

# Poetry and Democracy

## A Conversation with Robert Pinsky

ROBERT PINSKY, ELLEN HINSEY

*Robert Pinsky is one of America's best-known poets and critics. Born in 1940 in New Jersey, his own writing, as well as his three terms as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (1997–2000), have been critical to creating a robust dialogue in American poetry. Author of more than nineteen books that span the genres of poetry, essay, translation, and libretto, his oeuvre is a testimony to the essential place of poetry in America. A memoir, entitled Jersey Breaks, will be published this October. The founder of the Favorite Poem Project (videos available at [www.favoritepoem.org](http://www.favoritepoem.org)), Pinsky has received numerous honorary doctorates and is the recipient of many awards including a Premio Capri (Italy), the Los Angeles Times Book Award and the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. His volume, *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems*, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry.*

**Ellen Hinsey:** Robert, we are undertaking this conversation at a tragic moment: on February 24, 2022 the Russian military initiated a violent war against Ukraine. With more than four million refugees and six and a half million internally displaced persons as of this writing, we are witnessing the most consequential military conflict in Europe since the Second World War. While the focus of this edition of the *New American Studies Journal* is “American Crises,” the current situation casts our discussion of poetry in even wider terms.

**Robert Pinsky:** I'll try to relate the two topics, with thanks to you Ellen for inviting me to try...and giving me the excuse of improvisation.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky—speaking in Russian to the Russian people, as a neighbor—has indicated that the invasion of his country is a world crisis. Maybe in contrast with that global scale—but maybe not—poetry for me has been a matter of human scale: the medium of breath in one person's voice. Voices and images from Ukraine remind me of that same principle—paradoxically, brought to my TV or computer screen by mass media that are the opposite of the personal, human scale of a lyric poem.

Those electronic images of bombed-out, smoldering buildings: a hospital, a theater, an apartment building, a school. Even the video images of death and mutilation, have a quality of visual proximity. That feeling—or illusion—of the nearby emanates from the perfection of compact, miraculously perfected digital cameras and computers. But there is an element of familiarity in the streets: the skeletal shape of an artillery-shattered village downtown or the sandbagged, surviving city center with its jumble of baroque palaces and snappy pizza joints. Those images are not in fact so far from our streets or the American villages of Willa Cather, the cityscapes of William Carlos Williams, the classic American films of Preston Sturges.

Zelensky has been called charismatic; but what he says is not different in tone or content from what we hear from individual Ukrainians in bomb shelters, refugee camps or smoldering ruins. The president echoes the judgment, expressed in a manner so emphatically passionate that it can seem understated, of the Ukrainian man on the street.

I like that venerable American cliché, “the man on the street” (despite the one-gender noun). That homely, cornball phrase harks back to my own childhood and the streets where I grew up—the ordinary, commercial or residential or small-town streets—not unlike the maimed townscapes and cityscapes I see in the terrifying images of cities such as Irpin, Kharkiv and Mariupol. I recognize the remaining or half-remaining houses, shops, public buildings, the rural stretches of road, the humble or grand downtowns, wounded. The humdrum civic scene of human scale, violated by technologies of death on a massive scale.

**EH:** I think what you are reinforcing here is very important—the necessity to make mental bridges between places that, in the end, are not humanly distant or other—

**RP:** In the United States, our crisis is manifested more (so far) in blather, rather than mass killing, though the binary conflict of underlying ideals may be similar. I don't mean to equate Putin's invocation of Russia's mystical, quasi-religious destiny with the rhetoric of our white supremacists. And yet...the torch-bearing defenders of a Confederate monument in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanted phrases that are surprisingly European: "blood and soil" and "Jews will not replace us." The paranoid, romantic mysticism of the political slogans, chanted in chorus by white supremacists: for me, those bursts of language are an effective bad poetry, the opposite of the lyric poetry I associate with an individual voice.

The photographs of lynchings typically depict the victim's corpse still hanging from a tree on some small-town street where the celebrating onlookers have gathered. Those pictures, once sold on postcards as popular touristic souvenirs, are warnings not to sentimentalize the American man on the street. I find a related warning in the art of Mark Twain and Willa Cather, in their writing about American streets, with the terrible under-currents of provincial rage, the tectonic forces of racism and nativism. Classic American literature understands the charm and the underlying violence, the various decency and indecency, in our streets.

