

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Primo Levi**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2004

**Publisher:**

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

## 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