



Regie Cabico is a poet and spoken word pioneer, having won the Nuyorican Poets Café Grand Slam in 1993 and taking top prizes in the 1993, 1994 & 1997 National Poetry Slams. Television appearances include 2 seasons on HBO's Def Poetry Jam. His work appears in over 30 anthologies including *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, *Spoken Word Revolution* & *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*. He co-edited *Poetry Nation: A North American Anthology of Fusion Poetry* (Vehicule Press, 1998). He is a recipient of a 2008 Future Aesthetics Arts Award Regrant from The Ford Foundation/Hip Hop Theater Festival, 3 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships for Poetry and Multidisciplinary Performance, Larry Neal Awards for Poetry 2007 (3rd Place) and 2008 (1st Place), a 2008 DC Commission for the Arts Poetry Fellowship.

He received the 2006 Writers for Writers Award from Poets & Writers for his work teaching at-risk youth at Bellevue Hospital in New York. He is a former Artist-In-Residence at NYU's Asian Pacific American Studies Program and has served as faculty at The Banff Centre's Spoken Word Program and Kundiman, an Asian American Writers Retreat. As a theater artist he has directed 2 plays for the 2007 & 2008 Hip Hop Theater Festival, *Elegies in the Key of Funk* and *The Other Side*. He received 3 New York Innovative Theater Award Nominations for his work in *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*. The Kenyon Review recently named Regie Cabico the "Lady Gaga of Poetry."

He is the Youth Program Coordinator for Split this Rock Poetry Festival and is the artistic director of Sol & Soul, an arts and activist organization. He is the co-founder of Sulu Dc, a monthly Asian American Performance Series and is the co-director of Capturing Fire: A Queer Spoken Word Summit. He is pleased to be returning as part of The Banff Centre's 2011 Spoken Word Faculty. ✖



# I Got It Bad For Nina Simone

nina look at the sky april clouds hang a fat  
sappy syrup on my saddest day  
played you monday night  
my day unbearable as a wool coat in april  
came back to find my bed empty as a tire swing in winter

nina in my saddest hour  
you have crooned me over a cruel block  
of loneliness when unrequited love  
is an italian bartender who flirts with you  
from the torso and offers you  
more lies than a tiramisu

yes nina, monday night i was so terribly sad  
sadder than a parlor of long veils,  
carrying groceries up too many flights of stairs

& the sound of your voice so full & broad-shouldered  
made the day with all its drama into bangles & diamonds  
nina you made me a culinary priestess  
you placed a bojangling spell on me

crooning to the sizzling oil as i pranced like a tiger  
among the tambourines & tin cans  
the raindrops applauded & the single wine glass wept

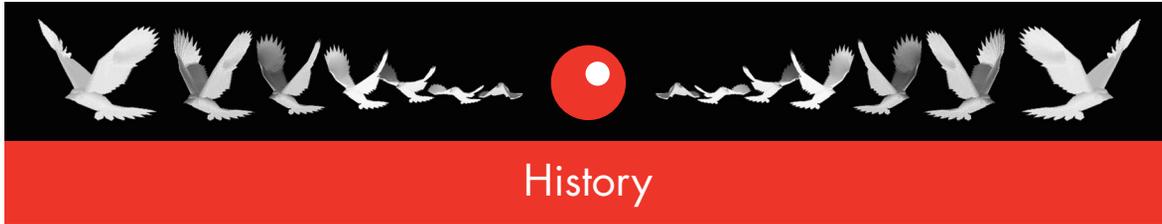
because i found my inner nina  
nina nubuan mona lisa woman painted  
with egyptian mascara

you use silence the way a woman's figure  
made jesus bend at the knees bend ache break  
to the will of your beautifully blessed contralto

crackling bittersweet as you held a phrase  
long enough for green finches to fly out the winter gloom  
nina, the storyteller, nina a river lonely as hell,  
nina tossed like an ark full of sparrows

you can honky tonk the bones of kali  
& steal the lightning from her toes  
listen nina, i think its gonna rain again  
human kindness is overflowing, flowing harder  
even in the cruelest time

-Regie Cabico ✶



## History

In 1992, I graduated from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, a semester early. With my BFA in Acting and Musical Theater degree (a minor in East Asian Studies & Journalism), I read *Back Stage Magazine* religiously. Call me a Filipino male version of Irene Cara's triple-threat diva, Coco Hernandez in the movie *Fame*. A decade before I heard the caramel-coloured, multi-racial diva belting, "Remember my name," *Fame!* & singing Walt Whitman's, *I Sing the Body Electric*, and it turned out to be the catalyst that tour jeté-d me from Washington, DC, to New York City.

