

LIFE MAGAZINE: The Favorite Poem Project (October 1998)

(This is the original version, including more entries than space in the magazine permitted to be published.)

In 1997, Robert Pinsky of Boston University was named the 39th Poet Laureate of the United States and thus placed in charge of a realm more vast, ancient, and inscrutable than any jurisdictions assigned to his fellow officials at the Pentagon, CIA, or Bureau of the Census.

Unlike theirs, his territory appeared on no map, though descriptions of it drifted down to him from the millennia. The style of these reports, however — “The garden flew round with the angel,/The angel flew round with the clouds,/And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round/And the clouds flew round with the clouds.” [Wallace Stevens, “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating”] were such as might make a practical-minded civil servant weep.

But for Pinsky — a fit dark-browed melodious-voiced poet, professor, psychologist’s husband, father of three grown daughters, and resident of an unswept inviting old Victorian house on the outskirts of Boston — poems, even obscure ones, relayed information of the highest importance. He believed, as famously expressed by the poet William Carlos Williams:

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there —*

Pinsky took his appointment seriously. How to be a steward, even for such a short time as a year or two, even in only one of the world’s capitals, for one of humanity’s oldest gifts: the gift for making song within speech, the art of poetry? And would it be possible to touch the lives of Americans other than those who lived, as he put it, “in the professional microcosm of poetry”?

Few Americans make a living off poetry, Professor Pinsky knew; he was one of them. He had published five books of poems, two of translations, and three of poetry criticism, each a treasure to critics and readers. At B.U., in a dusty old hexagonal bay-windowed room, he taught poetry-writing to a select half-circle of graduate students curled into old-fashioned wooden writing-chairs. In that same room, the great Robert Lowell once taught; Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath squeezed into those desks.

Pinsky often asked his students to read aloud their favorite poems, not poems they’d written, but poems they admired. Performance enriched both poem and speaker, he believed, recalling poetry’s ancient origins: the rhyming epics declaimed above tribal fires, the legends of great loves and battles spun by journeying balladeers for the pleasure of pre-electronic audiences. What Pinsky told his rapt students was that poetry was a physical art; not an art of anthology, biography, concordance, and doctoral dissertation, but an art of blood and eyeball and muscle. “Poetry may be among the first means we evolved to communicate not only with our companions, but with our descendants and our ancestors,” he wrote. In reciting aloud the poems they loved, the students learned about poetry’s music and history and power.

But who, outside the earnest semi-circles of academia, cared for poetry?

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Elevated to Laureate, loaned an office high in the rafters of the Library of Congress, his salary privately funded, Pinsky was invited to think big, to think about America. It occurred to him to propose to the nation the same project he assigned his hand-picked Boston students: let’s all pick our favorite poems and read them aloud.

What quickly became known as the “Favorite Poem Project” invited Americans to mail or email submissions to Professor Pinsky of their most-loved poems, along with explanations of why they loved them so much.

All published poems were welcome, of any century, in any language, as long as the poems were not composed by the applicants. A thousand participants would be chosen to read their poems aloud on audiotape, to become a kind of end-of-millennium time capsule, and 200 would be recorded on videotape, in honor of the bicentennial of the Library of Congress. By the fall of 1998, Pinsky hoped grass-roots “Favorite Poem Project” poetry readings would be springing up around the nation, hosted by libraries, theaters, governors, schools, YMCAs, bookstores, literacy projects, community centers.

“I want all American voices to be heard,” announced Pinsky, as the call went out. “I want English, Chinese, Spanish, Navajo, and Yiddish. I want cowboy poems. I hope truck drivers and doctors and welders will consider nominating themselves to read a poem for this project.” He was looking, he said, for “relationships”: his hope was to create an anthology not of the worlds’ greatest poetry, but of deep connections between Americans and their favorite poems.

The “Favorite Poem Project” was unveiled in the spring of this year.

And then the U.S. Poet Laureate waited.

Common knowledge held that Americans, under constant bombardment by hundreds of television channels, radio talk shows, big-budget movies, celebrity magazines, and multi-million dollar marketing blitzes, were too harried and overloaded to have time to care for the subtle, solitary art of poetry. Rumor was that while Russians, Chileans, Nigerians, Chinese, Egyptians, Armenians, Italians, Japanese, and Mexicans revered poetry and honored their poets, Americans did not.

