

Waiting / Philip Levine

I

Nine years ago, early winter  
in Barcelona, the office  
of the town doctor. The old  
wrapped like the dead, the sick,  
the poor, all of us afraid  
to be called. In the silence  
the sobbing of a civil guard,  
his head hung between his knees,  
coatless, the leather suspenders  
crossed on his back, the holster  
shining beside him. His son,  
no more than five, cradled  
his father's head, stroked  
the stubbled cheek from time  
to time, and whispering  
into his ear pointed  
at invisible things  
on the smoke-filled air.  
The soldier looked up,  
he too with the face  
of a boy, the eyes brimming,  
and said, "I see! I see!"

II

You write from Folsom: "Cold  
day, March 20, windy, no one  
on the yard." You hear a tv  
in the distance, a prison movie  
you saw as a teenager in Kansas City,  
and beyond that the grating  
of steel against rock, you hope,  
and maybe voices. You wish  
you were guilty, you write,  
so you could confess and be pardoned.  
Nine years gone down, a wife lost,  
and this month a new love gone,  
and you'll be 45. "I wish I were

but I'm not so I can't say so."  
The judge and the judge's wife  
tell me you're where you belong.  
No one belongs where you are,  
you answer, and you pray for them,  
you do, a lot of souls you pray for  
down in Fresno. The letter ends,  
as always, with a poem, this one  
of Ginny, "greener than goose manure  
piled five feet high."

III

I look out the window  
and the sun rides low in a crown  
of mist. Someone is mowing,  
the motor starts and stalls and starts  
one last time and fades  
into the stillness. The calm doctor  
who played "futbol" for Barcelona  
goes on reading the sports, pulling  
at the ends of his moustache,  
and we sit in the gold light  
of afternoon nine years ago, swimming  
in the heavy smoke of tobacco  
where everything stays. You sit  
at the window above the windswept yard  
treeless forever, and you pray  
for us all, for the lying witness  
left in a ditch, for the stolen car,  
for that place you are especially  
with its diamond beaten out of clay  
and the nine souls who circle the bases  
and never score, for the gray walls  
the Chinamen made before they starved,  
for your own soul, your treasure,  
though it thickens like your waist  
or like the great oak tree above  
your mother's grave. You pray  
until the light catches in the branches  
of that tree you never saw,  
as it does now, and darkens  
into sundown and its own life.