Thank you for having us. My name is Nicole Tong, and for the past two years, I have been honored to serve as Fairfax County’s inaugural Poet Laureate. I’ll be offering a poem this evening.

POETRY
   For the Residents of Fairfax County

Say there is a lake
    a child moves toward
giddy as soon as his life vest
is fastened
    Later the child
shouts from a canoe

Look how far
    we are, points
to the place where water
laps the land
    There’s paper in the vessel
and a pencil too

and while his mother rows
    the child draws
a series of peaks
asks his family
  What do you see?
His grandmother guesses

Mountains?
  But the child saw the complete picture in his mind

even before the question
  Rings two moons
over the ridgeline

and suddenly the peaks
  are a googly-eyed monster
With pride, the child says,

Where once they were mountains,
  now there are ferocious teeth
Say we embrace this way

of seeing the world
  with an artist’s eye
with the mind of a poet

with a composer’s ear
  the dancer’s next eight count,

We would come to see
  the world NOT for what is
at any one moment
(2020’s pandemic peaks
   neighbors masked
in market lines)

but the always already
   a place in the making
Just like this one

At the start of the semester
   I ask community college students
the languages they speak

& names of the places
   that raised them
Respond imagine the miracle

that brought us all here
   together as WE are in this moment
A space poetry made

Say a word is a world
   is a bright orange life
vest that buoy us

One poem one person one
   breath the next
inevitable as air

So each chance you get, you return
   to the magic of a drifting canoe
Find what geographies
Fairfax County FY23 Budget Hearing
April 13, 2022
Testimony of Nicole Tong, Fairfax Poet Laureate

or monsters hide behind the
mind’s eye
Along the way neighbors

at the shoreline wave
so you take them in
You say stay, stay

We’ll get there
  in time there’s room
enough here for everyone