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# Let Me Be

Philip Levine

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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!