

“THE STRANGE ROOT THAT IS HIS HEART:” PHILIP LEVINE’S *UNSELECTED POEMS*

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Perhaps the only redeemable by-products of exile are lament and love. Some days the former’s worth is lost on me. Whenever I try to pinpoint the cause-and-effect of any exile, I think of Ovid sitting on huge, unpolished chunks of marble on the south side of Greece, bored with flinging olive pits into the Mediterranean between lines of poetry he’d send back to his wife in Rome. Then, there is Wordsworth’s pining for heaven and youth and its entire alleged splendor. Or else I try to imagine how enormous Garcia Lorca’s solitude must have felt as he waited for nothing to arrive on that dirt road in 1936 moments before they shot him, forgetting to stamp his last letter as he handed it over to the carrier history has left anonymous. I can’t help but think of exile, too, in airports. Departures and arrivals of strangers happening every three minutes, it’s difficult to decipher whose exile is beginning, and whose exile is ending. It seems to me that there are at least two things that take us all into the clouds of exile at one point or another: the idea of home and the necessity of work.

For Philip Levine, these two forces have rendered a body of work that realizes and accepts empathy for, among others, the blue collars of Detroit and the Generation of 1898 Spanish poets. For those familiar with Levine’s poetry, this is no grand revelation. It is also a gross understatement. Perhaps, it is Levine’s care and concern for the poems themselves, however, as if they were his children, that I find most remarkable about him as a poet. It only seems consistent with Levine’s large and generous heart—that strange root we all might be so willing to acquire—that he should offer us *Unselected Poems*, 1997 by Greenhouse Review Press. Levine’s

generosity, as well as a fatherly instinct, perhaps, is evident as early as the book's introduction. Undercurrents of both remorse and relief are obvious as he recalls a brief, but definitive, moment with his son, who asks him: "Pop, how many poems do you think you have out there working for you?" So while this may have triggered Levine's project in trying to save those poems exiled from his *Selected Poems* and *New Selected Poems*, readers of Levine might have difficulty determining why they were left out the first time. Such exclusion gives testimony to Levine's preeminent place in American poetry.

Unselected Poems does more than offer a speedier cross-section of Levine's poetry than, say, *Selected Poems* or *New Selected Poems*. Surely, one luxury of packaging over thirty years worth of his poetry in a hundred-page collection is seeing how Levine's voice and vision have not flinched while his thematic concerns have evolved. Detroit is the landscape for much of the book. Or rather, as Larry Levis—his one-time student—put it, it is more of a *psychic* landscape, for it is the past tense from which Levine is exiled. Levine enters the lives of those who were once around him because, as they enter the past tense, they have also, without his asking, entered his life.

But *Unselected Poems* articulates more than a voice for the voiceless. It goes beyond his trademark direct and brutal honesty about the "ugliness" of the world he sees. No doubt, these are his thematic and visionary corner stones; they permeate the collection. What speaks loudest in *Unselected Poems* is the idea of exile—the Wordsworthian exile in his Immortality Ode—and the desire to stop time.

Wordsworth longed for youth because it is youth that continually hunches on the stoop of heaven. And it's the present tense—with its short-term memory loss, always checking its watch—wondering when it is time to go home. Levine, in *Unselected Poems*, wrestles with time. We all do; Levine just wins more than most because of his ability to dismantle the tenses. I find it remarkable that Levine has consistently crafted poems that shed their labels of past, present, and future. Or rather, he melds the tenses into one lucid and transient moment, a moment he might call “a life.” In doing so, he achieves in *Unselected Poems* one of the primary aspirations of art: stopping time, that man-made, and man-unmaking, abstraction.

“Where We Live Now” is an early longer poem, broken into snapshot-like sections, a strategy that allows Levine to exist among the fictive family and to step away from them. These sections of self-removal contain some of the most imaginative and expressive moments in the poem. Here is section 3:

Money's the same, he says.
 He brings it home in white slabs
 that smell like soap.
 Throws them down
 on the table as though
 he didn't care.
 The children hear
 and come in from play glowing

like honey and so hungry.

Section Two is almost entirely made up of elegies for other lives similar to those in Section One. For example, the rhythms in “For the Fallen,” an elegy for Durruti and the Ascaso brothers, push the poem too swiftly along to let it wallow in self-pity, an impulse easily fallen into in an elegy. What Levine has also employed is the you-as-I strategy:

Look at your hands. They
are not scarred by
the cigarettes of the police,
and the palms are soft,
the fingers long but
slightly kinked, the hands
once of a boy stained
with the ink of dull reports
the day they laid
Buenventura beside Francisco
Ascaso and thousands gathered
weeping or somber.

