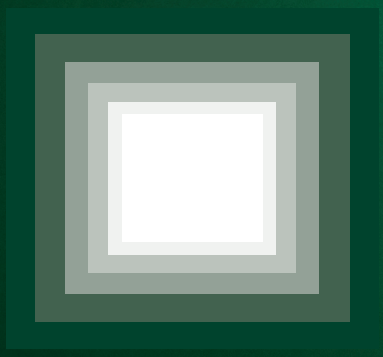
INTERNAL TAPESTRIES

LOUISE GLÜCK SAYS A POET MUST BE SURPRISED BY WHAT THE MIND IS CAPABLE OF UNVEILING, WHICH MAY EXPLAIN WHY HER TWELFTH BOOK OF POEMS, *FAITHFUL AND VIRTUOUS NIGHT*, PUBLISHED THIS MONTH BY FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, FEELS SO STARTLINGLY ALIVE WITH THE WONDER OF DISCOVERY.

In his essay "Meditations of a Sitter," Louise Glück's onetime teacher Stanley Kunitz penned a line of such searing veracity it seems a condemnation of entire quadrants of the human tribe: "The empty ones are those who do not suffer their selfhood." To suffer a selfhood means to embody the soul of self, to know yourself en route to *becoming* yourself. Glück studied with Kunitz at Columbia University in the mid-sixties, and for nearly five decades she has been the American poet most willing to communicate the flammable vicissitudes of selfhood, to detect the temblors beneath the self's consistent adaptations to the facts of living. The facts of any life are impotent and ineffectual until literature intercedes, until it takes hold of those facts and twists them into the light, casting a refraction that allows us to glimpse them anew.



Glück's refractions reveal the counterpoint between fable and fact, between mythos and mundanity, between the paralysis of silence and the necessity of assertion. Her new book of poems, *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, betrays an intimate surrealism, a congress of parable and dream—it's more a stranger to normality than anything she's ever written and ceaselessly thrilling in its tonal effects. Thoreau believed that "truth strikes us from behind, and in the dark," but in Glück truth seems to strike always from below, from beneath the half-lit undulations of desire and dread.

Glück shares a birthday with Immanuel Kant and is the author of thirteen books of poems and a fierce collection of essays. She is the Rosenkranz Writer-in-Residence at Yale University, and for eight years served as judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, a service of which she remains immensely proud. As a poet she's so decorated that if she were a general you'd have to squint into the glare of her: the Bollingen Prize for *Vita Nova* (Ecco, 1999), the Pulitzer Prize for *The Wild Iris* (Ecco, 1992), the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Triumph of Achilles* (Ecco, 1985), the Wallace Stevens Award, the Lannan Literary Award—on and on. We spoke for several hours one July afternoon at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her immaculate apartment is adorned with artwork by the poet Mark Strand, and out back breathes her beloved garden, transplanted here from Vermont thirteen years ago.

BY **WILLIAM GIRALDI** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY **WEBB CHAPPELL**

What's remarkable about the architecture of *Faithful and Virtuous Night* is that one can land anywhere inside this book and find a poem that is both self-fulfilled, unconcerned with what precedes or follows, and also a component in the larger whole that informs the unfurling narrative. You've erected similar scaffolding in the past—in all of your books since the 2007 collection, *Ararat*, the poems coalesce and function as a single movement—but in its intricacy and dynamism the architecture of this new book seems to me entirely different.

It seems to me different too. There were years when I thought I'd never resolve the issue of this structure, never be able to give a shape to these poems, which usually means there's a piece missing, as was true here. I had first thought that the long monologue—which is now divided, interspersed with these surreal, fragmented narratives and prose poems—I had thought that the long poem would be a whole that moved roughly chronologically from section to section, but it seemed lifeless when I put it together that way. I tried rearranging the sequence but that wasn't the answer. At some point, fiddling with order, I put the title poem next to "An Adventure." That juxtaposition suggested the shape this book wanted. But that shape didn't really find itself until the end—when I wrote prose poems, which I'd never done before—they were written in a tide of exhilaration at the thought that maybe I could finally finish this book.

Those prose poems are ligatures that allow the whole to cohere with such startling poise. They recall the way Hemingway's vignettes function in his story collections, the narrative tendons connecting muscle to bone. I cannot conceive of this book without them.

