

Poetry Life & Times

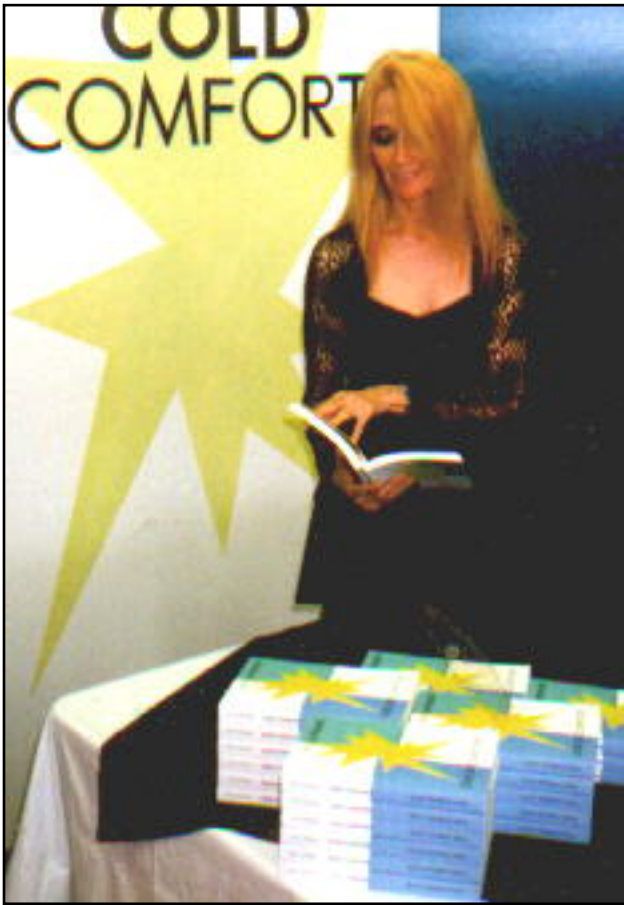


January 1999

Café Society's Poetry News Update

Do you have any poetry news? Do you have any comments for the Readers' Letters section? If so, mail me on the email link at the bottom of this page. This is a non-commercial site - competitions and calls for submissions can be announced here free, because they are of interest to poets.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LYN LIFSHIN



Lyn Lifshin at a book signing for her book "Cold Comfort"

For this issue, which is dedicated entirely to the work of women poets, I am delighted to have the opportunity to interview [Lyn Lifshin](#).

Lyn Lifshin has written more than 100 books and edited 4 anthologies of women writers. Her poems have appeared in most poetry and literary magazines in the U.S.A., and her work has been included in virtually every major anthology of recent writing by women. She has given more than 700 readings across the U.S.A. and has appeared at Dartmouth and Skidmore colleges, Cornell University, the Shakespeare Library, Whitney Museum, and Huntington Library. Lyn has also taught poetry and prose writing for many years at universities, colleges and high schools, and has been Poet in Residence at the University of Rochester, Antioch, and Colorado Mountain College. Her numerous awards include the Jack Kerouac Award for her book *Kiss The Skin Off*. Lyn is the subject of the documentary film *Lyn Lifshin: Not Made of Glass*. Her newest book is *COLD COMFORT* from Black Sparrow Press. They will publish her next collection *BRUISED VELVET* in 1999.

For her absolute dedication to the small presses which first published her, and for managing to survive on her own apart from any major publishing house or academic institution, Lifshin has earned the distinction "Queen of the Small Presses." She has been praised by Robert Frost, Ken Kesey and Richard Eberhart, and Ed Sanders has seen her as "a modern Emily Dickinson."

Poetry L & T:

What events, or which poets, first inspired you to write poetry, Lyn?

