

1985

Salts and Oils

Philip Levine

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Recommended Citation

Levine, Philip. "Salts and Oils." *The Iowa Review* 15.1 (1985): 36-37. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3162>

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Salts and Oils · *Philip Levine*

In Havana in 1948 I ate fried dog
believing it was Peking duck. Later,
in Tampa I bunked with an insane sailor
who kept a .38 Smith and Wesson in his shorts.
In the same room were twins, oilers
from Toledo, who argued for hours
each night whose turn it was
to get breakfast and should he turn
the eggs or not. On the way north
I lived for three days on warm water
in a DC-6 with a burned out radio
on the runway at Athens, Georgia. We sang
a song, "Georgia's Big Behind," and prayed
for WWII and complete, unconditional surrender.
Napping in an open field near Newport News,
I chewed on grass while the shadows of September
lengthened; in the distance a man hammered
on the roof of a hanger and groaned how he
was out of luck and vittles. Bummed a ride
in from Mitchell Field and had beet borsch
and white bread at 34th and 8th Avenue.
I threw up in the alley behind the YMCA
and slept until they turned me out.
I walked the bridge to Brooklyn
while the East River browned below.
A mile from Ebbets Field, from all
that history, I found Murray, my papa's
buddy, in his greasy truck shop, polishing
replacement parts. Short, unshaven, puffed,
he strutted the filthy aisles,
a tiny Ghengis Khan. He sent out for soup

and sandwiches. The world turned on barley,
pickled meats, yellow mustard, kasha,
rye breads. It rained in October, rained
so hard I couldn't walk and smoke, so I
chewed pepsin chewing gum. The rain
spoiled Armistice Day in Lancaster, Pa.
The open cars overflowed, girls cried,
the tubas and trombones went dumb,
the floral displays shredded, the gutters
clogged with petals. Afterwards had ham
on buttered whole wheat bread, ham
and butter for the first time
on the same day in Zanesville with snow
forecast, snow, high winds, closed roads,
solid darkness before 5 p.m. These were not
the labors of Hercules, these were not
of meat or moment to anyone but me
or destined for story or to learn from
or to make me fit to take the hand
of a toad or a toad princess or to stand
in line for food stamps. One quiet morning
at the end of my thirteenth year a little bird
with a dark head and tattered tail feathers
had come to the bedroom window and commanded
me to pass through the winding miles
of narrow dark corridors and passageways
of my growing body the filth and glory
of the palatable world. Since then I've
been going out and coming back
the way a swallow does with unerring grace
and foreknowledge because all of this
was prophesied in the final, unread book
of the Midrash and because I have to
grow up and because it pleases me.