



December 2001

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 37, no.4, December 2001, p. 289-308

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Galway Kinnell's Imperfect Thirst

By BERT HORNBACK

THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS, as we know it, is the cynic's response to the idea of transcendence. The idealist's response to the same idea is a wonderfully ironic version of the myth of the overreacher. The image the overreacher myth creates is the same as that which the myth of Sisyphus gives us, but its meaning is very different.

The cynic pushes the rock up the hill, knowing that it will tumble back down—naturally. He can't make the mountain any higher, can't keep the rock up there, can't accomplish anything except the pushing and the climb. The cynic watches himself pushing the rock, recognizes—he says—the stupidity of the myth, of the idea of transcendence, and of the presumption to achieve; but he keeps his shoulder to the stone since the only alternative is boredom. And when the rock has rolled back down, he follows it—and then starts to push and climb again.

Though the idealist's journey in life is like the cynic's in its parabolic design, it is not at all the same in what it says. For the cynic, that everything that rises must come down proves the validity of his cynicism. But for the idealist that parabola represents the form that human wisdom must take. Thus the myth of the overreacher: who dreams of transcending this world, only to realize at the apex of his achievement, at the height of super-humanity and other-worldliness, that the greatest ambition is to love human life, to commit himself to this limited but lovable world. And down he comes—naturally.

The greatest overreacher in Western history is Dante, I suppose. His ambition is usually represented as "transcendent," implying that what he wanted to do was to get to heaven and see God. And Dante's pilgrim does want that, as he proceeds through Purgatory and up into Paradise. But even as we say that we have to keep in mind that Dante tells us, from the beginning, that his ambition is to get home. And in the end, getting home—understanding what home is—is the achievement of the *Commedia*.¹ Home is this world, this life. When Dante sees this world and all life revolving in "the Love that moves the sun and all the stars," he is home. And ready to die.

To have an ambition more compelling than heaven was heretical in Dante's time, and has been ever since in the major religions of Western culture. The

1. For a full representation of this argument see my essay "Dante's Universe" in *Soundings* (Fall 2000).

Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition teaches us not to love the world that the God supposedly loves, but to love the God: not to want to be here, with the rest of creation, but to want to be in heaven. That makes a kind of sense—but it's a self-serving, self-defending sense: since we can't live here forever, let's want to be somewhere else. Given that we are mortal, the ambition to be other than human is psychologically healthy—or so believers are told.

But the ambition to escape isn't healthy, and it isn't responsible. What we have to do is learn to love this world so that we can love well *in* this world, and die happy. Curiously, the overreacher learns how to love this world through his ambition to transcend it. Once he gets away from us, beyond us, he can understand his place with us and his need for us. And he comes home—naturally *and* intentionally. He comes down the hill faster than the rock Sisyphus pushed comes down, because he comes willingly. Human will is not unnatural—but will is a power that rocks don't have. Consciousness, will, imagination, desire, love: all these capacities and virtues enhance gravity, which Galway Kinnell calls "the hug of the earth." Humans have to learn to accept—and return—that hug.

The prototypical Romantic overreacher poem is Byron's *Manfred*. At its conclusion Manfred—restored now to the love of this world—tells the monk attempting to minister to him, "Old man, 'tis not too difficult to die." Like Dante, he has found home.

When the American poet James Wright was dying, at the age of fifty-two, many of his friends visited him regularly, and sat with him. He couldn't speak, and needed his new poems read to him so that he could hear them. He wanted to be told jokes, too, to be given their little pleasures as he prepared to die. One of Wright's regular visitors was Galway Kinnell, to whom he entrusted his last poems.

This essay is about Kinnell's poetry and also about the poetry of Wright, Donald Hall, and Jane Kenyon. It is about the way they love this world: the way their best poems express that love. My primary focus is on Kinnell and how he understands and achieves that love, over and over again, in different, difficult ways, writing and rewriting Dante's journey, climbing Mount Monadnock, working through nightmares to the faith that "Lastness / is brightness," remembering the boy in the Seekonk woods whose life was still before him.

Wright's best poetry shows quickly in two relatively early poems, "The Blessing" and "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." They are both poems trying to make—to live—something like the parabola of Romantic transcendence.

