

“Look Closely at the Letters”: A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry
Week 4: “All Is Translation”: Life to Art and Back | March 22, 2023
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FIVE POEMS FOR THIS WEEK:

1. Marsyas (*The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, 1959; *Selected Poems [SP]*, p. 13)
2. For Proust (*Water Street*, 1962; *SP*, pp. 26–27)
3. The Victor Dog (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *SP*, pp. 138–39)
4. The Kimono (*Divine Comedies*, 1976; p. 142)
5. Lost in Translation (*Divine Comedies*, 1976; pp. 143–48)

FIVE OPTIONAL READINGS:

1. Lorelei (*The Fire Screen*, 1969; *SP*, p. 74)
2. Syrinx (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *SP*, pp. 140–41)
3. Page from the Koran (*Late Settings*, 1985; *SP*, p. 188)
4. Santo (*Late Settings*, 1985; *SP*, p. 189)
5. Arabian Night (*The Inner Room*, 1988; *SP*, p. 206)

JM ON ART

When Jan Kieपुरa sang His Handsomeness
Of Mantua those high airs light as lust
Attuned one’s bare throat to the dagger-thrust.
Living for them would have been death no less.

Or Lehmann’s Marschallin!—heartbreak so shrewd,
So ostrich-plumed, one ached to disengage
Oneself from a last love, at center stage,
To the beloved’s dazzled gratitude.

What havoc certain Saturday afternoons
Wrought upon a bright young person’s morals
I now leave to the public to condemn.

The point thereafter was to arrange for one’s
Own chills and fever, passions and betrayals,
Chiefly in order to make song of them.

—James Merrill, from “Matinées” (1969), a sequence on a life devoted to opera, with its highs and lows, emotional and artistic (the two singers named are the Polish-born tenor Jan Kieपुरa and the German soprano Lotte Lehmann; the Duke of Mantua and the Marschallin are roles in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, respectively)

JMH JAMES MERRILL HOUSE & *James Merrill* WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

DAVID KALSTONE: Your own way of veiling the first person here has to do with the way you present the landscape, doesn't it?

JAMES MERRILL: You hardly ever need to *state* your feelings. The point is to feel and keep the eyes open. Then what you feel is expressed, is mimed back at you by the scene. A room, a landscape. I'd go a step further. We don't *know* what we feel until we see it distanced by this kind of translation.

—James Merrill, "On 'Yánnina': An Interview with David Kalstone," *Saturday Review* (December 1972)

J. D. MCCLATCHY: The hallmark of your poetry is its *tone*, the way its concerns are observed and presented. And much of its effect depends on your fondness for paradox. Is that a cultivated habit of mind with you? A deliberate way into, and out of, the world and the poem?

JAMES MERRILL: It's hard to know. "Cultivated" certainly in the gardening sense of the word—which doesn't explain the mystery of the seed. I suppose that early on I began to understand the relativity, even the reversibility, of truths. At the same time as I was being given a good education I could feel, not so much from my parents, but from the world they moved in, that kind of easygoing contempt rich people have for art and scholarship—"these things are all right *in their place*, and their place is to ornament a life rather than to nourish or to shape it." Or when it came to sex, I had to face it that the worst iniquity my parents (and many of my friends) could imagine was for me a blessed source of pleasure and security—as well as suffering, to be sure. There was truth on both sides. And maybe having arrived at *that* explained my delight in setting down a phrase like, oh, "the pillow's dense white dark" or "Au fond each summit is a cul-de-sac," but the explanation as such neither delights nor convinces me. I believe the secret lies primarily in the nature of poetry—and of science too, for that matter—and that the ability to see both ways at once isn't merely an idiosyncrasy but corresponds to how the world needs to be seen: cheerful *and* awful, opaque *and* transparent. The plus and minus signs of a vast, evolving formula.

—James Merrill, "An Interview with J. D. McClatchy," *The Paris Review* (Summer 1982)

THOMAS BOLT: What's most fun about poetry?

