

Classic Poetry Series

Galway Kinnell
- 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](http://www.poemhunter.com/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](http://www.poemhunter.com/edgar-allan-poe/) and [Emily Dickinson](http://www.poemhunter.com/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](http://www.poemhunter.com/william-stanley-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](http://www.poemhunter.com/james-arlington-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*.

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.

Galway Kinnell

Another Night In Ruins

1

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

2

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 ..."

4

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.

7

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?

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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 fatigued 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.

Galway Kinnell

Crying

Crying only a little bit
is no use. You must cry
until your pillow is soaked!
Then you can jump in the shower
and splash-splash-splash!
Then you can throw open
your window
and, "Ha, ha! ha ha!"
And if people say, "Hey,
what's going on up there?"
"Ha ha!" sing back, "Happiness
was hiding in the last tear!
I wept it! Ha ha!"

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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 will-
ing to go into those woods that never got warmer than ten below,
he's gone,

pond where two wards of the state wandered on Halloween, the Na-
tional 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, Inéacute;s, 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.

Galway Kinnell

Flower Herding On Mount Monadnock

1

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.

Galway Kinnell

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?

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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 texture, gluey lumpishness, hint of slime,
and unusual willingness to disintegrate, 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 Autumnn."

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 Autumnn," 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 simultaneously
gummy and crumbly, and therefore I'm going to invite Patrick Kavanagh
to join me.

Galway Kinnell

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 cheek 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.

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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 snout 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.

Galway Kinnell

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 riffing 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

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?

Galway Kinnell

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 tablecloth-
like 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 everything no matter what has been given.

Galway Kinnell

The Correspondence School Instructor Says Goodbye To His Poetry Students

Goodbye, lady in Bangor, who sent me
snapshots of yourself, after definitely hinting
you were beautiful; goodbye,
Miami Beach urologist, who enclosed plain
brown envelopes for the return of your very
Clinical Sonnet; goodbye, manufacturer
of brassieres on the Coast, whose eclogues
give the fullest treatment in literature yet
to the sagging-breast motif; goodbye, you in San Quentin,
who wrote, 'Being German my hero is Hitler,'
instead of 'Sincerely yours,' at the end of long,
neat-scripted letter demolishing
the pre-Raphaelites:

I swear to you, it was just my way
of cheering myself up, as I licked
the stamped, self-addressed envelopes,
the game I had
of trying to guess which one of you, this time,
had poisoned his glue. I did care.
I did read each poem entire.
I did say what I thought was the truth
in the mildest words I know. And now,
in this poem, or chopped prose, not any better,
I realize, than those troubled lines
I kept sending back to you,
I have to say I am relieved it is over:
at the end I could feel only pity
for that urge toward more life
your poems kept smothering in words, the smell
of which, days later, would tingle
in your nostrils as new, God-given impulses
to write.

Goodbye,
you who are, for me, the postmarks again
of shattered towns-Xenia, Burnt Cabins, Hornell-

their loneliness
given away in poems, only their solitude kept.

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

The Still Time

I know there is still time -
time for the hands
to open, for the bones of them
to be filled
by those failed harvests of want,
the bread imagined of the days of not having.

Now that the fear
has been rummaged down to its husk,
and the wind blowing
the flesh away translates itself
into flesh and the flesh
gives itself in its reveries to the wind.

I remember those summer nights
when I was young and empty,
when I lay through the darkness
wanting, wanting,
knowing
I would have nothing of anything I wanted -
that total craving
that hollows the heart out irreversibly.

So it surprises me now to hear
the steps of my life following me -
so much of it gone
it returns, everything that drove me crazy
comes back, blessing the misery
of each step it took me into the world;
as though a prayer had ended
and the bit of changed air
between the palms goes free
to become the glitter
on some common thing that inexplicably shines.

And the old voice,
which once made its broken-off, choked, parrot-incoherences,
speaks again,
this time on the palatum cordis

this time saying there is time, still time,
for one who can groan
to sing,
for one who can sing to be healed.

- - -

Ah, lovely.

Galway Kinnell

The Stone Table

Here on the hill behind the house,
we sit with our feet up on the edge
of the eight-by-ten stone slab
that was once the floor of the cow pass
that the cows used, getting from one pasture
to the other without setting a hoof
on the dirt road lying between them.

From here we can see the blackberry thicket,
the maple sapling the moose slashed
with his cutting teeth, turning it
scarlet too early, the bluebird boxes
flown from now, the one tree left
of the ancient orchard popped out
all over with saffron and rosy,
subacid pie apples, smaller crabs grafted
with scions of old varieties, Freedom,
Sops-of-Wine, Wolf River, and trees
we put in ourselves, dotted with red lumps.

We speak in whispers: fifty feet away,
under a red spruce, a yearling bear
lolls on its belly eating clover.
Abruptly it sits up. Did I touch my wine glass
to the table, setting it humming?
The bear peers about with the bleary undressedness
of old people who have mislaid their eyeglasses.
It ups its muzzle and sniffs. It fixes us,
whirls, and plunges into the woods—
a few cracklings and shatterings, and all is still.

As often happens, we find ourselves
thinking similar thoughts, this time of a friend
who lives to the south of that row of peaks
burnt yellow in the sunset. About now,
he will be paying his daily visit to her grave,
reading by heart the words, cut into black granite,
that she had written for him, when they
both thought he would die first:

I BELIEVE IN THE MIRACLES OF ART BUT WHAT
PRODIGY WILL KEEP YOU SAFE BESIDE ME.

Or is he back by now, in his half-empty house,
talking in ink to a piece of paper?

I, who so often used to wish to float free
of earth, now with all my being want to stay,
to climb with you on other evenings to this stone,
maybe finding a bear, or a coyote, like
the one who, at dusk, a week ago, passed
in his scissorish gait ten feet from where we sat—
this earth we attach ourselves to so fiercely,
like scions of Sheffield Seek-No-Furtherers
grafted for our lifetimes onto paradise root-stock.

Galway Kinnell

Two Seasons

I

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.

Galway Kinnell

Vapor Train Reflected In The Frog Pond

The old watch: their
thick eyes
puff and foreclose by 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.

Galway Kinnell

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.

Galway Kinnell

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 pirl, 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?

Galway Kinnell