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My Mind is a Forest: An Autistic Wandering Through the Language of Silence and the Poems of Mary Oliver

Torri Blue

Isn't it plain the sheets of moss, except that
they have no tongues, could lecture
all day if they wanted about
spiritual patience?

—Mary Oliver, from "Landscape" (1986)

PART I: LANDSCAPE

My mind is a forest. At least that is one of the theories. Synaptic overgrowth. An insufficient pruning mechanism, a lazy gardener in my mindgarden. Perhaps autism means my brain branches are tangled, looped around each other, the jungle of my synapses dense and humming. Wild.

A few years ago my neighbor chopped down all the trees in her yard. One day I stepped outside and they were gone—about a dozen dancing yellow pines which had, for their century of life, been kinfolk with the yellow pines that grew behind our home.

I wept. I said, "How dare she, how dare she? She has lived here two weeks and those trees are older than her grandparents!" I wished curses upon her home. My roommate said wishing curses was "evil." I said to him, "Don't talk to me!" I slammed doors. I grieved the loss of many lives and shelters, fledglings and kits. Wasps and bees. Ants, entire tribes of them. I scowled as our neighbor planted grass where a murmuring, animate understory used to be. I wished more curses and kept them to myself.

In the absence of the old pines, the sun fell heavy on our hill. What was once undergrowth tamed by an ample, coniferous canopy began to rumble. Then it erupted. Saplings and ragweed, staining beautyberries and sweet maypop.

Wild plants grew into every sun-touched space, climbing hip-high, then neck-high, then towering over our back porch, leaning in imposingly, netted together by the work of giant, golden orb-weavers whose webs are strong enough to ensnare birds, whose appetites are large enough to eat them.

We called landscapers to help us mitigate some of the more intrusive overgrowth. Several arrived, looked around, mumbled something about incline or tools or poison ivy, and scurried home. Meanwhile the plants continued to compete for sunlight, growing, growing, crowding out the others. Crowding out our dogs, one of whom resorted to pooping on the deck. In the absence of a willing landscaper, the grass grew past our knees. Our neighbors called the city. The city sent us a letter that said Property Violation! They threatened to fine us if we didn't bring our yard to code. My wife stood for hours in the side-yard with a weedwhacker, hacking away at the ryegrass until her battery died.

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In 2014, the *New York Times* published an article titled "Study Finds That Brains With Autism Fail to Trim Synapses as They Develop" (Belluck, n.p.). Teams of neurobiologists poked around in the brains of dead autistics and found that autistic adults had, since toddlerhood, pruned only a fraction of the synapses than were pruned by their nonautistic peers.

"More is not better," said one molecular biologist of synaptic growth. "[I]f all parts of the brain talk to all parts of the brain, all you get is noise" (Belluck). The findings of this study could help "*fix the system* the brain uses," emphasis mine. And though the drug used to clear these synapses in mice was a harsh immunosuppressant, they did "eliminate the abnormal social behaviors."

"This drug has really horrible side effects," said the molecular scientist. "and you don't want to give it to everybody." Nonetheless, the results were deemed "exciting" and gave researchers "hope." Ah, it is possible our autistic mindgardens might be tidied, sheared, neatened, shaped. How lucky for everyone else that our autism behaviors could be improved by only a bit of brain topiary!

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My mind is a forest. In the morning I rise and I am there, waking with my head on a pillow of peat moss to a place that is my own, under a sky kissed at the hems by silvery morning light. My mind is a forest. Green and speckled with sun, woven blanket of canopy draped overhead. The trees that interpret sound have grown into the trees that interpret touch, and I feel birdchatter as marbles in my belly, a squirrel's bark as a gust of air on my cheek. Music moves like electricity through my muscles. My most honest body is dancing. Swaying. Responding.

My mind is a forest, and the mind city sent me a letter that said Property Violation! Many do-gooders—their mindgardens clear and neat, their skies wide and blue—have passed through with conviction, looking around and shouting their advice.

"Have you considered?" they'd ask me. "Have you tried?" I'd welcome them in, listen closely to their wisdom on how to make my brain, and the life it gave me, more beautiful. I'd do what I could to change for them. My efforts would not be sufficient.

"May I?" they'd inevitably ask. I'd oblige. I'd hold perfectly still as they went about their landscape design; a patient on their operating table. They'd try to untangle, to rewire, to cut away, to clean out. They'd instruct: "Stop fixating. Stop flapping. Don't say that. Don't wear that. Don't think that." In the end, always after their years of tillage, they'd say, "That's better. At least a bit." Then, as though we were strangers, they'd be gone.

