

Classic Poetry Series

Denise Levertov

- poems -

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A Tree Telling of Orpheus

White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began
I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors
of salt, of treeless horizons. But the white fog
didn't stir; the leaves of my brothers remained outstretched,
unmoving.

Yet the rippling drew nearer – and then
my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if
fire had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips
were drying and curling.

Yet I was not afraid, only
deeply alert.

I was the first to see him, for I grew
out on the pasture slope, beyond the forest.

He was a man, it seemed: the two
moving stems, the short trunk, the two
arm-branches, flexible, each with five leafless
twigs at their ends,
and the head that's crowned by brown or golden grass,
bearing a face not like the beaked face of a bird,
more like a flower's.

He carried a burden made of
some cut branch bent while it was green,
strands of a vine tight-stretched across it. From this,
when he touched it, and from his voice
which unlike the wind's voice had no need of our
leaves and branches to complete its sound,
came the ripple.

But it was now no longer a ripple (he had come near and
stopped in my first shadow) it was a wave that bathed me
as if rain

rose from below and around me
instead of falling.

And what I felt was no longer a dry tingling:

I seemed to be singing as he sang, I seemed to know
what the lark knows; all my sap
was mounting towards the sun that by now
had risen, the mist was rising, the grass

was drying, yet my roots felt music moisten them
deep under earth.

He came still closer, leaned on my trunk:
the bark thrilled like a leaf still-folded.

Music! There was no twig of me not
trembling with joy and fear.

Then as he sang
it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
came into my roots
out of the earth,
into my bark
out of the air,

into the pores of my greenest shoots
 gently as dew
and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning.
He told me of journeys,
 of where sun and moon go while we stand in dark,
 of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day
deeper than roots ...
He told of the dreams of man, wars, passions, griefs,
 and I, a tree, understood words – ah, it seemed
my thick bark would split like a sapling's that
 grew too fast in the spring
when a late frost wounds it.

 Fire he sang,
that trees fear, and I, a tree, rejoiced in its flames.
New buds broke forth from me though it was full summer.
 As though his lyre (now I knew its name)
 were both frost and fire, its chords flamed
up to the crown of me.
 I was seed again.
 I was fern in the swamp.
 I was coal.

Denise Levertov

Adam's Complaint

Some people,
no matter what you give them,
still want the moon.

The bread,
the salt,
white meat and dark,
still hungry.

The marriage bed
and the cradle,
still empty arms.

You give them land,
their own earth under their feet,
still they take to the roads

And water: dig them the deepest well,
still it's not deep enough
to drink the moon from.

Denise Levertov

An Embroidery

Rose Red's hair is brown as fur
and shines in firelight as she prepares
supper of honey and apples, curds and whey,
for the bear, and leaves it ready
on the hearth-stone.

Rose White's grey eyes
look into the dark forest.

Rose Red's cheeks are burning,
sign of her ardent, joyful
compassionate heart.
Rose White is pale,
turning away when she hears
the bear's paw on the latch.

When he enters, there is
frost on his fur,
he draws near to the fire
giving off sparks.

Rose Red catches the scent of the forest,
of mushrooms, of rosin.

Together Rose Red and Rose White
sing to the bear;
it is a cradle song, a loom song,
a song about marriage, about
a pilgrimage to the mountains
long ago.
Raised on an elbow,
the bear stretched on the hearth
nods and hums; soon he sighs
and puts down his head.

He sleeps; the Roses
bank the fire.
Sunk in the clouds of their feather bed
they prepare to dream.

Rose Red in a cave that smells of honey
dreams she is combing the fur of her cubs
with a golden comb.
Rose White is lying awake.

Rose White shall marry the bear's brother.
Shall he too
when the time is ripe,
step from the bear's hide?
Is that other, her bridegroom,
here in the room?

Denise Levertov

An excerpt from "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus"

iiGloria

Praise the wet snow
falling early.
Praise the shadow
my neighbor's chimney casts on the tile roof
even this gray October day that should, they say,
have been golden.
Praise
the invisible sun burning beyond
the white cold sky, giving us
light and the chimney's shadow.
Praise
god or the gods, the unknown,
that which imagined us, which stays
our hand,
our murderous hand,
and gives us
still,
in the shadow of death,
our daily life,
and the dream still
of goodwill, of peace on earth.
Praise
flow and change, night and
the pulse of day.

