

On having compassion towards your rough drafts



José Olivarez discusses what originally drew him to writing poetry, his relationship to failure, and why understanding your reader and your own artistic community are so important.

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As told to Jessica Hopper, 2745 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Failure](#).

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Calumet City, Illinois, on the south side of Chicago, south suburbs.

Tell me what Calumet City is like, and about what Calumet City was like for you.

Calumet City is a city in transition. It's traditionally a working-class white city. Around the time my family moved there, it started to shift. By the time I graduated high school, the city was primarily Black-American. Then the population under that was Latinx people, primarily Mexicans, so white people were in the minority by the time we left. And so there are things that were true at the beginning of my time there that were not true at the end—like it being very working class, the big employers being steel mills, and the existence of retail jobs at the mall.

And your dad worked in the mill?

Yeah, my dad worked at a steel mill. We were lucky because it was one of the ones that lasted the longest. It didn't close until I was 18 or 19. We continued to get good luck because he was able to find a job at another steel mill, a couple years after that. At the same time that white flight was happening, many of the steel mills which had been consistent places for people to find jobs began closing. And so the people who were moving into the city, mostly people of color, just as they signed a lease or got their mortgage, their stable jobs were disappearing. So now, there are tons of foreclosures. Economically it's really, really different and really, really bleak right now.

Growing up there, what do you remember writing about your own life?

I never really spent a lot of time writing about myself. It took me a long time before I realized that I was allowed to and that there would be any interest in that. Everything that I read was about a fantasy world—I loved reading fantasy books about kings and princes and wizards and witches. I loved to imagine that world. Or, about people who were rich. I wasn't rich, and so I didn't know that there was anything to write about in Calumet City.

Were you reading those books because they had a transporting power?

I knew from a really early age, or at least I thought I knew, that the most important thing was that I had to leave Calumet City. I had to leave in order to become a lawyer or a doctor and be able to provide for my family out in the world somewhere. Part of it was that—imagining being somewhere else. I just loved reading. I read everything that I could get my hands on.

What brought you to poetry?

My high school had a poetry slam team. They won *Louder Than a Bomb*, which is a poetry festival here in Chicago. And to celebrate, the school gave them an assembly and had free pizza for everyone. They gave us a choice: "You can come see the poetry slam team, or you can go to your seventh period chemistry class."

You go for the free pizza, you stay for the poetry.

The poetry slam team was incredible. I just remember being struck by how loud and powerful they were about stories that were about their families, and about their sexuality and about all of these things that I just assumed that we had to accept silence around, or that we had to accept the prevailing authoritative opinion about.

This was right around the time that the United States was going to war in Iraq. I'd never questioned that up until that point. It felt like my teachers told me that the war was necessary, and so my job as a student was to accept that for a fact. To see my fellow classmates proclaim, and have adults listen to them, that it was wrong and that actually the war was immoral and imperialist, it made me question everything that I knew about myself and what I could do and what was possible for me. And also my relationship to the world. It made me feel like I could question more.

How quickly did you go from seeing this performance to being like, "I want what they have?"

I think that I had accepted that I was a quiet person. I had accepted that I was shy. I had accepted that I was one way. But I was longing to be someone else. I just didn't know how to do it, and when I saw it, I was like, "That is how I can be the person that I want to be. This is who I actually am. And this quiet version of myself is just what other people want me to be. But I have a lot to say." I knew that immediately.

I remember going home and beginning to write poems. And then doing the deep dive and looking at what other opinions there were around the war, and politics and the President, and everything else. Finding other ways to think and other questions that were worth asking.

I came back in the fall. I had been writing the whole summer, and most of my poems were anti-war poems. That felt most important. I gave the poems to my teacher, Mr. Mooney, and he read them and he was like, "These are all really bad." He was like, "We can't use any of these. But, if you keep coming, we'll help you."

How do you write a poem?

Part of it is a state of writing all the time. I was riding the train to work this morning, and I was turning a line over in my head. I'm kind of constantly trying to play with language, and turning different things over in my head.

In terms of writing a poem, for me it really is more about showing up than waiting for inspiration. I try to think of writing a poem in the same vein as any other job. A plumber doesn't say, "I'm going to wait until I am struck with plumbing inspiration, and then I'm going to go do my work." The plumber just grabs his tools and starts doing their work.

So for me, I have tools, too. If I really can't write, then I'll go read a book, and if I still can't write, then I'm also okay with that. But it starts with just sitting down and trying to write, and failing a lot. Like really, really bad lines immediately that I know are bad.

I'm very curious about your relationship to failure.

I used to be really terrified of failure. I think that's part of why I took so long to choose the path that I'm on now, and why I really tried hard to avoid choosing this path.

Having to confront a fear of failure is integral!

To being a poet, yeah. Also, because there's economic failure in writing that is not an inherent risk of other career paths. What I have always loved about poetry is that it's so hard. I'm so bad at it, and I don't think that I have a natural gift for it.

If that's true, how are the poems in your book so good? Are those the 30th drafts we're reading?

For the most part, they're 30-plus drafts of each poem. You have to understand that now I've been writing for 14 or 15 years, and so part of how I'm able to write poems that are successful in some measure, is because I've at least learned how to identify when a poem doesn't feel right to me.

When it's not working in some regard.

Yeah. So to go back to your question about fear for a second, about failure. I was a straight-A student in high school. I went to Harvard University. I had a job getting out of college. Then I moved to New York, and I was fired from a job. Before I was hired at YCA [Young Chicago Authors], I couldn't find a job. I got rejected from grad school, I got rejected from everything. I had relationships fail, and I learned that I wasn't perfect as a person, or as a partner.