A year hanging out in New York's stand-up comedy clubs, cabaret bars and at open mics; left me unfulfilled. Where were my mentors and role models? Coco Hernandez was a screen persona. Were there any Filipino triple-threats? There were literally no parts for me except for a musical of Ghandi's life called *5 Guys Named Mo-hatma*. One day as I roamed the East Village looking for work, I stepped into the St. Mark's Bookshop. I saw anthologies of Asian American poets and queer writers. The 90s generated a multicultural democracy of diverse voices. What was happening in American literature was not reflected on film, television, or in the theatre. Should I write poetry, go to massage school, or get a law degree?

The Poetry Calendar was an 11x17 sheet of coloured paper that listed every reading and open mic in "The City." I wrote poems and short prose, read my work and submitted them to The Writers' Voice Westside Y (Master Class). Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn was teaching fiction and Agha Shahid Ali was teaching poetry. These artists were writers whose work I'd read, admired AND they were of the Asian-American diaspora - Jessica Hagedorn being Filipino. I submitted the same manuscript to both teachers, except changed the line breaks to look like poetry. Though I was rejected from Hagedorn's class, I was accepted into poetry.

Essex Hemphill's poetry and essays fuelled me. Reading his poetry dealing with subjects like AIDS, HIV, loss and being an African-American gay man in Washington, DC; gave me the audacity to explore my own sexual identity candidly. *ntozake shange's* for colored girls who considered suicide when the rainbow wuz enuff taught me how rage, grief & poetry can soar in a black box. These poets gave me my two essential slam poems, *gameboy* and *Check One*, published in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*.

In 1993, you'd have to be desperate, looking for crack, dodging bullets, or a homeless mole person hobbling up the sewers; just to read your poetry on 3rd Street between Avenue B & C. With craggily poets hunched over wine, the tall ceilings and balcony was the church-like Alphabet City home for poets. There was something sacred and ornery about the Nuyorican Poets Cafe; poets of all ages and styles were downtown characters mingling in another universe. And this is what I never witnessed while I was an NYU student.

When I signed up to read in the Wednesday night open mic, I didn't know what the numbers were being called out for. When I found out that you could win \$10, I thought: "I need ten dollars. I've got to win this." The idea of the Poetry Slam as a poetry competition written and performed for the people, and judged by the people, was the basis for Marc Smith's invention. A construction worker and poet, Smith gave poets 3 minutes to recite their original works without music, props, or costumes. Poets were being judged by people who didn't know anything of poetry. The motto goes: "if you want to be a judge, you're over-qualified."

I didn't know it then, but I was performing in what I call "the end of the first wave of the Poetry Slam." Paul Beatty, Edwin Torres, Maggie Estep, Reg E Gaines, Hal Sirowitz, Willie Perdomo, and Dael Orlandersmith were some of the artists who defined the

New York Slam. The Nuyorican Poets Cafe named these artists their All-Stars and they were already touring internationally. Bob Holman, poet and poetry activist, was the Friday Night Slam host, and his zany style and love for words came through in his intros and outros for the slammers. (Holman was busy filming *The United States of Poetry* and some of the All-Stars were on MTV with 30-second poetry videos.)

After losing 4 Wednesday nights, I finally won the slam and got to compete in the Friday night slot. There were usually 5 or 6 slam poets. That night Bob Holman put 12 poets on stage. It was a fierce line-up; I did a comic prose poem called *Benny's Burritos* about a fleeting gay romantic encounter, a poem about the lions coming to life at The New York Public Library and *Check One*, a poem about Filipino America identity. The crowd went bozonkers, and I got a perfect score of 30. I felt like I won Olympic gold! A week later, *New York Magazine* released an issue called *The Beats are Back*, with Edwin Torres on the cover. Inside the magazine were slam poets, and placed in the centerfold with a staple through my face was my photo labelled, *The Nuyorican Anonymous*. I didn't care, I was just happy to be in the issue. My theatre classes at Tisch School of the Arts never prepared me for this kind of adulation. In fact, the drama teachers made me feel as if I couldn't act. But the slam wasn't about "acting," because it was about breaking the 4th wall, playing yourself, and writing the role that you were made to perform.

