Louise Gluck
- poems -

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Louise Gluck (22 April 1943)

Born in 1943, Louise Gluck is an American poet. She was born in New York City and grew up in Long Island. Her father helped invent the X-Acto Knife. Gluck graduated in 1961 from George W. Hewlett High School, in Hewlett, New York. She went on to attend Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University.

Glück won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1993 for her collection The Wild Iris. Glück is the recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award (Triumph of Achilles), the Academy of American Poet's Prize (Firstborn), as well as numerous Guggenheim fellowships. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was previously a Senior Lecturer in English at Williams College in Williamstown, MA. Glück currently teaches at Yale University, where she is the Rosencranz Writer in Residence, and in the Creative Writing Program of Boston University. She has also been a member of the faculty of the University of Iowa.

Glück is the author of eleven books of poetry, including Averno (2006); The Seven Ages (2001); Vita Nova (1999), which was awarded The New Yorker's Book Award in Poetry; Meadowlands (1996); The Wild Iris (1992), which received the Pulitzer Prize and the Poetry Society of America's William Carlos Williams Award; Ararat (1990), which received the Library of Congress's Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry; and The Triumph of Achilles (1985), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Boston Globe Literary Press Award, and the Poetry Society of America's Melville Kane Award. The First Four Books collects her early poetry.

Louise Gluck has also published a collection of essays, Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry (1994), which won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for Nonfiction. Sarabande Books published in chapbook form a new, six-part poem, October, in 2004. In 2001 Yale University awarded Louise Glück its Bollingen Prize in Poetry, given biennially for a poet's lifetime achievement in his or her art. Her other honors include the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry, the Sara Teasdale Memorial Prize (Wellesley, 1986), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Anniversary Medal (2000), and fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations and from the National Endowment for the Arts.

She is a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1999 was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. In 2003 she was named as the new judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets and continues to serve in that position. Glück was appointed the US Poet Laureate from 2003-2004, succeeding Billy Collins.
A Fable

Two women with the same claim came to the feet of the wise king. Two women, but only one baby. The king knew someone was lying. What he said was Let the child be cut in half; that way no one will go empty-handed. He drew his sword. Then, of the two women, one renounced her share: this was the sign, the lesson. Suppose you saw your mother torn between two daughters: what could you do to save her but be willing to destroy yourself—she would know who was the rightful child, the one who couldn't bear to divide the mother.

Louise Gluck
A Fantasy

I'll tell you something: every day people are dying. And that's just the beginning. Every day, in funeral homes, new widows are born, new orphans. They sit with their hands folded, trying to decide about this new life.

Then they're in the cemetery, some of them for the first time. They're frightened of crying, sometimes of not crying. Someone leans over, tells them what to do next, which might mean saying a few words, sometimes throwing dirt in the open grave.

And after that, everyone goes back to the house, which is suddenly full of visitors. The widow sits on the couch, very stately, so people line up to approach her, sometimes take her hand, sometimes embrace her. She finds something to say to everybody, thanks them, thanks them for coming.

In her heart, she wants them to go away. She wants to be back in the cemetery, back in the sickroom, the hospital. She knows it isn't possible. But it's her only hope, the wish to move backward. And just a little, not so far as the marriage, the first kiss.

Louise Gluck
A Myth of Devotion

When Hades decided he loved this girl
he built for her a duplicate of earth,
everything the same, down to the meadow,
but with a bed added.

Everything the same, including sunlight,
because it would be hard on a young girl
to go so quickly from bright light to utter darkness

Gradually, he thought, he'd introduce the night,
first as the shadows of fluttering leaves.
Then moon, then stars. Then no moon, no stars.
Let Persephone get used to it slowly.
In the end, he thought, she'd find it comforting.

A replica of earth
except there was love here.
Doesn't everyone want love?

He waited many years,
building a world, watching
Persephone in the meadow.
Persephone, a smeller, a taster.
If you have one appetite, he thought,
you have them all.

Doesn't everyone want to feel in the night
the beloved body, compass, polestar,
to hear the quiet breathing that says
I am alive, that means also
you are alive, because you hear me,
you are here with me. And when one turns,
the other turns—

That's what he felt, the lord of darkness,
looking at the world he had
constructed for Persephone. It never crossed his mind
that there'd be no more smelling here,
certainly no more eating.
Guilt? Terror? The fear of love?
These things he couldn't imagine;
no lover ever imagines them.

He dreams, he wonders what to call this place.
First he thinks: The New Hell. Then: The Garden.
In the end, he decides to name it
Persephone's Girlhood.

A soft light rising above the level meadow,
behind the bed. He takes her in his arms.
He wants to say I love you, nothing can hurt you

but he thinks
this is a lie, so he says in the end
you're dead, nothing can hurt you
which seems to him
a more promising beginning, more true.

Louise Gluck
Several weeks ago I discovered a photograph of my mother
sitting in the sun, her face flushed as with achievement or triumph.
The sun was shining. The dogs
were sleeping at her feet where time was also sleeping,
calm and unmoving as in all photographs.

I wiped the dust from my mother's face.
Indeed, dust covered everything; it seemed to me the persistent
haze of nostalgia that protects all relics of childhood.
In the background, an assortment of park furniture, trees and shrubbery.

The sun moved lower in the sky, the shadows lengthened and darkened.
The more dust I removed, the more these shadows grew.
Summer arrived. The children
leaned over the rose border, their shadows
merging with the shadows of the roses.

A word came into my head, referring
to this shifting and changing, these erasures
that were now obvious—

it appeared, and as quickly vanished.
Was it blindness or darkness, peril, confusion?

Summer arrived, then autumn. The leaves turning,
the children bright spots in a mash of bronze and sienna.

When I had recovered somewhat from these events,
I replaced the photograph as I had found it
between the pages of an ancient paperback,
many parts of which had been
annotated in the margins, sometimes in words but more often
in spirited questions and exclamations
meaning "I agree" or "I'm unsure, puzzled—"

The ink was faded. Here and there I couldn't tell
what thoughts occurred to the reader
but through the bruise-like blotches I could sense
urgency, as though tears had fallen.

I held the book awhile.
It was Death in Venice (in translation):
I had noted the page in case, as Freud believed,
nothing is an accident.

Thus the little photograph
was buried again, as the past is buried in the future.
In the margin there were two words,
linked by an arrow: &quot;sterility&quot; and, down the page,
&quot;oblivion&quot;—

&quot;And it seemed to him the pale and lovely
summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned...&quot;

3

How quiet the garden is;
no breeze ruffles the Cornelian cherry.
Summer has come.

How quiet it is
now that life has triumphed. The rough

pillars of the sycamores
support the immobile
shelves of the foliage,

the lawn beneath
lush, iridescent—

And in the middle of the sky,
the immodest god.

Things are, he says. They are, they do not change;
response does not change.

How hushed it is, the stage
as well as the audience; it seems
breathing is an intrusion.

He must be very close,
the grass is shadowless.

How quiet it is, how silent,
like an afternoon in Pompeii.

4

Beatrice took the children to the park in Cedarhurst.
The sun was shining. Airplanes
passed back and forth overhead, peaceful because the war was over.

It was the world of her imagination:
true and false were of no importance.

Freshly polished and glittering—
that was the world. Dust
had not yet erupted on the surface of things.

The planes passed back and forth, bound
for Rome and Paris—you couldn't get there
unless you flew over the park. Everything
must pass through, nothing can stop—

The children held hands, leaning
to smell the roses.
They were five and seven.

Infinite, infinite—that
was her perception of time.

She sat on a bench, somewhat hidden by oak trees.
Far away, fear approached and departed;
from the train station came the sound it made.

The sky was pink and orange, older because the day was over.

There was no wind. The summer day
cast oak-shaped shadows on the green grass.

