A photograph of Robert Pinsky, an older man with grey hair, sitting on a large piece of driftwood on a sandy beach. He is wearing a dark jacket, blue jeans, and red loafers. The background shows the ocean and a few people in the distance.

# THE INSPIRATION OF ROBERT PINSKY

HOW A BOY  
FROM THE  
JERSEY SHORE  
BECAME  
AMERICA'S  
POET

BY LARA EHRLICH

PHOTOS BY  
GABRIELA HASBUN



**T**he *Simpsons* holds nothing sacred—not even poetry. In episode 289, Lisa Simpson sits before the Café Kafka stage in a black beret. Smooth jazz fades into the background as the host takes the mic to introduce the “Coltrane of the quatrain, the Tony Danza of the A-B stanza,” three-term poet laureate of the United States,

Robert Pinsky. Spot-lit and Simpsons-yellow, his hawkish eyebrows swooping, the poet mesmerizes Lisa with a recitation of his poem “Impossible to Tell.”

**Slow dulcimer, gavotte and bow, in autumn,  
Bashō and his friends go out to view the moon;  
In summer, gasoline rainbow in the gutter...**

The scene skewers poetry’s reputation for pretentiousness, and Pinsky, who’s made it his life’s mission to disprove that perception, is playing right along. He has become so recognizable in his quest to uphold poetry’s relevance that he can guest-star on *The Simpsons* as himself.

A professor of English and creative writing at CAS, Pinsky is the Pulitzer Prize–nominated author of 10 books of poetry. He has also published five books of essays and a biography of King David, judged a metaphor contest on *The Colbert Report*, translated Dante’s *Inferno*, penned a libretto, released two jazz/poetry albums, written a computer game, and performed with Bruce Springsteen. In 2016, he published his first poetry collection in four years, *At the Foundling Hospital* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), which the *Los Angeles Times* calls “considered and timely.”

Pinsky’s wide-ranging and eclectic passions are reflected in his work, where he tackles complexities like American democracy and the construction of identity. In person with *arts&sciences*, he is articulate to the point of sounding practiced, evasive about his own work, and forceful when championing poetry.

**Q. Is there an interview question you’re sick of answering?**  
**A. “How did you first get interested in poetry?” And sometimes the question that doesn’t quite make sense for me: “What made you decide to become a poet?” as though you decide to become a poet.**

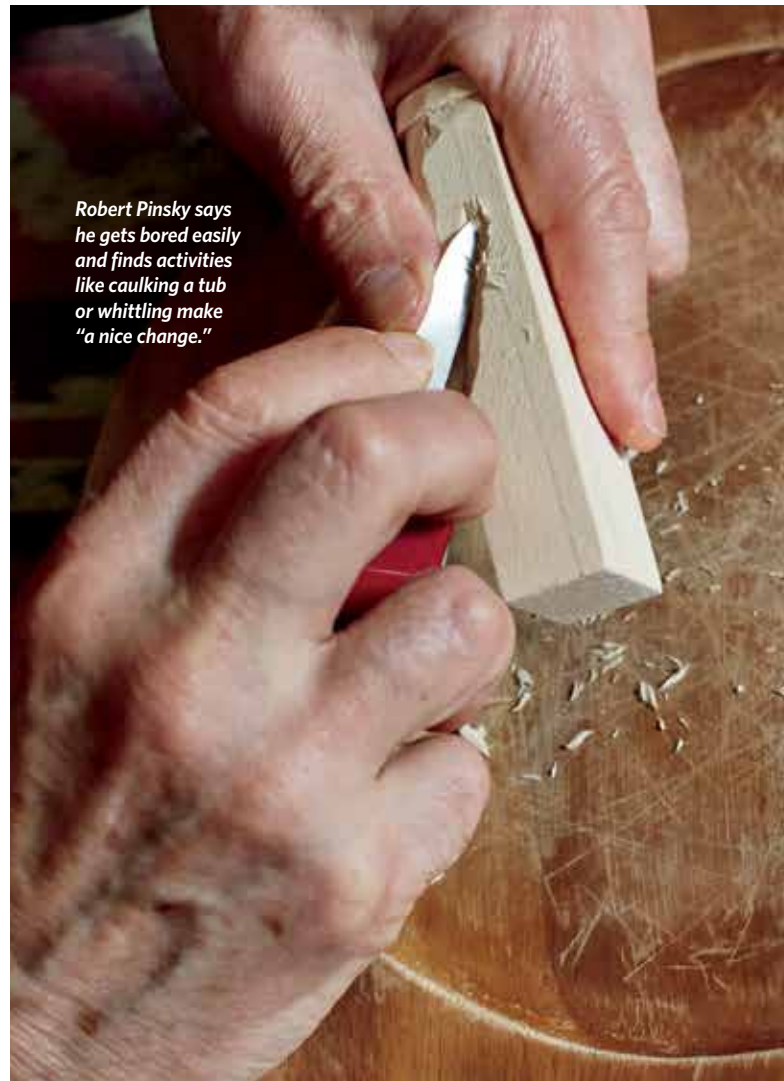
This is Robert Pinsky in seven vignettes.

