

“Look Closely at the Letters”: A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry
Week 5: Endings | March 29, 2023
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FIVE POEMS FOR THIS WEEK:

1. Grass (*Late Settings*, 1985; *Selected Poems [SP]*, p. 184)
2. Investiture at Ceccoli’s (*The Inner Room*, 1988; *SP*, p. 219)
3. Farewell Performance (*The Inner Room*, 1988; *SP*, pp. 220–21)
4. Self-Portrait in Tyvek^(TM) Windbreaker (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; pp. 251–54)
5. Christmas Tree (*Collected Poems*, 2001; p. 266)

FIVE OPTIONAL READINGS:

1. The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (*The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, 1959; *SP*, p. 57)
2. Log (*Braving the Elements*, 1972; *SP*, p. 111)
3. A Downward Look (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; p. 223)
4. An Upward Look (*A Scattering of Salts*, 1995; p. 255)
5. Oranges (*Collected Poems*, 2001; *SP*, p. 257)

JM ON ENDINGS

JAMES MERRILL: I think one problem that has presented itself over and over, usually in the case of a poem of a certain length, is that you’ve got to end up saying the right thing. A poem like “Scenes of Childhood” made for a terrible impasse because at the point where my “I” is waking up the next morning, after a bad night, I had him say that *dawn was worse*. It took me a couple of weeks to realize that this was something that couldn’t be said under nearly any circumstances without being dishonest. Dawn is not worse; the sacred sun rises and things look up. Once I reversed myself, the poem ended easily enough. I had the same problem with “An Urban Convalescence” before writing those concluding quatrains. It broke off at the lowest point: “The heavy volume of the world / Closes again.” But then something affirmative had to be made out of it.

J. D. MCCLATCHY: You’re so self-conscious about *not* striking attitudes that the word “affirmative” makes me wonder . . .

JAMES MERRILL: No, think of music. I mean, you don’t *end* pieces with a dissonance.

—James Merrill, “An Interview with J. D. McClatchy,” *The Paris Review* (Summer 1982)

When Maxine Groffsky was consigning a pill-box-full of our dear one [the late literary critic David Kalstone, Merrill’s close friend] to the Grand Canal, Peter and I took Rollie’s dinghy—have I told you this?—out a hundred yards or so, on a diamond-clear morning. With tears simply bursting out of my eyes, an hour earlier, I’d written a few lines which we burned and mixed with the “cremains.” By the time the plastic bag with all of this in it had been turned inside-out under water, and the mansize cloud

of white revolved once like one of Balanchine’s dancers before dispersing, I felt so strong and grateful—and hoped, when my time comes, for nothing better than to be given back to the elements at the hand of a friend. This was selfish perhaps, in that so many of D’s other friends were excluded from that moment, but one can’t have everything. I’d reserved a last teaspoon to go at the base of Eleanor’s apple tree, and as DJ and a couple of others stood around, I read a couple of Philip Sidney poems.

—JM, letter to David McIntosh, August 8, 1986; published in *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill* (2021), edited by Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser. Compare this letter with Merrill’s elegy for Kalstone, “Farewell Performance” (see pp. 5–6 below).

Or in three lucky strokes of word golf LEAD
Once again turns (LOAD, GOAD) to GOLD.

—JM, from “Processional,” the last two lines of his penultimate collection *The Inner Room* (1988)—a letter-perfect example of Merrill’s alchemical endings.

There is a moment comedies beget
When escapade and hubbub die away,
Vows are renewed, masks dropped, La Folle Journée
Arriving star by star at a septet.
It’s then the connoisseur of your bouquet
(Who sits dry-eyed through *Oedipus* or *Lear*)
Will shed, O Happiness, a furtive tear.

—JM, from “Nine Lives,” in Merrill’s final collection *A Scattering of Salts* (1995). *La Folle Journée* (French for “The Mad Day”) is an alternate title for *The Marriage of Figaro*; Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear* are tragedies; “Una furtiva lagrima” (in English, “A furtive tear”) is an aria from Gaetano Donizetti’s opera *L’elisir d’amore*. Think of this seven-line stanza as Merrill’s description of how the perfect comic finale might sound and feel.

