

Classic Poetry Series

James Merrill

- 12 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

James Merrill (3 March 1926 – 6 February 1995)

James Ingram Merrill was an American poet whose awards include the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1977) for *Divine Comedies*. His poetry falls into two distinct bodies of work: the polished and formalist (if deeply emotional) lyric poetry of his early career, and the epic narrative of occult communication with spirits and angels, titled *The Changing Light at Sandover*, which dominated his later career. Although most of his published work was poetry, he also wrote essays, fiction, and plays.

Life

James Ingram Merrill was born in New York City to Hellen Ingram Merrill and Charles E. Merrill, founding partner of the Merrill Lynch investment firm. He had two older half siblings (a brother and a sister) from his father's first marriage. As a boy, Merrill enjoyed a highly privileged upbringing in economic and educational terms. Merrill's childhood governess taught him French and German, an experience Merrill wrote about in his 1974 poem "Lost in Translation." His parents separated when he was eleven, then divorced when he was thirteen years old. As a teenager, Merrill attended the Lawrenceville School, where he befriended future novelist Frederick Buechner. When Merrill was 16 years old, his father collected his short stories and poems and published them as a surprise under the name *Jim's Book*. Initially pleased, Merrill would later regard the precocious book as an embarrassment.

Merrill was drafted in 1944 into the United States Army and served for eight months. His studies interrupted by war and military service, Merrill returned to Amherst College in 1945 and graduated in 1947. *The Black Swan*, a collection of poems Merrill's Amherst professor (and lover) Kimon Friar published privately in Athens, Greece in 1946, was printed in just one hundred copies when Merrill was 20 years old. Merrill's first mature work, *The Black Swan* is Merrill's scarcest title and considered one of the 20th century's most collectible literary rarities. Merrill's first commercially published volume was *First Poems*, issued in 990 numbered copies by Alfred A. Knopf in 1951.

Merrill's partner of more than four decades was David Jackson, also a writer. Merrill and Jackson met in New York City after a performance of Merrill's "The Bait" in 1953. Together, they moved to Stonington, Connecticut in 1955. For two decades, the couple spent part of each year in Athens, Greece. Greek themes, locales, and characters occupy a prominent position in Merrill's writing. In 1979 Merrill and Jackson began spending part of each year at Jackson's home in Key West, Florida. In his 1993 memoir *A Different Person*, Merrill revealed that he suffered writer's block early in his career and sought psychiatric help to overcome its effects. Merrill painted a candid portrait of gay life in the early 1950s, describing relationships with several men

including writer Claude Fredericks, art dealer Robert Isaacson, David Jackson, and his last partner, actor Peter Hooten.

Despite great personal wealth derived from unbreakable trusts made early in his childhood, Merrill lived modestly. A philanthropist, he created the Ingram Merrill Foundation, the name of which united his divorced parents. The private foundation operated during the poet's lifetime and subsidized literature, the arts, and public television. Merrill was close to poet Elizabeth Bishop and filmmaker Maya Deren, giving critical financial assistance to both (while providing money to many other writers, often anonymously). Merrill served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1979 until his death. While vacationing in Arizona, he died on February 6, 1995 from a heart attack related to AIDS.

Awards

Beginning with the prestigious Glascock Prize, awarded for "The Black Swan" when he was an undergraduate, Merrill would go on to receive every major poetry award in the United States, including the 1977 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Divine Comedies*. Merrill was honored in mid-career with the Bollingen Prize in 1973. He would receive the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1983 for his epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* (composed partly of supposedly supernatural messages received via the use of a Ouija board). In 1990, he received the first Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry awarded by the Library of Congress for *The Inner Room*. He garnered the National Book Award for Poetry twice, in 1967 for *Nights and Days* and in 1979 for *Mirabell: Books of Number*. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1978.

Style

A writer of elegance and wit, highly adept at wordplay and puns, Merrill was a master of traditional poetic meter and form who also wrote a good deal of free and blank verse. Though not generally considered a Confessionalist poet, James Merrill made frequent use of personal relationships to fuel his "chronicles of love & loss" (as the speaker in *Mirabell* called his work). The divorce of Merrill's parents — the sense of disruption, followed by a sense of seeing the world "doubled" or in two ways at once — figures prominently in the poet's verse. Merrill did not hesitate to alter small autobiographical details to improve a poem's logic, or to serve an environmental, aesthetic, or spiritual theme.

