



# Recorded Events

## 2014 Seattle Reads “For All of Us, One Today”: Poetry Reading by Richard Blanco

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[0:00:40] “Hello, good evening. I'm Chris Higashi, program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. So welcome to 2014 Seattle Reads. This year you know, we're reading, *For All of Us, One Today: An Inaugural Poet's Journey*, by Richard Blanco. This is the 16th year of Seattle Reads, Seattle's renowned one book community reading program. We like to remind you every year that we are the creators. Nancy Pearl and I dreamed up this little project in about 1996 and we presented the first one in 1998. And since that time hundreds, probably thousands of them have been done across the country in all 50 states and even internationally. So we're grateful to all our Seattle Reads sponsors--The Wallace Foundation, The Seattle Times, generous promotional support. Our media sponsor, KUOW public radio, Beacon Press, our independent bookstore partners, Elliott Bay Book Company, and tonight, Open Books: A Poem Emporium. I also have to thank Allison, Richard's agent, who is just for just all of

[0:01:55] her care and attention. So finally this event is supported by the Seattle Public Library Foundation. It is private gifts to the Foundation that make possible hundreds and hundreds of free library programs and Seattle Reads every year. Okay, this is day three of four of Richard Blanco's visit, event number eight. There's something that Richard writes really early on in this memoir. “I'm 45 days old. Already,” (sorry), “a character in a story who is already of three countries”. That was my introduction to this book. I think you know that Richard was raised and educated in Miami, grew up in close-knit among close-knit Cuban exiles. My brain is mush by now, I'm sorry. With a strong sense of community and identity and you're going to see that in all of his works. Richard has published three books of poetry to critical acclaim. He has a full-length memoir coming out in September. We're going

to hope to bring him back for that. He's working on a children's book with the Bainbridge children's illustrator,

[0:03:09] Dave Pilkey. All right, so so for all of us, *One Today*, tells of the very emotional and spiritual journey that Richard takes in the writing of the poem, *One Today*. His poem reflects his belief in the united uniting power of poetry, you know, all those firsts, the youngest, the first Latino, the first immigrant, the first openly gay writer, to be so honored. His works address those universal themes that we ask ourselves on our own journey. Where am I from? Where do I belong? Where's home? Who am I in this world? He's going to talk to us a little bit about his experiences since the inauguration, and he's going to read some poems and he's going to tell us about what's been happening and he's going to show us about what's been happening. And now please help me welcome the wonderful poet, memoirist and friend, Richard Blanco, to the Seattle Public Library.”  
[applause]

[0:04:21] “Thank you everyone. It's, ah where do I begin, it's day four, right? We got one more day. It's just a first experience to me to be so so sort of celebrated in this whole sort of week-long experience of what literature is and learning so much about myself from speaking, and and and connecting with so many people. And so it's it's a great feeling to be celebrated this way. Oh, sorry. [Chris Higashi interrupts with a reminder about turning off cell phone].

[0:04:54] Oh, yeah, he's supposed to turn it off, here we go...

[0:05:01] I put it down in case I was saying anything bad before and put it down here. Sorry guys, as I as I was saying, it's just such a wonderful feeling to be celebrated in this way, and it's just amazing for any artist. Just just the love that comes back to you. When you you know, you write the stuff you write your poems you do your work and but the to receive that back and what I love about Seattle Reads and what what Chris and everyone I know it takes a village to create this, that really what what moves me is this idea that I've always believed that really literature is best enjoyed amongst the group that in its very inception is the idea of coming together around the proverbial campfire and learning from each other, learning through a book learning sharing our stories of what a poem or or book may bring to us and it's just an amazing very powerful feeling to feel that and feel that all week. So I thank I thank the whole the whole idea, I thank the whole of Seattle for participating in this, this is definitely

[0:06:07] a village for literature, I mean, I love it. It's just been amazing amazing experience. So thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you.

[0:06:20] But I'd like to officially I know as I said, I think it takes a village it takes every sponsor if there're sponsors here if there's ah donors here that have supported this this wonderful project, I thank you. I thank but especially Chris who has been not only a wonderful hostess, but a wonderful mediator and trying to keep my nerves down as we walk around, as we drive around Seattle to different venues and to also I don't know if L...[unintelligible] and Carlo are here? No, we had a wonderful dinner with them. And and again this idea that that literature is a living breathing thing that yes, we read our books at home in private and we have these great intimate moments with them, but

at the end of the day and especially with poetry it is about coming together, and understanding ourselves in the light of art. This is this is what this program is, ultimately just blows my mind. So again, I thank you, enough thanks, I guess. What I like to do tonight is sort of take you on the emotional journey which is which

[0:07:29] is in this book but to take you on that journey through some of my poetry, some of my earlier work the idea of this emotional journey to the podium. Yeah. We need to show the slides. That's why we have the lights dim. Is that all right? You see me? So yeah, what I'd like to do is take you know, this book that we're celebrating tonight. It's sort of a it's a prose book that sort of gives you a lot of the emotional journey of what happened on that way to the podium. What I'd like to do tonight is take you on that journey through some of my work, through some of my poems and to see, I hope what you see is that there's there's a script going on here, that in some ways all my work has been leading up to that or at least I feel that way, has been leading up to that honor to writing that Poem for America. And then what I'd like to do and show you a few slides whatnot of what's been happening after the podium. It's been a year and a half now and a lot of exciting things have been happening for

[0:08:22] poetry as I have witnessed. So I'd like to share some of that with you. Firstly, sort of autobiographical journey which starts in some ways as I always like to say this idea of, Chris put it very eloquently, but I'll put it more colloquially. As I always like to say, I was made in Cuba, assembled in Spain and imported to United States. What that means is basically this- my mother left seven months pregnant from Cuba, so my soul is Cuban, apparently. This is what my parents tell me and then I we fled well not fled, we immigrated to Madrid first, where I was born and 45 days later we emigrated to the United States. To first to New York City and this is a [Spanish language] which is not quite a birth certificate, but that that picture that you see there is my newborn picture which was actually my green card photo. So by the time I was 45 days old, this was my first ID, by the time I was 45 days old, I belonged to three countries. At the time I was 45 days old, I had lived in two world class cities

