A Tribute to Mary Oliver

Presented by Mass Poetry and WBUR in collaboration with Art Week

Thursday, May 2

Selected Poems read by Panelists

Helene Atwan, Krysten Hill, Susan Edwards Richmond and Nadia Colburn
The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

From House of Light

Selected by Susan Edwards Richmond
The Poet Goes to Indiana

I'll tell you a half-dozen things
that happened to me
in Indiana
when I went that far west to teach.
You tell me if it was worth it.

I lived in the country
with my dog—
part of the bargain of coming.
And there was a pond
with fish from, I think, China.
I felt them sometimes against my feet.
Also, they crept out of the pond, along its edges,
to eat the grass.
I'm not lying.
And I saw coyotes,
two of them, at dawn, running over the seemingly
unenclosed fields.
And once a deer, but a buck, thick-necked, leaped
into the road just—oh, I mean just, in front of my car—
and we both made it home safe.
And once the blacksmith came to care for the four horses,
or the three horses that belonged to the owner of the house,
and I bargained with him, if I could catch the fourth,
he, too, would have hooves trimmed
for the Indiana winter,
and apples did it,
and a rope over the neck did it,
so I won something wonderful;
and there was, one morning,
an owl
flying, oh pale angel, into
the hay loft of a barn,
I see it still;
and there was once, oh wonderful,
a new horse in the pasture,
a tall, slim being—a neighbor was keeping her there—
and she put her face against my face,
put her muzzle, her nostrils, soft as violets,
against my mouth and my nose, and breathed me,
to see who I was,
a long quiet minute—minutes—
than stamped feet and whisked tail
and danced deliciously into the grass away, and came back.
She was saying, so plainly, that I was good, or good enough.
Such a fine time I had teaching in Indiana.

From Why I Wake Early

Selected by Helene Atwan
Doesn't Every Poet Write a Poem About Unrequited Love?

The flowers
I wanted to bring to you,
wild and wet
from the pale dunes

and still smelling
of the summer night
and still holding a moment or two
of the night crickets

humble prayer,
would have been
so handsome
in your hands—

so happy—I dare to say it—
in your hands—
yet your smile
would have been nowhere

and maybe you would have tossed them
onto the ground,
or maybe, for tenderness,
you would have taken them

into your house
and given them water
and put them in a dark corner
out of reach.

In matters of love
of this kind
there are things we long to do
but must not do.

I would not want to see
your smile diminished.
And the flowers, anyway,
are happy just where they are,

on the pale dunes,
above the cricket's humble nest,
under the blue sky
that loves us all.

From *Thirst*

Selected by Helene Atwan
Dogfish

Some kind of relaxed and beautiful thing
kept flickering in with the tide
and looking around.
Black as a fisherman’s boot,
with a white belly.

If you asked for a picture I would have to draw a smile
under the perfectly round eyes and above the chin,
which was rough
as a thousand sharpened nails.

And you know
what a smile means,
don’t you?

I wanted the past to go away, I wanted
to leave it, like another country; I wanted
my life to close, and open
like a hinge, like a wing, like the part of the song
where it falls
down over the rocks: an explosion, a discovery;
I wanted
to hurry into the work of my life; I wanted to know,

whoever I was, I was
alive
for a little while.

It was evening, and no longer summer.
Three small fish, I don’t know what they were,
huddled in the highest ripples
as it came swimming in again, effortless, the whole body
one gesture, one black sleeve
that could fit easily around
the bodies of three small fish.

Also I wanted
to be able to love. And we all know
how that one goes,
don’t we?

Slowly
the dogfish tore open the soft basins of water.

You don’t want to hear the story
of my life, and anyway
I don’t want to tell it, I want to listen
to the enormous waterfalls of the sun.

And anyway it’s the same old story — —
a few people just trying,
one way or another,
to survive.

Mostly, I want to be kind.
And nobody, of course, is kind,
or mean,
for a simple reason.

And nobody gets out of it, having to
swim through the fires to stay in
this world.

And look! look! look! I think those little fish
better wake up and dash themselves away
from the hopeless future that is
bulging toward them.

And probably,
if they don’t waste time
looking for an easier world,
they can do it.

From *Dream Work*

Selected by Krysten Hill
Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

From *Dream Work*

Selected by Krysten Hill
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.

From *The House of Light*

Selected by Nadia Colburn
The Plum Trees

Such richness flowing
through the branches of summer and into
the body, carried inward on the five
rivers! Disorder and astonishment
rattle your thoughts and your heart
cries for rest but don’t
succumb, there’s nothing
so sensible as sensual inundation. Joy
is a taste before
it’s anything else, and the body
can lounge for hours devouring
the important moments. Listen,
the only way
to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it
into the body first, like small
wild plums.

From *American Primitive*

Selected by Nadia Colburn