

## WHAT DO WE KNOW

Mary Oliver.  
Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002.

## THE LEAF AND THE CLOUD

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So powerful is the image of the garden in Andrew Marvell's poem of that name that the mind of the poet himself is rendered as a "green thought in a green shade." Roughly a century and a half after Marvell, the garden writ large enough to include Swiss Alps and the English Lake District seemed to William Wordsworth a needed refuge from a world where getting and spending lay waste to our powers. And Wordsworth's nature poetry often showing us a solitary figure (a highland lass, a leech-gatherer, a friend, a sister) communing with wind and weather in a moment which seems to be out of time was so important to John Stuart Mill that he credited it with helping him climb his way out of a nervous breakdown.

Mary Oliver's poetry, written at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, reveals the created world as her garden and the poet herself as the solitary figure in it. She brings to her poems the sensuous intensity and intelligence of Marvell, the Romantic faith of Wordsworth, the conviction of Mill that the soul is nourished by poetry. Much of Oliver's work is celebratory and uncommonly risky. We are inclined to respect Dickinson's or Frost's quarrel with God; we are less accustomed to a straightforward theism. We may appreciate Stevens' wish

that poetry speak to the delicatest ear of the mind; we're astonished to hear Oliver: "from my mouth to God's ear, I swear it; I want only to be a song." *What Do We Know* begins with quotations from Emerson: "the invisible and imponderable is the sole fact"; and from Augustine: "my mind is on fire to understand this most intricate riddle" (Augustine's riddle concerns the nature of time). These two statements form accurate enough parameters for the poems which follow, with one exception; neither bespeaks the sense of humour with which Oliver occasionally approaches her task. In "The Word," a prose piece in which she imagines listeners already know the word is song in the forest, she writes:

I speak of the soul, and seven  
people rise from their chairs  
and  
leave the room, seven others  
lean forward to listen. I speak  
of the body,  
the spirit, the  
mocking bird, the hollyhock,  
leaves opening in the rain.  
music, faith, angels seen at dusk  
—and seven more people leave  
the room  
and are seen running down the  
road.

Mary Oliver is, without apology, a full-blown Romantic. Keats wrote that "if a Sparrow come before my window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel"; Oliver in "One Hundred White-sided Dolphins on a Summer Day," writes:

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

Oliver's garden includes the sea and its creatures, dunes abloom with wild roses, meadows and forest, ponds and streams—plenty with which to make new a nineteenth-century romanticism. A strength of her poems and a mark of their stature is the readiness with which they call to mind the best of the past, only to remake it. Emily Dickinson's narrow fellow in the grass, who makes her feel zero at the bone, is Oliver's "Black Snake" who "looks shyly at nothing and streams away into the grass, his long body swaying like a suddenly visible song."

Oliver tempers Tennyson's criticism that nature is red in tooth and claw with Stevens' "death is the mother of beauty" to give us "Beauty," a poem about an owl which concludes:

This beast of a bird  
with her thick breast  
and her shimmering wings –  
whose nest, in the dark trees,

is trimmed with screams and  
bones  
whose beak  
is the most terrible cup  
I will ever enter.

Here is the Romantic sublime: pure beauty, pure terror. Although Oliver has lived for sometime in Provincetown, Massachusetts, she was born in Ohio and occasionally you hear the middle-west in intonation and diction. Speaking of the non-human seascape and the absence of language posing the problem of the poem in "Mockingbird," Oliver writes: "and nothing there anyway knew, what a word is." She changes the familiar "don't you know," inserted mid-sentence to "don't we know," implicating the reader and echoing her title. Indeed, we know we need the poet for the word.