## Growing Up

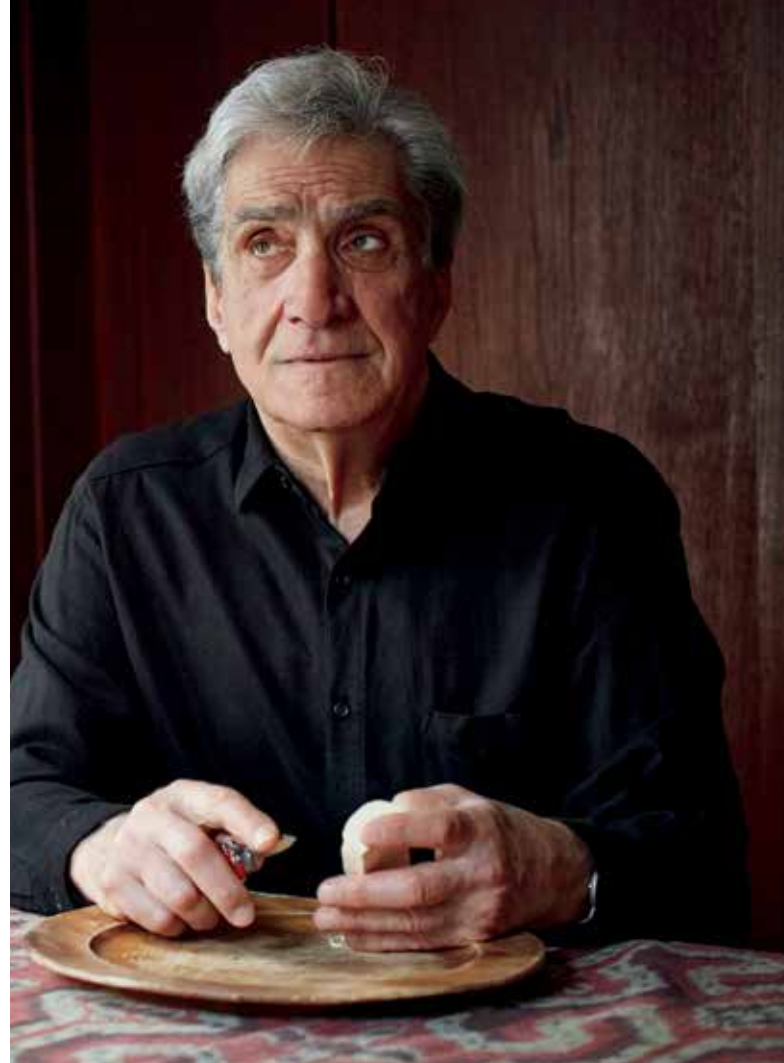
... glassdust and lenses  
Everywhere, broken eyeglasses, forms  
And odd pieces of paper, voices

Like phones ringing, tools  
Broken and whole everywhere, mail  
Unread, the sign—“Milford S.” or

“Robert”—hanging like a straight face...  
 (“To My Father”)



Robert Pinsky says he gets bored easily and finds activities like caulking a tub or whittling make “a nice change.”



**WHEN PINSKY’S FATHER** read his book-length 1979 masterpiece, *An Explanation of America*, he said, “Robert, I read the whole thing and I think I understood it.” The poet repeats the quote, savoring its humor, and only half-jokes, “I was thinking of having that as a blurb on the next printing of the book.”

Like his parents and their parents, Pinsky grew up in Long Branch, New Jersey, a faded beach town where celebrities and presidents once vacationed. “It is bounded on three sides by similar places / And on one side by vast, uncouth houses / A glum boardwalk and, / As we say, The Beach.” (“Long Branch, New Jersey”) Families of different races and ethnicities lived shoulder-to-shoulder, giving the town a “polyglot, many-colored, mixed, poly-vocal American culture,” Pinsky says. “Family history and American history, ethnic identity and ethnic blending made me patriotic before I had a term for it.” In some ways, he has said, all of his work is about Long Branch, where one grandfather owned a liquor store during Prohibition and the other, a part-time tailor, washed windows.

