

Classic Poetry Series

Alison Luterman

- poems -

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Invisible Work

Because no one could ever praise me enough,
because I don't mean these poems only
but the unseen
unbelievable effort it takes to live
the life that goes on between them,
I think all the time about invisible work.
About the young mother on Welfare
I interviewed years ago,
who said, "It's hard.
You bring him to the park,
run rings around yourself keeping him safe,
cut hot dogs into bite-sized pieces for dinner,
and there's no one
to say what a good job you're doing,
how you were patient and loving
for the thousandth time even though you had a headache."
And I, who am used to feeling sorry for myself
because I am lonely,
when all the while,
as the Chippewa poem says, I am being carried
by great winds across the sky,
thought of the invisible work that stitches up the world day and night,
the slow, unglamorous work of healing,
the way worms in the garden
tunnel ceaselessly so the earth can breathe
and bees ransack this world into being,
while owls and poets stalk shadows,
our loneliest labors under the moon.

There are mothers
for everything, and the sea
is a mother too,
whispering and whispering to us
long after we have stopped listening.
I stopped and let myself lean
a moment, against the blue
shoulder of the air. The work
of my heart
is the work of the world's heart.
There is no other art.

Alison Luterman

On Not Flying To Hawaii

I could be the waitress
in the airport restaurant
full of tired cigarette smoke and unseeing tourists.
I could turn into the never-noticed landscape
hanging identically in all the booths
or the customer behind the Chronicle
who has been giving advice about stock portfolios for forty years.
I could be his mortal weariness,
his discarded sports section, his smoldering ashtray.
I could be the 70-year-old woman who has never seen Hawaii,
touching her red lipstick and sprayed hair.
I could enter the linen dress
that poofs around her body like a bridesmaid,
or become her gay son
sitting opposite her, stirring another sugar
into his coffee for lack of something true to say.
I could be the reincarnated soul of the composer
of the Muzak that plays relentlessly overhead,
or the factory worker who wove this fake Oriental carpet,
or the hushed shoes of the busboy.

But I don't want to be the life of anything in this pitstop.
I want to go to Hawaii, the wet, hot
impossible place in my heart that knows just what it desires.
I want money, I want candy.
I want sweet ukelele music and birds who drop from the sky.
I want to be the volcano who lavishes
her boiling rock soup love on everyone,
and I want to be the lover
of volcanos, who loves best what burns her as it flows.

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