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Gifts

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Gifts

Sandy Stott

IN THE WINTER OF 1988, MARY OLIVER CAME TO CONCORD ACADEMY, where I was working as a teacher, as that year's Hall Fellow, the annual two-day, speaking and teaching engagement that honors the school's formative head, Elizabeth Hall. Some months earlier, Oliver had accepted our invitation, a pinch-me moment. My favorite poet would be teaching and reading at my school!

That feeling intensified when I was asked to introduce Oliver at the reading. Her poem, "Sleeping in the Forest," had captured—truly—my experiences sleeping in woods and on mountains, and I began my introduction by citing it. Oliver then rose to read . . . and began with "Sleeping in the Forest," which opens with these lines:

I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds. I slept
as never before, a stone . . .

I felt blessed.

A year and some months later, my 41st birthday drew near. The school year was underway, and I was immersed in it. Late in the day, I collected my mail, which included a thick manila envelope. I glanced at the return address, and my heart rate jumped. "Oliver," it read, "Provincetown, MA."

The saying goes that you don't get to choose your parents; a corollary might be this: You do get to choose your heroes. Should life and its choices align just so, you may be lucky enough to find these two categories coalescing on occasion. The contents of this envelope announced one such occasion once I'd learned how they had arrived for my birthday.



Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Concord, Massachusetts: the kind of subtle natural landscape that inspired Mary Oliver. DAN STONE

Here's what I found inside:

A note from Oliver wishing me a happy birthday and sketching out the story of how she knew from my father that it was drawing near. The envelope's heft came from the second enclosure, a blue chapbook, Oliver's *The Night Traveler*. Another birthday greeting filled the blank first page: "For Sandy Stott, With many good wishes for your birthday, 29th September 1989. Here is a poem I thought you would like—it will be in the next book."

Across from that greeting, on the inside cover in black, handwritten ink, I found a poem, "Some Questions You Might Ask." It began, "*Is the soul solid, like iron? / Or is it tender and breakable, like / the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl? / Who has it and who doesn't? / I keep looking around me.*"

I looked around me. Mystery intensified.

How, I wondered, had my father found Oliver and persuaded her to send on this perfect gift? The two people could not be more unlike—my father, Fred Stott, extroverted and evident; Oliver, reclusive and quiet. Still, I reflected, as I read on in the poem, neither shies from what is. Both ask hard questions that invite the world in, and both feel plain lucky to be able to go out often into its woods and wild lands.

“Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg? / Like the eye of a hummingbird?” I read. *“Why should I have it, and not the anteater / who loves her children? Why should I have it, and not the camel? / Come to think of it, what about the maple trees? . . . what about the grass?”*

Still filled with questions, I reread my gift. It multiplied.

I sent on thanks, and a while later I wondered in a note if Oliver might send us a poem for *Appalachia*. She would, and over time, her work became a recurring high point in our journal’s pages. Each newly arrived poem or piece of prose was a gift to be savored. Each gift took me back to that birthday, reminding me that I was lucky in parents, wise in hero.

SANDY STOTT was the editor-in-chief of *Appalachia* for ten years. He edits the journal’s Accidents section and is the author of *Critical Hours: Search and Rescue in the White Mountains* (University Press of New England, 2018).