Classic Poetry Series

Galway Kinnell

- 24 poems -

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Galway Kinnell (1 February 1927)

Galway Kinnell is an American poet. He was Poet Laureate of Vermont from 1989 to 1993. An admitted follower of Walt Whitman, Kinnell rejects the idea of seeking fulfillment by escaping into the imaginary world. His best-loved and most anthologized poems are "St. Francis and the Sow" and "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps".

Biography

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, Kinnell said that as a youth he was turned on to poetry by Edgar Allan Poe

href="http://www.poemhunter.com/edgar-allan-poe/">Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson, drawn to both the musical appeal of their poetry and the idea that they led solitary lives. The allure of the language spoke to what he describes as the homogeneous feel of his hometown, Pawtucket, Rhode Island. He has also described himself as an introvert during his childhood.

Kinnell studied at Princeton University, graduating in 1948 alongside friend and fellow poet W.S. Merwin. He received his master of arts degree from the University of Rochester. He traveled extensively in Europe and the Middle East, and went to Paris on a Fulbright Fellowship. During the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States caught his attention. Upon returning to the US, he joined CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and worked on voter registration and workplace integration in Hammond, Louisiana. This effort got him arrested. In 1968, he signed the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest" pledge, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War. Kinnell draws upon both his involvement with the civil rights movement and his experiences protesting against the Vietnam War in his book-long poem The Book of Nightmares.

Kinnell was the Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Creative Writing at New York University and a Chancellor of the American Academy of Poets. As of 2011, he is retired and resides at his home in Vermont.

Work

While much of Kinnell's work seems to deal with social issues, it is by no means confined to one subject. Some critics have pointed to the spiritual dimensions of his poetry, as well as the nature imagery present throughout his work. "The Fundamental Project of Technology" deals with all three of

those elements, creating an eerie, chant-like and surreal exploration of the horrors atomic weapons inflict on humanity and nature. Sometimes Kinnell utilizes simple and brutal images ("Lieutenant! / This corpse will not stop burning!" from "The Dead Shall be Raised Incorruptible") to address his anger at the destructiveness of humanity, informed by Kinnell's activism and love of nature. There's also a certain sadness in all of the horror—"Nobody would write poetry if the world seemed perfect." There's also optimism and beauty in his quiet, ponderous language, especially in the large role animals and children have in his later work ("Other animals are angels. Human babies are angels"), evident in poems such as "Daybreak" and "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps".

In addition to his works of poetry and his translations, Kinnell published one novel (Black Light, 1966) and one children's book (How the Alligator Missed Breakfast, 1982).

A close friend of James Wright until Wright's death in 1980, Kinnell wrote two elegies to Wright, which appear in From the Other World: Poems in Memory of James Wright.

Works:

Poetry Collections

What a Kingdom It Was. Houghton Mifflin. 1960.

Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock. Houghton Mifflin. 1964.

Body Rags. Houghton Mifflin. 1968.

The Book of Nightmares. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 1973.

The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World: Poems 1946-64 (1974)

Walking Down the Stairs (a collection of interviews) (1978).

Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. Houghton Mifflin. 1980.

"After Making Love We Hear Footsteps". Copper Canyon Press. 1980.
Blackberry Eating. William B. Ewert. 1980.
Selected Poems. Houghton Mifflin. 1982. Pulitzer Prize; National Book Award How the Alligator Missed Breakfast. Illustrator Lynn Munsinger. Houghton Mifflin. 1982.

"The Fundamental Project of Technology". William B. Ewert. 1983.

The Past. Houghton Mifflin. 1985.

When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone. Knopf. 1990.

Three Books. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2002.

Imperfect Thirst. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 1996.

A New Selected Poems. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2001. National Book Award finalist.

The avenue bearing the initial of Christ into the New World: poems, 1953-1964. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2002.

Strong Is Your Hold. Houghton Mifflin. 2006.

Translated Collections

Yves Bonnefoy (1968). On the motion and immobility of Douve. Translator Galway Kinnell. Ohio University Press.

François Villon (1982). The poems of François Villon. Translator Galway Kinnell, UPNE

Yvan Goll (1970). Lackawanna Elegy. Translator Galway Kinnell. Sumac

Yvan Goll (1968). Yvan Goll, Selected Poems. Translators Paul Zweig, Jean Varda, Robert Bly, George Hitchcock, Galway Kinnell. Kayak Books. Rainer Maria Rilke (2000). Galway Kinnell. ed. The Essential Rilke. Translators Galway Kinnell, Hannah Liebmann. HarperCollins.

Novels

Black Light. Houghton Mifflin. 1966.

After Making Love We Hear Footsteps

For I can snore like a bullhorn or play loud music or sit up talking with any reasonably sober Irishman and Fergus will only sink deeper into his dreamless sleep, which goes by all in one flash, but let there be that heavy breathing or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house and he will wrench himself awake and make for it on the run - as now, we lie together, after making love, quiet, touching along the length of our bodies, familiar touch of the long-married, and he appears - in his baseball pajamas, it happens, the neck opening so small he has to screw them on, which one day may make him wonder about the mental capacity of baseball players and flops down between us and hugs us and snuggles himself to sleep, his face gleaming with satisfaction at being this very child.

