

# Grief

**poems  
by**

**Donald**

**Lev**

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*Poetry Bay* for “The Trail”, “Dissatisfaction”

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*Mudfish* for “The Spread”

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## **To Enid**

*In memory and longing*

## Contents

The Trail	1
Just Think	2
Another Day	3
101 <sup>st</sup> Poem of Love	4
Shiva	4
Connections	5
This Place	6
A Memorial Poetry Reading for Enid Dame at the Woodstock NY Town Hall 2/14/04	6
We Held Hands	7
Grief	8-9
Dissatisfaction	10
Poem for the Jewish High Holy Days	11-12
Photo Above This Word Processor	13
The Unveiling	14
To Enid, Halloween 2004	15
Contemporary Country Blues	16
That Beautiful Smile	17
Christmas Eve 2004	18-19
Psalm	20
Something for the New Year	21
The Spread	22
No Exit Ever	23
To Enid on Her Birthday	24
The Seat of Sublimity – for Enid	25
My Christmas	26

## **The Trail**

The trail was arduous, but usually rising  
which we thought was generally good,  
often falling into funny ruts and crevices  
and very unpleasant wet or gaseous spots;  
but we dutifully, sometimes joyfully, followed it  
hand in hand as it mostly rose and now we see  
that it ends shortly ahead of us at a bleak promontory  
which we will probably be approaching at night too  
weary and terrified and committed not to stumble past.

4/03

## **Just Think**

Just think what it would be like if everything went wrong—if you were old and weak and all the wrong turns you took in your life that you hoped would somehow find the right direction after all, definitely proved irretrievably wrong, deadly wrong. You are tremendously in debt, your wife is desperately ill, and you don't want to burden her any more with the results of your foolishness, where would you turn? To God? To friends? From all of whom you've created such distance as will not now be decreased. I am standing in water up to my knees. The tide is slowly but steadily rising. Perhaps a huge bird will pick me up and fly me to some beautiful land where all I love is healthy, happy, and at home.

## **Another Day**

A cough emerged from the other room.  
A fan blew cool on my neck. I am here  
to celebrate existence, say that it is  
good then go on to another day when  
one hopes one's beautiful old long  
haired cat does not die, when one's  
wife's terrible disease does not hasten  
on its destructive path but stops along  
the way to perhaps atone? And one's  
own deserved agonies take a holiday.  
A lovely day to contemplate. A Disney  
day with happy animals and birds at  
play. A child's day.

7/03



## 101<sup>st</sup> Poem of Love

Enid in California your courage and  
honesty there with you. My heart, my true  
being there with you too.

What is with me? Your eyes your  
forthrightness your inscrutable love for  
me, a miracle

which is my life.

8/03

## Shiva

They have rent all my garments.  
They make me sit upon the hard wet ground.  
They have sent their children away from me.  
They have crushed my mirrors.  
And they command me to mourn.  
I ought to rejoice in the commandment.  
And I do. I do.  
I have always loved you, my buried bride.  
As now I am commanded to do.  
I will always love you my beautiful one.  
As I am and am not commanded to do.

12/03

## Connections

This is about connections.

We always were connected.

We'd sit together, say at a theater,  
and she would touch me, my knee maybe, just to  
check on the connection.

And the times we were in different cities

I guess those times were few considering the number of years  
we would always telephone any night we were apart.

Connections.

I was trying to get at something bigger,  
something maybe cosmic,  
but I can't really come up with anything.  
Like my plug is out of its socket.

1/04

## **This Place**

This place  
is a place for grief.  
I do not remember walking here.  
I do not remember riding here.  
I may always have been here.  
I believe it is the place I  
will never leave.

1/04

## **A Memorial Poetry Reading for Enid Dame at the Woodstock NY Town Hall 2/14/04**

It's a wall. No.  
More a stretch of space where a wall was.  
In that space there  
is night. But night with  
happy markings. Like stars only  
closer, and more like writing.

2/04

## **We Held Hands**

We held hands across  
the portable hospital counter,  
you sitting on the bed and I across in that chair.  
You trying to keep breathing the oxygen, diminishing how much  
I hadn't realized.  
You didn't want me to go.  
You said, "You're not staying the night again" and I said not this  
time. I was afraid of two nights in a row. I got heart palpitations  
last night. But I stayed much longer than I had intended.  
But at last I waved goodbye and left you with terror.  
When I got back to Jersey there was a call waiting for me  
and I had to turn right around and got no sleep anyway.

How can you forgive me?

3/04

## Grief

The cry  
of the crows,  
the crows of Ginsberg's "Kaddish"  
caw caw caw . . .  
comes closest.

