

James Merrill

Fall 2022

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER



POETRY ON THE PORCH MAKES A COMEBACK

EACH JUNE, A MERRILL HOUSE RESIDENCY and stipend is reserved for the winner of the Yale Younger Poets Prize. The poet is invited to give a reading hosted by Merrill house friends and members of the 107 Society. This wonderful partnership resumed this summer after a two-year pandemic hiatus. Robert Wood Lynn, introduced by Willard Spiegelman, read from his debut collection *Mothman Apologia*, which explores love, grief, the opioid epidemic, and coming of age. A graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law, Robert splits his time between Brooklyn and Rockbridge County, Virginia. His chapbook *How to Maintain Eye Contact* is forthcoming from Button Poetry in January 2023. Watch Robert's Studio 107 interview at jamesmerrillhouse.org/studio107. Thanks to Marit McCabe and Derek Dubois, who offered their terrace and garden for this year's event.



"LITTLE VISITORS" ATTRACT HUGE CROWDS

ON THE DAY OF STONINGTON'S ART WALK this September, Dan Potter met newcomers to the Merrill House Visitors Center with "ripostes of elan" over his little critters. Tiny sculptures in intimate positions, arranged by Sylvia Lynch (co-chair of JMH's Conservation Committee), are being snatched off new shelves with all kinds of giddy brio for little or nothing. Most are priced below \$50; many at \$20.

As a child Potter met Merrill in the 50s at art shows in Ann Fuller's Stonington Art Gallery just around the corner, where the poet bought similar critters and soon became a close friend. Half the profits from the show go to support residencies for poets and writers at the Merrill House. Potter's artwork will be on display and available for purchase through the holiday season.



Returning Summer Fellows Offer Writing Tips at the VC

THE LAUNCH OF THE Merrill House Visitors Center coincided with the arrival of two Returning Summer Fellows, novelist Claire Luchette (July 2020) and fiction writer Molly Anders (September 2014). Both were eager to make use of the new space: Claire with a reading and book-signing; Molly with a writing workshop. Once again we are grateful to Lynn and Jeff Callahan, whose generosity enables us to offer two former fellows a week-long residency at 107 Water Street.



At 11 years old, Dan Potter had a sculpture in the Whitney Biennial. Now, at age 75, he has mounted a display of his latest pieces in the Merrill House Visitors Center.



YOUNG WRITER STEPS UP TO THE PLATE

EACH YEAR the Merrill House Committee awards the James Merrill Prize for Creative Writing to a graduating senior nominated by Stonington High School's English department. The latest recipient of the \$500 stipend is Madelyn "Maddie" Stepski, who also shined as All-State catcher for the Stonington Bears softball team. She is currently a freshman at Stony Brook University. Congratulations to Maddie from everyone on the Merrill Committee.



MEET THE COLLECTIONS INTERNS

IN LATE 2021, the Merrill House joined Connecticut Collections, a project of the Connecticut League of History Organizations. Beyond offering professional workshops, CLHO affords a database that will allow the Merrill House Collections to be centralized, digitized and standardized to provide greater accessibility for scholars and interested parties. This project has made significant strides thanks to Hayley Edgar, who signed on as the first Merrill House Collections intern.

A recent graduate of Bard College, Hayley focuses on gender issues such as "femininity and obscenity" in her own photography. She was not familiar with James Merrill's writing, but saw the archival work in the Merrill Apartment as aligning with her own goals. During her 8-month internship, she focused on migrating the Merrill House art collection into the Connecticut Collections database and setting it up for future scholars. She found the database "very clean, organized and functional," and its linkage to the Getty Research Portal very helpful: How did one label James Merrill's Birkenstocks? Answered!

Being on the LGBTQ spectrum, Hayley became engaged with Merrill himself. A Japanese gouache of three wrestlers in the Merrill collection held particular resonance, gay culture being very apparent in the painting. Hayley was intrigued by how James Merrill as a gay man "succeeded" in a seemingly straight town, affirming his unspoken privilege.

A totally positive spirit, Hayley has started Library School at Simmons University, where we all wish her much success. We are delighted that collections work is continuing with our new intern, Sophia Terry who graduated from Smith in June and is also aiming to start library school next fall. Prior to these two young women, Phoebe Boatwright provided archival support, including aligning the JMH with the Connecticut Collections. We thank them all!

