

James  
Merrill

CHRISTMAS TREE

To be  
Brought down at last  
From the cold sighing mountain  
Where I and the others  
Had been fed, looked after, kept still,  
Meant, I knew—of course I knew—  
That it would be only a matter of weeks,  
That there was nothing more to do.  
Warmly they took me in, made much of me,  
The point from the start was to keep my spirits up.  
I could assent to that. For honestly,  
It did help to be wound in jewels, to send  
Their colors flashing forth from vents in the deep  
Fragrant sables that cloaked me head to foot.  
Over me then they wove a spell of shining—  
Purple and silver chains, eavesdripping tinsel,  
Amulets, milagros: software of silver,  
A heart, a little girl, a Model T,  
Two staring eyes. The angels, trumpets, BUD and BEA  
(The children's names) in clownlike capitals,  
Somewhere a music box whose tiny song  
Played and replayed I ended before long  
By loving. And in shadow behind me, a primitive IV  
To keep the show going. Yes, yes, what lay ahead  
Was clear: the stripping, the cold street, my chemicals  
Plowed back into the Earth for lives to come—  
No doubt a blessing, a harvest, but one that doesn't bear,  
Now or ever, dwelling upon. To have grown so thin.  
Needles and bone. The little boy's hands meeting  
About my spine. The mother's voice:  *Holding up wonderfully!*  
No dread. No bitterness. The end beginning. Today's  
Dusk room aglow  
For the last time  
With candlelight.  
Faces love lit,  
Gifts underfoot.  
Still to be so poised, so  
Receptive. Still to recall, to praise.

1995  
2004