

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Alison Luterman**

**- poems -**

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## **Alison Luterman**

Alison Luterman was raised in New England, but moved to Oakland, California in 1990. Since that time she has worked as an HIV counselor, a drug and alcohol counselor, a drama teacher and a freelance reporter and has taught a number of poetry workshops in schools.

As a writer she is known as a poet, essayist, short story writer and playwright. Her pieces have appeared in the publications Poetry East, Poet Lore, Whetstone, Kalliope, Oberon, The Sun, Kshanti, The Brooklyn Review, Poet Lore and Kalliope.

She describes her poetry as "accessible... with a spiritual focus, grounded in the real world of my daily life". Her first book, *The Largest Possible Life* won the Cleveland State University Poetry Prize 2000 and was published in 2001.

She also says that: "My strength as a writer comes from my willingness to be naked and vulnerable, and to connect my own small set of concerns to the larger questions and concerns of humanity."

## Because Even the Word Obstacle is an Obstacle

Try to love everything that gets in your way:  
the Chinese women in flowered bathing caps  
murmuring together in Mandarin, doing leg exercises in your lane  
while you execute thirty-six furious laps,  
one for every item on your to-do list.  
The heavy-bellied man who goes thrashing through the water  
like a horse with a harpoon stuck in its side,  
whose breathless tsunamis rock you from your course.  
Teachers all. Learn to be small  
and swim through obstacles like a minnow  
without grudges or memory. Dart  
toward your goal, sperm to egg. Thinking Obstacle  
is another obstacle. Try to love the teenage girl  
idly lounging against the ladder, showing off her new tattoo:  
Cette vie est la mienne, This life is mine,  
in thick blue-black letters on her ivory instep.  
Be glad shell have that to look at all her life,  
and keep going, keep going. Swim by an uncle  
in the lane next to yours who is teaching his nephew  
how to hold his breath underwater,  
even though kids aren't allowed at this hour. Someday,  
years from now, this boy  
who is kicking and flailing in the exact place  
you want to touch and turn  
will be a young man, at a wedding on a boat  
raising his champagne glass in a toast  
when a huge wave hits, washing everyone overboard.  
He'll come up coughing and spitting like he is now,  
but he'll come up like a cork,  
alive. So your moment  
of impatience must bow in service to a larger story,  
because if something is in your way it is  
going your way, the way  
of all beings; towards darkness, towards light.

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## Earthquakes

So many so small go on day and night  
under your feet you barely notice.

A big bang sounds like someone in the upstairs apartment  
knocking over their refrigerator, and you ask,

Why knock over your refrigerator?  
while friends turn pale and head for the doorjambs.

No, no, it's just some guy  
going ape-shit in his kitchen, you insist.

Maybe he's drunk. You're so good at making up explanations,  
you miss the moments things shift

for real, red tulips beginning to wilt in their vase,  
their lipstick mouths puckering like dowagers,

or the way a marriage curdles like milk left out too long.  
You're standing on sand,

(you're always standing on sand,)  
but its not the same sand as a wave ago,

everything has swept in and out,  
regardless of whether you believe in death

who says, Alright, fine, don't believe in me,  
or who doesn't say anything at all,

just goes about his death business,  
loosening lovers arms from around each other's necks,

liberating teeth from their gums.  
The yellow and brown crumpled gloves

of last year's fig leaves  
lie abandoned in front of your house,

flaking detritus someone has to sweep up  
and touch, someone has to notice and mourn.

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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.

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## Looking for Work

Consider the pigeons of the city,  
how in their filthy swoop and dive they fatten  
on dusty Dorito crumbs;  
consider their evolution  
through generations of squawk and squalor,  
peck and fight. (And what did it take for that one,  
strutting his kingly amethyst ruff,  
his neck sheen of subdued emerald,  
his fat gray feathers of survival,  
to survive here?)

Consider the homeless man outside Albertson's,  
approaching every car with his rags and Windex,  
whose far-distant ancestor  
was able to track and kill  
the wildebeest, the antelope, and the cape hare.  
Consider how far he has come,  
listening to his ipod between customers,  
and yet how faithful he stays to the wild  
dictates of seek and hunt and gather,  
scoping out the best shelters for meals,  
the cleanest beds, the one  
tight face still able to open.

Consider your bank account,  
dipping like a low-flying bird,  
then spreading wings and planing  
over the fields of dead numbers,  
canceled checks, ancient pay stubs,  
long afternoons bought and paid for  
in boredom and lost purpose. And the live  
bodies of your brothers and sisters, crushed  
in the trash compactor of Unwanted Ads.