[0:09:34] Madrid and New York, and if that wasn't sort of some higher power going like "guess what little Ricky is going to be obsessed about when he grows up and becomes a poet," these questions of home, of place, of identity, of cultural identity, this negotiation of where do I belong, what's going on here? To add to that after after New York we moved to a galaxy very very far away called Miami. And that added further to the script of this idea of question, of questioning of place and identity. As anybody that's been to Miami you'll testify to this idea that as we as Miamians say, we love living in Miami because it's so close to the United States and and and you don't need a passport. So the idea was that this added to the mythology. I grew up between two imaginary worlds in Miami, one was this 1950s and '60s Cuba, my parents and the stories and the telegrams and in the photographs everything this wonderful place, this paradise, this homeland that we came from and where we're going back to some day. So don't get used to it, don't

[0:10:44] get used to where we're living right now. And to me it was this mysterious place because the place that I knew somehow, but I had never been there and so the and so that was one imaginary world, the other half which isn't so obvious is America. Growing up in Miami I grew up in a very

undiverse community. I grew up where everyone was Cuban. My classmates were Cuban, the gardener was Cuban, the lawyer was Cuban, the mechanic was Cuban, the mayor was Cuban. Everybody was Cuban. So Miami felt like a sort of a cultural purgatory somewhere, a waiting ground between the real imagined Cuba some day that I'd go to, or the real America that I'd eventually come to, go to some day and it was that negotiation between those two worlds that sort of started informing my work years later when I became a poet. How I contextualized America in that very Cuban world was through television. I mean and I think we're all of the same age group here. You all know what the *Brady Bunch* is I hope, and *Leave it to Beaver*

[0:11:51] and all the rest. Well, it was more than a show to me. I really believed that that was what America was, I really believed that someday this would happen to me. That someday I would live in that *Brady Bunch* house, I would live in that place. That was America. And so between these two yearnings is sort of where my work as a poet first started off and I tell you this in retrospect now, of course after years years of thinking about it, but it really it was really art and poetry that brought me to those questions. You kind of float through life and you know these things are happening but you never sit down and question them. And so I like to begin with this poem which again in this sense sometimes I feel my life is scripted. I walked into my first creative writing course in graduate school and Professor Campbell McGrath makes us read some Ginsberg and some what was that other guy Whitman and some Frost and he says write a poem about America. And I was like, America? I didn't recognize myself

[0:12:59] in any of those poems. So the idea was I went home and I was like what's America and suddenly this flood gate opened with all this idea of where is my place in America and to fast forward a little bit when the when Obama called with with the assignment which was basically, Richard, we want you to write a poem about America. I was like, I got this, don't worry. I did this 20 years ago. So in some ways I want to give you an arc, a narrative of what's going on. So in some ways I've been writing I felt I had been writing about America in for many years and that negotiation I think is what you'll see in this poem this first poem which is *Little Ricky*, which is what I call myself in my head. *Little Ricky* sort of negotiating between these two worlds and trying to figure out where he belongs. This poem is that very first poem assignment that Campbell McGrath gave us. And you should know three things for this. Cubans and I think Latinos in general never got Thanksgiving. We call it San Giving, as in San

[0:14:07] Pedro or San Ignacio or whatnot. It's a feast day of a whole other kind. For Cubans, pork is not the other white meat, it's the only white, it's the only meat I should say. And there's a line in here about Kennedy and I think we're we're all of the same generation here that we understand the ill feelings of Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs invasion. But it always cracks me up because I was like, I don't think the White House read that one, this poem, and didn't realize that I was named after Richard Nixon.

[0:14:41] So here we go. *America*. Although Tia Miriam boasted she discovered at least half a dozen uses for peanut butter-- topping for guava shells in syrup, butter substitute for Cuban toast, hair conditioner and relaxer-- Mama never knew what to make of the monthly five-pound jars handed out

by the immigration department until my friend Jeff mentioned jelly. There was always pork though, for every birthday and wedding, whole ones on Christmas and New Year's Eves, even on Thanksgiving Day—pork, fried, broiled, or crispy skin roasted--as well as cauldrons of black beans, fried plantain chips and yuca con mojito. These items required a special visit to Antonio's Mercado on the corner of Eighth Street where men in guayaberas stood in senate, blaming Kennedy for everything—"Ese hijo de puta!" [Spanish language] the bile of Cuban coffee and cigar residue clinging to the wrinkled lips; ashamed and hollow as empty trees. By seven I had grown suspicious-- we were still here. Overheard conversations about returning had grown wistful

[0:16:02] and less frequent. I spoke English; my parents didn't. We didn't live in a two-story house with a maid or a wood-panel station wagon nor vacation camping in Colorado. None of the girls had hair of gold; none of my brothers or cousins were named Greg, Peter, or Marcia; we were not the *Brady Bunch*. And none of the black and white characters on *Donna Reed* or the *Dick Van Dyke Show* were named Guadalupe, Lazaro or Mercedes. Patty Duke's family wasn't like us either--they didn't have pork on Thanksgiving, they ate turkey with cranberry sauce; they didn't have yuca, they had yams like the dittos of Pilgrims I colored in class. So a week before Thanksgiving I explained to my abuelita about the Indians and the Mayflower, how Lincoln set the slaves free; I explained to my parents about the purple mountain's majesty, "one if by land, two if by sea," the cherry tree, the tea party, the "masses yearning to be free," liberty and justice for all, until finally they agreed: this Thanksgiving we would have turkey, as well as

[0:17:18] pork. Abuelita prepared the poor fowl as if committing an act of treason, faking her enthusiasm for my sake. Mama set a frozen pumpkin pie in the oven and prepared candied yams following instructions I had translated from the marshmallow bag. The table was arrayed with gladiolas, the plattered turkey loomed at the center on plastic silver from Woolworth's. I uttered a bilingual blessing and the turkey was passed around like a game of Russian Roulette.

