

## A Still Point in the Shifting World

By Kirsten Bosnak

Book Review:

*The Water Leveling With Us*, by Donald Levering.  
Red Mountain Press, 2014.



The poems in Donald Levering's 12th collection, *The Water Leveling With Us*, explore the horrors and loss that come from material excess, war, unpreparedness for natural disasters, alongside life and beauty and miracles that persist. In "The Calcium of Stars," Levering pulls earth, sky and our bodies together:

Lichens survive on fog blown in from sea

From the coast the Atacama rises  
thousands of meters to a ridge  
where radio telescopes  
listen for the stars' first stories.  
Astronomers chart each surfacing star's  
calcium thumbprint

Below the telescope towers,  
anything discarded desiccates  
Hard minerals, shells, and bones—remain

Memory is rock and crevice

Here, women search through rocks for bones of "the disappeared," for what remains of their loved ones near Augusto Pinochet's prison, the site of torture. But permanence lies in the sea and stars.

As in Levering's previous work, the poems of *Water Leveling* are grounded in the details of landscape and the attentiveness of the mind. Relief from painful subject matter comes in the form of the long view, the realization of resilience. Inside a fenced-off field of land mines, the ecosystem restores itself. An ultralight pilot leads

orphaned whooping cranes along their ancestral migration route. In a time and place far from the Atacama, a child escapes from a different prison camp to the forest and experiences a life of loneliness and transcendent encounters: "Little Fire was my friend. / Little Fire, and a silver fox / who shared my feast of seeds, / neither thinking it odd."

In only one poem, "Counting for the Apparition of William Stafford," does the speaker come close to asking another human being what to do. The speaker crosses a quiet town on foot to a creek to meet the ghost of William Stafford—who in the '70s held the post that would become U.S. poet laureate and who was well known for his pacifism. The speaker waits, but the ghost is silent:

Stafford's shade declines to say  
whether I should be clicking  
on my abacus of grief  
the number of butterflies  
in an acre of torched rainforest

Stafford didn't believe he could stop war. Nor does *Water Leveling* (the title poem refers to rising seas) offer solutions to climate change. Levering, a morning writer, as Stafford was, knows what it is to be awake in the early darkness, simply listening to his own thoughts.

In *Harper's* magazine last summer, in an article subtitled "The decline of American verse," Mark Edmundson lamented what he saw in current poetry as a lack of ambition, specifically, a failure to prophesy. He held up Robert Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning" as a standard. He was "calling things as he believed them to be," Edmundson says of Lowell, "not only for himself but for all his readers."

*Water Leveling* delivers. There is nothing to prove; one can only witness. As in the poems of Lowell and Stafford, there is no frenzy, no demand, only stories to which we cannot help but respond.