

Ali · *W.S. Merwin*

Small dog named for a wing
never old and never young

abandoned with your brothers on a beach
when you were scarcely weaned

taken home starving
by one woman with
too many to feed as it was

handed over to another
who tied you out back in the weeds
with a clothesline and fed you if she remembered

on the morning before the eclipse of the moon
I first heard about you over the telephone

only the swellings of insect bites
by then held the skin away from your bones

thin hair matted filthy the color of mud
naked belly crusted with sores
head low frightened silent watching

I carried you home and gave you milk and food
bathed you and dried you

dressed your sores and sat with you
in the sun with your wet head on my leg

we had one brother of yours already
and had named him for the great tree of the islands
we named you for the white shadows
behind your thin shoulders

and for the reminder of the desert
in your black muzzle lean as an Afghan's

and for the lightness of your ways
not the famished insubstance of your limbs

but even in your sickness and weakness
when you were hobbled with pain and exhaustion

an aerial grace a fine buoyancy
a lifting as in the moment before flight

I keep finding why that is your name

the plump vet was not impressed with you
and guessed wrong for a long time
about what was the matter

so that you could hardly eat
and never grew like your brother

but played with him as long as you could
oh small dog wise in your days

never servile and never disobedient
and never far
watching and listening

standing with one foot on the bottom stair
wanting it to be bedtime

standing in the doorway looking up
tail wagging slowly below the sharp hip bones

finally you were with us whatever we did
intelligent dignified uncomplaining
fearless loving
and dying

the gasping breath through the night
ended an hour and a half before daylight

the gray tongue hung from your mouth
we went on calling you holding you

feeling the sudden height