

“Look Closely at the Letters”: A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry  
Week 6: Merrill at Home | April 5, 2023  
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FIVE POEMS FOR THIS WEEK:

1. Mirror (*The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, 1959; *Selected Poems* [SP], pp. 11–12)
2. An Urban Convalescence (*Water Street*, 1962; SP, pp. 21–23)
3. A Tenancy (*Water Street*, 1962; SP, pp. 34–36)
4. Charles on Fire (*Nights and Days*, 1966; SP, p. 51)
5. The Book of Ephraim: A–C (*Divine Comedies*, 1976; SP, pp. 175–81)

FIVE OPTIONAL READINGS:

1. Angel (*Water Street*, 1962; SP, p. 32)
2. From the Cupola (*Nights and Days*, 1966; SP, pp. 58–71)
3. The Summer People (*The Fire Screen*, 1969; SP, pp. 91–110)
4. 18 West 11th Street (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; SP, pp. 125–28)
5. Days of 1994 (*Collected Poems*, 2001; SP, pp. 268–69)

JM ON STONINGTON, HOME, HOSPITALITY

What else,—oh yes, we have bought the building itself! At least we go today to sign papers. Two weeks ago, strolling out at dusk, thinking nothing bad, we saw a for sale sign tacked by our door—a four-masted schooner (4 Sail, get it?) with the agent’s name. Panic ensued. We tried to get hold of old [Stanley Jerome] Hoxie and found out all kinds of alarming things—that he is clearing out of Conn, that he is mixed up with a scheming widowwoman, goes off weekends to Vermont (local papers please copy) with her. They wanted \$16,000 for it which seemed sort of unfair, considering that a generous fraction of that price would be our own improvements. And then the agent said that no leases are respected unless registered in the town hall—ours isn’t. Eh bien! yesterday we heard that our offer has been accepted: we take over a \$6000 mortgage and pay \$5000. My word, we ought 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 for 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. There is an income of about \$1000 from the little shops below. The taxes are next to nothing. Tralalalalalala.

—James Merrill, letter to Claude Fredericks, June 11, 1955; published in *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill* (2021), edited by Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser; this letter reports the purchase of 107 Water Street in Stonington, Connecticut.

Oh very well, then. Let us broach the matter  
Of the new wallpaper in Stonington.  
Readers in small towns will know the world  
Of interest rippling out from such a topic,  
Know by their own case that “small town” is  
Largely a state of mind, a medium  
Wherein suspended, microscopic figments  
—Boredom, malice, curiosity—  
Catch a steadily more revealing light.  
However. Between our dining room and stairs  
Leading to the future studio,  
From long before our time, was this ill-lit  
Shoebox of a parlor where we’d sit  
Faute de mieux, when not asleep or eating.  
It had been papered by the original people—  
Blue-on-eggshell foliage touchingly  
Mottled or torn in places—and would do  
Throughout a first phase, till the Fisherman’s  
Wife in one of us awoke requiring  
That our arrangements undergo a partial  
Turn of the screw toward grandeur. So began  
What must in retrospect be called the Age  
—Some fifteen years—of the Wrong Wallpaper.  
Still blue and white, still floral, in the shop  
Looking unexceptionably prim,  
No sooner on our walls, the buds uncurl  
In scorn. Compulsively repetitive  
Neuroses full-blown and slack-lipped, then whole  
Faces surely not intended, peer  
Forth—once seen, no question of unseeing  
That turbaned mongoloid, that toad with teeth . . .  
Hiding as many as we can beneath  
Pictures, in our heart of hearts we know  
Either they or we will have to go.  
So *we* do. Into the next room—upstairs—  
To Boston—Athens! It would seem all roads  
Return us to the cell marked GO. Uncanny,  
One’s tolerance for those quotidian toads.

—JM, the opening of *Mirabell: Books of Number* (1978), Book 0.0; the second part of the trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), *Mirabell* is preceded by *The Book of Ephraim* (1976) and followed by *Scripts from the Pageant* (1980).

How about lunch?

—JM, the final line of his 1982 *Paris Review* interview with J. D. McClatchy.

