

THIRST



Poems by
Mary Oliver

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THIRST

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EPILOGUE

Thirst

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”

—From *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

Messenger

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
 equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
 keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
 astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are
here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
 and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
 to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
 that we live forever.

Walking Home from Oak-Head

There is something
about the snow-laden sky
in winter
in the late afternoon

that brings to the heart elation
and the lovely meaninglessness
of time.
Whenever I get home—whenever—

somebody loves me there.
Meanwhile
I stand in the same dark peace
as any pine tree,

or wander on slowly
like the still unhurried wind,
waiting,
as for a gift,

for the snow to begin
which it does
at first casually,
then, irrepressibly.

Wherever else I live—
in music, in words,

in the fires of the heart,
I abide just as deeply

in this nameless, indivisible place,
this world,
which is falling apart now,
which is white and wild,

which is faithful beyond all our expressions of faith,
our deepest prayers.

Don't worry, sooner or later I'll be home.
Red-cheeked from the roused wind,

I'll stand in the doorway
stamping my boots and slapping my hands,
my shoulders
covered with stars.

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.
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.

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
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

The Poet Visits the Museum of Fine Arts

For a long time
I was not even
in this world, yet
every summer

every rose
opened in perfect sweetness
and lived
in gracious repose,

in its own exotic fragrance,
in its huge willingness to give
something, from its small self,
to the entirety of the world.

I think of them, thousands upon thousands,
in many lands,
whenever summer came to them,
rising

out of the patience of patience,
to leaf and bud and look up
into the blue sky
or, with thanks,

into the rain
that would feed

their thirsty roots
latched into the earth—

sandy or hard, Vermont or Arabia,
what did it matter,
the answer was simply to rise
in joyfulness, all their days.

Have I found any better teaching?
Not ever, not yet.
Last week I saw my first Botticelli
and almost fainted,

and if I could I would paint like that
but am shelved somewhere below, with a few songs
about roses: teachers, also, of the ways
toward thanks, and praise.

Musical Notation: 1

The physicality of the religious poets should not be taken idly. He or she, who loves God, will look most deeply into His works. Clouds are not only vapor, but shape, mobility, silky sacks of nourishing rain. The pear orchard is not only profit, but a paradise of light. The luna moth, who lives but a few days, sometimes only a few hours, has a pale green wing whose rim is like a musical notation. Have you noticed?

We had a dog once that adored flowers; no matter how briskly she went through the fields, she must stop and consider the lilies, tiger lilies, and other blossoming things along her way. Another dog of our household loved sunsets and would run off in the evenings to the most western part of the shore and sit down on his haunches for the whole show, that pink and peach colored swollenness. Then home he would come trotting in the alpenglow, that happy dog.

Ribbon Snake Asleep in the Sun

I come upon him and he is
startled; he glides
to the rock's rim; he wheels, setting in motion
the stripes of his body, yet not going
anywhere. And, though the books say
it can't be done, since his eyes are set
too far apart in the narrow skull, I'm not
lying when I say that he lifts his face and looks

into my eyes and I look back until
we are both staring hard
at each other. He wants to know
just where in this bright, blue-faced world
he might be safe. He wants to go on with the
flow of his life. Then he straightens
his shining back and drops

from the rocks and rockets through
the tangle of weeds, sliding, as he goes, over
my bare foot. Then it vanishes
into the shade and the grass, down to
some slubby stream, having
startled me in return. But this is a
small matter. What I would speak of, rather,
is the weightless string of his actually soft and
nervous body; the nameless stars of its eyes.

When the Roses Speak, I Pay Attention

“As long as we are able to be extravagant we will be hugely and damply extravagant. Then we will drop foil by foil to the ground. This is our unalterable task, and we do it joyfully.”

And they went on. “Listen, the heart-shackles are not, as you think, death, illness, pain, unrequited hope, not loneliness, but

lassitude, rue, vainglory, fear, anxiety, selfishness.”

Their fragrance all the while rising from their blind bodies, making me spin with joy.

Great Moth Comes from His Papery Cage

Gone is the worm, that tunnel body. Gone is the mouth
that loved leaves and tomatoes.
Gone are the innumerable feet.

