

PAGE-TURNER

# LOUISE GLÜCK, REMEMBERED BY WRITERS

*Henri Cole, Elisa Gonzalez, Jiayang Fan, Katy Waldman, Kevin Young, and Hilton Als commemorate the Nobel-winning poet.*

**By The New Yorker**

October 16, 2023



Photograph by Katherine Wolkoff

*Louise Glück, who contributed poems to *The New Yorker* for half a century, died on Friday. We've gathered reflections on her life and work from writers and poets who knew, read, and studied with Glück.*

In the fall of 2005, I signed up to take Louise Glück's writing workshop. At our small liberal-arts college, Professor Glück cut an intimidating figure. My classmates and I knew it was a privilege to be in her company. The Nobel was still more than a decade off, but she had won awards, big ones, we were vaguely aware. More important, she was a practicing poet. Was it tedious for her to be in our company? The class was called Introduction to Poetry, and there were no prerequisites for entry. Most of us did not know what poetry was and mistook curlicues, flourishes, and acrobatic metaphors for the apex of the form. Which is to say, we were children.

And yet, Professor Glück refused to treat us like children. The fact was made manifest during the first weeks of class, when she said that a few lines of what I believed to be stylish verse were "inert." I had thought I knew what the word meant, but I had never heard it used with such visceral aversion. It wasn't until years later, when I read her essay "Education of a Poet," in which she describes "the fundamental experience of the writer" as "helplessness," that I realized her reaction to inertness on the page arose out of her own helplessness to respond otherwise.

Write anything you want, she told us. Just make sure it's not dead. Every class, Glück chose a poem from our submissions to read and analyze aloud. A few weeks in, a poem of mine was chosen. I don't remember much of the poem, except that it was about a mother and a daughter and the swollen feelings that could not be expressed between them. A few things about the poem stood out to Glück. One, the line "peeling porch swing, creaking weakly" was a mistake; it was too much, and creaking with too much desperation to "sound like poetry." That line aside, though, she had found the "sparse" quality of the poem's language appealing. It was the first thing of mine she'd ever read.

Glück gave us assignments on a weekly basis. Always, I kept my poems simple because the simplicity of my “poetic form” seemed to keep them in Glück’s favor. One of the poems she even called “accomplished,” seemingly unaware that its sparseness was not a stylistic choice as much as the consequence of a lack of experience.

For our last student-teacher conference, Professor Glück called me into her office. The last poem I turned in didn’t work, she told me frankly. For this final assignment, I had been determined to demonstrate that I could write something that was emphatically un-sparse. And so I had spent a considerable amount of time imitating the style of a famous twentieth-century poet whose baroque lines I did not understand and therefore found worthy of imitation. In front of Professor Glück, I now looked at the page I had submitted. She hadn’t even bothered marking it up because, as she put it, “There’s not much there.” As she said those words, a liquid shame poured over me. It was over. I had been found out, not only for my mediocrity but for my perverse deception.

She must have said other things, but I didn’t hear them. My ears perked up only at what I understood to be consolation. Some of my earlier poems were good, she said. They were “not quite there but came very close.” Close to what? I dared not ask. Then the most perplexing thing in my short writing life happened. “When you write more, you can send them to me over the holiday break,” she said. On a notepad, she wrote down her address and tore it off for me. She couldn’t possibly be paid to read student poems after she had handed in all the grades, was my first thought. The second thing that struck me was her certainty that I would write more poems despite the disastrous effort of the most recent one.

I never sent her any poems. But, for a long time, that scrap of paper on which she wrote her address was the most precious thing I owned. Years passed, and gradually I did begin to write, not poems but small reflections that spun into longer essays about my mother, childhood, and feelings that could not be easily expressed, as it turned out, in any form.

