

Transcript from Interview with Richard Blanco

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Interviewers:

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Interviewee:

Richard Blanco

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Hottel: I guess I can start. I just finished *Looking for The Gulf Motel* and it struck me as remarkably cohesive. I was wondering if it was conceived as a collection or did it evolve out of one or two specific poems?

Blanco: It was conceived as a collection, but I use the word conceived very lightly. I think that poets tend to go one of either two ways and not worry about the structure of a book as a collection and just sort of put poems together. But a lot of poets do take great care to place poems and give you a narrative within the book, from poem to poem or from section to section. And certainly I always look at poetry that way. I've made mistakes in the past where I've tried to premeditate that too much and white knuckle it and think I'm going to write this book about x things and then I've had to learn to trust that everything is coming out of the same person, that as I evolve the poems themselves evolve and pick up the conversation or advance the conversation in different ways. So almost when I come to a book I'll write just unconsciously thinking about order, taking what I've written and lay it on the table and say "oh, this is interesting," almost like tarot cards, this is happening, and then put it back and keep on writing. I've had to trust that the subconscious will take care of putting that together. It's almost chronological when it comes time to putting the book together, you see that what you were thinking about has evolved from poem to poem without you being so conscious of it. But yeah I take great pains to think about that when I'm putting a collection together, because number one I was taught that way, mentored that way, but I think it adds another dimension to the reading of poetry. And sometimes we'll read poems like fortune cookies and we just kind of open the book. And I think if you read from poem to poem and really look at what

each section is trying to do in the aggregate you get more out of the collection and it's a book of poetry more than just a collection of poems, certainly.

Schiler: I was curious, you talk a lot about imaginaries and how in some ways you have these colliding imaginaries of what Cuba is like and what that means – or what it means to be American when you're a kid, and just that term, imaginary. And I've read that some people think an artist's job is to create new imaginaries for people to think about things differently. Do you view your work as creating a new imaginary of what it means to be American, or, you know, in different ways, is that something that you think about?

Blanco: Sure. Most of the work revolves around the obsession about home, place, identity and national identity and cultural identity and the rest, and those topics I think are part of art because there's no final answer, but also because things continue to evolve. So what's happened actually is of late that, after the experience of being honored as inaugural poet, the experience of having to go emotionally through another hurdle of thinking about my place in America and thinking about it beyond the imaginary. And here I am asked to write about a poem for America and deliver the poem, really created a whole new set of questions about what does it mean to be an American? No longer thinking about that imaginary Brady Bunch world but opening the door to thinking about "how can my work think about and explore more about what is the American identity?" And I'm eager to do that, it's just part of the continuing evolution of the art and the questioning and so I'm interested in thinking about the same question Whitman asked, you know, we're still asking, "what does America mean?" Not just in the immediate realm of my biographical

sphere but rather thinking about America in larger or more inclusive questions about...you know. I see it in America, all of a sudden there's more of a resurgence about thinking about where we're from, the idea of cultural roots and ethnic roots, this obsession with ancestry.com, even TV shows that take celebrities and have them trace...So I love that that's happening in America because we're sort of in a way coming out of the immigrant and ethnic closet in some ways. And I'm eager to explore that in the work sort of collectively, what is happening in America now, how that narrative is evolving and catching up with that narrative. You know America is still, well everything is still a work in progress still, and I'm eager to think about how I can talk about home and place and all those other things that obsess me but with a new dimension which is a little more inclusive and broader.

Schiler: I wonder if your work as a civil engineer informs how you think about place in a more inclusive way, right? It's not just a place that one person uses, it has to accommodate more people.

Blanco: Yeah, and I think that's relevant as an engineer also in the sense of growing up in a very tight knit, close knit, Cuban exile community where its not just about your household, but your survival depended back then, as immigrants, on the collective whole and helping each other out. In fact the inaugural poem actually, I think in some ways, takes some of the inspiration of that idea that we're all community and connected and each is part of a necessary whole. So yeah, in thinking about not just that, but how community affects us and how community is part of that elusive thing we call home. And

as an engineer I look at that also in a brick and mortar way, how physical landscapes and emotional landscapes sort of overlay each other and the idea of home is affected not just by the psychological landscape but this idea of things that are familiar physically. And what happens when that changes? Especially in America, which is something we deal with a lot, this constant, these landscapes and markers in our life are constantly evolving, you know, if its twenty years old, tear its down, it's old! So I'd love to explore the psychic dimensions of the physical and how they interact with our sense of home. And that really just comes from the engineers. You know I don't look at a city the same way that an ordinary poet does, I look at manholes and drainage structures and sidewalks and the actual public works and how the manifestation of an idea of home is a collective and the way it's a collective representation through city councils, through members of the community, of what that means to them. And sometimes we have to go in as engineers to re-envision that sense of home because communities change. It's a challenge of how to respect the history, how to bring forward the history, while still respecting the vision of those that claim this as home now. And it's a perpetual question because those claims keep on changing and people keep on moving around. It's a question that we've all been dealing with since the dawn of civilization, since we first claimed the cave and were like, "yeah that cave looks better. What are we going to do with this place?" Or, "that field looks greener," you know, we're all constantly searching for what makes home, what make community, what makes place.

Winn: I am going back to what Karen first began in terms of home. And in your memoir you make reference to "Cuba-roni", and you say "a mix of flavors that don't make sense

to me.” But when I read your poetry and I read later sections of your memoir you seem to be striving to how you can make sense of being Cuban and being American. I think it’s one of your most powerful themes. But as I was reading, it seems to me, would you be exiled in the country your family is exiled from?

Blanco: It’s a question that’s sort of coming online for me now. Again, this idea of how there’s no fixed definition of home and it’s a constantly evolving question. After experiencing such a great connection to America and feeling a real sense of place at the American table this news of potentially opening up formal relationships with Cuba just sort of totally changes the whole...I mean it just like totally caught me by surprise. And so all new questions about that exact topic, aside from the political and the economic and all the other things that have to be dealt with. I think there’s something that’s important that I’m trying to myself address in writing and also address publicly in a blog that I’m starting called “The Emotion Embargo.” We need to have conversations about just exactly that, not just for me, I mean part of it is selfishly me because I need to have a conversation, but our Cuban Americans and Cubans throughout the country and across the globe and in the island have to have a conversation that I think the arts and humanities are best to handle, the element of storytelling. And it’s a fear of mine, in a sense, will I be too gringo for Cuba and too Cuban for gringo? Can I love, can a man, can I have enough room in my heart to love two countries? Will I have to choose? Who’s the real Cuban? My mother? My nephews? Me? The Cubans who stayed in Havana? The Cuban communities in Spain or France? So, interesting conversation and I look forward to another evolution of that imagining, as now that there’s a real Cuba, in a sense that

there aren't these invisible walls that keep it in the space of imagination, it's going to be a real place, a real real place, a place that I can interact with more freely that's going to raise some wonderful questions and wonderful writing, hopefully, and wonderful discoveries. But I do worry about that. I think about that. Where will my loyalties fall? My mother, in a poem that I have, has this great phrase, "You're not from where you're born, but where you choose to die." It's a very interesting question because you don't get to choose where you're born but you get to choose where you die. And when you come to think where do you want your bones, or your ashes, it really makes you question, you know. And until the news of Cuba I was like "I'm going to be buried right in Miami, which is kind of in between two worlds. But still, but it makes you think. Or will I hate Cuba? Will the Cuba that I imagined just completely be...? Will I not stand it now that it's no longer in the space of imagination or of potential?"

