

## THREE POEMS



### *Galway Kinnell*

#### THE STRIPED SNAKE AND THE GOLDFINCH

I

When I pick up the corner of the sheet of black  
plastic spread over last year's potato patch,  
a striped snake two feet long lifts her head.  
When I take her by the back of the neck, she writhes,  
seeking purchase so she can throw herself and bite,  
her tongue zzzing like an arc welder rumpling out  
a brass bandage, rough as the gossamers snakes  
slough on mountain paths, which crested flycatchers  
snatch up and weave into their nests to hex cowbirds.  
Trying to slide away, she goes through one of my hands  
and finds the other waiting to draw her back.  
Up on my shoulder, she drags herself across my nape,  
turns, drags herself back again across my Adam's apple,  
making me think of one of those high-limb rope saws  
you work from the ground by pulling alternately  
on the two control cords, sawing off my head.  
Now she crawls over me more slowly and drapes herself,  
and I can feel what seems her pleasure, and  
am happy to be her somewhat living warm object.  
Sliding halfway off my hand, she holds herself  
with forepart pulled down like a wand of applewood  
straining toward water under the black soil  
where the worms rumba, streams to the ground  
like a spirit going from me, wriggles over  
to the black plastic, pauses, and slides under.

2

Stepping into the woods, I remember going  
alone into Seekonk Woods when I was ten,  
sometimes 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  
which I spent as if walking at night in a village  
high in the Alps when the lights in the valley  
seem farther away than the stars, passing houses  
where a man and a woman lie asleep  
in one room, and children sleep in another,  
and in a courtyard a dog, hearing someone  
unfamiliar walking at the wrong hour, wakes—  
someone smoking a cigarette, like the cigarette my father  
dragged on, as he sat in mud, its periodic glow  
proof he existed while shells shrieked overhead  
and exploded in other trenches, the trench  
where his brother David blew up many times  
in imagination, wrote one letter to his mother  
praying he might live to come home, blew up  
into parts some of which may have got mixed up  
with some of someone else's—and barks? *proof*,  
and again, double-checking, *proof proof*, and then,  
hearing no one, goes back to sleep, and the village  
snow creaks as if the press of nightwalking hurt it.

3

How much do I have left of the loyalty to earth,  
which human shame, and dislike of our own lives,  
and others' deaths that take part of us with them,  
wear out of us, as we go towards that moment  
when we find out how we die: clinging and pleading,  
or secretly relieved that it is all over,  
or despising ourselves, knowing that death  
is a punishment we deserve, or like an old dog,  
off his feed, who suddenly is ravenous,  
and eats the bowl clean, and the next day is a carcass.  
There is an unfillableness in us—in some of us,  
a longing for that blue-shaded black night  
where the beloved dead, and all those others  
who suffered and sang and were not defeated—  
the one who hushed them by singing "Going Home"  
when they lynched him on Bald Mountain,  
the klezmer violinists who pressed bows  
across strings until eyes, by near-starvation  
enlarged, grew wet and sparkled—have gone.  
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.

4

Coming out of the woods I cross the field,  
check the black plastic—nobody—and go up  
to the house. Inside there is a flurry of clicks—  
goldfinch, who must have flown in the open door  
on seeing sky in the window in the opposite wall,  
flies at window glass, beak and talons hitting  
it like a telegraph key sending ...—...  
Holding a towel to the glass, I bunch it around the bird,  
take the bundle to the door, reach in  
and draw the soft-surfaced, distinct body  
into the brilliant sunshine. He looks at me, his eye guarded,  
unforthcoming, with the blankness of an old person  
on a gurney staring at corridor ceilings  
on the way to surgery. Perhaps also with defiance.  
I search it for signs of eros—before long  
a bird can start courting us, if we have rescued it,  
put splints on a leg or wing, eyedropped it sugary water,  
deposited mealworms and pieces of fruit  
down its throat, surrounded it in a warm hand  
that brings back an embryo-memory of the hot,  
featherless brood patch which darkened upon the egg,  
like the lead aprons the good dentists Landa  
and Silloway have spread, huge and heavy, on me,  
or the tongue of God pressed to a body just  
before giving it that vast lick from head to tail.

5

When I open my hand, wherever I touched him  
looks corroded; wherever I had not shines  
his original lemon yellow. He sits a moment,  
as if half-limed. But, his *odorat* undeveloped,  
unresponsive to the 2-methyl-3-hexanoic  
which the lipophilic diptheroids of my hand  
release through the wrinkles cross-stitching  
each other down the heart line, he flies,  
dipping and lifting like a needle basting a hem,  
disappears into the intertangled branches of the birches

Ines and I planted in the spring of our marriage  
six hundred and thirteen years ago, if you go  
by the affection-rings and the weariness-rings  
inside the trunk when the magician saws it through,  
and opens it, and finds each of you cut in half,  
separated from yourself at the waist. There he is,  
in a birch top, its crown. Meanwhile the snake  
may have crawled up my spine to sit in my mouth  
and utter an unsteady flame. I think I will fly  
for a while now in the world that exists  
the height of the human head above the ground.  
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, with zzzing tongue,  
through this heaven, some moments, on the way to death.

