

JMH

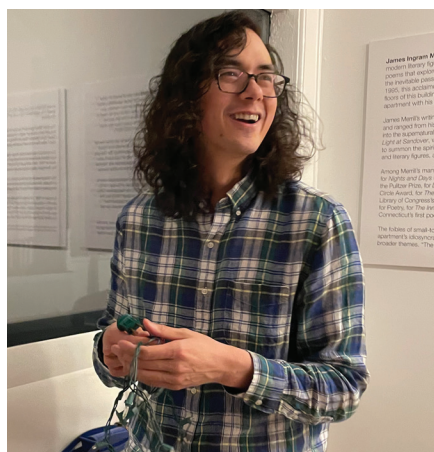
James Merrill

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

WOULD JAMES MERRILL HAVE LIKED ZOOM?

By Christopher Spaide

I FOUND MYSELF mulling over that question around 5:30 PM each Wednesday, from March into April, whenever I clicked “Start” on my weekly Zoom meetings for “Look Closely at the Letters: A Six-Part Introduction to Reading James Merrill’s Poetry”—the first online course offered by the Merrill House. The best answer I’ve come to think, is the ambivalent pair of words floating in the upper corners of Merrill’s homemade Ouija boards: YES and NO.



This spring, former Merrill Fellow Christopher Spaide launched a virtual seminar on reading James Merrill’s poems.

pairs of themes across his career: beginnings and endings, home and travel, “chronicles of love and loss” and his translations of life to art and back. I brought lecture notes and PowerPoints; the group brought insights and inquiries that spilled over into free-for-all discussions and “show and tell” for our own discoveries and creations— including an astrological “birth chart” for Merrill (born March 3: a Pisces).

And why NO? Surely Merrill, immaculate host that he was, would have dreamed up some way to congregate us, not virtually but in person, in his living room. We settled for the next best thing: For our last meeting, I led the course from inside 107 Water Street, touring the Zoom crowd through the apartment like an overeager realtor. Wielding my laptop’s camera, I showed participants their reflection in the mirror that inspired Merrill’s poem “Mirror” (1958); snuck them inside the study named in the title of *The Inner Room* (1988); and concluded our course in front of the “Backdrop” of *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982)—a dining room with “Walls of ready-mixed matte ‘flame’ (a witty / Shade, now watermelon, now sunburn).” Starting the course as its nominal teacher, I ended it wandering through thickets of mystification with my fellow readers, leading one another to clearings of sunlit understanding. He never turned up, not in the real room, nor in the Zoom room, but few experiences have brought me closer to Merrill’s ghost, that witty shade...

Why YES? Like a souped-up Ouija board outfitted with the latest audiovisual technologies, Zoom allowed me to commune with far-ranging participants, that included Merrill House neighbors on Water Street and Californians giving us their early afternoons; first-time close readers as well as professors emeriti. Staying true to Merrill’s recognition of “the relativity, even the reversibility, of truths,” we explored contrasting



18TH ANNUAL MERRILL LECTURE

BRITISH AUTHOR AND SCHOLAR, Sir Jonathan Bate will deliver this year’s Merrill lecture at the La Grua Center in Stonington. Professor of Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University and Senior Research Fellow in English Literature at Oxford University, Bate is the author of *The Genius of Shakespeare* and *The Song of the Earth*, a book on poetry and the environment. He’s also written a novel, *The Cure for Love*, and a one-man play for British actor Simon Callow, *Being Shakespeare*. Bate was the first to introduce an ecological approach to the arts and humanities into British scholarship. He’ll be introduced by his friend and colleague Jonathan Post. Join us on Thursday, September 28, at 5pm for this event. Free and open to the public.



UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN...

FOR WELL OVER TWO DECADES Lynn and Jeff Callahan have been steadfast supporters of the Merrill House. Both during and since Lynn’s term as chair of the JMH Committee the couple have hosted countless gatherings where current fellows, visiting writers, and committee members formed lasting bonds. We wish them all the best as they embark on a new chapter—moving to Cleveland, Ohio to be closer to family and grandkids. Photos, clockwise from upper left: David Schulz, Jason Alden, Stuart Vyse,

2022-2023 Merrill House Fellows

ANGIE ESTES (October 2023) is the author of six poetry books, including *Enchantée* (Kingsley Tufts Poetry Prize) and *Tryst* (one of two finalists for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize). Her many awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship and fellowships from the



National Endowment for the Humanities and the NEA. She has served as professor of American literature and creative writing at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and has

taught creative writing at Oberlin College, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Ohio State University.