Winn: You know another dimension; one of my favorite characters is Yetta, the Jewish woman in your memoir in that chapter that sounds like you could be checking in to The Gulf Motel. That chapter really moved me to tears and in that chapter she says, "Change can't be changed, one day when you're old like me and look at the world not like it is, but like it was, you'll know what that means." She and your time with her really engenders deep emotional connection with me, as I said, and I think her words seem to echo the ways of your parents, your grandfather, your homophobic grandmother, other family members who grew up in Cuba. So I'm wondering, do you feel that time always separates us from those that are younger than us?

Blanco: I think so, because you can't help but mature and grow in your perspective, and why Yetta is very significant is that she teaches me about my parents in a way that I'm able to listen because it's not my parents. So there's, when you're younger until you mature and have experiences and you go through the wide range of emotions and are able to experience loss and are able to experience all the stuff your parents are talking about since, especially in the context of exile community and my parents. So Yetta is able to offer me a way of validating my parents' experience, but it had to come from someplace else, it had to come from her. So, I think not necessarily time in terms of a generation gap because in a sense we have been repeating the same sets of emotions since the cave. There's nothing new here, it's love, hate, betrayal, all the rest, the emotions don't change. So I don't think it's in terms of a generational gap but rather that we have to mature in ourselves to have moments of empathy with our parents. And I think that a lot of the memoir is exactly that, the arc of becoming Cuban. I rejected my parents initially because they were just my parents, you know? I didn't get them. They were telling all these stupid stories about Cuba, dancing salsa and whatnot, but yet there was a part of me that was getting it that wasn't getting it. It was imprinting on me but I wasn't... It really was this wonderful process, and Yetta helps me a lot to finally mature enough to accept them and their losses and their triumphs and their hopes and their fears and their dreams and everything that you're picking up along the way. And then I think there's a wonderful union, in some ways, but it's not as a rule, and I think it's an emotional base sort of connection that has to happen, and then empathy. In my case and the particular case of the memoir and the setting of the memoir, it's at its core a coming of age story and in some ways a cultural coming of age story, which is, again, you are finally able to sort of

be apart of the community in a way that you couldn't when you were five years old or six years old. So I think eventually we unite in some way or another. That's certainly something that I wanted to highlight in the memoir, finally finding, finally claiming that story, finally allying with your parents and your grandparents and the elders and learning from them and realizing that they weren't just telling some dumb stories, the equivalent of, "I used to walk nine miles uphill in the snow," that kind of feeling, you know? You're like, "Yeah sure." They probably did. They weren't lying.

Hottel: I was wondering, since you write so extensively about them, do your family members – have they read your poems? Have they impacted them at all?

Blanco: There are several dimensions to that...

Hottel: Or do you even feel constricted perhaps?

Blanco: No, one is a linguistic barrier so the elders, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and great aunts and great uncles, they don't read in English so I have an out. They can read it but they certainly won't understand the subtleties and the nuances of poetry. And I guess my mother, she's never told me she's read them or not read them, even though she claims she should get royalties since she's such an inspiration to me. But I never understood that problem in graduate school, when people were like "how can –

I'm scared to write about this or that." I was like "Why are you scared about that? My parents aren't ever going to read this." That's one angle. The other thing is that I'm not exposing anything terrible. I'm not writing some sort of really traumatic or scandalous element of the family. I think all my poems are in many ways written from a great sense of honor and wanting their stories, wanting to be a catalyst to carry their stories forward when I was finally able to appreciate them. And that sort of did happen when I started and because I started writing and really looking at my life. So, in that sense I don't have that reservation so I feel very free with the exception of a couple things. The poems about my grandmother were...I didn't do it consciously but basically I never wrote about my grandmother till after she died and that was probably subconscious. The memoir on the other hand was a little scary because there was a lot more periphery family members involved and in many drafts I was saying some really, not scandalous things, but like inside family jokes and not so flattering things about their characters. And more so I was writing, realizing that that book, unlike poetry, has very big potential of being translated into Spanish. So I was like "Oh my God my mother's going to read this in Spanish." And there I had a really interesting, or a little bit of an interesting, dilemma.

One interesting thing was in terms of genres my mother, in my poetry, is sort of revered as a sort of a Virgin Mary kind of martyr because I'm seeing into her very soul. Poetry skips the narrative, just goes right for the soul, right? And my mother, inside, was a woman who was dying. I mean she was half a mother but she left her entire family in Cuba. You could sense that sense of loss, that despair, that longing, her having to live with her decision, the incredible courage that she lived with every single day that she

woke up. Every single day. And that's what poetry covered. In the memoir, which has to begin with sort of the surface characterization, my mother was a control freak. She was a warden of the family. She ran the whole house. She was the go to for everything. And so she comes across in the memoir as exactly that, almost as a character you can't sympathize with. At the beginning I had to work on it because in essence that was a psychological response to all her instability and loss, to control everything that she can because she couldn't bear to lose one more thing in her life. Not even a pack of Kleenex, you know? It was holding on, keeping it together, because any crack would make her crack. And so I learned that from the memoir. I was like, "Why is my mother coming across as this incredible grouch?" You know?

And then my grandmother, who deep down inside was a much meaner and sort of hurtful person to me, verbally abusive – in the memoir she comes across as this gregarious, fun character, you know? Because on the surface my grandmother was my buddy. My grandmother was the life of the party. She always had a piece of gossip. She was a bookie. She always had a great story to tell. She would always conveniently forget her purse when it was time to pay. She was just, everybody loved her. And then I'd go scratching my head like, "But you haven't seen her behind closed doors, the hurtful things she says." So in the memoir I had to think about, "How do I include more empathy for my mother and more disgust for my grandmother?" How to balance it all. So I mean I learned about them. So to answer your question that was a little more complicated, because I didn't want my grandmother also to look like too much of a complete jerk and I

didn't want also to miss out on my mother's truest part of her being, which is essentially a very feeling, sentient woman.

