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the poetry of
Philip Levine

by members of

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To the memory of

Philip Levine

(1928-2015)

We gratefully acknowledge the kind assistance of Edward Hirsch with the preparation of this issue.

Figure 1: Philip Levine
Photograph © Matt Valentine

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PREFACE

JIM GORMAN

SSML members were saddened to learn of Philip Levine's passing in February of 2015. That year the Society presented Phil with its Mark Twain Award for distinguished contributions to Midwestern literature and was planning to honor him at the annual conference in May. Levine, you might say, pulled a Levine on us, sidestepping our invitation in perhaps the only way that we as Midwesterners might find not insulting: he died. His good friend and fellow Detroit poet M. L. Liebler accepted the award in his place. His remarks at the awards luncheon described another of Phil's ironic returns to his home city, in 1983, and further described Phil as a tireless advocate of bringing poetry—not just his but all poetry—to new audiences through community workshops and performances. "Punk bar, auditorium, library, YMCA—it was all the same to Phil: turn everyday people on to poetry by any means necessary." Phil might have died months earlier, but as Liebler finished his tribute by reading Levine's elegy, "To Cipriano, in the Wind," it seemed that the poet was there with us alive as ever. Liebler's appreciation of Phil is the first of six essays published here in the poet's honor. The other five were prepared by SSML members for the conference in 2015 or 2017 and presented in panels celebrating Philip Levine's Midwestern origins and his universal achievements.

In the foreword to Levine's final posthumous collection, *The Last Shift* (2016), Edward Hirsch says that the poet's six-decade career "began in rage, ripened toward elegy, and culminated in celebration" (vii). My own essay focuses on the first of these moods, Levine's early anger, found in poems that critique working conditions in Detroit's automotive industry. Born in Detroit in 1928, Levine worked several industrial jobs in the 1940s and '50s. His poem, "You Can Have It" (1979), set in 1948, decries the cyclic perpetuity of shift work where "each man / has one brother who dies when he sleeps / and sleeps when he rises" (196). Henry Ford's assembly line moved around the clock, creating "full" employment, but at the cost of family members isolated from each other.

Labor historian John Beck sifts Levine's poems for artifacts, patiently amassing a detailed depiction of workplace culture and

meaning. The industrial landscape is dominated by its huge plants such as Ford Rouge. These stand mysterious to outsiders. Workers get beyond the mystery by punching in. The deafening beat of the presses acculturates them. They accommodate themselves to factory time and shifts—days, afternoons, nights—and work against fear and tedium to build camaraderie. Though Levine himself worked a decade inside factories, his experiences lacked value and dignity, he said in his autobiographical writings, until he transformed them into poetry. Beck believes the reading of Levine's poetry can likewise transform the experiences of millions more, though they labor in different workplaces and occupations.

Christina Triezenberg begins with Levine's appreciation of the photographs of Andrew Moore as published in *Detroit Disassembled* in 2010. Levine penned an essay for the book, "Nobody's Detroit," praising the "stark beauty and unexpected dignity" of Moore's monumental portraits of Detroit's ravished landmarks. Triezenberg examines four of Levine's poetic portraits written during the same decades as Moore's photos were taken (1988-2009). It's as if she is testing Levine to see if his portraits are as clear-eyed as Moore's. They are. Levine focuses on an unnamed working woman ("Coming Closer," 1991), his immigrant grandfather ("The New World," 1999), and perhaps the only social institution that he loved unconditionally, the Detroit Public Library ("Library Days," 2009). The fourth of these poems is Levine's own monumental portrait of a fictional black man, the ironically named Tom Jefferson ("A Walk with Tom Jefferson," 1988), a survivor and gardener who narrates the ruined city's history: his family's migration north on the promise of five dollars a day, the mid-century wars—WWII, which he survived; Korea, which his son did not—and the disheartening riots of the 1960s. This character embodies Levine's belief in the transformation of experience through poetry: Tom's plainly spoken insights confer dignity. Levine's poems about Detroit weave together personal and social experience to give readers a deeper understanding of Detroit's troubled history as well as hope for a better future.

Levine was in his eighties when he wrote about Moore's photo collection. By then, he had published twenty collections and had won the National Book Award twice, as well as the Pulitzer Prize. He might have been the only serious reader of American poetry who wouldn't suspect he'd soon be named US Poet Laureate, which he was, in 2011. Liebler's tribute also covers this episode in the poet's

life: his humility coupled with his too-sensitive insight about his irascible personality ("You're out of your mind, Mike," Levine tells Liebler. "They would never, ever, ever, have me as Poet Laureate. I am too controversial, too old, too crabby and they know it."). In a usual time, "they" would have disqualified him for such traits, but it was not a usual time: his selection was another of those magical dreams come true of the Obama presidency.

Philip Levine declares in several autobiographical writings that he thought he was alone in writing about the lives of working-class peoples. Nancy Bunge says Levine fails to mention predecessors not out of arrogance, but because Midwestern literary tradition was unacknowledged during his formative years. She points out that his subjects were the same as several earlier Midwestern fiction writers, especially Mark Twain, and at least one well-known poet, Carl Sandburg. This nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Midwestern literary tradition was revolutionary and distinct from the qualified optimism of the nineteenth-century New England writers, especially Emerson and Thoreau, in that it sprang from a vital and unqualified faith in people and a deep respect for nature. Bunge shows that both Levine and Sandburg learned to present members of the working class not just as victims of oppression, but as sources of inspiration and hope as well. Both poets lamented the damage inflicted on workers by those who relentlessly seek wealth and both also show how workers themselves sustained each other.

Philip A. Greasley presents a comprehensive review of Levine's evolving worldview. Levine lost his father at age five, leaving a psychological void and exposing his family to economic disadvantage. By fourteen, he was working part time and directly experiencing the danger and pollution of the industrial workplace. These early experiences fueled his sense of deprivation and inequity, but although he enjoyed relatively greater resources and social acceptability than many of his fellow workers, he came to respect them. He began by writing about himself and family. However, by the time he moved from the city in his mid-twenties, he had become a voice for those at the bottom who could not leave. Away from Detroit, he continued to write about them, his early anger now tempered by a Wordsworthian understanding of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility." Levine combined memory with imagination, leading to poems that moved from realism to impressionism and surrealism. Though he never returned to Detroit to live, he, in effect, never left. His work

provides the quintessential nightmarish vision of industrial and postindustrial Detroit, but it is not limited to that. Levine's vision addresses all times and places, remaining true to his values and never quitting.

Philip Levine would have turned ninety years old on January 10, 2018. In Detroit, it is hard to find the houses where he lived but not hard to find some of the urban institutions that he frequented. For example, still facing east on Woodward Avenue are the side-by-side edifices of the Wayne [State] University Union building, where he took classes, and the main branch of the Detroit Public Library, where he often went to read. Nor is it hard to find "the railroad crossing on Grand Blvd," which provides the setting of the last poem published in his last volume, both titled "The Last Shift." That poem presents a persona who seems to be dying while waiting for the train to cross ("I could feel a deep cold slowly climbing / my legs." 77). As Greasley shows above, Levine was not a quitter, and yet in the final lines of this final poem, his persona seems to be acknowledging that "last shift" in our dogged human awareness, that it is time to do so:

> . . . These places where I had lived / all the days of my life were giving up / their hold on me and not a moment too soon. (77)

Rest in peace, Philip Levine. All others, please enjoy these essays celebrating his life and work.

Otterbein University

ASCENSION

Philip Levine

Now I see the stars
are ready for me
and the light falls upon
my shoulders evenly,
so little light that even
the night birds can't see
me robed in black flame.
I am alone, rising
through clouds and the lights
of distant cities until
the earth turns its darker
side away, and I am ready
to meet my guardians
or speak again the first words
born in time. Instead,
it is like that dream
in which a friend leaves
and you wait, parked
by the side of the road
that leads home, until
you can feel your skin
wrinkling and your hair
grown long and tangling
in the winds, and still you
wait because you've waited
so long. Below, the earth
has turned to light but,
unlike the storied good

in Paradise, I see no going
and coming, none of the pain
I would have suffered had I
merely lived. At first
I can remember my wife,
the immense depth of her eyes
and her smooth brow in morning
light, the long lithe body
moving about her garden
day after day, at ease in the light
of those brutal summers. I can
see my youngest son again
moving with the slight swagger
of the carpenter hitching
up his belt of tools. I
can even remember the feel
of certain old shirts
against my back and shoulders
and how my arms ached
after a day of work. Then I
forget exhaustion, I forget
love, forget the need to
be a man, the need to
speak the truth, to close
my eyes and talk to someone
distant but surely listening.
Then I forget my own trees
at evening moving in the day's
last heat like the children
of the wind, I forget the hunger
for food, for belief, for love,
I forget the fear of death,
the fear of living forever,
I forget my brother, my name,
my own life. I have risen.
Somewhere I am a god.
Somewhere I am a holy
object. Somewhere I am.

AN APPRECIATION:
FAREWELL, PHILIP LEVINE: A DETROIT ORIGINAL

M. L. Liebler

I first said hello to Philip Levine in mid-fall 1983 at a retirement celebration for Wayne State University's much loved Creative Writing Professor Jay McCormick. Jay had been my faculty mentor when I started teaching at Wayne in 1980. He was a beautiful man who smoked too many cigarettes, read and critiqued countless student poems and stories, and was the faculty advisor for the *Wayne Literary Review*, which must have started under his guidance in the mid-1950s. Jay helped many students into writing careers. I know he mentored playwright Bill Harris and my beloved poetry mentor, the late Lawrence Pike. I also knew Phil Levine had been one of Jay's students during the early years of his career at the university, which spanned forty years, 1943-1983. So when we held a farewell party for Jay at the Detroit Institute of Arts that fall, Phil Levine came home to pay homage to his beloved undergraduate teacher.

However, Phil's trip home was to become a legendary story thanks to his detailed recounting of it in an essay he published in *The New Yorker* years later. Phil's trip got weird when the WSU English Department chair didn't think him important enough to send someone to get him from the airport. Phil called the English Department to see where his ride would meet him. Our chair told him no one was coming, and he should take the number 32 bus to the number 64 bus cross town and get off at Woodward and Warren and walk north two blocks to The Detroit Institute of Arts, where everyone would be happy to greet him. Talk about a hero not being recognized in his own land!

Phil got a lot of mileage out of that experience, and he even wrote and later published a poem about a bus ride through his old Detroit

where he had stopped to shoot the shit with neighbors on various porches. Meanwhile, at the DIA, all of us were whispering, "Where's Phil?" He eventually made it to the gathering, where he was the featured reader. A story like this could only happen in Detroit, and that's the beauty of our beloved, working-class Detroit.

I felt a kinship with Phil from the start. We were both rarities in academia: both children raised in working-class families, learning the rules of life from those small ranch house front porches, first-generation college kids who were exposed to a whole different way of life through books and poems. Phil was a rebel and somewhat of an anti-intellectual all of his career as a poet and as a professor at Fresno State, which he often described as the Wayne University of the West. He said Fresno was a similar working-class community that just happened to be in sunny California. While he did his thirty-plus years at Fresno, Phil nurtured some of America's greatest poets: Gary Soto, Garrett Hongo, Dorianne Laux, Edward Hirsch, Larry Levis, Etheridge Knight, and many others. Phil did not suffer fools (or administrators) gladly. He spoke his mind always, said what needed to be said in workshops, and that is why his students loved and respected him from Fresno to NYU, where he also taught in later years. Phil never worried what other people thought about him. If they had a problem with his way of looking at poems, issues, fields of inquiry, they needed to speak up, shut up or get the hell out.

I really met Phil up close and personal around the fall of 1985 when the English Department brought him back for the Miles Modern Poetry Series. After his exquisite reading, we all went to a local campus bar. I remember we closed out the night toasting (several times) by drinking full glasses of Frangelica liqueur. I remember saying to Phil, with a bit of a Frangelica slur, "I dig you, brother! You're my kinda poet." And Phil said something like, "I dig you, too." Little did I know that a night in a campus bar drinking silly sweet liqueur would lead to a thirty-plus-year friendship.

Over many years, I hosted Phil for readings a number of times, at Wayne State University and at various venues in Detroit. He was a member of one of the first YMCA Writer's Voice National Tours, which also included Toni Morrison, Galway Kinnell and Allen Ginsberg. In the early '90s, I became the director of the Detroit Writer's Voice at The Downtown YMCA, now right field at Comerica Park. Phil came to Detroit as part of that program whenever I asked him. He did readings, craft talks, meet-and-greets, all in

the name of building the community of poetry in his beloved Detroit. He was my go-to nationally recognized award-winning poet and he never let me down.

In 1999, Melba Joyce Boyd, Distinguished Professor at Wayne State University, joined me in gathering poems for an anthology to celebrate Detroit's 300th birthday. Once again, Phil was the first call I made. I knew we needed Phil to have an "official Detroit anthology of poetry." He, as always, was in. He offered me enough new material and Knopf copyrighted material that we could have easily done a whole section on Phil's Detroit. He was a great supporter of both of us during the long process of developing a popular anthology of poetry for The Wayne State University Press that still sells well.

Phil was, also, always open to my crazy poetry programming ideas. Once I had him, Ken Kesey, Jim Daniels and acclaimed Vietnam-veteran poet W.D. Ehrhart on a wild Labor Arts program in a huge punk rock club on the Wayne State University campus. Again, Phil was there as if he'd been invited to read at Royal Albert Hall! Punk bar, university, auditorium, library, YMCA—it was all the same to Phil: turn everyday people on to poetry by any means necessary. A few years later, I wanted Phil to be a part of a major working-class and labor literature anthology I was working on. Again Phil was in. He gave me poems and sent me a copy of his *Uncollected Poems* with handwritten notes and checks by all the working-class related poems. His note inside said, "Mike, I own all of these poems, use any of them you want in your anthology." One of the marked poems was "Ascension," which appears at the beginning of this issue.

