Poetry Readings for March 29, 2016

"Hummingbirds" - Mary Oliver

The female, and two chicks, each no bigger than my thumb, scattered, shimmering

in their pale-green dresses; then they rose, tiny fireworks, into the leaves and hovered;

then they sat down, each one with dainty, charcoal feet – each one on a slender branch – and looked at me.

I had meant no harm, I had simply climbed the tree for something to do on a summer day, not knowing they were there, ready to burst the ledges of their mossy nest

and to fly, for the first time, in their sea-green helmets, with brisk, metallic tails – each tullied wing, with every dollop of flight, drawing a perfect wheel across the air. Then, with a series of jerks, they paused in front of me and, dark-eyed, stared – as though I were a flower – and then, like three tosses of silvery water, they were gone. Alone, in the crown of the tree,

I went to China, I went to Prague; I died, and was born in the spring; I found you, and loved you, again.

Later the darkness fell and the solid moon like a white pond rose. But I wasn’t in any hurry.

Likely I visited all the shimmering, heart-stabbing questions without answers before I climbed down.

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“The Black Snake” – Mary Oliver

When the black snake
flashed onto the morning road,
and the truck could not swerve--
death, that is how it happens.

Now he lies looped and useless
as an old bicycle tire.
I stop the car
and carry him into the bushes.

He is as cool and gleaming
as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet
as a dead brother.
I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking
about death: its suddenness,
its terrible weight,
its certain coming. Yet under

reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones
have always preferred.
It is the story of endless good fortune.
It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.
It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward
happily all spring through the green leaves before
he came to the road.

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“August” – Mary Oliver

Our neighbor, tall and blonde and vigorous, the mother of many children, is sick. We did not know she was sick, but she has come to the fence, walking like a woman who is balancing a sword inside of her body, and besides that her long hair is gone, it is short and, suddenly, gray. I don’t recognize her. It even occurs to me that it might be her mother. But it’s her own laughter-edged voice, we have heard it for years over the hedges.

All summer the children, grown now and some of them with children of their own, come to visit. They swim, they go for long walks at the harbor, they make dinner for twelve, for fifteen, for twenty. In the early morning two daughters come to the garden and slowly go through the precise and silent gestures of T’ai Chi.

They all smile. Their father smiles too, and builds castles on the shore with the children, and drives back to the city, and drives back to the country. A carpenter is hired—a roof repaired, a porch rebuilt. Everything that can be fixed.

June, July, August. Every day, we hear their laughter. I think of the painting by van Gogh, the man in the chair. Everything wrong, and nowhere to go. His hands over his eyes.

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“Daisies” – Mary Oliver

It is possible, I suppose that sometime
we will learn everything
there is to learn: what the world is, for example,
and what it means. I think this as I am crossing
from one field to another, in summer, and the
mockingbird is mocking me, as one who either
knows enough already or knows enough to be
perfectly content not knowing. Song being born
of quest he knows this: he must turn silent
were he suddenly assaulted with answers. Instead
oh hear his wild, caustic, tender warbling ceaselessly
unanswered. At my feet the white-petalled daisies display
the small suns of their center piece, their - if you don't
mind my saying so - their hearts. Of course
I could be wrong, perhaps their hearts are pale and
narrow and hidden in the roots. What do I know?
But this: it is heaven itself to take what is given,
to see what is plain; what the sun lights up willingly;
for example - I think this
as I reach down, not to pick but merely to touch -
the suitability of the field for the daisies, and the
daisies for the field.

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“Oxygen” – Mary Oliver

Everything needs it: bone, muscles, and even, while it calls the earth its home, the soul. So the merciful, noisy machine

stands in our house working away in its lung-like voice. I hear it as I kneel before the fire, stirring with a

stick of iron, letting the logs lie more loosely. You, in the upstairs room, are in your usual position, leaning on your
	right shoulder which aches all day. You are breathing patiently; it is a beautiful sound. It is your life, which is so close to my own that I would not know where to drop the knife of separation. And what does this have to do with love, except everything? Now the fire rises and offers a dozen, singing, deep-red roses of flame. Then it settles to quietude, or maybe gratitude, as it feeds as we all do, as we must, upon the invisible gift: our purest, sweet necessity: the air.”