

Session 2: Remembering Jimmy

Stephen Yenser, one of James Merrill's literary executors and editors, is a poet, literary critic, and Distinguished Professor of English at UCLA.

Stephen will be reading an essay about his friendship with Merrill.

Randy Bean, board member, James Merrill House Committee, a Managing Partner of NewVantage Partners and a National Council Member for the WU Libraries

Randy is presenting on the history and initiatives of the James Merrill House

Judy Moffett is the author of *James Merrill: An Introduction to the Poetry* (Columbia University Press, 1984)--a critical study--and of three collections of poetry heavily influenced by the work and example of JM. The third, *Tarzan in Kentucky*, was published this summer by David Robert Books.

Judy's talk is Mixed Messages, an excerpt from "Unlikely Friends: A Memoir"

Rachel Hadas is a professor in the Department of English at Rutgers University. She is the author of numerous books of poetry, essays, and translations. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry, an Ingram Merrill Foundation grant in poetry, and an award in literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Rachel unfortunately couldn't join us today but instead she recorded a video as a way to contribute to the symposium. It's about 12 minutes and contains Rachel reading from The Book of Ephraim, a poem she wrote inspired by the biography, and recollecting about her friendship with Merrill.

Remembering James Merrill

The rubric for this section of the symposium is “Remembering Jimmy,” and that phrase would seem to imply a trove of recollections and anecdotes. So I might begin by telling you that the first thing that he said that I wrote down when I was in a class that he taught at the University of Wisconsin in 1967, apropos the strangeness of a “workshop” in poetry, was “What you do with your loneliness is your own business.” And I might go on and on and eventually end with an anecdote, rooted in a poem called “Pledge” in his last book, about the fate of a Japanese bronze cricket that he gave to me and my former wife after we got married.

But I would have to preface those personal remarks with a brief demur. For one thing, I always knew him as James, rather than Jimmy; and for the other, more important one, while I knew him for 28 years and do have a few stories, when I sat down to muse over this occasion I found myself recurring to thoughts less biographical than aesthetic. The reason, it was immediately clear, was that in his case the person and the poet keep merging. Although he had almost nothing to say in public about his poetry—he never talked shop in social gatherings—he insisted on the coalescence in several ways. In his short verse play “The Image Maker,” to take one kind of instance, the titular character, a proxy for the poet, responds to the voice of his reproachful mother, who laments the absence of grandchildren, with the simple plea for understanding: “My work, Mamá. That’s *my* whole life.” In another context, prompted by an interviewer, James put it quite plainly: “Poetry made me what I am.”

I take this last claim to be more than an avowal of vocation, more a matter of sensibility than profession. In a lighter mood he was thinking along the same lines the first time we spoke together after the class that I took with him. The term was over, and my wife and I had finally worked up the temerity to ask him to dinner before he left town. We were walking down a hall

in the student union. I hadn't ever taken a workshop before, and never would again. (Not that his course had been a true workshop. In order not to embarrass us by discussing our work before our peers, he asked us to bring him our work outside class and to talk in class about the published work he assigned: poems by Bishop, Berryman, Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*, a song by Heine, and many others.) Anyway, I couldn't imagine how one could grade "creative writing" students, and I asked him what his criteria could have been. "Well," he said, "it wasn't hard. I gave an A to those people who loved poetry. And I gave a B to those who loved themselves. And I gave a C to those who didn't love anything." I didn't really understand that explanation and thought, I suppose, that "to love poetry" meant something like to memorize Shakespeare eagerly and to imitate the work of, say, George Herbert and Valéry. Much later, as I began to read his poems more closely and to talk to him about the work, it dawned on me that he meant something else—the same thing, perhaps, that his familiar spirit Ephraim had in mind, in the wonderful sequence named for him, when he elaborated to JM and DJ (by way of the Ouija board in section Q) on the concept of "DEVOTION." "& NOW ABOUT DEVOTION IT IS I AM FORCED TO BELIEVE THE MAIN IMPETUS DEVOTION TO EACH OTHER TO WORK TO REPRODUCTION TO AN IDEAL IT IS BOTH THE MOULD & THE CLAY SO WE ARRIVE AT GOD OR A DEVOTION TO ALL OR MANY'S IDEA OF THE CONTINUUM." At some point, Ephraim continues, "DEVOTION BECOMES AN ELEMENT OF ITS OWN FORCE," and then he becomes "TOO EXCITED" to make much sense, and the reader is left to ponder this mystical state, "devotion" or "love."