In the half darkness we look at each other and smile and touch arms across his little, startling muscled body - this one whom habit of memory propels to the ground of his making, sleeper only the mortal sounds can sing awake, this blessing love gives again into our arms.

Another Night in Ruins

In the evening haze darkening on the hills, purple of the eternal, a last bird crosses over, 'flop flop,' adoring only the instant.

Nine years ago, in a plane that rumbled all night above the Atlantic, I could see, lit up by lightning bolts jumping out of it, a thunderhead formed like the face of my brother, looking down on blue, lightning-flashed moments of the Atlantic.

3
He used to tell me,
"What good is the day?
On some hill of despair
the bonfire
you kindle can light the great sky—
though it's true, of course, to make it burn
you have to throw yourself in ..."

Wind tears itself hollow in the eaves of these ruins, ghost-flute of snowdrifts that build out there in the dark: upside-down ravines into which night sweeps our cast wings, our ink-spattered feathers.

5
I listen.
I hear nothing. Only
the cow, the cow of such
hollowness, mooing
down the bones.

6
Is that a rooster? He thrashes in the snow for a grain. Finds it. Rips it into flames. Flaps. Crows.

Flames bursting out of his brow.

How many nights must it take one such as me to learn that we aren't, after all, made from that bird that flies out of its ashes, that for us as we go up in flames, our one work is to open ourselves, to be the flames?

Blackberry Eating

I love to go out in late September among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries to eat blackberries for breakfast, the stalks very prickly, a penalty they earn for knowing the black art of blackberry-making; and as I stand among them lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries fall almost unbidden to my tongue, as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words like strengths or squinched, many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps, which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well in the silent, startled, icy, black language of blackberry -- eating in late September.

Burning

He lives, who last night flopped from a log Into the creek, and all night by an ankle Lay pinned to the flood, dead as a nail But for the skin of the teeth of his dog.

I brought him boiled eggs and broth. He coughed and waved his spoon And sat up saying he would dine alone, Being fatigue itself after that bath.

I sat without in the sun with the dog. Wearing a stocking on the ailing foot, In monster crutches, he hobbled out, And addressed the dog in bitter rage.

He told the yellow hound, his rescuer, Its heart was bad, and it ought Not wander by the creek at night; If all his dogs got drowned he would be poor.

He stroked its head and disappeared in the shed And came out with a stone mallet in his hands And lifted that rocky weight of many pounds And let it lapse on top of the dog's head.

I carted off the carcass, dug it deep. Then he came too with what a thing to lug, Or pour on a dog's grave, his thundermug, And poured it out and went indoors to sleep.

I saw him sleepless in the pane of glass Looking wild-eyed at sunset, then the glare Blinded the glass—only a red square Burning a house burning in the wilderness.

Daybreak

On the tidal mud, just before sunset, dozens of starfishes were creeping. It was as though the mud were a sky and enormous, imperfect stars moved across it as slowly as the actual stars cross heaven. All at once they stopped, and, as if they had simply increased their receptivity to gravity, they sank down into the mud, faded down into it and lay still, and by the time pink of sunset broke across them they were as invisible as the true stars at daybreak.

Fergus Falling

He climbed to the top of one of those million white pines set out across the emptying pastures of the fifties - some program to enrich the rich and rebuke the forefathers who cleared it all at once with ox and axe - climbed to the top, probably to get out of the shadow not of those forefathers but of this father and saw for the first time down in its valley, Bruce Pond, giving off its little steam in the afternoon,

pond where Clarence Akley came on Sunday mornings to cut down the cedars around the shore, I'd sometimes hear the slow spondees of his work, he's gone,

where Milton Norway came up behind me while I was fishing and stood awhile before I knew he was there, he's the one who put the cedar shingles on the house, some have curled or split, a few have blown off, he's gone,

where Gus Newland logged in the cold snap of '58, the only man willing to go into those woods that never got warmer than ten below, he's gone,

pond where two wards of hte state wandered on Halloween, the National Guard searched for them in November, in vain, the next fall a hunter found their skeletons huddled together, in vain, they're gone,

pond where an old fisherman in a rowboat sits, drowning hooked worms, when he goes he's replaced and is never gone,

and when Fergus saw the pond for the first time in the clear evening, saw its oldness down there in its old place in the valley, he became heavier suddenly in his bones the way fledglings do just before they fly, and the soft pine cracked.

I would not have heard his cry if my electric saw had been working, its carbide teeth speeding through the bland spruce of our time, or burning black arcs into some scavenged hemlock plank, like dark circles under eyes when the brain thinks too close to the skin, but I was sawing by hand and I heard that cry as though he were attacked; we ran out, when we bent over him he said, "Galway, Inés, I saw a pond!" His face went gray, his eyes fluttered close a frightening moment.

