



My Name Is Where My Honor Lies

INTERVIEW BY ERIC QUITUGUA

Houston attorney Zachary Caballero's poetry answers the eternal question of "who am I?"

MEETING ZACHARY CABALLERO, one immediately notices the innate drive and passion he has for poetry. When he speaks, he does so rhythmically, beating his hands on the table when making impassioned revelations. Just like the surge of poetic thought coming out of him, Caballero responds to questions with a sense of urgency. The Houston-based personal injury law attorney and descendant of Mexican immigrants deep-dives into his identity, both celebrating it and confronting his own contradictions—and often in front of audiences in H Town's slam poetry scene. Caballero met with the *Texas Bar Journal* in November 2019 to jump into the background of his art.

ABOVE: "You can call it word vomit. You can call it spontaneous combustion. But the point of the matter is, I can't stop it from coming out. And that's when I know that a poem is right in the air," Zachary Caballero told the *Texas Bar Journal*. PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER DIAZ PHOTOGRAPHY

LET'S START WITH THE BASICS. WHEN DID YOU BEGIN WRITING POEMS?

The first poem I ever wrote was in the seventh grade at Ridgeview Middle School in Mr. Malcolm's English class. Then the next one was a love poem to my girlfriend once I realized I could write poems. But I didn't start performing until about five or six years later. The writer part I kept more secret because I was young and unsure of what it means to be 12 years old and write poems and also play football.

SO, THE FIRST POEM—WHAT WAS IT AND HOW DID IT COME OUT AND WHEN THAT LIGHTNING ROD JUST KIND OF SHOT OFF, WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

Yeah, I'm pretty sure the lightning rod came from when I was reading *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. I was writing a poem either about Ponyboy or one of the other characters in terms of how they were perceived, how they were judged—wanting to be seen for something more than how the world sees them. Almost demanding a different perspective. I know it was like a page long, but I remember it was about identity, which is what a lot of my poetry is about. I think the universal idea in literature is trying to answer the question “who am I?” and so I think I started my first poem in some shape or form trying to answer that. It is much like a lightning rod. You can call it word vomit. You can call it spontaneous combustion. But the point of the matter is, I can't stop it from coming out. And that's when I know that a poem is right in the air. And that was a new feeling for me—this incessant voice that just won't quiet; this need to keep putting words on paper until I felt like the job was done. So that's how it feels—very much like a lightning rod.

INSPIRATION IS A TRICKY THING BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT ALWAYS GOING TO FEEL INSPIRED BUT YOU STILL WANT TO WRITE. HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE THAT AND HAVE YOU EVER WRITTEN SOMETHING THAT YOU WEREN'T NECESSARILY INSPIRED TO WRITE BUT YOU KNEW I HAVE TO KEEP MY HANDS MOVING EVEN IF IT DOESN'T COME OUT GREAT. I'VE JUST GOT TO PUT THIS DOWN?

Oh, yeah. The things I get inspired to write about now are oftentimes influenced by my family, my heritage, my culture, and how I don't always fit in with those things. Even then, I didn't start writing poems about being Mexican, my identity, until junior year of college when my roommate called me out. Somebody was calling from U.T. I said my last name like “Cabalero” because that's how the majority of people would say my name growing up. My roommate said, “Why do you pronounce your name like that? That's not your name.” I didn't know. I didn't have any true answer. So I backtracked. I didn't seek out to write this poem (*When You Say My Name*), but the poem was in response to me being confronted with *why do I mispronounce my own name?* Because of where I grew up—I grew up in the 'burbs playing soccer with a bunch of white boys. I remember every single time we would check in with the ref and there'd be the player cards and no one could ever pronounce my name—and the laughter. I just remember the laughter. I could never ever forget the laughter. Even as a man now—it was so startling. Being confronted with something and through my own investigation of myself had raised all these things that I've dealt with since childhood.

THERE'S ANOTHER LINE I GLEANED FROM *WHEN YOU SAY MY NAME*—“ANYTIME SOMEONE DROPPED MY NAME ON ITS HEAD, I TOLD MYSELF IT WAS FUNNY.” AND THEN LATER, “I WAS RIPPING MY GRANDFATHER'S CALLOUSED HANDS APART WHEN HE GAVE THIS NAME TO MY FATHER TO GIVE TO HIS SONS.” IS IT HARD TO CONFRONT YOURSELF IN THESE MOMENTS WHERE YOU'RE AGAINST YOUR OWN IDENTITY IN A WAY?

It is tough. It's not common and it's work. It's work to excavate and pull out those moments of saying, “This is where I fell short.” I'm doing this excavation internally, this constant self-examination, and I'm referencing this to say what would my grandfather think, who had 13 kids and was in the Texas Army National Guard and worked with his hands his whole life. And my dad, who didn't go to college, went to the Navy when he was 17, and his name was what they called you. Whenever I wrote that poem, I thought about my grandfather, and I thought about my dad and my brothers and his brothers and my aunts, and how proud they were to be where they were from and who they were. My family's story and heritage is so deep and well known between the people back home that it was such a disservice, and dishonorable, for me to allow people to constantly mispronounce Caballero. I was proud and I am proud of who I am, but I didn't see something as small as “oh no, you need to say my name correctly” ... I would feel bad about checking someone or feel awkward about it. If someone mispronounced it as a boy, I would just laugh because I didn't have the cultural context to be critically aware or I wasn't confident enough to say, “Hey, please don't say my name like that. My name is *Caballero*. I will teach you how to pronounce it,” which is what I do in the poem. But that was hard because to say that, I had to look back at all the times where I didn't say that, all the times where I would make jokes with my brothers whenever we were at my grandma's house for Thanksgiving and we would be surrounded by a bunch of our family members who are all obviously Mexican and we would be cracking jokes like, “Oh, yeah, are we all legal?” Growing up, it was almost second nature to disrespect your identity because everyone else was doing it. Everyone else made it seem cool. The way I saw myself on television was not through a heroic representation, a man of stature, or characters who look like me on TV.

There's a very, very important book to me by Octavio Paz, the *Labyrinth of Solitude*, which is incredible. He talks about the contradictions of American identity and Mexican identity and he uses the Chicano movement to compare against nationalists in Mexico and what it means to be Mexican or Latino in America. He has a term that used to be the name of my blog. It's called “pachuco,” P-A-C-H-U-C-O—typically Chicano males who were born in America but have family from Mexico and they're basically representative of the Chicano men in California who had the zoot suits in the '50s. Those are pachucos—people who were loud and trying to assert themselves in a world that already thought it knew who they were. That book was really instrumental in how I saw myself and found the words and the language to speak about it. The quote is from that book: “Self-discovery is above all the realization that you are alone.” That quote, when I put out a book of poetry, will be the opening quote. **TBJ**