

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

**“Look Closely at the Letters”: A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry
Bonus Handout for Week 6: Merrill at Home | April 5, 2023
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TEN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY POEMS ABOUT AND/OR WRITTEN IN STONINGTON:

1. Brigit Pegeen Kelly, “Black Swan” (*The Orchard*, 2004)
2. Daniel Hall, “Neoclassical” (*Under Sleep*, 2007)
3. Richie Hofmann, “First Night in Stonington” (*Second Empire*, 2015)
4. Richie Hofmann, “Mirror” (*Second Empire*, 2015)
5. J. D. McClatchy, “My Plot” (*The New Yorker*, January 22, 2018)
6. Nate Klug, “The Pokémon Go People” (*Hosts and Guests*, 2020)
7. Dan Chiasson, “Coda: Stonington” (*The Math Campers*, 2020)
8. James Longenbach, “In the Village” (*Forever*, 2021)
9. James Longenbach, “School Street” (*Forever*, 2021)
10. Walt Hunter, “The Swimmers” (*Some Flowers*, 2022)

Brigit Pegeen Kelly, “Black Swan” (*The Orchard*, 2004)¹

I told the boy I found him under a bush.
What was the harm? I told him he was sleeping
And that a black swan slept beside him,
The swan’s feathers hot, the scent of the hot feathers
And of the bush’s hot white flowers
As rank and sweet as the stewed milk of a goat.
The bush was in a strange garden, a place
So old it seemed to exist outside of time.
In one spot, great stone steps leading nowhere.
In another, statues of horsemen posting giant stone horses
Along a high wall. And here, were triangular beds
Of flowers flush with red flowers. And there,
Circular beds flush with white. And in every bush
And bed flew small birds and the cries of small birds.
I told the boy I looked for him a long time
And when I found him I watched him sleeping,
His arm around the swan’s moist neck,
The swan’s head tucked fast behind the boy’s back,
The feathered breast and the bare breast breathing as one,
And then very swiftly and without making a sound,
So that I would not wake the sleeping bird,
I picked the boy up and slipped him into my belly,
The way one might slip something stolen
Into a purse. And brought him here
And so it was. And so it was. A child with skin
So white it was not like the skin of a boy at all,
But like the skin of a newborn rabbit, or like the skin
Of a lily, pulseless and thin. And a giant bird
With burning feathers. And beyond them both
A pond of incredible blackness, overarched
With ancient trees and patterned with shifting shades,
The small wind in the branches making a sound
Like the knocking of a thousand wooden bells
Things of such beauty. But still I might
Have forgotten, had not the boy, who stands now
To my waist, his hair a cap of shining feathers,
Come to me today weeping because some older boys
Had taunted him and torn his new coat,

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¹ Kelly appears to draw the title “Black Swan,” the character of a “boy,” and perhaps more besides from Merrill’s “The Black Swan” (1945). Kelly wrote much of *The Orchard* during her 2000–2001 residency at the James Merrill House.

Had he not, when I bent my head to his head,
Said softly, but with great anger, "I wish I had never
Been born. I wish I were back under the bush,"
Which made the old garden rise up again,
Shadowed and more strange. Small birds
Running fast and the grapple of chill coming on.
There was the pond, half-circled with trees. And there
The flowerless bush. But there was no swan.
There was no black swan. And beneath
The sound of the wind, I could hear, dark and low,
The giant stone hooves of the horses,
Striking and striking the hardening ground.

Daniel Hall, “Neoclassical” (*Under Sleep*, 2007)²

Round the point, flotillas of swans come trailing
sunlit V’s and W’s, otherworldly,
but a little corny. When they arrived here
no one remembers.

Nor can we remember the explanation
why the swans are in the ascendant, surging
even as our own population trickles
out to the suburbs.

Garbo Lobster’s fleet has been sold; Monsanto,
windows broken, whistles an absent air; New
Yorkers long since bought up the nicer houses;
God, it’s depressing. . . .

Village life is moribund, swans or no swans,
ever since the agora folded up and
drifted down Route 1 to the A&P (that
meeting of waters).

There the blue-haired villagers wander endless
aisles of wontons, jicama, squid-ink pasta,
lemongrass—a vision of purgatory
clear to myopics.

Yesterday a family of tourists watched as
swans ripped loaves of bread into soggy tatters,
hissing, stabbing. . . . Finally the little girl said,
Can’t we go home now?

