

JARGON 19

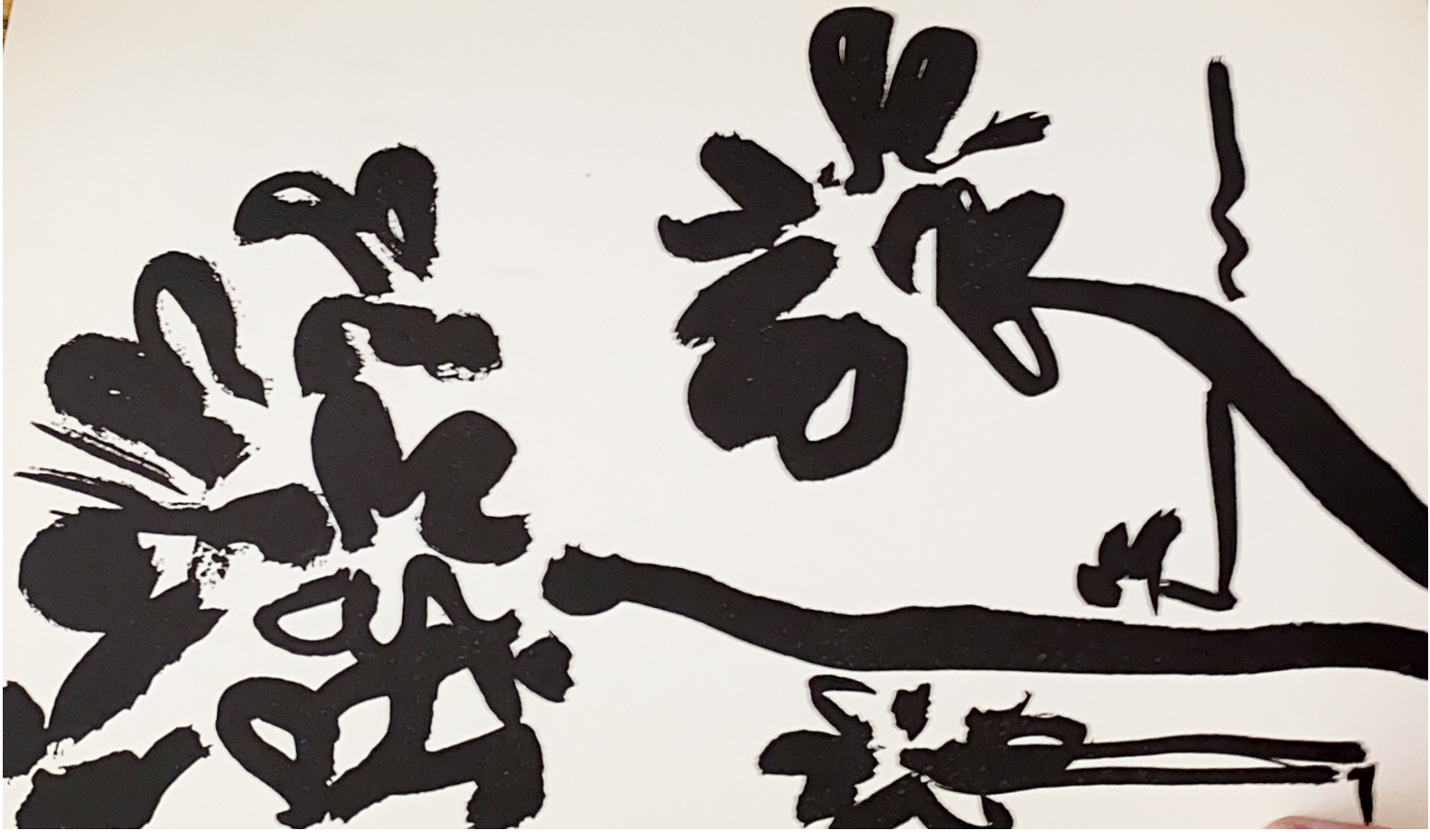


OVERLAND
TO THE
ISLANDS

DENISE LEVERTOV

JONATHAN WILLIAMS, PUBLISHER

HIGHLANDS 1958



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
edgewise, there's nothing
the dog disdains on his way,
nevertheless he
keeps moving, changing
pace and approach but
not direction—“every step an arrival.”

THE PALM TREE

The bright moon stranded like a whale
the east yellow
and the mistral furious
out of the back hills seawards in black flames,

How the mule-eared palm, half paralyzed
has quickened overnight! Scraping
leaves beating!

(strained flags . . .)

The palm tree in frenzy!