Louise Gluck
Aboriginal Landscape

You're stepping on your father, my mother said,
and indeed I was standing exactly in the center
of a bed of grass, mown so neatly it could have been
my father's grave, although there was no stone saying so.

You're stepping on your father, she repeated,
louder this time, which began to be strange to me,
since she was dead herself; even the doctor had admitted it.

I moved slightly to the side, to where
my father ended and my mother began.

The cemetery was silent. Wind blew through the trees;
I could hear, very faintly, sounds of? weeping several rows away,
and beyond that, a dog wailing.

At length these sounds abated. It crossed my mind
I had no memory of ??being driven here,
to what now seemed a cemetery, though it could have been
a cemetery in my mind only; perhaps it was a park, or if not a park,
a garden or bower, perfumed, I now realized, with the scent of roses?—
douceur de vivre filling the air, the sweetness of? living,
as the saying goes. At some point,

it occurred to me I was alone.
Where had the others gone,
my cousins and sister, Caitlin and Abigail?

By now the light was fading. Where was the car
waiting to take us home?

I then began seeking for some alternative. I felt
an impatience growing in me, approaching, I would say, anxiety.
Finally, in the distance, I made out a small train,
stopped, it seemed, behind some foliage, the conductor
lingering against a doorknob, smoking a cigarette.

Do not forget me, I cried, running now
over many plots, many mothers and fathers?—
Do not forget me, I cried, when at last I reached him. 
Madam, he said, pointing to the tracks, 
surely you realize this is the end, the tracks do not go further. 
His words were harsh, and yet his eyes were kind; 
this encouraged me to press my case harder. 
But they go back, I said, and I remarked 
their sturdiness, as though they had many such returns ahead of them.

You know, he said, our work is difficult: we confront 
much sorrow and disappointment. 
He gazed at me with increasing frankness. 
I was like you once, he added, in love with turbulence.

Now I spoke as to an old friend: 
What of you, I said, since he was free to leave, 
have you no wish to go home, 
to see the city again?

This is my home, he said. 
The city?—the city is where I disappear.

Louise Gluck
Reading what I have just written, I now believe
I stopped precipitously, so that my story seems to have been
slightly distorted, ending, as it did, not abruptly
but in a kind of artificial mist of the sort
sprayed onto stages to allow for difficult set changes.

Why did I stop? Did some instinct
discern a shape, the artist in me
intervening to stop traffic, as it were?

A shape. Or fate, as the poets say,
intuited in those few long ago hours—

I must have thought so once.
And yet I dislike the term
which seems to me a crutch, a phase,
the adolescence of the mind, perhaps—

Still, it was a term I used myself,
frequently to explain my failures.
Fate, destiny, whose designs and warnings
now seem to me simply
local symmetries, metonymic
baubles within immense confusion—

Chaos was what I saw.
My brush froze—I could not paint it.

Darkness, silence: that was the feeling.

What did we call it then?
A "crisis of vision" corresponding, I believed,
to the tree that confronted my parents,

but whereas they were forced
forward into the obstacle,
I retreated or fled—

Mist covered the stage (my life).
Characters came and went, costumes were changed,
my brush hand moved side to side
far from the canvas,
side to side, like a windshield wiper.

Surely this was the desert, the dark night.
(In reality, a crowded street in London,
the tourists waving their colored maps.)

One speaks a word: I.
Out of this stream
the great forms—

I took a deep breath. And it came to me
the person who drew that breath
was not the person in my story, his childish hand
confidently wielding the crayon—

Had I been that person? A child but also
an explorer to whom the path is suddenly clear, for whom
the vegetation parts—

And beyond, no longer screened from view, that exalted
solitude Kant perhaps experienced
on his way to the bridges—
(We share a birthday.)

Outside, the festive streets
were strung, in late January, with exhausted Christmas lights.
A woman leaned against her lover's shoulder
singing Jacques Brel in her thin soprano—

Bravo! the door is shut.
Now nothing escapes, nothing enters—

I hadn't moved. I felt the desert
stretching ahead, stretching (it now seems)
on all sides, shifting as I speak,

so that I was constantly
face to face with blankness, that
stepchild of the sublime,
which, it turns out,
has been both my subject and my medium.

What would my twin have said, had my thoughts reached him?

Perhaps he would have said
in my case there was no obstacle (for the sake of argument)
after which I would have been referred to religion, the cemetery where questions of faith are answered.

The mist had cleared. The empty canvases were turned inward against the wall.

The little cat is dead (so the song went).

Shall I be raised from death, the spirit asks.
And the sun says yes.
And the desert answers your voice is sand scattered in wind.

Louise Gluck
All Hallows

Even now this landscape is assembling.
The hills darken. The oxen
Sleep in their blue yoke,
The fields having been
Picked clean, the sheaves
Bound evenly and piled at the roadside
Among cinquefoil, as the toothed moon rises:

This is the barrenness
Of harvest or pestilence
And the wife leaning out the window
With her hand extended, as in payment,
And the seeds
Distinct, gold, calling
Come here
Come here, little one

And the soul creeps out of the tree.

Louise Gluck
An Adventure

It came to me one night as I was falling asleep
that I had finished with those amorous adventures
to which I had long been a slave. Finished with love?
my heart murmured. To which I responded that many profound discoveries
awaited us, hoping, at the same time, I would not be asked
to name them. For I could not name them. But the belief that they existed—
surely this counted for something?

2.
The next night brought the same thought,
this time concerning poetry, and in the nights that followed
various other passions and sensations were, in the same way,
set aside forever, and each night my heart
protested its future, like a small child being deprived of a favorite toy.
But these farewells, I said, are the way of things.
And once more I alluded to the vast territory
opening to us with each valediction. And with that phrase I became
a glorious knight riding into the setting sun, and my heart
became the steed underneath me.

3.
I was, you will understand, entering the kingdom of death,
though why this landscape was so conventional
I could not say. Here, too, the days were very long
while the years were very short. The sun sank over the far mountain.
The stars shone, the moon waxed and waned. Soon
faces from the past appeared to me:
my mother and father, my infant sister; they had not, it seemed,
finished what they had to say, though now
I could hear them because my heart was still.

4.
At this point, I attained the precipice
but the trail did not, I saw, descend on the other side;
rather, having flattened out, it continued at this altitude
as far as the eye could see, though gradually
the mountain that supported it completely dissolved
so that I found myself riding steadily through the air—
All around, the dead were cheering me on, the joy of finding them
obliterated by the task of responding to them—

5.
As we had all been flesh together,
now we were mist.
As we had been before objects with shadows,
now we were substance without form, like evaporated chemicals.
Neigh, neigh, said my heart,
or perhaps nay, nay—it was hard to know.

6.
Here the vision ended. I was in my bed, the morning sun
contentedly rising, the feather comforter
mounded in white drifts over my lower body.
You had been with me—
there was a dent in the second pillowcase.
We had escaped from death—
or was this the view from the precipice?

Louise Gluck
April

No one's despair is like my despair--

You have no place in this garden
thinking such things, producing
the tiresome outward signs; the man
pointedly weeding an entire forest,
the woman limping, refusing to change clothes
or wash her hair.

Do you suppose I care
if you speak to one another?
But I mean you to know
I expected better of two creatures
who were given minds: if not
that you would actually care for each other
at least that you would understand
grief is distributed
between you, among all your kind, for me
to know you, as deep blue
marks the wild scilla, white
the wood violet.

Louise Gluck
Archaic Fragment

I was trying to love matter.
I taped a sign over the mirror:
You cannot hate matter and love form.

It was a beautiful day, though cold.
This was, for me, an extravagantly emotional gesture.

........ your poem:
tried, but could not.

I taped a sign over the first sign:
Cry, weep, thrash yourself, rend your garments—

List of things to love:
dirt, food, shells, human hair.

