**‘She never stops making demands on herself’: how US poet Louise Glück won the Nobel**

A writer of wisdom and grit, Glück sets a new course for each collection

* Read Telescope, by Louise Glück, below

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 Harbouring contradictions ... the Nobel laureate, Louise Glück. Photograph: Webb Chappell

**R**eaders who follow American poetry closely noticed [Louise Glück](https://www.theguardian.com/books/louise-gl-ck) in the 1970s. The rest of the literary world mostly took her Nobel prize last week as a surprise. And no wonder. She is not particularly topical, nor internationally influential; like the sadder-but-wiser adults who populate her later work, she can seem to keep her own counsel, to withdraw. That attitude is not so much a limit as a condition for her success, over a lifetime of serious, often terse, introspective, unsettling, sometimes exhilarating work. Like all authors of her calibre she harbours contradictions. Read her 12 collections (and two chapbooks) of poetry for the first time, and they may seem almost all of a piece. Read them again, though, and the divisions pop out: she has said that she tries to change, to challenge herself, even to reverse direction with each new book, and if you go deep enough you can see how she’s right.

Do not begin at the beginning; *Firstborn* (1969) was apprentice work. Instead, look at poems from *The House on Marshland* (1975) and the volumes that followed (available in the UK as *The First Five Books of Poems*). These elegantly laconic pieces portrayed women or girls seeking certainty and stability in a world whose only stable truths were grim. Glück’s version of Gretel, after escaping the witch, cannot stop imagining the oven in which her brother almost died: she feels as if she had not saved him. A poem called “Here Are My Black Clothes” begins: “I think now it is better to love no one / than to love you.” “Love Poem” condemns a lover or an ex: “No wonder you are the way you are, / afraid of blood, your women / like one brick wall after another.”

Early Glück wasn’t always that bleak, but she came close, in works that described many people, many difficult families, many adults’ rough choices, rather than stacking up details from her own life. *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) expanded her repertoire of myths and scenes, of aphorisms and insights, without alleviating the sadness: a dream vision of stacked oranges in a marketplace, apparently a refuge for a lonely girl, concludes: “So it was settled: I could have a childhood there. / Which came to mean being always alone.”

Glück’s father helped invent the X-Acto utility knife, often used for crafting, a hard-to-resist metaphor for the cutting precisions of Glück’s poetry. After an eating disorder derailed her teens on Long Island, Glück spent her early 20s not in college but in extensive psychoanalysis: “I’ve learned to hear like a psychiatrist,” she wrote in *Ararat* (1990). That volume placed family stories at the forefront: the long, almost chatty scenes in poems such as “The Unreliable Narrator”, might resonate with readers who had difficult early lives. “A Fable” revised the legend of King Solomon: “Suppose / you saw your mother / torn between two daughters: / what could you do / to save her but be / willing to destroy / yourself?” If the poems were confessional, they were self-consciously, self-accusingly so, taking potentially life-wrecking traumas as matter of fact statements: “My son’s very graceful, he has perfect balance, / He’s not competitive, like my sister’s daughter” (“Cousins”).

These self-scrutinies remain some readers’ favourite poems. For others, though, they feel like run-ups to Glück’s thunderclap of a volume, *The Wild Iris* (1993), which won a Pulitzer prize. Most of its component lyric poems have nonhuman speakers: flowering plants, moss, trees and God. Through such masks, the poet addresses a creator on behalf of the whole creation: “You made me; you should remember me.” (Petals and leaves make good heavenly respondents because their life cycles are perfect fits for no single human being.) “Daisies” even wrong-foots poetic sceptics by asking whether the feelings Glück chronicles matter: “Go ahead. Say what you’re thinking. The garden / is not the real world … It is very touching, / all the same, to see you cautiously / approaching.”

