

ing. The poems never succumb to this threat. But we need to feel a swirling cloud of language congealing to make the poems, just as the crowd in "Avenue" seems as if it were condensed down to the nameless one in the street.

These poems are exciting to read. And however many times I re-read them, they remain mysterious. Not in the sense that they are obscure or merely difficult: The poems remind me of how the people we know best can, in an instant, become inscrutable. Among the new poems in *The Figured Wheel*, elegies are prominent; Pinsky commemorates the lives of lost friends, his mother, a grandmother he never knew. These poems tell us about other people, but even more profoundly, they let us feel the insoluble mystery of otherness. In "Poem With Refrains," Pinsky looks at his mother so intently that he must wonder if he knew her at all. This woman—who

refused to visit her own dying mother, although she lived four doors away—remains the "dark figure, awaited, attended, aware, apart."

Though threateningly intimate, "Poem With Refrains" is studded with quotations from other poems. And in a sense, all of Pinsky's poems are poems with refrains—poems that, while built from quotation and repetition, seem "to happen/Always for the first time over and over again." They make questions of language, culture and identity seem visceral. They suggest that we plumb the depths of our souls by surveying the grand diversity of names and roles we occupy throughout our lives. Pinsky is a poet who has also written criticism, translated Dante's *Inferno* and composed a hypertext novel. It isn't easy to explain why a culture needs poetry; but as we look forward to the next century, Pinsky offers a model for everything a poet could be. ■

the poems to the husband/Odysseus. "What can I tell you that you don't know/that will make you tremble again?" she asks. That's just the trouble: Language no longer serves; its purpose is to wound, not to make up or make love, and these two can't talk about anything without being bilious: "Look what you did—you made the cat move." "The only time you're totally happy/is when you cut up a chicken." "You'd be a nicer person/if you were a fan of something."

Actually, they're both fans—of the New York Giants, whose home stadium is in—surprise—the Meadowlands. The book is full of sudden juxtapositions of elements from two familiar but disparate worlds, classical Greece and modern America. Why has Glück chosen the location of a football field to frame this tempest? Perhaps because stadiums, the setting of both glory and carnage, are our equivalent of the Homeric battlefield, which here is also the last stand of the heart. As one voice—Glück's, it seems—points out in "Meadowlands 3," the name seems inappropriate: the stadium "has/about as much in common with a pasture/as would the inside of an oven." The husband comes back with "New Jersey/was rural. They want you/to remember that." The same could be said of their marriage: Its origins were green.

Separation can speak for itself: "From this point on," Glück says in "Quiet Evening," "the silence through which you move/is my voice pursuing you." She has arranged *Meadowlands*, full of ocean references, in wave patterns: poems describing hints of reconciliation alternate with accounts of the triggering of the minefields both have been planting for a decade. The knock of waves against pilings is an answer to the perpetual question *Do you love me?* Yes and no and yes and no. And if silence can be speech, absence connives to be presence as well. "Departure" is a literalist's word: As Glück's Penelope tells us in "Ithaca," "The beloved doesn't/need to live. The beloved/lives in the head."

If *The Odyssey* is the story of Odysseus's homecoming, *Meadowlands* details its negative: the same ten years' journey, but away from Ithaca, toward uncharted waters. As in Homer, Glück's husband and wife suffer separately and without benefit of communication. But in this version, they have to visit treacherous islands together: Bicker, Nostalgia, Regret. Instead of Penelope's nightly unweaving to deceive her suitors, here it is the marriage that is being undone; when all is said and done there is

## Above an Abyss

EMILY GORDON

**MEADOWLANDS.** By Louise Glück. Ecco. 61 pp. \$22.

**OTHERWISE: New & Selected Poems.** By Jane Kenyon. Graywolf. 230 pp. \$23.95.

If good poetry is an emotional and spiritual insomnia, the poems of Louise Glück and Jane Kenyon are—in their different ways—especially restless. Kenyon was wakeful at night literally as well as metaphorically, with each movement recorded and every sound, outside and inside the mind, amplified.

