

Classic Poetry Series

Larry Levis
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Larry Levis(1946 - 1996)

Larry Levis was born in Fresno, California, on September 30, 1946. The son of a grape grower, he grew up driving a tractor, picking grapes, and pruning vines of Selma, California, a small fruit-growing town in the San Joaquin Valley. He later wrote of the farm, the vineyards, and the Mexican migrant workers that he worked alongside. He also remembered hanging out in the local billiards parlor on Selma's East Front Street, across from the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks.

Levis earned a bachelor's degree from Fresno State College (now California State University, Fresno) in 1968. He went on to earn a master's degree from Syracuse University in 1970 and a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1974.

Levis taught English at the University of Missouri from 1974-1980. From 1980 to 1992, he directed the creative writing program at the University of Utah. From 1992 until his death from a heart attack in 1996 he was a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, which annually awards the Levis Reading Prize in his remembrance (articles about Levis and the prize are featured each year in *Blackbird*, an journal of literature and the arts).

Levis won the United States Award from the International Poetry Forum for his first book of poems, *Wrecking Crew* (1972), which included publication by the University of Pittsburgh Press. The American Academy of Poets named his second book, *The Afterlife* (1976) as Lamont Poetry Selection. His book *The Dollmaker's Ghost* was a winner of the Open Competition of the National Poetry Series. Other awards included a YM-YWHA Discovery award, three fellowships in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Fulbright Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His poems are featured in *American Alphabets: 25 Contemporary Poets* (2006) and in many other anthologies. Larry Levis died of a heart attack in Richmond, Virginia on May 8, 1996, at the age of 49.

Anastasia & Sandman

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

I refuse to explain.

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

Went on reflecting clouds & stars.

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

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

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

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

The crowd in the Callea Victoria listened closely
But no one heard anything. In the distance
There was only the faint glow of a few clouds.
And the horses were led into boxcars & emerged
As the dimly remembered meals of flesh
That fed the starving Poles
During that famine, & part of the next one--

In which even words grew thin & transparent,
Like the pale wings of ants that flew
Out of the oldest houses, & slowly
What had been real in words began to be replaced
By what was not real, by the not exactly real.
"Well, not exactly, but. . ." became the preferred
Administrative phrasing so that the man
Standing with his hat in his hands would not guess
That the phrasing of a few words had already swept
The earth from beneath his feet. "That horse I had,
He was more real than any angel,
The housefly, when I had a house, was real too,"
Is what the man thought.
Yet it wasn't more than a few months
Before the man began to wonder, talking
To himself out loud before the others,
"Was the horse real? Was the house real?"
An angel flew in and out of the high window
In the factory where the man worked, his hands
Numb with cold. He hated the window & the light
Entering the window & he hated the angel.
Because the angel could not be carved into meat
Or dumped into the ossuary & become part
Of the landfill at the edge of town,
It therefore could not acquire a soul,
And resembled in significance nothing more
Than a light summer dress when the body has gone.

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

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

That is why he killed them all.

Members of the Committee on Solitude, consider
Our own impoverishment & the progress of that famine,
In which, now, it is becoming impossible
To feel anything when we contemplate the burial,
Alive, in a two-hour period, of hundreds of people.
Who were not clichés, who did not know they would be

The illegible blank of the past that lives in each
Of us, even in some guy watering his lawn

On a summer night. Consider

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

Incapable of treachery.

Then imagine, in your planning proposals,
The exact moment in the future when an angel
Might alight & crawl like a fly into the ear of a horse,
And then, eventually, into the brain of a horse,
And imagine further that the angel in the brain
Of this horse is, for the horse cropping grass
In the field, largely irrelevant, a mist in the corner
Of the field, something that disappears,
The horse thinks, when weight is passed through it,
Something that will not even carry the weight
Of its own father
On its back, the horse decides, & so demonstrates
This by swishing at a fly with its tail, by continuing
To graze as the dusk comes on & almost until it is night.

Old contrivers, daydreamers, walking chemistry sets,
Exhausted chimneysweeps of the spaces
Between words, where the Holy Ghost tastes just
Like the dust it is made of,
Let's tear up our lecture notes & throw them out
The window.

Let's do it right now before wisdom descends upon us
Like a spiderweb over a burned-out theater marquee,
Because what's the use?

I keep going to meetings where no one's there,
And contributing to the discussion;
And besides, behind the angel hissing in its mist
Is a gate that leads only into another field,
Another outcropping of stones & withered grass, where

A horse named Sandman & a horse named Anastasia
Used to stand at the fence & watch the traffic pass.
Where there were outdoor concerts once, in summer,
Under the missing & innumerable stars.

Larry Levis

As I Move On With You

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

Fantisies,
And mists,
Of dreams,

Lost away,
Onto the ways,
Of yesterday,

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

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

Larry Levis

As It Begins With A Brush Stroke On A Snare Drum

The plaza was so still in that moment two years ago that
everything was clear,
As if it had been preserved beneath a kind of lacquered
stillness, & for a while,
I did not even notice the pigeons lifting above the sad tiles
of churches,

Or how they must have sounded like applause that is not
meant for anyone;

I must not have noticed that blind woman on the corner who
begged coins
For a living, who had one eye swelled shut entirely while
the other, a thin film
Of glaucoma over it that had taken on the lustreless sheen
of a nickel,

Was held wide open to witness spittle on the curb. And soon
the band
In their sun-bleached military uniforms were tuning up beneath
the blossom of rust
Covering the gazebo, its eaves festooned with the off-white
spiderwebs of unlit Christmas lights.

And that girl, Socorro, her smile surfacing voluptuously as
an unspoken thought

Again, was selling gardenias—their petals already beginning
to appear
Faintly discolored around the edges—from a basket she carried
on her head
In an unwobbling stillness; Martin was selling chicklets but
no one bought

Chicklets anymore; no one bought the little squawking birds
or the cheap stone
Animals turned out on a lathe in Veracruz, either; no one
wanted his shoes shined.
By then the band was playing show tunes from My Fair Lady

& South Pacific & was

Interrupted only once because of a routine demonstration by
the Communists, who,
Mostly, were demonstrating because it was Sunday & because
that is what they did,
On Sundays. After a while I started walking vaguely away
beside some fading stonework,

Which in fact is not called Our Lady of Perfect Solitude nor
even Our Sister
Of Perpetual Solitude, but simply Santo Domingo. I do not
know why I walked near it then,
& passed without entering.

*

Still, in the painting the children kept skating, & the others
are probably
Walking home from school at this moment in their yellow
raincoats, with
The stale smells left on wax paper locked in their lunch pails.
That woman

Keeps brushing her hair, & so somewhere it is still 1970 &
the riot police
Are spilling Out of their buses. On the marsh above the
Sound there were egrets,
There were black swans nesting in the rushes; the canal was
warm, & salty.

