

*Breathing Poems: An Interview with Lyn Lifshin*

*by Jay Dougherty*

DOUGHERTY: Who have been your primary influences as a writer, and what aspects of their work or lives have had the most effect upon your work?

LIFSHIN: The influences have been everything I've read from college--including Dylan Thomas, Donne, Thomas Browne, Beowulf, through Dickinson, Plath, and Sexton--to many poets still writing. I don't think, though, that anything about their *lives* has had any effect upon me. But their *work*, yes. And I do read a lot of poetry: it's the one type of book I buy on a regular basis.

DOUGHERTY: When did you begin writing, anyway?

LIFSHIN: I started writing in third grade, where I was catapulted at age six, having been able to read, and I just zoomed through.

DOUGHERTY: And you had more of a natural ability with language than with other subjects?

LIFSHIN: Yes. Language and words were more comfortable to me than numbers. I never have been good in math.

DOUGHERTY: Has being a professional writer always been your goal, then?

LIFSHIN: Not really. I put writing on hold for many years. I did

some writing in high school and college, but not much. I continued to skip--or be able to skip--a lot of years in grade-school, and at twenty I was thinking about getting my Ph.D. Although I had *filled all the requirements* and had all "A's"--had even learned Italian in a month or six weeks so that I could pass an Italian exam--suddenly there I was with all that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry and no job, nothing. I had planned to write my dissertation on Thomas Wyatt. But it no longer made sense to me. So I painted for a few months, got a job at a television station and then started writing for real.

DOUGHERTY: Did you seek publication originally through the small presses and little magazines or did you turn to those outlets out of frustration with or disappointment in the established outlets?

LIFSHIN: While I was at the television station, I started sending out postcards to get copies of magazines listed in the *International Directory of Little Magazines*. I hadn't seen that much poetry anywhere else. I had seen *The New Yorker*, of course, but I really didn't know much about those kinds of markets, the bigger markets. And if I had seen some other bigger markets like *The New Yorker*, I suppose I wasn't thrilled. I don't remember. I did see some poems of Anne Sexton in a *Hudson Review* anthology, and those moved me so much that I can remember where I was when I first read them, that it was Sunday, April, cold, with a little snow on the ground. And I sat in an icy car, transfixed.

When these little magazines began sending me copies, I was stunned, wildly excited that magazines like *Wormwood*, *Goodly Company*, *Earth Rose*, *Marijuana Quarterly* were publishing poems that were so moving, intense, funny, wild, crazy, fun, horrifying.

And to me, they were more exciting than anything. With magazines like *Wormwood* and *Choice*, which I liked so much, I was really stunned that they also liked me.

Excluding *Ms.* and *Rolling Stone*, two large markets I really miss immensely since they stopped printing poetry, I've rarely sent my work to a large press. It's not that I wouldn't want to be published there; I've just rarely approached them.

DOUGHERTY: You've appeared in many if not most of the anthologies of the last twenty years that are devoted to writing by women. In what ways do you feel tied in to a new consciousness of women as a writer? And in what ways do you feel your writing reflects concerns that are peculiar to women?

LIFSHIN: I think the outspokenness, the rage, the sexual language in my poetry, the willingness to talk about very intimate, supposedly revealing or violent things did, in a way, come before all that was widely accepted in women's writing, or even men's, although now it seems to be. But I do notice a reverse trend now. Recently, a local punk rock nightclub that usually would feature Lydia Lunch as the only poet, or perhaps just music, did a program of mostly local writers. I read there, and I read almost nothing that I hadn't read before at various times: things that were anthologized in *Tentacles Leaves*, *No More Anthologizing*, as well as a number of poems that were in magazines I especially admire, like *New York Quarterly*. And another woman poet there was shocked, couldn't believe the language, and said something like *the nice Lyn went away and the mean Lyn came out*. It was almost a flashback to before the free speech movement, which of course led me this morning to write a number of poems around "The Mad Girl Longs

For a New Free Speech Movement" theme. And that incident will probably trigger a half-dozen more poems.

