

Philip Levine

1-10-28 to 2-14-15

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Philip Levine, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet whose intimate portraits of blue-collar life were grounded in personal experience and political conscience, died Saturday. Levine was 87.

Levine, the country's poet laureate in 2011-2012, died at his home in Fresno, California, of pancreatic and liver cancer, his wife said Sunday.

A native of Detroit and son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Levine was profoundly shaped by his working-class childhood and years spent in jobs ranging from driving a truck to assembling parts at a Chevrolet plant.

Although he taught in several colleges, he had little in common with the academic poets of his time. He was not abstract or insular or digressive. He consciously modeled himself after Walt Whitman as a poet of everyday experience and cosmic wonder, writing tactile, conversational poems about his childhood, living in Spain, marriage and parenting and poetry itself.

"We've lost a great presence in American poetry," said Edward Hirsch, a friend of Levine and president of the Guggenheim Foundation.

Levine captured the ways "ordinary people are extraordinary," while writing poems that are accessible to readers, Hirsch said Sunday. "They move between the most ordinary diction and high romantic heights."

Levine loved the earth and sky as much as any poet of nature, but he came to be identified with poems about work and workers, like "Buying and Selling" or "Saturday Sweeping," in which employees toil under a leaky roof and "blue hesitant light." In "What Work Is," the title piece of his celebrated 1991 collection, he offers a grim sketch of standing on line in the rain, hoping for a job:

This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.

He was among the country's most decorated poets, winning the Pulitzer in 1995 for "The Simple Truth" and National Book Awards for the 1979 collection "Ashes" and for "What Work Is." His other honors included the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize for lifetime achievement and a National Book Critics Circle Award. In naming Levine poet laureate in 2011, Librarian of Congress James H. Billington cited his "plainspoken lyricism" and his gift for expressing "the hard work we do to make sense of our lives."

Levine was born in Detroit in 1928, the son of an auto-parts salesman who died when Philip was 5. Although his mother found work as an office manager, Levine remembered his childhood as "a succession of moves from first a house to a series of ever-shrinking apartments."

The future poet was a scrawny kid — 5 feet 2 inches, 125 pounds — who imagined himself in peril on the streets of Detroit, "the most anti-Semitic city west of Munich." He would imagine walking home from school with a rifle, shooting at Cadillacs, Lincolns and other cars owned by rich people.

By the end 1942, when he was just 14, he had worked at a soap factory and, like a first kiss, discovered poetry. He would walk the streets late at night, speaking to the "moon and stars about the emotional revolution that was raging" inside him. In college, Wayne State University, he read the verse of Stephen Crane and T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams and "immersed" himself in the history of poetry.

"I believed even then that if I could transform my experience into poetry I would give it the value and dignity it did not begin to possess on its own," he later observed.

Exhausting factory hours made Levine so determined to write that he showed up in 1953 at the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop even though a planned fellowship had fallen through. He was told he could sign up for one course, but he enrolled in three. One of his teachers, the poet John Berryman, became a mentor.

"He seemed to feel I had something genuine," Levine told *The Paris Review* in 1988, "but that I wasn't doing enough with it, wasn't demanding enough from my work. He kept directing me to poetry that would raise my standards."

Another poet, Yvor Winters, allowed Levine to stay with him at his home in California and picked him for a Stanford Writing Fellowship in 1958. Around the same time, Levine joined the faculty of California State in Fresno and remained there for more than 30 years. He also taught at Princeton University, Columbia University and several other colleges.

His debut collection, "On the Edge," came out in 1963. Other books included "Not This Pig," "They Feed the Lion" and "1933." For a time in the 1960s, he lived in Spain, still under the rule of Francisco Franco. Levine developed a deep bond to the country and to its people, especially those who had fought Franco during the country's civil war of the 1930s. He wrote poems about Spain and helped translate works by the Spanish poets Gloria Fuertes and James Sables. Back in the U.S., Levine was an opponent of the Vietnam War and defender of civil rights and the rights of working people. In "Coming Home, Detroit 1968," he took in "the charred faces" and "eyes boarded up" of his hometown, which had been devastated by riots the year before. In 1968, he also was among the writers who vowed not to pay taxes until the Vietnam War ended.

"I can remember feeling full of the power of a just cause and believing that power would not fail me. It failed me or I failed it. We didn't really change the way Americans lived, unless you take hairstyles seriously," he once said.

"I'm not a man of action; it finally comes down to that. I'm not so profoundly moral that I can often overcome my fears of prison or torture or exile or poverty. I'm a contemplative person who goes in the corner and writes." Levine was married twice, to Patty Kanterman and to Frances J. Artley, his wife since 1954.

