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An Interview with Albert Abonado

Albert Abonado is a poet and essayist currently residing in Rochester, NY. He received his MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars and teaches at The State University of New York College at Geneseo and RIT. Abonado's work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *Colorado Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *Hobart*, *Waxwing*, among other publications. He has also received fellowships for poetry from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

GD: *JAW* is split up into four parts. It is clear there are different themes and motifs that compliment each section, can you describe your process of assigning each poem to a part, and what defining factor you would give to each part?

AA: To be honest, the sections were probably the hardest part for me to decide when putting the book together. Should it be two sections? Three? What if I just did the book as one continuous series of poems?

I wanted that first section to be a kind of thematic primer. These are my concerns. This establishes the voice you will hear for the next however many pages. Family, loss, identity—these are my obsessions and I wanted these up front. I think of the subsequent sections as being threads that all come from the first section.

I really wrestled with the Tito Manuel and Harold/Kumar poems. I'd toyed with trying thematic sections where the series were integrated throughout the book, but ultimately, concluded that they deserved their own sections. I felt the momentum of the series gets lost when distributed through-

out the collection. Here, among their siblings, the poems have more push, more propulsion.

I wanted to give some sense of an arc in the book, wanted the reader to feel as if they have been on some kind of journey, examining concerns that were historical and immediate, which explains the choices for many of the poems in the final section. I think of the final section as being more forward looking. Actually, my opinion of that final section changes daily. Sometimes, I feel that this is where the book opens up, explores possibilities that lie ahead. Yes, there's death, but also a sense of things to come. Other times, I think, no, this section is really a meditation on loss and grief, about the need to preserve through memory and story. My feelings about the sequence of sections reflects my feelings about the poem. I shouldn't end up in the same place I started. I want to be transformed.

GD: Some of the motifs I noticed that carried through the entirety of the book were that of fish, mammals, insects, and of course—teeth. How do you tie in these motifs with some of the overall themes of this book, like heritage, family, race, and existentialism?

Honestly, I think my obsessions with teeth has to do with all the years in high school that I spent in braces.

I wish I understood the connection. If I had to guess, many of the motifs, fish for example, have cultural ties. My family is from the Philippines and fish was a staple in our kitchen. I was never much of a fisher, but every summer, my family would make trips to the beach or to the piers and fish until dark on a Saturday. In that way, the fish becomes a place where family, culture, and identity might intersect.

When I explore those themes, I latch on to something to ground them, something familiar, at least to me. We all have idiosyncratic relationships with objects, unique associations with animals, mammals, and insects and what-not, and sometimes those relationships collide on the page in absurd ways. The logic of the poems can be slippery, can slide from one theme to another with the fish or the teeth acting as conduits, a means of opening up new ideas, discovering intersections. A friend once said that my poems have trap doors that I open up halfway through the poem and crawl into just to start the poem again, which was such a delightful gift of a description, and I think captures the ways in which those motifs work in the poems. The associations that I make through images or sentences are in many ways a record of me processing an obsession: family, race, death, culture, faith. I return to those obsessions again and again, no matter how hard I try to resist them.

GD: I found there were several poems in this book placed next to each other that I considered to be almost "sister poems." Some of these include the placements of "In a Field Called Vietnam" next to "On Citizenship," "Bear Suit"

next to “House of Birds” next to “Brother Octopus,” and of course the six Tito Manuel poems. Can you talk a little bit about the process of how you wrote these poems, especially in terms of revision?

Oh, I love this idea of sister poems. I do think of all the poems as being related to one another, some more clearly than others. Each poem has its unique biography, but they largely start the same way: I’m curious about an image or phrase or story. I ask myself what happens if I put these words next to each other? And this happens again and again until I feel I can’t sustain it any longer. For example, the Tito Manuel poems emerged from the stories my mother would tell me about my uncle. My uncle passed away when I was pretty young, so I never had the opportunity to hear these stories directly from him. I wanted to bring those stories to life. I wanted to hear his voice, and in doing so, reconnect with my uncle, that history, that cultural heritage. I pieced together what I could, drew from other sources to assemble my uncle.

With the exception of the poems in the Tito Manuel series or the Harold and Kumar series, the poems were largely born independent of one another. I certainly have my obsessions and that accounts for the similar themes and the repetition of motifs and patterns. After all, I can’t escape myself in my writing. I’ve learned by now to trust those obsessions, to follow them down the rabbit hole. I’ve learned that repetition does not have to mean redundant. It can suggest urgency. It can be a deepening relationship. The poems could be collectively telling me that I am not done with this material yet.

Once I assembled the poems into a collection, I had to reconsider the function of the poems. Before, the poems operated independently, living in magazines or on my laptop without worrying about any other poems, but now I had to think about their relationship to one another, think about the bits of language that might clash and adjust the poems for that. I had a lot of help, too, from my editor, whose perspective helped guide many of those revision choices.

GD: There are several references in these poems to past relatives, movie figures, and poets. What made you decide to address Harold and Kumar from the movie *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* in this collection?

