



# Recorded Events

## 2014 Seattle Reads “For All of Us, One Today”: Main Event with Richard Blanco

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[0:00:40] I'm Marcellus Turner and I'm the city librarian and I want to welcome you to our 2014 Seattle Reads Main Event. A special event featuring Book-It Repertory Theater staged readings for readings from *For All of Us, One Today* by Richard Blanco, whom I just had the pleasure of meeting. This is the 16th year of the Seattle Public Library's renowned Seattle Reads series. Hundreds of one book community reading programs have taken place all over the country and internationally. The project originated here, the inspiration of Nancy Pearl and Chris Higashi, who did the first one in December 1998.

[0:01:25] I'm very proud of our library for leading the way. We are grateful to all our Seattle Reads sponsors; the Wallace Foundation which funded Seattle reads at it's inception, the Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs, media sponsor KUOW public radio, Beacon Press, Elliott Bay Book Company, Rick Simonson, and Karen Maeda Almond for being our longtime partner in Seattle Reads. And finally, last but not least, special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation and thousands of people in our community who make gifts small and large to benefit our library. Now, let me turn things over to Chris Higashi, program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library, who directs our annual Seattle Reads series to introduce the rest of the program. So, I know that Annie the director was a little nervous to be, I mean she's adapted and directed some 25 works for Book-It but she said, “I've never done, you know, out of a real person's life.” I said, “Richard is cool. He's fine. Don't worry.” Okay, so following the performance, you're going to be invited to ask questions of Annie, the adapter, and the director and the actors and Richard. So what we want to tell you is that Book-It is different from other theater that you may have seen, that the Book-It style uses almost every word that the author has written. The actors speak both

the dialogue and the narrative. Okay, with that here is *For All of Us, One Today: An Inaugural Poet's Journey* by Richard Blanco. Thanks. [applause] [music]

[0:03:55] Days before our field trip to the science center, Mrs. Bermudez tells our class, "The sun is actually hundreds of times larger than the earth. We move around it. We are nothing, zooming through dark space." She says matter-of-factly as if we didn't matter that we were no longer the center of our own little worlds. We, with crayons in our hands coloring dittos of the sun and our nine planets. We, at our desks, but also helplessly zooming through cold, dark space. I didn't want to believe her. "The sun is the size of a sunflower," I insist. I draw lemon yellow petals around it and color its center sienna brown. The first time I see a lion, I am 9 years old. His grandfather's hand holding him back from the cage, I want to open. I can still feel his grip and the lions eyes staring at me like tiny amber planets behind bars, asking me to set him free. My first kiss was under the shade of moonlit palms in Janet Carballo's backyard, exactly two days before the end of the school year. But I am still feeling the powdery skin behind her ear lobes,

[0:05:08] smelling her strawberry lip gloss and the orange blossoms in the air already thick with summer.

[0:05:16] I never saw a comet until I was 24, cupped in the darkness of the Everglades and in the arms of the man I loved. The comet's tail a brush stroke of pure genius light. These are more than memories. They are what lives -- and relives -- inside our bodies, in every cell and heartbeat. The undiscovered DNA of our souls imprinted with the minute details of those eternal moments that change our lives, our stories, forever.

On the afternoon of December 12<sup>th</sup>, while casually driving back to my home in Maine, I received a phone call with the news that I had been chosen as inaugural poet, the fifth poet ever in our history to be US Inaugural Poet. I'm asked by the Presidential Inaugural Committee to write not one but three poems in three weeks. But before any apprehension or pressure sets in, the world I move through is transfixed by my jubilation and astonishment. I begin the poem in my mind as I drive, musing over a flood of lines and images.

But then I catch my eyes in the rearview mirror. It becomes a portal into the past. In my

[0:06:32] reflection, I see my father holding your hand for the last time as he is quietly dying in the spare room where he raised you. I think of him, your mother, your grandparents -- their courage and sacrifices. I pull off the highway, step out of the car and sit on the shoulder leaning against the car door. Looking into the sky, the sun becomes a sunflower again. This is because of them, because of them... because of them... all because of them...

[0:07:18] Every story begins inside a story that's already begun by others. 1968: his parents summon every bit of courage and decide to emigrate from Cuba, exiling themselves from the only country they have ever known, uncertain if they'll ever walk into the homes where they were born, and Las Casas de Su Nacimiento, or sit in the town square where they courted each other, or share a cafecito with

their lifelong neighbors. Mother's entire family is reduced to a handful of photographs, black and white hopes reliving even the simplest pleasures of her past: tasting her mother's arroz con pollo, gossiping with her five sisters, dancing with her eldest brother who taught her how to Mambo when she was five years old.

On a dizzying flight from Havana, my parents arrive to the frigid drizzle of Madrid in December: one suitcase, and the equivalent of 50 cents; my older brother six years old; my mother seven months pregnant with me. We shared a one floor apartment – un piso -- with two families, eat at soup kitchen, and wear mended winter coats

[0:08:31] from thrift shops. Two months later, I am born in a hospital run by Catholic Charities. At home, my mother lays me down in an open drawer padded with towels, my first crib. Weeks later, we emigrate once more to New York City, where my grandparents, exiled through Mexico, wait for us along with other relatives. My first baby picture is for my green card. I am 45 days old, a character in a story who already belongs to three countries. Four years later, after my parents have saved enough money, we move to Westchester, a Miami suburb and close-knit community of Cuban exiles, dutifully making their way with one eye on the American dream and the other, nostalgic eye looking backwards toward the homeland and the lives they left behind.

We settle into the house mother still lives in today, a modest duplex shadowed by royal palms and mango trees. The setting mimics my parents' lost island paradise -- a constant backdrop that feeds the hopes of someday returning to their patria. A story I have not lived, a story I couldn't quite

[0:09:44] possibly piece together from snippets of conversations at the dinner table. Sometimes it was a picture book story from photo albums smuggled out of the country that I would page through, looking for my resemblance in the black and white eyes and smiles of my dark-haired cousins, my barefoot uncles in tank tops, or my aunts in paper-thin housecoats. Their faces unfamiliar, even though they were family.

Family as distant as the American families I watched on TV, where elegant mother spoke English and didn't work outside their homes. A world where fathers came home from the office on time everyday, smoked pipes, and read the newspaper in their cardigans and said, "I love you, son" every night. This is how I understood America, from reruns of shows like *The Brady Bunch*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *My Three Sons*. That fantasy was the real America in my mind. Westchester felt like a waiting place caught between the real-imagined America and the real-imagined Cuba, both stories part of one story that I wouldn't weave together

[0:10:51] until forging through the creative process of writing the inaugural poems.

