



Winner  
*of the*  
Pulitzer Prize  
*for*  
Poetry

AMERICAN  
PRIMITIVE

POEMS BY  
*National Book Award Winner*

MARY OLIVER



# AMERICAN PRIMITIVE

Edited by  
MARY QUINN  
MURPHY



THE  
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*Twelve Moons*

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Chapbooks

*Sleeping in the Forest*

*The Night Traveler*

# AMERICAN PRIMITIVE

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*Poems by*

Mary Oliver



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*For James Wright  
in memory*

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AMERICAN  
PRIMITIVE



## ■ AUGUST

When the blackberries hang  
swollen in the woods, in the brambles  
nobody owns, I spend

all day among the high  
branches, reaching  
my ripped arms, thinking

of nothing, cramming  
the black honey of summer  
into my mouth; all day my body

accepts what it is. In the dark  
creeks that run by there is  
this thick paw of my life darting among

the black bells, the leaves; there is  
this happy tongue.

## ✱ 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 torn 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.

## ■ THE KITTEN

More amazed than anything  
I took the perfectly black  
stillborn kitten  
with the one large eye  
in the center of its small forehead  
from the house cat's bed  
and buried it in a field  
behind the house.

I suppose I could have given it  
to a museum,  
I could have called the local  
newspaper.

But instead I took it out into the field  
and opened the earth  
and put it back  
saying, it was real,  
saying, life is infinitely inventive,  
saying, what other amazements  
lie in the dark seed of the earth, yes,

I think I did right to go out alone  
and give it back peacefully, and cover the place  
with the reckless blossoms of weeds.

## ■ LIGHTNING

The oaks shone  
gaunt gold  
on the lip  
of the storm before  
the wind rose,  
the shapeless mouth  
opened and began  
its five-hour howl;  
the lights  
went out fast, branches  
sidled over  
the pitch of the roof, bounced  
into the yard  
that grew black  
within minutes, except  
for the lightning — the landscape  
bulging forth like a quick  
lesson in creation, then  
thudding away. Inside,  
as always,  
it was hard to tell  
fear from excitement:  
how sensual  
the lightning's  
poured stroke! and still,  
what a fire and a risk!  
As always the body  
wants to hide,  
wants to flow toward it — strives  
to balance while

fear shouts,  
excitement shouts, back  
and forth — each  
bolt a burning river  
tearing like escape through the dark  
field of the other.

## ✱ IN THE PINEWOODS, CROWS AND OWL

Great bumble. Sleek  
slicer. How the crows  
dream of you, caught at last  
in their black beaks. Dream of you  
leaking your life away. Your wings  
crumbling like old bark. Feathers  
falling from your breast like leaves,  
and your eyes two bolts  
of lightning gone to sleep.  
Eight of them  
fly over the pinewoods looking down  
into the branches. They know you are  
there somewhere, fat and drowsy  
from your night of rabbits and rats. Once  
this month you caught a crow. Scraps of him  
flew far and wide, the news  
rang all day through the woods. The cold  
river of their hatred roils  
day and night: you are their dream, their waking,  
their quarry, their demon. You  
are the pine god who never speaks but holds  
the keys to everything while they fly  
morning after morning against the shut doors. You  
will have a slow life, and eat them, one by one.  
They know it. They hate you. Still  
when one of them spies you out, all stream  
straight toward violence and confrontation.  
As though it helped to see the living proof.  
The bone-crushing prince of dark days, gloomy  
at the interruption of his rest. Hissing  
and snapping, grabbing about him, dreadful  
as death's drum; mournful, unalterable fact.

## ✱ MOLES

Under the leaves, under  
the first loose  
levels of earth  
they're there — quick  
as beetles, blind  
as bats, shy  
as hares but seen  
less than these —  
traveling  
among the pale girders  
of appleroot,  
rockshelf, nests  
of insects and black  
pastures of bulbs  
peppery and packed full  
of the sweetest food:  
spring flowers.  
Field after field  
you can see the traceries  
of their long  
lonely walks, then  
the rains blur  
even this frail  
hint of them —  
so excitable,  
so plush,  
so willing to continue  
generation after generation  
accomplishing nothing  
but their brief physical lives

as they live and die,  
pushing and shoving  
with their stubborn muzzles against  
the whole earth,  
finding it  
delicious.

## ❧ THE LOST CHILDREN

### I

In southern Ohio,  
a long time ago,  
Lydia Osborn, aged eleven, left  
her younger sister  
on the path and headed after  
some straying cows, and did not  
return.

Seven days a search was made; men  
from Ohio and Kentucky tramped  
the darkness, miles  
of underbrush and trees.

They found where she'd slept,  
under two fallen trees, and eaten  
fox grapes and other berries.

The searchers went on into  
the darkness. On the fifteenth day they found

footprints by a stream;  
nearby, a blackberry patch, and near that

a small house built of sticks,  
with a little door, and a roof of green moss.  
Inside, a tiny bed of leaves and more moss,  
wild flowers  
scattered over it.