I grow old under an intensity  
Of questioning looks. *Nonsense*,  
I try to say, *I cannot teach you children*  
*How to live.—If not you, who will?*  
Cries one of them aloud, grasping my gilded  
Frame till the world sways. *If not you, who will?*  
Between their visits the table, its arrangement  
Of Bible, fern and Paisley, all past change,  
Does very nicely. If ever I feel curious  
As to what others endure,  
Across the parlor *you* provide examples,  
Wide open, sunny, of everything I am  
Not. You embrace a whole world without once caring  
To set it in order. That takes thought. Out there  
Something is being picked. The red-and-white bandannas  
Go to my heart. A fine young man  
Rides by on horseback. Now the door shuts. Hester  
Confides in me her first unhappiness.  
This much, you see, would never have been fitted  
Together, but for me. Why then is it  
They more and more neglect me? Late one sleepless  
Midsummer night I strained to keep  
Five tapers from your breathing. *No*, the widowed  
Cousin said, *let them go out*. I did.  
The room brimmed with gray sound, all the instreaming  
Muslin of your dream . . .  
Years later now, two of the grown grandchildren  
Sit with novels face-down on the sill,  
Content to muse upon your tall transparence,  
Your clouds, brown fields, persimmon far  
And cypress near. One speaks. *How superficial*  
*Appearances are!* Since then, as if a fish  
Had broken the perfect silver of my reflectiveness,  
I have lapses. I suspect  
Looks from behind, where nothing is, cool gazes  
Through the blind flaws of my mind. As days,  
As decades lengthen, this vision  
Spreads and blackens. I do not know whose it is,  
But I think it watches for my last silver  
To blister, flake, float leaf by life, each milling-  
Downward dumb conceit, to a standstill  
From which not even you strike any brilliant  
Chord in me, and to a faceless will,  
Echo of mine, I am amenable.

An Urban Convalescence

(*Water Street*, 1962; *SP*, pp. 21–23)

Out for a walk, after a week in bed,  
I find them tearing up part of my block  
And, chilled through, dazed and lonely, join the dozen  
In meek attitudes, watching a huge crane  
Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years.  
Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man  
Laughs and curses in her brain,  
Bringing to mind the close of *The White Goddess*.<sup>1</sup>

As usual in New York, everything is torn down  
Before you have had time to care for it.  
Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall  
What building stood here. Was there a building at all?  
I have lived on this same street for a decade.

Wait. Yes. Vaguely a presence rises  
Some five floors high, of shabby stone  
—Or am I confusing it with another one  
In another part of town, or of the world?—  
And over its lintel into focus vaguely  
Misted with blood (my eyes are shut)  
A single garland sways, stone fruit, stone leaves,  
Which years of grit had etched until it thrust  
Roots down, even into the poor soil of my seeing.  
When did the garland become part of me?  
I ask myself, amused almost,  
Then shiver once from head to toe,

Transfixed by a particular cheap engraving of garlands  
Bought for a few francs long ago,  
All calligraphic tendril and cross-hatched rondure,  
Ten years ago, and crumpled up to stanch  
Boughs dripping, whose white gestures filled a cab,  
And thought of neither then nor since.  
Also, to clasp them, the small, red-nailed hand  
Of no one I can place. Wait. No. Her name, her features  
Lie toppled underneath that year's fashions.

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<sup>1</sup> *The White Goddess*: A work by the British author Robert Graves (1895–1985), published in 1948, that traces the origins of poetic myth in the ancient Mediterranean and Europe to a moon goddess or muse figure dating to the Old Stone Age.

The words she must have spoken, setting her face  
To fluttering like a veil, I cannot hear now,  
Let alone understand.

So that I am already on the stair,  
As it were, of where I lived,  
When the whole structure shudders at my tread  
And soundlessly collapses, filling  
The air with motes of stone.  
Onto the still erect building next door  
Are pressed levels and hues—  
Pocked rose, streaked greens, brown whites.  
Who drained the *pousse-café*?<sup>2</sup>  
Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.

Well, that is what life does. I stare  
A moment longer, so. And presently  
The massive volume of the world  
Closes again.

Upon that book I swear  
To abide by what it teaches:  
Gospels of ugliness and waste,  
Of towering voids, of soiled gusts,  
Of a shrieking to be faced  
Full into, eyes astream with cold—

With cold?  
All right then. With self-knowledge.

Indoors at last, the pages of *Time* are apt  
To open, and the illustrated mayor of New York,  
Given a glimpse of how and where I work,  
To note yet one more house that can be scrapped.