........ said
tasteless excess. Then I

rent the signs.

AIAIAIAI cried
the naked mirror.

Louise Gluck
Cana

What can I tell you that you don't know that will make you tremble again?

Forsythia
by the roadside, by
wet rocks, on the embankments
underplanted with hyacinth --

For ten years I was happy.
You were there; in a sence,
you were always with me, the house, the garden
constantly lit,
not with lights as we have in the sky
but with those emblems of light
which are more powerful, being
implicitly some earthly
thing transformed --

And all of it vanished,
reabsorbed into impassive process. Then
what will we see by,
now that the yellow torches have become
green branches?

Louise Gluck
Castile

Orange blossoms blowing over Castile
children begging for coins

I met my love under an orange tree
or was it an acacia tree
or was he not my love?

I read this, then I dreamed this:
can waking take back what happened to me?
Bells of San Miguel
ringing in the distance
his hair in the shadows blond-white

I dreamed this,
does that mean it didn't happen?
Does it have to happen in the world to be real?

I dreamed everything, the story
became my story:
he lay beside me,
my hand grazed the skin of his shoulder

Mid-day, then early evening:
in the distance, the sound of a train

But it was not the world:
in the world, a thing happens finally, absolutely,
the mind cannot reverse it.

Castile: nuns walking in pairs through the dark garden.
Outside the walls of the Holy Angels
children begging for coins

When I woke I was crying,
has that no reality?

I met my love under an orange tree:
I have forgotten
only the facts, not the inference;
there were children, somewhere, crying, begging for coins

I dreamed everything, I gave myself
completely and for all time

And the train returned us
first to Madrid
then to the Basque country

Anonymous submission.

Louise Gluck
Celestial Music

I have a friend who still believes in heaven.
Not a stupid person, yet with all she knows, she literally talks to God.
She thinks someone listens in heaven.
On earth she's unusually competent.
Brave too, able to face unpleasantness.

We found a caterpillar dying in the dirt, greedy ants crawling over it.
I'm always moved by disaster, always eager to oppose vitality
But timid also, quick to shut my eyes.
Whereas my friend was able to watch, to let events play out
According to nature. For my sake she intervened
Brushing a few ants off the torn thing, and set it down
Across the road.

My friend says I shut my eyes to God, that nothing else explains
My aversion to reality. She says I'm like the child who
Buries her head in the pillow
So as not to see, the child who tells herself
That light causes sadness-
My friend is like the mother. Patient, urging me
To wake up an adult like herself, a courageous person-

In my dreams, my friend reproaches me. We're walking
On the same road, except it's winter now;
She's telling me that when you love the world you hear celestial music:
Look up, she says. When I look up, nothing.
Only clouds, snow, a white business in the trees
Like brides leaping to a great height-
Then I'm afraid for her; I see her
Caught in a net deliberately cast over the earth-

In reality, we sit by the side of the road, watching the sun set;
From time to time, the silence pierced by a birdcall.
It's this moment we're trying to explain, the fact
That we're at ease with death, with solitude.
My friend draws a circle in the dirt; inside, the caterpillar doesn't move.
She's always trying to make something whole, something beautiful, an image
Capable of life apart from her.
We're very quiet. It's peaceful sitting here, not speaking, The composition
Fixed, the road turning suddenly dark, the air
Going cool, here and there the rocks shining and glittering-
It's this stillness we both love.
The love of form is a love of endings.

Louise Gluck
Circe's Grief

In the end, I made myself
Known to your wife as
A god would, in her own house, in
Ithaca, a voice
Without a body: she
Paused in her weaving, her head turning
First to the right, then left
Though it was hopeless of course
To trace that sound to any
Objective source: I doubt
She will return to her loom
With what she knows now. When
You see her again, tell her
This is how a god says goodbye:
If I am in her head forever
I am in your life forever.

Louise Gluck
Circe's Power

I never turned anyone into a pig.
Some people are pigs; I make them
Look like pigs.

I'm sick of your world
That lets the outside disguise the inside. Your men weren't bad men;
Undisciplined life
Did that to them. As pigs,

Under the care of
Me and my ladies, they
Sweetened right up.

Then I reversed the spell, showing you my goodness
As well as my power. I saw

We could be happy here,
As men and women are
When their needs are simple. In the same breath,

I foresaw your departure,
Your men with my help braving
The crying and pounding sea. You think

A few tears upset me? My friend,
Every sorceress is
A pragmatist at heart; nobody sees essence who can't
Face limitation. If I wanted only to hold you

I could hold you prisoner.

Louise Gluck
Circe's Torment

I regret bitterly
The years of loving you in both
Your presence and absence, regret
The law, the vocation
That forbid me to keep you, the sea
A sheet of glass, the sun-bleached
Beauty of the Greek ships: how
Could I have power if
I had no wish
To transform you: as
You loved my body,
As you found there
Passion we held above
All other gifts, in that single moment
Over honor and hope, over
Loyalty, in the name of that bond
I refuse you
Such feeling for your wife
As will let you
Rest with her, I refuse you
Sleep again
If I cannot have you.

Louise Gluck
Confession

To say I'm without fear--
It wouldn't be true.
I'm afraid of sickness, humiliation.
Like anyone, I have my dreams.
But I've learned to hide them,
To protect myself
From fulfillment: all happiness
Attracts the Fates' anger.
They are sisters, savages--
In the end they have
No emotion but envy.

Louise Gluck
Child waking up in a dark room
screaming I want my duck back, I want my duck back

in a language nobody understands in the least?—

There is no duck.

But the dog, all upholstered in white plush?—
the dog is right there in the crib next to him.

Years and years?—?that's how much time passes.
All in a dream. But the duck?—
no one knows what happened to that.

2

They've ?just met, now
they're sleeping near an open window.

Partly to wake them, to assure them
that what they remember of ?the night is correct,
now light needs to enter the room,

also to show them the context in which this occurred:
socks half ?hidden under a dirty mat,
quilt decorated with green leaves?—

the sunlight specifying
these but not other objects,
setting boundaries, sure of ?itself, not arbitrary,

then lingering, describing
each thing in detail,
fastidious, like a composition in English,
even a little blood on the sheets?—

3

Afterward, they separate for the day.
Even later, at a desk, in the market,
the manager not satisfied with the figures he's given,
the berries moldy under the topmost layer?—

so that one withdraws from the world
even as one continues to take action in it?—

You get home, that's when you notice the mold.
Too late, in other words.

As though the sun blinded you for a moment.

Louise Gluck
Early Darkness

How can you say
earth should give me joy? Each thing
born is my burden; I cannot succeed
with all of you.

And you would like to dictate to me,
you would like to tell me
who among you is most valuable,
who most resembles me.
And you hold up as an example
the pure life, the detachment
you struggle to acheive--

How can you understand me
when you cannot understand yourselves?
Your memory is not
powerful enough, it will not
reach back far enough--

Never forget you are my children.
You are not suffering because you touched each other
but because you were born,
because you required life
separate from me.

Louise Gluck
Early December in Croton-on-Hudson

Spiked sun. The Hudson's
Whittled down by ice.
I hear the bone dice
Of blown gravel clicking. Bone-
pale, the recent snow
Fastens like fur to the river.
Standstill. We were leaving to deliver
Christmas presents when the tire blew
Last year. Above the dead valves pines pared
Down by a storm stood, limbs bared . . .
I want you.

Louise Gluck
Elms

All day I tried to distinguish
need from desire. Now, in the dark,
I feel only bitter sadness for us,
the builders, the planers of wood,
because I have been looking
steadily at these elms
and seen the process that creates
the writhing, stationary tree
is torment, and have understood
it will make no forms but twisted forms.

Louise Gluck
End of Winter

Over the still world, a bird calls
waking solitary among black boughs.