## 2

I'm sorry for the mother and her grief,  
 I'm sorry for the father and his inconsolable  
 grief, climbing up and down the hillsides,

the edges of swamps, the desolations of the old  
 forest that ticked and spoke  
 in the thrush's gorgeous and amoral voice,  
 while pain picked him up and held him  
 in its gray jaw

enumerating  
 the terrible  
 possibilities.

## 3

Isaac Zane,  
 at nine, stolen  
 by the Wyandots, lived among them  
 on the shores  
 of the Mad River.

A grown man, he walked back  
 to the world and found himself  
 lost there. Or was it only

the smile  
 of the Indian girl  
 Myeerah, the White Crane,  
 that sent him back?

Anyway, he left the streets  
 and returned, and for fifty years

they lived together  
in a house he built beside the Mad River,  
he and the beautiful dark woman,  
the White Crane, Myceerah.

4

Not far from the tiny house in the forest, searchers  
the next day found Lydia Osborn's bonnet; nearby,  
the hoofprints of Indian horses. And now, oh,  
the possibilities are endless!

5

I'm sorry for grief, I said that.

But I think the girl  
knelt down somewhere in the woods  
and drank the cold water of some  
wild stream, and wanted  
to live. I think

Isaac caught  
dancing feet. I think

death has no country.  
Love has no name.

6

I know why the old Wyandot chief, Tarhe,  
laughed and would not barter back for anything  
in any world  
Isaac, the captured boy, his delight.

I know.  
He did it for his own sake.

7

Yet, because he was an old man, and a wise man,  
I think he'd understand  
how sometimes, when loss leans like a broken tree,  
I like to imagine  
he did it  
for all of us.

## ■ THE BOBCAT

One night  
    long ago,  
        in Ohio,  
            a bobcat leaped  
like a quick  
    clawed  
        whirlwind of light  
            from the pines  
beside the road,  
    and our hearts  
        thudded and  
            stopped —  
those lightning eyes!  
    that dappled jaw!  
        those plush paws!  
            In the north,  
we've heard,  
    the lynx  
        wanders like silk  
            on the deep  
hillsides of snow —  
    blazing,  
        it lounges in trees  
            as thick as castles,  
as cold as iron.  
    What should we say  
        is the truth of the world?  
            The miles alone  
in the pinched dark?  
    or the push of the promise?

or the wound of delight?  
As though in a dream  
we drive  
toward the white forest  
all day,  
all night.

✱ FALL SONG

Another year gone, leaving everywhere  
its rich spiced residues: vines, leaves,

the uneaten fruits crumbling damply  
in the shadows, unmattering back

from the particular island  
of this summer, this *Now*, that now is nowhere

except underfoot, moldering  
in that black subterranean castle

of unobservable mysteries—roots and sealed seeds  
and the wanderings of water. This

I try to remember when time's measure  
painfully chafes, for instance when autumn

flares out at the last, boisterous and like us longing  
to stay — how everything lives, shifting

from one bright vision to another, forever  
in these momentary pastures.

## ✕ EGRETS

Where the path closed  
down and over,  
through the scumbled leaves,  
fallen branches,  
through the knotted catbrier,  
I kept going. Finally  
I could not  
save my arms  
from the thorns; soon  
the mosquitoes  
smelled me, hot  
and wounded, and came  
wheeling and whining.  
And that's how I came  
to the edge of the pond:  
black and empty  
except for a spindle  
of bleached reeds  
at the far shore  
which, as I looked,  
wrinkled suddenly  
into three egrets —  
a shower  
of white fire!  
Even half-asleep they had  
such faith in the world  
that had made them —  
tilting through the water,  
unruffled, sure,  
by the laws

of their faith not logic,  
they opened their wings  
softly and stepped  
over every dark thing.

## ❖ CLAPP'S POND

Three miles through the woods  
Clapp's Pond sprawls stone gray  
among oaks and pines,  
the late winter fields

where a pheasant blazes up  
lifting his yellow legs  
under bronze feathers, opening  
bronze wings;

and one doe, dimpling the ground as she touches  
its dampness sharply, flares  
out of the brush and gallops away.



By evening: rain.  
It pours down from the black clouds,  
lashes over the roof. The last  
acorns spray over the porch; I toss  
one, then two more  
logs on the fire.



How sometimes everything  
closes up, a painted fan, landscapes and moments  
flowing together until the sense of distance —  
say, between Clapp's Pond and me —  
vanishes, edges slide together

like the feathers of a wing, everything  
touches everything.



Later, lying half-asleep under  
the blankets, I watch  
while the doe, glittering with rain, steps  
under the wet slabs of the pines, stretches  
her long neck down to drink



from the pond  
three miles away.

## ■ TASTING THE WILD GRAPES

The red beast  
who lives in the side of these hills  
won't come out for anything you have:  
money or music. Still, there are moments  
heavy with light and good luck. Walk  
quietly under these tangled vines  
and pay attention, and one morning  
something will explode underfoot  
like a branch of fire; one afternoon  
something will flow down the hill  
in plain view, a muscled sleeve the color  
of all October! And forgetting  
everything you will leap to name it  
as though for the first time, your lit blood  
rushing not to a word but a sound  
small-boned, thin-faced, in a hurry,  
lively as the dark thorns of the wild grapes  
on the unsuspecting tongue!