At once the mind, agape,

scavenging:

What's human here? what hope is here?
thumbing the dry leaves
eager, eager, for the fabulous
poem there may be
in this delight or battle
day coming and the moon not gone.

And all morning the palm tree
thick trunk immobile

abandons

its awkward leaves

(all its life awake

in struggling leaves . . .)

And only after the wind

is quenched

the tree dull

a quietness come

does the scraping mind perceive

what is possible:

there are no miracles but facts.

To see! (there might be work
a challenge, a poem)

The squat palm!

THE WAY THROUGH

Let the rain plunge radiant
through sulky thunder
rage on rooftops

let it scissor and bounce its denials
on concrete slabs and black
roadways. Flood the streets. It's much

but not enough, not yet: persist,
rain, real rain, sensuous,
swift, released from

vague skies, the tedium
up there.

Under scared bucking trees
the beach road washed out —

trying to get by on the verge
is no good, earth crumbles into the
brown waterfall, but he backs up
the old car again and CHARGES.

The water flies in the halfwit's eyes
who didn't move fast enough
"Who do you think I am, a horse?"
but we made it —

Drown us, lose us,
rain, let us loose, so,
to lose ourselves, to career
up the plunge of the hill

A STORY, A PLAY*

Not to take
that which is given, to overlook
the grace of it (these fragments
of lives, broken off for you, or
you might say drops of quicksilver
alive, rolling for your eyes' pleasure)

not to take—that's
the morality:
only desire for money is proof
money's deserved:
only expected echoes
merit attention

not generousities: that the one ("pointless")
lights itself, its whole span,
minute to minute, "perception
to perception,"—no crises
dearly bought, forced up by leverage—
but all of certain
minutes of a certain life,

while the other ("unplayable")
lets you in—in!—to the presence of
two, alone, who speak
for a long time, a long
time hardly moving,
as people speak when alone, late, at last,
at last speaking.

God knows there's enough
deprivation without
self-deprivation—because they tell you
the rules are broken! They gull you!

Let your senses work, let
your head have its head. The end
is pleasure, and the heart
of pleasure: enlightenment,
mystery:

rhythm

of their alternations, or best
rarest and best,

their marriage—

a grace, fire, bread, what
keeps you moving, keeps your eyes
wide with seeing,
having something to see.

**A Dream of Love (W.C.W.) and Jardou (R.C.)*

THE DOGWOOD

The sink is full of dishes. Oh well.

Ten o'clock, there's no

hot water.

The kitchen floor is unswept, the broom

has been shedding straws. Oh well.

The cat is sleeping, Nikolai is sleeping,

Mitch is sleeping, early to bed,

aspirin for a cold. Oh well.

No school tomorrow, someone for lunch,

4 dollars left from the 10—how did that go?

Mostly on food. Oh well.

I could decide

to hear some chamber music

and today I saw—what?

Well, some huge soft deep

blackly gazing purple

and red (and pale)

anemones. Does that

take my mind off the dishes?

And dogwood besides.

Oh well. Early to bed, and I'll get up

early and put

a shine on everything and write

a letter to Duncan later that will shine too

with moonshine. Can I make it? Oh well.

MERRITT PARKWAY

As if it were
forever that they move, that we
keep moving —

Under a wan sky where
as the lights went on a star
pierced the haze and now
follows steadily
a constant
above our six lanes
the dreamlike continuum . . .

And the people — ourselves!
the humans from inside the
cars, apparent
only at gasoline stops
unsure,
eyeing each other

drink coffee hastily at the
slot machines and hurry
back to the cars
vanish
into them forever, to
keep moving —

Houses now and then beyond the
sealed road, the trees / trees, bushes
passing by, passing
the cars that

keep moving ahead of

us, past us, pressing behind us
and
over left, those that come

toward us shining too brightly
moving relentlessly

in six lanes, gliding
north and south, speeding with
a slurred sound —

SOMETHING

“Something to
nullify the tall women on Madison
sniffing, peering at windows, sharp-eyed,
the ones with
little hope beyond the next hat?”

“Unequal forces.”

“But unmeasured.

That the whirlpool remains
(tossing aside the ‘Around Manhattan’ boat)
that the rocks remain
snarling among dusty lawns—
that’s something.

It was you who leapt—”

“from Spuyten Duyvil into
the desert!”

“Into another whirlpool,
the pit of it, where money
rattles against the rocks as it’s sucked down.
If it’s a battle I’ll take sides.”

“But
not with nature—she won’t fight—not
this battle. There’s no
sequence, beyond that they both exist as
elements of a city: your whirlpool, and my
boars stuffed with dollar bills, ‘alive’
only with maggots.”

“What then?”