PAUL MADDERN (November 2023) was born in Bermuda and lives in Ireland. He has a PhD from Queen's University Belfast, and has taught at the University of Leeds. He's published four volumes of poetry, *Kelpdings*, *The Beachcomber's Report*, *Pilgrimage*, and *The Tipping Line*, and received two Bermuda Government Literary Awards as well as awards from the Arts Council



of Northern Ireland. In 2021, he edited *Queering the Green: Post-2000 Queer Irish Poetry*. He owns and operates The River Mill Writers Retreat in County Down.

ADRIENNE RAPHEL (December 2023-January 2024) is the author of *Thinking Inside the Box: Adventures with Crosswords and the Puzzling People Who Can't Live Without Them* (Penguin Press), and the poetry collections *Our Dark Academia* (Rescue Press) and *What Was It For* (Rescue Press). Her writing appears in publications such as the *New York Times Book Review*,



The New Yorker, and *The Paris Review*. Raphael holds a PhD from Harvard and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop; she has taught at Princeton Writing Program.

LISA KO (February/March 2024) is the author of the nationally best-selling novel *The Leavers*, which was a 2017 National Book Award for Fiction finalist, won the 2016 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction, and was a finalist for the 2018 PEN/Hemingway Award. Her short fiction has appeared in *Best American Short Stories* and her essays and nonfiction in *The New York Times*, *The Believer*, and elsewhere. Her second novel, *Memory Piece*, will be published in Spring 2024 by Riverhead Books.



JUDITH DUPRÉ (April/May 2024) is a writer, structural historian, and public speaker. She's the author of several bestselling works of narrative nonfiction on art,

design, and architecture, including *Skyscrapers* and *One World Trade Center*, which chronicles the fourteen year rebuilding effort in lower Manhattan. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, she's a graduate of Brown, where she earned degrees in English Literature and Studio Art. She also holds a M.Div. from Yale University.



CINDY JUUYOUNG OK (June 2024) is this year's winner of the Yale Younger Poets Prize, America's longest-running poetry competition. In addition to writing her own poems, Ok has taught creative writing at various colleges and universities, and edits, translates, and reviews poetry.



Poems from her winning manuscript "Ward Toward" have previously appeared in *The Nation*, *Poetry*, and *The Yale Review*, among other publications, and will be published by Yale University Press in April 2024. She currently teaches writing at Wellesley College.

TOCHUKWU OKAFOR (August 2024) is an MFA Fiction candidate at Emerson College and holds a master's degree from Carnegie Mellon University. He has received support from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the John Anson Kittredge Fund, Aspen Words, Vermont Studio Center, Sewanee Writers' Conference, Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Arts (MASS MoCA), and elsewhere. He is at work on a story collection and a novel.



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That's the Ticket! A Mystery (Almost) Solved

By Dee Aldrich

VISITORS TO 107 Water Street have long been intrigued by a trio of ticket stubs, jauntily tucked into the dilapidated frame of a small portrait in the Merrill Apartment collection, and by the unsigned artwork itself: depicting a wide-eyed, androgynous figure most likely created by one of James Merrill's artist friends. Some touring the apartment are as captivated by the hidden meaning of the antique doll's chair and azure and gold vase patterned with a beetle's wing motif placed on the radiator cover next to it. For it is well known by Merrill's friends and scholars that these knick-knacks held deep talismanic significance for him that interfused his life experiences and friendships with his poetry.

The stubs are in fact tickets for an event that took place at the 92nd Street YMHA on Manhattan's Upper East Side fifty years ago, on Wednesday, April 11, 1973, at which Merrill and his beloved friend and idol Elizabeth Bishop both read. Their appearance together was memorable — not only to its audience, and for June Fortress, the evening's organizer, who'd endeavored unsuccessfully for years to persuade Bishop to give a reading there — but also a noteworthy triumph for Merrill. For it was he who'd beguiled the notoriously reclusive Bishop into accepting the joint invitation.

When Fortress wrote to Merrill in 1972 to see whether he would consider a double billing with Bishop at the Y, he wrote back immediately, scribbling on the back of her letter: "(No paper where I'm writing this.) Oh yes, please ask Elizabeth Bishop. I couldn't dream of a grander co-star." Merrill had recently completed and dedicated his poem "The Victor Dog" to Bishop, evoking the little white dog on the RCA Victor Label:

Obediently, in silence like the grave's
He sleeps there on the still warm
gramophone

Only to dream he is at the premier of
a Handel
Opera long thought lost — *Il Cane Minore*.
Its allegorical subject is his story!
A little dog revolving around a spindle

Gives rise to harmonies beyond belief,
A cast of stars . . . Is there in Victor's heart
No honey for the vanquished? Art is art.
The life it asks of us is a dog's life.

