

Close Talking Episode #112

“October (2.)” by Louise Glück

10/23/20

<https://soundcloud.com/close-talking/episode-112-october-louise-gluck>

Show Notes

(Close Talking theme music)

Connor 0:07

Hello and welcome to Close Talking the world's most popular poetry analysis podcast from Cardboardbox Productions Incorporated. I am co-host Connor McNamara Stratton, and with my good friend Jack Rossiter-Munley we read a poem,

Jack 0:21

talk about the poem,

Connor 0:23

and read the poem again.

Jack 0:25

Before we get into today's selection, a quick note that if you like what we do here at Close Talking and you have a spare minute, it would mean the world to us if you would give the podcast a rating and review on Apple podcasts.

Connor 0:36

Those ratings and reviews help boost us up the algorithm and find new listeners.

And if you have suggestions for future episodes, or comments on this one, you can send us an email at closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com. You can also find us on social media; on Twitter the show is @closetalking. I'm @connormstratton and Jack is @jackrossitermun.

Jack 1:00

On Instagram, the show is @closetalking and on Facebook it's [facebook.com/closetalking](https://www.facebook.com/closetalking).

Connor 1:08

And our website where you can find all our past episodes is [closetalking.com](https://www.closetalking.com). And Cardboardbox Productions is going to have a newsletter. Stay tuned on social media for more information on how to subscribe.

Jack 1:21

On with the show.

Connor 1:31

Hello, and welcome to an all new episode of Close Talking. I'm your co-host Connor McNamara Stratton.

Jack 1:39

And I'm your other co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley.

Connor 1:43

And on this beautiful Friday, we've got another beautiful poem for you today. We are doing a poem by a poet we've already discussed, Louise Glück, who we discussed the poem "Presque Isle" in an earlier episode. But we thought we'd make an exception since Glück was recently announced the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature for "Her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal." The Swedes have spoken. And yeah, so we thought, it's not every day that an American poet or really a poet wins a Nobel. And so we thought we'd make an exception one that's also apropos of the month. It's called "October." And we'll just it's actually a multi part poem so we'll just talk about one part. But just in case, just a little background of as the Nobel indicates one of the big living titans of American poetry, won the Pulitzer Prize, she's won the National Book Award, she's been a US Poet Laureate. She was a judge for the Yale Younger Prize for many years. Yeah, she's amazing. So this comes from her book "Averno," which came out in 2004. And this is part two of what I believe is a six part poem. This is "October", by Louise Glück

2.

Summer after summer has ended,
balm after violence:
it does me no good
to be good to me now;
violence has changed me.

Daybreak. The low hills shine
ochre and fire, even the fields shine.
I know what I see; sun that could be
the August sun, returning
everything that was taken away—

You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice;
you can't touch my body now.
It has changed once, it has hardened,
don't ask it to respond again.

A day like a day in summer.
Exceptionally still. The long shadows of the maples

nearly mauve on the gravel paths.
And in the evening, warmth. Night like a night in summer.

It does me no good; violence has changed me.
My body has grown cold like the stripped fields;
now there is only my mind, cautious and wary,
with the sense it is being tested.

Once more, the sun rises as it rose in summer;
bounty, balm after violence.
Balm after the leaves have changed, after the fields
have been harvested and turned.

Tell me this is the future,
I won't believe you.
Tell me I'm living,
I won't believe you.

Well, I love this poem. And I love this part of this poem. Shout out to my sister, who I had read this poem a while ago and nearly forgotten it for some crazy reason. And then I was talking with my family. And she mentioned that the poem "October" by Louise Glück was very striking. And I thought my sister struck - have to investigate. And

Jack 6:06

You mentioned that this was published as part of a book, I believe it was also all six parts were separately published as their own chapbook.

Connor 6:13

I could believe that it's pretty it's, it's, I think, six sections. So it could probably stand alone as a chapbook. And, yeah, it um, in the book "Averno", which is like, came out in '04 it's the second book of the collection. And it's, it's like the first part of section one. And the collection as a whole often talks about the myth of Persephone, which is something that Glück writes about a lot, and has kind of always, she said, she's written about it on Persephone on and off for, like, fifty years or something like that. But that's the myth where it's a Greek myth, and Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, who's the, you know, the goddess of bounty and the earth, and Hades. Like, basically, she eats a pomegranate, and then

Jack 7:18

That was her first mistake, they're nasty

Connor 7:20

Yes.

Jack 7:21

And way more trouble than they're worth.