Denise Levertov

Aware

When I found the door
I found the vine leaves
speaking among themselves in abundant
whispers.
My presence made them
hush their green breath,
embarrassed, the way
humans stand up, buttoning their jackets,
acting as if they were leaving anyway, as if
the conversation had ended
just before you arrived.
I liked
the glimpse I had, though,
of their obscure
gestures. I liked the sound
of such private voices. Next time
I'll move like cautious sunlight, open
the door by fractions, eavesdrop
peacefully.

Denise Levertov

Bearing the Light

Rain-diamonds, this winter morning, embellish the tangle of unpruned pear-tree twigs;
each solitaire, placed, it appears, with considered judgement, bears the light beneath
the rifted clouds -- the indivisible shared out in endless abundance.

Denise Levertov

Celebration

Brilliant, this day – a young virtuoso of a day.
Morning shadow cut by sharpest scissors,
deft hands. And every prodigy of green –
whether it's ferns or lichens or needles
or impatient points of buds on spindly bushes –
greener than ever before. And the way the conifers
hold new cones to the light for the blessing,
a festive right, and sing the oceanic chant the wind
transcribes for them!
A day that shines in the cold
like a first-prize brass band swinging along
the street
of a coal-dusty village, wholly at odds
with the claims of reasonable gloom.

Denise Levertov

Contraband

The tree of knowledge was the tree of reason.
That's why the taste of it
drove us from Eden. That fruit
was meant to be dried and milled to a fine powder
for use a pinch at a time, a condiment.
God had probably planned to tell us later
about this new pleasure.
We stuffed our mouths full of it,
gorged on *but* and *if* and *how* and again
but, knowing no better.
It's toxic in large quantities; fumes
swirled in our heads and around us
to form a dense cloud that hardened to steel,
a wall between us and God, Who was Paradise.
Not that God is unreasonable – but reason
in such excess was tyranny
and locked us into its own limits, a polished cell
reflecting our own faces. God lives
on the other side of that mirror,
but through the slit where the barrier doesn't
quite touch ground, manages still
to squeeze in – as filtered light,
splinters of fire, a strain of music heard
then lost, then heard again.

Denise Levertov

Everything That Acts Is Actual

From the tawny light
from the rainy nights
from the imagination finding
itself and more than itself
alone and more than alone
at the bottom of the well where the moon lives,
can you pull me

into December? a lowland
of space, perception of space
towering of shadows of clouds blown upon
clouds over
 new ground, new made
under heavy December footsteps? the only
way to live?

The flawed moon
acts on the truth, and makes
an autumn of tentative
silences.
You lived, but somewhere else,
your presence touched others, ring upon ring,
and changed. Did you think
I would not change?

 The black moon
turns away, its work done. A tenderness,
unspoken autumn.
We are faithful
only to the imagination. What the
imagination
 seizes
as beauty must be truth. What holds you
to what you see of me is
that grasp alone.

Denise Levertov

From the Roof

This wild night, gathering the washing as if it were flowers
 animal vines twisting over the line and
 slapping my face lightly, soundless merriment
 in the gesticulations of shirtsleeves,
I recall out of my joy a night of misery

walking in the dark and the wind over broken earth,
 halfmade foundations and unfinished
 drainage trenches and the spaced-out
 circles of glaring light
 marking streets that were to be
walking with you but so far from you,

and now alone in October's
first decision towards winter, so close to you--
 my arms full of playful rebellious linen, a freighter
 going down-river two blocks away, outward bound,
 the green wolf-eyes of the Harborside Terminal
 glittering on the Jersey shore,
and a train somewhere under ground bringing you towards me
to our new living-place from which we can see

a river and its traffic (the Hudson and the
hidden river, who can say which it is we see, we see
something of both. Or who can say
the crippled broom-vendor yesterday, who passed
just as we needed a new broom, was not
one of the Hidden Ones?)
 Crates of fruit are unloading
 across the street on the cobbles,
 and a brazier flaring
 to warm the men and burn trash. He wished us
luck when we bought the broom. But not luck
brought us here. By design

clean air and cold wind polish
the river lights, by design
we are to live now in a new place.

Denise Levertov

Grey Sparrow Addresses the Mind's Ear

In the Japanese tongue of the mind's eye one two syllable word tells of the fringe of rain clinging to the eaves and of the grey-green fronds of wild parsley.

Denise Levertov

Hymn To Eros

O Eros, silently smiling one, hear me.
Let the shadow of thy wings
brush me.
Let thy presence
enfold me, as if darkness
were swadown.
Let me see that darkness
lamp in hand,
this country become
the other country
sacred to desire.

