



POETRY FOUNDATION

Mary Oliver

1935–2019

<http://maryoliver.beacon.org/>

Mary Oliver was an “indefatigable guide to the natural world,” wrote Maxine Kumin in the *Women’s Review of Books*, “particularly to its lesser-known aspects.” Oliver’s poetry focused on the quiet of occurrences of nature: industrious hummingbirds, egrets, motionless ponds, “lean owls / hunkering with their lamp-eyes.” Kumin also noted that Oliver “stands quite comfortably on the margins of things, on the line between earth and sky, the thin membrane that separates human from what we loosely call animal.” Oliver’s poetry won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and a Lannan Literary Award for lifetime achievement. Reviewing *Dream Work* (1986) for the *Nation*, critic Alicia Ostriker numbered Oliver among America’s finest poets, as “visionary as [Ralph Waldo] Emerson.”

Mary Oliver was born and raised in Maple Hills Heights, a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. She would retreat from a difficult home to the nearby woods, where she would build huts of sticks and grass and write poems. She attended both Ohio State University and Vassar College, but did not receive a degree from either institution. As a young poet, Oliver was deeply influenced by Edna St. Vincent Millay and briefly lived in Millay’s home, helping Norma Millay organize her sister’s papers. Oliver is notoriously reticent about her private life, but it was during this period that she met her long-time partner, Molly Malone Cook. The couple moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the surrounding Cape Cod landscape has had a marked influence on Oliver’s work. Known for its clear and poignant observations and evocative use of the natural world, Oliver’s poetry is firmly rooted in place and the Romantic nature tradition. Her work received early critical attention; *American Primitive* (1983), her fifth book, won the Pulitzer Prize. According to Bruce Bennetin the

New York Times Book Review, *American Primitive*, “insists on the primacy of the physical.” Bennet commended Oliver’s “distinctive voice and vision” and asserted that the “collection contains a number of powerful, substantial works.” Holly Prado of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* also applauded Oliver’s original voice, writing that *American Primitive* “touches a vitality in the familiar that invests it with a fresh intensity.”

Dream Work (1986) continues Oliver’s search to “understand both the wonder and pain of nature” according to Prado in a later review for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. Ostriker considered Oliver “among the few American poets who can describe and transmit ecstasy, while retaining a practical awareness of the world as one of predators and prey.” For Ostriker, *Dream Work* is ultimately a volume in which Oliver moves “from the natural world and its desires, the ‘heaven of appetite’ ... into the world of historical and personal suffering. ... She confronts as well, steadily,” Ostriker continued, “what she cannot change.”

The transition from engaging the natural world to engaging more personal realms was also evident in *New and Selected Poems* (1992), which won the National Book Award. The volume contains poems from eight of Oliver’s previous volumes as well as previously unpublished, newer work. Susan Salter Reynolds, in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, noticed that Oliver’s earliest poems were almost always oriented toward nature, but they seldom examined the self and were almost never personal. In contrast, Oliver appeared constantly in her later works. But as Reynolds noted “this self-consciousness is a rich and graceful addition.” Just as the contributor for *Publishers Weekly* called particular attention to the pervasive tone of amazement with regard to things seen in Oliver’s work, Reynolds found Oliver’s writings to have a “Blake-eyed revelatory quality.” Oliver summed up her desire for amazement in her poem “When Death Comes” from *New and Selected Poems*: “When it’s over, I want to say: all my life / I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.”

Oliver continued her celebration of the natural world in her next collections, including *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (1999), *Why I Wake Early* (2004), *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2* (2004), and *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (2010). Critics have compared Oliver to other great American lyric poets and celebrators of nature, including

Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Walt Whitman. “Oliver’s poetry,” wrote *Poetry* magazine contributor Richard Tillinghast in a review of *White Pine* (1994) “floats above and around the schools and controversies of contemporary American poetry. Her familiarity with the natural world has an uncomplicated, nineteenth-century feeling.”

