

# **Robert Pinsky**

**- poems -**

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## At Pleasure Bay

In the willows along the river at Pleasure Bay  
A catbird singing, never the same phrase twice.  
Here under the pines a little off the road  
In 1927 the Chief of Police  
And Mrs. W. killed themselves together,  
Sitting in a roadster. Ancient unshaken pilings  
And underwater chunks of still-mortared brick  
In shapes like bits of puzzle strew the bottom  
Where the landing was for Price's Hotel and Theater.  
And here's where boats blew two blasts for the keeper  
To shunt the iron swing-bridge. He leaned on the gears  
Like a skipper in the hut that housed the works  
And the bridge moaned and turned on its middle pier  
To let them through. In the middle of the summer  
Two or three cars might wait for the iron trusswork  
Winching aside, with maybe a child to notice  
A name on the stern in black-and-gold on white,  
Sandpiper, Patsy Ann, Do Not Disturb,  
The Idler. If a boat was running whiskey,  
The bridge clanged shut behind it as it passed  
And opened up again for the Coast Guard cutter  
Slowly as a sundial, and always jammed halfway.  
The roadbed whole, but opened like a switch,  
The river pulling and coursing between the piers.  
Never the same phrase twice, the catbird filling  
The humid August evening near the inlet  
With borrowed music that he melds and changes.  
Dragonflies and sandflies, frogs in the rushes, two bodies  
Not moving in the open car among the pines,  
A sliver of story. The tenor at Price's Hotel,  
In clown costume, unfurls the sorrow gathered  
In ruffles at his throat and cuffs, high quavers  
That hold like splashes of light on the dark water,  
The aria's closing phrases, changed and fading.  
And after a gap of quiet, cheers and applause  
Audible in the houses across the river,  
Some in the audience weeping as if they had melted  
Inside the music. Never the same. In Berlin  
The daughter of an English lord, in love  
With Adolf Hitler, whom she has met. She is taking  
Possession of the apartment of a couple,  
Elderly well-off Jews. They survive the war  
To settle here in the Bay, the old lady  
Teaches piano, but the whole world swivels  
And gapes at their feet as the girl and a high-up Nazi  
Examine the furniture, the glass, the pictures,  
The elegant story that was theirs and now  
Is part of hers. A few months later the English  
Enter the war and she shoots herself in a park,  
An addled, upper-class girl, her life that passes  
Into the lives of others or into a place.  
The taking of lives--the Chief and Mrs. W.

Took theirs to stay together, as local ghosts.  
Last flurries of kisses, the revolver's barrel,  
Shivers of a story that a child might hear  
And half remember, voices in the rushes,  
A singing in the willows. From across the river,  
Faint quavers of music, the same phrase twice and again,  
Ranging and building. Over the high new bridge  
The flashing of traffic homeward from the racetrack,  
With one boat chugging under the arches, outward  
Unnoticed through Pleasure Bay to the open sea.  
Here's where the people stood to watch the theater  
Burn on the water. All that night the fireboats  
Kept playing their spouts of water into the blaze.  
In the morning, smoking pilasters and beams.  
Black smell of char for weeks, the ruin already  
Soaking back into the river. After you die  
You hover near the ceiling above your body  
And watch the mourners awhile. A few days more  
You float above the heads of the ones you knew  
And watch them through a twilight. As it grows darker  
You wander off and find your way to the river  
And wade across. On the other side, night air,  
Willows, the smell of the river, and a mass  
Of sleeping bodies all along the bank,  
A kind of singing from among the rushes  
Calling you further forward in the dark.  
You lie down and embrace one body, the limbs  
Heavy with sleep reach eagerly up around you  
And you make love until your soul brims up  
And burns free out of you and shifts and spills  
Down over into that other body, and you  
Forget the life you had and begin again  
On the same crossing--maybe as a child who passes  
Through the same place. But never the same way twice.  
Here in the daylight, the catbird in the willows,  
The new cafe, with a terrace and a landing,  
Frogs in the cattails where the swing-bridge was--  
Here's where you might have slipped across the water  
When you were only a presence, at Pleasure Bay.

