

**Poetry, USA:
The Favorite Poem Project**

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www.thepoetryplace.com

*THE CALL HAS GONE OUT ACROSS THE LAND: MEN AND WOMEN, OLD AND
YOUNG, SEND US YOUR RHYMES AND YOUR REASONS*

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*

*

Robert Pinsky, born in 1940 in Long Branch, New Jersey, was a dreamy little kid in love with the sound of language. He would sit happily for hours with a good dictionary. "I loved that it didn't go anywhere," he says, "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."

Musing about words and about the sound fragments of speech, he drifted through high school, earning one A—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 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: ...
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. After Stanford, Pinsky wrote and published five books of poems, four of 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* put Dante back on best-seller lists for the first time in 600 years. As he continued to write, he passed down what he had learned. At B.U., in a dusty old 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. Few Americans make a living off poetry, but Robert Pinsky was one of them.

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. “I never thought that going ‘de-dah-de-dah-de-dah-de-dah-de-dah’ would bring me to this.”

*

Pinsky took his appointment seriously. How to be a steward 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 “in the professional microcosm of poetry”?

Pinsky often asked his B.U. students to read aloud their favorite poems, not poems they'd written, but poems they admired. Performance enriched both poem and speaker, 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. In reciting aloud the poems they loved, the students learned about poetry's music and history and power.

Elevated to Laureate, loaned an office high in the rafters of the Library of Congress, 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 college students: let's all pick our favorite poems and read them aloud.

In April 1998, National Poetry Month, Pinsky appeared in newspapers and on airwaves with a call for poetry. 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, 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.

And then the U.S. Poet Laureate waited, and wondered: who, outside the earnest semi-circles of academia, cared for poetry?

*

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.

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?”

*

And then the letters began to come in.

From Alabama, Alaska, and Arizona they arrived; from Dayton, White Plains, and Santa Fe. Poems were sent by police officers, retirees, military personnel, landscapers, schoolteachers and retirees. Catullus arrived in Latin, Paul Celan in German, Octavio Paz in Spanish, an anonymous Afghan poet in a Persian-related tongue, George Seferis in Greek, and Anna Akhmatova in Russian. Grad students were hired to help Pinsky winnow out the thousand people who asked to record for the Library of Congress.

In summer, Pinsky haggardly emerged from the avalanche of mail and announced: “Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are still heroes in this country.”

*



<http://www.dirkhagner.com/woodcutpage%203.html>

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.*

“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!”

*



<http://www.everywritersresource.com/writingsense/2011/01/edgar-allan-poe-by-john-cowper-powys-1915/>

Wrote Daniel McCall of Boston: “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. 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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“My favorite poem is *The Raven* by Edgar Allen Poe,” wrote Brianne Vallenari. “I started reading Shakespeare when I was six 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 ten and a half and I live in Alabama.”

*

Sherry Lynn Wood, of Rye, N.H., also asked if she could read *The Raven*: “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...’”

*

“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 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...”

*

“Enclosed are a few examples of my own poetry,” wrote a New York woman, one of many submitting original work. “I don’t mind if you like it or dislike it. It is nonetheless mine.” Handsome though it was, it will not be recorded. Pinsky wants to enlarge our appreciation of poetry, rather than have us focus solely on our own. “We deserve to know that as Americans we have a particularly wonderful heritage in poetry.” He hopes the project will lead us “to check out what the masters do.”

“Look,” he says, “I fumble away on the sax, then I put on Sonny Rollins. Hearing a sublime master reminds me how beautiful the instrument is.”

*

“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.”



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Laurence_Dunbar

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

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.”

*

“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.”