“I didn’t grow up among people who were doctors and lawyers and teachers and so forth,” Pinsky says. His father and mother were opticians. Their friends were plumbers and shop owners. “It was an ambiance in which some proficiency with your hands was valued,” and he inherited that proficiency, even as he was the first in his family to attend college.

Poetry and manual labor are not unrelated pursuits, says Pinsky, who has likened translating Dante to the groove you find while carving wood along its grain or shooting hoops. He whittles (a chess set is one of his triumphs). He works around the house: “I had a therapeutic experience—very carefully and in the proper way—of caulking a bathtub the other day.”

## Writing from Life

...My poor mother fell,

And after the accident loud noises and bright lights  
Hurt her. And heights. She went down stairs backwards,  
Sometimes with one arm on my small brother’s shoulder.

Over the years, she got better. But I was lost in music...  
 (“History of My Heart”)

**ON HER WORST DAYS** after suffering a devastating fall, Pinsky’s mother would lie in a darkened room. Dinner was served sometimes at five, or at eleven, or sometimes not at all. “The most negative aspects of my childhood made me feel that there was no meaning in the world,” Pinsky told the *Paris Review* in 1997. “The notion of meaning or significance that actually rests somewhere is almost exotic to me.” To this day, Pinsky resists routine. He has no wake-up time, no typical breakfast, and no preferred props or settings to prompt his writing. Pinsky has said he avoided writing about his mother’s illness, but it began to steal into his poems, beginning with “History of My Heart.” While many scholars caution against reading autobiography into a poet’s work—in critical circles, it’s considered an oversimplification of artistic intent—Pinsky draws explicitly from life experience.

**“Family history and American history, ethnic identity and ethnic blending made me patriotic before I had a term for it.”**

“I don’t think I’ve ever been capable of writing in a straight ahead autobiographical mode, and I’m also bad at taking a large view of a subject and leaving myself out,” Pinsky says. “So, my work often skitters or jumps or sometimes somersaults from autobiographical material to historical material.” As in *An Explanation of America*, where he addresses searching questions about national identity to his eight-year-old daughter, “...not expecting you to read a word... / Though you are better at understanding words / Than most people I know.”

Pinsky’s new book, *At the Foundling Hospital*, nominated for a 2017 National Book Critics Circle Award, is one of his most incisive and personal works to date, exploring the construction of identity, from the make-up of a single person to the origins of the human race. The collection’s subject is the foundling, an abandoned infant identified solely by the “Bit of lace or a pewter brooch, / Identifying coin, button / Or bangle” (“The Foundling Tokens”) pinned to its nightie.

“The foundling is a universal condition,” Pinsky says. The poems explore how we come to be us, how the world commands: “This will be your language, this will be the religion you grow up in, this will be your gender identity, this is how the world will treat your sexual impulses.”

## Music and Breath

This is the golden trophy. The true addiction.  
Steel springs, pearl facings, fibers and leathers, all  
Mounted on the body tarnished from neck to bell.  
 (“Horn”)

**VOTED “MOST MUSICAL BOY”** in high school, Pinsky played the saxophone at bar mitzvahs, weddings, and dances around Long Branch. It was during one of these gigs, as the audience danced to his melody, he says, that he began to see art-making as a physical pursuit. “My heart following after a capacious form, / Sexual and abstract, in the thunk, thrum, // Thrum, come-wallow and then a little screen / Of quicker notes goosing to a fifth higher, winging / To clang-whomp of a major seventh: listen to *me*.” (“History of My Heart”)

Had Pinsky been a musical prodigy, he says, he would never have become a poet. In college, he auditioned for a gig with his band and “stunk up the place,” he told *Guernica* in 2007. They did not get the gig, and “I think I decided I was a poet on the way home, more or less.” The decision was not as impulsive as it might seem. “From early on, I couldn’t disregard the rhythms of sentences and the sounds of words,” he says. “It sometimes seemed like a peculiar mental aberration—and gradually, over a lifetime, I recognized that peculiarity as part of a life’s work.”



