



The Simple Truth

Philip Levine , Harry Ford (Editor)

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Written in a voice that moves between elegy and prayer, *The Simple Truth* contains thirty-three poems whose aim is to weave a complex tapestry of myth, history (both public and private), family, memory, and invention in a search for truths so basic and universal they often escape us all.

The Simple Truth Details

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Theelmo26 says

I honestly enjoyed this collection. Levine's writing is very simple. You can feel the calmness in each line, idk if you get what i mean! These poems are very quiet 'n lovely

Jen says

I'm not sure what prompted me to finally get a volume of Philip Levine's poetry. Perhaps I'd heard of his passing earlier this year. I've been curious about his poetry ever since first reading "You Can Have It" (available here <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/...>) in an anthology many years ago. I've enjoyed other poems of his I've run across over the years. I chose The Simple Truth because it won him a Pulitzer so I thought it might represent some of his best work. However, I doubt that's the case. My response to it was lukewarm, and while it may just be I'm not into Levine and much as I'd hoped, I'm going to give him another chance before letting him go.

The Simple Truth is a book of places and people, most especially family. In the midst of the book, I found myself wondering if I had ever read the work of a male poet who was so deeply connected to family. Family suffuses his work. There is also grief, not only of those who have died but for the circumstances of those who live. Much of it is deeply sympathetic work. He sees into lives and renders them. However, he is most often looking back through his childhood eyes at people back then. There's a feeling of him being arrested in that time. Nostalgia, yes, but also a hint of stagnation or stuckness. He would have been in his 60s when he wrote most of these poems, so that boyhood was a long way off. Still, his most intense, memorable poems come from his childhood and young adulthood.

Levine's poems often present a solid column of text on the page. They often draw a portrait or vignette. They're very rooted in a time and place. One of the poems from this volume that's on the Poetry Foundation's site is Tristan (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetr...>), which is an example of a portrait.

Here's an excerpt from another poem I enjoyed, "Getting There," in which a father and son (presumably Levine and his son) find themselves stranded due to car failure and are taken in by an old farmer.

[...] Handed up, my boy sat
grimly on the tractor seat holding fast
to the steering wheel as though the world
in its turing might buch him off,
his face fixed and serious. The old man
returend from teh barn leading a goat
on a rope, a white goat named ahab
as though he'd gotten the story wrong.
Teddy stared out over the acres of wheat,
stretching all the way to those mountains
we had yet to cross, stared, and would not
begin to smile or come down to earth,
while the great day went on. [...]

And here's an example of a more lyrical poem, spurred by an encounter with a homeless man. This is from

midway in "The Poem of Chalk."

[...] He knew feldspar,
he knew calcium, oyster shells, he
knew what creatures had given
their spines to become the dust time
pressed into these perfect cones,
he knew the sadness of classrooms
in December when the light falls
early and the words on the blackboard
abandon their grammar and sense
and then even their shapes so that
each letter points in every direction
at once and means nothing at all.

My plan is to try Levine's *What Work Is*, which won the National Book Award, before coming to a verdict about whether I'm a fan or not. There was nothing wrong with the poetry in this volume, it just didn't move me.

Daniel Rosler says

Bought this on a whim because I saw Cameron McGill post about it. Needed something to read, and he spoke so fondly of it. Can't deny I was curious, though it appears superficial, that it won the '95 Pulitzer Prize.

At first, I wasn't sure if I was enjoying it. But the more I got accustomed to Levine's style, the more I fell in love. Absolutely feeling inspired thanks to this collection.

Robin Friedman says

Phillip Levine's *Simple Truth*

Philip Levine writes in the title poem of this collection:

"Some things/you know all your life. They are so simple and true/they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme,/they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker,/the glass of water, the absence of light gathering/ in the shadows of picture frames, they must be/ naked and alone, they must stand for themselves."

These lines capture many of the themes of this Pulitzer-prize winning book. The poems in this collection are deceptively simple, "naked and alone". They generally involve an incident or person, recollected by the poet from his past. The incident is recounted in bare unrhymed lines, without hyperbole or judgment. We are encouraged to see the incident, as we see the still life reproduced on the cover of the volume and to let it "stand for itself". The poems are elegiac in tone and the effect of the memory is generally one of deep sadness.

