

Philip Levine: A poet laureate for his time and place

By the Editorial Board

Philip Levine had the credentials to be the nation's poet laureate long before the Library of Congress bestowed the honor in 2011.

Yet the timing was poetic.

Levine, [who died over the weekend in Fresno at age 87](#), devoted a lifetime to writing about hard work and to celebrating working people. His words resonated powerfully as America recovered from the worst recession since the Great Depression and as attention focused on the widening gap between rich and poor.

As then-Sacramento Bee editorial page editor [Stuart Leavenworth wrote in 2011](#): "Levine is the perfect laureate for an era ... in which working people and their communities are being marginalized, scorned and exploited."

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Poet Philip Levine at his Fresno home in 2011. died over the weekend in Fresno at age 87 | CRAIG KOHLRUSS Fresno Bee file

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Levine was a native of Detroit, the epitome of an American city hollowed out by the loss of manufacturing. He worked at auto plants and attended night school at Wayne State University. He started writing poetry in his youth but didn't publish his first book of poems until 1963, when he was 38.

By then, he was living in the Central Valley, where he spent more than a half century. He taught at Fresno State University from 1958 until he retired in 1992. Besides the poetry itself, Levine's proudest legacy is the impressive number of illustrious poets and writers who came through the creative writing program he started.

While [not every critic was enamored](#) of his spare free verse, [Levine won the National Book Award](#) in 1980 and again in 1991, plus the Pulitzer Prize in 1995. He went on to teach at prestigious universities and had a second home in Brooklyn, but he always returned to the Fresno – another hardscrabble city filled with the workers who populated his poems.

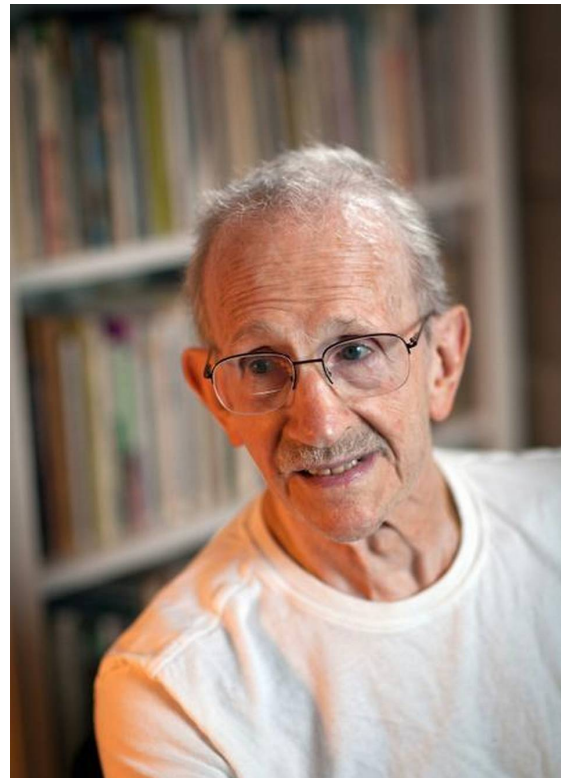
In "[What Work Is](#)," the title piece of Levine's award-winning 1991 collection, he writes about standing in line, hoping for a job:

You know what work is – if you're

old enough to read this you know what

work is, although you may not do it.

Forget you. This is about waiting,



*shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.*

*You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it's someone else's brother,
narrower across the shoulders than
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
that does not hide the stubbornness,
the sad refusal to give in to
rain, to the hours wasted waiting,
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say, "No,
we're not hiring today," for any
reason he wants.*

Anyone who has been unemployed or who has stood around for day labor knows exactly what Levine means.