

**“Look Closely at the Letters”: A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry**  
**Week 1: Beginnings | March 1, 2023**  
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FIVE POEMS FOR THIS WEEK:

1. The Black Swan (*First Poems*, 1951; *Selected Poems*, p. 3)
2. Nightgown (*Nights and Days*, 1966; *Selected Poems*, p. 37)
3. The Broken Home (*Nights and Days*, 1966; *Selected Poems*, pp. 52–55)
4. The School Play (*Late Settings*, 1985; *Selected Poems*, p. 187)
5. b o d y (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; *Selected Poems*, p. 240)

FIVE OPTIONAL READINGS:

1. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser’s introduction to the *Selected Poems* (pp. xi–xvi)
2. Scenes of Childhood (*Water Street*, 1962; *Selected Poems*, pp. 28–31)
3. Matinées (*The Fire Screen*, 1969; *Selected Poems*, pp. 87–90)
4. Days of 1935 (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *Selected Poems*, pp. 115–24)
5. My Father’s Irish Setters (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; *Selected Poems*, pp. 237–38)

JM ON POETIC BEGINNINGS:

Anybody starting to write today has at least ten kinds of poem, each different from the other, on which to pattern his own.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds would you say?

There would be the confessional, if you will; or the personal nature lyric along the lines of [Theodore] Roethke; or the Chinese-sage manner, full of insects and ponies and small boats and liquor and place-names; or the kind of stammered-out neo-epigram of people like [Robert] Creeley—to name only a few. And there are all sorts of schemes on the page to reproduce—the broken line, [William Carlos] Williams’s downward staircase, three paces to a step; the tight stanza; the heavy garlands of [Saint-John] Perse; the “expressionist” calligrams of [Ezra] Pound or [Charles] Olson. . . .

—Donald Sheehan, “An Interview with James Merrill,” *Contemporary Literature* (Winter 1968)  
[first names for everyone Merrill name-drops added in brackets]

One of your present advantages is a relative immaturity that gives you time to focus on your craft. Of course ideas & metaphors will come your way, but the chances are that they will be sources of embarrassment even a few years hence. What will not embarrass you is the fulfilling of formal problems, whether set by older models or contrived by yourself. Am I urging you to write sestinas, villanelles, sonnets? I am. Because to have done so implies a level of skill you may one day go far beyond, but which meanwhile will not turn to ashes in your mouth like This Season’s Deep Thought. Live 40 more years and you’ll find those TSDTs resurfacing, encrusted with rare submarine textures for your own personal use. So there’s no hurry, at least where Content is involved. Now’s the time to surrender to the Craft. At your age you can learn quickly & lastingly. Learn the full expressiveness of your medium, the forms, the meters, the joys of syntax direct and devious. If a friend or teacher should read this page and say “What utter shit!” remember that he has my sympathy, not my envy.

—James Merrill, letter to Torren Blair, a high-school senior and JM’s “pupil,” January 14/16, 1995; published in *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill* (2021), edited by Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser

**The Black Swan**

(*First Poems*, 1951; *Selected Poems*, p. 3)<sup>1</sup>

Black on flat water past the jonquil lawns  
Riding, the black swan draws  
A private chaos warbling in its wake,  
Assuming, like a fourth dimension, splendor  
That calls the child with white ideas of swans  
Nearer to that green lake  
Where every paradox means wonder.

Though the black swan's arched neck is like  
A question-mark on the lake,  
The swan outlaws all possible questioning:  
A thing in itself, like love, like submarine  
Disaster, or the first sound when we wake;  
And the swan-song it sings  
Is the huge silence of the swan.

Illusion: the black swan knows how to break  
Through expectation, beak  
Aimed now at its own breast, now at its image,  
And move across our lives, if the lake is life,  
And by the gentlest turning of its neck  
Transform, in time, time's damage;  
To less than a black plume, time's grief.

Enchanter: the black swan has learned to enter  
Sorrow's lost secret center  
Where, like a maypole separate tragedies  
Are wound about a tower of ribbons, and where  
The central hollowness is that pure winter  
That does not change but is  
Always brilliant ice and air.