Schiler: Following up on that risk question, one of the things I really like about your poetry is I feel like you're bravely earnest, in a way that oftentimes people who think of themselves as earnest, like there's more, I don't know, other stuff going on. I just felt there was a lot of openness, especially when it comes to the tenderness you show to your family members, the way the poem you read earlier today, the love story between you and your father and all that, you know?

Blanco: Right.

Schiler: And I think that that's, it does require a certain amount of bravery. Have you ever felt burned by being that openly earnest? And it's never sentimental, but it is very much like, "Here's the love." And have you ever sort of regretted that or written a poem and then somebody critically evaluates it and you're just like, "Ah, I wish I hadn't shared that?"

Blanco: So you're saying, like, in terms of burned by just writing a bad poem?

Schiler: Yeah, certainly, or just feeling like "I wish I hadn't shared..."

Blanco: One of my mentors, not quite a mentor but something, and I forget his name now – you know how you pick up different things, right? So now we’re talking about craft and process and all that? Said once, “That your strengths are your weaknesses and your weaknesses are your strengths.” And so I’m constantly aware of that. So at one point the sentiment becomes overly sentimental. But strength. So it’s just like taking it right to the edge. The same person said once, “It never ceases to amaze me, how little it takes to make a poem absolutely great or horrible.” That one little line that you cross. And so a lot of the challenge to me aesthetically and as a writer is, “How do you work with that strength and push it as far as you can without falling off a cliff?” And so certainly it’s happened. I have to recoil a little bit. And that’s why I like Elizabeth Bishop because Elizabeth Bishop’s excruciating sentimentality is all in between the line. You know, she’s sort of talking about the fish or the moose but she’s dying inside. And she has the magic to be able to convey that so, sort of, elusively or implicitly to the poem without ever saying anything. Without saying “I’m dying, I’m dying inside.” So I look at her as a model to help me push back, come back to center a little bit. So certainly it’s something I watch out for.

The same idea with, I tend to be, and I think this comes from sort of a physics understanding of language and it’s imprinting on me through Spanish. So Spanish, it tends to take longer to say things in Spanish and it becomes a lot more flowery, allows a lot more sentimentality, in a poem especially, but it’s also much more innate. And that’s another thing I always have to navigate in the poems. I love imagery; I love the lushness of imagery. I can go on describing a plastic covered sofa that you hopefully will fall over

and I can go on and on and on and I have to stop at some point. So it's also about editing back and just trying to pick the precise best, most telling, set of images and move on. Because I can linger and over describe and over... I fall in love with imagery and metaphor and all that, and it's like this pyrotechnics that get lost, you know? And it's something that I constantly watch out. And when it works, it works. And when it doesn't work it takes me awhile to throw it in the trash but you got to throw it in the trash. But definitely the inspiration comes right in, right?

In comparing poetry to memoir now, now that I, as a memoirist, have been through this process. I come to a poem when I just, when I'm presented with a mass of emotion that I have no idea what it means. Or like a memory of seeing an image that just oftentimes just...bawling. Not bawling, but just like really moved in a mystical way that I'm not sure, but I know that there's something deep in there. When I come to write prose, it's usually because it's a curiosity about, "Oh that's a great story. That would be a nice story to tell. I wonder what happens." But it's not that "ughhh," you know? So, all the inspiration sort of comes through that deep feeling and that's usually, I dare to say, where most great poems come from. There's a thing I try to tell my students, that whenever you think, "Wow that would make a good poem," or when someone tells you, "You should write a poem about that," don't. When the idea comes before the poem, nine times out of ten it falls short unless you take that idea into the realm of emotion. Because at the end of the day, poetry, to me, is about feeling. There's a sense to me that it's about really getting in touch with that core emotion. And, of course, touching the craft, imagery and all the rest, that's just blithering out sentiment. There's a restraint, a discipline. And what

I find fascinating about that, and there's this great irony in art too, sort of...beginning writers think poetry's all about expressing, you know? Putting it on paper and exposing, you know? This idea of exposure that we're talking about, right? That "I can't say that about my boyfriend or my girlfriend or my mother or my grandmother," so it's all about gossip and exposure and being *honest*. Poetry's not about being honest, it's about art. It's about the honesty of the art. And there's this great thing, that, why I'm addicted to poetry in this ironic or really, art in general, allows you to sort of take a step back from your own sea of emotion, from your own luggage. And in that process of paying attention to the discipline of the art, adhering and putting the art before your own personal expression, is in a weird way a great way to discover something amazing that you wouldn't have discovered if you were blathering on the page. So it's that distance sometimes. And it's this great irony because you are impassioned. You come with this great emotion. I compare it to, it might not be an appropriate metaphor but I love using it, as an analogy: you can go to a party and take a couple shots of tequila, or four or five, and, like, go on the dance floor and whoo! And you're dancing and you're, like, having a great time and, like, everybody calls, "Oh, you're a great dancer! Richard, oh my God, you know, of course, you're Cuban..." But there's a difference between that and signing up for ballet classes. Or to jazz, or to tap. Now you have entered a discipline. Now you have entered an art. Now you have entered another realm that, in the irony of it, is going to produce more beauty than you just going down to the dance floor after a couple shots of tequila.

And we have this mystique with writing, especially when we're early students, that it's just kind of this thing that comes. And we don't realize it's a discipline, it's a practice as well. The core comes from that raw feeling but it's what you do with that raw feeling that makes art and transcends. Ultimately the goal for me is always to transcend that very selfish inward...so who cares that I felt like this? Why do I feel like this and why should the world care? Do other human beings feel like this? And crafting through discipline and through art a way that the poem becomes completely sort of individual and singular and at the same time completely selfless and universal. To me, that, there's the rub. And again that's a fine line. When do you know when you're being, like, completely absorbed and when do you know the magic is happening? When you're life and your passions are a template for others to, and inviting others to share in that emotion rather than just telling them how you feel.

Winn: Sort of concretizing what you've been responding to Karen with, some of the poems that are elegiac reflections on your father. The way that you negotiate the craft and the very strong sentiment. And two that really impact me are "The Port Pilot..."

Blanco: I'm glad to hear you say that.

Harbor: ...and "Revisiting Metaphors at South Point." But can you remember anecdotally how you worked through this danger of...

Blanco: Dangerous territory, right?

Winn: ...of being overly sentimental or over crafting?

Blanco: Sure. Yeah, how to balance that. How to be disciplined and balance the craft with the raw emotion.

Winn: Yeah, it's just such an incredible poem.

