



# THE SIMPLE TRUTH

PHILIP LEVINE

A K N O P F  B O O K

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# THE SIMPLE TRUTH

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  
lm above the shadowy undercurrents as past

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

sight to find a shore that they might waddle up  
settle down to nesting. But first the war  
d 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  
most 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

7 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,  
he 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  
to 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."  
d 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  
at 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've'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 Tre*

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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