I can only begin to tell you how touched and delighted I am by *Out of Egypt*. . . . Alexandria has permanently colored my days. To find it now in your pages, all rosy and clear-eyed from the tonic of your telling, is the greatest imaginable gift. That whole world of the trivial & the tragic, interwoven as in Chekhov, and underscored as in opera, is for me the very best life has to offer, and as close to a “real” home as I’ve ever come. No reflection on my parents, that the Stork delivered me to West Eleventh Street instead of the Corniche. But here I am. What do you do with so much blue, once you’ve seen it? (Terrible things await us before the book ends. Meanwhile, just a long sigh of relief . . .)

Well, I could spin this all out at greater length—you can’t be averse to praise. Most of all, though, I want to go back to the beginning and read it through a second time.

—JM, letter to *Out of Egypt*’s author André Aciman, February 1, 1995, the final letter in *A Whole World*, and quite likely Merrill’s last complete letter. He died five days later.

Grass

(*Late Settings*, 1985; *SP*, p. 184)

The river irises
Draw themselves in.
Enough to have seen
Their day. The arras

Also of evening drawn,
We light up between
Earth and Venus
On the courthouse lawn,

Kept by this cheerful
Inch of green
And ten more years—fifteen?—
From disappearing.

Investiture at Cecconi's

(*The Inner Room*, 1988; *SP*, p. 219)

for David Kalstone¹

Caro,² that dream (after the diagnosis)
found me losing patience outside the door of
“our” Venetian tailor. I wanted evening
clothes for the new year.

Then a bulb went on. The old woman, she who
stitches dawn to dusk in his back room, opened
one suspicious inch, all the while exclaiming
over the late hour—

Fabrics? patterns? those the proprietor must
show by day, not now—till a lightning insight
cracks her face wide: *Ma! the Signore's here to
try on his new robe!*

Robe? She nods me onward. The mirror triptych
summons three bent crones she diffracted into
back from no known space. They converge by magic,
arms full of moonlight.

Up my own arms glistening sleeves are drawn. Cool
silk in grave, white folds—Oriental mourning—
sheathes me, throat to ankles. I turn to face her,
uncomprehending.

Thank your friend, she cackles, *the Professore!*
Wonderstruck I sway, like a tree of tears. You—
miles away, sick, fearful—have yet arranged this
heartstopping present.

¹ David Kalstone: Merrill's friend the American literary scholar and professor David Kalstone (1933–1986), whose book *Five Temperaments* (1977) includes a chapter on Merrill and to whom this poem is dedicated. Kalstone was Merrill's first close friend to die of AIDS, the same year Merrill learned he was HIV-positive.

² Caro: “Dear,” an Italian salutation Merrill frequently used for Kalstone, his Italophile friend. For many summers in the 1970s and 1980s, Kalstone rented rooms in the Palazzo Barbaro in Venice, where Merrill would visit him. (Merrill also uses the word in “Farewell Performance,” below.)



Farewell Performance

(*The Inner Room*, 1988; *SP*, pp. 220–21)

*for DK*³

Art. It cures affliction. As lights go down and
Maestro lifts his wand, the unfailing sea change
starts within us. Limber alembics once more
make of the common

lot a pure, brief gold. At the end our bravos
call them back, sweat-soldered and leotarded,
back, again back—anything not to face the
fact that it's over.

You are gone. You'd caught like a cold their airy
lust for essence. Now, in the furnace parched to
ten or twelve light handfuls, a mortal gravel
sifted through fingers,

coarse yet grayly glimmering sublimate of
palace days, Strauss, Sidney, the lover's plaintive
Can't we just be friends? which your breakfast phone call
clothed in amusement,

this is what we paddled a neighbor's dinghy
out to scatter—Peter who grasped the buoy,⁴
I who held the box underwater, freeing
all it contained. Past

sunny, fluent soundings that gruel of selfhood
taking manlike shape for one last jeté⁵ on
ghostly—wait, ah!—point into darkness vanished.
High up, a gull's wings

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³ This elegy for David Kalstone narrates his ashes being scattered (see stanza 5 onward). It alludes to the Palazzo Barbaro as well as two of Kalstone's favorite artists: the German composer Richard Strauss (1864–1949) and the English Renaissance courtier poet Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586), on whose work Kalstone wrote his first book, *Sidney's Poetry: Contexts and Interpretations* (1965).

⁴ Peter: Merrill's friend Peter Hooten (b. 1950), an American actor.

