ABSTRACT

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The Windstorm
(Under the Direction of DR. SABRINA ORAH MARK)

This project is a critical study on the poetics of grief and loss in Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* as well as a collection of original poems. In my study on Glück, I examine how metaphors for suffering are psychological as well as aesthetic devices for portraying and ultimately, abstracting loss. I use trauma theory to understand how emotional trauma informs Glück's speakers as vehicles and bodies for bearing grief and to suggest that speaking itself becomes a way in which Glück's speakers survive and recuperate after psychological tragedy. By studying the way in which Glück's speakers testify after traumatic events, I suggest that experiences of psychological wounding are constantly subverted and repressed and are revealed through metaphor rather than factual accuracy. Lastly, I show how the pastoral landscape of *The Wild Iris* shapes the mental landscapes of grief. The poems of my own collection deal specifically with the process of articulating suffering in an elegiac landscape of trauma and decay and how the distortion of images reflects emotional scarring.

INDEX WORDS: Trauma Theory, Poetics, Poetry, Louise Glück, The Wild Iris, Grief

THE WINDSTORM

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DEDICATION

For always encouraging and supporting me, I would like to dedicate these poems to my family. Thank you for always being there for me. These poems could not have been written without knowing and loving you all.

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I owe much gratitude to all of my teachers who have challenged and encouraged me these past years. Thank you Dr. Sabrina Orah Mark for being my mentor as well as a source of poetic courage and inspiration. I would also like to thank Dr. Andrew Zawacki for reading this paper on such short notice. Dr. Aidan Wasley and Dr. Reginald McKnight have also been important advisers of mine whose teachings are invaluable to me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
SURVIVING "THE OTHER WORLD" IN LOUISE GLÜCK'S *THE WILD IRIS*

Through her creation of untrustworthy and often unreliable speakers as narrators of their own experiences, as well as the poems' dependence on the "you," or a listener, Louise Glück suggests that the conditions under which the poems of *The Wild Iris* are conceived involve vestiges of real trauma and may be interpreted as such. Glück's speakers narrate and articulate their personal suffering in ways that often resemble testimony of those who have survived psychological and emotional trauma. "I didn't know my voice / if one had given me / would be so full of grief," writes Glück in "Trillium" (19-21). When reading Glück's speakers in *The Wild Iris* as trauma victims, the relationship between voice and silence is crucial for the victim's testimony as well as her recovery. "End of Winter," "Trillium," and "Snowdrops" specifically show how poetic witnessing and testifying are ways to both articulate and even aestheticize grief, as well as a means to moderate the suffering of the speaker. The voices of Glück's speakers become vehicles or bodies for experiencing grief as well as the only links to a distorted or repressed actual experience. If, as Daniel Morris argues, "testimony may be a cathartic means to treat and cure…wounds," then arguably a way in which Glück's speakers grow and survive is by finding and using a voice to tell their stories – even one that has been silenced by a never explicitly mentioned and constantly subverted tragedy (134). Speaking in *The Wild Iris* becomes a way to process a devastating experience as well as the only way to recover from it. Furthermore, Glück's use of the pastoral as the landscape of her poems complicates her poetics of grief. Glück transforms the pastoral by combining the elegy with trauma to invent a lyric space or another world in which one can not only grieve, but also eventually recuperate. It is here, in the site of the pastoral that her speakers present metaphor rather than facts to articulate

grief, which in turn, distances the painful past experience. Metaphor is used continually in these poems as a psychological, as well as an aesthetic device to abstract grief.