Finally, I wanted to hold a grand public reading for Phil, to make Wayne State University pay him what he was really worth. So I had them fly him and his beloved bride Frannie in to spend a few days in luxury and friendship in Detroit. It was during that visit that I told Phil, "You will one day be the US Poet Laureate." He said, "You're out of your mind, Mike. They would never, ever, ever have me as Poet Laureate. I am too controversial, too old, too crabby and they know it." I told him he was wrong. In e-mails and phone calls over the years leading to the summer of 2011, I cajoled, teased and reminded him of what he called my "ludicrous, ridiculous" idea. Then, out of the blue, one warm August morning in 2011, I received a call from *The Detroit Free Press*. They wanted my reaction to the news that "Philip Levine was just named U.S. Poet Laureate for 2011-2012." I couldn't believe it. I was pleasantly stunned, happy

and downright giddy. A sly smile crossed my face. "I knew it. I knew it," I kept shouting in my kitchen to my perplexed little dog. Our beloved working-class hero poet was the damn Poet Laureate of the United States of America. It was an amazing feeling that a working-class person was finally getting his just deserts. I immediately called Phil with the expected "I told ya—you knucklehead—I told ya!" phone call. He was stunned and pleasantly surprised, too, but I immediately got the sense that he understood what he had to do for poetry and for the people under that banner and title. He wanted poetry to be accessible to all. He wanted it brought out in the open and out of the shadows of universities and schools. He wanted it out where real working people live. He wanted others to have the chance he had to explore the written word. I was proud of my old pal and I truly sensed he was proud, too. He was our working-class hero from a beaten-down city, graduated from a great and gritty urban institution, winner of two National Book Awards and a Pulitzer, who had reached the top of the poetry mountain—and he was still one of us.

His year as Poet Laureate passed successfully and I was hoping to have Phil back to Detroit once again. Then, in late 2014, Professor Ron Primeau of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature called to see if I could ask Phil to come to Lansing in June of 2015 to accept the Society's prestigious Mark Twain Award at their annual conference. I wrote Phil immediately. I didn't hear back. I didn't think that was unusual. I wasn't sure if he had gone back to Fresno for the spring and summer. However, when I tried a couple more times, I did become suspicious. I e-mailed our mutual pal, poet Edward Hirsch, to see what was happening with Phil. That's when he told me that Phil was in hospice care in Fresno, and the outlook was not good. In fact, he said he had just paid his final visit to Phil's bedside to say goodbye. The news knocked the wind right out of me. I sadly called Ron at SSML. He kindly asked if I would come to receive the award for Phil in June. I said absolutely. Then on a cold Valentine's night in 2015, I received word from Ed that "Phil is gone." WOW! All the years rushed back—from his weird bus trip from the airport, to the dizzy night of Frangelica, to Phil and Ken Kesey on the same stage, to Phil giving craft talks in a broken-down room in an old Downtown YMCA, and to that wonderful summer day when I heard he was named Poet Laureate. It was a living film in reverse, and it hurt to think that Philip Levine, Detroit poet, working-

class professor and good, good friend, was gone. He would return to us no more. I felt horrible for his family and his dear wife Frannie.

In April of 2015, Edward Hirsch was coming to Detroit to participate in my annual Midwest Literary Walk in Downtown Chelsea. We both decided we wanted to hold a Detroit Tribute to our hero and friend. A lot of people turned up on short notice to hear Ed talk and read and to listen to others who knew Phil read one of his poems. In a way, we were bringing Phil's spirit back to his old Wayne University (as he always called it). Ed began with a reading of his favorite of Phil's poems, "To Cipriano, in the Wind," and a young alternative rock musician ended the night with a unique musical presentation of Phil's beautiful "Ascension." I read "Cipriano" to the SSML conference audience when I received Phil's Mark Twain Award in May of 2015. I knew he was smiling down on everyone assembled in that East Lansing room.

Both poems mentioned in this essay are here printed in this issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* for you to contemplate and enjoy. Philip Levine of Detroit, Michigan, has left his mark on American poetry for all time, and he will always live in our hearts and our poetry souls. Read these two poems and think of dear Phil ascending in the wind.

Wayne State University

TO CIPRIANO, IN THE WIND

PHILIP LEVINE

Where did your words go,
Cipriano, spoken to me 38 years
ago in the back of Peerless Cleaners,
where raised on a little wooden platform
you bowed to the hissing press
and under the glaring bulb the scars
across your shoulders "a gift
of my country"—gleamed like old wood.
"Dignidad," you said into my boy's
wide eyes, "without is no riches."
And Ferrente, the dapper Sicilian
coatmaker, laughed. What could
a pants presser know of dignity?
That was the winter of '41, it
would take my brother off to war,
where you had come from, it would
bring great snowfalls, graying
in the streets, and the news of death
racing through the halls of my school.
I was growing. Soon I would be
your height, and you'd tell me
eye to eye, "Some day the world
is ours, some day you will see."
And your eyes burned in your fine
white face until I thought you
would burn. That was the winter
of '41, Bataan would fall

to the Japanese and Sam Baghosian
would make the long march
with bayonet wounds in both legs,
and somehow in spite of burning acids
splashed across his chest and the acids
of his own anger rising toward his heart
he would return to us and eat
the stale bread of victory. Cipriano,
do you remember what followed
the worst snow? It rained all night
and in the dawn the streets gleamed,
and within a week wild phlox leaped
in the open fields. I told you
our word for it, "Spring," and you said,
"Spring, spring, it always come after."
Soon the Germans rolled east
into Russia and my cousins died. I
walked alone in the warm spring winds
of evening and said, "Dignity." I said
your words, Cipriano, into the winds.
I said, "Someday this will all be ours."
Come back, Cipriano Mera, step
out of the wind and dressed in the robe
of your pain tell me again that this
world will be ours. Enter my dreams
or my life, Cipriano, come back
out of the wind.

(from *One for the Rose*, 1981)

NARRATIVE PASSION IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LEVINE

JIM GORMAN

In forty plus years Philip Levine was a poet of nature, of family, of the immigrant experience, but because of the accident of his birth—1928, in Detroit—and more so because of his sensibility—what he describes as "overblown"—he will be remembered for a large number of simple but dramatic poems about work and working-class people. These terms—"1928," "Detroit," and "overblown"—are used by Levine in describing himself in "One for the Rose," the title poem of his 1981 collection. Here is the ending of that poem:

> What was I doing in Akron, Ohio
> waiting for a bus that groaned slowly
> between the sickened farms of 1951
> and finally entered the smeared air
> of hell on US 24 where the Rouge plant
> destroys the horizon? I could have been
> in Paris at the feet of Gertrude Stein,
> I could have been drifting among
> the reeds of a clear stream
> like the little Moses, to be found
> by a princess and named after a conglomerate
> or a Jewish hero. Instead I was born
> in the wrong year and in the wrong place,
> and I made my way so slowly and badly
> that I remember every single turn,
> and each one smells like an overblown rose,
> yellow, American, beautiful, and true. (43-44)

In the year mentioned, 1951, Levine is twenty-three years old. As he says here, he was born in the wrong year—1928, or eighteen

months ahead of the stock market crash. As a young man, he is not in Paris. He's also not God's prophet, nor is he wealthy. Rather, he is riding a bus back to his home city, where he is working for Chevy Gear and Axle. At twenty-three, he had been working in the city of Detroit in various jobs for close to a decade, having started work at age fourteen while in high school. He is also enrolled part time at the local city college, Wayne University. Graduating in 1950, Levine continued to work in the city until 1953, when he left Detroit for Iowa, where he attended the Writers Workshop, at first not registering, but later completing an MFA in 1957. From there he moved to Stanford on a fellowship, then to a teaching position at California State-Fresno.

Levine never left Detroit as a poet, though. His poems about the city continue. They are both more angry and ironic than his other poems, simpler and louder. They are, in his word, overblown. They form the backbone of his first several collections, in the '60s and '70s. By 1981, with the collection that contains the poem quoted above, he is trying to grow beyond them. He both succeeds and fails at this. He does grow less angry, less loud, less Marxist in his indictment of the system, but, on the other hand, he never stops writing about Detroit and work. You might say, with later poems like "Sweet Will" and "A Walk with Tom Jefferson," that he has made a deft switch from writing about his own work to writing about the dire effects of industrialization on working-class peoples, or on the people who could not escape those effects, who could not move away.

By 1971, he had published four collections, none of them distinguished. But he comes into his own with his 1972 collection, *They Feed They Lion*. That book's title poem is an ironic Whitmanesque catalog, perhaps one of the first poems in which Levine cuts his anger with wit. The poem is distinct but not yet wholly his own, as Whitman's manner is so directly felt. We hear Whitman's exalted tone, his biblical anaphora, his cataloging. But the industrial subject matter, the paradoxical combinations and the anger are all Levine. The poet is breaking out, rising up. In other poems in this collection, Levine has burrowed down to the rich but confining level of individual story. Here, though, he breaks through to a kind of loud, musical jeremiad:

> Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
> Out of black bean and wet slate bread,

> Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
> Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
> They Lion grow. (34)

The poem also brings together means and ends, or labor and why we do it: we work to eat, to feed ourselves, or vice versa: they feed they Lion. The energy and force of the modern world come from working men. Muscular men come from all over to the urban work centers; they are harnessed, used, but in this poem, at least, they are not tamed. Rather, they "Lion"—always with a capital L: "they Lion."

"They Feed They Lion" has as much music as any Levine poem and it has passion, but it does not move beyond catalog to tell a singular story. The poem that joins rhetorical passion with specific story is "You Can Have It," published seven years later, in 1979. Very clear and bold, this poem is much anthologized and might be his most widely known poem. I think it is one of his greatest. It has the two Levine qualities that I hunger for: intimate story and working-class politics. "You Can Have It" plays with a personal accident in Levine's life, the fact that he was a twin. The poem moves easily from autobiographical material to collective statement as the story of modern industrial life rises out of the lives of these twins. Like Plato's conjoined selves, the brothers seem to be divided at birth so that the one can labor while the other sleeps:

> All night at the ice plant he had fed
> the chute its silvery blocks, and then I
> stacked cases of orange soda for the children
> of Kentucky, one gray box-car at a time
>
> with always two more waiting. . . (64)

The poem tells us that Detroit was founded by "Cadillac for the distant purposes of Henry Ford." Ford's assembly line brought the work to the worker, but it also *never* stopped, not for eight hours, not for twenty-four hours. The fact that one man cannot keep up with it, cannot work twelve, twenty-four or more hours, is easily finessed by the system, however. Levine's epiphany comes when he realizes that:

> . . . each man
> has one brother who dies when he sleeps
> and sleeps when he rises to face this life,

and that together they are only one man
sharing a heart that always labors . . . (64)

Labor is physically exhausting, but, worse, it consumes all of your waking time. At age twenty, the prime year of your life, you have no time to live, no time for anything but work. The poem stays rooted in the particulars of Levine's life. And its defiant message is also rooted in what the brother has said, which Levine interprets as a "curse for God" and "all creation": You (God) can have it (all creation).

Philip Levine's best poems are driven by narrative passion. What I mean by "narrative" is story, which I'll define as a glimpse of a protagonist, a laborer, either beating or being broken by an antagonist, either an unnamed system or a named boss or owner. What I mean by "passion" is anger, outrage. Passion might describe other feelings, of course, but in Levine's best poems, passion is usually anger. It rises suddenly out of the example; the passionate statement is often sarcastic, an intemperate lashing out; it is voiced by the laboring man and aimed at the boss, who, in this poem, is named (Cadillac and Ford). The speech is based on observation but intemperately jumps to exaggeration ("we were twenty for such a short time . . . we were never twenty").

These outbursts are tempered, though, by the poem's formality: it is written in unrhymed free verse structured into quatrains, which give the poem a controlled look. The stanzas settle the outbursts, temper them. The poem is tempered, too, by another feature of the story: its intimacy. Loud in one line, the speech is tender in the next. It is, in the phrase quoted earlier, overblown, an "overblown" rose, a rose after it's bloomed, a spoiled rose. This is the beauty and truth of America in 1948, when he and his twin were twenty, and even more so in 1978, the year the speaker regretfully looks back. The once good idea of Fordism has ruined us. The brother's despair—you can have this life, I don't want it—results from exhaustion following his own shift of hard, hurried work, but such despair is amplified by the speaker's recognition that shift work keeps him and his brother from enjoying each other's company. Workers do benefit from such a system, but at the cost, literally, of isolation from family members.

Levine's brother also appears in one of his last celebrated poems about work, "What Work Is" (1991). This poem is about the unemployed. Levine stands in line waiting to be hired. Work here is time

wasted. Here the unemployed labor as hard waiting for a job as they would if they had one. Where is his brother in this poem? At first, he imagines him in the line with him, but then remembers that he is home sleeping. But at least in this poem, Levine's brother has a waking life beyond his job. He is an opera singer who wakes himself early to study German.

In another later poem, "Sweet Will" (1985), Levine again shifts his understanding of time. Here the worker is not forced to keep up with the assembly line but seems to work at his own pace. One worker, Stash, has enough time to both work and sip cherry brandy. Again, it is 1948, the night shift at the Cadillac plant. Stash gets drunk, falls, bangs his head on the shop floor, and passes out. The other workers say let him alone, let him get up at his "own sweet will." Stash does get up in his own time, then celebrates his co-workers in a song and dance that playfully uses ethnic slurs as its lyrics: Nigger, Kike, Hunky, River Rat. This song of solidarity is a triumphant moment, but quickly the poem takes us back to the present, thirty-four years later, when Stash and the other workers are dead. The one survivor is the speaker, Levine, uttering his "sad tales of men/who let the earth break them back" (18).

In Levine's poems about work, then, we may see a progression in his attitude. He is no doubt angriest in "You Can Have It" (1979), where both he and his brother are forced to work quickly, incessantly, and where work crowds out the rest of life. In "Sweet Will" (1986), Stash uses alcohol and his own irascibility to at least express his humanity on the job, though in the end, the job breaks him. In the third poem, "What Work Is" (1991), in another glimpse into his brother's life, this brother is able at least to participate in some sustaining human activity—learn German, sing opera—in the hours outside work. In these poems, time exists in two senses: first, time on task, the eight- or twelve-hour shift, and second, the larger time of a life. What we may be seeing also is the difference between workers like himself and his brother who, through education, can work in these factory jobs for a number of years but not for a *lifetime*. Levine and his brother can escape; Stash and others do not.

