

Mary Oliver - poems

I Happened To Be Standing

I don't know where prayers go,
or what they do.
Do cats pray, while they sleep
half-asleep in the sun?
Does the opossum pray as it
crosses the street?
The sunflowers? The old black oak
growing older every year?
I know I can walk through the world,
along the shore or under the trees,
with my mind filled with things
of little importance, in full
self-attendance. A condition I can't really
call being alive.
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition,
or does it matter?
The sunflowers blaze, maybe that's their way.
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe not.

While I was thinking this I happened to be standing
just outside my door, with my notebook open,
which is the way I begin every morning.
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,
I don't know why. And yet, why not.
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe
or whatever you don't. That's your business.
But I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be
if it isn't a prayer?
So I just listened, my pen in the air.

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?

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.

Poem of the One World

This morning
the beautiful white heron
was floating along above the water

and then into the sky of this
the one world
we all belong to

where everything
sooner or later
is a part of everything else

which thought made me feel
for a little while
quite beautiful myself.

A Thousand Mornings

All night my heart makes its way
however it can over the rough ground
of uncertainties, but only until night
meets and then is overwhelmed by
morning, the light deepening, the
wind easing and just waiting, as I
too wait (and when have I ever been
disappointed?) for redbird to sing.

Spring

Somewhere
a black bear
has just risen from sleep
and is staring

down the mountain.
All night
in the brisk and shallow restlessness
of early spring

I think of her,
her four black fists
flicking the gravel,
her tongue

like a red fire
touching the grass,
the cold water.
There is only one question:

how to love this world.
I think of her
rising
like a black and leafy ledge

to sharpen her claws against
the silence
of the trees.
Whatever else

my life is
with its poems
and its music
and its glass cities,

it is also this dazzling darkness
coming
down the mountain,
breathing and tasting;

all day I think of her —
her white teeth,
her wordlessness,
her perfect love.

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.

On Traveling to Beautiful Places

Every day I'm still looking for God
and I'm still finding him everywhere,
in the dust, in the flowerbeds.
Certainly in the oceans,
in the islands that lay in the distance
continents of ice, countries of sand
each with its own set of creatures
and God, by whatever name.
How perfect to be aboard a ship with
maybe a hundred years still in my pocket.
But it's late, for all of us,
and in truth the only ship there is
is the ship we are all on
burning the world as we go.

Varanasi

Early in the morning we crossed the ghat,
where fires were still smoldering,
and gazed, with our Western minds, into the Ganges.
A woman was standing in the river up to her waist;
she was lifting handfuls of water and spilling it
over her body, slowly and many times,
as if until there came some moment
of inner satisfaction between her own life and the river's.
Then she dipped a vessel she had brought with her
and carried it filled with water back across the ghat,
no doubt to refresh some shrine near where she lives,
for this is the holy city of Shiva, maker
of the world, and this is his river.
I can't say much more, except that it all happened
in silence and peaceful simplicity, and something that felt
like the bliss of a certainty and a life lived
in accordance with that certainty.
I must remember this, I thought, as we fly back
to America.
Pray God I remember this.

The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac

1.

Why should I have been surprised?
Hunters walk the forest
without a sound.
The hunter, strapped to his rifle,
the fox on his feet of silk,
the serpent on his empire of muscles—
all move in a stillness,
hungry, careful, intent.
Just as the cancer
entered the forest of my body,
without a sound.

2.

The question is,
what will it be like
after the last day?
Will I float
into the sky
or will I fray
within the earth or a river—
remembering nothing?
How desperate I would be
if I couldn't remember
the sun rising, if I couldn't
remember trees, rivers; if I couldn't
even remember, beloved,
your beloved name.

3.

I know, you never intended to be in this world.
But you're in it all the same.

so why not get started immediately.

I mean, belonging to it.
There is so much to admire, to weep over.

And to write music or poems about.

Bless the feet that take you to and fro.
Bless the eyes and the listening ears.
Bless the tongue, the marvel of taste.
Bless touching.

You could live a hundred years, it's happened.

Or not.

I am speaking from the fortunate platform
of many years,
none of which, I think, I ever wasted.

Do you need a prod?

Do you need a little darkness to get you going?

Let me be urgent as a knife, then,

and remind you of Keats,

so single of purpose and thinking, for a while,
he had a lifetime.

4.

Late yesterday afternoon, in the heat,
all the fragile blue flowers in bloom
in the shrubs in the yard next door had
tumbled from the shrubs and lay
wrinkled and fading in the grass. But
this morning the shrubs were full of
the blue flowers again. There wasn't
a single one on the grass. How, I
wondered, did they roll back up to
the branches, that fiercely wanting,
as we all do, just a little more of
life?

Mushrooms

Rain, and then
the cool pursed
lips of the wind
draw them
out of the ground -
red and yellow skulls
pummeling upward
through leaves,
through grasses,
through sand; astonishing
in their suddenness,
their quietude,
their wetness, they appear
on fall mornings, some
balancing in the earth
on one hoof
packed with poison,
others billowing
chunkily, and delicious -
those who know
walk out to gather, choosing
the benign from flocks
of glitterers, sorcerers,
russulas,
panther caps,
shark-white death angels
in their town veils
looking innocent as sugar
but full of paralysis:
to eat
is to stagger down
fast as mushrooms themselves
when they are done being perfect
and overnight
slide back under the shining
fields of rain.

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, some-

where 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 heavens 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 Jesus Christ, 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.