We sat together in the hospital holding hands  
only hours before the end

I never wanted to let you go.  
You never wanted me to let you go.  
Yet . . .

Grief can't really be approached by art  
except maybe a little bit in sound

caw caw caw

In Dylan Thomas  
you can detect it if you listen.  
It's in Whitman

and maybe some of the dying scenes in Verdi operas  
—Traviata—Forza—

I helped you bathe,  
grateful for the intimacy,  
then we held hands,  
we even joked  
and then

caw caw caw

You can sense it in Bluegrass and other Celtic musics.  
Hank Williams, with tears in his voice,  
came close  
but he dressed it up too primly.  
Grief's more  
raw, unseemly

caw caw caw caw caw caw

3/04

## **Dissatisfaction**

I never took her to a hockey game,  
I never took her to the race track.

Things we were always going to do someday.  
We would have walked over to the paddock.  
She loved animals. Smell of horses.  
The beautiful animals.  
The sound of skates.  
The color, excitement.  
Speed, beauty.  
I never

took her where she might have discovered  
the same instinct picking horses  
she had choosing restaurants.

That's where I have to leave this one.

5/04

## Poem for the Jewish High Holy Days

Where is the beginning? I need to return there.

I have lost my way and am confused.

What lights appear among the darkening branches of the trees?

It is a sunset. It enriches me, it depresses me. It makes me afraid.

Did I think I was in Andalusia when I was in New York?

In Bessarabia

when I lived in Brooklyn? Am I, in the hills of eastern

New York State,

in some vortex where everything unites and spins and becomes  
confused beyond recognition?

I am a lonely, bitter old man. My

sweet vibrant wife has left me for the grave.

I am planning the unveiling. High Holy Days come first.

I have never been intensely Jewish

(no matter what gentile friends might say),

but she was; and I joined with her to the extent I could.

It's a big trip being Jewish. A thing to avoid if possible.

I tried, I couldn't.

I've been listening on the radio to Andalusian music played by  
Gypsies, Arabs, and Jews.

And now old records spin on my little record player,

Richard Inger, whom

nobody, I expect, has heard of. And Moishe Oysher,

famous in my childhood.

Where have these records come from? My secular aggressively  
socialist wife would no doubt disavow them.



(She furnished our household with songs from the Jewish Socialist Bund—a truly beautiful album). I guess I had them.

Moishe Oysher is singing cantorials. What a sound! It is a recording from the '50's narrated by Barry Gray offering High Holy Day music of the Synagogue. I should go to a Yizkor service to honor my wife. I'm not sure what that is. I should ask people who know. I should either join the Woodstock Jewish Congregation under a big tent in Saugerties, where my wife loved to go or I should travel to Brooklyn to the synagogue of the great lesbian feminist rabbi who officiated at Enid's funeral. I should do *something*. Everyone should have *some* religion.

I was baptised in the Roman Catholic Church in 1963. I never told anyone in writing before. By the time I met my wife, more than a decade later, my conversion was pretty much dissipated. The tribalism I wished to escape into the "Church Universal" really couldn't be escaped. The Celts, Teutons, Latins, Slavs, were as tribal as my ancient Twelve, and theirs seemed to exclude mine. So much for one world.

This is getting thin,  
I am generally an eschewer of long poems  
and confessional poems.  
I am just waiting for Moishe Oysher to chant the Kol Nidre  
which for Jews is like "Amazing Grace"  
which even Catholics go for these days.

## **Photo Above This Word Processor**

Her back to the Pacific Ocean, she  
stretches her hands toward us—  
a victorious embrace;

her very California little pink hat in her left hand  
her right palm frontward,  
her smile, made glorious by suffering, a blessing . . .

Blessed as I am, I choke.  
Memories are too huge  
to speak of, to write my way out of . . .

Another object for model could be  
this little glass of deep red wine beside me.  
A little frieze of white leaves surrounds the  
glass a third of the way below the rim.

The wine tastes better than it should.

10/04

## **The Unveiling**

When we spilled some wine on the Silvermans' tombstone  
(the name wasn't Silverman but it's close enough)

I was momentarily embarrassed, tried to wipe it up with  
some napkins I had in my pocket. Someone said the  
rain would wash it clean. We had spongecake too, Steve's  
idea. He's from The Bronx and knows about these things.  
And Lisa, sent from the synagogue in Park Slope, sang  
and was sweet and well organized, and Barbara was in tears,  
I had to look away, and all those good friends  
and relatives, handsome young brother and his beautiful  
brilliant daughter who writes well too  
and we took the veil off and placed stones, I  
brought some ugly ones from High Falls  
which has wonderful rocks (native blue stone)  
but looking for small stones, not very productive.  
But we all had a warm good time at your grave  
before we had to leave you

I sit keening now, as I often do

10/04

## **To Enid, Halloween 2004**

Thinking about putting miniature candybars in a bowl on the porch for trick or treaters.