Robert Pinsky

## Ginza Samba

A monosyllabic European called Sax  
Invents a horn, walla whirledy wah, a kind of twisted  
Brazen clarinet, but with its column of vibrating  
Air shaped not in a cylinder but in a cone  
Widening ever outward and bawaah spouting  
Infinitely upward through an upturned  
Swollen golden bell rimmed  
Like a gloxinia flowering  
In Sax's Belgian imagination

And in the unfathomable matrix  
Of mothers and fathers as a genius graven  
Humming into the cells of the body  
Or cupped in the resonating grail  
Of memory changed and exchanged  
As in the trading of brasses,  
Pearls and ivory, calicos and slaves,  
Laborers and girls, two

Cousins in a royal family  
Of Niger known as the Birds or Hawks.  
In Christendom one cousin's child  
Becomes a "favorite negro" ennobled  
By decree of the Czar and founds  
A great family, a line of generals,  
Dandies and courtiers including the poet  
Pushkin, killed in a duel concerning  
His wife's honor, while the other cousin sails

In the belly of a slaveship to the port  
Of Baltimore where she is raped  
And dies in childbirth, but the infant  
Will marry a Seminole and in the next  
Chorus of time their child fathers  
A great Hawk or Bird, with many followers  
Among them this great-grandchild of the Jewish  
Manager of a Pushkin estate, blowing

His American breath out into the wiggly  
Tune uncurling its triplets and sixteenths--the Ginza  
Samba of breath and brass, the reed  
Vibrating as a valve, the aether, the unimaginable  
Wires and circuits of an ingenious box  
Here in my room in this house built  
A hundred years ago while I was elsewhere:

It is like falling in love, the atavistic  
Imperative of some one  
Voice or face--the skill, the copper filament,  
The golden bellful of notes twirling through  
Their invisible element from  
Rio to Tokyo and back again gathering

Speed in the variations as they tunnel  
The twin haunted labyrinths of stirrup  
And anvil echoing here in the hearkening  
Instrument of my skull.

Robert Pinsky

## Impossible To Tell

to Robert Hass and in memory of Elliot Gilbert

Slow dulcimer, gavotte and bow, in autumn,  
Bash&otilde; and his friends go out to view the moon;  
In summer, gasoline rainbow in the gutter,

The secret courtesy that courses like ichor  
Through the old form of the rude, full-scale joke,  
Impossible to tell in writing. "Bash&otilde;"

He named himself, "Banana Tree": banana  
After the plant some grateful students gave him,  
Maybe in appreciation of his guidance

Threading a long night through the rules and channels  
Of their collaborative linking-poem  
Scored in their teacher's heart: live, rigid, fluid

Like passages etched in a microscopic circuit.  
Elliot had in his memory so many jokes  
They seemed to breed like microbes in a culture

Inside his brain, one so much making another  
It was impossible to tell them all:  
In the court-culture of jokes, a top banana.

Imagine a court of one: the queen a young mother,  
Unhappy, alone all day with her firstborn child  
And her new baby in a squalid apartment

Of too few rooms, a different race from her neighbors.  
She tells the child she's going to kill herself.  
She broods, she rages. Hoping to distract her,

The child cuts capers, he sings, he does imitations  
Of different people in the building, he jokes,  
He feels if he keeps her alive until the father

Gets home from work, they'll be okay till morning.  
It's laughter versus the bedroom and the pills.  
What is he in his efforts but a courtier?

