

MARY  
OLIVER



Devotions

*The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*

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# Devotions

THE SELECTED POEMS OF MARY OLIVER

Mary Oliver

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*For Anne Taylor*

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FROM  
**Felicity**

2015

## I WAKE CLOSE TO MORNING

Why do people keep asking to see  
    God's identity papers  
when the darkness opening into morning  
    is more than enough?  
Certainly any god might turn away in disgust.  
Think of Sheba approaching  
    the kingdom of Solomon.  
Do you think she had to ask,  
    "Is this the place?"

## THIS MORNING

This morning the redbirds' eggs  
have hatched and already the chicks  
are chirping for food. They don't  
know where it's coming from, they  
just keep shouting, "More! More!"  
As to anything else, they haven't  
had a single thought. Their eyes  
haven't yet opened, they know nothing  
about the sky that's waiting. Or  
the thousands, the millions of trees.  
They don't even know they have wings.

And just like that, like a simple  
neighborhood event, a miracle is  
taking place.

## THE WORLD I LIVE IN

I have refused to live  
locked in the orderly house of  
reasons and proofs.

The world I live in and believe in  
is wider than that. And anyway,  
what's wrong with *Maybe*?

You wouldn't believe what once or  
twice I have seen. I'll just  
tell you this:  
only if there are angels in your head will you  
ever, possibly, see one.

## WHISTLING SWANS

Do you bow your head when you pray or do you look  
up into that blue space?

Take your choice, prayers fly from all directions.  
And don't worry about what language you use,  
God no doubt understands them all.

Even when the swans are flying north and making  
such a ruckus of noise, God is surely listening  
and understanding.

Rumi said, There is no proof of the soul.

But isn't the return of spring and how it  
springs up in our hearts a pretty good hint?

Yes, I know, God's silence never breaks, but is  
that really a problem?

There are thousands of voices, after all.

And furthermore, don't you imagine (I just suggest it)  
that the swans know about as much as we do about  
the whole business?

So listen to them and watch them, singing as they fly.

Take from it what you can.

## STORAGE

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 is 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.

## FOR TOM SHAW S.S.J.E. (1945–2014)

Where has this cold come from?

“It comes from the death of your friend.”

Will I always, from now on, be this cold?

“No, it will diminish. But always  
it will be with you.”

What is the reason for it?

“Wasn’t your friendship always as beautiful  
as a flame?”

## I KNOW SOMEONE

I know someone who kisses the way  
a flower opens, but more rapidly.  
Flowers are sweet. They have  
short, beatific lives. They offer  
much pleasure. There is  
nothing in the world that can be said  
against them.  
Sad, isn't it, that all they can kiss  
is the air.

Yes, yes! We are the lucky ones.

## THAT LITTLE BEAST

That pretty little beast, a poem,  
has a mind of its own.

Sometimes I want it to crave apples  
but it wants red meat.

Sometimes I want to walk peacefully  
on the shore  
and it wants to take off all its clothes  
and dive in.

Sometimes I want to use small words  
and make them important  
and it starts shouting the dictionary,  
the opportunities.

Sometimes I want to sum up and give thanks,  
putting things in order  
and it starts dancing around the room  
on its four furry legs, laughing  
and calling me outrageous.

But sometimes, when I'm thinking about you,  
and no doubt smiling,  
it sits down quietly, one paw under its chin,  
and just listens.

## THE POND

August of another summer, and once again  
I am drinking the sun  
and the lilies again are spread across the water.  
I know now what they want is to touch each other.  
I have not been here for many years  
during which time I kept living my life.  
Like the heron, who can only croak, who wishes he  
could sing,  
I wish I could sing.  
A little thanks from every throat would be appropriate.  
This is how it has been, and this is how it is:  
All my life I have been able to feel happiness,  
except whatever was not happiness,  
which I also remember.  
Each of us wears a shadow.  
But just now it is summer again  
and I am watching the lilies bow to each other,  
then slide on the wind and the tug of desire,  
close, close to one another.  
Soon now, I'll turn and start for home.  
And who knows, maybe I'll be singing.

## I HAVE JUST SAID

I have just said  
something  
ridiculous to you  
and in response,

your glorious laughter.  
These are the days  
the sun  
is swimming back

to the east  
and the light on the water  
gleams  
as never, it seems, before.

I can't remember  
every spring,  
I can't remember  
everything—

so many years!  
Are the morning kisses  
the sweetest  
or the evenings

or the inbetweens?  
All I know  
is that “thank you” should appear  
somewhere.

So, just in case  
I can't find  
the perfect place—  
“Thank you, thank you.”

## THE GIFT

Be still, my soul, and steadfast.  
Earth and heaven both are still watching  
though time is draining from the clock  
and your walk, that was confident and quick,  
has become slow.

So, be slow if you must, but let  
the heart still play its true part.  
Love still as once you loved, deeply  
and without patience. Let God and the world  
know you are grateful.  
That the gift has been given.

FROM  
**Blue Horses**

2014

## AFTER READING LUCRETIUS, I GO TO THE POND

The slippery green frog  
that went to his death  
in the heron's pink throat  
was my small brother,

and the heron  
with the white plumes  
like a crown on his head  
who is washing now his great sword-beak  
in the shining pond  
is my tall thin brother.

My heart dresses in black  
and dances.

## I DON'T WANT TO BE DEMURE OR RESPECTABLE

I don't want to be demure or respectable.

I was that way, asleep, for years.

That way, you forget too many important things.

How the little stones, even if you can't hear them,  
are singing.

How the river can't wait to get to the ocean and  
the sky, it's been there before.

What traveling is that!

It is a joy to imagine such distances.

I could skip sleep for the next hundred years.

There is a fire in the lashes of my eyes.

It doesn't matter where I am, it could be a small room.

The glimmer of gold Böhme saw on the kitchen pot  
was missed by everyone else in the house.

Maybe the fire in my lashes is a reflection of that.

Why do I have so many thoughts, they are driving me  
crazy.

Why am I always going anywhere, instead of  
somewhere?

Listen to me or not, it hardly matters.

I'm not trying to be wise, that would be foolish.

I'm just chattering.

## STEBBIN'S GULCH

by the randomness  
of the way  
the rocks tumbled  
ages ago

the water pours  
it pours  
it pours  
ever along the slant

of downgrade  
dashing its silver thumbs  
against the rocks  
or pausing to carve

a sudden curled space  
where the flashing fish  
splash or drowse  
while the kingfisher overhead

rattles and stares  
and so it continues for miles  
this bolt of light,  
its only industry

to descend  
and to be beautiful  
while it does so;  
as for purpose

there is none,  
it is simply  
one of those gorgeous things  
that was made

to do what it does perfectly  
and to last,  
as almost nothing does,  
almost forever.

## FRANZ MARC'S BLUE HORSES

I step into the painting of the four blue horses.  
I am not even surprised that I can do this.

One of the horses walks toward me.  
His blue nose noses me lightly. I put my arm  
over his blue mane, not holding on, just  
    commingling.

He allows me my pleasure.

Franz Marc died a young man, shrapnel in his brain.  
I would rather die than try to explain to the blue horses  
    what war is.

They would either faint in horror, or simply  
    find it impossible to believe.

I do not know how to thank you, Franz Marc.  
Maybe our world will grow kinder eventually.  
Maybe the desire to make something beautiful  
    is the piece of God that is inside each of us.

Now all four horses have come closer,  
    are bending their faces toward me  
        as if they have secrets to tell.

I don't expect them to speak, and they don't.  
If being so beautiful isn't enough, what  
    could they possibly say?

## ON MEDITATING, SORT OF

Meditation, so I've heard, is best accomplished  
if you entertain a certain strict posture.  
Frankly, I prefer just to lounge under a tree.  
So why should I think I could ever be successful?

Some days I fall asleep, or land in that  
even better place—half-asleep—where the world,  
spring, summer, autumn, winter—  
flies through my mind in its  
hardy ascent and its uncompromising descent.

So I just lie like that, while distance and time  
reveal their true attitudes: they never  
heard of me, and never will, or ever need to.

Of course I wake up finally  
thinking, how wonderful to be who I am,  
made out of earth and water,  
my own thoughts, my own fingerprints—  
all that glorious, temporary stuff.

# LONELINESS

I too have known loneliness.

I too have known what it is to feel

misunderstood,

rejected, and suddenly

not at all beautiful.

Oh, mother earth,

your comfort is great, your arms never withhold.

It has saved my life to know this.

Your rivers flowing, your roses opening in the morning.

Oh, motions of tenderness!

## DO STONES FEEL?

Do stones feel?

Do they love their life?

Or does their patience drown out everything else?

When I walk on the beach I gather a few

white ones, dark ones, the multiple colors.

Don't worry, I say, I'll bring you back, and I do.

Is the tree as it rises delighted with its many

branches,

each one like a poem?

Are the clouds glad to unburden their bundles of rain?

Most of the world says no, no, it's not possible.

I refuse to think to such a conclusion.

Too terrible it would be, to be wrong.

## DRIFTING

I was enjoying everything: the rain, the path  
wherever it was taking me, the earth roots  
beginning to stir.

I didn't intend to start thinking about God,  
it just happened.

How God, or the gods, are invisible,  
quite understandable.

But holiness is visible, entirely.

It's wonderful to walk along like that,  
thought not the usual intention to reach an answer  
but merely drifting.

Like clouds that only seem weightless  
but of course are not.

Are really important.

I mean, terribly important.

Not decoration by any means.

By next week the violets will be blooming.

Anyway, this was my delicious walk in the rain.

What was it actually about?

Think about what it is that music is trying to say.

It was something like that.

## BLUEBERRIES

I'm living in a warm place now, where you can purchase fresh blueberries all year long. Labor free. From various countries in South America. They're as sweet as any, and compared with the berries I used to pick in the fields outside of Provincetown, they're enormous. But berries are berries. They don't speak any language I can't understand. Neither do I find ticks or small spiders crawling among them. So, generally speaking, I'm very satisfied.

There are limits, however. What they don't have is the field. The field they belonged to and through the years I began to feel I belonged to. Well, there's life, and then there's later. Maybe it's myself that I miss. The field, and the sparrow singing at the edge of the woods. And the doe that one morning came upon me unaware, all tense and gorgeous. She stamped her hoof as you would to any intruder: Then gave me a long look, as if to say, Okay, you stay in your patch, I'll stay in mine. Which is what we did. Try packing that up, South America.

## THE VULTURE'S WINGS

The vulture's  
wings are  
black death  
color but  
the underwings  
as sunlight  
flushes into  
the feathers  
are bright  
are swamped  
with light.  
Just something  
explainable by  
the sun's  
angle yet  
I keep  
looking I  
keep wondering  
standing so  
far below  
these high  
floating birds  
could this  
as most  
things do  
be offering  
something for  
us to

think about  
seriously?

## WHAT GORGEOUS THING

I do not know what gorgeous thing  
the bluebird keeps saying,  
his voice easing out of his throat,  
beak, body into the pink air  
of the early morning. I like it  
whatever it is. Sometimes  
it seems the only thing in the world  
that is without dark thoughts.  
Sometimes it seems the only thing  
in the world that is without  
questions that can't and probably  
never will be answered, the  
only thing that is entirely content  
with the pink, then clear white  
morning and, gratefully, says so.

FROM  
**Dog Songs**

2013

## THE STORM

Now through the white orchard my little dog  
romps, breaking the new snow  
with wild feet.

Running here running there, excited,  
hardly able to stop, he leaps, he spins  
until the white snow is written upon  
in large, exuberant letters,  
a long sentence, expressing  
the pleasures of the body in this world.

Oh, I could not have said it better  
myself.

## PERCY (ONE)

Our new dog, named for the beloved poet,  
ate a book which unfortunately we had  
left unguarded.

Fortunately it was the *Bhagavad Gita*,  
of which many copies are available.

Every day now, as Percy grows  
into the beauty of his life, we touch  
his wild, curly head and say,

“Oh, wisest of little dogs.”

## LITTLE DOG'S RHAPSODY IN THE NIGHT (PERCY THREE)

He puts his cheek against mine  
and makes small, expressive sounds.  
And when I'm awake, or awake enough

he turns upside down, his four paws  
in the air  
and his eyes dark and fervent.

Tell me you love me, he says.

Tell me again.

Could there be a sweeter arrangement? Over and over  
he gets to ask it.  
I get to tell.

## PERCY (NINE)

Your friend is coming I say  
to Percy, and name a name

and he runs to the door, his  
wide mouth in its laugh-shape,

and waves, since he has one, his tail.  
Emerson, I am trying to live,

as you said we must, the examined life.  
But there are days I wish

there was less in my head to examine,  
not to speak of the busy heart. How

would it be to be Percy, I wonder, not  
thinking, not weighing anything, just running forward.

## BENJAMIN, WHO CAME FROM WHO KNOWS WHERE

What shall I do?

When I pick up the broom

he leaves the room.

When I fuss with kindling he

runs for the yard.

Then he's back, and we

hug for a long time.

In his low-to-the-ground chest

I can hear his heart slowing down.

Then I rub his shoulders and

kiss his feet

and fondle his long hound ears.

Benny, I say,

don't worry. I also know the way

the old life haunts the new.

## THE DOG HAS RUN OFF AGAIN

and I should start shouting his name  
and clapping my hands,  
but it has been raining all night  
and the narrow creek has risen  
is a tawny turbulence is rushing along  
over the mossy stones  
is surging forward  
with a sweet loopy music  
and therefore I don't want to entangle it  
with my own voice  
calling summoning  
my little dog to hurry back  
look the sunlight and the shadows are chasing each other  
listen how the wind swirls and leaps and dives up and down  
who am I to summon his hard and happy body  
his four white feet that love to wheel and pedal  
through the dark leaves  
to come back to walk by my side, obedient.

## BAZOUGEY

Where goes he now, that dark little dog  
    who used to come down the road barking and shining?  
He's gone now, from the world of particulars,  
    the singular, the visible.

So, that deepest sting: sorrow. Still,  
    is he gone from us entirely, or is he  
a part of that other world, everywhere?

Come with me into the woods where spring is  
    advancing, as it does, no matter what,  
not being singular or particular, but one  
    of the forever gifts, and certainly visible.

See how the violets are opening, and the leaves  
    unfolding, the streams gleaming and the birds  
    singing. What does it make you think of?  
His shining curls, his honest eyes, his  
    beautiful barking.

## HER GRAVE

She would come back, dripping thick water, from the green bog.  
She would fall at my feet, she would draw the black skin  
from her gums, in a hideous and wonderful smile—  
and I would rub my hands over her pricked ears and her  
    cunning elbows,  
and I would hug the barrel of her body, amazed at the unassuming  
    perfect arch of her neck.



It took four of us to carry her into the woods.  
We did not think of music,  
but, anyway, it began to rain  
slowly.



Her wolfish, invitational, half-pounce.

Her great and lordly satisfaction at having chased something.

My great and lordly satisfaction at her splash  
of happiness as she barged  
through the pitch pines swiping my face with her  
wild, slightly mossy tongue.



Does the hummingbird think he himself invented his crimson throat?  
He is wiser than that, I think.

A dog lives fifteen years, if you're lucky.

Do the cranes crying out in the high clouds  
think it is all their own music?

A dog comes to you and lives with you in your own house, but you  
do not therefore own her, as you do not own the rain, or the  
trees, or the laws which pertain to them.

Does the bear wandering in the autumn up the side of the hill  
think all by herself she has imagined the refuge and the refreshment  
of her long slumber?

A dog can never tell you what she knows from the  
smells of the world, but you know, watching her, that you know  
almost nothing.

Does the water snake with his backbone of diamonds think  
the black tunnel on the bank of the pond is a palace  
of his own making?



She roved ahead of me through the fields, yet would come back, or  
wait for me, or be somewhere.

Now she is buried under the pines.

Nor will I argue it, or pray for anything but modesty, and  
not to be angry.

Through the trees there is the sound of the wind, palavering.

The smell of the pine needles, what is it but a taste  
of the infallible energies?

How strong was her dark body!  
How apt is her grave place.

How beautiful is her unshakable sleep.



Finally,  
the slick mountains of love break  
over us.

## THE POETRY TEACHER

The university gave me a new, elegant classroom to teach in. Only one thing, they said. You can't bring your dog. It's in my contract, I said. (I had made sure of that.)

We bargained and I moved to an old classroom in an old building. Propped the door open. Kept a bowl of water in the room. I could hear Ben among other voices barking, howling in the distance. Then they would all arrive—Ben, his pals, maybe an unknown dog or two, all of them thirsty and happy. They drank, they flung themselves down among the students. The students loved it. They all wrote thirsty, happy poems.

## THE FIRST TIME PERCY CAME BACK

The first time Percy came back  
he was not sailing on a cloud.  
He was loping along the sand as though  
he had come a great way.  
“Percy,” I cried out, and reached to him—  
    those white curls—  
but he was unreachable. As music  
is present yet you can’t touch it.  
“Yes, it’s all different,” he said.  
“You’re going to be very surprised.”  
But I wasn’t thinking of that. I only  
wanted to hold him. “Listen,” he said,  
“I miss that too.  
And now you’ll be telling stories  
    of my coming back  
and they won’t be false, and they won’t be true,  
but they’ll be real.”  
And then, as he used to, he said, “Let’s go!”  
And we walked down the beach together.

FROM  
**A Thousand Mornings**

2012

## I GO DOWN TO THE SHORE

I go down to the shore in the morning  
and depending on the hour the waves  
are rolling in or moving out,  
and I say, oh, I am miserable,  
what shall—  
what should I do? And the sea says  
in its lovely voice:  
Excuse me, I have work to do.

## 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.

## THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER

As long as you're dancing, you can  
break the rules.

Sometimes breaking the rules is just  
extending the rules.

Sometimes there are no rules.

## LINES WRITTEN IN THE DAYS OF GROWING DARKNESS

Every year we have been  
witness to it: how the  
world descends

into a rich mash, in order that  
it may resume.

And therefore  
who would cry out

to the petals on the ground  
to stay,  
knowing as we must,  
how the vivacity of *what was* is married

to the vitality of *what will be*?  
I don't say  
it's easy, but  
what else will do

if the love one claims to have for the world  
be true?

So let us go on, cheerfully enough,  
this and every crisping day,

though the sun be swinging east,  
and the ponds be cold and black,  
and the sweets of the year be doomed.

## AN OLD STORY

Sleep comes its little while. Then I wake  
in the valley of midnight or three a.m.  
to the first fragrances of spring

which is coming, all by itself, no matter what.  
My heart says, what you thought you have you do not have.  
My body says, will this pounding ever stop?

My heart says: there, there, be a good student.  
My body says: let me up and out, I want to fondle  
those soft white flowers, open in the night.

## THE INSTANT

Today  
one small snake lay, looped and  
solitary  
in the high grass, it

swirled to look, didn't  
like what it saw  
and was gone  
in two pulses

forward and with no sound at all, only  
two taps, in disarray, from  
that other shy one,  
my heart.

## TIDES

Every day the sea

    blue gray green lavender  
pulls away leaving the harbor's  
dark-cobbled undercoat

slick and rutted and worm-riddled, the gulls  
walk there among old whalebones, the white  
    spines of fish blink from the strandy stew  
as the hours tick over; and then

far out the faint, sheer

    line turns, rustling over the slack,  
the outer bars, over the green-furred flats, over  
the clam beds, slippery logs,

barnacle-studded stones, dragging  
the shining sheets forward, deepening,  
    pushing, wreathing together  
wave and seaweed, their piled curvatures

spilling over themselves, lapping

    blue gray green lavender, never  
resting, not ever but fashioning shore,  
continent, everything.

And here you may find me

on almost any morning  
walking along the shore so  
    light-footed so casual.

## THE POET COMPARES HUMAN NATURE TO THE OCEAN FROM WHICH WE CAME

The sea can do craziness, it can do smooth,  
it can lie down like silk breathing  
or toss havoc shoreward; it can give

gifts or withhold all; it can rise, ebb, froth  
like an incoming frenzy of fountains, or it can  
sweet-talk entirely. As I can too,

and so, no doubt, can you, and you.

