

# James Merrill

## JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Spring 2019

### Poet, Playwright, Essayist Mary Jo Salter to Give 14th Annual Merrill Lecture

**MARY JO SALTER** will be the featured speaker at this year's Annual Merrill Lecture on Saturday, September 28, 5 pm, at La Grua Center. The author of eight books of poetry, most recently *The Surveyors* (Knopf, 2017), she is known for "marrying domestic concerns to exotic locales," according to her profile on the Poetry Foundation website ([www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)), which goes on to observe how Salter's "most acclaimed poems are at once formally inventive and speak to her experiences in foreign cultures, including Iceland, Italy, Japan, France, and England." A prolific reviewer and essayist who studied with Elizabeth Bishop while an undergraduate at Harvard, Salter is also a lyricist whose song cycle "Rooms of Light," with music by Fred Hersch, premiered at Lincoln Center in 2007. Her children's book *The Moon Comes Home* appeared in 1989 and her play *Falling*



*Bodies* premiered in 2004. She is co-editor, with Margaret Ferguson and Jon Stallworthy, of the fourth and fifth editions of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. She joined the writing faculty at Johns Hopkins in 2007,

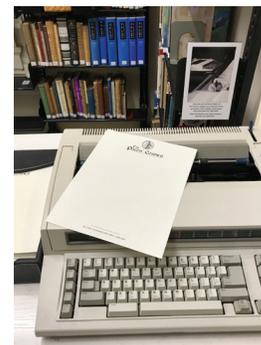
after 23 years of teaching at Mount Holyoke College. Reviewing Salter's latest collection for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Rachel Hadas notes that "like all poets whose art continues to develop over decades, [Salter is] something of a moving target. She's not easy to pin down or pigeonhole as a poetic

presence. James Merrill and Elizabeth Bishop are discernible presences, but we also hear of Henry James's novels and of *Paradise Lost*...Yet the poems aren't principally bookish. The consistently sane and thoughtful voice in Salter's poems coexists with a certain restlessness; where will the next poem take us?" Please join the Merrill House Committee for what promises to be great evening of poetry and conversation.

### Read, Muse, Type

**STONINGTON FREE LIBRARY** executive director Belinda Kay encourages patrons to check out the revamped gallery overlooking the main hall. Recreated in memory of J.D. "Sandy" McClatchy (1945-2018), longtime borough resident and friend of Merrill House, the space houses a substantial portion of Sandy's personal library of art, music, and literary volumes bestowed by his spouse Chip Kidd. Sandy's friend and colleague Jonathan Post was enlisted to help

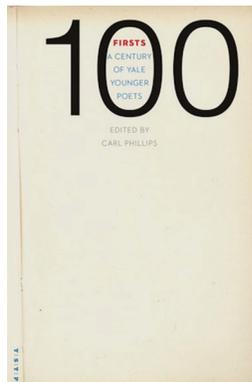
winnow the best of the best. And yes, Belinda confirms, visitors are welcome to try out McClatchy's IBM Wheelwriter at the top of the stairs—donated by another friend, Robert



Palm, with fresh typewriter ribbons and embossed stationery to keep creativity flowing. Those wishing to enter the Poets' Corner competition may drop off an original poem (handwritten or typed) at the front desk, with name and email attached. Every few weeks Connecticut poet laureate Margaret Gibson will read submissions and pick out a few to be published in the Library's newsletter.

### Celebrating a Hundred "Firsts"

**SEVEN YEARS AGO**, the James Merrill House Committee teamed up with the administrators of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize to offer the competition's annual winner a month-long residency at 107 Water Street to work on his/her next project. Yani, the Brooklyn-based poet whose manuscript *The Year of Blue Water* garnered the Yale award in 2018, will be in residence through June. This year also marks the centenary of the Yale prize, the oldest annual literary award presented in the United States, and one for which James Merrill served as judge from 1983 to 1989. Plans are afoot for the Merrill House to host a celebration in the fall to honor this remarkable legacy and the partnership it inspired. (Check the events calendar at [jamesmerrillhouse.org](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org) for updates.) Meantime, those seeking enlightenment about the progress of American poetry from post-WWI to the digital era and beyond will be pleased to learn that current YYP judge Carl Phillips



has anticipated their interest by curating an anthology comprised of three poems from each winner since the prize was inaugurated in 1919. *Firsts: A Century of Yale Younger Poets* will be released by Yale Press in October.

