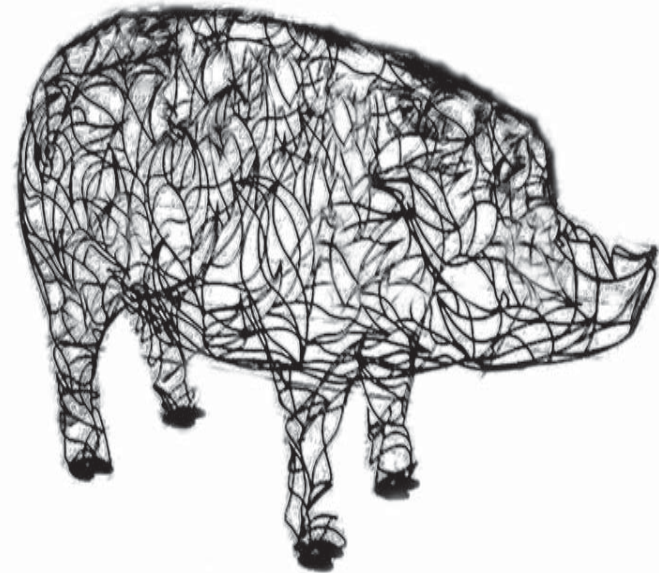


The Long,

Perfect Loveliness

of Sow:



*Selected Poetry of Galway Kinnell*

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edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr. & Cassandra Soulard

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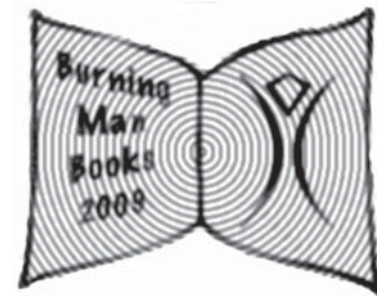
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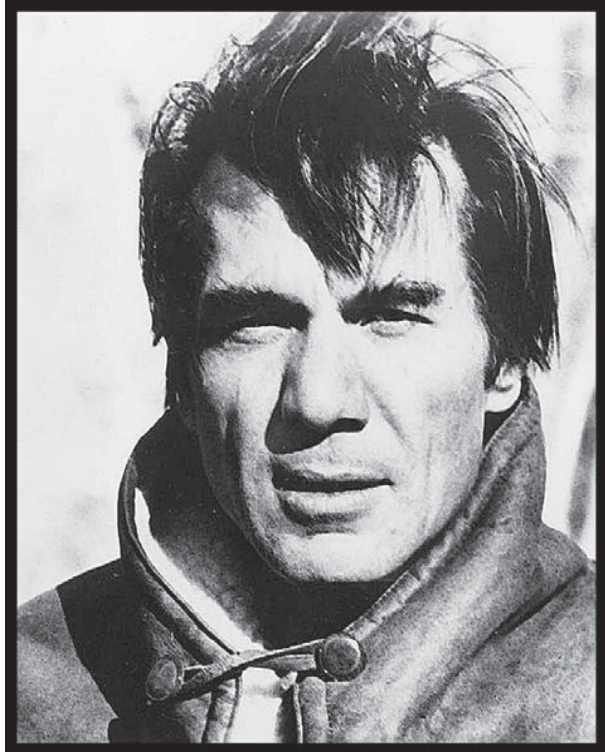
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**The Long, Perfect Loveliness of Sow:  
Selected Poetry of Galway Kinnell**

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*For those young artists who worry the years  
will grind them down, leave them barren of song,  
consider how this singer's poems  
have only grown stronger with the years . . .*



### First Song

Then it was dusk in Illinois, the small boy  
After an afternoon of carting dung  
Hung on the rail fence, a sapped thing  
Weary to crying. Dark was growing tall  
And he began to hear the pond frogs all  
Calling on his ear with what seemed their joy.

Soon their sound was pleasant for a boy  
Listening in the smoky dusk and the nightfall  
Of Illinois, and from the fields two small  
Boys came bearing cornstalk violins  
And they rubbed the cornstalk bows with resins  
And the three sat there scraping of their joy.

It was now fine music the frogs and the boys  
Did in the towering Illinois twilight make  
And into dark 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.

## 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 under them  
The hard smile of bones.

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 place on the water,  
The river leaning like a wave toward the emptiness.

## 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

I awake 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?