Glück's poetics invent a speaker that straddles what Morris calls the "gap between what a survivor can say about the experience of a catastrophic event and what one cannot describe with anything like historical accuracy" (133). This mysterious and compelling gap in Glück manifests itself as a type of sleep or psychological unconsciousness. From the start of the collection we learn that the speaker has "return[ed] from oblivion," from a state of "death," and that she has "survive[d] / as consciousness / buried in the dark earth" ("The Wild Iris"). Indeed, Glück's central metaphor for traumatic experience is a deathlike sleep within the earth. The emblem and persona for such experience is repeatedly the flower who blossoms out of the deep earth after having survived its darkness. The incapability on behalf of the speaker to detail with narrative precision or to dwell in a retelling of a traumatic experience is ostensibly because that speaker has literally been asleep and cannot clearly remember what has actually occurred. Glück's speaker's shift in consciousness – from the unconscious state of a sleeper to the hyperconscious state of a resurrected victim, is characteristic of a traumatized subject seeking recovery with her own voice. The credibility of this strangely lucid and controlled voice, however, becomes increasingly more questionable throughout Glück's poems.

The vagueness and obscurity of the speaker's testimony as she relays her experience in "Trillium" can be interpreted as an unwillingness to relate an experience or a mental inability to do so. The suddenness with which the poem begins, "When I woke up I was in a forest / …I knew nothing," implies the latter condition (1,4). The speaker's state suggests what theorists identify as traumatic amnesia, or an inability to fully recount the experience wherein a psychological wound originated. But most importantly, this speaker cannot speak; she can "do nothing but see" and wonder, "Are there souls that need / death's presence, as I require

protection?" (4, 10-11). The victim relies on speaking to the extent that it becomes the sole means of her survival and a potential response to what she does not know: "I think if I speak long enough / I will answer that question" (12-13). If the "unreliability of testimony can be interpreted as a psychic tremor that exemplifies how the witness may regard the present as a painful repetition of the long-ago," then the "rain streaming from" the speaker at the end of "Trillium" can be interpreted as proof, or truth "about how the pain of the past has literally intruded upon the present-tense existence of the speaker…" (25, Morris 99). Literally, the rain is a metaphor for a well of tears; however, this physical display is also an emotional release, the apotheosis of the speaker's suffering as well as evidence of the ways in which knowledge and grief change us. Furthermore, before the speaker uses her voice, she is "ignorant" (18). Speaking, therefore, becomes not only a way of surviving, of bearing witness and coping with grief, but it also is a form of personal enlightenment. This knowledge may be painful; after all, the wakened woman "did not even know [she] *felt* grief" until her voice came, but she has at last begun to speak with her own voice (23, emphasis added). Similar to the speaker in "Trillium," the speaker of "Snowdrops" experiences an awakening and an eventual assertion over her past suffering:

> I did not expect to survive
> earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
> to waken again, to feel
> in damp earth my body
> able to respond again, remembering
> after so long how to open again
> in cold light of earliest spring— (4-11)

In "Arcadia Redux," Ann Townsend writes, "nostalgic pastoral often seeks to reconfigure the body of the earth as a human body" (*Radiant Lyre* 160). This is traditionally a sexual or

romantic move, one that equates a woman's body with a ripened or harvested landscape. Glück, too, uses the female body as an earthen one, but the proximity of female to earth is merely another source of grief for the speaker ("This is the earth? Then / I don't belong here" ["The White Rose"] and "all / earthly beauty my punishment…/ source of my suffering" ["Ipomoea"]). Much like in "Trillium," the weight of the earth causes traumatic and nearly fatal amnesia in "Snowdrops." Indeed, in trauma theory the "distinctions between remembering, forgetting and misremembering become moot" for the victim (99 *Glück*). Glück, in the pastoral tradition, uses the body, but largely as a vehicle and a voice for suffering. In "The White Rose," Glück writes, "I have only / my body for a voice" (13-14). In "End of Winter," it is the mother's body that houses the child and in "Snowdrops," the body is physically endangered and is the final connection in her suspension between quite literally, life and death and sleep and waking. The body, crucial to the pastoral, threatens to expose the speaker and that which she desires to remain secret.

