

PAT MORA

MORA: When you worked on "My Own True Name," you read the "Ode to Pizza," right, that begins, "Yeast pillow, sailing through the green oregano air." Now, I love odes, so I just last week put together a new collection of poems for adults that is called "Adobe Odes." I wanted to include some poems that were celebrations but were also dealing with some difficult issues. And what I want to do is I want to read you a part of one of these odes. As you listen, in addition to what the piece of the story is, let yourself respond to individual words. So, if you hear a word or two, and they trigger something, let that be what you write about. It doesn't have to be about this, okay? Just sort of try to be totally open, totally open.

"Ode to Courage."

"In this country of strange sounds, you move quickly through your house, gather clothes, water plants, una madre bringing order to a place you don't understand. Brown bird busy with your cramped nest. This teacher spits these words at your first-grade daughter, 'Don't speak that garbage in here.' She pinches your niñita when she speaks Spanish, smacks her with a ruler. The woman, what kind of woman, you wonder, pours beans from a bag. You hear the beans hit the wood floor, you feel the words, 'Kneel on that,' hit your daughter's ears while the other first graders watch the girl who can't talk right."

Write a little bit.

MORA: One of my hopes is that the literature makes us all more compassionate. You know, I say a lot that—and I believe it—that literature helps us cross borders and build community. I believe that, you know. And it is when we hear many different kinds of voices that that happens. It wasn't until I was an adult who began to write that I realized that the most exciting thing I had to write about was about being of Mexican descent and coming from the desert. So, I want them to feel that they could bring any part of themselves—their language, their sadness, whatever kind of family they come from—and that it's going to be honored, it's going to be treated with tremendous respect. At first I was kind of confused because it was a great poem, but I really didn't get how it was about courage. The poem was told to me by a teacher. And she was talking about herself when she was in first grade. And this really happened to her. And the "Ode to Courage" is about her mom. Because though her mom didn't speak any English, she marched into the school the next day, and she said to the principal, "*No, señor. No, señor. Así no tratan a mi'ija.*" And in the poem I say, "And the principal didn't understand. And the principal did

understand." Because you don't have to speak Spanish to know that she is saying, "No." She is setting limits. Right? But you brought up a very interesting point, which is the courage that the girl had to have to keep going back—where I was focused thinking about the mom.

STUDENT: So, when did you kind of get interested in writing, like, know that you really wanted to do this for a living?

MORA: I'm a writer because I'm a reader. You know, that's the truth. And I think often writers are people who—you soak up enough language that it sort of spills over, it's sort of like a fountain. And that's the joy of writing. You know, you're sort of—you're—it's this welling up of language. So one of my hopes for our time together is that you will think more about reading as essential to writing. I'm wondering because you have the poem in there that's called, "Picturesque: San Cristóbal de las Casas." Have you been to San Cristóbal?

MORA: I have. Have you?

STUDENT: Yeah. I went there last summer.

MORA: And what I was trying to do in the poem was, of course, which is what I'm often trying to do in my work, was to invite the reader to look at the people that we're taught to ignore. So people go to San Cristóbal, it's a very popular tourist place, they're looking at the weaving, they're going shopping, they're having good food and not thinking about the fact of where that weaver lives and what her life is like, you know? And I'm interested in the way that we want to buy the weaving, but we can ignore the weaver.