## Vapor Train Reflected in the Frog Pond

1

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.

2

And I hear,  
coming over the hills, America singing,  
her varied carols I hear:  
crack of deputies' rifles practicing their aim on stray dogs at night,  
sput of cattleprod,  
TV groaning at the smells of the human body,  
curses of the soldier as he poisons, burns, grinds, and stabs  
the rice of the world,  
with open mouth, crying strong, hysterical curses.

3

And by rice paddies in Asia  
bones  
wearing a few shadows  
walk down a dirt road, smashed  
bloodsuckers on their heel, knowing  
the flesh a man throws down in the sunshine  
dogs shall eat  
and the flesh that is flung into the air  
shall be seized by birds,  
shoulder blades smooth, unmarked by old feather-holes,  
hands rivered  
by blue, erratic wanderings of the blood,  
eyes crinkled almost shut,  
seeing the drifting sun that gives us our lives.

## One Who Used to Beat His Way

Down the street of warehouses,  
each with  
its redlighted shaftway,  
its Corinthian columns,  
its bum crapped out on the stoop,  
he staggers, among  
wraiths that steam up out of manhole covers  
and crimesheets skidding from the past.

He gets a backed-up  
mouthful of vomit-cut liquor, mumbles, “Thanks God,”  
and regulps it. And  
behind him the continent glimmers, the wild land  
crossed by the *Flying Crow*  
that changed her crew at Shreveport,  
the *Redball* and the *Dixie Flyer*, that went on through,  
the *Big 80*  
that quilled her whistles to make blues on the Delta.  
“Everybody’s eating everybody, and nobody  
gives a shit where they bite,”  
the old timer growls, poking the jungle fire . . .  
“Bible-ranters, bulls, hicks, systems, scissor-bills . . .”

And he who used  
to beat his way hauls himself down  
into his wino-niche, where he has left his small possessions,  
a killed bottle,  
a streambed of piss groping down dry stone.

## Under the Maud Moon

1

On the path,  
by this wet site  
of old fires—  
black ashes, black stones, where tramps  
must have squatted down,  
gnawing on stream water,  
unhousing themselves on cursed bread,  
failing to get warm at a twigfire—

I stop,  
gather wet wood,  
cut dry shavings, and for her,  
whose face  
I held in my hands  
a few hours, whom I gave back  
only to keep holding the space where she was,

I light  
a small fire in the rain.

The black  
wood reddens, the deathwatches inside  
begin running out of time, I can see  
the dead, crossed limbs  
longing again for the universe, I can hear  
in the wet wood the snap  
and re-snap of the same embrace being torn.



The raindrops trying  
to put the fire out  
fall into it and are  
changed: the oath broken,  
the oath sworn between earth and water, flesh and spirit, broken,  
to be sworn again,  
over and over, in the clouds, and broken again,  
over and over, on earth.

2

I sit a moment  
by the fire, in the rain, speak  
a few words into its warmth—  
*stone saint smooth stone*—and sing  
one of the songs I used to croak  
for my daughter, in her nightmares.

Somewhere out ahead of me  
a black bear sits alone  
on his hillside, nodding from side  
to side. He sniffs  
the blossom-smells, the rained earth,  
finally he gets up,  
eats a few flowers, trudges away,  
his fur glistening  
in the rain.

The singed grease streams  
out of the words, the one  
held note  
remains—a love-note  
twisting under my tongue, like the coyote's bark,  
curving off, into a  
howl.

3

A round-  
cheeked girlchild comes awake  
in her crib. The green  
swaddlings tear open,  
a filament or vestment  
tears, the blue  
flower opens.

And she who is born,  
she who sings and cries,  
she who begins the passage, her hair  
sprouting out,  
her gums budding for her first spring on earth,  
the mist still clinging about  
her face, puts  
her hand  
into her mother's mouth, to take hold of  
her song.

4

It is all over,  
little one, the flipping  
and overleaping, the watery  
somersaulting alone in the oneness  
under the hill, under  
the old, lonely bellybutton  
pushing forth again  
in remembrance,  
the drifting there furled in the dark,  
pressing a knee or elbow  
along a slippery wall, sculpting  
the world with each thrash—the stream  
of omphalos blood humming all about you.



5

Her head  
enters the headhold  
that starts sucking her forth: existence  
closes down all over her, draws her  
into the shuddering  
grip of departure, the slow,  
agonized clenches making  
the last molds of her life in the dark.