*The fox! The fox!*

## ■ JOHN CHAPMAN

He wore a tin pot for a hat, in which  
he cooked his supper  
toward evening  
in the Ohio forests. He wore  
a sackcloth shirt and walked  
barefoot on feet crooked as roots. And everywhere he went  
the apple trees sprang up behind him lovely  
as young girls.

No Indian or settler or wild beast  
ever harmed him, and he for his part honored  
everything, all God's creatures! thought little,  
on a rainy night,  
of sharing the shelter of a hollow log touching  
flesh with any creatures there: snakes,  
raccoon possibly, or some great slab of bear.

Mrs. Price, late of Richland County,  
at whose parents' house he sometimes lingered,  
recalled: he spoke  
only once of women and his gray eyes  
brittled into ice. "Some  
are deceivers," he whispered, and she felt  
the pain of it, remembered it  
into her old age.

Well, the trees he planted or gave away  
prospered, and he became

the good legend, you do  
what you can if you can; whatever

the secret, and the pain,

there's a decision: to die,  
or to live, to go on  
caring about something. In spring, in Ohio,  
in the forests that are left you can still find  
sign of him: patches  
of cold white fire.

## ■ FIRST SNOW

The snow  
began here  
this morning and all day  
continued, its white  
rhetoric everywhere  
calling us back to *why, how,*  
*whence* such beauty and *what*  
the meaning; such  
an oracular fever! flowing  
past windows, an energy it seemed  
would never ebb, never settle  
less than lovely! and only now,  
deep into night,  
it has finally ended.

The silence  
is immense,  
and the heavens still hold  
a million candles; nowhere  
the familiar things:  
stars, the moon,  
the darkness we expect  
and nightly turn from. Trees  
glitter like castles  
of ribbons, the broad fields  
smolder with light, a passing  
creekbed lies  
heaped with shining hills;  
and though the questions  
that have assailed us all day  
remain — not a single

answer has been found —  
walking out now  
into the silence and the light  
under the trees,  
and through the fields,  
feels like one.

## ☒ GHOSTS

### 1

*Have you noticed?*

### 2

Where so many millions of powerful bawling beasts  
lay down on the earth and died  
it's hard to tell now  
what's bone, and what merely  
was once.

The golden eagle, for instance,  
has a bit of heaviness in him;  
moreover the huge barns  
seem ready, sometimes, to ramble off  
toward deeper grass.

### 3

1805  
near the Bitterroot Mountains:  
a man named Lewis kneels down  
on the prairie watching

a sparrow's nest cleverly concealed in the wild hyssop  
and lined with buffalo hair. The chicks,  
not more than a day hatched, lean  
quietly into the thick wool as if  
content, after all,  
to have left the perfect world and fallen,

helpless and blind  
into the flowered fields and the perils  
of this one.

4

In the book of the earth it is written:  
*nothing can die.*

In the book of the Sioux it is written:  
*they have gone away into the earth to hide.*  
*Nothing will coax them out again*  
*but the people dancing.*

5

Said the old-timers:  
the tongue  
is the sweetest meat.

Passengers shooting from train windows  
could hardly miss, they were  
that many.

Afterward the carcasses  
stank unbelievably, and sang with flies, ribboned  
with slopes of white fat,  
black ropes of blood — hellhunks  
in the prairie heat.

6

*Have you noticed?* how the rain  
falls soft as the fall

of moccasins. *Have you noticed?*  
how the immense circles still,  
stubbornly, after a hundred years,  
mark the grass where the rich droppings  
from the roaring bulls  
fell to the earth as the herd stood  
day after day, moon after moon  
in their tribal circle, outwaiting  
the packs of yellow-eyed wolves that are also  
*have you noticed?* gone now.

7

Once only, and then in a dream,  
I watched while, secretly  
and with the tenderness of any caring woman,  
a cow gave birth  
to a red calf, tongued him dry and nursed him  
in a warm corner  
of the clear night  
in the fragrant grass  
in the wild domains  
of the prairie spring, and I asked them,  
in my dream I knelt down and asked them  
to make room for me.

## ❖ COLD POEM

Cold now.

Close to the edge. Almost  
unbearable. Clouds  
bunch up and boil down  
from the north of the white bear.  
This tree-splitting morning  
I dream of his fat tracks,  
the lifesaving suet.

I think of summer with its luminous fruit,  
blossoms rounding to berries, leaves,  
handfuls of grain.

Maybe what cold is, is the time  
we measure the love we have always had, secretly,  
for our own bones, the hard knife-edged love  
for the warm river of the I, beyond all else; maybe

that is what it means, the beauty  
of the blue shark cruising toward the tumbling seals.

In the season of snow,  
in the immeasurable cold,  
we grow cruel but honest; we keep  
ourselves alive,  
if we can, taking one after another  
the necessary bodies of others, the many  
crushed red flowers.

## ❖ A POEM FOR THE BLUE HERON

### 1

Now the blue heron  
wades the cold ponds  
of November.

In the gray light his hunched shoulders  
are also gray.

He finds scant food — a few  
numbed breathers under  
a rind of mud.

When the water he walks in begins  
turning to fire, clutching itself to itself  
like dark flames, hardening,  
he remembers.

Winter.

