

Birdie · *W.S. Merwin*

You don't think anything that I know of  
but as for me when I think of you  
I don't know how many of you there are  
and I suppose you thought there was just the one

how many times you may have been born  
as my father's other sisters would say  
in your bawdy nobody is interested  
in things like that in the family

sombody wrote down though that you was  
born one time on April 20  
1874 so that my grandmother  
at that occasion was thirteen and the hardest thing  
to believe in that account as I think of it  
is that she was ever thirteen years old  
the way we grew up to hide things from each other

so she had a little baby at that age

and that was you Birdie that was one of you  
did you know  
it presents a different picture of my  
grandmother from the one I was brought up to

that was the you she had when she was thirteen  
which goes a long way to explain  
her puritanism and your gypsy earrings  
and all the withered children who came after  
and their scorn of your bright colors and your loud heart

and maybe even your son who was delicate  
and an artist and painted heads of Jesus  
on church walls where they crumbled and could not be  
moved  
and your having a good time and dying in Arizona

except that as everybody knew  
that you  
was nothing but a mistake in  
the writing and the real Birdie came along  
when Grandma was into her twenties and she  
had her firstborn a little baby girl  
which explains nothing

puritanism earrings the children who came after  
your son the frail artist the crumbling heads of Jesus  
the having a good time and dying in Arizona  
that was the you I met one morning in summer  
whom nobody could explain for you was different

inviting all them so unexpected  
and not heard of for so long your own mother  
younger brother younger sisters new nephew  
to breakfast laughing and waving your hands  
with all the rings and them not listening  
saying they was in a hurry to drive farther  
and see the family and you going on  
telling them everything there was to eat