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A Village Life, Louise Glück's eleventh collection of poems, begins in the topography of a village, a Mediterranean world of no definite moment or place:

All the roads in the village unite at the fountain.

Avenue of Liberty, Avenue of the Acacia Trees—

The fountain rises at the center of the plaza;

on sunny days, rainbows in the piss of the cherub.

—from "tributaries"

Around the fountain are concentric circles of figures, organized by age and in degrees of distance: fields, a river, and, like the fountain's opposite, a mountain. Human time superimposed on geologic time, all taken in at a glance, without any undue sensation of speed.

Glück has been known as a lyrical and dramatic poet; since Ararat, she has shaped her austere intensities into book-length sequences. Here, for the first time, she speaks as "the type of describing, supervising intelligence found in novels rather than poetry," as Langdon Hammer has written of her long lines—expansive, fluent, and full—manifesting a calm omniscience. While Glück's manner is novelistic, she focuses not on action but on pauses and intervals, moments of suspension (rather than suspense), in a dreamlike present tense in which poetic speculation and reflection are possible.

A Village Life Details

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From Reader Review A Village Life for online ebook

Megan says

Louise Glück swiftly became one of my favorite poets.

Molly Brodak says

Obviously, Glück is supremely talented. Still, I think she should just go ahead and write a novel if that's what she wants to do. I can't help but feel that a hybrid--just like my road/mountain bike hybrid-- doesn't do either job particularly well.

Lisboa says

I just absolutely fell in love with this book. The poetry is structured in such a way that it reads almost like a story. But, taken in bits and pieces it is just as intense.

Every time I read it I can see, so clearly, the mountain. The dark dirt, cold under the shadows of the trees. The inhabitants in their lives, their houses.

It's, it's just wonderful. Just the image on the cover is a preview of what lies within - foggy nights, cool afternoons with the dark walk home through the bramble, all alone.

Cyrus says

A surprising book from this exceptional poet, who usually works in a more concise, oracular mode. These empathetic poems depicting life in an unnamed village have a sensual, earthy, conversational quality, new to her work--reminiscent of the early 20th century Italian poet, Cesare Pavese. Among its strengths, A Village Life contains some of the best poems on adolescence that I've ever read.

Luis Correa says

Elegant. SO FUCKING ELEGANT. The poems and themes and images repeat themselves, but intentionally! AND SO GODDAMN ELEGANTLY. Straddling the fine line between vignettes and poems—maybe at times a little too prosaic, I guess. The music's in the meditation.

V Mignon says

"Nothing proves I'm alive.

There is only the rain, the rain is endless."

- Solitude

I saw a quote once, on the nature of writing, and I lack the name of whoever must have said it (which seems to be a common case these days), but it went as paraphrased: "Academic writing requires complex language to express simple thoughts. Creative writing requires simple language to express complex thoughts." While the thoughts expressed in academic writing are never that "simple," it is often the thoughts we take for granted, that which we believe needs no understanding. And I think, in a way, that was Louise Gluck's goal with *A Village Life*. Through poetry, she expresses simple thoughts that are easily attained on one read and complex thoughts through the second and third. All with her deceptively simple prose.

This is the nature of poetry, though. You can't expect to read a poem once and understand it entirely. I found myself reading the first poem in this collection over and over, trying to force my understanding of it. Until I realized that was not the way to read this collection. There is a strange meditative state that occurs when reading *A Village Life*. It's easy to become caught up in the little stories hidden within. That is what they are on the surface - little stories about a village where everyone mourns their lost youth, lost love, or lost connection with nature. Essentially, each poem explores our need to romanticize nature, to go back to an idyllic place (past, nature, youth) for happiness, but all we find in its place is impermanence.

The footholds of life are examined. In *A Slip of Paper*, a man is visiting a doctor while our observant narrator states, "To get born, your body makes a pact with death / and from that moment, all it tries to do is cheat . . ." The medical profession cannot save us when being born means that we must die. But I love the word "cheat" in this line. It insinuates that our natural inclinations, to deceive ourselves into thinking that something greater awaits us, is our way of cheating.

