



**A WALK WITH TOM  
JEFFERSON**

**PHILIP LEVINE**

**A K N O P F  B O O K**

**BOOKS BY PHILIP LEVINE**

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SELECTED POEMS 1984

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NOT THIS PIG 1968

ON THE EDGE 1963

A WALK WITH  
TOM JEFFERSON

POEMS BY

PHILIP LEVINE



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*FOR T.J. ANDERSON  
WHO GETS THE MUSIC*

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**I**

## BUYING AND SELLING

I the way across the Bay Bridge I sang  
the cool winds buffeting my Ford,  
r I was on my way to a life of buying  
touched drive shafts, universal joints,  
rfect bearings so steeped in Cosmoline  
ey could endure a century and still retain  
eir purity of functional design, they  
uld outlast everything until like us  
eir usefulness became legend and they  
ere transformed into sculpture. At Benicia  
the Oakland Naval Yard or Alameda  
eft the brilliant Western sun behind  
enter the wilderness of warehouses  
th one sullen enlisted man as guide.  
ere under the blinking artificial light  
vas allowed to unwrap a single sample,  
hack or saw my way with delicacy  
rough layer after layer of cardboard,  
etallic paper, cloth webbing, wax  
hard as wood until the dulled steel  
as revealed beneath. I read, if I could,  
e maker's name, letters, numbers,  
f which translated into functions  
d values known only to the old moguls  
the great international junk companies  
Chicago, Philadelphia, Brooklyn,  
nose young emissary I was. I, who at  
renty had wept publicly in the Dexter-  
ivison branch of the public library  
er the death of Keats in the Colvin  
ography and had prayed like him  
be among the immortals, now lived

thirty by a code of figures so arcane  
ey passed from one side of the brain  
the other only in darkness. I, who  
twenty-six had abandoned several careers  
salesmanship— copper kitchenware,  
ller brushes, American encyclopedias—  
om door to unanswered door in the down  
d out neighborhoods of Detroit, turning  
my sample cases like a general handing  
er his side arms and swagger stick, I  
ow relayed the new gospels across mountains  
d the Great Plains states to my waiting masters.  
ie news came back: Bid! And we did  
d did so in secret. The bids were  
arded, so trucks were dispatched,  
ohawks, Tarn O'Shanter's, Iroquois.  
new Wellingtons, I stood to one side  
hile the fork lifts did their work,  
tering only at the final moment to pay  
th loaders and drivers their pittances  
t to steal, to buy at last what could  
t be bought. The day was closing down.  
en in California the afternoon skies  
ust turn from blue to a darker blue  
d finally take the color of coal, and stars  
the same or similar ones—hidden so long  
ove the Chicago River or the IRT  
Brooklyn, emerge stubbornly not in ones  
it in pairs, for there is safety in numbers.  
lent, alone, I would stand in the truck's  
ay wake feeling something had passed,  
as over, complete. The great metal doors  
the loading dock crashed down, and in  
e sudden aftermath I inhaled a sadness  
onger than my Lucky Strike, stronger  
an the sadness of these hills and valleys

th their secret ponds and streams unknown  
en to children, or the sadness of children  
emselves, who having been abandoned believe  
eir parents will return before dark.

## MAKING LIGHT OF IT

call out a secret name, the name  
the angel who guards my sleep,  
and light grows in the east, a new light  
no other, as soft as the petals  
the blown rose of late summer.  
Yes, it is late summer in the West.  
Even the grasses climbing the Sierras  
reach for the next outcropping of rock  
with tough, burned fingers. The thistle  
sheds its royal robes and quivers  
awake in the hot winds off the sun.  
The cloudless sky fills my room, the room  
I was born in and where my father sleeps  
in long dark sleep guarding the name  
I shared with me. I can follow the day  
through the black rags and corners it will  
linger on because someone always  
goes ahead burning the little candle  
with his breath, making light of it all.

## WINTER WORDS

*For Tu Fu*

ly after day in a high room between  
o rivers, I sit alone and welcome  
orning across the junked roof tops  
Harlem. Fifteen stories up, neither  
a cloud of soot nor a roof of stone,  
m in my element, urging the past  
t of its pockets of silence.