He is beautiful now, and shivers into the air
as if he has always known how,
who crawled and crawled, all summer.
He has wide wings, with a flare at the bottom.
The moon excites him. The heat of the night excites him.

But, where did the dance come from?
Surely not out of a simple winter's sleep.
Surely it's more than ambition, this new architecture!
What could it be, that does it?

Let me look closer, and a long time, the next time
I see green-blooded worm crawling and curling
hot day after hot day
among the leaves and the smooth, proud tomatoes.

Swimming with Otter

I am watching otter, how he
plays in the water, how he
displays brave underside to the
wave-washings, how he

breathes in descent trailing sudden
strings of pearls that tell
almost, but never quite, where he is
apt to rise—how he is

gone, gone, so long I despair of him, then he
trims, wetly, up the far shore and if he
looks back he is surely
laughing. I too have taken

my self into this
summer lake, where the leaves of the trees
almost touch, where peace comes
in the generosity of water, and I have

reached out into the loveliness and I have
floated on my flat back to think out
a poem or two, not by any means fluid but,
dear God, as you have made me, my only
quickness.

Mozart, for Example

All the quick notes
Mozart didn't have time to use
before he entered the cloud-boat

are falling now from the beaks
of the finches
that have gathered from the joyous summer

into the hard winter
and, like Mozart, they speak of nothing
but light and delight,

though it is true, the heavy blades of the world
are still pounding underneath.
And this is what you can do too, maybe,

if you live simply and with a lyrical heart
in the cumbered neighborhoods or even,
as Mozart sometimes managed to, in a palace,

offering tune after tune after tune,
making some hard-hearted prince
prudent and kind, just by being happy.

Making the House Ready for the Lord

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but
still nothing is as shining as it should be
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an
uproar of mice—it is the season of their
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves
and through the walls the squirrels
have gnawed their ragged entrances—but it is the season
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

The Winter Wood Arrives

I think

I could have
built a little house
to live in

with the single cord—
half seasoned, half not—
trucked into the
driveway and

tumbled down. But, instead,
friends came
and together we stacked it
for the long, cold days

that are—
maybe the only sure thing in the world—
coming soon.
How to keep warm

is always a problem,
isn't it?
Of course, there's love.
And there's prayer.

I don't belittle them,
and they have warmed me,

but differently,
from the heart outwards.

Imagine

what swirls of frost will cling
to the windows, what white lawns
I will look out on

as I rise from morning prayers,
as I remember love, that leaves yet never leaves,
as I go out into the yard
and bring the wood in

with struggling steps,
with struggling thoughts,
bundle by bundle,
to be burned.

After Her Death

I am trying to find the lesson
for tomorrow. Matthew something.
Which lectionary? I have not
forgotten the Way, but, a little,
the way to the Way. The trees keep whispering
peace, peace, and the birds
in the shallows are full of the
bodies of small fish and are
content. They open their wings
so easily, and fly. So. It is still
possible.

I open the book
which the strange, difficult, beautiful church
has given me. To Matthew. Anywhere.

Percy (Four)

I went to church.
I walked on the beach
and played with Percy.

I answered the phone
and paid the bills.
I did the laundry.

I spoke her name
a hundred times.

I knelt in the dark
and said some holy words.

I went downstairs,
I watered the flowers,
I fed Percy.

Cormorants

All afternoon the sea was a muddle of birds
black and spiky,
long-necked, slippery.

Down they went
into the waters for the poor
blunt-headed silver
they live on, for a little while.

God, how did it ever come to you to
invent Time?

I dream at night
of the birds, of the beautiful, dark seas
they push through.

What I Said at Her Service

When we pray to love God *perfectly*,
surely we do not mean *only*.

(Lord, see how well I have done.)

A Note Left on the Door

There are these: the blue
skirts of the ocean walking in now, almost
to the edge of town,

and a thousand birds, in their incredible wings
which they think nothing of, crying out

that the day is long, the fish are plentiful.

And friends, being as kind as friends can be,
striving to lift the darkness.

