

Robert Pinsky

Braveries

from: An Explanation of America

(to my daughter)

Once, while a famous town lay torn and burning
A woman came to childbed, and lay in labor
While all around her people cursed and screamed
In desperation, and soldiers raged insanely—
So that the child came out, the story says,
In the loud center of every horror of war.
And looking on that scene, just halfway out,
The child retreated backward, to the womb:
And chose to make those quiet walls its urn.

“*Brave infant of Saguntum,*” a poet says—
As though to embrace a limit might show courage.
(Although the word is more like *bravo*, the glory
Of a great tenor, the swagger of new clothes:
The infant as a brilliant moral performer
Defying in its retreat the bounds of life.)

Denial of limit has been the pride, or failing,
Well-known to be shared by all this country’s regions,
Races, and classes; which all seem to challenge
The idea of sufficiency itself . . .
And while it seems that in the name of limit
Some people are choosing to have fewer children,
Or none; that too can be a gesture of freedom—
A way to deny or brave the bounds of time.

A boundary is a limit. How can I
Describe for you the boundaries of this place
Where we were born: where Possibility spreads
And multiplies and exhausts itself in growing,
And opens yawning to swallow itself again?
What pictures are there for that limitless grace
Unrealized, those horizons ever dissolving?

A field house built of corrugated metal,
The frosted windows tilted open inwards
In two lines high along the metal walls;
Inside, a horse-ring and a horse called Yankee
Jogging around the ring with clouds of dust
Rising and settling in the still, cold air
Behind the horse and rider as they course
Rhythmically through the bars of washed-out light
That fall in dim arcades all down the building.

The rider, a girl of seven or eight called Rose,
Concentrates firmly on her art, her body,
Her small, straight back and shoulders as they rise
Together with the alternate, gray shoulders
Of the unweary horse. Her father stands
And watches, in a business suit and coat,
Watching the child's face under the black serge helmet,
Her yellow hair that bounces at her nape
And part-way down her back. He feels the cold
Of the dry, sunless earth up through the soles
Of his thin, inappropriate dress shoes.

He feels the limit of that simple cold,
And braves it, concentrating on the progress
Of the child riding in circles around the ring.
She is so charming that he feels less mortal.
As from the bravery of a fancy suit,
He takes crude courage from the ancient meaning
Of the horse, as from a big car or a business:
He feels as if the world had fewer limits.
The primitive symbols of the horse and girl
Seem goods profound and infinite, as clear
As why the stuffs of merchants are called, “goods.”

The goods of all the world seem possible
And clear in that brave spectacle, the rise
Up from the earth and onto the property
Of horses and the history of riding.

In his vague yearning, as he muses on goods
Lost and confused as chivalry, he might
Dream anything: as from the Cavalier
One might dream up the Rodeo, or the Ford,
Or some new thing the country waited for—
Some property, some consuming peasant dream
Of horses and walls; as though the Rodeo
And Ford were elegiac gestures; as though
Invented things gave birth to long-lost goods.

The country, boasting that it cannot see
The past, waits dreaming ever of the past,
Or all the plural pasts: the way a foetus
Dreams vaguely of heaven—waiting, and in its courage
Willing, not only to be born out into
The Actual (with its ambiguous goods),
But to retreat again and be born backwards
Into the gallant walls of its potential,
Its sheltered circle . . . willing to leave behind,
It might be, carnage.

What shall we keep open—
Where shall we throw our courage, where retreat?

White settlers disembarked here, to embark
Upon a mountain-top of huge potential—
Which for the disembarking slaves was low:
A swamp, or valley of dry bones, where they lay
In labor with a brilliant, strange slave-culture—
All emigrants, ever disembarking. *Shall these
Bones live?* And in a jangle of confusion
And hunger, from the mountains to the valleys,
They rise; and breathe; and fall in the wind again.