Poetic License

She was a poet who didn’t know itâ€¦until she got HIV

November 1, 1998 By River Huston

My first poem was meant to be a suicide note.

Afraid of living
afraid of dying
walking empty-handed
into the void.
No man
no money
no job.
Just me and this imaginary
disease.
Can’t say what it looks like
speck of dust
flash of light
Mack truck.

The year was 1991. It had been one of those Country and Western months—the wedding was off, the dog got sick, and my family stopped talking to me. As if I got HIV just to ruin their lives. Sitting alone on the floor of an apartment empty but for a wedding dress, sleeping bag and guitar, I began to compose my final au revoir. After about 10 pages, I was feeling better…and I’d created a work of art—my first poem.

I used to say my ego saved my life: I had to show my masterpiece to someone. After my neighbor read it, he talked me into going to the next local poetry slam. What did I have to lose?

I walked into the neighborhood cafe expecting to encounter some somber poets dressed in black, drinking coffee. Instead, the room was full of people waving noisemakers and throwing things. I timidly asked, “Is this the poetry reading?” and was told: “This is no stinking reading. This is a slam, baby.”

At a slam, it was explained to me, your work is judged by people who hold up signs from 1 to 10, or just “You suck.” This shook me up, but I wasn’t turning back. I asked the woman who ran the

slam to read my poem and tell me if it was any good. “Don’t worry, hon,” she replied. “They’ll boo you if it’s bad.” I signed up, next-to-last on the list—my second suicide attempt in a month.

As poet after poet animatedly recited wild verse, I became less and less enamored of the sweat-soaked words I held between my fingers. When my name was finally called, I read my poem with shaking hands and a trembling voice. But toward the end, the passion I felt magically flowed from my lips:

Don’t metaphorize, hypnotize,
categorize or sanitize me.
It is hard enough living with
an illusion.
No more definitions of my death
no more death sentence eyes
I am not dead, dying
I am living.
I just thought I would
let you know.

A pin dropped. I waited for the flying rubber chicken to hit me on the butt. Then everyone jumped to their feet applauding. Turns out, dumbstruck me won the slam (I got the pot of 50 bucks—not bad).

My life suddenly had new meaning. Each week for the next six, I came up with a poem and won—until they retired me from competition. (My early works were drenched in sex. It didn’t take me long to realize that the more I wrote about sex, the better my odds of winning. I became the unofficial Body Fluid Queen of the slams.)

So it’s my poetry, not my ego, that saved me. Poetry is the one place where I can let go of my rage about being trapped in my body and my turbulent past. It’s a place of total freedom of expression, where I’m not aware of the time, not hungry, not tired. It’s the place where I go to heal, and it’s much cheaper than therapy. Another outcome is the realization that all bets are off and I no longer have anything to fear. I used to worry about what others thought of me, but it’s really none of my business. You do the work, put it out there and let it go.

There was no looking back. My first book of poetry, Jesus Never Lived Here, was published in 1992, followed by The Bones of Susan. In 1995, I was named Poet Laureate of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. At the honors ceremony, I read a poem to the county commissioners. It was around World AIDS Day so I chose a piece about living with HIV. (When I submitted my nomination, I didn’t send anything that even sounded like I had a cold. I’m suspicious of prizes when people know I have AIDS. I can hear the pity: “Give it to the sick girl.”)

The next day’s headlines read: “Poet Laureate Too Licentious for Some,” “Bucks Officials Want a Nice Poet Laureate,” and “Some Find the Subject of AIDS Annoying.” I wrote an editorial about how

annoying I find AIDS. And yet good has come of it all, and the ability to pursue my dreams, without a constant editorial, is one of the best things.

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