One, still hungry, paddled in closer, striking
poses learned through aeons of evolution,
tensely splayed, like someone who cannot bear to
touch his own body.

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² “Neoclassical” adopts a neoclassical form: an Americanized version of the Sapphic stanza, which Merrill used in “Investiture at Cecconi’s” and “Farewell Performance,” from *The Inner Room* (1988), and only a few other poems.

Likewise our millennial rage for order.
That these birds are immigrants makes the yearning
even keener: we should just round them up and
—What am I saying?

Yes, go home, the village is saying, softly,
firmly, in its passive-aggressive way, there's
nothing left but realtors, antiques, a newsstand.
On your way out, though,

scan the racks of three-for-a-dollar postcards.
What's with all the classical architecture?
Columns, spaces—beauty and truth, I guess? What's
made and what happens?

Evening finds us high in our rooftop aeries
facing westward, scanning the late edition:
Heaven's *vide papier*³ has been scribbled over
over and over.

Why this vague anxiety? Ah, it isn't
Lyme disease or equine encephalitis
that we fear, but wind from the wind of boredom
passive above us.

Right on cue, as bold as you please, a loner
cleaves the sky from sunset to moonrise. Funny,
how that *who-ab, who-ab* of twanging wingtips
deepens the silence.

Elsewhere, tuned a half-tone apart, the bellbuoys
pass the time in chitchat, retailing no news,
good news: one more lunatic, mundane round of
rising and falling.

³ *vide papier*: Blank page (French).

Richie Hofmann, "First Night in Stonington" (*Second Empire*, 2015)

So rare in this country to pace the streets
of another century, to wander and survey
gray alleys, cobbled by colonists and pilgrims,
and crooked houses later built for fleets
of Portuguese fishermen, whose heirs, today,
received the bishop's yearly blessing: sailors' hymns
and holy water. In the town square, someone
has set a cannonball, the balding, black veneer
freckled with rust, on a tapered pillar embellished
with the date of its arrival, a battle won
by port-merchants and innkeepers' wives. All here:
these long-dead people's memories, cherished
and chiseled into iron.

In this apartment, too,
another story preserved in the black chair
where no one sits; in boxes stuffed with photographs,
loose buttons, and playing cards; the faded blue
of Japanese prints. A book, open like hands in prayer,
rustles when the window draws a breath.

Richie Hofmann, “Mirror” (*Second Empire*, 2015)⁴

You’d expect a certain view from such a mirror—
clearer
than one that hangs in the entry and decays.
I gaze
past my reflection toward other things:
bat wings,
burnt gold upon blue, which decorate the wall
and all
those objects collected from travels, now seen
between
its great, gold frame, diminished with age:
a stage
where, still, the supernatural corps de ballet
displays
its masquerade in the reflected light.
At night,
I thought I’d see the faces of the dead.
Instead,
the faces of the ghosted silver sea
saw me.

⁴ Compare Hofmann’s “Mirror” with Merrill’s “Mirror,” from *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959) (week six handout, p. 2; *Selected Poems*, pp. 9–10).

J. D. McClatchy, "My Plot," *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2018.

It seemed as good a time as any to buy
A cemetery plot. The price is bound
To spike, the local real estate being
What it is
For both the living and the dead, and seeing
How few opportunities to make a sound
Decision are left as our debilities multiply,

I signed up for a double bed, the gruff
Six inches above an adamant rockledge here
That doesn't allow for anything but ashes—
Yours and mine,
I trust. Why molder while the family rehashes
As ghosts the grievances that went in one ear . . . ?
Weren't the wars one survived aboveground enough?

While waving the check to dry its bottom line,
I asked the gravedigger who is it owns
The space next to ours, now a crabgrass aisle.
He scratched his chin,
Then named a woman whose flaking shingle style
Is eight down from mine, a woman I've known,
Good God, for decades, who's now by chance assigned

To be playing second harp at the stand right next
To mine. Mistress Quickly, who has the dirt
On everybody—the ironies of the hereafter!
And that very
Night, at the village Costume Ball—the laughter,
The band, the strings of lights, the married flirt
And the divorcée pretending to be perplexed—

My friends and neighbors were having the time of their lives.
In fact, it was life itself—fizzy and full
Of contrivances to keep itself afloat.
Ahead by three
Martinis, I heard a snigger-quote-unquote
About my disguise, admittedly an eyeful—
That frosted mophead Andy Warhol, deprived

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Of pallor or purpose, so trite I am at once
 Singled out in my turtleneck as a fool.
 But by now the sozzled dancers are circling—it's late—
 The bonfire
 In the middle of the green. I ingratiate
 Myself clumsily, a minor Lord of Misrule,
Into the conga line of squeals and grunts.

