



THE SIMPLE TRUTH

PHILIP LEVINE

A K N O P F  B O O K

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POEMS BY

PHILIP LEVINE



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*FOR MY BROTHERS,
WITH ME FROM THE START*

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ON THE MEETING OF GARCIA LORCA AND HART CRANE

Brooklyn, 1929. Of course Crane's
been drinking and has no idea who
this curious Andalusian is, unable
even to speak the language of poetry.
The young man who brought them
together knows both Spanish and English,
but he has a headache from jumping
back and forth from one language
to another. For a moment's relief
he goes to the window to look
down on the East River, darkening
slowly as the early night comes on.
Something flashes across his sight,
a double vision of such horror
he has to slap both his hands across
his mouth to keep from screaming.
Let's not be frivolous, let's
not pretend the two poets gave
each other wisdom or love or
even a good time, let's not
invent a dialogue of such eloquence
that even the ants in your own
nose won't forget it. The two
greatest poetic geniuses alive
meet, and what happens? A vision
comes to an ordinary man staring
at a filthy river. Have you ever
had a vision? Have you ever shaken
your head to pieces and jerked back
the image of your young son
falling through open space, not
from the stern of a ship bound
from Vera Cruz to New York but from
the roof of the building he works on?
Have you risen from bed to pace
until dawn to beg a merciless God
to take these pictures away? Oh, yes,
let's bless the imagination. It gives
us the myths we live by. Let's bless
the visionary power of the human—
the only animal that's got it—,

ess the exact image of your father
ad and mine dead, bless the images
at stalk the corners of our sight
d will not let go. The young man
as my cousin, Arthur Lieberman,
en a language student at Columbia,
o told me all this before he died
tly in his sleep in 1983
a hotel in Perugia. A good man,
thur, he survived graduate school,
er came home to Detroit and sold
anos right through the Depression.
e loaned my brother a used one
compose his hideous songs on,
ich Arthur thought were genius.
hat an imagination Arthur had!

ODE FOR MRS. WILLIAM SETTLE

Lake Forest, a suburb of Chicago,
woman sits at her desk to write
e a letter. She holds a photograph
me up to the light, one taken
' years ago in a high school class
Providence. She sighs, and the sigh
tells of mouth wash and tobacco.
she were writing by candlelight
e would now be in the dark, for
living flame would refuse to be fed
r such pure exhaustion. Actually
e is in the dark, for the man
e's about to address in her odd prose
d a life span of 125/th of a second
the eye of a Nikon, and then he
olitely asked the photographer to
t lost, whispering the request so as
t to offend the teacher presiding.
those students are now in their thirties,
e Episcopal girls in their plaid skirts
d bright crested blazers have gone
prepared, though French speaking, into
world of liars, pimps, and brokers.
7% have died by their own hands,
d all the others have considered
e act at least once. Not one now
members my name, not one recalls
e reading I gave of Cesar Vallejo's
eat *Memorium* to his brother Miguel,
t even the girl who sobbed and
d to be escorted to the school nurse,
lmed and sent home in a cab. Evenings
Lake Forest in mid-December drop
ddenly; one moment the distant sky
a great purple canvas, and then it's
ne, and no stars emerge, however
t the least hint of the stockyards
slaughter houses is allowed to drift
t to the suburbs, so it's a deathless
rkness with no more perfume than
llophane. "Our souls are mingling

ow somewhere in the open spaces
etween Illinois and you," she writes.
hen I read the letter two weeks
er, forwarded by my publisher,
will suddenly discover a truth
our lives on earth, and I'll bless
rs. William Settle of Lake Forest
r giving me more than I gave
r, for addressing me as Mr. Levine,
e name my father bore, a name
man could take with courage
d pride into the empire of death.
I read even unto the second page
startled by the phrase, "By now
ou must have guessed, I am
dancer." Soon snow will fall
the Tudor houses of the suburbs
rning the elegant parked sedans
to anonymous mounds, the winds
ll sweep in over the Rockies
d across the great freezing plains
ere America first died, winds
fierce boys and men turn their backs
them and simply weep, and yet
all that air the soul of Mrs. William
ttle will not release me, not even
r one second. Male and female,
ed and middle aged, we ride it out
own eastward toward our origins,
e impure being become wind. Above
e Middle West, truth and beauty
e one though never meant to be.

