

The Houses · *W.S. Merwin*

Up on the mountain where nobody is looking  
a man forty years old in a gray felt hat  
is trying to light a fire in the springtime

up on the mountain where nobody  
except God and the man's son are looking  
the father in a white shirt is trying  
to get damp sticks to burn in the spring noon

he crumples newspaper from the luggage compartment  
of the polished black Plymouth parked under the young leaves  
a few feet away in the overgrown wagon track  
that he remembers from another year  
he is thinking of somewhere else as the match flame blows

he has somewhere else in mind that nobody knows  
as the flame climbs into the lines of print and they curl  
and set out unseen into the sunlight  
he needs more and more paper and more matches  
and the wrapping from hot dogs and from buns  
gray smoke gets away among the slender trees

it does not occur to the son to wonder  
what prompted his father to come up here  
suddenly this one morning and bring his son  
though the father looks like a stranger on the mountain  
breaking sticks and wiping his hands on the paper  
as he crumples it and blowing into the flames  
but when his father takes him anywhere they are both strangers

and the father has long forgotten that the son  
is standing there and he is surprised  
when the smoke blows in his face and he turns  
and sees parallel with the brim the boy looking at him  
having been told that he could not help and to wait there  
and since it is a day without precedents the son  
hears himself asking the father whether he may  
please see what is down the wagon track and he surprises  
himself hearing the father say yes but don't go far

and be very careful and come right back  
so the son turns to his right and steps over  
the gray stones and leaves his father making  
a smoky fire on the flat sloping rock  
and after a few steps the branches close overhead  
he walks in the green day in the smell of thawed ground  
and a while further on he comes to a turn to the right  
and the open light of cleared ground falling away  
still covered with the dry grass of last year  
by a dark empty barn he can see light through

and before the barn on the left a white house  
newly painted with wide gray footsteps leading  
up to the gray floor of the porch where the windows  
are newly washed and without curtains so that he  
can look into the empty rooms and see the doors  
standing open and he can look out  
through windows on the other side into the sky  
while the grass new and old stands deep all around the house  
that is bare in readiness for somebody  
the wind is louder here than in the woods  
the grass hissing and the clean panes rattling

he looks at rusted handles beside bushes  
and with that thinks of his father and turns back  
into the shadowy wagon track and walks  
slowly tree by tree stone by stone under  
the green tiers of leaves until he comes  
to the smell of smoke and then the long pile of stones  
before the clearing where his father is bending  
over the fire and turns at the son's voice and calls him  
a good boy for coming back and asks whether  
he's hungry and holds out a paper plate  
they stand in the smoke holding plates while the father  
asks the blessing and afterwards the son tells him

of the white house the new paint the clean windows  
into empty rooms and sky and nobody in sight  
but his father says there is no such house along there  
and he warns the son not to tell stories  
but to eat and after a moment the son  
surprises them both by insisting that he has

seen it all just as he said and again the father  
scolds him this time more severely returning  
from somewhere else to take up his sternness  
until the son starts to cry and asks him  
to come and see for himself after they have eaten

so when the plates have been burned and the fire  
put out carefully and the car packed they walk  
without a word down the wagon track where the light  
seems to have dimmed as though rain might be on its way  
and the trees are more remote than the boy  
had thought but before long they reach the opening  
where the track turns to the right and there is  
the glare of the dry grass but no house no barn  
and the son repeats I saw them but the father says  
I don't want to hear any more about it

in a later year the father takes the boy  
taller now and used to walking by himself  
to an old farm in the middle of the state  
where he busies himself in the small house he has bought  
while the son having been told that he cannot help  
walks down the lane past the vacant corn crib and barn  
past the red shale banks where the lane descends  
beside unkempt pastures with their springs and snakes  
into the woods and onto a wooden bridge

still on his father's land he watches the dark water  
flow out from under low branches and the small fish  
flickering in glass over the black bed and as he  
turns and climbs the lane on the far side he sees  
to his right below him on the edge of the stream  
a low house painted yellow with a wide porch  
a gun leaning beside the front door and a dog's chain  
fastened to the right of the steps but no dog visible

there appears to be no one in the house and the boy goes  
on up the lane through the woods and across pastures  
and coming back sees that nothing has changed  
the gun still by the door the chain in the same place  
he watches to see whether anything moves  
he listens he stares through the trees wondering

where the dog is and when someone will come home  
then he crosses the stream and returns to his father  
indoors and in the evening he remembers  
to ask who is living in the yellow house  
in the woods on the far side of the stream  
which he had understood was his father's land  
but his father tells him there is no house there

by then they have left the farm and are driving home  
and the son tells the father of the gun by the door  
the dog's chain by the front steps and the father  
says yes that is his land beyond the stream  
but there is no building and nobody living there

the boy stops telling what he has seen  
and it is a long time before he comes again  
to walk down the lane to the woods and cross the bridge  
and see on the far side only trees by the stream

then the farm is sold and the woods are cut and the subject  
never brought up again but long after the father  
is dead the son remembers the two houses