The effort of my life's work as a poet, like my understanding of poetry in my country, is related to the idea of human scale, built into the intimate, vocal art of the lyric. Our poets have sometimes been poor models as people—T.S. Eliot gave the proto-fascistic lectures he published,<sup>1</sup> then suppressed, in the same Charlottesville where those demonstrators carried their torches. But the art of poetry, in my conviction, inherently respects the dignity of the individual. The poetry of "Four Quartets" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is on the scale of one voice. The poem, in the voice of any reader, survives beyond the mortal voice of the imperfect maker. The medium of poetry, because it is on the scale of breath, inherently respects the dignity of the individual.

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1. Eliot, T.S. *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. Faber and. Faber, 1934. Three lectures delivered for the Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville in 1933.

**EH:** Let's explore this a bit further. In your important book *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry* (2002), the opening essay "Culture"<sup>2</sup> touches on a number of critical issues related to poetry and democracy that are even more relevant today. You begin the essay by outlining a fundamental aspect of American culture: "For an American poet, the fear of lost differentiation and the fear of excessive differentiation...embody a single...anxiety." I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more on this.

**RP:** Here again, I'll try to consider that two-sided American anxiety—fear of uniformity and fear of diversity merging into a single, contorted dread—by evoking the word "street."

Because of where I grew up, I think of downtown streets as embodying a hybrid, immigrant-welcoming culture. On the main street of my New Jersey hometown, Long Branch, the hardware stores included Townley's and Boroff's. The restaurants on Broadway included The Alps, owned by the Apostolakos family, Nunzio's, and the Roxy, owned by the Lubetkins. Anastasia's pharmacy, Yankow's sporting goods, Garippo's, Woolley's were landmarks of my childhood. The bars on the town's Broadway included Cammarano's, Joe Purcell's, and the Broadway Tavern, owned by my grandfather, Dave Pinsky.

It was a home, and a working, mixed community—but it was not a multicultural paradise! Down my hometown's Broadway on July 4, 1924, marched thousands of Ku Klux Klan members in their gowns and pointy-headed hoods, from a tri-state Konklave held in Long Branch's Elkwood Park. They marched past Vogel's, Purcell's, Cammarano's (and past Pinsky's Broadway Tavern), past Liberty Street and Union Avenue.

The downtown and the Klan—Culture against Cult, in the terms of that essay in *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*. Or, it could be thought of as one imagination of culture against another. The "Klan," the "Konklave"—the funny spellings to my ear are a kind of inept poetry, evoking a mythical exotic past but also making an opposite American move: a contemptuous, homespun, anti-intellectual disregard for the old civil conventions of spelling. The "K" asserts difference while asserting uniformity: two sides of an old conflict.

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2. Delivered as a Tanner Lecture on Human Values at Princeton University, April 5–6, 2001. Printed with permission of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, a Corporation, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

This kind of conflict, involving the defensive fears of the outsiders and the insider— often the same person—reaches into the ethnic and class-based comedy of vaudeville and far back into American history, to before the time of Twain, Hawthorne and Melville. The story of *Moby Dick* begins not on the ocean but on the streets of Nantucket, where Queequeg and the narrator become roommates, and players in the whaling shop's concentrated, intense drama of race, displacement and immigration, with individual voices struggling with a theoretical norm and each one's relation to it.

That national drama is played out, often, in the street. For example, a busy, unremarkable street in Minneapolis: 38<sup>th</sup> Street, the familiar-looking scene of the police murder of George Floyd, recorded on cell-phone video and audio by a young passerby. The video that became evidence records the voice of the victim and of people in the crowd, pleading with the police. That same street, scruffy but thriving in ways easy to recognize, became the scene of demonstrations outside the deli-grocery-check-cashing place that was a central, familiar locus for that killing and its unfolding story. On January 6, it was a street in Washington, D.C.—Pennsylvania Avenue—where ex-President Trump promised a large crowd that he would walk down that avenue with them, as a route to the Capitol.

**EH:** But, in the end, Trump didn't in fact join them—

**RP:** That's right. He did not walk down that street with them. He watched on television, as a remarkable scene at the Capitol interrupted a symbolic, ritual government process. Along with the violence and the yelling as at the Charlottesville march with torches, there were symbols: vernacular anti-intellectual rituals, designed to offend the official ceremony, such as the brandishing of Confederate flags and shitting—literally and figuratively—on central spaces. The walk down the street was a prelude to terror of both kinds, real and symbolic.

