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The Long Way Home: Waiting in Mary Oliver's Living Room

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Waiting in Mary Oliver's Living Room

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, MY BROTHER-IN-LAW MALCOLM TOOK ME TO meet the poet Mary Oliver. He had refloored part of her house in Provincetown. I was the new editor-in-chief of this journal, and we often published her work. I felt the weight of my responsibility to continue *Appalachia's* distinguished and long history.

I did not edit Mary Oliver; the poetry editor did. Yet I felt proprietary on behalf of my new office. I took along extra copies of the journal.

A tall man opened the door. Malcolm had told me this was a friend who watched out for Mary, sometimes accompanying her to readings in far-off places, a protective companion.

He was all that. He said, "Come in. Mary is upstairs, napping. She'll be down soon."

He offered us beers—in midmorning, so I said no. Malcolm accepted. He and the guardian sipped and joked. I can't remember one thing they said. Maybe I leaned toward the man in my earnestness, with my copies of the journal as my calling card. I did remind him that we had been publishing Mary Oliver's poems for almost two decades.

I remember more the light from the western windows—big windows that let in the bay. The water was so close. I was surprised she lived in town. I had imagined Mary Oliver inhabiting a place like her poetry: a quiet woods path, by a stream, birds nearby, a fox acting up.

We waited. They sipped. Mary did not come down. The friend offered Malcolm another beer. In "Of Power and Time," Mary had written that the most disruptive interruptions a creative person battles come from the self. Perhaps my unannounced arrival constituted a second worst. Unlike Malcolm, I didn't build floors. Waiting there, I felt awkward that I wasn't even her editor at the journal. I was not the editor who had written to her originally. I suggested where we would place her lines on the pages. I had transacted some administrative business concerning her poems.

She wrote, “There is a notion that creative people are absent-minded, reckless, heedless of social customs and obligations. It is, hopefully, true. For they are in another world altogether. It is a world where the third self is governor.”*

I sat there, gazing at the sea. I had entered another world, the world of embarrassed editor socializing with increasingly tipsy gentlemen while the poet remained upstairs. She was not coming down. I knew that now. A younger Mary Oliver and an older me might have chatted. An older, more confident me might have invited her to write a prose piece for us. But I was not that person yet, that day. She had also

written that if she had an appointment with someone but was late, the waiting person should rejoice. “Rejoice even more if I do not arrive at all.”

I did not feel like rejoicing, but I knew what to do next. I had come for my own sake, and now I left, for her sake, hauling my brother-in-law out with me.

—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief



Mary Oliver's former house in Provincetown.

JOSEPH AND ANNA MELDAHL

* “Of Power and Time,” an essay in Oliver’s 2016 book, *Upstream* (Penguin).