



The Barnard Bulletin

DECEMBER 2021

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A VERMONT WRITER

by Margaret Edwards

This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce a Vermont writer who deserves wider renown.

Galway Kinnell

1927 - 2014



Surely the late poet Galway Kinnell, awarded both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award in recognition of his work, had the sort of “wide renown” most poets long for and never achieve. He was prolific, publishing over the years a dozen books of poetry; he was highly regarded by critics as well as fans; he was familiar on American campuses where he gave well-attended public readings and was a sought-after writer-in-residence. Most of his work is still in print. He hardly needs a boost. But when he died in 2014, his poems lost the remarkable voice that had recited them, and that loss is well worth a separate lament.

Kinnell’s voice was the perfect instrument to reinforce the meaning of his words. It was not so much deep as sonorous, a speaking voice with the mysterious quality or gift that singing voices can have, with a vocal reach that adds a subtle throb of emotion to any tone. Listeners hearing Kinnell in a live performance were enchanted. As he spoke a poem, the lines lifted off the page and became newly alive and profound. In fact, when at times he would read or recite the poems of other poets,

their work shone in a new light and became more interesting.

Vermont claims Galway Kinnell as its own. From 1989 to 1993, he was our poet laureate. Never mind that he was born in Providence and grew up in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Never mind that he was educated at Princeton, had traveled the world widely, and had dedicated himself to civil rights work in the South. Never mind that, for decades, he lived in Manhattan and held a permanent teaching post at New York University, only visiting Vermont when he could. And never mind that one of his most famous poems (“The Bear”) is set in Alaska. Vermont’s claim on this here-now-then-gone-again poet is based on his early purchase of a run-down farm near Sheffield.

That lone, lovely, antique house set in fields far from other habitations provided a setting and imagery for important parts of Kinnell’s work. It was the place where he literally sat down to write. Regularly he headed north, returning to his Vermont house in all seasons. At the age of 87, he died there.

Most of Kinnell’s best poems resemble elegies, written with a keen sense of everyone’s inevitable departure from this life. Death is ever present in his work, but not dreaded. He describes lovers as “living only in the overlapping lifetimes of dying things” (“The Waking”). In the following poem, the poet addresses a young woman who, unlucky in love, has been contemplating suicide.

WAIT

Wait, for now.

Distrust everything, if you have to.

But trust the hours. Haven't they carried you everywhere, up to now?

Personal events will become interesting again.

Hair will become interesting.

Pain will become interesting.

Buds that open out of season will become lovely again.

Second-hand gloves will become lovely again,

their memories are what give them

the need for other hands. And the desolation

of lovers is the same: that enormous emptiness

carved out of such tiny beings as we are

asks to be filled; the need

for the new love is faithfulness to the old.

Wait.

Don't go too early.

You're tired. But everyone's tired.

But no one is tired enough.

Only wait a while and listen.

Music of hair,

Music of pain,

music of looms weaving all our loves again.

Be there to hear it, it will be the only time,

most of all to hear,

the flute of your whole existence,

rehearsed by the sorrows, play itself into total exhaustion.

Cont. next page - Kinnell

Kinnell - Cont. from front page

Perhaps all Kinnell's poems give the reader this same advice: *You will be dead soon enough, so rekindle your wonderment at what it means to be alive.*

In his poems Kinnell often takes on the persona of a subject not at all himself, be it a racist white Southern sheriff, a starving hunter, the corpse of a drunk laid out on a bed in a flea-bag hotel. Kinnell can even convincingly inhabit a porcupine. When he slips into another body, he assumes that body's consciousness. Here are the lines ending his poem entitled "The Auction":

These farm shoes by the door,
covered in dried mud, a hobnail
or two touched by first light,
hold the shapes a man trudged
into them a last time before dawn,
going out the other end of the barn,
straying across the pasture, climbing
all the way to the sugarbush
most of it sold off to the spindle mill,
passing beneath an owl, startling a few doves,
to see the sun come up.

The old farmer has died, and as the poem begins, his effects are being dispersed at a country auction. The reimagining of the farmer's last walk—in this case it's a journey toward the dawn—is a common motif in Kinnell's poetry. The poet often describes in acute detail a very physical journey that will lead an individual to a moment of transcendence or revelation.

In various interviews, Galway Kinnell described the job of a poet as bearing witness. "To me," he said, "poetry is somebody standing up, so to speak, and saying, with as little concealment as possible, what it is for him or her to be on earth at this moment." The poet's job, he believed, "is to figure out the connection between one's self and the world, and to get it down in words...that have a chance of lasting." In a question-and-answer period at the end of one of his public readings, he confessed how the issue of his work's "lasting" occasionally made him break into a cold sweat when he visited a library. He would contemplate, Kinnell said, how vastly many writers, represented by the tons of books, had been hoping—as he himself fervently hoped—to create immortal words.

Ambitious poets are sometimes made envious or bitter by the superlative achievements and the greater fame of other poets, especially of those who are their contemporaries. It is a tribute to Kinnell, ambitious as he was, that he rose above the mean-spirited emotions. Particularly toward his fellow poets, he was generous. And to the Vermont poet who was the literary colossus of his time, Robert Frost, Kinnell addressed a poem of veneration.