In "The Blessing" Wright hasn't been going *up*, except perhaps to the North: he has been on a highway to Rochester, Minnesota.² Highways go places, and cars (Wright and a friend are in a car at the beginning of the

2. Keats went *up* to Scotland in "Song of Myself," a brilliant, funny, and shamefully neglected little poem about looking for a Romantic "vision."

poem) take people there. But Wright and his friend pull off the highway, stop the car, get out, climb a fence, and enter a field where two ponies graze. The poem then loses Wright's friend, the car, the highway and the idea of the highway, and Wright begins to understand the life of those two ponies. He imagines their sufficiency, and their love. And then he applies what he has imagined to himself, as an idea, a possibility:

Suddenly I realize
that if I stepped out of my body I would break
into blossom.

For what would seem clarity's sake, Wright should have broken the line after "out of my body." But maybe the true clarity is complex, and the images of the poem, as they collect into meaning, give two meanings to the story, not just one. The wonderful meaning is that which grows out of his attraction to the ponies, his understanding of their love, his experience with the pony which nuzzles his hand: he "could break / into blossom." But he wants to hold that pony in his arms, human-style; and her ear is not a pony's delicate ear but an ear "delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist." No: if he were to step out of his body, he "would break"—because his perspective is still defensively human; and though he climbed over the fence into the ponies' field, he can't climb out of his self into their world, even though he senses that he *could* fall in love with it.

The poignance of the poem comes in the fear of breaking, which the line break and the conditional mood of the verb—"would break"—give us. If the line break had come after "out of my body" Wright would be affirming the possibility of a greater life. But as the poem stands, the realization is complex. The world of highway and car and Rochester, Minnesota is hardly the climb-the-hill world, nor is the field in which he meets those two ponies simply the world he knows he should want to experience—naturally. Wright isn't Gulliver, either, and those are Indian ponies, not houghnhnms. Wright almost gets to Rochester, Minnesota, but then he is given a chance not to go: to become, instead, a part of the world those ponies inhabit. And he realizes the immensity of that chance even as he knows that he *can't* take it. That realization is an imaginative one, an imaginative understanding that could change a life.

Imaginative understandings are like what Christians used to call "states of grace," in that however wonderful they are, they don't necessarily last. The miracles of art always need to be reenacted and reexperienced. Thus this next Wright poem, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota."

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,

In a field of sunlight between two pines,
 The droppings of last year's horses
 Blaze into golden stones.
 I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
 A chicken-hawk floats over, looking for home.
 I have wasted my life.

We don't know where Wright has been before this afternoon, or what he has been doing; but in comparison to what he experiences lying in the hammock at William Duffy's farm, it has been a waste. Wright is not the great heroic overreacher, though he did love the English Romantics and knew a great deal of Wordsworth and Keats and long passages of *Manfred* by heart. The beauty of this little poem is in the qualified realization the speaker comes to, from the leisure to look at this world. The realization of "Lying in a Hammock" is of a life missed, of having "wasted ... life"—so far.

Great works of art try to teach us how to live. They do this by offering us experiences, by inviting us into their lives. Dante's *Commedia* begins "In the middle of our life" Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, gives "the story of myself," not for the sake of self, but because "what we have loved, / Others will love, and we will teach them how." Poets teach what the imagination lets them see, and know, and love.

One of the earliest of Galway Kinnell's poems is a tight, intense little poem called "First Song," which appeared at the beginning of his first book, *What a Kingdom It Was*. It remembers or imagines a scene on a farm in Illinois:

the small boy,
 After an afternoon of carting dung
 Hung on the rail fence, a sapped thing
 Weary to crying.

Two other boys come, and together they make "such music" on their "corn-stalk violins" that

in spite of a shoulder's ache
 A boy's hunched body loved out of a stalk
 The first song of his happiness, and the song woke
 His heart to the darkness and into the sadness of joy.

This conclusion launches, in a way, Kinnell's now long career as a poet. Most of his best work since has been a series of long poems, sung in praise of just such a painful but beautiful awakening or understanding.

The main poem in *What a Kingdom It Was* is a celebration of New York's Avenue C, called "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World."

pcheek pcheek pcheek pcheek pcheek
 They cry. The motherbirds thief the air
 To appease them. A tug on the East River
 Blasts the bass-note of its passage, lifted
 From the infra-bass of the sea. A broom
 Swishes over the sidewalk like feet through leaves.

