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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 11, 1998

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT MILLENNIUM LECTURE

The East Room

7:45 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Professor Bailyn, for that wonderful, wonderful lecture. I thank the First Lady and Ellen Lovell for conceiving this entire Millennium Series. The others will have a hard act to follow.

I can't think of a better way to inaugurate this series of lectures than with one on the founding of our republic, also the first White House cyberspace lecture. We are truly imagining - honoring the past, not by imagining the future, but through the prism of the future.

I thank Bernard Bailyn for what he said and the way he said it and for a lifetime of work. We received the distilled wisdom tonight of more than four decades of hard thinking and work about what it means to be an American and what America means to Americans and to the rest of the world.

I was rather amused, he said when we started that all these people who came from a lot of different places, they moved around a lot, they disagreed a lot, they were disdainful of government -- I thought, what's new? But they were also, as Professor Bailyn said at the end of his remarks, at their best moments profoundly idealistic and always, always appropriately suspicious of untrammelled power in the hands of anyone in the government.

They were very wise about human nature, our founders. They understood that there was light and dark in human nature. They understood that we are all imperfect, but society is, nonetheless, improvable. And in some ways, I think their most important charge to us was to always be about the business of forming a more perfect union. As I said in my State of the Union address, they understood it would never be perfect, but that we always had to try to make it more perfect. And that is what they always tried to do, and when they left the scene they instructed us to follow suit. And we've been at it ever since.

We have a lot of questions that we have to face about the new millennium: We're more

diverse than ever before -- can we really be one America? How do we have a government that is flexible enough and strong enough to give people the tools they need to make the most of their own lives, and still avoid the abuses that the founders understood would always be there when people were too driven by power, instead of the larger purposes of America? How can we widen the circle of opportunity to include everyone in a market system that seems inherently exclusive in some ways?

There are lots of other challenges facing us, but I think our ability to meet the challenges of the 21st century rest in no small measure on our understanding of the constant values and insights with which we began. By honoring the past we know there were forebears there who were always imagining the future. By imagining the future we must do so with the hope that all of our successes will honor our past, for it is there, in the depth of our values and the genius of our system, that we began the long journey that has brought us to this day, and that I am convinced will take us to better days ahead.

Thank you again, Professor Bailyn. And now I'd like to turn the discussion over to the Director of the White House Millennium Council, Ellen Lovell. And we will begin with the questions.

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THE PRESIDENT: (on measuring a nation's patriotism) --I'll just give you a couple of examples. I agree with you on this. I do think that we're very patriotic if patriotism means loving country and caring about its future more than you care about your immediate self-interest. I think we're still capable of that. And I could give you two or three examples.

I think the enormous response we've had to the idea that we have to save the Social Security system for the 21st century before we go around spending this first surplus we've had in 30 years on tax cuts or spending programs is an example of patriotism. I think the enormous reservoir of interest we've had in this whole issue of climate change and how we can preserve the environment for 21st century America is an example of patriotism, because selfishness is just going ahead and gobbling up whatever was here before us. I think all these young people all over America that are responding to the call to serve in their communities is an example of patriotism.

So I think -- why I am so glad you're here -- I think that it's not because we're not patriotic, but I think a lot of the basic patriotic elements of America -- that is the things that make us go -- we do tend to take for granted, which is why I think it's so important that we take the occasion of entering a new millennium and a new century to think about the basic things again, so we'll be more sensitive to them. Why do we have a Bill of Rights? Why do we have a government with certain powers to unify us as well as certain limits so that it can't abuse us? What does all this mean?

I think that we've been around so long now and Americans get up every day just expecting the country to work. And so we tend to take for granted what's really best about our

country. And I think that can be bad. But I do think that the country is fully capable of patriotic action if patriotism means sacrificing today for something greater tomorrow.

* * * * *

THE PRESIDENT: I was just going to say, following up on that, I think you can look at basically all the big turning points of American history, all of them, and say that we survived and sort of went on to a higher level of achievement because two things happened -- one, we reaffirmed the union in new circumstances instead of letting it become weaker and divided, obviously in the Civil War; and secondly, we expanded the meaning of liberty in a new and different time, but in a logical way.

And I think if you go back throughout the entire history of the country and you look at every major turning point in history, it was a triumph for the idea of union and for the idea of liberty. and I hope that that will always be the case. But I believe that to be true.

I also -- we had a cyberspace question here about should we learn anything from 1900. It may just be pure accident, but it's interesting that in 1800 when Thomas Jefferson was elected, when the century changed, we were essentially -- we began the movement from being essentially a colonial society to a continental one. In 1900, when William McKinley was reelected and Theodore Roosevelt soon thereafter became when Mr. McKinley was killed, we began to come to terms fully with the implications of the Industrial Revolution on our society. And in 2000, we will be still about the business of fully coming to term for the implication of the technology and information revolution in our society.

So I think there -- you might be able to go back and see how people were dealing with it, what principles were there, whether they are relevant to today, and it might also be interesting to see what some of the predictions were in 1900 that turned out right and what turned out wrong as a way of adding a grain of salt to whatever all the rest of us are going to be saying in three years.

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THE PRESIDENT: First of all, let me say to all of those who have followed us in other sites, thank you for joining us. Technology really has turned out to be a wonderful thing. We had 4,000 hits on our web site after the State of the Union. So Americans really are tuning in in positive ways on the Internet.

Professor Bailyn, thank you for reminding us of the things that are profoundly, essentially American about our nation, about our past, and therefore, critical to our future.

I want to thank Hillary again and Ellen Lovell for conceiving of this idea and executing it. I want to welcome you all to Abigail Adams' washroom here and go down to the State Dining Room where we'll all be able to visit for a few moments now, and ask everyone to tune in when, in about three weeks we have the next one of these.

Thank you very much, and good evening.

END

8:08 P.M. EST

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 6, 1998

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT MILLENNIUM LECTURE SERIES

The East Room

8:17 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. And Dr. Hawking, you'll have to forgive me, I'm a little hoarse. I hope for some genetic improvement sometime in the next year or so.

Ladies and gentlemen, this was a stunning event for me and I hope for all of you. Yesterday, Stephen and Elaine came by the White House to see Hillary and me and, as you can imagine, like Hillary, I had reread A Brief History of Time and I was utterly terrified that he would say something like, you know, I went to University College Oxford, too, and then he would ask me some incredible comparative academic question about our experiences there. Instead, he said, was the food just as bad when you were there which was a wonderful relief.

Albert Einstein once said, because politics is for the present, but an equation is something for eternity, equations were more important than politics. I don't know about the politics part, but Professor Hawking's insights into equations have altered our notions of time and the very nature of eternity itself. Tonight he's given us a lot to think about, even the ability to imagine a future in which we as humans will have finally captured the Holy Grail of Physics, reconciling the infinitesimal with the infinite; presenting the world with the Ultimate Theory of Everything. Now, when a physicist does that, he can totally ignore politics and buy a newspaper.

The one thing I liked most about thinking about the future in Professor Hawking's term is that even when we reach the era of Star Trek, which will make a lot of our children very happy, it won't be so static. It will still be human and dynamic. And according to the visuals accompanying the lecture, it will still matter whether you can bluff at poker, which is encouraging.