There was a cabin filling with so much moonlight I almost
believed I could
Dissolve in it if I sat very still, & I sat very still. I watched
my son
Skating at the edge of a pond in his sleep. It was summer
by the time

I finally saw the painting in Brussels & counted each one of
the children as if
To make sure they were still there, & then gradually
lost count, & in the dream

Of the plowman on the hill there must have been the face
of an English poet

Looking as lined as a maple leaf pressed between the pages
of a book. Beneath it
The Danube is gliding, & I am just holding his book now,
not even needing to read it
Anymore as I cross into the frontier—green wheat, alfalfa, a
feeling of distance

In it all like sleep or rain reclaiming some lost, rural Missouri
slum town until
It no longer exists—& now the Hungarian checkpoint, where
guards with stars
The shade of American lipstick on their caps will enter &
seem proud of the unchipped,

Deep blue enamel on their machine guns. Most of them are
just poor teen-agers
From the surrounding villages & farms . . . & innocent, &

The only glamour that is left
On the Orient Express
Is a soiled, torn doily on an armrest.
Rhyme then, rhyme & dream, but in the other painting,
which is not a painting,
They are trudging home from school in the rain which is like
a kind of sleep
When one of them thinks the mind is not the mind in the
unbewitched, meticulous,

First shaping of numbers on a blackboard; it is only the
shadow of a skater over
A white pond. There is a sea beyond it, roughened by
whitecaps, & the mind
Moves first one way, then another, then both ways at once,
& then one long

Glide past the pines that look black from this far away, but
aren't black.
The boy's friend is saying he 'hates school, but only sort
of.' But the child's

Not listening, he is thinking that something he painted was
something he dreamt,

And then some of the dream got mixed in with the paint,
& then with recess,
The afternoon, this long walk in the rain, & now he will
never get it sorted
Out . . . In the story, the boy, falling, must have thought his
father had wings

Unlike his own, & real. That is why the myth is so clear,
& so cruel,
And why we survive it. Yellow rain gear. Black woods. Gray
sky. Home
Is where you can forget some things, the boy is thinking,
because he is

Tired from having to walk for so long & because he has left
his galoshes
At school & his shoes are wet as he unthinkingly turns his
back to me now,
Goes up the worn, slick steps of a front porch, & the door
closes. And,

Because I am not allowed to see it, there is a glass of milk
on the table,
The stairs behind it are dark, & from a narrow upstairs
window there is
A glimpse of the sea, & later, in his dream, there is sometimes
a father,

And then it is more like a story about a father, & then it is
the hush of ice
Over a pond's surface. In spring, when it begins to thaw,
there is a little
Noise underneath it like steel sighing, if steel could sigh as
it seems to,

Sometimes—when you are walking home alone on a trestle
above a river & there
Is a broken pattern of geese above it, a vee decomposing, a
sky mottled with blue

And some clouds. It is like a father dissolving, & setting you free, & what

Has the father ever achieved that will outlast his own vanishing? And so
The boy spits over the railing & watches the silvery web of it falling
And thinning until it is gossamer, a filament untying itself forever & saying

Exactly what forever always meant to say—that this long pull of spring tide in the river
Needs nothing, nothing except its one momentary witness, a boy pausing

Above it all on a bridge.

*

In Oaxaca, after the bomb went off, there were nevertheless a few seconds . . .

A pure stillness in which I could hear the fountain in the plaza, distant traffic,
The sudden silence of birds. Then everyone was rushing through the streets

Toward a place where sound had been, a place that wasn't there. It is funny,
But the sound of a bomb, a few seconds after it has gone off, is no longer even
Surprising. In a little while it seems only right, & sad. I sat in the balcony of a restaurant

Overlooking it all, & read a poem by Alberto Blanco in the magazine edited by Paz,
And waited for the place to open, & in the next hour watched the plaza
Gradually fill with the usual crowds . . . those who love, or those who think they love,

Novelty; & change.

Larry Levis

Blue Stone

Someday, when you are twenty-four and walking through
The street of a foreign city...
Let me go with you a little way,
Let me be that stranger you won't notice.
And when you turn and enter a bar full of young men
and women, and your laughter rises,
Like the stones of a path up a mountain,
To say that no one has died,
I promise I will not follow.

Larry Levis

Childhood Ideogram

I lay my head sideways on the desk,
My fingers interlocked under my cheekbones,
My eyes closed. It was a three-room schoolhouse,
White, with a small bell tower, an oak tree.
From where I sat, on still days, I'd watch
The oak, the prisoner of that sky, or read
The desk carved with adults' names: Marietta
Martin, Truman Finnell, Marjorie Elm;
The wood hacked or lovingly hollowed, the flies
Settling on the obsolete & built-in inkwells.
I remember, tonight, only details, how
Mrs. Avery, now gone, was standing then
In her beige dress, its quiet, gazelle print
Still dark with lines of perspiration from
The day before; how Gracie Chin had just
Shown me how to draw, with chalk, a Chinese
Ideogram. Where did she go, white thigh
With one still freckle, lost in silk?
No one would say for sure, so that I'd know,
So that all shapes, for days after, seemed
Brushstrokes in Chinese: countries on maps
That shifted, changed colors, or disappeared:
Lithuania, Prussia, Bessarabia;
The numbers four & seven; the question mark.
That year, I ate almost nothing.
I thought my parents weren't my real parents,
I thought there'd been some terrible mistake.
At recess I would sit alone, seeing
In the print of each leaf shadow, an ideogram—
Still, indecipherable, beneath the green sound
The bell still made, even after it had faded,
When the dust-covered leaves of the oak tree
Quivered, slightly, if I looked up in time.
And my father, so distant in those days,
Where did he go, that autumn, when he chose
The chaste, faint ideogram of ash, & I had
To leave him there, white bones in a puzzle
By a plum tree, the sun rising over
The Sierras? It is not Chinese, but English—

When the past tense, when you first learn to use it
As a child, throws all the verbs in the language
Into the long, flat shade of houses you
Ride past, & into town. Your father's driving.
On winter evenings, the lights would come on earlier.
People would be shopping for Christmas. Each hand,
With the one whorl of its fingerprints, with twenty
Delicate bones inside it, reaching up
To touch some bolt of cloth, or choose a gift,
A little different from any other hand.
You know how the past tense turns a sentence dark,
But leaves names, lovers, places showing through:
Gracie Chin, my father, Lithuania;
A beige dress where dark gazelles hold still?
Outside, it's snowing, cold, & a New Year.
The trees & streets are turning white.
I always thought he would come back like this.
I always thought he wouldn't dare be seen.