## LIFE STORY

When I lived under the black oaks  
I felt I was made of leaves.  
When I lived by Little Sister Pond,  
I dreamed I was the feather of the blue heron  
left on the shore;  
I was the pond lily, my root delicate as an artery,  
my face like a star,  
my happiness brimming.  
Later I was the footsteps that follow the sea.  
I knew the tides, I knew the ingredients of the wrack.  
I knew the eider, the red-throated loon  
with his uplifted beak and his smart eye.  
I felt I was the tip of the wave,  
the pearl of water on the eider's glossy back.  
No, there's no escaping, nor would I want to escape  
this outgo, this foot-loosening, this solution  
to gravity and a single shape.  
Now I am here, later I will be there.  
I will be that small cloud, staring down at the water,  
the one that stalls, that lifts its white legs, that  
looks like a lamb.

## 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.

FROM  
**Swan**

2010

## I WORRIED

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers  
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn  
as it was taught, and if not, how shall  
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,  
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows  
can do it and I am, well,  
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,  
am I going to get rheumatism,  
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.  
And gave it up. And took my old body  
and went out into the morning,  
and sang.

## I OWN A HOUSE

I own a house, small but comfortable. In it is a bed, a desk, a kitchen, a closet, a telephone. And so forth—you know how it is: things collect.

Outside the summer clouds are drifting by, all of them with vague and beautiful faces. And there are the pines that bush out spicy and ambitious, although they do not even know their names. And there is the mockingbird; over and over he rises from his thorn-tree and dances—he actually dances, in the air. And there are days I wish I owned nothing, like the grass.

## DON'T HESITATE

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

## SWAN

Did you too see it, drifting, all night on the black river?  
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air,  
an armful of white blossoms,  
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned  
into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of lilies,  
biting the air with its black beak?  
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling  
a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees,  
    like a waterfall  
knifing down the black ledges?  
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds—  
a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet  
like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light  
    of the river?  
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?  
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?  
And have you changed your life?

## PASSING THE UNWORKED FIELD

Queen Anne's lace  
is hardly  
prized but  
all the same it isn't  
idle look  
how it  
stands straight on its  
thin stems how it  
scrubs its white faces  
with the  
rags of the sun how it  
makes all the  
loveliness  
it can.

## HOW I GO TO THE WOODS

Ordinarily I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend, for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable.

I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds or hugging the old black oak tree. I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours.

Besides, when I am alone I can become invisible. I can sit on the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of weeds, until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing.



If you have ever gone to the woods with me, I must love you very much.

## ON THE BEACH

On the beach, at dawn:  
four small stones clearly  
hugging each other.

How many kinds of love  
might there be in the world,  
and how many formations might they make

and who am I ever  
to imagine I could know  
such a marvelous business?

When the sun broke  
it poured willingly its light  
over the stones

that did not move, not at all,  
just as, to its always generous term,  
it shed its light on me,

my own body that loves,  
equally, to hug another body.

FROM  
**Evidence**

2009

## VIOLETS

Down by the rumbling creek and the tall trees—  
    where I went truant from school three days a week  
        and therefore broke the record—  
there were violets as easy in their lives  
    as anything you have ever seen  
        or leaned down to intake the sweet breath of.  
Later, when the necessary houses were built  
    they were gone, and who would give significance  
        to their absence.  
Oh, violets, you did signify, and what shall take  
    your place?

## WE SHAKE WITH JOY

We shake with joy, we shake with grief.

What a time they have, these two  
housed as they are in the same body.

## IT WAS EARLY

It was early,  
which has always been my hour  
to begin looking  
at the world

and of course,  
even in the darkness,  
to begin  
listening into it,

especially  
under the pines  
where the owl lives  
and sometimes calls out

as I walk by,  
as he did  
on this morning.  
So many gifts!

What do they mean?  
In the marshes  
where the pink light  
was just arriving

the mink  
with his bristle tail  
was stalking  
the soft-eared mice,

and in the pines  
the cones were heavy,  
each one  
ordained to open.

Sometimes I need  
only to stand  
wherever I am  
to be blessed.

Little mink, let me watch you.  
Little mice, run and run.  
Dear pine cone, let me hold you  
as you open.

WITH THANKS TO THE FIELD SPARROW,  
WHOSE VOICE IS SO DELICATE AND  
HUMBLE

I do not live happily or comfortably  
with the cleverness of our times.  
The talk is all about computers,  
the news is all about bombs and blood.  
This morning, in the fresh field,  
I came upon a hidden nest.  
It held four warm, speckled eggs.  
I touched them.  
Then went away softly,  
having felt something more wonderful  
than all the electricity of New York City.

## A LESSON FROM JAMES WRIGHT

If James Wright  
could put in his book of poems  
a blank page

dedicated to “the Horse David  
Who Ate One of My Poems,” I am ready  
to follow him along

the sweet path he cut  
through the dryness  
and suggest that you sit now

very quietly  
in some lovely wild place, and listen  
to the silence.

And I say that this, too,  
is a poem.

## ALMOST A CONVERSATION

I have not really, not yet, talked with otter  
about his life.

He has so many teeth, he has trouble  
with vowels.

Wherefore our understanding  
is all body expression—

he swims like the sleekest fish,  
he dives and exhales and lifts a trail of bubbles.  
Little by little he trusts my eyes  
and my curious body sitting on the shore.

Sometimes he comes close.  
I admire his whiskers  
and his dark fur which I would rather die than wear.

He has no words, still what he tells about his life  
is clear.

He does not own a computer.  
He imagines the river will last forever.  
He does not envy the dry house I live in.  
He does not wonder who or what it is that I worship.  
He wonders, morning after morning, that the river  
is so cold and fresh and alive, and still  
I don't jump in.

## TO BEGIN WITH, THE SWEET GRASS

### 1.

Will the hungry ox stand in the field and not eat  
of the sweet grass?

Will the owl bite off its own wings?

Will the lark forget to lift its body in the air or  
forget to sing?

Will the rivers run upstream?

Behold, I say—behold  
the reliability and the finery and the teachings  
of this gritty earth gift.

### 2.

Eat bread and understand comfort.

Drink water, and understand delight.

Visit the garden where the scarlet trumpets  
are opening their bodies for the hummingbirds  
who are drinking the sweetness, who are  
thrillingly gluttonous.

For one thing leads to another.

Soon you will notice how stones shine underfoot.

Eventually tides will be the only calendar you believe in.

And someone's face, whom you love, will be as a star  
both intimate and ultimate,  
and you will be both heart-shaken and respectful.

And you will hear the air itself, like a beloved, whisper:  
oh, let me, for a while longer, enter the two  
beautiful bodies of your lungs.

### **3.**

The witchery of living  
is my whole conversation  
with you, my darlings.  
All I can tell you is what I know.

Look, and look again.  
This world is not just a little thrill for the eyes.

It's more than bones.  
It's more than the delicate wrist with its personal pulse.  
It's more than the beating of the single heart.  
It's praising.  
It's giving until the giving feels like receiving.  
You have a life—just imagine that!  
You have this day, and maybe another, and maybe  
still another.

### **4.**

Someday I am going to ask my friend Paulus,  
the dancer, the potter,  
to make me a begging bowl  
which I believe  
my soul needs.

And if I come to you,  
to the door of your comfortable house

with unwashed clothes and unclean fingernails,  
will you put something into it?

I would like to take this chance.

I would like to give you this chance.

**5.**

We do one thing or another; we stay the same, or we  
change.

Congratulations, if  
you have changed.

**6.**

Let me ask you this.

Do you also think that beauty exists for some  
fabulous reason?

And, if you have not been enchanted by this adventure—  
your life—

what would do for you?

**7.**

What I loved in the beginning, I think, was mostly myself.

Never mind that I had to, since somebody had to.

That was many years ago.

Since then I have gone out from my confinements,  
though with difficulty.

I mean the ones that thought to rule my heart.

I cast them out, I put them on the mush pile.

They will be nourishment somehow (everything is nourishment

somehow or another).

And I have become the child of the clouds, and of hope.  
I have become the friend of the enemy, whoever that is.  
I have become older and, cherishing what I have learned,  
I have become younger.

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?  
Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.

# EVIDENCE

## 1.

Where do I live? If I had no address, as many people do not, I could nevertheless say that I lived in the same town as the lilies of the field, and the still waters.

Spring, and all through the neighborhood now there are strong men tending flowers.

Beauty without purpose is beauty without virtue. But all beautiful things, inherently, have this function—to excite the viewers toward sublime thought. Glory to the world, that good teacher.

Among the swans there is none called the least, or the greatest.

I believe in kindness. Also in mischief. Also in singing, especially when singing is not necessarily prescribed.

As for the body, it is solid and strong and curious and full of detail; it wants to polish itself; it wants to love another body; it is the only vessel in the world that can hold, in a mix of power and sweetness: words, song, gesture, passion, ideas, ingenuity, devotion, merriment, vanity, and virtue.

Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.

## 2.

There are many ways to perish, or to flourish.

How old pain, for example, can stall us at the threshold of function.

Memory: a golden bowl, or a basement without light.

For which reason the nightmare comes with its painful story and says: *you need to know this*.

Some memories I would give anything to forget. Others I would not give up upon the point of death, they are the bright hawks of my life.

Still, friends, consider stone, that is without the fret of gravity, and water that is without anxiety.

And the pine trees that never forget their recipe for renewal.

And the female wood duck who is looking this way and that way for her children. And the snapping turtle who is looking this way and that way also. This is the world.

And consider, always, every day, the determination of the grass to grow despite the unending obstacles.

## 3.

I ask you again: if you have not been enchanted by this adventure—your life—what would do for you?

And, where are you, with your ears bagged down as if with packets of sand? Listen. We all have much more listening to do. Tear the sand away. And listen. The river is singing.

What blackboard could ever be invented that could hold all the zeros of eternity?

Let me put it this way—if you disdain the cobbler may I assume you walk barefoot?

Last week I met the so-called deranged man who lives in the woods. He was walking with great care, so as not to step on any small, living thing.

For myself, I have walked in these woods for more than forty years, and I am the only thing, it seems, that is about to be used up. Or, to be less extravagant, will, in the foreseeable future, be used up.

First, though, I want to step out into some fresh morning and look around and hear myself crying out: “The house of money is falling! The house of money is falling! The weeds are rising! The weeds are rising!”

## PRAYER

May I never not be frisky,  
May I never not be risqué.

May my ashes, when you have them, friend,  
and give them to the ocean,

leap in the froth of the waves,  
still loving movement,

still ready, beyond all else,  
to dance for the world.

## MYSTERIES, YES

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous  
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the  
mouths of the lambs.

How rivers and stones are forever  
in allegiance with gravity  
while we ourselves dream of rising.

How two hands touch and the bonds will  
never be broken.

How people come, from delight or the  
scars of damage,  
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those  
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say  
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,  
and bow their heads.

# AT THE RIVER CLARION

## 1.

I don't know who God is exactly.

But I'll tell you this.

I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a  
water splashed stone

and all afternoon I listened to the voices  
of the river talking.

Whenever the water struck the stone it had  
something to say,

and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing  
under the water.

And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me  
what they were saying.

Said the river: I am part of holiness.

And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered  
the moss beneath the water.

I'd been to the river before, a few times.

Don't blame the river that nothing happened quickly.

You don't hear such voices in an hour or a day.

You don't hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears.

And it's difficult to hear anything anyway, through  
all the traffic, and ambition.

## 2.

If God exists he isn't just butter and good luck.

He's also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke.  
Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then  
keep on going.  
Imagine how the lily (who may also be a part of God)  
would sing to you if it could sing, if  
you would pause to hear it.  
And how are you so certain anyway that it doesn't sing?

If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics.  
He's the forest, He's the desert.  
He's the ice caps, that are dying.  
He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts.

He's van Gogh and Allen Ginsberg and Robert  
Motherwell.  
He's the many desperate hands, cleaning and preparing  
their weapons.  
He's every one of us, potentially.  
The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician,  
the poet.  
And if this is true, isn't it something very important?

Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and  
each of you too, or at least  
of his intention and his hope.  
Which is a delight beyond measure.  
I don't know how you get to suspect such an idea.  
I only know that the river kept singing.  
It wasn't a persuasion, it was all the river's own  
constant joy  
which was better by far than a lecture, which was  
comfortable, exciting, unforgettable.

**3.**

Of course for each of us, there is the daily life.  
Let us live it, gesture by gesture.  
When we cut the ripe melon, should we not give it thanks?  
And should we not thank the knife also?  
We do not live in a simple world.

**4.**

There was someone I loved who grew old and ill.  
One by one I watched the fires go out.  
There was nothing I could do

except to remember  
that we receive  
then we give back.

**5.**

My dog Luke lies in a grave in the forest,  
she is given back.  
But the river Clarion still flows  
from wherever it comes from  
to where it has been told to go.  
I pray for the desperate earth.  
I pray for the desperate world.  
I do the little each person can do, it isn't much.  
Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves.

**6.**

Along its shores were, may I say, very intense  
cardinal flowers.  
And trees, and birds that have wings to uphold them,

for heaven's sakes—  
the lucky ones: they have such deep natures,  
they are so happily obedient.  
While I sit here in a house filled with books,  
ideas, doubts, hesitations.

**7.**

And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river  
keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its  
long journey, its pale, infallible voice  
singing.

FROM

The Truro Bear and Other  
Adventures

2008

## THE OTHER KINGDOMS

Consider the other kingdoms. The trees, for example, with their mellow-sounding titles: oak, aspen, willow.

Or the snow, for which the peoples of the north have dozens of words to describe its different arrivals. Or the creatures, with their thick fur, their shy and wordless gaze. Their infallible sense of what their lives are meant to be. Thus the world grows rich, grows wild, and you too, grow rich, grow sweetly wild, as you too were born to be.

## THE GIFT

After the wind-bruised sea  
furrowed itself back  
into folds of blue, I found  
in the black wrack

a shell called the Neptune—  
tawny and white,  
spherical,  
with a tail

and a tower  
and a dark door,  
and all of it  
no larger

than my fist.  
It looked, you might say,  
very expensive.  
I thought of its travels

in the Atlantic's  
wind-pounded bowl  
and wondered  
that it was still intact.

Ah yes, there was  
that door  
that held only the eventual, inevitable  
emptiness.

There's that—there's always that.

Still, what a house  
to leave behind!

I held it

like the wisest of books

and imagined

its travels toward my hand.

And now, your hand.

## COYOTE IN THE DARK, COYOTES REMEMBERED

The darkest thing  
met me in the dark.  
It was only a face  
and a brace of teeth  
that held no words,  
though I felt a salty breath  
sighing in my direction.  
Once, in an autumn that is long gone,  
I was down on my knees  
in the cranberry bog  
and heard, in that lonely place,  
two voices coming down the hill,  
and I was thrilled  
to be granted this secret,  
that the coyotes, walking together  
can talk together,  
for I thought, what else could it be?  
And even though what emerged  
were two young women, two-legged for sure  
and not at all aware of me,  
their nimble, young women tongues  
telling and answering,  
and though I knew  
I had believed something probably not true,  
yet it was wonderful  
to have believed it.  
And it has stayed with me

as a present once given is forever given.  
Easy and happy they sounded,  
those two maidens of the wilderness  
from which we have—  
who knows to what furious, pitiful extent—  
banished ourselves.

FROM  
**Red Bird**

2008

## NIGHT HERONS

Some herons  
were fishing  
in the robes  
of the night

at a low hour  
of the water's body,  
and the fish, I suppose,  
were full

of fish happiness  
in those transparent inches  
even as, over and over,  
the beaks jacked down

and the narrow  
bodies were lifted  
with every  
quick sally,

and that was the end of them  
as far as we know—  
though, what do we know  
except that death

is so everywhere and so entire—  
pummeling and felling,  
or sometimes,  
like this, appearing

through such a thin door—  
one stab, and you're through!  
And what then?  
Why, then it was almost morning,

and one by one  
the birds  
opened their wings  
and flew.

## MORNINGS AT BLACKWATER

For years, every morning, I drank  
from Blackwater Pond.

It was flavored with oak leaves and also, no doubt,  
the feet of ducks.

And always it assuaged me  
from the dry bowl of the very far past.

What I want to say is  
that the past is the past,  
and the present is what your life is,  
and you are capable  
of choosing what that will be,  
darling citizen.

So come to the pond,  
or the river of your imagination,  
or the harbor of your longing,

and put your lips to the world.  
And live  
your life.

## THE ORCHARD

I have dreamed  
of accomplishment.  
I have fed

ambition.  
I have traded  
nights of sleep

for a length of work.  
Lo, and I have discovered  
how soft bloom

turns to green fruit  
which turns to sweet fruit.  
Lo, and I have discovered

all winds blow cold  
at last,  
and the leaves,

so pretty, so many,  
vanish  
in the great, black

packet of time,  
in the great, black  
packet of ambition,

and the ripeness

of the apple  
is its downfall.

# SOMETIMES

## 1.

Something came up  
out of the dark.  
It wasn't anything I had ever seen before.  
It wasn't an animal  
    or a flower,  
unless it was both.

Something came up out of the water,  
    a head the size of a cat  
but muddy and without ears.  
I don't know what God is.  
I don't know what death is.

But I believe they have between them  
    some fervent and necessary arrangement.

## 2.

Sometimes  
melancholy leaves me breathless.

## 3.

Later I was in a field full of sunflowers.  
I was feeling the heat of midsummer.  
I was thinking of the sweet, electric  
    drowse of creation,

when it began to break.

In the west, clouds gathered.

Thunderheads.

In an hour the sky was filled with them.

In an hour the sky was filled

with the sweetness of rain and the blast of lightning.

Followed by the deep bells of thunder.

Water from the heavens! Electricity from the source!

Both of them mad to create something!

The lightning brighter than any flower.

The thunder without a drowsy bone in its body.

#### **4.**

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*

#### **5.**

Two or three times in my life I discovered love.

Each time it seemed to solve everything.

Each time it solved a great many things

but not everything.

Yet left me as grateful as if it had indeed, and  
thoroughly, solved everything.

#### **6.**

God, rest in my heart  
and fortify me,  
take away my hunger for answers,  
let the hours play upon my body

like the hands of my beloved.  
Let the cathead appear again—  
the smallest of your mysteries,  
some wild cousin of my own blood probably—  
some cousin of my own wild blood probably,  
in the black dinner-bowl of the pond.

## 7.

Death waits for me, I know it, around  
    one corner or another.  
This doesn't amuse me.  
Neither does it frighten me.

After the rain, I went back into the field of sunflowers.  
It was cool, and I was anything but drowsy.  
I walked slowly, and listened  
  
to the crazy roots, in the drenched earth, laughing and growing.

## INVITATION

Oh do you have time  
to linger  
for just a little while  
out of your busy

and very important day  
for the goldfinches  
that have gathered  
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,  
to see who can sing  
the highest note,  
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,  
or the most tender?  
Their strong, blunt beaks  
drink the air

as they strive  
melodiously  
not for your sake  
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning  
but for sheer delight and gratitude—  
believe us, they say,  
it is a serious thing

just to be alive  
on this fresh morning  
in this broken world.  
I beg of you,

do not walk by  
without pausing  
to attend to this  
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.  
It could mean everything.  
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:  
*You must change your life.*

# FROM THIS RIVER, WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I USED TO DRINK

But when I came back I found  
that the body of the river was dying.

“Did it speak?”

Yes, it sang out the old songs, but faintly.

“What will you do?”

I will grieve of course, but that’s nothing.

“What, precisely, will you grieve for?”

For the river. For myself, my lost  
joyfulness. For the children who will not  
know what a river can be—a friend, a  
companion, a hint of heaven.

“Isn’t this somewhat overplayed?”

I said: it can be a friend. A companion. A  
hint of heaven.

## WE SHOULD BE WELL PREPARED

The way the plovers cry goodbye.

The way the dead fox keeps on looking down the hill  
with open eye.

The way the leaves fall, and then there's the long wait.

The way someone says: we must never meet again.

