

Remarks given by Guest Speaker Cristina García
22nd Annual Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Awards Ceremony
September 15, 2016 – New York City

It's my great pleasure to join you this evening in welcoming six extraordinary women at the front lines of essential new writing. Our award winners, each in her own way, are navigating the interstices between language and culture, fleshing out the stories too often excluded from our official histories, witnessing and dreaming into being the narratives without which our worlds would remain woefully incomplete. Their poetic inquiries tackle, fiercely, the very nature of allegiances, both familial and political, and explore what it means to become—and to belong.

It's said, and I wholeheartedly believe, that every great book can change your life. We don't always fully understand the mystery, the wildness, that makes this so but we know it when we read it, or write it—the strange, ineluctable, jagged-edged power of the dangerously unexpected; the feeling that the world, as we thought we knew it, has irrevocably changed. Sometimes it might be a single image, or a devastating utterance, a detail that suddenly illuminates character, or a

moment that frightens us, alters our perceptions, invites us, as poet Simon Ortiz wrote, to “the vastness we do not enter.”

Secrets frequently have that power. And while the telling of secrets—truths buried by shame or remorse, intimidation, effrontery, revenge—is important for all writers, it is especially so for those from communities historically relegated to the margins. It is urgent for us to create meaning and stories where we’ve been told they have no worth. To defy “received” histories, and pave the way for more complex, radically divergent refractions of reality. To chronicle forgotten lives, do justice to the overlooked triumphs and discontents, the separations, the heartbreak. To remember and record loss, fight against forgetting, to make art that is not only adequate to the task but to suffuse it with the exigencies of beauty. To write until it hurts, until the hurting sings.

Each of this year’s award winners is doing precisely that. In their luminous works, they move from the historical to the intimate—and back—with exquisite precision, and beauty, and humor. They tackle the challenges of ‘translation’—both linguistic and experiential—with authenticity and compassion. They chronicle the divides between us,

and the minute, sometimes hopeful, stitchings that attempt to bridge the severings. And they tally the joys, and the grief: the contents of a dying mother's suitcases; the history buried in a backyard; the enduring silence between a traumatized couple in postwar Japan; salient details that not only define their characters' lives but an entire era, and, ultimately, our own lives. For in every writer's well-told tale is also the story of community.

In her poem, *On Meeting Want for the First Time*, Airea Matthews writes of the "ordinary invisible." In a phrase, *her* phrase, this is what the stories we're celebrating here offer us: the *ordinary invisible* of worlds alive with a rich, particular poetry.

The writers before you tonight are structurally inventive and unsparing with content, no matter how vividly difficult. They take us to places we haven't yet been, silences we haven't yet heard. They write sentences like, "It's hard to be a mystery when you're from Mississippi." (Thank you, Jamey Hatley.) Or: "The myth of myths is that there is always reason and explanation." (Gracias, Lina María Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas). They hold their gazes, then hold them longer still . . . The news, the

urgent news, the news we need today, is in their books. Please allow ample time for them, and be forewarned: you will be derailed, marked and changed—for good.

In our age of continuous distraction, books like the one we're championing matter more desperately than ever. Why? Because they disrupt the tyranny of information in favor of unhurriedly conferring readers with distinct and elucidated passions, values, obsessions, distortions, and—most crucially—competing truths. (Try tweeting that!) The finest writing gifts us, as Anne Carson has said, with “moments that are the opposite of blindness.”

But perhaps the prophetic James Baldwin said it best: “It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.”

The six wonderful writers with us this evening work from an abiding sense of mission, and discovery, and relentless curiosity. Please help me in welcoming them, in rejoicing in their talent and their commitment to

storytelling. And, *por favor*, open your hearts, and be ready—and *grateful, extremely grateful*—to receive their gifts.

Thank you very much.