A few years ago I taught the semester’s final seminar in my graduate poetry course. This particular class was devoted to James Merrill. Somehow, unless it was my wishful thinking rather than an accurate observation, the students all seemed to rise to the level of articulate civility, of alertness and ingenuity, that characterized Merrill as a social presence during his lifetime and that indelibly distinguish his work as well.

The Merrill poem we happened to spend the most time on in that last class was “Days of 1964.” Until I reread it for the course, I hadn’t thought about that poem in several years; and as often happens with good poems after a hiatus, it struck me now with fresh force. Not only was “Days of 1964” still moving, many-layered, and beautiful, but like many of the poems that had been coming to my aid since my husband’s dementia had begun to change our lives, it seemed weirdly apposite. “Days of 1964” is a poem that reminisces about a time (obviously), a place, and a love affair; and it is also a poem about love itself, or rather, since the poem has a distinctly allegorical tenor, I should say about Love.

Why, in this difficult spring, would a love poem speak to me so urgently? Maybe because the poem was filling what my father used to enjoy calling a much-needed gap. For quite a while now, love has been in short supply.

When poems speak to us freshly, we notice lines that somehow passed us by before or we read familiar lines with a new emphasis. For me, in that final seminar, it was the last stanzas of “Days of 1964” that bloomed like a lavish new flower, especially the lines I italicize.
Forgive me if you read this.
(And may Kyria Kleo,
Should someone ever put it into Greek
And read it aloud to her, forgive me, too.)
I had gone so long without loving,
I hardly knew what I was thinking.

Where I hid my face, your touch, quick, merciful,
Blindfolded me. A god breathed from my lips.
If that was illusion, I wanted it to last long;
To dwell, for its daily pittance, with us there,
Cleaning and watering, sighing with love or pain . . .

The speaker apologizes to the lover who has occasioned the poem. He asks forgiveness not only for telling an indiscreet anecdote about Kleo, the cleaning lady, but also for some of his own trains of thought or fantasy. In addition, he ruefully justifies himself for any extravagant behavior on the grounds that he hasn’t been in his right mind—has, indeed, been possessed (“a god breathed from my lips”). And the reason for this giddiness: “I had gone so long without loving, / I hardly knew what I was thinking.”

The love affair that serves as the poem’s occasion, theme, and backdrop has blown in like a rainstorm after a long drought—the whole neighborhood, we’re told at the outset, is “trembling still / In pools of the night’s rain”—and it has left the speaker, as he puts it toward the end of the poem, “falling, legs / Buckling, heights, depths, / Into a pool of each night’s rain.” Eros has swept all reason out of his head, a state of affairs that is fine with him: “If that was illusion, I wanted it to last long.”

Somehow, I’d never before caught the note of screwball comedy in that line—its charming, willed, knowing, love-struck goofiness. If I was besotted, the speaker concedes, it’s partly because I wanted to be; if I was living in a fool’s paradise, I wanted to stay there as long as I could. Besides, that “if” raises the possibility of a contrary-to-fact clause; maybe it wasn’t illusion at all. Maybe, just maybe, and for however long or short a time it lasted, this love was the real thing.

In May 2007, those were the parts of this poem that reached out to me. They didn’t apply with much logic or precision to my own life; the words didn’t quite fit, but the tune was right. The thirst, the loneliness, the habituation to emotional deprivation that marked the way I was living. . . . Somewhere, there
are pools of rain, ardor, and longing. Somewhere there is joy—illusory, maybe, but you want it to last.

I didn’t know what I wanted. I knew what I didn’t want. I didn’t want to go on living in this cage of silence, this dumb desert, with a man who no longer spoke to me. I had gone so long living in this deepening drought that I hardly noticed it any more; I didn’t visit my own thoughts much, until poems and dreams brought me face to face with them.