"To a Child" may be indebted to Berryman's "The Ball Poem," which is also about loss of innocence. The differences are instructive. Berryman's poem talks in the third person about a boy who has lost his ball; it addresses the boy directly for just one sentence, then expands upon "The epistemology of loss, how to stand up / Knowing what every man must one day know / And most know many days, how to stand up...." It concludes in the first person with the emphasis where it has been, really, all along, on the speaker's unsupportable grief. By contrast, "To a Child" ends by *focusing* on what every man must one day know: "We've all been here before / ...and we stopped crying. / You think your life is over? / It's just begun." In 1977, in an interview with Calvin Bedient, Levine put it another way: "I don't like these wisdom machines telling people how they ought to live.... I don't have the answer to anything, except 'Keep trying, kid, buddy, old man.'"

Philip Levine

3 poems

3 essays by other poets

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ANIMALS ARE PASSING FROM OUR LIVES

It's wonderful how I jog
on four honed-down ivory toes
my massive buttocks slipping
like oiled parts with each light step.
I'm to market. I can smell
the sour, grooved block, I can smell
the blade that opens the hole
and the pudgy white fingers

that shake out the intestines
like a hankie. In my dreams
the snouts drool on the marble,
suffering children, suffering flies,

suffering the consumers
who won't meet their steady eyes
for fear they could see. The boy
who drives me along believes

that any moment I'll fall
on my side and drum my toes
like a typewriter or squeal
and shit like a new housewife

discovering television,
or that I'll turn like a beast
cleverly to hook his teeth
with my teeth. No. Not this pig.

Lee Upton

YES. YES, THIS PIG

Years ago, while I was reciting my poem "Hog Roast" in Flint, Michigan, a man in the audience squealed like a pig. I would have been more bothered, but until I sat down and friends told me otherwise I thought it was machinery malfunctioning. The next reader was Philip Levine.

Within minutes after Levine began reading his poetry the heckler shouted "negative space." After the second shout, Levine stopped reading. His anger was something you could feel — as if the air held thistles. It sounds comical now, but at the time it occurred to me that I might be witnessing the first poetry reading I'd been part of with a potential for violence.

Levine started talking. Here's what he said (warning: rough paraphrase): "I've met this man in Cincinnati, I've met this man in Kansas City, I've met this man in Ottawa, I've met this man in Cleveland." After a long catalogue of meeting sites, Levine said something on the order of "And God bless this man."

By the time Levine finished, the audience was not only filled with admiration for him but overwhelmed with pity for the heckler.

Which brings me to "Animals Are Passing From Our Lives," which Levine read that night — and during which no one dared to squeal. Long before that reading in Flint, I loved the little pig who speaks in that poem. I have loved that pig not just because I grew up on a farm and spent considerable time from the age of three upwards with pigs. ("A hog can strip the skin off a horse" — one of my mother's unheeded warnings.) I have loved that pig for his attitude: freedom of mind unto death. To be doomed and yet dignified about it.

For years I've remembered the poem not by its original title, but by its final words, "No. Not this pig," words that make the entire poem ripple and coil. (The final three words title the collection in which the poem appears.) For all of Levine's focus in "Animals Are Passing From Our Lives" on a non-human animal — animals are passing from our lives, as any report of species extinction informs us — the poem is unmistakably about how humans are transformed into objects.

Readers have approached the poem in many ways, even as a statement of conflict-avoidance or resignation, although such a reading hardly seems convincing if we consider the pig's discipline and rage, even his prescience. I'm not the first to notice that the pig bears a resemblance to Bartleby ("I would prefer not to"), although maybe not a lot of people have connected the pig to Hemingway's "grace under pressure."

Plenty of animals pass through Levine's poetry, irreducible creatures, like us and not like us: a sow eats a child and is hanged like a felon. Unpredictable dogs and strange birds appear. Surely Levine himself is the title creature in "The Fox," a being "who must proclaim / not ever ever ever / to mounted ladies and their gentlemen."

Levine often locates power through the body — the body's energy as well as the waste of the body in labor that numbs and diminishes. In "Commanding Elephants" he offers the lines "Oh my body, what have you // done to me?" In "Animals Are Passing From Our Lives," it's not what the body does, but what is done to the body.