I am not one of those poets who claim to have been writing poems since I was in the womb. However, I have been possessed by a creative spirit and curiosity since I was a child. On the other hand, I was also a whiz at math and sciences. Truly a left-brained, right brained person. Like many immigrants his parents strongly encouraged him to pursue a sound, financially rewarding career to

ensure I'd have a better life than they had had. A life in the arts is just outside the realm of possibility. After graduating with honors, I established my civil engineering career, making your family, and myself, proud. Then the unexpected happened. In the course of my engineering duties, I began writing inch-thick reports, proposals, lengthy letters. I started paying close attention to the way language worked to organize my thoughts, create a point, or create a persona. I discovered that language had to be engineered in a way, just like the bridges

[0:12:03] and roads I was designing.

Eventually I couldn't resist the urge to pick up a pen and explore writing from my own personal expression. One night, while pondering *The Red Wheelbarrow* by William Carlos Williams, I noticed mother in the kitchen preparing dinner and suddenly became aware of the violence in her hands, [Spanish language] the dull glint of that same old knife she'd used since I was a child, the faded old tomato sauce stains on her apron, the smells of olive oil sizzling through the house. In that instant, I grasped the power of imagery to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, into a poem where my mother was not just my mother, and a wheelbarrow was not just a wheelbarrow.

It was another one of those life-changing moments -- the moments that I got poetry as a real, living thing and decided to pursue the art more seriously, though with only a vague sense of what becoming a real poet meant. I enrolled in a series of creative writing courses at a community college in Miami. Eventually I applied

[0:13:21] and was accepted to the master's program for creative writing at Florida International University, though I continued working full-time as an engineer. I graduated from the creative writing program the same year I passed my engineering board exam, meaning I got my poetic license and my engineering license at the same time! Richard Blanco, PE, which stood for Professional Engineer as well as Poet Engineer; as I was playfully dubbed by my co-workers. Which came, first the engineer or the poet?

Ready to work the very first day after I got the call, I relocate my laptop from my office to the kitchen table downstairs. Changing my environment helps stimulate creativity. My dog, Joey, follow downstairs, sleeping all day by the fireplace. As is the two cats, Buddha and Sammy, their tails tick-tocking the minutes, the hours away as I stared at a blank screen.

I spent the next two days in a creative incubation period, reading and thinking about the assignment, turning to the inaugural poems by Robert Frost, Maya

[0:14:34] Angelou, Meyer Williams, and Elizabeth Alexander. Suddenly, in the company of such great poets, I felt part of a continuum, wanting to honor them with humility and grace by offering my voice, adding to the story they had told to in their poems -- the story of our country.

During this time I also considered my many hats as the first gay, first immigrant, and first Latino poet, initially feeling a self-imposed pressure to write poems that would have some political charge. But soon I decide that my selection was enough of a statement.

By the third day, anxiety really began to set in as I faced the reality of my assignment: three poems in three weeks, one of which would arguably be the most important poem of my writing life. During one of my mental breaks when I had to disconnect, I'd watch recorded episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Bewitched*, and, my favorite, *The Brady Bunch*. Then the news of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary broke -- another one of those moments I instantly knew would live inside me --

[0:15:45] inside us -- forever.

The tragedy opened a new emotional pathway for me. Writing the inaugural poem wasn't the same assignment anymore. I suddenly understood that as a Cuban-American, I hadn't explored my American side of the hyphen as much as my Cuban side. I had begun asking questions of myself and our country that I had never dared to ask or explore. Do I truly love America? It was a question I had to answer honestly if I was going to write an honest poem. I began thinking of my relationship with America and how it had evolved through different phases, just as my consciousness of love had evolved, especially with my partner Mark. I see parallels between a loving human relationship and the love we hold for our country. This was the genesis of the first poem *What We Know of Country*, which begins as young love begins, with a certain childlike innocence. I discovered that yes, I truly loved America, but not with a blind love or blind patriotism. Rather with a love that's much like loving another person, a love that demands effort, asks us to give and take, and forgive, and constantly examine promises spoken and unspoken.

[0:17:12] Throughout our 12 years together, Mark and I have learned to adapt to each other's needs and re-evaluate our relationship through various life changing circumstances. Being named inaugural poet was certainly one of those circumstances. We've always alternated roles as primary breadwinners and work-at-home house-husbands. When we moved to Maine, I assumed the latter role, managing our home while also working part-time on consulting engineering projects. But the intense pressure of a three-week deadline to finish the inaugural poems forced me to write every available minute of the day and well into the morning hours, and consumed all of my mental and physical energy. Mark took over the day-to-day routine: picking up mail, walking and feeding Joey, grocery shopping, stoking the fire. He also took a leave of absence from work so he could step in as your manager, coordinating logistics with the Inaugural Committee. All so I could write -- and write I did, right through Christmas and New Year's Eve.

[0:18:13] Mark has always been my first reader -- that didn't change. His everyday person's perspective was especially important when I consider the inaugural poem's audience. Every night I'd leave him drafts I had just finished before going to bed, and the next morning, while I was still sleeping, he would carefully read over them. I would awake to giant mushy stars and heart-shaped 'I love you's' scribbled in the margin, which secretly meant as much to me as his brilliant comments and suggestions that we then discussed, at length, over coffee. I had always been his emotional rockN



Now, he was yours. Support, devotion, encouragement, all these things fall under the umbrella of love which allowed me to keep writing and working even harder.

[0:19:07] I couldn't say a word about my selection for three weeks, until the Inaugural Committee issued a press release with the official news. Finally I could tell tu madre! She immediately began making travel plans to Washington. However, I was told that only one guest could be seated next to me on the platform at the inauguration, which presumably would be Mark. But he insisted that your mother be the one instead of him. "The bigger story is about you and your mother, the American dream. She should be the one with you. I'll be okay." It was perhaps the kindest act of selfless love I'd ever received from him.

Mark understood the reverence and awe your brother and you had for your mother and her courage when she left Cuba, leaving behind her mother, her brother, and her five sisters, and all her relatives. I asked myself if I could ever leave America? The question birthed another of the three poems, *Mother Country*, in which I place myself, the reader, in my mother's emotional shoes.

I couldn't imagine having

[0:20:13] to leave my mother forever. She has always been your emotional center and your connection to Cuba. But in *Mother Country*, she also connected me to America in an unexpected way. I realized that her story wasn't solely about loss and courage but also about faith -- the incredible faith she had in America, which was a little more than a set of ideals that she had never lived. It occurred to me how strongly immigrants uphold to those ideals of freedom, justice, and equality, which they do not take for granted. There's the irony that immigrants like my mother stand among the most patriotic of Americans and at the heart of the American dream. She will sit next to me on the platform of the Capitol. [Spanish language] She won't fully understand the poem I will read about America to America in English, but she doesn't have to. She is the poem. Soy America.

