

Circle of Voices – Spotlight on PHILIP LEVINE (1928-2015)

Wednesday, January 20 at 6:30pm (January 27 Snow Date)

My Brother the Artist, at Seven

As a boy he played alone in the fields
behind our block, six frame houses
holding six immigrant families,
the parents speaking only gibberish
to their neighbors. Without the kids
they couldn't say "Good morning" and be
understood. Little wonder
he learned early to speak to himself,
to tell no one what truly mattered.
How much can matter to a kid
of seven? Everything. The whole world
can be his. Just after dawn he sneaks
out to hide in the wild, bleached grasses
of August and pretends he's grown up,
someone complete in himself without
the need for anyone, a warrior
from the ancient places our fathers
fled years before, those magic places:
Kiev, Odessa, the Crimea,
Port Said, Alexandria, Lisbon,
the Canaries, Caracas, Galveston.
In the damp grass he recites the names
over and over in a hushed voice
while the sun climbs into the locust tree
to waken the houses. The husbands leave
for work, the women return to bed, the kids
bend to porridge and milk. He advances
slowly, eyes fixed, an animal or a god,
while beneath him the earth holds its breath.

You Can Have It

My brother comes home from work
and climbs the stairs to our room.
I can hear the bed groan and his shoes drop
one by one. You can have it, he says.

The moonlight streams in the window
and his unshaven face is whitened
like the face of the moon. He will sleep
long after noon and waken to find me gone.

Thirty years will pass before I remember
that moment when suddenly I knew each man
has one brother who dies when he sleeps
and sleeps when he rises to face this life,

and that together they are only one man
sharing a heart that always labors, hands
yellowed and cracked, a mouth that gasps
for breath and asks, Am I gonna make it?

All night at the ice plant he had fed
the chute its silvery blocks, and then I
stacked cases of orange soda for the children
of Kentucky, one gray boxcar at a time

with always two more waiting. We were twenty
for such a short time and always in
the wrong clothes, crusted with dirt
and sweat. I think now we were never twenty.

In 1948 in the city of Detroit, founded
by de la Mothe Cadillac for the distant purposes
of Henry Ford, no one wakened or died,
no one walked the streets or stoked a furnace,

for there was no such year, and now
that year has fallen off all the old newspapers,
calendars, doctors' appointments, bonds,
wedding certificates, drivers licenses.

The city slept. The snow turned to ice.
The ice to standing pools or rivers
racing in the gutters. Then bright grass rose
between the thousands of cracked squares,

and that grass died. I give you back 1948.
I give you all the years from then
to the coming one. Give me back the moon
with its frail light falling across a face.

Give me back my young brother, hard
and furious, with wide shoulders and a curse
for God and burning eyes that look upon
all creation and say, You can have it.

Smoke

Can you imagine the air filled with smoke?
It was. The city was vanishing before noon
or was it earlier than that? I can't say because
the light came from nowhere and went nowhere.

This was years ago, before you were born, before
your parents met in a bus station downtown.
She'd come on Friday after work all the way
from Toledo, and he'd dressed in his only suit.

Back then we called this a date, some times
a blind date, though they'd written back and forth
for weeks. What actually took place is now lost.
It's become part of the mythology of a family,

the stories told by children around the dinner table.
No, they aren't dead, they're just treated that way,
as objects turned one way and then another
to catch the light, the light overflowing with smoke.

Go back to the beginning, you insist. Why
is the air filled with smoke? Simple. We had work.
Work was something that thrived on fire, that without
fire couldn't catch its breath or hang on for life.

We came out into the morning air, Bernie, Stash,
Williams, and I, it was late March, a new war
was starting up in Asia or closer to home,
one that meant to kill us, but for a moment

the air held still in the gray poplars and elms
undoing their branches. I understood the moon
for the very first time, why it came and went, why
it wasn't there that day to greet the four of us.

Before the bus came a small black bird settled
on the curb, fearless or hurt, and turned its beak up
as though questioning the day. "A baby crow,"
someone said. Your father knelt down on the wet cement,

his lunchbox balanced on one knee and stared quietly
for a long time. "A grackle far from home," he said.
One of the four of us mentioned *tenderness*,
a word I wasn't used to, so it wasn't me.

The bus must have arrived. I'm not there today.
The windows were soiled. We swayed this way and that
over the railroad tracks, across Woodward Avenue,
heading west, just like the sun, hidden in smoke.

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.

The Mercy

The ship that took my mother to Ellis Island
Eighty-three years ago was named "The Mercy."
She remembers trying to eat a banana
without first peeling it and seeing her first orange
in the hands of a young Scot, a seaman
who gave her a bite and wiped her mouth for her
with a red bandana and taught her the word,
"orange," saying it patiently over and over.
A long autumn voyage, the days darkening
with the black waters calming as night came on,
then nothing as far as her eyes could see and space
without limit rushing off to the corners
of creation. She prayed in Russian and Yiddish
to find her family in New York, prayers
unheard or misunderstood or perhaps ignored
by all the powers that swept the waves of darkness
before she woke, that kept "The Mercy" afloat
while smallpox raged among the passengers
and crew until the dead were buried at sea
with strange prayers in a tongue she could not fathom.
"The Mercy," I read on the yellowing pages of a book
I located in a windowless room of the library
on 42nd Street, sat thirty-one days
offshore in quarantine before the passengers
disembarked. There a story ends. Other ships
arrived, "Tancred" out of Glasgow, "The Neptune"
registered as Danish, "Umberto IV,"

the list goes on for pages, November gives
way to winter, the sea pounds this alien shore.
Italian miners from Piemonte dig
under towns in western Pennsylvania
only to rediscover the same nightmare
they left at home. A nine-year-old girl travels
all night by train with one suitcase and an orange.
She learns that mercy is something you can eat
again and again while the juice spills over
your chin, you can wipe it away with the back
of your hands and you can never get enough.

Among the Children

I walk among the rows of bowed heads--
the children are sleeping through fourth grade
so as to be ready for what is ahead,
the monumental boredom of junior high
and the rush forward tearing their wings
loose and turning their eyes forever inward.
These are the children of Flint, their fathers
work at the spark plug factory or truck
bottled water in 5 gallon sea-blue jugs
to the widows of the suburbs. You can see
already how their backs have thickened,
how their small hands, soiled by pig iron,
leap and stutter even in dreams. I would like
to sit down among them and read slowly
from The Book of Job until the windows
pale and the teacher rises out of a milky sea
of industrial scum, her gowns streaming
with light, her foolish words transformed
into song, I would like to arm each one
with a quiver of arrows so that they might
rush like wind there where no battle rages
shouting among the trumpets, Hal Ha!
How dear the gift of laughter in the face

of the 8 hour day, the cold winter mornings
without coffee and oranges, the long lines
of mothers in old coats waiting silently
where the gates have closed. Ten years ago
I went among these same children, just born,
in the bright ward of the Sacred Heart and leaned
down to hear their breaths delivered that day,
burning with joy. There was such wonder
in their sleep, such purpose in their eyes
dosed against autumn, in their damp heads
blurred with the hair of ponds, and not one
turned against me or the light, not one
said, I am sick, I am tired, I will go home,
not one complained or drifted alone,
unloved, on the hardest day of their lives.
Eleven years from now they will become
the men and women of Flint or Paradise,
the majors of a minor town, and I
will be gone into smoke or memory,
so I bow to them here and whisper
all I know, all I will never know.