

# James Merrill

## JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

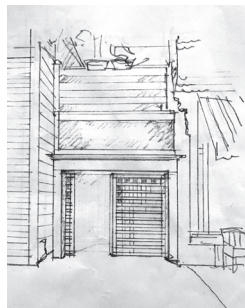
Fall 2016

### James Merrill House Recognized as National Historic Landmark

**JUST THREE YEARS** after being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, 107 Water Street, home to James Merrill from 1954 until his death in 1995, has been named a National Historic Landmark. This designation has been awarded to just over 2,500 in the country. It is among a group of 10 new landmarks that includes properties, like the Merrill House, that honor LGBTQ history. The U.S. Department of the Interior said the Merrill House received the designation as a noteworthy site “for its association with one of the most significant American writers of the second half of the 20th century.” The Merrill House is now in the company of the Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain house museums, the only other writer’s homes in Connecticut to have received this honor.

### From ‘Old Eye-Sore’ to Eye-Candy

**THE TRASH BINS**, emergency generator, and other practical gear stowed in the alley at the north end of 107 Water will do a disappearing act in the near future. Merrill Committee members Sibby Lynch and Bill Middleton oversaw the design of a screen to improve the view from the



street, while preserving easy access to essential apparatus for the building’s retail tenants, residents, and emergency personnel. The Borough approved the project, bids were solicited, and installation will soon be underway.

### Meeting of ‘Blithe Spirits’ at 107 Water



*Moore takes a break from writing*

**INVITED MERRILL FELLOW** Lorrie Moore read at La Grua Center on July 24. Introducing the acclaimed author to a packed house, poet and literary critic J.D. McClatchy cited her “Shakespearean” knack for mixing comedy and pathos to expose the most deluded emotions and calamitous aspects of human nature. This was demonstrated wonderfully in Moore’s reading of “The Juniper Tree,” a mordant tale about a professor visited by the ghost of her recently deceased friend from her recent collection *Bark*, published by Alfred A. Knopf. Currently the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, Moore described her first extended visit to the Borough as a “magical two weeks in a magical place.” She added, “Not only does one feel the brilliant and blithe spirits in the house, the printer works.”

Support for the event and Moore’s residency was generously provided by friends of David Clapp in memory of his many contributions to the Merrill House and the Stonington Village Improvement Association.

### One of America’s Last Great Letter Writers

**“BUT I DON’T KEEP** a journal,” James Merrill wrote from Kyoto in 1956 to his friend Irma Brandeis, “Letters have got to bear all the burden.” While his claim wasn’t strictly true, since Merrill continually wrote in notebooks, his voluminous letters comprise the most complete record of his life. The extant letters (including a few in French, Italian, and Greek, housed mostly in the Olin Library Special Collections at Washington University and at the Beinecke Library at Yale University) number in the thousands and might in their entirety rival the collected correspondence of Byron, though Merrill’s *Selected Letters* will be limited to about 600 pages.

Like Byron, whose poems he admired, Merrill is a mercurial master of the epistolary genre. His letters contain detailed descriptions of the climes he visited in his trip around the world and on subsequent sojourns in Greece and elsewhere. Colorful anecdotes abound: his youthful participation in a break-in at the home of Emily Dickinson’s sister-in-law; the earnest young hitchhiker picked up on the

road to Athens who has been corresponding intimately with Cavafy in advance of their rendezvous — though Cavafy has been dead for years. He adopts personae, provides recipes, and reflects on other literary figures and his own writings. He writes love letters, rehashes parties, advises younger poets and critiques established ones, tells jokes, composes limericks and witty character sketches, sets vignettes from Proust to the tune of “The River Kwai March,” and explains (and obfuscates) situations for his mother.

Merrill will surely turn out to be one of the last great American letter writers. His close friend Elizabeth Bishop once taught a seminar at Harvard on what she called “Letters!” ... Just *letters* — as an art form or something — an art form, she opined, that was “the dying form of communication.” Here is that form at its late best. — *Stephen Yenser*

*Merrill’s Selected Letters, edited by Langdon Hammer, J. D. McClatchy, and Stephen Yenser, will be published by Alfred Knopf in 2018.*

#### James Merrill House Committee

##### Co-Chairs

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Jack Fix  
Charlie Hatton  
Susan Lindberg  
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Lynn Callahan