Always the black swan moves on the lake; always  
The blond child stands to gaze  
As the tall emblem pivots and rides out  
To the opposite side, always. The child upon  
The bank, hands full of difficult marvels, stays  
Forever to cry aloud  
In anguish: I love the black swan.

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<sup>1</sup> Texts and footnotes from James Merrill, *Selected Poems*, edited by J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Knopf, 2008).

**Nightgown**

*(Nights and Days, 1966; Selected Poems, p. 37)*

A cold so keen,  
My speech unfurls tonight  
As from the chattering teeth  
Of a sewing machine.

Whom words appear to warm,  
Dear heart, wear mine. Come forth  
Wound in their flimsy white  
And give it form.

**The Broken Home**

(*Nights and Days*, 1966; *Selected Poems*, pp. 52–55)

Crossing the street,  
I saw the parents and the child  
At their window, gleaming like fruit  
With evening's mild gold leaf.

In a room on the floor below,  
Sunless, cooler—a brimming  
Saucer of wax, marbly and dim—  
I have lit what's left of my life.

I have thrown out yesterday's milk  
And opened a book of maxims.  
The flame quickens. The word stirs.

Tell me, tongue of fire,  
That you and I are as real  
At least as the people upstairs.

My father, who had flown in World War I,  
Might have continued to invest his life  
In cloud banks well above Wall Street and wife.<sup>2</sup>  
But the race was run below, and the point was to win.

Too late now, I make out in his blue gaze  
(Through the smoked glass of being thirty-six)  
The soul eclipsed by twin black pupils, sex  
And business; time was money in those days.

Each thirteenth year he married. When he died  
There were already several chilled wives  
In sable orbit—rings, cars, permanent waves.  
We'd felt him warming up for a green bride.

He could afford it. He was “in his prime”  
At three score ten. But money was not time.

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<sup>2</sup> Merrill's parents were Charles E. Merrill (1885–1956), co-founder of the Merrill Lynch brokerage firm, and Hellen Ingram (1898–2000).

When my parents were younger this was a popular act:  
A veiled woman would leap from an electric, wine-dark car  
To the steps of no matter what—the Senate or the Ritz Bar—  
And bodily, at newsreel speed, attack

No matter whom—Al Smith<sup>3</sup> or José María Sert<sup>4</sup>  
Or Clemenceau<sup>5</sup>—veins standing out on her throat  
As she yelled *War mongerer!*<sup>6</sup> *Pig! Give us the vote!*,  
And would have to be hauled away in her hobble skirt.

What had the man done? Oh, made history.  
Her business (he had implied) was giving birth,  
Tending the house, mending the socks.

Always that same old story—  
Father Time and Mother Earth,  
A marriage on the rocks.

One afternoon, red, satyr-thighed  
Michael, the Irish setter, head  
Passionately lowered, led  
The child I was to a shut door. Inside,

Blinds beat sun from the bed.  
The green-gold room throbbled like a bruise.  
Under a sheet, clad in taboos  
Lay whom we sought, her hair undone, outspread,

And of a blackness found, if ever now, in old  
Engravings where the acid bit.  
I must have needed to touch it  
Or the whiteness—was she dead?  
Her eyes flew open, startled strange and cold.  
The dog slumped to the floor. She reached for me. I fled.

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<sup>3</sup> Al Smith: The Democratic politician (1873–1944), who advocated reform in labor laws and other areas and was the first American Roman Catholic nominee for president (defeated by Herbert Hoover in 1928).

<sup>4</sup> José María Sert: The Spanish painter (1876–1945), whose large mural *American Progress* (1934) occupies a wall in the main lobby of what is now Rockefeller Center, replacing, at Nelson Rockefeller's behest, one by Diego Rivera that showed leftist sympathies.

<sup>5</sup> Clemenceau: Georges Clemenceau (1876–1945), the prime minister of France (1917–1920), radical Republican turned right-wing nationalist, who favored more severe treatment of Germany at the end of World War I and thus clashed with Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George.

<sup>6</sup> *war mongerer*: I.e., warmonger. The furious woman has made a mistake.

Tonight they have stepped out onto the gravel.  
The party is over. It's the fall  
Of 1931. They love each other still.

She: Charlie, I can't stand the pace.  
He: Come on, honey—why, you'll bury us all!