# Merrill House Fellows 2019 – 2020

**GABRIELLA GAGE** (July – August 2019)



is a writer, editor, and journalist from Somerville, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Boston Globe*, *Elle Decor Italia*, *Newsweek*, as well as multiple MIT publications. She holds history degrees from Harvard and McGill Universities and has served as a researcher and historical consultant on academic texts, nonfiction books, and bestselling historical fiction novels. In 2014, she was awarded a Somerville Arts Council Fellowship in Nonfiction Literature. She's at work on a narrative about the lives of 19<sup>th</sup> century mill workers.

**MATTHEW MINICUCCI** (January



2020) is the author of *Translation* (Kent State University Press, 2015), chosen for the Wick Poetry Prize, and *Small Gods* (New Issues, 2017), a finalist for the Stafford/Hall Oregon Book Award in Poetry. His writing has appeared in or is forthcoming from numerous journals including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Believer*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Southern Review*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Recent honors include the 2018 C. Hamilton Bailey Oregon Literary Fellowship and the Stanley P. Young Fellowship from Bread Loaf. He lives in Portland, OR.

Colony, UCross, Millay Colony for the Arts, and the Vermont Studio Center, and serves as Assistant Poetry Editor at *Four Way Review* and Digital Media Editor at *Obsidian Journal*. His first book, *Fieldnotes on Ordinary Love*, was published by Copper Canyon this spring. He is working on a project about Nat Turner.

**NICHOLAS BOGGS** (April – May 2020)



is co-editor of a new edition of James Baldwin's experimental "children's book for adults," *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood* with illustrations

by French artist Yoran Cazac (Duke, 2018). His writing has been anthologized in *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, *James Baldwin Now*, and *Best Gay Stories 2013*. Recipient of a 2019 Robert and Ina Caro Travel and Research Fellowship, he is at work on a literary biography of Baldwin, forthcoming from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and teaches in the Department of English at New York University.

**LYSLEY TENORIO** (February 2020) is



the author of *Monstress*, a collection of stories inspired by the Filipino diaspora. His writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, and *Ploughshares*.

A former Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, he is the recipient of a Whiting Award, an NEA Fellowship, and the Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and has had residencies at Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, and the Bogliasco Foundation. His novel is forthcoming from Ecco/HarperCollins. He currently lives in San Francisco and teaches at Saint Mary's College of California.

**JILL OSIER** (June 2020) won this year's



Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize for her manuscript "The Solace Is Not the Lullaby," to be published by Yale Press in 2020. Her poems

have also appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Georgia Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere. The Recipient of an NEA Fellowship, she served as the Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the Chapbook Fellow at The Frost Place, and the George Bennett Fellow at Phillips Exeter Academy. A native of Iowa, she now lives in Fairbanks, Alaska.

**KEITH S. WILSON** (March 2020) is an



Affrilachian Poet, Cave Canem fellow, and graduate of Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop. Along with an NEA grant, he has received numerous scholarships from Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, MacDowell

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107 Water Street, Stonington, CT 06378

www.JamesMerrillHouse.org

(860) 333-8834

James Merrill House is a program of the Stonington Village Improvement Association, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization

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Taking full measure of 107 Water Street

## Better Late Than Never Merrill House Equipped with "As Built" Floor Plans

**TONY CRANE**, head of the James Merrill House Building Committee, discovered during the Fall of 2018 that there were no floor plans on record detailing the prevailing conditions of the JMH building. Lack of plans meant planning for renovations and improvements to 107 Water Street would require risky ad hoc estimation and guesswork rather than proceeding on a solid foundation of precise, professionally derived measurements. The

# Arriving Where They Started

Glass orbs, a lollipop chair, a drawing of an elephant composed of giants, and other treasures return to the Merrill House...

**CHIP KIDD HAS GENEROUSLY** given back to the Merrill House an array of mementos that James Merrill bequeathed to Chip's late husband, J.D. "Sandy" McClatchy, who served as one of Merrill's literary executors.