You wanted to be born; I let you be born.
When has my grief ever gotten
in the way of your pleasure?

Plunging ahead
into the dark and light at the same time
eager for sensation

as though you were some new thing, wanting
to express yourselves

all brilliance, all vivacity

never thinking
this would cost you anything,
ever imagining the sound of my voice
as anything but part of you—

you won't hear it in the other world,
not clearly again,
not in birdcall or human cry,

not the clear sound, only
persistent echoing
in all sound that means good-bye, good-bye—

the one continuous line
that binds us to each other.

Louise Gluck
Epithalamium

There were others; their bodies
were a preparation.
I have come to see it as that.

As a steam of cries.
So much pain in the world - the formless
grief of the body, whose language
is hunger-

And in the hall, the boxed roses:
what they mean

is chaos. Then begins
the terrible charity of marriage,
husband and wife

climing the green hill in gold light
until there is no hill,
only a flat plain stopped by the sky.

Here is my hand, he said.
But that was long ago.
Here is my hand that will not harm you.

Louise Gluck
First Memory

Long ago, I was wounded. I lived
to revenge myself
against my father, not
for what he was--
for what I was: from the beginning of time,
in childhood, I thought
that pain meant
I was not loved.
It meant I loved.

Louise Gluck
Happiness

A man and a woman lie on a white bed.
It is morning. I think
Soon they will waken.
On the bedside table is a vase
of lilies; sunlight
pools in their throats.
I watch him turn to her
as though to speak her name
but silently, deep in her mouth--
At the window ledge,
once, twice,
a bird calls.
And then she stirs; her body
fills with his breath.

I open my eyes; you are watching me.
Almost over this room
the sun is gliding.
Look at your face, you say,
holding your own close to me
to make a mirror.
How calm you are. And the burning wheel
passes gently over us.

Louise Gluck
Horse

What does the horse give you
That I cannot give you?

I watch you when you are alone,
When you ride into the field behind the dairy,
Your hands buried in the mare's
Dark mane.

Then I know what lies behind your silence:
Scorn, hatred of me, of marriage. Still,
You want me to touch you; you cry out
As brides cry, but when I look at you I see
There are no children in your body.
Then what is there?

Nothing, I think. Only haste
To die before I die.

In a dream, I watched you ride the horse
Over the dry fields and then
Dismount: you two walked together;
In the dark, you had no shadows.
But I felt them coming toward me
Since at night they go anywhere,
They are their own masters.

Look at me. You think I don't understand?
What is the animal
If not passage out of this life?

Louise Gluck
Humidifier

—After Robert Pinsky
Defier of closed space, such as the head, opener
Of the sealed passageways, so that
Sunlight entering the nose can once again

Exit the ear, vaporizer, mist machine, whose
Soft hiss sounds like another human being

But less erratic, more stable, or, if not like a human being,
Carried by one, by my mother to the sick chamber
Of my childhood? as Freud said,

Why are you always sick, Louise? his cigar
Confusing mist with smoke, interfering
With healing?Embodied

Summoner of these ghosts, white plastic tub with your elegant
Clear tub, the water sanitized by boiling,
Sterile, odorless,

In my mother's absence
Run by me, the one machine

I understand: what
Would life be if we could not buy
Objects to care for us

And bear them home, away from the druggists' pity,
If we could not carry in our own arms
Alms, alchemy, to the safety of our bedrooms,
If there were no more

Sounds in the night, continuous
Hush, hush of warm steam, not
Like human breath though regular, if there were nothing in the world

More hopeful than the self,
Soothing it, wishing it well.
Hyacinth

Is that an attitude for a flower, to stand
like a club at the walk; poor slain boy,
is that a way to show
gratitude to the gods? White
with colored hearts, the tall flowers
sway around you, all the other boys,
in the cold spring, as the violets open.

2
There were no flowers in antiquity
but boys' bodies, pale, perfectly imagined.
So the gods sank to human shape with longing.
In the field, in the willow grove,
Apollo sent the courtiers away.

3
And from the blood of the wound
a flower sprang, lilylike, more brilliant
than the purples of Tyre.
Then the god wept: his vital grief
flooded the earth.

4
Beauty dies: that is the source
of creation. Outside the ring of trees
the courtiers could hear
the dove's call transmit
its uniform, its inborn sorrow—
They stood listening, among the rustling willows.
Was this the god's lament?
They listened carefully. And for a short time
all sound was sad.

5
There is no other immortality:
in the cold spring, the purple violets open.
And yet, the heart is black,
there is its violence frankly exposed.
Or is it not the heart at the center
but some other word?
And now someone is bending over them,
meaning to gather them—

6
They could not wait
in exile forever.
Through the glittering grove
the courtiers ran
calling the name
of their companion
over the birds' noise,
over the willows' aimless sadness.
Well into the night they wept,
their clear tears
altering no earthly color.

Louise Gluck
Labor Day

Requiring something lovely on his arm
Took me to Stamford, Connecticut, a quasi-farm,
His family's; later picking up the mammoth
Girlfriend of Charlie, meanwhile trying to pawn me off
On some third guy also up for the weekend.
But Saturday we still were paired; spent
It sprawled across that sprawling acreage
Until the grass grew limp
with damp. Like me. Johnston-baby, I can still see
The pelted clover, burrs' prickle fur and gorged
Pastures spewing infinite tiny bells. You pimp.

Louise Gluck
There is always something to be made of pain.
Your mother knits.
She turns out scarves in every shade of red.
They were for Christmas, and they kept you warm
while she married over and over, taking you
along. How could it work,
when all those years she stored her widowed heart
as though the dead come back.
No wonder you are the way you are,
afraid of blood, your women
like one brick wall after another.

Louise Gluck
Lullaby

My mother's an expert in one thing:
sending people she loves into the other world.
The little ones, the babies--these
she rocks, whispering or singing quietly. I can't say
what she did for my father;
whatever it was, I'm sure it was right.

It's the same thing, really, preparing a person
for sleep, for death. The lullabies--they all say
don't be afraid, that's how they paraphrase
the heartbeat of the mother.
So the living grow slowly calm; it's only
the dying who can't, who refuse.

The dying are like tops, like gyroscopes--
they spin so rapidly they seem to be still.
Then they fly apart: in my mother's arms,
my sister was a cloud of atoms, of particles--that's the difference.
When a child's asleep, it's still whole.

My mother's seen death; she doesn't talk about the soul's integrity.
She's held an infant, an old man, as by comparison the dark grew
solid around them, finally changing to earth.

The soul's like all matter:
why would it stay intact, stay faithful to its one form,
when it could be free?

Louise Gluck
**Matins**

You want to know how I spend my time?
I walk the front lawn, pretending
to be weeding. You ought to know
I'm never weeding, on my knees, pulling
clumps of clover from the flower beds: in fact
I'm looking for courage, for some evidence
my life will change, though
it takes forever, checking
each clump for the symbolic
leaf, and soon the summer is ending, already
the leaves turning, always the sick trees
going first, the dying turning
brilliant yellow, while a few dark birds perform
their curfew of music. You want to see my hands?
As empty now as at the first note.
Or was the point always
to continue without a sign?

Louise Gluck
Midnight

Speak to me, aching heart: what
Ridiculous errand are you inventing for yourself
Weeping in the dark garage
With your sack of garbage: it is not your job
To take out the garbage, it is your job
To empty the dishwasher. You are showing off
Again,
Exactly as you did in childhood--where
Is your sporting side, your famous
Ironic detachment? A little moonlight hits
The broken window, a little summer moonlight,
Tender
Murmurs from the earth with its ready
Sweetnesses--
Is this the way you communicate
With your husband, not answering
When he calls, or is this the way the heart
Behaves when it grieves: it wants to be
Alone with the garbage? If I were you,
I'd think ahead. After fifteen years,
His voice could be getting tired; some night
If you don't answer, someone else will answer.

