



Swan: Poems and Prose Poems

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“Joy is not made to be a crumb,” writes Mary Oliver, and certainly joy abounds in her new book of poetry and prose poems. *Swan*, her twentieth volume, shows us that, though we may be “made out of the dust of stars,” we are of the world she captures here so vividly: the acorn that hides within it an entire tree; the wings of the swan like the stretching light of the river; the frogs singing in the shallows; the mockingbird dancing in air. *Swan* is Oliver’s tribute to “the mortal way” of desiring and living in the world, to which the poet is renowned for having always been “totally loyal.”

As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, innumerable readers go to Oliver’s poetry “for solace, regeneration and inspiration.” Few poets express the immense complexities of human experience as skillfully, or capture so memorably the smallest nuances. Speaking, for example, of stones, she writes, “the little ones you can / hold in your hands, their heartbeats / so secret, so hidden it may take years / before, finally, you hear them.” It is no wonder Oliver ranks, according to the *Weekly Standard*, “among the finest poets the English language has ever produced.”

Swan: Poems and Prose Poems Details

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From Reader Review Swan: Poems and Prose Poems for online ebook

David says

"A name / is not a leash."

Not my favorite from Oliver but still pretty damn good.

Cheryl says

I reread this at 11,000 feet, after a wildflower hike, watching the weather come in, feeling and smelling and breathing the rain, and dancing in it. I listen, Mary O, I really do. Some of the same poems spoke to me, some new ones had a voice I was ready for this time.

What Can I Say

What can I say that I have not said
before? So I'll say it again.

The leaf has a song in it.

Stone is the face of patience. Inside
the river there is an unfinishable

story and you are somewhere
in it and it will never end until all ends.

Take your busy heart to the art museum
and the chamber of commerce but
take it also to the forest.

The song you heard singing in the leaf
when you were a child is singing still.

I am of years lived, so far,
seventy-four, and the leaf is singing still.

There are questions you must ask at least once in your life, or all your life. On the Beach: HOW MANY KINDS OF LOVE ARE THERE AFTER ALL? DON'T WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN WAYS OF PRAYING, AND WHAT ARE YOURS? From How I Go to the Woods. I GO TO THE WORLD ALONE OFTEN.

I could eat of this world endlessly: sometimes the perfection of a vegetable, its absolute sensuality in the color, crunch, and taste making me realize I am eating of the "blessed earth" and how extraordinary it is from Beans yellow and Green. Tom Dancer's Gift: Eating a pinecone, from the scat of a bear, swallowing life as bitter or rough it can be. I WANT SOMEONE TO GIVE ME SUCH A GIFT, although could enjoy something not from a bear's poop.

Her dog poems aren't as fancy as maybe a Pulitzer/national book award winning poem, but find me a dog lover that does not cry at them. From Swan,
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?

The poet advises, don't allow a "negligence of the mind," see everything. (How Heron comes) In all her poems, she will not tolerate us closing our eyes, or sleepwalking. Notice everything, find joy and beauty in everything. Change your life. She says, allow pure joy to fill you, and not worry at its apparent flamboyance and excess. (Don't Hesitate). I cried after reading some of the poems, and caught my breath, and laughed out loud at some of her beautiful and appropriate imagery that invites us to open, look, and see inside and out. So beautiful.

After these poems, I walked around as I always do, this time at dusk, and all I could see were stars and sky and tree silhouettes where soon there will be leaves. Bears, ocean, dogs, dunes, pines, swans, and birds. That is the magic of poetry.

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.

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 unheard sound of the roses singing.

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

Tom Dancer's gift of a whitebark pine cone

You never know
What opportunity
Is going to travel to you,
Or through you.

Once a friend gave me
A small pine cone-
One of a few
He found in the scat

Of a grizzly
In Utah maybe,
Or Wyoming.
I took it home

And did what I supposed
He was sure I would do-
I ate it,
Thinking

How it had traveled
Through that rough
And holy body.
It was crisp and sweet.

It was almost a prayer
Without words.
My gratitude, Tom Dancer,
For this gift of the world
I adore so much
And want to belong to.
And thank you too, great bear.

Percy wakes me (fourteen)

Percy wakes me and I am not ready.
He has slept all night under the covers.
Now he's eager for action: a walk, then breakfast.
So I hasten up. He is sitting on the kitchen counter
Where he is not supposed to be.
How wonderful you are, I say. How clever, if you
Needed me,
To wake me.
He thought he would a lecture and deeply
His eyes begin to shine.
He tumbles onto the couch for more compliments.
He squirms and squeals: he has done something
That he needed
And now he hears that it is okay.
I scratch his ears. I turn him over
And touch him everywhere. He is
Wild with the okayness of it. Then we walk, then
He has breakfast, and he is happy.
This is a poem about Percy.
This is a poem about more than Percy.
Think about it.