LAME DUCKS, MCKESSON & ROBBINS, 1945

te Friday afternoon in the final year
the Second World War, Stanley and I
zed from the men's head on the fourth floor,

men downriver they came, a flotilla of ducks
eastern waters of our river
aded toward the magic isles of Hamtramck.

e had shaved and patted our cheeks with cologne
olen from "Sundries." We had washed
heroes in movies do, standing before

open window so that women might mark
e line from armpit to crotch scrubbed clean
the roots of the sparse thatch going dark.

ressed in our pressed white T-shirts we smoked
d sipped from a bottle of paregoric
olen from "Addictive Medicines," and talked

the whole weekend that spread out before us.
own below, patched with light, the river rode on
ward the waiting darkness. And then the ducks

peared, a little gliding V of seven,
rhaps a family, perhaps not. "Canadian
als," said I. "No," said Stanley, "birds of heaven."

their plumage caught the colors of the world,
their bills were gleaming and pliant, their black rumps
lms above the shadowy undercurrents as past

the Bob-Lo boat where it discharged its cargo
daytime revellers they swept and past the moored
and serious boats to Buffalo and out

sight to find a shore that they might waddle up
settle down to nesting. But first the war
had to end in Asia, the river had to burn,

anley had to brush his teeth and comb his hair
ven times and fluff it up and grease it down.
ad to fall off a ladder to the stars

d break my right forearm and flunk calculus
as predicted at my initial birth
l be good for nothing but to tell you this.

FEBRUARY 14TH

wakening at dawn thirty-
z years ago, I see
e lifting of her eyelids
elcome me home. I can
call her long arms encircling
e, and I reach
it until the moment slides
to all the forgotten hours.
l the rest of our lives
e tree outside that window
oans in the wind. In other
oms we'll hear other houses
utter and won't care, and
on hearing and not
ring until our names
erge with the wind. One
om, bare, uncurtained,
a city long ago lost,
es with us into the wide
easureless light. A tune
es with us too. Hear
in the little weirs
llecting winter waters,
the drops of frozen rain
eking from the eaves to
ol in the tiny valleys
their making. Six weeks,
d the wide world is green

ONE DAY

Everyone knows that the trees will go one day
and nothing will take their place.
Everyone has wakened, alone, in
a room of fresh light and risen
to meet the morning as we did.
How long have we waited
quietly by the side of the road
for someone to slow and ask why.
The light is going, first from between
the long rows of dark firs
and then from our eyes, and when
it is gone we will be gone.
No one will be left to say,
He took the stick and marked off
the place where the door would be,"
"she held the child in both hands
and sang the same few tunes
over and over."

Before dinner we stood
in line to wash the grease from our faces
and scrub our hands with a hard brush,
and the pan of water thickened and grayed,
white scum frothed on top,
and the last one flung it in the yard.
Boiled potatoes, buttered and salted, onions,
thick slices of bread, cold milk
almost blue under the fading light,
the smell of coffee from the kitchen.
I felt my eyes slowly closing.
You smoked in silence.

What life
were we expecting? Ships sailed
from distant harbors without us,
the telephone rang and no one answered,
no one came home alone and stood
for hours in the dark hallway.
The woman bowed to a candle
and spoke as though it could hear,
though it could answer.
My aunt went to the back window
and called her small son, gone now

years into the closed wards
the state, called his name again
and again. What could I do?
answer for him who'd forgotten
his name? Take my father's shoes
and go into the streets?

Yes, the sun
is risen again. I can see the windows
change and hear a dog barking. The wind
tickles the slender top of the alder,
the conversation of night birds
whispers, and I can hear my heart
rhythmic and strong. I will live to see
the day end as I lived to see
the earth turn molten and white,
then to metal, then to whatever shape
is stamped into it as we laughed
the long night hours away or sang
as the eagle flies on Friday.
When Friday came, the early hours perfect
and cold, we cursed our only lives
and passed the bottle back and forth.

Some died.

He turned and he was gone, my friend
with the great laugh who walked
quietly and ate with his head
down, like a bear, his coarse hair
almost touching the plate. The tall one
with arms no thicker than a girl's,
who cursed his swollen face
though he could have another.
The one whose voice lilted softly
when he raised a finger and spoke. I sat
beside him, trying to describe the sea
I had seen it, but it was lost,
constant and unseen, perhaps no longer
there under a low sky. I tried to tell him
how the waves darkened and left only
the sound of their breaking,
and after a silence we learned to bear,
he all came back. He turned away
from the wall and slept, and I went out
to the city. It was I who'd held his wife
and felt the small bones of her back

ing and falling as she did not cry.

ter I would see my son from a distance
d not call out. I would waken that night
side a sleeping woman and count
ch breath.

