



MARY OLIVER

NEW AND  
SELECTED  
POEMS

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD  
AND THE PULITZER PRIZE

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NEW AND  
SELECTED  
POEMS



*Volume One*

*Mary Oliver*



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NEW  
POEMS



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## *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?

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.



## *Spring Azures*

In spring the blue azures bow down  
at the edges of shallow puddles  
to drink the black rain water.  
Then they rise and float away into the fields.

Sometimes the great bones of my life feel so heavy,  
and all the tricks my body knows—  
the opposable thumbs, the kneecaps,  
and the mind clicking and clicking—

don't seem enough to carry me through this world  
and I think: how I would like

to have wings—  
blue ones—  
ribbons of flame.

How I would like to open them, and rise  
from the black rain water.

And then I think of Blake, in the dirt and sweat of London—a boy  
staring through the window, when God came  
fluttering up.

Of course, he screamed,  
seeing the bobbin of God's blue body  
leaning on the sill,  
and the thousand-faceted eyes.