[0:21:24] *Mother Country* was the last of the three poems I wrote for the inauguration. I finished it a week after I completed the first two poems, *What We Know of Country* and *One Today* and submitted them to the committee. They overwhelmingly selected *One Today* as the poem to read. But once I had completed *Mother Country*, it became my favorite poem. I was closest to it emotionally, and I wondered if I had any bargaining power to insist that *Mother Country* be the inaugural poem. I reached out to friends and writing colleagues for advice. Mark felt that *One Today* was the more appropriate poem from the first draft. But perhaps the biggest champion of *One Today* was writer Julia Alvarez. She said, without reservation, that *One Today* was the perfect poem for the occasion of a country coming together, even if it was for that one moment at the inauguration.

In the end, all these conversations and feedback gave me the courage and confidence to move forward with *One Today*.

What do I love about America? That was

[0:22:29] the question that eventually yielded the first draft of *One Today*. Most significantly, I discovered that the inspiration for *One Today* harkens back to the story I was born into: the story of the close-knit community of Cuban exiles that instilled in me a deep sense of mutual respect, compassion, and oneness. I remembered my brother and me spending almost every weekend with our parents haciendo visitas -- visiting relatives or the old friends from Cuba, especially the elderly and less fortunate than us who had just emigrated. Mother would show up with home-made flan or a home-sewn blouse, sometimes a garbage bag full of toys and clothes, sometimes just a can of Cuban coffee she had found on sale. My father would bring his tool box, ready to replace a leaky faucet, install a [Spanish language], or fix a broken chair.

The same spirit of my exile community was rekindled when Mark and I moved nearly five years ago to Bethel, Maine, a small rural town of about 2,500 residents. I was charmed by its townspeople who, from the start, went out of their way to make the two gay guys from Miami, as we were known affectionately, feel welcomed -- albeit in the most polite and reserved manner typical of New Englanders.

I realized that both communities held several things in common for me: respect for the importance of the individual, compassion for one another, and most

[0:23:59] Important, a deep abiding sense of dignity and unity.

My poetic sensibilities understood these as the most endearing and enduring qualities of the American spirit. I wanted America to embrace itself, and recognize -- no feel -- how we are all an essential part of one whole, if only for those few minutes when I would stand at that podium. I made the conscious choice to keep the focus of *One Today* on a contemporary setting -- a snapshot of the country at our present moment, of which I was a part.

But how to make the poem mine rather than appear distant and preachy. This is why I decide to include specific autobiographical references to my mother and father, and refer to myself as the living poet behind the voice of the poet. This same intent prompted me to also include more subtle nods in the poem relating to my life as an engineer, as a gay man, and as a Latino. Meeting my deadline January 14th 2013, at noon, I emailed the final version of *One Today* to the Inaugural Committee. They forwarded on

[0:25:12] to the White House for final review and approval. Surprisingly, within an hour I heard back from them. They loved it.

*One Today* was done. For the first time in over a month I was able to take a deep breath and rest.

But, there was one more very important thing left to do: practice the delivery of the poem. A few weeks to go, a few weeks prior to the inauguration my brother and nephews had visited us over the holidays and made a snowman that was still alive in the field below our deck. One morning I woke to find Mark on the deck setting your reading folder and a photo of President Obama atop a makeshift

podium he fashioned out of a cardboard box. "Read to the snowman. You should rehearse outside. Feel what it's going to feel like." [laughter]

At first I thought it was a silly idea and that perhaps Mark was cracking under the stress, but then it occurred to me that at the inauguration, I would indeed have to read and into an immense open space before hundreds of thousands. "One sun rose on us today,"

[0:26:31] I began, feeling the stare of the snowman's stony eyes. He was a tough audience. [laughter] I spoke into the wind breezing through the pines, aimed the words up to the blue blank sky, and heard them fall over the ground frozen with all its surprises for spring, as if standing inside the very poem I had written when the first blush of the moon's face appeared.

The delivery of *One Today* was especially important as a poem that would be heard before it would ever be read. I had about five minutes -- one chance -- to captivate Americans and connect with them.

After rehearsing for a week, I knew it was time to put it away. Let it rest for a while and trust it as I trusted that the snow would melt even as I watched it fall outside my window in January.

[0:27:33] Mark and I had lived in Washington, DC for over three years, so the city was still somewhat familiar when we arrived. This was comforting in no small way. But even more comforting was the village that traveled with me. Mark had arranged for us all to stay in the same hotel: my good friend Nikki acting as my social-media guru; Alison Granucci, my agent; Meredith Beattie representing City Year; and my cousin Sergio Baradat. David Naranjo, my publicist, offered his expertise and energy to help us navigate the media frenzy. And, of course, my mother, brother, and mother-in-law

ushered around by David, I spent the first few days in the city dashing from one interview to another: CNN, Telemundo, BBC, Univision, PBS. Suddenly, I was thrust into a whole new world of makeup chair, microphone wires, spotlights, and newsrooms, with cameras eyeing me from every angle. It was terrifying, yet wonderful, thanks to David, who dissipated my anxiety with his witty one-liners. More important, he was Cubanito like me,

[0:28:42] who grew up in Miami, knew my story, and empowered me to believe this story could make a difference in the lives of millions of immigrants and LGBT people -- all of them Americans.

The night before the inauguration, I practiced reading the poem aloud one last time, imagining four hundred thousand

[0:29:07] snowmen [laughter] listening. I then sat quietly by myself, marking up my reading copy and preparing my binder with the poem. In the sleeve, I put a hand colored photo of your maternal grandparents who I never met, wanting them to be with me in spirit at the podium. I also placed one of Mark's notes that I'd saved in which he wrote: "Read it. Feel it. Lose yourself in the poem". Mark



eventually wakes me up. I stumble to bed and fall back asleep knowing my life will never be the same tomorrow.

January 21st, 6:30 a.m., I am not a morning person. But I am up, wanting to savor the day that will only happen once in a lifetime. After three double espressos, I take the poem out yet again and find a solitary spot outside on the lower terrace of the hotel. For the last time I begin reading over it silently: "One sun rose on us today," and as I do, the sun begins peeking above the rooftops as if enacting the poem, blinding me the way Robert Frost was blinded by the sun the morning of his inaugural reading decades ago. I'm not

[0:30:33] one to readily believe in mystical signs, but if there ever was a time to believe something greater is speaking to me, it is now. The sun becomes a sunflower -- my sunflower again.

I get dressed, put on the silver eagle cufflinks that Mark surprised me with as a gift the day before. By 8:30 a.m., I find myself riding in a motorcade just like in the movies with your mother and Mark seated beside him, along with David, and Nikki, and Allison. We are escorted to a holding room. We can barely speak, keeping a reverent silence as we wait with our eyes glued to the TV monitor panning the scenes of the inaugural stage where my mother and I will soon take our seats. A few minutes before being called out, we gather in a circle and hold hands in a prayer led by David to offer our gratitude for the beauty of the moment unfolding before us.