The way mold spots the cake,  
the way sourness overtakes the cream.

The way the river water rushes by, never to return.

The way the days go by, never to return.

The way somebody comes back, but only in a dream.

## MEADOWLARK SINGS AND I GREET HIM IN RETURN

Meadowlark, when you sing it's as if  
you lay your yellow breast upon mine and say  
hello, hello, and are we not  
of one family, in our delight of life?

You sing, I listen.

Both are necessary  
if the world is to continue going around  
night-heavy then light-laden, though not  
everyone knows this or at least  
not yet,

or, perhaps, has forgotten it  
in the torn fields,

in the terrible debris of progress.

## OF THE EMPIRE

We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

## RED

All the while  
I was teaching  
in the state of Virginia  
I wanted to see  
gray fox.  
Finally I found him.  
He was in the highway.  
He was singing  
his death song.  
I picked him up  
and carried him  
into a field  
while the cars kept coming.  
He showed me  
how he could ripple  
how he could bleed.  
Goodbye I said  
to the light of his eye  
as the cars went by.  
Two mornings later  
I found the other.  
She was in the highway.  
She was singing  
her death song.  
I picked her up  
and carried her  
into the field  
where she rippled

half of her gray  
half of her red  
while the cars kept coming.  
While the cars kept coming.  
Gray fox and gray fox.  
Red, red, red.

## NIGHT AND THE RIVER

I have seen the great feet  
leaping  
into the river

and I have seen moonlight  
milky  
along the long muzzle

and I have seen the body  
of something  
scaled and wonderful

slumped in the sudden fire of its mouth,  
and I could not tell  
which fit me

more comfortably, the power,  
or the powerlessness;  
neither would have me

entirely; I was divided,  
consumed,  
by sympathy,

pity, admiration.  
After a while  
it was done,

the fish had vanished, the bear

lumped away  
to the green shore

and into the trees. And then there was only  
this story.

It followed me home

and entered my house—  
a difficult guest  
with a single tune

which it hums all day and through the night—  
slowly or briskly,  
it doesn't matter,

it sounds like a river leaping and falling;  
it sounds like a body  
falling apart.

## SELF-PORTRAIT

I wish I was twenty and in love with life  
and still full of beans.

Onward, old legs!  
There are the long, pale dunes; on the other side  
the roses are blooming and finding their labor  
no adversity to the spirit.

Upward, old legs! There are the roses, and there is the sea  
shining like a song, like a body  
I want to touch

though I'm not twenty  
and won't be again but ah! seventy. And still  
in love with life. And still  
full of beans.

## WITH THE BLACKEST OF INKS

At night

the panther,  
who is lean  
and quick,

is only

a pair of eyes  
and, with a yawn,  
momentarily,

a long, pink tongue.

Mostly  
he listens  
as he walks

on the puffs

of his feet  
as if  
on a carpet

from Persia,

or leaps  
into the branches  
of a tree,

or swims

across the river,  
or simply  
stands in the grass

and waits.

Because, Sir,  
you have given him,  
for your own reasons,

everything that he needs:  
leaves, food, shelter;  
a conscience  
that never blinks.

FROM  
**Thirst**

2006

## WHEN I AM AMONG THE TREES

When I am among the trees,  
especially the willows and the honey locust,  
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
    but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine."

## WHEN THE ROSES SPEAK, I PAY ATTENTION

“As long as we are able to  
be extravagant we will be  
hugely and damply  
extravagant. Then we will drop  
foil by foil to the ground. This  
is our unalterable task, and we do it  
joyfully.”

And they went on. “Listen,  
the heart-shackles are not, as you think,  
death, illness, pain,  
unrequited hope, not loneliness, but

lassitude, rue, vainglory, fear, anxiety,  
selfishness.”

Their fragrance all the while rising  
from their blind bodies, making me  
spin with joy.

## 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, somewhere 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 heaven 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 Christ Jesus, 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.

## GETHSEMANE

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 splendid 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 a part of the story.

## THE POET THINKS ABOUT THE DONKEY

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

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

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

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.

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.

## PRAYING

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.

## DOESN'T EVERY POET WRITE A POEM ABOUT UNREQUITED LOVE?

The flowers

I wanted to bring to you,  
wild and wet  
from the pale dunes

and still smelling  
of the summer night,  
and still holding a moment or two  
of the night cricket's

humble prayer,  
would have been  
so handsome  
in your hands—

so happy—I dare to say it—  
in your hands—  
yet your smile  
would have been nowhere

and maybe you would have tossed them  
onto the ground,  
or maybe, for tenderness,  
you would have taken them

into your house  
and given them water

and put them in a dark corner  
out of reach.

In matters of love  
of this kind  
there are things we long to do  
but must not do.

I would not want to see  
your smile diminished.  
And the flowers, anyway,  
are happy just where they are,

on the pale dunes,  
above the cricket's humble nest,  
under the blue sky  
that loves us all.

# ON THY WONDROUS WORKS I WILL MEDITATE

(Psalm 145)

## 1.

All day up and down the shore the  
fine points of the waves keep on  
tapping whatever is there: scatter of broken  
clams, empty jingles, old  
oyster shells thick and castellated that held  
once the pale jewel of their bodies, such sweet

tongue and juice. And who do you  
think you are sauntering along  
five feet up in the air, the ocean a blue fire  
around your ankles, the sun  
on your face on your shoulders its golden mouth whispering  
(so it seems) *you! you! you!*

## 2.

Now the afternoon wind  
all frill and no apparent purpose  
takes her cloud-shaped  
hand and touches every one of the  
waves so that rapidly  
they stir the wings of the eiders they blur  
the boats on their moorings; not even the rocks

black and blunt interrupt the waves on their way to the shore and one last swimmer (is it you?) rides their salty infoldings and outfoldings until, peaked, their blue sides heaving, they pause; and God whistles them back; and you glide safely to shore.

### 3.

One morning

a hundred pink and cylindrical squid lay beached their lacy faces, their gnarls of dimples and ropy tentacles limp and powerless; as I watched the big gulls went down upon

this sweetest trash rolling

like the arms of babies through the swash—in a feathered dash,

a calligraphy of delight the beaks fell grabbing and snapping; then was left only the empty beach, the birds floating back over the waves.

### 4.

How many mysteries have you seen in your

lifetime? How many nets pulled full over the boat's side, each silver body ready or not falling into

submission? How many roses in early summer uncurling above the pale sands then

falling back in unfathomable

willingness? And what can you say? Glory to the rose and the leaf, to the seed, to the

silver fish. Glory to time and the wild fields,  
and to joy. And to grief's shock and torpor, its near swoon.

**5.**

So it is not hard to understand  
where God's body is, it is  
everywhere and everything; shore and the vast  
fields of water, the accidental and the intended  
over here, over there. And I bow down  
participate and attentive

it is so dense and apparent. And all the same I am still  
unsatisfied. Standing  
here, now, I am thinking  
not of His thick wrists and His blue  
shoulders but, still, of Him. Where, do you suppose, is His  
pale and wonderful mind?

**6.**

I would be good—oh, I would be upright and good.

To what purpose? To be shining not  
sinful, not wringing out of the hours  
petulance, heaviness, ashes. *To what purpose?*  
*Hope of heaven?* Not that. But to enter  
the other kingdom: grace, and imagination,

and the multiple sympathies: to be as a leaf, a rose,  
a dolphin, a wave rising  
slowly then briskly out of the darkness to touch  
the limpid air, to be God's mind's  
servant, loving with the body's sweet mouth—its kisses, its  
words—

everything.

**7.**

I know a man of such  
mildness and kindness it is trying to  
change my life. He does not  
preach, teach, but simply is. It is  
astonishing, for he is Christ's ambassador  
truly, by rule and act. But, more,

he is kind with the sort of kindness that shines  
out, but is resolute, not fooled. He has  
eaten the dark hours and could also, I think,  
soldier for God, riding out  
under the storm clouds, against the world's pride and unkindness  
with both unassailable sweetness, and consoling word.

**8.**

Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden  
cloth of the sand and say  
some kind of musical thanks for  
the world that is happening again—another day—  
from the shawl of wind coming out of the  
west to the firm green

flesh of the melon lately sliced open and  
eaten, its chill and ample body  
flavored with mercy. I want  
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.  
O Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am  
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you.

## THE CHAT

I wish

I were

the yellow chat

down in the thickets

who sings all night,

throwing

into the air

praises

and panhandles,

plaints,

in curly phrases,

half-rhymes,

free verse too,

with head-dipping

and wing-wringing,

with soft breast

rising into the air—

meek and sleek,

broadcasting,

with no time out

for pillow-rest,

everything—

pathos,

thanks—

oh, Lord,  
what a lesson  
you send me  
as I stand

listening  
to your rattling, swamp-loving chat  
singing  
of his simple, leafy life—

how I would like to sing to you  
all night  
in the dark  
just like that.

## THIRST

Another morning and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have. I walk out to the pond and all the way God has given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord, I was never a quick scholar but sulked and hunched over my books past the hour and the bell; grant me, in your mercy, a little more time. Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.

FROM  
New and Selected Poems:  
Volume Two

2005

## HUM

What is this dark hum among the roses?

The bees have gone simple, sipping,  
that's all. What did you expect? Sophistication?

They're small creatures and they are  
filling their bodies with sweetness, how could they not  
moan in happiness? The little  
worker bee lives, I have read, about three weeks.

Is that long? Long enough, I suppose, to understand  
that life is a blessing. I have found them—haven't you?—

stopped in the very cups of the flowers, their wings  
a little tattered—so much flying about, to the hive,  
then out into the world, then back, and perhaps dancing,  
should the task be to be a scout—sweet, dancing bee.

I think there isn't anything in this world I don't  
admire. If there is, I don't know what it is. I

haven't met it yet. Nor expect to. The bee is small,  
and since I wear glasses, so I can see the traffic and  
read books, I have to

take them off and bend close to study and

understand what is happening. It's not hard, it's in fact  
as instructive as anything I have ever studied. Plus, too,

it's love almost too fierce to endure, the bee  
nuzzling like that into the blouse

of the rose. And the fragrance, and the honey, and of course  
the sun, the purely pure sun, shining, all the while, over  
all of us.

## LEAD

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.

## OXYGEN

Everything needs it: bone, muscles, and even,  
while it calls the earth its home, the soul.

So the merciful, noisy machine

stands in our house working away in its  
lung-like voice. I hear it as I kneel  
before the fire, stirring with a

stick of iron, letting the logs  
lie more loosely. You, in the upstairs room,  
are in your usual position, leaning on your

right shoulder which aches  
all day. You are breathing  
patiently; it is a

beautiful sound. It is  
your life, which is so close  
to my own that I would not know

where to drop the knife of  
separation. And what does this have to do  
with love, except

everything? Now the fire rises  
and offers a dozen, singing, deep-red  
roses of flame. Then it settles

to quietude, or maybe gratitude, as it feeds

as we all do, as we must, upon the invisible gift:  
our purest, sweet necessity: the air.

# WHITE HERON RISES OVER BLACKWATER

I wonder

what it is

that I will accomplish

today

if anything

can be called

that marvelous word.

It won't be

my kind of work,

which is only putting

words on a page,

the pencil

haltingly calling up

the light of the world,

yet nothing appearing on paper

half as bright

as the mockingbird's

verbal hilarity

in the still unleaved shrub

in the churchyard—

or the white heron

rising

over the swamp

and the darkness,

his yellow eyes  
and broad wings wearing  
the light of the world  
in the light of the world—

ah yes, I see him.  
He is exactly  
the poem  
I wanted to write.

## HONEY LOCUST

Who can tell how lovely in June is the  
honey locust tree, or why  
a tree should be so sweet and live  
in this world? Each white blossom  
on a dangle of white flowers holds one green seed—  
a new life. Also each blossom on a dangle of flowers  
holds a flask  
of fragrance called *Heaven*, which is never sealed.

The bees circle the tree and dive into it. They are crazy  
with gratitude. They are working like farmers. They are as  
happy as saints. After a while the flowers begin to  
wilt and drop down into the grass. Welcome  
shines in the grass.

Every year I gather  
handfuls of blossoms and eat of their mealiness; the honey  
melts in my mouth, the seeds make me strong,  
both when they are crisp and ripe, and even at the end  
when their petals have turned dull yellow.

So it is  
if the heart has devoted itself to love, there is  
not a single inch of emptiness. Gladness gleams  
all the way to the grave.

## SONG FOR AUTUMN

In the deep fall

don't you imagine the leaves think how  
comfortable it will be to touch

the earth instead of the  
nothingness of air and the endless

freshets of wind? And don't you think  
the trees themselves, especially those with mossy,  
warm caves, begin to think

of the birds that will come—six, a dozen—to sleep

inside their bodies? And don't you hear  
the goldenrod whispering goodbye,

the everlasting being crowned with the first  
tuffets of snow? The pond

vanishes, and the white field over which  
the fox runs so quickly brings out

its blue shadows. And the wind pumps its  
bellows. And at evening especially,

the piled firewood shifts a little,  
longing to be on its way.

# FIREFLIES

At Blackwater  
fireflies  
are not even a dime a dozen—  
they are free,

and each floats and turns  
among the branches of the oaks  
and the swamp azaleas  
looking for another

as, who doesn't?  
Oh, blessings  
on the intimacy  
inside fruition,

be it foxes  
or the fireflies  
or the dampness inside the petals  
of a thousand flowers.

Though Eden is lost  
its loveliness  
remains in the heart  
and the imagination;

he would take her  
in a boat  
over the dark water;  
she would take him

to an island she knows  
where the blue flag grows wild  
and the grass is deep,  
where the birds

perch together,  
feather to feather,  
on the bough.

And the fireflies,

blinking their little lights,  
hurry toward one another.  
And the world continues,  
God willing.

## THE POET WITH HIS FACE IN HIS HANDS

You want to cry aloud for your  
mistakes. But to tell the truth the world  
doesn't need any more of that sound.

So if you're going to do it and can't  
stop yourself, if your pretty mouth can't  
hold it in, at least go by yourself across

the forty fields and the forty dark inclines  
of rocks and water to the place where  
the falls are flinging out their white sheets

like crazy, and there is a cave behind all that  
jubilation and water-fun and you can  
stand there, under it, and roar all you

want and nothing will be disturbed; you can  
drip with despair all afternoon and still,  
on a green branch, its wings just lightly touched

by the passing foil of the water, the thrush,  
puffing out its spotted breast, will sing  
of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything.

## WILD, WILD

This is what love is:  
the dry rose bush the gardener, in his pruning, missed  
suddenly bursts into bloom.  
A madness of delight; an obsession.  
A holy gift, certainly.  
But often, alas, improbable.

Why couldn't Romeo have settled for someone else?  
Why couldn't Tristan and Isolde have refused  
the shining cup  
which would have left peaceful the whole kingdom?

Wild sings the bird of the heart in the forests  
of our lives.

Over and over Faust, standing in the garden, doesn't know  
anything that's going to happen, he only sees  
the face of Marguerite, which is irresistible.

And wild, wild sings the bird.

## NORTH COUNTRY

In the north country now it is spring and there  
is a certain celebration. The thrush  
has come home. He is shy and likes the  
evening best, also the hour just before  
morning; in that blue and gritty light he  
climbs to his branch, or smoothly  
sails there. It is okay to know only  
one song if it is this one. Hear it  
rise and fall; the very elements of your soul  
shiver nicely. What would spring be  
without it? Mostly frogs. But don't worry, he  
arrives, year after year, humble and obedient  
and gorgeous. You listen and you know  
you could live a better life than you do, be  
softer, kinder. And maybe this year you will  
be able to do it. Hear how his voice  
rises and falls. There is no way to be  
sufficiently grateful for the gifts we are  
given, no way to speak the Lord's name  
often enough, though we do try, and  
especially now, as that dappled breast  
breathes in the pines and heaven's  
windows in the north country, now spring has come,  
are opened wide.

## TERNS

Don't think just now of the trudging forward of thought,  
but of the wing-drive of unquestioning affirmation.

It's summer, you never saw such a blue sky,  
and here they are, those white birds with quick wings,

sweeping over the waves,  
chattering and plunging,

their thin beaks snapping, their hard eyes  
happy as little nails.

The years to come—this is a promise—  
will grant you ample time

to try the difficult steps in the empire of thought  
where you seek for the shining proofs you think you must have.

But nothing you ever understand will be sweeter, or more binding,  
than this deepest affinity between your eyes and the world.

The flock thickens  
over the roiling, salt brightness. Listen,

maybe such devotion, in which one holds the world  
in the clasp of attention, isn't the perfect prayer,

but it must be close, for the sorrow, whose name is doubt,  
is thus subdued, and not through the weaponry of reason,

but of pure submission. Tell me, what else  
could beauty be for? And now the tide

is at its very crown,  
the white birds sprinkle down,

gathering up the loose silver, rising  
as if weightless. It isn't instruction, or a parable.

It isn't for any vanity or ambition  
except for the one allowed, to stay alive.

It's only a nimble frolic  
over the waves. And you find, for hours,

you cannot even remember the questions  
that weigh so in your mind.

FROM  
**Blue Iris**

2004

## JUST LYING ON THE GRASS AT BLACKWATER

I think sometimes of the possible glamour of death—  
that it might be wonderful to be  
lost and happy inside the green grass—  
or to be the green grass!—  
or, maybe the pink rose, or the blue iris,  
or the affable daisy, or the twirled vine  
looping its way skyward—that it might be perfectly peaceful  
to be the shining lake, or the hurrying, athletic river,  
or the dark shoulders of the trees  
where the thrush each evening weeps himself into an ecstasy.

I lie down in the fields of goldenrod, and everlasting.  
Who could find me?  
My thoughts simplify. I have not done a thousand things  
or a hundred things but, perhaps, a few.  
As for wondering about answers that are not available except  
in books, though all my childhood I was sent there  
to find them, I have learned  
to leave all that behind

as in summer I take off my shoes and my socks,  
my jacket, my hat, and go on  
happier, through the fields. The little sparrow  
with the pink beak  
calls out, over and over, so simply—not to me

but to the whole world. All afternoon

I grow wiser, listening to him,  
soft, small, nameless fellow at the top of some weed,  
enjoying his life. If you can sing, do it. If not,

even silence can feel, to the world, like happiness,  
like praise,  
from the pool of shade you have found beneath the everlasting.

## SEA LEAVES

I walk beside the ocean, then turn and continue walking just beside the first berm, a few yards from the water which is at half tide. Eventually I find what I'm looking for, a plant green and with the flavor of raw salt, and leaves shaped like arrow-heads. But before that, down the long shore, I have seen many things: shells, waves, once a pair of whimbrels, gulls and terns over the water, rabbits long-legging it through the thickets above the berm. I kneel and pick among the green leaves, not taking all of any plant but a few leaves from each, until my knapsack is filled. Keep your spinach; I'll have this. Then I stroll home. I'll cook the leaves briefly; M. and I will eat some and put the rest into the freezer, for winter. The only thing I don't know is, should the activity of this day be called labor, or pleasure?

## MORNING AT BLACKWATER

It's almost dawn  
and the usual half-miracles begin  
within my own personal body as the light  
enters the gates of the east and climbs  
into the fields of the sky, and the birds lift  
their very unimportant heads from the branches  
and begin to sing; and the insects too,  
and the rustling leaves, and even  
that most common of earthly things, the grass,  
can't let it begin—another morning—without  
making some comment of gladness, respiring softly  
with the honey of their green bodies; and the white  
blossoms of the swamp honeysuckle, hovering just where  
the path and the pond almost meet,  
shake from the folds of their bodies  
such happiness it enters the air as fragrance,  
the day's first pale and elegant affirmation.  
And the old gods liked so well, they say,  
the sweet odor of prayer.

