

Classic Poetry Series

**Denise Levertov**  
**- poems -**

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# Denise Levertov(24 October 1923 – 20 December 1997)

Denise Levertov was a British-born American poet.

## <b>Biography</b>

Born in Ilford, Essex, England, her mother, Beatrice Spooner-Jones Levertoff, was Welsh. Her father, Paul Levertoff, immigrated to England from Germany, was a Russian Hassidic Safardic Jew who became an Anglican priest. While being educated at home, Levertov showed an enthusiasm for writing from an early age. When she was five years old, she said later in life, she declared she would be a writer. At the age of 12, she sent some of her poems to T. S. Eliot, who replied with a two-page letter of encouragement. In 1940, when she was 17, Levertov published her first poem.

During the Blitz, Levertov served in London as a civilian nurse. Her first book, *The Double Image*, was published six years later. In 1947 she married American writer Mitchell Goodman and moved with him to the United States in the following year. Although Levertov and Goodman would eventually divorce, they had a son, Nikolai, and lived mainly in New York City, summering in Maine. In 1955, she became a naturalized American citizen.

Levertov's first two books had concentrated on traditional forms and language. But as she accepted the U.S. as her new home, she became more and more fascinated with the American idiom. She began to come under the influence of the Black Mountain poets and most importantly William Carlos Williams. Her first American book of poetry, *Here and Now*, shows the beginnings of this transition and transformation. Her poem "With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads" established her reputation.

During the 1960s and 70s, Levertov became much more politically active in her life and work. As poetry editor for *The Nation*, she was able to support and publish the work of feminist and other leftist activist poets. The Vietnam War was an especially important focus of her poetry, which often tried to weave together the personal and political, as in her poem "The Sorrow Dance," which speaks of her sister's death. Also in response to the Vietnam War, Levertov joined the War Resister's League.

Much of the latter part of Levertov's life was spent in education. After moving to

Massachusetts, Levertov taught at Brandeis University, MIT and Tufts University. On the West Coast, she had a part-time teaching stint at the University of Washington and for 11 years (1982-1993) held a full professorship at Stanford University. In 1984 she received a Litt. D. from Bates College. After retiring from teaching, she traveled for a year doing poetry readings in the U.S. and England.

In 1997, Denise Levertov died at the age of 74 from complications due to lymphoma. She was buried at Lake View Cemetery in Seattle, Washington.

### <b>Political Poetry</b>

Both politics and war are major themes in Levertov's poetry. Levertov was published in the "Black Mountain Review" during the 1950s, but denied any formal relations with the group. She began to develop her own lyrical style of poetry through those influences. She felt it was part of a poet's calling to point out the injustice of the Vietnam War, and she also actively participated in rallies, reading poetry at some. Some of her war poetry was published in her 1971 book *To Stay Alive*, a collection of anti-Vietnam War letters, newscasts, diary entries, and conversations. Complementary themes in the book involve the tension of the individual vs. the group (or government) and the development of personal voice in mass culture. In her poetry, she promotes community and group change through the imagination of the individual and emphasizes the power of individuals as advocates of change. She also links personal experience to justice and social reform.

Suffering is another major theme in Levertov's war poetry. The poems "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival", "Paradox and Equilibrium", and "Poetry and Peace: Some Broader Dimensions" revolve around war, injustice, and prejudice. In her volume "Life at War", Denise Levertov attempts to use imagery to express the disturbing violence of the Vietnam War. Throughout these poems, she addresses violence and savagery, yet tries to bring grace into the equation. She attempts to mix the beauty of language and the ugliness of the horrors of war. The themes of her poems, especially "Staying Alive", focus on both the cost of war and the suffering of the Vietnamese. In her prose work, *The Poet in the World*, she writes that violence is an outlet. Levertov's first successful Vietnam poetry was her book *Freeing of the Dust*. Some of the themes of this book of poems are the experience of the North Vietnamese, and distrust of people. She attacks the United States pilots in her poems for dropping bombs. Overall, her war poems incorporate suffering to show that violence has become an everyday occurrence. After years of writing such poetry, Levertov eventually came to the conclusion that beauty and poetry and politics can't go together (Dewey). This opened the door wide for her religious-themed poetry in the later part of her life.

