

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Edward Hirsch**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**  
2012

**Publisher:**  
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

## Edward Hirsch(20 January 1950)

Edward Hirsch is an American poet and critic who wrote a national bestseller about reading poetry. He has published eight books of poems, including *The Living Fire: New and Selected Poems* (2010), which brings together thirty-five years of work. He is president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in New York City (not to be mistaken with E. D. Hirsch, Jr.).

<b>Life</b>

Hirsch was born in Chicago. He had a childhood involvement with poetry, which he later explored at Grinnell College and the University of Pennsylvania, where he received a Ph.D. in folklore.

Hirsch was a professor of English at Wayne State University. In 1985, he joined the faculty at the University of Houston, where he spent 17 years as a professor in the Creative Writing Program and Department of English. He was appointed the fourth president of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation on September 3, 2002. He holds seven honorary degrees.

Hirsch is a well-known advocate for poetry whose essays have been published in the *American Poetry Review*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, and elsewhere. He wrote a weekly column on poetry for *The Washington Post Book World* from 2002-2005, which resulted in his book *Poet's Choice* (2006). His other prose books include *Responsive Reading* (1999) and *The Demon and the Angel: Searching for the Source of Artistic Inspiration* (2002). He is the editor of *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art* (1994), *Theodore Roethke's Selected Poems* (2005) and *To a Nightingale* (2007). He is the co-editor of *A William Maxwell Portrait: Memories and Appreciations* and *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology* (2008). He also edits the series "The Writer's World" (Trinity University Press).

Hirsch's first collection of poems, *For the Sleepwalkers*, received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets and the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award from New York University. His second book, *Wild Gratitude*, received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1986. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985 and a five-year MacArthur Fellowship in 1997. He received the William Park Riley Prize from the Modern Language Association for the best scholarly essay in PMLA for the year 1991. He has also received an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, a Pablo Neruda

Presidential Medal of Honor, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature. He is a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Hirsch's book, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999), was a surprise bestseller and remains in print through multiple printings.

# A Greek Island

Traveling over your body I found  
The failing olive and the cajoling flute,  
Where I knelt down, as if in prayer,  
And sucked a moist pit  
From the marl  
Of the earth in a sacred cove.

You gave yourself to the god who comes,  
The liberator of the loud shout,  
While I fell into a trance,  
Blood on my lips,  
And stumbled into a temple on top  
Of a hill at the bottom of the sky.

Edward Hirsch

# After A Long Insomniac Night

I walked down to the sea in the early morning  
after a long insomniac night.

I climbed over the giant gull-colored rocks  
and moved past the trees,  
tall dancers stretching their limbs  
and warming up in the blue light.

I entered the salty water, a penitent  
whose body was stained,  
and swam toward a red star rising  
in the east—regal, purple-robed.

One shore disappeared behind me  
and another beckoned.

I confess

that I forgot the person I had been  
as easily as the clouds drifting overhead.

My hands parted the water.  
The wind pressed at my back, wings  
and my soul floated over the whitecapped waves.

Read more:

Edward Hirsch

# Amour Honestus

The nights were long and cold and bittersweet,  
And he made a song for the hell of it.

She stood by the window, a heavenly light  
Who created havoc for the hell of it.

He used to fondle every skirt in sight,  
Then he fell in love—that's the hell of it.

Now there's a courtyard with an abject knight  
Yodeling his head off for the hell of it.

O poor me, my Lady, my hopeless plight!  
She married a prince for the hell of it.

Honorable, unsatisfied, illicit—  
Why bring it up? Just for the hell of it.

The fever spread from poet to poet  
Who burned in the high-minded hell of it.

But the Untouchable had him by the throat,  
And he stopped singing for the hell of it.

Love is a tower, a trance, a medieval pit.  
When I lost you, I knew the hell of it.

Edward Hirsch

# Branch Library

I wish I could find that skinny, long-beaked boy  
who perched in the branches of the old branch library.

He spent the Sabbath flying between the wobbly stacks  
and the flimsy wooden tables on the second floor,

pecking at nuts, nesting in broken spines, scratching  
notes under his own corner patch of sky.

I'd give anything to find that birdy boy again  
bursting out into the dusky blue afternoon

with his satchel of scrawls and scribbles,  
radiating heat, singing with joy.

