

*Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell*

Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

Down through the tomb's inward arch  
He has shouldered out into Limbo  
to gather them, dazed, from dreamless slumber:  
the merciful dead, the prophets,  
the innocents just His own age and those  
unnumbered others waiting here  
unaware, in an endless void He is ending  
now, stooping to tug at their hands,  
to pull them from their sarcophagi,  
dazzled, almost unwilling. Didmas,  
neighbor in death, Golgotha dust  
still streaked on the dried sweat of his body  
no one had washed and anointed, is here,  
for sequence is not known in Limbo;  
the promise, given from cross to cross  
at noon, arches beyond sunset and dawn.  
All these He will swiftly lead  
to the Paradise road: they are safe.  
That done, there must take place that struggle  
no human presumes to picture:  
living, dying, descending to rescue the just  
from shadow, were lesser travails  
than this: to break  
through earth and stone of the faithless world  
back to the cold sepulchre, tearstained  
stifling shroud; to break from them  
back into breath and heartbeat, and walk  
the world again, closed into days and weeks again,  
wounds of His anguish open, and Spirit  
streaming through every cell of flesh  
so that if mortal sight could bear  
to perceive it, it would be seen  
His mortal flesh was lit from within, now,  
and aching for home. He must return,  
first, in Divine patience, and know  
hunger again, and give  
to humble friends the joy  
of giving Him food—fish and a honeycomb.