[0:31:48] Arm in arm, I escort my mother down the steps to the Capitol platform. "I was born in a dirt floor in rural Cuba and now, I am the guest of honor seated next to my son on stage with the President of the United States, members of the US Congress and Supreme Court, as well as James Taylor, Kelly Clarkson, and la Beyonce!

[0:32:14] I used to have a figure of la Beyonce, believe it or not. Ah mijó, I wish your father could be here with us." She gives me that wide-eyed look I've known since I was a child, silently telling you to sit still, behave, and stop fidgeting with the binder, which I flip through over and over again to make sure all of the pages of the poem are there. I adjust my tie a half a dozen times and glance at my wrist watch every few minutes. My mother offers him a honey-filled candy. "I'm mother no matter the occasion."

The horns blare and the ceremony begins. I become struck with the importance of the occasion together with hundreds of thousands of people -- we -- who have come to bear witness to the founding ideals of America. In that moment, I feel America's standing as one, putting aside differences and taking a deep collective breath. I turned to my mother and whisper, "Mama. I think we are finally Americanos." She gives me a tender look as if saying, "I know, I know."

In that instance, I understand *One Today* as a gift to America.

[0:33:31] Inspired by that realization, I find the courage to open up my binder to the poem and add "for us today" at the end of the second stanza.

Senator Charles Schumer introduces him and calls him up to the podium. Mother squeezes your shoulder. I am surprised when the President and Vice President stand up to greet me and shake my hand on the way to the podium. They both whisper something in my ear I can't make out, but their gracious gestures speak silently to my heart as if saying, "here is your country. This is your story."

[0:34:13] Our next distinguished guest is the poet, Richard Blanco, who will share with us words he has composed for this occasion. [applause]

[0:34:38] Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, America...

### *One Today*

One sun rose on us today, kindled over our shores,  
peeking over the Smokies, greeting the faces  
of the Great Lakes, spreading a simple truth  
across the Great Plains, then charging across the Rockies.  
One light, waking up rooftops, under each one, a story  
told by our silent gestures moving across windows.

My face, your face, millions of faces in morning's mirrors,  
each one yawning to life, crescendoing into our day:  
the pencil yellow school buses, the rhythm of traffic lights,  
fruit stands: apples, limes, and oranges arrayed like rainbows  
begging our praise. Silver trucks heavy with oil or paper—  
bricks or milk, teeming over highways alongside us,  
on our way to clean tables, read ledgers, or save lives—  
to teach geometry, or ring up groceries as my mother did  
for twenty years, so I could write this poem for all of us today.

All of us as vital as the one light we move through,  
the same light on blackboards with lessons for the day:  
equations to solve, history to question,

[0:36:35] or atoms imagined,  
the "I have a dream" we all keep dreaming,  
or the impossible vocabulary of sorrow that won't explain  
the empty deaths of 20 children marked absent  
today, and forever. Many prayers, but one light  
breathing color into stained glass windows,  
life into the faces of bronze statues, warmth  
onto the steps of our museums and park benches  
as mothers watched children slide into the day.

One ground. Our ground, rooting us to every stalk  
of corn, every head of wheat sown by sweat  
and hands, hands gleaning coal or planting windmills  
in deserts and hilltops that keep us warm, hands  
digging trenches, routing pipes and cables, hands  
as worn as my father's cutting sugarcane  
so my brother and I could have books and shoes.

[0:37:53] The dust of farms and deserts, cities and plains  
mingled by one wind -- our breath. Breathe. Hear it  
through the day's gorgeous din of honking cabs,  
buses launching down avenues, the symphony  
of footsteps, guitars, and screeching subways,  
the unexpected song bird on your clothes line.

Hear: squeaky playground swings, trains whistling,  
or whispers across cafe tables. Hear: the doors we open  
each day for each other saying hello / shalom /  
buon giorno / howdy / namaste / or buenos dias  
in the language my mother taught me -- in every language  
spoken into one wind carrying our lives  
without prejudice, as these words break from my lips.

One sky: since the Appalachians and Sierras claimed  
their majesty, and the Mississippi and Colorado worked  
their way to the sea. Thank the work of our hands:  
weaving steel into bridges, finishing one more report  
for the boss on time, stitching another wound  
or uniform, the first brush stroke on a portrait,  
or the last floor on the Freedom Tower  
jutting into the sky that yields to our resilience.

One sky, toward which we sometimes lift our eyes  
tired from work: some days guessing at the weather

[0:39:50] of our lives, some days giving thanks for a love  
that loves you back, sometimes praising a mother  
who knew how to give, or forgiving a father  
who couldn't give what you wanted.

We head home: through the gloss of rain or weight  
of snow, or the plum blush of dusk, but always, always

home, always under one sky, our sky. And always  
one moon like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop  
and every window, of one country -- all of us --  
facing the stars. Hope -- a new constellation waiting  
for us to map it, waiting for us to name it -- together. [applause]

[0:41:10] Back in the holding room, I and my village of highly educated and respected professionals, who had worked so hard and seamlessly, know we've earned the right to celebrate unabashedly and get just plain silly in a private moment belonging to us, solely to us. [Spanish language] in relief, we bounced around the room, hugging each other, making toasts with orange juice and water bottles. Mark wraps the scarf around him and we break into a conga step. Nikki darts around the room. "Oh my God, you're trending worldwide. Oh my God, you're ahead of Beyonce!" Mark is snapping photos every three seconds, recording the eternal moment being born inside us. My mother asks me where the bathroom is and in the same moment she tells you she loves you and asks you to sit with her for a moment.

We hear from Beyonce's entourage that she wants to meet the poet. We are escorted into her holding area. She tells him how much he enjoyed the poem. I thank her and ask, "Were you as nervous as I was?" She was, but at least she was

[0:42:26] singing someone else's song. She couldn't imagine what it'd be like to read something you wrote yourself. [laughter]

[0:42:37] Beyonce was gracious and genuine, and to answer the question I will get asked a dozen times: Yes, she is just as beautiful in person.

After the inaugural parade, Mark and I walk through the street trying to find our designated shuttle back to the hotel. People begin recognizing me as the poet. I feel like a part of America for real... It's as if you were speaking to me... It made me cry... Thank you, thank you. We take pictures together, they tell me about their lives, their stories. Some are teachers, firemen, lawyers, secretaries, accountants, housekeepers. They ask how can they get copies for their children, students, grandmother, neighbors. I had wanted Americans to embrace each other, but I hadn't expected that America would embrace me and that the poem would be gifted back to me in such a way.

