**FICTION AND POETRY**

**Fire Tongue**

Zvi A. Sesling (COM’66)
Červená Barva Press

When a poetry collection’s most comforting verse is titled “The World Is Ending,” you know you’re in for some pretty dark reading. Death not only pervades these verses, it is the scaffolding they cling to. It is the fuel for irony, bitterness, faith, and redemption, and in these poems, all that thrives in life does so with the sad insistence of a barnacle on a dying reef.

No one is spared: cars mow down blameless children, a hydrogen bomb rains on a city. In the poem “Last Will,” the grieving relatives, likened to vultures, lean in close to hear a dying man’s last words: “Screw you all!” One poem is titled, simply, “Death.”

Divided into four sections, “Fire Tongue,” “City,” “Sorrow Road,” and “War Zones,” the poems range from intimate to historical, including “Texas Tower Massacre,” which ponders the psyche of the 25-year-old man who shot dead 14 people at the University of Texas in 1966:

Crush the people like cockroaches on sidewalks bullets in place of feet, hands steady rifle do you—feel close to God or Satan in the tower up there pulling the trigger again and again

A widely published poet who has taught at Emerson College as well as Boston University, Sesling has created in *Fire Tongue* an affecting landscape of loss, fear, and decay. Some of the poems, such as “Hotel Terminus,” read like a warning and could have been penned by a mischievous Death itself. The shorter poems deliver swift stabs to the gut, such as this, from “Hours Gray and Ill”:

Sadness pervades black night, stars hide from illness of dark

By embracing something so fundamentally and universally human—death and fear of death—Sesling’s poems whisper in the reader’s ear that although there is no escape, he or she is not alone, and that for all its inevitability, death is oblivion, and we are right to be, to varying degrees, obsessed with it. —SUSAN SELGSON

**NONFICTION**

**Casting Lots: Creating a Family in a Beautiful, Broken World**

Susan Silverman (CAS’85)
Da Capo Press

Reading Silverman’s *Casting Lots* is like spending time in the company of a wise, funny, and generous friend. Although the subtext is a call to international adoption (there are tens of millions of orphans in the world, Silverman, whose resource website is JustAdopt.net, tells us), the book is on many levels a love story. An ordained rabbi, a human rights activist, and an adoption advocate, Silverman takes us through a childhood in a family so blended that her parents’ divorce was not a loss, but ultimately a windfall in the form of stepparents (and a half sibling) who feel devotion to their children, biological or not, and relaxed affection for one another. It’s a portrait of a sometimes achingly honest marriage where dinner table discussion can take on the weightiness of a Talmudic argument. It’s about an extended family of loquacious, cheek-pinching kvellers who cannot get enough hugs, kisses, or laughs.

Silverman has always wanted and planned to be a mother, and for as long as she can remember, that plan included adoption. In her husband, Yosef Abramowitz (CAS’86), she finds a thoughtful, devout, and optimistic partner whose progressive brand of Judaism fuels his commitment to the notion of *tikkun olam*—healing the world. “I want to adopt from abroad,” Silverman declares to Abramowitz. “And I don’t mean from a lady.” At the time, they have two young biological daughters. Ethiopia, writes Silverman, seems a perfect choice—Abramowitz had been active in bringing Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

It was agreed the child would be a boy. “Girls come from mommy’s tummy and boys come from Ethiopia,” evolves
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family. And it was good.

another and the planet, they made a

beliefs and fueled by their love for one

book. Guided by their own instincts and

family snapshots that appears in the

montage of Silverman-Abramowitz

international adoption. But an even

more beautiful and less broken. She de-

making that world, ever so slightly,

end that Silverman lays out the case

it is not until her author’s note at the

kind of throw of the dice to determine

to the Old Testament’s mention of a

Casting Lots

, a reference

development. She spent part

of 2014 training at the Arizona Wildlife

Fire Line

The story reads as if Santos
tagged along with the Granite Moun-
tain Hotshots in the field, but in fact,
she never met them. She

relied heavily on inter-

views with their families

and friends to flesh out her

characters. She interviewed

scientists and climate ex-

perts as well. Wildfires, she

writes, are becoming more

prevalent because of climate

change and increased urban

development. She spent part

of her time in Italy.

Over the next 18 years, Lahiri studied

the language as she raised her family

and built a literary career. But after

completing The Lowland, in 2013, she

felt that she had come to the end of a
certain creative phase in her writing

life. In Other Words begins with her
decision to move with her husband and
two children from Brooklyn, N.Y., to

Rome, so she could read and write full-
time in Italian.

In some of the memoir’s most moving

passages, Lahiri chronicles her compli-
cated relationship with language. She

spoke only Bengali until she was four,

when her family moved to Rhode Island

from India (by way of England). Her first en-

counter with English, she writes, “was harsh

and unpleasant.” She
describes how hard it

was to trust teachers

and make friends, “be-

cause I had to express

myself in a language

that I didn’t speak, that

barely knew.... I was ashamed of speak-

ing Bengali and at the same time, I was

ashamed of being ashamed.” As she

notes, “Writing in Italian offers a flight

from that conflict.”

Lahiri wrote the book in Italian; the

English version is presented in a dual-

language format, with her Italian text

appearing on the left page and the

English translation, by Ann Goldstein,
on the right.

In Other Words ends with Lahiri

and her family about to return to the

United States after a three-year ab-
sence. But thanks to this project, she

writes, “a piece of me can remain in

Italy.” —JOHN O’ROURKE

The Fire Line: The Story of the Granite Mountain Hotshots and One of the Deadliest Days in American Firefighting

Fernanda Santos (COM’99)

Flatiron Books

I

N HER JOB AS New York Times

Phoenix bureau chief, Santos was
	
tasked with covering the tragic

June 2013 wildfire that killed 19 elite

firefighters in one day. Their deaths

marked the single greatest loss of

firefighters nationwide since 9/11,

and the largest death toll of profes-
sional wildland firefighters in more than

century.

She took an eight-month leave from the

times to write her first book, The

Fire Line. The story reads as if Santos
tagged along with the Granite Mount-

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In Other Words

Jhumpa Lahiri (GRS’93, UNI’95/’97)

Alfred A. Knopf

HUMPA LAHIRI WAS JUST 32

when she won the 2000 Pulitzer

Prize for her first book, the short

story collection Interpreter of Maladies.

Since then, she has written two well-

received novels, The Namesake and The

Lowland, as well as another collection of

stories, Unaccustomed Earth, each

vividly depicting the Indian diaspora.

In Other Words is altogether differ-

tent: a slim memoir that at its heart is a

love story. And like any love story, this

one is full of passion, longing, and at

times, exasperation. But Lahiri’s affair

is with the Italian language.

“It was love at first sight,” Lahiri

writes, recalling her first trip to Italy in

1994 while she was working on a PhD

in renaissance studies at BU. “My rela-
tionship with Italy is as auditory as it is

visual...What I hear in the shops, in the

restaurants, arouses an instantaneous,

intense, paradoxical reaction. It’s as if

Italian were already inside me.”

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and built a literary career. But after

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