Maybe save me from having to deal much with them.

What else am I thinking of?

I have four yahrzeit candles burning for our parents.

My mother actually died on Halloween.

Your parents sometime in October.

My father passed in February, but he wouldn't mind having some company.

He was always pretty gregarious.

Halloween was never that big on our calendar. But Thanksgiving was, and that's coming up.

How I miss you!

## Contemporary Country Blues

Crowded dance floor;  
suits newly brushed brush  
against gowns subtly perfumed.  
Oh the night  
so fresh, so endless!

The big jet touches down  
in California or Carolina.  
Passengers line up to exit the plane. I with them.

There is a cocktail lounge somewhere in America.  
It doesn't have to be in New York or Boston.  
It could be in Topeka or Omaha.  
I am there sipping a martini  
exchanging views on football with  
the occupant of the next stool,  
eyeing the lovely occupant of the stool at the end of the bar.  
The tv is tuned to a golf tournament without sound.  
The afternoon light is turning golden  
through the big window panes.  
I feel I ought to leave.

I loosen my necktie  
and churn my painful neck  
and think about the stars in the sky—  
one of which I had named after you.

## **That Beautiful Smile**

She always had that beautiful smile.

Life is tragic. There is no  
commonplace, no ephemeral.

There is a music that  
is hymnal. Shut your  
eyes & maybe you can dance to it.

A gravity was hers,  
often lifted

by sudden light  
and laughter.

12/04

## Christmas Eve 2004

Merry Christmas.

It's Enid's first yearzeit.

I've been sitting by

her candle

drinking chicken soup and

cataloguing her poems and stories,

and listening to

jazz on public radio.

They're a little too sophisticated.

I have a recording of Bing doing

White Christmas somewhere in

this house and I'm going to

play it before the night's over.

Jack Newfield died recently.

I just heard it yesterday on "Fresh Air"

where there was an old interview with him

when he moved from the Voice to the News.

I knew him a little at the Voice.

He was fairly friendly (I was basically

a messenger there) but I respected

him greatly for coming out early for

Robert Kennedy for president.

Sirhan Sirhan crippled us both

along with the rest of history.

He was at Hunter College when I

was. I remember him (it may not

in all fairness have really been him)

responding to my backward Queens  
querying, what is progressive? “pro  
Negro and pro Jewish” he (possibly Newfield)  
sputtered. This could be '55 or '56?  
Bobby Darin was also celebrated on “Fresh Air” today.  
Interesting that he had tried to tie all those different  
genres and sensitivities together to come out with  
something really unique and wonderful.  
My dear friend Eunice, gone these many years, was  
very into him. Maybe because he also was  
German-American? Or suffered tragic illness?  
Maybe just because he was gemini like Eunice and  
Bob Dylan, who she liked a lot too.

So have yourself a merry little Christmas all ye who mourn  
this silent night.  
Sleep, all ye who sleep,  
in heavenly peace.

I'm in no condition now to play White Christmas.  
Maybe tomorrow.  
Thank G-d this year it is not a white Christmas  
as I have to drive down to New Jersey day after tomorrow.



## **Psalm**

Where is it?

I think I dropped it just here

but it isn't here.

The long night.

The moon bright but not bright enough.

What is lost is lost.

I turn and face you

who know.

I tell you what you don't need to hear.

Because I need to tell.

You listen. Knowing.

12/04

## **Something for the New Year**

How do I write something upbeat  
for the new year? Not that I have  
to. I've been told I'm never that  
upbeat anyway. Hey maybe  
threehundredthousand in Asia  
killed by the tsunami and no  
let-up in Iraq, whose horrors  
seem dwarfed at the moment; and my  
own loss a year ago, but a  
loss for me every day of my  
life: think of all those hundreds of  
thousands of other every-day  
losses, and then swing! How to sound,  
not that I have to, up-beat, well  
here I am posing the question.

1/05

## The Spread

1.

There is what I call “the spread”  
before me.

After that a wall  
composed of children’s voices singing, laughing.  
I choose to go the other way only  
I can’t bring myself to turn around.  
so here I am.

2.

I choose something merrier  
this time.

Nothing can be that bleak.

