

# Mary Oliver's Poems for Lent



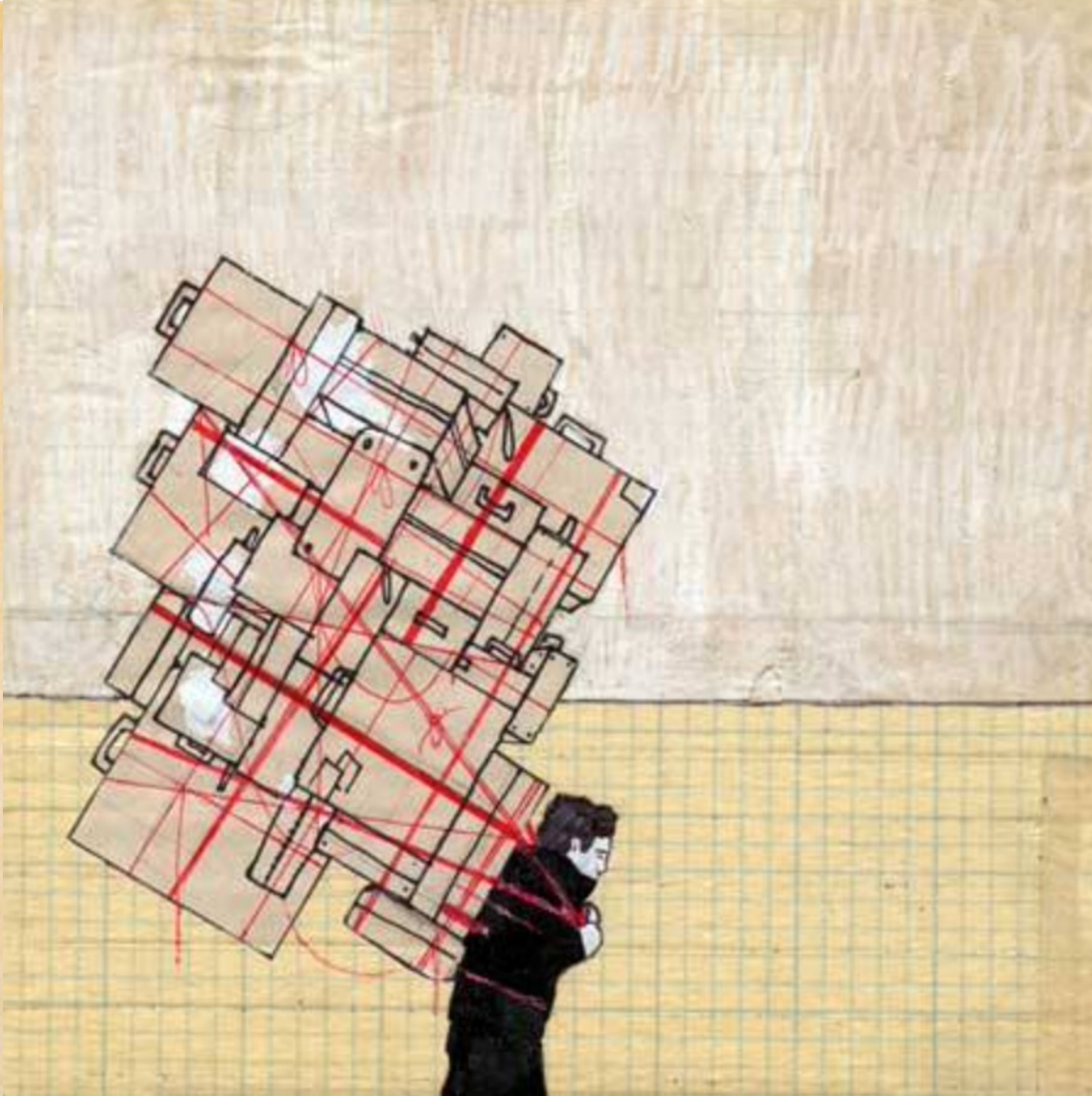


Image by Isaac Tobin

# Storage

by Mary Oliver

When I moved from one house to another  
there were many things I had no room  
for.

What does one do?