Yes - a pond

that lets off its mist on clear afternoons of August, in that valley to which many have come, for their reasons, from which many have gone, a few for their reasons, most not, where even now and old fisherman only the pinetops can see sits in the dry gray wood of his rowboat, waiting for pickerel.

Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock

I I can support it no longer. Laughing ruefully at myself For all I claim to have suffered I get up. Damned nightmarer!

It is New Hampshire out here, It is nearly the dawn. The song of the whippoorwill stops And the dimension of depth seizes everything.

2
The whistles of a peabody bird go overhead
Like a needle pushed five times through the air,
They enter the leaves, and come out little changed.

The air is so still That as they go off through the trees The love songs of birds do not get any fainter.

3
The last memory I have
Is of a flower that cannot be touched,

Through the bloom of which, all day, Fly crazed, missing bees.

4
As I climb sweat gets up my nostrils,
For an instant I think I am at the sea,

One summer off Cap Ferrat we watched a black seagull Straining for the dawn, we stood in the surf, Grasshoppers splash up where I step, The mountain laurel crashes at my thighs.

5
There is something joyous in the elegies
Of birds. They seem
Caught up in a formal delight,
Though the mourning dove whistles of despair.

But at last in the thousand elegies
The dead rise in our hearts,
On the brink of our happiness we stop
Like someone on a drunk starting to weep.

6
I kneel at a pool,
I look through my face
At the bacteria I think
I see crawling through the moss.

My face sees me, The water stirs, the face, Looking preoccupied, Gets knocked from its bones.

7
I weighed eleven pounds
At birth, having stayed on
Two extra weeks in the womb.
Tempted by room and fresh air
I came out big as a policeman
Blue-faced, with narrow red eyes.
It was eight days before the doctor
Would scare my mother with me.

Turning and craning in the vines I can make out through the leaves The old, shimmering nothingness, the sky.

8
Green, scaly moosewoods ascend,
Tenants of the shaken paradise,

At every wind last night's rain Comes splattering from the leaves,

It drops in flurries and lies there, The footsteps of some running start.

9
From a rock
A waterfall,
A single trickle like a strand of wire,
Breaks into beads halfway down.

I know
The birds fly off
But the hug of the earth wraps
With moss their graves and the giant boulders.

10 In the forest I discover a flower.

The invisible life of the thing Goes up in flames that are invisible, Like cellophane burning in the sunlight.

It burns up. Its drift is to be nothing.

In its covertness it has a way

Of uttering itself in place of itself, Its blossoms claim to float in the Empyrean,

A wrathful presence on the blur of the ground.

The appeal to heaven breaks off. The petals begin to fall, in self-forgiveness. It is a flower. On this mountainside it is dying.

How Could You Not

-- for Jane kenyon

It is a day after many days of storms. Having been washed and washed, the air glitters; small heaped cumuli blow across the sky; a shower visible against the firs douses the crocuses. We knew it would happen one day this week. Now, when I learn you have died, I go to the open door and look across at New Hampshire and see that there, too, the sun is bright and clouds are making their shadowy ways along the horizon; and I think: How could it not have been today? In another room, Keri Te Kanawa is singing the Laudate Dominum of Mozart, very faintly, as if in the past, to those who once sat in the steel seat of the old mowing machine, cheerful descendent of the scythe of the grim reaper, and drew the cutter bars little reciprocating triangles through the grass to make the stalks lie down in sunshine. Could you have walked in the dark early this morning and found yourself grown completely tired of the successes and failures of medicine, of your year of pain and despair remitted briefly now and then by hope that had that leaden taste? Did you glimpse in first light the world as you loved it and see that, now, it was not wrong to die and that, on dying, you would leave your beloved in a day like paradise? Near sunrise did you loosen your hold a little? How could you not already have felt blessed for good, having these last days spoken your whole heart to him, who spoke his whole heart to you, so that in the silence he would not feel a single word was missing? How could you not have slipped into a spell, in full daylight, as he lay next to you, with his arms around you, as they have been, it must have seemed, all your life? How could your cheek not press a moment to his cheek, which presses itself to yours from now on? How could you not rise and go, with all that light at the window, those arms around you, and the sound, coming or going, hard to say, of a single-engine plane in the distance that no one else hears?

Lastness

A black bear sits alone in the twilight, nodding from side to side, turning slowly around and around on himself, scuffing the four-footed circle into the earth. He sniffs the sweat in the breeze, he understands a creature, a death-creature, watches from the fringe of the trees, finally he understands
I am no longer here, he himself from the fringe of the trees watches a black bear get up, eat a few flowers, trudge away, all his fur glistening in the rain.

