

Mary Oliver

ON BENDED KNEE

By Margaret Murphy

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

— Rumi, thirteenth century



1.

Mary Oliver's newest volume of poetry was published last fall, within weeks of her eightieth birthday. The book is called *Felicity*, Mary's word for the feeling in her heart in living her life now, and the best word for our own state of grace in hearing her speak again.

2.

Finally the world is beginning to change, its fevers mounting, its leaves unfolding.

And the mockingbirds find ample reason and breath to fashion new songs. They do. You can count on it.

3.

Mary has described herself as a person who does the walking and the scribbling and then works the scribbled things into poems. The new poems give witness to this person, who has long been recognized as one of our greatest living poets. Mary can experience and express profound connection to the world's beauty and mystery and the inner lives of people and other living things. We have come to count on her for this, and her new collection does it for us.

Her empathy for all Creation is among her greatest gifts. *Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures. (Canticle of the Sun, St. Francis of Assisi)* Mary sees a miracle in newborn chicks hatching out of redbird eggs, chicks who know nothing about the sky that's waiting for them, or even that they have wings. She hears the trees speaking to the wind and talking to the sun but also, later, crying out at the sawmill.

4.

A redbird—a cardinal—is a songbird that does not migrate and has traditionally been more common in warmer climes such as the US Southeast, although it also lives in New England. Unlike many songbirds, both male and female redbirds sing, and the female often vocalizes with song from her nest. Mary called her twelfth volume of poetry *Red Bird*. *Felicity* is her twenty-fifth volume.

5.

Mary has said that poetry is a community ritual. She wants to pay attention, be astonished, and tell about it. What she says, she says for all of us. She cultivates simple words and everyday life, and writes so that everyone who is interested can share her experience. When she wakes early and takes her walks, it enriches everyone. She has described the world as the theater of the spiritual. In this way, her poems offer instructions for living a life. Her new poems do all of this, adding to the vast treasure of beloved lines and lessons that her poetry gives to the universe.

Recently, living her life has brought new experiences. Mary is on her morning walk at creek-edge and decides to jump across as she has hundreds of times. *"Something in me refuses to abdicate."* This time, for the first time, she falls in.

She moved from one house to another and rented a storage space that she filled with her things. As time passed, the things she cared about grew fewer. One day she called the trash man and he took it all. *"Things! Burn them, burn them! Make a beautiful fire! More room in your heart for love, for the trees! For the birds who own nothing—the reason they can fly."*

6.

Half of Mary's new poems are love poems. They tell us about Mary running toward love's allure. They let God and the world know she is grateful for the gift of loving and being loved. The poems are exuberant. She quotes from Rumi about a field beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing. The last poem is about her heart lying down in that field and being happy.

7.

I'm living in a warm place now, where you can purchase fresh blueberries all year long. Labor free. From various countries in South America. They're as sweet as any, and compared with the berries I used to pick in the fields outside Provincetown, they're enormous. But berries are berries. They don't speak any language I can't understand. Neither do I find ticks or small spiders crawling among them. So, generally speaking, I'm very satisfied.

There are limits, however. What they don't have is the field. The field they belonged to and through the years I began to feel I belonged to. Well, there's life, and then there's later. Maybe it's myself that I miss. The field, and the sparrow singing at the edge of the woods. And the doe that one morning came upon me unaware, all tense and gorgeous. She stamped her hoof as you would to any intruder. Then gave me a long look, as if to say, Okay, you stay in your patch, I'll stay in mine. Which is what we did. Try packing that up, South America.



8.

Mary Oliver lived in Provincetown for fifty years, and now lives in a small town in Florida. The town is close to the Atlantic coast, just inland from a national wildlife refuge. The refuge is home to beach-nesting birds and sea turtles and hundreds of acres of mangrove trees. The mangroves thrive shoulder to shoulder with the coastal waters, and canopies of gnarled banyan trees grace the road across the bridge to the refuge. When Mary walks in the morning now, what she sees in the rising sun are mangroves. How blessed we are that, wherever she is, Mary is still walking and scribbling, seeing the beauty of this world, and instructing us about living our lives. 🌿

