

The Poet as Depth Psychologist:

Charles Baudelaire (1821-67)

“What is exhilarating in bad taste is the aristocratic pleasure of giving offense.”

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91)

**“Its been found again! What?
Eternity. It is the sea mingled with the sun.”**

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)

**“The purpose of life is to be defeated
by ever larger things.”**

Mary Oliver (1935-)

**“I had a very dysfunctional family and a very hard
childhood. So I made a world out of words. And it
was my salvation.”**

Correspondences

Nature is a temple whose living colonnades
Breathe forth a mystic speech in fitful sighs;
Man wanders among symbols in those glades
Where all things watch him with familiar eyes.

Like dwindling echoes gathered far away
Into a deep and thronging unison
Huge as the night or as the light of day,
All scents and sounds and colors meet as one.

Perfumes there are as sweet as the oboe's sound,
Green as the prairies, fresh as a child's caress,
- And there are others, rich, corrupt, profound

And of an infinite pervasiveness,
Like myrrh, or musk, or amber, the excite
The ecstasies of sense, the soul's delight.

Charles Baudelaire

Be Drunk

You have to be always drunk. That's all there is to it--it's the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk.

But on what? Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk.

And if sometimes, on the steps of a palace or the green grass of a ditch, in the mournful solitude of your room, you wake again, drunkenness already diminishing or gone, ask the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock, everything that is flying, everything that is groaning, everything that is rolling, everything that is singing, everything that is speaking. . .ask what time it is and wind, wave, star, bird, clock will answer you: "It is time to be drunk! So as not to be the martyred slaves of time, be drunk, be continually drunk! On wine, on poetry or on virtue as you wish."

Charles Baudelaire

Autumn

Soon we will plunge ourselves into cold shadows,
And all of summer's stunning afternoons will be gone.
I already hear the dead thuds of logs below
Falling on the cobblestones and the lawn.

All of winter will return to me:
derision, Hate, shuddering, horror, drudgery and vice,
And exiled, like the sun, to a polar prison,
My soul will harden into a block of red ice.

I shiver as I listen to each log crash and slam:
The echoes are as dull as executioners' drums.
My mind is like a tower that slowly succumbs
To the blows of a relentless battering ram.

It seems to me, swaying to these shocks, that someone
Is nailing down a coffin in a hurry somewhere.
For whom? -- It was summer yesterday; now it's autumn.
Echoes of departure keep resounding in the air.

Charles Baudelaire

Anywhere Out of the World

This life is a hospital where every patient is possessed with the desire to change beds; one man would like to suffer in front of the stove, and another believes that he would recover his health beside the window.

It always seems to me that I should feel well in the place where I am not, and this question of removal is one which I discuss incessantly with my soul.

'Tell me, my soul, poor chilled soul, what do you think of going to live in Lisbon? It must be warm there, and there

you would invigorate yourself like a lizard. This city is on the sea-shore; they say that it is built of marble

and that the people there have such a hatred of vegetation that they uproot all the trees.

There you have a landscape

that corresponds to your taste! a landscape made of light and mineral, and liquid to reflect

them!

My soul does not reply.

'Since you are so fond of stillness, coupled with the show of movement, would you like to settle in Holland,

that beatifying country? Perhaps you would find some diversion in that land whose image you have so often admired

in the art galleries. What do you think of Rotterdam, you who love forests of masts, and ships moored at the foot of houses?'

My soul remains silent.

'Perhaps Batavia attracts you more? There we should find, amongst other things, the spirit of Europe

married to tropical beauty.'

Not a word. Could my soul be dead?

'Is it then that you have reached such a degree of lethargy that you acquiesce in your sickness? If so, let us

flee to lands that are analogues of death. I see how it is, poor soul! We shall pack our trunks for Tornio. Let us go

farther still to the extreme end of the Baltic; or farther still from life, if that is possible; let us settle at the Pole. There

the sun only grazes the earth obliquely, and the slow alternation of light and darkness suppresses variety and

increases monotony, that half-nothingness. There we shall be able to take long baths of darkness, while for our

amusement the aurora borealis shall send us its rose-coloured rays that are like the reflection of Hell's own

fireworks!'