And what glistening! Sancho Fergus, my boychild, had such great shoulders, when he was born his head came out, the rest of him stuck. And he opened his eyes: his head out there all alone in the room, he squinted with pained, barely unglued eyes at the ninth-month's blood splashing beneath him on the floor. And almost smiled, I thought, almost forgave it all in advance.

When he came wholly forth
I took him up in my hands and bent
over and smelled
the black, glistening fur
of his head, as empty space
must have bent
over the newborn planet
and smelled the grasslands and the ferns.

Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair In The Moonlight

1

You scream, waking from a nightmare.

When I sleepwalk into your room, and pick you up, and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard, as if clinging could save us. I think you think I will never die, I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars, even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.

2

I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down, I have stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die. Little Maud,

I would blow the flame out of your silver cup,
I would suck the rot from your fingernail,
I would brush your sprouting hair of the dying light,
I would scrape the rust off your ivory bones,
I would help death escape through the little ribs of your body,
I would alchemize the ashes of your cradle back into wood,
I would let nothing of you go, ever,

until washerwomen feel the clothes fall asleep in their hands, and hens scratch their spell across hatchet blades, and rats walk away from the cultures of the plague, and iron twists weapons toward the true north, and grease refuses to slide in the machinery of progress, and men feel as free on earth as fleas on the bodies of men, and lovers no longer whisper to the presence beside them in the dark, O corpse-to-be ...

And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry, this the nightmare you wake screaming from: being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

3

In a restaurant once, everyone quietly eating, you clambered up on my lap: to all the mouthfuls rising toward all the mouths, at the top of your voice

you cried your one word, caca! caca! caca! and each spoonful stopped, a moment, in midair, in its withering steam.

Yes,
you cling because
I, like you, only sooner
than you, will go down
the path of vanished alphabets,
the roadlessness
to the other side of the darkness,

your arms like the shoes left behind, like the adjectives in the halting speech of old men, which once could call up the lost nouns.

4

And you yourself, some impossible Tuesday in the year Two Thousand and Nine, will walk out among the black stones of the field, in the rain,

and the stones saying over their one word, ci-gît, ci-gît, ci-gît,

and the raindrops hitting you on the fontanel over and over, and you standing there unable to let them in.

5

If one day it happens you find yourself with someone you love in a café at one end of the Pont Mirabeau, at the zinc bar where white wine stands in upward opening glasses,

and if you commit then, as we did, the error of thinking, one day all this will only be memory,

learn, as you stand at this end of the bridge which arcs, from love, you think, into enduring love, learn to reach deeper into the sorrows to come – to touch the almost imaginary bones under the face, to hear under the laughter the wind crying across the black stones. Kiss the mouth which tells you, here, here is the world. This mouth. This laughter. These temple bones.

The still undanced cadence of vanishing.

6

In the light the moon sends back, I can see in your eyes

the hand that waved once in my father's eyes, a tiny kite wobbling far up in the twilight of his last look:

and the angel of all mortal things lets go the string.

7

Back you go, into your crib.

The last blackbird lights up his gold wings: farewell. Your eyes close inside your head, in sleep. Already in your dreams the hours begin to sing.

Little sleep's-head sprouting hair in the moonlight, when I come back we will go out together, we will walk out together among the ten thousand things, each scratched too late with such knowledge, the wages of dying is love.

Oatmeal

I eat oatmeal for breakfast.

I make it on the hot plate and put skimmed milk on it.

I eat it alone.

I am aware it is not good to eat oatmeal alone.

Its consistency is such that is better for your mental health if somebody eats it with you.

That is why I often think up an imaginary companion to have breakfast with.

Possibly it is even worse to eat oatmeal with an imaginary companion.

Nevertheless, yesterday morning, I ate my oatmeal porridge, as he called it with John Keats.

Keats said I was absolutely right to invite him:

due to its glutinous texturé, gluey lumpishness, hint of slime, and unsual willingness to disintigrate, oatmeal should not be eaten alone.

He said that in his opinion, however, it is perfectly OK to eat it with an imaginary companion, and that he himself had enjoyed memorable porridges with Edmund Spenser and John Milton.

Even if eating oatmeal with an imaginary companion is not as wholesome as Keats claims, still, you can learn something from it.

Yesterday morning, for instance, Keats told me about writing the "Ode to a Nightingale."

He had a heck of a time finishing it those were his words "Oi 'ad a 'eck of a toime," he said, more or less, speaking through his porridge.

He wrote it quickly, on scraps of paper, which he then stuck in his pocket,

but when he got home he couldn't figure out the order of the stanzas, and he and a friend spread the papers on a table, and they made some sense of them, but he isn't sure to this day if they got it right.

An entire stanza may have slipped into the lining of his jacket through a hole in his pocket.

He still wonders about the occasional sense of drift between stanzas, and the way here and there a line will go into the configuration of a Moslem at prayer, then raise itself up and peer about, and then lay \ itself down slightly off the mark, causing the poem to move forward with a reckless, shining wobble.

