

THE SRPR INTERVIEW:
ALLISON JOSEPH

Ann Hudson: Your upbringing is a blend of many different cultures and places. You were born in London to Caribbean parents, you came of age in the Bronx, you studied at Kenyon College in Ohio, and you live in Carbondale, Illinois. What do you consider home? Is home a particular place for you? How might a shifting geography have influenced your poetry?

Allison Joseph: Home is not a place, but a person. My home is anywhere Jon Tribble, my husband and partner of twenty-plus years, is. All of those places you list are places that have been fundamental to me as a poet and person, but my true home is with him; corny, but true.

AH: Who or what prompted you to write when you were younger? Was it an experience? A person? A place?

AJ: Books—whether they were from my father’s bookstore (he had an Afrocentric bookstore in Toronto) or from the library (I haunted the Castle Hill and Parkchester branches of the New York Public Library like some sort of little brown ghost). I loved books from the get-go. I wanted what they had in them—those powerful, powerful words.

AH: So your writing was prompted by a vigorous reading practice. Is it still? Do you have favorite books, or kinds of books, that you reach for over and over?

AJ: I read a lot of poetry anthologies as a girl—discovered Gwendolyn Brooks that way. Had my Sylvia phase like every girl-poet should. I find myself returning to poets such as Roethke, Hayden, W.C. Williams, James Wright, to name a few. These are poets I discovered as a young woman, and I still love them.

AH: Do you have any predictions on the fate of bricks-and-mortar bookstores or libraries?

AJ: I hope they will survive, but my students don’t seem to be much interested in the commerce of books (or music, for that matter). If you

download everything, it becomes a lot less special, in my opinion. But if you have to get your clothes on, walk or drive or take the bus to that bookstore or library or record store, then it's an experience. I hope enough people still value the tactile nature of such places, but I don't know that there are huge numbers anymore.

AH: To what extent do you know what the subject matter of any given poem will be when you begin it? What triggers poems for you?

AJ: For me a poem begins with either a spark (a "get this line down now sensation") or a nag (the poem comes out of something that's been in mind for a long time, nagging at me, and I finally find a way to get it to paper). Anything can trigger a poem.

AH: So many of your poems negotiate and investigate adolescence and coming-of-age. I'm thinking here of many of the poems in *Soul Train*, particularly of the title poem, in which the speaker, distracted from her chores by the sequined dancers on TV, tries to emulate what she sees:

I'd try to dance, to keep up,
moving like the figures on

the screen, hoping the rhythm
could hit me in that same
hard way, that same mission

of shake and groove, leaving
my dust rag behind, ignoring
the furniture and the polish

to step and turn as they did,
my approximation nowhere near
as clever or seductive, faking

it as best I knew how, shaking
my 12 year old self as if something
deep depended upon the right move,

the righteous step, the insistent
groove I followed, yearning to get
it right, to move like those dancers

blessed by funk, touched with rhythm,
confident in their motions, clothes,
their spinning and experienced bodies.

Why is adolescence such a powerful subject matter for you?

AJ: I am still such a kid in so many ways, so adolescence is fascinating to me, and will be when I'm sixty. I think those awkward moments of teenage life so quickly become the awkward moments of middle-aged life, but the difference is you know when to laugh, when to cry, and when to walk away.

AH: And those moments of adolescent awkwardness are so layered. There are many poems in *Soul Train* that investigate burgeoning sensuality, curiosity, terror, and shame—they're all part of the same adolescent kaleidoscope. The speaker from another poem from *Soul Train*, "Home Girl Talks Girlhood," confesses that after "longing for hips / and breasts" she didn't have any idea what to do with the body she was longing for:

Just who I was
going to lure with all this,
I didn't know—all I did know

was that I quaked, afraid
each time I had to pass
those boys on the corner,

their eyes inspecting me,
finding what wasn't there,
calling after me *you ugly,*

too skinny, for real.

In what way do these poems of adolescence foreground the poems in which you describe moments of older, more adult sensuality?

AJ: I'm not sure I know how they do. It seems a continuum of experience to me, and I'm hopping up and down and back and forth as I write about these various life phases.

AH: Many of your poems investigate the idea of the body as a locus of pleasure and a locus of pain. I hear you're passionate about running. Why? Are running and writing twin pursuits of any kind?

AJ: I became a runner because I needed to bring my blood pressure down after a hospitalization. I started working out regularly, and found that the treadmill was what made me lose weight the fastest. Then, one day, when I didn't want to go to the campus recreation center, I just ran outside. It was so much easier than the treadmill! And there were birds and bunnies and squirrels to keep me company. I kept up the running, and have become a late-in-life athlete. My running blog is at <http://cwrnrun.blogspot.com/>.

Runners and writers can be so similar. Intense and single-minded to the point of being evangelical about their pursuits. I try to approach both pursuits with a good deal of humor—I am, after all, an amateur at both.

AH: This reminds me of these lines from “Why Poets Should Dance”:

Boogie is both noun
and verb for a reason, blessings
of motion due you on both page

and stage. How else will you
get your poems to flow if you
don't let your backbone slip,

if you don't subscribe to groove
theory?

Running, writing, dancing...they're all driven by a beat, a pulse, a rhythm, but one that this poem suggests has to be *in motion* for it to be activated. “Why Poets Should Dance” is about abandon, but in tight, articulated lines. Do you ever let loose in the line, or let the lines go wild on the page?

AJ: Sometimes, but not often. I like the tension between the controlled line and the “let-loose” vibe that poems can have.

AH: “Apologies to the Biker Babe” investigates that moment when the dance begins; when we step into it and are taken away by it. It takes courage to dance without shame, to step into music with abandon. What's the spark for you between music and writing?

AJ: I am the kind of person who loves music, and also loves learning about musicians and the way they create. I like the tales of musical inspiration that I read about in music reference books, even if they