



City of a Hundred Fires



Richard Blanco



Photo Shop

These faces are fifteen under faux diamond tiaras
and grandmother's smuggled *brillantes*;
these faces are pierced with the mango smiles
that dress hopeful *Teresitas* and *Mariás*—
quinceañeras with coffee bean eyes;
these pearl faces are mother's taffeta dream,
a decorated anguish in painful pink manicures.
These young faces can't remember that last day—
the innocence of their small steps into the propeller
plane drifting above palms waving elegant farewells.
These barefoot faces are those red mountains
never climbed, a Caribbean never drunk,
they are a *guajiro* sugar never tasted.
These faces are displaced *Miritas* and *Susanitas*.
These faces are a 50s revolution
they are the Beatles and battles,
they are Celia Cruz—*AZUCAR*—loud and brown;
these faces rock-n-roll and roll their *r*'s,
they are eery *botánicas* and 7-Elevens.
These fiery faces are rifles and bongos,
they are *maracas* shaking, *machetes* hacking;
these faces carry too many names:
their white eyes are toppling dominos
their glossy eyes are rum and iced tea
their African eyes are gods and Castilian saints
haloed with the finest *tabaco* smoke.
These faces rest an entire ocean on Taino eyebrows;
they are Kennedy, Batista and Nixon,

they are a dragon in uniform;
these faces are singing two anthems,
nailed against walls, the walls are chipping.
These overflowing faces are swollen barrels
with rusting hoops and corset seams straining;
these faces are beans: black, red, white and blue,
with steaming rice on chipped china;
these faces are pork fat and lace gowns.
These standing faces are a sentinel—
when the Vietnamese kitchen next door stops
when the alley veils itself and closes like a fresh widow
when the flower shop draws in buckets of red carnations
when gold and diamonds are pulled from late windows
when neon flashes relieve the sun over these fading faces.
These chromatic faces are nothing important,
they are *nada* we need to understand,
they will transform in their photo chemistry,
these faces will collage very Americanly.

Así eres:

la palma libre
de mi reposo,
la lluvia inquieta
de tus ramas
el río que reuno
en mis manos
y llevo a este
labio inútil,
tú, mi sed y mi agua
mi sombra tranquila.

Así eres:

isla larga y espigada
contigo me estiro
mi espalda se rompe
contra tus costas.
eres el exilio
de mi exilio,
eres la montaña roja,
el valle cálido
es mi boca abierta
esperando tu cosecha.

Así eres:

la cuna verde
el pulso
disuelto en la mano,
un corazón de colibrí
y el centinela de estrellas,
atenta fe
entre palmas rezando
un credo a la brisa:
vino de coco, pan de arena
palmita mía.

Palmita Mía

You are this:
the free palm
of my rest,
the impatient rain
from your fronds
a river I collect
in my open hands
and bring to my dry
useless lip,
you, my thirst, my water
my tranquil shade.

You are this:
drawn island lean
I stretch with you,
back breaks
against your coast,
are the exile
of my exile
are the red mountain,
the temperate valley
mouth open
waiting for your harvest

You are this:
the green crib
the pulse
loose in open hand,
a hummingbird heart
and the sentinel of still stars,
attentive faith
among the praying palms,
a creed of breezes:
coconut wine, loaves of sand,
palmita mía.

Hola

A saving quarter from a linted pocket, a week-old number on a napkin I had by now memorized like the taste of water. I dial you. My voice crackling with the static of the pay phone. You answer the Sunday call with “*hola*,” a homonym for wave—*ola*—in our language of silent *h*'s and a silent beach where we meet as if we could resolve something; as if by staring at the vastness of the universe icing the Atlantic anything could become less important by contrast. Tonight Gemini is two fireflies hovering about my fingertip and I could be Polaris, a moon or a grain of sand just the same. I have little defense against all this paradox. I could easily finish drowning tonight in the throat of waves, let their foamy mouths seal me in a sepulcher of coral. Or I could fuse with the fine quartz descending in your green eyes, become a small dune in your palm and drown instead in the *hola* of your greeting, your Spanish voice that is a guitar strumming chestfuls of black heartbeats, pulling waves from the obsidian of night and sea. Tonight, I sleep with the taste of your salt, with a grit in my teeth.

Winner of the 1997 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize

"Blanco is a fine young poet, and this poetry, the bread and wine of our language of exile, is pure delight, written with Lorca's El Duende's eyes and heart. May he continue to produce such a heavenly mix of rhythm and image—these poems are more than gems, they are the truth not only about the Cuban-American experience, but of our collective experience in the United States, a beautiful land of gypsies."

—Virgil Suarez

"Richard Blanco's **City of a Hundred Fires** lights up the American literary scene with a fresh new vigor and voice that takes its place in the front rank of poetry. This wonderful book will also draw readers from beyond the world of poetry, entrancing a wide audience with the music of its language, its beautiful evocation of love and loss and hope."

—Dan Wakefield

"**City of a Hundred Fires** is one of the most exciting first books of the decade—vibrant and diverse, infused with energy and formal dexterity, equally at ease in Spanish and English. As if that weren't enough, it feels like an important cultural document as well—a bicultural document, testimony to the dualities of identity central not only to Cubans but to all "hyphenated Americans"—exile and citizen, emigrant and immigrant, elegist and celebrant. Richard Blanco is a poet of remarkable talents—in any language."

—Campbell McGrath

"In this remarkable first book Richard Blanco speaks in a wise, compassionate voice that finds beauty in loss and takes bright lessons from despair. These are poems that hurt and heal."

—Gustavo Pérez Firmat

"What a *delicia* these poems are, sad, tender, and filled with longing. Like an old photograph, a saint's statue worn away by the devout, a bolero on the radio on a night full of rain. *Me emocionan*. There is no other way to say it. They emotion me."

—Sandra Cisneros

"The poet's nostalgia for Cuba, a life seen through the lens of his parents' exile, here meets head on his own coming of age in a culturally and racially diverse Miami. Full of vivid and specific detail, dotted with Spanish phrases, these poems arrest the reader much as the Ancient Mariner did, transfixing the listener."

—Maxine Kumin

Richard Blanco lives in Miami, a multicultural and multilingual city that continues to form the center of his experiences. His work has appeared in the *Nation*, *Michigan Quarterly*, *TriQuarterly*, *Indiana Review*, and *Americas Review*. Blanco is a graduate of the MFA program in creative writing at Florida International University and also works as a civil engineer. He can be contacted on the World Wide Web at <http://www.richblanco.com>.

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