At last my soul explodes, and wisely cries out to me: 'No matter where! No matter where! As long as it's out

of the world!'

Charles Baudelaire

Albatrosses

Often our sailors, for an hour of fun,
Catch albatrosses on the after breeze
Through which these trail the ship from sun to sun
As it skims down the deep and briny seas.

Scarce have these birds been set upon the poop,
Than, awkward now, they, the sky's emperors,
Piteous and shamed, let their great white wings droop
Beside them like a pair of idle oars.

These wingèd voyagers, how gauche their gait!
Once noble, now how ludicrous to view!
One sailor bums them with his pipe, his mate
Limps, mimicking these cripples who once flew.

Poets are like these lords of sky and cloud,
Who ride the storm and mock the bow's taut strings,
Exiled on earth amid a jeering crowd,
Prisoned and palsied by their giant wings.

To the Reader

Folly, depravity, greed, mortal sin
Invade our souls and rack our flesh; we feed
Our gentle guilt, gracious regrets, that breed
Like vermin glutting on foul beggars' skin.

Our sins are stubborn; our repentance, faint.
We take a handsome price for our confession,
Happy once more to wallow in transgression,
Thinking vile tears will cleanse us of all taint.

On evil's cushion poised, His Majesty,
Satan Thrice-Great, lulls our charmed soul, until
He turns to vapor what was once our will:
Rich ore, transmuted by his alchemy.

He holds the strings that move us, limb by limb!
We yield, enthralled, to things repugnant, base;
Each day, towards Hell, with slow, unhurried pace,
We sink, uncowed, through shadows, stinking, grim.

Like some lewd rake with his old worn-out whore,
Nibbling her suffering teats, we seize our sly
delight, that, like an orange—withered, dry—
We squeeze and press for juice that is no more.

Our brains teem with a race of Fiends, who frolic
thick as a million gut-worms; with each breath,
Our lungs drink deep, suck down a stream of Death—
Dim-lit—to low-moaned whimpers melancholic.

If poison, fire, blade, rape do not succeed
In sewing on that dull embroidery
Of our pathetic lives their artistry,
It's that our soul, alas, shrinks from the deed.

And yet, among the beasts and creatures all—
Panther, snake, scorpion, jackal, ape, hound, hawk—
Monsters that crawl, and shriek, and grunt, and squawk,
In our vice-filled menagerie's caterwaul,

One worse is there, fit to heap scorn upon—
More ugly, rank! Though noiseless, calm and still,
yet would he turn the earth to scraps and swill,
swallow it whole in one great, gaping yawn:

Ennui! That monster frail!—With eye wherein
A chance tear gleams, he dreams of gibbets, while
Smoking his hookah, with a dainty smile. . .
—You know him, reader,—hypocrite,—my twin!

THE CARCASS

Remember that object we saw, dear soul,
In the sweetness of a summer morn:
At a bend of the path a loathsome carrion
On a bed with pebbles strewn,

With legs raised like a lustful woman,
Burning and sweating poisons,
It spread open, nonchalant and scornful,
Its belly, ripe with exhalations.

The sun shone onto the rotting heap,
As if to bring it to the boil,
And tender a hundredfold to vast Nature
All that together she had joined;

And the sky watched that superb carcass
Like a flower blossom out.
The stench was so strong that on the grass
You thought you would pass out.

Flies hummed upon the putrid belly,
Whence larvae in black battalions spread
And like a heavy liquid flowed
Along the tatters deliquescing.

All together it unfurled, and rose like a wave
And bubbling it sprang forth;
One might have believed that, with a faint breath filled,
The body, multiplying, lived.