It is a concept that I suspect James had come across in Wallace Stevens, who had a great early influence on him and whose "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" was one of the constellations he navigated by. James did have Shakespeare and many others by heart, of course—many more lines than anyone I have ever known—and I will never forget the subtle intensity with which he would recite the last section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."

Stevens begins that sequence, you'll recall, with a prefatory verse (which seems *not* to amplify on the preceding dedication to his friend Henry Church). "And for what," it asks, "except for you, do I feel love? / Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man / Close to me, hidden in me day and night?" Later in his little proem, conjuring the situation in which he and his lover meet, Stevens tells us that "In the uncertain light of single, living truth, / Equal in living changingness to the light / In which I meet you [his lover], in which we sit at rest, / For a moment in the central of our being, / The vivid transparence that you bring is peace." Now it is surely that passage and that ambience that James had in mind when he decided to call his epic *The Changing Light at Sandover*, and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" could be in effect his own "extremest book of the wisest man." In any event, when James concluded the PBS TV segment of "Voices & Visions" that focused on Wallace Stevens, he reverted to that "light" or "vivid transparence" by reading his predecessor's "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (surely an apt sobriquet for the one for whom the poet "feels love" in the preface to "Notes").

[Read pertinent passages from the poem.]

So I am thinking that we can love poetry, we can believe that poetry made us what we are, because it permits us "to forget each other and ourselves," to "feel the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous, // Within its vital boundary, in the mind." It—and by "it" I mean the direct engagement with it, as in the process of composition—lets us understand that "God and the imagination are one." James returns to Stevens's proposition on several occasions, and he has a secular version of it in mind when he once quoted to me Valéry's assertion that the "grand achievement of the poets is the ability to grasp forcefully in their words what they can only feebly entertain in their spirit."

That juxtaposition might seem to involve a terrific leap. Let me get at the notion another, maybe straighter way. In the course of editing James's poems and at the same time some of his letters, I have been struck by the frequency of his conviction that he is often unable to feel as keenly or as deeply as people are supposed to feel. He sometimes takes this inability to empathize, or to sympathize, or to be moved emotionally as the distinguishing characteristic of humanity. What it means to be human is to feel, and when he doesn't feel sufficiently, he seems to himself to be less than "human" or, on occasion, "real." His means of making himself human, so to speak, of indeed creating himself, is writing—and by "writing" I mean the entire complex of composition, inspiration through endless revision. The Image Maker, in the course of making his "images," his poems, inhabits, however temporarily, that state of mind in which he perceives that "God and the imagination are one." I don't think that state can be crisply delineated. I think that we have to settle for something like Stevens's "thought in which we collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing"—which he glosses as "A light, a power, the miraculous influence" and as the "intensest rendezvous."

Remembering James, I remember the man who devoted himself to collecting himself "Out of all the indifferences"—the relationships, familial and social and intimate, with all they entailed, the travels to all the countries and all the languages—into "one thing."

Poem after poem, sequence after sequence, trace out—no, *constitute* the development from isolation or alienation, coldness or "loneliness" to union or reunion or communion. "What you do with your loneliness is your own business," he observed 48 years ago, and what he did with his was to contrive verbal objects that made him feel completely "human," to feel and to think as fully as possible all at once, to come to an understanding, transient though it might be, of

“an order, a whole.” For him as for Yeats not being in love (and therefore losing) but writing about being in love (and losing) was the peak, empowering, unifying experience.