JAMES MERRILL: To engage as much of the self as possible . . . and then to forget the self—is that fun? I think so. Innocent fun. I'd like to stress the innocence. Hours go by and nobody's been harmed. The neighbors don't even know you're at home.

—James Merrill, "An Interview with Thomas Bolt," *Bomb* (Summer 1991)

TWO COMPETING DEFINITIONS

Poetry is what is lost in translation.

—Robert Frost

Poetry is what is gained in translation.

—Joseph Brodsky

Marsyas

*(The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace, 1959; SP, p. 13)*¹

I used to write in the café sometimes:
Poems on menus, read all over town
Or talked out before ever written down.
One day a girl brought in his latest book.
I opened it—stiff rhythms, gorgeous rhymes—
And made a face. Then crash! my cup upset.
Of twenty upward looks mine only met
His, that gold archaic lion's look

Wherein I saw my wiry person skinned
Of every skill it labored to acquire
And heard the plucked nerve's elemental twang.
They found me dangling where his golden wind
Inflicted so much music on the lyre
That no one could have told you what he sang.

¹ In Greek mythology, Marsyas is a flute player who challenged Apollo, an expert on the lyre, to a musical duel. Apollo won the contest and the right, which he exercised, to flay Marsyas alive. He left the body dangling in a pine tree.

For Proust

(*Water Street*, 1962; *SP*, pp. 26–27)²

Over and over something would remain
Unbalanced in the painful sum of things.
Past midnight you arose, rang for your things.
You had to go into the world again.

You stop for breath outside the lit hotel,
A thin spoon bitter stimulants will stir.
Jean takes your elbow, Jacques your coat. The stir
Spreads—you are known to all the personnel—

As through packed public rooms you press (impending
Palms, chandeliers, orchestras, more palms,
The fracas and the fragrance) until your palms
Are moist with fear that you will miss the friend

Conjured—but she is waiting: a child still
At first glance, hung with fringes, on the low
Ottoman. In a voice reproachful and low
She says she understands you have been ill.

And you, because your time is running out,
Laugh in denial and begin to phrase
Your questions. There had been a little phrase
She hummed, you could not sleep tonight without

Hearing again. Then, of that day she had sworn
To come, and did not, was evasive later,
Would she not speak the truth two decades later,
From loving-kindness learned if not inborn?

She treats you to a look you cherished, light,
Bold: “Mon ami, how did we get along
At all, those years?” But in her hair a long
White lock has made its truce with appetite.

(continued next page)

² [Note from Chris: This poem is written for and about the French novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922), perhaps *the* major author for Merrill, ever since Merrill encountered Proust’s seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*) as a freshman at Amherst College; the undergraduate Merrill returned to Proust for his senior thesis, “*À la recherche du temps perdu*: Impressionism in Literature.”]

And presently she rises. Though in pain
You let her leave—the loved one always leaves.
What of the little phrase? Its notes, like leaves
In the strong tea you have contrived to drain,

Strangely intensify what you must do.
Back where you came from, up the strait stair, past
All understanding, bearing the whole past,
Your eyes grown wide and dark, eyes of a Jew,

You make for one dim room without contour
And station yourself there, beyond the pale
Of cough or of gardenia, erect, pale.
What happened is becoming literature.

Feverish in time, if you suspend the task,
An old, old woman shuffling in to draw
Curtains, will read a line or two, withdraw.
The world will have put on a thin gold mask.

The Victor Dog

(*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *SP*, pp. 138–39)³

for Elizabeth Bishop

Bix to Buxtehude to Boulez,⁴
The little white dog on the Victor label
Listens long and hard as he is able.
It's all in a day's work, whatever plays.

From judgment, it would seem, he has refrained.
He even listens earnestly to Bloch,⁵
Then builds a church upon our acid rock.
He's man's—no—he's the Leiermann's best friend,⁶

Or would be if hearing and listening were the same.
Does he hear? I fancy he rather smells
Those lemon-gold arpeggios in Ravel's
“Les jets d'eau du palais de ceux qui s'aiment.”⁷

He ponders the Schumann Concerto's⁸ tall willow hit
By lightning, and stays put. When he surmises
Through one of Bach's eternal boxwood mazes
The oboe pungent as a bitch in heat,

(continued next page)

³ The label of the early recordings produced by The Victor Talking Machine Company featured a small terrier named Nipper listening to a Victrola.

