

Classic Poetry Series

Larry Levis

- poems -

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Anastasia & Sandman

The brow of a horse in that moment when
The horse is drinking water so deeply from a trough
It seems to inhale the water, is holy.

I refuse to explain.

When the horse had gone the water in the trough,
All through the empty summer,

Went on reflecting clouds & stars.

The horse cropping grass in a field,
And the fly buzzing around its eyes, are more real
Than the mist in one corner of the field.

Or the angel hidden in the mist, for that matter.

Members of the Committee on the Ineffable,
Let me illustrate this with a story, & ask you all
To rest your heads on the table, cushioned,
If you wish, in your hands, &, if you want,
Comforted by a small carton of milk
To drink from, as you once did, long ago,
When there was only a curriculum of beach grass,
When the University of Flies was only a distant humming.

In Romania, after the war, Stalin confiscated
The horses that had been used to work the fields.
"You won't need horses now," Stalin said, cupping
His hand to his ear, "Can't you hear the tractors
Coming in the distance? I hear them already."

The crowd in the Callea Victoria listened closely
But no one heard anything. In the distance
There was only the faint glow of a few clouds.
And the horses were led into boxcars & emerged
As the dimly remembered meals of flesh
That fed the starving Poles
During that famine, & part of the next one--
In which even words grew thin & transparent,
Like the pale wings of ants that flew
Out of the oldest houses, & slowly
What had been real in words began to be replaced
By what was not real, by the not exactly real.
"Well, not exactly, but. . ." became the preferred
Administrative phrasing so that the man
Standing with his hat in his hands would not guess
That the phrasing of a few words had already swept
The earth from beneath his feet. "That horse I had,
He was more real than any angel,
The housefly, when I had a house, was real too,"
Is what the man thought.

Yet it wasn't more than a few months
Before the man began to wonder, talking
To himself out loud before the others,
"Was the horse real? Was the house real?"
An angel flew in and out of the high window
In the factory where the man worked, his hands
Numb with cold. He hated the window & the light
Entering the window & he hated the angel.
Because the angel could not be carved into meat
Or dumped into the ossuary & become part
Of the landfill at the edge of town,
It therefore could not acquire a soul,
And resembled in significance nothing more
Than a light summer dress when the body has gone.

The man survived because, after a while,
He shut up about it.

Stalin had a deep understanding of the kulaks,
Their sense of marginalization & belief in the land;

That is why he killed them all.

Members of the Committee on Solitude, consider
Our own impoverishment & the progress of that famine,
In which, now, it is becoming impossible
To feel anything when we contemplate the burial,
Alive, in a two-hour period, of hundreds of people.
Who were not clichés, who did not know they would be
The illegible blank of the past that lives in each
Of us, even in some guy watering his lawn

On a summer night. Consider

The death of Stalin & the slow, uninterrupted
Evolution of the horse, a species no one,
Not even Stalin, could extinguish, almost as if
What could not be altered was something
Noble in the look of its face, something

Incapable of treachery.

Then imagine, in your planning proposals,
The exact moment in the future when an angel
Might alight & crawl like a fly into the ear of a horse,
And then, eventually, into the brain of a horse,
And imagine further that the angel in the brain
Of this horse is, for the horse cropping grass
In the field, largely irrelevant, a mist in the corner
Of the field, something that disappears,
The horse thinks, when weight is passed through it,
Something that will not even carry the weight

Of its own father
On its back, the horse decides, & so demonstrates
This by swishing at a fly with its tail, by continuing
To graze as the dusk comes on & almost until it is night.

Old contrivers, daydreamers, walking chemistry sets,
Exhausted chimneysweeps of the spaces
Between words, where the Holy Ghost tastes just
Like the dust it is made of,
Let's tear up our lecture notes & throw them out
The window.
Let's do it right now before wisdom descends upon us
Like a spiderweb over a burned-out theater marquee,
Because what's the use?
I keep going to meetings where no one's there,
And contributing to the discussion;
And besides, behind the angel hissing in its mist
Is a gate that leads only into another field,
Another outcropping of stones & withered grass, where
A horse named Sandman & a horse named Anastasia
Used to stand at the fence & watch the traffic pass.
Where there were outdoor concerts once, in summer,
Under the missing & innumerable stars.