Nobel Laureate poet Czeslaw Milosz told Pinsky that “during the Nazi occupation, carrying a copy of a poem around was a form of rebellion that even the most timid person could engage in,” said Pinsky, “not an incendiary poem, but any poem in Polish; a lot of people carried a poem as the most minimal way of resisting.” “The Nazis declared Poles ‘undermen,’ and were bent on exterminating the intelligentsia (the rest were to be simply enslaved) and then any poem was a weapon against this plan,” confirms Polish emigre Irena Grudzinska-Gross of the Ford Foundation. “The essence of Polishness was created and codified in poetry. As much of the 19th century poetry was written against the Russian, it was easily transferable to the Nazi.”

If Americans today wanted to leave home carrying small concealed objects powerfully emblematic of their national culture, what would they choose? Guns? Beepers?

When Pinsky announced that he would now be accepting submissions — that the phones, in effect, were now open, with operators standing by — there was, in the immediate aftermath, silence. Empty mailbags. Would poems come in?

“What if the stereotype is true,” he wondered, “that Americans are too busy watching TV?”

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Robert Pinsky had been a dreamy little kid, born in 1940 in Long Branch, New Jersey; in love, from the start, with the sound of language. He happily curled up for hours with a good dictionary. “I loved that it didn’t go anywhere,” he says fondly of his childhood dictionary, “that in its sequence it had no purpose. Read as much as you want, this word reminds you of that word, you could just wander. It didn’t matter if you lost your place. It wasn’t tyrannical like a story.”

He lost himself, as well, in books so far over his head that he could scarcely make heads or tails of them — he happily recalls that sensation whenever he encounters a particularly obscure poem: “I loved to read books that were too old for me. I think it’s one of the most pleasurable feelings to read something that you know makes sense, but you don’t understand it. It’s sexy, it’s smoky, it’s mysterious. I think one of the hallmarks of the intelligent, literary child is a child who not only reads and tries to master difficult books, but who likes the sensation of not quite getting it.”

Musing about words and about the sound fragments of speech, he drifted through high school, earning only one A in four years: in shop. He graduated from Rutgers University; by the time he enrolled in graduate school at Stanford, studying literature, his mother was phoning weekly to remind him that it was still not too late to pursue his father’s field of opticianry.

The son, in fact, did want to learn a trade. He was in the process of learning which trade it was. He later wrote, in a poem called “To My Father”:

*What I wanted, was to dwell
Here in the brain as though
At my bench, as though in a place
Like the live ongoing shop—
Between kitchen and factory —
Of a worker in wood or in leather:*

*Implements ranged in sizes and shapes
The stuff itself stacked up
In the localized purposeful clutter*

*Of work, the place itself smelling
Of the hide, sawdust or whatever.
I wanted the exact words...*

The son hoped to work not in lenses or eyeglasses like his father, but in words; how to find the precise words to clarify, to magnify, to bring into focus the thousand shades of natural light and of human emotion.

Throwing himself upon the world — without opticianry to fall back on — Pinsky wrote and published poems to increasingly high praise. He won honors; *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966-1996* was a Pulitzer finalist; and his 1996 translation of Dante’s *Inferno* was so acclaimed it put Dante on best-seller lists for the first time in 600 years. Pinsky taught at the University of California at Berkeley before joining the English faculty of B.U. in 1988, and in 1997 was invited to succeed Joseph Brodsky, Mona Van Duyn, Rita Dove, and Robert Hass — to walk in the footsteps of Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Hayden — and assume the mantle of Poet Laureate.

“This is certainly a long way from New Jersey,” he thought, on his first of many visits to the White House. He whispered to his son-in-law, at his side that first time: “I never thought that going ‘de-dah-de-dah-de-dah-de-dah’ would bring me to this.”