And this world gave out a strange music
Like of running water and of wind,
Or of grain in a winnow
Rhythmically shaken and tossed.

Form was erased and all but a vision,
A sketch slow to take shape
On a forgotten canvas, which the artist finishes
From memory alone.

Behind the rocks a fretting bitch
Looked at us with fierce mien
Anxious to retrieve from the corpse

Yet to this rot you shall be like,
To this horrid corruption,
Star of my eyes, sun of desire,
You, my angel and my passion!

Yes, such you shall be, you, queen of all graces,
After the last sacraments,
When you go beneath the grass and waxy flowers,
To mold among the skeletons.

Then, oh my beauty! You must tell the vermin,
As it eats you up with kisses,
That I have preserved the form and essence divine
Of my decayed loves.

Ten days, beyond the blinking eyes of land!
Lulled by storms, I drifted seaward from sleep.

Sweeter than apples to a child its pungent edge;
The wash of green water on my shell of pine.
Anchor and rudder went drifting away,
Washed in vomit and stained with blue wine.

Now I drift through the poem of the sea;
This gruel of stars mirrors the milky sky,
Devours green azures; ecstatic flotsam,
Drowned men, pale and thoughtful, sometimes drift by.

Staining the sudden blueness, the slow sounds,
Deliriums that streak the glowing sky,
Stronger than drink and the songs we sing,
It is boiling, bitter, red; it is love!

I know how lightening split the sky apart,
I know the surf and waterspouts and evening's fall,
I've seen the dawn arisen like a flock of doves;
I've seen what men have only dreamed they saw!

I saw the sun with mystic horrors darken
And shimmer through a violet haze;
With a shiver of shutters the waves fell
Like actors in ancient, forgotten plays!

I dreamed of green nights and glittering snow,
Slow kisses rising in the eyes of the sea,
Unknown liquids flowing, the blue and yellow
Stirring of phosphorescent melody!

For months I watched the surge of the sea,
Hysterical herds attacking the reefs;
I never thought the bright feet of Mary
Could muzzle up the heavy-breathing waves!

I have jostled - you know? - unbelievable Floridas
And seen among the flowers the wild eyes
Of panthers in the skins of men! Rainbows
Birdling blind flocks beneath the horizons!

In stinking swamps I have seen great hulks:
A Leviathan that rotted in the reeds!
Water crumbling in the midst of calm
And distances that shatter into foam.

Glaciers, silver suns, waves of pearl, fiery skies,

The Drunken Boat

As I drifted on a river I could not control,
No longer guided by the bargemen's ropes.
They were captured by howling Indians
Who nailed them naked to coloured posts.

I cared no more for other boats or cargoes:
Flemish wheat or English cottons, all were gone
When my bargemen could no longer haul me
I forgot about everything and drifted on.

Amid the fury of the loudly chopping tides
Last winter, deaf as a child's dark night,
Ah, how I raced! And the drifting Peninsulas
Have never known such conquering delight.

Lighter than cork, I revolved upon waves
That roll the dead forever in the deep,

As the
P in Sand

Giant serpents stranded where lice consume
Them, falling in the depths of dark gulfs
From contorted trees, bathed in black perfume!

I wanted to show children these fishes shining
In the blue wave, the golden fish that sing -
A froth of flowers cradled my wandering
And delicate winds tossed me on their wings.

Sometimes, a martyr of poles and latitudes,
The sea rocked me softly in sighing air,
And brought me dark blooms with yellow stems -
I remained there like a woman on her knees.

Almost an island, I balanced on my boat's sides
Rapacious blond-eyed birds, their dung, their screams.
I drifted on through fragile tangled lines
Drowned men, still staring up, sank down to sleep.

