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BEFORE MONEY WAS INVENTED

An interview with Alison Luterman

*by Judith Tannenbaum*

*In the year 2000, the Cleveland State University Poetry Center Prize went to Bay Area poet, Alison Luterman. Bruce Weigl was the judge. Alison's work has appeared in the Sun, Poetry East, Whetstone, and Slipstream, as well as in a number of anthologies. In December of last year, Alison and I – friends and colleagues – had the following conversation about her poems, her vision, and about winning the CSU prize.*

JT: I love your book's title, Alison: *The Largest Possible Life*. The largest possible life is certainly what your poems demand and offer. As "largest" implies, the life in these poems is full of all kinds of beauty and all kinds of pain. In "Impossible," a poem dedicated to staff and students in drug and alcohol groups you offered at Oakland High, you speak to young men whom you've been counseling about the probable consequences of the choices they're making. You advocate for a healthy life, and also recognize:

We say life, and the shine on their faces  
tells you it is coursing through them, it's like telling

Life itself to be careful, you fear it is threatened  
must it run so fast, so hard, and hearing Life say back  
I know I know but I can't help it. ("Impossible")

AL: Yes, I'm glad you picked up on that, because in our consumerist culture, the title, "The Largest Possible Life," can sound like bigger, better, more, faster – like a new car or something. But the title poem, "The Largest Possible Life," is dedicated to my friend Ruth Schwartz and her then-lover Gladys, because Ruth donated her kidney to Gladys when she needed one, and this great generosity of love touched me. I think our lives are as large as our capacity to love is;

elsewhere in the poem I talk about monks immolating themselves in an act of love, of sacrifice, in an attempt to stop war. Knowing that people have done this unthinkable thing has always moved me and terrified me because I know how far I am from being capable of such an act. But it's to grow towards being that large that the poems aspire.

JT: I love that aspiration and how, right at your book's beginning – in the second poem – you say, apparently to yourself:

Still, you want to bring God into everything.  
Mostly, you like the name,  
the way it hangs like light around ordinary objects,  
the grace it lends the least utensils. ("The Dog Next Door")

These poems insist on seeing God in everything. Your poems let us know that you're hungry for grace, and not an easy grace but one that comes from "the shadow behind all this loveliness," ("In my neighborhood now"). In the poem, "You have to make a family because you can't," there's the injunction: "Make it out of broken because everything is."

AL: Yes, and most of the poems in the book were written during a time when I was especially aware of my own brokenness because of my marriage ending. In the aftermath of that, I felt tremendous empathy with the drug addicts and other broken people I encountered living and working in the city. I felt like I was walking around without skin, grieving and wounded, and it became very easy for me to connect with other "broken" people, whatever their circumstances. In time, I came to see that we are all broken, one way or another, and there's no shame in that. And, since Nature abhors a vacuum, in the absence of a husband, all kinds of other relationships – with street people, with neighborhood children, with the pit bull next door, with God – rushed in to my life in unexpected ways.

JT: And these people – real people – fill your poems. There are kids writing poems in middle school; women in the Jacuzzi at the 23rd Street Y; high school young men; drug addicts you've counseled; the "world's oldest living whore/her face a weathered cave of ten-dollar blowjobs" whom you see on the street; Abraham and Patty and Roy – kids in your "trashed/and blooming neighborhood;" your mother, father, sister and friends.

You've lived and worked with people such as the boys in your neighborhood with their "fatherless odds," or the old junkie who says in "Angel Rant:" "I don't think I've got/another recovery left in me."

In "Angel Rant," you write: "I'm tired, don't want to hear any more wounds oozing their stories." Your poems don't put any kind of screen between the reader and these real people; there's neither cynicism nor sentimentality. Instead, your poems honor both the individuals who appear on the page and the suffering we all share as human beings. As you write, in "The Notary Public:" "Okay, so her pain too, goes down to the core of the earth."

AL: I kind of think we're all living and working with needy, suffering people all the time, whether we're aware of it or not, because we all have needs and we're all suffering, and so is everyone around us, so you can't avoid it! Because I was fortunate enough to get a job at San Francisco General Hospital in the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic, and then to work at Glide; and because I was also lucky enough to live in an urban neighborhood where people related to each other, I did get to be privy to a lot of dramatic stories. But I think the stories are everywhere, the suffering is everywhere, and so is the redemption, if only we have eyes to see it, and ears tuned to hear it..

