

FIVE POEMS



Robert Pinsky

THE PHOENIX

Dark herald, self-conceived in the desert waste,
What *yang* or *yin* enfolds your enigma best?

Memory, whose wing of fire destroys the past—
Or the present, brooding on an ashen nest?

Singing in the flames of Hell, triumphant Christ
Harrowing with Being the Nihil of the Beast—

Or, one foot lifted, one foot planted in dust,
Lord Shiva dancing, hammer in his fist?

You are the emblem of emigrants who crossed
Ocean and continent on their long flight West,

And Entropy's immobile image: chaste
And labile, fluent at rest and saved when lost.

Shakespeare appoints the swan your funeral priest,
The dove your spouse, at rites that you outlast,

But your true mate is Speech, the profane ghost—
The quick boy brandishing his lightning-burst.

MACHINE

Leather and brass, wood, forged or die-cut steel.
Silicon, gold electrodes, chased gear and bronze pawl.
Silver wing, Iron Horse, its hum or wail

Or white noise, whispering of molten soul
Poured by the makers into the tiny grail
Of escapement at my wrist. Or a roaring bull,

And I astride it, or inside at the wheel
Of animate substance, the golem angel flail
Thrashing the germ of spirit from its hull.

Or magnetic speakers, that ape the primate pull
To lip the air, voiced matter—the tongue of will
Cleaves the material to its euphoric call.

THE GREEN PIANO

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 logs
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 an 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 them carrying our mother 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 were gone, despoiled
one—

Pink one, forever-green one, white and gold one, comforter a
living soul.

A PHONEBOOK COVER HERMES OF THE NINETEEN-
FORTIES

Naked but for the winged helmet and sandals,
He flourishes a jagged bundle of lightning
High over his head as a trophy.

His other hand at his hip grips
A thick sinuous bunch of the cable
That spirals his trunk and legs

Rooted on the North Pole, the sole
Of one sandal extending down
Over Alaska, balancing him

Solidly on the globe. Head down
And averted, under the metal brim
His eyes are invisible not through

Shyness or diffidence but a triumph
Of absorption—athletic, the slender
Thunderer surrounded by thunder

With fire zigzag in his fist, messenger
Of light itself, he knows to
See without needing to see.

AT THE WORCESTER MUSEUM

Inheritors, bored or exalted, we turn
Murmuring through the galleries'
Underwater stillness. What force pressed
Wooden molds into plaster, breath
Into glass, tools into stone or wood,
Moves us through the Muses-house—stunned
By so much striving hung in stillness,
The demonstrated spectacle of collection
And preservation, catalogued. Entropy
Suspended trembles in worn marble stairs.

That mastery is fiery in the blood

Is nearly imperceptible, yet we are
The very animal that snaked the Romex
To junction boxes, that measured and laid
The pipes, that nailed this flooring
And subfloor to the joists and drew the plans.

Here is *Domestic Conflict*, in an ink
So acid it eats away the paper where
The drawing is at its densest, the wife's
Hand turning aside her husband's pistol barrel.

And here the arm of a Meroitic prince
Angles his war axe high above his head
In bas-relief to slay twelve enemies.
They gape their terror while his regal fist
Grips the whole dozen by their gathered hair.
Egyptian, his profiled, imperial stance.
Sudanese Kush his features, calm
As any Buddha. Although he died
Before he came to power,
Perhaps a child, whatever spirit
Demands presence in absence
Sculpted the vision of his triumph here.

O long-dead royal infant, memory
Tangles and swerves: twenty centuries
Before the Yankees wangled Massachusetts
From Narragansetts and Wampanoags
A Greco-African master hired by your father
Carved female Victory floating
On sandstone wings like the Holy Ghost
To wield her flywhisk at your brow—
Or like memory, the Muses's mother,
Though they are bright and she is dark
As the winged fates the Vikings called
The Wyrds: in collection and recollection,
Elegy and memorial of the dead.

On one wall here in the bathroom
Someone has painted—since painted
Over in the palimpsest of time
And barely visible—a heart and the legend,
Helio and Marie will fuck forever.

“Forever.” Collection and recollection—
Memento mori. Even the motion
Of this Franz Kline, and Bourke-White’s silver
Flashes in *Moscow Under Air Attack*
Are emblems of the dead,
It’s in the shepherdesses’ skin:
Everyone you love and everyone you know
Will die: we are all a room of skulls
Gazing at these walls. And all our things:
Your garments, your house, your car,
Your animals, your music and mortal pictures.

Worcester eminences, prosperous
Congregationalists and Unitarians:
The third Stephen Salisbury,
Bachelor, last of his family line
Of Yankee dealers. John Chandler
Bancroft, collector of three thousand
Japanese woodblock prints. They made
A temple for the population of the thriving
Mill city, bringing the hive tribute to
Possession—or to Classical, recalled
Leisure and prowess. Immigrant
Children from Cork, Poznan or Piacenza
Saw Miyagawa Choshun’s picture
Of the Floating World: *Amusements*
At Cherry-Blossom-Viewing Time:
Sake and music of the samisen.

And still smouldering in memory,
This half-brutal excreted sweetness.
Banging their pans and kettles
Or rattling a stick along a rake
To attract the honeybee
The hooved and heavy breasted
Sexual creatures of Piero
DiCosimo’s *Discovery Of Honey*
By Bacchus dance and grin.
One furry-thighed mother
Suckles her faun. Lord Bacchus,
The ever-born prince of pleasure
And violent orgy, hugs Ariadne

As bees swarm to the tree,
In loud ecstatic procession the monstrous
Yet nearly human celebrants pay
Homage to their languid, immortal lord,
Bacchus the drunkard, great
Breaker of structures—spirit
Of this live remnant that abides
In conservation: this place apparently
Apart and barely tangent to the real
City outside it: this nearly condescending
Palace, marbled, civic, still, medicinal,
Stuffy or cool, so subtly tiring, that seems
So separate from the world—it is
The world, or what we remember of the world.