

# IN BLACKWATER WOODS

*Mary Oliver*

Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars

of light,  
are giving off the rich  
fragrance of cinnamon  
and fulfillment,

the long tapers  
of cattails  
are bursting and floating away over  
the blue shoulders

of the ponds.  
and every pond,  
no matter what its  
name is, is

nameless now.  
Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned

in my lifetime  
leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side

is salvation  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world

you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.



## THREE THINGS

A RESPONSE TO "IN BLACKWATER WOODS"

*Mary Ann de Stefano*

Our parents entered their eighties still strong. Daddy continued to complete the daily crossword puzzle in the Niagara Falls Gazette and worked part-time preparing American and Canadian income tax returns. He drove his car, mowed the lawn, and shoveled snow from the long sidewalk in front of their home. Mom kept house, painted, and read about art. But at age eighty-three, they were ill enough to be hospitalized from time to time—pneumonia, congestive heart failure, and other typical diseases of the aging we thought they escaped. They were never sick as far as I could remember. It alarmed us when they fell ill with increasing frequency. Each time Mom or Daddy was admitted, one or more of their five children, at once or in shifts, flew back home because it might be the last time.

Our parents didn't die. Each time, they came right back from the brink and recovered enough, or so they thought, to continue their lives as usual.

We siblings tried to manage their situation. After one parent came home from the hospital, my sister cooked meals, then sealed, labeled, and stored them for my parents to heat up after she left. Months later, when she returned, the meals remained in the freezer untouched. On our various visits we cleaned their house, bought all sorts of plastic containers to organize and store their things, posted notes on the refrigerator door to remind them to take their pills, and removed the scatter

rugs we thought might trip one of them. We suggested they get a cleaning service and someone to do the laundry. Once we left, the plastic storage containers lay empty, and Daddy found the rugs in the trash and brought them back into the house. And he ignored all our suggestions about getting household help. Daddy cooked, cleaned and washed clothes for the two of them, doing housework for the first time in his life.

Over several years, as they came into their late eighties, they continued to get sick, be hospitalized, and recover. We continued to fly home at the point of crisis. Siblings exchanged frantic, sometimes despairing, phone calls. We thought we knew best. "Move," we said to them. "Move to a smaller place. Move closer to family. You can't continue to live here without help." Daddy, the decision-maker for both of them, wouldn't budge from the house where he and Mom lived their entire married lives. Sometimes he pretended to be thinking about moving so his children would just be quiet about it, and let him do things in his own way. We worried.

On one of our visits, Daddy, impatient with one or the other of us insisting they move, said, "I won't leave this house until they carry me out feet first!" At age eighty-nine, a stroke left him paralyzed on one side. Carried from his house on a stretcher, an ambulance took him to the hospital. He died a little over two weeks later.

We said we wanted to make our parents' lives easier, but actually we attempted to control something uncontrollable. We tried to stop them from dying. As if we could. Pressing them to change their ways didn't change the inevitable. It didn't matter if they had a tidy house, home-cooked dinners in the freezer, or leftovers properly stored in plastic containers. It didn't matter where they lived. They were going to die. Not right away, but much sooner than we wished. If we truly

loved them we would let them do it in peace and in their own way, not ours.

I understand all this for the first time. These words I am writing come to me because I am moved by poetry to search for them: “To live in this world / you must be able / to do three things.”

It shocked me when I saw Mom’s official medical diagnosis—dementia—on a form posted on her refrigerator door by a temporary home health care aide. None of us fully realized the extent of her impairment. My family tended to refer only to Mom’s “memory loss,” the way she repeated things, or the odd things she said sometimes. Occasionally, I could make myself say “senile,” a word somehow less frightening to me than “dementia.” Later, I adopted the term “pleasantly confused,” an even gentler term describing Mom’s cloudy mind and sweet nature. Whatever name it took, she couldn’t possibly live alone.

It was always supposed to be our sister Terri who took care of our elderly parents. A nurse, competent and calm, she’d know what to do when they needed more medical attention. Her brother and three sisters counted on her to do it when the time came. Not the nurturing, caretaker type, I was especially vocal about how I would never do it, could never do it.

After Daddy’s funeral, my siblings and I sat in the dining room in our parents’ house. Mom’s oil paintings hung there and the antique bookshelf with glass doors she cleverly bought for only a few dollars stood crammed with her art books. We sat at our old places around the dining room table where, not long ago, Daddy ruled, Mom laid out fabric and cut patterns

to make us clothes, and we ate platters full of her home-made ravioli. Only a few hours remained before we returned to our separate homes. I sat and quietly listened as my siblings talked.

Terri agreed to take Mom as we expected. She'd make arrangements for an aide to care for her during the day. My siblings discussed their stressful jobs and schedules. They all planned to travel in the next couple of months. I listened, then spoke without thinking.

"Why don't I take care of Mom? She can come live with me for a few months until Terri returns from her trip and gets settled."

I have no idea why I said it. Even though I consistently said I couldn't take in my parents, even though I didn't feel at all close to my mother, certainly not as close as the others, I said it, and it seemed right.

