2016 Poem: “The Juggler” (Richard Wilbur)

Prompt: Read carefully the following poem by Richard Wilbur, first published in 1949. Then, write an essay in which you analyze how the speaker describes the juggler and what that description reveals about the speaker. You may wish to consider poetic elements such as imagery, figurative language, and tone.

The Juggler

A ball will bounce, but less and less. It’s not
A light-hearted thing. It tests its own resilience.
Falling is what it loves, and the earth falls
So in our hearts from brilliance,
Settles and is forgot.
It takes a sky-blue juggler with five red balls

To shake our gravity up. Whee, in the air
The balls roll round, wheel on his wheeling hands,
Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres
Grazing his finger ends,
Cling to their courses there,
Swinging a small heaven about his ears.

But a heaven is easier made of nothing at all
Than the earth regained, and still and sole within
The spin of worlds, with a gesture sure and noble
He reaps that heaven in,
Landing it ball by ball,
And trades it all for a broom, a plate, a table.

Oh, on his toe the table is turning, the broom’s
Balancing up on his nose, and the plate whirls
On the tip of the broom! Damn, what a show, we cry.
The boys stamp, and the girls
Shriek, and the drum booms
And all comes down, and he bows and says good-bye.

If the juggler is tired now, if the broom stands
In the dust again, if the table starts to drop
Through the daily dark again, and though the plate
Lies flat on the table top,
For him we batter our hands
Who has won for once over the world’s weight.

From Ceremony and Other Poems (1950)
in Richard Wilbur, New and Collected Poems,