Larry Levis

As I move on with you

Different days,
Different hours,
Many faces,
bouqutes of flowers,

Fantisies,
And mists,
Of dreams,

Lost away,
Onto the ways,
Of yesterday,

See the future,
Past untold,
In his arms,
Is her hold,

Watch the moments,
See me through,
As my love,
Moves on with you..

Larry Levis

For Zbigniew Herbert, Summer, 1971, Los Angeles

No matter how hard I listen, the wind speaks
One syllable, which has no comfort in it--
Only a rasping of air through the dead elm.

*

Once a poet told me of his friend who was torn apart
By two pigs in a field in Poland. The man
Was a prisoner of the Nazis, and they watched,
He said, with interest and a drunken approval . . .
If terror is a state of complete understanding,

Then there was probably a point at which the man
Went mad, and felt nothing, though certainly
He understood everything that was there: after all,
He could see blood splash beneath him on the stubble,
He could hear singing float toward him from the barracks.

*

And though I don't know much about madness,
I know it lives in the thin body like a harp
Behind the rib cage. It makes it painful to move.
And when you kneel in madness your knees are glass,
And so you must stand up again with great care.

*

Maybe this wind was what he heard in 1941.
Maybe I have raised a dead man into this air,
And now I will have to bury him inside my body,
And breathe him in, and do nothing but listen--
Until I hear the black blood rushing over
The stone of my skull, and believe it is music.

But some things are not possible on the earth.
And that is why people make poems about the dead.
And the dead watch over them, until they are finished:
Until their hands feel like glass on the page,
And snow collects in the blind eyes of statues.

Larry Levis

In a Country

My love and I are inventing a country, which we can already see taking shape, as if wheels were passing through yellow mud. But there is a problem: if we put a river in the country, it will thaw and begin flooding. If we put the river on the border, there will be trouble. If we forget about the river, there will be no way out. There is already a sky over that country, waiting for clouds or smoke. Birds have flown into it, too. Each evening more trees fill with their eyes, and what they see we can never erase.

One day it was snowing heavily, and again we were lying in bed, watching our country: we could make out the wide river for the first time, blue and moving. We seemed to be getting closer; we saw our wheel tracks leading into it and curving out of sight behind us. It looked like the land we had left, some smoke in the distance, but I wasn't sure. There were birds calling. The creaking of our wheels. And as we entered that country, it felt as if someone was touching our bare shoulders, lightly, for the last time.

Larry Levis

Readings in French

1.

Looking into the eyes of Gerard de Nerval
You notice the giant sea crabs rising.
Which is what happens
When you look into the eyes of Gerard de Nerval,
Always the same thing: the giant sea crabs,
The claws in their vague red holsters
Moving around, a little doubtfully.

2.

But looking into the eyes of Pierre Reverdy
Is like throwing the editorial page
Out into the rain
And then riding alone on the subway.

Also, it is like avoiding your father.
You are hiding and he looks for you
Under each vine; he is coming nearer
And nearer. What can you do
But ignore him?

3.

In either case, soon you are riding alone on a subway.
Which is not important.
What is important is to avoid
Looking too closely into the eyes of your father,
That formal eclipse.

Larry Levis

The Clearing of the Land: An Epitaph

The trees went up the hill
And over it.
Then the dry grasses of the pasture were
Only a kind of blonde light
Settling everywhere
And framing the randomly strewn
Outcropping of gray stone

That anchored them to soil.

Who were they?
One in the picture, & one not, & both
Scotch-Irish drifters,
With nothing in common but a perfect contempt
for a past;
Ancestors of stumps & fallen trees &
One sits on a sorrel mare,
Idly tossing small stones at the rump
of a steer
That goes on grazing at tough rosettes
of pasture grass & switching its tail
In what is not yet irritation.

What I like, what I

Have always liked, is the way he tosses each small
Stone without thinking, without
A thought for anything, not aiming at all,
The easy, arcing forearm nonchalance
Like someone fly casting,
For this is what
He wanted:
To be among the stones, the grasses,
Savoring a stony self
That reminded him of no one else,
And on land where that poacher, Law,
Had not yet stolen through his fences,
The horse beneath him tensing
Its withers lightly to keep

The summer flies away,

And the woman in the flower-print dress hemmed
With stains
A half mile off
Is the authoress of no more than smoke rising,
Her sole diary & only publication,
From a distant chimney.
They have perhaps a year or two
Left of this
Before history begins to edit them into
Something without smoke or flies, something

Beyond all recognition.