*



<http://edwardbyrne.blogspot.com/2007/05/elizabeth-bishop-poets-voice.html>

Lawrence Broch, a television comedy writer in L.A., spent the past several seasons working on *Ellen*. Even during shooting, he didn't end his day with scripts, however, but with poetry. "I read poetry every day," he wrote to Pinsky. "I read it at night in bed. Often I read aloud to my fiancée. At work I turn to it often—for fun, as a stress reliever, as a way to hit the 'reset' button on my brain. Elizabeth Bishop's *Filling Station* gladdens my heart whenever I read it: "

Filling Station

*Oh, but it is dirty!
--this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil-permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.
Be careful with that match!*

*Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him
(it's a family filling station),
all quite thoroughly dirty.*

*Do they live in the station?
It has a cement porch
behind the pumps, and on it
a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.*

Some comic books provide

*the only note of color--
of certain color. They lie
upon a big dim doily
draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia.*

*Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?
(Embroidered in daisy stitch
with marguerites, I think,
and heavy with gray crochet.)*

*Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:
ESSO--SO--SO--SO*

*to high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all.*

“Somebody loves us all!” –what a wonderful line, a line that might be corny in another context, yet here it seems both inevitable and surprising, a difficult effect to achieve.”

*

“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...”

*

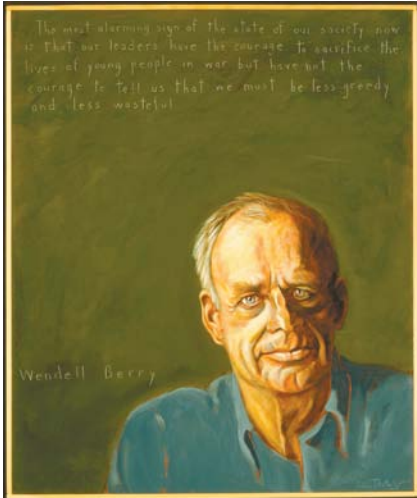
Howard Michael Henderson, a community involvement coordinator with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Atlanta, was unable to choose between two poems by Langston Hughes: *I, Too* and *Merry-Go-Round*. So he proposed both of them. “Doesn’t matter if you have a Ph.D. or a grade-school education, the poems make sense. People make things complicated, when some solutions are so simple: Just put children together, let them grow up together, they grow up thinking, ‘That’s my friend.’ They don’t have to be taught about prejudice. These poems are anchors for me as I journey each day in a world not racially free.”



http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_1/hughes/hughes.htm

Merry-Go-Round

*Where is the Jim Crow section
On this merry-go-round,
Mister, cause I want to ride?
Down South where I come from
White and colored
Can't sit side by side.
Down South on the train
There's a Jim Crow car.
On the bus we're put in the back—
But there ain't no back
To a merry-go-round!
Where's the horse
For a kid that's black?*



<http://dgvcfaspring10.wordpress.com/2010/10/31/gimme-a-b-gimme-a-u-gimme-a-t-what%E2%80%99s-that-spell-part-one-but-introductions/>

“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.”

*

Leslie Mraz of Coos Bay, Oregon, wrote: “just reading about the Favorite Poem Project gave me a deep feeling of comfort. It was like making contact with a far-flung underground movement.

*

In 1994, Jessie Alpaugh, a healthy, happy teenager from L.A., contracted encephalitis while on a ski vacation. Today she is paralyzed, wheelchair-bound. 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."



<http://www.susanjeffers-art.com/snowypg1.html>

"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... Jackie has made staggering progress. I think that she could give inspiration to nonreaders... 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.”

*

“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.’”

*



и сь дымовой трубой во рту. Эта линия «любимого друга» Ахматовой тогда померзали... Известная линия. Ахматовой безграничней упростомъ и себя, формула, ластъ рвется захъ тьмъ, рить в боли чьмъ на пог самшш линии. го пог дить рактег ланта олодог (Род. А. Кои увидлй пестерб 20-го оодем: ки, « рмй вй йвше ки, ду цы, п что-то чъ, п Ремиза то слу гавизи тривае же вре Писате вь свое положение. Голова груди свитерь. Поверх ст что-то женскос... Все оавне

