

Joseph O. Legaspi on living the life of a poet



December 1, 2017 -

As told to Thora Siemsen, 1949 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Independence](#).

What is your first memory of writing a poem?

My first memory of poetry was watching the rain on my windowsill when I was young, and touching the windowpane. I have often told younger poets that writing doesn't involve the keyboard all the time. Being a poet is not just about that. It's about living the life of a poet.

As a Fulbright Scholar, you spent 2015 in the Philippines exploring Filipino Poetics in and out of the Diaspora. How was that research trip structured?

A lot of beach time. Reading a lot of available Filipino poems, Filipino texts. Getting to know academics and poets in the Philippines. That's kind of a loose structure. I also think living in the Philippines, too, and trying to figure out how the country of my childhood feeds into my poetic sensibilities; how some of that nostalgia will actually seep back into not only my writing, but the way I think of poetics.

The ironic thing is that I actually ended up being dismayed by what's being taught in Filipino universities. A lot of the poems being taught are still very much old school. There's a lot of Yeats and a lot of traditional imagery. I was really hungry, and I wasn't successful at finding contemporary poets that are writing in response to discrimination, or violence, or government malfeasance in the country. That's probably my shortcoming. I wasn't able to penetrate that. In American poetry, people are responding to racism and larger subject matter. That's not what I found when I was in the Philippines.

Your debut collection was titled *Imago*, a polysemous word which means both "the final and fully developed adult stage of an insect, typically winged" and "an unconscious, idealized mental image of someone, especially a parent, that influences a person's behavior." At which point during the writing of a book do you decide its title?

It was actually [Philip Levine](#) who titled my book. There was a poem called "Imago," and I knew about the word primarily as the insect definition. I didn't realize, until looking at the definition again, about the relationship between the idealized vision of parents through a child's eye. When I found that, it just made sense. It's intuition, and having a mentor as perceptive as Philip Levine to actually point that out to me. That was much later on in the process. That was probably my second or third draft of the book, and the final draft really, when that title stuck.

In an interview you recalled how your mentor, the poet Philip Levine, used to write every morning. *You said*, "But Phil was a beast. I'm more of an amphibian that suspends its bodily (poetic) functions to survive, endure, and pass by the harsh seasons, extreme weather." What was your communication with him like about your very different styles of making work?

Phil, in a way, had no filter. I really appreciated that. If there's anything, the one thing that connected me to Phil Levine was our working-class background. I was first introduced to Phil not as the person, but as the poet through his writing. That resonated to me, even though we're from very different parts of the world. The working-class ethic; and the reverence for family; and the reverence for hard work; and the struggle for parents' and for immigrants and migrants and working class people to carve out a living is something that I feel connected to Phil.

What does this type of weather, winter in New York, do to your writing?

I love winter and fall, because I feel more internal. I feel I have to protect my heart. You have to bundle, and I love that. I feel closer to the source of poetry. As for the summer, I feel I have to be outside. Hence, also being outside of myself.

What are some ways that writing a book becomes a frame through which you view the world?

I don't think it's a frame. I think a book is a grand necklace. Me writing a book doesn't necessarily illustrate how I view my life. It's something that doesn't consume my life, but it's a beautiful part of my life. It's something that I can put on my neck, and I can show it off sometimes, or I can put it in a jewelry box if I want to. I don't think it's a frame at all. I don't want it hung on a wall. It's something that I can put on me that's part of who I am as a person. But I'm not my poems.

How have your ideas of community changed since you founded Kundiman—a national organization dedicated to the creation and cultivation of Asian American creative writing?

The community is vibrant, the community is larger than what I expected. When I first started this organization with [Sarah Gambito](#), I thought there were only two of us. This kind of messed up Adam and Eve scenario. But lo and behold, there are a lot of people out there, a lot of young and not so young Asian Americans who felt and are feeling lonely and isolated. They want to pursue this craft, this art. We're just thankful that we're still here, and that we're able to actually offer our services. We're a small organization, and we're trying our best all the time. We want to serve those beyond our fellows, the ones who go to the retreat. We're trying to figure that out. We're always trying to figure out how to broaden and serve this community that's ever-growing.

It's very heartening that our stories are being written, and our stories are being published. That's the most important thing for us. My view of community has grown in many different ways, in terms of what it looks like and what it is, and the power in our collective voices. We always feel imperiled and marginalized. As a group, we're stronger. Now we're acquiring partnerships with other organizations of color, and that strengthens us further.

