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## A Poet, A Teacher: Standing Still with Mary Oliver

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A Poet, A Teacher: Standing Still with Mary Oliver

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Melissa Benedek

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*In loving memory of my grandfather Dr. Thomas G. Benedek*



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## Introduction

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In one of her rare interviews, the poet Mary Oliver discussed her admiration of observation. When asked if she wrote poems in silence, she replied, “I don’t think I do any of it silently. [...] I love the line of Flaubert<sup>1</sup> about observing things very intensely, and I think our duty—a somber word—as writers begins not with our own feelings, but with the powers of observing, [...]”<sup>2</sup> This was in 1994 when Oliver had already published several books and was well established. But there was always more work to do, meaning more to observe. The silence associated with the indoors did not pair well with Oliver’s writing practice. But the stillness of the outdoors did. Oliver’s vocation led her to the natural world, where she learned that the mundane never was trivial. It was stillness; that guided Oliver to see everything repeatedly for the first time.

However, for Oliver, the results of stillness were unknown. Observation was not done through a procedural lens or in search of something specific. Her empathetic relationship to the natural world allowed her to get lost in all of its movements as she stood still, hoping for nature to show its many forms. Figuring out the novelty of the familiar and common was a ceaseless task for Oliver. Her imagination was always at work interpreting the animal, the plant, and the

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<sup>1</sup> “The line of Flaubert”: “Talent is a long patience, and originality an effort of will and intense observation” is actually from the artist Vincent van Gogh. In a letter to his younger brother Theo, van Gogh discusses this line that is falsely attributed to Flaubert today. See: “Letter 588. To Theo van Gogh. Arles, Wednesday 21 or Thursday, 22 March 1888.”

<http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let588/letter.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, “An Interview with Mary Oliver,” by Renee Olander, Association of Writers and Writing Programs, last modified September 1994, accessed October 11, 2020, [https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine\\_media/writers\\_chronicle\\_view/2370/an\\_interview\\_with\\_mary\\_oliver](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_chronicle_view/2370/an_interview_with_mary_oliver).

body of water to understand that she belonged among the minuteness and grandeur of the natural world. Oliver indicated that everyone could learn this if they chose to observe for themselves, not for an agenda to collect facts. Observation is not a quick project one can assign a schedule to and complete in a short period. Patience pertains to looking in nature, accepting what cannot be entirely explained about it, and writing about both using experienced observations as a beginning to an understanding.

In this project, I have decided to examine the particular status lines have in Oliver's work that deals with the natural world. The line is what defines poetry, but in landscapes, we often do not think about lines. Oliver tries to bring these two together not to illustrate the obvious, that lines are ubiquitous, but that what happens in the space off the line is especially significant. Observations of the natural world, as are reflected in Oliver's poetry, are shaped by looking in the space above, below, and across the line on the page and in landscapes. Such space is the opportunity for entering and journeying through shared places of encounters in the natural world and imagining their purposes for happening and existing.

How do people pay attention to the natural world? What does that practice look like? Is it an individual or group experience? What does observation of nature and animals teach us about human behavior and communication? What stories do animals tell? How can human senses benefit or prohibit us from comprehending an animal's reality? These are the fundamental questions about the human experience that I am interested in.

I will start by laying the groundwork for how Oliver begins writing a poem, and how uncertainty plays a role in a poem's opening as a means of engaging the reader to develop their associations with unknown beginnings in nature. Then, I will move to understanding the line-break as a critical device to illustrate the effect of an animal encounter and how the line itself is

figured in nonhumans. In a final section, I will look at the possibility of community among humans and animals through language, speaker pronouns, and enjambment in one of Oliver's early works.

I will write about several Oliver poems from throughout her career, but want to spend a moment with "The Place I want to Get Back To," (2006) as it deals with ideas I will discuss in the chapters of this project. This poem addresses the effect that observation of the natural world, particularly, animals can have on the human individual. Oliver writes:

The Place I Want to Get Back To

is where  
     in the pinewoods  
         in the moments between  
             the darkness

and first light  
     two deer  
         came walking down the hill  
             and when they saw me<sup>3</sup>

The space that visually separates the title and first line from the opening stanza is an opportunity. The reader can wonder what happened at the place the speaker desires to return to again. On the other hand, the use of enjambment compels the reader to move to the next line. The reader learns that the speaker wants to revisit a scene "in the pinewoods" right before dawn (line 2). The line-break between "the darkness / and first light" contrasts the changing time from night to day before turning to the deer, which are the focal point of the poem (lines 4-5). The speaker sees the deer first "walking down the hill" in the quiet morning, unknowingly approaching the speaker (line 7). Interestingly, the deer do not scatter away once they notice a human. They reassure themselves that "this one is okay," to "let's see who she is" showing a curiosity for this figure in

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver, "The Place I Want to Get Back To," in *Thirst* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 35, lines 1-8.

their path that is below them motionless (lines 10-11). Since the speaker is still and not above the deer, they do not feel threatened.

The deer take this as an invitation: “and so they came / on their slender legs / and gazed upon me” as the speaker waits in anticipation (lines 17-19). This moment is paramount, but how the speaker feels about being looked at is not directly addressed. It seems that the deer noticing the speaker is done with an intention, possibly as a way to say, “you are welcome here.” Their observation is extended to a physical gesture when “one of them leaned forward / and nuzzled my hand,” as a motion to communicate what they maybe would say in language (lines 24-25).

The speaker is left speechless after being observed by the deer that she initially saw. There are no words to match that moment of physical connection between human and animal. The speaker ponders, “what can my life / bring to me that could exceed / that brief moment?” (lines 25-27). Further, what can surpass that contact which rarely happens in the wild? It is invaluable. All the speaker can do is remind herself that this unplanned meeting solidifies that animals will recognize us if they choose. The speaker proposes that we can be left to ask ourselves what that means. Part of the final stanza states: “If you want to talk about this / come to visit” (lines 33-34). This project accepts Oliver’s offer. Through the reception of one’s self-presence and emotions when observing and writing about the environment, a setting that implies and invokes sensation, one may develop a practice of paying attention to the natural world.

## Chapter 1

### Uncertain Beginnings

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#### Introduction

Many of Oliver's observations, reactions, and questions were collected in small notebooks as part of her writing practice.<sup>4</sup> Various moments she transcribed may have become the opening lines of a poem. This practice extends back to Oliver's childhood, where she established reading and writing as fixed duties in her life. In the essay "Staying Alive," she states, "I read my books with diligence, and mounting skill, and gathering certainty. I read the way a person might swim to save his or her life. I wrote that way too."<sup>5</sup> Oliver's use of the word "certainty" interests me in connection to her forming opening lines of a poem. I arrive at this connection since certainty is not guaranteed for the poet when writing opening lines, especially those that are about animal encounters. An opening line is not necessarily certain in terms of its direction regarding the speaker's voice or actions. Even Oliver may not know a poem's trajectory until she writes several lines because an opening line has nothing to fall back on. It exists independently, floating on the page until it ends with either a punctuation mark or is enjambed.

A beginning can imply a search for the origin of something and the possible reasons as to why an object or subject has evolved the way it has. Circumstances are important because they can indicate the several possible directions a beginning can provide. Beginnings are also possibilities, and without some parameters, they can feel unbounded. It is necessary to have

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver, "Pen, Paper, and a Breath of Air," in *Blue Pastures* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1995), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Oliver, "Staying Alive," in *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 16.

some conditions as to why a beginning is even happening in the first place. What draws one to start looking, writing, or whatever action that will get one going towards a potential avenue, an avenue that will be the basis for what follows after a beginning? How can one maintain a sense of knowing that a beginning will take them somewhere even if it is unknown? The idea of uncertainty that comes with beginnings can also connect to Oliver's recurring theme of animal encounters in the natural world. Observing an animal in the wild is uncertain too and can only be predicted so much. A poem's beginning is unpredictable, but it is enticing, and witnessing an animal echoes in similarity. I think uncertainty may be necessary for both the poet, speaker, and reader to discover what is or may become certain. Being immersed in the natural world that is ambiguous may help one to find what is tangible and still.

Oliver occasionally employs a specific format by having a poem's title as the opening line. The title is often the subject or object of the poem that the speaker will talk about. Sometimes a title can also be a one or two-word phrase that is not directly mentioned in the poem. Either way, the title is essential and meant to be noticed. "The Turtle" by Oliver is an example where the title is also the opening line.<sup>6</sup> Despite "The Turtle" indicating the poem's subject, the reader still does not know what the subsequent action of the turtle is going to be until they reach the first stanza. Uncertainty is present in the title, in the space between the title and the following line, and within the poem's content. I think this uncertainty is associated with Oliver giving attention to each line she writes, just as she observes the specific details of the turtle and the landscape. Her immediate focus is not on future lines but making sure the present, individual line conveys an image that makes sense.

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<sup>6</sup> Oliver, "The Turtle," in *Dream Work* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1986), 57.

Since feelings of ambiguity may range for both writers and readers surrounding opening lines, what is something in a poem that is certain and remains consistent? More specifically, if one focuses on the poet, what does Oliver have the most control over in a poem? Oliver writes about her early stages of writing: “What I write down is extremely exact in terms of cadence and phrasing. [...] The words do not take me to the reason I made the entry, but back to the felt experience, whatever it was. This is important. I can, then, think forward again to the idea—that is, the significance of the event—.”<sup>7</sup> “The felt experience” is Oliver’s priority. From the first line she writes, she wants to illustrate everything she can that may connect to the reader on an emotional level. Setting and imagery are especially significant in helping the reader place themselves in the speaker’s position and imagining each action of the poem’s subject. The end goal of Oliver doing this may also be to guide the reader to develop and realize a certainty or an assurance about one’s position in the natural world that may parallel to or differ from other human experiences.

