

In 2007, I was born to two English teacher parents, who raised me as English teachers tend to do. That is, with words being just as much my sustenance as the milk in my bottle. By third grade, I had won several writing contests and frequently had my books taken up by my teachers due to my being absorbed in the world of literature. Fantasy was ambrosia, and I slipped into those imaginary worlds daily, finding my friends and family among them.

I oft spent my afternoons climbing trees and running around with my tangible and literary companions, acting out the stories I read or ones of my own making. My childhood was rich with imagination and sun, fulfillment through the worlds around and inside of me.

Once I reached high school, however, the stresses and pressures of a modern world chewed me up and spat me out, digesting the stamina and freedoms of a child. It's as if the lights of a phone screen were a blinding curtain that blocked out the words presented to me on fine, silky pages. It was no help that my life began a swift downward spiral to an end of some kind, rife with despair. Feeling abandoned yet imprisoned by those supposed to care for me most, I was secluded deeper from any bright life of years passed. Suddenly simply surviving was the hardest task I had ever undertaken. I spent most every class on my phone, drowning out the crush of existence with mindless scrolling and the endless online facade of those drowning with me.

*I do not live happily or comfortably
with the cleverness of our times.
The talk is all about computers,
the news is all about bombs and blood.*

After a year and a half, feeling understood and truly seen became such a rare occurrence that some long-dead, ever-young piece of me reached again for the comfort it had once known. It began with an increased interest in music and an expanding taste in such, finding familiarity in the lines and chords of some desperate and reaching song. Unbeknownst to myself, this would start my slow return to the world of literature. For songs are just poetry set to music, are they not? It became incredibly easy to spend my class time with my headphones on, reading every book of soul-crushing poetry I could get my hands on, and picking up my pen for the first time in years to write my own.

I felt known in the words, and yet they did no good for my crumbling mind. Yes, I was reading again, and yes, I was writing again, but those words did naught but validate my self-destruction. The creatures in the works I consumed treated themselves the same as I did, hence the familiarity of their stories, but I did not delight in their recovery. We were not friends but twisted mirrors, broken sisters. I wished to have someone sit with me and rot. My collection of poetry grew, until one day I happened across a new and devastating quote. I thought I had found my newest shadow in this woman who died just before I began to.

*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.*

Once I opened her poems, however, I was met with a love and a god and a nature I hadn't known in a long time, or perhaps never. I was not religious, and yet her speaking on the divinity around her in the song of a bird or the ripples on a lake may have saved my soul. While I might never reach heaven, my new-found peace brought me close enough. Mary became my confidant

and advisor. She was not falsely joyful, nor some perfect saint. We were just enough alike to hold my attention, yet she had taken our suffering and turned it to something deeply appreciative that I did not yet hold. Our conversations between the pages kept me whole as she guided me with some gentle hand, while my own held themselves across dog-eared, worn-soft paper. Nowhere else had I found such moving words, full of faith and recognition. I have some doubt that I would have survived without my newest and oldest friend. Through her spirit, I was given the strength and purpose needed to drag myself from the cursed embrace of despondency, and we walked together to a life after death. *These are the days the sun is swimming back to the east and the light on the water gleams as never, it seems, before.* For her, this meant an existence beside her God and the decay of her body into new, green sprouts. For me, this meant an existence beside this breathing world and the flow of my blood into new, vibrant health.

*How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
To the comfort of a poem.*

But first and foremost, I learned from Mary Oliver that a poem is a pretty little beast, taking off in directions of its own. Yes, it is a thing one may analyze in some stuffy classroom, something to pick apart and eat from. This is a beautiful thing, a powerful thing, yet not what lives at a poem's center. A poem is meant to curl up inside the caverns of the heart. A poem was the exact company I needed. I shall always remember my time spent with Oliver, saying to the world, *"Don't bother me. I've just been born."*