

THE SUN

---

Have you ever seen  
anything  
in your life  
more wonderful

than the way the sun,  
every evening,  
relaxed and easy,  
floats toward the horizon

and into the clouds or the hills,  
or the rumpled sea,  
and is gone—  
and how it slides again

out of the blackness,  
every morning,  
on the other side of the world,  
like a red flower

streaming upward on its heavenly oils,  
say, on a morning in early summer,  
at its perfect imperial distance—  
and have you ever felt for anything

such wild love—  
do you think there is anywhere, in any language,  
a word billowing enough  
for the pleasure

that fills you,  
as the sun  
reaches out,  
as it warms you

as you stand there,  
empty-handed—  
or have you too  
turned from this world—

or have you too  
gone crazy  
for power,  
for things?

SOME QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT ASK

---

Is the soul solid, like iron?  
Or is it tender and breakable, like  
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?  
Who has it, and who doesn't?  
I keep looking around me.  
The face of the moose is as sad  
as the face of Jesus.  
The swan opens her white wings slowly.  
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.  
One question leads to another.  
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?  
Like the eye of a hummingbird?  
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?  
Why should I have it, and not the anteater  
who loves her children?  
Why should I have it, and not the camel?  
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
What about the blue iris?  
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?  
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
What about the grass?

SLEEPING IN THE FOREST

---

I thought the earth  
remembered me, she  
took me back so tenderly, arranging  
her dark skirts, her pockets  
full of lichens and seeds. I slept  
as never before, a stone  
on the riverbed, nothing  
between me and the white fire of the stars  
but my thoughts, and they floated  
light as moths among the branches  
of the perfect trees. All night  
I heard the small kingdoms breathing  
around me, the insects, and the birds  
who do their work in the darkness. All night  
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling  
with a luminous doom. By morning  
I had vanished at least a dozen times  
into something better.

FIVE A.M. IN THE PINEWOODS

---

I'd seen  
their hoofprints in the deep  
needles and knew  
they ended the long night

under the pines, walking  
like two mute  
and beautiful women toward  
the deeper woods, so I

got up in the dark and  
went there. They came  
slowly down the hill  
and looked at me sitting under

the blue trees, shyly  
they stepped  
closer and stared  
from under their thick lashes and even

nibbled some damp  
tassels of weeds. This  
is not a poem about a dream,  
though it could be.

This is a poem about the world  
that is ours, or could be.

Finally  
one of them—I swear it!—

would have come to my arms.

But the other  
stamped sharp hoof in the  
pine needles like

the tap of sanity,  
and they went off together through  
the trees. When I woke  
I was alone,

I was thinking:  
so this is how you swim inward,  
so this is how you flow outward,  
so this is how you pray.

THE SUMMER DAY

---

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean—  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

MORNING POEM

---

Every morning  
the world  
is created.  
Under the orange

sticks of the sun  
the heaped  
ashes of the night  
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches—  
and the ponds appear  
like black cloth  
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.  
If it is your nature  
to be happy  
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination  
alighting everywhere.  
And if your spirit  
carries within it

the thorn  
that is heavier than lead—  
if it's all you can do  
to keep on trudging—

there is still  
somewhere deep within you  
a beast shouting that the earth  
is exactly what it wanted—

each pond with its blazing lilies  
is a prayer heard and answered  
lavishly,  
every morning,

whether or not  
you have ever dared to be happy,  
whether or not  
you have ever dared to pray.

WILD GEESE

---

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.

ONE OR TWO THINGS

---

Don't bother me.  
I've just  
been born.

The butterfly's loping flight  
carries it through the country of the leaves  
delicately, and well enough to get it  
where it wants to go, wherever that is, stopping  
here and there to fuzzle the damp throats  
of flowers and the black mud; up  
and down it swings, frenzied and aimless; and sometimes

for long delicious moments it is perfectly  
lazy, riding motionless in the breeze on the soft stalk  
of some ordinary flower.

The god of dirt  
came up to me many times and said  
so many wise and delectable things, I lay  
on the grass listening

to his dog voice,  
crow voice,  
frog voice; now,  
he said, and now,  
and never once mentioned forever,

which has nevertheless always been,  
like a sharp iron hoof,  
at the center of my mind.