Blanco: Well the interesting, and again, we said ourselves, it's a discipline and you sort of set yourselves these sort of aesthetic hurdles or loops and it's a way of creating that distance to let your mind think deeper than, "Oh, it's my dad," or whatever. That poem began with the simple idea that I was always fascinated with, the idea that my dad was a port pilot and that he never told me this till I was an adult. So these mysteries in our own families and how little you can know your own father. And so, aesthetically, what I tried to do in that poem, and if you'll notice it's one long sentence. So what I was sort of fooling around with was, "How can I suspend this syntax all the way through the end of the poem?" And that's kind of what kept that balance and that distance, in a way of, the art also gives us vehicles, structures, things that we don't...It's just a way of processing emotion as well through language that, you know, that lets us arrive at places that we wouldn't arrive by just, again, blathering. And so I always try to look for some kind of pattern, some kind of, something else that the art can give me to be able to couch these raw emotions and, again, come out the other end, perhaps, where I didn't expect. And so that poem in particular, I remember that.

With “Revisiting Metaphors at South Point,” again, there’s the premise, how I got away from it was shifting the premise about, it’s really an Ars Poetica, in a way. It’s a quasi Ars Poetica poem. It talks about creating metaphors and how that happens in that moment in the poem and, so that, it was speaking about writing at the same time it was speaking about father and how in a way we create. In my case, I recreate. Not recreate my father but create my father through language because I really didn’t know him. He was a very silent and emotionally handicapped man, as many are of his generation, so I think a spent man because of his exile. And, sort of, I use in language, most of the poems that involve him are sort of also exploring how language creates, imagines, recreates events, creates, brings to birth the inner emotional life of my father that I felt but never really had a firsthand experience with. So art becomes a way to create him, to make him live, to meet the father that I never had. So all those things get mixed up with the father poems a lot.

Hottel: Since we’re speaking about writing I’m wondering, what do you struggle with most in your writing, if there’s even one answer? Is it walking that fine line that we’ve referred to?

Blanco: Definitely that, straddling the fine line is a big deal. I mean to tell you the truth I think it’s, I mean, I think and I’m not sure it’s a struggle but, or, at least I always approach it that way...

Hottel: Struggle slash strength, maybe?

Blanco: Well there's a process struggle versus a craft struggle. The process struggle is sometimes getting to that emotional moment, opening that emotional door. Uncovering that, what, you know – so I have this memory about my dad being a port pilot, what do I do with that? What do I feel about that? And sort of constantly, you know, it's this weird weird feeling. It's like music and it seems I spend a lot of time sort of tuning the guitar. And you're tuning the guitar and you're tuning the guitar and you're listening and finally you hear that chord where the conscious and subconscious and everything, and you hear your own voice and you know that's you. You know that's your voice. And you have to do that every single poem. And often it's just that first line, which may become the last line or a line in the middle, but it's this weird thing like you just, tuning and tuning you finally hear Richard. You hear that chord that's perfectly suited for you. To get to that space, that's a lot of process and a lot of walking away and a lot of pulling your hair out and a lot of reading a book on psychology and a lot of being angry at your mother and a lot of, like, other things. So that's in terms of process.

In terms of craft, I overwrite. It's kind of the same thing I was saying, because I don't edit myself. I don't edit at all on my first draft I'm like, "Pfft." And once it gets going I don't stop and I just, I can write a four-page poem in like an hour, you know? And then to me the challenge that I constantly have to come up with is about chiseling, chiseling. So I'm that kind of writer. I overwrite and then chisel. And my personal opinion is that I don't know what's going to...I don't want to miss an opportunity by censoring myself or editing myself. So it's a lot about then coming and shrinking the poem back, getting it to

its core. And sometimes that's a difficult decision because some great things come up but they may be another poem.

Hottel: I feel like my temptation would be to make four mini poems out of the huge poem. But I'm sure that's not how it works.

Blanco: Right, haha, well every writer's process is...some people just see poetry and, very Emily Dickinson-esque, that's the way they see language. That's the way they see. That's their unit of thought and they're probably not missing anything by not overwriting. And then you have Whitman and so, you know, which some poems I think could have used a good editor. Are you going to scratch that? So yeah, everybody has a different sensibility of that process that turns into a craft. I mean it's all a dance that happens at the same time, right? We were talking about yesterday this triangulation between craft, emotion and analysis. Because there's also a part of your left brain that's trying to figure out what this poem is meaning, you know? You know you're writing in some overarching sense of a theme, you know?

Schiler: So what would be your...if you were speaking to an aspiring poet, and I've already heard, today, questions asked along these lines, but what would be your biggest advice in terms of process, motivation, and craft? Like, you know, what I'd like to see more of and people learn more of with three things....

Blanco: I think they need to, to really understand the whole idea of being a writer in those three dimensions. I mean one is to, you know, you're not going to be a writer by waiting for the muse to come and, like, grace you with a poem. You know it's not magic. There's magic in the poem but it's not just magic. That like anything, playing football or being an engineer or a scientist or something, you have to study your craft. You have to constantly study your craft. You have to keep your skills up. You can't go out to the Super Bowl and play a good game if you haven't practiced in a year. You know, come on. So writers need to understand that. It's an art and that's a good thing because it gives us a discipline through which to sort of process what we're feeling. And that's part of it.

The other thing, conversely is to not forget that there's things that craft can't teach. And that is the core and the emotional core of the poem and the emotional reason for being there. And I can never say this in French but the... the *raison d'être*? We can lose sight of that so quickly because our left brain gets obsessed with the craft, as if the craft can only provide just this formula. And I get that over and over again with questions in my ... like, well, "Should I do this or should I do that?" That's like, "should" is the ugliest word in the English language. Should I do this or should I not? Like, "Who should I be reading?" Whoever the hell you want! Read whoever is making you write great poems. Read whoever is making you cry and when it's not making you cry read someone else who makes you laugh, but anyway. This insistence that craft is the only component of it, and it's a balance, we have to remember that the emotional component is something that you have to teach yourself. And it's a psychological process as much as a creative one. And a creative endeavor is an emotional endeavor and an emotional endeavor becomes a

creative endeavor and those things have a relationship that we can't deny, but to not lean on either one too much because you're forgetting the other. It's a dance between the two. I've gotta tell you, I mean I've judged a lot of contests in the last five or so years and there are poems that come in, manuscripts that come in, you checked up all the boxes on the craft checklist: great lines, great metaphor, wow, wonderful image, I really like this clever use of colors and... Technically the poems sort of hold it's own weight. You can tell the person has studied craft and on the other hand it feels like soulless dribble perfectly executed. I know that's cruel, but I only put that in my head, I don't tell them.

Hottel: It's not in the comment section?