The worst things  
usually happen to other people and then only on television.  
I feel like  
swinging and swaying  
doing a twist or a biblical hora;  
reaching into the stuff of the universe and coming up  
with a handful of pure pleasure.  
This is a rich moment.

3.

Clump of moist dark earth, fecund, cool, to the touch,  
clinging like a long kiss.

Then sand, running through the fingers, almost hot, and gone.  
Wash in sea water, salt rising in the air, gulls’ tears.

# **No Exit Ever**

*for Phil Levine*

Hell isn't only other people, it is also no other people.

Jean Paul Sartre and his cool ilk  
fabricated an existential hero alone  
in glacial subterranea  
making cool decisions because  
he had no choice but choice.

I am enjoying such freedom, nowadays.

I wished myself a happy (don't laugh)  
69<sup>th</sup> birthday at a bar with gibsons and  
steak sandwich. Only my second in the last  
27 I was not across a table from the one  
other person that had been my heaven.

Cool existentialist poet that I was I  
guess I gave little inkling on paper all those years  
on how it really was.

5/15/05

## To Enid on Her Birthday

Wordless again,  
caught in an internal net.  
How you used to get upset  
when you'd say "say something" and I  
couldn't open my mouth. I still can't explain it.  
today would have been your sixtysecond birthday.  
Barbara and I met in Brighton and drove out to the cemetery.  
Barbara had planned to bring roses but forgot to buy any.  
I told her it wasn't a Jewish thing to do anyway, not that  
it had to be, but for some reason Jews used stones, not flowers.  
I thought of your poem, "Stone Shekhina"  
and was stunned by the light  
shone on this very mystery.  
I brought along a little seashell and piece of coral  
from where you had placed them on the bookshelf in New Jersey.  
They broke in my pocket but I left the pieces anyway.  
There already were many stones atop your little monument.  
Could they have been left undisturbed  
from the unveiling nine months ago?  
That would be amazing. Or that so many had come to visit you  
those months would also be wonderful and amazing.  
I left stones on my parents' graves too.

6/28/05

## **The Seat of Sublimity — for Enid**

*"For Kant the reason was transcendent divine. It was the seat of sublimity."*

—Henry Hart in an essay on Seamus Heaney

The seat of sublimity  
was a rock in Central Park  
where my cousin sat and gave full  
voice to his Scottish bagpipes.

The seat of sublimity  
was a stoop on the Lower East Side  
where I sat with a can of beer waiting for  
nothing in particular.

The seat of sublimity  
was at our kitchen table  
when you were alive to share it.

The seat of sublimity  
ought to be this one;  
from which one leans over  
a typewriter

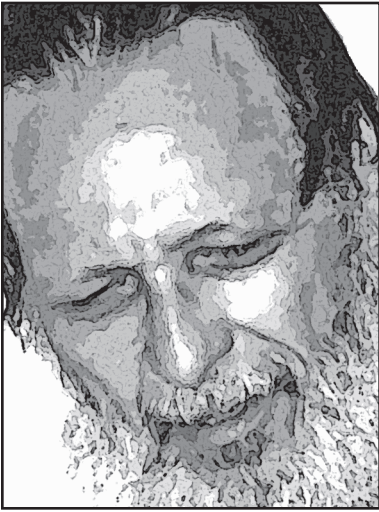
10/05

## **My Christmas**

Contemplating only soup, that is  
mingling, simmering, and wine  
which is some relief, gratification,  
spirit, and a yahrzeit candle for company—  
Christmas, my Christmas, dawns—  
which is warlike Hanukka too;  
but is mostly the confusion of a  
ragged chicken soup, and of  
time departed and time left  
and the illusion that they are  
of equal length and the confusion  
that makes them one

12/05

Photo by Eldad Benary



Donald Lev was born in New York City in 1936. He attended Hunter College, worked in the wire rooms of the *Daily News* and *New York Times*, and then drove a taxi cab for 20 years (with a 6 year hiatus in which he ran messages for, and contributed poetry to, *The Village Voice* and operated the Home Planet Bookshop on the Lower East Side).

His earliest poems appeared in print in 1958 and he started his first small press magazine, *HYN Anthology*, in 1969, the same year his brief underground film acting career pinnacled with his portrayal (he wrote his own lines) of the Poet in Robert Downey Sr.'s classic *Putney Swope*.

He met the poet Enid Dame (1943-2003) at a N.Y. Poets' Cooperative meeting in 1976. They became life partners in 1978, and in 1979 founded the literary tabloid *Home Planet News*, which Lev still publishes. This volume is the fourteenth collection of his poetry.

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