

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:19	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. When Nikki Giovanni writes a poem, she writes plainly. She’ll recount a conversation with an old woman she had when she was younger and basically just let the conversation play out as it happened. She’ll recount her childhood memories the way a journalist might: chores she used to do, old habits her grandpa had. She’ll describe clothes: a red swimsuit, blue sandals. It’s poetry that catches you off-guard. Plain language that evokes memories and talks about bigger ideas. And I’ll be honest, her poems have made me cry more than once. Giovanni was born in Tennessee in 1943, raised mostly in Ohio. Her early work focused on the civil rights movement—not chronicling it, really, but reacting to it. The hope, the exhilaration, the grief, the anger. She collaborated with James Baldwin, was friends with Maya Angelou, interviewed Mohammad Ali, published dozens of books—both of poetry and essays. I am, as you might have guessed, a huge fan of her work, but I’m far from her only fan. She’s won a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album, seven NAACP Image Awards, and was named a living legend by Oprah Winfrey. For her day job, she’s a professor at Virginia Tech. She taught there in 2007, when a former student of hers shot and killed 32 people on campus. The day after, at a memorial service for the dead, she gave the convocation.
00:01:53	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:54	Clip	Clip	Nikki Giovanni: We are Virginia Tech. We are sad, today. And we will be sad for quite a while. We are not moving on. We are embracing our mourning. We are Virginia Tech. We are strong enough to stand tall, tearlessly. We are brave enough to bend and cry and sad enough to know we must laugh again. We are Virginia Tech. We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it. But neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDs. Neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid being captured by a rogue army. Neither does the baby elephant watching his community be devastated for ivory. Neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water. Neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib, in the home his father built with his own hands, being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy. We are Virginia Tech: the Hokie nation embraces our own and reaches out with open heart and hand to

those who offer their hearts and minds. We are strong and brave and innocent and unafraid. We are better than we think and not quite what we want to be. We are alive to the imagination and the possibility. We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears, through all this sadness. We are the Hokies. We will prevail. We will prevail. We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech.

00:03:25	Sound Effect	Transition	<i>[The audience applauds.]</i> Music swells and fades.
00:03:26	Jesse	Host	Nikki Giovanni has a new book out. It's called <i>Make Me Rain</i> —another beautiful collection of poetry. I'm honored to be speaking with her. Let's get into it.
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
00:03:38	Music	Transition	My interview with poet Nikki Giovanni. Relaxed, jazzy music.
00:03:44	Jesse	Host	Well, Nikki Giovanni, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm so happy to have you on the show. It's such a pleasure.
00:03:49	Nikki Giovanni	Guest	Thank you, I'm delighted to be—to be with you.
00:03:52	Jesse	Host	Do you remember the first poem you ever wrote?
00:03:56	Nikki	Guest	Uh, the first important poem I ever wrote was a poem called "Nikki-Rosa". It was about my childhood. Yes.
00:04:03	Jesse	Host	What—now, what's the line between important and not important poem?
00:04:07	Nikki	Guest	Well, you know, when you're in the fourth and fifth grade, your teacher has you write poems and you write, then, all those little—you know, Sally Walker kind of poems. But the first poem that I thought was to be taken seriously, at least by myself and not—I was not looking for anybody else to take it seriously—but by myself was that, um—I was trying to understand a little bit more about my childhood.
00:04:33	Jesse	Host	How old were you when you—when you wrote "Nikki-Rosa"?
00:04:36	Nikki	Guest	Oh, I don't know. Probably... 14, 15? Something like that. The worst age in the world is teenage, which everybody knows.
			<i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:04:46	Jesse	Host	Was it bad for you?
00:04:49	Nikki	Guest	Oh, I don't know "bad" as much as—the teenage years are just horrible years. And I can understand why people hate them. I have always been in favor of eliminating high school. I think we should go from, you know, college—from eighth grade, I think that we should be allowed to do two years of service and that would put us, you know, into like the—that would put us in 17 or so. And that would give us some maturity. And then we could come back and look at college if you wanted to or look at a trade school or do something else. I think high school is terrible. People are mean. And we've been hearing so much about that. I wasn't mean and I don't think that I was bullied any more than anybody else. There's always somebody that wants to beat you up or something, but I just think that—you know, you asked and I'm just being honest. But I think it's a terrible age and I think we should eliminate it.