## <b>Religious Influences</b>

From a very young age Levertov was influenced by her religion, and when she began writing it was a major theme in her poetry.[6] Through her father she was exposed to both Judaism and Christianity. Levertov always believed that her culture and her family roots had inherent value to herself and her writing. Furthermore, she believed that she and her sister had a destiny pertaining to this.[6]When Levertov moved to the United States, she fell under the influence of the Black Mountain Poets, especially the mysticism of Charles Olson. She drew on the experimentation of Ezra Pound and the style of William Carlos Williams, but was also exposed to the Transcendentalism of Thoreau and Emerson. Although all these factors shaped her poetry, her conversion to Christianity in 1984 was the main influence on her religious writing. Sometime shortly after her move to Seattle in 1989, she became a Roman Catholic. In 1997, she brought together 38 poems from seven of her earlier volumes in *The Stream & the Sapphire*, a collection intended, as Levertov explains in the foreword to the collection, to "trace my slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith, a movement incorporating much doubt and questioning as well as affirmation."

## <b>Religious Themes</b>

Denise Levertov wrote many poems with religious themes throughout her career. These poems range from religious imagery to implied metaphors of religion. One particular theme was developed progressively throughout her poetry. This was the pilgrimage/spiritual journey of Levertov towards the deep spiritual understanding and truth in her last poems.

One of her earlier poems is "A Tree Telling of Orpheus", from her book *Relearning the Alphabet*. This poem uses the metaphor of a tree, which changes and grows when it hears the music of Orpheus. This is a metaphor of spiritual growth. The growth of the tree is like the growth of faith, and as the tree goes through life we also go through life on a spiritual journey. Much of Levertov's religious poetry was concerned with respect for nature and life. Also among her themes were nothingness and absence.

In her earlier poems something is always lacking, searching, and empty. In "Work that Enfaiths" Levertov begins to confront this "ample doubt" and her lack of "burning surety" in her faith. The religious aspect of this is the doubt vs. light debate. Levertov cannot find a balance between faith and darkness. She goes back and forth between the glory of God and nature, but doubt constantly plagues her.

In her earlier religious poems Levertov searches for meaning in life. She explores God as he relates to nothing(ness) and everything. In her later poetry, a shift can be seen. "A Door in the Hive" and "Evening Train" are full of poems using images of cliffs, edges, and borders to push for change in life. Once again, Levertov packs her poetry with metaphors. She explores the idea that there can be peace in death. She also begins to suggest that nothing is a part of God. "Nothingness" and darkness are no longer just reasons to doubt and agonize over. "St. Thomas Didymus" and "Mass" show this growth, as they are poems that lack her former nagging wonder and worry.

In Evening Train, Levertov's poetry is highly religious. She writes about experiencing God. These poems are breakthrough poems for her. She writes about a mountain, which becomes a metaphor for life and God. When clouds cover a mountain, it is still huge and massive and in existence. God is the same, she says. Even when He is clouded, we know He is there. Her poems tend to shift away from constantly questioning religion to accepting it simply. In "The Tide", the final section of Evening Train, Levertov writes about accepting faith and that not knowing answers is tolerable. This acceptance of the paradoxes of faith marks the end of her "spiritual journey".

Levertov's heavy religious writing began at her conversion to Christianity in 1984. She wrote a great deal of metaphysical poetry to express her religious views, and began to use Christianity to link culture and community together. In her poem "Mass" she writes about how the Creator is defined by His creation. She writes a lot about nature and individuals. In the works of her last phase, Levertov sees Christianity as a bridge between individuals and society, and explores how a hostile social environment can be changed by Christian values.

