

A Summer Wandering

Written by Vivian Bikulege



Sometimes I need only to stand wherever I am to be blessed. — Mary Oliver, *It Was Early*

Summertime is a season like no other. Hot – hotter than ever – it speaks the language of fresh vegetables, ripened fruit, popsicles, and ice cream cones. In Beaufort, we find ourselves turning from Fourth of July fireworks to our annual Water Festival celebration. All are blessings as we cautiously move through months marked in a countdown toward the end of the hurricane season.

During the week of the Fourth, my family gathered at Fripp Island in the grand beachfront home of my brother and sister-in-law. It was a treat, a reunion of three generations pockmarked only by the absence of my dad and my mom's little white dog. One afternoon, my sister Stacie selected the Beach Boys on Pandora as background music to enjoy early evening pina coladas. When Chubby Checker sang the *Twist*, and she rotated her hips doing an imitation of my father dancing, it shocked me into the recognition of my father in my sister's face, a memory I will keep of this summer.

Earlier that day, on a morning drive down Highway 21 toward Hunting Island State Park, I strayed far away from beach music, popping a disc of Mary Oliver's poetry into the Ford Flex's CD player. I believe I have a minor obsession with Mary's take on nature and life. A 1984 Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry, Oliver caught me off guard as she read *Percy (Nine)* while I stared through my windshield at the flat stretch of road that navigates through marsh and palm

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forest

Wrapping her words around her little dog Percy, the poet teaches me something more than just a dog's tale. She agrees with Ralph Waldo Emerson that we need to live an "examined life," but she laments that sometimes there is just too much in her head to examine and her heart is too busy. And then, Mary considers her dog and explains to her listener that maybe Percy's *not thinking, not weighing anything, just running forward* may in fact be the answer. I think she may be right.

Time off of work with no deadline to be anywhere finally prompted me to pull into the cul-de-sac bordering a tidal creek that winds through the state park boundaries, a refuge I have passed by for over seven years. I stopped there to really listen as I watched a brown pelican rival any Olympic high diver in its quest for food. Mary read *Poppies* to me, a meditation on life and death where she uses the flowers as an orange-red testament to the fact that *loss is the great lesson*.

Oliver's voice, and tone, and cadence bring me to tears because I realize that I understand what she means when she talks about loss, and I need this cry to cool my cheeks and release the exhaustion of busyness. And then, as the pelican floats, a beak full with a trapped fish, the poet says,

...light is an invitation to happiness, and that happiness, when it's done right, is a kind of holiness, palpable and redemptive.

I stop crying and smile.

Summertime presents the excuse to lie in the grass and watch the clouds pass by. It's a time for drive-ins and bike rides, cook-outs and pool parties. When I was a kid, we would use my mother's clothes line to make tents out of bed spreads and "camp out," or at least hang out, until the street lights came on and we would have to go inside and get ready for bed. Summer was the time to catch lightening bugs that made your hands stink or dig up earthworms to go fishing.

The summer floats by like a warm tide, or the passing of an early evening rain shower, or the orbit of the blue moon that will close out this coming August as we roll into Labor Day, and autumn, and the quiet finale of another year. My dad always said, "Don't wish your life away." So instead I will look back, not forward like Percy this time, and remember warm summer afternoons sitting on Pennsylvania hillsides with my dad, hunting groundhogs, but really, just looking forward to a summertime ride home in our 1969 brown Pontiac Catalina with the windows rolled down, maybe eating a Milky Way, or drinking a can of pop, and just talking about the upcoming school year, and my friends, how we got skunked again, and how tough it is to grow up.

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I remember summers of blow up pools, hoses, sprinklers and squirt guns; a time when I could run around in my underpants and nothing else, or go outside in my baby doll pajamas because it was warm. I remember amusement parks and caramel popcorn, visits to the zoo, and our annual family vacations to the beach or lake.

In *Another Summer Begins*, the last poem of her collection titled *Evidence*, Mary Oliver asks, *How did it come to be that I am no longer young and the world that keeps time in its own way has just been born?*

She answers the question by putting on her boots and walking to an *unnamed, flowered corner of the pasture*

to sleep for the night. Sometimes the answers are quiet actions without words.

Enjoy these days of crickets and cicadas, dusk settling in later as she follows a lazy sun, and the unmistakable taste of a cold, liquid piece of bright red watermelon, full of seeds for spitting as far as you dare. And take the dare because the summer of 2012 is passing away and the best one can do is to look forward.

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