I want to get on with the questions now. And again, I want to thank Professor Hawking for the extraordinary clarity and vigor of his presentation and for sharing his time with us tonight, and for placing this particular moment in the larger spectrum of time -- which I think if we all

could do more and more clearly every day, we would live happier, more productive lives. Thank you, Professor.

Ellen, would you like to take over and bring in the questions?

MS. LOVELL: Thank you, Mr. President. I would like to begin our question and comments session. Because of the way Professor Hawking communicates and the time it takes him to select words from his screen to assemble his responses, we did give him a few questions in advance. I just learned that we're getting two e-mails a minute from all over the world and have over 300. The students who are here tonight and in the Indian Treaty Room were chosen on the basis of the questions they wrote to Professor Hawking.

But for the first live question, I turn to Dr. Vera Rubin, astrophysicist, in the Department of Terrestrial Magnetism at Carnegie Institute.

DR. RUBIN: Thank you, Professor Hawking, for this most stimulating and entertaining talk. Our knowledge of the universe comes both from observations and from theoretical studies. I wonder if you would be willing to stick your neck out once again and tell us what you think will be the most exciting discovery in connection with cosmology in the next 100 years.

MS. LOVELL: And while Professor Hawking is responding, I want to turn to Dr. Silvester Gates, past president of the American Association of Black Physicists, to expand on a point Professor Hawking made.

Dr. Gates, for the average listener, like me, how do "super partner species" and "closed loops" of particles cancel each other out? Advanced physics in two minutes.

DR. GATES: Well, first of all, as we all know, we can't walk through walls. It's a very obvious property. You don't have to teach any student a physics course to know that. In the idea of super symmetry, where we think that there's another part to the universe that we haven't seen, there may be objects for which this isn't true. There may be things, the super partners -- and we don't know how much they are, how many there are, or how they behave -- but if they are there, they will lead to new forms of energy and matter and the possibilities are beyond our imagination at this point. Thank you.

MS. LOVELL: I think I got it. We got an intriguing question from a University of Maryland student, Daniel Manilow, which I would like to direct to Dr. William Phillips, 1997 Nobel Laureate in Physics.

Dr. Phillips, why does the universe obey any laws at all?

DR. PHILLIPS: Well, that's a really good question, and I really wish I had a really good answer for it. It's the kind of question that has intrigued and vexed scientists and, I suppose, philosophers and theologians for a long time. It's really quite remarkable.

All of the wonderful things Professor Hawking talked about can actually be described in a very small number of relatively simple equations and then a lot of complicated mathematics. Why is it that the universe is so simple? Why is it that it follows mathematical laws? Well, people have speculated about this, and one possible answer is that if the universe had been any different from what it is, we wouldn't be here. That is, if the laws of the universe hadn't been what they are or if there were no laws at all, it would have been impossible for life to have evolved. It would have been impossible for us to have evolved to the point that we could ask that question. So that's sometimes called the "entropic principle." Not perhaps to put too much emphasis on people, but it probably applies to amoebas as well, that they wouldn't have been able to evolve either.

On the other hand, there is another answer, which isn't actually that far from that answer, and if you're a person with religious faith, as I am, you could answer that the reason we have a universe that follows laws is because God decided to make the universe in that way because God wanted us to develop the way we have and to evolve in the way that we have; and that this is, of course, a philosophical and theological answer and it has more to do with one's faith than one's scientific conclusions, but it's an answer that I like very much and that I don't find very different from the first one.

MS. LOVELL: Thank you. Professor Hawking raised the question of redesigning our DNA. Dr. Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project at the National Institutes of Health, is here.

Dr. Collins, what would be the implications of genetic engineering of the human race?

DR. COLLINS: Well, I appreciate the question and certainly Professor Hawking's presentation was very thought-provoking in this regard -- having physicists speculate about biology is welcome, indeed. No, I mean that. I mean that.

Certainly, the proposal about the widespread application of genetic engineering to human beings raises a couple of points. This kind of knowledge is, in itself, neither good, nor evil -- it's knowledge. It's the use to which we put it that determines sort of the moral character of it. To what extent are these improvements in human beings moral or immoral is a question that we, as society, will have to wrestle with. If, in fact, the goal is to wipe out a dread disease, then I think that's entirely consistent with our moral obligations as human beings to try to alleviate suffering. And if that could be done without inducing other harms, then I suspect many of us would celebrate it.

If, on the other hand, it is to achieve improvements, you quickly begin to wonder who defines what an improvement is, and does that, in fact, allow one group of people to decide that their characteristics are more improved than others and, therefore, more in need of being transferred to various recipients. And that puts one into a bit of an ethical dilemma.

Furthermore, I think, as the President has recently said, science should not be a line that allows us further to discriminate between the haves and the have-nots. And one would worry

very much about a technology which allowed this kind of improvement only to be available to certain people.

Finally -- and I echo what the preceding speaker said -- this does get us into an area where you begin to wonder about our view of ourselves, especially our view of ourselves as it relates to God. If we are to transform our species in this wholesale way, what do we end up with?

So there's plenty of things to think about there. I actually, along with Winston Churchill, have a great deal of confidence in our ability as a species to make sure that our technologies are our servants and not our masters. But it will take a great deal of public involvement to make sure that that is the outcome.

MS. LOVELL: Thank you very much. We're ready for Dr. Hawking's reply to Dr. Rubin.

PROFESSOR HAWKING: The most exciting discovery will probably be something we don't expect -- that is, such surprising discoveries that have led to the great revolutions in the past.

MS. LOVELL: Mrs. Clinton, we have a question from the Internet.

MRS. CLINTON: This is a question from Candra, in Washington: Do you ever lose your place while solving mathematical equations in your head? And, if so, how do you handle that?

DR. HAWKING: It is difficult to handle complicated equations in my head. I, therefore, avoid problems with a lot of equations or translate them into problems in geometry. I can then picture them in my mind.

MRS. CLINTON: This question is from Larry in Denver: How does it feel to be compared to Einstein and Newton?

DR. HAWKING: I think to compare me to Newton and Einstein is media hype.

MRS. CLINTON: I must say, you did look good at the card table.

DR. HAWKING: I fit the popular stereotype of a mad scientist or a disabled genius or, should I say, a physically challenged genius, to be politically correct. I am clearly physically challenged, but I don't feel I am a genius like Newton and Einstein.

MS. LOVELL: Mrs. Clinton, there is a special message for you, the President, and Professor Hawking.

MRS. CLINTON: And is that message on the Internet?

MS. LOVELL: You're going to see it on the screen behind you. It comes from very far away.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, this is a special message, Professor Hawking, from your friends in outer space.

ASTRONAUT THOMAS: Good evening, Mr. President, Mrs. President and Professor Hawking. I'm the NASA astronaut presently orbiting the Earth on the space station Mir. I want to thank you for the opportunity to join you briefly tonight as I explore the universe up here on the space station -- the universe that Professor Hawking has so clearly elucidated to us in his writings. I'm delighted that students are able to participate in this event. It gives us a way of honoring the past and imagining the future, and encouraging students to believe in -- I think is the future for us.

Thank you all for your participation and good evening.

MS. LOVELL: Well, I have to bring us back to Earth. Sakhile Moyo, from the University of the District of Columbia, I know you have a question.