### **Accomplishments**

Levertov wrote and published 20 books of poetry, criticism, and translations. She also edited several anthologies. Among her many awards and honors, she received the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Frost Medal the Lenore Marshall Prize, the Lannan Award, a Catherine Luck Memorial Grant, a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

# A Map Of The Western Part Of The County Of Essex In England

Something forgotten for twenty years: though my fathers  
and mothers came from Cordova and Vitepsk and Caernarvon,  
and though I am a citizen of the United States and less a  
stranger here than anywhere else, perhaps,

I am Essex-born:

Cranbrook Wash called me into its dark tunnel,  
the little streams of Valentines heard my resolves,  
Roding held my head above water when I thought it was  
drowning me; in Hainault only a haze of thin trees  
stood between the red doubledecker buses and the boar-hunt,  
the spirit of merciful Phillipa glimmered there.  
Pergo Park knew me, and Clavering, and Havering-atte-Bower,  
Stanford Rivers lost me in osier beds, Stapleford Abbots  
sent me safe home on the dark road after Simeon-quiet evensong,  
Wanstead drew me over and over into its basic poetry,  
in its serpentine lake I saw bass-viols among the golden dead leaves,  
through its trees the ghost of a great house. In  
Ilford High Road I saw the multitudes passing pale under the  
light of flaring sundown, seven kings  
in somber starry robes gathered at Seven Kings  
the place of law  
where my birth and marriage are recorded  
and the death of my father. Woodford Wells  
where an old house was called The Naked Beauty (a white  
statue forlorn in its garden)  
saw the meeting and parting of two sisters,  
(forgotten? and further away  
the hill before Thaxted? where peace befell us? not once  
but many times?).  
All the Ivans dreaming of their villages  
all the Marias dreaming of their walled cities,  
picking up fragments of New World slowly,  
not knowing how to put them together nor how to join  
image with image, now I know how it was with you, an old map  
made long before I was born shows ancient  
rights of way where I walked when I was ten burning with desire  
for the world's great splendors, a child who traced voyages

indelibly all over the atlas, who now in a far country  
remembers the first river, the first  
field, bricks and lumber dumped in it ready for building,  
that new smell, and remembers  
the walls of the garden, the first light.

Denise Levertov

# A Time Past

The old wooden steps to the front door  
where I was sitting that fall morning  
when you came downstairs, just awake,  
and my joy at sight of you (emerging  
into golden day—  
the dew almost frost)  
pulled me to my feet to tell you  
how much I loved you:

those wooden steps  
are gone now, decayed  
replaced with granite,  
hard, gray, and handsome.  
The old steps live  
only in me:  
my feet and thighs  
remember them, and my hands  
still feel their splinters.

Everything else about and around that house  
brings memories of others—of marriage,  
of my son. And the steps do too: I recall  
sitting there with my friend and her little son who died,  
or was it the second one who lives and thrives?  
And sitting there 'in my life,' often, alone or with my husband.  
Yet that one instant,  
your cheerful, unafraid, youthful, 'I love you too,'  
the quiet broken by no bird, no cricket, gold leaves  
spinning in silence down without  
any breeze to blow them,  
is what twines itself  
in my head and body across those slabs of wood  
that were warm, ancient, and now  
wait somewhere to be burnt.

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



# At The Justice Department November 15, 1969

Brown gas-fog, white  
beneath the street lamps.  
Cut off on three sides, all space filled  
with our bodies.

Bodies that stumble  
in brown airlessness, whitened  
in light, a mildew glare,  
that stumble  
hand in hand, blinded, retching.  
Wanting it, wanting  
to be here, the body believing it's  
dying in its nausea, my head  
clear in its despair, a kind of joy,  
knowing this is by no means death,  
is trivial, an incident, a  
fragile instant. Wanting it, wanting  
with all my hunger this anguish,  
this knowing in the body  
the grim odds we're  
up against, wanting it real.  
Up that bank where gas  
curled in the ivy, dragging each other  
up, strangers, brothers  
and sisters. Nothing  
will do but  
to taste the bitter  
taste. No life  
other, apart from.

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

# Caedmon

All others talked as if  
talk were a dance.  
Clodhopper I, with clumsy feet  
would break the gliding ring.  
Early I learned to  
hunch myself  
close by the door:  
then when the talk began  
I'd wipe my  
mouth and wend  
unnoticed back to the barn  
to be with the warm beasts,  
dumb among body sounds  
of the simple ones.  
I'd see by a twist  
of lit rush the motes  
of gold moving  
from shadow to shadow  
slow in the wake  
of deep untroubled sighs.  
The cows  
munched or stirred or were still. I  
was at home and lonely,  
both in good measure. Until  
the sudden angel affrighted me—light effacing  
my feeble beam,  
a forest of torches, feathers of flame, sparks upflying:  
but the cows as before  
were calm, and nothing was burning,  
nothing but I, as that hand of fire  
touched my lips and scorched my tongue  
and pulled my voice  
into the ring of the dance.

