

**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.