Your collections were published a decade apart. In between, there was a chapbook called *Subways*, full of observations culled from taking public transportation. How do other forms of transportation enhance your curiosity as a poet?

The main mode of transportation was the plane that brought me and my family to the United States in 1984 from Manila. That's the biggest mode of all. I was born in 1971 in November, and Marcos declared Martial Law in May, 1972. I grew up in Martial Law. The opposition leader, Aquino, was assassinated in '83. We left in '84. The new government was instituted in '86. I was kind of unclear as to why it took my family that long to actually leave the Philippines for the United States. But that changed everything. In my book *Imago*, there's a poem about taking a plane, leaving the Philippines on that day. I specified the date to July 30, 1984.

Even taking the 7 train from Queens to Manhattan is a culture shock. Also heading back from Manhattan to Queens, when the train surfaces, I feel this lifting on my shoulders, too. The light kind of shines through the train, and you're closer to home. I love that aspect of it. I guess writing is like that. You're staring at a blank piece of paper, and you're trying to go somewhere else. You're trying to go back in time, even. And that's probably the most amazing travel. It's time travel.

What was your first encounter with queerness in literature?

I'm such a reader, and I think there's always been kind of queerness even in children's books that I read, but I never really detected anything until it's so obvious. The most obvious piece of literature that made me point at the page like ah-ha was *The Well of Loneliness*. It's a lesbian love story. I don't know what I was feeling. I knew there was some titillation there. Not so much in the girl-to-girl action, but more in the seemingly illicit factor of it. My first encounter was not this illuminating, feel-good relationship with queerness. I didn't come out until I was 30. There's just so much stigma around it for me, being the first son from a Filipino background. The culture is very Catholic, very homophobic. I ended up going to a Jesuit university. My first encounter with queerness, and this is kind of a revelation to me now, is that it's illicit. In a way, that made me want to explore it more

because I love the dark side.

You write frequently about your mother. What does she think about your career as a poet?

I don't think she thinks about my career as a poet. I don't even think she understands it. I think she thinks it's funny, thinks it's cute. I send her books. I don't think she reads them. I think she likes the product of it. Which is totally fine by me. She's never been a reader. She's not dismissive of it. I think she understands the gravitas of it, as this art form. But she would rather me making more money.

She's an amazing, lovely, charismatic woman. She's always dressed to the nines, and her hair's always in that Imelda Marcos bun. I feel like my aesthetic and my love for beauty I got from my mother. That sensibility, and the gregariousness. She always gives people the benefit of the doubt. There's an openness about her that I admire so much.

What are some things that have surprised you most about where your creativity has taken you in life?

I'm still surprised that I'm in New York City, that I ended up here. I'm still loving it here, and I'm still thriving here. An offshoot of that is that I'm surrounded by creative people. My pursuing something creative leads to this amazing brotherhood and sisterhood and siblinghood with creative folks. That's the best thing about being a creative, because I would say 90% of your friends are creative. They, in turn, bring so much beauty and language and sunlight, and darkness, and drama in your life. You feel alive all the time, having all these people around you. I'm really thankful for it.

What is your writing space at home like?

I have an office. I have a desk. Most of the time, I end up in bed. I read in bed. I write in bed. I have a cup of tea nearby. When I'm more serious, I go to my desk and actually work. That's when I'm actually working. When I'm trying to be creative, I'm in the bed, and I'm writing and reading a lot.

Joseph O. Legaspi recommends:

[Call Me By Your Name](#)

Lucinda Williams' [self-titled album](#), especially the songs "[Side of the Road](#)" and "[Sundays \(live\)](#)"

Taco stall on the corner of Gleane St. and Roosevelt Ave. in Elmhurst, Queens

Tea in the afternoon, but not necessarily afternoon tea

[Bette Midler in "Hello, Dolly"](#)

[Anything is Possible](#) by Elizabeth Strout

[Ruth Asawa](#)

[The restaurant reviews of Ligaya Mishan](#), *NY Times* food critic

[Kiehl's Original Musk body lotion](#)

Upstate New York in the fall

The [Atacama Desert](#) in Chile

[Gilmore Girls](#), all 7 seasons on Netflix

[The Garden of Eatin'](#) Red Hot Blues tortilla chips

[Natural peanut butter](#)

Indulging yourself at least once a week ([Levain cookies](#), [massage](#), [Poetry](#)).

[Name](#)

Joseph O. Legaspi

[Vocation](#)

Poet