As opening lines are usually given close attention, I think they can be considered a first impression. Opening lines found intriguing by the reader can benefit the writer’s aim to share the felt experience and their hope that the reader’s interpretation highlights its importance. What makes an experience of the poem “felt” is not a singular, generalized idea or emotion. And Oliver would likely not want to speak for any reader and tell them what or how they should feel about any of her lines in a poem. However, I believe if readers connect to Oliver’s opening lines, meaning if readers notice the subtleties such as syntax, word choice, and enjambment, then she would be satisfied as readers have found the aspects of a poem that can determine its

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver, “Pen and Paper,” *Blue Pastures*, 46.

understanding. Before examining the poem “The Turtle,” I will discuss the presence of uncertainty in writing to understand beginnings as a reader of Oliver’s work.

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### **The Necessity of Uncertainty in a Poet’s Writing Practice**

The APA Dictionary of Psychology states two definitions for uncertainty. The first is, “The state or condition in which something (e.g., the probability of a particular outcome) is not accurately or precisely known.” The second is the “lack of confidence or clarity in one’s ideas, decisions, or intentions.”<sup>8</sup> I am interested in the latter definition and how it pertains to one’s writing practice. In *A Poetry Handbook*, Oliver begins by writing, “Everyone knows that poets are born and not made in school.”<sup>9</sup> She goes on to say that poets, like visual artists, have something uniquely innate that cannot be taught. Maybe it is the feeling a poet gets when they put pen to paper, and they can determine the rhythm of the line early on. Perhaps it is something that is not about structure at all. Either way, if “poets are born and not made in school,” then that means every poet may have a different approach to starting a poem and that some level of uncertainty may be involved (1).

Oliver emphasizes the need for choices so that a poet may learn the ins and outs of their craft. The intention of a poet is to find their voice and not to mirror another’s because how one sees or hears the experience in language will always be distinct. For any poet, whether beginner or advanced, one’s craft, meaning technique, voice, and style, does not establish itself after writing a few poems that are satisfying for the writer. A fulfilling poem is one that is remembered, not necessarily verbatim, but one’s participation in its content. Oliver states that

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<sup>8</sup> “Uncertainty,” in APA Dictionary of Psychology, American Psychological Association, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/uncertainty>.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994), 1.

“the real, unimaginably difficult goal of writing” is to write “*memorably. That work is done slowly and in solitude, [...]*” (9). I do not think that Oliver has such an ambitious objective centered in her mind when writing because it is not about a specific poem enduring throughout time. It is about “the desire to make a poem, and the world’s willingness to receive it—indeed the world’s need of it” that makes writing effective and worthwhile (9).

When beginner writers can dispel the assumption that a poem is written in one sitting with a precise plan of action, uncertainty settles in. However, there are ways to put one’s uncertainty to use productively. First, acknowledging one’s “desire to make a poem” is essential because it shows that one is not forcing themselves to create but that it is an honest venture. Second, even if a poet has a plan of what they are going to write, the act of translating one’s thoughts to lines will inevitably alter such a plan. Having uncertainty is necessary to let one leave the constructed restrictions one has built up in their mind of remaining on a rigorous course. Oliver writes, “Poems must, of course, be written in emotional freedom” (3). This does not mean to throw away the conventions of a poem’s chosen form, such as measure, but that one gives themselves room to learn as a writer, learn what one enjoys in a poem, and what one naturally observes in any given line.

The uncertainty rooted in one’s expectations may lead to some form of imposter syndrome. Reading can be an answer to counteract that from consuming one’s writing practice. It may seem strange that understanding one’s craft can be learned through being absorbed by other poetry, but reading develops one’s poetic voice and aligns one’s interests. Oliver expresses this point in her essay “A Poet’s Voice.” She states, “in order to become a doer and a maker, it is necessary first that the mind’s attention be entrapped and enthralled by what already exists.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Oliver, *Blue Pastures*, 96.

For Oliver, it was Walt Whitman whose work she interacted with early on as a child, which I believe occupied her curiosity. Whitman's poetic voice was inclined to recognize familiar subjects in a colloquial manner to establish a connection with his audience. Oliver saw Whitman demonstrating "certain things—attention, great energy, total concentration, tenderness, risk, beauty," as all fundamental features in a poem (97). Having confidence in what attention may provide gives the poet a chance to seek out their personality, even if that means taking an uncertain risk because "risk is always hovering somewhere."<sup>11</sup> Even reading a poem requires trust and commitment to the work for the lines' meanings to be revealed. In the same vain when writing poetry, "if you are reliably there, it begins to show itself" (8).

The presence of uncertainty in one's evolving craft also functions in poetry that deals with ambiguous encounters or questions of why stuff exists the way it does. Particularly, Oliver's work aims to come to terms with what cannot be explained regarding animal and plant life within the natural world. Oliver uses poetry to work through living and accepting uncertainty as it is impossible to know what cannot be truly known as a human. But one can still imagine and share their reasons and responses for the unknown. An example of not an answer but a question regarding the poem's existence is Oliver's notable inquiry. She asks, "Who knows anyway what it is, that wild, silky part of ourselves without which no poem can live?" (8) I think the "wild, silky part" is what we do not control or intensely notice. A possible reason is that poets are constantly searching within language for the words to demonstrate their dedication and commitment to skill while being in an ongoing engagement with the mysterious, involuntary part of the self.

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<sup>11</sup> Oliver, *A Poetry*, 8.

An additional thought on uncertainty is Oliver's brief reference in *A Poetry Handbook* to the idea of "negative capability," a term coined by the English Romantic poet John Keats. Keats describes this as, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—."<sup>12</sup> I believe this is relevant to touch upon because Keats' theory suggests that the poet can remove themselves from their poetry to get a different perspective. Oliver understands "negative capability" as the poet being "empty" and the only possibility for "the poet to fill himself with an understanding of, or sympathy for, or empathy with, the subject of his poem" (82-83). Keats wanted to achieve "negative capability" at an extreme level by removing himself from his work and striving for an "almost complete disinterestedness."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, I think Oliver suggests that the poet applying "negative capability" means to be invested in oneself enough so that one can be above their self-awareness and able "to move from the page to the reader an absolutely essential quality of real feeling."<sup>14</sup> The poet can exist with uncertainty and mystery as benefits to connect with a poem's content, whether it be regarding a setting or a speaker. Further, the Poetry Foundation states of "negative capability," "A poet, then, has the power to bury self-consciousness, dwell in a state of openness to all experience, and identify with the object contemplated."<sup>15</sup>

Both within a writer's craft and poetry, uncertainty is useful even if it sounds contrary. It slows the poet down to look carefully and give notice to their abilities. Oliver's collection *Dream Work* strikes me as being welcoming to the unknown and the mysterious. Even the word "dream" implies a vision, an image, or a nightmare of something complex that may be clear or vague.

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<sup>12</sup> Oliver, *A Poetry*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Simmons, "Shapeshifters and Skinwalkers: The Writer's Curse of Negative Capability," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 8, nos. 4 (32) (1997): 401, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308311>.

<sup>14</sup> Oliver, *A Poetry*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> "Glossary of Poetic Terms: Negative Capability," Poetry Foundation, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/negative-capability>.

Whether or not the poems in this collection are based on dreams, including “The Turtle,” Oliver may have chosen this title because it hints at memory. Interestingly, Sigmund Freud has a section in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* titled “The Dream-Work.” Freud writes, “dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking . . . . It is the *dream-work* which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature.”<sup>16</sup> Would Oliver agree that dreaming is a type of thinking? At least, I think she might have recognized dreams as a way to learn about the self and the natural world. Learning or paying attention makes up the “work.” “The Turtle” is an example of showing what can be taught by the natural world as one sees it. From the speaker’s perspective, observing the nonhuman is unpredictable, but that keeps the speaker interested. The speaker patiently waits to see what the turtle is trying to communicate.

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### **Beginnings and “The Turtle”**

When one thinks about beginnings in connection with nonhuman life, there are a few images that stand out. One is laying eggs as seen amongst birds, fish, insects, and turtles, among other species. Eggs show that new life is forthcoming and inevitable in the natural world. The snake’s shedding of skin is another representation of a beginning because it indicates a physical removal of the old to manifest what is new and fresh. A beginning can also be a transformation, such as a caterpillar’s chrysalis that will become a butterfly. Beyond nonhuman creatures, some beginnings indicate changes in time and landscape, such as a season, particularly spring, that is recognized for rebirth and renewal. Even though all of these beginnings are frequent occurrences and often certain for animals, humans cannot plan for them the same way. For example,

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<sup>16</sup> Graham Frankland, *Freud's Literary Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 127.

witnessing the hatching of alligator eggs would likely catch one by surprise because there is no precise date or time to prepare for a chance sighting. When writing about these beginnings and encounters in the natural world, one can anticipate a level of uncertainty even before starting to describe one's encounter with the nonhuman. The dynamic of uncertainty remains present from the beginning and can set up the rest of the poem, as is the case with "The Turtle."

"The Turtle" begins:

The Turtle

breaks from the blue-black  
skin of the water, dragging her shell<sup>17</sup>

The repeated short-stopped sound in "breaks" and "blue-black" mirrors the turtle's brief movements followed by a rest. The turtle "breaks" from one landscape to another as she makes it to the threshold of the shore. The meaning of "break" here signifies damage and risk, which the turtle takes a chance with as she emerges. Oliver pairs the phonetic with the image blending the details one hears of the words and the metaphor she creates. "Blue-black" implies bruising, especially when followed by "skin," and also suggests the setting is at nighttime. The turtle's shell is a trademark of its identity and its survival. The turtle's "dragging her shell" is not only an action to pull her physical body, but also to bring the safety and vulnerability her shell offers out of the water.

