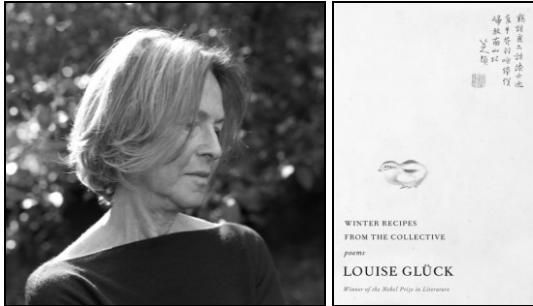


LIVING IN THE IMAGINATION: LOUISE GLÜCK'S LATEST COLLECTION, REVIEWED BY DILYS WOOD



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If we were to seek a single facet of Louise Glück's poetry that might explain her eminence as a Nobel Laureate and the winner of major US awards, it might be the *construction* of her poems. She found a striking way to organise her material in her 1992 collection *The Wild Iris*, where a perspective on matters of life and death is expressed in the voice of plants not people. Her 13th collection, *Winter Recipes from the Collective*, is also concerned with deep issues (ageing and death among them) and makes innovative use of narrative form.

Reviewing a Glück collection, one quickly forms the impression that the poet is a step ahead and there will always be an element of shape-shifting magic in how she does it. Conformity with trend has no appeal for her. The language and construction of her poems obey her own (exigent) rules. In particular, the construction of this book represents a challenging alternative to the normative depiction of the contemporary scene.

Great numbers of acceptable contemporary poems re-live (usually in the author's voice) specific slices of actual experience with settings and emotional content highly relevant to readers' lives – a democratising tendency that can be solipsistic. Glück constructs differently, perhaps to avoid solipsism and conventionality and perhaps to challenge herself to depict open-ended situations. This is evident in relation to settings and references in these poems. There's little here about the day-to-day domestic round, urban life, streetwise behaviours, or (directly) about any of the current 'babbles' which rightly or wrongly preoccupy the media.

This is not to suggest that Glück is indifferent to different kinds of contemporary malaise. While focussing on inner experience and maintaining a degree of detachment, she nevertheless asks how to counter *anomie*. One answer is to find herself afresh (however beset by doubts) in the life of the imagination. This is, in fact, the note on which this collection ends: "Ah, he says, you are dreaming again // And I say then I'm glad I dream / the fire is still alive" (*Song*). But how, in the construction and language of these poems does she define the life of the imagination for us?

Of fifteen poems here, the majority are relatively short reflective pieces, some very lyrical. Five narrative poems (*The Denial of Death*, *Winter Journey*, *An Endless Story*, *The Setting Sun* and the eponymous *Winter Recipes from the Collective*) take up substantially more than half the text. One clue to the kind of narrative in these poems is a reference in *An Endless Story* to the art of 'fable': an old woman falls asleep, "She had been telling / some sort of *fable* [my italics] concerning / a young girl who awakens one morning / as a bird".

The first (short) poem here, *Poem*, strikes the note of fable ("a boy and girl / pausing only to eat wild berries [...] climb the high ice-covered mountain, / then they fly away"). The next, *The Denial of Death*, epitomises the fable form. A typical fable is a story that aims to entertain but also to impart

wisdom; that often involves a journey and dialogues with mysterious strangers; that has features (including dangerous developments) that remind us we're outside our comfort zone. *The Denial of Death* shares elements with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, including the 'crisis of the soul' and the strong 'moralising' in that iconic C17 text.

The Denial of Death involves a lost passport. A fun tourist journey continues for one of two protagonists ("how merrily you stood on the balcony, / pelting me with foil-wrapped chocolates") but the symbolically 'passport-less' partner must now test what in life is most important, including finding more sympathetic, insightful companions. How close the poem is to *fable* form is, of course, for individual judgement. You could argue that the fluid construction is based on dreams or daytime reveries. One aim of the poem is to confront the end of life, and other narrative poems here also explore whatever might help sustain us in this existential crisis, including, in *The Setting Sun*, artistic integrity.