Many of the poems have a deliberately pictorial quality, as reflected in their titles, that remind one of a photo or of a painting in a museum. In many cases, the reader is tempted to conceive in the mind's eye a painting to accompany the poem. This is true, particularly, as the book progresses into its final section with its

descriptions of the poet's mother ("My Mother with Purse, the Summer they Murdered the Spanish Poet"), father ("My Father with Cigarette Twelve Years before the Nazis could Break his Heart"), and others ("Edward Lieberman, Entrepreneur, four years after the Burnings on Okinawa") One of the poems of the collection is title simply "Photography". Ironically, this poem is less pictorial than many others. It relates a sad incident from the poet's childhood involving his Aunt, and others, and focuses on the ravages of time and memory.

The poems also focus on the role imagination plays in constituting our reality. The first poem of the collection "On the Meeting of Garcia Lorca and Hart Crane" relates a meeting between these two romantic 20th Century poets and alludes to Crane's apparent suicide in jumping from a ship bound from Vera Cruz to New York. Crane's tragic but romantic death is juxtaposed with the vision coming "to an ordinary man staring/ at a filthy river" as he contemplates not only Crane and Lorca but his son falling to his death "from/the roof of a building he works on." With a voice of irony, the poet asks us to "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- _"

These poems have a multi-layered simplicity realized through an understated voice of sadness and illuminated by imagination.

Katherine Emery says

"It is onions or potatoes, a pinch
of simple salt, the wealth of melting butter, it is obvious,
it stays in the back of your throat like a truth
you never uttered because the time was always wrong,
it stays there for the rest of your life, unspoken,
made of that dirt we call earth, the metal we call salt,
in a form we have no words for, and you live on it."

Marlee says

A lovely little volume. Some of the images and rhythms are truly astounding. I think my favorite is "No Buyers," especially the line "perhaps it's light in tiny diamonds meant to consecrate the day or dirty it." I also really liked "Magpiety."

David Czuba says

'Photography' is one of the best poems I've read in a long time.

Harper Curtis says

Brilliant, engaging, human and personal. Levine is one of the greats.

Ask for Nothing

Instead walk alone in the evening
heading out of town toward the fields
asleep under a darkening sky;
the dust risen from your steps transforms
itself into a golden rain fallen
earthward as a gift from no known god.
The plane trees along the canal bank
the few valley poplars, hold their breath
as you cross the wooden bridge that leads
nowhere you haven't been, for this walk
repeats itself once or more a day.
That is why in the distance you see
beyond the first ridge of low hills
where nothing ever grows, men and women
astride mules, on horseback, some even
on foot, all the lost family you
never prayed to see, praying to see you,
chanting and singing to bring the moon
down into the last of the sunlight.
Behind you the windows of the town
blink on and off, the houses close down;
ahead the voices fade like music
over deep water, and then are gone;
even the sudden, tumbling finches
have fled into smoke, and the one road
whitened in moonlight leads everywhere.

Dave says

The one poet I would take to a desert island. Deceptively simple and straight-forward. The voice of America from the jobs and small houses of second generation immigrants establishing a place in industrial might of our mid-Century. A voice of grey smoke and dirty rivers and people getting up in the morning in the dark.

Noha says

3.5

I honestly enjoyed this collection. Levine's writing is very simple. You can feel the calmness in each line, idk if you get what i mean! These poems are very quiet 'n lovely.

“Some things
you know all your life. They are so simple and true
they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme,

they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker—”

I'm definitely looking forward to read more of his work.

Rachel Gordon says

This is the first book of poetry I ever fell in love with. A friend on my year abroad in college had brought it with her to Ecuador, and I borrowed it repeatedly, and ordered a copy the minute I got home (it was also probably the first book I ever ordered through a local bookstore and paid full MSRP for). It's still magic to me. “Ask for nothing” remains probably my favorite poem in the world.