Connor 7:24

Well, that's the main thing, it's like, it's not really an impulsive thing to eat a pomegranate, because of the work it takes to eat it. At any rate, after that, you know, fatal flaw, Hades, basically steals her into the underworld, and makes her his wife. And then Demeter gets very upset, obviously, because she's lost her daughter. And then this is kind of the origin story of the seasons. And so they come to this arrangement where Persephone comes back for a certain time of the year based on the number of pomegranate seeds that she's eaten, which is how we should resolve most disputes.

Jack 8:09

We finally found a use for pomegranates, this is also very good.

Connor 8:15

And yeah, when she's in the underworld, Demeter is very sad. And that's why we have winter. And she, you know, anticipating the, you know, like, return of her daughter, we get spring, she gets more hopeful. But also notably, which was interesting, I was reading this in I think just like the Britannica article on Persephone or something, but the summer, the Britannica article says the story that Persephone spent four months each year in the underworld, was no doubt meant to account for the barren appearance of Greek fields in full summer, after harvest before their revival in the autumn rains when they are plowed and sown, which actually so maybe it wasn't winter. I'm not sure.

Jack 9:09

That's fascinating.

Connor 9:10

But it made me think of it. Yeah, I didn't either, actually. And now I'm like, I just told some misinformation. But that, that makes more sense in the context of this poem, which isn't specifically about Persephone, because there are some poems in "Averno" that are like, mention Persephone, sort of by name and talk about the myth. And this one is, I think, alludes to it. But you know, there's the parts like, you know, violence has changed me my body has grown cold like the stripped fields, you know, the stripped fields which made me think of like the barren fields after the harvest or something, you know, balm after the leaves have changed after the fields have been harvested and turned. At any rate, this poem comes before Persephone, as like, mentioned in the book, so it has other reference. But that's like, one way of thinking about it is this is that I have the poem is in some ways, like, Persephone, kind of, where it's like, you know, "You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice" you know, like, "you can't touch my body now", you know, "Tell me I'm living, I won't believe you." You can imagine how someone who's, you know, been taken to the underworld to hell, and who return sometimes is, you know, there's like a very tormented relationship and experience of being alive that, in a certain sense, this speaker couldn't have it.

Jack 10:52

That is all fascinating. And it has me wondering, because this poem, dealing with trauma and violence is sort of her response to 9/11, another thematic link to some of what we've been talking about, on this very podcast, you can go back and we did three whole episodes, discussing different poetic responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, both at the time and going forward in time. And I'm interested in the enduring power of the myth of Persephone, because she's using it here, partially in response to 9/11. And then there's also obviously the blockbuster musical "Hadestown," written long before the current administration was in power, but which has gained even greater significance because it has songs in it like about building a wall and a despotic figure, but it's again, it's another application of the myth of Persephone to American culture. And I'm, I'm curious if you have thoughts on what it is about that myth that has traction in this country or that more easily finds contemporary resonance, then maybe some other ones do?

Connor 12:10

Yeah, that's a really interesting point. In the poem that follows "October" in "Averno" called "Persephone The Wanderer", it talks about how the poem talks about how like, Perse, there's one line, it's like, Persephone is just meat, where she's, like, caught between this negotiation between her mother and Hades. And like, Persephone herself doesn't have that much say in the matter, basically, that she's like this sort of bargaining chip. And I think that, you know, I don't know if this is like American specific, but for Glück, anyway, she said in an interview that, like a recent one, actually, after winning the Nobel, about Persephone, that the issue with, like Demeter as the mother, like resonated with Glück's sort of issue with her own mother. And then she's like, not that it was useful for me, like in my daily life, you know, it's just that instead of complaining about my mom, when I wrote, I would just complain about Demeter, or something, which is pretty funny. And, yeah, and I mean, I do think that, and this, I think, is a little less American centric, but still, like contemporary, like, endorse to the contemporary moment, which is just lack of control kids have with their parents, like, both by necessity as kids, but then also kind of the enduring, like, kind of power that parents have over kids even into adulthood and stuff, I think is like a resonant kind of thing. And then and then I think like, the other part, that's also the, the gendered aspect of the myth is, I think, really central both for Glück and for the myth, and for its continued resonance, which is because so much of it is about Persephone's agency and like sexual agency. And like, the assumption is, of course, like, not trying to be with Hades, but then at the same time, there's this conflict with the mother that like she also doesn't have much choice in that sense. And, you know, there are a lot of writers have written about Persephone and some have, you know, maybe have have written her in a way that writes against the fact that she's just been coerced to live with Hades and maybe enjoys, you know, being with Hades or something like that. But I think like, a very obvious, contemporary analog is the insane, current debate that has continued in America about abortion rights, and like, women's autonomy and people's autonomy, gendered autonomy over their own bodies, right. And, like, the total, like, way that the stakes are so high, and yet the argument, you know, like, politicians, sort of treat them as just, "meat" in this political game that they're playing, right. And so there's, I do feel like there's a way in which power and

politics use women's bodies, and the idea of women's bodies as like, objects in their pursuit of power or control or whatever, that I think the story of Persephone kind of speaks to a little bit.

