

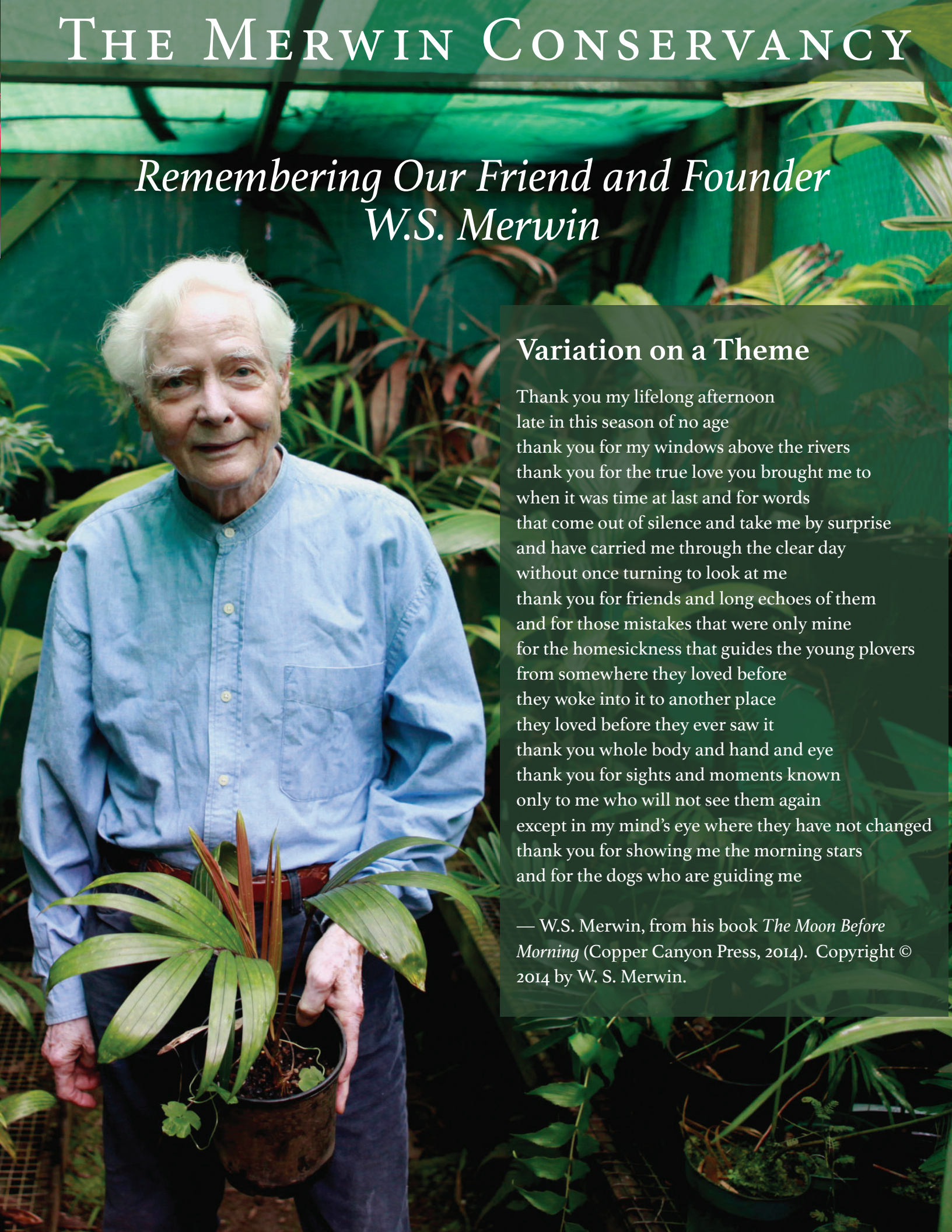
THE MERWIN CONSERVANCY

Remembering Our Friend and Founder W.S. Merwin

Variation on a Theme

Thank you my lifelong afternoon
late in this season of no age
thank you for my windows above the rivers
thank you for the true love you brought me to
when it was time at last and for words
that come out of silence and take me by surprise
and have carried me through the clear day
without once turning to look at me
thank you for friends and long echoes of them
and for those mistakes that were only mine
for the homesickness that guides the young plovers
from somewhere they loved before
they woke into it to another place
they loved before they ever saw it
thank you whole body and hand and eye
thank you for sights and moments known
only to me who will not see them again
except in my mind's eye where they have not changed
thank you for showing me the morning stars
and for the dogs who are guiding me

— W.S. Merwin, from his book *The Moon Before Morning* (Copper Canyon Press, 2014). Copyright © 2014 by W. S. Merwin.



