

**Mary Oliver Poetry**  
*from Devotions, The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*  
Penguin Press, 2017

**The Pond**

August of another summer, and once again  
I am drinking the sun  
and the lilies again are spread across the water.  
I know now what they want is to touch each other.  
I have not been here for many years  
during which time I kept living my life.  
Like the heron, who can only croak, who wishes he  
    could sing,  
I wish I could sing.  
A little thanks from every throat would be appropriate.  
This is how it has been, and this is how it is:  
All my life I have been able to feel happiness,  
except whatever was not happiness,  
which I also remember.  
Each of us wears a shadow.  
But just now it is summer again  
and I am watching the lilies bow to each other,  
then slide on the wind and the tug of desire,  
close, close to one another.  
Soon now, I'll turn and start for home.  
And who knows, maybe I'll be singing.

**After Reading Lucretius,  
I Go to the Pond**

The slippery green frog  
that went to his death  
in the heron's pink throat  
was my small brother,

and the heron  
with the white plumes  
like a crown on his head  
who is washing now his great sword-beak  
in the shining pond  
is my tall thin brother.

My heart dresses in black  
and dances.

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### **What Gorgeous Thing**

I don not know what gorgeous thing  
the blue bird keeps saying,  
his voice easing out of his throat,  
beak, body into the pink air  
of the early morning. I like it  
whatever it is. Sometimes  
it seems the only thing in the world  
that is without dark thoughts.  
Sometimes it seems the only thing  
in the world that is without  
questions that can't and probably  
never will be answered, the  
only thing that is entirely content  
with the pink, then clear white  
morning and, gratefully, says so.

### **I Go Down to the Shore**

I go down to the shore in the morning  
and depending on the hour the waves  
are rolling in or moving out,  
and I say, oh, I am miserable,  
what shall—  
what should I do? And the sea says  
in its lovely voice:  
Excuse me, I have work to do.

### **Tides**

Every day the sea  
blue gray green lavender  
pulls away leaving the harbor's  
dark-cobbled undercoat

slick and rutted and worm-riddled, the gulls  
walk there among old whalebones, the white  
spines of fish blink from the strandy stew  
as the hours tick over; and then

far out the faint, sheer  
line turns, rustling over the slack,  
the outer bars, over the green-furred flats, over

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the clam beds, slippery logs,

barnacle-studded stones, dragging  
the shining sheets forward, deepening,  
    pushing, wreathing together  
wave and seaweed, their piled curvatures

spilling over themselves, lapping  
    blue gray green lavender, never  
resting not ever but fashioning shore,  
continent, everything.

And here you may find me  
on almost any morning  
walking along the shore so  
    light-footed so casual.

## **Life Story**

When I lived under the black oaks  
I felt I was made of leaves.  
When I lived by Little Sister Pond,  
I dreamed I was the feather of the blue heron  
left on the shore;  
I was the pond lily, my root delicate as an artery,  
my face like a star,  
my happiness brimming.  
Later I was the footsteps that follow the sea.  
I knew the tides, I knew the ingredients of the wrack.  
I knew the eider, the red-throated loon  
with his uplifted beak and his smart eye.  
I felt I was the tip of the wave,  
the pearl of water on the eider's glossy back.  
No, there's no escaping, nor would I want to escape  
this outgo, this foot-loosening, this solution  
to gravity and a single shape.  
Now I am here, later I will be there.  
I will be that small cloud, staring down at the water,  
the one that stalls, that lifts its white legs, that  
    looks like a lamb.

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**I Own a House**

I own a house, small but comfortable. In it is a bed, a desk,  
a kitchen, a closet, a telephone. And so forth—you know  
how it is: things collect.

Outside the summer clouds are drifting by, all of them  
with vague and beautiful faces. And there are the pines  
that bush out spicy and ambitious, although they do not  
even know their names. And there is the mockingbird;  
over and over he rises from his thorn-tree and dances—he  
actually dances, in the air. And there are days I wish I  
owned nothing, like the grass.

