

Songs of the Soul
Rev Gary Kowalski

Some people want to be invisible, to disappear or become so deeply enmeshed they appear camouflaged. A human form might be so natural and lacking in artifice they resemble one more stone in field of boulders, not the brightest star in the sky but just one point in a vast expanse, unremarkable, like a deer so still and silent it vanishes among the underbrush.

Such an individual would be present but also absent, a spirit sensed without being seen. That seemed to be the goal for poet Mary Oliver, for whom privacy was not just a personal preference but a requirement of her art.

I actually wrote to the reclusive author years ago, asking if there were any printed sources on her life and she replied with a letter of two sentences that pointed me to a 1990 interview in the *Bloomsbury Review*. I'd hoped to find out something of the sources of her inspiration in her upbringing or biography, but I was disappointed if I thought I could pry forth any curious details of her life. She seldom gave interviews, she noted.

Some company once wanted to do a videotape of me in home—walk around and follow me—and wouldn't this be fine. And I said, thank you very much, no. They wrote and urged me again, suggesting that people who like my work would like to know more about me. And I wrote back and said that, if I've done my work well, I vanish completely from the scene. That's how I feel about it. I believe it is invasive of the work when you know too much about the writer, and almost anything is too much.

Mary Oliver's response reminds me of the dictum of the Tao-te-ching that "a good walker leaves no footprints." Like a finger pointing at the moon, her object is to draw our attention heavenward, not to herself. "As reserved as a guest, as elusive as melting snow," she is like those Chinese masters who wanted no traces of ego clinging to their trail, so that although she won a Pulitzer Prize for her book *American Primitive* and a National Book Award for her *New and Selected Poems* as well as numerous fellowships and other accolades, she never craved celebrity. "I am trying in my poems to vanish," she said, "and have the reader be the experiencer. I do not want to be there. It is not even a walk we take together."

A successful stroll for her was one where she stopped to marvel. Once, finding herself on a ramble through the woods with no pen in hand, she got into the habit of hiding pencils in trees so that she would never find herself in that predicament again. She died this past January at the age of 84, having outlived her life partner and literary agent Molly Malone Cook by fourteen

years. But of course there are tracks and footprints of Mary Oliver in each of her poems. Each one went through fifty or sixty revisions, she said, to reach completion. The verse has been polished and buffed like a lens until we can see nature as she sees it, with vivid, burning clarity.

“You don’t want to hear the story of my life, and anyway I don’t want to tell it,” she confides to her reader in one poem. “I want to listen to the enormous waterfalls of the sun.” To be drenched and drowned in the liquid brilliance that pours down on every centimeter of the earth: this is the vision she hoped to share. “Have you ever seen anything in your life more wonderful than the way the sun every evening, relaxe and easy, floats toward the horizon and into the clouds or the hills, or the ramped sea, and is gone,” she asks, “and how it slides again out of blackness every morning, on the other side of the world like a red flower?”

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.

House of Light is the name of one her twenty volumes, like so many published by our own Beacon Press. Light for Oliver is no mere metaphor, but the incandescent, saving energy suffusing creation, flaming out from every least bit. So she paints with words the way Mont or Van Gogh did with color, offering an impression as fresh and luminous as her own immediate sensations and as ripe with meaning. The poppies she sees are “orange flares.” A goldfinch is “a coin of reddish fire.” The wind on the goldenrod makes a “glittering pandemonium” on the citron and butter-colored hillsides. There is a radiance that shines through every living creatures and that brings an intoxication of warmth and well-being to those who catch even a glimmer.

This does not mean that the world she portrays is always kind of gentle. “Life has no purpose and is neither civil nor intelligent,” she reflects in her poem “Rain.” Sudden death, often violent, awaits every living being, like the mice who become “red, digestible joy” for the night owl, or like the prowling fox who leaves nothing but a “feather scuff of fur” of the snowshoe hare near the dark pebbles of the creek. Yet this is not ultimately a cruel universe. It operates with its own shining necessity. Every death forms the soil for new and unending life, so that on the “wild, amoral, reckless” mountainsides, flowers continue to bloom.

Every year

the lilies
are so perfect
I can hardly believe

their lapped light crowding
the black,
mid-summer ponds.
Nobody could count all of them —

the muskrats swimming
among the pads and the grasses
can reach out
their muscular arms and touch

only so many, they are that
rife and wild.
But what in this world
is perfect?

I bend closer and see
how this one is clearly lopsided —
and that one wears an orange blight —
and this one is a glossy cheek

half nibbled away —
and that one is a slumped purse
full of its own
unstoppable decay.

Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazzled —
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world.
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.

I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing —
that the light is everything — that it is more than the sum
of each flawed blossom rising and fading. And I do.

We do, too, through some alchemy of art or passion. In these poems we are invited to step across the boundary of our separate selves and into a continuum where our souls meet and merge with the large souls that animates our world. Poetry, says Wendell Berry, is “not only a technique and a medium, but a power as well, as power to apprehend the unity, the sacred tie, that holds life together.” According to the definition of another critic, poetry means nothing more or less than “interpenetration.” Thus in her poem “White Flowers,” Oliver speaks of “the porous line here my own body” is one with “and the roots and the stems and the flowers” begin. To help us dance across the delicate divide between self and other, birth and death, is the poet’s real achievement.

And despite it, we remain alone, solitary travelers though together on this trail, appreciating our companions but responsible only for our own awakening.

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 voice 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 thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life that you could save.

For me, the message these poems bear is that not only can we be saved, we are saved already, if only we had the grace and wit to open our eyes and see the light. But how do we learn to see? How do we remove the blinders that prevent us from gazing on life shimmering and whole? "Talent is a long patience," says Oliver (quoting Flaubert), and "originality an effort of will and of intense observation. With effort and will, with patience and attention, the vision will arise.