Dear Friends,

I write from William's garden, on the first of days to dawn without him here. For five months now, I have wandered here, riotous life all around, along with so much to learn, to know, to come to understand through presence of mind, and wonder. I've savored these visits just as I do the disorienting and delicious days of learning a foreign language, before sounds settle into structures, and make new homes in the mouth. On each walk, my copy of *The Essential W.S. Merwin* in hand, William's poems have astonished and then grounded me. The dry stream bed. The laughing thrush. *The tree that stands in the earth for the first time*. And his palms, of course, have too. Early on, down where Pe'ahi stream once flowed, I befriended a gorgeous palm. *Kerriodoxa elegans*. Elegant it is, its smooth stalks a stunning black beneath pleated fans. But what has truly anchored me in all of this astonishment, is the narrow vista that opens up where the muddy path meets stepping stones, and the soft traction of moss. From here, a glimpse of William's house, atop impossibly tall stilts. Here I've savored the faintest wafts of the Nag Champa that he always burned inside, the dash of brilliant red as his cardinal friend darted toward blueberries lined up on the north lanai, and William's amber voice, wispy but ever rich and warm.

Each visit, I'd make my way to his house, and if William was up for company, I'd tug off my boots and go in. This was my all-too-short friendship with William. We talked about border collies and chows, and fabled towns in the south of France. Memories drifted in, always awash in wonder, and he paused to pull them into focus—a long cloud moving across the folds of the Kalalau valley, enveloping his perch atop Koke'e. It was a place, we found, that was dear to us both.

For these few months, I have been a student of poems and palms, and of wonder itself. William fully lived his wonder. He practiced it daily and for decades on end, and rendered it in his poems as in his garden. He revered it as the place where we seek new understanding, where we begin to steward that which we love, and probably most importantly, as the place where we meet the unknown.

And now we are here, at this poignant and potent moment. We are custodians of an extraordinary place, and participants in its constant renewal. Here we will cultivate the generative possibilities of our imaginations, and honor the fearlessness and grace of our beloved friend.

Sonnet

The family asks that in lieu of flowers or cards, friends and admirers of W.S. Merwin make donations in William's honor to The Merwin Conservancy

A Remembrance from Michael Wiegers, William's Poetry Editor and Conservancy Board Member

We now know the exact day William Merwin foretold. March 15th. We have settled upon the anniversary of his death augured over fifty years ago in his poem. When William's body finally submitted itself to that previously unknown, yet eventual day, we lost the literary world's most graceful practitioner of the art of writing. We lost an unrivalled steward of the earth, who was enthralled by one of its oldest organisms: the palm. We lost the most beloved advocate of the common language that transcends all language: poetry.

There are plenty of stories that have been told, and are yet to be told about William Merwin and many will likely mention his generous and open personality. Despite guarding his privacy, despite the reverence he was afforded by his many readers, despite his aging body, when you were in his company, you *had* his attention. He was receptive and found shared ground. (The same might be said about his relationship to the palms.) Whether you were a seedling of a grade school student, an old poet-friend or a young editor, he listened intently—and in turn spoke as though with an intimate equal. This personality is present in his writing, too: when a reader enters the space of one of his poems, it's as if he is talking directly to *you*. I had the incredible privilege of working with William as his editor for 25 years and yet, still when reading his work—poems I've known and lived with for the increasing majority of my life—I discover his voice anew, over and over as though he is just entering the world for the first time and bringing me encouragingly along with him. With each successive manuscript, he shared his poems as if they were his first. Reading through his extraordinary later collection *Garden Time*, one senses that even at the end of his nine decades, William aspired to live still with a child's openness and wonder—even while he sensed his and his beloved wife Paula's pending mortality. And yet despite this childlike enthrallment, William was, like Paula, a person of enduring wisdom and grace. Although studied, his wisdom seemed equally centered in a committed sort of *unknowing*, of living in mysteries. His grace was not learned so much as it was hard-earned: through his daily practice of sitting, of scribbling his poems onto scraps of paper, and through what he absorbed via his communion with the forest he nurtured. In the garden, time somehow did not exist for him—captivated by human and natural history he was a participant in humanity's long, ongoing experiment with living. By