One or two things are all you need  
to travel over the blue pond, over the deep  
roughage of the trees and through the stiff  
flowers of lightning—some deep  
memory of pleasure, some cutting  
knowledge of pain.

But to lift the hoof !  
For that you need  
an idea.

THE FISH

---

The first fish  
I ever caught  
would not lie down  
quiet in the pail  
but flailed and sucked  
at the burning  
amazement of the air  
and died  
in the slow pouring off  
of rainbows. Later  
I opened his body and separated  
the flesh from the bones  
and ate him. Now the sea  
is in me: I am the fish, the fish ,. .  
glitters in me; we are t  
risen, tangled together, certain to fall  
back to the sea. Out of pain,  
and pain, and more pain  
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished  
by the mystery.

A MEETING

---

She steps into the dark swamp  
where the long wait ends.

The secret slippery package  
drops to the weeds.

She leans her long neck and tongues it  
between breaths slack with exhaustion

and after a while it rises and becomes a creature .  
like her, but much smaller.

So now there are two. And they walk together  
like a dream under the trees.

In early June, at the edge of a field  
thick with pink and yellow flowers

I meet them.  
I can only stare.

She is the most beautiful woman  
I have ever seen.

Her child leaps among the flowers,  
the blue of the sky falls over me

like silk, the flowers burn, and I want  
to live my life all over again, to begin again,

to be utterly  
wild.

AUNT LEAF

---

Needing one, I invented her—  
the great-great-aunt dark as hickory  
called Shining-Leaf, or Drifting-Cloud  
or The-Beauty-of-the-Night.

Dear aunt, I'd call into the leaves,  
and she'd rise up, like an old log in a pool,  
and whisper in a language only the two of us knew  
the word that meant follow,

and we'd travel  
cheerful as birds  
out of the dusty town and into the trees  
where she would change us both into something quick—  
two foxes with black feet,  
two snakes green as ribbons,  
two shimmering fish—  
and all day we'd travel.

At day's end she'd leave me back at my own door  
with the rest of my family,  
who were kind, but solid as wood  
and rarely wandered. While she,  
old twist of feathers and birch bark,  
would walk in circles wide as rain and then  
float back

scattering the rags of twilight  
on fluttering moth wings;  
or she'd slouch from the barn like a gray opossum;

or she'd hang in the milky moonlight  
burning like a medallion,

this bone dream,  
this friend I had to have,  
this old woman made out of leaves.

CROWS

---

From a single grain they have multiplied.  
When you look in the eyes of one  
you have seen them all.

At the edges of highways  
they pick at limp things.  
They are anything but refined.

Or they fly out over the corn  
like pellets of black fire,  
like overlords.

(Crow is crow, you say.  
What else is there to say?  
Drive down any road,

take a train or an airplane  
across the world, leave  
your old life behind,

die and be born again—  
wherever you arrive  
they'll be there first,

glossy and rowdy  
and indistinguishable.  
The deep muscle of the world.

THE RABBIT

---

Scatterghost,  
it can't float away.  
And the rain, everybody's brother,  
won't help. And the wind all these days  
flying like ten crazy sisters everywhere  
can't seem to do a thing. No one but me,  
and my hands like fire,  
to lift him to a last burrow. I wait  
  
days, while the body opens and begins  
to boil. I remember  
  
the leaping in the moonlight, and can't touch it,  
wanting it miraculously to heal  
and spring up  
joyful. But finally  
  
I do. And the day after I've shoveled  
the earth over, in a field nearby  
  
I find a small bird's nest lined pale  
and silvery and the chicks—  
are you listening, death?—warm in the rabbit's fur.

AT BLACKWATER POND

---

At. Blackwater Pond the tossed waters have settled  
after a night of rain.  
I dip my cupped hands. I drink  
a long time. It tastes  
like stone, leaves, fire. It falls cold  
into my body, waking the bones. I hear them  
deep inside me, whispering  
oh what is that beautiful thing  
that just happened?

THE JOURNEY

---

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 that you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

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POEMS BY MARY OLIVER

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