

*Lyn Lifshin*

**NISKAYUNA HOUSES AND OTHER HOMES:  
BELONGING AND LETTING GO**

The sense of home, place and belonging to that place is a core of my work. And maybe because I have never found it, I continue to look. Having a house has always been wildly important to me. Perhaps because from six until I left to marry, I lived in an apartment in a small town where everyone had yards and swings and sand boxes and went to one of many Christian churches. We were the only Jewish family in town. For years my mother went out with real estate people looking for a house but my father never was interested. A house has always meant so much more than a house. The pull of imagined life in others' homes is reflected in so many of my poems and books: *Shaker House Poems*, *Women Early Plymouth*, *The Old House on the Croton*, *Old House Poems*, *Nantucket Poems*, *Auddley End*, *Phillipsburg Manor* – books that it seems came from my trying to find how others belonged and lived and then let go in history. I'd go to each house, let the sense of the past sink in, notice how a chair was worn and imagine the man in it night after night planning to prepare for war, or harvest, a family. Or I'd imagine a woman in labor in a birthing room in Plymouth, barley and violets on her lips. I've written often about others' sense of home and identity: the women in The Revolution, Inuit in Alaska, women in Tibet in houses smelling of Yak butter, the Indians in their adobe pueblo homes. It always seemed fascinating, wondering how the light fell on their skin, wondering about their dreams, what would happen to make them leave, move on.

As I write this, I realize how elusive and yet magnetic home and the sense of belonging are in my work, the longing and the loss. It is probably not a coincidence that my first book was called *Why is the House Dissolving?* Like so many of my books, *Why is the House Dissolving* focuses on the past, on uncles and grandparents, who are, like the house, dissolving, often leaving legacies of sadness.

When I edited *Tangled Vine*, a collection of mother and daughter poems I noticed there was an intensity often not found even in the most passionate love poems. And there was also an ambivalence.

The mother and daughter relationship is central to my work and has changed amazingly from patterns of rebellion morphing to closeness and then the terrifying reversal of roles. From house to house it changes. It continues to haunt me. And, for me, it connects the different houses. "38 Main Street," a poem in *Tangled Vines*, my childhood home from six on, continues to keep its hold on me. Many poems are about going back to visit, and then, the archeological cleaning it out after my mother's death. I don't know how many poems grew from that. Many of my strongest pieces. To let 38 Main Street go a year ago, after fantasies of returning to live there, was and is very difficult. I want to keep everything.

Today, on Appletree Lane, in a house I'm in rarely the last years. The dress my mother wore to my wedding hangs in the closet. Books and tables cloths, dishes, sheet music and her mother's old dresses are still in the garage... Her letters, her clocks and jewelry, her nightgowns, her check book stubs. Moving on is not easy. I kept this dark wood house, where her memory and that of so many lovers are ghosts, kept it in spite of its non stop problems: roof problems, furnace problems, leaks, ants, mold and mustiness ... I'm not sure what I am holding on to. The me I was then? Among the boxes in the garage, every letter I wrote to my mother, the hospice and care takers' notes of her last days, her college year books and photographs. The intensity and ambivalence of our relationship meant I never ran out of material to write about. Three major books from *Black Sparrow*, *Cold Comfort*, *Before it's Light*, and, especially, *Another Woman who Looks Like Me* have passages about mothers and daughters that do read like a novel going from our life together and her life from child hood to death dealing with these legacies. This holding on, then letting go, reversal of roles, and legacies of what is handed down continue in my forthcoming book, *Persephone*. In one section called *Bay of Love and Sorrow: Mother poems*, I write about the things I do as she did even though at the time she did them I thought they were silly. So many of her rituals, her words, becoming mine as I imagine how things could have been, still could be in poems. The most disparate things bring her back: the poem "Asparagus" ends with us shopping in a supermarket, as she "fill(s) my cart as she did my life, with what she wanted for me."

From her, I learned I could do, try to do what I wanted. I was never

pushed to get married, to have children. She was always supportive of my work but she handed down worrying, as her mother had. We got my grandmother worry beads and I struggle not to need them. My grandmother's house, donated to an organization, is still I place I could visit, "56 North Pleasant Street," the title of several poems from my first book to those I'm working on now.