Larry Levis

Elegy For Poe With The Music Of A Carnival Inside It

There is this sunny place where I imagine him.
A park on a hill whose grass wants to turn
Into dust, & would do so if it weren't
For the rain, & the fact that it is only grass
That keeps the park from flowing downhill past
Its trees & past the slender figures in the statues.
Their stone blends in with the sky when the sky
Is overcast. The stone is a kind of rain,
And half the soldiers trapped inside the stone
Are dead. The others have deserted, & run home.
At this time in the morning, half sun, half mist,
There are usually three or four guys sprawled
Alone on benches facing away from one another.
If they're awake, they look as if they haven't slept.
If they're asleep, they look as if they may not wake....
I only imagine it as a sunny place. If they're
Awake, they gaze off as if onto a distant landscape,
Not at the warehouses & the freeway the hill overlooks,
Not onto Jefferson Avenue where, later, they'll try
To score a little infinity wrapped up in tinfoil,
Or a flake of heaven tied up in a plastic bag
And small as their lives are now, but at a city
That is not the real city gradually appearing
As the mist evaporates, For in the real city,
One was kicked in the ribs by a night watchman
Until he couldn't move. Another was
A small time dealer until he lost his nerve,
And would have then become a car thief, if only
The car had started. And the last failed to appear,
Not only for a court date, but for life itself.
In these ways, they are like Poe if Poe had lived
Beyond composing anything, & had been kicked to death
And then dismembered in this park, his limbs
Thrown as far away from what was left of him
As they could be thrown. And they are not like Poe.
The three of them stare off at a city that is there
In the distance, where they are loved for no
Clear reason, a city they walk toward when
They are themselves again, a city

That vanishes each morning in the pale light.
Poe would have admired them, & pitied them.
For Poe detested both the real city with its traffic
Crawling over the bridges, & the city that vanishes.

~ ~ ~

In autumn the rain slants & flesh turns white.
The tents go up again on the edge of town, &
In the carny's spiel, everyone gets lost,
And Poe, dismembered, becomes no more than the moral
In the story of his life, the cautionary tale
No better than the sideshow where the boy
With sow's hoofs instead of hands, taps the glass—
Some passing entertainment for the masses.
In the carny's spiel, everyone lost comes
Back again. Even Poe comes back to see
Himself, disfigured, in another. That is what
He's doing here, longing to mingle, invisibly,
With the others on the crowded midway as they lick
Their cotton candy, & stare expressionlessly
At one another. He wants to see the woman
Who has fins instead of arms, & the man without
A mouth. He wants to see the boy behind glass
And his own clear reflection in the glass.
The carnival's so close, only a few blocks,
That he can hear the intermittent off key music
Wheezing faintly out of the merry-go-round....
It might as well be music from the moon.
The traffic never lets him cross. The weeks pass,
And then the months, & then the years with their wars
And the marquees going blank above the streets
Because no one comes anymore. And the crowd,
Filing into the little tent, watches suspiciously,
For the crowd believes in nothing now but disbelief.
And therefore, at the intersection of radiance
And death, the intersection of the real city
And the one that vanishes, Poe is pausing
In the midst of traffic, one city inside the other.
The rain slants. The flesh is a white dust.
The cars pass slowly through him, & the boy keeps
Tapping at the glass, unable to tell his story.

Larry Levis

Elegy For Whatever Had A Pattern In It

Now that the Summer of Love has become the moss of tunnels
And the shadowy mouths of tunnels & all the tunnels lead into the city,

I'm going to put the one largely forgotten, swaying figure of Ediesto Huerta
Right in front of you so you can watch him swamp fruit

Out of an orchard in the heat of an August afternoon, I'm going to let you

Keep your eyes on him as he lifts & swings fifty-pound boxes of late
Elberta peaches up to me where I'm standing on a flatbed trailer & breathing in
Tractor exhaust so thick it bends the air, bends things seen through it

So that they seem to swim through the air.

It is a lousy job, & no one has to do it, & we do it.

We do it so that I can show you even what isn't there,
What's hidden. And signed by Time itself. And set spinning,

And is only a spider, after all, with its net waiting for what falls,
For what flies into it, & ages, & turns gray in a matter of minutes. The web
Is nothing's blueprint, bleached by the sun & whitened by it, it's what's left

After we've vanished, after we become what falls apart when anyone

Touches it, eyelash & collarbone dissolving into air, & time touching
The boxes we are wrapped in like gifts & splintering them

Into wood again, at the edge of a wood.

2

Black Widow is a name no one ever tinkered with or tried to change.
If you turn her on her back you can see the blood red hourglass figure

She carries on her belly,

Small as the design of a pirate I saw once on a tab of blotter acid

Before I took half of it, & a friend took the other, & then the two of us

Walked down to the empty post office beside the lake to look,

For some reason, at the wanted posters. We liked a little drama
In the ordinary then. Now a spider's enough.

And this one, in the legend she inhabits, is famous, & the male dies.
She eats its head after the eggs are fertilized.

It's the hourglass on her belly I remember, & the way the figure of it,
Figure eight of Time & Infinity, looked like something designed,

Etched or embossed upon the slick undershell, & the way there was,
The first time I saw it, a stillness in the pattern that was not
The stillness of the leaves or the stillness of the sky over the leaves.

After the male dies she goes off & the eggs

Live in the fraying sail

Of an abandoned web strung up in the corner of a picking box or beneath
Some slowly yellowing grape leaf among hundreds of other
Leaves, in autumn, the eggs smaller than the o in this typescript

Or a handwritten apostrophe in ink.

What do they represent but emptiness, some gold camp settlement
In the Sierras swept clean by smallpox, & wind?

Canal school with its three rooms, its bell & the rope you rang it with
And no one there in the empty sunlight, ring & after ring & echo.

It magnifies & I can't explain it.

Piedra, Conejo, Parlier. Stars & towns, blown fire & wind.
Deneb & Altair, invisible kindling, nothing above nothing.

It magnifies & I can't explain it.

3

Expressionless spinster, carrying Time's signature preserved & signed
In blood & hidden beneath you, you move two steps
To the right & hold still, then one step to the left,

And hold still again, motionless as the web you wait in.

Motionless as the story you wait in & inhabit but did not spin
And did not repeat. You wait in the beehive hairdo of the girl
Sitting across from me in class, wait in your eggs,
4

Wait in the hair the girl teases & sprays once more at recess.

Lipstick, heels, tight sweater, leather anklet.

The story has no point but stillness itself, absence in a school desk,
The hacked and scratched names visible in the varnished wood,

No one there, the bell with its ring & after ring & echo.

In class, I remember, she would look back at me with a gaze deeper
Than calm, blanker than a pond's scummed & motionless surface,
Beneath which there was nothing, nothing taking the shape of someone

Who had already drowned but could not die, & so sat in class
Because she had to, because that was the law.

