

cohabit the natural world without dominating it.

Kindness and responsibility guide the poems. Oftentimes moving, always wise, always precise as the prairie dogs, storms, pine trees, and blackbirds he describes, they call up a David Ignatow of the woods, Jiménez, Rilke, and the great Zen poets. Poems of the actual, of the true, they value "the present in which a car with a blown muffler rumbles and a neighbor's dog barks" ("Remembering to Breathe"), understand that "what we don't know / is subscribed by what we do." ("Grouse"), and live where solace confirms "Beyond the meadow is a greater meadow / and beyond the trees, more trees." ("Walking Out Alone") Contrarily, Gerber's poem, "The Favorite Child," holds one of the most harrowing psychological mother portraits in poetry:

*And I will eat this child, and he will satisfy
the hunger in me. Maybe.
And I will eat mine slowly, a little
at a time and make him last
my whole life, and even a little longer
so that I can go on eating
even when I have no stomach.*

* * *

Before It's Light: New Poems.

Lyn Lifshin.

Black Sparrow Press, 1999.

239 pages. \$16.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Mark Hornburg

Lyn Lifshin's new collection opens with a section of autobiographical poems (a section entitled, appropriately enough, "Biography") and finishes with the author's end-page bio. A collection bookended in this way is bound to serve up a generous portion of narcissism. Where this is the case, as in "Cabbages, Leaves and Morphine," Lifshin's poetry feels attenuated and prosaic – the difference between the autobiographical and the merely self-referential. A few poems even dissolve into pop music lyricism, as in "Enough": ("... And those / lies, I don't want / you moving thru my / arms anymore, / everything you / fall against / breaks open"). The worst poems here, which appear in a section entitled "Others" are merely cutesy: Lorena Bobbitt's recollections of the fateful night she held a detached penis in her hand; the Unabomber's girlfriend drawing up a list of complaints ("He was always typing or / whittling . . ."); Jackie O reading *The Story of O*; a feminist Barbie; Jesus in various contemporary modes (smoking pot, watching *Deep Throat*, fucking, going to galleries).

Many of these free verse poems achieve success, however, by fetishizing personal objects (a locket, a wedding ring, an article of clothing, a book, cigarettes),

as in certain Hitchcock films, in which homely objects, once fetishized, achieve powerful symbolic force. Primitive societies fetishized objects they believed to hold magical powers; 60 years after the death of Freud, Lifshin acknowledges, these talismanic objects obtain an erotic force, the "magic" of human sexuality. Lifshin often extends this fetishism to aspects of physiognomy, particularly hair – an especially sensual feature of the human body. Lifshin seems most comfortable operating in this mode, but other poems here – in a collection whose subject matter is all over the map – are also affecting, particularly those that read as pages torn from a memory book, as when the poet tackles the death of her mother. This series of poems begins with "The Doctor Says My Mother Is Fun," in which Lifshin's mother first learns that she has cancer:

*... The doctor talks in
a soothing voice, doesn't answer,
as my mother, unlike what she
earlier begged not to know, now
says, "of course, I must know*

*exactly what tests show," and I
feel faint as the doctor talks of bad
cells spreading, closing off her
throat and then something in
the lung. My mother is bubbly,
laughs. The doctor says, "Your*

*mother is fun" and my mother jokes
as she will back in her room, grin
"I'm fine," to people who will leave
her alone to let what is sink in.*

* * *

Blizzard of One.

Mark Strand.

Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

55 pages. \$15.00 (paperback).

The Weather of Words: Poetic Invention.

Mark Strand.

Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

142 pages. \$22.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by Robert West

Blizzard of One, former poet laureate Mark Strand's ninth collection, is a mixed bag. In some ways it's surprisingly slight. With only 20 poems, it's much shorter than its immediate predecessors, *The Continuous Life* (1990) and *Dark Harbor* (1993); the book design is attractive, but it's also clearly intended to add page length. On top of this, several poems are simply fluff: "The Beach Hotel," "Old Man Leaves Party," and "I Will

Love the Twenty-First Century” are quickly dismissed, the sort of thing a music critic would unhesitatingly call album filler. “Here” and “The Delirium Waltz” are interesting technically (the latter is a variation on the pantoum) but thin on substance.

That said, there are poems here that have to be ranked among Strand’s very best. One of these is “The Philosopher’s Conquest,” an exquisite villanelle based on Giorgio de Chirico’s 1914 painting of the same name. Strand deftly evokes De Chirico’s troubling cityscape, but he also offers context and interpretation: “Somewhere to the south a Duke is slain, / A war is won. Here, it is too late. / This melancholy moment will remain.” “Morning, Noon, and Night” is one of Strand’s most densely woven poems, its grand cadences and rich imagery as haunting as the sense of failure dogging its speaker, who dreams of drifting “forgotten / On a midnight sea where every thousand years a ship is sighted, or a swan, / Or a drowned swimmer whose imagination has outlived his fate, and who swims / To prove, to no one in particular, how false his life had been.” A half dozen or so poems are equally remarkable, including “In Memory of Joseph Brodsky,” “Five Dogs,” “A Suite of Appearances,” and “The Next Time.”

That last-mentioned poem declares that “Life should be more / Than the body’s weight working itself from room to room.” One thing Strand argues in *The Weather of Words*, his first collection of literary essays, is that poetry is essential to a full, meaningful life. Consider this passage from his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*:

The way poetry has of setting our internal house in order, of formalizing emotion difficult to articulate, is one of the reasons we still depend on it in moments of crisis and during those times when it is important that we know, in so many words, what we are going through . . . Without poetry, we would have either silence or banality, the former leaving us to our own inadequate devices for experiencing illumination, the latter cheapening with generalization what we wished to have for ourselves alone, turning our experience into impoverishment, our sense of ourselves into embarrassment.

And this from “On Becoming a Poet”:

A poem is a place where the conditions of beyondness and withinness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. It allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living. Even more paradoxically, poetry permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves.

Strand made his reputation early, with poems evoking paranoid fantasies and horrifying dream-visions; who could have foreseen him evolving into such a romantic? Yet it is easy to read his recent work, including much

of the best of *Blizzard of One*, in terms of these ideas. He’s arguably becoming a more Stevensian poet, and his essays likewise often echo Stevens; it should be said, however, that Strand is by far the better prose writer.

A winning aspect of *The Weather of Words* is its sense of humor. In addition to the wit often on display in the essays, there are wry “creative” pieces – chief among them “Workshop Miracle,” a miniature drama satirizing university creative writing classes. The book offers something rare: meditations on poetry that are thoughtful and authoritative, but also highly *engaging*.

Mixing Cement.

Peter Tomassi.

Thunder Rain Publishing, Louisiana, 2000.

62 pages. \$11.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Zoë Francesca

This gritty, sweet first book divides into four sections: “Cement,” “Sand,” “Water,” “Lime.” In them, a father teaches his son masonry, building humble foundations we take for granted:

Rows of gray, dark gray, gray,
Mortar, block, mortar, block, mortar . . .

A subsequent poem articulates accomplishments:

He framed in boxes: patios, front porches, stone planters.
It was great, he would say, clutching a trowel
As Zeus might have . . .

I expected at least one poem to explore the symbolic qualities or functions of cement, sand, water and lime – a sort of “Masonry 101.” Instead, I was left to wonder whether the poems in each section correlated more to the properties of Lime than to other unifying factors. Reading on, however, my attention was taken by the masonry metaphor itself. What begins as “The Trade” in the first section becomes “The Art” in the last. The Art is clearly writing. The poems give the reader a sense that the father’s trade is a foundation for the son’s different artistry. A tension locates in the young, working class, Italian American writer coming of age, splitting off from the patriarchal limb:

Trunk, branch, fruit:
We’re still family aren’t we?

The poems, boxed, sit solidly in even stanzas, often six stanzas to a poem, like the unobtrusive planters they describe. That said, Tomassi randomly deviates from this structure, as evidenced in uneven line counts, spo-