Valerio's pushcart Ice Coal Kerosine
Moves clack

clack

clack

On a broken wheelrim. Ringing in its chains
The New Star Laundry horse comes down the street
Like a roofleak whucking into a pail.

* * *

The Downtown Talmud Torah
Blozstein's Cutrate Bakery
Areceba Panataria Hispano
Peanuts Dried Fruit Nuts & Canned Goods
Appetizing Herring Candies Nuts
Nathan Kluger Chicken Store Fresh Killed Daily
Little Rose Restaurant
Rubenstein the Hatter Mens Boys Hats Caps Furnishings
J. Herrmann Dealer in All Kinds of Bottles
Natural Bloom Cigars
Blony Bubblegum

* * *

From a rooftop a boy fishes at the sky,
Around him a flock of pigeons fountains,
Blown down and swirling up again, seeking the sky.
A red kite wriggles like a tadpole
Into the sky beyond them, crosses
The sun, lays bare its own crossed skeleton.

In the fishmarket he catalogues the world of smelts, cod, butterfishes, porgies, squeteagues, mullets and mackerels, pikes, and

two-tone flounders

After the long contortion of pushing both eyes
To the brown side that they might look up,
Lying brown side down, like a mass laying upon of hands,
Or the oath-taking of an army.

The fishmonger nails the fish to the wood of his counter to clean them:

He scrapes the knife up the grain, the scales fly,
He unnails them, reverses them, nails them again,
Scrapes and the scales fly. He lops off the heads,
Shakes out the guys as if they did not belong in the first place,
And they are flesh for the first time in their lives.

There is nothing ever again in Kinnell's work so celebrative, so seemingly simple in its affirmation of the rich variety of life. The title poem of his second book, *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock*, introduces a new theme of nightmare, the nightmare that comes perhaps with a grown-up's understanding of "the sadness of joy," or from his understanding at a different level the existence celebrated in "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World." The world of life is a world of death, too; and like those fish—like all the rest of us, too—the Christ does die, even in the New World. For

any thoughtful creature other than the Christ, death can—could, perhaps should—make life meaningless.

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

The “it” of that first stanza is the nightmare, or rather what the nightmare is about—and then “it” is this world, this night, this morning. Unable to sleep or to “bear it,” Kinnell rises, goes out, and starts to climb Mount Monadnock. The present reality of the mountainside and memory’s own experiences blend as he climbs. “It” is his life, now, and it keeps trying to touch him. He starts to make sense of what he sees.

I kneel at a pool,
I look through my face

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

Then he sees and comprehends, imaginatively, other beautiful images of destruction and death:

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.

In the final section of the poem he stops. He is not at the top of Monadnock, but he stops—is stopped by what he sees:

In the forest I discover a flower.

The invisible life of the thing
Goes up in flames that are invisible
Like celophane 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.

The flower blooms, though blooming takes it to death. But unless it blooms and dies, of course, it isn’t a flower.

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

“It” is now flower, world, nightmare, night, morning, everything including life itself. And “it” teaches him. He can go back down the mountain now.

In "Another Night Among the Ruins" Kinnell remembers his brother's advice to him:

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 ..."

And the poem concludes:

How many nights must it take
 one such as me to learn
 that we aren't, after all, made
 from that bird which flies out of its ashes,
 that for a man
 as he goes up in flames, his one work
 is
 to open himself, to be
 the flames?

As a new young English professor, twenty-eight years old, I asked Donald Hall—he was thirty-five at the time—why he wasn't writing "great poems." I admired Hall's poems, but I wanted Wordsworth's or Keats's odes, Hardy's "Transformations" or Yeats's "Among School Children," Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill" or Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning." I don't remember his answer; all I remember is my stupidity in asking the question. When *Kicking the Leaves* appeared a few years later—first the poem, and then the book—I knew he was writing great poems, and I treasured them.

"Kicking the Leaves" is Hall's "building the house of dying" poem. There is nothing morbid about that—and as both the poem itself and his work since prove, there is nothing pretentious about it either. The poem is a rich, evocative affirmation of life: his children's lives, as they grow up; his move with Jane Kenyon, his new wife, to his grandparents' farm in New Hampshire; his return to long fallow fields of memories of his childhood and of lives before his childhood.

"Kicking the leaves" is an act, an image, a resonance. Hall uses it as the idiom for remembering, out of which or from which he can expand his focus, so that memory also becomes imagination, the past and the future both coming forward out of it.

