

You Do Not Have to Be Good:

CLIMATE GRIEF AND THE POETRY OF MARY OLIVER

by **KIT TYMOSHUK** /// EAC Volunteer

The sunrise over a pond,
somewhere in Montana.

PHOTO: Kit Tymoshuk

Last summer I lived where the sun never set. I spent my days canoeing through weedy streams covered in mud and mosquito bites. I swam in the lake with new friends, I planted tomatoes in my garden, I wandered around the pond near town. I choked through an Air Quality Index of 10+ for weeks when the forests around Inuvik, N.W.T., caught fire. Trying to sleep in an N95 mask, I lay awake mourning the burning trees and our burning planet. When it finally rained, I revelled in the lush and brilliant joy of sitting in a bed of moss, picking blueberries until my fingers were stained purple. To have had a place of refuge taken from me so quickly, so easily, made climate change brutally real, and every moment outside priceless.

Kit (they/them) is an aspiring kelp farmer and ceramicist currently working towards their Masters of Oceanography at Dalhousie. Among other things, they love smiley fries, gardening and their dog, Pip.

“I am replete, supine, finished, filled to the last edges with an immobilising happiness. And is this not also terrible? Is this not also frightening?”

— (Upstream, p.137)

As the effects of climate change threaten to drastically change our planet, I find myself turning to Mary Oliver’s poetry to soothe my climate grief. She wrote simply about her own walks in the woods, her quiet observations of the natural world. She understood how to look outside yourself at the endless cycling of dead and living things and the wonder and pain of loving something ephemeral.

“Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.”

— (Wild Geese)

Grief and love are inextricably linked together. How do we find joy in loving something that could disappear, in loving a world that is tipping further towards a precipice from which we cannot return? We love because of loss, not in spite of it. Through her constant wanderings and observations, Oliver weaved connections between herself and the living things she wrote about. Through connection there is mutual acknowledgement of pain; her poetry is a vessel for this. We can accept that grief is inevitable (always), but instead of fearing it, shape it into something resilient and hopeful.

“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.”

— (In Blackwater Woods)

Oliver’s poetry has softened my grief in many ways, allowing me to feel deeper empathy for myself and the world around me. I grieve the forests we lose to fires, love the ones we still have left, and hope for new ones to grow. I find joy in my time outside, in the climate movement, and still push for more. Because there is so much to be done; we just need to love enough to believe the work we are doing is worth it.

“Look, I want to love this world
as though it’s the last chance I’m ever going to get
to be alive
and know it.”

— (October)