

“PUT IT TO YOUR EAR, AND YOU HEAR THE SEA”

**CHARLIE VASQUEZ
LAURA STOTT &
SUNNI BROWN WILKINSON**

The beauty of Louise Glück's work is startling and brave. Reading her poems feels as if someone has finally unlocked an ancient voice buried deep inside each of us. One of the most revered writers of our time, Glück is known for her candid and often autobiographical examination of the world. During her writing career, which spans over seven decades, she has drawn from mythology, personal grief, and the natural world in order to examine loss of innocence, trauma, mortality, and transformation. Glück's collections are known to be compact and intense and her poems offer what critic Helen Vendler calls "an alternative to first-person 'confession,' while remaining indisputably personal."

Born in New York City in 1943, Glück began writing at an early age. Her debut poetry collection, *Firstborn*, was published in 1968 and notable works that followed include *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), *Ararat* (1990), *The Wild Iris* (1992), which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, *Vita Nova* (1999), *The Seven Ages* (2001), and most recently *Winter Recipes from the Collective* (2021). Glück is the author of thirteen collections of poetry, two poetry chapbooks, two essay collections on poetry, and a book of fiction titled *Marigold and Rose: A Fiction* (2022) about the first year of life of twin sisters. In all of Glück's writings there abides a deep sense of awe at being alive, a sharp and penetrating dis-



A Conversation with LOUISE GLÜCK

section of pain and wonder, and language that is both unsettling and incandescent.

As a Nobel and Pulitzer prize winner, a former U.S. Poet Laureate, and winner of numerous fellowships, awards, and honors, Glück continues to influence generations not only as a writer but as a teacher passionate about mentoring future writers.

The following is a compilation of two interviews that took place at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference at Weber State University in Spring 2023. They have been braided together for ease of reading. Ms. Glück's participation at NULC was the last public event she attended as a visiting writer before her death in October 2023.

(Wilkinson) Louise, we are so fortunate to have you here. I think I speak for everyone when I say that we are thrilled that you've traveled here – especially in difficult weather – and that we can gather with you here today to learn more about you, your writing, and your work. I want to start off on a slightly personal note. We met about nineteen years ago when you came and did a reading in Salt Lake City. It was a phenomenal reading, and to this day, it is probably my favorite reading ever. As you read your work, it seemed to me that it was less about crafting a poem and then performing it than it was about each line revealing itself to you as you were reading it. You read each poem very slowly. You read each line with care. It was as if it were coming to you, for the first time, in that moment. I stood at the back of that room, completely enthralled. These poems, that I had read so many times before, you read as if they were just coming to you, and we were experiencing them together. It made me think that maybe these truths that come to you in your writing, and then come and present themselves to you again in your readings, that there is something sacred in those. It felt, to me, that language itself is a spiritual practice for you. So, I want to start by asking you, what role does spirituality play in your life and in your writing?

That's impossible really to answer. First of all, I should say that I really must have been exceptional. I don't like reading my poems aloud. I feel like a salesman. I feel remote from work that comes from the center of my life, and to feel that degree of estrangement about something so important to you is extremely painful. I don't feel, when I listen to myself, as I read, that the words are coming out and that I'm just thinking them. It's a miracle that that was your experience. But those of you who will be listening tonight, I wouldn't make any bets along those lines.

Spirituality is a word I don't like. There are a great many MFA programs now, and

they encourage a notion that suggests that diligence and application are the way to excellence. They discourage the kind of patience that I think is essential to any writing life. There will be periods in which inspiration does not visit you. To continue your industrious journey of poetry, like a silkworm, seems to me a mistake. It doesn't allow that abyss to be experienced, out of which something new will emerge. So, I try to teach my students to understand that you're not always moved to write. And yeah, if you're in such a program, it's good to keep the juices flowing. I discovered teaching after years of thinking that the way to write great art was to do nothing else. Once I realized, after two years of silence, that I might not be a poet, I thought, well, I better find some better work than secretarial work. I took a one-semester teaching job. The minute I started teaching, the minute I got back into the world, I started writing again. And the other thing that was interesting to me was that I feared that, as a teacher, if I was in a period of not writing, as I certainly was when I began, I would so resent the appearance of power in the work that I was reading, that I had not written. I would sabotage it, out of envy. And I think this is why I started writing again. I felt the same exhilaration and excitement in looking at student poems—poems that had moments of real force, and life, and originality—as I would have toward my own work, helping those poems to become the most memorable poems that they could be. Teaching is important, but, in answer to

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your question, everything that I do comes from some deep imperative. That imperative translates into something that could be called play. If you're not having an adventure when you're writing, if you're not having a good time—which doesn't have to mean you're writing merry poems; it means that you're going somewhere you haven't been before, and something is unfolding in front of you that you had not anticipated—if you don't have that feeling, then something is going to be missing from the finished work, or at least in my life. So, I would call that "spirit."