“Whatever’s animated: *that* fights back. Not
the neurotic thrust at subway doors
but, well, like the kids from Junior High
yelling when they let ‘em out, chattering in
quick Spanish. Their faces change
from moment to moment
both the beautiful ones and those
deformed by want.
They yell and stamp
and cuff and wallop and shriek
as the bus sways off with them
and some before the enraged monitor
risk death each day
to cling to the backs of trucks, waving, and some
are grave, demure, but have earrings that shine & tremble.”

THE TURNING

The shifting, the shaded
change of pleasure

soft warm ashes in place of fire
—out, irremediably

and a door blown open:

planes tilt, interact, objects
fuse, disperse,
this chair further from that table—hold it!
Focus on that: this table
closer to that shadow. It's what appals the
heart's red rust. Turn, turn!
Loyalty betrays.

It's the fall of it, the drift,
pleasure
source and sequence
lift
of golden cold sea.

THE BEREAVED

... Could not speak
could not speak
no meeting was possible.

We spoke without euphemism of their deaths
cheerfully of their lives.
At night a touch on the shoulder, wishes for sleep;
no more. The children were dead.

Of one: he had grown thoughtful of late,
read much, listened at night,
was happy alone, but a sought companion,

The other:
certain words delighted her to laughter
her ways were quick and light.

No more.

Could not speak . . .

We could not speak:
a recoil from the abyss?
Did she see the mountain?
did she see the terraced olive-field, sunmist in hollows?
was the water cold and clear on her tongue?
the bucket risen
heavy
out of the black well-hole—
did she tremble before it?

The abyss was there.

(Standing there
she sees them darken and fall.)

We did not touch her

(she may not have seen us)
by fear or wisdom

did not touch her . . .

She left early

before violets opened
under the crumbled wall.

THE INSTANT

'We'll go out before breakfast, and get
some mushrooms,' says my mother.

Early, early: the sun
risen, but hidden in mist

the square house left behind
sleeping, filled with sleepers;

up the dewy hill, quietly, with baskets.

Mushrooms firm, cold;
tussocks of dark grass, gleam of webs,
turf soft and cropped. Quiet and early. And no valley,

no hills: clouds about our knees, tendrils
of cloud in our hair. Wet scraggs
of wool caught in barbed wire, gorse
looming, without scent.

Then ah! suddenly
the lifting of it, the mist rolls
quickly away, and far, far—

'Look!' she grips me, 'It is
Eryri!

It's Snowdon, fifty
miles away!'—the voice
a wave rising to Eryri,
falling.

Snowdon, home
of eagles, resting-place of
Merlin, core of Wales.

Light
graces the mountainhead
for a lifetime's look, before the mist
draws in again.

IN OBEDIENCE

'The dread word has been spoken.

*I expect, like myself, you have known it
all along. He does not guess it, I think,
and yet . . .' And yet he knows it. 'We live
from day to day, not
dipping too far
below the surface, and therefore
quite happily.*

You, too,

*be happy, dear children' . . . So be it:
bow the head for once. Shall it be
in the red
almost-invisible spiders circling
a hot stone I shall take pleasure today?
The veery*

hidden, his song

*rippling downward, inward, over and over,
almost-visible spiral?*

More:

let there be more joy!—if that
is what you would have. I dance
now that work's over and the house quiet:
alone among fireflies on the
dark lawn, humming and leaping.

'After all, life

is a journey to this goal

from the outset.' And Mr. Despondency's daughter

Muchafraid, went through the water singing?

I dance

for joy, only for joy
while you lie dying, into whose eyes
I looked seldom enough, all the years,
seldom with candid love. Let my dance
be mourning then,
now that I love you too late.

CONTINUING

From desire to desire

plucking

white petals away from their

green centres.

It was thus and thus

repeats the head, the fantasist.

No matter:

that wind sweeps forward

again—life itself.

Gather them, flawed, curled

veined like a child's temple

heaped one on another

irregular

displaced at a breath: secrets . . .

So

one smiled, another turned pages:

steady, heartbeats apart; many

continuing variously—

And the stripped green? Alert, hard

on a thick stalk. So.

NICE HOUSE

How charming, the colored cushions
curtains of brocade, the fine baskets
filled with fruit, candy, logs for the fire!

It was well-praised and well-shared, Nice House.
And so, many years passed. Hyacinths
in the garden, whiskey
never wanting, music of course.

And many years passed.

One day, came from the terrace and saw
the faded rags, curls of
dust blowing softly
across and across the room. Yes, correct,
brown flowers, smoking fire, the garbage
tipping out of its bag in the kitchen.

The smell was probably mice.

