



PHOTOGRAPHY 2

Across the road from Fred's a Mrs. Stempel
planted tulip bulbs and irises even though
the remnants of winter were still hanging on
in gray-speckled mounds. Smoking at all times
she would kneel, bare legs, to the hard ground
and shift the soil with her palms and fingers
as if to work for it well and strong or give
it a little extra substance for the fourth time
it was ever made.

When Charles Wheeler
came to Dearborn to take photographs
of the great Rouge plant he caught in
tiny little veins, at a distance, a perfect
under the surface of the earth, the faint
blue eyes of a child. Wheeler took the
with eyes, a faint focus, gray lumps with white
the way space got divided or how light
changed nothing.

Nowhere does Mrs. Stempel
show up in all the records of that year,
not in the few pale clips and irises
that blossomed in the yard of her rented house
long gone to fire. For the first time I was
in love that spring and would walk the long mile
from the bus stop knowing it was useless,
at my feet the rutted tracks the trucks made,
with half frozen. Ahead the slag heaps
burning at all hours, and the great stacks
blackening the sky, and nothing in between.

Coming Close

Forty Essays on Philip Levine

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An Apprentice's Tale

DANIEL NESTER

When was the first time I saw Philip Levine? I'm pretty sure it was the first day of classes at New York University in the fall of 1995, out in the lounge with ratty couches, on the second floor of 19 University Place. He sat next to Gerald Stern. They talked about the food in New York and the great poets of Cleveland. Who? Hart Crane and . . . where in Ohio is Rita Dove from? Some of us joined naming names. Who else? d. a. levy? Yes, d. a. levy, I threw in his name. The desire to impress fogs my memory. Later, Levine, dressed in a sweater and collared shirt, nice jacket, sat at the end of the seminar table as we walked in.

I had been in the city for a year, had committed to making something of myself as a poet, and assumed Levine and I would be simpatico, fellow blue-collar travelers. I even might have thought that I had "outgrown" Levine's poems, fancying myself a more experimental type. The sequence of different disguises I wore in those days is still unclear.

What is clear is that I was at once worshipful and ambivalent about being in the same room as the poet who redefined, for me, what was acceptable subject matter in a contemporary poem and how to go about writing about work. Here I was, twenty-six, old by grad student standards, with this sixty-seven-year-old poet, in the flesh, about to read our poems for the next fifteen weeks.

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I do remember the first time I read Levine's poems. It was the fall of 1991, my first poetry workshop, led by Michael S. Weaver (now Afaa M. Weaver) at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. I was a nonmatriculated student who had limped through undergrad. We're talking figuratively, but I also wore a polio brace on my right leg from a landscaping job accident. The figure I struck then was Dickensian. My leg clacked as I walked.

Weaver assigned several poets who remain favorites—Li-Young Lee, Sharon Olds—but the one who stood out for me was Philip Levine. You know the poem:

You know what work is—if you're
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.

His poems woke me up because I knew what work was. My grandfather, Curt Little, worked twenty years at a printer where he cut holes through green Turnpike tickets. When the owner went out of business, my grandfather lost his pension. I never heard him complain. My father, Mike Nester, worked nights as a truck driver, dead-lifted forty-pound boxes off the docks, rolled metal drums onto forklifts. My sister walked on his back, cracking vertebrae into place. Through high school, I worked at a car wash, where I scrubbed whitewalls with wire brushes and dried off bumpers. I didn't have proper work boots or gloves. I put plastic bags over my sneakers with rubber bands.

Philip Levine introduced the idea to me that blue-collar work is worthy of being made into a poem, of being poetic. Poetry was no longer just a rich person's game. And so when Afaa Weaver, who worked in a factory for fifteen years before entering the world of poetry, asked me, "What are you going to do with all these poems?," it changed my world. I sat up straight. He suggested this absurd thing called creative writing school.

As long as I can remember, I've had a conflicted relationship with the word *mentor*. It suggests to me a patrilineal passing of the torch or priestly rite of worship. I'm sure this started for me when poetry took the place of faith in God. I was about nineteen, and it was a welcome change. Still, I was skeptical of poetry. I wasn't ready, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, to "surrender wholly to the work."

Back then I was a nervous wretch, in most ways unmentorable; I was outgoing and social, but also insecure and rude and still hurting from a father who left the family. If I wasn't writing poems about empty driveways and union

jackets left on the hanger, I was writing about nosehair-picking. There was no time to be genteel; a poem had to reflect the brute significance of the oppressed reality of the human spirit, what William Carlos Williams calls the "human particulars." My particulars didn't involve paintings, animals, or allusions to philosophy, which seemed to appear in every poem I read in literary journals. I'm tired just explaining it to you now, but back then, that was the credo.

I was needy. Sometimes, it was all I could do to blurt out, all at once, my life story, so that Levine understood me completely, knew completely why I was sitting in that chair, in that room, with these poems, with him. That temptation to confess sat at the tip of my tongue, lapsed Catholic that I was. At other times, I assumed he'd divine I was part of his blue-collar tribe, that we shared this common drudgery.

