

# Denise Levertov

St. John's Cathedral

August 9, 2020



## Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

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- I do not believe that a violent imitation of the horrors of our times is the concern of poetry. Horrors are taken for granted. Disorder is ordinary. People in general take more and more “in their stride” — the hides grow thicker. I long for poems of an inner harmony in utter contrast to the chaos in which they exist. Insofar as poetry has a social function it is to awaken sleepers by other means than shock. (1960)
- Religion is “the impulse to kneel in wonder...the impulse to kiss the ground...the sense of awe. The felt presence of some mysterious force, whether it be what one calls beauty, or perhaps just the sense of the unknown—I don’t mean ‘unknown’ in the sense of we don’t know what the future will bring. I mean the sense of the numinous, whether it’s in a small stone or a large mountain.” (1971)

## ***Overland to the Islands***

Let's go—much as that dog goes,  
intently haphazard. The  
Mexican light on a day that  
'smells like autumn in Connecticut'  
makes iris ripples on his  
black gleaming fur—and that too  
is as one would desire—a radiance  
consorting with the dance.

Under his feet  
rocks and mud, his imagination,  
sniffing,  
engaged in its perceptions—dancing  
edgeways, there's nothing  
the dog disdains on his way,  
nevertheless he  
keeps moving, changing  
pace and approach but  
not direction—'every step an arrival.'

Denise Levertov, *Overland to the  
Islands*, 1958

# The Stream and the Sapphire (1975): The Tide

## *Of Being*

I know this happiness  
is provisional:

the looming presences --  
great suffering, great fear --

withdraw only  
into peripheral vision:

but ineluctable this shimmering  
of wind in the blue leaves:

this flood of stillness  
widening the lake of sky:

this need to dance,  
this need to kneel:  
    this mystery:

## • *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.

# The Stream and the Sapphire (1975): The Tide

- ***Flickering Mind***

- Lord, not you,  
it is I who am absent.  
At first  
belief was a joy I kept in secret,  
stealing alone  
into sacred places:  
a quick glance, and away—and back,  
circling.  
I have long since uttered your name  
but now  
I elude your presence.  
I stop  
to think about you, and my mind  
at once  
like a minnow darts away,  
darts  
into the shadows, into gleams that fret  
unceasing over  
the river's purling and passing.  
Not for one second  
will my self hold still, but wanders  
anywhere,  
everywhere it can turn. Not you,  
it is I who am absent.  
You are the stream, the fish, the light,  
the pulsing shadow,  
you the unchanging presence, in whom all  
moves and changes.  
How can I focus my flickering, perceive  
at the fountain's heart  
the sapphire I know is there?

- ***The Beginning of Wisdom***

- You have brought me so far.
- I know so much. Names, verbs, images. My mind overflows, a drawer that can't close.
- Unscathed among the tortured. Ignorant parchment uninscribed, light strokes only, where a scribe tried out a pen.
- I am so small, a speck of dust moving across the huge world. The world a speck of dust in the universe.
- Are you holding the universe? You hold onto my smallness. How do you grasp it, how does it not slip away?
- I know so little.
- You have brought me so far.



# The Stream and the Sapphire: Conjectures

- ***On the Parables of the Mustard Seed*** (Matt. 17:20; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19)
- Who ever saw the mustard-plant,  
wayside weed or tended crop,  
grow tall as a shrub, let alone a tree, a treeful  
of shade and nests and songs?  
Acres of yellow,  
not a bird of the air in sight.
- No. He who knew  
the west wind brings  
the rain, the south wind  
thunder, who walked the field-paths  
running His hand along wheatstems to glean  
those intimate milky kernels, good  
to break on the tongue,
- was talking of miracle, the seed  
within us, so small  
we take it for worthless, a mustard-seed, dust,  
nothing.  
Glib generations mistake  
the metaphor, not looking at fields and trees,  
not noticing paradox. Mountains  
remain unmoved.
- Faith is rare, He must have been saying,  
prodigious, unique –  
one infinitesimal grain divided  
like loaves and fishes,
- *as if* from a mustard-seed  
a great shade-tree grew. That rare,  
that strange: the kingdom  
a tree. The soul  
a bird. A great concourse of birds  
at home there, wings among yellow flowers.
- The waiting  
kingdom of faith, the seed  
waiting to be sown.



# The Stream and the Sapphire: Fish and a Honeycomb

- Poems in this section:
  - Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis
  - On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX
  - Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell
  - On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus
  - St. Thomas Didymus
  - Ascension

# The Stream and the Sapphire: Fish and a Honeycomb

- *On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX*

- Six hours outstretched in the sun, yes,  
hot wood, the nails, blood trickling  
into the eyes, yes –  
but the thieves on their neighbor crosses  
survived till after the soldiers  
had come to fracture their legs, or longer.  
Why single out the agony? What's  
a mere six hours?  
Torture then, torture now,  
the same, the pain's the same,  
immemorial branding iron,  
electric prod.  
Hasn't a child  
dazed in the hospital ward they reserve  
for the most abused, known worse?  
The air we're breathing,  
these very clouds, ephemeral billows  
languid upon the sky's  
moody ocean, we share  
with women and men who've held out  
days and weeks on the rack –  
and in the ancient dust of the world  
what particles  
of the long tormented,  
what ashes.

- But Julian's lucid spirit leapt  
to the difference:  
perceived why no awe could measure  
that brief day's endless length,  
why among all the tortured  
One only is "King of Grief."

- *The oneing, she saw, the oneing  
with the Godhead* opened Him utterly  
to the pain of all minds, all bodies –  
sands of the sea, of the desert –  
from first beginning  
to last day. The great wonder is  
that the human cells of His flesh and bone  
didn't explode  
when utmost Imagination rose  
in that flood of knowledge. Unique  
in agony, Infinite strength, Incarnate,  
empowered Him to endure  
inside of history,  
through those hours when he took to Himself  
the sum total of anguish and drank  
even the lees of that cup:

within the mesh of the web, Himself  
woven within it, yet seeing it,  
seeing it whole. *Every sorrow and desolation  
He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.*

--Denise Levertov (1923-1997), English/American  
poet, from *Oblique Prayers*, 1984  
Based on Julian's eighth vision.

## Making Peace, by Denise Levertov, from *Breathing the Water*, 1997

- 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.

