

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4

Lyn Lifshin

I Think Of My Grandfather

on a cramped ship
headed toward Ellis Island.

Fog, fog horns for a
lullaby. The black
pines, a frozen pear.
Straw roofs on fire.

If there were postcards
from the sea there might
have been a Dear
Hannah or Mama, hand
colored with salt.

I will come and get you.

*If the branches are
green, pick the apples.*

*When I write next, I will
have a pack on my
back, string and tin.*

*I dream about the snow
in the mountains. I never
liked it but I dream of
you tying a scarf
around my hair, your
words that white dust*

**If My Grandmother
Could Have Written A Postcard
To The Sister Left Behind**

It would be written
on sand, or on a
hand colored photo
graph of a country
with nobody waiting
with guns, no thatched
roofs on fire, no
hiding in trees after
a knock on the
door: *Sister, it is
nothing like we had
or what we imagined.
There are no Jews
in the small rural
towns hardly. They
don't spit or say
we are thieves but
it is as icy in Vermont
as days in Russia.
Lake Champlain is
not like our sea. We
are safe, we are
lonely*

**If My Grandmother
Would Have Written
A Post Card To Odessa**

she would write her
name in salt, salt
and mist, an SOS
from the ship sea
wind slaps with night
water. *Somehow I'm
dreaming of Russian
pines. I don't dream
of the houses on fire,
babies pressed into
a shivering woman's
chest to keep them
still. Someone had
something to eat the
color of sun going
down behind the
hill late summer,
rose, with its own
sweet skin. They
are everywhere in
America. If the lilies
bloom in our
town of darkness,
just one petal in an
envelope would be
enough*

**From The First Weeks
In New York,
If My Grandfather
Could Have Written A Postcard**

if he had the words, the
language. If he could
spell. If he wasn't
selling pencils but knew
how to use them, make
the shapes for words
he doesn't know. If he
was not weighed down
with a pack that made
red marks on his shoulder,
rubbed the skin that
grew pale under layers
of wet wool, he might have
taken the brown wrapping
paper and tried to write
three lines in Russian
to a mother or aunt he
might never see again.
But instead, too tired to
wash hair smelling of
burning leaves he walked
thru, maybe he curled
in a blue quilt, all he had
of the cottage he left
that night running past
straw roofs on fire,
dreamt of those tall black
pines, but not how, not
yet 17, he will live in
a house he will own,
more grand than any he
saw in his old country

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56 North Pleasant Street

past the beads hung over the door,
rose light floods the back room
where the safe is, my grandmother
with a sick baby crying, tapping
the pane under apple leaves

My mother is 8, her new doll's
head lies smashed on the floor.
She is hating her brother. Spirea
covers the sidewalk. She is
furious at her brother and runs
into the hot stove. Her

grandmother gets a cold knife.
My mother screams, is sure the
knife is a weapon. She is wild
to claw her brother. My great
grandmother will die without
replacing the broken head tho

she promises this until her last
month in the blue bed where I
will try to sleep when my mother
goes to have my sister and won't
tho my grandmother sings

White Cliffs of Dover and the
apples are like magic green eggs
in July light behind the house