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**Electives: Advanced
Poetry**

Denise Levertov

Module C: History and Memory

**Electives: Advanced
Prose Fiction and Poetry**

Rosemary Dobson

Module A: Comparative Study of Texts and Content

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Electives: Advanced Poetry

Denise Levertov

Module C: History and Memory

Don't You Hear That Whistle Blowin'...

Denise Levertov

The 4 a.m. freight comes pounding and shaking through
the fall night
and I go to the Middle Door to watch,
through the plain glass that has
stained glass around it,
pressing my forehead against the pane,
and Steve hurries along to look too—for he's out of Appalachia,
the lonesome romance of the rails West is in his bones;
and Richard comes close behind, gazing intently
over my shoulder –
out of the Midwest and the rails West are in his blood,
and our friend Bo is at this very moment hopping freight in Oregon
to pick pears;
and I seem to smell iron and rust, an animal smell,
red and dusty,
even through the glass that's steaming up with our breaths.
So I start to open the door, to hear the last cars and the
caboose louder
and the sound of going away, and to see the stars,
and I want you, Mitch, to step out with me into the dark garden,
for you're standing back of me too, taller than anyone;
but as the cold air comes in I turn toward you and you're
not there.
Then I realize I'm waking up: the train really is going by
but the Middle Door's back in my childhood, not in America,
and there's no one in the house but you and me,
you asleep beside me in bed, and soon you'll have left
and this moment of dark boxcars just visible
under the paling stars, a train of looming forms from
faraway states
lurching through the edge of Boston,
is just the beginning of a long train of times I'll turn
to share a vision with you and find I'm dreaming.

September 6–7, 1974

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In Thai Binh (Peace) Province

For Muriel and Jane

Denise Levertov

I've used up all my film on bombed hospitals,
bombed village schools, the scattered
lemon-yellow cocoons at the bombed silk-factory,

and for the moment all my tears too
are used up, having seen today
yet another child with its feet blown off,
 a girl, this one, eleven years old,
patient and bewildered in her home, a fragile
small house of mud bricks among rice fields.

So I'll use my dry burning eyes
to photograph within me
dark sails of the river boats,
warm slant of afternoon light
apricot on the brown, swift, wide river,
village towers – church and pagoda – on the far shore,
and a boy and small bird both
perched, relaxed, on a quietly grazing
buffalo. Peace within the
 long war.

It is that life, unhurried, sure, persistent,
I must bring home when I try to bring
the war home,
 Child, river, light.

Here the future, fabled bird
that has migrated away from America,
nests, and breeds, and sings,

common as any sparrow.

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Libation

Denise Levertov

Raising our glasses, smilingly
we wish one another not luck
but happiness. After half a lifetime
with and without luck,
we know we need more than luck.
It makes no difference that we're drinking
tomato juice, not wine or whiskey –
we know what we mean,
and the red juice of those virtuous
vegetable-fruits is something we both enjoy.
I remember your wonder, as at a miracle,
finding them growing on sturdy vines
in my old aunt and uncle's sun-room
ripe to pluck at the breakfast-table!
We were twenty-three, and unappeasably hungry...

We agree on tomatoes, then – and happiness?
yes, that too: we mean growth, branching,
leafing, yielding blossoms and fruit and the sharp odor
of dreams.

We mean knowing someone as deeply,
no, deeper, than we've known each other,
we mean being known. We are wishing each other
the luck not to need luck. I mill
some pepper into my juice, though,
and salt in the ancient gesture; and what would be wrong
with tipping out half a glass
for the gods?

We smile.

After these months of pain we begin
to admit our new lives have begun.

February 1975

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A Letter to Marek about a Photograph

Denise Levertov

For Mark Pawlak

This carpentered, unpainted, aging house,
one of many alike in some white ghetto,
is filled to the uninsulated seams with a face:
the brooding face of anxiety. – Or the house
(one cannot say which is
superimposed on the other) is so montaged,
waking and sleeping, into that mind, it is
the house fills the outgazing head,
extends its boundaries with wooden angles.