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April 1998 was National Poetry Month. In order to nudge along the possibility of submissions, Pinsky oversaw half-a-dozen high-profile Favorite Poem poetry readings. At Town Hall in New York City, Ed Bradley, Geraldine Ferraro, Garrison Keillor, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., read their favorite poems to a crowded room, along with a handful of public school students and an adult literacy student. At the Library of Congress in Washington, Senator Thad Cochran presented Robert Frost, and readers included a police sergeant, a realtor, a neurologist, and a representative of the Embassy of Lebanon. At the UCLA campus in Los Angeles, Mayor Richard Riordan read two poems by Shel Silverstein, actor Edward James Olmos read Federico Garcia Lorca, and two computer experts read and translated poems from the Vietnamese. At a White House reading, President Clinton ruefully mentioned — to knowing laughter — that reading Macbeth had given him a foretaste of the dangers of unrestrained political ambition. (He later recited long passages by heart to Pinsky and a few other guests.)

Pinsky was moved by the variety of the offerings, the passion in the renditions, and the fact that even the celebrity readers appeared not to be phonies. “You can recognize when someone really gets it,” Pinsky said. “Senator John Kerry clearly wasn’t faking it — he’s a poetry man — he started talking to me about the poetry club he was president of in high school, he quoted Shelley to me by memory, he talked about Eliot, he said, ‘Oh, I’ll read [Eliot’s] “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” for you.’”

“The president of B.U., Jon Westling, also astonished me. He said he wanted to read ‘The Idea of Order at Key West,’ by Wallace Stevens. It seemed so good a choice that I wondered, ‘Is this really a deep connection or is someone coaching him?’ As soon as he started to read, you could hear in his voice that he understood it as a work of art, the fluidity of it, the cadences. He read it gorgeously.”

Pinsky began to feel optimistic about the Favorite Poem Project.

Then the letters began to come in.

To this day, several thousand submissions later, the early letters are marked “early letter,” probably because they were the first harbingers of success. From Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, from Dayton, Takoma Park, and Santa Fe, from police officers, retirees, military personnel, landscapers, schoolteachers, ecologists, and tv news cameramen, poems came rolling in.

“I guess a ditch-digger who reads Shakespeare is still just a ditch-digger,” wrote 32-year-old John Doherty, a union laborer for the Boston Gas Company, but nonetheless submitted Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”

Catullus unfolded from an envelope in Latin, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Paul Celan in German, Federico Garcia Lorca and Octavio Paz in Spanish, an anonymous Afghan poet in a Persian-related tongue, George Seferis in Greek, and Anna Akhmatova in Russian. The mailbags were fat, the email screens were full, and graduate students were hired to help Pinsky sort through all the submissions, to begin to winnow out the thousand people who would be chosen to record their favorites for the Library of Congress.

If Pinsky was moved by the public readings, it was just an inkling of what he was to feel as poems — typed or hand-lettered, scholarly or misspelled, dabbled-in or heart-felt, discovered last week or memorized in 1911, from across America found their way to him.

In early summer, he haggardly emerged from the avalanche of mail long enough to announce: “Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are still heroes in this country.”

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“In boot camp during WW II, I walked on guard duty from midnight to four a.m. on a freezing winter night, and to, distract myself from the cold, went over all the poems I knew,” wrote Daniel McCall of Boston. “Shakespeare’s lark reminded me of Shelley’s ‘Hail to thee blithe spirit’ and then I went on to Poe’s Raven, and when I ran out of birds, turned to Edna Millay’s three mountains...The time passed — the chilling wind not diminished, but less noticeable. Poetry helped.”

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“I would like to read Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Raven,’ wrote Sherry Lynn Wood, of Rye, New Hampshire. “The poem has gotten me through childbirth, transcendental meditation, and innumerable traffic jams. I memorized it at 13 and, in the 27 years since, it has come to me nearly every day, soothingly, sibilantly, serendipitously... ‘The Raven’ even influenced my choice of mate: I knew I had found the right man when I was whispering to myself ‘and the raven never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting’ and my boyfriend (now husband) came up behind me and spoke softly in my ear ‘on the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door...’”

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“My favorite poem is “The Raven” by Edgar Allen Poe,” also wrote Brianne Vallenari. “I started reading Shakespeare when I was 6 and now I have developed quite a taste for Poe’s stories and poems. I hate to think that it took a pile of drugs to bring out the writer in him. He was quite insane, but in his insanity he was a genius... I am 10 Ω and I live in Alabama.”