MS. MOYO: Hi. My question to Professor Hawking is: If you believe that the galaxies around the universe will collapse once again, do you predict this as being another Big Bang?

PROFESSOR HAWKING: We don't yet know how much matter there is in the universe. The observations at present suggest that there isn't enough matter to stop the expansion of the universe, and so it will continue to expand forever. But if there is extra dark matter that we haven't detected, the universe could collapse again to a Big Crunch. However, the Big Crunch would be the end of the universe and of time itself. There doesn't seem to be any way one can continue through the Big Crunch to a new Big Bang. But don't worry, the Big Crunch won't come for at least 20 billion years. That will last my time and even that of the President, who is a bit younger than me.

MS. LOVELL: Dr. Andrea Dupree, I'm going to put you on the spot for a short comment on the lecture.

DR. DUPREE: Thank you. Well, during this marvelously eclectic and imaginative lecture, I couldn't help but think about the enormously rapid pace of our understanding and our development in things that we couldn't even anticipate. I know when I started out in training as an astrophysicist, I never thought that I would be able to use the Hubbell space telescope to actually look at the surface of a star, a star where the light is coming to us when Christopher Columbus arrived in our country. These are just wonderful things that we've been able to do.

And I really draw from much of this that we really have to prepare for the unexpected. And that's what basic research is all about; that we are looking for things and we're not always sure what we're going to find other than a magnificent, better understanding of where we are and

who we are and where we are going. And I'm sure if we keep up the momentum that we've heard about tonight that the next millennium will be magnificent and will have wonderful scientific rewards.

MS. LOVELL: Another optimist. Thank you.

Mrs. Clinton, the last question comes from the Internet.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, this question is from Al in New Hampshire. That is, for our British guests, Al Gore, who is never without his computer and, therefore, can log on anywhere, and was very sorry that previous obligations kept him from being here. So here is the Vice President's question:

Within the past month, we have seen evidence suggesting a strong, repulsive force in the universe -- an anti-gravitational force causing the universe to expand, surprisingly, at an accelerating rate. How surprised were you by this finding? What are its most important implications? And how could your national cosmology supercomputer help to prove or disprove these implications?

DR. HAWKING: What the Vice President is referring to is some observational evidence that suggests that there may be an anti-gravitational force that would cause the universe to expand at an increasing rate. The existence of such an anti-gravitational force is very controversial. Einstein first suggested it might exist, but later regretted it and said it was his greatest mistake. If it is there at all, it must be very small. It is difficult to understand why it should be so small, unless it were exactly zero.

We probably won't know if there's a small anti-gravitational force until observations come in from new satellites that the U.S. and Europe will put up in the first years of the millennium. But the data analysis of this satellite observations will require a supercomputer like the national cosmology computer we have in Cambridge. If it turns out that there really is an anti-gravitational force, it will mean that inflation is a law of nature.

THE PRESIDENT: Dr. Hawking, my position is we have repealed that law.

Let me say, first of all, in defense of my Vice President, you will all understand that he would love to be here, but there is a peculiar gravitational force in New Hampshire that manifests itself with a remarkable regularity. Let me also say that in the visual presentation accompanying Dr. Hawking's lecture, there was that remarkable project stamped "canceled" on it. This administration opposed the cancellation of it, I'm proud to say. But we hope that the Swiss project will take up the slack.

There's so many questions I know you would all like to ask. We have hundreds of questions coming in, and one of the questions I wish there were time to explore is, if we do, in fact, acquire a general understanding that time and space are more multidimensional than we have imagined, and computers become ever more sophisticated, even if people will never be able

to travel at the speed of light, will we be able to communicate some day in some ways that destroy our common notions of time?

I've thought about it a lot and I'm not smart enough to know what the answer is, but I'd love to -- that's one of the reasons I enjoyed re-reading the book.

Let me also say one other thing to close -- since our Nobel Laureate talked about his faith about how the world began -- the First Lady started tonight by talking about the marvels of technology which enable this astonishing man to communicate with us. And it is true that he is here and we did this because of the marvels of technology. It is also true, in my mind, that he is a genuine living miracle because of the power of the heart and the spirit. And we can only hope that all the advances that he has foreseen for us tonight in human knowledge will serve to amplify the heart and the spirit that we have humbly witnessed this evening.

Thank you and God bless you all.

END

8:41 P.M. EST

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

April 22, 1998

REMARKS AT
MILLENNIUM LECTURE SERIES

The East Room

7:30 P.M. EDT

MS. LOVELL: Welcome to the third Millennium Evening at the White House. We are glad to know that outside this room, so full of anticipation, are thousands of Americans who are watching, listening and having your own discussion.

We begin this evening with a short film in which our Librarian of Congress tells us about the Poet Laureate Consultant Program, and the three most recent Poets Laureate speak about their work as writers, but also as voices of poetry.

At the same time, we are here to honor all of you, poets of the world, listeners, readers, you whose curiosity and love of language is alive. Where the voice that is in us makes a true response; where the voice that is great within us rises up.

(A film is shown.)

MRS. CLINTON: Who can remember back to the first poets, the greatest ones, greater even than Orpheus? No one has remembered that far back, or now considers among the artifacts and bones and cantilevered inference the past is made of, those first and greatest poets, so lofty and disdainful of renown, they left us not a name to know them by.

They were the ones that, in whatever tongue worded the world, that were the first to say, star, water, stone; that said the visible and made it bring invisibles to view in wind and time and change. And in the mind itself, that mind of the hitherto idiot world, and spoke the speechless world, and sang the towers of the city into the astonished sky.

They were the first great listeners, attuned to interval relationship and scale; the first to say, above, beneath, beyond. Congerers with love, death, sleep, with bread and wine; who, having uttered, vanished from the world leaving no memory but the marvelous, magical elements -- the breathing shapes and stops of breaths we build our babbles of.

To you, who speak the speechless world, and to the great listeners who hear it, we are honored to welcome you to the White House.

Just like Howard Nemerov in "The Makers," we are here on this Millennium Evening to celebrate the timeless power of poetry and poets as our American memory, our purveyors of insight and culture, our eyes and ears who silence the white noise around us and express the very heart of what connects us, plagues us, and makes us fully human.

I want to thank everyone who has made this celebration possible -- especially Ellen Lovell, the Director of the White House Millennium Council; our Poets Laureate, Robert Pinsky, Rita Dove, Bob Hass, Anthony Hecht, and William Meredith. What better way to commemorate National Poetry Month than by gathering our nation's poetry and poets in our nation's home.

When Stephen Hawking gave the second Millennium Lecture here, I'd said that there had never been more physicists in the White House. I don't believe there have ever been more poets in the White House than this evening. I hope you will also get a chance to visit the foyer and see some of the extraordinary works that capture America's role in poetry and poetry's role in America. For that exhibit and so much more, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dr. James Billington, the center for the book, the curators, and the entire Library of Congress.

Let me also thank Bill Ferris and the National Endowment for the Humanities, state humanities councils, the Howard Gilman Foundation, Phi Theta Kappa, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Sun Microsystems for bringing this event to people throughout our nation and the world, first via satellite to more than 200 sites in 44 states, and also via the Internet on the White House web site and the Sun Microsystems site.