My time in Glück's class did not mark the beginning of my life as a writer. It hardly marked the start of my conception of what it meant to be one. But it initiated my belief that the aspiration to be one was a struggle in which I could claim agency. It would be my choice whether to continue to write, and embracing that choice was what made a writer, as much as the quality of the writing itself. "Not quite there" is still how I feel when I read back my own words on the page. It is a struggle every time, with words that start slow and leaden, and, if I am assiduous and patient, acquire something approximating life.

The ambition to create is indistinguishable from the fear, verging sometimes on conviction, that you can never do so. Glück's genius as a poet was reflected in her keen understanding that the craft returns us all to childhood, helpless and desperate for mastery. Her equally remarkable generosity as a teacher meant that she could never be less than honest with students about the reality of this process. A writer's life is dignified "by yearning," she believed, "not made serene by sensations of achievement." Write anything you want, just make sure it's not dead, she told us, knowing that we would most certainly write things that were dead—but that it was up to us where we went from there. —*Jiayang Fan*

Though I'm not entirely sure where I first read Louise Glück—I believe it was her poem "Mock Orange," in the "Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets," in which she's pictured, defiant, wearing a headband—I know for certain where I first came to love her work, which was when I found a copy of her début book, "Firstborn." Though she eventually came to be less appreciative of this early poetry, for me it was a window into what only deepens in her later work—that is, family, loss, and myth. Later still, artistic-but-not-poet friends of mine sang the praises of the stark language in Glück's books "Ararat" and "The Wild Iris"; I came to that work newly hearing the rich emotion they had heard in its ornate plainness. I still had my father then, not for long enough, and Glück's books were waiting for me once I lost him, nineteen years ago—her poem "Vespers" I especially saw as a useful field guide to grief. "You permit me / use of earth," Glück writes, ending, "I am responsible / for these vines." I would include it in "The Art of Losing," a book of elegies that I edited.

I didn't know then that "Vespers" had first appeared in *The New Yorker*, nor could I have guessed that I would get the chance to edit, which is to say, include, her poems in the magazine. The poems she sent arrived typed up and via snail mail; she didn't care for e-mail, or any number of modern things, but that was only part of the charm. Her poems were indeed missives from another world, and we were always eager to have them in hand. The day she won the Nobel Prize, nonplussed about the honor—"I was unprepared," she said—we had recently taken her poem "Song," which ran in the magazine a few days later. It was the culmination of more than fifty years of appearing in *The New Yorker's* pages. While we mourn her dying, and seemingly so suddenly, her work, like the vines in "Vespers," remains renewed and renewing. As she says in "Song": "And I say then I'm glad I dream /the fire is still alive." —*Kevin Young*

**D**uring my freshman year, Louise taught me to revise. It was perhaps the hardest lesson to learn in a year of hard lessons in and out of the classroom. After my first submission, I wept upon reading, in her distinctive half-print, half-cursive scrawl, "hopelessly conventional" on my poem. At last, I thought, I have reached my limits as a writer; I am mediocre and must learn to bear it. Later, Louise and I laughed about this whirlpool of teen-age feeling. We shared a tendency toward melodrama, and an awareness of this tendency, and thus a suspicion of it, and a weary amusement when confronted yet again with the inability to excise it. (It was also from her that I learned how to laugh at habitual faults without tolerating them.)

Sometimes she would circle a line and name it the only "alive" thing in a whole poem. Sometimes she would say, "There's something here, but it's not on the page yet." I think her excitement about the possibility of a poem that was alive in every particular helped me keep trying. I remember the trying, which was excruciating and slow, because writing and revising are often excruciating and slow, as alchemical transformation. I remember sitting on my extra-long twin bed in my dorm room, typing and—this is how I remember it—all at once understanding how to reimagine, not simply reword.

In her approach to my work, and to her own—in book after book, an effort at reinvention within the boundaries that must be resisted even as they are laid out, unavoidably, by the self—she showed me the kind of dedication that writing requires: a fidelity to the making of the best thing that one can make.