He finds kinship between music and poetry through breath. “In the musical instrument I played when I was young, the physical medium is breath,” he says, while “the medium of a poet is the breath of a reader.” The natural culmination of a poem is to be read aloud, which “brings out [its] nature,” says Pinsky, who famously recites his work and that of other poets with jazz musicians. While music often makes its way into his poetry as a subject, it’s also engrained in his language—“thunk, thrum, / Thrum, come-wallow” (“History of My Heart”) and “walla whirledy wah” (“Ginza Samsa”)—and in the way his lines break and collide.

## America’s Favorite Poems

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.

Wrench’d and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes,  
I sleep—I sleep long.  
(Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”)

**“THE CONNECTION I FEEL** with Walt Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself” is not due to the fact that he talks about laborers, physical labor, working outside—like the common working American,” says John Doherty, a Boston construction worker, in a short film he recorded for Pinsky’s Favorite Poem Project. “That’s a nice touch in it, of course, but I enjoyed it for its... uplifting-ness, its ability to inspire me and see things in life and in everyday existence that I hadn’t noticed before, that I might have taken for granted before.”

Pinsky initiated the Favorite Poem Project during his tenure as Poet Laureate of the United States, a position he held for an unprecedented three terms, from 1997 to 2000. He approached the public platform as an opportunity to free poetry from its reputation for inaccessibility and to prove that it is vital in our everyday life. The project quickly surpassed Pinsky’s initial goal to record 100 people reading their favorite poems; 18,000 Americans from every state participated in the first year alone. Many contributors, like Doherty, have been recorded reading their poems for the Library of Congress’ audio archive, and their submission letters are housed at BU’s Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center.

The project is ongoing: 25,000 Americans have participated since its founding, and Pinsky has edited three anthologies of the nation’s favorite poems. When asked which poets have been most popular through the decades, Pinsky says that’s “just not an interesting concept for me.” The project is not a consumer survey, he says. “I’m more interested in the ardor of any one person’s connection to a poem. Had I been interested in popularity I might’ve bought a guitar a long time ago.

“We didn’t tell people they ought to like poetry—we asked people to tell us a poem they loved,” Pinsky says. “And the answers turn out to be quite moving and encouraging.” When filming a construction worker, or a janitor reading Theodore Roethke, or a Jamaican immigrant reading Sylvia Plath, “it’s not that I’m sentimental about ordinary people,” he says; it all comes back to breath—to the act of reading aloud as both the

culmination of the poem and the reader’s entrée into it. “When a Cambodian-American high school student reads aloud Langston Hughes’ ‘Minstrel Man,’ it’s *her* voice,” he says. “It’s Langston Hughes’ poem, but it’s also her poem.

“To me, a poet’s highest ambition is that some other person will want to feel what it’s like to imagine saying these words aloud,” he says. “I write with my voice—for the voice of a reader I will most likely never meet. If I were to recite a poem by George Herbert to myself as I’m falling asleep, his exact physical breath and words are there in my mind. It’s a bit like possession by the dead.”

**Q. How does it feel to imagine a reader 100 years from now reciting one of your poems as they’re falling asleep?**

**A. One can’t dwell on it. But somewhere in the construction of a life’s work, it is there, for me. I don’t sneer at the idea of posterity.**

## The Teacher

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing...  
(William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”)

**AS A FRESHMAN AT** Rutgers University, Pinsky was so enthralled by “Sailing to Byzantium” that he typed the poem and hung it above his toaster. Now, he asks his students to type or write longhand a 40-page personal anthology encompassing any works that could be considered poetry, from snippets of music to nursery rhymes to Shakespeare. The act of transcribing another writer’s words, he says, is a way of “understanding the art from the inside.”

Many Americans are introduced to poetry in school with the question, “What does it mean?” says Pinsky, who denounces that approach as an insult. “You don’t study the score before you hear the music. You hear the music first, *then* you want to know how it’s made.”

To counter this, Pinsky conducts an annual one-week Poetry Institute for K–12 educators, hosted by the Favorite Poem Project in partnership with BU’s School of Education. Each summer, Pinsky invites elementary, middle, and high school teachers to collaborate with some of America’s most prominent poets. Workshop leaders have included Heather McHugh, Mark Doty, Carl Phillips, Eric McHenry (GRS’97), Maggie Dietz (GRS’97), and former BU professors Louise Glück and Rosanna Warren.

“We don’t tell the teachers how to teach; we talk to them about poems we love,” Pinsky says. “We discuss ways to teach poetry that emphasize the experience of the work of art. We encourage having the students read aloud to one another, and the teacher read aloud to the students.”

Teachers come away from the workshops with copies of the Favorite Poem Project anthologies and videos, which many have since used in their classrooms.