Edward Hirsch

# Cotton Candy

We walked on the bridge over the Chicago River  
for what turned out to be the last time,  
and I ate cotton candy, that sugary air,  
that sweet blue light spun out of nothingness.  
It was just a moment, really, nothing more,  
but I remember marveling at the sturdy cables  
of the bridge that held us up  
and threading my fingers through the long  
and slender fingers of my grandfather,  
an old man from the Old World  
who long ago disappeared into the nether regions.  
And I remember that eight-year-old boy  
who had tasted the sweetness of air,  
which still clings to my mouth  
and disappears when I breathe.

Edward Hirsch



# Early Sunday Morning

I used to mock my father and his chums  
for getting up early on Sunday morning  
and drinking coffee at a local spot  
but now I'm one of those chumps.

No one cares about my old humiliations  
but they go on dragging through my sleep  
like a string of empty tin cans rattling  
behind an abandoned car.

It's like this: just when you think  
you have forgotten that red-haired girl  
who left you stranded in a parking lot  
forty years ago, you wake up

early enough to see her disappearing  
around the corner of your dream  
on someone else's motorcycle  
roaring onto the highway at sunrise.

And so now I'm sitting in a dimly lit  
café; full of early morning risers  
where the windows are covered with soot  
and the coffee is warm and bitter.

Edward Hirsch

# Edward Hopper And The House By The Railroad (1925)

Out here in the exact middle of the day,  
This strange, gawky house has the expression  
Of someone being stared at, someone holding  
His breath underwater, hushed and expectant;

This house is ashamed of itself, ashamed  
Of its fantastic mansard rooftop  
And its pseudo-Gothic porch, ashamed  
Of its shoulders and large, awkward hands.

But the man behind the easel is relentless.  
He is as brutal as sunlight, and believes  
The house must have done something horrible  
To the people who once lived here

Because now it is so desperately empty,  
It must have done something to the sky  
Because the sky, too, is utterly vacant  
And devoid of meaning. There are no

Trees or shrubs anywhere--the house  
Must have done something against the earth.  
All that is present is a single pair of tracks  
Straightening into the distance. No trains pass.

Now the stranger returns to this place daily  
Until the house begins to suspect  
That the man, too, is desolate, desolate  
And even ashamed. Soon the house starts

To stare frankly at the man. And somehow  
The empty white canvas slowly takes on  
The expression of someone who is unnerved,  
Someone holding his breath underwater.

And then one day the man simply disappears.  
He is a last afternoon shadow moving

Across the tracks, making its way  
Through the vast, darkening fields.

This man will paint other abandoned mansions,  
And faded cafeteria windows, and poorly lettered  
Storefronts on the edges of small towns.  
Always they will have this same expression,

The utterly naked look of someone  
Being stared at, someone American and gawky.  
Someone who is about to be left alone  
Again, and can no longer stand it.

Edward Hirsch

# Fall

Fall, falling, fallen. That's the way the season  
Changes its tense in the long-haired maples  
That dot the road; the veiny hand-shaped leaves  
Redden on their branches (in a fiery competition  
With the final remaining cardinals) and then  
Begin to sidle and float through the air, at last  
Settling into colorful layers carpeting the ground.  
At twilight the light, too, is layered in the trees  
In a season of odd, dusky congruences—a scarlet tanager  
And the odor of burning leaves, a golden retriever  
Loping down the center of a wide street and the sun  
Setting behind smoke-filled trees in the distance,  
A gap opening up in the treetops and a bruised cloud  
Blamelessly filling the space with purples. Everything  
Changes and moves in the split second between summer's  
Sprawling past and winter's hard revision, one moment  
Pulling out of the station according to schedule,  
Another moment arriving on the next platform. It  
Happens almost like clockwork: the leaves drift away  
From their branches and gather slowly at our feet,  
Sliding over our ankles, and the season begins moving  
Around us even as its colorful weather moves us,  
Even as it pulls us into its dusty, twilit pockets.  
And every year there is a brief, startling moment  
When we pause in the middle of a long walk home and  
Suddenly feel something invisible and weightless  
Touching our shoulders, sweeping down from the air:  
It is the autumn wind pressing against our bodies;  
It is the changing light of fall falling on us.