JT: You write, in "Invisible Work:"

... The work  
of my heart  
is the work of the world's heart.  
There is no other art

In these poems, and in the work you've done to earn a living in the world, it certainly seems that the work of your heart is indeed "the work of the world's heart."

AL: Yes, and it is hard to honor that. Especially because I've never earned a real adult salary, sometimes I forget that the work I do that doesn't get paid, or doesn't get paid much, has real value. I wrote that poem to remind myself that humans have worked for thousands of years before money got invented. Our current capitalist system, which measures people's "worth" by how much they "produce" (and how much does a stockbroker "produce" anyway?) is really poisonous to our sense of reality. The real work of the planet – much of which is done by parents and farmers, and of course, artists, those who create, cultivate, and care for beings – is discounted. How crazy is that? And because I've been inculcated with the values of that system, like everyone else, I'm a bit crazy too. I get confused and I forget the worth of what I do, and by extension, the worth of what I am, what we all are. I wrote that poem to remind myself.

JT: Let's switch focus to the process that led to your book being published. You gathered your poems, as so many poets do, and sent the manuscript out to contests, dealt with rejection, reworked your manuscript, resubmitted it, and – unlike most of us – won a most prestigious prize. Please tell us about putting together your manuscript and about having the persistence to keep sending it off, despite the rejections along the way.

AL: I think I'm just stubborn! Also dogged, persistent and a little obsessive. I first started sending the whole manuscript to contests about ten years ago. It came right back like a boomerang. Then, I was disappointed. Now I'm glad because it wasn't good enough and I'm

glad that there's not a not-ready-for-prime-time book floating around with my name on it. This book now I feel is ripe.

I doubt that there's a single poem from that original manuscript that survived to the present one, which I've been sending out for at least five years, making extensive changes every year as I write new poems. The thing went through many name changes also. For a long time it was called "Reaching the Water" which is the title of a poem that I ended up cutting from the current manuscript.

Because my poems are "voice" poems – where you feel the speaker is talking to you, feel the sound of the poet's voice – rather than perfectly crafted image poems or whatever, they had a tendency to be sloppy and lax in places. I had to work hard with the help of good poet-editor friends to cut out the dead wood and yet still preserve the naturalness of the voice. My good friend Ruth Schwartz, a wonderful poet, helped me a lot with this process. Even though her own poetry tends to have a more perfect sense of craft, she appreciated the rough edges in my work and encouraged me not to smooth all of them out too much. Because as I said I tend to be obsessive, I would often email her five or six or ten drafts of a poem I was working on. Often she'd email back saying, "But I liked all that great stuff you had in your first draft! Put it back!" She was invaluable throughout this process. Also, my writing group, Susan Sibbett, Carolyn Miller, and Nina Lindsay, saw many of these poems in draft form and helped me improve them. They've been there all along, through my writing bursts and slumps and everything. It's so helpful to have a group where you know you're expected to show up with some work in hand. Also, Bruce Weigl, who judged the contest, was very helpful in emailing me comments on some of the poems he felt should be cut, and others he thought should be tightened before the final version was published. I took many of his suggestions, but not all, just as I take many of Ruth's suggestions, but not all. That's the hard part: getting all this good advice, some

of which contradicts other advice, and being carefully read by strong poets who understand what you're trying to do. All the same, in the end, it was my responsibility which poems stayed in and which came out, as well as which line and word choices I made. I agonized over all that as I went through the final rewrites, but I could also see how the process of editing had made my work so much stronger and tighter.

JT: So, how did it feel to win? After all the years and work and shaping and sending the manuscript to contests and not having it chosen – how did it feel to actually win?

AL: I cried. I almost couldn't believe it. I'd walk around in my normal life with all my normal feelings and problems, and then I'd think, "But I'm going to have a book!" I'd forget and then remind myself. I almost felt like, "I can die now." You know, not in a morbid way, but just: I did my work; I completed at least one thing that I came here to do.

*Judith Tannenbaum currently serves as Training Coordinator with San Francisco's WritersCorps program. She has written frequently for Poetry Flash. Her most recent books are Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes: Writing Poetry in the Primary Grades (Stenhouse, 2000) and Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin (Northeastern University Press, 2000)*