A prolific writer of both poetry and prose, Oliver routinely published a new book every year or two. Her main themes continue to be the intersection between the human and the natural world, as well as the limits of human consciousness and language in articulating such a meeting. Jeanette McNew in *Contemporary Literature* described “Oliver’s visionary goal,” as “constructing a subjectivity that does not depend on separation from a world of objects. Instead, she respectfully conferred subjecthood on nature, thereby modeling a kind of identity that does not depend on opposition for definition. ... At its most intense, her poetry aims to peer beneath the constructions of culture and reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness to celebrate the primitive, mystical visions that reveal ‘a mossy darkness – / a dream that would never breathe air / and was hinged to your wildest joy / like a shadow.’” Her last books included *A Thousand Mornings* (2012), *Dog Songs* (2013), *Blue Horses* (2014), *Felicity* (2015), *Upstream: Selected Essays* (2016), and *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (2017).

Mary Oliver held the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College until 2001. In addition to such major awards as the Pulitzer and National Book Award, Oliver received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She also won the American Academy of Arts & Letters Award, the Poetry Society of America’s Shelley Memorial Prize and Alice Fay di Castagnola Award.

Oliver lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and Hobe Sound, Florida, until her death in early 2019. She was 83.

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PRESS

~ STANLEY KUNITZ

I used to imagine him
coming from the house, like Merlin
strolling with important gestures
through the garden
where everything grows so thickly,
where birds sing, little snakes lie
on the boughs, thinking of nothing
but their own good lives,
where petals float upward,
their colors exploding,
and trees open their moist
pages of thunder —
it has happened every summer for years.

But now I know more
about the great wheel of growth,
and decay, and rebirth,
and know my vision for a falsehood.
Now I see him coming from the house —
I see him on his knees,
cutting away the diseased, the superfluous,
coaxing the new,
knowing that the hour of fulfillment
is buried in years of patience —
yet willing to labor like that
on the mortal wheel.

Oh, what good it does the heart
to know it isn't magic!
Like the human child I am
I rush to imitate —
I watch him as he bends
among the leaves and vines
to hook some weed or other;
even when I do not see him,
I think of him there
raking and trimming, stirring up
those sheets of fire
between the smothering weights of earth,
the wild and shapeless air.

Drawn Work, 1986

∞ 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.

Dream Work 1984

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

House of Light - 1990

MARY OLIVER

Of course, it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

THE KINGFISHER

The kingfisher rises out of the black wave
like a blue flower, in his beak
he carries a silver leaf. I think this is
the prettiest world—so long as you don't mind
a little dying, how could there be a day in your whole life
that doesn't have its splash of happiness?
There are more fish than there are leaves
on a thousand trees, and anyway the kingfisher
wasn't born to think about it, or anything else.
When the wave snaps shut over his blue head, the water
remains water—hunger is the only story
he has ever heard in his life that he could believe.
I don't say he's right. Neither
do I say he's wrong. Religiously he swallows the silver leaf
with its broken red river, and with a rough and easy cry
I couldn't rouse out of my thoughtful body
if my life depended on it, he swings back
over the bright sea to do the same thing, to do it
(as I long to do something, anything) perfectly.

MARY OLIVER

1992

HUMMINGBIRDS

The female, and the two chicks,
each no bigger than my thumb,
scattered,
shimmering

in their pale-green dresses;
then they rose, tiny fireworks,
into the leaves
and hovered;

then they sat down,
each one with dainty, charcoal feet—
each one on a slender branch—
and looked at me.

I had meant no harm,
I had simply
climbed the tree
for something to do

on a summer day,
not knowing they were there,
ready to burst the ledges
of their mossy nest

and to fly, for the first time,
in their sea-green helmets,
with brisk, metallic tails—
each tulle wing,

with every dollop of flight,
drawing a perfect wheel
across the air.
Then, with a series of jerks,

Hummingbirds 2

POETRY

they paused in front of me
and, dark-eyed, stared—
as though I were a flower—
and then,

like three tosses of silvery water,
they were gone.
Alone,
in the crown of the tree,

I went to China,
I went to Prague;
I died, and was born in the spring;
I found you, and loved you, again.