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

# Clouds

The clouds as I see them, rising  
urgently, roseate in the  
mounting of somber power

surging in evening haste over  
roofs and hermetic  
grim walls—

Last night  
As if death had lit a pale light  
in your flesh, your flesh  
was cold to my touch, or not cold  
but cool, cooling, as if the last traces  
of warmth were still fading in you.  
My thigh burned in cold fear where  
yours touched it.

But I forced to mind my vision of a sky  
close and enclosed, unlike the space in which these clouds move—  
a sky of gray mist it appeared—  
and how looking intently at it we saw  
its gray was not gray but a milky white  
in which radiant traces of opal greens,  
fiery blues, gleamed, faded, gleamed again,  
and how only then, seeing the color in the gray,  
a field sprang into sight, extending  
between where we stood and the horizon,

a field of freshest deep spiring grass  
starred with dandelions,  
green and gold  
gold and green alternating in closewoven  
chords, madrigal field.

Is death's chill that visited our bed  
other than what it seemed, is it  
a gray to be watched keenly?

Wiping my glasses and leaning westward,  
clearing my mind of the day's mist and leaning  
into myself to see  
the colors of truth

I watch the clouds as I see them  
in pomp advancing, pursuing  
the fallen sun.

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



# Ein Baum Erzählt Von Orpheus

Weißer Tagesanbruch. Stille. Als das Kräuseln begann,  
hielt ich es für Seewind, in unser Tal kommend mit Raunen  
von Salz, von baumlosen Horizonten. Aber der weiße Nebel  
bewegte sich nicht; das Laub meiner Brüder blieb ausgebreitet,  
regungslos.

Doch das Kräuseln kam näher – und dann  
begannen meine eigenen äußersten Zweige zu prickeln, fast als wäre  
ein Feuer unter ihnen entfacht, zu nah, und ihre Spitzen  
trockneten und rollten sich ein.

Doch ich fürchtete mich nicht, nur  
wachsam war ich.

Ich sah ihn als erster, denn ich wuchs  
draußen am Weidehang, jenseits des Waldes.

Er war ein Mann, so schien es: die zwei  
beweglichen Stengel, der kurze Stamm, die zwei  
Arm-Äste, biegsam, jeder mit fünf laublosen  
Zweigen an ihrem Ende,  
und der Kopf gekrönt mit braunem oder goldenem Gras,  
ein Gesicht tragend, nicht wie das geschnäbelte Gesicht eines Vogels,  
eher wie das einer Blume.

Er trug eine Bürde,  
einen abgeschnittenen Ast, gebogen, als er noch grün war,  
Strähnen einer Rebe quer darüber gespannt. Von dieser,  
sobald er sie berührte, und von seiner Stimme,  
die, unähnlich der Stimme des Windes, unser Laub und unsere  
Äste nicht brauchte, um ihren Klang zu vollenden,  
kam das Kräuseln.

Es war aber jetzt kein Kräuseln mehr (er war nahe herangekommen und  
stand in meinem ersten Schatten), es war eine Welle, die mich umspülte,  
als stiege Regen  
empor von unten um mich herum,  
anstatt zu fallen.

Und was ich spürte, war nicht mehr ein trockenes Prickeln:  
Ich schien zu singen, während er sang, ich schien zu wissen,  
was die Lerche weiß; mein ganzer Saft  
stieg hinauf der Sonne entgegen, die nun  
aufgegangen war, der Nebel hob sich, das Gras  
wurde trocken, doch meine Wurzeln spürten, wie Musik sie tränkte  
tief in der Erde.

Er kam noch näher, lehnte sich an meinen Stamm:  
Die Rinde erschauerte wie ein noch gefaltetes Blatt.  
Musik! Kein Zweig von mir, der nicht  
erbebte vor Freude und Furcht.

