**América**

By [Richard Blanco](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/richard-blanco) b. 1968

I.

Although Tía Miriam boasted she discovered

at least half a dozen uses for peanut butter—

topping for guava shells in syrup,

butter substitute for Cuban toast,

hair conditioner and relaxer—

Mamá never knew what to make

of the monthly five-pound jars

handed out by the immigration department

until my friend, Jeff, mentioned jelly.

II.

There was always pork though,

for every birthday and wedding,

whole ones on Christmas and New Year’s Eve,

even on Thanksgiving day—pork,

fried, broiled, or crispy skin roasted—

as well as cauldrons of black beans,

fried plantain chips, and yuca con mojito.

These items required a special visit

to Antonio’s Mercado on the corner of Eighth Street

where men in guayaberas stood in senate

blaming Kennedy for everything—“Ese hijo de puta!”

the bile of Cuban coffee and cigar residue

filling the creases of their wrinkled lips;

clinging to one another’s lies of lost wealth,

ashamed and empty as hollow trees.

III.

By seven I had grown suspicious—we were still here.

Overheard conversations about returning

had grown wistful and less frequent.

I spoke English; my parent’s didn’t.

We didn’t live in a two-story house

with a maid or a wood-panel station wagon

nor vacation camping in Colorado.

None of the girls had hair of gold;

none of my brothers or cousins

were named Greg, Peter, or Marcia;

we were not the Brady Bunch.

None of the black and white characters

on Donna Reed or on the Dick Van Dyke Show

were named Guadalupe, Lázaro, or Mercedes.

Patty Duke’s family wasn’t like us either—

they didn’t have pork on Thanksgiving,

they ate turkey with cranberry sauce;

they didn’t have yuca, they had yams

like the dittos of Pilgrims I colored in class.

IV.

A week before Thanksgiving

I explained to my abuelita

about the Indians and the Mayflower,

how Lincoln set the slaves free;

I explained to my parents about

the purple mountain’s majesty,

“one if by land, two if by sea,”

the cherry tree, the tea party,

the amber waves of grain,

the “masses yearning to be free,”

liberty and justice for all, until

finally they agreed:

this Thanksgiving we would have turkey,

as well as pork.

V.

Abuelita prepared the poor fowl

as if committing an act of treason,

faking her enthusiasm for my sake.

Mamá set a frozen pumpkin pie in the oven

and prepared candied yams following instructions

I translated from the marshmallow bag.

The table was arrayed with gladiolas,

the plattered turkey loomed at the center

on plastic silver from Woolworth’s.

Everyone sat in green velvet chairs

we had upholstered with clear vinyl,

except Tío Carlos and Toti, seated

in the folding chairs from the Salvation Army.

I uttered a bilingual blessing

and the turkey was passed around

like a game of Russian Roulette.

“DRY,” Tío Berto complained, and proceeded

to drown the lean slices with pork fat drippings

and cranberry jelly—“esa mierda roja,” he called it.

Faces fell when Mamá presented her ochre pie—

pumpkin was a home remedy for ulcers, not a dessert.

Tía María made three rounds of Cuban coffee

then Abuelo and Pepe cleared the living room furniture,

put on a Celia Cruz LP and the entire family

began to merengue over the linoleum of our apartment,

sweating rum and coffee until they remembered—

it was 1970 and 46 degrees—

in América.

After repositioning the furniture,

an appropriate darkness filled the room.

Tío Berto was the last to leave.