

Mary Oliver broke my heart

The poet helped me to realize how little I knew about a life observed.

by [Tim Brown](#)

January 17, 2019

I don't remember when I first read her work. I'm sure it was in my 20s. Because in my 20s I knew too much. Everything, actually. And if you doubt that, just ask my 27-year-old self. I would smile and demure and shy away from your question, but secretly answer in the affirmative.

And then enter Mary.

Mary, the poet. Mary, the theologian...though unwittingly, perhaps. Mary, with her short stacked sentences packed on top of one another like pancakes, dripping with meaning.

Heavy, sweet meaning.

Her observations on simple things, like ducks and pipefish, made me wish I knew how to engage with the world in a way that still retained the wonder and awe and love of my young self. And she was doing it in this way until she was quite old!

She helped me to realize that not only did I know nothing about ducks or pipefish, but I also knew nothing about a life observed—and that I'd better get with the program, better surround myself with poetry, if I was ever going to know anything about anything. Let alone myself, my life.

Poetry helps us to observe life, and observe it intently. With feeling. With hope and a good bit of angst and, good grief: it is something when it works.

Poetry is the picture that prose wishes it could paint. Poetry *is* the picture, mind you. It doesn't paint it; it is *it*.

Poetry is prayer both for those who are sure prayer is perfectly fine for other people and for those for whom prayer is every breath. It unites the faithful and the faithless in fancy couplets where they're forced to hold hands, at least for a moment.

It is subversive.

Submersive, if that is a word. It doesn't matter...that's what it is.

It is like water, winding its way through your soul as your eyes are jarred by unexplained breaks

and

dangling groups of letters that

just make you hold on because you're never sure when you're going to jump.

...

And when you do jump, when you build up the courage to actually engage poetry like an explorer spelunking into the cave of words, you crash into meaning.

And your heart breaks.

Like mine did when I first pondered what I'd do with my "one wild and precious life."

And you're never put back together in the same way again, thank God.

Her collection *House of Light* sits on my desk. I crack it for inspiration quite a bit. But my favorite of her poems is "[The Journey](#)."

Oliver has finally made the journey. And let me tell you, with her wild and precious life she broke my heart. I am grateful for it.

This post was originally published on [Brown's blog](#).