Jack 16:28

Even just going through like regular, regular sort of grade school education in the United States, you're going to learn some Greek myths. And I feel like the fact that the myth of Persephone is so concrete, like it's describing a natural process, it's not like Narcissus, which is describing a state of being, it is describing, like the natural world. So that's an easy concrete thing to like, remember it for just in terms of using it as a metaphor later on for something else. But you're absolutely right, I think the power aspect in it, the gender aspect combined is a lot of what gives it sort of continued resonance. And a lot of myths have continued resonance, but it feels like Persephone has a very sort of an easier to access resonance, which is probably part of why it is it's reached out to and I think also what you see in the myth is, I don't know it's just so intensely personal. Like the the personal thing that's being described in it is so foregrounded, even though it is obviously sort of explanatory for natural phenomena, and gets into all of these larger topics, like the way that Glück uses it, and has reached to it on and off for her entire writing life, is because of her personal connection to it. And I love that quote that you pulled out, that's so good.

Connor 18:00

Yeah, and I love that you brought up the fact that this this poem is about, you know, in some ways about September 11th. And I found a review of "Averno" in the Kenyon Review, which we'll link to written by Ann Keniston and it's very interesting, but but they they sort of talk about "October's" relationship to 9/11 and a way of understanding it just sort of, simply, which is kind of like, what's interesting in the poem is like, you know, there's this summer after summer has ended, balm after violence. And like, the poem is sort of describing this, like, really hot, sort of almost peaceful day in October, that's almost like, a summer day, basically, but it's in the fall. And then when you think about it in the context of 9/11 in September, it's like this day in October, that is, like very peaceful and like healing almost. But it's coming right on the heels of this incredible day of violence.

Jack 19:07

And the the resonance there goes on to a couple of different levels as well, because 9/11 famously, in New York, it was the clear blue sky of the day, which has become featured in several memorials about 9/11 shades of blue, the fact that it was a beautiful September day upon which you could barely imagine anything violent happening. And then I also find the tension between past and present really interesting because if you have this warm October day, that is like a summer day, it's also this day that calls back to the time before the violent act, which is so fascinating as like, this is a calming balm-like day, partially because it reminds me there was a time before. And I find that really interesting and in fact, the part that you pointed out, this is one part of a larger poem. But even within this one part, there are sort of repetitions and gentle echoes of lines. So the line balm after violence appears, or the phrase I should say it's a line at the very beginning, "Summer after summer has ended" linebreak "balm after violence", and then later very close to the end of the poem, this section of the poem,

“Once more, the sun rises as it rose in summer; bounty, balm after violence. Balm after the leaves have changed”. So you get this sort of echoing phrase, you also get the echo of the it does me no good phrase, there is a balm. But what are the limits of that balm? How much can it actually heal?