[0:17:52] "Dry," Tio Berto complained, and proceeded to drown the lean slices with pork fat drippings and cranberry jelly—"la mierda roja esa,"[Spanish language] as he called it. Faces fell when Mama presented her ochre pie--pumpkin was a home remedy for ulcers, not a dessert. Tia Maria made three rounds of Cuban coffee, then Abuelo and Pepe cleared the living room furniture, put on a Celia Cruz LP and the entire family began to merengue over the linoleum of our apartment, sweating rum and sugar, rum and sugar until they remembered--it was 1970 and 46 degrees--in America. Thank you. [Applause]

[0:18:54] I forgot to show this slide which is like the Thanksgiving.

[0:19:00] Maybe it's funny after I don't know, but? Inevitably Thanksgiving turned into a lot of spandex and dancing in my family, but I'm obsessed with the *Brady Bunch* as you can see. Obviously, obviously those questions of home and identity and belonging, cultural negotiation have obsessed me, all all my writing and and this is what artists do, they pick an obsession that feeds them all their life. These questions of home and place and identity, I thought at first were very unique to me, sort of sort of very autobiographical. Throughout the years of writing, I've realized that these are very

universal questions in a sense, that sense of where we belong or what is home are things that I think every one of us ask at some point in our lives whether you're from whether you're an immigrant or whether you're born in the same town where your great-great-grandparents were born, the sense that human beings always have of trying to connect with a place that they feel at home, and I think that's obviously

[0:20:05] what my work is coming across from. My mother, this is my mother and I at the Inauguration. And those questions of home and belonging naturally led me to ask and investigate my parents' question my parents' stories and where were they from? Okay, what was it like when you were growing up and whatnot, and for my mother that in the case of my mother's a particularly poignant question because she left every single family member behind in Cuba. And I'm talking, and you know what that means for a Latino, that means the neighbor is a family member. But literally she left all eight brothers and sisters, her parents, every single aunt and uncle, every single cousin, for the sake of coming to America. And my brother and I always understood that courage, admire that courage she had. We always felt that longing and sense of loss that she had but when I was asked to write the inaugural poem another dimension to that opened up for me, I had never realized the faith that my mother must have

[0:21:05] had to do that. The leap of faith that she had to have had to come to a country that she knew very little of and it's a quintessential sort of American Dream story and the idea that immigrants in some ways are some of the most patriotic people in our country and patriotic not in the not in the stereotypic sense, but the idea that they know how to appreciate the very values that we try to uphold in ways that are fresh and new. So this third poem, or I should say the third poem of the three inaugural poems, I had to write three in three weeks. I don't know if that's common knowledge, but they made the Cuban write three as I don't know why, but I was like, I don't know if they didn't trust me, I don't know what's going on. So this is the third one and I started contemplating that idea and an idea that I've always thought about.

[0:21:56] My mother is a is more of an American than I could ever be. And the idea of all of us have to get up off from our seats in this auditorium. And in three hours pack a bag and leave, forget leaving the country. Just you have to leave Seattle and never return here. You never you, you'll never be here again. What kind of faith does it take? What kind of courage and this is what this poem is about. It asks us to place myself and and the reader or listener in my mother's shoes.

[0:22:32] *Mother Country Madre Patria*

[0:22:43] 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, her wedding veil, the doorknob of her house, a jar of dirt from her backyard, goodbye letters she won't open for years. The sorrowful drone of the engines, one last, deep breath she'll take 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.

[0:24:01] 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-n-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 ten-hour days at the cash register. And at night, the zzz-zzz-zzz

[0:24:59] of her sewing her own blouses, and quinceanera dresses for her grown nieces still in Cuba, guessing at their sizes, and the gowns she'd sell the 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. 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, and your mother's hair, terrified you could somehow forget these. 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:

[0:26:40] You know, mijó, I've been thinking, it's not where you're born that matters, it's where you choose to die--

[0:26:54] that's your country. Thank you. [Applause]

[0:27:10] This is my dad. But I really just love this, I oh by the way, these are just meant to like be a backdrop into a play I hope. I hope they're not distracting. It's also the engineer in me who's just like has to have a PowerPoint slide somehow, but this is my father and really I love this slide because of the plastic on the sofa.

[0:27:31] Have to write a poem about that someday.

[0:27:36] The reason that this next poem is got a lot going on. A lot of the question that I get asked a lot even before all the inaugural hoopla was like you're an engineer and a poet and they look at you like a one-eyed monster and I'm like, yeah and I can chew gum and write a poem and I can chew gum and design a bridge. It's what's the big deal. But it gives us a little, I hope it gives you a little bit more of the emotional underpinnings of my choice to be an engineer. I should say that I was always a left brain right brain kid, and I love everything and I love all knowledge. But this poem in particular deals around my relationship with my father, some of the emotional connections that created that that engineer in me but there's something else going on here and it's a very engineering poem. I call this

an engineering poem. I'm fascinated, as an engineer, I get to redesign landscapes, hardscapes. So I will take a street like one of the streets in downtown Seattle and I will redo it. I mean with

[0:28:40] community involvement talking, you know, sometimes two years of talking with the community and saying what is your vision for home? How do you you know, what kind of lamp posts do you want? What would the sidewalks look like? You know what kinds of what what kinds of benches do you want? What is it that you want this place to feel like home? And for once in my life in the last eight years, that overlap, of course in my poetry, is always this quest for home and the idea that there's an emotional landscape which you'll see later in the *Gulf Motel* that I read. But the idea that I created a physical landscape as an engineer and an emotional landscape that overlays everything as a poet and so the engineer creates a three-dimensional space in which you walk into and have an emotional response and the poet creates a two-dimensional space in which you also walk into and have a response and I'm fascinated how that happens. I'm havin fascinated that everything that we experience in our lives and some ways

[0:29:35] is attached to place. When you have a memory, you think about that room you were in, that house you were in, the smell of the place, what it was like. And this poem is playing with that sense of cityscape and hardscape versus the emotional landscape. It takes place, there's a bridge in Miami and it was a during a time that I was designing a lot of bridges, that you cross in Miami off the toll and to the right is all the civic center where all the hospitals are and the hospital complexes is to, I'm sorry, to the left, to the right is all the landscape the the sky's skyline of Miami that you're probably familiar with and sort of the rest of the sea of the city, the flatlands so to speak and it's a bridge that I crossed every way, every day, every morning on my way to my office.

