

GALWAY KINNELL



A NEW SELECTED POEMS

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A New Selected Poems

Books by Galway Kinnell

POETRY

- What a Kingdom It Was 1960
Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock 1964
Body Rags 1968
First Poems 1946–1954 1971
The Book of Nightmares 1971
The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into
the New World: Poems 1946–64 1974
Mortal Acts, Mortal Words 1980
Selected Poems 1982
The Past 1985
When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone 1990
Three Books 1993
Imperfect Thirst 1994
A New Selected Poems 2000

PROSE

- Black Light 1966
Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews 1978
How the Alligator Missed Breakfast (for children) 1982

TRANSLATIONS

- Bitter Victory, by René Hardy 1956
The Poems of François Villon 1965
On the Motion and Immobility of Douve, by Yves
Bonnefoy 1968
Lackawanna Elegy, by Yvan Goll 1970
The Poems of François Villon (second version) 1977
The Essential Rilke (with Hannah Liebmann) 1999

EDITION

- The Essential Whitman 1987

TO EPHRAIM and MIRAH

*O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love upgroweth with youre age
 . . . thynketh al nys but a faire
This world, that passeth soone as floures faire.*
—Chaucer

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this paperback edition of *A New Selected Poems*, I have taken out three poems, all from early books, that were included in the hardcover edition, and added eight others, mostly from later books. This edition also incorporates revisions that were not present in the hardcover book. For many years, I have felt exasperated by my intractable habit of working at certain poems again and again, over long spans of time. But in recent years I have come to accept that, at least in the case of a complex project, this is simply how I write. It makes me think of the digestive process of a Methuselah-ian ruminant animal, one with many many stomachs, that chews its cud for decades (though I don't want to carry this analogy to its logical alimentary end). From the outside, it may seem only that a given poem has been belatedly revised, while to me, making these changes was still part of the process of composition, a final stage in the protracted struggle with my very "sullen art."

I would like to thank my peerless editor, Pat Strachan; Janet Silver, editor in chief; and Wendy Strothman, executive vice president, all of Houghton Mifflin, for understanding how necessary these reworkings are to me in my effort to bring the poems into their final form.

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FROM

What a Kingdom It Was

1960

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.

For William Carlos Williams

When you came and you talked and you read with your
Private zest from the varicose marble
Of the podium, the lovers of literature
Paid you the tribute of their almost total
Inattention, although someone when you spoke of a pig
Did squirm, and it is only fair to report another gig-

gled. But you didn't even care. You seemed
Above remarking we were not your friends.
You hung around inside the rimmed
Circles of your heavy glasses and smiled and
So passed a lonely evening. In an hour
Of talking your honesty built you a tower.

When it was over and you sat down and the chair-
man got up and smiled and congratulated
You and shook your hand, I watched a professor
In neat bow tie and enormous tweeds, who patted
A faint praise of the sufficiently damned,
Drained spittle from his pipe, then scrambled.

Freedom, New Hampshire

1

We came to visit the cow
Dying of fever,
Towle said it was already
Shoveled under, in a secret
Burial-place in the woods.
We prowled through the woods
Weeks, we never

Found where. Other
Children other summers
Must have found the place
And asked, Why is it
Green here? The rich
Guess a grave, maybe,
The poor think a pit

For dung, like the one
We shoveled in in the fall,
That came up a brighter green
The next year, that
Could as well have been
The grave of a cow
Or something, for all that shows.

2

We found a cowskull once; we thought it was
From one of the asses in the Bible, for the sun
Shone into the holes through which it had seen
Earth as an endless belt carrying gravel, had heard
Its truculence cursed, had learned how human sweat
Stinks, and had brayed—shone into the holes
With solemn and majestic light, as if some
Skull somewhere could be Baalbek or the Parthenon.

That night passing Towle's Barn
We saw lights. Towle had lassoed a calf
By its hind legs, and he tugged against the grip
Of the darkness. The cow stood by, chewing millet.
Derry and I took hold, too, and hauled.
It was sopping with darkness when it came free.
It was a bullcalf. The cow mopped it awhile,
And we walked around it with a lantern,

And it was sunburned, somehow, and beautiful.
It took a teat as the first business
And sneezed and drank at the milk of light.
When we got it balanced on its legs, it went wobbling
Toward the night. Walking home in darkness
We saw the July moon looking on Freedom, New Hampshire,
We smelled the fall in the air, it was the summer,
We thought, Oh this is but the summer!

3

Once I saw the moon
Drift into the sky like a bright
Pregnancy pared
From a goddess who had to
Keep slender to remain beautiful—
Cut loose, and drifting up there
To happen by itself—
And waning, in lost labor;

As we lost our labor
Too—afternoons
When we sat on the gate
By the pasture, under the Ledge,
Buzzing and skirling on toilet-
papered combs tunes
To the rumble-seated cars
Taking the Ossipee Road

On Sundays; for
Though dusk would come upon us

Where we sat, and though we had
Skirled out our hearts in the music,
Yet the not-yet dandruffed
Harps we skirled it on
Had done not much better than
Flies, which buzzed, when quick

We trapped them in our hands,
Which went silent when we
Crushed them, which we bore
Downhill to the meadowlark's
Nest full of throats, which
Derry charmed and combed
With an Arabian air, while I
Chucked crushed flies into

Innards I could not see,
For the night had fallen
And the crickets shrilled on all sides
In waves, as if the grassleaves
Shrieked by hillsides
As they grew, and the stars
Made small flashes in the sky,
Like mica flashing in rocks

On the chokecherried Ledge
Where bees I stepped on once
Hit us from behind like a shotgun,
And where we could see
Windowpanes in Freedom flash
And Loon Lake and Winnepesaukee
Flash in the sun
And the blue world flashing.

4

The fingerprints of our eyeballs would zigzag
On the sky; the clouds that came drifting up
Our fingernails would drift into the thin air;
In bed at night there was music if you listened,
Of an old surf breaking far away in the blood.