It was either going to break me—that I had such high expectations for myself and that I turned out to just be a *regular person*—or, I was going to revel in that. Through the help of therapy I came to see my imperfections as something that I could revel in, and take joy from. Like the fact that I write bad poems. Instead of hating myself for it, I could be more compassionate with myself. Then in that compassion I could make room to go back and do a second draft and a third draft, and so on and so forth.

What's the tripwire for your compassion towards your own writing? How do you keep going through the revisions and drafts?

Since I've begun to write, I've always had a community of people around me. That is immensely helpful, because it helps me get out of my own head. That works both when I'm in the self-loathing place, but also when I'm really feeling myself, which is the other thing. Sometimes I'll write a draft of a poem, and I'm like, "Yo! I really, I really got one here." [laughs]

And then they're like—

"—Actually, this is trash." And it's such a useful thing because it reminds me that it's not about my own exceptionalism. I keep thinking about this quote Lucille Clifton wrote in a poem: "Your voice is not unique." I think it's useful. So it's not that there's anything particularly unique about who I am, or that I'm such a marvelous person that I can't fail. But it's that I have set myself to this task.

Was there a particular organizing principle for the way that you put together *Citizen Illegal*? Was it like, "I have some poems that fit this world right now"?

The most important event in writing this book was getting to go to the Conversation Literary Festival in Mississippi, Alabama, and New Orleans. This was in 2016, and what I remember was that we spent a lot of time as a group talking about writing and who we were writing for. Which is a question that had kind of always felt like an itch. Like if I'm writing the story, my story of being a first-generation son of Mexican immigrants, but I'm writing it in a way that is kind of pleading my humanity, or my parents' humanity, to an imagined white reader who is, you know, weighing whether or not to vote for a Trump—you know what I mean? Like who am I writing these poems for?

You're doing your poetry a disservice.

Yeah, because I don't actually believe that person would, one, ever read my poems, or two, be like, "This poem has convinced me that Mexicans deserve some sense of justice." Or, "People seeking asylum deserve asylum. They should not be martyred when they're sent back to their countries."

So I left that festival with a much clearer sense of who my audience is, and feeling like I'm writing these poems in part for the poets that I have just spent a week deep in discussions with. I'm also writing for my parents and for my brothers, and that gave me a way to write poems that I struggled and failed at deeply.

I've had a similar experience where I realize I'd been writing to some imagined distant man who can fix the thing, thinking I have to have a bulletproof fucking argument for that person, or just writing to convince someone to, like, stop raping people. Instead of speaking to people who know what I'm talking about, who know this truth. It's like being a salesperson.

Exactly, exactly. That became one of the starting points. I was like, "Alright, the reader that I'm imagining doesn't need me to translate Spanish for them, because if they don't speak Spanish, then they can just look it up in a dictionary, or go to Google." Now it's more about the question, "Why are they reading my poems?" They're reading my poems because they want a tool that might be useful for helping them imagine something besides the way things are now.

Whereas, when I started writing poems, I'd be like, "This is my poem about my parents immigrating to this country, and it was for someone who might deny them entrance into this country." Now it was like, "Alright, where do I imagine my parents ending up? It can't just be waiting for a judgment to fall on them." So that's a poem like, "My parents never finished migrating, they just stopped," right? Imagine it not like the end of a journey but as an in-progress journey.

That's what sparked a lot of those poems. Many of those poems I wrote when I had come back to Chicago. Being back in the city of Chicago was incredibly generative for me because so much of what I was writing about was this particular experience, and here in Chicago I was able to have conversations with students at YCA who are first-generation Mexican-Americans or Latinx. And a lot of the poems were written after having conversations with them, and after hearing what they're writing about. When I was in New York I had a little bit harder time closing that distance, or becoming intimate with the particulars of that experience.

In your book there are three pages of thank-yous and acknowledgments at the back. Can you imagine what it'd be like if you didn't have that community?

I couldn't have written this book without the various communities that I was in. I remember a long, long time ago, I don't even know where I was, but Dark Noise Collective was performing and they were having a discussion... [Franny Choi](#) was talking about how being in a multicultural—or, multiracial is the word that they used, I think—poetry collective had benefited them.

Franny said that they had a poem that used black vernacular, and that after presenting it to the group they were like, "I don't know that you need black vernacular in this poem. I don't think that's actually the way that character, or that speaker would say that. Or, if it is why they would use those words or that tone." And Franny talked about seeing that they were correct, and then changing the poem.

And so from hearing that, I could go back to my poems and look for places where I'm doing something, whether it's using black vernacular or other language, and ask, "Where am I doing that in a way that is not helpful to the poem," you know?

Or you are distancing the people who are reading it.

Yeah, exactly. Where am I using language that is creating distance with the reader, for sure. I've learned that the most valuable thing I can be is a listener. What my community has

given me is a chance to listen to many different perspectives, and to then be able to generate for myself what feels most suitable for me. The other part of it is that writing is so solitary. There's so much of it that is just self-loathing and that feels so futile in a way. That then, when we get to see each other—that's where a lot of the joy is for me.

It's cool, I love that it's a community that I can depend on for critiques, but that I can also get together with and not talk about writing with. That they also know what it's like to be in the cave, and that when they're out of the cave they're willing to leave that. And just play cards. I love playing cards [laughs]. It's a big part of my process.

José Olivarez recommends:

Patricia Frazier's forthcoming debut chapbook of poems, Graphite.

Saba's new LP Care For Me—it's my favorite album of the year and his progression is inspiring.

Uncle Drew. What a fun movie. Give Chris Webber an Oscar for his performance.

Name

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Vocation

Poet