I think most or many women have found themselves pleasing more than they wanted to, caring more than they'd like, for others' approval. In graduate school, I was actually told things like "why would you want to work? You're married"--I was then, not now--"You don't need to support a family...and what's a nice girl, I mean, why not have a baby?" And it wasn't just in graduate school that I heard these things. There was this doctor I knew, who couldn't possibly have understood my choice of not wanting to have any children, who was sure that every woman wanted to have a baby. So my writing, I think, reflects all of these kinds of misunderstandings, conflicts, dual standards.

On the other hand, because I do write a lot about relationships with men, some feminists are put off because they don't feel that that is an important, worthy subject. I think I'm more tied in to a new consciousness of women who are in a varied world, of both men and women.

DOUGHERTY: Let me move now to your relationship to universities, the academy. You give numerous readings in university settings but have avoided teaching on a long-term basis...

LIFSHIN: Well, my relationship to the universities has been unstable, I guess you could say, although I've received a number of fellowships from Brandeis, Rochester University, SUNY Albany while I was still in graduate school. As a writer, I've had virtually no relationship to a university so far, thank goodness. I mean, it has totally been my choice. I haven't had to stay out of teaching.

I like teaching on a short-term, limited basis--going to do an intensive week or weekend and that's it. I'm a bit burnt out now from finishing my third anthology of women's writing, *Unsealed Lips*, a collection of women's memoirs and autobiography, to be published by Capra Press. It's just that I haven't taken a real break from writing, editing, doing workshops and readings for years. It's a self-imposed, very driven obsessiveness that I'd like to break away from, at least for a vacation. And right now, I'm more tired and less up on everything than I might be at other times.

But I don't think I would ever like teaching full-time. I'd rather push myself and work twenty hours per day on my own. I think I'd burn out fast as a full-time professor. I'm better at doing an intense, short-time, energetic stint.

DOUGHERTY: What have been your experiences with English departments and those who have been in positions to hire you?

LISFHIN: Since I've been a writer and not a student, I've had wonderful short-term relationships with most English departments. All of my negative poems about working on a Ph.D.--like "Orals," "You Understand the Requirements," or a number of poems called "The Department," some of which will be in a forthcoming book from Applezaba called *Doctors*--were all triggered by or based upon experiences that took place before I began writing, really. I have many close friendships with people in English departments across the country, and I often go back to see them on a regular basis.

I was offered two college teaching positions that I never even applied for. I was asked to come and interview. In both cases I did, and I was offered the positions. One position I was offered

twice, and, because of personal things, I simply couldn't take it. That was a little while ago. It's something: a short term, a year-long or semester-long position would be something I'd like. I did teach at a junior college a couple of times when they lost somebody suddenly.

DOUGHERTY: Do you feel that teaching hinders or helps your own work?

LIFSHIN: I'm not sure teaching either helps or hinders my writing. I don't really see a connection, except in terms of energy or time. I like teaching occasionally, and I like teaching a variety of ages, teaching in a variety of settings.

DOUGHERTY: You have published a tremendous amount of poetry; indeed, some have claimed that you publish too much, too often, that seeing Lifshin in the little magazines is just expected, nothing more. How would you respond to that?

LIFSHIN: I'm not exactly sure what it means to *publish too much*. Is there a right amount to publish? Multiply your height by your weight and then divide by the year of your birth, your lucky number? Although I publish a lot in books, a lot of those poems have been culled very carefully from many, many poems in magazines, and so really there is a larger choice in these books than anyone might expect.

I've often said, when someone questions the amount I write or publish, that in the Eskimo language the word for "to write" and "to make a poem" is the same as the word for "to breathe." So for me, writing is like breathing: necessary, daily, closely connected

to existing. Perhaps I would have had a different audience had I published less.