(Wilkinson) In The Seven Ages, my favorite poem is "The Sensual World." There's a line in the poem that says, "I loved nothing more: deep privacy of the sensual life." So, as a follow-up question, what in the sensual world has been exciting to you in your life? What has helped you in your writing to engage in life?

I think to engage in life, the first thing you have to do is to get rid of the piece of the part of the question that says, "What has helped you in your writing?" It seems to me you live your life and, if you're lucky, writing comes of it. You should live your life following the enthusiasms that present themselves to you, which will be particular to you and not to some generic notion that you have of poets or writers. I live through my senses, always—smell, taste, sight, sound, food, music, love, pain—all of these things register profoundly. I don't think this is particular to me; I think it's commonplace. And the other thing to say is that every poem makes its own world. So, within that poem, that statement could be made. But if you try to make that a kind of policy, or rubric, that informs everything I write, it won't work. But there, that's a poem about the sensual life, and also the degree to which it can't save you.

(Wilkinson) You have said before that some of your poetry collections were written in a very short period of time, even feverishly. I

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think you've said that, particularly, about The Wild Iris. These are collections that are typically very focused, very central, to a certain kind of theme. So, I'm wondering – moving on to your work Winter Recipes from the Collective – will you tell us what the circumstances were as you wrote the collection, about the time and place in particular?

It was not written quickly. *The Wild Iris* was. *Vita Nova* was even faster; *Vita Nova* was six weeks. *The Wild Iris* I'm a little sick of, but *Vita Nova* I'm still proud of. My newest book, which is prose, was written in three weeks, three ecstatic weeks in which I felt inhabited by these two wonderful voices that came from nowhere and then left. They went away, and I was all alone again. *Winter Recipes from the Collective* was slow. When I finished the book before that, *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, I felt a degree of pride-in-book that lasted an unusually long time, and it suggested to me that I was, perhaps, at the end of what I was going to be able to say during my human life. More typically, before that, I would come to hate a book pretty quickly. The repudiation of what had come before makes room for something

to come after. But I seemed to be unable to repudiate *Faithful and Virtuous Night*. So, I thought, well, that's it. And then, the poems that began after that sounded to me different. I mean, for one thing, they ended very differently; they ended abruptly. And I had had different kinds of endings in my writing life—sometimes the kinds of poems that end by drifting away, melting away, sometimes the sort that end definitively, like a judge's gavel. This was different; these poems just stopped. I thought it was interesting, because several life-changing things happened during that period. Most crucially, my sister became ill and died after several long cancers had piled on top of each other. That was one of the closest relationships of my life. There was just the two of us, and she was the person I had known at every stage. She had been my companion, my rival, my comrade, my enemy, my beloved. I mean, there were practically no

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roles we did not play in each other's lives. So, that happened, and then COVID happened.

Obviously, the initial stages of COVID were terrifying. And I, by that time, lived alone. When the first lockdown happened, I left California, where I'd been teaching, and I flew back to Cambridge, where I live. I'd been away for months, and when I got back, there was this feeling of estrangement and discontinuity. I regularly looked at my apartment and had the conviction that the furniture had been moved, even though no one had been in the apartment. The bed could not have been moved, but nothing looked right. I could not convince myself that this was the place where I lived. What fixed the feeling for me was seeing friends. So, I get home, and right away I see all my close friends, and by the end of a week I felt like I was home again. But this particular year, I flew home on March 15th, which was the day we couldn't go out anymore. And so, I get to this place that isn't my home anymore, and I can't see any of my friends, and I had no food in the house. This was harrowing. But as COVID evolved, and this sense of "pulling-in" evolved—even given my sense that my poems came out of my worldly, busy social life—something really remarkable started to happen. I would describe it as a kind of "shedding away" of what was unnecessary, and a clarification of what was necessary. At the same time, I began to have a longing to go back to Vermont, where I have lived for about twenty-five or thirty years. And because of COVID, I badly wanted to be in this place that seemed to me pure and clean. Ultimately, I bought a house there, because you could buy houses there for much less than almost anywhere in the world.

