

*Ends*

W.S. Merwin

When a shoelace breaks during use the ends do not always indulge at once in their new-found liberty. However long the break may have been preparing—the threads wearing through one by one, the rub settling in the same place stride after stride, the tension mounting in the other strands, making them watchful, on guard against any further illusions—the release itself, whether it is accompanied by one of the many variants of the dull sound which in this world signifies the end of something, or comes to pass in silence, always seems sudden to the point of being unexpected. A few ends there are, it is true, which at this moment fling themselves into the air waving and disporting themselves, the result of an inherent want of substance, or simply a reaction to the long strain. Some go so far as to flap and dance as though they were now the ends of whole laces. They are usually rewarded by being removed at once and disposed of. But the better laces respond to the occasion in silence, and often do not move at all at first. Whatever their unfulfilled desires may have been, and however clearly they may have foreseen the inevitability of the parting, it is no pleasure to them to feel that they have failed to carry to its conclusion the undertaking for which they were made and upon which they had entered without reservations. The release of strain throughout these natures is likely to express itself in a sudden despondency, a disorientation, a sense of emptiness, rather than exhilaration. In this they will be reflecting the fact that with the loss of their use (for they are no longer laces—that self has gone) they have become something different, and have not yet discovered what it is. It is hard for them to relinquish a usefulness that was theirs without their having to think about it as long as they remained a whole. Their keen awareness of their fragmentary state is in itself a nostalgia for their lost usefulness. For they are still one, they are still whole, each of them, but they cannot feel that this is enough any longer, or that it will ever be enough, that it will ever have any worth, that there will ever be anything about themselves that they will value and be able to take for granted. Wherever they go next, it seems to them, they will forever feel in some part of them that they are fragments whose salvation depended upon remaining whole. They see nothing ahead of them but dissolution. Given a new self, they respond by feeling deprived of the possibility of ever having a self at all. It is possible that the self, after all, is not a matter of use. But they cling to the need to be useful as though it were a last cherished shred of their unbroken life, and very slowly and reluctantly they are drawn toward the holes and disappear around the first bends of their journeys.

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