**Glück’s poems face truths that most people deny: the way old age comes for us if we’re lucky; the promises we can't keep**

Glück wrote in her first collection of prose, *Proofs & Theories* (1994), that she tried to make each of her books abjure a strength from the last: she never stopped making demands on herself. Having established her strength in mythic lyric, autobiography and pastoral allegory (talking flora), she moved to epic and to comedy. Her next volumes – from *Meadowlands*(1996) through *Averno* (2006) – cohere around the dissolution of a marriage, attempts to rebuild life in middle age, and around the epic journeys of travellers and heirs, from Dante to Homer’s Telemachus, sometimes treated for bathos. “I thought my life was over and my heart was broken. / Then I moved to Cambridge,” *Vita Nova* (1999) ends. She has made Cambridge, Massachusetts her home ever since.

By this time she was thoroughly famous, with a National Book Award, a job at Yale, and many other honours. Another poet might have concentrated on her public opportunities, to the detriment of her verse. Glück took those opportunities, judging the Yale Younger Poets contest and serving as US poet laureate consultant in 2003-04, but she also found new channels for her own work. *A Village Life* (2009) takes place in a pastoral setting not unlike northern Italy, where peasants and artisans keep up the loves and griefs of an unambitious era. “Young people move to the city, but then they move back. / To my mind, you’re better off if you stay, / That way dreams don’t damage you.” Her most recent book of new poems, *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014) – also her first to include many prose poems – follows the life of a made-up elderly writer, beginning in earliest youth, when “I could speak and I was happy. / Or: I could speak, thus I was happy.” But such happiness cannot stay: mature, “he lay on the cold floor of the study watching the wind stirring the pages, mixing the written and unwritten, the end among them” (“The Open Window”).

Glück’s poems face truths that most people, most poets, deny: the way old age comes for us if we’re lucky; the way we make promises we cannot keep; the way disappointment infiltrates even the most fortunate of adult timelines. She’s not a poet you read to cheer yourself up. She is, however, a poet of wisdom. And her declarations, her decisions, her conclusions, build and displace one another as the poems go on: even the sharpest claims require their poetic frames and contrasts. A Glück book can seem both visceral and cerebral, full of thought and full of grit and pith. If the earliest successes echoed Sylvia Plath, the latest reach beyond American poetry, to the melancholy generosity of Anton Chekhov, the shifting perspectives of Alice Munro. All poets come from somewhere; no poet speaks for us all. We can say, though, that Glück’s plain lines and wide views address experience common to many: feeling neglected, feeling too young or too old, and – sometimes – loving the life we find.

**TELESCOPE**

by Louise Glück

There is a moment after you move your eye away
when you forget where you are
because you’ve been living, it seems,
somewhere else, in the silence of the night sky.

You’ve stopped being here in the world.
You’re in a different place,
a place where human life has no meaning.

You’re not a creature in a body.
You exist as the stars exist,
participating in their stillness, their immensity.

Then you’re in the world again.
At night, on a cold hill,
taking the telescope apart.

You realize afterward
not that the image is false
but the relation is false.

You see again how far away
each thing is from every other thing.

• *From Averno, published by Carcanet.*

**Louise Glück: where to start with an extraordinary Nobel winner**

Poet Fiona Sampson explains why she admires the 2020 Nobel laureate and picks her favourite poems from a long career

[**Fiona Sampson**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/fionasampson)

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 ‘You read a passage by Glück and think, Ah yes, of course, *this*is how it is.’ Photograph: Katherine Wolkoff

**I**have been reading Louise Glück for more than 20 years, longer than the many poets whose star has risen and waned in the meantime; longer than I’ve been writing poetry. Perhaps this is why I’m so moved and excited by today’s announcement that the [77-year old American has won the Nobel prize in literature](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/08/louise-gluck-wins-the-2020-nobel-prize-in-literature).