Consider yourself,  
marching in and out of these institutions  
in your skirt and nylons, leaving ferocious lipstick tracks  
on styrofoam coffee cups,  
your name and address on application forms,  
like one of your ancestors peeing on a thorn bush.

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## 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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## Sidewalk Story

The afternoon had a flu-like quality, gray and threatening to burst into tears at any moment, but I held it together like a grown-up, taught my classes, smiled at the children. I was in love with one little boy who couldn't write, not one idea in his head despite my encouraging crouch near his desk so long my knees were stiff and rising I almost passed out.

The sky drained of color but plenty of gray light. The teachers nodded sympathetically and said That flu is horrible go home, get some rest.

On the sidewalk thronged the children like little commuters, with their plastic slickers and empty lunch boxes, waiting for their mothers to come pick them up in big shiny minivans. I tottered into poisonous air, head aching with flu, ears ringing with the fever of five hours teaching, saying 'Good! Good! That's great, that's wonderful,' in a high sincere voice.

The children are so smart, I can't take it sometimes.  
The way some of them will turn and look straight through me

Then I noticed the girl on the sidewalk, face the color of skimmed milk, ginger hair limp and straight, cut hopelessly to the chin. A small sad storybook of a second-grader, trying to evade her oppressor who in this case was wearing a puffy pink ski jacket and tormenting grin. The bigger girl walked backward blocking the small one from wherever it was she wanted to go. The little victim tried to get around her,

couldn't; tried, couldn't, dodged,  
head down, resigned,

the only object now being not to let anyone see me cry. It was myself of course. I stood rooted next to my foggy car, keys in hand, smelling the wet asphalt. Oh that tragically trembling chin! How did I get to be middle-aged, delirious from teaching these children for years, coaxing them to flower into the brutally onrushing future, into the mystery of their fates where poetry may or may not help them?

Then I remembered

and stepped forward.  
Took her hand,  
cool and fresh as milk,  
trusting, in my own fevered paw,  
and tall now, sidestepped the taunting girl.

But I wanted to talk to her!  
the bully persisted, grinning, still grinning--  
the awful, relentless, pasted-on grin--

As if I hadn't been on that side of it too.  
As if I didn't know.

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## Sustain

1.  
My love plays piano and his foot hovers above the pedal.  
Sustain, they call it when the note floats  
like a basketball player suspended in air,  
or a question whose purpose is to remain unanswered.  
Theres only this low keening urgency,  
the sound of mourning doves,  
drone and descant, murmur and coo.  
I am learning to rest inside the word enough  
its rough leathery consonants, its f of finitude.

2.  
To bear up under  
pain, or the memory of pain  
repeating itself, like scales, as if we were practicing  
to never do again what  
of course we will do again

3.  
I love you  
the way language loves the tongue,  
the way a sentence loves its verb,  
and parentheses love whatever they enclose.  
I love you the way notes love the fingers that play them,  
the way the ear loves sound  
as well as the silence that comes after.  
I love you the way a bridge loves land,  
anchoring itself to the river banks so it can arch  
over waters too rough to swim.  
I love you the way an apple loves the teeth that bite it,  
and a worm loves the earth it turns.

4.  
After divorce  
we sustained heavy losses,  
multiple injuries,  
head wounds, trauma, shock.

But you cant sustain shock.

You have to let it go, or move on into deeper waters.

5.  
Give us this day our stone-ground wholegrain toast with organic butter,  
our fair trade coffee, our soy creamer, our free-range eggs,  
our morning paper with its dismaying headlines,  
our kissing and teasing in the kitchen.  
Let it all go on, just  
another day, or week, or ten or twenty years.  
Barely enough time to slip through this life

like a fish through a hole in the net,  
or a string of pearls through nimble fingers,  
a lone saxophone note draped around the silken neck of night.

6.  
When I was young I worshipped the spark  
of the ignition, turn of the key in the lock,  
open door, blank page, lost maps,  
deserted freeways, and myself.  
Me, with my thumb stuck out,  
going for broke, coast to coast, on shredded brakes.

Later, after the fire  
had burned through and taken  
with it my most cherished obstacles,  
I learned to live in a field of ash, holding  
sorrow when there was nothing else to hold onto.

7.  
I dont know this woman  
with the clean kitchen, the watered garden,  
curly-leafed kale and immortal chard  
growing around her house.  
I dont know how  
she keeps it going, sustains this note  
weve put our weight on,  
or how the trees keep on standing there  
with all the trouble theyve seen,  
breathing in poison, giving out oxygen.  
I want to be like them, though I am only  
a flesh apple of hope and doubt.  
I want your hand in mine,  
as the old world ends and something else is born  
every moment,  
singing loves praises just a little while longer.

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