Lyn Lifshin:

As a child, I was given books like NOW WE ARE SIX, a collection of children's poems and I was entranced. I still love pieces in it like "Alexander Beetle," "Where is Anne," "Tattoo was the Mother of Pinkle Purr." I'm sure the music and mystery of this book must have had a lot to do with my loving poetry. When I skipped from first grade to third grade at six years old, and then, pushed ahead several grades, I found math much less interesting than reading and was lucky to have a teacher in third grade who had us reading poets like Blake and Milton and writing our own poems. I've often talked about how I found one of Blake's poems, copied it and showed it to my mother. I said I wrote it! Because we lived in a small town, Middlebury Vermont, it wasn't a surprise that my mother ran into this teacher, said what an inspiration she had been, how I'd written this wonderful poem with words like "rill" and "descending," words she didn't even know I knew. By the following Monday I had to write my own first poem. Actually, to my amazement, it wasn't that bad:

*The sun is descending out of sight
and night is drawing nigh
birds in their nests know it is night
while flowers nod near by*

*and soon the sun will be coming back
the light coming over the hill
and birds from their nests will fly
while flowers awake near the rill*

After that, I started as a drama major in college, at Syracuse University but fell in love with Dylan Thomas in college, Lorca, Sir Thomas Wyatt. I did my Master's Thesis on Dylan Thomas and started my Ph.D at Suny Albany where their Ph.D program was new enough that they wanted the "more seasoned" and preferably British writers as subjects so I began my Ph.D on Sir Thomas Wyatt. It wasn't until after leaving rather abruptly that I began to read Anne Sexton, Plath and Wakowski all influences I'm sure. And jolted from the academic world, at the time, I was drawn to the more wild writers like Bukowski, the Beats. If you look at the writers in the anthologies I've edited, esp Tangled Vines and Ariadne's Thread, you'll find many women writers I especially love, though of course, not all.

Poetry L & T:

Your book "Blue Tattoo" deals very powerfully with anti Semitism. Do you think that poetry can make a difference in the world, or, at least, raise awareness of injustice?

Lyn Lifshin:

I hope so. I do think the arts, film, painting and poetry, fiction can convey what "facts" often can't, can touch people because they are not just quotas and numbers but deal with feelings, passions, individual losses and pain. For me, the first awareness, emotional awareness, about the Holocaust came from seeing a film by chance I probably had heard something and yet, though my family is Jewish, it was never spoken about while I was growing up. But the film shocked me and that is my first clear memory of terror and outrage at something like anti-Semitism.

Poetry L & T:

Your poem about the prejudiced teacher, "For Me The Holocaust Started in '33 in a Small Village", is very moving. Was this from personal experience, or that of a friend of yours?

Lyn Lifshin:

As I think you mentioned, I spend my time between upstate New York and Virginia. In Albany New York there is a fine museum that has often asked me to design a workshop to go along with various exhibits they have displayed: mothers and daughters, feelings about war, the urban American landscape, mirrors and, for the exhibit, The Story of Daniel, they asked me to do a Holocaust workshop. Though I had begun reading about the period, writing some things, seeing some films, I worried that the people who took the workshop might know more than I did, might be survivors or children of survivors, so for a half a year I submerged myself in stories, films, non fiction books, poetry, art work about the Holocaust. I would go to the library and bring back 50 books at a time. I began dreaming about what I read and many of the poems in Blue Tattoo came from the intensity of being so surrounded, for such a long time, with so many stories. I ended up writing, after the publication of the book, a short pamphlet about the process of writing the poems, how they came almost in a dream like state, I went to so many lectures, so many plays, films I was breathing that time and half hypnotized. But the poem is from something I read most likely, a news article mixed with a dream.

Poetry L & T:

Your book "Cold Comfort" has some very touching poems about loved ones. Do you find that those people closest to you are your greatest inspiration?

