



"Let it Be Life"

A Collection of Poems  
For a Worship Service  
Of Jazz and Poetry

by Charles Blustein Ortman

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## *On The Mountain*

by Ric Masten

somewhere about a third of the way up  
he came striding down the trail  
and caught me unaware  
a poet  
staff in hand - naked - thin as a whip  
wild gray hair framing the sunstained  
face

his bright eyes blue holes  
and sky showing through

when he saw me resting there  
he laughed out loud

friend, he said  
i have been to the summit  
and found nothing there  
absolutely nothing

then laughing again  
he went on down around the bend  
and left me

with my brand new dayglow knapsack

ten dollar compass - waterproof boots  
remembering how i'd sharpened my knife  
till it shaved the hair  
on the back of my wrist  
preparing myself for almost anything but  
this

still i was young then  
and it wasn't until i too  
had run out of places to climb  
that i began to wonder

where he was going and what he was after  
laughing that way  
and so turning around  
i followed on down behind

and if i took you by surprise  
this morning coming down the path  
believe me i was only laughing at myself  
sitting there

*Landscape*  
By Mary Oliver

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

spiritual patience? Isn't it clear  
the black oaks along the path are standing  
as though they were the most fragile of flowers?

Every morning I walk like this around  
the pond, thinking: if the doors of my heart  
ever close, I am as good as dead.

Every morning, so far, I'm alive. And now  
the crows break off from the rest of the darkness  
and burst up into the sky—as though

all night they had thought of what they would like  
their lives to be, and imagined  
their strong, thick wings.

*Why Isn't This a Gentle World?*  
By Edward Wright Hale

Why isn't this a gentle  
world?  
Who needs it so?  
Who needs it as it is?

Why upon the warming slopes  
of oxeye, daisy, thistle mauve,  
hay switches, and honeysuckle,  
in hard-worked patterns that  
delight

and ravish the pure heart's  
abundance,  
does playfulness not  
fall softly?

Would we become sick or silly?  
I doubt it: We would  
become kings  
without gods and make  
speeches  
that bark out the spirit,

hailing and  
haranguing  
in praise of each  
other.  
None would prey on  
another,

own a thing, vie for  
affection.

We would sleep  
in the lap of springtime,  
naked on the slab of summer,  
frolic on the palm of winter.

### *Renascence*

by Edna St. Vincent Millay

All I could see from where I stood  
Was three long mountains and a wood;  
I turned and looked another way,  
And saw three islands in a bay.  
So with my eyes I traced the line  
Of the horizon, thin and fine,  
Straight around till I was come  
Back to where I'd started from;  
And all I saw from where I stood  
Was three long mountains and a wood.  
Over these things I could not see;  
These were the things that bounded me;  
And I could touch them with my hand,  
Almost, I thought, from where I stand.  
And all at once things seemed so small  
My breath came short, and scarce at all.  
But, sure, the sky is big, I said;  
Miles and miles above my head;  
So here upon my back I'll lie  
And look my fill into the sky.  
And so I looked, and, after all,  
The sky was not so very tall.  
The sky, I said, must somewhere stop,  
And -- sure enough! -- I see the top!  
The sky, I thought, is not so grand;  
I 'most could touch it with my hand!

And reaching up my hand to try,  
I screamed to feel it touch the sky.  
I screamed, and -- lo! -- Infinity  
Came down and settled over me;  
Forced back my scream into my chest,  
Bent back my arm upon my breast,  
And, pressing of the Undefined  
The definition on my mind,  
Held up before my eyes a glass  
Through which my shrinking sight did pass  
Until it seemed I must behold  
Immensity made manifold;  
Whispered to me a word whose sound  
Deafened the air for worlds around,  
And brought unmuffled to my ears  
The gossiping of friendly spheres,  
The creaking of the tented sky,  
The ticking of Eternity.  
I saw and heard, and knew at last  
The How and Why of all things, past,  
And present, and forevermore.  
The Universe, cleft to the core,  
Lay open to my probing sense  
That, sick'ning, I would fain pluck thence  
But could not, -- nay! But needs must suck  
At the great wound, and could not pluck

