

MARY OLIVER

1935-2019



When I Am Among the Trees

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.

5 I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

10 Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
15 into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

2006

Of Love

I have been in love more times than one,
thank the Lord. Sometimes it was lasting
whether active or not. Sometimes
it was all but ephemeral, maybe only
5 an afternoon, but not less real for that.

They stay in my mind, these beautiful people,
or anyway people beautiful to me, of which
there are so many. You, and you, and you,
whom I had the fortune to meet, or maybe

10 missed. Love, love, love, it was the
core of my life, from which, of course, comes
the word for the heart. And, oh, have I mentioned
that some of them were men and some were women
and some—now carry my revelation with you—
15 were trees. Or places. Or music flying above
the names of their makers. Or clouds, or the sun
which was the first, and the best, the most
loyal for certain, who looked so faithfully into
my eyes, every morning. So I imagine
20 such love of the world—its fervency, its shining, its
innocence and hunger to give of itself—I imagine
this is how it began.

2008

Iraq

I want to sing a song
for a body I saw
crumpled
and without a name

5 but clearly someone young
who had not yet lived his life
and never would.
How shall I do this?

What kind of song
10 would serve such a purpose?
This poem may never end,
for what answer does it have

for anyone
in this distant,
15 comfortable country,
simply looking on?

Clearly
he had a weapon in his hands.
I think

20 he could have been no more than twenty.

I think, whoever he was,
of whatever country,
he might have been my brother,
were the world different.

25 I think
he would not have been lying there
were the world different.
I think

if I had known him,
30 on his birthday,
I would have made for him
a great celebration.

2008

Self-Portrait

I wish I was twenty and in love with life
and still full of beans.

Onward, old legs!
There are the long, pale dunes; on the other side
5 the roses are blooming and finding their labor
no adversity to the spirit.

Upward, old legs! There are the roses, and there is the sea
shining like a song, like a body
I want to touch

10 though I'm not twenty
and won't be again but ah! seventy. And still
in love with life. And still
full of beans.

2008

Loneliness

I too have known loneliness.
I too have known what it is to feel
 misunderstood,
 rejected, and suddenly
5 not at all beautiful.
Oh, mother earth,
 your comfort is great, your arms never withhold.
It has saved my life to know this.
Your rivers flowing, your roses opening in the morning.
10 Oh, motions of tenderness!

2014

The First Time Percy Came Back

The first time Percy came back
he was not sailing on a cloud.
He was loping along the sand as though
he had come a great way.
5 “Percy,” I cried out, and reached to him—
 those white curls—
but he was unreachable. As music
is present yet you can’t touch it.
“Yes, it’s all different,” he said.
10 “You’re going to be very surprised.”
But I wasn’t thinking of that. I only
wanted to hold him. “Listen,” he said,
“I miss that too.
And now you’ll be telling stories
15 of my coming back
and they won’t be false, and they won’t be true,
but they’ll be real.”
And then, as he used to, he said, “Let’s go!”
And we walked down the beach together.

2013



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