

BOOK REVIEW

Zhadan's 'How Fire Descends' a powerful introduction to contemporary Ukrainian verse

"How Fire Descends," by Serhiy Zhadan. Yale University Press, 2023. 136 pp. ISBN: 9780300272468 (paperback), \$18.

by Olena Jennings

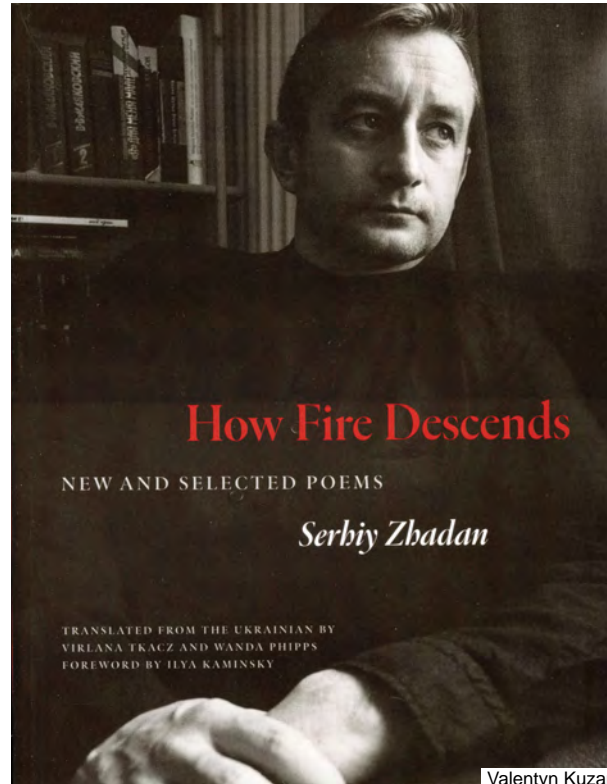
In his foreword to "How Fire Descends" by Serhiy Zhadan, translated by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps, poet Ilya Kaminsky writes, "Zhadan searches for language that connects with and makes legible eastern Ukrainians' experiences."

The book, with groups of selected poems from a series of collections, is evidence of this search. The poems highlight language, specifically the language of loneliness and the language of war. The included collections were all written since the Russian invasion of 2014.

It is impossible to falter when reading the translation by Ms. Tkacz and Ms. Phipps. The words are pressed to the page with confidence. The translation bears the language of the original inside it while sounding natural in English. The process of working on a co-translation makes the language feel particularly refined. Mr. Zhadan's poems are often featured in events staged by Yara Arts Group, of which Ms. Tkacz and Ms. Phipps are founding members, and it is a pleasure to read them on the page.

In his personal life, Mr. Zhadan uses language to champion Ukrainian causes. As Mr. Kaminsky mentions, when Mr. Zhadan was ordered to kiss the Russian flag, he refused, using words. In the book he writes, "The first word is the first light." Each word in the poetry carries a great weight.

Language becomes present in memory and in the future



Serhiy Zhadan's "How Fire Descends"

as it is, "important even after death." Mr. Zhadan writes about the attempt to change language. Changing language

includes changing reality and changing relationships. He also writes about "the desire to rename everything."

Poems from one of the last collections included in the book "Antenna" include a multi-layered love poem. Mr. Zhadan mentions retelling a story in his own words. The story between the couple is a language of gestures and disappointments. He thinks her lips look chapped as if "maybe she was kissing someone long and hard," but in fact she has been standing on the cold street for a long time handing out flyers "no one needs."

The poems are universal. They are the reason that Mr. Zhadan commands the popularity of a rock star. They are about having the strength to speak. "You Will Never Write," is about enjoying the words, letting them linger and fill you. When talking about poetry, he writes, "You can only enjoy it/You can only reread it." This book is one to enjoy, relate to and reread.

Readers need this book to better understand the world and themselves as they relate to the voices in the poems. The poems transcend loneliness as readers feel a sense of connection with the poet. "I now have the words/to talk about silence." Now readers have the poet's words to express their deepest thoughts. Mr. Zhadan commands: "Remember the breath, the presence, the eruption of language."

The book is available at local bookstores, bookshop.org, barnesandnoble.com, and from the publisher Yale University Press. "How Fire Descends" is a great way to introduce your friends who love poetry to contemporary Ukrainian verse.