

THE DARK ROOM AND OTHER POEMS

By Enrique Lihn

147 pages, New Directions, \$8.95

The greatest Latin American poetry of this century comes from Chile, Patricio Lorzundi points out in his brief introduction to this book. Enrique Lihn (b. 1929) is, with Nicanor Parra (b. 1914), among the most important Chilean poets since the generation of Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda. Mistral and Neruda won the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1945 and 1971 respectively.

This selection of Lihn's verse in English, with facing Spanish texts, draws on six books published between 1963 and 1977, and includes work from Lihn's "Occasional Poems" which was awarded the prestigious Casa de las Americas Prize. The translations by Jonathan Cohen, John Felstiner and David Unger are faithful to the original Spanish, yet fluent and colloquial. The English versions are so outstanding and so uniform in style that one suspects that each translator reviewed the others' work for improvement.

The great themes of poetry — love, loneliness, birth, death — are here: "The unending loneliness from which others drink/during the cocktail hour/is my grave . . . I bring it up to my lips/and thrash about in it till I disappear." And, "For no one in particular/with no hope or purpose of influencing the course of things/the poem is a solitary rite/related in what's essential, to death."

Yet Lihn is not always so fatalistic. He celebrates urban life as well as the solitary landscape; he writes of wars, revolutions and invasions in strong metaphors, and he commemorates loves, marriages and the stages of life. One of his most powerful pieces is the long title poem which ends, "Part of me is that boy who falls down on his knees/softly crushed by unbearable omens/and I haven't come of age yet/nor will I reach it like him/once and for all."

In 1974 Lihn toured the United States and stirred such enthusiasm among poets and translators that his work has since appeared in many American literary magazines. This book is another "first" for James Laughlin of New Directions, without whom many foreign poets would still be seeking an American audience. Through Enrique Lihn we know that Chilean poetry is still alive and well.

—Charles Guenther