

Owls and Other Fantasies

POEMS AND ESSAYS



Mary Oliver

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD
AND THE PULITZER PRIZE FOR POETRY

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Beloved of children, bards and Spring,

O birds, your perfect virtues bring,
Your song, your forms, your rhythmic flight,
Your manners for the heart's delight....

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "May-Day"



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.

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 awhile,
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.



Goldfinches

Some goldfinches were having a melodious argument at the edge of a puddle. The birds wanted to bathe, or perhaps just to dip their heads and look at themselves, and they were having trouble with who should be first, and so on. So they discussed it while I stood in the distance, listening. Perhaps in Tibet, in the old holy places, they also have such fragile bells. Or are these birds really just that, bells come to us—come to this road in America—let us bow our heads and remember now how we used to do it, say a prayer. Meanwhile the birds bathe and splash and have a good time. Then they fly off, their dark wings opening from the bright, yellow bodies; their tiny feet, all washed, clasping the air.

Such Singing in the Wild Branches

It was spring
and finally I heard him
among the first leaves—
then I saw him clutching the limb

in an island of shade
with his red-brown feathers
all trim and neat for the new year.
First, I stood still

and thought of nothing.
Then I began to listen.
Then I was filled with gladness—
and that's when it happened,

when I seemed to float,
to be, myself, a wing or a tree—
and I began to understand
what the bird was saying,

and the sands in the glass
stopped
for a pure white moment
while gravity sprinkled upward

like rain, rising,
and in fact
it became difficult to tell just what it was that was singing—
it was the thrush for sure, but it seemed

not a single thrush, but himself, and all his brothers,
and also the trees around them,
as well as the gliding, long-tailed clouds
in the perfectly blue sky—all, all of them

were singing.
And, of course, yes, so it seemed,

so was I.

Such soft and solemn and perfect music doesn't last

for more than a few moments.

It's one of those magical places wise people
like to talk about.

One of the things they say about it, that is true,

is that, once you've been there,
you're there forever.

Listen, everyone has a chance.

Is it spring, is it morning?

Are there trees near you,
and does your own soul need comforting?

Quick, then—open the door and fly on your heavy feet; the song
may already be drifting away.

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?



Upon the dunes and in the shaggy woodlands of the Province-lands, I have seen plenty of owls. Heard them at twilight and in the dark, and near dawn. Watched them, flying over Great Pond, flying over Rose Tasha's noisy barnyard, flying out of the open fretwork of the spire of the old Methodist Church on Commercial Street, where the pigeons sleep, and disappear one by one. I have seen them in every part of the woods, favoring this or that acreage until the rabbits are scarce and they move to new hunting grounds, and then, in a few seasons, move back.

In January and February I walk in the woods and look for a large nest in a tall tree. In my mind's eye I see the great horned, the early nester, sitting upon her bulk of sticks, like an old woman on a raft.

I look in every part of the Provincelands that is within my walking range. I look by Clapp Pond and Bennet Pond and Round Pond and Oak-Head Pond. I look along the riding trail that borders the landfill—in the old days a likely hunting ground and not one disdained by the owls or much else. I look in the woods close to the airport, so often have I flushed an owl from the pine trees there.

And I look in the woods around Pasture Pond, where, over a century ago, Mr. George Washington Ready, once the Province-town town crier, saw the six-eyed sea serpent. He witnessed it, he said, emerging from the ocean and slithering across the dunes. Into Pasture Pond it descended, and sank from sight. Every winter I stare into the ice of the pond and think of it—still asleep, I suppose, in the clasp of the lily roots, for no one has ever seen it again.

And I search in the deeper woods, past fire roads and the bike trail, among the black oaks and the taller pines, in the silent blue afternoons, when the sand is still frozen and the snow falls slowly and aimlessly, and the whole world smells like water in an iron cup. And I see on my way to the owl's nest, many marvelous things: the gray hives of the paper wasps hidden in summer by the leaves but now apparent on the boughs; nests, including one of the Baltimore oriole, with fishline woven into it, so that it has in the wind a comet's tail of rippling white threads; and pheasants, birds that were released into fall's russet fields but find themselves still alive at the far end of winter, and are glad of it, storming upward from the fields on their bright wings; and great blue herons, thin and melancholy; and deer, in their gray winter coats, bounding through the cold bogs; an owl in a tree with an unexpected face—a barred owl, seen once and once only.

Finally the earth grows softer, and the buds on the trees swell, and the afternoon becomes a wider room to roam in, as the sun moves back from the south and the light grows stronger. The bluebirds come back, and the robins, and the song sparrows, and great robust flocks of blackbirds; and in the fields blackberry hoops put on a soft plum color, a restitution; the ice on the ponds begins to thunder, and between the slices is seen the strokes of its breaking up in a stutter of dark lightning. And then the winter is over, and again I have not found the great horned owl's nest.