Connor 20:45

Yeah, that's such a good point. And in the in the review, Keniston says in fact, rather than choosing between the sensuous solace of the sun and the memory of violence, Glück recounts their intermingling; the ways that the balms themselves enable the violation to be both cast off and remembered, which I think kind of goes to what you were saying where the summer day in October provides relief, in a way but it also is it is an echo and a memory of a time before which sort of like reminds reminds one of what has taken place in between and how how, like intensely violent that was. And yeah, I think those those echoes are so the repetitions are so you know, it's such a repetitious poem in like, such a weird, weird way. Even at the level of the like, summer after summer has ended, has the repetition in you know, like, we're having the summer in October, like summer's happening again. And it's like, summer after summer. And like the balm after violence, violence has changed me. And then like, there's also these other parts, like “A day like a day in summer”, and then later in the stanza “Night like a night in summer.” And even in the beginning, you know, “it does me no good to be good to me now”. Which I think is like, like even there the the kind of inversion of the sit like the words it doesn't mean no good to be good to me now is, you know, what it you know, what it's saying in terms of meaning is like, there's no point to like, take care of myself at this point, basically, or something. But the way that it's phrased, it does me no good to be good to me now, that sort of the me and the good coming in a different order the second time basically, is really interesting. And like kind of sets up there's a lot in that first stanza that sets up the the repetitions that come after “Summer after summer has ended, balm after violence: it does me no good to be good to me now; violence has changed me.” That's the first stanza. And we get a version of most of those lines, you know, later. And so I mean, the other the other thing that the review says, because we've kind of talked about these two huge, like contextual layers that we can put on this poem, like the myth of Persephone, September 11th, and yet at the same time, like in this poem, you know, Persephone's not mentioned, 9/11, isn't mentioned specifically at all in the poem. And like something that Glück has said in that interview, which I think makes me think of this is like, she uses obviously her own life in her own poems. But she said, you know, I look for archetypal experience, and I assume that my struggles and joys are not unique. I'm interested in the struggles and joys of humans who are born and then forced to exit, even though there's this specific historical event of 9/11 and these, in the kind of the myth that the poem itself is speaking to a kind of archetypal structure that those events speak to but aren't like unique to them, you know, if that makes sense. So, like, I mean, part of why, you know, is interesting, and like, Vox actually, like posted part one of this poem after she won the Nobel Prize, which was the first time that I had seen Vox talk about poetry, which gave me great delight was something that they that they said about part one is that Glück in part one is writing ferociously around trauma, around some wound that has left scars and made the fact of October seem impossible. And then they say, in 2020, it's easy to read the trauma of pandemic into the illusions of her work into the space that has made the passage of time fall apart and

lose sense. And, you know, I think that that holds true in in part two as well. And also like, the pandemic and in some ways the I don't know the political horror the situation and in some ways, it's like, I don't know, I, I've been thinking a lot about the election. So it's coming up in time, but in some ways, the wound of 2016 is still frightfully present. And it spoke to me because, I don't know this month, like there's been times that have just been like, sort of extraordinarily beautiful and like, you know, this kind of a day like a day in summer exceptionally still, you know, but then it's like "The long shadows of the maples nearly mauve on the gravel paths", which is wonderful because there's this kind of the mauve maples is the kind of the evidence of fall within summer and I mean, funnily enough, yesterday, it's mid-October, I'm in Minnesota, I'm looking out at my tree, red, very red with autumn. And it starts to snow. I mean, come on, what the f, it's just total crap. And it was not summer and fall, it was winter and fall. And I was like, I need that poem, Nobel laureate. But this the kind of like, the kind of double seasons in themselves happening, and this kind of like, these moments of peace, but like the peace speaking to the violence that has taken place before, and like this, kind of, like, "Tell me this is the future, I won't believe you. Tell me I'm living, I won't believe you." Like, just like, the year has been so unreal, and like surreal, and like, the kind of like, the disbelief of time and place that like, I think, you know, is not, again, not unique to this moment, but it's happening in this moment, and happens to, you know, happened to many people, after 9/11, and happens to any number of people during any number of particular traumas, like, these are kind of kinds of experiences that are, you know, as the Nobel Committee said, you know, makes you individual experience universal, and it has a kind of resonance. But yeah, it's just funny, we talked about in when we talked about Herman Melville's "The Apparition" that the metaphor in the in that poem had this kind of portability and like, you could kind of like, take it, use it in your own life and use it to discuss it to think about any number of situations and it kind of provided a shape for understanding that. And this poem doesn't have kind of like, clear metaphor, in the in the way that the Melville thing like, Glück isn't saying, this is that, you know, like, October is an apple or whatever. But there is the this kind of mood and feeling and experience that's being sort of felt and expressed here that I think has a similar kind of portability, which, yeah, feels important to find those right now.

Jack 29:29

I think in place of having that metaphor with the poem does a really masterful job of is finding a bunch of different avenues towards the subject of change, basically, and like, change over time, and even the denial of time often ends up still pointing back towards that as like, a continually, inescapably referenced topic in the poem. And I like that it finds so many ways to do that because I don't feel like I'm being hit over the head with like, change is important. Change is a major concept that I wish you would think about. Here's my poem about the subject of change. It's similar to how the repetition works in the poem, it's very gentle, but it does feel like the examination of that topic builds over time. And you also through the different avenues get a very clear idea of how Glück is thinking about change, which is particularly change through violence and trauma. And the different ways that that manifests similar to her talking about she she does a masterful job of talking about the ways that can manifest individually, where maybe it is, "You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice; you can't touch my body now. It has changed once, it has hardened, don't ask it to respond again." A toughening body through

