

Lyn Lifshin

Nine Poems

Survivor

There were no tombstones. I didn't
know where my father was. It got colder.
Then we were rounded up. Cattle cars.
When we got to Auschwitz I was holding my
mother so tight. Then they told my mother
go to the left, sent me to the right. I
wouldn't go. Then a soldier came with a big
gun. I said I wanted to go with my mother.

He hit me so hard with the rifle I fainted.
I never saw my mother. Then, I'm with some
women. They tell us to take off our clothes.
We couldn't understand. What does it mean,
"take off our clothes?" Then they said they're
going to shave our heads. Nobody said anything.
They said "a shower." Nobody talked, nobody
screamed or cried. We knew shower meant
gas. We took orders. Whatever they said,
we just did. We looked at each other. No
tears. Then, we saw water and when
water came out we cried, that's when we cried

Coco

I was in a sewing workshop for the Hiroshima maidens. They were all disfigured, their faces and fingers gone. But I felt abandoned. My parents were taking care of the badly scarred girls. When I was 12, I stopped growing. I was examined every year to see if there was any damage. I was already developing breasts, that was my Hiroshima bomb

Hiroshima Maidens

When I was 15 I lost eye lashes with the bomb, my face, my lips. I had to be loved for who I am, for spirit. What would you do if you were a small snail in the fire. I was that ant, I was outdoors in a clean up program. A plane came and I put up my hand. My eyes were saved but my hands were ruined. My hair burned off but came back even more lush but I am damaged, ashamed

Going Back to Vietnam

As a child, I
was told if
didn't eat my
vegetables.
I'd be sent to
Hanoi where
Ho Chi Min
would gobble
me up or serve
me to prisoners
for dinner. I
was so young
I believed it
all but I was
not afraid. I
had my Chatty
Cathy doll
President
Kennedy sent
me but then as
I got a little
older, I'd slip
away. I saw
the Buddhist
protesters
burning them
selves in
gasoline in the
square. Even in
California, I
smelled their
burning flesh

Vietnamese Child, Air Lifted 1972

I grew up in a suburb of
Chicago, braces, cheerleading.
My adoptive parents sent me
to private camps. My real parents
I remembered as lips and eyes
in a dream.

After my own baby was born
I tried to imagine never
seeing her and knew I had
to find my parents.
Two years then luck.

I remembered my sister
being bigger than me.
Now she was small in my
arms and we didn't
speak the same language
but we held each other
cried and cried.

The drive to my parents
through elephant grass and shrub
trees seemed endless
I learned my father
searched daily in the jungle
for three years
for our bodies,
then tried to kill himself
he felt so guilty.

There were three of us
pulled from street rubble,
babies merely. Who knows
why we were saved,
weren't working in the fields.

All my family are skinny
their teeth crumbling.
I had braces, a good school.

I brought an old tape of me
when I was five
singing in Vietnamese.
As I look in their eyes,
I want to re-learn it.

Hearing of Reagan's Trip to Bitburg

as maples turn the size
of babies' hands the
last thing mothers
saw as the screaming
wriggling bodies were
thrown into fires hands
buried above some grave
as if waving goodbye
or pulling you with
them. Suddenly I'm in
the yellow room color
of new willows, sun
tulips the daffodils
breaking down woke
up each night dreaming
of tunnels and fire,
the words whispered in
front of the apart
ment, rain of the
blue tattoos. The gas,
words like *cattle car*
charged as the word
camp so when I went
to Camp Hochelaga, I
waited for gas, held
my breath couldn't
sleep with lights off

Sarajevo: Two Voices

1.

It was in a
place that
was safe they
said. We were
writing a poem.
I heard a flash
then I saw a
boy collecting
his books in
a daze. The
teacher's head
was snapped
back, hair
and brains
on the black
board, every
night now in
my dreams.

2.

right after the shelling
people looked exhausted,
their faces grey.
No one went out.
Now people have
clean hair,
clean clothes.
It's better but
we're still
cut off.
Lights go off,
elevators don't work.
People are packed into
one room, there are
so few houses. A
man sets up shop:
one towel, two bars
of soap, one tin
of salmon.

Rapes in Bosnia

Before the local Serb warlord took Merisha away from her apartment to rape her on June 9, he told her not to cry. Merisha, a Muslim school girl would be safe with him he promised. Then he ordered her, a 15 year old sister and an 18 year old friend into car and drove them to a motel in their home town of Visegrad where the girls were locked in separate rooms. Merisha heard her sister, a few hours later, sobbing. She never saw her again. The warlord, well known locally for years, came into Merisha's room, put a table in front of the door and told her to undress. "He said if I didn't do what he wanted, I would never go home," Merisha recalled, speaking in a nervous but steady voice.

"Then he ordered me to take off all my clothes. I didn't want to do that. He said I must, that it would be better to take off my clothes myself or else he would do it and he would be violent." Merisha paused, Tightened her hold on the hand of her older sister, stared at a spot on the table cloth and resumed speaking, "I started to cry. He said I was lucky to be with him. He said I could have been thrown in the river with rocks tied around my ankles. But I didn't want to do it. He got angry and cursed, said I'm going to bring in ten soldiers." And so Merisha who said she never had a boyfriend tried to stop crying as she was raped

Bosnia

as others watched
in amusement Emi
Jakobovic was
forced to castrate
two other men.
“They forced me to
tear off their
testicles with my
teeth so I tore
off their testicles
with my teeth. They
were screaming
with pain and they
put lubricant in
their mouths at
first pierced their
lips with wire but
they were still
screaming until they
bled to death

Lyn Lifshin is an award-winning poet whose work has been praised by Robert Frost, Richard Eberhart, James Dickey, Alan Dugan. She has been called “a modern Emily Dickinson.” Black Sparrow Press published *Cold Comfort* in 1997 and *Before It’s Light* in 1999.