

**“Look Closely at the Letters”:** A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry  
Week 3: Other Worlds | March 15, 2023  
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FIVE POEMS FOR THIS WEEK:

1. Voices from the Other World (*The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, 1959; *Selected Poems* [SP], pp. 16–17)
2. Days of 1971 (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *SP*, pp. 133–37)
3. Yánnina (*Divine Comedies*, 1976; *SP*, pp. 157–61)
4. Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; *SP*, pp. 249–51)
5. Koi (*Collected Poems*, 2001; *SP*, pp. 267)

FIVE OPTIONAL READINGS:

1. The Thousand and Second Night (*Nights and Days*, 1966; *SP*, pp. 38–47)
2. To My Greek (*The Fire Screen*, 1969; *SP*, pp. 82–83)
3. Chimes for Yahya (*Divine Comedies*, 1976; *SP*, pp. 149–156)
4. Ginger Beef (*The Inner Room*, 1988; *SP*, pp. 208–10)
5. Family Week at Oracle Ranch (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; *SP*, pp. 242–48)

ON TRAVEL TO OTHER WORLDS (IN TWO SENSES)

*“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places, not just stay at home?  
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right  
about just sitting quietly in one’s room?”*

*Continent, city, country, society:  
the choice is never wide and never free.  
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,  
wherever that may be?”*

—Elizabeth Bishop, the end of “Questions of Travel,” from *Questions of Travel* (1965). Among his contemporaries, Bishop was Merrill’s favorite poet: “Of all the splendid and curious work belonging to my time, these are the poems (the earliest appeared when I was a year old) that I love best and tire of least. And there will be no others” (“The Transparent Eye,” *Washington Post Book World*, February 20, 1983).

I was her first compatriot to visit in several months. She found it uncanny to be speaking English again. Her other guest, a young Brazilian painter, in town for the summer arts festival and worn out by long teaching hours, merely slept in the house. Late one evening, over old-fashioned by the stove, a too-recent sorrow had come to the surface; Elizabeth, unsistent and articulate, was in tears. The

young painter, returning, called out, entered—and stopped short on the threshold. His hostess almost blithely made him at home. Switching to Portuguese, “Don’t be upset, José Alberto,” I understood her to say, “I’m only crying in English.”

—James Merrill, “Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979),” *New York Review of Books*, December 6, 1979. Bishop lived in Brazil for fifteen years; Merrill was among one of the last American poets to visit before she returned to the United States.

HELEN VENDLER: The new mythology you’ve invented via the Ouija board—including the new God Biology, a universal past including Atlantis, Centaurs, and Angels, an afterlife which includes reincarnation—how real does it all seem to you?

JAMES MERRILL: Literally, not very—except in recurrent euphoric hours when it’s altogether too beautiful not to be true. Imaginatively real? I would hope so, but in all modesty, for the imagination in question kept assuming proportions broader and grander than mine. Also at times sillier: Atlantis, UFOs? I climbed the wall trying to escape that sort of material. But the point remained, to be always of two minds.

HELEN VENDLER: Do you think of yourself as in any way distinctively American? [ . . . ]

JAMES MERRILL: I feel American in Europe and exotic at home—and haven’t we our own “expatriate” tradition for that?

—James Merrill and Helen Vendler, “James Merrill’s Myth: An Interview,” *New York Review of Books*, May 3, 1979; the interview was conducted after the publication of *Mirabell: Books of Number* (1978), the middle section of Merrill’s epic trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982)

Meaning to stay as long as possible, I sailed for Europe. It was March 1950. New York and most of the people I knew had begun to close in. Or to put it differently, I felt that I alone in this or that circle of friends could see no way into the next phase. Indeed, few of my friends would have noticed if the next phase had never begun; they would have gone on meeting for gossip lunches, or drinking together at the San Remo on MacDougal Street, protected from encounters they perhaps desired with other customers by the glittering moat, inches deep, of their allusive chatter. I loved this unliterary company; it allowed me to feel more serious than I was. Other friends, by getting jobs or entering graduate schools, left me feeling distinctly less so. On the bright side, I had taught for a year at Bard College, two hours by car from MacDougal Street. My first book of poems had been accepted by the first publisher I sent it to. And I had recently met the love of my life (or so I thought), who promised to join me in Europe in the early summer, by which time we should both have disentangled ourselves from our past and present worlds. Was I ever coming back? Yes, yes, one of these days. But of course I would be a different person then.

