Porch Light

&

James Merrill House and the Angels Inside: Voice as Cosmology

A Collection of Poems and Critical Exegesis

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Abstract

Porch Light is a collection of poems that contains an enquiry into the relationship existing between mysticism, science (especially cosmology) and spirituality. Yet these poems also seek to discover this often problematic poetic-scientific hybrid space through the lens of human relationships and quotidian events ranging from cups of tea to sideshow suspension.

James Merrill House and the Angels Inside: Voice as Cosmology is an exegesis wrapped in a memoir and is based around my experience of visiting James Merrill House in Stonington, CT in 2011. Through an exploration of both James Merrill’s apartment and his long-poem The Changing Light at Sandover, I begin the process of examining my own poetic engagement with angels, the esoteric and popular science. With reference to Merrill’s long-poem, and by examining the work of poets such as joanne burns, Jack Spicer and Jorie Graham, I enter into dialogue with the poetic practices and thematic concerns contained within my own collection of poetry, Porch Light.
Porch Light
Porch Light

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Incidental Complications
Look Out

jot this down

jot:
obscure glyphs for kilometres
then sinless silence
then the trickling noise
of continents still tearing apart

jot:
there is no specific instance here
simply space
a girl with red trousers
more space
a few blue mountains

jot down:
the girl is you
the mountain is whatever remains outside
constantly vanishing

space is space

jot:
or maybe it is you
who disappears
Bed of Nails Routine

that spattering could be rain. some shower-head god. granting us what we did not plead for. secretly wanted.

these neutrinos. little life units. made it here from some star-death. grew up to be my long legs tap-dancing on your lithe abdomen. stretched gracefully between two beds of nails.

it gets rocky up here on the edge of chaos theory. yet i do not fall. you are not pierced. something about this sheer *survival* smacks of perpetuity. the units have made it this far. why should i slip. why would your lung be punctured.

our tango through the boneyard only serves to assure of the continuum. the sure swing of newton’s pendulum now defunct. the jovial jolt of the double pendulum. you and I and the ten thousand things locked in an anti-phase dance. impossible to predict the arc of swing. we wouldn’t want to.

still this rain falls. could flood.

the universe is picking up speed. spreading its bag of tricks over greater dimensions of space. perched on a board. over nails. over your bare gut. i continue the rhythm. *tap* *tip* *tap* steady. at first. my key eyes turn in the lock of your pain threshold. magician’s assistant. cosmic geographer. space-time palmed. yet

is this going too far. the risk the crowd has come to view. the suggestion of blood. the sense that i might slip. the glimmering steel sharps beneath. i glance again. am answered by a glint. first fringe of supernovas. begin figure eights. begin widdershins. you are contained. i am poised. the universe accelerates. there is always one more level. you are the still point. axis mundi. i am spinning space expanding forever as

steady rain morphs into a storm.
Agreement

A statue loses its head in branches.
All day long, these bold statements, here is my
skin, there is yours, fold a cloth of clouds
back on itself, a collapsing cosmos. Clouds,
not white nor grey, but blue on blue,
a rack of bathrobes or plastic bags, outline union –
a guide to survival in all this severance.

There is a cold this wind owns that outmanoeuvres
all we know of what it means to freeze. Still,
we consider what we experience as known,
all we feel as imperative. I fold back blue,
discover the statue, an explorer, no longer separable –
a bold white arm of the birch he shades beneath.
Our readiness conjures this: all at once, we have

already done the same. There is a law at work here,
a cellar door we winch from its hinges, drawing down
doom to do its will, willing what lies beneath to rise up,
bow to the business of becoming. We kiss, all day long
a cloth of clouds, what we know of what can not be
known, about amalgamation, about love, falls
out of itself, an unfolding firmament.
Tantras

We must participate. Boy sits with a clamp, tweezers, pincers: an insect, taking it down. Even to observe, we must reach in, shatter the glass of what’s out there with the knowledge of what’s in here. To measure we must touch with apparatus that has first touched us, to rate we must enter into dialogue.

We must enter in. Boy blossoms with the realisation that the further you dig into an atom, the more inseparable particles become. Man scrawls “Expansive Fractal Design” on vacant walls, heralds infinity through defining-down, infinity through isolation, infinity through the separation of units.

There is no separation of units. An elementary particle can’t exist without our participation in its entity; from the most minuscule subdivision we can imagine, and those we can’t, relationships reach out, involve, arrange themselves in thread-loops on the loom.

Tibetans call it Tantras, meaning web, meaning weaving. We are thick with it, these hooked hearts, linked skins – the contingencies of cerebral cores don’t bear comment. I require your dissection to measure my being; you, beloved boy, can’t exist without me to write you down.
Swiftly

i

This moment here, he said.
Yet there was pause between them;
A sense that this was no picnic minute,
Anarchic fields were popping up everywhere,
Surrounding them, in particular —

A sense that Physical Law was erroneous.

ii

Steady, she said,
There will be an organising of this miscellaneous matter,
There will be a reckoning.

iii

But look, he said, that fringe beyond is not
Growing, not gathering speed, not
Encroaching on our philosophy.

Touch it, he said, and see.

iv

She did. It was cold and hard, a grey counter in a shop.

v

Then, through all their bodies, the Lightening.
Then, through all their conceits, the Irrepressible.

vi

Scene: A certain bower to lie beneath.
Prop: A finger paint map of all consequence gone before.
Direction: The operatic exercise of death.

vii

Now, a kiss.
Now, busy traffic on the delicate bridge between them,
Now collision.

viii

Of all observations requiring birth in such instant,
One survives:

Consummation is a synonym for The End.

ix

What is she doing there, fingers tapping shop counters that do not exist?
Who is he, drawing down the shutters?

x

There is a certain panic that arrives only when human structures are threatened, she said,
Like fire near the powerlines.

You are fire near the powerlines, she said to him.

xi

Look! This moment here, he said. Yet there were infinite galaxies
Arcing backwards from beginnings
They acknowledged but could not bow to.

xii

Then, all their bodies splayed across the sky.
Then,
Quintessence

most of our universe is missing  we are in the dark about what really goes on between us as we sit here together  dark matter silently widens the gaps  it is dark because we just don't know  knowledge is light  dark matter is a filler  it knits up empty space  if it was not for the unknown most of the universe would simply be empty  it would be nothing

nothing can come out of nothing  while we sit here together  I do not fear the unknown I am afraid of nothing  I do not mean that I am afraid of nothing  though this is certainly true  I am afraid of nothing  I fear the end of consciousness  blank space  if gaps exist we lose ourselves to them  if there is void you and I are lost to it already

what is missing out there  what is missing in here as we sit together  holds more mass than the visible universe  the almost-thought that might be here soon  skulks around heavy  if we begin to cognate  if we begin to classify what binds up the space between us with nothing  what might we find  it might engulf us in constant grey  no colour or shade it might not exist  we might not

dark matter does not reflect enough electromagnetic radiation to be detected  how can we measure this thing that grows between us  as we sit here together  it grows between what we are and the possibility of naught  grows with every breath  how can we define what we can not gather up with the most proficient naming-nets we own  if we are real and in love I pray to the god of dark matter  it is as thick and insubstantial as this

there is hot dark matter  warm dark matter  cold dark matter  these phantoms do not clump to form structures  not like what we do as we sit here together  hot dark matter moves at a rate very close to the speed of light  nothing can go faster than light  but dark is in pursuit  perhaps where there is attraction there is also the gloaming  a little behind just as potent  perhaps more so for not really being
Wheel

‘For you yourself have created the karma that binds you. You are helpless in its power. And you will do the very thing which your ignorance seeks to avoid.’ – Bhagavad Gita

1. Muladhara (Base Chakra: root support)

Off working for peanuts,
off the books,
off in some country where I was not allowed,
I fell down two flights of stairs
on my base chakra.

I did not see a doctor,
for I knew better.

Six months later,
back on a slab in my rightful place,
dissection discovered
I had fractured my coccyx.

That type of thing never heals.

The root:
the grinding bone:
the tail that was:

I began the enquiry:
injuries to the base chakra,
emotional or physical,
create uncertainty,
birth a wanderlust.

Back in that cold country,
lying prone on my solar plexus,
embalmed in a numbing spray
Laura’s ma brought home
from the Falls Road hospital,
I planned my escape.

Root cracked and numb,
no personal loophole in spacetime,

no tail to curl around the branches
of my family tree,

no train to wind around my lover as he twitched,
uneasy,
beside my blocked Kundalini.
Him: you’ll be alright, 
you don’t need it, 
we haven’t had tails for thousands of years, 
at least.

Me: we nurse ghosts of all that has come before; 
my tail will keep you awake at night 
when I am gone.

2. Svadhisthana (Sacral Chakra: Her Special Abode)

One red blood rush.

It is correct to say the 
sex 
chakra contains the obvious pulleys and levers, 
our basic understanding of the cycles:

low heat rising, 
the demand, 
whatever comes next.

It is also correct to say it contains all the dead:

the threads are sung back into our bodies, 
we fuse them through only to gush them back out again.

3. Manipura (Solar Plexus Chakra: City of the Shining Jewel)

Sol and Luna got married in my guts. 
First flurry was fear, 
then undying love, 
then temperate flow like the guru said.

For followers of Kali, 
union of irreconcilable opposites is All – 
wine and illicit sex at night, 
yoga and fasting in the morning.

I’m afraid of things that dissipate categories, 
things that are The Ultimate Aim. 
Still, when you caused it, 
something snapped in there, like the 
corners of my mouth spanning outwards 
in cuts.
4. Anahata (Heart Chakra: Not Struck)

‘gone, gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, oh what an awakening’ – Heart Sutra

don’t for a second think this one’s going to be about St Valentine or this or that fat goblin with a bow or even you and me or this and that kissing some such under the waterfall or any other veiled reality the Buddhists tell me I don’t understand or really participate in nor do I wish to

when I felt the invitation unfold from yours I wanted to hide but instead I wrote back

there is debate over the true colour of the heart chakra some say green of all colours it is compassionate green they say others say rose pink which makes more sense to me though what would I know and anyway I hate rose pink does that mean I hate hearts my own heart

that’s melodramatic and ridiculous how could I hate my own heart

in yoga meditation she tells me to pluck the twelve-petalled flower she says it’s gold residing there at the pump site and send it to some significant one but I get scared that if I do that I won’t have any core to go home to when it gets too rough out here on the sea of televisions so

I keep it for myself then feel selfish then decide to give it out to everyman

there are actually seven heart centres according to this or that holy text my friend Reuben says he’s got heart centres in his heels they all represent a different love isn’t there a first principle in all this excess I want the right doctrine to represent everything I want to feel it feel it for all and sundry no differentiation I want it to be atomic that which can not be broken down

why does it always end up here at integers

5. Vishudda (Throat Chakra: Purified)

I had an Inanna icon once, believed in it, for she is the oldest and the first.

Once, I held her up to my ear, so she might say ancient things my bleating throat could not.

She, too, refused to speak.

I got ill, laryngitis in all this quiet, moved house or country.
Somewhere in between,
Inanna fell out of the box.

I had thought she was impervious.

They say if you ask and mean it,
she will appear in the sky, the Great Goddess,
bless you with a boon. Perhaps say something.

There is sky blue where all I can’t say
There is the non-verbal
There is the silence held dear
I wish for.
stored elsewhere.
haunting blood later.

When they adjust a throat chakra,
they whirl the sixteen petals to the left to let the emotions out.
The patient might start muttering things uncontrollably.

The first thing I mutter is Science
where my bones are kept.
The second thing I mutter is God
where the disguise is kept.
The third thing muttered hints at Unity
since I am now impervious.

6. Ajna (The Third Eye: The Qualified Absolute)

there is a superstring
replacing the unbreakable
electron with something that
could be snapped
if we desire it

little threads of sea
connecting the
O Svaha
topography of my body
to its instigator then
back again
O Agni
through the fire-gate to
you

7. Sahasrara (The Crown Chakra: The Unqualified Absolute)

honey around the outside
inside white

white

like staring at fractals until your brain bursts
sahasrara is the channel vessel
inner lotus of twelve petals
outside honey flower has nine hundred and sixty

what’s the meaning of this angel ladder
why nine hundred and sixty

reclining in a quiet grey bubble
the pineal gland remembers
Incidental Complications

A feather and a hammer fall at the same rate on the moon.

*

There are two,  
somehow this is important,  
division,  
we shall name the feather he,  
the hammer she,  
though they are any given splodge of particle dust.

*

Through all this star-picketing off,  
one from the other,  
the world is,  
after all,  
an interconnected whole.

*

Say they were on the moon, these two,  
the seeming difference  
in weights of heart –  
her hammer,  
his feather –  
would lack consequence.

*

On earth,  
a resistance in the air is doing the damage:  
resistance is something they are born into,  
an incidental complication.

*

A simple turn of events  
is given far too much importance,  
drains what is essentially them –  
a togetherness –  
out.

*

Yet see him approach her,  
side-stepping genetic spectres,  
a relic of light from some
dead celestial body,  
biting his own finger –  
the only available response to all this  
here and now.

*  

Yet watch her astronaut crescendo  
through here and now  
to the FACT that remains.

*  

Most everything the writer seeks to reveal  
concerns this non-linear system,  
refers to a pact made between these  
divisions  
to somehow reach the Absolute,  
via whichever polypeptide chain suggests itself.

*  

The interconnected whole  
must equal the sum of its parts,  
the combined weights of their hearts  
as they fall through, endlessly through,  
oh so gradually  
and because they must,  
thinnest space,  
his feather,  
her hammer,  
at the same rate  
must equal…  
must equal…

*  

Must they be on the moon?
Vehicle for the Fall

White limbs, entangled. As a child I haunt
autumn leaves and moths burnt on the light:
fall-seduced, purely. Mind unfolding in
there, yellow bicycle frame appears battered,
crumbled, bloodied.

Falling off was casual and expected,
a blank dream of no stars. Rising up, brushing
blood-mottled knees, perhaps pebbled, gashed,
always iced with dirt, was a rite of no doom,
passage dry of tears; a causal exchange.

Forms maintain themselves in the world by
restraint. Now, when catalyst prompts,
cataclysm occurs, recalling facts –
I rode too fast, downhill, dirt road and potholes –
becomes a sterile trial of correct procedure.

I plead insanity, promise poise, swear to keep my
thoughts inside their forms. It is only correct to avoid
The Amorphous, stay out of that shaman’s dream,
deny the beckon of the dark forest-fringe. Your Honour,
I will not free-fall, I will not trance-dance.

In fates imagined, primed to come true, a new
flesh vessel foams with sweat. I mount this wild
creature, dark as the Colt of Old Regret. Our
cliff-dives are measured with syncopated rhythm:
unbreakable flank melds with resolute thigh.

As we unite, we become a channel for causal flow,
Hermaphroditus with the nymph inside.
No need for explanatory hearings,
no hint of metallic betrayal, just joint purpose:
siring of right result, a new name for the fall.
Bodies

we are built for causal relationship to things

some things
built us
some things
we built

as a cause
or effect

and here we go again whoopdedo

now he leans over her with the knife
now she grins the knot is difficult neither can undo it with fingers or teeth
now he laughs remarks to the casual observer
now it is the only way the knot is very close to her jugular the knife is large
now he moves slow
now the cord is cut just
now release

as the next accumulation begins

there are elements that push each other to the very brink and beyond
potassium must be stored under argon or there's no telling what she will do
ever seen her hit water sucrose

there is an explosion where no trace remains
there is volatility
there is utter combustion

now focus
now this is very tricky someone could get hurt
now she is walking on broken glass her feet cushioned by his body
now the music of the spheres kicks in sideshow style
now the veil is torn slight cuts on his flesh
now she makes it across and through this time
now applaud

there were circus freaks in the thirties who hammered nails into any orifice
there were monks who sat on poles for decades in the middle ages
there are now anorexics and ballet dancers and junkies

our bodies are things
we are built for relationships to our bodies

our bodies
built us
our bodies
we built

as a causal exchange
or an effective punishment

and here we go again whoopdedo
Nouveau Devotion on the Train

out the window bamboo in the breeze
invasive fragility
then a digger a drone dinosaur
neck reaching deep in to suckle in deep earth

then from all of it a gaze of sheer increase
gathering gathering exponential

if it gets curved enough
will the Great Continuing fold back on itself
and if so
will we time-travel
will we know we are time-travelling
are we time-travelling now

every step is time travel
atoms are algorithms
these virtual particles
we base everything on
can never be observed
nothing makes any sense

just yesterday while walking
a row of rugby players
drunk
barrelled towards me
each in turn
plucked my form up from the ground

over the shoulder they are bricks
dropped me down again I am cotton wool

plonk jolt

the last one slapped me on the ass
I continued continuing down the street
without pause

day times smack of this
giant mistaken assembly line
arrhythmic disproportionate
dinosaur machine of blind muscle
its gristle of ridiculous intent
Warding

The air the crow calls down, opposed to the breeze we let pass without meaning; small movement that holds no mystery beyond stutter of leaves, feeling on things of being brushed, accidentally, or lit on by the slightest purpose.

The shroud the rain evokes stands certain on the way I would take – a garrison or a guide? Beside, frayed rope looms like a spectre, expecting necks to slip into its net.

Paused, I shelter in macadamia tufts, under avocado groves, up mango trees, inside strangler figs, Delayed, I burrow beneath rich red matter, search for a better stance to fit the mould of meantime – this sense as though the carved bones have been cast, but no seer can sort their meaning from the Ten Thousand Things, This sense as though the great gash between what is known and what is said is irreparable.

Enduring, crow air spooks the sky, rope in the rain betrays nothing but reticent violence, and the Great Other is so distant as to be indiscernible from distance, from impediment, from another sort of meanwhile. The Great Other is so away I fear inexistence, an unmaking.

Stilled, I haunt interims in all their silent guises, keep hushed watch while claws contort, arrange themselves in warding above my held-breath heart.
Golden Spiral

Whosever stuffed this pouch with seeds, creeks, seas, my own backyard, must have had some central image in mind.

Was it the inflated arc, curve, radius, diameter, protracted compass pleasure?

Or all angle – forty-five, sixty, ninety, like Pythagorus parking cars, lusting after perfect squares by splitting up rectangles.

In fact it had to be untidy: not quite in focus, not quite ideal in form, not quite there yet.

There had to be a fault through which to enter demons.
we are not mysterious creatures look here is mitosis meiosis the whole shebang dissected beyond baryons we are composed of dead stars really if I say I know I generally do these days of extra-terrestrial geography there is no beyond still out the window of this train I would love to dive beyond into these delicious sponge gums though I am not supposed to think of them as soft they are hardened survivors reflective leaves not letting in sun our father let alone one girl’s astral body that does not exist see I know and if I say we can not make it this time that is right also.
Not Right

cells that have not yet died from then reliving slow
dance at the blue light disco the touch of that precious
crush magnet at sixteen or whatever and shaking it is like
this when I touch you now crossing the caravan
linoleum to gather me up all senseless or full of sense no
thought just simple elements forming covalent bonds we
share

electrons it is high school level chemistry I’m flooding
back there to figure out what to do about it I mean it
orphic force all the better for knowing we can not make
it here like I said but by God if there is another field
where gums are sponges and astral bodies dive into
them I’ll meet you there where I end we begin
Washing the Ocean Off

The drive towards discipline;
you need to do what you want to do,
but those gone before intervene.

It becomes difficult to access muscle control centres,
make a cup of Irish Breakfast,
spin it around three times in honour of the Trinity.

The ancestors dictate that you begin this way,
they did,
they have come so far,
they don’t need your particular combination
of their bits
to mess it all up now.

The stakes, every morning, are towering,
dwarfing you, still washing the ocean off,
scouring desperately to escape
the shame of the sludge it arrived from,
most everything your genes have done since.

There are restless shadows bleeding through the curtains
(it has nothing to do with love and its meat teeth),
a lone butcher bird
(even less to do with the neck of fate),
red-dyed pointe shoes.

You are sticky with the pleading of infinity,
desire for that blank you can’t even imagine, let alone explain.

Spiky with resolve,
you scrub and scrub and scrub,
just to spite your genes.

There is an unopened cereal box
(you don’t even mean what you think you mean it’s just symbols),
rice milk
(it is all the fault of W.I.M.Ps – wildly interacting massive particles),
Deleuze and twenty kilograms of Australian Builder’s Cement.

Recovery from the occasional attack of discipline guilts,
brought to you by the bones of those you stumble over all day long,
is surprisingly simple:
You coax the calm dry day back into your belly,
let the hot wet night out.
Begone, Theory of Everything! Fall far from me, Ultimate Reality of the Universe!

Although you have a hide, something winsome seeps slowly through. What keeps it in, generally, now sets it free, specifically. It is a heard thing, recapitulated. An alarm cuckooing; no doubt you forgot you owned it.

Also, it sings to mine. And we are in love. Delineation and other hazards loom, but for now, in the silent suspension of this starburst, pleasantries and distractions. Leaping fish, dissolving fingertips.

I read today that dark matter emits light, information has been thought to skulk out of black holes, and the universe is only 2D. Case in point: it once was thought that what we think we are, we are. Now, even the mind is in the mind.

I hear you say: does that mean I am not responsible for my own body’s weather? That we are not enamoured?

I hear my reply: irradiated starbursts too close to our teetering system further reveal our fragility. So kiss me.
Astral Projection
Waxing Moon in Virgo

Lone magpie cry against morning.
Sometimes you implode inside to experience it:
galaxy upon galaxy of no new Earth,
all alone against the colossal empty.

You think colossal empty and are proud of it,
as though the real fears could be quantified,
and, once named, obliterated by word-magic –
as though dying to it all was ever enough.

Dying is enough, yet you refute the finer points,
so this forfeiture continues.

This one is dying, this old Earth you loved,
part of you dares it to go.
Part of you must have sent it packing:
the mind is the Earth is the mind.

Grinning, because even in the leather of all this ending,
the animal continues, the colossal empty still grants boons;
magpie song still drowns out the tick of continuing,
sunrise still enters with black tea. Perhaps ginger.
High Tea with the Muse

If you do not arrive,
I will leave this birdless space,
eject all useless speech,
turns of phrase, say:

‘silence. Increased silence.
Stilled sea. Not a pin drop.
Not one.’

Then laughter
– your laughter –
will begin.

I remain here at the
base of things, waiting.
I am left here at the primal seed,
needing to thread

one white teapot,
two silver spoons,
two patterned teacups

through the blanket of where things are,
where things should be,
where you might pop up:

no blame.
This vase in the kitchen holds blue flowers,
fresh oranges are cut into quarters,
there could be endless top-ups of tea.

If you were here with me,
I could sip, slow, inside,
Beg the birds’ return, write:

*dancing in the circus of situation,*
*married to movement’s minutiae,*
*unweighted in mind.*
Equilibrium

‘The work of God is done in an instant’ – Antoine-Joseph Pernety, 18th-century alchemist.

The winged thing nibbling
skin, no,
salt from this skin,
can have its fill,
while a lion doing similar
will necessarily be denied.

You, situated somewhere
in the food chain
– midpoint –
between beetles and sharks,
may take only what is yours
from what is mine,
and I’ll have what’s mine from you.
All that is still hallowed, even now,
will no doubt follow suit.