Every April for National Poetry Month I organize a little writing group that writes a new poem every day, and we exchange those poems via email for the whole month. Many people do something similar, which is why April is sometimes also known as National Poetry Writing Month, or NaPoWriMo for short. The Harold and Kumar poems began as an exercise for one of those months, a little experiment. I wanted to see what would happen if I wrote poems to Harold and Kumar.

When it comes down to it, I just really loved the movies. They are brash, fun, and bizarre. Qualities that I, in many ways, love seeing in poems. There’s

a little more to this, though. Right now, we are witnessing an increased representation of Asian Americans in the media. I just finished up the series *Warrior* on HBO Max and marveled at the complicated Asian characters. At the time those poems were written, however, I hadn't really seen many examples of such subversive or complex Asian American characters. Harold and Kumar felt fresh. They were silly, horny, ridiculous characters and I wanted to pay homage to that. Of course, I recognize the unfortunate irony of this increased representation arriving at time when a Filipinx woman is brutally attacked in broad daylight and world leaders carelessly refer to COVID as the kung flu, which is to say there is still much more work to do.

GD: One of the most prominent literary devices I've noticed throughout these poems is imagery. There's the repeating images of children, animals, living things having their guts torn open like in "House of Horses"—can you outline your creative process in terms of conjuring these images?

I love the use of the word "conjuring" in your question. Poems are like spellcraft, aren't they? We try to make the abstract qualities of our experiences into something tangible. I value the image in the poem not only for its ability to immerse us in experience, to ground our poems, but also for its versatility. The image can, among other things, transform, connect, reimagine, subvert, underline, and sometimes all of these at the same time.

The image, also, is important to my process. This may sound familiar to some of my former students, but the image acts as a springboard. I use one image to lead me to another. They become the engine to the poem. What memory or emotion or animal or color or shape or sound does this image evoke? There's a certain thrill in those discoveries, like tumbling through the wiki-pages of your brain, finding connections you never expected to find.

I know myself enough by know that I need to interrogate those choices: Did I push this image far enough? Was I lazy and did I settle for the easy, more obvious choice? If so, is there something more that I can do with it? Are there more interesting places I can take this image? I try to hold myself accountable for the choices I make in my poems, and this is true of the images. I want those images to be more than window dressing. They need to be a dynamic part of the poem.

GD: It's clear there is a lot of family history and cultural ties that appear, such as in the poems about Tito Manuel. What was your research process like for this book of poems?

In terms of research, much of it was asking for more stories from my family. I wanted to devour these stories, verify some of the details, confirm the timelines, and build on the stories they shared. I did a little research to clarify some questions I had about historical events, but mostly, the poems drew

from a reservoir of experiences. Many of the stories, the jokes, the history are things I grew up learning and knowing.

GD: The first section of the collection seems to tackle a lot of themes about race and privilege in America. For instance, in “Frederick Douglass: A Triptych,” it seemed as though the poem was tackling how the work put in by Frederick Douglass has to not paid off—we are still battling the same issues with racism we were back then. Would you consider this to be one of the overarching themes in this section?

I think that’s an astute reading of the first section. My concerns about identity, racism, American-ness, and privilege are certainly at the forefront of many of those opening poems. As I said before, I think of that section as a thematic primer, a kind of thesis, for lack of a better word, except it’s not so much an argument as it is an interrogation. What does it mean to Filipino American? What does it mean to be the son of immigrants? What does it mean to have one’s identity flattened by whiteness?

GD: Many of the poems in this collection seem to be in conversation with each other. For instance, the scenario in which Tito Manuel meets a relative on the Death March in “Tito Manuel Meets a Cousin Drinking Water on the Death March” is brought up again in “Idle,” but in a much softer, sweeter tone. If you could pinpoint a few main events that inspired this collection, what would they be, and how did you go about sacrificing other memories and events?

I think there are some formative experiences that act as a kind of nucleus for the book, so I love that you asked this. Many of the poems tie back, in one way or another, to this brief period of time in my life where I found myself returning to the Philippines. I hadn’t been back to the Philippines in maybe ten years, and then suddenly, I found myself going every year for a wedding or a funeral or an anniversary. I feel that so many of the poems I have written speak to those events, particularly the funeral of my grandfather.

But choosing the poems was a real struggle. What rubric can I apply here? How to compose a collection in which the poems “speak” to one another? I had to read through the collection several times to get a sense of the thematic threads that hold the book together, and from there, began a process of winnowing the poems out. In the end, I was mostly intuitive about the choices. Did this or that poem feel right for the collection and the themes I was exploring?

GD: Is there anything you’re currently working on or having coming out soon we can look forward to?

I’m working on a new manuscript. Many of the poems explore a terrible accident my parents experienced a few years ago. Only now do I feel I have

a perspective on those events, and so, I find the more recent poems explore the mortality of our families, my relationship with my Catholicism, and how I have turned to poetry to fill my spiritual needs. Some of these poems have been picked up in magazines here and there, so those should be appearing in the relative near future. The book, however, will take a little time to finish.