#### James Merrill House Advisory Committee

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Rachel Carley  
Nicholas Delbanco  
Deborah Garrison  
Daniel Hall  
Langdon Hammer  
Joseph Loewenstein  
Robin Magowan  
J. D. McClatchy  
Paul Merrill  
Paul Miller  
Lorrie Moore  
Ivy Pochoda  
Bruce Snider  
Stephen Yenser

The James Merrill House is a committee of the  
Stonington Village Improvement Association

## Poet Claudia Rankine to Give Merrill Lecture in 2017

**WE ARE THRILLED** to announce that Claudia Rankine will give the next James Merrill Lecture on September 23, 2017. The Jamaican-born poet is the author of five collections including *Citizen: An American Lyric*, a haunting 160-page prose poem with images that explore what it means to be an American in a “post-racial” society. A finalist for the National Book Award, *Citizen* holds the distinction of being the only poetry book among *New York Times* bestsellers in the nonfiction category.

For *Citizen*, Rankine won the Forward Prize for Poetry, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. Among her numerous awards and honors, Rankine is the recipient of the Poets & Writers’ Jackson Poetry Prize and fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2013, she was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Rankine, who moved with her parents to New York at age 7, was educated at Williams College and Columbia University. “My parents were immigrants looking for a better life. They both worked in hospitals, my father as an orderly and my mother as a nurse’s aide,” she recalled in a recent interview. Rankine’s love for poetry began when her mother read to her Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could



Ricardo DeAraujo

Not Stop for Death,” the year after the family arrived in the United States.

In addition to co-editing anthologies and publishing essays on art and poetry, Rankine is the author of plays including *The Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue*, which was originally performed on a bus touring the South Bronx. Rankine is the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale University in the Departments of African American Studies and English.

## Poetry on the Porch with Yale Younger Poets Prizewinner Noah Warren

**IN JUNE, THE MERRILL HOUSE** held its fourth annual Poetry on the Porch, featuring 2015 Yale Younger Poets Prizewinner Noah Warren. Warren read from his debut poetry collection, *The Destroyer in the Glass*, which Carl Phillips praised for “its wedding of intellect, heart, sly humor, and formal dexterity, all in the service of negotiating those moments when an impulse toward communion with others competes with an instinct for a more isolated self.” Dorothy and Declan Doogan once again generously hosted this event on their covered porch with views of the water.

Noah Warren was born in Nova Scotia and grew up in Charlestown, Rhode Island. He is a graduate of Phillips Academy and Yale, which awarded him the Frederick Mortimer Clapp Fellowship. His poems have appeared in *The Yale Review*, *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, and *AGNI*. He currently holds a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford. Warren is the fourth Yale prizewinner to be named a Merrill Fellow since the partnership with Yale was established.





# Update on Conservation

## Restoration of “The Blue Pitcher”



**THE STILL LIFE PAINTING** of a blue pitcher that until recently hung in the kitchen of the James Merrill Apartment is currently undergoing conservation treatment under the care of Kathy Hebb at Shoreline Painting Conservation in Guilford, Conn. Kathy is also in the process of restoring the Merrill Apartment’s large painting by David Jackson, “The Surly Temple.”

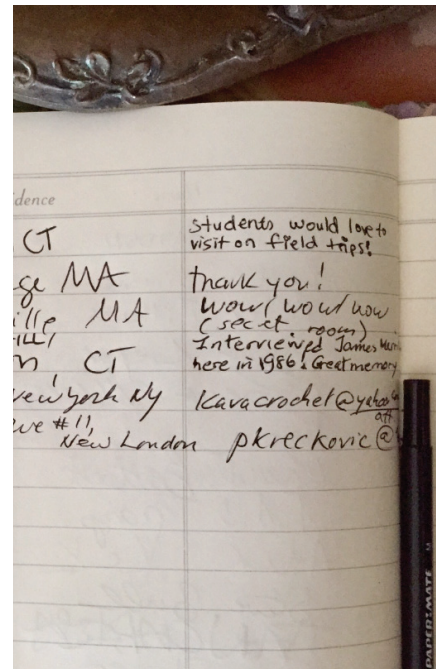
“The Blue Pitcher,” a painting by Robert L. Arner, who was once a student of James Merrill’s, has been suffering from flaking of its paint layer for some time, most likely due to the artist’s experimentation with painting techniques that ultimately proved unsound. The areas of loose, flaking paint have been painstakingly resecured by feeding conservation grade adhesive in liquid form underneath each individual flake, and then setting each flake back into contact with the painting with a miniature heat tool. The next step will be to fill any losses in the paint layer with a thin layer of putty to level the surface, and finally to in-paint the putty with conservation grade pigments to match the surrounding area. The painting should be back on the Merrill Apartment’s kitchen wall by Thanksgiving.