And of course it is *her* hand I'm holding. I can see
 Her face in the firelight, podgy and flushed,
 Her head thrown back, howling, on layers of neck,
 Greasy, joyous,
 Clearly in charge of this ghoulish discothèque
 Where flappers and freaks, titans and nuns are squashed
As she leads their silhouettes toward eternity.

Didn't Warhol say it was a nostalgia for *now*
 That drives us baby boomers—or *then*, do I mean?
 Or for however much time is left to ponder
 What it was
 We swore we would never play false or squander.
 I watch us wamble down Water Street between
The moment and the mortuary, somehow

Reassured that when we end up at the Point
 To await the first clumsy hints of dawn,
 I'll have remembered why our gritty cremains,
 Mine and yours,
 Will be kept out of sight. A closet shelf explains
 As much as the shovel of earth and a square of lawn . . .
(—I grin my thanks to the stranger passing a joint.

To take a toke from another tip of light
 I duck behind a rock, and there is Kaye,
 My once and future neighbor, crouched, staring
 At the sea,
 I sit beside her and take her hand, somewhere in
 Outer space. I offer the roach. "Hey!
Why not!" Two fingernails hold on tight.)

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. . . Explains at least why the dead are shown the door,
Written out of the script, the tale having taken
A sudden turn elsewhere and its onetime lead
Overnight
The know-it-alls decide has gone to seed,
Always unfairly, perhaps unwisely forsaken
In favor of some comer the director's fallen for.

“Not many nights like this,” she slurs. Or not
Many more, I think to add, but stop
Myself and toss my goofy wig away
As if it were
The silvery moon unwanted now that day-
Break's come, whose calendar-page splendor's a flop,
A drop curtain shown up as both garish and squat.

Weariness and booze and dope can't numb
My sense that Kaye, old girl, will be just fine.
I look at her again, I look and see
Her acceptance,
Her ease in exchanging gloom for gaiety.
The getup for each is headed for the clothesline
To be aired and beaten until the time has come.

“A little sad?” She nods and I know why—
Midnight's slew of stars, our motley friends
The comedy's cast with its delicious plot—
Revelation,
Forgiveness and love—the curtain's not
Coming up on someday soon, no amends
To be restored where she and I will lie.

I help her up. We're both a bit unsteady.
When I offer to brush the sand off the back
Of her Jackie O culottes, she lifts her shades:
“Whatever.”
The hour's at hand to brave the barricades
Of rolling eyes and marketeers and quacks.
Arm in arm, we both must sense we're ready.

But the view from our private boxes will make nothing plain.
Where are the shepherd, the king's lost daughter, the prince?
There was a letter and a sip of poisoned rum—
Now, nothing.
“Bravo!” is a boy calling his dog to come.
We'll never know how the story ends, since
The applause will only be the autumn rain.

Nate Klug, “The Pokémon Go People” (*Hosts and Guests*, 2020)

Not pretending to be shopping,
they canvass cobblestoned Water Street, nearsighted
as beach sweepers, their devices feeling ahead
for which alleyway, or corner of a yard,
might sprout a Snorlax, a purple Aerodactyl.

“These are the Pokémon Go people,” explains a villager
to her guest, careful not to point as one group passes,
their jean shorts to mid-shin, arms arabesqued
with dates or skewered hearts, some steering strollers.

Scattered among the eighteenth-century colonials,
the Improvement Association’s clapboard plaques
remember Hale, ship captain, and Stewart, joiner,
each calling stenciled right beneath the name.
In this new life, vocation’s not so certain—

assignments can vibrate at any time, the location
of a needed creature flash, then disappear.
You almost have to be waiting there already,
disconsolate after a day of nothing
as light drains at the former hotspot in Cannon Square.

When two wild Pikachu clamber
over the rocks, the woman shrieks and punches her partner,
to make sure he’d seen. A postcoital quiet
on their drive back home to Pawcatuck.