I realized as I was writing this that, in teaching me to revise, Louise also taught me to suffer the loss of language. Though it's frightening because words are so hard-won (from the world, from the self), much must be discarded to truly create. Writing demands a ruthless love. I am a less fearful rewriter because of her, but I don't know how I will bear the loss of *her*, even with all the language she's left behind. —*Elisa Gonzalez*

**O**f course she would die on Friday the 13th in October. It rivals being the daughter of one of the men who created the X-Acto knife. We fear profaning the absence she left behind, and so we are all dumbly quoting her, intuiting that only her poetry can rise to the occasion of her death. The truth is that any kind of writing is hard—something is so rarely preferable to nothing. Professor Glück, instead of pretending to forget this, distilled it down, and to read her work is to stand unprotected against the difficulty not just of writing but of bearing the knowledge that is worth being written. The words in her poems are like divining rods wiggling above an icy stream. You can only hold them for so long. When I was in school and she was briefly my professor, her office sat at the very top of the English building. You had to climb four flights of stairs, and then her door was unmarked at the end of a long hall. Most of us were terrified to meet with her, even though she was unfailingly kind. What I remember is a small round table; you'd sit across from her and she'd pore over your fanned-out pages with a stubby pencil in hand. My poems rarely got her going, but there's one, now, that still feels charged with the dark quality of her attention. When I read it, I can feel her eyes staring back at me. —*Katy Waldman*

Louise Glück once said to me that she thought American poets were extremely cautious in their opinions of one another socially, but promiscuous privately. She thought this was a formula that should be reversed. We were on the telephone, discussing her essay “American Narcissism,” which had recently appeared in *The Threepenny Review*. Louise had just begun to write again, after a two-and-a-half-year hiatus, so she was understandably happy. This meant that she would be able to make poems in the new life she was constructing for herself in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after living for many years in Vermont. I had already known that long silences were a painful, inexplicable part of her writing life.

A few weeks later, when I drove up the dead-end street where Louise lived, she was waiting at the foot of her front steps, wearing all black and carrying a small purse over her shoulder. Her hair was freshly washed. We were going out to dinner, but she wanted first to show me her apartment and garden, which I had never seen, and I took this as a sign that the seeds of friendship were being planted. Louise lived on the second floor of a triple-decker, and her little book-lined study was in an alcove at the front, in the treetops. The apartment was freshly painted white and scarcely furnished. On the mantle, a collection of Japanese netsuke was displayed. Her bedroom was at the back, overlooking the garden, and the linens on the bed were white, like much of the apartment. At the foot of the bed were two stuffed animals, anteaters or armadillos, which Louise told me were especially beloved because they could be microwaved and used as heating pads.

In the back yard, she had planted a large horseshoe-shaped garden, and many of its contents had come from her old garden in Vermont. There were pale-pink tea roses, dark-maroon peonies, and a small, mesh-covered lettuce plot. She told me there would soon be Casablanca lilies blooming, remembering I had written a poem about them. Then we drove to Inman Square, where Louise had reserved her usual table at a neighborhood restaurant. To start, we each drank a glass of California chardonnay, and Louise intermittently splashed seltzer in hers. For

dinner, she ordered a bowl of mussels, with extra broth, garlic, and parsley, then an arugula salad, without pears, walnuts, or blue cheese; I ordered a sirloin steak with dandelion salad, and when our meals arrived we shared between us a second glass of chardonnay.

Louise told me that writing her most recent book, “The Seven Ages,” had been like “flying,” and she recounted the story of a friend, a classicist from Williamstown, who’d had a dream in which Louise appeared. Louise, her friend, and her friend’s husband were on the rooftop of a high building, and Louise told them they must all jump, because if they did they would not be hurt. So they jumped, and all of them experienced nirvana. The last poem in Louise’s book, entitled “Fable,” reconfigures this dream as Louise and a lover:

Then I looked down and saw  
the world I was entering, that would be my home.  
And I turned to my companion, and I said *Where are we?*  
And he replied *Nirvana*.  
And I said again *But the light will give us no peace*.