Larry Levis

The Poem You Asked For

My poem would eat nothing.
I tried giving it water
but it said no,

worrying me.
Day after day,
I held it up to the light,

turning it over,
but it only pressed its lips
more tightly together.

It grew sullen, like a toad
through with being teased.
I offered it money,

my clothes, my car with a full tank.
But the poem stared at the floor.
Finally I cupped it in

my hands, and carried it gently
out into the soft air, into the
evening traffic, wondering how

to end things between us.
For now it had begun breathing,
putting on more and

more hard rings of flesh.
And the poem demanded the food,
it drank up all the water,

beat me and took my money,
tore the faded clothes
off my back,

said Shit,
and walked slowly away,
slicking its hair down.

Said it was going
over to your place.

Anonymous submission.

Larry Levis

The Widening Spell Of Leaves

--The Carpathian Frontier, October, 1968

--for my brother

Once, in a foreign country, I was suddenly ill.
I was driving south toward a large city famous
For so little it had a replica, in concrete,
In two-thirds scale, of the Arc de Triomphe stuck
In the midst of traffic, & obstructing it.
But the city was hours away, beyond the hills
Shaped like the bodies of sleeping women.
Often I had to slow down for herds of goats
Or cattle milling on those narrow roads, & for
The narrower, lost, stone streets of villages
I passed through. The pains in my stomach had grown
Gradually sharper & more frequent as the day
Wore on, & now a fever had set up house.
In the villages there wasn't much point in asking
Anyone for help. In those places, where tanks
Were bivouacked in shade on their way back
From some routine exercise along
The Danube, even food was scarce that year.
And the languages shifted for no clear reason
From two hard quarries of Slavic into German,
Then to a shred of Latin spliced with oohs
And hisses. Even when I tried the simplest phrases,
The peasants passing over those uneven stones
Paused just long enough to look up once,
Uncomprehendingly. Then they turned
Quickly away, vanishing quietly into that
Moment, like bark chips whirled downriver.
It was autumn. Beyond each village the wind
Threw gusts of yellowing leaves across the road.
The goats I passed were thin, gray; their hind legs,
Caked with dried shit, seesawed along--
Not even mild contempt in their expressionless,
Pale eyes, & their brays like the scraping of metal.
Except for one village that had a kind
Of museum where I stopped to rest, & saw
A dead Scythian soldier under glass,
Turning to dust while holding a small sword
At attention forever, there wasn't much to look at.
Wind, leaves, goats, the higher passes
Locked in stone, the peasants with their fate
Embroidering a stillness into them,
And a spell over all things in that landscape,
Like . . .

That was the trouble; it couldn't be
Compared to anything else, not even the sleep
Of some asylum at a wood's edge with the sound
Of a pond's spillway beside it. But as each cramp
Grew worse & lasted longer than the one before,
It was hard to keep myself aloof from the threadbare

World walking on that road. After all,
Even as they moved, the peasants, the herds of goats
And cattle, the spiralling leaves, at least were part
Of that spell, that stillness.

After a while,
The villages grew even poorer, then thinned out,
Then vanished entirely. An hour later,
There were no longer even the goats, only wind,
Then more & more leaves blown over the road, sometimes
Covering it completely for a second.
And yet, except for a random oak or some brush
Writhing out of the ravine I drove beside,
The trees had thinned into rock, into large,
Tough blonde rosettes of fading pasture grass.
Then that gave out in a bare plateau. . . . And then,
Easing the Dacia down a winding grade
In second gear, rounding a long, funneled curve--
In a complete stillness of yellow leaves filling
A wide field--like something thoughtlessly,
Mistakenly erased, the road simply ended.
I stopped the car. There was no wind now.
I expected that, & though I was sick & lost,
I wasn't afraid. I should have been afraid.
To this day I don't know why I wasn't.
I could hear time cease, the field quietly widen.
I could feel the spreading stillness of the place
Moving like something I'd witnessed as a child,
Like the ancient, armored leisure of some reptile
Gliding, gray-yellow, into the slightly tepid,
Unidentical gray-brown stillness of the water--
Something blank & unresponsive in its tough,
Pimpled skin--seen only a moment, then unseen
As it submerged to rest on mud, or glided just
Beneath the lustreless, calm yellow leaves
That clustered along a log, or floated there
In broken ringlets, held by a gray froth
On the opaque, unbroken surface of the pond,
Which reflected nothing, no one.