Yale professor Langdon Hammer writes in his biography of Merrill that the poem is "a sad, comic homage to the little white dog, one ear



cocked, listening for 'his Master's voice,' providing Merrill with an emblem of the life dedicated to art. That life requires diligence and modesty, such as Bishop exemplified for Merrill."

According to poet Marianne Moore, Merrill was "bowled over" by the work of Bishop, his elder by 15 years, who to Moore looked "like a glum, puffy faced niece." But Thomas Trivisano, writing in his book *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (1988), relates that Merrill immediately saw Bishop as his "feminine psyche or anima," as "a white rock nymph," as a "living doll," and as the adroitly "deft, if never wholly convincing impersonator, of 'an ordinary woman.'" As Merrill said of Bishop, "I've always had an eye out for 'the right woman,' someone my spirit could aspire to resemble. . . . Over the years Elizabeth kept filling the bill."

Hammer relates that when Merrill visited Bishop in Ouro Preto in Brazil during the 1960s in the 17th century house she was restoring, Bishop blurted out to him as they stood by the stove, "I think you love me, so I can talk to you like this, can't I?" According to Hammer, "Merrill did love Bishop, both the poet and the person. His identification with her was as deep as his identification with Proust, and, as with Proust, Bishop's homosexuality — or better, her sense of the contingency of sex and gender — was part of his feeling."

After Merrill and Bishop arrived at the 92nd Street Y for their reading, while they conversed backstage over drinks with the distinguished poet Richard Howard, their introducer for the evening, they were presented with golden laurel wreaths by their friends, the celebrated pianist duo, Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale. Meanwhile photographer Mara Pilatsky, commissioned by the Y to commemorate the event, snapped away energetically, greatly disconcerting Bishop, who hated having her picture taken.



Partners in rhyme: James Merrill and Elizabeth Bishop read together at the 92nd Street Y in 1973

Only three of the many photographs of Bishop taken that night remain, for she insisted that they all be destroyed, together with the event's audio recording. One surviving picture shows Merrill and Bishop opening their package of crowns, but only Merrill is shown wearing his at the reception that followed at the poet John Hollander's home.

Bishop died in 1979 at age 68. Merrill wrote a deeply sensitive and appreciative homage to her for the December issue of the *New York Review of Books* that year, recalling how "She disliked being photographed and usually hated the result. The whitening hair grew thick above a face each year somehow rounder and softer, like a bemused, blue-lidded planet, a touch too large in any case for a body that seemed never quite to have reached maturity."

Ten years later in "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia," published in *The New Yorker*, he paid further homage to her in the context of visiting the locus of her traumatically painful dislocated infancy: one in which he could find resonances in his own broken childhood, although his was relatively sheltered compared to Bishop, who lost both of her parents as a young child to mental illness and premature death, while the trauma of Merrill's parents' divorce was softened by the cushioning of deep wealth.

While it is not known who the three used tickets to the Bishop-Merrill reading belonged to (out of a large throng of friends in attendance), it is clear from Merrill's curation of the stubs that he treasured the memory of the event.

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As for the enigmatic portrait, to date neither its subject nor the artist has been identified, though Merrill generously supported and befriended many painters, including Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers. Given Merrill's habit of infusing poetic meaning into his environment by curating knickknacks throughout his living quarters, it may not be too much of a stretch to surmise the portrait that holds the ticket stubs also held a Bishop-Merrill significance for Merrill.

Might the portrait's blurred, androgynous face have evoked for Merrill, not only his own enduringly boyish face but also the face of his "psyche/ anima" Elizabeth Bishop, "like a blue-lidded

planet, a touch too large in any case for a body that hadn't reached maturity"? And might for Merrill, the doubling of the portrait, with one side relatively distinct and the other relatively blurred, have possibly evoked an amalgam of the two poets' faces – an interfusing of two injured children whose lives' work was to transmute their lives into art?

Then what of the empty antique doll's chair on the radiator cover next to the portrait? Might it invite in Merrill's "anima or psyche" Elizabeth Bishop who he also appreciated as "a doll"? As for the little beetle winged blue and gold vase...what of that?