In "End of Winter," Glück uses the setting of the pastoral to explore maternity, a natural condition inherently related to the earth, as a destructive rather than a procreative female force. The mother figure becomes an inheritor and a vehicle for bearing internal trauma. "You wanted to be born; I let you be born," Glück writes with haunting lucidness, imagining the creation and destruction of a child, and by extension, a world, that exists solely because of a mother's natural power (3). To be born comes with a "cost":

> never thinking
> this would cost your anything
> never imagining the sound of my voice
> as anything but part of you –
> you won't hear it in the other world

not clearly again,
not in birdcall or human cry (12-18)

The crucial "voice" of the mother, echoing in the womb since conception of the child, "won't" be heard in "the other world" and when the "sound of [her] voice" is lost, grief and separation follow and distinctly define that "other world" as traumatic (14,16). Dori Laub writes, "the victim's narrative…begin[s] with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not come into existence" (*Testimony* 57). Indeed, in the poem the "other world" has yet to come, but the speaker anticipates its coming as the source of the traumatic separation that must eventually take place between mother and child, speaker and listener (16). The speaker, in a sense, is therefore witnessing the trauma "from the inside" (*Testimony* 227). The pastoral becomes internalized in the body of the speaker.

The pastoral, according to David Baker in "The Pastoral: First and Last Things," is not only "defined by its location," its physical setting, but it also "situates itself very knowingly, by what it is opposed to, what is erased or ignored" (*Radiant Lyre* 39). Baker identifies the ironic opposition as "the real world," cities, civilization, etc., upon which the idealized pastoral depends (39). In Glück, however, her pastoral setting evokes another type of opposition. The pastoral presents itself ostensibly as a location and a setting for human love, but for Glück the pastoral is a site of emotional trauma and the irreconcilabilities of human nature in physical Nature. Though her poetry is set in the stark, forsaken landscape of the pastoral ripe with open fields, wild gardens and forests, Glück also finds a metaphor for survival within its confines. In the tradition of the pastoral elegy, Glück uses seasons to show human nature's restorative cycle of grieving and accepting, suffering and survival, against the natural cycles of birth and death. "End of Winter" is set on the cusp of a new season, spring – and marks a time of world-ending to a time of world-making. The potentials for recovery as well as for relapse represented by the flux of the

seasons become representations of Glück 's speaker's emotional growth in the pastoral realm. The earth, once again, is associated and identified as one of the most powerful and repeated sources of suffering for Glück's speakers. There is the repeated fear being trapped within the earth and the equal desire to be a part of it. In "Witchgrass," Glück uses the earth as a metaphor for herself, deeply internalizing her physical surroundings to the extent that she asserts, "I'll be here when only the sun and moon / are left, and the sea, and the wide field / I will constitute the field" (37-39). Even in "Snowdrops," "despair" and "winter" are equated with one another and it is the very earth, the traditional site of the pastoral, that is the speaker's source of "suppress[ion]" as well as her eventual release (2,3,5). In the fifth of the "Matins" poems, the speaker observes and is affected emotionally by how "summer is ending, already / the leaves turning, always the sick trees / going first, the dying turning / brilliant yellow" (10-13). These poems, especially "Snowdrops," incorporate elegy into testimony.

In his essay "Elegiac," Stanley Plumly argues that "in American poetry…the elegy has been less an issue of occasion than an expansive and inclusive way of processing emotion" (*Radiant Lyre* 32). The elegy is more of a "condition under which the life of the poem comes into being" (32). Indeed, in *The Wild Iris*, Glück's elegiac voice is the catalyst and the impulse for her poetry, much like the desire to testify after a traumatic experience, to find a voice for an experience of suffering that has happened or is, in some sense, still happening. Glück transforms the poetics of negation, denial and interrogation into psychological affirmation and acceptance to show how suffering is largely subliminal. We hear the voice of denial over and over again in these poems. In "Snowdrops" she writes, "I didn't expect to survive," "I didn't expect to waken again," and in "End of Winter": "You won't hear it…", "never thinking," "never imagining" and finally in "Trillium" we get, "it wasn't possible," "I didn't know my voice," "I didn't even know." These negations evoke a sense of despair and resistance to the present and take the place

of a lucid and credible poetic narrative. By learning what does not happen rather than what does happen, the poems exude the feeling of being frozen in time.

