

“Look Closely at the Letters”: A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry
Week 2: “Chronicles of Love and Loss”: Love and Out-of-Love Poems | March 8, 2023
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FIVE POEMS FOR THIS WEEK:

1. A Renewal (*The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, 1959; *Selected Poems*, p. 7)
2. The Mad Scene (*Nights and Days*, 1966; *Selected Poems*, p. 57)
3. Days of 1964 (*Nights and Days*, 1966; *Selected Poems*, pp. 72–73)
4. Willowware Cup (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *Selected Poems*, p. 129)
5. Pledge (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; *Selected Poems*, p. 241)

FIVE OPTIONAL READINGS:

1. Words for Maria (*The Fire Screen*, 1969; *Selected Poems*, pp. 80–81)
2. Last Words (*The Fire Screen*, 1969; *Selected Poems*, p. 84)
3. Another August (*The Fire Screen*, 1969; *Selected Poems*, p. 85)
4. After the Fire (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *Selected Poems*, pp. 112–14)
5. *from* Up and Down: 2. The Emerald (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *Selected Poems*, pp. 130–31)

JM ON LOVE, JM IN LOVE:

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 or warmed, now, by the fire.

—James Merrill, from “Days of 1971,” *Braving the Elements* (1972); see *Selected Poems*, p. 134

Perhaps the strangest thing that my experience has taught me is how profoundly feeling is colored by its object. The love I have for you is unique and irreplaceable—as all loves are. (Perhaps being a Pisces makes me over-suggestible?) The other side of this paradox has to do with recurring patterns of the sort we both know.

—James Merrill, letter to David McIntosh, November 13, 1972; published in *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill* (2021), edited by Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser

In life, there are no perfect affections. Estrangements among the living reek of unfinished business. Poems get written *to* the person no longer reachable. Yet, once dead, overnight the shrewish wife becomes “a saint,” frustrations vanish at cockcrow, and from the once fallible human mouth come words of blessed reassurance.

—James Merrill and Helen Vendler, “James Merrill’s Myth: An Interview,” *New York Review of Books*, May 3, 1979

Merrill believed in nothing as he believed in love. Love transformed, renewed, and redeemed: it was [Richard Wagner’s four-opera sequence] the *Ring* cycle’s soaring rainbow theme. Since the angels finished speaking and he put a period on the trilogy, he had been depressed and dry, ill and ill-tempered, frightened of aging—and privately terrified of AIDS. Now, the only way he could imagine the rest of his life, to continue to grow and change and not “go down,” was, it seems, to fall in love. He wanted to love rapturously, as he had a few times in the past; he wanted to *be* loved rapturously Furthermore, Merrill wanted more than a lover: he wanted a companion who would “last his time.”

—Langdon Hammer, *James Merrill: Life and Art* (2015); at this point in the biography, it’s early 1984, and JM is 58; the recently finished “trilogy” is the Ouija-board epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), which characterizes JM’s shorter poems as “CHRONICLES OF LOVE & LOSS”

I’m afraid the rest of this letter will be entirely about ME, but I can’t help it. I’m in love! It’s been so long that I’m bemused, not to say astonished and, oh my dear, so wildly happy—! But let me tell it in sequence.

—James Merrill, letter to Tony Parigory, April 13, 1984; published in *A Whole World*

A Renewal

(The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace, 1959; Selected Poems, p. 7)

Having used every subterfuge
To shake you, lies, fatigue, or even that of passion,
Now I see no way but a clean break.
I add that I am willing to bear the guilt.

You nod assent. Autumn turns windy, huge,
A clear vase of dry leaves vibrating on and on.
We sit, watching. When I next speak
Love buries itself in me, up to the hilt.

The Mad Scene

(Nights and Days, 1966; Selected Poems, p. 57)

Again last night I dreamed the dream called Laundry.
In it, the sheets and towels of a life we were going to share,
The milk-stiff bibs, the shroud, each rag to be ever
Trampled or soiled, bled on or groped for blindly,
Came swooning out of an enormous willow hamper
Onto moon-marbly boards. We had just met. I watched
From outer darkness. I had dressed myself in clothes
Of a new fiber that never stains or wrinkles, never
Wears thin. The opera house sparkled with tiers
And tiers of eyes, like mine enlarged by belladonna,
Trained inward. There I saw the cloud-clot, gust by gust,
Form, and the lightning bite, and the roan mane unloosen.
Fingers were running in panic over the flute's nine gates.
Why did I flinch? I loved you. And in the downpour laughed
To have us wrung white, gnarled together, one
Topmost mordent of wisteria,
As the lean tree burst into grief.

Days of 1964

(*Nights and Days*, 1966; *Selected Poems*, pp. 72–73)

Houses, an embassy, the hospital.
Our neighborhood sun-cured if trembling still
In pools of the night's rain . . .
Across the street that led to the center of town
A steep hill kept one company part way
Or could be climbed in twenty minutes
For some literally breathtaking views,
Framed by umbrella pines, of city and sea.
Underfoot, cyclamen, autumn crocus grew
Spangled as with fine sweat among the relics
Of good times had by all. If not Olympus,
An out-of-earshot, year-round hillside revel.

