My Brother the Artist, at Seven

By Philip Levine

As a boy he played alone in the fields behind our block, six frame houses holding six immigrant families, the parents speaking only gibberish to their neighbors. Without the kids they couldn’t say “Good morning” and be understood. Little wonder he learned early to speak to himself, to tell no one what truly mattered. How much can matter to a kid of seven? Everything. The whole world can be his. Just after dawn he sneaks out to hide in the wild, bleached grasses of August and pretends he’s grown up, someone complete in himself without the need for anyone, a warrior from the ancient places our fathers fled years before, those magic places: Kiev, Odessa, the Crimea, Port Said, Alexandria, Lisbon, the Canaries, Caracas, Galveston.

In the damp grass he recites the names over and over in a hushed voice while the sun climbs into the locust tree to waken the houses. The husbands leave for work, the women return to bed, the kids bend to porridge and milk. He advances slowly, eyes fixed, an animal or a god, while beneath him the earth holds its breath.

Philip Levine, "My Brother, the Artist, At Seven" from (, )

Source: Poetry