

## *Averno*

by Louise Glück

Alfred A. Knopf

### A Reading and Discussion Guide

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#### **SUMMARY**

Averno, as Louise Glück tells us, is “[a] small crater lake, ten miles west of Naples, Italy; regarded by the ancient Romans as the entrance to the underworld.” In her *Averno*, Glück’s point of view is suspended on that lip, at the gateways of psyche, myth, and the natural world. The poems in this collection, direct and archetypal, are ones of threshold; poised in the present, between past and future; poised in life, between memory and active death. Persephone, flanked by Demeter and Hades, is thematically wound into these poems directly and indirectly. These gods are vulnerable in their godly dilemmas, but the predominant voice is human here, mythic in its human trials. The easy language is often resonantly mystifying and thought provoking, with snatches of humor, irony, and sudden, piercing clarity. *Averno* is best considered in its entirety, but a wonderful discussion also can be had with selected poems.

#### **BIOGRAPHY**

Louise Glück was born in 1943 and grew up on Long Island. As a young girl, she struggled with anorexia, and as an adult endured a painful divorce, but she says, “I am endlessly irritated by the reading of my poems as autobiography. I draw on the materials my life has given me, but what interests me isn’t that they happen to me, what interests me is that they seem, as I look around, paradigmatic.” (*Excerpted from an interview by Grace Cavalieri, in Beltway Poetry Quarterly, <http://washingtonart.com/beltway/Gluckinterview.html>*)

Many of Glück’s eleven books of poetry have been honored with prizes, and she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1992 for her collection *The Wild Iris*. She was the Poet Laureate of the United States in 2003-2004. *Averno*, featured here as a recipient of the Massachusetts Book Award, was also a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award. The six-part poem “October,” the first long poem in *Averno*, was published separately as a chapbook by Sarabande Books in 2004. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and currently teaches at Yale University.

#### **PERSEPHONE**

Before venturing into the volume, it is useful to review briefly the myth of Persephone. Anyone who has had the fortune to read *The Hymn to Demeter* will have a more nuanced understanding, but here is a synopsis:

Demeter is a sister to Zeus and Hades. She lives on Earth, goddess of fertility and harvest, and has a daughter, Persephone. Zeus and Hades arrange for Persephone to be Hades' bride, without telling Demeter. When Persephone is taken, Demeter searches for her without success, and her enormous grief halts the fertility of the earth. This causes famine, and since humans have no produce to sacrifice to the gods, the whole cosmic order is upset. Finally, Dionysus goes to the underworld and brings Persephone back to her mother. But Persephone must return to Hades for part of each year, which causes winter.

## APPROACHES TO DISCUSSION

Suggestions for discussion are divided here into two approaches: the first for an established group, meeting regularly; the second for a walk-in group discussing a handful of individual poems without any outside reading. The questions for the established group are broader in nature since they encompass the whole book, while the second approach features close reading. However, the group considering the book as a whole will benefit from choosing a poem to review in detail.

### *Questions for the Established Book Group*

These questions will work best handed out in advance, so members can collect passages to submit for admiration, questions, or support of their thoughts.

1. Read the preamble poem, "The Night Migrations." While not all the themes of *Averno* are present in it, what themes does this poem alert us to read for?
2. Consider the voice of this book, the group of poems taken as a whole. Is it the voice of Persephone? The voice of a specific narrator? The voice of ourselves? Look at specific examples. Are there places where these voices are simultaneously at play?
3. In "Prism," Glück writes,

Who can say what the world is? The world  
is in flux, therefore  
unreadable, the winds shifting  
the great plates invisibly shifting and changing.

As this book progresses, themes and motifs gather in weight and complexity; make your own list of words, abstractions, repeated themes, such as the body's relationship to the soul, the field, winter, childhood, passage, memory, the condition of being silenced. (There are many more.) Trace the development of several of these themes and/or motifs.

