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Lyn Lifshin, Poet/Interview



Lyn Lifshin, Paris

**“... writers writing in a way
that seemed like writers writing
the way people talked ...”**

An Interview with Lyn Lifshin

by Emily Vogel

The following interview took place via e-mail in April.

EMILY VOGEL: *As a poet I can admit that at thirteen I also had aspirations to be an actress. And ballet, well, it was intense from the time I was six until fourteen years old. Anyway, let us commence this interview. Can you tell me who or what has inspired your aesthetic choices with regard to poetry?*

LYN LIFSHIN: Well it is an amazing coincidence that I got this question right when I am for the weekend at my place in New York where all my older books are.

How did I get started? I am told, around three years old on a trip from

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22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				
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META

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Barre, Vermont to Middlebury , Vermont, where I grew up until college, I am told, (while) looking at the trees, I told my mother it looked like the trees and leaves were dancing. And she said I'd probably grow up to be a poet (though she named me Rosalyn, thinking that would be the perfect name for an actress). I think as the first born I got a lot of attention, a lot of books, but one I really remember and just grabbed from the shelf is "Now We Are Six", by A. A. Milne. I adored the story of Pinkle Purr and the poem about Alexander Beetle and Butter Cup Days and Binky.... I loved that book, and how it survived I've no idea, but it was given to me when I was three. There're a few little scribbles in it, but pretty amazing – it is in great shape.

I started school at six, but skipped many grades because I read well before starting school. I had a simply wonderful third grade teacher who had us write poems every day. I still have a little blue notebook with those hand-written pieces, many based on things she'd bring in: a bough of apple blossoms, melting snow. So I had an early love of poetry. By fifth grade we were reading Milton. Being terrible in math, I am lucky poetry came easily.

I've often told the story of how I copied a poem of Blake's from "Songs of Innocence" in third grade and showed it to my mother and said I wrote it. She was amazed I knew words like "descending" and "rill", and not surprisingly she ran into my teacher, told her how amazed she was that I had written such an amazing poem. As a result, I had to write my own poem by (the following) Monday. And I had to use "descending" and "rill" in it.

So I got off to a good start really. My father, who I had little relationship with, showed one of my few poems to Robert Frost, who wrote on it "Very good images, sayeth Robert Frost... bring me some more poems." By the time I had more, he was dead. But that bit of praise went a long way in giving me confidence. Still, I started in theater in college, and then, feeling I needed a way to have a real job, I majored in English literature with a minor in art history. I thought I would get a Ph. D., get a good job and *then* write. Though I finished all the course work for a Ph. D., got all "A"s , passed Italian and French language exams and had 100 pages of a dissertation written, somehow, as the department said, there was a personality conflict between their new English faculty member and me. And in the end, I walked away from finishing the degree.

EV: So it is evident that your mother was a great influence on your poetry, and also the teachers you had in elementary school. When I was in fifth grade, we were introduced to the limerick form. Could you tell me a bit about what forms have inspired you and which forms you are devoted to?

LL: When I left SUNY (State University of New York), Albany, I walked out into traffic with no idea what I would do. I knew, or felt, I wanted to be as far away from anything Academic as possible. I painted for a while, was asked to display my paintings, have a very few on my web site. I took a job at an entertainment TV station. During the quiet weeks, I began to type up the few poems I'd started. I ordered a copy of Len Fulton's "International Directory" – a slim stapled, I think, directory at the time,

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and sent requests of sample copies to every magazine listed. I got a quick overview of what was being published. And, I wanted to get as far away from academia, as far from 15th and 16th and 17th century literary.

I started sending out poems that summer, and luckily the first submission (actually the second – the first submission – I can even remember the mail box I sent it from – two haiku pieces – two variations of the same poem) was accepted. I was thrilled. It was from *Folio* magazine, an attractive magazine from Birmingham, Alabama. That was followed by an acceptance from *Kauri* magazine, a poem, the first of many they would accept and publish.

It was an extremely exciting time. I was daily finding wonderful poems that thrilled me. I'd done my Master's thesis on Dylan Thomas, and an undergraduate thesis on Federico Garcia Lorca. And had my rough draft of Wyatt and Sidney – I still really love Wyatt, but I discovered poets like (Charles) Bukowski and Anne Sexton and (Sylvia) Plath ... writers writing in a way that seemed like writers writing the way people talked: William Carlos Williams ... it was like finding jewels every day.

