

LYN LIFSHIN

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## Under A Crying Sky: a suite of poems

In early September 2004 Chechen Islamic militants took more than 1,000 people, including 777 children, hostage on September 1. On the third day of the standoff, Russian security forces were forced to storm the building, using tanks after several explosions in the gym employing rockets and other heavy weapons. In the end, 334 hostages were killed including 186 children. Hundreds more were injured and many were reported missing. Men disguised as workmen had concealed weapons and explosives in the school sometime during July 2004, though this was later refuted. Still, several witnesses testified they were made to help their captors remove the weapons from the caches hidden in the school. There were also claims that the militants or their accomplices constructed a sniper's nest position on the sports hall roof in advance. September 1 is known as First September, the traditional start of the school year when the children, accompanied by their parents and other relatives, attend ceremonies hosted by the school. Because of the pupils and family members attending the Day of Knowledge festivities, there were many more people than usual for a normal school day.

Early in the morning, armed Islamic guerrillas left a forest encampment wearing masks and explosive underwear. At first, some at the school mistook the guerrillas for Russian Special Forces practicing a security drill. Soon the attackers began shooting in the air, forcing everybody from the school grounds into the building. They herded everyone into the gym and took all their mobile phones under threat of death and ordered everyone to speak in Russian and only when spoken to. A

man who stood to calm people and repeat the rules was shot in the head. Others were shot and bled to death. Their bodies, dragged from the sports hall, left a trail of blood visible in the video later made by the hostage takers.

It was sweltering, there was no food, children were crying, people were ill, were dying, weak, negotiations were not working, flames and explosions began and on day three, the assault began.

## UNDER A CRYING SKY

The field near the  
old graveyard, a  
field of gaping holes,  
some so wide they  
were pits large  
enough to hold  
3 or more bodies  
from one family. All  
morning volunteers  
and soldiers dug  
wet stony ground. By  
late morning, the  
funeral processions  
were arriving. Under  
a dark sky of rain,  
the men carrying  
coffins could barely  
walk in the mud  
and muck. Wailing  
women, sounds  
of grief from different  
parts of the cemetery  
blended. Then the  
grieving touched  
the corpse one last  
time, a final faint  
touch or a grasp  
that didn't want  
to let go

## UNDER A CRYING SKY

at 2:30 pm, 14 coffins  
came at one time. Some  
victims visible until  
these last minutes,  
a woman with red hair  
brushed back, parted  
over her blackening face.  
A young man in a Sunday  
suit, a shrouded child.  
A six year old first  
grader in an open coffin,  
her body veiled in  
lace and on top of her  
legs, her pink teddy bear

## THEN THE COFFINS WERE SHUTTERED

with final haunting  
bangs before they  
were placed in red  
bricked holes. Pieces  
of concrete were  
lowered on top  
before dirt was  
shoveled into the  
hole by young men,  
rain streaming  
down their faces

## WHEN THE SKY WON'T STOP CRYING

in some graves,  
three members of  
a family buried side  
by side, so large  
a dump truck had  
to back up to the  
hole and tip the  
load of dirt on  
the coffins. "It is  
our blood," one  
grave digger said,  
"yes the sky  
is crying."

## BANDITS

one woman says,  
they threw our  
babies to the  
pigs so the pigs  
would eat our  
children in front  
of their mothers

## MIXED WITH THE CHARRED RUBBLE

the shoes stood out,  
a burned black sneaker  
near the wall, a soiled  
white slipper with  
fake jewelry. A girl's  
toe-less sandal, a  
woman's high heels,  
each without its mate

Maybe they took their  
shoes off during the  
long siege or they  
were blown out by  
the explosion that  
tore apart their bodies

The shoes were all  
that was left, shoes  
and a belt, a torn  
red balloon, bottle  
of wine, an elastic  
band for a young  
girl's pony tail

## THE BODIES OF CHILDREN, TAKEN FROM THE WRECKAGE

the gym, a tomb  
for generations of  
this small town.  
The town came to  
look, just a few  
neighbors at first,  
then a few dozen,  
then hundreds.  
By the end of the  
day, thousands  
came, said they  
needed to see this.  
“We don’t need  
sweet medicine,  
we need bitter, so  
we know, so this  
will never happen  
again”