Forgive me, Lord of honeysuckle, of trees,
of notebooks, of typewriters, of music,
that there are also these:

the lover, the singer, the poet
asleep in the shadows.

Those Days

When I think of her I think of the long summer days
she lay in the sun, how she loved the sun, how we
spread our blanket, and friends came, and

the dogs played, and then I would get restless and
get up and go off to the woods
and the fields, and the afternoon would

soften gradually and finally I would come
home, through the long shadows, and into the house
where she would be

my glorious welcoming, tan and hungry and ready to tell
the hurtless gossips of the day and how I
listened leisurely while I put

around the room flowers in jars of water—
daisies, butter-and-eggs, and everlasting—
until like our lives they trembled and shimmered
everywhere.

A Pretty Song

From the complications of loving you
I think there is no end or return.
No answer, no coming out of it.

Which is the only way to love, isn't it?
This isn't a playground, this is
earth, our heaven, for a while.

Therefore I have given precedence
to all my sudden, sullen, dark moods
that hold you in the center of my world.

And I say to my body: grow thinner still.
And I say to my fingers, type me a pretty song.
And I say to my heart: rave on.

Coming to God: First Days

Lord, what shall I do that I
can't quiet myself?
Here is the bread, and
here is the cup, and
I can't quiet myself.

To enter the language of transformation!
To learn the importance of stillness,
with one's hands folded!

When will my eyes of rejoicing turn peaceful?
When will my joyful feet grow still?
When will my heart stop its prancing
as over the summer grass?

Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake.
I would climb the highest tree
to be that much closer.

Lord, I will learn also to kneel down
into the world of the invisible,
the inscrutable and the everlasting.
Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree
on a day of no wind,
bathed in light,
like the wanderer who has come home at last
and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things;
every motion; even words.

The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist

Something has happened
to the bread
and the wine.

They have been blessed.
What now?
The body leans forward

to receive the gift
from the priest's hand,
then the chalice.

They are something else now
from what they were
before this began.

I want
to see Jesus,
maybe in the clouds

or on the shore,
just walking,
beautiful man

and clearly
someone else
besides.

On the hard days
I ask myself
if I ever will.

Also there are times
my body whispers to me
that I have.

Six Recognitions of the Lord

1.

I know a lot of fancy words.
I tear them from my heart and my tongue.
Then I pray.

2.

Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour
me a little. And tenderness too. My
need is great. Beauty walks so freely
and with such gentleness. Impatience puts
a halter on my face and I run away over
the green fields wanting your voice, your
tenderness, but having to do with only
the sweet grasses of the fields against
my body. When I first found you I was
filled with light, now the darkness grows
and it is filled with crooked things, bitter
and weak, each one bearing my name.

3.

I lounge on the grass, that's all. So
simple. Then I lie back until I am
inside the cloud that is just above me
but very high, and shaped like a fish.
Or, perhaps not. Then I enter the place
of not-thinking, not-remembering, not-
wanting. When the blue jay cries out his
riddle, in his carping voice, I return.
But I go back, the threshold is always

near. Over and back, over and back. Then I rise. Maybe I rub my face as though I have been asleep. But I have not been asleep. I have been, as I say, inside the cloud, or, perhaps, the lily floating on the water. Then I go back to town, to my own house, my own life, which has now become brighter and simpler, somewhere I have never been before.

4.

Of course I have always known you are present in the clouds, and the black oak I especially adore, and the wings of birds. But you are present too in the body, listening to the body, teaching it to live, instead of all that touching, with disembodied joy. We do not do this easily. We have lived so long in the heaven of touch, and we maintain our mutability, our physicality, even as we begin to apprehend the other world. Slowly we make our appreciative response. Slowly appreciation swells to astonishment. And we enter the dialogue of our lives that is beyond all understanding or conclusion. It is mystery. It is love of God. It is obedience.

5.

Oh, feed me this day, Holy Spirit, with the fragrance of the fields and the freshness of the oceans which you have

made, and help me to hear and to hold
in all dearness those exacting and wonderful
words of our Lord Christ Jesus, saying:
Follow me.