The friends

my first poems long banished  
to silence and no time, leaving nothing  
tell me who they are.

A nail of sunlight

the George Washington Bridge. The first cars  
ossing to the island douse their lights  
d keep coming. They'll be joining us,  
ese early risers from New Jersey.

eets of rain falling in the descending  
ening dark. Red lights of the chicken shack  
Manhattan and 125th. The bridge lights,  
een and white. A siren comes on yelping,  
d another. The rain doubles and smears  
e night across the wide world.

Years ago

the mudflats of the Llobregat  
e walked in the late mist. Wild bird cry  
om a shivering stand of bamboo.  
ie high voices of young women and girls  
they gathered the long day's remnants.  
the half-dark a child found three feathers

a kingfisher and took them as a gift  
nature and gave me one.

I hold it

ow on my open palm for a moment.  
rises slowly and settles on no wind  
it my breathing, the colors softened  
the usual shades of rain, night, sleep.

om where I stand the Hudson barely moves  
over an hour and nothing has passed  
or down. I can see a few tugs smoking  
the Jersey side, and when the sky lifts  
ay daylight falls on barges, warehouses,  
il yards, black mountains of tenements,  
e smoking stacks of factories.

Once I slept

side a wide river whose currents pulled  
th night and day. I thought it began  
the source of all sweet waters and took them  
rough seven small seas to a great ocean  
sting of salt and our lives.

When the sun breaks

rough the full clouds of boyhood, we are there  
aiting on the dock in our summer suits  
r bright lake boats with the names of islands.

rthday tulips, twelve hothouse flowers  
royal purple on long stilt-like legs  
at sag beside the frosted window.  
per white narcissus uncoiled from bulbs  
at had only polished stones to push  
eir green shoots through. You can grow up here.

st I can see to Throg's Neck, a pale bridge  
at leads to Connecticut, and above  
e bridge a skyway of air the birds

uld take if they wanted another world.  
own below in an empty parking lot  
ind my favorite, the sparrow  
no picks about the gravel, and he invites  
e in with a twist of his head, a knock  
his beak. You can grow down here.

ow flakes racing across my window,  
en wind-checked, reversed, wheeling  
ck east to west.

At Puigcerda

l the way back from the holy valley  
Andorra, clouds of black starlings  
ing at dusk from bare winter trees  
d the hard ashen fields of December,  
wisting cloud above the road. They knew  
ere they were going.

Still more snow until

owly the dark rooftops below erase  
eir sullen faces. One lost seagull  
ainst a featureless gray sky,  
nite wings extended, hung  
otionless above the changing winds.

bove the bridge lights a rope of stars.  
one, late at night, my breath fogging  
e window, I can almost believe  
e sleeping world is the reflection  
heaven.

Detroit, 1951,

iday night, after swing shift we drove  
e narrow, unmarked country roads searching  
r Lake Erie's Canadian shore.  
ter, wrapped in rough blankets, barefoot  
l a private shoal of ground stones

e watched the stars vanish as the light  
the world rose slowly from the great  
ay inland sea. Wet, shivering, raised  
r beer cans to the long seasons  
come. We would never die.

Scattered

distant shores, long ago gone back  
the oily earth of Ohio,  
e carved Kentucky hills, the smokeless air.

## THE RAT OF FAITH

blue jay poses on a stake  
want to support an apple tree  
newly planted. A strong wind  
in this clear cold morning  
wind ruffles his tail feathers.  
When he turns his attention  
toward me, I face his eyes  
without blinking. A week ago  
my wife called me to come see  
the same bird chase a rat  
to the thick leaves  
of an orange tree. We came as  
close as we could and watched  
the rat dig his way into an orange,  
paws working meticulously.  
When he feasted, face deep  
to the meal, and afterwards  
washed himself in juice, paws  
rubbing soberly. Surprised  
at the whiteness of the belly,  
now open it was and vulnerable,  
I suggested I fetch my .22.  
She said, "Do you want to kill him?"  
I didn't. There are oranges  
enough for him, the jays, and us,  
across the fence in the yard  
next door oranges rotting  
on the ground. There is power  
in the name *rat*, a horror  
that may be private. When I  
was a boy and heir to tales  
of savagery, of sleeping men

ed kids eaten half away before  
ey could wake, I came to know  
at horror. I was afraid  
at left alive the animal  
ould invade my sleep, grown  
imense now and powerful  
th the need to eat flesh.  
vas wrong. Night after night  
vake from dreams of a city  
e no other, the bright city  
beauty I thought I'd lost  
en I lost my faith that one day  
e would come into our lives.  
e wind gusts and calms  
aking this miniature budding  
ple tree that in three months  
s taken to the hard clay  
our front yard. In one hop  
e jay turns his back on me,  
ps as though about to drink  
e air itself, and flies.

## THE WHOLE SOUL

it long as a noodle  
fat as an egg? Is it  
umpy like a potato or  
aged like an oak or an  
ion and like the onion  
e same as you go toward  
e core? That would be  
itable, for is it not  
e human core and the rest  
eant either to keep it  
arm or cold depending  
the season or just who  
u're talking to, the rest  
means of getting it from  
e place to another, for it  
ust go on two legs down  
e stairs and out the front  
or, it must greet the sun  
th a sigh of pleasure as  
stands on the front porch  
nsidering the day's agenda.  
hether to go straight ahead  
ssing through the ranch houses  
the rich, living rooms  
nelled with a veneer of fake  
ilippine mahogany and bedrooms  
th ermined floors and tangled  
as of silk sheets, through  
obe walls and secret gardens  
sweet corn and marijuana  
til it crosses several sets  
tracks, four freeways, and

mountain range and faces  
great ocean each drop of  
rich is known and like  
other, each with its own  
particular tang, one suitable  
bring forth the flavor  
a noodle, still another  
men dried on an open palm,  
sparkling and tiny, just right  
for a bite of ripe tomato  
to incite a heavy tongue  
that dragged across a brow  
would utter the awful words,  
"Oh, my love!" and mean them.  
The more one considers  
the more puzzling become  
these shapes. I stare out  
at the Pacific and wonder—  
noodle, onion, lump, double  
cooked egg on two legs,  
just as perfect as salt—  
and my own shape a compound  
of so many lengths, lumps,  
and flat palms. And while I'm  
there at the shore I bow to  
take a few handfuls of water  
which run between my fingers,  
these poor noodles good for  
holding nothing for long, and  
speak in a tongue hungering  
for salt and water without salt,  
to give a shape to the air going  
out and the air coming in,  
and the sea winds scatter it  
like so many burning crystals  
tattling on the evening ocean.

## 28

28 I was still faithless.  
I had crossed the country in a green Ford,  
sleeping one night almost 14 hours in a motel  
above Salt Lake City. I discovered  
I had a fever all that day and thus the animals  
that dotted the road, the small black spots  
that formed and unformed crows, the flying pieces  
of slate that threatened to break through  
the windshield ... were whatever they were.  
I took two aspirins and an allergy pill—that was all  
I had—and got into bed although it was light out.  
I was 28 years ago. Since then I have died  
twice, once in slow motion against  
the steel blue driver's side of a Plymouth  
station wagon. One moment before impact I said  
to myself, seriously, "This is going to hurt."  
The kids in the Plymouth's back seat gaped  
wildly, shouted, leaped, and the father held firm  
the steering wheel as I slipped through the space  
that was theirs, untouched, skidding first  
on the black field of asphalt and broken glass  
that is California 168, Tollhouse Road, and over  
the edge of the mountain, the motorcycle  
tumbling off on its own through nettles and grass  
to come to a broken rest as all bodies must.  
Often when I shave before a late dinner, especially  
on summer evenings, I notice the white lines  
on my right shoulder like the smeared imprint  
of a leaf on silk or the delicate tracings  
of a whale's fins that the smaller sea animals carve  
to test his virtue, and I reenter the wide blue eyes  
of that family of five that passed on their way