

Special Orders: Poems

reviewed by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Special Orders: Poems

Edward Hirsch
Knopf

These poems from Edward Hirsch, a mature and accomplished poet, are remarkable for the way jubilation arises from them, even through the usual heartbreak that

poems are often designed to carry.

The book is divided into two equal parts, under the headings “More Than Halfway” and “To the Clearing.” The reader is struck by how often the poems finish with something other than irony or the thud of dead-end existence, something other than a bitter or jarring end-stop of disappointment. Rather, it is as if the poet—who is in his late 50s—discovers clearings of one kind and another in his memories and in his art. Out of some of these clearings joy emerges.

In the first half of the book, the poet searches for the youngster he used to be, that “birdy boy . . . / bursting out in the dusky blue afternoon / with his satchel of scrawls and scribbles, / radiating heat, singing with joy.” In the second half we walk with that same boy, now grown and a father, following his own 15-year-old son: “I keep thinking of him as a wild fledgling / who tilts precariously on one wing / and peers back at me from the sudden height / before sailing over the treetops.”

We are treated to a memory of “the flock of Baptist women flying / off the bus and gathering on the bridge / over the river, singing with praise.” The poet argues, lightly: “I don’t believe that only sorrow / and misery can be written. / Happiness, too, can be precise.”

“Krakow, 6 A.M.” is a poem from the first part of the book. It ponders an old world of Jewish-colored memory and contains what may be read as a condensation of Hirsch’s humane point of view on his art: “Poetry, too, seeks a place in the world— / feasting on darkness but needing light, / taking confession, listening for bells, / for the first strains of music in a town square.”