Louise Gluck
Midsummer

On nights like this we used to swim in the quarry,
the boys making up games requiring them to tear off the girls' clothes
and the girls cooperating, because they had new bodies since last summer
and they wanted to exhibit them, the brave ones
leaping off the high rocks—bodies crowding the water.

The nights were humid, still. The stone was cool and wet,
marble for graveyards, for buildings that we never saw,
buildings in cities far away.

On cloudy nights, you were blind. Those nights the rocks were dangerous,
but in another way it was all dangerous, that was what we were after.
The summer started. Then the boys and girls began to pair off
but always there were a few left at the end—sometimes they'd keep watch,
sometimes they'd pretend to go off? with each other like the rest,
but what could they do there, in the woods? No one wanted to be them.
But they'd show up anyway, as though some night their luck would change,
fate would be a different fate.

At the beginning and at the end, though, we were all together.
After the evening chores, after the smaller children were in bed,
then we were free. Nobody said anything, but we knew the nights we'd meet
and the nights we wouldn't. Once or twice, at the end of summer,
we could see a baby was going to come out of all that kissing.

And for those two, it was terrible, as terrible as being alone.
The game was over. We'd sit on the rocks smoking cigarettes,
worrying about the ones who weren't there.

And then finally walk home through the fields,
because there was always work the next day.
And the next day, we were kids again, sitting on the front steps in the morning,
eating a peach. Just that, but it seemed an honor to have a mouth.
And then going to work, which meant helping out in the fields.
One boy worked for an old lady, building shelves.
The house was very old, maybe built when the mountain was built.

And then the day faded. We were dreaming, waiting for night.
Standing at the front door at twilight, watching the shadows lengthen.
And a voice in the kitchen was always complaining about the heat, wanting the heat to break.

Then the heat broke, the night was clear. And you thought of the boy or girl you'd be meeting later. And you thought of walking into the woods and lying down, practicing all those things you were learning in the water. And though sometimes you couldn't see the person you were with, there was no substitute for that person.

The summer night glowed; in the field, fireflies were glinting. And for those who understood such things, the stars were sending messages: You will leave the village where you were born and in another country you'll become very rich, very powerful, but always you will mourn something you left behind, even though you can't say what it was, and eventually you will return to seek it.

Louise Gluck
Mock Orange

It is not the moon, I tell you. 
It is these flowers 
lighting the yard.

I hate them. 
I hate them as I hate sex, 
the man's mouth 
sealing my mouth, the man's 
paralyzing body—

and the cry that always escapes, 
the low, humiliating 
premise of union—

In my mind tonight 
I hear the question and pursuing answer 
fused in one sound 
that mounts and mounts and then 
is split into the old selves, 
the tired antagonisms. Do you see? 
We were made fools of. 
And the scent of mock orange 
drifts through the window.

How can I rest? 
How can I be content 
when there is still 
that odor in the world?

Louise Gluck
Mother and Child

We're all dreamers; we don't know who we are.

Some machine made us; machine of the world, the constricting family.
Then back to the world, polished by soft whips.

We dream; we don't remember.

Machine of the family: dark fur, forests of the mother's body.
Machine of the mother: white city inside her.

And before that: earth and water.
Moss between rocks, pieces of leaves and grass.

And before, cells in a great darkness.
And before that, the veiled world.

This is why you were born: to silence me.
Cells of my mother and father, it is your turn
to be pivotal, to be the masterpiece.

I improvised; I never remembered.
Now it's your turn to be driven;
you're the one who demands to know:

Why do I suffer? Why am I ignorant?
Cells in a great darkness. Some machine made us;
it is your turn to address it, to go back asking
what am I for? What am I for?

Louise Gluck
Nocturne

Mother died last night,
Mother who never dies.

Winter was in the air,
many months away
but in the air nevertheless.

It was the tenth of May.
Hyacinth and apple blossom
bloomed in the back garden.

We could hear
Maria singing songs from Czechoslovakia?—

How alone I am?—
songs of that kind.

How alone I am,
no mother, no father?—
my brain seems so empty without them.

Aromas drifted out of the earth;
the dishes were in the sink,
rinsed but not stacked.

Under the full moon
Maria was folding the washing;
the stiff? sheets became
dry white rectangles of? moonlight.

How alone I am, but in music
my desolation is my rejoicing.

It was the tenth of May
as it had been the ninth, the eighth.

Mother slept in her bed,
her arms outstretched, her head
balanced between them.
There was an apple tree in the yard --
this would have been
forty years ago -- behind,
only meadows. Drifts
of crocus in the damp grass.
I stood at that window:
late April. Spring
flowers in the neighbor's yard.
How many times, really, did the tree
flower on my birthday,
the exact day, not
before, not after? Substitution
of the immutable
for the shifting, the evolving.
Substitution of the image
for relentless earth. What
do I know of this place,
the role of the tree for decades
taken by a bonsai, voices
rising from the tennis courts --
Fields. Smell of the tall grass, new cut.
As one expects of a lyric poet.
We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.

Louise Gluck
October

Is it winter again, is it cold again,
didn't Frank just slip on the ice,
didn't he heal, weren't the spring seeds planted

didn't the night end,
didn't the melting ice
flood the narrow gutters

wasn't my body
rescued, wasn't it safe

didn't the scar form, invisible
above the injury

terror and cold,
didn't they just end, wasn't the back garden
harrowed and planted-

I remember how the earth felt, red and dense,
in stiff rows, weren't the seeds planted,
didn't vines climb the south wall

I can't hear your voice
for the wind's cries, whistling over the bare ground

I no longer care
what sound it makes

when was I silenced, when did it first seem
pointless to describe that sound

what it sounds like can't change what it is-

didn't the night end, wasn't the earth
safe when it was planted

didn't we plant the seeds,
weren't we necessary to the earth,
the vines, were they harvested?

Louise Gluck
Odysseus' Decision

The great man turns his back on the island.
Now he will not die in paradise
nor hear again
the lutes of paradise among the olive trees,
by the clear pools under the cypresses. Time
begins now, in which he hears again
that pulse which is the narrative
sea, at dawn when its pull is strongest.
What has brought us here
will lead us away; our ship
sways in the tinted harbor water.
Now the spell is ended.
Give him back his life,
sea that can only move forward.

Louise Gluck
Parable Of Faith

Now, in twilight, on the palace steps
the king asks forgiveness of his lady.

He is not
duplicitous; he has tried to be
true to the moment; is there another way of being
true to the self?

The lady
hides her face, somewhat
assisted by the shadows. She weeps
for her past; when one has a secret life,

one's tears are never explained.

Yet gladly would the king bear
the grief of his lady: his
is the generous heart,
in pain as in joy.

Do you know
what forgiveness mean? it mean
the world has sinned, the world
must be pardoned --

Louise Gluck
Parable Of The Dove

A dove lived in a village.
When it opened its mouth
sweetness came out, sound
like a silver light around
the cherry bough. But
the dove wasn't satisfied.

It saw the villagers
gathered to listen under
the blossoming tree.
It didn't think: I
am higher that they are.
It wanted to wealk among them,
to experience the violence of human feeling,
in part for its song's sake.

So it became human.
It found passion, it found violence,
first conflated, then
as separate emotions
and these were not
contained by music. Thus
its song changed,
the sweet notes of its longing to become human
soured and flattened. Then

the world drew back; the mutant
fell from love
as from the cherry branch,
it fell stained with the bloody
fruit of the tree.

So it is true after all, not merely
a rule of art:
change your form and you change your nature.
And time does this to us.