While, as Shoshana Felman, in *Testimony: Cries of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, says, the "burden of the witness" is a "solitary" one, testifying requires a listener, or the poetic invention of the "you" in Glück 's work (3). Laub adds: "bearing witness to a trauma, is in fact, a process that includes the listener. For a testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate a total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears" (*Testimony* 70). Enacting this very idea, Glück, in order to articulate degrees of grief and despair, creates speakers who consistently rely on listeners to whom must be spoken. The speaker by the end of "Snowdrops," for example, is "among *you* again" (12, emphasis added). Only in the presence of the "other," or the "you," does the speaker "risk joy" and emerge into the "new world" (14). The "you" of "Snowdrops" resembles the child figure in "End of Winter" and similarly becomes a vehicle to bear the speaker's burdens through listening and to ease her grief. Glück uses silence in "End of Winter" to further extend her metaphor for trauma. The conundrum that it is only until the trauma is spoken of, or transcribed, that the silence of the victim is apparent, is expressed similarly in Glück's work. Silence, in "End of Winter," is symptomatic of the speaker's suffering. Once the speaker loses her "voice," or her attachment to her child, she cannot be recovered or enter the "other world" with her child (16). She must remain alone like the "solitary" bird when even just *imagining* the silent world is traumatic (2).

As trauma theorists have argued, language is one of the most crucial means of survival and recovery for victims of trauma. Having someone to listen, to bear witness to a testimony, is also a necessary way to humanize and process suffering. Glück shows how finding one's voice and more explicitly, using it, is one of the ways in which one finds metaphors for survival in the

wake of a psychological trauma. In a lecture entitled "The Restorative Power of Art," Glück says: "The poem is a revenge on loss, which has been forced to yield to a new form, a thing that hadn't existed in the world before. The loss itself becomes, then, both addition and subtraction" (191). The speakers in *The Wild Iris* narrate in order to survive the world Glück creates out of loss – a world that is simultaneously post-apocalyptic and on the verge on extinction ("…it / could all end, it is capable / of devastation…" ["The White Lilies"]). By situating the speaker's bodies in the pastoral, Glück "limits associations between nature and the self to the mutable physical body" (Morris 168). The pastoral becomes the complicated site of the speaker's traumatic past as well as the environment, dictated by the ebb and flow of seasons, in which she finds her voice to end silence with complete consciousness and assertion over her suffering. In the same speech, Glück expresses the complications of conveying suffering through poetry: "But suffering is so hard, why should its expression be easy? Trauma and loss are not, in themselves, art: they are like half a metaphor" (190). The metaphors of her poems become landscapes of internal suffering and psychological devices to transform the landscape in order to find a way out, or as Glück would incredibly imagine: "At the end of my suffering / there was a door" ("The Wild Iris").

CHAPTER 2
POETIC STATEMENT

I studied Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* as a way to discover where Glück's poetics differ from my own, to think about my specific poetics of grief, and to consider the differences between historical and personal trauma. The following poems were created in the period of one year. They deal specifically with the problem of aestheticizing grief and the powers of metaphor to transform an actual experience into something abstract, into something more manageable. While a hidden tragedy exists behind each poem of *The Windstorm*, the speakers, in their interactions with the "you" of the poems, reveal and conceal that tragedy through speaking, touching and remembering. The pastoral environment as the landscape of these poems also becomes a mental landscape of absence and loss that the speakers cannot escape. I am interested in poetry as an act of creation, one that has the ability to overcome, transcend and reinvent absence into another world.