Louise Gluck's poetry explores existentialism with calm prose. There is a sense of stillness in her language that evokes this rural life that we have all left at some time or another for a better life. But this stillness also expresses the creeping notion of death. Nostalgia is not a feeling that allows us to move forward with our lives. If we keep deluding ourselves about how much better life was *back then*, we will never see the forest, only the earthworms crawling through the ground.

Dreams and delusions create the body of poetry. In *Earthworm*, we are reminded, "It is not sad not to be human / nor is living entirely within the earth demeaning or empty: it is the nature of the mind / to defend its eminence, as it is the nature of those / who walk on the surface to fear the depths - one's / position determines one's feelings." We look upon those without our capacity for thought or without sentience as being less than human, another delusion of ours, as if "humanity" is the pinnacle of being. But those very earthworms that crawl through the dirt make up the structure of our world. And is it not simply a fortified creation of the mind to believe ourselves so powerful over nature?

Perhaps my favorite of *A Village Life*, *In the Plaza*, depicts a man who observes a woman and makes her his in fantasy. But as she becomes his, she loses her power. This is a fascinating poem for me because one of my literary interests is dream women in fiction. Gluck provides the reality of this often male-gaze centric figure: ". . . she will withdraw into that private world of feeling / women enter when they love. And / living there, she will become / like a person who casts no shadow, who / is not present in the world; / in that sense, so little use to him / it hardly matters whether she lives or dies." At the beginning of the poem, it is the woman who has the power: "Because she doesn't know it exists, / her power is very great now, fused to the needs of his imagination. / He is her prisoner. She says the words he gives her / in a voice he imagines, low-pitched and soft . . ." She is entirely a being of fantasy, a woman who will bring him into power. She will sacrifice

her self for his enlightenment.

Enlightenment will save us, we believe. There is something nestled within ourselves, nestled within nature, that will save us from death. From the impending doom. But, in the second *Earthworm*, Gluck reminds us, "repression does not deceive organisms like ourselves . . ." Life and death will remind us. And nature is merely a reflection of the cycle that occurs in our lives. We see the warning signs in our trees during fall, but we do not take heed.

It's rare that I speak of words such as "enjoy," "adore," or "love," when talking about books, probably because I assume that if I took the time to write about it, I obviously felt some emotion for it. In the case of [A Village Life](#), I have felt more for Gluck's prose in the time since I finished reading it. Her words linger in the mind. They need time to percolate.

If Gluck's simple prose has made me think about complex thoughts, then it has certainly done its job.

Abraham says

Hard to tell if I am just too sensationalized as a reader or if this book is lacking in real interest. It is a worthy project: take a town (mythic? Real? American?) and render it in a series of poems and portraits of the inhabitants. The poems tell no story but come back to the same images (like that of sitting in the window and looking out) several times, each return investing them with a new intensity and the sense that the things mentioned are deeply structural to the town (village) being drawn. Characters appear and disappear in a single poem, and the quiet life of a town, defined by a collection of experiencing consciousnesses, spreads languidly over the length of the book.

But it a boring life. I keep waiting for my own petty need for something of interest in these poems to die away, but it just won't. The book seems to defiantly declare that an interestingly structured portrait of the mundane is interesting enough, but I can't help needing content. Perhaps that's the point, that in the end, this village life is a dull one, where we spend our lives staring out the window hoping to have an experience and telling ourselves a story about the structure of it all.

Derek Emerson says

Louise Gluck's *A Village Life* will continue Gluck's leading role in American poetry, although it presents a more narrative style than her earlier work. We are presented with a unnamed, vaguely Mediterranean setting in an unclear time. In other words, the focus here is on the people.

The theme is familiar, but Gluck's presentation is unique. Here people, you and old, are faced with the reality that life moves forward whether they are ready or not. Indeed, our own choices may move the direction slightly, but finding our ultimate destination is clearly something we do not control. While we expect this in the older people facing death, Gluck knows that such experiences are not lost on the youth.

In "Noon" we find the tale of a "boy and girl" heading out into the meadow where they talk and picnic.

"The rest--how two people can lie down on the blanket--
they know about it but they're not ready for it.
They know people who've done it, as a kind of game or trial--
then they say, no, wrong time, I think I'll just keep being a child.