00:05:43 Jesse Host That was actually the plan for me. That was like the backup plan.

[Nikki laughs.]

I went to an arts high school in San Francisco and I'm not that talented. And so, when I auditioned for the arts high school, the backup plan was always that I would take the CHSPE, which is the high school—California High School Proficiency Exam and just hang out until it was time to go to college. *[Laughs.]*

00:06:04 Nikki Guest *[Chuckles.]* Yeah! Well, I was an early entrant to Fisk University. The Rockefeller Foundation had offered—I guess is the term—a scholarship for Black Americans, essentially, because they wanted—I guess—to help or something. And you could take a test. And if you passed that test, you were allowed to go to college, which is what happened with me. So, I didn't graduate. Thank god, I avoided the prom. I didn't have to go to the prom. And I didn't have to graduate, and I didn't have to worry about all of that. I went on to college. And I think that was a better idea. I had some difficulty as we all do in growing up and college, but at least I didn't have to bothered.

Can you imagine being bothered with the prom? You're 17 and you have to try—

[Jesse laughs.]

[Mockingly.] "Oh! I have to get a prom date!" What kind of sense does that make?

00:06:54 Jesse Host Nikki, I was into it! I went to the prom with my wife—my now wife—22 years ago.

00:07:02 Nikki Guest *[Beat.]* Well, I'm happy for you, but most people didn't!

[They laugh and Jesse agrees.]

Think about it! Most people were not that lucky. Most people had horrible experiences that they remember to this day, that they still hate. So, I'm glad that you're happy and I'm glad you found someone you love, but most people didn't. *[Laughing.]* You know? That's very—that's very fair.

00:07:20 Jesse Host

When you wrote your first serious poem—poem to be taken seriously, when you were 14 or 15 years old, did you think of yourself or did you aspire to be a poet?

00:07:33 Nikki Guest No, I was just trying to—again, I loved to read, and I loved space and I was just trying to understand some things. My parents had a difficult marriage, which I knew then and know especially now. And I talk about it, because I think youngsters should hear it—that a lot of parents have difficulty. Except you, of course, you're happy.

[Jesse chuckles.]

But most parents have a difficult situation and children sometimes think that they are the cause of that. And they're not. And so, you have to work out what is—why are they not happy? And they're not

happy and you know that because every Saturday night, they're arguing. Or your father is over drinking. My mother didn't drink that much. My father would be drunk. So—and I don't think that he was the only drunk father in the world. So, all of this had to—I had to—you know, you try to understand it. My solution of course, to be like clear, is that I thought I should go to Mars. But it was difficult. We didn't have any way to get there. But I thought, "Oh, that's what I should do is I should go to Mars and then I don't have to be bothered with all of this."

00:08:41 Jesse Host

My mom is the very same age as you are and I always grew up with the knowledge that when she went to college—she went to George Washington, in Washington DC—she was living at home and her parents didn't speak with—speak to her, because they didn't think she should go to college. What was your family's relationship to college?

00:09:06 Nikki Guest

Oh, college was important. Both of my parents and my grandparents—my grandfather—I attended and ultimately graduated from Fisk University, which was my grandfather's school. He graduated in 1905. And my grandmother went to Albany State. So, college was gonna be important. My mother and father both are Knoxville College—though Knoxville College no longer exists. So, college—but then, I'm Black. So, education and degrees were meaningful to the Black community. So, no. They wanted me to go. That wasn't the problem. I think the problem was that Gus didn't make enough money to do the things he wanted to do. He couldn't buy the kind of home he wanted to buy. I mean, I think that he had normal—for lack of a better word—male problems. He thought that as a man he should be able to do more for his family.

And I think that he did not sit down and do what I did, which was try to think it through. To say, "Why am I having difficulties?" And a lot of that, of course, is just gonna be your basic racism—that he's gonna be underpaid for the jobs that he does. And he's not gonna have a bank in the—in the community that he can count on to lend him money to do things that banks lend people money to do. So, I think that a lot of—he took a lot of that frustration out on his family and I didn't think that that was smart or good or right. And so, I went to live with my grandparents.

00:10:32 Jesse Host

Where did your grandparents live?