His first major long poem “The Thousand and Second Night” begins with a speaker who is bored, alone halfway around the world from his home, and ill, his face half-paralyzed, and the following sections work out through the narration of the experience the speaker’s rejuvenation. “Nightgown,” the poem that precedes it and opens in *Nights and Days*, starts with “a cold so keen” that the poet’s teeth chatter; “From a Notebook” departs from “The cold, the hush” of a winter’s morning; at the outset of “A Fever,” the speaker is ill with a virus, in bed, his teeth chattering; “Mornings in a New House,” which gave James the title for *The Fire Screen*, starts with a fire being lit by “a cold man” who “hardly cares”; “After the Fire” departs from a trio of aging, disillusioned figures convening in a “chill dusk”; “The Will” opens with the speaker making out a last will and setting out on his “cold way.” All of these poems, and others, work their way by means of their own construction to a moment of health, warmth, rejuvenation, and celebration. They all follow the path in “The Kimono,” the initial poem in *Divine Comedies*, which begins with a disappointed lover, “Frozen half-dead” by the wintry cold and a broken relationship, who returns to his hearth, dons a kimono, and magically merges with what its pattern evokes, the thawed stream in the preceding April’s pastoral scene. In its reference to “a bubble-gleam” there at the hearthside the poem hints at a toast to beginning anew.

The bubbly emerges too at the end of the first poem I mentioned, “Pledge,” which recounts the break-up of a marriage the poet attended years earlier. Now, he lifts a figurative glass to “life, unsweetened, fizzing up again” even at the marriage’s dissolution to fill “the heart.” “I drink to you apart,” he says at the close, “In that champagne.” And you see it’s the rather outrageous double-entendre of that last word that epitomizes the poet’s sense, arrived at

through the work, of “a whole, an order”: the marriage, broken, the new lives awaiting, the pain, the sham pain, the champagne . . . I can return to the aforementioned bronze Japanese cricket in later discussion. Thank you.

Stephen Yenser

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James Merrill Symposium



History and Initiatives of the James Merrill House

107 Water Street | Stonington Borough | CT

October 23, 2015



www.jamesmerrillhouse.org

107 Water Street



The American poet James Merrill came to Stonington in 1954, where he took up residence at 107 Water Street with his companion, David Jackson.

After Merrill's death in 1995, the Stonington Village Improvement Association (SVIA) found itself the unexpected beneficiary of the entire building.

In 2013, the building at 107 Water Street was awarded a listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Stonington Borough, CT

- From James Merrill Life and Art. pp. 180-181.
- **Stonington.** Neither Merrill or Jackson had heard of the seaside Connecticut town until January 1954. They had discovered a place of great natural beauty. Set in the far southeastern corner of the state, the town is built on a point about a mile long and less than a half mile wide. Fringed with wharves and moorings, it tapers to a finger of land reaching into Fishers Island Sound. At the end of it are a small beach and a rocky shore. To the west is Stonington Harbor, sheltered by a breakwater. To the east in Little Narragansett Bay and Sandy Point, an island formed by the mighty 1938 hurricane; on the other side of the bay are the resort town of Watch Hill, Rhode Island, and the dunes of Napatree Point. Rather than open sea, the view to the south is of Latimer Light and Fishers Island, New York, making this a three-state view. The sea surrounds the town, and the long low shapes of land on the horizon ring the sea, creating a natural theater. The scene is lit by the sun as it rises behind Watch Hill, climbs over the town, and drops behind the harbor at dusk. Blue, gray, green, tan, violet, pink – the colors of the land and sea keep shifting. Behind the sound track of church clock, seabirds, bell buoy, and foghorn, there is intense quiet. At night, the sky fills with stars. Stonington felt to Merrill, pleasingly, like a miniature Manhattan. “I love this town”, Merrill declared.

Stonington Borough, CT



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107 Water Street

- From James Merrill Life and Art. pp. 798-799.
- “And what of Merrill’s houses? The contents of Jimmy’s apartment at 107 Water Street were given to McClatchy, though the books were to be divided among Sandy, Stephen Yenser, and Robin. Otherwise, ownership of the whole building was transferred to the Stonington Village Improvement Association. The gift came with insufficient money for upkeep, let alone renovation, and no instructions for the future use of the property. What to do with the “old eyesore” was a problem for the local volunteer organization. Over time a plan emerged to leave Merrill’s apartment untouched as much as possible, and to make it available for writers and scholars to live and work there. A writer-in-residence program took shape, a lecture and reading series was established, the apartment was opened to visitors, and the deck again hummed with parties. Twenty years after Merrill’s death, there have been more than thirty writers-in-residence, the apartment has become a lived-in museum, and 107 Water Street is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.”

