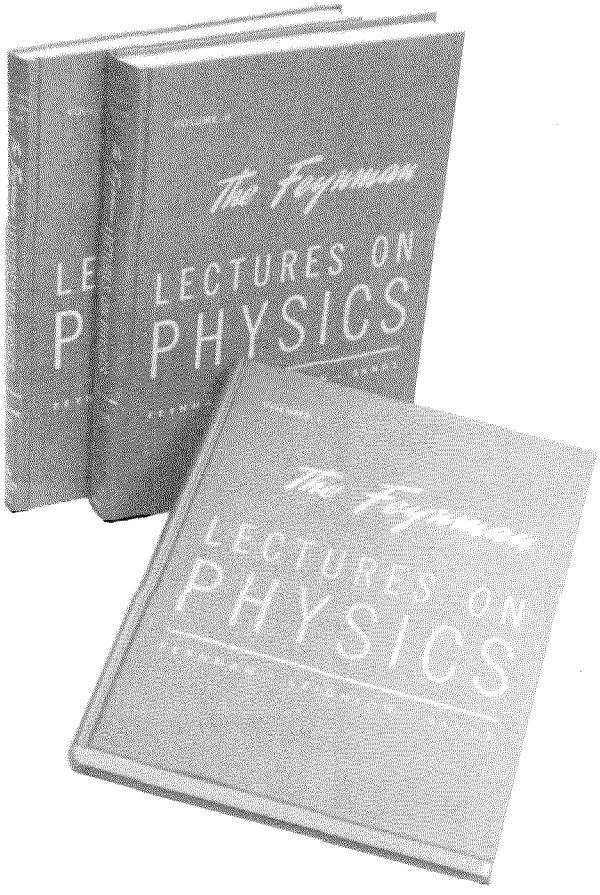

A Sonnet from Science

SCIENCE textbooks roll off the presses in relative profusion, but most are not noted for poetic expressiveness. There are, however, exceptions, as a recent letter from Jonathan V. Post (BS '73, in mathematics and literature) points out. Post says, in part, "I am reminded that 1983 will be the 20th anniversary of the publication of the world's most popular physics book: *The Feynman Lectures on Physics* by Richard P. Feynman, Robert B. Leighton, and Matthew Sands. There is a footnote in that text that comments on the relative virtues of science and poetry, and I found its language to be very poetic in itself. Consequently, I have rearranged the phrases, and added a few of my own, to compose a sonnet."

Post thought, and we agreed, that it would be most appropriate for the poem to appear in *Engineering & Science* in a 1983 issue, both to commemorate those famous bright red books and to "celebrate the bond between the humanities and sciences at Caltech." First, the footnote:

"The stars are made of the same *atoms as the earth." I usually pick one* small topic like this to give a lecture on. Poets say science takes away from the beauty of the stars — mere globs of gas atoms. Nothing is "mere." I too can see the stars on a desert night, and feel them. But do I see less or more? The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination — stuck on this carousel my little eye can catch one-million-year-old light. A vast pattern — of which I am a part — perhaps my stuff was belched from some forgotten star, as one is belching there. Or see them with the greater eye of Palomar, rushing all apart from some common starting point when they were perhaps all together. What is the pattern, or the meaning, or the *why*? It does not do harm to the *mystery to know a little about it. For far* more marvelous is the truth than any artists of the past imagined! Why do the poets of the present not speak of it? What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were like a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?

The Feynman Lectures on Physics
Addison Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., Vol. I, 3-6.

Next, Post's sonnet:

Footnote to Feynman*

Science takes away from the beauty of the stars?
On Earth, stuck on this carousel my little eye
(atoms: my stuff was belched from some forgotten star)
my eye can catch one-million-year-old light. Do I
see less or more? Mere globs of gas? Nothing is "mere."
I see them with the greater eye of Palomar —
What is the pattern, or the meaning, or the why?

Earth, stars, a vast pattern — of which I am part —
(and the whole universe is in a glass of wine)
stars rush apart from common starting point. My heart —
red as Betelgeux, Antares, Aldebaran —
my heart beats to the mystery of the sky.

It does not harm the mystery to know
our birth:
The stars are made of the same atoms as the Earth.

*Adapted with permission

And, finally, a footnote of our own: *The Feynman Lectures on Physics* arose out of a decision taken in the early 1960s that Caltech's required introductory course in physics needed revision. It would include a new course outline, a new textbook, and some new laboratory experiments. The text was produced by taping a set of lectures given in 1961-62 by Richard Feynman, then the Richard Chace Tolman Professor of Theoretical Physics and soon to *be awarded the Nobel Prize. The tapes* were transcribed, edited by Robert Leighton and Matthew Sands, professors of physics at Caltech, and published in 1963 by Addison-Wesley.

Whether the book then really became the "world's most popular physics book" we don't know, but the publishers have given us some impressive numbers about it. In the 20 years since the familiar three volumes were issued, nearly 350,000 copies in English have been sold. This number includes not only the separate hardbound copies but also the paperback set of three volumes that comes as a set. And this is only the beginning; the book has actually been reprinted 15 to 20 times, with more than 400,000 copies having been published in foreign languages — French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Slovak, and Spanish.

As for Jonathan Post, he now lives in Seattle, where he does software management for a number of Boeing Aerospace Company projects. He has over 200 *books, articles, stories, poems, and broad*casts to his credit, including a recent keynote address to the Washington State Legislature. He is also completing a book — *Science Poems* — on the history of the relationship between science and poetry. □ *–JB*

Jonathan Post