

Poems from *The Simple Acts of Life*

At the Un-national Monument along the Canadian Border

This is the field where the battle did not happen,
where the unknown soldier did not die.
This is the field where grass joined hands,
where no monument stands,
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound,
unfolding their wings across the open.
No people killed – or were killed – on this ground
hollowed by the neglect of an air so tame
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

--William Stafford

The Little Girl by the Fence at School

Grass that was moving found all shades of brown,
moved them along, flowed autumn away
galloping southward where summer had gone.

And that was the morning someone's heart stopped
and all became still. A girl said, "Forever?"
And the grass. "Yes. Forever." While the sky –

The sky – the sky – the sky.

--William Stafford

Ask Me

Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

--William Stafford

Our Kind

Our mother knew our worth-
not much. To her, success
was not being noticed at all.
"If we can stay out of jail,"
she said, "God will be proud of us."

"Not worth a row of pins,"
she said, when we looked at the album:
"Grandpa?-ridiculous."
Her hearing was bad, and that
was good: "None of us ever says much."

She sent us forth equipped
for our kind of world, a world of
our betters, in a nation so strong
its greatest claim is no boast,
its leaders telling us all, "Be proud"-

But over their shoulders, God and
our mother, signaling: "Ridiculous."

--William Stafford

Listening

My father could hear a little animal step,
or a moth in the dark against the screen,
and every far sound called the listening out
into places where the rest of us had never been.

More spoke to him from the soft wild night
than came to our porch for us on the wind;
we would watch him look up and his face go keen
till the walls of the world flared, widened.

My father heard so much that we still stand
inviting the quiet by turning the face,
waiting for a time when something in the night
will touch us too from that other place.

--William Stafford

Topography

After we flew across the country we
got in bed, laid our bodies
delicately together, like maps laid
face to face, East to West, my
San Francisco against your New York, your
Fire Island against my Sonoma, my
New Orleans deep in your Texas, your Idaho
bright on my Great Lakes, my Kansas
burning against your Kansas your Kansas
burning against my Kansas, your Eastern
Standard Time pressing into my
Pacific Time, my Mountain Time
beating against your Central Time, your
sun rising swiftly from the right my
sun rising swiftly from the left your

moon rising slowly from the left my
moon rising slowly from the right until
all four bodies of the sky
burn above us, sealing us together,
all our cities twin cities,
all our states united, one
nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

--Sharon Olds

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks with the
wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips black in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don't do it--she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you never heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go

up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty blank face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome blind face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips like chips of flint as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

--Sharon Olds

Adolescence

When I think of my adolescence, I think
of the bathroom of that seedy hotel
in San Francisco, where my boyfriend would take me.
I had never seen a bathroom like that --
no curtains, no towels, no mirror, just ***
a sink green with grime and a toilet
yellow and rust-coloured -- like something in a science experiment,
growing the plague in bowls.
Sex was still a crime, then,
I'd sign out of my college dorm
to a false destination, sign into
the flophouse under a false name,
go down the hall to the one bathroom
and lock myself in. And I could not learn to get that
diaphragm in, I'd decorate it
like a cake, with glistening spermicide,

and lean over, and it would leap from my fingers
and sail into a corner, to land
in a concave depression like a rat's nest,
I'd bend and pluck it out and wash it
and wash it down to that fragile dome,
I'd frost it again till it was shimmering
and bend it into its little arc and it would
fly through the air, rim humming
like Saturn's ring, I would bow down and crawl to retrieve it.
When I think of being eighteen
that's what I see, that brimmed disc
floating through the air and descending, I see myself
kneeling, reaching for my life.

--Sharon Olds

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.

--Galway Kinnell

Letter to My Father from 40,000 Feet

Blackberry Eating

I love to go out in late September
among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries
to eat blackberries for breakfast,
the stalks very prickly, a penalty
they earn for knowing the black art
of blackberry-making; and as I stand among them
lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries
fall almost unbidden to my tongue,
as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words
like strengths or squinched,
many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps,
which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well
in the silent, startled, icy, black language
of blackberry-eating in late September.

—Galway Kinnell

Dear Dad, I saw your double today
through the curtain to First Class. Reddish faced,
he had the pitted, swelled, fruit-sucker
skin cheeks lips of the alcoholic, still a
businessman, not fired yet.
He sat on the arm of his seat, chatting
across the aisle, I saw your salesman's
gaze, the eyes open and canny,
he had the shorn head, the loosened
tie, the shirt, the belt. I stared
through the split in the seats between us, and I wanted—
I wanted to go very close to him,
I did not want to gaze at him or kiss him,
I just wanted to put my long
arms around him, smell the ironed
cotton, feel the heat of his chest
against my cheek, the big male body
free of cancer, the fine sifted
lumpless batter of the flesh. Well, that's it, really,
just checking in. Isn't it something
the way I can't get over you, this
long, deep, unearned desire
you made when you made me, even after your death
it beams toward you, even when I'm dead I will be
facing you, my non-self
aiming this ardent non-love
steadily toward you. I guess I am saying
I hate you, too, there's a way I want
to take that first-class toper and throw him
down on the ground, arm-wrestle him
and win, bang his forearm on the earth
long after he cries out.

—Sharon Olds

After Making Love We Hear Footsteps

by Galway Kinnell

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.