We became completely disoriented. We have no idea how to get back to our hotel. Most of the streets are closed; no cabs in sight. We have about an hour to get ready for the inaugural ball. A woman -- an angel -- appears on a corner.

[0:43:48] She stares at me in amazement as if she has been looking for me. "I knew I would find you. I'm Lara, a psychologist and writer." After we explained our predicament, she says "Well, I got a car, I could give you a ride." We climb into her into her Toyota with her golden retriever Rusty [growling sounds]

[0:44:12] growling at Mark in the backseat. On the way back to the hotel, we talked about Einstein, quantum physics, love, the source of creativity, and *One Today*, as if we have known each other our whole lives. I promise to try and get her into the Inaugural Ball, but I never see that angel again.

[0:41:41] I had thought I was going to have a ball at the ball, maybe even get up to dance with the First Lady. But soon after we arrived, I realized the grand scale of the inaugural ball: thousands of people from all over the country and the world.

Before the president arrives, and I realize I won't meet him, we dash to the CNN studios for an interview with Anderson Cooper, whom we long admired for his work and courage for leading an openly gay life. From there, we rush off to the Human Rights Campaign ball. The organizers told everyone I wasn't going to attend. They wanted my appearance to be a surprise, which it is, for me as well. I walk on stage to say a few words, but I am silenced by three minutes of whistles, applause and hollers.

[0:45:26] I came of age in a generation fraught with homophobia. As such, I think there was still some part of me that hadn't fully accepted myself as a gay man until that very moment when I am overcome by the crowds response, the palpable love from my LGBT community. Not a town or a city, but a home nevertheless, where I belong as much as I belong to America.

[0:46:01] Days later, nestled in our seats at the airport, Mark and I are still electrified but too exhausted to even speak. It's the first opportunity I have to truly sit quietly for a moment and reflect. It's about 30 minutes before our departure time. I don't know that in a few months, I will interview with the editors of the *Newtown*, an arts and literature magazine from Newtown, Connecticut. We will plan classroom visits and a special event on the anniversary of the Sandy Hook tragedy. I don't know of the thousands of people who will stir my soul through letters I will receive. I don't know that in May, I'll meet President Obama in the Oval Office and we will speak of the First Lady's ongoing commitment to poetry.

The boarding process begins. I get in line, but I don't know of the Boston Marathon bombings, the boy and two young women whose lost lives I'll feel compelled to immortalize in *Boston Strong*, an occasional poem I'll write and read before tens of thousands of people at a benefit.

[0:47:12]

We fasten our seatbelts as instructed without knowing that in June, the Supreme Court will rule the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional, and I will team up with the Freedom to Marry organization to write a love poem commemorating a ten-year struggle for marriage equality.

The plane pushes back from the gate, but I don't know about the grade school and high school teachers from around the country who will send me hundreds of poems, drawings, and letters by their students, inspired and given hope by *One Today*.



The plane taxis down the runway, without my knowing that in July I'll read my poetry at the Robert Frost farm in Derry, New Hampshire. I will walk through his home, sit in his chair in the kitchen where he wrote, and feel the ghost of his words at my fingertips as I lay my hands over the typewriter keys.

The jet's engine begins revving up, and so do I, beginning to think of the memoir that I will write in the months to come: part proclamation, part call to action but all testimony -- not

[0:48:22] to the power of me, or my work, or my story, but to the power of poetry in our country. I know -- believe -- there's a new dawn at hand for poetry.

Mark looks at him, holds his hand as the plane lifts off the ground, carried by one wind, lifting us into the sky, crisp and bright as grace in my eyes, under our one sun. The sun is a sunflower after all. Indeed, our country is a sunflower with millions of petals around the center we can't always see or always understand, but one flower nonetheless, one story, the story we are all born into. A story we all have to continue writing together until we are not just one today, but one every day.

I had left Maine with a single poem to offer my country that I didn't quite understand. I returned as an American, driving back home through the pines of Maine under one moon, but with a thousand more stars and poems for me -- for us all -- to write, for us. [music] [applause]

[0:50:59] Alright, so, let's see first Annie and the actors, I want you to introduce yourselves. My name is Annie [unintelligible]. I'm Anna Marie Kempley.

[0:51:12] Alex Garnett. Justin Huertas. Carter Rodriguez. I like how we all asked our names like questions. [laughter] Justin Huertas? Is that really you? All right. It really, it's just my tremendous pleasure to welcome Richard Blanco to this, the main event of 2014 Seattle Reads. You know, I first read an advance copy of Richard's book last fall and I thought, wow, I think I got the next Seattle Reads. The only problem was that we already had a short list and my committee was already reading and talking and thinking and you know all that. So the first thing I did was I gave it to a librarian who, you know, she doesn't read a lot of poetry. I thought okay. Let me check out my reaction here and she took it and of course she loved it. Okay, you know on to the next person, on to the next person including somebody in the Foundation. I just, I just had to say I thought I just knew this is the right... Anyway, it's not my decision alone, just for the record. Okay, so about Richard. So Richard had published three books of poetry prior

[0:52:30] to this book: *City of a Hundred Fires*, *Directions to the Beach of the Dead*, and *Looking for the Gulf Motel*. He has a full-length memoir coming out this fall. We're going to start lobbying right away to have Richard come back and visit us then. He has a children's book coming in a couple of years. So now, please help me welcome the wonderful poet and memoirist Richard Blanco to Seattle. We're going to ask him to join Book-It.

[0:53:18] [applause, mixed voices] Thank you everyone. I just, I feel like they've given voice to all the voices in my head [laughter] because when my mother speaks [unintelligible] Mark speaks. So it's just

amazing to see this is the first experience for me of this kind. I mean no one has ever taken some of my work and to see yourself reflected in your interpretations is just, I mean, there's the box of tissues there to prove it. But yeah, it's just beautiful. Thank you so much. I mean, this is a gift that I take with me to the graves so to speak. So thank you. [applause]

[0:54:02] I think we're doing questions? Yeah, questions. As far as... I thought we just do questions. Well, I guess it's my pleasure to welcome everyone, I guess in some ways. I have a little, I think we met earlier and I hope this is somewhat of a repeat for some of you or in the reception, but thank you. Thank you Seattle Library for all the work that and support that you do. I was a library page for many years, for a couple of years I should say, when I was a teenager, late teenager, and I discovered the world of, I discovered so many worlds through just putting back books in library shelves back when we used to do that. So thank you very much for supporting the library and giving life to new to or giving the gift of imagination to so many you new readers and writers and what-not. Thank you so much for that. Thank you for having me here. I think it's just an amazing celebration of what the Seattle library puts together. I think this is the way poetry was meant to be, I daresay all of literature, to come together as a community and have

