

FIVE POEMS



W. S. Merwin

THE COMET MUSEUM

So the feeling comes afterward
some of it may reach us only
long afterward when the moment
itself is beyond reckoning

beyond time beyond memory
as though it were not moving in
heaven neither burning farther
through any past nor ever to
arrive again in time to be
when it has gone the senses wake

all through the day they wait for it
here are pictures that someone took
of what escaped us at the time
only now can we remember

HOME TUNDRA

It may be that the hour is snow
seeming never to settle not
even to be cold now slipping
away from underneath into
the past from which no sounds
follow what I hear is the dogs breathing
ahead of me in the shadow

two of them have already gone
far on into the dark of closed
pages out of sight and hearing

two of them are old already
one cannot hear one cannot see

even in sleep they are running
drawing me with them on their way
wrapped in a day I found today
we know where we are because we
are together here together
leaving no footprints in the hour

whatever the diaries say
nobody ever found the pole

DAYLIGHT

It is said that after he was seventy
Ingres returned to the self-portrait
he had painted at twenty-four and he
went on with it from that distance though
there was no model and in the mirror
only the empty window and gray sky
and the light in which his hand was lifted
a hand which the eyes in the painting would not
have recognized at first raised in a way
they would never see whatever he might
bring to them nor would they ever see him
as he had come, to be then watching them
there where he had left them and while he looked
into them from no distance as he thought
holding the brush in the day between them

DOWNSTREAM

Those two for whom two rivers had been named
how could it be that nobody knew them
nobody had seen them nobody seemed
to have anything to say about them
or maybe even to believe in them
if I asked who was Juniata who
was Marietta finding their names on
the map again feeling my throat tighten
and a day growing warmer in my chest
if I heard their names so I knew they were
secret and I was silent when we traveled
when we came close to them and caught sight
of the skin of water under the bending
trees the curves where they came out of hiding
and every time always they were different
always in secret they were beautiful
they had been waiting for me before I
heard they were there and they knew everything
Juniata was older sometimes and
sometimes a girl a late day in summer
a longed-for homecoming Marietta
was a little ahead of me waiting
and shy about nothing taking my hand
showing me and what has become of them
who would believe now what they were like once
nobody can remember the rivers

THE FENCE

in memory of Matthew Shepard

This was what the west was won for
and this was the way it was won
but things were not like the old days
no Indians left to shoot at
a long time since the last bounties
on their kind no more wolves to hang
and stand next to for the picture
nothing left by the time they had
their first guns but the little things
running in front of them maybe a hawk
for the barn door if they
were lucky or a coyote
to string up on the barbed wire fence
which was what the fences were for
but they were growing up thinking
there had to be something better
it was time to find somebody
like themselves but different in
a way they could give a name to
point at make fun of and frighten
somebody who would understand
why it was happening to him
when he was tied to the barbed wire
which was what the fence was there for
and when he was beaten until
they thought it was time to leave him
and they drove away growing up