[0:30:32] *Papa's Bridge*

[0:30:38] Morning, driving west again, away from the sun rising in the slit of the rearview mirror, as I climb on slabs of concrete and steel bent into a bridge arcing with all its parabolic y-squared splendor. I rise to meet the shimmering faces of buildings above tree tops meshed into a calico of greens, forgetting the river below runs, insists on running and scouring the earth, moving it grain by grain. And if only for a few inclined seconds every morning, I'm twelve years old again with my father standing at the tenth floor window of his hospital room, gazing back at the same bridge like a mammoth bone aching with the gravity of its own dense weight. The glass dosed by a tepid light reviving the city as I watched and read his sleeping, wondering if he could even dream in such dreamless white: Was he falling? Was he flying? Was he falling? Was he flying? Who was he, who was I underneath his eyelids, flitting like the birds across the morning and early morning stars wasting away, the rush-hour cars

[0:32:15] pushing through the avenues like the tiny blood cells through his vein, the IV spiraling down like a string of clear licorice feeding his forearm, bruised pearl and lavender, colors of the morning haze and the pills on his tongue. The stitches healed, while the room kept sterile with the usual silence between us. For three days I served him water or juice in wilting paper cups, flipped through muted soap operas and game shows, filled out the menu cards stamped Bland Diet. For three nights I

wedged flat strange pillows around his bed, his body shaped like a fallen S, mortared in place by layers of stiff percale.

[0:33:12] When he was ordered to walk, I took his hand, together we stepped to the window and he spoke-- Mijo you'll know how to build bridges like that someday--

[0:33:31] today, I cross the city, this bridge again, still spanning the silent distance between us with the memory of a father and son holding hands, and secretly in love. [Applause]

[0:34:06] They will appreciate this slide where he is, but this will make sense in a moment. One of the things that my work is, serve art over, is this idea of cultural sexuality. For years I had in my first two books, I hadn't come out in my poetry and it was really interesting to be named an openly gay, the first openly gay inaugural poet. I was like, boy if I wasn't open by then it was like what a way to come out, right? And it's like but I had been openly gay but not openly gay in my writing which is really interesting and part of it bugged me for years because I didn't understand I was was an openly gay man. And I realized that part of what it was is I hadn't found that doorway, that foreway into telling that story, so the idea of cultural negotiation and of home and belonging was very strong and then enter my grandmother. I, my grandmother just came back into my life and my grandmother was a woman who was as homophobic as she was xenophobic, so that anything that was culturally odd to her was gay. We're talking

[0:35:16] things like Fruit Loops, Cub Scouts, Play-doh, gay, anything in English that she couldn't read, gay. So I had very little very little wiggle room when I was a kid and and so she became sort of my doorway into discussing this idea of cultural sexuality that I can't separate who I am as a gay man, who I am as a Cuban man much and by the same token of who I am as a poet, and who I am as an engineer, as the last poem sort of described. And so this poem is sort of trying to to speak about that in her voice, but I will also say adding to this idea of universality and home and the idea of quest for home and and belonging. I made this connection in my last book it's like, it's like and and any sort of gay boy will understand this, that we wanted another home. We wanted that safe space. We grow up with the sense of someday we'll get some place. There will be that home, figurative home, where we can be who we are and so I realized that there was another sort of interesting layer to that, that my quest my quest to

[0:36:34] understand my sexuality was intertwined with that same quest for home, for that that sense of belonging and being in a place that you could be yourself. And so enter this poem, my grandmother, who, this is a poem in her voice, a poem that I thought when I wrote was a scathing poem and like totally like, you know angry, and the first time I read it, people started chuckling and then laughing and then I started laughing and I realized, god damn it, I still can't get even with her. What was the point of being a poet in the first place? But it I also want to say another another thing in terms of universality. Everybody has someone like my grandmother in their life, it's that it's that relative that never means well.

[0:37:22] The one, the one that'll say like, you look great, how many pounds did you lose? All right. I love what you're done with your hair, is that Clairol number 42 or 32, you know, every every every every compliment is framed in an insult and my grandmother was kind of that person and she was a hoot at parties and she was a funny person, but behind closed doors my grandmother was a source of a lot of of angst. *Queer Theory: According to my Grandmother*. Again, this is in her voice.

[0:38:03] Never drink your soda with a straw, Los hombres don't use straws. Milk shakes? Maybe. Stop eyeing your mother's Avon catalog, and the men's underwear in those Sears flyers. I've seen you... Stay out of her Tupperware parties and perfume bottles--don't let her kiss you, she kisses you much too much. Avoid hugging men, but if you must, pat them real hard on the back, even if it's your father. Must you keep that cat? Don't pet him so much. Aye Mijo, why don't you like dogs? Never play house, even if you're the husband. And quit hanging out with that Henry kid, he's too pale, and I don't care what you call them, those GI Joes of his are dolls. Don't draw rainbows or flowers or sunsets. I've seen you... Don't draw at all--no coloring books either. Put away your crayons, those Play-Dohs, those Legos. Where are your Hot Wheels, your laser gun and handcuffs, those knives I gave you for Christmas?

[0:39:23] Never fly a kite or roller skate, but light all the firecrackers you want, kill all the lizards you can, cut up worms--feed them to that cat of yours. Don't sit Indian style with your legs crossed--you're no Indian. Stop click-clacking your sandals- you're no Tropicana chorus girl. And for God's sake, never ever pee sitting down.