⁴ “Bix to Buxtehude to Boulez”: Leon Bismark (“Bix”) Beiderbecke (1903–1931), the American jazz cornet player and pianist. Dietrich Buxtehude (ca. 1637–1707), the Danish -born composer and organist. Pierre Boulez (1925–2016), the French composer and conductor.

⁵ Bloch: Ernest Bloch (1880–1959), the Swiss-born American composer.

⁶ the Leiermann: “Der Leiermann” (“The Organ-Grinder”), a poem by the German Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827) set to music by the Austrian composer Franz Schubert (1797–1828) as the final song in his cycle *Die Winterreise*.

⁷ Ravel's “Les jets d'eau du palais de ceux qui s'aiment”: “The palace fountains of those who are in love.” Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), the French composer, wrote “Jeux d'eau,” a piano solo, inspired by “Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este” by the Hungarian pianist and composer Franz Liszt (1811–1886). The line Merrill quotes is of obscure origin. It could well be his own *jeu de mots*.

⁸ the Schumann Concerto: The 1845 Piano Concerto in A minor by the German composer Robert Schumann (1810–1856).

Or when the calypso decants its raw bay rum
Or the moon in *Wozzeck*⁹ reddens ripe for murder,
He doesn't sneeze or howl; just listens harder.
Adamant needles bear down on him from

Whirling of outer space, too black, too near—
But he was taught as a puppy not to flinch,
Much less to imitate his bête noire Blanche¹⁰
Who barked, fat foolish creature, at King Lear.

Still others fought in the road's filth over Jezebel,¹¹
Slavered on hearths of horned and pelted barons.
His forebears lacked, to say the least, forbearance.
Can nature change in him? Nothing's impossible.

The last chord fades. The night is cold and fine.
His master's voice rasps through the grooves' bare groves.
Obediently, in silence like the grave's
He sleeps there on the still-warm gramophone

Only to dream he is at the première of a Handel
Opera long thought lost—*Il Cane Minore*.¹²
Its allegorical subject is his story!
A little dog revolving round a spindle

Gives rise to harmonies beyond belief,
A cast of stars . . . Is there in Victor's heart
No honey for the vanquished?¹³ Art is art.
The life it asks of us is a dog's life.

⁹ *Wozzeck*: The 1925 opera by the Austrian composer Alban Berg (1885–1935).

¹⁰ Cf. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.6.

¹¹ A Biblical queen (1 Kings), whose name has become the shorthand term for a corrupt woman.

¹² [Note from Chris: This is Italian for *The Little Dog*—a dreamt-up, not a real, opera. “Cane Minore” is also Italian for the constellation Canis Minor.]

¹³ No honey for the vanquished: Merrill's phrase, the counterpart to “To the victor go the spoils,” alludes to the now proverbial dictum, “Vae victis” (“Woe to the vanquished”) by the Roman historian Livy (59 BCE–17 CE). “Vae victis behavior” is also known as “Victor's justice.”

The Kimono

(*Divine Comedies*, 1976; *SP*, p. 142)

When I returned from lovers' lane
My hair was white as snow.
Joy, incomprehension, pain
I'd seen like seasons come and go.
How I got home again
Frozen half dead, perhaps you know.

You hide a smile and quote a text:
Desires ungratified
Persist from one life to the next.
Hearths we strip ourselves beside
Long, long ago were x'd
On blueprints of "consuming pride."¹⁴

Times out of mind, the bubble-gleam
To our charred level drew
April back. A sudden beam . . .
—Keep talking while I change into
The pattern of a stream
Bordered with rushes white on blue.