Impossible to tell his whole delusion.  
In the first months when I had moved back East  
From California and had to leave a message

On Bob's machine, I used to make a habit  
Of telling the tape a joke; and part-way through,  
I would pretend that I forgot the punchline,

Or make believe that I was interrupted--

As though he'd be so eager to hear the end  
He'd have to call me back. The joke was Elliot's,

More often than not. The doctors made the blunder  
That killed him some time later that same year.  
One day when I got home I found a message

On my machine from Bob. He had a story  
About two rabbis, one of them tall, one short,  
One day while walking along the street together

They see the corpse of a Chinese man before them,  
And Bob said, sorry, he forgot the rest.  
Of course he thought that his joke was a dummy,

Impossible to tell--a dead-end challenge.  
But here it is, as Elliot told it to me:  
The dead man's widow came to the rabbis weeping,

Begging them, if they could, to resurrect him.  
Shocked, the tall rabbi said absolutely not.  
But the short rabbi told her to bring the body

Into the study house, and ordered the shutters  
Closed so the room was night-dark. Then he prayed  
Over the body, chanting a secret blessing

Out of Kabala. "Arise and breathe," he shouted;  
But nothing happened. The body lay still. So then  
The little rabbi called for hundreds of candles

And danced around the body, chanting and praying  
In Hebrew, then Yiddish, then Aramaic. He prayed  
In Turkish and Egyptian and Old Galician

For nearly three hours, leaping about the coffin  
In the candlelight so that his tiny black shoes  
Seemed not to touch the floor. With one last prayer

Sobbed in the Spanish of before the Inquisition  
He stopped, exhausted, and looked in the dead man's face.  
Panting, he raised both arms in a mystic gesture

And said, "Arise and breathe!" And still the body  
Lay as before. Impossible to tell  
In words how Elliot's eyebrows flailed and snorted

Like shaggy mammoths as--the Chinese widow  
Granting permission--the little rabbi sang  
The blessing for performing a circumcision

And removed the dead man's foreskin, chanting blessings

In Finnish and Swahili, and bathed the corpse  
From head to foot, and with a final prayer

In Babylonian, gasping with exhaustion,  
He seized the dead man's head and kissed the lips  
And dropped it again and leaping back commanded,

"Arise and breathe!" The corpse lay still as ever.  
At this, as when Bashō's disciples wind  
Along the curving spine that links the renga

Across the different voices, each one adding  
A transformation according to the rules  
Of stasis and repetition, all in order

And yet impossible to tell beforehand,  
Elliot changes for the punchline: the wee  
Rabbi, still panting, like a startled boxer,

Looks at the dead one, then up at all those watching,  
A kind of Mel Brooks gesture: "Hoo boy!" he says,  
"Now that's what I call really dead." O mortal

Powers and princes of earth, and you immortal  
Lords of the underground and afterlife,  
Jehovah, Raa, Bol-Morah, Hecate, Pluto,

What has a brilliant, living soul to do with  
Your harps and fires and boats, your bric-a-brac  
And troughs of smoking blood? Provincial stinkers,

Our languages don't touch you, you're like that mother  
Whose small child entertained her to beg her life.  
Possibly he grew up to be the tall rabbi,

The one who washed his hands of all those capers  
Right at the outset. Or maybe he became  
The author of these lines, a one-man renga

The one for whom it seems to be impossible  
To tell a story straight. It was a routine  
Procedure. When it was finished the physicians

Told Sandra and the kids it had succeeded,  
But Elliot wouldn't wake up for maybe an hour,  
They should go eat. The two of them loved to bicker

In a way that on his side went back to Yiddish,  
On Sandra's to some Sicilian dialect.  
He used to scold her endlessly for smoking.

When she got back from dinner with their children



The doctors had to tell them about the mistake.  
Oh swirling petals, falling leaves! The movement

Of linking renga coursing from moment to moment  
Is meaning, Bob says in his Haiku book.  
Oh swirling petals, all living things are contingent,

Falling leaves, and transient, and they suffer.  
But the Universal is the goal of jokes,  
Especially certain ethnic jokes, which taper

Down through the swirling funnel of tongues and gestures  
Toward their preposterous Ithaca. There's one  
A journalist told me. He heard it while a hero

Of the South African freedom movement was speaking  
To elderly Jews. The speaker's own right arm  
Had been blown off by right-wing letter-bombers.