Co-existing with these temporal elements in Levine's poems is a spatial one. This element is important as we appreciate Levine as a poet of place, of *his* place and ours, the Midwest. As I mentioned earlier, Levine does write about other places, but most of his important poems are about Detroit. And just as there are two senses of time in

his poems, there are also two Detroits: the *inside* of the factory and the *outside* of everywhere else, the streets and dirty rivers. I have shown you some glimpses into factories. Here is one glimpse of an outside setting, from another of Levine's oft-anthologized poems, from his 1976 volume, *The Names of the Lost*. The emotion in this poem is not anger but sadness, regret:

Belle Isle, 1949

We stripped in the first warm spring night
and ran down into the Detroit River
to baptize ourselves in the brine
of car parts, dead fish, stolen bicycles,
melted snow. I remember going under
hand in hand with a Polish highschool girl
. . . .
… and swimming out
on the starless waters towards the lights
of Jefferson Ave. and the stacks
of the old stove factory unwinking
. . . .
… Back panting
to the gray coarse beach we didn't dare
fall on, the damp piles of clothes,
and dressing side by side in silence
to go back where we came from. (*The Names of the Lost* 30)

Belle Isle sits in the Detroit River. Ferries and later a bridge took residents across to enjoy the island's many natural and man-made amusements. The island still functions today, but on the night of this poem it is dark, as there is "no island at all." The poem's skinny dippers find a momentary romantic union as their breaths catch simultaneously when they hit the freezing river. That the setting is dark has something to do with the swimmers, as they want secrecy. Also, their romance may be thwarted by age (the girl is in "highschool") and morals ("where they came from"), but certainly "the gray coarse beach we didn't dare / fall on" is a discouraging factor, as is the debris—the car parts, dead fish, stolen bicycles—that swims with them. This is post-World War II Detroit, the Motor City at full employment. Such a churning industrial engine is ruining the environment, but these swimmers and other residents are learning to co-exist with the junk.

In another glimpse of himself as a young man, Levine again shows the beauty of the city intertwined with degradation. In the essay "Entering Poetry," from his autobiography, *The Bread of Time*, he describes his early encounters with poetic inspiration. He is thirteen, his widowed mother has moved the family to a house bordering a dark woods in a part of the city where there is no industry. At night he slips into the woods and lies under huge beech trees to study the stars. He also finds beauty in roses and irises.

But suddenly, Levine shifts his essay from 1942 to 1952 and describes himself working at Chevy Gear & Axle. He works in great heat, wearing gloves and using tongs to place and remove red hot pieces from a press. After only a few days, he mercifully gets "promoted" to a less stressful place on the assembly line. There he's invited by a co-worker to observe the sabotaging of a press: the co-worker malls the machine with a small sledge hammer. When the machine malfunctions, Levine is pulled into an interrogation. The bosses want him to rat, but Levine clams up, so he's transferred back to the earlier job of great heat. He works another few weeks and quits. In this story, we see another example of anger—the saboteur's direct and dishonest anger. Levine pays a price for protecting him but soon exercises his smart man's privilege of quitting and moving to a better life elsewhere. This unnamed worker finds an individual way to strike at the system, but he's also degraded the world he lives in. He is parallel to residents of Detroit who, in 1942, 1967 and other years, have trashed their own city by rioting.

In one of Levine's greatest poems, he gives us the story of an invented resident of Detroit who witnessed these riots and has settled in after them to live in the spoiled city. This invented resident is the main focus of Levine's 1988 long poem, "A Walk with Tom Jefferson." Only rarely does Levine write a poem longer than three pages. This one is thirteen pages, and yet, because of a deft formatting trick, it seems airy rather than dense, and it unfolds with a slow pace that befits its respectful subject. Levine's formatting trick is to "syncopate" his free verse lines by ex-denting / indenting them. The lines themselves are relatively short, but it's the odd stacking that creates the slowness, I think, that makes us pause and accept the poem phrase by phrase. Here are the opening lines:

> Between the freeway
> and the gray conning towers

of the ballpark, miles
  of mostly vacant lots, once
a neighborhood of small
  two-storey wooden houses —
dwellings for immigrants
  from Ireland, Germany,
Poland, West Virginia,
  Mexico, Dodge Main. (49)

The poem describes Detroit in the mid- to late-1980s, twenty years after the great riots of 1967, pretty much the same city that we see today. The ballpark mentioned is Tiger Stadium, closed in 1999.

What's remarkable about this poem is its mature thinking. It's no doubt a fictional story: Tom Jefferson is such a paragon that he must be fictional. He is no peeved young man with a sledge hammer, that's for sure. Rather, he is stately, "six feet of man unbowed." He has come north as a child with his parents in the Great Migration, his father drawn from sharecropping by the promise of a five-dollar-a-day job. Tom Jefferson is a believer who describes the ironies of his life as "Biblical," a repeated response that becomes a refrain. Some of these ironies are painful, some noble; most of them connect him to others: it's "Biblical" the way his young son took up his father's gardening spade when Tom went off to serve in World War II; it's also "Biblical" when the father took back the same spade when his son went off to serve, and die, in Korea. Here's a passage that suggests that these two wars as well as "Biblical" wars are as much about poverty and race as they are about global political realities:

  . . . Maybe even
  war is Biblical, maybe
even the poor white
  fighting the poor black
in this city for the same
  gray concrete housing,
the same gray jobs
  they both came
north for, maybe that's
  Biblical, the way
the Canaanites and the Philistines
  fought the Israelites . . . (58-59)

The "Biblical" explanation helps Tom Jefferson accept the loss of a son and wife and his whole neighborhood burning down around him.

But even larger than his belief in the Old Testament is his faith in the cycles of nature. The Old Testament helps him accept human destruction and loss. Nature gives him even more: it helps him survive, it puts food on his table. On the day of the poem, in late October, we see Tom Jefferson clear out this season's vegetable plants, pile them into his shopping cart, and dump them on an empty lot so that the earth will take them back. At day's end, he goes inside, whispering but one word, "Tomorrow." Tom Jefferson believes in winter, believes that seeds must freeze in order to sprout. Year to year, he survives with nature's help, growing corn, tomatoes, peppers, squash, and, especially, winter vegetables, cabbages the size of brains and fist-sized beets.

But once Tom Jefferson goes into his house, the poem continues, and the speaker goes further in articulating *his* belief. Yes, there is the *nature* of seeds and plants, of food. But even more fundamental than nature is the idea of *earth*—not the nature of husbandry but of industrial chemistry. He gives us two examples. The first is pollution: the deep maroon colors of a city sunset, "the signs / of all the earth we've pumped / into the sky." The second example is that of steel making, and again, Levine's persona recalls work in the forge room:

> I stood in the silence
> of the great presses slamming
> home, the roar of the earth
> striking the fired earth, the reds
> searing their glowing image
> into the eye and brain,
> the oranges and roses
> blooming in the mind long
> after, even in sleep. (63-64)

Philip Levine describes Tom Jefferson lovingly. That man's belief in nature sustains him. But the poet ends this great poem with a less sustaining image. Some few good people, like Tom Jefferson, may survive, even thrive, in the ruined neighborhoods of postindustrial Detroit. But Levine shows us, in the final passage of this poem, that a larger number of rapacious humans, the new Cadillacs and Henry Fords, are fighting earth with earth, ruining ever more new places, new cities across this planet. Levine suggests here that we are well beyond his brother's despondent curse—You (God) can have it (all creation). God does not control creation, someone more power-

ful does. Philip Levine wants us to respect the acceptant survivor Tom Jefferson, but he himself is less acceptant: his poem closes with anger.

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KNOWING WHAT WORK IS: WORKING AND THE WORKPLACE IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LEVINE

JOHN P. BECK

The late Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning poet Philip Levine knew what work was. Some of his first poems were penned when he was working the floor at Chevrolet Gear and Axle. The native Detroiter drew on his experiences of work and the workplace, starting in his early teens, and had those experiences become one of the defining center posts of the over half century of writing throughout his life. It is one thing to have factory life and hard physical work in your background; it is something quite different to focus on those working hours and make them one of the recurring facets of your literary craft. Though Levine made the relationship to work and the workplace a dominant feature of his lifetime body of work, this review of work and the workplace in Levine's poetry is limited to five major collections of poetry since the later 1980s. What are the overarching themes concerning worklife and workplace in Levine's poetry? How does the poet tell us "what work is"?

Philip Levine explored his relationship to work in his chapter, "Entering Poetry" in *The Bread of Time*:

> In the spring of 1952 in Detroit, I was working at Chevrolet Gear and Axle... and I hated the job more than any I'd had before or have had since, not only because it was so hard, the work so heavy and monotonous that after an hour or two I was sure each night that I would never last the shift, but also because it was dangerous. There in the forge room, where I worked until I was somehow promoted to a less demanding, equally boring job, the stock we handled so gingerly with tongs was still red-hot as we pulled it from the gigantic presses and hung it above us on conveyors that carried our handiwork out of sight. Others had mastered the art of handling the tongs loosely, the way a

> good tennis player handles his racquet as he approaches the net for a drop volley, applying just enough pressure not to let go and not enough to choke it. Out of fear, I squeezed for all I was worth, and all the good advice, the coaching I received from my fellow workers, was of no use. (85)

Drawing on those experiences at Chevrolet and other workplaces, Levine explored the various roles which work and the workplace play in our lives. The workplace serves as a dominant geographic marker in the community, a maker of landscape as well as a marker of it. The workplace is a destination; life is measured into work and non-work hours and defined through the transitions of coming to and going from work. The workplace is a foreboding place which is full of noises and smells, challenges and dangers. The workplace is a coming-together space where commonality and difference are both created and transformed. Workplaces are where work happens, where working can produce its host of outcomes and consequences, both planned and unplanned: tedium and exhaustion, testing and survival, fear and terror, skill, camaraderie and humor, identity, money and feelings of accomplishment. I will discuss each of these descriptions of work and the workplace in Levine's poetry, citing many of the wonderful poems in which Philip Levine gave us his key guidance in understanding "what work is."

The workplace, whether large or small, serves as one of the dominant magnets around which life is formed and enacted. The factories of Levine's native Detroit are immense, even in their postindustrial absence, in their stature and their place in the life of the Motor City and its residents, including Levine. The proximity of the factories are important since our lives are measured out in the blocks and miles from work or in relation on the street grid and these huge economic engines. The workplace is a neighbor, within whose shadow we live, a defining location across the street:

> Across the road from Ford's a Mrs. Strempek
> planted tulip bulbs and irises even though
> the remnants of winter were still hanging on
> in gray speckled mounds. . . . ("Photography 2," *The Mercy* 16)

Sometime, as Levine explores further in "Photography 2," the size of the workplace can almost make the people insignificant:

> When Charles Sheeler
> came to Dearborn to take his famous photographs
> of the great Rouge plant he caught some workers,
> tiny little men, at a distance, dwarfed
> under the weight of the tools they thought
> they commanded. When they got too close
> he left them out of focus, gray lumps with white
> wild eyes. Mainly he was interested in
> the way space got divided or how light
> changed nothing. (*The Mercy* 16)

From a distance, it is the workplaces not the skyscrapers that define Detroit for Levine:

> From Ontario's shore one sees
> The smoking stacks of breweries,
> the ore boats beached and fuming,
> the satanic stove factory
> where my great-uncle lost faith
> in serf work. . . . ("A View from Home," *Breath* 2)

Workplaces begat work. The geographic facts which were the auto factories, the breweries and other locations were the other home to thousands who did the "serf work" in Levine's words. Levine's city of workers is full of gray and smoke, but there is an exchange going on. People go to work and come from work and something happens there. Essential parts of life are created and/or destroyed there.

> Can you imagine the air filled with smoke?
> It was. The city was vanishing before noon
> or was it earlier than that? I can't say because
> the light came from nowhere and went nowhere.
> .....
> . . . Why
> is the air filled with smoke? Simple. We had work.
> Work was something that thrived on fire, that without
> fire couldn't catch its breath or hang on for life. ("Smoke," *The Mercy* 3-4)

Work is such a normal part of life that the absence of it is an essential part of its pull and power. Work is better than no work as evidenced in the title poem of Levine's 1991 collection, *What Work Is*, which takes place in a long line of unemployed men hoping for a

job at the Ford Highland Park where Levine's persona and the others share:

> ... the sad refusal to give in to
> rain, to the hours wasted waiting,
> to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
> a man is waiting who will say, "No,
> we're not hiring today," for any
> reason he wants. (18-19)

When they have work, people mark time in their lives into work and non-work time. The transition back and forth from work to non-work spaces is an important time to prepare for the rigors and dangers on shift or to decompress from them, or to reflect on the relationship to working. Levine shows us the preparation and entrance into work in these two selections from "Drum" and "Every Blessed Day":

> In the early morning before the shop
> opens, men standing out in the yard
> on pine planks over the umber mud. . . .
>
> … The light diamonds
> last night's rain; inside a buzzer purrs.
> The overhead door stammers upward
> to reveal the scene of our day. (*The Mercy* 8)
>
> Even before he looks he knows
> the faces on the bus, some
> going to work and some coming back,
> but each sealed in its hunger
> for a different life, a lost life.
> Where he's going or who he is
> he doesn't ask himself, he
> doesn't know and doesn't know
> it matters. . . .
> In a few minutes he will hold
> his time card above a clock,
> and he can drop it in
> and hear the moment crunching
> down, or he can not, for
> either way the day will last
> foreve … (*What Work Is* 8-9)

Levine spends a good amount of time in his poetry exploring the time after work, once the shift is done. In 'Salt and Oil" and "An Extraordinary Morning" respectively, Levine creates the universality of what it means to be young and done with work, essentially free until the next time you cross the workplace's threshold:

> Three young men in dirty work clothes
> on their way home or to a bar
> in the late morning. This is not
> a photograph, it is a moment
> in the daily life of the world,
> a moment that will pass into
> the unwritten biography
> of your city or my city
> unless it is frozen in the fine print
> of our eyes… (*The Mercy* 21-23)

> Two young men—you might call them boys—
> waiting for the Woodward streetcar to get
> them downtown. Yes, they're tired, they're also
> dirty and happy. Happy that they've finished
> a short workweek, and if they're not rich
> they're as close to rich as they will ever be
> in this town. (*News of the World* 22)

He explores this same nether-zone of time in the nonworkplace in a number of other poems that describe the camaraderie of co-workers:

> Twenty-eight years old, on our way home
> after a twelve hour shift baking Wonder bread ...
> To myself I smelled like a new mother minus
> the aura of talcum and the airborne acrid aromas
> of cotton diapers…
>
> A blurred moon was out, we both saw it. . . .
>
> . . . Did I look like you, my face
> anonymous and pure, bleached with flour. . . ("My Brother,
> Antonio, the Baker," *Breath* 23-24)

In other passages, he describes the difficulty of transitioning out of the workday and workplace:

> When he gets off work at Packard, they meet
> outside a diner on Grand Boulevard. He's tired,
> a bit depressed, and smelling the exhaustion
> on his own breath . . .
> He's been up late, she thinks, he's tired of the job. . . . ("The Two," *Breath* 19)

and the pronounced silences of the late night, early morning end of shift:

> After the rage of the anvil, the terror
> of iron striking iron and iron striking back,
> the streets outside Chevy Gear and Axle
> overflow with silence as the snow comes down
> slowly at first and then whitening the night. . . .
> ("Smoke," *The Mercy* 5)

> . . . How silent
> and still the world was after so much
> slamming of metal on metal and the groans
> of the earth giving way to the wakened fury
> of machines and the separate cries of people
> together for these nights. How odd that he...
> should stand numbed by the weight
> of a Thursday shift and raise his head
> to a heaven he'd never believed in and sing
> in a hoarse voice older than his years,
> "Oh, Lordy Lord, I am, I'm coming home!" ("When the Shift Was Over," *Breath* 71)

The demarcation between the outside and inside of the workplace is very real. As mentioned initially above, they can be a feature on the landscape, but the true mysteries of what goes on inside the workplace are reserved for those who "punch in" and play out their scenes within the inner landscape.