00:10:34 Nikki Guest

Knoxville, Tennessee. That's where I was born. I am the first child in my family born in a hospital. And I am the baby sister. And I'm smiling, but you can't see. But like any baby sister, you know, you're gonna have arguments. I don't know what line you are in your family, but you argue with your older siblings. And when Gary—her name was Gary Anne—and when Gary and I would have arguments, which wasn't all that much, but we had them. And when we'd have arguments, she would say, "Well, you know, we picked up the wrong baby. You were born in a hospital. We—you're not ours. You belong to somebody else." *[Chuckles.]*

And it used to frustrate me until I finally realized the response to that was, "I think you're right. *[Beat.]* I don't know you people. I'm not kin to you people and I need to go someplace else." *[Laughing.]* And then she quit saying that. I love it.

00:11:25	Jesse	Host	Did you have an idea of the kind of place that you thought you would belong?
00:11:29	Nikki	Guest	Oh, I thought—well, I’m a space freak. And I just thought wouldn’t it be wonderful to be on another planet? Because it’s so clear. And I laugh about it all the time, but you know, Earth is on its way out. And I just thought, “Well, wouldn’t it be wonderful to go to another planet? To see other people?” And, of course, when I’d say that—when I was much younger—people would say, “Oh, the aliens are there and they’re gonna—they’re gonna eat you up. They’re gonna—you know—destroy you.”
			And I would—and it’s true. I would say, “No, no, no. I live with the aliens.” I’m a Black American. I live with aliens. And nothing like the last four years of the—of the previous president has shown us, we live with aliens. So, I’m not—I’m not afraid of what’s on Mars. I’m afraid of what’s on Earth.
00:12:15	Jesse	Host	When Jack Kennedy said, “We’re going to the moon,” did you have ambivalence about the “we” part of that? I mean, I think it is—you know, it was a pretty conspicuously specific subset of Americans that got to walk on the moon. You know what I mean? I’m one of them. <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:12:39	Nikki	Guest	I think an American walked on the moon and I think that’s wonderful. And I was born in Knoxville, as I mentioned, and my family moved to Cincinnati before I moved back to Knoxville. But John Glenn, as you know, was an Ohioan. And we know that the Appalachians have had a lot to do—Black and White—with our—with the American trying to—I almost said “conquer”, but we don’t wanna conquer space. Again, we want to—we wanna go into the galaxy. But that “we” was human beings. I just think it’s so incredibly wonderful. I think it’s—we, from Earth, have now or are beginning to—and I hope—contact “we” in the galaxy. There’s some other life. A part of that life may be—just may be viruses. And somebody’ll say, “Well, if that’s the viruses, then they’re gonna harm us.” But they’re harming us, perhaps—I’m not a doctor, I’m just a poet—perhaps we are being harmed because we haven’t learned how to live <u>with</u> something else.
			Because you can look around. You don’t have to be intelligent to know we don’t live with each other. There’s nobody—there’s no way to look at history and say, “Oh yeah. People on Earth live very well together.” Because we don’t. So, maybe what we need to do is to start living with each other so that we can be prepared to live with that which we don’t know or don’t see. I don’t know if that made sense, but I think that’s so—I think that’s so important. Because we’re so afraid of what we do see. And what we don’t see, we’re always trying to kill. It’s not gonna work that way. We have to find a way to live with that which we are not knowing and not seeing.
00:14:33	Jesse	Host	Do you remember when, in your life, you felt like you were a poet?
00:14:41	Nikki	Guest	I don’t know what else I would be. I—I really—and I don’t mind talking to you. I’m glad we’re having this conversation or whatever, but people make a big deal out of, “Oh! When I was three, I knew I wanted to be an actor.” And I think that’s the dumbest crap I’ve heard.

[Jesse chuckles softly.]

I do know that I like words. And I do know that I love history. And I do know that I dream of stars. So, I—as a 77-year-old woman talking to you right now—still am accepting the fact that perhaps poetry is all I can do. But there's no, "Oh, one day I woke up and all of the sudden I realized this is what I should do and I was gonna change the world," because I don't believe any of that! I'm just gonna try to do the best I could—the best I can in the world in which I find myself.

00:15:33 Jesse Host

Do you think you could read the poem "In Silence", from your new book? It's on page 50, if you're looking.