My lips away till I had drawn  
All venom out. -- Ah, fearful pawn!  
For my omniscience paid I toll  
In infinite remorse of soul.  
All sin was of my sinning, all  
Atoning mine, and mine the gall  
Of all regret. Mine was the weight  
Of every brooded wrong, the hate  
That stood behind each envious thrust,  
Mine every greed, mine every lust.  
And all the while for every grief,  
Each suffering, I craved relief  
With individual desire, --  
Craved all in vain! And felt fierce fire  
About a thousand people crawl;  
Perished with each, -- then mourned for all!  
A man was starving in Capri;  
He moved his eyes and looked at me;  
I felt his gaze, I heard his moan,  
And knew his hunger as my own.  
I saw at sea a great fog bank  
Between two ships that struck and sank;  
A thousand screams the heavens smote;  
And every scream tore through my throat.  
No hurt I did not feel, no death  
That was not mine; mine each last breath  
That, crying, met an answering cry  
From the compassion that was I.  
All suffering mine, and mine its rod;  
Mine, pity like the pity of God.  
Ah, awful weight! Infinity  
Pressed down upon the finite Me!  
My anguished spirit, like a bird,  
Beating against my lips I heard;  
Yet lay the weight so close about  
There was no room for it without.

And so beneath the weight lay I  
And suffered death, but could not die.

Long had I lain thus, craving death,  
When quietly the earth beneath  
Gave way, and inch by inch, so great  
At last had grown the crushing weight,  
Into the earth I sank till I  
Full six feet under ground did lie,  
And sank no more, -- there is no weight  
Can follow here, however great.  
From off my breast I felt it roll,  
And as it went my tortured soul  
Burst forth and fled in such a gust  
That all about me swirled the dust.

Deep in the earth I rested now;  
Cool is its hand upon the brow  
And soft its breast beneath the head  
Of one who is so gladly dead.  
And all at once, and over all  
The pitying rain began to fall;  
I lay and heard each pattering hoof  
Upon my lowly, thatched roof,  
And seemed to love the sound far more  
Than ever I had done before.  
For rain it hath a friendly sound  
To one who's six feet underground;  
And scarce the friendly voice or face:  
A grave is such a quiet place.

The rain, I said, is kind to come  
And speak to me in my new home.  
I would I were alive again  
To kiss the fingers of the rain,  
To drink into my eyes the shine  
Of every slanting silver line,

To catch the freshened, fragrant breeze  
From drenched and dripping apple-trees.  
For soon the shower will be done,  
And then the broad face of the sun  
Will laugh above the rain-soaked earth  
Until the world with answering mirth  
Shakes joyously, and each round drop  
Rolls, twinkling, from its grass-blade top.  
How can I bear it; buried here,  
While overhead the sky grows clear  
And blue again after the storm?  
O, multi-colored, multiform,  
Beloved beauty over me,  
That I shall never, never see  
Again! Spring-silver, autumn-gold,  
That I shall never more behold!  
Sleeping your myriad magics through,  
Close-sepulchred away from you!  
O God, I cried, give me new birth,  
And put me back upon the earth!  
Upset each cloud's gigantic gourd  
And let the heavy rain, down-poured  
In one big torrent, set me free,  
Washing my grave away from me!

I ceased; and through the breathless hush  
That answered me, the far-off rush  
Of herald wings came whispering  
Like music down the vibrant string  
Of my ascending prayer, and -- crash!  
Before the wild wind's whistling lash  
The startled storm-clouds reared on high  
And plunged in terror down the sky,  
And the big rain in one black wave  
Fell from the sky and struck my grave.  
I know not how such things can be;  
I only know there came to me

A fragrance such as never clings  
To aught save happy living things;  
A sound as of some joyous elf  
Singing sweet songs to please himself,  
And, through and over everything,  
A sense of glad awakening.  
The grass, a-tiptoe at my ear,  
Whispering to me I could hear;  
I felt the rain's cool finger-tips  
Brushed tenderly across my lips,  
Laid gently on my sealed sight,  
And all at once the heavy night  
Fell from my eyes and I could see, --  
A drenched and dripping apple-tree,  
A last long line of silver rain,  
A sky grown clear and blue again.  
And as I looked a quickening gust  
Of wind blew up to me and thrust  
Into my face a miracle  
Of orchard-breath, and with the smell, --  
I know not how such things can be! --  
I breathed my soul back into me.  
Ah! Up then from the ground sprang I  
And hailed the earth with such a cry  
As is not heard save from a man  
Who has been dead, and lives again.  
About the trees my arms I wound;  
Like one gone mad I hugged the ground;  
I raised my quivering arms on high;  
I laughed and laughed into the sky,  
Till at my throat a strangling sob  
Caught fiercely, and a great heart-throb  
Sent instant tears into my eyes;  
O God, I cried, no dark disguise  
Can e'er hereafter hide from me  
Thy radiant identity!  
Thou canst not move across the grass