We talked about solitude, and Louise admitted that three days alone were too much. As our conversation grew intimate, she sat sideways in her chair, folding her slender leg up on it like a bird or a teen-ager. A sensualist, she wiped the salad dressing and juices from her plates with her index finger and unself-consciously licked it.

I told Louise I thought her new long poem “October,” which had recently appeared in *The New Yorker*, was magnificent, and she was pleased. It is a lyric sequence in six parts, and she explained how the first two were written first but the third, whose final lines I love, was written last:

*Come to me*, said the world. I was standing  
in my wool coat at a kind of bright portal—  
I can finally say  
*long ago*: it gives me considerable pleasure. Beauty



the healer, the teacher—

death cannot harm me  
more than you have harmed me,  
my beloved life.

“The rest was stitched together like scraps from a quilt,” she told me, adding that it was conceived, in part, as a response to her recovery from whiplash. I said I believed the body’s impulse was toward healing and that I’d learned this watching my own body recover from a bicycling accident in which I was thrown a great distance and lay unconscious in a hospital bed for many hours. But Louise argued instead that the body’s impulse was toward collapse and decay.

We talked about the need to transcend Eros in one’s work and discussed when this occurs in a career. We talked about contemporary tastes in American poetry and agreed that the *Zeitgeist* was shifting but what the future held was unknown. When I showed her two different jacket designs for my new collection “Middle Earth,” after holding each close to her face in the dim light, she said she favored the more austere version. Then she excused herself and went to wash her hands.

Awaiting her return, I thought about the pristine whiteness of Louise’s apartment. In her bathroom, the white tub, white toilet, white pedestal sink, white tiles, white floor, white cabinets, and white trash bin were brightly lit and offset by a large bevel-edged oval mirror with shiny chrome brackets. I imagined Louise lying in that white tub, like a figure in a Bonnard painting, surveying her body, floating in dream or thought or both. No truth would escape her there. Her home reminded me of Japanese teahouses I’d visited in the foothills around Kyoto, where there is a high value placed on austerity and rustic simplicity. Her poems could be said to be influenced by this aesthetic, in which beauty is always imperfect, impermanent, or incomplete, and in which only three simple realities are acknowledged: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect. This Japanese aesthetic brings about within us a serene melancholy or spiritual longing, as Louise’s poems sometimes do for me—with their simple vocabulary, dramatic juxtapositions, subtle pacing, and sentiments of desolation.

When Louise returned to the table, she asked about my love life, and I answered truthfully. Louise always listened carefully and reflected a moment before replying. She said she thought a writer had to be tough to survive. She said she tried to teach her students to be ambitious. She said she is always listening for the solitary voice in lament.

Louise called her mother every day to “check in.” Her mother was ninety-five, and that morning, when Louise had reported she’d been to the orthodontist, her mother had replied, “That’s marvellous, darling.” The television was loud in the background, and her mother had plainly misunderstood. She thought Louise had said she’d been to the “orchid-eater.” Louise was delighted and wanted to tell me because I was from the “lush South, where you might really have such things as orchid-eaters.”

Once, at a public reading, I heard Louise say that in her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, “The Wild Iris,” the figure of God, when he speaks, sounds remarkably like her mother, though she’d never told her mother this. When I told Louise how my mother had French expressions she frequently used when I was a boy—like “*mon derrière*” (“my ass”) and “*minute, papillon*” (“slow down, hold your horses”)—Louise said her parents had little phrases, too, in Japanese and French, that they used to call the family to meals, etc. She hated them.

After dinner, in the car driving home, Louise and I talked about writing during periods of happiness and love—which she believed was possible. Louise described a time long before, when she lived in Vermont and felt profound happiness in her marriage and was also able to write. I told her I believed love was our highest vocation and that I hoped I wouldn’t die without experiencing it. At her front door, we embraced. The next morning, she was flying to Washington, where there would be a gathering of young poets whom Louise would introduce.

