
The Gift Outright

The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living,
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

Robert Frost
The Witness Tree Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1942

PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURAL POETRY

Amanda Gorman was not very well known before Wednesday January 20, 2021—it seems everyone knows her now. Such is the power of poetry. The inauguration of Joseph Biden, 46th President of the United States, was graced with words from this 22-year-old poet. She was the youngest and only the sixth poet to speak at one of these extraordinary and unique events. Her poem “The Hill We Climb” was challenging to create; she sought to inspire us with hope and plead for national unity while we were reeling from profound political disunity, a type of violence never before seen, and a deadly pandemic that changed everything. It brought to mind the recitation of “The Gift Outright” by Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in January 1961. Frost was the first poet with such an honor. More than 30 years later, Bill Clinton invited Maya Angelou to read “On the Pulse of the Morning” at his 1993 inauguration and Miller Williams to read “Of History and Hope” at the 1997 ceremony. Barack Obama’s 2009 event included Elizabeth Alexander reading “Praise Song for the Day,” and his second inauguration in 2013 featured Richard Blanco and his poem “One Today.” Thus far, no Republican inauguration has featured a poet.

Note that Frost’s poem was recited, the only one not read from a script. The story is interesting. Robert Frost (1874 – 1963) was 86 when Kennedy was inaugurated. He was a failed farmer but became a world-renowned poet and educator recognized by Pulitzer Prizes and the Congressional Gold Medal. He taught at Amherst and other Ivy League schools for many years. His best-known poems, including “The Road Not Taken,” “Fire and Ice,” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” are still much loved. Frost was an early supporter of Kennedy in the race against Nixon, a fact Kennedy used to his advantage. He would use the final lines from “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” to end many of his campaign speeches, reciting, “But I have promises to keep/And miles to go before I sleep.” When a victorious Kennedy planned his inauguration, he returned to his early supporter, asking Frost to write and recite a poem at the event. Although Frost accepted the invitation, he initially did not want to write a new poem. As a compromise, Kennedy asked Frost to read “The Gift Outright,” and Frost agreed. Ultimately, Frost did write a new poem, “For John F. Kennedy Inauguration: Dedication” (later published as “Dedication”). However, that poem wasn’t published until 8 years after Kennedy’s inauguration.

So what happened? At 86 years old, Frost was becoming frail, and the 1961 inauguration day was blustery, cold, and held under a bright blue sky with piercing sunshine. Watching video archives of the event, one can see Frost struggling in the wind to control the papers and mumbling “I can’t see” because of the glare and flapping pages. He had intended to read “Dedication” as a prelude to “The Gift Outright.” In an attempt to help, a nearby tuxedoed gentleman sitting near the podium (some say it was Lyndon Johnson who had just been sworn in as vice president) rose to use his top hat as a sun and wind shield. It didn’t work. Instead, Frost improvised, eloquently reciting from memory the 16-line poem that Kennedy was expecting. He hadn’t had enough time to memorize the 42 lines of “Dedication.” In the end, “Dedication” made its debut in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York 1969).

In “The Gift Outright,” Kennedy had requested that the last line be changed from “Such as she was. Such as she would become,” to “Such as she was. Such as she will become.” Frost, though likely unhappy about the president’s wordsmithing, granted his request, ending his reading with “Such as she was, such as she would become, has become, and I – and for this occasion let me change that to – What she will become.” It was a piece focusing on national identity and patriotic service, much like Gorman’s 2021 inauguration poem. Amanda Gorman and Robert Frost—at similar events separated by 6 decades—remind us of the enduring power of poetry.

James B Young, MD
Executive Director of Academic Affairs, Cleveland Clinic
Professor of Medicine, Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of
Medicine of Case Western Reserve University
Section Editor, Poet’s Pen,
Methodist DeBakey Cardiovascular Journal

To all aspiring poets, we invite you to submit your musing for possible inclusion in this journal. Please submit your poem in a Word document, including your name, specialty, and affiliation, to mdcvj@houstonmethodist.org.