

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #214

January 2026

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Poetry for a New Year



From left, Mary Oliver, Brad Aaron Modlin, and Jack Gilbert

Last week, we ended a lengthy series of Book Notes “Classics” about autumn harvest festivals, the origins and backstories of classic Christmas carols, a short history of “The American Way of Christmas,” and concluded with some observations about Robert Burns’ “Auld Lang Syne” in which Burns exhorts us not to forget old times, old friends, and in remembering them to “tak a cup of kindnessse.”

Which I hope you did.

But now -- I almost said "tis" (that's the Burns' influence seeping in) -- it's time to set the "Classics" aside (at least for a while) and face the new year. I had originally intended to do that by sharing a new poet (or, at least, new to me) I found while sorting through the poetry shelves at Pressed, a local bookstore -- Brad Modlin.

This was going to be one of those short-short **Book Notes** in which I share a favorite poem or two by a favorite poet, but then I received an email from a friend in Cleveland sharing with me a post I had missed in the New York Times. So, this note will be a bit longer, but still under 2,000 words, including end notes and photo credits! Let's first set the scene for Modlin.

The article in the Times I had missed was about the trove of recordings the 92nd Street Y had just released of poets reading their own work at the Y's Unterberg Poetry Center in New York City. [1] It contains several great vignettes, such as Tom Wolfe talking about not fitting in, Arthur Miller noting the need to remember the possibility of catastrophe, and James Baldwin describing how an idea comes along and then not suddenly but almost suddenly there's this story "you gotta tell."

In that Times article, what struck me in our news and information -- fake and otherwise -- drenched times were clips about two of my favorite writers -- Joan Didion and Mary Oliver. They were very -- that's an understatement -- different people, but both touched on the same insight: the need to be **present-to-the-present**. As readers of these "Notes" know, I think the primary purpose of all art is to help us to be more **present-to-the-present**, or, using a phrase that has now sadly become hackneyed, to **be here now**. In our time, with our culture seemingly overwhelmed with the bleating and whining of an aged, petulant, and solipsistic adolescent, the need to be **present-to-the-present** acquires a sense of urgency.

For Didion, being **present-to-the-present** occurs only as an after-the-fact awareness resulting from the attention nailing impact of a catastrophe. It's that frisson -- that sudden, strong feeling; that emotional clutch -- that trauma induces that infuses much of her work with its signature neurotic energy. Granted, "her daughter's grave illness and the sudden death of her husband" would stun even the staunchest stoic, but Didion's awareness of the "ordinary," which constitutes almost all of life, seems only to blossom into consciousness as she, like the rest of us when "confronted with sudden disaster, focuses on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell." [2]

But it is those "unremarkable circumstances" -- those "ordinary moments" -- that are life.

If we miss them and are only alert to them when bludgeoned into awareness by catastrophe and disaster, then we've missed most of life. I think the hollowness that many sense at the center of much of Didion's work results from her having missed the "ordinary moments." Which is to say, results, in the final tallying, from her, distracted by the aberrant, having missed much about those "unremarkable circumstances" that make up her life and ours.

Fortunately, not everyone misses them. Three poets drawing our attention to the **present** are Mary Oliver, Jack Gilbert, and Brad Aaron Modlin, each of whom gifts us "notes" (or poems) to help us to remember not to forget, as I once wrote long ago, a summer lakeshore's breeze's "fine saltshaker sifting sound."

Mary Oliver said it better. You can hear her reading "Wild Geese" in the Times' article linked in the End Notes.

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. [3]

We've read more than a bit of both Oliver and Jack Gilbert these past five years in a number of **Book Notes**. I'll neither explicate their work nor say much about them I haven't already said in those **Book Notes**, but paying attention to the ordinary may never have been better "noted" than in Pittsburgh native Jack Gilbert's "Highlights and Interstices." Michiko referred to in the poem was Gilbert's wife who died from cancer.