These first lines demonstrate a beginning that can take the reader in more than one direction. There is a dual beginning of repeatedly reading from left to right while starting from the top of the page and heading down. The spacing between the title and the second line causes a visual and oral pause that prepares the reader to begin the first stanza. As the lines are enjambed, one can see that the space of the line-break is intentional. The reader is given time to search for

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver, "The Turtle," lines 1-2.

each line's meaning, which parallels the turtle's survey of the water and land. Space also suggests a separation despite the title being inextricably linked to the entire poem.

Simultaneously, the title's connection also implies that humans are not apart from the natural world. The language of these lines brings to mind questions about nonhuman life. How does a turtle perceive its path from the water to land? Has the turtle weighed the risks of exposing themselves to other animals and humans they do not naturally interact with on land or in water? Is this action of coming to shore the first step behind one of many beginnings? The speaker can only focus on the turtle's next movements before making a determination.

Leaving the water is something she must do to bring life into the world. She does not think twice about her goal even though the speaker does, wondering where she will build her nest and how she protects her confidence and composure all the while. The turtle makes it "to the yellow sand, / to dig with her ungainly feet," which is an image that removes the conception that digging a nest is an organized act (lines 6-7). It appears cumbersome and very slow, but it is instinctual for the animal. More patience is likely required for the speaker since they have the option to observe this new beginning or not whereas, the turtle does not have such a choice. The turtle "spewing / her white eggs down / into the darkness," at the same beach where she was born, shows a certainty even if the speaker will never know how she feels or how she can remember the location (lines 8-10).

Watching the turtle urges the speaker to recognize and accept how connected the creature is to her survival and what she is willing to sacrifice to keep living. The speaker states:

and you think  
of her patience, her fortitude  
her determination to complete  
what she was born to do –  
and then you realize a greater thing –

she doesn't consider  
 what she was born to do.  
 She's only filled  
 with an old blind wish. (lines 10-18)

The speaker is immediately drawn to applauding the turtle's strength and ability even though it is apparent this is "what she was born to do –" (line 13). It seems that the speaker needs to project the obvious to come to the second realization. It comes after a pause with the in-line dash: "and then you realize a greater thing –" something difficult to fathom for a human, that the turtle "doesn't consider / what she was born to do." (lines 14-16) Humans give a lot of consideration to pregnancy and birth. The turtle is "only filled / with an old blind wish" to finish depositing her eggs into the nest so that another beginning is possible for the few turtles who will reach adulthood (lines 17-18). Humans have a desire to plan and have several answers to questions of why and how, but the turtle lacks that sense. The turtle does not own the "old blind wish" as "It isn't even hers but came to her / in the rain or the soft wind, [...]" (lines 19-20). Since one does not exactly know how the turtle can determine which beach to return to or whether or not turtles have feelings towards their migration and nesting patterns, the speaker reaches for imagination.

Further, the speaker suggests a possible origin for why the turtle does not think about her innate duty. Turning to the natural world for a response results "in the rain or the soft wind" as vehicles to bring a message to the speaker. The "old blind wish" is not an otherworldly idea but a simple one: to not have to fantasize about existing in one's habitat (line 18). Even though the turtle is moving between settings of water and land, she belongs to both. Her familiarity with these landscapes prevents her from seeing them as something distant or detached from her. The third stanza reads:

She can't see  
 herself apart from the rest of the world  
 or the world from what she must do

every spring. (lines 22-25)

This level of certainty might be something the speaker yearns to possess. The ability to not have to dwell over where one fits within the natural world, or create multiple scenarios of what one's environment would look like, removes the pressure of being separate. The turtle does not focus on her individuality but on remaining cognizant of her surroundings.

The speaker states, "she doesn't dream / she knows" where and who she is amidst the water she calls home and the other species who depend on the same habitat (lines 28-29). The turtle's acknowledgment of her place does not remove any threats but allows her to not look forward to the unforeseeable. She is secure knowing she can leave the water and return just the same through the repeated cycles of beginnings throughout her lifespan. The turtle will always be "a part of the pond she lives in," where "the tall trees are her children," that shade her from the sun (lines 30-31). Finally, "the birds that swim above her / are tied to her by an unbreakable string" despite them being far away (lines 32-33).

The turtle knows to declare and remember her spot among the collective of animals and plants that depend on the same ecosystem as hers even as she comes and goes. It may take time to affirm one's place in the natural world as a human since it is not where one lives, but there is still an undeniable association one has with the environment. Humans do not have to dream to realize that animals offer the opportunity for people to enjoy the unknowable, and maybe that is the most essential thing for the speaker to appreciate. The speaker does not know everything about the turtle as they observe its movements. It is clear that both the turtle and human speaker share a mutual vulnerability despite there being a difference in their cognition. In this case, I believe that it is best for humans not to overthink but instead welcome the imminent events in life and then move on without questioning the certainty of their happening.

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### The Reader Faces Oliver's Beginnings

The reader might suppose that Oliver's process of starting a poem is unplanned, like her spontaneous walks in the outdoors. She does not sit at a table and write from start to finish. That would be too confining. Being in the natural world helps Oliver transport details of the ordinary into transcendent images that can be didactic for readers. Oliver never glamorizes poetry or the natural world. "Poetry, after all," Oliver states, "is not a miracle" and at the same time, it is not to be labeled or minimized as "pretty." She goes on to say that "such words—"cute," "charming," "adorable"—miss the mark, for what is perceived of in this way is stripped of dignity, and authority. What is cute is entertainment, and replaceable."<sup>18</sup> Oliver suggests that the poet dealing with nature is not always to be taken lightheartedly. Such work conveys a form of communication about feeling and perception that can certainly shape one's perspective. That is the power the poet has.

Oliver focuses on accessibility in her writing in terms of readers' comprehension. She writes of poetry: "It is an effort to formalize (ritualize) individual moments and the transcending effects of these moments into a music that all can use. It is the song of our species."<sup>19</sup> But does a poem feel accessible in its beginning? Is it really a "song of our species" from the get-go? That awareness probably arrives much later in the poem once a reader has figured their way into its meaning as they have interpreted it. The reader encountering the start of an Oliver poem is no less uncertain than the poet herself. I say this because, from Oliver's point of view, there is no distance between the reader and the poet. The unsure poet does not intend to misconstrue the

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<sup>18</sup> Oliver, "A Few Words," in *Blue Pastures*, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Oliver, "Pen and Paper," in *Blue Pastures*, 59.

reader's understanding of a poem. It is to highlight that humans, regardless of their position, share a oneness surrounding the obscure.

At the end of the essay "Winter Hours," Oliver writes:

I would say that there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and chances are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family; and there is no decency or sense in honoring one thing, or a few things, and then closing the list. The pine tree, the leopard, the Platte River, and ourselves—we are at risk together, [...].<sup>20</sup>

Oliver associates "risk" with the effects of climate change to imply that it is something everyone will feel, whether physically or emotionally. The risk of environmental change may result in a lack of predictability and reliability on landscapes overall. Changes in appearance may cause one's interactions with animals, vegetation, and bodies of water to be completely altered. However, this risk can be planned for and mitigated to an extent depending on one's attitude towards the reality of the rise in detrimental events occurring within the natural world. Both concerning the uncertainty of climate change and generally in one's life, humans' connectivity to one another is based on how one chooses to react. Contemporary poet Jane Hirshfield states, "Whether in art or in science, the periphery of the already known is where richness and transformation lie, whether the renovation is of thought, feeling, or technique. Too much familiarity asks no attention, too much that is new cannot be comprehended at all."<sup>21</sup> There may be people who dwell on the unknown and those who decide to ignore novel issues that require complex investigation.

Hirshfield's article, "Poetry and Uncertainty," in *The American Poetry Review* emphasizes that risk and uncertainty can make a poem stick with readers. Knowing what risk and

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<sup>20</sup> Oliver, *Upstream: Selected*, 154.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Hirshfield, "Poetry and Uncertainty," *The American Poetry Review* 34, no. 6 (2005): 67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20683075>.

uncertainty are is something that humans have to live with, and such awareness makes humans, humans. Hirshfield writes, “One of the penalties of consciousness is waking each day into the awareness that the future cannot be predicted, that the universe rests on the back of an incomprehensible mystery, that bewilderment, caprice, and the unknowable are among the most faithful companions of any life” (63). The unknown keeps one attentive and on the search for what is new, including objects or subjects one has encountered multiple times. Poetry, I think, is not supposed to tell the reader what to do but let the reader live with the mystery. Readers can ask themselves what they want to do with the unknown in a poem and life, so long as they know it will always exist and are prepared for the overwhelming amount of possibilities. If the poem has the reader wondering or questioning from its beginning, it will be a poem that the reader will return to again and again.

Beginnings thrive on uncertainty and are not intrinsic to what is present or known. Beginnings are not clear-cut but seek to find curiosity and test humans’ ability to let go of their authority. Hirshfield links the balance between the certain and the unknown to identify a poem as “good” through the image of the line. She states, “The making of good poetry entails control; it also requires surrender and a light hand. [...] it lives along that exploration line that has to do with what aspects of our lives we can know, we cannot, and the spirit and tools with which we engage the question” (66). Oliver’s beginnings are not linear, meaning the plan she may set out with will not be what she sticks to. Neither are readers’ interpretations, which rarely, if ever, are definite from the start of a poem. The line in poetry is a platform for exploratory endeavor, which unavoidably includes exciting and uncomfortable risk.