Edward Hirsch

# Fast Break

In Memory of Dennis Turner, 1946-1984

A hook shot kisses the rim and  
hangs there, helplessly, but doesn't drop,

and for once our gangly starting center  
boxes out his man and times his jump

perfectly, gathering the orange leather  
from the air like a cherished possession

and spinning around to throw a strike  
to the outlet who is already shoveling

an underhand pass toward the other guard  
scissoring past a flat-footed defender

who looks stunned and nailed to the floor  
in the wrong direction, trying to catch sight

of a high, gliding dribble and a man  
letting the play develop in front of him

in slow motion, almost exactly  
like a coach's drawing on the blackboard,

both forwards racing down the court  
the way that forwards should, fanning out

and filling the lanes in tandem, moving  
together as brothers passing the ball

between them without a dribble, without  
a single bounce hitting the hardwood

until the guard finally lunges out  
and commits to the wrong man

while the power-forward explodes past them  
in a fury, taking the ball into the air

by himself now and laying it gently  
against the glass for a lay-up,

but losing his balance in the process,  
inexplicably falling, hitting the floor

with a wild, headlong motion  
for the game he loved like a country

and swiveling back to see an orange blur  
floating perfectly though the net.

Edward Hirsch

# For The Sleepwalkers

Tonight I want to say something wonderful  
for the sleepwalkers who have so much faith  
in their legs, so much faith in the invisible

arrow carved into the carpet, the worn path  
that leads to the stairs instead of the window,  
the gaping doorway instead of the seamless mirror.

I love the way that sleepwalkers are willing  
to step out of their bodies into the night,  
to raise their arms and welcome the darkness,

palming the blank spaces, touching everything.  
Always they return home safely, like blind men  
who know it is morning by feeling shadows.

And always they wake up as themselves again.  
That's why I want to say something astonishing  
like: Our hearts are leaving our bodies.

Our hearts are thirsty black handkerchiefs  
flying through the trees at night, soaking up  
the darkest beams of moonlight, the music

of owls, the motion of wind-torn branches.  
And now our hearts are thick black fists  
flying back to the glove of our chests.

We have to learn to trust our hearts like that.  
We have to learn the desperate faith of sleep-  
walkers who rise out of their calm beds

and walk through the skin of another life.  
We have to drink the stupefying cup of darkness  
and wake up to ourselves, nourished and surprised.

Edward Hirsch

# I'M Going To Start Living Like A Mystic□

Today I am pulling on a green wool sweater  
and walking across the park in a dusky snowfall.

The trees stand like twenty-seven prophets in a field,  
each a station in a pilgrimage—silent, pondering.

Blue flakes of light falling across their bodies  
are the ciphers of a secret, an occultation.

I will examine their leaves as pages in a text  
and consider the bookish pigeons, students of winter.

I will kneel on the track of a vanquished squirrel  
and stare into a blank pond for the figure of Sophia.

I shall begin scouring the sky for signs  
as if my whole future were constellated upon it.

I will walk home alone with the deep alone,  
a disciple of shadows, in praise of the mysteries.

Edward Hirsch



# In Memoriam Paul Celan

Lay these words into the dead man's grave  
next to the almonds and black cherries---  
tiny skulls and flowering blood-drops, eyes,  
and Thou, O bitterness that pillows his head.

Lay these words on the dead man's eyelids  
like eyebrights, like medieval trumpet flowers  
that will flourish, this time, in the shade.  
Let the beheaded tulips glisten with rain.

Lay these words on his drowned eyelids  
like coins or stars, ancillary eyes.  
Canopy the swollen sky with sunspots  
while thunder addresses the ground.

Syllable by syllable, clawed and handled,  
the words have united in grief.  
It is the ghostly hour of lamentation,  
the void's turn, mournful and absolute.

Lay these words on the dead man's lips  
like burning tongs, a tongue of flame.  
A scouring eagle wheels and shrieks.  
Let God pray to us for this man.

Edward Hirsch

## Late March

Saturday morning in late March.  
I was alone and took a long walk,  
though I also carried a book  
of the Alone, which companioned me.

The day was clear, unnaturally clear,  
like a freshly wiped pane of glass,  
a window over the water,  
and blue, preternaturally blue,  
like the sky in a Magritte painting,  
and cold, vividly cold, so that  
you could clap your hands and remember  
winter, which had left a few moments ago—  
if you strained you could almost see it  
disappearing over the hills in a black parka.  
Spring was coming but hadn't arrived yet.  
I walked on the edge of the park.  
The wind whispered a secret to the trees,  
which held their breath  
and scarcely moved.  
On the other side of the street,  
the skyscrapers stood on tiptoe.

