

Robert Pinsky

(1940 -)

Poem About People (1975)

The jaunty crop-haired graying
Women in grocery stores,
Their clothes boyish and neat,
New mittens or clean sneakers,

Clean hands, hips not bad still,
Buying ice cream, steaks, soda,
Fresh melons and soap—or the big
Balding young men in work shoes

And green work pants, beer belly
And white T-shirt, the porky walk
Back to the truck, polite; possible
To feel briefly like Jesus,

A gust of diffuse tenderness
Crossing the dark spaces
To where the dry self burrows
Or nests, something that stirs,

Watching the kinds of people
On the street for a while—
But how love falters and flags
When anyone's difficult eyes come

Into focus, terrible gaze of a unique
Soul, its need unlovable: my friend
In his divorced schoolteacher
Apartment, his own unsuspected

Paintings hung everywhere,
Which his wife kept in a closet—
Not, he says, that she wasn't
Perfectly right; or me, mis-hearing

My rock radio sing my self-pity:
“The Angels Wished Him Dead”—all
The hideous, sudden stare of self,
Soul showing through like the lizard

Ancestry showing in the frontal gaze
Of a robin busy on the lawn.
In the movies, when the sensitive
Young Jewish soldier nearly drowns

Trying to rescue the thrashing
Anti-semitic bully, swimming across
The river raked by nazi fire,
The awful part is the part truth:

Hate my whole kind, but me,
Love me for myself. The weather
Changes in the black of night,
And the dream-wind, bowling across

The sopping open spaces
Of roads, golf courses, parking lots,
Flails a commotion
In the dripping treetops,

Tries a half-rotten shingle
Or a down-hung branch, and we
All dream it, the dark wind crossing
The wide spaces between us.

Shirt (1991)

The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
The nearly invisible stitches along the collar
Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians

Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break
Or talking money or politics while one fitted
This armpiece with its overseam to the band

Of cuff I button at my wrist. The presser, the cutter,
The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,
The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The infamous blaze

At the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven.
One hundred and forty-six died in the flames
On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes—

The witness in a building across the street
Who watched how a young man helped a girl to step
Up to the windowsill, then held her out

Away from the masonry wall and let her drop.
And then another. As if he were helping them up
To enter a streetcar, and not eternity.

A third before he dropped her put her arms
Around his neck and kissed him. Then he held
Her into space, and dropped her. Almost at once

He stepped to the sill himself, his jacket flared
And fluttered up from his shirt as he came down,
Air filling up the legs of his gray trousers—
Like Hart Crane's Bedlamite, "shrill shirt ballooning."
Wonderful how the pattern matches perfectly
Across the placket and over the twin bar-tacked

Corners of both pockets, like a strict rhyme
Or a major chord. Prints, plaids, checks,
Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras. The clan tartans

Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian,
To control their savage Scottish workers, tamed
By a fabricated heraldry: MacGregor,

Bailey, MacMartin. The kilt, devised for workers
To wear among the dusty clattering looms.
Weavers, carders, spinners. The loader,

The docker, the navvy. The planter, the picker, the sorter
Sweating at her machine in a litter of cotton
As slaves in calico headrags sweated in fields:

George Herbert, your descendant is a Black
Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma
And she inspected my shirt. Its color and fit

And feel and its clean smell have satisfied
Both her and me. We have culled its cost and quality
Down to the buttons of simulated bone,

The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters
Printed in black on neckband and tail. The shape,
The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt.

From the Childhood of Jesus (1991)

One Saturday morning he went to the river to play.
He molded twelve sparrows out of the river clay

And scooped a clear pond, with a dam of twigs and mud.
Around the pond he set the birds he had made,

Evenly as the hours. Jesus was five. He smiled,
As a child would who had made a little world

Of clear still water and clay beside a river.
But a certain Jew came by, a friend of his father,

And he scolded the child and ran at once to Joseph,
Saying, "Come see how your child has profaned the Sabbath,

Making images at the river on the Day of Rest."
So Joseph came to the place and took his wrist

And told him, "Child, you have offended the Word."
Then Jesus freed the hand that Joseph held

And clapped his hands and shouted to the birds
To go away. They raised their beaks at his words

And breathed and stirred their feathers and flew away.
The people were frightened. Meanwhile, another boy,

The son of Annas the scribe, had idly taken
A branch of driftwood and leaning against it had broken

The dam and muddied the little pond and scattered
The twigs and stones. Then Jesus was angry and shouted,

“Unrighteous, impious, ignorant, what did the water
Do to harm you? Now you are going to wither

The way a tree does, you shall bear no fruit
And no leaves, you shall wither down to the root.”