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-
s 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?

The poet dreams of the classroom

I dreamed
I stood up in class
And I said aloud:

Teacher,
Why is algebra important?

Sit down, he said.

Then I dreamed
I stood up
And I said:

Teacher, I'm weary of the turkeys
That we have to draw every fall.
May I draw a fox instead?

Sit down, he said.

Then I dreamed
I stood up once more and said:

Teacher,
My heart is falling asleep
And it wants to wake up.
It needs to be outside.

Sit down, he said.

The sweetness of dogs (fifteen)

What do you say, Percy? I am thinking
of sitting out on the sand to watch
the moon rise. Full tonight.
So we go

and the moon rises, so beautiful it
makes me shudder, makes me think about
time and space, makes me take
measure of myself: one iota
pondering heaven. Thus we sit,

I thinking how grateful I am for the moon's
perfect beauty and also, oh! How rich
it is to love the world. Percy, meanwhile,
leans against me and gazes up into
my face. As though I were
his perfect moon.

The poet dreams of the mountain

Sometimes I grow weary of the days, with all their fits and starts.
I want to climb some old gray mountains, slowly, taking

The rest of my lifetime to do it, resting often, sleeping
Under the pines or, above them, on the unclothed rocks.
I want to see how many stars are still in the sky
That we have smothered for years now, a century at least.
I want to look back at everything, forgiving it all,
And peaceful, knowing the last thing there is to know.
All that urgency! Not what the earth is about!
How silent the trees, their poetry being of themselves only.
I want to take slow steps, and think appropriate thoughts.
In ten thousand years, maybe, a piece of the mountain will fall.
How heron comes

It is a negligence of the mind
not to notice how at dusk
heron comes to the pond and
stands there in his death robes, perfect
servant of the system, hungry, his eyes
full of attention, his wings
pure light.

When

When it's over, it's over, and we don't know
any of us, what happens then.
So I try not to miss anything.
I think, in my whole life, I have never missed
The full moon
or the slipper of its coming back.
Or, a kiss.
Well, yes, especially a kiss.

In your hands

The dog, the donkey, surely they know
They are alive.
Who would argue otherwise?

But now, after years of consideration,
I am getting beyond that.
What about the sunflowers? What about
The tulips, and the pines?

Listen, all you have to do is start and
There'll be no stopping.
What about mountains? What about water
Slipping over rocks?

And speaking of stones, what about
The little ones you can

Hold in your hands, their heartbeats
So secret, so hidden it may take years

Before, finally, you hear them?

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 happened 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.

More evidence

...lord, there are so many fires, so many words, in
my heart. It's going to take something I can't
even imagine, to put them all out.

Sing, if you can sing, and it not still be
musical inside yourself.

Sean says

Winner: "Don't Hesitate," a prose poem which ends "Joy is not made to be a crumb:" a fantastic sentiment.

Adorable: lots of attention, repeated through several poems, to a chance spotting of a fox.

Inscrutable: "Tom Dancer's Gift of a Whitebark Pine Cone." I'm not mature enough to leave this one alone.

Christina says

Oddly enough, this was my first acquaintance with the celebrated Mary Oliver. Although I'm not generally a

fan of nature poetry, this collection had a homespun wisdom and humor that won me instantly and kept me smiling, reading and rereading each spare and often quirky poem. I do count myself her fan now. Also, what a pleasure to hold such a truly beautiful book for a change: well-designed, handsomely printed on quality, acid-free paper and hardbound. Too rare a treat now that publishers have turned craven. Although I realize the industry's imperiled state, I couldn't help but think how much more appealing a slim volume of poetry is when the quality of the printing is equal to the book's contents and how much better a book's chances of selling. Publishers, take note!

Lisa Roney says

Some of these poems are very beautiful, while others seem to me banal and formulaic. I felt almost as though I were reading an idea notebook rather than a fully formed and perfected book of poetry. There are some wonderfully worthwhile ones, and so I'll just forget the forgettable ones.

Chris says

This one had a couple of things I quite liked, but overall it didn't resonate that much with me.

Tony says

I read a library copy. Stuck to the outside was a tiny sticker that read +2.25. Someone ahead of me seems to have bought glasses to read this book.

Miri says

Beans Green and Yellow

In fall
it is mushrooms
gathered from dampness
under the pines;
in spring
I have known
the taste of the lamb
full of milk
and spring grass;
today
it is beans green and yellow
and lettuce and basil
from my friend's garden—
how calmly,

as though it were an ordinary thing,
we eat the blessed earth.

April

I wanted to speak at length about
the happiness of my body and the
delight of my mind for it was
April, night, a
full moon and—

but something in myself or maybe
from somewhere other said: not too
many words, please, in the
muddy shallows the

frogs are singing.