6

The black eye  
opens, the pupil  
doozed with black hairs  
stops, the chakra  
on top of the brain throbs a long moment in world light,

and she skids out on her face into light,  
this peck  
of stunned flesh  
clotted with celestial cheesiness, glowing  
with the astral violet  
of the underlife. As they cut

her tie to the darkness  
she dies  
a moment, turns blue as a coal,  
the limbs shaking  
as the memories rush out of them. When

they hang her up  
by the feet, she sucks  
air, screams  
her first song—and turns rose,  
the slow,  
beating, featherless arms  
already clutching at the emptiness.

7

When it was cold  
on our hillside, and you cried  
in the crib rocking  
through the darkness, on wood  
knifed down to the curve of the smile, a sadness  
stranger than ours, all of it  
flowing from the other world,

I used to come to you  
and sit by you  
and sing to you. You did not know,  
and yet you will remember,  
in the silent zones  
of the brain, a specter, descendant  
of the ghostly forefathers, singing  
to you in the nighttime—  
not the songs  
of light said to wave  
through the bright hair of angels,  
but a blacker  
rasping flowering on that tongue.

For when the Maud moon  
glimmered in those first nights,  
and the Archer lay  
sucking the icy biestings of the cosmos  
in his crib of stars,

I had crept down  
to riverbanks, their long rustle  
of being and perishing, down to marshes  
where the earth oozes up  
in cold streaks, touching the world  
with the underglimmer  
of the beginning,  
and there learned my only song.

And 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.

## The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible

1

A piece of flesh gives off  
smoke in the field—

carrion,  
caput mortuum,  
orts,  
pelf,  
fenks,  
sordes,  
gurry dumped from hospital trashcans.

*Lieutenant!*  
*This corpse will not stop burning!*

2

“That you Captain? Sure,  
sure I remember—I still hear you  
lecturing at me on the intercom, *Keep your guns up, Burnsie!*  
and then screaming, *Stop shooting for crissake, Burnsie!*  
*those are friendlies!* But crissake, Captain,  
I’d already started, burst  
after burst, little black pajamas jumping  
and falling . . . and remember that pilot  
who’d bailed out over the North,  
how I shredded him down to a bunch of guts on his strings?  
one of his slant eyes, a piece  
of his smile, sail past me  
every night right after the sleeping pill . . .



“It was only  
that I loved the *sound*  
of them, I guess I just loved  
the *feel* of them sparkin’ off my hands . . . ”

3

On the television screen:

Do you have a body that sweats?  
Sweat that has odor?  
False teeth coming away with your sandwich?  
Case of the dread?  
Headache so steady it may outlive you?  
Armpits sprouting hair?  
Piles so big you don’t need a chair to sit at a table?

*We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed . . .*

4

In the Twentieth Century of my trespass on earth,  
having exterminated the most I could of heathens,  
heretics, Jews, Moslems, witches, mystical seekers,  
Asians, blacks, including Christian brothers,  
every one of them for his own good,

a continent of red men for living in community  
and having spiritual relations with the land,  
one billion species of animals for being sub-human,  
and ready to take on the bloodthirsty creatures from the farthest stars,  
I, Christian man, groan out this testament of my last will.

I give my blood fifty parts polystyrene,  
twenty-five parts benzene, twenty-five parts good old gasoline,  
to the last bomber pilot aloft, that there will be one acre  
in the dull world where the kissing flower may bloom,  
which kisses you so long your bones explode under its lips.

My tongue goes to the Secretary of the Dead  
to tell the corpses, “I’m sorry, fellows,  
the killing was just one of those things  
difficult to pre-visualize—like a cow,  
say, getting blown up by lightning.”

My stomach, which has digested  
four hundred treaties giving the Indians  
the right to their land, I give to the Indians,  
I throw in my lungs full of tumors, from faithfully  
smoking the peace pipe before every massacre.

My soul I leave to the bee  
that he may sting it and die, my brain  
to the fly, his back the hysterical color of slime,  
that he may eat it and die, my flesh to the advertising man,  
the anti-prostitute, who loathes human flesh for money.

I assign my crooked backbone  
to the dice maker, to chop up into dice,  
for casting lots as to who shall see his own blood  
on his shirt front and who his brother’s,  
for the race isn’t to the swift but to the crooked.