This is the third of many Millennium Evenings we will be holding with scholars, artists, scientists, and other creative individuals to help our nation explore who we are, who we want to be as we enter the next century. The goal of all of our White House Millennium activities is to honor the past and imagine the future, and that is what we are doing tonight, with both poetry and prose, with cutting-edge technology and the torn pages of old books.

Like many of you, I suppose my first real introduction to poetry took place in a classroom. I remember standing before what looked to be a sea of other children and reciting poems I'd memorized by saying them out loud at the kitchen table on the way to school before going to sleep, over and over again. That is how I and so many learned to feel the music and rhythm and inspiration of poetry, to understand its window onto our experiences as Americans, individuals and communities. Whether we sang the Star-Spangled Banner or recited in Emma Lazarus' words inscribed in the Statue of Liberty, or asked Langston Hughes' haunting question, what happens to a dream deferred, we were being influenced by poetry.

We know that happens every day, not just while we're still in school -- when we fall in love or see loved ones die, when our hopes are realized or dashed; we tuck our children into bed, perhaps to a favorite rhyme or walk through a garden. In every moment of our lives the poems we read or write or remember speak to us, often transforming us, comforting us. And we pass

that love for them down from generation to generation.

It's important that we touch not just the lives of the few through poetry, but the everyday life of all of us. That's what the Poet Laureate Joseph Brodsky was talking about when he said that, an anthology of American poetry should be found in the drawer in every room in every motel in the land. Seven years later, we see that dream being fulfilled in truck stops, supermarkets and train stations, where thousands of copies of 101 Great Poems are being handed out by his American Poetry and Literacy Project every April.

This afternoon, we saw poetry in action at Johnson Junior High School in Southeast Washington. We saw students who were practicing for a poetry slam taking place tonight. Now, for those of you who have never seen a slam, it's a high-speed, high-spirited competition where students face off against each other, reading their own poems and receiving scores like at the Olympics from a group of judges.

Using their voices as an instrument and their souls as a library, these students read poems about the beauty of their names, the plight of a homeless man, the contributions of Duke Ellington, their pride, and their pains. And they talked about how poetry had helped put their anger on paper, instead of acting it out; how it had opened up thoughts they never knew existed and given them confidence. One young man stood up and said as part of his poem, I'm so musical that when I write a song you sing it for the rest of your life.

No one has worked harder to ensure that children and young people and all of us throughout America sing poetry for the rest of our lives than our two former and current Poets Laureate. Whether by promoting literacy and celebrating our environment, or by bringing poetry to everyone and putting everyday life into poetry, they have been on the front lines.

We are also very grateful that Robert Pinsky has created a program for recording poems, the poems that help define us as individuals and as a nation. And just this morning I was pleased to announce that the National Endowment for the Arts is awarding \$500,000 to support the Favorite Poem Project.

So tonight it is my great honor to introduce three of Howard Nemerov's "makers" who will speak the speechless world and bring it to all of us -- in other words, their own version of the poetry slam -- our Poets Laureate, Bob Hass, Rita Dove and Robert Pinsky, who will start things off with a few comments.

Please welcome them.

MR. PINSKY: We're here to honor our ancestors -- not our literal ancestors, but our ancestors in poetry -- and to imagine ways that we can give the gift that they gave to us to the young.

I'll start with just a few lines from Harriet Converse's 19th century translation of an Iroquois Thanksgiving Song:

We give thanks that the voice of the Great Spirit can still be heard through the words of ganay-oh-day-ho. We thank the Great Spirit that we have the privilege of this pleasant occasion. We give thanks for the persons who can sing the Great Spirit's music and hope that they will be privileged to continue in his faith. We thank the Great Spirit for all the persons who perform the ceremonies on this occasion.

We're going to try to give a fast, representative reading from the great heritage of American poetry. And the place to begin seems to be with the poet who embodies the sweep and embrace and cultural appetite of American art and American life at its best. I'll read a few lines from the opening from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," by Walt Whitman, and then my friends will continue in that vein.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me. On the ferry boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose. And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditation than you might suppose.

The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them, the certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore. Others will watch the run of the flood tide. Others will see the shipping of Manhattan, north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east. Others will see the islands large and small;

Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high. A hundred years hence, or ever

so many hundred years hence, others
will see them, will enjoy the sunset,
the pouring in of the flood tide, the
falling back to the sea of the ebb
tide.

It avails not, time nor place; distance
avails not. I am with you, men and
women of a generation, or ever so many
generations hence.

Just as you feel when you look on the
river and sky, so I felt. Just as any
of you who is one of a living crowd, I
was one of a crowd. Just as you are
refreshed by the gladness of the river
and the bright flow, I was refreshed.

Just as you stand and lean on the rail,
yet hurry with the swift current, I
stood, yet was hurried. Just as you
look on the numberless masts of ships
and the thick-stemmed pipes of
steamboats, I looked.

MS. DOVE: From Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

A child said, What is the grass?
fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not
know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my
disposition, out of hopeful green stuff
woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of
the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer
designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name some way in
the corners, that we may see and remark
and say, Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child,
the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform
hieroglyphic,

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad
zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among

white, Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman,
Cuff, I give them the same. I receive
them the same. And now it seems to me
the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

And Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

I've known rivers. I've known rivers
ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns
were young. I built my hut near the
Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the
pyramids above it. I heard the singing
of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen
its muddy bosom turn all golden in the
sunset.
I've known rivers, ancient, dusky
rivers. My soul hath grown deep like
the river.

MR. HASS: We move from Walt Whitman's Atlantic to
Langston Hughes' Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean of Robinson
Jeffers. I'm going to read a poem written after the death of his
wife, in the late 1950s, and it's called "Vulture."

I had walked since dawn and laid down
to rest on a bare hillside above the
ocean. I saw through half-shut eyelids
a vulture wheeling up in heaven. And
presently it passed again, but nearer
and lower; its orbit narrowing.

I understood then that I was under
inspection. I laid death-still and
heard the flight feathers whistle above
me and make their circle and come
nearer. I could see the naked red head
between the great wings bear downward,
staring.

I said, 'My dear bird, we are wasting

time here. These old bones still work.
They are not for you.' But how
beautiful he looked gliding down on
those great sails. How beautiful he
looked veering away in the sea light
over the precipice. I tell you
solemnly that I was sorry to have
disappointed him. To be eaten by that
beak and become part of him, to share
those wings and those eyes, what a
sublime end of one's body, one an
enskyment, what a life after death."

MR. PINSKY: I hope you all noticed how artfully we went from the east coast to the
midwest to the Pacific. I hope it's not a complete bromide to say that if Whitman embodies an
audacious sweep and cultural appetite and cultural omnivorousness, Emily Dickinson embodies
other characteristics of American art, an audacious individuality and boldness and concentration.
And we thought it would be appropriate to do some of those.

Further in summer than the birds,
pathetic from the grass
A minor nation celebrates its unobtrusive mass.
No ordinance be seen
So gradual the grace a pensive custom
it becomes, enlarging loneliness.
Antiquiest felt at noon
When August burning low
Arise this spectral canticle,
Repose to typify.
Remit as yet no grace,
No furrow on the glow
Yet a Druidic difference
Enhances nature now.

MR. HASS: Much madness is the vinest sense to the discerning eye. Much sense the
starkest madness. Tis the majority prevails; tis the majority in this as all prevails. Assent and
you are sane; demure, you're straight way dangerous and handled with a chain.

