

AMONG CHILDREN

I walk among the rows of bowed heads—
the children are sleeping through fourth grade
so as to be ready for what is ahead,
the monumental boredom of junior high
5 and the rush forward tearing their wings
loose and turning their eyes forever inward.
These are the children of Flint,¹ their fathers
work at the spark plug factory or truck
bottled water in five-gallon sea-blue jugs
10 to the widows of the suburbs. You can see
already how their backs have thickened,
how their small hands, soiled by pig iron,²
leap and stutter even in dreams. I would like
to sit down among them and read slowly
15 from the Book of Job³ until the windows
pale and the teacher rises out of a milky sea
of industrial scum, her gowns streaming
with light, her foolish words transformed
into song, I would like to arm each one
20 with a quiver of arrows⁴ so that they might
rush like wind there where no battle rages
shouting among the trumpets, Ha! Ha!
How dear the gift of laughter in the face
of the eight-hour day, the cold winter mornings
25 without coffee and oranges, the long lines
of mothers in old coats waiting silently
where the gates have closed. Ten years ago
I went among these same children, just born,
in the bright ward of the Sacred Heart and leaned
30 down to hear their breaths delivered that day,
burning with joy. There was such wonder
in their sleep, such purpose in their eyes
closed against autumn, in their damp heads
blurred with the hair of ponds, and not one
35 turned against me or the light, not one
said, I am sick, I am tired, I will go home,
not one complained or drifted alone,
unloved, on the hardest day of their lives.
Eleven years from now they will become
40 the men and women of Flint or Paradise,⁵
the majors of a minor town, and I
will be gone into smoke or memory,
so I bow to them here and whisper
all I know, all I will never know.

Philip Levine
Contemporary American poet

¹Flint--car manufacturing town in Michigan which was devastated when the main plant was moved to Mexico

²pig iron—crude iron with high carbon content, used to manufacture steel

³Job—a hero in the Old Testament of the Bible. Job endured his great afflictions with fortitude and faith and was rewarded.

⁴quiver of arrows—Job was armed by God with the "arrows of his tongue"

⁵Paradise—small American town