But I think it’s much more than this. The 12 collections (and two chapbooks) of poetry that Glück has published to date vary enormously in style and theme, from the domestic and familial stories of her first books, 1968’s aptly-titled Firstborn and her breakthrough second collection [The House on Marshland](https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780856460289) (1975), to the fabular and increasingly philosophic writing of later work like [Averno](https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781857548372) (2006) – named for the entrance to the Classical underworld – and her most recent collection, [Faithful and Virtuous Night](https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781847774798) (2014). But what unites all this work is a quality of lucid, calm attention. You read a passage by Glück and think, Ah yes, of course, *this*is how it is. She has the extraordinary writer’s gift of making clear what is, outside the world of her poem, complex.

Here she is in the 10-part poem Ripe Peach, on arriving at middle age:

There was
a peach in a wicker basket.
There was a bowl of fruit.
Fifty years. Such a long walk
from the door to the table.

This is classic Glück, distilling time, beauty, and emotional ambivalence in a single clarifying gesture. Only the literary allusion betrays the complexity behind the apparent ease: no poet can avoid hearing George Herbert’s “Love bade me welcome…” in the offering, although the reader doesn’t need any such knowledge for the poem to work. That single gesture is an inclusive, not exclusive, one. Through decades of Anglo-American poetry alternating between over-intellection and misery-memoir confession, Glück has continued to write poetry that is accessible, despite its huge sophistication.

Ripe Peach is published in [The Seven Ages](https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781857545425) (2001), a book I’ve always loved. Where, in As You Like It, Shakespeare has Jacques’s famous Seven Ages tell the story of a man’s life; with equal lightness of touch, Glück has the confidence to assume that a *woman’s* experience can provide the human example. By doing so she’s already managed, without polemic, to assure several generations of women that their lives are as real, and as mighty a measure of the human, as any man’s. She’s neatly shown a path through the canon for everyone who feels themselves excluded by that white male norm we should be past questioning.

Descending Figure(1980), another cunningly-appropriated title, reveals some of how this is done – like in the poem 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…

This quiet, but steely feat of readjustment to lived experience runs through Glück’s work. [The House on Marshland](https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780856460289), a book full of sibling and filial jostling, starts the poetic lifework of revealing how extraordinary everyday life is. “Even now this landscape is assembling. /The hills darken. The oxen /sleep,” it opens. There’s nothing passive or pastoral about this, but the sense of something thrillingly about to happen:

and the seeds
distinct, gold, calling
*Come here
Come here, little one*

And the soul creeps out of the tree.

Writing such hair-raising poetry by just her second collection, it’s no surprise that Glück would receive the US’s leading literary honours, starting with two Guggenheims and multiple National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. Her fierce and grief-struck fourth book, The Triumph of Achilles (1985), won the National Book Critics Circle award: “The city rose in a kind of splendour /as all that is wild comes to the surface,” it prophesied. And Glück continued, and continues, to come to the surface. In 1993, [The Wild Iris](https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781857542233)won a Pulitzer prize. In 1999, she received a Lannan award; in 2001, the Bollingen prize; in 2003, she became US poet laureate. And this year, as well as the Nobel, she’s received the Tranströmer prize, awarded in memory of the great Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer – the last poet to receive the Nobel prize, back in 2011.

Of course, it’s not that she is suddenly “big in Sweden”. What Glück shares with her fellow laureate Tranströmer is a compassionate, comprehensive vision of human understanding and destiny. Much of what powers her work is explored in her two books of essays, Proofs and Theories (1994) and American Originality (2017). “The fundamental experience of the writer is helplessness,” she tells us in the essay Education of a Poet; their life “is dignified, I think, by yearning, not made serene by sensations of achievement. In the actual work, a discipline, a service.” Glück’s poetry, for all its huge distinction, its vibrant intelligence and its beauty, has never lost the ability to serve society, or the reader.

* *Fiona Sampson is a poet. Her latest collection is*[*Come Down*](https://www.hachette.co.uk/titles/fiona-sampson/come-down/9781472155153/)*(Corsair 2020).*

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