## HOW WOULD YOU LIVE THEN?

What if a hundred rose-breasted grosbeaks  
flew in circles around your head? What if  
the mockingbird came into the house with you and  
became your advisor? What if  
the bees filled your walls with honey and all  
you needed to do was ask them and they would fill  
the bowl? What if the brook slid downhill just  
past your bedroom window so you could listen  
to its slow prayers as you fell asleep? What if  
the stars began to shout their names, or to run  
this way and that way above the clouds? What if  
you painted a picture of a tree, and the leaves  
began to rustle, and a bird cheerfully sang  
from its painted branches? What if you suddenly saw  
that the silver of water was brighter than the silver  
of money? What if you finally saw  
that the sunflowers, turning toward the sun all day  
and every day—who knows how, but they do it—were  
more precious, more meaningful than gold?

# HOW THE GRASS AND THE FLOWERS CAME TO EXIST, A GOD-TALE

I suppose

the Lord said:

Let there be fur upon the earth,  
and let there be hair upon the earth,

and so the seeds stuttered forward into ripeness  
and the roots twirled in the dark  
to accomplish His desire,

and so there is clover,  
and the reeds of the marshes,  
and the eelgrass of the sea shallows  
upon which the dainty sea brant live,

and there is the green and sturdy grass,  
and the goldenrod  
and the spurge and the yarrow  
and the ivies and the bramble  
and the blue iris

covering the earth,  
thanking the Lord with their blossoms.

FROM  
**Why I Wake Early**

2004

## WHY I WAKE EARLY

Hello, sun in my face.

Hello, you who make the morning  
and spread it over the fields  
and into the faces of the tulips  
and the nodding morning glories,  
and into the windows of, even, the  
miserable and the crotchety—

best preacher that ever was,  
dear star, that just happens  
to be where you are in the universe  
to keep us from ever-darkness,  
to ease us with warm touching,  
to hold us in the great hands of light—  
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day  
in happiness, in kindness.

## SPRING AT BLACKWATER: I GO THROUGH THE LESSONS ALREADY LEARNED

He gave the fish  
her coat of foil,  
and her soft eggs.  
He made the kingfisher's  
quick eye  
and her peerless, terrible beak.  
He made the circles  
of the days and the seasons  
to close tightly,  
and forever—  
  
then open again.

# MINDFUL

Every day

I see or I hear  
something  
that more or less

kills me

with delight,  
that leaves me  
like a needle

in the haystack

of light.  
It is 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?

## LINGERING IN HAPPINESS

After rain after many days without rain,  
it stays cool, private and cleansed, under the trees,  
and the dampness there, married now to gravity,  
falls branch to branch, leaf to leaf, down to the ground

where it will disappear—but not, of course, vanish  
except to our eyes. The roots of the oaks will have their share,  
and the white threads of the grasses, and the cushion of moss;  
a few drops, round as pearls, will enter the mole's tunnel;

and soon so many small stones, buried for a thousand years,  
will feel themselves being touched.

## DAISIES

It is possible, I suppose, that sometime  
we will learn everything  
there is to learn: what the world is, for example,  
and what it means. I think this as I am crossing  
from one field to another, in summer, and the  
mockingbird is mocking me, as one who either  
knows enough already or knows enough to be  
perfectly content not knowing. Song being born  
of quest he knows this: he must turn silent  
were he suddenly assaulted with answers. Instead

oh hear his wild, caustic, tender warbling ceaselessly  
unanswered. At my feet the white-petaled daisies display  
the small suns of their center-piece—their, if you don't  
mind my saying so—their hearts. Of course  
I could be wrong, perhaps their hearts are pale and  
narrow and hidden in the roots. What do I know.  
But this: it is heaven itself to take what is given,  
to see what is plain; what the sun  
lights up willingly; for example—I think this  
as I reach down, not to pick but merely to touch  
the suitability of the field for the daisies, and the  
daisies for the field.

## GOLDENROD, LATE FALL

This morning the goldenrod are all wearing  
their golden shirts  
fresh from heaven's soft wash in the chill night.

So it must be a celebration.

And here comes the wind, so many swinging wings!

Has he been invited, or is he the intruder?

Invited, whisper the golden pebbles of the weeds,  
as they begin to fall

over the ground. Well, you would think the little murmurs  
of the broken blossoms would have said  
otherwise, but no. So I sit down among them to  
think about it while all around me the crumbling  
goes on. The weeds let down their seedy faces  
cheerfully, which is the part I like best, and certainly

it is as good as a book for learning from. You would think  
they were just going for a small sleep. You would think  
they couldn't wait, it was going to be  
that snug and even, as all their lives were, full of  
excitation. You would think

it was a voyage just beginning, and no darkness anywhere,  
but tinged with all necessary instruction, and light,

and all were shriven, as all the round world is,  
and so it wasn't anything but easy to fall, to whisper  
*Good Night.*

## THE OLD POETS OF CHINA

Wherever I am, the world comes after me.  
It offers me its busyness. It does not believe  
that I do not want it. Now I understand  
why the old poets of China went so far and high  
into the mountains, then crept into the pale mist.

# LOGOS

Why wonder about the loaves and the 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.

## SNOW GEESE

Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!

What a task  
to ask

of anything, or anyone,

yet it is ours,

and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

One fall day I heard

above me, and above the sting of the wind, a sound  
I did not know, and my look shot upward; it was

a flock of snow geese, winging it

faster than the ones we usually see,  
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun

so they were, in part at least, golden. I

held my breath

as we do

sometimes

to stop time

when something wonderful

has touched us

as with a match

which is lit, and bright,

but does not hurt

in the common way,  
but delightfully,  
as if delight  
were the most serious thing  
you ever felt.

The geese  
flew on.  
I have never  
seen them again.

Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.  
Maybe I won't.  
It doesn't matter.  
What matters  
is that, when I saw them,  
I saw them  
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

## AT BLACK RIVER

All day

its dark, slick bronze soaks  
in a mossy place,  
its teeth,

a multitude

set  
for the comedy  
that never comes—

its tail

knobbed and shiny,  
and with a heavy-weight's punch  
packed around the bone.

In beautiful Florida

he is king  
of his own part  
of the black river,

and from his nap

he will wake  
into the warm darkness  
to boom, and thrust forward,

paralyzing

the swift, thin-waisted fish,  
or the bird  
in its frilled, white gown,

that has dipped down  
from the heaven of leaves  
one last time,  
to drink.

Don't think  
I'm not afraid.  
There is such an unleashing  
of horror.

Then I remember:  
death comes before  
the rolling away  
of the stone.

## BEANS

They're not like peaches or squash.  
Plumpness isn't for them. They like being  
lean, as if for the narrow path. The beans  
themselves sit quietly inside their green  
pods. Instinctively one picks with care,  
never tearing down the fine vine, never not  
noticing their crisp bodies, or feeling their  
willingness for the pot, for the fire.

I have thought sometimes that something—  
I can't name it—watches as I walk the  
rows, accepting the gift of their lives to  
assist mine.

I know what you think: this is foolishness.  
They're only vegetables. Even the  
blossoms with which they begin are small  
and pale, hardly significant. Our hands, or  
minds, our feet hold more intelligence.  
With this I have no quarrel.

But, what about virtue?

## THE ARROWHEAD

The arrowhead,  
which I found beside the river,  
was glittering and pointed.  
I picked it up, and said,  
“Now, it’s mine.”  
I thought of showing it to friends.  
I thought of putting it—such an imposing trinket—  
in a little box, on my desk.  
Halfway home, past the cut fields,  
the old ghost  
stood under the hickories.  
“I would rather drink the wind,” he said,  
“I would rather eat mud and die  
than steal as you still steal,  
than lie as you still lie.”

## WHERE DOES THE TEMPLE BEGIN, WHERE DOES IT END?

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.

FROM  
**Long Life**

2004

# JUST AS THE CALENDAR BEGAN TO SAY SUMMER

I went out of the schoolhouse fast  
and through the gardens and to the woods,  
and spent all summer forgetting what I'd been taught—

two times two, and diligence, and so forth,  
how to be modest and useful, and how to succeed and so forth,  
machines and oil and plastic and money and so forth.

By fall I had healed somewhat, but was summoned back  
to the chalky rooms and the desks, to sit and remember

the way the river kept rolling its pebbles,  
the way the wild wrens sang though they hadn't a penny in the  
bank,  
the way the flowers were dressed in nothing but light.

## CAN YOU IMAGINE?

For example, what the trees do  
not only in lightning storms  
or the watery dark of a summer night  
or under the white nets of winter  
but now, and now, and now—whenever  
we're not looking. Surely you can't imagine  
they just stand there looking the way they look  
when we're looking; surely you can't imagine  
they don't dance, from the root up, wishing  
to travel a little, not cramped so much as wanting  
a better view, or more sun, or just as avidly  
more shade—surely you can't imagine they just  
stand there loving every  
minute of it; the birds or the emptiness, the dark rings  
of the years slowly and without a sound  
thickening, and nothing different unless the wind,  
and then only in its own mood, comes  
to visit, surely you can't imagine  
patience, and happiness, like that.

## SOFTEST OF MORNINGS

Softest of mornings, hello.  
And what will you do today, I wonder,  
to my heart?  
And how much honey can the heart stand, I wonder,  
before it must break?

This is trivial, or nothing: a snail  
climbing a trellis of leaves  
and the blue trumpets of its flowers.

No doubt clocks are ticking loudly  
all over the world.  
I don't hear them. The snail's pale horns  
extend and wave this way and that  
as her finger-body shuffles forward, leaving behind  
the silvery path of her slime.

Oh, softest of mornings, how shall I break this?  
How shall I move away from the snail, and the flowers?  
How shall I go on, with my introspective and ambitious life?

## CARRYING THE SNAKE TO THE GARDEN

In the cellar  
was the smallest snake  
I have ever seen.  
It coiled itself  
in a corner  
and watched me  
with eyes  
like two little stars  
set into coal,  
and a tail  
that quivered.  
One step  
of my foot  
and it fled  
like a running shoelace,  
but a scoop of the wrist  
and I had it  
in my hand.  
I was sorry  
for the fear,  
so I hurried  
upstairs and out the kitchen door  
to the warm grass  
and the sunlight  
and the garden.  
It turned and turned  
in my hand  
but when I put it down

it didn't move.

I thought

it was going to flow

up my leg

and into my pocket.

I thought, for a moment,

as it lifted its face,

it was going to sing.

And then it was gone.

FROM  
**Owls and Other Fantasies**

2003

## THE DIPPER

Once I saw  
in a quick-falling, white-veined stream,  
among the leafed islands of the wet rocks,  
a small bird, and knew it

from the pages of a book; it was  
the dipper, and dipping he was,  
as well as, sometimes, on a rock-peak, starting up  
the clear, strong pipe of his voice; at this,

there being no words to transcribe, I had to  
bend forward, as it were,  
into his frame of mind, catching  
everything I could in the tone,

cadence, sweetness, and briskness  
of his affirmative report.  
Though not by words, it was  
a more than satisfactory way to the

bridge of understanding. This happened  
in Colorado  
more than half a century ago—  
more, certainly, than half my lifetime ago—

and, just as certainly, he has been sleeping for decades  
in the leaves beside the stream,  
his crumble of white bones, his curl of flesh  
comfortable even so.

And still I hear him—  
and whenever I open the ponderous book of riddles  
he sits with his black feet hooked to the page,  
his eyes cheerful, still burning with water-love—

and thus the world is full of leaves and feathers,  
and comfort, and instruction. I do not even remember  
your name, great river,  
but since that hour I have lived

simply,  
in the joy of the body as full and clear  
as falling water; the pleasures of the mind  
like a dark bird dipping in and out, tasting and singing.

## SPRING

All day the flicker  
has anticipated  
the lust of the season, by  
shouting. He scouts up  
tree after tree and at  
a certain place begins  
to cry out. My, in his  
black-freckled vest, bay body with  
red trim and sudden chrome  
underwings, he is  
dapper. Of course somebody  
listening nearby  
hears him; she answers  
with a sound like hysterical  
laughter, and rushes out into  
the field where he is poised  
on an old phone pole, his head  
swinging, his wings  
opening and shutting in a kind of  
butterfly stroke. She can't  
resist; they touch; they flutter.  
How lightly, altogether, they accept  
the great task, of carrying life  
forward! In the crown of an oak  
they choose a small tree-cave  
which they enter with sudden quietness  
and modesty. And, for a while,  
the wind that can be

a knife or a hammer, subsides.

They listen  
to the thrushes.

The sky is blue, or the rain  
falls with its spills of pearl.

Around their wreath of darkness  
the leaves of the world unfurl.

# WHILE I AM WRITING A POEM TO CELEBRATE SUMMER, THE MEADOWLARK BEGINS TO SING

Sixty-seven years, oh Lord, to look at the clouds,  
the trees in deep, moist summer,

daisies and morning glories  
opening every morning

their small, ecstatic faces—  
Or maybe I should just say

how I wish I had a voice  
like the meadowlark's,

sweet, clear, and reliably  
slurring all day long

from the fencepost, or the long grass  
where it lives

in a tiny but adequate grass hut  
beside the mullein and the everlasting,

the faint-pink roses  
that have never been improved, but come to bud

then open like little soft sighs  
under the meadowlark's whistle, its breath-praise,

its thrill-song, its anthem, its thanks, its  
alleluia. Alleluia, oh Lord.

## CATBIRD

He picks his pond, and the soft thicket of his world.

He bids his lady come, and she does,

flirting with her tail.

He begins early, and makes up his song as he goes.

He does not enter a house at night, or when it rains.

He is not afraid of the wind, though he is cautious.

He watches the snake, that stripe of black fire,

until it flows away.

He watches the hawk with her sharpest shins, aloft

in the high tree.

He keeps his prayer under his tongue.

In his whole life he has never missed the rising of the sun.

He dislikes snow.

But a few raisins give him the greatest delight.

He sits in the forelock of the lilac, or he struts

in its shadow.

He is neither the rare plover or the brilliant bunting,

but as common as grass.

His black cap gives him a jaunty look, for which

we humans have learned to tilt our caps, in envy.

When he is not singing, he is listening.

Neither have I ever seen him with his eyes closed.

Though he may be looking at nothing more than a cloud

it brings to his mind a several dozen new remarks.

From one branch to another, or across the path,

he dazzles with flight.

Since I see him every morning, I have rewarded myself

the pleasure of thinking that he knows me.

Yet never, once has he answered my nod.  
He seems, in fact, to find in me a kind of humor,  
    I am so vast, uncertain and strange.  
I am the one who comes and goes,  
    and who knows why.  
Will I ever understand him?  
Certainly he will never understand me, or the world  
    I come from.  
For he will never sing for the kingdom of dollars.  
For he will never grow pockets in his gray wings.

## BACKYARD

I had no time to haul out all  
the dead stuff so it hung, limp  
or dry, wherever the wind swung it

over or down or across. All summer  
it stayed that way, untrimmed, and  
thickened. The paths grew  
damp and uncomfortable and mossy until  
nobody could get through but a mouse or a

shadow. Blackberries, ferns, leaves, litter  
totally without direction management  
supervision. The birds loved it.

FROM  
**What Do We Know?**

2002

## SUMMER POEM

Leaving the house,  
I went out to see

the frog, for example,  
in her shining green skin;

and her eggs  
like a slippery veil;

and her eyes  
with their golden rims;

and the pond  
with its risen lilies;

and its warmed shores  
dotted with pink flowers;

and the long, windless afternoon;  
and the white heron

like a dropped cloud,  
taking one slow step

then standing awhile then taking  
another, writing

her own softfooted poem  
through the still waters.

## THE LOON

Not quite four a.m., when the rapture of being alive strikes me from sleep, and I rise from the comfortable bed and go to another room, where my books are lined up in their neat and colorful rows. How

magical they are! I choose one and open it. Soon I have wandered in over the waves of the words to the temple of thought.

And then I hear outside, over the actual waves, the small, perfect voice of the loon. He is also awake, and with his heavy head uplifted he calls out to the fading moon, to the pink flush swelling in the east that, soon, will become the long, reasonable day.

Inside the house it is still dark, except for the pool of lamplight in which I am sitting.

I do not close the book.

Neither, for a long while, do I read on.

## WINTER AT HERRING COVE

Years ago,  
in the bottle-green light  
of the cold January sea,

two seals  
suddenly appeared together  
in a single uplifting wave—

each in exactly the same relaxed position—  
each, like a large, black comma,  
upright and staring;

it was like a painting  
done twice  
and, twice, tenderly.

The wave hung, then it broke apart;  
its lip was lightning;  
its floor was the blow of sand

over which the seals rose and twirled and were gone.  
Of all the reasons for gladness,  
what could be foremost of this one,

that the mind can seize both the instant and the memory!  
Now the seals are no more than the salt of the sea.  
If they live, they're more distant than Greenland.

But here's the kingdom we call remembrance

with its thousand iron doors  
through which I pass so easily,

switching on the old lights as I go—  
while the dead wind rises and the old rapture rewinds,  
the stiff waters once more begin to kick and flow.

## MINK

A mink,  
    jointless as heat, was  
tip-toeing along  
    the edge of the creek,

which was still in its coat of snow,  
    yet singing—I could hear it!—  
the old song  
    of brightness.

It was one of those places,  
    turning and twisty,  
that Ruskin might have painted, though  
    he didn't. And there were trees  
leaning this way and that,  
    seed-beaded

buckthorn mostly, but at the moment  
    no bird, the only voice  
that of the covered water—like a long,  
    unknotted thread, it kept  
slipping through. The mink  
    had a hunger in him

bigger than his shadow, which was gathered  
    like a sheet of darkness under his  
neat feet which were busy  
    making dents in the snow. He sniffed  
slowly and thoroughly in all

four directions, as though

it was a prayer to the whole world, as far  
as he could capture its beautiful  
smells—the iron of the air, the blood  
of necessity. Maybe, for him, even  
the pink sun fading away to the edge  
of the world had a smell,

of roses, or of terror, who knows  
what his keen nose was  
finding out. For me, it was the gift of the winter  
to see him. Once, like a hot, dark-brown pillar,  
he stood up—and then he ran forward, and was gone.  
I stood awhile and then walked on

over the white snow: the terrible, gleaming  
loneliness. It took me, I suppose,  
something like six more weeks to reach  
finally a patch of green, I paused so often  
to be glad, and grateful, and even then carefully across  
the vast, deep woods I kept looking back.

## BLUE IRIS

Now that I'm free to be myself, who am I?

Can't fly, can't run, and see how slowly I walk.

Well, I think, I can read books.

“What's that you're doing?”  
the green-headed fly shouts as it buzzes past.

I close the book.

Well, I can write down words, like these, softly.

“What's that you're doing?” whispers the wind, pausing  
in a heap just outside the window.

Give me a little time, I say back to its staring, silver face.  
It doesn't happen all of a sudden, you know.

“Doesn't it?” says the wind, and breaks open, releasing  
distillation of blue iris.

And my heart panics not to be, as I long to be,  
the empty, waiting, pure, speechless receptacle.

# YOU ARE STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE WOODS

You are standing at the edge of the woods  
at twilight  
when something begins  
to sing, like a waterfall

pouring down  
through the leaves. It is  
the thrush.

And you are just

sinking down into your thoughts,  
taking in  
the sweetness of it—those chords,  
those pursed twirls—when you hear

out of the same twilight  
the wildest red outcry. It pitches itself  
forward, it flails and scabs  
all the surrounding space with such authority

you can't tell  
whether it is crying out on the  
scarp of victory, with its hooked foot  
dabbed into some creature that now

with snapped spine  
lies on the earth—or whether  
it is such a struck body itself, saying

goodbye.

The thrush  
is silent then, or perhaps  
has flown away.  
The dark grows darker.

The moon,  
in its shining white blouse,  
rises.

And whatever that wild cry was

it will always remain a mystery  
you have to go home now and live with,  
sometimes with the ease of music, and sometimes in silence,  
for the rest of your life.

## THE ROSES

All afternoon I have been walking over the dunes, hurrying from one thick raft of the wrinkled, salt roses to another, leaning down close to their dark or pale petals, red as blood or white as snow. And now I am beginning to breathe slowly and evenly—the way a hunted animal breathes, finally, when it has galloped, and galloped—when it is wrung dry, but, at last, is far away, so the panic begins to drain from the chest, from the wonderful legs, and the exhausted mind.