— Jenny Dixon, Co-Chair Conservation

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JAMES MERRILL WAS a generous person – with his time, his interests, his writing, and his philanthropy. He played an important role in the literary life of this country, as well as nurturing future generations of writers. It is the mission of the James Merrill House to continue this tradition, providing opportunities for writers to do their work in a magical setting where Merrill's poetry is brought to life by the Ouija board, the paintings, crystals, objets d'art, thousands of books, and the famous bat wallpaper and flame-colored dining room walls – historic environs that have inspired over 100 writers in the last 27 years. The James Merrill House Committee has achieved this with an active, mostly volunteer cadre. But the building, as well as the writing and public programs, cost money to maintain and continue. We rely on you, our supporters, to make this work possible. Please consider an annual gift to support the rich programming and presence the James Merrill House brings to Stonington and the world.

Within this newsletter you will find a handy envelope, which you can return to us with your check made out to James Merrill House. Or simply scan the QR code with your smartphone camera to make your contribution online.

Thank you for your generosity!

—The James Merrill House Committee

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The Songster Who Created the Merrill Apartment's "Fantastical" Bat Wallpaper

By Dee Aldrich

WHEN VISITORS to James Merrill's upstairs residence at 107 Water Street in Stonington Borough pass through its small foyer into its living room, they find themselves interrogated by the questioning gaze of a handsome, dark-haired young man portrayed in an arresting oil painting hanging on the left hand wall. After Merrill bequeathed his Water Street building to the Stonington Village Improvement Association, it was assumed that the portrait was of the young James Merrill, whom the sensitive looking, slender young man seems to resemble. It is in fact a self-portrait by the poet's beloved southern friend, Hubbell Pierce, who designed and manufactured the highly prized "bat" wallpaper that covers the facing walls.

Pierce's gaze towards those viewing his self-portrait is in fact the self-interrogating gaze of the multitalented (albeit unheralded) artist whom James Merrill first encountered in 1950s New York. According to a 1976 profile in New York Magazine entitled "Pierce de Resistance," the New Orleans native had been a cynosure of Manhattan nightclub life, singing "wonderful and unfamiliar songs" in a number of fashionable clubs. "When Café Society faded away, so did he, and off he went to design men's wear, children's murals, and wallpaper..."

Before reinventing himself, however, Pierce performed his nightclub act in Italy. And while Merrill was in Rome in 1956, their attachment developed further. As Merrill's biographer Langdon Hammer relates, "When Pierce was in town that fall, Jimmy often went to hear him play the piano and sing Cole Porter songs in the blue and gold bar at the Orso restaurant. The music evoked for Jimmy 'a Byronic elite of fox-trotters classy enough to crack jokes while their hearts were breaking.'" Merrill and Pierce subsequently continued on to London together en route home to New York by ocean liner. The friendship endured for decades. In the 1960s, Pierce and a companion visited Merrill and his partner David Jackson in Athens.

In 1975, Merrill started work on his *Book of Ephraim*. It was the first summer in a decade in which Merrill and Jackson had spent an entire season together in Stonington. Hammer recounts that "In the spirit of renewal, Jimmy decided that the decade-old wallpaper in the sitting room 'had to go'; so he commissioned [Pierce] to create new paper based on motifs from the room's Chinese rug. Pierce's handiwork would be hung that winter. His elegant pattern adapted the carpet's swirling clouds and tiny bats... and

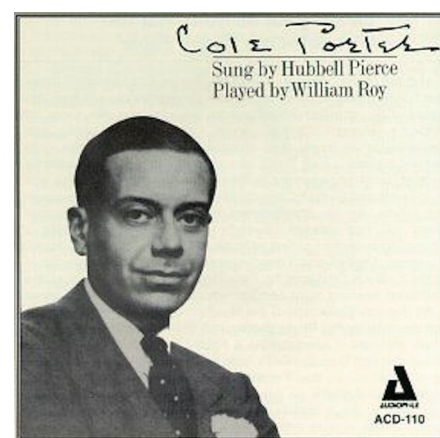


a design from one of the house's Japanese fans, set against a dark blue field." The fashion for dramatic wallpaper had become the craze of interior decorators in the 1960s, and Pierce successfully transitioned from nightclub music to wallpaper manufacturing. A couple of swatches are in the collection of the Cooper Hewitt museum in New York. Pierce collaborated with artist Ben C. Morris on those designs, but there is no evidence that any designer was involved in the creation of Merrill's "bat" wallpaper other than Pierce and Merrill himself.

