

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #204

July 2025

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### A “Mini” Note: Two Poems by Louise Glück



For the past several months, with two or three exceptions, the JES ran “**Classic**” **Book Notes** as I completed a short book on leadership that we plan to release later this year. Although I am at the Chautauqua Institution this week delivering a series of presentations on the future of the American Experiment, I thought it was time for some fresh material.

Noting that of all the **Book Notes**, those that generate the most animated reader response are not about history or contemporary events but poetry. One of my

editors, Ben Speggen, suggested that I occasionally write a “mini” **Book Note** highlighting a poet I particularly admire.

So, this week, two poems by Louise Glück (pronounced “Glick”), and next week, T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets.”

Do you remember the story of “Hansel and Gretel?”

Louise Glück does.

Most people, if they think about the story at all, recall it as a children’s fairy tale about a brother and sister lost in the woods who encounter a wicked witch who lives in a house made of bread, cake, and sugar. They dimly recall that the witch threatened the children, but the children escaped to live happily ever after. That is a very sanitized, Disneyfied version of what is actually a very grim (pun intended since it first gained fame in **Grimms’ Fairy Tales**) story of two children intentionally abandoned deep in the forest by their father and stepmother who, threatened by starvation, could not afford to keep them. In the woods, captured by a witch who plans to eat them, Gretel saves them by killing her. Gretel tricks the witch into looking into the oven in which she plans to roast Hansel. When she does, Gretel pushes her into the oven and slams its door shut. The children discover jewels in the stable where Hansel is imprisoned, and a swan helps them find their way home. At home, the stepmother has died, so they are reunited with their father and live happily ever after.

Or, do they?

Glück has her doubts.

In a poem she wrote early in her career, she asks a question I have also asked myself: how do characters who have survived great trauma go on? What happens next? A thought experiment: in **The Great Gatsby**, Fitzgerald kills off Gatsby, but just before all of that, he has a scene in which Tom and Daisy sit at their kitchen table eating a cold meal, making their peace with one another before they go off to live their thoughtless, carefree mega-rich lives. It has always occurred to me that for Tom, the literalist, yes, that might be true, but not for Daisy, who has just enough imagination to make the rest of her life after the death of Gatsby something less than carefree.

Or, am I wrong?

In “Gretel In Darkness,” Glück asks and answers the same question.

Gretel In Darkness

This is the world we wanted.  
All who would have seen us dead  
are dead. I hear the witch's cry  
break in the moonlight through a sheet  
of sugar: God rewards.  
Her tongue shrivels into gas...

Now, far from women's arms  
and memory of women, in our father's hut  
we sleep, are never hungry.  
Why do I not forget?  
My father bars the door, bars harm  
from this house, and it is years.

No one remembers. Even you, my brother,  
summer afternoons you look at me as though  
you meant to leave,  
as though it never happened.

But I killed for you. I see armed firs,  
the spires of that gleaming kiln—  
Nights I turn to you to hold me  
but you are not there.  
Am I alone? Spies  
hiss in the stillness, Hansel,  
we are there still and it is real, real,  
that black forest and the fire in earnest. [1]

As readers of these **Book Notes** know, I agree with Billy Collins that explication can kill a poem so I will refrain from explicating. But in response to some readers' questions about how to read a poem, I will say this: Glück demands attention.

First, who is the speaker of the poem? It is Gretel. Next, although one must listen to the rhythm of the words, one must read Glück slowly. This is not a newspaper article to be hurried through.



One must pay attention to the words, to the sentence structure, to how the lines are spaced on the page, and to the punctuation which measures the rhythm. A period is a full stop; a semi-colon a half stop; a comma a quarter stop; and, when one line runs into the next, that is called enjambment and asks the reader to pause ever so slightly to give the first word in the next line its proper attention. Okay, enough

pedantry. Read her slowly – she will reward you.

Speaking of rewards, in her marvelous collection “The Wild Iris,” Glück writes a sustained sequence of poems in which the speakers are either the flowers themselves, God, or the gardener herself (Glück). In the sequence, which begins with the poem “The Wild Iris,” she takes the reader through the life of the garden from late winter/early spring full cycle back to winter. If “Gretel In Darkness” struck you as too fraught, her “Snowdrops” will reaffirm your life force.

### Snowdrops

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know  
what despair is; then  
winter should have meaning for you.

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 the cold light  
of earliest spring--

afraid, yes, but among you again  
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world. [2]

No explication, but two things: 1) the flower is the speaker, and 2) a snowdrop is a white flower in the amaryllis family; it is one of the first flowers of spring; it is a symbol of hope, new life, new beginnings, and overcoming challenges.

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“Louise Glück (photo by Sigrid Estrada)” at “Nobel Prize for Literature 2020: American poet Louise Glück wins for her ‘unmistakeable poetic voice’” in **Independent** (US Edition) 8 October 2020 available at [Nobel prize for Literature 2020: American poet Louise Glück wins for her ‘unmistakeable poetic voice’ | The Independent](#) accessed July 9, 2025.  
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### End Notes

1. Glück, Louise, “*Gretel In Darkness*,” in **Louise Glück Poems 1962-2012** (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 61.
2. “Snowdrops,” in Glück *cited above*, p. 250.

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