Anyway, the book was finished during COVID. I think some of the strongest poems are the poems that came out of COVID, like the last one in the book. I wrote those poems as I was taking my daily exercise—no more gym, no more classes—just a walk, which, in Cambridge, was a sort of prisoner's walk. I did the same walk every day, so that I would

know how long the walk was, and I wrote a lot of poems in my head. Not a lot, because it's a small book, but I wrote some of those poems in my head. The whole thing took probably six years, and then a few years of silence beforehand, so longer than most books.

(Wilkinson) I really appreciate your candor. Sometimes you are a lightning rod, right? Sometimes things come, and then sometimes you have those long periods where they don't, but we shouldn't panic during those periods, right?

Well, you do panic. (Laughter) You're not okay with periods of silence. It's the abyss. It's crucifixion. It's terrible. (Laughter)

(Stott) But we shouldn't force it, just wait. If it's silent, wait – rather than be belaboring the page. Is that correct?

It's true for me. I mean, there may be people who are made so nervous by that sort of capitulation that they do better to keep up the drill of writing daily. But for me, that was simply productive of increased panic, because the things that I was writing in those periods were so utterly dreadful, and there was very little eked out, you know, drips. I would write a noun, usually with a definite article, "the tree," and I couldn't get a verb. "Stands"—that was a day's work, you know. So, it was better for me just to re-enter life fully and hope. But the sense of despair that these periods produce, that's vivid.

(Stott) There is also that time of life where, for instance, for me, now, with a full-time job and small kids, being able to carve out those spaces to get to the page is sometimes difficult. But, I still do it. Do you have advice on this? I sometimes worry about this with my students as well, if they don't have a class giving them assignments. . . making that space, that time, in your life for writing when things get intense or busy, or, like you said, when there are those abysses that are

very difficult to get out of. What do you do to get out of that?

I don't have any quick hints for getting out. I just believe in patience, and I also think that the students who leave class and don't write more poems are probably not supposed to be writing poems in their lives. If they were, they would. As for how to make space, it seems to me that an equal danger is the ceremonious *making* of space, which puts too much emphasis on an art that has to be, has to *feel*, like, furtive, clandestine, private-time stolen from the life. The minute that it becomes the bright-lit purpose of the life, even though I know it to be that, it's suicidal. I don't write that way. I've seen it also in my students. There's a big prize at Yale for the best undergraduate writer. I have nothing to do with choosing who wins, which is good, because I'm the teacher of everybody, so I wouldn't want to choose among them. But, the people who win this very big prize then feel compelled to spend a year doing nothing but writing. And when this happens to them, they've usually just finished work on a thesis. Often, the thesis manuscripts are extraordinary, and many of them go on to be parts of books. But they're tapped; they're emptied out; they've used everything that they have accumulated to that point. They've had this year of ceremonious writing, and, for them, it's terrifying. They do nothing, or they write. I have a former student, who is now in law school at Berkeley, and she showed me her poems from the Clap-year, The Clap Prize, and they are one after another *terrible*, just terrible. But, she's capable of great work. And you can say to her, "Tiana, this is, you know. . . put it away, you save that one." For her, it was restorative. It reminded her of the fact that you can write bad poems and still be a poet. That better be true.

(Wilkinson) I think it's so helpful for young writers to see that things will come. I wanted to lean in a little bit further into Winter Recipes from the Collective, which I

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found to be a remarkable collection. As you say, it is fairly slight, but there's so much in there. Several of your collections have leaned into fable, scripture, mythology, narratives of the ancient or natural worlds, to examine the human experience. This particular collection seems to lean into many references to Eastern sensibilities, practices, and philosophy; poems about bonsai tree caretaking, and references to Chinese characters. A few particular lines that I love read, "Perhaps you will attain that enviable emptiness into which all things flow, like the empty cup in the Daodejing," and, in a later poem, "The Chinese were right, she said, to revere the old." So, I am curious what drew you to this theme that seems to surface a lot in Winter Recipes?

I have no idea. (Laughter) Something of that came to me in a dream. It was so out of left field that I was immediately drawn and began

improvising worlds around a bonsai tree. I don't know why I would have had a dream about a bonsai tree. I don't know all that much about Asia. I hate travel. I haven't ever been there. I do have Asian students, but it's not as though they gave me tutorials in Asian studies. I think if a totem appears to you in a dream, and something in your waking life adheres to it, it's a prompt, so you start riffing around it, that's how all this happened. I started reading up a little, just in the most cursory way. I wasn't trying to make myself a scholar in these fields. I began with nothing, but you pick up facts. Sometimes you pick up inaccurate facts, but that doesn't mean they can't be used; in fact, they can be used interestingly. What was very strange about those poems is that, shortly after this book was finished, my son had, at the age of 47, twin daughters, and they're half-Chinese. When I was writing these poems, he didn't even have a Chinese girlfriend, she appeared later. What I feel about that material is that it was clairvoyant, but it wasn't. Please don't quote that. (Laughter) It pleases me to think so, but do I really think it, no.