And then I remembered.
When I was a child, our neighbors would disappear.
And there wasn't a pond of crocodiles at all.
And they hadn't moved. They couldn't move. They
Lived in the small, fenced-off backwater
Of a canal. I'd never seen them alive. They
Were in still photographs taken on the Ivory Coast.
I saw them only once in a studio when
I was a child in a city I once loved.
I was afraid until our neighbor, a photographer,
Explained it all to me, explained how far
Away they were, how harmless; how they were praised
In rituals as "powers." But they had no "powers,"
He said. The next week he vanished. I thought

Someone had cast a spell & that the crocodiles
Swam out of the pictures on the wall & grew
Silently & multiplied & then turned into
Shadows resting on the banks of lakes & streams
Or took the shapes of fallen logs in campgrounds
In the mountains. They ate our neighbor, Mr. Hirata.
They ate his whole family. That is what I believed,
Then. . .that someone had cast a spell. I did not
Know childhood was a spell, or that then there
Had been another spell, too quiet to hear,
Entering my city, entering the dust we ate. . . .
No one knew it then. No one could see it,
Though it spread through lawnless miles of housing tracts,
And the new, bare, treeless streets; it slipped
Into the vacant rows of warehouses & picked
The padlocked doors of working-class bars
And union halls & shuttered, empty diners.
And how it clung! (forever, if one had noticed)
To the brothel with the pastel tassels on the shade
Of an unlit table lamp. Farther in, it feasted
On the decaying light of failing shopping centers;
It spilled into the older, tree-lined neighborhoods,
Into warm houses, sealing itself into books
Of bedtime stories read each night by fathers--
The books lying open to the flat, neglected
Light of dawn; & it settled like dust on windowsills
Downtown, filling the smug cafés, schools,
Banks, offices, taverns, gymnasiums, hotels,
Newsstands, courtrooms, opium parlors, Basque
Restaurants, Armenian steam baths,
French bakeries, & two of the florists' shops--
Their plate glass windows smashed forever.
Finally it tried to infiltrate the exact
Center of my city, a small square bordered
With palm trees, olives, cypresses, a square
Where no one gathered, not even thieves or lovers.
It was a place which no longer had any purpose,
But held itself aloof, I thought, the way
A deaf aunt might, from opinions, styles, gossip.
I liked it there. It was completely lifeless,
Sad & clear in what seemed always a perfect,
Windless noon. I saw it first as a child,
Looking down at it from that as yet
Unvandalized, makeshift studio.
I remember leaning my right cheek against
A striped beach ball so that Mr. Hirata--
Who was Japanese, who would be sent the next week
To a place called Manzanar, a detention camp
Hidden in stunted pines almost above
The Sierra timberline--could take my picture.
I remember the way he lovingly relished
Each camera angle, the unwobbling tripod,

The way he checked each aperture against
The light meter, in love with all things
That were not accidental, & I remember
The care he took when focusing; how
He tried two different lens filters before
He found the one appropriate for that
Sensual, late, slow blush of afternoon
Falling through the one broad bay window.
I remember holding still & looking down
Into the square because he asked me to;
Because my mother & father had asked me please
To obey & be patient & allow the man--
Whose business was failing anyway by then--
To work as long as he wished to without any
Irritations or annoyances before
He would have to spend these years, my father said,
Far away, in snow, & without his cameras.
But Mr. Hirata did not work. He played.
His toys gleamed there. That much was clear to me
That was the day I decided I would never work.
It felt like a conversion. Play was sacred.
My father waited behind us on a sofa made
From car seats. One spring kept nosing through.
I remember the camera opening into the light
And I remember the dark after, the studio closed,
The cameras stolen, slivers of glass from the smashed
Bay window littering the unsanded floors,
And the square below it bathed in sunlight All this
Before Mr. Hirata died, months later,
From complications following pneumonia.
His death, a letter from a camp official said,
Was purely accidental. I didn't believe it.
Diseases were wise. Diseases, like the polio
My sister had endured, floating paralyzed
And strapped into her wheelchair all through
That war, seemed too precise. Like photographs . . .
Except disease left nothing. Disease was like
And equation that drank up light & never ended,
Not even in summer. Before my fever broke,
And the pains lessened, I could actually see
Myself, in the exact center of that square.
How still it had become in my absence, & how
Immaculate, windless, sunlit. I could see
The outline of every leaf on the nearest tree,
See it more clearly than ever, more clearly than
I had seen anything before in my whole life:
Against the modest, dark gray, solemn trunk,
The leaves were becoming only what they had to be--
Calm, yellow, things in themselves & nothing
More--& frankly they were nothing in themselves,
Nothing except their little reassurance
Of persisting for a few more days, or returning