### 2

I do not remember who first said to me, if anyone did:  
*Not everything is possible;*  
*some things are impossible,*

and took my hand, kindly,  
and led me back  
from wherever I was.

## 3

Toward evening  
 the heron lifts his long wings  
 leisurely and rows forward

into flight. He  
 has made his decision: the south  
 is swirling with clouds, but somewhere,  
 fibrous with leaves and swamplands,  
 is a cave he can hide in  
 and live.

## 4

Now the woods are empty,  
 the ponds shine like blind eyes,  
 the wind is shouldering against  
 the black, wet  
 bones of the trees.

In a house down the road,  
 as though I had never seen these things —  
 leaves, the loose tons of water,  
 a bird with an eye like a full moon  
 deciding not to die, after all —  
 I sit out the long afternoons  
 drinking and talking;  
 I gather wood, kindling, paper; I make fire  
 after fire after fire.

## ■ FLYING

Sometimes,  
on a plane,  
you see a stranger.  
He is so beautiful!  
His nose  
going down in the  
old Greek way,  
or his smile  
a wild  
Mexican fiesta.  
You want to say:  
do you know  
how beautiful you are?  
You leap up  
into the aisle,  
you can't let him go  
until he has touched you  
shyly, until you have rubbed him,  
oh, lightly,  
like a coin  
you find on the earth somewhere  
shining and unexpected and,  
without thinking,  
reach for. You stand there  
shaken  
by the strangeness,  
the splash of his touch.  
When he's gone  
you stare like an animal into  
the blinding clouds

with the snapped chain of your life,  
the life you know:  
the deeply affectionate earth,  
the familiar landscapes  
slowly turning  
thousands of feet below.

❖ POSTCARD FROM FLAMINGO

At midnight, in Flamingo,  
the dark palms are clicking in the wind,  
an unabashed autoeroticism.

Far off in the red mangroves  
an alligator has heaved himself onto a hummock of grass  
and lies there, studying his poems.

Consider the sins, all seven, all deadly!  
Ah, the difficulty of my life so far!  
This afternoon, in the velvet waters, hundreds  
of white birds!  
What a holy and sensual splashing!

Soon the driven sea will come lashing around the blue  
islands of the sunrise. If you were here,  
if I could touch you,  
my hands would begin to sing.

## ■ VULTURES

Like large dark  
lazy  
butterflies they sweep over  
the glades looking  
for death,  
to eat it,  
to make it vanish,  
to make of it the miracle:  
resurrection. No one  
knows how many  
they are who daily  
minister so to the grassy  
miles, no one  
counts how many bodies  
they discover  
and descend to, demonstrating  
each time the earth's  
appetite, the unending  
waterfalls of change.  
No one,  
moreover,  
wants to ponder it,  
how it will be  
to feel the blood cool,  
shapeliness dissolve.  
Locked into  
the blaze of our own bodies  
we watch them  
wheeling and drifting, we

honor them and we  
loathe them,  
however wise the doctrine,  
however magnificent the cycles,  
however ultimately sweet  
the huddle of death to fuel  
those powerful wings.

## ■ AN OLD WHOREHOUSE

We climbed through a broken window,  
walked through every room.

Out of business for years,  
the mattresses held only

rainwater, and one  
woman's black shoe. Downstairs

spiders had wrapped up  
the crystal chandelier.

A cracked cup lay in the sink.  
But we were fourteen,

and no way dust could hide  
the expected glamour from us,

or teach us anything.  
We whispered, we imagined.

It would be years before  
we'd learn how effortlessly

sin blooms, then softens,  
like any bed of flowers.

✱ RAIN IN OHIO

The robin cries: *rain!*

The crow calls: *plunder!*

The blacksnake climbing  
in the vines halts  
his long ladder of muscle

while the thunderheads whirl up  
out of the white west,

their dark hooves nicking  
the tall trees as they come.

*Rain, rain, rain!* sings the robin  
frantically, then flies for cover.

The crow hunches.

The blacksnake

pours himself swift and heavy  
into the ground.

## ■ WEB

So this is fear.

The dark spider scuttles away  
over the underboards.

I watch the blood bead on my skin  
and think rapidly:

the last dollar,

the last piece of bread,

lightning sizzling under the door.

Whether it hurts or not

I imagine it does.

I remember a bat caught years ago

in the attic, how he tired

among the swung brooms,

not knowing we would let him go.

I get up to walk, to see if I can.

*So this is fear.*

The trapdoor

unnails itself; in the dusk

the curtains move

as though the wind had bones.

## ■ UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL, BOSTON

The trees on the hospital lawn  
are lush and thriving. They too  
are getting the best of care,  
like you, and the anonymous many,  
in the clean rooms high above this city,  
where day and night the doctors keep  
arriving, where intricate machines  
chart with cool devotion  
the murmur of the blood,  
the slow patching-up of bone,  
the despair of the mind.

When I come to visit and we walk out  
into the light of a summer day,  
we sit under the trees —  
buckeyes, a sycamore and one  
black walnut brooding  
high over a hedge of lilacs  
as old as the red-brick building  
behind them, the original  
hospital built before the Civil War.  
We sit on the lawn together, holding hands  
while you tell me: you are better.

