

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

November 19, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



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.

Mary Oliver¹

¹ "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field" by Mary Oliver from *Owls and Other Fantasies*, Beacon Press Boston. Used by permission.

☞ Reflections

A friend recently gifted me Christian Wiman's new book, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art*, and it is exquisite, lyric prose that feels to me equal parts memoir and prayer, "a love letter to poetry" as the inside flap notes, and written as "if the nineteenth-century English poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins were transported to early twenty-first-century America," as one scholar says.

This poem of Mary Oliver's appears in a chapter in which Wiman is remembering one of his first official events as editor of the prestigious Chicago-based Poetry magazine: a large public reading by Oliver herself, perhaps America's most famous poet. After meeting her in the hotel lobby, they talked and walked along busy Michigan Avenue until she stopped suddenly to pick up what Wiman assumed was a piece of meat. "At least that's what I thought at first," he writes. And then, "When she spread the gray-red mess out on her hands, you could see that it was, or at least had been, a bird. A pigeon, in fact, which she proceeded to describe with avid eyes and intelligent touch, showing us exactly where the hawk had struck, the talons clutched and torn." When it was time to keep walking, she simply put the pigeon carcass in her coat pocket and later gave a reading for eight hundred people with that bloody bird still there.

Wiman uses this anecdote as a way of meditating on mortality—our fascination and our fear—and of introducing this lesser known poem of hers: "maybe death isn't darkness, after all, / but so much light wrapping itself around us—/as soft as feathers—..." I think what I admire most about this poem is its fearlessness, its willingness to imagine a new possibility, to rework an ancient idea, that death be not grotesque, not frightening nor dark, not final, but instead winged and weightless, blindingly beautiful, effortless and eternal as we are "washed and washed / out of our bones." In Oliver's metaphor, it strikes me as equally transcendent to be either the owl or its prey, the one carrying or the one being carried; if, at the moment of our death, the white owl flies into the field of our life and carries us out while we simply "shut our eyes, not without amazement" then perhaps there is after all less to fear than I had first thought.

Just as the poet put that pigeon in her pocket—perhaps as a reminder of our transience, our fragility, our vulnerability—I put this poem in mine, a reminder to keep watch for beauty, to be less afraid and to imagine a new possibility that is within the depths of light.

☞ About the Poet

Mary Oliver (b. 1935), National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize winner, is a best-selling poet and one of America's most beloved writers. Though born in Ohio, she spent much of her life in New England and now lives in Florida. For more than 40 years, she lived with her partner, the photographer Molly Malone Cook, until Cook's death in 2005. Oliver came to St. Stephen's in 2011 for a rare appearance and read her poems to a standing room only audience in the church.



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