

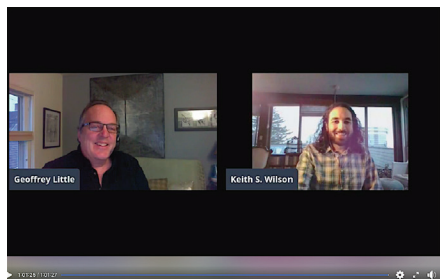


JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Spring 2020

The Merrill House Goes Virtual

IN MID-MARCH, when it became clear Covid-19 was rampant in the Tri-State area, and a shut-down was mandated to “flatten the curve,” the reading by writer-in-residence



Geoffrey Little and Keith Wilson at JMHC's first-ever virtual reading

Keith Wilson scheduled at the Stonington Free Library had to be canceled. JMHC committee member Geoffrey Little, together with Program Coordinator Bergin O'Malley,

worked with Keith to replace the in-person event with a virtual one that went ahead at the originally scheduled time. Seated in his home office, Geoffrey introduced Keith, seated up in the Studio at the Merrill apartment with a backdrop of Stonington rooftops, to viewers who linked to the event via the streaming service StreamYard. The online audience exceeded 600, and included the remote participation of several former JMHC writers-in-residence. Keith, who in addition to writing poetry also works as a deviser of video games, proved to be a natural at this new-found medium, and leveraged his laptop to display the poems as he read, demonstrating that a virtual event can compensate for lack of physical proximity with immediacy and impact. At the end, the audience submitted questions by email and Keith answered them live. Those unable to watch the event live may access it via Stonington Free Library as well as JMHC Facebook.

Among Schoolchildren, Remotely

IN 2019, Stonington High School teacher Anne Marie Houle brought her local history class to the Merrill House for a tour that proved a great hit with the students. She had booked a visit for her 2020 class for April, then had to cancel because of the pandemic. Fortunately, JMHC program coordinator Bergin O'Malley, along with committee members Dee Aldrich and Willard Spiegelman, worked with Anne Marie and writer-in-residence Keith Wilson to enable 60 students to tour Merrill House

via Google Meets. Teachers and students could “unmute the mic” to ask questions, and were enthusiastic about Willard's and Keith's narration, though it became clear that a virtual tour necessitates professional cinematography.

Accordingly, the Merrill House is seeking funding for a filmed version. Not only will it be useful for future virtual visits by schools, but also for those who cannot manage the building's steep stairs or get to Stonington for JMHC Open House days.

The Road Ahead

THE MERRILL COMMITTEE has rescheduled events that had to be postponed due to the pandemic. The 15th Annual Merrill Lecture featuring Carl Phillips, award-winning poet and judge of the Yale Younger Poets competition, will take place in October 2020; and a talk by Marlon James, Booker Prize winner and National Book Award finalist, is now scheduled for May 2021. We'll continue to post updates, and look forward to your meeting and greeting incoming fellows and speakers, in person or remotely (as case may be).

A Good Friend to the Merrill House

THIS SPRING Ruth Saunders stepped down as co-chair of the Merrill House Committee. Over seven-plus years, she served as Development Chair and Treasurer, as well as on the Building & Conservation, Nominating & Governance, and Finance committees. She worked closely with the National Park Service on the Merrill House's National Historic Landmark designation. Her stewardship of JMHC finances resulted in a substantial cash reserve, enabling the Committee to hire its first-ever staff member, as well as complete the conservation and restoration work mostly financed by a grant from the Hellen Ingram Plummer Charitable Foundation. Over the years, Ruth opened her home many times for meetings and post-event parties, serving some of the most delicious sausages in town. Her presence will be sorely missed by the entire Committee, which expresses its deep and abiding gratitude for her service, her tact, her wisdom, and her leadership.



Ruth Saunders

Succeeding Ruth as co-chair is Randy Bean, who joined the committee in 2010 and



Randy Bean

most recently chaired the Program Committee. “I look forward to helping shepherd activities of the James Merrill House over the next few years with my co-chair Cynthia Elliott, and working with the dedicated

and talented board,” Randy remarked after his election. “I have a deep respect for the legacy of the institution, the reputation the program has established, and the community which has been so supportive of James Merrill House and its mission.”