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The James Merrill House



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The James Merrill House



Twenty years after Merrill's death.

There have been more than 50 writers-in-residence.

All have been enriched by the opportunity to live and work in these inspiring rooms.

The apartment has become a lived-in museum.

107 Water Street is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Writer-in-Residence (WIR) Program



This year has been a landmark one for James Merrill, highlighted by the publication of Langdon Hammer's biography, James Merrill: Life and Art. We were delighted to host a reading by Hammer in Stonington in May, followed by a celebratory dinner.

Kay Ryan, past Poet Laureate of the United States, recently completed her residency as an Invited Fellow.

The current fellow is National Book Award winning author Julia Glass.

MIXED MESSAGES

My obsession with James Merrill was nourished by passion for his poetry, but the poet himself was its target over time. If I could persuade this man to drop his mask, I would learn something vital about myself—I sensed this early on, and I was right. But obsession is difficult to bear, both for the person obsessed and for its object. When I skim through our letters from the first couple of years of knowing each other, I'm astonished at Jimmy's tolerance, his amazing patience with me as I struggled and failed to conceal what I was feeling. By the time he died, nearly three decades later, he had revealed to me nearly everything he had once withheld. But between these high points at beginning and end, there were a number of ups and downs. The piece of memoir that I'll read today tells the story of one of the downs. If some of it shows us both in a less than flattering light, it also shows a human side of Merrill that's as much a part of the story as his legendary helpfulness and generosity to me and to others.

My first post-PhD job was at Behrend College, a branch of Penn State's Commonwealth Campus network. A dream job it was not. Most of my students were products of the Erie, PA public school system, and were neither well prepared for college nor motivated to learn much while there. To make things more interesting, for them and for myself, I convinced the administration to let me invite a number of creative writers to the campus. They were all writers I knew. John Hollander came, and Peter S. Beagle, the fantasy writer, and my former college professor Edward Lueders, for a week as writer-in-residence. And finally in the spring of my second year, James Merrill consented to come and give a reading. There was a wrinkle: the details had long been settled when an opportunity suddenly arose for Jimmy to read with Elizabeth Bishop at the 92nd Street Y on the evening before the

scheduled Behrend gig. We tried to change the date, but that proved difficult, and in the end he agreed to come as planned. This solved one problem, but created another, since it meant he would have been up late and arrive tired.

--and now I'll read from the memoir, *Unlikely Friends*:

On the afternoon of April 12, 1973, I drove out to the tiny Erie airport and met Jimmy's flight. He walked down the metal stairway they had pushed up to the little plane clutching a shoulder bag, and kissed me on both cheeks. He'd said on the phone, a week before, that he was too depressed to write, but he seemed fine. On the way back to my place, we stopped at a liquor store where he—declaring “My dear, I'm not going to *let* you get out of the car”—bought a bottle of sherry and one of Scotch.

While we drove, he gave a lively account of his reading at Penn the previous week. He had mostly enjoyed the visit, but griped about his host, Daniel Hoffman, my dissertation director, who had annoyed him by being cynical about Mrs. Yeats's claim to be a medium, and who had impatiently shrugged off Jimmy's comments about his own psychic experiences. Repeated failures to get the projected Ouija novel off the ground must have made that brushoff hard to take; but I wondered privately what other response he could have expected. Not for three more years would rational academics be notified, by the publication of *Divine Comedies*, how deeply serious this poet was about the occult.

In the hallway outside my apartment, before we had even darkened the door, Jimmy suddenly wrenched his back. That this was an evil omen for the visit was clear at once. He said later that he thought carrying Elizabeth Bishop's suitcase in New York the day before had provoked the

problem; but in the first moments of realizing what had happened, he acted as if *I* were somehow to blame. Or so it seemed. He pushed his suitcase at me—“Well *take* it!”—in a tone the longsuffering David Jackson would surely have recognized. My fear of incurring Jimmy’s displeasure while in his company always lurked near the surface, it felt as if my very life depended on pleasing him, and my heart sank as I snatched the suitcase from his hand and fumbled with my keys.