Washington was designed with radiant public boulevards like Pennsylvania Avenue crossing a businesslike grid of numbered streets, a design that strives to be splendid but not regal: an architectural and civic idea. For the violators, the city embodied a rational process they defied, striving against the very idea of it, maybe in the name of something as fundamental as blood, or a primal, pre-rational past—some of what I mean by “cult.”

**EH:** And this brings us back to Ukraine—

**RP:** I think many Americans, of many different kinds, respond intuitively, profoundly, to the conflict between a blood-blinded, destructive (and self-destructive) invading force against the ordinary, reasonable streets and people of Ukraine. We recognize the two sides—not just two countries, not merely two peoples, but two deeply opposed ideas of what a country is or a people is—as when Zelensky addressed the Russian people in the Russian language, as a neighbor.

**EH:** The question is if poetry can find a way to overcome this in a productive way—if it can turn diversity into positive form of multiplicity and not just fracturing—

**RP:** For poetry, the churning, melding, clashing process of navigating differences is a terrain of marvels and menaces, traversed in a defining example by Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," with its cadences and idioms that are kind of ordinary and kind of operatic—his voice, in this context, of the street and of the opera house. Whitman the pragmatic journalist and home-made visionary embodies a passionate belief in the project of America—his conviction, in a way, heedless. His implicit notion of poetry is large in a radical way. Poetry for him is not a traditional sign of gentility, the property of a cultured upper class. Nor does Whitman present poetry as a folk art, rooted in a single people as their inherited property. Neither of those is the American ideal presented by *Leaves of Grass*.

We will see if that work's peculiarly syncretic, passionate conviction—transcending blood, transcending cults, and many other kinds of difference—will prevail in the form of a unifying national coherence...or not.

**EH:** While these sorts of cleavages are not unique to America, as a nation of immigrants fleeing economic hardship, and of generations uprooted by slavery, it is a place where nevertheless one sees these tensions manifest in particular ways. In your essay you express this in a vivid way when you write that the tensions in America around culture "reflect a profound ambivalence about culture itself, which like the goddess Kali-Parvati both nurtures and destroys"—

**RP:** The racial divide with its roots in slavery is only the most egregious example of the national tension or uncertainty, about how much anyone is like and unlike some imagined norm. I think of my immigrant grandparents, and also of the northward migration of Black people. In an effort to at least take a stab at understanding those provincial Klan marchers of sixteen years before I was born, I try to imagine their anxieties about their imperiled, barely attained sense of their own American normality.

Again, the devastation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be seen as an extreme, terrible example: the paranoid blood-culture with its idea of historical destiny versus the blended, cosmopolitan (let's call it) street-culture that's in place, having evolved from the horrors of the past. In Eastern Europe, the pained history of immigration, emigration, deportation, migration is redoubled by the way borders also migrate. Those shifting borders provide a terrible background for the variously remembered, variously forgotten sites of extermination of Jews, and from my American perspective, the escape of a remnant.

Regarding my own name, the city of Pinsk, as empires clashed, was briefly German, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Byelorussian. The Pinsk Massacre was a contentious issue discussed during negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles, as I can read, with the bemusement or diluted horror of distance in time, as an American native of New Jersey whose grandparents arrived in the new world five or six years before that first World War and the Treaty.

The very name "New Jersey," like "New York," denotes a past and connotes varieties of inclusion or exclusion. My status as "native" recalls the peculiar term "Nativism." Is that way of thinking, so repellent to me, history-based or anti-historical? I am thinking of a T-shirt I like, with the words "This is America—Speak Navajo." Questions of different languages—and about language itself—are related to the word "Voice" in the book's title.

**EH:** Throughout this interview we are speaking about the interwoven threads of place and history. And the way in which history can be unpredictable. In light of present events, we are also aware of the ways in which history can lay traps for us—and if we are not vigilant, those traps can suddenly ensnare us—

**RP:** Faulkner's line about the past not being past keeps becoming relevant in new ways. The Klan of 1924 marching down Broadway and the malign, screwball organizations marching down Pennsylvania Avenue in 2020—comical and abominable, absurd and sinister in what degrees? And when? Experts and ordinary

people, in Ukraine, in New Jersey, pundits in Europe and in America, politicians, poets, optometrists, farmers...we would have found this invasion, these threats of nuclear weapons, these mass killings, unlikely, preposterous, a devastation that seemed impossible to us all, almost till the moment it happened.

