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Ashes

Philip Levine

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Ashes · Philip Levine

Far off, from the burned fields of cotton, smoke rises and scatters on the last winds of afternoon. The workers have come in hours ago, and nothing stirs. The old bus creaked by full of faces wide-eyed with hunger.

I sat wondering how long the earth would let the same children die day after day, let the same women curse their precious hours, the same men bow to earn our scraps. I only asked.

And now the answer batters the sky: with fire there is smoke, and after, ashes. You can howl your name into the wind and it will blow it into dust, you can pledge your single life, the earth will eat it all, the way you eat an apple, meat, skin, core, seeds.

Soon the darkness will fall on all the tired bodies of those who have torn our living from the silent earth, and they can sleep and dream of sleep without end, but before first light bloody days opening in the east they will have risen one by one and dressed in clothes still hot and damp. Before I waken they are already bruised by the first hours of the new sun. The same men who were never boys, the same women their faces gone gray with anger, and the children who will say nothing.

Do you want the earth to be heaven? Then pray, go down on your knees as though a king stood before you, and pray to become all you’ll never be, a drop of sea water, a small hurtling flame across the sky, a fine flake of dust that moves at evening like smoke at great height above the earth and sees it all.