But after that exasperated outburst, he pulled himself together and telephoned his New York doctor, who called in a back-pill prescription to a drugstore to be collected the next day. And then, after taking a couple of whatever painkillers I had on hand, and settling himself on my couch against a supportive wedge pillow, he had so far recovered himself as to ask in a normal voice how things had been going for me.

I had invited Ben Lane, the academic dean who had found the funds to support the readings, to drop by for a drink and a private word with the poet. Ben was a sophisticated and experienced person, as these things were reckoned in Erie, but he had been truly wowed by Jimmy’s work and was less at ease than I’d ever seen him as the three of us chatted in my living room. Indeed, I gradually realized he was playing up to the visitor by fulsomely praising *me*, as if that would make Jimmy like him better. And revising history: I had certainly never run up to Ben’s office to show him any new poems in draft. I did not suppose for an instant that his making much of me would gratify our guest, and was embarrassed. When Jimmy irritably ordered me to turn the stereo down, something I should have done without being prompted, I leapt to obey. This evidence of part of the truth between us seemed to fly right past the besotted dean.

After Ben left, Jimmy meditated—he was doing Transcendental Meditation in those days— while I threw some food together: homemade bread, Muenster, tomato slices and spinach greens; my guest had requested something light. After eating we chose the poems he would read: The Victor Dog, The Broken Home, Days of 1964, Willowware Cup, From the Cupola. The subject turned again to Ouija, and I heard for the first time the story of how Jimmy, and David’s wife Sewelly, had been trying it together for a lark, Sewally lost interest, David took her place, and the planchette began to zip about the board. My journal reports, “He’s completely convinced the whole thing is true—or rather that he needn’t look further (‘It satisfies me.’).”

But the Ouija *novel* he’d been working on kept refusing to achieve liftoff. He said he was depressed because he couldn’t write, the inverse of what he’d told me on the phone; it wasn’t clear, between depression and writer’s block, what had caused what. But the only signs of depression up to then were those little eruptions of testiness, which might have been no more than fatigue and back pain. His letters through the previous months had occasionally said he was feeling glum, but the glumness was expressed so stylishly it didn’t seem alarming. “A mean bullet-shaped turkey hangs in the cold kitchen,” he wrote, and “I’ve... sent off a subdued recommendation to the people at Brown. Brown! Just my mood...” Form’s what affirms; despite their sense I saw enough affirmation in these clever lines not to take his depression too seriously. But it *was* serious, and he was still depressed.

The reading was excellent and the turnout gratifying. My students were required to come, but faculty, administrators, even people from the community showed up too. I was proud of the kids, who listened even to the many pages of “From the Cupola” with still absorption. Jimmy apologized

for reading while seated at a table, instead of standing at the lectern provided, explaining that he had hurt his back. The college's brand-new video equipment /recorded/ the event. (The Olin Library owns the tape, by the way.)



Between the reading and the reception, several faculty and admin people, including my ex-lover John, went up and introduced themselves. A group of us then moved to the library, where seating had been arranged around a low table. No refreshments were provided—students were not allowed to drink on college property, and not even coffee would have been allowed in the library, let alone food—and the lack of something to drink, particularly in view of the wrenched back and the absence of a practiced script, may partly account for what happened next.

Here are the facts as I recorded them the following day. First: at the reception the great man sat balancing his cigarette in an ash tray held in the air about a foot from my nose. Playing to my students, who were forbidden

by me to smoke in class, I said “Jimmy, would you hold that in your other hand?” The kids laughed on cue. Jimmy said crossly, “Well, sit somewhere else!” Second: during the discussion someone asked why he had chosen José Maria Sert as one of the men attacked by suffragettes in “The Broken Home,” and he said partly because the name rhymes with skirt. He had looked up *skirt* in a rhyming dictionary. I said, audience in mind, “You shouldn’t admit that right out!” Laughter from the students. *He* came back with: ‘What do you mean? You’re ma-a-ad. Of course you should’—then proceeded to twist my arm about it until I agreed, mostly to make him quit. ‘There now,’ he said, ‘that wasn’t so hard to admit, was it?’ At which point Phil Jobst, who taught philosophy at Behrend and was a good friend, remarked that maybe thinking in rhymes instead of looking them up developed a rhyming sort of mind. Jimmy shot him a look of disdain from beneath lowered lids. “Ye-e-s. Perhaps yours is the better method,” he said.