We go to work and the workplace delivers, things both good and bad, for us as workers: an economic stake in either fast living or security for the long haul; a sense of danger and exhaustion by the shift or by the lifetime; a culture of solidarity, skill and common language based in the camaraderie of the shop floor; and identity and the dual senses of accomplishment and futility.

In "Growth," describing his job in the soap factory in a Whitmanesque moment at fourteen, Levine shows us the essential role of work as personal economic fact:

> . . . I hammered and sawed, singing
> my new life of working and earning,
> outside in the fresh air of Detroit
> in 1942, a year of growth. (*What Work Is* 10-11)

and then again at age twenty in "Arrival and Departure,"

> I should have seen
> where we were headed; even at twenty
> it was mine to know. Like you, I thought
> 2.35 an hour was money, I thought
> we'd sign on for afternoons and harden
> into men. Wasn't that the way it worked,
> men sold themselves to redeem their lives? (*News of the World* 23-25)

Though an economic necessity (as evidenced in the problem of lack of work mentioned earlier), hard work breaks down the body and spirit—a reality that created the common sense nugget, "Why do you think they call it work?" In "Fire," Levine talks of the exhaustion of western firefighters, but the tiredness, the slow plodding of footfall after footfall he describes is echoed in his other poems as well:

> By now, without sleep, they've
> gone beyond exhaustion. Some can't
> waken, some are crazed, a few go
> on—the oldest—working steadily. (*What Work Is* 7)

In "Closed," a hoped-for meal at the end of shift does not materialize since the diner is closed and the deli next door doesn't serve breakfast:

> For eight hours I been thinking of nothing but breakfast," said Bernie. "This has spoiled my whole weekend, maybe my whole life." By this time the sun had cleared the stacks of the transmission plant & broken through the dusty window of the deli. . . . "If I had anything left in me," he said, "I'd cry." (*News of the World* 42)

One of the causes of exhaustion is the rhythm of the workplace, the relentless and deafening beat of the line, which demands attention yet

can be a source of tedium as well, as evidenced by the immigrant Yakov in the poem of the same name:

> His Detroit was something else:
> in the back of Automotive
> a bare bulb swung above him
> as he bowed to the wrong job
> in the wrong place and entered
> the unwritten epic of tedium,
> a cigarette in one hand,
> three fingers on the other. *(News of the World* 12-13)

But the workplace is a dangerous place where the machinery, like the forges mentioned in many of Levine's poems, or noxious chemicals can kill you or maim you like Yakov above. Death is one of the dangers that lurks in the workplace and colors the workers' time there.

Levine, juxtaposing two different confining and dangerous places, prison and the factory, in "The Great Truth," cites the deadly nature of the latter wondering why men vie for membership in its ranks:

> The September he came back from prison, penniless,
> and took a murderous night job in the forge room
> at Cadillac . . .
> . . . I believed one morning
> he'd turn suddenly to tell me why men and boys
> went into such forbidding places. . . (*Breath* 8-9)

In "Dearborn Suite," workers do not have to die to experience one version of the afterlife:

> Hell is here in the forge room
> where the giant presses stamp
> out body parts and the smell
> of burning skin seeps into
> our hair and under our nails. (*News of the World* 19 - 21)

At end of shift, we can ascend from these Detroit-based "dark satanic mills," unfortunately for some not as whole men and women; there is no question that the use of "body parts" in the passage above from "Dearborn Suite" holds the double meaning of parts both automotive and human.

This exploration of the dangers of work is done quite pointedly in "Fear and Fame" about his time in the pickling tanks of the tubing

factory; donning all of his protective gear, Levine is arrayed as for battle and the gear protects him from everything but himself:

> Half an hour to dress, wide rubber hip boots,
> gauntlets to the elbow, a plastic helmet
> like a knight's but with a little glass window
> that kept steaming over, and a respirator
> to save my smoke-stained lungs. (3)

Levine goes down into the acid-filled pickling tanks and returns, but must do it all again to close out his shift:

> . . . stiffened
> by the knowledge that to descend and rise up
> from the other world merely once in eight hours is half
> what it takes to be known among women and men. (*What Work Is* 3-4)

These dangers can turn the workplace into a place of terror for the worker as evidenced in a number of Levine poems. The danger can also be the basis of a common experience and solidarity of testing and survival in the workplace, as Levine sketched out dramatically in "Naming":

> When the power failed we stood in the dark
> waiting for the crash of steel falling from
> the overhead cranes. I could make out
> Johnson, his eyes wide, the sweat starting
> from his broad forehead. We lit up on one match
> as tiny lights blazed all down the line
> robbing the air of anything to breath. . . .
>
> Long Johnson took my left hand in his
> so that when the lights came back I'd know
> at long last we were brothers in terror. (*Breath* 47-59 [58])

Levine's workplace is a dangerous place and we are reborn each day or night by surviving and leaving it.

There is an important relationship between workers in the workplace; this brotherhood of common fear is mirrored by the brotherhood born of other common experiences, a shared language unique to particular production processes or occupations, the transfer of mores, skills and knowledge (perhaps secrets) from old-timers to newcomers, and the occasional sense of joy and camaraderie which

comes simply from the hours spent together. Levine explores skill, language and culture in a number of his poems. In "Fear and Flame," he explains that he fills the pickling tanks "all from a recipe I shared with nobody and learned from Frank O'Meara. . . ." (*What Work Is* 3-4).

Secrets are to tell or not. Simple co-presence is not enough to build a workplace solidarity. In "Coming Close," Levine has come to understand a woman co-worker because he has "come closer":

> … You must come closer
> to find out, you must hang your tie
> and jacket in one of the lockers
> in favor of a blue smock, you must
> be prepared to spend shift after shift
> hauling off the metal trays of stock,
> bowing first, knees bent for a purchase,
> then lifting with a gasp, the first word
> of tenderness between the two of you,
> then you must bring new trays of dull,
> unpolished tubes. You must feed her,
> as they say in the language of the place. ("Coming Close," *What Work Is* 5-6)

As Levine continues in the next line of the poem, "Make no mistake, the place has a language." All workplaces have languages and rules which newcomers can learn. Following the rules and learning the language, they can gain acceptance, in moments before, during and/or after work:

> One midnight my newfound companions
> introduced me to the common miracle
> of Seven Crown and cherry schnapps with beer
> chasers and burgers fried in pork fat—
> four for a dollar—served in Spud's café.
> Some of the Irish and Albanians
> like to fight, especially on Friday nights
> after our shift. My friend Carey . . .
> told me one night
> if I cared to take part I was welcome.
> I felt honored. ("Magic," *News of the World* 59-61)

It is right to feel honored since such acceptance is not automatically conferred. We learn of another special sense of acceptance for a woman autoworker in "After Leviticus":

> Even before you washed up and changed your shirt
> Maryk invited you for a drink. You sat in the back,
> Maryk and his black pal Williams in the front,
> as the bottle of Seven Crown passed slowly
> from hand to hand, eleven slow circuits
> until it was empty . . .
> Neither Maryk nor Williams had made a pass,
> neither told a dirty joke or talked dirty. (*The Mercy* 6-7)

Conversations, full of both words and silences, are the glue which bind relationships before, during and after work. These conversations can be about work or about other matters. Workplace stories, true or not, build a shared link as in Levine's poem "Innocence" where an older Italian immigrant and Levine and his co-workers talk about World War II, family and especially women:

> Each noon, Michelangelo told the same joyous tales . . .
> We toasted the girls who lavished their cares on his long knotted
> body . . .
> We even lied back in return, inventing squadrons
> of blondes and serious brunettes driven by love
> to wait on our doorsteps . . . (*What Work Is* 12-13)

Work defines workers, gives them meaning or no meaning to their lives—their choice. What they do at work marks them in the same way that they affect and make products, the fruits of their processes and machines. Where they and their parents work is a definer of who they are as well, as shown in these passages from "The Lesson" and "The Esquire": "My mother married a bland wizard in clutch plates and drive shafts" (*Breath* 28-29); "(Bernie) Blond, pale, Slavic, the favorite son, he told us, of a Polish nobleman, though his mother worked nights at Ford Rouge" (*Breath* 32-33).

Levine tied together so much about product, employer, being a worker and being an economic fact in this extended passage from "A Walk with Tom Jefferson":

> when I worked nights
> on the milling machines
> at Cadillac transmission,

another kid just up
from West Virginia asked me
what was we making,
and I answered, I'm making
2.25 an hour,
don't know what you're
making, and he had
to correct me, gently, what was
we making out of
this here metal, and I didn't know.
. . . . . .

Later, in the forge room
at Chevy, now a man,
still making what I never knew,
I stood in the silence
of the great presses slamming
home
. . . . . .

The place was called Chevy
Gear & Axle—
it's gone now, gone to earth
like so much here—
so perhaps we actually made
gears and axles
for the millions of Chevies
long dead or still to die.
It said that, "Chevrolet
Gear & Axle"
right on the checks they paid
us with, so I can
half-believe that's what we
were making way back then. (*A Walk with Tom Jefferson* 63-64)

The female autoworker in "After Leviticus" explains the sense of accomplishment that comes after work coming home to her children in a house across from the factory:

. . . You're actually filled
with the same joy that comes to a great artist
who's just completed a seminal work,
though the work you've completed is "serf work"

(to use your words), a solid week's worth of it
in the chassis assembly plant number seven. (*The Mercy* 6-7)

In *The Bread of Time*, Philip Levine explained what he was trying to do in writing poetry about his work at Chevy Gear & Axle: "I believed even then that if I could transform my experience into poetry I would give it the value and dignity it did not begin to possess on its own" (140). Levine's poetry, though strongly industrial in nature, transformed not only his experiences for wider understanding, but perhaps did the same for the millions of other workers who labor across the wide spectrum of workplaces and occupations. Philip Levine was able to do this because he knew what work was.

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INVITING US TO COME CLOSER: PHILIP LEVINE'S PORTRAITS OF DETROIT

CHRISTINA TRIEZENBERG

In his essay, "Nobody's Detroit," published in Andrew Moore's stunning collection of photographs of the Motor City entitled *Detroit Disassembled* (2010), the late US Poet Laureate, Philip Levine, quietly marveled at the stark beauty and "unexpected dignity" Moore had managed to capture in his portraits of Detroit landmarks that had been ravaged by both man and nature in the wake of the city's decades-long decline (117). A native Detroiter who once labored in some of the now derelict factories featured in Moore's collection, Levine, then in his eighties, paid tribute to the manner in which Moore's photographs "honor what is most ignored and despised among us" and expressed his gratitude to Moore for having made these once storied but now abandoned places the focus of his work and wider attention. As Levine tells Moore's readers: "I had thought my city no longer mattered, and [that] I—as one of its poets—had been writing for sixty-five years about next to nothing, that my life's work was only a footnote to the history of American idiocy and hubris. I had thought I knew what it meant to be from Detroit, to be of Detroit, to be Detroit. In truth I didn't know the half of it" (117). Of course Levine knew the half of it. The complex emotions he experienced as he studied Moore's carefully composed portraits of the crumbling landmarks that continue to stand like specters throughout much of Detroit today only confirmed Levine's lifelong knowledge of and abiding love for the place and people of his birth.

Described in 1984 by his friend and fellow poet Edward Hirsch as "a poet of the night shift, a late ironic Whitman of our industrial heartland" (259), Philip Levine voiced the experiences of millions of Americans in his poems about working-class Detroit, as well as paid

tribute to his own family's experiences as Jewish-Russian immigrants. Levine crafted works that captured the daily challenges facing those whose dreams and ambitions were too often overshadowed by the struggle to survive in dangerous landscapes that left them physically and mentally drained and in industries that thought nothing of forsaking them—or the city in which they worked—when the cost of doing business became more profitable elsewhere. Indeed, this destructive dynamic—the overshadowing of the worker's dream by the struggle to survive—is frequently the focus of Levine's scorn and condemnation, particularly in his early work, which is marked by the frustration he felt in a series of industrial jobs, including positions at Chevrolet Gear & Axle and Detroit Transmission, even as he nurtured his love of language in the reading rooms of Detroit's public libraries and in the classrooms of what would become Wayne State University, where he would earn both bachelor's and master's degrees and become an active member of the community of poets who met regularly in the university's Miles Poetry Room (Levine, "Neruda y Yo" 48).