Oh sweetness pure and simple, may I join you?

I lie down next to them, on the sand. But to tell about what happens next, truly I need help.

*Will somebody or something please start to sing?*

## STONES

The white stones were mountains, then they went traveling.

The pink stones also were part of a mountain before  
the glacier's tongue gathered them up.

Now they lie resting under the waves.

The green stones are lovelier than the blue stones, I thought  
for a little while,

then I changed my mind.

Stones born of the sediments tell what ooze floated down  
the outwash once.

Stones born of the fire have red stars inside their bodies,  
and seams of white quartz.

Also I admire the heft, and the circularities  
as they lie without wrists or ankles just under the water.

Also I imagine how they lie quietly all night  
under the moon and whatever passes overhead—say, the floating  
lily of the night-heron.

It is apparent also how they lie relaxed under the sun's  
golden ladders.

Each one is a slow-wheeler.

Each one is a tiny church, locked up tight.

Each one is perfect—but none of them is ready quite yet  
to come to the garden, to raise corn  
or the bulb of the iris.

If I lived inland I would want to take one or two home with me  
just to look at in that long life of dust and grass,  
but I hope I wouldn't.

I hope I wouldn't take even one like a seed from the sunflower's face,  
like an ant's white egg from the warm nursery under the hill.

I hope I would leave them, in the perfect balance of things,  
in the clear body of the sea.

# ONE HUNDRED WHITE-SIDED DOLPHINS ON A SUMMER DAY

## 1.

Fat,  
black, slick,  
galloping in the pitch  
of the waves, in the pearly

fields of the sea,  
they leap toward us,  
they rise, sparkling, and vanish, and rise  
sparkling,  
they breathe little clouds of mist, they lift  
perpetual smiles,

they slap their tails on the waves, grandmothers and grandfathers  
enjoying the old jokes,  
they circle around us,  
they swim with us—

## 2.

a hundred white-sided dolphins  
on a summer day,  
each one, as God himself  
could not appear more acceptable

a hundred times,  
in a body blue and black threading through

the sea foam,  
and lifting himself up from the opened  
tents of the waves on his fishtail,  
to look  
with the moon of his eye  
into my heart,

**3.**

and find there  
pure, sudden, steep, sharp, painful  
gratitude  
that falls—

I don't know—either  
unbearable tons  
or the pale, bearable hand  
of salvation  
on my neck,  
lifting me  
from the boat's plain plank seat  
into the world's

**4.**

unspeakable kindness.  
It is my sixty-third summer on earth  
and, for a moment, I have almost vanished  
into the body of the dolphin,  
into the moon-eye of God,  
into the white fan that lies at the bottom of the sea  
with everything

that ever was, or ever will be,

supple, wild, rising on flank or fishtail—  
singing or whistling or breathing damply through blowhole  
at top of head. Then, in our little boat, the dolphins suddenly gone,  
we sailed on through the brisk, cheerful day.

FROM  
**The Leaf and the Cloud**

2000

# FLARE

## 1.

Welcome to the silly, comforting poem.

It is not the sunrise,  
which is a red rinse,  
which is flaring all over the eastern sky;

it is not the rain falling out of the purse of God;

it is not the blue helmet of the sky afterward,

or the trees, or the beetle burrowing into the earth;

it is not the mockingbird who, in his own cadence,  
will go on sizzling and clapping  
from the branches of the catalpa that are thick with blossoms,  
that are billowing and shining,  
that are shaking in the wind.

## 2.

You still recall, sometimes, the old barn on your great-grandfather's farm, a place you visited once, and went into, all alone, while the grown-ups sat and talked in the house.

It was empty, or almost. Wisps of hay covered the floor, and some wasps sang at the windows, and maybe there was a strange fluttering bird high above, disturbed, hoo-ing a little and staring down from a messy ledge with wild, binocular eyes.

Mostly, though, it smelled of milk, and the patience of animals; the give-offs of the body were still in the air, a vague ammonia, not unpleasant.

Mostly, though, it was restful and secret, the roof high up and arched, the boards unpainted and plain.

You could have stayed there forever, a small child in a corner, on the last raft of hay, dazzled by so much space that seemed empty, but wasn't.

Then—you still remember—you felt the rap of hunger—it was noon—and you turned from that twilight dream and hurried back to the house, where the table was set, where an uncle patted you on the shoulder for welcome, and there was your place at the table.

### **3.**

Nothing lasts.

There is a graveyard where everything I am talking about is, now.

I stood there once, on the green grass, scattering flowers.

### **4.**

Nothing is so delicate or so finely hinged as the wings  
of the green moth  
against the lantern  
against its heat  
against the beak of the crow  
in the early morning.

Yet the moth has trim, and feistiness, and not a drop  
of self-pity.

Not in this world.

**5.**

My mother  
was the blue wisteria,  
my mother  
was the mossy stream out behind the house,  
my mother, *alas, alas,*  
did not always love her life,  
heavier than iron it was  
as she carried it in her arms, from room to room,  
*oh, unforgettable!*

I bury her  
in a box  
in the earth  
and turn away.

My father  
was a demon of frustrated dreams,  
was a breaker of trust,  
was a poor, thin boy with bad luck.  
He followed God, there being no one else  
he could talk to;  
he swaggered before God, there being no one else  
who would listen.

*Listen,*  
this was his life.  
I bury it in the earth.  
I sweep the closets.  
I leave the house.

**6.**

I mention them now,  
I will not mention them again.

It is not lack of love  
nor lack of sorrow.  
But the iron thing they carried, I will not carry.

I give them—one, two, three, four—the kiss of courtesy,  
of sweet thanks,  
of anger, of good luck in the deep earth.  
May they sleep well. May they soften.

But I will not give them the kiss of complicity.  
I will not give them the responsibility for my life.

**7.**

Did you know that the ant has a tongue  
with which to gather in all that it can  
of sweetness?

Did you know that?

**8.**

The poem is not the world.  
It isn't even the first page of the world.

But the poem wants to flower, like a flower.  
It knows that much.

It wants to open itself,  
like the door of a little temple,  
so that you might step inside and be cooled and refreshed,  
and less yourself than part of everything.

**9.**

The voice of the child crying out of the mouth of the  
grown woman

is a misery and a disappointment.

The voice of the child howling out of the tall, bearded,  
muscular man

is a misery, and a terror.

**10.**

Therefore, tell me:

what will engage you?

What will open the dark fields of your mind,

like a lover

at first touching?

**11.**

Anyway,

there was no barn.

No child in the barn.

No uncle no table no kitchen.

Only a long lovely field full of bobolinks.

**12.**

When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields, consider  
the orderliness of the world. Notice  
something you have never noticed before,

like the tambourine sound of the snow-cricket  
whose pale green body is no longer than your thumb.

Stare hard at the hummingbird, in the summer rain,  
shaking the water-sparks from its wings.

Let grief be your sister, she will whether or no.  
Rise up from the stump of sorrow, and be green also,  
like the diligent leaves.

A lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world  
and the responsibilities of your life.

Scatter your flowers over the graves, and walk away.  
Be good-natured and untidy in your exuberance.

In the glare of your mind, be modest.  
And beholden to what is tactile, and thrilling.

Live with the beetle, and the wind.

*This is the dark bread of the poem.*

*This is the dark and nourishing bread of the poem.*

## FROM THE BOOK OF TIME

### 1.

I rose this morning early as usual, and went to my desk.  
But it's spring,

and the thrush is in the woods,  
somewhere in the twirled branches, and he is singing.

And so, now, I am standing by the open door.  
And now I am stepping down onto the grass.

I am touching a few leaves.  
I am noticing the way the yellow butterflies  
move together, in a twinkling cloud, over the field.

And I am thinking: maybe just looking and listening  
is the real work.

Maybe the world, without us,  
is the real poem.

### 2.

For how many years have you gone through the house  
shutting the windows,  
while the rain was still five miles away

and veering, o plum-colored clouds, to the north,  
away from you

and you did not even know enough  
to be sorry,

you were glad  
those silver sheets, with the occasional golden staple,

were sweeping on, elsewhere,  
violent and electric and uncontrollable—

and will you find yourself finally wanting to forget  
all enclosures, including

the enclosure of yourself, o lonely leaf, and will you  
dash finally, frantically,

to the windows and haul them open and lean out  
to the dark, silvered sky, to everything

that is beyond capture, shouting  
*I'm here, I'm here! Now, now, now, now, now.*

### **3.**

I dreamed  
I was traveling  
from one country  
to another

jogging  
on the back  
of a white horse  
whose hooves

were the music  
of dust and gravel

whose halter  
was made of the leafy braids

of flowers,  
whose name  
was Earth.  
And it never

grew tired  
though the sun  
went down  
like a thousand roses

and the stars  
put their white faces  
in front of the black branches  
above us

and then  
there was nothing around us  
but water  
and the white horse

turned suddenly  
like a bolt of white cloth  
opening  
under the cloth-cutter's deft hands

and became  
a swan.  
Its red tongue  
flickered out

as it perceived

my great surprise  
my huge and unruly pleasure  
my almost unmanageable relief. . . .

#### 4.

“Whoever shall be guided so far towards the mysteries of love, by contemplating beautiful things rightly in due order, is approaching the last grade. Suddenly he will behold a beauty marvellous in its nature, that very Beauty, Socrates, for the sake of which all the earlier hardships had been borne: in the first place, everlasting, and never being born nor perishing, neither increasing nor diminishing; secondly, not beautiful here and ugly there, not beautiful now and ugly then, not beautiful in one direction and ugly in another direction, not beautiful in one place and ugly in another place. Again, this beauty will not show itself like a face or hands or any bodily thing at all, nor as a discourse or a science, nor indeed as residing in anything, as in a living creature or in earth or heaven or anything else, but being by itself with itself always in simplicity; while all the beautiful things elsewhere partake of this beauty in such manner, that when *they* are born and perish *it* becomes neither less nor more and nothing at all happens to it. . . .”

#### 5.

What secrets fly out of the earth  
when I push the shovel-edge,  
when I heave the dirt open?

And if there are no secrets  
what is that smell that sweetness rising?

What is my name,  
o what is my name  
that I may offer it back  
to the beautiful world?

Have I walked  
long enough  
where the sea breaks raspingly  
all day and all night upon the pale sand?

Have I admired sufficiently the little hurricane  
of the hummingbird?

the heavy  
thumb  
of the blackberry?

the falling star?

## 6.

Count the roses, red and fluttering.  
Count the roses, wrinkled and salt.  
Each with its yellow lint at the center.  
Each with its honey pooled and ready.  
Do you have a question that can't be answered?  
Do the stars frighten you by their heaviness  
and their endless number?  
Does it bother you, that mercy is so difficult to  
understand?  
For some souls it's easy; they lie down on the sand  
and are soon asleep.  
For others, the mind shivers in its glacial palace,  
and won't come.  
Yes, the mind takes a long time, is otherwise occupied  
than by happiness, and deep breathing.  
Now, in the distance, some bird is singing.  
And now I have gathered six or seven deep red,  
half-opened cups of petals between my hands,

and now I have put my face against them  
and now I am moving my face back and forth, slowly,  
against them.

The body is not much more than two feet and a tongue.  
Come to me, says the blue sky, and say the word.  
And finally even the mind comes running, like a wild thing,  
and lies down in the sand.

Eternity is not later, or in any unfindable place.

*Roses, roses, roses, roses.*

## 7.

Even now  
I remember something

the way a flower  
in a jar of water

remembers its life  
in the perfect garden

the way a flower  
in a jar of water

remembers its life  
as a closed seed

the way a flower  
in a jar of water

steadies itself  
remembering itself

long ago  
the plunging roots

the gravel the rain  
the glossy stem

the wings of the leaves  
the swords of the leaves.

rising and clashing  
for the rose of the sun

the salt of the stars  
the crown of the wind

the beds of the clouds  
the blue dream

the unbreakable circle.

FROM  
**West Wind**

1997

# HAVE YOU EVER TRIED TO ENTER THE LONG BLACK BRANCHES

Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches  
of other lives—  
tried to imagine what the crisp fringes, full of honey,  
hanging  
from the branches of the young locust trees, in early summer,  
feel like?

Do you think this world is only an entertainment for you?

Never to enter the sea and notice how the water divides  
with perfect courtesy, to let you in!  
Never to lie down on the grass, as though you were the grass!  
Never to leap to the air as you open your wings over  
the dark acorn of your heart!

No wonder we hear, in your mournful voice, the complaint  
that something is missing from your life!

Who can open the door who does not reach for the latch?  
Who can travel the miles who does not put one foot  
in front of the other, all attentive to what presents itself  
continually?  
Who will behold the inner chamber who has not observed  
with admiration, even with rapture, the outer stone?

Well, there is time left—  
fields everywhere invite you into them.

And who will care, who will chide you if you wander away  
from wherever you are, to look for your soul?

Quickly, then, get up, put on your coat, leave your desk!

To put one's foot into the door of the grass, which is  
the mystery, which is death as well as life, and  
not be afraid!

To set one's foot in the door of death, and be overcome  
with amazement!

To sit down in front of the weeds, and imagine  
god the ten-fingered, sailing out of his house of straw,

nodding this way and that way, to the flowers of the  
present hour,

to the song falling out of the mockingbird's pink mouth,

to the triplets of the honeysuckle, that have opened  
in the night

To sit down, like a weed among weeds, and rustle in the wind!



Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?

While the soul, after all, is only a window,  
and the opening of the window no more difficult  
than the wakening from a little sleep.



Only last week I went out among the thorns and said  
to the wild roses:  
deny me not,  
but suffer my devotion.  
Then, all afternoon, I sat among them. Maybe

I even heard a curl or two of music, damp and rouge red,  
hurrying from their stubby buds, from their delicate watery bodies.



*For how long will you continue to listen to those dark shouters,  
caution and prudence?*

*Fall in! Fall in!*



A woman standing in the weeds.  
A small boat flounders in the deep waves, and what's coming next  
is coming with its own heave and grace.



Meanwhile, once in a while, I have chanced, among the quick things,  
upon the immutable.  
What more could one ask?

And I would touch the faces of the daises,  
and I would bow down  
to think about it.

That was then, which hasn't ended yet.

Now the sun begins to swing down. Under the peach-light,  
I cross the fields and the dunes, I follow the ocean's edge.

I climb, I backtrack.

I float.

I ramble my way home.

## SEVEN WHITE BUTTERFLIES

Seven white butterflies  
delicate in a hurry look  
how they bang the pages  
of their wings as they fly

to the fields of mustard yellow  
and orange and plain  
gold all eternity  
is in the moment this is what

Blake said Whitman said such  
wisdom in the agitated  
motions of the mind seven  
dancers floating

even as worms toward  
paradise see how they banter  
and riot and rise  
to the trees flutter

lob their white bodies into  
the invisible wind weightless  
lacy willing  
to deliver themselves unto  
the universe now each settles  
down on a yellow thumb on a  
brassy stem now  
all seven are rapidly sipping

from the golden towers who  
would have thought it could be so easy?

## AT ROUND POND

owl  
make your little appearance now

owl dark bird bird of gloom  
messenger reminder

of death  
that can't be stopped

argued with leashed put out  
like a red fire but

burns as it will  
owl

I have not seen you now for  
too long a time don't

hide away but come flowing and clacking  
the slap of your wings

your death's head oh rise  
out of the thick and shaggy pines when you

look down with your  
golden eyes how everything

trembles  
then settles

from mere incidence into  
the lush of meaning.

## BLACK OAKS

Okay, not one can write a symphony, or a dictionary,  
or even a letter to an old friend, full of remembrance  
and comfort.

Not one can manage a single sound, though the blue jays  
carp and whistle all day in the branches, without  
the push of the wind.

But to tell the truth after a while I'm pale with longing  
for their thick bodies ruckled with lichen

and you can't keep me from the woods, from the tonnage  
of their shoulders, and their shining green hair.

Today is a day like any other: twenty-four hours, a  
little sunshine, a little rain.

Listen, says ambition, nervously shifting her weight from  
one boot to another—why don't you get going?

For there I am, in the mossy shadows, under the trees.

And to tell the truth I don't want to let go of the wrists  
of idleness, I don't want to sell my life for money,  
I don't even want to come in out of the rain.

## AM I NOT AMONG THE EARLY RISERS

Am I not among the early risers  
and the long-distance walkers?

Have I not stood, amazed, as I consider  
the perfection of the morning star  
above the peaks of the houses, and the crowns of the trees  
blue in the first light?

Do I not see how the trees tremble, as though  
sheets of water flowed over them  
though it is only wind, that common thing,  
free to everyone, and everything?

Have I not thought, for years, what it would be  
worthy to do, and then gone off, barefoot and with a silver pail,  
to gather blueberries,  
thus coming, as I think, upon a right answer?

What will ambition do for me that the fox, appearing suddenly  
at the top of the field,  
her eyes sharp and confident as she stared into mine,  
has not already done?

What countries, what visitations,  
what pomp  
would satisfy me as thoroughly as Blackwater Woods  
on a sun-filled morning, or, equally, in the rain?

Here is an amazement—once I was twenty years old and in  
every motion of my body there was a delicious ease,

and in every motion of the green earth there was  
a hint of paradise,  
and now I am sixty years old, and it is the same.

Above the modest house and the palace—the same darkness.  
Above the evil man and the just, the same stars.  
Above the child who will recover and the child who will  
not recover, the same energies roll forward,  
from one tragedy to the next and from one foolishness to the next.

I bow down.

Have I not loved as though the beloved could vanish at any moment,  
or become preoccupied, or whisper a name other than mine  
in the stretched curvatures of lust, or over the dinner table?  
Have I ever taken good fortune for granted?

Have I not, every spring, befriended the swarm that pours forth?  
Have I not summoned the honey-man to come, to hurry,  
to bring with him the white and comfortable hive?

And, while I waited, have I not leaned close, to see everything?  
Have I not been stung as I watched their milling and gleaming,  
and stung hard?

Have I not been ready always at the iron door,  
not knowing to what country it opens—to death or to more life?

Have I ever said that the day was too hot or too cold  
or the night too long and as black as oil anyway,  
or the morning, washed blue and emptied entirely  
of the second-rate, less than happiness

as I stepped down from the porch and set out along

the green paths of the world?

## FOX

You don't ever know where  
a sentence will take you, depending  
on its roll and fold. I was walking  
over the dunes when I saw  
the red fox asleep under the green  
branches of the pine. It flared up  
in the sweet order of its being,  
the tail that was over the muzzle  
lifting in airy amazement  
and the fire of the eyes followed  
and the pricked ears and the thin  
barrel body and the four  
athletic legs in their black stockings and it  
came to me how the polish of the world changes  
everything, I was hot I was cold I was almost  
dead of delight. Of course the mind keeps  
cool in its hidden palace—yes, the mind takes  
a long time, is otherwise occupied than by  
happiness, and deep breathing. Still,  
at last, it comes too, running  
like a wild thing, to be taken  
with its twin sister, breath. So I stood  
on the pale, peach-colored sand, watching the fox  
as it opened like a flower, and I began  
softly, to pick among the vast assortment of words  
that it should run again and again across the page  
that you again and again should shiver with praise.

## FROM "WEST WIND"

1.

If there is life after the earth-life, will you come with me?  
Even then? Since we're bound to be something, why not  
together. Imagine! Two little stones, two fleas under the  
wing of a gull, flying along through the fog! Or, ten blades  
of grass. Ten loops of honeysuckle, all flung against each  
other, at the edge of Race Road! Beach plums!  
Snowflakes, coasting into the winter woods, making a  
very small sound, like this

sooo

as they marry the dusty bodies of the pitch-pines. Or, rain  
—that gray light running over the sea, pocking it,  
lacquering it, coming, all morning and afternoon, from the  
west wind's youth and abundance and jollity—pinging  
and jangling down upon the roofs of Provincetown.

9.