Mrs. Avery went on & on at the blackboard so we could know
Who Magellan & Vizcaino had been, or sometimes she would make

The boy who spoke only Spanish read from a book,
Watch him as he used his forefinger to point at each syllable

He would read, read & mispronounce, & stumble over, & go on.
§

And this isn't much of a story either, but it's one I know:

One afternoon in August, two black widow spiders bit Ediesto Huerta.
He killed them both & went on working,

Went on swinging the boxes up to me. In a few minutes the sweat
Bathed his face until it glistened, & still he went on working;
And when I asked him to stop he would not & instead

Seemed to begin to dance slowly in the rhythms of the work,
Swing & heft & turning back for another box, then

Swing, heft, & turning back again. And within a half hour or so,

Without him resting once but merely swinging box after box

Of peaches up to me in the heat, the fever broke.

5

In the middle of turning away again, he stopped dancing,
He stopped working. He seemed to be listening to something, & then

He passed out & fell flat on his back. It looked as if he had gone to sleep
For a moment. I let the idling tractor sputter & die, & by the time

I reached him, he had awakened, & in the next moment, his face

Began twitching, his arms & legs danced to something without music
And then stiffened, his jaws clenched & his eyes fluttered open
And turned a pure white. I made a stick from a peach limb & tore

The leaves & shoots off it & stuck it between his teeth

As I heard one was supposed to, & in this way, almost
Killed him by suffocation, & so took the stick out & threw it away.

And later lifted him by the one arm he extended to me & pulled him up onto
The bed of the trailer. He dangled his legs off the rear of it.

We sat there, saying nothing.

It was so quiet we could hear the birds around us in the trees.

And then he turned to me, & addressing me in a name as old as childhood,
Said, 'Hey Cowboy, you wanna cigarette?'

§

In the story, no one can remember whether it was car theft or burglary,
But in fact, Ediesto Huerta was tried & convicted of something, & so, afterward,
Became motionless & silent in the web spun around him by misfortune.

In the penitentiary the lights stay on forever,

Cell after cell after cell, they call their names out, caught in time.

Ring, & after ring, & echo.

In the story, the girl always dies of spider bites,
When in fact she disappeared by breaking into the jagged pieces of glass
Littering the roadsides & glinting in the empty light that shines there. 6

All we are is representation, what we appear to be & are, & are not,
And representation is all we remember,

Something hesitating & looking back & caught for a moment.

God in the design on a spider's belly, standing for time & infinity,
Looks back, looks back just once, then never again.

We go without a trace, I am thinking. We go & there's no one there,
No one to meet us on the long drive lined with orange trees,
Cypresses, the bleaching fronds of palm trees,

And though the town is still there when I return to it, when I'm gone
The track is empty beside the station, & the station is boarded up,
Boarded over, the town is overgrown with leaves, with weeds

Tall as windowsills, window glass out & dark inside the shops.

The classrooms & school are gone & the bell, & the rope
To ring it with, & the boy reading from the book, forefinger
On a syllable he can't pronounce & stumbles over again & again.

§

All we are is representation, what we are & are not,

Clear & then going dark again, all we are
Is the design or insignia that misrepresents what we are, & stays

Behind, & looks back at us without expression, empty road in sunlight.
I once drove in a '48 Jimmy truck with three tons of fruit
On it & the flooring beneath the clutch so worn away I could see

The road go past beneath me, the oil flecked light & shadow

Picking up speed. Angel & Johnny Dominguez, Ediesto Huerta,
Jaime Vaca & Coronado Solares, Querido Flacco

7

And the one called Dead Rat & the one called Camelias;

We go without a trace, I am thinking.

§

Today you were lying in bed, drinking tea, reading the newspaper,
A look of concentration on your face, of absorption in some

Story or other.

It looked so peaceful, you reading, the bed, the sunlight over everything.

There is a blueprint of something never finished, something I'll never
Find my way out of, some web where the light rocks, back & forth,
Holding me in a time that's gone, bee at the windowsill & the cold

Coming back as it has to, tapping at the glass.

The figure in the hourglass & the body swinging in the rhythm of its work.
The body reclining in bed, forgetting what it is, & who.

While the night goes on with its work, the stars & the shapes they make,
Cold vein in the leaf & in the wind,

What are we but what we offer up?

Gifts we give, things for oblivion to look at, & puzzle over, & set aside.

Oblivion resting his cheek against a child's striped rubber ball
In the photograph I have of him, head on the table & resting his cheek
Against the cool surface of the ball, the one that is finished spinning, the one

He won't give back.

Oblivion who has my face in the photograph, my cheek resting
Against a child's striped ball.

Oblivion with his blown fires, & empty towns...

Oblivion who would be nothing without us, I am thinking,
8

As if we're put on the earth to forget the ending, & wander.
And walk alone. And walk in the midst of great crowds,

And never come back.

Larry Levis

Elegy With A Bridle In Its Hand

One was a bay cowhorse from Piedra & the other was a washed out palomino
And both stood at the rail of the corral & both went on aging
In each effortless tail swish, the flies rising, then congregating again

Around their eyes & muzzles & withers.

Their front teeth were by now as yellow as antique piano keys & slanted to the
angle
Of shingles on the maze of sheds & barn around them; their puckered

Chins were round & black as frostbitten oranges hanging unpicked from the limbs
Of trees all through winter like a comment of winter itself on everything
That led to it & found gradually the way out again.

In the slowness of time. Black time to white, & rind to blossom.
Deity is in the details & we are details among other details & we long to be

Teased out of ourselves. And become all of them.

The bay had worms once & had acquired the habit of drinking orange soda
From an uptilted bottle & nibbling cookies from the flat of a hand, & like to do
Nothing else now, & the palomino liked to do nothing but gaze off

At traffic going past on the road beyond vineyards & it would follow each car
With a slight turning of its neck, back & forth, as if it were a thing

Of great interest to him.

If I rode them, the palomino would stumble & wheeze when it broke
Into a trot & would relapse into a walk after a second or two & then stop
Completely & without cause; the bay would keep going though it creaked

Underneath me like a rocking chair of dry, frail wood, & when I knew it could no
longer
Continue but did so anyway, or when the palomino would stop & then take

Only a step or two when I nudged it forward again, I would slip off either one of
them,
Riding bareback, & walk them slowly back, letting them pause when they wanted

to.

At dawn in winter sometimes there would be a pane of black ice covering
The surface of the water trough & they would nudge it with their noses or
muzzles,
And stare at it as if they were capable of wonder or bewilderment.

They were worthless. They were the motionless dusk & the motionless

Moonlight, & in the moonlight they were other worlds. Worlds uninhabited
And without visitors. Worlds that would cock an ear a moment
When the migrant workers come back at night to the sheds they were housed in

And turn a radio on, but only for a moment before going back to whatever

Wordless & tuneless preoccupation involved them.

The palomino was called Misfit & the bay was named Querido Flacco,
And the names of some of the other shapes had been Rockabye
And Ojo Pendejo & Cue Ball & Back Door Peter & Frenchfry & Sandman

And Rolling Ghost & Anastasia.

