

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Louise Gluck**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2004

**Publisher:**

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

## Louise Glück(22 April 1943)

Born in 1943, Louise Glück 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. Glück 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 Poets 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 Glück 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

# A Summer Garden

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.

2

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 &quot;I agree&quot; or &quot;I'm unsure, puzzled—&quot;

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: "sterility" and, down the page,  
"oblivion"—

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

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 doorframe, 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

# Afterword

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  
constrantly 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 Glück

# 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&#8212;  
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

# Dawn

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 achieve--

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,  
never 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

climbing 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

# Love Poem

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 Glück

# 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 Glück

# 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.

Louise Gluck

# Nostos

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 than 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

# Poem

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

# Portrait

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 Glück

# 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

# Saints

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

# Snow

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 Glück

# 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

# The Drowned Children

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  
attempts to 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  
blackier 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 Silver Lily

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 Glück

# 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 apparant, 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 Glück

# 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

# Vespers

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