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Rejection Slip? What Rejection Slip?

Dispatch from a reading by Lyn Lifshin, who might be one of the most prolific poets in the universe.

by Daniel Nester

It's a warm night in Saratoga Springs, New York, and somewhere along this strip of preppy bars, tchochtke shops, and white-tablecloth restaurants, Lyn Lifshin, The Most Widely Published Poet in America, will soon be taking the stage to read her work. Caffé Lena, tucked upstairs on Phila Street, bills itself as the oldest continuously running coffeehouse in the country. For folk fans, Caffé Lena is holy ground: Bob Dylan played the living room-size venue months after it opened in 1960, followed by everyone from Arlo Guthrie to Emmylou Harris to Ani DiFranco.

Like Caffé Lena, Lyn Lifshin has been in business for a long time. If you've ever browsed the literary journals at a Barnes & Noble, odds are good that you've seen Lifshin's byline in at least one of them. And if you're part of that unsung subset who reads the submissions to those journals—as I have for the past 15 years—it's certain you have handled the ubiquitous #10 business-size Lifshin envelope, stuffed to the gills with carbon copies of typescript poems.

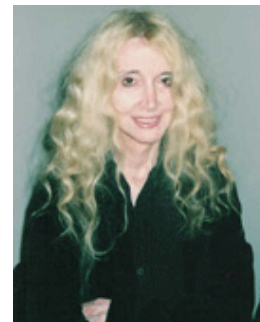
Since her first poem was published in 1967 in the anti-war mimeo magazine *Kauri*, work by Lifshin has appeared in more than 300 journals big and small. Now in her late 50s, she is unofficially known as the queen of the small presses. Len Fulton, publisher of *Dustbooks' Directory of Poetry Publishers*, takes an informal poll every year in which he asks journal editors to name five representative authors from their pages. He tallies up the names and publishes the results in the directory's "Popularity Sweepstakes." Lifshin has won the poll 16 times.

When I heard about Lifshin's Caffé Lena reading, my curiosity was piqued. I wanted to see if she was for real. She is so prolific; would it be possible for her to take a break from writing her accessible, conversational, mostly short-lined poems? Would she be stuffing envelopes bound for faraway journals at her table? Was she a good reader of her work? Most of all, I think, I wanted some closure after reading so many of her submissions.

As I walk in, I buy a chocolate chip cookie from a table staffed by clean-scrubbed high school kids. I take a seat under a large photo of folk legend Odetta. I scan the room for our Lifshin, and I spot her in the back as she sets up a table with her books. Rock star-skinny in tight jeans and a Western belt buckle, sporting a Greek fisherman's cap atop mod-cut platinum blonde hair, she rocks a softball shirt that sports the visage of Ruffian, the female racehorse from the early 1970s and namesake of her latest book, *The Licorice Daughter: My Year with Ruffian*.

Many in the crowd are signed up for the open mike, which will take place before and after Lifshin's reading. For two nervous teenage girls, this night will be their reading debut. It

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occurs to me that poets aren't born in the academy; rather, they are born in places like this: coffeehouses where open mikes bring in the crowds, and poets sell their books at merchandise tables. It is a scene that replays itself across the country.

When it's time for Lifshin to read, Carol Graser, Caffé Lena's poet-host, asks the poet's former students to raise their hands. Half the audience complies. Graser describes Lifshin as "one of the early feminist poets who worked outside academia," and everyone applauds.

Lifshin moves slowly and is comfortable in her skin. She speaks softly and deliberately as she reads poems about Ruffian, her racehorse muse. (Lifshin was putting out single-themed poetry books decades before those Iowa MFA kids were encouraged to do so.) The timing is apt: in a few weeks, nearby Saratoga Raceway's season will be in full swing, so all this talk of fillies and jockeys goes over well. The way she chats between poems, with tidbits of history and horse lore, makes me think of the days when reading-talk banter wasn't so self-conscious.

If one follows the rule of quality over quantity—she's estimated to write hundreds of poems a year—one might be tempted to write off Lifshin's poems themselves. But it's not that easy. It is a relief to read a Lifshin poem, because she is clearly someone who writes what she means. She addresses women's issues in an especially hard-hitting way. In "Dead Girls, Dying Girls," for example, she describes her subjects as "always in / demand on the news. / Often in a pink dress / in photographs of / pink rooms." In "Barbie Watches TV Alone, Naked," the doll proxies for the Everywoman who

doesn't want to
have to keep smiling
as any stranger who
buys her twists her
arm out of its socket
or throws her out

As she reads, Lifshin's breathy voice feels natural, almost conversational. She doesn't read in that unfortunate William Shatner monotone that seems to be an epidemic among poets. If there's one criticism to make, it would be that her movement from speech to reading is so minute that one's ear becomes tired from being on guard, wanting to hear everything.

When I approach Lifshin to interview her, it's clear that she's no stranger to this: as I whip out my tape recorder, she whips out hers. For a moment it's like a duel in a Western.

We talk about a lot of things—how her father's friend Robert Frost praised her poetry when she was a teenager; how she walked away from her dissertation on 16th-century poet Sir Thomas Wyatt and dove head-first into contemporary poetry journals; how a member of the Byrds, seeing her picture in *Rolling Stone*, offered to take her away and marry her.

All of these topics are very interesting, but what I really want to ask is: *How do you deal with all those rejection slips?*

I run the numbers in front of her. Considering the massive amount of work Lifshin sends out, even if some gets published, the laws of math dictate that much of it gets sent back, rejected.

It takes some time for her to answer. I realize I'm being tacky, careerist. But I really want to know.

Lifshin is gracious. "I didn't really first send to the magazines I liked. I thought, 'Well, I'm not good enough for that,'" she says.

She started sending out poems while working at a television station. During the ample downtime, she typed up everything she had and sent it out to the small magazines sprouting up across the country. Thus, in addition to appearing in such top-shelf stalwarts

as *American Poetry Review*, *Georgia Review*, and *Yankee*, Lifshin's poems popped up in fringe magazines such as *Medusa's Hairdo*, *Kiss the Skin Off*, and *Portable Wall*.

Even with all this acceptance, she says, "when a rejection slip comes from a magazine, I'm certainly not pleased about it." From the beginning, her first reaction has been to "send it right back out." The hardest rejections for her to swallow have been for book manuscripts, as well as for a certain annual award for work published in small-press journals.

"I always think of myself as the Susan Lucci of the Pushcart," she says. In the 1970s and '80s, Lifshin estimates that she was nominated for the Pushcart Prize anthology by at least 10 journal editors every year. But she was always passed over. One editor still nominates her annually. "He said he will until one of us dies."

After the reading, I am recruited by our host to work behind Lifshin's merch table. I count the books in front of me: 16 in all, from out-of-print 1980s chapbooks to her most recent titles from Black Sparrow Press, the mega-indie home of Charles Bukowski, Paul Bowles, and other underground icons. (Sold off in 2002, Black Sparrow now publishes Lifshin under the Black Sparrow/David R. Godine imprint.)

The morning after the reading, I get an e-mail from Lifshin: she "may have downplayed" her reaction when I asked her about rejection. "I do of course not feel happy to get rejected," she writes. "I know I may have recently published in a particular magazine, sent a too-large submission.

"I am prolific, a gift and a curse, I suppose," she writes. "More a gift, but not to everyone."