

Thank you, Ann, for your generous introduction, and thanks for welcoming us at the Blaine House today.

As you've probably heard, the American poet Adrienne Rich died last month, and I want to begin today with a few words about her. Her main mission as a poet was to redefine what it means to be a woman, and in her work she helped transform both our poetry and our culture. Yet she was more than a feminist poet. Any fair reading of poems like "The Knight" or "Diving into the Wreck" makes clear that she not only wanted to free women from the old cultural myths but men, too. And in her well-known commitment to social justice, she spoke for the downtrodden of both genders, and all races.

But what I'd like to remember especially today about Adrienne Rich is her insistence that poetry speak to all readers and include their experience. A poet, she wrote, should honor two questions from the reader. One is, "What has [this thing you're writing about] to do with me?" And the other, "Do I exist in your poem?" She believed that poetry should not belong only to a handful of critics or academics, or to poets who share a secret code; it should belong to all of us.

And by God, she was right. Poetry does belong to everybody – to the people. Never mind that they've never taken a class in it, and may not know the proper terminology. Addressing them and their lives does not compromise poetry; in fact, it expands poetry's vision. Maine's best-known poets, Longfellow, Robinson and Millay understood this. By speaking to readers in general, they developed not only a wide audience, but a poetry that was universal and still matters to us today. So my goal from the start as poet laureate has been to restore poetry's

connection with general readers, who care about poems and need them more than some poets may think. They deserve, like the thousands of Maine readers now following my weekly poetry column called *Take Heart*, now in 30 newspapers across our state, to be included in poetry's conversation.

The *Take Heart* column, as you know, was my first initiative as poet laureate, and at today's annual celebration of poetry, I want to introduce my second initiative, which will include still more Mainers in poetry's vital conversation. The name of the initiative is the Maine Poetry Express, and it will bring together Maine poets and ordinary citizens across this state for a series of poetry readings and recitations.

Here, in brief, is the plan. The Maine Poetry Express, a metaphoric train, of course, will be launched in the fall at two locations: the Down East town of Stonington, and our northernmost town of Fort Kent. Then it will chug to 14 "stops" throughout Maine, including the underserved areas of our state. At each stop, a local sponsor – or a "conductor" -- will put on an event that features two or three area poets, together with five or six town citizens of various occupations and life experiences, who'll pick out a couple of poems from two Maine anthologies I've edited, recite the poems, and tell their neighbors why they chose the poems and what each means to them personally. The objectives of these events are first, to acquaint towns with the work of their own poets, and second, to put poetry directly into the hands of the people, in much the same way as happened in the early Grange Halls, where recitations of poetry by ordinary citizens were common events.

The Maine Poetry Express will make some special stops. One of these will be a dam removal site on the Penobscot River. As you know, the Nature Conservancy is removing two

dams along the Penobscot this year, and creating a bypass for a third, to restore the river to sea-run fish, and we'll be celebrating that effort with a special set of readings and recitations about Maine's natural heritage. Somewhere along the Express route, we'll also sponsor a poetry contest for area high-school students, whose winners will take the stage to read their poems; and plans are now afoot to put on another evening for rural slam poets.

Like the Take Heart initiative, this new one will last much longer than a single year. With the help of my ongoing partner in this laureateship, the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance. I will fire up the locomotive of the Poetry Express in future years as well, taking it to new Maine towns in every year of my five-year term.

So beginning in September, perk up your ears, because you may hear a rumble on the tracks and the whistle of a train outside your own town. But for today, to prepare ourselves for all the recitations of poetry that will soon be taking place across our state, we've arranged for you to hear two reciters of poetry, namely Tyler O'Brien, the winner of this year's Poetry Out Loud competition, and Doris Dean, an actual Grange hall reciter from the Maine town of Madison.

I'll introduce these reciters to you in just a minute, but first, let me pause to thank some people for their help over the past year of my laureateship. First of all, David Turner, my special assistant for the *Take Heart* column, for his unusual skills and competence. Thanks also to two people who helped me present my series of workshops for students in the Poetry Out Loud contest this year. They are Megan Grumbling and Gibson Fay-LeBlanc, not only gifted poets, but gifted teachers, and I couldn't have managed the workshops without them. And while I'm on the subject of Poetry Out Loud, Suzanne Nance of MPBN is here today, and I want to thank you, Suzanne – we all want to thank you – for bringing Poetry Out Loud to television this year in such

a beautifully produced program. Would you please stand for just a minute, so we can recognize you? We are all very grateful to you, Suzanne.

And finally, I want to thank the Executive Director of the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, Joshua Bodwell. As you know, Josh has been in the press lately for his new appointment as a member of the MAC, and for appearing on the prestigious list of Maine's up-and-coming professionals, called "Forty under Forty." I wish *I* had an award to offer him, too, for all the assistance he's given me as poet laureate. But all I have. Josh, is my sincere thanks for the many ways you've helped over the past year. Will you stand up also, Josh?

