

## **Sidedoor Season 4, Episode 4: Things You'd Never Tell Your Parents**

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Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Regie Cabico is a poet. That's his job. But he's not your usual "two roads diverged in a yellow wood" kind of poet. Regie is a "spoken word" poet. In a competitive context, Regie's craft is known as, "slam poetry." And if you're like me, you might not really know what slam poetry sounds like. So, here's a selection from Regie performing his poetry in a TED talk.

[APPLAUSE]

Regie Cabico: As soon as my poetry came out, I came out. It's one thing to be straight acting, but when I'm writing, I can't lie. I have been mistaken for Tibetan in Manhattan, Peruvian in Queens, Japanese at the Black Pride parade, Chichi from Scarface. I have been Bombay in my father's barrios of Pangasinan. Every Lyft driver's six degrees of separation and that guy on 'Lost'.

[LAUGHTER]

Lizzie Peabody: On stage, Regie's talent for crafting and delivering poetic experiences earned him a lot of recognition. He earned top prizes in the 1993, '94 and '97 National Poetry Slams. His work has been featured in more than 30 anthologies. He appeared twice on the HBO series, "Def Poetry Jam". And this August, Cabico is emcee-ing and performing in the Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Literature Festival, which is an annual celebration bringing Asian American literature to the Smithsonian. The very concept of slam poetry feels boundary breaking. It's a format that brings together two things that might not seem like they belong together: poetry and competition. And Regie offers this advice to aspiring slam poets.

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: If you don't know what you want to write, write about things you could never tell your mother, things you could never tell your father and um, a lot will come out.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Regie's parents were Filipino immigrants, who moved to Maryland's rural Eastern Shore in the 1970s. His neighbors were largely white and African American families.

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: And navigating in between living what's African American and white and, and like "Who are you in in that space?" was something that you had to reconcile. But I guess, I was just always just the isolated kind of artist.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Even inside his own conservative Catholic family, Regie was an outlier.

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: My sisters' names are Faith and Charity.

Lizzie Peabody: And so, where does Regie come from?

Regie Cabico: Yes, um, there is no hope in the family.

[LAUGHTER]

Regie Cabico: My name is Regie. The name means king, but my parents didn't know they got a queen. So, um...

[LAUGHTER]

Lizzie Peabody: But despite his isolation and his sense that he was different from his family members, Regie always sought the spotlight.

Lizzie Peabody: But was your family supportive of, of that performative side of you?

Regie Cabico: I think that they couldn't stop me. As Judy Garland said about Liza, (Judy Garland voice) "I can't stop Liza from performing!"

[LAUGHTER]

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Regie's slam poetry is best shared live, on stage, between him and the audience. His performances can't be hung on a museum gallery wall or reproduced in a book. They have to be heard.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, we share the performance of slam poetry star, Regie Cabico. We hear two of Regie's poems, and discuss slam poetry, identity, and of course, Pokemon.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Reggie Cabico says he's an accidental poet. He'd graduated from New York University with a focus in acting, but he wasn't booking gigs. So, he went to the metaphorical "theatre performance buffet" and tasted them all.

Regie Cabico: So, I did all the open mics. I was doing standup comedy. I was doing cabaret. And then there was a thing called, "the poetry calendar" and they were giving free poetry workshops. And at this time of the 90s, it was the growth of multicultural literature. So, you saw Asian Anthologies, African American anthologies, Queer Anthologies. So, I absorbed all of those works and I started to write my own poems.

Lizzie Peabody: After workshopping his poetry, and studying the poems and performances of other slam poets, Regie thought "I can do that." He was drawn in by the rowdy crowds at the slam poetry performances. He was hooked.

[APPLAUSE]

[ANNOUNCER ON MIC]

[APPLAUSE]

Regie Cabico: And people were giving me a standing ovation for these poems, which I had not ever gotten a standing ovation because I would always be like, delivery boy number five or servant role number six, you know. And so, there's nothing wrong with that, but I know that I can do more. And so, that was the accident. And I think, if the... and the poetry slam was just starting. And I think that if that didn't happen, I don't know what I'd be doing at this moment. The people who find themselves in poetry slams are usually at the end of their rope. And then they, they find a community. And, and so, it opens up so many doors.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I asked Regie what exactly is slam poetry?

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: It could be a short story. It could be, uh, a poem. It could be a rant. It could be a rap, where a poet performs an original poem without music, costumes or props under three minutes. So, to me, when I look at slam poetry, it's almost a writer preaching their own gospel truth, uh, and being real and authentic.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: At a slam poetry performance, there are a handful of poets performing in front of judges, but the goal is really about connecting with the audience.

