

Blue Tattoo

In the last lines of *Blue Tattoo*

a Holocaust victim says:

We want to remain
among the living—
at least on paper.

Lyn Lifshin has done the job. *Blue Tattoo* is a living witness to the deportation, extermination, and cremation of millions of human beings in this 20th century. It is a stupendous achievement, and one that must be honored—not only Lyn Lifshin's poetry but Joseph Cowles' superb editing and book design, and Dee Clements' stark bronze sculptures that illustrate the book.

The poems are roughly in chronological order of the awful events—from the first hint of catastrophe in Europe in the early 1930s—

Leaves are flattened
under black cars,
smoke rises from
books burning.

—to Warsaw in 1939—

A woman shocked
to see a man's hand
severed,
hanging from his wrist
by a small piece of skin,
his good one holding
his torn bleeding hand.

—to the lies told to the refugees—

*These are freight cars
but you will be switched
on the way.*

—to the fiendish scientific experiments—

If one twin dies
they will kill the other.

—to the discovery of Dachau by the outside world—

*Refrigerators full of bodies,
stacks of them,
that had been left in the cold
to see how long it took
to freeze people.*

—to the disbelief of the American liberators of Dachau—

*They were so skinny
you couldn't tell the difference
between a man and a woman.*

—to the endless examples of meaningless violence perpetrated on the victims—

*He kicked me
over and over—
made my mother watch.*

Lyn Lifshin has worked a lifetime to perfect the simplest of linear poems using spare plain style diction and allowing each image and voice to carry the short poems. Lifshin herself withholds her point of view, letting the various persona voices speak for themselves. I can think of no other contemporary poet who could have done the job so completely, so simply, so movingly. Now 50 years after the end of World War II in 1945, this one single book provides the most incisive and authentic overview of the horror of the Holocaust.

As editor of *The New York Quarterly*, I knew the book was in the works because we were proud to publish some of these poems in *NYQ* over the past few years. I remember especially the poem about Edward R. Murrow breaking the news about Buchenwald over the radio to the American people. Now all these poems are together in book form, and I recommend it to anyone who cares about contemporary poetry.

But it would be a mistake to see this as just another Holocaust book—Lyn Lifshin herself has commented:

"I think the experience is not just about Germany in World War II. Some of the ghetto poems were originally published in a magazine that mostly published Africa American poems—and some could be about Bosnia today."

It is, then, a powerful insight into our time, into ourselves.

—William Packard

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Poems of the Holocaust by Lyn Lifshin

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