

The Erotic Spirit: An Anthology of Poems of Sensuality, Love, and Longing.

Sam Hamill, editor.

Shambhala Press, 2003.

210 pages, \$16.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Reginald Harris

In *The Erotic Spirit*, Copper Canyon Press founding editor Sam Hamill has collected a global, century-spanning group of poems that celebrate desire and physical experience, love, and loss expressed in the body. While many well-known poets are included, from Sappho to Marvell, the true value of this rich gathering is Hamill's choice of lesser-known poets and works. Roman epigramist Paulus Silentiarius celebrates an older woman's beauty, "Your autumn outshines a mortal spring, / your winter warmer than a summer sun." American poet and student of Indo-European cultures, Maurya Simon extols "Shiva's Prowess" in ever more dizzying heights: "His wide neck taut with cords of rolling muscles, / his chest an orchestra, his heart a ship's hull." Moving work by anonymous authors from indigenous cultures is also included, breathtaking in its simplicity.

Many of the poems are as much concerned with "spirit" and the beauty and suffering of lost love and separation as it is with the "erotic," ecstasy being both a sacred and secular experience. Hamill has filled *The Erotic Spirit* with the intensity of small moments, the joy lovers feel in little things about the beloved. A number of the poets focus on objects representing their lover so intently they become fetishes, like Yuan Chen's "Bamboo Mat":

I cannot bear to put away
the bamboo sleeping mat:

that night I brought you home,
I watched you roll it out.

This is a collection to be read slowly, leisurely, savoring each of its jewel-like pleasures.



All the Poems of Muriel Spark.

Muriel Spark.

New Directions, 2004.

130 pages, \$13.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Anne C. Elguindi

Although better known for her novels and short stories, Muriel Spark says in the introduction to *All the Poems*

of Muriel Spark, "I have always thought of myself as a poet." Spark's dry humor and deep intent fill these poems, which cover a wide range of technique and tone. Included is everything from a strict adherence to form (villanelles, sonnets, even a rondel) to a twenty-one-page, surreal (and sometimes violent) narrative to a light-hearted poem about a tea machine that eventually tires of making tea for its owner and instead demands the roles switch: "What the hell, / I've stood this treatment long and dumb; / Mr. Chiddicott, the time has come / For you to make the tea instead."

Spark's earlier works, written during the 1940s and 1950s, are distinctly careful. These poems must be unpacked and the meanings still seem deliberately vague. The early poems are also peppered with elevated language ("orgulous," "postprandial," "syringa") that would seem out of place in Spark's recent poems of 2002 and 2003, which are much more colloquial and accessible.

Although Spark's work encompasses a wide range of style, it is united by an emphasis on the rhythm and sound of the words, and many of her poems develop through repetition of words and structure in a theme and variation design. Her work is also united by two central concerns: dialogue and the forgotten individual—a stranger standing on the street below, the people who appear in dreams then get left behind when the dreamer wakes, and even the three Wise Men, whose own power comes into question once their deed is done.

As in all collections, some poems work better than others, but there are some true gems to be found in this one.



The Man Who Loves Cezanne: Poems.

Dabney Stuart.

Louisiana State University Press, 2003.

62 pages, \$15.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Cy Dillon

Back in 2001, Dabney Stuart told me he expected this to be his last book of poems. While I hope he changes his mind, it must be admitted that this collection is a fitting testament to a writer who has focused relentless energy on creating and teaching poetry for over forty years. While perhaps not as powerful a collection as *Settlers* (1999), the thirty-three poems confront questions of memory, family relationships, aging, and the role of the writer with Stuart's absolute control of language and image. Witness "Light Touch,"

Go ahead, touch it. It will give you
the music of blood, too,
in a dull or vanishing abrasion,
or a little welling on the fingertip.

