

**JOHN LEVY**

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[The following selection of poetry by John Levy will appear in the *Legal Studies Forum*, vol. 31, 2007. It appears here with the expression permission of Mr. Levy.]

**Death**

When you're dead, my seven-  
year-old daughter explained,

one of the first things you do  
is get lessons

on how to be invisible  
so you can come back

as a ghost. And then  
it's not

so different from being  
alive.

I didn't get her words  
verbatim, nor did I say

But you may find out, my  
love, how being alive

you also get lessons  
on what it is like to be invisible.

## **Philip Guston**

As a boy Philip came home. He was 10  
or 11. He came home

then found his father  
had hanged himself.

He was the first to find his father.  
Philip was the youngest of seven.

His father hung himself  
from a rope thrown over a rafter.

He found his father. And he began to draw  
cartoons. He shut

himself in, at home, in a large closet with its one  
light bulb, and he'd draw.

Draw draw draw draw draw draw draw.  
Repeated, it almost begins to sound

like a crow's call, or sound like the opposite of  
snow, nothing white falling from the sky but,

instead, the pencil lead and what hand  
makes appear

out of a hidden place  
or a place that wasn't there before, that only he

could bring to life.

### **I'm Writing a Poem about Death**

Quote Louis Zukofsky about when  
"we will lie as faceless as the grass"

then write about being a pallbearer  
at my uncle's funeral six days ago.

Allyson, four-and-a-half, comes into the kitchen,  
drags a wooden chair next to me, stands on it and looks

into my ear. She says, "You're only  
a skeleton with a costume on."

■  
Death  
gathers  
faces

we're all  
going home

**Poetics**

like that chicken down there  
who has scratched the earth clear  
of weeds and debris  
to find one thing fresh

## **Kaolack, Senegal**

—*August, 1982*

Second biggest city in Senegal, 100,000, but seems a village. Graffiti is all over, sketches, children's drawings (by children?) in pencil, crayon, charcoal, paint. A large-beaked bird, six feet tall, on the exterior wall of the cobbler's little shop. In a bar a penciled man and woman cover a wall as they lean (over the actual jukebox) toward each other.

I take a walk with a young man trying to learn a little English. He wants me to speak to him in English instead of French. As we walk it begins to drizzle. He stops, looks like he is trying to figure something out. Then he asks, seriously, if it rains in America. I solemnly say—Yes. “Then this,” he says, gesturing expansively, “is not news.”

## **In Hills between Villages**

With a shovel, the man down there  
in a black

smoking field of fallen and standing  
stalks. A single blank glance

to our passing train.

■

the widows  
in black  
are at night

yelling to  
each other over  
the dirt road  
on which they live

separately

voices of complaint  
dispute  
lower  
for gossip

the full moon

sometimes a laugh  
usually not joined

dogs from all directions  
yap

one woman sighs as if shifting  
some burden  
they speak  
with such energy breaking

the silence breaking it  
into pieces as small  
as stars

■



Each second, a grain of sand; the accumulation  
forms a beach—*God*, when the wave thunders

**Loss**

to grieve

a loss

someone  
who will never

who will never

for all my  
future

will  
never

come back

who

will

never

**Bill,**

I saw you on the porch today  
writing, slowly bringing  
the poem closer

a kite  
you lost as a child . . .

A whisper  
would've sent it sailing . . .

## **George**

Not

that he doesn't love  
Jesus, worked  
in a church after  
he retired

and when he started to paint  
bought a color-by-number  
Jesus.

But the two purple irises  
and seven yellow daffodils  
in a white bowl

he painted by himself, and on  
a larger canvas. Each

daffodil bell

a shade of green the  
yellow stamen  
stands out in

in the living room.

Jesus  
waits in the back room, on the blue wall  
with icons.

### **Family Get-Together**

Strangers come up to me and ask  
if I'm a poet, my brother Andy says. You do

look like a poet, his wife says, laughing.  
Well, Andy says, turning to me, you're the poet

in the family—anyone ever think you're a poet?  
I mean a stranger. Never once, I answer.