00:15:39 Nikki Guest

Oh, I love that, because my grandparents would sit down and—of course, Grandpapa was absolutely in love with Grand—well, they were in love with each other. And after dinner, they would—they would sit out on the front porch. And that's another thing that I really think we should get rid of, if you're asking me—can—"Nikki, what would you like to get rid of?" I would love to get rid of patios and those other things. Decks. I think we need to go back to front porches, where you could see your neighbors.

But I would wash the dishes—because I'm there and that's my job—and Grandmother and Grandpapa—Grandmother smoked, but Grandpapa didn't—would sit on the front porch and they would talk to the neighbors. I wondered why. And sometimes they wouldn't, by the way.

"I wondered why Grandmother and Grandpapa could sit in silence on the front porch. She smoked a cigarette. He didn't. Sitting on the swing, in silence. I washed the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen, trying to figure out why they sat in silence. Then I got to be my own age, with my own deck and my own person, and I understood."

And, you know, you learn a lot more. Sitting at—the front porch was important, and Grandmother and Grandpapa would sit there and sometimes they would sit in absolute silence. Or if somebody came by, they would—you know, even in *[inaudible]*, and they would go on or they would talk. Grandmother liked to gossip. And they were both civil rights people. But watching them, you begin to—I began to understand the importance of silence. What silence is saying. And I definitely, as I—I came at this poem backwards, but I definitely understand why you really do need to get rid of back—of decks. Decks need to go. I do. I sit on a deck. I have a deck and I have dog. But it would be so nice to go back to the front porch, where you actually knew what your neighbors looked like, where you talked to them.

My neighbor's husband died—now, about two months ago—and she had to walk over here to tell me that he had—that Les had passed. I thought so, because I saw all of the police cars and two of her sons are policemen and emergency vehicles and I thought, "Oh. This is not good news." But he had passed. And you ought to be able to sit there. I check, when I leave my home—I just check over to see if her lines are up. If—I—they pick up our garbage on

Tuesday. If her garbage cans are pulled out. And I have a gentleman who helps me. And if they wouldn't be, I make sure that he goes over to pull her cans out, because her husband isn't there anymore to do that. And that's what a front porch does for you. You get to know your neighbors. And I think we miss that.

00:18:36 Jesse Host The house next to me was empty for a long time and some folks moved in there about a year and a half ago and I've been so grateful to see them in the front yard and to have them when my family was going through really tough times this year, like, slide us a loaf of bread that they baked. And I've never been in these people's houses, because they *[chuckling]* moved in right before we stopped going over to other people's houses. But I've never been more grateful to talk to somebody from 13 feet away. *[Chuckles.]*

00:19:10 Nikki Guest Yeah! Yeah. It's a neighborhood. It's—and everybody here, you know—well, you don't. But I do live in a neighborhood. I have friends who have—they live out in the country and they just got yards and yards. I don't have that much. I don't have these two acres. But almost all of my neighbors have dogs. So, everybody walks their dog except me. We don't walk. *[Chuckles.]* We have a—we're lazy, I guess. But we have a nice lady who comes to walk the dog. And Cleo is the dog. Cleo loves her, so that makes everybody happy, 'cause I'm not gonna do it. But you can sit, and you can watch people. And that's so nice. You can watch the neighbors' dogs. And my dog—Cleo—will bark and, you know, "Oooh, so and so was out with their dog." And that's what—that's what it's about. You know?

At some point, there has to be something called "enough". And at some point, we all have to recognize that we have enough. And a part of "enough" is the love that we share with our family and also with our neighbor and our neighborhood. And I think that that's something we all need to work on and be proud of.

00:20:27 Jesse Host When I was preparing for this interview, I went into the archives of another NPR show, *Fresh Air*, and I listened to a conversation that you had with Terry Gross in the early '80s.

[Nikki reacts with surprise.]

You know, you were—I guess, you know—35, 40 years old. Something like that, at the time. And you talked, even in that conversation, about your comfort with moving through different parts of life. That you were fine with... not being, you know, a young person. Like in the, like, early 20s—I'm gonna go, you know—I'm gonna go have a March type of energy... even then. Has that—was that something that you had to talk yourself into? That comfort? Or was that something that came naturally to you?