MS. DOVE: I heard a fly buzz when I died;
The stillness in the room was like the
stillness in the air between the heavens
of storm.
The eyes around had wrung them dry, and
breaths were gathering firm for that
last onset, when the king be witnessed

in the room.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away what
portion of me be assignable. And then
it was there interposed a fly,
With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,
between the light and me.
And then the windows failed, and then I
could not see to see.

MR. PINSKY: After great pain, a formal feeling comes. The nerves sit ceremonious,
like tombs. The stiff heart questions, was it He that bore, and yesterday, or centuries before? The
feet, mechanical, go round of ground or air or ought. A wooden way, regardless grown. A
quartz contentment, like a stone. This is the hour of lead,

Remembered, if outlived, as freezing
persons recollect the snow.
First chill, then stupor, then the
letting go.

We could be all Dickinson, couldn't we? I said that these are poems of the past, but we
are imagining them for future generations. So we thought we'd read a group of poems to do with
children and families and the passing on of culture. I think this is the only commissioned poem
that will be read tonight. This is a poem by William Carlos Williams that his grandson asked
him to write.

The Turtle (For My Grandson.)

Not because of his eyes, the eyes of a
bird but because he is beaked,
bird-like, to do an injury, has the
turtle attracted you. He is your only
pet. When we are together you talk of
nothing else, ascribing all sorts of
murderous motives to his least action.
You ask me to write a poem, should I
have poems to write about a turtle.
The turtle lives in the mud, but is not
mud-like.
You can tell it by his eyes, which are
clear. When he shall escape his
present confinement he will stride
about the world destroying all with his
sharp beak. Whatever opposes him in
the streets of the city shall go down.
Cars will be overturned. And upon his

back shall ride to his conquests my
lord, you. You shall be master.
In the beginning there was a great
tortoise who supported the world. Upon
him all ultimately rests. Without him,
nothing will stand. He is all wise and
can outrun the hare. In the night, his
eyes carry him to unknown places. He
is your friend.

MR. HASS: Anne Bradstreet was, I guess, the first American poet. She was the first English colonist to publish a book of poems. She came to New England on the ship *Arabella*, the first ship that brought the Puritans to New England, in 1630. And her book was published in 1650, but the poem I'm going to read was not in that book. She thought it was too personal to be printed, and it wasn't, in fact, printed until 1865. It was a poem that she wrote to her husband in the ninth month of a pregnancy.

Giving birth in that wilderness in those years was a risky business, and she feared she wouldn't survive it, and she wrote this poem to speak to him. It begins, as Puritan poems often did, in adages and platitudes, but listen to what happens. The Victorian editor gave it the title "Before the Birth of One of Her Children."

All things within the fading world hath
end. Adversity doth still our joys
attend. No ties so strong, no friend
so dear and sweet,
But with death's parting blow is sure
to meet.
The sentence passed is most
irrevocable, a common thing, yet, oh,
inevitable.
How soon, my dear, death may my steps attend.
How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend.
We're both ignorant, yet love bids me these farewell
lines to recommend to thee,
That when that knot's untied that made us one,
I may seem thine, who in effect am none.
And if I see not half my days that's due,
What nature would, God grant to yours and you.
The many faults that well you know I have
Let be interred in my oblivious grave.
If any worth or virtue were in me,
Let that live freshly in they memory.
And when thou feelst no grief as I no harms,
Yet love they dead who lay long in thine arms.

And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains,
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
And if thou loves thyself or lovest me,
These, oh, protect from stepdame's injury.
And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs, honor my absent hearse.
And kiss this paper, for thy love's dear sake,
Who, with salt tears, this last farewell did take.

MR. PINSKY: I'll read a poem by one of our predecessors as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, Robert Hayden. The poem is a memory of his childhood.

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays, too, my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blue-black cold,
then with cracked hands that ached from labor
in the weekday weather made banked fires blaze.
No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm he'd call
and slowly I would rise and dress, fearing
the chronic angers of that house,

speaking indifferently to him who had driven out the
cold and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know of
love's austere and lonely offices?

MS. DOVE: Many of us know Sylvia Plath as a writer of wonderful and troubled poems. And what some people do not realize is that she wrote some of the most beautiful love poems to her children, poems about being a mother, all of that joy, and that anguish.

"Child"

Your clear eye is the one absolutely
beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new
Whose names you meditate,
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
little stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images

Should be grand and classical
Not this troublous wringing of hands,
this dark ceiling without a star.

MR. PINSKY: One of the things that Americans should perhaps be most patriotic about is our impurity. Cultural blendings, collidings, crazy mixes and improvisations are behind our distinctive works -- such as jazz and the American feature film and, indeed, American poetry as well as American music, of country music, things. And we thought we'd try to read a few poems that suggest some of that genius for unexpected and impure cultural mixes and ways that we're related to the cultures of other continents in ways that are unexpected.

MS. DOVE: I'll start with a poem by County Cullin, who was a great proponent of the Harlem Renaissance, that magnificent explosion of music, of poetry, art and just plain good fun in the '20s. In this poem, though, County Cullin, who's an African American poet, writes to another poet, to John Keats, the English poet.

To John Keats, poet, at springtime. I
cannot hold my peace, John Keats.
There never was a spring like this. It
is an echo that repeats my last year's
song and next year's bliss. I know, in
spite of all men say of beauty, you
have felt her most. Yea, even in your
grave, her way is laid. Poor, troubled,
lyric ghost, spring never was so fair
and dear as beauty makes her seem this
year.

I cannot hold my peace, John Keats. I
am as helpless in the toil of spring as
any lamb that bleats, the field of
solid earth recoil beneath his puny
legs. Spring beats her toxin call to
those who love her and, lo, the dogwood
petals cover her breast with drifts of
snow and sleek white gulls fly
screaming to her and hover about her
shoulders and kiss her cheek, while
white and purple lilacs muster a
strength that bears them to a cluster
of color and odor. For her sake, all
things that slept are now awake.

And you and I, shall we lie still, John
Keats, while beauty summons us?
Somehow I feel your sensitive will is
pulsing up some tremulous sap road of a
maple tree, whose leaves grow music as
they grow, since your wild voice is in
them -- a harp that grieves for life,
that opens death's dark door. Though
dust, your fingers still can push the
vision splendid to a birth. Though now
they work as grass in the hush of the
night on the broad, sweet page of the
earth.

John Keats is dead, they say. But I,
who hear your full, insistent cry in
bud and blossom, leaf and tree, know
John Keats still writes poetry.

And while my head is earthward bowed to read new life sprung from your shroud, folks
seeing me must think it's strange that merely spring should so derange my mind. They do not
know that you, John Keats, keep rebel with me, too.

MR. PINSKY: A whole tremendous weight of European thought and religion and
philosophical questioning is dealt with in a very irreverent and saucy way in this poem by
Wallace Stevens.

"The Pleasures of Merely Circulating."

The garden flew round with the angel.
The angel flew round with the clouds.
And the clouds flew round and the
clouds flew round and the clouds flew
round with the clouds.

Is there any secret in skulls, the
cattle skulls in the woods? Do the
drummers and black hoods rumble
anything out of their drums?

Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby might well
have been German or Spanish
But the things go round and again go
round Has rather a classical sound.

MR. HASS: Since Rita read County Cullin's tribute to John Keats, I thought that I'd read the tribute of an Irish American poet to a great black American artist. It's Frank O'Hara's elegy for Billie Holiday, called, "The Day Lady Died." And you should probably know that Billie Holiday used to sing at the Five Spot and that her accompanist was named Mal Waldron. This is the saucy, circumstantial American poetry of the New York art scene in the 1950s.

"The Day Lady Died"

It is 12:20 in New York, a Friday,
three days after Bastille Day. Yes,
it's 1959 and I go get a shoe shine
because I will get off the 419 in
Easthampton at 7:15 and then go
straight to dinner and I don't know the
people who will feed me.

I walk up the muggy street beginning to
sun and have a hamburger and a malted
and buy an ugly New World Writing to
see what the poets in Ghana are doing
these days.

I go to the bank and Mrs. Stillwagon
(first name Linda, I once heard)
doesn't even look at my balance for
once in her life. And in the Golden
Griffin Bookstore I get a little
Verlaine for Patsy with drawings by
Bonnard although I do think of Hesiod
translator Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon
or Les Negres of Genet,
But I don't, I stick with Verlaine after practically
going to sleep with quandariness.

And for Mike I just stroll into the
Park Lane Liquor Store and ask for a
bottle of Strega and then I go back
where I came from, to 6th Avenue and
the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld
Theatre, and casually ask for a carton
of Gauloises and a carton of Picayunes
and a New York Post with her face on
it.

And I am sweating a lot now and

thinking of leaning on the john door in
the 5 Spot while she whispered a song
along the keyboard to Mal
Waldron and everyone and I stopped
breathing.

MR. PINSKY: We'll read a series of poems that have to do with imagination, I think in an American context. The poem I'm going to read to you has a lot in common in American country music. It's basically kind of a "somebody done somebody wrong" narrative in which the extraordinary nature of the woman who chooses very badly in love becomes part of the pride of a town. And the relationship between the gossip, or the preoccupation of the town and her heroism makes something of the story that's a little more significant to the imagination than the story would be in itself, for her, or than the town would be.

And the rhymes -- it's Edwin Arlington's "Eros Turannos" -- Love the Tyrant. The rhymes in the poem are like a somewhat, somewhat longing notion of a ballad, but it's like a hyper-ballad. It's a ballad straining to be a ballad in a community that is partly too lonely to be the adequate community.

"Eros Turannos"

She fears him, and will always ask
What fated her to choose him;
She meets in his engaging mask
All reasons to refuse him;
But what she meets and what she fears
Are less than are the downward years
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
Of age, were she to lose him.

Between a blurred sagacity
That once had power to sound him,
And love that will not let him be
The Judas that she found him,
Her pride assuages her almost,
As if it were alone the cost.
He sees that he will not be lost
And waits and looks around him.
A sense of ocean and old trees

Envelops and allures him;
Tradition touching all he sees
Beguiles and reassures him;
And all her doubts of what he says

Are dimmed with what she knows of days

--

Ill even in prejudice delays
And fades, and she secures him.

The falling leaf inaugurates
The reign of her confusion;
The pounding wave reverberates
The dirge of her illusion;
And home, where passion lived and died,
Becomes a place where she can hide
While all the town harbor side
Vibrate with her seclusion.

We tell you, tapping on our brows,
The story as it should be,
As if the story of a house
Were told, or ever could be;
We'll have no kindly veil between
Her visions and those we have seen,
As if we guessed what hers have been,
Or what they are or would be.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a God have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given;
Though like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

MS. DOVE: Elizabeth Bishop wrote one of the most amazing sestinas I think of the English language. The sestina is a lot like a household as seen by a child. Words keep popping up, objects, and you try to make sense of them. And just as a sestina uses those six words over and over again, a child will find a way to piece together the puzzle of its existence and its place in the world.

This is Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina."

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old
grandmother sits in the kitchen with
the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,

reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of
the house

were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.

The iron kettle sings on the stove.

She cuts some bread and says to the
child, It's time for tea now; but the
child is watching the teakettle's small
hard tears dance like mad on the hot
black stove,

the way the rain must dance on the
house.

Tidying up, the old grandmother hangs
up the clever almanac on its string.

Birdlike, the almanac hovers half open
above the child, hovers above the old
grandmother and her teacup full of dark
brown tears.

She shivers and says she thinks the
house feels chilly, and puts more wood
in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.

I know what I know, says the almanac.

With crayons, the child draws a rigid
house and a winding pathway. Then the
child puts in a man with buttons like
tears and shows it proudly to the
grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove, the
little moons fall down like tears from
between the pages of the almanac into
the flower bed the child has carefully
placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.

The grandmother sings to the marvelous
stove and the child draws another
inscrutable house.

MR. HASS: Wallace Stevens probably thought longer and more directly about imagination, about the American imagination, about the relationship of the imagination to reality than any other American poet. And this is his last -- possibly his second to last, poem on the subject. It's either the last poem he wrote, or very near it -- this man who spent 30 years walking from his house to his job as an executive vice president of the Hartford Insurance Company, musing on his own mind. And this last poem he called, "Of Mere Being."

I should say that it's a man who lived through hard-winters Floridian imagination of mere being.

The pond at the end of the mine, beyond
the last thought rises in the bronze
decor. A gold feathered bird sings in
the pond without human feeling, without
human meaning, a foreign song. It is
then you know it is not the reasons
that make us happy or unhappy..

The tree stands at the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly through the
branches. The birds' fire-fangled
feathers dangle down."

MR. PINSKY: What we've been doing is seeking inspiration and sustenance and comfort from our past, from the ancestors. The last poem that we're going to read for this part of the evening is a poem about that journey, how mysterious and difficult and stressful and challenging and, the end, restorative, that search into the past is. And we'll share the reading of the poem amongst the three of us.

So the final poem, this part of the evening, is Robert Frost's poem, "Directive."

Back out of all this now too much for
us. Back in a time made simple by the
loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved and broken
off Like graveyard marble sculpture in
the weather.
There is a house that is no more a
house, Upon a farm that is no more a
farm,
And in a town that is no more a town.
The road there, if you'll let a guide
direct you
Who only has at heart your getting

lost, May seem as if it should have
been a quarry,
Great monolithic knees the former town
Long since gave up pretense of keeping
covered.

And there's a story in a book about it;
Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels
The ledges show lines ruled southeast,
northwest,
The chisel work of an enormous glacier
That braced his feet against the Arctic
Pole.

You must not mind a certain coolness
from him

Still said to haunt this side of
Panther Mountain.

Nor need you mind the serial ordeal of
being watched from forty cellar holes
As if by eye pairs out of forty
firkins.

MS. DOVE: As for the woods excitement
over you that sends light russell
rushes to their leaves, charge that to
upstart inexperience. Where were they
all not twenty years ago. They think
too much of having shaded out a few old
pecker-fretted apple trees.

Make yourself up a cheering song of how
someone's road home from work this once
was, who may be just ahead of you on
foot or creaking with a buggy-load of
grain. The height of the adventure is
the height of country where two village
cultures faded into each other. Both
of them are lost.