That's cuz, my sister-in-law says,  
you look like a butcher. No offense.

Hey, I'm flattered, I say. Butchers  
are strong, vital, and occasionally handsome.

Weird, Andy says, you look like a butcher  
and you've been a vegetarian for what?

About 32 years, I say. Not eating meat  
makes you look prosaic, Mom says.

No, Dad says, you are what you eat and  
it's the mammals that are the poets.

**Occasionally a poet's name makes a certain**

amount of sense (Pound, Spicer). But  
Levy? An amount taxed? Troops  
mustered? Except

my family pronounces it to rhyme with TV,  
not bevy, so that puts Levy  
into the enormous

Meaningless Name School of Poets, with

Lorine Niedecker a nearby neighbor  
on one side and Kenward  
Elmslie going the other way though he

has the distinction of argu-  
ably  
having a meaningless first

and last as if he himself were hurtling syllables  
“thanks to a blessed motor disturbance in the Heavens”

### **Both of Us Lawyers**

He tells me what he'd  
do. I tell him I'm sure that is  
what he'd do. Trying again, he prefaces  
the same advice with

"If I were you . . ."  
"If you were me," I reply, after  
he completes his sentence,  
"you wouldn't write poetry."

The three of us on this  
long distance call  
laugh: my father, my mother, and me.  
I remember once, years ago,

he surprised me, after I'd asked  
if he believes in life-after-death.  
People wouldn't believe in Heaven, he said,  
with a straight face, if they had enough money.

He filled our house with books  
and I knew how much he loved them, although  
I don't remember him talking to me,  
when I was a child, about that.

If I were he,  
I wouldn't read this  
because it looks like a poem.  
The only books of poetry we had

were by Ogden Nash. But, no,  
if I were he, I would read this  
because, like him, I'd read anything  
by my son.

### **In the Eyes of the Hard**

“In the eyes of the hard” is what  
I read in her letter to the judge.

She was telling the sentencing judge all  
about her life—and her letter,

single-spaced, hand-written, had words  
jammed together. She wrote that she had always tried

to be good “in the eyes of the hard.”  
She’s a heavy woman, plain, her

parents divorced, her own life  
without lovers. All eyes are

hard, I thought, rereading her words.  
That has been her life

and so she embezzled to make her life  
a little better. I reread her words and saw

her h was supposed to be an L  
though this capital L curves

in the middle of its bottom line,  
as if that line has to cover a stone.

And so what looks like an a is an o pushed  
so close to the L and the r

it’s hard to tell what it is. In the eyes of the  
Lord, in the eyes of the hard, for her

there isn’t much difference; she asks  
for probation.



## **Lies**

if a lie is white that  
color means it  
is little, really meaningless

except that it does mean  
the liar wants to avoid  
telling the truth

and then we have the  
beige lies, a little bigger

and so on and so not forth

as the color deepens  
and we get to downright  
or downwrong or simply

down and out deceit, betrayal  
or, to put it sweetly, someone is taking  
advantage

the blue lies, the deep blue  
lies, those are saved for  
love failing

and let's not even talk  
about the two-tone  
and the ones so nuanced

they could be  
Rothkos  
minus the beauty

**Spite**

blame honed  
and thrust

## **Forgiveness**

to give  
again, to someone

whom I'd given to  
before.

To be  
for

giving  
instead of

a  
gainst.

### **Busts of Diego Giacometti**

Alberto Giacometti made busts of his  
brother, over and over  
compressing that face into a slice

pressured, touched, pushed all over.  
Alberto and Diego's mother  
once told Alberto, "You'd

never win a  
beauty contest." Another time she  
in-

formed him  
he looked as if he'd come  
from a land of dark fogs.

He probably didn't  
reply, "Yes, I'm  
your son." Alberto

made Diego look  
like he comes, gouged,  
out of the land of minus.

