HSC English Prescriptions 2015–20

English (Extension 1)
Module B: Texts and Ways of Thinking
Elective 3: Navigating the Global

Denise Levertov
What Were They Like?

Denise Levertov

1) Did the people of Vietnam use lanterns of stone?
2) Did they hold ceremonies to reverence the opening of buds?
3) Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
4) Did they use bone and ivory, jade and silver, for ornament?
5) Had they an epic poem?
6) Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone. It is not remembered whether in gardens stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom, but after the children were killed there were no more buds.
3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.
4) A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy. All the bones were charred.
5) It is not remembered. Remember, most were peasants; their life was in rice and bamboo. When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces, maybe fathers told their sons old tales. When bombs smashed those mirrors there was time only to scream.
6) There is an echo yet of their speech which was like a song. It was reported their singing resembled the flight of moths in moonlight. Who can say? It is silent now.

You who are so beautiful–
your deep and childish faces,
your tall bodies–

Shall I warn you?

Do you know
what it was to have
a certitude of grasses waving
upon the earth though all
humankind were dust?
Of dust returning
to fruitful dust?

Do you already know
what hope is fading from us
and pay no heed,
see the detested grave-worm shrivel,
the once-despised,
and not need it?

Is there an odyssey
your feet pull you towards
away from now to walk
the waters, the fallen
orchard stars?

It seems
your fears are only the old fears, antique
anxieties, how graceful;
they lay as cloaks on shoulders
of men long dead,
skirts of sorrow wrapped
over the thighs of legendary women.

Can you be warned?
If you are warned will your beauty
scale off, to leave
gaping meat livid with revulsion?

No, who can believe it.
Even I in whose heart
stones rattle, rise each day
to work and imagine.

Get wisdom, get understanding, saith
the ancient. But he believed
there is nothing new under the sun,
his future
rolled away in great coils forever
into the generations.
Among conies the grass
grew again
and among bones.
And the bones would rise.

If there is time to warn you,
if you believed there shall be
never again a green blade in the crevice,
luminous eyes in rockshadow:
if you were warned and believed
the warning,

would your beauty
break into spears of fire,

fire to turn fire, a wall
of refusal, could there be
a reversal I cannot

hoist myself high enough
to see,
plunge myself deep enough
to know?

The Malice of Innocence
Denise Levertov

A glimpsed world, halfway through the film,
one slow shot of a ward at night

holds me when the rest is quickly
losing illusion. Strange hold,

as of romance, of glamor: not because
even when I lived in it I had

illusions about that world: simply because
I did live there and it was

a world. Greenshaded lamp glowing
on the charge desk, clipboards
stacked on the desk for the night,

sighs and waiting, waiting-for-morning stirrings
in the dim long room, warm, orderly,
and full of breathings as a cowbarn.

Death and pain dominate this world, for though
many are cured, they leave still weak,

still tremulous, still knowing mortality
has whispered to them; have seen in the folding
of white bedspreads according to rule

the starched pleats of a shroud.

It's against that frozen
counterpane, and the knowledge too
how black an old mouth gaping at death can look

that the night routine has in itself–
without illusions—glamor, perhaps. It had

a rhythm, a choreographic decorum:
when all the evening chores had been done
and a multiple restless quiet listened
to the wall-clock’s pulse, and turn by turn

the two of us made our rounds
on tiptoe, bed to bed,

counting by flashlight how many pairs
of open eyes were turned to us,

noting all we were trained to note,
we were gravely dancing–starched

in our caps, our trained replies,
our whispering aprons–the well-rehearsed

pavanne of power. Yes, wasn’t it power,
and not compassion,

    gave our young hearts
their hard fervor? I hated

to scrub our lockers, to hand out trays of
unappetizing food, and by day, or the tail-end of night

(daybreak dull on gray faces–ours and theirs)
the anxious hurry, the scolding old-maid bosses.
But I loved the power
of our ordered nights,
    gleaming surfaces I’d helped to polish
making patterns in the shipshape
halfdark–

    loved
the knowing what to do, and doing it,
list of tasks getting shorter

hour by hour. And knowing
all the while that Emergency
might ring with a case to admit, anytime,

if a bed were empty. Poised,
ready for that.
    The camera
never returned to the hospital ward,
the story moved on into the streets,
into the rooms where people lived.

But I got lost in the death rooms a while,
remembering being (crudely, cruelly,

just as a soldier or one of the guards
from Dachau might be) in love with order,

an angel like the *chercheuses de poux*, floating
noiseless from bed to bed,

smoothing pillows, tipping
water to parched lips, writing

details of agony carefully into the Night Report.

A Place of Kindness
Denise Levertov

Somewhere there is a dull room
where someone slow is moving,
stumbling from door to chair
to sit there patiently
doing nothing but be,
enjoying the quiet and warmth,
pleased with the gradual
slope of day's light
into his corner. Dull
illiterate saint, never imagining
the atrocious skills his kin
devise and use,
who are avidly, viciously active,
refining quality, increasing quantity--
million by million--
of standardized Agony-Inflicters.

Somewhere there is a dull room
no phosphorescence of guile illumines.
No scintillations
of cruelty.

Imagination could put forth
gentle feelers there.
Somewhere there must be

such a room, and someone dumb
in it, unknown to cruelty,
unknowing.

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The Life of Others
Denise Levertov

Their high pitched baying
as if in prayer's unison

remote, undistracted, given over
utterly to belief,

the skein of geese
voyages south,
    hierarchic arrow of its convergence toward
    the point of grace
swinging and rippling, ribbon tail
of a kite, loftily

over lakes where they have not
elected to rest,

over men who suppose
earth is man's, over golden earth

preparing itself
for night and winter.
    We humans
are smaller than they, and crawl
unnoticed,

about and about the smoky map.

What It Could Be

Denise Levertov

Uranium, with which we know
only how to destroy,
lies always under
the most sacred lands—

Australia, Africa, America,
wherever it’s found is found an oppressed
ancient people who knew
long before white men found and named it
that there under their feet

under rock, under mountain, deeper
than deepest watersprings, under
the vast deserts familiar
inch by inch to their children

lay a great power.

And they knew the folly
of wrestling, wrestling, ravaging from the earth
that which it kept
so guarded.

Now, now, now at this instant,
men are gouging lumps of that power, that presence,
out of the tortured planet the ancients
say, is our mother.

Breaking the doors
of her sanctum, tearing the secret
out of her flesh.

But left to lie, its metaphysical weight
might in a million years have proved
benign, its true force being to be
a clue to righteousness—
showing forth
the human power
not to kill, to choose
not to kill: to transcend
the dull force of our weight and will;
that known profound presence, untouched,
the sign
providing witness,
      occasion,
      ritual
for the continuing act of
nonviolence, of passionate reverence, active love.

Talk in the Dark
Denise Levertov

We live in history, says one.
We’re flies on the hide of Leviathan, says another.

Either way, says one,
fears and losses.

And among losses, says another,
the special places our own roads were to lead to.

Our deaths, says one.
That’s right, says another,
now it’s to be a mass death.

Mass graves, says one, are nothing new.
No, says another, but this time there’ll be no graves,
all the dead will lie where they fall.

Except, says one, those that burn to ash.
And are blown in the fiery wind, says another.

How can we live in this fear? says one.
From day to day, says another.

I still want to see, says one,
where my own road’s going.

I want to live, says another, but where can I live
if the world is gone?

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