Everybody smoked in the early Seventies, smoking was permitted in a library room where even coffee was verboten, ashtrays were provided and others besides him were using them. Jimmy well knew I was sensitive to cigarette smoke, but I equally knew he would smoke at the reception. Had there been a smoke-free place to sit, I might have sat there. But I was the professor who had invited the special guest, and I felt my place was beside him, where of course I preferred to be. The photo captures this fraught moment in body language: ashtray, cigarette aimed like a blowgun, me inclined as far away from both as I could get.

In the event I stayed where I was and Jimmy switched the ashtray to his other hand. But I smarted under the putdown, and when the rhyming-dictionary issue came up soon after, Phil, a heavy smoker himself, read the situation right and tried to come to my rescue. And received for his gallantry

a frosty putdown of his own. A photo snapped just as the reception was getting underway seems the very image of the dynamic between us that evening: poet grimly tensed to fly off the handle, I braced to receive the anticipated blow, the disembodied head of my gay friend Dennis Kovach floating between us.



I see now that Jimmy's actions partly reflected his lack of experience with students so much less sophisticated than the ones he had taught at Bard. He hadn't recognized that I was playing to my audience in a way designed to put them at ease; if he had he might have followed my lead and played along. But I didn't think of that then. I took it all personally; I felt that this poet celebrated for impeccable manners had behaved as he had because this was only me, and Behrend only a humble college in a social and academic backwater, a world away from Elizabeth Bishop and the 92nd Street Y. I made no allowances for depression or back pain, or, for the cumulative irritant of the tension I could never keep from radiating in his presence.

I would learn over the next few days that the poet had made a bad impression on many of the adults who attended the reception. Behrend's Assistant Director, John Claridge, remarked that people sensed he would talk to them only on his own terms, and that in that case *they* wouldn't have much to say. They had also been put off by his treatment of Phil and me. Phil asked later whether he often did things to me like the rhyming-dictionary thing. He and his wife both called Jimmy intimidating. Several people commented on what an unhappy person he seemed to be. With the adults, the wonderful reading had not made up for the display of unprofessional incivility at the reception.

My students, however, had enjoyed the reading more than I'd dared to hope. A few days later I was able to report to JM that "The most unexpected students responded strongly to this poem or that one, even to 'From the Cupola.' Jim Benner, the kid who asked the last couple of questions about the media [at the reception], said to me yesterday: 'I could have listened to him for a couple more hours.'" In the self-absorbed way of students everywhere, mine had proved oblivious to frictions among the grown-ups. Some of them teased me about the rhyming-dictionary episode, but they thought it was funny; *they* hadn't perceived it as a putdown.

Driving back to my apartment, I almost hit a tree. Jimmy gasped in alarm as the tree loomed in the headlights; I made a quick correction and blurted "Sorry!" An awkward silence ensued, which Jimmy broke by beginning to tell me about his chat with my former lover. "'John was curious...we talked about Herbert & that seemed to open a door; he told me about his mother & his psychiatrist...'" John had heard a lot about Jimmy from me; I too thought it odd, though, that despite the breakup he had impulsively addressed Jimmy as an intimate. And now, as if the close

encounter with the tree had sent a signal he *had* picked up on, Jimmy shifted gears, and the journal records that “Somehow we got from [John’s confidences] to the scandal [created by our affair—John was married] & its social pressures, & Jimmy outs with the very first even indirect reference to his homosexuality that he’s ever made to me, something like: ‘For most of my life, obviously, I’ve had to deal with people’s disapproval & prejudice, & making peace with that is very important.’”