Dan Chiasson, “Coda: Stonington” (*The Math Campers*, 2020)

On the deck upstairs, I read about
the deck upstairs. In the daybed
I read about the daybed. In the books
I read I read about the books I read.

*

High up, all night, I thought about
my sons, how when they wake
I will be finishing this line:
my night their day from here on out.

*

Birds, check. First light. Sunrise.
Pole vaulting all night long.
My outline splayed on the guest bed
Where Mary McCarthy stayed.

*

The sponsors: the bats, the bottles;
The milk-glass tabletop, the china cup.
The *Santorini Guide* and smiling lads from 1982.
A tin mini–license plate read “Jim.”

*

In a book on one of the shelves
I left a copy of this poem
changed slightly since that night
changed crucially yet slightly

*

since the night I lay on the star deck
and made my body an angel
in the warm September night
above the Sound and its bright buoys

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the way I did when I was a small child
in a snowbank in my zippered snowsuit
you can find this poem inside a book
on the shelves in the hidden study

three to the left of the *Santorini Guide*
though when you find it you will see
the poem changed slightly, crucially—
because, you know why: because time.

James Longenbach, "In the Village" (*Forever*, 2021)

1.

Shortly before I died,
Or possibly after,
I moved to a small village by the sea.

You'll recognize it, as did I, because I've written
About this village before.
The rocky sliver of land, the little houses where the fishermen once lived—

We had everything we needed: a couple of rooms
Overlooking the harbor,
A small collection of books,
Paperbacks, the pages
Brittle with age.

How, if I'd never seen
The village, had I pictured it so accurately?
How did I know we'd be happy there,
Happier than ever before?

The books reminded me of what,
In our youth,
We called literature.

2.

The sentences I've just written
Took it out of me.
I searched for the words,
And I resisted them as soon as I put them down.

Now, listening to them again, what I hear
Is not so much nostalgia
As a love of beginning. A wish

Not to be removed
From time but
Always to be immersed in it,
The boats come in, the boats go out—

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3.

After a routine ultrasound revealed a fifteen-centimeter mass, my left kidney was removed robotically on February 12. Fifteen months later, nodules were discovered in my lungs and peritoneum. Two subsequent rounds of therapy failed to impede their growth, so I enrolled in a trial, a treatment not yet FDA approved.

I walked down High Street to the harbor, though when I say *walked* I mean imagined; I hadn't been there yet.

4.

Of ghosts pursued, forgotten, sought anew—
Everywhere I go
The trees are full of them.

From trees come books, that, when they open,
Lead you to expect a person
On the other side:

One hand having pulled
The doorknob
Towards him, the other

Held out, open,
Beckoning
You forward—

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5.⁵

The Branch Will Not Break.

A Cold Spring.

Leaflets.

The Lost World.

The Moving Target.

Nightmare Begins Responsibility.

Rivers and Mountains.

The Story of Our Lives.

Untitled Subjects.

Water Street.

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⁵ These ten italicized phrases are titles of poetry collections by (in order) James Wright, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Randall Jarrell, W. S. Merwin, Michael S. Harper, John Ashbery, Mark Strand, Richard Howard, and James Merrill. All of them are early or midcareer collections, published between 1955 (Bishop) and 1975 (Harper)—a period that includes Longenbach's childhood and early adolescence.

6.

Ash-blond, tall, a sweater
Knotted by its sleeves around his neck,
A boy is leaning on a bicycle. Deftly when she reaches him

A girl slips to the grass, one hand straightening her skirt
The other tugging at the boy,
Who remains standing, to sit beside her.

Their heads are close
Enough to be touching;
Their lips are still—

A book is the future.
You dream
Of reading it, and once you've finished, it's a miracle, you know the past.

The sky fills with stars. The sun
Climbs every morning
Over Watch Hill, dropping behind the harbor at dusk.

Water Street runs past
Church and Wall,
Harmony and School,
Until it crosses Omega, by the sea.

