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.

**Political Poetry**

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.
Religious Influences

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."

Religious Themes

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.

<b>Accomplishments</b>

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
A Tree Telling Of Orpheus

White dawn. the rippling began
I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors
of salt, of treeless horizons. But the white fog
didn't stir; the leaves of my brothers remained outstretched,
unmoving.
Yet the rippling drew nearer – and then
my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if
fire had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips
were drying and curling.
Yet I was not afraid, only deeply alert.
I was the first to see him, for I grew
out on the pasture slope, beyond the forest.
He was a man, it seemed: the two moving stems, the short trunk, the two arm-branches, flexible, each with five leafless twigs at their ends,
and the head that's crowned by brown or golden grass,
bearing a face not like the beaked face of a bird,
more like a flower's.
He carried a burden made of some cut branch bent while it was green,
strands of a vine tight-stretched across it. From this,
when he touched it, and from his voice
which unlike the wind’s voice had no need of our
leaves and branches to complete its sound,
&nbs; &nbs; &nbs; came the ripple.
But it was now no longer a ripple (he had come near and
stopped in my first shadow) it was a wave that bathed me
&nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; as if rain
&nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; instead of falling. And what I felt was no longer a dry tingling:
&nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; what the lark
knows; all my sap
&nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; was mounting towards the sun
that by now
&nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; had risen, the mist was rising,
the grass
was drying, yet my roots felt music moisten them
depth under earth.

He came still closer, leaned on my trunk:
&nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; &nbs; the bark thrilled like
a leaf still-folded.
Music! There was no twig of me not
Then as he sang
it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
came into my roots
out of the earth,
into my bark
out of the air,
into the pores of my greenest shoots
and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning.
He told me of journeys,
of where sun and moon go while we stand in dark,
of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day
deeper than roots ...
He told of the dreams of man, wars, passions, griefs,
and I, a tree, understood words – ah, it seemed
my thick bark would split like a sapling's that
 grew too fast in the spring
when a late frost wounds it.

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

Denise Levertov
Adam's Complaint

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

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

The marriage bed
and the cradle,
still empty arms.

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

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

Denise Levertov
An Embroidery

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sleeps; the Roses
bank the fire.
Sunk in the clouds of their feather bed
they prepare to dream.
Rose Red in a cave that smells of honey
dreams she is combing the fur of her cubs
with a golden comb.
Rose White is lying awake.

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

Denise Levertov
An Excerpt From &quot;Mass For The Day Of St. Thomas Didymus&quot;

iiGloria

Praise the wet snow
falling early.
Praise the shadow
my neighor'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
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
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 <i>but</i> and <i>if</i> and <i>how</i> and again
<i>but</i>, 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

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 Reizen,
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,
as ob meine dicke Rinde aufplatzen würde, wie die eines Schößlings,
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, wenn gleich es Hochsommer war.
Als ob seine Leier (nun wüßte 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
     seizeas 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
From The Roof

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

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

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

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

Denise Levertov
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,
wrty-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 way 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 <i>them</i>
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 <i>are</i>, and their presence
is quietness ineffable--and the bombings <i>are</i>, 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
glass 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,
"The poets must give us
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only
the absence of war."

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
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
'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 A Theme By Thomas Merton

"Adam, where are you?"

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

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

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

Denise Levertov
On The Mystery Of The Incarnation

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

Denise Levertov
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

wander off, each alone, not looking
in the slow crowd. Among sideshows

under movie signs,

pictures made of a

million lights,

giants that move

and again move

again, above a

cloud of thick smells,

franks, roasted

nutmeats-

Or going up to some apartment, yours

or yours, finding

someone sitting in the dark:

who is it really? So you switch the

light on to see: you know the name but

who is it?

But you won't see.

The fluorescent light flickers sullenly, a

pause. But you command. It grabs

each face and holds it up
by the hair for you, mask after mask.

You and I repeat gestures that make do when speech has failed—and talk, laughing, saying 'I', and 'I', meaning 'Anybody'.

Denise Levertov
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
Psalm Concerning The Castle

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

Denise Levertov
Seeing For A Moment

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

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

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

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

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

Word after word floats through the glass. Towards me.

Submitted by Gnute

Denise Levertov
September 1961

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

has dazzled past us and gone
leaving us new silence.
Ine 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 curlucque 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 unfaultering!

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
toog. 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 seemliness,
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 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:

eletion, grief, joy, contrition, entwined;

shaking, changing,

forever

forming,

transforming:

all praise,

all praise to the

great web.

Denise Levertov
Wedding-Ring

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

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

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

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

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

Denise Levertov
What Were They Like?

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

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

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