Merrill's and McClatchy's close friendship led Sandy—the eminent poet, teacher, and longtime editor of the *Yale Literary Review*—to play a vital role in the Merrill House writer-in-residence program as advisor to the James Merrill House Committee. Soon after Merrill's death, Sandy organized and narrated a video that documents how Merrill's apartment was arranged in the last years of the poet's life. This video is assisting Debbie Norman of Grand & Water Street Antiques and Sarah Dove, of the JMH Committee, in re-positioning objects that Sandy cherished and had long displayed in his Stonington home.

With Debbie Norman's and Karen von Ruffer Hills' help, Chip Kidd arranged for all the items to be documented and returned to Merrill House, with two exceptions: a group of photographs and postcards to be donated to the James Merrill archive at Washington University in St. Louis; and some extremely fragile Japanese prints that the James Merrill House Committee was not able to curate adequately and were therefore consigned to auction.

Sarah Dove arranged for a "Blossoms Landscape" print by Jane Freilicher (1924–2014)



"Blossoms Landscape" print by Jane Freilicher (American, 1924-2014)



Nineteenth Century British campaign chest, mahogany and brass initially owned by Lt. Grignon, 37<sup>th</sup> Regiment

to be expertly re-matted and framed by Mara Beckwith before re-hanging it at the Merrill Apartment. "An integral part" of the New York School of American artists, Freilicher included several contemporary poets among her friends. According to Langdon Hammer in his acclaimed biography of Merrill, she was considered the "muse, confidante, beloved brain" of the avant-garde New York School of



James Merrill reclining in his bat wallpapered drawing room while contemplating his luminous assemblage of glass orbs adorning the window sill



Lollipop chair



India ink drawing of an elephant constructed of giants, lions, etcetera, by Sunderlal, 1747 A.D.



Miscellaneous objects from a side table in James Merrill's drawing room that Sandy McClatchy kept in his study



Miscellaneous Indic and Greek bronzes and Javanese puppet heads

poetry. Hammer notes that while Merrill "cannot be subsumed into the avant-garde of his day...he had significant ties to them derived from spending the early years of his career in New York in the '50s and '60s."

Jane Freilicher is noted for her expansive landscapes. The "Blossoms Landscape" series was painted near Water Mill, Long Island, not far from James Merrill's childhood home in Southampton. It is also reminiscent of the coastal landscape of expansive marshlands, sea and sky that surrounds Stonington.



Photograph of James Merrill savoring the scent of a rose. One of the photos and postcards from J.D. McClatchy's estate that are being entrusted to the James Merrill Archive at Washington University in St. Louis

In addition to an antique campaign chest and a "lollipop" style chair, possibly attributable to George Jacob Hunzinger's work in the late 19th century, and a fantastical Mughal drawing, the Merrill apartment is now re-adorned with numerous Buddha heads, Javanese masks, muscular Greek bronzes, and other talismanic objects that held significance for the poet and his coterie.

# To Our Donors...

Thank you so much for your support of the Merrill House during the period of April 1, 2018 through March 31, 2019. During that time, we have undertaken important restoration projects and conservation of the collections, we have hosted many distinguished writers-in-residence and lecturers, and we have embarked on a new strategic plan for the coming years. All of this has been made possible by your generous contributions. Thank you also to the committed members of the James Merrill House Committee, who do so much to carry out the mission of the Merrill House.

With much appreciation,  
Ruth Saunders & Cynthia Elliott  
Co-Chairs

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# Gift in memory of J.D. McClatchy  
+ Former Merrill fellow  
++ Deceased

NOTE: Please consider making your gift a monthly charge to your credit card. Even small contributions add up! Use the handy envelope included in this newsletter or give us a call at (860) 333-8834.

We sincerely hope we have accurately acknowledged all our donors and gifts. However, if you find any errors or discrepancies, please let us know by emailing [merrillhousefellowship@gmail.com](mailto:merrillhousefellowship@gmail.com).



Following a tour of the Merrill Apartment with members of JMHC and SVIA, Bank of America's Joseph Gianni (right) delivered the company's magnanimous gift to JMHC program committee chair Randy Bean who accepted on behalf of Merrill House

## Merrill House Receives Special Grant

Bank of America has provided the James Merrill House with a generous one-time unrestricted grant of \$15,000. James Merrill was the son of Charles Merrill, founder of Merrill Lynch, which is an operating unit of Bank of America. The check was presented on Tuesday May 14 by Joseph Gianni, Market President and Public Policy Executive for Bank of America.