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Stephen Yenser

107 Water Street, Stonington, CT 06378
Email: merrillhousefellowship@gmail.com

Program Coordinator Bergin O'Malley:
bergin.jmh@gmail.com

James Merrill House is a program of the Stonington Village Improvement Association, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization
Facebook @TheJamesMerrillHouse
Instagram @jamesmerrillhouse
Twitter @merrill_house

Merrill House Fellows 2020-2021



CLAIRE LUCHETTE (July 2020) currently lives in Ohio and teaches at John Carroll University. A 2020 National Endowment for the Arts fellow, she has received fellowships from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Lighthouse Works, Blue Mountain Center, and the Millay Colony. Her short fiction has appeared in *VQR*, *Ploughshares*, *Granta*, and *Kenyon Review*, and her first novel is forthcoming from FSG.



TALVIKKI ANSEL (August 2020) won the 1996 Yale Younger Poets prize for her collection *My Shining Archipelago* and The Ohio State University Press / The Journal Award in Poetry for her 2015 collection, *Somewhere in Space*. She been anthologized in *Firsts: 100 Years of Yale Younger Poets* (Yale University Press, 2019) and elsewhere. A former artist-in-residence at The Connecticut Audubon Society's Trail Wood, she teaches at University of Rhode Island.



WALT HUNTER (September 2020) is the author of *Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization*, and co-translator, with Lindsay Turner, of Frédéric Neyrat's *Atopias: Manifesto for a Radical Existentialism*. Hunter's poems have appeared in the *Harvard Advocate*, *The Atlantic*, *Boston Review*, and other publications. While at the James Merrill House he intends to pursue his study of James Merrill and the American House Poem.



RYAN CHAPMAN (October 2020) is a Sri Lankan-American writer originally from Minneapolis. He is the author of the novel *Riots I Have Known* (Simon & Schuster), named a best book of 2019 by Electric Literature and The Marshall Project. He lives in Kingston,

New York and is currently at work on his second novel, *The Ends*, interrogating elite philanthropy, scam culture, and our inability to comprehend climate disaster.



JENNIFER GROTZ (November 2020) is the author, most recently, of *Window Left Open: Poems* (Graywolf). Her translation with Piotr Sommer of *Everything I Don't Know*, the selected poems of the Polish poet Jerzy Ficowski, is forthcoming from World Poetry Books. She teaches poetry and translation at the University of Rochester and serves as director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conferences. She is now at work on her fourth book of poetry.



KIRSTIN VALDEZ QUADE (February-March 2021) is the author of *Night at the Fiestas*, which won the John Leonard prize from the National Book Critics Circle. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, and elsewhere. She is an Assistant Professor at Princeton, and her novel *The Five Wounds* is forthcoming from W.W. Norton.



GREG WRENN (April-May 2021) is the author of *Centaur*, awarded the 2013 Brittingham Prize in Poetry. A former Stegner Fellow, he is currently an assistant professor of English at James Madison University, and is at work on *Row*, a memoir about using the ocean to heal from childhood trauma, and *Origin*, his second poetry collection. An Advanced PADI Nitrox diver, he has been exploring coral reefs around the world for over 25 years.



DESIREE BAILEY (June 2021) won the 2020 Yale Younger Poets Prize for her collection *What Noise Against the Cane*, forthcoming from Yale University Press next year. She has had work published in *Best American Poetry 2015*, *Callaloo*, *The Rumpus* and elsewhere. She holds a BA from Georgetown, an MFA in Fiction from Brown, and is currently an MFA Poetry candidate at New York University. Born in Trinidad and Tobago, she lives in New York City.