Sam says

This guy came to me by way of Joseph Millar recommendation. It's obvious that Levine has been a strong influence on Millar (and others, I would assume): long lines, narrative poems, descriptions of work, occasional references to the Spanish Civil War... Among the many, many collections that Levine published, I grabbed this one because it won the Pulitzer. It's almost immediately apparent that this is a book of recollection, a book of remembering, rather than an “urgent” book—Levine was almost 70 when it was published. So he is reflecting on his younger years, how one of his memories happened at the same time as a large world event (Lorca's murder, Hitler's ascension), how one event ended up being significant in the larger scope of his life. I like a lot of these poems, but it sometimes feels like I'm listening to my grandpa: I know it's important, but I also kind of want to know what he thinks about what's going on these days. Maybe this feeling could have been avoided by reading the collection more slowly, and I definitely do feel like I will revisit some of these poems in the future.

Something that did rub me the wrong way is that these are very self-focused poems. Someone like Joe Millar, for example, writes poetry in the same vein but also brings in other characters. It's apparent that family is very important, it's apparent that people have had a big impact on him. With Levine, in this book at least, he is at the front and center and end. His wife is only a passing reference, as are children. Figures from his family enter the picture but hardly appear more than once. If this is autobiography, it's very obvious who was number one in Levine's book. Like I said though, maybe this is only the case in the one poetry collection.

Mike says

Ask for Nothing

Instead walk alone in the evening
heading out of town toward the fields
asleep under a darkening sky;
the dust risen from your steps transforms
itself into a golden rain fallen
earthward as a gift from no known god.

The plane trees along the canal bank
the few valley poplars, hold their breath
as you cross the wooden bridge that leads
nowhere you haven't been, for this walk
repeats itself once or more a day.
That is why in the distance you see
beyond the first ridge of low hills
where nothing ever grows, men and women
astride mules, on horseback, some even
on foot, all the lost family you
never prayed to see, praying to see you,
chanting and singing to bring the moon
down into the last of the sunlight.
Behind you the windows of the town
blink on and off, the houses close down;
ahead the voices fade like music
over deep water, and then are gone;
even the sudden, tumbling finches
have fled into smoke, and the one road
whitened in moonlight leads everywhere.

Ann says

This 1995 Pulitzer Prize-winning volume by the great American poet Philip Levine deserves its heady accolades. Harold Bloom wrote at the time of its release: "I wonder if any American poet since Walt Whitman himself has written elegies this consistently magnificent. The controlled pathos of every poem in the volume is immense, and gives me a new sense of Levine." Plain and exalted, the experience of reading this collection is as rich as reading a great novel. Some highlights:

from "The Poem of Chalk:

On the way to lower Broadway
this morning I faced a tall man
speaking to a piece of chalk
held in his right hand. The left
was open, and it kept the beat,
for his speech had a rhythm,
was a chant or dance, perhaps
even a poem in French, for he
was from Senegal and spoke French...

He had the bearing
of a king of lower Broadway, someone
out of the mind of Shakespeare or
Garcia Lorca, someone for whom loss
has sweetened into charity.

from "The Simple Truth"

I bought a dollar and half's worth of small red potatoes,
took them home, boiled them in their jackets
and ate them for dinner with a little butter and salt...

Some things
you know all your life. They are so simple and true
they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme,
they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker,
the glass of water...

from "The Old Testament"

My twin brother swears that at age thirteen
I'd take on anyone who called me kike
no matter how old or big he was.
I only wish I'd been that tiny kid
who fought back through his tears, swearing
he would not go quietly.

He insists, he names the drugstore where I poured
a milkshake over the head of an Episcopalian
with quick fists as tight as croquet balls.

Sorrow mixed with humor: the simple truth. All hail, Levine!

Wardah Beg says

By the time I realised it isn't for me, I was already halfway through the book, so I took it as an argument that it isn't really as boring and dry as I think.

Continued reading it, and I found myself falling in love with the style. These poems are in the form of lyrical elegies that feel easy on the tongue; and Mr Levine expertly describes things with such detailed imagery that the scenarios he paints become as vivid as reality. He successfully brings, through narrative, the simple truth that we all overlook.

"Somethings you know all your life. They are so simple and true they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme, they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker, the glass of water, the absence of light gathering in the shadows of picture frames, they must be naked and alone, they must stand for themselves"
~The Simple Truth

Over time, you become acquainted with the style that is simple yet so meaningful and gorgeously knit. Philip Levine has always been known as a voice of the working-class, which he himself was a part of, in his time in Detroit. This collection of poetry called 'The Simple Truth' is dedicated specifically to the subject of labour. He won a Pulitzer for this one. (1995)