I can't either. It was my friend Kathryn Davis who prompted me toward them. She'd read every poem as it was written, and during one of my many stages of hopelessness she said, "I think you should be reading Kafka's short fiction." I'd read Kafka's short fiction before but thought I'd try again, and although I didn't love it this time around, that was useful to me, because I didn't feel daunted by him. I read the short-shorts—"The Wish to Be a Red Indian" and others—in bed, where all my mental activity now occurs. My bed usually looks like Proust's bed; my whole life is lived there. I got my notebook—which I keep around usually for other purposes, because if I let myself think that I might write something I become so paralyzed with longing and despair I can hardly bear it—and I wrote a little prose poem. It was, I thought, terrible, not even worth typing. But I was having dinner with Frank Bidart that night—I'm willing to be humiliated in the presence of my friends—and so before I threw away the prose poem, I thought I'd see what Frank thought. And Frank, as you know, can be a tough critic. He told me I mustn't throw it out, and after that I wrote a little squadron of them. The book was then very easy to put together. I'd been trying for two years, but I didn't have that last mode. It didn't need another large thing, another tone, but it needed another mode, another facet to the prism, another method by which to examine these same materials.

What a bolt of insight for Kathryn Davis to recommend that you go back to Kafka. The frequent playfulness and stabs of comedy in your work are too little noticed, and the same is true for Kafka: Many readers don't notice how funny he can be. I'm delighted by your dedication to great prose writers. The poetic persona in "A Summer

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WILLIAM GIRALDI is the author of the novels *Hold the Dark*, published this month by Norton, and *Busy Monsters* (Norton, 2011). He is the fiction editor for the journal *AGNI* at Boston University.

Garden" is reading Mann's *Death in Venice*. Do you see a novelist's sense of narrative as different from your own?
Yes, I think prose writers work with narrative very differently. When I'm trying to put a poem or a book together, I feel like a tracker in the forest following a scent, tracking only step to step. It's not as though I have plot elements grafted onto the walls elaborating themselves. Of course, I have no idea what I'm tracking, only the conviction that I'll know it when I see it.

The novelist enjoys a clear advantage over the poet who employs narrative: The novelist has characters who need something, and they have either to achieve their needs or not achieve them. The plot is the pursuit of those needs. The poet doesn't necessarily have that. I like your image of stalking through the wood, unsure where it ends. The novelist had better see to the end of that wood. Not that there can't be surprises in what is found there, but better at least to glimpse it in advance.
I depend on that ignorance, on not seeing to the end of the book, because if I have an idea, initially it's likely to be the wrong idea. I mean my ideas come later, after the fact. Ideas are not a part of how I conceive of a book.

Reading you, and especially these new poems, I'm often in mind of a quip by the English critic Desmond MacCarthy: "It is the business of literature to turn facts into ideas."
It's pretty, but I don't know if that's what I think. I don't like that trinity of words: *business*, *facts*, *ideas*. I don't think literature exactly has a business, and the minute someone says to me what the business is, I immediately want to prove that that's too limited a notion. For instance, I want to substitute *tone* for *fact*. If you can get right the tone, it will be dense with ideas; you don't initially know fully what they are, but you want by the end to know fully what they are or you won't have made an exciting work. For me it's tone—the way the mind moves as it performs its acts of meditation. That's what you're following. It guides you but it also mystifies you because you can't turn it into conscious principles or say precisely what its attributes are. The minute you turn tone into conscious principle it goes dead. It has to remain mysterious to you. You have to be surprised by what it is capable of unveiling. As you

POEM

A Summer Garden

4.
Mother died last night,
Mother who never dies.

Winter was in the air,
many months away
but in the air nevertheless.

It was the tenth of May.
Hyacinth and apple blossom
bloomed in the back garden.

We could hear
Maria singing songs from Czechoslovakia—

How alone I am—
songs of that kind.

How alone I am,
no mother, no father—
my brain seems so empty without them.

Aromas drifted out of the earth;
the dishes were in the sink,
rinsed but not stacked.

Under the full moon
Maria was folding the washing;
the stiff sheets became
dry white rectangles of moonlight.

How alone I am, but in music
my desolation is my rejoicing.

It was the tenth of May
as it had been the ninth, the eighth.

Mother slept in her bed,
her arms outstretched, her head
balanced between them.

work on a book of poems you begin to understand what is at issue, but I don't have any attitude toward the facts. And if MacCarthy's terms are correct, I would prefer the notion that a poet turns ideas and abstractions into facts, rather than the other way around.