[0:39:52] I've seen you... Never take a bubble bath or wash your hair with shampoo--shampoo is for women. So is conditioner. So is el mousse. So is hand lotion. Never file your nails or blow-dry your hair--go to the barber shop with your Abuelo. You're not unisex, are you? Stay out of the kitchen. Los hombres don't cook- they eat. Eat anything you want, except: deviled eggs, Blow Pops, croissants, bagels? maybe. Cucumber sandwiches and those petit fours. Don't watch *Bewitched* or *I Dream of Jeannie*. Don't stare at the *Six-Million Dollar Man*. I've seen you... Never dance alone in your room: Donna Summer, Barry Manilow, the Captain and Tennille, Bette Midler and all musicals- forbidden. Posters of kittens, Star Wars, or the Eiffel Tower--forbidden. Those fancy books on architecture and art- I threw 'em in the trash. No, you can't wear cologne or puka shells and I better not catch you in clogs. If I see you in a ponytail- I'm cutting it off. 'kay? What? No, you can't pierce your ear, left or right side- I don't care- you will

[0:41:23] not look like a goddamn queer. I've seen you... even though I know you are one. [Applause]

[0:41:48] One of these days I just want to read that poem dressed as my grandmother... [Someone in audience says something, unintelligible]

[0:41:55] Oh, that's a good for Q&A. But yes, that's crossed my mind, the homo, the classic homophobia syndrome, right? So let me skip forward to try to tell you my life in 20 years in five minutes. But that quest for home, that idea of belonging led me eventually to Cuba, my first trip to Cuba, and it was an amazing trip. I mean this filling in all these blanks and coming in again with all my

mother's entire family that I had never met, I grew up with half a family. It was an amazing, wonderful, enriching experience, but at the same time I realized well, there's still another half of me that is in the states and I kind of really realized I thought I'd go to Cuba and like would just like live there and that was it there was this yearning to understand that. So I got back from that and I still go to Cuba often and it is very satisfying but when I got back from my first trip was like, all right, Little Ricky and, Little Ricky's what I call myself in my head. Let's go to America finally, let's go to that

[0:42:57] real imagined America. Let's go to the other half of that, the other side of that imaginary universe and I said, I'll get a job in Connecticut and I did and living in Hartford, West Hartford and I thought oh boy, like sleigh rides in the snow, me and Martha Stewart doing arts and crafts every Tuesday. Homes with curly cues of chimneys and curly cues of smoke, who knows if the Bradys would show up there? I mean, I really, again I was a we were a relatively very poor family. I had never even visited New England. I went up there still with that glossy-eyed sort of idea that I was going to, I was going to be American finally and um and that didn't quite happen. Of course, we know that all that, a lot of that is myth. I mean there's a lot of history and great stuff but it's not exactly what I thought, it wasn't what they showed me in the picture books. So I said, all right, Little Ricky. Well a quote from Pascal that changed my life was "the sole cause of a man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly

[0:44:02] in his room". And I thought well, where is that room that I left, that I should have stayed? And that was South Florida. So I said, well, let's just move back to Miami, or the idea of living in between those two worlds, maybe that's the only place I could exist, and so that didn't work out and that's what this poem is about, it sort of addressing that whole, that adage of you can't go back home. Narrative behind this is that I took my partner, Mark, to Marco Island. You can't make this stuff up sometimes. It's a place that we used to vacation since I was a kid, and on the west coast of Florida, poor man's vacation. It's like \$100 for the week in the middle of July and 98 degrees, hundred percent humidity, the air conditioning was on the fritz and but it was a very special place in my life and my memory. And I took Mark like 20 something years later, maybe 30 years later, to take that proverbial trip down memory lane and say look, this is where I used to do this and used to do that. Then I, of course, the place I can the

[0:45:07] landscape, the hardscape, you know, the had completely changed and it was this horrible feeling of having that emotional landscape completely abstracted from this place that was so special to you. And I was, I start cussing like saying all sorts of things and going all Ricky Ricardo, and Mark turned to me and said you sound like your mother. It's like, the wrong thing to say in any circumstance, but I was like, you're right. This is exactly how my parents spoke about Cuba, that sense of loss, that sense of the in, it's more than loss and nostalgia. And I want you all to understand this. This is not about nostalgia. It's really about the idea, at least in this poem, the idea that of that first recognition that you're mortal, that life goes on. Things change without your permission that you're you know, you're just here for a a blink and that life and everything goes on and things change and I realized my parents' story even better than I had before and I also realized how universal their loss was. In my own life and

[0:46:14] my own context in Marco Island, I was experiencing the same thing in some ways that they had experienced from their losses. And so this poem, which I always say, everybody has their own *Gulf Motel*. There's this place in your memory.

[0:46:32] That wonderful place that you all know and you can go back to in your minds, when life was absolutely pristine and wonderful, and you don't want anyone to mess with that, and that doesn't necessarily mean a motel, it could be a bowling alley, it could be a million things. Think about that as you hear this poem.

[0:46:55] *Looking for the Gulf Motel*. Marco Island, Florida

[0:47:03] There should be nothing here I don't remember... The Gulf Motel with mermaid lampposts and ship's wheel in the lobby should still be rising out of the sand like a cake decoration. My brother and I should still be pretending we don't know our parents, embarrassing us as they roll a luggage cart past the front desk loaded with our scruffy suitcases, two dozen loaves of Cuban bread, brown bags bulging with enough mangos to last the entire week, our espresso pot, the pressure cooker--and a pork roast reeking garlic through the marble lobby. All because we can't afford to eat out, Mijo, not even on vacation, only two hours away from our home in Miami, but far enough away to be thrilled by the whiter sands on the west coast of Florida, where I should still be for the first time watching the sun set instead of rise over the ocean.