#### WHY REGRET?

Didn't you like the way the ants help  
the peony globes open by eating off the glue?  
Weren't you cheered to see the ironworkers  
sitting on an I-beam dangling from a cable,  
in a row, like starlings, eating lunch, maybe  
baloney on white with fluorescent mustard?  
Wasn't it a revelation, waggling from the estuary  
up the river, the pirl, the kill, the run,  
the brook, the beck, the sike gone dry,  
all the way to the shock of a spring?  
Didn't you almost shiver, hearing the book lice  
clicking their sexual dissonance inside the ancient  
Webster's *New International*—perhaps having just  
eaten out of it *izle*, *xyster* and *thalassacon*?  
What did you imagine lay in store anyway  
at the end of a world whose sub-substance is:  
ooze, gleet, birdlime, slim, mucus, muck?  
Don't worry about becoming emaciated—think of the wren  
and how little flesh is needed to make a song.  
Didn't it seem somehow familiar when the nymph  
split open and the mayfly struggled free  
and flew and perched and then its own back split open  
and the imago, the true adult, somersaulted

out backwards and took flight  
 toward the swarm, mouth-parts vestigial,  
 alimentary canal unfit to digest food,  
 a day or hour left to find the desired one?  
 Or when Casanova threw the linguine in squid ink  
 out the window, telling his startled companion,  
 "The perfected lover does not eat."  
 As a child didn't you find it calming to think  
 of the pinworms as some kind of tiny batons  
 giving cadence to the squeezes and releases  
 around the downward march of debris?  
 Didn't you once glimpse what seemed your  
 own inner blazonry in the monarchs, wobbling  
 and gliding, in desire, in the middle air?  
 Weren't you reassured at the thought that these flimsy,  
 hinged beings might navigate their way to Mexico  
 by the flair of the dead bodies of ancestors  
 who fell in the same migration a year ago?  
 Isn't it worth missing whatever joy  
 you might have dreamed, to wake in the night and find  
 you and your beloved are holding hands in your sleep?

#### NEVERLAND

Bending over her bed, I saw the smile  
 I must have seen when I looked up from the crib.  
 Knowing death comes, imagining it, smelling it,  
 may be a fair price for consciousness.  
 But looking at my sister lying there, I wished  
 she could have been snatched up from behind  
 to die by surprise, without ever knowing about death.  
 Too late. Wendy said, "I am in three parts.  
 Here on the left is red. That is pain.  
 On the right is yellow. That is exhaustion.  
 The rest is white. I don't know yet what white is."  
 For most people, one day everything is OK.  
 The next, the limbic node catches fire. The day after,  
 the malleus in one ear starts missing the incus.  
 Then the arthritic opposable thumb no longer opposes  
 whoever screwed the top onto the jam jar.  
 Then the coraco-humeral ligament frizzles apart,

the liver speckles, the kidneys dent,  
two toes lose their souls. Of course,  
before things get worse, a person could run.  
I could take off right now, climb the pure forms  
that surmount time and death, follow a line  
drawn along Avenue D, make a 90° turn right on 8th Street,  
90° left on C, right on 7th, left on B, then cross  
to Sixth Avenue, catch the A train to Nassau,  
the station where the A pulls up beside the Z,  
get off and hop on the Z and hurtle under the river  
and rise on Euclid under the stars and taste,  
with a woman, in perfectly circular kisses,  
the actual honey of paradise.  
Then, as if Wendy suddenly understood  
this flaw in me, that I could die  
still wanting what is not to be had here, drink  
and drink and yet have most of my thirst  
intact for the water table, she opened her eyes.  
“I want you to know I’m not afraid of dying”,  
she said. “I only wish it didn’t take so long.”  
Seeing her look so young and begin to die  
all on her own, I wanted to whisk her off.  
Quickly she said, “Let’s go home.” From outside  
in the driveway came the gargling noise  
of a starter motor, and a low steady rumbling, as if  
my car had turned itself on and was warming up the engines.  
She said this as if we had gone over to visit  
a friend, to sign our names on the plaster cast  
on her leg, broken on the swing in our backyard,  
and some awful indoor game had gone wrong,  
and Wendy had turned to me and said, “Let’s go home.”  
She had closed her eyes. She looked entirely white.  
Her hair had been white for years; in her illness  
her skin was as if powdered with twice-bleached flour;  
now her lips seemed to have given up their blood.  
Color flashed only when she opened her eyes.  
Snow will come down next winter, in the woods;  
the fallen trees will have that flesh on their bones.  
When the eye of the woods opens, a bluejay shuttles.  
Outside, suddenly, all was quiet, and I  
realized my car had shut off its engine.  
And now she felt hot to the touch, as if  
an almost immaterial fat were still clinging,

like a lining, to the inside of her skin,  
burning. There was a looseness to her flesh.  
A translucency came into it, as had happened  
with our mother when she was about to die.  
At last a spot of rosiness showed in each cheek:  
blushes, perhaps, at a joy she had kept from us,  
from somewhere in her life, perhaps two mouths,  
hers and a beloved's, near each other, like roses  
sticking out of a bottle of invisible water.  
She was losing the half-given, half-learned  
art of speech, and it became a struggle for her  
to find the words, to form them, to position them,  
and then quickly utter them. After much effort  
she said to me, "Now is when the point of the story changes."  
After that, one eye at a time, the left listened,  
and drifted, the right focused, gleamed  
meanings at me, drifted. Stalwart,  
the halves of the brain, especially the right.  
Now, as they ratchet the box holding  
her body into the earth, I hear her voice,  
calling back across the region she passes through,  
in prolonged, even notes, which swell and diminish,  
a far landscape I seem to see as if from above,  
much light, much darkness, tumbling clouds,  
sounding back to us from its farthest edge.  
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