All through your work, certainly from *Ararat* on, much of that rhythm happens by the repetition of simple terms. In this new book the same terms appear again and again: *silence*, *winter*, *mother*, *father*, *night*. The overlap of personae works the same way, when the poet's perspective repeatedly intrudes upon and augments the perspective of the larger narrative.

Yes, there's that overlap, as you say, because over and over there are the same materials, though to my ear they're passing through a very different lens. More interesting to me than the repeating words (which seem fairly ordinary) are the repeated images. When I put the book together, I was astounded by the internal tapestries. I hadn't consciously built in those recurrences or echoing gestures and vignettes, but there they were—there was the train, and the train again, and the train was a character. *Averno* I thought of the same way, actually. It's not a shaped narrative arc the way some of the others are, but it's a meditation on a set of conditions and dilemmas, so all the poems revolve around certain repeating images, such as the burned field, which is right out of Henning Mankell. *Averno* was my homage to Mankell. I tried to use something from one of his books in every one of the poems. Nobody noticed it, which is good, but it was there for me.

In her book *Why I Read: The Serious Pleasure of Books*, your friend Wendy Lesser speaks about your abiding love of murder mysteries and of Mankell in particular.

Mankell makes me happy. Murder mysteries are a way of releasing the unconscious mind to speculative, shapeless, dreamy seeking by absorbing the conscious mind in a compelling quest. One of the advantages of aging is that you know you've read a book, or believe you've read a book, but you don't really remember it. You remember only that you love it. And somewhere near the middle you realize that you actually do remember all of the details of the plot. It's immensely pleasing to read something you have confidence in, something that won't disappoint you. The only disappointment might be that you're missing the thrill of uncovering the killer, but it's a small disappointment if you love the world that's being constructed.

In that regard Wilkie Collins is unmatched—one can read his best novels every few years with identical pleasure. He's better than Dickens in the construction of a thrilling, alternate world that dictates its own stipulations. Do you remember *The Woman in White*?

And *The Moonstone*, yes. I read those books first in my adolescence and a few times since then. I bought *The Moonstone* again when I felt I had exhausted all available murder fiction, and I had trouble getting into it. Maybe I'll try again. I certainly need something to give competition to the iPad. I seem to be in an iPad period. I don't read on it. I just watch things that move.

Your legion of devotees might be startled to hear about your iPad.

I was startled myself. I never had the Internet until last year. This is all brand-new for me. The iPad was given to me at a reading. I told the person: "Don't give this to me. I will never turn it on." But the person shoved it at me, so then I had it, and I felt sort of responsible to it. So I sat with it for about six months. And then one day I began poking at it. I knew people poked at it. But nothing happened, and I thought: "Well, I just don't have the gift." Then I realized I needed some sort of hookup. That took another six months. By this time my niece was in a television show, *Orange*

Is the New Black, which was available only through streaming. It turned out, on this little device, you just press something and there they all were. And it became my bed buddy. It's really the freakiest thing because I became an addict very fast. At the moment it has usurped the place of reading in my life. Part of me thinks this is dangerous; my own vocation will dissolve. Another part of me thinks this is exploratory, that if my vocation is so fragile or precarious it isn't a vocation. After all, there were two years when I read nothing but garden catalogues, and that turned out okay—it became a book.

You mean *The Wild Iris*. I'm certain you're the only American poet who's won the Pulitzer after two years of reading nothing but garden catalogues.

Well, there's something my brain needs in such indulging, so I indulge it. This iPad addiction seems to me endlessly curious. Something may come of it. I'm an opportunist—I always hope I'll get material out of any activity. I never know where writing is going to come from; it isn't as though I have something in mind and this iPad is the source. This is just dream time, the way detective fiction is. It stills a certain kind of anxiety and at the same time engages the mind. As the mind is engaged and anxiety suppressed, some imaginative work in some recessed portion of the being is getting done. Not to say that every moment is contributing to a book or a poem, but you can't know in advance what will. Don't prejudge your stimuli. Just trust where your attention goes.

You once said to me on the phone, "Follow your enthusiasms."
I believe that. I used to be approached in classes by women who felt they shouldn't have children because children were too distracting, or would eat up the vital energies from which art comes. But you have to live your life if you're going to do original work. Your work will come out of an authentic life, and if you suppress all of your most passionate impulses in the service of an art that has not yet declared itself, you're making a terrible mistake. When I was young I led the life I thought writers were supposed to lead, in which you repudiate the world, ostentatiously consecrating all of your energies to the task of making art. I just sat in Provincetown at a desk and it was ghastly—the more I sat there not writing the more I thought that I just hadn't given up the world enough. After two years of that, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't going to be a writer. So I took a teaching job in Vermont, though I had spent my life till that point thinking that real poets don't teach. But I took this job, and the minute I started teaching—the minute I had obligations in the world—I started to write again.