# Catching up with Past Merrill Fellows

**MIKE ALBERTI** (Winter 2017–18): One of my stories, “Prairie Fire, 1899”—originally published in *One Story*—was selected by Antonya Nelson for inclusion in the anthology *New Stories from the Midwest 2018* (New American Press).

**SALLY BALL** (December 2012): *Hold Sway*, my new book of poems, is just out from Barrow Press (a book begun on Water Street, in which the Merrill House is thanked!).

**CAITLIN DOYLE** (September 2013): I’m very excited to have had two of my poems—“Cradle Thief” and “The Doll Museum”—featured in the American Life in Poetry column, with lovely intros by U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser, and also to have moderated a panel titled “Diaspora and Endurance: Immigrant Legacies in American Poetry” for the 2019 Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference.

**MIKE EERKENS** (November 2013): My memoir *All Ships Follow Me: A Family Memoir of War Across Three Continents* is finally out from Picador! Missing Stonington and sending love and gratitude for my time there.

**PETER FILKINS** (Spring 2011): My latest book is a biography, *H.G. Adler: A Life in Many Worlds* from Oxford University Press. I will be doing a talk on it in Stonington at 5 pm on Sunday, September 22, as part of the Stonington Library Lecture Series.

**CAOLINN HUGHES** (Winter 2016–17): The first story I ever wrote—albeit after several novels—and completed at the Merrill House, won 1st place in The Moth International Short Story Prize. It’s called “Psychobabble” (oddly, it also won 3rd place). I also have a story out in *Granta*: “My Biggest Insecurity about the Garden.”

**SIGRID NUNEZ** (Winter 2018-19): A short story of mine has been selected by Anthony Doerr for the upcoming anthology *Best American Short Stories 2019*, which will be out in October. May you have a wonderful spring.

**DAN O'BRIEN** (June 2013): We’re in London for four months, as my wife Jessica’s been cast in a new show for HBO that shoots there. I’ll be doing some poetry and playwriting gigs while in the UK, and then home to teach playwriting at the Sewanee Writers’ Conference at the end of July.

**TERESE SVOBODA** (November 2015): My second story collection, *Great American Desert* had stars from *Kirkus* and *Booklist*! Several Merrill House friends came to the launch party at Corner Bookstore in Manhattan. I remember my time at 107 Water as dreamy: stimulating talk so many nights with such fabulous board members, boats at Mystic Seaport and Velvet Factory-ing, finding frozen soup in November on the honor system, poring through the library to make sense of Mr. Merrill, making the Ouija board sing.

**KATHLEEN WINTER** (December 2014): My second poetry collection, *I Will Not Kick My Friends*, came out in 2018 from Elixir Press. My poems have recently appeared in *The New Republic*, *Shenandoah*, and *The New Statesman*, as well as an interview and poems in *Waxwing* this month.

**MARK WUNDERLICH** (Spring 2017): My next book of poems, entitled *God of Nothingness*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press. I am also at work on a nonfiction book about the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, called *Neighboring Solitudes*.

**MATTHEW ZAPRUDER** (Spring 2003): Ecco Press published my most recent book, *Why Poetry*, in 2017. I have a new collection coming out in the fall from Copper Canyon Press entitled *Father’s Day*.



## In Praise of a “Vital” Poet

A RECENT ISSUE of AWP’s *Writer’s Chronicle* features artist Molly Mendoza’s cover portrait of James Merrill’s familiar boyish mien, and critic Daniel Groves’ revelatory exploration of Merrill’s later work—particularly the poems gathered in *A Scattering of Salts*—and pursuit of “a virtuosity worthy of the legacy bequeathed by literary predecessors.” The JMHC will post a link to the issue at [jamesmerrillhouse.org](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org) as soon as it’s available online.

## Better Late Than Never

*continued from page 2*

Committee agreed with Tony that a full set of blueprints should be commissioned for the building and Chris Carey of Boxwood LLC was contracted to execute the work.