change can be scar tissue or toughened meat through adrenaline, and, you know, fear, psychological toughening through trauma, it can be, specifically, you know, a hardened body, if you think about bodybuilders, and people who work out that's literally just repeated muscle trauma, you're just tearing your muscles over and over again, so that they'll grow back larger, theoretically, like, there's a lot going on there that all points to this specific type of change that she's interested in. And that's very personal. And then the next stanza, "A day like a day in summer. Exceptionally still. The long shadows of the maples nearly mauve on the gravel paths." It goes from those personal, you know, my mind, my voice, my body to talking about seasonal change, talking about change in the wider world, it keeps you sort of very easily flowing through the conversation on the topic without getting bogged down in like minutiae of change. Without getting lost in the vastness of the seasonal metaphor. It moves between the two, finding new things in both and keeping you engaged and interested and as curious as the writer is about the topic, which I really like.

Connor 32:08

Yeah, I think that's a really good point. Yeah, and just like something about Glück, that I think is, like, so good in her work throughout, but I think, and this poem, I think, like, really, this part of this poem really shows is, and she talks about in that New York Times interview, like, she's sort of known for her pared down style, and like, sort of austere voice. But she was sort of talking about how like, syntax and like, kind of what you can do with the structure of a sentence, always really interested her. And, and I think like, I don't know, just in terms of like, not like, beating you over the head with this is a change poem, kind of thing. Like, she does a lot with the syntax and the repetition and the kind of the voice that is created through that, if that makes sense. Like one thing that's always really sort of compelled me about Glück's poetry is how it's not on its face, everything is very comprehensible, like each sentence sort of by themselves, like, you know, violence has changed me like you hear this voice this is my mind's voice. It does me no good. Tell me this is the future I won't believe you. It's very direct in this kind of way. And and it's not using vocabulary or I don't know that there's there's a certain simplicity to the style, but where it gets like, really, sort of complex and strange is in the way that the repetition in the syntax happens I guess if that makes sense. Where you know, you have this first stanza "Summer after summer has ended, balm after violence: it does me no good to be good to me now; violence has changed me." But then like when it when those sort of moments return, like, you know, it does me no good. Violence has changed me. Then, you know, it does me no good, is now referring to the day like a day in summer or like the summer day. And in repeating the balm over and over again it acquires that secondary meaning, rather like the balm after violence in the beginning, it's like, oh, it's a balm, like it's providing relief, but in the balm coming back with the violence you know, all these times, then it also gets that second meaning of, it's also reminding you of the violence, and it's reminding you of what has changed, even as it's providing relief. And then also just like, all of this, and then the end is like, "Tell me this is the future, I won't believe you. Tell me I'm living, I won't believe you", which is just like, so different from the poem in a way. But it's so direct, but then it's, it's, it's, it's hard to say exactly. But like, the disbelief of the speaker is, is, like, built up in everything before it, and I don't know. So it gets this like, really intense kind of feeling, at least when I read it. Whereas if you know that, by itself, it doesn't have like, like that last stanza is, is direct and

powerful, perhaps, but like, by itself, it could mean anything, really, I mean, like, tell me this is the future. I don't know depends on what future you're talking about. Or, like, I won't believe you like, okay, but it's, it's the placement of, in a way, it's like the larger syntax of the poem, like not the sentence structure, but the poem structure where this coming at the end, having accumulated all this kind of complicated feeling, and concrete detail, and, and violence and balm and strangeness, that the you know, this direct statement coming at the end just like is really, I mean, I just keep saying intense, but, but it's hard to say exactly.

Jack 36:52

But it is, because and part of what makes it so intense is that sort of disruption of the syntax you become comfortable with throughout the poem, which, while it's direct, the last stanza feels almost clipped. It's so short, and to the point. And without the poem, yeah, it doesn't necessarily like it could mean anything without context. But because it has context, it's more, really, as you said, it's an intense iteration of what has come before it is the distillation of the crystallization of the ideas that are coming before, or like the sort of, if you want to know the headspace of the speaker, you've been given a bunch of context, and this is where they are. It reminds me there's a moment in the Dungeons and Dragons podcast, The Adventure Zone, which is a great, it's great, and it's really fun. And there's this character in it, a wizard named Taako. And towards the end of the first arc, you've got, like fifty, or sixty plus hour long episodes of story that are leading up to the point where they're like, checking in, like, how's Taako doing? And he just says, Taako is at a point where he trusts no one and nothing, he's over it and he's done. He's not doing it like Taako's out, Taako's done, he trusts no one and nothing. He's got no time for it. And I feel like to get to that moment and to understand where Taako the wizard is coming from, you have to have about sixty hours of context, and all this backstory about Taako's life up to that point and the adventures he's been on for that to make any sense and mean anything, but it hits really hard. And and that's exactly what's happening here, where this hits really hard, because you know what's going into it, and it is this sort of crystallization point. And to your point about how the repetition works in this, I was also thinking about that I realized in somewhat like I don't know, I was thinking about that in kind of cinematic terms very much like how musical motifs work in film, where you'll have the same character on screen doing something different, but the music will be that characters theme. And so that musical score associated with the character builds meaning over time in the movie, or if it's a series, especially it'll build meaning over time. And I felt like that was happening, for me with these like, slightly turned phrases. It felt to me like I was revisiting the same character in a new context. But I remembered the last time, which is maybe just a useless way of saying that it's like the same thing again, but slightly different. But I realized that I was very much thinking about it in those terms. Just because I feel like when it shows up in film, there are two big components that are the same which is the character and the music and then the character is doing something different in the scene and it felt to me like it was that that level of different where there were big components that were the same, and then one element was changed. And that was helping the meaning grow over time. Again, I felt very gently.

