

## *At a Country Funeral*

Wendell Berry

Now the old ways that have brought us  
farther than we remember sink out of sight  
as under the treading of many strangers  
ignorant of landmarks. Only once in a while  
they are cast clear again upon the mind  
as at a country funeral where, amid the soft  
lights and hothouse flowers, the expensive  
solemnity of experts, notes of a polite musician,  
persist the usages of old neighborhood.  
Friends and kinsmen come and stand and speak,  
knowing the extremity they have come to,  
one of their own bearing to the earth the last  
of his light, his darkness the sun's definitive mark.  
They stand and think as they stood and thought  
when even the gods were different.  
And the organ music, though decorous  
as for somebody else's grief, has its source  
in the outcry of pain and hope in log churches  
and on naked hillsides by the open grave,  
eastward in mountain passes, in tidelands,  
and across the sea. How long a time?  
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide my  
self in Thee. They came, once in time,  
in simple loyalty to their dead, and returned  
to the world. The fields and the work  
remained to be returned to. Now the entrance

of one of the old ones into the Rock  
too often means a lifework perished from the land  
without inheritor, and the field goes wild  
and the house sits and stares. Or it passes  
at cash value into the hands of strangers.  
Now the old dead wait in the open coffin  
for the blood kin to gather, come home  
for one last time, to hear old men  
whose tongues bear an essential topography  
speak memories doomed to die.  
But our memory of ourselves, hard earned,  
is one of the land's seeds, as a seed  
is the memory of the life of its kind in its place,  
to pass on into life the knowledge  
of what has died. What we owe the future  
is not a new start, for we can only begin  
with what has happened. We owe the future  
the past, the long knowledge  
that is the potency of time to come.  
That makes of a man's grave a rich furrow.  
The community of knowing in common is the seed  
of our life in this place. There is not only  
no better possibility, there is no other,  
except for chaos and darkness,  
the terrible ground of the only possible  
new start. And so as the old die and the young  
depart, where shall a man go who keeps  
the memories of the dead, except home  
again, as one would go back after a burial,  
faithful to the fields, lest the dead die  
a second and more final death.