

# The Simple Truth

by Philip Levine

I bought a dollar and a half's worth of small red potatoes,  
took them home, boiled them in their jackets  
and ate them for dinner with a little butter and salt.  
Then I walked through the dried fields  
on the edge of town. In middle June the light  
hung on in the dark furrows at my feet,  
and in the mountain oaks overhead the birds  
were gathering for the night, the jays and mockers  
squawking back and forth, the finches still darting  
into the dusty light. The woman who sold me  
the potatoes was from Poland; she was someone  
out of my childhood in a pink spangled sweater and sunglasses  
praising the perfection of all her fruits and vegetables  
at the road-side stand and urging me to taste  
even the pale, raw sweet corn trucked all the way,  
she swore, from New Jersey. "Eat, eat" she said,  
"Even if you don't I'll say you did."

Some things  
you know all your life. They are so simple and true  
they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme,  
they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker,  
the glass of water, the absence of light gathering  
in the shadows of picture frames, they must be  
naked and alone, they must stand for themselves.  
My friend Henri and I arrived at this together in 1965  
before I went away, before he began to kill himself,  
and the two of us to betray our love. Can you taste  
what I'm saying? It is onions or potatoes, a pinch  
of simple salt, the wealth of melting butter, it is obvious,  
it stays in the back of your throat like a truth  
you never uttered because the time was always wrong,  
it stays there for the rest of your life, unspoken,  
made of that dirt we call earth, the metal we call salt,  
in a form we have no words for, and you live on it.