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LOUISE GLÜCK

MARATHON

1. Last Letter

Weeping, standing still—then going out again into the garden.
In the field, white heads of dandelions making rows of saints,
now bending, now stiff with awe—
and at the edge, a hare: his eyes fixed, terrified.
Silence. Herds of bells—
Without thinking, I knelt in the grass, like someone meaning to pray.
When I tried to stand again, I couldn’t move,
my legs were utterly rigid. Does grief change you like that?
Through the birches, I could see the pond.
The sun was cutting small white holes in the water.
I got up finally; I walked down to the pond.
I stood there, brushing the grass from my skirt, watching myself,
like a girl after her first lover
turning slowly at the bathroom mirror, naked, looking for a sign.
But nakedness in women is always a pose.
I was not transfigured. I would never be free.

2. Song of the River

Once we were happy, we had no memories.
For all the repetition, nothing happened twice.
We were always walking parallel to a river
with no sense of progression
though the trees across from us
were sometimes birch, sometimes cypress—
the sky was blue, a matrix of blue glass.
While, in the river, things were going by—
a few leaves, a child’s boat painted red and white,
its sail stained by the water—
As they passed, on the surface we could see ourselves;
we seemed to drift
apart and together, as the river
linked us forever, though up ahead
were other couples, choosing souvenirs.

3. The Encounter

You came to the side of the bed
and sat staring at me.
Then you kissed me—I felt
hot wax on my forehead.

I wanted it to leave a mark:
that’s how I knew I loved you.
Because I wanted to be burned, stamped,
to have something in the end—
I drew the gown over my head;
a red flush covered my face and shoulders.
It will run its course, the course of fire,
setting a cold coin on the forehead, between the eyes.
You lay beside me; your hand moved over my face
as though you had felt it also—
you must have known, then, how I wanted you.
We will always know that, you and I.
The proof will be my body.

4. Song of Obstacles

When my lover touches me, what I feel in my body
is like the first movement of a glacier over the earth,
as the ice shifts, dislodging great boulders, hills
of solemn rock: so, in the forests, the uprooted trees
become a sea of disconnected limbs—
And, where there are cities, these dissolve too,
the sighing gardens, all the young girls
eating chocolates in the courtyard, slowly
scattering the colored foil: then, where the city was,
the ore, the unearthed mysteries: so I see
that ice is more powerful than rock, than mere resistance—
Then for us, in its path, time doesn’t pass,
not even an hour.

5. Night Song

Look up into the light of the lantern.
Don’t you see? The calm of darkness
is the horror of Heaven.
We’ve been apart too long, too painfully separated.
How can you bear to dream,
to give up watching? I think you must be dreaming,
your face is full of mild expectancy.
I need to wake you, to remind you that there isn’t a future.
That’s why we’re free. And now some weakness in me
has been cured forever, so I’m not compelled
to close my eyes, to go back, to rectify—
The beach is still; the sea, cleansed of its superfluous life,
opaque, rocklike. In mounds, in vegetal clusters,
seabirds sleep on the jetty. Terns, assassins—
You’re tired; I can see that.
We’re both tired, we have acted a great drama.

Even our hands are cold, that were like kindling.
Our clothes are scattered on the sand; strangely enough,
they never turned to ashes.
I have to tell you what I've learned, that I know now
what happens to the dreamers.
They don't feel it when they change. One day
they wake, they dress, they are old.
Tonight I'm not afraid
to feel the revolutions. How can you want sleep
when passion gives you that peace?
You're like me tonight, one of the lucky ones.
You'll get what you want. You'll get your oblivion.
6. The Beginning
I had come to a strange city, without belongings:
in the dream, it was your city, I was looking for you.
Then I was lost, on a dark street lined with fruit stands.
There was only one fruit: blood oranges.
The markets made displays of them, beautiful displays—
how else could they compete? And each arrangement had, at its center,
one fruit, cut open.
Then I was on a boulevard, in brilliant sunlight.
I was running; it was easy to run, since I had nothing.
In the distance, I could see your house; a woman knelt in the yard.
There were roses everywhere; in waves, they climbed the high trellis.
Then what began as love for you
became a hunger for structure: I could hear
the woman call to me in common kindness, knowing
I wouldn't ask for you anymore—
So it was settled: I could have a childhood there.
Which came to mean being always alone.
7. First Goodbye
You can join the others now,
body that wouldn't let my body rest,
go back to the world, to avenues, the ordered
depths of the parks, like great terminals
that never darken: a stranger's waiting for you
in a hundred rooms. Go back to them,
to increment and limitation: near the centered rose,
you watch her peel an orange
so the dyed rind falls in petals on her plate. This
is mastery, whose active
mode is dissection: the enforced light
shines on the blade. Sooner or later
you'll begin to dream of me. I don't envy you

those dreams. I can imagine how my face looks,
burning like that, afflicted with desire—lowered
face of your invention—how the mouth betrays
the isolated greed of the lover
as it magnifies and then destroys:
I don’t envy you that visitation.
And the women lying there—who wouldn’t pity them,
the way they turn to you, the way
they struggle to be visible. They make
a place for you in bed, a white excavation.
Then the sacrament: your bodies pieced together,
churning, churning, till the heat leaves them entirely—
Sooner or later you will call my name,
cry of loss, mistaken
cry of recognition, of arrested need
for someone who exists in memory: no voice
carries to that kingdom.
8. Song of Invisible Boundaries
Last night I dreamed we were in Venice;
today, we are in Venice. Now, lying here,
I think there are no boundaries to my dreams,
nothing we won’t share.
So there is nothing to describe. We’re interchangeable
with anyone, in joy
changed to a mute couple.
Then why did we worship clarity,
to speak, in the end, only each other’s names,
to speak, as now, not even whole words,
only vowels?
Finally, this is what we craved,
this lying in the bright light without distinction—
we who would leave behind
exact records.
9. Marathon
I was not meant to hear
the two of them talking.
But I could feel the light of the torch
stop trembling, as though it had been
set on a table. I was not to hear
the one say to the other
how best to arouse me,
with what words, what gestures,
nor to hear the description of my body,
how it responded, what

it would not do. My back was turned.
I studied the voices, soon distinguishing
the first, which was deeper, closer,
from that of the replacement.
For all I know, this happens
every night: somebody waking me, then
the first teaching the second.
What happens afterward
occurs far from the world, at a depth
where only the dream matters
and the bond with any one soul
is meaningless; you throw it away.