At the start, the pig declaims "It's wonderful how I jog" in a tone of triumphant self-belief, a demand that living flesh be valued. (It's wonderful, too, how the poem jogs among its precise and brutal images.) Even if the pig compares his own backside to "oiled parts," the pig is insistently not an object to himself. In essence, he gives us a guided tour of his body — and of his horribly realistic dreams. Soon we're up in the pig's nostrils. Next we internalize his imagination of how human fingers (themselves plump and piggish) will enter his body, his intestines yanked out like "a hankie," in a moment that resembles a sickening magic act. By then, the rhythmic pressure we experience comes in part from nursery rhymes, those most potent linguistic forms. "I'm to market" begins the second stanza, an echo of "This little pig went to market" and of "To market / to market / to buy a fat pig / home again / home again / jiggedy jig" — echoing the pig's rhythmic jogging.

Finally, our elegant pig, our defiant pig, our pig capable of withering disdain refuses to engage in useless panic before he's butchered. *No. Not this pig.*

Dignity takes many forms, as does revolt. Levine's pig won't put on a show of wild flailing terror for anyone — which amounts to an aesthetic of sorts for the poet himself in his unswerving commitment to a non-flamboyant poetry that doesn't reduce its subjects but that questions subjection itself.

"Animals Are Passing from Our Lives" is followed in *Not This Pig* by "Baby Villon." In the latter poem, Levine stages an imaginary meeting between his speaker and the legendary brawler and thieving poet, the irrepressible François Villon. "Baby Villon" ends:

> No bigger than a girl, he holds my shoulders,
> Kisses my lips, his eyes still open,
> My imaginary brother, my cousin,
> Myself made otherwise by all his pain.

Making "otherwise" has defined much of Levine's career. Repeatedly, he chooses to imagine what inhabiting another body and another fate feels like. He must have learned at an early age what misery felt like and, although his circumstances changed, he didn't forget.

Years ago, in Flint, it was dark in the auditorium. I never saw the heckler's face. In the end, always on the side of the rebels, Levine let the heckler keep his dignity. Just think of what Levine might have said, given his arsenal. At any rate, the heckler didn't heckle again — not for the rest of that night.

THEY FEED THEY LION

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow.
Out of the gray hills
Of industrial barns, out of rain, out of bus ride,
West Virginia to Kiss My Ass, out of buried aunties,
Mothers hardening like pounded stumps, out of stumps,
Out of the bones' need to sharpen and the muscles' to stretch,
They Lion grow.
Earth is eating trees, fence posts,
Gutted cars, earth is calling in her little ones,
"Come home, Come home!" From pig balls,
From the ferocity of pig driven to holiness,
From the furred ear and the full jowl come
The repose of the hung belly, from the purpose
They Lion grow.
From the sweet glues of the trotters
Come the sweet kinks of the fist, from the full flower
Of the hams the thorax of caves,
From "Bow Down" come "Rise Up,"
Come they Lion from the reeds of shovels,
The grained arm that pulls the hands,
They Lion grow.
From my five arms and all my hands,
From all my white sins forgiven, they feed,
From my car passing under the stars,
They Lion, from my children inherit,
From the oak turned to a wall, they Lion,
From they sack and they belly opened
And all that was hidden burning on the oil-stained earth
They feed they Lion and he comes.

Edward Hirsch

LIONIZING FURY

Anger becomes art, at least in Philip Levine's case, and "They Feed They Lion" is a magisterial celebration of rage, a raging celebration. The poem is so rhetorically charged, so rhythmically driven, that it is, in a stylistic sense, a verbal machine unlike any other in Levine's work. But in another thematic sense, it is the culmination of Levine's early work, which begins in silence and failure (the desperate silence of "Silent in America," the failure of poets who don't write in "My Poets"). Levine's first books — from *On the Edge* (1963) to *They Feed They Lion* (1972) — obsessively return to the subject of voicelessness. As his work developed, he increasingly insisted on the defiant transformation of blankness into language, refusing to be quieted. The theme of the necessity of violently breaking silence peaks in a poem that celebrates the racial rebellion — the social insurrection — of the Detroit riots of 1967. The oppressed speak through wildly destructive action.

Levine has said that he wrote "They Feed They Lion" when he returned to Detroit just after the riots to see what had happened to his hometown. There's a telling reference to his driving around the city, which is the actual backdrop of the poem — a white man passing through black neighborhoods ("From all my white sins forgiven, they feed, / From my car passing under the stars"). Here is his story of how he came up with the title, a startling linguistic formula waiting to be remembered and deployed:

> I was working alongside a guy in Detroit — a black guy named Eugene — when I was probably about twenty-four. He was a somewhat older guy, and we were sorting universal joints, which are part of the drive-shaft of a car. The guy who owned the place had bought used ones, and we were supposed to sort the ones that could be rebuilt and made into usable replacement parts from the ones that were too badly damaged. So we spread them out on the concrete floor, and we were looking at them carefully, because we were the guys who'd then do the job of rebuilding them. We had two sacks that we were putting them in — burlap sacks — and at one point Eugene held up a sack, and on it were the words "Detroit Municipal Zoo." And he laughed and said, "They feed they lion they meal in they sacks."

