

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”: