An Interview with Alison Turner, winner of the 2021 Catamaran Poetry Prize for West Coast Poets

Catherine Segurson: I just thought it would be nice to start with your being an attorney because it’s interesting how you juggle those two lives, being a poet and an attorney. How did you decide to study law at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)? And then, why did you become an appellate attorney?

Alison Turner: Well, the decision to study law was the result of a tuna melt at Denny’s in Santa Cruz. I was there with some younger women who had just graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and were on their way to graduate schools of one sort or another—urban planning or social work or medicine. And they said, “You should go back to school. You could get a $10,000 graduate student loan.” In those days, $10,000 was more than enough to cover fees and living expenses, and I had been living off a lot of very part-time jobs, so it sounded like a good plan. I decided that a law degree made the most sense because there were no prerequisites. I decided on UCLA because it was the best of the schools that I’d gotten into. And also my partner, who then became my husband, was from Los Angeles. He was just starting to break out as a short fiction writer, and the inspiration for all his writing came from the neighborhoods of Los Angeles. It seemed like a logical place to go. When I drove over the hill on an August afternoon and saw the smog sitting on the city, I thought, “Oh my god, I’ve made the most terrible mistake.” I had thought I would live in Santa Cruz the rest of my life, and my first sight of Los Angeles was this sort of vision of what I imagined purgatory might look like. But, I got so I loved it. I mean, we’ve been living in Los Angeles now for almost forty years and it’s in my blood. I became an appellate lawyer after a few years as a litigator. I loved being a litigator. I got to go to Australia and New Zealand and take depositions and it was really fun. But then it was going to not be fun anymore because I was getting expensive. I was going to be billed out at high rates and they were going to take away the one thing I really loved, which was research and writing. In an appellate practice, research and writing is mainly what you do, pushing the boundaries of the law, figuring out how to engage and persuade the appellate justices. Not so different in that respect from poetry—it’s all about the language. So, that’s why I made...
the shift—to be able to do more research and writing as an appellate attorney.

CS: While you were a busy practicing attorney you created a routine for yourself where you would carve out the early-morning hours for writing poetry. So, as you were doing that, did you ever tell people you were a poet while you were practicing as an attorney? Did you start to develop a community of poets to keep you going and inspired?

AT: My husband would tell people that I was a poet. It took me a long time to feel comfortable calling myself a poet. I felt maybe I was a hobbyist or something, but just about every day I either read poetry or read about it. Sometimes I wrote it. Sometimes I sent it out. Sometimes it was published. I even gave an occasional reading, but I felt like I wasn’t a real poet, like some of my poet friends. Like Morton Marcus, for instance, who was a poet first and a teacher second to support himself. I was just a lawyer who happened to really love poetry. I did not have a community of poets to keep me going. Then about fifteen years ago my husband bought me at auction a consultation with the poet Jean Valentine. She would read ten of my poems and then we’d talk on the phone about them. That was a fabulous experience. Two key things that she said to me were, first, “You’re a poet,” and second, “Get out there in the community and find other poets and read them your stuff and talk to them about it.” So, I took her advice. I went to the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and I went to Idyllwild Arts a couple of times. I was reading to strangers and listening to what they had to say, which was good experience for me. And it was wonderful to have a week out of my life with no responsibility other than to read poetry and write it. But, I didn’t really form a lasting community of fellow poets to exchange work with. Then shortly before the pandemic, I decided to take a class on revision at UCLA Extension’s Writers’ Program led by Los Angeles poet Suzanne Lummis. I thought I could use some actual knowledge about how this revision thing is done. After the pandemic shut us down in person, she gave a follow-up class on Zoom, and I began to make friends with some of my classmates. As the pandemic deepened, Suzanne organized a discussion group on Zoom in which we read American poets from Pound and Eliot up to present day and talked about their poems. And, from those classes, I made friends with a few people with whom I now regularly exchange poems. Without the pandemic and Zoom, that might not have happened.

CS: It’s interesting that, with Catamaran, we held some online Zoom classes with the poet Alison Luterman, and in a similar way it did bring a lot of poets together that wouldn’t normally be able to come together and meet in person. I think that’s been really good that people were spending more time for one thing at home, so they could write, and then being able to meet poets that they wouldn’t normally be able to have a chance to meet and study with because the workshops were being held on Zoom.

AT: Right. I think that’s been the upside of the whole pandemic thing for me, and the time that being locked down allowed.
They knew I was a poet. It was an interesting law firm. An appellate calendar allows people to pursue their other creative interests. Among my partners, one had his photographs exhibited at the Smithsonian, another had his own rock and roll band, another won the Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction. So my colleagues were pursuing these creative ends outside the law, but I didn’t sit down and discuss my poetry with them. I knew that some people in the firm, lawyers and staff, read my poems when they could, and a couple even came to a reading. Although we didn’t talk about poetry, it was okay to be a lawyer and a poet in that firm. It might not have been in another kind of firm.

So, you’ll get to give all the attorneys a copy of your poetry collection when it comes out?

Well, my husband says never give your book to friends or family because they may be the only ones to buy it. So, maybe not all, but I will to some. I’ve heard a few are quite excited for me.

Why did you title your debut poetry collection The Second Split Between?

I liked the sound of it. Also, it’s from a line from the poem “Couchella” in the book about picking up dead bats on a wind farm who were sliced by the blades in mid-flight. The split second between hunger and nothing and between being alive and dead. I guess it’s sort of the notion of the time allotted to us, which is not much. It’s one theme running through the book, or maybe holding it together, how on the edge we are all the time. It’s that old lyric notion, the hint of our lives.

Your collection was selected to win the prize by our judge this year, Dorianne Laux. She referred to some of the poems in your collection as “impressionistic views of the pandemic, moments opened up and explored.” So, how did the pandemic and the situation we’re in inform the poems in your collection?

Well, I love L.A. As I said, it’s in my blood. It’s what I see, what I over hear, what I experience. It’s certainly the ground of my poetry, particularly Hollywood, where I live, downtown L.A., the diverse eastside neighborhoods of the city generally. Place is just everything for me, where you are and who you are in that place. How others live their lives there.

You live under the Hollywood Sign, and does that particular location inform your poetry?

The thing that’s so fascinating about this area of Los Angeles is that the Hollywood Sign is on the edge of Griffith Park and Beachwood Canyon, where the natural world, nature, really penetrates urban life. I have passing through my yard bobcats, foxes, raccoons, coyotes—even once our neighborhood mountain lion. I know that because we had his paw prints on our steps. And I’m five minutes from Hollywood Boulevard and all the wildness that’s going on there. It’s all part of the fabric that is my life. There’s one poem that explicitly touches on this, called “Under the Hollywood Sign.” It’s unique to have this wildness in the middle of human wilderness.

I don’t think people normally think of L.A and the Hollywood Sign as being associated with so much nature and wildlife.

Perhaps it’s because they’re all inside tourist vans just looking for the sign, associating “Hollywood” with the movies. But the wild life is there, actually living with us. It’s wonderful.

Can you talk about any poets or poetry that you enjoy reading, or if you have a favorite poet?

In the past couple of weeks, I reread Patricia Smith’s Blood Dazzler, which is a knockout. I read Katie Farniss’s A Net to Catch My Body in Its Wearing. It’s a chapbook of powerful, luminous lyrics about a very tough subject, namely her cancer treatment. I reread Ilya Kaminsky’s Deaf Republic. I read again Marie Howe’s What the Living Do. I’m sort of reading now for what I can steal, by which I mean, I’m looking at how people do things, how they get the effect that they get, the craft. And, I think, having taken those classes at UCSC, I’m a little more articulate in my own head about what they’re doing. As to my favorite poet, I can’t say, because it’s whoever I’m reading at any given moment.

Are there some really great books that you just mentioned?

Let’s go back to when you were young and you lived in Santa Cruz. Did any of the Santa Cruz culture from those years inform you as a poet?

Those are some really great books that you just mentioned. Let’s go back to when you were young and you lived in Santa Cruz. Did any of the Santa Cruz culture from those years inform you as a poet?

Those years in Santa Cruz made me a poet. They were responsible for me being a poet at all. Poetry was everywhere in the seventies in Santa Cruz—in Sundaze, the underground newspaper, in the explosion of small-press publications, poetry readings in town or at the university, and you could get books of poetry really cheap. There was a used bookstore down at the end of Pacific Avenue where you could get, for about thirty-eight cents, anybody from John Ashbery to Diane Wakoski. So I got hooked on poetry. I just loved reading it. Then I tried writing it and I sent a few of my poems to a magazine called Quarry West, which was started by Ray Carver. I got a call from the editor that he was taking my poems. The editor turned out to be my future husband, Lou Mathews.

So, your husband, now, was the editor of Quarry West in Santa Cruz? And that’s how you met?

Yes. Everything good in my life really began there in Santa Cruz. I don’t have any of the poems that I wrote in Santa Cruz except those published. I typed them all on an Olivetti typewriter and they didn’t survive the passage of time, but I feel like I’m completing a circle. I published my first poem in Santa Cruz and now I’m coming back after all these years and publishing my first book in Santa Cruz.

I was just going to say that, that it’s come full circle and that you’re the winner of the poetry prize based here in Santa Cruz, which was open to all the poets on the West Coast. So, it’s really interesting that your first book is coming back home to Santa Cruz.

Yes, I feel very good about that.

Well, I feel great about that, too, that you were originally inspired here in Santa Cruz. That’s what we’re trying to do. Hopefully, we’ll keep inspiring people to become poets.

The more the better. We need them.
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CS: You’re married to a writer and I wonder, do you ever write in any other genres other than poetry, I don’t know if legal writing counts, but I mean short stories or memoirs, anything?

AT: Before I became a poet, I once tried to write a novel. I found it during the pandemic when I was cleaning out old cabinets. A few pages in and it was apparent that it was pretty bad. I didn’t even read very many novels in those days. I don’t know why I thought I could write one. I have for years kept a journal, if that is a genre. Things I think or see or hear. Not my feelings. It’s not a personal confessional or a “I’m thinking about my marriage” kind of journal. There’s a certain form to the entries, I think. I had a pandemic with nothing to do, really, but housework. So, I thought, try and put something together here. Let’s pretend this is my job. And, I certainly had more than a couple of hours in the morning to think about how to do that.

CS: To put the collection together?

AT: Yes.

CS: Well, we’re glad you did. Are any of the poems in the collection autobiographical in a way?

AT: I think they’re all autobiographical, in the broad sense that they come from things I see and overhear and ponder. As to strictly autobiographical facts, they are a jumping off point but I will occasionally lie to make a better poem. Someone told me once that when I was a little kid I saw two worlds at the same time, that I’d be in a room and I’d see everything that was going on in the room—the facts. But also I’d see something going on under the surface, something stranger. Things happen when facts settle in the imagination.

CS: Oh, that’s interesting. And that’s how the poems are shaped, as well?

AT: Yes, that’s right. The line between fact and fiction is kind of fluid for me when I write poetry.

CS: What are you going to be doing next, after this book is published? Do you have a theme or an idea for the next book?

AT: I read an interview with Robert Hass in which he said something to the effect that he just writes poems and he leaves it to his editor to find out if there’s a book there. I don’t think in terms of, for instance, “Now I’m going to sit down and I’m going to write a collection of poems about my childhood and what it meant.” I write the poems that happen, that come along and find me, and then since they’re coming from a consistent source, maybe they’ll add up to some kind of whole. There’s a line by Anne Carson that I like, “Just to hang on to life is why.” And, I think that’s why I write poems, just to hang on to life, and that’s kind of my project.

CS: What would be your advice to other new poets that don’t have a first book published yet?

AT: Well, if you love poetry, read everything that you can read and just keep writing. You can’t ever get discouraged. Well, you can get discouraged, but it’s never too late because, who knows, something might happen, might come along and surprise you—just the right combination of circumstances for you to get your book out there. I’m the perfect example. I’ve got to tell you, I thought I would never publish a book. But, I couldn’t not write poetry, even if it wasn’t going to be published, because it is my way of paying attention, it makes life so much more interesting, exhilarating even. It gives me this whole other world that I can live in and think about. It would be nice to have a book, because that means your poems have connected and someone other than your husband or your wife or your partner has recognized that what you’re doing is good and you’re a poet. You won’t stop being a poet just because you don’t yet have a published book. And if you’re a poet, you’re going to keep going.

CS: I know a lot of people struggle to get their first book out and we’re just so thrilled to be able to publish your first book.

AT: It’s just amazing. I still can’t get over this Santa Cruz connection.