It took a fair amount of perversity to want to distance myself from my friends, for with them only—never in solitude or with my family—did I feel at ease.

—The first page and change of Merrill’s memoir *A Different Person* (1993), packed with ambiguity and paradox (“stay” *where*, or *what*, “as long as possible”? what makes one “a different person”: effort, or time passing? who is most easefully oneself not “in solitude or with [one’s] family” but with friends—and who would perversely distance oneself from them?)

**Voices from the Other World**

(*The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, 1959; *SP*, pp. 16–17)<sup>1</sup>

Presently at our touch the teacup stirred,  
Then circled lazily about  
From A to Z. The first voice heard  
(If they are voices, these mute spellers-out)  
Was that of an engineer

Originally from Cologne.  
Dead in his 22nd year  
Of cholera in Cairo, he had KNOWN  
NO HAPPINESS. He once met Goethe, though.  
Goethe had told him: PERSEVERE.

Our blind hound whined. With that, a horde  
Of voices gathered above the Ouija board,  
Some childish and, you might say, blurred  
By sleep; one little boy  
Named Will, reluctant possibly in a ruff

Like a large-lidded page out of El Greco, pulled  
Back the arras for that next voice,  
Cold and portentous: ALL IS LOST.  
FLEE THIS HOUSE. OTTO VON THURN UND TAXIS.  
OBEY. YOU HAVE NO CHOICE.

Frightened, we stopped; but tossed  
Till sunrise striped the rumpled sheets with gold.  
Each night since then, the moon waxes,  
Small insects flit round a cold torch  
We light, that sends them pattering to the porch . . .

But no real Sign. New voices come,  
Dictate addresses, begging us to write;  
Some warn of lives misspent, and all of doom  
In ways that so exhilarate  
We are sleeping sound of late.

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<sup>1</sup> [Note from Chris: This poem, which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1957, is Merrill's first to mention the Ouija board. His next Ouija poem, "The Will," would not appear until 1974.]

Last night the teacup shattered in a rage.  
Indeed, we have grown nonchalant  
Towards the other world. In the gloom here,  
Our elbows on the cleared  
Table, we talk and smoke, pleased to be stirred

Rather by buzzings in the jasmine, by the drone  
Of our own voices and poor blind Rover's wheeze,  
Than by those clamoring overhead,  
Obsessed or piteous, for a commitment  
We still have wit to postpone

Because, once looked at lit  
By the cold reflections of the dead  
Risen extinct but irresistible,  
Our lives have never seemed more full, more real,  
Nor the full moon more quick to chill.



**Days of 1971**

(*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *SP*, pp. 133–37)<sup>2</sup>

[1] Fallen from the clouds, well-met.  
This way to the limousine.  
How are things? Don't tell me yet!  
Have a Gauloise<sup>3</sup> first, I mean.

Matches now, did I forget—  
With a flourish and no word  
Out came the sentry-silhouette  
Black against a big, flame-feathered bird,

Emblem of your “new” regime  
Held, for its repressive ways,  
In pretty general disesteem

Which to share just then was hard,  
Borne up so far on a strategic blaze  
Struck by you, and quite off guard.

[2] In Paris you remark each small  
Caged creature, marmoset, bat, newt, for sale;  
Also the sparkling gutters, and the smelly  
Seine this afternoon when we embark.

And the Bateau Mouche<sup>4</sup> is spoiled by a party of cripples.  
Look at what's left of that young fellow strapped  
Into his wheelchair. How you pity him!  
The city ripples, your eyes sicken and swim.

The boy includes you in his sightseeing,  
Nodding sociably as if who of us  
Here below were more than half a man.

There goes the Louvre, its Egyptian wing  
Dense with basalt limbs and heads to use  
Only as one's imagination can.

(continued next page)

<sup>2</sup> [Note from Chris: Like “The Broken Home” from our first week, “Days of 1971” is a sequence made up of sonnets—ten, to be exact. To make the sequence easier to navigate, I've numbered the sonnets in square brackets. What Merrill describes in the first sonnet is the “[e]mblem” of the then-new Greek government, depicting a soldier and a phoenix; here, it's printed on a matchbox.]

<sup>3</sup> Gauloise: The name of a French band of cigarette.