But my quick eyes will see Thee pass,  
Nor speak, however silently,  
But my hushed voice will answer Thee.  
I know the path that tells Thy way  
Through the cool eve of every day;  
God, I can push the grass apart  
And lay my finger on Thy heart!

The world stands out on either side  
No wider than the heart is wide;  
Above the world is stretched the sky, --

No higher than the soul is high.  
The heart can push the sea and land  
Farther away on either hand;  
The soul can split the sky in two,  
And let the face of God shine through.  
But East and West will pinch the heart  
That can not keep them pushed apart;  
And he whose soul is flat -- the sky  
Will cave in on him by and by.

### *Let It Be Life*

Charles Blustein Ortman

4-23-05

Let it be; let it be.  
Let it be...  
Life

We were twenty eight then  
And had been friends  
    for more than a dozen years,  
    best friends for most of that time.

They had been growing years, learning years  
    years of expanded consciousness and widening worlds,  
As the world itself around us had been  
    widening through fits and starts.  
I'd been more the pragmatist, he the realer of schemes,  
    sent, I imagine, to awaken me to a life of loftier dreams.

It was October  
And the leaves of the trees  
    were in their fullest autumnal glory.

And part of that fall was a crash  
and a late night call.

They laid him out then  
so many miles from home  
at a casual, makeshift wake;  
dressed him in a brown shirt  
with a bright orange-rust v-neck sweater.

The specter in the room once again  
mirrored the outside world.

Fiery autumn fades to brown.

Sometimes we choose life;  
sometimes it chooses us;  
And sometimes death is the portal of life  
that comes calling.

But always, autumn; passing through the winter,  
becomes the spring.  
The seasons will whirl their cycles spun.

And so it's left to us, it seems  
to know or to learn,  
or through countless experience  
to somehow find comfort, faith and hope  
in choosing what we can.

My prayer for me, my prayer for you  
my prayer for us, my prayer for our world,  
Is that we will let it be life...

Accepting that life came before us;  
that it is sustained within us;  
that beyond our own fall lies yet endless springs,  
My prayer is that we will choose to embrace it,  
to let it be,  
to let it be life.

So let our prayer be this:

That we might let it be life...

that stepping out into:

the tang of a spring morning,

the glory of a summer afternoon,

the nip of an autumn sunset

the bite of a midwinter night,

we might let it be life.

Let our prayer be that we might let it be life...

That as long as we have breath to inhale

we will accept it

with the promise to use it well:

for living through our next step

of loving and longing

of holding and caring

of dreaming and daring

of yielding and learning

of connecting and nurturing

of finding ourselves evermore one

in a world made more whole

by our doing.

Let our prayer be that we might let it be life...

that we might surrender, submit

to its implacable determination *to be*;

that we might let in the strength of its vying

to make of it the most

ere its our own time for dying.

For now is our turn for living.

Let it be; let it be.

Let it be...

Life.

*Preacher, Don't Send Me*

By Mia Angelou

Preacher, Don't Send me  
when I die  
to some big ghetto  
in the sky  
where rats eat cats  
of the leopard type  
and Sunday brunch  
is grits and tripe.

I've known those rats  
I've seen them kill  
and grits I've had  
would make a hill,  
or maybe a mountain,  
so what I need  
from you on Sunday  
is a different creed.

Preacher, please don't  
promise me  
streets of gold  
and milk for free.  
I stopped all milk  
at four years old  
and once I'm dead  
I won't need gold.

I'd call a place  
pure paradise  
where families are loyal  
and strangers are nice,  
where the music is jazz  
and the season is fall.  
Promise me that  
or nothing at all.