Highlights and Interstices

We think of lifetimes as mostly the exceptional and sorrows. Marriage we remember as the children, vacations and emergencies. The uncommon parts. But the best is often when nothing is happening. The way a mother picks up the child almost without noticing and carries her across Waller Street while talking with that other woman. What if she could keep all of that? Our lives happen between the memorable. I have lost two thousand habitual breakfasts with Michiko. What I miss most about her is that commonplace I can no longer remember. [4]

In this Note's first or second paragraph, I began by saying I wanted to introduce you to a new poet I recently discovered. He is Brad Modlin, who I first found in an anthology "50 Poems to Open Your World" edited by Irish poet Padraig O Tuama. [5] Tuama offers a wonderful accompanying essay to each poem he includes; he mingles explication with his personal reflections in so fine a fashion the essay becomes a small work of art in its own right. As you know, that violates my sense that explication can kill a poem. I choose upon first, second, third and further readings until I think I've got it to let the poem speak for itself. Then, and only then, might I check to see what others have thought.

Modlin is that rare thing: a very readable academic poet. I say "rare," but in fact there is more than one but still not very many academic poets worthy of a second or third reading. Modlin is a professor of creative writing at the University of Nebraska, Kearney, where, as he says on his website, "he teaches undergraduates & grad students, coordinates the visiting writer's series, & keeps 'healthy' snacks in his office filing cabinet." [6]

Reading Tuama's choice of Modlin's work, I then purchased Modlin's collection of poems "Everyone at This Party Has Two Names," which begins with what I think one of the best short poems I have ever read helping one focus on the present: "What You Missed that Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade." In it, Modlin notes how one day a gifted teacher threw away the lesson plan and helped her students understand how to pay attention -- how to be **present-to-the-present.**

What You Missed that Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade

Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas,

how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer. She took questions on how not to feel lost in the dark.

After lunch she distributed worksheets that covered ways to remember your grandfather's

voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep without feeling you had forgotten to do something else —

something important — and how to believe the house you wake in is your home. This prompted

Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing how to chant the Psalms during cigarette breaks,

and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts are all you hear; also, that you have enough.

The English lesson was that *I am* is a complete sentence.

And just before the afternoon bell, she made the math equation look easy. The one that proves that hundreds of questions,

and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking for whatever it was you lost, and one person

add up to something. [7]

Remember: Mary Oliver's

"Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it." [8]



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“Brad Aaron Modlin,” at **Everyone At This Party Has Two Names: Brad Aaron Modlin** available at [Brad Aaron Modlin | Writer | Absent from Fourth Grade](#) accessed Dec. 9, 2025.
“Jack Gilbert,” [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

End Notes

1. Harris, Elizabeth A. and Aliza Aufrichtig, “*Joan Didion and Kurt Vonnegut Had Something to Say. We Have It on Tape*,” in **The New York Times** (Dec. 19, 2025) available at [Hear James Baldwin, E.E. Cummings, Mary Oliver, and More - The New York Times](#) accessed Dec. 22, 2025.
2. Ibid.
3. Oliver, Mary, “*Wild Geese*,” in **Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver** (New York: Penguin Press, A Division of Random House, 2017), p. 347.
4. Gilbert, Jack, “*Highlights and Interstices*,” in **Collected Poems** (New York: Knopf, 2017), p. 176.
5. O Tuama, Padraig. *50 Poems to Open Your World*. (New York: W.W. Norton, Co., 2023).
6. You can find this and other musings by Modlin at “**Brad Aaron Modlin**” available at [Brad Aaron Modlin | Writer | Absent from Fourth Grade](#) accessed Dec. 22, 2025.
7. Modlin, Brad Aaron, “*What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade*,” in **Everyone At This Party Has Two Names** (Cape Girardeau, MO: Southeast Missouri State University Press, 2016), p.13.
8. Oliver, Mary, “*Sometimes*,” in **Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver** (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), pp. 104-105.

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