Kicking the leaves, October, as we walk home together
 from the game, in Ann Arbor,
 on a day the color of soot, rain in the air;
 I kick at the leaves of maples,
 reds of seventy different shades, yellow
 like old paper; and poplar leaves, fragile and pale;
 and elm leaves, flags of a doomed race.
 I kick at the leaves, making a sound I remember
 as the leaves swirl upward from my boot,
 and flutter; and I remember

He remembers himself as a young man, helping his grandfather rake leaves up against the foundation of the house, for insulation. He remembers himself as a boy, laughing, tumbling in the leaves with his father. "Kicking the leaves," he uncovers "the lids of graves"; and "Kicking the leaves," he hears "the leaves tell stories," and looks ahead, then, to "building / the house of dying."

Now I fall, now I leap and fall
to feel the leaves crush under my body, to feel my body
buoyant in the ocean of leaves, the night of them,
night heaving with death and leaves, rocking like the ocean.
Oh, this delicious falling into the arms of leaves,
into the soft laps of leaves!

...

I see the tall bare maple trunks and branches, the oak
with its few brown weathery remnant leaves,
and the spruce trees, holding their green.
Now I leap and fall, exultant, recovering
from death, on account of death, in accord with the dead,
the smell and taste of leaves again,
and the pleasure, the only long pleasure, of taking a place
in the story of leaves.

As the poem moves toward this conclusion its image changes. No longer is the musing, remembering poet kicking leaves; rather he is falling, leaping and falling into them, "exultant" in this living and remembering affirmation of dying. Using memory as he does, populating the world with past lives, Hall joins the world of death, imaged as "the story of leaves," and appreciates and praises life even as it dies.

More poems like "Kicking the Leaves" followed. "Names of Horses" recreates Mackerel and Riley and all those others out of "the pasture of dead horses." The rich, moving resonance of the lives that they—and Eagle Pond Farm—lived is what the poem praises even as it records their deaths. "The Ox-Cart Man" dramatizes the cycle or spiral of generations. The brilliant love poem, "O Cheese," praises "Cheddars and harsh / Lancashires....cheeses of gravity, cheeses of wistfulness," Emmentaler and Brie, "magnanimous" Gorgonzola, Stilton, "Reblochon openly sexual...Dolcelatte, always generous to a fault," "cheeses that dance in the moonlight, cheeses / that mingle with sausages"; and from this litany of praises for the cheeses of this world it comes to an understanding of life that is much like Kinnell's on Mount Monadnock, as he watches that flower dying:

O village of cheeses, I make you this poem of cheeses,
O family of cheeses, living together in pantries,
O cheeses that keep to your own nature, like a lucky couple,
this solitude, this energy, these bodies slowly dying.

Jane Kenyon's poems explore similar themes: simply, at first, and then ever more deeply and complexly as she nears the end of her short life. Early poems, like "Ironing Grandmother's Tablecloth" and "The Thimble," know, through a generous and selfless sort of meditation, how death comes between and among lives, as natural and seasonal and bleak as winter. She protests

against needless death, the obscenely caused deaths we call "casualties," in brilliant poems like "Gettysburg: July 1, 1863" and—protesting the U.S. war against Iraq—"Three Small Oranges." But otherwise, death is neither terrible nor fearsome.

In "Reading Aloud to My Father," she watches with sympathy and understanding as her father's cancer "appropriated / what was left of him," and he moves away into a final sort of independence: "the dying," she observes, "so often reach / for something only they can apprehend."

At the end they don't want their hands
to be under the covers, and if you should put
your hand on theirs in a tentative gesture
of solidarity, they'll pull the hand free;
and you must honor that desire,
and let them pull it free.

Kenyon's style—her manner, her language—have nothing to do with Emily Dickinson's, and yet in some ways she is more like Dickinson than any other American poet has been, and more like Dickenson than she is like anybody else. So many of her poems are about death, but—like Dickinson—she writes knowledgeably, familiarly, sympathetically about it. And though Kenyon is a religious poet and in her last work sometimes a mystical poet, she understands the finality of death clearly—and still sees it as a part of life. It means the end of *things*, and of continuing to *do things*.