Drowsy god,
slow the wheels of my thought
so that I listen only
to the snowfall hush of
thy circling.
Close my beloved with me
in the smoke ring of thy power,
that we way be, each to the other,
figures of flame,
figures of smoke,
figures of flesh
newly seen in the dusk.

Denise Levertov

Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell

Down through the tomb's inward arch
He has shouldered out into Limbo
to gather them, dazed, from dreamless slumber:
the merciful dead, the prophets,
the innocents just His own age and those
unnumbered others waiting here
unaware, in an endless void He is ending
now, stooping to tug at their hands,
to pull them from their sarcophagi,
dazzled, almost unwilling. Didmas,
neighbor in death, Golgotha dust
still streaked on the dried sweat of his body
no one had washed and anointed, is here,
for sequence is not known in Limbo;
the promise, given from cross to cross
at noon, arches beyond sunset and dawn.
All these He will swiftly lead
to the Paradise road: they are safe.
That done, there must take place that struggle
no human presumes to picture:
living, dying, descending to rescue the just
from shadow, were lesser travails
than this: to break
through earth and stone of the faithless world
back to the cold sepulchre, tearstained
stifling shroud; to break from *them*
back into breath and heartbeat, and walk
the world again, closed into days and weeks again,
wounds of His anguish open, and Spirit
streaming through every cell of flesh
so that if mortal sight could bear
to perceive it, it would be seen
His mortal flesh was lit from within, now,
and aching for home. He must return,
first, in Divine patience, and know
hunger again, and give
to humble friends the joy
of giving Him food--fish and a honeycomb.

Denise Levertov

Illustrious Ancestors

The Rav
of Northern White Russia declined,
in his youth, to learn the
language of birds, because
the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless
when he grew old it was found
he understood them anyway, having
listened well, and as it is said, 'prayed
with the bench and the floor.' He used
what was at hand--as did
Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations
were sewn into coats and britches.
Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems direct as what the birds said,
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.

Denise Levertov

In California During the Gulf War

Among the blight-killed eucalypts, among
trees and bushes rusted by Christmas frosts,
the yards and hillsides exhausted by five years of drought,

certain airy white blossoms punctually
reappeared, and dense clusters of pale pink, dark pink--
a delicate abundance. They seemed

like guests arriving joyfully on the accustomed
festival day, unaware of the year's events, not perceiving
the sackcloth others were wearing.

To some of us, the dejected landscape consorted well
with our shame and bitterness. Skies ever-blue,
daily sunshine, disgusted us like smile-buttons.

Yet the blossoms, clinging to thin branches
more lightly than birds alert for flight,
lifted the sunken heart

even against its will.
But not
as symbols of hope: they were flimsy
as our resistance to the crimes committed

--again, again--in our name; and yes, they return,
year after year, and yes, they briefly shone with serene joy
over against the dark glare

of evil days. They *are*, and their presence
is quietness ineffable--and the bombings *are*, were,
no doubt will be; that quiet, that huge cacophany

simultaneous. No promise was being accorded, the blossoms
were not doves, there was no rainbow. And when it was claimed
the war had ended, it had not ended.

Denise Levertov

In Mind

There's in my mind a woman
of innocence, unadorned but

fair-featured and smelling of
apples or grass. She wears

a utopian smock or shift, her hair
is light brown and smooth, and she

is kind and very clean without
ostentation-

but she has
no imagination

And there's a
turbulent moon-ridden girl

or old woman, or both,
dressed in opals and rags, feathers

and torn taffeta,
who knows strange songs

but she is not kind.

Denise Levertov

Intrusion

After I had cut off my hands
and grown new ones

something my former hands had longed for
came and asked to be rocked.

After my plucked out eyes
had withered, and new ones grown

something my former eyes had wept for
came asking to be pitied.

Denise Levertov

Living

The fire in leaf and grass
so green it seems
each summer the last summer.

The wind blowing, the leaves
shivering in the sun,
each day the last day.

A red salamander
so cold and so
easy to catch, dreamily

moves his delicate feet
and long tail. I hold
my hand open for him to go.

Each minute the last minute.

Denise Levertov

Looking, Walking, Being

*"The World is not something to
look at, it is something to be in."
Mark Rudman*

I look and look.
Looking's a way of being: one becomes,
sometimes, a pair of eyes walking.
Walking wherever looking takes one.

The eyes
dig and burrow into the world.
They touch
fanfare, howl, madrigal, clamor.
World and the past of it,
not only
visible present, solid and shadow
that looks at one looking.

And language? Rhythms
of echo and interruption?
That's
a way of breathing.

breathing to sustain
looking,
walking and looking,
through the world,
in it.