Dann, als er sang,  
waren es nicht mehr nur Klänge, aus denen die Musik entstand:  
Er sprach, und wie kein Baum zuhört, hörte ich zu, und Sprache  
kam in meine Wurzeln  
aus der Erde,  
in meine Rinde  
aus der Luft,  
in die Poren meiner grünsten Knospen  
sanft wie Tau,  
und er sang kein Wort, das ich nicht zu deuten wußte.  
Er erzählte von Reisen,  
davon, wo Sonne und Mond hingehen, während wir im Dunkeln stehen,  
von einer Erden-Reise, von der er träumte, sie eines Tages zu tun  
tiefer als Wurzeln...  
Er erzählte von den Menschenträumen, von Krieg, Leidenschaften, Gram  
und ich, ein Baum, verstand die Wörter – ach, es schien,  
als ob meine dicke Rinde aufplatzen würde, wie die eines Schöblings,  
der zu schnell wuchs im Frühling,  
so daß später Frost ihn verwundete.

Feuer besang er,  
das Bäume fürchten, und ich, ein Baum, erfreute mich seiner Flammen.  
Neue Knospen brachen auf in mir, wenngleich es Hochsommer war.  
Als ob seine Leier (nun wußte ich ihren Namen)  
zugleich Frost und Feuer wäre, ihre Akkorde flammten  
hinauf bis zu meiner Krone.  
Ich war wieder Samen.  
Ich war Farn im Sumpf.  
Ich war Kohle.

Denise Levertov

# Eros

The flowerlike  
animal perfume  
in the god's curly  
hair —

don't assume  
that like a flower  
his attributes  
are there to tempt

you or  
direct the moth's  
hunger —  
simply he is  
the temple of himself,

hair and hide  
a sacrifice of blood and flowers  
on his altar

if any worshipper  
kneel or not.

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

# February Evening In New York

As the stores close, a winter light  
opens air to iris blue,  
glint of frost through the smoke  
grains of mica, salt of the sidewalk.  
As the buildings close, released autonomous  
feet pattern the streets  
in hurry and stroll; balloon heads  
drift and dive above them; the bodies  
aren't really there.

As the lights brighten, as the sky darkens,  
a woman with crooked heels says to another woman  
while they step along at a fair pace,  
'You know, I'm telling you, what I love best  
is life. I love life! Even if I ever get  
to be old and wheezy—or limp! You know?  
Limping along?—I'd still ... ' Out of hearing.  
To the multiple disordered tones  
of gears changing, a dance  
to the compass points, out, four-way river.  
Prospect of sky  
wedged into avenues, left at the ends of streets,  
west sky, east sky: more life tonight! A range  
of open time at winter's outskirts.

Denise Levertov





# Goodbye To Tolerance

Genial poets, pink-faced  
earnest wits—  
you have given the world  
some choice morsels,  
gobbets of language presented  
as one presents T-bone steak  
and Cherries Jubilee.  
Goodbye, goodbye,  
I don't care  
if I never taste your fine food again,  
neutral fellows, seers of every side.  
Tolerance, what crimes  
are committed in your name.

And you, good women, bakers of nicest bread,  
blood donors. Your crumbs  
choke me, I would not want  
a drop of your blood in me, it is pumped  
by weak hearts, perfect pulses that never  
falter: irresponsible  
to nightmare reality.

It is my brothers, my sisters,  
whose blood spurts out and stops  
forever  
because you choose to believe it is not your business.

Goodbye, goodbye,  
your poems  
shut their little mouths,  
your loaves grow moldy,  
a gulf has split  
the ground between us,  
and you won't wave, you're looking  
another way.  
We shan't meet again—



unless you leap it, leaving  
behind you the cherished  
worms of your dispassion,  
your pallid ironies,  
your jovial, murderous,  
wry-humored balanced judgment,  
leap over, un-  
balanced? ... then  
how our fanatic tears  
would flow and mingle  
for joy ...

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 swandown.  
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 may be, each to the other,  
figures of flame,  
figures of smoke,  
figures of flesh  
newly seen in the dusk.

Denise Levertov

# Hypocrite Women

Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak  
of our own doubts, while dubiously  
we mother man in his doubt!