My mind is a forest, and when I learned this, I suddenly saw nothing but the years of work I'd done to make it more accommodating, hospitable for my visitors. Benches wedged among bramble, tents pitched between the great maples. Trash cans and barbecues. Papers and cups blown about, caught in bushes and branches. Boots had trampled trilliums, sunk dens, kicked nests, left their prints in the soil. They came and they went. Evidence of them is everywhere.

Swiftly I began the labor, blunt and slow, of taking apart the pieces of this world that were not mine. No more benches, no more tents, no more trash,

cups, boots. No more invitations extended to those who are not content to enter barefoot and reverent, to listen to the din of the forest, to sit with me in the earth where the heavy treads of people have begun to grow over with spongy, delicate moss.

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If I could think a life and sprout it like feathers, I'd imagine myself a fjord. Forests of coldwater coral fill my glacial belly, my stony earth-shoulders stippled with conifer and birch. Magpies and cormorants watch the skies and the tides from their branches, filling the air with their natter. In the hollow of an old spruce I tuck each of my flights of worry; not to avoid or deny them, but to keep them safe as I care for them one by one, nursing injured wings, releasing them back to dance over the waters as a murmuration of starlings. Patience runs like a current through my middle, and my contentment touches everything, spreading quiet and persistent as lichen. I grow slow and old. See the long, white tresses of snow falling down my back.

If I cannot be made a fjord, let me not be changed at all.

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Let me not be changed. Let my mindforest grow. So what if I am strange or silent? So what if my words get caught in my mouth sometimes?

Isn't it plain the sheets of moss . . .

Language has constrained our imaginations, of this there can be little doubt. The tongueless sheets of moss do lecture. Patiently, ceaselessly. Who is listening?

Who is listening to the nonspeaking child, stacking his cups with brilliant precision? Who is listening to the autistic poet who can ramble and ramble until she cannot, until her words disappear? Do you assume she has nothing now to say? Who is listening to the lonely bear grieving? Who is listening to the jumping raven with the cut wing or the old, once-injured owl blinking slowly in her habitat? Who is listening to the flower garden overtaken with bindweed? To "the black oaks along the path… standing / as though they

were the most fragile of flowers?" (Oliver, 1986, p. 68). To the sheets of moss, the crows in flight, the pond opening heart-doors? Who is listening to what cannot be heard in words? Who is intuiting the language the world nonetheless utters? How, from our cramped English lexicon, can we translate what we who listen hear? If not a poem, how?

PART II: WHISPERS

Have you ever
tried to
slide into
the heaven of sensation and met

you know not what
resistance but it
held you back?

—Mary Oliver, from "Whispers" (1986)

How does one name a longing? How does one spot it in the first place, then, without crushing it, catch it in cupped hands? How does one part their thumbs to see its bioluminescent body cast shadows on the creases of their palms? How does one find the courage to call it by its name? To say, *I want, I want.*

I have not been great at wanting since I was a child; since my yearnings were labeled obsessions, then obsessively culled. Where does one find the heart to be truthful about their wanting? For as long as I can remember, I have envied people who are brave enough to throw open the doors to yearning. My friend Marit writes beautiful music, so lush with longing, so full of what sounds to me like trust the world will hold it.

My friend Courtney, through a series of weighty losses and unfulfilled hopes, ritualized her grief, looking it in the face every morning and every evening with tears and kindness. My son Auden, just three, throws his head back and wails his disappointment loud and unapologetically. Yet when I feel yearning's vibration at my edges, I rush to pull the curtains shut.

Few things feel to me more vulnerable than desire. When I told my now-wife how I felt about her for the very first time, it was via text. We were sitting across from each other on the same couch. I looked at the tight weave of its red fabric and floral print. I looked at the wicker rocker across the room, and the sheet of glass fixed within the hull of the wood table beside me, and the words and images on the screen in my hand. I looked anywhere but at her. It was deeply uncomfortable to look away, but far better than the alternative.

Listen. I am an exposed nerve. This is always true, but never truer than when a wanting grips me in the middle and squeezes. It is not the fear of vulnerability but the intensity of it that snags me like a sweater on a doorknob—no, that overwhelms me, a surge of dangerous energy tripping my breakers, shutting down my word center. I want, and I want you to know. I do. But I cannot speak. Can you hear me in the quiet? Can you understand my languagelessness, in a way a language of its own?