Denise Levertov

Losing Track

Long after you have swung back
away from me
I think you are still with me:

you come in close to the shore
on the tide
and nudge me awake the way

a boat adrift nudges the pier:
am I a pier
half-in half-out of the water?

and in the pleasure of that communion
I lose track,
the moon I watch goes down, the

tide swings you away before
I know I'm
alone again long since,

mud sucking at gray and black
timbers of me,
a light growth of green dreams drying.

Denise Levertov

On a Theme by Thomas Merton

"Adam, where are you?"
 God's hands
palpate darkness, the void
that is Adam's inattention,
his confused attention to everything,
impassioned by multiplicity, his despair.

Multiplicity, his despair;
 God's hands
enacting blindness. Like a child
at a barbaric fairgrounds --
noise, lights, the violent odors --
Adam fragments himself. The whirling rides!

Fragmented Adam stares.
 God's hands
unseen, the whirling rides
dazzle, the lights blind him. Fragmented,
he is not present to himself. God
suffers the void that is his absence.

Denise Levertov

On the Mystery of the Incarnation

It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.

Denise Levertov

People at Night

A night that cuts between you and you
and you and you and you
and me : jostles us apart, a man elbowing
through a crowd. We won't
 look for each other, either-
wander off, each alone, not looking
in the slow crowd. Among sideshows
 under movie signs,
 pictures made of a million lights,
 giants that move and again move
 again, above a cloud of thick smells,
 franks, roasted nutmeats-

Or going up to some apartment, yours
 or yours, finding
someone sitting in the dark:
who is it really? So you switch the
light on to see: you know the name but
who is it ?
 But you won't see.

The fluorescent light flickers sullenly, a
pause. But you command. It grabs
each face and holds it up
by the hair for you, mask after mask.
 You and you and I repeat
 gestures that make do when speech
 has failed and talk
 and talk, laughing, saying
 'I', and 'I',
meaning 'Anybody'.
 No one.

Denise Levertov

Pleasures

I like to find
what's not found
at once, but lies

within something of another nature,
in repose, distinct.
Gull feathers of glass, hidden

in white pulp: the bones of squid
which I pull out and lay
blade by blade on the draining board--

tapered as if for swiftness, to pierce
the heart, but fragile, substance
belying design. Or a fruit, mamey,

cased in rough brown peel, the flesh
rose-amber, and the seed:
the seed a stone of wood, carved and

polished, walnut-colored, formed
like a brazilnut, but large,
large enough to fill
the hungry palm of a hand.

I like the juicy stem of grass that grows
within the coarser leaf folded round,
and the butteryellow glow

in the narrow flute from which the morning-glory
opens blue and cool on a hot morning.

Denise Levertov

Psalm Concerning the Castle

Let me be at the place of the castle.
Let the castle be within me.
Let it rise foursquare from the moat's ring.
Let the moat's waters reflect green plumage of ducks, let
the shells of swimming turtles break the surface or be
seen through the rippling depths.
Let horsemen be stationed at the rim of it, and a dog,
always alert on the brink of sleep.
Let the space under the first storey be dark, let the water
lap the stone posts, and vivid green slime glimmer upon
them; let a boat be kept there.
Let the caryatids of the second storey be bears upheld on
beams that are dragons.
On the parapet of the central room, let there be four
archers, looking off to the four horizons. Within, let
the prince be at home, let him sit in deep thought, at
peace, all the windows open to the loggias.
Let the young queen sit above, in the cool air, her child in
her arms; let her look with joy at the great circle, the
pilgrim shadows, the work of the sun and the play of
the wind. Let her walk to and fro. Let the columns uphold
the roof, let the storeys uphold the columns, let there
be dark space below the lowest floor, let the castle rise
foursquare out of the moat, let the moat be a ring and
the water deep, let the guardians guard it, let there be
wide lands around it, let that country where it stands be
within me, let me be where it is.

Denise Levertov

Seeing For A Moment

I thought I was growing wings—
it was a cocoon.

I thought, now is the time to step
into the fire—
it was deep water.

Eschatology is a word I learned
as a child: the study of Last Things;

facing my mirror—no longer young,
the news—always of death,
the dogs—rising from sleep and clamoring
and howling, howling,

nevertheless
I see for a moment
that's not it: it is
the First Things.

Word after word
floats through the glass.
Towards me.

Submitted by Gnute

Denise Levertov

September 1961

This is the year the old ones,
the old great ones
leave us alone on the road.

The road leads to the sea.
We have the words in our pockets,
obscure directions. The old ones

have taken away the light of their presence,
we see it moving away over a hill
off to one side.