This memory also jumpstarts the action and the poet takes the joke — using the detritus of junked autos as food for the wild animals of Detroit — and transforms it into the metaphor that drives the poem:

> Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
> Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
> Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
> Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
> They Lion grow.

Levine ingeniously marshals the genius of the black vernacular — has any other white poet used it so appropriately? — to summon up the Great Migration, the movement of millions of African Americans from the rural South to the industrializing North. A city such as Detroit was completely transformed between, say, 1900 and 1940, when the population of Wayne County, Michigan, grew from around three-hundred and fifty thousand to more than two million. By 1967, blacks represented more than forty percent of Detroit's overall population. Here is Levine's dramatic condensation, which mixes the journey North with the growing of a rough beast, a mythical Lion, slouching not towards Bethlehem, as in Yeats' "The Second Coming," but towards a gritty Midwestern city, which would suffer its own apocalypse. The poem rides the vernacular and yet the long lines — and the rhetorical repetition of the phrase "Out of" — move the language beyond speech into the realm of prophecy:

> Out of the gray hills
> Of industrial barns, out of rain, out of bus ride,
> West Virginia to Kiss My Ass, out of buried aunties,

Mothers hardening like pounded stumps, out of stumps,
Out of the bones' need to sharpen and the muscles' to stretch,
They Lion grow.

Levine recognizes the centrality of the pig to black culture, especially southern black culture, and he uses this most despised of animals to create the movement toward a furious sacrifice, a near-sacred reckoning. The riots began when the police raided an after-hours bar or "blind pig." Formally, the lengthening stanzas enact the feeling that something violent is ominously building, a Lion (one recognizes it as the most majestic of African animals) is growing. Paul Zweig once noted that this Lion "is a mockery of St. Mark's biblical lion" because "when it comes, man and earth will be devoured by one hunger." The words "Out of" are now replaced by phrases beginning with the word "From." Something is growing that cannot be stopped.

Earth is eating trees, fence posts,
Gutted cars, earth is calling in her little ones,
"Come home, come home!" From pig balls,
From the ferocity of pig driven to holiness,
From the furred ear and the full jowl come
The repose of the hung belly, from the purpose
They Lion grow.
From the sweet glues of the trotters
Come the sweet kinks of the fist, from the full flower
Of the hams the thorax of caves,
From "Bow Down" come "Rise Up,"
Come they Lion from the reeds of shovels,
The grained arm that pulls the hands,
They Lion grow.

Levine fuses a host of influences into a daring new whole in "They Feed They Lion," which moves with a sense of relentless pressure. The splendid twists and turns of colloquial black speech marry the incantatory rhythms of the biblical prophets, the anaphora of Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno" and Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," the wildly inventive mixed diction of John Berryman and Dylan Thomas (the inversion "From my five arms and all my hands" comes directly from Thomas' playbook). The poem inventively uses the word "Lion" as both noun (as in "the Lion") and verb (as in "to Lion"). The word "They" becomes both subject (as in "They Feed") and possessive pronoun (as in "They" or their "Lion"). This gives the poem a sinuous syntactical energy and ambiguity. Altogether it has a sweeping musical and rhetorical authority, a burning sense of "the acids of rage, the candor of tar," a psychological understanding of what motivates people to move from "Bow Down" to "Rise Up."

There are a host of religious echoes and allusions cryptically employed as this thirty-three line poem builds to its final apocalyptic reckoning and conclusion. The symbolic number resonates. The sacrifice has been laid out. The rebellion has come, the meek have inherited the earth, such as it is in the industrial Midwest, and a terrible reckoning has come to America.

From my five arms and all my hands,
From all my white sins forgiven, they feed,
From my car passing under the stars,
They Lion, from my children inherit,
From the oak turned to a wall, they Lion,
From they sack and they belly opened
And all that was hidden burning on the oil-stained earth
They feed they Lion and he comes.