But your body doesn't listen. It knows everything know,
it says you're not a child, you haven't been a child for a long time."

As the poems move on we see that many of these youth listen to their bodies and find their life now laid out for them. Some go away and come back, but they only suffer more.

"To my mind, you're better off if you stay;
that way, dreams don't damage you."

This theme of longing for what we cannot have continues with age.

"My body, now that we will not be traveling together much longer
I begin to feel a new tenderness toward you, very raw and unfamiliar,
like what I remember of love when I was young--"

While all this starts to sound like another aging poet becoming depressed over life, Gluck is not complaining. Instead, even as seen in the stanzas above she finds those moments in life to enjoy and sees change, no matter how much we resist it, as a normal part of life. These changes in our lives are inevitable, but not to be mourned. But she is intentional about recognizing where we are and living in the moment we have.

In "Walking at Night" we see an older woman who takes advantage of the fact that men no longer desire her to take her walks at night where "her eyes that used never to leave the ground/are free now to go where they like." She is rejuvenated by her age and situation and seeks nor needs any pity.

This joy is seen best in "Abundance," a glorious ode to spring which celebrates its newness while recognizing its transience. A boy touches a girl "so he walks home a man, with a man's hungers." The fruit ripens, "baskets and baskets from a single tree/so some rots every year/ and for a few weeks there's too much." The mice scamper through the harvest, the moon is full, "Nobody dies, nobody goes hungry" and the only sound is "the roar of the wheat." Gluck calls on us to revel in these moments without fearing what has preceded and what is to come.

Much of Gluck's intent is seen in three poems all entitled "Burning Leaves." As the leaves burn we are left with little, but the burning is important in creating room for the new. We are offered no promise of anything more.

"How fast it all goes, how fast the smoke clears.
And where the pile of leaves was,
an emptiness that suddenly seems vast."

But while the fire is burning, it has life.

"And then, for an hour or so, it's really animated
blazing away like something alive.

...

death making room for life"

Gluck has created a volume that will benefit from repeated readings, and her easy, unhurried rhythm makes the return that much easier. She has the gift of all great poets in seeing the commonplace, and finding in it a celebration of life as it is.

Anne says

Gluck's poems are moving and beautiful.

Ann Michael says

I loved this one. I think it's my favorite of her books so far. Lyrical narratives, emotionally tight, evocative imagery.

Laurie says

This was a library book I had checked out and needed to return. I would check it out again and read some more.

Margaryta says

Louise Gluck is the only poet I can confidently call my favourite. I've enjoyed collections by other poets, and individual works by a few, but with Gluck there is always consistency, even if the style is a bit different. "A Village Life" takes on a very prose-like form, with longer lines and stanzas that, at times, could even be called paragraph. There's also much more repetition and restating of the obvious. And initially this was confusing.

Like always however, there is a meditative tone to each of the poems. I've grown to love how Gluck has several poems in a collection with the same name as they mimic the same repetitive routine that is diluted by events such as outings with friends. The same way I grew accustomed, and even ended up loving, the repetitive wording and long phrases. "Hunters" was particularly beautiful in its simplicity and that cyclical, closely-knitted narrative that leaves the reader with a startling and dark finish. However it was in "A Slip of paper", the next poem after, that I found my favourite couple of lines in the entire collection, for they reminded me why I enjoy Gluck's poems as much as I do:

To get born, your body makes a pact with death, / and from that moment, all it tries to do is cheat

Sophie says

Interesting passages.

To my mind, you're better off if you stay; that way, dreams don't damage you.

They know that at some point you stop being children, and at that point you become strangers. It seems unbearably lonely.

Better look at the fields now, see how they look before they're flooded.

She will withdraw into that private world of feeling/ women enter when they love. And living there, she will become/ like a person who casts no shadow, who is not present in the world;/ in that sense, so little use to him/ it hardly matter whether she lives or dies

It says forget, you forget/ It says begin again, you begin again.

He never uses words. Words, for him, are for making arrangements,/ for doing business. Never for anger, never for tenderness.

In the other life, your despair just turns into silence.

