

Circle of Voices - Mary Oliver
Wednesday, April 15 at 6:30pm

When Death Comes

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.
When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

A Visitor

My father, for example,
who was young once
and blue-eyed,
returns
on the darkest of nights

to the porch and knocks
wildly at the door,
and if I answer
I must be prepared
for his waxy face,
for his lower lip
swollen with bitterness.
And so, for a long time,
I did not answer,
but slept fitfully
between his hours of rapping.
But finally there came the night
when I rose out of my sheets
and stumbled down the hall.
The door fell open

and I knew I was saved
and could bear him,
pathetic and hollow,
with even the least of his dreams
frozen inside him,
and the meanness gone.
And I greeted him and asked him
into the house,
and lit the lamp,
and looked into his blank eyes
in which at last
I saw what a child must love,
I saw what love might have done
had we loved in time.

The Uses of Sorrow

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

Fletcher Oak by Mary Oliver

There is a tree here so beautiful it even has a name.
Every morning, when it is still dark, I stand under its branches.
They flow from the thick and silent trunk. One can't begin to imagine their weight.
Year after year they reach,
they send out smaller and smaller branches, and bunches of flat green
leaves to touch the light.

Of course this has consequences.
Every year the oak tree fills with fruit.
Just now, since it is September,
the acorns are starting to fall.

I don't know if I will ever write another poem.
I don't know if I am going to live for a long time yet, or even for a while.

But I am going to spend my life wisely.
I'm going to be happy and frivolous and useful.
Every morning, in the dark, I gather a few acorns and imagine, inside of them,
the pale oak trees.
In the spring, when I go away,
I'll take them with me, to my own country, which is a land of sun and
restless ocean and moist woods.
And I'll dig down,
I'll hide each acorn in a cool place in the black earth,
to rise like a slow and beautiful poem; to live along time.

Singapore

In Singapore, in the airport,
A darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.

Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together,
and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps,
with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and
fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.
If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course, it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
The way her smile was only for my sake; I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

The Mango

One evening I met the mango.
At first there were four or five of them
in a bowl.
They looked like stones you find
in the rivers of Pennsylvania
when the waters are low.
That size, and almost round.
Mossy green.
But this was a rich house, and clever too.
After salmon and salads,
mangoes for everyone appeared on blue plates,
each one cut in half and scored
and shoved forward from its rind, like an orange flower,
cubist and juicy.
When I began to eat
things happened.
All through the sweetness I heard voices,
men and women talking about something—
another country, and trouble.
It wasn't my language, but I understood enough.
Jungles, and death. The ships
leaving the harbors, their holds
filled with mangoes.
Children, brushing the flies away
from their hot faces
as they worked in the fields.
Men, and guns.
The voices all ran together
so that I tasted them in the taste of the mango,
a sharp gravel in the flesh.
Later, in the kitchen, I saw the stones
like torn-out tongues
embedded in the honeyed centers.
They were talking among themselves—
family news,
a few lines of a song