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
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
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 spurted 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 ARITHMETIC 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. Nearby, 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”
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
The sky cries tears now
Loud thunder rumbles the ground
The storm is at hand.

Light electrified
A streak on the horizon
Fear sparks in man's hearts.
Danger dances strong
In the voice of the wind's song
Singing its fury.

Trees bend, leaves rattle
The branches weak are scattered
The storm is going.
The sky has brightened
The dim, gray, dark, sky no more
The aftermath shows.

So passes a day
Cherish, no matter how bleak
A new season's peak.

Crying Sky by Katherine Byrd.

My eyes wander to the window glass
And I see the sky crying
On tree dirt and grass.

No one wants to see my real face, for I am dead in this place.
So I scream, "You cry in face of sadness when I am under lock and key of pain!"
Whenever I scream out in agony with tears running,
No one even glances at me.
As if people find it cunning,
All I have ever wanted was to be sadness free.
I let myself fall into the mud,
Careless of what others think
If I could change the past, I surely would
And tell myself to smash the lies people force me to drink.

Katherine Byrd.

There is another sky,
Ever serene and fair,
And there is another sunshine,
Though it be darkness there;
Never mind faded forests,
Austin,
Never mind silent fields -
Here is a little forest,
Whose leaf is ever green;
Here is a brighter garden,
Where not a frost has been;
In its unfading flowers I hear the bright bee hum:
Prithee, my brother, Into my garden come!

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Next Poem.