



**With Christ in the School of Creation: A Review of
Thirst, by Mary Oliver (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006)**

In the very first line of the very first poem of Mary Oliver's new collection of poetry, entitled *Thirst*, she says "My work is loving the world" (Messenger). In the very last poem of this slim volume, she says "Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart" (Thirst). These poems bookend a new affirmation of faith for Oliver: For the first time in her life, at the age of 71, she is writing from an apparent Christian framework, loving the world of marshes, ponds, beaches, bears and dogs *and* the Creator of all these things she has so long loved.

These are poems that celebrate the world of Creation, that praise the Creator, that walk through grief (Oliver lost her long time partner and agent, Molly Malone Cook, in 1995) into resolute hope, that point beyond nature and grief to the Giver of all. Her love of nature might be seen in the way she addresses it as addressing a good friend, as in "When I Am Among the Trees," where she says

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."*

The light flows from their branches.

*And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."*

There are poems about ribbon snakes, roses, a great moth, otters, Percy (her dog), and that great conversation ("And still I believe you will/ come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,/ the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea goose, know/ that really I am speaking to you" (Making the House Ready for the Lord).

And then there is grief. I loved this one (Percy (Four)), so simple, so true, about doing what need be done as we wait for grief to pass and life to go on, moving faithfully yet mutely through each day:

I went to church.

*I walked on the beach
and played with Percy.*

*I answered the phone
and paid the bills.*

I did the laundry.

*I spoke her name
a hundred times.*

*I knelt in the dark
and said some holy words.*

*I went downstairs,
I watered the flowers,
I fed Percy.*

That's it. No emotion here. She just did what needed to be done, including praying, though she was in that state where you seem to have lost all feeling.

In the end though, after the poems of creation and poems of grief, what stand out are the affirmations of faith. In "Coming to God: First Days," she says "Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake./ I would climb the highest tree/ to be that much closer." In "Six Recognitions of the Lord," she celebrates "everywhere the luminous sprawl of gifts,/ the hospitality of the Lord and my/ inadequate answers as I row my beautiful, temporary body/ through this water-lily world." And, at last, in "Thirst," she writes "Another morning and I wake with thirst/ for the goodness I do not have. I walk/ out to the pond and all the way God has/ given us such beautiful lessons."

Mary Oliver thirsts for God. Some will disagree with her lifestyle (Molly Malone Cook was truly her life partner), but her faith seems real as does her love of the

world and her experience of grief. Those are things that must resonate with us, as we are human too.

Most helpful is the accessibility of these poems. Many people will be able to read and enjoy them. The language is simple yet elegant. The "space" in the poems created by their economy is an almost aural testimony to the awe with which she regards the life of the world and, now, the One who made it all.

I highly recommend this book of poetry. It's like walking through a room of Monet paintings: there's not much not to love. Use it to stimulate your own love of nature and of nature's God.