[0:48:09] There should be nothing here I don't remember... My mother should still be in the kitchenette of The Gulf Motel, her daisy sandals from Kmart squeaking across the linoleum, still gorgeous in her teal swimsuit and amber earrings stirring a pot of arroz-con-pollo, adding sprinkles of onion powder and dollops of tomato sauce. My father should still be in a terrycloth jacket smoking, clinking a glass of amber whiskey in the sunset at The Gulf Motel, watching us dive into the pool, two sons he'll never see grow into men who will be proud of him.

[0:49:01] There should be nothing here I don't remember... My brother and I should still be playing Parcheesi, my father should still be alive, slow dancing with my mother on the sliding-glass balcony of The Gulf Motel. No music, only the waves keeping time, a song only their minds hear ten-thousand nights back to their life in Cuba.

[0:49:34] My mother's face should still be resting against his bare chest like the moon resting on the sea, and the stars, the stars should still be turning around them. There should be nothing here I don't remember... My brother and I should still be thirteen, sneaking rum in the bathroom, sculpting naked women from sand. Still dazzled by seashells, and how many seconds we can hold our breath underwater--but I'm not. I'm thir../ I'm thirty-eight, driving up Collier Boulevard, looking for The Gulf Motel, for everything that should still be, but isn't. I want to blame the condos, their shadows for ruining the beach and my past, I want to chase the snowbirds away with their tacky McMansions and yachts, I want to turn the golf courses back into mangroves, I want to find The Gulf Motel exactly as it was and pretend, pretend for just a moment, that nothing I've lost, is lost. [Applause]

[0:51:16] This is one of those hand coated photographs in my that I mentioned in my *Madre Patria* poem. These are my great-grandparents whom I never met and my mother gives me this photo about two weeks before the Inauguration. And this is this is the photo I had slipped in my little folder when I went up to read at the Inauguration, this sense of continuity that I discussed in the in the little memoir at of the Inauguration that

[0:51:47] I think we're all of age here that realize that but there's a certain moment in your life where you realize that as Chris was saying in the introduction what what grabbed her was this idea that at 20-something you think oh, I chose my major, I'm going to be an engineer, I'm going to be a poet or blah blah blah and you don't realize or you realize it at a later age that when you're born, you're already born in the middle of the story, you're born in the fifth act. And so many so much that has come before you has decided who you are in a very wonderful way and so in some ways they are because I am because they are and and that was very comforting moment for me, that idea of continuity. That and a little note by my partner who, my partner Mark, who wrote some like, feel the poem like think of Frost like this loving note that he wrote, he would write me notes every morning as as I had different drafts of the poem. And so here's the chute where you come down was just like it's photographed a lot, further back. We're like

[0:53:00] in the Inauguration, I remember I think they took a photo of President Obama and he he looked back and he realized that was the last time he would ever see that it in that capacity, of course, but what I want to say is I've tried to give you an arc of understanding of you know people, I find myself interested by the idea that suddenly this Richard Blanco came on the scene and read this poem to America as if he came out of the blue, this first gay, as Chris was saying, first gay, first Latino, first this, first that, the other, first guy with like it goes on and on and on and on but in some ways it was scripted and some ways I feel that it was it was an amazing sort of continue continuation of all the work that all the questions I have been asking. Where is home? Where do I belong? And that moment that that question wasn't answered to me until moments before I get up to read the poem, to realize that the greatest gift of the Inauguration for me is not to to to all the readings I've done or it's not all the

[0:54:09] media but that sense of realizing that I was home all along, that home was in my backyard, that home, that America is all those stories. It was my story. It was my mother's story. It was 8 everyones of those every one of those 850,000 people sitting there, standing there witnessing that moment, the idea of that, the idea that America is in some way a story again that I was born into, but a story that's it's it's not done yet. We keep on right we keep on adding chapter by chapter every generation this ideal those ideals are still there and the guiding sort of principles towards what we're writing. Sometimes we could throw a chapter away because we don't like it and we've all been there but the idea that we each contribute our stories to America and that and that amazingly that we get a chance to do that. Even if sometimes we have to struggle to include that narrative in our country, we can do it. There's a sense that that we can step up to the mic, we can step up to the podium and tell our stories.

[0:55:22] Anyway, I'm going to read a little excerpt from the book that sort of I think may capture some of that. Perhaps less than I what I just told you but nonetheless.

In that moment, I feel America standing as one, putting differences aside for a moment and taking a deep collective breath. We pay tribute to something far bigger and more important than any one of us. And I truly feel like one of us. One of "We the people" in the echoes of the presidents and others' speeches. I embrace America in a way I never had, or thought I could. Feeling for the first time that I belong, truly belong to one country. Not any imaginary ideal from TV or nostalgic island floating in the sea of my parents' memories, but a real tangible place that is mine, was mine all along. I turn to my mother and whisper, mama, I think we're finally Americanos. She gives me a tender look as if saying, I know, I know.

[0:56:47] Senator Schumer introduces me and calls me up to the podium. My mother squeezes my shoulder. I stand more confident than I imagined I would or could be, transfixed by the moment that it's no longer about me or my poem or my glory, but about our country. Still I'm surprised when the President and Vice President stand up to greet me, shake my hand on my way to the podium. They both whisper something in my ear that I can't make out.

[0:57:22] But their gracious gestures speak silently to my heart, silently as if saying, Richard, here is your country. This is your story. Here, your home. I step up to the podium, look out over the crowd, a patchwork quilt of lives, of stories spread across our ground, under our sky, beneath our one sun. I take it all in as I take one deep breath, then another. This is for them. This is for us. For all of us, I think to myself and begin speaking into our wind. Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, America--  
*One Today*

[0:58:35] 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 over the Rockies. One light, waking up rooftops, under each one, a story told by our silent gestures moving behind windows.

[0:59:07] My face, your face, millions of faces in morning's mirrors, each one yawning to life, crescendoing into our day: 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, save lives-- to teach geometry, or ring-up groceries as my mother did for twenty years, so I could write this poem for us today.