I was born in Barre, Vermont, a granite mining town, a small town that seemed stuck in the 50's and 40's, the names and numbers of streets seem to hold on to me as I hold on to them. 23 Hill Street, that first address, became a series of poems.. So many others, love poems, mother and daughter poems grew from the years on Appletree lane, even a poem, "Directions to Appletree Lane." The house grew into the poems, dark cherry wood, velvet couches, the stained glass that marbled the floor, the desk, skin. So many agony/ecstasy rides in this house. So many faces tucked in drawers, in boxes, under the gray paint. Finger prints of the gone.

"Enjoy this day," the rabbi said, "after that it will be your husband and our children." I cringed. So many changes seemed as gloomy. Living in Pennsylvania Quarter in DC was a thrill. A museum visit almost every day and the films at Portrait Gallery growing into poems: Gypsies, the Chinese in the city, Wyoming Jews. My *Marilyn Monroe* book grew from imagining her as out of place and alone as I felt the first few months there. She was with me in trips to exhibits at the Corcoran. Arctic poems grew from the Inuit art at Canadian Embassy. I knew almost no one but in the apartment, with Janet Reno on one side, owners of a suspicious night club on the other and a drug dealer across the hall, I could watch the last light through a round window over looking the Washington monument. I could drift and dream as I wrote about Marilyn, Barbie. Strangers who kept me company.

Baronhurst Drive is my other "now" home. Very different poems have grown here. The first day, unpacking, I was astonished: Geese. These huge birds seemed so close to the glass I felt they were in the room with me. Later, goose music at midnight. When I saw the film *Fly Away Home*, I noticed a band on a bird like one goose I saw, had written the date and band number down on the back of poetry note book. To learn more about

what to feed these gorgeous creatures, (never imagining everyone wouldn't want then to stay at the pond,) I called Operation Migration. I had seen an article about the real science behind the film and how they were doing experiments, teaching mother- less geese to migrate following an ultra light plane. If anyone could suggest good books, I was sure they could. Soon, my answering machine was full of urgent messages: call any time of day or night. It turns out I had discovered the only motherless goose (stories about this were on 20/20, in videos and books and now the film) from those baby geese trained to imprint and to fly from Canada to the Maryland shore sighted again in the states. I had become a celebrity in the goose world. Because of this house, this pond, now the subject of *Nutley Pond* just published by Goose River, was not only photographed by the Washington Post in an interview but is the photograph I took for the book's cover. And it is here, somehow pulled back to an early poem I wrote in Appletree Lane, that something sparked an obsession with horses. First with the famous race horse Ruffian and then with Barbaro and Lost in the Fog. Was it a growing sense of beauty and fragility that pulled me to want to keep what had left, was leaving?

Recently out is 92 Rapple Drive, another address, the one where I first began to write. My first poetry acceptance came in that house. It was when late August leaves started to turn. I had a poet lover in the trees and terrible divorce nightmares. The photo on the back cover of this book from Coatlim is in front of that house. The cats I held then, the Mexican lace dress I couldn't bargain for, that made my eyes look enormous with my long dark hair there too. My first acceptance began here as the leaves went red, red as the Chianti stain that kept bleeding thru white paint from the bottle of wine I threw against it

I've recently done several 222 Jackson Avenue poems, the second apartment I lived in with my husband where I started to work on a PhD so I could write and then wrote because I didn't. The stress, the strangeness of those days when I was told women didn't need a degree, was told "why didn't I just have a baby," made me know I had to do something that with a degree I might have put off. I was all finished, except for my dissertation and the fifty pages of that had vanished. But there are enough poems about that phase not to say more here.

*Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4*

I think I haven't felt a pull between work and home. They are braided, entwined as my homes are. They aren't where I lived but where I seem to still live. There's something that still pulls me from the rooms I left at three. I'm sorry when I found the house a summer ago that I lived in until I was three, I didn't just try to remember the rooms and how I felt in them. I wish I'd gone up to the door and asked to see what I was still imagining. It is there I started to be a poet I'm sure, an outsider, the only girl at my first birthday party. I am told before 3, on a trip on a back road, I told my mother it looked like the trees were dancing.

I've never left these houses somehow. And of course there are other rooms. I don't think I've done that well with transitions but am glad poems came and come from that and maybe they are my own transitions, my own place