“They’ll be like young eaglets watching one another,” she said, slamming the car door shut. —*Henri Cole*

A few years ago, I was chatting with an actress friend—an acquaintance, really—and, toward the end of our conversation, I asked the usual question: Was she working? Any scripts out there that were worth her time? Actually, the woman said, she had been cast in a small ensemble piece, one in which she was meant to play with and against the fabled K; it was a TV flick written by Z, an author whose work we both admired. But, I countered, could she, an intuitive, internal performer, really perform with K? Although K had been fascinating in a number of projects, I said, I had never been able to locate her wound—a feeling my actress friend understood at once. Being a consummate artist, she knew that a wound was essential to a creative inner life, that the hurt she'd experienced had contributed to her understanding of how other people lived and suffered and survived. While K's relative healthiness might serve her well in life, I said, it wasn't the best thing for art, or, at least, for the kind of art that I was interested in, which conveyed something of what it felt like to stand in the rain outside the house of the family of man.

When I first heard of Louise Glück's death, I thought of that conversation, which sounded, in memory, like a poem that only Louise Glück could write—she who knew how to write about that kind of creative alchemy, how to experience it. Alchemy was one of her great subjects, as was getting at the truth of character, of the soul, through the wounded self. In her 2009 poem "Bats," Glück writes, "There are two kinds of vision: / the seeing of things, which belongs / to the science of optics, versus / the seeing beyond things, which / results from deprivation." If we are fat with life, the writer suggests, how can we see beyond our satiation? In her electric and spartan work, Glück concentrates, too, on the white space surrounding a poem, how the light of that whiteness makes her words incandescent, beyond our reach even as we try to read them, dream them, sing them. A Glück poem can sound like the most intimate, constructive conversation you've ever had with a friend who is smarter than you, her intelligence a gift, her words a form of charity.

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I came to Glück rather late in her career, and, when I did, I didn't "like" her writing. It didn't feel like "poetry" to me—romantic, "wild"—but, rather, like lines that one would find stitched into "apocalyptic wallpaper" by the visual artist Elaine Reichek. Indeed, I thought some of the poems would resonate more—for me, at least—as visual objects. Something to hang on a wall and study from a distance—the distance I felt in Glück's verse. But when I read her final volume, "Winter Recipes from the Collective" (2021), I started to understand why Glück used relatively simple language to get at the heart of things: to earn her poems' endings. She didn't seem to be interested in finishing a poem in order to let it go; rather, she wanted to work her way toward the *sound* of a conclusion, that village church bell announcing the end of one day and the beginning of another. Glück's poem "Night Thoughts," in "Winter Recipes," for instance, takes us on a journey of inquiry about the self:

Long ago I was born.  
There is no one alive anymore  
who remembers me as a baby.

Was I a good baby? A  
bad? Except in my head  
that debate is now  
silenced forever.  
What constitutes  
a bad baby, I wondered. Colic  
my mother said, which meant  
it cried a lot.

Of course, the "it" is and isn't Glück: she may have had colic, but there are many other colicky babies, too, a world of babies. At the close of the poem, though, Glück becomes an "I," a baby unto herself:

What a shame I became  
verbal, with no connection  
to that memory. My mother's love!  
All too soon I emerged  
my true self,  
robust but sour,  
like an alarm clock.

To be robust but sour, like an alarm clock, is to make a fretful noise. And, when I first read this poem, I not only heard the clock; I felt the humor in Glück's description of a body and mind that grew and grew past being "mothered."