And the face

is the face of your father, Marek,
a Polish workman, or of his brother, or –
for, beardless and hair dragged back,
it could be the face of a woman – your mother,
your grandmother in the 1930's,
just staying off the breadline ...
any young woman quickly grown old, forehead
deeply wrinkled, eyes unable to laugh. Whatever else
– store-boughten furnishings, tawdry treasures, stories –
is inside the house, at the door
that *look* looks out,
worry without hope.

But the house itself

though cheaply built, has its share of ornaments turned on the lathe
of humor and trust, a human, unique
identity fronting the weather. In houses like these
your family of millions, Polacks, Wops,
Scotch-Irish, people shut now into 'projects,'
used to live. You would have known its
familiar mystery, its faint, sour charm,
even by dark, even before you had seen
its fretted gable, Marek:
your in-feeling comprehension
would touch with probing finger
the concealed wounds of those who built,
those who dwelt, those who moved on
or died here. Your gift is to reveal
poetry in the cries caught in nameless throats,
in eyes gazing into the street of trouble,
and foolish tender joys suspended
in half-light of memory; to lift
griefs out of the blind pit of unknowing,
placing glass and mercury under the tongue of dreams –
magical quick-
silver that measures
the fever it is to be human.

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The Pilots

Denise Levertov

Because they were prisoners,
because they were polite and friendly and lonesome and homesick,
because they said Yes, they knew

the names of the bombs they dropped
but didn't say whether they understood what these bombs
are designed to do
to human flesh, and because

I didn't ask them, being unable to decide
whether to ask would serve
any purpose other than cruelty, and
because since then I met Mrs. Brown, the mother of one of
their fellow prisoners,
and loved her, for she has the same lovingkindness in her
that I saw in Vietnamese women (and men too)
and because my hostility left the room and wasn't there
when I thought I needed it
while I was drinking tea with the POW's

because of all these reasons I hope
they were truly as ignorant,
as unawakened,
as they seemed,

I hope their chances in life up to this point
have been poor,
I hope they can truly be considered
victims of the middle America they come from,
their American Legionnaire fathers, their macho high schools.
their dull skimped Freshman English courses,

for if they did understand precisely
what they were doing, and did it anyway, and would do it again,

then I must learn to distrust
my own preference for trusting people,
then I must learn to question
my own preference for liking people,

then I must learn to keep
my hostility chained to me
so it won't leave me when I need it.

And if it is proved to me
that these men understood their acts,

how shall I ever again
be able to meet the eyes of Mrs. Brown?

Electives: Advanced Prose Fiction and Poetry

Rosemary Dobson

Module A: Comparative Study of Texts and Content

Young Girl at a Window

Rosemary Dobson

Lift your hand to the window latch:
Sighing, turn and move away.
More than mortal swords are crossed
On thresholds at the end of day;
The fading air is stained with red
Since Time was killed and now lies dead.

Or Time was lost. But someone saw
Though nobody spoke and nobody will,
While in the clock against the wall
The guiltless minute hand is still:
The watchful room, the breathless light
Be hosts to you this final night.

Over the gently-turning hills
Travel a journey with your eyes
In forward footsteps, chance assault –
This way the map of living lies.
And this the journey you must go
Through grass and sheaves and, lastly, snow.

© Rosemary Dobson.

Chance Met

Rosemary Dobson

Swing back the gate till it stumbles over the furrows
Where the plough swerves close to the fence and the brown earth crumbles
From mountains crested with tossed-up tussocks, to valleys
Runnelled with rivers of rain.

The drops hang bright on the wires, the diligent spider
Worked shifts all night to set up his house by sunrise
Between the hinge, rusted with rain, and the latch.

Who went before through the gate – this affable stranger
Who touches the topmost rail and leans to dazzle,
Spinning his hat for greeting? Morning,
Golden and rakish, who stole his shirt from the scarecrow
To shroud the fire at heart. Good Morning

Swing back the gate, good fellow.
Swing back the gate! There is nobody there. The sunlight
In golden footprints runs up the ridge of the hill.

© Rosemary Dobson.

Landscape in Italy

Rosemary Dobson

Were there, then, roses in the grass?
And saints with holy feet who trod
The mountain paths on pilgrimage
With rapt face looking up to God?

Was there a bird on every tree
Beyond the city's walls and towers
And angels stepping gently by
Over the field-embroidering flowers?