6.

Every summer the lilies rise
and open their white hands until they almost
cover the black waters of the pond. And I give
thanks but it does not seem like adequate thanks,
it doesn't seem
festive enough or constant enough, nor does the
name of the Lord or the words of thanksgiving come
into it often enough. Everywhere I go I am
treated like royalty, which I am not. I thirst and
am given water. My eyes thirst and I am given
the white lilies on the black water. My heart
sings but the apparatus of singing doesn't convey
half what it feels and means. In spring there's hope,
in fall the exquisite, necessary diminishing, in
winter I am as sleepy as any beast in its
leafy cave, but in summer there is
everywhere the luminous sprawl of gifts,
the hospitality of the Lord and my
inadequate answers as I row my beautiful, temporary body
through this water-lily world.

The Beautiful, Striped Sparrow

In the afternoons,
in the almost empty fields,
I hum the hymns
I used to sing

in church.
They could not tame me,
so they would not keep me,
alas,

and how that feels,
the weight of it,
I will not tell
any of you,

not ever.
Still, as they promised,
God, once he is in your heart,
is everywhere—

so even here
among the weeds
and the brisk trees.
How long does it take

to hum a hymn? Strolling
one or two acres

of the sweetness
of the world,

not counting
a lapse, now and again,
of sheer emptiness.
Once a deer

stood quietly at my side.
And sometimes the wind
has touched my cheek
like a spirit.

Am I lonely?
The beautiful, striped sparrow,
serenely, on the tallest weed in his kingdom,
also sings without words.

More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord

1.

In the household of God, I have stumbled in recitation,
and in my mind I have wandered.
I have interrupted worship with discussion.
Once I extinguished the Gospel candle after all the others.

But never held the cup to my mouth lagging in gratitude.

2.

The Lord forgives many things,
so I have heard.

3.

The deer came into the field.
I saw her peaceful face and heard the shuffle of her breath.
She was sweetened by merriment and not afraid,
but bold to say
whose field she was crossing: spoke the tap of her foot:
“It is God’s, and mine.”

But only that she was born into the poem that God made,
and
called the world.

4.

And the goldfinch too
And the black pond I named my little sister, since

otherwise I had none.
And the muskrat, with his shy hands.
And the tiny life of the single pine needle,
which nevertheless shines.

And the priest in her beautiful vestments,
her hand over the chalice.

And clouds moving, over the valleys of Truro.

5.

All day I watch the sky changing from blue to blue.
For You are forever
and I am like a single day that passes.
All day I think thanks for this world,
for the rocks and the tips of the waves,
for the tupelos and the fading roses.
For the wind.
For You are forever
while I am like a single day that passes.
You are the heart of the cedars of Lebanon
and the fir called Douglas,
the bristlecone, and the willow.

6.

It's close to hopeless,
for what I want to say the red-bird
has said already, and better, in a thousand trees.

The white bear, lifting one enormous paw, has said it
better.

You cannot cross one hummock or furrow but it is
His holy ground.

7.

I had such a longing for virtue, for company.
I wanted Christ to be as close as the cross I wear.
I wanted to read and serve, to touch the altar linen.
Instead I went back to the woods where not a single tree
turns its face away.

Instead I prayed, oh Lord, let me be something
useful and unpretentious.
Even the chimney swift sings.
Even the cobblestones have a task to do, and do it well.

Lord, let me be a flower, even a tare; or a sparrow.
Or the smallest bright stone in a ring worn by someone
brave and kind, whose name I will never know.

Lord, when I sleep I feel you near.

When I wake, and you are already wiping the stars away,
I rise quickly, hoping to be like your wild child
the rose, the honey-maker the honey-vine;
a bird shouting its joy as it floats
through the gift you have given us: another day.