OTHERWISE

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

The word “otherwise” changes through the course of this short poem from meaning simply *not this* to meaning both *not this* and *not at all*. The word appears in line four, and then in line eight, and both times it signifies only that things need not have happened as they have today. We insert an “otherwise,” I suspect, after the next four lines:

I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

But it might have been otherwise, we think or say.

Next, two quick repetitions, over lovemaking and dinner:

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.

The words are adumbrative, now, foreboding; they carry meaning that is not yet articulate, but is felt. Then five lines, curiously disembodied as the speaker talks about what she did today—and *did* tonight:

I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the wall, and
planned another day
just like this day.

We don’t usually include our having slept the night in a description of what we have done *today*. The poem has outgrown its simple-seeming point of view. The speaker is not exactly a part of the experience of her day anymore; the remembering imaginative consciousness which created the experience has stepped back, as though to look at its life, and from that perspective reminds itself, not that things won’t always be so wonderful but that things won’t always *be*. Kenyon communicates this indirectly through her repetitions of the word “otherwise,” and through the syntax of the sentence that leads to the poem’s final “otherwise.” She writes the first nineteen lines in ten simple sentences. One thing at a time, and one or two things at a time responded to: “It might have been otherwise.” But the penultimate sentence, which takes up five lines, is a compound sentence—and more: she sleeps in a room *with* paintings on the walls, *and* she plans *another* day. She is gathering up more of life, extending it beyond the present. Then she reminds herself:

But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

In the largeness of sympathetic response to existence Kenyon is like Kinnell—which may seem as strange as likening Dickinson to Whitman. But

in her honesty and eloquent simplicity Kenyon saw life much as Kinnell does. In "After an Illness, Walking the Dog," she writes of taking Gus up the logging road on Ragged Mountain: "It's so good to be uphill with him, / nicely winded, and looking down at the pond." Then they come down:

Time to head home. I wait
until we're nearly out to the main road
to put him back on the leash, and he
—the designated optimist—
imagines to the end that he is free.

In the last part of "Having it Out with Melancholy," she awakes in the early morning,

High on Nardil and June light
...
waiting greedily for the first
notes of the wood thrush.

When she hears its "wild, complex song" she is "overcome / by ordinary contentment." The poem concludes:

What hurt me so terribly
all my life until this moment?
How I love the small, swiftly
beating heart of the bird
singing in the great maples;
its bright, unequivocal eye.

This isn't "Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock," but its images are very much like Kinnell's. And the sense of this last section of "Having it Out with Melancholy" is like what Wright came to at the end of "Lying in a Hammock..." Kenyon's "ordinary contentment" here is what she called "perfect possibility" in "Afternoon in the House." The important thing is the perspective, the way of seeing life that the poet achieves at the end of the poem. The "bright, unequivocal eye" of the small bird watches, curiously, from its perch in the great maples. It doesn't flinch from reality, from what it sees, and for that she loves it. It is Kenyon's "bright, unequivocal eye" that lets her relish "ordinary contentment," and will let her see, know, accept what "one day... / will be otherwise."

In 1968 Kinnell published *Body Rags*, which concluded with "The Bear," probably the best-known poem written in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a graphic but mystical poem about pursuit and transformation. By the seventh day of chasing the wounded bear, the hunter-narrator is "living ... on bear blood alone." When the bear dies,

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.

And then he becomes the bear, dreaming
 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.

This is the nightmare poem, again, but it is imagined differently this time. In his dream as the bear, he tries to escape his pain—but can't. Bear is bear; and human, or poet, or Kinnell at any rate, is bear as well. The only attempt at transcendence is the bear's pathetic attempt to "dance" and "leap." Dying, he tells himself, "I must rise up / and dance. And I lie still." But when this dream or nightmare has ended—"I awaken I think"—Kinnell is still the bear, haunted now by the question,

what, anyway,
 was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry by which
 I lived?

The question doesn't go away any more than the bear does. Like Seamus Heaney's salmon fisher, who goes home at the end of his day "fish-smelling and scaly," Kinnell is his experience, the way imagination is life. But knowing what experience or life means is something else: in a little poem called "Prayer" Kinnell writes "Whatever / what is is what / I want." And whatever that is, it requires the imagination's continuous re-investigation just to keep the moving question in focus.