A lead soldier guards my windowsill:  
Khaki rifle, uniform, and face.  
Something in me grows heavy, silvery, pliable.

How intensely people used to feel!  
Like metal poured at the close of a proletarian novel,  
Refined and glowing from the crucible,  
I see those two hearts, I'm afraid,  
Still. Cool here in the graveyard of good and evil,  
They are even so to be honored and obeyed.

. . . Obeyed, at least, inversely. Thus  
I rarely buy a newspaper, or vote.  
To do so, I have learned, is to invite  
The tread of a stone guest<sup>7</sup> within my house.

Shooting this rusted bolt, though, against him,  
I trust I am no less time's child than some  
Who on the heath impersonate Poor Tom<sup>8</sup>  
Or on the barricades risk life and limb.

Nor do I try to keep a garden, only  
An avocado in a glass of water—  
Roots pallid, gemmed with air. And later,

When the small gilt leaves have grown  
Fleshy and green, I let them die, yes, yes,  
And start another. I am earth's no less.

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<sup>7</sup> a stone guest: In the 1787 opera *Don Giovanni* by the Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), the Stone Guest is the cemetery statue of the Commendatore, whom Don Giovanni has killed. The Commendatore has his revenge when the statue delivers Don Giovanni to Hell.

<sup>8</sup> Poor Tom: In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, 2.3., Poor Tom is Edgar—the loyal son of Kent, the Duke of Gloucester—banished from the kingdom and disguised as a madman on the heath.

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

A child, a red dog roam the corridors,  
Still, of the broken home. No sound. The brilliant  
Rag runners halt before wide-open doors.  
My old room! Its wallpaper—cream, medallioned  
With pink and brown—brings back the first nightmares,  
Long summer colds and Emma, sepia-faced,  
Perspiring over broth carried upstairs  
Aswim with golden fats I could not taste.

The real house became a boarding school.  
Under the ballroom ceiling's allegory  
Someone at last may actually be allowed  
To learn something; or, from my window, cool  
With the unstiflement of the entire story,  
Watch a red setter stretch and sink in cloud.

The School Play

(*Late Settings*, 1985; *Selected Poems*, p. 187)<sup>9</sup>

“Harry of Hereford, Lancaster, and Derby,  
Stands here for God, his country, and . . .” And what?  
“Stands here for God, his Sovereign, and himself,”  
Growls Captain Fry who had the play by heart.  
I was the First Herald, “a small part”  
—I was small too—“but an important one.”  
What was not important to the self  
At nine or ten? Already I had crushes  
On Mowbray, Bushy, and the Duke of York.  
Handsome Donald Niemann (now himself,  
According to the Bulletin, headmaster  
Of his own school somewhere out West) awoke  
Too many self-indulgent mouthings in  
The dummy mirror before smashing it,  
For me to set my scuffed school cap at him.  
Another year I’d play that part myself,  
Or Puck, or Goneril, or Prospero.  
Later, in adolescence, it was thought  
Clever to speak of having found oneself,  
With a smile and rueful headshake for those who hadn’t.  
People still do. Only the other day  
A woman my age told us that her son  
“Hadn’t found himself”—at thirty-one!  
I heard in the mind’s ear an amused hum  
Of mothers and fathers from beyond the curtain,  
And that flushed, far-reaching hour came back  
Months of rehearsal in the gymnasium  
Had led to: when the skinny nobodies  
Who’d memorized the verse and learned to speak it  
Emerged in beards and hose (or gowns and rouge)  
Vivid with character, having put themselves  
All unsuspecting into the masters’ hands.

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<sup>9</sup> The school cast is performing Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. The “school play” was an annual event at St. Bernard’s School in New York City that Merrill attended as a boy.



**b o d y**

(*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; *Selected Poems*, p. 240)

Look closely at the letters. Can you see,  
entering (stage right), then floating full,  
then heading off—so soon—  
how like a little kohl-rimmed moon  
*o* plots her course from *b* to *d*

—as *y*, unanswered, knocks at the stage door?  
Looked at too long, words fail,  
phase out. Ask, now that *body* shines  
no longer, by what light you learn these lines  
and what the *b* and *d* stood for.