## Chapter 2

### Meeting the Line

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#### Introduction

Whether in landscapes or sheet music, lines typically present themselves as starting points and endpoints. Lines make me think of the demarcation of physical or visual spaces that either guide or restrict movement. Borders are labeled between county and state lines to separate them with roads as primary indicators of entries and exits. Bars of measure in music are marked by vertical lines to show how many beats there are to be played. Both of these examples demonstrate organized structure that may cause one to get lost or confused when not followed. There is no room for individual interpretation. But what happens if lines are divided into pieces or sections with little guidance for what comes next?

The enjambed line in poetry is not met with an obvious endpoint, such as a period like in prose. It produces a line-break where there is a moment that is not visually bounded. As a result, space arises that gives the reader room for external thought. Despite line-breaks' placement being still, they create movement within a poem. Oliver balances the static, constant elements of a poem such as meter and margins with the dynamic features, including enjambment and imagery. Enjambment offers various pauses which permit action, meaning readers have more freedom to interpret lines.

Throughout Oliver's essays, she refers to "turning the line" as the moment when a line ends and then comes back in a subsequent line. She writes in the foreword to *Long Life*: "We talk about poems turning the line—that magical device—but of course prose turns, too, where the paper is about to run out. Such steadiness! But the prose-horse is in harness, a good, sturdy and

comfortable harness, while the horse of poetry has wings. And I would rather fly than plow.”<sup>22</sup>

“The horse of poetry” alludes to balance and transportation. Oliver does not want to be boxed in without options. She wants to move as much as possible within the margins of a page. Oliver manipulates line-breaks in particular ways that have to do with animal encounters. I suggest that her aim is to get the reader to not only think about specific images of the natural world but also to realize that engaging with the environment is a personal experience. Encountering an animal can raise a lot of questions that may create a desire to form assumptions about nonhuman creatures that cross one’s path. One animal that can be discussed regarding how lines are figured in the natural world is the snake.

The snake is a recurring animal the speaker encounters in Oliver’s poetry and offers a few points concerning lines. One is its physical shape, which rarely appears in a straight line as it moves by coiling its body. Due to this, the snake also does not travel on a linear course. The snake diverges at random turns that are not necessarily beginning or endpoints. There is a ceaseless breaking of the line from the snake’s “S” movement as it traverses over, under, and across numerous paths. In particular, two Oliver poems, “Ribbon Snake Asleep in the Sun” and “The Instant,” use enjambed lines instead of end-stopped lines to emphasize that snakes are transient animals that are not place-bound. Both of these poems will be analyzed, but first, I will consider how rhythm and melody work within enjambed lines.

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### **“On the Function of the Line”**

One of the main takeaways in the poet Denise Levertov’s essay “On the Function of the Line” is that the line appears as a very formal element but can be made personal with

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Oliver, *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings* (Da Capo Press, 2004), xiii-xiv.

enjambment and the line-break. She begins by emphasizing that free-verse is not held to the same metric rules as traditional verse and that the former may have an advantage in providing more room for discovery. She states, “the forms more apt to express the sensibility of our age are the exploratory, open ones.”<sup>23</sup> Without the need to observe a defined meter, the “open form” or free-verse lets both the poet and reader question and pursue the development of an experience in a poem. Experiencing a poem’s content is tied to emotion. The line-break creates space for readers to perceive their emotions of each line and then of a poem overall. Understanding the line-break may help readers to realize that a poem’s experience can be deeper if they acknowledge its function within the features of rhythm and tone.

Identifying the pause of the line-break is not indicated visually. Levertov writes, “the line-break is a form of punctuation *additional* to the punctuation that forms part of the logic of completed thoughts” (31). When reading a poem aloud, each reader decides the length of the pause. This choice is independent of the poet or other readers, which may imply that the line-break is essential for poets and readers alike to find their distinct voices within poetry. One aspect that may determine the length of the pause at the line-break is the change in vocal tone that occurs when readers interpret the rhythmic arrangement of a poem’s lines. Levertov parallels reading a poem to reading a piece of music. She states:

given that the deployment of the poem on the page is regarded as a score, that is as the visual instructions for auditory effects—the way the lines are broken affects not only rhythm but *pitch patterns*. Rhythm can be sounded on a monotone, a single pitch; melody is the result of pitch-patterns combined with rhythmic patterns. (32)

Levertov illustrates that melody is just as important as rhythm as both are inextricably linked when reading. I think pitch does not only pertain to one’s enunciation of specific words

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<sup>23</sup> Denise Levertov, “On the Function of the Line,” *Chicago Review* 30, no. 3 (1979): 30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25303862>.

but how one's fluctuation in pitch can emphasize certain phrases, and therefore, attach additional layers to a poem's meaning and reception. Levertov continues, "just as vowels and consonants affect the music of poetry not by mere euphony but by expressive, significant interrelationship, so the nuances of meaning apprehended in variations of pitch create *significant, expressive melody*" (34). The line-break is an instrument of expression that becomes more personal through shifts in melody and breath duration as one reads through a poem's rhythm.

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### **The Mechanics of *A Poetry Handbook***

*A Poetry Handbook* is Oliver's dissection of the elements that make up a poem and how one may approach reading and writing poetry throughout life. In this book, she outlines the inner workings of the line, such as line lengths, rhythmic variation, and line-endings for an audience that ranges in their knowledge of poetry. Readers get a feel for Oliver's teaching perspective here. She advocates for clear learning and emphasizes that *A Poetry Handbook* can be a starting place with a few guiding points. However, readers cannot fully learn the details she discusses until they decide first to build a relationship with practice to implement the goals of poetic elements in their writing. When talking about the features of poetry, such as the line, Oliver does not list several definitions for each characteristic. Instead of taking the time to mention every possibility, she takes the route of showing readers what she means through examples of poets throughout history.

It is important to understand metered poetry before entering into a conversation about free-verse so one can know what makes that type of poetry "free." Oliver's explanation of the line is straightforward, almost mathematical, as she describes line lengths in metered verse. She visually presents in charts the names of footed lines from monometer to octameter and the stress

symbols for an iamb to a trochee. Oliver includes these reference tables followed by examples, not as an effort to make poetry seem procedural, scientific, or remote. She wants to inform readers how minor technicalities matter a lot. How a poet employs lines makes a significant difference in a reader's reception, interpretation, and voice of a poem. The length of lines, especially lines unfamiliar to the eye and ear, can catch one by surprise. Most readers are accustomed to iambic pentameter, so writing outside of five-foot lines, especially shorter lines, can add both variety and mystery. Oliver writes:

All deviations from the norm do, however, emit messages. Excitement of all kinds, with its accompanying physical and psychic tension, "takes our breath." Any shorter line than pentameter indicates this. The reader is brought to a more than usual attentiveness by the shorter line, which indicates a situation in some way out of the ordinary.<sup>24</sup>

Change is valuable for line lengths and can keep the reader inquisitive so long as the writer is mindful of rhythmic structure.

Not all lines in a poem follow an established rhythm a reader can feel from the beginning. Oliver notes that rhythm is to be identifiable but not overly obvious. Rhythm may not be "so strict or metronomic that it merely repeats itself exactly" (43). No two lines need to have identical measure. Chances are, a reader will not read each line the same. A writer taking rhythm to a strict level creates more work for themselves and readers. Increasingly predictable lines cause reading to become more of a chore one cannot wait to finish. Being meticulous when writing or reading is not bad; it is advantageous. Oliver suggests that writers can counter predictability with variation, which requires precision.

Variation provides balance and lets lines read more instinctively. A few subtle breaks away from a rhythmic pattern can make a poem steadier, where "some variation enhances the very strength of the pattern" itself (44). Varied lines alter how one reads, understands, and

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<sup>24</sup> Oliver, *A Poetry*, 40.

encounters the substance of a poem's language. In terms of reading a line, there naturally will be differences. But Oliver is sure to say, "Neither of us has to be wrong; we may *both* be within the bounds of the reasonable. Perhaps it is partly this individual inflection with which each of us reads a poem that creates a personal bonding to it" (44). The "bounds of the reasonable" may spread a great distance since there can be several possible readings of a poem. Further, Oliver may agree that it is a good thing when a reader cannot initially see the limits. If it takes a while to determine one's connection to a poem, the reader will spend more time giving attention to each line, including line-endings.

In traditional meter, line-endings typically follow a rhythmic pattern. Oliver presents an example of four lines with an AABB structure. Upon reading the lines aloud, one can hear the rhyme that meets each line-ending. She quotes from "The Tyger" by William Blake:

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears,  
Did He smile His work to see?  
Did He who made the lamb make thee?<sup>25</sup>

The clear rhyme scheme gives these lines a pulse allowing one to feel where the lines will end. The pulse closely coordinated to the measure helps readers to remember the lines easily. Oliver writes, "The similarity of sound at the end of two or more lines creates cohesion, order, and gives pleasure" (53). There is not only apparent rhyme in poetry, as is Blake's example, but also slant, feminine, and masculine rhyme. Readers may have to listen more intently to notice their sense of the pattern, even if a writer's goal is to have an inconspicuous rhyme scheme. In free-verse, line-endings are usually not associated with rhyme. A line-ending that speaks to a poem's visual appearance more than rhyme is the line-break following enjambment.

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<sup>25</sup> William Blake, "The Tyger" in *A Poetry Handbook*, 52.

Enjambment and the device of the line-break imply a fashioning and crafting of what will come next. The line-break rests in the right margin on the page giving the reader time to enter into its created blank space. Where and when the line is enjambed can influence the reader about what to think about regarding the line just read and the line waiting to be encountered. Oliver states, "Turning the line, in free verse, is associated not only with the necessary decision at each turn (since the poem is not following any imposed order), but it also has much to do with the visual presentation on the page" (54). Oliver views the line-break as an instrument that is primarily identifiable visually. She employs enjambment to pause the line and views the brief delay as one of the device's most essential features.