As Merrill matured, the polished and taut brilliance of his early work yielded to a more informal, relaxed voice. Already established in the 1970s among the finest poets of his generation, Merrill made a surprising detour when he began incorporating occult messages into his work. The result, a 560-page apocalyptic epic published as *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), documents two decades of messages dictated from otherworldly spirits during Ouija séances hosted by Merrill and his partner David Noyes Jackson. *The Changing Light at Sandover* is one of the longest epics in any language, and features the voices of recently deceased poet [W. H. Auden](http://www.poemhunter.com/wystan-hugh-auden/), Merrill's late friends Maya Deren and Greek socialite Maria Mitsotáki, as well as heavenly beings including the Archangel Michael. Channeling voices through a Ouija board "made me think twice about the imagination," Merrill later explained. "If the spirits aren't external, how astonishing the mediums become! Victor Hugo said of his voices that they were like his own mental powers multiplied by five."

Following the publication of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Merrill returned to writing shorter poetry which could be both whimsical and nostalgic: "Self-Portrait in TYVEK Windbreaker" (for example) is a conceit inspired by a windbreaker jacket Merrill purchased from "one of those vaguely imbecile / Emporia catering to the collective unconscious / Of our time and place." The Tyvek windbreaker — "DuPont contributed the seeming-frail, / Unrippable stuff first used for Priority Mail" — is "white with a world map." "A zipper's hiss, and the Atlantic Ocean closes / Over my blood-red T-shirt from the Gap."

Works:

Poetry collections

The Black Swan (1946)

First Poems (1951)

The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (1959)

Water Street (1962)

Nights and Days (1966)

The Fire Screen (1969)

Braving the Elements (1972)

Divine Comedies (1976), including "Lost in Translation" and The Book of Ephraim

Mirabell: Books of Number (1978)

Scripts for the Pageant (1980)

The Changing Light at Sandover (1982)

From the First Nine: Poems 1946-1976 (1982)

Late Settings (1985)

The Inner Room (1988)

Selected Poems 1946-1985 (1992)

A Scattering of Salts (1995)

Posthumous editions

Collected Poems (2001)

Selected Poems (2008)

Prose

Recitative (1986) - essays

A Different Person (1993) - memoir

Collected Prose (2004)

Novels

The Seraglio (1957)

The (Diblos) Notebook (1965)

Drama

The Birthday (1947)

The Immortal Husband (1955)

The Bait

Collection

Collected Novels and Plays (2002)

A Mysterious Epigraph

These days which, like yourself,
Seem empty and effaced
Have avid roots that delve
To work deep in the waste.

James Merrill

An Urban Convalescence

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.

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.
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-cafe?
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.
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-Elysees, her hand in his,
But the dull need to make some kind of house
Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.

James Merrill

Another April

The panes flash, tremble with your ghostly passage
Through them, an x-ray sheerness billowing, and I have risen
But cannot speak, remembering only that one was meant
To rise and not to speak. Young storm, this house is yours.
Let our eye darken, your rain come, the candle reeling
Deep in what still reflects control itself and me.
Daybreak's great gray rust-veined irises humble and proud
Along your path will have laid their foreheads in the dust.

James Merrill

Home Fires

I peered into the crater's heaving red
And quailed. I called upon the Muse. I said,
"The day I cease to serve you, let me die!"
And woke alone to birdsong, in our bed.

The flame was sinewed like those angels Blake
Drew faithfully. One old log, flake by flake,
Gasp'd out its being. Had it hoped to rise
Intact from such a wrestler's give-and-take?

My house is made of wood so old, so dry
From years beneath this pilot-light blue sky,
A stranger's idle glance could be the match
That sends us all to blazes.—Where was I?

Ah yes. The man from Aetna showed concern.
No alarm system—when would people learn?
No outside stair. The work begins next week.
Must I now marry that I may not burn?

Never again, oracular, wild-eyed,
To breathe on a live ember deep inside?
The contract signed in blood forbids that, too,
Damping my spirit as it saves my hide.

Take risks! the crowd chants in a kind of rage
To where his roaring garret frames the sage
Held back by logic, by the very thought
Of leaping to conclusions, at his age.

Besides, the cramped flue of each stanza draws
Feeling away. To spare us? Or because
Heaven is cold and needs the mortal stuff
Flung nightly around its barenesses, like gauze.

Last weekend in a bar in Pawcatuck
A boy's face raw and lean as lightning struck.
Before I knew what hit me, there you were,
Sweetheart, with your wet blanket. Just my luck.

I touched the grate with my small hand, and got
Corrected. Sister ran to kiss the spot.
Today a blister full of speechless woe
Wells up for the burnt children I am not.

Magda was molten at sixteen. The old
Foundryman took his time, prepared the mold,
Then poured. Lost wax, the last of many tears,
Slid down her face. Adieu, rosebuds and gold!

