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Inaugural poet commissioned to write poem for Friday's Cuban embassy ceremony

PITTSBURGH— Richard Blanco, the inaugural poet for Barack Obama, has written a special poem for the ceremonial re-opening of the U.S. embassy in Havana, Cuba, on Friday. Blanco, the son of Cuban exiles, will read his *Matters of the Sea / Cosas del mar*, commissioned by the U.S. State Department. It will be published as a bilingual chapbook by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Last month, Obama announced the historic decision to re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba for the first time since severing ties in 1961. The decision became effective July 20. On Friday, when Secretary of State John Kerry officially re-opens the U.S. Embassy in Havana, and raises the Stars and Stripes there, Blanco will be in attendance to present his new work.

"*Matters of the Sea* is one of the most emotionally complex and personal poems I've ever written, invested with all my love for the people of two countries that are part of my very being," said Blanco. "As with the presidential inauguration in 2013, I am once again humbled and honored to participate as a poet in another significant historic moment.

"I'm elated by the power of poetry to mark such important, communal moments, and be a catalyst for change and understanding by reaching deep into our emotion selves and connecting us to our shared humanity," he explained.

Blanco has published two full-length poetry collections with UPP: *Looking for the Gulf Motel*, winner of the Paterson Poetry Prize, the Thom Gunn Award, and Maine Literary Award; and *City of a Hundred Fires*, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. His *Directions to the Beach of the Dead* (University of Arizona Press) won the Beyond Margins Award from the PEN/American Center.

UPP also published two chapbooks marking impactful historical events and garnering national recognition for Blanco. *One Today: A Poem for Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration*, is a commemorative presentation of the poem commissioned by Obama for his second inaugural on January, 21, 2013. Blanco became only the fifth inaugural poet in U.S. history. *Boston Strong* is a beautiful reproduction of the poignant poem Blanco penned for "Boston Strong: An Evening of Support and Celebration," held on May 30, 2013, to benefit those affected by the tragic Boston Marathon bombings.

Blanco, 47, was born in Madrid, Spain, and grew up in Miami, Florida, among close-knit Cuban exiles, whom he credits with instilling in him the strong sense of community, dignity, and identity that informs his writing. In addition to being a writer, Blanco is a professional civil engineer.

Beginning Aug. 13, *Matters of the Sea / Cosas del mar* is available for preorder here: <http://www.upress.pitt.edu/BookDetails.aspx?bookId=36606> and through bookstores and online retailers.