It seemed the place was empty
at first—then we made out
the police, their black clothes in the shadows
waiting. The chief sat feet apart
beefsteak hands on his knees.
Nobody said a word—only
the lonely icebox set up its sobbing and shaking
which gave us cover, anyway.

A SUPERMARKET IN GUADALAJARA, MEXICO

In the supermercado the music
 sweet as the hot afternoon
wanders among the watermelons,
 the melons, the sumptuous tomatoes,
and lingers among the tequila bottles,
 rum bacardi, rompopo. It
hovers like flies round the butchers
 handsome and gay, as they dreamily
sharpen their knives; and the beautiful
 girl cashiers, relaxed
in the lap of the hot afternoon,
 breathe in time to the music
whether they know it or not—
 at the glossy supermercado,
the super supermercado.

A SONG

Red flowers on a leafless tree.

All day the light is clear
the baker boy with his basket
comes and goes in the sun
his bicycle shines in the sun.

Red flowers on a leafless tree.

The dust of the fields is blowing
the cattle are eating dust and grass
all day the light is clear
the flowers shine in the sun.

Red flowers, shine for me.
The dust is gray and comforts me
a woolen blanket of soft dust.
I want your red to anger me.

THE RECOGNITION

Since the storm two nights ago
the air
is water-clear, the mountains
tranquil and clear.

Have you seen
an intelligent invalid—that look
about the eyes and temples?—one who
knows damn well
death is coming—in the guise let's say
of a carpenter, coming
to fix him for good
with his big hammer and
sharp nails.

The air and the horizon.

Clouds make
gestures of flight but
remain suspended. The builders
continue to build the
house next door.

Nothing
will happen. A transparency
of the flesh, revealing
not bones but the shape of bones.

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF THE PEPPERTREES

I

The peppertrees, the peppertrees!

Cats are stretching in the doorways,
sure of everything. It is morning.

But the peppertrees
stand aside in diffidence, with berries
of modest red.

Branch above branch, an air
of lightness; of shadows
scattered lightly.

A cat
closes upon its shadow.
Up and up goes the sun,
sure of everything.

The peppertrees
shiver a little.

Robust
and soot-black, the cat
leaps to a low branch. Leaves
close about him.

II

The yellow moon dreamily
tipping buttons of light
down among the leaves. Marimba,
marimba — from beyond the
black street.

Somebody dancing,
somebody
getting the hell
outta here. Shadows of cats
weave round the tree trunks,
the exposed knotty roots.

III

The man on the bed sleeping
defenseless. Look —
his bare long feet together
sideways, keeping each other
warm. And the foreshortened shoulders,
the head
barely visible. He is good.
Let him sleep.

But the third peppertree
is restless, twitching
thin leaves in the light
of afternoon. After a while
it walks over and taps
on the upstairs window with a bunch
of red berries. Will he wake?

THE SHARKS

Well then, the last day the sharks appeared,
Dark fins appear, innocent
as if in fair warning. The sea becomes
sinister, are they everywhere?
I tell you, they break six feet of water.
Isn't it the same sea, and won't we
play in it any more?
I liked it clear and not
too calm, enough waves
to fly in on. For the first time
I dared to swim out of my depth.
It was sundown when they came, the time
when a sheen of copper stills the sea,
not dark enough for moonlight, clear enough
to see them easily. Dark
the sharp lift of the fins.

ACTION

I can lay down that history
I can lay down my glasses
I can lay down the imaginary lists
of what to forget and what must be
done. I can shake the sun
out of my eyes and lay everything down
on the hot sand, and cross
the whispering threshold and walk
right into the clear sea, and float there,
my long hair floating, and fishes
vanishing all around me. Deep water.
Little by little one comes to know
the limits and depths of power.

LONELY MAN

An open world
within its mountain rim:
trees on the plain lifting
their heads, fine strokes
of grass stretching themselves to breathe
the last of the light.

Where a man
riding horseback raises dust
under the eucalyptus trees, a long way off, the dust
is gray-gold, a cloud
of pollen. A field
of cosmea turns
all its many faces
of wide-open flowers west, to the light.

It is your loneliness
your energy
baffled in the stillness
gives an edge to the shadows —
the great sweep of mountain shadow,
shadows of ants and leaves,
the stones of the road each with its shadow
and you with your long shadow
closing your book and standing up
to stretch, your long shadow-arms
stretching back of you, baffled.

ONE A.M.

The kitchen patio in snowy
moonlight. That
snowsilence, that
abandon to stillness.

The sawhorse, the concrete
washtub, snowblue. The washline
bowed under its snowfur!

Moon has silenced
the crickets, the summer frogs
hold their breath.