In this process of equilibrium,
we extract art from primal matter,
ferment these mercurial waters
with the sulphur of self-sacrifice.
Love, the endpoint, is the only elixir:

as precious as the pause
between wing beats,
as light as the seamless glint
that marries shore to sea.
Diameter

There must be a bookmark out here somewhere. I'll throw it, as a knife, through the burning heart mid-point of this cause and release library. Watch! We slumber, die in dreams, rise, fierce augury arrives as rainbow lorikeets inscribe rings in the sky. This is Kingdom Come: a circular passage of seeming-static atoms coyly conveying the immensity of the chain. To explain, some cog and wheel machine, not separate from what I think of as me, sings my song. Next, wind whirls life scraps to where actual and represented become one: your burning heart, this fire-wreath sun. We are that arc of exploding spirals, how dare we tire of cycles? Each evening, let us keep watch for our rising, by morning orbit our calling, circle dance in dervish robes, toss our caution-skin to the corona of chance. If there is a horizontal line from God to where this is, let's encompass essence, name this segment: will to live.
Uncreation

I swear to you it was because she wanted release.
There was this hold on things; a gravity; a grandeur.
There was this cosmological constant
inconsistent with all we know about Law.

There was nothing else for it, I swear. She bit her lip,
fi red.

And then this blaze on things.
And then the surprised squeal from things being illuminated,
displayed without their
bits on.

There was pause,
a hideous silence.

I promise you it was because she wanted to exhale,
give back the primal matter,
witness equilibrium: everything nullifying everything
else out, all becoming ether;
nobody getting what they want,
al l appeased with fog-phantoms of near-enough,
homogeneous sublimation.

She told herself it wasn't happening,
that she didn't start the whole thing,
that the arrow of time was something she made up
to get the kids to bed.

I swear to you it wasn't her fault – she was the point at which
infinity found its rest,
the center of a black hole
in which relativity and probability combined peacefully.

I swear to you it was because she made a mistake in this birthing –
it had to be released. She lit the kiln,
temperature off the scale,
watched eternity cease,
the vessel implode.
Apocalypse in the Garden

A day. A forgotten myth day and all this light: new glow on old leaf. The blip of spring, inserting fierce will into every sad gap.

Old Father is anxious, and the Maiden: golden horror. All this anticipation, dangling comfort over the edges, accepting half-breath in the place of utterance. If there is a season in this almostness, name it: pause, fissure. Say, “quashed frost.”

Say what you will, these new bush vines reach towards, only towards – they know what death moves backwards from before to join them here.

This fresh strength of sun, more brawny every year, is fuelled by blank stare, forced eye contact, the last thing you ever want to take in, here at the natural conclusion.
What we do for Survival (Body Chart, Jon Catapan, Newcastle Region Art Gallery)

Green was first when the extant set out to condense itself down. Then cinnabar: capillaries of fire and endlessness, a nest of triangles, symbols of the Three Principles — the Great Heart of some elapsed thing.

The only world we can cope with is this shopping list of perceptions: round bottomed flask, orphic egg, Aurora Australis, lung sack, runes in cubes seeming to square the circle, Tetragrammaton in a cyclic continuum trailing off the canvas, off this Perspex page.

Consciousness is not the only node responding to this inoculation of meaning — the body catches the flame, also. Electrical signals smelt biology and chemistry from shamanism and alchemy, distil human genome research from arcane pixels, coagulate white noise with all this green-black rapid change.

What lies beneath this ladder of coercion is still beneath; scumble-over it as we will, set it free though we may.
Fly Away (Kandinsky at The Met.)

It was not painted for you, thus, don’t explain this inherent linking. Ask it to please leave, yet still some shade remains when you close your lids. You couldn’t be crazed enough to take a photo. Still these dots keep forming everything into nothing, congratulating their potential for raw image and the revision of new light. It is not even Kandinsky’s ink anymore, now it is your own lens and this mistake of staring over and against your fierce internal layering.
Push: Sylvie Guillem & Russell Maliphant

don't dim the lights
for the stroking dark
will smother me also

as light derails
silhouettes remain
to recreate fission

liquid she
while he is
pure chord

so much dissipation in together
as though one more leaning inwards
would shatter the whole thing

explode those jiggling bones
enforce gender collapse
make something somewhere please

the analogy is to raw element but also to
meeting complex self again and again
in and through these others

some grasping after capture
wanting to write out the body
while knowing letters

will not even brush up against
the way dance leans towards
eternity every single time

what can you possibly say
sinew in calico
shadow on screen

constantly switched on to reveal
meat-guts and skin twisting
another idea back on itself
The Tunguska Event

All is observation and experiment.
God is blue and smells of bones
claims one who met with it,
others blame green aliens.

The law of inertia: a moving object
will preserve its velocity and direction
until something influences it
and moves it out of its path.

A fireball hitting Siberia, June 30th 1908,
instead moves forests out of its path,
produces an atmospheric shockwave
that circles the earth. Twice.

In London, ten thousand kilometres away,
for two whole days and nights,
a newspaper can be read at any hour
down any non-lamped lane.

Through the light-adhering abilities of
atmospheric dust, there is no night for days.
What sets us neatly off course then-there,
provides a good mystery to rehash here.

We know well this magic:
mini shockwaves resonate still
in our own air, lungs, heart –
we are now composed of this same dust.

We sense conspiracy: something ten
thousand times worse than the A-Bomb,
perhaps anti-matter anti-exploding,
or Nikolas Telsa shooting some

white flame stolen from a black hole,
through earth, leaving only entry wounds.
No evidence could be gathered, they were too
busy backing war to bother filing phenomena.

Tunguska, 1908, Tsar leaves the peasants,
town, eighty million trees to obliterate,
blame their own blue gods, lie as powdered
bones while the future dreams up green aliens.
The Clearing

Today concerns the clearing of indifference: flight on the horizon, the reaching after it involved, that one sure math required to get us anywhere.

This drive to overcome continues reckoning against the great pause of all intake, the sugar of this golden finch, these grasses slithering with spiders.

And those mountains, beloved, mountains! Undersea, lurking where we will not uncover their mysteries without the necessary history.

Or more special simplicities: things doing and undoing, disguised as raw meat or not, enamoured or disgusted – as I with you, as salt with heat.

To think we used to fear those pavement cracks. Now we prod at them, romantic in volatility, mythic in belligerence.

To think we sat with backs to the incoming comet, eyes squished shut to the flashes in the corners, to the next ice age and the end of our form.

Now we allow just a few clarifying blinks before returning to face Armageddon. Now we reach through the cold, clear circumflex surrounding true sentience, towards the veil that would cut us off, the great gaping hole in the veil the comet creates; now we gather our lost fists together that used to shake at gods.
Gathering (it) Together

A dirt path through ghost gums, shadow-specked.
What is this loop extending out from your neck, pulling forward, along, only to fold you back into your body again?

Whoosh of tiny wings,
brush of heavy skirt,
crunch of sun-baked clay.

Extending, through all things, this endless loop:
entirety of infinite string theories
bifurcating off, gleaning further figure-eights,

returning you to source. You walk. A loop, only visible through this dirt dervish with ghost gums, reaches out, along, only to fold you back in again.
Strangler Fig

Seed dropped from some tarsus, careless.
It is a necessary thing, this taking-over –
sliding into the fork of some poor fortune’s fool.

Elucidate for me this grasping, this clawing towards being,
this reach towards progeny at the cost of the host:
at the cost of any cost. Name it what you will.

Meanwhile, the seed thrives, cradled in the limbs of
the quarry. Gathered tulle roots slither out snake
metamorphosis, as other mythical analogies
extend its magnificence so far up skyward.
Nothing if not breathtaking. In our glancing and gazing,
we forget it receives grandeur through fatal strangulation.

Something in this smacks of ancient daemons we
called up to own us when our brain halves were joined.
A necessary thing, this being taken-over: we miss it.

First symbiosis, then slavery, then the necessary
cyclical sacrifice. Oh to become vessels again,
annihilate atomic structures, empty out. Can we, please?

Imagine digging into my veins, strangler fig,
finding a port for your primitive circulatory system,
adjusting your god-veins to the munificence of my viscera.

Imagine squeezing until I ceased true being,
became a rotted spine inside you: still mostly alive,
if life is the scientific definition we grant it.

Strangler fig, you are raw making and unmaking, before our
very eyes in this speck of rainforest the farms didn’t inhale.
It is as inevitable as the giving out of ribs, this being taken-over.
A Point in Space

things rising up and falling
over the end like a lone
white crane flying the last
brown stick into the final
sky so grey-blue-green
all would swear it was black
in the retellings of afterwards
supposing there were to be
an afterwards

somehow I trip over
thus uncover
the end of the world rope
and it’s not frayed like
previously considered
iniquitous hells or warrior heavens
it is diamond-cut severance
clean and faultless
even when observed under
an electron microscope
not one quark remains

and everything falls
out of the end
choice and chance
the mind
even paradox falls
off the end

it is not blackout or red-flash or
blanched silence
it is end
nothing to colour or be coloured
nothing to give colour a name
it is not even final

I see you there
constantly approaching
contemplating the structures we had
built-up to keep it all
downwind from where it ends
I say the way we thought backwards
keeping ideas of what went on here
safely in the dark of not enough sleep
you say futile
I say speaking of futile

I had been building for myself
for what would have felt like
forever had I not known end
a one out of the two of us
disregarding all other
it was as futile as
waiting for explanation

at the end
no triangles
no two of us
plus one ghost
not even one

I hope you saw then
why I could not comfort you
as you approached the end
as everything fell off of it
as you joined in the falling
as I never could

if there was to be a
recount of these events
if you had come
back from the end
you might have stated
something to soothe
you might have finally
turned to me then
you might have said
Each Line

compare and contrast
reach of a pelican’s neck against
constant comforting green

the stillness inside this road-kill crow
decomposing faster than you are now
from birth falling, dropping out of sky

each last line furthering the former
disregarding ending
racing endlessly towards, towards

grab a stick and say, forest, eden
use it as a warding rod
against the lines you are writing out

suggesting they were in, initially
a dog, perhaps three-headed and
certainly alarmingly large

grows tired of chasing sticks or lines
resumes guarding the door you can’t see
though you sense it, entirely

not allowing
never allowing passage
until passage is all that is allowed

this is merely afternoon
the blurt of blowfly against gauze
those intersecting lines

crossing in, falling over fragments
for the bare brain to bear witness to
begin to seek to name

crow against dog
green against pelican
the drive on things to drop out of sky

in neat or messy lines,
sigh, name themselves
stick or Eden
Cancer

the exact date is
oak leaves in ice
explaining always
disregarding why
it couldn’t possibly
be so still in here

when you want it
grace is oolong tea
bitter, warm – you
recall news backwards
even after wrangled with
a lingering word remains

and these ferns have
died for winter
you’d even prefer
your own miniature
dog to all these
emotional situations

returning to slants
this possible cancer
now quite literal
stitching itself in as though
crumpling into inevitable
would sort it all out

cracked ice on
pond surface
or is it merely
another frozen puddle
this perfect fact
inside all rogue cells
Fission and Fusion

counting backwards from forever
a clock beneath all magma
cleaves to no city’s time zone
considers no adjustment for the glitch of axis

this silent symbolic regulator considers solely
the countless returns of hope
feeds eternity’s frenzy with
the next chaos bifurcation

nuclear physicists click over
our everyman clock
this doomsday clock to
nanoseconds off midnight

through the halls of the Orphic sanctuary
this molten core counter continues to fold
the knowledge of what follows over
the rune of when it all arrived
Wet Stockings

“Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear myself out, I shall never know.” – Roland Barthes

Wet stocking clinging to my legs. Could remind me of the big black vortex wrapped around this one small globe of light, could even refer to my opaque analysis splayed carelessly across your tepid sleepy form in the monsoon morning.

They almost hurt, the cling is so fierce.

Train-air adds a layer of ice to wet. Should’ve planned for this, packed spare tights, an umbrella of arteries for when the wet heart clogs itself with conclusions. Mars could’ve given us neighbours, we wouldn’t feel so drowned,

shivering out here in the great Earth-machine.

Out the window, the other is as impenetrable as the cause that got me here: train air, wet legs, drawn conclusions – the cogs of it all, endlessly colliding. Snack food apocalypse: abandoned paper says there’s an asteroid, waiting at 2012.

I wouldn’t have thought it possible, yet the other is nonplussed if my stockings are wet.
Anaphase. You did ask for it. And now you’re scared because it smacks of chemicals. Beyond tired, Route 66 Roadhouse Café. Since you can’t begin to name the Presidents, what with all the plane radiation and fluros, this may not be wise. There’s no point postulating, time travel does something serious to your bones. It comes to only be about gathering your pre-spindle DNA fragments back together. It comes to only be about sufferance, clutching the airport lounge margarita as if it were a magnetic pole.
Nuclear

In the dead centre of every last atom fragment is always this O-gape hole, void, empty. It's what the final bomb took when it ceased all future. No going back now. All this sheer moving through time has to stop somewhere, can you tell me, light through variegated leaf, X-rayed by star radiation, to what new portal the old light might move? As there is no possible response, let's limit remarks to the weather: a perfect winter day, here in the land with no real cold left. Out here in this garden, air so still one might almost hear the gas exchange: carbon dioxide to oxygen and back again. There are always other elements, some more sinister. Still, so much light and space, puny solar panels give out more oomph than one small abode can handle. It's not so elsewhere, in the dark, cold and ever-clouded winters, we unearth what probably should remain earthed to make the heat-machines motor. We are beyond concern, even if we believe the naysayers, even if we realise a strong apocalypse is good for the plant. No, really, it got rid of the dinosaurs last time, this time it's our own turn. To make way for what, variegated leaf? We got it wrong and now it must be the epoch of the ant. When speaking of testing the (lack of) waters in order to move to Mars, the astrobiologist says she wouldn't want to bring anything back to experiment on she didn't know she could personally kill if it threatened to kill us. Maybe we are dying out to make way for that very Martian thing. Still, the patient sages of SETI listen out, further out than puny Mars, for something perhaps still whispering there, where there really is dark matter and black holes swallow up all the extinctions we can imagine. Perhaps they even belch out new life; it depends how narrowed your eyelids are when you glance at those glorious galaxies, those stunning technicolour nebulae (we coloured them in). Once, forever ago now, 1977, they did hear something out there: a lone frequency, a perhaps-voice. That milli-second glitch. Since then, even when my home computer joins in the search for things even beyond its ken, we still fumble over far too many frequencies. Nothing is ever obvious or contained. How can I write a lyric poem about the micro-needle in the gargantuan multiverse? The sheer size of out there is beyond all possible thought about size in here. We are terrified of all this expansion; we now devote our holy quest to the inwards, to breaking down. With our Large Hadron Collider, we seek the sheer empty of within. Within every final fragment, we dig deeper into beneath, towards the very bowels of interior. There, inside the inside, past what we thought could not be broken down, we think we might find a beginning, which is also our vast outside-end: the future we saw out there. We move outwards, inwards, yet only ever see ourselves, mirrored inside our own vast solitude, encompassing our own immense vacancies with more O-gape hole atomic space.
Fault

And the eye that looks out, this eye, your
eye, is cut by slanted light, slit by winter flowers.
You are caged behind glass, reading – reactor research –
reaching Fukushima, fearing it killing you here,
countries away, though only one continent.
Radiation sounds reminiscent of lost light, that
beatific bride on her day. Please don’t mention the angels.
But you see your own removed tumour, deceptive cabbages,
future babies born with three appendages. Could be extra
heads, cut them off before the sea, the iodinated sea,
makes them more. No, that is a Kerberos myth fragment in your
ancient brain, not nuclear winter. There is nothing to fear
here, surely. Surely you know this, surely some demigod,
politics on fire, would have let you know, personally,
if there was room for fear this day. Yet for so long
the old gods, and even their bastards, have kept
silence like a last star in a box, stooping over it,
grey nomad phone psychics with Perspex crystal balls,
revealing nothing, too old for this game, using their
secrets to curry favour with the alien lords of the new galaxy
they will move on to, but you will not. The old gods
need their secrets to grant safe passage when this big star
spurts its final light seed and finally rots away.
At Fukushima, most were quick to blame those old gods for those
giant waves that broke the technology. Perhaps it was their last
blast before giving us all up and over to oblivion. Yet some are
not so sure. “When you inflict significant change to nature,
nature will eventually get back at you with significant force,”
says a scientist, the rational ones we hope will rule us now the old
gods are leaving for the parallel universe where nuclear technology
is a bad idea some evil priest had eons ago. They realigned him,
went back to singing together and dancing outdoors –
it’s easy to correct faults there, in that parallel world.
Faults, in that place, be they of nature or nurture, can be
set like bones. Here, at Fukushima, in the slightest review, even
considering the gods, faults in the system appear. Faults appear
but of course, they are as natural as air, and as necessary.
We cut twenty-five metres off a thirty-five metre sea cliff so
we didn’t have to lift the seawater; seawater we make use of
because it’s anyone’s to use, too high, to power the power.
In lifting the sea too high, some multizillion dollar machine might
sprain its spine. It was the sixties, some world domination race or
another was on, humans were curious infants and you certainly weren’t
born to be blamed for it. From what you can piece together, it was
all about getting through some awkward phase, the sixties, moving on,
and still remaining at the end. It was about continuing. It was
darker than Gilligan’s Island lets on; there is something so sinister,
sending shiver, even now, in the phrase economic growth, even when
whispered in your mind by a shining image in an instamatic photo album. Those endless albums your nanna had, with the plastic sticky sheets that wrecked the photos in the end. In your more ancient bones, the ones that mapped the world, created money and are always there, here and everywhere, you know this truth like you’ve known nothing else: Fukushima Power Station was built on the grounds of a WWII air base. A colossal one. Nothing needs to be said about kook recipes for what we all comprehend without enquiry. Spaces carry gossamer fate snags, mapped out by the old gods (who are leaving like the elves in Tolkien). Fragments of this knowledge, from those old gods, must remain dormant in your bones even now like radioactive iodine. Nobody mention the half-lives looming over us post-meltdown, please do not say: *sawing twenty five meters off a natural sea cliff is no small thing.* There is oh so much ocean for the isotopes to settle into; more everyday now the great melt is on, and who are we to measure out boundaries for this or any other inconvenience. This far and no further means nothing to nature. This far and no further meant everything to the old gods.
Velocity

“Gustav was released off the Normandy coast and, faced with headwinds of up to 30mph and no sun to guide him on a cloudy day, he flew 150 miles to a pigeon loft in Thorney Island, near Portsmouth, in a journey that lasted five hours and 16 minutes… Gustav was the first of the RAP’s Homing Pigeon Service to bring back news of D-Day to the UK.” – BBC NEWS

And it’s the birds again, their
Gossamer glory hooks tugging our
Eyes up from morning teacups

In the last leaf embers, we had been courting Doom

Yet gaze is raised up to Gustav
Flying WWII out of the Great Chronicle
Against all the God-fury we can imagine
The God-fury he no longer had to imagine
Over ghost ships and sea monsters

His own mass the only anchor: Hooked into sky

Because he had been directed
Because it was a sort of game
Because at the end if it all was a comfortable loft

At the end of our game
Remains the question: “who is best?”
It is not enough to simply regain home

We race on against devolution
Somehow settling the issue
Yet with each subatomic chaos-flux
Best is born again

In the white sky where it is finalised
Examples of endurance are thick as flies:
Gustav with his D-Day daring
And all the ghouls of the air

Here with us, mid-chase, through the not yet deciphered
Here with us, mid-chase, amongst the not quite decided
Here with us, mid-chase, inside the almost terminal

Breathless, we balance our pigeon post
Against one another:
A log chronicling the velocity of our Doom

“Who is best?” remaining our guide,
Residing inside the fracture:
Distance we have travelled to remain here
/
Speed with which we rush to regain home
Porch Light

“How do the angels get to sleep when the Devil leaves the porch light on?” – Tom Waits

1.

If you consulted your own cipher-mind (if what presents as yours could be compressed in such a lazy line), would it encircle this whole ball of string theory or only what lies beneath? Every oceanic floor peak, all those pre-lung beasts that beckon us back, ever back, while we struggle up here in the arc of your earth-wing? It is suffocating under your airs, Old Birdman, we don’t know enough about our own night terrors to ever consider yours. To claim you frighten the children with your silent staring is like naming the midnight ocean mysterious, to sing out your secret symbol through all this typical cataclysm might boil our blood. Still, see you slip and slide out of heaven into the foam pits of human love: more, elevated, other. Exotic, no matter how well disguised, for we blinks of one of your manifold eyes don’t claim to tune into our own timings. There is a connection octave-plinking through this mystical equation, yet this is not another symposium examining the intricacies of angels.

2.

Perhaps some planet put you up to it. You didn’t want so many eyes on your wings: it’s embarrassing, it’s a job. Hard to refigure you without, yet once in the annals of this endless processing, perhaps you were writ down as feather-skin, transitional form. If only we had come down from the birds, we too could be haunted by memory of flight. We did not fling down from the firmament; we squelched up from watery depths, aquatic apes. You are a terraform failure. Fire-sword bearing man-birds could have ruled, yet water monkeys made it through. Your trajectory, defeated, exited earth for heaven. The fall went up. You did not win. We did not rejoice in the progression. This murky wet won’t leave us – even now we are swamp and slime. You: air or light or both, descend on passage-ladders right before our very minds. We grasp hold of the base, steady it with a sick grin. You can at least go back up the way you came down. We can never return; we left our gills on the shore and the tide snatched them back. If we, green with envy or slime, are seeking Return, it is to pond and puddle; yours is to some flaming red aerial heart of everything.
3.

You cut the fancy-free heart right out of us. In the witching hours, when night dervish morphs into night mare, you are stilled, silenced, scribbling and scribing, saving it all up to sing it out later. Some Lizard-God wants to know the electro-magnetic reading of an attempt at meeting. Circling the throne, later and always reporting, you proclaim the heart to be still beating – that pink-to-blue mass, alone in the shadow of all horrors, what can go on between lovers: smashed telephones, shared appliances, night. Watcher, you are never still, you whisper continuum to these moments even as you raise the knife. Left to our own devices, we could be the scribes of our own autopsy, the records of entanglement’s dissection. We could carve up the shared ventricles, the cleft aorta, discover what was never beating to begin with. We could bathe our empty cavity in a plenty-more-fish sea, decide what cut out means, what we will do with the etch-mark-once-heart, what new world our new work will break forth into. But with you here, light bleeds along the wall, the shuddering is of presence and we know – clinging and ejecting aside no matter on whose behalf – we are poppets.

4.

You burst forth as a woman. We thought this soft body too moist to house an angel. Murky spirits aplenty, but pure swords of light? When the Heavenly Grace stabs in, it will leak out through all those holes. To where will it escape? How will we find it all to shove it back in again? We saw those frescos, believed them, for they were birthed out of Holy Father. The Devil with breasts, leaking out everywhere to all sorts: constantly shadow, probably dark matter and other arcane fears of science. We suppose you could be our Mother, angel, you are cold and removed, set in marble. Yet we overlooked you for centuries, you were so far away, and we certainly forgot you could possibly be true, what with all that loft and strength and absence. Isn’t absence of the father? If you were allowed to choose, you might seek woman out because here we seek out our names through pain. You want your own gender angst, a category other to Holy. We won’t tell, we will watch you watching us as you reflect sheen on this Leviathan’s back, drag the frescos towards your breast for spring cleaning, a bath in new light.

5.

Blood. You are out for it, we try to keep it in, at all costs. Blood: The way to tell if we are here or not is whether we can hear it circling. Or not. It’s unlovable, really. It is smelly and of metal and is awfully difficult to remove from cashmere once it all floods out. We are constantly managing it, feeding it, giving it away, taking it all back. It’s essentially a connector, even magnetic. We wonder why you want to exchange pulsating white for toffee apple sticky. We don’t think you would if you really knew what it meant. Blood, Blut or Bloed, might be our earliest word. It has always been there, unforeseeable just like you. Blood is the very opposite of you: intermediary, link, vapid passageway. Blood raises spirits and runs to the sacred places. Blood is in the family. Anything but pallid, blood of an other contains your revenge. You can never have revenge, Watcher. Say we don’t know how lucky we are to own it, say what you will. We are bloody-minded, moving onwards over bones that birthed the whole bloody mess is all we know. Our red warmth runs cold against all your white. We have always been afraid of this.
6.

