HAVEPOETRY.COM

LOUISE GLÜCK

BIRTHDAY

Every year, on her birthday, my mother got twelve roses
from an old admirer. Even after he died, the roses kept coming:
the way some people leave paintings and furniture,
this man left bulletins of flowers,
his way of saying that the legend of my mother's beauty
had simply gone underground.
At first, it seemed bizarre.
Then we got used to it: every December, the house suddenly
filling with flowers. They even came to set
a standard of courtesy, of generosity—
After ten years, the roses stopped.
But all that time I thought
the dead could minister to the living;
I didn't realize
this was the anomaly; that for the most part
the dead were like my father.
My mother doesn't mind, she doesn't need
displays from my father.
Her birthday comes and goes; she spends it
sitting by a grave.
She's showing him she understands,
that she accepts his silence.
He hates deception: she doesn't want him making
signs of affection when he can't feel.