He said someone told him that later in life Wordsworth heard about the scraps of paper on the table, and tried shuffling some stanzas of his own, but only made matters worse.

I would not have known any of this but for my reluctance to eat oatmeal alone.

When breakfast was over, John recited "To Autumn."

He recited it slowly, with much feeling, and he articulated the words lovingly, and his odd accent sounded sweet.

He didn't offer the story of writing "To Autumn," I doubt if there is much of one.

But he did say the sight of a just-harvested oat field go thim started

on it, and two of the lines, "For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells" and "Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours," came to him while eating oatmeal alone.

I can see him drawing a spoon through the stuff, gazing into the glimmering

furrows, muttering.

Maybe there is no sublime; only the shining of the amnion's tatters. For supper tonight I am going to have a baked potato left over from lunch. I am aware that a leftover baked potato is damp, slippery, and simultaneaously gummy and crumbly, and therefore I'm going to invite Patrick Kavanagh to join me.

Parkinson's Disease

While spoon-feeding him with one hand she holds his hand with her other hand, or rather lets it rest on top of his, which is permanently clenched shut. When he turns his head away, she reaches around and puts in the spoonful blind. He will not accept the next morsel until he has completely chewed this one. His bright squint tells her he finds the shrimp she has just put in delicious. Next to the voice and touch of those we love, food may be our last pleasure on earth a man on death row takes his T-bone in small bites and swishes each sip of the jug wine around in his mouth, tomorrow will be too late for them to jolt this supper out of him. She strokes his head very slowly, as if to cheer up each separate discomfited hair sticking up from its root in his stricken brain. Standing behind him, she presses her check to his, kisses his jowl, and his eyes seem to stop seeing and do nothing but emit light. Could heaven be a time, after we are dead, of remembering the knowledge flesh had from flesh? The flesh of his face is hard, perhaps from years spent facing down others until they fell back, and harder from years of being himself faced down and falling back in his turn, and harder still from all the while frowning and beaming and worrying and shouting and probably letting go in rages. His face softens into a kind of quizzical wince, as if one of the other animals were working at getting the knack of the human smile. When picking up a cookie he uses both thumbtips to grip it and push it against an index finger to secure it so that he can lift it. She takes him then to the bathroom, where she lowers his pants and removes the wet diaper and holds the spout of the bottle to his old penis until he pisses all he can, then puts on the fresh diaper and pulls up his pants. When they come out, she is facing him, walking backwards in front of him and holding his hands, pulling him when he stops, reminding him to step

when he forgets and starts to pitch forward. She is leading her old father into the future as far as they can go, and she is walking him back into her childhood, where she stood in bare feet on the toes of his shoes and they foxtrotted on this same rug. I watch them closely: she could be teaching him the last steps that one day she may teach me. At this moment, he glints and shines, as if it will be only a small dislocation for him to pass from this paradise into the next.

Poem Of Night

1

I move my hand over slopes, falls, lumps of sight, Lashes barely able to be touched, Lips that give way so easily it's a shock to feel underneath them

The bones smile.

Muffled a little, barely cloaked, Zygoma, maxillary, turbinate.

2

I put my hand
On the side of your face,
You lean your head a little
Into my hand--and so,
I know you're a dormouse
Taken up in winter sleep,
A lonely, stunned weight.

3

A cheekbone,
A curved piece of brow,
A pale eyelid
Float in the dark,
And now I make out
An eye, dark,
Wormed with far-off, unaccountable lights.

4

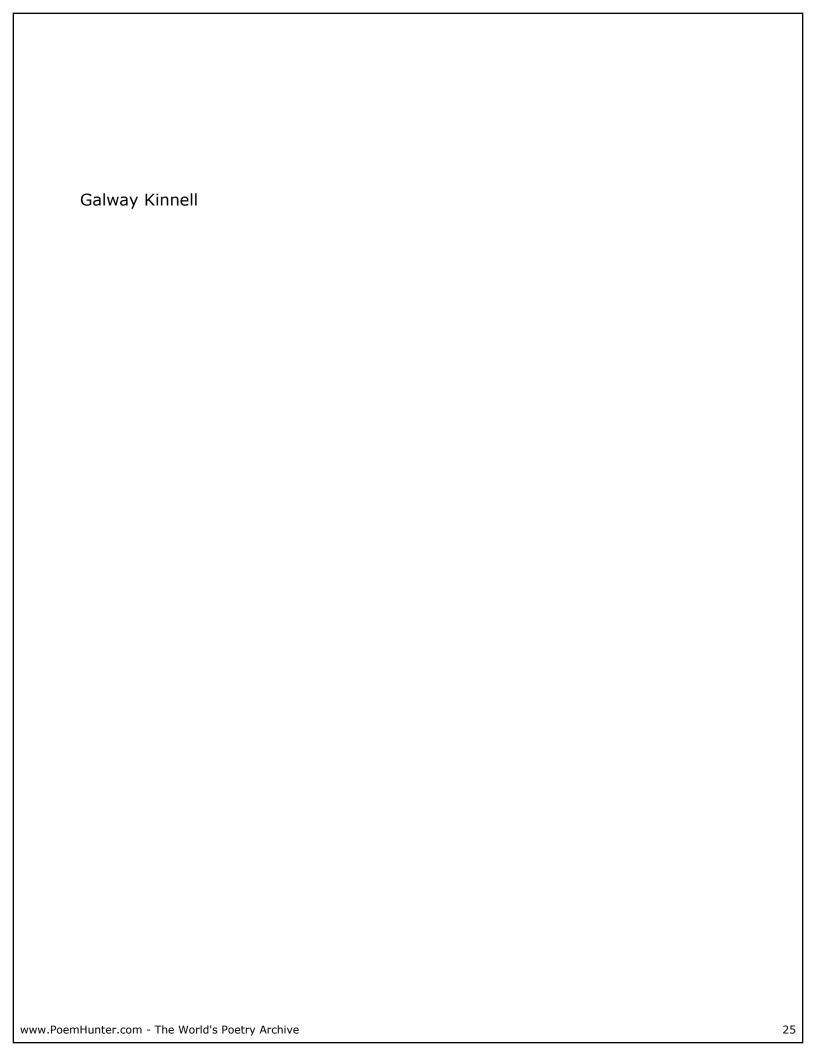
Hardly touching, I hold What I can only think of As some deepest of memories in my arms, Not mine, but as if the life in me Were slowly remembering what it is.