<sup>4</sup> Bateau Mouche: A sightseeing boat on the River Seine in Paris.

[3] Can-can from last night's *Orphée aux Enfers*<sup>5</sup>  
Since daybreak you've been whistling till I wince.  
Well, you were a handsome devil once.  
Take the wheel. You're still a fair chauffeur.

Our trip. I'd pictured it another way—  
Asthmatic pilgrim and his “nun of speed,”<sup>6</sup>  
In either mind a music spun of need . . .  
That last turnoff went to Illiers.

Proust's Law (are you listening?) is twofold:  
(a) What least thing our self-love longs for most  
Others instinctively withhold;

(b) Only when time has slain desire  
Is his wish granted to a smiling ghost  
Neither harmed nor warmed, now, by the fire.

[4] Stephen in the Pyrenees<sup>7</sup>—our first  
Real stop. You promptly got a stomachache.  
Days of groans and grimaces interspersed  
With marathon slumbers. Evenings, you'd wake

And stagger forth to find us talking. Not  
Still about poetry! Alas . . .  
So bottles were produced, and something hot.  
The jokes you told translated, more or less.

Predictably departure cured you. Stephen  
Investing me with a Basque walking stick,  
“How much further, James, will you be driven?”

He didn't ask. He stood there, thin, pale, kind  
As candlelight. Ah, what if *I* took sick?  
You raced the motor, having read my mind.

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<sup>5</sup> *Orphée aux Enfers: Orpheus in the Underworld*, the 1858 operetta by the French composer Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880).

<sup>6</sup> [Note from Chris: As Merrill clarifies before a 1972 reading of this poem at Harvard University, “nun of speed” is a description of an early automobile driver by the French novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922); Proust himself was asthmatic. Illiers (now Illiers-Combray) is the village where Proust grew up.]

<sup>7</sup> Stephen in the Pyrenees: Stephen Yenser (b. 1941), the American poet and critic and Merrill's friend, whom JM visited during this trip in Jurançon, France, near Pau.

[5] Sucked by haste into the car,  
Pressing his frantic buzzer, Bee!  
Suppose he stings—why such hilarity?  
These things occur.

Get rid of him at once  
While we can! His wrath  
Is almost human, the windshield's warpath  
Dins with a song and dance

In one respect unlike our own:  
Readily let out into the open.  
There. Good creature, also he had known  
The cost of self-as-weapon;

Venom unspent, barb idle, knows  
Where they lead now—thyme, lavender, musk-rose,

[6] Toulouse, Toulon, the border. Driven?  
At ease, rather among fleeting scenes.  
The O L I V E T T I signs<sup>8</sup>  
Whiz by, and azure Lombardy is given

Back, as the Virgin of Officialdom  
Severely draped twists on her throne to peek  
At the forbidden crags of kingdom come  
Before resuming her deft hunt and peck.

One V sticks. Venice. Its vertiginous pastry  
Maze we scurry through like mice and will  
Never see the likes of in our lives.

It is too pink, white, stale to taste,  
Crumbling in the gleam of slimy knives.  
Have your cake and eat it? Take the wheel.

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<sup>8</sup> The O L I V E T T I signs: Signs beside the road that, letter by letter, advertise the Olivetti typewriter.

[7] What—now where are we? Who is everyone?  
Well, that’s a princess, that’s the butler . . . no,  
Probably by now the butler’s son.  
We were stopping till tomorrow with Umberto<sup>9</sup>

Among trompe l’oeil, old volumes, photographs  
Of faded people wearing crowns and stars.  
Welcome to the Time Machine, he laughed  
Leaning on us both up its cold stairs.

At table the others recalled phrases from  
Homer and Sappho, and you seemed to brighten.  
Your sheets would entertain the “priest” that night  
(Dish of embers in a wooden frame)

And eyes glaze on the bedside book, remote  
But near, pristine but mildewed, which I wrote.

[8] Take the wheel. San Zeno<sup>10</sup> will survive  
Whether or not visited.  
Power is knowledge in your head.  
(Sorry, I must have been thinking aloud. Drive, drive.

Time and again the novel I began  
Took aim at that unwritten part  
In which the hero, named Sebastian  
Came to his senses through a work of art.

O book of hours, those last  
Illuminated castles built  
In air, O chariot-motif

Bearing down a margin good as gilt  
Past fields of ever purer leaf  
Its burning rubric, to get nowhere fast . . .