To the last one surviving on earth  
I give my eyelids worn out by fear, to wear  
in the long nights of radiation and silence,  
so that the eyes can’t close, for regret  
is like tears seeping through closed eyelids.



I give the emptiness my hand: the pinkie picks no more,  
slag clings to the black stick of the ring finger,  
a bit of flame jets from the tip of the fuck-you finger,  
the first finger accuses the heart, which has vanished,  
on the thumb stump wisps of smoke ask a ride into the emptiness.

In the Twentieth Century of my nightmare  
on earth, I swear on my chromium testicles  
to this testament  
and last will  
of my iron will, my fear of love, my itch for money, and my madness.

5

In the ditch  
snakes crawl cool paths  
over the rotted thigh, the toe bones  
twitch in the smell of burnt rubber,  
the belly  
opens like a deadly nightflower,  
the tongue has evaporated,  
the nostril  
hairs sprinkle themselves with yellowish-white dust,  
the five flames at the end  
of each hand have gone out, a mosquito  
sips a last meal from this plate of serenity.

And the fly,  
the last nightmare, hatches himself.

6

*I ran  
my neck broken I ran  
holding my head up with both hands I ran  
thinking the flames  
the flames may burn the oboe  
but listen buddy boy they can't touch the notes!*

7

A few bones  
lie about in the smoke of bones.

Effigies pressed into grass,  
mummy windings,  
desquamations,  
sags incinerated mattresses gave back to the world,  
memories left in mirrors on bedroom ceilings,  
angel's wings  
flagged down into the snows of yesteryear,

kneel  
on the scorched earth  
in the shapes of men and animals:

*do not let this hour pass,  
do not remove this last, poison cup from our lips.*

And a wind holding  
the cries of love-making from all our nights and days  
moves among the stones, hunting  
for two twined skeletons to blow its last cry across,

*Lieutenant!  
This corpse will not stop burning!*

## Night Song

I cannot think who is guilty,  
One or the other, both—I remember  
Only the turning of platters *leaving me*  
*Blue blue Jezebel*—so now I hear

Outside in the raining city  
The poor shiver and go on walking and the unfed  
Ask alms or shelter and get pity  
And I know the lonely are afraid in their beds.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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—  
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 this little, startlingly 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.

## The Frog Pond

In those first years I came down  
often to the frog pond—once called,  
before the earthen dam wore away,  
the farm pond—to bathe, standing  
on a rock and throwing pond water over me—  
and doing it quickly because of the leeches,  
who need but minutes to know you're there—  
or to read the mail or to scribble  
or to loaf and think, sometimes  
of the future, while the one deerfly  
that torments everyone who walks in Vermont  
in July—smack it dead as often  
as one will—orbited about my head.  
Then the beavers came, the waters rose,  
and the frog pond became the beaver pond.  
The next year a sunken rowboat surfaced,  
with sheet metal nailed all around it  
to hold the hull boards in place  
while they rotted. The four  
of us would oar, pole, and bail  
a few feet above the sunken green bank  
where a man used to sit and think  
and look up and seem to see four people  
up here oaring and poling and bailing  
above him: the man  
*seems* happy,  
the two children laugh and splash,  
a slight shadow crosses the woman's face.  
Then one spring the beavers disappeared—  
trapped off, or else gone away  
on their own—and soon this pond,  
like the next, and the one after that,  
will flow off, leaving behind its print  
in the woods, a sudden green meadow  
with gleams of sky meandering through it.

The man who lies propped up  
on an elbow, scribbling in a notebook  
or quietly thinking, will be older  
and will remember the pond that was here,  
writhing with leeches and overflown  
by the straight blue bodies of dragonflies,  
and will think of small children  
grown up and true love broken  
and will sit up abruptly and swat  
the hard-biting deerfly on his head,  
crushing it into his hair, as he has done before.