You lie here now in your physicalness, This beautiful degree of reality.

5

And now the day, raft that breaks up, comes on.

I think of a few bones Floating on a river at night, The starlight blowing in a place on the water, The river leaning like a wave towards the emptiness.



Rapture

I can feel she has got out of bed. That means it is seven a.m. I have been lying with eyes shut, thinking, or possibly dreaming, of how she might look if, at breakfast, I spoke about the hidden place in her which, to me, is like a soprano's tremolo, and right then, over toast and bramble jelly, if such things are possible, she came. I imagine she would show it while trying to conceal it. I imagine her hair would fall about her face and she would become apparently downcast, as she does at a concert when she is moved. The hypnopompic play passes, and I open my eyes and there she is, next to the bed, bending to a low drawer, picking over various small smooth black, white, and pink items of underwear. She bends so low her back runs parallel to the earth, but there is no sway in it, there is little burden, the day has hardly begun. The two mounds of muscles for walking, leaping, lovemaking, lift toward the east—what can I say? Simile is useless; there is nothing like them on earth. Her breasts fall full; the nipples are deep pink in the glare shining up through the iron bars of the gate under the earth where those who could not love press, wanting to be born again. I reach out and take her wrist and she falls back into bed and at once starts unbuttoning my pajamas. Later, when I open my eyes, there she is again, rummaging in the same low drawer. The clock shows eight. Hmmm. With huge, silent effort of great, mounded muscles the earth has been turning. She takes a piece of silken cloth from the drawer and stands up. Under the falls of hair her face has become quiet and downcast, as if she will be, all day among strangers, looking down inside herself at our rapture.

St. Francis And The Sow

The bud stands for all things, even those things that don't flower, for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing; though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch it is lovely until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing; as St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow, and told her in words and in touch blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen shout all the way through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine down through the great broken heart to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them: the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Telephoning In Mexican Sunlight

Talking with my beloved in New York I stood at the outdoor public telephone in Mexican sunlight, in my purple shirt. Someone had called it a man/woman shirt. The phrase irked me. But then I remembered that Rainer Maria Rilke, who until he was seven wore dresses and had long yellow hair, wrote that the girl he almost was "made her bed in his ear" and "slept him the world." I thought, OK this shirt will clothe the other in me. As we fell into long-distance love talk a squeaky chittering started up all around, and every few seconds came a sudden loud buzzing. I half expected to find the insulation on the telephone line laid open under the pressure of our talk leaking low-frequency noises. But a few yards away a dozen hummingbirds, gorgets going drab or blazing according as the sun struck them, stood on their tail rudders in a circle around my head, transfixed by the flower-likeness of the shirt. And perhaps also by a flush rising into my face, for a word -- one with a thick sound, as if a porous vowel had sat soaking up saliva while waiting to get spoken, possibly the name of some flower that hummingbirds love, perhaps "honeysuckle" or "hollyhock" or "phlox" -- just then shocked me with its suddenness, and this time apparently did burst the insulation, letting the word sound in the open where all could hear, for these tiny, irascible, nectar-addicted puritans jumped back all at once, as if the air gasped.

The Bear

1

In late winter
I sometimes glimpse bits of steam
coming up from
some fault in the old snow
and bend close and see it is lung-colored
and put down my nose
and know
the chilly, enduring odor of bear.

2

I take a wolf's rib and whittle it sharp at both ends and coil it up and freeze it in blubber and place it out on the fairway of the bears.