And what did you think love would be like? A summer  
day? The brambles in their places, and the long stretches  
of mud? Flowers in every field, in every garden, with their  
soft beaks and their pastel shoulders? On one street after  
another, the litter ticks in the gutter. In one room after  
another, the lovers meet, quarrel, sicken, break apart, cry

out. One or two leap from windows. Most simply lean, exhausted, their thin arms on the sill. They have done all that they could. The golden eagle, that lives not far from here, has perhaps a thousand tiny feathers flowing from the back of its head, each one shaped like an infinitely small but perfect spear.

FROM  
**White Pine**

1994

## MAY

What lay on the road was no mere handful of snake. It was the copperhead at last, golden under the street lamp. I hope to see everything in this world before I die. I knelt on the road and stared. Its head was wedge-shaped and fell back to the unexpected slimness of a neck. The body itself was thick, tense, electric. Clearly this wasn't black snake looking down from the limbs of a tree, or green snake, or the garter, whizzing over the rocks. Where these had, oh, such shyness, this one had none. When I moved a little, it turned and clamped its eyes on mine; then it jerked toward me. I jumped back and watched as it flowed on across the road and down into the dark. My heart was pounding. I stood a while, listening to the small sounds of the woods and looking at the stars. After excitement we are so restful. When the thumb of fear lifts, we are so alive.

## YES! NO!

How necessary it is to have opinions! I think the spotted trout lilies are satisfied, standing a few inches above the earth. I think serenity is not something you just find in the world, like a plum tree, holding up its white petals.

The violets, along the river, are opening their blue faces, like small dark lanterns.

The green mosses, being so many, are as good as brawny.

How important it is to walk along, not in haste but slowly, looking at everything and calling out

*Yes! No!* The

swan, for all his pomp, his robes of glass and petals, wants only to be allowed to live on the nameless pond. The catbrier is without fault. The water thrushes, down among the sloppy rocks, are going crazy with happiness.

Imagination is better than a sharp instrument. To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.

## IN POBIDDY, GEORGIA

Three women  
climb from the car  
in which they have driven slowly  
into the churchyard.  
They come toward us, to see  
what we are doing.  
What we are doing  
is reading the strange,  
wonderful names  
of the dead.  
One of the women  
speaks to us—  
after we speak to her.  
She walks with us and shows us,  
with a downward-thrust finger,  
which of the dead  
were her people.  
She tells us  
about two brothers, and an argument,  
and a gun—she points  
to one of the slabs  
on which there is a name,  
some scripture, a handful of red  
plastic flowers. We ask her  
about the other brother.  
“Chain gang,” she says,  
as you or I might say  
“Des Moines,” or “New Haven.” And then,

“Look around all you want.”

The younger woman stands back, in the stiff weeds,  
like a banked fire.

The third one—

the oldest human being we have ever seen in our lives—  
suddenly drops to the dirt  
and begins to cry. Clearly  
she is blind, and clearly  
she can't rise, but they lift her, like a child,  
and lead her away, across the graves, as though,  
as old as anything could ever be, she was, finally,  
perfectly finished, perfectly heartbroken, perfectly wild.

## PORCUPINE

Where  
the porcupine is  
I don't  
know but I hope

it's high  
up on some pine  
bough in some  
thick tree, maybe

on the other side  
of the swamp.  
The dogs have come  
running back, one of them

with a single quill  
in his moist nose.—  
He's laughing,  
not knowing what he has.

almost done  
to himself.  
For years I have wanted to see  
that slow rambler,

that thornbush  
I think, what love does to us  
is a Gordian knot,  
it's that complicated.

I hug the dogs  
and their good luck,  
and put on their leashes.  
So dazzling she must be—

a plump, dark lady  
wearing a gown of nails—  
white teeth tearing skin  
from the thick tree.

## WRENS

here I go  
into the wide gardens of  
wastefields blue glass clear glass  
and other rubbishes blinking from the

dust from the fox tracks among the  
roots and risings of  
buttercups joe pye honey

suckle the queen's  
lace and her

blue sailors

the little wrens  
have carried a hundred sticks into

an old rusted pail and now they are  
singing in the curtains of leaves they are

fluttering down to the bog they are dipping

their darling heads down to wet

their whistles how happy they are to be  
diligent at last

foolish birds

## MOCKINGBIRDS

This morning  
two mockingbirds  
in the green field  
were spinning and tossing

the white ribbons  
of their songs  
into the air.  
I had nothing

better to do  
than listen.  
I mean this  
seriously.

In Greece,  
a long time ago,  
an old couple  
opened their door

to two strangers  
who were,  
it soon appeared,  
not men at all,

but gods.  
It is my favorite story—  
how the old couple  
had almost nothing to give

but their willingness  
to be attentive—  
and for this alone  
the gods loved them.

and blessed them.  
When the gods rose  
out of their mortal bodies,  
like a million particles of water

from a fountain,  
the light  
swept into all the corners  
of the cottage,

and the old couple,  
shaken with understanding,  
bowed down—  
but still they asked for nothing

beyond the difficult life  
which they had already.  
And the gods smiled as they vanished,  
clapping their great wings.

Wherever it was  
I was supposed to be  
this morning—  
whatever it was I said

I would be doing—  
I was standing  
at the edge of the field—  
I was hurrying

through my own soul,  
opening its dark doors—  
I was leaning out;  
I was listening.

## I FOUND A DEAD FOX

I found a dead fox  
beside the gravel road,  
curled inside the big  
iron wheel

of an old tractor  
that has been standing,  
for years,  
in the vines at the edge

of the road.  
I don't know  
what happened to it—  
when it came there

or why it lay down  
for good, settling  
its narrow chin  
on the rusted rim

of the iron wheel  
to look out  
over the fields,  
and that way died—

but I know  
this: its posture—  
of looking,  
to the last possible moment,

back into the world—  
made me want  
to sing something  
joyous and tender

about foxes.  
But what happened is this—  
when I began,  
when I crawled in

through the honeysuckle  
and lay down,  
curling my long spine  
inside that cold wheel,

and touched the dead fox,  
and looked out  
into the wide fields,  
the fox

vanished.  
There was only myself  
and the world,  
and it was I

who was leaving.  
And what could I sing  
then?  
Oh, beautiful world!

I just lay there  
and looked at it.  
And then it grew dark.  
That day was done with.

And then the stars stepped forth  
and held up their appointed fires—  
those hot, hard  
watchmen of the night.

## MORNING GLORIES

Blue and dark-blue

rose and deepest rose

white and pink they

are everywhere in the diligent

cornfield rising and swaying

in their reliable

finery in the little

fling of their bodies their

gear and tackle

all caught up in the cornstalks.

The reaper's story is the story

of endless work of

work careful and heavy but the

reaper cannot

separate them out there they

are in the story of his life

bright random useless

year after year

taken with the serious tons

weeds without value humorous

beautiful weeds.

## AUGUST

Our neighbor, tall and blond and vigorous, the mother of many children, is sick. We did not know she was sick, but she has come to the fence, walking like a woman who is balancing a sword inside of her body, and besides that her long hair is gone, it is short and, suddenly, gray. I don't recognize her. It even occurs to me that it might be her mother. But it's her own laughter-edged voice, we have heard it for years over the hedges.

All summer the children, grown now and some of them with children of their own, come to visit. They swim, they go for long walks along the harbor, they make dinners for twelve, for fifteen, for twenty. In the early morning two daughters come to the garden and slowly go through the precise and silent gestures of T'ai Chi.

They all smile. Their father smiles too, and builds castles on the shore with the children, and drives back to the city, and drives back to the country. A carpenter is hired—a roof repaired, a porch rebuilt. Everything that can be fixed.

June, July, August. Every day, we hear their laughter. I think of the painting by van Gogh, the man in the chair. Everything wrong, and nowhere to go. His hands over his eyes.

## TOAD

I was walking by. He was sitting there.

It was full morning, so the heat was heavy on his sand-colored head and his webbed feet. I squatted beside him, at the edge of the path. He didn't move.

I began to talk. I talked about summer, and about time. The pleasures of eating, the terrors of the night. About this cup we call a life. About happiness. And how good it feels, the heat of the sun between the shoulder blades.

He looked neither up nor down, which didn't necessarily mean he was either afraid or asleep. I felt his energy, stored under his tongue perhaps, and behind his bulging eyes.

I talked about how the world seems to me, five feet tall, the blue sky all around my head. I said, I wondered how it seemed to him, down there, intimate with the dust.

He might have been Buddha—did not move, blink, or frown, not a tear fell from those gold-rimmed eyes as the refined anguish of language passed over him.

## I LOOKED UP

I looked up and there it was  
among the green branches of the pitchpines—

thick bird,  
a ruffle of fire trailing over the shoulders and down the back—

color of copper, iron, bronze—  
lighting up the dark branches of the pine.

What misery to be afraid of death.  
What wretchedness, to believe only in what can be proven.

When I made a little sound  
it looked at me, then it looked past me.

Then it rose, the wings enormous and opulent,  
and, as I said, wreathed in fire.

# THE SEA MOUSE

What lay this morning  
on the wet sand  
was so ugly  
I sighed with a kind of horror as I lifted it  
into my hand  
and looked under the soaked mat of what was almost fur,  
but wasn't, and found  
the face that has no eyes, and recognized  
the sea mouse—  
toothless, legless, earless too,  
it had been flung out of the stormy sea  
and dropped  
into the world's outer weather, and clearly it was  
done for. I studied  
what was not even a fist  
of gray corduroy;  
I looked in vain  
for elbows and wrists;  
I counted  
the thirty segments, with which  
it had rippled its mouse-like dance  
over the sea's black floor—not on  
feet, which it did not have, but on  
tiny buds tipped with bristles,

like paintbrushes—  
to find and swallow  
the least pulse, and so stay alive, and feel—  
however a worm feels it—satisfaction.

Before me  
the sea still heaved, and the heavens were dark,  
the storm unfinished,  
and whatever was still alive

stirred in the awful cup of its power,  
though it breathe like fire, though it love  
the lung of its own life.

Little mat, little blot, little crawler,

it lay in my hand  
all delicate and revolting.  
With the tip of my finger  
I stroked it,

tenderly, little darling, little dancer,  
little pilgrim,  
gray pouch slowly  
filling with death.

FROM  
New and Selected Poems:  
Volume One

1992

## 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?

# GOLDENROD

On roadsides,  
in fall fields,  
in rumpy bunches,  
saffron and orange and pale gold,

in little towers,  
soft as mash,  
sneeze-bringers and seed-bearers,  
full of bees and yellow beads and perfect flowerlets

and orange butterflies.

I don't suppose  
much notice comes of it, except for honey,  
and how it heartens the heart with its

blank blaze.

I don't suppose anything loves it except, perhaps,  
the rocky voids  
filled by its dumb dazzle.

For myself,

I was just passing by, when the wind flared  
and the blossoms rustled,  
and the glittering pandemonium

leaned on me.

I was just minding my own business  
when I found myself on their straw hillsides,  
citron and butter-colored,

and was happy, and why not?

Are not the difficult labors of our lives  
full of dark hours?

And what has consciousness come to anyway, so far,

that is better than these light-filled bodies?

All day  
on their airy backbones  
they toss in the wind,

they bend as though it was natural and godly to bend,  
they rise in a stiff sweetness,  
in the pure peace of giving  
one's gold away.

## WHEN DEATH COMES

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox;

when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder

if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

## WHELKS

Here are the perfect  
fans of the scallops,  
quahogs, and weedy mussels  
still holding their orange fruit—  
and here are the whelks—  
whirlwinds,  
each the size of a fist,  
but always cracked and broken—  
clearly they have been traveling  
under the sky-blue waves  
for a long time.

All my life  
I have been restless—  
I have felt there is something  
more wonderful than gloss—  
than wholeness—  
than staying at home.  
I have not been sure what it is.  
But every morning on the wide shore  
I pass what is perfect and shining  
to look for the whelks, whose edges  
have rubbed so long against the world  
they have snapped and crumbled—  
they have almost vanished,  
with the last relinquishing  
of their unrepeatability energy,  
back into everything else.

When I find one

I hold it in my hand,  
I look out over that shanking fire,  
I shut my eyes. Not often,  
but now and again there's a moment  
when the heart cries aloud:  
yes, I am willing to be  
that wild darkness,  
that long, blue body of light.

# GOLDFINCHES

In the fields  
we let them have—  
in the fields  
we don't want yet—

where thistles rise  
out of the marshlands of spring, and spring open—  
each bud  
a settlement of riches—

a coin of reddish fire—  
the finches  
wait for midsummer,  
for the long days,

for the brass heat,  
for the seeds to begin to form in the hardening thistles,  
dazzling as the teeth of mice,  
but black,

filling the face of every flower.  
Then they drop from the sky.  
A buttery gold,  
they swing on the thistles, they gather

the silvery down, they carry it  
in their finchy beaks  
to the edges of the fields,  
to the trees,

as though their minds were on fire  
with the flower of one perfect idea—  
and there they build their nests  
and lay their pale-blue eggs,

every year,  
and every year  
the hatchlings wake in the swaying branches  
in the silver baskets,

and love the world.

Is it necessary to say any more?

Have you heard them singing in the wind, above the final fields?

Have you ever been so happy in your life?

# POPPIES

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 also I 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?

## WATER SNAKE

I saw him  
in a dry place  
on a hot day,  
a traveler  
making his way  
from one pond  
to another,  
and he lifted up  
his chary face  
and looked at me  
with his gravel eyes,  
and the feather of his tongue  
shot in and out  
of his otherwise clamped mouth,  
and I stopped on the path  
to give him room,  
and he went past me  
with his head high,  
loathing me, I think,  
for my long legs,  
my poor body, like a post,  
my many fingers,  
for he didn't linger  
but, touching the other side of the path,  
he headed, in long lunges and quick heaves,  
straight to the nearest basin  
of sweet black water and weeds,  
and solitude—

like an old sword  
that suddenly picked itself up and went off,  
swinging, swinging  
through the green leaves.

# WHITE FLOWERS

Last night  
in the fields  
I lay down in the darkness  
to think about death,  
but instead I fell asleep,  
as if in a vast and sloping room  
filled with those white flowers  
that open all summer,  
sticky and untidy,  
in the warm fields.  
When I woke  
the morning light was just slipping  
in front of the stars,  
and I was covered  
with blossoms.  
I don't know  
how it happened—  
I don't know  
if my body went diving down  
under the sugary vines  
in some sleep-sharpened affinity  
with the depths, or whether  
that green energy  
rose like a wave  
and curled over me, claiming me  
in its husky arms.  
I pushed them away, but I didn't rise.  
Never in my life had I felt so plush,

or so slippery,  
or so resplendently empty.  
Never in my life  
had I felt myself so near  
that porous line  
where my own body was done with  
and the roots and the stems and the flowers  
began.

## PEONIES

This morning the green fists of the peonies are getting ready  
to break my heart  
as the sun rises,  
as the sun strokes them with his old, buttery fingers  
and they open—  
pools of lace,  
white and pink—  
and all day the black ants climb over them,  
boring their deep and mysterious holes  
into the curls,  
craving the sweet sap,  
taking it away  
to their dark, underground cities—  
and all day  
under the shifty wind,  
as in a dance to the great wedding,  
the flowers bend their bright bodies,  
and tip their fragrance to the air,  
and rise,  
their red stems holding  
all that dampness and recklessness  
gladly and lightly,  
and there it is again—  
beauty the brave, the exemplary,

blazing open.

Do you love this world?

Do you cherish your humble and silky life?

Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?

Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden,  
and softly,

and exclaiming of their dearness,

fill your arms with the white and pink flowers,

with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling,

their eagerness

to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are

nothing, forever?

## THE EGRET

Every time  
but one  
the little fish  
and the green  
and spotted frogs  
know  
the egret's bamboo legs  
from the thin  
and polished reeds  
at the edge  
of the silky world  
of water.  
Then,  
in their last inch of time,  
they see,  
for an instant,  
the white froth  
of her shoulders,  
and the white scrolls  
of her belly,  
and the white flame  
of her head.  
What more can you say  
about such wild swimmers?  
They were here,  
they were silent,  
they are gone, having tasted  
sheer terror.

Therefore I have invented words  
with which to stand back  
on the weedy shore—  
with which to say:  
Look! Look!  
What is this dark death  
that opens  
like a white door?

## RICE

It grew in the black mud.

It grew under the tiger's orange paws.

Its stems thinner than candles, and as straight.

Its leaves like the feathers of egrets, but green.

The grains cresting, wanting to burst.

Oh, blood of the tiger.

I don't want you just to sit down at the table.

I don't want you just to eat, and be content.

I want you to walk out into the fields

where the water is shining, and the rice has risen.

I want you to stand there, far from the white tablecloth.

I want you to fill your hands with the mud, like a blessing.

# RAIN

## 1.

All afternoon it rained, then  
such power came down from the clouds  
on a yellow thread,  
as authoritative as God is supposed to be.  
When it hit the tree, her body  
opened forever.

## 2. The Swamp

Last night, in the rain, some of the men climbed over  
the barbed-wire fence of the detention center.  
In the darkness they wondered if they could do it, and knew  
they had to try to do it.  
In the darkness they climbed the wire, handful after handful  
of barbed wire.  
Even in the darkness most of them were caught and sent back  
to the camp inside.  
But a few are still climbing the barbed wire, or wading through  
the blue swamp on the other side.

What does barbed wire feel like when you grip it, as though  
it were a loaf of bread, or a pair of shoes?  
What does barbed wire feel like when you grip it, as though  
it were a plate and a fork, or a handful of flowers?  
What does barbed wire feel like when you grip it, as though  
it were the handle of a door, working papers, a clean sheet

you want to draw over your body?

### **3.**

Or this one: on a rainy day, my uncle  
lying in the flower bed,  
cold and broken,  
dragged from the idling car  
with its plug of rags, and its gleaming  
length of hose. My father  
shouted,  
then the ambulance came,  
then we all looked at death,  
then the ambulance took him away.  
From the porch of the house  
I turned back once again  
looking for my father, who had lingered,  
who was still standing in the flowers,  
who was that motionless muddy man,  
who was that tiny figure in the rain.

### **4. Early Morning, My Birthday**

The snails on the pink sleds of their bodies are moving  
among the morning glories.  
The spider is asleep among the red thumbs  
of the raspberries.  
What shall I do, what shall I do?

The rain is slow.  
The little birds are alive in it.  
Even the beetles.  
The green leaves lap it up.  
What shall I do, what shall I do?

The wasp sits on the porch of her paper castle.  
The blue heron floats out of the clouds.  
The fish leap, all rainbow and mouth, from the dark water.

This morning the water lilies are no less lovely, I think,  
than the lilies of Monet.

And I do not want anymore to be useful, to be docile, to lead  
children out of the fields into the text  
of civility to teach them that they are (they are not) better  
than the grass.

### **5. At the Edge of the Ocean**

I have heard this music before,  
saith the body.

### **6. The Garden**

The kale's  
puckered sleeve,  
the pepper's  
hollow bell,  
the lacquered onion.

Beets, borage, tomatoes.  
Green beans.

I came in and I put everything  
on the counter: chives, parsley, dill,  
the squash like a pale moon,  
peas in their silky shoes, the dazzling  
rain-drenched corn.

### **7. The Forest**

At night  
under the trees  
the black snake  
jellies forward  
rubbing  
roughly  
the stems of the bloodroot,  
the yellow leaves,  
little boulders of bark,  
to take off  
the old life.

I don't know  
if he knows  
what is happening.

I don't know  
if he knows  
it will work.

In the distance  
the moon and the stars  
give a little light.

In the distance  
the owl cries out.

In the distance  
the owl cries out.

The snake knows  
these are the owl's woods,  
these are the woods of death,  
these are the woods of hardship  
where you crawl and crawl,  
where you live in the husks of trees,  
where you lie on the wild twigs  
and they cannot bear your weight,

where life has no purpose  
and is neither civil nor intelligent.

Where life has no purpose,  
and is neither civil nor intelligent,  
it begins  
to rain,  
it begins  
to smell like the bodies  
of flowers.

At the back of the neck  
the old skin splits.

The snake shivers  
but does not hesitate.

He inches forward.

He begins to bleed through  
like satin.