Levine was a natural storyteller who reveled in "the telling of tales" and who viewed narrative as a necessary component in his quest to "capture the absolute truth" of human experience ("New Poet Laureate Philip Levine's 'Absolute Truth'"). Levine's body of work is marked not only by his love of storytelling itself and a lifetime of reading the works of other storytellers, but also by his profound awareness of his role as a chronicler of his own life experiences and evolving understanding of the world. Having developed meaningful relationships with many of his co-workers while he worked in the factories of Detroit as a young man, Levine deeply respected the men and women with whom he once labored, a respect that fueled his commitment to pay tribute to the quiet dignity with which he saw them navigating the often difficult realities of their lives. As he explained in an interview with *Detroit Magazine* in 1978: "I saw that the people that I was working with . . . were voiceless in a way . . . In terms of the literature of the United States they weren't being heard. Nobody was speaking for them. [So,] as young people will, you know, I took this foolish vow that I would speak for them and that's what my life would be. And sure enough I've gone and done it. Or tried anyway . . . ("Philip Levine").

Although critics have not always appreciated Levine's focus on workers, his "autobiographical bent" and "strong narrative thrust,"

or his "tendency to shun conventional poetic devices" (Fox 1), his conscious decision to people his poems with characters who are representative of the individuals he encountered on the streets of Detroit, his use of eloquent but "unpretentious diction" (Garner C1), and his gathering of the quotidian details that make up the fabric of everyday life have been appreciated by readers, who have the privilege of seeing clearly the lost worlds he documents. Whether he is describing his anxiety and exhaustion in the forge room of Chevy Gear & Axle, paying homage to the strength and determination of his immigrant mother, honoring the memory of the father he lost as a young boy, or describing his quiet dismay at the now devastated landscapes that formed the backdrop of his childhood and young adulthood, Levine provides his readers with a rich window through which to view the people and places of Detroit, the city that shaped his artistic sensibilities and made him an advocate for the rights of the working class. Levine's poems encourage us to join him in bearing witness to the indelible impact that workers and the city of Detroit itself had in shaping American life and culture in the twentieth century.

Levine's 1991 poem, "Coming Close," which first appeared in his National Book Award-winning collection, *What Work Is*, is one of the many poems he wrote that was directly influenced by his own experiences in the factories of Detroit as a young man and is marked by his determination to illuminate the very real toll that such work took on those who were forced to perform it. "Take this quiet woman," his persona begins softly,"she has been / standing before a polishing wheel / for over three hours, and she lacks / twenty minutes before she can take / a lunch break. Is she a woman?" (5). Forcing the reader to consider the dehumanizing effect that industrial work has on the mind, body, and spirit, Levine's persona focuses his reader's attention on the physical strength and mental concentration that are required of the woman who stands before the rapidly moving machine, commanding him to "[c]onsider the arms as they press / the long brass tube against the buffer, / they are striated along the triceps, / the three heads of which clearly show" (5).

Moving the lens of his gaze to the woman's face, whose features he pointedly leaves hidden, Levine's persona asks his reader to [c]onsider the fine dusting of dark down / above the upper lip, and the beads of sweat that run from under the red / kerchief across the brow and are wiped / away with a blackening wrist band / in one odd motion a child might make / to say No! No! (5). Not content to allow

his reader to consider the silent woman only in passing, who might very well be stifling her own desire to cry out as one of Levine's co-workers once did in tearful frustration years earlier (Levine, "An Interview with Kate Bolick" 107), Levine's persona turns to the reader again to insist:

> … You must come closer
> to find out, you must hang your tie
> and jacket in one of the lockers
> in favor of a black smock, you must
> be prepared to spend shift after shift
> hauling off the metal trays of stock,
> bowing first, knees bent for a purchase,
> then lifting with a gasp, the first word
> of tenderness between the two of you,
> then you must bring new trays of dull,
> unpolished tubes. You must feed her,
> as they say in the language of the place.
> Make no mistake, the place has a language. . . . (5)

Levine's own language in these lines is spare but pointed as his persona describes the tremendous effort required to perform the tasks at which the woman labors—so much effort that a gasp of exertion is the only sound she is capable of producing as she bends to move a new tray toward her—and the repetitive and mentally fatiguing nature of the work, which is as dull as the unpolished tubes the woman handles. The work is dangerous, too, Levine's persona implies, as he describes the "separate bristles" that make up the wheel to which the woman presses the tubes with her bare hands, sweat beading on her forehead, and the careful manner in which she must brace herself as she anticipates the ponderous weight of yet another tray. Having been reminded himself by a more experienced co-worker years earlier to bend carefully when lifting heavy auto parts in order to protect his back from injury (Levine, "An Interview with Kate Bolick" 105), Levine's descriptions are ones that are grounded in his own experiences and clearly intended to elicit empathy from the reader. His insistence that his reader figuratively participate in the same mentally and physically draining work with which the woman engages, by hanging his "tie and jacket in one of the lockers" and donning "a black smock," like the one that she, too, presumably wears, which protects her clothing from harm but effectively erases her individuality as she becomes just another cog in the mechanized

world in which she toils, similarly reveals Levine's desire to immerse his readers fully in the dehumanizing environment he describes. Levine's pointed directions to the reader also underscore his awareness that such an immersion is necessary—that his readers, safe in their suburban living rooms, would be largely unfamiliar with the industrialized landscape he describes and, like the unnamed viewer to whom he speaks, startled when the woman, in the final lines of his poem, turns and "places the five / tapering fingers of her filthy hand / on the arm of your white shirt to mark / you for your own, now and forever" (5).

Levine's 1999 poem, "The New World," first published in *The Mercy*, a collection of poems dedicated to the memory of his mother Esther and filled with pieces that pay tribute to her immigrant experience as well as to the experiences of other members of his family, widens the focus of Levine's storytelling to provide another portrait of Detroit and his beloved grandfather, who emigrated from Russia to America with his brother during the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and who was a much-loved figure in Levine's childhood, particularly in the wake of the sudden death of his father in 1933, when Levine was five ("An Interview with Kate Bolick" 101). Pulling his readers into a now vanished world in which immigrant merchants wandered the narrow streets of the ethnic neighborhoods of Detroit to peddle fresh fruits and vegetables to support themselves and their families, Levine offers his readers a portrait of his grandfather that is a mixture of both fact and fiction and that plays on, and consciously overturns, timeless myths about America as a land of easy wealth and endless opportunity. "A man roams the streets with a basket / of freestone peaches hollering, 'Peaches, / peaches, yellow freestone peaches for sale'" (56), Levine's persona begins. "My grandfather in his prime could outshout / the Tigers of Wrath or the factory whistles / along the river," he brags (56).

> . . . Hamtramck hungered
> for yellow freestone peaches, downriver
> wakened from a dream of work. Zug Island danced
> into the bright day glad to be alive.
>
> Full-figured women in their negligees
> streamed into the streets from the dark doorways
> to demand in Polish or Armenian

the ripened offerings of this new world.
Josepf Prisckulnick out of Dubrovica
to Detroit by way of Ellis Island

raised himself regally to his full height
of five feet two and transacted until
the fruit was gone into those eager hands.

Thus would there be a letter sent across
an ocean and a continent and thus
would Sadie waken to the news of wealth

without limit in the bright and distant land
and thus bags were packed and she set sail
for America. Some of this is true. (56)

Levine's affectionate portrait of his diminutive but loud-voiced grandfather expertly selling his wares to a bevy of appreciative immigrant housewives in the working-class streets of Hamtramck in the early morning and of the letter that spurred his grandmother to pack her bags and leave the familiar world from which her beloved had so recently departed himself depicts a dynamic that was all too common in the history of American immigration, of young men leaving their homelands to prepare a place in the New World for the families they hoped to start and the better lives they hoped to build. But the images of streets paved with gold that spurred so many emigrants to head for American shores were frequently a mirage, as Levine makes clear in the second half of his poem, when his persona reveals the realities of life in this New World:

The women were gaunt. All day the kids dug
in the back lots searching for anything.
The place was Russia with another name.

Joe was five feet two. Dubrovica burned
to gray ashes the west wind carried off,
then Rovno went, then the Dneiper turned to dust.

We sat around the table telling lies
while the late light filled an empty glass.
Bread, onions, the smell of burning butter,

small white potatoes we shared with no one
because the hour was wrong, the guest was late,
and this was Michigan in 1928. (56-57)

Though Levine's early life was marked by the tragedy of his father's death at thirty-five and his widowed mother's struggles to support him and his two brothers on her modest income as an office worker in the years that followed (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 35), he readily acknowledged his debt to both of his parents "for being avid readers" and "for filling his childhood with books" ("An Interview with Kate Bolick" 109). He recalled with fondness the many hours he spent in the local branch of the Detroit Public Library that was down the street from his family's home, immersing himself in the lives of other people and imagining the wider world beyond the Depression-riddled Motor City in which he was growing up (Pacernick 15). A window into not only Levine's working life as a young man but also his lifelong love of books and reading, his poem "Library Days" from *News of the World* (2009) offers a much more humorous and optimistic portrait of Detroit than most of his factory-focused poems, illustrating the kind of respite from the world of work that the Detroit Public Library and its many branches provided the city's residents and Levine himself.

In the summer of 1951, when he worked as a delivery man, he was able "to spend four hours every afternoon" in the magnificent main branch of the Detroit Public Library on Woodward Avenue, reading "through their collection of Tolstoy, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Stendhal" between deliveries (*The Bread of Time* 114). As Levine's persona admits without a hint of remorse, in the opening lines of his poem, he "would sit for hours with the sunlight / streaming in the high windows and know / the delivery van was safe, locked in the yard / with the brewery trucks, and my job secure" (32). Watchful of "[t]he librarian, a woman gone gray though young, / [who] sat by the phone that never rang, assembling the frown / reserved exclusively for me when I entered / at 10 a.m. to stay until the light dwindled / into afternoon" (32), whose job "[no] doubt…was to guard" the literary treasures of "Melville . . . Balzac, [and] Walt Whitman" Levine found all around him (32). Levine's persona recalls an incident during this idyllic period when "a suited gentleman reader creaked / across the polished oaken floor to request / the newest copy of *Jane's Book of Fighting Ships* / only to be told,

'This, sir, is literature!' / in a voice of pure malice" (32). Looking up "from the text swimming before me in hopes / of exchanging a first smile" with the graying sentinel sitting across the room, Levine's persona finds his stern companion had "gone back / to her patient vigil over the dead black phone," while outside he "could almost hear the world, trucks / maneuvering the loading docks or clogging / the avenues and grassy boulevards" of the bustling city around him (32).

Knowing that his former schoolmates, who were then serving in Korea, ". . . were off / on a distant continent in full retreat, their commands / and groans barely a whisper across the vastness / of an ocean and a mountain range" (32) and bemused by Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin's inexplicable desire to "lie down to sleep among the dead" (33), which he deems "a pure broth of madness" (33), Levine's persona acknowledges the deep satisfaction he experienced during these quiet hours of study as well as his fierce dedication to his craft, which he consciously sought to develop through his exposure to the literary masterworks he found on the library's shelves. As he admits to his readers in closing,

> . . . I knew then
> that soon I would rise up and leave the book
> to go back to the great black van waiting
> patiently for its load of beer kegs, sea trunks
> and leather suitcases bound for the voyages
> I'd never take, but first there was *War and Peace*,
> there were Cossacks riding their ponies
> toward a horizon of pure blood, there was Anna,
> her loves and her deaths, there was Turgenev
> with his impossible, histrionic squabbles,
> Chekhov coughing into his final tales. The trunks—
> with their childish stickers—could wait, the beer
> could sit for ages in the boiling van slowly
> morphing into shampoo. In the offices and shops,
> out on the streets, men and women could curse
> the vicious air, they could buy and sell
> each other, they could beg for a cup of soup,
> a sandwich and tea, some few could face life
> with or without beer, they could embrace or die,
> it mattered not at all to me, I had work to do. (33)

Levine's frustration with his life as a factory worker, particularly after he had completed his degrees at Wayne State University, even-

tually led him to leave Detroit in 1954 to pursue his literary ambitions in full measure. With friends and family members still living in the city, however, and finding himself turning more frequently to his experiences there as a young man in his art, Levine's connection to Detroit remained strong, and he documented his own reactions to the city's simmering racial tensions that exploded in the riots of 1967 in his much-admired 1972 collection *They Feed They Lion*.

By his own admission, however, Levine's favorite poem about Detroit in his own body of work was the title poem of his 1988 collection, *A Walk with Tom Jefferson* (Levine, "An Interview with Paul Mariani" 121), which is loosely based on his return to Detroit in the late 1980s and the conversation he had with an elderly African American man as he wandered the neighborhoods around the old Tiger Stadium, who appears in the poem as his good-natured guide "Tom Jefferson." One of his lengthiest and most complex works, Levine's figurative "walk" through the streets of Detroit almost two decades after the violence of the summer of 1967 provides his readers with a portrait of the city that can, sadly, be seen even today, a still devastated landscape seemingly frozen in time.

> Between the freeway
> and the gray conning towers
> of the ballpark, miles
> of mostly vacant lots, once
> a neighborhood of small
> two-storey wooden houses —
> dwellings for immigrants
> from Ireland, Germany,
> Poland, West Virginia,
> Mexico, Dodge Main. (49)

Levine's persona begins, pulling his reader into the wasteland-like world in which he wanders while recalling the scores of immigrants—from both the Old World and the New—who had once filled the neighborhoods throughout Detroit, arriving from places both near and far to work in the city's then burgeoning automotive industry. "On this block," Levine's persona notes soberly, "seven houses / are still here to be counted" (49), the only ones remaining "after the town exploded / in '67" when buildings throughout the city "were plundered for whatever / they had" (50). "During baseball season / the neighborhood's a thriving / business for anyone / who can make

change / and a cardboard sign / that reads 'Parking $3,'" though, Levine's persona quickly reassures his reader. "He can stand on the curb / directing traffic . . . pretending / the land is his" (50).