[0:55:13] interpretations of work to have something come alive, I mean, as well as our private moments with books which are very important by our firesides or what-not. But to come together and actually feel in our souls and our very bodies the sense of what literature is. That it's not just some abstract thing but it's something that has to do with our daily lives, that has to do with every time that we see a bird, or see someone on the street, or get on a bus, or get in our cars. Whatever it is that that literature -- that art -- is part of our daily lives. And this is what I strive to think about in my life. This is what I think the inaugural poem was sort of aiming for in that same way. So I hope we acknowledge, that and you acknowledge yourselves for being part of this this moment for being supportive of the library for being here and taking place in the proverbial campfire that is literature, that is all of us coming together. Thank you. [applause]

[0:56:22] We'll welcome any questions for us, the actors, Richard, anything you'd like. Yes. Oh, yes that she was saying that she does, in the inaugural poem, correct? That there doesn't quite see me as a gay man so much in the inaugural except for the rainbow reference, which you're right on. [laughter]

[0:56:45] I get it. I got to tell you also I think the artist, I think I tried to put the arts in there with the, with the portrait. I mean, not to be stereotypical like all artists are gay or anything like that. But you know, I got to be honest in some ways, there is a lot of hats to put on and I didn't know quite how to navigate all of that in the poem and I think in the end it was just I just had to go with what I was moved with which was more of the family story and that sense of immigration because in some ways, and I spoke about this at the library today in Queen Anne, in some ways that immigration layer was a little more fundamental to me in the sense that since I was 45 days old as, as you know, I was already like where the hell are we, what are we doing here, what's going on? They just plopped me here and now we're moving somewhere else. So there I think that that's affected me psychologically

in a much more significant way, even though my grandmother, which you will meet on Monday night at the readings,

[0:57:44] had has done a number on me. I was always more obsessed with the sense of home, but look at it this way, and this is how I've come to see this, and this is what's amazing about poetry, that it even surprises me. I mean the things as always the poem is smarter than me. Like I'm coming back to understand that that sense of home, that quest which is in the inaugural poem that... So we had home, you know. Through Gloucester of rain or weight of snow the poem blush of dusk that has been my wish and my life, right? That the the sense of being, of being gay man that there's another kind of home that you always want to go to and it is that safe space, that sense of that place where you can be who you are and I think that's filtered in a lot through the immigration, through the sort of Latino element in the writing. I think that's part of it. So you're right, it isn't quite in there as much as I thought about it, but the other day a week so I had to make some choices but I think part of that longing of home of belonging

[0:58:56] is part of being gay in the in a way that sense of just having that space where you can be, where you can be home. You can be safe. You can be okay. Yes, over here on the...

[0:59:14] This book is recorded in my voice. Actually, I insisted upon it. So there's recording. The memoir, I'm not sure it's it's up to the powers that be, but it will it will most definitely come out an audiobook and I also know recently I actually did meet someone who told me there's also other programs that can turn books into sort of printed page. Because she was a poet and she wanted not just to hear the poem but to actually see how it was laid out, you know quote see how it was laid out on the page. So she promised to contact me so I could put her in contact with the publisher to see what kind of program that was that automatically serve translates to so there's something I don't know. It's it's like the Facebook. I have no idea, it's some kind of newfangled thing, but it was amazing because there's she wanted to see not just not just I hear the words, but feel how they were laid on the page, and I thought that was an amazing experience for me to have her share that with me. So, thank you. Yes. Sure.

[1:00:21] Thank that's a good question. Actually it relates to your question in a way. I got to say that the most poignant part was about my partner in in ways that I hadn't expected. You know, my mom, of course my mother, you know. I just see her and I start crying [laughter]. You know, she's a pain but

[1:00:45] I that was that was a real moment where the mirror was really like it was just sort of like to see that moment and how to acknowledge marks the position, sort of importance in my life and that moment where he asked me -- where he said -- he literally gave up his seat without me asking I should say he didn't give it up, he just said you know, "Here." That was especially striking. I wish he was...sitting ....

[1:01:19] My mother, interestingly enough, and I'll probably share that the mother poem with you at closing, but when we were debating back and forth and then, this is stuff that's not in the book, my mother's like like, I'm hesitant to take my mother in some ways because, you know, she's she's older

she gets freaked out when people speak English to her and she's like all, you know, a little bit nuts, you know, and she's like gets nervous and like, and I didn't want to have to caretake at that moment because obviously I got big things to do right now. She was great. She was great. But when I called on the phone, I said, "Mom, you've got to behave, you know, if if Obama comes up to you and says a good morning don't say good evening, like just he may speak to you in Spanish. It's it'll be okay. Just trust me, but you got to tell me you're not going to freak out because if you're going to freak out then I'm taking Mark." [laughter]

[1:02:20] And then she said to me, as all good mothers would say, "Well, if you want me to go, I'll go." [laughter]

[1:02:31] That's not in the book. You can probably tell, right? She was very gracious to give me the candy. She was to behave like, of course, she was like it's cold, like, when are we starting this thing? But it was like, it was like my mother, it was like she was right there beside me -- it was awesome. But yeah, that was one moment, ironically relating to your question that I really, for some reason, I think I glossed over that, and not glossed over it, but there was no way to really say how much work Mark had really done. I mean, this guy Mark's a scientist, and he's like he's... He doesn't know where the cat food is in the house or like where the batteries are, or the broom, but he's the kind of guy you call when the space shuttle goes out of orbit. You know, they have NASA has his phone number. When stuff goes down, you call Mark. So he in one week had everything organized and like he's a urgency like he will he knows how to handle stress really well and he works on [unintelligible] so the whole, the whole a lot of the success behind the whole operation

[1:03:46] was because of Mark in some ways. Like I was just trying to write the poem. I mean, I was just like I can't feed the dog. I can't feed the cats. I can't get the mail anymore. For four weeks, five weeks, my life simply stopped, I did nothing but write, and showed up where I was told to show up. That was it like, here you go. So, okay sure. So the question is what poets have inspired me, not only in my writing but sort of in my life in general. I should say inspired a good work because there's there's a thing called in being inspired so that when we read as writers, we forget to read for inspiration sometimes and we start reading to dissect and to sort of not copy but to absorb different techniques and things like that and one of the most surprising influences in my life that I never thought would be an influence was Elizabeth Bishop. Who is as far as far as from a little Cuban gay kid? Well, there's a gay thing. But you know a blue hair from like Worcester, Massachusetts that I can't even

[1:04:51] spell. A woman that seems so so so different than me, that the attraction in some ways emotionally was so powerful. I felt that she was always an exile from the moment I read her first poem. She was an orphan when she was very young and that sense of home and trying to always find that place. Traveled all over the world, lived in all sorts of places, lived in Brazil, was was was gay. All that spoke to me in a way that that continued the conversation that she started with the world. I think, I feel this, I'm having a similar conversation. Different because it's me, but nonetheless, I think she's been one of my greatest influences. Oh, no, it's all in English. Yeah, no, no, no, I was educated in English so Spanish is actually a pretty much a very quite a weak language for me. I mean I can

certainly talk to anybody and drop me in any Spanish speaking country, but no I'm, was here 45 days. I'm I'm an American poet, trust me, and if not call Obama.