At once, the boy was all withered. His parents moaned,
The Jews gasped, Jesus began to leave, then turned

And prophesied, his child’s face wet with tears:
“Twelve times twelve times twelve thousands of years

Before these heavens and this earth were made,
The Creator set a jewel in the throne of God

With Hell on the left and Heaven to the right,
The Sanctuary in front, and behind, an endless night

Endlessly fleeing a Torah written in flame.
And on that jewel in the throne, God wrote my name.”

Then Jesus left and went into Joseph’s house.
The family of the withered one also left the place,

Carrying him home. The Sabbath was nearly over.
By dusk, the Jews were all gone from the river.

Small creatures came from the undergrowth to drink
And foraged in the shadows along the bank.

Alone in his cot in Joseph's house, the Son
Of Man was crying himself to sleep. The moon

Rose higher, the Jews put out their lights and slept,
And all was calm and as it had been, except

In the agitated household of the scribe Annas,
And high in the dark, where unknown even to Jesus

The twelve new sparrows flew aimlessly through the night,
Not blinking or resting, as if never to alight.

To Television (1998)

Not a "window on the world"
But as we call you,
A box a tube

Terrarium of dreams and wonders.
Coffer of shades, ordained
Cotillion of phosphors
Or liquid crystal

Homey miracle, tub
Of acquiescence, vein of defiance.
Your patron in the pantheon would be Hermes

Raster dance,
Quick one, little thief, escort
Of the dying and comfort of the sick,

In a blue glow my father and little sister sat
Snuggled in one chair watching you
Their wife and mother was sick in the head
I scorned you and them as I scorned so much

Now I like you best in a hotel room,
Maybe minutes
Before I have to face an audience: behind
The doors of the armoire, box
Within a box--Tom & Jerry, or also brilliant
And reassuring, Oprah Winfrey.
Thank you, for I watched, I watched
Sid Caesar speaking French and Japanese not
Through knowledge but imagination,
His quickness, and Thank You, I watched live
Jackie Robinson stealing

Home, the image--O strung shell--enduring
Fleeter than light like these words we
Remember in, they too winged
At the helmet and ankles.

The Green Piano (1999)

Aeolian. Gratis. Great thunderer, half-ton infant of miracles
Torn free of charge from the universe by my mother's will.
You must have amazed that half-respectable street

Of triple-decker families and rooming-house housepainters
The day that the bole-ankled oversized hams of your legs
Bobbed in procession up the crazy-paved front walk

Embraced by the arms of Mr. Poppik the seltzer man
And Corydon his black-skinned helper, tendering your thighs
Thick as a man up our steps. We are not reptiles:

Even the male body bears nipples, as if to remind us
We are designed for dependence and nutriment, past
Into future. O Europe, they budged your case, its ponderous

Guts of iron and brass, ten kinds of hardwood and felt
Up those heel-pocked risers and treads splintering tinder.
Angelic nurse of clamor, yearner, tinkler, dominator —

O Elephant, you were for me! When the tuner Mr. Otto Van Brunt
Pronounced you excellent despite the cracked sounding board, we
Obeyed him and swabbed your ivories with hydrogen peroxide.

You blocked a doorway and filled most of the living room.
The sofa and chairs dwindled to a ram and ewes, cowering: now,
The colored neighbors could be positive we were crazy and rich,

As we thought the people were who gave you away for the moving
Out of their carriage house — they had painted you the color of pea soup.
The drunk man my mother hired never finished antiquing you

Ivory and umber, so you stood half done, a throbbing mistreated noble,
Genuine — my mother's swollen livestock of love, lost one, unmastered:
You were the beast she led to the shrine of my genius, mistaken.

Endlessly I bonged according to my own chord system 'Humoresque,'
'The Talk of the Town,' 'What'd I Say.' Then one day they painted you pink.
Pink is how my sister remembers you the Saturday afternoon

When our mother fell on her head, dusty pink as I turn on the bench
In my sister's memory to see our mother carried moaning up the last
Steps and into the living room, inaugurating the reign of our confusion.

They sued the builder of the house she fell in, with the settlement
They bought a house at last and one day when I came home from college
You were gone, mahogany breast, who nursed me through those

Years of the Concussion, and there was a crappy little Baldwin Acrosonic
In your place, gleaming, walnut shell. You sere gone, despoiled one
Pink one, forever green one, white-and-gold one, comforter, living soul.