00:21:24 Nikki Guest I just think I was intelligent.

[They laugh.]

00:21:28 Jesse Host Eh, you probably still are.

00:21:29 Nikki Guest I really do. I really do. I think that—well, I've always been a reader. And anybody who reads a lot of books, you're gonna get a lot of additional, different points of view. And they're gonna help you put some things together. But I think it's intelligent. It was just basic

intelligence. I don't remember, as you know—I don't—the interview, I don't remember what was said or why. But I know at each step of the way, you have to be satisfied that you've done a good job, that you have been honest and, as much as you can, loving. But also, now that I'm a little bit older than that, I know that you can't love everybody. And I do say that I miss being onstage, because I used to—I gotta laugh about that, because everybody says, "Oh, you know, you got to love. We have to love each other." But we don't. Some people are not loveable.

[Jesse laughs.]

And so, if you just get rid of the people that are not lovable, you'll have enough love left over for the people who are. And I think that's what's important. And I like being 77. I really do. I recommend it. And I just—I don't have what they call bucket lists, but I—because I am a space freak, I wanna go up to the Arctic Circle before it melts. So, I'm hoping that—I'm hoping this year that my granddaughter will be able to go with me to the Arctic Circle, that we'll be able to go up with my—our friend Jenny. I think you all have talked to Jenny. And we'll be able to go up. And I'd just like to see it. I've done—I've done Antarctica, so I'd like to see that 'cause I know I cannot do the moon or space—the space station or Mars. But it'd be fun. I think you have to, at some point, be satisfied. And I never did understand, and I still don't, people who are never satisfied. It's always one more thing. And I hate that.

A friend of mine is a grandmother now and her daughter just had a daughter. And she was saying, "Oh, the baby's so cute. I wonder what it'll be." And you don't correct your friends, otherwise you can't stay friends. But my first thought, "It'll be a baby. Get over it." Because something just born doesn't have a tooth in its head, doesn't *[chuckles]*—doesn't—it usually doesn't have a hair on his head. Doesn't know how to say anything. All it can do is whine or whatever. Cry or whatever. And I'm thinking—already, people are saying, "I wonder what he or she—I wonder what it'll be when it grows up?" Why? Let it be what it is as it grows. And it's very strange, because that's a lot of pressure.

So, all of your life you've been hearing somebody say, "Oooh, you really have a—you really have a good chance to sing. Your voice is so wonderful. You can—" Or, you know, "Oh, you're really smart. You can do a lot of math, so maybe you'll be a mathematician. Maybe you'll be a physicist or something." But why don't we let people develop? Why don't we let them blossom? Why don't we treat people with as much respect as we do tomatoes on the vine? Why don't we let them grow and bloom? Why don't we leave them alone?

00:24:40	Jesse	Host	We'll finish up with the great Nikki Giovanni in just a minute. When we come back, I'll ask her what her dreams are like lately and she'll tell me why she doesn't feel like sharing that, thank you very much. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:24:55	Music	Transition	Cheerful, upbeat music.

00:24:57 Jesse Host This message comes from NPR's sponsor NerdWallet: a personal finance website and app that helps people make smarter money moves. Have new money goals this year? Whether you want to use credit card points to plan a family vacation abroad—once it's safe—or take advantage of low mortgage rates to refinance and save for your child's education, NerdWallet is the best place to shop financial products to help make your 2021 money goals happen. Discover and compare the smartest credit cards, mortgage lenders, and more at [NerdWallet.com](https://nerdwallet.com).

00:25:32 Promo Clip *[Music fades out.]*
Music: Light, chiming music.

James Arthur M.: Hey, folks! It's me, James Arthur M., host of *Minority Korner*—your home through these bewild times for weekly doses of pop culture, history, news, nerdy stuff, and more through a BIPOC, queer, and allied lens.

[Scene change.]

James: I already took you back in time through one time machine. We're going back even further! *[Singing.]* Do-dodo. Dodo-dodo. Do-do-do. Do-do.

Speaker 1: Oh my god. Oooh! Here we go! I'm holding on!

James: I know it seems scary, because now we're in the 1830s! No, wait hold on!

Speaker 1: *[Quietly.]* No, I don't like that time period.

James: It's gonna be fine! Continuing along on the White People's Apology Tour, Justin Timberlake—*[laughs.]*

[Scene change.]