Soon it was summer, afternoon,
e city hid indoors in the great heat,
e hot wind shrivelled our faces. I said,
hey're gone." The light turned from red
green, and we went on. "If they're not here,"
u said, "where are they?" We both
oked into the sky as though
were our only home. We drove on.
othing moved, nothing stirred
the oven of this valley. What
as there left to say? The sky
as on fire, the air streamed
to the open windows. We broke free
yond the car lots, the painted windows,
e all-night bars, the places
ere the children gathered, and we just
ent on and on, as far as we could
to a day that never ended.

ASK FOR NOTHING

stead walk alone in the evening
ading out of town toward the fields
leep under a darkening sky;
e dust risen from your steps transforms
elf into a golden rain fallen
rthward as a gift from no known god.
e plane trees along the canal bank,
e few valley poplars, hold their breath
you cross the wooden bridge that leads
where you haven't been, for this walk
peats itself once or more a day.
at is why in the distance you see
eyond the first ridge of low hills
ere nothing ever grows, men and women
tride mules, on horseback, some even
foot, all the lost family you
ever prayed to see, praying to see you,
anting and singing to bring the moon
own into the last of the sunlight.
hind you the windows of the town
ink on and off, the houses close down;
ead the voices fade like music
er deep water, and then are gone;
en the sudden, tumbling finches
ve fled into smoke, and the one road
itened in moonlight leads everywhere.

SOUL

Castelldefels we say, “There are four thousand souls
living in this village,” not daring to omit even
the squat, gray haired captain of the *Guardia Civil*
at the trailer camp of Gypsies who thrive on a grassy plot
adjacent to the tracks, the men who shine my wife’s boots
while leering shamelessly up her skirt, the women
who beg at the tables of the open-air cantinas
in the public square, rolling their eyes and pinching
the borrowed babies until they bawl. As a child
I was embarrassed to implore the Lord to take my “soul,”
whatever that was, before I woke. I was five then,
living splendidly in a two-story house on the West Side
with a fenced yard, heated garage, and a governess to tend
to my brother and me, a Mrs. Morton, who professed
a faith in the afterlife and thought it charming
at bedtime to force the twin heathens to their knees
and recite her rhyming prayer, which we did only the once
when a circus act for company. Thankfully the Great Depression
saved us, and Mrs. Morton, caught pawing my mother’s rings,
went packing—with no references—into the larger Christian world.
We moved, carless, to a dim, cramped walk-up behind
a used-car lot on Livernois. There my spiritual life
got a second start when I collapsed on the way to school
for no known reason and awakened staring up into the face
of a policeman with the improbable name of Officer German.
The school nurse, while fussing with my pulse and staring
at her watch, solemnly announced I must be dead,
and my mother was summoned from work to take me home
in a Checker cab. That night I lay face up on the couch
hoping for words that might stay the inevitable.
I was allowed by the spirits that rule in such affairs
to return to life disguised as a seven-year old
but not yet fully aware of the beauty of women’s legs
or the firm skin that stretched across their gleaming sternums,
though Marta—our boarder from Nazi occupied Vienna—
had lured me into her room one night to sample her talcums,
her colognes and creams, and to try on her silk garments,
which I stubbornly rejected, only to bring on a storm
of Middle Eastern abuse—a lost opportunity
I lived to regret. In the sixth grade, seated beside
a pudgy girl in pleated skirt and starched white blouse

elt for the first time my present incarnation
king hold, and though I fought it for days, though I begged
e unknown powers within me for relief, preferring
remain rounded off and complete, the yin and yang
the eleven-year old, it went on. Now the long torpors
uld descend on me each spring. I became the object
d no longer the subject of my own sentence. When I asked
e inconstant stars that occasionally winked through
e dim air over Detroit for their guidance, they answered
an indecipherable riot of words, Basque and Chinese,
rich I alone could interpret. Thus the sudden flight
Havana in 1947 in the hope of mastering
tin ballroom dancing, my enlistment in the naval reserve
order to acquire discipline and bearing, the marriage
a fifteen-year old suburban delinquent. All of this failed,
st as the year on the night shift at Wonder Bread
d the diurnal sweats of the seven ovens failed
rinse me of indignation. The surprise came when
my twenty-sixth birthday while sober a grown woman
ose me, who was not sober, to father her children,
d together we embarked on a life we could call ours
the village of Castelldefels in the year of our Lord
1965, where returning home alone on foot after a long day
idling in the great cemetery of Barcelona, I shouted out
the night sky, "There is that lot of me and all so luscious."
id believed it. I believe it now, even though
e squat captain of the *Guardia Civil* goes on censoring
y mail, the dwarf barber sneers as he calls me Don Felipe,
e butcher hints I lack the *cojones* to take her sister,
d each night the sea tears at the littered coast, the wind
ges through the pines, and—except for us—all four thousand
uls, some alone, some in pairs, huddle in their beds and pray.