[1:05:59] No, I know where your question is from, but no, I don't. It saddens me because I don't think in Spanish and it bothers me sometimes especially as a years of, you know gotten ahead of me. But usually when, I always trying to include something in Spanish in each book and it's usually from a trip to Cuba where, after a few days, I start thinking in Spanish, but I would never hold myself up to the light of Pablo Neruda or anything like that. I don't write in that tradition. I don't write in that I don't have the command of the language. My Spanish is reflection of again, what is an American story? Of immigrants, you know that that is part of a vernacular just like all the Yiddish words we have, and all the Irish through the words from Irish or from Italian and from German. That's the same idea that I bring to the page I think. Go ahead. So basically the question is about my writing routine. Yeah, as was mentioned in the memoir, whenever I have a big part, project, I move to like somewhere else.

[1:07:04] I think it helps to move. Even if it's to the dining, to the kitchen table, which is ironically this whole Obama thing of the kitchen table. It kept on haunting me while I was at the kitchen table trying to write, and I wrote these horrible drafts of poems called *The Kitchen Table*. Bad poems, but it helps to change from your environment so that I'm not sitting in the same seat where I do the bills and the emails and all the rest. That's one thing. The other routine that I have is I'm a notorious vampire writer. I actually will probably get back to the hotel and start writing about 11 o'clock at night tonight. I write till like three, four, five in the morning. So that's one thing I do with plenty of coffee early on but there's something that's wired that way. I have little routines, lighting candles, things like that, but I'm not, I got to say I'm not one of those writers that writes every day, and I got to qualify that. I get a little little irritated when we just spit out those adages in a writing course.

[1:08:14] A writer should write every day. It's like yeah, well if you're single mom with three kids you don't write every day. But the idea is to pay attention to the world as a writer every day and I try to do that. There's a convention of the Arthur Murray Dance convention at my hotel right now. I almost didn't come tonight, I want you to know because I was like, I want to wear one of those like, you know those pants with those shoes. That's paying attention to the world as a writer, like noticing people, like going like and I wouldn't be surprised if I show up there sometime this weekend, but... I got a few salsa moves up my sleeve, but that's the idea. That you always pay attention to the world, that you're never letting each -- any -- day or I should say, completely any day just pass by you without feeling alive for one moment and saying, wow, look at that lady with that feathered dress smoking, and she's like a Tango dancer, probably, you know. There's a poem in there somewhere, you know. So those

[1:09:23] are the sort of things that I go through I ferment a lot in my head. I keep images forever and then when I sit down and write I'd like I just sit down and write for like 6 months straight don't even talk to me. I'm that kind of writer and and I, and it's interesting because I think we're all different if you ask someone else here and I'm sure you've heard this question before, they'll give you a different answer. It's all about what works for you and how you and how you're, how you're wired and what that means. Okay.



Yeah. Well, I think Chris mentioned I was trying not to panic because I've adapted so many novels and so many historical pieces but never for a living memoir of a person who's going to be sitting in the audience.

And having like a week.

Yeah.

Not that long ago.

I really I wanted to I wanted to capture his language that he writes in his prose is very poetic and I didn't want to screw with that frankly. So I wanted to keep as much of it integrally part of it. So it became very hard to cut because everything is you know,

[1:10:36] it's not a very big book. So it's I like what do I cut here? Because this incredible piece of language is I want to have you know, we call them purple words at Book-It, you know, what are the purple phrases? What are the purple words the important things when you're adopting a novel you have to cut so much out to make a two hour play and everything was purple, whole damn thing was purple, so it took me a long time to figure out and hone and then figure out how the other voices were going to come in and come out and when they were a character and then they when they were just us, you know, all of us and our thoughts and sort of reverberating in you know, Richard's mind as Justin was my Richard. And the other thing I thought about was that I wanted Justin to play this role because I knew he played the cello and to me that's very close to poetry. So I wanted that in this piece of became my central, he became my central dude, because of that.

[1:11:45] And I sort of built it around him. I was a little worried, we were all a little worried about the dog like, oh is he gonna just hate us for impersonating his dog. But we just, [low talking]

[1:12:02] I had to give Carter a lot of notes about, really know, you really really go for it. He's like do I really play a dog? I'm like, yes, you really play a dog.

I got this notice, it like you know if you really commit to the dog, and I said I'm not, I can commit, I'm just not sure if I'm doing the right dog. What breed? We were, that was really to bring out the humor because I found a lot of humor in the book and we really wanted to play on that and because it was, you know, such an enjoyable part of reading it. So why not amplify it at all? Yeah, take him home.

[1:12:43] Over here. Not at this point. I don't get, I don't make those decisions, you know, Jane and Myra do. I would think because the poems are in the book that probably not because it was very important to Richard to have the poem in his voice and us too, that it's it's a hard piece to do with, in other pieces with Book-It, you know, they're fictional, they're large landscapes. This is a this is a specific moment in time. So I'm not sure that there's any big production but I could be wrong, I don't know.

Wait for the big memoir.

Okay, I'll wait for the big memoir.

But I agree. I agree with you in a way because like it was an interesting book to write because it's it is a memoir but it's not a memoir. It's an account, really, and that's what makes it different. It's like phone call driving home and I knew I had to limit to that because this was I the impulse to write it was just the artistic impulse to as I me an [inintelligible] says that writers taste life twice. I needed to write it just to make sure it happened.

[1:13:49] I was like you're, this really happened and to go over those fine details. And also I thought I would always serve as a handbook for the next next inaugural poet because they don't tell you anything of what to expect. It's like, really? So that was part of... actually, ironically, silly enough was part of the impulse was like I want the next inaugural poet to be able to have a sense of what this felt like emotionally and I can't believe that no other in our group would have a written, but it is very specific, and it's almost there, almost like each section is like a little prose poem and it's separated by parts of the poem and I approached it that way because it was all like a dream. It was just all, kind of just happened, so I could see what you're saying. Yes, it's kind of hard to add to that, or fictionalize it in any way.

Yeah, we probably have time for just one or two more. Yes back there.

What [unintelligible] do the actress relate to in the book or the poems, that for me, I'm first-generation American, my parents are from

[1:14:53] Mexico, so it was, that was like [unintelligible] stories. What really resonated with me, and my little sister's actually here in the audience. And so one thing I really strongly remember actually with my little sister is getting getting pulled out of school one day when our mom became an American citizen. I remember being there, and like just having like I just remember flashes of it and like lots and lots of people and just like having that emotional moment where you're like, oh my gosh, you're Americans like just like having that celebration with our mother and like just kind of that finding that unity of like of next like your whole part of like, I've never really explored the American side of me, but I've known the Mexican side of a very strongly my whole life. And so that was one thing I really related to this piece.

