

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

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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

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(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 buoys 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

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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