I walked down to the pier to watch  
the launching of a passenger ship.  
Ice had broken up on the river  
and the water rippled smoothly in blue light.  
The moon was a faint smudge  
in the clouds, a brushstroke, an afterthought  
in the vacant mind of the sky.  
Seagulls materialized out of vapor  
amidst the masts and flags.  
Don't let our voices die on land,  
they cawed, swooping down for fish  
and then soaring back upwards.

The kiosks were opening  
and couples moved slowly past them,  
arm in arm, festive.

Children darted in and out of walkways,  
which sprouted with vendors.  
Voices greeted the air.  
Kites and balloons. Handmade signs.  
Voyages to unknown places.  
The whole day had the drama of an expectation.

Down at the water, the queenly ship  
started moving away from the pier.  
Banners fluttered.  
The passengers clustered at the rails on deck.  
I stood with the people on shore and waved  
goodbye to the travelers.  
Some were jubilant;  
others were broken-hearted.  
I have always been both.

Suddenly, a great cry went up.  
The ship set sail for the horizon  
and rumbled into the future  
but the cry persisted  
and cut the air  
like an iron bell ringing  
in an empty church.  
I looked around the pier  
but everyone else was gone  
and I was left alone  
to peer into the ghostly distance.  
I had no idea where that ship was going  
but I felt lucky to see it off  
and bereft when it disappeared.

Edward Hirsch

# Lay Back The Darkness□

My father in the night shuffling from room to room  
on an obscure mission through the hallway.

Help me, spirits, to penetrate his dream  
and ease his restless passage.

Lay back the darkness for a salesman  
who could charm everything but the shadows,

an immigrant who stands on the threshold  
of a vast night

without his walker or his cane  
and cannot remember what he meant to say,

though his right arm is raised, as if in prophecy,  
while his left shakes uselessly in warning.

My father in the night shuffling from room to room  
is no longer a father or a husband or a son,

but a boy standing on the edge of a forest  
listening to the distant cry of wolves,

to wild dogs,  
to primitive wingbeats shuddering in the treetops.

Edward Hirsch

# Poor Angels

At this hour the soul floats weightlessly  
through the city streets, speechless and invisible,  
astonished by the smoky blend of grays and golds  
seeping out of the air, the dark half-tones

of dusk suddenly filling the urban sky  
while the body sits listlessly by the window  
sullen and heavy, too exhausted to move,  
too weary to stand up or to lie down.

At this hour the soul is like a yellow wing  
slipping through the treetops, a little ecstatic  
cloud hovering over the sidewalks, calling out  
to the approaching night, "Amaze me, amaze me,"

while the body sits glumly by the window  
listening to the clear summons of the dead  
transparent as glass, clairvoyant as crystal.  
Some nights it is almost ready to join them.

Oh, this is a strange, unlikely tethering,  
a furious grafting of the quick and the slow:  
when the soul flies up, the body sinks down  
and all night—locked in the same cramped room—

they go on quarreling, stubbornly threatening  
to leave each other, wordlessly filling the air  
with the sound of a low internal burning.  
How long can this bewildering marriage last?

At midnight the soul dreams of a small fire  
of stars flaming on the other side of the sky,  
but the body stares into an empty night sheen,  
a hollow-eyed darkness. Poor luckless angels,

feverish old loves: don't separate yet.  
Let what rises live with what descends.



# The Skokie Theater

Twelve years old and lovesick, bumbling  
and terrified for the first time in my life,  
but strangely hopeful, too, and stunned,  
definitely stunned—I wanted to cry,  
I almost started to sob when Chris Klein  
actually touched me—oh God—below the belt  
in the back row of the Skokie Theatre.  
Our knees bumped helplessly, our mouths  
were glued together like flypaper, our lips  
were grinding in a hysterical grimace  
while the most handsome man in the world  
twitched his hips on the flickering screen  
and the girls began to scream in the dark.  
I didn't know one thing about the body yet,  
about the deep foam filling my bones,  
but I wanted to cry out in desolation  
when she touched me again, when the lights  
flooded in the crowded theatre  
and the other kids started to file  
into the narrow aisle, into a lobby  
of faded purple splendor, into the last  
Saturday in August before she moved away.  
I never wanted to move again, but suddenly  
we were being lifted toward the sidewalk  
in a crush of bodies, blinking, shy,  
unprepared for the ringing familiar voices  
and the harsh glare of sunlight, the brightness  
of an afternoon that left us gripping  
each other's hands, trembling and changed.