ARMEN DAVOUDIAN (July 2021) is a poet and translator of Persian literature whose work has appeared in *AGNI*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Yale Review* and elsewhere. He's received scholarships from Bread Loaf, Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Born in Isfahan, Iran, he is currently a PhD candidate in English at Stanford, where he is writing a dissertation on *metanoia* or self-correction in 20th century American poetry.

Remembering Jan Lindberg (1941-2020)

WE ARE SO SORRY to let you know that Jan Lindberg, husband of JMHC member Susan Fletcher Lindberg and a beloved member of the Stonington community, died from a sudden heart attack on January 6. For many years, Jan had worked as a physicist at the Naval Underwater Sound Laboratory in New London. For his significant contributions to underwater acoustic sonar



Susan and Jan at the Merrill House deck party

systems, Jan was conferred the Naval Undersea Warfare Center Decibel Award in 2011, the highest award for technical achievement in the field of acoustics. He and Susan lived in Norwich from 1971 until moving to Stonington in 2012, where Jan served on the borough's Planning and Zoning Committee and Susan, former publications designer at Connecticut College, joined the Merrill House Committee. Those wishing to remember Jan—a lover of sweet corn, exotic cars and wristwatches, who rarely missed an incoming Merrill fellow's "Meet & Greet" or reading—may make donations to the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, Oxfam America, or the Unitarian Universalists Association.

To Our Donors...

THANK YOU SO MUCH for your support of the Merrill House in our fiscal year of April 1, 2019, through March 31, 2020. During that time, we have undertaken important restoration projects and conservation of the collections, we have hosted many distinguished writers-in-residence and lecturers, and we have hired a new Program Coordinator. All of this has been made possible by your generous contributions. Thank you also to the committed members of the James Merrill House Committee, who do so much to carry out the mission of the Merrill House.

With much appreciation,
Cynthia Elliott & Randy Bean
Co-Chairs

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James Merrill House for five years
or more
+ Former Merrill fellow
++ Deceased

NOTE: Please consider making your gift a monthly charge to your credit card. Even small contributions add up! Visit us online, use the handy envelope included in this newsletter, or give Program Coordinator Bergin O'Malley a call at (860) 333-8834.

We sincerely hope we have accurately acknowledged all our donors and gifts. However, if you find any errors or discrepancies, please let us know by emailing bergin.jmh@gmail.com

SPOTLIGHT: 107 Society's Newest Member

WE ARE DEEPLY GRATEFUL to Kathleen Bonann-Marshall for supporting the Merrill House and its programs through the 107 Society. Her gift coincided with the publication of her thesis, "Dear Premises: James Merrill & the Domestic Impulse in his Life" along with her PhD hooding at the University of California in June 2019. A group of ten friends and family members joined her to generously donate to the James Merrill House in celebration. A profile of Bonann-Marshall follows on the next page [p4]



Kathleen Bonann-Marshall, right, at the hooding ceremony after receiving her doctorate this spring

“The Happy Family” A Merrill scholar recalls her 20-year friendship with the poet

IN SPRING 1974, while a graduate student at UCLA, 24-year-old Kathleen Bonann wrote to James Merrill to inquire if she might examine some of his notebooks and manuscripts held in the Special Collection at Washington University in St. Louis. With “almost diagnosable thoughtfulness,” Merrill made sure that his friends, the poet Mona Van Duyn and her husband, Jarvis Thurston, then Chair of the English Department at Washington University, gave Kathe all possible assistance with her project. Kathe spent every evening with the couple while there, consuming home cooked dinners and reading Merrill’s poetry aloud. “Mona and Jarvis reflected a generosity I would come to discover was characteristic of James’s closest friends.”

Soon Kathe was to meet Merrill in person at a dinner party in California with fellow poet and academic Stephen Yenser and his wife Mary. When Kathe married Donald Marshall the following year Yenser presented them with a framed verse blessing their marriage and hand-written by Merrill. Later, Yenser would give Merrill and the Marshalls identical photographs of the Sleeping Woman, a land formation visible from the Island of Poros in Greece, and a motif in Merrill’s 1965 novel *The (Diblos) Notebook*. Merrill hung his copy over his desk in his study in Stonington.