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A 19-year-old Irish-American kid, John Ulrich, from South Boston mailed in Gwendolyn Brooks’s brief 1960 poem, “We Real Cool”:

*We real cool. We
Left school. We*

*Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We*

*Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We*

*Jazz June. We
Die soon.*

[The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 1169]

“Because,” John wrote, “my generation is living this poem. In 1997 we buried 6 kids under 20 because of the Suicide Plague that roam the street of South Boston. Now a new Plague has set in, the “Heroin” plague. It has capture many of South Boston’s youth who think their Real Cool!”

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“In 1989, this poem was a source of comfort to me when a man I loved died tragically and too young,” wrote Traci Mann, of Los Angeles, in support of “In Blackwater Woods” by Mary Oliver, which concludes:

*Every year
everything
I have ever learned*

*in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side*

*is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world*

*you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it*

*against your own bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.*

[“In Blackwater Woods,” *New and Selected Poems*, Mary Oliver,
Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 178]

“In 1991, while hunting for this poem (which I had lost track of) in the poetry aisle of a bookstore, I ran into an acquaintance. We found the poem. I read it aloud to him in the poetry aisle. We married in 1995...”

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“I thought I would send in my name and favorite poem to put myself in the hopper with the others,” wrote Stuart K. Allison, assistant professor of biology at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. “The only prerequisite mentioned in the Peoria Journal Star article was that the poem be by a published author and the reader not be a celebrity. Well, I’m certainly not a celebrity and my favorite poem is certainly by a published author.” Thus arrived William Carlos Williams’ “Danse Russe.”

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“I grew up in West Harlem,” wrote Karen Wilson of the Bronx. “When I was a little girl, my mother used to recite the beginning of “The Party” to me, leaving her “Virginia-lady” speech to reproduce another southern dialect, and telling me with love and pride that this was the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar.”

*Dey had a gread big pabty down to Tom's de othab night;
Was I dah? You bet! I nevah in my life see sich a sight;
All de folks f'om fou' plantations was invited, an' dey come,
Dey come troopin' thick ez chillun when dey byeabs a fife an' drum.*

[The Paul Lawrence Dunbar Reader, ed. by Jay Martin & Gossie H. Hudson, NY: Dodd, Mead & Co., p. 301]

The long poem continues in the remarkable foot-tapping music of Dunbar's poetic speech. "Now I have been able to research the traditional songs embedded in the poem," wrote Wilson, "and find it to be a valuable window on social mores and practices in one 19th century, southern African-American community. That made me love it all the more. And I perform it with great joy whenever I am able. It is, at least in part, a tribute to my mother and her love for this great poet."

Romeo G. Sanchez chose "The Sacrilege" by Thomas Hardy.

*...I have a love I love too well
To whom, ere she was mine,
"Such is my love for you," I said,
"That you shall have to hood your head
A silken kerchief crimson red
Woven finest of the fine."*

"I picked this poem because it reminded me about the time I first met Avelina (my wife). It was Valentine's Day, and she was wearing a red scarf."

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"I would love to read my two favorite passages from Byron's "Manfred" in memory of my grandfather," wrote Michael Graham from Columbia, South Carolina. "The Faust tale has been told so many times, but the image of one man, one will, braving the world with his own, uncompromising vision, is tremendously compelling."

*The stars are forth, the moon above the tops
Of snow-shining mountains.—Beautiful!
I linger yet with Nature, for the night
Hath been to me a more familiar face
Than that of man; and in her starry shade
Of dim and solitary loveliness,
I learned the language of another world.*

"My grandfather — who grew up on the streets of Tulsa in the Dust Bowl, followed Patton across Europe, fought a life-long battle against alcoholism and who lived his entire life on his own terms — taught me more about what it means to be a man...than anyone else in my life."

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"My favorite sonnet is [Shakespeare's] number 138: 'When my love swears she is made of truth, I do believe her, though I know she lies,'" wrote John Bartoli of College Park, Maryland, rather hilariously adding that it "...reminds me of my twenty years with my wife." But he explained: "the idea that simple lies as well as truths make up a relationship...Our love is there in full view of the everyday faults we have. I believe that anyone can love a perfect being, not everyone can love the imperfect ones too. 'Therefore, I lie with her and she with me, and in our faults by lies we flattered be.'"

