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Waiting

Philip Levine

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Waiting / Philip Levine

I

Nine years ago, early winter
in Barcelona, the office
of the town doctor. The old
wrapped like the dead, the sick,
the poor, all of us afraid
to be called. In the silence
the sobbing of a civil guard,
his head hung between his knees,
coatless, the leather suspenders
crossed on his back, the holster
shining beside him. His son,
no more than five, cradled
his father's head, stroked
the stubbled cheek from time
to time, and whispering
into his ear pointed
at invisible things
on the smoke-filled air.
The soldier looked up,
he too with the face
of a boy, the eyes brimming,
and said, "I see! I see!"

II

You write from Folsom: "Cold
day, March 20, windy, no one
on the yard." You hear a tv
in the distance, a prison movie
you saw as a teenager in Kansas City,
and beyond that the grating
of steel against rock, you hope,
and maybe voices. You wish
you were guilty, you write,
so you could confess and be pardoned.
Nine years gone down, a wife lost,
and this month a new love gone,
and you'll be 45. "I wish I were

but I'm not so I can't say so."
The judge and the judge's wife
tell me you're where you belong.
No one belongs where you are,
you answer, and you pray for them,
you do, a lot of souls you pray for
down in Fresno. The letter ends,
as always, with a poem, this one
of Ginny, "greener than goose manure
piled five feet high."

III

I look out the window
and the sun rides low in a crown
of mist. Someone is mowing,
the motor starts and stalls and starts
one last time and fades
into the stillness. The calm doctor
who played "futbol" for Barcelona
goes on reading the sports, pulling
at the ends of his moustache,
and we sit in the gold light
of afternoon nine years ago, swimming
in the heavy smoke of tobacco
where everything stays. You sit
at the window above the windswept yard
treeless forever, and you pray
for us all, for the lying witness
left in a ditch, for the stolen car,
for that place you are especially
with its diamond beaten out of clay
and the nine souls who circle the bases
and never score, for the gray walls
the Chinamen made before they starved,
for your own soul, your treasure,
though it thickens like your waist
or like the great oak tree above
your mother's grave. You pray
until the light catches in the branches
of that tree you never saw,
as it does now, and darkens
into sundown and its own life.