How many young men, I wonder,  
came here, wheeled on cots off the slow trains  
from the red and hideous battlefields  
to lie all summer in the small and stuffy chambers  
while doctors did what they could, longing  
for tools still unimagined, medicines still unfound,  
wisdoms still unguessed at, and how many died

staring at the leaves of the trees, blind  
to the terrible effort around them to keep them alive?  
I look into your eyes

which are sometimes green and sometimes gray,  
and sometimes full of humor, but often not,  
and tell myself, you are better,  
because my life without you would be  
a place of parched and broken trees.  
Later, walking the corridors down to the street,  
I turn and step inside an empty room.  
Yesterday someone was here with a gasping face.  
Now the bed is made all new,  
the machines have been rolled away. The silence  
continues, deep and neutral,  
as I stand there, loving you.

## ■ SKUNK CABBAGE

And now as the iron rinds over  
the ponds start dissolving,  
you come, dreaming of ferns and flowers  
and new leaves unfolding,  
upon the brash  
turnip-hearted skunk cabbage  
slinging its bunched leaves up  
through the chilly mud.  
You kneel beside it. The smell  
is lurid and flows out in the most  
unabashed way, attracting  
into itself a continual spattering  
of protein. Appalling its rough  
green caves, and the thought  
of the thick root nested below, stubborn  
and powerful as instinct!  
But these are the woods you love,  
where the secret name  
of every death is life again — a miracle  
wrought surely not of mere turning  
but of dense and scalding reenactment. Not  
tenderness, not longing, but daring and brawn  
pull down the frozen waterfall, the past.  
Ferns, leaves, flowers, the last subtle  
refinements, elegant and careful, wait  
to rise and flourish.  
What blazes the trail is not necessarily pretty.

## ✱ SPRING

I lift my face to the pale flowers  
of the rain. They're soft as linen,  
clean as holy water. Meanwhile  
my dog runs off, noses down packed leaves  
into damp, mysterious tunnels.  
He says the smells are rising now  
stiff and lively; he says the beasts  
are waking up now full of oil,  
sleep sweat, tag-ends of dreams. The rain  
rubs its shining hands all over me.  
My dog returns and barks fiercely, he says  
each secret body is the richest advisor,  
deep in the black earth such fuming  
nuggets of joy!

## ■ MORNING AT GREAT POND

It starts like this:  
forks of light  
slicking up  
out of the east,  
flying over you,  
and what's left of night —  
its black waterfalls,  
its craven doubt —  
dissolves like gravel  
as the sun appears  
trailing clouds  
of pink and green wool,  
igniting the fields,  
turning the ponds  
to plates of fire.  
The creatures there  
are dark flickerings  
you make out  
one by one  
as the light lifts —  
great blue herons,  
wood ducks shaking  
their shimmering crests —  
and knee-deep  
in the purple shallows  
a deer drinking:  
as she turns  
the silver water  
crushes like silk,  
shaking the sky,  
and you're healed then

from the night, your heart  
wants more, you're ready  
to rise and look!  
to hurry anywhere!  
to believe in everything.

## ■ THE SNAKES

I once saw two snakes,  
northern racers,  
hurrying through the woods,  
their bodies  
like two black whips  
lifting and dashing forward;  
in perfect concert  
they held their heads high  
and swam forward  
on their sleek bellies;  
under the trees,  
through vines, branches,  
over stones,  
through fields of flowers,  
they traveled  
like a matched team  
like a dance  
like a love affair.

## ❖ BLOSSOM

In April  
the ponds  
open  
like black blossoms,  
the moon  
swims in every one;  
there's fire  
everywhere: frogs shouting  
their desire,  
their satisfaction. What  
we know: that time  
chops at us all like an iron  
hoe, that death  
is a state of paralysis. What  
we long for: joy  
before death, nights  
in the swale — everything else  
can wait but not  
this thrust  
from the root  
of the body. What  
we know: we are more  
than blood — we are more  
than our hunger and yet  
we belong  
to the moon and when the ponds  
open, when the burning  
begins the most  
thoughtful among us dreams  
of hurrying down

into the black petals,  
into the fire,  
into the night where time lies shattered,  
into the body of another.

## ❖ SOMETHING

### 1

Somebody skulking in the yard  
stumbles against a stone, it stutters  
across the dark boards of the night  
and we know. We know  
he's there. We kiss

anyway. This  
is not a pleasant story.

### 2

And time loops like the woodbine  
up into the branches  
of new seasons, and two towns away  
a man who can no longer bear his life  
takes it, alone, in the thick woods.

The police know.  
And we know — since no one tramples again  
the grass outside our window —  
he is our lonely brother,  
our audience,  
our vine-wrapped spirit of the forest who  
grinned all night.

### 3

Now you are dead too, and I, no longer young,  
know what a kiss is worth. Time

has made his pitch, the slow  
speech that goes on and on,  
reasonable and bloodless. Yet over  
the bed of each of us moonlight  
throws down her long hair until

one must have something.  
Anything. This  
or that, or something else:  
the dark wound  
of watching.