(Stott) Along these same lines, I'd like to talk about an experience I had with one of your early collections, The House on Marshland. It wasn't the first book that I owned of yours, but nearly one of the first. Right from the beginning, the first poem, "All Hallows," the experience I had when I read that poem, I was a graduate student, and I felt all of this electricity coming off of the page. It did something that I feel a lot of your poetry does, which is that it has this sense of being grounded in this world, but there is something else happening – you're reaching into some other world. There is a dream-like element to your work, even today. It's one of the qualities that attracts me to your poetry. Will you talk about that a little bit, how poetry can do that? It can be very much here, but then not here, at the same time.

I can try. It's a complicated question. First of all, what I was talking about with *Winter Recipes* is different *quality*. That first poem in that book *did* come from an actual dream, but the dream-like quality that certain poems invoke, that isn't translated or decanted from actual dreams. I certainly know the quality you mean, but how to account for it is difficult. All I can say is that as a writer, you know when it's *not* there. I mean, you know if the words that you're setting down are clear, literal, true, maybe even suggestive. But the poem isn't straddling realms. I like poems that seem to mean several things at once. I don't always write them, but when I do, I'm happier. But, how to describe it, or account for it, that would take a great deal of time and thought. I don't know how to account for it, but I could probably describe it, given time to think it through.

(Vasquez) *One line in Winter Recipes from the Collective reads, "the book contains only recipes for winter, when life is hard. In spring, anyone can make a fine meal." What, to you, defines a good meal in this poetic and metaphorical sense?*

Well, what those lines say is that when an abundance of ingredients present themselves, inexhaustibly, it's easy to just put them on the table—you put the fresh peaches on the table, and the new lettuces with a little olive oil—you can't go wrong. But when what you have is snow, ice, and preserved meat—it's harder. So, what's being talked about is old age and the kind of thrill that comes from making something memorable at a point when you don't have a lot of raw materials, but you're up for the challenge. I have a number of good things to say about old age. I don't mean on the page, I mean in life; it's surprising to me. I think what that is saying is the people in this strange commune and/or collective, doing these dream-like, surreal things like gathering moss—men going into the woods to gather moss—all of this

came out of a dream. It was actually a couple I know, gathering the moss, in the dream. They are very sanctimonious people—literally sanctimonious, not religious. The dream had them making sandwiches out of preserved moss. And all of this seemed to be just incredibly funny. The poem that emerged had about it a kind of valor and pathos that I found interesting. I think it was the first poem written for this book. And I had the sense that I would be drawing on it. But it was a slow draw.

(Stott) *Yesterday, you talked about how there was a possible clairvoyant moment in a poem. There is an interesting history within Hebrew literature where poet and prophet can mean the same thing. I'd also like to talk about the adventurous quality of following a poem and seeing what it's going to reveal to you. Will you talk about poetry's role in revealing things to us, whether that is us, the writer of the poem, or for readers, as they come to poetry?*

Well, I think the experience that the writer has should predict the experience that the reader has. If I'm writing, and I feel a sense of being taken some place I've never been, then I know that the poem is dead. It's conceivable that a dead poem can be brought to life, unlike other dead things, but it's crucial to recognize when the thing on the page is inert. The feeling of the unexpected, of the poem taking turns that you don't anticipate, this seems to be crucial. It's the opposite of having an advance of writing, an idea, for what you want the poem to be. That idea precludes the sort of adventuring that I'm talking about. It seems to me that if it isn't happening to the writer, it's not going to happen for the reader either. Ideally, the writer is breaking trail for the reader, and the experiences will be parallel.

One of the ways that you can encourage such things to happen, I think, is that if a poem seems to you to be leaden, inert, change a declarative sentence to a question; change a negative to a positive. When I was

writing a poem that has since become very well known, “Mock Orange,” at the beginning of *The Triumph of Achilles*, the first two lines say, “It is not the moon, I tell you / It is these flowers / lighting the yard. / I hate them. / I hate them, as I hate sex.” The poem goes on to talk about that hatred of sex, as compared to the hatred of flowers. What’s hated is the inebriating quality; the sense of possession; the sense of transformation, in the case of sex, being when the act ends, or the romance ends. Those lines, originally, were, “I love them. / I love them as I love sex.” And I thought, “Oh, God, no!” Then, I tried saying, “I hate them,” and I thought, “Now that’s interesting; there is something I can do with this.” So, my point is, don’t be invested in your original ideas, because they may be unproductive; they may curtail imagination too strictly. If there is a tactic that will put you on the path of going somewhere new, it is: change what you say.