They are not dying,
they are withdrawn
into a painful privacy

learning to live without words.
E. P. "It looks like dying"-Williams: "I can't
describe to you what has been

happening to me"-
H. D. "unable to speak."
The darkness

twists itself in the wind, the stars
are small, the horizon
ringed with confused urban light-haze.

They have told us
the road leads to the sea,
and given

the language into our hands.
We hear
our footsteps each time a truck

has dazzled past us and gone
leaving us new silence.
I can't reach

the sea on this endless
road to the sea unless
one turns aside at the end, it seems,

follows
the owl that silently glides above it
aslant, back and forth,

and away into deep woods.

But for us the road
unfurls itself, we count the

words in our pockets, we wonder

how it will be without them, we don't
stop walking, we know
there is far to go, sometimes

we think the night wind carries
a smell of the sea...

Denise Levertov

Settling

I was welcomed here—clear gold
of late summer, of opening autumn,
the dawn eagle sunning himself on the highest tree,
the mountain revealing herself unclouded, her snow
tinted apricot as she looked west,
Tolerant, in her steadfastness, of the restless sun
forever rising and setting.
Now I am given
a taste of the grey foretold by all and sundry,
a grey both heavy and chill. I've boasted I would not care,
I'm London-born. And I won't. I'll dig in,
into my days, having come here to live, not to visit.
Grey is the price
of neighboring with eagles, of knowing
a mountain's vast presence, seen or unseen.

Denise Levertov

Sojourns in the Parallel World

We live our lives of human passions,
cruelties, dreams, concepts,
crimes and the exercise of virtue
in and beside a world devoid
of our preoccupations, free
from apprehension--though affected,
certainly, by our actions. A world
parallel to our own though overlapping.
We call it "Nature"; only reluctantly
admitting ourselves to be "Nature" too.
Whenever we lose track of our own obsessions,
our self-concerns, because we drift for a minute,
an hour even, of pure (almost pure)
response to that insouciant life:
cloud, bird, fox, the flow of light, the dancing
pilgrimage of water, vast stillness
of spellbound ephemerae on a lit windowpane,
animal voices, mineral hum, wind
conversing with rain, ocean with rock, stuttering
of fire to coal--then something tethered
in us, hobbled like a donkey on its patch
of gnawed grass and thistles, breaks free.
No one discovers
just where we've been, when we're caught up again
into our own sphere (where we must
return, indeed, to evolve our destinies)
--but we have changed, a little.

Denise Levertov

St. Peter and the Angel

Delivered out of raw continual pain,
smell of darkness, groans of those others
to whom he was chained--

unchained, and led
past the sleepers,
door after door silently opening--
out!

And along a long street's
majestic emptiness under the moon:

one hand on the angel's shoulder, one
feeling the air before him,
eyes open but fixed...

And not till he saw the angel had left him,
alone and free to resume
the ecstatic, dangerous, wearisome roads of
what he had still to do,
not till then did he recognize
this was no dream. More frightening
than arrest, than being chained to his warders:
he could hear his own footsteps suddenly.
Had the angel's feet
made any sound? He could not recall.
No one had missed him, no one was in pursuit.
He himself must be
the key, now, to the next door,
the next terrors of freedom and joy.

Denise Levertov

Stepping Westward

What is green in me
darkens, muscadine.
If woman is inconstant,
good, I am faithful to
ebb and flow, I fall
in season and now
is a time of ripening.
If her part
is to be true,
a north star,
good, I hold steady
in the black sky
and vanish by day,
yet burn there
in blue or above
quilts of cloud.
There is no savor
more sweet, more salt
than to be glad to be
what, woman,
and who, myself,
I am, a shadow
that grows longer as the sun
moves, drawn out
on a thread of wonder.
If I bear burdens
they begin to be remembered
as gifts, goods, a basket
of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me
in fragrance. I can
eat as I go.

Denise Levertov

Talking to Grief

Ah, Grief, I should not treat you
like a homeless dog
who comes to the back door
for a crust, for a meatless bone.
I should trust you.

I should coax you
into the house and give you
your own corner,
a worn mat to lie on,
your own water dish.

You think I don't know you've been living
under my porch.
You long for your real place to be readied
before winter comes. You need
your name,
your collar and tag. You need
the right to warn off intruders,
to consider
my house your own
and me your person
and yourself
my own dog.