Death would come for both of them with its bridle of clear water in hand
And they would not look up from grazing on some patch of dry grass or even

Acknowledge it much; & for a while I began to think that the world

Rested on a limitless ossuary of horses where their bones & skulls stretched
And fused until only the skeleton of one enormous horse underlay
The smoke of cities & the cold branches of trees & the distant

Whine of traffic on the interstate.

If I & by implication therefore anyone looked at them long enough at dusk
Or in moonlight he would know the idea of heaven & of life everlasting
Was so much blown straw or momentary confetti

At the unhappy wedding of a sister.

Heaven was neither the light nor was it the air, & if it took a physical form
It was splintered lumber no one could build anything with.

Heaven was a weight behind the eyes & one would have to stare right through it
Until he saw the air itself, just air, the clarity that took the shackles from his eyes
And the taste of the bit from his mouth & knocked the rider off his back

So he could walk for once in his life.

Or just stand there for a moment before he became something else, some
Flyspeck on the wall of a passing & uninteruptible history whose sounds claimed
To be a cheering from bleachers but were actually no more than the noise

Of cars entering the mouths of a tunnel.

And in the years that followed he would watch them in the backstretch or the far
turn

At Santa Anita or Del Mar. Watch the way they made it all seem effortless,

Watch the way they were explosive & untiring.

And then watch the sun fail him again & slip from the world, & watch
The stands slowly empty. As if all moments came back to this one, inexplicably
To this one out of all he might have chosen-Heaven with ashes in its hair

And filling what were once its eyes-this one with its torn tickets
Littering the aisles & the soft racket the wind made. This one. Which was his.

And if the voice of a broken king were to come in the dusk & whisper
To the world, that grandstand with its thousands of empty seats,

Who among the numberless you have become desires this moment

Which comprehends nothing more than loss & fragility & the fleeing of flesh?
He would have to look up at the quickening dark & say: Me. I do. It's mine.

Larry Levis

Elegy With A Chimneysweep Falling Inside It

Those twenty-six letters filling the blackboard
Compose the dark, compose
The illiterate summer sky & its stars as they appear

One by one, above the schoolyard.

If the soul had a written history, nothing would have happened:
A bird would still be riding the back of a horse,

And the horse would go on grazing in a field, & the gleaners,

At one with the land, the wind, the sun examining
Their faces, would go on working,

Each moment forgotten in the swipe of a scythe.

But the walls of the labyrinth have already acquired
Their rose tint from the blood of slaves
Crushed into the stone used to build them, & the windows

Of stained glass are held in place by the shriek

And sighing body of a falling chimneysweep through
The baked & blackened air. This ash was once a village,

That snowflake, time itself.

But until the day it is permitted to curl up in a doorway,
And try to sleep, the snow falling just beyond it,

There's nothing for it to do:

The soul rests its head in its hands & stares out
From its desk at the trash-littered schoolyard,

It stays where it was left.
When the window fills with pain, the soul bears witness,
But it doesn't write. Nor does it write home

Having no need to, having no home.
In this way, & in no other

Was the soul gradually replaced by the tens of thousands
Of things meant to represent it—

All of which proclaimed, or else lamented, its absence.

Until, in the drone of auditoriums & lecture halls, it became
No more than the scraping of a branch
Against the side of a house, no more than the wincing

Of a patient on a couch, or the pinched, nasal tenor
Of the strung-out addict's voice,

While this sound of scratching, this tapping all night,
Enlarging the quiet instead of making a music within it,

Is just a way of joining one thing to another,

Myself to whoever it is—sitting there in the schoolroom,

Sitting there while also being led through the schoolyard
Where prisoners are exercising in the cold light—

A way of joining or trying to join one thing to another,
So that the stillness of the clouds & the sky

Opening beneath the blindfold of the prisoner, & the cop
Who leads him toward it, toward the blank

Sail of the sky at the end of the world, are bewildered

So that everything, in this moment, bewilders

Them: the odd gentleness each feels in the hand
Of the other, & how they don't stop walking, not now

Not for anything.

Larry Levis

Family Romance

Sister once of weeds & a dark water that held still
In ditches reflecting the odd,
Abstaining clouds that passed, & kept
Their own counsel, we
Were different, we kept our own counsel.
Outside the tool shed in the noon heat, while our father
Ground some piece of metal
That would finally fit, with grease & an hour of pushing,
The needs of the mysterious Ford tractor,
We argued out, in adolescence,
Whole systems of mathematics, ethics,
And finally agreed that altruism,
Whose long vowel sounded like the pigeons,
Roosting stupidly & about to be shot
In the barn, was impossible
If one was born a Catholic. The Swedish
Lutherans, whom the nuns called
"Statue smashers," the Japanese on
Neighboring farms, were, we guessed,
A little better off
When I was twelve, I used to stare at weeds
Along the road, at the way they kept trembling
Long after a car had passed;
Or at gnats in families hovering over
Some rotting peaches, & wonder why it was
I had been born a human.
Why not a weed, or a gnat?
Why not a horse, or a spider? And why an American?
I did not think that anything could choose me
To be a Larry Levis before there even was
A Larry Levis. It was strange, but not strange enough
To warrant some design.
On the outside,
The barn, with flaking paint, was still off-white.
Inside, it was always dark, all the way up
To the rafters where the pigeons moaned,
I later thought, as if in sexual complaint,
Or sexual abandon; I never found out which.
When I walked in with a 12-gauge & started shooting,

They fell, like gray fruit, at my feet—
Fat, thumping things that grew quieter
When their eyelids, a softer gray, closed,
Part of the way, at least,
And their friends or lovers flew out a kind of skylight
Cut for loading hay.
I don't know, exactly, what happened then.
Except my sister moved to Switzerland.
My brother got a job
With Colgate-Palmolive.
He was selling soap in Lodi, California.
Later, in his car, & dressed
To die, or live again, forever,
I drove to my own, first wedding.
I smelled the stale boutonniere in my lapel,
A deceased young flower.
I wondered how my brother's Buick
Could go so fast, &
Still questioning, or catching, a last time,
An old chill from childhood,
I thought: why me, why her, & knew it wouldn't last.

Larry Levis

Fish

The cop holds me up like a fish;
he feels the huge bones
surrounding my eyes,
and he runs a thumb under them,

lifting my eyelids
as if they were
envelopes filled with the night.
Now he turns

my head back and forth, gently,
until I'm so tame and still
I could be a tiny, plastic
skull left on the

dashboard of a junked car.
By now he's so sure of me
he chews gum,
and drops his flashlight to his side;

he could be cleaning a trout
while the pines rise into the darkness,
though tonight trout
are freezing into bits of stars

under the ice. When he lets me go
I feel numb. I feel like
a fish burned by his touch, and turn
and slip into the cold

night rippling with neons,
and the razor blades
of the poor,
and the torn mouths on posters.