Connor 40:14

Yeah, no, I think that's really, I think it's kind of the same. It's definitely the same principle, I find, I find it much easier to think about the use of repetition in movies, in part, because there are those sort of discrete elements like, oh, it's the music part. And like, sometimes it's a little harder in poetry, because it's like, it's this part of language, and that's that part of language. I mean, you can talk about different repetitions of phrases and stuff, and it becomes clearer, but like, that's, you could, it's easy, it's easy to identify in a poem, the thing that is the same, which is to say, balm after violence is the same thing repeated it, it's harder to identify what's different. So I think, I think that's a great way of thinking about it. And yeah, I just think it's something I need to think about more to be able to articulate more, because I think like, you know, repetition has this both this kind of like, formal like, propulsive kind of momentum, energy building effect, and it has this way of building meaning, but those things, there's a lot contained within that sentence, like meaning is so variable, and, and it's kind of so like, and different kinds of repetition, do different things, you know, but I think like, it's really right, that that this is such a, I don't know, it's such a good example of the and, you know, it's not like a strictly formal, like, it's not a villanelle, or pantoum, or like a blues or something where, like, there are lines and formal constraints that sort of have to repeat and then, you know, you have sort of the expected thing, this is, you know, essentially, a free verse poem, where Glück's doing whatever she wants, but she has incorporated these very intentional phrase repetitions into the poem, that sort of do the same kind of work, in that it builds on something before that we expect and remember, but is sort of shifting at the same time. And, yeah, it's, it's like, it's, it's really, it's really cool. Sitting with this poem has been sort of helpful for me in I don't know, this, this October of all October's in just like, it can be, I don't know, I felt like it's been hard for me to feel grounded, because so much craziness is happening. And like, the world is so topsy turvy and terrible, in lot of ways, because sometimes it feels like, like to ground myself is to escape those things I guess, if that makes sense. Like, oh, I just need to be in the world away from all that crazy stuff. But it's like not quite that simple. And I sort of feel like, when I've been able to sit with this poem, it like keeps its engaging with the the crazies, the violence, and it, but it's also a way it's a kind of balm itself, for me anyway, that it's been helpful.

Jack 43:50

Yeah, I mean, at a time when so many things are up in the air. And at a time when things that under normal circumstances, would feel certain, like even down to the election. If the current polling was happening under any other circumstances, there's a clear winner, like, well, not a clear winner, there'd be a clear leader in the polls, and the conversation would be around how significant the lead is. And instead, here we are wondering, what the fuck could possibly go wrong? And what could happen along the way? Like, yeah, that's, and that is replicated in so many areas of life right now, where a situation that under any normal circumstances would be like, oh, it's a pandemic, the very basic things that we can do to make it less deadly we should all do. Like, no, no, that's up for debate too, we have to talk about that one. Will there be a peaceful transfer of power? No we got to talk about that, too. Can you disavow QAnon? No, no, we got to talk about that too. There are so many things that under normal circumstances, wouldn't have to be up for highly contentious debate that are, I don't know, there's just a lot going on. And there's important stuff to talk about. And then there's a bunch of weird stuff that we have to talk about forever. And I agree with you that reading this poem, and I would

encourage everyone listening to go out and read all six parts, but even just reading and sitting with this part of it is like a very grounding experience, because it is somebody not coming to answers about any of this stuff, but like grappling with it meaningfully. And coming to some realizations at the very least, that can be helpful to readers.

Connor 45:39

Yeah, I agree with all that. Should we read it again?

Jack 45:46

Let's read it again.