Later the darkness fell
and the solid moon
like a white pond rose.
But I wasn't in any hurry.

Likely I visited all
the shimmering, heart-stabbing
questions without answers
before I climbed down.

MARY OLIVER

9083 - Poetry Magazine

AT BLACK RIVER

All day
its dark, slick bronze soaks
in a mossy place,
its teeth,

a multitude
set
for the comedy
that never comes—

its tail
knobbed and shiny,
and with a heavy-weight's punch
packed around the bone.

In beautiful Florida
he is king
of his own part
of the black river,

and from his nap
he will wake
into the warm darkness
to boom, and thrust forward,

paralyzing
the swift, thin-waisted fish,
or the bird
in its frilled, white gown,

that has dipped down
from the heaven of leaves
one last time,
to drink.



POETRY FOUNDATION

Breakage

BY MARY OLIVER

I go down to the edge of the sea.
How everything shines in the morning light!
The cusp of the whelk,
the broken cupboard of the clam,
the opened, blue mussels,
moon snails, pale pink and barnacle scarred—
and nothing at all whole or shut, but tattered, split,
dropped by the gulls onto the gray rocks and all the moisture gone.
It's like a schoolhouse
of little words,
thousands of words.
First you figure out what each one means by itself,
the jingle, the periwinkle, the scallop
full of moonlight.

Then you begin, slowly, to read the whole story.

Source: *Poetry* (Poetry Foundation, 2003)

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Song for Autumn

Don't you imagine the leaves dream now
how comfortable it will be to touch
the earth instead of the
nothingness of the air and the endless
freshets of wind? And don't you think
the trees, especially those with
mossy hollows, are beginning to look for

the birds that will come — six, a dozen — to sleep
inside their bodies? And don't you hear
the goldenrod whispering goodbye,
the everlasting being crowned with the first
tuffets of snow? The pond
stiffens and the white field over which
the fox runs so quickly brings out
its long blue shadows. The wind wags
its many tails. And in the evening
the piled firewood shifts a little,
longing to be on its way.

New + Selected - 2004

Children, It's Spring

And this is the lady
whom everyone loves,
Ms. Violet
in her purple gown

or, on special occasions,
a dress the color
of sunlight. She sits
in the mossy weeds and waits

to be noticed.
She loves dampness.
She loves attention.
She loves especially

to be picked by careful fingers,
young fingers, entranced
by what has happened
to the world.

We, the older ones,
call it Spring,
and we have been through it
many times.

But there is still nothing
like the children bringing home
such happiness
in their small hands.

Mew and Selected Poems, V.1, 2005

FORGIVE ME

Angels are wonderful but they are so, well, aloof.
It's what I sense in the mud and the roots of the
trees, or the well, or the barn, or the rock with
its citron map of lichen that halts my feet and
makes my eyes flare, feeling the presence of some
spirit, some small god, who abides there.

If I were a perfect person, I would be bowing
continuously.
I'm not, though I pause wherever I feel this
holiness, which is why I'm often so late coming
back from wherever I went.

Forgive me.

From Blue Horses, 2014

I Am Pleased to Tell You

Mr. Death, I am pleased to tell you, there
are rifts in your long black coat. Today
Rumi (obit. 1273) came visiting, and not for
the first time. True he didn't speak with
his tongue but from memory, and whether
he was short or tall I still don't know.
But he was as real as the tree I was
under. Just because something's physical
doesn't mean it's the greatest. He
offered a poem or two, then sauntered on.
I sat awhile feeling content and feeling
contentment in the tree also. Isn't
everything in the world shared? And one
of the poems contained a tree, so of
course the tree felt included. That's
Rumi, who has no trouble slipping out of
your long black coat, oh Mr. Death.

The Gift

Be still, my soul, and steadfast.
Earth and heaven both are still watching
though time is draining from the clock
and your walk, that was confident and quick,
has become slow.

So, be slow if you must, but let
the heart still play its true part.
Love still as once you loved, deeply
and without patience. Let God and the world
know you are grateful.
That the gift has been given.

Felicity - 2010