From the playful mood of “Here, Promising,” a poetic catalog of his books, and “Free Will,” a surreal take on Shakespeare from one who has read and taught his works for decades, to the dead serious imagism of “A Shadow They Cast,” the break-neck pace of “Sky Dive,” and the elegant visual manipulation of the title poem, Stuart never misses. The lessons for aspiring writers are many—some obvious, some subtle. Everything is carefully crafted, including the order in which the poems are presented, so that the adept reader is always aware of the author’s skill just beneath the surface. Stuart’s ability to inject a redeeming, delicate sense of distance guarantees that he can turn on a dime from humor and word play to a willingness to look directly at the most difficult truths. Nevertheless, there is ample wit but no arrogance. As Stuart says in “High Desert Snow,”

This is an instance of the imagination
seeking what might suffice, knowing
in time nothing does . . .



A New Film about a Woman in Love with the Dead.

Lyn Lifshin.

March Street Press, 2002.

109 pages, \$20 (paperback).

Reviewed by David Need

It is good to know that there are poets like Lyn Lifshin who can develop ambitious, careful projects like *A New Film about a Woman in Love with the Dead* without the support of a major publisher or university sinecure. A Patterson Prize winner for her 1999-2000 volume *Before It’s Light*, Lifshin has worked relentlessly within small press circles and makes claims to over 100 volumes of poetry.

The 109 linked poems of this collection move the reader through a period of grief associated with the death of an ex-lover. With a spoken diction undisturbed by the regular line breaks, each poem drops like rain in a clean sheet. Because of this, the piece’s “turn” is not effected by a lyric thrust, but by the slow accumulation of repeated strophes. By the fortieth poem you realize you’ve traveled through time.

I am not familiar with Lifshin’s work, but I’d guess the form was specific to this piece, and that tells me she’s a smart artist who knows that form and sense are linked. Here, the poems are arranged like film frames, and their

succession bodies out the pace of grief, capturing both the sharp clarity of feeling, and grief’s hold, its lack of movement. And she ends the piece well; towards the end, her focus drifts, capturing the way the mind, after long weeks, begins to shift again to new reference.

The material, of course, must have seemed almost embarrassingly fertile—the links between a dead love and death, the permissions of grief that make it possible to speak in aching language. But poets get many ideas that are not executed, and it is not so easy to pour out 109 clean, straight “film-stills.”

I’d dog-eared two-dozen by the end of the hour.



Dreams of Fire: 100 Polish Poems 1970-1989.

Zbigniew Joachimiak, David Malcolm, Georgia Scott, editors.

Poetry Salzburg, March 2004.

152 pages, \$18.50 (paperback).

Reviewed by Ricks Carson

Dreams of Fire reunites two dignities American literature has forgotten because our civilization has divorced them: despair and joy. These twenty poets have wrested Polish poetry from the Nazis and Soviets, swallowed them whole, and stand vulnerable but resourceful. Americans assume poetry is not history and private lives are confessions. Poles assume their poetry and private lives are essentially history. For them, literature and civilization are still wedded.

Formula: survival = art.

Surrealism dominates these anti-romantic poems, and forget traditional forms and, in most cases, rules of grammar. Poem by poem, a weird rightness confirms this rebuttal of “normal.” Such irony saves their harmed reason, as in Anton Pawlak’s “Polish Prayer” and Krystyna Lars’ “give birth to a knife.” Wit can deflect horror in Anna Janko’s “Open Letter to a Laboratory Rabbit” and Jozef Baran’s “Game.”

There’s struggle. In “dice,” Zbigniew Joachimiak’s speaker endlessly throws dice despite always receiving a “lower score;” Krzysztof Lisowski’s speaker in “Evening in August” finally unites with a WW II survivor in a “deepening forgetfulness,” and “in each other [they see] . . . a hardsurviving.”

The results? Consecration: “Keep a sharp look out / for signs of the great dead / reaching out their hands to you” (Pawlak, “Ready?”); devotion: “I come to You Lord / . . . / so I may follow You / into the unknown” (Jan Sochon, “X”); and authority, as in Urszula Benka’s “Chronomea”: