



New American Gazette: Transcript of the Robert Frost Forum

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Recording Summary:

Transcription of a Ford Hall Forum that featured Robert Frost, a Pulitzer Prize winning American poet. Frost addressed his views of America through readings of his poetry. The forum was originally recorded in 1961 and rebroadcast as part of the New American Gazette radio program on March 31, 1991. The radio broadcast is introduced by host Marvin Kalb.



Transcript:

ANNOUNCER: From Boston, the Ford Hall Forum presents an archive edition of the New American Gazette with guest host Marvin Kalb

[00:00:17]

MARVIN KALB: He was the first inaugural poet. Huddled in a large gray overcoat, as John F. Kennedy was sworn into office, he read an ode to the young leader and to the future of the country.

New Englanders tried to forget that he was born in San Francisco as they adopted him as one of their own. Later, a nation would adopt him as the Poet Laureate of America. Robert Frost was called the Dean of American Poets, a four-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize. The language of his poems speaks volumes. But Frost's principle legacy was not the tomes of poetry that the octogenarian left after five decades of writing. It is a particular pride of place, a certain unconventional wisdom, acute observations of the American landscape and its inhabitants eloquently expressed in verse and meter.

His appeal was universal. His words spoke to common experiences among us, small movements observed, deceptively simple things. He was not, however, a simple man. Robert Frost attended Harvard College and went on to lecture and teach at dozens of institutions of higher learning. Nor was he the arch conservative his critics claimed. He considered himself more radical in politics and principles than his detractors, a believer in democratic ideals based on a firm, moral core.

[00:01:47]

He became an elder statesman traveling to the Soviet Union in 1962 where he exchanged political views with Nikita Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders. Despite his extensive travels and worldwide adulation, Robert Frost concluded late in his life that the most exciting movement



in nature is not progress or advancement, but expansion and contraction, the opening and shutting of the eye, the hand, the heart, the mind.

[00:02:19]

When Robert Frost addressed the Ford Hall Forum in Boston in 1961, he read from his upcoming book of poems, *In the Clearing*, which was to be his last. On that day, he shared his vision of America, and his views on the dawn of a new era. Join us as we remember the poet who had a lover's quarrel with the world, Robert Frost.

(applause)

ROBERT FROST: You don't want to hear me talk politics, but I might say this political thing. That America is in a strange position in the world now and we're in the position of having to think a good deal about just where it is and what it is. And I'm going to read you a poem called "America is Hard to See." People all trying to see what it is, the world trying to see what it is. I met an old governor from Lapland, a Finn, not long ago, and he said through a translator, through an interpreter, he said "In my little country, we have no anxiety because there's no use having any." He said, "We understand your anxiety because you're in the responsible position in the world. Everybody looks in your direction about everything." Meant Russia. "And if we don't know who we are or how important we are, that should tell us that whenever anything—anybody addresses great things, political things, to anybody in the world, they address it to us."

[00:04:43]

Maybe the pleasantest way to take it is without thinking too hard, for my part. Another poet I'm going to name was a lady. Her name was Katharine Lee Bates. And she was a nice poet, and a fine person, great lady at Wellesley, the great lady of her time at Wellesley. And she had a very New England story. Her father's father was a college president and her father was a little minister down on our Cape. And he died young, and she told me once that she didn't know what brought her and her sister up, no mother. Kept her mother. She thought the neighbors did it by leaving things on the porch. It's what she said after her father died.



And she wrote that thing called “America the Beautiful” that I hear sung right and left, wherever I go. And maybe that's a lovely way to take it. It's a sort of matter of course the way to take it. You don't think too politically about it, but it's just a matter of course. We have acted on the principle that made us withdraw from the Philippines. You know and I know how long and how often we've had thoughts of Cuba through the years. It's a strange interesting history, and how just we've refrained there.