Who could know, at the Treaty of Versailles, that the few dozen intellectuals killed in the Pinsk Massacre were such a small harbinger of what was to come? Princeton used to be a symbol of upper-class privilege, and the Ivy League university for Southerners. Now, the alma mater of the Dulles brothers is also the alma mater of Michelle Obama. In my home state as in Ukraine, history unfolds in unpredictable, sometimes benign ways.

**EH:** I'd like to refer to one more key quote from the "Culture" essay: "Cultural clashes seem to have replaced ideological strife....Religious difference, racial difference, linguistic difference, even generational difference can seem compounded and hypertrophied by information-age forces. The fanatical concentration on difference and its exploitation by tyranny have been multiplied, accelerated and terribly empowered by modern technology."

**RP:** I wonder how much my own writing will run afoul of that magnifying, accelerating process I could observe in that essay written twenty years ago.

In my 2016 book of poetry *At the Foundling Hospital*, a central, autobiographical poem related to these conflicts has the title "Creole." Does that title identify me, in 2022 as presuming to use the word inappropriately? (Or in appropriation?) In *The Want Bone* (1990), the poem "Window" tries to weep and laugh at one's aperture of being born at a certain time and place, to certain people, with each person a foundling rapidly assimilated to an identity, in the first-person singular. "In the Fells, by the Falls, the Old Ghetto or New Jersey, / Little Havana or Little Russia—I forget, / Because the baby wasn't me, the way / These words are not." The foundling in each person has a limited but real possibility inventing or at least modifying the inherited identity, the poem proposes: a different freedom and a different fate from the orphan.

**EH:** Let's speak about your forthcoming autobiography *Jersey Breaks*, which will be published in October 2022. In it you give us a wonderful description of your growing up in Jersey and you sketch portraits of some of the seminal figures and relationships in your life. For instance, you speak about studying under

the late Paul Fussell, a non-fiction author and brilliant scholar of prosody, who wrote so movingly about his experiences during the Second World War. Fussell's unflinching descriptions of modern warfare are a searing indictment of the cruelty and tragedy of conflict.

**RP:** Fussell was terribly wounded in a mortar attack that killed the sergeant who had tutored the young, upper-class Lieutenant Fussell, teaching him the fundamental skills demanded by the abomination, war. Fussell dedicates *The Great War and Modern Memory* to that sergeant. In prose of a crisp, understated rage, he describes the young men who died while they were in under his command. He writes about commanding his men to sleep on the ground where they were, lost somewhere in the pitch-dark night. They awaken to find themselves surrounded by objects that are the corpses of dead German boys. Compelled to register explicitly the youth of those dead German soldiers, Fussell emphasizes the word, "boys." Social class is an element in his feelings about the war and his role in it. At basic training, Paul Fussell has written, he encountered for the first time in his life people who worked for a living. As a teacher at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey—very much not Princeton or Yale—Fussell, I believe, associated us, his working-class students, with those dead boys on both sides in that war.

In my book, I try to think aloud about social class in America, as I have experienced it, including Fussell's work as a deeply motivated teacher. His war, I am convinced, became part of the story of my life. In raising such possibilities *Jersey Breaks* is maybe not exactly a memoir but, as you call it, an autobiography. (Though I do try to include some good stories!)

**EH:** In 1997 you were named Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress and you served an unprecedented three terms (1997–2000.) Rita Dove and Robert Hass had held the appointment just before you. Rita developed poetry programs for the Washington, D.C. school system and Robert Hass focused on ecology. Your orientation, which coalesced into the Favorite Poem Project, began with the conviction that poetry plays a meaningful role in American lives. Can you speak a little about the very beginning of this undertaking?

**RP:** With some readings at the Library of Congress in Washington, we discovered that—contrary to our national stereotype—there were many Americans, in various walks of life, who loved poetry. Without the snob value attached to the art in some cultures, there was a kind of direct, unfeigned appreciation of poems by Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, Elizabeth Bishop. Also poems in Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, German, Japanese.

The Clinton administration, looking for ways to celebrate the millennium, gave us the resources to make the videos at [www.favoritepoem.org](http://www.favoritepoem.org) readers who mostly are not poets, not actors, not scholars or critics—but ardent readers of poems, of various professions, regions, ages, kinds of education, who have cogent things to say about specific poems they read aloud. I'll dare call it a patriotic project. In its vision of art as a matter of pleasure and meaning, not necessarily limited by any conventional window, maybe the project is relevant to the social or cultural crisis of this moment.

