LOUISE GLÜCK

THE END OF THE WORLD

1. Terra Nova

A place without associations—
Where, in the other country, there were mountains
so the mind was made to discover
words for containment, and so on,
here there was water, an extension of the brilliant city.
As for detail: where there had been, before,
nurturing slopes of grass on which, at evening or before rain,
the Charolais would lie, their many eyes
affixed to the traveler, here
there was clay. And yet it blossomed astoundingly:
beside the house, camellia, periwinkle, rosemary in crushing profusion—
in his heart, he was a lover again,
calling now, now, not restricted
to once or in the old days. He lay on his back in the wild fennel.
But in fact he was an old man.
Sixty years ago, he took his mother’s hand. It was May, his birthday.
They were walking in the orchard, in the continuous present,
gathering apple blossoms. Then she wanted him to watch the sun;
they had to stand together as it sank in the possessive earth.
How short it seemed, that lifetime of waiting—
this red star blazing over the bay
was all the light of his childhood
that had followed him here.

2. The Tribute

In that period of strange calm
he wandered down stone steps to the wide harbor:
he was moved; the lights of the city moved him deeply
and it seemed the earth was being offered to him
as a source of awe—he had no wish to change.
He had written, he had built his temple.
So he justified a need to sacrifice.
He leaned against the railing: in the dark bay, he saw the city waver;
cells of light floated on the water, they rocked gently, held by white threads.
Behind him, on the steps, he heard a man and woman
arguing with great intensity.
In a poem, he could bring them together
like two pieces of a broken toy that could be joined again—

Then the voices ceased, replaced by sighs, rustlings, the little sounds
of which he had no knowledge
though the wind persisted
in conveying them to where he stood,
and with them all the odors of summer.

3. The End of the World

It is difficult to describe, coming as it still does
to each person at a different time.
Unique, terrible—and in the sky, uncanny brilliance
substituting for the humanizing sun.
So the blessed kneel, the lucky who expect nothing,
while those who loved the world
are returned by suffering
to what precedes attachment, namely
hatred of pain. Now the bitter are confirmed
in loneliness: they watch the winter sun
mockingly lower itself over the bare earth,
making nothing live—in this light
god approaches the dying.
Not the true god, of course. There is no god
who will save one man.