As the glory pours in and through, even the Throne of the Most High is merely a tube. There are innumerable zillions even in our own brains without considering the external piping we construct to extend the nexus out. To echo the universe, which is one Giant Conduit sucking us all in, out, round and round, we recreate the cylindrical vessel. *Inside the spaces of subatomic nothings, how many cylinders?* We etch on the lining of a brain-tube while cannulas poison to near-death, while lines to arms and throat and heart ensure life persists with a tube no longer viable inside where evolution always requires it. Inserted tubes suck out the pooled blood like pulped prayers. *TV is The tube,* we yearn to recall when thrown out of your tunnel of Graceful Light, yet by that time pain, and not-remembering, are the new profound. The nostril tube floods oxygen, floats brains so far *away* that blood-prayers creep in and add up somewhere outside all tubing: the dark energy inside. Isn’t it enough that you ensure our continuing? That exploding would have burst all persistence even as we received The Annunciation, sipping from a chipped teacup while scrawling the word ‘Grigori’ at the top of the page.

7.

So hard to tell if the birds are mating or fighting. The koalas are attempting both, here in last the pocket protected enough for them to keep at it. We too keep at it: against, always against. It’s not your fault, messenger, yours is to intone the Great Law. The Great Law is Always. We are to blame – bifurcate is all we do down here. Small wonder the axis teeters, unsure of whether to shift or remain safe in stasis. It will break, this is Occam’s Razor. Now, while our hair falls out (it’s the anaesthetic, it’s the morphine), you gibber endlessly, something about the Great Glory, what was *before* until *then.* As our wounds pus and blister, we grow tired of this obfuscated babble. You are doing it deliberately, jiggling these abstractions, these meaning-carrots, before our puny brains. Say what you mean to say, Watcher, is this all? Here? This everymorning dying? Last koalas grunting in blind continuing, whip birds and koels bouncing beckon or warning against the everywhere-everything hills. Clouds so sneaky, when we turn our backs the sky is something else entirely. Light on new leaf, trembling. You gibbering on, some non-direction-everywhere, while our best awe is silence.
Ouija
Walking in (what is it our antennae pick up really do we even have antennae) your legs give you heaps yet you aren’t nervous what with the New England twee preaching and the shoreline public access path closed due to ice. You are kept safe, yet you could never be safe with all these oak china cabinets. But what would you know with legs going loco, as though some soul tugged at them, perhaps a child expecting treats. What you sought to discover was larger but they took the art away because it was all worth too much.

Here you forget he ever died as the giant gold-framed photo in the bat-infested lounge room (they didn’t remove the wallpaper) comes to life and dusts the willowware. Perturbed, you sit down where you should not and are promptly scolded by your watchful guide who is lovely but of course yet tells you that gay men like parlour games as though this could dismiss any otherworlds you might care to conjure up. No, you are imagining things, you can’t be frowned upon, there is too much Botox in this glorious fishing village, it’s all a picture here and besides, in summer shining well-mannered children who aren’t ghosts eat ice-cream with Truman Capote while their genes dream of the glory days they no doubt never had back in ye Olde Englund.
I AM JOHN IS DEAD – with DB

HI AMANDA ME HERE. And you remember that wandering self you were at twenty. Jumping a train to the middle, just so you could say you’d been there. The middle was burnt eyelids, glue-stench, flies flies flies and most other things you might say you hated, if asked. The endless red, though, was something else.

NO LIGHT I AM SORRY. So he had died, then. If anyone could haunt you all these years post the advent of himself to you, I Am John would.

I AM SORRY GAME IS MEAN. You met the symbol known as I Am John because he floated up to you on the smelly train to Broken Hill. He had that ballet walk, even amongst the rickety sway of The Indian Pacific. You were willing to get off wherever the train stopped next, he’d bet a bunch of Lebanese boys that he could woo you before midnight. He’d noticed you sitting there alone with that onyx stone wrapped around your neck and that stupid hairdo: shaved, bar the one dreadlock with bells. He saw you scribbling away, copying excerpts out of some Theosophist text. You allowed him to kiss you for laughs, but only on the cheek.

EDUCATE YOU ENJOY AMANDA. You never found out how much money he made on that exchange. Half of it was rightly yours, but in the end, you lent him three hundred so he could get back to the coast. His gig as the Alice Springs horse-whisperer had fallen through because his boss treated man and beast too rough for anyone’s business. The horses out there were beyond repair. And besides, the boss had a hole cut into the wall so that he could perve on the Swedish backpackers who stayed on his property, working for nothing. He showed I Am John this constructed peep show of no consent so I Am John might amuse himself at his leisure. I Am John quit that very day instead. And you left town with him. The boss threw two bottles of water at you as you walked away. People die out here, you know, the boss yelled to your retreating backs. The interior is too strong for you weak fucks, stay outside, cling to your safe green fringe, was what he meant.

I AM JOHN HAS DIED. Turns out the boss’ prophecy may have proved true but for the Zen truckie. To backtrack, you and I Am John had been sitting in the desert for hours in the middle of the day and not one giant air-conditioned SUV had seen you for dust. It was getting warm. The elders in the open-tray ute noticed, though, they picked you up with: “what are youse mob doing out here?” No answer required. You sat in the back with the dogs, who seemed composed of hard salt, but were gloriously saccharine. When you finally stopped for fuel, a scorpion sat on your bare foot, again without biting, and then the owner of the servo pulled a gun on I Am John and thus on you.

NO SAY IN IT. You’d only travelled with him for two weeks or so; you didn’t even know why you were deep in the preserved heart of the burnt-out land you never could quite identify with. You felt so useless in all your white. It was a real hell of a place, there in the centre; so when that craggy flannel shirt in that dirt town thought to shoot you because you and I Am John had hitched a ride with those Koori elders, it was almost blasé or expected. Flannel shirt didn’t like any of their mob, man or dog, so he didn’t like you. In the end, after the shotgun was tucked away under veiled threats, and the elders had motored back to their homeland with gas but no groceries for the week, you were rescued by the road train truckie who was all astrology, Zen and Aikido. He had a few planets in Gemini and immediately warmed to you. He had been doing some work on himself. In his road train

FORGIVE ME. And then you bumped into I Am John again at that party in the mountains, years later. Though he was at least forty years older than you, he was terribly drunk so you were therefore older than him and all that was left was a half-conversation about of all things what you were wearing. He didn’t like it. Then his wife, who really was a witch, flew towards you, ranting that you must have had an affair, out there in the desert, she just knew these things, and you felt so guilty about all your messed-up flings thus far in your young life you almost confessed the lie just to atone for something else you probably did or meant to do one other time with someone else entirely.

MAN HAD CHARM. Ouija board, could that library of stories really be dead? Surely such tall tales never really end. Once he was plain or anything but plain John Tsakiris from the Ballet Rambert and leapt over pianos with Baryshnikov. Baryshnikov called him ‘kangaroo’ with that Russian accent. John Tsakiris got his new name from ascended masters and once the Queen of England’s sister had invited him home after a show in London: wink-wink. Then there was the time he met David Bowie, all curled up on a couch at a party, drug-paranoid. Bowie told I Am John that he had given up and was thus dead. I Am John told Bowie to take the name The Thin White Duke instead. So Bowie did. You told I Am John you were only travelling to the red centre because you’d lost yours. You’d given up on ballet, and were ready to rescind so much more. You wanted to be as void and unobtrusive as salt bush. I Am John told you to shove your vague ideals and get back to the coast and out onto the stage. Eventually, you did.
DIONYSIUS – with DB

I DIONYSIUS. DB read somewhere unsavoury that the sad little elementals trapped in this world plane pretend to be the Great Dead Gods of the canon to hook us in. It works.

TRUST NOT. Granted, but we are suckers for it. We trust you enough to allow you in,

KNEEL AWE AWE. And in a sense we worship you still.

AMNESIA GATE. The immediate association is to Plato’s plains of forgetting. Yes, and to those dying-gods of the seasons, cycling through it all again, jumping back through the veil, obliterating the last death.

AM NOT AS ANGEL. We figured, though we must confess we sought an angel – so lofty, so golden, so difficult to tether to the board, apparently.

MEANING AM NOT AGAIN MAN. Yes, for man is never quite enough.

NO VEGAN TAIN. And the animal is as obligatory as the moon.
JESUS – with DB

JESUS (YES) GOD JESUS. And, with all our family histories, we are silenced.


SUN JESUS IS WELL. But I would acquaint you more with some sort of moon deity, Lord: death, underworlds, as you said, water. And that other illicit thing.

I GIVE WELLNESS. U HAVE. Back to Ravenna and Dante’s tomb with the fish inside, secreted behind the altar.

TEACH YOU I WILL. Oh to be ready to be taught! Wishing our brains were big enough for the eons.

U WIN TIME. It doesn’t feel that way, but the way I can almost physically relive the Ravenna of ten years ago in an instant suggests you might be right.

WE TAKE YESTERDAY. The cosmos eats up another white dwarf.

LATE U VIEW KARMA. We know we know we know: that chant you learnt at a sacred drumming workshop and its paradoxical truths.

SIGH VAST VAST. Recall that feeling of connection to the far reaches of the milky way.

WILL MAKE HEAD SPIN WHEN U WITNESS THIS. Like staring at the roof of the baptismal basilica thinking about the double spiral of the old gods into the new.

I GET U V WELL. WILL YOU WORK WITH ME. We hesitate and utter “sure,” though we are unsure.

VICTORY IS MINE. WE GO NOW.
RAZIEL – with DB

RAZIEL. Ah, the angel who gave Adam and Eve that book with the god-names in it that meant they had to go eat of that tree and now look at us etc.

DANCE. The chaos loops of the Cosmos all bifurcating off and threading back through each other like Victorian debutantes.

NO BAD ACTION PRODUCED FAE AFTER A FOE AROSE. Turns out I had been thinking about Irish mythology all that day long. And what are faeries, really, but our blink-of-light ancestors. No blame.

NO CARE ABOUT EACH ASPECT OF AEONS. Yet I try to hold perspective in my hand like a sorry-ass prospector holds fool's gold in a pan. Just to look at it for a moment, just to see what it is I’m missing.

NO DARKNESS. Does that mean there’s no light there either, at the end? Or could we finally have done with dualism? I want at least seven alternatives for every one thing, angel.

I AM NEAR NOTHING NO PEOPLE I AM NOTHING. Possibly that very sentiment is what we all wish for, there at the end.

CAN MAKE A GOD. That day I had picked up a pinecone off the ground and really looked at it. I think I saw you making a god there inside, angel.

A GAME AMANDA. You mean this Ouija board? That’s not what I’ve been told.

NEAR A GOD A GOD A GOD. A triple God/dess? The sacred moves in triangles.

A GOD OR DENSE AGE AMON RA. Amon Ra created himself alone. Out of himself alone, or so they say.

FA SO LA TE DO. Swiss nuns teaching children to sing. When the final note of the scale that births the universe sounds, Angel Raziel, what then?

DON'T CATCH AIDS. And so I ask if you are James Merrill after all, elemental masquerading as the angel Raziel, and you answer: “YES.” I put the board away.
Follies
Follies

You know they desire a writing-out. They want their voices back. And they choose to dictate to the eternal plenum through your constant hovering-over-page. In the midst of this cacophony of the disembodied, you can barely make out the pathway of ink, the direction it begs after, the terrible meaning. Lines meandering across the page-stage like sultans or pelicans, worn out by the drive to give voice, give text. As though a word now could return to us those wraiths, the Nameless-Beauties of the Ziegfeld Follies. Clear, clean and perky: fifteen pairs of nineteen-year-old thighs expounding a chord in an Albinoni concerto. Nothing has ever been so sparkling, nor so very on cue. No doubt they were alien robots.

No doubt they are controlling your mind right now, desperate in their desire. They want you to give them back their names, those long-dead, bony beauties. Concertina back then, to that now: 1922, 1931 or what have you, it’s all happening at once. Time is a dot outside a blank that goes forever, and you are on it, as are they. Go there and go through the bust-waist-hip ratio, the breast-bounce check. Rid yourself of those grey eyes, they are too intelligent. Say you are just on nineteen, be truly seventeen and an anatomy flash-card. Here is your clavicle, there is your pelvic bone: see your glutimus maximus muscles clench. In another shade of the time-dot, not this one, not that, but certainly another, you are dead on a slab, undergoing autopsy – think of that as they prod your stomach, check your teeth, measure you out for their tableau. Fit you with a ridiculous feather hat.

And now that you have returned to your own smudge on the time-dot, you realise you did not catch their names. They did not seem to have names back then. They will be angry, now, those alien robots. No doubt their voices have blown across time to tell you that they still exist in a bunker somewhere in a desert in America, switches permanently on ‘Off’. Rescue them here through words, and you can all you flap off into 1931, especially with those kilometre-high hats. They are really feather crowns. You know you always wanted one. Surely your form will crest and curve and those blonde eyelashes will darken with each flickering bat. Your wage will be easily three times that of a Regular Office Lady. There is a Law in your ancestral female femur, etched in during some emancipating Great War or other, which states you ought to flaunt it. No doubt the Ziegfeld Follies robot aliens agree.
Contact Juggler

Balanced on his shoulder like an extra atom, the ball is mirror is sea is your own mind. Please don’t mention the emotional life. Even if you are on the outer surface of all of this inner poise, you are not so bad as the ball, the extra atom that nobody really bothered to make room for though they balance it there, though they remain abreast of it. There is no time for keeping still in all this avoiding the fall.

Even if you are the ball and the ball is not an extra atom, but is anti-atom, dark matter black hole – even this – still you must benefit from all this sucking it in, the great absorption of light. And, even better, through your quest towards down and off, you are necessary to keep the shining host where he is: onwards and upwards in mastery over gravity.

This is unlikely salvation, this exploration of the pretty parts of horizontal defiance. This is the contact juggler, the volatile element, on stage with that extra atom, circling the outer shell of skin, begging for ionic bonding, balancing immediacy over contraction.
Glass-Eater

It’s killing you slowly but you don’t mind. It’s for the laughs or the money or the gasps or the tears or the squinting or the looking away. Sometimes the punters even leave the room – like that time you hung an iron off your nipple piercing. Too much, but that was the merest wince of body bombastic compared to the gawp of glass-eating. Perhaps you are secretly desperate for disembodiment after all. The crunch as it grinds around your gums is nails on blackboards. And I feed it to you under lights without question because you asked me to. Sometimes it’s all miked up, as if happening were not enough, amplification adheres it to our adrenals. If the Fakirs had kept their mouths shut, if some long-held thought about God wasn’t of an all-consuming grunt minus a body, if bodies were diamond, not her poor cousin carbon, this would be nothing. But even on a soft-lit stage with a cloaked smile, you are thin membranes and soft walls and squishy organs and if it doesn’t get you today, there’s always tomorrow’s X-ray.
The Suspender

And for that matter, why critique this? What is blasé enough to merely mention backstage might fill up this page: pre-show filler, the girl with the Golden Gaytime and where it inevitably ends up while another dripping treat is fed messily to an audience member. You are ready early, watching from the wings – stage right – wondering what symbols might fall from the flakes of nut and cocoa and milk. The empowered stickiness of it all.

After this, it’s best not to stare endlessly at the next act’s fake vagina, stuck, half on half off: a flapping, awkward appendage one minute before curtain. Another performer kneels between long legs, under the fake flesh suit, attempting desperately to safety-pin it back to semblance: fumble fingers in the Most Holy place. You are probably thinking something like: it’s only a paper moon. And if gender could be removed and replaced, which would you choose.

By the second half, near the time you are due to take your cue, hanging an anvil off a scrotum feels like a D.I.Y. project for some suburban Saturday garden brunch. That is, until the suspender in the act before you rips open his calf muscle while hanging upside down from a Crucifix by a meat hook through his leg. The tearing sound, the slick thud of form against stage, the clash of light waves colliding as they create the next hologram.

The stage manager discretely whispers close the curtains, clean it up for heaven’s sake, make sure the next act doesn’t slip on all that. That next act is you. Why did he have to mention heaven, bringing to mind once again Christ, and if the idea of that death is accurate, what did it feel like towards the end when the adrenaline wore thin: God? Backstage, adrenaline comes undone and you see the face of only human gods in the blanched expression of the fallen artist. The stage hand whistles low, sighs. God throws him a bucket of disinfectant. You walk onto the stage.
Angel of the Neo-Burlesque

Twigs and leaves going their separate ways like your brain against your mind: the great unfolding of matter from spirit.

What you are composed of – what is fundamentally unknown – will also one day leave this place, grow nearer to some elsewhere. You (the fundamental unknown) may even get there eventually, so you are told when they deign to tell the angels anything.

Moral philosophy? Of course you were lost to it! The ocean was just outside and there were mountains, inconceivable alps, kilometres beneath the surface, kilometres high. Best not to imagine the under-sea breadth of Sedna’s smile or you’ll end up inside it. Furthermore, her hidden fires, there, under the sea where magma meets the ocean deeps. Of course you had to don pasties, a diamante G-string and leap from the window, wings akimbo.

The soul must be wedded to the flesh. There is only this. You leapt.

Even now, you still peel gauze from your fingers, shards from the secret scars you gained as you charged through the glass. Even now, you (fundamentally unknown) pluck air and light from the sides of your eyes. Here in deep-sea, a shimmy is a sort of knowing, unfolding.
54 Working Murderers
- For Major Barney, Newcastle Nobby’s Breakwall, c1836.

“This Major George Barney - resident civil engineer in charge of the Nobby’s Breakwater project and a gang of 54 working murderers and hardened thieves - is hosting high tea for the Catholic Church on the lawn behind the Commandants Cottage. Abutting the copse a temporary platform has been erected and the town’s finest string quartet are providing for entertainment. As the strings shrill and the players toil beneath tight collars, the sponge cake sweats in the afternoon heat....” – Bulletin, 1836

This would be a lot easier if you weren’t stuck forever between one point and another. If it weren’t for God’s endless chronology, you could be prised out, you could be given over to the now. You were at the colony to build the break-wall, but society ladies came first. Each gluon in this dot on what your lizard brain back then saw as a line but which we know now is really a broken hologram – history – displays the totality of the whole: Fifty working murderers and four hardened thieves, fifty Catholic ladies and four highly-strung instruments, all splayed through each slice, balancing each other out on the cosmic weighing machine. You probably don’t even want this scene God thrust upon you: a shard of sponge cake, sweating in the sun. You eat it anyway, as we consume you - 1840, or perhaps today, it’s difficult to differentiate in all this space-time quantum fielding. Your tastebuds expound the now rancid cream to your synapses, which pass the dire message like Chinese Whispers through neurotransmitters to your cerebral cortex but by then it is too late, Mrs Smith is asking what you think of her recipe. You may have never even met a Chinaman, let alone teased them over their mixed-up whispers, yet they are here already, near where we last imagined you, digging for gold dust, just around a corner somewhere. Mrs Smith casually mentions that the sweating sponge won first prize at the Parish Fair. You nod, but when she excuses herself it is spat out amongst the middens, against the bones of those you trespass across all summer long. The quartet covers over the clank of steel collars against chain. What is the ratio of cake to convict transpiration? Society ladies don’t sweat, even when shipped from Brighton to Bloody Hell. The bones beneath no longer sweat. We still have lizard brains now, some seven score and more years later. For all their innovation, they can’t begin to dream up this scene you didn’t even want, the one God thrust out of the chronology, into the cortex of us all.
design

“The world is a corpse-eater” – Gospel of Phillip

hesitant mauve against final cause red. jacaranda bows to the flame tree. sea hawk powers past. dog moans somewhere distant. dry wind cuts through dead snake grass. the cosmological decisiveness acquiesces to give you a seat in the scene. instead you rise.

you rise. too tardy for proper courtesy. introduce terms like teleological uncertainty to the morning. feel bad about it. continue on regardless. whims like intelligent design seep from the landscape. you roll your eyes. thread your toes through the pre-crushed petals. bleed more red. mauve deserves to be ignored. too reminiscent of society ladies.

camphor laurels are society ladies. they loom out there. nodding heads at fashionable dinners. chickens bob about in their run. they have not had breakfast. you have not had breakfast nor have you kissed your lover’s forehead for days. the ocean you can barely see is out there anyway. constantly gobbling up shore. discretely so you barely notice. it is edging closer.

every day I realise we’ve left it too late to get it back, but then I work like a bitch to get it back. speaks a bush regeneration agent in the new day air. but you are scribbling. too busy for Sisyphus. lines turn into letters turn into denials you will never send. lack denotes longing. admission of longing assumes a fault somewhere. fault leads itself right down the garden path to blame.

there are billions upon billions of parallel worlds reclining just through that mauve and red. bathing just beyond that powdered baby blue and new leaf green. colours are veils. there are other worlds. just there on that other side. just get to them. just go. just get to one.
**summer storm**

isn’t it 3.46am and aren’t you standing in a storm-filled caravan. dancing to blondie with the symbols inside you somewhere, just under the skin. and didn’t you at age twelve decide you knew where the blueprints to the right religion were. you simply had to imprint the inside surface of your skin out with carbon paper to get them. and then do it again and keep doing it until you understood. but eventually you would know. probably by age eighteen. well and truly by now. by now you would most likely be dead. you could still die right here right now in your annex. they put out the evacuation order and you don’t have an operational phone. here with storm shakes and tree rattles. also steam and flame and other electric states you can’t touch or even name the physical reaction to produce. not to mention that pause in the continuum all storms make. that glitch that keeps you remaining. here at 3.47am with all the copying instruments you need but no clue how to turn them on. or how to get them inside you. and still after all these years you fear you might rip your own spine out and sew it onto a leotard like sequins so they can all see right through the glamour to the blueprint inside.
and it’s not like you have some other place to be. tea, open fire place, open fire on some
other space for avoidance. it’s not like you are this ashes urn, portable picnic for later
holocausts. or this charred log. you aren’t even the small burning before the final ash out.
most other people come here to support themselves in whatever horror seems most
appropriate in which ever day dream. of theirs. this day. why not you. this time. possibly
they realise you won’t tip well even though lord knows desmond tutu ate here just last
week. exclusivity should equal your absence. it’s not as though anyone can shape this
differently to how they were born to shape it. there are no other tools, no contrasting
fashions, no further instructions. what does equality really signify in any case. an afternoon
of missing your morning of the subsequent day means little here. sunlight so new and
distant, almost reaching the sand inlet out the window before these clouds join forces to
obfuscate it altogether.
sky

like finally seeing the sky. not seeing yourself thinking of the sky, but just the sky. blank sky, but for all of this. if I read more critical theory can I possibly paraphrase or will it do nothing but kill this beautiful night. here, where we really are standing, fire clings to the object that is being consumed, and thus is bright. what is consumed. what is oxidised. what is being-for-death. what is re-arranged re-arranges us as we partake in shades. in segments. in the trace. for the seeing being life is a meaningful life. big with the world above the artist speaks. we are nothing but sky. look up. out. finally see 2am.
night park

is there a tent of radiance to erect over this, a plastic bubble to lock in the child-smiles of day, block out the bad-lights, stark night. what if we begin to imagine what goes on here when the last swing surrenders to witching. sure, there is lamp-light. why does this evoke short, sharp, suppressed second-breaths. there is no live human presence left here to recount the tale, so why bother writing it in your mind. we know. this bench will not refuse to sing its sordid secrets, no matter what surveillance methods we pretend to use to pry them out. the community comprehends what really takes place in this public play space. when the lights go out, we shut our blinds to the myth, while the creek we really did name styx crouches in wait. a silent witness.
Senescence

“In modern scientific enquiry, the origin and nature of consciousness has yet to be fully understood; any... view about the existence or non-existence of consciousness after death therefore remains speculative.” - Wikipedia

Probably I wake up and it is that first pause again: we are bold, glorious, probably made up of all these airs and swallowed dusts, only everything knows how beautiful – and still we do not die. How, as a child, I loved the sound of the word death more than the sound of life. Annunciating cessation: so exponential, the way the hiss comes in at the end. If it is too crass to compare the resounding resonance to exhaled breath, I will write: the gift of pushing air out with the tongue. The gift of hiss. The hum of life, so flat and nasal-encumbered, while death is an upturned moon in the day-sky: never quite realised, a brush of unseen wing, our only secret. This early love of exponentials adhered the hiss of death to that virulent liquid coursing cushions between my brain and skull: the first sac where the last truth lies. That miracle: that I have not as yet died, though I have loved the sound of the word.
The Gaps

The text has holes in it, little keyholes for the sake of myth-making, and only the one stargazing out can (im)possibly slip into them. There is a crucial adjustment when “how can I exist?” turns into “how can I be alive in this?” Suddenly those roundabout machines we built to keep ourselves way out of critical theory converge in the centre, provoking and awakening an idea of onwards-and-upwards. This sensation is momentary.

