

THE YORNER, MARCH 27, 1995

THE MAD SCENE

Again last night I dreamed the dream called Laundry.
In it, the sheet and towels of a life we were going to share,
The mille-stitching shroud, eaching to be over
Trampled or staled, bled on or groped for blind,
Came, precariously out of an enormous willowisper
Onto merrily boards. We had just met. I watched
From outer darkness, I had dressed myself in clothes
Of a new kind that never stains or wrinkles never
Wear them out, even house smocked with ties
And tiers of soft, like rings enlarged by bellows—
Trained hives. There I saw the cloud-clot, gone by gust.
Form and lightning bite, and the rosin man unloosen.
Fingers were swining in panic over the flute's pine gates.
What did I feel? I loved you. And in the slow sport laughed
To have us young white, girded together, one
Topmost moment of wisteria,
As the laughter burst into grief.

—J. MES. MERRILL
(1962)

clinging, a wind in the hair, like upheld
hand of a Buddha.

A few days ago, Merrill wrote him to tell of Tolstoy's "Happiness." The poem for it but could find no one of the worn paper on which, two years earlier, he had typed a stanza from Byron's poem "Bepo"—lines that at the time described a person he might grow to resemble:

Then he was faithful, too, as well as amorous,
So that no sort of female could complain,
Although they're now then a little
clumsy;

He doesn't the pretty face in vain
environs;

Wax to receive and march
a certain
school;
as they cool
Who still become more constant.

Rather like his father, a lover of the good old school,
his own *boudoir* copyist/
David Jackson, Jackson
piano, write a story,
guitar; he was
treasures
chair
times

gathered—of, latching a certain distance
from each other. It was as if Merrill were
determined to keep himself the kind
of relationship he had known
away. He was coming to his other lovers,
as well. (Merrill had affairs before he met
Jackson, and several afterwards.) For the
last dozen years, he was devoted to a
young actor, Peter Cooten. (He had a
way of naming each affair not only into
affection, but into poetry. He wrote some of his most beautiful
love poems of this story. He relished
Borges's description of love as "a religion
with a fallible god," and few poets have
looked or loved wit such a vulnerable
and wary eye:

Where I laid my face, our moon, quickly,
merciful,
Blotched me. A goathorn from my lips
If that was deepest
in devil, that go
Cleaning and wash out
or pain.

I hoped it would die
the bright
Even of degradation,
Seemed, those days,
Dove a world of wild
Flowers, seating tree
Buckling, heightende
Into a pool of each
But you were every
As who was not,

Merrill's sex
dye let falling
slued but soft

openly, seriously about homosexual
love long before that was fashionable. In
his memoirs he writes, "As in the classic
account of Sarah Bernhardt descending
a spiral staircase—she stood still and it
revolved around her—my good fortune
was to stay in one place while the closest
simply disintegrated."

WHEN Merrill was forty-
six and had earned his first full
measure of love, "Nights and Days" had
won the 1973 National Poetry Award,
whose judges, W.H. Auden, James
Dickey, and Edward Niermeyer, singled
out "his insistence on taking the kind of
tough, poetic chances which make the
difference between esthetic success or
failure." And he had just published
"Braving the Elements," whose exquisite
austerities mark a kind of extreme in
his work. Devoid and rapturous, the poe-
ems are set amid the hazards of history
and romance. His narrative skills turn out
Chekhovian vignettes like "After the
Fire" or "Die" of 1971, where the end
of an affair flings him to a wistful self-
knowledge.

"Present Love," his latest offering, is two
a What leastening our self-love long for most
Others having only withholds
b) Only when one has slain desire
Is his whig led to a smiling ghost
Neither harm nor warmed, now, by the fire

When "Braving the Elements" was
awarded the 1973 Bollingen Prize, Mer-
rill was the subject of a *Tibet* editorial at-
tacking those who continue to "reward
poetry that literary, private, traditional."
That has been sentiment, a peculiarly
Americanized of the Fancy, that other
readers have sensed. Some early critics
condescended to his work by calling it
"bewitched." Ironically, their contemporaries
dismissed it at a larger truth:
"He is more than
merely bewitched; he bears
the elements—earth, air,
water, fire—in many of his poems
as embodiment. Crystal
brooch, waterfall or ge-
nerator, star or planet, or whatever
elements he chose; it was
done with care, carefully the natural
elements of life. He once told a young
woman, 'I'm not precious but the seeds
are to resist.' And, like most
poets, he seemed largely in-
genius. He knew his