[1:00:08] 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, or atoms imagined, the "I have a dream" we keep dreaming, or the impossible vocabulary of sorrow that won't explain the empty desks of twenty children marked absent today,

[1:00:41] and forever.

[1:00:45] 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 watch their children slide into the day.

[1:01:05] One ground. Our ground, rooting us to every stalk of corn, every head of wheat sown by sweat and hands, hands gleaned coal or planting windmills in deserts and hilltops that keep us warm, hands digging trenches, hands routing pipes and cables, hands as worn as my father's cutting sugarcane so my brother and I could have books and shoes.

[1:01:44] The dust of our farms and deserts, our cities and plains mingled by one wind--our breath. Breathe.

[1:02:02] 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, and trains whistling, and whispers across cafe tables. Hear: the doors we open for each other all day, 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.

[1:03:09] One sky: since the Appalachians and Sierras claimed their majesty, and the Mississippi and Colorado worked their way to the sea.

[1:03:22] 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 a sky that yields to our resilience.

[1:03:48] One sky, toward which we sometimes lift our eyes tired from work: some days guessing at the weather 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.

[1:04:21] And so we head home home: through the gloss of rain or the 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. And hope --a new constellation waiting for us to map it, waiting for us to name it—together.  
[Applause]

[1:05:24] Thank you. I lose track of the slides, but this is the real money shot.

[1:05:31] If the shoot was scary enough, but so I like to take you just real briefly through some slides of okay, here's, I'm at the podium, what's happened since then. As you saw, I just sort of this sense of home and belonging and the idea that I had come to the sense of place and and I don't want a rose color to rose lens color this, but you know new questions have arisen but there was a different sense

of what home was for me, but it also changed my perspective of poetry in America. There's a...  
[unintelligible, from the audience]

[1:06:07] sure. I need the book though, you know I wouldn't ordinarily accept that interjection, that's wonderful idea. Thank you, which stanza? [unintelligible, from the audience] I love the last one. I love the last one. Thank you. Thank you for thank you for having the guts to do that. I love that. Yes, this is as I said, we're in a poetry, we're in a book club right here right now. It's wonderful.

[1:06:41] If I can find it here. Amazing, I got the pages. All right, I'll try to do my best because my Spanish is not... Okay, this is the last stanza which I think of course is the clincher in any poem, sort of the closure is the

[1:07:04] [Last stanza of poem read in Spanish language] [Applause]

[1:08:05] Thanks for that, thanks for that. I don't ordinarily, I don't assume any any audience is bilingual. So thanks for that. Part of the reason I wanted to translate that in the book. I didn't translate them myself, but part of it was I thought it was important for people like my mother to be able to appreciate it, at least the poems. So thank you. So anyway a lot of things have been happening. I was very jaded as many of us were with poetry.

[1:08:36] So I not only had a transformation in terms of of of my place in America, my place at the table of America but my whole idea of what poetry can be in America was turned completely transformed. This, they I don't know if you guys remember they made a lot of fun of this slide of like what's his name Eric Cantor right, who was like like I don't get the poem. I prefer to believe that he was so absorbed in the poem that he was like completely immersed in it but that probably wasn't the case. I also had this is America's sort of general attitude about poetry right, I'll give you a minute to read that.

[1:09:19] And yet amazing what the inaugural.. ah, this next step, I I always hesitate to say this is this is not about self aggrand aggrandization. I just love what I've witnessed as Inaugural Poet of what the power of poetry can have in our lives and the misunderstanding of poetry and the and the mis-education of poetry. So I mean, but even the idea that the inauguration got Conan O'Brien to talk about poetry and that alone is a miracle right? He cracks me up. What I witnessed was a completely different perspective that changed my mind. We crashed four Gmail accounts. People stopping me in the streets in Washington and hugging me and crying. Drawings from you know dozens of of grade schools writing, depicting the poem, some of them writing their own version of their inaugural poem. This is the the salon where I get my hair cut. Well, I use the word salon very, very loosely. This is where I cut my hair in Bethel. The point is that they were selling my poem, my poetry books before I became Inaugural Poet. Someone got wind of

[1:10:37] that I was a poet, I hadn't come out in Bethel as a poet. I was gay but I hadn't come out as a poet. It was scarier to come out as a poet. The idea that poetry and again, this is what I love about Seattle Reads that it is the proverbial campfire that when people are given a chance as the

Inauguration does, that people respond to it with such amazing power when they realize that poetry isn't something that stopped in high school, that poetry is something that is relevant to our lives. And I keep on seeing this over and over and over again and I just want to share that with you. So now of course they did a whole thing on 207 which is a news magazine in in a Bethel, which is a hoot. But yeah, I sell a lot of books at the poetry salon and they have my books at the at the checkout counter right next to the National Enquirer. Why not? So in May, I met the President, officially in the Oval Office and we present, this is my partner Mark, and we presented him with a beautiful print of my cousin Sergio

[1:11:40] Baradat who has done about four series of stamps for the US Postal Service. We presented him with the poem and he complimented me on the poem and all the things that the senators were saying and all the stuff and went on and on and the cute little anecdote and don't quote me as me as quoting the president, but it was you don't know Obama seems like the President next door, and I was terrified to meet him because I didn't want to be illusion, disillusioned. He is the president next door. So about two seconds after that, he's like, come on guys I'm going to show you where I'm going to put this and he takes us to the back room in the Oval Office and he's like this is where I put all the stuff I really like, not all the political stuff they give me. He's got pictures of of you know, men, Nelson Mandela and I think Ella Fitzgerald, was all sort of a blur, but you know very personal things, it's his little sort of den, his thinking room. So we have poetry hanging in the Oval Office. The Inaugural Poet should be a law.

[1:12:45] What can I say? How did this slide get in here? Oops?