I brought home flowers from my climbs.
Kyria Kleo¹ who cleans for us
Put them in water, sighing *Virgin, Virgin*.
Her legs hurt. She wore brown, was fat, past fifty,
And looked like a Palmyra matron²
Copied in lard and horsehair. How she loved
You, me, loved us all, the bird, the cat!
I think now she *was* love. She sighed and glistened
All day with it, or pain, or both.
(We did not notably communicate.)
She lived nearby with her pious mother
And wastrel son. She called me her real son.

I paid her generously, I dare say.
Love makes one generous. Look at us. We'd known
Each other so briefly that instead of sleeping
We lay whole nights, open, in the lamplight,
And gazed, or traded stories.

One hour comes back—you gasping in my arms
With love, or laughter, or both,
I having just remembered and told you
What I'd looked up to see on my way downtown at noon:

(continued next page)

¹ Kyria Kleo: The poem is set at the house at 44 Athinaion Efivon Street in Athens that Merrill and Jackson shared beginning in the 1960s. “Kyria” is a Greek honorific comparable to “madam,” and “Kleo” is a first name or nickname.

² Palmyra matron: Palmyra was an important caravan city in ancient Syria. Excavations of burial sites have yielded limestone slabs with busts representing the souls of the interred.

Poor old Kleo, her aching legs,
Trudging into the pines. I called.
Called three times before she turned.
Above a tight, skyblue sweater, her face
Was painted. Yes. Her face was painted
Clown-white, white of the moon by daylight,
Lidded with pearl, mouth a poinsettia leaf.
Eat me, pay me—the erotic mask
Worn the world over by illusion
To weddings of itself and simple need.

Startled mute, we had stared—was love illusion?—
And gone our ways. Next, I was crossing a square
In which a moveable outdoor market's
Vegetables, chickens, pottery kept materializing
Through a dream-press of hagglers each at heart
Leery lest he be taken, plucked,
The bird, the flower of that November mildness,
Self lost up soft clay paths, or found, foothold,
Where the bud throbs awake
The better to be nipped, self on its knees in mud—
Here I stopped cold, for both our sakes;

And calmer on my way home bought us fruit.

Forgive me if you read this. (And may Kyria Kleo,
Should someone ever put it into Greek
And read it aloud to her, forgive me, too.)
I had gone so long without loving,
I hardly knew what I was thinking.

Where I hid my face, your touch, quick, merciful,
Blindfolded me. A god breathed from my lips.
If that was illusion I wanted it to last long;
To dwell, for its daily pittance, with us there,
Cleaning and watering, sighing with love or pain.
I hoped it would climb when it needed to the heights
Even of degradation as I for one
Seemed, those days, to be always climbing
Into a world of wild
Flowers, feasting, tears—or was I falling, legs
Buckling, heights, depths,
Into a pool of each night's rain?
But you were everywhere beside me, masked,
As who was not, in laughter, pain, and love.

Willowware Cup

(Braving the Elements, 1972; Selected Poems, p. 129)

Mass hysteria, wave after breaking wave
Blueblooded Cantonese upon these shores

Left the gene pool Lux-opaque and smoking
With dimstore mutants. One turned up today.

Plum in bloom, pagoda, blue birds, plume of willow—
Almost the replica of a prewar pattern—

The same boat bearing the gnat-sized lovers away,
The old bridge now bent double where her father signals

Feebly, as from flypaper, minding less and less.
Two smaller retainers with lanterns light him home.

Is that a scroll he carries? He must by now be immensely
Wise, and have given up earthly attachments, and all that.

Soon, of these May mornings, rising in mist, he will ask
Only to blend—like ink in flesh, blue anchor

Needled upon drunkenness while its destroyer
Full steam departs, the stigma throbbing, intricate—

Only to blend into a crazing texture.
You are far away. The leaves tell what they tell.

But this lone, chipped vessel, if it fills,
Fills for you with something warm and clear.

Around its inner horizon the old odd designs
Crowd as before, and seem to concentrate on you.

They represent, I fancy, a version of heaven
In its day more trouble to mend than to replace:

Steep roofs aslant, minutely tiled;
Tilted honeycombs, thunderhead blue.

Pledge

(A Scattering of Salts, 1995; Selected Poems, p. 241)

House on alert.
Sun setting in a blaze
Of insight kisses book and budvase
Where they hurt.

Did the page-turner yawn and slacken,
Or an omen flip by unread?
Prime cuts that once bled
Now blacken.

Her brimming eyes say
More than they see.
He is all worried probity
About to get its way.

Dance steps the world knows curiously well
Ease them asunder—
Friends “rallying around her,”
His “move to a hotel.”

Which one will get
The finger-wagging metronome,
Which one make a home
For the agèd cricket

Who sang togetherness ahead
From a hearth glowing bright?
It’s dark now. I write
Propped up in bed:

“You who have drained dry
Your golden goblet are about to learn—
As in my turn
Have I—

How life, unsweetened, fizzing up again
Fills the heart.
I drink to you apart
In that champagne.”