## The Cat

The first thing that happened  
was that somebody borrowed the Jeep,  
drove fifty feet, went off the road.  
The cat may have stuck a tire iron  
or baseball bat into the steering wheel.  
I don't know if it did or didn't.  
I do know—I don't dare say it aloud—  
when the cat is around something goes awry.  
Why doesn't our host forewarn us? Well,  
he tries. He gives each guest on arrival  
a list of instructions about the cat.  
I never was able to read mine,  
for the cat was watching when I got it,  
so I stuck it in my pocket to read later,  
but the cat saw, leapt at me, nearly  
knocked me down, clawed at the pocket,  
would have ripped my clothes off  
if I had not handed it over.  
The guest book contains the name  
of the young woman who was my friend,  
who brought me here in the first place,  
who is the reason I have come back,  
to try to learn what became of her.  
But no one would tell me.  
Except tonight, my final evening,  
at dinner, the host says, "There is  
someone . . . someone . . . a woman . . .  
in your life . . ." I know he means her,  
but why the present tense? "Whom you have in . . ."  
The next word sounds like "blurrarree"  
but it could be "slavery." "Well, yes,"  
I say. "Yes, but where is the cat?"  
"It is an awful thing you are doing,"  
he goes on. "Quite awful." "But who?"  
I protest. "What are you talking about?"

"The cat," he says. "When you lock her up  
she becomes dangerous." "The cat?  
What cat?" I remember the one kitten saved  
out of the burlap sack when I was seven,  
I was mothering or fathering her, my father  
or mother said, "Stop smothering it."  
Now an electric force grabs my feet.  
I see it has seized my host's, too—  
he is standing up, his hands are flopping  
in front of him. "What is it?" I whisper.  
"I'm washing the dishes," he says.  
"O my God," I think.  
"I'm washing the dishes," he repeats.  
I realize he is trying to get the cat to believe  
he is not in a seizure but washing the dishes.  
If either of us lets on about the seizure  
it is certain the cat will kill us both.

## The Man on the Hotel Room Bed

He shifts on the bed carefully, so as  
not to press through the first layer  
into the second, which is permanently sore.  
For him sleep means lying as still as possible  
for as long as possible thinking the worst.  
Nor does it help to outlast the night—  
in seconds after the light comes  
the inner darkness falls over everything.  
He wonders if the left hand of the woman  
in the print hanging in the dark above the bed,  
who sits half turned away, her right hand  
clutching her face, lies empty,  
or does it move in the hair of a man  
who dies, or perhaps died long ago  
and sometimes comes and puts his head in her lap,  
and then goes back and lies under a sign  
in a field filled nearly up to the roots  
holding down the hardly ever trampled grass  
with mortals, the once-lovers. He goes over  
the mathematics of lying awake all night alone  
in a strange room: still the equations require  
multiplication, by fear, of what is,  
to the power of desire. He feels around—  
no pillow next to his, no depression  
in the pillow, no head in the depression.  
Love is the religion that bereaves the bereft.  
No doubt his mother's arms still waver up  
somewhere reaching for him; and perhaps  
his father's are now ready to gather him  
there where peace and death dangerously mingle.  
But the arms of prayer, which pressed his chest  
in childhood—long ago, he himself, in the name  
of truth, let them go slack. He lies facedown,  
like something washed up. Out the window  
first light pinks the glass building across

the street. In the religion of love to pray  
is to pass, by a shining word, into the inner chamber  
of the other. It is to ask the father and mother  
to return and be forgiven. But in this religion  
not everyone can pray—least of all  
a man lying alone to avoid being abandoned,  
who wants to die to escape the meeting with death.  
The final second strikes. On the glass wall  
the daylight grows so bright the man sees  
the next darkness already forming inside it.

## The Man in the Chair

I glanced in as I walked past  
the door of the room where he sat  
in the easy chair with the soiled area  
along the top from the olive oil.  
I think I noticed something—  
a rigidity in the torso, making it  
unable to settle into the cushions,  
or a slackness in the neck,  
causing the head to tilt forward,  
or a shaking in the lifted right fist,  
as through he were pushing a hammer  
handle back with all his force, to pull  
a spike driven nineteen years before  
the end of the nineteenth century  
into *lignum vitae* so dense the steel  
must have cried out in excruciated singsong,  
or an acute angle in the knees,  
as if he held his feet inches off  
the floor to keep them from a whitish  
wash of mist from some freshly  
dug pit simmering across it,  
or the jerk of a leg, as if a hand  
just then had reached through the floor  
and tried to grab it. I think I noticed,  
yet I did not stop, or go in, or speak.  
For his part he could not have spoken,  
that day, or any day, had a human  
version of the pip, the disease that thickens birds'  
vocal cords and throttles their song.  
I had it too, no doubt caught from him,  
and I could not speak truly except  
to the beings I had invented within.  
I walked past, into my room, shut  
the door, and sat down at the desk,  
site of so many hours lost

passing one number through another  
and drawing the little row of survivors on top,  
while my mother sat across from me  
catching my mistakes upside down.  
I wrote, and as I did I allowed  
to be audible in the room only  
the scritch of the pen nib, a sound  
like a rat crawling around in the dark  
interior of a wall, making a nest of shreds.  
All other sounds, including  
the words he never said to me,  
my cries to him I did not make, I forced down  
through the paper, the desk, the floor,  
the surface of the earth, the roof  
of that dismal region where they stood,  
two or three of them, who had reached up  
and had him by the foot, and were pulling hard.