**Passing the Unworked Field**

Queen Anne's lace  
is hardly  
prized but  
all the same it isn't  
idle look  
          how it  
stands straight on its  
thin stems how it  
scrubs its white faces  
with the  
rags of the sun how it  
makes all the  
loveliness  
it can.

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### **How I Go to the Woods**

Ordinarily I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend, for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable.

I don't really want to be witnessed talking to catbirds or hugging the old black oak tree. I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours.

Besides, when I am alone I can become invisible. I can sit on the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of weeds, until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing.

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If you have ever gone to the woods with me, I must love You very much.

### **Violets**

Down by the rumbling creek and the tall trees—  
    where I went truant from school three days a week  
    and therefore broke the record—  
there were violets as easy in their lives  
    as anything you have ever seen  
    or leaned down to intake the sweet breath of.  
Later, when the necessary houses were built  
    they were gone, and who would give significance  
    to their absence.  
Oh, violets, you did signify, and what shall take  
    your place?

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**With Thanks to the Field Sparrow  
Whose Voice is So Delicate  
and Humble**

I do not live happily or comfortably  
with the cleverness of our times.  
The talk is all about computers,  
the news is all about bombs and blood.  
This morning, in the fresh field,  
I came upon a hidden nest.  
It held four warm, speckled eggs.  
I touched them.  
Then went away softly,  
having felt something more wonderful  
than all the electricity of New York City.

**A Lesson from James Wright**

If James Wright  
could put in his book of poems  
a blank page

dedicated to "the Horse David  
Who Ate One of My Poems," I am ready  
to follow him along

the sweet path he cut  
through the dryness  
and suggest that you sit now

very quietly  
in some lovely wild place, and listen  
to the silence.

And I say that this, too,  
is a poem.

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## **The Other Kingdoms**

Consider the other kingdoms. The  
trees, for example, with their mellow-sounding  
titles: oak, aspen, willow.  
Or the snow, for which the peoples of the north  
have dozens of words to describe its  
different arrivals. Or the creatures, with their  
thick fur, their shy and wordless gaze. Their  
infallible sense of what their lives  
are meant to be. Thus the world  
grows rich, grows wild, and you too,  
grow rich, grow sweetly wild, as you too  
were born to be.

## **Invitation**

Oh do you have time  
to linger  
for just a little while  
out of your busy

and very important day  
for the goldfinches  
that have gathered  
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,  
to see who can sing  
the highest note,  
or the lowest,

of the most expressive of mirth,  
or the most tender?  
Their strong, blunt beaks  
Drink the air

As they strive  
melodiously  
not for your sake  
and not for mine

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and not for the sake of winning  
but for sheer delight and gratitude—  
believe us, they say,  
it is a serious thing

Just to be alive  
on this fresh morning  
in this broken world.  
I beg of you,

Do not walk by  
without pausing  
to attend to this  
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.  
I could mean everything.  
I could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:  
*You must change your life.*

**Meadowlark Sings and I  
Greet Him in Return**

Meadowlark, when you sing it's as if  
you lay your yellow breast upon mine and say  
hello, hello, and are we not  
of one family, in our delight of life?  
You sing, I listen.  
Both are necessary  
if the world is to continue going around  
night-heavy then light-laden, though not  
everyone knows this or at least  
not yet,

or, perhaps, has forgotten it  
in the torn fields,

in the terrible debris of progress.



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**Praying**

It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.

**How Would You Live Then?**

What is a hundred rose-breasted grosbeaks  
flew in circles around your head? What if  
the mockingbird came into the house with you and  
became your advisor? What if  
the bees filled your walls with honey and all  
you needed to do was ask them and they would fill  
the bowl? What if the brook slid downhill just  
past your bedroom window so you could listen  
to its slow prayers as you fell asleep? What if  
the stars began to shout their names, or to run  
this way and that way above the clouds? What if  
you painted a picture of a tree, and the leaves  
began to rustle, and a bird cheerfully sang  
from its painted branches? What if you suddenly saw  
that the silver of water was brighter than the silver  
of money? What if you finally saw  
that the sunflowers, turning toward the sun all day  
and every day—who knows how, but they do it—were  
more precious, more meaningful than gold?

