

**Introduction to *Meditations*, by Mary Oliver,  
Poetry Society of America National Chapbook Prize**

The truth comes to me only when I am alone, writes Joshua Poteat in “String Figures and How to Make Them,” section iii of the opening poem of his book, *Meditations*. How well and honestly he has named this, his first collection. For here we are the audience of what is clearly an inner voice, flowing forward, throwing out its lovely perceptions, its lyrical lines of praise, its wonderment, its pursuit of moments and places, past and present, where mystery’s veil for a moment sparks upward. Meditation, after all, is a complex idea, one of those—I say it again—outflowing words suggestive of more than simple thought, darker than pensive, deeper than reflective, closely associated with devotion. It holds no defined intent to discover answers or closure, though the desire for these may be the impetus. Or, it may be the stimulus of the world, and experience. Or, it may be one of the primary conditions of being alive. Or, it may be some combination of all of these. When we are young, what is the subject? Everything.

Nothing in this collection, no detail, is passed by casually, as though by merely existing it deserves to be paused upon, and observed exactly. As though, otherwise, the mediation would be diminished. I offer three examples from a plentitude.

*Today, the sky is the color of a pigeon’s throat...*

*...the night in its hammock swinging the grouse to sleep.*

*The first snow turns blue and sighs  
against the birches, the black willows,  
as it should...*

Ah, one more, so simple yet so effective:

*Ask me and I will tell you of the flowering tobacco leaves of my youth.*

It is a lyricism that reminds me of James Wright, and this I mean certainly as praise, when he employed, as I called it, an intensified vernacular—throwing me off my stride, gathering me to him by the detail of some earnest and often terrible beauty, in the easy language of our country with its sweet, oiled syntax—a presence of the common voice *in extremis*, as sometimes letters may be that carry vital news.

In this way *Meditations* is a dramatic book, a kind of word—or mood—theater. Poteat tells me things as if I were an audience but invisible. Or as if I were the moon. Yet something real passes between us, which is to say that the book is very good, that it leaves its mark.

Nor, of course, is everything sweet and lyrical. There is pleasure; also, there is scarifying memory. There is the world with its abundance of color, things, moods, people, history. There is the wound of being alive. And there is the hard salvation of lining up, briskly and well, the endless hot and tender words.