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"The first money I ever earned was reciting poetry to a golfer while he was playing his round," wrote William M. Barker, born in 1931 in Alva, Oklahoma, now a resident of Summerville, Georgia. "I was eight years old at the time and lived across the street from the local golf course. He gave me a quarter for reciting Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Land of Counterpane.' I would like to do something in the later years of my life that I did at the first and still enjoy."

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“Dear Mr. Pinsky, I am a complete baseball fanatic,” wrote ten-year-old Lee Samuel. “I learned to read from sorting through my many, many baseball cards. I live in the hometown of one of the best teams ever, the “Team of the ‘90s,” the Atlanta Braves. They have Greg Maddux, the best pitcher ever, Andruw Jones, one of the best fielding center fielders in the game, and Andres Gallaraga, one of the best power-hitters. I love the history of baseball, including learning about: the Negro League players like Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson and Cool Papa Bell (who was so fast they said that he could turn off his light and be in bed before the room went dark, that he once got hit with his own line-drive, and that he scored from first on a sacrifice bunt); Bobby Thompson’s “Shot Heard Round the World”; the 1947 season, which was Jackie Robinson’s rookie season; the 1919 Black Sox scandal with Joe Jackson; and April 14, 1974, the date of Henry Aaron’s 715th home run. It would be nice to include a baseball poem in your archive: “Casey at the Bat” by Ernest Lawrence Thayer. Casey is the star hitter and a show-off and he ends up striking out. I play in Little League and I see this happen all the time. One of the things I love about baseball is that games can turn around so quickly. I am ten years old, I live in Atlanta, I play second base, third base, and pitcher, and this is my favorite poem.”

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“I often lecture to six hundred military officers and I do my best to illustrate the theme of my talk with a line or two of poetry,” wrote Lewis Ware, Professor of Middle East Studies, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. “You would not think, perhaps, that the military culture is sensitive to poetry, but it is. When I spoke to them last about the shape of the future strategic environment, I quoted Wislawa Szymborska’s playful vision of the unity of time in ‘Reality Demands,’” which reads in part:

*Reality demands
that we also mention this:
Life goes on.
It continues at Cannae and Borodino,
at Kosovo Polje and Guernica...*

*Where not a stone still stands,
you see the Ice Cream Man
besieged by children.
Where Hiroshima had been
Hiroshima is again,
producing many products
for everyday use...*

“Several students were so moved by her words that they asked me for a copy of the poem.”

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The great 20th century Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, whose dark and quiet poems bitterly described the horror of the Soviet landscape, was taken to heart by her nation, her work memorized by millions. Genya Ehrlich, of San Francisco, sent in an Akhmatova poem in Russian, provided his own translation, and — as explanation — offered with simplicity, “The poem is very dear to me.” The brief poem, the story of a relationship ending painfully, concludes:

*Breathless, I managed to cry:
“It was a joke, if you leave I’ll die!”
He turned, face terribly sad
“Don’t stand in the wind,” he said.*

[Poem without title, translated by Genya Ehrlich]

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“My choice occupies four pages of my father’s poetry scrapbook — a lawyer’s desk book from 1915 covered in red leatherette and once having gilt-edged pages,” wrote Beatrice K. Agathen of Ferguson, Missouri. “On every page in the book he pasted poems cut from newspapers and magazines. The original poem, ‘Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis,’ by Francois Villon was copied by hand, word for word, letter by letter from somewhere. He didn’t know any French or any foreign language, except perhaps a few words of Latin... On another page is a translation, by Dane Gabriel Rosetti, titled ‘Ballad of Old-Time Ladies.’...My choice is probably motivated by a bit of nostalgia, knowing it must have been one of my father’s favorites. He died in 1951.”

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“Enclosed are a few examples of my own poetry,” wrote a New York woman, one of dozens submitting original work. “I don’t mind if you like it or dislike it. It is nonetheless mine.”

Handsome though her work may be, it will not be recorded, since Pinsky hopes that the Project will enlarge Americans’ appreciation of world poetry, rather than encourage them to focus solely on their own. “I welcome them, they’re allies of the art I’ve given my life to,” he said of the contributors offering amateur verse. “But if they’re at all serious, the appetite cannot be simply to write, it also has to be to read. They deserve to know that as Americans they have a particularly wonderful heritage in poetry. They may not have really attended to Dickinson or Stevens or Whitman or Eliot or Williams or Frost, and I hope that for the best of them, the wisest of them, the nature of the Favorite Poem Project will lead them to check out what masters do in the art.