ABC (2001)

Any body can die, evidently. Few
Go happily, irradiating joy,

Knowledge, love. Many
Need oblivion, painkillers,

Quickest respite.

Sweet time unafflicted,
Various world:
X=your zenith.

Samurai Song (2001)

When I had no roof I made
Audacity my roof. When I had
No supper my eyes dined.

When I had no eyes I listened.
When I had no ears I thought.
When I had no thought I waited.

When I had no father I made
Care my father. When I had
No mother I embraced order.

When I had no friend I made
Quiet my friend. When I had no
Enemy I opposed my body.

When I had no temple I made
My voice my temple. I have
No priest, my tongue is my choir.

When I have no means fortune
Is my means. When I have
Nothing, death will be my fortune.

Need is my tactic, detachment
Is my strategy. When I had
No lover I courted my sleep.

Rhyme (2008)

Air an instrument of the tongue,
The tongue an instrument
Of the body, the body
An instrument of spirit,
The spirit a being of the air.

A bird the medium of its song.
A song a world, a containment
Like a hotel room, ready
For us guests who inherit
Our compartment of time there.

In the Cornell box, among
Ephemera as its element,
The preserved bird—a study
In spontaneous elegy, the parrot
Art, mortal in its cornered sphere.

The room a stanza rung
In laddered filament
Clambered by all the unsteady
Chambered voices that share it,
Each reciting I too was here—

In a room, a rhyme, a song.
In the box, in books: each element
An instrument, the body
Still straining to parrot
The spirit, a being of air.

Grief (2016)

I don't think anybody ever is
Really divorced, said Lenny. Also,
I don't think anybody ever is
Really married, he said. Because

English was really his second language
And because of Yiddish and its displaced
Place in the world, he never really
Believed in his own prose. He wrote

Sentences the way a great boxer moves.
Near the end he told me “I’m in Hell”—
Something Lenny might have said about
Hunting for a parking space in Berkeley.

Mike too was himself. His last month,
Too weak to paint or make prints,
He sat and made drawings of flowers:
Ink attentive to rhythms of beach rose,

Wisteria, lily—forms like acrobats
Or Cossack dancers. Mike had a vision
Of his body dead on his studio floor
Seen from high above—he didn’t feel sad

Or afraid at seeing it, he said, just
Sorry for the person who would find it.
You can’t say nobody ever really dies:
Of course they do: Lenny died. Mike died.

But the odd thing is, the person still makes
A shape distinct and present in the mind
As an object in the hand. The presence
In the absence: it isn’t comfort—it’s grief.

At Mt. Auburn Cemetery (2021)

Walking among the graves for exercise
Where do you get your ideas how do I stop them
Looking for Mike Mazur’s marker I looked
Down at the grass and saw Stanislaw Baranczak
Our Solidarity poetry reading in Poznan
Years later in Newton now he said I’m a U.S.
Liberal with a car like everybody else
When I held Bobo dying in my arms
His green eyes told me *I am not done yet*

Then he was gone when he was young he enjoyed
Leaping up onto the copy machine to press
A button and hear it hum to life and rustle
A blank page then another out onto its tray
Sometimes he batted the pages down to the floor
I used to call it his hobby here's a marble
Wicker bassinet marking a baby's grave
To sever the good fellowship of dust the vet's
Needle first a sedative then death now Willie
Paces the house mowling his elegy for Bobo
They never meow to one another just to people
Or to their nursing mother when they're small I
Marvel at this massive labelled American elm
Spreading above a cluster of newer names
Chang, Ohanessian, Kondakis joining Howells,
Emerson, Parkinson and here's a six-foot sphere
Of polished granite perfect and inscribed *Walker*
Should I have let him die his own cat way
Bruce Lee spends less on a stone than Schwarzenegger
The cemetery official confided what will mark
The markers when like mourners they bow and kneel
And topple down flat to kiss the very heaps
They have in trust under the splendid elm
Also marked with its tag a noble survivor
Civilization lifted my cat from the street gave him
A name and all his shots and determined his death
Now Willie howls the loss from room to room
When people say I'm ashamed of being German
Said Arendt I want to say I'm ashamed of being
Human sometimes when Bobo made the machine
Shoot copies of nothing I crumpled one he could chase
And combat practicing the game of being himself.