Once, I thought even through this
I could go quietly as a star turning over and over
in the deep truce of its light.

Now, I must
go on repeating the last, filthy
words on the lips
of this shunken head

shining out of its death in the moon—
until trout surface
with their petrified, round eyes,
and the stars begin moving.

Larry Levis

For Zbigniew Herbert, Summer, 1971, Los Angeles

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

*

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

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

*

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

*

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

But some things are not possible on the earth.
And that is why people make poems about the dead.
And the dead watch over then, until they are finished:
Until their hands feel like glass on the page,

And snow collects in the blind eyes of statues.

Larry Levis

In 1969

Some called it the Summer of Love, & although the clustered,
Motionless leaves that overhung the streets looked the same
As ever, the same as they did every summer, in 1967,
Anybody with three dollars could have a vision.
And who wouldn't want to know what it felt like to be
A cedar waxwing landing with a flutter of gray wings
In a spruce tree, & then disappearing into it,
For only three dollars? And now I know; its flight is ecstasy.
No matter how I look at it, I also now know that
The short life of a cedar waxwing is more pure pleasure
Than anyone alive can still be sane, & bear.
And remember, a cedar waxwing doesn't mean a thing,
Qua cedar or qua waxwing, nor could it have earned
That kind of pleasure by working to become a better
Cedar waxwing. They're all the same.
Show me a bad cedar waxwing, for example, & I mean
A really morally corrupted cedar waxwing, & you'll commend
The cage they have reserved for you, resembling heaven.

Some people spent their lives then, having visions.
But in my case, the morning after I dropped mescaline
I had to spray Johnson grass in a vineyard of Thompson Seedless
My father owned—& so, still feeling the holiness of all things
Living, holding the spray gun in one hand & driving with the other,
The tractor pulling the spray rig & its sputtering motor—
Row after row, I sprayed each weed I found
That looked enough like Johnson grass, a thing alive that's good
For nothing at all, with a mixture of malathion & diesel fuel,
And said to each tall weed, as I coated it with a lethal mist,
Dominus vobiscum, & sometimes, mea culpa, until
It seemed boring to apologize to weeds, & insincere as well.
For in a day or so, no more than that, the weeds would turn
Disgusting hues of yellowish orange & wither away. I still felt
The bird's flight in my body when I thought about it, the wing ache,
Lifting heaven, locating itself somewhere just above my slumped
Shoulders, & part of me taking wind. I'd feel it at odd moments
After that on those long days I spent shoveling vines, driving trucks
And tractors, helping swamp fruit out of one orchard
Or another, but as the summer went on, I felt it less and less.

As the summer went on, some were drafted, some enlisted
In a generation that would not stop falling, a generation
Of leaves sticking to body bags, & when they turned them
Over, they floated back to us on television, even then,
In the Summer of Love, in 1967,
When riot police waited beyond the doors of perception,
And the best thing one could do was get arrested.

Larry Levis

In A Country

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

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

Larry Levis

Larry Levis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Said it was going
over to your place.

Larry Levis

Readings In French

1.

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

2.

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

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

3.

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

Larry Levis

Signs

All night I dreamed of my home,
of the roads that are so long
and straight they die in the middle—
among the spines of elderly weeds
on either side, among the dead cats,
the ants who are all eyes, the suitcase
thrown open, sprouting failures.

2.

And this evening in the garden
I find the winter
inside a snail shell, rigid and
cool, a little stubborn temple,
its one visitor gone.

3.

If there were messages or signs,
I might hear now a voice tell me
to walk forever, to ask
the mold for pardon, and one
by one I would hear out my sins,
hear they are not important—that I am
part of this rain
drumming its long fingers, and
of the roadside stone refusing
to blink, and of the coyote
nailed to the fence with its
long grin.

And when there are no messages
the dead lie still—
their hands crossed so strangely
like knives and forks after supper.

4.

I stay up late listening.
My feet tap the floor,
they begin a tiny dance
which will outlive me.
They turn away from this poem.
It is almost Spring.

Larry Levis

The Clearing Of The Land: An Epitaph

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

That anchored them to soil.

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

What I like, what I

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

The summer flies away,

And the woman in the flower-print dress hemmed

With stains

A half mile off

Is the authoress of no more than smoke rising,

Her sole diary & only publication,

From a distant chimney.

They have perhaps a year or two

Left of this

Before history begins to edit them into

Something without smoke or flies, something

Beyond all recognition.

Larry Levis

The Future Of Hands

All winter
The trees held up their silent hives
As if they mattered.
But on one main street of bars and lights,
I watched a woman who had begged for days
Throw all the coins back, insulted,
Into the crowd,
And then each cheap stone on her necklace,
As if they were confetti
At a bitter wedding,
And then her stained blouse.
I smiled, then, at her dignity.
But when the night came
With only its usual stars to show,
She was applauded and spat on,
Or those passing stepped around her,
Avoiding her body
As if it had become private, or pure.
When the police arrived,
Sniveling about the cold day she had chosen
To strip,
Her face was a brown jewel,
And I knew the hands
Of the police would have to close now,
On this body abandoned to wind,
Just as her hands closed, finally,
On wind that would have nothing
To do with her,
And never had.

*

I know that wind
Had nothing to do with longing.
I have seen that, even in the eyes
Of girls across a lunch counter--
A desire to be anywhere that wasn't
Texas, and waiting on tables--
Their eyes making a pact

With the standing, staring wheat
About to be turned back into the black soil
That spreads everywhere when no one is watching.

And writing this,
I stare at my hands,
Which are the chroniclers of my death,
Which pull me into this paper
Each night, as onto a bed of silk sheets,
And the woman gone.

After two hours of work,
I do not know if there ever was a woman.

I watch the flies buzz at the sill.

*

Or, if I sleep,
I must choose between two dreams.

In one of them, my hands move calmly
Over a woman's waist, or lift
In speech the way birds rise or settle
Over a marsh, over nesting places.

In the other dream,
There are no nesting places,
The birds are white, and scavenging.
They lift negligently over the town in wind,
Like paper, like the death of paper.
They dip and rise
As if there had never been a heaven.
Beneath them, it is summer.
It is the same town I was born in.
And in its one bar
The man selling illegal human hair from Mexico,
The hair of brides mixed
With the hair of the dead,
Argues all day over the price.

Larry Levis

The Map

Applying to Heavy Equipment School
I marched farther into the Great Plains
And refused to come out.
I threw up a few scaffolds of disinterest.
Around me in the fields, the hogs grunted
And lay on their sides.

You came with a little water and went away.
The glass is still on the table,
And the paper,
And the burned scaffolds.