And if at Mill Valley perched in the trees  
the sweet rain drifting through western air  
a white sweating bull of a poet told us

our cunts are ugly—why didn't we  
admit we have thought so too? (And  
what shame? They are not for the eye!)

No, they are dark and wrinkled and hairy,  
caves of the Moon ... And when a  
dark humming fills us, a

coldness towards life,  
we are too much women to  
own to such unwomanliness.

Whorishly with the psychopomp  
we play and plead—and say  
nothing of this later. And our dreams,

with what frivolity we have pared them  
like toenails, clipped them like ends of  
split hair.

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.



# 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 California: Morning, Evening, Late January

Pale, then enkindled,  
light  
advancing,  
emblazoning  
summits of palm and pine,

the dew  
lingering,  
scripture of  
scintillas.

Soon the roar  
of mowers  
cropping the already short  
grass of lawns,

men with long-nozzled  
cylinders of pesticide  
poking at weeds,  
at moss in cracks of cement,

and louder roar  
of helicopters off to spray  
vineyards where braceros try  
to hold their breath,

and in the distance, bulldozers, excavators,  
babel of destructive construction.

Banded by deep  
oakshadow, airy  
shadow of eucalyptus,

miner's lettuce,  
tender, untasted,  
and other grass, unmown,  
luxuriant,  
no green more brilliant.

Fragile paradise.

. . . .

At day's end the whole sky,  
vast, unstinting, flooded with transparent  
mauve,  
tint of wisteria,  
cloudless  
over the malls, the industrial parks,  
the homes with the lights going on,  
the homeless arranging their bundles.

. . . .

Who can utter  
the poignance of all that is constantly  
threatened, invaded, expended

and constantly  
nevertheless  
persists in beauty,

tranquil as this young moon  
just risen and slowly  
drinking light  
from the vanished sun.

Who can utter  
the praise of such generosity  
or the shame?

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

# Making Peace

A voice from the dark called out,  
&quot;The poets must give us  
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar  
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only  
the absence of war.&quot;

But peace, like a poem,  
is not there ahead of itself,  
can't be imagined before it is made,  
can't be known except  
in the words of its making,  
grammar of justice,  
syntax of mutual aid.

A feeling towards it,  
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have  
until we begin to utter its metaphors,  
learning them as we speak.

A line of peace might appear  
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,  
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,  
questioned our needs, allowed  
long pauses. . . .

A cadence of peace might balance its weight  
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,  
an energy field more intense than war,  
might pulse then,  
stanza by stanza into the world,  
each act of living  
one of its words, each word  
a vibration of light—facets  
of the forming crystal.

Denise Levertov



# Matins

i

The authentic! Shadows of it  
sweep past in dreams, one could say imprecisely,  
evoking the almost-silent  
ripping apart of giant  
sheets of cellophane. No.  
It thrusts up close. Exactly in dreams  
it has you off-guard, you  
recognize it before you have time.  
For a second before waking  
the alarm bell is a red conical hat, it  
takes form.

ii

The authentic! I said  
rising from the toilet seat.  
The radiator in rhythmic knockings  
spoke of the rising steam.  
The authentic, I said  
breaking the handle of my hairbrush as I  
brushed my hair in  
rhythmic strokes: That's it,  
that's joy, it's always  
a recognition, the known  
appearing fully itself, and  
more itself than one knew.

iii

The new day rises  
as heat rises,  
knocking in the pipes  
with rhythms it seizes for its own  
to speak of its invention—

the real, the new-laid  
egg whose speckled shell  
the poet fondles and must break  
if he will be nourished.

iv

A shadow painted where  
yes, a shadow must fall.  
The cow's breath  
not forgotten in the mist, in the  
words. Yes,  
verisimilitude draws up  
heat in us, zest  
to follow through,  
follow through,  
follow  
transformations of day  
in its turning, in its becoming.

v

Stir the holy grains, set  
the bowls on the table and  
call the child to eat.

While we eat we think,  
as we think an undercurrent  
of dream runs through us  
faster than thought  
towards recognition.

Call the child to eat,  
send him off, his mouth  
tasting of toothpaste, to go down  
into the ground, into a roaring train  
and to school.

His cheeks are pink  
his black eyes hold his dreams, he has left  
forgetting his glasses.