CHAPTER 3
THE WINDSTORM

Windermere

The night the gardener
starved you
wooden apples fell
from the ill trees

You followed him out
into the orchard
until you always were gone

That night the gardener
made you shake
fell the sick trees

You skinned the apples but
the trees didn’t stop dying

January

Where the forest ended
there was a field

We put on our warm white clothes
and pressed into the frozen land

But there you were afraid of storms
and you would not touch me—
not even in your gloves

All day I watched you
clear the land for a garden,

You took seeds from the dead grass,
pulled the fruit out the birds' mouths,
stacked the fish against the house

Then in the field I couldn't
touch what you touched:
the door in our room, the flat weeds,
the ice pond

When you slept, I
disappeared – looked
and looked back

for our forest—for the soft ground,
the old windmill, your long hair

But you woke and followed
me into the garden
like I had wanted

Then you touched my
mouth with your gloves
and I couldn't speak anymore
Not even to tell you I couldn't go back—

Selbridge Mill

The first winter behind the middle house
the creek froze all the animals
Inside, the brother shut

the wooden boxes
and we slept on the floor
until there weren’t any trees
and the creek flooded that summer
into the back garden,
into his black boots
The boxes were full of water
we couldn’t empty
before winter came again
Still, we carried the wooden brother
when we left the middle house,
when snow sealed over all the rooms—

Landfall

That winter on Monhegan
I tied on your black boots

The children burned down
frozen ships that came

and didn't leave the island—
you weren’t in any of them.

I dragged the black sails up
into the house and didn't sleep

The trees were mostly dead that winter
and the children wouldn't stop growing

In the ice storms, I listened to the
whales open their mouths
and sink into the sea
you couldn't

The Orchard

Our summer in the orchard,
you tended my sickness—
pulled from my mouth the dead leaves,
the ones I could never let go
even when it was time
They had begun to stop glowing,
to crack slowly open,
to beg out of my mouth

I blamed you at first,
for touching them.
for taking their glows,
for making me speak of them
so they would finally go

But you took them in your mouth,
left me deep in the orchard,
swore to find the forest where they'd glow again

Back for me, late that winter
you come dragging the tree I hid over
and over in the forest from you

But you never found me,
never again in the orchard.
You shut your teeth over my leaves
still sick in your mouth,
never recovered

Where We Were Born

When we finally leave the first house, we let all the doors open. We fill the rooms with the boxes you buried: your wooden glasses, your black clock, your Christmas bell. I put on the wooden glasses for the one last time and call out *brother* even though I said I would not. Before we go, our mother lines all three of us against the wall to trace our shapes in dark paint. She still calls us her staircase children even though the first step broke boxes and boxes ago. But my mother, covered in dark paint, leaves us there, knowing how each of us fell when that step broke, separately, in the place it was.

Winter

Did you burn the field,
our childhood,
was it gone so that I could
never get back –
not to our years in that field,
the poison animals, the windstorms,
not to the boxes we buried:
first my frozen brother, then your wooden ship—
Did we go there together for
our one last time,
to sail the frozen ship,
to sink the wooden brother,
to climb the one tree
that never stopped growing—
Was that when winter came,
when you carried the candles to the edge
and held me back from flooding
into that burning field

The Sonogram

In the sonogram, found at the bottom of the stairs, our hands look like smudged snow
but in my mother's room, Wintum wore one crumpled wing where my fingers grew
his melted softly in the dark with my mother,
and I was born leaving, folding my hands into wings for ever
the snow came always after that, falling even into my sleep,
into the locked attic, where all the shorn wings I reached for in the dark were
with Wintum's hands, I buried them in the snow
and mother, for ever asleep at the bottom of the stairs, filled all the empty rooms

October

Didn’t we cover your floor in dirt
Didn’t we push the seeds into it
The ones you left in our gloves,
then in our mouths, then in our shoes
But weren’t we afraid of the ground
when we opened our mouths—
afraid to know what would come
out of your hands full of seeds –
until you always were gone, and
we flooded the room, and
Didn’t we, wasn’t that how
we always wanted you,
to come back from the ground again—

The Staircase

You and Alice named the babies,
began to build the stairs to a house
at night in your groom gloves
you put her down
in the tall grass, shaking—
after, you had to find
and find her
she was disappeared
into the house
and when the last stair
broke, not even you
could get to Alice.
you took off your groom
gloves, left them in the tall grass,
left her caught in the house
where Alice made you
carry the babies up that staircase in the dark.