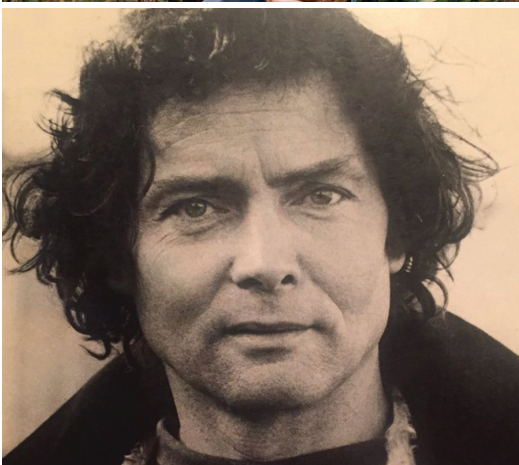
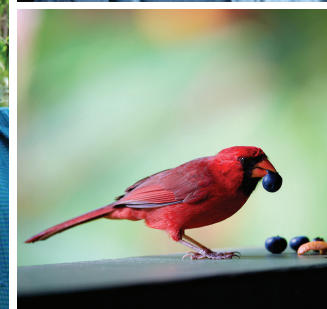
sitting and meditating in his beloved Haiku or Lacan, he learned the importance of place and presence. Through the practice of writing, he learned to write, as he traced his mind's wanderings. And through his garden time, he learned an openness to the world which only grew and expanded and found light.

William was an extraordinary presence on this earth. He changed our collective place in the world by changing his own. It is not hyperbole to state that American poetry was undeniably altered and influenced by his curious explorations of tradition and language. Similarly, the patches of ground he called home—and has now left for future generations—were transformed by his direct engagement with soil, seed, light, water and topography. His trees will continue to offer seeds for the future, and shade against the growing heat. His poems will offer future readers and poets a way of looking, of engaging the impossible. On multiple occasions, when talking about his palm forest, William would say to the curious “you can do this too.” He has given us a model for how to live with grace, generosity, curiosity and perseverance. There will never be another William Merwin, and yet we all have at least a bit of him in us—we can do this too.





"It has been an enchantment, all of it, from the daydreaming to the digging." - W.S. Merwin





A Remembrance from Robert Becker, Merwin Conservancy Vice President

The tops and trunks of magnificent palms block the view of the Pacific from the lanai of the Merwins' Maui house. I'm sure Paula explained it the same way to everyone. "William thinks, if you want to see the ocean, go and see the ocean!" For most of us it's a common desire to live within sight of the roiling blue-blue sea, just check the real estate listings in Hawaii. From the day he arrived, however, William Merwin became preoccupied with the fecundity of the land beneath his feet—not what was out of reach—and the possibility it held for growing plants and poetry. Climb up the hill behind the house or down the single-track road to the small bay at the end, you find the Pacific; but you must make the effort, according to William, have that as your intention.

It took me several years of visiting William and Paula to really explore their land. There's a simple explanation: I'd arrive for lunch at 12:30 pm and before long it was dark out and we'd be thinking about dinner or the flight back to Oahu I was missing. A dam of conversation always burst from the moment William emerged from his writing and we sat down to eat. One day we might disappear into Hawaii's complex history, which fascinated and disturbed us both, and where William found a rich vein to mine for his page-turning epic poem, *The Folding Cliffs*. Another day our extended family might take center stage; he and I were kin, his mother and my grandmother first cousins and close to each other growing up. At some point though, the talk always moved to books and

writing. This was when you realized you were seated at the table of a master.

You do have to walk through a corner of the enchanted forest to get to the house, along the uneven stone-cobbled paths through a tunnel of shimmering and translucent greens. At first, to me, it was simply one of the finest gardens I'd ever seen. The piles of trug baskets and trowels by the front door pointed to the Merwins as gardeners not forest builders, as did the lilies and hibiscus flowers popping with scarlet and pink here and there, and the moss-encrusted stone fountain bubbling a few feet away. But as my visits grew longer, sometimes overnight, and with a few hours alone, I started to wander and to get lost. I began then to realize the depths and layers of the place, very much like William's poems, and its importance to Hawaii, but also to humankind.