That slim bronze figure of Free Speech among
Repressive glooms woke ardor in the young,

Only to ring with mirth—a trope in Czech
Twisting implacably the fire's tongue.

One grace: this dull asbestos halo meant
For the bulb's burning brow. Two drops of scent
Upon it, and our booklined rooms, come dusk,
Of a far-shining lamp grew redolent.

The riot had been "foretold" to Mrs. Platt,
The landlady, by a glass ruby at
The medium's throat. "Next she'll be throwing fits,"
Gerald said coldly. "I shall move. That's that."

Torchlit, the student demonstrators came.
Faint blues and violets within the flame
Appeared to plead that fire at heart was shy
And only incidentally to blame.

Consuming fear, that winter, swept the mind.
Then silence, country sounds—and look! Behind
Me stands the blackened chimney of our school,
Crowned with a stork's nest, rambler-rose-entwined.

A sunset to end all. Life's brave disguise—
Rages and fevers, worn to tantalize—
Flickers to ash. What's left may warm itself
At the hearth glowing in its lover's eyes.

~

Dear Fulmia, I thought of you for these
Obsidian trinkets purchased, if you please,
In a boutique at the volcano's core.
(Extinct? I wonder.) Love, Empedocles.

James Merrill

Log

Then when the flame forked like a sudden path
I gasped and stumbled, and was less.
Density pulsing upward, gauze of ash,
Dear light along the way to nothingness,
What could be made of you but light, and this?

James Merrill

Manos Karastefanes

Death took my father.
The same year (I was twelve)
Thanási's mother taught me
Heaven and hell.

None of my army buddies
Called me by name—
Just 'Styles' or 'Fashion Plate'.
One friend I had, my body,

And, evenings at the gym
Contending with another,
Used it to isolate
Myself from him.

The doctor saved my knee.
You came to the clinic
Bringing War and Peace,
Better than any movie.

Why are you smiling?
I fought fair, I fought well,
Not hurting my opponent,
To win this black belt.

Why are you silent?
I've brought you a white cheese
From my island, and the sea's
Voice in a shell.

James Merrill

The Broken Home

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.
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.

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 or José María Sert
Or Clemenceau—veins standing out on her throat
As she yelled War mongerer! 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.

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 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
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.

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.

James Merrill

The Candid Decorator

I thought I would do over
All of it. I was tired
Of scars and stains, of bleared
Panes, tinge of the liver.
The fuchsia in the center
Looked positively weird
I felt it—dry as paper.
I called a decorator.
In next to no time such
A nice young man appeared.
What had I in mind?
Oh, lots and lots of things—
Fresh colors, pinks and whites
That one would want to touch;
The windows redesigned;
The plant thrown out in favor,
Say, of a small tree,
An orange or a pear . . .
He listened dreamily.
Combing his golden hair
He measured with one glance
The distance I had come
To reach this point. And then
He put away his comb
He said: "Extravagance!
Suppose it could be done.
You'd have to give me carte
Blanche and an untold sum.
But to be frank, my dear,
Living here quite alone
(Oh I have seen it, true,
But me you needn't fear)
You've one thing to the good:
While not exactly smart,
Your wee place, on the whole
It couldn't be more 'you.'
Still, if you like—" I could
Not speak. He had seen my soul,
Had said what I dreaded to hear.
Ending the interview
I rose, blindly. I swept
To show him to the door,
And knelt, when he had left,
By my Grand Rapids chair,
And wept until I laughed
And laughed until I wept.

James Merrill

The Puzzle is no Puzzle

A card table in the library stands ready
To receive the puzzle which keeps never coming.
Daylight shines in or lamplight down
Upon the tense oasis of green felt.
Full of unfulfillment, life goes on,
Mirage arisen from time's trickling sands
Or fallen piecemeal into place:
German lesson, picnic, see-saw, walk
With the collie who 'did everything but talk' —
Sour windfalls of the orchard back of us.
A summer without parents is the puzzle,
Or should be. But the boy, day after day,
Writes in his Line-a-Day No puzzle.

When the puzzle finally arrives, after days of waiting, it is described in detail:

Out of the blue, as promised, of a New York
Puzzle-rental shop the puzzle comes —
A superior one, containing a thousand hand-sawn,
Sandal-scented pieces. Many take
shapes known already — the craftsman's repertoire
nice in its limitation — from other puzzles:
Witch on broomstick, ostrich, hourglass,
Even (not surely just in retrospect)
An inchling, innocently-branching palm.

James Merrill

The Victor Dog

Bix to Buxtehude to Boulez,
The little white dog on the Victor label
Listens long and hard as he is able.
It's all in a day's work, whatever plays.