Now I, a little lost boat, in swirling debris,
Tossed by the storm into the birdless upper air
- All the Hansa Merchants and Monitors
Could not fish up my body drunk with the sea;

Free, smoking, touched the violet haze above,
I, who the lurid heavens breached like some rare wall
Which boasts - confection that the poets love -
Lichens of sunlight, and snots of bright blue sky;

Lost branch spinning in a herd of hippocamps,
Covered over with electric animals,
An everlasting July battering
The glittering sky and its fiery funnels;

Shaking at the sound of monsters roaring,
Rutting Behemoths in thick whirlpools,
Eternal weaver of unmoving blues,
I thought of Europe and its ancient walls!

I have seen archipelagos in the stars,
Feverish skies where I was free to roam!
Are these bottomless nights your exiled nests,
Swarm of golden birds, O Strength to come?

True, I've cried too much; I am heartsick at dawn.
The moon is bitter and the sun is sour...
Love burns me; I am swollen and slow.
Let my keel break! Oh, let me sink in the sea!

If I long for a shore in Europe,
It's a small pond, dark, cold, remote,
The odour of evening, and a child full of sorrow
Who stoops to launch a crumpled paper boat.

Washed in your languors, sea, I cannot trace
The wake of tankers foaming through the cold,
Nor assault the pride of pennants and flags,
Nor endure the slave ship's stinking hold.

The Seekers Of Lice

When the child's forehead, full of red torments,
Implores the white swarm of indistinct dreams,
There come near his bed two tall charming sisters
With slim fingers that have silvery nails.
They seat the child in front of a wide open
Window where the blue air bathes a mass of flowers,
And in his heavy hair where the dew falls,
Move their delicate, fearful and enticing fingers.
He listens to the singing of their apprehensive breath
Which smells of long rosy plant honey,
And which at times a hiss interrupts, saliva
Caught on the lip or desire for kisses.
He hears their black eyelashes beating
in the perfumed Silence;
and their gentle electric fingers
Make in his half-drunken indolence the death of the little lice
Crackle under their royal nails.
Then the wine of Sloth rises in him,
The sigh of an harmonica which could bring on delerium;
The child feels, according to the slowness of the caresses,
Surging in him and dying continuously a desire to cry.

Arthur Rimbaud

Vowels

Black A, white E, red I, green U, blue O - vowels,
Some day I will open your silent pregnancies:
A, black belt, hairy with burst flies,
Bumblng and buzzing over stinking cruelties,

Pits of night; E, candour of sand pavilions,
High glacial spears, white kings, trembling Queen
Anne's lace;
I, bloody spittle, laughter dribbling from a face
In wild denial or in anger, vermilions;

U, ...divine movement of viridian seas,
Peace of pastures animal-strewn, peace of calm lines
Drawn on foreheads worn with heavy alchemies;

O, supreme Trumpet, harsh with strange stridencies,
Silences traced in angels and astral designs:
O...Omega...the violet light of His Eyes!

Arthur Rimbaud

Night in Hell

Arthur Rimbaud

(*Une Saison en Enfer: Nuit de L'Enfer*)

I have swallowed a famous gulp of poison – Thrice blessed be the thought that came to me! – My guts are burning. The venom's violence wracks my limbs; deforms me, fells me. I'm dying of thirst; I'm stifling, unable to cry out. It's hell, the everlasting torment! See how the flames rise up! I'm burning in the proper manner. Well then, demon!

I've glimpsed a conversion to goodness and joy, salvation. Let me describe the vision, the air of hell suffers no hymns! It was of millions of enchanting creatures, sweet spiritual harmony, strength and peace, noble ambitions, who knows what?

Noble ambitions!

There's life yet! – What if damnation is eternal! A man who wants to mutilate himself is truly damned, is he not? I think myself in hell, therefore I am. It's the ratification of the catechism. I'm the slave of my baptism. Parents, you caused my wretchedness and your own. Poor innocent! – Hell can't touch pagans – There's life yet! Later the delights of damnation will deepen. A crime, quick, let me fall into the void, in the name of human law.