**EH:** The project then expanded into community readings and multi-media—the reading at the White House. Did you ever imagine that the Favorite Poem Project would go on to become such an important poetic and civic force in America?

**RP:** Yes, in a way. I actually did imagine that, sort of, no doubt naively. I was sure the project would work and that it would correct a stereotype of Americans as poorly educated jerks, incapable of reading poems. Or is it that, because poetry has been integral to my own life, I projected my experience onto the rest of the country? Absurdly, but perhaps, to some extent, a good guess?

**EH:** The videos that were produced as part of this project remain moving testimonials to both the dignity of each individual, but also the mysterious power that poetry can have in the course of a life. I am thinking about the famous interview with [John Doherty](#), a construction worker, who read lines from Whitman's "Song of Myself." It is clear that the poem is interwoven into his life, a touchstone, and not something ancillary or ornamental—

**RP:** Whitman! As I say in *Jersey Breaks*, John Doherty is one of three readers who chose a poem by Whitman. There's also the hockey hero from 1980 Olympics "miracle on ice," [Mike Eruzione](#). His father used to recite "O Captain, My Captain!" at family gatherings in Winchester, Massachusetts. (Being a hockey captain

was an irrelevant coincidence.) As a third wonderful contrast, there is the Chinese filmmaker Xu Xing. As he recounts in the Favorite Poem Project video, he was a teenager during the Cultural Revolution, when he read Whitman in translation. He loved it, and shared his excitement in the poem with a certain girl in his class at school, sending it to her in what he hoped was an impressive way of courting her. She immediately reported him to their teacher, who was also a secret police officer, and he had the young Xu Xing arrested as a counter-revolutionary subversive. I imagine Walt Whitman being delighted by the thought of all three of these readers, the construction worker, the hockey player, the Chinese film maker. Probably he would have also been pleased at the thought of his poetry finding its way to the attractive young woman and even to the teacher/secret police agent, as well.

**EH:** All of this highlights what you have called the “tensions of pluralism.” For me this describes an important part of the vibrancy of American poetry. While at risk from the forces we have just been speaking about, American poetry nevertheless emerges from these tensions with a particular power precisely because of its mission to “speak truth to power,” to articulate civic and individual struggles—whether in anger, sorrow or grief, or demanding justice, but also sometimes in healing—

**RP:** There is something unruly, eclectic, recklessly inclusive in American culture that can produce awful vulgarity and great art—Trump in *The Apprentice* and Buster Keaton in *The General*, Laurence Welk and Sid Caesar. And maybe that messy but fertile range applies to our poetry, too?

**EH:** Your well-known poem “Shirt” has been often cited as a poem that articulates a critical and unspoken part of American history—

**RP:** Yes and no, as to “unspoken.” The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire seems to be important lore for those who know about it, though I guess many do not. The event—a fire in which 146 garment workers, mostly young women and immigrants, perished—is said to have inspired laws against child labor and unsafe working conditions. But the poem was inspired by reading about child labor and unsafe working conditions in basement sweatshops in San Francisco in the 1980s! And I guess some of the material I borrowed for my poem, from Hobsbawm’s *The Invention of Tradition*, the part about the kilt, for example, is not well-known.

**EH:** Before we end, let's return to Eastern Europe. While some might not remember, in your book *Poetry and the World* you have two short essays about being in Poland at a very different historic moment: spring 1981. You were there at the height of the Solidarity trade movement, a half-year before martial law was declared on 13 December 1981. Can you explain a bit about how it was that you found yourself there?

**RP:** The U.S. State Department used to send writers, musicians, dancers on tours to other countries. I was lucky enough to be on one of those trips—to the Poland of Solidarity, and to the East Berlin, Romania, Hungary of the Soviet days. In 1981, it was exhilarating to be in Poland in that time when—despite shortages, despite dread of a Russian invasion—there was a kind of inebriated joy in freedom. Thanks to that trip to Poland I got to know Stanisław Baranczak and Piotr Sommer, and to become friends with Adam Zagajewski, author of the great poem “To Go to Lvov.”

**EH:** You are very modest in *Poetry and the World* about this experience—as well as in *Jersey Breaks* about your subsequent work with Miłosz in Berkeley right after he had won the Nobel Prize. But I wonder how those experiences—observing the intersection of poetry and civic dignity in Poland—later affected your own sense of the possibilities of the intersection of poetry and democracy we have just spoken about?

