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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

I CAUGHT A GLIMPSE, THE EVENING TURNED ITS BACK UPON HER VOICE, THE THREE
CROWS

Philip Levine

I CAUGHT A GLIMPSE

It happens when I've been driving
for hours on two-lane roads winding
past orchards just after they've bloomed.

When I ask myself where I was when all
this burst like the bounty of heaven, no
answer comes back from the earth or heaven.

A hint of rain is in the air and the sky
broods above a sudden stand of oak that
rushes by. Between the trees coming

into the new green of their leaves light
breaks for a second and within the light a path
opens through the trees and the fields beyond.

Beyond, unseen, an ancient river runs
high in its banks bringing the Sierras' gift
back down to earth. The moment is so full

I have to close my eyes and slow the car.
Should I go back the long, abandoned roads
that lead me to this place and this moment

to find why I've become who I am
and why that could matter? Slowly now
I pass through a small town of scrubbed houses,

wide lawns, and empty streets. A rain has passed
leaving little pools reflecting the sky
that stares open-eyed at its own image.

If this were Sunday the bells would ring,
if this were sixty years ago I
would be a boy on foot no farther

than I am now with my eyes filled
with so much seeing. I caught a glimpse,
a road through the trees, a door

that opened a moment only to close.

Twelve miles from Stockton. I could go west
until I reached the sea or keep going

farther and farther into this valley

past the truck stops and the ruined towns
while the afternoon closes down around me.

THE EVENING TURNED ITS BACK UPON HER VOICE

Is she waiting for a knock on the door
or a letter from someone she has never met?
The rain and the night are coming down as one
as she knew they would. Forty years ago,

a gray hotel across from the terminal.
She sits in the wooden chair, my sister,
her hands crossed in her lap, her eyes cast down,
no longer listening for a voice, yours or mine,

carried on wet winds across the broken years.
Tomorrow it will be 1956
for the first time. The shadows do not know
this, nor does the bare bulb swaying above,

nor does the swollen river with its name
of orange blossoms and silt, nor does the moon
no one sings to. You and I, sitting side
by side, leafing through the great book of days

know it now. You trace a forefinger down
the crowded page and find her name, misspelled
but here, the three curious, foreign names,
her only life crowded into the slack letters

that say nothing of her hands, pale and strong,
the black nails broken by work, or of her voice,
of how it hung like smoke in that bare room,
of how it calls and calls to us without words.

THE THREE CROWS

At dawn my great aunt Tshipie would rise and go
to the east windows of the apartment,
face the weak October sun and curse God.
A deeply spiritual woman, she could roll
strudel dough so fine even the blind could see through it.
Overweight, 62, worn out
from mothering three daughters and one husband
– an upholsterer on nights at Dodge Main –
she no longer walked on water or raised
the recently dead. Instead she convened
at noon from her seventh story back porch
with heaven's emissaries, three black crows
perched in the top branches of the neighborhood's
one remaining oak. Stuffed with strudel,
safely inside the screen door, I heard
her speak out in Ukrainian Yiddish
addressing the three angels by their names.
They would flutter their greasy, savage wings
in warning and settle back. "Fuck with me,"
they seemed to say, "You fuck with Him on high."
The hardness of eyes, the sureness of claws,
the incessant caw-cawing of their voices,
the incandescence of feathered wings,
of gleaming beaks, all this she faced down.
Who brought the sharp wheeze to her grandson's chest?
Who left her youngest simple? Who put Jake,
her husband, crooked back and all, on nights?
For minutes on end the three crows listened
and gave nothing in return. I could say
to all those who live in God's green kingdom,
her grandson grew into a tall young man,
Jake made it to days, simple Annie,
her daughter, learned to sew by hand at last,
for in truth all this happened. Even Yenkel,
her dearest brother, given up for lost
thirty years before, escaped from prison
in the pine forest of Siberia
to make his way to Michigan. Can you hear
the axe buried in a foreign tree, the child
floating like ashes above the lost town,
can you hear the vanished world? I remember
the three crows, especially their silences.
I remember Tshipie's voice, high and sweet,

going out on her breath of milk and tea,
 asking to be heard. When the crows took off,
 I remember the high branches quivering
 before the world stilled. The three birds rose
 imperiously above the roof tops
 until they disappeared into a sky
 long ago gone gray above our lives,
 only to plummet surely back to earth.