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: Poetry slam becomes poetry for the people, decided by the people. And so, you're changing your idea of what a poem can be because it's, it's happening live and it becomes a sport.

Lizzie Peabody: Poetry. That's also a sport. But unlike most sports, you don't need any special training. You just need to have something to say.

Regie Cabico: And in order to write a poem, there's either something that has happened to you that drives you to delve deep inside that you, that you need to speak. So, um, it varies, but, you know, people come to the slam because they've survived something

Lizzie Peabody: So, with that prologue, here is Regie, performing part of his poem called, "Triggers in Five Acts."

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: Act 1: "Another Operatic Drama of the Asian Diaspora in Reston VA."

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: The theater usher glares. Her skull, a cauldron of question marks.  
Scanning my bones: a metal detector. When I stare back, she hands me a program.  
"Are you Hawaiian?" "I'm Filipino." Her eyes dilate & rattle like tiki salt & pepper shakers.  
"Well, we did *Beauty and the Beast* and our Belle was Chinese!"

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: I didn't ask if she was Alaskan and though I may look Hawaiian, what makes her a Hawaiian expert? Did I make your space a Tribal Wonderland? Shall I play Belle for you on my ukulele? The audience finds their seats. The overture stops as the purple lights go down.

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: Act 2: "A Brown On Brown Racial Mis-identification at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts." I grand jeté towards the Hall of Nations to catch my students perform their poems. Turning to the guard, I ask, "where is the 'Spoken Word' open mic?" He stares at me, as if I am a breathing death certificate scrawled in hieroglyphics. We stand on the red foyer. Heart brown faces commuting. Toddlers wearing the same Pokemon Pikachu costume on Halloween. I ask again, "Poetry? Hip Hop?" He directs me through the backstage labyrinth on an elevator going up. The doors open and I see Japanese women

changing in kimonos & bamboo parasols. The dancers stare at me. And I feel like I'm Mr. Miyagi popping out of a Johnny Air Cargo mail order package, freezing myself into a pissed-off butoh pose as a gust of cherry blossoms tumble on my skull.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: What made you write this poem?

Regie Cabico: I realized that I sublimated all of those, what we would call them microaggressions, where people say something not to hurt you, but it's sort of this weird trigger. Like, when someone asks, 'Are you Hawaiian?' Or they stare at you for a long time. And the, the idea of, you know, "where are you from" is, uh, it's just an exasperating question. Um, and I think that there is another way of asking, you know, what your race is, and the root of it, um, without sounding like you're on the cover of National Geographic.

Lizzie Peabody: I think my favorite part about that poem is the two toddlers in the same Pokemon Pikachu costumes. That image is funny and really strong to me.

[LAUGHTER]

Lizzie Peabody: I mean, this sort of bewilderment of recognition and yet not quite. What made you choose that particular descriptor?

Regie Cabico: I think it was playing Pokemon, the video game, at the time on my phone.

[LAUGHTER]

Regie Cabico: But I think um, Pikachu has a very wide-eyed, sort of like, look. You know, his eyes are just very receptive and open and very all seeing and very compassionate. But, it was just sort of two people looking at each other. Um, me out of breath exasperation, and him trying to understand me. And uh, we're two people of color, right? Looking at each other and we're both trying to do something. And I'm trying to see my students and he's trying to steer people. And so, to be sent in the wrong elevator because he assumed that I was Japanese, I must be going to the Japanese tea dance ceremony. And I think this whole series is all of these moments where I'm always misidentified, but I just move on. And they're going on. I have five acts, but every day, something else happens. So, this book will just go on and on and on and on.

[LAUGHTER]

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Coming up, we'll hear more of Regie's spoken word poetry and answer an age-old question: Should we eat the carp? That's after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Today on Sidedoor, we've been talking with the acclaimed spoken word poet, Regie Cabico. Regie performs his short poems, just three minutes long, in slam poetry competitions. His poetry comes from his lived experiences, navigating the world as a Filipino-American. Regie says he grew up American, but he lives his life with constant reminders that he's not quite American enough. But his next poem was written for an audience at one of the most American institutions out there, aside from the Smithsonian, of course. I'm talking about the National Archives, home to the constitution, and so many other historically critical documents.

Regie Cabico: I, I get asked to write poems for different occasions, right? And the, the Academy of American poets invited me to do this. It's a huge honor. So, it, it felt so, um, austere and important. And I think, because I am a performance poet, I wanted to write something that was Americana and performancy.