Denise Levertov

The Ache of Marriage

The ache of marriage:

thigh and tongue, beloved,
are heavy with it,
it throbs in the teeth

We look for communion
and are turned away, beloved,
each and each

It is leviathan and we
in its belly
looking for joy, some joy
not to be known outside it

two by two in the ark of
the ache of it.

Denise Levertov

The Avowal

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

Denise Levertov

The Breathing

An absolute
patience.
Trees stand
up to their knees in
fog. The fog
slowly flows
uphill.
White
cobwebs, the grass
leaning where deer
have looked for apples.
The woods
from brook to where
the top of the hill looks
over the fog, send up
not one bird.
So absolute, it is
no other than
happiness itself, a breathing
too quiet to hear.

Denise Levertov

The Dog of Art

That dog with daisies for eyes
who flashes forth
flame of his very self at every bark
is the Dog of Art.
Worked in wool, his blind eyes
look inward to caverns and jewels
which they see perfectly,
and his voice
measures forth the treasure
in music sharp and loud,
sharp and bright,
bright flaming barks,
and growling smoky soft, the Dog
of Art turns to the world
the quietness of his eyes.

Denise Levertov

The Elves

Elves are no smaller
than men, and walk
as men do, in this world,
but with more grace than most,
and are not immortal.

Their beauty sets them aside
from other men and from women
unless a woman has that cold fire in her
called poet: with that

she may see them and by its light
they know her and are not afraid
and silver tongues of love
flicker between them.

Denise Levertov

The Garden Wall

Bricks of the wall,
so much older than the house -
taken I think from a farm pulled down
when the street was built -
narrow bricks of another century.

Modestly, though laid with panels and parapets,
a wall behind the flowers -
roses and hollyhocks, the silver
pods of lupine, sweet-tasting
phlox, gray
lavender -
unnoticed -
but I discovered
the colors in the wall that woke
when spray from the hose
played on its pocks and warts -

a hazy red, a
grain gold, a mauve
of small shadows, sprung
from the quiet dry brown -
archetype
of the world always a step
beyond the world, that can't
be looked for, only
as the eye wanders,
found.

Denise Levertov

The Great Black Heron

Since I stroll in the woods more often
than on this frequented path, it's usually
trees I observe; but among fellow humans
what I like best is to see an old woman
fishing alone at the end of a jetty,
hours on end, plainly content.
The Russians mushroom-hunting after a rain
trail after themselves a world of red sarafans,
nightingales, samovars, stoves to sleep on
(though without doubt those are not
what they can remember). Vietnamese families
fishing or simply sitting as close as they can
to the water, make me recall that lake in Hanoi
in the amber light, our first, jet-lagged evening,
peace in the war we had come to witness.
This woman engaged in her pleasure evokes
an entire culture, tenacious field-flower
growing itself among the rows of cotton
in red-earth country, under the feet
of mules and masters. I see her
a barefoot child by a muddy river
learning her skill with the pole. What battles
has she survived, what labors?
She's gathered up all the time in the world
--nothing else--and waits for scanty trophies,
complete in herself as a heron.

Denise Levertov

The Métier of Blossoming

Fully occupied with growing--that's
the amaryllis. Growing especially
at night: it would take
only a bit more patience than I've got
to sit keeping watch with it till daylight;
the naked eye could register every hour's
increase in height. Like a child against a barn door,
proudly topping each year's achievement,
steadily up
goes each green stem, smooth, matte,
traces of reddish purple at the base, and almost
imperceptible vertical ridges
running the length of them:
Two robust stems from each bulb,
sometimes with sturdy leaves for company,
elegant sweeps of blade with rounded points.
Aloft, the gravid buds, shiny with fullness.

One morning--and so soon!--the first flower
has opened when you wake. Or you catch it poised
in a single, brief
moment of hesitation.
Next day, another,
shy at first like a foal,
even a third, a fourth,
carried triumphantly at the summit
of those strong columns, and each
a Juno, calm in brilliance,
a maiden giantess in modest splendor.
If humans could be
that intensely whole, undistracted, unhurried,
swift from sheer
unswerving impetus! If we could blossom
out of ourselves, giving
nothing imperfect, withholding nothing!

Denise Levertov

The Mutes

Those groans men use
passing a woman on the street
or on the steps of the subway

to tell her she is a female
and their flesh knows it,

are they a sort of tune,
an ugly enough song, sung
by a bird with a slit tongue

but meant for music?

Or are they the muffled roaring
of deafmutes trapped in a building that is
slowly filling with smoke?

Perhaps both.

