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The Night of the Shirts

W. S. Merwin

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to think he is living at the end of an era; he has, at the very least, the security of his dissolution. I would also suggest that for Merwin and the line of poets he follows (Eliot, Yeats, Pound, St.-John Perse) The End has already taken place; their prophecies tell us nothing we have not known for a long time. Merwin’s particular contribution has been a language and rhythm cleansed of all raw specificity which render how it feels to live in the polity of the credibility gap, among those who make revolution for the hell of it, and under those who make war to guarantee their own destruction. Perhaps such poetry can offer a measure of protection even though words are thin armor against the enemy, even though the poet makes his ritual disclaimer:

And that my words are the garment of what I shall never be
Like the tucked sleeve of a one-armed boy

W. S. Merwin

The Night of the Shirts

Oh pile of white shirts who is coming
to breathe in your shapes to carry your numbers
to appear
what hearts
are moving toward their garments here
their days
what troubles beating between arms

you look upward through
each other saying nothing has happened
and it has gone away and is sleeping
having told the same story
and we exist from within
eyes of the gods

you lie on your backs
and the wounds are not made
the blood has not heard
the boat has not turned to stone
and the dark wires to the bulb
are full of the voice of the unborn

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