*

You were bent over the sink, washing your stockings.
I came up behind you like the night sky behind the town.
You stood frowning at your knuckles
And did not speak.

*

At night I lie still, like Bolivia.
My furnaces turn blue.
My forests go dark.
You are a low range of hills, a Paraguay.
Now the clouds cover us both.
It is raining and the movie houses are open.

Larry Levis

The Oldest Living Thing In L.A.

At Wilshire & Santa Monica I saw an opossum
Trying to cross the street. It was late, the street
Was brightly lit, the opossum would take
A few steps forward, then back away from the breath
Of moving traffic. People coming out of the bars
Would approach, as if to help it somehow.
It would lift its black lips & show them
The reddened gums, the long rows of incisors,
Teeth that went all the way back beyond
The flames of Troy & Carthage, beyond sheep
Grazing rock-strewn hills, fragments of ruins
In the grass at San Vitale. It would back away
Delicately & smoothly, stepping carefully
As it always had. It could mangle someone's hand
In twenty seconds. Mangle it for good. It could
Sever it completely from the wrist in forty.
There was nothing to be done for it. Someone
Or other probably called the LAPD, who then
Called Animal Control, who woke a driver, who
Then dressed in mailed gloves, the kind of thing
Small knights once wore into battle, who gathered
Together his pole with a noose on the end,
A light steel net to snare it with, someone who hoped
The thing would have vanished by the time he got there.

Larry Levis

The Poem You Asked For

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Said it was going
over to your place.

Larry Levis

The Poet At Seventeen

My youth? I hear it mostly in the long, volleying
Echoes of billiards in the pool hall where
I spent it all, extravagantly, believing
My delicate touch on a cue would last for years.

Outside the vineyards vanished under rain,
And the trees held still or seemed to hold their breath
When the men I worked with, pruning orchards, sang
Their lost songs: Amapola; La Paloma;

Jalisco; No Te Rajes -- the corny tunes
Their sons would just as soon forget, at recess,
Where they lounged apart in small groups of their own.
Still, even when they laughed, they laughed in Spanish.

I hated high school then, & on weekends drove
A tractor through the widowed fields. It was so boring
I memorized poems above the engine's monotone.
Sometimes whole days slipped past without my noticing.

And birds of all kinds flew in front of me then.
I learned to tell them apart by their empty squabbings,
The slightest change in plumage, or the inflection
Of a call. And why not admit it? I was happy.

Then, I believed in no one. I had the kind
Of solitude the world usually allows
Only to kings & criminals who are extinct,
Who disdain this world, & who rot, corrupt & shallow

As fields I disced: I turned up the same gray
Earth for years. Still, the land made a glum raisin
Each autumn, & made that little hell of days --
The vines must have seemed like cages to the Mexicans.

Who were paid seven cents a tray for the grapes
They picked. Inside the vines it was hot, & spiders
Strummed their emptiness. Black Widow, Daddy Longlegs.
The vine canes whipped our faces. None of us cared.

And the girls I talked to after class
Sailed by, then each night lay enthroned in my bed,
With nothing on but the jewels of their embarrassment.
Eyes, lips, dreams. No one. The sky & the road.

A life like that? It seemed to go on forever --
Reading poems in school, then driving a stuttering tractor
Warm afternoons, then billiards on blue October
Nights. The thick stars. But mostly now I remember

The trees, wearing their mysterious yellow sullenness
Like party dresses. And parties I didn't attend.
And then the first ice hung like spider lattices
Or the embroideries of Great Aunt No One,

And then the first dark entering the trees --
And inside, the adults with their cocktails before dinner,
The way they always seemed afraid of something,
And sat so rigidly, although the land was theirs.

Larry Levis

The Widening Spell Of The Leaves

--The Carpathian Frontier, October, 1968
--for my brother

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

Turning to dust while holding a small sword
At attention forever, there wasn't much to look at.
Wind, leaves, goats, the higher passes
Locked in stone, the peasants with their fate
Embroidering a stillness into them,
And a spell over all things in that landscape,
Like . . .
That was the trouble; it couldn't be
Compared to anything else, not even the sleep
Of some asylum at a wood's edge with the sound
Of a pond's spillway beside it. But as each cramp
Grew worse & lasted longer than the one before,
It was hard to keep myself aloof from the threadbare
World walking on that road. After all,
Even as they moved, the peasants, the herds of goats
And cattle, the spiralling leaves, at least were part
Of that spell, that stillness.
After a while,
The villages grew even poorer, then thinned out,
Then vanished entirely. An hour later,
There were no longer even the goats, only wind,
Then more & more leaves blown over the road, sometimes
Covering it completely for a second.
And yet, except for a random oak or some brush
Writhing out of the ravine I drove beside,
The trees had thinned into rock, into large,
Tough blonde rosettes of fading pasture grass.
Then that gave out in a bare plateau. . . . And then,
Easing the Dacia down a winding grade
In second gear, rounding a long, funneled curve--
In a complete stillness of yellow leaves filling
A wide field--like something thoughtlessly,
Mistakenly erased, the road simply ended.
I stopped the car. There was no wind now.
I expected that, & though I was sick & lost,
I wasn't afraid. I should have been afraid.
To this day I don't know why I wasn't.
I could hear time cease, the field quietly widen.
I could feel the spreading stillness of the place
Moving like something I'd witnessed as a child,
Like the ancient, armored leisure of some reptile
Gliding, gray-yellow, into the slightly tepid,

Unidentical gray-brown stillness of the water--
Something blank & unresponsive in its tough,
Pimpled skin--seen only a moment, then unseen
As it submerged to rest on mud, or glided just
Beneath the lustreless, calm yellow leaves
That clustered along a log, or floated there
In broken ringlets, held by a gray froth
On the opaque, unbroken surface of the pond,
Which reflected nothing, no one.
And then I remembered.
When I was a child, our neighbors would disappear.
And there wasn't a pond of crocodiles at all.
And they hadn't moved. They couldn't move. They
Lived in the small, fenced-off backwater
Of a canal. I'd never seen them alive. They
Were in still photographs taken on the Ivory Coast.
I saw them only once in a studio when
I was a child in a city I once loved.
I was afraid until our neighbor, a photographer,
Explained it all to me, explained how far
Away they were, how harmless; how they were praised
In rituals as "powers." But they had no "powers,"
He said. The next week he vanished. I thought
Someone had cast a spell & that the crocodiles
Swam out of the pictures on the wall & grew
Silently & multiplied & then turned into
Shadows resting on the banks of lakes & streams
Or took the shapes of fallen logs in campgrounds
In the mountains. They ate our neighbor, Mr. Hirata.
They ate his whole family. That is what I believed,
Then. . .that someone had cast a spell. I did not
Know childhood was a spell, or that then there
Had been another spell, too quiet to hear,
Entering my city, entering the dust we ate. . . .
No one knew it then. No one could see it,
Though it spread through lawnless miles of housing tracts,
And the new, bare, treeless streets; it slipped
Into the vacant rows of warehouses & picked
The padlocked doors of working-class bars
And union halls & shuttered, empty diners.
And how it clung! (forever, if one had noticed)
To the brothel with the pastel tassels on the shade

