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By [Kay Day](#) offline



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## Poetry Dynamo Lyn Lifshin

Author: [Kay Day](#)

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*The most published poet in the world today, Lifshin shows here with this book what many literary magazine editors have known for decades: she's a poet of substance, range and invention.*  
--Small Press Review

Any serious poet knows the name [Lyn Lifshin](#). Lifshin the legend, Lifshin the dynamo, Lifshin the poet whose work turns up, words pared like apples cut into perfectly sized pieces. Robert Frost described her poetry as having "very good images," and advised, "Bring me more poems." *The San Francisco Review* casts her as "...frighteningly prolific and utterly intense. One of a kind."

Poetry Dynamo

That she is. This trim woman with the long blond hair and dark penetrating eyes has written over 100 books and edited four anthologies of women writers. She has published in virtually every poetry and literary magazine in the nation; she has given more than 700 readings at places like Cornell, Dartmouth, and The Shakespeare Library. Winner of the Jack Kerouac Award, finalist with the likes of Maxine Kumin and Philip Levine for the Patterson Award, Lifshin has made it in the world of poetry, the one she both picked and created.

Lifshin's focus on poetry began in elementary school. "I had a wonderful third grade teacher who had us reading Milton, Longfellow, Blake. I copied a poem of Blake's out and showed it to my mother. I said I wrote it. She ran into my teacher." Lifshin then had to write a poem that was really her own. "That is one way I started," she says, adding, "but I also loved poetry, read a lot—and when I left graduate school and took a job, though I was also painting, I began writing—poems just seemed natural."

The "natural" aspect of her poetry follows Lifshin to this day. I find her poetry like a silk dress, with threads so fine and light, you almost don't even think of reading the lines requiring effort, because they flow so smoothly. One of my very favorite poems by her is, "The Daughter I Don't Have" (*Cold Comfort*). She speaks of a daughter awakening in the middle of the night, describes emotions that capture maternal essence with lines that are tight, yet thickly textured:

*... I part her  
hair, braid her  
to me as if to  
keep what I can't  
close, like hair  
wreathes under  
glass in New  
England.*

I count Lifshin among the must-reads, but I honestly don't even remember how I discovered her. At times, she has seemed to be everywhere. Her efforts to publish have inspired legions of tales. One of my fellow editors shared a story with me. "I remember getting submissions from Lyn Lifshin years ago when I was co-editor for a now-defunct literary magazine. While most poets sent three to five poems, she sent huge stacks of her work, typed on onion skin. And while most sent us only one packet of

submissions for our annual magazine, Lyn sent two or more.”

“I’ll admit,” my colleague continued, “I hated wading through her reams of material, but the caliber of her work was so much higher than most of what we received, it was well worth the effort. I also remember being envious that she had so much material to submit in the first place...”

Submitting can be a challenge to any poet, regardless of talent. Lifshin says the part of the business she finds tough is the “networking.” “Some people are great at this, love it.” she writes. “I’d rather be writing.” She has a new book, *Before It’s Light*, coming from [Black Sparrow Press](#) this fall, and confides, “I’ll work at doing as much as I can to publicize it.” But Lifshin, the consummate writer, adds, “The writing is always the high--“

One of the first poems I discovered by Lifshin, “Getting My Mother Ice,” from the collection, [Cold Comfort](#) explores the mother-daughter relationship that draws words from so many female poets. The poem that begins, “Nothing lasts long/in this heat/except the dark/of waiting...” probes feelings between a critically ill parent and her daughter-caretaker. The reader receives a snapshot of the daughter getting a wash cloth for her parent, and is caught up in the hopelessness of the situation. In an article for *Writer’s Digest*, Lifshin called poetry a “way to hold, to keep a moment, like photographs...”

Asked about her interest in the mother-daughter bond, Lifshin replied, “I agree that the mother and daughter relationship is so intense, interesting, and ambivalent that an incredible number of strong poems on the subject exist. That was why I chose that relationship for the first anthology I edited, *Tangled Vines*, and that has been kept in print almost without a break.”

Lifshin calls the present “a comparatively quiet (catch up) time for me before the publication of my next book—and all the work in trying to arrange readings etc. around that...I still have about 100 handwritten notebooks of poems to catch up on.” She says she has thought about a novel, but she hasn’t done it yet. As a Lifshin fan, I’ll be watching the shelves, because after experiencing what she does with poetry, the novel should be a piece of cake.



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