James: That is Minority Korner. Like. Having those difficult conversations, those necessary conversations.

Speaker 2: This is now the moment for White people to be rising up and going, "This is our problem."

[Scene change.]

James: So, join me and some of your new BFFs every Friday, here on Maximum Fun, to stay informed, empowered, and have some fun. Minority Korner: because together, we're the majority.

00:26:21 Promo Clip *[Music fades out.]*
Music: Soft, surreal music.

Speaker: On NPR's *Consider This* podcast, we don't just help you keep up with the news, we help you make sense of what's happening. Like what the case about George Floyd's killing means

for the ongoing fight for racial justice. Or how to best navigate a pandemic that's changed life for all of us. All of that in 15 minutes every weekday. Listen now to *Consider This*, from NPR.

[*Music ends.*]

00:26:41 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with Nikki Giovanni. She's a poet, an essayist, and professor at Virginia Tech University. She's been writing poems since the 1960s. Her works have been celebrated by Maya Angelou, Oprah, and James Baldwin. Her latest collection of poems is called *Make Me Rain*. You can buy it now at your local bookstore. Let's get back into our conversation.

00:27:18 Nikki Guest There's a really wonderful sort of granddaughterly poem that I loved, in your book *Make Me Rain*. I wonder if you could read it? It's a short one. It's called "Everything but the Water".

"My red plaid-ish swimsuit, blue sandals, suntan lotion to keep me safe, potato chips, chocolate chip cookies, lemonade but no ice, Mama's old blanket, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* in case I finish *Surf's Up*, the grass Daddy cut yesterday, and lots of sun. The only thing missing is the ocean. Oh well. Maybe next year."

00:28:17 Jesse Host And that's because we—I've always lived in, of course, uh... on land. And now I'm living actually in mountains. [*Chuckles.*] It's really different. And so, you always—you know, you'll say to yourself, "Oh. I wish I—" Not, I wish, but—you know, it'd be lovely. I've got my swimsuit. I've got my suntan lotion. You know. Everything but the water. [*Chuckles.*] And so, yeah. I like that. [*Laughs.*] Thank you.

00:28:17 Jesse Host You mentioned that you've always been a big reader. When you started writing poetry, was there ever a time that you thought your—that your poetry should have language that was grander and more writerly or whatever—fancier, for lack of a better word—rather than what it is? Which I think is like very deeply connected to spoken language.

00:28:47 Nikki Guest Oh, thank you. No, I've always just wanted my language to be honest and to be understood. And I've always had—I tell stories. And I come from a family of storytellers. So, I want—when I'm trying to write a poem or writing a poem, I want that story to come through. I want somebody to read that and say, "Oh yeah, I got that. I remember—" You know, that's—you're always hoping that "I remember", but no. I wasn't... my career, because writing is my career, is a competitive career. And I would be a big, big, big liar if I—if I didn't say that. We are—we writers are competitive. But one of the things that we are competitive about is trying to tell the truth, trying to find something that somebody else has not paid attention to.

And the other day—I've been on—this is a part of virtual book tour, because of *Make Me Rain*—and I was doing a lecture with a college and one of the questions, you know, that came through the chat room. And I'm not good at any of that stuff, but it came through the chat room, "What do you think is the most important speech that was ever given?" And I don't know what youngster thought I was gonna say, but I said—and it's true—probably, in America, the most

important speech that was made was when Mose Wright stood up, in the courtroom, and said, “Thar he.” Just those two words. “Thar he.” And from that, of course, as you know, we’re gonna get Mrs. Parks—Rosa Parks. We’re gonna get her refusing to give up a seat. We’re gonna get a civil rights movement. And from that, we’re gonna get—which I am now so, so proud of—we’re gonna get Black Lives Matter. And Black Lives Matter goes all over the globe.

But the youngster that I said that to was surprised, because he said, “Well, I thought you would’ve said, you know, ‘I have a dream’ or something.”