THE TRADE

touching down in the loud morning air
the docks of Genoa, with the gulls wheeling
overhead, the fishermen calling, I considered
for a moment, then traded a copy of T.S. Eliot
for a pocket knife and two perfect lemons.
The old man who engineered the deal held
the battered black *Selected Poems*, pushed
the book out at arm's length perusing the notes
on "The Wasteland" as though he understood them.
Perhaps he did. He sifted through the box
of lemons, sniffing the tough skins of several,
before finally settling on just that pair.
He worked the large blade back and forth
adding all the while, and stopped abruptly
as though to say, Perfect! I had not
come all that way from America by way
of the Indies to rid myself of the burden
of a book that haunted me or even to say,
I've had it with middle age, poetry, my life.
It came only from Barcelona on the good ship
the Angaroo, sitting up on deck all night
with a company of conscript Spaniards
who passed around the black wine of Alicante
while they sang gypsy ballads and Sinatra.
I'd been six hours late getting started.
As the long May light the first beacons
along the Costa Brava came on, then France
was topped by, jewelled in the darkness, as I
was sized and drank by turns in the warm sea air
which calmed everything. A book my brother gave
me twenty years before, out of love, stolen
from Doubleday's and brought to the hospital
as an offering, brother to brother, and carried
with me those years until the words, memorized,
meant nothing. A grape knife, wooden handled,
thickened at one end like a dark fist, the blade
black and slightly rusted. Two lemons, one
for my pocket, one for my rucksack, perfuming
my clothes, my fingers, my money, my hair,
that all the way to Rapallo on the train
I would stand among my second-class peers, tall,

gelic, an ordinary man become a gift.

LLANTO

for Ernesto Trepo

um, almond, cherry have come and gone,
e wisteria has vanished in
e dawn, the blackened roses rusting
ong the barbed-wire fence explain

w April passed so quickly into
is hard wind that waited in the west.
ead is summer and the full sun
ling at ease above the stunned town

o longer yours. Brother, you are gone,
at which was earth gone back to earth,
at which was human scattered like rain
to the darkened wild eyes of herbs

at see it all, into the valley oak
at will not sing, that will not even talk.

IN THE DARK

the last light of a summer day facing the Canadian shore
e watched from the island as night sifted into the river,
ackening the still surface. An ore boat passed soundlessly
ailing a tiny wake that folded in upon itself with a sigh,
less that sigh was hers or mine. In the darkness it's hard
tell who is listening and who is speaking. St. Augustine
aimed we made love in the dark— though he did not write
ade love"— because we were ashamed to do it in the sight
anything, although I suppose God could see in the dark, having
least as good eyesight as a cat. Our cat Nellie used to like
watch my wife and me at love, but she was not a creature
o generalized and of all things she liked best a happy household.
od loves a happy giver," I read in the Abyssinian chapel
top of the Holy Sepulcher, which suggests the old saint
d no idea what he was talking about, but in the darkness
s not easy to tell who is talking and who listening, who giving,
o taking, who praying, who cursing. Even then, watching
om the island, I thought that making love was a form of prayer.
ou got down on your knees, if you were a boy, and prepared yourself
r whatever the future held in store, and no matter how firm
ur plans without the power of another power you were lost.
s so dark back then I can't tell what I'm thinking, although
aven't placed my hand on Millie's shoulder for nothing,
or have I turned my face toward Millie's merely to catch
reflection of the darkness in her wide, hazel eyes, cat eyes
alled them then. Millie sighs, the ore boat passes silently
disappear into a future that's still mysterious, I take a breath,
e deepest breath of my life, and knowing the generations of stars
e watching from above, I go down on my knees in prayer.

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