[1:12:51] You got it. I'm trying to show you what like, all right, this is, before I had read the poem we tried to see Beyonce and she's like, her people were like, no, you can't see her. After the poem, her peeps came to my peeps and said Beyonce wants to see the poet. So even Beyonce wanted to see the poet. I mean, it's amazing. I mean again, I'm not doing this that I show a picture Beyonce, but and she paid me an honest, we had an honest artist to artist conversation. She's like, I was singing somebody else's song, this is before the whole lip sync thing, but she said, I was singing somebody else's song, I can't imagine, I can imagine how difficult it was for you to write this poem and then deliver it to everybody. I would have been a nervous wreck. She in her intimate as the pop diva and amazing woman that she is and she's just as beautiful in person, she's not, just so you know, paid tribute to poetry in her own, in her own way. And that's more common and understood that there is art that that

[1:13:54] was there. Of course Jay-Z is also another amazing person as well, that understands the connection between poetry and poetry as public is as as as occupying public space. The other thing that's been happening is these amazing people have been coming out of the woodworks to commission poems, more occasional poems and I always find it interesting because we have this aversion to the occasional poem and yet we all in our classes and our literature classes, our creative classes, we all like Whitman, Whitman, Whitman, Whitman, Whitman. Whitman was an occasional poet, if you ask me. I mean the guy understood how to take something, an event and make something personally beautiful and passionate and felt but also that had had a collective voice and

had something interesting. So people have been asking me to commission poems one of them was the *Boston Strong* poem, which was right after the Boston bombings and the idea that poetry could come around something like that, a way, again the

[1:14:56] proverbial campfire, a way to heal, a way to commemorate, a way to celebrate. And I ended up having reading the poem to the Boston Strong benefit concert, which I like to say I opened to Aerosmith and James Taylor and Carole King. And James Taylor and I have now done three things together. But you know what surprises me was like I was petrified. I think I was petrified more for this than the Inauguration, like I'm at a rock concert. You could hear a pin drop. You can understand that people were expecting a poem. They knew that that was the moment for it. Nobody was clawing for the exits, everybody understood that moment as a moment to let us come together for a moment. Poetry in some way is prayer and it's a way of addressing addressing that in our psyche. I got to read this at ah at Fenway Park. I don't think there's any Yankee fans here, so it really doesn't matter but remember the slide with me at Little League? This was the ultimate payback. I called my brother, I was like, you see? Poetry

[1:16:11] can do things that, he was much more of a jock. But amazing again, like it was expected. It was just as if someone were singing the National Anthem and they enjoyed it. Did they swoon in their seats and say, oh my god Richard, we love you, like no, it's not about that. But the idea that poetry can be part of our lives in so many different facets and ways is what I've been discovering. And again, like I said, I subscribe to the whole other side of the spectrum. Another thing that's been happening is to sort of I've been asked to be keynote for a lot of of causes and this is where I feel that I'm most useful as well, like LGBT [inaudible], immigration. This in particular, my partner Mark's younger sister is intellectually and developmentally handicapped and her mother is really active in an organization called ARC, which used to stand for America American Association of Retarded Citizens and I don't know what else to call it because they still keep the acronym which is gone away from that but

[1:17:18] they asked me to to you know to speak at a fundraiser and the this is in Syracuse and the billboard company is so involved and moved that they donated the whole space for the advertisement of the reading as a fundraiser, and so this to me is like I've done, you know, I've died and gone to heaven the day that poetry is on billboards. And again, I take a step back. It's not because of me. It just freaks me out because I'm just I'm witnessing these things. I've been read been reading at the USDA and Federal Reserve in June. I'm like, how are you going to pay me, in gold? I have no idea. I've been reading at engineering firms, at a Fra the Fragrance Awards, which is this hoopla big deal with Taylor Swift and Taylor Swift is it?

[1:18:20] And Justin Bieber or Jason Bieber, Jason Bieber and the Facebook whatever, that they were part of the audience. Again, nobody was clawing for the doors. They were actually like, what a relief it was just it was the best moment of the evening because everything else was like kind of the Academy Awards and now for the next award, you know, so it's this wonderful break in the evening. Nobody freaked out. It was expected. It was it was accepted when you give them a chance. The other piece that I've been doing is poetry and social justice. So this is my poet and wonderful wonderful poet and wonderful friend, Spencer Reece, and this whole project is really more his brainchild, but I

always like to show it. Doing poetry in an all girls' orphanage in Honduras, which has a very very significant problem with more than males, with females being abandoned, and taking poetry into their lives and having them, teaching them English, by the way, you know, I'm of course is part of the idea but also to get them to through

[1:19:29] poetry understand their lives in a way that nothing else can really open up their lives, and or their lives and their souls to themselves. As a way of healing, as a way of crying, as a way of many things. Here we are with goofing off, and this is one of one of the girls and don't be fooled, she's trying to get me to do her homework. She's like like I don't know, and I was of course me being the instructor. So I'd like to just end with this poem by one of the girls that one of the poems that the girl wrote and I think we're done. This is by Aylin and is called *Counting*.

[1:20:24] Every week, every day, every hour, every minute, and every second that I pass without my family, it feels like a knife trying to get inside a rock. I am the knife and the rock is my life. So this is me, Aylin, and this is my difficult life without my family. Some people think that living in a home for girls like Our Little Roses is a big blessing. Yes, I say to those people, but it is it is a great blessing but at the same time it is a curse. Every night I start thinking and talking to God in my prayers: "Why God, why did my family leave me alone?" There is no answer. A lot of people see me with my sisters and my aunt who's not really my aunt, and they think we are a happy group, but really all of us think the same thing that no one ever says: one day, will our mother come to visit us? It is ugly to know that everyone in this school is celebrating Mother's Day. In this day, I feel ashamed to be me. But, God, listen to this:

[1:21:57] I'm counting the time like people count the stars and I will keep counting until my mother comes. My sist my sisters are graduating and soon I will go to college too. When I graduate from college and when I am finally somebody in this world, God, I will go straight to Mexico where my mother lives and I will stare at her like I stare at the stars and with the voice that cracks like thunder I will say: I forgive you! But for now, God, I am here, in Our Little Roses, counting." [Applause]

[1:22:59] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.