

Air in. Air out. Poetry between

Philip Levine writes on death in carefully measured breaths

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Philip Levine has always been a scrapper. When he read in San Antonio a few years ago, he dressed down an audience member who asked a stupid question; when he worked in factories in Detroit, he taught himself to speak in iambic pentameter to pass the time. Vitality has always marked his Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry -- and it marks his new collection, "Breath," as the 76-year-old poet wrestles with his mortality.

Facing death isn't easy; some writers resist it, some grow nostalgic. Levine's poems are characterized not by a desire for answers, but by a fierce resistance to prettying up hard truths and questioning what truths are. In the opening poem, he writes, "I didn't come for answers/to a place like this, I came to walk/on the earth, still cold, still silent." Walking on the Earth comes to mean examining the past -- traditionally rich territory for Levine -- and writing about naming, music, wind, people long dead and dust.

One of the things that Levine does so well is write in plain, accessible language; many of the words he uses are one syllable, landing with an iambic punch. The simplest words are often the biggest, and his are chosen carefully for the greatest impact. In the poem "Dust" he writes:

. . . Tonight my wife
holds a glass of black Catalan wine up
to the candlelight and drinks to my New Year
and I to hers, acts as good as any
to stall our time from whirling into dust.

In that last line, "stall" and "whirling" are paired through consonance and the fact that both are verbs. But those linkages set up a juxtaposition: between the calm of lingering and the speed of whirling. The line itself is perfect iambic pentameter, a regulation of meter and time that sets up another contrast: though Levine may want to linger, though it may feel as if time whirls, time itself is constant and immutable.

Moments of self-indulgence and pity enter a few of the poems -- for example, "we're all too old or too dead to work." They are, perhaps, a necessary part of thinking about coming death. But mostly the collection is a head-on look at what's coming and what is still unknown. The last poem, "Call It Music," ends with these lines:

Music, I'll call it music. It's what we need
as the sun staggers behind the low gray clouds
blowing relentlessly in from that nameless ocean,
the calm and endless one I've still to cross.

The collection is called "Breath." Breathing is the first thing a child must do and the last thing a man does before he dies. It is what gives a writer his speech, a man his life. It is

vital, even as one hears the unspoken rhyme with "death." This is not a book about accepting old age and the coming end, but it doesn't turn away, either. There is, perhaps, a small kind of peace in facing something directly: the blowing may be "relentless," and the ocean "nameless," but it is "calm" and "endless," and Levine's last act will be an active one: "to cross."

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