

James Merrill

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Fall 2020

Celebrating Our 25th Year

THE FIRST WRITERS in residence came to the James Merrill House shortly after James Merrill's death in 1995. Since then, over 85 writers have stayed in his home, a National Historic Landmark, to work on projects of their own. Thanks to Merrill's generosity, the house now belongs to the Stonington Village Improvement Association, and is an ongoing inspiration for writers and poets around the

world. To mark our 25th Anniversary, a year-long series of events, programs, projects and presentations is planned. These include Merrill Lectures by Willard Spiegelman and Carl Phillips; a new program of



video interviews with former Merrill House writers discussing their recently published work; a virtual tour of the Merrill House and its contents; and taped interviews with friends and acquaintances closely associated with James Merrill during his years living at 107 Water Street in Stonington. All will be available for viewing on the James Merrill House website, at www.jamesmerrillhouse.org.

This Year's Nobel Prize Goes to 2017 Invited Merrill Fellow Louise Glück

CONGRATULATIONS to Louise Glück on receiving this year's Nobel Prize in Literature—the first time an American woman has been chosen since Toni Morrison won in 1993. In his citation, Nobel Prize Committee

responded, "I couldn't be happier. We are in a bleak moment in this country, and as we poets continue to imagine our way forward, Louise has spent a lifetime showing us how to make language both mean something and hold everything." Soon after the announcement, JMH's then-resident poet Walt Hunter published an appreciation in *The Atlantic*: "The question *How do we begin anew?* Runs throughout [the poet's] work. The ultimate point, in Glück, is not despair or resignation, but the abandonment of a 'wish to return,' whether to a first garden or an undamaged relation to the world." When new readers ask Glück what book to start with, she advises them to skip the earliest and reach for *Averno* (2010), say, or *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014). For those fully caught up, we're happy to report that Glück's latest collection, *Winter Recipes from the Collective* will be out in 2021.



Glück at La Grua, June 2017

Chair Anders Olssen expressed admiration for Glück's "candid and uncompromising voice, full of humor and biting wit." Glück's friend Claudia Rankine (a past Merrill Lecturer)



Carl Phillips Gives 15th Annual Merrill Lecture

THIS YEAR our signature event unfolded not at La Grua Center but on split screens—one trained on 15th Annual Merrill Lecturer Carl Phillips' study in St. Louis, the other on Merrill Committee co-chair Randy Bean's study in Stonington Village. From 2011 to 2020, Phillips served as judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize competition, and this year joined the Merrill House advisory board. Phillips began his talk by reading James Merrill's "The Black Swan," followed by his own poem "Black Swan on Water, in a Little Rain." He also read selections from his latest collection, *Pale Colors in a Tall Field* (FSG), and discussed his process for winnowing poetry manuscripts of not yet established poets to come up with a winner. Listen to the podcast via buzzsprout.com, or watch via the James Merrill House YouTube channel.

Broadcast Live from "Studio 107"

THE MERRILL APARTMENT now doubles as "Studio 107" where guest speakers and current writers in residence await their cues. On September 17, author and professor emeritus Willard Spiegelman kicked off our Fall 2020 season with "James Merrill: Poet for the 21st Century," in which he highlighted how Merrill, "the most Mozartian of poets," is a "poet for today." This lecture can be accessed at www.jamesmerrillhouse.org/events. Recent readings by Merrill Fellows Claire Luchette, Talvikki Ansel, Walt Hunter, Ryan Chapman, and Jennifer Grotz are also viewable at the James Merrill House website.

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James Merrill House

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Program Coordinator

Bergin O'Malley
bergin.jmh@gmail.com

107 Water Street, Stonington, CT 06378
Email: merrillhousefellowship@gmail.com

James Merrill House is a program of the Stonington Village Improvement Association, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization
Facebook @TheJamesMerrillHouse
Instagram @jamesmerrillhouse
Twitter @merrill_house

Merrill House Awarded CARES Grant

THE MERRILL HOUSE was one of 70 organizations to receive a CARES Act Humanities Relief grant from Connecticut Humanities (CTH). An affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, CTH partners with organizations such as the Merrill House that tell the state's stories, build community, and enrich lives. The CARES grant goes toward job and program preservation for cultural and historic societies financially impacted by the pandemic. "We're grateful to Connecticut Humanities for stepping up during a challenging time for so many arts programs, including ours," says Merrill House co-chair Cynthia Elliott.