I think I related most to a probably just the kind of openness and honesty of the other relation, of the honesty within the relationship between Richard and Mark. It just, it

[1:15:53] seemed real and open and out there, and it's very kind of beautiful, really.

I'm... for me. I guess one thing is being a gay person of color, sometimes I have sort of like... not a crisis... what's the word I'm looking for. I don't really know, but like sort of like this. Where do I, where do I fit in America? Everywhere? Where do I fit anywhere? You know like am I supposed to be in this

like little box or this little box or like am I in my own little box by myself and I'm just waving at everyone else or life. Where do I fit and like what I really connected to to the poem itself and sort of like feeling that you are that that I am different. I am special but I am also a part of this really really big huge thing. And that was really really wonderful for me. I also am a writer and so knowing that Richard was going to be here, I was like really, you know, you were rehearsing this play and all I'm thinking is like I can so connect with this nervousness and this pressure and stress because I'm just like I'm

[1:17:05] going to be staying with words in front of him. [laughter] And I'm gonna suck. [laughter]

[1:17:12] So that was very, that helped a lot with the performance I think.

[1:17:21] After hearing the poem the first time I started thinking about how different forms of discrimination and racism I see, are often against people of different culture who are actually like the most patriotic Americans that I see every day, you know, and there's still discriminated with one thing or another and it will get you know categorized by whatever their culture they came from that they may be you know, ten generations deep in America, but they're still an Asian person just, or whatever. And then also it was a lot of fun to be the father because just growing up as Latino in Colorado and my family's been there for a couple hundred years, I think, there's a lot of source material to be Latino dad. That was fun.

It's getting late. I'm sorry. It's getting late. I mean, I know you all have a lot more you have a lot more questions. I want I specifically told people I want us to leave with Richard's voice in our heads and I'm screwing up. Okay, so Richards going to read a couple of poems.

[1:18:34] I think the obvious choice here, which I had thought about, was to read the 3rd inaugural poem that you read, that you all, so glad you honored that narrative and didn't cut that up because that was such a, it was a very creative turmoil. Not sure if you mentioned her if this I forget what I've written in what I thought in my head since I've written the book but the idea, the lesson for me was a very creative lesson because in a way I had clung to my, this mother poem, because it was something I was very, felt very comfortable with it was a Richard Blanco poem in my head. *One Today* was was treading on new territory that I wasn't familiar with. And again, you did mention Julio Alvarez in the whole thing and that was important, but then I went back to the poem and realized that it was a really important sort of artistic moment to realize that I had published three books of poetry had been acclaimed and awarded, not because of what I wrote about, but because of the way I wrote about it. And that was a big lesson for me as an immigrant,

[1:19:39] as a writer, as a gay man. This always sort of, this feeling that well, it's just because I got a cute story to tell. You know that realizing that the power of the story was in how you told it, and then I went back to *One Today* and revised it with that wholeness of my heart. So that's the *One Today* you see today. The first version was like started with the pilgrims and they were gold buckle shoes in there, and it didn't work too well. But it's, so that's part of the creative genre. Anyway, this is *The Mother Country* which are you two guys did a brilliant job of sort of bringing out. I don't think that I

have to say much more about this except, again, thinking about what you were, you just ended with, that immigrants are in some ways the most patriotic people of our country in asking this question. My mother has always played significantly in my life. And in my poetry for those reasons that you mentioned. She left every single family member behind and we had understood that that life of loss

[1:20:38] and of tragedy and of courage, but never made that connection with faith. And so in the third inaugural poem, my mother was the obvious inspiration. And in this poem I ask I ask myself a question that I've sort of always ask myself all my life but never wrote about it, but I ask the reader and the listener to place themselves in my mother's emotional shoes.

Can you imagine that you have to get up from here right now? With whatever you got on you. Whatever you have in your purse, in your wallet, and get on a plane and leave. Forget this country, leave Seattle forever. Never knowing if you'd ever be back to the city. This is what this poem names.

[1:21:30] *Mother Country, Madre Patria*

[1:21:41] To love a country as if you've lost one: 1968  
my mother leaves Cuba for America, a scene  
I imagine as if standing in her place -- one foot  
inside a plane destined for a country she knew  
only as a name, a color on a map, or glossy photos  
from drugstore magazines, her other foot anchored  
to the platform of her patria, her hand clutched  
around one suitcase, taking only what she needs  
most: hand-colored photographs of her family,  
a jar of dirt from her backyard, the doorknob  
from our house, goodbye letters  
she won't open for years. The sorrowful drone  
of engines, one last, deep breath of familiar air  
she takes with her, one last glimpse at all  
she'd ever known: the palm trees wave goodbye  
as she steps onto the plane, the mountains shrink  
from her eyes as she lifts off into another life.

[1:23:03] To love a country as if you've lost one: I hear her  
-- once upon a time -- reading picture books  
over my shoulder at bedtime, both of us learning  
English, sounding out words as strange as the talking  
animals and fair-haired princesses in their pages.  
I taste her first attempts at macaroni and cheese  
(but with chorizo and peppers), and her shame  
over Thanksgiving turkeys always dry, but countered  
by her perfect pork pernil and garlic yuca. I smell, I smell

the rain of those mornings huddled as one under  
one umbrella waiting for the bus to her 10-hour days  
at the cash register. And at night the zzz-zzz-zzz of her sewing

[1:24:02] her sewing her own blouses, quinceanera dresses for her grown nieces  
still in Cuba, guessing at their sizes, and the gowns  
she'd sell to neighbors to save for a rusty white sedan –  
no hubcaps, no air-conditioning, sweating all the way  
through our first vacation to Florida theme parks.

[1:24:26] To love a country as if you've lost one: as if  
it were you on a plane departing from America  
forever, clouds closing like curtains on your country,  
the last scene in which you're a madman scribbling  
the names of your favorite flowers, trees, and birds  
you'd never see again, your address and phone number  
you'd never use again, the color of your father's eyes,  
your mother's hair, terrified you could somehow forget these.

[1:25:09] To love a country as if I was my mother last spring  
hobbling, insisting I help her climb all the way up  
to the Capitol, as if she were here before you today  
instead of me, explaining her tears, her cheeks pink  
as the cherry blossoms coloring the air that day when  
she stopped, turned to me, and said: You know, mijo,

[1:25:41] I've been thinking, it isn't where you're born that matters, It's where  
you choose to die – that's your country.

[1:26:23] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and foundation and made possible  
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