I was the 1st poet slammer to bring a theatrical polish to the genre. I incorporated what I developed from stand-up comedy and musical theatre onto the slam stage. I was off-book and if I needed to read a poem, I brought with me a big black binder with my poems in plastic sheets as if I were doing a staged reading. I looked at a slam poem as if it were a musical showstopper. As this slam wave was ending, my poems were published in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* edited by Miguel Algarin, Nuyorican founder and poet, and Bob Holman. My Grand Slam Finals with Anne Elliott, Shirley Bradley LeFlore & Julie Patton were narrated by Algarin in the introduction. I won the slam and channelled my inner Coco Hernandez, not belting Whitman, but reciting my own, out-of-the-closet verses.

Other poets of colour with theatre backgrounds would find their way to the slam stage; Saul Williams & Sarah Jones, most notably. But also activists like Alix Olson and Carlos Andres Gomez who seem-

ingly approach slam as a way of getting their political messages across. Over the last 2 decades, I have seen the poetry slam become performance driven. We have reached and crossed a phase which I call the Hollywood blockbuster slam poem. If you compared Slam to Cinema and if in 1993 Technicolor was discovered and *The Wizard of Oz* was made, within a few years we reach the over-the-top performance styles, which are formidable and copy-able. We reached the Spielberg era of slam; the *Jaws*, the *Star Wars* era. I am not knocking Spielberg at all or any of these iconoclastic slam poets. Poetry evolves and so does the slam. A great slam poem is a great slam poem and stands the test of time.

In writing this history, I am reminded of a time when the poetry slam was an open mic for "writers." In those days, you could read from your journal and get a perfect score. And as this wave closed, another period was ending as well. Danny Hoch, a solo performance artist from NYU was making his debut at P.S. 122. I consider Hoch the last of the great performance artists that included Tim Miller, Karen Finley, Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray & John Leguizamo. These artists, to varying degrees, have crossed over on a commercial level – Whoopi Goldberg, most notably, who won a Tony, a Grammy & an Oscar, was the center square in Hollywood Squares and who continues to "slam" her political passions on *The View*. ★



### EXERCISE 1 ♥

#### *The List Poem*

Write a list of "50 Things That Drive You Crazy."

A strong list poem has variety and general detail i.e. people, places, things, days of the week, foods, cartoon characters, TV shows etc... Use sensory details: Things that you smell, taste, see, touch, and hear. It's not important that you come up with 50 items but you should be trained to write for the allotted time that you give yourself. I usually have the class write for 10-15 minutes.

Use a list of words or phrases. Break the images down: If it's dogs that drive you crazy, is it pugs or Pomeranians? And is it, Pomeranians barking in the middle of the night or is it pugs who stare at you? Avoid abstractions: Racism, Homophobia, Poverty...Come up with an image. Instead of Poverty – Try: Shaking pennies from a piggy bank. Towards the last third of the writing time you have allotted the class, continue the list but shift to things that drive you crazy in a "good" way, i.e. tiramisu, Brad Pitt, Sunday afternoons, honorariums.

Below are some examples written by three students in the 2010 Spoken Word Program at The Banff Centre. It is the only spoken word program of its kind and the Director is Sheri-D Wilson. These writings are by people who were in my workshop.

**"the Canadian inferiority complex, hippies telling me "it's all good", beach culture, vertical suburbia's, black liquorice, people who talk big but never follow through, people who actually believe the world will end in 2012, fatalism in all forms, tragic attitudes, BOO TRAGEDY, self-sabotaging friends, March Madness, the Toronto Raptors, poetry slams, sunflower seeds, espresso, the essays of David Foster Wallace, shopping..."**

*Chris Gilpin*

**"techno music from the apartment upstairs, panty lines, reality TV, rain splashing on pants when walking in it, large egos, misogynists, people who don't smile, pedestrians who don't understand driving, drivers who don't understand pedestrians, bad grammar, know-it-alls, sloppy kisses, dark chocolate, my cat biting and rubbing her face in my hair, my cat sleeping on the radiator, my cat spooning with me, my cat on my lap, neck rubs, taking risks, Johnny Depp, making a film, coffee with Bette, hummingbirds, Sudoku Puzzles, meditation..."**