Of an unlit table lamp. Farther in, it feasted
On the decaying light of failing shopping centers;
It spilled into the older, tree-lined neighborhoods,
Into warm houses, sealing itself into books
Of bedtime stories read each night by fathers--
The books lying open to the flat, neglected
Light of dawn; & it settled like dust on windowsills
Downtown, filling the smug cafés, schools,
Banks, offices, taverns, gymnasiums, hotels,
Newsstands, courtrooms, opium parlors, Basque
Restaurants, Armenian steam baths,
French bakeries, & two of the florists' shops--
Their plate glass windows smashed forever.
Finally it tried to infiltrate the exact
Center of my city, a small square bordered
With palm trees, olives, cypresses, a square
Where no one gathered, not even thieves or lovers.
It was a place which no longer had any purpose,
But held itself aloof, I thought, the way
A deaf aunt might, from opinions, styles, gossip.
I liked it there. It was completely lifeless,
Sad & clear in what seemed always a perfect,
Windless noon. I saw it first as a child,
Looking down at it from that as yet
Unvandalized, makeshift studio.
I remember leaning my right cheek against
A striped beach ball so that Mr. Hirata--
Who was Japanese, who would be sent the next week
To a place called Manzanar, a detention camp
Hidden in stunted pines almost above
The Sierra timberline--could take my picture.
I remember the way he lovingly relished
Each camera angle, the unwobbling tripod,
The way he checked each aperture against
The light meter, in love with all things
That were not accidental, & I remember
The care he took when focusing; how
He tried two different lens filters before
He found the one appropriate for that
Sensual, late, slow blush of afternoon
Falling through the one broad bay window.
I remember holding still & looking down

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

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

Larry Levis

Those Graves In Rome

There are places where the eye can starve,
But not here. Here, for example, is
The Piazza Navona, & here is his narrow room
Overlooking the Steps & the crowds of sunbathing
Tourists. And here is the Protestant Cemetery
Where Keats & Joseph Severn join hands
Forever under a little shawl of grass
And where Keats's name isn't even on
His gravestone, because it is on Severn's,
And Joseph Severn's infant son is buried
Two modest, grassy steps behind them both.
But you'd have to know the story--how bedridden
Keats wanted the inscription to be
Simple, & unbearable: "Here lies one
Whose name is writ in water." On a warm day,
I stood here with my two oldest friends.
I thought, then, that the three of us would be
Indissoluble at the end, & also that
We would all die, of course. And not die.
And maybe we should have joined hands at that
Moment. We didn't. All we did was follow
A lame man in a rumpled suit who climbed
A slight incline of graves blurring into
The passing marble of other graves to visit
The vacant home of whatever is not left
Of Shelley & Trelawney. That walk uphill must
Be hard if you can't walk. At the top, the man
Wheezed for breath; sweat beaded his face,
And his wife wore a look of concern so
Habitual it seemed more like the way
Our bodies, someday, will have to wear stone.
Later that night, the three of us strolled,
Our arms around each other, through the Via
Del Corso & toward the Piazza di Spagna
As each street grew quieter until
Finally we heard nothing at the end
Except the occasional scrape of our own steps,
And so said good-bye. Among such friends,
Who never allowed anything, still alive,

To die, I'd almost forgotten that what
Most people leave behind them disappears.
Three days later, staying alone in a cheap
Hotel in Naples, I noticed a child's smeared
Fingerprint on a bannister. It
Had been indifferently preserved beneath
A patina of varnish applied, I guessed, after
The last war. It seemed I could almost hear
His shout, years later, on that street. But this
Is speculation, & no doubt the simplest fact
Could shame me. Perhaps the child was from
Calabria, & went back to it with
A mother who failed to find work, & perhaps
The child died there, twenty years ago,
Of malaria. It was so common then--
The children crying to the doctors for quinine.
And to the tourists, who looked like doctors, for quinine.
It was so common you did not expect an aria,
And not much on a gravestone, either--although
His name is on it, & weathered stone still wears
His name--not the way a girl might wear
The too large, faded blue workshirt of
A lover as she walks thoughtfully through
The Via Fratelli to buy bread, shrimp,
And wine for the evening meal with candles &
The laughter of her friends, & later the sweet
Enkindling of desire; but something else, something
Cut simply in stone by hand & meant to last
Because of the way a name, any name,
Is empty. And not empty. And almost enough.

Anonymous submission.

Larry Levis

Winter Stars

My father once broke a man's hand
Over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man,
Ruben Vasquez, wanted to kill his own father
With a sharpened fruit knife, & he held
The curved tip of it, lightly, between his first
Two fingers, so it could slash
Horizontally, & with surprising grace,
Across a throat. It was like a glinting beak in a hand,
And, for a moment, the light held still
On those vines. When it was over,
My father simply went in & ate lunch, & then, as always,
Lay alone in the dark, listening to music.
He never mentioned it.

I never understood how anyone could risk his life,
Then listen to Vivaldi.

Sometimes, I go out into this yard at night,
And stare through the wet branches of an oak
In winter, & realize I am looking at the stars
Again. A thin haze of them, shining
And persisting.

It used to make me feel lighter, looking up at them.
In California, that light was closer.
In a California no one will ever see again,
My father is beginning to die. Something
Inside him is slowly taking back
Every word it ever gave him.
Now, if we try to talk, I watch my father
Search for a lost syllable as if it might
Solve everything, & though he can't remember, now,
The word for it, he is ashamed...
If you think of the mind as a place continually
Visited, a whole city placed behind
The eyes, & shining, I can imagine, now, its end-
As when the lights go off, one by one,
In a hotel at night, until at last
All the travelers will be asleep, or until

Even the thin glow from the lobby is a kind
Of sleep; & while the woman behind the desk
Is applying more lacquer to her nails,
You can almost believe that the elevator,
As it ascends, must open upon starlight.

I stand out on the street, & do not go in.
That was our agreement, at my birth.

And for years I believed
That what went unsaid between us became empty,
And pure, like starlight, & that it persisted.

I got it all wrong.
I wound up believing in words the way a scientist
Believes in carbon, after death.

Tonight, I'm talking to you, father, although
It is quiet here in the Midwest, where a small wind,
The size of a wrist, wakes the cold again—
Which may be all that's left of you & me.

When I left home at seventeen, I left for good.

That pale haze of stars goes on & on,
Like laughter that has found a final, silent shape
On a black sky. It means everything
It cannot say. Look, it's empty out there, & cold.
Cold enough to reconcile
Even a father, even a son.

Larry Levis