**RP:** From Czesław, from Stanisław, from Adam, I learned and gained many things—maybe to be summarized as a Polish *confidence* in art in general and the art of poetry in particular. The younger poets in my generation, Adam, Stanisław, and Piotr, were part of the Solidarność determination to never write “for the desk drawer.” Everything would be public, even if was by carbon copies, or a reading in someone's apartment. And Czesław said how even the most timid person, during the Nazi occupation, could carry on their person a poem in Polish—nothing inflammatory or political, but in the Polish language: a declaration.

**EH:** Akhmatova revered the power of memory because she believed, in the end, it had the power to triumph over evil and tyrants. In a similar vein, addressing the conflicts of our time, you have written: “But it is historical memory that tempers both of the imagined extremes of culture, the barely habitable polarities

of total undifferentiation and total fragmentation....Memory resists uniformity because it registers fine gradations.” Do you think that American poetry is up to this task? If you were to give advice to younger poets facing this moment in America what would it be?

**RP:** I’ll try to answer with a practical bit of advice for young poets, related to memory: Go to a public library and find the poetry magazines from ten, twenty, forty, sixty—maybe a hundred years ago, and study the contents a bit. Note the names you recognize and the many you do not. Read some of the reviews, too. Maybe read all the volumes of *Poetry* for 1922 or 1952 or 1972.

What shared assumptions can you detect? Is there some work you like by the names you don’t know? Surprising similarities or dissimilarities with work you do know?

Try to understand the profound issues and the superficial fads of the past, the vogues and the needs. What do those poets of the past appear to remember...or to forget? What do you see, from their future, from the ephemeral standpoint of your present, that they did not?

What assumptions might we share, today, that will be noticed in the future?

Try to imagine what your future counterpart, fifty or a hundred years from now, will think about *our* time, or since I’m a lot older than you, about *your* time. In your judgment, what should be remembered? What (if anything) deserves to be forgotten? A 22nd-century scholar or poet or undergraduate majoring in American Literature may be in Zimbabwe or Slovenia or Indonesia. What do you expect or hope or dread that she may find useful or excellent or repellent? You cannot know, of course, but why not take a guess?

Do you, at all, write for posterity? Are you, in any sense at all, posterity?

**EH:** To finish, and in honor of the struggle in Ukraine, I wonder if we could quote the last three stanzas of your new poem “Place Names,” forthcoming in *Agni Review* this spring<sup>3</sup>, which references the current situation in Ukraine, and also the late Adam Zagajewski’s tribute to the beautiful city of his birth Lviv/Lvov. I think it expresses well the web between the experience and hardships of American immigrants and the tragedies that are now unfolding in Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Lviv itself—the “chorus of its blood.”

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3. *Agni Review* 51, Spring 2022.

*That is to Babi Yar as Kyiv is to Kiev, chasms of blood  
In one spelled shade of pronunciation or another,  
As the Lvov of Adam's poem is Lviv. Mr. Lemberg from  
Vilnius Wilno Vilna— instrument of cousin tongues,*

*And every tongue a fanged familiar spirit. To dispel  
In air the blood-stunned music of time, a spoken  
Clarity, peaceful, explosive. Fate saturates names.  
Death awaits you, he wrote calling the city by name*

*In the name of the earth. In all degrees of translation  
Every city a Jerusalem, every person a Jew, a city  
Contorted breathes the syllables of its name again  
As plain as a peach in every chorus of its blood.*

**RP:** Thank you for asking, Ellen. And for encouraging me to think about these vital questions.

## About the Authors

**Robert Pinsky** grew up in Long Branch, N.J., an historic seashore resort. His most recent book of poetry is *At the Foundling Hospital*. Other works include the best-selling translation *The Inferno of Dante* and in prose *The Life of David*, on the Biblical figure. Previous books include his *Selected Poems*. His autobiography, *Jersey Breaks*, will appear in October. His honors include the Korean Manhae Award, the Italian Premio Capri and the Harold Washington Award of the City of Chicago. He has honorary degrees from institutions including Stanford and the University of Michigan.

**Ellen Hinsey** is the author of nine books of poetry, essays, dialogue and translation. Her most recent books are *Mastering the Past: Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe and the Rise of Illiberalism* and *The Illegal Age* (UK Poetry Book Society Choice). A Former Berlin Prize Fellow of the American Academy in Berlin, her work has appeared in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Der Tagesspiegel* and *Poetry Review*. She is currently working on the question of new forms of authoritarianism.



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