Over the next twenty years Kathe and Merrill exchanged over 100 letters. James, who deemed Kathe his “almost perfect reader,” would stay with the couple on multiple occasions while Donald taught at the University of Iowa, and later in Illinois. While visiting them in Iowa City in 1984, he was delighted by the couple’s two toddlers, Steph and Zach, and by the fact that they were read to at mealtimes, something that he was never allowed as a child. As Kathe recalled, “The human instinct for a child seemed only just to have occurred to him. James took immediately to our gentle rhythm of early supper, bath, and bedtime.” It occurred to her that as a small boy often alone with his governess, Mademoiselle, he must have been quite lonely.

For Steph and Zach, Merrill became the indispensable Uncle James. He read *Peter Rabbit* to them at supper and sent numerous thoughtful gifts over the ensuing years. For Kathe, “James was like having an angel in the house. He would sit at the piano to play Bach or imitate ‘The Moonlight Sonata,’ in that long, slow dramatic way that Lucia did in E.F. Benson’s books, and pulled Proust from our bookshelves and read aloud. He extended to us and our kids—in whose shadow he had to fend for himself since children are so determined to be the life of any

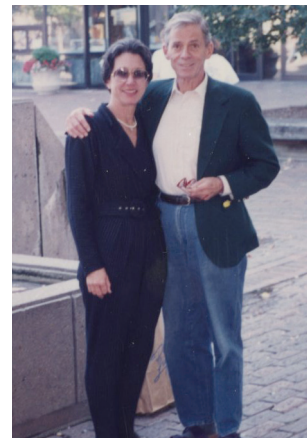
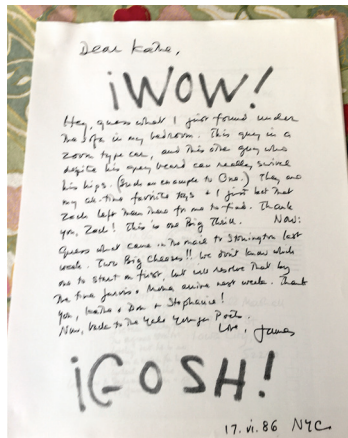
occasion—a love which embraced our family as if it were his own.”

Merrill reciprocated by inviting the four of them to stay at his grandmother’s apartment on East 72nd Street in Manhattan. As they drove out of Manhattan toward home a week later, Zach called out, “Bye, Strato.” It turned out that Zach had thoughtfully tucked one

following a cancer diagnosis, that Kathe committed to finishing her dissertation on Merrill. Washington University had coincidentally offered her copies of the 82 cards and letters she’d written to Merrill between 1974-1994, which Merrill had donated to the WUSTL library shortly before his death. “It was both a shock and joy to discover James had saved and

donated my letters,” Kathe recalled, “and was gratified by my humble act of ‘writing back’ with the ordinary details of growth and change and steadfast affection.” Kathe in turn gave Washington University an additional 60 letters and cards sent by Merrill to her.

Kathe knew she had something to contribute to contemporary scholarship on Merrill. She also felt that Merrill’s tender and deep non-sexual friendships had been stunted in favor of those of the homoerotic and celebrity sort. Despite the travails of chemotherapy, she managed to successfully complete her dissertation and received her doctorate from the University of California, which has made the abstract of “Dear Premises: James Merrill & the Domestic Impulse in his Life”



TOP: Photo of Kathe and her children Zach and Steph with “Uncle James,” which Merrill’s niece Amy later dubbed “The Happy Family”

BOTTOM LEFT: “WOW!” thank you note sent to Kathe’s son by Merrill

BOTTOM RIGHT: Kathe and Merrill in a photo taken in 1992

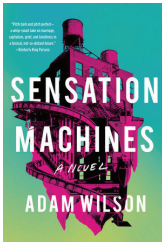
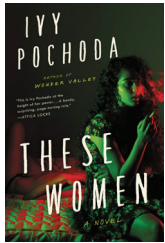
of his toy action figures into Merrill’s bed, “because Uncle James doesn’t have any toys to play with.”