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The catalyst for *Faithful and Virtuous Night* was your agon with not writing, with wordlessness.
Yes, I was moaning to my sister about losing words, about the deterioration of my vocabulary. I said to her, "How am I ever going to write when I'm losing words?" and she said, "You'll write about losing words." And I thought, "Wow, good, I'll write about having no speech, about deterioration." Then it was the most exciting thing, a wealth of material—everything I had been bemoaning was actually unexplored territory. That was the catalyst, as you say, for the whole endeavor—a liberating, a permission. The idea of writing about not writing seemed promising because I knew a lot about those not-writing states, but they were not something I'd ever written about. One of the experiences of putting together my large book of extant poems was an astonishment because my sense of my life, now fairly long, is that almost all the time I'm not writing. I was flabbergasted putting together that large book, nearly seven hundred pages. And I thought: "How can that have happened? When did I write all that?" My feeling concerning my life is that always I was not working. Well, apparently I was.

The gestures of silence lurk everywhere in *Faithful and Virtuous*

***Night*, as they do in your work as a whole, but is your conception of your own silence a kind of illusion? A seven-hundred-page collection of poems is not silence.**
No, it's real, not an illusion at all. I go through two, three years writing nothing. Zero. Not a sentence. Not bad poems I discard, not notes toward poems. Nothing. And you don't know in those periods that the silence will end, that you will ever recover speech. It's pretty much hell, and the fact that it's always ended before doesn't mean that any current silence isn't the terminal silence beyond which you will not move, though you will live many years in your incapacity. Each time it feels that way. When I'm not writing, all the old work becomes a reprimand: *Look what you could do once, you pathetic slug.*

I recall those lines from "Approach of the Horizon": "It is the gift of expression / that has so often failed me. / Failed me, tormented me, virtually all my life."
Do you know Iris Murdoch?

She's superb. I love the humor in *Under the Net*.
I'd been rereading all of Murdoch before I began this new book. I often reread a writer—read one book and then want to enter that world more fully. In any case, I can hear Murdoch in those lines you just recited. I love *The Black Prince*, *A Severed Head*, *The Green Knight*, even strange things such as *A Word Child*. There's something in her archness, not a tone I'd normally think to emulate, but there's something delicious in it. Her people might be murdering and raping but really they're thinking about what goodness is in the world, bizarre juxtapositions of that kind. Something of her got transferred to this new book. It's a matter of tone. The interest of the poems is in the tone in which large pronouncements are made, not necessarily the pronouncements themselves. The pronouncements are constantly being scrutinized by the tone, which is taking objection to some of the things being said. It's not a book in which large bannerlike truths are being unfolded.

There's a disciplined seething detectable just beneath the surface of these new poems, a fervency of feeling we know is there just as we know distant planets are there—not because we can see them but because they cause a bending, a wobble in the light of their stars. In these new poems, the tone, the pitch is bent to reveal the seething beneath it. The book has such a patient turbulence.
That's nice, a patient turbulence. It's there as a background but the whole book seems to me to be about moving beyond that turbulence, or that seething, as you say, and into this uncommon zone where you're on a horse flying through the air. How did *that* happen? What's distinctive in this book is that sense of dreaminess. But there are two parallel issues regarding silence: one is the silence that is the faltering of a gift or a need for expression, and there's also silence that is the result of deterioration, a faltering in the being that is a product of age. Although I've been writing about death my whole life, deterioration or the weakening of the powers is brand-new to me. The subject is gloomy, I suppose, but new material is exhilarating. The quality I feel most intensely in this book is a quality of euphoria, a floating, a whimsy. It's an undertaking of a large adventure, which is the adventure of decline. It seems an oxymoron, I know, and will come to seem a gloomy fate, but now—as long as it produces something of which you're proud, you're grateful for it, delighted by it.

You said once that the life of a poet oscillates between ecstasy and agony, and what mitigates those extremes is the necessary daily business of living.
Yes. Friends, conversation, gardens. Daily life. It's what we have. I believe in the world. I trust it to provide me.