HAVEPOETRY.COM

LOUISE GLÜCK

A VILLAGE LIFE

The death and uncertainty that await me
as they await all men, the shadows evaluating me
because it can take time to destroy a human being,
the element of suspense
needs to be preserved—
On Sundays I walk my neighbor’s dog
so she can go to church to pray for her sick mother.
The dog waits for me in the doorway. Summer and winter
we walk the same road, early morning, at the base of the escarpment.
Sometimes the dog gets away from me—for a moment or two,
I can’t see him behind some trees. He’s very proud of this,
this trick he brings out occasionally, and gives up again
as a favor to me—
Afterward, I go back to my house to gather firewood.
I keep in my mind images from each walk:
monarda growing by the roadside;
in early spring, the dog chasing the little gray mice,
so for a while it seems possible
not to think of the hold of the body weakening, the ratio
of the body to the void shifting,
and the prayers becoming prayers for the dead.
Midday, the church bells finished. Light in excess:
still, fog blankets the meadow, so you can’t see
the mountain in the distance, covered with snow and ice.
When it appears again, my neighbor thinks
her prayers are answered. So much light she can’t control her happiness—
it has to burst out in language. Hello, she yells, as though
that is her best translation.
She believes in the Virgin the way I believe in the mountain,
though in one case the fog never lifts.
But each person stores his hope in a different place.
I make my soup, I pour my glass of wine.
I’m tense, like a child approaching adolescence.
Soon it will be decided for certain what you are,
one thing, a boy or girl. Not both any longer.
And the child thinks: I want to have a say in what happens.
But the child has no say whatsoever.
When I was a child, I did not foresee this.

Later, the sun sets, the shadows gather,
rustling the low bushes like animals just awake for the night.
Inside, there’s only firelight. It fades slowly;
now only the heaviest wood’s still
flickering across the shelves of instruments.
I hear music coming from them sometimes,
even locked in their cases.
When I was a bird, I believed I would be a man.
That’s the flute. And the horn answers,
when I was a man, I cried out to be a bird.
Then the music vanishes. And the secret it confides in me
vanishes also.
In the window, the moon is hanging over the earth,
meaningless but full of messages.
It’s dead, it’s always been dead,
but it pretends to be something else,
burning like a star, and convincingly, so that you feel sometimes
it could actually make something grow on earth.
If there’s an image of the soul, I think that’s what it is.
I move through the dark as though it were natural to me,
as though I were already a factor in it.
Tranquil and still, the day dawns.
On market day, I go to the market with my lettuces.