

# DOMESTIC BEAT

Edward Butcher

*COLD COMFORT: SELECTED POEMS  
1970-1996*

Lyn Lifshin

Black Sparrow Press  
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In a bio-blurb, Lyn Lifshin is credited (or charged?) with having produced “more than 90 books and chapbooks” since 1970, and certainly it is difficult to pick up a college or small press journal and not encounter a deft, narrow, often intense poem of hers. And Lifshin poems have a distinct look and feel about them—a good sign when attempting to weigh such a phenomenon—that usually entails urging the personal nearer some universal condition, albeit too easily at times.

*The humiliation and death of the mother from cancer...pierce to the brave heart of Lifshin’s engagement with ordinary life’s ordinary horrors.*

As with Simon Perchik or the late David Ignatow, verse, the making of poems, is an integral, perhaps daily aspect of Lifshin’s existence. Such pure poets, who rarely write prose unless forced to by impure thoughts of profit or mainstream attention, tend to nurture too many weak poems, although any one of them may seed a future success. The greater danger, however, which Lifshin does not always escape, is to relax into a formula, into a smooth, even glib lyric-coast home at the expense of necessary tension.

The first large chunk of *Cold Comfort* has been grouped under “Biography,” which plays to Lifshin’s confessional strengths and begins with 13 poems (“Autobiography”) that profile the maturation of a little fat girl who loses her father and must grow in the shadow of a pretty sister, a wallflower who knew “some/ part of me would/ never stop waiting/ to dance.” The progress of the poet’s wounded alter ego continues through the

38 poems of the next section, “After Dark My Sweet,” with dysfunctional inevitability, as school and writing classes give the desperate search for love artistic shape, self-imposed significance. At her best, Lifshin compresses the naturalistic and the metaphoric into surreal anti-fairy tales, as in “Your Words,” which can be swallowed in a single aspirin gulp:

hammers between  
the veal calves  
eyes, the  
red stain. Head  
less chickens  
stagger in wet  
grass where  
a child will  
dream about  
them twisting  
in a night sweat,  
running to  
a mother’s arms  
in the moon  
who sees her  
father sitting  
on her glitter-  
ing like the knife

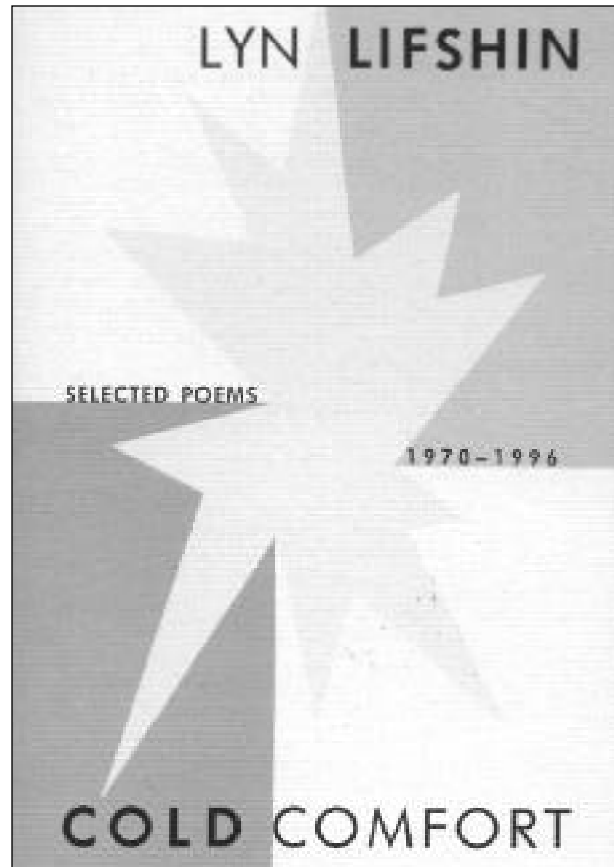
Here the Lifshin virtues and flaws harmonize well: the odd enjambments and economy of means, a brave willingness to risk associative extremes, brutal images seeking archetypal family constructs amid psychological ruins. Factor in the climactic feminist thrust, and you have an editor-proof envelope stuffer. If too familiar for profundity, “Your Words” stakes out a legitimate aesthetic territory and mines it effectively. And a series of mother-daughter poems offers much more, extending Lifshin’s workshop authority to its furthest limits as they paint a harrowing portrait of a mother’s last agonies: “This morning, my mother/ at ninety pounds, was afraid to/ stay alone in the mall,/ her face gray as the stone/ squares.”

The humiliation and death of the mother from cancer, etched in graphic stations of a naked cross, pierce to the brave heart of Lifshin's engagement with ordinary life's ordinary horrors. Rounding off the death series are seven poems directed at "The Daughter I Don't Have," which permits the speaker to rewind and reanimate the mother-daughter dance from the mother's vantage: "I part her/ hair, braid her/ to me as if to/ keep what I can't close." The signature narrow line well earns its desert waste.

*Cold Comfort*'s two remaining sections, "Other People" and "Other Places," lack the urgency and emotive heft of the personal poems, too intent upon politics, a public context, as in "Muriel Rukeyser Accepting an Honorary Degree" and "Georgia O'Keeffe," which are more clever than wise. Designed to shock, some poems court mere trickery as they labor for relevance. "Thirty Miles West of Chicago," for example, a minimalist exercise not without a real edge, scissored newspaper pathos into a man poised amid corn watching "as if something/ could grow from/ putting a dead child// in the ground."

But Lifshin's stumbles when she strays beyond the precinct of her domestic beat do not cripple the vital poetic intelligence that energizes so much of *Cold Comfort*. To ask for more might confound her obsessive art's need for art: "drunk on the poems/ sun makes/ in their bodies."

*Edward Butcher is currently at work on a critical biography of Woody Allen.*



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