And if you're lost enough to find
yourself by now, pull in your ladder
road behind you and put a sign up:
Closed to all but me. Then make
yourself at home. The only field now
left no bigger than a harness gall.

First there is the children's house of
make-believe, some shattered dishes
underneath a pine, the playthings in
the playhouse of the children. Weep
for what little things could make them
glad.

MR. HASS: Then for the house that is
no more a house but only a bililacked
cellar hole now slowly closing like a
dent in dough. This was no playhouse
but a house in earnest. Your
destination and your destinies, a brook
that was the water of the house, cool
as a spring as yet so near its source,
too lofty and original to rage.

We know the valley streams that when
aroused will leave their tatters hung
on barb and thorn. I have kept hidden
in the instep arch of an old cedar at
the waterside a broken drinking goblet
like the grail, under a spell so the
wrong one's can't find it, so can't get
saved, as St. Mark says they mustn't.
I stole the goblet from the children's
playhouse.

Here are your waters and your watering
place. Drink and be whole again,
beyond confusion.

THE PRESIDENT: I don't mean to be heretical, but I was transported by Robert and
Robert and Rita. And I was thinking, this really is an historic moment: first, there were the three
tenors -- then there were three sopranos, but nobody ever had three such poets before. and we
thank them.

A few years ago there was an interesting article in the Atlantic Monthly, which asked
whether poetry could matter in the 21st century. I reread it a few moments before coming down
tonight. You know, in this crazy world we're living in, everything's running around so fast. If it
could matter, how could we revive the human value of poetry -- its importance to our culture, to
our sense of who we are and who we are becoming as individuals and as a people?

Well, tonight there is a poet who was not an American, but was very much of the
Americas, and I think we would be remiss not to acknowledge. Here's what Octavio Paz said

about his craft:

"Between what I see and what I say, between what I say and what I keep silent, between what I keep silent and what I dream, between what I dream and what I forget, poetry."

That is what we celebrate here tonight. Does it have any value? Of course, it does. It made us happy. It made us nostalgic. It made us sad. It made us wiser tonight.

When I was a boy in high school I was once required to memorize 100 lines from MacBeth -- hardly designed to entice me to a public career. But then again, I learned about the dangers of blind ambitions -- the fleeting nature of fame -- the ultimate emptiness of power disconnected from higher purpose. Mr. Shakespeare made me a better President.

Something quite a lot to be said for all this, and I welcome you here tonight. Tonight, we have honored the poetry of our nation's past. Now, I'd like for you to see some of the poets of our future, people whom Hillary and our Poets Laureate visited with today at Johnson Junior High School.

(A video is shown.)

THE PRESIDENT: Now I'd like to turn the discussion over to the Director of our White House Millennium Project, Ellen Lovell.

MS. LOVELL: Thank you, Mr. President. We invited some other Americans who love poetry to come here and read us their favorite poems. And the first is Barry Norkin from the Veterans Nursing Home program in Silver Spring, Maryland.

MR. NORKIN: Hello, I am Barry Norkin, and I would like to share with you Robert Frost's beautiful poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
to watch his woods fill up with
snow.
My little horse must think it queer
to stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
this darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
to ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
of easy wind on downy flake.
Ah, the woods are lovely, dark, and deep,

but I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
and miles to go before I sleep.

MS. LOVELL: Thank you, Mr. Norkin. I know that poem means a lot to you.

We have Internet questions now from all over the world, Mrs. Clinton, from Germany and Australia, Saudi Arabia, England, and India, but let's take the first one from the United States.

MRS. CLINTON: This question is from Rebecca Sue Olson from Chapin, South Carolina. And it's for any of the poets. "As we become more and more of a sound-bite society and rely upon technology for communication, will poetry even be relevant in the new millennium?"

Robert, Bob, Rita?

MR. HASS: Someone asked me that the other day. In fact, poets often get asked that in interviews, and I always think it's such a curious question. Technologies are media. They have content. I was with the grand old Nobel Laureate, Czeslaw Milosz, a couple of weeks ago on a spring afternoon in Portland. And we walked into a restaurant, and a very fresh-faced young waitress came toward us with a tray full of fruit. And he turned to me and said, you know, life is so pleasant it's a pity one has to die.

One needs a language in which to say those things whatever the technologies are. I don't understand how human beings will have any less need to think strange thoughts and feel their way into the strangest and funniest and happiest and weirdest feelings because they're using some other media.

MS. LOVELL: Reverend Michael Haynes from the Twelfth Baptist Church in Boston, I know that poetry is intertwined with your life and work.

REVEREND HAYNES: My parents immigrated to the United States from the island country of Barbados around 1920. I was born around 1927 in the heart of Boston, on the edge of the Great Depression, which had its terrible impact upon our family. I went to the Boston Public Schools, and in the 9th grade in junior high school a very, very caring, insightful teacher kept quoting phrases that said something like this, "Be not like dumb, driven cattle; be a hero in the strife." That was the first seed in my life of one whom I came to know as the New England poet by the name of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

When I got to Boston English High School, our English teacher made us learn the poem and recite the poem, gave us a little of the background. I didn't realize that I was receiving a seed in my life that was going to help me psychologically, sociologically and even, eventually, theologically.

When I got to theological school all of the pieces of Longfellow began to make an awful lot of sense. His Psalm of Life became mine:

Tell me not in mournful numbers, life
is but an empty dream, for the soul is
dead that slumbers and things are not
what they seem. Life is real. Life is
earnest. And the grave is not its
goal. Dust thou art, to dust returnest
was not spoken of the soul. Not
enjoyment and not sorrow is our
destined end away, but to act, that
each tomorrow finds us farther than
today.

Art is long and time is fleeting and
our hearts, though stout and brave,
sill like muffled drums are beating
funeral marches to the grave. In the
world's broad field of battle, in the
bivouac of life, be not like the dumb,
driven cattle, be a hero in the strife.
Trust no future, how ever pleasant.
Let the dead past bury its dead. Act.
Act in living present. Heart within
and God or head.

Lives of great men all remind us we can
make our lives sublime and departing
leave behind us footprints on the sands
of time. Footprints that perhaps
another sailing on life's solemn main,
a forlorn and a shipwrecked brother
seeing shall take heart again.

Let us then be up and doing, with a
heart for any fate still achieving,
still pursuing, learn to labor and
learn to wait."

MRS. CLINTON: This next question from the Internet is from Everett C. Albers from Bismark, North Dakota: "Suppose that in the next millennium poetry becomes the medium of shared vision and American community; there's a reading beginning at midnight, 2099. What lines from American poetry of the 20th century might be recited 1,000 years or so hence?

MR. HASS: Probably someone would get up and sing Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changing."

MS. DOVE: And that would be very appropriate.

MR. PINSKY: We started to try to answer that question in what we did for half an hour. We were partly thinking of the occasion. But I would say that Williams, Stevens, Bishop, Frost, O'Hara, Hughes, Hayden, the poets that we read represent not only our sense of what would be good to read on this occasion, but also things that live in our hearts and we think are likely to be living 100 years from now -- things by those authors. So it's not a very original answer, but it is from the heart.

MS. DOVE: And we can see that, I mean, if you think of -- we read Dickinson, and we wanted to stay there -- she will also be read in the year 2999.