Such men most often
look as if groan were all they could do,
yet a woman, in spite of herself,

knows it's a tribute:
if she were lacking all grace
they'd pass her in silence:

so it's not only to say she's
a warm hole. It's a word

in grief-language, nothing to do with
primitive, not an ur-language;
language stricken, sickened, cast down

in decrepitude. She wants to
throw the tribute away, dis-
gusted, and can't,

it goes on buzzing in her ear,
it changes the pace of her walk,
the torn posters in echoing corridors

spell it out, it
quakes and gnashes as the train comes in.
Her pulse sullenly

had picked up speed,
but the cars slow down and
jar to a stop while her understanding

keeps on translating:
'Life after life after life goes by

without poetry,
without seamliness,
without love.'

Denise Levertov

The Quest

High, hollowed in green
above the rocks of reason
lies the crater lake
whose ice the dreamer breaks
to find a summer season.

'He will plunge like a plummet down
far into hungry tides'
they cry, but as the sea
climbs to a lunar magnet
so the dreamer pursues
the lake where love resides.

Denise Levertov

The Rainwalkers

An old man whose black face
shines golden-brown as wet pebbles
under the streetlamp, is walking two mongrel dogs of dis-
proportionate size, in the rain,
in the relaxed early-evening avenue.

The small sleek one wants to stop,
docile to the imploring soul of the trashbasket,
but the young tall curly one
wants to walk on; the glistening sidewalkentices him to arcane happenings.

Increasing rain. The old bareheaded man
smiles and grumbles to himself.
The lights change: the avenue's
endless nave echoes notes of
liturgical red. He drifts

between his dogs' desires.
The three of them are enveloped -
turning now to go crosstown - in their
sense of each other, of pleasure,
of weather, of corners,
of leisurely tensions between them
and private silence.

Denise Levertov

The Sea's Wash In The Hollow Of The Heart...

Turn from that road's beguiling ease; return
to your hunger's turret. Enter, climb the stair
chill with disuse, where the croaking toad of time
regards from shimmering eyes your slow ascent
and the drip, drip, of darkness glimmers on the stone
to show you how your longing waits alone.
What alchemy shines from under that shut door,
spinning out gold from the hollow of the heart?

Enter the turret of your love, and lie
close in the arms of the sea; let in new suns
that beat and echo in the mind like sounds
risen from sunken cities lost to fear;
let in the light that answers your desire
awakening at midnight with the fire,
until its magic burns the wavering sea
and flames carress the windows of your tower.

Denise Levertov

The Secret

Two girls discover
the secret of life
in a sudden line of
poetry.

I who don't know the
secret wrote
the line. They
told me

(through a third person)
they had found it
but not what it was
not even

what line it was. No doubt
by now, more than a week
later, they have forgotten
the secret,

the line, the name of
the poem. I love them
for finding what
I can't find,

and for loving me
for the line I wrote,
and for forgetting it
so that

a thousand times, till death
finds them, they may
discover it again, in other
lines

in other
happenings. And for
wanting to know it,
for

assuming there is
such a secret, yes,
for that
most of all.

Denise Levertov

The Thread

Something is very gently,
invisibly, silently,
pulling at me-a thread
or net of threads
finer than cobweb and as
elastic. I haven't tried
the strength of it. No barbed hook
pierced and tore me. Was it
not long ago this thread
began to draw me? Or
way back? Was I
born with its knot about my
neck, a bridle? Not fear
but a stirring
of wonder makes me
catch my breath when I feel
the tug of it when I thought
it had loosened itself and gone.

Denise Levertov

The Well

At sixteen I believed the moonlight
could change me if it would.

 I moved my head
on the pillow, even moved my bed
as the moon slowly
crossed the open lattice.

I wanted beauty, a dangerous
gleam of steel, my body thinner,
my pale face paler.

 I moonbathed
diligently, as others sunbathe.
But the moon's unsmiling stare
kept me awake. Mornings,
I was flushed and cross.

It was on dark nights of deep sleep
that I dreamed the most, sunk in the well,
and woke rested, and if not beautiful,
filled with some other power.

Denise Levertov

To the Reader

As you read, a white bear leisurely
pees, dyeing the snow
saffron,

and as you read, many gods
lie among lianas: eyes of obsidian
are watching the generations of leaves,

and as you read
the sea is turning its dark pages,
turning
its dark pages.

Denise Levertov

To the Snake

Green Snake, when I hung you round my neck
and stroked your cold, pulsing throat
as you hissed to me, glinting
arrowy gold scales, and I felt
the weight of you on my shoulders,
and the whispering silver of your dryness
sounded close at my ears --

Green Snake--I swore to my companions that certainly
you were harmless! But truly
I had no certainty, and no hope, only desiring
to hold you, for that joy,
which left
a long wake of pleasure, as the leaves moved
and you faded into the pattern
of grass and shadows, and I returned
smiling and haunted, to a dark morning.

