

BO BARTLETT

America, 2007
oil on linen, 80 x 116 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD BLANCO

Writing a Poem about America

An Inaugural Poet's Journey

After reading some Ginsberg, some Frost, some Whitman, our first take-home assignment in graduate school was to write a poem about America. I went home and scratched my head; I was like, this isn't America, this Ginsberg, this is not my America. My America is a little Cuban kid from Miami. That was exactly the same assignment I got twenty years later when President Obama called and said, "Write a poem about America." For about five seconds I was a little cocky, thinking, I've done that poem. I've been writing about America really throughout my whole body of work, which is questioning my cultural identity and place in America. I thought, Don't worry, Obama, you've reached the right number.

That lasted five seconds. Then I realized it was like that poem but then it wasn't, and I started investigating what that journey would look like and just jumped into it because I had to write the inaugural poem in three weeks. I had to learn that things already in regular poems are heightened in the occasional poem. For me, I was struggling with the idea that the occasional poem I was writing in this particular instance would be my first spoken word poem. It would be the first poem I wrote that would be heard before it would ever be read in a book or a magazine or anywhere else. I had seven minutes to capture the imagination of forty million people through the ear. If I didn't do it through the ear, through my performance, the poem was going to go nowhere, and it would die right there in the moment. I started rehearsing the poem, started thinking about the poem in the sense of this triangulation.

There was me the poet, there was the audience that would be right in front of me, and there was the audience, including my peers, that would not be right in front of me and that would read this poem. How do you solve those three things and how can you satisfy those three things? I rehearsed the poem like I have never rehearsed a poem in my life. I rehearsed outside because I would recite the poem outside. I built a makeshift podium in my deck in my house in Maine with a photo of Obama. This is Maine in January. My makeshift podium was overlooking a bluff and a snowman that my nephews had built. I read to the snowman.

With the inaugural poem I had to go through a lot of that emotional searching: what is this America? I started

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the poem with the pilgrims landing and then, by page twelve we were still like at the Civil War, and I was like, “Well, what’s going on here?” I was like, “Okay, Richard, who cares about all this crap? Seriously, if I don’t care about it . . .” I had to care about this assignment, and I had to search deeply emotionally just like anything else, just like an assignment in a workshop, in order to write a poem about America. I had to find some kind of passion. In the inaugural poem, I had to ask some heart-wrenching questions. One was, Richard, are you American? At that point I still felt, well, I’m not quite Peter Brady or Marcia Brady, and so there was that sense that I didn’t have the emotional authority to write that poem.

The other question was, do I love America? Can I be honest enough in a poem to say I connect with America in that way? These were questions I had never really been forced to ask. I had explored them in my writing, but if I couldn’t answer yes to those questions, I might as well call the White House and say, “You know, you need to find somebody else for this poem.” Of course I wasn’t going to do that, but I really felt that strongly.

When the tragedy of Sandy Hook happened right as I got the assignment, I suddenly felt this emotional door open, this connection, this feeling that, yes, this is my family, this is my nation village, and like every great dysfunctional family, I don’t love everything about America, but in some ways, like families, we come together in moments of great tragedy and great triumph. I felt suddenly that I could write. I gave myself that emotional permission, that authority that I could pull this off because I cared, because I honestly found something to care about.

At first when I wrote the inaugural poem, I thought it was sort of a distant poem that had nothing to do with me in some ways, but as I look back to the poem—and I’ve been living with it for years now—it’s one of the most deeply personal poems that I have ever written, in the sense that it circles around the same obsession that all my other poems circle around: what is home? How do we know what that feels like? Everything that that word calls into place, including culture, identity, national loyalties. How do we know home? How do we find home?

The inaugural poem in some ways is just that. It’s a contemplation of how do we all sit around that table and say we’re family and we’re home? When you’re writing regular poems where you already have built-in conflict with a loved one—your mother-in-law, et cetera—you come to the page already with that tension. Occasional poems have to find that tension. It can be very subtle but it has to be there, and with the inaugural poem it can appear to be very Pollyanna, this idea that we’re all one today.

The poem I delivered is saying we’re not really there yet, we have not all come together. It ends on this idea, waiting for us to name that hope, waiting for us to map that hope. It’s the very subtle tension that I knew had to work in there. An occasional poem should be larger than yourself, should be universal. In some ways, we write everything to sit around that campfire and share it and have an occasion for it.

The other thing writing the inaugural poem taught me was a sense of boundary and scale. You do need that grand stroke every once in a while. For that I did actually turn, in a sense, to nature in the poem, and to Whitman. The poem has these grand Whitman strokes of “one sun rose on a nature” that transcend the power of nature, something that everybody can connect to and can’t deny: moon, sun, earth, wind, your primordial pieces, experiences of nature that we have.

In the inaugural poem, what I had to do was select images that were at once specific and open enough to let other people see themselves in the mirror of the poem, but yet intimately. It’s about echoing an image that’s specific enough but open enough—breathing in between these two spaces. Then I infused my own personal moments in there. This was the hardest part to write. Those little references make it personal, such as when I refer to those

of us who “ring up groceries as my mother did for twenty years so I could write this poem today.” Suddenly it’s not just an occasional poem, it’s not like I’m writing a poem for you. No, I am part of this poem. I am a person in this poem. I have as much at stake emotionally as you who are listening to me and that’s what this moment is all about.

The inauguration does this at a scale like nothing else in America. It puts poetry in the public space, in the public realm. After I delivered the inaugural poem, three of my Gmail accounts crashed from people writing to me from all over the world. There were people hugging me in the street and crying, little kids drawing pictures of the inaugural poem, writing their own inaugural poems, and all sorts of wonderful things that made me realize that when you put a poem like that out there, you’re doing something that’s of great service to the art of poetry. You’re creating the chance for so many people to connect with a poem. In many cases it’s the first time in their lives that they have ever connected with a contemporary voice, and the results are amazing. That’s what keeps me thrilled about doing occasional poems.

Since the inaugural poem, I’ve delivered dozens of other occasional poems, and I now think that the occasional poem helps reclaim the public space that poetry has always had historically in our lives. I think we need that now in some ways more than ever.

—Excerpt from a speech given at the Associated Writing Programs Conference in Minneapolis, 2015

Richard Blanco is an American poet, public speaker, author, and civil engineer. He is the fifth poet to read at a United States presidential inauguration, having read for Barack Obama’s second inauguration. He has published three collections of poetry, *City of a Hundred Fires*, *Directions to the Beach of the Dead*, and *Looking for the Gulf Motel*, as well as a recent memoir, *The Prince of Los Cocuyos: A Miami Childhood*.