

1976

Ricky

Philip Levine

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on the road, moving with, moving  
counter to water. Stars  
pale like dog howls in dawn.  
Where our road ends, people  
from the woods ask the way home.  
Our road moves with the water.  
Both carry stars to our lawn.

## Ricky / Philip Levine

I go into the back yard  
and arrange some twigs  
and a few flowers. I go alone  
and speak to you as I never could  
when you lived, when you  
smiled back at me shyly.  
Now I can talk to you as I talked  
to a star when I was a boy,  
expecting no answer, as I talked  
to my father who had become  
the wind, particles of rain  
and fire, these few twigs  
and flowers that have no name.

\*

Last night they said a rosary  
and my boys went, awkward  
in slacks and sport shirts,  
and later sitting under the hidden  
stars they were attacked and beaten.  
You are dead, and a nameless rage  
is loose. It is 105,  
the young and the old burn  
in the fields, and though they cry  
*enough* the sun hangs on  
bloodying the dust above the aisles  
of cotton and grape.

\*

This morning they will say a mass  
and then the mile-long line of cars.  
Teddy and John, their faces swollen,  
and four others will let you  
slowly down into the fresh earth  
where you go on. Scared now,  
they will understand some of it.  
Not the mass or the rosary  
or the funeral, but the rage.  
Not you falling through the dark  
moving underwater like a flower  
no one could find until  
it was too late and you had gone out,  
your breath passing through dark water  
never to return to the young man,  
pigeon-breasted, who rode  
his brother's Harley up the driveway.

\*

Wet grass sticks to my feet, bright  
marigold and daisy burst in the new day.  
The bees move at the clumps  
of clover, the carrots—  
almost as tall as I—  
have flowered, pale lacework.  
Hard dark buds  
of next year's oranges, new green  
of slick leaves, yellow grass  
tall and blowing by the fence. The grapes  
are slow, climbing the arbor,  
but some day there will be shade  
here where the morning sun whitens  
everything and punishes my eyes.

\*

Your people worked so hard

for some small piece of earth,  
for a home, adding a room  
a boy might want. Butchie said  
you could have the Harley  
if only you would come back,  
anything that was his.

A dog barks down the block  
and it is another day. I hear  
the soft call of the dove,  
screech of mockingbird and jay.  
A small dog picks up the tune,  
and then *tow-weet tow-weet*  
of hidden birds, and two finches  
darting over the low trees—  
there is no end.

\*

What can I say to this mound  
of twigs and dry flowers, what  
can I say now that I would speak  
to you? Ask the wind, ask  
the absence or the rose burned  
at the edges and still blood red.  
And the answer is you  
falling through black water  
into the stillness that fathers  
the moon, the bees ramming into  
the soft cups, the eucalyptus  
swaying like grass under water.  
My John told me your cousin  
punched holes in the wall  
the night you died and was afraid  
to be alone. Your brother

walks staring at the earth.  
I am afraid of water.

\*

And the earth goes on  
in blinding sunlight.  
I hold your image  
a moment, the long  
Indian face  
the brown almond eyes  
your dark skin full  
and glowing as you grew  
into the hard body  
of a young man.

And now it is bird screech  
and a tree rat suddenly  
parting the tall grass  
by the fence, lumbering  
off, and in the distance  
the crashing of waves  
against some shore  
maybe only in memory.

We lived by the sea.  
Remember, my boys wrote  
postcards and missed you  
and your brother. I slept  
and wakened to the sea,  
I remember in my dreams  
water pounded the windows  
and walls, it seeped  
through everything,  
and like your spirit,  
Ricky, like your breath,  
nothing could contain it.