(Stott) I like that, thank you. I’m now thinking of a few poems that I need to do that with.

Well, just go back in with the opposite, and see what happens.

(Vasquez) Speaking of the feeling of the unexpected, in talking about the bird in the poem, “An Endless Story,” you say, “once it is kissed / it becomes a human being. So it cannot fly.” And later, when talking about love, you write, “we search for it all our lives, / even after we find it,” Why the departure from the usual “love sets you free,” and why do we search for it all our lives?

Well, we do. I think it’s the great animating force. But, what the line says is, “the usual myth is you find love at the end.” And fairy-tales operate that way, the stories end with lovers coming together. The frog becomes a prince; the story that the old woman tells follows along with that model. But, she has a perspective that makes her the spinner of

such a tale. We’re, all of us, at every moment of our lives, waiting to be transformed. Transformed means you get to keep everything you have, but you add. So, you don’t lose anything that you value, but you become “other.” That sense of being entrapped in a single-self disappears—transformation. The obvious place that people look for transformation is love, because it actually does provide that sense of transformation. In its initial stages, falling in love is transforming; the world looks different. What the lines say, which I think is true, is that there’s a love story. You look for love, you find a mate, you live with a mate, and in many cases, you do find durable but mutable happiness, or you flourish within the relationship. That wish for transformation, I think, continues beyond the falling in love. And so, what the line says is, there is no stopping point. As long as you’re alive, you’re looking to be transformed, searching for love, in order to catalyze that transformation. And even after you find it, you’re still looking for it. I actually believed this, but I didn’t *know* I believed it, until I wrote these lines. And I may not believe it at some point, but the point is that it’s an insight specific to the world that’s created in that poem.

(Wilkinson) I love your explanations; there are worlds in each of your poems. But then there are these startling truths that bubble up to the surface that, I feel, have withstood time. Each time I go back to those poems, each time I re-enter those worlds, there are certain truths that still startle me, that still feed me. So, I appreciate that.

I was struck by the theme of time, which of course we write about, and think about, and carry around with us as mortals. But, it seems to play a very large role in Winter Recipes as well. There are many references to clocks and watches; there is this sense of being in time, but being out of time at the same time. I found interesting the fact that the title contains “winter,” and then that lines up beautifully with the line that

you just read, "the way we loved when we were young, as though there were no time at all." I'm wondering if there is something in this collection about the process of aging and facing life. You said briefly a moment ago that you have a lot to say about aging. So, what can you impart to us?

One of the things about age, for a writer, is that any condition that affords you new information is a gold mine. Because out of that new information can come new perspectives and new material. So, no matter how inconvenient the new information may be, at some level, it's a godsend; it will keep you alive as a writer trying to find what there is in that shift, or change, that you can transform and use. There are different stages of aging. And there's a long, long period that is a period of diminishment. I've been writing about the fear of death since I was three years old. So, the new for me, at this point of my life, is not the fear of death. When I was young, and healthy, there was still the possibility of dying tragically young, which no longer exists. So that's actually quite thrilling. But what I hadn't realized was the great challenge of diminishment. The diminishment of faculties, the sense that your body is beginning to make unwise aesthetic decisions, all of these things. (Laughter) But then, when you're finally quite old, certifiably old—people offer you wheelchairs at airports—what you realize is that, you've come to a still point. It's not that movement has stopped, that time has stopped, but you've accustomed yourself to the fact that many things have changed. And I experienced—after the age of mid-70s somewhere—this strange, euphoric acceptance. And the other thing that happened was that when I bought my house in Vermont, I went back to a place that was astonishingly unchanged in the thirty years I'd been away. I mean, I visited, but the point is, this particular piece of Vermont hadn't changed. The streets in Montpelier are exactly what they were when I went there at twenty-seven