## 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.

## My Mother's R & R

She lay late in bed. Maybe she was sick,  
though she was never sick. There were  
pink flowers in full blossom in the wallpaper  
and motes like bits of something ground up  
churning in sunrays from the windows.  
We climbed into bed with her.  
Perhaps she needed comforting,  
and she was alone, and she let us take  
a breast each out of the loose slip.  
“Let’s make believe we’re babies,”  
Derry said. We put the large pink  
flowers at the end of those lax breasts  
into our mouths and sucked with enthusiasm.  
She laughed and seemed to enjoy our play.  
Perhaps intoxicated by our pleasure,  
or frustrated by the failure of the milk  
to flow, we sucked harder, probably  
our bodies writhed, our eyes flared,  
certainly she could feel our teeth.  
Abruptly she took back her breasts  
and sent us from the bed, two small  
hungry boys enflamed and driven off  
by the she-wolf. But we had got our nip,  
and in the empire we would found,  
we would taste all the women and expel  
each one as she came to resemble her.

## Hitchhiker

After a moment, the driver, a salesman  
for Travelers Insurance heading for  
Topeka, said, “What was that?”  
I, in my Navy uniform, still useful  
for hitchhiking though the war was over,  
said, “I think you hit somebody.”  
I knew he had. The round face, opening  
in surprise as the man bounced off the fender,  
had given me a look as he swept past.  
“Why didn’t you say something?” The salesman  
stepped hard on the brakes. “I thought you saw,”  
I said. I didn’t know why. It came to me  
I could have sat next to this man all the way  
to Topeka without saying a word about it.  
He opened the car door and looked back.  
I did the same. At the roadside,  
in the glow of a streetlight, was a body.  
A man was bending over it. For an instant  
it was myself, in a time to come,  
bending over the body of my father.  
The man stood and shouted at us, “Forget it!  
He gets hit all the time!” Oh.  
A bum. We were happy to forget it.  
The rest of the way, into dawn in Kansas,  
when the salesman dropped me off, we did not speak,  
except, as I got out, I said, “Thanks,”  
and he said, “Don’t mention it.”

## 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 chattering 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, fast, as if the air gasped.

## Everyone Was in Love

One day, when they were little, Maud and Fergus  
appeared in the doorway naked and mirthful,  
with a dozen long garter snakes draped over  
each of them like brand-new clothes.  
Snake tails dangled down their backs,  
and snake foreparts in various lengths  
fell over their fronts. With heads raised and swaying,  
alert as cobras, the snakes writhed their dry skins  
upon each other, as snakes like doing  
in lovemaking, with the added novelty  
of caressing soft, smooth, moist human skin.  
Maud and Fergus were deliciously pleased with themselves.  
The snakes seemed to be tickled, too.  
We were enchanted. Everyone was in love.  
Then Maud drew down off Fergus's shoulder,  
as off a tie rack, a peculiarly  
lumpy snake and told me to look inside.  
Inside the double-hinged jaw, a frog's green  
webbed hind feet were being drawn,  
like a diver's, very slowly as if into deepest waters.  
Perhaps thinking I might be considering rescue,  
Maud said, "Don't. Frog is already elsewhere."

## Ode and Elegy

A thud. Shrieks. Frantic  
wingbeats like a round  
of soft applause.  
The hawk jumps on top  
of the jay knocked to the grass,  
presses his wings to the ground,  
digs his claws into the jay's  
back, strikes the neck  
over and over, scattering  
blue feathers. Then,  
as easily as a green wave  
in heavy seas lifts a small boat  
and throws it upside down,  
still afloat but keel up, so  
the hawk flips the jay,  
then tears at his throat.