[00:06:26]

And one of the things that bothers you today is a book such as I handled in somebody else's house the other day, it's called *The Shark and the Sardines*, I guess, I think it's sardines for the rest. All the little nations, it's by a Guatemalan and somebody that had it in his hands said it's subversive. I said, “Let me see it,” but I didn't get a good read of it. But here we're called a shark to the little sardines of all these other countries when the reproach is as much to them as to us. Why are they sardines? (laughter and applause)

[00:07:21]

But I accept the reproach to a certain extent. But the thing turns on our investment in those countries. That's what it turns on. And our investments were wanted. And maybe we invested too much and too long and too unscrupulously as some, but they were wanted. There was a certain, I don't see any good in the world unless I'm helping somebody who's helping me. That mainly is my interest. What you might call symbiosis. If I get as much out of it as they get out of it, it's better. When I teach or preach or anything else, you know. But there's something else I know beyond that.

But, it's great futures ahead of us to come to some relations with the sardines, you know. We want to get over being shark and we want them to get over being sardines. So isn't it—and when you think, you know, when you worry about it all, I said to a Jewish friend of mine that I worried about little nations, Finland was one of them, and another one was Israel. And he said to me, he's a noted explorer, a great friend of mine, he said, “You shouldn't worry about Israel, you know,



about our security.” He said, “We never had any except a short time under Solomon.” (laughter)
As for security.

[00:09:09]

And then he said, “And we have no business there anyway. We drove out the Canaanites,” see? He [inaudible]. A great explorer, he knows all about it. Gets it out of the ground and matches everything he gets out of the ground with chapter and verse in the Bible. It’s very, very unassuming.

But this question, see I find too many people being humble about what we are. And if we don’t know what we are, certainly the Russians do. They look our way about everything. Now, I’ll read this for the fun of it. I had intended sort of to be, you know, just lovely about lovely—a lovely country, that’s what I feel I’ve been. But I had this come into my head. But now I have with me a little one that I call “America is Hard to See.” It was in *The Atlantic* one time under another title. I keep changing its title. (laughter) It’s about Columbus and it’s a sort of a mystical affair.

*Columbus may have worked the wind
A new and better way to Ind
And also proved the world a ball,
But how about the wherewithal?
Not just for scientific news
Had the queen backed him to a cruise.*

*Remember he had made the test
Finding the east by sailing west.
But had he found it, here he was
Without one trinket from Hormuz
To save the queen from family censure
For her investment in his venture.*



I want you to like my rhymes. (laughter and applause)

*There had been something strangely wrong
With every coast he tried along
He could imagine nothing barrener
The trouble was with him, the mariner
He wasn't off a mere degree
His reckoning was off a sea*

*And to intensify the drama
Another mariner Da Gama
Came just then sailing into port
From the same general resort,
But with the gold in hand to show for
His claim it was another Ophir.*

*Had but Columbus known enough
He might have boldly made the bluff
That better than Da Gama's gold
He had been given to behold
The race's future trial place,
A fresh start for the human race.*

He might have fooled Valladolid.

I once had that, show you how poems get corrected, I once had “He might have fooled them in Madrid.” And a historian called my attention to the fact they weren't in Madrid that time. (laughter) So all I had to do was turn it into Valladolid. You see it rhymes the same. That's where they were.



[00:13:05]

*He might have fooled Valladolid
I was deceived by what he did.
If I had had my chance when young
I should have had Columbus sung
As a god who had given us
A more than Moses' exodus.*

*But all he did was spread the room
Of our enacting out the doom
Of being in each other's way,
And so put off the weary day
When we would have to put our mind
On how to crowd and still be kind.*

See, this is what I've been talking about, how to crowd and still be kind.

[00:13:51]

*For these none too apparent gains
He got no more than dungeon chains
And such small posthumous renown
(A country named for him, a town,
A holiday) as where he is,
He may not recognize as his.*

*They say his flagship's unlaid ghost
Still probes and dents our rocky coast
With animus approaching hate,
And for not turning out a strait*



*He has cursed every river mouth
From fifty north to fifty south.*

[00:14:33]

*Someday our navy I predict
Will take in tow this derelict
And lock him through Culebra Cut,
His eyes as good (or bad) as shut
To all the modern works of man
And all we call American.*

*America is hard to see.
Less partial witnesses than he
In book on book have testified
They could not see it from outside—
Or inside either for that matter.
We know the literary chatter.*

*Columbus, as I say, will miss
All he owes to the artifice
Of tractor-plow and motor-drill.
To naught but his own force of will,
Or at most some Andean quake,
Will he ascribe his lucky break—*

[00:15:29]

Going through Culebra Cut.