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A poem that only speaks, never listens, is not a poem but a sermon. A sermon has its place, certainly, and may even be beautiful. But poetry is innately, necessarily relational. It is words, but also wordlessness. It speaks and it listens.

"Have you ever?" asks our Mary, and my reading body answers her asking with something haptic, tactile, sensual. "Have you ever?" asks our Mary, and from behind my collarbone comes a tug—a tug that reminds me that *yes* is a feeling.

This is what a poem reveals; something that longs to be heard. It is more than mere metaphors arranged prettily on a page, more than their rhythms and rhyme. It is a conversation with oneself, or with the world, or with the very words being read. This is what a poem reveals: questions just yearning to be answered. Have you ever been a question that yearns to be answered? Have you ever?

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I keep returning to this: “a language that is not a mother, that is not a tongue, do we need to use this to be understood?” (Hjorth et al, 2022, n.p.).

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If a poem was a person, she might be autistic.

Consider this: how a careless reader will see a poem as something gratuitous, self-involved, asocial. They believe a poem speaks not *with* but *at*. Her rhythms and repetitions are involuntary and meaningless. Her silence is irrelevant. She has a place in the world, sure, but she is not worthwhile beyond as metaphor, as inspiration.

Consider this, too: careless reading yields careless mistakes. It is not a praiseworthy feat to appreciate a poem’s inherent value, but an act of simple, essential humility.

If you have ever loved a poem, you have loved her depth, her noticing, her keen way of sensing, her sensitivity, her fixation, her obsession, her attention, her tension, her care. She carefully, gently cracks open the object of her affection, and it crackles like the spine of a book that has waited for years to be read. If you have ever loved a poem, you have understood there is nothing detached about her. Her rhythm and repetition are words. Even her silence, even her silence is, her silence is language.

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Ralph Savarese wrote about the autistic writer that "a poem's attention resembled their attention" (2010, p. 200). Poems are monotropic. They have tunnel vision. They look closer, and then closer, and then closer. They memorize the shape of the rose and each petal, of Orion's studded belt, of their love's hands, of the crow's voice, which is made of sharp angles and bubbles. Autists are monotropic. We have tunnel vision. We look closer, and then closer. We memorize the shapes of the world. We feel everything entirely.

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I don't want to speak too much to "the intolerable condition" Oliver mentions in the poem (1986, p. 29). There is plenty to be said, but I don't know how to say it. I sense it, I feel it. I hold it in my body. I carry it to term, I deliver, I weep, I nurse. Grief. Perhaps that's what it is. Humanity is unrivaled in its capacity to creatively impregnate the world with grief, which then must be held with the care and resilience of a mother.

I don't want to speak too much to "the explosions can follow," of "Whispers," either (p. 29). There is plenty to be said, but how can I? To name some and forsake the rest—silence, as I've said, is language. These explosions are symbolic or they are literal. They are crumpled bodies, crushed or weeping, and whether this is a metaphor is beside the point. To suffer is to suffer.

I don't want to speak too much. Can you hear me in the quiet? Can you understand my languagelessness, in a way a language of its own?

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Perhaps we cannot belong, or will not, to the humdrum Oliver describes. To the flushed bodies and flashes. To the "certain happiness," the delight, alight in alignment with nature. Perhaps we have ruined that for ourselves, demanding, as we do, that those among us who are flowers sing with the same voice as the *swirling rivers*, which must sing with the same voice as the *birds like tossing fires*. We are so insufficiently accepting of so-called divergence, so inadequate in our capacity to appreciate discomfort and

the wisdom it seeks to share. While the autist is deemed Other for the way our hands line up our toys by shape and color, the neurotypical segregates humanity by the same criteria. While the autist is deemed alien for fusing with the world too much, the neurotypical is deemed earthling for setting themselves entirely apart.

Is there any wonder we have created such loneliness for one another? There is no isolation gathering for the earth-others. Without words to divide, they each find themselves fit snugly within "the family of things" (Oliver, 1986, p. 14). Our Mary asks us, "have you ever / turned on your shoulder // helplessly, facing / the white moon, crying / let me in?" (p. 29).

Have you?

If not, why?