Louise Gluck
Parable of the Hostages

The Greeks are sitting on the beach
wondering what to do when the war ends. No one
wants to go home, back
to that bony island; everyone wants a little more
of what there is in Troy, more
life on the edge, that sense of every day as being
packed with surprises. But how to explain this
to the ones at home to whom
fighting a war is a plausible
excuse for absence, whereas
exploring one's capacity for diversion
is not. Well, this can be faced
later; these
are men of action, ready to leave
insight to the women and children.
Thinking things over in the hot sun, pleased
by a new strength in their forearms, which seem
more golden than they did at home, some
begin to miss their families a little,
to miss their wives, to want to see
if the war has aged them. And a few grow
slightly uneasy: what if war
is just a male version of dressing up,
a game devised to avoid
profound spiritual questions? Ah,
but it wasn't only the war. The world had begun
calling them, an opera beginning with the war's
loud chords and ending with the floating aria of the sirens.
There on the beach, discussing the various
timetables for getting home, no one believed
it could take ten years to get back to Ithaca;
no one foresaw that decade of insoluble dilemmas—oh unanswerable
affliction of the human heart: how to divide
the world's beauty into acceptable
and unacceptable loves! On the shores of Troy,
how could the Greeks know
they were hostages already: who once
delays the journey is
already enthralled; how could they know
that of their small number
some would be held forever by the dreams of pleasure,
some by sleep, some by music?

Louise Gluck
Parable of the Swans

On a small lake off
the map of the world, two
swans lived. As swans,
they spent eighty percent of the day studying
themselves in the attentive water and
twenty percent ministering to the beloved
other. Thus
their fame as lovers stems
chiefly from narcissism, which leaves
so little leisure for
more general cruising. But
fate had other plans: after ten years, they hit
slimy water; whatever the filth was, it
clung to the male's plumage, which turned
instantly gray; simultaneously,
the true purpose of his neck's
flexible design revealed itself. So much
action on the flat lake, so much
he's missed! Sooner or later in a long
life together, every couple encounters
some emergency like this, some
drama which results
in harm. This
occurs for a reason: to test
love and to demand
fresh articulation of its complex terms.
So it came to light that the male and female
flew under different banners: whereas
the male believed that love
was what one felt in one's heart
the female believed
love was what one did. But this is not
a little story about the male's
inherent corruption, using as evidence the swan's
sleazy definition of purity. It is
a story of guile and innocence. For ten years
the female studied the male; she dallied
when he slept or when he was
conveniently absorbed in the water,
while the spontaneous male
acted casually, on
the whim of the moment. On the muddy water
they bickered awhile, in the fading light,
until the bickering grew
slowly abstract, becoming
part of their song
after a little longer.

Louise Gluck
Parousia

Love of my life, you
Are lost and I am
Young again.

A few years pass.
The air fills
With girlish music;
In the front yard
The apple tree is
Studded with blossoms.

I try to win you back,
That is the point
Of the writing.
But you are gone forever,
As in Russian novels, saying
A few words I don't remember-

How lush the world is,
How full of things that don't belong to me-

I watch the blossoms shatter,
No longer pink,
But old, old, a yellowish white-
The petals seem
To float on the bright grass,
Fluttering slightly.

What a nothing you were,
To be changed so quickly
Into an image, an odor-
You are everywhere, source
Of wisdom and anguish.

Louise Gluck
Penelope's Song

Little soul, little perpetually undressed one,
Do now as I bid you, climb
The shelf-like branches of the spruce tree;
Wait at the top, attentive, like
A sentry or look-out. He will be home soon;
It behooves you to be
Generous. You have not been completely
Perfect either; with your troublesome body
You have done things you shouldn’t
Discuss in poems. Therefore
Call out to him over the open water, over the bright
Water
With your dark song, with your grasping,
Unnatural song--passionate,
Like Maria Callas. Who
Wouldn't want you? Whose most demonic appetite
Could you possibly fail to answer? Soon
He will return from wherever he goes in the
Meantime,
Suntanned from his time away, wanting
His grilled chicken. Ah, you must greet him,
You must shake the boughs of the tree
To get his attention,
But carefully, carefully, lest
His beautiful face be marred
By too many falling needles.

Louise Gluck
In the early evening, a now, as man is bending over his writing table. Slowly he lifts his head; a woman appears, carrying roses. Her face floats to the surface of the mirror, marked with the green spokes of rose stems.

It is a form of suffering: then always the transparent page raised to the window until its veins emerge as words finally filled with ink.

And I am meant to understand what binds them together or to the gray house held firmly in place by dusk because I must enter their lives: it is spring, the pear tree filming with weak, white blossoms.

Louise Gluck
A child draws the outline of a body.  
She draws what she can, but it is white all through,  
she cannot fill in what she knows is there.  
Within the unsupported line, she knows  
that life is missing; she has cut  
one background from another. Like a child,  
she turns to her mother.  

And you draw the heart  
against the emptiness she has created.  

Louise Gluck
Retreating Wind

When I made you, I loved you.
Now I pity you.

I gave you all you needed:
bed of earth, blanket of blue air--

As I get further away from you
I see you more clearly.
Your souls should have been immense by now,
not what they are,
small talking things--

I gave you every gift,
blue of the spring morning,
time you didn't know how to use--
you wanted more, the one gift
reserved for another creation.

Whatever you hoped,
you will not find yourselves in the garden,
among the growing plants.
Your lives are not circular like theirs:

your lives are the bird's flight
which begins and ends in stillness--
which begins and ends, in form echoing
this arc from the white birch
to the apple tree.

Louise Gluck
In our family, there were two saints,  
my aunt and my grandmother.  
But their lives were different.

My grandmother's was tranquil, even at the end.  
She was like a person walking in calm water;  
for some reason  
the sea couldn't bring itself to hurt her.  
When my aunt took the same path,  
the waves broke over her, they attacked her,  
which is how the Fates respond  
to a true spiritual nature.

My grandmother was cautious, conservative:  
that's why she escaped suffering.  
My aunt's escaped nothing;  
each time the sea retreats, someone she loves is taken away.

Still she won't experience  
the sea as evil. To her, it is what it is:  
where it touches land, it must turn to violence.

Louise Gluck
Siren

I became a criminal when I fell in love.
Before that I was a waitress.

I didn't want to go to Chicago with you.
I wanted to marry you, I wanted
Your wife to suffer.

I wanted her life to be like a play
In which all the parts are sad parts.

Does a good person
Think this way? I deserve

Credit for my courage--

I sat in the dark on your front porch.
Everything was clear to me:
If your wife wouldn't let you go
That proved she didn't love you.
If she loved you
Wouldn't she want you to be happy?

I think now
If I felt less I would be
A better person. I was
A good waitress.
I could carry eight drinks.

I used to tell you my dreams.
Last night I saw a woman sitting in a dark bus--
In the dream, she's weeping, the bus she's on
Is moving away. With one hand
She's waving; the other strokes
An egg carton full of babies.

The dream doesn't rescue the maiden.

Louise Gluck
Late December: my father and I
are going to New York, to the circus.
He holds me
on his shoulders in the bitter wind:
scraps of white paper
blow over the railroad ties.

My father liked
to stand like this, to hold me
so he couldn't see me.
I remember
staring straight ahead
into the world my father saw;
I was learning
to absorb its emptiness,
the heavy snow
not falling, whirling around us.

Louise Gluck
Snowdrops

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know what despair is; then winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive, earth suppressing me. I didn't expect to waken again, to feel in damp earth my body able to respond again, remembering after so long how to open again in the cold light of earliest spring--

afraid, yes, but among you again crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

Louise Gluck
Summer

Remember the days of our first happiness,
how strong we were, how dazed by passion,
lying all day, then all night in the narrow bed,
sleeping there, eating there too: it was summer,
it seemed everything had ripened
at once. And so hot we lay completely uncovered.
Sometimes the wind rose; a willow brushed the window.