Dear readers, we'd love to hear your proofs and rebuttals and conjectures about the above!

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR DONORS for your wonderful and generous support for the James Merrill House over the past year (April 2022-March 2023). Your contributions make possible all we do, from writers' residencies to art conservation, from online literary programs to the new Visitors Center, and so much more.

With gratitude,
Kathryn Burchenal, Chair
Penny Duckham, Vice Chair

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What's New?

Catching up with past Merrill Fellows

RYAN CHAPMAN (October 2020) I'm pleased to share that my next novel, *The Audacity*, will be published by Soho Press in Spring 2024. The James Merrill House was crucial for its genesis, and for that I am truly grateful. In other news, I'm teaching at Vassar College during the year and the Sewanee MFA in the summer. Perhaps it's time to incorporate the Ouija into my pedagogy.

JOHN COTTER (January 2022) My memoir, *Losing Music*, was published by Milkweed Editions on April 11 (our launch reading was that same evening at Bank Square books in Mystic, CT). Also of interest: a short essay about my stay at the Merrill House, and also about my father's death, will appear in the Summer issue of Epoch.

CAOLINN HUGHES (December 2016-January 2017) I have big news: a Cullman Fellowship and a new novel in Spring 2024 with Riverhead Books. Perhaps a bit soon to start the NYC apartment hunt—but can't wait!

WALT HUNTER (September 2020) I have a piece coming out in the May issue of *The Atlantic* on Jorie Graham's *To 2040*. And *The American House Poem, 1945-2021*, will be out in August 2023 from Oxford. It includes a whole chapter on the Merrill House, which I wrote during my residency at the Merrill Apartment.

PIOTR GWIAZDA (Fall 2008) In May Diálogos Books published my translation of Polish writer Grzegorz Wróblewski's *Dear Beloved Humans: Selected Poems*. This past year my poems and translations appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *P-Queue*, *Washington Square Review*, and *Forms of Migration: Global Perspectives on Immigrant Art and Literature* (Falschrum Books).

KAMRAN JAVADIZADEH (February-March 2022) I published a piece about Maggie Millner's *Couplets: A Love Story* on the website of *The New Yorker*, and another about Diane Seuss's *frank: sonnets* in the *London Review of Books*. My other news is that I recently launched a podcast, *Close Readings*. Friends of the Merrill House have already appeared, with more in the works! The podcast is available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts.

LAURA KOLBE (October 2022) My son, Sandro, who spent his seventh month in the

womb at the James Merrill House last year, was born in January. We're all doing great and looking forward to taking him to Stonington again. My poem "Simple," from the collection I was working on at 107 Water Street, also appeared in *The New Yorker* in January, and I'm hoping to complete the rest of the manuscript this spring.

MATT MINICUCCI (December 2019-January 2020) I'm happy to announce my fourth collection of poems, *Dual*, is forthcoming from *Acre Books* on October 15th, 2023. The collection examines masculinity and gun violence as I scrutinize the grammatical concept of the dual—a number neither singular nor plural. The poems consider contemporary moments next to texts from "western" lit, like Greek epic, and the "West" as a landscape.

LORRIE MOORE (July 2016) Greetings from Berlin, where I am at the American Academy until mid-May. I have a novel coming from Knopf in June, *I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home*.

SIGRID NUNEZ (December 2018-January 2019) One of my essays, "Life and Story," which was first published in *Sewanee Review*, has been selected for the next volume in the *Best American Essays* series out this fall. Also, my ninth novel, *The Vulnerables*, will be coming from *Riverhead Books* on November 7, 2023.

DAN O'BRIEN (June 2013) My fifth poetry collection, *Survivor's Notebook*, will be out this September. Many of the poems are in journals and magazines now and upcoming including *The Southern Review*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Poetry London*, *Witness*, and others. My play about Sandy Hook, Newtown, was just announced as a world premiere in Geva Theatre's upcoming season. And I'll be on the playwriting faculty again at this summer's Sewanee Writers Conference.