Kate says

I bought Mary Oliver's recent copy of poetry titled *Swan* and read it over my solitary dinner. It is a slim volume full of lyrical treasures. I guess I will leave you with the titular poem. In it she whisks you away to the natural world and then hits you in the gut with a burning question at the end. God I love her.

The 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?

Becky says

I felt elated finishing this book tonight. What a joy of my life to read Mary Oliver.

Anna says

Beautiful. Possibly my favorite collection of Mary Oliver poems. But I think that after pretty much every poetry collection by her.

Rachel Yong says

Tender lovely Mary Oliver. I can make a bed in her descriptions - the shock of seeing a fox at night by the side of the road. The fox! The fox!

metaphor says

and the heart, if it is still alive,

feels something—
a yearning
for which we have no name

but which we may remember,
years later,
in the darkness,

upon some other empty road.

Clara says

4.5 ?

Naomi says

One of the leading contemporary spiritual poets, Oliver's way with words is stunning and captivating. Phrases stick in my heart and become one with my bones. This book includes many texts I expect to hear in future worship services in many traditions and also quoted in book clubs and in epigrams. There is less of the

nature poet in this text, more meditations on living daily with the dead and dying, and much, much, much more on joy as the song of the world. Buy it: you'll take it off your shelf regularly, until the poems are memorized and then you can pass your beloved copy to another.

Martha says

Swan: Poems and Prose Poems, by Mary Oliver -- Another dear, dear friend gave me this book! What riches!! I can't say I've finished it, because you never finish with a book of poetry, but I have given all the poems a once-over, and some more than a once. It's a lovely book. I love the way Mary Oliver brought nature into the hearts and minds of so many preachers only to discover sacramental Christianity herself late in life. Here's a poem, "How Many Days" that describes the tension between the two:

How many days I loved and had never used
the holy words.

Tenderly I began them when it came to me
to want to, oh mystery irrefutable!

Then I went out of that place
and into a field and lay down
among the weeds and the grasses,
whispering to them, fast, in order to keep
that world also.

Just love that.

Terry says

It is good to discover new material. This isn't new. In fact, I tried on Oliver's poems over the years and never found a good fit. Until now. Something in these poems grabbed me. I can point to a few instances that say more about what I've read in the past than anything else. Take "Bird in the Pepper Tree."

Don't mind my inexplicable delight
in knowing your name,
little Wilson's Warbler
yellow as a lemon, with a smooth black cap.

Just do what you do and don't worry, dipping
branch by branch down to the fountain
to sip neatly, then flutter away.

A name
is not a leash.

Immediately, my mind lurched back to this from Terry Tempest Williams in *Pieces of White Shell*, "I speculate over some of the Anglo nomenclature of birds: Wilson's snipe, Forster's tern. . . :What natural images do these names conjure in our minds? What integrity do we give back to the birds with our labels?"

How could it not. How could I not suddenly need to rethink and reevaluate all I've read and thought and imagined about names. Names are words; words are names, that is, words name. Emerson wrote, "Every word was once a poem" and "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty." And yet, even as she says, in effect, I know your name, Oliver says, too, after a fashion, That puts no hold on you, the named. That's beautiful.

All of this put me in a susceptible state when a few pages, and a few weeks later (because one does not want to speed too quickly through a found volume like this), I came upon "How Heron Comes."

It is a negligence of the mind
not to notice how at dusk
heron comes to the pond and
stands there in his death robes, perfect
servant of the system, hungry, his eyes
full of attention, his wings
pure light.

Ursula K. Le Guin, from *Searoad*, "I never know the heron as it flies at first. What is the slow, wide-winged figure in the sky? Then I see it, like a word in a foreign language, like seeing one's own name written in a strange alphabet and recognizing it, I say it: the heron." Two perspectives: a naming and a beauty.

Truly, though, I must have been, finally, ready for Oliver. It was the first poem in the collection that took gentle hold of me to remind me that "the leaf is singing still."

Mark Robison says

If I could only read one writer for the rest of my life, it would be Mary Oliver. I never tire of her. A sample poem picked at random from "Swan," this one called "The Sweetness of Dogs": What do you say, Percy? I am thinking/ of sitting out on the sand to watch/ the full moon rise. Full tonight./ So we go // and the moon rises, so beautiful it/ makes me shudder, makes me think about/ time and space, makes me take/ measure of myself: one iota/ pondering heaven. Thus we sit, // I thinking how grateful I am for the moon's/ perfect beauty and also, oh! how rich/ it is to love the world. Percy, meanwhile,/ leans against me and gazes up into/ my face. As though I were/ his perfect moon." Grade: A

Henna | CARRY ON READING says

3,5

Amy says

Another great book of poems from Mary Oliver. Most poems were about nature. She favors foxes and tells sweet stories about her dog, Percy. My favorite poem from this book is about Queen Anne's lace.