*High purpose makes the hero rude
He will not stop for gratitude.*



*But let him show his haughty stern
To what was never his concern
Except as it denied him way
To fortune-hunting in Cathay.*

[00:15:51]

*He'll be starting pretty late.
He'll find that Asiatic state
Is about tired of being looted
While having its beliefs disputed.
His can be no such easy raid
As Cortés on the Aztecs made.*

Now see, just a minute, because this is sort of political. I'll linger over a line or two of it. You see, "America is hard to see, less partial witnesses than he." You see it's—you understand I make him the ghost of it all, his vulgar ghost. "America is hard to see, less partial witnesses than he have, in book on book have testified they could not see it from outside," or inside either, for that matter. He'll miss all of it and go right through Culebra Cut without seeing it. But then, "He'll be starting pretty late, that's another important thing in it. He'll be starting pretty late, he'll find that Asiatic state is about tired of being looted while having its beliefs disputed." I put into that couplet a lot of myself. "Is about tired of being looted while having its beliefs disputed." There's a lot of my politics in that.

[00:17:17]

Then here's a gentler one. These are to be in my new book. I didn't know whether I'd read this segment, but I'm tempted to read it, too. There's two things talking in it, mist and smoke—talking. The mist says—this is called, the poem is called, "The Cabin in the Clearing," "The Cabin in the Clearing." The mists says, "I don't believe the sleepers in this house know where they are." The smoke says, "They've been here long enough to push the woods back from around the house and part them in the middle with a path."



And the mist says, “And still I doubt if they know where they are. And I begin to fear they never will. All they maintain the path for is the comfort of visiting with each other equally bewildered.” Equally bewildered. That's a funny word, bewildered. So people now—the government's trying to restore wilderness is all—declaring wilderness is going to—declare wilderness on my farm. A friend of mine—

“Nearer, nearer in plight than neighbors are than distance.” Then the smoke says, “I am the guardian wraith of starlit smoke that leans out this and that way from their chimney. I will not have their happiness despaired of.” And the mist says, “No one, not I, would give them up for loss merely because they don't know where they are. I am the damper counterpart of smoke that gives off from a garden ground at night, but lifts no higher than the garden grows. I cotton to their landscape, that's who I am. I am no further from their faith than you are,” the smoke—the mist says to the smoke, see.

[00:19:34]

And the smoke says, “They must by now have learned the native tongue. Why don't they ask the red man where they are?” And the mist says, “They often do, and none the wiser for it. So do they also ask philosophers who come to look in on them from the pulpit. (For they will ask anyone) They will ask anyone there is to ask in the fond faith accumulated fact will of itself take fire and light the world up. Learning has been a part of their religion.”

I'm not reading it very well. And then the smoke says, “If the day ever comes when they know who they are, they may know better where they are. But who they are is too much to believe, either for them or for the onlooking world. They're too sudden to be credible.” It's only taken us 200 years, you see. “They are too sudden to be credible.”

[00:20:48]

The mist says, “Listen, they murmur, talking in the dark on what should be their daylong theme continued. Putting the light out has not put their thoughts out. Let us pretend the dew drops from



the eaves are you and I eavesdropping on their unrest, a mist and smoke eavesdropping on a haze and see if we can tell the bass from the soprano.” I guess that was John Adams and Abigail.

(laughter)

And then it says, “Then smoke and mist, who better could appraise the kindred spirit of an inner haze.” See that, I didn’t read that with the force I meant to I was just shy of it a little. (applause) It was too new and I hadn’t read it, I had never read it before aloud, so I stumbled a little about it.

Now, I’ll say something to you. Those are brand new, and then to go back, you know, Judge Lurie was saying he’d just been reading an old poem of mine, “In the Old Use Companion,” [?] and the date of it was 1906, he said. Long time ago. And I think I know the poem, but let me get it here. I have it in front of me, I can say it probably all right.