Ю. П. Аншиков. — Портрет Анны Ахматовой

<http://hilobrow.com/2009/06/23/hilo-hero-anna-akhmatova/>

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]*

*



<http://www.shoshanakertesz.com/sylviaplath.html>

Martin B. Miller, a clinical psychologist from High Falls, NY, lost his daughter, Polly, in 1996 when she died after an asthma attack. Shortly thereafter, his son Jaik discovered a 1959 poem by Sylvia Plath entitled Polly's Tree, which reads, in part:

*A dream tree, Polly's tree:
a thicket of sticks,
each speckled twig
ending in a thin-paned
leaf unlike any
other on it
or in a ghost flower
flat as paper and
of a color
vaporish as frost-breath,
more finical than
any silk fan
the Chinese ladies use
to stir robin's egg
air. The silver-
haired seed of the milkweed
comes to roost there, frail
as the halo
rayed round a candle flame,
a will-o'-the-wisp
nimbus, or puff
of cloud-stuff, tipping her
queer candelabrum.*

Martin remembered his daughter drawing a tree in art class, a picture “like Polly herself: beautiful, luminous, mysterious.” To him, the poem instantly “seemed to be not only about her drawing but about Polly herself.” Martin wrote to Pinsky: “if I had a chance to read it, people who never knew her could be introduced to Polly. That would be very comforting to me and my family.”

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Steve Conteaguero is a Marine Corps staff sergeant stationed in Quantico, Virginia. "I am originally from Miami," he wrote. "My parents are Cuban. In my adolescence, being at my father's side imprinted on me the significance of things political, first as they motivated his work as a voice for exiles and later as I tried to find my place in our own American history." His search took him into the military and to "a flood of emotions that came with leaving people I loved." When he found William Butler Yeats's "very human and personal poem, I felt for a moment as if I knew that Truth really was and how It lay inside each of us and far away from politics."



http://jssgallery.org/Paintings/Mugs/William_Butler_Yeats.htm

*HOW can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!*

*



http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Wislawa_Szymborska.aspx

“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.*

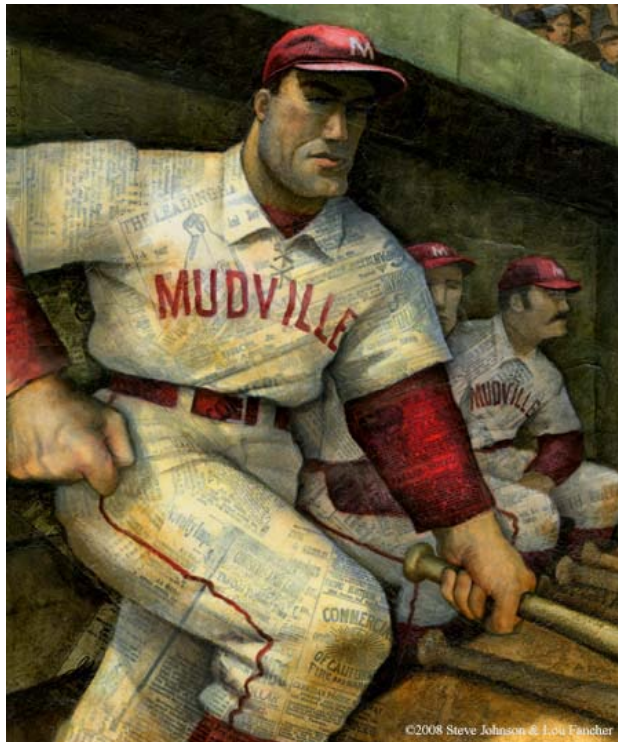
*Where Hiroshima had been
Hiroshima is again,
producing many products
for everyday use...*

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

*

*

"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."



<http://sportsthenandnow.com/2010/11/12/roger-federer-is-no-casey-at-the-bat/>

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<http://torontoismytown.blogspot.com/2010/08/pablo-neruda-poetry-and-herbie-hancocks.html>

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 Samuel' s video. At 11, 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>



Note: this is the original version of the article, slightly longer than the published edition.