I wonder in the journal how well he’s truly made peace with it. Masks, surfaces, poems like “Yam”? But speaking to me of that core truth about himself was huge. It persuades me that at some level his unconscious was keeping accounts: somewhere he knew he had embarrassed me in public, took in the message of the sudden tree in the headlights, and brought me into the firelight at just that moment to make it up to me. Six months later, in Athens, when I alluded to the rhyming-dictionary exchange while trying to help him remember who Phil was, he drew a blank. And when I quoted his actual words to him, “Oh dear,” he said, ‘in front of your friends’—seeing the situation from another angle, in a happier mood.

Meanwhile, back in Erie, the evening wasn’t over. Restored to my apartment, restored also to the solid ground of talking about poetry in private, and with a drink in his hand, things went much better than they had in the public quicksands of the reception. Jimmy made himself a Scotch-and-water, settled into his chair, and we traded poems. From him, “Lost in Translation,” which he’d xeroxed on the library machine so I would have a copy to keep, and a couple of others, “Chimes for Yahya” and perhaps a draft of “The Will.” While I read those, he switched to mentor mode and went over several newer poems of mine. My journal records that “He made some useful suggestions & some I won’t take, and suggested that after

Poetry I might try Richard Howard at *North American Review* — ‘You can use my name [he said]...anywhere.’”

Besides my poems, Jimmy also read the penultimate draft of an essay that would appear in *The Hollins Critic* that summer, my first published critical piece about his work, a review essay on *Braving the Elements*. My journal reports: “His words on my agonized-over review were ‘It seems all right.’ A nitpick here & there (‘I no longer think the worst thing is the truest thing.’ ‘You should have said that 2 years ago! You’ll wreck my structure!’ ‘I don’t think I knew it 2 years ago; that’s your fault for choosing a subject who isn’t dead yet.’). As for the master’s work, I wrote “Jimmy’s poems are very good... They’re all, in this batch, of the middle-ground, difficult-but-not-impossible sort” of which I had written in my *Hollins Critic* essay that “they meet you halfway and make the process of getting halfway delightful.”

The evening ran long, considering that each of us had already had a very long day. Around one a.m. I suggested we call it a night. We had a cheese and apple snack, Jimmy tested my bed for firmness adequate to support his wrenched back, donned his Japanese sleeping robe, there was a bit more talk, then we turned in. Before crashing on my couch, at the very end of that complicated day full of mixed messages, I got a goodnight kiss.

I’d bungled my instructions about the next morning, which began for me with a braying “*Ju-day!*” of exasperation when the poet woke up and looked at the clock. But in fact we had plenty of time. At the airport he bestowed another stately double kiss before boarding his plane. I must have driven home in a daze and fallen facedown on the bed. But later, summing up, I wrote: “Last summer’s visit [to Stonington] was kindlier [than this one]...I don’t feel bad about it at all...but I do feel some things.” “At all” is a gross overstatement, I did feel bad. But I wasn’t shocked, as I’d been in

Stonington four years earlier, when Jimmy had been jumping out of his skin on the eve of a visit to David McIntosh, and had taken his nervousness out on me. After that upset I'd learned to weigh getting my head bitten off for nothing, and worse, against the many kindnesses he never stopped extending. The messages were mixed, but it seems he meant them all.

In any case my obsession had not been compromised by anything that happened at Behrend. My summary's hyperbolic final sentence reads: "All I know is that I didn't like him much this time round, & that I would die for him anytime you please."

Over the years there would be more such downs and recoveries, times more fraught than this one, when bad treatment would hurt or infuriate me nearly to the point of breaking off the connection. Invariably Jimmy would sense when another tree-in-the-headlights moment had arrived. He never apologized, not in all the years I knew him—but a long, intimate letter would come, a gift, a phone call, a confidence, a detailed, respectful critique of poems I'd sent him. He could have been rid of me half a dozen times, just by doing nothing, but he never let it happen. Instead, over time, he gradually showed me more and more of what I needed to see, till eventually there was nothing left to obsess *about*. Twenty years after Behrend, while we were traveling together in Sweden, Jimmy scribbled in his journal: "May 21st. Stockholm. Long quiet-talkative train trip (6 ½ hours from Lund). As usual I tell J. everything but the thing she would (if she knew) most want to know"—that he was mortally ill with AIDS.