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How does one name a longing? What even is a longing, if not a *let me in*? I remember mornings when I have rolled my body over to hold A., feeling such vivid love that I wish our atoms would merge; not to unbecome ourselves but to become something more than both of us. That we might become the linen against our skin, the cotton of the headboard, the dust on the walls; become the space between the windowpanes and their cobwebs, the corpse of the old spider who lived and died in them. Become the world. I feel it in my blood and in the air, that "the Voices of the I-you-we are many more that those of the I and the You" (Nygren and Bertilsdotter, 2022, p. 38). *Let me in.*

I feel this yearning like a hum in my hands, a pulse, a spirit. Not only in love, but in everything. Let me become the song in my ears as I close my eyes and dance. Let me become the goldfinch on the feeder, singing to his babies where they sit on the telephone wire. Let me become the old sugar maple in her glory, which is only natural, so slow and unselfconscious. *Let me in*, I say to the stone and the bay and the flecks of sun shuddering around me. *Let me in*, I say—yes—I turn on my shoulder, helplessly, and say to the moon.

Is it any wonder now that autistic wanting feels, in a way, dangerous and wild? Is it a surprise, knowing what you know, I feel like a broken tooth

exposed to winter air? I lose my language when I am overwhelmed, so of course my longings are silent.

As a poet—and as an autist—I have had to learn to leave the silence in. I have talked right through it at times, diffusing not just the quiet, but the truth and vitality of the longings tucked within it. The margins must speak for themselves. Silence, as I've said, is language.

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A. has told me she's learned to stop assuming she can see my feeling with her naked eye. Even A., who knows me better than anyone—or perhaps this is why she does. "It's not until you write a poem and I read it," she said to me, "that it hits me that a world has been happening this whole time inside you."

Our Mary, in an interview with Maria Shriver, said she entered into a creative life because, "with words, I could build a world I could live in" (Shriver, 2011), With a poem, yes, I can build a world that accepts me, scramble-atom'd, into itself. The roots of a tree in the lobes of my lungs. The soul of my love seeping into the space between my cells. My bare feet in the soil, the soil. With a poem, yes, my relationship to the whole praiseworthy world becomes a language. An autistic poetic.

PART III: TRILLIUMS

Oh, I wanted

to be easy
in the peopled kingdoms,
to take my place there,
but there was none

that I could find
shaped like me.

—Mary Oliver, from "Trilliums" (1986)

As a child, I wished to be anything but a person. In Kindermusik, they begged me to don a velveteen dress, clasp my hands together at my chest, and sing with the group about Mary's Little Lamb. I would not, I would not, I would *not* so debase my four-year-old self.

"How about," so the teacher suggested, "you be Mary's Little Lamb?" I smiled smugly, yes, then clasped my hands and sang: *baaaaa*.

As I grew, I immersed myself in books about mice and ferrets with cloaks and swords, riddles told by badgers. While my classmates gossiped about kissing and spread rumors about which girls slept in the same sleeping bag, I, as a hedgehog, crafted daggers from fallen branches and hair ties and fought pearl-stealing pine martens.

In middle school Spanish, I called myself Tortuga. I wished my name was Turtle. I wished I might enter Narnia, where my people were fauns and lions. I wished I might be an elf or a kestrel or have the ears of a bat or the sleek, swimming body of an otter.

In high school, when my childhood fantasies fell out of fashion, I immersed myself in the myths of my religion—I was Spirit, I was Called. I spent all my time in the shadow of the divine, wishing and praying to be anything but human; to be anything but the humanity I saw around me with their purses and trucks and judgments.

In my twenties, when I found myself in a trendy, terrible Hollywood megachurch, I was asked by its authorities to prove I was "teachable." So I tried this humanness on like a costume.

I let the pretty girls with their blonde hair do my makeup and clothe me like a doll. They asked me for a performance, so after all those years I finally clasped my hands together at my chest and sang.

Baaaaa.

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My best efforts to be easy were, well, rather difficult. They were expensive and not made for me, pricy jeans that frayed all too quickly where my thighs touch. They were blundering and uncertain, like my best wild guesses whether "we're going to—" was an announcement or an invitation. They were shoulders bumping in crowded rooms, saved seats, praise and acts of service, devoted listening, birthday gifts.

My best efforts to be easy were endless. And they were not enough. I learned this when—dressed in someone else's clothes, my hair curled by someone else's iron, my eyelashes darkened by someone else's hand—one of the people I all but sold my soul to impress stood at a pulpit in front of a thousand of my peers and praised me for not caring what anybody thinks.