Having reminded the reader of the harsh realities with which the residents of Detroit continued to wrestle decades after the riot's end, Levine's persona proceeds to recall one of the city's most famous residents, whose exploits in the boxing ring were a source of tremendous pride to African Americans throughout the United States during an era in which Jim Crow laws still held sway throughout the South and when Detroit, and other urban centers in the North, imposed a de facto segregation of the races that was almost as constrictive as Jim Crow and that would eventually help to precipitate the rebellion that erupted on the city's streets in July of 1967. "Joe Louis grew up a few miles / east of here and attended / Bishop Elementary" (51), Levine's persona reminds us. "No one recalls / a slender, dumbfounded / boy afraid of his fifth grade / home room teacher," but his guide, "Tom Jefferson / — 'Same name as the other one' — / remembers Joe at seventeen / all one sweltering summer / unloading bales of rags / effortlessly from the trucks / that parked in the alley / behind Wolfe Sanitary Wiping Cloth" (51)"

> "Joe was beautiful,"
> is all he says, and we two
> go dumb replaying Joe's
> glide across the ring
> as he corners Schmeling
> and prepares to win
> World War I . . . (51)

Drawing parallels between Louis's experiences and Tom's own, Levine's persona reveals that,

> . . . [l]ike Joe
> Tom was up from Alabama,
> like Joe he didn't talk
> much then, and even now
> he passes a hand across
> his mouth when speaking
> of the $5 day that lured
> his father from the cotton fields
> and a one-room shack the old folks
> talked about until

they went home first
to visit and later to die. (52)

an inducement that Tom makes clear was hardly an improvement in the quality of life his family enjoyed in the pre-Civil Rights era South.

Early afternoon behind
his place, Tom's gathering up
the remnants of this year's
garden—the burned
tomato plants and the hardy
runners of summer squash
that dug into the chalky
soil and won't let go.
He stuffs the dried remains
into a supermarket shopping cart
to haul off to an empty block. (52)
.....
Alabama is not so far back
it's lost in a swirl
of memory. "I can see trees
behind the house. I do
believe I still feel
winter mornings, all of us
getting up from one bed
but for what I don't know,"

he tells Levine's persona, tipping "his baseball cap / to the white ladies passing / back the way we've come" (52-53).

"We all come for $5
a day and we got this!"
His arms spread wide to
include block after block
of dumping grounds,
old couches and settees
burst open, the white innards
gone gray, cracked
and mangled chifforobes
that long ago gave up
their secrets, yellow wooden
ice boxes yawning
at the sky, . . .

the shattered rib cages
  of beds that couldn't hold
our ordinary serviceable dreams. . . . (53)
. . . . . .
. . . 'Making do,'
  says Tom Jefferson. (54)

Levine's descriptions of the devastated landscape from which Tom ekes out a narrow existence are sobering ones that reflect, once again, the promises of a better life that lured so many workers from around the globe to work in industrial cities like Detroit that were broken in the wake of globalization, leaving communities throughout the Rust Belt struggling to replace the once-booming industries that had allowed Midwestern families to support themselves and quietly realize their own dreams of prosperity in America. But Levine's allusions to Joe Louis's triumph over the German boxer Max Schmeling in their second fight, in 1938, which effectively "debunked at once the myths of Nazi superiority and black inferiority" (Stein 29), and his portrait of Tom himself—pointedly named after perhaps the most illustrious of the United States's Founding Fathers, who held "conflicting roles as [a] defender of individual rights, President, plantation owner, and slave holder" (Stein 28)—reveal, as Kevin Stein has pointed out in his own discussion of Levine's "'conversation' with history," Levine's determination to frame Detroit's history within the larger history of American race relations (28), which, as recent events throughout the United States attest, remain problematic and lend an added immediacy to Levine's text, as well as a window into a larger American problem.

. . . We could escape,
each of us feels in
  his shuddering heart, take
the bridge south to Canada,
  but we don't. Instead we
hunker down, slump a little
  lower in our trousers,
and go slow . . . (55)

Levine's persona tells us after a harrowing description of childless streets gone wild, populated by someone the "neighbors swear . . . runs on all fours / with his dog packs" and "lost / house cats grown to the size / of cougars" (54). "Even I have seen a brutish / black mon-

grel Dane / in late afternoon . . .," Levine's persona admits, ". . . rising / on his hind legs to over / seven feet, hanging / over fences, peering into windows / as though he yearned / to come back to what we were" (55).

Struggling to come to terms with his own despair at what he sees, Levine's persona adds hopefully that "One night soon / I'll waken to a late quiet / and go out to see all this / transformed, each junked car, / each dumping ground and battered / hovel a hill / of mounded snow / every scrap / of ugliness redeemed / under the light of a street lamp / or the moon" (55). But he is quickly overcome by his own skepticism, as well as a profound respect for Tom's determination to continue living in this devastated landscape, tilling the soil as his Alabama-born mother had done (56) and as his dead son had continued to do when he himself went to war for "three years / in the Seabees / building airstrips so we could / bomb Japan, doing / the war work he did at home / for less pay" (57), despite the manifold American betrayals that have brought him to this point:

> What commandment
> was broken to bring God's
> wrath down on these streets,
> what did we wrong, going
> about our daily lives,
> to work at all hours until
> the work dried up,
> then sitting home until home
> became a curse
> with the yellow light
> of afternoon falling
> with all the weight of final
> judgement, I can't say. (*A Walk with Tom Jefferson* 60)

Levine's persona notes the scene soberly as the day comes to an end and Tom "smiles and says the one word, / 'Tomorrow,' and goes in" (62). Levine once suggested in an interview that he didn't foresee Detroit coming back from its long decline (Pacernick 27), but his repeated returns to the city, both literal and figurative, underscore Detroit's centrality to his life and work, as well as his desire to continue to draw attention to the city's ongoing struggles, which he depicts so poignantly in "A Walk with Tom Jefferson." Like the photographs of Andrew Moore that so moved Levine himself, Levine's visually rich and emotionally moving poems about Detroit provide a

window into his own history with the city, as well as show the often troubled history of the city itself, enabling readers who are unfamiliar with Detroit to gain a deeper understanding of the industries that both sustained and exploited the workers who helped to make the city the industrial giant it once was. For those readers who continue to call the Motor City home, Levine's poems help them to take pride in their city's rich history and provide hope for its future in the years to come.

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PHILIP LEVINE AND THE MIDWESTERN LITERARY TRADITION

NANCY BUNGE

The *New York Times* obituary for Philip Levine stresses his singularity, especially as a workers' poet. It concludes by quoting Levine's declaration that "nobody is writing the poetry of this world here; it doesn't exist" (Fox). But a bevy of well-known Midwestern fiction writers have rendered working-class lives, including Theodore Dreiser, Jack Conroy, Meridel Le Sueur, Chester Himes, James T. Farrell, Tillie Olsen, Nelson Algren and Willard Motley. And even an iconic Midwestern poet described them: Carl Sandburg. Levine fails to mention his predecessors not out of arrogance, but because the Midwestern literary tradition has gone unacknowledged. But, in fact, much of the poetry and fiction Midwesterners have produced realizes a central principle Hamlin Garland set out in 1894 when he predicted that a new kind of writing would emerge from the center of the United States: "If the past was the history of a few titled personalities riding high on obscure waves of nameless, suffering humanity, the future will be the day of high average personality. . ." (45). Ten years before Garland made this declaration, Mark Twain realized its central principle with *Huckleberry Finn*'s influential portrayal of ordinary lives. Moreover, Levine's description of working-class trials comes attached to a fundamental faith in people and a deep respect for nature also shared by other Midwestern authors. These traits sharply delineate Levine and other Midwestern poets and novelists from the writers of New England who dominated American literature before Twain and Garland. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau ostensibly considered human nature good, but to realize this dimension of themselves, people had to achieve spiritual awareness. And, as Thoreau acknowledges when he writes, "The

millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life" (Harding 88), few mere mortals could meet Thoreau's and Emerson's standards for the appropriate consciousness. The work of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne often portrays people as simply evil. And although Thoreau and Emerson value nature, they do so because they feel it reflects their best, most spiritual selves, not because they cherish nature for itself. So, although he apparently did not realize it, Levine's poetry comes from the revolutionary Midwestern literary tradition that Garland described 130 years ago.

For one thing, Levine shares a Midwestern faith that people enter the world vibrant and optimistic. And, as a result, many Midwestern writers produce work that values children, including the fiction writers Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Louise Erdrich, Charles Baxter, Jonathan Franzen and Toni Morrison. The Midwestern poets Theodore Roethke and William Stafford also, like Levine, see childhood as a period of endless possibilities too often foreclosed when the individual grows up and must engage the unrelenting social structure. Roethke articulates this notion indirectly by writing poetry that requires the reader to reawaken the spirited and instinctual self of childhood in order to understand it. Roethke sought to realize this process of recovery in himself, vowing that "through the young, I shall recover my lost innocence" (*Straw for the Fire* 161). He moves so far into the emotional world of childhood that some of his poems make little rational sense. As Richard Wilbur explains, Roethke produces "a poetry of the subverbal and supraverbal which pursues the wordless through the wordless" (168-169). So those who would understand it must move, at least temporarily, beyond the deadness Roethke describes in the working world of "Dolor": "I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils, / Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper weight, /All the misery of manilla folders and mucilage" (*Collected Poems* 44). Instead, he insists that his readers re-enter the experiences of dancing on one's father's feet or hanging around the kitchen while one's mother cooks because only by returning to the past can the adult recover the wholeness that comes naturally to the child as in the experience central to Roethke's "The Waking": "And all the waters/ Of all the streams/ Sang in my veins/ that summer day" (*Collected Poems* 49).

William Stafford traces all poetry to this vitality and regrets that so many abandon the "lip-smacking impulses" central to producing poetry as they age. Stafford explains that all people, but especially children, "make remarks they like better than other remarks. They have that lip-smacking realization of differences in discourse. But then later they may feel, 'I'm a salesman. I'm not allowed to have any lip-smacking impulses about things. I'm going to give it the way it is in the book. And so they quit" (qtd. in Bunge 115). Stafford's poem 'Judgments' sums up the shutting down that takes place as people age and find their ways through life. He opens each stanza with "I accuse" and then continues to explain how the people he encountered at a class reunion have become accomplished since graduation. For instance, the narrator addresses a former classmate named George, saying, "You know how to help others; / you manage a school." When young, according to Stafford, they all felt overwhelmed: "The gawky, hardly to survive students / we were; not one of us going to succeed." But they have made it, and, in order to do so, they have pushed away reality: "Then we / sprawled in the world / and were ourselves part of it; now / we hold it firmly away with gracious / gestures (like this of mine!) we've achieved." Stafford suggests that children's helplessness and openness give them an intense affiliation with the environment and other people that adults abandon in order to assert control over their lives and collect accomplishments. He believes that this process leads people away from the truth: "And that fear was true. / And is true" (118-119). It also creates a detachment that strips the universe of resonance.

Similarly, Philip Levine cannot observe lively children without worrying that they'll lose their vibrancy because of the deadening that afflicts them even while young and lies in wait to attack them full force once they become adults. In "Among Children," Levine entertains the possibility of liberating a classroom from its tedious rituals and replacing the teacher with one who "rises out of a milky sea / Of industrial scum, her gown streaming / With light, her foolish words transformed / into song" (*What Work Is* 16). Levine recalls the impossible richness of his own life at the age of seven, despite the mundane tools he had to work with, leaving him "thankful for corn, beans, and poisonous pork" (*What Work Is* 77). The density of his present depends on his confidence in the future: "I believed the land rose westward toward mountains / hidden in dust and smog and beyond the mountains / the sea spread out, limitless and changing /

everything, and that I would get there some day" ("The Sea We Read About," *The Mercy* 33). In retrospect, he understands that the miserable experience of getting drunk on gin better prepared him for the kind of future most children endure when they reach adulthood:

> . . . Ahead
> lay our fifteenth birthdays,
> acne, deodorants, crabs, salves,
> butch haircuts, draft registration,
> the military and political victories
> of Dwight Eisenhower, who brought us
> Richard Nixon with wife and dog.
> Any wonder we tried gin. ("Gin," *What Work Is* 32-33)

William Stafford's poem, "Accountability," offers a similar rendition of what American culture does to the young. Here's its ending:

> The school bus by the door, a yellow
> mound, clangs open and shut as the wind finds a loose
> door and worries it all night, letting the hollow
> students count off and break up and blow away
> over the frozen ground. (9)

Stafford explicates the poem:

> Students are inducted in the hall of high school with lockers, with limited library, with military recruitment posters. . . . Those who talk about accountability in schools think they're talking about split infinitives or something . . . trivialities . . . I'm talking about lives, vision, hope, something plain like kindness and humility and they'd throw their kids into a school that would teach them all about split infinitives and send them straight over to drop atom bombs on someone. Is that accountability? (qtd. in Bunge 116-117)

Levine finds relief from the harsh social world in nature, but, like many other Midwestern writers and unlike the pastoralists, he finds little human meaning there. Lawrence Buell notes that the pastoralism so purely manifested in Thoreau's writings is essentially conservative because in it "the natural environment as empirical reality has been made to subserve human interests" (21). Just as Aldo Leopold opens *A Sand County Almanac* attempting to figure out what a skunk has in mind and failing, in "Orphans," when Levine aspires to find a soulful meaning in nature, he hears the sound of cars on the road

instead. Midwestern prose writers who see nature in similar ways include Mark Twain, John Muir, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor and Toni Morrison. Similarly, in "Snails" Levine suggests that all grand pronouncements about nature are false or "something immediately recognizable/as so large a truth it's totally untrue." Instead, he concludes that "no one could score their sense or harmony" of morning glories presumably because human standards have no relevance to nature (*What Work Is* 23-24). This would make complete sense to William Stafford, who asserts in "At the Bomb Testing Site," that given the enormous scope of the universe and the limited abilities of human beings, even a bomb test on "[a] continent without much on it / under a sky that never cared less" (41) has little impact. Similarly, Philip Levine and his wife travel to a place where a massacre took place and find no sign of it. The only signal comes from nature and rests beyond the limits of human language: "Above the cries of seagulls, the message comes / translated into the language of water and wind, / decipherable, exact, unforgettable, the same / words we spoke before we spoke in words" ("Alba," *News of the World* 49).

Not only does the natural universe function in terms of patterns beyond our comprehension and possess such enormity that human struggles to control it always fail, its longevity exceeds our imaginations. In "Sunlight," Jim Harrison reminds his readers that their time on earth is "seconds in cosmic time, twelve and a half billion years" (121). Philip Levine declares that people ride on the planet much too temporarily to claim any part of it: "You have to remember this isn't your land, / it belongs to no one, like the sea you once lived beside/and thought was yours" ("Our Valley," *News of the World* 3).