## ■ MAY

May, and among the miles of leafing,  
blossoms storm out of the darkness —  
windflowers and moccasin flowers. The bees  
dive into them and I too, to gather  
their spiritual honey. Mute and meek, yet theirs  
is the deepest certainty that this existence too —  
this sense of well-being, the flourishing  
of the physical body — rides  
near the hub of the miracle that everything  
is a part of, is as good  
as a poem or a prayer, can also make  
luminous any dark place on earth.

## ■ WHITE NIGHT

All night

I float

in the shallow ponds

while the moon wanders

burning,

bone white,

among the milky stems.

Once

I saw her hand reach

to touch the muskrat's

small sleek head

and it was lovely, oh,

I don't want to argue anymore

about all the things

I thought I could not

live without! Soon

the muskrat

will glide with another

into their castle

of weeds, morning

will rise from the east

tangled and brazen,

and before that

difficult

and beautiful

hurricane of light

I want to flow out

across the mother

of all waters,

I want to lose myself

on the black  
and silky currents,  
yawning,  
gathering  
the tall lilies  
of sleep.

## ■ 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  
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.

## ✱ HONEY AT THE TABLE

It fills you with the soft  
essence of vanished flowers, it becomes  
a trickle sharp as a hair that you follow  
from the honey pot over the table

and out the door and over the ground,  
and all the while it thickens,

grows deeper and wilder, edged  
with pine boughs and wet boulders,  
pawprints of bobcat and bear, until

deep in the forest you  
shuffle up some tree, you rip the bark,

you float into and swallow the dripping combs,  
bits of the tree, crushed bees — a taste  
composed of everything lost, in which everything  
lost is found.

## ■ CROSSING THE SWAMP

Here is the endless  
wet thick  
    cosmos, the center  
        of everything — the nugget  
of dense sap, branching  
vines, the dark burred  
    faintly belching  
        bogs. Here  
is *swamp*, here  
is struggle,  
    closure —  
        pathless, seamless,  
peerless mud. My bones  
    knock together at the pale  
        joints, trying  
            for foothold, fingerhold,  
mindhold over  
    such slick crossings, deep  
        hipholes, hummocks  
            that sink silently  
into the black, slack  
    earthsoup. I feel  
        not wet so much as  
            painted and glittered  
with the fat grassy  
    mires, the rich  
        and succulent marrows  
            of earth — a poor  
dry stick given  
    one more chance by the whims

of swamp water — a bough  
that still, after all these years,  
could take root,  
sprout, branch out, bud —  
make of its life a breathing  
palace of leaves.

## ✘ HUMPBACKS

✘

There is, all around us,  
this country  
of original fire.

You know what I mean.

The sky, after all, stops at nothing, so something  
has to be holding  
our bodies  
in its rich and timeless stables or else  
we would fly away.

✘

Off Stellwagen  
off the Cape,  
the humpbacks rise. Carrying their tonnage  
of barnacles and joy  
they leap through the water, they nuzzle back under it  
like children  
at play.

✘

They sing, too.  
And not for any reason  
you can't imagine.

✘

Three of them  
rise to the surface near the bow of the boat,  
then dive  
deeply, their huge scarred flukes  
tipped to the air.

We wait, not knowing  
just where it will happen; suddenly  
they smash through the surface, someone begins  
shouting for joy and you realize  
it is yourself as they surge  
upward and you see for the first time  
how huge they are, as they breach,  
and dive, and breach again  
through the shining blue flowers  
of the split water and you see them  
for some unbelievable  
part of a moment against the sky —  
like nothing you've ever imagined —  
like the myth of the fifth morning galloping  
out of darkness, pouring  
heavenward, spinning; then

✘

they crash back under those black silks  
and we all fall back  
together into that wet fire, you  
know what I mean.

✘

I know a captain who has seen them  
playing with seaweed, swimming  
through the green islands, tossing  
the slippery branches into the air.

I know a whale that will come to the boat whenever  
she can, and nudge it gently along the bow  
with her long flipper.

I know several lives worth living.



Listen, whatever it is you try  
to do with your life, nothing will ever dazzle you  
like the dreams of your body,

its spirit  
longing to fly while the dead-weight bones

toss their dark mane and hurry  
back into the fields of glittering fire

where everything,  
even the great whale,  
throbs with song.

## ■ 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.

## ❧ LITTLE SISTER POND

### I

In the early morning: a blaze of noise  
among the trees — a wood duck  
somewhere in the forest calling  
her hatchlings down  
from the warm cave in the tree  
they were born in.

Later, someone I love sees them gathered  
by the water, small  
and full of a whirring music they  
tumble in, they swim their first fast circles  
on the black water.

### 2

A blue damselfly —  
climbing up out of the wet cities —  
streaks across the water, hesitates  
in the villages of the reeds, then  
settles on my arm.

It is lovely, it has  
bright eyes, the wings  
don't seem heavy.  
Apparently it breathes, for the chest —

if you can call it that —  
moves in a quick rhythm.

When our eyes meet  
I do not know what to say.

3

All day I turn the pages of two or three good books  
that cost plenty to set down  
and even more to live by

and all day I turn over my own best thoughts,  
each one  
as heavy and slow to flow  
as a stone in a field full of wet and tossing flowers.

