

Lyn Lifshin (1942-2019)

Today, thanks to an ex-student of mine (I used to teach poetry and American literature at the Rhode Island School of Design), I learned of the passing of Lyn Lifshin, an adored but too-little-known American poet. She was 77.

I first encountered Lyn when, sometime in the mid-1980s, unsolicited, she sent me an envelope full of her poems. I do not exaggerate: the envelope she sent me – return address 2142 Appletree Lane, Niskayuna, NY 12309 – was packed full of poems, and every time I opened a letter from her thereafter, which was often, that's what I got: a thick sheaf of poems. And very good poems, too: short, direct, energetic poems, written as if spoken, spoken to be read aloud. I was immediately won over. At the time I was publishing an art and politics fanzine called *NOT BORED!* and, though I did not often publish poetry in it, I chose to publish her "Three Candidates" in issue #10 (July 1986).

Later that same year, as editor and publisher of the *Black Mountain II Review*, which was supported by the poet Robert Creeley (back in the 1950s an associate of the original Black Mountain College and then the holder of the Grey Chair at the State University of New York at Buffalo), I published Lyn's "A Dozen Madonnas Minus Two," a ten-part poem, in the fifth issue of that publication. When asked for an autobiographical statement, she responded, "The last month been writing mad girl poems as the lights go out and candles keep dripping."

In the sixth issue of the *Black Mountain II Review*, which came out in 1987, I published four poems by Lyn: "After the War," "That April," "July 4 1985" and "Somewhere in a London Airport." On 1 April 1987, I organized a poetry reading to support the Black Mountain II program. Held at the Jane Keeler Room at the SUNY at Buffalo, it featured readings by Lyn, who read 10 poems – "No More Apologizing," "You Understand," "Orals," "In Spite of His," "Minestrone Madonna," "Stamp Madonna," "I Got the Bucks," "How It Happened," "I Remember Hiafa" and "Phat" – as well as readings by my fellow graduate student Joseph Brennan and Robert Creeley himself, who'd evidently become a fan of her work. In a letter to me dated May 29, 1991, Lyn said, "a few weeks ago I was in California and understand Robert Creeley who read at one place just before me, told the audience to come and definitely see me, one of his good friends-- which was real real nice of him."

In 1988, I published Lyn's poem "Getting The Goods" in *+R*, a literary arts journal that was, once again, supported by Creeley and the Gray Chair.

Upon being hired by the Rhode Island School of Design in 1990, I began a series of performances that featured contemporary American poets. The first one to be booked was, of course, Lyn Lifshin, who performed on 23 October 1991 at a packed auditorium. (The other poets in the series were Robert Creeley and Charles Bernstein.) I remember well the dissatisfaction of the head of the English Department, which had sponsored the event. In her estimation, what Lyn did was "performance," not "poetry," but that didn't seem to trouble the students, who loved what they'd heard, seen and experienced.

If I could pick a single word to describe Lyn, it would be "resilient." Here was a beautiful woman, who, the victim of a traffic accident when she was young (I believe it was a car crash), did not give up or give in, and who continued to live and fight and be beautiful. She was a great inspiration to me, and an excellent poet, and she will be sorely missed and dearly remembered.

Bill Brown, Brooklyn, NY
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