The year after, & the year after that, & every
Year following--estranged from us by now--& clear,
So clear not one in a thousand trembled; hushed
And always coming back--steadfast, orderly,
Taciturn, oblivious--until the end of Time.

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And the pains lessened, I could actually see
Myself, in the exact center of that square.
How still it had become in my absence, & how
Immaculate, windless, sunlit. I could see
The outline of every leaf on the nearest tree,
See it more clearly than ever, more clearly than
I had seen anything before in my whole life:
Against the modest, dark gray, solemn trunk,
The leaves were becoming only what they had to be--
Calm, yellow, things in themselves & nothing
More--& frankly they were nothing in themselves,
Nothing except their little reassurance
Of persisting for a few more days, or returning

The year after, & the year after that, & every
Year following--estranged from us by now--& clear,
So clear not one in a thousand trembled; hushed
And always coming back--steadfast, orderly,
Taciturn, oblivious--until the end of Time.

Larry Levis

Those Graves In Rome

There are places where the eye can starve,
But not here. Here, for example, is
The Piazza Navona, & here is his narrow room
Overlooking the Steps & the crowds of sunbathing
Tourists. And here is the Protestant Cemetery
Where Keats & Joseph Severn join hands
Forever under a little shawl of grass
And where Keats's name isn't even on
His gravestone, because it is on Severn's,
And Joseph Severn's infant son is buried
Two modest, grassy steps behind them both.
But you'd have to know the story--how bedridden
Keats wanted the inscription to be
Simple, & unbearable: "Here lies one
Whose name is writ in water." On a warm day,
I stood here with my two oldest friends.
I thought, then, that the three of us would be
Indissoluble at the end, & also that
We would all die, of course. And not die.
And maybe we should have joined hands at that
Moment. We didn't. All we did was follow
A lame man in a rumpled suit who climbed
A slight incline of graves blurring into
The passing marble of other graves to visit
The vacant home of whatever is not left
Of Shelley & Trelawney. That walk uphill must
Be hard if you can't walk. At the top, the man
Wheezed for breath; sweat beaded his face,
And his wife wore a look of concern so
Habitual it seemed more like the way
Our bodies, someday, will have to wear stone.
Later that night, the three of us strolled,
Our arms around each other, through the Via
Del Corso & toward the Piazza di Spagna
As each street grew quieter until
Finally we heard nothing at the end
Except the occasional scrape of our own steps,
And so said good-bye. Among such friends,
Who never allowed anything, still alive,
To die, I'd almost forgotten that what
Most people leave behind them disappears.
Three days later, staying alone in a cheap
Hotel in Naples, I noticed a child's smeared
Fingerprint on a bannister. It
Had been indifferently preserved beneath
A patina of varnish applied, I guessed, after
The last war. It seemed I could almost hear
His shout, years later, on that street. But this
Is speculation, & no doubt the simplest fact
Could shame me. Perhaps the child was from
Calabria, & went back to it with
A mother who failed to find work, & perhaps

The child died there, twenty years ago,
Of malaria. It was so common then--
The children crying to the doctors for quinine.
And to the tourists, who looked like doctors, for quinine.
It was so common you did not expect an aria,
And not much on a gravestone, either--although
His name is on it, & weathered stone still wears
His name--not the way a girl might wear
The too large, faded blue workshirt of
A lover as she walks thoughtfully through
The Via Fratelli to buy bread, shrimp,
And wine for the evening meal with candles &
The laughter of her friends, & later the sweet
Enkindling of desire; but something else, something
Cut simply in stone by hand & meant to last
Because of the way a name, any name,
Is empty. And not empty. And almost enough.

Anonymous submission.

Larry Levis