He told his listeners they had to cast their ballots  
For the ANC--a group the old Jews feared  
As "in with the Arabs." But they started weeping

As the old one-armed fighter told them their country  
Needed them to vote for what was right, their vote  
Could make a country their children could return to

From London and Chicago. The moved old people  
Applauded wildly, and the speaker's friend  
Whispered to the journalist, "It's the Belgian Army

Joke come to life." I wish I could tell it  
To Elliot. In the Belgian Army, the feud  
Between the Flemings and Walloons grew vicious,

So out of hand the army could barely function.  
Finally one commander assembled his men  
In one great room, to deal with things directly.

They stood before him at attention. "All Flemings,"  
He ordered, "to the left wall." Half the men  
Clustered to the left. "Now all Walloons," he ordered,

"Move to the right." An equal number crowded  
Against the right wall. Only one man remained  
At attention in the middle: "What are you, soldier?"

Saluting, the man said, "Sir, I am a Belgian."  
"Why, that's astonishing, Corporal--what's your name?"  
Saluting again, "Rabinowitz," he answered:

A joke that seems at first to be a story

About the Jews. But as the renga describes  
Religious meaning by moving in drifting petals

And brittle leaves that touch and die and suffer  
The changing winds that riffle the gutter swirl,  
So in the joke, just under the raucous music

Of Fleming, Jew, Walloon, a courtly allegiance  
Moves to the dulcimer, gavotte and bow,  
Over the banana tree the moon in autumn--

Allegiance to a state impossible to tell.

Robert Pinsky

## Ode To Meaning

Dire one and desired one,  
Savior, sentencer--

In an old allegory you would carry  
A chained alphabet of tokens:

Ankh Badge Cross.  
Dragon,  
Engraved figure guarding a hallowed intaglio,  
Jasper kinema of legendary Mind,  
Naked omphalos pierced  
By quills of rhyme or sense, torah-like: unborn  
Vein of will, xenophile  
Yearning out of Zero.

Untrusting I court you. Wavering  
I seek your face, I read  
That Crusoe's knife  
Reeked of you, that to defile you  
The soldier makes the rabbi spit on the torah.  
"I'll drown my book" says Shakespeare.

Drowned walker, revenant.  
After my mother fell on her head, she became  
More than ever your sworn enemy. She spoke  
Sometimes like a poet or critic of forty years later.  
Or she spoke of the world as Thersites spoke of the heroes,  
"I think they have swallowed one another. I  
Would laugh at that miracle."

You also in the laughter, warrior angel:  
Your helmet the zodiac, rocket-plumed  
Your spear the beggar's finger pointing to the mouth  
Your heel planted on the serpent Formulation  
Your face a vapor, the wreath of cigarette smoke crowning  
Bogart as he winces through it.

You not in the words, not even  
Between the words, but a torsion,  
A cleavage, a stirring.

You stirring even in the arctic ice,  
Even at the dark ocean floor, even  
In the cellular flesh of a stone.  
Gas. Gossamer. My poker friends  
Question your presence  
In a poem by me, passing the magazine  
One to another.

Not the stone and not the words, you  
Like a veil over Arthur's headstone,  
The passage from Proverbs he chose

While he was too ill to teach  
And still well enough to read, I was  
Beside the master craftsman  
Delighting him day after day, ever  
At play in his presence--you

A soothing veil of distraction playing over  
Dying Arthur playing in the hospital,  
Thumbing the Bible, fuzzy from medication,  
Ever courting your presence,  
And you the prognosis,  
You in the cough.

Gesturer, when is your spur, your cloud?  
You in the airport rituals of greeting and parting.  
Indicter, who is your claimant?  
Bell at the gate. Spiderweb iron bridge.  
Cloak, video, aroma, rue, what is your  
Elected silence, where was your seed?

What is Imagination  
But your lost child born to give birth to you?

Dire one. Desired one.  
Savior, sentencer--

Absence,  
Or presence ever at play:  
Let those scorn you who never  
Starved in your dearth. If I  
Dare to disparage  
Your harp of shadows I taste  
Wormwood and motor oil, I pour  
Ashes on my head. You are the wound. You  
Be the medicine.