From judgment, it would seem, he has refrained.
He even listens earnestly to Bloch,
Then builds a church upon our acid rock.
He's man's--no--he's the Leiermann's best friend,

Or would be if hearing and listening were the same.
Does he hear? I fancy he rather smells
Those lemon-gold arpeggios in Ravel's
"Les jets d'eau du palais de ceux qui s'aiment."

He ponders the Schumann Concerto's tall willow hit
By lightning, and stays put. When he surmises
Through one of Bach's eternal boxwood mazes
The oboe pungent as a bitch in heat,

Or when the calypso decants its raw bay rum
Or the moon in Wozzeck reddens ripe for murder,
He doesn't sneeze or howl; just listens harder.
Adamant needles bear down on him from

Whirling of outer space, too black, too near--
But he was taught as a puppy not to flinch,
Much less to imitate his bête noire Blanche
Who barked, fat foolish creature, at King Lear.

Still others fought in the road's filth over Jezebel,
Slavered on hearths of horned and pelted barons.
His forebears lacked, to say the least, forbearance.
Can nature change in him? Nothing's impossible.

The last chord fades. The night is cold and fine.
His master's voice rasps through the grooves' bare groves.
Obediently, in silence like the grave's
He sleeps there on the still-warm gramophone

Only to dream he is at the première of a Handel
Opera long thought lost--Il Cane Minore.
Its allegorical subject is his story!
A little dog revolving round 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.

James Merrill

Voices from the Other World

Presently at our touch the teacup stirred,
Then circled lazily about
From A to Z. The first voice heard
(If they are voices, these mute spellers-out)
Was that of an engineer

Originally from Cologne.
Dead in his 22nd year
Of cholera in Cairo, he had KNOWN
NO HAPPINESS. He once met Goethe, though.
Goethe had told him: PERSEVERE.

Our blind hound whined. With that, a horde
Of voices gathered above the Ouija board,
Some childish and, you might say, blurred
By sleep; one little boy
Named Will, reluctant possibly in a ruff

Like a large-lidded page out of El Greco, pulled
Back the arras for that next voice,
Cold and portentous: ALL IS LOST.
FLEE THIS HOUSE. OTTO VON THURN UND TAXIS.
OBEY. YOU HAVE NO CHOICE.

Frightened, we stopped; but tossed
Till sunrise striped the rumpled sheets with gold.
Each night since then, the moon waxes,
Small insects flit round a cold torch
We light, that sends them pattering to the porch . . .

But no real Sign. New voices come,
Dictate addresses, begging us to write;
Some warn of lives misspent, and all of doom
In way's that so exhilarate
We are sleeping sound of late.

Last night the teacup shattered in a rage.
Indeed, we have grown nonchalant
Towards the other world. In the gloom here,
our elbows on the cleared
Table, we talk and smoke, pleased to be stirred

Rather by buzzings in the jasmine, by the drone
Of our own voices and poor blind Rover's wheeze,
Than by those clamoring overhead,
Obsessed or piteous, for a commitment
We still have wit to postpone

Because, once looked at lit
By the cold reflections of the dead
Risen extinct but irresistible,
Our lives have never seemed more full, more real,

Nor the full moon more quick to chill.

James Merrill

Yánnina

'There lay the peninsula stretching far into the dark gray water, with its mosque, its cypress tufts and fortress walls; there was the city stretching far and wide along the water's edge; there was the fatal island, the closing scene of the history of the once all-powerful Ali.'
—EDWARD LEAR

Somnambulists along the promenade
Have set up booths, their dreams:
Carpets, jewelry, kitchenware, halvah, shoes.
From a loudspeaker passionate lament
Mingles with the penny Jungle's roars and screams.
Tonight in the magician's tent
Next door a woman will be sawed in two,
But right now she's asleep, as who is not, as who . . .

An old Turk at the water's edge has laid
His weapons and himself down, sleeps
Undisturbed since, oh, 1913.
Nothing will surprise him should he wake,
Only how tall, how green the grass has grown
There by the dusty carpet of the lake
Sun beats, then sleepwalks down a vine-festooned arcade,
Giving himself away in golden heaps.

And in the dark gray water sleeps
One who said no to Ali. Kiosks all over town
Sell that postcard, 'Kyra Frossíni's Drown,'
Showing her, eyeballs white as mothballs, trussed
Beneath the bulging moon of Ali's lust.
A devil (turban and moustache and sword)
Chucks the pious matron overboard—
Wait—Heaven help us—SPLASH!