The Walls of the Room

You won’t follow me again,
not into the trees
to hear to the old storms
You won’t want to again,
to dream back to me,
I won’t be holding
the bell to wake you,
won’t scrape the walls
of your room,
won’t want the wind
from the storm
to touch you—

Lastborn

I decided, finally, that you had gone before the morning,
that the night shook
your sleep gently, that
you never stopped dreaming.

Years I stayed against your door
holding back the water you dreamt
from coming into the house where we were born.

Once, I left you, wanting my own sleep—
I opened your room up,
let that water wrap us all under

Never again against your door, I tore myself,
impossibly,
out of the house where we were born,
where the water still fills all the rooms,
still reaches back inside our mother,
the dark place where you'd grown,
where I felt you first, already gone,
before you knew I was there too, survived—
where your water woke me, then sealed me shut.

Will

When winter comes,
I will bury you in the dark
I will throw the birthday trees into the water
I will take off all your clothes
I will swallow the teeth you left in your gloves.

On your last birthday, there was blood in your mouth
But you said the trees would stop growing,
you would not put your hands in your gloves anymore.

Will, when winter came,
I could not even carry the trees
I put on all your clothes
and in the dark place
I wear your birthmark
I empty your gloves.

White Clothes

Now the quiet sea
hushes and hushes
over you

I will not rush back to
take off your white clothes
over again

I could not bear to watch you
come into and out of them each day

Now I remember
we were never here together
digging for bells in the sea

The Doctors

The doctors grew the dark
ferns over me

You couldn’t find me under
all the old leaves in the field

You weren’t the boy turning
into the ground,

Not the town into that
frozen field

The doctors weren’t here together
digging through the dark ferns

You should have put on my clothes
and found the doctors

Spoken backwards until
I crawled back out again

The Town

There weren't any sick doctors in the town anymore. There were the new fields the winds shook with ice. Far inside the town there was the frozen animal that hadn't learned to speak. There were storms one year that sealed the gardens over. But there was the magnolia tree that hadn't died for eight years now. And there was the one distant winter closing in on it.

When the Forest Stopped Moving

I found a way into the forest of all those trees that never stopped dying. In that forest, I could finally put down my gloves and sleep. I would not think of you. I would not even think of the animals that kept being born. In the forest, nothing would grow. It was dangerous then, when the world would stop completely. Finally, I had to dream a storm came into that forest when nothing had moved for so long.

Overgrown

When you were in every room
that winter I knew
you weren't real anymore

But I made a way back to
you – through the bright
open field into the overgrown

There everyone was
your mother sick
with wanting you to be
born again and again,
to be rid of you

Last Dream

That summer burned
the forest down
Now you left
that forest again and again
The trees melted slowly
with the animals until
it was winter
in the new field.
I almost woke
when the beaks were
iced shut,
when nothing moved
in the yellow grass but me.
Then I could feel you
not waking back up,
the frozen animals still
not speaking
not opening a way out

When I Knew I would not Wake Again

With the forest gone, I learned to look away from the ground. With the forest gone, light filled the bare field. With the forest gone, I could look out and finally see the one yellow mountain. I imagined after that mountain, imagined how when it disappeared, there was the sea. I would find the wooden ship, I decided, in the black trees with the forest gone.

Tongues

When the forest was gone,
light filled the bare field—
the animals would not speak
anymore,
their teeth hurt all winter
in their daydreams,
their nests on the ground
they couldn’t get out
awake—
suddenly everything
in the field would
stop moving
suddenly they would
grow tongues.

On the Wooden Ship

I drag the frozen brother
out of the sea and
onto the wooden ship for
the one last time

In every other dream he
begs back
into the water

But this time, I press
his frozen hands to
my wooden skin

and this time, he does not
leave the dream first

Softly from the wooden ship
into the sea
I let the frozen brother go

Far Enough

I remembered the beginning
wrong. Your teeth marks
were not in the tree.

I cannot ask you where
they are now—
neither of us can reach
far enough back

I will never devastate
the forest enough to open
you back up,
to know which mother
is now yours

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