Robert Pinsky

## Poem With Refrains

The opening scene. The yellow, coal-fed fog  
Uncurling over the tainted city river,  
A young girl rowing and her anxious father  
Scavenging for corpses. Funeral meats. The clever  
Abandoned orphan. The great athletic killer  
Sulking in his tent. As though all stories began  
With someone dying.

When her mother died,  
My mother refused to attend the funeral--  
In fact, she sulked in her tent all through the year  
Of the old lady's dying. I don't know why:  
She said, because she loved her mother so much  
She couldn't bear to see the way the doctors,  
Or her father, or--someone--was letting her mother die.  
"Follow your saint, follow with accents sweet;  
Haste you, sad notes, fall at her flying feet."

She fogs things up, she scavenges the taint.  
Possibly that's the reason I write these poems.

But they did speak: on the phone. Wept and argued,  
So fiercely one or the other often cut off  
A sentence by hanging up in rage--like lovers,  
But all that year she never saw her face.

They lived on the same block, four doors apart.  
"Absence my presence is; strangeness my grace;  
With them that walk against me is my sun."

"Synagogue" is a word I never heard,  
We called it shul, the Yiddish word for school.  
Elms, terra-cotta, the ocean a few blocks east.  
"Lay institution": she taught me we didn't think  
God lived in it. The rabbi is just a teacher.

But what about the hereditary priests,  
Descendants of the Cohanes of the Temple,  
Like Walter Holtz--I called him Uncle Walter,  
When I was small. A big man with a face  
Just like a boxer dog or a cartoon sergeant.  
She told me whenever he helped a pretty woman  
Try on a shoe in his store, he'd touch her calf  
And ask her, "How does that feel?" I was too little  
To get the point but pretended to understand.  
"Desire, be steady; hope is your delight,  
An orb wherein no creature can ever be sorry."

She didn't go to my bar mitzvah, either.  
I can't say why: she was there, and then she wasn't.  
I looked around before I mounted the steps  
To chant that babble and the speech the rabbi wrote

And there she wasn't, and there was Uncle Walter  
The Cohane frowning with his doggy face:  
"She's missing her own son's musaf." Maybe she just  
Doesn't like rituals. Afterwards, she had a reason  
I don't remember. I wasn't upset: the truth  
Is, I had decided to be the clever orphan  
Some time before. By now, it's all a myth.  
What is a myth but something that seems to happen  
Always for the first time over and over again?  
And ten years later, she missed my brother's, too.  
I'm sorry: I think it was something about a hat.  
"Hot sun, cool fire, tempered with sweet air,  
Black shade, fair nurse, shadow my white hair;  
Shine, sun; burn, fire; breathe, air, and ease me."

She sees the minister of the Nation of Islam  
On television, though she's half-blind in one eye.  
His bow tie is lime, his jacket crocodile green.  
Vigorously he denounces the Jews who traded in slaves,  
The Jews who run the newspapers and the banks.  
"I see what this guy is mad about now," she says,  
"It must have been some Jew that sold him the suit."  
"And the same wind sang and the same wave whitened,  
And or ever the garden's last petals were shed,  
In the lips that had whispered, the eyes that had lightened."

But when they unveiled her mother's memorial stone,  
Gathered at the graveside one year after the death,  
According to custom, while we were standing around  
About to begin the prayers, her car appeared.  
It was a black car; the ground was deep in snow.  
My mother got out and walked toward us, across  
The field of gravestones capped with snow, her coat  
Black as the car, and they waited to start the prayers  
Until she arrived. I think she enjoyed the drama.  
I can't remember if she prayed or not,  
But that may be the way I'll remember her best:  
Dark figure, awaited, attended, aware, apart.  
"The present time upon time pass&uml;d striketh;  
With Phoebus's wandering course the earth is graced.

The air still moves, and by its moving, cleareth;  
The fire up ascends, and planets feedeth;  
The water passeth on, and all lets weareth;  
The earth stands still, yet change of changes breedeth."

Robert Pinsky

## Shirt

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 up 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 patern 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.

Robert Pinsky



## The Night Game

Some of us believe  
We would have conceived romantic  
Love out of our own passions  
With no precedents,  
Without songs and poetry--  
Or have invented poetry and music  
As a comb of cells for the honey.

