

Let Me Be · *Philip Levine*

When I was first born
the world was another place.
Men were somehow taller
and sang a great deal. I sang
as soon as I could. I sang
to the roads I drove over.
I sang to the winds, and I loved
them. It seemed I loved
so much that at times I
shook like a leaf
the moment before it surrenders
the branch and takes the air.
Little wonder I aged so fast,
and before I was forty
I was wizened and tiny, shrunken
like my Grandpa, and like him
afraid of nothing. I think
I would have died early
had I not been re-born
American, blue-eyed, tall.
This time I smoked Luckies,
let my hair grow long,
and never prayed. Except
for the smoking people said
I was like Jesus, except
for that and not knowing
the answers to anything. This
time too I drove badly because
my head was always filled
with tunes and words, and when
the songs went wild, so did I.
Four times I was arrested
for drunk driving, and the police
could not understand a man
so full of joy and empty
of drugs and alcohol. They
would make me walk a line,
but instead I danced and sang
like a lunatic. Yes,
even alone at night, blinded
by their headlights and pushed

by rough unseen hands,
I knew that life was somehow
all I would be given
and it was more than enough.
The months in jail were nothing—
my children came on weekends,
and they seemed proud of me,
though each week I grew
more tiny and tired. They
thought I was happy.
In the soft work shirt and
pale jeans, I was once more
the father of their infancies.
My wife's tears fell burning
my hands, for to her
there was something magical
about me, something that
could not survive the harsh voices,
the bars, the armed men. I died
in her eyes. I could feel
the pain of that death
like a fever coming over me,
rising along my back, up
through my neck and descending
into my eyes like blindness.
This time I died altogether,
without a word, and all
the separate atoms that held
my name scattered into
the mouths of bus conductors
and television repairmen.
I could have lived one
more time as so many
dollars and cents, but given
the choice I asked to remain
nothing. So now I am
a remembered ray of darkness
that catches at the corners
of your sight, a flat calm
in the oceans that never rest,
a yearning that rises
in your throat when you
least expect it, and screams

in a voice no one understands,
Let me be!
Let me be!