

Louise Glück's "Messengers"

with discussion by Henri Cole

You have only to wait, they will find you.
The geese flying low over the marsh,
glittering in black water.
They find you.

And the deer –
how beautiful they are,
as though their bodies did not impede them.
Slowly they drift into the open
through bronze panels of sunlight.

Why would they stand so still
if they were not waiting?
Almost motionless, until their cages rust,
the shrubs shiver in the wind,
squat and leafless.

You have only to let it happen:
that cry – *release, release* – like the moon
wrenched out of earth and rising
full in its circle of arrows

until they come before you
like dead things, saddled with flesh,
and you above them, wounded and dominant.

– "Messengers," from *The First Four Books of Poems* by Louise Glück. Copyright © 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1985, 1995 by Louise Glück. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

HENRI COLE, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2010, is an award-winning American poet and Professor of English at Ohio State University. He is also poetry editor for *The New Republic*. His poetry collections include *Touch* (2011), *Pierce the Skin* (2010), *Black-bird and Wolf* (2007), and *Middle Earth* (2003), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry.

© 2014 by Henri Cole
doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00257

Louise Glück's first book, *Firstborn*, was rejected eighteen times before it was published. Or was it twenty-eight times? And there was an interval of seven years before her second book, *The House on Marshland*, was published by Ecco Press in 1975. But when it appeared, it was clear that a commanding new voice – classically restrained, yet emotional – had arrived. It was the late 1970s, and I was still a graduate student, reading Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*, Seamus Heaney's *North and Field Work*, John Ashbery's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and Robert Hass's *Praise* – they were game-changers, too.

* * *

Today, the poems in *The House on Marshland* do not seem to me so much austere as essential utterances in which everything ornamental has been stripped away. The lines are made of simple Latinate sentences, sometimes with suspensions, sometimes with dashes and ellipses . . . revealing a writer's hunger for a listener. Also, the endings of the poems seem to move outward like the mouth of a river, instead of stopping abruptly, like a knife against a board. Though there are echoes of Rilke and James Wright's *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* – also, Sylvia Plath (in particular the harsh *Ariel*) and the Robert Lowell of *Life Studies* – the dangers of imitation (is there any greater danger for a poet than drowning in another's glorious style?) have somehow been surpassed.

* * *

In *The House on Marshland*, there are just thirty-five short poems, and the section titles – “All Hallows” and “The Apple Trees” – convey Glück's love of the earth, or, to put it another way, her preoccupation with death. Family life, the conundrum of marriage, maternal love, childhood – these are some of Glück's early subjects. In her poems, life seems continually to be mirrored in the passing of the seasons.

The self (or should I say the soul?) awakens inside a body, like a flowering plum tree, which will fade as autumn comes. Henri Cole

* * *

I first read Glück's poem “Messengers” in *Antaeus*, the international literary magazine (edited by Daniel Halpern), which sadly ceased publication after twenty-five years in 1994. But during the intervening decades, the poem has not lost its intensity for me, or its beauty. Set near a marshland, it begins:

You have only to wait, they will find you.
The geese flying low over the marsh,
glittering in black water.
They find you.

And the deer –
how beautiful they are,
as though their bodies did not impede them.
Slowly they drift into the open
through bronze panels of sunlight.

The second-person point of view (*you you you*) gives the feeling of experience (even the protagonist's own experience) being commented on from a distance – in the most reduced terms – as if it is occurring in a myth where we get the haunted (almost posthumous) commemoration of experience. There is no first-person narrator revealing the events of her life. Instead, the tone is matter-of-fact, disembodied, but strangely triumphant, too. The deer seem to have meaning for the speaker, who asks: “Why would they stand so still / if they were not waiting?”

Like the deer, is Glück waiting for something? Has her body impeded her? Is this why she envies their instinctual grace, stepping through “bronze panels of sunlight” like figures on a medallion? I wonder now to what degree a deer is a female image – for surely femaleness calls up something in us that is different than maleness. Is Glück speaking about the complicated relationship she had with

On Louise
Glück's
"Messengers"

her own body as an anorexic? Though I don't know the answer to this, I'm drawn to the noncircumstantial content of the poem – to the symbolic rather than the biographical – and to the story which feels intimate and heroic.

* * *

Then the camera pans out, and we see a little more of the landscape:

Almost motionless, until their cages rust,
the shrubs shiver in the wind,
squat and leafless.

Glück is not a poet of metrical fluency. Instead, there is a plainness in her poems that has an archaic quality. And Glück is not a poet of elliptical fragmentation – she goes deeper. With her simple vocabulary, dramatic juxtapositions, and subtle pacing, the poems seem to be more in conversation with Blake, Yeats, and Eliot, illuminating what all art must, those human subjects that she identifies as “time which breeds loss, desire, and the world's beauty.”

* * *

Near the end of “Messengers,” there is an invocation to the reader that reframes the first line of the poem, “You have only to wait, they will find you.” Glück says:

You have only to let it happen:
that cry – *release, release* – like the moon
wrenched out of earth and rising
full in its circle of arrows

until they come before you
like dead things, saddled with flesh,
and you above them, wounded and
dominant.

After the mind engages with the landscape and the deer, the poem strives to move toward some fresh idea. Are the grazing deer emblems of pure spirit that do not seem to be detained by anything physical – as we humans are detained by our “wounded” and “dominant” bodies?

Does Glück long for the same preternatural grace and strength that she observes in the deer as they step through bronze sunlight like figures on a painted screen?

* * *

Perhaps, because it is a longing that can never be satisfied, she will make something durable from language instead, though “Messengers” – like all of Glück's poems – does not comfort or placate the reader. It ends on a note of ungratified spiritual hunger. But for the reader there is nobility in recognizing this state, and pleasure in seeing it dignified through language. Her poems could be said to be influenced by an 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. The soul (or consciousness) must question, undergo, and choose, but there is never an easy resolution. Instead there is a turning away.

For all of us trying to make something durable from language – who are not drawn to the prettiness of our utterances, or their melodic flourishes; who are attracted to a kind of fatal truthfulness; and who seek in poems a voice whose distilled vocabulary demands only one listener (like a conch shell pressed against an ear) – Louise Glück is a liberator.