My situation made good sense for Mom. I lived in the sunny Florida suburbs, with a spare bedroom and no stairs to climb, and worked (only part-time) out of my home. My siblings lived in wet, cold places, in urban apartments with no extra room, or houses with stairs, and they worked long hours. The first three months passed quickly, and it wasn't as difficult as I imagined. Eventually I said she could stay with me permanently. I didn't know then she would be in my care for four years.

In the beginning, she lived with my husband, son, and me. Alexander, only ten years old, certainly benefited from spending time with his grandmother. He learned to make her happy by showing her affection. She saved her biggest smiles for him. Ninety years old, but still strong, she enjoyed strolling in our garden, and talked about the colors of the flowers and the shapes and sheen of the leaves, her artist's soul moved.

Her dementia showed more than it had in her own home, and I learned how difficult it must have been for Daddy to care for her. She couldn't make a decision about what to wear or what to eat. She couldn't remember why she lived in Florida.

"How did I get here?"

"We didn't want you to live alone, Mom, so you came to stay with us."

"Where's Daddy?"

"He got very sick. A stroke. The doctors couldn't help him. He died, Mom."

"Too soon." She wept.

With experience, I learned to keep my replies short. Many times she'd repeat a question as soon as I got the answer to it out of my mouth.

"What is the weather today?"

"Warm and sunny."

"What is the weather today?"

"I can tell you all my secrets, Mom. They're safe with you, because you instantly forget them."

She laughed as if she understood my joke. So gentle, so sweet, and so very grateful for everything I did, she never asked for anything and never complained. I didn't regret volunteering to care for her.

After living with us for seven months, she fell ill. Her memory and ability to reason reduced dramatically, her disposition changed from sunny to dark, and she refused to eat. Her doctor offered no help at all. Rapidly, she lost weight off her already thin frame. One by one, my siblings visited Mom in my home, as they visited her in her own home so many times, thinking it might be the last time. One day, Terri lifted Mom's frail body and carried her to the bathroom, because she could no longer walk. A sister and I, then my brother and

I, searched for a nursing home, a place to get good medical care around the clock, a place where Mom could comfortably die.

The day before she entered the nursing home, my brother and I sat with Mom at my kitchen table. Our mother, so thin that her robe circled her body almost twice, made a face at a speck of apple on the plate in front of her. With disgust she refused it, declaring even this particle of nourishment “too much.” My brother stopped cutting the apple he had carefully peeled, set the knife down gently on the table, and shrank in his chair.

“What are you going to do with me?” Mom asked.

“We’re not doing anything except trying to get you to eat, Mom,” I said. “Would you like a cookie?”

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked again.

“Nothing, Mom. We’re not going anywhere today.”

She sat expressionless, not looking at either of us. I knew explanations were useless.

“What are you going to do with me?”

My brother rose up a bit in his chair, bent close to her, and put his hand on her arm. “Mom, you’re very sick,” he said. “You need to be in a place where there are more people to take care of you.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“You’re very sick and we’re worried about you. We want you to get better. We’ve found a good place, Mom. A health care facility. It’s just ten minutes from here. Mary Ann can see you every day. You’ll see for yourself how nice it is. You’re very sick, Mom. You’ll get better there.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

He put his hand on her cheek and tenderly turned her face so her eyes could meet his. “You’re very sick, Mom. And we’re worried about you. We want you to get better.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“Mom,” he started again.

“What are you going to do with me?”

My big brother sank into his chair again and broke down, crying hard.

She didn’t die. She thrived.

A new doctor in the nursing home prescribed an antidepressant and appetite stimulant. She gained weight and walked again with support. She made a friend, and the two of them could often be found gossiping and giggling on the back porch like girls. Seeing her happier and healthier than when she lived with me relieved me of guilt for “putting” her in a nursing home. She enjoyed activities there, especially anything involving nature or music. A male resident developed a crush on my cheerful, pretty mother. Sometimes, when I came to visit, I saw them holding hands. She forgot about Daddy, and didn’t ask about him anymore.

Although her dementia still made her ask many of the same questions repeatedly, they were amusingly dotty. “Why do you never see anyone with curly hair?” she wondered. At her ninety-third birthday celebration, she kept asking why she got presents. “Oh,” she said, “how old am I? Twenty-eight?”

Her health declined almost imperceptibly, but persistently. People say, “When I die...” as if it happens in a moment. But dying happens slowly. During the four years I cared for her, I watched her die, unhurried. She could have been bedridden, handicapped, or in pain. It could have been worse. Even so, she was dying—by inches.

The dying happened the day her body stiffened, her eyes rolled back into her head, and she seemed not there with me, gone, for some very long seconds. Coming out of it, she vomited and lost bowel control. Soon aware again, with no



idea what happened, she apologized for being so much trouble.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said.

Usually squeamish, I surprised myself with calm competence when it happened, and guided her into the bathroom to clean up and put on some new clothes, all the time soothing her, saying “no trouble at all, Mom,” reminding her she changed my diapers.

“That’s different,” she said, “this is my second childhood.”