Was there, far off, a ship at sea
With storm-tossed sailors bent in prayer,
And did, above the violent clouds,
Saint Nicholas, to save, appear?

Landscapes, once seen, in memory
Waver and tremble to a dream.
How lay the contours of the hills
We viewed that day, where ran the stream?

But Art, more durable than thought
Between event and memory
Has interposed her coloured chart
To show in perpetuity

That but five steps from where we lay
Drowsing upon the short-cropped grass
Lightly, with all her springtime flowers,
Did Botticelli's Flora pass.

© Rosemary Dobson.

Azay-le-Rideau

Rosemary Dobson

What lutes, what notes, what waterfalls of music,
Voices of summer dying on the wind;
From the carved balustrades, the formal gardens
The murmuring laughter eddies to its end.
Over the paving-stones the lingering crimson,
Linden and gold, a burden of brocade;
In the stitched meadows of a thousand flowers
Pensive as listeners to a silent music
They dream, enchanted, in the close-leaved shade.

Oh idle hands beneath the falling fountain,
Gloved fingers resting on the marble urn,
Hands that withdraw, that speak, that lie together
Folded like wings upon a shaft of stone.
Distant as figures dancing in a landscape
This fabled grace gives back its youth to Age,
Prisoned and held upon a web of canvas
Or shut for ever in a Book of Hours
Between the enamelled and the gilded page.

© Rosemary Dobson.

The Rape of Europa

Rosemary Dobson

Beautiful Europa, while the billy boils
Underneath the she-oaks, underneath the willows,
Underneath the sky like a bent bow of silver,
Like the arms of a god embracing a mortal –
Beautiful Europa has set out a picnic.

All her father's paddocks that slope to the water
Are singing with runnels and freshets of crystal
And the voice of the river is loud as it plunges
By boulders of granite and shouldering basalt –
On a spit of white sand she is boiling the billy.

The cattle come down to the sand by the river,
Europa is plaiting green willows and buttercups,
Daisies and water-weeds: mocking, she crowns them
With wreaths and festoons, with dripping green garlands,
And climbs to the back of the dark one, the leader.

Europa, Europa, the billy is boiling,
Down from the woolsheds your brothers come riding.
There's a splash in the shallows, a swirl, a commotion,
He has leapt, he is swept in the rush of the current,
And the riders draw rein on the hillside, astounded.

Oh wave to Europa for far she is faring
Past farmyard and homestead, past township and jetty,
And many will say that they saw them go riding,
The girl and the bull on the back of the river
Down to the harbour and over the ocean.

And distant indeed are the coasts of that country
Where the god was revealed in splendour and ardour.
Europa, Europa, as you lay quiet
In sunshine and shadow, under a plane-tree,
Did you remember the river, the she-oaks?

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Romantic

Rosemary Dobson

I should like to go out into the snow
In a long black coat with a fur hat over my ears,
My hands in my sleeves crushing a tribute of violets.

A tall stranger to close the door behind me
Bearing my skates, one hand under my elbow
Guiding my footsteps to the frozen river.

Oh, amber sky with a faint smudge of twilight!
Windows in narrow, unfamiliar houses!
I am your heroine, strange, exciting city.

And down the river we would glide for ever,
Talking always of poetry, gloved hands touching,
And the cold air rushing away like smoke between us.

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Primitive Painters

Rosemary Dobson

God's hand, authoritative, shows
the Way, the Life, with thumb tucked in
and index finger pointed straight
as well-ruled as a five-barred gate,
the other three turned back, discreet,
shirt-cuff immaculately neat
marked where the hole and button meet.

This is the Hand that moves above
the painted landscape they reveal,
primitives, in their innocence,
their logic and their confidence.
This is the Hand that gently shows
the flowering fruit-trees in their rows
and grass appearing where He sows.

A landscape peopled by the saints
on billboards – holy Doctor Morse,
the carbide-battery man, a girl
displaying teeth like orient pearl.

They send, first bending on their knees,
the ribbon roads to roll undone
and drop the fence-posts one by one
like notes of plainsong towards the sun.

Look at the landscape through the eyes
of Innocents. Be sanctified.
(The Hand above, the Saints beneath
with banished headaches, well-brushed teeth.)
Observe their wise simplicity,
they paint for those with eyes to see
their world, their holy hierarchy.

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