A blue wing wrests itself free, flaps  
like a flag saying *i will fight you!*  
The hawk stuffs the wing  
back down into place and  
clamps it there with one foot.  
Now jay and hawk stare  
at each other beak to beak,  
as close as Jesus and Judas at their kiss.  
The hawk strikes, the jay struggles  
to strike back, but his neck breaks, his eyes  
shrink into beads of taxidermists' glass.  
The cere above the hawk's beak  
flushes hard yellow from exertion.



As a grape harvester trampling out  
the last juices of grape, so the hawk  
treads the jay's body up and down  
and down and up. He places  
a foot on the throat and a foot  
on the belly, flaps his wings,  
repositions his feet, flaps again.

He pushes off, clutching transversely  
the body of the jay, which is like a coffin  
made in the shape and color of the dead.

Much as in *la décollage à l'américaine*  
of the Lafayette Escadrille, when  
the pilots would gain speed only yards  
above the tarmac, then haul back  
on the joystick, putting their planes  
into nearly vertical ascent, just so  
the sharp-skinned hawk, carrying  
his blue load glinting in the sunlight  
low to the ground, now suddenly  
climbs steeply and soars over the tops  
of the Norway spruce and the tamarack.

## Burning the Brush Pile

I shoved into the bottom of the brush  
pile two large grocery bags holding  
chainsaw chaff well soaked  
in old gasoline gone sticky—a kind  
of homemade napalm, except, of course,  
without victims, other than boughs,  
stumps, broken boards, vines, crumbles.

Bracing my knees against the next-  
to-the-top roundel of the twelve-foot  
apple-picker stepladder,  
I poured diesel all gurgling  
and hiccupping into the center of the pile,  
then climbed down and sloshed  
the perimeter with kerosene and sludge.

Stepping back, I touched a match  
to the oil rag knotted to the thick end  
of a thick stick and hurled it, javelin  
style, into the core of the pile,  
which gasped, then illuminated:  
red sunset seen through winter trees.  
A small flame came curling out from either  
side of the pile and quietly wavered there,  
as if this were simply the way matter burns.  
Suddenly the great loaded shinicle roared  
into flames that leapt up sixty, seventy feet,  
swarming through the hole they had heated  
open in the chill air to be their chimney.



At noon I came back with a pitchfork  
and flicked into the snapping flames  
a lot of charred boughs, twig ends burnt off,  
that lay around the edges of the fire  
as if some elephantine porcupine had been  
bludgeoned on its snout, on this spot,  
and then, rotting away, had left a rough circle  
of black quills pointing to where it had been.

In the evening, when the fire had faded,  
I was raking black clarts out of the smoking dirt  
and felt a tine of my rake snag on a large lump.  
I jerked, shook, beat it apart, and out fell  
a small blackened snake, the rear half  
burnt away, the forepart alive. When  
I took up this poor Isaac, it flashed its tongue,  
then struck my hand a few times; I let it.

Already its tail was sealing itself off,  
fusing shut the way we cauterize unraveling  
nylon line by using its own hot ooziings  
as glue. I lowered it into the cool grass,  
where it waggled but didn't get very far.  
Gone the swift lateral undulation, the whip-tail,  
the grip that snakes bring into the world.

It stopped where the grass grew thick  
and flashed its tongue again, as if trying  
to spit or to spirit away its pain,  
as we do, with our growled profanities,  
or as if uttering a curse, or—wild fantasy—  
a benediction. Most likely it was trying to find  
its whereabouts, and perhaps get one last take  
on this unknown being also reeking of fire.  
Then the snake zipped in its tongue  
and hirpled away into the secrecy of the grass.

## Pulling a Nail

In the year of my birth  
my father buried this spike,  
half in hemlock half in oak,  
battered the flat of its head  
into the dead center  
of the round dent of his last blow.

He would have struck  
in quick strokes filled  
with inertia and follow-through.  
He would have hit at the precise  
moment the direction of force  
in the hammer exactly lined up  
with the axis of the nail.

As friction tightened, he would have  
hit harder, striking up  
shock waves that struck back  
in his elbow and shoulder.

Near the end, when his arm  
grew weak and his hand  
could barely hang on,  
he would have gone  
all out and clobbered  
the nail, crushed it into itself,  
with each blow knocking  
off kilter every new tilt of the head.