The Setting Sun at first appears to recollect incidents from the poet's early youth. The setting of part 2 is an art class-room or studio, but confidence in actuality is swept away by a turn in the dialogue between a pupil and her master: "Why, sir, I asked, have you no comments on the work before us? / I have been blind for many years, he said". We are back in the moral atmosphere of fable with the sense of dissolving figments of imagination. This doesn't invalidate what the poet wants to bring forward: the role of 'blindness' for the true artist, "Not enough night, I answered. In the night I can see my own soul. / That is also my vision, he said."

All the longer poems here involve a protagonist, *not quite* the poet herself. A 'distancing' project ensures that 'I' doesn't monopolise the foreground. Instead, 'every-woman' characters are portrayed as humble learners or helpless bystanders, awed perhaps by the demands of a stern system, looking back on times (childhood?) when they felt more upheld. Such scenarios call for discussion in depth with companions who Glück sometimes hints could be alter egos. When one of these precisely expressed, gently probing discussions is afoot we may feel that we've reached the heart of what Glück is trying to do – to take us along with the fluctuations of both thought process and mood (which at times is charged with strong emotion).

We don't of course expect resolution of argument. All is provisional. As often happens in fables, the protagonist is placed in a 'developing' situation. A turn-round of moral direction seems possible. The obliteration of static, 'recognisable' settings assists. Short descriptions combine chiselled accuracy with touches of tender feeling ("snow was beginning to fall, / not fall exactly, more like weave side to side, / sliding round the sky", *Winter Journey*; "I could see / the arboretum glowing across the snow; / the trees had been hung with tiny lights; I remember thinking how they must be / visible from far away", *Winter Recipes from the Collective*). But a sense of insolidity (and fluidity in relation to historical period) remains.

The suspension of everyday reality draws us in, recognising vulnerabilities and responding to the poet's frequent call for the assistance of 'good' memories. Scraps of family intimacy float in, Glück's touch sometimes so light it comes to us as a murmur in the ear. One such vignette – in this case vividly and humorously described – is of the poet and her sister in an institutional setting, "having a glass of gin without ice [...] so the nurses / smiled at you as they passed, / pleased at how hydrated you were becoming", *Winter Journey*. *Winter Journey* is not a reminiscence poem about a sister's illness but harvests a family moment as part of an exploratory discourse about the growth of awareness in youth, and different kinds of love.

With a complex writer like Glück there are surprises, including the occasional directly satirical approach exposing deficiencies in current attitudes and governance. *Presidents' Day*, with its 'give-away' title, reads like a direct reference to the mood of a nation that (under Donald Trump?), has been deprived of reasonable hope, "*Joyful* – now there's a word / we haven't used for a while." This poem expresses a steely, no-nonsense side to Glück that makes itself felt in several aspects of her approach. Though that approach is clearly boldly experimental, language including syntax is tightly controlled

and she punctuates meticulously. Within settings that are themselves a kind of deliberate ‘limbo’, linguistic full-dress is kept up.

In terms of metaphorical riches, symbolic meanings and ornate (‘jewel’) qualities, Glück’s writing here can seem on the thin and cool side. Whether her style seems strongly ‘poetic’ is a matter of taste or ‘ear’ for a subtle musicality. But what effects does Glück intend? A kind of linguistic ‘timelessness’ or ‘classicism’ is achieved. The break with confessional-style emotive immediacy in the structure of these poems is matched language purged of the idioms and casual, ‘slipshod’ qualities that might link it with the street. Touches of formal phrasing verging on the archaic underline the courteous deliberation of dialogue exchanges. At times, reported speech echoes the serious fabulist’s voice (say, a master of prose like R.L. Stevenson).

In this new collection Glück does something she has done before – very carefully ‘places herself’ as the scrupulous independent artist (‘investigator’ might be a good word) and not a follower of fashion. While using the obliquities of the ‘fable’ mode, she conveys a struggle for intellectual and emotional honesty and perhaps a deeper drive (at the time when many writers turn to such matters) towards the salvation of the soul. This makes for a brave and ‘big’ book. As the dust cover blurb concludes, ‘This magnificent book couldn’t have been written by anyone else, nor could it have been written by the poet at any other time in her life.’

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***Rain Tree* by Ruth Sharman**
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Ruth Sharman’s second poetry collection, *Scarlet Tiger*, also from Templar, won the Straid Collection Award in 2016.

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