The pause the line-break provides may instill a skepticism within the reader who may feel compelled to ask why turn the line here? How does this particular line-break at a given word or phrase affect the entire poem? Oliver states, "the pause works as an instant of inactivity, in which the reader is "invited" to weigh the information and pleasure of the line" (54). The invitation does not mean to find a single answer at that moment for how and why the line is organized in such a way, but to absorb the language and take a breath. When the writer has the reader in mind and is purposeful with enjambment, a poem maintains its stability and balance with other applied elements like imagery and diction, among others.

Erratic use of enjambment puts other features of the line, such as variation and length, at stake. The writer has to be sure not to overuse the line-break to the point where it becomes the only thing recognizable in a poem. Using one's authority as a writer wisely means that "the poem needs to be reliable" (56). No reader wants to be thrown about because the writer is not consistent. Oliver elaborates, "You cannot swing lines around, or fling strong-sounding words, or scatter soft ones, to no purpose" (56). The potential outcomes of enjambment, when

implemented with discretion, are exciting. Breaking the line can invoke new emotions for readers that can be felt on different levels. Oliver teaches that the line-break allows the writer to possibly “change the very physiological mood of the reader,” as will be seen in the next section (43).

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### Encountering the Snake in Poetry

The snake often moves in a zig-zag formation as it bears its formlessness. The creature’s meandering strengthens its unpredictability. Like the snake, the line-break can be read as a type of wandering. One does not know when a line will turn until it is read. It cannot be prepared for in advance, and neither can a snake encounter. Oliver’s poem “Ribbon Snake Asleep in the Sun” presents the line and line-break as elements of both the poem and its subject. The first few lines describe the speaker’s immediate meeting of the snake. Oliver writes:

I come upon him and he is  
startled; he glides  
to the rock’s rim; he wheels, setting in motion  
the stripes of his body, yet not going<sup>26</sup>

The visual indentations of the second and fourth lines illustrate the snake’s drifting movement. Oliver deviating from the typical visual structure heightens the image one imagines of this scene. There is motion from the speaker stumbling into “him” and the snake’s ensuing actions to “glide” and wheel” in place. The snake’s body naturally coils once it starts to withdraw from its immobile state. Its meandering reflects the contrasting line lengths of the poem from long to short, which also indicates the varying breaths one takes when reading.

The snake and speaker’s meeting can be a common experience for one walking in a rural area. Even if this event were rare for a reader, Oliver does not describe the speaker’s encounter

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<sup>26</sup> Oliver, “Ribbon Snake Asleep in the Sun,” in *Thirst* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 8, lines 1-4.

as unusual or ordinary but intimate. The frequent line-breaks allow the moment between speaker and animal to appear lasting, not brief, even if it is a short amount of time that they are together. Each hesitation that comes with the line-break signifies “the process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking, [...]”<sup>27</sup> As the speaker describes the snake, two things occur. First, there is the chance meeting between the two figures. Second, there is the subsequent registering and identifying of each other as distinct beings. The speaker speculates what the snake is thinking and feeling as they look at each other. A few lines into the second stanza read: “He wants to know / just where in this bright, blue-faced world / he might be safe. / He wants to go on with the / flow of his life.”<sup>28</sup> The speaker imagines the snake’s perspective and tries to empathize with the creature’s survival.

Moreover, the poem offers the speaker an exercise to acknowledge one’s human identity and innate instincts as a member of a species so far removed from the snake. There remains a longing for the speaker to communicate with the snake to gain completely new insight and perspective of the natural world. Once the snake begins to move away from the speaker, there is an increased desire to find permanence within its movement to establish a unique connection. But just as the snake is not a stationary creature, he “flows” on. At the end of the second stanza, the snake “straightens / his shining back and drops” returning to its ceaseless gliding (lines 14-15). The speaker is left frozen, watching the snake close in on the small space between them only to leave the encounter and make distance. Oliver writes in the last stanza:

from the rocks and rockets through  
the tangle of weeds, sliding, as he goes, over  
my bare foot. Then it vanishes  
into the shade and the grass, down to (lines 16-19)

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<sup>27</sup> Levertov, “On the Function,” 31.

<sup>28</sup> Oliver, “Ribbon Snake,” lines 11-14.

The snake moves without warning. It traverses under, over, and across a linear path. Leading the way before the speaker, the snake will not return to the same spot. The snake's course continues as "it vanishes" and lacks a known direction. As the snake glides away and stops at momentary landings, one wonders how the creature is capable of doing that.

Besides the snake's link to the line, there is also its relationship to the circle. The persistent motion of rotating in nature emphasizes how nonlinear an animal encounter can be, particularly with a creature who must coil to survive. The encounter also does not happen on a specific line or path because it is spontaneous. The snake appears to go any which way zig-zagging along to its next stopping point. There is an ambiguity of the snake's recurring circular movements, which leave the speaker interested both in the creature's swift departure and its physical capacity. One useful way to examine the snake's shape is to see how the creature is depicted in art, which broadens the conversation about the animal itself.

Art historian T.J. Clark focuses on the snake's formlessness as portrayed in painting. Part of Clark's lecture surrounds the seventeenth-century painting *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* by Nicolas Poussin.<sup>29</sup> At first glance, the painting's background seems to represent a pastoral setting with vegetation, a body of water, and distant structures. Upon looking closely at the foreground, one notices a figure in the bottom left of the image being clenched by a writhing snake. Clark aims to define the snake both in the artwork and in general. He states:

The snake, so the drawing sets out for us, is a body that can constantly recreate its own form, and which appears to have no "given" or optimum disposition of its parts in space. It is a body that is content with a constant, as it were provisional, intersection of one bit of itself with another: a constant coiling.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, 1648, The National Gallery, London, UK. See: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/nicolas-poussin-landscape-with-a-man-killed-by-a-snake>.

<sup>30</sup> T.J. Clark, "Painting at Ground Level," lecture presented at Princeton University, April 17, 2002, The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 138-139, [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/c/clark\\_2002.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/c/clark_2002.pdf).

The constancy of the snake's physical composition signals its stability through its repetitious circling. However, even with repetition, the snake's gliding is never arranged in terms of time and space. The snake's "weightless string of his actually soft and / nervous body" defies spatial and temporal boundaries that are unknown to humans.<sup>31</sup> As the snake perpetually advances, it additionally signifies that circles create changes in size and location. Size change also implies growth and adaptation.

Another link to coiling is Ralph Waldo Emerson's discussion of circles. For Emerson, the circle is an individual component of one's existence. In his essay "Circles," Emerson writes, "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end."<sup>32</sup> The circle of the self is infinite, which centers on increasing one's consciousness and educating one's conscience. There is an expansion of the circle that is shaped by one's autonomy and intentions. Self-reliance influences the ever-evolving circle of the individual, which is not monotonous as Emerson believes humans can discover their full thought and potential. The snake synthesizes the line and the circle, which shows that flexibility can be a force of continuity. Emerson states, "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees" (174). The snake's lack of permanence reiterates how it refuses to settle, which is to its advantage. The speaker in "Ribbon Snake Asleep in the Sun" learns that as there are "no fixtures in nature," the unplanned and nonlinear events ultimately teach one more about what to notice (174).

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<sup>31</sup> Oliver, "Ribbon Snake," lines 23-24.

<sup>32</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Circle," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 175.

An additional poem that centers on the snake is “The Instant,” which also highlights the speaker’s awe of the creature’s change in direction. I have chosen “The Instant” to stress Oliver’s word choice that describes the revolving motion of a circular form. The first two stanzas state:

Today  
 one small snake lay, looped and  
 solitary  
 in the high grass, it  
  
 swirled to look, didn’t  
 like what it saw  
 and was gone  
 in two pulses <sup>33</sup>

The words “looped” and “swirled” detail the sudden action from stillness to movement and from coiling to springing away. A pivotal moment is when the snake looks at the speaker and then decides to turn towards a new line or path. It is interesting to see how the snake is given the agency of looking at the human speaker. The speaker is on the outside looking in at the snake who instinctually uses the free will they have against the human they view as a predator. In terms of looking, it is central to return to Emerson, who taught Oliver what the outcome of visual observation could be. Oliver’s essay, “Emerson: An Introduction,” gives a brief overview of his life and highlights the essence of his doctrine. She writes, “The one thing he is adamant about is that we *should* look—we *must* look—.”<sup>34</sup> By physically seeing, one can see of their mind and spirit too. Oliver continues to echo Emerson: “All the world is taken in through the eye, to reach the soul, where it becomes *more*” (71). In “The Instant,” the speaker relishes not knowing the snake’s plan or motive but still keeps looking and trying to find meaning in such a mystery.

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<sup>33</sup> Oliver, “The Instant” in *A Thousand Mornings* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2012), 51, lines 1-8.

<sup>34</sup> Oliver, “Emerson: An Introduction” in *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 69.

### A Career with the Line-Break

The majority of Oliver's poems feature enjambed lines with various line lengths in free-verse. As Oliver got older, enjambment remained, but her line lengths got shorter. This is particularly noticeable in her 2012 book *A Thousand Mornings*, which includes the poem "The Instant." She refrains from extending her lines close to the right margin. Oliver expanded on this point in a 2015 interview with Krista Tippett: "if you can say it in a few lines, you're just decorating for the rest of it. Unless you could—intent makes something more intense, but if you said what you want to say, you're not going to make it more intense. You're just going to repeat yourself."<sup>35</sup> Across Oliver's works, whether her lines are short or long, her relationship to the line follows a consistent trend. She considers the intricate parts of the line to further explore her opportunities with it. Oliver determines how few or many words will receive their own or several lines. The line is also Oliver's place to extend and connect her images and encounters to larger associations, such as animal consciousness and specific settings with environmental histories.