Even if I say to you “you are this if this is life” it won’t matter and we will continue into cake at 3pm, our bodies refusing forever. Even if I sew in to my own skin the text: I will continue this remaining, the stitches will only remain, like me, until they don’t anymore. And we’ll need them to stay there forever.

To perform becomes the central verb. Like the encroaching of the sea, we now perform this abeyance as though this temporary pause to consider could be stitched into skin, as though that very same skin could push its way through all the gaps the text could (im)possibly hold. As though, at the end, that same stinking vellum could be stretched over contingency like a disappearance-blanket. As though we could then hide away under it, remain in this word: love.
James Merrill House and the Angels Inside: Voice as Cosmology
James Merrill House and the Angels Inside: Voice as Cosmology

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Section One

Wherefore

a grave, deliberate
Glissando of the cup towards the rainbow’s end:

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

DJ. What’s all this?

JM. Looks like the alphabet.

Gabr. THE NEW MATERIALS, YOUNG POET, FOR A NEW FAITH:
ITS ARCHITECTURE, THE FLAT WHITE PRINTED PAGE
TO WHICH WILL COME WISER WORSHIPPERS IN TIME

(Merrill, The Changing Light 446)

Figure 1: The Tower

Like some piece of technicolour cover-art from a 1950’s mystery novel, James Merrill’s Stonington apartment loomed in the background as I stepped out of the gutter-snow and onto the street. I was wearing a bright red coat; the apartment matched the slate-blue winter sky. From the outside, the poet’s house felt as prissy and twee as
everything else in this tiny—dare I say quaint, fishing village. The crab chowder I’d just consumed in the café three doors down had been hearty and yet watered down to perfection: not too flavoured, not too flashy, yet rich—an echo of the village values. Once inside the tower house, however, Merrill’s still-pervading spirit unfurled its colourful stripes with candour. The experience of standing in Merrill’s house was hyper, bizarre, other. The apartment could never have been real, what with all the separation of units—the oceans and time between me-now and him-then. It couldn’t possibly have been standing as he left it: preserved like some mausoleum-museum nobody ever visited, stilled and silenced since Merrill had died in 1995. As an Australian poet and research student with no real connection to any American poetry canon, it seemed almost blasphemous that I should walk amongst the ornaments, touching the faded chairs where JM and DJ once played with the dead.

I discovered the James Merrill House in stages. Prior to arriving at his house, I had never read any biographical material concerning Merrill, yet through my reading of his often veiled autobiographical poetry, I already felt like I had an ancient, secret knowledge of his living space. The epic long-poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* unfolds its secret titbits of personal information slightly, almost sideways. Merrill’s revealing of his home throughout the long-poem is controlled, yet the subtext is wild, like deliberate whispers in the night. The snippets of the poem that evoked Merrill’s domestic abode always felt to me like a quiet rumour, shared just between friends. While I was now physically leaving my footsteps behind in the sidewalk snow outside the Water Street house, I had already arrived inside many times in my thoughts, while reading *The Changing Light*.

Wandering about inside James Merrill House and photographing his personal flotsam and jetsam, I knew I really shouldn’t be so familiar with the space. In fact, when I
sat myself down on a cane chair in the tower room, my guide very politely asked me to stand up. Perhaps I was too at home in the tower room, the one “the newly dead” Wallace Stevens would mistake as an “alcove in the Baptist church” (Merrill, *CLS* 5), yet here I was and there it was, out of the poem and in to the actual—not so ecclesiastical—encompassing me. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* asks, “is there one among us who has not spent romantic moments in the tower of a book he has read?” (25), and I admit I had often become adrift inside the looming fortress’ “unforgettable intimacy” (24) while reading *The Changing Light*. Perhaps it wasn’t the outrageous cosmological claims of the long-poem, but instead Merrill’s intimate descriptions of his home and domestic life, scattered throughout its pages, that drove me to investigate the poem further. I had unwittingly spent what must amount to days (it’s a rather long long-poem) dreaming myself inside this curious New England home, envisioning sitting down with the poet and an Ouija board under the “pressed tin dome” (Merrill, *CLS* 5). So many of the poem’s secrets were unfolded at the round table in the tower room of the “old eyesore” with its “witty shade” of paint: “now watermelon, now sunburn” (Merrill, *CLS* 5). I can now attest to the fact that the colour of the walls in the dining room is quite beautiful, if garish. When I finally found myself sitting inside the Water Street apartment in Stonington, CT, on the other side of the world, in a winter more cold than I could imagine, I knew the place like a familiar character from a favourite novel, or a favourite Aunt—someone with whom I regularly had tea and cake on a Sunday afternoon.

Sitting at my desk in Newcastle, NSW, a couple of weeks prior to my visit to the US, fifteen years after James Merrill’s death and thirty years since the publication of *The Changing Light* (it was completed not long after I was born), I wasn’t sure why I was reading the frustrating long-poem. What I needed at the time was to ground my own poetry in image, to centre my wandering, almost cosmological, expansive poetics safely inside the
boundary fence of the simple lyric. While somebody might have once mentioned Merrill’s book in reference to my (albeit eclectic) more serious studies, I most likely came across it myself in some quasi-scientific/religious book on angels or black holes or both (the title of which I conveniently can’t remember, no doubt out of embarrassment). An endlessly contradictory epic that encompasses five hundred and sixty odd pages, *The Changing Light* comes on like an occultist apocalypse in which Merrill converses via an Ouija board with the dead, with fallen angels, archangels, and even God Biology himself. Merrill, it is revealed, is writing (or transcribing) the epic because it is his “V-work” (161)—a sort of life calling, to do so: to create this farrago that the fallen angels refer to as “POEMS OF SCIENCE” (109). He is divinely, it appears, called on to share his findings (which amount to the heavenly beings’ previous and future plans for humanity) with the literary-minded poetry readers of the future (yes, I am also thinking of the Raelians or the sci-fi religion of Hubbard). Even to my ready to believe in anything mind, *The Changing Light*’s prophetic intention came on a bit too strong. Although I, too, have a whimsical prophet-poet inside me, Merrill’s reluctant role in the salvation of the universe was almost too much. At first, I took it to be a dramatic feint, a hyper-reality coated farce. And perhaps it was.

While it is best to heed Timothy Materer’s warning when he writes “Is *The Changing Light* trilogy an epic, mock epic, or anti-epic? Applying any critical category to Merrill is dangerous” (*Apocalypse* 2), for the purposes of this exegesis, I can’t escape trying. The long-poem, apparently dictated by the many voices of the dead and other spirits, contains a multi-layered eschatological worldview centred on the threat housed inside the atom; and a salvation that may or may not (the chief spirit, God Biology, seems ready to give up at any moment) come from a type of elitist genetic engineering, or soul-cloning, scheme. The reader might logically assume that the epic’s tone simply *has* to be largely tongue in cheek, and certainly driven by a large grain of salt. Poetry written in the first person can provide a
perfect theatrical space for farce and theatricality—inside the assumed truth lies an apt arena for invention. Almost immediately upon reading *The Changing Light*, many continuity issues within the poem’s doctrine (messily outlined, stated forthrightly and then taken back pages later) become overwhelming. Still, this often paradoxical, sometimes confusing epic somehow managed to lock on to my bones, drawing me in, just as I was trying to avoid hearing its haunting call. This long-poem, even with its bat-angels and Unice the unicorn, in the style of a Gnostic, theosophist, or even Alistair Crowley-inspired holy text, seems to believe in itself, thus inviting one to believe in it. While I was attempting to ground my own ephemeral poetry in simple description and image, Merrill’s apocalyptic, spirit-dictated fission of air and light was pulling me back to familiar territory: that almost-millennial, certainly playful, almost pop-cultural—certainly pop-scientific—miasma from which I was attempting to distance my own poetry/self.
To give an idea of just a few of the difficulties to be faced when reading *The Changing Light*, both the physical appearance of the text and the multifaceted layers of voice need to be discussed. *The Changing Light* is a fusion of poetic asides and direct Ouija board dictates jotted down by James Merrill (the SCRIBE), but pointed out by David Jackson (the HAND), who acted as a channel for the multifarious voices of the Ouija board spirit world. The long-poem is presented as being derived from actual messages received from the spirit world, and initially that means the dead, including the very famous dead (from Akhenaton to Gertrude Stein). These spirits often dictate direct messages, while at other times Merrill works his poetic magic over the transmissions in order to make them more palatable. As the work progresses various heavenly and/or hellish spirits, and even a god whose name is Biology, and his counterpart Nature, also chime in and direct (via the archangels) a series of lessons about the progressions of the universe and the history of humanity.
The Changing Light is presented as a trilogy (made up of three increasingly opaque books of poetry) with a coda at the end. The first book, The Book of Ephraim, was begun in the 1950s but published in 1976 as part of Merrill’s collection Divine Comedies. The second volume of the series, Mirabell: Books of Number, quickly followed the first and was published in 1978. The third instalment, Scripts For the Pageant, arrived in 1980 and the trilogy was finally collected together (along with the coda The Higher Keys) in 1982 as The Changing Light at Sandover. The epic long-poem was adapted into a screenplay in 1990 for the film Voices from Sandover at the prompting of Merrill’s intense fan (and lover at that time) Peter Hooten; but as far as I can tell, most serious critics prefer to pretend that this never happened. I found it impossible to access a copy of the VCR tape made of the play, though I can see that from stills found on Roger Bourland’s blog (http://rogerbourland.com/2010/09/11/finding-voices-from-sandover) it was a poor, effects driven affair. The latest, most beautiful edition of the (print) long-poem, the one I purchased at a glamorous bookstore in Greenwich, CT, contains also the script for the controversial film Voices from Sandover, following the coda at the end of the trilogy; so I suppose it is now a five book masterpiece: that is, a prolific pentalogy. It seems this already insanely long long-poem just never stops growing in length, even post Merrill’s death, and its mysterious expansion is just one of its many endearing quirks.

As the all-encompassing thematic concerns of the heavenly beings progress through the long-poem, the otherworldly message is extracted via increasingly frenzied (that is, involving less deliberate poetry and more immediate Ouija transcript) instalments of dialogue with the disembodied. The progression is only natural, since the souls contacted via the board are undergoing an evolution also, beginning with “the myriads/ Who hardly understand, through the compulsive/ Reliving of their deaths, that they have died” (Merrill 6); then moving on to a superior dead human, Ephraim, who lived at the
time of Caligula and who is now a spirit guide willing to instruct DJ and JM on the intricacies of the afterlife. During *The Book of Ephraim* DJ and JM contact dead poets, friends, and other famous personalities; then, during *Mirabell* and *Scripts*, up the heavenly ladder they ascend, speaking firstly to fallen angels (especially their bat-peacock fallen angel guide Mirabell), and then to archangels and finally on to God Biology and Nature, the twin rulers of the known universe. In true teleological fashion there is a *beyond* beyond those gods, but that is only hinted at, in a frightening fashion, when God B. (where the buck, perhaps rightly, should stop) says:

HERS HEAR ME I AND MINE SURVIVE SIGNAL
ME DO YOU WELL I ALONE IN MY NIGHT
HOLD IT BACK BROTHERS I AND MINE (Merrill, *CLS* 517)

What the terrifying “IT” that needs to be kept at bay is we may never know (most likely, considering further thematic concerns, I would hazard a guess that it’s a type of dark energy/nuclear threat existing outside of all godhead), but we certainly know that *The Changing Light* has, since its very first instalment, prompted much quizzical literary criticism due to its bizarre alleged origins and obtuse cosmology, not to mention the dubious parlour-game method of transcription or transmission. If James Merrill, an already established American poet, hadn’t penned this multi-layered millennial poem, I wonder whether the miraculous mishmash would have ever made it to the prestigious Knopf printing press.

The most compelling aspect of this trilogy overall (speaking in very general terms about a work that is so contrasting and dissimilar to itself within itself) is the surreal language employed throughout. The angels, shades and bats employ a type of free-verse,
which utilises what we might now name ‘text-speak’—that is, it is narrated in capitals, with vowels left out for the sake of speedy transmission when convenient. James Merrill’s ‘own’ voice, like that of his partner David Jackson, is presented in lower case and ranges in scope from the easy vernacular to quite formal language, often utilising a variety of formal poetic forms (Merrill) and theatrical interjections (Jackson). The dead, in direct contrast to the more elevated spirits, are generally stuck inside plain old iambic pentameter. Throughout *The Changing Light*, by stepping back, in a sense, from the construction of his own poetry, Merrill seems to be engaged in a process that might lead rather to the creation of a linguistic framework. When Merrill is crafting, he is piecing together what he referred to in an interview with J.D. McClatchy as the “drunken lines of capitals lurching across a page, gibberish until they are divided into words and sentences,” which would come out at “five hundred to six hundred words an hour. Better than gasoline” (Merrill, *Prose* 107). The spectres blurt a constant stream of gabble, and Merrill then digs up the bones and writes out the marrow of the messages. In *The Changing Light*, through the use of the ghostly capitals of Ouija-speak, mixed in with such formal, often verging on stiff, poetic asides, Merrill seems to be distilling words into alphabet symbols, or is at least playing with the building blocks of language and form to the extent of new meanings. In his 1989 essay on the epic long-poem: “The Metaphysics of Postmodern Death,” Philip Kuberski claims that Merrill has created “an original and revealed metaphysics founded precisely on the act of writing,” containing “revelations that are found within the very annunciation of the alphabet” (242). The process of crafting the floating, ephemeral, disembodied capitals of the spirits, mixed in with the very contained, distilled formal poetry of Merrill’s asides and reflections, creates an undeniable alchemy. This alchemical transforming of language is what, during my continued reading, began to grab my interest, to hook on to my own poesis, dragging me in, towards its siren song.
Like any writer wishing to be a poet, or at least to write what is generally considered to be poetry, from time to time, I’ve often thought about where the words might actually come from. The answer should be fairly straightforward (my own brain) and yet, as centuries of poetry theory has attempted to expound, it certainly doesn’t feel so simple. When I am writing it doesn’t (initially at least) seem to be a conscious decision to choose certain words instead of others to fill my lines, or to place line breaks here or there instead of elsewhere. The San Francisco Renaissance poet Jack Spicer made a lot of sense when he spoke of poetry being transmitted via “Martians” (The House that Jack Built 81) and not by his own volition. In my own practice this lack of possession of my own agency sometimes gets so bad that, if I write a draft and leave it sitting for a few days, weeks, or especially months, when I return to it I can barely recall having written it; not to mention those times I’ve written something I might even like, only to discover I was haunted by the ghost of Jorie Graham (well, the poor man’s Jorie Graham perhaps), or some other favourite, throughout. There have been a few mornings when I have suspected that someone else
has been using my computer, saving files in my poetry folder under my name. As I still generally use the old-school ink method of transcription (and handwriting, as we all know, is individual) there can be no doubt I did scribble that poem late last night even if, in the light of day, it doesn’t read like something I would write. And yet I’m not myopic enough to assume that ‘my’ best poetic moments arrive from the space I call my mind alone.

Jack Spicer is an interesting poet to examine in terms of agency and authorship. His ideas about our lack of individual sovereignty, delivered in the infamous Vancouver Lectures, are startlingly similar to the way I might think about the production of poetry, and also share some similarities with Merrill’s practice. As a West Coast American ‘almost Beat poet’ of the 1950s, who co-founded the Six Gallery, Spicer, from what I can make out, ascribed his poetic spark to transmissions from the outside, creating a poetry formed by the other—a poetry of otherness. The Vancouver Lectures, collected together by Peter Gizzi in *The House that Jack Built*, posit a curious insight into where poetry, or at least all worthy poems, might actually come from. While Merrill was playing around with authorship—supplementing his own voice with voices both human and divine, mixing what he considered his own poetry in with that of his mentors and other-worldly superiors, Spicer was formulating an idea that any poem that is a true poem, written with the natural voice of the poet, comes utterly from outside the poet, and is actually dictated by “the green Martian spook” (81). Indeed the processes of Merrill and Spicer do, in some ways, contain a very striking similarity, which is concisely summed up by Peter Gizzi in the introduction to *The House that Jack Built*. Speaking of Spicer’s practice, Gizzi states: “By being purposefully inexact and giving a paucity of detail and slightly bizarre examples of poetic composition… Spicer allows for a meaning that is much more unwieldy than a more systematic thesis would allow” (vii). Gizzi goes on to say that Spicer “allows contradictions to arise—particularly the contradictions that his poems themselves manifest. In doing so,
he creates an emptiness, a center, which no one can own” (vii). This deliberate creation of the vacant centre is, of course, an undertaking similar to Merrill’s deference to his Ouija board.

The parallel existing between Jack Spicer’s ideas about transmission with Merrill’s Ouija board practice, which began in the early 1950s—years that were to be Jack Spicer’s final ones—is slight perhaps, but is nevertheless remarkable. It is perhaps also no surprise that both poets acknowledge a strong debt to W. B. Yeats and his experiments in automatic writing. “The idea Yeats started out,” claims Spicer, in his first Vancouver lecture, “is that essentially you are something which is being transmitted into”; further claiming that the objective when writing poetry is to “clear your mind away from yourself” (7). Spicer’s true poetic authors—be they ghosts, ascended masters or aliens—are undoubtedly otherworldly and disembodied. In Spicer’s Vancouver lectures, the reader is confronted with the idea that poetry is ultimately something else: that is, not a product of the poet’s ‘own’ body or mind. Such philosophies, with, admittedly, less of a supernatural bent, continue to underpin early twenty-first century post-humanist literary theory.

In a similar vein to Spicer, when Merrill wrote out his dead and angels, be they fallen bats or arch blasts of light, he invited the reader to believe he was not involved in an act of creation, but in an ancient method of cosmological dictation. He used an aid, a prop: the talking tool of the Ouija board that spelled out the poems for him, letter by letter. Time and again, throughout Merrill’s endless interviews on the authorship of The Changing Light, the reader is asked to simply accept that the many voices are, in fact, the musings of disembodied spirits. Often during interviews on the subject, Merrill’s claims regarding the true authorship of the poem were open and forthright: “it’s not me saying those things” (423) he casually asserted during an interview with Charles Buckley in 1992. Whether his
voices were those of quotidian or famous deceased humans throughout history, or
demonic or angelic spirits, Merrill continuously claimed that the divine messages were
actually other to those voices belonging to himself or his partner, David Jackson.

Helen Sword examines the process of naming voices other to the self as the true
authors of a work in her book *Ghostwriting Postmodernism*. Sword views Merrill’s chosen
method of transcription as “a display and an abdication of literary and spiritual authority,
affirming the special selection of its mediums even while conveniently displacing the very
act of authorship” (553). This bizarre claim of origins has predictably caused explosions of
controversy throughout the literary (read: more sceptical) world. As Dean Flower states in
his article “James Merrill’s Voices”: “Nobody wants to believe that the ‘spirits’ heard
through the implausible-sounding device of the Ouija board—isn't that a parlor game?—
have any reality external to the minds of their transcribers” (275). Throughout the poem
even JM and DJ don’t want to believe it:

Something tells me all this Flame and Fall
Has to be largely metaphorical. (Merrill, 114)

More alarming than all this authorial displacement is the fact that the reader is asked to
accept, and by this I mean literally accept, that *The Changing Light* is an accurate account of
spirit messages narrated to JM and DJ from the mid-1950s (though not transformed from
scribble into poetry until the 1970s) up until the early 1980s. We are asked to acknowledge
that DJ and JM acted as high culture psychic mediums, and that spirits actually came into
the room where the men were playing the game. Furthermore, we are invited to accept a
sort of horror movie style notion that sometimes these messages weren’t particularly
wanted nor welcome, and that they were against what these men may have wanted to reveal or experience:

David’s left hand

Has grazed the board. He cannot lift it. And

Whoever the Powers are we’ve been avoiding

Take possession, speed us far downstream

Through gorges echoing at the pitch of dream. (Merrill 108)

and again:

David looks up in genuine alarm:

But these are devils, they’re the fallen angels!...

Let’s stop right now. (Merrill 114)

Thirty years is a long time to be entrenched in discourses of devils and the dead. In his interview with Buckley, possibly the most candid interview Merrill undertook on the subject (in part due to the fact that he was reacting against his interviewer, placing himself in an oppositional stance), the poet asks the reader to simply believe that “this happened, wherever the messages came from” (420). Of course this denial of voice—the act of giving one’s authority over to a supernatural other—allows Merrill, when harangued about the arguably privileged ideologies evident in The Changing Light (which exonerate cloning and wipe out: “run of the mill souls who / life by life, under doomed thickness, / Plod the slow road of Earth – billions of these” [139]), to gracefully demur with his philanthropy intact. While such passages could be read as a critique of Middle America, they also seem to contain the suggestion of a certain intellectual-elitist view. According to the fallen angels
then (and not Merrill), the boring plodders of this world are doomed to death, while educated, intelligent, and especially childless souls are exalted in life as hierophants: hovering above, transcending, in a sense, the natural world. As the Archangel Michael tells Merrill and Jackson in his initial speech at the end of *Mirabell: Book 9:*

**WE HAVE IN THIS MEETING FOUND YOU INTELLIGENT & YOUR SERIOUS NATURES AT ONE WITH US (276)**

while earlier, Mirabell him/itself had also identified with DJ & JM, stating:

**KEEP IN MIND THE CHILDLESSNESS WE SHARE THIS TURNS US OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS & THE MYSTERIES (216)**

not to mention the poet-exulting prophecy that:

**THERE SHALL BE NO ACCIDENT, THE Scribe SHALL SUPPLANT RELIGION, & THE ENTIRE APPARATUS DEVELOP THE WAY TO P A R A D I S E (180).**

I’ve often wondered if there was any “NO ACCIDENT” (Merrill 176) cosmic thread connecting me to the fact that I began reading this epic just after I had miscarried and had been declared potentially unable to bear further children. Perhaps Merrill, through some unknowable portal, was speaking through his already spoken-through work to console me with the notion that, while I may not be a progenitor, at least I could still be a high priestess of the new religion. Yet seriously, while these bold angelic statements may, at the very least, seek to exalt the educational status and life expressions of the author, we
are asked to accept that: “it’s not me saying those things, but by and large it is Mirabell, who isn’t a human character” (Buckley 423). Sometimes, the Ouija dictation feels to me to be a form of ultimate giving-over—a saintly surrendering to what Merrill, in an interview with J. D. McClatchy, calls, “a time when everyone, not just a poet, wants to get beyond the self… To reach, if you like, the ‘god’ within you” (Prose 107). At other times it feels like an easy displacement, or a denial: Merrill is hiding behind anything available in order to escape revealing his own and/or Jackson’s millennial ideologies. Whatever the case, Helen Sword deftly sums up what could conceivably be the purpose of all this literary and spiritual displacement, by stating that it is: “to assure us of… Merrill’s visionary authority by reminding us of the even higher authority of [his] teachers” (Ghostwriting Postmodernism 145).