LET ME BEGIN AGAIN

Let me begin again as a speck
of dust caught in the night winds
sweeping out to sea. Let me begin
this time knowing the world is
salt water and dark clouds, the world
is grinding and sighing all night, and dawn
comes slowly and changes nothing. Let
me go back to land after a lifetime
of going nowhere. This time lodged
in the feathers of some scavenging gull
white above the black ship that docks
and broods upon the oily waters of
your harbor. This leaking freighter
has brought a hold full of hayforks
from Spain, great jeroboams of dark
Algerian wine and quill pens that can't
write English. The sailors have stumbled
off toward the bars or the bright houses.
The captain closes his log and falls asleep.
1/10'28. Tonight I shall enter my life
after being at sea for ages, quietly,
in a hospital named for an automobile.
The one child of millions of children
who has flown alone by the stars
above the black wastes of moonless waters
that stretched forever, who has turned
golden in the full sun of a new day.
A tiny wise child who this time will love
his life because it is like no other.

Kathy Fagan

NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT

Thirty years ago, when I was a student of Philip Levine's at Fresno State, he'd often say to us that we had more interesting things in our pockets than in our poems. And he was right. That lint, loose tobacco, and couple of cents were infinitely more evocative than anything in our poems, and more useful. A similarly effective pedagogical method of Levine's was to shake our poems above his desk — a lab table, with sink: poetry workshops at Fresno State were held in the agriculture building — and listen for the "real stuff," the good stuff, for *any* stuff to fall out of them. These were the best lessons in the value of concrete language and the importance of specificity, image, and detail to poetry that I've ever learned, and I use them with my own students and, secretly but without fail, on my own poems to this day.

When I shake out a Philip Levine poem I find, as all readers do, working men and women and the ruined landscapes they inhabit in an accessible free verse lyrical narrative Levine has become justly famous for. I find the gutsy, plainspoken, unmistakably Philip Levine song that's been critically acclaimed, savagely dismissed, and roundly awarded and rewarded. But I also find the visionary and ecstatic, the sometimes exotic and surreal, the inconsolable and restlessly spiritual cast across variously arranged lines of impeccably worked and highly musical sentences. It's this combination of gorgeousness and grit, I think, this heady lyricism with its calloused hands, that's made Levine the shaping influence he is on the poetry of our time.

Levine's poem "Let Me Begin Again," from the 1979 collection *7 Years from Somewhere*, serves as an example of the kind of poem I found especially instructive as a young poet. It was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1978. I was a junior at Fresno State; Phil was exactly the age I am now. I didn't subscribe to *The New Yorker* and didn't personally know anybody at the time who did, but I worked at Fresno State's library, in Reference, one area over from Periodicals, and kept an eye out for incoming literary journals in the obsessive way only an aspiring poet can. I remember encountering the poem for the first time there in that large, oppressively

uninspiring block of room. Soon to turn twenty, I was already more than ready to begin again, and the poem's opening invocation could have been uttered by my heart: "Let me begin again as a speck / of dust caught in the night winds / sweeping out to sea."

In summer, when temperatures in the San Joaquin Valley climbed well over the century mark, Fresnans who could afford to, and many of those who couldn't, made pilgrimages to the Pacific, just to breathe something other than dust and pesticides. The sight of the ocean and the shock of cold and sea spray were a reprieve. More liberating was to find Levine's insistent words: only mono- or double-syllable words from lines one to ten; and, throughout, hypnotic combinations of anapests, dactyls, and spondees. The poem's first sentence is both simple and alliteratively pleasing; the second sentence builds from the first a more complex syntax, a more complex music. Levine's lines range from eight to thirteen syllables in this poem, and the sentences containing them are greatly varied in length and structure. Nearly half are not, in fact, full sentences, but fragments meant to expand and modify previous complete sentences: "This time lodged" (line 9) is a long fragment covering the space of four lines. Another long fragment — "The one child of millions of children" — serves as the poem's penultimate, transformative moment. And the quirky non-sentence of the date — of the captain's log entry? of the child's birth? of Levine's birth, it turns out — 1/10'28, opens perhaps one of the most rhythmically innovative free verse lines of the late 20th century, replete with thirteen syllables, three caesuras, and scansion that to my ear sounds like / / / x / x / x x / x x /.

"Let Me Begin Again" is a poem steeped in darkness, a night flight. Even the "hold full of hayforks / from Spain" and "jeroboams of dark / Algerian wine and quill pens that can't / write English" are darknesses holding a dark that holds the dark. "The captain closes his log and falls asleep." Writing is referenced here, as are rebirth and travel. There's a Homeric intensity in the details, atmosphere, and rhythms, and surely something epic and oracular — following, in typical Levine fashion, the wise-guy humor of "Tonight I shall enter my life / after being at sea for

ages, quietly, / in a hospital named for an automobile" — in the chosen one flying alone in the dark until he turns golden, loving "his life because it is like no other."

