

Interview with Joseph Lu



Joseph Lu is based in Petaling Jaya and writes fiction when he's not busy doing content calendars for his day job. He hopes to publish a book one day.

MMOJ: Could you describe your journey in writing poems: When you started writing poetry? What keeps you writing poems? Do you have any vision of how you see yourself as a poet in a few years?

Joseph: I wrote my first poem when I was 18 as an exercise in my English Literature class. It was about boba tea and I didn't think much of it but my lecturer really liked it and encouraged me to write more.

I tend to take a long time before completing a poem – mostly due to procrastination. So it's hard to say if I have yet a proper motivation. But I do feel a sense of accomplishment after finishing each poem so maybe that's the reason.

Don't really have any vision. Maybe to self-publish a collection? Either way, it would mostly be for fun.

MMOJ: What are your preoccupations in your poems?

Joseph: I think there are a lot of similarities between poetry and photography in the sense that they both document things. Photography documents the physical whereas poetry, cognition.

As for subject matter, I write about whatever was the highlight of my week – regardless of whether the experience was good or bad.

MMOJ: Who are your favourite poets and do they have any influence on your writing?

Joseph: I only started reading poetry in college. My English Literature lecturer – Ms. Yap Yoke Lin – introduced me to Wilfred Owen who has been a big influence on me even until today. My only other encounter with verse as a child is song lyrics from punk bands. Those lyrics tend to be abstract and cryptic due to the constraints of melody so unsurprisingly, that’s the style I default to when I write.

I do sometimes read blogs and articles on poetry. And if I come across a poet’s name more than twice, I’ll make the effort to find a copy of their book. So some poets I’ve grown fond of over the years are Ilya Kaminsky, Franny Choi, Peter Balakian, Layli Long Soldier, with Wanda Coleman being my most recent discovery.

MMOJ: Do you think about your position as a Malaysian poet writing in English?

Joseph: I’m a bit uncertain about the term ‘Malaysian poet’. I do think poets are in a privileged position to talk about the culture and era they live in. But if the readership is adverse or in some cases doesn’t exist, it would become a Sisyphean task.

That in mind, I tend to write from personal experience. If I feel I have a unique perspective no poet has, that’s what I try to talk about.

MMOJ: Please choose one of your poems from either *Malaysian Millennial Voices* or *Year of the Rat and Other Poems* and share your experience in writing the poem.

Joseph: I guess the poem that needs the most explanation is 'Lost in Translation'. Inspired by aleatoric music, the poem actually started out with the idea of writing with aid from a lorem ipsum generator – a program that generates gibberish in Latin, usually for purposes of website mock-ups.

I would stick pages of this text into Google Translate to get an English reading, saving the lines I really liked. Once I had enough lines to form a stanza, I rearranged the lines until I had some semblance of a narrative.

At this point, I had the idea to talk about language and how one object can be seen from multiple perspectives. So I translated my stanza back and forth between English and Malay. After editing a few words here and there, I had my first stanza in the final poem. I gave the same treatment to the second and third stanzas, using Chinese and Tamil respectively.

All in all, it was an interesting experiment and it was a great way (I think) to force myself into a different mindset.

Lost in Translation

Joseph Lu

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it.
And in that loss, a self-effacing tree,
Colour of context — imperceptibly
Rustling with an angel, turning to waste
To shade and fibre, milk and memory.

However, what you've lost.
Other: translation, it will be lost
every bit of us. Loss
of self-contempt that colour
context, and aware that Angel
and rustling shade fibre,
milk and memory will be wasted.

However, you've lost.
Other: every bit of translation is lost
loss of colour, self-contempt
and an Angel is wasted. Notes rustling
in the shade of textiles, dairy products, and memory.

(Source: Vethamani, M. E. ed. *Malaysian Millennial Voices*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2021.)