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<sup>9</sup> Umberto: Umberto Morra (1897–1981), an Italian friend of Merrill’s, whom he visited in Cortona.

<sup>10</sup> San Zeno: San Zeno Maggiore, an elegant twelfth-century Romanesque church in Verona, Italy.



[9] The road stopped where a Greek mountain fell  
Early that week. Backed-up cars glared in the dusk.  
Night fell next, and still five stupid slack-  
Jawed ferries hadn't got their fill of us.

Tempers shortened. One self-righteous truck  
Knocked the shit out of a eucalyptus  
Whose whitewashed trunk lay twitching brokenly—  
Nijinsky in *Petrouchka*<sup>11</sup>—on the quai.

Later, past caring, packed like sheep,  
Some may have felt the breathless lounge redeemed  
By a transistor singing to the doomed

At last in their own tongue. You fell asleep  
Life-sentenced to the honey-cell of song,  
Harsh melisma, torturous diphthong.

[10] Strato,<sup>12</sup> each year's poem  
Says goodbye to you.  
Again, though, we've come through  
Without losing temper or face.

If care rumpled your face  
The other day in Rome,  
Tonight just dump my suitcase  
Inside the door and make a dash for home

While I unpack what we saw made  
At Murano,<sup>13</sup> and you gave to me—  
Two ounces of white heat  
Twirled and tweezered into shape,

Ecco! another fanciful  
Little horse, still blushing, set to cool.

<sup>11</sup> Nijinsky in *Petrouchka*: Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950), the Russian ballet dancer and choreographer who danced the principal role of the puppet in the premiere of *Petrouchka* by the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971).

<sup>12</sup> Strato: Strátos Mouflouzélis (b. 1942), Merrill's Greek friend who was the driver on this road trip from Paris to Athens.

<sup>13</sup> Murano: An island north of Venice, famous for its glassmaking factories.



Yánnina

(*Divine Comedies*, 1976; *SP*, pp. 157–61)<sup>14</sup>

*for Stephen Yenser*

*“There lay the peninsula stretching far into the dark gray water, with its mosque,  
its cypress tufts and fortress walls; there was the city stretching far and wide along  
the water’s edge; there was the fatal island, the closing scene of the history of the  
once all-powerful Ali.”*

—EDWARD LEAR

Somnambulists along the promenade  
Have set up booths, their dreams:  
Carpets, jewelry, kitchenware, halvah, shoes.  
From a loudspeaker passionate lament  
Mingles with the penny Jungle’s roars and screams.  
Tonight in the magician’s tent  
Next door a woman will be sawed in two,  
But right now she’s asleep, as who is not, as who . . .

An old Turk at the water’s edge has laid  
His weapons and himself down, sleeps  
Undisturbed since, oh, 1913.  
Nothing will surprise him should he wake,  
Only how tall, how green the grass has grown  
There by the dusty carpet of the lake  
Sun beats, then sleepwalks down a vine-festooned arcade,  
Giving himself away in golden heaps.

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<sup>14</sup> Ioannina, or Jannina, a lake city, now the capital of Epirus in northwestern Greece, described in the epigraph by the English painter and nonsense poet Edward Lear (1812–1888). Under Turkish control for centuries, its most famous period was when it was ruled by Ali Pasha (1741–1822), the “Lion of Epirus,” whose flamboyant life, including his meeting with Byron, is vividly recounted in the biography Merrill quotes, *The Diamond of Jannina* (first published in 1938 by under the title *Ali the Lion*) by the South African writer William Plomer (1903–1973). [Note from Chris: This is the extremely rare poem for which Merrill wrote his own footnotes, two of them. See the two asterisks in the poem, below; I’ve also added an indication to the notes themselves.]

And in the dark gray water sleeps  
One who said no to Ali. Kiosks all over town  
Sell that postcard, “Kyra Frossíni’s Drown,”<sup>15</sup>  
Showing her, eyeballs white as mothballs, trussed  
Beneath the bulging moon of Ali’s lust.  
A devil (turban and moustache and sword)  
Chucks the pious matron overboard—  
Wait—Heaven help us—SPLASH!