“Reluctance.”

*Out through the fields and the woods
And over the walls I have wended
I have climbed the hills of view
And looked at the world and descended
I have come by the highway home
And lo, it is ended.*

*The leaves are all dead on the ground,
Save those that the oak is keeping
To ravel them one by one
And let them go scraping and creeping
Out over the crusted snow,
When others are sleeping.*

And the dead leaves lied huddled and still,



*No longer blown hither and thither;
The last lone aster is gone;
The flowers of the witch hazel whither;
The heart is still aching to seek
But the feet question, "Whither?"*

*Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
And yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?*

See, that's one of my very young ones. Then I'm going to read you another very young one about this question of—

*Who has given to me this sweet
And given my brother dust to eat?
And when will his wage come in?*

[00:24:03]

The thoughts that William Vaughn Moody had; I never met him, I knew his widow, who thought of him all the time and thought—and the keeping of his memory in the world, these things fade so easily, don't they? But that's a very fine poem, that "Gloucester Moors," you ought to read it. Who, sin, get that into your nature. "Who has given to me this sweet, and given my brother dust to eat? And when will his wage come in?" You know that's where your—

And here is a little something similar that I was writing earlier than that. This would be in the '90s, I wrote this. And it's an odd one, but somebody—I've seen somebody take it entirely wrong, not very lately.



*A stranger came to the door at eve
And he spoke the bridegroom fair.
He bore a green white stick in his hand,
And, for all burden, care.
He asked with the eyes more than the lips
For a shelter for the night,
And he turned and looked at the road afar
Without a window light.*

[00:25:18]

*The bridegroom came forth into the porch
With, 'Let us look at the sky,
And question what of the night to be,
Stranger, you and I.'
The woodbine leaves littered the yard,
The woodbine berries were blue;
Autumn, yes, winter was in the wind;
'Stranger, I wish I knew.'*

[00:25:45]

*Within the bride in the dusk alone
Bent over the open fire,
Her face rose-red with the glowing coal
And the thought of the heart's desire.
The bridegroom looked at the weary road,
Yet saw but her within,
And wished her heart in a case of gold
And pinned with a golden pin.*



The bridegroom—

And this is into these affairs of the world again.

*The bridegroom thought it little to give
A dole of bread, a purse,
A heartfelt prayer for the poor of God,
And for the rich a curse;
But whether or not a man was asked
To mar the love of two
By harboring woe in the bridal house,
The bridegroom wished he knew.*

[00:26:38]

See, I don't have to go into that. But I amused myself in one little spot in it that I didn't have too many rich friends and I was willing to sacrifice them, of course. (laughter and applause) All the foundations and everything, I didn't have—there were no foundations when I wrote that, I think. It's all kind of new, anyway, these foundations. So I said cheerfully there, you know, the bridegroom thought it little to give, see me chugging them all, a dole, a bread, a purse, a heartfelt prayer for the poor of God, and for the rich a curse. You see, I was willing to curse all my rich friends. Didn't have many. It's all a funny world. Funny world.

[00:27:34]

And the question remains the same. I'm always riding the liberals. I'm a radical myself. (laughter) And I say all sorts of things about liberals. And that's a typical line, liberal, that very line is the bridegroom wished he knew. A liberal is one who wished he knew. That's a good definition of a liberal, wish he knew. And he's always in that state. And wished he knew.

He'd rather, I've said about him lately, you know, he can't take his own side in a quarrel, that's one thing. Then he'd rather fuss with a Gordian knot than cut it, and so on. I'm always at it.



Oh, then I call him, too, if—this is a literary reference—I call him a Dover beachcomber. That's Matthew Arnold, the great liberal, you know. And when Mr. Stevenson, whom I admire and a friend of mine, when he was running for president, I threatened to cross his name out and put Matthew Arnold's in and vote for Matthew Arnold. (laughter) This is all in—friendship is all. And I often think that. After I differed with people and all, I'd throw up my hands, say, friendship is all, friendship is all.