*Pippa Hirst*

**"lemon pledge scent in restaurants because it smells like someone died, high-pitched whistling of my brother, crowded places, people who don't respect your personal space in a crowded place, 2pm in the afternoon on a weekday at work, energy suckers as friends, sweatpants with "juicy" written on the butt, losing pens, plagiarism, a novel to read where you can lose track of the time when reading it, cuddling, plunging my hands into a basket of soft wool, the feeling of taking an ice cold drink of water and feeling it move down your throat, watching the stars, being in the rain, being the first person to break the surface of the water in the pool, grilled cheese sandwiches, riding in a zodiac on the ocean, whale watching..."**

*Mary Pinkowski*



**EXERCISE 2 ♥***"The Urge" Poem*

With the list generated, write an urge poem. Each line starting with I have the urge to...and then incorporate the images and phrases from the crazy list. Consider verb choices and focus on image and specificity. For example, I have the urge to lie. I have the urge to cry. I have the urge to ask why... doesn't give me a picture... add details, specific where's, with whom & what's. I have the urge to drink cold beer from your hands... evokes something sensory.

**EXERCISE 3 ♥***Create a Variation*

The basic form of performance poetry and lyrics are lists. Anne Elliott, is a slam poet who performed with me in the first wave of slam. Her influences are in the performance art confessional texts of Karen Finley. horehound stillpoint, of San Francisco, uses the list with queer punk rock audacity. I have included their poems here. Please reference A LONE LITANY, by Anne Elliott and note what sections, "THINGS THAT DRIVE ME CRAZY/URGE" have resonance.

**DISCUSSION →**

What you have created is a unique list of things that provide a strong reaction, positive or negative in you. These triggers are important in slam. Now, take one of these images and break it down, explaining your love or hate. What's the conflict? In a slam poem there is an enemy, an antagonist. And if not, ask yourself who "is the hero?" Odes to rock stars, or the attractive guy or girl behind the Starbucks counter are great fodder for a slam poem. What's the conflict? What's the message? The crazy list has a simple, clear sometimes humorous message. ✚





## EXERCISE ♥

### *Whisper, Scream, Sing – Dive into Poetry*

There is no simple method or exercise to inspire an honest, committed poetry performance. In working with students, especially beginners, it's key to note that as a poet performing a poem, you are "diving" into the world of the poem.

Think about what you need to be doing in the world of the poem you are about to perform. Are you breaking up with someone? Finally telling someone that you have a crush for them? Are you saving the world from racism, homophobia, or apathy? Are you convincing someone to leave their job, glorifying or paying homage to a deceased loved one?

Especially in the poetry slam, you must raise the stakes; perform from the most up against the wall, climactic moment you can conjure up. Your poem is an aria without singing, the Broadway showstopper you were meant to perform. Your job is to relive the emotions you went through as you wrote the poem. Keep in mind that performing a poem is not the recitation of words; the poem has a complex series of emotional colors and levels that you can draw upon with voice, body gesture and facial expressions. The poem is a series of words, phrases, images for the audience to catch, hold and take in.

Ask yourself: "who am I?" in the poem. Poems require certain aspects of our personality: our presidential side, the truck driver, our inner wallflower, our lusty lush, our preacher pontificating our gospel truth. (While working with a student who had no idea what to do with her hands or voice in a poem, the words flower, fire and hushed footfall came up. I asked her to physical-ize the "flower" in her hand, hold the "fire" to let the sensation of "hushed footfall" rush through her body and see how the words affect her stance and vocals.)

I developed this exercise while teaching at New York City's Project Reach. First, I taped a section on the floor that would indicate the stage. I showed the students Center Stage; Stage Left (poets left); Stage Right (poets right); Upstage (away from the audience); and Downstage (towards the audience). Then I had poets make their entrance CENTER STAGE and would have them whisper, sing and shout a line of their poetry.

A whisper is a stage whisper, one that is breathy but also audible and articulate. Singing forces the performer to explore the vocal possibilities of pitch, sung vowels and staccato rhythms. Shouting has the poet explore her/his full vocal possibilities, being able to project to the back of the room and command a declamatory presence useful for slam performance.

This exercise also brings about an untapped sense of play for the poet, to really "own" the stage with the freedom from the page to make vocal choices. I also encourage poets to make physical choices with gesture. Diving into the emotional world of the poem requires sense memory, whole-hearted commitment and an ability to "read" the audience, acknowledging that they are there and that they will trust you on the poetic/story-telling journey that you are about to take them on. Think about where you yourself need to go emotionally in the poem, the arc and flow of the drama unfolding. From the first line to the end of the poem you should have been transformed and so should the audience. ✨