4

Even in the room, though,  
I feel the sun's  
tenderness on my neck  
and shoulders, and think

if I turn  
someone will be standing there  
with a body  
like water.

5

In the evening  
I tell how the wood hen called the chicks down  
in a waterfall of crying, meanwhile

touching, feeling  
good;

and you tell  
how they huddled at the water's edge and then  
tumbled in whirring and learning, meanwhile  
touching, feeling  
pretty good  
also.

6

And somewhere the blue damselfly  
sleeps in the reeds  
it flew back to when it left my wrist,  
its tiny lungs  
inhaling, exhaling, its eyes  
staring east where the summer moon  
is rising,  
brushing over the dark pond,  
for all of us, the white flower  
of dreams.

## ■ THE ROSES

One day in summer  
when everything  
has already been more than enough  
the wild beds start  
exploding open along the berm  
of the sea; day after day  
you sit near them; day after day  
the honey keeps on coming  
in the red cups and the bees  
like amber drops roll  
in the petals: there is no end,  
believe me! to the inventions of summer,  
to the happiness your body  
is willing to bear.

## ❖ BLACKBERRIES

I come down.  
Come down the blacktop road from Red Rock.  
A hot day.

Off the road in the hacked tangles  
blackberries big as thumbs hang shining  
in the shade. And a creek nearby: a dark  
spit through wet stones. And a pool

like a stonesink if you know  
where to climb for it among  
the hillside ferns, where the thrush  
naps in her nest of sticks and loam. I

come down from Red Rock, lips streaked  
black, fingers purple, throat cool, shirt  
full of fernfingers, head full of windy  
whistling. It

takes all day.

✱ THE SEA

Stroke by  
stroke my  
body remembers that life and cries for  
the lost parts of itself —  
fins, gills  
opening like flowers into  
the flesh — my legs  
want to lock and become  
one muscle, I swear I know  
just what the blue-gray scales  
shingling  
the rest of me would  
feel like!  
paradise! Sprawled  
in that motherlap,  
in that dreamhouse  
of salt and exercise,  
what a spillage  
of nostalgia pleads  
from the very bones! how  
they long to give up the long trek  
inland, the brittle  
beauty of understanding,  
and dive,  
and simply  
become again a flaming body  
of blind feeling  
sleeking along  
in the luminous roughage of the sea's body,  
vanished

like victory inside that  
insucking genesis, that  
roaring flamboyance, that  
perfect  
beginning and  
conclusion of our own.

## ■ HAPPINESS

In the afternoon I watched  
the she-bear; she was looking  
for the secret bin of sweetness —  
honey, that the bees store  
in the trees' soft caves.

Black block of gloom, she climbed down  
tree after tree and shuffled on  
through the woods. And then  
she found it! The honey-house deep  
as heartwood, and dipped into it  
among the swarming bees — honey and comb  
she lipped and tongued and scooped out  
in her black nails, until

maybe she grew full, or sleepy, or maybe  
a little drunk, and sticky  
down the rugs of her arms,  
and began to hum and sway.  
I saw her let go of the branches,  
I saw her lift her honeyed muzzle  
into the leaves, and her thick arms,  
as though she would fly —  
an enormous bee  
all sweetness and wings —  
down into the meadows, the perfection  
of honeysuckle and roses and clover —  
to float and sleep in the sheer nets  
swaying from flower to flower  
day after shining day.

✘ MUSIC

I tied together  
a few slender reeds, cut  
notches to breathe across and made  
such music you stood  
shock still and then

followed as I wandered growing  
moment by moment  
slant-eyed and shaggy, my feet  
slamming over the rocks, growing  
hard as horn, and there

you were behind me, drowning  
in the music, letting  
the silver clasps out of your hair,  
hurrying, taking off  
your clothes.

✘

I can't remember  
where this happened but I think  
it was late summer when everything  
is full of fire and rounding to fruition  
and whatever doesn't,  
or resists,  
must lie like a field of dark water under  
the pulling moon,  
tossing and tossing.

✘

In the brutal elegance of cities  
I have walked down  
the halls of hotels

and heard this music behind  
shut doors.



Do you think the heart  
is accountable? Do you think the body  
any more than a branch  
of the honey locust tree,

hunting water,  
hunching toward the sun,  
shivering, when it feels  
that good, into  
white blossoms?

Or do you think there is a kind  
of music, a certain strand  
that lights up the otherwise  
blunt wilderness of the body —  
a furious  
and unaccountable selectivity?



Ah well, anyway, whether or not  
it was in late summer, or even  
in our part of the world, it is all

only a dream, I did not  
turn into the lithe goat god. Nor did you come running  
like that.

✱

Did you?

## ✱ CLIMBING THE CHAGRIN RIVER

We enter  
the green river,  
heron harbor,  
mud-basin lined  
with snagheaps, where turtles  
sun themselves — we push  
through the falling  
silky weight  
striped warm and cold  
bounding down  
through the black flanks  
of wet rocks — we wade  
under hemlock  
and white pine — climb  
stone steps into  
the timeless castles  
of emerald eddies,  
swirls, channels  
cold as ice tumbling  
out of a white flow —  
sheer sheets  
flying off rocks,  
frivolous and lustrous,  
skirting the secret pools —  
cradles  
full of the yellow hair  
of last year's leaves  
where grizzled fish  
hang halfway down,  
like tarnished swords,  
while around them

fingerlings sparkle  
and descend,  
nails of light  
in the loose  
racing waters.

