

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house 6
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop. 12
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible. 18
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind, 24
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company 30
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save. 36

—Mary Oliver

amphisbaenic rhyme

The Pickerel Pond: A Double Pastoral (excerpted)

The lake lies with never a ripple,
A lymph to lave sores from a leper:
The sand white as salt in an air
That has filtered the tamed every ray;
Below limpid water, those lissome
Scrolleries scribbled by mussels;
The floating dropped feathers of gulls;
A leech like a lengthening slug [. . .]

Edmund Wilson

Death at a Great Distance

The ripe, floating caps
of the fly amanita
glow in the pinewoods.
I don't even think
of the eventual corruption of my body, 5
but of how quaint and humorous they are,
like a collection of doorknobs,
half-moons,
then a yellow drizzle of flying saucers.
In any case 10
they won't hurt me unless
I take them between my lips
and swallow, which I know enough
not to do. Once, in the south,
I had this happen: 15
the soft rope of a water moccasin
slid down the red knees
of a mangrove, the hundreds of ribs
housed in their smooth, white
sleeves of muscle moving it 20
like a happiness
toward the water, where some bubbles
on the surface of that underworld announced
a fatal carelessness. I didn't
even then move toward the fine point 25
of the story, but stood in my lonely body
amazed and full of attention as it fell
like a stream of glowing syrup into
the dark water, as death
blurted out of that perfectly arranged mouth. 30

—Mary Oliver