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years old. My oldest friends are still there. We were girls and boys together, and now we're ready for assisted living—not quite, but you know, we're moving toward it. And that sense of wholeness, and the sense that you have a perch from which you can see the whole of a human life, that is extraordinary. The feelings about time change—I had this sense, as I was living through all those years, that it was taking forever, sometimes moving fast, but oftentimes moving slowly. If you'd told me then how many years I've been alive, I'd have said, impossible. But what it now seems to me is I feel as though I have had the lifespan of a mosquito—you just suddenly feel all time collapse. But it isn't harrowing, it's deeply strange. And it puts you in realms that are unfamiliar. You couldn't have had these experiences earlier, because you couldn't have had that much to look back on. So, all of that I find very interesting. And I think that's what is in the book. If you had told me, when I finished that book, that two years later I'd write, in three weeks, a book of fable, I'd have said, I couldn't possibly. But it is that feeling of depletion that then creates the new, and makes that new seem miraculous, because

you would have sworn you were utterly empty. So, when that happens, it is a great gift.

(Wilkinson) There's a sense of looking backwards and forwards in life, and looking inward as well. Toward the end of the book, the speaker of the poem says that "the fire is still there." There is still something there that continues to surprise. So, it was a book that was strange, and it was also very hopeful.

I think so. I mean, people have described it as bleak. Well, the things that people have said about my books dazzle me sometimes. You can't be sure that you're the one who's right about what the books are, there's no way to know. I certainly thought the book was filled with hope and kindness, and it's weirdly expansive even though it was a tiny, little thing.

(Stott) In your Nobel lecture, you talk about your early experiences reading Blake and Dickinson, and the intimate experience you felt with them when reading those poems. Oftentimes, when I read your poetry, I feel like I'm being spoken to directly. I wonder if you could talk about that. Is that a conscious experience that you're attempting to create with your readers? And how much are you thinking about that, either while you're writing or revising the poems?

It's what I prize in the art. It's what spoke to me when I was a child, that sense of the voice in the seashell. You hold it; it's a shell; it is inert; it's not speaking. You put it to your ear, and you hear the sea. I want poems that are like that, or like notes in bottles that you rescue from the waves—private information disclosed to a single reader, that feeling of an intimate bond with a listener—as opposed to, say, stadium poetry or rhetorical poetry that's meant for a large audience; or even a certain kind of meditative poetry that is the self, talking to the self. Wallace Stevens's poems have a kind of grandeur and privacy; they're gorgeous. He's a magnificent artist,

but for me too self-involved to be useful to me as a writer, because I'm excluded. It's a kind of private audience he's having with himself. To many writers he's the great stimulator, but to me, he silences me. Of course, there would be people who would say, that's a good thing.

(Stott) This might be a selfish question, but I really like to garden, and I've noticed from your poems is it safe to say that you also like to garden?

It's safe.

(Stott) What is the relationship between your writing process and gardening? Is there anything there?

No. I mean, gardening, like cooking, which I also love. . . . You do hover over and worry over a new plant or seed. But, there's a deep sense that things will probably go well for the seed. It will sprout, and from the sprout will come whatever it is programmed to be.

I don't have that feeling as a writer at all. Things come to nothing, or there are no seeds, there's nothing to plant. I find ritual activities that take me out of my head to be enormously consoling, and therefore useful. Anything that consoles, that diminishes anxiety, is useful to a writer, I think.

(Wilkinson) Do you have a favorite collection, poetry collection in particular, that is close to your heart?

No. It changes.

(Stott) Last night, you mentioned how sometimes you come under the spell of a book, or a single poem, that you love, something that you just continually read. You talked about Mark Strand's book. Will you share another book that is like that for you, or a poem?

Right now, I am basically reading one poem, a poem by Tomas Tranströmer. I don't speak Swedish, but I read it in the English transla-

tion. It's called "Vermeer," and I can't get enough of it. It's clear to me that this poem is trying to teach me something, and the fact that I can't get enough of it means I haven't been taught yet. Everything else, no matter how masterful or brilliant, or thrilling, seems, at this moment, to me, besides the point. The point is this poem. There's usually something like that. There was Mark Strand's book, *Almost Invisible*, when I was working on *Faithful and Virtuous Night*. Other books have enthralled me in that way, and writers whose effects I have thought I have to figure out.

(Wilkinson) Is there an element to writing that uses obsession? Whether we like it or not, we're sort of consumed by something that doesn't release us for some time. Because your collection seems so carefully centered on certain things, has obsession played some role?

Absolutely. But the role that it plays is not that an idea presents itself and you doggedly turn it into something that passes for obsession. What obsession means is that the thing won't relinquish you—an idea, a kind of language, oftentimes it's a tone. And if it does relinquish you, then you can prop it up. You've gotten what you can from it. If you keep brooding about it, thinking about it, playing with it, toying with it, then it is doing the work for you. All you're doing is succumbing. And when I say succumbing, you succumb with a certain kind of savvy as you write for many years. You will know when you have a fish on the line, but every fish is finite, the obsessions end. Whatever vein you were mining, you get what you can from it. You can't go back.