Merrill died in 1995, just before Zach and Steph went to college, and when Zach got his first job (as a particle physicist at CERN) he donated part of his first pay check to the James Merrill House, and has continued to make bi-annual donations ever since, including on the annual occasion of his mother’s birthday. Kathe spent several summers in Stonington, staying at the Jackson apartment. In 2009, in conjunction with the La Grua Foundation, she put together a Merrill symposium that included gatherings on the Star Deck (as Merrill called his rooftop terrace). It was only in 2015,

available for free download at e-scholarship.org. Letters exchanged between Merrill and Marshall are downloadable as well, and may also be found at wustl.edu.

At her daughter’s birthday celebration this past March, Kathe listened as Steph and Zach got to talking about all the things they had not yet accomplished. Kathe—who survived the Covid-19 virus, despite wrestling with a second bout of cancer—mentioned her ambition of becoming a member of the Merrill House 107 Society. Zach asked, “Why not do it?” They agreed it was something “Uncle James” would have done, “endorsing hope and tradition and generosity in the face of the pandemic.”

Catching Up with Merrill Fellows



MIKE ALBERTI (December 2017–January 2018)

My first book, a collection of stories titled *Some People Let You Down*, was awarded the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction and will be published in November by the University of North Texas Press.

DAN CHIASSON (September 2017)

My new book, *The Math Campers*, will be published by Knopf in September, and much of it is set in Merrill's apartment and around Stonington. I hope Merrill peeps and Stonington habitués will like it.

AMY GLYNN (October 2012)

My second collection of poems, *Romance Language*, which I began working on during my Merrill residency, is coming out with Measure Press in—well, it was going to be July but I suspect Virus Timing will apply. It contains several nods to Merrill and to Stonington.

LANGDON HAMMER (Spring 2008)

Stephen Yenser and I finished the manuscript of *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill* which will be published next spring by Knopf. Also, of interest to Merrill House people and Stonington is an elegy for Sandy McClatchy in the rebooted *Yale Review*: "Still to Love: For J. D. McClatchy."

JAMES LONGENBACH (Spring 2019)

I have a prose book called *The Lyric Now* coming from Chicago later this year, and a book of poems coming from W.W. Norton called simply *Forever*. A poem called "In the Village" is "about" James Merrill's library, and appeared recently in *American Poetry Review*. There's also a smaller poem called "School Street," which is thinking of JM and Water Street.

AIREA D. MATTHEWS (June 2017, Yale Younger Poet)

Some happy news. I've been awarded The Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Foundation Award for Distinguished Teaching at Bryn

Mawr College. I try to leave everything I know about poetry in those classrooms. I'm honored.

SIGRID NUNEZ (December 2018—January 2019)

My news is a novel coming out in September, called *What Are You Going Through* (Riverhead). I worked on the book during my residency at JM last winter, that blessed time.

IVY POCHODA (Spring 2009)

Happy that *These Women* (Ecco/Harper Collins) was recommended by The New York Times Sunday Book Review.

NOAH WARREN (June 2016, Yale Younger Poet)

My next book, *The Complete Stories*, is out next spring from Copper Canyon, and I'll certainly be in the Stonington area. Sending many safe e-hugs!

ADAM WILSON (November 2014)

Sensation Machines (Soho Press), the novel I was writing during my time at the Merrill House, will finally be out in July.

MARK WUNDERLICH (Spring 2017)

I recently finished a book of poems called *God of Nothingness*, some of which I wrote during my time in Stonington. (The final poem in the book was written at James Merrill's desk one cold morning in the spring). The book will be published in January by Graywolf Press.