I rented a storage space. And filled it.

Years passed.

Occasionally I went there and looked in,  
but nothing happened, not a single  
twinge of the heart.

As I grew older the things I cared  
about grew fewer, but were more  
important. So one day I undid the lock  
and called the trash man. He took  
everything.

I felt like the little donkey when  
his burden was finally lifted. Things!  
Burn them, burn them!  
Make a beautiful fire!  
More room in your heart for love,  
for the trees! For the birds who own  
nothing - the reason they can fly.





# Praying

by Mary Oliver

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.

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# The Summer Day

by Mary Oliver

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 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

by Mary Oliver

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.



# In Blackwater Woods

by Mary Oliver

Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars  
of light,  
are giving off the rich  
fragrance of cinnamon  
and fulfillment,  
the long tapers  
of cattails  
are bursting and floating away over  
the blue shoulders  
of the ponds,  
and every pond,  
no matter what its name is, is  
nameless now.

Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned  
in my lifetime  
leads back to this:  
the fires and the black river of loss  
whose other side is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.

To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
To love what is mortal;  
to hold it against your bones  
knowing your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.





# Logos

by Mary Oliver



Floor mosaic of fish and bread in Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves near the of Sea of Galilee

Why worry about the loaves and fishes?

If you say the right words, the wine expands.

If you say them with love  
and the felt ferocity of that love  
and the felt necessity of that love,  
the fish explode into many.

Imagine him, speaking,  
and don't worry about what is  
reality, or what is plain,  
or what is mysterious.

If you were there, it was all those  
things.

If you can imagine it, it is all those  
things.

Eat, drink, be happy.

Accept the miracle.

Accept, too, each spoken word  
spoken with love.



# Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?

by Mary Oliver

There are things you can't reach. But  
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,  
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing  
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around,  
but standing around as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some  
shining coil of wind,  
or a few leaves from any old tree –  
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.  
Everything in the world  
comes.

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.  
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold  
fluttering around the corner of the sky

of God, the blue air.



# Some Questions You Might Ask

by Mary Oliver

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?

# Mindful

by Mary Oliver



Everyday  
I see or hear  
something  
that more or less  
kills me  
with delight,  
that leaves me  
like a needle  
in the haystack  
of light.

It was what I was born for —  
to look, to listen,  
to lose myself  
inside this soft world —  
to instruct myself  
over and over  
in joy,  
and acclamation.

Nor am I talking  
about the exceptional,  
the fearful, the dreadful,  
the very extravagant —  
but of the ordinary,  
the common, the very drab,  
the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,  
I say to myself,  
how can you help  
but grow wise  
with such teachings  
as these —  
the untrimmable light  
of the world,  
the ocean's shine,  
the prayers that are made  
out of grass?



# The Poet thinks of the Donkey

by Mary Oliver



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

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

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

4. 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.

5. 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.



# Singapore

by Mary Oliver

In Singapore, in the airport,  
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.  
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.  
A woman knelt there, washing something  
in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach  
and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.  
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.  
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.  
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain  
rising and falling.

A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.  
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together,  
and neither could win.  
She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?  
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.  
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,  
which is dull enough.

She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps,  
with a blue rag.

Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.

She does not work slowly, nor quickly, like a river.

Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.

And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop  
and fly down to the river.

This probably won't happen.

But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?  
Of course, it isn't.

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only  
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean  
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,  
The way her smile was only for my sake; I mean  
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.



# Gethsemane

by Mary Oliver

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 splended 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 part of the story.