When I began to write, I wanted to read and publish in the least academic magazines I could. I was charmed by *Wormwood Review*, *Marijuana Quarterly*, *Goodly Company*, *Trace*, *Lung Socket*. I avoided any magazine with a university connection. Of course, that changed eventually, but I wanted magazines like *The Outsider* with their special Bukowski issue. These are the magazines I submitted to, read, collected.

I was happy to publish regularly, to be the most published poet in *Rolling Stone*. I was chosen early on as one of one hundred most promising young poets – that was special to me. It attracted mostly good attention, but one well known promoter called, wanted to send me air fare to come out to LA to see if I really looked as good and interesting as I seemed in that photo. I didn't go, but the one phone call triggered at least one poem that is in my new book, "All the Poets (Mostly) Who Have Touched Me Living and Dead," *All True, Especially the Lies*.

Now, my tastes are much more catholic. You can get an idea of some writers I love (not all – there are so many), in the three anthologies I have edited: "Tangled Vines," "Ariadne's Thread," and "Lips Unsealed".

As for forms I am addicted to, I'd say there are none. Sometimes I try my own vaguely like a villanelle, but with its own variations. I wrote haiku early on and some sonnets, but I have not worked with form that much.

EV: It seems that your philosophy for poetry is that it is a daily practice, not just an occasional hobby. Being a poet myself, I have more than once been accused of "poetry as obsession." Do you find that poetry can be addictive, or that it is just simply one of the necessities of daily life?

LL: I would say yes to all the aspects of obsession, addiction and something I have to do every day. Once I said that the word in the Eskimo language for "to breathe" is the same one as to make a poem. I believe and feel that. Of course I am obsessive about a lot: ballet, ballroom , horses, Abyssinian cats, horse like Ruffian and Barbaro –

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velvet, clothes, silk, soft leather.... So "Yes" to all you suggest!

EV: You have obviously written an enormous amount of poems. Do you ever get stuck in the rut of an image, word, phrase, or topic that wants to be recycled? In other words, what have been your experiences with "writer's block" and how have you overcome it?

LL: I should cross my fingers before saying I rarely have writers block. Ironically, in college I was afraid to take a creative writing course, afraid I would have nothing to write about.

I am pleased my new book "All The Poets (Mostly) Who Have Touched Me (Living and Dead: All True, Especially the Lies," is out and getting strong reviews, "...a tremendous book along the lines of John Berryman's *Dream Songs*" ... "mind candy" ... "witty ... lusty ... a feast of words." If you are a poet, know a poet, or are wild for the secrets of writers you may never have heard before, this is a book you shouldn't resist.

DRIFTING

things I have and
don't have
come from this
moving between
people like
smoke. I've been
waiting the way
milkweed I
brought inside two
years ago stays
suspended, hair in the
wind it seems to
float, even its
black seeds don't
pull it down
tho you don't under
stand how any
thing could stay
that way
so long

LIGHT FROM THIS TURNING

I have lost touch with
distant trees,
the wind you brought
in your hair
and lilac hills.

Something different
bites into the river
and the river of lost days

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floats over my tongue.

Love, you are like that
distant water, pulling
and twisting,
you turn me

apart from myself
like some frightening road,
something I don't want
to know

Still, let my
hair float slow through
this new color,
let my eyes absorb
all light

from this turning
that has brought us
here, has carried us
to where we are,
we are

NOT THINKING IT WAS SO WITH YELLOW FLOWERS

At night I
dreamed that
same dream,
the one
full of muscles
and thighs
that aren't you.
Later the fear
came back
crossing into
Mexico tho
at first
when I woke up
I thought it
wasn't true
the air was so
bright and
yellow flowers
were falling
from the
pepper tree
like suns

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New Books by Lyn Lifshin include “Ballroom” and “*ALL THE POETS WHO HAVE TOUCHED ME, LIVING AND DEAD. ALL TRUE: ESPECIALLY THE LIES.*” Recent books include “The Licorice Daughter: My Year with Ruffian,” “Another Woman Who Looks Like Me,” “Following Cold and comfort”, “Before It’s Light, Desire” and “92 Rapple.” She has over 120 books and edited four anthologies.

For more information, visit: www.lynlifshin.com

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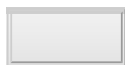
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