In a lovely poem called "Gratitude" she uses the question/answer structure of the old English ballads (I'm thinking particularly of "The Cutty Wren") to make a kind of

summary catechism: "What did you notice? ... What astonished you?" Her responses, a Whitman-like list of the marvels of the natural world: "the tin music of the cricket's body;/ the blouse of goldenrod," are all impersonal except for one sequence, "What would you like to see again?" She has written her big black dog, Luke, into several of her poems and does so here:

my dog: her energy and exuberance,  
her willingness,  
Her language beyond all nimbleness  
of tongue, her recklessness,  
her loyalty, her sweetness,  
her strong legs, her curled black lip,  
her snap.

It's a risky business, grieving in poetry for a pet. Pablo Neruda has a brilliant poem on the loss of his dog, but I know of no other poet of stature who has tried it. Oliver manages a careful poise between adjectives which mark shared territory between animal and human (the first seven abstract adjectives) and those (in the final line) concrete and particular to her own dog. "Gratitude" concludes with the reason for the series of questions in the first place: "so the gods shake us from our sleep."

*The Leaf and the Cloud*, a powerful seven-part lyric poem addressing nature, beauty, work, love, and death, begins with a quotation from Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, defining man's position mid-way between earth and the heavens. In the first section, "Flare," Oliver summons her childhood, assesses and dismisses it, and then denies its existence: "anyway,/there was no barn,/no child in the barn,/no uncle no table no kitchen,/only a long lovely field full of bobolinks," as though she had read Lao Tzu – "to forget what you knew is best." Here is a poetry which has clear designs upon us:

Let grief be your sister, she will  
whether or no,  
Rise up from the stump of sor-

row, and be green also,  
Like the diligent leaves.

The second section, "Work," is her love song to the wild world; the third, "From the Book of Time," recalls Plato's notion of ideal beauty and then in haiku-like couplets renders the ideal concrete.

Even now  
I remember something

The way a flower  
in a jar of water

remembers it life  
in the perfect garden

The way a flower  
in a jar of water

remembers it life  
as a closed  
seed ....

"Riprap" (the word for cobblestone laid on a mountain trail to prevent erosion) is the title of her fourth section and as such is a nod to Gary Snyder, who has claimed the word metaphorically for his method of composition. Oliver's poem is carefully constructed of interacting images—mussels on the sea rocks, the quick mind of the poet, the gratitude she feels for love –

I know what to hoard in my  
heart more than the value of  
pearls and seeds,  
There was the day you first spoke  
my name –

culminating in the image of a white heron, landing at night over a salt marsh, appearing, "Not herself but the perfection of self,/a white fire."

Only for a moment does the poet perceive the bird as pure soul and as out of time, but the moment holds the poem.

In "Rhapsody," the short fifth section, the poet catches Time "by the blue sleeve" and tells him he does not rule the field. The love song which

follows is her argument.

The penultimate section, "Gravel," marks the inevitable erosion of the cobbled path, recognizes the certainty of death, and asks "are you afraid?" The poet responds with question and answer—the question, "What does it mean, the world is beautiful/What does it mean?"

°And "This is the poem of good-bye,/ And this is the poem of I don't know ... dirt, mud, stars, water – / I know you as I know myself." In this sustained meditation, Oliver is pure pantheist, insisting on the certainty of the thrush, the certainty of the poet's song. "Evening Star" introduces death as "snake" (by dropping the article, she makes him pure symbol) on his relentless way toward the mouse's hole. "It is easy," she writes, to praise God in nature –

... as if you were yourself a flower  
in the field,  
the rain tossing you and tossing  
you,

until you are that flower  
as torn as muddy as golden as  
that.

Oliver's God partakes both of death and the creature that awaits it.

The tenth section begins "the first streak of light in the darkness, the first bird to sing, ..." returning the poem to its beginnings in "Flare." The eleventh asks the question: what is it I need to know, opening the way for her next volume of poetry, *What Do We Know*, and in the haunting final stanza, the poet sings as though beyond the self and its questions, her voice merely the alleluia discernable in the beating wings of swans in winter as they

rise and fall  
oh rise and fall  
through the raging flowers of  
snow.

From her mouth to God's ear;  
what a gift that we also can hear the  
song.