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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IS SHEER POETRY TO FORMER LAUREATE

LEIGH WEIMERS *column*

Bits and bytes are what's behind a surge in poetry's popularity? That's the theory of former U.S. poet laureate **Robert Pinsky**, who knows about this popularity firsthand: His low-key call for Americans to share their favorite poems got more than 18,000 responses, and the resulting book he edited, "Americans' Favorite Poems," is in an unprecedented eighth hardcover printing. "I credit digital technology," **Pinsky** said at a CulturalInitiatives Silicon Valley luncheon this week. Technology offers us all sorts of information, art and entertainment, he explained, but we get it passively. People desire to do more than sit in front of their TV or monitor screens, so many of the couch potatoes are turning to poetry, he said, especially to read it aloud. "You're missing the best part of poetry if you don't read it aloud," **Pinsky** emphasized. Just reading poetry to yourself "is like trying to learn music by looking at the score." You can check out **Pinsky's** poetry project -- via digital technology, ironically -- at www.favoritepoem.org.

And if you can get up off your duff, check out "The Evolution of Information Storage" exhibit opening today at the Museum of American Heritage in Palo Alto. You'll see it's not such a new thing -- although our immersion in it is -- when you look at the ways we've stored information, from the 18th century to today: early cameras, phonographs, record albums, early computers and disk drives, even an early computer mouse. Made of wood (you were expecting maybe fur?).

BUILDING BLOCKS: The travel and tourism business may be slow, but the San Jose Fairmont Hotel didn't cut any corners with its tower addition, being formally opened today. As in the original hotel, there's plenty of marble, exotic wood paneling, art that's a cut above usual hotel fare and enough Murano glass to qualify as a virtual trip to Venice. And to justify the hotel's top-tier room rates.

David Burwell of Quantum wonders about the design of the Fairmont addition, though, especially from the Market Street side where the semi-circular tower cozies up to high-rise condos next door. "It's kind of like the Fairmont is just waiting until no one is looking," Burwell says, "and then bam, down come the condos and they complete the new tower." He imagines Fairmont execs saying, "Condos? What condos? Our tower has always been round.' "

Earlier this week, I shouldn't have included city inspectors among those to blame for the utility boxes that now hinder pedestrians on busy Santa Clara Street outside the new Opus high-rise. Inspectors are stuck with enforcing city regulations as written, points out senior construction inspector Luis Arevalo. No matter how dumb the regs. "What you should have said is that city architects and their consultants should give more thought to the public's convenience," Arevalo notes. "More accurately, since we're talking about a project in downtown, Redevelopment Agency architects and their consultants."

AROUND AND ABOUT: "Cover girl" is OK as titles go, but "Billboard Girl" is bigger. That's why tiny dynamo Helen Owen should enjoy seeing herself on those new Leukemia Society billboards around the city. They're a tribute to her fundraising efforts on behalf of the public-benefit organization.

Can't say the ladies don't wear gloves anymore. For the Daughters of the American Revolution reception honoring Santa Clara County's Kimberly Faraday as the DAR's outstanding national junior member this week, the invitations specified "semi-formal tea length attire with gloves." And the guests complied (although you know there must have been a lot of digging through trunks beforehand).

ON THE WALL: Spotted by Michael Vaughn on the bathroom wall at Coffee Society, this challenge: "Let's start a revolution of the proletariat." And written below it: "In Cupertino?" Reminds him of a previous graffito at the late, lamented Printers Inc. on the Peninsula: "Palo Alto -- Seething Hotbed of Content."

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