The assumptions varied, but it became evident that Levine just wanted to read and discuss our poems. He was going to read poems, mark them with a pencil, underline words, cross out others. And that, to me, is where the real mentorship began.

That first class, Levine addressed a rumor about his teaching methods. "You might've heard," he said, "some story where I tore up somebody's poem in front of everybody, and this made many people upset, including the writer of that poem. That's not true."

I'd heard the story, as had everyone else, and we were surprised he met the story head-on. We knew Levine was a tough customer, or at least had a different communication style, from, say, Sharon Olds, who maintained a yogic calm as we picked each other's poems apart. I think some of us would have worn it like a badge of honor if Levine tore up one of our poems; I know I would have.

It wasn't all kumbaya. Levine did confront us in class. "What was the greatest book of 'New York poetry' ever written?" he asked us one night. A pause hung in the air. My friend Christopher Connelly sat across the table from me. He said one word under his breath—"Lorca?"—so low it sounded like a cough.

"What was that?" Levine asked. "Did someone say Lorca?"

Connelly later said he thought he was wrong and should take back what he said. And just when he was about to, Levine pounced. "Right!" he said. "You are absolutely right. Federico García Lorca's *Poet in New York*."

This was a rare moment when someone got the right answer, or had any answer. A class with Philip Levine was more about finding the questions to ask.

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Levine said he liked teaching at NYU because we "didn't act like we were the anointed." This was true. Our group of twelve was serious about work and we gave each other, as we say, great feedback, as great as any class I'd been in, before or since. There were no alliances or payback pools, all of which I've seen and some of which I've participated in.

We were also not very sophisticated in the ways of the Po-Biz. In the years after NYU, I wished we'd been debriefed in navigating the confidence games every poet must play. I may sound like an old man who walked bare-foot uphill to school, but back in our day, our program didn't have much in the way of career advice besides a stack of *Writer's Chronicles* and a bulletin board announcing crappy contests. Writing programs are more adept at faking these things now.

In recent years I have come to think it is good we focused on our poems and poetry in that room. It was a far more pure process, for one, to see our professor take each line of ours, pencil in hand, and match each individual talent to a tradition. Besides, what were we going to do—ask Philip Fucking Levine about what to say in a cover letter or how many poems to send with a SASE to *Kenyon Review*?

I am looking at a WordPerfect file of poems I wrote that semester: forty-seven poems, along with forty drafts of others. One, "Parade," a stanza-by-stanza imitation of Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," swaps Fats Domino's "Careless Love" with Journey's power ballad "Open Arms" and ends with oversexed MTV videos instead of a family of skunks.

Another poem is so shamelessly imitative of Levine's I dare not mention its title, only that it involves chalk, an homage to his "The Poem of Chalk," and frying potatoes, an allusion to his "The Simple Truth." I know I was not the only one who cribbed words and allusions to spark up an interest in the old man. Imagine collecting these derivative poems from these souls week after week! Imagine the reticence required not to say: *Knock it off, brown-noser. Stop imitating me, and write your own damn poems.*

It is not uncommon for poets to send work to teachers after the semester is over, to keep in touch. It doesn't make sense now, but back then I made a conscious decision not to do this. Levine offered me encouragement and direction, some direct advice. We talked about William Carlos Williams, about "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" and marriage.

I never attempted to keep up a correspondence with Levine. I don't think he would have wanted to, but that's not the point. I'm not sure what such a correspondence would have consisted of. Would I have kept on sending him poems, and he'd offer mild encouragement? It didn't make sense, at least to me, to do such a thing, and to be honest, I saw it as kissing up or striving. Other people don't feel that way, I know, but back then, that's how it felt. There were people who bragged about "still talking" to their old teachers. Or maybe they weren't bragging. Maybe these things simply happen. Regardless, my thought on this matter was always, and still is: Why bother them?

I worked as a secretary at NYU after graduate school, and occasionally I would see Levine in the gym locker room. There he was, Philip Levine, taking off his pants or putting his towel in a gym bag. I think he swam. I did say hello to him once. It was awkward. We were both half-naked. He was nice, but I don't think he remembered me, or remembered me in the way I would have wanted him to, which would have been as some poetic genius. It didn't matter. We had spent our time together, and that time was over. I read his poems, he read mine, and then we got back to work doing what we did before.

Although I have had many excellent teachers in my lifetime, I never thought I had enjoyed the benefits of having a mentor. My thoughts on these matters have changed. Maybe it's because I am now a father twice over. Maybe I've gotten soft in middle age. What I've learned is it's best to acknowledge one's mentors, and, two decades later, that's better than not doing anything at all. I look back with a terrible regret for not being open to having mentors or acknowledging them. I think of Afaa Weaver, my first mentor, as well as Philip Levine, because of their work backgrounds, sure; but also, frankly, they take on a paternal glow in my rearview mirror. They feel like my fathers.

I think back to years beneath that goddamn car wash blower, how I could scream along with it and no one could hear me. How it's muffled my hearing to this day. Whenever I shift one foot to another, I know I don't have to limp around anymore. I can stand straight up.

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