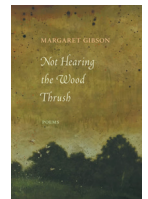
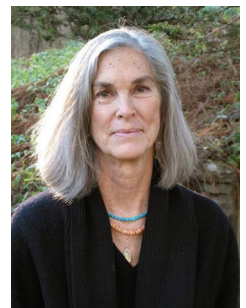
More updates from former Fellows may be found on James Merrill House's Instagram and Facebook pages

5

Connecticut's Poet Laureate Envisions Eco-Themed "Cafes"

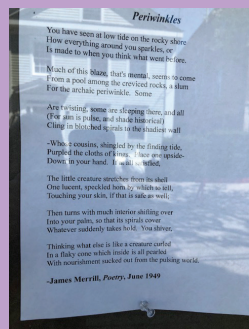
MARGARET GIBSON, who now joins the James Merrill House Advisory Board, has just completed her first year as Connecticut Poet Laureate—the sixth since Merrill himself was named the state's first poet laureate in the mid-1980s. She's one of twenty-three poet laureates of states, cities, counties, and the Navajo Nation, who each received a \$55,000 grant from the Academy of American Poets' 2020 Poets Laureate Fellowship program, underwritten by the Mellon Foundation. A portion of the grant goes to support the poet with the rest used to lead and fund a community-based project in the year ahead. Gibson has been devoting her term as poet laureate to advocating for the environment.

Her original plan was to host eco-themed readings featuring local poets at designated "Green Poetry Cafes" in settings such as nature preserves. With limits on public gatherings in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, she's planning online readings, viewable on multiple websites, and will hold in-person events at a future date. In addition, she'll be co-editing an anthology of poets writing about the natural world and climate change to be published next year by Grayson Press. To learn more visit www.margaretgibsonpoetry.com.



Whodunnit?

The Merrill House Committee is seeking the identity of the literary Banksy who has been posting Merrill poems in the glass case outside 107 Water Street. Both the poetry and the gesture have lifted our spirits during weeks of social distancing. If the secret sharer reveals himself or herself, we'll raise a toast at the first post-pandemic Meet & Greet.



James Merrill

HOUSE & WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

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Stonington, CT 06378

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For more information about our programs, visit us
at jamesmerrillhouse.org and follow us on Facebook
and Instagram.

Calendar of Events*

FRIDAY, JULY 24

Merrill Fellow **Claire Luchette** reads from her work

FRIDAY, AUGUST 7

Merrill Fellow **Talvikki Ansel** reads from her work

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

Merrill Fellow **Walt Hunter** reads from his work

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2

15th Annual Merrill Lecture given by **Carl Phillips**

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24

Merrill Fellow **Ryan Chapman** reads from his work

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 21

Merrill Fellow **Jennifer Grotz** reads from her work

*Dates and venues subject to change

The Art Whisperer

AS 107 WATER STREET'S "IN-HOUSE" CURATOR, Sarah Dove has been nothing short of a miracle worker. During her six years on the Merrill House committee, she's

assembled experts to restore artwork James Merrill had received or collected during his years in Stonington, found artisans to repair the "secret" door to Merrill's library and vintage Eames chair, and advised writers-in-residence on how to "water" Merrill's Steinway piano during dry winter months. Her foresight and expertise have contributed enormously to the presentation and preservation of Merrill's legacy. Among her most important projects was arranging a Collections Assessment Program Survey (CAP) of the Merrill Apartment in 2017, which included recommendations for everything from upgrading the ventilation system, to abating insect and sunlight damage, to preventative conservation measures for irreplaceable artifacts. Last year Sarah enlisted Tara Kennedy, a preservationist at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book Library, to oversee cleaning, cataloguing, and the wrapping of fragile volumes in Merrill's library—efforts that will greatly benefit future Writers in Residence, and other visitors to these spaces. Sarah, a highly-regarded paper conservator in her own right, recently stepped off the JMHC to concentrate on her studio work (among her clients are Yale University, Cooper-Hewitt/Smithsonian Museum, and Lyman-Allen Museum). Sibby Lynch, who has a background in graphic design and helped Sarah with the re-accessioning of objects given to Sandy McClatchy by Merrill, will now co-chair the Conservation & Building team with Tony Crane.



Sarah Dove (right) with book conservator Tara Kennedy