DOUGHERTY: It is true, isn't it, that many of your poems go through numerous stages of revision and that you send poems out in their various stages of completion?

LIFSHIN: My poems do go through a number of revisions. And sometimes there are different versions of the "same" poem. But I don't--or at least I try not to--send a poem out in different stages, although I suppose that it has happened. Often, between the time it's in a magazine and the time it gets in a book, a poem is revised. Sometimes during a reading I read a poem differently, and that change becomes the revision. And I'm pretty open to editors who suggest changes, too.

DOUGHERTY: How important is revision to you in general? And when do you call it quits--when, that is, do you feel that a poem is "finished."

LIFSHIN: I'm not sure I ever think about when a poem is really finished. Usually I write poems in longhand, with a pen, in a spiral notebook. Often I'll have a couple of lines that I'm either not comfortable with or unsure of or have several different possibilities for. And I'll leave question marks and wavy lines near the possibilities. Sometimes there will be ten or twenty poems all called "Jealousy" or on a particular theme--and you could think of all ten as versions of the same poem, although they are often totally different. Usually I leave these handwritten versions alone for a while: half a year or a couple of years. Then

I do the typing and that's where another stage of revision, after a length of time, takes place.

DOUGHERTY: What do you feel your primary motivations for writing are, and actually how much time per day or week would you say you spend upon writing itself?

LIFSHIN: I write because I do feel that to breathe and to write are necessary to keeping on. Writing keeps demons away, catches what otherwise might dissolve; it transforms, cherishes, exorcises, celebrates, gets back at, makes sense of, orders, changes, revises a lot of things I might not be able to otherwise. And it's fun. I'd like to try fiction, and that might change everything about my poetry.

I usually write in the morning, early--maybe an hour, maybe less, maybe more. I try to keep a diary, too, though I'm usually behind on that. I tend to write on days I don't teach, lecture, travel to work on some writing-related thing. When I'm deeply involved in working on something I'm editing, like this *Unsealed Lips* book, I often don't write during a long portion of that job. When I used to type up poems, waiting until a pile of manuscripts grew, I somehow didn't write much, although lately I have. I tend not to write on weekends, though. I might look at the mail, but not work on poems.

DOUGHERTY: Do you have any idea of how many poems you have published? How many books?

LIFSHIN: I've no idea of the number of poems. Don't forget that many of them, like the madonna poems, are very small. I've



published somewhere between fifty and eighty books, chapbooks, pamphlets, and some very small poetry collections.

DOUGHERTY: Do you ever throw poems away? Or do you work on something once it's in existence until it meets with your satisfaction?

LIFSHIN: Believe it or not, I throw out a lot of poems. Some I save for a while. One magazine did an issue of "bad poems" recently, and I have a lot of poems that I don't send out just for such occasions. Some poems I *retire*, you might say. And it's hard to say how many--but quite a few. And then there are poems that I write, type up, and just never send out.

DOUGHERTY: What advice in terms of necessary reading or practice would you give a young poet?

LIFSHIN: I'd say read a lot. I'd say keep a diary. Read fiction, non-fiction. And I'm really into movies. I think a lot of incredible images come from film, sequences, strangeness.

DOUGHERTY: And what are your current projects or goals for the future?

LIFSHIN: Well, this memoir book is pretty much done. So I'd say prose: I've published a few short short things in prose, one in a recent magazine of short stories, but I'm interested in trying more. The book *Doctors* does have some prose pieces in it, very short prose pieces. In the past I've worked with an actress and a dancer, and I'm interested in mixing music with poetry, trying

anything.

DOUGHERTY: So, are you about ready to stop answering questions?

LIFSHIN: It's funny: I've dreaded doing this interview, but it's been kind of fun, even with a number of other things I have to do, like get ready to go to Buffalo, where I'm doing a mother and daughter workshop. But to answer your question: yes.