

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  
bloodies the sky 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.