ANNOUNCER: From Boston, you have been listening to the New American Gazette presented by the Ford Hall Forum.

ROBERT FROST: Now let's say some more—forget all this. Whose words these are, I don't think you can make any politics out of this.

*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
The 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 and downy flake.*

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.*

[00:30:21]

Oh star—suppose I look up at a star way up there.

*Oh star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud.
I was about to say of night, but dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat
Say something! And it says, "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does have something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may take something like a star*



To stay our minds on and be staid.

[00:31:30]

That's to myself more than anybody else, the times I've been too far one way, too far another.

(applause)

Then to change the tune a little, this one I call carefully, I'm very careful about myself in public, I call this "Lines Written in Dejection on the Eve of Great Success." See, so even if it comes out all right, I shan't be twitted on it, see?

[00:32:11]

*I once had a cow that jumped over the moon,
Not onto the moon but over.*

*I don't know what made her so lunar a loon;
All she'd been having was clover.*

*That was back in the days of my godmother Goose.
But though we are goosier now,
And all tanked up with mineral juice,
We haven't caught up with my cow.*

(applause) You see, I'm all safe, though. If they arrive there tomorrow, I'm all right. You see, I said "Lines Written in Dejection on the Eve of Great Success." I fixed it. (laughter) Science can't catch me. These fellas.

Then another similar, not as funny as that, but this is one that's called "The Objection to Being Stepped On." I'd just been called on to storm the barricade. You know what that means, that revolutionary thing? Storm the barricade in Berlin. So they used to do that in the streets of Paris



when I was young. Now you got to do it in Berlin. I don't know whether I'll go or not. It's a good way to die, get killed the way. Dreading anything, if you're dreading anything worse, see—
But “The Objection to Being Stepped On.”

*At the end of the row
I stepped on the toe
Of an unemployed hoe.
It rose in offense
And struck me a blow
In the seat of my sense.
It wasn't to blame
But I called it a name.
And I must say it dealt
Me a blow that I felt
Like malice prepense.
You may call me a fool,
But was there a rule
The weapon should be
Turned into a tool?
But what do we see?
The first tool I step on
Turned into a weapon.*

(laughter and applause)

[00:34:40]

Then these are new ones. It's kind of fun. Oh, to go back, though. Ones that I ought to read because I am misunderstood in it so much. Nearly everybody says to me sooner or later, you know, it's something there is that doesn't level all between friends. Well, that's so between friends, but you do like to waltz between—well, even between friends. Something there is that



loves a wall, I feel like saying, let's not argue it, though. See, some there is that doesn't love a wall and some there is that does love a wall, and I don't get quoted both ways at once. It's too far apart in the poem, I guess. But anyway, you know, those are difficult questions.

[00:35:31]

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen groundswell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have (made not) have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending time, we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we were.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some are so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am Apple orchard.
My Apple trees will never get across*



*And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say, "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."*

[00:37:43]

See, I play pretty fair in that. I give him the credit for looking at it one way, and I take the credit the other. And then twice I say something, there is a doesn't love a wall, twice I say—then twice I say some—good fences make good neighbors. I try and even that up. (applause)

I don't know what you've had, but I've had more trouble about boundaries that didn't exist. You know, lines between one place and another, trespass, encroachment. I didn't make it, the other fellow made it every time. It's a funny world.



Now, I ought to reach—I'm going to say another one to you.

*I opened the door so my last look
Should be taken outside a house and book.
Before I gave up seeing and slept,
I said I would see how Sirius kept
His watchdog eye on what remained
To be gone into, if not explained.*

[00:39:05]

Always get out to look at the stars, I do.