Philip Levine revealed the poetry in the lives working people, and especially the people and places of his youth — in the auto factories and working class homes of urban Detroit. In a career that spanned six decades, he was a United States Poet Laureate, and winner of two National Book Awards and a Pulitzer Prize. He died Saturday of pancreatic and liver cancer in Fresno, Calif. He was 87.

"Don't scorn your life just because it's not dramatic, or it's impoverished, or it looks dull, or it's workaday. Don't scorn it. It is where poetry is taking place if you've got the sensitivity to see it, if your eyes are open."

In 2004, at the age of 76, Levine said his biggest literary influence was the New Jersey poet, William Carlos Williams. "He seemed able in his best poetry — to find poetry almost anywhere, anywhere," Levine said. "And that was the big lesson I got from him: Don't scorn your life just because it's not dramatic, or it's impoverished, or it looks dull, or it's workaday. Don't scorn it. It is where poetry is taking place if you've got the sensitivity to see it, if your eyes are open."

Levine found poetry on the production line and — in his poem "[The Two](#)" — in the after-hours meeting of two lovers working the graveyard shift:

... He's been up
late, she thinks, he's tired of the job, perhaps tired
of their morning meetings, but when he bows
from the waist and holds the door open
for her to enter the diner, and the thick
odor of bacon frying and new potatoes
greet them both, and taking heart she enters
to peer through the thick cloud of tobacco smoke
to see if "their booth" is available. ...

"If you're not paying attention, it can sound like just awfully good prose," says critic Terrence Rafferty. But "as you hear it in your head, you know it's not prose. It has music. It has meter. It has subtle surprises in the diction and the thought of the poem."

All of those things — and believability — are what made any poem a good poem for Philip Levine.

"The first thing that hits me is the language," Levine said. "Is it fresh? Is it resourceful? The second thing is the imagery. I mean, you know, does the work have the authority of lived experience? And if it has those two things, and then musically it's interesting, as a piece of rhythmic language, I'm hooked. I'm going. And I'm off to the races."

Levine tried to inspire that kind of enthusiasm in his students. Among other places, he taught at California State University in Fresno for more than 30 years.

Rafferty says what separated Levine from the rest of the pack were the details the poet observed assembling radiators and brakes for Cadillacs, Chevys and Packards.

"His descriptions of working class Detroit is something that hadn't been there before," Rafferty says. "It's not as if no one had ever written poems about workers before, clearly. But it's a piece of the world that had not been in poetry before."

He wrote "[Sweet Will](#)" in March 1985:

... so it was Saturday in the year of '48
in the very heart of the city of man
where your Cadillac cars get manufactured.
In truth all those people are dead,
they have gone up to heaven singing
"Time on My Hands" or "Begin the Beguine,"
and the Cadillacs have all gone back
to earth, and nothing that we made
that night is worth more than me. ...

Levine started writing poems when he was 13. His parents were Russian Jewish immigrants, and his father died when he was five. Levine said he lived in a noisy house on the outskirts of Detroit where a wartime freeze on construction left large tracts of open land.

"I used to go into this undeveloped land," he recalled. "I had a particular tree I loved — a copper beech. And I used to climb into the tree, and start making up these poems — to the stars, to the rain, to the smell of the Earth. And it was strange. ... It was like I had never enjoyed anything in my life so much. It was utterly thrilling. I began to live for it."

Levine's first book of poetry was published in 1963. He won his first National Book Award in 1980, another a decade later, followed by a Pulitzer in 1995. He never stopped writing.

Here's how he ends his poem "The Two":

... "And the lovers?" you ask. I wrote nothing about lovers.
Take a look. Clouds, trucks, traffic lights, a diner, work,
a wooden shoe, East Moline, poached eggs, the perfume
of frying bacon, the chaos of language, the spices
of spent breath after eight hours of night work.
Can you hear all I feared and never dared to write?
Why the two are more real than either you or me,
why I never returned to keep them in my life,
how little I now mean to myself or anyone else,
what any of this could mean, where you found
the patience to endure these truths and confessions?

Levine's poetry suggests that in the course of an ordinary American's life, such as his, there can be a kind of grace and beauty.

Philip Levine, a former United States poet laureate whose work was vibrantly, angrily and often painfully alive with the sound, smell and sinew of heavy manual labor, died on Saturday morning at his home in Fresno, Calif. He was 87. The cause was pancreatic cancer, said Christopher Buckley, a longtime friend and fellow poet.