Carey has performed a complete survey of the entire James Merrill building and provided the JMHC with existing conditions (“as-built”) floor plans for all of its five levels. The plans were drawn with the aid of 3D computer modeling that not only provides fully dimensioned floor plans but provides the capability to rapidly reveal perspectives of the building from any angle selected. They include the location of all significant mechanical, electrical and plumbing equipment, and the location of the emergency system (lighting, annunciator panel etc.). The plans are safely archived in JMHC Google Docs and readily usable hard copies can be printed out easily.

For now, the as-builts are proving helpful in laying out the schematics for the proposed HVAC system which Yankee Remodelers will be working on during the Fall of 2019. When any future changes to the building are made, they will be incorporated into the computer plan drawings to keep the as-builts current.

## Callahan Gift to Writing Program Brings Happy Returns

**THANKS AGAIN** to the generosity of Lynn and Jeff Callahan, former Merrill Fellows Michael Snediker (Fall 2006) and Duy Doan (Yale Younger Poet, June 2018) will visit Stonington as this year’s Returning Summer Fellows. Selected by random drawing, each RSF gets to spend one week at the Jackson Apartment, with full access to Merrill’s library and studio. We look forward to welcoming both Duy and Michael back to the borough!

# James Merrill

HOUSE & WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

James Merrill House  
107 Water Street  
Stonington, CT 06378

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

For more information about our programs, visit us at [jamesmerrillhouse.org](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org) and follow us on Facebook and Instagram.

## Calendar of Events

### SATURDAY, JUNE 8

**Merrill Apartment Open House** (part of the 15th Annual CT Open House Day), 107 Water Street, Stonington, 1-5 pm

### SATURDAY, JUNE 15

Poetry on the Porch with **Yanyi**, winner of 2018 Yale Younger Poets Prize, Stonington, 5 pm  
Check [jamesmerrillhouse.org](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org) for details

### MONDAY, JULY 22

Meet & Greet with July–August Merrill House Fellow **Gabriella Gage**, Noah's Restaurant, Stonington, 5-7 pm

### SUNDAY, AUGUST 24

Merrill House Fellow **Gabriella Gage** reads from her work, Stonington Free Library, 5 pm

### SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

14th Annual Merrill Lecture with **Mary Jo Salter**, La Grua Center, 5 pm

### SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12

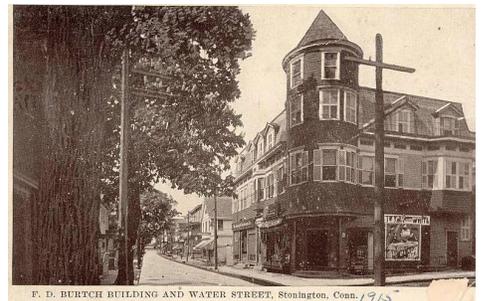
Merrill House Celebrates **Yale Younger Poets Prize Winners**

## James Merrill “At Home”

**ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN RACHEL CARLEY** charmed her audience at La Grua recently with a lecture about the quirky building where poet James Merrill made his home in Stonington with his partner David Jackson. After

Merrill purchased the rambling “Burtch Block” in 1956, he and Jackson proceeded to turn its top-floor studio into one of the liveliest salons of its day, lasting until Merrill’s death in 1995. During those years, the couple played charming hosts to a stream of locals and out-of-town glitterati (Elizabeth Bishop, Truman Capote, George Copeland among the many), who filled

the intimate spaces above Water Street with laughter, gossip and ideas. The pair spent hours ruminating on the colors and furnishings of the rooms, creating a décor that never failed to intrigue visitors. Drawing from her an extensive research project to enable listing the building on the National Register of Historic Places (and since 2016 a National Historic Landmark), Carley shared jottings from Merrill’s journals and other discoveries that illuminate the ways in which his deep connection to Stonington shaped his writing, which resonates with references to the pleasures and peccadilloes of living in this close-knit community. She also touched entertainingly on the rambunctious prior history of the eccentric Victorian building, built by an entrepreneurial druggist in 1901. If you haven’t yet seen the Merrill Apartment, our next Open House Day (Saturday, June 8) is the perfect opportunity.



1915 postcard image of Burtch Block building that would become Merrill House