Quiet, quiet there! ... Here's shame and reproach: Satan, who says that the fire is ignoble, that my anger is fearfully stupid. – Enough! ... Of the errors whispered to me, magic, false perfumes, puerile music. – And to think that I grasp truth, see justice: my judgement is sane and sound, I am ready for perfection... Pride – the skin of my head dries up. Pity! Lord, I'm afraid. I thirst, such thirst! Ah, childhood, grass, the rain, the lake over stones, *the moonlight when the clock struck twelve!* ... the devil's in the belfry, at that hour. Mary! Holy Virgin! – Horror at my stupidity.

Back there, aren't there honest souls, who wish me well? ... Come... I've a pillow over my mouth; they can't hear me, they're phantoms. Besides, no one ever thinks of others. Let no one come near me. I smell of scorching, that's certain.

The hallucinations are innumerable. That's what has always been wrong with me, in fact: no belief in history, obliviousness to principles. I'll be quiet about it: poets and visionaries would be jealous. I am a thousand times richer, let's be as miserly as the sea.

See there! The clock of life has just stopped. I am no longer in the world – Theology is no joke, hell is certainly *down below* – and heaven above – Ecstasy, nightmare, slumber in a nest of flames.

What tricks while waiting in the countryside... Satan, Ferdinand, runs rife with wild seed... Jesus walks on the purple briars, without bending them... Jesus once walked on the troubled waters. The lantern showed him to us standing, pale with brown tresses, on the flank of an emerald wave...

I shall unveil all the mysteries: mysteries religious or natural, death, birth, future, past, cosmogony, nothingness. I am a master of phantasmagoria.

Listen! ...

I possess every talent! – There is no one here, yet there is someone: I don't wish to spill my treasure – Shall it be negro chants, the dance of hours? Shall I vanish, dive deep in search of *the ring*? Shall I? I will make gold, cures.

Have faith then in me, faith soothes, guides, heals. Come, all you – even the little children – let me console you, may a heart go out to you – the marvellous heart! – Poor men, workers! I don't ask for prayer; with your trust alone, I'll be happy.

– And let us consider myself. It makes me regret the world very little. I was lucky not to suffer more. My life was nothing but sweet follies, it's regrettable.

Bah! Let us make every possible grimace.

Decidedly, we are beyond the world. No more sounds. My sense of touch: gone. Ah, my chateau, my Saxony, my rank of willows! Evenings, dawns, nights, days... How weary I am!

I ought to have a hell for my anger, a hell for my pride, – and a hell for my caresses; a concert of hells.

I'm dying of lassitude. It's the tomb; I'm going to the worms, horror of horrors! Satan, you trickster, you want to destroy me with your enchantments. I demand, I demand one prick of the fork, one drop of the fire!

Ah, to rise again to life! To set eyes on our deformities. And that poison, that kiss a thousand times damned! My weakness, the world's cruelty! My God, have pity, hide me, I can't defend myself! – I'm hidden yet unhidden.

It's the fire that flares again with its damned soul.

Lament

Everything is far
and long gone by.
I think that the star
glittering above me
has been dead for a million years.
I think there were tears
in the car I heard pass
and something terrible was said.
A clock has stopped striking in the house
across the road...
When did it start?...
I would like to step out of my heart
an go walking beneath the enormous sky.
I would like to pray.
And surely of all the stars that perished
long ago,
one still exists.

I think that I know
which one it is--
which one, at the end of its beam in the sky,
stands like a white city...

Rainer Maria Rilke

Rainer Maria Rilke (C. F. MacIntyre, translator)

"The Ninth Elegy"

Duino Elegies

Why, if it's possible to spend this span
of existence as laurel, a little darker than all
other greens, with little waves on every
leaf-edge (like the smile of a breeze), why, then,
must we be human and, shunning destiny,
long for it?...

