

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

A Girl Goes Into The Woods
selected poems
Lyn Lifshin 2013
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review by Irene Koronas

MANY YEARS AGO Lyn Lifshin submitted her poems to the Wilderness House Literary Review where I was new to the poetry editorial position. When an email arrived with at least fifty poems, I was overwhelmed. Who was this poet, Lifshin? I learned to take to reading her poems slowly.

Reading the poems one at a time I came to understand or at least I thought I understood what the poems were saying or not saying. Sometimes Lifshin would submit the same poem written three or four different ways and ask me to chose which one to publish.

Through that experience, I realized a poem could work in many different forms and words began to take on many meanings at the same time. The word choices were not better for the poem or not worse for the poem, the words were just different, inferring differences when read in the same context. Instead of thinking of poems as revisions, I thought about poems as individual, momentary explanations, in which one word's meaning could differ, depending on the location the poem presented:

Some Days

*Don't you want to just
be invisible? Go out
in one of those full-body
burkas?*

The beginning verse in 'Some days' we find how, line end words, as in the first two end lines, 'just' and 'out', are short, curt and set the tone, the poem rhythm, which then lends the writing its atmosphere. The poem severs itself, meaning, the end line words, are not extending, to make an easy turn, instead, the end words invite us the reader to pause, to come to an explanation, of the, 'just'. The poem asks us to read, relate, take each word as one would in a haiku, fraught with intention, seen and unseen, visible and invisible. By the time we get to read the word 'burkas' we understand why we are dressing ourselves with the poem. Lifshin uses subject matter, in almost every word, just as early Hebrew writing, uses each word to depict God. Lifshin can be recognized for the writer she is, her mood, her juxtaposition of mood and phrases:

*of course even
then people would stare.*

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Those two lines reveal through the use of 'even, and stare.' I take 'even' as equality. An emphatic equality, even in wearing a burka the poem is seen as naked. We come to be seen, at any moment, even when we cover ourselves, this poem uncovers us from our need to please, to profit from being seen in the right out-fit, shoes, labels, the right body parts lifted to heaven:

*"Haven't you ever wanted
to at least get rid of parts
of your body you can't
stand?"*

Wow! Who would write such a thing! Only a woman? No! Yet we are sure the poem is about a woman because the only word so far that references woman, is the word burka, until we get to the "I." The drama, the burka invokes leads us to an uncovering or cutting off from what is meant to be hidden:

*Belly and chin,
maybe thighs and every -
thing that isn't as it could
be? I could tell something
was happening when I
stopped lusting for clothes
as if they were a man's
body, stopped dialing
VS late at night like
whispering to a taboo love.*

Again a line cuts off the meaning, 'every - thing. The poem is being written by and with a simple gesture, a hyphen, as Dickinson inserted her hyphen. Make of that what you will. I see the hyphen as a fragment, a space in time to meander into the unseen. Just as a nun might cloister herself, as an anorexia girl who seeks the body perfect, which seems demanded of her by her environment, to be perfect, untouched by life or even untouched by sight:

*In fine - line diary entries
I often put down a favorite
or hated dress. Other
friends still bury depression
in shopping. Tho I did, it
no longer works, ineffective
as certain long - used drugs.*

"It", that word, 'it'. "tho I did, it". The poem reduces itself to, 'it'. I am it, "tho I did, it." the saving grace becomes the word "did." Did, becomes or takes us to the past and we lose the tense feelings, "it no longer works." First we the reader must get around the corner after it stops the line with its it:

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*look at me now, at the
kitchen table in faded yoga
pants and mismatched top
and my hair hardly flowing.
Don't you want to some -
times just not make nice or
look nice?*

Just as we read 'just' in the first part of the verse, we encounter, just, in the middle of the poem. Finally the poem finds comfort in being itself and perhaps asks the reader to read the poem on its own terms. The poem becomes a poem because it doesn't have to look nice or read nice. It just has to be accepted as the poem it is:

*keep the phone
off the hook, stop checking
email, not have to hear
about anybody else's prizes
or degrees, new books and
just decide to never again
go to any graduation,
any place you have to pretend
to be anything you're not?"*

The poem, *Some Days*, asks questions. Do we have to pretend we are reading a poem. Do we pretend to read a poem by comparisons, by our cover – up phrases, we expect, from a poem, instead of the poem as it being its own poem? Lifshin's poetry continues to challenge me and I'm glad 'it' does:

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 under-
stand how any-
thing could stay
that way
so long*

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Every poem in this giant of a book, *A Girl Goes into the Woods*, leads the reader to an entirety. Each reader will be able to clarify for themselves what the poet is saying and how the meaning effects each life in different ways. We are privy to the way poetry grows wild, as we walk into a woody area where one can find an assortment, vegetation, sky, animal, bug and leaf. The poems teem with wilderness. "sometimes I'd come in I couldn't tell it was me except for my shape."

I think this is the best poetry book of 2013.