*But scarcely was my door ajar,
When, past the leg I thrust for bar,
Slipped in to be my problem guest,
Not a heavenly dog made manifest,
But an earthly dog of the carriage breed,
Who, having failed of the modern speed,
Now asked asylum, and I was stirred
To be the one so dog-preferred.*

*He dumped himself like a bag of bones.
He sighed himself a couple of groans,
And head to tail, then firmly curled
Like swearing off on the traffic world.*

*I set him water. I set him food.
He rolled an eye with gratitude,
Or merely manners, it may have been
But never so much as lifted chin.*

*His hard tail loudly smacked the floor,
As if beseeching me, "Please, no more;
I can't explain, tonight at least."
His brow was perceptibly trouble-creased.
So I spoke in tones of adoption, thus:
"Gusty, old boy, Dalmatian Gus,
You're right, there's nothing to discuss.
Don't try to tell me what's on your mind,
The sorrow of having been left behind
Or the sorrow of having run away.
All that can wait for the light of day.
Meanwhile, feel obligation-free;
Nobody has to confide in me."*

[00:40:31]

Because I'm not a psychiatrist, you see. (laughter) Nobody has to confide in me.

*'Twas too one-sided a dialogue,
And I wasn't sure I was talking Dog.
I gave up baffled, but all the same,
In fancy, I ratified his name;
Gusty, Dalmatian Gus, that is,
And started sharing my life with his,
Sharing his miles of exercise
And finding him in his right supplies.*

*Next morning the minute I was about,
He was at the door to be let out.
With an air that said, "I've paid my call.
You mustn't feel hurt if now I'm off*



For getting back somewhere, or further on.”

I opened the door and he was gone.

[00:41:23]

I was to taste in little the grief

That comes of dogs' lives being so brief.

Only a fraction of ours, at most,

He might have been the dream of a ghost,

In spite of the way his tail had smacked

My floor so hard and matter-of-fact.

And things have been going so strangely since,

I wouldn't be too hard to convince,

I might almost claim he was Sirius.

Think of presuming to call him Gus!

The star itself, heaven's brightest star,

Not a meteorite, but an avatar.

Who had made this overnight descent

To show by deeds he didn't resent

My having depended on him so long,

And yet had done nothing about it in song.

A symbol was all he could hope to convey,

An intimation, a shot of ray,

A meaning I was supposed to seek,

And finding wasn't supposed to speak.

[00:42:24]

That's a dog one. (applause) Let's see a minute. I'd like to read you one longer one. Oh, yeah, I'll tell you one more thing that just—adventures are this way. In Mr. Eisenhower's house, when the



White House was his, there was a minister named Frederick Fox, and he became a great friend of mine. And I saw that he, oh you know, that he longed for something beside the White House; not that he didn't like that well enough. But he longed for something else, get away.

[00:43:18]

And where is he now? I just had a letter from him. He's away in the middle of Africa and he's—he—I've just had a bunch of letters from him. I wonder if he's here. He hasn't come [inaudible] but—no, he's in the middle of Africa as far as I know. And the letter from his—about half a dozen of his Negro pupils that he's working with. And the most pathetic letters you ever read.

And they're not about food or anything, but wanting to have a country, see. Wanting to have a country. Every one of them's about wanting to have a country. A sovereignty, an independence such as we declared. It's as if they all knew, to all of my direction, written to me they all are, and passed along by him. Just thought I'd speak of it now. He was a great friend of mine, but I had never understood him. The last time I saw him, I had a little party for all his little children, his little family. Hors d'oeuvres, just hors d'oeuvres. And then he disappeared from me. The administration changed and I didn't know where he was going. He didn't want to tell me where he's going. That's where he is, gone off with his heart into the middle of Africa.

[00:44:53]

And it's called—let me see what it's called there. Tell you about it. It's a curious letter here. It's called Africa—Africa Literacy and Writing Center. And it's in northern Rhodesia, a little place called K-i-t-w-e, Box so and so. This is his letter to me about them. Very much moved, very much moved with the simplicity of what he did and not telling anybody, not you know—go off like that. He and I will want to see more of each other here or hereafter.