Architectural historian Rachel Carley, who has extensively researched the history of the Merrill Apartment, relates that Pierce produced the wallpaper after he, Merrill, and Jackson gathered for a dinner of soufflé and cocktails at 107 Water Street. The silk-screened paper was printed exclusively for Merrill and Jackson by the New York firm of Katzenbach & Warren.

In their essay, "The Summer Palace: James Merrill's Fantastical Wallpaper" (from *James Merrill: Other Writings*, a digital catalog in the Special Collections Washington University in St. Louis), Ida McCall and Margaret Funkhouser note that Merrill wrote an introduction for a catalog on the painter Corot, in which he observed that "The writer will always envy the painter..." McCall and Funkhouser go on to describe the poet's interest in the connection between writing and the visual arts that emerged later in his epic poem *Mirabell: Books of Number*, in which "we see Merrill the designer influence Merrill the poet."

Here's how Merrill described his foun-



There are two Cole Porter record albums in Merrill House Collections, one of which is a limited pressing of Cole Porter, Sung by Hubbell Pierce, Played by William Roy, "celebrating the first half-century of Hubbell Pierce (1923-1973)."

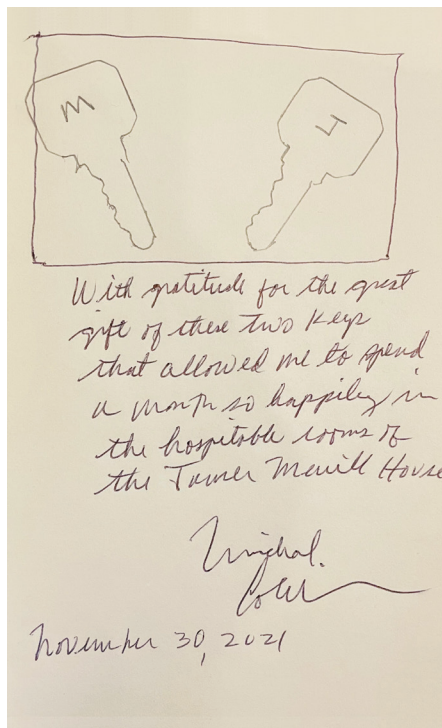
dational carpet (brought second hand from Boston by a Stonington neighbor, the wife of a local fisherman) in the poem:

The border renders in two shades of tan
And three intensities of Prussian blue
Overlapping cloudlets that give way
To limber, leotarded blue-eyed bats
—Symbols of eternity said the dealer.

Alas, the carpet today is faded greatly and pallid shades of tan and blue are all that remain; however, the wallpaper is still lively with color. McCall and Funkhouser concur:

The wallpaper is more than mere interior design: it is the artistic creation of the collaboration between Merrill and Pierce. *Mirabell: Books of Number* begins by describing the creation of the wallpaper. The wallpaper also provides the setting for the poem as it is an integral element of the room where Merrill and Jackson communicate with the spirit world via

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Two keys

made from the same blanks, stamped with the prohibition DO NOT DUPLICATE. One engraved with M, the other J, two halves of the same Egyptian crocodile jaw, although try to line them up, they're visibly mismatched, unless detached from the not-too-difficult-to-splay metal ring that like the gravity of marriage, side by side, lets them hang.

The way the locks have worn their notches and teeth is best seen by tracing each on paper, one above the other. Then it's possible to think of them in their individuation as the ridge lines of almost-duplicate, far-off mountain ranges.

Those entrusted with them, locking one door to unlock the other, go back and forth between two men's lives, crossing the landing they crossed, where *tediums*, according to M, *ignited into quarrels*. . . they vowed *not to repeat* and where for those now who hold the keys move from stage to stage, laboring *images* (M again)

till they yield a subject or, if stymied, do nothing more than pass through the phases of their moods, asking all the while the unanswerable Y, asking too, if ever by feel they'll learn, after all the time they've spent inside the spaces that M and J protect, which one opens which.

—Michael Collier
(JMH Fellow, November 2021)

Pierce

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the Ouija board. As the poem continues, Merrill and Jackson find they are talking to creatures who say they look very much like the bats represented on the wallpaper—the symbols of eternity. The wallpaper has become the medium between the spirit world and the material world in the poem. As a work of art on its own and as the subject for another work of art, the wallpaper brings together the visual and the written... the lines between reality and the created world of the poem blur.