For Louise Glück in her newest book, divorce is the start awake after the sleep-walking of a bad relationship. As in some of her previous collections, she draws from a mythic source in *Meadowlands*, using central figures and themes from *The Odyssey* to illustrate the dissolution of her marriage. There is abundant proof in *Meadowlands* that Glück has resources to equal those of Odysseus, who says (in Homer's words) "I have a heart that is injured to suffering.... So let this new disaster come. It only makes one more."

There are many more in Glück's voyage. The uneasy marital landscape of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Wild Iris* has been torn up in *Meadowlands* by frustration and violence. In "Parable of the Hostages," Glück writes of the Greek soldiers that "the world had begun/calling them, an opera beginning with the war's/loud chords and ending with the floating aria of the sirens." *Meadowlands* follows much the same model, the earlier poems sketching apprehension and raw hostility, the

final poems succumbing to acceptance. But no one is immune from tragedy, and as foreshadowed in *The Wild Iris*'s "April," the "grief is distributed/between you"—as is the tending of this malignant garden. The destruction, as Glück shows us, has been gradual, and has thus done that much more damage.

*Meadowlands* is haunted by voices. Glück speaks in the persona of Penelope, waiting for a husband who will, in this case, never come back. Glück's husband, half of a continuing dialogue, is a frequently cruel Odysseus. (After telling her to wish on a butterfly, he announces smugly, "It doesn't count.") Like Anne Sexton and others, Glück lets traditional villainesses speak for themselves, giving a sympathetic voice to a siren and to Circe, who in "Circe's Power" has a refreshing defense: "I never turned anyone into a pig./Some people are pigs; I make them/look like pigs." A frustrated, perceptive Telemachus has several monologues as well.

As Penelope, Glück addresses many of

nothing but memory, a poor foundation, to hold them up.

The husband—"a man training himself to avoid the heart"—is no hero here, and in "Penelope's Song" the wife says to herself, "you have not been completely/perfect either; with your troublesome body/you have done things you shouldn't/discuss in poems." Conspicuously, Glück avoids specifying what Penelope—she—has done in the absence of the wandering king. She also leaves out the details of the husband's wanderings, though the blame seems principally assigned to him.

The starkness, the lack of filigree, in Glück's lines is a window on her internal pandemonium. Her Siren says, "I think now/if I felt less I would be/a better person." Frequently Glück's characters say things they seem to be trying to convince themselves of, as when she writes, of a flock of birds rising, "You must learn to think of our passion that way./Each kiss was real, then/each kiss left the face of the earth." The statement is painful and consciously untrue. No kiss that crucial ever leaves the face of the earth; each one lives and dies with us. This husband and wife have a permanent claim on each other.

But in this game's last quarter, bewilderment and blame play very rough. Still Glück emerges as a victorious quarterback, scarred by love: "This is the end, isn't it?/And you are here with me again, listening with me: *the sea/no longer torments me; the self/I wished to be is the self I am.*"

The violence in *Meadowlands* is the breakup's cruel, gratuitous kind. For Jane Kenyon violence is, as in nature, inevitable, necessary, even welcome. Kenyon wrote about the seasonal gradations of rural life, where the rustle of leaves is "like so many whispered conversations." Like the poems of Elizabeth Bishop (one of Kenyon's favorites) and Robert Frost, the poems in *Otherwise*—twenty new ones as well as selections from her four previous books—are rooted in a sympathetic observation of the physical world.

