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Book Notes #180

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Summer Heat



'Girl Resting in the Shade During the Summer Heat'

Do you love summer?

Not everyone does.

I can immediately think of at least three people who think Bruce Brown's classic 1966 documentary love song to surfing "The Endless Summer" should be reclassified as a horror film. If you've never seen the movie or forgotten it, Brown follows two surfers around the world in an *endless summer* seeking the perfect wave. I don't remember if they ever *caught* it.

My wife Judy and sisters-in-law Shelley and Jill (and, occasionally, my niece Laura, too, for that matter) probably couldn't think of anything worse. Not for them the joys of endless, unforgiving sun. They are connoisseurs of the gray, chill, damp, if not rainy, *cudgy* day snuggled comfortably indoors. For them, the perfect locale might well be Lerwick, Scotland – largest (a relative term) town in the Shetland Islands.



Lerwick and the Shetland Islands, as the location of the British crime series "Shetland," steal the show. Off the northeast coast of Scotland, Shetland is the land to which summer seems never to come. Today, July 21, 2024, as I write this **Note**, the temperature in Lerwick is 57 degrees and the high for the coming week will be Thursday's 59. At the moment, it is

cloudy and overcast, but, of course, in a kind of counterpoint to an "endless summer," in Shetland it is almost always cloudy and overcast. In Shetland, beachwear is an anorak. Although, if the series can be believed, the locals do manage the occasional chilly North Sea skinny-dip. [1]

This got me asking myself "What have the poets had to say about **not** liking summer?"

It turns out not much, but along the way I discovered a number of sites warning about summer's hazards – some whimsical, some serious. Among the whimsical, a site called "Best Life" lists: "lines at music festivals," "the pressure to do something," "hangovers are worse," "sand in your clothes," "remembering to wear sunblock," "sunblock in your eyes," and "watery drinks." [2]

Among the decidedly not whimsical, the Cleveland Clinic's "Health Essentials" identifies "[12 Summer Health Risks to Watch Out For.](#)" [3] They include the obvious, like dehydration, sunburns, bee stings, and insect bites, to the serious, like drowning (usually the result of improper or no protective equipment) and heat illnesses, to the annoying, like shoe woes and foot pain, gardening-related illnesses, and biking injuries. The one that caught my eye, however, was seasonal depression. [4]

According to the Cleveland Clinic, “Yes, you can get Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.) in the summer. It’s most commonly associated with the start of autumn and those increasingly shorter, darker days. But in some people, summer’s arrival can bring the blues.” [5] So, Judy, Shelley, Jill, and Laura’s yearning for Lerwick’s gray calm has a name – “Summer S.A.D.” Before throwing up one’s hands and moving to northern Scotland, the Clinic’s Dr. Adam Borland, PsyD, suggests coping with Summer S.A.D. by “keeping a good routine, keeping a mood journal, and staying cool.” [6] Regarding the latter – *nooooo* problem! Thanks to the beneficence of air conditioning, if summer isn’t, sweater weather in the Roth abode is *endless*.

In numerous **Book Notes** these past four-and-a-half years, we’ve explored what poets have had to say about the year’s seasons. **Notes** #112, #113, and #174 in particular explored summer. They can be found here [Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society \(jeserie.org\)](http://BookNotes-JeffersonEducationalSociety(jeserie.org)). For the most part, they celebrate summer; poets have apparently not found much disagreeable to say about summer. Granted, I did not do an “exhaustive search,” as they like to say in academia, but after a reasonably thorough scouring of the internet’s innumerable poetry sites and my much humbler but not small poetry collection, I only found two anti-summer poems. Calling them “anti-summer” poems might be a stretch, but they definitely don’t like the heat, and, in one case, the memories associated with it.

And, in that serendipitous way rummaging around in a topic rewards, I found two exceptionally fine poems by Louise Glück.



British poet John Stammers indelibly associates summer heat with the memory of being “dumped”; in the process, he both seems to have survived the episode and recalls it with a certain elan. The line “I got out my character/and began the tasks of a lifetime” reveals a becoming, in both senses of the word (*attractive* and *maturing*), resilience.

Like A Heatwave Burning

It was the hottest summer on record;
we flew into rages at the drop of a pin.
The heat made cacti of us all.

I woke up hot crazy at one in the morning.
The day’s sun had heated up the sky so heavy

it felt like being ironed.

We sat on the curbside like hot bananas
and Jane read me the Miranda
of our future lives together:

there would be no future lives together.
I'd never heard the nightjay squawk
so damnably shrilly in the
still, still stilly.

My eyeballs made sinuous rills.
I sloughed on my sandals and loped
onto a streetcar named expire.

Tyres welded cars to the road.
I got out my character
and began the tasks of a lifetime.

Pine trees collapsed in a dead swoon
all over the place. Believe you me,
honeydew features, it was hot. [7]



Expressing sentiments I've heard numerous times from my wife Judy and sister-in-law Shelley, in "Heat," American expatriate poet Hilda Doolittle, who published under the pseudonym "H.D.," voiced her frustration with summer's heat. She exhorts the wind to "rend it open" and, rending it, disperse it. A friend of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams, H.D. mastered the imagistic style of saying as much as possible in the fewest possible words. Hers was an art of compression. As one of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* said, "H.D.'s poems, often modelled on the fragments of classical verse and exploiting that very quality of fragmentariness, are reminders that less can be more and that **implication** is an all-important source of energy in poetry." (Emphasis added) [8]

Heat

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air—
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat—
plough through it,
turning it on either side
of your path. [9]



A former Poet Laureate of the United States (a role for which I have always thought her somewhat miscast) and a Nobel Laureate, the late Louise Glück's work was marked, as the Poetry Foundation says, by "technical precision, sensitivity, and insight into loneliness, family relationships, divorce, and death." [10] Chronologically, a contemporary of mine (born in 1943 she would have been a high school senior when I was a freshman), Glück published her first book of poetry in that epochal year 1968. Although in many respects they couldn't be more different, along with Mary Oliver and Jack Gilbert she is one of the poets I most admire. For the past year, I have been systematically reading the entirety of her work in the order in which she published it preparatory to one day writing a **Book Note** about her.

