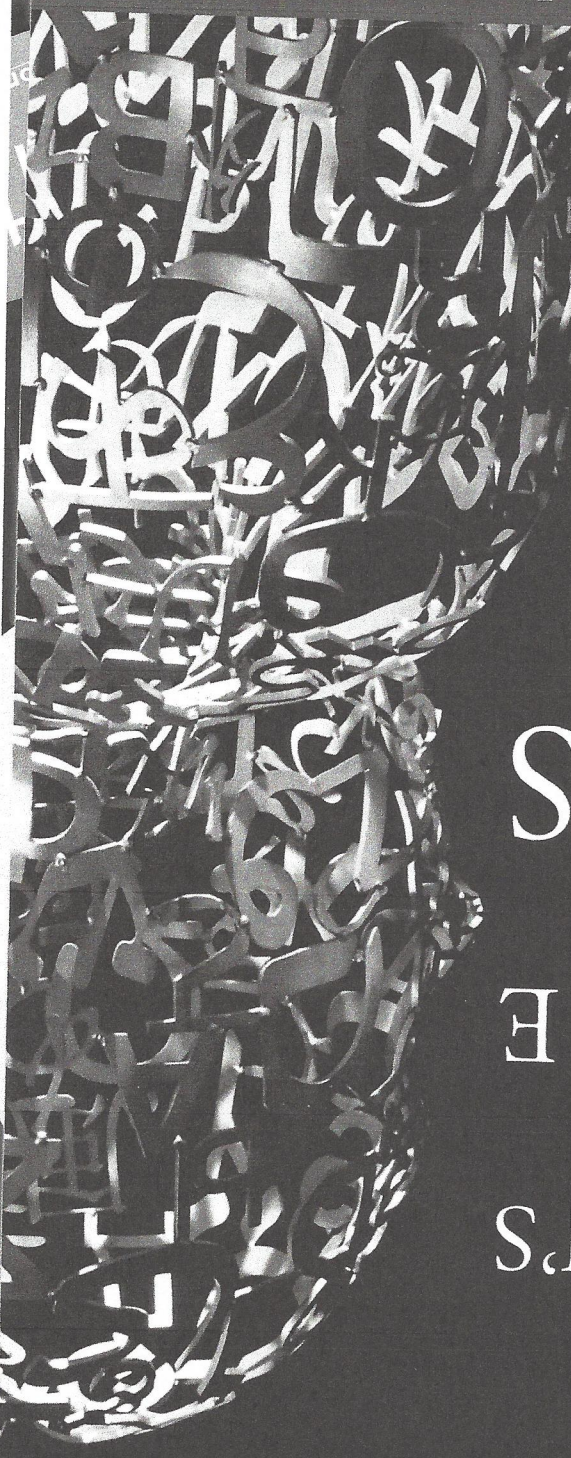


A Houston Poet Laureate Project
Edited by ROBIN DAVIDSON



HOUSTON'S
FAVORITE
POEMS

Mary Oliver

UNITED STATES * W. 1953

I experienced several untimely deaths at a young age, so I have never had the luxury of pretending death will not affect me. It already has. "The Summer Day" reminds me to slow down and appreciate what is before me today since everything will come to an end, and too soon. This can be challenging in a world obsessed with quick and pretty and easy. Death gives immediacy to my life and forces me to live purposefully. The idea of not feeling rushed all the time and just being idle (and blessed!) is appealing yet often difficult to achieve given the demands of modern life rife with cell phones, the internet, tweets, and 24 hour news. Mary Oliver's writing is so beautiful that I long to handle a grasshopper and stroll through the field, as I ponder what I will do with my "one wild and precious life."

Beyl Kaminsky, Consultant

I have bring outside and have taught writing at the Houston Arboretum through Writers in the Schools for many years. The Arboretum is a rich garden of natural delights hidden in the middle of the maze of highways that is Houston. Sharing the wonders of nature with city children is always a joy for me. I use this poem, "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver, to create a powerful experience for young writers. This poem turns the contemplation of a grasshopper into a deeper, sublime experience. I ask students to choose something around them in nature—a squirrel, a leaf, an ant—and look closely. By listing all the details they see, the young writers learn that paying attention to the world around us is an invocation to a higher power. The children slow down and see what Oliver sees—that life passes too quickly and we have to appreciate the sanctuary of the natural world. As I watch this poem inspire young writers, Oliver's words work their magic on me as well, as I learn to actually see the little things and not squander my "one wild and precious life."

Harriet Riley, Writer and Writing Teacher

Summer Day

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean—

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

What a comfort to be reminded by Oliver that I don't have to suffer to join in "the family of things." This poem brings tears to my eyes when she says, "you only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." My place in this world is assured.

Hallie Moore, Retired Teacher

I love that this poem presents nature as a religion and respects the sinner within all of us in a humane way. In a world where we seem to be so judgmental and unforgiving, Mary Oliver offers us hope that we still have a place "in the family of things."

Rebecca Wells, Senior Managing Director, Software Company

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 mountain and the rivers.

I experienced several untimely deaths at a young age, so I have never had the luxury of pretending death will not affect me. It already has. "The Summer Day" reminds me to slow down and appreciate what is before me today since everything will come to an end and too soon. This can be challenging in a world obsessed with quick and pretty and easy. Death gives immediacy to my life and forces me to live purposefully. The idea of not feeling rushed all the time and just being idle (and blessed!) is appealing yet often difficult to achieve given the demands of modern life rife with cell phones, the internet, tweets, and 24 hour news. Mary Oliver's writing is so beautiful that I long to handle a grasshopper and stroll through the field, as I ponder what I will do with my "one wild and precious life."

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—Hannet Riley, Writer and Writing Teacher

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Sharon Olds

UNITED STATES * B. 1942

I am a creative nonfiction writer. The last several years I have mainly focused my creative efforts on stories about my past, my family and myself. Sharon Olds is a beautifully honest poet who touches on the heart of a woman's story. This poem, "I Go Back to May 1937," helps us come to grip with our personal history and shows how we can tell our own stories. I love all the details and how well Olds paints a picture with her words in this poem. It touches me deeply and reminds me that I must speak my own truth with authenticity and courage.

—Harriet Riley, Writer and Writing Teacher

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips aglow in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don't do it—she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,

his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.