⁵ [Note from Chris: A jeté is a kind of ballet leap in which one leg appears to be “thrown” (the literal meaning of the French *jeté*) in the direction of the leap. Merrill uses it, I suspect, in part because of that buried meaning, “thrown”: he is striving, or straining, to reimagine something tragic—scattering the ashes of an aesthetically attuned friend—as a willful act: a final artistic act.]

clapped. The house lights (always supposing, caro,
Earth remains your house) at their brightest set the
scene for good: true colors, the sun-warm hand to
cover my wet one . . .

Back they come. How you would have loved it. We in
turn have risen. Pity and terror⁶ done with,
programs furred, lips parted, we jostle forward
eager to hail them,

more, to join the troupe—will a friend enroll us
one fine day? Strange, though. For up close their magic
self-destructs. Pale, dripping, with downcast eyes they've
seen where it led you.

⁶ [Note from Chris: Aristotle's treatise *Poetics* (c. 335 B.C.E.) defines tragedy as a dramatic genre that (among other things) "accomplish[es] by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions."]

Self-Portrait in Tyvek^(TM) Windbreaker

(A Scattering of Salts, 1995; SP, pp. 251–54)

The windbreaker is white with a world map.
DuPont contributed the seeming-frail,
Unrippable stuff first used for Priority Mail.
Weightless as shores reflected in deep water,
The countries are violet, orange, yellow, green; 5
Names of the principal towns and rivers, black.
A zipper's hiss, and the Atlantic Ocean closes
Over my blood-red T-shirt from the Gap.

I found it in one of those vaguely imbecile
Emporia catering to the collective unconscious 10
Of our time and place. This one featured crystals,
Cassettes of whalesong and rain-forest whistles,
Barometers, herbal cosmetics, pillows like puffins,
Recycled notebooks, mechanized lucite coffins
For sapphire waves that crest, break, and recede, 15
As they presumably do in nature still.

Sweat-panted and Reeboked, I wear it to the gym.
My terry-cloth headband is green as laurel.
A yellow plastic Walkman at my hip
Sends shiny yellow tendrils to either ear. 20
All us street people got our types on tape,
Turn ourselves on with a sly fingertip.
Today I felt like Songs of Yesteryear
Sung by Roberto Murolo.⁷ Heard of him?

Well, back before animal species began to become 25
Extinct, a dictator named Mussolini banned
The street-singers of Naples. One smart kid
Learned their repertoire by heart, and hid.
Emerging after the war with his guitar,
He alone bearing the old songs of the land 30
Into the nuclear age sang with a charm,
A perfect naturalness that thawed the numb

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⁷ Roberto Murolo: The Neapolitan singer and scholar (1912–2003) whose encyclopedic collection of Neapolitan songs ranges from 1200 to 1962.

Survivors and reinspired the Underground.
From love to grief to gaiety his art
Modulates effortlessly, like a young man's heart, 35
'Tonic to dominant—the frets so few
And change so strummed into the life of things
That Nature's lamps burn brighter when he sings
Nannetta's fickleness,⁸ or chocolate,
Snow on a flower, the moon, the seasons' round. 40

I picked his tape in lieu of something grosser
Or loftier, say the Dead or Arvo Pärt,⁹
On the hazy premise that what fills the mind
Shows on the face. My face, as a small part
Of nature, hopes this musical sunscreen 45
Will keep the wilderness within it green,
Yet looks uneasy, drawn. I detect behind
My neighbor's grin the oncoming bulldozer

And cannot stop it. Ecosaints—their karma
To be Earth's latest, maybe terminal, fruits— 50
Are slow to ripen. Even this dumb jacket
Probably still believes in Human Rights,
Thinks in terms of "nations," urban centers,
Cares less (can Tyvek breathe?) for oxygen
Than for the innocents evicted when 55
Ford bites the dust and Big Mac buys the farm.

Hah. As if greed and savagery weren't the tongues
We've spoken since the beginning. My point is, those
Prior people, fresh from scarifying
Their young and feasting in triumph on their foes, 60
Honored the gods of Air and Land and Sea.
We, though . . . Cut to dead forests, filthy beaches,
The can of hairspray, oil-benighted creatures,
A star-scarred x-ray of the North Wind's lungs.

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⁸ Nannetta: A character in *Falstaff* (1893), the last opera by Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901).