Reading Collected Prose, Merrill’s collection of interviews, memoirs, lectures and reviews, it becomes clear that, being such an eclectic and mercurial poet, Merrill was loath to be caught inside any particular idea of the origins of his poetry. On examining the many interviews undertaken on The Changing Light, it seems Merrill’s motivation cannot reliably be defined by what he has said about his masterwork. In an interview with Jean Lunn “Conversations with James Merrill”, conducted in 1982 after the release of the trilogy as a whole, JM, however successfully, dissociates himself (his own voice, his essential voice) from the message of the long-poem, stating:

As for belief, I’ve spent too much time trying to be of two minds—because that seemed to be the most fruitful way of writing the poem, and feeling about the material—I’ve spent too much time doing that to settle permanently for one or the other, for skepticism or credulity. I have been very skeptical, usually in the early stages; I’ve also been extremely credulous at high exciting moments, simply because
there was no room left for doubt, there couldn't be—the excitement, the thrill of the patterns you saw consolidating was such that you did believe. But this is exactly what Yeats said: that in the heat of the dictation you shape things instinctively, your experience gets stylized in spite of yourself, kind of like the tulip that doesn't know it's growing.... I don't think that just because it turns out to be a system that there's anything against it; it seems to me that everybody's belief is a system of one sort or another. (4-5)

Again, much later, in 1991, in another interview, that was videotaped with Helen Vendler, at the conclusion of *Voices From Sandover*, Merrill elaborates on the reason for his own state of belief/disbelief, claiming:

Well, as with Yeats, he said that there were times when it is extremely beautiful and there was no choice but to believe; but then as the experience cooled and as he distanced himself from it, he saw that, in a way, times, culture, and civilization—all these things that the voices are given to—were stylizations like the cubes and so on in a Wyndham Lewis drawing. In writing the poem I never wanted to be of less than two minds. It seemed to me that if I gave in and swallowed the doctrine, the system, hook, line, and sinker, that there would be no, no way of saving myself or saving the poem as a piece of literature.

Merrill is, of course, making an oblique reference here to Yeats’ introduction to *A Vision*, wherein Yeats proclaims: “if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, I have soon recovered” (25). Certainly Merrill’s constant clever quips, asides, and puns, coupled with the sometimes near-farcical—certainly theatrical—tone, allow the reader to think (perhaps paradoxically) that
he isn’t taking it all too seriously. “Merrill never allows us to forget that the Ouija board is finally not a textbook but a parlour game,” claims Helen Sword (145). There are quite a few subtle hints throughout the long-poem that Merrill does not believe his own hype and is indeed taking some responsibility for the messages. In the first book of the trilogy, *The Book of Ephraim*, he writes: “Jung says – or if he doesn’t, all but does – / That God and the Unconscious are one” (Merrill, *CLS* 74). When explaining his practice, often in very contradictory fashions, it seems of paramount importance to Merrill to speak in terms of a simple breaking down of authorship: a deconstruction. The poem stands on its own—the validity of voice in regards to the poet; the narration; the dead; the fallen angel bats of the second book of the trilogy; and the archangels of the third is constantly in question, and constantly being redefined.

Another contradiction inherent to this investigation into voice is that Merrill often displays himself as fiercely opposing the messages as they come through the board and onto the page. It’s as though he is involved in a wrestling match—not with the undercover angel, but with his own mind (which, granted, may well be the undercover angel). “Stop trying to have everything both ways” (122) Merrill quips in *Mirabell*, revealing angst at the bat-angels’ confusing lessons—and this is just one example among many of what he labels his “impatience” (123) with the often difficult Ouija text. As can be seen from *Collected Prose*, and also the interview with Charles Buckley, Merrill was quite aware of the inherent difficulties residing in the process of sounding out the Ouija-dictated messages from what he did admit was, “another world which could be imaginary” (Buckley 417). It must have all been terribly confusing. Voice, for Merrill, whether the product of actual spirits or musings of a combined subconscious/unconscious mind, appears to be key to unravelling this mystery. The entire long-poem can be read as a presentation and exploration of expanded expression, with the many complex and layered voices representing what is
disembodied and other to both Merrill and Jackson. The raw Ouija transcripts (the sections in capitals) then become examples of voice as something that can stand apart from the poem, and can be seen to be separate to Merrill’s body/mind or self. While it might be seen to be terribly clever, not to mention terribly convenient, to present a large body of work in such a disassociated manner, the trilogy is nonetheless also an exploration of the poet’s resistance to these voices: Merrill is reacting against the messages he receives. If the messages do arrive from various and sundry spirits, or even if they are from Merrill’s own subconscious/unconscious, throughout all three instalments Merrill does have moments of setting himself up in opposition to the bizarre prophecy he is uncovering and, thus, against his own poetry.

As the trilogy progresses, through Mirabell and into the final instalment—Scripts, Merrill not only includes far more passages of raw Ouija text (as displayed via the sustained use of capitals) but also presents himself as swimming increasingly against the tide of the divine dictates he is receiving. Throughout these last two books Merrill begins to position himself as increasingly resisting the long-poem’s thematic concerns. Devin Johnston explores this curious stance in his article “Resistance to the Message.” According to Johnston, Merrill “frames the entire poem as a form of resistance against the message he has received” (93). In Mirabell: Book 9, after being ‘told’ by the poet W. H Auden that the work of transcription is “THRILLING FOR U JM,” Merrill quips:

And Maddening – it’s all by someone else!

In your voice, Wystan, or in Mirabell’s.

I want it mine, but cannot spare those twenty

Years in a cool dark place that Ephraim took

In order to be palatable wine (261).
Section Two

No Accident

I will now return to James Merrill House, for it was the house that sparked this investigation and sent echoes of Merrill forward through time to my own poetry. If I hadn’t visited the Water Street apartment, I would have shelved Merrill’s long-poem, perhaps referred to it in passing in an exegesis that would have been concerned with poetry I wrote about the body and the stage, with some angels thrown in there somewhere for good measure. After careful consideration, however, I’m afraid I must accept the notion that “THERE IS NO ACCIDENT” (Merrill, CLS 176) in this particular change of trajectory. Thus something akin to fate saw me meandering down the main street of Stonington in February 2011, attempting to avoid slipping into the deep snow-piles on the sidewalk, bemused by the curious angles of winter light. I was merely taking a long-
overdue holiday, I thought, visiting a friend I had neglected in a country I had never thought to experience. Yet, wherever I go, those angels or Martians who write my poetry (or ignite my thoughts on poetry) never seem to be on holiday.

Getting to the house proved relatively straightforward. A Ph.D student I had flatted with in a cheap, falling down share-house in a not so pleasant area of Belfast, NI, many moons ago, had grown up to be a moderately famous philosopher/theologian. He now lived in a sizeable house in the very beautiful (yet frightening in its over-sizing) Greenwich, CT. While I had no real desire to visit what I (however stereotypically) considered a land of gigantic cars and plastic food, it seemed just as easy to head one way around the globe to visit my friend as the other. Living for a time in such a Stepford Wives-esque Connecticut town was something I had certainly never even imagined in my wildest dreams— except in a Stepford Wives kind of way (incidentally, the most recent version of that film was filmed in this very neighbourhood). The offer, however, to explore NYC while being safely ensconced in opulent Greenwich, CT, didn’t require too much deliberation.

When leaving for my US adventure, I knew that I would have to take my (at this time, mostly alleged) exegesis along for the ride. Working on my exegesis at this stage loosely involved researching the figure of the angel in poetry as I had lost momentum in my musings about the stage and the body. I was then only considering penning a short aside concerning Merrill and his epic, thinking it interesting that we had both written such curious portraits of otherworldly watchers, but I was not particularly interested in the work as a whole. My poetry collection Porch Light, the creative focus of the PhD, was almost complete at this stage, and glancing through its pages as it was gathered together, I discovered something odd. While I seemed to be writing a lot about performance and the
body, I was also, perhaps more so, focused on a sincere quest into the ephemeral world and, curiously, somehow obsessed with some sort of apocalypse. While I had completed the manuscript thus far with no real idea that I was turning out to be a mystic poet—I certainly didn’t feel millenarian—parallels with Merrill’s work began to take shape.

I should point out at this stage that I have chosen to focus on the work of other poets, such as Merrill’s *The Changing Light*, as a window into my own collection of poetry, while simultaneously making any allusions to my own work almost on the sly. My engagement with poetic influence is perhaps even more obscured than Merrill’s engagement with disembodied spirits, and so to claim Merrill as a direct influence on my practice would feel dishonest. It is rather through my reading of *The Changing Light*, for the most part after the fact of writing the majority of the poems in *Porch Light*, that I have come to identify, more heuristically in method, a potential poetic lineage for my work. My visit to James Merrill House sparked an investigation into alternate methods of poetic transcription and composition, methods I felt I had (however subconsciously) employed in writing *Porch Light*. Prior to this, my drafted poetry manuscript wasn’t sitting quite right with me—it felt as though there was too much otherworldly meandering in a collection that should have been about the theatre and the body on stage (with, admittedly, a smattering of popular science thrown in). I couldn’t seem to escape this meandering, nor could I bear to edit the more troubling poems out: poems such as “Porch Light” (the title sonnet sequence), “Waxing Moon in Virgo,” “Nuclear,” “Tantras” and “Wheel” all contain a questing into the divine via science and ideas of apocalypse, and the same thread was reaching its way through quite a number of the more science-based poems in *Porch Light* as well—poems such as “Quintessence,” “Right,” and “Not Right,” which had cleverly tried to disguise themselves as love poems or something else entirely. The apocalypse was also
reaching its way into stage-based poems such as “Bed of Nails Routine,” which contains the lines:

i glance again. am answered by a glint. first fringe of supernovas. begin figure eights. begin widdershins. you are contained. i am poised. the universe accelerates. there is always one more level. you are the still point. axis mundi. i am spinning space expanding forever as

steady rain morphs into a storm. (18-22)

My visit to James Merrill House was to begin a new fascination with the poet and his work, and into many poets with an interest in more occult methods of poetic transmission, which would, with time, hopefully provide a sounding board from which to contextualise my own (at this stage confusing) poetics and practice.

Back in January 2011, however, I had merely planned to take the epic long-poem with me on the plane, to while away the nineteen-hour flight time with heavenly dictates. Leading up to my departure, I had no clue that I was heading right into Merrill’s territory. James Merrill grew up on the east coast of the US. He was born in New York City and, I soon discovered, had intermittently resided in Stonington, Connecticut for most of the later years of his life, where, more importantly to my interests, a lot of the Ouija poems had been received or composed. The website entitled “James Merrill House” (http://www.jamesmerrillhouse.org/) lead me to the realisation that when he died Merrill had, for reasons known only to him, left his abode and all its contents to the Stonington Village Improvement Association. The house was maintained largely as Merrill had left it (while I was there my guide even diligently watered the indoor plants as though Merrill
might turn up at any moment, dashing back from a quick trip to the shops) and from what I could make out from browsing the website, the space was now a shrine of sorts—a gargantuan sarcophagus potentially still haunted by its flamboyant ghost.

I thought it might be oddly romantic of me to call in to the oft-spooked house, since I was going to be in the neighbourhood and I was reading the long-poem. I thought I would just go and stand outside, perhaps take a photograph or two. I’m not a famous writers’ houses junkie. I can safely say I have never, in memory, visited another dead writer’s once-house (at least not that I know of, not for the sake of visiting it). I am aware it’s quite a popular thing for budding writers and literary critics to do—there are websites devoted to writers’ houses tours and, of course, many books on the subject with titles such as *A Skeptic’s Guide to Writers’ Houses*. Perhaps it’s an Australian reticence thing: I was never a huge fan, growing up, of the poets of the Australian canon—Henry Lawson lived near where my brother was a local cop for years, but I can’t say I ever thought to follow the signs to his (no doubt tin and wood) shack. My Dad did drag me to Don Bradman’s house once when we were on holidays when I was a child, but I was immediately embarrassed and bored and spun around in the back yard until I made myself sick. There’s something almost creepy and voyeuristic about visiting anyone’s private home without their stated permission—without being a friend or acquaintance. It’s intrusive even if they have been dead for years. As a teenager, the scene in *Pride and Prejudice* wherein Lizzie visits Mr Darcy’s house just to have a look, without his knowledge or consent, always upset me, even though it was all quite acceptable in Jane Austen’s time. In the moment when she gets caught out in the act, I wondered that she ever recovered enough to adjust her bonnet again, let alone marry the guy. And yet, there I was, hurtling up the Interstate from Greenwich. Perhaps I thought I could get to know the posthumous Merrill; in some way
tango with his spectre, become friends, so that it might not seem so very forward of me to visit.

While those who were responsible for the upkeep of the James Merrill House website hadn’t revised it in years, I was able to discover that the main function of the house was actually not to act as a shrine, but to accommodate winners of a writer in residency prize (said prize was Merrill’s legacy also—he was exceedingly well off) while they worked on their next big thing. Winners of this prize (who were these days mostly fiction writers) were able to live and breathe and sleep in Merrill’s house for a season, nestled in amongst Merrill’s personal ephemera, which included everything from Ouija board mouse pads to yellowing shopping lists and notes scrawled in notepaper in the many books of his secret library. That halcyon period had ended, however, and the winning writers were now housed at what is known as the ‘renovated Jackson apartment’, conveniently located across the hallway from Merrill’s abode. I guess it was the place Jackson escaped to in order to get some solo space during the pair’s lazy summers in the village. The main apartment, Merrill’s apartment, was now largely a sort of hall for literary gatherings. The James Merrill House mission statement revealed: “The James Merrill House is maintained by the Stonington Village Improvement Association in Stonington Borough in order to preserve an important literary landmark and to further the legacy of one of America’s great poets.” Though the writer in residency prize wasn’t open to Australians, I figured I might be able to at least take a small tour if I enquired politely.

After watching a virtual tour conducted by J. D. McClatchy online, I was hooked. Surely Merrill wouldn’t mind, surely he had even intended such unexpected visits by leaving his house to the village in such a way. The house of the virtual tour popped out of the screen at me. It appeared almost exactly as I had imagined it. A few emails back and
forth with the Village Improvement Association later and it was all arranged. I’d already been introduced to the space through the intimacy of Merrill’s description, yet I had never expected to find myself wandering about inside the house itself. While I was inside I took a photo of myself through the “immense / Victorian mirror” (Merrill, CLS 98) that reflected me back to me and included within its arc (although I wouldn’t notice this until I was home, looking at the prints for the first time) James Merrill himself, in a curious portrait: propped on a chair, his chair, in the corner (see figure 5). He was there, obscured and hiding, only to be revealed later, over-seeing everything with a knowing smile on his face. If I didn’t know how I came to be there, or why, he certainly appeared to.
The instant my guide and I ascended the stairs and turned the key in the creaky, shifty lock I felt it: a sense of what I can only call ‘spirit’ was there, everywhere, inserting its eerie presence into everything. My guide caught my enthralled expression and immediately quipped that a lot of ‘sensitive’ types notice something in the house as soon as they cross the threshold. Perhaps I was having a gothic novel moment, yet I’m not embarrassed to say my legs began to shake, and it was not from nerves, nor caution—I was far too curious to entertain any of those states of being and hadn’t given a great deal of thought to haunted houses. As I write in the poem “James Merrill House”:

Walking in (what is it our
antennae pick up really

Ouija

Figure 6: Ouija with Willowware
do we even have antennae)
your legs give you heaps
yet you aren’t nervous
what with the New England
twee preaching and the
shoreline public access path
closed due to ice. You are kept
safe, yet you could never be safe
with all these oak china cabinets.
But what would you know with
legs going loco, as though some
soul tugged at them, perhaps a
child expecting treats. (1-15)

The spirit-board image was everywhere in Merrill’s home. Ouija: a fusion of
syllabary, numbers, affirmation, negation; that bridging symbol “&,” and the endlessly
polite signing off of GOOD BYE, had stamped its essence over the Water Street house.
The mystical game infiltrated the whole apartment, especially physically, whether sewn into
cushion covers, scanned onto the novelty mouse pad or propped upon the bench in the
kitchen. With its fancy font alphabet the Ouija board almost appeared as the remnants of a
circus banner or a child’s learning toy. Or was it The Most Dangerous Game, as the title of
Stoker Hunt’s 1985 instructive study suggests? According to Hunt, whatever Ouija’s
diabolical status may be (and he seems to believe it is rather nasty), soon after it was
patented by the Parker Bros. this simple symbol board that sought out the dead became an
all time best seller in the game world (6). Interestingly enough, the Ouija Board’s bestseller
status occurred in the midst of the Vietnam War, and its previous rise to power had come during World War Two (6).

The Ouija board I was viewing at Merrill’s house on Water Street, Stonington wasn’t his of course. Merrill, while originally beginning with a store-bought board in the 50s, very soon made his own board, for ease of transmission (Prose 107). As I stood in the room, I imagined DJ and JM with their board, in this room, placing their hands on the cup planchette and awaiting the voices. That board, the real one, the board of significance, the one I was so craving to view, was elsewhere, probably stored away somewhere safe, hidden and veiled for posterity. As with all aspects of Merrill’s “maddening” (Changing Light 261) trilogy, there is so much veiling, so much opacity, so much stippling over: nothing is as it seems. The board sitting there in the kitchen was a fraud, probably found in one of the many ‘ye olde’ antique and collectible stores that line the main street (Water Street, Merrill’s street) of Stonington. This board was disappointing and dust-gathering. By the look of it the board was not even a particularly old Parker Brothers edition (the one my partner picked up for me from eBay looks more like a contemporary of Merrill’s compositional time). Still, the blue and white Willowware cup imposed its presence over the Parker Bros. eyesore, probably much like the one JM and DJ used. It was, no doubt, not the original willowware substitute for a planchette, but the idea was there. In fact it was so convincing that immediately after the tour I ducked into an antique store just down the street in order to pick up my own willowware teacup for divining purposes. James Merrill House was a museum of the event, the eventual representation, and the trace that remains. The presence of this board and cup seemed almost insulting, considering Merrill didn’t particularly like what he described as “The commercial boards… with a funny see-through planchette on legs. I find them too cramped” (Prose 107); but it was still very evocative, reminiscent of most museum displays. Like Merrill’s expensive art objects, the real gateway
creator—the board he and David Jackson created to better house their messages—was considered too valuable for display and had been spirited away. Still, while this cheap imitation maintained absolutely no trace: no beyond-the-veil thread of Merrill and Jackson, no speck of DNA, I was tempted to contact him there, with it, this unreal thing. I, too, could have placed my hands on the tea-cup, and awaited some propelling force to move my hands around the board to various letter combinations, forming words, forming proclamations. If it hadn’t been for the subtle, yet firm, hovering of my guide, I no doubt would have.

“Anyone who chooses may make his own Ouija board,” claims Merrill in his preface to Scripts, and he then goes on to describe the process of constructing a board for those of us bold enough to dive on in (Prose 40-41). Merrill was not always so glib about the board however, bluntly stating in an interview with J. D. McClatchy in 1982, “I’ve stopped… recommending it to inquisitive friends” (108). Merrill even admitted to frightening experiences with the game in this interview, stating:

Those early voices in Mirabell gave us, I admit, a nasty turn. Looking back, though, I’ve the sense that we agreed to let them take us over, for the sake of the poem. Poems can do that, even when you think you are writing them all by yourself. Oh we’ve been scared at times. (110)

Merrill’s fear, and his reason for continuing with the Ouija board experiments though, is revealed in these lines from the 1955 poem (published in Selected Poems, and reflecting on the early experiments with Ouija pre-The Changing Light) “Voices from the Other World”:

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 (47)

While he might have constructed his own board out of paper and cardboard, Ouija was by no means Merrill’s invention. Derived from the French and German words for ‘yes’, the first American version of the parlour game was patented in 1892, and it had allegedly existed in various forms since time immemorial (for a more detailed, albeit brief, history see Hunt’s *Most Dangerous Game* 3-7). It was wildly popular as a commercially produced board game in sixties and seventies America, the kind of thing that might be found in any games cabinet. Helen Sword in her article “James Merrill, Sylvia Plath and the Poetics of Ouija,” writes of its appeal to occult-minded poets of the time:

Indeed, its very status as a commercial object—and moreover as a board game that can be found on toy store shelves alongside such other popular amusements as Monopoly and Parcheesi—could well explain its tremendous symbolic appeal for… poets earnestly (and independently) attempting to fashion a visionary poetics appropriate to a literary generation caught between modernism’s mythopoetic nostalgia and postmodernism’s self-conscious romance with commodity culture (556).

As Merrill admits, again in the McClatchy interview of 1982, “Of course there are disciplines with grander pedigrees… The board happens to be ours.” (*Prose* 108).
Occult forms of automatic writing (one of which is Ouija, but another was the table rapping which infected the lives of the Victorians and the poet H.D.) have not belonged solely to the ‘kingdom of the kooks,’ and have held a strong dialogue with established poets such as Plath, H.D., and, of course, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn initiate W. B. Yeats (or at the very least his wife, George). Among the Hermeticists, Golden-Dawners and Theosophists of the Nineteenth (and first few decades of the Twentieth) Century for example, it was considered run-of-the-mill to break out the planchette in order to write. Certainly many of the literary manifestos of the early Twentieth Century (Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto* comes to mind) seem to at least honour the age-old tradition of tapping into some god/dess within via the gateway portal of automatic writing. According to Lawrence Rainey: “Automatic writing, from its inception, was a mimetic counter-language, a way in which people restaged new forms of subjectivity increasingly shaped by contemporary changes in communications and transcription technologies” (127).

In this essay on Merrill’s (and in part my own) experiments with a type of automatic writing, I don’t really think it’s fair of me not to consider the chief modern mystic poet of the canon, W. B. Yeats. The Yeats’ (W. B. and his wife, George) automatic writing experiments—leading to the (equally) maligned and revered *A Vision*—are fundamental to any consideration of poetry and the occult, and Yeats very obviously heavily influenced James Merrill throughout *The Changing Light*. Susan Johnston Graff, in her book *W. B. Yeats, Twentieth Century Magus* claims that “the literary canonization of [Yeats’] more popular works has lead to a kind of secular humanist version of the poet that misses the mark” (2). It is a shame that most critics don’t seem to know what to do with the more obscure methods of transcription that make up *A Vision*. While I realise that the secular view of Yeats doesn’t quite convey the depths of his practice and convictions, I’ve often, paradoxically, thought that sometimes too much has been made of his association
with the Theosophical Society and especially the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (abbreviated from now on to G.D.), thus allowing many to label Yeats as more of a mystic poet than he potentially was. Not that an association with the G.D. is necessarily a bad thing; I think it lends him a kind of edginess that wouldn’t readily be found in the bespectacled man’s generally dry and formal early poetry, demeanour, or pre-George Yeats lyrical and autobiographical writing. Before *A Vision*, and the poetry those last great years produced, it seems Yeats himself was happy enough to keep his mystic tendencies as a separate side project to his poetry and daily life. In a similar manner to Merrill’s oeuvre, though, I believe Yeats’ later poetry, which includes many unveiled references to his veiled spiritual leanings, is much more effective and powerful for these more mythically, and even spiritually, rich inclusions.