MS. LOVELL: When I spoke with Rich Wormeli, a middle school teacher from Herndon, Virginia, and the 1996 Disney English Teacher of the Year, his deep feeling for words really came through. He's here with his students. Rick?

MR. WORMELI: Thank you. Thank you very much. We took your charge at heart. We have 11- and 12-year-olds, not just 13-year-olds, Ms. Dove -- some of Virginia's finest with us here tonight. But I have to tell you that in our classroom, we try to make poetry so compelling that the students can only escape by feeling the poet's passion, understanding the context. And with each poem we somehow plant a seed, I hope, of developed thought, developed maturation, and understanding. But it is through poetry that we're finally able to express those things that are unspeakable, unbridled joy, and tragic sorrow.

It is the latter of the two that I share with you tonight in effort to make poetry alive and lasting for my students. I read you "The Ballad of Birmingham," by Dudley Randall, which expresses what was going on in this poet's mind at the bombing of the churches in 1993 Birmingham, Alabama.

Mother dear, may I go downtown instead
of out to play, and march the streets of
Birmingham in a freedom march today?

No, baby, no, you may not go. For the
dogs are fierce and wild, and clubs and
hoses, guns and jail are not good for a
little child.

But mother, I won't be alone. Other
children will go with me, and march the
streets of Birmingham to make our
country free.

No, baby, no, you may not go. For I
fear those guns will fire. But you may
go to church instead and sing in the
children's choir.

She has combed and brushed her
night-dark hair and bathed rose-petal
sweet, and drawn white gloves on her
small brown hands and white shoes on
her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child was
in this sacred place. That smile was
the last smile to come upon her face.
For when she heard the explosion, her
eyes grew wet and wild. She raced
through the streets of Birmingham
calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and
brick and lifted out a shoe. Oh,
here's the shoe my baby wore, but,
baby, where are you?

MRS. CLINTON: This is an appropriate question to follow your poem. It's from Alice George in Evanston, Illinois. "Please identify one activity to be enacted in our country's public schools which you believe best inspires children to welcome the power of poetry, reading, and writing into their lives.

MR. PINSKY: A very simple answer: To read aloud. The teacher should read aloud to the kids. The kids should read aloud. And people should follow their tastes. The most stringent assignment a teacher can give to students is find something that you think is worth memorizing. Find something you think is worth reading aloud to other people.

To return to the previous question, it's the young poets and the passionate young people who decide what lives. It's not curricula or critics or anthologies. It's what gets under people's skin and what gives them the pleasure of reading aloud.

Knowledge is good. Analysis is good. Discussion is good. Learning is good. But all these things in art must begin with a physical encounter. And the physical encounter with the poem is saying it aloud and feeling that emotion people feel when they say a poem aloud. And my advice for anyone who wants to learn more about poetry is the same as my advice to myself - read it aloud and see what happens between the mind and the body as you read it aloud.

MS. LOVELL: I think we have time for one last Internet question, Mrs. Clinton.

MRS. CLINTON: This is from Louis Farrell of Las Altas Hills, California.

"Technology is leading us into the new millennium with such things as new DNA research, faster computers, Internet, et cetera. What value will poetry add to our quality of living that compares to these new marvels?

MS. DOVE: The key word there of course is "quality." And I would say that all of those new computer things have to have something to talk about and to write about, and poetry allows us to imagine the future. I don't believe that poets have any kind of monopoly on imagination, but what poetry can do is awaken the imagination, and through that imagination you can have the DNA research, the computers and all of these marvels. So it's all connected, it's all wrapped up together.

MR. HASS: I'll say that I love my computer. I have a great time with it. I love my CD player. I like my television set very much. And all of those things, the human appetite for art in the human being is bottomless, there's no end to it. And the very speed and the technological magnificence and vividness and the highly duplicable quality of those media I think already, as I perceive it in the country, create in reaction -- I'm not rejecting those things, but in reaction -- love for and need for the kind of excitement and comfort that comes from an art where the medium is one person's body. Not necessarily the artist's body, not Rita reading Rita's poems or me reading mine, but the body of the audience.

When I say a poem by Robert Hayden or Dickinson or Whitman with my voice, that voice -- my breath, is the artist's medium. And that's in a highly individual, personal scale that I think we crave, along with our craving for spectacular gadgets and massive film on a video disk of the Earth from space. It's wonderful, but it doesn't fill up my appetite for pizza.

MS. LOVELL: Our next to last reading. Jessica Rawls is a 7th grader from Charles Hart Middle School in D.C., she was with us today. She's a star in her poetry slam team. Jessica has so many poems that I know it was hard for her to choose just one to read, but she did.

MS. RAWLS: "Life Is Fine," by Langston Hughes.

I went down to the river. I sat down
on the bank. I tried to think, but
couldn't, so I jumped in and sank. I
came up once and hollered. I came up
twice and cried. If that water hadn't
been so cold I might have sunk and
died. But it was cold, cold that
water. It was cold.

I took the elevator 16 floors above the
ground. I thought about my baby and
thought I would jump. I stood there
and hollered. I stood there and cried.

If it hadn't been so high I might have
jumped and died. But it was high, high
up there. It was high.

So since I'm still here living, I guess
will live on. I could die for love,
but for living I was born.

Though you may hear me holler and you
may hear me cry, I'll be dogged, sweet
baby, if you're going to see me die.
Life is fine, fine as wine. Life is
fine.

Thank you.

MS. LOVELL: Mr. President, I know you have some words to give us.

THE PRESIDENT: Let me say, first of all, I thought the people who were in the
audience who read their poems were absolutely fabulous and I'd like to thank you all. You were
great. Thank you.

Well, I'm supposed to end. I suppose the first thing I should say is that poets help me get
over MacBeth. When I was about 21 and despairing I came across those wonderful lines from
Carl Sandburg, "A tough will counts; so does desire. So does a rich, soft, wanting. Without rich
wanting, nothing arrives."

We want these children to have ambition. We just want it to be well-connected.

A lot of Presidents have wanted to be poets. George Washington actually tried his hand
at poetry, writing that "true happiness depends upon a quiet soul" -- as I told our Poets Laureate
on the way out. And John Quincy Adams actually wanted to be a poet, he wanted to do that, but
he just couldn't quite get there. So he settled for a lesser path.

But still he composed verses all his life. Even when he was an old man in Congress,
waiting to vote, he would write out little verses. He once wrote in the Congress, "We must seize
the moments as they pass, and snatch the retrieveless sunbeam as it flies."

Lucky for you, I haven't written any poetry in over 20 years. And the poems I wrote to
Hillary so long ago I would still be a little embarrassed to read today.

But I would like to close with a particularly American poem about love of country,
sacrifice, the conflict between mortality and the timeless value of a deed well done. It is Ralph
Waldo Emerson's "Concorde Hymn," written to honor the completion of the Battle Monument,
commemorating the battles of Lexington and Concorde in the Revolutionary War.

By the rude bridge that arched the flood
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard 'round the world .

The foe long since in silence slept;
alike the conqueror in silence sleeps.
In time the ruined bridge has swept
down the dark stream which seaward
creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft
stream, we set today a votive stone,
that memory may their deed redeem when,
like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit that made those heroes dare to
die and leave their children free bid
time and nature gently spare. The
shaft we raise to them and thee.

Thank you very much.

END 8:55 P.M. EDT