My hair is frizzy, it sticks out in every direction! My sweaters have animals on them! I hop around and laugh loudly, I don't give a damn, and isn't that so inspiring? When I mingle among the people, I am told regularly how I march to the beat of my own drum. "And," as one friend told me, "your drummer left the band ages ago!"

I know I am perceived as an individualist, though it's not an identity I find particularly resonant. I don't think enough about how I contrast to those around me to be a genuine nonconformist. My goal has never been to stand out (though I imagine people who have known me at various points in my life would scoff at this). I do not care to be unique, noticed uniquely. I don't need to be special or interesting. I just want to be at home in my body, in the world. I want, quite simply, "to be, to be, to be" (Nygren, 2023, p. 107).

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A couple months ago I found a photograph of Maria Shriver sitting on a large cream couch. Her features are sharp, her hair is lush and flowing. Her smile is knowing, her gaze practiced. One arm crosses her body, long fingers resting easy on her opposite shoulder, soft on her silky blouse. She leans forward, at ease in her role. She clicks with the camera like her body knows just what say.

Next to her, in loose, cuffed jeans and multicolored socks, sitting cross-legged on her couch cushion, is Mary Oliver. Her hair is plain and soft and white, her glasses thin-rimmed, her expression relaxed. Her jacket is pink and puffy, her fingers interlaced, hands folded together in her lap. Mary's presence, and the juxtaposition of their poses, makes Maria Shriver look like she was cut out of a magazine and gluesticked in. Mary, in her own way, also looks at ease—though not so much with the camera, which she doesn't look to care to impress. Sitting there, she appears comfortable, unconcerned, rooted. She seems Someone At Home in the world.

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As I've grown into myself, I've made many, many leavings. These have been excruciating and simple: I left the communities that could not, in the end, embrace me. I left the religion of my youth, the mythology of the special and the called and the holy. I left the image, the fabrication of a person I was not. I stripped down to my earthbody and went, "though the voices around you / kept shouting / their bad advice…" (Oliver, 1986, p. 38).

As a child, when I named myself an otter or a peregrine, I gained a freedom, a sense of contentedness in my imagined body, its shimmering wings. But from that "not a person, but earth-other" framework, I learned my human body as something to despise, my human relationship to the world as fragmented and lonely. I was not easy in the birded kingdom with my dense bones and mammary glands. But as a young adult, when I tried to reconcile this sense of displacement, to drape the idea of the human over my shoulders, to wear ease like a costume, I discovered I was even lonelier than I had been as a bird.

There was shame in being human, set apart from the world in which I felt so at home. Let me in. There was shame too in not being human enough, in standing amidst my own species and being handled like a pet. Laughed at like a silly, hapless creature.

When I learned I was autistic, I was no longer a mystery. A *what are you*, a thing, a project, a strange bandless drummer who doesn't give a shit. I understood immediately in my bones that my humanity is intrinsic, it belongs to me. I am a person in the world.

But as much as I am a person, irreducibly human, I am not aligned with humanity as it is sold to us—it doesn't suit me, it never has. What suits me is the rootedness of trees, the silence of river rocks, a chatty communion with red squirrels and purple finches. These lines we draw between the human and the nonhuman are, as I see it, inherently false. My instinct for intimacy with the earth-others and my belief that we are, while human, also creatures—that we are the natural world, indistinguishably connected, earthlings, all of us, person and moss and mustelid—it all, as if by magic, fit.

I wanted to be let into the moon. I wanted to be easy in the peopled kingdoms. I wanted to know my place here, in the family of things. "So I entered / through the tender buds…" (Oliver, 1986, p. 10).

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My mind is a forest.

Every morning, I wake here in my humanity. My personhood. My earthbody, the soft animal of me in all her contentment among the earth-others, who are my kin, who are my people. "I entered / through the tender buds" (p. 10). That I wake here is not by chance, but is the work of all that root wrangle, the deep rumble of an understory "becoming / at the last moment // flaring and luminous…" (p. 10).

I have never been more myself than since making peace with the state of my mindgarden, soft and brittle, strange and cluttered and peaceful and wild. I have never felt so easy in the peopled kingdoms than since realizing I don't have to be.

I speak, I write, I live an Autistic Poetic. If it feels out of place, consider, please, this might be because it is rooted in a place you've forgotten.

We are earthlings, you and I, made of the same starstuff that created everything you know, everything you touch and praise and use. To be human is to be here, now, named and explained by the world that gives you life each morning. Listen to the silence speak to you, and it will, of the wonderful inexpressibility of being alive.

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