Mr. Levine served as poet laureate from 2011 to 2012. He received a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for his collection "The Simple Truth" and won two National Book Awards — in 1980 for "Ashes: Poems New & Old" and 1991 for "What Work Is." His poetry appeared often in The New Yorker, Harper's Magazine and other major publications.

At his death, he was an emeritus professor of English at California State University, Fresno.

In spare, realistic free verse, Mr. Levine explored the subjects that had long animated his work: his gritty Detroit childhood; the soul-numbing factory jobs he held as a youth; Spain, where he lived for some time as an adult; and the Spanish anarchists of the 1930s, a personal passion since he was a boy.

Mr. Levine in 1995, after learning that "The Simple Truth" had won the Pulitzer.

These were themes with which few American poets were concerning themselves when his first collection, "On the Edge," appeared in 1961. "A large, ironic Whitman of the industrial heartland" is how the poet Edward Hirsch, writing in The New York Times Book Review, [described Mr. Levine](#) in 1984.

In his poem "Coming Home, Detroit, 1968," for instance, Mr. Levine wrote:

A winter Tuesday, the city pouring fire,
Ford Rouge sulfurs the sun, Cadillac, Lincoln,
Chevy gray. The fat stacks
of breweries hold their tongues. Rags,
papers, hands, the stems of birches
dirtied with words.

His work was not to every critic's taste. Because of its strong narrative thrust, frequent autobiographical bent and tendency to shun conventional poetic devices, some reviewers dismissed it as merely prose with line breaks. Others found monotony in his revisiting the same themes again and again.

But many admired his deceptively simple style, which could belie the carefully worked out cadences beneath its colloquial surface. They also praised Mr. Levine's unabashed use of poetry as a vehicle for radical social criticism, noting

his frank explorations of the nature of masculinity and his clear-eyed depictions of working-class lives and the immigrant Jewish experience.

Reviewing his collection "1933" in *The New York Review of Books* in 1975, Robert Mazzocco wrote, "He can create the sense of a milieu, the sound, feel, geography of a place, a time, a people, the flavor of what's been happening among us and what continues to happen, which seem to me almost totally lacking in most other serious poetry today."

Philip Levine was born in Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit on Jan. 10, 1928. It was a metrically auspicious birth date — the spondee "ONE, TEN" resounding like slaps on a baby's bottom, the anapest "twenty-EIGHT" hurtling toward the future. Mr. Levine would use the date in a poem, "Let Me Begin Again":

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.

Mr. Levine's parents were Russian Jewish immigrants without much money. As he later said, his childhood was shaped by several signal events, among them the Depression, the death of his father when Philip was 5 and an infatuation with poetry that began when he was in his teens.

Another event was the Spanish Civil War, in which many of young Mr. Levine's ardent anti-fascist neighbors went off to fight and from which not all of them came back. The experience would inform many of his poems, including one of his most famous, "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations." Collected in "7 Years From Somewhere" (1979), the poem is an elegy for the anarchist leader Francisco Ascaso, who was killed in the fighting in Barcelona in 1936. It reads in part:

Here in the great cemetery
behind the fortress of Barcelona
I have come once more to see
the graves of my fallen. ...
For two there are floral
displays, but Ascaso faces
eternity with only a stone.
Maybe as it should be. He was
a stone, a stone and a blade,
the first grinding and sharpening
the other.

Starting at 14, Mr. Levine held a series of industrial jobs: working in a soap factory, hefting cases of soft drinks at a bottling plant, manning a punch press at Chevrolet Gear and Axle and operating a jackhammer at Detroit Transmission. A great many poems sprang from this experience, including "Growth," from "What Work Is," which opens:
In the soap factory where I worked

Philip Levine was a wonderfully fine poet because he could span poems about family life, poems about working class in the industrial economy...

CompostKing 4 days ago

On waters near New York City, in an old crane, on an old barge, I hammered wood pilings into the bottom below the water, or dove in dark...

A poet friend gave me this quotation today, something W. S. Merwin said: "Galway taught us all that a poet's work is to look the events of..."

when I was fourteen, I spoke to
no one and only one man spoke
to me and then to command me
to wheel the little cars of damp chips
into the ovens. While the chips dried
I made more racks, nailing together
wood lath and ordinary screening
you'd use to keep flies out, racks
and more racks each long afternoon,
for this was a growing business
in a year of growth.