Unwillingly I picture  
My walls weathering in the general view.  
It is not even as though the new  
Buildings did very much for architecture.

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<sup>2</sup> *pousse-café*: A vividly hued alcoholic drink layered (densest ingredient at the bottom) so that, viewed from the side, it has horizontal stripes of color.

Suppose they did. The sickness of our time requires  
That these as well be blasted in their prime.  
You would think the simple fact of having lasted  
Threatened our cities like mysterious fires.

There are certain phrases which to use in a poem  
Is like rubbing silver with quicksilver. Bright  
But facile, the glamour deadens overnight.  
For instance, how “the sickness of our time”

Enhances, then debases, what I feel.  
At my desk I swallow in a glass of water  
No longer cordial, scarcely wet, a pill  
They had told me not to take until much later.

With the result that back into my imagination  
The city glides, like cities seen from the air,  
Mere smoke and sparkle to the passenger  
Having in mind another destination

Which now is not that honey-slow descent  
Of the Champs-Élysées, her hand in his,  
But the dull need to make some kind of house  
Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.

A Tenancy

(*Water Street*, 1962; *SP*, pp. 34–36)

*for David Jackson*

Something in the light of this March afternoon  
Recalls that first and dazzling one  
Of 1946. I sat elated  
In my old clothes, in the first of several  
Furnished rooms, head cocked for the kind of sound  
That is recognized only when heard.  
A fresh snowfall muffled the road, unplowed  
To leave blanker and brighter  
The bright, blank page turned overnight.

A yellow pencil in midair  
Kept sketching unfamiliar numerals,  
The 9 and 6 forming a stereoscope  
Through which to seize the Real  
Old-Fashioned Winter of my landlord's phrase,  
Through which the ponderous *idées reçues*  
Of oak, velour, crochet, also the mantel's  
Baby figures, value told me  
In some detail at the outset, might be plumbed  
For signs I should not know until I saw them.

But the objects, innocent  
(As we all once were) of annual depreciation,  
The more I looked grew shallower,  
Pined under a luminous plaid robe  
Thrown over us by the twin mullions, sashes,  
And unequal oblong panes  
Of windows and storm windows. These,  
Washed in a rage, then left to dry unpolished,  
Projected onto the inmost wall  
Ghosts of the storm, like pebbles under water.

And indeed, from within, ripples  
Of heat had begun visibly bearing up and away  
The bouquets and wreathes of a quarter century.  
Let them go, what did I want with them?  
It was time to change that wallpaper!

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Brittle, sallow in the new radiance,  
Time to set the last wreath floating out  
Above the dead, to sweep up flowers. The dance  
Had ended, it was light; the men looked tired  
And awkward in their uniforms.  
I sat, head thrown back, and with the dried stains  
Of light on my own cheeks, proposed  
This bargain with—say with the source of light:  
That given a few years more  
(Seven or ten or, what seemed vast, fifteen)  
To spend in love, in a country not at war,  
I would give in return  
All I had. All? A little sun  
Rose in my throat. The lease was drawn.

I did not even feel the time expire.

I feel it though, today, in this new room,  
Mine, with my things and thoughts, a view  
Of housetops, treetops, the walls bare.  
A changing light is deepening, is changing  
To a gilt ballroom chair a chair  
Bound to break under someone before long.  
I let the light change also me.  
The body that lived through that day  
And the sufficient love and relative peace  
Of those short years, is now not mine.  
Would it be called a soul?  
It knows, at any rate,  
That when the light dies and the bell rings  
Its leaner veteran will rise to face  
Partners not recognized  
Until drunk young again and gowned in changing  
Flushes; and strains will rise,  
The bone-tipped baton beating, rapid, faint,  
From the street below, from my depressions—

From the doorbell which rings.  
One foot asleep, I hop  
To let my three friends in. They stamp  
Themselves free of the spring's  
Last snow—or so we hope.

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One has brought violets in a pot;  
The second, wine; the best,  
His open, empty hand. Now in the room  
The sun is shining like a lamp.  
I put the flowers where I need them most

And then, not asking why they come,  
Invite the visitors to sit.  
If I am host at last  
It is of little more than my own past.  
May others be at home in it.

