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What Might Surprise Mary?

Sandra Sylvia Nelson

IN 1989, MY HUSBAND AND I FOUND OUR NAMES ON A SCHEDULE saying we must entertain Mary Oliver one afternoon during her few days' visit to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. I was teaching and taking graduate courses at the time. My husband and I didn't know what to do with her: not enough time to go fishing, no money to take her to a restaurant. I called her and asked what she wanted to do. She said she was being fed right before we got her, so we were to “surprise” her.

What might surprise Mary? We had no idea. We only knew her poems. But we figured she might like a trip to our house in the heart of Milwaukee's highest-murder-rate zip code. We picked her up in our rusted-out pickup, squeaking and rattling all the way to 18th and Vine. She was skinny, so she climbed into the middle seat, usually reserved for children. I watched her look out the windows at a different kind of wildlife than she was used to. We drove past burned-out mattress springs used as fencing, porches balancing on two knock-kneed pillars and dangling gutters with the drip. When we'd stop at a light, the throbbing of music seemed to vibrate more rust off our quarter panels. An old Maytag washer stood on the corner grassy lot as we turned onto 18th. Mary took everything in without comment.

At the house I had prepared two “Mary Oliver pies”: an apple pie made from fresh apples and a cherry made from canned cherries. She was indeed surprised when I told her we were having “Mary Oliver pies” and coffee. I showed her the pies with her name punched into the tops, the holes serving as the vents. Then we told her stories about the neighborhood as well as about our neighbors.

She was relaxed, never needing to rush her words. She laughed easily, as if she were an old family member. She never made one critical remark about our house or unmatched silverware. She loved her pies and commented favorably on the flaky crusts. I explained how to make flaky crusts and gave her the recipes.

We should have talked about writing. But writing is already doing the talking, so why talk about talking? The pies, the coffee, and the bright afternoon sun warming us through were all we needed.

SANDRA SYLVIA NELSON has published widely, including in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Yankee*, *Tar River*, *The North American Review*, *The Iowa Review* and its anthology *Hard Choices*, and *Ms*.

Unraveling Lessons from Mary Oliver

Sarah Audsley

WINTER IS LONG THIS YEAR: FLURRIES TEST THE LOCALS INTO MAY; the plow guy makes too many visits up and down our long dirt driveway; I gamble taking off my snow tires in late March; on a bad night driving home after a shift at the restaurant, I nearly hit a birch tree fallen across the road, its slim whiteness blending in with the snow curtain. On January 17, 2019, just home after graduating from my MFA program, two and a half years of rigorous study and writing, I call my best friend and sob into the phone. Mary Oliver has died; there is no consoling me. I pull all of her books off my shelf, make a pile on the coffee table, light a candle, and hold vigil. A friend comes over, and we read Mary Oliver's poems out loud to each other, passing numerous collections back and forth. Why do I feel this way? Never have I felt this way about someone I never even met. . . . The candle doesn't comfort, but my friend, who presented me with my first collection, *New and Selected, Volume II*, much loved and dog-eared but somehow misplaced in the many moves from apartment to apartment throughout my 20s, says maybe Oliver is reunited now with her dog, Percy. What I know for certain is this: I have clung to Mary Oliver's words; they have helped me get through rough times,