

FOUR POEMS



Philip Levine

DETROIT, TOMORROW

Newspaper says the boy killed by someone,
don't say who. I know the mother, waking,
gets up as usual, washes her face
in cold water, and starts the coffee pot.

She stands by the window up there on floor
sixteen wondering why the street's so calm
with no cars going or coming, and then
she looks at the wall clock and sees the time.

Now she's too awake to go back to bed,
she's too awake not to remember him,
her one son, or to forget exactly
how long yesterday was, each moment dragged

into the next by the force of her will
until she thought this simply cannot be.
She sits at the scarred, white kitchen table,
the two black windows staring back at her,

wondering how she'll go back to work today.
The windows don't see anything: they're black,
eyeless, they give back only what's given;
sometimes, like now, even less than what's given,

yet she stares into their two black faces
moving her head from side to side, like this,
just like I'm doing now. Try it awhile,
go ahead, it's not going to kill you.

Now say something, it doesn't matter what
you say because all the words are useless:
"I'm sorry for your loss." "This too will pass."
"He was who he was." She won't hear you out

because she can only hear the torn words
she uses to pray to die. This afternoon
you and I will see her just before four
alight nimbly from the bus, her lunch box

of one sandwich, a thermos of coffee,
a naval orange secured under her arm,
and we'll look away. Under your breath make
her one promise and keep it forever:

in the little store-front church down the block,
the one with the front windows newspapered,
you won't come on Saturday or Sunday
to kneel down and pray for life eternal.

UNFINISHED

He lived with a pack of stray dogs up in the hills
beyond Tibidabo. I went first to see the house
shaped like a flower, a late unfinished work
of the great Gaudí, and found the wild man, bearded,
dressed for winter on a hot June afternoon
in the dense pine forests: jackets over jackets,
two pairs of gray woolen pants full of moth holes.
I'd surprised him coming as I did alone on foot
the last half mile and found him brewing something
in a coffee can over a little smoking fire
in the cellar. With a long wooden staff he roused
the dogs sleeping around him. I stood speechless
while he too barked, in Catalan or nothing,
shaking the staff above his head and would not answer
me in Spanish. And so I left. And returned
some days later to find three uniformed boys
pelting him with pebbles. I scared them off.
Little fascists, he told me. From the summer camp
up the hills. "Their idea of fun." This day we spoke,
I standing above his cellar hole and he below,
cradling a moth-eaten brown mongrel who also
had been hit and gazing now and then up at me
to answer my questions. With his long beard gone white
and his wild voice, I had thought him ancient and mad,

some relic of the war hiding from the police
since '39. He offered to share his soup.
In one gloved hand he held up the steaming can,
in the other a wooden spoon. When I refused
he raised his dark brows and laughed. "This is home",
he said, "I live and worship here. I welcome you."
When I returned with a sort of care package
of cheese, salami, and bars, I met him
coming up the trail to the place. "Unfinished",
he told me, Gaudí had died alone unknown,
like him, and the work had stopped. This time I saw
he was only my age, for in spite of one bad leg
he made his way up the hill ease, naming
the wild flowers along the way and calling the dogs
who romped ahead. He laid a plank out for us
the cross the moat. "Careful", he said, "careful",
as we crossed the rotting floor to where a stairway
descended to the cellar. Side by side we sat
on metal crates, and he pointed up to where
a line of white clouds rode the few rafters
that were the roof. As a boy he'd loved houses
like this, unfinished, open, for they left
nothing out. He could play in them all day
and come back alone at night when the stars
drew near and whispered their names. "I was happy",
he said. "I would sleep and waken in the stars."
He accepted my package with a courtly little bow
of his narrow shoulders, and we shared a slab
of white Gallegan cheese he cut in long strips
with a pocket knife. "I will skip the soup today",
he said and laughed again. I never returned.
I never saw him again though I lived nearby
for the rest of that year and came back often.
On the way down the hill a strong wind picked up
moaning through the pines and raising the harsh dust
of the trail into my nose and mouth until
I almost choked. I doubt that was why. I don't
know why. I know that when I asked him what
happened when it rained he laughed a last time.
"Why then everything is clean. The house is clean."

