

Classic Poetry Series

Primo Levi
- poems -

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Primo Levi(1919 - 1987)

Primo Levi was born in Turin in Italy in 1919, to a family of non-religious Jews with Spanish roots. Pursuing an education in chemistry, he flouted Mussolini's racial laws of 1938, which prohibited Jews from higher education. Levi received his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Turin in 1941. He eventually landed a position in a pharmaceutical laboratory where he worked until 1943, when the Germans invaded Northern Italy.

Leaving his job, the young chemist traded his glassware for a pistol, joining a band of partisans devoted to fighting Germans and Italian fascists. After being betrayed by one of their own number, Levi was handed over to the Germans and deported to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. He spent 10 months at Auschwitz, where he survived by working in a synthetic rubber factory in the Monowitz labor section of the camp. Falling ill to scarlet fever, he was left behind when the Germans evacuated the camp in anticipation of advancing Russian forces. Levi's harrowing experiences in Auschwitz are the source of an insuppressible sense of wonder present in his work, a wonder over every detail of the animate and inanimate world, coupled with a profound appreciation of simply being alive to observe the details.

In January 1945, Levi was liberated by the Red Guard. Making his way back to Milan, he married Lucia and resumed his career as an industrial chemist. In 1977, he retired from his position as manager of a chemical factory in Turin, devoting himself exclusively to writing until his controversial death on April 11, 1987, in the apartment building where he was born and eventually took up residence. Falling to his death from the railing of his third-floor stairwell, the question of whether Levi committed suicide or was the victim of a tragic accident is still open to debate.

Reveille

In the brutal nights we used to dream
Dense violent dreams,
Dreamed with soul and body:
To return; to eat; to tell the story.
Until the dawn command
Sounded brief, low
 'Wstawac'
And the heart cracked in the breast.

Now we have found our homes again,
Our bellies are full,
We're through telling the story.
It's time. Soon we'll hear again
The strange command:
 'Wstawac'

Translated by Ruth Feldman And Brian Swann

Anonymous submission.

Primo Levi

Shema

You who live secure
In your warm houses
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

Translated by Ruth Feldman And Brian Swann

Anonymous submission.

Primo Levi

The Survivor

Once more he sees his companions' faces
Livid in the first faint light,
Gray with cement dust,
Nebulous in the mist,
Tinged with death in their uneasy sleep.
At night, under the heavy burden
Of their dreams, their jaws move,
Chewing a non-existent turnip.
'Stand back, leave me alone, submerged people,
Go away. I haven't dispossessed anyone,
Haven't usurped anyone's bread.
No one died in my place. No one.
Go back into your mist.
It's not my fault if I live and breathe,
Eat, drink, sleep and put on clothes.'

Primo Levi

To My Friends

Dear friends, and here I say friends
the broad sense of the word:
Wife, sister, associates, relatives,
Schoolmates of both sexes,
People seen only once
Or frequented all my life;
Provided that between us, for at least a moment,
A line has been stretched,
A well-defined bond.
I speak for you, companions of a crowded
Road, not without its difficulties,
And for you too, who have lost
Soul, courage, the desire to live;
Or no one, or someone, or perhaps only one person, or you
Who are reading me: remember the time
Before the wax hardened,
When everyone was like a seal.
Each of us bears the imprint
Of a friend met along the way;
In each the trace of each.
For good or evil
In wisdom or in folly
Everyone stamped by everyone.
Now that the time crowds in
And the undertakings are finished,
To all of you the humble wish
That autumn will be long and mild.

Primo Levi