Shaped by ignorance,  
A succession of new worlds,  
Congruities improvised by  
Immigrants or children.

I once thought most people were Italian,  
Jewish or Colored.  
To be white and called  
Something like Ed Ford  
Seemed aristocratic,  
A rare distinction.

Possibly I believed only gentiles  
And blonds could be left-handed.

Already famous  
After one year in the majors,  
Whitey Ford was drafted by the Army  
To play ball in the flannels  
Of the Signal Corps, stationed  
In Long Branch, New Jersey.

A night game, the silver potion  
Of the lights, his pink skin  
Shining like a burn.

Never a player  
I liked or hated: a Yankee,  
A mere success.

But white the chalked-off lines  
In the grass, white and green  
The immaculate uniform,  
And white the unpigmented  
Halo of his hair  
When he shifted his cap:

So ordinary and distinct,  
So close up, that I felt  
As if I could have made him up,  
Imagined him as I imagined

The ball, a scintilla  
High in the black backdrop

Of the sky. Tight red stitches.  
Rawlings. The bleached

Horsehide white: the color  
Of nothing. Color of the past  
And of the future, of the movie screen  
At rest and of blank paper.

"I could have." The mind. The black  
Backdrop, the white  
Fly picked out by the towering  
Lights. A few years later

On a blanket in the grass  
By the same river  
A girl and I came into  
Being together  
To the faint muttering  
Of unthinkable  
Troubadours and radios.

The emerald  
Theater, the night.  
Another time,  
I devised a left-hander  
Even more gifted  
Than Whitey Ford: A Dodger.  
People were amazed by him.  
Once, when he was young,  
He refused to pitch on Yom Kippur.

Robert Pinsky

## The Refinery

". . . our language, forged in the dark bycenturies of violent pressure, underground,out of the stuff of dead life."

Thirsty and languorous after their long black sleep  
The old gods crooned and shuffled and shook their heads.  
Dry, dry. By railroad they set out  
Across the desert of stars to drink the world  
Our mouths had soaked  
In the strange sentences we made  
While they were asleep: a pollen-tinted  
Slurry of passion and lapsed  
Intention, whose imagined  
Taste made the savage deities hiss and snort.

In the lightless carriages, a smell of snake  
And coarse fur, glands of lymphless breath  
And ichor, the avid stench of  
Immortal bodies.

Their long train clicked and sighed  
Through the gulfs of night between the planets  
And came down through the evening fog  
Of redwood canyons. From the train  
At sunset, fiery warehouse windows  
Along a wharf. Then dusk, a gash of neon:  
Bar. Black pinewoods, a junction crossing, glimpses  
Of sluggish surf among the rocks, a moan  
Of dreamy forgotten divinity calling and fading  
Against the windows of a town. Inside  
The train, a flash  
Of dragonfly wings, an antlered brow.

Black night again, and then  
After the bridge, a palace on the water:

The great Refinery--impossible city of lights,  
A million bulbs tracing its turreted  
Boulevards and mazes. The castle of a person  
Pronounced alive, the Corporation: a fictional  
Lord real in law.

Barbicans and torches  
Along the siding where the engine slows  
At the central tanks, a ward  
Of steel palisades, valved and chandeliered.

The muttering gods  
Greedy penetrate those bright pavilions--  
Libation of Benzene, Naphthalene, Asphalt,  
Gasoline, Tar: syllables  
Fractioned and cracked from unarticulated

Crude, the smeared keep of life that fed  
On itself in pitchy darkness when the gods  
Were new--inedible, volatile  
And sublimated afresh to sting  
Our tongues who use it, refined from oil of stone.

The gods batten on the vats, and drink up  
Lovecries and memorized Chaucer, lines from movies  
And songs hoarded in mortmain: exiles' charms,  
The basal or desperate distillates of breath  
Steeped, brewed and spent  
As though we were their aphids, or their bees,  
That monstered up sweetness for them while they dozed.

Robert Pinsky

## To Television

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.

Robert Pinsky