Denise Levertov

Triple Feature

Innocent decision: to enjoy.
And the pathos
of hopefulness, of his solicitude:

--he in mended serape,
she having plaited carefully
magenta ribbons into her hair,
the baby a round half-hidden shape
slung in her rebozo, and the young son steadfastly
gripping a fold of her skirt,
pale and severe under a handed-down sombrero --
all regarding
the stills with full attention, preparing
to pay ad go in--
to worlds of shadow-violence, half-
familiar, warm with popcorn, icy
with strange motives, barbarous splendors!

Denise Levertov

Variation on a Theme by Rilke

A certain day became a presence to me;
there it was, confronting me--a sky, air, light:
a being. And before it started to descend
from the height of noon, it leaned over
and struck my shoulder as if with
the flat of a sword, granting me
honor and a task. The day's blow
rang out, metallic--or it was I, a bell awakened,
and what I heard was my whole self
saying and singing what it knew: I can.

Denise Levertov

Wanting the Moon

Not the moon. A flower
on the other side of the water.

The water sweeps past in flood,
dragging a whole tree by the hair,

a barn, a bridge. The flower
sings on the far bank.

Not a flower, a bird calling
hidden among the darkest trees, music

over the water, making a silence
out of the brown folds of the river's cloak.

The moon. No, a young man walking
under the trees. There are lanterns

among the leaves.
Tender, wise, merry,

his face is awake with its own light,
I see it across the water as if close up.

A jester. The music rings from his bells,
gravely, a tune of sorrow,

I dance to it on my riverbank.

Denise Levertov

Web

Intricate and untraceable
weaving and interweaving,
dark strand with light:

designed, beyond
all spiderly contrivance,
to link, not to entrap:

elation, grief, joy, contrition, entwined;

shaking, changing,

forever

forming,

transforming:

all praise,

all praise to the

great web.

Denise Levertov

Wedding-Ring

My wedding-ring lies in a basket
as if at the bottom of a well.
Nothing will come to fish it back up
and onto my finger again.

It lies

among keys to abandoned houses,
nails waiting to be needed and hammered
into some wall,
telephone numbers with no names attached,
idle paperclips.

It can't be given away
for fear of bringing ill-luck.

It can't be sold
for the marriage was good in its own
time, though that time is gone.

Could some artificer
beat into it bright stones, transform it
into a dazzling circlet no one could take
for solemn betrothal or to make promises
living will not let them keep? Change it
into a simple gift I could give in friendship?

Denise Levertov

What Were They Like?

Did the people of Viet Nam
use lanterns of stone?
Did they hold ceremonies
to reverence the opening of buds?
Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
Did they use bone and ivory,
jade and silver, for ornament?
Had they an epic poem?
Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
It is not remembered whether in gardens
stone gardens illumined pleasant ways.
Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,
but after their children were killed
there were no more buds.
Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.
A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.
All the bones were charred.
it is not remembered. Remember,
most were peasants; their life
was in rice and bamboo.
When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.
When bombs smashed those mirrors
there was time only to scream.
There is an echo yet
of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled
the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now.

Denise Levertov

Zeroing In

"I am a landscape," he said.
"a landscape and a person walking in that landscape.
There are daunting cliffs there,
And plains glad in their way
of brown monotony. But especially
there are sinkholes, places
of sudden terror, of small circumference
and malevolent depths."
"I know," she said. "When I set forth
to walk in myself, as it might be
on a fine afternoon, forgetting,
sooner or later I come to where sedge
and clumps of white flowers, rue perhaps,
mark the bogland, and I know
there are quagmires there that can pull you
down, and sink you in bubbling mud."
"We had an old dog," he told her, "when I was a boy,
a good dog, friendly. But there was an injured spot
on his head, if you happened
just to touch it he'd jump up yelping
and bite you. He bit a young child,
they had to take him down to the vet's and destroy him."
"No one knows where it is," she said,
"and even by accident no one touches it.
It's inside my landscape, and only I, making my way
preoccupied through my life, crossing my hills,
sleeping on green moss of my own woods,
I myself without warning touch it,
and leap up at myself -"
"- or flinch back
just in time."
"Yes, we learn that.
It's not a terror, it's pain we're talking about:
those places in us, like your dog's bruised head,
that are bruised forever, that time
never assuages, never."

Denise Levertov