

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *The Wild Iris*

At the end of my suffering  
there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death  
I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.  
Then nothing. The weak sun  
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive  
as consciousness  
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being  
a soul and unable  
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth  
bending a little. And what I took to be  
birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember  
passage from the other world  
I tell you I could speak again: whatever  
returns from oblivion returns  
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came  
a great fountain, deep blue  
shadows on azure seawater.

Louise Glück<sup>1</sup>

## **Reflections**

Biblical scholar Luis Alonso Schökel writes, “What has been written with imagination, must also be read with imagination.” In my own explorations of the connectedness of theology and poetry, religion and the arts, I find that the very thing at the root of my anxieties and doubts about my work is the same thing that inspires me to continue it—what Schökel calls a “certain faculty,” that is, an imaginative capacity albeit insufficient.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Wild Iris” by Louise Glück from *The Wild Iris*, HarperCollins. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*

“The Wild Iris” is an example of an intense imaginative exercise; its difficulty is its reward and what is at first a disorienting landscape clarifies and sharpens toward recognition. The titular poem, from the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Wild Iris* (1992), is one of a series set in the imagined voice of a flower speaking to the gardener-poet. It may not be clear on the first (or perhaps even second) reading that the speaker of this poem is indeed the wild iris, a “consciousness buried in the dark earth,” but that knowledge is central, as critic Helen Vendler explains, if we are to “decode the import, ‘solve’ the allegory.”<sup>3</sup>

The iris pleads with us in the third line—“Hear me out”—and so we do: we are silent and below ground *with* the iris, directly addressed *by* the iris, and with “the stiff earth / bending a little,” we find a voice *in* the iris returned from its oblivion. This is a poem that requires a kind of surrender from the reader, a willingness to imagine beyond capacity. Glück’s poem is cryptic, visionary and bewildering; it is personal but not private; and, it offers an invitation to participate in whatever was the “passage from the other world.” Vendler again: “[W]e must, according to the case, fill out the story, substitute ourselves for the fictive personages... and later read the poem, instead, as a truth complete within its own terms, reflecting some one of the innumerable configurations into which experience falls.”

But here’s why this poem has kept me up at night: it illustrates what I find to be a provocative assertion, that the imagination and the real are not, as they are often understood, antithetical. In fact, what we might consider the dreamworld could very well be truer to the soul’s center than “real life.” I’ve been thinking about this poem as emblematic of the intersection of religion and the arts, a marriage of territories that have in common our ancient and universal fears—of death, voicelessness, oblivion, failure, destruction—and our desires: for comfort, clarity, love, assurance, beauty as miraculous as the iris’s petals, blue on blue.

What begins as a puzzle, the speech of an iris, ends as a mirror. Indeed, it is I who have feared “being / a soul and unable / to speak, ending abruptly” and I, too, able to rejoice “from the center of my life” when I find my voice again in bloom.

### ✧ About the poet

**Louise Glück** (b. 1943) is the author of numerous books of poetry and two collections of essays. Her most recent volume, *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, won the 2014 National Book Award. *The Wild Iris*, in which the poem printed here appears, won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize. In 2003, she was appointed United States Poet Laureate, succeeding Billy Collins. Born in New York, she now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is writer-in-residence at Yale University.



**Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey**  
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<sup>3</sup> from Vendler’s review published in New Republic of *The House on Marshland* (1975)