

Fine lines: lyrical lust for life in new poetry collections

I LIVED ON THIS EARTH... HUNGARIAN POETS ON THE HOLOCAUST

Selected and edited by George and
Mari Gömöri
Alba Press, £10.99

SONGS FROM TWO CONTINENTS

Moris Farhi
Saqi, £10

THE GIRL IS SMILING

Cheryl Moskowitz
Circle Time Press, £7

REVIEWED BY PETER LAWSON

Some people have a problem with Holocaust poetry. It seems destined to leave readers unhappy. And it might be asked why anyone wanting to know about the subject wouldn't do better reading historical studies.

To people beset by such misgivings, I unreservedly recommend *I Lived on this*

Earth... The poets assembled in George and Mari Gömöri's anthology are not defined or delimited by the Holocaust.

While writers like Miklós Radnóti, István Vas and János Pilinszky found themselves flung into a situation to which they applied their poetic gifts, several of the poets included did not physically experience the Holocaust, although they clearly carry the psychological scars. Zoltán Sumonyi (b.1942), for example, bears witness only in *Mauthausen 2009*, when visiting the former concentration camp's museum. István Turczi (b.1957) adds an epigraph to his poem *Memento*: "Nothing but a photograph remains of this generation".

The Holocaust is slipping into history – which makes this finely translated collection all the more significant. And a lot of the writing affirms what makes life worth living, and simultaneously compels its readers to question their own behaviour towards others.

Moris Farhi's latest collection begins with an affirmation of "God" and "the flesh". Far from the horrors of man's

inhumanity to man, Farhi's personae find grace through sexual passion: "have you been loved/ as I have been loved?/ have you felt grace/ when you blessed/ your flesh/ and not your mind?// does not passion/ redeem/ the loss of innocence?". The poems in the first half of this selection are largely about sexual love. Then death enters the picture, and we see that Farhi's passion is partly shaped by the need to "forget/ the many ways they have killed us".

Consistent with this, in a poem entitled *After Auschwitz*, Farhi writes: "love is wisdom/ wisdom is love". Love is the antidote to the time – in a reference to a memory drawn from his own family experience – "when your sister's skull/ stared at you from a pile of skeletons/ in Birkenau's Crematorium 2". Love is "restorative soil" and "reincarnation/ by embracing the fire".

The final words of this brave and affecting volume urge the reader "to keep on loving/ while waiting" for "the dust". Farhi writes a pared-down, "skinny" form of free verse, reminis-

cent of Dylan Thomas's similarly passionate and poetic lust for life.

Cheryl Moskowitz is also concerned with reincarnation in *The Girl is Smiling*. She writes of childbirth: "I understood for the first time/ the meaning of reincarnation:/ that each new delivery returns us/ absolutely to the beginning". Another impressive poem, *Lifted*, concerns the kidnapping and abuse of a "scarecrow girl/ a slip of a thing".

It is deft and discreet in the manner in which it tackles its difficult subject. The rapid repetitions are suggestive of nursery rhyme, a place where an innocent girl encounters this "man/ this guard/ this brick of a thing/ this thick-skinned/ hard-nosed prick of a thing".

Confrontation between fragile female and violent male recurs in another poem, stressing its narrator's inability to intervene: "I couldn't save her./ My sheets are wet with sweat./ Nothing, I say

**Cheryl Moskowitz:
family fulfilment**

again./ shouting into the pillow/ to smother the noise". The life-fulfilling qualities of the family appear to be redemptive in Moskowitz's work, which contains some beautiful poems about mothers, fathers and daughters.

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