The speaker is talking to himself and, in this case, is chastising himself for the easier life he leads. Beneath the angered rhythms and poignant descriptions, Levine is, in a

reductive sense, feeling sorry for himself. The self-pity is mitigated, however, through the quick lines and sorrow he feels ultimately, not for himself, but for those who remain, specifically Joaquin Ascaso, who goes:

...home to prepare,
knowing he was all
of them, as you know
they are all that gathers
in your hands, all
that is left, words
spoken to no one...

In other words, Levine's dead congregate in him because he remembers them and loves them. The source of lament is not their absence, but rather his inability to be heard by them.

An elegy whose rhythm is more elegant than forceful is "Any Night." It is an elegy for youth in which the speaker is a witness to history—sagacious, yet powerless to the passage of time. The lines, in comparison to "For the Fallen," are widened, more meditative, hence metaphysical:

... I will have to learn
to sing in the voices of pure joy
and pure pain. I will have to forget

my name, my childhood, the years
 under the cold dominion of the clock
 so that this voice, torn and cracked,
 can reach the low hills that shielded
 the orange trees once.

The longer lines sustain their agility with anaphora. In turn, the anaphora builds in concept; the speaker longs to lose his identity, his voice. While “For the Fallen” and “Any Night” have sharp contrasts in tone, Levine’s emotive thrust for them is the same: confronting the sovereignty of time so as to defeat “the cold dominion of the clock.”

Nowhere else in *Unselected Poems* does time’s dominion surface more frigidly than in “Get Up,” the first poem of Section Three. Again, Levine’s preoccupation with time engages itself in an exact, mundane, and immediate occasion: shaving. Wisely, and not coincidentally, he includes the tender emblem of youth, his son, who like his father, does not want to get out of bed to face the “grinding and honking” of New York City. Interspersed among the metaphysics and urban decay is humor: “The taxpayers of hell are voting/ today on the value of garbage,.../ all the trains are on time for the fun of it.” Levine’s voice is still driven in its rhythms, but it seems that at middle age he has learned to not take it all *too* seriously. Humor is evidence of the will to survive, even at middle age, even in February, even in New York City. What young poet could make these lines resonate with any sincerity:

... If I
were serious I would say I
take my stand on the edge
of the future tense and offer
my life, but in fact I stand
before a smudged bathroom mirror
toothbrush in hand and smile
at the puffed face smiling
back out of habit.

The speaker is “on” to his narcissistic bent, and because of this, he is able to laugh at and indulge himself in it. The poem’s rueful conclusion brings the son back, and, in doing so pays homage to youth:

...Get up,
honey, I say, it could be worse,
it could be a lot worse,
it could be happening to you.

“Ascension,” from Section Four, is, arguably, Levine at the height of his powers. The poem is working on all cylinders. His voice is so human that the catalog of ethereal and supernatural elements sings as naturally as any he has given us about urban Detroit.

Now I see the stars
are ready for me
and the light falls upon
my shoulders evenly,
so little light that even
the night birds can't see
me robed in black flame.
I am alone, rising
through clouds and the lights
of distant cities until
the earth turns its darker
side away, and I am ready
to meet my guardians
or speak again the first words
born in time...

From the poem's onset, Levine has placed us on a higher plain with his vision of what the stars want to do with him. And it accumulates its power, due in part to rhythm, as it continues. The loose usage of iambs allows each line to briefly amble as the catalog pushes on to include his wife, son, and finally the feel of starched uniform shirts—the emblems of hard labor. Thus the lines that follow,

...Then I
forget exhaustion, I forget
love, forget the need to
be a man, the need to
to speak the truth, to close
my eyes and talk to someone
distant but surely listening.

Again, Levine uses anaphora to not just list the conditions of being human, but to rhythmically, and therefore emotionally, propel the poem to its epiphany:

Somewhere I am a god.
Somewhere I am a holy
object. Somewhere I am.

To exist, and to exist in a state of grace, is to dismantle the tenses, to annul every exile. “Ascension,” and the whole of Levine’s vision, alleviates the condition of misery we’re handed at birth. Like all successful art, Levine works to solve the riddle of Time. And how generous of him to give us one more collection that spans his exemplary career.