## ✱ TECUMSEH

I went down not long ago  
to the Mad River, under the willows  
I knelt and drank from that crumpled flow, call it  
what madness you will, there's a sickness  
worse than the risk of death and that's  
forgetting what we should never forget.  
Tecumseh lived here.

The wounds of the past  
are ignored, but hang on  
like the litter that snags among the yellow branches,  
newspapers and plastic bags, after the rains.

Where are the Shawnee now?  
Do you know? Or would you have to  
write to Washington, and even then,  
whatever they said,  
would you believe it? Sometimes

I would like to paint my body red and go out into  
the glittering snow  
to die.

His name meant Shooting Star.  
From Mad River country north to the border  
he gathered the tribes  
and armed them one more time. He vowed  
to keep Ohio and it took him  
over twenty years to fail.

After the bloody and final fighting, at Thames,  
it was over, except

his body could not be found.  
It was never found,  
and you can do whatever you want with that, say

his people came in the black leaves of the night  
and hauled him to a secret grave, or that  
he turned into a little boy again, and leaped  
into a birch canoe and went  
rowing home down the rivers. Anyway,  
this much I'm sure of: if we ever meet him, we'll know it,  
he will still be  
so angry.

## ■ BLUEFISH

The angels  
I have seen  
coming up  
out of the water!  
There I was,  
drifting,  
not far from shore,  
when they appeared,  
flying  
in their blue robes  
from the waves,  
from the reflected clouds,  
from the brimming  
of high tide — a thousand  
hungry fish,  
open-mouthed,  
charging  
like small blue  
tigers after  
some schooling  
minnows, darkening  
the water, ripping it  
to shreds.  
Have you ever wondered  
where the earth  
tumbles beyond itself  
and heaven begins?  
They poured  
like fire over the minnows,  
they fell back through the waves  
like messengers

filled with good news  
and the sea  
held them in its silken folds  
quietly,  
those gatherers,  
those eaters,  
those powerfully leaping  
immaculate  
meat-eaters.

## ■ THE HONEY TREE

And so at last I climbed  
the honey tree, ate  
chunks of pure light, ate  
the bodies of bees that could not  
get out of my way, ate  
the dark hair of the leaves,  
the rippling bark,  
the heartwood. Such  
frenzy! But joy does that,  
I'm told, in the beginning.  
Later, maybe,  
I'll come here only  
sometimes and with a  
middling hunger. But now  
I climb like a snake,  
I clamber like a bear to  
the nuzzling place, to the light  
salvaged by the thighs  
of bees and racked up  
in the body of the tree.  
Oh, anyone can see  
how I love myself at last!  
how I love the world! climbing  
by day or night  
in the wind, in the leaves, kneeling  
at the secret rip, the cords  
of my body stretching  
and singing in the  
heaven of appetite.

## ■ IN BLACKWATER WOODS

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.

## ✱ THE PLUM TREES

Such richness flowing  
through the branches of summer and into

the body, carried inward on the five  
rivers! Disorder and astonishment

rattle your thoughts and your heart  
cries for rest but don't

succumb, there's nothing  
so sensible as sensual inundation. Joy

is a taste before  
it's anything else, and the body

can lounge for hours devouring  
the important moments. Listen,

the only way  
to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it

into the body first, like small  
wild plums.

## ■ THE GARDENS

1

Moon rose  
full and without  
compromise through the good  
garden of leaves,  
here and there  
stars rode in flickering  
slicks of water  
and for certain  
the burly trees  
hunched toward each other,  
their dark mantles  
like the fur of animals  
touching. It was  
summer on earth  
so the prayer  
I whispered was to no  
god but another  
creature like me.  
*Where are you?*  
The wind stood still.  
Lightning flung  
its intermittent flares;  
in the orchard  
something wandered  
among the windfalls,  
licking the skins,  
nuzzling the tunnels,  
the pockets of seeds.  
*Where are you?* I called

and hurried out  
over the silky  
sea of the night, across  
the good garden of branches,  
leaves, water, down  
into the garden  
of fire.

2

This skin you wear  
so neatly, in which  
you settle  
so brightly  
on the summer grass, how  
shall I know it?  
You gleam  
as you lie back  
breathing like something  
taken from water,  
a sea creature, except  
for your two human legs  
which tremble  
and open  
into the dark country  
I keep dreaming of. How  
shall I touch you  
unless it is  
everywhere?  
I begin  
here and there,  
finding you,  
the heart within you,  
and the animal,  
and the voice; I ask

over and over  
for your whereabouts, trekking  
wherever you take me,  
the boughs of your body  
leading deeper into the trees,  
over the white fields,  
the rivers of bone,  
the shouting,  
the answering, the rousing  
great run toward the interior,  
the unseen, the unknowable  
center.

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COUNTRY JOURNAL: *August, Humpbacks*  
THE GEORGIA REVIEW: *Skunk Cabbage, The Gardens*  
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