Oh, not because happiness,

that over-hasty profit of loss impending, *exists*.
Not from curiosity, or to practise the heart,
that would also be in the laurel...
but because to be here is much, and the transient Here
seems to need and concern us strangely. Us, the most transient.
Everyone *once*, *once* only. Just *once* and no more.
And we also *once*, Never again. But this having been
once, although only *once*, to have been of the earth,
seems irrevocable.

And so we drive ourselves and want to achieve it,
want to hold it in our simple hands,
in the surfeited gaze and in the speechless heart.
want to become it. give it to whom? Rather
keep all forever...but to the other realm,
alas, what can be taken? Not the power of seeing,
learned here so slowly, and nothing that's happened here.
Nothing. Maybe the suffering? Before all, the heaviness
and long experience of love--unutterable things.
But later, under the stars, what then? *They* are *better* untold of.
The wanderer does not bring a handful of earth,
the unutterable, from the mountain slope to the valley,
but a pure word he has learned, the blue
and yellow gentian. Are we *here* perhaps just to say:
house, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window--
at most, column, tower... but to say, understand this, to say it
as the Things themselves never fervently thought to be.
Is it not the hidden cunning of secretive earth
when it urges on the lovers, that everything seems transfigured
in their feelings? Threshold, what is it for two lovers

that they wear away a little of their own older doorstill,
 they also, after the many before,
 and before those yet coming...lightly?

Here is the time for the *unutterable*, *here*, its country.
 Speak and acknowledge it. More than ever
 the things that we can live by are falling away,
 supplanted by an action without symbol.
 An action beneath crusts that easily crack, as soon as
 the inner working outgrows and otherwise limits itself.
 Our heart exists between hammers,
 like the tongue between the teeth,
 but notwithstanding, the tongue
 always remains the praiser.

Praise the world to the angel, not the unutterable world;
 you cannot astonish him with your glorious feelings;
 in the universe, where he feels more sensitively,
 you're just a beginner. Therefore, show him the simple
 thing that is shaped in passing from father to son,
 that lives near our hands and eyes as our very own.
 Tell him about the Things. He'll stand amazed, as you stood
 beside the rope-maker in Rome, or the potter on the Nile.
 Show him how happy a thing can be, how blameless and ours;
 how even the lamentation of sorrow purely decides
 to take form, serves as a thing, or dies
 in a thing, and blissfully in the beyond
 escapes the violin. And these things that live,
 slipping away, understand that you praise them;
 transitory themselves, they trust us for rescue,
 us, the most transient of all. They wish us to transmute them
 in our invisible heart--oh, infinitely into us! Whoever we are.

Earth, isn't this what you want: *invisibly*
 to arise in us? Is it not your dream
 to be some day invisible? Earth! Invisible!
 What, if not transformation, is your insistent commission?
 Earth, dear one, I will! Oh, believe it needs
 not one more of your springtimes to win me over.
 One, just one, is already too much for my blood.
 From afar I'm utterly determined to be yours.
 You were always right and your sacred revelation is the intimate death.
 Behold, I'm alive. On what? Neither childhood nor future
 grows less...surplus of existence
 is welling up in my heart.

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Autumn

The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,
as if orchards were dying high in space.
Each leaf falls as if it were motioning "no."

And tonight the heavy earth is falling
away from all other stars in the loneliness.

We're all falling. This hand here is falling.
And look at the other one. It's in them all.

And yet there is Someone, whose hands
infinitely calm, holding up all this falling.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Fall Day

Lord, it is time. This was a very big summer.
Lay your shadows over the sundial,
and let the winds loose on the fields.

Command the last fruits to be full;
give them two more sunny days,
urge them on to fulfillment and throw
the last sweetness into the heavy wine.

Who has no house now, will never build one.
Whoever is alone now, will long remain so,
Will watch, read, write long letters
and will wander in the streets, here and there
restlessly, when the leaves blow.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Lament

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and long gone by.
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glittering above me
has been dead for a million years.
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in the car I heard pass
and something terrible was said.
A clock has stopped striking in the house
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stands like a white city...