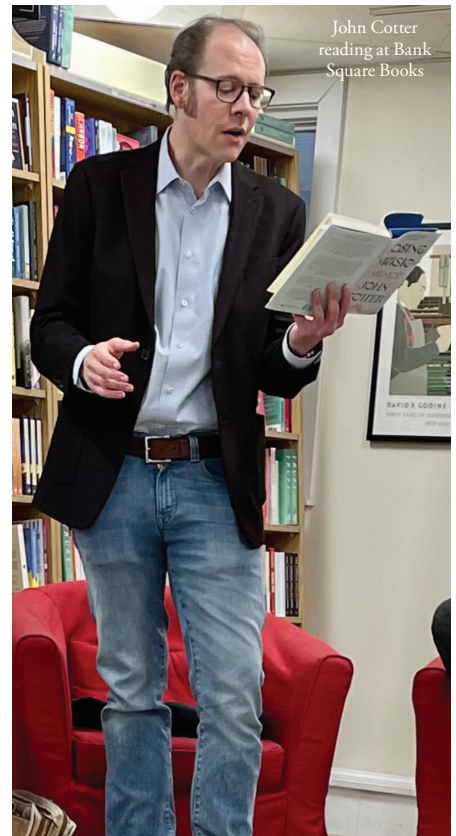
WALTER PERRIE (August 2017) My most recent work, *Points of Order: Marking Philosophy* (Waterstones) was published in December. Am off to Nimes, France for a few days. Trust you flourish.

WILL SCHUTT (Fall 2011) My translation of the selected poems of contemporary Swiss Italian poet Fabio Pusterla, *Brief Homage to Pluto and Other Poems*, came out this April with Princeton University Press, as part of their Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation series. I've spent the past year gladly filling in for fellow former Merrill House Fellow Moira Egan as the creative writing teacher at St. Stephen's School in Rome, Italy: Cool kids, a view of the Colosseum from the classroom.

JEFFREY SKINNER (Spring 2002) I have new poems forthcoming in *American Poetry Review* and *Volt*. My prose chapbook, *Blue Book*, will be out soon from Seven Kitchens Press.

TERESE SVOBODA (November 2015) I'm now as famous as Jerry Lewis in France, as I spoke on my work at the Sorbonne, April 14. My eighth book of fiction, *Dog on Fire*, was published March 7. *Roxy and Coco*, a novel (West Virginia University Press), and *The Long Swim* (U. of Massachusetts Press), a collection of stories, will be published next year, the second as winner of the Juniper Prize.

GREG WRENN (April-May 2021) My book *Mothership: A Memoir of Wonder and Crisis* will be published next year by Regalo Press, a new socially conscious imprint distributed by Simon & Schuster. The book is my account of turning to the ocean, rainforests, and psychedelic plants to recover from childhood trauma when pharmaceuticals did little to help. Regalo will make a donation to an environmental charity upon publication, and I've committed to donating at least 10 percent of the earnings to the Nature Conservancy.

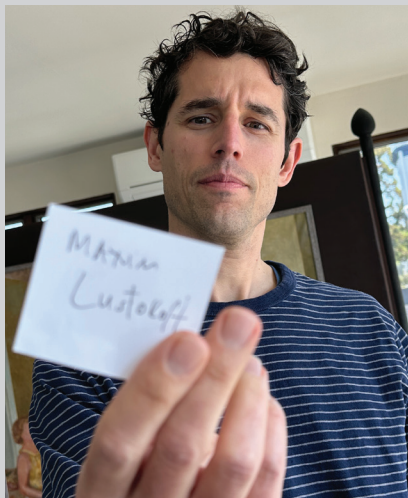


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**For more information about our programs
visit us at jamesmerrillhouse.org
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LUCKY WINNERS

CONGRATULATIONS TO NOVELIST Maxim Loskutoff and poet Rick Hilles, winners of this year's Summer Fellows lottery. Each will spend a week in the Jackson Apartment this July with full access to Merrill's library and studio. Max (November 2017 Fellow) is the author of *Ruthie Fear*, winner of the 2021 High Plains Book Award in fiction, and the short story collection, *Come West and See*. Rick (Fall 2007 Fellow) is the author of two prizewinning books of poetry, *Brother Savage* and *A Map of the Lost World*. Thanks, too, to current writer-in-residence Rob Schlegel for drawing the winners' names at random from the official Merrill House cocktail shaker!

Calendar of Events

SATURDAY, JUNE 10

**JMH Open House, 12-4pm
107 Water Street,
Stonington, CT**

SATURDAY, AUGUST 26

**Reading by Merrill Fellow
Maureen McLane, 5pm
via JMH YouTube/Facebook**

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 16

**Stonington Art Walk and
JMH Open House, 10-4pm
107 Water Street
Stonington, CT**

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

**18th Annual Merrill Lecture
with Sir Jonathan Bate
La Grua Center, 5pm
Stonington, CT**

For details visit our website
www.jamesmerrillhouse.org