Follow down the stairs at a clatter  
to give them to him and save  
his clear sight.

Cold air  
comes in at the street door.

vi

The authentic! It rolls  
just out of reach, beyond  
running feet and  
stretching fingers, down  
the green slope and into  
the black waves of the sea.  
Speak to me, little horse, beloved,  
tell me  
how to follow the iron ball,  
how to follow through to the country  
beneath the waves  
to the place where I must kill you and you step out  
of your bones and flystrewn meat  
tall, smiling, renewed,  
formed in your own likeness.

vii

Marvelous Truth, confront us  
at every turn,  
in every guise, iron ball,  
egg, dark horse, shadow,  
cloud  
of breath on the air,

dwell  
in our crowded hearts  
our steaming bathrooms, kitchens full of  
things to be done, the  
ordinary streets.

Thrust close your smile  
that we know you, terrible joy.

Denise Levertov

# News Report, September 1991

## U.S. BURIED IRAQI SOLDIERS ALIVE IN GULF WAR

'What you saw was a  
bunch of trenches with  
arms sticking out.'  
'Plows mounted on  
tanks. Combat  
earthmovers.'  
'Defiant.'  
'Buried.'  
'Carefully planned and  
rehearsed.'  
'When we  
went through there wasn't  
anybody left.'  
'Awarded  
Silver Star.'  
'Reporters  
banned.'  
'Not a single  
American killed.'  
'Bodycount  
impossible.'  
'For all I know,  
thousands, said  
Colonel Moreno.'  
'What you  
saw was a bunch of  
buried trenches  
with people's  
arms and things  
sticking out.'  
'Secretary Cheney  
made no mention.'  
'Every single American  
was inside  
the juggernaut  
impervious  
to small-arms

fire.' 'I know  
burying people  
like that sounds  
pretty nasty, said  
Colonel Maggart,  
But . . . .'  
'His force buried  
about six hundred  
and fifty  
in a thinner line  
of trenches.'  
'People's arms  
sticking out.'  
'Every American  
inside.'  
'The juggernaut.'  
'I'm not  
going to sacrifice  
the lives  
of my soldiers,  
Moreno said, it's not  
cost-effective.'  
'The tactic was designed  
to terrorize,  
Lieutenant Colonel Hawkins  
said, who helped  
devise it.'  
'Schwartzkopf's staff  
privately  
estimated fifty to seventy  
thousand killed  
in the trenches.'  
'Private Joe Queen was  
awarded  
a Bronze Star for burying  
trenches with his  
earthmover.'  
'Inside  
the juggernaut.'  
'Impervious.'  
'A lot of the guys  
were scared, he said,

but I  
enjoyed it.'  
'A bunch of  
trenches. People's  
arms and things  
sticking out.'  
'Cost-effective.'

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

# Partial Resemblance

A doll's hair concealing  
an eggshell skull delicately  
throbbing, within which  
maggots in voluptuous unrest  
jostle and shrug. Oh, Eileen, my  
big doll, your gold hair was  
not more sunny than this  
human fur, but  
your head was  
radiant in its emptiness,  
a small clean room.

Her warm and rosy mouth  
is telling lies—she would  
believe them if she could believe:  
her pretty eyes  
search out corruption. Oh, Eileen  
how kindly your silence was, and  
what virtue  
shone in the opening and shutting of your  
ingenious blindness.

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



# 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

# Prisoners

Though the road turn at last  
to death's ordinary door,  
and we knock there, ready  
to enter and it opens  
easily for us,  
yet  
all the long journey  
we shall have gone in chains,  
fed on knowledge-apples  
acrid and riddled with grubs.

We taste other food that life,  
like a charitable farm-girl,  
holds out to us as we pass—  
but our mouths are puckered,  
a taint of ash on the tongue.

It's not joy that we've lost—  
wildfire, it flares  
in dark or shine as it will.  
What's gone  
is common happiness,  
plain bread we could eat  
with the old apple of knowledge.

That old one—it griped us sometimes,  
but it was firm, tart,  
sometimes delectable ...

The ashen apple of these days  
grew from poisoned soil. We are prisoners  
and must eat  
our ration. All the long road  
in chains, even if, after all,  
we come to

death's ordinary door, with time  
smiling its ordinary  
long-ago smile.