7 Years from Somewhere, Levine's sixth full-length collection, is full of poems of rebirth, or rather, its possibility and impossibility, a conflict Levine works out over a lifetime of writing. But in this book his perspective is decidedly middle-aged. *Home* is a word that recurs throughout; memories of childhood and elegies for the dead are abundant; and Levine's tone, while defiant as ever, is softened here by a fatherly tenderness, most notably in poems such as "Ricky," "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations," "Your Life," "Snow," and, arguably the book's masterpiece, "You Can Have It."

The cover of the book features a photograph of the grave of one of the left-wing anarchists of the Spanish Civil War whom Levine frequently references in his poems. In "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations," for example, Levine loosely quotes Buenaventura Durruti from a 1936 interview, in which he says, "we carry a new world, here, in our hearts." "Let Me Begin Again" possesses the spirit of Durruti's words. Levine's insignificant speck of dust traverses the world and enters into a life that promises to be new, to be heartfelt, unique, wise, and brightly lit. A romantic vision? Yes. Sentimental? Hardly. For the true life of this child, of most children, Levine implies, is something else indeed. Nevertheless, without the hopefulness of Durruti's belief, re-stated by Levine in so many of his poems, the faithful spirit cannot even begin to dream of moving forward.

While I didn't know it then, other poets besides Levine had written about work, about class, about opportunities missed and young lives lost. But in those days it was true for the majority of Levine's Fresno State students that Poetry lived on the East Coast, if not in England, and we lived on the not-quite-West Coast. Crappy luck. Except Levine lived among us, too, and he had lived there in Detroit, he had lived there in Barcelona, and he continued to live there in his poems. I'm not making too much of this when I claim that what the work did was stir our spirits out from under the crush and devastation of the ordinary, ugly, and

poor, and because of that, poetry became possible for us. Because of Levine's subject matter, his prosody, his humor, his anger, his allegiances to and alliances with the political and social underclass, his students not only found a way to speak, but were reassured of their right to. The courage and confidence we'd been in danger of losing — to observe the world, criticize it, mourn it, praise it, analyze it, create and recreate it — were restored. And it became clear that if we chose to, and worked very hard, we might just make poets of ourselves, as Philip Levine had. Literature that had once seemed largely inaccessible or irrelevant to me and my peers seemed suddenly necessary — ours for the taking and, most astonishingly, ours to make.

Alas, there is no poet or teacher good enough to teach someone how to survive a life of poetry, how to stay surprise-able, how to love your life enough and be able to sustain yourself on work and sometimes on the work alone. But poems like "Let Me Begin Again" prepared me to learn those things, and they continue to instruct me in ways poetic and practical every day. As a teacher myself now at a state institution, teaching poetry to many students who are first in their families to attend college, I see again and again the connection most of them make with Levine poems, the instantaneous recognition, a where-have-you-been-all-my-life wonder, though they know nothing of his politics or background, and more often than not refer to him as Philip LeVine (long i). When this love match happens, as it does at least once or twice a year, I'm reminded of a story I heard many years ago from someone who taught *Great Expectations* to a group of urban, academically and financially disadvantaged high school kids. He'd been amazed to see the students engage so completely with a long book by a white English author of the 19th century, and when he asked the students, point-blank, what it was they liked about the novel, one of them answered, "Anyone who's been despised can understand this book."

Just as Dickens offers Pip a do-over, so Levine offers his reader a do-over in "Let Me Begin Again." No guarantees, just opportunity. We make of it what we can. Turns out, that task is our hardest work yet.

THE FOX

I think I must have lived
once before, not as a man or woman
but as a small quick fox pursued
through fields of grass and grain
by ladies and gentlemen on horseback.
This would explain my nose
and the small tufts of hair
that rise from the base of my spine.
It would explain why I am
so seldom invited out to dinner
and when I am I am never
invited back. It would explain
my loathing for those on horseback
in Central Park and how I can
so easily curse them and challenge
the men to fight and why no matter
how big they are or how young
they refuse to dismount,
for at such times, rock in hand,
I must seem demented.
My anger is sudden and total,
for I am a man to whom anger
usually comes slowly, spreading
like a fever along my shoulders
and back and turning my stomach
to a stone, but this fox anger
is lyrical and complete, as I stand
in the pathway shouting and refusing
to budge, feeling the dignity
of a small creature menaced
by the many and larger. Yes,
I must have been that unseen fox
whose breath sears the thick bushes
and whose eyes burn like opals
in the darkness, who humps