## Dealt

The rat of spaces. The ace of lies. The ten of  
horror. Deuce of stone. The jack is dressed

in a potato costume, you can see his dark eyes:  
the jack of insanity. The queen of

addictions is almost nude, her bikini top  
old, discolored. The king of lies (there are two cards

for liars) is shown in a small room  
surrounded by corpses. The bumpkeeper

is the dealer, never cheats  
in any way you can detect. You stare,

rarely with disbelief, at each card.  
The nine of despair, six of lust,

four of betrayal, three of shame. Five of  
helplessness. The seven of bitterness and resentment

is a cluttered collage, small  
dark scenes, ugliness. Sometimes

you manage to discard. Sometimes  
you feel free.

## **Sincerity**

A man in an orange jumpsuit, sitting  
in court, knowing he is going to prison  
but not knowing for how long, speaks  
to the judge. The judge had said

this man wrote a convincing letter last time  
when he apologized for fleeing to another state  
while on probation. That was a year ago.  
The judge gave him another chance and the man

ran away to an even more distant place.  
The judge scolds him for writing another  
sincere sounding letter. The man explains, "I was  
meaningful when I wrote that letter."

## **Evolution**

During dinner my six-year-old daughter says  
she doesn't believe any of her

relatives, no matter how  
far back, were monkeys.

My son, nine, says he thinks we are  
related to monkeys and follows that

by declaring he wants to be a Quaker  
because they're

against war.

**Paul Klee, Drafted at 35**

*—for David Miller*

World War I, a red piece of paper from the German government: Klee must enter the infantry. Issued a helmet removed from a corpse. Transfers to flying school, varnishes wings.

Transfers to another flying school, works in the paymaster's office, finally has a place where he can close a door and be alone. His office near the landing strip.

Planes have canvas skin. After the planes crash and the dead are pried out, and/or washed out, Klee walks over to the mess to cut off pieces of unburnt canvas. He paints in a desk drawer he shuts when he hears footsteps.



### **Political Poetry**

changes nothing. I'm glad.  
What if the other side  
had the best poets?

**(after Basho)**

My poems aren't  
really mine. Any more

than a frog  
owns its croak

or its splash as it dives  
beneath the green surface.

You see the surface translated  
into language

ripples. (The frog invisible,  
immersed.)

■  
almond blossoms  
in grey  
dusk  
appear  
as if their tree  
weren't there

**Allyson's View**

My four-year-old daughter  
said of the moth beating  
at our window,  
"It is made of bones and dreams."

## **Naked, Short Poems**

According to Alice Notley, “A short poem  
is peculiarly naked . . .”

Ah, peculiar  
nakedness

keeps

your attention

a bit  
longer.

. . .

The shorter the poem the more  
peculiar

its  
body

parts.

. . .

A long poem  
dressed for winter

as the short one stripped  
to skinny-

dip in the white  
page.

**Monet's Water Lilies**

—*for Susan Arnold*

flowers

floating

*at every hour of the day*

out

*in the lily-white light of the early morning*

of the

*in the bronze haze of noon*

end

*in the violet shadows of late afternoon*

of a life

(quotation by Louis Vauxcelles)

## Autumnal Pilgrimages

—*for my Mother*

Millions  
stepping out  
(as they do

in Kyoto)  
to pay homage to  
each of the local

most celebrated  
trees, trees famous

for bold reach of  
branch or

deep wine-reds mixed  
with gold, or just  
for the bark, a

sycamore's gray  
smooth bark

which has scaled to  
reveal buff  
or orange

## **Emily Dickinson and N**

Emily Dickinson: “. . . to N’s I had an  
especial aversion, as they  
always seemed  
unfinished M’s.”

A world of the  
unfinished  
next to the finished. A  
world, for

her, alive and  
emotional, full of  
seeming, all the way  
down

to where a letter is never  
fulfilled  
no matter where  
it appears.



## **My Client**

who committed his crime  
drunk and then, still  
drunk, confessed to the police  
is angry

that he was indicted, keeps  
telling me that someone else who did  
something much worse  
got off “scotch free.”

The last thing he needs to  
hear is  
his vocabulary is also  
in deep shit.