I hack and scrape  
but can't get the hammer's claw  
to catch under the rim of the nail,  
and I have no nail pull or pry bar.  
But looking back in time, I see  
my father, how he solved  
it when in the same fix:  
angling the claw of his hammer  
like a chisel, he cozied it  
up to the nail head, then taking  
a second hammer, smacked  
the face of the first, and kept on  
smacking it, until the claw  
gouged grooves for itself  
in the bruised wood and grudged under.  
So I do as my father did.

Now begins what could be called  
carpenters' arm wrestling, and also,  
in this case, transrealmic combat  
between father and son.  
We clasp right hands (the flared  
part of the hammer hand,  
his hand) and press right elbows  
to the hemlock (the curved  
hammer head, his steel elbow) and pull.  
Or rather, I pull, he holds fast, lacking  
the writ to drag me down where he lies.

A nail driven so long ago  
ought to be allowed to stay put,  
until the structure it serves  
crumbles into its ill-fitting cellar hold,  
or on a freezing night flaps up  
and disappears in a turmoil  
of flame and smoke and its  
blackened bones; or until the nail  
discovers it has become  
merely a nail hole filled with rust.

A spike driven long ago  
resists being pulled—worse  
than a stupefied wisdom tooth  
whose roots, which have screwed  
themselves into the jawbone,  
refuse to budge; worse even  
than an old pig who hears  
the slaughterer's truck pull up  
and rasp open its gate and rattle  
its ramp into place, and grunts,  
and squeals, and digs in.

Slipping for leverage  
a scrap of quarter-inch wood  
under the hammer, I apply  
a methodology I learned from  
unscrewing stuck bottle lids:  
first, put it to the maximum force  
you think you can maintain,  
and second, maintain it.



Just as when an earthworm  
pulls itself out of a cul-de-sac,  
cautious end pulling adventurous end,  
stretching itself almost in two  
until the stuck end starts to come free,  
so this nail, stretched and now  
starting to let go, utters a thick squawk—  
first sound it has made since  
my father brought down his hammer  
full force on it, adding a grunt of his own,  
and thudded it home—and a half-inch  
of newly polished steel stutters  
out of fibrous matter intended to grip it  
a good long time, if not forever.

My fulcrum this time a chunk  
of inch board, I pull again, again  
creating a chaotic ruckus,  
and another segment of bright  
steel screeches free.

Helped along this time by  
a block of two-by-four lying  
on its inch-and-three-quarter side,  
I leverage out another noisy half-inch.  
At last, standing the block up  
on its three-and-three-quarter-inch side,  
I pull hard, hold the pressure,  
and the entire rest of the nail,  
almost too hot to handle, extrudes  
in an elegant curve of defeated matter.

It seems I've won.  
But in matters like this  
winning doesn't often  
feel exactly like winning.  
It's only a nail, I know,  
an earthen bit. Bent.  
Very possibly torqued.  
And yet my father drove it  
to stake out his only hope  
of leaving something  
lasting behind. See,  
there he is now, bent  
at his workbench,  
in the permanent  
gloom of the basement  
of the house on Oswald  
Street that he built, as he did  
everything he did, alone,  
probably driving all but a few dozen  
of its ten thousand nails himself.



A dark yellowish aura, like  
the dead glow of earliest  
electricity, unused to being  
harnessed, hangs above  
his head. He's picking over  
a small heap of bent nails,  
chucking some, straightening  
out others back into usefulness  
in the rectilinear world.  
At this one he pauses.  
He lifts it to the light, sights  
along it as if he doubts  
it can ever be used again.  
I take it from his hand just  
as he fades out of sight.  
In it I can feel the last heat  
of our struggle. Thumb  
and forefinger hold the nail  
to the bench, bent side up,  
forming a little wobbling  
bridge between then  
and now, between me and him,  
or him and me, over which  
almost nothing of what mattered  
to either of us ever passed.  
A hammer still floats in the space  
he had been standing in.  
I pluck it out of the air  
and use it to hammer the nail  
up and down its length, rotate it  
to keep the bend on top,  
hammer it, rotate it,  
hammer it, well into the night.  
The cellar windows become light.  
It is late. I don't think  
I will ever straighten it out.

### Promissory Note

If I die before you  
which is all but certain  
then in the moment  
before you will see me  
become someone dead  
in a transformation  
as quick as a shooting star's  
I will cross over into you  
and ask you to carry  
not only your own memories  
but mine too until you  
too lie down and erase us  
both together into oblivion.