## THE SCHOOL HAD NOTHING LEFT TO OFFER BUT BUILDINGS

wrecked by bombs,  
rocks, tank fire,  
it looked like war  
time Grozny, Kabul  
or Sarajevo. Part  
of the second floor  
in one wing had been  
lifted off the building,  
it was as if a hurricane  
tore thru, leaving  
class rooms and halls  
open to the air, one  
wall was pocked  
by tens of thousands  
of bullet holes  
and blood

BRICKS, BROKEN GLASS,  
OVERTURNED FURNITURE,  
SCATTERED THROUGHOUT  
WHAT ONCE WAS A SCHOOL

burst pipes spurting water,  
a black board in a  
class of first graders  
lay on the floor  
pierced by bullets. One  
room where a teacher  
taught history of  
civilization was still  
smoking, “Just a horror”  
she said as she looked  
at the scene of torn  
lesson books. Because  
she was a minute  
late, she escaped capture.  
Now she has nothing  
left but memories  
of the many children  
she taught

THE WALL OF THE FIRST  
FLOOR MATH CLASS ROOM,  
DECORATED WITH FIGURES  
FORM RUSSIAN FAIRY TALES

was splattered with dark  
stains, dried blood. An  
overpowering stench  
was still there from the  
corpses. On top of a  
record player a rotting  
piece of flesh guarded  
jealously by a few flies

NEXT TO THE RECORD PLAYER,  
A MULTIPLICATION TABLE  
AND ARITHMATIC BOOKS

Flesh lay on the floor,  
It was as if someone  
had tried to escape,  
chairs and desk stacked  
in an awkward pile  
up to a high school  
window, a curtain  
on the sill he climbed  
thru without being  
slashed by broken glass

FOR THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL,  
A HANDWRITTEN POSTER  
“GRAMMER MISTAKES”

flesh and blood on  
the floor, the room  
transformed to an  
execution chamber  
where men were  
taken to be shot.  
Blood splotches  
on a medicine  
cabinet. The floor  
stained red, the  
window sill stained  
with red from  
murdered bodies  
thrown to the  
yard outside

## PEOPLE WATCHED THE BUILDING

bursting with anger  
and horror. "We saw  
the bodies of the  
bastards in the  
street." When one  
of them was  
lifted up his head  
fell apart. One  
man took a glove,  
put on a glove,  
picked up  
the head and  
smashed it  
against a truck

## YOUNG MEN WENT THRU THE RUBBLE

no one knew how much  
was still booby trapped,  
if a bag of soil was  
full of explosives

## IN THE MIDDLE OF SMASHED FURNITURE

they found a stuffed  
grandfather Frost,  
picked it out of the  
dirt and propped  
it up on a desk. On  
the floor in a  
corridor lay a  
poster showing how  
to assemble an  
ignition device. Near-  
by, a door was  
blown off its  
hinges. A sign read  
“Weapons Storage  
Room”

## FOR 52 HOURS, SWELTERING

in late summer heat,  
nothing to eat or  
drink wondering if  
they would die, the  
hostages waited

now, only ashes,  
shredded walls,  
blown out windows  
the night air moans  
thru. Ventilation

pipes fall down.  
Fall charred rafters  
all that remain

## LATER AS THE HOURS PASSED

the gym was turned into  
a memorial. Flowers  
on the blackened  
rubble of the sills,  
always in even  
numbers in keeping  
with the Russian  
death traditions. Two  
chairs were set up  
in the middle of the  
gym for more flowers,  
or for cookies and  
water bottles, a custom  
intended to lure  
animals and birds to  
eat in the memory  
of the dead

## LATER IN THE BURNED OUT GYM

sets of burned keys, a 5  
ruble coin. Three icons  
and a new school note  
book. At the foot of the  
chairs was a tiny white  
shoe that may have been  
worn by a 3 year old.  
No one was left unmoved.  
A bus driver said "I just  
wanted to see where  
the kids were and  
and how it was"

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**LYN LIFSHIN** has published over 130 books including three from Black Sparrow. Recent books: *Barbaro: Beyond Brokenness* and *The Licorice Daughter: My Year with Ruffian*. Recent books: *Ballroom*, *All the Poets (Mostly) Who Have Touched me*, *Living and Dead*. *All True, Especially the Lies*. Just out, *Knife Edge & Absinthe: The Tango Poems*. NYQ books will publish *A Girl Goes into The Woods*. Also just out *For the Roses* poems after Joni Mitchell. Her web site: [www.lynlifshin.com](http://www.lynlifshin.com)