Good Friends of Merrill House: Remembering Leslie McGrath and Jack Fix

LESLIE MCGRATH, a former Merrill House Committee member, passed away on August



7. A longtime faculty member at Central Connecticut State University, Leslie founded *The Tenth Gate*, a poetry imprint of Word Works Press in Washington, DC, to recognize the work of poets in mid-career. Lynn Callahan, emeritus JMHC chair, credits McGrath with proposing shorter and more frequent Merrill residencies which greatly expanded the pool of potential applicants. Leslie's own writing was published widely, including in *Agni*, *Poetry*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, and *The Yale Review*. She lived in Essex, CT with husband Bill Taylor, a retired

professor turned wooden boat builder, who believes Leslie will be remembered as a writer who was "able to play the language as a fine and insistent instrument, inviting you to think in ways that were often unfamiliar and eye-opening." Marilyn Nelson, a past poet laureate of Connecticut, shared one of her favorite McGrath poems with us:

Resound

By Leslie McGrath

The flower of a weed is a flower
An arm in a cast, an arm
A person in prison, a person
Harm done unawares is still harm.
Some things we hear once and remember
Only some things forgotten are gone
A refrain is music worth repeating
The echo of song is song.

JACK FIX, longtime Merrill House committee member, passed away on November 20 at age 86. Jack served on the committee for over a decade and was known for his helpfulness in ways great and small. An artist—silversmith, jeweler, and collector of arts, antiques, and crafts—and teacher at Norwich Free Academy, Jack enjoyed entertaining Merrill fellows with his wife, Marcia. He was a fixture as a bartender at the annual Merrill House deck party, and made an early 2000's pilgrimage to James Merrill's home in Key West. Jack is survived by his wife Marcia, daughter Anne, and son-in-law and former Merrill Committee member, Kevin Bowdler.

Here are tributes from former and current Merrill Committee chairs who worked with Jack over the years: *Lynn Callahan*: "Jack was always there to help out in any way that he could. He ALWAYS came through. he was patient and gentle and resourceful and careful and experienced. he had all the good qualities one looks for in a board member (and in a friend)." *Bill Middleton*: "A true gem of a man and a great loss to the community. A great inspiration in community service and so many other facets of his life." *Sally Wood*: "A lovely person. If you were musing out loud about something related to the Merrill House, he always offered a thoughtful and often definitive opinion rooted in common sense, and if it was related to a task he also would often immediately jump in with 'I can do that.'" *Ruth Saunders*: "A very nice man. He will be much missed." *Randy Bean*: "Jack was a true gentleman in every sense. Fun, serious, thoughtful, dedicated, always helpful. He will be greatly missed."



TOP: Jack Fix and Lynn Callahan at James Merrill's home in Key West
BOTTOM: Jack Fix and Randy Bean as bartenders at annual Merrill House deck party

Call for Volunteers!

LOOKING FOR A REWARDING WAY to contribute your time, experience, and enthusiasm to a local nonprofit? The James Merrill House Committee would like to speak with you. We have a variety of volunteer assignments that might match your interests and availability. Please contact Charlie Hatton, Chair of the JMHC Nominating Committee to discuss how you could get involved in furthering the Merrill House's literary and historic preservation mission. You can reach him at (516) 851-0893 or charlie.hatton@comcast.net.

Reunited with an Old Flame

WHILE THE MERRILL HOUSE art collection was off the walls, awaiting conservation, it was clearly time to repaint the extravagantly colorful room where James Merrill and his partner David Jackson had once entertained friends and amused themselves at the Ouija board. In the years since the writer-in-residence program was established (thanks to Merrill's gift of his house to the Borough), the original hue had sadly faded, and water leakage had left unsightly cracks, and bubbling plaster. The challenge was to match the color they had used. Fortunately, Merrill had left a vital clue at the very beginning of his poem "The Book of Ephraim," where he sets the scene of composing the poem:



James Merrill (right) and David Jackson in their dining room

Backdrop: The dining room at Stonington.
 Walls of ready-mixed matte "flame" (a witty Shade, now watermelon, now sunburn).
 Overhead, a turn of the century dome
 Expressing white tin wreathes and fleurs-de-lys
 In palpable relief to candlelight, with that dislocated
 Perspective of the newly dead, would take it
 For an alcove in the Baptist church next door
 Whose moonlit tower saw eye to eye with us.
 The room breathed sheer white curtains out. In blew
 Elm- and chimney-blotted shimmerings, so
 Slight the tongue of land, so high the point of view.
 1955 this would have been,
 Second summer of our tenancy.
 Another year we'd buy the old eyesore
 Half of whose top story we now rented;
 Build, above that, a glass room off a wooden
 Stardeck; put a fireplace in; make friends.
 Now, strangers to the village, did we even
 Have a telephone? Who needed one!
 We had each other for communication
 And all the rest. The stage was set for Ephraim.

Searching for a paint company that might have had a paint named Flame in the 1950s, Sibby Lynch, the Merrill House's recently appointed chair of the Collections and Conservation Committee, contacted Sherwin-Williams headquarters in Cleveland.

Hearing that the original paint had been chosen by a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who mentioned the color in his most celebrated work, and that his home was now on the National Register of Historic Places, Alison DeMichele, Sherwin-Williams' Color Support Agent, was intrigued. Initially, she found nothing color-related to a Sherwin-Williams Flame. She searched pre-mixed matte orange hues from the past but none came close. Alison then reached out to her former coworker, Teresa McGrath, a history buff who thought a current color might be the old Pratt & Lambert color called Flame.

Turns out Sherwin-Williams had acquired Pratt & Lambert back in 1996, and although by that time it did not include Flame on its

product list, it did provide a reference of it having been designated No. 1855 in the Calibrated Colors Palette (now labeled No. 6-14 in the Never Compromise

Match of Pratt and Lambert™ 1855 Flame *



Palette). Johnson's Hardware in Groton, Connecticut, sells Pratt & Lambert paint, which is where Sibby got her first glimpse of the witty shade. She adds that Bernardo Juarez, our plasterer and painter, says he might paint *his* living room Flame.

We are delighted with Sherwin Williams and Pratt & Lambert's sleuth work, and enthusiasm for the project, not to mention Pratt & Lambert's offer to pay for the paint.

Merrill House Visitors React to the "Witty Shade"

"Wow, that's bright."

"The restored walls now look to me so much more alarmingly sunburned than hitherto! I hate to think of the condition of those lads' tender New England skin while sun-worshipping on the Greek isles if this shade was their notion of 'sunburn!'"

"Brilliant of you to leave a patch of the original untouched."

"Thank you! This makes sense. It's brave."

"That's what he intended! Thank you for researching this and getting it right. It's wonderful to see conservation and restoration going forward with the full blessing of the JMHC."

"The first flame is the hottest!"

Old Friends Meet at 107 Water Street

WHEN LONGTIME Stonington resident Gigi Bradford spotted her friend Henri Cole's new book of poems, *Blizzard* (FSG), reviewed in *The New Yorker* this fall, she called to congratulate him. The two had worked together at the Academy of American Poets, and after Gigi moved on to direct another literature program, Henri took on her role as director at the academy. Gigi learned that Henri was already at work on another book, a "collage-memoir" partly centered on his mentor, literary critic David Kalstone, whose coterie included James Merrill and Elizabeth Bishop, among others. Henri mentioned that Kalstone "was like a brother to James Merrill," whereupon Gigi invited him to pay a visit the Merrill Apartment, along with literary scholar Rachel Jacoff, one of Henri's closest friends—the other being Louise Glück (a past Merrill speaker, who was in the process of being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature). As Gigi put it: "Henri, Rachel, and Louise are three peas in a pod of friendship." A tour of the recently renovated Merrill Apartment was quickly arranged, and brought back memories for all—including,



From left: Henri Cole, Gigi Bradford and Henri, James Merrill and Rachel Jacoff

for Gigi, dinner parties there while James Merrill was alive. Rachel, a specialist in Medieval Italian literature, had edited *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. Merrill was intrigued by the Dantean concept of writings from the Afterlife, and had sent her drafts of *The Changing Light at Sandover* to review while he was writing it. After touring the house Henri paid a visit to the grand beech tree in Eleanor Perenyi's garden (beneath which he believes some of David Kalstone's ashes were scattered), and then to James Merrill's grave in Stonington's Evergreen Cemetery.

A Poet Vanishes Under the Piano: A tribute to James Merrill from his friend Mélisande Potter

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WHEN WE MOVED to Stonington Village, I didn't know who James Merrill was, until I went to a cocktail party with my then-husband Daniel Potter. A parlor vibrating with rumbling voices was so daunting that I wandered into a less crowded room with a Steinway grand piano that said, "Play me!" As I ran my fingers through Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, a charming man with a distinguished voice appeared. "I just want to be closer to hear you play," he said and promptly disappeared underneath the piano. That is how I met James Merrill.

Daniel and I soon became accepted by the borough's literati, though we were much younger than nearly everyone else in the grand party circuit. Happily, my encounters with Jimmy became more frequent and our friendship grew. Sometimes we played four hands on the piano at his Water Street home. He playfully referred to our sessions as piano foreplay. I could sense that he enjoyed the challenge.

Whenever Jimmy traveled to his other homes in Athens and Key West, he kindly gave me his apartment keys so that I could practice in solitude. My Bechstein grand was situated in our open living room/kitchen space and made it difficult for others to communicate.

The 1970s were exciting and fecund years. Jimmy was a constant source of inspiration and support. When my daughters were children, I wrote and illustrated stories for them. Jimmy liked one called, "Manimal Zoo" which evolved into a wild outdoor theater event. He introduced me to the director of

the Ingram Merrill Foundation in New York City whereupon I received a literary award to prompt the completion of the book.

In 1973, Daniel and I founded the Mystic Paper Beasts, a mask and mime theater company. We formed a non-profit organization and Jimmy offered to be a patron. Out of the blue, at yet another cocktail party, he asked, *sotto voce*, if the Beasts could use a monetary donation. He also offered to fund the purchase of a mirage synthesizer that led to a musical transition for us. We'd just had a successful audition at Columbia Artists Management who arranged a showcase performance at Penn State University. Thanks to Jimmy, I strayed from my classical roots, and composed two rock pieces on the mirage for that occasion. It was a bold and wild evening, and we were offered a touring contract to places where more cultural exposure was needed. But it would have been grueling and difficult for our daughters, so we declined.

It was time for a reciprocal dinner party for our supportive patrons. Jimmy arrived early wearing immaculate white trousers and a shirt. Suddenly we heard high pitched squeals from upstairs. A flying squirrel was trapped in our bedroom wood stove after falling down the flue. Upon its release, it flew downstairs and headed straight for Jimmy. I never saw anyone jump with such alacrity from the floor to a high kitchen table. He was afraid of the sooty creature, and had on his white pants, so he did what any cat would do!

The last time I saw Jimmy was at Rollie



McKenna's photo portrait exhibition, with such faces as Dame Edith Sitwell, Dylan Thomas, and, of course, James Merrill. We were staring at my picture when Jimmy commented that I looked so "farouche." (I thought I heard a word related to ferocity! No, it was "farouche" which means "shy." I disagreed about being shy but respected what he perceived.)

In times of duress, Jimmy was always warm and simpatico. When he grew frail from his illness, we planned to meet in New York City where I had hoped to give him comforting words. But I was too late to catch him as he was en route to the Mayo clinic in Arizona. Sadly, I was never able to say goodbye to my sensitive, witty, erudite, and supportive friend.

Dear Jimmy, your "touches" on our lives will be forever.

Ballet dancer, concert pianist, and co-founder of a mask and mime theater, Mélisande Potter, seen in photo above, has been a professional performer since the age of five.

What's New?

Catching up with Merrill Fellows



AMY BEEDER (October 2013): My third collection *And So Wax Was Made & Also Honey* will be out in December from Tupelo Press. Poems forthcoming in *American Poetry Review* and *Beloit*.

CAITLIN DOYLE (September 2013): My essay on poet Gwendolyn Brooks appeared in a recent issue of *MidAmerica*. Sadly, this year's Frost Farm Poetry Conference, where I am on the faculty, was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

PETER FILKINS (Spring 2012): I was awarded an NEH Summer Stipend to translate Elias Canetti's *Das Buch gegen den Tod* (*The Book Against Death*). My essay, "Remembering Joseph Brodsky," appeared in the summer issue of *The American Scholar*.

GABRIELLA GAGE (August 2019): My piece on Longfellow's weather fascination came out online in *Ploughshares* this summer. I'm working on my book manuscript and have also started on a nonfiction piece about a teenaged "clairvoyant" during Italian unification. Also, the first (!) Merrill House baby—Valentina Ingram Gage Brazzell—celebrated her first birthday this October.

CAOILINN HUGHES (December 2016-January 2017): My story "I Ate It All And I Really Thought I Wouldn't" was named Short Story of the Year by Writing.ie, and *The Wild Laughter* was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards' Novel of the Year.

NATE KLUG (September 2016): My new book of poems, *Hosts and Guests*, came out in September from Princeton University Press. Several of the poems were written at the Merrill House.

MAXIM LOSKUTOFF (November 2017): My debut novel *Ruthie Fear* was published by W.W. Norton in September. My next novel, a story of the Unabomber entitled *Old King*, is set to be published in 2023.

AIREA D. MATTHEWS (Yale Younger Poet, June 2017): Thrilled to announce I've been

awarded a 2020 Pew Fellowship. I can't wait to experiment with new ideas in poetry in no small part due to this generous gift!

DAN O'BRIEN (June 2013): In October I performed a rehearsed reading of my memoir-play *The House in Scarsdale* for the theatre company PTP/NYC, to stream on their YouTube channel. My collection on playwriting, entitled *A Story That Happens*, will be out in the UK next May.

WALTER PERRIE (August 2017): I have a new collection, *The Ages of Water*, out this fall from Grace Note Publications. Greetings to those who remember my stay at Merrill House. It's still very present to me.

JOANNA SCOTT (Spring 2019): The story collection I worked on during my JMH residency, *Excuse Me While I Disappear*, will be published by Little, Brown in April 2021.

JEFFREY SKINNER (Spring 2002): I just completed a musical play, *The Golden Key*, with collaborator Gabe Evens, adapted from a fairytale by 19th century Scottish writer George MacDonald.

TERESE SVOBODA (November 2015): I've just been commissioned to write an opera about Josephine Baker! A papadoodle puppy with sharp teeth is a new addition to our family, as is a new computer (the two are not unrelated).

MICHAEL TYRELL (2003-2004): A manuscript in progress, tentatively titled *The Arsonist's Letters*, was a runner-up for the Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize.

KATHLEEN WINTER (December 2014): My third collection, *Transformer*, was published in June by *The Word Works Press*. The book was the 2019 Hilary Tham Collection selection by judge Maggie Smith.

YANYI (YYP, June 2019): My second collection, *Dream of the Divided Field*, was acquired this year by One World Random House for release in 2022.

Shelf Life: A New Chapter in a Longstanding Partnership

WE ARE THRILLED to now have a James Merrill House Writer-in-Residence shelf in the "locals" section of Bank Square Books in downtown Mystic, CT, thanks to bookseller Annie Philbrick and her team.



On display: new books by past and current Merrill fellows

Stop by this beloved, and fiercely independent, bookshop to purchase titles by current and past Merrill fellows, as well as books by James Merrill himself. Don't live locally? Follow this link — <https://www.james-merrillhouse.org/buybooks> — to browse the online Merrill House shelf, and Bank Square will ship directly to you. You'll be supporting this gem of a store, our writers, and our mission, as a percentage of each sale supports the Merrill House program. P.S. When ordering titles be sure to ask for a copy with a James Merrill House bookplate designed by Merrill House Committee member Susan Lindberg.



2019 Merrill Fellow Gabi Gage and one-year-old Valentina paid a visit to 107 Water this summer

James Merrill

HOUSE & WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

James Merrill House
107 Water Street
Stonington, CT 06378

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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, JANUARY 16

Merrill Fellow **Nicholas Boggs** reads from
his work

SATURDAY, MARCH 14

Merrill Fellow **Kirstin Valdez Quade** reads
from her work

SATURDAY, MAY 1

Spring 2021 Merrill Lecture with novelist
Marlon James

SATURDAY, MAY 22

Merrill Fellow **Greg Wrenn** reads from
his work

Merrill House Memories

Have a personal anecdote to share about James Merrill or the early years of the Merrill House writing program? We'd love to hear from you! Email Bergin.jmh@gmail.com.

Splendid to Come Home to

ONE OF LATE 20TH CENTURY'S last great letter writers, James Merrill made a habit of chronicling his activities to friends and family. *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill* (Knopf) contains the bulk of them, annotated by his biographer Langdon Hammer and literary critic Stephen Yenser (both members of the JMH advisory board). Weighing in at 720 pages, the book will be out in mid-March. In the meantime, we reached out to Stephen Yenser for a sneak peek. He kindly shared a jaunty missive Merrill dashed off to a friend about acquiring 107 Water Street:

What else, —oh yes, we have bought the building itself! . . . [Y]esterday we heard that our offer has been accepted: we take over a \$6000 mortgage and pay \$5000. My word, we ought perhaps to have offered less . . . Anyhow we have great plans, to turn the attic into a gorgeous studio room with lots of glass and big terraces high above everything, black + white linoleum squares on the floor. We are inquiring about a frugal architect-contractor. And then paint the bldg. And fix the basement. In short, have something splendid to come home to. We're terribly pleased about it.

"I like the price—and the frugality!" Yenser adds. As his and Hammer's foreword promises, Merrill's correspondence is "unfettered, self-critical, full of good gossip, and attuned to the wicked irony, the poignant detail—a natural extension of the great poet's voice." Who could ask for anything more?