Yeats, or “Demon Est Deus Inversus” (D.E.D.I. for short), as he was known in the G.D., is evoked often in *The Changing Light*, even if his inclusion does feel at times weighted (as though he is there despite Merrill’s best efforts to keep him out). Indeed, throughout the long-poem, Yeats comes through as a bumbling, tweed-wearing misfit who seems nervous and out of place. As Bauer explains in his article on Yeats’ influence on Merrill, “The chief sign of Merrill’s ambivalence toward Yeats is the way he undermines Yeats’ authority, consistently constructing Yeats as a shuffling, mistaken character in the poem’s play of otherworldly voices” (89). In his collected prose, James Merrill had some almost scathing things to say about Yeats such as: “Rilke was five times more poetic to me than Yeats. Yeats seemed by comparison somewhat external to one’s situation” (*Prose* 65), but does go on to confess that “I must say that I read and admired [Yeats] a lot in my youth” (65-66). In *James Merrill’s Apocalypse* Timothy Materer claims that Yeats “has all along been the guiding force for DJ’s hand (as Milton was concealed in Blake’s foot in *Milton*)” (123). This further act of displacement (it was the angels, no it was Yeats) does seem evident in
Merrill’s Mirabell when, in discussing literal ghost-writing, Mirabell says, “YEATS MOVES DJ’S HAND” (217), a fact which Merrill himself seems to accept in lower case: “after the first stupefaction, why/ Not? Who but Yeats could have pulled, from the same high/ Hat… / Our friend here?” (217) David Jackson agrees that Yeats’ near-demonic possession of him could be real, replying: “The whole thing’s controlled” (217), though I’m not sure ‘controlled’ is quite the right word for it. It seems that the Magus Yeats as a guiding force (as opposed to Yeats the Irish Nature poet) is quite acceptable to Merrill’s apocalyptic epic; the spirit of Yeats’ spirit, his Daimon, perhaps, is more persuasive and glorious than the man. Certainly Yeats the man chimes in, via the Ouija board on occasion throughout the poem (as himself, rather than the silent, occult guider of the hand) with such witty quips as: “DJ, LET ME SHAKE THE OTHER HAND. YOU WERE NEARLY AS GOOD AS A WIFE” (Merrill, CLS 481). Yeats is furthermore allowed to recite a poem of his ‘own’ towards the conclusion of the epic; still in this moment Yeats defers a certain authorship to Merrill when he claims in his ‘own’ dictated poem (which isn’t up to standard) that Merrill has “REFASHIONED US BY FASHIONING THIS” (486). The obvious conclusion to draw from all this confusing layering is that Merrill did, in fact, admit that W. B. Yeats was ‘un/naturally’, some type of spiritual, if not poetic, mentor—a father-figure whose shadow Merrill couldn’t quite escape from. I feel that it was Yeats’ Daimon or, as Yeats says in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, his “anti-self” (4), that became accessible and also acceptable to Merrill in The Changing Light. This ‘anti-self’ comes on in a style similar to one of Blavatsky’s ascended masters, it might be argued—using DJ’s hand like some gaudy automaton writing out portions of Merrill’s poetry in that same way that George Yeats wrote A Vision for Yeats. Furthermore, there can’t be much doubt that the Yeats’ experiments with automatic script did, at the very least, allow Merrill to consider his Ouija dictates as valid fodder for literature.
The automatic writer George Yeats seems to me the unsung hero of the Yeats’ magnum opus, just as David Jackson may have been for James Merrill’s epic. In her informative essay “George Yeats and her Automatic Script,” Margaret Mills Harper laments the lack of credence given to George and her automatic writing familiar, or “Daimon” (*A Vision* [22]), as co-authors of Yeats’ (and his Daimon’s) later works: “After the honeymoon… critical notice has tended to wane. After some mention that the experimentation of the automatic script continued for several years, the attention gradually shifts to the texts Yeats authored, and back to Yeats as the author of them” (291). Harper claims readers are only too glad to take themselves back to the “relative security of ‘Yeats’ in trying to make sense of texts that have their source in communications the writer believed were held with beings from beyond this world” (292) and I can see a similar phenomenon at play when reading what many critics make of Merrill’s claims. Even if the spirit voices are all a well-formulated gaff, I feel that the influence of David Jackson, who was, after all, the man with his hand on the willowware cup (the vessel they used as a stand-in for a planchette), would need to be considered in any investigation of authorship yet he, outside of the poem itself, was generally quite silent about the whole affair. Any form of automatic writing, of course, leads to a menagerie of questions regarding voice and authorship, many of which have already been addressed in this essay and the least of which is arguably: who is actually writing this? For the pairs of Yeats’ and DJ and JM, with all claims of authorship overshadowed by their Daimons or Ouija board angels, the question of whose hand was on the cup, or the medium’s role in it all, probably fades into insignificance.

Yet back at the James Merrill House the willowware cup—perched so inauspiciously on the Ouija board in Merrill’s dining room, just to the side of the table where the initial experiments were conducted—did bring to mind both participants and
their diabolical experiences. It was hard to feel particularly anxious or even spooked, though: the day was all light, and even winter sun bouncing from the bay to the dirty sidewalk snow felt like glory. Merrill’s house was made to catch the light, and his collection of tiny coloured bottles and other see-through curios glittered beside perfectly placed window seats. This home was filled with pure flamboyant kitsch, not occultist gloom; it was all light-catchers and the infamous flame shade of paint, not to mention the wallpaper.

Back in the safety of retrospect, I feel regret that I did not find the courage to react against the dictates of polite behaviour and grab the board, despite my misgivings. Perhaps Merrill might have rewarded my courage by at least peaking through the veil towards this strange Australian wandering around the house and touching things as though they were hers. I don’t believe my guide would have relished a game (or something infinitely more serious) of Ouija however. She had already revealed that she thought of The Changing Light as more the product of what she referred to as a gay man of a certain age’s parlour amusement, rather than the apocalypse worthy of the years of praise and appraisal it has received.

While she had a certain love for Merrill’s early poetic oeuvre, I don’t think the trilogy impressed her at all. She was pure Stonington, as far as I understood it (and I had only been in Stonington for two hours), and admitted she never would have thought Merrill would bequeath the town (which, if this was anything to go by, did not seem to relish him) a book from his massive library, let alone his whole house and (the less expensive) contents.

Once I returned home to Australia, after failing to reach (or even attempting to reach) Merrill at his house, I realised that I would have to instead write my own (or not my own as the case may prove) Ouija board poem. I decided to join these illustrious poets in involving another person—my partner DB—in the experiment, probably out of fear of doing it on my own. Initially I too decided not to name my co-Ouija participant as a co-
author of the few Ouija-based poetry experiments included in Porch Light, mostly because I ended up shaping the messages myself. In our case, both of us acted as the hand in the experiments; both of our hands were on the planchette throughout the process—I held it with my right hand and used my left to write. Ultimately, I did feel slightly strange about naming myself as sole author, however, when really anything received must have been a product of both my and my partner’s subconscious Daimons and/or any number of spirits. Thus I decided to include the epigraph “with DB” in the title of the poems that were composed with the Ouija board and, in part, DB’s hand. We had some lofty, high aims in beginning the practice. Merrill himself, I thought, may make a cameo, seeing as I had gone all that way to meet his ghost (only to be foiled at the last by my own sense of propriety). Or perhaps Yeats might turn up, as he always seems to. Even if it was only a conduit for a melodramatic unearthing of my own subconscious mind trash, Ouija was beginning to seem like a symbol system of endless possibilities, and potentially the ideal vessel for my own inner acolyte.

Helen Vendler once called the Ouija board “a symbol system that offers potentially unlimited combinations of letters and numbers, affirmations and denials,” concluding that: “it can stand, we might say, for language itself” (Vendler 220). Ouija’s ideal alphabet, and simple YES & NO (and I appreciate that across the top of the board is scribbled yes and no rather than yes or no, which suits my ideas about things) seem now like some perfected reality of language—a stripping away that leaves room for the essential, without expanding out too far into the realms of the sub-atomic void. When a “depressed” DJ mopes, overwhelmed: “Isn’t it like a door/ Shutting us off from living?” Merrill replies:

Art –

The tale that all but shapes itself – survives
By feeding on its personages’ lives,

The stripping process, sort of. What to say?

Our lives led to this. It’s the price we pay. (218)

While Merrill, in this passage from Mirabell, makes the grand assumption that this Ouija transcription is “art” (and I certainly agree) and is thus, rightly, all-consuming, he might also be making reference to the general gleaning process of the Ouija board experiments. Merrill seems to be commenting on the way in which, through Ouija’s reduction to the alphabet and denial of punctuation and word spacing (and even, at times, vowels) the game, this art, consumes the treasured tropes of language itself. This seems to be a process that is almost above and beyond the lives of those invested in the process. This progression of construction and then annihilation fascinates me, reminds me of a child carelessly jumping on an intricate sandcastle she just made. I am drawn deeper in to this long-poem through witnessing the deconstructive practice of the board, and what could possibly be the ultimate destruction of assumed language conventions. Merrill’s Ouija practice, or the practice of automatic writing in general, seems to provide answers about the process of the poem, any poem: my poems.

In an interview with Merrill, conducted after the publication of Mirabell: Books of Number, Helen Vendler sought to discover what she called Merrill’s “new form” (Prose 88) of Ouija board transmission had brought to post-modern poetics at large. In this interview, Merrill described the “unprecedented way in which the material came. Not through flashes of insight, wordplay, trains of thought.” Instead, Merrill insisted, that it was “more like what a friend, or stranger, might say over a telephone. DJ and I never knew until it had been spelled out letter by letter” (Prose 85). Vendler seems, in this interview, able to suspend disbelief—indeed she seems fascinated by potentials and
arrivals, enticing Merrill to talk candidly about “the doubleness of [the poem’s] source, spelled out on every page by the interplay between the spirits’ capitals and our own lower case responses” (88). Vendler does, however, see the many issues this endless shadowing and voice doubling raises throughout the epic. In her review of *Mirabell* in *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, Vendler claims that “[t]he board throws up bits and pieces of Merrill’s reading (as *A Vision* threw up Yeats’, as *History* threw up Lowell’s), and one of the difficulties with the trilogy is that no one of us duplicates Merrill’s reading bank, any more than we duplicate Blake’s or Milton’s” (226). The epic does feel to be constructed from an endless throwing up: an eclectic vomit of information, popular science, new-age occultism—the very things Merrill claimed to want to avoid, yet seemed fascinated by. As Merrill laments in the second book of the trilogy:

…VERY BEAUTIFUL all this
Warmed up Milton, Dante, Genesis?
This grand tradition come to grief
In volumes by Blavatsky and Gurdjieff?
Von and Torro in their Star Trek capes,
Atlantis, UFOs, God’s chosen apes – ?
Nobody can transfigure junk like that
without first turning down the rheostat
To Allegory, in whose gloom the whole
Horror of Popthink fastens on the soul.
Harder to scrape off than bubblegum (*CLS* 136)

I am equally fascinated and freaked out by such alleged occultist paraphernalia. It’s no surprise, then, that I wanted to experiment, to see what would happen if I tried out
some Ouija poetry. Perhaps I would get past Merrill, Yeats and all the visionary poets, and into the Swedenborgian realms of the higher ones, even though I had never, up to this point, even experimented with Ouija (I was a very well-behaved teenager). Perhaps the angels might gurgle a mad cacophony of popular science or unpopular occult dictates for me, impressed by the fact that I’d written poems for them. And, Lord knows, I read a startlingly similar library to the one Merrill once did. Even though a lot of his books had been removed from his house by the time I got there, his quite impressive secret collection (occluded, hidden behind the bookcase door) contained many volumes that I have either owned or read at some point. At first though, the Ouija messages DB and I procured were all simply jumbled gobbledygook and startled confusion. Perhaps it was my fault, I couldn’t get past the fact that the planchette moved and constantly accused my partner in crime of forcing all the zipping across the board. The Ouija board was vintage and from eBay (I spent a long time smudging it with sage) and did feel slightly too small, as Merrill had discovered many years previously. The process of transmission was initially painfully slow and painfully nonsensical. Perhaps the angels or ghosts were speaking an incomprehensible dialect made up solely of consonants? Words came up every now and again, including a poignant name (yes, you guessed it, W. B. Yeats), but I assumed it was all emanating out of my subconscious somehow. The nonsensical nothings weren’t really providing me with any profound metaphors for my poetry (see A Vision) and I was getting frustrated. My other hand, DB, made the astute point that the spirits (whomever they were) might be coming across various difficulties, after trying to find their way through the vast miasmic confusion of being dead, to gather themselves together on one small plastic marker on a game board in this hot summer one year since my visit to Merrill’s house (yes, it had taken me that long to get game). And we were no mediums, not yet, in any case—perhaps the miscommunication was our fault. It was only after quite a few sessions that a curious friend, who claimed to be dead (I hadn’t heard about it, but I hadn’t seen or heard
from him in twelve years and he had to be getting on), showed up and with his bizarre announcement came the impetus that created the first Ouija poem: “I AM JOHN IS DEAD.” In this poem I attempted to combine Ouija script (straight out of the experiments) with reflections on the time I spent in central Australia with the man who was now the spirit who seemed to be contacting me. It was surprisingly rewarding to use the Ouija transcripts as a portal to a sort of prose poem memoir— “I AM JOHN IS DEAD”, concerning a very strange summer I spent in the outback with an ex ballet dancer from the Ballet Rambert who was now a horse-whisperer:

HI AMANDA ME HERE. And you remember that wandering self you were at twenty. Jumping a train to the middle, just so you could say you’d been there. The middle was burnt eyelids, glue-stench, flies flies flies and most other things you might say you hated, if asked. The endless red, though, was something else.

NO LIGHT I AM SORRY. So he had died, then. If anyone could haunt you all these years post the advent of himself to you, I Am John would. (1-6)

As a post-script, I feel I should interject to say that a spirit claiming to be James Merrill did reveal itself to DB and I during one of our sessions. Most of what arrived in this particular session was gobbledegook, alongside such phrases as: “NO BAD ACTION PRODUCED FAE AFTER A FOE AROSE” or “A GOD OR VAST AGE AMONN-RA,” which, of course, smacked of the messages of Mirabell (see my poem “RAZIEL” for further Ouija-script of this session). After feeling increasingly tired and annoyed as the session wore on, I finally asked, “is there any specific message anyone/thing wants to convey to us?” The message transmitted to us was: “DON’T CATCH AIDS.” I asked the ether “are you James Merrill?” and the answer came: “YES.”
“WE MUST HAVE / POEMS OF SCIENCE” (Merrill, CLS 113), demand the fallen bat-angels Merrill meets in the opening sections of *Mirabell: Books of Number*.

When I walked through the wooden door and into Merrill’s apartment on that vast wintery day, the bat-angels were there alright, flayed all over the rug and floating up into the wallpaper in the blue sitting room. The controversial blue room, where DJ and JM would reflect upon the day or night’s Ouija messages created in the red room next door,
was rife with “limber, leotarded, blue-eyed bats” (Merrill, CLS 98) that, it is revealed, were included in Merrill’s especially constructed wallpaper—not simply to match the rug, but because they represented the bat-angels who contacted DJ and JM via the Ouija board. The wallpaper, considered so camp at its conception that Merrill devoted a few pages of *Mirabell* to its defence, is simply beautiful. These eerie fallen-angels are still splayed on the wall in the often-closed up house, overseeing, proclaiming to no one, even now. The bats (which still match the albeit heavily faded rug) are oddly frightening in their glory; one gets the sense that, with their askew wings and awkward angles, they are potentially as evil as DJ feared. Perhaps it’s the flat, scope-less eyes, and the fact that there are so very many of them—one feels surrounded. They felt imbued with otherness, as I imagine journeys deep into the interior of the atom, of sub-atomic space, might just be.

I like to think I write poems of science. At the very least I like to use science as a way to further my own world-seeking agenda. The language of science provides my poems, such as “Quintessence” or “Swiftly”, with a constant stream of new naming tools, helpful metaphors, new questions:

We must enter in. Boy blossoms with the realisation that the further you dig into an atom, the more inseparable particles become. Man scrawls “Expansive Fractal Design” on vacant walls, heralds infinity through defining-down, infinity through isolation, infinity through the separation of units. (5-8)

In “Swiftly”, the language of cosmology somehow paves the way towards truly expressing even the most quotidian human emotions like love:
Look! This moment here, he said. Yet there were infinite galaxies
Arcing backwards from beginnings
They acknowledged but could not bow to. (“Swiftly”, xi: 1-3)

Reading popular science, such as Brian Greene’s *The Elegant Universe*, or something more brain-stretching, like Michael Talbot’s *The Holographic Universe*, not only promotes expansive thinking, but also provides a new vocabulary with which to play, and from this a new way to think about language and meaning: a new way to place the self. A lot of my poems discover their spark of divine inspiration in the curious monikers of cosmology, or of quantum physics. Without wishing to sound too spiritual about what is essentially a very logical process, a lot of my reading verges on a space where a type of new science and a type of new religion meet. It naturally follows that my writing might do the same.

James Merrill, when sitting down to begin *Mirabell* in the mid-seventies, was possibly uncovering a similar hybrid meeting place wherein science and poetry converge. The poet, who claims early in *Mirabell*, “Poems of science? Urg.” (109), confessed to Helen Vendler that he began reading quite a volume of popular science writers in the seventies, from Julian Jaynes to Carl Sagan. In this interview Merrill admits, “the most I could hope for was a sense of the vocabulary and some possible images” (*Prose* 86). Like me reading Paul Davies, Merrill, when reading “a biophysichemical / Textbook” confesses, “The simplest term elicits / Pity and dread. Self-pity for the maze/ Of meanings to be stumbled through blindfolded” (110). It seems that, to Merrill’s thinking “words like ‘quarks’ or ‘mitochondria’ aren’t words at all, in the Rilkean sense of / House, Dog, Tree” (110), yet they seem to awaken more passion than any diurnal phrasing, or what he calls those simple “translucent, half-effaced, / Monosyllabic bezoars already / Found in gullet of a two-year-
old” (110). No matter how coy Merrill is with this material in the second book of the trilogy:

I lolled about one winter afternoon
In Stonington – rather, a whole precarious
Vocabulary of each different cell,
Enzyme, ion, what not, millionfold
(Down to the last bacterial organelle)
Particles that “show a tendency”
To form the person and the moods of me,
Lolled about. We were not feeling well (110)

one gets the sense that science-think is flooding Merrill with poetic spark. He is, admittedly, only reading in reaction to the demands of the bat-angels, but something within him, a twin process, is revelling in this dutiful reading and writing. Popular science, like so much of what Vendler calls the “eclectic litter and learning that crowds his mind” (226), or what Merrill calls “my learning evanescent, level light / Colliding in the mirror with itself” (111), is brewing God-like cosmologies within, possibly to the same degree as it is reminding him, and by extension, the reader, of his tiny human incompetence.

Merrill is possibly protesting slightly too much when he claims that “the simplest science book is over my head” (Prose 86), yet I can empathise with this sensation of ineptitude coupled with inexplicable excitement. My poem “Nouveau Devotion on the Train” wrangles with this type of scientific enquiry:

if it gets curved enough
will the Great Continuing fold back on itself
and if so
will we time-travel
will we know we are time-travelling
are we time-travelling now (10-16)

When I’m reading popular science I realise that a lot of the concepts explored may require a physics degree: but language simply requires a love of symbols, of representations, of connections between the thing and what we lizard-brains make of it. If these concepts are flooding over me in the vaguest possible manner, the words and symbols aren’t. I’m almost to the point of arguing something grandiose, like that the poet, with his/her potential grasp of the expansive, may be the only one who could ever really understand the true words/symbols of science, but perhaps I’ve been far too influenced by Merrill’s (or his angels’) idea of the universe.

Much has been written—and there is still far too much to write—about the numinous, almost religious space in which science and poetry collide. According to Maura High in her article “The Poetry Lab: Science in Contemporary American Poetry,” “[p]oets are drawn to science precisely because its relation to poetry is problematical. To use science in your poetry is to do something unconventional: it has the flavour of conquest in it, of rebellion; it asserts your autonomy as an individual” (338). High goes on to state that “[i]t is an act rich in implications and parallels. One could think of poetry’s use of science as a kind of literary cross-dressing; as a subversive act; as stealing; as colonization; as an act of transubstantiation from the world of fact to that of idea” (338). There is certainly something naughty, almost illegal, about whimsical poets pilfering the language of the fact-finders. Perhaps that’s why we do it. There is also something quite, dare I say it, sacred about the act.
In *Modernist Writings and Religio-Scientific Discourse*, Lara Vetter examines the process by which “with the breakdown of the ‘old’ physics and the emergence of Einsteinian quantum mechanics, popular scientific discourse became laden with imaginative, spiritualized terms” (19). It seems that, in modernist poetics, these “imaginative, spiritualized” scientific terms were ones the poets were already at home with, and thus were certainly not afraid to begin to adopt as their own. Not much has changed: they borrow exotic phrasing; we borrow it back, without anyone knowing who is the chicken and who is the egg. It’s as simple as humans breathing and trees photosynthesising. In his introduction to *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, Robert Crawford suggests:

> Contemporary science and technology offer the poet metaphors, sounds, and lexis for writing about experiences… in an idiom that is true to the grain of contemporary language and contemporary culture. Yet, used in a poem, these scientific elements may also be in contact with the kinds of etymological, magical, visionary, even religious experience that many poets tend to love (70).

The lexicons of the traditions have been borrowing meaning from each other (most obviously poetry from science, but the inventiveness of science-speak also smacks of poetry), as all our (inter)texts seem to do, from time immemorial. Simon Armitage, in “Modelling the Universe: Poetry, Science and the Art of Metaphor,” claims that poetry “with its mythmaking power may precede, rather than simply follow, science” (Crawford 20). Armitage goes on to state that “What science does is ventriloquise the universe in a very specific and logical way, though its main method is essentially a poetic one, that of metaphor” (119), further claiming that this type of mimesis is “like poetry… deal[ing] in likeness, similitude, and equivalence” (107). Armitage may be taking things a little too far
into the realm where poetry wins the first-principles war when he claims, “[s]cience didn’t drop the bomb on Hiroshima,” but instead that, “it was a poetic nightmare-vision of hell-fire discharged into the infrastructure and flesh of an unsuspecting city that opened the bomb-hatch… even if science guided it down to its target” (120). The essential message, however, of his chapter, and of *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, seems to be that science does enrich poetry with a new language, even as the poetic tradition provides the metaphors necessary for the continued naming of the things of the cosmos, including the most nasty, frightening things, like nuclear weaponry.

Merrill’s bat-angels are, of course, obsessed with metaphors; they even use the metonym (M) throughout the epic (standing for metaphor) to point out that what they are transmitting is the closest thing to the thing itself, but is not the elusive thing. These angels claim to exist “WITHIN THE ATOM” (Merrill, *CLS* 113), itself a metaphor for the great unknown/unknowable. The beings are also fuelled by what they call “BASIC RADIUM” (140), though what Merrill (or his angels) really mean by all of this extraordinary emphasis on otherworldly nuclear energy is typically unclear, but not surprising (the long-poem was written in the on-edge age of the Cold War). I can testify that Merrill did indeed read a lot of popular science, and even a smattering of pop spirituality, if the volumes in his library at Stonington are anything to go by. According to Brian McHale:

There is no denying Merrill's reliance on the paraphernalia of pop spirituality in his long narrative trilogy… Familiar pop-culture narrative motifs abound, deriving from popular books of pseudo-science and the occult, the sub-literatures of near-death experience and alien abduction, and gothic horror fiction. The actual substance of the messages transmitted to Merrill via the Ouija board tends to echo
Throughout *The Changing Light*, Merrill was, as mentioned earlier, endeavouring to escape the pop-spirituality/pop-science of the mid to late twentieth-century. As he told Helen Vendler after the publication of *Mirabelle* “Atlantis, UFOs? I climbed the walls trying to avoid that sort of material” (*Prose* 86). Yet the concept of Atlantis (and even UFOs to some extent) is a core theme of *The Changing Light* (as narrated by bat-angels, granted), thus we have again returned to the realm of authorship and denial. Perhaps Merrill, in his own mind (assuming this can exist aside from the quasi-occultist messages from the disembodied), actually preferred more straightforward, science-based poems and science theory. But, in truth, there can’t be much of a distinction drawn between the more Blavatsky-esque science and the science of the bat-angels—it all reeks of myth. As Reena Sastri writes in *James Merrill: Knowing Innocence*:

> While the modernists drew on the broadly philosophic potential of scientific concepts, Merrill emphasises their mythic potential. He uses scientific models and theories as elements within a larger poetic structure that both creates a flexible, evolving cosmological myth, and enacts a poetic mind’s encounter with the sometimes baffling, sometimes surprisingly congenial elements of contemporary science (95).