Oliver wants readers to take their time with the line and the space that follows before committing to a final understanding, just as one would when looking at an aspect of the natural world. She urges the reader to look for what is not stated on the line in writing, making one consider what cannot be communicated through words, especially between humans and animals. Silence as a response to the void of the line-break is acceptable. Sometimes space does not need to be filled only to offer an unsatisfying answer. The limits one faces with the line-break, language, and the environment as an observer and reader of Oliver's poetry indicate a particular connectedness. Oliver's question, which all readers experience, is how will one make those limits fulfilling?

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<sup>35</sup> Krista Tippett, "Listening to the World," February 5, 2015, in *On Being*, podcast, audio, 19:18.

## Chapter 3

### “We” and “I”: Poet, Speaker, Reader

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#### Introduction

In the same interview from 2015, Oliver stated of poetry: “It wishes for a community. It’s a community ritual, certainly. And that’s why, when you write a poem, you write it for anybody and everybody.”<sup>36</sup> When Oliver creates a poem, the reader, in turn, facilitates its communication, interpretation, and determines their relationship to the text. As poetry is communal from Oliver’s perspective, several readings can occur that may agree or oppose each other. But what happens when an entire community of readers cannot communicate with the poem’s subject, such as the animal, and do not communicate with each other?

Language can be viewed as having a unique link to community between humans. It can be a fundamental factor to connect individuals, whether that means speaking the same language, using language to discuss similar ideas, or questioning language’s efficacy to describe incommunicable experiences, including those associated with nonhumans. This third point particularly interests me. How can humans’ distance themselves from using language to label animals, even if that is an inherent action? Can language be employed in a way by humans that does not remove animals’ agency? Are humans primarily intrigued by animals because they can speak for them? Philosopher Thomas Nagel states in his essay “What is it Like to Be a Bat?”: “there are facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in a human

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<sup>36</sup> Tippett, “Listening to the World,” audio, 9:33.

language.”<sup>37</sup> Humans are left to wonder and associate certain terms with what they can physically observe, such as an animal’s appearance and mode of living.<sup>38</sup> Language becomes a tool of humans’ imaginations to put interpretations of animals into comprehensible words.

The role of language that has separated humans and animals will be discussed in an early section of this chapter. Specifically, how language has been used by humans to articulate the animal experience will be emphasized. Looking at various scholars invested in animal studies, I note that humans have utilized language as a means to assert their dominance over animals. The human-animal gaze is not one-sided, even as humans tend to disregard animals’ capacity for observation. “Cold Poem” by Oliver raises this notion as it imagines what it is like to be an animal which is a mutual thought that humans speculate about. The elements of enjambment and speaker pronouns are made engaging through language. Community may be identified through the poem’s speaker pronouns. Enjambment provides blank space as an opportunity for language surrounding the reader, speaker, and poet’s imaginations to exist. Before examining “Cold Poem” and these aspects, language as a feature of human-animal distinction will be considered.

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### **A Few Points on Language and Human-Animal Distinction**

Since language is often viewed as a primary difference, it is a starting place to find a possible perspective on the relationship between humans and animals. The imaginative imagery of animals that have existed in literature for millennia has been illustrated with symbolic meanings for the benefit of humans. Such representations have stripped animals of their consciousness and independence. This has allowed people to assert their ability to observe

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What Is It like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 441, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>.

<sup>38</sup> Nagel, “What Is It Like,” 439.

nonhumans and forget that animals are capable of observing humans. John Berger writes, “What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them.”<sup>39</sup> Language has established a vast construction of distance to exist and grow between humans and animals. Akira Mizuta Lippit’s Introduction to *Electric Animal* outlines how language is a barrier, even maybe a detrimental one to the animal population. He writes:

Animals are linked to humanity through mythic, fabulous, allegorical, and symbolic associations, but not through the shared possession of language as such. Without language one cannot participate in the world of human beings. [...] animals inhabit a separate world within the universe of human knowledge—a world that [...] is susceptible to permanent displacement.<sup>40</sup>

There is no positive outcome to reinforce animals as myths when trying to determine what it is like to be a nonhuman. Humans have to decenter themselves and accept that animals may, in fact, be conscious of their will and reason even though they cannot communicate through language, at least a language we can understand. Through decentering, one also has to distance themselves from the connections they have created to identify animals. What does this process look like? I would propose that as humans detach themselves from literary narratives that have shaped their perspective on the nonhuman, they may realize the need to become closer to animals, whether that be seeing them physically or writing about them outside of a mythic context.

If getting closer to the reality of animals, as in being near their actual physical form and habitat, is attempted by writers and poets through language, is not that pursuit still an imagined experience? Language can only get one so close to what one thinks it is like to be an animal, so

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<sup>39</sup> John Berger, *About Looking*. (New York, NY: Vintage International), 1980, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, “Introduction: Remembering Animals” In *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, NED - New ed., 1-26. (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv0fh.4>.

humans choose to envision and revert to fantasizing about the animal experience. Thomas Nagel states, “I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to my own resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, [...]”<sup>41</sup> So, humans are left in a neutral state aware that “there is something it is like to *be*” an animal but are incapable of finding out and saying what the “to *be*” is (436). Even though language is one of the “resources” of a human mind and one that “animals remain inextricably linked to,” it is not an entirely compatible resource to learn about animal consciousness.<sup>42</sup>

However, humans cannot settle for this realization, and with access to speech, there remains a strong desire to attach language to animals which furthers their othering. Applying language may also remove the independence of the animal as humans assert their own autonomy. The poet Lyn Hejinian writes, “we acquired knowledge of animals by naming them,” which has led to speaking for them, alienating them, and projecting them onto human ideas of fantasy.<sup>43</sup> But what if humans still want to reflect on the actual experience animals may have? One thing to first recognize is that human domination over animals has caused a reverse effect, where the displacement of them has simultaneously displaced humans’ connection and understanding of the natural world. To this end, Akira Lippit echoes a point made by Carl Jung:

According to Jung, the dislocation of animal being lessens the fullness of *our* world and not the animal’s. The absence of animal being weakens the humanity of the human world. Jung’s statement reverses the terms of animal sacrifice: it is now the human world that

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<sup>41</sup> Nagel, “What Is It Like,” 439.

<sup>42</sup> Lippit, “Introduction:” 15.

<sup>43</sup> Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” In *The Language of Inquiry*, (University of California Press, 2000), 53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppbsq.8>.

suffers from the exclusion of animals, whereas before, it was precisely the removal of animals that allowed human beings to establish their autonomy.<sup>44</sup>

Now that humans have declared their autonomy for so long through implementing language, animals are seen as objects instead of subjects fundamental to human existence. However, I think two possible factors can change this perspective. One, humans may have to understand what it means to be a species, not an individual. Two, humans have to set aside their autonomy to do this. Can this be done successfully? Probably not, since having individuality develops one's personality, makes one a human and a distinct species. But with access to language, humans can identify their limits regarding what they cannot determine about the animal experience. Thomas Nagel writes, "We can be compelled to recognize the existence of such facts without being able to state or comprehend them."<sup>45</sup>

Instead of applying language to ineffectively discover what goes on in an animal's consciousness or mythicize the nonhuman, one can use language to stress that nonhuman creatures still exist even in the distorted natural world. Humans can illustrate that animals experience their natural surroundings in particular fashions without trying to find out what it is like "to *be*" an animal. One can use language to convey their experience of witnessing various animal species without further silencing them and view creatures as beings that can help humans reflect on themselves. Cultivating an appreciation for observation is a practice that can show one what they have been overlooking. John Berger writes of animals, "The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance," but I believe this should be made significant again, even if minutely at first.<sup>46</sup> Observation may let one realize the need to restore the fact that animals can also

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<sup>44</sup> Lippit, "Introduction:" 17.

<sup>45</sup> Nagel, "What Is It Like," 441.

<sup>46</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1980), 16.

observe humans even though that notion has been buried under the overwhelming marginalization of animals. Humans can better figure out their place in the natural world by acknowledging the capabilities of their nonhuman counterparts.

I define attention as being selective towards one's awareness. In referring to cognitive psychology, attention is viewed as "a voluntary, active response of the mind."<sup>47</sup> Attention in the natural world is an active looking process at an object or subject's movement and behavior. At the same time, it is an introspective action because one is also reflecting on the perception of their observations. Being introspective about one's specific observations may best be linked to the psychologist William James' theory, the "stream of consciousness," which is present in literature. Hejinian writes of a problem concerning introspection: "[...] introspecting the contents of that stream, and more precisely, a particular item floating along it, interrupts the streaming, [...]."<sup>48</sup> In the moment of observing an animal, though, one may not necessarily "interrupt the stream" of thoughts and connections forming in one's mind. I think interruption may occur when one tries to remember the observations that formed one's experience of noticing an animal and then attempts to write them down. When writing about human-animal observation, being introspective may not be negative because its presence can work towards a "dismantling of the hierarchy between human and animal."<sup>49</sup>

From a human perspective, one has to unlearn the hierarchy that ranks human above animal, because as Emerson says, "every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of

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<sup>47</sup> Melissa Bailes, "Paying Attention: Cognitive Psychology in Eighteenth-Century Poetry," *The Eighteenth Century* 56, no. 4 (2015): 527, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44730007>.

<sup>48</sup> Hejinian, "Strangeness," In *The Language of Inquiry*, (University of California Press, 2000), 144, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppbsq.12>.