"It" was a nightmare—and became a flower. It was a bonfire, too; and just before it became a bear, in *Body Rags*, it was a porcupine:

In my time I have
 crouched, quills erected,
 Saint
 Sebastian of the
 sacred heart, and been
 beat dead with a locust club
 on the bare snout.
 And fallen from high places
 I have fled, have
 jogged
 over fields of goldenrod,
 terrified, seeking home,
 and among flowers
 I have come to myself empty

Kinnell's next book is *The Book of Nightmares*, which he offers as a "gift" to his daughter, Maud. As she enters this life she

sucks
 air, screams
 her first song—and turns rose,
 the slow,
 beating, featherless arms
 already clutching at the emptiness.

Kinnell prays—dreams ahead in time—for her:

in the days
 when you find yourself orphaned,
 emptied
 of all wind-singing, of light,
 the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue,
 may there come back to you
 a voice,
 spectral, calling you
sister!
 from everything that dies.
 And then
 you shall open
 this book, even if it is the book of nightmares.

In the next poem, “The Hen Flower,” Kinnell writes with immense sympathy of a hen, her

wing
 made only to fly—unable
 to write out the sorrows of being unable
 to hold another in one’s arms—and unable
 to fly

The hen, he says, seems born but to die—or to give more life, and then die. And in the end he tries to take his understanding of her into his nightmare, to domesticate it:

Listen, Kinnell,
 dumped alive
 and dying into the old sway bed,
 a layer of crushed feathers all that there is between you
 and the long shaft of darkness shaped as you,
 let go.

Even this haunted room
 all its materials photographed with tragedy,
 even the tiny crucifix drifting face down at the center of the earth,
 even these feathers freed from their wings forever
 are afraid.

In the second poem for his daughter, “Little Sleep’s-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,” Maud, “waking from a nightmare,” clings to him “as if clinging could save us.”

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 darkness

But not to worry. The only mistake is the one he and her mother made, “the error / of thinking / *one day all this will only be memory.*” Maud must learn, instead, “to reach deeper / into the sorrows / to come,” to

Kiss

the mouth
 which tells you, *here*,
here is the world. This mouth. This laughter. These temple bones.
 The still undanced cadence of vanishing.

At the end Maud is safe, freed from her nightmare by her father’s interruption of the void, and she sleeps again.

Back you go, into your crib.
 ...
 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 in time with such knowledge, the wages
of dying is love.

The Book of Nightmares is as significant a poem as—and a better poem than—Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. At the end of *The Waste Land*, Eliot is defeated by our chaos, or would be had he not determined to save himself through a combination of Christianity and a Tennysonian bit of aesthetic trickery. Eliot holds on *against* the world, dependent upon Christian mythology and his own version of the vision of salvation, which arrives—like the miraculous bells in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*—as the rain, “*Shantih shantih shantih.*” Eliot translates this, in his footnote to the poem, as “the peace that passeth understanding”; it also means, traditionally, “the averting of pain or calamity.”

Kinnell ends his nightmare much more wonderfully in both substance and imagination than Eliot does, working his way through his experiences in this world more honestly and responsibly. *The Waste Land* is still a wasteland for Eliot at the end of the poem, however we read its final lines. And the poet is in retreat. At the end of *The Book of Nightmares* Kinnell is responsible to and in this world. When the dead hen flies, he knows that her miracle is his making: he has flung her carcass up into the air, giving her her one chance at that parabola of transcendence before everything that she has been ceases to be. He can’t save Maud from the idea of death—and doesn’t want to. Earlier in the poem, when he proposed to defend her from it, it was already too late.

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.

So instead of trying to protect her from death, he protests on her behalf against the death-making in our supposed civilization:

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 then he looks forward to a time when

... lovers no longer whisper to the one beside them in the
dark, *O you-who-will-no-longer-be* ...

That lesson learned, he can let his daughter go. She will know to

Kiss
the mouth
which tells you, *here*,
here is the world. This mouth. This laughter. These temple bones.
The still undanced cadence of vanishing.

The Book of Nightmares is an almost incredible collection of metaphors, of the new understandings that metaphors create. In the final poem, "Lastness," Kinnell tells himself

Stop.
Stop here.
Living brings you to death, there is no other road.

This final poem is

the free floating of one
opening his arms into the attitude
of flight, as he obeys the necessity and falls ...

Kinnell the flower on Mount Monadnock, the bear and the poet, the lover, the would-be defender, is now the hen as well.