Edward Hirsch

## The Widening Sky□

I am so small walking on the beach  
at night under the widening sky.  
The wet sand quickens beneath my feet  
and the waves thunder against the shore.

I am moving away from the boardwalk  
with its colorful streamers of people  
and the hotels with their blinking lights.  
The wind sighs for hundreds of miles.

I am disappearing so far into the dark  
I have vanished from sight.  
I am a tiny seashell  
that has secretly drifted ashore

and carries the sound of the ocean  
surging through its body.  
I am so small now no one can see me.  
How can I be filled with such a vast love?

Edward Hirsch



# To Poetry

Don't desert me  
just because I stayed up last night  
watching *The Lost Weekend*.

I know I've spent too much time  
praising your naked body to strangers  
and gossiping about lovers you betrayed.

I've stalked you in foreign cities  
and followed your far-flung movements,  
pretending I could describe you.

Forgive me for getting jacked on coffee  
and obsessing over your features  
year after jittery year.

I'm sorry for handing you a line  
and typing you on a screen,  
but don't let me suffer in silence.

Does anyone still invoke the Muse,  
string a wooden lyre for Apollo,  
or try to saddle up Pegasus?

Winged horse, heavenly god or goddess,  
indifferent entity, secret code, stored magic,  
pleasance and half wonder, hell,

I have loved you my entire life  
without even knowing what you are  
or how—please help me—to find you.

Edward Hirsch

## What The Last Evening Will Be Like□

You're sitting at a small bay window  
in an empty café by the sea.  
It's nightfall, and the owner is locking up,  
though you're still hunched over the radiator,  
which is slowly losing warmth.

Now you're walking down to the shore  
to watch the last blues fading on the waves.  
You've lived in small houses, tight spaces—  
the walls around you kept closing in—  
but the sea and the sky were also yours.

No one else is around to drink with you  
from the watery fog, shadowy depths.  
You're alone with the whirling cosmos.  
Goodbye, love, far away, in a warm place.  
Night is endless here, silence infinite.

Edward Hirsch

## Wild Gratitude□

Tonight when I knelt down next to our cat, Zooey,  
And put my fingers into her clean cat's mouth,  
And rubbed her swollen belly that will never know kittens,  
And watched her wriggle onto her side, pawing the air,  
And listened to her solemn little squeals of delight,  
I was thinking about the poet, Christopher Smart,  
Who wanted to kneel down and pray without ceasing  
In everyone of the splintered London streets,

And was locked away in the madhouse at St. Luke's  
With his sad religious mania, and his wild gratitude,  
And his grave prayers for the other lunatics,  
And his great love for his speckled cat, Jeffry.  
All day today—August 13, 1983—I remembered how  
Christopher Smart blessed this same day in August, 1759,  
For its calm bravery and ordinary good conscience.

This was the day that he blessed the Postmaster General  
'And all conveyancers of letters' for their warm humanity,  
And the gardeners for their private benevolence  
And intricate knowledge of the language of flowers,  
And the milkmen for their universal human kindness.  
This morning I understood that he loved to hear—  
As I have heard—the soft clink of milk bottles  
On the rickety stairs in the early morning,

And how terrible it must have seemed  
When even this small pleasure was denied him.  
But it wasn't until tonight when I knelt down  
And slipped my hand into Zooey's wagging mouth  
That I remembered how he'd called Jeffry 'the servant  
Of the Living God duly and daily serving Him,'  
And for the first time understood what it meant.  
Because it wasn't until I saw my own cat

Whine and roll over on her fluffy back  
That I realized how gratefully he had watched  
Jeffry fetch and carry his wooden cork  
Across the grass in the wet garden, patiently

Jumping over a high stick, calmly sharpening  
His claws on the woodpile, rubbing his nose  
Against the nose of another cat, stretching, or  
Slowly stalking his traditional enemy, the mouse,  
A rodent, 'a creature of great personal valour,'  
And then dallying so much that his enemy escaped.

And only then did I understand  
It is Jeffry—and every creature like him—  
Who can teach us how to praise—purring  
In their own language,  
Wreathing themselves in the living fire.

Edward Hirsch