

The background of the top two-thirds of the cover is a complex, abstract pattern. It consists of numerous thin, horizontal, slightly wavy lines in shades of gray and white. Overlaid on this pattern is a large, dark, angular shape that resembles a stylized 'X' or a series of intersecting planes, creating a sense of depth and shadow. The overall effect is a textured, almost optical illusion-like background.

Oblique Prayers

Denise Levertov

New Poems with 14 Translations from Jean Joubert

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Levertov**

**Oblique
Prayers**

New Poems with 14 Translations from Jean Joubert

A New Directions Book

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Author's Note

The four sections of this book represent a thematic, not a chronological order. Similarly, the poems within each section are arranged in what has seemed to me the most appropriate sequence, whether or not it was that in which they were composed.

The section of translations from Jean Joubert requires a word of introduction. Joubert was born in 1928 in Châlette-sur-Loing (Loiret), France. He has lived in Languedoc for the last twenty-five years and teaches American literature at the Université Paul Valéry at Montpellier. He has published novels and children's stories as well as poetry, and his collection *Poèmes: 1955-1975* (Grasset, 1975) was awarded the prize of the Académie Mallarmé in 1978. Most of these poems are taken from a later volume, *Cinquante toiles pour un espace blanc* (Grasset, 1982). I hope to present a book-length selection of translations from his work in the future; meanwhile, it is hoped that these poems will serve to introduce him to the American public.

DECIPHERING

Deciphering

for Guillev

i

When I lose my center
of gravity
I can't fly:

levitation's
a stone
cast straight as a lark

to fall plumb
and rebound.

ii

Half a wheel's
a rising sun:
without spokes,
an arch:

half a loaf
reveals
the inner wheat:
leavened
transubstantiation.

iii

A child
grows in one's body,
pushes out and
breaks off:

 nerves
denying their
non-existence
twist and pinch

long after:
after that otherness
floats
far,
thistledown engine,

up and
over
horizon's ramparts.

iv

Felt life
grows in one's mind:
each semblance

forms and
reforms cloudy
links with
the next

and the next:
chimes and
gamelan gongs

resound:

pondering,
picking the tesserae,
blue or
perhaps vermilion,

what one aches for
is the mosaic music
makes in one's ears

transformed.

Broken Ghazal

Each life spins
 into its own orbit—rain
of meteor showers, sparkle of—
 some brittle desire, is it?
 the stab of deep pain?

Not without tearing
 a few fibers,
 the magnet forces
pull apart. I. He. Being
 is not referential.

I wake: instant recollection—a shadow
 threatens my son's life.
Others slide their elongations toward his spirit.

My being, unconformable
 to his perception,
moves on. Awake, I keep waking.

He survives
 and leaves, moving
through the apparition he sees and
 away from it.

Again waking, I stretch a hand out
to stop the warning clock.
 Time is another country.

Squinting toward light:
 a tree has filled it
with green diamonds. Or there's the air, bemused:
 newfallen snow.

Shock waves of a music
 I don't hear
as you
 don't hear mine.
 How they beat on the sea-wall!

The Gaze Salutes Lyonel FeIninger While Crossing the New Jersey Wasteland

A certain delicacy in the desolation:
olive-green the polluted
stretches of grass and weeds, the small
meres and sloughs dark with the darkness
of smoked glass,
gray air at intervals slashed with
rust-red uprights,
cranes or derricks;
and at the horizon line,
otherwise indeterminate,
a spidery definition of viaducts and
arched bridges,
pale but clear in silverpoint.

Blue Africa

for Angela Jackson

As they roam over grassland
the elephants cast
a blue river of shadows.
Their ears flap as they listen.

One evening, caught
in icy wind,
the traffic snarling,
I saw for one moment
their fluent stride, and heard
a quiet in Africa,
hum without menace.
They listened to sunlight,
and flowed
onward, unhurried.

Remember,
they are there
now.

Each in turn
enters the river of blue.

They make mistakes:
they busy themselves,
anxious to see more, straining their necks to look
beyond blue trees at dusk,
forgetting it is
the dust at their feet reveals
the strangest, most needful truth.

They think they want
a cherishing love to protect them
from the anguish they must distribute, the way
 wives of cruel kings handed
 loaves of bread to the poor—
a love that delights in them: but when

ironic Time gives them such love
they discover—and only then—its weight, which,
if they received and kept it, would crush down
the power entrusted to them.

The tender lover,
aghast at what he sees them seeing, or blind
and gently denying it, would set
a wall of lead about them,
hold down their feathered
Hermes-feet,
close the eyes that brim
not with tears but with visions,
silence the savage music
such golden mouths
 are sworn to utter.

With one I learned
how roots turn
to grip loam,
learned
the pulse of stone,
mineral arteries,
skylless auroras.

Was it so indeed?
I remember now
only telling myself
it was so.

Another led me
under the wing of
the waterfall. Light
was fine mist.
My skin was myself.

I remember now
only the words,
what they tell is gone.

And others I loved—
what were their kingdoms?
What songs did I sing of them,
and gazed from what high windows
toward their borders?

I journeyed
onward, my road always
drawing me further.

Lovers (II): Reminde

'But that other:
he danced like a gypsy's bear at the winter crossroads,
the days of your youth and his are a bit of blue glass
bevelled by oceans and kept in his pocket,
wherever he is is always
now.