Later, I learned to label the event a mini-stroke. The first one happened right after she came to live with me. I never counted, but eventually she endured many, many mini-strokes in my presence. Some were recognized at the nursing home, and some, I suspect, were not. Each time, she lost a few brain cells, and became weaker and more wobbly. Each time, her memory and language skills worsened. My mother died a little and I watched.

I understand all this for the first time. These words I am writing come to me because I am moved by poetry to search for them: “love what is mortal.”

I am not a saint. I got tired of taking care of her. I got tired of cleaning up her messes, and washing clothes smelling from urine. I got tired of the nursing home calling about some problem just when I planned to do something on my own. I got tired of checking up to make sure she got the kind of care she deserved from the ever-changing staff. And tired of having her at my house every Sunday for dinner, even though I knew she enjoyed the change so much. My siblings gave me financial and emotional support and loads of appreciation. I heard in their voices on the phone and saw in their

faces when they left Mom after a visit, how hard it was for them to be so far away from her, unable to help on a daily basis. But I got tired of keeping them informed, of soothing their worries, of telling them I could handle it. I got tired of having them visit and help out, only to leave again. I got tired of visiting Mom at the nursing home day after day and our batty non-conversations. I got tired of the constancy of all of it.

I felt sorry for myself, resentful, and guilty all at the same time. But I cared for her anyway, fueled with a reserve of loving competence and ability to nurture I didn't know I possessed.

One day when I visited Mom, she displayed a moment of clarity, unusual with her dementia. Recognizing my weariness she said, "You don't have to come all the time, you know, you have things to do. Your own life."

"But I want to be here." A half-truth.

My life changed drastically during the four years I cared for her. My marriage collapsed and I coped as a single mother attempting some social life of my own. At age fifty, I returned to college after an almost thirty-year break between my sophomore and junior years. There I developed a passion for writing, but when I pursued it I stole time from my son and mother. Everything happened so quickly in the four years, I never really even took time to grieve for my father. I showed a happy face to the world, and continued to care for my son, but physically, financially, and emotionally I was strained. I couldn't visit Mom every day anymore. I couldn't give her all the attention I knew she deserved.

"Don't worry. You're taking good care of me. Doing the best job you can. A good job."

She let me off the hook.

I always thought the two of us were different, estranged.

But we are very much alike and inextricably linked. We both sought soul support in art, her painting, my writing. Given the hardships of her life, she sometimes resented having to care for me as a child, as I resented having to care for her in her old age. I suspect nurturing and caretaking didn't come naturally to her either, but she did it anyway, as I did. Both of us did the best job for each other we could. Not perfect, but the best job we could.

As a child, I felt the sting of her resentment and little of her love. Wisely, compassionately, while under my care she overlooked my resentment and responded only to my love, so that, finally, I felt hers.

"You're doing a good job," she said. "Where would I be without you?"

My mother helped me into this world, and I was helping her out of it and into the next one. My mother and I, both of us imperfect beings, formed a perfect circle. Where would I be without her? Nowhere.

I understand all this for the first time. These words I am writing come to me because I am moved by poetry to search for them: "hold it / against your bones knowing / your own life depends on it."

Eventually, Mom's decline progressed rapidly. She grew weaker, and fell a couple of times. She could no longer get around with a walker and needed to be in a wheelchair. She lost interest in eating. Even her favorite sweets didn't tempt her. Appetite stimulants no longer worked. Her dementia worsened. No longer merely repetitive or dotty, she struggled to find words. I couldn't engage her interest in anything, even in nature or art. I warned my siblings it seemed she would

leave us soon. When they visited she showed no enthusiasm. Her question, "What am I still doing here?" came more frequently. The dying was getting serious.

As she withdrew, I finished my college graduation requirements. For one of my last assignments, I wrote a response to Mary Oliver's "In Blackwater Woods," drawn to this poem by images from the natural world she uses. She wrote, "the trees are turning their own bodies into pillars of light," reminding me of how my father looked in his white-sheeted bed at the moment he passed from this world into the next.

Her words made me think about my mother, too, and her love for nature. Mom seemed to be drifting away like the fluff of cattails in the poem.

When I drafted the assignment, I started on the surface with the images, but the poem was about the process of dying. And even though for Oliver, dying led to a "black river of loss," she found something positive, a "rich fragrance of cinnamon and fulfillment." The poem compelled me to write about my parents.

For me, writing is usually a slow process, but moved by the words of the poem, my own words came quickly. Because of an academic assignment, and within the context of the literary experience of reading and writing, I found a way to deepen my understanding. Oliver's words illuminated my chaotic thoughts and showed me a way to make sense of things that happened at the end of my parents' lives.

Taken up by events, I couldn't find perspective while it all unfolded. Moved by Oliver's poem though, I wrote, retold the story—and breathed the scent of cinnamon.

As Oliver says, I may never know the other side, or the meaning of salvation there. But through writing about my

parents, I realized three things my experience during their last years taught me. These three things brought me peace with my part in their dying, peace with my mother, and peace with myself. Perhaps that is what education is, what salvation in this life is—to recognize what you have already learned.

I understand all this for the first time. These words I am writing come to me because I am moved by poetry to search for them: “and, when the time comes to let it go, / to let it go.”

A few weeks after I found the poem, I read it at my mother’s funeral. ■