

Classic Poetry Series

**James Merrill**  
**- poems -**

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## 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.

<B>Life</b>

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.

#### <b>Awards</b>

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.

#### <b>Style</b>

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."

# 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,  
Gaspd 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 throbbed 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

# 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

&lt;i&gt;'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.'&lt;/i&gt;  
—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  
Karaghiózi 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 grimeiest 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, gouts 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