LOUISE GLÜCK

ABISHAG

1.
At God’s word David’s kinsmen cast
through Canaan:
It was understood
the king was dying
as they said
outright
so that my father turned to me saying
How much have I ever asked of you
to which I answered
Nothing
as I remembered
So the sun rose from his shoulders:
blue air, the desert, the small
yellowing village
When I see myself
it is still as I was then,
beside the well, staring
into the hollowed gourd half filled
with water, where the dark braid
grazing the left shoulder was recorded
though the face
was featureless
of which they did not say
She has the look of one who seeks
some greater and destroying passion:
They took me as I was.
Not one among the kinsmen touched me,
not one among the slaves.
No one will touch me now.
2.
In the recurring dream my father
stands at the doorway in his black cassock
telling me to choose
among my suitors, each of whom
will speak my name once
until I lift my hand in signal.
On my father’s arm I listen

for not three sounds: Abishag,
but two: my love—
I tell you if it is my own will
binding me I cannot be saved.
And yet in the dream, in the half-light
of the stone house, they looked
so much alike. Sometimes I think
the voices were themselves
identical, and that I raised my hand
chiefly in weariness. I hear my father saying
Choose, choose. But they were not alike
and to select death, O yes I can
believe that of my body.