¹⁴ [Note from Chris: This isn't a quotation from any real text, but it recalls such Buddhist sutras as the Fire Sermon, which understands desire as a kind of burning. (Hence "Hearths" in this stanza, "charred" in the next.)]



Lost in Translation

(*Divine Comedies*, 1976; *SP*, pp. 143–48)¹⁵

for Richard Howard

*Diese Tage, die leer dir scheinen
und wertlos für das All,
haben Wurzeln zwischen den Steinen
und trinken dort überall.¹⁶*

A card table in the library stands ready
 To receive the puzzle which keeps never coming.
 Daylight shines in or lamplight down
 Upon the tense oasis of green felt.
 Full of unfulfillment, life goes on, 5
 Mirage arisen from time's trickling sands
 Or fallen piecemeal into place:
 German lesson, picnic, see-saw, walk
 With the collie who "did everything but talk"—
 Sour windfalls of the orchard back of us. 10
 A summer without parents is the puzzle,
 Or should be. But the boy, day after day,
 Writes in his Line-a-Day *No puzzle.*

He's in love, at least. His French Mademoiselle,
 In real life a widow since Verdun,¹⁷ 15
 Is stout, plain, carrot-haired, devout.
 She prays for him, as does a curé in Alsace,¹⁸
 Sews costumes for his marionettes,
 Helps him to keep behind the scene
 Whose sidelit goosegirl, speaking with his voice, 20
 Plays Guinevere as well as Gunmoll Jean.

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¹⁵ [Note from Chris: I've included line numbers; see page 16 for my "map" of the poem.]

¹⁶ Epigraph: These lines are a translation of part of the seventh stanza of Paul Valéry's poem "Palme": "Ces jours qui te semblent vides / Et perdus pour l'univers / Ont des racines avides / Qui travaillent les deserts," as translated by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). In a later collection, Merrill translated these same lines into English: "These days which, like yourself, / Seem empty and effaced / Have avid roots that delve / To work deep in the waste."

¹⁷ Verdun: This town in northeastern France, in Lorraine, was the stie of one of World War I's bloodiest battles and its longest (February through December, 1916).

¹⁸ curé: A parish priest in France. Alsace: A region in eastern France annexed with Lorraine by Germany in 1871. A bone of contention between France and Germany, it was recovered by France after World War I, then occupied by Germany in World War II and returned to France after that war.

Or else at bedtime in his tight embrace
 Tells him her own French hopes, her German fears,
 Her—but what more is there to tell?
 Having known grief and hardship, Mademoiselle 25
 Knows little more. Her languages. Her place.
 Noon coffee. Mail. The watch that also waited
 Pinned to her heart, poor gold, throws up its hands—
 No puzzle! Steaming bitterness
 Her sugars draw pops back into his mouth, translated: 30
 “Patience, chéri. Geduld, mein Schatz.”¹⁹
 (Thus, reading Valéry the other evening
 And seeming to recall a Rilke version of “Palme,”
 That sunlit paradigm whereby the tree
 Taps a sweet wellspring of authority, 35
 The hour came back. Patience dans l’azur.²⁰
 Geduld im. . . Himmelblau? Mademoiselle.)

Out of the blue, as promised, of a New York
 Puzzle-rental shop the puzzle comes—
 A superior one, containing a thousand hand-sawn, 40
 Sandal-scented pieces. Many take
 Shapes known already—the craftsman’s repertoire
 Nice in its limitation—from other puzzles:
 Witch on broomstick, ostrich, hourglass,
 Even (surely not just in retrospect) 45
 An inchling, innocently branching palm.
 These can be put aside, made stories of
 While Mademoiselle spreads out the rest face-up,
 Herself excited as a child; or questioned
 Like incoherent faces in a crowd, 50
 Each with its scrap of highly colored
 Evidence the Law must piece together.
 Sky-blue ostrich? Likely story.
 Mauve of the witch’s cloak white, severed fingers
 Pluck? Detain her. The plot thickens 55
 As all at once two pieces interlock.

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¹⁹ “Patience, chéri. Geduld, mein Schatz”: French for “Patience, dear,” then German for “Patience, my darling.”

