

JOHN 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.