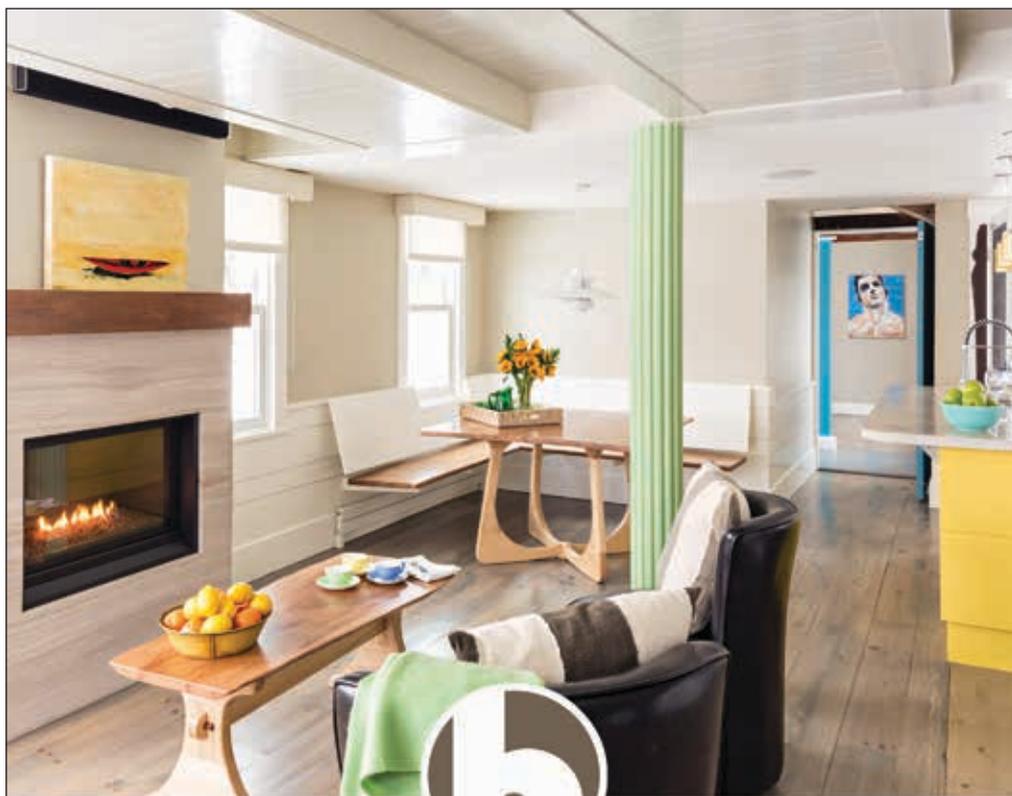
MARGARET MURPHY was Executive Director of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and an environmental lawyer and advocate in New York City. Upon her departure from the Work Center, it created a Named Endowed Fellowship in her honor. She lives in New York and Provincetown and devotes her time to nonprofit and naturalist endeavors.

Rumi lines from *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, © 1995, published by HarperCollins, New York.

2. Excerpted from "Late Spring," published in the collection *Felicity* by Mary Oliver, © 2015 by Mary Oliver, published by The Penguin Press, New York.

5. Excerpted from "Cobb Creek" and "Storage," published in the collection *Felicity* by Mary Oliver, © 2015 by Mary Oliver, published by The Penguin Press, New York.

7. "Blueberries," from the collection *Blue Horses* by Mary Oliver, © 2014 by Mary Oliver, published by The Penguin Press, New York.



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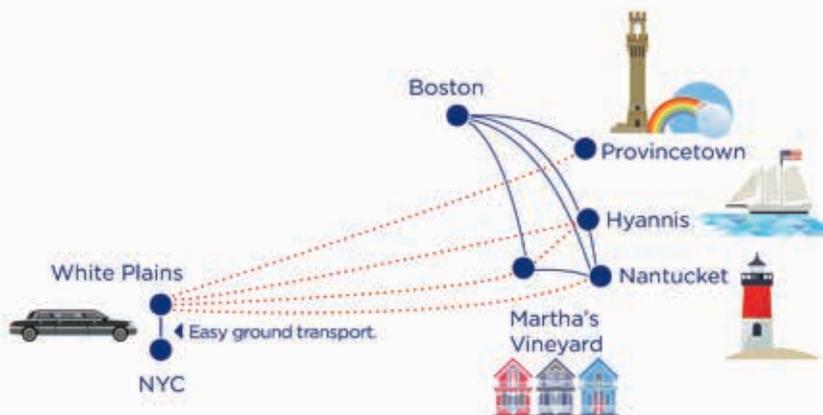
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