Mr. Levine was the first member of his family to earn a college degree. "When I turned college age I had to make a decision about what I was going to do about my life," he told the novelist Mona Simpson [in a 1988 interview in The Paris Review](#). "My high school teachers encouraged me to go to college. I stood in line at Wayne State University to enroll, and when I got up to the head of the line, this woman said, 'Can I help you?' "I said, 'I'd like to go to college.' She said, 'Do you want a bachelor's?'"

"I said, 'I already have a place to live.' Because to me a bachelor's was a small apartment."

At Wayne University, as it was then known, Mr. Levine fell in love with modern poetry, receiving bachelor's and master's degrees in English there. In 1957 he earned a master of fine arts from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where his mentors included the distinguished poet John Berryman; Mr. Levine included a moving portrait of Mr. Berryman in his collection of autobiographical essays, "The Bread of Time" (1994).

Mr. Levine, who was also a regular guest instructor at New York University, had homes in Fresno and Brooklyn. He is survived by his wife, Frances J. Artley; three sons, Mark, John and Teddy; a twin brother, Edward; another brother, Eli; five grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

His other volumes of poetry include "Not This Pig" (1968), "They Feed They Lion" (1972), "A Walk With Tom Jefferson" (1988), "The Mercy" (1999) and "Breath" (2004). He also edited an anthology, "The Essential Keats" (1987).

Among his other honors are the 1977 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets for "The Names of the Lost"; the 1979 National Book Critics Circle Award for "Ashes" and "7 Years From Somewhere," both published that year; and the 1987 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize from the Poetry Foundation for his body of work.

In a 1977 radio conversation with Studs Terkel, reproduced in "Don't Ask" (1981), a collection of interviews with Mr. Levine, the poet spoke of the influence of his blue-collar background on his later career.

"It was at an early age, while I was working in factories and also trying to write," Mr. Levine said. "I said to myself, 'Nobody is writing the poetry of this world here; it doesn't exist!' And it didn't. You couldn't find it." He continued: "I took a vow that I was going to do it, and goddamn it, it didn't matter how long it was going to take. I was going to write the poetry of these people because they weren't going to do it. And it was very funny, when my fellow workers would say, you know, 'What do you do?' and I would say, 'I write poetry,' nobody laughed at me."

On What Work Is

Philip Levine's poetry evokes the vibrant durability and continuity of things. It is no accident that the seemingly unbreakable thistle, which survives California's harsh summers, is his 'flower.' At least he has celebrated it in such a way throughout his books. Possibly he has done so because its work is to survive, and it does. the way we must, impassively committed surviving, standing up though the harsh heat, the inevitable storms. Levine's poem, 'What Work Is, ' should be read in this context. To work is to survive, and the details of how difficult or debased work can be are evoked in the title poem and the poem 'Growth' (each the book What Work Is) . Levine was the man, he suffered, he was there. But the symbolic importance of work operates as an emblem of the soul as well, since not knowing how to love, Levine writes, is to not 'know what work is.' We may seem to be closer here to the meaning of work as it occurs in the tragedies, desolations, and betrayals of the remarkable book of poems *Hard Labor* by the Italian poet Cesare Pavese than to the Whitman of 'A Song of Occupations. But the paradox that Whitman extols, where 'Objects gross and the unseen soul are one' are filtered through a rich groove into Levine's book in the poem 'Soloing.' In the poem his mother tells him 'she dreamed/ of John Coltrane, 'a young Trane/ playing his music with such joy/ and contained energy and rage/ she could not hold back her tears/.' Levine sees the dream visitation as a Dream Vision, a gift of music from the great musician so lasting in the force of his passion that he is retained within, and resurfaces out of, the 'unseen' after death in the mother's dream. And here the poet, almost Dante-like, coming into the smogged-over sea-dead L.A. basin simultaneously presents the dignified but saddened alone-ness of the mother with the mother who is still a source of sustenance, whose work as a mother is not over. There is then a placental quality to the poem since the mother's dream itself was the substance that fed the poet-son's language. The remarkable quality, especially of Levine's later poems, is this capacity for lucidly evoking the subtleties of how the inner and outer worlds of experience inter-relate. He could also be saying that sometimes you have to go through hell, and that it is worth going through hell, to receive a gift from the mother—herself a symbol of what primarily sustains and devours all. But the possibly deeper comical or mystical intent is incidental. At the foundation of Levine's poetry is the durability that arises out of integrity: he is committed to finishing the 'job, ' knowing there are all the reasons in the world to hesitate, but that if he did quit, if he were to ever 'have turned back, ' he would have 'lost the music.' One of Levine's best books.