A BOY'S ANSWER

Port Sanilac, Michigan, August, '39

The train passes every afternoon
without stopping. Some of the kids play
foolish games: they lie down on the tracks
to feel the trembling of its coming
in their bodies and then leap aside
just in time. As a kid I did it
too, especially on long summer days
when there was nothing else to do
but fight with someone for no reason.
My aunt would scold me when I came
home with swollen lips or tears on my cheeks.
Secretly I think she was glad I'd
turned out to be a "vagabond",
as she called me, for the family
had turned its back on her more than once.
I was her favorite, small and hard,
at only eleven willing to steal,
cheat, lie, but never to her, never,
for we were like brother and sister,
so close we understood each other
even without words. Even without words
I knew she would be gone some day,
knew I would awaken before dawn
in late August to an empty house,
to the roar of silence the kids heard
as they stood beside the rails in the winds
of departure. I'd watched the men's eyes
move across her face, her throat, her chest
on the way to the weekly matinee
or in the markets. I could feel her hand
tighten on mine, I could almost hear
her heart quicken. A boy lies down once
on the tracks, he feels his whole being
quicken with a power only the earth
can contain, and he rises trembling
as though he were even more than a man.
He does it again and still again
to become something without a name.

A WAR STORY

During June of '43 a Mr Bidderman
came to stay with us
"on business."

Fiftyish, old to me, he always rose
last and came down slowly
to the table

in a blue paisley bathrobe and carrying
his leather-bound journal,
unlined writing pad,

envelopes, and gold-capped Parker fountain pen
to set up his office
for the day.

The family was working, my mother at the office,
Eddie and I at Mavis—
Nu-Icy bottling

where the long days of loading box-cars
left me so worn out I could ignore
my other life.

Left alone, Mr Bidderman had to get breakfast
for himself, something he
wasn't used to.

A quick study, he learned to scramble eggs
though he sighed a great deal,
missing, I thought,

his wife back in London with his daughters, Daph
and Nina, both "in service."
When we asked him

about "The Blitz" and the other terrors of war
he shook his head and remarked
they'd gotten through it.

Every afternoon he wrote what he called
a family letter and walked
the four long blocks

to the closest sub-station to mail it,
his hands clasped behind his back,
more stately now

that his flaccid, hairless calves no longer showed.
He favored dark suits in a shade
he called "nigger",

charcoal ties to match, soft leather half-boots,
and a narrow brimmed fedora,
a deep rust with one

yellow and one red feather springing from the band.
Almost every day something came back
in a fragile, blue

envelope stamped "Par Avion" even though
I'd been taught the English
wrote in English.

On weekends I'd see him poised at the table
long after noon writing
page after page

in blue-black ink in a tiny, cramped script as his
egg-stained plate filled with ashes
and cigarette butts,

the breakfast nook growing dense, cloudy, blue.
Summer passed into autumn, my brother
and I returned

to junior high, rising early to catch the bus.
The leaves fell, red and orange,
flaming the gutters.

After dinner, the kitchen cleaned, I'd go out
to walk the dark deserted streets
feeling winter in the wind,

while the stars-clustered above and frozen
in their tracks—gave nothing
away nor guided me

to whatever it was I was searching for, what
as yet I had no name for
nor ever would,

though now and then I felt something drawing close,
falling on my shoulders and arms,
a cape of light—

unseen even by me—or a core of darkness
within the darkness. I'd hurl
my voice out

into the thick autumnal night expecting a voice
in answer to my own. Exhausted
I turned for home

to find only the porch light still faintly burning,
the house asleep and at peace
except for me.

Mr Bidderman shared our Thanksgiving turkey.
He bowed to his work,
carving the desiccated breast

and heaped each plate with yams, mashed potatoes,
jellied cranberry sauce,
stuffing, curdled gravy.

Moist eyes cast upward, he raised his glass
of Mogan David and Whispered,
“Next year in London.”

In mid-January mother again went south
leaving Mr Bidderman in our care.
Reduced to baked beans,

fried hot dogs, Franco-American Spaghetti,
BLTs, canned soup,
he made do.

Snow piled against the storm doors. All down the block
cars failed, and in galoshes
we stamped off

to the bus stop only to return hours later
cursing the dark and find him
writing seriously,

until one Friday in early March the house
was empty, the dishes washed,
his bed made.

On his pillow a note, one thin blue sheet
precisely inscribed to us,
his two young friends

who stood by him "through this terrible hour"
when others would not though
they'd been asked.

"Not ever shall I forget your generosity",
he wrote above his name,
"Bidderman."