(Stott) Do you see any underlying currents or themes that have developed over the course of your writing career? You've written for a very long time.

Yes, seven decades. In a way, it would be more for a reader to say such things. I think, from the beginning of my writing career, when

I really was a little tot, I was preoccupied with the idea of mortality. It seemed to me so agonizing even when I was very young, to think that the magnificence of the world was offered to us, and there was a "use by" date attached—not to the world, though now it seems to be—to our ability to participate in it.

I think the subject of mortality has been preoccupying from the beginning of time for me. And disappearance. I can recite the first poem of mine that I remember, written when I was probably about six years old. My father used to write doggerel poems. So, here's my childish poem, and you can see that it's of a piece with later work: "If Kittycats liked roast beef bones, and doggies sipped up milk, and elephants walked 'round the town, all dressed in purest silk, if robins went out coasting, then slid down, crying 'Wee,' if all this happened to be true, then where would people be?" I mean, I am still, sort of, writing that poem.

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(Stott) That's amazing. Thank you for sharing that. I remember writing poems when I was that young, but I don't remember any of them. I had a conversation with my students about what they would be interested in hearing, and one person said they would really love to hear you speak about your organization process and about putting together a collection. Is there anything you do, logistically, to help that process? Is there an order you put things in?

Every book is completely different, and learning to put one book together isn't going to help you with the next book at all. But, I do have rough models. I put books together as though a reader would start on the first page and end on the last—as someone would with a novel. I realize that a lot of people don't read books of poetry this way, but I shape them this way. It's essential to me, because it's a way of enlarging the scope of an individual collection of lyric poems. You make a larger shape, an arc. I like to work from both ends toward the middle, and I like to work in clusters. An analogy would be to a batting order, though you don't always want your big hitter third. Sometimes, it depends on the material; it depends on the book. But, I usually have a sense, as I'm working on a manuscript. I get to the poem that I think is going to be first—sometimes it turns out that it's last; first and last can oftentimes be flipped. I work in little constellations of three or four poems; you get a little group. It'll be necessary in some books to group together poems that are thematically related, and then, in other books, to separate them—you puzzle it out, you try different arrangements, and then you look at it, and, if you turn the page and your heart sinks, then you know there's something wrong with the order. Some books are very easy to put together, some books are not. One of the things that I've learned is, if a book seems really recalcitrant, nothing I can think of makes the book, as a whole, work; it usually means that some-

thing's missing. That was notably true with *Ararat*, and I had to wait a year, doing nothing, thinking I can't write another of these poems, I'm done, I've finished with whatever this mode can give me. But, I hadn't finished. The first poem and the last poem were written a year after all the rest. Then, the minute I had those, I could put the book together in three minutes. But, it took a year of waiting.

(Stott) Oh, that's really fascinating. I feel like there are a couple of books where the beginning poem feels like it casts a spell of some kind. Then, I feel like, okay, I'm ready to read more. Another concern that I hear about from students is that they are worried about their process. They like to ask how you do it. Do you want to talk about process at all?

I don't know what that word means, I really don't. It suggests that you can work out a process that will serve you in every poem that you write. That's never been my experience. Everything is done as though you'd never done it before, except at a certain point, when you're used to certain kinds of obstacles, walls, and periods where you get to a certain point and the poem is not done, but you cannot think what the next move is. You can be stuck for a long time. I mean a year, two years, is not unknown to me. I would say, stay away from rigid formulations for how you should work and how often you should write. You have to let time and the unconscious work on your behalf.

(Vasquez) What was the hardest part of starting out as a poet? What advice would you have for a beginner like me?

Be patient and develop a tough skin. You're going to have to deal, if you continue to write, with all manner of public response. If you're lucky, you'll deal with praise and approbation—that has its own set of problems. You'll certainly have to deal with periods of being completely ignored. And then, there'll be mild

regard, which is almost the worst (Laughter), because it seems to have taken your measure and accorded you something microscopic. I've been target practice; I've been on the top of Olympus; I've been treated with contempt. "If you like this sort of thing, you might like her," that kind of remark, and you have to bear up under all of that. And not only that, the humiliation of knowing that, if something has appeared in print, everyone you know, who reads, may have read it. So, you slink around town until the worst is over. And, of course, it doesn't matter to anyone but you, but you do need a certain kind of toughness. That doesn't preclude the porousness that lets you take in criticism. And you have to stay open to that, especially as poems are being written—seek out response, because how many poems worth remembering will anyone write? A finite number. So, you want everything you do to be as good as, as memorable as, it can possibly be. If someone tells you to change something that they see would make for a better poem, try to figure out how to do it. And mainly, just live through those periods when you're not writing, or writing badly. Throw yourself into your life. Let life happen to you. And with luck, it will give you what you need.