Touch, mass, weight, warmth:
a language you found you knew.
He brought you
the bread of sunlight on great platters of laughter.'

Seeing for a Moment

I thought I was growing wings—
it was a cocoon.

I thought, now is the time to step
into the fire—
it was deep water.

Eschatology is a word I learned
as a child: the study of Last Things;

facing my mirror—no longer young,
the news—always of death,
the dogs—rising from sleep and clamoring
and howling, howling,

nevertheless
I see for a moment
that's not it: it is
the First Things.

Word after word
floats through the glass.
Toward me.

Man Wearing Bird

... one afternoon, I saw a patient
standing in the middle of the driveway
... Something was moving on his head
Suddenly, two large wings flapped over
his head in the light breeze ... He had
rolled his pants up to his knobby knees
and wore an opened leather jacket over
a T-shirt with a large number 17 ... the
mesmerized motorists slowed to a crawl
for a longer look ... The patient later
told his therapist he had ... realized that
people were startled by his appearance
In fact, he had relished it ... *Boston
Globe, December 1983*

I could be stone,
a live bird on my civic head.
They would not look twice.

This is my pigeon
and I its prophet.
No one but I

found it. It died
for me to find,
to lift like the Host

and place aloft, a soft
weight on my naked scalp,
where one more time

flailing wings can
contest with the wind.
I am a column, a pillar of

righteousness, upholding
mystery, a dead pigeon that spoke
and continues to speak, that told

no one but me what to do,
told me to hold still under its
cold flutterings, told me

to relish the foolish grins, the awestruck
staring of passing, passing,
tenuous motorists, stand

barelegged in the winter day, display—
with the same wind beating
upon it—the number life and its warders

assign me, inscribed on my thin shirt
over my heart:

I the prophet,
chosen from all, ennobled, singular,
by this unique
unfathomable death.

The Mourner

Instead of arms to hold you
I want longer limbs, vines,
to wrap you twofold, threefold.

I wrap you, I pick you up, I carry you,
your knees drawn up, your head bent,
your arms crossed on your breast.

You are heavy.
I walk, I walk.
You say nothing.

Onward. Hill and dale. Indoors.
Out again. You say nothing.
You grow smaller, I wrap you fourfold.

I show you all the wonders you showed me,
infinitesimal and immense.
You grow smaller, smaller,
and always heavier. Why will you not speak?

Sundown Sentence

Fogbillows crest over ocean, soundless, unbreaking,
infinitely patient.

Tier after tier, mountains rehearse
the passage from green to evening's amethyst.

Red wings repeat with unslaked thirst
their one sweet song.

The rain's cleared off and the cats are dreamily
watching the lucid world, perched on the fence-rail,
striving for nothing; their shadows grow long.

Delicately,
two hilltop deer
nibble the sky.

Counting Sheet

Mexico City—smog and light but no color.

Los Angeles—light and smog but no color.

San Francisco—arid pastels.

Brownstone and grime-gray and black glass—New York.

Boston—trees and clouds but no color.

Tawny Rome!

 The pearl-gray sheen of Paris.

The dear soot-darkened Portland stone of London.

Soot-darkened stone of London.

Stone of London.

Dear. Soot-darkened. Stone.

Of London ...

Running before the storm, the older child
was beautiful, her gold hair flew about her,
her small plump legs twinkled amusingly.
It was the other needed help—
wailing, toiling along, a wisp
of misery. Sticky with jam,
her skin damp, her hands
spiders in my hair.
But carrying her, strangely I began
to cherish that discomfort.
The wind blew, the first large raindrops
were falling, the forest we were leaving
leaned darkly after us, waving
in threat or longing.
Quieted, my burden
held fast to me,
patiently trustful. Of necessity.

Grey Sweater

for James Laughlin

You want your old grey sweater,
lost or given away, you
need it for life and death, your lines
are cast to pull it
back around you.
Last night I dreamed one—
a sweater, I mean, found in the woods,
knit by an oriole.
Once I had—have you seen one ever?
—an oriole's nest,
woven of silvery milkweed silk
and weathered light as a
spindrift timber
tempered ten saltwater seasons ...
I wore it, a perfect
châtelaine at my waist,
till it slipped off and was lost again
in orchard leaves.
The sweater I dreamed
was like that.

I meant,
waking, to offer it
as a replacement. It would stretch
to fit you. But then I recalled
that indeed you had conjured yours already
into a poem,
it and your need for it are
the knit and purl of the poem's rows
re-raveled.

Sunlight in Ohio, touching
frostbitten stubble fields
and the cabbage yards, strewn
with rusting downhill racers and
abandoned rabbit-hutches,
of small frame houses near the railroad ...

The spirit
of Jim Wright is strong here,

so strong it comes through into the train,
through the thick pane.

The sun's light hands
touch the land
blindly, careful to memorize
planes and expressive
inclinations. It fingers
the scrapyard, the silo'd farm, the school bus,
the windowless plant and the men
going in for the day shift.

Jim
can't speak anymore, he's dead,
but I swear
he's here
making me look, he's here
angry and loving and full
of *Sehnsucht*, he's in
this landscape
where industry straggles uncertainly
out into farmland, and farmland
shrinks and looks grey—

he's the kid
skilfully spinning a beat-up bike-wheel
along and along,

down a road that leads straight,
straight, straight to the edge of the world.

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