Lyn Lifshin:

When I edited Tangled Vines, a collection of mother and daughter poems, I did not have a single mother and daughter poem. But, as with the Holocaust, I was immersed in the subject. That is when I began to write mother and daughter poems. As my mother became older and ill, the intensity of the relationship, always very close, with all the ambivalence of mother and daughter relationships (one reason why I think the poems in Tangled Vines are so wonderful) shifted in subject and mood. In her last half year, as she was dying, I was with her often 24 hours a day. The poems were a way to survive. On the day she died at my house, I couldn't believe this was happening and sat near her bed. I kept writing lines on the top page of a notebook: each line a new page. I never went back to finish the poems. But one of my most successful pieces, WRITING MINT LEAVES AT YADDO, a poem in Cold Comfort, (a piece that has won several awards) talks about how I wrote the poem during this time. It is in the August 1994 Writers Digest and also in an anthology of Best Writing from the year by Story Press. Intense and difficult family

relationships often seem a wellspring of such strong feelings. This past May, for my new book BRUISED VELVET, I went back to the fall of 1991, the fall after she died: I had typed up poems up to her death and then, more recent ones. But I still have about 100 notebooks of yet to be typed, handwritten manuscripts of poems (the blessing and curse of being prolific). The poems from the year after my mother's death were so painful to go back to, type, revise. Many will be in the new book. Many are still in these overflowing, spiral books.

Poetry L & T:

The poem "After A day we Stay in Bed Until the Sun is Close to Setting" deals with the subject of love in a warmly sensual manner. Do you generally see poets as sensualists, or as commentators of life?

Lyn Lifshin:

When I first began writing I used to say I was living like a nun and writing in a much more erotic way than I was living. I think Diane Wakoski said you write about what you don't have you see a man with a ring on his finger on the metro and try to imagine a life time with him. But, when you are with someone, you don't need that bridge to reality: it is right there, at your side. I think perhaps the poems, even the ones most rooted in "reality" are a way to experience what is missing, lost, never quite what it could be. And yet, many of the poems, including the one you mention, did begin in an incident, real or imagined. For me, told I was "wholesome" in high school, something I hated when the other cheer leader girls were going across the state line to drink and I was just doing science projects and painting and wishing I was thinner, (now I weigh 100) more flashy and never wholesome and "good," the erotic poems were a mask I could put on and do what I hadn't dared to, a way to be someone else, startle, tease. I've never thought about whether we see poets as sensualists exactly I think we DO think of them that way but whether it is fair, I wonder. Interesting. I'll have to think more about that! I do think poets can't help but be commentators of life though.

Poetry L & T:

As a successful poet, do you still find that some doors of opportunity seem to stay firmly closed?

Lyn Lifshin:

Absolutely - it never gets easier, even after 100 books and publications in most literary magazines. In fact, in some ways it is harder than when I started: well known review magazines no longer review much poetry, libraries do not buy archives as they once did and so much seems connected with pull, connections, power, politics. I suppose it was always that way to an extent. But my first poems were reviewed in Library Journal, Publishers Weekly, Choice on a regular basis and that is not the case any more. And of course, the onslaught of huge chain bookstores is devastating for independent presses. I do though feel wildly lucky and happy to have a wonderful press: Black Sparrow doing my last book, COLD COMFORT and my coming book, BRUISED VELVET. I've had wonderful editors and publishers since I began, patient, helpful, supportive and loyal. And often when I read around the country, it is my poems in small magazines that readers have seen most. Distribution is a real problem and now finding my books in many places is such a thrill.

Poetry L & T: Do you think that large publishing companies place enough importance on seeking new talent?

Lyn Lifshin: In the same way that serious journalism and news reporting is now battling with fast, quick, yellow, tabloid-almost television etc, it seems the audience for serious work is really dissolving. Entertainment seems in: popular blockbusters, slams, cable tv and it is hard for publishing companies, who care really only about a profit, unfortunately, not to go where that is. The individual editors that still are in small press, I don't think play as much of a part anymore.

Poetry L & T: What do you think of small presses who charge poets for copies of anthologies featuring their work? Should that be regarded as a form of "vanity publishing" or a valid chance to get noticed by bigger publishers?

