

Blue Iris

POEMS AND ESSAYS



Mary Oliver

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

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AFTERWORD

Roses, Late Summer

Flowers and fruits are always fit presents; flowers because they are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts"



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.

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.



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.

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.



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?

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