But we were lost in a way, didn’t you feel that?
The bed was like a raft; I felt us drifting
far from our natures, toward a place where we’d discover nothing.
First the sun, then the moon, in fragments,
stone through the willow.
Things anyone could see.

Then the circles closed. Slowly the nights grew cool;
the pendant leaves of the willow
yellowed and fell. And in each of us began
a deep isolation, though we never spoke of this,
of the absence of regret.
We were artists again, my husband.
We could resume the journey.

Anonymous submission.

Louise Gluck
The Butterfly

Look, a butterfly. Did you make a wish?

You don't wish on butterflies.

You do so. Did you make one?

Yes.

It doesn't count.

Louise Gluck
You see, they have no judgment.
So it is natural that they should drown,
first the ice taking them in
and then, all winter, their wool scarves
floating behind them as they sink
until at last they are quiet.
And the pond lifts them in its manifold dark arms.

But death must come to them differently,
so close to the beginning.
As though they had always been
blind and weightless. Therefore
the rest is dreamed, the lamp,
the good white cloth that covered the table,
their bodies.

And yet they hear the names they used
like lures slipping over the pond:
What are you waiting for
come home, come home, lost
in the waters, blue and permanent.

Louise Gluck
The Empty Glass

I asked for much; I received much.
I asked for much; I received little, I received
next to nothing.

And between? A few umbrellas opened indoors.
A pair of shoes by mistake on the kitchen table.

O wrong, wrong—it was my nature. I was
hard-hearted, remote. I was
selfish, rigid to the point of tyranny.

But I was always that person, even in early childhood.
Small, dark-haired, dreaded by the other children.
I never changed. Inside the glass, the abstract
tide of fortune turned
from high to low overnight.

Was it the sea? Responding, maybe,
to celestial force? To be safe,
I prayed. I tried to be a better person.
Soon it seemed to me that what began as terror
and matured into moral narcissism
might have become in fact
actual human growth. Maybe
this is what my friends meant, taking my hand,
telling me they understood
the abuse, the incredible shit I accepted,
implying (so I once thought) I was a little sick
to give so much for so little.
Whereas they meant I was good (clasping my hand intensely)—
a good friend and person, not a creature of pathos.

I was not pathetic! I was writ large,
like a queen or a saint.

Well, it all makes for interesting conjecture.
And it occurs to me that what is crucial is to believe
in effort, to believe some good will come of simply trying,
a good completely untainted by the corrupt initiating impulse
to persuade or seduce—

What are we without this?
Whirling in the dark universe,
alone, afraid, unable to influence fate—

What do we have really?
Sad tricks with ladders and shoes,
tricks with salt, impurely motivated recurring
to attempts build character.
What do we have to appease the great forces?

And I think in the end this was the question
that destroyed Agamemnon, there on the beach,
the Greek ships at the ready, the sea
invisible beyond the serene harbor, the future
lethal, unstable: he was a fool, thinking
it could be controlled. He should have said
I have nothing, I am at your mercy.

Louise Gluck
The Fear Of Burial

In the empty field, in the morning,
the body waits to be claimed.
The spirit sits beside it, on a small rock--
nothing comes to give it form again.

Think of the body's loneliness.
At night pacing the sheared field,
its shadow buckled tightly around.
Such a long journey.

And already the remote, trembling lights of the village
not pausing for it as they scan the rows.
How far away they seem,
the wooden doors, the bread and milk
laid like weights on the table.

Louise Gluck
The Garden

The garden admires you.
For your sake it smears itself with green pigment,
The ecstatic reds of the roses,
So that you will come to it with your lovers.

And the willows--
See how it has shaped these green
Tents of silence. Yet
There is still something you need,
Your body so soft, so alive, among the stone animals.

Admit that it is terrible to be like them,
Beyond harm.

Louise Gluck
The Gold Lily

As I perceive
I am dying now and know
I will not speak again, will not
survive the earth, be summoned
out of it again, not
a flower yet, a spine only, raw dirt
catching my ribs, I call you,
father and master: all around,
my companions are failing, thinking
you do not see. How
can they know you see
unless you save us?
In the summer twilight, are you
close enough to hear
your child's terror? Or
are you not my father,
you who raised me?

Louise Gluck
The Myth Of Innocence

One summer she goes into the field as usual
stopping for a bit at the pool where she often
looks at herself, to see
if she detects any changes. She sees
the same person, the horrible mantle
of daughterliness still clinging to her.

The sun seems, in the water, very close.
That's my uncle spying again, she thinks—
everything in nature is in some way her relative.
I am never alone, she thinks,
turning the thought into a prayer.
Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer.

No one understands anymore
how beautiful he was. But Persephone remembers.
Also that he embraced her, right there,
with her uncle watching. She remembers
sunlight flashing on his bare arms.

This is the last moment she remembers clearly.
Then the dark god bore her away.

She also remembers, less clearly,
the chilling insight that from this moment
she couldn't live without him again.

The girl who disappears from the pool
will never return. A woman will return,
looking for the girl she was.

She stands by the pool saying, from time to time,
I was abducted, but it sounds
wrong to her, nothing like what she felt.
Then she says, I was not abducted.
Then she says, I offered myself, I wanted
to escape my body. Even, sometimes,
I willed this. But ignorance
cannot will knowledge. Ignorance
wills something imagined, which it believes exists.

All the different nouns—
she says them in rotation.
Death, husband, god, stranger.
Everything sounds so simple, so conventional.
I must have been, she thinks, a simple girl.

She can't remember herself as that person
but she keeps thinking the pool will remember
and explain to her the meaning of her prayer
so she can understand
whether it was answered or not.

Louise Gluck
The Past

Small light in the sky appearing
suddenly between
two pine boughs, their fine needles

now etched onto the radiant surface
and above this
high, feathery heaven—

Smell the air. That is the smell of the white pine,
most intense when the wind blows through it
and the sound it makes equally strange,
like the sound of the wind in a movie—

Shadows moving. The ropes
making the sound they make. What you hear now
will be the sound of the nightingale, Chordata,
the male bird courting the female—

The ropes shift. The hammock
sways in the wind, tied
firmly between two pine trees.

Smell the air. That is the smell of the white pine.

It is my mother's voice you hear
or is it only the sound the trees make
when the air passes through them

because what sound would it make,
passing through nothing?

Louise Gluck
The Pond

Night covers the pond with its wing.  
Under the ringed moon I can make out  
your face swimming among minnows and the small  
echoing stars. In the night air  
the surface of the pond is metal.

Within, your eyes are open. They contain  
a memory I recognize, as though  
we had been children together. Our ponies  
grazed on the hill, they were gray  
with white markings. Now they graze  
with the dead who wait  
like children under their granite breastplates,  
lucid and helpless:

The hills are far away. They rise up  
blacker than childhood.  
What do you think of, lying so quietly  
by the water? When you look that way I want  
to touch you, but do not, seeing  
as in another life we were of the same blood.

Louise Gluck
The Racer's Widow

The elements have merged into solicitude,
Spasms of violets rise above the mud
And weed, and soon the birds and ancients
Will be starting to arrive, bereaving points
South. But never mind. It is not painful to discuss
His death. I have been primed for this -
For separation - for so long. But still his face assaults
Me; I can hear that car careen again, the crowd coagulate on asphalt
In my sleep. And watching him, I feel my legs like snow
That let him finally let him go
As he lies draining there. And see
How even he did not get to keep that lovely body.

Louise Gluck
The Red Poppy

The great thing
is not having
a mind. Feelings:
oh, I have those; they
govern me. I have
a lord in heaven
called the sun, and open
for him, showing him
the fire of my own heart, fire
like his presence.
What could such glory be
if not a heart? Oh my brothers and sisters,
were you like me once, long ago,
before you were human? Did you
permit yourselves
to open once, who would never
open again? Because in truth
I am speaking now
the way you do. I speak
because I am shattered.