4. T.S Eliot wrote in "Burnt Norton" (from *Four Quartets*), "At the still point of the turning world, neither flesh nor fleshless, neither from nor towards," and "Here is a place of disaffection/ Time before and time after/ In a dim light." World War II, during which *Four Quartets* was written, colored this work. *Averno* is a sister world, where the narrator stands in a gateway, at a similar still point of a turning world.

- What is the general setting of this book: is there a predominant season? Time of day? Choose passages to illustrate your thoughts.
- Is there a predominant age of the mind view of the narrator? Is it our time or mythical time? Choose passages to illustrate your thoughts.
- How is *Averno*, in its tone, its expectations, its depictions of the natural, a product and depiction of our present day?

### *Questions for the Walk-in Group*

Caveat: Though Glück's language is spare and easily approached, there are few poems in *Averno* that offer themselves completely on one or two readings, and to select certain poems means to leave out others of equal breadth and beauty, significant to the work as a whole. At Forbes Library, we found two hours insufficient to complete a discussion of the following.

- Begin the discussion by reviewing briefly the myth of Persephone, above. Then move on to the poems suggested below.
- “October,” p. 5. Read the whole poem out loud. Then re-read the first section and proceed, re-reading each section before beginning discussion. The following questions will help start the conversation.
  - Part 1
    - Is this the voice of Persephone? Or a contemporary voice? Or both?
    - When in the seasonal year is this poem set?
    - In “I can’t hear your voice for the wind’s cries,” who is “you”?
    - In “What it sounds like can’t change what it is—,” what is “it”? What does this mean?
    - This poem is almost all questions. Discuss what impact this has. Where is it not a question?
  - Part 2
    - Discuss the last stanza. Why is the narrator having trouble believing?
    - Who is “you” in this section? Continue this consideration in other sections.
    - What is the narrator’s relation to the natural world in this segment?
  - Part 3
    - In “I stood/ at the doorway, ridiculous as it now seems.” Discuss why this would seem ridiculous to her.
    - “Very simple. But there was no voice there.” Discuss the significance of there being no voice.
  - Part 4
    - Is the last stanza of this section ironic or sincere, according to what we know of the narrator so far? Does the narrator believe in anything?
    - Who is speaking the italicized lines? Discuss.
  - Part 5
    - What is “the word itself”?
    - How does the narrator see her role as poet?
    - In the last stanza, is the poem telling the truth?

- Part 6
  - What does the first stanza mean?
  - Characterize the moon of the last stanza. Is this last thought a consolation?
- “Persephone The Wanderer,” p. 16. Discuss what this poem illuminates in “October.”
- “Prism,” p. 20.
  - Read the entire poem and then re-read Sections 1-3.
    - What does “the beds/damp at the sea’s edge—” evoke as choice elements of the world?
    - In 3, do you think of the windows as real or metaphorical? Is the narrator outside, looking in, or inside looking out? How does one take in an enemy?
    - What does it mean to think “I am master here”?
  - Re-read Sections 4-6
    - What is the attitude held about love by the two sisters?
    - List the implications of “crossroads” in Section 7.
  - Re-read Sections 7-11
    - What does “veins/ of mercury that were the paths of the rivers—” mean to you?
    - How does Section 7 relate to Sections 6 and 8, as it is sandwiched between them?
    - From Section 9, “In the window, constellations of summer. Once I could name them.” From Section 10, “I could name them. I had names for them: two different things.” What does the narrator mean by these three different statements?
  - Re-read Sections 12-16
    - Discuss the introduction of “assignment” Sections 12, 14, and 16. How do these reflect on and expand the poem as a whole? Re-read Section 7, and the command to “List the implications of “crossroads” as you consider this.
    - What is the developing view of adult love so far?
  - Re-read Sections 17-20
    - What does each statement of Section 20 imply, given the territory covered by the poem?
- “The Myth of Devotion,” p. 58. Read out loud to finish the session.



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