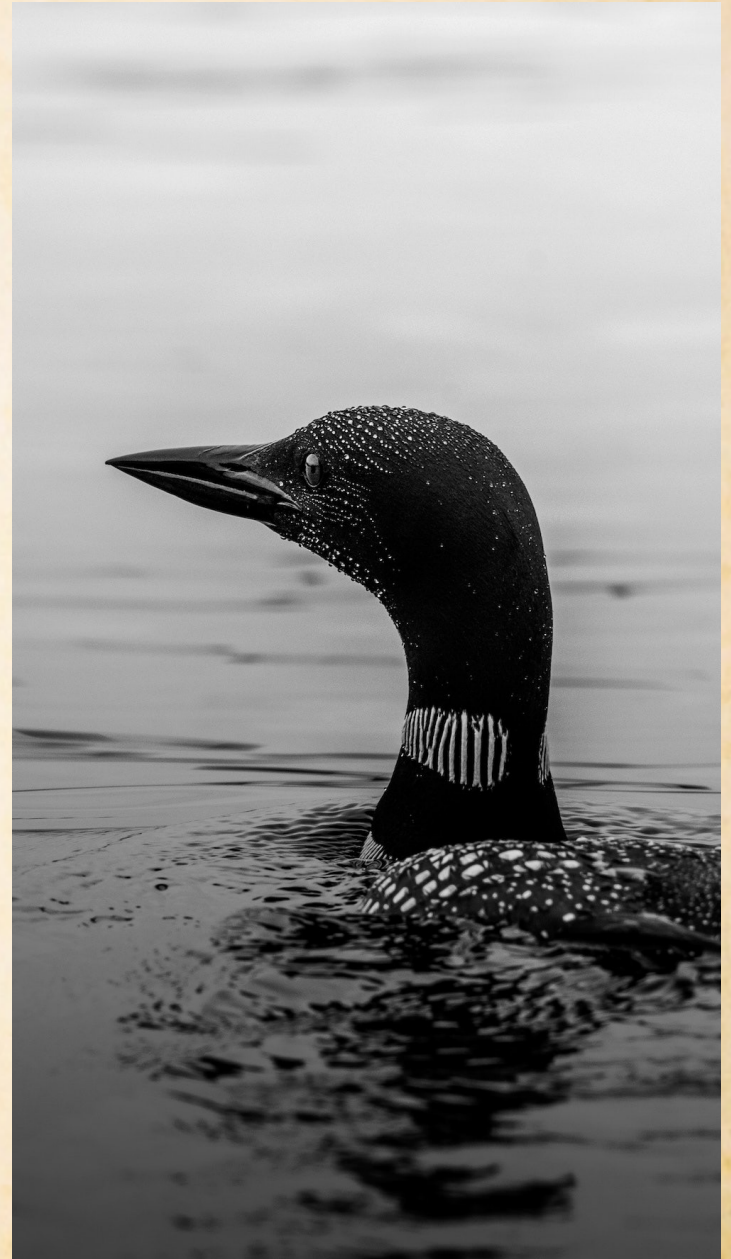


Image by Quaritsch Photography

# Lead

by Mary Oliver

Here is a story  
to break your heart.  
Are you willing?  
This winter  
the loons came to our harbor  
and died, one by one,  
of nothing we could see.  
A friend told me  
of one on the shore  
that lifted its head and opened  
the elegant beak and cried out  
in the long, sweet savoring of its life  
which, if you have heard it,  
you know is a sacred thing,  
and for which, if you have not heard it,  
you had better hurry to where  
they still sing.  
And, believe me, tell no one  
just where that is.  
The next morning  
this loon, speckled  
and iridescent and with a plan  
to fly home  
to some hidden lake,  
was dead on the shore.  
I tell you this  
to break your heart,  
by which I mean only  
that it break open and never close again  
to the rest of the world.





# Poppies

by Mary Oliver

The poppies send up their  
orange flares; swaying  
in the wind, their  
congregations  
are a levitation  
of bright dust, of thin  
and lacy leaves.  
There isn't a place  
in this world that doesn't  
sooner or later drown  
in the indigos of darkness,  
but now, for a while,  
the roughage  
shines like a miracle  
as it floats above everything  
with its yellow hair.  
Of course nothing stops the  
cold,  
black, curved blade  
from hooking forward—  
of course  
loss is the great lesson.

But I also say this: that light  
is an invitation  
to happiness,  
and that happiness,  
when it's done right,  
is a kind of holiness,  
palpable and redemptive.  
Inside the bright fields,  
touched by their rough and spongy gold,  
I am washed and washed  
in the river  
of earthly delight—  
and what are you going to do—  
what can you do  
about it—  
deep, blue night?



# Morning Poem

by Mary Oliver

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.



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