And when it has vanished I move out on the bear tracks, roaming in circles until I come to the first, tentative, dark splash on the earth.

And I set out running, following the splashes of blood wandering over the world. At the cut, gashed resting places I stop and rest, at the crawl-marks where he lay out on his belly to overpass some stretch of bauchy ice I lie out dragging myself forward with bear-knives in my fists.

3

On the third day I begin to starve, at nightfall I bend down as I knew I would at a turd sopped in blood, and hesitate, and pick it up, and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down, and rise and go on running.

4

On the seventh day,

living by now on bear blood alone, I can see his upturned carcass far out ahead, a scraggled, steamy hulk, the heavy fur riffling in the wind.

I come up to him and stare at the narrow-spaced, petty eyes, the dismayed face laid back on the shoulder, the nostrils flared, catching perhaps the first taint of me as he died.

I hack a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink, and tear him down his whole length and open him and climb in and close him up after me, against the wind, and sleep.

5

And dream of lumbering flatfooted over the tundra, stabbed twice from within, splattering a trail behind me, splattering it out no matter which way I lurch, no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence, which dance of solitude I attempt, which gravity-clutched leap, which trudge, which groan.

6

Until one day I totter and fall—
fall on this
stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,
to digest the blood as it leaked in,
to break up
and digest the bone itself: and now the breeze
blows over me, blows off
the hideous belches of ill-digested bear blood
and rotted stomach
and the ordinary, wretched odor of bear,

blows across my sore, lolled tongue a song or screech, until I think I must rise up and dance. And I lie still.

7

Galway Kinnell

I awaken I think. Marshlights
reappear, geese
come trailing again up the flyway.
In her ravine under old snow the dam-bear
lies, licking
lumps of smeared fur
and drizzly eyes into shapes
with her tongue. And one
hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,
the next groaned out,
the next,
the next,
the rest of my days I spend
wandering: wondering
what, anyway,
was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by which I lived?

The Cellist

At intermission I find her backstage still practicing the piece coming up next. She calls it the "solo in high dreary. Her bow niggles at the string like a hand stroking skin it never wanted to touch. Probably under her scorn she is sick that she can't do better by it. As I am, at the dreary in me, such as the disparity between all the tenderness I've received and the amount I've given, and the way I used to shrug off the imbalance simply as how things are, as if the male were constituted like those coffeemakers that produce less black bitter than the quantity of sweet clear you poured in--forgetting about how much I spilled through unsteady walking, and that lot I threw on the ground in suspicion, and for fear I wasn't worthy, and all I poured out for reasons I don't understand yet. "Break a leg!" somebody tells her. Back in my seat, I can see she is nervous when she comes out; her hand shakes as she re-dog-ears the top corners of the big pages that look about to flop over on their own. Now she raises the bow--its flat bundle of hair harvested from the rear ends of horses--like a whetted scimitar she is about to draw across a throat, and attacks. In a back alley a cat opens her pink-ceilinged mouth, gets netted in full yowl, clubbed, bagged, bicycled off, haggled open, gutted, the gut squeezed down to its highest pitch, washed, sliced into cello strings, which bring an ancient screaming into this duet of hair and gut. Now she is flying--tossing back the goblets of Saint-Amour standing empty, half-empty, or full on the tableclothlike sheet music. Her knees tighten and loosen around the big-hipped creature wailing and groaning between them as if in elemental amplexus. The music seems to rise from the crater left when heaven was torn up and taken off the earth; more likely it comes up through her priest's dress, up from that clump of hair which by now may be so wet with its waters, like the waters the fishes multiplied in at Galilee, that each wick draws a portion all the way out to its tip and fattens a droplet on the bush of half notes now glittering in that dark. At last she lifts off the bow and sits back. Her face shines with the unselfconsciousness of a cat screaming at night and the teary radiance of one

who gives everythi	ng no matter what	has been given.	

33

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The Man Splitting Wood in the Daybreak

The man splitting wood in the daybreak looks strong, as though, if one weakened, one could turn to him and he would help. Gus Newland was strong. When he split wood he struck hard, flashing the bright steel through the air so hard the hard maple leapt apart, as it's feared marriages will do in countries reluctant to permit divorce, and even willow, which, though stacked to dry a full year, on being split actually weeps—totem wood, therefore, to the married-until-death-sunders with many little lip-wetting gasp-noises. But Gus is dead. We could turn to our fathers, but they help us only by the unperplexed looking-back of the numerals cut into headstones. Or to our mothers, whose love, so devastated, can't, even in spring, break through the hard earth. Our spouses weaken at the same rate we do. We have to hold our children up to lean on them. Everyone who could help goes or hasn't arrived. What about the man splitting wood in the daybreak, who looked strong? That was years ago. That was me.

