Joe Gould's Pen

I am told this is the pen,
that it will write for me too
if I let it have its way,
that it will be eloquent
as only genius can be.
glad, bittersweet, profound. "blue,"
as we used to say when we
indulged ourselves, also to
the point, precise in detail
when sketching the actual,
but able always to dash
off into the unreal at
any moment. Poised over
the paper, I wait, then write:
"Later when the candle died
she could see the day begin
between the ash cans and the larch,
so she rose." Is her hair blond,
black, gray? Does she bow her head
when I reach to stroke her and
rise slowly against my palm
as a cat might? The pen asks
much more than it can answer,
one word at a time. "The Owl,
the Alabama, the Grand,
Newport, Crystal, White House,
the Progress, the Marathon,
the Lion, all on the Bowery
in nineteen and forty-one,
each one fifty cents a night,
each one once my home sweet home."
Even the cheap post office ink
knows the universe does not
exist anymore. Slugs closed,
no more cups of coffee for
nothing, no more samovars
steaming by the open door,
no more black gypsy goulash
on the back burner, no more
all-night Judgment Day sermons, no more anything no more.

"Before dusk the sparrows came back to pick at what crumbs of rye bread toast the pigeons left that morning." I'm following the oral history of our times as it forms itself letter by letter on this blank school book, but nowhere does it say up or down, right or not right, exit slowly, men at work, smoking allowed, enter at your own risk, two for the price of one, nowhere does it say house for sale, this land is mine, attack cat on premises. "If we had time I could take you to Garcia Lorca's unknown graveyard, the run-down old Jewish one off St. James. We could lean against the stones, converse, and eat egg salad sandwiches. The dead would not mind; in fact the dead are gone. They were so gaunt they slipped through the rusting gate one night and walked to Jerusalem."

Joe Gould's pen wrote those ten lines hoping to capture his sense of the ridiculousness of the life he was born to, to hint at the wealth that came so close to him he could taste it all the rest of his life smeared with ketchup. Pee Wee Joe, who loved to dance, who talked to seagulls in their language, his pen tried to find him in 9,250,000 words and failed because it had
no word for what rises in
your esophagus when night
starts over at 4 A.M.,
no word for the itch you can't
scratch, no word for the bubble
of pain that rises slowly
to settle underneath your heart.
We could say “heartburn,” but that
doesn’t begin to do it.
we could say “anxiety,”
“terror,” “loneliness,” “despair,”
and still not get anywhere
closer than he did with his
9,250,000
words that vanished into blue
hospital air before he
turned to the wall and welcomed
the last act. He had a word
for that—we all do—but no
word for a woman’s shoulders
as she rises from her bed
in the darkness, no word even
for the warm darkness smelling
of one ocean and the seven
rivers that surround the heart.
no word for the wind flattening
the motherwort that grows at
its ease in the public squares
or along the cracked curbing
on Delancey Street, the wind
bringing hope in the morning
and carrying off our exhaust
as the light goes each evening.
Don’t blame the pen with its chromed
steel nib and fat black plastic
body that for forty years
contained the dark lexicon
of the mystery of one
little man and missed the point.
“You’d find him in the downtown
libraries,” someone wrote, “at
all hours filling page after
page, scribbling furiously,
always chasing the last word.”
He carried his swollen books in a cardboard folder stained with black coffee and clutched to his chest as though they were his own life. Perhaps they were. Perhaps he knew that when he gave back the last hard breath each earned word would disappear the way the golden halo goes when the dawn shreds the rose into dust, the way a voice fades in an empty room, the way the pomegranate fallen from the tree scatters the seeds of its resurrection, the way these lines are vanishing now.

Philip Levine was born in 1928 in Detroit where he attended Wayne State University. His work has received a National Book Award in 1991 for What Work Is, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for The Simple Truth. He read at Grand Valley State University as part of Poetry Night in October 2005. This poem, from Mercy, is reprinted by permission of the author.