Denise Levertov





# Seeing For A Moment

I thought I was growing wings&mdash;  
it was a cocoon.

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

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

facing my mirror&mdash;no longer young,  
the news&mdash;always of death,  
the dogs&mdash;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

# Song For Ishtar

The moon is a sow  
and grunts in my throat  
Her great shining shines through me  
so the mud of my hollow gleams  
and breaks in silver bubbles

She is a sow  
and I a pig and a poet

When she opens her white  
lips to devour me I bite back  
and laughter rocks the moon

In the black of desire  
we rock and grunt, grunt and  
shine

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 90th Year

High in the jacaranda shines the gilded thread  
of a small bird's curlicue of song-too high  
for her to see or hear.

I've learned  
not to say, these last years,  
'O, look!-O, listen, Mother!'  
as I used to.

(It was she  
who taught me to look;  
to name the flowers when I was still close to the ground,  
my face level with theirs;  
or to watch the sublime metamorphoses  
unfold and unfold  
over the walled back gardens of our street...

It had not been given her  
to know the flesh as good in itself,  
as the flesh of a fruit is good. To her  
the human body has been a husk,  
a shell in which souls were prisoned.  
Yet, from within it, with how much gazing  
her life has paid tribute to the world's body!  
How tears of pleasure  
would choke her, when a perfect voice,  
deep or high, clove to its note unfaltering!

She has swept the crackling seedpods,  
the litter of mauve blossoms, off the cement path,  
tipped them into the rubbish bucket.  
She's made her bed, washed up the breakfast dishes,  
wiped the hotplate. I've taken the butter and milkjug  
back to the fridge next door-but it's not my place,  
visiting here, to usurp the tasks  
that weave the day's pattern.  
Now she is leaning forward in her chair,  
by the lamp lit in the daylight,  
rereading War and Peace.

When I look up

from her wellworn copy of The Divine Milieu,  
which she wants me to read, I see her hand  
loose on the black stem of the magnifying glass,  
she is dozing.  
'I am so tired,' she has written me, 'of appreciating  
the gift of life.'

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 Sage

The cat is eating the roses:  
that's the way he is.  
Don't stop him, don't stop  
the world going round,  
that's the way things are.  
The third of May  
was misty; fourth of May  
who knows. Sweep  
the rose-meat up, throw the bits  
out in the rain.  
He never eats  
every crumb, says  
the hearts are bitter.  
That's the way he is, he knows  
the world and the weather.

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 Springtime

The red eyes of rabbits  
aren't sad. No one passes  
the sad golden village in a barge  
any more. The sunset  
will leave it alone. If the  
curtains hang askew  
it is no one's fault.

Around and around and around  
everywhere the same sound  
of wheels going, and things  
growing older, growing  
silent. If the dogs  
bark to each other  
all night, and their eyes  
flash red, that's  
nobody's business. They have  
a great space of dark to  
bark across. The rabbits  
will bare their teeth at  
the spring moon.

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 Live in the Mercy of God

To lie back under the tallest  
oldest trees. How far the stems  
rise, rise  
before ribs of shelter  
open!

To live in the mercy of God. The complete  
sentence too adequate, has no give.  
Awe, not comfort. Stone, elbows of  
stony wood beneath lenient  
moss bed.

And awe suddenly  
passing beyond itself. Becomes  
a form of comfort.  
Becomes the steady  
air you glide on, arms  
stretched like the wings of flying foxes.  
To hear the multiple silence  
of trees, the rainy  
forest depths of their listening.

To float, upheld,  
as salt water  
would hold you,  
once you dared.

.

To live in the mercy of God.

To feel vibrate the enraptured

waterfall flinging itself  
unabating down and down  
to clenched fists of rock.  
Swiftness of plunge,  
hour after year after century,  
O or Ah

uninterrupted, voice  
many-stranded.  
To breathe  
spray. The smoke of it.  
Arcs  
of steelwhite foam, glissades  
of fugitive jade barely perceptible. Such passion—  
rage or joy?  
Thus, not mild, not temperate,  
God's love for the world. Vast  
flood of mercy  
flung on resistance.

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



## 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