Although Levine hopes the workers enjoy nature's respite, he suggests that the longer they struggle at their jobs, the more alienated they become from it. In "Detroit Grease Shop Poem," Levine writes of a worker looking at a raindrop that falls on his arm:

> as though it were something
> rare or mysterious
> like a drop of water or
> a single lucid meteor
> fallen slowly from
> nowhere and burning on
> his skin like a tear. (*New Selected Poems* 76)

Similarly, after cataloguing the depressing aspects of the city humans have built for themselves in "The Minneapolis Poem," James Wright concludes, "I want to be lifted up / By some great white bird unknown to the police, / And soar for a thousand miles and be carefully hidden / Modest and golden as one last corn grain" (141).

Despite the consonance of Levine's stances towards nature and children with those of other Midwestern poets, an even more striking link exists between Levine's poems about workers and those of Carl Sandburg. Both present members of the working class as a source of inspiration and hope, lamenting the damage inflicted on them by those who relentlessly seek wealth. In "Dearborn Suite," Levine writes of the nightmarish universe Henry Ford created with his factory:

> Hell is here in the forge room
> where the giant presses stamp
> out body parts and the smell
> of burning skin seeps into
> our hair and under our nails. (*News of the World* 20)

The factory also pollutes its surroundings;

> … The skies
> above the great Rouge factory
> are black with coke smoke, starless,
> the world is starless now, all
> because he remade it in
> his image . . . (*News of the World* 19)

This contaminated atmosphere reflects Ford's character because his narcissism makes even him miserable. Henry Ford finds himself "supremely bored/with his wife, hating his work / unable to sleep (*News of the World* 19). Levine tastes this sadness in himself when he makes money wheeling and dealing: "I inhaled a sadness/stronger than my Lucky Strike" (*New Selected Poems* 260).

In "Child of the Romans," Sandburg notes the way wealthy people take for granted those whose labor sustains their lives. An Italian laborer, called a "dago shovelman" in the poem, levels the train bed and then eats a bologna sandwich for lunch. A train passes with a dining car full of people enjoying steaks, strawberries and éclairs. Then the laborer "[g]oes back to the second half of a ten-hour day's work / Keeping the road-bed so the roses and jonquils / Shake hardly

at all in the cut glass vases / Standing slender on the tables in the dining cars" (*Harvest Poems* 38-9). Neither the shovelman nor the people on the train understand the quiet cruelty of the class division the poem describes.

Despite the obvious challenges of their lives, the working class people in Levine's and Sandburg's poems manifest a zest missing in the upper classes. In the poem "Happiness," Sandburg suggests that the wealthy not only betray their better natures by ignoring workers, they lose the chance to learn from them:

> I asked professors who teach the meaning of life to tell me what is happiness.
> And I went to famous executives who boss the work of thousands of men.
> They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though I was trying to fool with them.
> And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along the Desplaines river
> And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their women and children and a keg of beer and an accordion. (*Harvest Poems* 36)

In his poem "The Two," Levine suggests that if F. Scott Fitzgerald had known some working-class people, it would have tempered his pessimism. But Fitzgerald never had this chance "unless he stayed late at the office / to test his famous one-liner, 'We keep you clean/in Muscatine,' on the woman emptying/his wastebasket" (*Breath* 19). Sandburg and Levine repeatedly admire workers who endure difficult lives with passion and verve. In "Growth," Levine offers a detailed description of the unsavory aspects of his job in a soap factory, but the poem ends with exaltation: he has a job!: "…I hammered and sawed, singing / my new life of working and earning, / outside in the fresh air of Detroit/in 1942, a year of growth" (*What Work Is* 11).

Levine reports that he became a poet when he realized that showing laborers as victims of oppression did not do them justice; he had an obligation to also convey the richness and dignity of their work, as well as the ways the workers sustain each other: "The first truly good poems I'd written about the city [Detroit] . . . are by no means all sweetness and light. There was and still is much that I hate about Detroit, much that deserves to be hated, but I had somehow found a

'balanced' way of writing about what I'd experienced; I'd tempered the violence I felt towards those who'd maimed and cheated me with a tenderness toward those who had touched and blessed me" (*The Bread of Time* 90). So, he tells of a "tiny Sicilian coat maker" in the back of a cleaning store listening to the Metropolitan Opera and singing along "on tiptoe to reach the high notes / along with Bjorling" (*Breath* 54). Or he writes of a man singing as he waits for the bus to pick him up after he finishes his shift (*Breath* 71).

Sandburg also wants his reader to understand the emotional richness of working people's lives precisely because those lives consist of more than making money. In "The Shovel Man," he describes a man who digs ditches for a living, but the poem ends by letting the reader know that a woman "…in the old country dreams of him" as one who has "a kiss better than all the wild grapes that ever grew in Tuscany" (*Poems of the Midwest* 35). He tells of a fish crier whose "face is that of a man terribly glad / to be selling fish, terribly glad that God made fish, and customers to whom he may call his / wares from a pushcart" (*Poems of the Midwest* 36). Sandburg tries to help readers understand the perspectives of people who, for instance, "Go Forth Before Daylight" (*Harvest Poems* 50-51). He points out that men who work in the steel mills have to deal with burns from cinders and filth from the flames. Policemen must buy their shoes carefully because they spend all day on their feet. Sandburg also suggests that the relationship between their hard work and their optimism is not accidental, for these laborers must keep their spirits up to survive. He calls them "people who must sing or die; / people whose song hearts break if there / is no song mouth; these are my people" (*Smoke and Steel* 13). He has confidence that The People would triumph if they could remain sharply aware of their mistreatment:

> When I, the People, learn to remember, when I, the People, use the lessons of yesterday and no longer forget who robbed me last year, who played me for a fool—then there will be no speaker in all the world say the name: "The People," with any fleck of a sneer in his voice or any far-off smile of derision.
> (*Poems of the Midwest* 142)

But the same spirit that allows them to sing after working hard all day draws their attention away from the abuse they suffer.

So the stances that Philip Levine takes toward the working class, children, and nature parallel views presented by other Midwestern

authors suggesting that, perhaps without knowing it, he participates in a Midwestern ethos that celebrates precisely the people and things that American culture generally denigrates, or worse, ignores. This reality may help explain why Levine cannot turn away from his commonplace Midwestern experiences:

> A modest house in a row of modest houses
> in an ordinary neighborhood on the west side
> of the city of Detroit. . . .
> . . . . . .
> How ordinary
> it all was, the dawn breaking each morning, dusk
> arriving on time just as the lights of houses
> came softly on. Why can't I ever let it go?
> ("Northern Motive," *The Mercy* 71-73)

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PHILIP LEVINE: CHAMPION OF OUTSIDERS AND UNDERDOGS

PHILIP A. GREASLEY

US Poet Laureate for 2011-2012, Philip Levine was born in Detroit on January 10, 1928, of Russian-Jewish émigé parents Harry and Esther Levine. His major influences included his father, who died when Philip was five; his extended family; his Russian-Jewish heritage; his birth and first twenty-six years in Detroit; and his experiences working in industry there. Subsequent to 1955, Levine lived most of his life in California and a few years in Spain, but of his post-Detroit locales, only Spain exerted any significant imaginative pull.

Levine's poetry is distinctive in both its style and worldview. Christopher Buckley, in "Levine's *1933*," asserts that it evolves slowly from personal to universal (76), from memory-driven depiction of self and family to portrayal of a wide range of imagined characters (vi). Levine adopted atypical poetic techniques to assist him in conveying his perceptions and philosophical strategies for coping with a universe in which loss and death are the ultimate realities. Throughout, he steadfastly championed democratic values and society's outsiders and the less fortunate.

Perhaps Levine's most important influence was his father, as Philip emphasized in his 2002 "Interview with Paul Mariani." Harry Levine's death in 1933 left a lifelong psychological void. The economic impact of his father's death was also significant, pushing the family from comfortable middle-class status to financial struggle aggravated by the Great Depression. Following Harry Levine's death, the family moved repeatedly to smaller accommodations in less desirable Detroit neighborhoods. Young Levine found identity in his extended family, including his mother, his siblings, grandparents, and an array of aunts, uncles, and cousins. His family elders were

notable in their personal and cultural strength, their tenacious coping, and the spirit with which they embraced life.

The family was not highly religious, but they adhered to Jewish religious practices and embraced their Russian heritage. Surrounded and supported by Russian-Jewish émigré culture, Levine reported that it was not until he started school that he began to realize his divergence from the Detroit community norm. Exemplifying his growing sense of personal, family, and ethnic alienation, he reported in his autobiography, *The Bread of Time* (1994), that the Detroit of his youth was extremely anti-Semitic, as witnessed by Father Charles Coughlin's weekly pro-Nazi, anti-Jewish radio broadcasts (39). Levine always sought spiritual connection but didn't believe in God per se. On that basis, too, alienation marked his life. His writing provided a venue through which he sought a clear, positive, supportive identity, an expression of positive values, an understanding of his relationship to the universe, and a strategy for coping with loss.

As the Depression wore on and World War II loomed, economically disadvantaged, socially stigmatized populations—among them southern Blacks, Appalachian whites, and eastern European immigrants—moved in large numbers to urban-industrial Detroit seeking work. All experienced exploitation and discrimination. From age fourteen on, Philip Levine joined these people and experienced Detroit's industrial life. He knew slum housing and lived amid pervasive pollution. Conditions in the industrial Detroit of his youth and early manhood rivaled those experienced by Upton Sinclair's stockyards hands, as depicted in *The Jungle*, and Carl Sandburg's laborers, as portrayed in *Chicago Poems*.

Levine's Detroit experiences were seminal. They shaped his life and fueled his sense of isolation, deprivation, inequity, and anger. Although he enjoyed greater resources, opportunities, and social acceptability than did many industrial workers, he came to respect, admire, identify and find common cause with those at the bottom. For the remainder of his life, Levine's intense Detroit industrial experiences remained central to his perceptions and worldview.

Leaving Detroit, earning an MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and joining the Fresno State University faculty brought Levine to a sharply different environment. He also spent time in Barcelona, and these stays in Spain were influential, strengthening his democratic leanings and providing poetic inspiration. He admired the Spanish people and poets, but the intensity of his experiences in

California and Spain never achieved the level of those of Detroit, which he described in *The Bread of Time* as having an "insane, nightmarish quality . . . the epic clanging of steel on steel . . . the awesome heat in our faces, those dreamlike moments when the lights failed and we stood in darkness" (86-87).

Levine's early poetry reflects his influences, experiences, and emerging philosophy. These poetic volumes, like *On the Edge* (1963), *Not This Pig* (1968), and *Red Dust* (1971), are highly personal, even private. His tone is quiet. His father, though deceased, is regularly present. In "Who Are You?," from *Not This Pig*, for example, his father narrates the poem, highlighting family heritage and his son's endangered Russian-Jewish identity:

> . . . it's time
> . . . for kindergarten.
> . . . . . .
> Where will you arrive?
> And will I know you then,
> Blue-eyed and American?
> . . . . . .
> At Christmas time. What will
> You say to me when you
> Are taunted as a Jew?
> . . . . . .
> Are you of no people
> Punished for their God?
> . . . . . .
> You live for Easter now,
> . . . . . .
> Wondering who you are,
> Wondering what unknown fathers
> Have reached through me to you . . . (35)

Loss and alienation predominate. Judson Jerome, in "Uncommitted Voices," asserts that the tone of alienation is enhanced by Levine's technique of juxtaposing clear, direct, realistic opening narration with difficult, dreamlike, nightmarish, or surrealistic passages (17-18) in an unsettling juxtaposition, as in "Lights I Have Seen Before" from *On the Edge*:

> . . . I
> shave carefully,
> . . . . . .

wanting to ease
myself away from the face
that is faintly familiar.
. . . . . .
. . . On
the way home houses
that are insane
. . . . . .
I drive on the road between.
Between the cry of matter
and the cry of those whose lives are here. (3-4)

References to "houses" recur throughout Levine's writing. These references typically reflect heritage and identity positively through remembered people, relationships, and experiences. The poet uses memory and imagination to keep the past relevant and lend his poetic persona emotional support with which to combat current challenges and future struggles.

Christopher Buckley, in his preface to *On the Poetry of Philip Levine* (1991), sees Levine's slightly later volumes as more directly elegiac, reinforcing the view of Levine as a poet of memory (v). Among these collections are *Ashes* (1971), *1933* (1974), and *The Names of the Lost* (1976). In "Starlight" from *Ashes,* Levine's narrator, now a man much like the poet, looks back on the sense of connection, fulfillment, and harmony that he had felt in moments as a child with his father. For the rest of his life Levine attempted to recapture the joyful sense of integration he had experienced in moments like these:

I am four years old and growing tired.
I see . . . [my father's] head among the stars,
the glow of his cigarette, redder
than the summer moon . . .
. . . . . .
. . . he asks me if I am happy.
. . . . . .
Then he lifts me to his shoulder,
and now I too am there among the stars,
as tall as he. Are you happy? I say.
He nods in answer, Yes! Oh yes! Oh yes! (35)

Similar elegies appear across Levine's writings for real and imagined members of his extended family. In *1933* these include one for

"Zaydee," his grandfather; his Polish "Grandmother in Heaven"; his "Uncle"; and his fictional brother killed in war. Loss is a constant in Levine's poetry. In "Lost and Found," from *Ashes,* the narrator laments the difficulty of grasping "—the simplest facts of our lives— / that certain losses are final, / death is one, childhood another (65).

Levine's poetry is far from limited to personal losses. Over time, his writings increasingly focus on work and generalize on the human condition. In his later volumes, many of his life metaphors derive from his industrial experience in Detroit. The lead poem of *What Work Is* (1991), "Fear and Fame," describes Levine's persona in a job that he himself had held. The job described is symbolic of the human condition. The narrator alludes to the corrosiveness of life in describing his weekly assignment cleaning and restocking pickling tanks in a metal plating company:

> . . . with a little glass window
> . . . and a respirator
> . . . I . . . descend
> . . . into the dim world
> of the pickling tank and there prepare
> the new solutions from the great carboys
> of acids lowered . . . on ropes . . .
> . . . . . .
> Then . . . climb back, step by stately step . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . and . . . stand
> fully armored as the downpour of cold water
> rained down . . . and the smoking traces puddled
> at my feet . . . (3)

Newly emerged from the pickling tank, he removes the protective gear, sits to rest, and attempts to displace the acid in his already scarred lungs with cigarettes grasped in shaking hands.