I knew little about Glück's life when I started reading her work seriously. In any case, I never gravitate to poets' biographies at first: the sound and meter of who they are—what makes up their soul—is there in the work, along with their wounds. As it happens, Glück, who benefitted from psychoanalysis, doesn't hide from straight-up autobiography, particularly in her philosophical prose. And even though she was considered a confessional poet, along the lines of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, early in her career, I have to say that part of what I grew to love about her writing was how much she was hiding in plain sight within it. It is very difficult to find the metaphors that ring true about a life, but Glück achieved that again and again. Before Glück's birth, there was an older sister, but she died, leaving Glück bereft before she even knew what that meant; for her whole life she lived with a ghost that her poet self could not let go. And it is that haunting that we see and feel in Glück's extraordinary 1975 work "Gretel in Darkness," which goes, in part:

This is the world we wanted.  
All who would have seen us dead  
are dead. I hear the witch's cry  
break in the moonlight through a sheet  
of sugar: God rewards.  
Her tongue shrivels into gas. . . .

No one remembers. Even you, my brother,  
summer afternoons you look at me though  
you meant to leave,  
as though it never happened.  
But I killed for you. I see armed firs,  
the spires of that gleaming kiln come back, come back

Nights I turn to you to hold me  
but you are not there.  
Am I alone? Spies  
hiss in the stillness, Hansel,  
we are there still and it is real, real,  
that black forest and the fire in earnest.

To turn to someone who is not there is to know something about both  
deprivation and hope. When Glück wishes for something that is not there, how can  
she will it  
to be present? Through words and their failures. From her 1989 lecture “The  
Education of the Poet”:

The fundamental experience of the writer is helplessness. This does not mean to distinguish  
writing from being alive: it means to correct the fantasy that creative work is an ongoing record  
of the triumph of volition, that the writer is someone who has the good luck to be able to do  
what he or she wishes to do: to confidently and regularly imprint his being on a sheet of paper.  
But writing is not decanting of personality. And most writers spend much of their time in various  
kinds of torment: wanting to write, being unable to write; wanting to write differently, being  
unable to write differently. . . . [The writer’s life] is dignified, I think by yearning, not made  
serene by sensations of achievement.

In other words, writing heals nothing: it only reopens a wound as you try—in vain  
—to dress it. Writers are not nature; we do not regenerate and grow again. But we  
can rise, crooked and beautiful, as we try to describe what nature does to us, which  
one of the themes of Glück’s 1992 collection “The Wild Iris.” In that book, Glück  
gives the wounded and wounding earth—and all that grows in it—a voice. From  
“Daisies”:

. . . It is  
not modern enough, the sound the wind makes  
stirring a meadow of daisies: the mind  
cannot shine following it. And the mind  
wants to shine, plainly, as  
machines shine, and not  
grow deep, as, for example, roots. It is very touching,  
all the same, to see you cautiously  
approaching the meadow's border in early morning  
when no one could possibly  
be watching you.

Sometimes, while reading Glück, I am reminded of this comment by Dian Arbus, to whose photographs of the real and imagined self Glück's poems—more precisely, her ethos as an artist—can sometimes bear an uncanny resemblance. Describing the experience of taking photographs at a nudist camp in New Jersey, Arbus recalled:

I mean there'd be an empty pop bottle or a rust bobby pin—the lake bottom oozes mud in a particularly nasty way and the outhouse smells, the woods look mangy. It gets to seem as if way back in the Garden of Eden after the Fall, Adam and Eve had begged the Lord to forgive them and He, in His boundless exasperation, had said, “All right, then. Stay. Stay in the Garden. Get civilized. Procreate. Muck it up.” And they did.

In her poems, Glück describes how the landscape we've mucked up is just another manifestation of our loneliness, and how we try to fill that loneliness with some spiritual value beyond ourselves. Can that spirit hear us? Or is it too late? The earth in “The Wild Iris” also helps the poet reckon with death, with how the life we're given is the life that must be taken away, in order for the world to blossom (if it can). In “Heaven and Earth,” Glück writes:

Where one finishes, the other begins. . . .

The extremes are easy. Only  
the middle is a puzzle. Midsummer—  
everything is possible.

Never will imagery like Glück's end. It will last as long as death still grows in the moist and not holy earth.

—*Hilton Als* ◆