

## Philip Levine

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### *Alba*

On bad springs bouncing and swaying down  
the coast road south of the city to a spit  
of land overlooking the sea, they trucked  
the merchant princes and their courtiers  
in their gun-metal suits and soured white shirts.  
Portly, substantial men, manufacturers  
of camshafts, holiday bunting, antacids,  
dispensers of bifocals and mornings  
of benzene mists, architects of newspapers and  
cardboard communes stuttering up the slopes  
of Montjuich. Prodded, they limped, shoeless,  
over the rocky ground to where the land  
stopped at last and the waves broke far below  
deafening the air and waited, some hopeful,  
smoking, some silent, some whispering, a few  
kneeling alone, praying, while the militiamen  
squatted facing them, their heads falling  
in and out of sleep. The warm wind  
—the one they call the Levante—that blew  
in the first scraps of dawn from Africa  
churned the waves below from black to cobalt.  
All at once the men were herded  
to the land's edge and shot dead. I'm told  
on good authority there is a lesson here,  
one I am in need of. For Gonzales Brilla,  
twenty-five, the militia commandant,  
his head wrapped in a red and black scarf,  
the lesson was clear. Before the ragged volley  
called in the day, he shouted it out,  
but with the wind swirling, the waves breaking  
and those about to die abusing their Gods,  
no one heard. (Within a year Brilla himself,  
bound and gagged in a damp cellar

off Calle Montcado, was shot just once above his unfurrowed nape, and left no written record.) On the ride back to Barcelona it is reported—and now in print—he told the driver that the air of Spain was clearer now, although both men stunk of cordite. Years later his comrade, Ramon Puig, told the English historian that the night before the executions—while oiling his Astra 9mm taken from the body of a Guardia officer—Brilla had rehearsed his speech: “You, the guilty, who are about to die, to leave the stage of history, behold . . . behold . . . something or other,” was all Puig could ever remember. The widow, Mercedes Brilla Robles, swears he never spoke that way in his whole life. White haired, shrunken to almost nothing, she lives on state welfare plus foreign contributions in a village south of Perpignon. Her Spanish is ragged now, her Catalan and French perfect as she speaks of her girlhood days as an anarchist rebel, the urban communes, the battle for the telephone exchange, the government betrayals, the journey of the defeated on foot across the mountains in February of '39, the iron hunger in the French camps, the terrible war that followed, even her years as a hairdresser. Unfortunately she can go on forever. I know. When by accident I found Ramon Puig three weeks ago in a ward of the tiny public hospital in Santa Coloma de Gramanet he remembered nothing, not even the war, the people armed, the glory days of '36, and what came after, much less Brilla's words. Then by pure luck,

seventeen kilometers south of Castelldefels  
on a bright spring morning, I spot the place  
where the road—impossibly narrow and steep—  
hugs the coastline as it twists and climbs  
until a brief widening appears.  
My wife and I stop and park the rental car.  
Hand in hand we walk to the edge  
of the continent. No gunfire echoes  
from the past or if it does the sea  
silences it. To the south, Sitges  
with its fake Irish pubs and swanky new hotels,  
to the north Barcelona barely visible  
in its familiar, rosy shroud, dead ahead  
the ancient impossible sea moving  
slowly toward us as it broods on itself.  
Can we hear them now, the words of Brilla,  
the elusive lesson worth all those lives?  
Above the cries of seagulls, the message comes  
translated into the language of water and wind,  
decipherable, exact, unforgettable, the same  
words we spoke before we spoke in words.