Blacno: Right it's not in the comments. Because it is technically good, but where is the — there's no human being. It's like a machine created it. Because they're saying "I should do this," and "Here's a good thing, I should write a metaphor," or "Here's a good place I should do this, or "This poem is really about"... You don't know what the hell the poem's about! Shut up and write the poem. Let the poem tell you what it's about. And then you'll have that one manuscript that you read the first two lines of the poem and it's like that person just walked in and sat right in front of you. A real human being. And sometimes some of the technical stuff could use a little polishing actually, but the weight of that voice, I mean, it's just overpowering. It's like, and that's what I mean, the balance of it to, to have the craft, but also it's that voice has to come from a really deep... You can't, there's no craft exercises for voice. It has to come from another wellspring. And so young writers need to always remember that. When you're young you tend to think, "Ah craft,

who needs to tell me more of that?” When you get old you’re like, “Craft craft craft craft craft craft, because it’s easier to do craft then go to places where your mind kind of doesn’t want to go, or do a lot of emotional homework that your mind can get very lazy about. So it’s easier to distract yourself with, like, for three hours, on, “Hmm, I wonder if I should break that line there or there,” or like, four hours on the title of the poem. The title of the poem’s not going to come because the poem doesn’t come, and your poem hasn’t come yet and no craft book...But again, I don’t want to say... It’s an iterative process because, you know, stepping away from yourself for a moment to think about craft then triggers new things in your mind so you can step away from the craft, have more of a conversation on that and then come back to the craft, you know, and with a new sort of refreshed insight or refreshed sense of direction for the poem. And certainly we have an over insistence on, I think in teaching creative writing, on revise revise revise. They tell you revise revise, revise to what end? If you’re not revising out of some sense of inspiration or motivation or discovery, if you’re like, just, or playfulness, if you’re just like, “I gotta revise this piece because it sucks,” well yeah, but, what are you gonna do? Is there any real “a-ha” here? Because, “What if I put the last line first?” Yeahhh, why? I mean try it, but... so that would be my critical, I mean not only just to budding writers but it’s something that I have to learn constantly at all times. I’m preaching to myself as much as anybody else. I have to, like, sometimes remember both things.

Winn: Have you seen the recent Korean film, Lee Chang-Dong’s *Poetry*?

Blanco: No.

Winn: I think you might respond to it, but Theresa and I have seen it. I'm not sure about Matt or Karen. But a woman, middle-aged woman, enrolls in a community poetry class and the teacher, who is a poet, tells her that she just needs to write intensely about her emotional experience and that ultimately the craft will come. She'll find her way.

Blanco: In a way I think, that's interesting; did you say it's Korean?

Winn: South Korean.

Blanco: I tend to lean in that direction only in this way that, using the metaphor of a football player, really the rules you can learn any way, you can learn the craft, or at least how craft should be, pretty much in a year. But the other part is a harder part and that part starts informing the craft because, again, it's an iterative process, but I tend to think that the harder thing is that part of writing intensely. Of course the follow up to that is very important, that the craft will come. It's often students or younger writers will get stuck on writing intensely, and that's it: "It's important because I'm intense." Or because it's true, or because...who cares if it's true? But the writer eventually discovers that a more powerful poem, or a more powerful sentiment, or a more powerful discovery, is through craft, taking that...It's that vehicle. I think that I'm a firm believer, and I think most writers actually would be on the same page with me on that.

Blanco: *After pause.* Where were you on the night of September 25th? *Laughter.* Is this your poem? *Etc.*

Winn: This is a bit different direction but I'm really curious why the memoir? With that number of poets who write memoirs, Mark Doty, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Natasha Trethewey... But why did you go the memoir road? And I find when reading it I feel like I find contextual space for many of the poems, in that having read your memoir and looking back at some of the poems, they talk to each other. I've been there before. You know, psychologically and emotionally I've been there before. They really interact.

Blanco: I mean that's exactly it. After the third book of poetry came out I had, it started just as creative curiosity, an aesthetic curiosity just: "Okay, so I've done three books of poetry, I wonder what else you can do with this stuff? What else can you do with language? And just challenging myself. And I thought a more natural connection was essays or nonfiction, and they were okay but my agent and editor at the time said, "This is a nice essay but you see this line here, these two sentences? That's a whole story and I'd rather hear about that than all the rest of the stuff surrounding this." Because the essay began with the idea and I used images and pieces of anecdotes as just to support the idea and I realized it's a little too left brainy in a way for a poet, even for an engineer poet. So I thought, "Okay I kind of, like, had some great moments in those essays," so I just started fooling around with writing memoir. And as I got a little bit into it I realized that I was having great fun because there are things — every genre has its strengths and its weaknesses, its limitations and its pros and cons etc. etc. And I realized that poetry, again

like I was talking about earlier, is great at sort of zeroing in on sort of the soul or the core or the inexplicable, the mysterious, and putting language and putting imagery to that. But there was still a lot of backstory, there was still a lot of characters that were missing, characterizations that were missing, dimensions of characters that the poetry just wasn't going to hold.

Not only that, I had sort of written already enough that I wasn't going to go back and re-characterize some of my family and the people that inspire me, you know. It's hard to write a poem about EZ cheese. You know I do write humorous poems but poems always have to have that little thing at the end that goes, "A-ha, I got you," turning from laughing to crying, you know the idea of having a real moment of gravitas, which prose does too, but in a lighter way. And so I was having a lot of fun because I was filling in a lot of blanks, especially about my grandmother and all these stories, but it's really this memoir is the first half of my first book of poetry, unpacked. That's how compressed poetry is. So I think why maybe poets do this is because they think, and I think maybe I'm figuring out, that poetry is the emotional outlet or makes me do the emotional work of figuring out these things at its most core essential level. And to me the prose is an unpacking of that, sort of building a narrative about that that delights the reader in a different way that's more obviously narrative, more about characterization, that's more about entertainment. Let's face it, I mean prose is a littler broader in the things that it does.

So I'm thinking that's the way I'm going to work moving forward. I can't write another memoir right now, I mean they want me to and I might but I really almost need to write a

book of poetry to understand what the memoir will be. I think maybe that's why poets are attracted to that. It's not that it's easy, but once you do the emotional core, especially in a memoir, you know you've got the goods. The rest is sort of delving into memory, unpacking stories, unpacking more memories and nuances, but you have that little core and you know what the central core emotion and human denominator is there and that helps to guide your writing a lot in the memoir. I meant that memoir, it took me less [time] to write than a book of poetry and it's three hundred pages, so go figure. This (picks up book of poetry) takes five years, for Pete's sake. And the other one only took really two years, and then a lot of editing, ugh! I didn't like that part of it. That was a surprise. Because you know poets don't really edit, you know. We don't really edit in a real sense of the word. We revise, we re-envision, we throw the entire poem out, we burn it, we stomp on it, we start a new one, we take out the old one and oh that wasn't so bad, but we don't go through a meticulous sort of editing. But when you have three hundred pages, part of the editing process was just very practical things, things to support, and to make sure your narrator remained reliable, you know: "page 52 the car was red but in page 112 you said the car was maroon, which is it?" I don't care, I'm a poet! I really don't care. It turned maroon in my eyes, you know. You can't do that in a memoir! Or, like, verb tense, oh for Pete's sake, really? And it was a hard thing to do because you drift into the poetic tense and you're like, yeah and then we would do that and then my father used to... And now, okay you went completely into another tense and that realization that you're starting to write a little poem. So anyway that was a big lesson. The book was months editing and just picking out little things and nuances and connections, crossing dots, crossing t's, dotting i's. Poetry sort of is a whole other process that is harder to get

to point B but once you get to point B it's done in a way. I mean when I hand in a manuscript it's, "Yeah you could add some more poems and there's a typo on page 5 and take out this line in this poem," and that's it. Because if you don't get it to that stage it ain't going to be a poem, you know what I mean? There's no like, oh let me hand in, like selling a book of poetry and a sample chapter and a sample poem and a lot of hot air, which is, you know, I don't care but now I'm getting into trouble with the whole trained publishing industry. But some books are sold on a song and dance, you know? And then you have to write it and edit the hell out of it.