²⁰ Patience dans l’azur: “Patience beneath the blue,” a phrase from Valéry’s “Palme” followed by a faulty recollection of Rilke’s translation of it into German, “Patience in the . . . blue-sky?” (Rilke’s version is “Gedulden unter dem Blau,” “Patience under the blue”).

Mademoiselle does borders— (Not so fast.
 A London dusk, December last.
 Chatter silenced in the library
 This grown man reenters, wearing gray. 60
 A medium. All except him have seen
 Panel slid back, recess explored,
 An object at once unique and common
 Displayed, planted in a plain tole
 Casket the subject now considers 65
 Through shut eyes, saying in effect:
 “Even as voices reach me vaguely
 A dry saw-shriek drowns them out,
 Some loud machinery—a lumber mill?
 Far uphill in the fir forest 70
 Trees tower, tense with shock,
 Groaning and cracking as they crash groundward.
 But hidden here is a freak fragment
 Of a pattern complex in appearance only.
 What it seems to show is superficial 75
 Next to that long-term lamination
 Of hazard and craft, the karma that has
 Made it matter in the first place.
 Plywood. Piece of a puzzle.” Applause
 Acknowledged by an opening of lids 80
 Upon the thing itself. A sudden dread—
 But to go back. All this lay years ahead.)

Mademoiselle does borders. Straight-edge pieces
 Align themselves with earth or sky
 In twos and threes, naive cosmogonists 85
 Whose views clash. Nomad inlanders meanwhile
 Begin to cluster where the totem
 Of a certain vibrant egg-yolk yellow
 Or pelt of what emerging animal
 Acts on the straggler like a trumpet call 90
 To form a more sophisticated unit.
 By supertime two ragged wooden clouds
 Have formed. In one, a Sheik with beard
 And flashing sword hilt (he is all but finished)
 Steps forward on a tiger skin. A piece 95
 Snaps shut, and fangs gnash out at us!
 In the second cloud—they gaze from cloud to cloud
 With marked if undecipherable feeling—
 Most of a dark-eyed woman veiled in mauve

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Is being helped down from her camel (kneeling) By a small backward-looking slave or page-boy (Her son, thinks Mademoiselle mistakenly) Whose feet have not been found. But lucky finds In the last minutes before bed	100
Anchor both factions to the scene's limits And, by so doing, orient Them eye to eye across the green abyss. The yellow promises, oh bliss, To be in time a sumptuous tent.	105
<i>Puzzle begun</i> I write in the day's space, Then, while she bathes, peek at Mademoiselle's Page to the curé: “. . . cette innocente mère, Ce pauvre enfant, que deviendront-ils?” ²¹ Her azure script is curlicued like pieces Of the puzzle she will be telling him about.	110
(Fearful incuriosity of childhood! “Tu as l’accent allemande,” ²² said Dominique. Indeed. Mademoiselle was only French by marriage. Child of an English mother, a remote Descendant of the great explorer Speke, ²³ And Prussian father. No one knew. I heard it Long afterwards from her nephew, a UN Interpreter. His matter-of-fact account Touched old strings. My poor Mademoiselle, With 1939 about to shake	115
This world where “each was the enemy, each the friend” To its foundations, kept, though signed in blood, Her peace a shameful secret to the end.) “Schlaf wohl, chéri.” ²⁴ Her kiss. Her thumb Crossing my brow against the dreams to come.	120
	125
	130

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²¹ “cette innocente mère, / Ce pauvre enfant, qui deviendront-ils?”: French: “This innocent mother, / This poor child, what will become of them?”

²² “Tu as l’accent allemande”: French: “You have a German accent.”

²³ Speke: John Hanning Speke (1827–1864), the English officer who explored Africa and was the first Westerner to reach (with Sir Richard Burton [1821–1890]) Lake Tanganyika and (by himself) Lake Victoria.

²⁴ “Schlaf wohl, chéri”: “Sleep well, dear one.” Mademoiselle is again mixing German and French.

