

## FOUR POEMS



*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 vapour, 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.

IDEAL

(*On Eve Tempted by the Serpent by Defendente Ferrari, and in  
Memory of Congresswoman Barbara Jordan of Texas*)

Rare spirit harkened to now with a pang  
Of half forgotten clarity or density:  
A quality, quilled, a learned freshness

Unshattered though not perfect—not Eden, not  
This rippled meander through newborn islands,  
These parentless first leaves and branches tender

And green marsh fresh, the blue, the white feet  
Of our adolescent mother, myth of  
Perfection imagined just before unperfecting

Itself as if by impulse. And grinning  
Cynically in a tree, bearded bignose already  
Stuck on his tube of body, the Crawler: we

The tempter, we the corrupted, with no notion  
Where bright spirits are culled—our very  
Admiration a self-exculpation. “Who

Is this strange bird", we say as if the  
Achieved idea were a sport—like a certain  
Parrot, gaudy escapee from some

Domestic cage into azure margins  
Of California: crested stranger, it joined  
A band of crows, flew and fed with them

Conducting itself as one brilliant  
Crow. We prefer that to this other  
Realized excellence, eloquence made of our

Same eggs and flowers and waters, plumed  
As we are, no feathered exception immune  
To that first painted April when we fell,

We fowl of a feather, we feel we fail—  
And not that she made it look difficult  
Or easy but possible—and we fall.

#### THE HAUNTED RUIN

Even your computer is a haunted ruin, as your  
Blood leaves something of itself, warming  
The tool in your hand.

From far off, down the billion corridors  
Of the semiconductor, military  
Pipes grieve at the junctures.

This too smells of the body, its heated  
Polymers smell of breast milk  
And worry—sweat.

Hum of so many cycles in current, voltage  
Of the past. Sing, wires. Feel, hand. Eyes,  
Watch and form

Legs and bellies of characters:  
Beak and eye of A. Serpentine hiss  
S of the foregoers, claw-tines

Of E and of the claw hammer  
You bought yesterday, its head  
Tasting of light oil, the juice

Of dead striving the haft  
Of ash, for all its urethane varnish, is  
Polished by body salts.

Pull, clawhead. Hold, shaft. Steel face,  
Strike and relieve me. Voice  
Of the maker locked in the baritone

Whine of the handsaw working.  
Lost, lingerer like the dead souls of  
Vilna, revenant. Machine-soul.

#### TO TELEVISION

Pierced chamber. 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 are winged  
At the helmet and ankles.