James Longenbach, "School Street" (*Forever*, 2021)

The person I once was found himself
In the present, which was the only place he could be.
The dog that yesterday had barked
At his empty dish barked again.
The stars were still shining,
Though the brilliance of the sun obscured them so completely
You'd believe they'd disappeared.
Time to walk to the paddock.
Will the roses be blooming? Will Penny be there, too?
Selfishly we planted cornflowers, delphiniums,
A different bed for every shade.
From behind the wisteria came children, then grandchildren—
The girls wore smocked dresses, dresses my mother
Had made, the boys had floppy hair.
The things we made
Ourselves seemed permanent,
But like the stars invisible, even the things
We made from words. Downstairs
The kitchen, the living room, everything in place:
The bed could fold up in the wall.
But upstairs a ladder where each evening, one by one,
We'd climb into the crow's nest
To rehearse the stars. Hold the railing! Don't fall!
How did we afford this house?
Why, if it exists
In the present,
Am I speaking in the past?

Walt Hunter, “The Swimmers” (*Some Flowers*, 2022)

1

This September morning it was snowing in Denver.
I told you that I dreamed my face was being
lifted off my face. You told me that you couldn’t find your hat.
The whirling wicker houses full of dreams
have never been ours, but the basements look the same:
putting the lid down on the washer, turning the dial
under the bare bulb. The light falls where it can
and makes a house we live in while the light lasts.
It’s true what Jennifer said this morning on the docks:
the shepherds in the ancient pastoral, unhoused, say “nevertheless”
and share a meal together before parting.
*To have such sorwe and be not ded*⁶—a car honks
to get us out of the way. And a pair of girls, faces masked,
are running fast as they can down Harmony Street, toward the Sound.

2

Bobbing in the water talking to Ken about Chaucer
I hold my hand up to block the sudden glare
and go down under the chop.
Our friends are swimming longer distances
now that the days for swimming are almost over.
What have I done the last twenty years
besides come to know you? First with laughter
and deflection, then with anger and loss,
now with truth hanging in the afternoon
over our heads, and whispering something
that we strain to hear. There were years
I thought I knew that language, sent back
every signal with my own reply. But now
it’s just me coming out of the water toward you,
the day after the storm, when the surface moves
with the weeds and wrack, billowing up from the rocks.

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⁶ *To have such sorwe and be not ded*: a line from Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Book of the Duchess” (c. 1368–72); modernized, the line might read “To have such sorrow and be not dead.”

3

This is the first evening when the summer changes,
the water from the fog hangs on
the telephone lines. A full moon scabs and heals.
The light is more hospitable to shadow now.
The leaves record the intervals of wind,
the light-strewn leaves and cigarette butts
here outside the United Church of Stonington.
Last night Jonathan stopped talking
and pointed at the seabirds breaking pieces
off the harbor. Later, after everyone had gone,
while coming up the stairs, I thought I heard
the swallows, but when I looked it was
the blue and calmless sky, unbroken.

4

September and I sit here on the water,
taking notes for you. I know these places
where the first hour of the day is hottest.
The shadows of the ropes are blackbirds
scrawled on the docks. Four teenage boys
stand wide awake in the gazebo. "It's probably
too shallow to go in." They're looking away
from the water as the blinds come up
on the near end of summer. The night last night
was limitless, the bitter taste of something
I had said to you kept me awake. But that was years ago,
and I had come back, and you had come back.
Put your love in mind, the new song goes
with the old words. Or is it *mine*?⁷

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⁷ "Put your love in mine" is a line from the song "Love in Mind" (2020) by the band Big Thief.

5

Never having wanted to be so thoughtless, never
so hopeless, never having wanted to drive these
northern distances without you, never having
to risk the end of myself, the ruin of the house
I kept inside my mind for you, the ruin of my mind,
the linear tear the sky makes through itself
while the world burns, the ruin of the world
to shivering jets of toxin where Joanna
jerks her leg up from the murk. It could have been
the algae. It could have been the warmth sending us out
each day, then into separate houses when the sunset
piles its glamor into the table like a mirror and it will
have been the air that sabled the pine, the elm, the oak,
the lawn, the air itself, the aim of the trail of the boat's
wake. Endlessly the lights in houses flicker and come on.

6

Alone on the deck, I watch for signs of life
in the cupola windows. It's the panic hour:
I can see my heartlessness in the ashen sky
that's neither ash nor cloud but something
of pure temperature. I know that if I wait
it will dissolve. The day slumps in a line
from Westerly to Old Mystic, fracturing the current.
But it makes a brightness anyway. You and I
grew up unnoticed on our front lawns, waiting
for the past to change to weather. Now the past is over.
Walking under the mountains, you're so far from here
that I've mistaken clouds for the snow falling.
None of the things I ever asked you for you couldn't do.
I watch the trees grow dark with night, but slowly.