(Audience Question) For those of us who don't thrive in a super processed style of writing, do you have any strategies on how to step into writing when it comes to you if you don't have a specific place?

You don't need it. If it comes to you, it comes as an imperative. This is very different from novelists. They have a lot of space to travel, and I think stealing time is not something that's going work as well for a novelist as it would for a poet. If something comes to you, you write it down. And not only do you write it down, if it comes to you, and it has real staying power, it won't leave you. It can begin to torture you, and it will not leave you. If it does, it's not worth saving. So, I think you have to trust in the durability of those gifts. And

the impulse to "write it down" becomes the impulse to look at it written down, and see if anything attaches to it, and that may not happen immediately. But, you'll be *compelled* to look at it. You don't have to worry about making time. If you're extremely busy, and you have a full-time job, and seven children,

Be patient and develop a tough skin. You're going to have to deal, if you continue to write, with all manner of public response. If you're lucky, you'll deal with praise and approbation — that has its own set of problems. You'll certainly have to deal with periods of being completely ignored. And then, there'll be mild regard, which is almost the worst (Laughter), because it seems to have taken your measure and accorded you something microscopic. I've been target practice; I've been on the top of Olympus; I've been treated with contempt. "If you like this sort of thing, you might like her," that kind of remark, and you have to bear up under all of that. And not only that, the humiliation of knowing that, if something has appeared in print, everyone you know, who reads, may have read it. So, you slink around town until the worst is over. And, of course, it doesn't matter to anyone but you, but you do need a certain kind of toughness.

you just stop sleeping. I mean, sometimes you do that, but you do it not because you've scheduled it. You do it because you have no choice. Someone else could tell you something completely opposite, but I'm telling you what's been true of my experience.

(Audience Question) Do you ever look back at your old poems and find that there's a subject you cannot write about anymore, or at least in the same way? Also, is there anything that you feel like you have lost in your writing since you began?

There are things I've stopped doing. But I don't know that I would call them *lost*. Always, I feel at the end of a book, that I can't do that anymore, but I also don't want to. There are certain kinds of notes. . . . I think of my books as either vertical or horizontal. The vertical books go from despondency to euphoria, the horizontal books, like *Meadowlands* or *Village Life*, they're more capacious, varied, social. But if I do one of those books that reaches deep down and lifts up, I have no wish to go back there. Whatever I write next, I have to break that mode; I have to, because I can't best it at that time. I say "I can," as though all this were calculated. It isn't. It all happens quite spontaneously. After a while, I can approach some of those tones again.

I remember, I was about to move to Cambridge from Vermont, and my Vermont garden had been very important to the writing of *The Wild Iris*, which was the book that made the biggest dent in my public life. There were two poets who were driving through Vermont, and they said, "Can we stop in?" And I talked to them about moving to Cambridge, which at that particular point

in my life was a great thing to do, and one of them said, "But how will you write?" And I thought, I could stay here forever, but I can't write about this garden again. . . . What? *The Wild Iris* Goes to College? (Laughter) You have no wish to do that, but you also *can't* do that. The end of a book should be when you have exhausted, fully, what it has given you to say, within a certain tone or array of themes. Every book is a closed door. But that's fine. That means you have to find something else. And what I'm interested in is the finding of something else. That's what's exciting.

(Audience Question) When do you know an idea is good? At the beginning, during the process, when the idea comes to you?

Oh, it varies. I mean, if you have an idea, usually a line, you play with it. Sometimes, if your style changes, you have very little in the way of critical apparatus to deal with that change. So, you look at something that's, stylistically, totally different from what's gone before, as far as you can tell, and you think, well, this could be absolutely wonderful, or this could be disastrously bad. And it wouldn't surprise you to hear either. But, gradually, you develop critical apparatus for making judgments about work and new modes. You basically table that while you're working, and you just have to see how things play out. If you're exhilarated, that's a good test.

(Wilkinson) Thank you so much. This was wonderful.

(Stott) Thank you, Louise. I'm so pleased to have had this conversation with you today. It feels like a miracle to me.



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