## PICKING BLUEBERRIES, AUSTERLITZ, NEW YORK, 1957

Once, in summer,  
in the blueberries,  
I fell asleep, and woke  
when a deer stumbled against me.

I guess  
she was so busy with her own happiness  
she had grown careless  
and was just wandering along

listening  
to the wind as she leaned down  
to lip up the sweetness.  
So, there we were

with nothing between us  
but a few leaves, and the wind's  
glossy voice  
shouting instructions.

The deer  
backed away finally  
and flung up her white tail  
and went floating off toward the trees—

but the moment before she did that  
was so wide and so deep

it has lasted to this day;  
I have only to think of her—

the flower of her amazement  
and the stalled breath of her curiosity,  
and even the damp touch of her solicitude  
before she took flight—

to be absent again from this world  
and alive, again, in another,  
for thirty years  
sleepy and amazed,

rising out of the rough weeds,  
listening and looking.

Beautiful girl,  
where are you?

# OCTOBER

## 1.

There's this shape, black as the entrance to a cave.  
A longing wells up in its throat  
like a blossom  
as it breathes slowly.

What does the world  
mean to you if you can't trust it  
to go on shining when you're

not there? And there's  
a tree, long-fallen; once  
the bees flew to it, like a procession  
of messengers, and filled it  
with honey.

## 2.

I said to the chickadee, singing his heart out in the  
green pine tree:

little dazzler,  
little song,  
little mouthful.

## 3.

The shape climbs up out of the curled grass. It

grunts into view. There is no measure  
for the confidence at the bottom of its eyes—  
there is no telling  
the suppleness of its shoulders as it turns  
and yawns.

Near the fallen tree  
something—a leaf snapped loose  
from the branch and fluttering down—tries to pull me  
into its trap of attention.

**4.**

It pulls me  
into its trap of attention.

And when I turn again, the bear is gone.

**5.**

Look, hasn't my body already felt  
like the body of a flower?

**6.**

Look, I want to love this world  
as though it's the last chance I'm ever going to get  
to be alive  
and know it.

**7.**

Sometimes in late summer I won't touch anything, not  
the flowers, not the blackberries

brimming in the thickets; I won't drink  
from the pond; I won't name the birds or the trees;  
I won't whisper my own name.

One morning  
the fox came down the hill, glittering and confident,  
and didn't see me—and I thought:

so this is the world.  
I'm not in it.  
It is beautiful.

FROM  
**House of Light**

1990

## 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?

## THE BUDDHA'S LAST INSTRUCTION

“Make of yourself a light,”  
said the Buddha,  
before he died.

I think of this every morning  
as the east begins  
to tear off its many clouds  
of darkness, to send up the first  
signal—a white fan  
streaked with pink and violet,  
even green.

An old man, he lay down  
between two sala trees,  
and he might have said anything,  
knowing it was his final hour.  
The light burns upward,  
it thickens and settles over the fields.

Around him, the villagers gathered  
and stretched forward to listen.

Even before the sun itself  
hangs, disattached, in the blue air,  
I am touched everywhere  
by its ocean of yellow waves.

No doubt he thought of everything  
that had happened in his difficult life.

And then I feel the sun itself  
as it blazes over the hills,  
like a million flowers on fire—  
clearly I'm not needed,

yet I feel myself turning  
into something of inexplicable value.  
Slowly, beneath the branches,  
he raised his head.  
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.

## 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?

# 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.

## LITTLE OWL WHO LIVES IN THE ORCHARD

His beak could open a bottle,  
and his eyes—when he lifts their soft lids—  
go on reading something  
just beyond your shoulder—  
Blake, maybe,  
or the Book of Revelation.

Never mind that he eats only  
the black-smocked crickets,  
and dragonflies if they happen  
to be out late over the ponds, and of course  
the occasional festal mouse.  
Never mind that he is only a memo  
from the offices of fear—

it's not size but surge that tells us  
when we're in touch with something real,  
and when I hear him in the orchard  
fluttering  
down the little aluminum  
ladder of his scream—  
when I see his wings open, like two black ferns,  
  
a flurry of palpitations  
as cold as sleet  
rackets across the marshlands  
of my heart,  
like a wild spring day.

Somewhere in the universe,  
in the gallery of important things,  
the babyish owl, ruffled and rakish,  
sits on its pedestal.

Dear, dark dapple of plush!  
A message, reads the label,  
from that mysterious conglomerate:  
*Oblivion and Co.*

The hooked head stares  
from its blouse of dark, feathery lace.  
It could be a valentine.

## THE KOOKABURRAS

In every heart there is a coward and a procrastinator.

In every heart there is a god of flowers, just waiting  
to come out of its cloud and lift its wings.

The kookaburras, kingfishers, pressed against the edge of  
their cage, they asked me to open the door.

Years later I wake in the night and remember how I said to them,  
*no*, and walked away.

They had the brown eyes of soft-hearted dogs.

They didn't want to do anything so extraordinary, only to fly  
home to their river.

By now I suppose the great darkness has covered them.

As for myself, I am not yet a god of even the palest flowers.

Nothing else has changed either.

Someone tosses their white bones to the dung-heap.

The sun shines on the latch of their cage.

I lie in the dark, my heart pounding.

## ROSES, LATE SUMMER

What happens  
to the leaves after  
they turn red and golden and fall  
away? What happens

to the singing birds  
when they can't sing  
any longer? What happens  
to their quick wings?

Do you think there is any  
personal heaven  
for any of us?  
Do you think anyone,

the other side of that darkness,  
will call to us, meaning us?  
Beyond the trees  
the foxes keep teaching their children

to live in the valley.  
so they never seem to vanish, they are always there  
in the blossom of light  
that stands up every morning

in the dark sky.  
And over one more set of hills,  
along the sea,  
the last roses have opened their factories of sweetness

and are giving it back to the world.

If I had another life

I would want to spend it all on some  
unstinting happiness.

I would be a fox, or a tree

full of waving branches.

I wouldn't mind being a rose

in a field full of roses.

Fear has not yet occurred to them, nor ambition.

Reason they have not yet thought of.

Neither do they ask how long they must be roses, and then what.

Or any other foolish question.

# WHITE OWL FLIES INTO AND OUT OF THE FIELD

Coming down  
out of the freezing sky  
with its depths of light,  
like an angel,  
or a buddha with wings,  
it was beautiful  
and accurate,  
striking the snow and whatever was there  
with a force that left the imprint  
of the tips of its wings—  
five feet apart—and the grabbing  
thrust of its feet,  
and the indentation of what had been running  
through the white valleys  
of the snow—

and then it rose, gracefully,  
and flew back to the frozen marshes,  
to lurk there,  
like a little lighthouse,  
in the blue shadows—  
so I thought:  
maybe death  
isn't darkness, after all,  
but so much light  
wrapping itself around us—  
as soft as feathers—

that we are instantly weary  
of looking, and looking, and shut our eyes,

not without amazement,  
and let ourselves be carried,  
as through the translucence of mica,  
to the river

that is without the least dapple or shadow—  
that is nothing but light—scalding, aortal light—  
in which we are washed and washed  
out of our bones.

# SINGAPORE

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, but 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.

## THE HERMIT CRAB

Once I looked inside  
the darkness  
of a shell folded like a pastry,  
and there was a fancy face—

or almost a face—  
it turned away  
and frisked up its brawny forearms  
so quickly

against the light  
and my looking in  
I scarcely had time to see it,  
gleaming

under the pure white roof  
of old calcium.  
When I set it down, it hurried  
along the tideline

of the sea,  
which was slashing along as usual,  
shouting and hissing  
toward the future,

turning its back  
with every tide on the past,  
leaving the shore littered  
every morning

with more ornaments of death—  
what a pearly rubble  
from which to choose a house  
like a white flower—

and what a rebellion  
to leap into it  
and hold on,  
connecting everything,

the past to the future—  
which is of course the miracle—  
which is the only argument there is  
against the sea.

## THE KINGFISHER

The kingfisher rises out of the black wave  
like a blue flower, in his beak  
he carries a silver leaf. I think this is  
the prettiest world—so long as you don't mind  
a little dying, how could there be a day in your whole life  
that doesn't have its splash of happiness?  
There are more fish than there are leaves  
on a thousand trees, and anyway the kingfisher  
wasn't born to think about it, or anything else.  
When the wave snaps shut over his blue head, the water  
remains water—hunger is the only story  
he has ever heard in his life that he could believe.  
I don't say he's right. Neither  
do I say he's wrong. Religiously he swallows the silver leaf  
with its broken red river, and with a rough and easy cry  
I couldn't rouse out of my thoughtful body  
if my life depended on it, he swings back  
over the bright sea to do the same thing, to do it  
(as I long to do something, anything) perfectly.

## THE SWAN

Across the wide waters  
something comes  
floating—a slim  
and delicate

ship, filled  
with white flowers—  
and it moves  
on its miraculous muscles

as though time didn't exist,  
as though bringing such gifts  
to the dry shore  
was a happiness

almost beyond bearing.  
And now it turns its dark eyes,  
it rearranges  
the clouds of its wings,

it trails  
an elaborate webbed foot,  
the color of charcoal.  
Soon it will be here.

Oh, what shall I do  
when that poppy-colored beak  
rests in my hand?  
Said Mrs. Blake of the poet:

I miss my husband's company—  
he is so often  
in paradise.

Of course! the path to heaven

doesn't lie down in flat miles.

It's in the imagination  
with which you perceive  
this world,

and the gestures  
with which you honor it.

Oh, what will I do, what will I say, when those white wings  
touch the shore?

# TURTLE

Now I see it—  
it nudges with its bulldog head  
the slippery stems of the lilies, making them tremble;  
and now it noses along in the wake of the little brown teal

who is leading her soft children  
from one side of the pond to the other; she keeps  
close to the edge  
and they follow closely, the good children—

the tender children,  
the sweet children, dangling their pretty feet  
into the darkness.

And now will come—I can count on it—the murky splash,

the certain victory  
of that pink and gassy mouth, and the frantic  
circling of the hen while the rest of the chicks  
flare away over the water and into the reeds, and my heart

will be most mournful  
on their account. But, listen,  
what's important?  
Nothing's important

except that the great and cruel mystery of the world,  
of which this is a part,  
not be denied. Once,  
I happened to see, on a city street, in summer,

a dusty, fouled turtle plodding along—  
a snapper—  
broken out I suppose from some backyard cage—  
and I knew what I had to do—

I looked it right in the eyes, and I caught it—  
I put it, like a small mountain range,  
into a knapsack, and I took it out  
of the city, and I let it

down into the dark pond, into  
the cool water,  
and the light of the lilies,  
to live.

## THE LOON ON OAK-HEAD POND

cries for three days, in the gray mist.  
cries for the north it hopes it can find.

plunges, and comes up with a slapping pickerel.  
blinks its red eye.

cries again.

you come every afternoon, and wait to hear it.  
you sit a long time, quiet, under the thick pines,  
in the silence that follows.

as though it were your own twilight.  
as though it were your own vanishing song.

## 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.

## SOME HERONS

A blue preacher  
flew toward the swamp,  
in slow motion.

On the leafy banks,  
an old Chinese poet,  
hunched in the white gown of his wings,

was waiting.

The water  
was the kind of dark silk

that has silver lines  
shot through it  
when it is touched by the wind

or is splashed upward,  
in a small, quick flower,  
by the life beneath it.

The preacher  
made his difficult landing,  
his skirts up around his knees.

The poet's eyes  
flared, just as a poet's eyes  
are said to do

when the poet is awakened

from the forest of meditation.

It was summer.

It was only a few moments past the sun's rising,  
which meant that the whole long sweet day  
lay before them.

They greeted each other,  
rumpling their gowns for an instant,  
and then smoothing them.

They entered the water,  
and instantly two more herons—  
equally as beautiful—

joined them and stood just beneath them  
in the black, polished water  
where they fished, all day.

FROM  
**Dream Work**

1986

# ONE OR TWO THINGS

## 1.

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

## 2.

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.

## 3.

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*,

**4.**

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

**5.**

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.

**6.**

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

**7.**

For years and years I struggled  
just to love my life. And then

the butterfly  
rose, weightless, in the wind.  
“Don’t love your life  
too much,” it said,

and vanished  
into the world.

## 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.

## SHADOWS

Everyone knows the great energies running amok cast terrible shadows, that each of the so-called senseless acts has its thread looping back through the world and into a human heart.

And meanwhile  
the gold-trimmed thunder  
wanders the sky; the river  
may be filling the cellars of the sleeping town.  
Cyclone, fire, and their merry cousins

bring us to grief—but these are the hours  
with the old wooden-god faces;  
we lift them to our shoulders like so many  
black coffins, we continue walking  
into the future. I don't mean

there are no bodies in the river,  
or bones broken by the wind. I mean  
everyone who has heard the lethal train-roar  
of the tornado swears there was no mention ever  
of any person, or reason—I mean

the waters rise without any plot upon  
history, or even geography. Whatever  
power of the earth rampages, we turn to it  
dazed but anonymous eyes; whatever  
the name of the catastrophe, it is never  
the opposite of love.

## 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 thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

## POEM

The spirit

likes to dress up like this:

ten fingers,

ten toes,

shoulders, and all the rest

at night

in the black branches,

in the morning

in the blue branches

of the world.

It could float, of course,

but would rather

plumb rough matter.

Airy and shapeless thing,

it needs

the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,

the oceanic fluids;

it needs the body's world,

instinct

and imagination

and the dark hug of time,

sweetness

and tangibility,

to be understood,  
to be more than pure light  
that burns  
where no one is—

so it enters us—  
in the morning  
shines from brute comfort  
like a stitch of lightning;

and at night  
lights up the deep and wondrous  
drownings of the body  
like a star.

## TWO KINDS OF DELIVERANCE

### 1.

Last night the geese came back,  
slanting fast  
from the blossom of the rising moon down  
to the black pond. A muskrat  
swimming in the twilight saw them and hurried  
  
to the secret lodges to tell everyone  
spring had come.

And so it had.  
By morning when I went out  
the last of the ice had disappeared, blackbirds  
sang on the shores. Every year  
the geese, returning,  
do this, I don't  
know how.

### 2.

The curtains opened and there was  
an old man in a headdress of feathers,  
leather leggings and a vest made  
from the skin of some animal. He danced  
  
in a kind of surly rapture, and the trees  
in the fields far away  
began to mutter and suck up their long roots.

Slowly they advanced until they stood  
pressed to the schoolhouse windows.

**3.**

I don't know  
lots of things but I know this: next year  
when spring  
flows over the starting point I'll think I'm going to  
drown in the shimmering miles of it and then  
one or two birds will fly me over  
the threshold.

As for the pain  
of others, of course it tries to be  
abstract, but then

there flares up out of a vanished wilderness, like fire,  
still blistering: the wrinkled face  
of an old Chippewa  
smiling, hating us,  
dancing for his life.

## BLACK SNAKES

Suddenly  
there I was  
on the warm rocks—fear  
like a mallet  
slung against  
metal—it was  
that sudden,  
that loud,  
though in truth  
there was no sound, only  
the rough wing of fright  
rushing  
through our bodies.  
One flowed  
under the leaves, the other flared  
half its length  
into the air  
against my body, then swirled  
away. Once I had steadied,  
I thought: how valiant!  
and I wished  
I had come softly, I wished  
they were my dark friends.  
For a moment I stared  
through the impossible gates.  
Then I saw them, under the vines,  
coiled, cringing,  
wishing me gone

with their stone eyes.  
Not knowing what I would do  
next, their tongues  
shook like fire  
at the echoes of my body—  
that column of death  
plunging  
through the delicate woods.

## 1945–1985: POEM FOR THE ANNIVERSARY

Sometimes,  
walking for hours through the woods,  
I don't know what I'm looking for,  
maybe for something  
shy and beautiful to come  
frisking out of the undergrowth.

Once a fawn did just that.  
My dog didn't know  
what dogs usually do.  
And the fawn didn't know.

As for the doe, she was probably  
down in Round Pond, swizzling up  
the sweet marsh grass and dreaming  
that everything was fine.



The way I'd like to go on living in this world  
wouldn't hurt anything, I'd just go on  
walking uphill and downhill, looking around,  
and so what if half the time I don't know  
what for—

so what if it doesn't come  
to a hill of beans—

so what if I vote liberal,

and am Jewish,  
or Lutheran—  
or a game warden—  
or a bingo addict—  
and smoke a pipe?

In the films of Dachau and Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen  
the dead rise from the earth  
and are piled in front of us, the starved  
stare across forty years,  
and lush, green, musical Germany  
shows again its iron claw, which won't

ever be forgotten, which won't  
ever be understood, but which did,  
slowly, for years, scrape across Europe



while the rest of the world  
did nothing.



Oh, you never saw  
such a good leafy place, and  
everything was fine, my dog and the fawn  
did a little dance,  
they didn't get serious.  
Then the fawn clambered away through the leaves  
and my gentle dog followed me away.



Oh, you never saw such a garden!  
A hundred kinds of flowers in bloom!  
A waterfall, for pleasure and nothing else!  
The garden furniture is white,  
tables and chairs in the cool shade.  
A man sits there, the long afternoon before him.  
He is finishing lunch, some kind  
of fruit, chicken, and a salad.  
A bottle of wine with a thin and beaded neck.

He fills a glass.  
You can tell it is real crystal.  
He lifts it to his mouth and drinks peacefully.

It is the face of Mengele.



Later  
the doe came wandering back in the twilight.  
She stepped through the leaves. She hesitated,  
sniffing the air.

Then she knew everything.



The forest grew dark.

She nuzzled her child wildly.

## THE SUNFLOWERS

Come with me

into the field of sunflowers.

Their faces are burnished disks,  
their dry spines

creak like ship masts,

their green leaves,

so heavy and many,

fill all day with the sticky

sugars of the sun.

Come with me

to visit the sunflowers,

they are shy

but want to be friends;

they have wonderful stories

of when they were young—

the important weather,

the wandering crows.

Don't be afraid

to ask them questions!

Their bright faces,

which follow the sun,

will listen, and all

those rows of seeds—

each one a new life!—

hope for a deeper acquaintance;  
each of them, though it stands  
in a crowd of many,  
like a separate universe,

is lonely, the long work  
of turning their lives  
into a celebration  
is not easy. Come

and let us talk with those modest faces,  
the simple garments of leaves,  
the coarse roots in the earth  
so uprightly burning.

FROM  
*American Primitive*

1983

## 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.

## 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.

## 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 trceries  
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.

## 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.

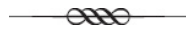


How sometimes everything  
closes up, a painted fan, landscapes and moments  
flowing together until the sense of distance—  
say, between Clapp's Pond and me—  
vanishes, edges slide together

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.

## 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.

## 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 easeful, wait  
to rise and flourish.  
What blazes the trail is not necessarily pretty.

## 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.

## 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.

# HUMPBACKS



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

You know what I mean.

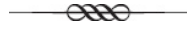
The sky, after all, stops at nothing, so something  
has to be holding  
our bodies  
in its rich and timeless stables or else  
we would fly away.



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.

## 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.

# 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.

## 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.

FROM  
Three Rivers Poetry Journal  
1980  
and “Three Poems for James  
Wright”  
1982

## 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 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.

# THREE POEMS FOR JAMES WRIGHT

## 1. Hearing of Your Illness

I went out  
from the news of your illness  
like a broken bone

I spoke your name  
to the sickle moon and saw her white wing  
fall back toward the blackness, but she  
rowed deep past that hesitation, and  
kept rising.

Then I went down  
to a black creek and alder grove  
that is Ohio like nothing else is  
and told them. There was an owl there,  
sick of its hunger but still  
trapped in it, unable to be anything else.  
And the creek  
tipped on down over some dark rocks  
and the alders  
breathed fast in their red blossoms.

Then I lay down in a rank and spring-sweet field.  
Weeds sprouting in the darkness, and some  
small creatures rustling about, living their lives  
as they do, moment by moment.

I felt better, telling them about you.

They know what pain is, and they knew you,  
and they would have stopped too, as I  
was longing to do, everything, the hunger  
and the flowing.