The torch smokes on the prow. Too late.  
(A picture deeply felt, if in technique slapdash.)  
Wherefore the Lion of Epirus, feared  
By Greek and Turk alike, tore his black beard  
When to barred casements rose the song  
Broken from bubbles rising all night long:  
“A ton of sugar pour, oh pour into the lake  
To sweeten it for poor, for poor Frossíni’s sake.”\*<sup>16</sup>

Awake? Her story’s aftertaste  
Varies according to the listener.  
Friend, it’s bitter coffee you prefer?  
Brandy for me, and with a fine  
White sandy bottom. Not among those braced  
By action taken without comment, neat,  
Here’s how! Grounds of our footnote infiltrate the treat,  
Mud-vile to your lips, crystal-sweet to mine.

Twilight at last. Enter the populace.  
One little public garden must retrace  
Long after school its childish X,  
Two paths that cross and cross. The hollyhock, the rose,  
Zinnia and marigold hear themselves named  
And blush for form’s sake, unashamed  
Chorus out of *Ignoramus Rex*:  
“What shall the heart learn, that already knows

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<sup>15</sup> Frossíni: A wife of Ali Pasha.

<sup>16</sup> [Merrill’s footnote.] “Time was kind to the reputation of this woman who had been unfaithful to her husband, vain, and grasping. She came to be regarded as a Christian martyr and even as an early heroine in the struggle for Greek independence. She has been celebrated in legend, in poetry, in popular songs and historical fiction, and surrounded with the glamour which so often attaches to women whose love affairs have been of an intense nature and have involved men of political or historical importance.”

—WILLIAM PLOMER, *The Diamond of Jannina*

Its place by water, and its time by sun?"  
Mother wit fills the stately whispering sails  
Of girls someone will board and marry. Who?  
Look at those radiant young males.  
Their morning-glory nature neon blue  
Wilts here on the provincial vine. Where did it lead,  
The race, the radiance? To oblivion  
Dissembled by a sac of sparse black seed.

Now under trees men with rush baskets sell  
Crayfish tiny and scarlet as the sins  
In any fin-de-siècle villanelle.  
Tables fill up. A shadow play begins.  
Painted, translucent cut-outs fill the screen.  
It glows. His children by a jumping bean  
Karaghíózi clobbers, baits the Turk,<sup>17</sup>  
Then all of them sing, dance, tell stories, go berserk.

Tomorrow we shall cross the lake to see  
The cottage tumbling down, where soldiers killed  
Ali. Two rugless rooms. Cushions. Vitrines  
In which, to this day, silks and bracelets swim.  
Above, a painting hangs. It's him,  
Ali. The end is near, he's sleeping between scenes  
In a dark lady's lap. Vassilikí.<sup>18</sup>  
The mood is calm, the brushwork skilled

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<sup>17</sup> Karaghíózi: The main Greek character in the eponymous Turkish shadow theater, a venerable genre with complex materials that is now almost extinct. The stage is separated from the audience by a fine white sheet of cotton or other material stretched taut and illuminated by oil lamps. The puppeteer holds the puppets, on horizontal rods, between the lights and the screen. The puppets (each about a foot high), silhouettes made of animal skin stained with translucent dyes, show up in brilliant color on the screen. Their operation is an intricate and delicate matter. The comic dramas, which mix slapstick with sophisticated literary devices, involve stock characters and formulaic structures, the details of which are improvised in presentation.

<sup>18</sup> Vassilikí: A wife of Ali Pasha.

By contrast with Frossini's mass-produced  
Unsophisticated piece of goods.  
The candle trembles in the watching god's  
Hand—almost a love-death, höchste Lust!<sup>19</sup>  
Her drained, compliant features haunt  
The waters there was never cause to drown her in.  
Your grimest ragamuffin comes to want  
Two loves, two versions of the Feminine:

One virginal and tense, brief as a bubble,  
One flesh and bone—gone up no less in smoke  
Where giant spits revolving try their rusty treble,  
Sheep's eyes pop, and death-wish ravens croak.  
Remember, the Romantic's in full feather.  
Byron has visited. He likes  
The luxe, and overlooks the heads on pikes;  
Finds Ali "Very kind . . . indeed, a father . . ."\*<sup>20</sup>

Funny, that is how I think of Ali.  
On the one hand, the power and the gory  
Details, pigeon-blood rages and retali-  
ations, gout of fate that crust his story;  
And on the other, charm, the whimsically  
Meek brow, its motives all ab ulteriori,  
The flower-blue gaze twining to choke proportion,  
Having made one more pretty face's fortune.

