Classic Poetry Series

Edward Hirsch
- poems -

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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.).

Life

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’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
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
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, Jeoffry.
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 waggling mouth
That I remembered how he'd called Jeoffry '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
Jeoffry 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 Jeoffry—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