The Place I Want to Get Back To

is where
in the pinewoods
in the moments between
the darkness

and first light
two deer
came walking down the hill
and when they saw me

they said to each other, okay,
this one is okay,
let's see who she is
and why she is sitting

on the ground, like that,
so quiet, as if
asleep, or in a dream,
but, anyway, harmless;

and so they came
on their slender legs
and gazed upon me
not unlike the way

I go out to the dunes and look
and look and look

into the faces of the flowers;
and then one of them leaned forward

and nuzzled my hand, and what can my life
bring to me that could exceed
that brief moment?
For twenty years

I have gone every day to the same woods,
not waiting, exactly, just lingering.
Such gifts, bestowed,
can't be repeated.

If you want to talk about this
come to visit. I live in the house
near the corner, which I have named
Gratitude.

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.

Musical Notation: 2

Everything is His.

The door, the door jamb.

The wood stacked near the door.

The leaves blown upon the path
that leads to the door.

The trees that are dropping their leaves

the wind that is tripping them this way and that way,
the clouds that are high above them,

the stars that are sleeping now beyond the clouds

and, simply said, all the rest.

When I open the door I am so sure so sure

all this will be there, and it is.

I look around.

I fill my arms with the firewood.

I turn and enter His house, and close His door.

News of Percy (Five)

In the morning of his days he is in the afternoon of his life.
It's some news about kidneys, those bean-shaped necessities,
of which, of his given two, he has one working, and
that not well.

We named him for the poet, who died young, in the blue
waters off Italy.
Maybe we should have named him William, since
Wordsworth
almost never died.

We must laugh a little at this rich and unequal world,
so they say, so they say.
And let them keep saying it.

Percy and I are going out now, to the beach, to join
his friends—
the afghan, the lab, the beautiful basset.
And let me go with good cheer in his company.
For though he is young he is beloved,
he is all but famous as he runs
across the shining beach, that faces the sea.

Doesn't Every Poet Write a Poem about Unrequited Love?

The flowers

I wanted to bring to you,
wild and wet
from the pale dunes

and still smelling
of the summer night,
and still holding a moment or two
of the night cricket's

humble prayer,
would have been
so handsome
in your hands—

so happy—I dare to say it—
in your hands—
yet your smile
would have been nowhere

and maybe you would have tossed them
onto the ground,
or maybe, for tenderness,
you would have taken them

into your house
and given them water
and put them in a dark corner
out of reach.

In matters of love
of this kind
there are things we long to do
but must not do.

I would not want to see
your smile diminished.
And the flowers, anyway,
are happy just where they are,

on the pale dunes,
above the cricket's humble nest,
under the blue sky
that loves us all.

Letter to _____.

You have broken my heart.
Just as well. Now
I am learning to rise
above all that, learning

the thin life, waking up
simply to praise
everything in this world that is
strong and beautiful

always—the trees, the rocks,
the fields, the news
from heaven, the laughter
that comes back

all the same. Just as well. Time
to read books, rake the lawn
in peace, sweep the floor, scour
the faces of the pans,

anything. And I have been so
diligent it is almost
over, I am growing myself
as strong as rock, as a tree

which, if I put my arms around it, does not
lean away. It is a

wonderful life. Comfortable.
I read the papers. Maybe

I will go on a cruise, maybe I will
cross the entire ocean, more than once.
Whatever you think, I have scarcely
thought of you. Whatever you imagine,

it never really happened. Only a few
evenings of nonsense. *Whatever you believe—
dear one, dear one—
do not believe this letter.*

The Poet Thinks about the Donkey

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out into the meadow,
leap with delight!
How doves, released from their cages,
clatter away, splashed with sunlight!*

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
Then he let himself be led away.
Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark,
obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon
him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to,
forward.

Gethsemane

The grass never sleeps.
Or the roses.
Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until
morning.

Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.

The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet,
and it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body,
and heaven knows if it ever sleeps.

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe
the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move,
maybe
the lake far away, where once he walked as on a
blue pavement,
lay still and waited, wild awake.

Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not
keep that vigil, how they must have wept,
so utterly human, knowing this too
must be a part of the story.

The Fist

There are days
when the sun goes down
like a fist,
though of course

if you see anything
in the heavens
in this way
you had better get

your eyes checked
or, better still,
your diminished spirit.
The heavens

have no fist,
or wouldn't they have been
shaking it
for a thousand years now,

and even
longer than that,
at the dull, brutish
ways of mankind—

heaven's own
creation?