**Charles on Fire**

(*Nights and Days*, 1966; *SP*, p. 51)

Another evening we sprawled about discussing  
Appearances. And it was the consensus  
That while uncommon physical good looks  
Continued to launch one, as before, in life  
(Among its vaporous eddies and false calms),  
Still, as one of us said into his beard,  
“Without your intellectual and spiritual  
Values, man, you are sunk.” No one but squared  
The shoulders of his own unloveliness.  
Long-suffering Charles, having cooked and served the meal,  
Now brought out little tumblers finely etched  
He filled with amber liquor and then passed.  
“Say,” said the same young man, “in Paris, France,  
They do it this way”—bounding to his feet  
And touching a lit match to our host’s full glass.  
A blue flame, gentle, beautiful, came, went  
Above the surface. In a hush that fell  
We heard the vessel crack. The contents drained  
As who should step down from a crystal coach.  
Steward of spirits, Charles’s glistening hand  
All at once gloved itself in eeriness.  
The moment passed. He made two quick sweeps and  
Was flesh again. “It couldn’t matter less,”  
He said, but with a shocked, unconscious glance  
Into the mirror. Finding nothing changed,  
He filled a fresh glass and sank down among us.

**A**dmittedly I err by undertaking  
This in its present form.<sup>3</sup> The baldest prose  
Reportage was called for, that would reach  
The widest public in the shortest time.  
Time, it had transpired, was of the essence.  
Time, the very attar of the Rose,  
Was running out. We, though, were ancient foes,  
I and the deadline. Also my subject matter  
Gave me pause—so intimate, so novel,  
Best after all to do it as a novel?  
Looking about me, I found characters  
Human and otherwise (if the distinction  
Meant anything in fiction). Saw my way  
To a plot, or as much of one as still allowed  
For surprise and pleasure in its working-out.  
Knew my setting; and had, from the start, a theme  
Whose steady light shone back, it seemed, from every  
Least detail exposed to it. I came  
To see it as an old, exalted one:  
The incarnation and withdrawal of  
A god. That last phrase is Northrop Frye's.<sup>4</sup>  
I had stylistic hopes moreover. Fed  
Up so long and variously by  
Our age's fancy narrative concoctions  
I yearned for the kind of unseasoned telling found  
In legends, fairy tales, a tone licked clean  
Over the centuries by mild old tongues,  
Grandam to cub, serene, anonymous.  
Lacking that voice, the in its fashion brilliant  
Nouveau roman (even the one I wrote)  
Struck me as an orphaned form, whose followers,  
Suckled by Woolf not Mann,<sup>5</sup> had stories told them  
In childhood, if at all, by adults whom

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<sup>3</sup> Setting for section A: Overview of the poem, then January 1974, Stonington.

<sup>4</sup> Northrop Frye: The Canadian literary theorist (1912–1991), whose 1957 *Anatomy of Criticism* is cited. See the chapter “Theory of Mythos: An Introduction.”

<sup>5</sup> Woolf not Mann: The English writer Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and the German novelist Thomas Mann (1875–1955).

They could not love or honor. So my narrative  
Wanted to be limpid, unfragmented;  
My characters, conventional stock figures  
Afflicted to a minimal degree  
With personality and past experience—  
A witch, a hermit, innocent young lovers,  
The kinds of being we recall from Grimm,  
Jung, Verdi, and the commedia dell' arte.<sup>6</sup>  
That such a project was beyond me merely  
Incited further futile stabs at it.  
My downfall was “word-painting.” Exquisite  
Peek-a-boo plumage, limbs aflush from sheer  
Bombast unfurling through the troposphere  
Whose earthward denizens' implosion startles  
Silly quite a little crowd of mortals  
—My readers, I presumed from where I sat  
In the angelic secretariat.  
The more I struggled to be plain, the more  
Mannerism hobbled me. What for?  
Since it had never truly fit, why wear  
The shoe of prose? In verse the feet went bare.  
Measures, furthermore, had been defined  
As what emergency required. Blind  
Promptings put at last the whole mistaken  
Enterprise to sleep in darkest Macon  
(Cf. “The Will”),<sup>7</sup> and I alone was left  
To tell my story. For it seemed that Time—  
The grizzled washer of his hands appearing  
To say so in a spectrum-bezeled space  
Above hot water—Time would not;  
Whether because it was running out like water  
Or because January draws this bright  
Line down the new page I take to write:

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<sup>6</sup> Grimm, / Jung, Verdi, and the commedia dell' arte: Jacob and Wilhelm, the Brothers Grimm, the German folklorists who published their first collection of fairy tales in 1812. Carl Jung (1875–1961), the Swiss psychiatrist noted for his writings on the idea that the psyche can be best understood through art, mythology, and astrology. Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901), the Italian composer of often melodramatic operas. Commedia dell' arte, an improvisational theater style popular in eighteenth-century Italy and elsewhere, based on a repertory of stock situations and characters.

