



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Poetry and Literature Center

Behind the Scenes with the Poet Laureate: Philip Levine

May 4, 2012

Our Valley

We don't see the ocean, not ever, but in July and August when the worst heat seems to rise from the hard clay of this valley, you could be walking through a fig orchard when suddenly the wind cools and for a moment you get a whiff of salt, and in that moment you can almost believe something is waiting beyond the Pacheco Pass, something massive, irrational, and so powerful even the mountains that rise east of here have no word for it.

You probably think I'm nuts saying the mountains have no word for ocean, but if you live here you begin to believe they know everything. They maintain that huge silence we think of as divine, a silence that grows in autumn when snow falls slowly between the pines and the wind dies to less than a whisper and you can barely catch your breath because you're thrilled and terrified.

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. Remember the small boats that bobbed out as the waves rode in, and the men who carved a living from it only to find themselves carved down to nothing. Now you say this is home, so go ahead, worship the mountains as they dissolve in dust, wait on the wind, catch a scent of salt, call it our life.

"Our Valley" from NEWS OF THE WORLD: POEMS by Philip Levine, copyright © 2009 by Philip Levine.
Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

The Simple Truth

I bought a dollar and a half's worth of small red potatoes,
took them home, boiled them in their jackets
and ate them for dinner with a little butter and salt.
Then I walked through the dried fields
on the edge of town. In middle June the light
hung on in the dark furrows at my feet,
and in the mountain oaks overhead the birds
were gathering for the night, the jays and mockers
squawking back and forth, the finches still darting
into the dusty light. The woman who sold me
the potatoes was from Poland; she was someone
out of my childhood in a pink spangled sweater and sunglasses
praising the perfection of all her fruits and vegetables
at the road-side stand and urging me to taste
even the pale, raw sweet corn trucked all the way,
she swore, from New Jersey. "Eat, eat," she said,
"Even if you don't I'll say you did."

Some things
you know all your life. They are so simple and true
they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme,
they must be laid on the table beside the salt-shaker,
the glass of water, the absence of light gathering
in the shadows of picture frames, they must be
naked and alone, they must stand for themselves.
My friend Henri and I arrived at this together in 1965
before I went away, before he began to kill himself,
and the two of us betray our love. Can you taste
what I'm saying? It is onions or potatoes, a pinch
of simple salt, the wealth of melting butter, it is obvious,
it stays in the back of your throat like a truth
you never uttered because the time was always wrong,
it stays there for the rest of your life, unspoken,
made of that dirt we call earth, the metal we call salt,
in a form we have no words for, and you live on it.

"The Simple Truth" from THE SIMPLE TRUTH by Philip Levine, copyright © 1994 by Philip Levine.
Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

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
rain, to the hours of 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,
the worst music ever invented.
How long has it been since you told him
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
done something so simple, so obvious,
not because you're too young or too dumb,
not because you're jealous or even mean
or incapable of crying in
the presence of another man, no,
just because you don't know what work is.

"What Work Is" from WHAT WORK IS by Philip Levine, copyright © 1991 by Philip Levine.
Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.