

# Industrial-strength art

Poet Philip Levine brings his working-class style to town

**Philip Levine learned to write with calloused hands.** He finds inspiration in clang, sweat and smoke but mostly in those who, like himself, endured these conditions to fuel America's insatiable need for productivity.

With 17 books of poetry, a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for *The Simple Truth*, two National Book awards, a National Book Critics Circle award and the first American Book Award, Levine has done his share of work.

Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, Levine, 76, will read his critically acclaimed poems tonight at Stotler Lounge in Memorial Union.

Once a factory employee, Levine takes the reader on a journey from his working-class upbringing in Detroit, early in the "final industrial century," to his rise in academia, a clash of two very different lives he lived when working in an automotive factory and attending Wayne State University. Five years ago, Levine told Edward Hirsch of the *American Poet*, "I keep writing about the ordinary because for me it's the home of the extraordinary, the only home."

He says the bulk of what he will read comes from his new book, *Breath*. Some poems he's never read to an audience. "I'd like to hear how they sound," he says. There are others, particularly elegies, he won't ever read aloud. "Those are personal. I'm not sure how I'd react."

A few weeks ago Levine entertained requests while reading at Harvard. The audience not only supplied the requests but also some of his older poetry books.

"I was asked to read a lot of old poems that day, and I was really surprised by how imaginative and rich they were. When you reach the height of your powers, it's difficult to sustain. I have a yen for those old poems."

Levine says he was also delighted by the energy and youthfulness of his earlier poetry.

"It has to do with the extraordinary drive you had before discovery and that immense anger I had as a working-class guy that I needed to express," he says. "It came out wilder and a more energetic form than it does now."

Yet many critics have hailed *Breath* as Levine's greatest work. Showing slices of racial and ethnic hatred based on his own experiences of anti-Semitism and race riots in Detroit, his poems speak volumes about the human condition, highlight the hardship of the working class and delve into the way his parents, Russian immigrants, faced a new world. His unique perspective hasn't changed during his 60 years as a writer.

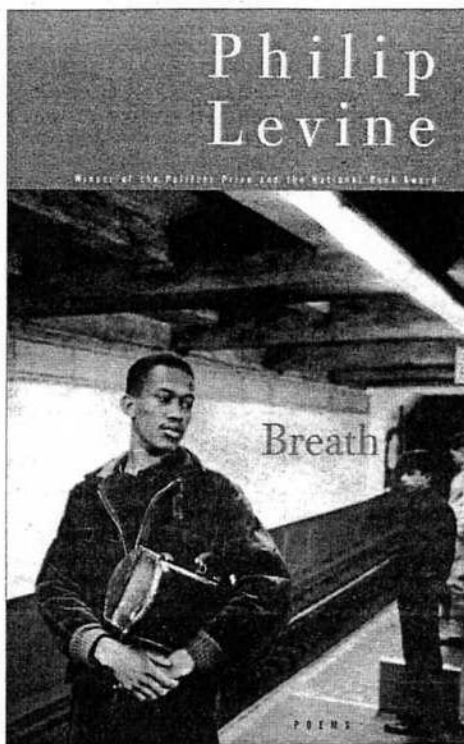
Introspective and prophetic, Levine's poetry offers insight into various worlds. As he reads his work, his searing voice still compels attention.

Levine places the listeners onto his assembly line. As the intensity builds, he offers tense pauses where the audience can reflect before it is swept up again in his bold, swirling voice.

He finally reaches his destination with dignified resignation. What feels like a stream of consciousness later reveals itself to have had a clear beginning and end.

When writing poetry, Levine says, "I generally don't know where I'm going, and I don't get there. Sometimes I get somewhere else.

"I've never had what people call writer's block," Levine says. "A lot of people say they had writer's block, but what they had was fun. You have to create a space in your life



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for writing. Famous writer Dashiell Hammett once told playwright Lillian Hellman: 'Maybe you should sit your ass on a chair, and put the chair in front of a desk.' I think he was on to something."

For all his accomplishments, Levine says that he still finds motivation stemming from what hasn't been written.

"There are powerful experiences that I've had that I've yet to find a means, an avenue, shall we say, to get them into poetry," he says. "There are people who I've known and loved and learned from who have yet to enter my poetry.

"If I don't do it, nobody is going to do it because nobody else who writes knew them."

Levine, now a professor at New York University, tells his students: "I hope you're serious about this. It's going to take your whole life. If you fool around with poetry, poetry will fool around with you."

— ERIKA KELSEY

## EVENT INFO

**What:** Philip Levine poetry reading

**Where:** Stotler Lounge, Memorial Union

**When:** tonight, 7 p.m.

**Cost:** free

**Call:** 884-7773

**Listen Online:** [ibiblio.org/ipa/levine/](http://ibiblio.org/ipa/levine/)

## MY BROTHER, ANTONIO, THE BAKER BY PHILIP LEVINE, FROM *BREATH*

Did the wind blow that night? When did it not? I'd ask you if you hadn't gone underground lugging the answer with you. Twenty-eight years old, on our way home after a twelve-hour shift baking Wonder bread for the sleeping prisoners in the drunk tank at the Canfield Station dreaming of a breakfast of horse cock and mattress stuffing. (Oh, the luxuries of 1951! How fully we lived—the working-classes and the law-abiding dregs—on buttered toast and grilled-cheese sandwiches as the nation braced itself for pâté and pasta.) To myself I smelled like a new mother minus the aura of talcum and the airborne, acrid aromas of cotton diapers. Today I'd be labeled nurturing and bountiful instead of vegetal and weird. A blurred moon was out, we both saw it; I know because, leaning back, eyes closed on a ruined sky, you did your thing, welcoming the "bright orb" waning in the west. "Moon that drained down its silver coins on the darkened Duero and the sleeping fields of Soria." Did I look like you, my face anonymous and pure, bleached with flour, my eyes glistening with the power of neon light or self-love? Two grown men, side by side, one babbling joyfully to the universe that couldn't care less, while the other practiced for middle age. A single crow settled on the boiler above the Chinese restaurant, his feathers ruffling, and I took it for a sign. A second sign was the couple exiting the all-night pharmacy; the man came first through the glass door, a small white sack in hand, and let the door swing shut. Then she appeared, one hand covering her eyes to keep the moonlight at bay. They stood not talking while he looked first left, then right, then left again as flakes of darkness sifted upward toward the streetlight. The place began to rumble as though this were the end. You spoke again, only this time you described someone humble walking alone in darkness. I could see the streetcar turning off Joy Road, swaying down the tracks toward us, its windows on fire. There must have been a wind, a west wind. What else could have blown the aura of forsythia through the town and materialized one cross-town streetcar never before on time? A spring wind freighted with hope. I remember thinking that at last you might shut up. An old woman stood to give you her seat as though you were angelic or pregnant. When her eyes spilled over with happiness, I saw she took your words to heart as I never could. Maybe she recalled the Duero, the fields asleep in moonlight, maybe the words were music to her, original and whole, words that took her home to Soria or Kraków or wherever, maybe she was not an old woman at all but an oracle in drag who saw you as you were and saw, too, you couldn't last the night.