“Look,” he said, sympathetic, “I fumble away on the saxophone, and then I put on my Sonny Rollins’ CD. Hearing a sublime master play inspires me and reminds me how beautiful the instrument is.”

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“I ask you to record my favorite poem of all time, ‘Do Not Be Ashamed,’ by Wendell Berry, the poet laureate of Kentucky,” wrote Christopher B. Bedford of Hyattsville, Maryland. “I am an advocacy film maker who works with communities fighting for justice, for their children’s future, to put bread on their table...”

An excerpt:

*Though you have done nothing shameful,
they will want you to feel ashamed.
They will want you to kneel and weep
and say you should have been like them.
And once you say you are ashamed,
reading the page they hold out to you,
then such light as you have made
in your history will leave you...*

“When the people, the courageous, giving people I work for and with become discouraged, defeated and drained, I give them a copy...(I had a whole bunch printed up for this purpose.) It invariably raises their spirits, makes them feel proud, and fortifies them for the next round.”

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“I have put off writing because I have been seized by a mild terror of choosing the wrong poem,” wrote Diana Slickman of Chicago. “I am the sort of person who spends way too long deciding even simple things like what to order for breakfast in a restaurant — not because I’m afraid that what I will order will be bad, but what if the other thing is better?... But when I heard the project described, the first poem I thought of was Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Fish.” The first time I read it, I nearly stopped breathing, it moved me so...”

In Bishop’s incomparable language, a just-caught fish is described.

*He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper...*

*I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.*

[“The Fish,” *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, Elizabeth Bishop, (NY: Farrar, Straus & Girous, The Noonday Press, 1979), p. 42.

The catcher of the fish discovers that this fish is an old and battered veteran, a recidivist, with a lower lip hung with the hooks of past battles. Exultant, the catcher lets the fish swim free. “I am not a fisherman,” wrote Slickman, “but...there’s a sense of accomplishment and reward and a fight well fought...It is so simple on the face of it but so absolutely full. And I love it because it seems to be about more than one thing — perfect for a person who has trouble deciding...”

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“I fell out of a tree ten years ago and landed in a wheelchair,” wrote playwright and poet John Arndt, of Singer Island, Florida. “The quintessential American poem has to be ‘Leaves of Grass’ by Walt Whitman and the section that has literally changed my life is ‘Song of the Open Road.’ That section of his incredible life’s work is one of the main reasons I even have a life ten years later...”

*Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous
Strong and content I travel the open road...*

*nothing,
criticisms,*

“Whitman’s integrity of mind and spirit speak to the best of what is American and, beyond that, to ‘the making of the best persons’ anywhere.”

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“When I was growing up my mother begged, pleaded, cajoled, and of course read to me to get me interested in books. None of it worked,” wrote Julie Krabbenhoft of San Mateo, California. “She died when I was 18. I found myself living alone in a small apartment with little money and my only entertainment was my library card. While my circle of friends grew, so did my circle of books. Over the next few years I rediscovered many of the books my mother had tried to introduce to me years before.” Julie nominated Lewis Carroll’s “The Walrus and the Carpenter.”

“Reading this poem aloud, I hear her voice in me and have come to learn what she was trying to teach me 30 years ago.”

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A woman living in an old Atlantic harbor-town submitted the magnificent “Eros Turannos” by Edwin Arlington Robinson. “Love of the tyrant” describes the life of a woman who has married badly, who has married a man who seems chiefly to have been interested in her home and family lineage, whose blighted life is now the subject of local gossip, but who resolves to stay married rather than face old age alone.