Now, I think I'll read "The Death of the Hired Man" to you. (applause) And that has, right in the middle of it that I never called anybody's attention before you to come on it, it's something that I get quoted as saying a good many times. "Home is the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in." See, I get that quoted. But that's what he says, and the man, husband

and wife are talking. And then she adds—that might be the Republican Party speaking, see? That might be the father, patriotic way of talking. The father is—this might be matriotism. And she says, “I should have called it home, you know. I should have called it something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

[00:46:51]

The husband, the man in the family wants you to deserve what—things and get going, you know? But it doesn't matter what happens to you, your mother is your mother still. Father doesn't stand being good for nothing as well as a mother does. And this—that's the—that's just the difference between matriotism and patriotism. (laughter and applause) And you got a long think coming, same as I have. All this way and that way goes in your life. All is fair game, people, you know, and well—how you'll treat them, but there's matter with them. That's the same as the first one—that young one I wrote back there, “Love in a Question.” What will you—what will you give—will you give up your rich friends, you give up everything, but will you give up bliss? Will you—will you give up your home and everything? Who will you turn your home inside out for?

It's always there. It's all—all right. This is right buried in that where nobody bothered to notice it. “The Death of the Hired Man.”

*Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. ‘Silas is back.’
She pushed Warren with her outward through the door
And shut it after her. ‘Be kind,’ she said.
She took the market things from Warren’s arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.*



*'When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back,' he said.
'I told him so last haying, didn't I?
If he left then, I said, that ended it.
What good is he? Who else will harbor him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there's no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.
"All right," I say, "I can't afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could."
"Someone else can." "Then someone else will have to."
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
If that were what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there's someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us.*

'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you,' Mary said.

'I want him to: he'll have to soon or later.'

[00:50:09]

*'He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too—*



*You needn't smile—I didn't recognize him—
I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.
Wait till you see.'*

'Where did you say he'd been?'

*'He didn't say. I dragged him to the house,
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.'*

'What did he say? Did he say anything?'

'But little.'

'Anything? Mary, confess

He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me.'

'Warren!'

'But did he? I just want to know.'

[00:50:58]

*'Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—*



*The boy you had in haying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'*

[00:52:06]

'Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.'

*'Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.*

[00:52:42]

*He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.*

*He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay—'*

*'I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'*

[00:53:31]

*'He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.'*

*Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.*



*'Warren,' she said, 'he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.'*

[00:54:31]

'Home,' he mocked gently.

'Yes, what else but home?

It all depends on what you mean by home.

Of course he's nothing to us, any more

Than was the hound that came a stranger to us

Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'

'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in.'

And then she says—

'I should have called it

Something you somehow haven't to deserve.'

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,

Picked up a little stick, and brought it back

And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.

'Silas has better claim on us you think

Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles

As the road winds would bring him to his door.

Silas has walked that far no doubt today.

Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich,

A somebody—director in the bank.'



'He never told us that.'

'We know it though.'

[00:55:37]

*'I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to—
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he'd had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He'd keep so still about him all this time?'*

'I wonder what's between them.'

[00:56:09]

*'I can tell you.
Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anybody. Worthless though he is,
He wouldn't be ashamed to please his brother.'*

[00:56:27]

'I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'

*'No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.'*



*He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there tonight.
You'll be surprised at him—how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it.'*

'I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'

[Microphone picks up someone else talking]

*'I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself.
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon.'*

It hit the moon.

*Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.*

[00:57:31]

*Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.*

'Warren,' she questioned.

'Dead,' was all he answered.



New American Gazette: Transcript of the Robert Frost Forum

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(applause)

ANNOUCER: You have been listening to an archive edition of The New American Gazette from Boston's Ford Hall Forum. The New American Gazette was produced by Deborah Stavro, with post-production engineers Roger Baker, Brian Sabo, and Anthony Debartolo. The New American Gazette was produced in cooperation with the nation's presidential libraries, the National Archives, and Northeastern University.

To purchase a copy of this program, or receive information about the 2006 spring season of the Forum, please call 617-373-5800, or visit www.fordhallforum.org. Thank you for joining us.

END

Transcript Begins

INTRODUCTION: From Old South Meeting House in Boston, the Ford Hall Forum presents the New American Gazette with guest host William Hahn.

[00:00:26]

WILLIAM HAHN: Few politicians are as controversial and even fewer provoke passions as deep as Louisiana State Representative David Duke. His name has become so familiar that United Press International once called him the "best-known state legislator in America."

END OF RECORDING