Schiler: (to Winn) Did you have any more questions about the memoir specifically? I was going to go back to poetry but I wanted to be sure.

Winn: Go back to poetry.

Schiler: You care a lot about poetry in education in a really broad, great sense. What is it about poetry that makes it so particularly suited to be kind of a populist art? Which, of course, runs contrary to what so many of my incoming students think, you know, it's just the snooty art.

Blanco: There are sort of several dimensions to that. One, it's what I know. And it's also what I discovered on my own as an adult and came to in a way that is a very powerful discovery to me. And so I think about the incredible revelations, realizations, maturity that ensued in me just in general, sort of how it shifted my thinking and my whole life

and my perspective the day I discovered poetry. And I keep on thinking, if that were to happen sooner much sooner, wow. You know, what great human beings we would be pushing out of schools. Or better human beings at least, more aware people, more kids that are sort of... there's a lot of stuff out there that children and high school kids need to deal with and the arts are what handle that in my case, again because poetry is what I know. And so I think that's part of my impetus. I was also one of those kids that was denied arts, and especially poetry, for socioeconomic reasons and I would like to give that opportunity to kids early on in life. And just fighting, I mean poetry is my line, the line I'm defending. But it's really all arts and humanities.

I just can't stand this conversation, this lack of conversation that's happening in America right now. As if one or the other of these two things aren't important. Algebra's important. So is poetry. What's the argument there? One teaches us reason; the other one teaches what it means to be a human being. What is the argument, folks? And I don't like when the arts and humanities people sort of disregard the scientists because, let's face it, you don't go to a poet when you have a brain tumor. I mean you might read poetry in the hospital, which will help you psychologically, emotionally and all the rest, but everything in the world is necessary. And so anyway, but we know that there's an overabundance, and sort of a lot of cheerleaders, for the whole science stuff, and as a poet engineer I get both sides of the equation. I'm not arguing do away with... Who needs math? Who needs algebra? Who needs biology? We all do need those things too whether you're going to be a biologist or not, and you need poetry whether you're going to be a poet or not. You

don't have to be a poet to like poetry or to appreciate poetry or know a little bit about poetry. But anyway.

So that's a little bit of where I come from, but the real motivation has come from the inauguration, that realizing that I too had given in to this idea that poetry is not for everyone, it's a very elite thing, yada yada yada. And throughout the experience of connecting with so many thousands and thousands of people through poetry, people who I realize was the first opportunity or the first moment they ever had to engage with a contemporary poem that they felt relevant in their lives, and that the results were amazing, and that there was actually a hunger for this kind of stuff, an unsatisfied hunger for this kind of poetry and thinking about...and again that poetry makes the writer think about things in ways he or she never thought about and makes the reader think about things that he or she never thought.

And so that just proves my first hand witness, "hey, wait a minute, we don't have this built in anti-poetry gene." And given the background of other cultures that I come from, nobody's scared of poetry in Cuba. They might not be avid poetry readers but they know their national poets. They can belt out their few quotes of poetry, they probably tried their hand at poems here and there. I just went to the international poetry festival in Granada, Nicaragua. One hundred twenty poets from across the country, every night readings of two or three thousand people: villagers, people from every walk of life, every socioeconomic status, applauding, cheering asking for autographs from poets. Poetry had never left that folkloric sense and need that it fulfills and in America it has. I don't know

exactly why or how but the last thing that I can remember, which wasn't even in my lifetime, was the connection that the beat poets had. There were still sort of, even in Frost's age, even in the age of Elizabeth Bishop, there was still this idea that poetry mattered. Somewhere along the lines that got screwed up, and I think perhaps it's this direction that we've been going of disregarding the arts more and more. So I think it's natural that I become an advocate and a champion and a cheerleader of that, and I try to do what I can. I also think poetry, in a weird way, and I've thought about this but I don't know if it's really true but, I find it funny that we'll commit, in America, to reading a four hundred page novel, but we won't read a poem on a subway train that takes ten minutes that could change your life forever. And I thought in this hurried world, this multitasking world, poetry would seem like this great thing. And I think that it's getting there. I think the arts in general, its part, what I'm focusing on is education but also educating. It's more about supporting the educators.

Because what happens is, yeah, you have poets in the schools program and that's great and then the funding dries out and then the program moves somewhere else or the poets drop out and so what happens to the next class and the next class and the next class? Sort of the equivalent of giving someone a fish. But if we have the teacher have an experience with poetry, let them, because often they have their own sort of apprehensions about poetry. They were taught the same way after all; it was their teachers. If we can think about engaging them in ways that they can have an experience with poetry, a broadening of perspective poetry, get hooked on poetry, have an experience with poetry, then you're teaching them how to fish because that teacher, over the course of his or her career, think

about how many thousands of students. And it's not that every student — I think we got wires crossed too. To like poetry we want to make writers out of the students. That's silly. We don't have to make writers. That's not the way you teach poetry. There are two separates goals, you know? It kind of reminds me of, if you sign up for algebra class we're going to make you an engineer, like no, you have to know algebra that's it. It's good for you. If you want to go on and study engineering great, then you'll sign up for Calculus Five, God bless you. But you know, the idea is that at least have them walk away with a little bit of critical sense, spectrum, of what poetry is.