Lizzie Peabody: So, when Regie was researching what he'd want to write for the occasion, he found an old 1911 flier from the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, titled, "Eat the Carp." But it's written in all caps, and has an exclamation point. So, if I were reading it grammatically, it would sound more like this: "EAT THE CARP!" And it's a deeply weird document to be written by the government. Here's the first few lines, to give you a taste.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody Reading "Eat The Carp": "The carp discovered America in 1877. He found the land to his liking. He multiplied and filled the waters with his kind. He is now big, abundant, useful. He converts useless vegetation and small animals into meat."

Lizzie Peabody: It reads like a fishy manifest destiny that concludes...

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody Reading "Eat The Carp": "Catch the carp; buy the carp; cook the carp properly and eat it. Eat the roe; can the roe. Make carp jelly. Can the fish. Smoke it, too."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, Regie took this very bossy manifesto, and turned it into his poem, called "Carpapalooza: An American Anthem." Here's Regie performing it.

[MUSIC]

Regie Cabico: I can write about colonialism, Disney, riots and inoculations. Centuries of American history before me; Pocahontas' bust, Rosa Parks' arrest records, Elvis Presley meeting Nixon, but with an hour to go before recording a poem, I am in the Starbucks struggling with the most profound piece of literature in the archives, "Eat The Carp." The Bureau of Fisheries urges Americans to eat the Carp. This resilient variety of fish that lolled the tea gardens of Japan & became the staple for gefilte to Jews is 43 million pounds strong at the turn of the dawn of the 20th century. We were to eat carp croquettes, jelly and caviar. Before there were McNuggets, there was the Carp. These oversized gold fish that multiplied from Carolina to California with the force of horseless carriages pounding through our streams.

I was going to write haikus to the Carp. Neruda-like odes to the Carp. Howl, Allen Ginsberg-style to the Carp. Create a Jackson Pollock Splatter of concrete poetry all over our marbled Carpital City to the Carp. I even wanted to write a Filipino riddle to the Carp with lemon grass and soy sauce. Ultimately, this poem was supposed to be a carpe diem poem to the Carp. To live and roam the continent free as the Carp. So, seize the Carp, roast the Carp, till the Carp fisheries are lit in flames becoming us, taking us into a new dawn. Oh Lord, give me carp, the power to go on and pay my student loans and find a boyfriend on okcupid. Give me Carp crispy-fried in crisco, roasted and well done. Oh Lord, serve me a sweltering sausage of Carp, with sriracha and mustard on a whole wheat bun.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: What is going on in this poem?

Regie Cabico: I am trying to figure this out. So, I wanted to spin it and not be so patriotic, but also just have something where I could just have fun. And I think that we're missing that in poetry. I think that it's alright to be silly and still be, you know, smart about it.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Carpapalooza is a bit of a zany, punny ride through American culture. It celebrates American icons and lampoons some of the biggest National institutions. Not the Archives. I'm talking about Disney and McDonald's. But there's an edge to it. It has this cheeky tone that Regie says should be celebrated in poetry.

Regie Cabico: I have to ask myself, "What am I going to write that could be fun and serious and memorable and still be respectful?" So, for me, this was, uh, the rebellion from trying to be sacred. And I feel that the sacred and the profane need to come together, especially now, because it is so hard to be funny in this era because people are looking at every single word; that it is hard to be profane or funny. And I think that you need them both. And so, for me, those are the things that I try to balance as an artist.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, go ahead. Eat the Carp. And if you have something to say, follow Regie's lead. Go on stage. And tell the whole world. Especially, if it's something you might not tell your parents.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. And we want to send an extra special thank you to Regie Cabico for giving us an exclusive performance of his poems in the Sidedoor Studio!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to hear more of Regie Cabico's poetry performances, check out our newsletter, where we'll include some links to some videos of his work. But if you happen to be near Washington, D.C. between August 2nd and August 4th, 2019, you can see Regie perform alongside many other talented writers, poets and spoken word performers at the Smithsonian's Asian American Literary Festival. We'll include a link to that on our newsletter as well. Check it out at [si.edu/Sidedoor](http://si.edu/Sidedoor). And if you like the show, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps people find the show, plus we get a kick out of hearing what your favorite episodes are.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Sidedoor is made possible by listeners like you! Your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Michelle Harven, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq and Lara Koch. Greg Fisk does our episode artwork. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship@prx.org](mailto:sponsorship@prx.org). I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]