<sup>49</sup> Vanessa Robinson, "Poetry's Language of Animals: Towards a New Understanding of The Animal Other," *The Modern Language Review* 110, no. 1 (2015): 30, <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.110.1.0028>.

mind.”<sup>50</sup> In particular, one’s observations of the natural world can shape one’s thinking about the human experience and survival. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke urges the human to look at the animal as much as the animal looks at its habitat. He is trying to invert the hierarchy between humans and animals in his poem. The opening lines of Rilke’s Eighth Elegy from *Duino Elegies* read: “All other creatures look into the Open / with their whole eyes. But our eyes, turned inward,”<sup>51</sup> A possible reading of Rilke’s lines is that humans have their eyes “turned inward” because their survival is not dependent upon looking. If one acknowledges how crucial observation is for animals to survive, humans too may look “with their whole eyes” to notice what one sees “into the Open” of the natural world.

The ideas I have touched upon here include how the resource of language has created distance and separation between animals and humans. This point raised the question of how maybe humans could possibly decenter their individuality and imagination to get closer to the reality of the animal experience. However, such an attempt would likely not be very effective. Overall, human language is not a functional device to learn what it is like to be an animal and know an animal’s consciousness. Language can be used, however, as a means to recognize what humans can and cannot describe. It can also be implemented to determine the thoughts and the connections made behind one’s observations of animals. Oliver’s “Cold Poem” is an example that uses language to contemplate one’s observations of the animal to figure out how the human may survive and exist in the natural world and life together.

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<sup>50</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977), lines 1-3.

### A First Look at “Cold Poem”

“Cold Poem” begins by describing the physical and visible effects of the cold: “Cold now. / Close to the edge. Almost / unbearable.”<sup>52</sup> The reader can recall what the cold feels like and its ability to numb one’s body, make one’s skin burn, nose run and the only warmth can sometimes be one’s breath. This is the weather where certain animals have evolved to thrive, including the bear. The reader meets “the white bear” in stanza one, an animal who can manage a “tree-splitting morning.” (lines 5-6) Unlike trees whose roots can only withstand a certain amount of cold and below freezing temperatures, the bear’s “lifesaving suet” makes it easier to endure the elements. The line “I dream of his fat tracks” implies both an admiration of the literal fat within the bear’s adaptable composition but also a desire to remember the “fat,” flourishing times before winter. The analogy that summer is fat and winter is a season of hunger reminds one that humans possess a natural longing to consume. This idea of consumption extends to the second stanza: “I think of summer with its luminous fruit, / blossoms rounding to berries, leaves, / handfuls of grain” (lines 9-11). Even though the winter does not provide abundant nourishment, the desire to consume or else be consumed remains.

The third stanza shifts from talking about the literal cold to reflecting on what the cold as a metaphor may represent. It reads:

Maybe the cold is, is the time  
we measure the love we have always had, secretly,  
for our own bones, the hard knife-edged love  
for the warm river of the I, beyond all else; maybe (lines 12-15)

The speaker suggests the winter season, which moves slower and is less fruitful, is “the time / we measure,” the time to think about ourselves, and “the love we have always had,” (lines 12-13).

The cold may be the time to be reminded about the human capacity to love one’s self, which is

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<sup>52</sup> Oliver, “Cold Poem,” lines 1-3.

often forgotten or neglected when nature is in full bloom providing a “visual” love and happiness. In the winter, one has to fend for themselves and show care to “our own bones,” our minds, and hearts to demonstrate what self-love means. “The hard knife-edged love / for the warm river of I,” presents a strong image and one that can sometimes be difficult to accept (lines 14-15). To love yourself can be a “hard-knife edged love,” a love that is a challenge to welcome and cultivate (line 14). However, it is not a self-centered act to sacrifice and consume the “other,” whether that symbolically means the bear or one’s personal trials “for the warm river of the I” (line 15). The words “knife-edged” and “warm river” associate with blood, which the speaker clearly connects to the two lines in the next stanza: “that is what it means, the beauty / of the blue shark cruising toward the tumbling seals.” (lines 16-17) Just as much as animals consume the “other,” in this case, the blue shark’s prey, humans also have the need to consume to survive the winter.

The last stanza outlines the poem’s message and emphasizes the claim being made. A core line of the poem is “we grow cruel but honest;” because it reiterates the harshness of the cold and the necessary “hard knife-edged love” to “keep / ourselves alive” through the winter and next seasons. The final three lines state:

if we can, taking one after another  
the necessary bodies of others, the many  
crushed red flowers. (lines 22-24)

One has to assume and essentially destroy “the necessary bodies of others” to stay alive. Even though the cold causes one to be heartless, it allows one to witness or participate in the cycles of life and death. Further, the setting of the natural world evokes the notion that life is born and life dies under many different circumstances. Placing the verb “crush” next to “red flowers” juxtaposes the bitter action of sacrifice and consumption with alive flowers. This final image

restates how the bear's death is symbolic. Despite its "lifesaving suet" not being "lifesaving," the bear's memory will sustain as more bears are born and will fight to survive each winter.

Thinking about these last few lines from a human perspective, when faced with losing someone or something, one wants to absorb and "consume" particular moments not to be shared but retained for themselves as life moves forward.

Returning to the start of "Cold Poem," the reader notices Oliver's emphasis on being sensory-oriented when describing each image. Looking closer at where the senses are underlined, the reader recognizes the sight of the "white bear," the touch of its insulating layer of "lifesaving suet," followed by the taste of the summer harvest with "its luminous fruit," (line 9). Oliver highlighting the human senses while talking about the bear is interesting and ironic because her attempt to bridge the gap between the human and the bear is made by reiterating the obvious: humans are not bears. Maybe she does this for two reasons. First, to acknowledge that the bear is better suited to endure the cold than the human. Second, to show that human senses can inform one's observations of the bear while also indicating that humans will try to compare what they notice to their own lives to understand the animal experience. I do not think the notion that "the poem suggests that human and animal survival rests upon the taking of other life forms," is true because it is not possible for Oliver to be a bear or fully understand a bear's consciousness.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, discussing the bear's physical composition, which illustrates its differences between humans, is not equivalent to talking about the bear as if it were the speaker's body. I propose that Oliver's goal in "Cold Poem" is not to create a mythic experience of a human "inhabiting" a bear's body so one can see the world from an animal's perspective. Such an idea

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<sup>53</sup> Jeanette E. Riley, "The Eco-Narrative and the Enthymeme: Form and Engagement in Environmental Writing," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41210021>.

is not feasible to accurately imagine and convey; as Thomas Nagel states, “we cannot form more than a schematic conception of what it *is* like” to be a bear.<sup>54</sup> Oliver does not surpass her boundaries as a human to try to become another form because she wants to share the experience of witnessing the bear. Her intention is to be able to write about the experience in verse through, which is attainable. This point invites the reader to look at Oliver’s use of enjambment and speaker pronouns in “Cold Poem.” As discussed in the previous chapter, enjambment is a significant device because it can unsettle a poem and the reader while also shaping one’s reading of a poem’s content. Readers are urged to discover the opposite of such unsettlement, by finding an explanation through reading to the end of a poem. Speaker pronouns are not to be overshadowed because they not only indicate who is speaking but also the agency of the speaker and a poem’s subject.

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### **Speaker Pronouns and Enjambment in “Cold Poem”**

The first speaker pronoun the reader encounters is in the line “I dream of his fat tracks,” which is an action-filled phrase. The individual speaker of the “I” dreams of the bear’s distinguishable mass and visible paw prints in the snow. It is interesting how Oliver does not write “we dream” instead. It could be that using “I” at the beginning of the poem sets up an invitation for the reader to position themselves within the “I.” Maybe using “I” early in the poem also implies that dreaming or envisioning a scene is a personal action because animals and places can look different for everyone. It is not surprising that dreaming leads to thinking when the speaker states, “I think of summer with its luminous fruit,” (line 9). The speaker envisioning the cold and the bear is at the same time actively making connections to what the cold and the bear

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<sup>54</sup> Nagel, “What Is It Like,” 439.

represent. In the third stanza, the reader is brought to a “turning point” in the poem as the speaker directly speculates about what the cold signifies and where the speaker pronouns switch from “I” to “we.”

As the speaker contemplates what cold is, the shift to “we” may indicate that the reader has situated themselves in the poem within the first two stanzas where “I” was used. I think, however, Oliver uses “we” as the speaker pronoun because she is exploring several things in the poem that she thinks all readers may question, such as what the cold is and how observing the animal can help “us” and “we” determine possible answers. The act of inquiry in “Cold Poem” is intended to be communal. Saying, “Maybe what the cold is, is the time / we measure the love we have always had, secretly” implies that multiple readers may share this thought (lines 12-13). Further, I believe Oliver is expressing that the readers behind the “we” are all likely to have put themselves first in situations to protect and survive even if “secretly.” Without drawing attention, we still notice the care we have “for our own bones, the hard knife-edged love” that makes us human (line 14). When faced with the cold in the natural world, one has to save themselves first, even if it is painful to realize and do. Since the winter season represents a time where love is visibly absent among dormant plants and few animals around, we become callous and cold-hearted. One will emotionally consume what can provide a semblance of love, whether it is a memory of the past like “summer with its luminous fruit,” or a place that can provide grounding moments to keep one going through the winter (line 9).