In the twenty years that followed *The Book of Nightmares*, Kinnell published three books: *Mortal Acts*, *Mortal Words*; *The Past*; and *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone*. The poems in these books are for the most part very different poems from his earlier work. The vision—the faith in what he seemed to see and understand so well—is gone. I tried to interview Kinnell once, in the 1980s, to ask him about this. We sat down to talk, and talked for more than two hours; but nothing happened. My questions, I suspect, were as stupid as the one question I had asked Donald Hall twenty years earlier: "Why

aren't you writing great poems?" What I wanted to know was where those earlier themes and understandings had gone. It seemed that the "visionary gleam" had abandoned him. Kinnell hadn't become a cynic, but he wasn't overreaching either: didn't even seem to be reaching.

The poems of *Mortal Acts*, *Mortal Words* and the two books following it are filled with difficult, sometimes depressed, and frequently depressing poems. Often they are marked by a sad acceptance of mortality, by a sense of the self's infinite vulnerability and final futility. When at the end of "The Hen Flower" he told himself,

Listen, Kinnell,
dumped alive
and dying into the old sway bed,
...
let go,

and then admitted his fear among all the other fears, his words were reassuring: the fear was acceptable, understandable, and we—Kinnell, us—were not to worry. His fear was natural, just as death was. But in the next books, except in a few poems like "St. Francis and the Sow," Kinnell no longer seems to know that, or believe it. He keeps recognizing a self who is old, or getting old, and facing death unhappily, unwillingly, though earlier he was not resisting it. "Here come the joggers. / I am sixty-one. The joggers are approximately very young," he writes in *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone*; in another poem he says "I don't want / to know that on the other / side of the pillow nobody / stirs." He ends yet another, "I don't want to die. / I want to be born."

But the final set of poems in *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone* is different. They don't bring him back to where he had been before; rather, they set him off to someplace new—and newly beautiful.

I am not complaining that the poems in *Mortal Acts*, *Mortal Words* or *The Past* are bad; they certainly aren't. But they aren't satisfying the way the earlier poems were, because Kinnell isn't being satisfied in or with himself. Kinnell's poetry, like most poetry in English since the beginning of the nineteenth century, is autobiographical. The novel took over the job of telling stories about this world, of imagining it—and left the poets to imagine themselves and tell their own stories. Kinnell says that whereas novelists create other people, as characters, his kind of poet creates the self. The self Kinnell creates in these poems after *The Book of Nightmares* is often a disturbed self, and they are often disturbing poems.

We must not confuse Kinnell's autobiographical poetry with the kind of personal experience written about by the "confessional" poets of late twentieth-century America. The confessional poets write about self, documenting it the way a meticulous biographer might. The assertion of the confessional school seems to be something like *my life is interesting to me* rather than *my life may make some sense that could be useful to you*: it's Little Jack Horner, not Wordsworth, or Kinnell.

Kinnell's career is the document of a life, a work in progress. By the end of *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone* he has managed his way through depression, through living alone and loneliness. He has learned a new respect for life. It is not so grand as it was in the heroic days of nightmares and bears; it is more frugal, now, more intimate, more careful of self and of others. He begins small with this new carefulness—and in writing about “one” instead of “you” or “I” he pretends to a careful distance between himself and the experience about which he is writing.

When one has lived a long time alone
 one refrains from swatting the fly
 and lets him go, and one hesitates to strike
 the mosquito, though more than willing to slap
 the flesh under her
 ...
 when one has lived a long time alone.

He watches the snake's face, and when it quits flicking its dangerous tongue and closes its jaws, “letting the gaudy tips show, as children do / when concentrating,” he sees himself too, making the same face. He listens to mourning doves and peewits, peabody birds, grasshoppers, frogs, to flycatchers and woodpeckers,

all of them in time's unfolding
 trying to cry themselves into self-knowing—

and he “knows that one is here to hear them into shining, / when one has lived a long time alone.”

Sometimes he finds that “one likes / any other species better than one's own, / which has gone amok, making one self-estranged”; and sometimes, “sour, misanthropic, one ... forgets / one's kind ... and abandons hope / of the sweetness of friendship or love.” But eventually,

one knows,
 after a long time of solitude, after the many steps taken
 away from one's kind, toward the kingdom of strangers,
 the hard prayer inside one's own singing
 is to come back, if one can, to one's own,
 a world almost lost, in the exile that deepens,
 when one has spent a long time alone.