Seeking out anti-summer poems, however, I jumped way ahead in her **Louise Glück: Poems 1962-2012** to page 484's "Summer Night" and found on the facing page "Fable." Not remotely an "anti-summer poem," working an entirely different metaphysical vein, "Fable's" last line "*But the light will give us no peace*" touches on the summer sun's two-faced nature. On the one hand, life giving; on the other, revelatory and unforgiving, as in Yeats' line in "The Second Coming": "A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun."

Fable

Then I looked down and saw
the world I was entering, that would be my home.
And I turned to my companion, and I said, *Where are we?*
And he replied Nirvana.
And I said again *But the light will give us no peace.* [11]

I'm resisting the temptation to explain the last line, but holding fast to my notion that explication can kill a poem, all I'll say is that if H.D.'s poetry mastered the art of saying the maximum with the least, with that line Glück explodes an entire karmic quest.

Like Jack Gilbert, Glück understood that life isn't lived in the big moments. In the end, it's really the sum of the ordinary. Perhaps one has to be of a certain age, have arrived at a certain stage to fully appreciate it, but her "Summer Night" is a very fine summing-up. In it, we're a long way from any glib anti-summer attitude. I need to read it another dozen or so times, but in it she finds the *balm* of a soft, summer night, the "*balm* of the ordinary" as she reflects upon her lived experience of the only life we get. The dictionary tells us "Balm" means anything that heals, soothes, or mitigates pain. Like all artists, Glück doesn't tell us that – she shows us.

Summer Night

Orderly, and out of long habit, my heart continues to beat.
I hear it, nights when I wake, over the mild sound of the air conditioner.
As I used to hear it over the beloved's heart, or
variety of hearts, owing to there having been several.
And as it beats, it continues to drum up ridiculous emotion.

So many passionate letters never sent!
So many urgent journeys conceived of on summer nights,
surprise visits to men who were nearly complete strangers.
The tickets never bought, the letters never stamped.
And pride spared. And the life, in a sense, never completely lived.
And the art always in some danger of growing repetitious.

Why not? Why not? Why should my poems not imitate life?
Whose lesson is not the apotheosis but the pattern, whose meaning
is not in the gesture but in the inertia, the reverie.

Desire, loneliness, wind in the flowering almond –
surely these are the great, the inexhaustible subjects
to which my predecessors apprenticed themselves.
I hear them echo in my own heart, disguised as convention.

Balm of the summer night, balm of the ordinary,
imperial joy and sorrow of human existence,
the dreamed as well as the lived –
what could be dearer than this, given the closeness of death? [12]



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"A girl resting in the shade during the summer heat.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:A girl resting in shade during the summer heat.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed July 19, 2024.

"15 Fascinating Facts about Lerwick/NorthLink Ferries" at **Microsoft Bing Images** available at [Lerwick, U.K. - Search Images \(bing.com\)](#) accessed July 21, 2024.

"John Stammers" at **Bing Images** available at [john stammers poet - Search Images \(bing.com\)](#) accessed July 21, 2024.

"H.D. in 1922.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:H.D. in 1922.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed July 21, 2024.

"Louise Glück by Katherine Wolkoff" in **The New York Times** *"Louise Glück Is Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature"* (October 8, 2020) available at [Louise Glück Is Awarded the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) accessed July 21, 2024.

End Notes

1. By the way, if you like British detective shows, the program is a damn fine crime series. It can be found on Prime; it might require a secondary subscription to BritBox.
2. Daniel, Alex, *"30 Worst Things About Summer"* (April 26, 2018) at **BestLife** available at [30 Worst Things about Summer — Best Life \(bestlifeonline.com\)](#) accessed July 21, 2024.
3. *"12 Summer Health Risks to Watch Out For," Health Essentials (May 23, 2024) The Cleveland Clinic* available at [12 Summer Health Risks To Watch Out For \(clevelandclinic.org\)](#) accessed July 21, 2024.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. *"Yes, You Can Get SAD in the Summer," Health Essentials (July 12, 2023) The Cleveland Clinic* available at [Yes, You Can Get SAD in Summer \(clevelandclinic.org\)](#) accessed July 21, 2024.
7. Stammers, John, *"Like a Heatwave Burning"* at **The Poetry Society** available at [John Stammers – The Poetry Society: Poems](#) accessed July 21, 2024.

8. "H.D. (Hilda Doolittle 1886-1961)" in **The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry**, Eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, Co., 1973), p. 371.
9. H.D., "Heat" in **The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry**, Eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, Co., 1973), p. 373.
10. "Louise Glück 1943-2023" at **The Poetry Foundation** available at [Louise Glück | Poetry Foundation](#) accessed July 21, 2024.
11. Glück, Louise, "Fable" in [Louise Glück: Poems 1962-2012](#) (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 485.
12. _____, "Summer Night" in **Louise Glück: Poems 1962-2012** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 484.

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