Instead: such patience!
Such willingness

to let us continue!
To hear,
little by little,
the voices—

only, so far, in
pockets of the world—
suggesting
the possibilities

of peace?
Keep looking.
Behold, how the fist opens
with invitation.

Logan International

In the city called Wait,
also known as the airport,
you might think about your life—
there is not much else to do.
For one thing,
there is too much luggage,
and you're truly lugging it—
you and, it seems, everyone.

What is it, that you need so badly?
Think about this.

Earlier, in another city,
you're on the tarmac, a lost hour.
You're going to miss your connection, and you know it,
and you do.
You're headed for five hours of nothing.
And how long can you think about your own life?

What I did, to save myself,
was to look for children, the very young ones
who couldn't even know where they were going, or why.
Some of them were fussing, of course.
Many of them were beautifully Hispanic.

The storm was still busy outside, and snow falling
anywhere, any time, is a wonder.
But even more wonderful, and maybe the only thing

to put your own life in proportion,
were the babies, the little ones, hot and tired,
but still
gurgling, chuckling, as they looked—
wherever they were going, or not yet going,
in their weary parents' arms (no!
their lucky parents' arms)—
upon this broken world.

The Poet Comments on Yet Another Approaching Spring

Don't flowers put on their
prettiness each spring and
go to it with
everything they've got? Who

would criticize the bed of
yellow tulips or the blue
hyacinths?
So put a

bracelet on your
ankle with a
bell on it and make a
little music for

the earth beneath your foot, or
wear a hat with hot-colored
ribbons for the
pleasure of the

leaves and the clouds, or at least
a ring with a gleaming
stone for your finger; yesterday
I watched a mother choose

exquisite ear-ornaments for someone
beloved, in the spring

of her life; they were
for her for sure, but also it seemed

a promise, a love-message, a commitment
to all girls, and boys too, so
beautiful and hopeful in this hard world
and young.

The Uses of Sorrow

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

Heavy

That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had His hand in this,

as well as friends.
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter,
as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.
Then said my friend Daniel
(brave even among lions),
“It’s not the weight you carry

but how you carry it—
books, bricks, grief—
it’s all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.”

So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?

Have you heard
the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled—
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply?

On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate

(Psalm 145)

1.

All day up and down the shore the
fine points of the waves keep on
tapping whatever is there: scatter of broken
clams, empty jingles, old
oyster shells thick and castellated that held
once the pale jewel of their bodies, such sweet

tongue and juice. And who do you
think you are sauntering along
five feet up in the air, the ocean a blue fire
around your ankles, the sun
on your face on your shoulders its golden mouth
whispering
(so it seems) *you! you! you!*

2.

Now the afternoon wind
all frill and no apparent purpose
takes her cloud-shaped
hand and touches every one of the
waves so that rapidly
they stir the wings of the eiders they blur

the boats on their moorings; not even the rocks
black and blunt interrupt the waves on their

way to the shore and one last swimmer (is it you?) rides
their salty infoldings and outfoldings until,
peaked, their blue sides heaving, they pause; and God
whistles them back; and you glide safely to shore.

3.

One morning
a hundred pink and cylindrical
squid lay beached their lacy faces,
their gnarls of dimples and ropy tentacles
limp and powerless; as I watched
the big gulls went down upon

this sweetest trash rolling
like the arms of babies through the
swash—in a feathered dash,
a calligraphy of delight the beaks fell
grabbing and snapping; then was left only the
empty beach, the birds floating back over the waves.

4.

How many mysteries have you seen in your
lifetime? How many nets pulled
full over the boat's side, each silver body
ready or not falling into
submission? How many roses in early summer
uncurling above the pale sands then

falling back in unfathomable
willingness? And what can you say? Glory
to the rose and the leaf, to the seed, to the
silver fish. Glory to time and the wild fields,
and to joy. And to grief's shock and torpor, its near swoon.

5.