The torch smokes on the prow. Too late.
(A picture deeply felt, if in technique slapdash.)
Wherefore the Lion of Epirus, feared
By Greek and Turk alike, tore his black beard
When to barred casements rose the song
Broken from bubbles rising all night long:
'A ton of sugar pour, oh pour into the lake
To sweeten it for poor, for poor Frossíni's sake.' (*)

Awake? Her story's aftertaste
Varies according to the listener.
Friend, it's bitter coffee you prefer?
Brandy for me, and with a fine
White sandy bottom. Not among those braced
By action taken without comment, neat,
Here's how! Grounds of our footnote infiltrate the treat,
Mud-vile to your lips, crystal-sweet to mine.

Twilight at last. Enter the populace.

One little public garden must retrace
Long after school its childish X,
Two paths that cross and cross. The hollyhock, the rose,
Zinnia and marigold hear themselves named
And blush for form's sake, unashamed
Chorus out of Ignoramus Rex:
'What shall the heart learn, that already knows

Its place by water, and its time by sun?'
Mother wit fills the stately whispering sails
Of girls someone will board and marry. Who?
Look at those radiant young males.
Their morning-glory nature neon blue
Wilts here on the provincial vine. Where did it lead,
The race, the radiance? To oblivion
Dissembled by a sac of sparse black seed.

Now under trees men with rush baskets sell
Crayfish tiny and scarlet as the sins
In any fin-de-siècle villanelle.
Tables fill up. A shadow play begins.
Painted, translucent cut-outs fill the screen.
It glows. His children by a jumping bean
Karaghíózi clobbers, baits the Turk,
Then all of them sing, dance, tell stories, go berserk.

Tomorrow we shall cross the lake to see
The cottage tumbling down, where soldiers killed
Ali. Two rugless rooms. Cushions. Vitrines
In which, to this day, silks and bracelets swim.
Above, a painting hangs. It's him,
Ali. The end is near, he's sleeping between scenes
In a dark lady's lap. Vassilikí.
The mood is calm, the brushwork skilled

By contrast with Frossíni's mass-produced
Unsophisticated piece of goods.
The candle trembles in the watching god's
Hand—almost a love-death, höchste Lust!
Her drained, compliant features haunt
The waters there was never cause to drown her in.
Your grimiest ragamuffin comes to want
Two loves, two versions of the Feminine:

One virginal and tense, brief as a bubble,
One flesh and bone—gone up no less in smoke
Where giant spits revolving try their rusty treble,
Sheep's eyes pop, and death-wish ravens croak.
Remember, the Romantic's in full feather.
Byron has visited. He likes
The luxe, and overlooks the heads on pikes;
Finds Ali 'Very kind ... indeed, a father ... ' (*)

Funny, that is how I think of Ali.
On the one hand, the power and the gory
Details, pigeon-blood rages and retali-
ations, gout of fate that crust his story;
And on the other, charm, the whimsically
Meek brow, its motives all ab ulteriori,
The flower-blue gaze twining to choke proportion,
Having made one more pretty face's fortune.

A dove with Parkinson's disease
Selects our fortunes: TRAVEL AND GROW WISE
And A LOYAL FRIEND IS MORE THAN GOLD.
But, at the island monastery, eyes
Gouged long since to the gesso sockets will outstare
This or that old-timer on his knees
Asking the candlelight for skill to hold
The figures flush against the screen's mild glare.

Ali, my father—both are dead.
In so many words, so many rhymes,
The brave old world sleeps. Are we what it dreams
And is a rude awakening overdue?
Not in Yánnina. To bed, to bed.
The Lion sets. The lights wink out along the lake.
Weeks later, in this study gone opaque,
They are relit. See through me. See me through.

For partings hurt although we dip the pain
Into a glowing well—the pen I mean.
Living alone won't make some inmost face to shine
Maned with light, ember and anodyne,
Deep in a desktop burnished to its grain.
That the last hour be learned again
By riper selves, couldn't you doff this green
Incorruptible, the might-have-been,

And arm in arm with me dare the magician's tent?
It's hung with asterisks. A glittering death
Is hefted, swung. The victim smiles consent.
To a sharp intake of breath she comes apart
(Done by mirrors? Just one woman? Two?
A fight starts—in the provinces, one feels,
There's never that much else to do)
Then to a general exhalation heals

Like anybody's life, bubble and smoke
In afterthought, whose elements converge,
Glory of windless mornings that the barge
(Two barges, one reflected, a quicksilver joke)
Kept scissoring and mending as it steered
The old man outward and away,

Amber mouthpiece of a narghilé
Buried in his by then snow white beard

James Merrill