That they could not—  
merely loved you and waited  
to take you back

as a stone,  
as a small quick Ohio creek,  
as the beautiful pulse of everything,  
meanwhile not missing one shred of their own

assignments of song  
and muscle—  
was what I learned there, so I

got up finally, with a grief  
worthy of you, and went home.

## **2. Early Morning in Ohio**

A late snowfall.  
In the white morning the trains  
whistle and bang in the freightyard,  
shifting track, getting ready  
to get on with it, to roll out  
into the country again, to get  
far away from here and closer  
to somewhere else.

A mile away, leaving the house, I hear them  
and stop, astonished.

Of course. I thought they would stop  
when you did. I thought you'd never sicken  
anyway, or, if you did, Ohio  
would fall down too, barn  
by bright barn, into

hillsides of pain: torn boards,  
bent nails, shattered  
windows. My old dog

who doesn't know yet he is only mortal  
bounds limping away  
through the weeds, and I don't do  
anything to stop him.

I remember  
what you said.

And think how somewhere in Tuscany  
a small spider might even now  
be stepping forth, testing  
the silks of her web, the morning air,  
the possibilities; maybe even, who knows,  
singing a tiny song.

And if the whistling of the trains drags through me  
like wire, well, I can hurt can't I? The white fields  
burn or my eyes swim, whichever; anyway I whistle  
to the old dog and when he comes finally

I fall to my knees in the glittering snow, I throw  
my arms around him.

### **3. The Rose**

I had a red rose to send you,  
but it reeked of occasion, I thought,  
so I didn't. Anyway  
it was the time  
the willows do what they do  
every spring, so I cut some  
down by a dark Ohio creek and was ready  
to mail them to you when the news came  
that nothing  
could come to you  
in time  
anymore  
ever.

I put down the phone  
and I thought I saw, on the floor of the room, suddenly,  
a large box,  
and I knew, the next thing I had to do,  
was lift it  
and I didn't know if I could.

Well, I did.  
But don't call it anything  
but what it was—the voice  
of a small bird singing inside, Lord,  
how it sang, and kept singing!  
how it keeps singing!

in its deep  
and miraculous  
composure.

FROM  
**Twelve Moons**

1979

## 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.

## SNAKES IN WINTER

Deep in the woods,  
under the sprawled upheavals of rocks,

dozens lie coiled together.  
Touch them: they scarcely

breathe; they stare  
out of such deep forgetfulness

that their eyes are like jewels—  
and asleep, though they cannot close.

And in each mouth the forked tongue,  
sensitive as an angel's ear,

lies like a drugged muscle.  
With the fires of spring they will lash forth again

on their life of ribs!—  
bodies like whips!

But now under the lids of the mute  
succeeding snowfalls

they sleep in their cold cauldron: a flickering broth  
six months below simmer.

## MUSIC LESSONS

Sometimes, in the middle of the lesson,  
we exchanged places. She would gaze a moment at her  
    hands  
spread over the keys; then the small house with its knick-knacks,  
its shut windows,

its photographs of her sons and the serious husband,  
vanished as new shapes formed. Sound  
became music, and music a white  
scarp for the listener to climb

alone. I leaped rock over rock to the top  
and found myself waiting, transformed,  
and still she played, her eyes luminous and willful,  
her pinned hair falling down—

forgetting me, the house, the neat green yard,  
she fled in that lick of flame all tedious bonds:  
supper, the duties of flesh and home,  
the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome.

## ENTERING THE KINGDOM

The crows see me.  
They stretch their glossy necks  
In the tallest branches  
Of green trees. I am  
Possibly dangerous, I am  
Entering the kingdom.

The dream of my life  
Is to lie down by a slow river  
And stare at the light in the trees—  
To learn something by being nothing  
A little while but the rich  
Lens of attention.

But the crows puff their feathers and cry  
Between me and the sun,  
And I should go now.  
They know me for what I am.  
No dreamer,  
No eater of leaves.

## THE NIGHT TRAVELER

Passing by, he could be anybody:  
A thief, a tradesman, a doctor  
On his way to a worried house.  
But when he stops at your gate,  
Under the room where you lie half-asleep,  
You know it is not just anyone—  
It is the Night Traveler.

You lean your arms on the sill  
And stare down. But all you can see  
Are bits of wilderness attached to him—  
Twigs, loam and leaves,  
Vines and blossoms. Among these  
You feel his eyes, and his hands  
Lifting something in the air.

He has a gift for you, but it has no name.  
It is windy and woolly.  
He holds it in the moonlight, and it sings  
Like a newborn beast,  
Like a child at Christmas,  
Like your own heart as it tumbles  
In love's green bed.  
You take it, and he is gone.

All night—and all your life, if you are willing—  
It will nuzzle your face, cold-nosed,  
Like a small white wolf;

It will curl in your palm  
Like a hard blue stone;  
It will liquefy into a cold pool  
Which, when you dive into it,  
Will hold you like a mossy jaw.  
A bath of light. An answer.

## BEAVER MOON—THE SUICIDE OF A FRIEND

When somewhere life  
breaks like a pane of glass,  
and from every direction casual  
voices are bringing you the news,  
you say: I should have known.  
You say: I should have been aware.  
That last Friday he looked  
so ill, like an old mountain-climber  
lost on the white trails, listening  
to the ice breaking upward, under  
his worn-out shoes. You say:  
I heard rumors of trouble, but after all  
we all have that. You say:  
what could I have done? and you go  
with the rest, to bury him.  
That night, you turn in your bed  
to watch the moon rise, and once more  
see what a small coin it is  
against the darkness, and how everything else  
is a mystery, and you know  
nothing at all except  
the moonlight is beautiful—  
white rivers running together  
along the bare boughs of the trees—  
and somewhere, for someone, life  
is becoming moment by moment  
unbearable.

## LAST DAYS

Things are  
    changing; things are starting to  
        spin, snap, fly off into  
            the blue sleeve of the long  
                afternoon. *Oh* and *ooh*  
come whistling out of the perished mouth  
    of the grass, as things  
turn soft, boil back  
into substance and hue. As everything,  
    forgetting its own enchantment, whispers:  
        I too love oblivion why not it is full  
            of second chances. *Now*,  
hiss the bright curls of the leaves. *Now!*  
    booms the muscle of the wind.

## THE BLACK SNAKE

When the black snake  
flashed onto the morning road,  
and the truck could not swerve—  
*death*, that is how it happens.

Now he lies looped and useless  
as an old bicycle tire.  
I stop the car  
and carry him into the bushes.

He is as cool and gleaming  
as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet  
as a dead brother.

I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking  
about *death*: its suddenness,  
its terrible weight,  
its certain coming. Yet under

reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones  
have always preferred.

It is the story of endless good fortune.

It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.

It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward  
happily all spring through the green leaves before  
he came to the road.

## THE TRURO BEAR

There's a bear in the Truro woods.  
People have seen it—three or four,  
or two, or one. I think  
of the thickness of the serious woods  
around the dark bowls of the Truro ponds;  
I think of the blueberry fields, the blackberry tangles,  
the cranberry bogs. And the sky  
with its new moon, its familiar star-trails,  
burns down like a brand-new heaven,  
while everywhere I look on the scratchy hillsides  
shadows seem to grow shoulders. Surely  
a beast might be clever, be lucky, move quietly  
through the woods for years, learning to stay away  
from roads and houses. Common sense mutters:  
it can't be true, it must be somebody's  
runaway dog. But the seed  
has been planted, and when has happiness ever  
required much evidence to begin  
its leaf-green breathing?

# MUSSELS

In the riprap,  
    in the cool caves,  
        in the dim and salt-refreshed  
            recesses, they cling  
in dark clusters,  
    in barnacled fistfuls,  
        in the dampness that never  
            leaves, in the deeps  
of high tide, in the slow  
    washing away of the water  
        in which they feed,  
            in which the blue shells  
open a little, and the orange bodies  
    make a sound,  
        not loud,  
            not unmusical, as they take  
nourishment, as the ocean  
    enters their bodies. At low tide  
        I am on the riprap, clattering  
            with boots and a pail,  
rock over rock; I choose  
    the crevice, I reach  
        forward into the dampness,  
            my hands feeling everywhere  
for the best, the biggest. Even before  
    I decide which to take,  
        which to twist from the wet rocks,  
            which to devour,

they, who have no eyes to see with,  
see me, like a shadow,  
bending forward. Together  
they make a sound,  
not loud,  
not unmusical, as they lean  
into the rocks, away  
from my grasping fingers.

## SNOW MOON—BLACK BEAR GIVES BIRTH

It was not quite spring, it was  
the gray flux before.

Out of the black wave of sleep she turned,  
enormous beast,

and welcomed the little ones, blind pink islands  
no bigger than shoes. She washed them;

she nibbled them with teeth like white tusks;  
    she curled down  
beside them like a horizon.

They snuggled. Each knew what it was:  
an original, formed

in the whirlwind, with no recognitions between  
itself and the first steams

of creation. Together they nuzzled  
her huge flank until she spilled over,

and they pummeled and pulled her tough nipples, and she  
    gave them  
the rich river.

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## 1.

My great-aunt Elizabeth Fortune  
stood under the honey locust trees,  
the white moon over her and a young man near.  
The blossoms fell down like white feathers,  
the grass was warm as a bed, and the young man  
full of promises, and the face of the moon  
a white fire.

Later,  
when the young man went away and came back with a  
bride,  
Elizabeth  
climbed into the attic.

## 2.

Three women came in the night  
to wash the blood away,  
and burn the sheets,  
and take away the child.

Was it a boy or girl?  
No one remembers.

## 3.

Elizabeth Fortune was not seen again

for forty years

Meals were sent up,  
laundry exchanged.

It was considered a solution  
more proper than shame  
showing itself to the village.

#### **4.**

Finally, name by name, the downstairs died  
or moved away,  
and she had to come down,  
so she did.

At sixty-one, she took in boarders,

washed their dishes,  
made their beds,  
spoke whatever had to be spoken,  
and no more.

#### **5.**

I asked my mother:  
what happened to the man? She answered:  
Nothing.  
They had three children.  
He worked in the boatyard.

I asked my mother: did they ever meet again?  
No, she said,  
though sometimes he would come

to the house to visit.

Elizabeth, of course, stayed upstairs.

## **6.**

Now the women are gathering

in smoke-filled rooms,

rough as politicians,

scrappy as club fighters.

And should anyone be surprised

if sometimes, when the white moon rises,

women want to lash out

with a cutting edge?

## PINK MOON—THE POND

You think it will never happen again.  
Then, one night in April,  
the tribes wake trilling.  
You walk down to the shore.  
Your coming stills them,  
but little by little the silence lifts  
until song is everywhere  
and your soul rises from your bones  
and strides out over the water.  
It is a crazy thing to do—  
for no one can live like that,  
floating around in the darkness  
over the gauzy water.  
Left on the shore your bones  
keep shouting *come back!*  
But your soul won't listen;  
in the distance it is unfolding  
like a pair of wings, it is sparking  
like hot wires. So,  
like a good friend,  
you decide to follow.  
You step off the shore  
and plummet to your knees—  
you slog forward to your thighs  
and sink to your cheekbones—  
and now you are caught  
by the cold chains of the water—  
you are vanishing while around you

the frogs continue to sing, driving  
their music upward through your own throat,  
not even noticing  
you are something else.

And that's when it happens—  
you see everything  
through their eyes,  
their joy, their necessity;  
you wear their webbed fingers;  
your throat swells.

And that's when you know  
you will live whether you will or not,  
one way or another,  
because everything is everything else,  
one long muscle.

It's no more mysterious than that.  
So you relax, you don't fight it anymore,  
the darkness coming down  
called water,  
called spring,  
called the green leaf, called  
a woman's body  
as it turns into mud and leaves,  
as it beats in its cage of water,  
as it turns like a lonely spindle  
in the moonlight, as it says  
yes.

## 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 quicker—  
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.

## FARM COUNTRY

I have sharpened my knives, I have  
Put on the heavy apron.

Maybe you think life is chicken soup, served  
In blue willow-pattern bowls.

I have put on my boots and opened  
The kitchen door and stepped out

Into the sunshine. I have crossed the lawn,  
I have entered

The hen house.

## THE LAMPS

Eight o'clock, no later,  
You light the lamps,

The big one by the large window,  
The small one on your desk.

They are not to see by—  
It is still twilight out over the sand,

The scrub oaks and cranberries.  
Even the small birds have not settled

For sleep yet, out of the reach  
Of prowling foxes. No,

You light the lamps because  
You are alone in your small house

And the wicks sputtering gold  
Are like two visitors with good stories

They will tell slowly, in soft voices,  
While the air outside turns quietly

A grainy and luminous blue.  
You wish it would never change—

But of course the darkness keeps  
Its appointment. Each evening,

An inscrutable presence, it has the final word  
Outside every door.

FROM  
**The River Styx, Ohio**

1972

## LEARNING ABOUT THE INDIANS

He danced in feathers, with paint across his nose.  
Thump, thump went the drum, and bumped our blood,  
And sent a strange vibration through the mind.  
White Eagle, he was called, or Mr. White,

And he strutted for money now, in schoolrooms built  
On Ohio's plains, surrounded by the graves  
Of all of our fathers, but more of his than ours.  
Our teachers called it Extracurricular.

We called it fun. And as for Mr. White,  
Changed back to a shabby salesman's suit, he called it  
Nothing at all as he packed his drums, and drove,  
Tires screeching, out of the schoolyard into the night.

## GOING TO WALDEN

It isn't very far as highways lie.  
I might be back by nightfall, having seen  
The rough pines, and the stones, and the clear water.  
Friends argue that I might be wiser for it.  
They do not hear that far-off Yankee whisper:  
How dull we grow from hurrying here and there!

Many have gone, and think me half a fool  
To miss a day away in the cool country.  
Maybe. But in a book I read and cherish,  
Going to Walden is not so easy a thing  
As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult  
Trick of living, and finding it where you are.

## NIGHT FLIGHT

Traveling at thirty thousand feet, we see  
How much of earth still lies in wilderness,  
Till terminals occur like miracles  
To civilize the paralyzing dark.

Buckled for landing to a tilting chair,  
I think: if miracle or accident  
Should send us on across the upper air,  
How many miles, or nights, or years to go  
Before the mind, with its huge ego paling,  
Before the heart, all expectation spent,  
Should read the meaning of the scene below?

But now already the loved ones gather  
Under the dome of welcome, as we glide  
Over the final jutting mountainside,  
Across the suburbs tangled in their lights,

And settled softly on the earth once more  
Rise in the fierce assumption of our lives—  
Discarding smoothly, as we disembark,  
All thoughts that held us wiser for a moment  
Up there alone, in the impartial dark.

FROM  
**No Voyage and Other Poems**

1963 and 1965

## NO VOYAGE

I wake earlier, now that the birds have come  
And sing in the unfailing trees.  
On a cot by an open window  
I lie like land used up, while spring unfolds.

Now of all voyagers I remember, who among them  
Did not board ship with grief among their maps?—  
Till it seemed men never go somewhere, they only leave  
Wherever they are, when the dying begins.

For myself, I find my wanting life  
Implores no novelty and no disguise of distance;  
Where, in what country, might I put down these thoughts,  
Who still am citizen of this fallen city?

On a cot by an open window, I lie and remember  
While the birds in the trees sing of the circle of time.  
Let the dying go on, and let me, if I can,  
Inherit from disaster before I move.

O, I go to see the great ships ride from harbor,  
And my wounds leap with impatience; yet I turn back  
To sort the weeping ruins of my house:  
Here or nowhere I will make peace with the fact.

# JACK

The wagons stand  
And rust, and glitter sometimes in the moon,  
Since we have lost dominion of the fields.  
No more great clattering Jack,  
His thick mane filled with chaff and wind,  
Will let us lead him from the easy barns;  
No more sweet gentle Jack  
Will let us strap him to his leather bondage  
And help us tow the weight of summer home.

The days  
Are easier now, and we have time for thought,  
Idling in corners of our weedy land.  
But now we learn, as season follows season  
And no one plants upon these hills,  
How poor a gift is freedom to the spirit  
That loved the labor. Now, like Jack,  
We stand turned out into eternal Sunday,  
And look through moonlight at the silenced wagons.

Yet we have lives to balance our regret,  
Can turn to other things.  
Now in the moonlight we can move away,  
While he is left staring upon the stark  
Arrangement of the wagons leaning earthward:  
The simple blood that cannot name its lack,  
But knows the world has fallen out of reason,  
That it is autumn, and no laborer comes.

## BEYOND THE SNOW BELT

Over the local stations, one by one,  
Announcers list disasters like dark poems  
That always happen in the skull of winter.  
But once again the storm has passed us by:  
Lovely and moderate, the snow lies down  
While shouting children hurry back to play,  
And scarved and smiling citizens once more  
Sweep down their easy paths of pride and welcome.

And what else might we do? Let us be truthful.  
Two counties north the storm has taken lives.  
Two counties north, to us, is far away,—  
A land of trees, a wing upon a map,  
A wild place never visited,—so we  
Forget with ease each far mortality.

Peacefully from our frozen yards we watch  
Our children running on the mild white hills.  
This is the landscape that we understand,—  
And till the principle of things takes root,  
How shall examples move us from our calm?  
I do not say that it is not a fault.  
I only say, except as we have loved,  
All news arrives as from a distant land.

## THE SWIMMING LESSON

Feeling the icy kick, the endless waves  
Reaching around my life, I moved my arms  
And coughed, and in the end saw land.

Somebody, I suppose,  
Remembering the medieval maxim,  
Had tossed me in,  
Had wanted me to learn to swim,

Not knowing that none of us, who ever came back  
From that long lonely fall and frenzied rising,  
Ever learned anything at all  
About swimming, but only  
How to put off, one by one,  
Dreams and pity, love and grace,—  
How to survive in any place.

## ON WINTER'S MARGIN

On winter's margin, see the small birds now  
With half-forged memories come flocking home  
To gardens famous for their charity.  
The green globe's broken; vines like tangled veins  
Hang at the entrance to the silent wood.

With half a loaf, I am the prince of crumbs;  
By time snow's down, the birds amassed will sing  
Like children for their sire to walk abroad!  
But what I love, is the gray stubborn hawk  
Who floats alone beyond the frozen vines;  
And what I dream of are the patient deer  
Who stand on legs like reeds and drink the wind;—

They are what saves the world: who choose to grow  
Thin to a starting point beyond this squalor.

## THE RETURN

The deed took all my heart.  
I did not think of you,  
Not till the thing was done.  
I put my sword away,  
And then no more the cold  
And perfect fury ran  
Along my narrow bones,  
And then no more the black  
And dripping corridors  
Held anywhere the shape  
That I had come to slay.  
Then, for the first time,  
I saw in the cave's belly  
The dark and clotted webs,  
The green and sucking pools,  
The rank and crumbling walls,  
The maze of passages.

And I thought then  
Of the far earth,  
Of the spring sun  
And the slow wind,  
And a young girl.  
And I looked then  
At the white thread.

Hunting the minotaur  
I was no common man

And had no need of love.  
I trailed the shining thread  
Behind me, for a vow,  
And did not think of you.  
It lay there, like a sign,  
Coiled on the bull's great hoof  
And back into the world.  
Half blind with weariness  
I touched the thread and wept.  
O, it was frail as air.

And I turned then  
With the white spool  
Through the cold rocks,  
Through the black rocks,  
Through the long webs,  
And the mist fell,  
And the webs clung,  
And the rocks tumbled,  
And the earth shook.

And the thread held.

## MORNING IN A NEW LAND

In trees still dripping night some nameless birds  
Woke, shook out their arrowy wings, and sang,  
Slowly, like finches sifting through a dream.  
The pink sun fell, like glass, into the fields.  
Two chestnuts, and a dapple gray,  
Their shoulders wet with light, their dark hair streaming,  
Climbed the hill. The last mist fell away,

And under the trees, beyond time's brittle drift,  
I stood like Adam in his lonely garden  
On that first morning, shaken out of sleep,  
Rubbing his eyes, listening, parting the leaves,  
Like tissue on some vast, incredible gift.

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