A dove with Parkinson's disease  
Selects *our* fortunes: TRAVEL AND GROW WISE  
And A LOYAL FRIEND IS MORE THAN GOLD.  
But, at the island monastery, eyes  
Gouged long since to the gesso sockets will outstare  
This or that old-timer on his knees  
Asking the candlelight for skill to hold  
The figures flush against the screen's mild glare.

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<sup>19</sup> höchste Lust: "Highest bliss [desire]," from Isolde's last aria in the 1865 opera *Tristan und Isolde* by the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883).

<sup>20</sup> [Merrill's footnote.] Letter to his mother, November 12, 1809. Plomer observes: ". . . even allowing for Oriental effusiveness, it seems doubtful whether [Ali's] interest in Byron was exactly as paternal as he pretended, for a father does not give his son sweets twenty times a day and beg him to visit him at night. It is worth remarking that Ali was a judge of character and a connoisseur of beauty, whether male or female, and that the like of Byron, and Byron at twenty-one, is not often seen."

Ali, my father—both are dead.  
In so many words, so many rhymes,  
The brave old world sleeps. Are we what it dreams  
And is a rude awakening overdue?  
Not in Yánnina. To bed, to bed.  
The Lion sets. The lights wink out along the lake.  
Weeks later, in this study gone opaque,  
They are relit. See through me. See me through.

For partings hurt although we dip the pain  
Into a glowing well—the pen I mean.  
Living alone won't make some inmost face to shine  
Maned with light, ember and anodyne,  
Deep in a desktop burnished to its grain.  
That the last hour be learned again  
By riper selves, couldn't you doff this green  
Incorruptible, the might-have-been,

And arm in arm with me dare the magician's tent?  
It's hung with asterisks. A glittering death  
Is hefted, swung. The victim smiles consent.  
To a sharp intake of breath she comes apart  
(Done by mirrors? Just one woman? Two?  
A fight starts—in the provinces, one feels,  
There's never that much else to do)  
Then to a general exhalation heals

Like anybody's life, bubble and smoke  
In afterthought, whose elements converge,  
Glory of windless mornings that the barge  
(Two barges, one reflected, a quicksilver joke)  
Kept scissoring and mending as it steered  
The old man outward and away,  
Amber mouthpiece of a narghilé  
Buried in his by then snow white beard.

Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia

(*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; *SP*, pp. 249–51)

*Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979)*<sup>21</sup>

Your village touched us by not knowing how.  
Even as we outdrove its clear stormlight  
A shower of self-belittling brilliants fell.  
Miles later, hours away, here are rooms full  
Of things you would have known: pump organ, hymnal,  
Small-as-life desks, old farm tools, charter, deed,  
Schoolbooks (Greek Grammar, *A Canadian Reader*),  
Queen Mary in oleograph, a whole wall hung  
With women's black straw hats, some rather smart  
—All circa 1915, like the manners  
Of the fair, soft-spoken girl who shows us through.  
Although till now she hasn't heard of you  
She knows these things you would have known by heart  
And we, by knowing you by heart, foreknew.

The child whose mother had been put away  
Might wake, climb to a window, feel the bay  
Steel itself, bosom bared to the full moon,  
Against the woebegone, cerebral Man;  
Or by judicious squinting make noon's red  
Monarch grappling foreground goldenrod  
Seem to extract a further essence from  
Houses it dwarfed. Grown-up, the visitor  
Could find her North by the green velvet map  
Appliquéd upon this wharfside shack,  
Its shingles (in the time her back was turned)  
Silver-stitched to visionary grain  
As by a tireless, deeply troubled inmate,  
Were Nature not by definition sane.

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<sup>21</sup> [Note from Chris: To enjoy this poem, you don't need to know anything about the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, who grew up partly in Great Village, Nova Scotia. That said: Bishop fans will recognize allusions to and images from her work in just about every sentence. A complete list of relevant Bishop texts might include the poems "The Man-Moth," "A Cold Spring," "The Bight," "At the Fishhouses," "Cape Breton," "Questions of Travel," "Sestina," "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Filling Station" (mentioned in the third stanza), "The Moose," and "Poem" ("About the size of an old-style dollar bill"), as well as the prose piece "In the Village."]