But the owls themselves are not hard to find, silent and on the wing, with their ear tufts

flat against their heads as they fly and their huge wings alternately gliding and flapping as they maneuver through the trees. Athena's owl of wisdom and Merlin's companion, Archimedes, were screech owls surely, not this bird with the glassy gaze, restless on the bough, nothing but blood on its mind.

When the great horned is in the trees its razor-tipped toes rasp the limb, flakes of bark fall through the air and land on my shoulders while I look up at it and listen to the heavy, crisp, breathy snapping of its hooked beak. The screech owl I can imagine on my wrist, also the delicate saw-whet that flies like a big soft moth down by Great Pond. And I can imagine sitting quietly before that luminous wanderer the snowy owl, and learning, from the white gleam of its feathers, something about the arctic. But the great horned I can't imagine in any such proximity—if one of those should touch me, it would touch to the center of my life, and I must fall. They are the pure wild hunters of our world. They are swift and merciless upon the backs of rabbits, mice, voles, snakes, even skunks, even cats sitting in dusky yards thinking peaceful thoughts. I have found the headless bodies of rabbits and blue jays, and I know it was the great horned owl that did them in, taking the head only, for the owl has an insatiable craving for the taste of brains. I have walked with prudent caution down paths at twilight when the dogs were puppies. I know this bird. If it could, it would eat the whole world.

In the night, when the owl is less than exquisitely swift and perfect, the scream of the rabbit is terrible. But the scream of the owl, which is not of pain and hopelessness and the fear of being plucked out of the world, but of the sheer rollicking glory of the death-bringer, is more terrible still. When I hear it resounding through the woods, and then the five black pellets of its song dropping like stones into the air, I know I am standing at the edge of the mystery, in which terror is naturally and abundantly part of life, part of even the most becalmed, intelligent, sunny life—as, for example, my own. The world where the owl is endlessly hungry and endlessly on the hunt is the world in which I live too. There is only one world.

Sometimes, while I have stood listening to the owl's song drifting through the trees, when it is ten degrees above nothing and life for any small creature is hard enough without that, I have found myself thinking of summer fields. Fields full of flowers—poppies or lupines. Or here, fields where the roses hook into the dunes, and their increase is manifold. All summer they are red and pink and white tents of softness and nectar, which wafts and hangs everywhere—a sweetness so palpable and excessive that, before it, I'm struck, I'm taken, I'm conquered; I'm washed into it, as though it was a river, full of dreaming and idleness—I drop to the sand, I can't move; I am restless no more; I am replete, supine, finished, filled to the last edges with an immobilizing happiness. And is this not also terrible? Is this not also frightening?

Are the roses not also—even as the owl is—excessive? Each flower is small and lovely, but in their sheer and silent abundance the roses become an immutable force, as though the work of the wild roses was to make sure that all of us, who come wandering over the sand, may be, for a while, struck to the heart and saturated with a simple joy. Let the mind be teased by such stretches of the imagination, by such balance. Now I am cringing at the very sound of the owl's dark wings opening over my head—not long ago I could do nothing but lounge on

the sand and stare into the cities of the roses.

I have two feathers from the big owl. One I found near Round Pond; the other, on another day, fell as I watched the bird rise from one tree and flap into another. As the owl rose, some crows caught sight of it, and so began another scrimmage in their long battle. The owl wanted to sleep, but the crows pursue it and when it settles a second time the crows—now a dozen—gather around and above it, and scream into its face, with open beaks and wagging tongues. They come dangerously close to its feet, which are huge and quick. The caught crow is a dead crow. But it is not in the nature of crows to hide or cower—it is in their nature to gather and to screech and to gamble in the very tree where death stares at them with molten eyes. What fun, to aggravate the old bomber! What joy, to swipe at the tawny feathers even as the bird puffs and hulks and hisses.

But finally the owl rises from the trees altogether and climbs and floats away, over two or three hills, and the crows go off to some other merriment.

And I walk on, over the shoulder of summer and down across the red-dappled fall; and when it's late winter again, out through the far woodlands of the Provincelands, maybe another few hundred miles, looking for the owl's nest, yes, of course, and looking at everything else along the way.



June

A single swallow glides in the air above the water. Next to it something hovers, thin and white. It flies too—or is it floating? It vanishes. It appears again, a little smaller than the bird.

Now the bird approaches land. Now it is over the beach itself. The floating object is also over the beach. A feather!

The swallow snaps the feather from the air and holds it in its beak while it takes three or four rapid strokes forward. Then it lets the feather go, and dives away.

The feather pauses on the updraft, then begins to descend. The bird turns, flows back, glides above and beneath it. The feather tumbles erratically. With a plunge the swallow snaps from the air and flies on, and then, again, lets it go.

All of this is repeated maybe a dozen times. Finally the swallow ignores the feather, which drifts toward the berms of wild roses, between the dunes and the sea. The swallow climbs higher into the air, blue shoulders pumping hard. Then it swings, glides, turns toward the sea and is gone.

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