Louise Gluck
The nights have grown cool again, like the nights
Of early spring, and quiet again. Will
Speech disturb you? We're
Alone now; we have no reason for silence.

Can you see, over the garden—the full moon rises.
I won't see the next full moon.

In spring, when the moon rose, it meant
Time was endless. Snowdrops
Opened and closed, the clustered
Seeds of the maples fell in pale drifts.
White over white, the moon rose over the birch tree.
And in the crook, where the tree divides,
Leaves of the first daffodils, in moonlight
Soft greenish-silver.

We have come too far together toward the end now
To fear the end. These nights, I am no longer even certain
I know what the end means. And you, who've been
With a man--

After the first cries,
Doesn't joy, like fear, make no sound?

Louise Gluck
The Triumph Of Achilles

In the story of Patroclus
no one survives, not even Achilles
who was nearly a god.
Patroclus resembled him; they wore
the same armor.

Always in these friendships
one serves the other, one is less than the other:
the hierarchy
is always apparent, though the legends
cannot be trusted--
their source is the survivor,
the one who has been abandoned.

What were the Greek ships on fire
compared to this loss?

In his tent, Achilles
grieved with his whole being
and the gods saw
he was a man already dead, a victim
of the part that loved,
the part that was mortal.

Louise Gluck
The Untrustworthy Speaker

Don't listen to me; my heart's been broken.
I don't see anything objectively.

I know myself; I've learned to hear like a psychiatrist.
When I speak passionately,
That's when I'm least to be trusted.

It's very sad, really: all my life I've been praised
For my intelligence, my powers of language, of insight-
In the end they're wasted-

I never see myself.
Standing on the front steps. Holding my sisters hand.
That's why I can't account
For the bruises on her arm where the sleeve ends . . .

In my own mind, I'm invisible: that's why I'm dangerous.
People like me, who seem selfless.
We're the cripples, the liars:
We're the ones who should be factored out
In the interest of truth.

When I'm quiet, that's when the truth emerges.
A clear sky, the clouds like white fibers.
Underneath, a little gray house. The azaleas
Red and bright pink.

If you want the truth, you have to close yourself
To the older sister, block her out:
When I living thing is hurt like that
In its deepest workings,
All function is altered.

That's why I'm not to be trusted.
Because a wound to the heart
Is also a wound to the mind.

Louise Gluck
The White Lilies

As a man and woman make
a garden between them like
a bed of stars, here
they linger in the summer evening
and the evening turns
cold with their terror: it
could all end, it is capable
of devastation. All, all
can be lost, through scented air
the narrow columns
uselessly rising, and beyond,
a churning sea of poppies--

Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me
how many summers I live to return:
this one summer we have entered eternity.
I felt your two hands
bury me to release its splendor.

Louise Gluck
The Wild Iris

At the end of my suffering there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting. Then nothing. The weak sun flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive as consciousness buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being a soul and unable to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth bending a little. And what I took to be birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember passage from the other world I tell you I could speak again: whatever returns from oblivion returns to find a voice:

from the center of my life came a great fountain, deep blue shadows on azure seawater.

Louise Gluck
The Wish

Remember that time you made the wish?

I make a lot of wishes.

The time I lied to you
about the butterfly. I always wondered
what you wished for.

What do you think I wished for?

I don't know. That I'd come back,
that we’d somehow be together in the end.

I wished for what I always wish for.
I wished for another poem.

Louise Gluck
In your extended absence, you permit me use of earth, anticipating some return on investment. I must report failure in my assignment, principally regarding the tomato plants. I think I should not be encouraged to grow tomatoes. Or, if I am, you should withhold the heavy rains, the cold nights that come so often here, while other regions get twelve weeks of summer. All this belongs to you: on the other hand, I planted the seeds, I watched the first shoots like wings tearing the soil, and it was my heart broken by the blight, the black spot so quickly multiplying in the rows. I doubt you have a heart, in our understanding of that term. You who do not discriminate between the dead and the living, who are, in consequence, immune to foreshadowing, you may not know how much terror we bear, the spotted leaf, the red leaves of the maple falling even in August, in early darkness: I am responsible for these vines.

Louise Gluck
Visitors from Abroad

Sometime after I had entered
that time of ??life
people prefer to allude to in others
but not in themselves, in the middle of the night
the phone rang. It rang and rang
as though the world needed me,
though really it was the reverse.

I lay in bed, trying to analyze
the ring. It had
my mother's persistence and my father's
pained embarrassment.

When I picked it up, the line was dead.
Or was the phone working and the caller dead?
Or was it not the phone, but the door perhaps?

2

My mother and father stood in the cold
on the front steps. My mother stared at me,
a daughter, a fellow female.
You never think of us, she said.

We read your books when they reach heaven.
Hardly a mention of us anymore, hardly a mention of? your sister.
And they pointed to my dead sister, a complete stranger,
tightly wrapped in my mother's arms.

But for us, she said, you wouldn't exist.
And your sister?—?you have your sister's soul.
After which they vanished, like Mormon missionaries.

3

The street was white again,
all the bushes covered with heavy snow
and the trees glittering, encased with ice.

I lay in the dark, waiting for the night to end. It seemed the longest night I had ever known, longer than the night I was born.

I write about you all the time, I said aloud. Every time I say "I," it refers to you.

4

Outside the street was silent. The receiver lay on its side among the tangled sheets, its peevish throbbing had ceased some hours before.

I left it as it was; its long cord drifting under the furniture.

I watched the snow falling, not so much obscuring things as making them seem larger than they were.

Who would call in the middle of the night? Trouble calls, despair calls. Joy is sleeping like a baby.

Louise Gluck
Vita Nova

You saved me, you should remember me.

The spring of the year; young men buying tickets for the ferryboats. Laughter, because the air is full of apple blossoms.

When I woke up, I realized I was capable of the same feeling.

I remember sounds like that from my childhood, laughter for no cause, simply because the world is beautiful, something like that.

Lugano. Tables under the apple trees. Deckhands raising and lowering the colored flags. And by the lake's edge, a young man throws his hat into the water; perhaps his sweetheart has accepted him.

Crucial sounds or gestures like a track laid down before the larger themes

and then unused, buried.

Islands in the distance. My mother holding out a plate of little cakes—

as far as I remember, changed in no detail, the moment vivid, intact, having never been exposed to light, so that I woke elated, at my age hungry for life, utterly confident—

By the tables, patches of new grass, the pale green pieced into the dark existing ground.

Surely spring has been returned to me, this time not as a lover but a messenger of death, yet it is still spring, it is still meant tenderly.
Widows

My mother's playing cards with my aunt,
Spite and Malice, the family pastime, the game
my grandmother taught all her daughters.

Midsummer: too hot to go out.
Today, my aunt's ahead; she's getting the good cards.
My mother's dragging, having trouble with her concentration.
She can't get used to her own bed this summer.
She had no trouble last summer,
getting used to the floor. She learned to sleep there
to be near my father.
He was dying; he got a special bed.

My aunt doesn't give an inch, doesn't make
allowance for my mother's weariness.
It's how they were raised: you show respect by fighting.
To let up insults the opponent.

Each player has one pile to the left, five cards in the hand.
It's good to stay inside on days like this,
to stay where it's cool.
And this is better than other games, better than solitaire.

My grandmother thought ahead; she prepared her daughters.
They have cards; they have each other.
They don't need any more companionship.

All afternoon the game goes on but the sun doesn't move.
It just keeps beating down, turning the grass yellow.
That's how it must seem to my mother.
And then, suddenly, something is over.

My aunt's been at it longer; maybe that's why she's playing better.
Her cards evaporate: that's what you want, that's the object: in the end,
the one who has nothing wins.

Louise Gluck