

two kisses. And then spring
came and withdrew from me
the absolute
knowledge of the unborn
leaving the brick stoop
where you stand, shading
your eyes, but
it is night, the moon
is stationed in the beechtree
round and white among
the small tin markers of the stars:
Thirty years. A marsh grows up
around the house. Schools of spores
circulate behind the shades, drift
through gauze flutterings of vegetation.

Gemini

Stanley Plumly

I don't want to begin like a reviewer—because my intent is to try to touch something essential in these three poems and then get off the page—but let me go on like one for just a moment: Louise Glück has always been a poet of severity, constriction and obsession. If *Firstborn*, her one book to date, represents a sequence of high-powered concentrations of psychic energy, in which both the emphatic rhythms and rhymes serve to intensify the needs of the speaking voice—usually one of several personae—then the three poems here illustrate not only an alteration of method, but an augmentation of matter. The brilliant rhetorical bias of the early poems tends to restrict their emotional range: experience is more often judged than revealed; the possibility for ambiguity more often anticipated than realized. The new poems, however, are much more open to emotional alternatives. They bear none of the burden of language acting under certain prescriptive tests and expectations. And they are written in the singular and personal voice of the poet. The obsessions remain, but they are now so limited to the egocentricity of a persona. End of school.

What I find so moving in these poems is the authority of their “absolute knowledge”: since the present must be at best provisional, it's in the potential of the past that we find our lives. This sounds Proustian, of course, like saying that all poems are poems of memory—recollected, in this case, in anxiety. But the paradox animates these poems. They meditate, as well as mediate, over terrifying denials, yet the very presence of their language depends on a primary confrontation

with one's own psychic history. In each of them—whether the “antagonist” is a lover, mother, or child—the speaker is *placed* in a position of such ambivalence that what is most attractive must be most rejected.

When you look that way
I want to touch you, but
Do not . . .
(“The Pond”)

It was better when we were
together in one body.
(“For My Mother”)

Such of my own lives
I have cast off—
(“Gemini”)

The past becomes an attenuated version of the self, all ghost, all present. The denial depends on the confrontation.

The secret of the power of the confrontation is the love, the energy, that motivates it. In *Firstborn* so much of the venom is the result of a sense of violation. The various speakers become the constant victims of themselves and others. The psychic position is generally passive, concentric. Here the speaker is an active co-participant in the crime, if not the initiator. I suppose I'm saying that *Firstborn* is a book of *I* poems, exclusive, even selfish, in its tonalities; these are *we* poems—they share, they are in fact *about* and *of* the commonality of what they face. So that as the image of the antagonist tends toward the reductive—“Your face swimming among minnows and the small/ Echoing stars”; “Screened/through the green glass/of your eye”; “A skull matted/With black hair/That shape/Already formed and detaching”—the cumulative emotional effect is one of reconciliation. So that even as the ambience, the atmosphere, seems severe, stark—“The surface of the pond is metal”; “the moon/is stationed in the beechtree”; “the wicker chairs/Uncovered, winter after winter”—the final impression is one of weight and depth.

What beautiful and painful poems these are. They seem to me to reach back to the very sources of the self—back to the blood, back to the first imagination of things. In “The Pond,” the speaker and her lover lie down in a darkness almost total. The stars are “small” and “echoing,” like the silver minnows in the black water; the “hills are far away . . ./Blacker than childhood.” At the center of the poem, the speaker finds in her lover's eyes “a memory I recognize, as though/We had been children together.” The entire poem becomes then predicated on the *as though*, and that becomes, through the variation on the simile “like children,” the presiding subjective correlative. Like children, the dead past

posits the future. By the end of the poem the possibility of *like* has become the reality is: "I want to touch you, but/Do not, seeing/As in another life we were of the same blood."

The vision in "For My Mother" is also "filtered" through the moonlit eye of the other. Why "was it better when we were/together in one body"? The question is, of course, rhetorical. It was better because it was perfect, complete, as in a circle—"the absolute/knowledge of the unborn." Now thirty years later, a lifetime, the mother's eyes (and the speaker's vision) are shaded from the moon "stationed in the beechtree/round and white among/the small tin markers of the stars." As in "The Pond," the possibility has become the reality: the signs of life-in-death, of connection, of relationship are everywhere, from the wide arc of the universe to the "schools of spores" circulating "behind the shades," drifting "through the gauze flutterings of vegetation." I can only point out how well the "shades" and "flutterings of vegetation" return us to the "green glass" opening the poem. This poem is as much remarkable for its absolute terms as for its absolute knowledge.

In "Gemini" the mother's child becomes the mother-to-be. Twins. Just as the birthday becomes the deathday. This is Glück's most open-ended poem, the poem most subterranean in its sources. The child she is about to have turns into the child she was. "There is a soul in me/. . . asking to be given its body" states, clearly, the dialectic behind each of these three poems. The body, the child, the life is born to be "cast off," as *outside* "the stars finally/thicken & descend as snow." This last, quietly apocalyptic snowfall/starfall should remind us, winter or no, that the title of the poem represents, among other things, a constellation, an order, a past. The "small, echoing stars" become "the small tin markers" become the "snow"; the "ringed moon" becomes "round and white" becomes "sunlight"; "metal" becomes "tin" becomes "copper." In all these transformations there exists a pattern of intensification and purification. As the relative formality of "The Pond" opens into the lucidity of "Gemini," the vision turns less shapely and more ambiguous. More is evoked and therefore more is disturbed. I find "Gemini" to be the darkest poem here simply because so much has been promised that will not be performed. F. Scott Fitzgerald, in an essay called "The Crack-Up," commented that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is to be able to hold opposing ideas in the mind at the same time yet retain the ability to function. One should know that things are hopeless," he went on, "yet be able to behave as if they weren't." Keats called this "negative capability." I think that Louise Glück's poetry has matured toward such a twin.

Louise Glück's Response

I thank Stanley Plumly: it is both moving and frightening to have been read with such sensitivity.

I have little to add. The poems here are recent, the most recent, "Gemini,"

having been written six months ago. In a particular sense they are of a piece with everything I've ever written—my poems have seemed always to be rooted in and to embody a sense of loss. If these poems are less judgmental and ferocious than the poems in *Firstborn*, they are also sadder. One pole implies the existence of its opposite: the rigid outrage of those earlier poems was a manifestation, in part, of an urgent need to believe in absolute fulfillment. The anger stemmed from willed immersion in a fixed idea: the contrast between the self's misery and the happiness it projected onto others. The fury, the feeling of having been shortchanged, performed a necessary psychic function by which the soul was constantly reassured of the existence of perfect contentment. These new poems hope for less. On the other hand they probably see more clearly; what they hope for is more likely to be realized.

A few words on two of the poems: I've done several incest poems, of which "The Pond" is one. The narcissism manifest in love of this sort threads through the other poems too, in various forms.

The image at the end of "For My Mother" has its source in the myth of Sleeping Beauty. The marsh acts like the hedge in the old story, but is more malevolent in that it claims the house irrevocably. The speaker and the mother are separated this second time, the mother being on the inside now, frozen into that posture so inappropriate for darkness. The speaker watches—"lucid and helpless," like the children in "The Pond"—as this final separation comes into being, as the wall goes up between the self and the mother, the self and the house, experiencing her own articulate grief and the mother's mute, impenetrable despair.