To attempt to look at Merrill’s dogma through the lens of a certain science, the God created throughout *The Changing Light* must essentially be an entity centred on nuclear physics, biology, numerology and a type of cosmology. “THE POINT MY DEARS IS THE EMERGENCE OF/ A SCIENCE GOD” (Merrill 137), says bat-angel 741, before
he/it becomes the peacock, Mirabell. He/she/it must, however, even with all this science, be quite ok with Atlantis, the reality of UFOs, centaurs, unicorns, a genetic breeding program involving human soul material, and forthcoming inevitable nuclear doom. There is an obvious quirky, mythic, spirituality at the poem’s, albeit mostly scientific, core, at least inside the messages of the fallen angels and archangels of the trilogy. Yet this is a spirituality that pleads for a fission and fusion of the two traditions, no matter how fraught this process might be. One significant reason behind this desperate need for fusion could be, it seems, to mollify the frightened human types (JM and DJ in this case) of the Cold War period. As 741, who then becomes Mirabell, says: “NOW, SCIENCE, FORCED / MORE & MORE TO SHARE THE RELIGIOUS FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS / MUST TRY TO REASSURE” (137).

Reminding humanity of the threat of nuclear holocaust and other apocalyptic calamities is a veiled yet penetrating thematic concern of Merrill’s throughout all the instalments of The Changing Light. Considering the stretch of time the trilogy was composed (and published) in, an obsession with nuclear energy cannot come as too much of a shock to the reader. While the epic long-poem took thirty or so years to (initially) be completed, the cold war took even longer to run its course. With the spectre of WWII looming constantly over Merrill’s shoulder (a war in which he had briefly served), and with the period of history which saw everyday folk digging up their backyards to make bomb shelters surrounding him as he wrote, it is no surprise that the biggest fear of the trilogy is the energy contained in the atom. When reading the long-poem, I have to continue reminding myself that, to Merrill’s generation, the threat of utter worldwide destruction was not a distant far-off fear, but was ever-present and real. There is an intense focus on the implications of cracking the atom throughout the trilogy: an act that, according to Ephraim, Mirabell, and even the archangels, had ruined other races in the past and (the
implications are) will again in the future. From early on in the long-poem (section “P” of *Ephraim*) Merrill makes his stance regarding nuclear energy clear:

Plutonium waste

Eking out in drowned steel rooms a half
Life of how many million years? Enough
To set the doomsday clock – its hands our own:
The same rose ruts, the red-as-thorn crosshatchings –
Minutes nearer midnight. On which stroke
Powers at the heart of matter, powers
We shall have hacked through thorns to kiss awake,
Will open baleful, sweeping eyes, draw breath
And speak new formulae of megadeath (55).

And much later in the long-poem: “It’s random death we dread. / The bomb” (304).

Perhaps this type of intimate confession is simply an example of, as Materer states, “expressing a personal fear by imagining worldwide destruction” (*Apocalypse* 15). Whatever the case, it pays to remember that the doomsday clock (the physicist-inspired ultimate naysayer and something I’ve long been fascinated with) had moved closer to midnight at the time of *The Changing Light*’s early conception. In October 1949, with the testing of the first Soviet nuclear device (and the beginning of the arms race), the minute hand of this symbolic clock was moved to three minutes to midnight and in 1953, with the testing of the US H-bomb, it moved to the closest position to doom it had, or to this day has ever, held: 11.58pm. In Merrill’s *Ephraim* writing days, physicists certainly thought there was something to fear in the nucleus, as did Merrill and his spirits. In section “P” of *Ephraim*, Ephraim himself chimes in with the definitive statement: “NO SOULS CAME FROM
HIROSHIMA U KNOW/ EARTH WORE A STRANGE NEW ZONE OF ENERGY/
Caused by? SMASSED ATOMS OF THE DEAD MY DEARS” (55). In a cosmology so
founded on the evolution of souls, the idea of non-souls—of actual soul death—is
naturally terrifying and unearths Merrill’s “deepest fears.” (55). Indeed, the world had
already once been destroyed by Atomic energy, according to the bat-angels of Mirabell:
“URANIUM FISSION WRECKED THE GREENHOUSE ONCE/ 500 MILLION
YEARS AS YOU KNOW YEARS AGO GOD B/ GAVE US A 2ND CHANCE”
(116). The entire epic is rife with fears that this will happen again: “FOR NOW THE
PHYSICIST IS DRAWN IF UNWITTINGLY TO/ FIRE EXTINCTION THAT
ANCIENT GLAMOR & COULD AGAIN/ WRECK THE LAB (115). “THE LAB” is
of course Earth, and also Heaven—the great scientific laboratory where the soul cloning
exercise is carried out by God B and his minions.

In *James Merrill’s Apocalypse*, Timothy Materer takes Merrill’s fascination with nuclear
energy with an intensity and seriousness that names nuclear fear as the central theme of the
epic (8, 103). Robert Polito’s *Reader’s Guide to The Changing Light at Sandover* also lists
hundreds of direct references to the subject of atomic energy throughout the long-poem,
pointing out many other indirect references throughout. Mirabell’s bat-angels speak thus
of atomic energy, likening it to the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil:

NOW MAN TRIES TO SEIZE & RULE THE ATOM
BUT AS HIS ORIGIN IS ELECTRIC HE WILL
REMAIN CONTROLLABLE. ELECTRICAL POWER IS ORGANIC,
ATOMIC POWER… GALACTIC? WE KNOW ONLY IT IS
THE FIRE THE FUEL OF THE PANTHEON OF THE GODS
OF THE VARIOUS GALAXIES GOD B GUARDS THE POWER
JEALOUSLY IT IS HIS BRIGHT RED APPLE (199)

The power contained inside the most unbreakable structure we thought we knew is Merrill’s eschatological haunting space. In a sense it stands to reason that nuclear power might be God’s own forbidden fruit; God must also be, at core, a cacophony of unknowns. But it is the repercussions of this forbidden knowledge that continue to spook Merrill throughout the text.

This fascination with the possibility of nuclear destruction has been over and again dismissed by critics such as Robert von Hallberg, who believes that Merrill’s treatment of this very serious, far-reaching subject is imbued with too much of a “camp sensibility” (569) to be intended to be taken seriously. Indeed, Merrill claimed to have very little interest in the politics of his time, stating in the autobiographical poem “The Broken Home”: “I very rarely buy a newspaper, or vote” (Poems 111). And yet the anti-nuclear message of *The Changing Light* cannot be ignored, I feel, nor passed off as some exaggerated, theatrically light-and-fluffy candyfloss evaluation. “Merrill’s poem is an extended warning that humanity can, and must, control its destructive forces” (Apocalypse 103) claims Materer, later stating: “Merrill chose the destruction of matter itself as the symbol of evil” (104). In the 2001 summer electronic edition of *The Boston Review*, Stephen Burt claimed that “Sandover’s involuted cosmology (involving radioactive isotopes, reincarnation, prehistory, and daemonic super-bats) furnished a way of living with, and thinking about, the nuclear threat.”

Writing about nukes (the A-Bomb, or the H-Bomb, or whatever nuclear WMDs) immediately invokes in my mind images of sixties housewives ducking under the table in the Cold War era. Yet in 2012, under the new threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, it is easy to
see that the deep dark nuclear fear is always present somehow, ignore it as we might. For Merrill, when he thought about nuclear warfare, it must have seemed that the worst was so inevitable, it might have already happened. Many critical thinkers naturally became obsessed by this possibility throughout the cold war. As the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote in 1989, in a passage from “The Anorexic Ruins”:

Nevertheless, do not panic. Everything has already become nuclear, faraway, vaporized. The explosion has already occurred; the bomb is only a metaphor now. What more do you want? Everything has already been wiped off the map. It is useless to dream: the clash has gently taken place everywhere. The last bomb, the one no one speaks about, is the bomb that is not content to strew things in space but would strew them in time. The temporal bomb. Where it explodes, everything is suddenly blown into the past; and the greater the bomb’s capacity, the further into the past they go. Look around: this explosion has already occurred. In an amnesiac world like ours, everything living is projected into the past as though things had been over-hastily plunged into a dimension in which the only meaning they acquire is that wrested from time by a final revolution. That is the real bomb, the bomb that immobilizes things in eerie retrogression (34-35).

This passage feels hauntingly poignant, considering Merrill’s poem which, eerily enough, has an atemporal, almost hysteron proteron, sense of the use of nuclear energy—the bat angels blatantly explain to Merrill that apocalypse has happened before and is almost perpetually happening now. Furthermore, in Merrill’s epic at least, how can the apocalypse not inevitably happen in the future when the chief spirits of the universe seem to be made of a certain destructive type of nuclear energy?
Yet Baudrillard’s warning also throws its echoes beyond Merrill, to my own poetry, in the assumed future. I write about the dire possibilities of all this continued investigation into the atomic structures, colliding protons, and the act of capturing nuclear force to feed our consumption. While I rarely consciously think about the threat of nuclear annihilation, its shadow still pops up in many of my poems. My poem “Nuclear” undertakes to explore this subject matter quite openly, however:

In the dead centre of every last atom fragment is always this O-gape hole, void, empty. It's what the final bomb took when it ceased all future. No going back now. All this sheer moving through time has to stop somewhere, can you tell me, light through variegated leaf, X-rayed by star radiation, to what new portal the old light might move? (1-5)

Many other poems within my manuscript also work with a fear of the expansiveness of the nuclear, and that certain dread of the beyond beyond the unbreakable units, as a subtext. As my early poem “Quintessence,” written long before I ever thought about James Merrill’s poetry, states: “if gaps exist we lose ourselves to them if there is void you and/ I are lost to it already” (11-12).

While the spectres of nuclear warheads raise their ugly heads every now and again, summoned from the void beneath by invocations centred around who has signed what treaty, and who allegedly secreted them where, it seems that they don't hold contemporary literature’s focus nearly as much as they once did in the impending nuclear destruction days of the Cold War. Nuclear energy, however, has once again been under an intense focus in our contemporary brains in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear power plant nuclear crisis of early 2011. I developed a strange sense of synchronicity upon hearing about
Fukushima. I had been spending my writing days thinking about the atom, Merrill’s angels of the atom, and the potential destructive capacity encased therein. And here that fear was, eking out into the oceans of Japan, projecting itself aerially across the waters towards America and beyond. I simply had to compose on it (like Keats and his Autumn afternoons) and yet even while being driven towards the theme, I understood how fraught any commentary regarding such a horrible disaster could become. The best response, evoked in the poem “Fault” seemed to be to mask the fear with personal revelation:

And the eye that looks out, this eye, your
eye, is cut by slanted light, slit by winter flowers.
You are caged behind glass, reading – reactor research –
reaching Fukushima, fearing it killing you here,
countries away, though only one continent.
Radiation sounds reminiscent of lost light,
beatific bride on her day. Please don’t mention the angels.
But you see your own removed tumour, deceptive cabbages,
future babies born with three appendages (1-9).

While writing my poem “Fault” and its companion poem “Nuclear” I couldn’t move past thinking about how little information was typically available about such a catastrophe—it is as though we know not to turn around and look, for we might see the Medusa’s head. It is as though we cannot release the cold hard facts of the matter, as then we would have to face something solid and tangible: the after-effects of our questionable actions. It was the psychology of the worldwide reaction to the nuclear threat in general that fascinated me, as evidenced here in the lines of “Nuclear”: 
We are beyond concern, even if we believe the naysayers, even if we realise a strong apocalypse is good for the planet.

No, really, it got rid of the dinosaurs last time, this time it's our own turn. (12-14)

In his essay “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles Seven Missives)”, delivered to Cornell University in 1984, another French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, expounds the notion that nuclear warfare is “fabulously textual, through and through” (23). Because full-scale nuclear war, at the time Merrill was writing, was looming, yet had never actually happened (Derrida dismisses Hiroshima and Nagasaki as merely “ending a ‘classical’, conventional war” (23), not creating a true nuclear war), the true nuclear apocalypse, existed (as it does now) entirely in a space of narrative fantasy, which allows it to become whatever we say/write about it. “Nuclear weaponry depends… upon structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes,” claims Derrida, rendering it the machine-slave of language. Derrida then goes on to state: “one can only talk and write about it,” suggesting that the threat of nuclear war is an almost mythological space of endless narrative potential and that the way in which we can write about nuclear warfare continues to create the war itself and “conditions every discourse” (23). The space of nuclear weaponry, that is, the nucleus of an atom, is a space in which such phantasmagorical writings as *The Changing Light* might necessarily be born (and might, therefore, create their own nuclear apocalypse). In this essay, Derrida seems to be stating that the very idea of going beyond the nuclear is so powerful a threat because it is so unrealised: “it has never occurred itself, it is a non-event” (23). In a similar manner to sub-atomic spaces, nuclear holocaust is, thus, whatever we say it is: it can only ever be this way. The nuclear crisis’
dire singularity is, for Derrida (and we can see this clearly in Merrill) what makes it such an epic threat:

Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness, what it prompts us to think even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridical-literary archive—that is, total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism (26).

The end of the literary archive is, to the philosopher and poet, undoubtedly the end of the world. Utter nuclear annihilation can have no other state to compare itself to, says Derrida, who names it: “the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge” (26). This is cessation without revelation, that is, the ultimate accumulation occurring without a soul to scribe it down. It seems that the non-occurrence of inscription, to Derrida, is at least as upsetting as the end of human life.

Merrill, the self/angel appointed “SCRIBE”(72), albeit the latest in a series of many throughout the eons, attempting to rescue humanity with his “POEMS OF SCIENCE” (109), or transcriptions of this nuclear age, would most likely agree with Derrida’s thesis. The essay was written in the early 1980s at the height of the cold war and published at a similar time as the collected version of The Changing Light. Perhaps this is what is meant, ultimately, by the angel’s idea of “POEMS OF SCIENCE” (109): the poem of nuclear holocaust that can never be written, or if written, never recalled, because its after-effect is so final, so utter and everything-at-once that no trace could ever remain to name it by. As
the bat-angels also state: “CALL IT THE VOID CALL IT IN MAN A WILL TO NOTHINGNESS” (Merrill, 120). Merrill’s apocalyptic quest in writing this epic, then, might amount to an ultimate revelation of utter finality. The flip side of this argument is that this fear can never be actualised, of course, because neither JM nor DJ would be around to converse with spirits and then, in turn, write about it. The end result of this paradox could perhaps be thought of as a literature of resistance against finality, against catastrophe, against death, towards something that comes before and warns of an after that can never be (always is). The bat-angels put it best when they state: “MAN IS NOT CLONED WITH AN ACCEPTING DENSITY THEREIN/ HIS POWER: HE RESISTS” (Merrill 202).

Jorie Graham is a contemporary American poet who engages with the theme of nuclear holocaust. Throughout most of Graham’s later work, the idea of apocalypse, even The Apocalypse, is omnipresent. Her 2000 collection Overlord can be read as an extended meditation on war—overtly ‘Operation Overlord’ in WWII, but on into all wars, including the ones America is currently engaged in. In this collection, which includes comment on nuclear war and its after-effects, the end of the world becomes a common fact, an understood thing. As the poet states in “Passenger”:

The Apocalypse? That is a common
destination spot for many human minds now. The
rapid swallowing of all we made. The bird’s- eye view we’re
so in love with. (46-49)

Graham confessed, in her fifth collection Never, to being influenced by the “World Scientist’s Warning to Humanity” of 1993 (111), and the pressing reality of ecocide. Yet it
is in the poems of *Overlord* that the most intense, fascinating and generally haunting examples of world ending occur. It is as though it is so inevitable as to have already happened, as dire as nuclear half-life. In the poem “Praying (*Attempt of June 14 ’03*)” Graham states:

I know they are
burying our waste, that it will last hundreds of millions
of years in the mountain, that they are trying to cover it with signs they
do not know how to develop in
a language that will still communicate in that far
future saying don’t open this, this is lethal beyond
measure, back away, go away, close the lid, close
the door (10-17)

In her article “‘Fission and Fusion both Liberate Energy’: James Merrill, Jorie Graham and the Metaphoric Imagination,” Claudia Ingram considers the importance of the motif of atomic energy and subsequent nuclear threat in both Graham’s and Merrill’s work. Graham’s poetry, Ingram claims, “appears concerned not to rescue a complex world from entropy but to rescue some genuine plurality, genuine otherness, from linguistic reduction” (159). Ingram poses the thesis that Graham faces the nuclear threat by reducing and distilling (akin to atomic fusion) in her writing, while Merrill works through expansion (akin to atomic fission). Ingram does not see the nuclear threat threads weaving through *The Changing Light* as simply thematic; she sees them as deeply involved in the linguistic coherence, and certainly deeply ingrained in the psychological undercurrents, of Merrill’s poem. Ingram, it could be argued, views the splitting apart of Merrill’s voice/s throughout the trilogy, and his immense reliance on the other selves to expound the themes of the
poem, as indicative of the fission involved in the launching of atomic weaponry. Ingram’s essay is an extended exploration of the fission of nuclear fusion in poetry, that is, the intense pulling apart that comes out of colliding. Ingram claims that Merrill “undertakes to construct a twentieth century in which… a self constituted by its relations to others, living and dead, could be imaginatively incarnated,” which could ultimately “engage the powers and terrors of the worlds disclosed by the sciences” (172). The religion-supplanting scribe may be, it seems, the last bastion standing firm against the continuously oncoming unknown.
Section Four

Angels

Figure 9: Merrill’s day bed is struck by angelic light

The angels, especially the Archangels, who speak to Merrill in the final sections of The Changing Light are the ultimate Revelators of that very oncoming unknown. As Merrill’s epic progresses throughout the books, the Ouija conversations revealed contain less chitchat with the elevated dead and more pointed instructional dictates from the higher realms of the divine. The books Mirabell and Scripts contain less and less of a focus on the lesser creatures (though they are certainly present) and more of a focus on an
angel/archangel-dictated mythology (complete with the unicorn, centaurs from Atlantis, the goddess Nature and the nine muses). Only the very famous human dead seem to be allowed to chime in by the last books of the long-poem. John Greening, in his article “Ouija: The Poetry of James Merrill” states:

The list of celebrities at the party grows rapidly. By the last volume of the trilogy, which is, as its title suggests, a series of ‘scripts’… we have contributions from or glimpses of many of the West’s cultural icons. Speakers include God and his Archangels, Akhenaton, Homer, Montezuma, Nefertiti, Plato, Jesus, Mohammed, with walk-on parts for others ranging from Richard Strauss to Gertrude Stein (37).

While the voices of Merrill and Jackson’s deceased historical and literary heroes, and the many lessons dictated by mythological beings are endlessly fascinating, it is the voices of the fallen angels and archangels and their obscure, opaque yet fascinating “lessons” that I find most satisfying. Unlike many people who have read the books, I find that The Changing Light becomes much more exciting as it progresses along the yellow brick road of cosmological obscurity. While critics have generally preferred the more studied and precise poetry of Ephraim to the urgent scrawl of Scripts, I have always been more interested in the hybrid forms; the spaces of divine dictation, the kingdoms of the air and the fire of angels.

I wrote about angels long before I came across Merrill (or even Rilke), though there is something slightly awkward about such an admission. As Materer says, when talking about Merrill in Modernist Alchemy, “[t]he problem of achieving negative (or affirmative) capability was… more severe for a post-Freudian generation that understood the psychological seductiveness of religious beliefs” (5). How much more severe is the issue
here in the next century along from Freud? I hardly know how we believe in our toast in the morning. Perhaps we don’t. Perhaps the answer, if there is one, lies in an approach to existence infused with deliberate irony and considered obscurity. An example of this approach can be found in my wrestle with the angels in the cosmologically obscure long poem “Porch Light” which, while only weighing in at ten pages and not coming close to conquering any of the mystic pinnacles Merrill did or did not ascend, recently (2010) won the local section of the Newcastle Poetry Prize and was commended in the open section. I had no idea why I had dedicated a sonnet sequence to angels. This poem had happened to me. “Porch Light” gets its title from an epigram from Tom Waits’ “Mr Seigal”—a dark hymn spat out in the face of futility. This poem had happened in a flash of perhaps divine, perhaps drug-induced (the boundaries grow dim) hysteria as I awoke from surgery following a burst ectopic pregnancy that had almost cost my life. The end of a pregnancy isn’t something that I would seek to force into poetry: I am no confessional poet and I tend to shy away from first person in my poetry, as the collection Porch Light reveals—and yet perhaps the near-end of my own life alongside the pregnancy forced the issue. In the fog of that first night of regained consciousness in the recovery room, I somehow managed to scribble, in the manner of some mystic waking from a dream in the dark to mark down an epiphany, the first sonnet. In my wildest anaesthesia induced nightmare, I had not intended for the poem to arrive as a sonnet, and hadn’t, at the time, recognised that it was; but apparently there’s no arguing with the angels. Generally, I suspect, night-scribbling mystics wake in the morning to find their nocturnal outpourings are illegible, and not half as profound as the god-whisper they thought they had received (I keep thinking of Cocteau’s car radio in Orpheus for some reason), and I was no exception. I recall barely being able to read my own writing when next I looked at it (which was days, weeks later).
The transmission may well have come due to the shifting of my brain chemistry: as the seventh sonnet of “Porch Light” claims, “It’s the anaesthetic, it’s the/ morphine” (6-7). Certainly, I was driven to write upon ‘awakening’ in the half-awakened state of the anaesthesia trance. Due to the emergency of the situation I did not have any of my worldly possessions near me (I hadn’t quite realised I was alive, let alone reached for my handbag), and had access only to an unreliable biro I had begged from a tut-tutting nurse. I had no paper, I had to use the back of the first get well card that had floated my way while under, that I was in too much pain and unacceptance to open. I could though, at least turn it over and write on the envelope. And, of course, it was mostly dark—as dark as a recovery ward ever gets, at 3am. Still, upon reading the poem after I had regained an idea of being in the world, I had to admit there was something there. As the opening sonnet’s final couplet ironically states:

There is a connection octave-plinking through this mystical equation,

yet this is not another symposium examining the intricacies of angels (13-14).

Angel, from the old English *engel*, from the Greek *angelos*, meaning messenger, might simply be a product of air and light, the type of blinding and revelation that comes when squinted eyes look directly into the sun. Through my readings of Harold Bloom’s *Omens of Millennium*, or Dr. A Nyland’s *Angels, Archangels and Angel Categories: What the Ancients Said*, and many other not-so-scholarly tomes, when I now think of angels I get a cacophony sounding in my mind—some sort of hybrid entity made up of supreme Jewish Messengers and elevated Islamic djinns, Persian Fravashis, or even Sumerian Anunnaki (which may or may not have been Extra-Terrestrial beings). Growing up, though (and no matter how often I dutifully read the bible), angels seemed only classifiable as something winged, golden and fantastical; something that literature, from Milton to Pynchon, had
discovered, or at least given the best and most formidable descriptions of. In church on Sundays I hardly would have thought about our doubted angels and their demon counterparts, possibly considering them something as natural and numinous as air particles (though, it must be said, not something that would deign to have anything to do with me, specifically). Angels were hardly mentioned, simply generally assumed. They were of course true because they were in the Bible, but it was best not to dip into the theological quagmire surrounding them, as that would only have revealed riddles inside enigmas. The angels of my childhood didn’t seem very involved, no matter what Michael Landon in the TV series *Highway to Heaven* might have to say about it. The idea of angels as being a product of literature, of our writing, may even prove ironically apt, considering that the human patriarch Enoch (who later became an angel himself) was, according to the 153 B.C.E. Jewish pseudepigraphical epic *The Book of Jubilees* (4.15-18), taught by the “watchers” the secret art of “writing, knowledge and wisdom” (*Pseudepigrapha* 18).

