

Appalachia

Volume 71
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2020: Farewell, Mary
Oliver: Tributes and Stories*

Article 7

2020

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Recommended Citation

Howe, Parkman (2020) "Telling the Bees," *Appalachia*: Vol. 71 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol71/iss1/7>

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Telling the Bees

Parkman Howe

WHEN I ASSUMED THE POETRY EDITORSHIP OF *APPALACHIA* IN the early winter of 1992, Mary Oliver had already submitted her first prose poem, “The Gesture,” to the journal; it appeared that June. Her first poem for us, “The Instant,” appeared in the next issue: a lyric about a fleeting encounter with a small snake that fled in the time it took a heart, Mary’s heart, to beat twice. During the first fourteen years of her association with *Appalachia*, Sandy and Lucille Stott, former editors-in-chief, handled the relationship with Mary, since they had initiated it.

Then, in 2006, came the fraught moment when Lucille Stott was stepping down as editor, and I would have to deal with “Ms. Oliver,” winner of the Pulitzer Prize and one of America’s most esteemed poets, myself. My first letter to her asked for her approval of a biographical note that would appear with her poem, “White Heron Rises over Blackwater.”

From then on, ranging from every six months to a year or so, a letter from Provincetown, Massachusetts, addressed on a distinctive manual typewriter, would magically appear in the mail, unsolicited. In all, Mary published 33 original pieces in *Appalachia*, plus a reprint of her “Going to Walden.” Most were short lyrics about places, animals, birds; a few were prose poems. She wrote two remarkable pieces for our “Encounters” series in 2004 and 2005: “Bird” (for *Encounters with Light*), and “Walking Home from Pasture Pond” (for *Encounters with Silence*).

Almost immediately, we fell into a correspondence—about weather, houses, travels. She sent back my second letter with corrections of biographical note marked. At the bottom, she added a note announcing the death of her longtime partner, Molly Malone Cook, on August 26, 2005. In my letter, I had offered to send some jars of honey from our four beehives in Carlisle, Massachusetts. Mary had drawn an arrow beside the offer and written, “Oh, yes!” Thus I became honey supplier to the Oliver household.



Low tide off Cape Cod, a view Mary Oliver saw while working on her manual typewriter. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB/ART MORENZ

As I started shipping off 2-pound packages of honey to Mary, I began to receive in return clippings of news stories about bees and recommendations for reading, including *The Honey Trail* by Grace Pundyk (St. Martin's Press, 2008). I always received a thank-you note for each shipment: "Oh, honey! Yum and yum . . . gratitude." And, "What a treat! It's so dark, and rich, I thought that could only happen later in the summer. . . ." Mary was also aware of the darkening plight of bees across the country: "Oct. 1, 2009, Oh poor bees, what will we do?"

One thank-you note, written on August 15, 2015, prefigured one of her delightful prose poems about a black bear captured on Cape Cod, "Who Cometh Here?" (December 2015):

Maybe you heard that a young black bear visited the Cape earlier this summer—swam the canal, roved through every town including ours, was seen at Wood End [Lighthouse] staring at the bay which I guess he knew was not a canal, then wandered back, took out and no doubt

enjoyed a hive in Wellfleet, then was given a ride out of town. Oh that honey must have been so delicious to him! I am aware that I'm much like that fellow—accept the honey, enjoy, and wander on without a word. So this is my note of thanks, it is as usual so good.

Her thank-you notes took on the quality of short poems, as Mary's life in Provincetown gradually came to a close: "July 18, 2011. The honey is beautiful (can what you eat be beautiful—yes!) and I thank you very much. . . . We are fine down here [Florida], no lack of sweetness, but so very different!"

A few years later Mary was struck with cancer. She included a note with her poem "Cross the Road" (December 2016): "Sometimes life surprises you—after almost a year of chemo I am okay, but as tired as an old broom."

On February 2, 2011, Mary sent the following query: "Did you ever hear of that business that, when a death occurs, one is supposed to go out to the hives and tell the bees? Whatever it means, it sounds like a wonderful thing to do." She is referring to the old New England custom, imported from England, of draping beehives with black cloth and "telling them" when a beekeeper or anyone in the household has died. The best-known version of the practice remains John Greenleaf Whittier's "Telling the Bees," first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858. In the ballad a young lover returns to the farmstead of his beloved after a year's absence. He notes that a "chore-girl" has draped the hives with pieces of black cloth, and now she sings a melancholy song to the bees. The speaker assumes that his beloved's aged grandfather has "Gone on the journey we all must go!" But no, the grandfather rests in the doorway, his head on his cane. The chore-girl sings instead of the lover's own beloved: "Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence! / Mistress Mary is dead and gone!"

So, when I heard that our Mary had left us, I went to the bee yard, of course, and told the bees that one of the wisest, sweetest souls of all our days and lands had gone.

PARKMAN HOWE is *Appalachia's* longtime poetry editor.