⁹ the Dead: The Grateful Dead, a group of rock musicians who started out in San Francisco in 1965 and became known for their eclectic mix of influences. Arvo Pärt: The Estonian composer (b. 1935) of experimental music, recently the kind he calls "tintinnabulation."

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

Still, not to paint a picture wholly black, 65
 Some social highlights: Dead white males in malls.
 Prayer breakfasts. Pay-phone sex. “Ring up as meat.”
 Oprah. The GNP. The contour sheet.
 The painless death of History. The stick
 Figures on Capitol Hill. Their rhetoric, 70
 Gladly—no, rapturously (on Prozac) suffered!
 Gay studies. Right to Lifers. The laugh track.

And clothes. Americans, blithe as the last straw,
 Shrug off accountability by dressing
 Younger than their kids—jeans, ski-pants, sneakers, 75
 A baseball cap, a happy-face T-shirt . . .
 Like first-graders we “love” our mother Earth,
 Know she’s been sick, and mean to care for her
 When we grow up. Seeing my windbreaker,
 People hail me with nostalgic awe. 80

“Great jacket!” strangers on streetcorners impart.
 The Albanian doorman pats it: “Where you buy?”
 Over his ear-splitting drill a hunky guy
 Yells, “Hey, you’ll always know where you are, right?”
 “Ever the fashionable cosmopolite,” 85
 Beams Ray.¹⁰ And “Voilà mon pays”—the carrot-haired
 Girl in the bakery, touching with her finger
 The little orange France above my heart.

Everyman, c’est moi, the whole world’s pall
 The pity is how soon such feelings sour. 90
 As I leave the gym a smiling-as-if-I-should-know-her
 Teenager—oh but I *mean*, she’s wearing “our”
 Windbreaker, and assumes . . . Yet I return her wave
 Like an accomplice. For while all humans aren’t
 Countable as equals, we must behave 95
 As if they were, or the spirit dies (Pascal).¹¹

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¹⁰ Ray: Ray Izbiki (1921–2007), who became Merrill’s friend, rented an apartment in the poet’s building on Water Street in Stonington and, in Merrill’s will, was granted life tenancy.

¹¹ Pascal: Blaise Pascal (1623–1663), the French philosopher and mathematician. See Pascal’s complex argument in “Trois Discours sur la condition des grands.”

“We”? A few hundred decades of relative
 Lucidity glinted-through by minnow schools
 Between us and the red genetic muck—
 Everyman’s underpainting. We look up, shy 100
 Creatures, from our trembling pool of sky.
 Caught wet-lipped in light’s brushwork, fleet but sure,
 Flash on shudder, folk of the first fuck,
 Likeness breathes likeness, fights for breath—*I live*—

Where the crush thickens. And by season’s end, 105
 The swells of fashion cresting to collapse
 In breaker upon breaker on the beach,
 Who wants to be caught dead in this cliché
 Of mere “involvement”? Time to put under wraps
 Its corporate synthetic global pitch; 110
 Not throwing out motley once reveled in,
 Just learning to live down the wrinkled friend.

Face it, reproduction of any kind leaves us colder
 Though airtight-warmer (greenhouse effect) each year.
 Remember the figleaf’s lesson. Styles betray 115
 Some guilty knowledge. What to dress ours in—
 A seer’s blind gaze, an infant’s tender skin?
 All that’s been seen through. The eloquence to come
 Will be precisely what we cannot say
 Until it parts the lips. But as one grows older 120

—I should confess before that last coat dries—
 The wry recall of thunder does for rage.
 Erotic torrents flash on screen instead
 Of drenching us. Exclusively in dream,
 These nights, does the grandsire rear his saurian head, 125
 And childhood’s inexhaustible brain-forest teem
 With jewel-bright lives. No way now to restage
 Their sacred pageant under our new skies’

Irradiated lucite. What then to wear
 When—hush, it’s no dream! It’s my windbreaker 130
 In black, with starry longitudes, Archer, Goat,
 Clothing an earphoned archangel of Space,
 Who hasn’t read Pascal, and doesn’t wave . . .
 What far-out twitterings he learns by rote,
 What looks they’d wake upon a human face, 135
 Don’t ask, Roberto. Sing our final air:

(continued next page)

Love, grief etc. * * * * for good reason.
Now only * * * * * STOP signs.
Meanwhile * * * * * if you or I've ex-
ceeded our [?] * * * ~~more than time~~ was needed
To fit a text airless and * * as Tyvek
With breathing spaces and between the lines
Days brilliantly recurring, as once *we* did,
To keep the blue wave dancing in its prison.