And now it's on to our reciters of poetry. The first, as I mentioned, is the winner of this year's statewide Poetry Out Loud contest, Tyler O'Brien, of the Mariconeag Waldorf School in Freeport, who'll be representing Maine in the national Poetry Out Loud competition coming up in Washington, DC. According to his teacher and poetry coach David Sloan, who's here today (where are you, David?) – according to David, Tyler O'Brien is active in a variety of school activities, including basketball, track, skiing and ultimate Frisbee. As a freshman, Tyler played the lead in the school's production of *Jabberwock*, and he's been a two-time finalist in the Mariconeag Poetry Festival. Tyler's here today with his proud dad, Jeff O'Brien, who happens to be the faculty chair at the Mariconeag School. Jeff, will you put your hand up? As we all understand, the acorn never falls far from the tree. Here, then, is the 2012 winner of the Poetry Out Loud Contest for the state of Maine, Tyler O'Brien. -- --

Thank you very much, Tyler, and congratulations. We couldn't hope for a better representative in Washington.

Our second reciter is Doris Dean, of Madison, Maine. I asked Doris here today because she's had a distinguished career as a reciter of poetry by heart for over fifty years in the Grange halls of west Central Maine.

Doris Dean was born in my town of Mercer, Maine, and lived there until she married her husband Carroll and moved to Madison. (I want to pause and ask Carroll to raise his hand.) We're glad you could join us today, Carroll.

In Madison Doris raised six children and helped Carroll to run a dairy farm with sixty cows until the late 1980s. Afterward, she worked in the kitchen at the Cedar Ridge Nursing Home in Skowhegan. Doris is retired now, with seven grandchildren, and she volunteers in the senior companion program for the elderly, sponsored by the University of Maine.

Busy as she's been all her life, Doris has always valued poetry, learning poems by heart and presenting them at Grange meetings in Mercer, Madison, Smithfield, Bingham, Canaan, New Portland and Norridgewock for over 50 years. She learned the art of recitation in Mercer from her father, Elwyn Bridges, who was widely known as a reciter in his own day in west Central Maine, as was her older sister, Ethel Herbert, of Mercer.

As a reciter of poetry, Doris joins a tradition that dates back to the nineteenth century in the state of Maine, when small-town reciters performed poems from the popular culture such as Ernest Thayer's "Casey at the Bat," Robert W. Service's "The Cremation of Sam McGee," and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," to full houses. I've often heard poets in the academy – some of them friends of mine -- despair that people have abandoned poetry. But given this long and active tradition, how can that possibly be true?

Through Doris Dean's recitation today, we honor both her and the long tradition of Grange Hall reciters she represents. Ladies and gentlemen, Doris Dean. -- --

How wonderful to hear those poems, Doris. Would you step back up here for a moment? I think the First Lady has something to give you. [Presentation of certificate recognizing Doris's service to poetry, signed by the governor, the first lady and the poet laureate.]

Let me conclude this annual April gathering today by reading a poem I wrote a little while back called "My Town." It's a poem that celebrates the towns of Maine, which are the core of who we are as a state, and the places where the readings of the Maine Poetry Express will take place this summer. But I also chose the poem because it features the town of Mercer, where Doris Dean and her sister Ethel Herbert, and her father, Elwin Bridges, got their start as reciters. As a matter of fact, I actually include a recitation of poetry by Ethel, as you will hear in this poem which is about Mercer, as I say, but I hope in some way it's about your little Maine town, too, if you're lucky enough to live in one.

My Town

Where it belongs on the state
tourist map, well above the red lobster
on the coast and in between the man
skiing down the slope and the shining dome
of the capitol building, you'll find nothing
except a moose standing in the grass.
But who would come to this place

to see the three-foot long spotted
yellow butterflies faithfully displayed
on the side of LaFlamme's house, or gather
with the others in the Grange Hall to hear
old Ethel Chadwick recite with a lisp
and the dazed, oddly beautiful look
in her eye "The Cremation of Sam McGee"

in its entirety on Old Home Day?
Anyway, what (as people from the city
might say after straying off Route 2
to find our few houses thrown downhill
among the trees) do they do here

for work? Nothing important, as you might
guess from how early in the morning

they start up the hill to do it, driving
to the shoe shop two towns over,
or the paper mill, or just down the road
to the store, where Betty DeCarlo stands all
day at the counter asking the same question:
"Can I help you?" I'm the one waiting
in line behind the couple with the skis

on their minivan who don't even notice her alert,
genuine eyes, on their way through Eyeblink,
Maine, to someplace they've heard of,
and I'm the one lying awake listening
to the cars struggling up our hill in the darkness
of 5 o'clock a.m. to start their long day,
and at twilight sitting down in the old parlor

with the Redlevskis, that's me, with a bag
of rhubarb I've just picked from my garden
for the two of them. On the television
in the corner a frowning man, on mute,
mimes all the news of concern to the nation.
Meanwhile they are talking about how good
it is to eat fresh sticks of rhubarb raw, a concern

so small you wouldn't care much about it
unless you could be there to see the face
she makes for the taste, a mixture of sorrow
and pleasure that seems to have her whole life
in it, and to hear, in the lamplight, the intimate
twang of their voices telling me this news
at evening in my town, as I'm telling it

to you now, in this only other place I know
where unexpected things can happen, off the map.