In living as in poetry, your art  
Refused to tip the scale of being human  
By adding unearned weight. “New, tender, quick”—<sup>22</sup>  
Nice watchwords; yet how often they invited  
The anguish coming only now to light  
In letters like photographs from Space, revealing  
Your planet tremulously bright through veils  
As swept, in fact, by inconceivable  
Heat and turbulence—but there, I’ve done it,  
Added the weight. What tribute could you bear  
Without dismay? Well, facing where you lived  
Somebody’s been inspired (*can* he have read  
“Filling Station”?) to put pumps, a sign:  
ESSO—what else! We filled up at the shrine.

Look, those were elms! Long vanished from *our* world.  
Elms, by whose goblet stems distance itself  
Taken between two fingers could be twirled,  
Its bouquet breathed. The trees look cumbersome,  
Sickly through mist, like old things on a shelf—  
Astrolabes, pterodactyls. They must know.  
The forest knows. Out from such melting backdrops  
It’s the rare conifer stands whole, one sharp  
Uniquely tufted spoke of a dark snow crystal  
Not breathed upon, as yet, by our exhaust.  
Part of a scene that with its views and warblers,  
And at its own grave pace, but in your footsteps  
—Never more imminent the brink, more sheer—  
Is making up its mind to disappear

. . . With many a dirty look. That waterfall  
For instance, beating itself to grit-veined cream  
“Like Roquefort through a grater”? Or the car—!  
So here we sit in the car wash, snug and dry  
As the pent-up fury of the storm hits: streaming,  
Foaming “emotions”—impersonal, cathartic,  
Closer to both art and what we are  
Than the gush of nothings one outpours to people  
On the correspondence side of bay and steeple  
Whose dazzling whites we’ll never see again,  
Or failed to see in the first place. Still, as the last  
Suds glide, slow protozoa, down the pane,  
We’re off—Excuse our dust! With warm regards,—  
Gathering phrases for tomorrow’s cards.

<sup>22</sup> “New, tender, quick”: The last words of “Love Unknown” by the English poet George Herbert (1593–1633), a favorite of the American poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979).



**Koi**

(*Collected Poems*, 2001; *SP*, p. 267)<sup>23</sup>

Snow today, the first in seven years,  
As major a blizzard as the mildness here can muster.  
Big slow skydiving flakes, their floating filigrees  
Aspiring to come back as a field of Queen Anne's lace.

Then it is over, and the terrain resumes its menace.  
Coyotes patrol it, watchful for a small  
Privileged dog to steal. Premonitions! Whole nights  
Preliving the yelp of pain and disbelief

As we helplessly watch our Cosmo<sup>24</sup> borne struggling off.  
We keep him on a stout red leash, but still . . .  
Behind these garden walls it's safe. Birds, olive trees,  
A rectangular pool of koi. Twin to the urban

Gempool south of us. Last night again: a moon,  
Big stars, white clouds—no, wait, clouds colorized  
To the exact tint of the white patches on the koi. A white  
Ever so faintly suffused by blood and gold.

And from the clouds, or far beyond them, at intervals  
Our upturned faces receive a mild pinprick of dew.  
*Feel the world drop away* it whispers. *Seven years more*  
Breathes the melting snow. To which the koi can only

Reply *Carpe diem*. Next morning to their skylight comes a human  
Silhouette edged by radiance, and they cluster to be fed.  
Hold a fistful of pellets underwater, your hand will be kissed  
By the tenderest mouths. It's too much: our "Lindbergh puppy"

Is barking—he's losing his footing—he's fallen in!

<sup>23</sup> "Koi" is the Japanese word for ornamental carp. [Note from Chris: "Koi" was first published in *The New Yorker* a few weeks after Merrill's death. In an accompanying article, J. D. McClatchy describes the discovery of the poem: "When Merrill's ashes were sent back [from Arizona, where he died] to be buried in Stonington, a box of papers came along too. Among them was a poem called 'Koi.' Behind the house he had been renting in Tucson for the winter is a small ornamental pool of koi, the Japanese carp. The poem—the last he wrote, a couple of weeks before he died—is about those fish and his little Jack Russell terrier, Cosmo. Of course it wasn't written as a last poem, but circumstances give it a special poignancy" ("Braving the Elements," *New Yorker*, March 27, 1995).]

<sup>24</sup> Cosmo: The Jack Russell terrier owned by Merrill and his friend Peter Hooten.