorothy Jeanne Ferry; and stayed on to do graduate work in Romance languages.



Lyn Chase, president of the Academy of American Poets, presented Mr. Merwin with the \$100,000 Tanning Prize in 1994. He also won two Pulitzer Prizes, a National Book Award and numerous other honors. Associated Press

Needing gainful employment — a chronic occupational condition for poets — Mr. Merwin decamped with his wife for Europe, where he worked as a tutor to the children of the rich and famous, among them, in Majorca, the son of the poet Robert Graves.

He moved on to London, where he worked as a translator. After his marriage to Ms. Ferry ended in divorce, he wed Ms. Milroy, a ferocious, proprietary Englishwoman 15 years his senior, with whom he collaborated on a verse play. (“Dido’s ex-husband said she always wanted to own a poet,” Mr. Merwin told *The New York Times* in 1995.)

Returning to the United States, he served as a poet in residence at the Poets’ Theater in Cambridge, Mass., and fell in with the cohort of Boston-area poets around Robert Lowell.

In 1952, Mr. Merwin’s first collection, “A Mask for Janus,” was awarded the Yale Younger Poets Prize. A formative award in the field, the prize was judged in those years by W. H. Auden. The poems in the collection, displaying fairly conventional scansion and suffused with mythic references from Classical tradition, ancient sagas and oral verse, typify Mr. Merwin’s early style.

“Where I came by torchlight there is dawn-song,” one work, “Sestina,” begins. It continues:

*Leaves remembering, sudden as a name  
 Recalled from nowhere, remembering morning,  
 Fresh wind in high grass, cricket on plowshare,  
 Whisper of stream in the green-shadowed place,  
 Thrush and tanager keeping season.*

Mr. Merwin and his wife returned to Europe, eventually settling into the old farmhouse in the Dordogne region. He reprised their time there in “The Lost Upland” (1992), a semi-autobiographical collection of short stories.

## A Mature Poet

By the late 1960s, the couple had separated — they would later divorce — and Mr. Merwin, now an established poet, had moved to New York. In his mature style, the diffuse mythic imagery of his earlier work is supplanted by harder-edged invocations of the here and now. The meter is faster and looser, and, stripped of punctuation and most capitalization, his lines hurtle with sheer oral abandon.

“Punctuation basically has to do with prose and the printed word,” he said in the Paris Review interview. “I came to feel that punctuation was like nailing the words onto the page. Since I wanted instead the movement and lightness of the spoken word, one step toward that was to do away with punctuation.”

Mr. Merwin received his first Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for his collection “The Carrier of Ladders.” The volume epitomized his concern with absence.

“Now it is clear to me that no leaves are mine,” a poem from the collection, “Now It Is Clear,” begins:

*no roots are mine  
 that wherever I go I will be a spine of smoke in the forest  
 and the forest will know it  
 we will both know it.*

Mr. Merwin publicly announced his intention to donate the thousand-dollar Pulitzer award to antiwar causes. That drew censure from Auden, who, in an open letter in *The New York Review of Books*, said that he considered the politicizing of the award unseemly.

In reply, Mr. Merwin wrote:

“If I had behaved, in the circumstances, as though I thought that the only permissible response to the award was silence, there would have been real grounds for questioning my respect for those connected with the giving of it. Is it, after all, dishonoring the present distinction to use it to

register once again an abhorrence at being swept along, as we are, and most of the time anonymously, in this evil?"

## Hawaii

In the mid-1970s, Mr. Merwin went to Hawaii to study with the Zen master Robert Aitken. He remained there, purchasing some 19 acres on a remote part of Maui called Haiku — an apt place for a poet if ever there was one — where he set out to create a Walden in the Pacific.



Mr. Merwin, and his wife, Paula, at their home on a former pineapple plantation atop a dormant volcano on the northeast coast of Maui.

Tom Sewell for The New York Times

When Mr. Merwin bought the property in the late 1970s, it was distressed and barren. Decades earlier, it had been deforested, overgrazed and then “pinappled,” as he described it, forging a verb as perhaps only a poet can — an act of agricultural imperialism that had denuded the land of its native foliage.

He married Paula Schwartz in 1983, and with her he tenderly husbanded the land, planting an effusion of flora. In particular, he planted palms — more than 2,700 trees, representing nearly 500 species, resulting in one of the largest palm collections in the world — their massed common names reading like found poetry.

There were monkeypods, “planted as seedlings no taller than chives,” as Mr. Merwin wrote, in impeccable dactylic tetrameter, in an essay in “What Is a Garden?,” which centers on his work in Hawaii. (Published in 2015, the book comprises Mr. Merwin’s poems and prose, with photographs by Larry Cameron.)

There were also Parlor Palm and Ivory Cane; Aren Gelora and Bedang Dawn Noda Noda; Solitary Sugar, Weeping Cabbage, Fishtail Lawyer Cane; and scores of others.

In 2010, the couple established the Merwin Conservancy, dedicated to the continued preservation of their house and garden.

Life in Hawaii gave rise to many poetic works, notably Mr. Merwin's book-length narrative poem "The Folding Cliffs." Published in 1998, it tells the story, based on a historical incident, of a 19th-century Hawaiian couple whose lives are sundered by leprosy.

## Laurels Abound

Mr. Merwin won a National Book Award in 2005 for "Migration: New and Selected Poems" and his second Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for "The Shadow of Sirius." In "To Paula in Late Spring," a poem from that collection, he wrote:

*Let me imagine that we will come again  
when we want to and it will be spring  
we will be no older than we ever were  
the worn griefs will have eased like the early cloud  
through which the morning slowly comes to itself  
and the ancient defenses against the dead  
will be done with and left to the dead at last  
the light will be as it is now in the garden  
that we have made here these years together  
of our long evenings and astonishment*

Mr. Merwin's other laurels include the inaugural Tanning Prize from the Academy of American Poets; the Bollingen Prize for Poetry from Yale; the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award; the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize from the Poetry Foundation; and the PEN Translation Prize.

Mr. Merwin's wife died in 2017. He is survived by two stepsons, Matthew Carlos Schwartz and the novelist John Burnham Schwartz; two grandchildren; and a sister, Ruth Moser.

Among his other books are the poetry collections "The Moving Target" (1963), "The Compass Flower" (1977), "The Rain in the Trees" (1988) and "The Moon Before Morning" (2014); a memoir, "Unframed Originals" (1982); and an essay collection, "The Ends of the Earth" (2004).

In later years, with Mr. Merwin's eyesight failing, Paula Merwin became his amanuensis, taking down new poems at his dictation. The resulting volume, "Garden Time," his final collection of poems, was published in 2016.

Like nearly all of Mr. Merwin's work, "Garden Time" is shot through with valediction. Yet the poems it contains differ from the all-encompassing elegies of his early verse. This time, it is apparent, they are a requiem for something far closer to home.

In "Black Cherries," a poem from the collection, Mr. Merwin wrote:

*Late in May as the light lengthens  
toward summer the young goldfinches  
flutter down through the day for the first time  
to find themselves among fallen petals  
cradling their day's colors in the day's shadows  
of the garden beside the old house  
after a cold spring with no rain  
not a sound comes from the empty village  
as I stand eating the black cherries  
from the loaded branches above me  
saying to myself Remember this*

Ana Fota contributed reporting.

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