Humans, like animals, will use their instincts to stay alive. However, instinctual reactions are not always foolproof. The speaker states, “we keep / ourselves alive, / if we can,” (lines 20-22). The “if” points to the potential that either outcome is possible. Supposing that one cannot find “the necessary bodies of others,” or the full memories to consume for a “hard knife-edged

love,” one may not be able to sustain the winter (lines 23 and 14). At the same time, this idea of possibility extends to Oliver’s use of “we” and her idea of community. Oliver’s notion of community is imagined. Only sometimes communities of readers will form, and she does not know when that will or will not happen. There is only a chance that by stating “we,” the reader will connect the speaker pronoun to the presence of a community since Oliver’s imagination is unlike anyone else’s. Oliver may claim that poetry is communal including, “Cold Poem,” but every reader’s understanding of Oliver’s imagination and community, in general, may differ slightly or greatly from each other. Reading the experience that “Cold Poem” offers is individual and personal, even if what is discussed may connect to several readers. I believe “we” in “Cold Poem” is the hope that the speaker may touch individual readers but not stretch to the idea of being a community. Rather than trying to establish a potential community, “we” may be interpreted as an attempt to link the reader to the natural world, which is a shared place.

Therefore, “we” also raises the question of whether a community between humans and animals can exist. Both humans and animals have solitary experiences in the natural world but can still be physically together in the same outdoor, open space. The speaker sees the bear in “Cold Poem” and then continues to discuss its significance because it influences the speaker’s perspective on how animals shape the human experience within and outside nature. But since that focus is largely on humans, and animals and humans remain separated, there may not be a community that equally exists between both groups. One cannot know if animals in the wild sense a community among humans who observe them due to their lack of speech, but I think there is an impression of community between humans who venture into the natural world and share their encounters with each other.

As noted, the speaker pronoun “we” presents many understandings. In the context of “Cold Poem,” “we” does not represent a community made up of a group or individuals. Using “we” is Oliver’s way of juxtaposing the use of “I” as she shifts the speaker’s description away from imagining the bear between the first two stanzas to reflecting on the cold season in the rest of the poem. Although it is unexpected for Oliver to use “we,” it fits in “Cold Poem” because she is examining complex ideas and wants to do so from various angles by moving between both pronouns “I” and “we.”

Instead of the closure that comes with end-stopped lines in poetry, enjambment lets lines have open endings, making the poem overall more accessible. Lyn Hejinian explains, “The “open text,” by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader, [...] It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive.”<sup>55</sup> Such “participation” I think is intended on a reader to reader basis, not a collective of readers because they will likely never talk to each other about a specific poem unless one is in a book club made for that purpose. The openness that enjambment provides through the line-break helps to not elevate one role over the other between writer and reader; the reader feels the urge to make the poem theirs. This is not to suggest that the poet is relinquishing their ownership of their work, but that the reader may create their own reading experience out of the poem. Oliver stated in a 1994 interview, “The poem isn’t finished to me until it is read. It’s important that it reach readers, that people realize the poet as well as the poem within themselves.”<sup>56</sup>

Enjambment is particularly present in the third and fifth stanzas and pushes the reader forward but does not rush the reader to the end of the poem. The reader wants to find the poem’s

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<sup>55</sup> Hejinian, “The Rejection of,” 43.

<sup>56</sup> Oliver, “An Interview,” interview, Association of Writers and Writing Programs.

conclusion, which is not found until the last line, “crushed red flowers.” (line 24) Punctuation, besides a period, works to create more of a pause at line-endings. For example, “I dream of his fat tracks,” ends with a comma, but the line is enjambed and features a line-break (line 7). The reader may see the comma as a visual cue to pause after “tracks,” but wants to continue to the next line to discover why the speaker dreams of this. The last line of the opening stanza, “the lifesaving suet.” brings forth the first resolution of the poem as the reader now has a clear understanding of the bear’s physical form and the connection between “fat tracks,” and “lifesaving suet.” (lines 7-8) The period may serve as an indication that the reader can take a brief moment to comprehend and mentally record the image of the stanza that introduces the setting of season and place.

On the other hand, the third stanza has no sign of a period in any of the line-endings. Each line ends with no punctuation mark except for one comma after the word “secretly,” but the reader is still held in suspense until the next stanza completes the phrase. An instance where the reader is left waiting for the line to turn is the first line in the third stanza: “Maybe what cold is, is the time [...]”<sup>57</sup> Anticipation already starts to build with the word “maybe” because it implies uncertainty. Ending with “the time” lures the reader in further because one wants to know what happens at this time of cold. I think the word that Oliver breaks the line at is significant because it is the last word the reader encounters before moving on. The enjambed line encourages the reader to reflect on the word “time” personally and what it may mean in the context of life, winter, and the natural world. Time is naturally associated with measurement. In “Cold Poem,” the line states, “we measure the love we have always had, secretly,” which shows that determining the amount of love is difficult (line 13). Since we keep our love a secret and do not

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<sup>57</sup> Oliver, “Cold Poem,” line 12.

always reveal it to ourselves, it is a “hard knife-edged love / for the warm river of the I, beyond all else; maybe” (lines 14-15). The reader meets a second “maybe” at this line-ending, which evokes even more uncertainty because one is left not knowing what the word “maybe” is directed at. The ambiguity is also amplified because the reader is confronted with a blank space, which leaves the reader no choice but to move down the page.

The speaker tells the reader of a possible answer to what cold is: “maybe / that is what it means, the beauty / of the blue shark cruising toward the tumbling seals.” (lines 16-18) The previous stanza, which was more abstract, ends with a concrete, physical image of an animal hunting its prey in undoubtedly cold water to stay alive. Enjambment causes a visual circling back from the right margin to the left like a pendulum that does not stop moving until the end of this long phrase with the period after “tumbling seals.” Enjambment is particularly felt in the last stanza that has six consecutive line-breaks until the final line, “crushed red flowers.” (line 24) I think Oliver establishes two points through enjambment. First, in the context of the poem, enjambment, and the subsequent line-breaks help the reader see how the speaker is trying to underscore the reality of physically and emotionally surviving periods of life that are cold, literally, and figuratively. Second, enjambment and line-breaks allow Oliver to create purposefully undefined lines. She balances her manipulation of line-break placement without losing the rhythmic structure of the poem.

“Cold Poem” bridges speaker pronouns and enjambment together but not how I initially thought. I do not think that the speaker pronoun “we” indicates a community in the sense of readers gathering, just as enjambment does not signify an opportunity for that to happen. Despite the use of “we,” the line-break and enjambment still allow for readers to use the empty space they encounter and place themselves “into” the poem independently for their own experience. I

believe that “we,” as the speaker pronoun, points out an openness that enjambment helps to unfold. “We” is less bound to one particular thing, unlike “I,” which is directed at the singular person. Using “we” suggests a vastness and more room to take up the smaller space that “I” occupies. The lines in “Cold Poem,” “we grow cruel but honest; we keep / ourselves alive, / if we can, taking one after another” would not be read the same with the pronoun “I” (lines 20-22). “We” binds the poet, reader, and speaker together because uncertainty emerges in everyone and everywhere. The unpredictability of winter survival is an extreme example of the unknown, but the natural world can be viewed as a large metaphor for uncertain events in one’s life, even the small ones.

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## Conclusion

Language has been recognized as helping the reader get “inside” “Cold Poem” at the enjambed lines to make their reading individualized. The reader figuring their way into an enjambed line can use language to decide how space affects their understanding and influences the poem’s content. Even if poetry is not communal, language lets us propose what that could look like. We can also use language to decipher the natural world figuratively and conceive of a status where humans and animals are treated the same. Writer Stephen Spratt states, “we must imaginatively diminish the human in relation to non-human nature in order to see nature more purely, accurately, and virtuously.”<sup>58</sup> It is up to humans to realize that language does not have to be an obstacle to living beside and communing with animals. Understanding that language is not the only thing that defines humans may be deeply beneficial to protecting the natural world, including us.

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<sup>58</sup> Stephen Spratt, “‘To Find God in Nature’: Thoreau’s Poetics of Natural History,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 45, no. 1 (2012): 156, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029790>.

## Coda

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Throughout this project it has been determined that the line in poetry is always looking at us as it asks us to look at ourselves. The line is always attempting to say more than what its appearance offers. And that is what readers hope for; there will always be more within the line to bring to the surface. We want to linger on the broken line, searching for the connectedness of the wordless void and carefully crafted word choice. The line also asks us to notice the tension between those two sides as the poet chooses what to have visually absent and present. Additionally, the line invites readers to deal with what, at times, seems inexplicable through language, whether that is the space following the line-break or the poet's imagination.

Oliver's perspective of the natural world and imagination of the lives of animals was never out of the ordinary. I have learned that several poets and writers throughout history have shared similar experiences of both elated and disappointing realizations about cyclical events that animals and humans share. We all witness birth, death, growth, decay, and sacrifice, but we all imagine those facets of mortality differently. Our impermanence calls for us to sense that the differences we feel between ourselves and the natural world will fade once we know we are and always have been part of the earth. This is not a cliché because it can take a lifetime and more to figure out that we belong to nature and that it does not belong to us.

Oliver discovered that before old age. Her attentiveness to being still when everything else was moving was not occasional. Observation let her accept cues from the natural world that we might think are coincidences or irrational. But the natural world is not vacant of strangeness, or at least what we believe is unfamiliar. Our wandering imaginations are vessels for capturing what we want to say in response to our existence in the vast arrangement of natural beings and

things. Oliver conversationally states, “That’s the big question, the one the world throws at you every morning. “Here you are, alive. Would you like to make a comment?””<sup>59</sup> So, we readers and writers shall never refrain from reflection and discussion in poetry and its various forms.

Further, our reflection on the self and attention to the natural world does not have to be understood right away. It is not meant to be because these substantial actions include unknowns and risks. Oliver would be glad we have begun to “comment,” even if we are unsure. We will eventually reveal what we have found out about ourselves, whether on the page of a poem or off. We shall continue looking, whether standing still in the woods or on the shore of Provincetown, Massachusetts, which Oliver frequented until we know and retain the unmistakable reverence and hope of the natural world.

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<sup>59</sup> Oliver, *Long Life*, xiv.

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