Merrill's protégé, the poet and French scholar Alfred Corn, remarked that "Merrill had an eye for coded messages and symbols, which Jimmy found everywhere. He could make anything say more than it said...he had an ability to make the material world allegorical."

Yet, as Walter Perrie—a former Merrill House writer-in-residence and Merrill family friend—explains, Merrill was also deeply abetted in his allegorizing enterprise by the ancient Chinese iconography of the carpet and wallpaper:

SHOU is the Chinese word for longevity. It is the character shown in the big cream and gold circles on the wallpaper. RUYI (white cloud forms) are in the form of a scepter, a lucky wand, the head of which is in the shape of the fungus of immortality. A couple of Chinese emperors spent a lot of time and vast sums searching for it. In Chinese iconography it is read as MAY YOU BE GRANTED YOUR WISHES. The third good luck sign in the wallpaper design is FU, the Chinese word for happiness (but with a different tone); it is also the Chinese word for a bat. Thus the bat becomes a rebus for happiness.

Pierce's resumption of his musical career in the late 1970s prompted New York Magazine to observe: "He's back where he belongs—at the

piano, in a small and smoky room, wryly dispensing songs by Porter ('My Cozy Little Corner in the Ritz,' 'What Am I to Do?'...)." Around this time Pierce was photographed by fashion paparazzo Horst P. Horst. Evolved from his youthful self-portrait, the ever more handsome "Hub" seen in that image seems a man who has come fully into his own mature self.

Shortly after receiving the 1979 National Book Award for *Mirabell: Books of Number*, Merrill forwarded the prize money to his friend, along with this note:

Dearest Hub—
Without you how could Mirabell have manifested itself or been given a prize? The bats urge me to divide my winnings with you. Don't risk their anger by refusing.
Xxx Jas.

Pierce died in Pensacola, Florida in 1980, at age 56. His song recitals can be found online, as can (with some persistence) his illustrated children's book, *Murdoch*, which tells the playful story of a croquet-playing mouse.





POET, SCHOLAR, FRIEND

With great sadness, we remember the life and work of former Merrill Fellow, poet, critic, and teacher James Longenbach, who succumbed to kidney cancer at his home in Stonington Borough on July 29, surrounded by his family. After completing their joint residency at 107 Street in Spring 2019, Jim and his wife, the novelist Joanna Scott, resolved to purchase a house in the village, where they quickly became active, and much beloved, members of our community. Jim will also be greatly missed by his neighbors, students, and colleagues at University of Rochester, where he and Joanna taught for decades and raised their two daughters. Jim's wonderful Studio 107 interview, in which he discussed his latest books *The Lyric Now* (2020) and *Forever* (2021), can be viewed online at jamesmerrillhouse.org/studio107.

What's New?

Catching up with past Merrill Fellows

NICHOLAS BOGGS (December 2020-January 2021) Since May of this year, I've been an NEH Long Term Fellow at The New York Public Library where I'm working on a literary biography of James Baldwin, forthcoming from Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. Grateful to spend the Fall as the inaugural Walter O. Evans Fellow at the Beinecke Library at Yale.

HENRI COLE (September 2021) Cole's article "Past, Present, Perfect: An Overdue Pilgrimage to Stonington, Connecticut"—an account of his friendship with James Merrill, and subsequent experience as a Merrill Fellow—appeared in *The Paris Review* in August.

ARMEN DAVOUDIAN (July-August 2021) I have a brief update to share involving two poems I wrote while at the Merrill House: My poem "Snow" won the 2022 Lyric Poetry Award from the Poetry Society of America. Another poem, "Facing Pages," was published in *Poetry* magazine in April.

AMY GLYNN (Oct 2012) My second book, *Romance Language*, won the 2022 Able Muse Book Award and will be available in spring 2023. It's scaffolded by a passage from Merrill's *Changing Light at Sandover*.

JENNIFER GROTZ (November 2020) I wanted to share two news items: *Everything I Don't Know*, the selected poems of Jerzy Ficowski that I co-translated from the Polish with Piotr Sommer, received the PEN Award for Best Book of Poetry in Translation this year. Also, my fourth book of poems, *Still Falling* (which I assembled as a JMH fellow), is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in May 2023.