The Perch

There is a fork in a branch of an ancient, enormous maple, one of a grove of such trees, where I climb sometimes and sit and look out over miles of valleys and low hills. Today on skis I took a friend to show her the trees. We set out down the road, turned in at the lane which a few weeks ago, when the trees were almost empty and the November snows had not yet come, lay thickly covered in bright red and yellow leaves, crossed the swamp, passed the cellar hole holding the remains of the 1850s farmhouse that had slid down into it by stages in the thirties and forties, followed the overgrown logging road and came to the trees. I climbed up to the perch, and this time looked not into the distance but at the tree itself, its trunk contorted by the terrible struggle of that time when it had its hard time. After the trauma it grows less solid. It may be some such time now comes upon me. It would have to do with the unaccomplished, and with the attempted marriage of solitude and happiness. Then a rifle sounded, several times, quite loud, from across the valley, percussions of the custom of male mastery over the earth -- the most graceful, most alert of the animals being chosen to die. I looked to see if my friend had heard, but she was stepping about on her skis, studying the trees, smiling to herself, her lips still filled, for all we had drained them, with hundreds and thousands of kisses. Just then she looked up -- the way, from low to high, the god blesses -- and the blue of her eyes shone out of the black and white of bark and snow, as lovers who are walking on a freezing day touch icy cheek to icy cheek, kiss, then shudder to discover the heat waiting inside their mouths.

Two Seasons

Ι

The stars were wild that summer evening As on the low lake shore stood you and I And every time I caught your flashing eye Or heard your voice discourse on anything It seemed a star went burning down the sky.

I looked into your heart that dying summer And found your silent woman's heart grown wild Whereupon you turned to me and smiled Saying you felt afraid but that you were Weary of being mute and undefiled

II

I spoke to you that last winter morning Watching the wind smoke snow across the ice Told of how the beauty of your spirit, flesh, And smile had made day break at night and spring Burst beauty in the wasting winter's place.

You did not answer when I spoke, but stood As if that wistful part of you, your sorrow, Were blown about in fitful winds below; Your eyes replied your worn heart wished it could Again be white and silent as the snow.

Vapor Train Reflected in the Frog Pond

The old watch: their thick eyes puff and foreclose by the moon. The young, heads trailed by the beginnings of necks, shiver, in the guarantee they shall be bodies.

In the frog pond the vapor trail of a SAC bomber creeps,

I hear its drone, drifting, high up in immaculate ozone.

Wait

Wait, for now.
Distrust everything, if you have to.
But trust the hours. Haven't they
carried you everywhere, up to now?
Personal events will become interesting again.
Hair will become interesting.
Pain will become interesting.
Buds that open out of season will become lovely again.
Second-hand gloves will become lovely again,
their memories are what give them
the need for other hands. And the desolation
of lovers is the same: that enormous emptiness
carved out of such tiny beings as we are
asks to be filled; the need
for the new love is faithfulness to the old.

Wait.
Don't go too early.
You're tired. But everyone's tired.
But no one is tired enough.
Only wait a while and listen.
Music of hair,
Music of pain,
music of looms weaving all our loves again.
Be there to hear it, it will be the only time,
most of all to hear,
the flute of your whole existence,
rehearsed by the sorrows, play itself into total exhaustion.

Why Regret

Didn't you like the way the ants help the peony globes open by eating the glue off? Weren't you cheered to see the ironworkers sitting on an I-beam dangling from a cable, in a row, like starlings, eating lunch, maybe baloney on white with fluorescent mustard? Wasn't it a revelation to waggle from the estuary all the way up the river, the kill, the pirle, the run, the rent, the beck, the sike barely trickling, to the shock of a spring? Didn't you almost shiver, hearing book lice clicking their sexual dissonance inside an old Webster's New International, perhaps having just eaten out of it izle, xyster, and thalassacon? What did you imagine lies in wait anyway at the end of a world whose sub-substance is glaim, gleet, birdlime, slime, mucus, muck? Forget about becoming emaciated. Think of the wren and how little flesh is needed to make a song. Didn't it seem somehow familiar when the nymph split open and the mayfly struggled free and flew and perched and then its own back broke open and the imago, the true adult, somersaulted out and took flight, seeking the swarm, mouth-parts vestigial, alimentary canal come to a stop, a day or hour left to find the desired one? Or when Casanova took up the platter of linguine in squid's ink and slid the stuff out the window, telling his startled companion, 'The perfected lover does not eat.' As a child, didn't you find it calming to imagine pinworms as some kind of tiny batons giving cadence to the squeezes and releases around the downward march of debris? Didn't you glimpse in the monarchs what seemed your own inner blazonry flapping and gliding, in desire, in the middle air? Weren't you reassured to think these flimsy hinged beings, and then their offspring, and then their offspring's offspring, could navigate, working in shifts, all the way to Mexico, to the exact plot, perhaps the very tree, by tracing the flair of the bodies of ancestors who fell in this same migration a year ago? Doesn't it outdo the pleasures of the brilliant concert to wake in the night and find ourselves holding hands in our sleep?