I said, “No. You asked me, and I answered.” And for me, I think one of the most important speeches ever, was when Mr. Wright stood up and, “Thar he.” And that changed—that changed a lot. And I think that—I think people—and that’s what I want my work to do, is to maybe look at some of the people that we’ve overlooked, that we forget the strength and the beauty and the courage that it took for them to present themselves with the words that matter. And so, I like to think that my words matter. My words are not nearly as important, and I know that, as Mose Wright, because being the uncle—the granduncle, excuse me, of Emmett Till and ultimately having to see that body, that was—I hope I never have to face that. That’s more courage than I would want to be bothered with. But I think we have to give Mr. Wright credit. I think that somewhere there should be a statue of Mose Wright standing, pointing his finger, saying, “Thar he.”

00:32:00 Jesse Host That was a great speech. When I’m writing for the radio, like for this show for example, I have had to really work hard to develop this skill of being able to put down on paper something that feels like something that you would say out loud. You know, I think that’s one of the hardest things about writing for the radio, is you wanna write—you wanna write like you would an essay, an opinion piece for the *New York Times* or something, because that’s what you’ve been taught writing is, for so long. And you really have to work to like hear yourself saying it in your head, before you put it down into the computer or onto paper.

00:33:00 Nikki Guest And I wonder, when you’re writing, if you sort of see it on the paper in your head? Like, think of it as writing? Or if you hear it being spoken in your head and think of it as speech? I think, to be honest—and I don’t mean to be frivolous on this—when I think, I see it in my heart. I think I see what touches me. And what touches me and then wanting—and wanting that bit of light to touch somebody else. There’s an old—and I’m sure you know that—an old children’s song, but it’s a spiritual, that’s like, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” And I—that’s not a great spiritual and that’s not a great song or anything like that, but it makes a lot of sense. And I really—that touches you. And so, we teach that to kids. We teach that to little kids.

And I think, because Mose Wright came back to me, because I was doing some reading—you know, some other things came up about

the assassination of Emmett Till. And I thought, “My goodness, we have overlooked Mr. Wright and what he brought to us at great sacrifice to himself.” He did that. And, of course, it’s easier when we look—and there’s no problem with that. We look at Frederick Douglass, who was a good-looking guy. Looked great in his suit. He spoke very well, even though he was born in slavery. He learned a lot. He came—of course, everybody loves the speeches, the voice, and the way that he thought, actually. The way that Martin Luther King thought. Everybody we mentioned earlier—everybody thought, and everybody was right, Winston Churchill could give great speeches. And Jack Kennedy gave great speeches. And there are more.

00:34:49	Jesse	Host	But once you put that in your mind and you’re just sitting at your desk and you’re saying, “What’s—what’s a great speech?” I had to come back to Mose Wright. “Thar he.” That cannot be overlooked. You’ve taught for quite a while at Virginia Tech. You teach English there. Is there any particular book or text that you particularly love to teach?
00:35:01	Nikki	Guest	No. I don’t—I don’t do criticisms. I don’t critique. We—I teach creative writing, so what is important to me, for my classes, is imagination. And I have been—right now, I’m teaching in the evening, but I have been teaching in the morning. I have been teaching at eight o’clock. And people would say, “Well, eight o’clock is a—is a terrible hour. Why do you teach at eight? You know. That—you have get up so early.”

And I say, “Yeah. Because the students come to me from their dreams.” I love the eight o’clock class, because they wake up and probably put just a, not—you know, jeans or whatever on, and come on over to class. And before the—COVID, we could bring our coffee in. And then we could talk about what we had dreamed. So, I don’t have a text. We have the dreams of the students and we start to write about them. And as Thelonious Monk—and I’m a big Monk fan—but somebody was correcting Thelonious Monk, which is a stupid, bad, ugly thing to do—and Monk looked up at him [*chuckles*] and said, “The piano don’t have no wrong notes.” ‘Cause they were trying to correct him on that. And Monk is right. And I say that to my students. I want them to know that.

Thelonious said, “The piano don’t have no wrong notes.” And words are not wrong. You’re writing a poem or you’re writing a short story. There’s no wrong poem or short story. It’s just words haven’t found their right place. So, what you’re doing as you’re beginning to bring your dreams to paper is making sure that the words find the right home. It kind of wakes them up.