This World that shifts like sand, its unforeseen
 Consolidations and elate routine,
 Whose Potentate had lacked a retinue?
 Lo! it assembles on the shrinking Green.

Gunmetal-skinned or pale, all plumes and scars, 135
 Of Vassalage the noblest avatars—
 The very coffee-bearer in his vair
 Vest is a swart Highness, next to ours.

Kef²⁵ easing Boredom, and iced syrups, thirst, 140
 In guessed-at glooms old wives who know the worst
 Outswat that virile fiction of the New:
 “Insh’Allah,²⁶ he will tire—” “—or kill her first!”

(Hardly a proper subject for the Home,
 Work of—dear Richard,²⁷ I shall let *you* comb
 Archives and learned journals for his name— 145
 A minor lion attending on Gérôme.)²⁸

While, thick as Thebes²⁹ whose presently complete
 Gates close behind them, Houri and Afreet³⁰
 Both claim the Page. He wonders whom to serve,
 And what his duties are, and where his feet, 150

And if we’ll find, as some before us did,
 That piece of Distance deep in which lies hid
 Your tiny apex sugary with sun,
 Eternal Triangle, Great Pyramid!

Then Sky alone is left, a hundred blue 155
 Fragments in revolution, with no clue
 To where a Niche will open. Quite a task,
 Putting together Heaven, yet we do.

(continued next page)

²⁵ Kef: Literally “pleasure” in Arabic; hence, hashish smoked to induce that state.

²⁶ Insh’Allah: “God willing,” an Islamic formulation in Arabic.

²⁷ Richard: Richard Howard (1929–2022), the American poet, critic, translator, friend of Merrill’s, and the dedicatee of this poem.

²⁸ Gérôme: Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), the French academic painter and printmaker who often rendered Middle Eastern scenes.

²⁹ Thebes: The ancient capital of Egypt, on the Nile in Upper Egypt.

³⁰ Houri and Afreet: A female attendant spirit in the Moslem paradise and an evil demon in Arabian mythology respectively.

It's done. Here under the table all along
 Were those missing feet. It's done. 160

The dog's tail thumping. Mademoiselle sketching
 Costumes for a coming harem drama
 To star the goosegirl. All too soon the swift
 Dismantling. Lifted by two corners,
 The puzzle hung together—and did not. 165

Irresistibly a populace
 Unstitched of its attachments, rattled down.
 Power went to pieces as the witch
 Slithered easily from Virtue's gown.
 The blue held out for time, but crumbled, too. 170

The city had long fallen, and the tent,
 A separating sauce mousseline,³¹
 Been swept away. Remained the green
 On which the grown-ups gambled. A green dusk.
 First lightning bugs. Last glow of west 175
 Green in the false eyes of (coincidence)
Our mangy tiger safe on his bared hearth.

Before the puzzle was boxed and readdressed
 To the puzzle shop in the mid-Sixties,
 Something tells me that one piece contrived 180
 To stay in the boy's pocket. How do I know?
 I know because so many later puzzles

Had missing pieces—Maggie Teyte's³² high notes
 Gone at the war's end, end of the vogue for collies,
 A house torn down; and hadn't Mademoiselle 185
 Kept back her pitiful bit of truth as well?
 I've spent the last days, furthermore,

Ransacking Athens for that translation of "Palme."
 Neither the Goethehaus nor the National Library
 Seems able to unearth it. Yet I can't 190
 Just be imagining. I've seen it. Know
 How much of the sun-ripe original

Felicity Rilke made himself forego
 (Who loved French words—verger, mûr, parfumer)³³
 In order to render its underlying sense. 195
 Know already in that tongue of his

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³¹ sauce mousseline: Hollandaise sauce with whipped cream folded in.

³² Maggie Teyte: The English soprano (1888–1976).

³³ verger, mûr, parfumer: French: "Orchard, ripe, to perfume."

