

**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,  
&quot;Was the horse real? Was the house real?&quot;  
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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Larry Levis

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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  
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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.

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