## Renovation of the “Secret” Library Door to James Merrill’s Study

**ONE OF THE GREATEST PLEASURES** of the resident JMH Fellows is to read and write in James Merrill’s “secret” study as he used to do while working behind its closed door, invisible behind the seven ample bookshelves concealing its front.

Alas, the heaviness of those bookshelves, weighed down as they are with Merrill’s books, together with the wear of time on the door’s hinges, has caused the door to sag and scrape on the floor when it is opened and closed. As a result the door no longer shuts fully as it used to do when Merrill closed it firmly on the outside world.

The JMH Committee’s conservation expert Sarah Dove is evaluating the best course of action to remedy the door’s problems. It will require two people to lift the door up off its hinges to make the necessary repairs. But we hope that the work will be successfully completed over the winter months so that the Merrill residents can soon re-experience James Merrill’s pleasure of being closed off in a secret world.



## Overheard at the Open House

**FOUR TIMES A YEAR** the Merrill House opens Merrill’s apartment to visitors. Among the sightseers at recent openings were a local teacher who imagines introducing poetry to her third graders by showing them Merrill’s “secret door” (“Perfect age for it,” she said, “They’re so into mystery”); a staffer at the MIT Media Lab who read Merrill’s work in graduate school and was curious to see where certain poems incubated; and a reporter who brought his wife along to revisit the apartment where, three decades before, he’d interviewed the Pulitzer-prizewinning poet (“I was this kid and scared to death,” he recalled, “Merrill invited me up to the deck and was so charming he put me at ease.”).

Along with greeting and fielding questions, our volunteer docents will soon have a new prop to enrich the experience of first-time and repeat visitors alike. In tandem with the Merrill House Committee, preservation consultant Rachel Carley is preparing a room-by-room guide to Merrill’s apartment. The interpretive guide will reference jottings, archival photographs, and sketches (which came to light during Carley’s project to list Merrill’s home on the National Register of Historic Places) to illuminate how the poet and his partner David Jackson furnished their home, creating a décor that charmed their guests as much as it delights those touring or in residence at 107 Water Street today.

*(To visit the Merrill House by appointment, please email [residency@jamesmerrillhouse.org](mailto:residency@jamesmerrillhouse.org).)*

James Merrill

WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM & MUSEUM

James Merrill House  
107 Water Street  
Stonington, CT 06378

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

For more information about our programs, visit us at [jamesmerrillhouse.org](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org) and follow us on Facebook.

## Calendar of Events

### NOVEMBER 12

**Jennifer Clarvoe** leads a discussion of the works of past Merrill Fellow Brigit Kelly. Stonington Free Library, 3:30 pm

### DECEMBER 3

**Jennifer Clarvoe** November/December Merrill Fellow reads from her work. Stonington Free Library, 5 pm

### JANUARY 7

**Caoilinn Hughes** Winter Merrill Fellow reads from her work. Stonington Free Library, 5 pm

### APRIL 9

**Mark Wunderlich** Spring Merrill Fellow reads from his work. Stonington Free Library, 5 pm

### SEPTEMBER 23

**Claudia Rankine** gives the Merrill Lecture. LaGrua Center, 5 pm

## Making Merry: Shakespeare on the Deck

**MERRILL HOUSE FRIENDS** joined former fellows — wearing nametags with monikers drawn from their favorite Shakespeare play — at the annual Deck Party held



*Aymeric Dupré la Tour, Sibby Lynch, Terese Svoboda and Susan Clapp on the Merrill deck*

on August 6. This year's theme drew from Merrill's lifelong love for theatre, dating from his early school days at St. Bernard's and summers at Camp Duncan in Vermont, where he got cast in the role of Puck in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Between English Renaissance scholar Jonathan Post's reading of Merrill's poem "The School Play" (in which he ruefully

recalls being assigned "a small part" in *Richard II*) and harpsichordist Aymeric Dupré la Tour's performance of Elizabethan airs on a rare Zuckermann virginal, guests quaffed elderberry cordial and nibbled midsummer-night inspired hors d'oeuvres supplied by our volunteers. Past Merrill fellow Terese Svoboda and husband Steve Bull lent a touch of pageantry to the event by sailing over from the east end of Long Island in unsettled weather bearing home-farmed oysters.