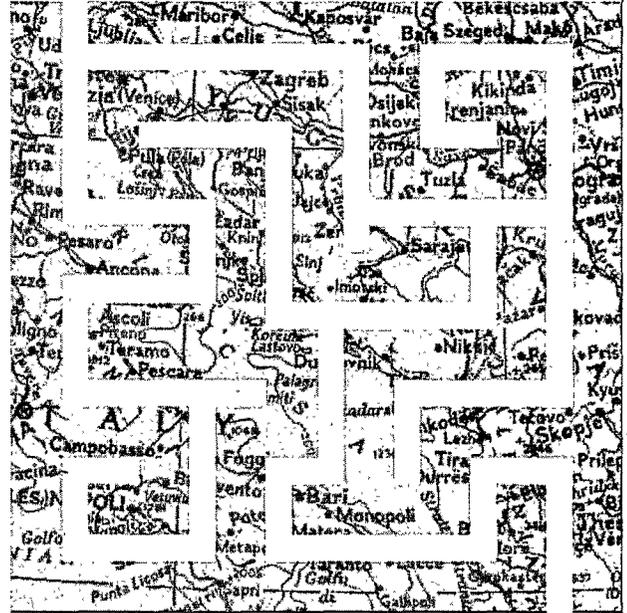
This is Kenyon's final book, collected just before her death from leukemia at 47. As she told Bill Moyers in a 1994 interview, "There is something in me that will not be snuffed out." In these testaments to places, like the spot where sun melts snow around a rock, "where something small could luxuriate," Kenyon stretches the limits of her faith—religious, personal and natural. Her phrasing is playful and rhythmic, stitched together with unexpected rhymes and caesuras.

# Escape through the Balkans

## The Autobiography of Irene Grünbaum

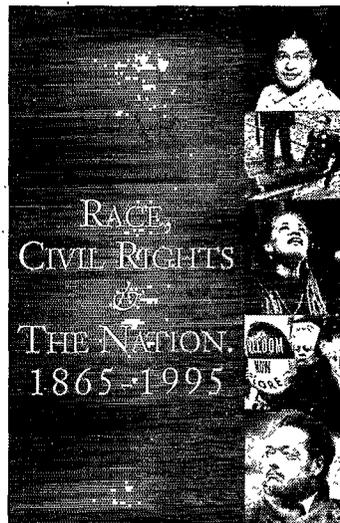
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What kept Kenyon up, listening to the day noises as well as the night, was an accentuated attention that encompassed many lives, present and past, obvious and less so: neighbors, Keats, the nameless woman who used the thimble she finds wedged in the floorboards of the barn, the dog "pissing long/and thoughtfully against an ancient hemlock." She renders insects with unusual empathy: "A portly housefly dropped on the page/in front of me.... Waking ill-tempered, [it] lay/on its back, flailing its legs and wings"; in "Catching Frogs," "gnats/roiled in a shaft of sun."

As objects and animals submit to human strength (and occasional brutality), humans are confined in turn by weather, family, possessions, ceremony. In "Ironing Grandmother's Tablecloth," Kenyon looks dementia straight in the eye: "The streets of your brain become smaller, old houses torn down." In "Reading Aloud to My Father," one of the best of the new poems, Kenyon abruptly stops reading Nabokov to her dying father after the passage beginning, "The cradle rocks above an abyss":

But to return to the cradle rocking.  
Nabokov had it wrong. This is the abyss.  
That's why babies howl at birth,  
and why the dying so often reach  
for something only they can apprehend.

Kenyon's voice can be impish, too, as in the subtly erotic "The Shirt" or, in "Fat"—of women friends who "get by on seaweed milkshakes"—"the talk turns dreamily to sausages,...noodles gleaming with cream, yams, and plums,/and chapati fried in ghee." *Otherwise* is full of singular gestures—cleaning out a dead woman's house and putting a cookie to her own forehead "because/it seemed like the next thing to do," or leaving a ripe tomato from the "bug-riddled remains" of a vine at the town dump: "I offer it to oblivion/with the rest of what was mine." Neither the ceremony nor the sacrifice is undertaken with melodrama, but with unchallengeable grace.