Summer night, summer night, standing
one-legged, a crane
in the snowmarsh, staring
at snowmoon!

PURE PRODUCTS

To the sea they came—
2000 miles in an old bus
fitted with brittle shelves and makeshift beds
and cluttered with U.S. canned goods
—to the Sea!

on which they paddle
innertubes —and the lowhovering Sun!
from which the old woman hides her head
under what looks like
a straw wastebasket.

“Yep, they cured me alright,
but see, it made my breasts grow like a woman's.”
And she: “Something hurts him in his chest,
I think

maybe it's his heart,” — and her's
I can see beating at the withered throat.

To the Sea some force has driven them —
away from a lifetime.

And in this windless heat they purpose
to walk the 3 miles of shadeless beach to the store
to ask in Spanish (of which they know
only yes and no) for wholewheat flour
(which is unknown in the region) that she
may bake their bread!

They are dying
in their gentleness, adorned
with wrinkled apple smiles—nothing
remains for them
but to live a little, invoking
the old powers.

ILLUSTRIOUS ANCESTORS

The Rav
of Northern White Russia declined,
in his youth, to learn the
language of birds, because
the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless
when he grew old it was found
he understood them anyway, having
listened well, and as it is said, "prayed
with the bench and the floor." He used
what was at hand—as did
Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations
were sewn into coats and britches.

Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems direct as what the birds said,
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.

BROKEN GLASS

Two bean-fed boys set bottles on the wall
yesterday, and shyed at them for a half-hour
with desperate energy, taking their stand
back a way in the rubbled lot.

Now the green fragments glitter.

Is that a lizard stirred among them?

The black goat that goes ahead of the cows
picks by in a hurry, her udders rocking.

She hears

something I don't hear.

The young ivy leaves
are shining. Is it spring?

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

After the First Communion
and the banquet of mangoes and
bridal cake, the young daughters
of the coffee merchant lay down
for a long siesta, and their white dresses
lay beside them in quietness
and the white veils floated
in their dreams as the flies buzzed.
But as the afternoon
burned to a close they rose
and ran about the neighborhood
among the half-built villas
alive, alive, kicking a basketball, wearing
other new dresses, of blood-red velvet.

THE LESSON

Martha, 5, scrawling a drawing, murmurs
'These are two angels. These are two bombs. They
are in the sunshine. Magic
is dropping from the angels' wings.'

Nik, at 4, called

over the stubble field, 'Look,
the flowers are dancing underneath the
tree, and the tree

is looking down with all its apple-eyes.'
Without hesitation or debate, words
used and at once forgotten.

THE WHIRLWIND

The doors keep rattling—I
stick poems between their teeth to
stop them. The brown dust
twirls up outside the window, off
the dead jicama field, scares the curtains,
spirals away to the dirty hollow
where the cesspools are, and the most ants,
and beyond—to the unfenced pasture land, where nothing
will get in its way for miles and it
can curtsey itself at last into
some arroyo. The doors
keep rattling—I'm
shivering, desperate for a poem
to stuff into their maws that will
silence them. I know what they want:
they want
in all their wooden strength
to fly off on the whirlwind into
the great nothingness.

A STIR IN THE AIR

A stir in the air, the proper space
holding existences in grave distinction—

If as you read I walk

around you in a

half circle

your response to the poem will

waver, maybe, like the lights just now

in the thunderstorm—the balance

is that fine—the dance

of hiving bees it is, that design

in air, joyfully

reducing possibilities to

one, the next act.

THE ABSENCE

Here I lie asleep
or maybe I'm awake yet —

not alone — and yet
it seems by moonlight

I'm alone, hardly hearing
a breath beside me. And those shadows

on the wall indeed are
not shadows but the

featherweight dancing echoes
of headlights sliding by.

Here I lie and wonder
what it is has left me, what element.
I can't remember my dreams
by morning.

Maybe, as Frazer tells,

my soul flew out in that moment
of almost-sleep. If it should go

back to the scenes and times
of its wars and losses

how would I ever lure it
back? It would

be looking for something, it would be
too concentrated to hear me.

O moon, watching everything,
delay it in the garden among the white flowers

until the cold air before sunrise
makes it glad to come back to me through the screens.

THE SPRINGTIME

The red eyes of rabbits
aren't sad. No-one passes
the sad golden village in a barge
any more. The sunset
will leave it alone. If the
curtains hang askew
it is no-one's fault.

Around and around and around
everywhere the same sound
of wheels going, and things
growing older, growing
silent. If the dogs
bark to each other
all night, and their eyes
flash red, that's
nobody's business. They have
a great space of dark to
bark across. The rabbits
will bare their teeth at
the spring moon.

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