Yes, ask ten people in America, probably ten of them, "Does a poem have to rhyme?" Ten of them will probably say yes. Somebody dropped the ball. And the somebody is poets themselves. Including me. We just give up. We don't, I don't think we ever got to the core of the problem. We're too busy writing, which is a good thing. But some of us care more than others about that. But you know, somebody dropped the ball. It's the equivalent of getting out of high school and asking, "Do we still have to paint like Michelangelo?" and saying yes. Most kids will walk out of high school with a little bit of critical perspective at least like, "Yeah Picasso, ugh, I could've done that." But at least it's a critical perspective, that Picasso and Michelangelo are different. But most people walk away with this monolithic idea of what poetry is, with a big P. It's all the same, undecipherable, things only dead people write, only dead white people write. And you know that's absolutely not true. Especially in today's day and age. So if we can at least get them some critical perspective and not being afraid of poetry. At least that is an incredible goal, to be able to say, when their boyfriend or girlfriend says, "Hey, let's go

to this poetry event,” they don’t suddenly come down with the flu, you know. The idea that you can hate poetry and you can hate certain poetry and you can have a preference of this or the other, you can go to a poetry reading and not have such a good time because you didn’t like the work, just like you didn’t like a movie or you didn’t like the musical. I mean a critical perspective and a willingness to not be afraid of it, that alone, I mean forget about having them become avid readers of poetry or like poets or experts on the craft or anything, just a general education, a seed, that if they do want to learn more or become writers they already have a real good foundation of what poetry is. And bring them up to speed, for Christ’s sake. You know there’s a lot of challenges to that, you know there are ways, but.

One of the things I’m trying to work with is, I think I mentioned yesterday, was the Academy of American Poets who actually have a very strong education, teacher based education mission. And so again, I think this is the core issue at the end of the day. The other thing that happens, which I kind of cringe a little bit at, in that sort of lack or fear or apprehension sometimes the poetry unit becomes, “Well lets throw in a Bob Dylan song or a hip hop song and analyze the lyrics.” There’s the poetry unit. Let’s discard the last 800 years of poetry for Bob Dylan, and not giving them the critical perspective of how actually poetry began. That Bob Dylan would have been a poet eight hundred years ago because that’s where poetry came from. Then they’ll have a critical perspective as to, yes there’s this and this and this and this and all of that sort of falls in the symphony of poetry. But then they just leave it at that and the kids walks away with this overly inflated, slightly misinformed idea of what poetry is. And anyway that can be dangerous

too. Or the other way around, “Let’s read Beowulf in sophomore English.” That’s always productive. Like don’t we do Beowulf in sophomore college, when you actually have the intellect, the curiosity, and the maturity to be able to really appreciate it? Or teach it hand and hand. Teach Beowulf and a Vietnamese war poem. Wow. Okay, we learn mostly, we learn very effectively, through comparison, right? It’s fundamental to how we learn, so doing that, teaching in terms of, so, like Billy Collins’s thing we teach it backwards. Get them hooked through contemporary, relevant, age-appropriate work, and regional, people that are writing, writing wonderful awarded, notable poets that usually live within a stone’s throw of any – there’s so many poets in America, it’s like one every fifty miles, tons of (*unsure, 17:35*), you know, prize winning, award-winning, really legit work, that’s writing about the store that they go to every day or the neighborhood that they live in from the, you know, the sports team, so, you know, make it relevant. And then take them, use that as the door to then get them to the canonical texts, you know? I think. I shouldn’t have said that. I wouldn’t have said that at the lunch. Burn the witch! No, you know I think those teachers in there totally got it, actually. If not they wouldn’t be involved in their creative writing support of the students. Some of this will be edited right? This is a lot of references I’m making here. People ten years from now won’t understand what the hell is going on!

Hottel: It’s interesting because I’m involved in the undergraduate literary journal here, and it’s just a panel of volunteer editors deciding what gets published, and not a lot of people want to touch the poetry. I’ll send people, students, the poems and I’ll get an immediate email back that usually says, “I don’t know poetry,” or, “I don’t get poetry,”

but it's just interesting because, like, are you a short story expert, are you a screenplay expert? And they have no qualms about having an opinion on that. But for some reason having an opinion on poetry is something you have to earn.

Blanco: Yeah and I think because it is promoted as this sort of elite. And I think it's partly because of what texts they choose, I mean I don't know if it's changed that radically but the 101 famous poem anthologies, that's just 101 famous British white guys writing 300 years ago, and they're writing about daffodil. And it's great poetry that I appreciate but when you're seventeen or twenty-something I mean, come on. Because there is such relevant work that then you can use again. Yeah and so we form an opinion rather quickly and early on and this probably comes all the way from high school or even junior high, about what poetry is. What I love to do is corner people sometimes, especially adults when they're in their thirties and forties and fifties and sixties and like, "Oh I don't get poetry. I've never gotten poetry," and ask them, "When was the last poem you read?" High school. It's like, don't say you don't get poetry, you just don't read poetry. You've never tried to get poetry. You don't read poetry. So don't say you don't like it, or don't, you should have no opinion about poetry. Just say I never read poetry I have no idea what poetry is about, fine, but don't say I don't like poetry or I don't get poetry. Like, yeah, you could. And so to have this opinion based on absolutely no relevant ground, whereas, and I think there's... I've been mystified by it as well but a lot of what I came to love poetry was very private, out of curiosity. And I don't want to finger point at teachers or anything, they're busy, they're crazy, especially now, but I think the key is to help them feel confident about poetry and pass that passion or that

little seed of enthusiasm on to their students. And I've seen it, when you have, I don't know if you guys have ever seen like a writer who is a teacher, like a poet or a creative writer who teaches high school and this is, I'm really digressing here, but this is another thing, it's a little bit arrogant within our own sort of poetry world, this idea that, well if you teach at a high school, well, you know there's this little conversation of where are you teaching. I just love to say I haven't taught in twenty-five years. They're like, what do you do? And if I'm in the mood I'll say I'm semi-retired. Go ask Wallace Stevens what he did. Did he teach? But this is a little, now I'm getting, as my partner Mark calls: Bitchin' with Blanco. But, where was I? The idea, help me out here, the idea that high school, I've seen when high school teachers who really have not only the curriculum, the English major curriculum, but are writers as well, the results in those classrooms are just, I've seen it with 5th graders, I've seen it with 4th graders, it's just amazing. Those kids will never look at poetry...they will come away from a 4th grade class all the way to high school and they're going to tell their high school teacher probably, "Yeahhhh no, but I don't really like Beowulf that much, I like this better." They're going to have that critical perspective, hopefully. But I've seen what a difference it makes and there's this kind of taboo that as a writer, that you have to work at a university, and that the fancier the better and that the bigger name brand the better. Well if we try to change that thinking and honor poet writers, to encourage them to actually get in schools and high schools where they can actually make a hell of a lot more difference in the field of poetry in a way, that we need to honor that and think of that change a little bit. One of the things I wish I could sort of implement, or one of the things in the back of my mind is, what if we did a... because lets face it, there's hardly any teaching jobs for MFA poets anyway, anymore, its

sort of a pipe dream nowadays. But what if we created a dual program where you could get your MFA and also, I don't know all the details of how this might work, but get certified with your masters in teaching at a high school level. Now you have the art and the English major but you also have a practical way of earning a living as a writer that's not depending on jobs that are basically nonexistent, and you're also making an incredible difference to the art, so just put it out there, America.