*She fears him, and will always ask
What fated her to choose him;
She meets in his engaging mask
All reasons to refuse him.
But what she meets and what she fears
Are less than are the downward years,
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
Of age, were she to lose him.*

it begins; and goes on to show that he is more than content, even if she is not:

*A sense of ocean and old trees
Envelopes and allures him;
Tradition, touching all he sees,
Beguiles and reassures him;
And all her doubts of what he says
Are dimmed with what she knows of days—
Till even prejudice delays
And fades, and she secures him.*

Though she understands the roots of her unhappiness, she chooses to accept “what the god has given.” The six-stanza poem ends from the point of the view of the watching townsfolk:

*Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a god have striven,
Not bearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given;
Though like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.*

“I discovered the poem many years ago, as a newly married girl living in a small town which in fact possesses a harborside,” wrote the woman to Pinsky. “My husband had an intractable (it seemed then) drug and alcohol problem and was away a lot for his job. I didn’t have a job at the time, knew no one, and spent many days in solitude, riding my bike, reading, and reflecting on what my life had become since my decision to marry. I lived then and live now in an ancient house left me by my father, whose father left it to him, whose father left it to him. It is one mile from the ocean, surrounded by old trees. These facts made up no small part of my husband’s decision to marry me.

“I copied that poem into the journal I kept then and it sits before me on the table as I write. The knowledge that I’ve gained about ‘the god’ has lent a retrospective dignity to events experienced then as utter failure. The discovery of the poem, with its eerily large number of coincidences with my own situation was like a gift, or maybe a clue in a giant game of charades, from the god himself, who saw he had perhaps misjudged his opponent.”

In 1994, a healthy, happy, normal teenage girl from L.A., Jessie Alspaugh, was on a Christmas skiing vacation in Montana when she somehow contracted encephalitis, with neurological complications. Suddenly near death, the high school sophomore was airlifted by helicopter to a medical center and never recovered. Paralyzed, wheelchair-bound, on oxygen feed, fed intravenously, she suddenly faced life as a paraplegic, unable to move face or body. She communicates through a laser eye-point system that activates letters on a keyboard. She has found poetry sustaining, and applied to the Favorite Poem Project to read Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

"When I was a little kid I had an illustrated book of the poem," she wrote. "I loved having my Dad read it to me and I loved the illustrations of the snowy woods. When I finished elementary school, I quoted the last stanza of that poem at my sixth grade graduation speech. I felt it represented moving on to new and bigger challenges. Never giving up. Just always moving forward. When I was 16, an illness left me completely disabled. And now this recent hospitalization, with six major surgeries and counting, has been an even bigger challenge. But I try to keep moving forward. That is why the poem is important to me. I think poetry has become more meaningful over time...When I was forced to slow down, and have endless months of emptiness at hand, poetry found a place in my life."

*...The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

*

"I am writing for a friend, a courageous friend, who would like to read a poem..." wrote Linda Fell of San Juan Capistrano, California. "For 47 years people have been calling Jackie stupid. She is nothing of the sort. She just couldn't read. There are hundreds of thousands of people in our country who are illiterate or semi-literate and they feel shame. They continue to live fearfully because some might discover that they can't read...Jackie has made staggering progress. I think that she could impart the kind of inspiration needed to have non-readers come forward and seek help. When I think how reading is changing Jackie's life, I want others to have this treasure. They deserve to feel good about themselves, to be able to read a story to their children, to write a note to their spouse, the everyday things that most of us take for granted.

"Jackie hasn't yet chosen a poem. We started looking for a poem last night after our lesson in the library. I have to admit that I am not familiar with poetry, so perhaps your idea is already working. You have two people discovering poetry together that may have never done so. We hope to hear from you..."

*

And finally: "Ode to My Socks" by Pablo Neruda arrived from Oneonta, New York:

*Maru Mori brought me
a pair
of socks
which she knitted with her own
shepherd hands,
two socks as soft
as rabbits.
I slipped my feet
into them
as if they were
two
cases
knitted
with threads of
twilight
and the pelt of sheep.*

The poem goes on for pages about these most rare and beautiful socks, which honor his feet. Asked to explain why she loved this poem, Emily J. Wilson-Orzechowski economically stated: "I have knitted socks."

The rattling pages, piling up, are exultant, jangling, cacophonous, orchestral, an American choir. Robert Pinsky may be the first poet since Walt Whitman who is honestly qualified to declare, I hear America singing.

LINKS:

Favorite Poem Project website:

<http://www.favoritepoem.org>

Don't miss my son Lee's video: then 11 years old, he submitted "Casey at the Bat" and was chosen for a public reading and to be the subject of a FPP video which aired on the Jim Lehrer

News Hour:

<http://www.favoritepoem.org/thevideos/lisamuel.html>