00:36:41	Jesse	Host	<i>[They laugh.]</i> <i>[Laughing.]</i> Yeah. I have much less fond memories of my eight AM classes than you— <i>[laughing]</i> than you seem to.
00:36:46	Nikki	Guest	Oh, I’m sorry! <i>[Laughs.]</i> I really am sorry, ‘cause it’s a great—it’s a great time. It really is. ‘Cause there’s nothing else to have annoyed people. By the time you get to the 11 and 12 o’clock class,

00:37:05 Jesse Host something has made you angry. But you go for the eight o'clock class, you just come from bed to me. *[Laughs.]* That's all.
 00:37:09 Nikki Guest Have you had any great dreams lately?
 00:37:17 Jesse Host *[Beat.]* Actually, my dreams have been pretty good. *[Beat.]* Are you
 00:37:21 Nikki Guest expecting me to share my dreams with you?
 I'm hoping you might! I wouldn't say I'm expecting you to.
 I don't know. I'm at the stage in my life where my dreams are private. *[Laughs.]* I'm sorry.

[They laugh.]

00:37:36 Jesse Host No. Sorry! *[Laughs.]*
 Fair enough. Is there—is there anything else, speaking of stages of life—are there any stages of life that you're looking forward to or are you just feeling secure in the one that you're in?
 00:37:50 Nikki Guest Well, I do like where I am, and it bothers me that I've lost so many friends. Particularly when Maya passed. And my students came in, because Maya had come up to visit the class. You know. And they knew and said, "Oh, we're so—we're so sorry." And, you know, they came up—because there was a stamp. As you know, there is a stamp, a Maya Angelou stamp. And one of my students bought the stamp and said, "Well, Nikki, we bought this for you and we want you to know that, you know—the class—And one day, you'll have a stamp!"

And I said, "You do realize that the only way you get a stamp is that you're dead. So, *[chuckling]* I'm not looking forward to a stamp any time soon."

And they were like, "Ooh! My goodness, we didn't know it—" They didn't look at it that way. They just wanted me to know that they loved me. But it's—you just go forward. I saw Ferlinghetti just passed. And he was, what, 101? And Lawrence had to—had to feel that he did his job, that he—I mean, you talk about somebody going to Heaven. He had to feel that, "I have—I have—you know, send the train down. I have—I have earned my place." And we've lost—well, last year we lost quite a few. 2019, we lost Toni Morrison, who was a good friend. And I was really very, very sorry. I wrote the bench for Toni, and I was sorry that she wasn't here for me to read it to her. And we—you know, you just try to go day by day. I am a jazz fan, so losing McCoy Tyner was very, very sad. We lost John Coltrane waaay too early but losing McCoy—'cause you realize that McCoy—the piano had so much to do with how the Coltrane Quartette sounded. And I was very, very sad to lose—to lose McCoy.

So, you know. You just... I'm not looking—I'm not afraid, but I'm not anxious. I'm not gonna jump off a building. You know. *[Chuckles.]* But whatever comes my way—I'm gonna wear my mask. I don't want—I don't wanna cause somebody else to pass before their time. But if you're born, you're gonna die. And so, you have to accept that. But you know, you wanna be graceful. You wanna—you don't want to be, you know, whiny and pitiful.

00:40:21	Jesse	Host	Well, Ms. Giovanni, I'm so grateful for your time. Thank you very much for talking to me.
00:40:28	Nikki	Guest	It was a pleasure. Thanks a lot. Now take care. Bye-bye.
00:40:32	Jesse	Host	Nikki Giovanni. Her latest book is called <i>Make Me Rain</i> . It's a beautiful, heartbreaking, heartwarming, rousing, collection of poetry and prose.
			Can I just recommend—? Giovanni made some beautiful records and my favorite she recorded with the New York Community Choir. It's called <i>Like a Ripple on a Pond</i> , and it is her performing her poetry along with the choir singing and, man, it's just—it's a wonderful record.
00:41:03	Music	Transition	Relaxed music.
00:41:08	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where it is raining, right now! As I look out my window, [<i>chuckling</i>] the sky is bright blue and yet somehow it is also pouring rain down upon my house. You might even be able to hear it coming down the downspout, outside of my office window.
			The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team and to their label, Memphis Industries. You can also keep up with our show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We're at Twitter.com/bullseye . We're on Facebook at Facebook.com/bullseyewithjessethorn . And we're on YouTube; just search for <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> . We post all our interviews in all of those places.
			And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.
00:42:16	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
			[<i>Music fades out.</i>]