So it is not hard to understand
where God's body is, it is
everywhere and everything; shore and the vast
fields of water, the accidental and the intended
over here, over there. And I bow down
participate and attentive

it is so dense and apparent. And all the same I am still
unsatisfied. Standing
here, now, I am thinking
not of His thick wrists and His blue
shoulders but, still, of Him. Where, do you suppose, is His
pale and wonderful mind?

6.

I would be good—oh, I would be upright and good.
To what purpose? To be shining not
sinful, not wringing out of the hours
petulance, heaviness, ashes. *To what purpose?*
Hope of heaven? Not that. But to enter
the other kingdom: grace, and imagination,

and the multiple sympathies: to be as a leaf, a rose,
a dolphin, a wave rising
slowly then briskly out of the darkness to touch
the limpid air, to be God's mind's
servant, loving with the body's sweet mouth—its kisses, its
words—
everything.

7.

I know a man of such
mildness and kindness it is trying to

change my life. He does not
preach, teach, but simply is. It is
astonishing, for he is Christ's ambassador
truly, by rule and act. But, more,

he is kind with the sort of kindness that shines
out, but is resolute, not fooled. He has
eaten the dark hours and could also, I think,
soldier for God, riding out
under the storm clouds, against the world's pride and
unkindness
with both unassailable sweetness, and consoling word.

8.

Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden
cloth of the sand and say
some kind of musical thanks for
the world that is happening again—another day—
from the shawl of wind coming out of the
west to the firm green

flesh of the melon lately sliced open and
eaten, its chill and ample body
flavored with mercy. I want
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.
O Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you.

Percy (Six)

You're like a little wild thing
that was never sent to school.
Sit, I say, and you jump up.
Come, I say, and you go galloping down the sand
to the nearest dead fish
with which you perfume your sweet neck.
It is summer.
How many summers does a little dog have?

Run, run, Percy.
This is our school.

Percy (Seven)

And now Percy is getting brazen.
Let's down the beach, baby, he says.
Let's shake it with a little barking.
Let's find dead things, and explore them,
by mouth, if possible.

Or maybe the leavings of Paul's horse (after which,
forgive me for mentioning it, he is fond of kissing).

Ah, this is the thing that comes to each of us.
The child grows up.
And, according to our own ideas, is practically asunder.

I understand it.
I struggle to celebrate.
I say, with a stiff upper lip familiar to many:

Just look at that curly-haired child now, he's his own man.

In the Storm

Some black ducks
were shrugged up
on the shore.

It was snowing

hard, from the east,
and the sea
was in disorder.

Then some sanderlings,

five inches long
with beaks like wire,
flew in,
snowflakes on their backs,

and settled
in a row
behind the ducks—
whose backs were also

covered with snow—
so close
they were all but touching,
they were all but under

the roof of the ducks' tails,
so the wind, pretty much,

blew over them.
They stayed that way, motionless,

for maybe an hour,
then the sanderlings,
each a handful of feathers,
shifted, and were blown away

out over the water
which was still raging.
But, somehow,
they came back

and again the ducks,
like a feathered hedge,
let them
crouch there, and live.

If someone you didn't know
told you this,
as I am telling you this,
would you believe it?

Belief isn't always easy.
But this much I have learned—
if not enough else—
to live with my eyes open.

I know what everyone wants
is a miracle.
This wasn't a miracle.
Unless, of course, kindness—

as now and again
some rare person has suggested—
is a miracle.
As surely it is.

The Chat

I wish
I were
the yellow chat
down in the thickets

who sings all night,
throwing
into the air
praises

and panhandles,
plaints,
in curly phrases,
half-rhymes,

free verse too,
with head-dipping
and wing-wringing,
with soft breast

rising into the air—
meek and sleek,
broadcasting,
with no time out

for pillow-rest,
everything—

pathos,
thanks—

oh, Lord,
what a lesson
you send me
as I stand

listening
to your rattling, swamp-loving chat
singing
of his simple, leafy life—

how I would like to sing to you
all night
in the dark
just like that.

EPILOGUE

Thirst

Another morning and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have. I walk out to the pond and all the way God has given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord, I was never a quick scholar but sulked and hunched over my books past the hour and the bell; grant me, in your mercy, a little more time. Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.

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