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Journey

By Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Wild Geese

By Mary Oliver

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.

Blue Iris

By Mary Oliver

Now that I'm free to be myself, who am I?

Can't fly, can't run, and see how slowly I walk.

Well, I think, I can read books.

"What's that you're doing?"
the green-headed fly shouts as it buzzes past.

I close the book.

Well, I can write down words, like these, softly.

"What's that you're doing?" whispers the wind, pausing
in a heap just outside the window.

Give me a little time, I say back to its staring, silver face.
It doesn't happen all of a sudden, you know.

"Doesn't it?" says the wind, and breaks open, releasing
distillation of blue iris.

And my heart panics not to be, as I long to be,
the empty, waiting, pure, speechless receptacle.

You Are Standing at the Edge of the Woods

By Mary Oliver

You are standing at the edge of the woods
at twilight
when something begins
to sing, like a waterfall

pouring down
through the leaves. It is
the thrush.
And you are just

sinking down into your thoughts,
taking in
the sweetness of it—those chords,
those pursed twirls—when you hear

out of the same twilight
the wildest red outcry. It pitches itself
forward, it flails and scabs
all the surrounding space with such authority

you can't tell
whether it is crying out on the
scarp of victory, with its hooked foot
dabbed into some creature that now
with snapped spine
lies on the earth—or whether
it is such a struck body itself, saying
goodbye.

The thrush
is silent then, or perhaps
has flown away.
The dark grows darker.

The moon,
in its shining white blouse,
rises.
And whatever that wild cry was

it will always remain a mystery
you have to go home now and live with,
sometimes with the ease of music, and sometimes in silence,
for the rest of your life.

White Flowers

By Mary Oliver

Last night
in the fields
I lay down in the darkness
to think about death,
but instead I fell asleep,
as if in a vast and sloping room
filled with those white flowers
that open all summer,
sticky and untidy,
in the warm fields.

When I woke
the morning light was just slipping
in front of the stars,
and I was covered
with blossoms.

I don't know
how it happened—

I don't know
if my body went diving down
under the sugary vines
in some sleep-sharpened affinity
with the depths, or whether
that green energy
rose like a wave
and curled over me, claiming me

in its husky arms.
I pushed them away, but I didn't rise.
Never in my life had I felt so plush,
or so slippery,
or so resplendently empty.
Never in my life
had I felt myself so near
that porous line
where my own body was done with
and the roots and the stems and the
flowers
began.

One Hundred White-Sided Dolphins on a Summer Day

By Mary Oliver

1.

Fat,
black, slick,
galloping in the pitch
of the waves, in the pearly

fields of the sea,
they leap toward us,
they rise, sparkling, and vanish, and rise sparkling,
they breathe little clouds of mist, they lift perpetual smile,

they slap their tails on the waves, grandmothers and grandfathers
enjoying the old jokes,
they circle around us,
they swim with us—

2.

a hundred white-sided dolphins
on a summer day,
each one, as God himself
could not appear more acceptable

a hundred times,
in a body blue and black threading through
the sea foam,
and lifting himself up from the opened

tents of the waves on his fishtail,
to look
with the moon of his eye
into my heart,

3.

and find there
pure, sudden, steep, sharp, painful
gratitude
that falls—
I don't know—either
unbearable tons
or the pale, bearable hand
of salvation

on my neck,
lifting me
from the boat's plain plank seat
into the world's

4.

unspeakable kindness.
It is my sixty-third summer on earth
and, for a moment, I have almost vanished
into the body of the dolphin,

into the moon-eye of God,
into the white fan that lies at the bottom of the sea
with everything
that ever was, or ever will be,

supple, wild, rising on flank or fishtail—
singing or whistling or breathing damply through blowhole
at top of head. Then, in our little boat, the dolphins suddenly gone,
we sailed on through the brisk, cheerful day.

When Death Comes

By Mary Oliver

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When death comes

like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps his purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.