"Dearborn Suite," from *News of the World* (2009), provides a similar ironic testimony based on another job Levine held: "Hell is here in the forge room / where the giant presses stamp / out body parts . . . (20)." The double entendre is intentional; elsewhere in his poems multiple references depict workers losing hands to the forge's crushing blows. Levine's industrial job sites were brutal and toxic to workers, emphasizing how Detroit industries, fueled by greed and disregard, impacted residents. In "A View of Home," from *Breath* (2004), Levine describes the Rouge River, adjacent to Ford's industrial com-

plex, as " . . . salted with blown truck tires, / nonunion organizers, dead carp / floating silver side up" (27). His poem "The Lesson," from the same collection, sums up industry's impact on the environment, saying: "Years before . . . the invention of smog, / before Fluid Drive, the eight-hour day, / the iron lung, I'd come into the world / in a shower of industrial filth raining / from the bruised sky above Detroit" (28).

Whether workers, residents, or both, danger and terrible conditions trapped those at the bottom of Detroit's social ladder, those with no options—alcoholics, addicts, minorities of all kinds—in the worst industrial jobs. The poem "Sweet Will," in the collection of that same name (1985), describes just such a person, a blue-collar worker, Stash, who imbibed too fully on the job one Friday night, fell down on the foundry's oily cement floor, knocked himself out, bled profusely, and, when he wakened, resumed work, unfazed,

> . . . and hollered at all
> of us over the oceanic roar of work,
> addressing us by our names and nations—
> "Nigger, Kike, Hunky, River Rat,"
> But he gave it a tune, an old tune,
> Like "America the Beautiful." And he danced
> A little two-step and smiled showing
> the four stained teeth left in the front
> and took another suck of cherry brandy. (17-18)

The spirit with which this community of societal and industrial victims faced their lives led Levine to revere and celebrate them in multiple poems, some written as many as sixty years after he left Detroit and long after they were dead. Beyond being a poet of family and of Detroit then, Levine was a poet of the voiceless, the working class, the downtrodden. Edward Hirsch, Levin's friend and the editor of Levine's 2016 posthumous volume of poetry, *The Last Shift*, wrote in his preface to the volume that "[h]e is a poet of social justice and memory, a singer who enjoined himself to stand up for the victimized and the disenfranchised. The rages of his early work still burn ('Oh / to be young and strong and dumb / again in Michigan!'), but they no longer threaten to thwart or silence him" (viii). "The Future," from *The Last Shift*, also echoes this change from anger to resignation and celebration of those he admired:

> . . . Perhaps
> I just like repeating their names
> as though that could help them
> or perhaps help me, and it does,
> it helps me. They're beyond
> my help. (22)

Levine found Detroit a compellingly nightmarish place during its heyday in the 1950s. He also documented the pain experienced later by the stragglers who, without viable choices, remained there as the city devolved into a postindustrial wasteland. In the ironically titled poem, "A Walk with Tom Jefferson," from the collection of the same name (1988), the narrative does not recount the words and philosophy of our third president, a man with an optimistic vision of America's strong yeoman farmers and opportunity for all—the liberating philosophy on which the old Northwest Territory and the Midwest were premised. Rather, Levine salutes an old, transplanted black Alabama sharecropper named Tom Jefferson, who, decades earlier, had been lured from the cotton fields for the promise of five dollars a day in Detroit but got very little. Somehow, despite weathering every plague that could be visited on a man, Tom, like his namesake, is still optimistic and a "farmer," though on a personal scale, proudly raising vegetables to eat (49-64), and Levine salutes him. In "Leaves," also from his final volume, Levine describes Detroit's lost industry of his era and the displacement of its people, saying: ". . . The factory / is gone, the machines with it, / the night workers, you, me, / even the rats . . ." (10).

Throughout his writings Levine's poetic techniques and his existential coping strategies support his evolving elegiac themes and his commitment to fighting for working people and democratic values. The surfaces of his poems are highly realistic, describing commonplace people and events in simple language. Emotion is carried by images, not adjectives. The tone is quiet. His early poems center on self and family. In interviews, the poet often describes himself, his extended family members, his jobs, and situations in words extremely close to those used in his poems. At times, direct and nonintrusive narrators very much like Levine guide readers; at other times, poems unfold as a sequence of related images based in memory, free association, or imagination.

At times, Levine's technique goes beyond realism to become impressionistic and even surreal. Certain poems convey their import primarily through mood, tone, or psychological state. In "The Angels of Detroit," for example, from *5 Detroits*, the final verse paragraph includes the words: ". . . The toilets / overflow, the rats dance, the maggots / have it, the worms of money / crack like whips, and / among the angels / we lie down" (28).

Nonrealistic approaches are appropriate in this poetry because Levine associates people's felt identities with their most intense experiences, which they retain indelibly in memory throughout their lives. He also sees all times and places as one. In support of these conceptions, Levine's words and images often convey moods that replicate nonlogical approaches and the workings of the subconscious. As Levine's poems progress, images and moods appearing later increasingly diverge from the clear, realistic descriptions marking the poems' beginnings, making the poems more dreamlike or nightmarish as they progress.

Poetic technique and philosophy come together in Levine's adoption of spirituality as a means of withstanding the pain and loss inherent in the human condition. Levine did not believe in God except perhaps in moments. He consistently saw a world in which death is the norm and wars wreak almost continuous havoc. In his early poetry, Levine's reaction was anger. Over time, this anger softened, as suggested in his volume *Sweet Will* (1985) with its epigraph from William Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802": "Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep! / The river glideth at his own sweet will . . . (214)." Levine's use of Wordsworth's lines as the epigraph for the volume suggests two important associations: first, as asserted by William Pitt Root in "Songs of the Working Class," the value of "renewed attention to the concerns and language of working people and plain speech" (209); and, second, the value of poetry based on Wordsworth's concept of "emotion recollected in tranquility," as presented in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The poems in Levine's *Sweet Will* and other later writings adopt this quieter, more meditative tone (Buckley, *On the Poetry of Philip Levin*e 229).

Levine's poetry adopts multiple strategies for coping with what he sees as a death-dealing universe. A constantly used strategy is memory. From his perspective, if lost people, places, and times are remembered, they remain alive, relevant, and meaningful in the pre-

sent. In doing so, they assert identity, heritage, and value to those who follow. "The Present" from *Sweet Will* exemplifies Levine's belief in the living past:

> I began this poem in the present
> because nothing is past. The ice factory,
> the bottling plant, the cindered yard
> all gave way to a low brick building
> a block wide and windowless where they
> designed gun mounts for personnel carriers
> that never made it to Korea. My [lost] brother
> rises early, and on clear days he walks
> to the corner to have toast and coffee. (15-16)

Levine considers imagination a viable companion to memory. In "On the Meeting of Garcia Lorca with Hart Crane," from *The Simple Truth* (1994), the narrator asserts:

> let's bless the imagination. It gives
> us the myths we live by. Let's bless
> the visionary power of the human . . .
> . . . . . .
> bless the exact image of your father
> dead and mine dead, bless the images
> that stalk the corners of our sight
> and will not let go. (3-4)

Levine's narrator praises the power of imagination, but in asserting that it "gives us the myths we live by" he makes it clear that our imaginative constructs can be myths, fabrications, falsifications that we create and agree to hold as true, in the process imputing meaning and value but also potentially deluding ourselves. These myths are like the hopes bequeathed to mankind in the classical story of Prometheus and Pandora's box, false hopes to keep the human race going in times of trouble. Levine intermingles memory and imagination, transmuting his family story to achieve poetic and philosophical goals, as he asserts in two interviews. In an interview with Edward Hirsch, he says, "What I inherited were myths and maybe even a few facts. My father's life seemed and still seems utterly mysterious to me" (*So Ask* 145). In his April 1999 "Interview with Wen Stephenson," he reports: "I've seized on certain things and raised them to the level of truth, whether they're true or not . . ." (*So Ask* 130).

As William Faulkner asserted in his acceptance speech for the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, "the poet's voice [can provide more than just] . . . the record of man. It can be one of the props . . . that help [man] endure and prevail." For Levine, prevailing is more likely to come in the form of enduring with dignity and fighting the good fight to the end rather than in prevailing outright, but he makes clear his commitment to this approach and to art in "The Present," from S*weet Will*. Here he says:

> The old man . . .
> is not an old man. He is twenty years
> younger than I am now putting this down
> in permanent ink on a yellow legal pad
> during a crisp morning in October. (13)

Earlier in this same poem, Levine's narrator was much older than the "old man" described here, but maintaining a record of events has somehow extended the scribe-narrator's youth. His efforts later in the same poem ultimately lead to uncertain but appealing possibilities:

> . . . When I heave myself
> out of this chair with a great groan of age
> and stand shakily, . . .
> the wind brings voices I can't make out,
> scraps of song or sea sounds, daylight
> breaking into dust, the perfume of waiting
> rain, of onions and potatoes frying. (16)

"A Poem with No Ending," from *Sweet Will*, offers a somewhat clearer yet still impressionistic presentation of the value of lives flowing into one another, passing deaths and breathing new life. The poem ends with these words: "I see beyond / the dark the distant sky breaking / into color and each wave taking / shape and rising landward" (35).

When Levine's coping strategies fail, he resorts to prayer. Prayers assert peace, harmony, even joy, but, like other approaches, they remain uncertain in effect. In "An Ending," from *Sweet Will,* the speaker offers just such a tentative prayer:

> This little beach at the end
> of the world is anywhere . . .
> … Don't be scared, the book said, don't flee
> as wave after wave the breakers rise

in darkness toward their ghostly crests,
for he has set a limit to the sea
and he is at your side… (40)

Ultimately, when all life strategies fail, Levine offers one more: hold on; don't quit. Through to his death on February 14, 2015, Philip Levine never quit. His poetry became quieter and more resigned, but he retained his values, celebrated where he could, and never abandoned the fight. Levine adopted as his poetic clientele the outsiders and those at the bottom of society: the poor, the outcast, the minorities (*On the Poetry of Philip Levine* 19). He was a poet of the common man and democracy. His poetic treatment of Detroit began as reportage of his personal life and experiences but metamorphosed into an exemplar of the destructive crucible of life experienced by all (Buckley, "Preface" vii). As a poet and a man, Levine asked the eternal questions: Who am I? What is my relation to others and the creation? How can I end my isolation? How can I live best and minimize the pain and loss surrounding me? How can I assert spirit and bring fairness and fulfillment to all?

Philip Levine's poetry is distinctive in its outsider's dark worldview, its use of poetic technique to assist in portraying philosophical perspectives, and its recurrent strategies for coping with loss and death. His work provides the quintessential nightmarish vision of industrial and postindustrial Detroit, but it is not limited to that. Levine's vision addresses all times and places. He knew who he was, remained true to his values, and never quit.

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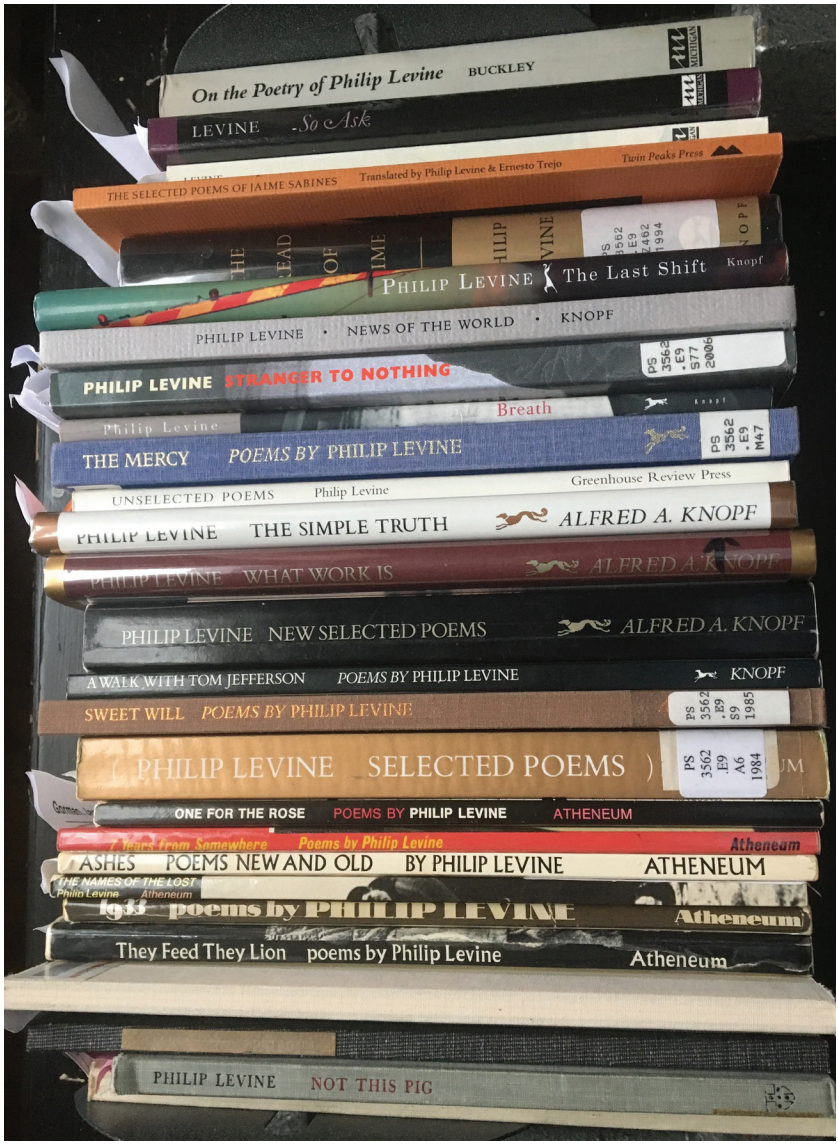

Figure 2: Books by Philip Levine
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