140

“Self-Portrait in Tyvek^(TM) Windbreaker”: A brief map, by line number (l. or ll.) and stanza number

- ll. 1 to 8; stanza 1: The speaker of this self-portrait—I’ll call him Merrill, though he’s a particularly jaded and knowing version of the poet, part stand-up comedian and part doomsday prophet—shows off his trendy windbreaker. Its Tyvek-brand polyethylene fabric is “white with a world map”: the entire interconnected and imperiled earth, sitting snugly on one’s shoulders. As symbols go, this windbreaker may sound too ingenious, too good to be true. But Merrill has in mind a real windbreaker manufactured and sold in the Eighties and Nineties, punningly named “Wearin’ the World.” (Where in the world?)
- ll. 9 to 22; stanzas 2 to 3: An earlier poem, such as Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Map” or Merrill’s own “The Black Swan,” would devote stanzas to its titular object, turning it over and over. But Merrill immediately glances sideways. First he recalls where he bought the jacket: “one of those vaguely imbecile / Emporia” that sells samples or knock-offs of the natural world, from “crystals” to “mechanized lucite” wave machines. Then he goes over the rest of his gym-day outfit, from his Reebok sneakers up to his laurel-green headband and yellow Walkman earphones. (This is Merrill’s postmodern spin on a conventional device of love poetry, the *blazon*: a catalogue of physical attributes, usually someone else’s, most often a woman’s.)
- ll. 23 to 40; stanzas 3 to 5: What’s playing on Merrill’s Walkman? A (fictional) tape called Songs of Yesteryear, compiling performances by the Neapolitan singer Robert Murolo (1912–2003). He may remind Merrill of older, pre–World War II artists, or even a younger version of Merrill himself: an individual talent who knows the tradition well, a prodigy with tones and tonalities, a renovator of centuries-old subjects like “Snow on a flower, the moon, the seasons’ round.” (Note the similarity of their two names, their shared consonants: Murolo and Merrill.)
- ll. 41 to 64; stanzas 6 to 8: Merrill provides the pop-psych rationale behind picking Murolo’s tape for his walk (a “hazy premise”: “what fills the mind / Shows on the face”). Without warning, we’re suddenly on that walk, strolling past cheery “Ecosaints” who aggravate Merrill’s cynicism about narrowly local politics and optimistic environmentalism. *Yeah, right*, Merrill seems to reply, as he jumps to images of an already devastated planet: “Cut to dead forests, filthy beaches, / The can of hairspray, oil-benighted creatures, / A star-scarred x-ray of the North Wind’s lungs.”
- ll. 65 to 79; stanzas 9 to 10: Opting “not to paint a picture wholly black” (but not quite denying the truth in that black picture either), Merrill reels off some “social highlights” and pop-cultural curiosities of the early Nineties, almost in the manner of Billy Joel’s 1989 song “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” (This may be the first *and* most anthologized poem to mention Oprah, or Prozac, or gay studies.) Merrill’s list ends with clothing, and specifically with the day’s vogue for dressing juvenily young and sporting hollow or ironic messages about the planet.
- ll. 79 to 96; stanzas 10 to 12: All this fashion talk brings Merrill back to his walk and to the attention his windbreaker receives from Manhattan’s diverse “street people.” Merrill’s feelings sour when he leaves the gym, exchanges waves with a teenager sporting “our” jacket, and wonders what kind of community or fellow feeling he’s been conscripted into. Maybe it’s true what Blaise Pascal says, though: “we must behave” as if we’re all equals, “or the spirit dies.”