<sup>7</sup> “The Will”: A poem of Merrill's, also included in his 1976 collection *Divine Comedies*.

The Book of a Thousand and One Evenings Spent  
With David Jackson<sup>8</sup> at the Ouija Board  
In Touch with Ephraim Our Familiar Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> David Jackson: An American writer and painter, Jackson (1922–2001) shared homes with Merrill in Stonington, New York City, Athens, and Key West. Their communication with spirits by way of the Ouija board (they made their own on many occasions and used the handle of a teacup as a pointer) continued for decades. The first of Merrill’s poems to mention the Ouija board, which also plays a part in his novel *The Seraglio* (1957), is “Voices from the Other World” (which we read in Week 3). Communications through the Ouija board also figure in “The Will” as well as being the basis for *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

<sup>9</sup> Ephraim: The otherworldly spirit and central figure in *The Book of Ephraim*, with whom Merrill and Jackson communicated for years by way of the Ouija board.

**B**ackdrop: The dining room at Stonington.<sup>10</sup>

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.  
Wallace Stevens,<sup>11</sup> 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.

Properties: A milk glass tabletop.  
A blue-and-white cup from the Five & Ten.  
Pencil, paper. Heavy cardboard sheet  
Over which the letters A to Z  
Spread in an arc, our covenant  
With whom it would concern; also  
The Arabic numerals, and YES and NO.  
What more could a familiar spirit want?  
Well, when he knew us better, he’d suggest  
We prop a mirror in the facing chair.  
Erect and gleaming, silver-hearted guest,  
We saw each other in it. He saw us.

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<sup>10</sup> Setting for section B: Summer 1955, Stonington.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace Stevens: The American poet (1879–1955), who appears throughout *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

(Any reflecting surface worked for him.  
Noons, D and I might row to a sandbar  
Far enough from town for swimming naked  
Then pacing the glass treadmill hardly wet  
That healed itself perpetually of us—  
Unobserved, unheard we thought, until  
The night he praised our bodies and our wit,  
Our blushes in a twinkling overcome.)  
Or we could please him by swirling a drop of rum  
Inside the cup that, overturned and seeming  
Slightly to lurch at such times in mid-glide,  
Took heart from us, dictation from our guide.

But he had not yet found us. Who was there?  
The cup twitched in its sleep. “Is someone there?”  
We whispered, fingers light on Willowware,<sup>12</sup>  
When the thing moved. Our breathing stopped. The cup,  
Glazed zombie of itself, was on the prow  
Moving, but dully, incoherently,  
Possessed, as we should soon enough be told,  
By one or another of the myriads  
Who hardly understand, through the compulsive  
Reliving of their deaths, that they have died  
—By fire in this case, when a warehouse burned.  
HELLP O SAV ME scrawled the cup  
As on the very wall flame rippled up,  
Hypnotic wave on wave, a lullaby  
Of awfulness. I slumped. D: One more try.  
Was anybody there? As when a pike  
Strikes, and the line singing writes in lakeflesh  
Highstrung runes, and reel spins and mind reels  
YES a new and urgent power YES  
Seized the cup. It swerved, clung, hesitated,  
Darted off, a devil’s darning needle  
Gyroscope our fingers rode bareback  
(But stopping dead the instant one lost touch)  
Here, there, swift handle pointing, letter upon  
Letter taken down blind by my free hand—  
At best so clumsily, those early sessions  
Break off into guesswork, paraphrase.

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<sup>12</sup> Willowware: Popular and inexpensive household china, imitating the blue-on-white patterns of Chinese export porcelain.

**JMH** *James Merrill* **JAMES MERRILL HOUSE &  
WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM**

Too much went whizzing past. We were too nice  
To pause, divide the alphabetical  
Gibberish into words and sentences.  
Yet even the most fragmentary message—  
Twice as entertaining, twice as wise  
As either of its mediums—enthralled them.