Connor 45:48

This is "October", by Louise Glück

2.

Summer after summer has ended,
balm after violence:
it does me no good
to be good to me now;
violence has changed me.

Daybreak. The low hills shine
ochre and fire, even the fields shine.
I know what I see; sun that could be
the August sun, returning
everything that was taken away—

You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice;
you can't touch my body now.
It has changed once, it has hardened,
don't ask it to respond again.

A day like a day in summer.
Exceptionally still. The long shadows of the maples
nearly mauve on the gravel paths.
And in the evening, warmth. Night like a night in summer.

It does me no good; violence has changed me.
My body has grown cold like the stripped fields;
now there is only my mind, cautious and wary,
with the sense it is being tested.

Once more, the sun rises as it rose in summer;
bounty, balm after violence.

Balm after the leaves have changed, after the fields
have been harvested and turned.

Tell me this is the future,
I won't believe you.
Tell me I'm living,
I won't believe you.

(Close Talking theme music)

So Jack it's October it's not yet November. So we got that going for us. Yeah. What, ah, what do you what have you been up to what have you been reading? What have you been watching?

Jack 48:05

An excellent new book just arrived for me that I ordered. And I have been devouring it it is called "Culture Warlords: My Journey Into the Dark Web of White Supremacy" by Talia Lavin. Very appropriate because we just discussed a poem by Herman Melville. And in addition to this book, and her work covering the far right and white supremacy, Talia Lavin is also the host of 'Moby Dick Energy,' one of my current favorite podcasts that goes chapter by chapter through Moby Dick. But "Culture Warlords" is her book about the year that she basically spent going undercover in right wing spaces. And the first paragraph of the like, jacket copy is perfect, which says "Talia Lavin is every skinheads worst nightmare allowed an unapologetic Jewish woman, acerbic, smart and profoundly anti-racist with the investigative chops to expose the tactics and ideologies of online hate mongers," which is pretty much a perfect encapsulation of this book. And if you want to understand how white supremacy flourishes online, the way that it connects to far right news outlets and groups and the way that those then bleed into more mainstream contemporary conservative culture, and news, I highly recommend her journalistic work and the the writing that she's been doing, the way that she has contextualized particularly online meme culture, and online culture generally, around subjects like white supremacy is really really valuable for understanding their contours because a lot of times what happens is a violent event or some kind of major right wing news story will come out and it is very much like a tip of the iceberg situation, where you are seeing one small part of the media ecosystem, and community universe that created the person who did the violent act, or who made a news story that showed up in more mainstream outlets. So the work that she's doing is also, obviously for her intensely personal and really difficult, and the amount of awful shit that you'd have to wade through as somebody who is Jewish, and a woman in these vehemently anti-semitic, misogynistic spaces, is really just like heroic, heavy lifting on a personal level to have the wherewithal to do all of that. So it's an incredible work just for what it is, but also knowing what she went through for like a year plus, going into these spaces, undercover, learning, and spending so much time with all this really hateful content, like adds another layer of appreciation to the to the work, and I am, she's also just an incredible writer, so I'm loving it.

Connor 51:08

Wow. Yeah. I can't imagine doing that. No, that's, that's really interesting ought to check that out. It's always been important, but it's been increasingly apparent how important it is to try to understand these groups. And like, you know, white supremacy, generally, and systemic racism are, you know, like a fabric of American society and culture that we all sort of grew up within. But the kind of groups that embrace it, with passionate hatred are terrifying and very important to comprehend I think, even as like, I think, even when you're more interested in confronting it on a like, wider systemic level. Does that make sense?

Jack 52:05

I think particularly for the present political conversation, if you watched the Republican National Convention, we both had Jessica Young, the incredible AP European History teacher who was fond of saying that, basically like the modern world is a joke you don't get unless you learn European history. Which is another way of kind of saying that, like, it's a joke you don't get unless you understand the history of colonialism. But the point is that the Republican National Convention would be a joke you don't get unless you're immersed in a right wing ecosystem that doesn't necessarily draw directly from these most extreme groups. But there is a continuum within it that includes these groups. And in a lot of ways, the increasingly less coded language but the coded language of the right is now seeped in this media universe that includes these groups. And again, that is just something that she is so good at decoding, explaining and contextualizing but it helps provide a real understanding of like, where does Stephen Miller get his news from? What shapes his worldview? It actually it goes back to the kind of question that Katie Couric asked Sarah Palin, which is like, what newspapers do you read? I'm interested in what information shapes your worldview, which was like, gotcha journalism, but it's actually a really important question for elected officials is like, where do you get your information? Like, what voices are you listening to? Because if you think about it, that's something you'd want to know, for your friends and family and stuff. Like, who are you listening to? Who is helping you understand the world? Like, that's a big part of the puzzle. And, and yeah, the the continuum from Breitbart, which Steve Bannon himself called the, you know, mouthpiece of the alt right. Like, it connects. And I think that this, this book has been just another level of understanding that not necessarily the most uplifting thing, but I have been ripping right through it. But what about you, what have you been reading, listening to, watching, thinking about?