The final poem of this series is a celebration like that which Kinnell called *What a Kingdom It Was*. Tonally, of course, it is very different: quieter, more muted, and still controlled by that impersonal pronoun. But it is thoroughly as miraculous as what he has written earlier, and maybe wiser.

When one has lived a long time alone,
 one wants to live again among men and women,
 to return to that place where one's ties with the human
 broke, where the disquiet of death and now also
 of history glimmers its firelight on faces,
 where the gaze of the new baby looks past the gaze

of the great granny, and where lovers speak,
 on lips blowsy from kissing, that language
 the same in each mouth, and like birds at daybreak
 blether the song that is both earth's and heaven's,
 until the sun has risen, and they stand
 in a halo of being made one: kingdom come,
 when one has lived a long time alone.

Artists usually think of their latest work as their best—which makes sense. Lately, however, Kinnell has been reading and talking about the Maud poems from *The Book of Nightmares*. He says he finds them hard to read, which is understandable. But he wants to read them—and does so with obvious pleasure, pleasure like the “sadness of joy” which that Illinois boy found in the first poem in *What a Kingdom It Was*. But that boy’s discovery, however great, was only discovery, not wisdom or understanding or even knowledge yet. Thirty years ago the brilliance of parts of *The Book of Nightmares* seemed sometimes like a gift, its wisdom was so profound. In the new poems the brilliance sounds earned, its wisdom deeply relearned.

And relearned in a more serene, less dramatic, but equally beautiful and rewarding way in the most recent book, *Imperfect Thirst*. The parables of bear-transcendence, the almost mystical insights are replaced by a closer, more intimate, and maybe even ordinary wisdom—if wisdom is ever ordinary. The glorious question at the end of “The Bear”—

what, anyway,
 was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by which
 I lived?

—was the insight that sent Kinnell charging back down the hill, racing ahead of the rock, affirming “the hug of the earth” and unafraid of the nightmare inside him, ready to tell Maud that “*the wages / of dying is love*,” and to tell himself that “*Lastness / is brightness*,” that “*Living brings you to death, there is no other road*.” And ready, in this life, to believe it.

And Kinnell still—or maybe again—believes it. But he writes about it differently. What he had lost, for a while, was either acceptance of the dying or the love that was to be dying’s reward, the prize given before the race was finished. Whichever it was, or both: it doesn’t matter. He writes now about both dying and love, without seeming to write about either. His subjects in *Imperfect Thirst* are more personal, perhaps, than they have ever been. His sister, his mother, his father, the man who will find him someday, having been “accepted back into the family of mortals.” His lover.

His imagination, too, is his subject again, as it was in “The Bear.” It lets him take on all the responsibility of and for his life, which includes both love and death. As he lets his imagination loose in that large responsibility in “The Striped Snake and the Goldfinch,” he questions his own “loyalty to earth,” and acknowledges an “unfillableness” which must be a part of being human; but he concludes with a statement, an affirmation, not a question. It’s not an

answer to the final question of "The Bear," telling us what poetry is; rather, it tells us what life is:

Yet I know more than ever that here is the true place,
here where we sit together, out of the wind,
with a loaf of country bread, and tomatoes still warm
from the distant sun, and wine in glasses that are,
one for each of us, the upper bell of the glass
that will hold the last hour we have to live.

In an earlier part of this long poem he remembers himself as a boy of ten,

wondering: Who would I be?
Would I find work I could do? Could I love,
or be loved? Was being, for me, even possible?
Looking back, I have to squint, to see those days

He sees that boy, and he appreciates him. In the end, when he thinks

I will fly
for a while now in the world that exists
the height of a human head above the ground,

he decides with ease and sweetness to give this strange, magical pleasure to his boy-self of sixty years ago:

A boy who stood in Seekonk Woods might like
living out this life; he might even count it a worthy destiny
to pass, in rhythmic flight ...
through this heaven, some moments, on the way to death.

"Here where we sit together" is "the true place"; and in the same sense or spirit of thought that let him tell Maud, "*the wages / of dying is love*," he tells us now that this place is "heaven."

The whole of Galway Kinnell's poetry grows more beautiful, the more one reads it as a whole. He is that flower on Mount Monadnock, uttering himself in place of himself, as the true poet must. And his utterance of this poet, "open[ing] himself, to be / the flames," is wonderful.

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