Winn: Sounds to me like that'll be your poet laureate project.

Blanco: Well, you know, I'm waiting. You know this is interesting though because this is interesting as part of the disconnect of poetry in America is, a little piece of it which surprised me. I came to the office of the Library of Congress and met with the Dr. Billington and all the rest and with all these ideas and all this energy like a spazzed out Ricky Ricardo like, and I come to find out, they were completely gracious and on board of course, but they explained to me that the Library of Congress is run through the legislative branch of government, and the Department of Education is run through the executive branch of government and you know how governments are, if you're here, you're not there. So two different budgets, two different call numbers, two different everything's. So part of why you see that some of the, even though they're great, some of the poet laureates' projects don't really, can't really dig their roots too much into education in terms of the construct of, because in my head I was like, Library of Congress, surely we can get into every school in America and like change the entire curriculum and go like, "pfft, we're doing poetry," they can't do that. The Library of

Congress doesn't have that kind of power. So you have to go, so I thought about going through the department of education, and I thought, I just looked at that building and I was like, this is a lifetime. And I think the only way to work is from bottom up, sort of grassroots. Because that's a lifetime, and political climates change and where you put in today, but if you give a teacher, again, a genuine experience. So but I think that I would do something around, I would maybe try to team up with the Department of Education or the National Endowment for the Arts or really, more so, the National Endowment for the Humanities is actually, would be a key player in this. I'm hoping to do that with the Academy in some ways. Working with them and using some of the access that I have, since the inauguration, to keep on promoting and also growing and expanding and funding and all the rest, but definitely that, I don't know, it's just really something that really just has hit me like a ton of bricks. I really really just believe in that so, yeah I would love to do that. And Natasha tried to do some of it more on a popular front, the new poet laureate doesn't really seem to be very enthusiastic about doing anything so he probably won't do a project. Billy Collins did a great sort of, a little bit of a shift in that, of course Robert Pinsky. But you see how all of their, their programs are sort of not education-based but sort of about poetry appreciation and putting poetry out in sort of a public space, but not really curriculum, messing with the curriculum, not really getting into the mud of education.

Winn: [*unintelligible*] still has that poem a week.

Blanco: Oh yeah, and those do go a great...

Winn: . . . his resilience in a way sustained that.

Blanco: And the Poetry Out Loud, which actually I'm doing in April. But you see, sort of, how they have this social component and not sort of, and those things are great to support now, education, which hinges, or to support teachers in a way. The American Academy though has a really hardcore education plan. I mean they have, lesson plans that are developed hand in hand with teachers, as the teachers know about the core curriculum requirements and all this other stuff, and so they have the goals that they want to see on your lesson plans of what this fulfills, so their lesson plan is not written by some poet out in left field who has never understood the challenges of being actually in a classroom, but hand in hand with teachers. So that we give them: here's all this that a poem is and can do and is about and they, of course, love poetry or have come to love poetry and they translate that so it's very powerful. A huge part of their traffic and the people they serve are teachers, I think some crazy number in April, like almost in the millions, people that come, teachers like, oh it's poetry month, where do I go?

(Pause)

Anything you say can and will be used against you.

Winn (to Schiler and Hottel): Do you all have other questions, topics?

Schiler: I think I'm pretty good.

Winn: (to Blanco) Do you have questions for us?

Blanco: Let me see if there's anything I haven't...in my musings.

Winn: Questions you would have anticipated we would have asked you or that we SHOULD have asked you?

Blanco: Oh no, these are great questions, I'm just trying to see if there's anything, sort of, in my realm of obsessions that you guys didn't hit. I think we covered everything: education, the memoir, the ideas of the different genres, the whole idea of process versus craft. No, I think we've done quite a job here.

Hottel: So it sounds like we do get cookies.

Blanco: Yes, we get cookies.

Schiler: We've earned them.

Winn: Are you serving, Karen?

Schiler: Yeah sure, I'll serve the cookies. I got them from Ingrid's.

Winn: It's a local German original bakery.

Schiler: I did want to know what you think of Oklahoma. I don't know how much time you've spent or if this is your first time in Oklahoma City.

Blacno: First time.

Schiler: Or how much you've seen of it.

Blanco: I love the thunderstorms, it reminds me of Florida. I haven't heard thunder in months. I love thunder and rain. It's so romantic.

Winn: Well if you were awake early this morning you got some.

Blanco: Well I was outside having a couple smokes and I had to hide and the wind was blowing, wasn't that much rain but a lot of wind, blowing. But I haven't seem much but it never ceases to amaze me how incredibly large and diverse this country is. And how, I don't know how we keep it together honestly. I mean we've only had one civil war, I mean, you would think we would've had several. It's just amazing to think, I always think about, what is home as a nation village? What is it that, fascinating to me, like you come to Oklahoma like this thing that just sort of, like the name of a perfume in your head, some place that exists that you've never been to and there you are and there's people, and they have cookies, and they read poetry. And your like, it's America, it's still American and we have coffee shops and it's – I love embracing that and it's one of the

things that just, I mean one of the dreams is to do like a Jack Kerouac thing and just get in an RV and go to every cheese ball tourist thing, every city, just experience and write stories about just the people I meet, but I'll have to wait. You know that sense of experiencing, it is...because one of the things I sort of tell people is, you know I'm intense about immigration, but that's a whole other...I always tell people that you don't have to be an immigrant to have an immigrant experience in America. Or in most countries actually, in a way, this idea that, you know, obviously the immigrant experience is intense but if you move from San Diego to New York City or from, God bless, from Oklahoma to Miami, Miami's a given, but how we're negotiating, having to negotiate community and in many cases language itself, regionalism, food, we have to, it's what immigrants go through on a much larger scale with the idea that we're constantly engaged with place and identity and the connection between the two and that can happen whether you came from the Mayflower and even that was an experience. So, I just love seeing the expanse of this country and how many different experiences we have and how somehow we're all American. That just fascinates me. That is what the inaugural poem was trying to reach for too in some ways, was like, how do we do this? Somehow, I don't know if it's the work ethic, I don't know if it's the idea, you know, we have this fierce individualism in America that's also this great sort of contradiction that we're incredibly selfless and think of ourselves as a whole at the same time. You know even Jeannie, the idea of philanthropists, talking about that this morning, doesn't exist in Latin America, it just doesn't exist. You know its like, the idea of philanthropy is just not, the idea that who you are comes from your community and you have to give back to that idea, and not just Jeannie, from every, from the person that gives a dollar for the Jimmy fund at the grocery

store, this idea that we're at the same time sort of fiercely individual in that if you don't make it in life it's because you're a loser, because capitalism gives everybody the equal opportunity. It doesn't, but, and yet, we're all neighbors, we all like help each other, it's this other way, its like we're American, goddamnit. It's a fascinating play.