### **At the Chinese Restaurant**

my eight-year-old daughter asks me,  
“What’s human beef?” “That must be Hunan

beef,” I say. “Oh,” she says, “yeah, you’re right.”  
“Human beef would be illegal,” I add. “Why?”

“Eating people is illegal.” “But  
couldn’t something, like a beef

something, just  
be called

human beef, but  
be made from a cow?”

“Do you think people would want it,”  
I ask. She says

she wants the sweet and sour  
chicken. She always wants that, though

carefully studies every single  
offering, adding each to her world of possibilities.

### **Public Transport, Morning Bus**

A woman reads a paperback novel.  
I wish  
I'd written her book. She's

in her 20s, moving her lips.  
It's seven twelve a.m. If she were reading my  
book of poems, which poem

would I want her to read?  
I don't know. She wears  
no lipstick, the only garish thing about her

is the novel's bright cover and now  
she closes the book and  
her mouth, frowns. It seems

she didn't want to leave those words.  
She doesn't know that, as she read, a man  
in his 50s back here

made her the plot and  
single page  
of his attention.

■  
*longing*: a wish to reach  
awash with that wish

## **Snapshot of Philip Larkin**

Young man, isolated

with his complete  
volume

of  
Yeats pur-

loined

from the  
local

girls'  
school.

### **Wrong Number**

They hear your voice first.  
They wanted someone else.  
So did you. It's a little like  
love gone wrong, but so much faster.

**Han Wu Ti (156-87 B.C.)**

The two lovers in the  
courtyard in autumn

are no longer, as the  
leaves move around them,

making love

& Han Wu Ti  
explains this, saying

*The rustling of the  
silk is discontinued*

### **In Chinese**

put the character “autumn” on top of  
“heart” to make the character

“sorrow.” Wu Wenying, in the 13th century, begins a poem  
by asking what sorrow is made of.

“Autumn on the heart of a man who travels,” he writes  
of being far from home.



### **Vacant Lot Where Empress Once Stood**

In Tucson today, on the bus, I passed a  
razed X-rated club, the lot  
just dirt now

behind a chain-link fence. All the erections  
over the years, pointing and pointless,  
in a place named Empress. As if

any She who has a body we want could rule us  
forever, pull us around by the news of a  
face, and breasts, and all the rest, the dreamed-of

reduced to dirt behind a fence, the chain-link  
like fish-net stockings made of wire, as if air itself  
rises like a woman's legs. Open all night. Just like the

dirt is now, the waiting dirt, the thoughtless, un-  
nipped, omnipotent dirt  
that waits, deep, under every thing we put up.

### **Poem**

We are the authors of this animal,  
the creators of its setting.

The page a white sea.

Our home  
with its great view of the sea.

Any time  
we have

for poems

is a time  
we have good luck.

A time we have  
to listen to.

We are the time of this good luck,  
we are it breathing.

■  
WATCH THE WORLD ARGUE, ARGUE WITH ITSELF

Black ink on an oak table in the law school library.  
Above it, blue ink, in equally blocky letters: PISS OFF!  
Under it, in a small, neatly penciled rounded script:  
Who's going to teach me peace and happiness?

**As**

honest as a bird  
means nothing

to sing like them  
of nothing

but a bird's  
song

surely means  
something

we will probably never  
understand

fully

in that way  
it is like

our lives

### **Clean Monday**

First day of Lent, the day  
kites are flown.

9 a.m. I open my shutters &  
feeling the wind,  
look at the blue for kites.

None, but the old widow  
across the street  
has just let out

her chickens.

At 10:20 a few shapes  
gliding  
in spirals

pigeons,  
taking off from a church on the hill

no one in sight  
holding their strings.

### **My Crow**

I painted my crow green. He said, "You fool,  
I want and will keep my black wings, my killing  
beak, my language  
that reduces nitwits to caw."

## **Moving Through The Desert**

We sang, we had to

but not aloud.

And we rode

mirages

we rode on through.

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Note: The final line of “Occasionally a poet’s name makes a certain” is quoted from a Kenward Elmslie poem.