

Mary Oliver: Selected Poems

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We Happy Few

White-Eyes

IN winter
all the singing is in
the tops of the trees
where the wind-bird

with its white eyes
shoves and pushes
among the branches.
Like any of us

he wants to go to sleep,
but he's restless—
he has an idea,
and slowly it unfolds

from under his beating wings
as long as he stays awake.
But his big, round music, after all,
is too breathy to last.

So, it's over.
In the pine-crown
he makes his nest,
he's done all he can.

*

I don't know the name of this bird,
 I only imagine his glittering beak
 tucked in a white wing
 while the clouds—

which he has summoned
 from the north—
 which he has taught
 to be mild, and silent—

thicken, and begin to fall
 into the world below
 like stars, or the feathers
 of some unimaginable bird

that loves us,
 that is asleep now, and silent—
 that has turned itself
 into snow.

Breakage

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.

forty years

FOR forty years
the sheets of white paper have
passed under my hands and I have tried
to improve their peaceful

emptiness putting down
little curls little shafts
of letters words
little flames leaping

not one page
was less to me than fascinating
discursive full of cadence
its pale nerves hiding

in the curves of the Qs
behind the soldierly Hs
in the webbed feet of the Ws
forty years

and again this morning as always
I am stopped as the world comes back
wet and beautiful I am thinking
that language

*

is not even a river
is not a tree is not a green field
is not even a black ant traveling
 briskly modestly

from day to day from one
golden page to another

The Real Prayers Are Not the Words, But the Attention that Comes First

THE little hawk leaned sideways and, tilted,
rode the wind. Its eye at this distance looked
like green glass; its feet were the color
of butter, so was the sudden, slow circle it carved
into the slightly silvery air, and the
squaring of its shoulders, and the pulling into
itself the long, sharp-edged wings, and the
fall into the grass where it tussled a moment,
like a bundle of brown leaves, and then, again,
lifted itself into the air, that butter-color
clenched in order to hold a small, still
body, and it flew off as my mind sang out oh
all that loose, blue rink of sky, where does
it go to, and why?

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.

The Storm

Now through the white orchard my little dog
 roms, breaking the new snow
 with wild feet.

Running here running there, excited,
 hardly able to stop, he leaps, he spins
until the white snow is written upon
 in large, exuberant letters,
a long sentence, expressing
 the pleasures of hte body in this world.

Oh, I could not have said it better
 myself.

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.

Don't think
I'm not afraid.
There is such an unleashing
of horror.

Then I remember:
death comes before
the rolling away
of the stone.

fall

THE black oaks
fling their bronze fruit
into all the pockets of the earth
pock pock

they knock against the thresholds
the roof the sidewalk
fill the eaves
the bottom line

of the old gold song
of the almost finished year
what is spring all that tender
green stuff

compared to this
falling of tiny oak trees
out of the oak trees
then the clouds

gathering thick along the west
then advancing
then closing over
breaking open

*

the silence
then the rain
dashing its silver seeds
 against the house

Morning Glories

BLUE and dark blue
 rose and deepest rose
 white and pink they

are everywhere in the diligent
 cornfield rising and swaying
 in their reliable

finery in the little
 fling of their bodies their
 gear and tackle

all caught up in the cornstalks.
 The reaper's story is the story
 of endless work of

work careful and heavy but the
 reaper cannot
 separate them out there they

are in the story of his life
 bright random useless
 year after year

*

taken with the serious tons
weeds without value humorous
beautiful weeds.

Death at a Great Distance

THE ripe, floating caps
of the fly amanita
glow in the pinewoods.
I don't even think
of the eventual corruption of my body,

but of how quaint and humorous they are,
like a collection of doorknobs,
half-moons,
then a yellow drizzle of flying saucers.
In any case

they won't hurt me unless
I take them between my lips
and swallow, which I know enough
not to do. Once, in the south,
I had this happen:

the soft rope of a water moccasin
slid down the red knees
of a mangrove, the hundreds of ribs
housed in their smooth, white
sleeves of muscle moving it

*

like a happiness
toward the water, where some bubbles
on the surface of that underworld announced
a fatal carelessness. I didn't
even then move toward the fine point

of the story, but stood in my lonely body
amazed and full of attention as it fell
like a stream of glowing syrup into
the dark water, as death
blurted out of that perfectly arranged mouth.

I Swallowed a Toothpick

Darling, let me tell you something.

In your lifetime, you are going to clean a lot of houses.

And among all of those, a few of them will stick out as truly wonderful, beautiful experiences.

And none of them will be the ones that were easy.

In Malaysia

MOONLIGHT
washes the red tiles
and the white walls

the streets
are cool at last
after the great

heat of the day
the gardeners
have all gone home

leaving the lawns
perfect
the ocean

rises
sighing
dragging its sleeves

of light and litter
along the shore
in the distance

*

the mountains
are smoky
old fires

greatly subdued
the brass key
is nested

in the carved door
blossoms
yellow ivory pure white

swell and begin to open
the agony of their sweetness
far older than the house

far older than the city itself
then the little bats
appear

float
over the lawns
fall

cup each flower
in their small
daggered hands.