Lyn Lifshin: I would not pay to be published by anyone. Never. I might not GET paid what I would like, but I draw the line at paying. For each of my books a rather well known poet has accused me of paying! It always makes me laugh. I know some small presses do need the money and we know not many people subscribe. I happen to buy poetry collections on a very regular basis Most of my books are poetry. And by a range of writers. But many people do not. Now I am hearing of slams and open readings actually charging writers to read which seems outrageous to me. When I began doing readings I was always paid. In this Virginia---DC area there are a lot of poets wild to read who never get paid. I couldn't believe that when I first came down here: I never traveled or read anywhere without pay. I was shocked and I didn't like it. But, to promote my last book, I did read. But to pay to read??? Give me a break. yet, I think some people actually do. Not getting poetry reviewed in widely circulated reviewing venues and being asked to read and not get paid are my biggest current peeves. I am a good reader, I am always told but I think of readings as work. I had a couple of nightmare readings in the recent past absurd events but so bizarre they became subjects of poems. (My new book, BRUISED VELVET, has a story about trying to get a bookstore to carry my books that is pretty wild, too) Back to the question of anthologies or magazines asking for money: I was burned early on told never to pay and I did, it was for a recording that never happened. So I'm doubly against paying. Yet, there are legitimate cooperative publishing venues and self-publishing has always been around Virginia Wolfe, Hemingway etc.

Poetry L & T: Do you think that poetry on the Internet is widely regarded as being as important as that which is published in books?

Lyn Lifshin: I think it might be becoming that. I know more and more writers seem to publish on the net I expect this will continue to be an important part of publishing. More and more.

Poetry L & T: This question comes from the poet Joyce Tres, (who has some of her poetry in this month's issue). Have you ever thought of having an online poetry workshop?

Lyn Lifshin: A couple of people have approached me and the idea is interesting. I do a lot of poetry work shopping through the mail. I'd like to I think.

Poetry L & T:

When you lecture on poetry, are there some points you like to make about form or style, which are absolutely vital to remember when composing a poem?

Lyn Lifshin:

I like to let writers know my own biases: I don't tend to write formal poems, often use rather conversational language, like surprise, like tight and open poems, spaces, twists, intensity as well as things left out. I think those taking a workshop with me should know my biases since really all critiquing is based on such subjective things. If I go into a school, I always write **DETAILS MAKE THE LIE MORE BELIEVABLE** on the black board. Feeling one can lie frees young people's imaginations and makes writing more fun I think. Often I've said that if you know where a poem is going, it probably isn't worth writing. But that is a little flip. I think beginning writers often try enormous topics when the smallest detail, a jagged scar on the face of someone on the subway, the pattern of oil smeared over earth might be a more unique, unusual and rewarding place to begin. I try to get students to trust their senses, use dreams, free flow, not worry about being silly. I've had a number of students who have gone on to do incredible work even though I don't teach all that much. There are two places I talk a lot about writing that might be of help: a documentary film made about me called: **LYN LIFSHIN; NOT MADE OF GLASS** and available from Women Make Movies and a memoir I wrote for Gale Research Series: **ON THE OUTSIDE: LIPS BLUES, BLUE LACE**. (The memoir should be in any library and the film also can be rented thru library loans.) I wrote a long article about style and form for an issue of Writers Digest that is still available as a special issue: **THE BASICS OF GETTING STARTED IN WRITING**, volume 16, 1995 a collection of pieces for new writers giving a lot of suggestions: use photographs, keep a diary, keep phone tapes, eavesdrop, read everything, day dream. But mainly, keep writing. Even when you think you have nothing to write about: Start with any thought, collect postcards, names, words, free flow from awful things: accidents, disasters. Write from different point of view, from the voice of someone in history or myth. Read about herbs and roots, animals and birds. Keep momentos, really look at apple leaves, use your childhood, remember the smell of wood, the sounds of the floor boards of an old house. Keep calendars, check stubs, clips of news articles, drift through dictionaries, listen to conversations, think of early secrets, what people told you about yourself that changed your life. Use memories, old songs, old TV and movie fragments. Do all this until writing becomes like breathing, a way to enter and explore the world more fully.

Poetry L & T:

I am sure these last comments will be very inspirational to aspiring poets. Thank you for the interview, Lyn.