**C**orrect but cautious, that first night, we asked

Our visitor's name, era, habitat.<sup>13</sup>  
EPHRAIM came the answer. A Greek Jew  
Born AD 8 at XANTHOS Where was that?  
In Greece WHEN WOLVES & RAVENS WERE IN ROME  
(Next day the classical dictionary yielded  
A Xanthos on the Asia Minor Coast.)  
NOW WHO ARE U We told him. ARE U XTIANs  
We guessed so. WHAT A COZY CATACOMB  
Christ had WROUGHT HAVOC in *his* family,  
ENTICED MY FATHER FROM MY MOTHERS BED  
(I too had issued from a broken home—  
The first of several facts to coincide.)  
Later a favorite of TIBERIUS Died  
AD 36 on CAPRI throttled  
By the imperial guard for having LOVED  
THE MONSTERS NEPHEW (sic) CALIGULA  
Rapidly he went on—changing the subject?  
A long incriminating manuscript  
Boxed in bronze lay UNDER PORPHYRY  
Beneath the deepest excavations. He  
Would help us find it, but we must please make haste  
Because Tiberius wanted it destroyed.  
Oh? And where, we wondered of the void,  
*Was* Tiberius these days? STAGE THREE

Why was he telling *us*? He'd overheard us  
Talking to SIMPSON Simpson? His LINK WITH EARTH  
His REPRESENTATIVE A feeble nature  
All but bestial, given to violent  
Short lives—one ending lately among flames  
In an Army warehouse. Slated for rebirth  
But not in time, said Ephraim, to prevent  
The brat from wasting, just now at our cup,  
Precious long distance minutes—don't hang up!

So much facetiousness—well, we were young  
And these were matters of life and death—dismayed us.  
Was he a devil? His reply MY POOR  
INNOCENTS left the issue hanging fire.

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<sup>13</sup> Setting for section C: Summer 1955, Stonington.

As it flowed on, his stream-of-consciousness  
Deepened. There was a buried room, a BED  
WROUGHT IN SILVER I CAN LEAD U THERE  
IF IF? U GIVE ME What? HA HA YR SOULS  
(Another time he'll say that he misread  
Our innocence for insolence that night,  
And meant to scare us.) Our eyes met. What if . . .  
The blood's least vessel hoisted jet-black sails.  
Five whole minutes we were frightened stiff  
—But after all, we weren't *that* innocent.  
The Rover Boys<sup>14</sup> at thirty, still red-blooded  
Enough not to pass up an armchair revel  
And pure enough at heart to beat the devil,  
Entered into the spirit, so to speak,  
And said they'd leave for Capri that same week.

Pause. Then, as though we'd passed a test,  
Ephraim's whole manner changed. He brushed aside  
Tiberius and settled to the task  
Of answering, like an experienced guide,  
Those questions we had lacked the wit to ask.

Here on Earth—huge tracts of information  
Have gone into these capsules flavorless  
And rhymed for easy swallowing—on Earth  
We're each the REPRESENTATIVE of a PATRON  
—Are there that many patrons? YES O YES  
These secular guardian angels fume and fuss  
For what must seem eternity over us.  
It is forbidden them to INTERVENE  
Save, as it were, in the entr'acte between  
One incarnation and another. Back  
To school from the disastrously long vac  
Goes the soul its patron crams yet once  
Again with *savoir vivre*. Will the dunce  
Never—by rote, the hundredth time round—learn  
What ropes make fast that point of no return,  
A footing on the lowest of NINE STAGES  
Among the curates and the minor mages?

(continued next page)

<sup>14</sup> The Rover Boys: A popular series of books for children published between 1899 and 1926 that turn on the adventures of three brothers, Tom, Sam, and Dick Rover.

**JMH** JAMES MERRILL HOUSE &  
*James Merrill* WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

Patrons at last ourselves, an upward notch  
Our old ones move THEYVE BORNE IT ALL FOR THIS  
And take delivery from the Abyss  
Of brand-new little savage souls to watch.  
One difference: with every rise in station  
Comes a degree of PEACE FROM REPRESENTATION  
—Odd phrase, more like a motto for abstract  
Art—or for Autocracy—In fact  
Our heads are spinning—From the East a light—  
BUT U ARE TIRED MES CHERS SWEET DREAMS TOMORROW NIGHT