The sun telling the same lies about how beautiful the world is/ when all you need to know of a place is, do people live there./ If they do, you know everything.

My body, now that we will not be traveling together much longer/ I begin to feel a new tenderness toward you, very raw and unfamiliar,/ Like what I remember of love when I was young.

And though sometimes you couldn't see the person you were with,/ There was no substitute for that person.

So for a while it seems possible/ not to think of the hold of the body weakening, the ration/ of the body to the void shifting.

James Murphy says

Though I look forward to and eagerly buy each new volume of Gluck's poetry, I have a little trouble expressing why I like it so much. A Gluck poem draws your attention instantly because it confidently strides from its beginning to its clear and convincing resolution. A Gluck poem has a certain formal respectability you come to expect. While she doesn't bend the verbal rules or hammer new forms that glow with creation, neither would she, I don't think, write about a red dress in a honkytonk. Not that her poems don't radiate heat at times. It's simply more controlled, and it may be that cool control I admire the most about her. She can enter a theme of her choice and show you truths that hadn't been apparent before, in my mind, one of the

primary exercises of the poet. She produces volumes with themes: 1996's *Meadowlands* looked at a New Jersey family as emblem for Odysseus, Penelope and Telemachus at Ithaca, 2006's *Averno* dealt with classical views of hell. Impressively, Gluck has the skill to tailor her voice to her subject--a Homeresque description of New Jersey, the more classical, Dantean, and infernal style of *Averno*. *A Village Life* is a volume about those who live in a small, mostly self-contained community in what I take to be Mediterranean Europe. The style is plainer, more subdued, what you'd expect from people who understand their daily rounds and the importance of getting on with them. It reminds me a bit of John Berger. If Berger wrote verse this might be what it'd be like. Gluck here is concerned with what matter to her villagers: the seasons, the weather, animals, the satisfactions of work, the harvest, the landscape. Gluck captures it well. I think of her as a stately poet but also as a worldly one, someone who can stand in a room or in a landscape and understand what she sees. And can tell us about it.

Ann Cefola says

Glück has this amazing ability to capture the felt sense of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and the uneasy passages in between. This is a book of a poet looking back and remembering, and making concrete the loss as we leap from one time period to the next. There is a lot of Vermont, where she lives, in this book, especially the four poems "Burning Leaves" which Vermonters still do...burn wood, leaves, whatever; and the mountain views. The poetry feels both easy and earned. Brava!

metaphor says

All her life she dreamed of living by the sea
but fate didn't put her there.
[...]
now she's
down to two words,
never and only, to express this sense that life's
cheated her.

Never the cries of the gulls, only, in summer, the
crickets, cicadas.
Only the smell of the field, when all she wanted
was the smell of the sea, of disappearance
*The lovers part. The sea hammers the shore, the
mark each wave leaves
wiped out by the wave that follows.
Never accumulation, never one wave trying to
build on another,
never the promise of shelter—

The sea doesn't change as the earth changes;
it doesn't lie.
You ask the sea, what can you promise me
and it speaks the truth; it says erasure.

*

and the smell of the past is everywhere,
[...]
the smell of too many illusions—

Jeremy Allan says

I can understand (most of) the critiques I've heard / read about this book so far. Still, Glück remains a poet with the ability to move me, even in the midst of her obsessions. While individual poems rarely stand apart in my mind, I always find myself at home in the steady accumulation of her lines, both across pages and across books. Read Glück not for flash, but for mastery.

Kate says

This is my third collection of Glück's that I have read. I still wasn't blown away and for some reason I feel I should be and I'm determined to be. I will read more of her work, but I'm having a break for now. I'm not giving up though and I don't know why. For that alone maybe Louise Glück's work deceives more stars!

Callista says

I read half and skimmed through the rest. Beautiful images, yet I couldn't help but be saddened by this poetry. If they left me feeling alive and hopeful, I would have gobbled them up.

Lisa Rector says

Favorite poems - Sunset, Snowdrops, End of Winter, Matins (pgs. 13 & 25), Scilla, Witchgrass, Song, The Red Poppy, Vespers (pgs. 36, 37, & 42), and Retreating Light.
