

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 milk-stiffening, the shroud, each tag to be ever
 Trampled or soiled, bled on or groped for blindly,
 Came gyrating out of an enormous willow-leaf
 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
 Wears down, whose house assailed with ties
 And ties of ties, like mine enlarged by bellows,
 Trained inward. There I saw the cloud-clot, gone by gust,
 Form, and the lightning bite, and the roan mane unloosen,
 Fingers were waving in panic over the flute's ribe gates.
 Why did I flinch I loved you. And in the downpour laughed
 To have us wearing white, garled together, one
 To possess the rest of wisteria,
 As the lightning burst into grief.

—JAMES MERRILL
 (1962)

clings hot, a window to his
 hand of a Buddha.

L. L. James wrote
 him to reread Tolst
 Happiness." The po
 for it but could find
 in one of the work. P
 kept by his bed. When
 Bonjour Coignard," out
 of paper on which, twen
 he had typed a stanza
 poem "Sippo"—lines that
 at the time described a pe
 grow to resemble:

Then he was faithful, too, as
 So that no sort of female
 Although they're now an
 chorating
 He never put the territe
 a
 m
 Wax to receive and marble
 He vases lover of the good of
 Who still become more constan

Rather like his father,
 lover of the good old school
 held found
 his own bomber copical
 David Jackson, Jack
 piano, write a story,
 color, he was
 irresistible
 strain
 times

gether—of, late, a certain distance
 from each other. It is as if Merrill were
 determined to keep himself the kind
 of relationship he had thrown
 away. He was compared his other lovers,
 as well, 1961 had hers before he met
 Jackson, and several others. (For the
 last dozen years, he was devoted to a
 young actor, Peter (ooten.) He had a
 way of turning each fair not only into
 an abiding friend, but into poetry.
 He wrote some of the most beautiful
 love poems of this ntury. He relished
 Borges's description of love as "a religion
 with a fallible god," and few poets have
 looked on love wit such a vulnerable
 and wary eye:

Where I hid my face, your touch, quick,
 merciful,
 Blinded me. A gas reached from my lips
 If that was the blood
 in those, the A, the
 Cleaning and washed
 or pain.
 I hoped it would quell
 the lights
 Even of degradation,
 Seemed, those days, t
 into a world of wild
 Flowers, feasting, the
 Bucking, heights, de
 into a pool of each
 But you were every
 As who was not, the

Merrill's se
 dye let follow
 ded but w

openly and 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—the stood still and it
 revolved around her—my good fortune
 was to stay in one place while the closet
 simply disintegrated."

When met Merrill, he was forty-
 six and had earned his first full
 measure of fame. "Nights and Days" had
 won the 1967 National Book Award,
 whose judges (N. H. Auden, James
 Dickey, and Howard Nemerov) 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 exqui-
 site austerities mark a kind of extreme in
 his work. Dense and rapturous, the po-
 ems are set amid the hazards of history
 and romance. His narrative skills turn
 out Chekhov vignettes like "After the
 Fire" or "Day of 1971," where the end
 of an affair brings him to a wistful self-
 knowledge.

"Prett's Love are you listening? It is too
 a What leasting our self-loving for most
 Others being only withheld.
 b) Only when one has slain desire
 Is his wish granted to a smiling ghost
 Neither harm nor was used, now, by the first

When "Braving the Elements" was
 awarded the 1973 Bollingen Prize, Mer-
 rill was the subject of a *Time* editorial at-
 tacking those who continue to "reward
 poetry that is literary, private, traditional."
 That has been sentiment, a peculiarly
 American fear of the Fancy, that other
 readers have shared. Some early critics
 condescended to his work by calling it
 "bejewelled," and finally, their contemptu-
 ous derision amounted at a larger level
 to a dismissal of his work. Merrill took his be-
 lievement in the elements—earth, air,
 fire, and water—into many of his poems
 as a metaphor for embodiment. Crystal
 brooch, waterfall or ge-
 ometry, or planet, or whatever
 elements he chose; it was
 carefully the natural
 He once told a young
 precious but the spirit
 resist." And, like most
 seemed largely un-
 dertaken. He knew his