Denise Levertov

Bedtime

We are a meadow where the bees hum,
mind and body are almost one
as the fire snaps in the stove
and our eyes close,
and mouth to mouth,
the covers pulled over our shoulders,
we drowse as horses drowse afield,
in accord; though the fall cold
surrounds our warm bed, and though
by day we are singular and often lonely.

A Day Begins

A headless squirrel, some blood
oozing from the unevenly
chewed-off neck
lies in rainsweet grass
near the woodshed door.
Down the driveway
the first irises
have opened since dawn,
ethereal, their mauve
almost a transparent gray,
their dark veins
bruise-blue.

The Mutes

Those groans men use
passing a woman on the street
or on the steps of the subway
to tell her she is a female
and their flesh knows it,
are they a sort of tune,
an ugly enough song, sung
by a bird with a slit tongue
but meant for music?
Or are they the muffled roaring of deafmutes trapped in a building that is slowly filling with smoke?
Perhaps both.

Such men most often
look as if groan were all they could do,
yet a woman, in spite of herself,
knows it's a tribute:
if she were lacking all grace
they'd pass her in silence:
so it's not only to say
she's a warm hole. It's a word
in grief-language, nothing to do with primitive, not an ur-language;
language stricken, sickened, cast down
in decrepitude.
She wants to throw the tribute away,
disgusted, and can't,
it goes on buzzing in her ear,
it changes the pace of her walk,
the torn posters in echoing corridors
spell it out, it
shakes and gnashes as the train comes in.
Her pulse sullenly
had picked up speed,
but the cars slow down and
jar to a stop while her understanding
keeps on translating: “life after life after
life goes by
without poetry,
without seemliness,
without love.”

Abel's Bride

Woman fears for man, he goes
out alone to his labors. No mirror
nests in his pocket. His face
opens and shuts with his hopes.
His sex hangs unhidden
or rises before him
blind and questing.

She thinks herself
lucky. But sad. When she goes out
she looks in the glass, she remembers

herself. Stones, coal,
the hiss of water upon the kindled
branches—her being
is a cave, there are bones at the hearth.

Come into Animal Presence

Come into animal presence.
No man is so guileless as
the serpent. The lonely white
rabbit on the roof is a star
twitching its ears at the rain.
The llama intricately
folding its hind legs to be seated
not disdains but mildly
disregards human approval.
What joy when the insouciant
armadillo glances at us and doesn't
quicken his trotting
across the track into the palm brush.

What is this joy? That no animal
falters, but knows what it must do?
That the snake has no blemish,
that the rabbit inspects his strange surroundings
in white star-silence? The llama
rests in dignity, the armadillo
has some intention to pursue in the palm-forest.
Those who were sacred have remained so
holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence
of bronze, only the sight that saw it
faltered and turned from it.
An old joy returns in holy presence.

Living

The fire in leaf and grass
so green it seems
each summer the last summer.

The wind blowing, the leaves
shivering in the sun,
each day the last day.

A red salamander
so cold and so
easy to catch, dreamily

moves his delicate feet
and long tail. I hold
my hand open for him to go.

Each minute the last minute.