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- ll. 97 to 129; stanzas 13 to 17: “We?” Merrill promptly asks. (He’s also punning on Pascal’s French with a quizzical *Oui?*) The next twenty-odd lines, among the densest passages in this chatty poem if not all of Merrill’s work, wonder who “we” are (“we” fashionable New Yorkers, “we” the living, “we” *Homo sapiens*) and how the singular Merrill fits in with the rest of us. Merrill’s heady, metaphor-rich lines intertwine a university curriculum’s worth of subjects, including evolution, sex and reproduction, the representations offered by art and fashion, political “involvement,” climate change, the fall from innocence (and Adam and Eve’s fig-leaf attire), poetic and rhetorical style, and the aging of a man, a species, and a planet.
- ll. 129 to 136; stanza 17: Faced with that tangled knot of subjects and the countless feelings they elicit, Merrill does not pose the daunting question *What should we do*. Instead he asks something more pragmatic, egocentric, answerable: “What then to wear.” Just then, he spots (or simply imagines) the opposite of himself and his white, worldly windbreaker: “an earphoned archangel of Space,” sporting a black windbreaker with the night sky and its constellations. (This too is based on a real windbreaker, a glow-in-the-dark jacket named “Glowin’ the Galaxy.”) This ominous passerby, unlike the “smiling-as-if-I-should-know-her / Teenager,” does *not* wave. Merrill needs to find companionship elsewhere, and asks for it from the man singing through his Walkman earphones: “Don’t ask, Roberto. Sing our final air.”
- ll. 137 to 144; stanza 18: The poem’s final stanza looks unfinished. Its first five lines include placeholders (“etc.,” “[?]”), strikethroughs (“~~more than time~~”), and an expanse of space-taking stars (***). A poem that, up until now, has deftly posed questions now leaves the questioning to us. Should we find hope or despair in Merrill’s own “final air” or aria? The space those stars take up: is that something to fill in with later, fuller knowledge, or something we will never live to complete? (Are those stars like the constellations on the archangel’s windbreaker, imaginary shapes drawn upon empty space?) Merrill’s final three lines knit together just in time to finish some thought—though who can say what it is?—on time and the possibility of “Days brilliantly recurring.” If once Merrill and his generation appeared to recur brilliantly (“as once *we* did”), now the only recurrence Merrill can visualize is an artificial recurrence: a plastic wave machine with “a blue wave dancing in its prison” (see ll. 14–16). More hopefully, maybe we can identify brilliant recurrences within the poem’s other rectangular (and gorgeously artificial) forms: a plastic cassette with spools of song, or an exquisitely turned eight-line stanza by the late James Merrill.



Christmas Tree

(*Collected Poems*, 2001; *SP*, p. 257)¹

To be
Brought down at last
From the cold sighing mountain
Where I and the others
Had been fed, looked after, kept still,
Meant, I knew—of course I knew—
That it would be only a matter of weeks,
That there was nothing more to do.
Warmly they took me in, made much of me,
The point from the start was to keep my spirits up.
I could assent to that. For honestly,
It did help to be wound in jewels, to send
Their colors flashing forth from vents in the deep
Fragrant sables that cloaked me head to foot.
Over me then they wove a spell of shining—
Purple and silver chains, eavesdripping² tinsel,
Amulets, milagros: software of silver,
A heart, a little girl, a Model T,
Two staring eyes. Then angles, trumpets, BUD and BEA³
(The children's names) in clownlike capitals,
Somewhere a music box whose tiny song
Played and replayed I ended before long
By loving. And in shadow behind me, a primitive IV
To keep the show going. Yes, yes, what lay ahead
Was clear: the stripping, the cold street, my chemicals
Plowed back into the Earth for lives to come—
No doubt a blessing, a harvest, but one that doesn't bear,
Now or ever, dwelling upon. To have grown so thin.
Needles and bone. The little boy's hands meeting
About my spine. The mother's voice: *Holding up wonderfully!*
No dread. No bitterness. The end beginning. Today's
Dusk room aglow
For the last time
With candlelight.
Faces love lit,
Gifts underfoot.
Still to be so poised, so
Receptive. Still to recall, praise.

¹ [Note from Chris: I've moved the notes for this poem to another page—I want Merrill's most striking shape-poem to have the stage to itself!]

² [Note from Chris: Yes, that's "eavesdripping tinsel," not eaves*dropping* tinsel. Think water dripping off an icy eave; think an IV dripping; think Christmas E(a)ve, and the slow drip to the year's end.]

³ [Note from Chris: Bud and Bea: These names for a boy and a girl are throwbacks to a certain midcentury image of an American nuclear family—fit for a Norman Rockwell painting, maybe, with a "Model T" parked somewhere in the background. But Merrill, irrepressible with puns, is also thinking about how certain men and normative families are permitted to "bud" (or reproduce) and "be"—activities closed off for an ailing tree (or man), and for a gay man who chose not to have children.]