Some of Kenyon's poems are mundane; her use of ellipses can make her seem evasive or unwilling to trust a conclusion. But she makes few moral claims for herself, and is not often sentimental. The central struggle in her work seems to be how to reconcile "the unmerciful/hours of [her] despair" with the presence inside her, as she explains in "Who," of that being, "a stranger sitting in my chair;/...someone who already knows/how to live without trouble/among books, and pots and pans...." How can this "animal," this "angel," who can produce these

lines, also suffer so much in the gestation?

In "Afternoon in the House" she articulates a fundamental poets' dilemma: "I'm frightened,/sitting in the middle of perfect/possibility." In the moments when she can celebrate contentment, she isn't too complacent or cozy—the fear and confrontation in her work make it impossible. It is gratitude that moves the best of these poems. "Rain in January" begins, "I woke before dawn, still/in a body." It's as if she's watching sadness, as if it were a deer or the overflowing pond.

Some of Kenyon's poems question her place in the ancestral farmhouse of her husband, poet Donald Hall: "I move from room to room,/a little dazed.... My people are not here." Often, neither is she. When she is inside, she is looking outside; when home in the country, thinking about a trip to the city; when happy, conscious of sadder times. "At dinner I laughed with the rest,/but in truth I prefer the sound/of pages

turning," she writes in "After the Dinner Party," but don't be fooled by the implication of shyness; she is fearless. Her recreations of childhood scenes, like "The Stroller," are buoyant. In one, she remembers waiting for the school bus: "Spruce, inadequate, and alien/I stood at the side of the road./It was the only life I had."

Throughout these poems Kenyon mourns deeply and generously: for the neighbor with cancer, a cat that has died (though "there are sorrows keener than these"); the geranium "like topiary at Versailles," now broken in a rainstorm, that was "my nightingale, my goose, my golden/child. We drank from the same cup." This book chronicles the uncertainty of living as culpable, temporary creatures, and catalogues "anger, the inner/arsonist" as well as triumph. We have lost Kenyon, but "God does not leave us/comfortless, so let evening come"; *Otherwise* is proof of that. ■

## Spoken/Word

MONA MOLARSKY

*Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, fighting in the captain's tower  
While calypso singers laugh at them, and fishermen hold flowers*  
—Bob Dylan

Willie Perdomo leaps onto the stage, swings his arms and goes into an uptown diddy-bop: "O.K. Let's do this. Boom!" He launches into his poem "The New Stuff." Fez, a downtown New York club, is packed.

Perdomo's in a fine mood tonight, and a grin lights up his striking face. The audience is with him already and he's barely said a word. His new book, *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime*, is just out and it's packaged with a CD. He's got a two-minute spot on the PBS series *The United States of Poetry*, and he's here to celebrate.

CDs and TV specials, packed parties in downtown clubs? Not long ago, this was exclusively the world of rockers, not poets. Now, the distinctions between poetry and pop have blurred. Poets like Perdomo are performing their work in venues across the country. "In America the poetry audience has probably never been larger," says Lee Briccetti, director of Poets House, who adds that more than 1,300 volumes of poetry were published last year.

Readings are now one of the most important ways to sell poetry books, and unlike the Beat poets of the fifties—a small

group of bohemians clustered on two coasts—the new out-loud poets are writing and reading in almost every state. If many live on the fringe, that has more to do with thirty years of voodoo economics than the desire to strip off bourgeois trappings and become seers.

In his poem about East Harlem, "Where I'm From," Perdomo says:

Where I'm from, the police come into  
your house without  
knocking. They throw us off rooftops and  
say we slipped. They  
shoot my father and say he was crazy.  
They put a bullet in my  
head and say they found me that way.

Perdomo isn't talking about the self-imposed exile of an artist but a whole community that's been disfranchised against its will. His tie to that community is intergenerational, and he can move from the street talk of his peers to old-fashioned

Mona Molarisky writes about fiction and poetry.

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