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## The Street

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## The Street

Streaked and fretted with effort, the thick  
Vine of the world, red nervelets  
Coiled at its tips.

All roads lead from it. All night  
Wainwrights and upholsterers work finishing  
The wheeled coffin

Of the dead favorite of the Emperor,  
The child's corpse propped seated  
On brocade, with yellow

Oiled curls, kohl on the stiff lids.  
Slaves throw petals on the roadway  
For the cortege, white

Languid flowers shooting from dark  
Blisters on the vine, ramifying  
Into streets. On mine,

Rockwell Avenue, it was embarrassing:  
Trouble—fights, the police, sickness—  
Seemed never to come

For anyone when they were fully dressed.  
It was always underwear or dirty pyjamas,  
Unseemly stretches

Of skin showing through a torn housecoat.  
Once a stranger drove off in a car  
With somebody's wife,

And he ran after them in his undershirt  
And threw his shoe at the car. It bounced  
Into the street

Harmlessly, and we carried it back to him;  
But the man had too much dignity  
To put it back on,

So he held it and stood crying in the street:  
"He's breaking up my home," he said,  
"The son of a bitch

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Bastard is breaking up my home." The street  
Rose undulant in pavement-breaking coils  
And the man rode it,

Still holding his shoe and stiffly upright  
Like a trick rider in the circus parade  
That came down the street

Each August. As the powerful dragonlike  
Hump swelled he rose cursing and ready  
To throw his shoe—woven

Angular as a twig into the fabulous  
Rug or brocade with crowns and camels,  
Leopards and rosettes,

All riding the vegetable wave of the street  
From the John Flock Mortuary Home  
Down to the river.

It was a small place, and off the center,  
But so much a place to itself, I felt  
Like a young prince

Or aspirant squire. I knew that Ivanhoe  
Was about race. The Saxons were Jews,  
Or even Coloreds,

With their low-ceilinged, unbelievably  
Sour-smelling houses down by the docks.  
Everything was written

Or woven, ivory and pink and emerald—  
Nothing was too ugly or petty or terrible  
To be weighed in the immense

Silver scales of the dead: the looming  
Balances set right onto the live, dangerous  
Gray bark of the street.

Robert Pinsky is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *Jersey Rain*. He is the Poet Laureate of the United States, and this poem is reprinted here with his permission.