During the day the forest steals your eyes and keeps them busy, from the swaying of grand palm crowns overhead in the canopy, to the flitting of a leaf—over there, on the left—to the mulchy browns and ochres of rich healthy fungi growing from decomposing logs next to the paths. Nighttime was something different, however. Lying on the knobbled futon mattress in the library, eyes closed, I could hear the forest speak. The sounds of palms chattering and screeching is nothing like the mournful howling of other tree forests. It's more lively, like a party. And if you stop paying attention, for a moment drift away, a frond, crashing a hundred feet to the ground outside the window, reminds you where you are. At night I might forget William planted this forest himself—that it hadn't actually been there forever—that before his tenure the place was essentially barren. It was William who had set into motion this elegant conversation I was listening to.

When the Merwins began talking about making the house and land into a conservancy I was eager to help. The idea was abstract then, of course, something far in the future, and their not physically being present something only spoken of, not imagined. I joined the board of directors a few years later when William asked me to take his place so he could focus on last poems. Now the future is here, on the heels of the death of my dear friend, cousin, and mentor just a few days ago. I'm in New York City as I write this, just a block away from Cooper Union where William taught in the 1980s. I'll board a plane in a few days for the long flight back to Maui, to see their sons Matt and John, and my Conservancy colleagues. The only consolation is knowing that we'll always have William's poetry, and his forest will continue to speak to me and everyone else.

Make a Memorial Gift

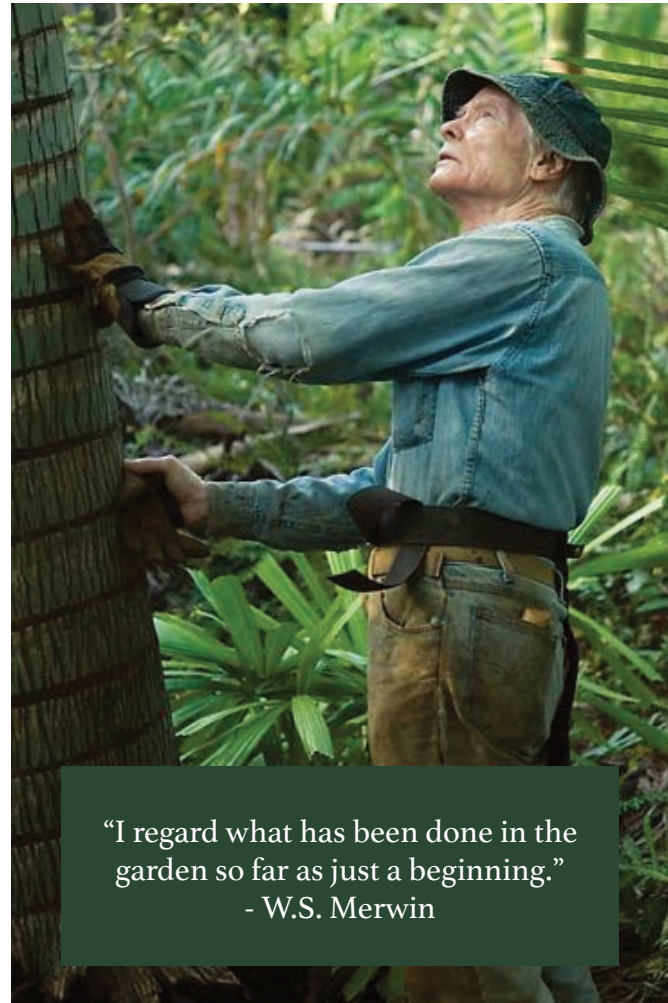
Steward the vision, secure the future of The Merwin Conservancy

This is the moment to come together in support of our transformative work. Your memorial gift will ensure that William's vision finds its fullest expression, and his garden thrives in perpetuity. To make a gift in memory of W.S. Merwin, please visit www.merwinconservancy.org/donate.

Join the Merwin Legacy Circle

Make a planned gift to The Merwin Conservancy

Your legacy gift will conserve W.S. Merwin's home and palm garden in perpetuity. To learn more about planned giving, write to Sonnet at scoggins@merwinconservancy.org.



"I regard what has been done in the garden so far as just a beginning."
- W.S. Merwin

Photos provided by: Tom Sewell, Diane Cook and Len Jenshel, Larry Cameron, Jessica Pearl, Sarah Cavanaugh, Jill Greenberg, Karen Bouris, and the Merwin Family.

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**In Memoriam*

OUR MISSION

*To inspire innovation in
the arts and sciences by
advancing the ideas of
W.S. Merwin – his life,
work, house and palm
forest – as fearless and
graceful examples of the
power of imagination
and renewal.*