When I discovered I had written yet again about angels, this time a sick-bed sonnet to those metaphysical shards of light I admittedly knew very little about, I stepped-up my research into the phenomena of God’s messengers. I was pleased to discover that literary critics were still writing about the angelic hosts, as they had always seemed to me to be so typical, overdone, and slightly embarrassing as far as familiar spirits go—I’d much preferred something more exotic, like Lorca’s *duende*. Sadly, I think that angels have withered over time. Something dire happened to the lords of heaven between millenniums. Angels in the new millennium feel too reminiscent of gaudy badges with diamantes, self-help cards, teenage supernatural romance novels, or trashy $2 Shop statuettes with glitter peeling off. These angels of our time simply smack of tacky faded aphorism.
James Merrill encouraged anyone who so chose to make their own Ouija board yet I would not necessarily encourage any reader to begin to dip in the vast field of angelology. The endless collections of printed material regarding angels throughout the history of literature (and not quite literature) convinces me that the airy realm of the winged ones is a nonsensically diverse pleroma. In this contrasting and conflicting realm, the metaphor—the ineffable, if you like—is allowed to remain as such; there seems to be little or no real way to demonstrably, once and for all, reduce these spirits into safe and complete categorical definitions. I think Milton has a lot to answer for in giving us our idea of the winged ones, as does Dante, over and above the theologians. It seems most ancient theological writers of various secret doctrines, or even contemporary angelologists, are quite content to write for entire lifetimes on the topic without ever exiting the deliberately obfuscated or at least maddeningly metaphorical language of the ineffable. The early Christian Fathers—and other theologians the early Christian Fathers preferred not to own (such as Dionysius the Areopagite, known also as Pseudo-Dionysius)—might have tried to give shape to the angels’ etherealness, yet it seems that, lacking canonical biblical nomenclature for the airy beings, the learned ones, for the most part, sorted out their own categories and then argued amongst themselves as to the validity of their various particular schemes. Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy*, known as the first Christian attempt to classify angels and also as the core text that everyone from Thomas Aquinas to Doreen Virtue seems to have pilfered from, contains a hierarchy based on veiled and impenetrable claims. In this confusing volume Dionysius lays down his obscure litany of ineffable otherness, and succeeds in wrapping these opaque beings in further veils. In a section entitled “What the designation of ‘angel’ signifies” Dionysius claims that angels, “have the first and most diverse participation in the divine and they, in return, provide the first and most diverse revelations of hiddenness”; further claiming that “they have a preeminent right to the title of angel or messenger, since it is they who pass on to us these revelations which are so far
beyond us” (157). I exited Dionysius’ book with as much of an idea of angels as I had when I entered in to it. In my desperation, I almost turned to Doreen Virtue, but then decided to ask the poems instead.

In his essay concerning the abundant predominance of angelic beings in poetry of the 1990s “Awash with Angels,” Roger Gilbert says, “Angels are, after all, first and foremost, figures of mediation, travelling between distinct spheres while allowing each to communicate with the other. Yet they themselves are curiously blank and indeterminate, at least in their poetic incarnations” (246). I suppose this blankness might just be the attraction. Thinking about it, when I start using second person in my own poetry, it is never you I am addressing and it is barely even myself—perhaps it is always some sort of indeterminate daemon that might just be an angel. Perhaps I use second person to speak into the fiery nothingness that angels seem to me to represent. Certainly, when I speak directly to angels in poems such as “Porch Light” or “High Tea with The Muse,” something almost accusatory arrives in my tone, something I did not expect. I think this tone has something to do with my frustration with my lack of understanding as to what it is angels actually are, coupled with a sense of embarrassment that I have joined the literary hordes past and present who seem unreasonably obsessed with them, regardless.

In her poem “pitch,” from the 2011 collection *amphora*, Australian poet joanne burns writes:

i know an angel poem can be cliché
but every poet’s got an angel somewhere
cruising through their work even if they don’t
admit it; ruffle the leaves of any old anthology
and you’ll hear angels speaking through the dust (15)

Indeed, burns’ latest collection seems secretly cluttered with angels. They are quietly flooding through the text, leaving the trace signature of their wingtips in the very lettering. burns’ angels are perhaps a tad more casual-domestic than world-forming; again in “pitch” from amphora:

… but i don’t need one with that much
muscle or one from the top rank of the angel
hierarchy and i don’t want an angel with huge wings
that rustle, i need someone quiet who likes to dust and shop and
vacuum while i recline and dream up poems (15)

And in this same poem burns articulates my equally reticent approach to the angels:

there is an awkwardness a glibness in any
talk of angels, who wants to sounds naïve, perhaps
angels are just for the more reticent parts of ourselves
particle waves antennae those parts we can’t see (17)

In a curious parallel coincidence, throughout amphora nuclear energy is waiting alongside burns’ angels and mystical experiences with the numinous other. In “raft” there is:

no eulogising of celestial light
over the dark satanic  remember the brighter
than a thousand suns light the vandalic glow above
This light might be angels, but it might also be nuclear flashpoint. Perhaps angels exist inside the atom for burns also.

burns’ domesticated angels seem almost reminiscent of Graham’s “Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia”, from her 1997 collection *The Errancy*, who asks:

Shall I arrange the flowers again?
Shall I put them a little further to the left
Into the light?
Will that fix it? Will that arrange the thing? (1)

This busy, dizzy and frantic guardian angel finds itself increasingly flabbergasted with worry throughout the initial poem of *The Errancy*. It almost feels as though the angel is the poet—attempting to delineate, to comprehend, human existence through hurried arrangement. This collection contains, in one sense, an enquiry into the everyday reality of the poet’s struggle against and towards the varied everyday forms, including those belonging to what is disembodied, even the angel. This collection asks the question: how do we name that which we are surrounded by, that which is constantly making and unmaking us, that thing we could never really guess at, try as we might? I struggle through this same quest throughout the pages of *Porch Light*. For example, in sonnet seven of “Porch Light”: “You are doing it deliberately, jiggling these abstractions, these meaning-carrots, / before our puny brains. Say what you mean to say, Watcher, is this all? Here? This/ everymorning dying?” (9-11).
Graham’s *The Errancy* explores the idea of angelic struggle through a series of overt “Guardian Angel of…” poems, yet the same theme can be found echoing throughout most of the poems in the collection. Jacob’s wrestling-double angel makes an appearance in perhaps the most haunting and frustrated exploration of desire in *The Errancy*, “The Scanning,” which contains various repetitions and riffs on the line: “Jacob waiting and the angel didn’t show” (7). Longing seems to be the key: “*Our* plan… To get the beauty of it hot” (8). And yet the poem is frustrated by a constant sense of absence: “a mess/ of conflicting notions” (9); a series of narrow misses, and the inevitable mental wrestling which can only create “an architecture of mockery, /a self-portrait of the unmargined thing by the margined thing” (9). The confusion of intertwined bodies is everywhere: “The angel was on the telephone. / No, Jacob was on the telephone” (9). Forrest Gander, in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, claims, “[Graham’s] treatment of the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel becomes paradigmatic of man’s encounter, fraught by miscommunication, with the other – both the human and divine other” (75). Gander argues that Graham’s quest throughout this collection is centred on “the struggle to leaven fatigue and despair with feeling, to reawaken the full possibilities of being” (75), which would seem to drag this poet into Rilkean landscapes, into the belly of the ancient watching beast.

In his e-review of *The Errancy*, Eric Lorberer makes the astute claim: “[Graham’s] angels bear little resemblance to the millennium conjured angels that litter the new age section of the bookstore. Charged with watching over such ideas as “the Little Utopia,” “Self-Knowledge,” and “Point of view,” they sadly articulate their worries and limits.” Perhaps the most intense and disheartened Guardian Angel of Graham’s collection: “The Guardian Angel of Not Feeling,” begins “As where a wind blows. / I can teach you that. /
The form of despair we call the ‘world’” (46). This same angel asks, “Do you wish to come with me?” (46) into what we can assume is heavenly perspective, which would seem to be the penultimate experience for the poet and, indeed, the conclusion of Graham’s quest in this collection. The angelic invitation is fraught, even dangerous, however. For even while the angel is all too eager to expound the idea of “happiness – incorruptible whole/ how soothing – so real” (46), at the end of all this gazing into divine slant, and the meticulous examination of the body, all that remains of heavenly perspective, and even the speaker, is annihilation: “the tiny heart/ mouthing and mouthing its crisp inaudible black zeros out” (47).

The guardian angels here are patterns of thought and necessary ends. They seem to me to represent a type of yearning for obliteration, an immense brokenness, and even an apocalypse. The angels who haunt Graham’s poems ache to meet up; finally to understand, to unscramble the myriad processes of human be-ing. Naturally this seeking is futile, and still it continues on into nothingness, crashing up again and again against what “The Guardian Angel of Self-Knowledge” would call “the wound we cannot medicate” (15). When Graham’s angels speak, they reveal themselves to be anything but silent watchers; instead they are over-lapping themselves in their chaotic figure eights, utterly busy, arcing out into the most impossibly wide questions. Even as they are performing such quotidain tasks as those of “The Guardian Angel of the Private Life”: “I stir the winter-grounded leaves/ up from the paths, nimbly, into a sheet of sun,” (20) they are all representatives of a quashed, pointless enquiry, fruitlessly examining the lives of the humans below. “The Guardian Angel of Self-Knowledge” finds itself crashing into inevitability when it finally asks:

who will they be when they get to the bottom of it
when they’ve stripped away the retrospect, when they’ve peeled away the
orphanhood, the shimmering merriments of consolation?

How will they feel the erasures erase them?

Who will they resemble when they’re done with resemblance? (15)

The only way out of the mire of this questioning and profuse philosophical enquiry,
the way through the terrible necessity (assuming there can be one), seems to always lie in
embodied human action. For the endless list making envisaged by “The Guardian Angel
of the Private Life,” the remedy is simple: “Oh put it down” (22). For Jacob, wrestling, the
response is “look up!” (10), and even the very busy initial angel of “the Little Utopia” faces
the window and says, “let us look out again”(3). In the final poem of the collection: “Of
the Ever-Changing Agitation in the Air”, dancing, being extremely and utterly embodied,
seems to be the key to attempting some sort of “Liberty” (109). To continue moving about,
even in the midst of all this apocalyptic enquiry (the attempt to catch wind in a net, as the
Wyatt epigraph to the collection suggests), seems to Graham to be the only competent
response for the human in touch with these thought-angels. I have a similar response in
my poem “Porch Light”; though like Graham, I would be hesitant to frame it in glory, or
even say it was liberating. I put it this way: “moving onwards over ones that birthed the
whole bloody mess is all we know” (5.14).

While there is an embodied solution for humanity, there is a parallel problematic
despair, and hunger for embodiment surrounding these heavenly hosts. We’ve all heard
the holy rumours (cinema will show us, even if we’ve never come across a holy text) about
angels yearning for embodiment, and being immensely jealous of humanity. I personally
fear we ground-dwellers may have evoked this notion to oppose our own longing for
airiness. Yet in “The Guardian Angel of Point-of-View” Graham explores the melancholy desire of the disembodied:

Thirst,
because I’m never wholly in creation,

unlike these I am compelled to witness, there, everywhere –

(any skull will do) –

seizing all too easily all that I split apart,

emptiness’s vast ripe fruit (78)

Graham’s quest into her own inner angel (one can easily imagine the reflective poet engaged in an endless act of witnessing) and of course into the imagined perspective of the imagined angel, which takes place in what Forrest Gander calls “another rough night at the end of century that has seen the failure of many utopian dreams” (80), utterly exhausts her. It seems that embodiment in the fallen world, coupled with that quest into the angelic perspective the poetry demands, in the end tires, to the point of defeat, the poet straddling both worlds. In her notes on the poem “Emergency” Graham admits to being influenced by this passage from Emmanuel Levinas’ *Existence and Existents*: “[w]hat is absolute in the relationship between existence and the existent, in an instant, consists in the mastery the existent exercises on existence, but also in the weight of existence on the existent… In the *Fatigue* of the subject inescapably burdened with itself, weighed down by its own materiality” (*Errancy* 112). In the poem “That Greater Than Which Nothing” absolutely everything is exhausted:

Even the plenitude is tired of the magnanimous, disciplined,

beached eye in
its thrall. Even the accuracy
is tired – the assimilation tired –
of entering the mind.
The reader is tired.
I am so very tired. (50)

I am also “so very tired” when it comes to existing inside my own body, yet attempting to unravel the angelic, to straighten out the folds of those heavy, multifaceted wings. It is not as beneficial or sublime as it might sound. One of my favourite films is Wim Wenders’ Wings of Desire; my attraction to the angelic has always been more about seeking my own negation and haunting rather than a warm, Judeo-Christian/New Age guardianship. Exploring the immense privilege of embodiment, while aching, perhaps, for disembodiment, for the end of blood and brains, does leave one with a sense of inevitable emptiness.

Yet I continue to pursue the quest to define angels through poetry. Even if I name angels as ‘dark matter’ in my poems, or equate them with some quark pattern I’ve read about in one of those piles of popular science books, it is still that same gust of missing wing beat I seek out. It is a draining restlessness, this ache for the ineffable other. No doubt this restlessness is reflected back at us from that same unknown—that other we create to contrast ourselves against bounces back this same desire for what we are not. Throughout the sonnet sequence “Porch Light” I become obsessed with this need to know what is not self, balanced against the other’s need to know what is only mine. In sonnet five of “Porch Light” I wrestle with this exchange, unravelling my own perceived fears of both being embodied (this seems to reveal itself as a fear of blood: I had witnessed far too much of my own lost blood and had suffered through that odd exchange of being filled up
with another’s blood) and that ineffable opposite, the fear of being not embodied (as I almost was). I dissect this fear sideways, trying to (perhaps unsuccessfully) wrap my insecurities in a theosophical and psychological questioning: “We wonder why you want to exchange pulsating white for toffee apple sticky. / We don’t think you would if you really knew what it meant” (5.6-7). And later in that same sonnet (again addressed to the angels, which in this case might just be my own sense of im/mortality): “Our red warmth runs cold against all your white. We have always been afraid of this” (5.14).

What I liked about James Merrill, I realised at some point into reading The Changing Light, was that he was writing about angels when it was utterly uncool to do so. The last instalment of The Changing Light was published in 1982, right in the thick of post-modernity. Indeed, all instalments of the poem had been written in the post-war period of American literature when the secular was the new black. If I wanted to place myself inside a similar context I could say that I was writing about angels when it had once again become uncool, or at least outdated: by 2010, the angel fad had mostly moved on, or had been absorbed in greater categories of supernatural fiction, overshadowed by renewed interest in vampires, fairies and werewolves. If there are angels in our contemporary literature, they are now of the more suave, fallen kind.

Of course Merrill invokes the more dramatic aspects of the angelic realms when he spends time communing with the fallen angels throughout The Changing Light. The voices that begin to speak in the opening sections of Mirabell are thought by David Jackson to be “devils… fallen angels” (114). Indeed, the beings, who call themselves “THE BAD ANGELS” (119), are akin to the darker forces of cosmology, describing themselves as a product of “NEGATIVE ENERGY THE BLACK HOLE” (113), recognisable as “ANTIMATTER” (120). These fallen angels originate from spaces of denial, claiming
always the negative—there is a radical otherness at the bat-angels’, thus the poem’s, source. They claim to “SPEAK FROM WITHIN THE ATOM” (113) and thus are sub-atomic, breaking out from that magic space which (it was thought) could not be broken down.

Paradoxically enough, these fallen angels have an obvious distaste for radiation and nuclear weaponry, even as they are composed of these sinister radioactive particles themselves. They frighten DJ who, in the opening sections of Mirabell, has to be asked, near begged, to begin the Ouija sessions again, after stating: “let’s stop right now” (114).

“WE USE WORDS WHEN WE SPEAK WORDS CANNOT EXPRESS SUCH POWER” (113) claim the fallen, from the outset of Mirabell, revealing once again the inherent negation in the core of their meaning. And the archangels of Scripts for the Pageant are no more forthcoming with any analysis of their genesis. The scribe and hand (naturally, though perhaps curiously, considering the many unbelievable characters of the long-poem) have moments of doubting that the archangels can possibly be what they say they are. “But these are real powers would you say, / These angels,” (345) DJ asks the spirit of W. H. Auden in a moment of curious doubt. “I BELIEVE WE SHALL DISCOVER/ THEIR POWERS ARE IN US AS MUCH AS OVER. / SO VERY BEAUTIFUL, WHICHEVER WAY” (345) comes the reply.

Throughout the entire epic it is interesting to note that these fallen-angelic and angelic beings that demand “WE MUST HAVE POEMS OF SCIENCE” (113), and set Merrill on this all too important task, which involves the scribing of the many paradoxical and opaque lessons of Scripts, constantly avoid direct conveyance of their essential message. They are quite unscientific in speech and action, and while they set up their analysis with a convincing enough hypothesis and stated aim, they utterly avoid the results and conclusion section of their lab experiment. Indeed, this constant paradox and negation prompts
Kuberski to state that the poem is “based on the absence of all grounds, selves and even words – for the alphabet and its numberless possible combinations are the foundations of Merrill’s prophecy” (243). When dictating the messages the fallen angels are certainly other to Merrill’s writing self—always else, at any stage distancing themselves from ready interpretation and constantly disentangling themselves from meaning.

In “Telling Stories Again” Brian McHale digs up the subtext of Merrill’s epic perspective shifts by claiming: “Merrill laces his revelations with expressions of skepticism and subjects them to constant revision, such that each hard-won understanding is liable to be displaced by a fresh one, and 'truth' is never allowed to stand still for a moment” (260). The angels, it seems, are greedy—they want all meanings and all alleged truths to bear witness to their message, and all at once. Furthermore, they seem to desire a deliberate misreading of their meaning. This, to my mind, seems typical of the mythical beasts and it is a central theme of my poem “Porch Light,” the last sonnet of which pleads, “Say what you mean to say, Watcher” (7.9-10). McHale further elaborates that “what makes the modernist legacy treacherous for postmodernists… is the loss of surface narrative in the modernist long poem, the dissolution of its 'narrative glue' is compensated for by the persistence of narrative at another level” (251). Some central story, for McHale at least, some meaningful angelic message, even amongst all this obfuscation, continues somewhere. It simply must. And that place, that other level, I would unabashedly maintain, is on the pinhead where these figures still dance: evading distinctions, meaning all.
There is no one thought-fragment remaining isolated in my mind with which to construct a concluding narrative or parting paragraph about my visit to James Merrill House, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, poems of science and angels and the effect of all of this on my own collection *Porch Light*. When I was leaving James Merrill House, I felt unfulfilled and mouse-like. Couldn’t I have asked for more, wasn’t there something else I needed to discover? Yet after arriving home, I found myself inspired to write pages and
pages of text on the poet, his house, and the thematic concerns branching out of The Changing Light. And, of course, my visit to the house prompted many of the poems in my manuscript Porch Light. Perhaps being bold enough to journey to the house changed very little about my own poetic practice, perhaps it has slightly altered the construction of every poem I’ve written since. Regardless, I know I would never have found Merrill’s poem so profound if I had not visited his space: if I had not set out to meet his ghost, and if I had not sought a real introduction with the man and his context. Also, I would never have investigated the angels, and why they tend to show up in my poetry, to the extent that I did if Merrill hadn’t led me to question them, or if his house hadn’t invited me to enquire even further. Possibly, I would never have experimented with the Ouija version of automatic writing based poetry if I hadn’t been so saddened by the fact that I did not attempt Ouija experimentation when I was in the house of Merrill, at the round table where he conducted his experiments. I’ve been noticing a lot more of a focus on nuclear energy in my poetry too, since becoming involved with the epic long-poem, though whether or not those fascinating doomsday poetics are all that successful or necessary to my own quest remains to be seen. The threat of nuclear warfare was certainly an important and necessary theme for Merrill and his epoch, however, and I can see many contemporary political reasons why it might continue to be so in mine.

Concerning the matter of agency and validity, I find myself coming to the conclusion that I don’t really mind whether or not James Merrill and David Jackson did actually reach out into the dead and beyond in the epic to receive their nuclear apocalypse message. I do mind, however, that DJ and JM claimed they did in fact meet with the dead, the angels and beyond into a declared Godhead. I am content with Merrill’s version of authorship, and with his particular displacement or fragmenting of self as author. In a similar manner to Merrill I’m happy to remain of “two minds”— hovering like an angel
that exists in the space between scepticism and credulity. I’m happy to state right now that I believe in the outrageous claims of this poem as much as I believe in Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Heavenly Hierarchy* and Yeats’ *A Vision*. In my own experiments with the Ouija version of automatic writing or spirit connection, I cannot surely say where the “messages” received are coming from and, like Merrill, I would probably end up contradicting myself if I attempted to.

In some sense, it all returns to image, both those astounding ones conjured out of Merrill’s epic, and on a much smaller scale, the photographs I took at his house. Glancing through the images now, I feel a strong sense of connection to Merrill’s space, bereft of him for some sixteen years: a sense of something not found in my more general holiday snaps of NYC, Connecticut and beyond. The house I had considered my friend while beginning to read *The Changing Light* seems to have actually become so, and the only regret lingering is that I did not spend more time sitting on Merrill’s day bed, rifling through the personal papers and various lists that still clutter the place. Perhaps I didn’t linger too long (or grab the Ouija board) not only from a sense of propriety, but also out of a certain fear. DJ and JM didn’t always have a good time with their ghosts, and it seems that all that haunting, while being a beautiful binding tool for the scribe and hand while they were constantly at it, left a sad sense of emptiness when the sessions ended. The great romance of the hand and the scribe, which is arguably at the very core of the long-poem, did come to a very sad end when the experiments stopped. My own brief, vague attempts to write poetry via such a portal have, thus far, proved not only frustrating, confusing, and obfuscating, but also strangely all-consuming. It feels as though one could get truly and utterly sucked into the vast otherlands: those worlds either created by the psyche or by the spirits. It feels like one could start preferring these spaces to the here and now. The frightening thought is that the experimenter could in fact find a home there in the
otherlands and never truly return. The realms of the glorified dead; fallen angels and archangels, are, after all, so captivating, yet compared to the life of the living human, so eternally final.

While writing the mystic science-based poems contained in Porch Light has been an illuminating experience, I feel there is so much more to uncover, so many other words to unfurl, even under the blanket of poetry and the occult. I feel the greatest mysteries may lie not in the ether, but in the earth-bound human body. I don’t feel that I need my poetry to ultimately end up in spirit if that means exiting the embodied themes of this world entirely—I guess that’s why I have included so many poems in my manuscript that have little, or nothing, to do with the perceived higher glories. Instead, these poems find their glory in the here and now; the quotidian becomes the sublime. As the Robert Bly translation of the Sufi poet Kabir’s poem “Think while you are Alive” states: “What is found now, is found then. / If you find nothing now, / you will simply end up with an apartment in the City of Death” (12-13). While The Changing Light is glorious, eerie, beautiful, and worthy of every scribbling that ever grappled with its themes, there is still something to be said for the blessing of denying the revelations of angels, of being kept here and now, gloriously in the dark.
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