EDITOR'S LETTER, JANUARY 1999

Dear Poets,

This issue is dedicated to women poets, both amateur and professional. It features an interview with successful poet **Lyn Lifshin**, along with examples of her poems and work by several other accomplished women poets I have encountered on newsgroups and the internet. I have not included my own work in this section, but anyone who would like to read my poems can go to link 4 on the main index of Café Society, or [click here](#).



There is a picture of each poet included, with a brief bio. Lyn's poems appear first. They are the two mentioned in her interview, which will allow readers to gain some insight into Lyn's thoughts behind them.

Any comments on this issue or back issues can be emailed to me on the link at the bottom of the page.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sara Fussell". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The name "Sara" is written in a larger, more prominent script than "Fussell".



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LYN LIFSHIN,

the subject of this month's interview, was widely published in small presses in the USA and numerous poetry magazines before finding success with her current publisher Black Sparrow Press. She also teaches poetry at several universities - See bio at beginning of interview for more details.

Or visit her website:

<http://www.lynlifshin.com/>

**FOR ME THE HOLOCAUST STARTED IN '33
IN A SMALL VILLAGE**

© Lyn Lifshin

I was in a class
and the teacher said
I hear we have
a Jew pig in this class.
I shook. He said
I'm going to show
this Jew pig
how much pain
a Jew can survive.
He took a stick
out of the desk
and hit and hit.
I don't remember the pain,
but only the kids
who'd once been my friends
laughing and laughing.

**AFTER A DAY WE STAY IN BED UNTIL
THE SUN IS CLOSE TO SETTING**

© Lyn Lifshin

He drives home
thru the black trees
with a poem
about me that will
make him famous
starting in his
fingers. He wishes
the wheel was his
Olympia typewriter.
He needs to get my
hair where he can
touch it on the long
drive thru the pine
trees, my musk still
drenching the car.
I want to read
this poem almost as

much, dazed, the
night's performance
has sucked me flat
and pale as an empty
sheet of non erasable
bond, has pulled
all color, all the
wet moist verbs
out the way he took
the stories I told
and made them in
to his own surreal
dreams. Even my
leaves and branches
became the green
arms of a child.
My mouth is dry, I
need to have his
poem where my clove
nipples press into his
blue striped cotton
smelling of sun and
wind in the pine
trees, a mirror that
will reflect my dark
eyes. I need this as
much as he needs
to invent me to
become himself.

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JULIE DAMERELL has been published in various internet journals: [Café Society Guest Poets](#), the June '98 [Pigs 'n' Poets](#), Michael Stephen's [Avalon](#), and the Nov-Dec '98 [Wired Art From Wired Hearts](#). Her column for [Ellavon: An Ezine of Basic Culture](#), is titled Rural Route Two. Two of her essays are included in **Mother Voices**, an anthology published by **Rose Communications** in March 1998.

**SOMETHING TO DO:
RICHARD BEALE, THIRTY YEARS OF PAINTING THE
CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE
© Julie Damerell, July 1998**

I don't understand a word,
not one,
until he starts talking about mandala.
He is mispronouncing the South African president's name,
I suppose,
but don't mind
because for a moment I am bright enough
to be in the gallery.
Then I figure I must be wrong;
surely I would have heard if Mandela painted
during his twenty-seven prison bound years.
So I look at the pictures with the most intelligent expression
I can devise.
I witness circles in squares on the canvas
and guess that his talk about painting the circle in the square
isn't about that monument you have to drive around on Main Street,
isn't about where he painted, but what.
So I stop trying to understand the words
and simply feel what the pictures hum.

Shadow upon shadow,
mirrored treasures sought and found.
A man seeing himself and joy in moonlit water,
welcoming stars to join him.
Flowers unfolding to four corners
hosted by a southwestern moon
guiding its followers out of suffering.
Midnight cat refusing dragonfly tea,
trees casting for bird
and sky,
home to souls lonely and loved.

Words on the tip
of a paintbrush
filling empty spaces,
telling spirit's journey.