WALT HUNTER (September 2020) This autumn I joined the English faculty at Case Western Reserve University as associate professor and chairperson. I was also appointed contributing poetry editor at the *Atlantic Monthly*. I'm thrilled to bring a wide array of diverse voices into the magazine. I'm also grateful to be publishing my own collection *Some Flowers* (MadHat Press) this fall, and to have received a grant from the Robert B. Silvers Foundation for the completion of *The American House Poem, 1945-2015*, which will be published by Oxford University Press.

ROBERT WOOD LYNN (YYP June 2022) My latest update is that I have a new poetry chapbook, *How To Maintain Eye Contact* forthcoming from Button Poetry in January 2023. Already missing my time in Stonington and everyone from the Merrill House committee.

MATTHEW MINICUCCI (December 2019-January 2020) Excited to share good news: my third full-length collection, *Dual*, will be published by Acre Books in Fall 2023! And my first ever short story publication, "Best Supporting Actor," was in *The Collagist*. Many thanks to Gabe Blackwell for believing in a poet writing a weird story about a minor TV character showing up to work to be killed off...

JAMES REIDEL (Spring 2013) Just published *Manon's World: A Hauntology of a Daughter in the Triangle of Mahler, Walter Gropius and Franz Werfel* (Sea Gull Books, 2022). Much of its research and writing was done at James Merrill House. More recently, I've been writing and publishing prose poems and am presently writing a revisionary history of the "Fatty" Arbuckle case of a century ago with an emphasis on the comedian's alleged victim, the fashion model and silent film actress Virginia Rappe.

TERESE SVOBODA (November 2015) Along with prepping my novel *Dog on Fire*

(out next March), and *Roxy and Coco* (the novel I'm publishing the year after), I've published a preview of my second memoir, *Hitler and My Mother-in-Law*, at 3 Quarks Daily, and will be doing a regular column for them. I've been invited to Paris to lecture for the Observatoire de littérature américaine contemporaine. Viva la Jerry Lewis!

LYSLEY TENORIO (February 2020) My novel, *The Son of Good Fortune*, was published in 2020, and won the 2020 New American Voices Award. It's been optioned by Amazon for a TV adaptation, produced by Riz Ahmed and Lulu Wang. I received a 2021-22 fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and a 2022 Guggenheim Fellowship for Fiction. This fall, I joined the faculty of The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.

MIKE TYRELL (2003-2004) My poetry collection *The Arsonist's Letters* dropped in early 2022. And I have poetry forthcoming in *Del Sol Review* and am acting in a play called *Prairie Fire*, at Teatro LATEA, in October.

KATHLEEN WINTER (December 2014-January 2015) In March I had a residency at the Dora Maar House in Provence, where I much enjoyed recording a video interview for the Merrill House Studio 107 series. My new chapbook *Cat's Tongue* came out in Texas Review Press in 2022.

MARK WUNDERLICH (Spring 2017) This summer I served as a Poetry Faculty member at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. At Bennington College, I have been promoted to Executive Director of the Bennington Writing Seminars. A recent poem was published by the Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day, and I have a poem included in the most recent Best American Poetry.

MATTHEW ZAPRUDER (Spring 2003) I just guest edited Best American Poetry 2022, and I have a new book coming out in April with Unnamed Press in LA, *Story of a Poem*.

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For more information about our programs, visit us
at jamesmerrillhouse.org and follow us on Facebook
and Instagram.

Calendar of Events

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22
Laura Kolbe & Anna DeForest
JMH YouTube, 5pm-6pm

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19
Christopher Spaide &
Willard Spiegelman
JMH YouTube, 5pm-6pm

SATURDAY, JANUARY 28
Lauren Sandler
JMH YouTube, 5pm-6pm

For details visit
jamesmerrillhouse.org



October fellow Laura Kolbe checks out the James Merrill Fellows bookshelf at Bank Square Books in Mystic, CT.

THIS COULD BE YOUR YEAR Do you have something to write? Do you need a quiet, inspiring space to do so? Applications are now open for 2023-24 residencies through January 9, 2023. In recognition of James Merrill's own contributions to Stonington, and his longstanding generosity, the fellowship provides living and working space and a stipend to a writer to complete a project of literary or academic merit. Fellows are also hosted by local community members and organizations.