Connor 54:16

Oh, man, well, somewhat relatedly, the I have been doing a lot of election thinking. And there is some concern that Minnesota because it is a battleground state will be there will be attempts at voter intimidation at the polls and things things like that coming from Trump supporters and GOP and all that stuff. So I've been trying to sort of understand what that could look like. And so there's been there been a number of documents, but two, two ones that have that have been kind of pretty interesting and I think aren't aren't specific at all to Minnesota, there's a there's a group called the Transition Integrity Project, and it's it's like TIP. And basically, it's very interesting for me, it's a little tough, but I think it's like important to read, which is basically like a bunch of former kind of government officials and like political scientists kind of came together and like, played a kind of game of, let's play out the scenarios of the election and see what

happens. So like, some of them were like, Trump and the GOP, some of them were like, Biden, and the, the Democratic Party, some of them were judges, some of them were like, all these sort of different kind of like institutional players. And basically, what they did is like, played out a number of scenarios of like, okay, let's say, you know, we don't know the election results on November 3, and it seems like maybe it's going to be close in these states, or what is what is Trump do? And then like, kind of plays it out, like a, like a kind of game. And so it kind of tries to envision in like, a concrete way, like, what could the next few months actually look like? And then kind of like, what are the ways that and then sort of through that process like, identify, okay, so what's vulnerable and why? And also, like, what are the things that could be taken at these steps to counteract whatever sort of bad actors are doing, and then kind of relatedly which, which is not a wasn't made by the people of the Transition Integrity Project, but uses that information, to some extent, is called, Hold the Line. It's like a guide to defending democracy. And basically, it's, it's trying to form like a general sort of, like, overview of what can people do, beyond, you know, the vote, which obviously is important to kind of, like, make sure that we have a free and fair election. And so you know, it, it outlines anything from if you're young and like, not too like immunocompromised, and there's a polling, like place shortage, you can volunteer and do that. And that's good to do. But it also talks about, like, you know, it's very possible that there's going to be a need for like, peaceful mass demonstrations after the election to kind of like, keep public pressure on officials and stuff to like, make sure that all the votes are counted. And like, there's no funny business and things like that. And kind of like, to me, it's been very instructive. And I had a kind of one one reason why I've been reading it beyond just like, in terms of like, what I've been doing for Minnesota is like, you read these news stories, and you listen to Trump, and like, It's horrifying, but it's like, it's very hard to imagine what it could actually look like, you know what I mean? Or it's like, what is what is a non peaceful transfer of power look like from the orange demon that is the Don. And yeah, well, and there's also like, there's a lot of situations where and there's gonna be an there already is like, a ton of litigation in the courts of like, can you have a weird deadline for absentee ballots? Or like, how, you know, can you stop counting this and there's kind of like a Bush v Gore 2000 case times 100. And, you know, it's like, but now it's like, okay, well with the Supreme Court shenanigans and the federal courts being packed by McConnell and stuff, it's like, there's an instinct on, I don't think it's enough to like, quote, unquote, leave it to the courts to decide. I think there's like, there's a question of, what else can people do, basically. And, on the one hand, it is a little scary to read, but on the other hand, it's been helpful for me in like, making what was a very vague, kind of melvillian, apparition of horror, into a kind of like, okay, this is what could happen. This is what could happen. This is what could happen. This is what we can do. And it's kind of like made things feel more palpable and workable in certain ways, and so I would recommend checking them out.

Jack 1:00:02

I like that. I think that's really good. And I think it's particularly valuable to be thinking in that way to be thinking proactively about ways that the election could could go. Because I think the earliest piece I saw even contemplating that was one by Ed Luce in the Financial Times and he was essentially sounding the alarm pretty early on that basically anything other than a Biden landslide, be ready to fight. Yeah, and and basically just be ready to fight for fairness, and

believing in the freedom of the election that happened. So I think it's yeah, it's particularly valuable for us to be to be doing all we can to be prepared for for November 4th, and 5th and 6th and 7th, because this doesn't end on the 3rd no matter what happens.

(Close Talking theme music)