

# Mary Oliver: Selected Poems



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

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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.