What Pains, what monolithic Truths
Shadow stanza to stanza's symmetrical
Rhyme-rutted pavement. Know that ground plan left
Sublime and barren, where the warm Romance 200
Stone by stone faded, cooled; the fluted nouns
Made taller, lonelier than life
By leaf-carved capitals in the afterglow.
The owlet umlaut peeps and hoots
Above the open vowel. And after rain 205
A deep reverberation fills with stars.

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it
(Or found—I wander through the ruin of S 210
Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
Color of context, imperceptibly
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
To shade and fiber, milk and memory. 215

“Lost in Translation”: A brief map, by line number (l. or ll.)

- ll. 1–13: Merrill sets the scene: a mansion’s library during “A summer without parents” (the poem’s first puzzle). A child described as “the boy” or “he”—and later as “I,” the poet looking back on and reinhabiting his younger self—waits for a jigsaw puzzle to arrive.
- ll. 14 to 37: In lieu of a parent or friend his age, the boy has Mademoiselle, a nanny who speaks in a curious mix of French and German. (In parentheses, we flash-forward to the adult Merrill, who has been reading French poetry and remembering—and misremembering—German translations. For much of the poem, Merrill cordons his present-day self to parentheses; eventually the boy and the man, “he” and “I,” will start to merge.)
- ll. 38 to 56: The puzzle arrives! What it depicts isn’t yet clear, though each piece has its own distinctive shape and hints at some larger representation.
- ll. 57 to 82: Mademoiselle gets started on the puzzle’s borders— (But here the adult Merrill breaks in with a sudden association: a memory of watching a magician or psychic “medium” correctly guessing what’s hidden inside a box. “All this lay years ahead,” Merrill assures himself, though the interconnections between past and present are striking, almost magical.)
- ll. 83 to 109: Back to the puzzle, mid-assembly. Its depiction gradually materializes: an Eastern or Oriental scene, complete with “a Sheik with beard,” “a tiger skin” rug, “a dark-eyed woman veiled in mauve,” and “a small backward-looking slave or page-boy.” The boy’s and Mademoiselle’s interpretations of the scene begin to diverge.
- ll. 110 to 130: Stepping away from the puzzle, the boy—now a first-person “I”—turns to writing in his Line-a-Day and reading Mademoiselle’s letters. (The adult Merrill also steps away, thinking ahead to what he’ll someday learn about Mademoiselle.) Mademoiselle bids the boy goodnight, “Crossing my brow against the dreams to come” . . .
- ll. 131 to 160: . . . and in deftly rhymed stanzas as vividly animated as dreams, the puzzle comes together, and the figures it depicts spring to life. Inspired by the antiquated Orientalist scene, Merrill adopts the rhyme scheme (*abba*) and capitalized nouns of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1851), a collection of Persian quatrains translated into English by the Victorian poet Edward FitzGerald—for a time, Merrill’s favorite poem. (One cheeky stanza in parentheses addresses the poem’s dedicatee, the poet and translator Richard Howard.)
- ll. 161 to 177: “All too soon” after the puzzle’s conclusion comes “the swift / Dismantling,” leaving the child Merrill back in his own puzzling domestic scene.
- ll. 178 to 206: Turning decisively to the present, the adult Merrill wrestles with the suspicion that his life’s various puzzles—emotional and familial, historical and literary—all have their “missing pieces.” “How do I know?” A series of sentences anchored on that verb, “know,” attempts some explanations.
- l. 207: Wondering aloud, the poem’s only one-line stanza makes a worrying case: Are missing pieces forever “Lost,” irretrievably “buried”?
- ll. 208 to 215: The poem’s last stanza first makes the opposite case—“But nothing’s lost”—and then achieves a gorgeous synthesis: “Or else: all is translation / And every bit of us is lost in it.” (“Or found,” a final parenthetical continues to muse, thinking of S, short for Strato, Merrill’s Greek ex.) The poem ends not with argument or assertion but with verbal music (listen to all those rhymes) and a closing image—“a self-effacing tree,” standing tall amid the desert’s “waste”—derived from the puzzle’s Oriental scene and the past’s “milk and memory.”