“You don’t begin with ‘What does it mean?’—you begin with *it*,” with reading the poem, Pinsky says. Analysis and interpretation follow naturally, “motivated by intense, immediate experience.”

## High and Low Culture

You lie face up on a table in the stark laboratory.  
There is a hospital smell, and dozens of electrodes are attached to your body.

“Are you ready to begin your journey? Or would you like a description of the situation? Or perhaps you would like me to tell you about the Minds?” asks Doctor Virgil. He waits for your reply. Suspended in front of you is a computer keyboard.

(From *Mindwheel*, an electronic novel)

**PINSKY’S 1984 “ELECTRONIC** novel,” *Mindwheel*, puts you at the helm of a text adventure. By typing commands like “turn left” and “open the door,” you navigate through a succession of surrealistic scenes—a crystal stairway with a winged woman in a cage, a bar crawling with insects—all in service of your end goal: tracking down the mindwheel that, according to the game, “contains the secret of the world’s best values.”

Pinsky was invited to create *Mindwheel* (available for free at mindwheelgame.com) by the cofounder of Synapse Software during the brief popularity of interactive fiction—text-based computer games—in the 1980s.

“I’ve never been completely comfortable in the academic setting,” Pinsky says. “I don’t have a really scholarly mind in many

**Q. Do you think the poet has a responsibility to respond to cultural and political events, like the 2016 presidential election?**

**Pinsky: I think the poet has a responsibility to write well.**

ways, and I like the immediacy of things like TV shows. I get bored much more easily than most people, so to try writing a video game, or to caulk the bathtub or whittle, makes a nice change.”

This immediacy is reflected in his poetry, where Pinsky dovetails seemingly disparate elements from history, mythology, literature, politics, and pop culture, to name just a handful of recurring elements from his body of work. Like the wheel of the title poem from his 1997 Pulitzer Prize–nominated collection, *The Figured Wheel*, his poetry “rolls through shopping malls and prisons /

Over farms, small and immense, and the rotten little downtowns” collecting and juxtaposing “grotesque demi-Gods, Hopi gargoyles and Ibo dryads” with “wind-chimes and electronic instruments” and “Toys and messages, jokes and zodiacs.”

As he told the *Paris Review*, “Ideally, I’d like to write poetry that pretends neither that I’ve been a professor all my life, nor that I’m still a streetboy.... My favorite parts of language may be those places where the distinction between high and low breaks down.”

## Putting in Politics

I want our country like a common dream  
To be between us in what we want to see...  
(*An Explanation of America*)

**ON THE BIRTHDAY** of Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS’55, Hon.’59), one week before President Donald J. Trump’s inauguration, Pinsky gave voice to a crowd of peaceful protestors gathered at the steps of the New York Public Library. Dubbed “re-inauguration poets” by PEN America, Pinsky and fellow former US Poet Laureate Rita Dove headlined the Writers Resist, an event championing democracy and free expression. Pinsky read aloud a new poem, “Exile and Lightning,” in which he advocates taking up art as arms against “charismatic indecency / And sanctimonious greed. Falsehood / Beyond shame.” Following readings by Pinsky, Dove, and more than 50 other writers, the crowd marched to Trump Tower, where they delivered a pledge to defend the First Amendment.

**Q. Do you think the poet has a responsibility to respond to cultural and political events, like the 2016 presidential election?**  
**A. I think the poet has a responsibility to write well.**

“To leave out politics, or to leave out social awareness—you better be very good at describing the trees,” Pinsky told the *Boston Herald* in 2011. While he *is* good at describing trees—“And Summer turns her head with its dark tangle / All the way toward us; and the trees are heavy, / With little sprays of limp green maple and linden” (“Raleigh’s Prizes”)—Pinsky has explored the convolutions of American identity with depth and insightfulness that have rendered him one of our most profound civic poets, often mentioned in the same breath as Walt Whitman and Robert Lowell (Hon.’77). In *An Explanation of America*, Pinsky endeavors to explain to his daughter—and by extension, to us—“something about our country, / Or my idea of it” while acknowledging that “Countries and people of course / Cannot be known or told in final terms...”

For *place*, itself, is always a kind of motion,  
A part of it artificial and preserved,  
And a part born in a blur of loss and change—  
All places in motion from where we thought they were.

**Q. In 1980, you dedicated *An Explanation of America* to your daughter. What poem would you write to Nicole now?**  
**A. I’ll stand by *An Explanation of America*. The poem I will write next I will write next. a&s**