Kinnell's "For Robert Frost" is a lengthy elegy written after Frost's death in 1963. It first recounts Kinnell's visit to the great man himself, who, in old age, had become a garrulous celebrity prone to extensive monologues. Then Kinnell reminds us of the television image

beamed to multitudes in 1960 when the famous octogenarian stood up to read—or rather, *attempted* to read—a poem he'd written for the occasion of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's Inauguration. (Frost saved the day by reciting a poem he knew by heart, "The Gift Outright.")

For Robert Frost

1

Why do you talk so much
Robert Frost? One day
I drove up to Ripton to ask,
I stayed the whole day
And never got the chance
To put the question.
I drove off at dusk
Worn out and aching
In both ears. Robert Frost,
Were you shy as a boy?
Do you go on making up
For some long period of solitude?

Is it simply that talk
Doesn't have to be metered and rhymed?
Or is talk distracting from something worse?

2

I saw you once on the TV,
Unsteady at the lectern,
The flimsy white leaf
Of hair standing straight up
In the wind, among top hats,
Old farmer and son
Of worse winters than this,
Stopped in the first dazzle
Of the District of Columbia,
Suddenly having to pay
For the cheap onion-skin,
The worn-out ribbon, the eyes
Wrecked from writing poems
For us—stopped,
Lonely before millions,
The paper jumping in your grip,
And as the Presidents
Also on the platform
Began flashing nervously
Their Presidential smiles
For the harmless old guy,
And poets watching on the TV
Started thinking, Well that's
The end of *that* tradition,
And the managers of the event
Said, Boys this is it,
This sonofabitch poet
Is gonna croak,
Putting the paper aside
You drew forth
From your great faithful heart
The poem.

Cont. next page - Kinnell

Cont. from previous page - Kinnell

In the third of five sections, Galway Kinnell describes a snowy winter's walk that he takes to seek out Frost, an "old creature in a huge, clumsy overcoat." Kinnell is bent on following this spectral figure when Frost, or the spirit of Frost, turns and speaks like an oracle from the beyond. Masterfully throughout the final sections, Kinnell is splicing Robert Frost's own words from various famous poems to create a resounding tribute.

3

Once, walking in winter in Vermont,
In the snow, I followed a set of footprints
That aimed for the woods. At the verge
I could make out, "far in the pillared dark,"
An old creature in a huge, clumsy overcoat,
Lifting his great boots through the drifts,
Going as if to die among "those dark trees"
Of his own country. I watched him go.

Past a house, quiet, warm and light,
A farm, a countryside, a woodpile in its slow
Smokeless burning, alder swamps ghastly white,
Tumultuous snows, blanker whitenesses,
Into the pathless wood, one eye weeping,
The dark trees, for which no saying is dark enough,
Which mask the gloom and lead on into it,
The bare, the withered, the deserted.

There were no more cottages.
Soft bombs of dust falling from the boughs,
The sun shining no warmer than the moon,
He had outwalked the farthest city light,
And there, clinging to the perfect trees,
A last leaf. What was it?
What was that whiteness?—white, uncertain—
The night too dark to know.

4

He turned. *Love,*
Love of things, duty, he said,
And made his way back to the shelter
No longer sheltering him, the house
Where everything was turning to words,
Where he would think on the white wave,
Folded back, that rides in place on the obscure
Pouring of this life to the sea—
And seal the broken lips
Of darkness with the *mot juste*.

5

Poet of the country of white houses,
Of clearings going out to the dark wall of woods
Frayed along the skyline, you who nearly foreknew
The next lines of poems you suddenly dropped,
Who dwelt in access to that which other men
Have burnt all their lives to get near, who heard
The high wind, in gusts, seething
From far off, headed through the trees exactly
To this place where it must happen, who spent
Your life on the point of giving away your heart
To the dark trees, the dissolving woods,
Into which you go at last, heart in hand, deep in:
When we think of a man who was cursed

Neither with the mystical all-lovingness of Walt Whitman
Nor with Melville's anguish to know and to suffer,
And yet cursed... A man, what shall I say,
Vain, not fully convinced he was dying, whose calling
Was to set up in the wilderness of his country,
At whatever cost, a man who would be his own man,
We think of you. And from that same doorway
At which you lived, between the house and the woods,
We see your old footprints going away across
The great Republic, Frost, up memorized slopes.
Down hills floating by heart on the bulldozed land.

In the final lines above, Kinnell acknowledges how Frost, by means of his lasting words, now belongs to our entire "great Republic," and not just to Vermont.

What will be lasting in the works of Galway Kinnell? Lovers of poetry, familiar with his laudable, large *Collected Poems*, have their favorites. But there is something to be said for this poet's acknowledgment throughout his work that words themselves might not be enough to affix life to the page. "Another Night in the Ruins" seems to question all literary ambition as it concludes:

How many nights must it take
one such as me to learn
that we aren't, after all, made
from that bird that flies out of its ashes,
that for us
as we go up in flames, our one work
is
to open ourselves, to *be*
the flames?

The Danforth Library owns a hardcover copy of *Collected Poems: Galway Kinnell*, edited with an introduction by Edward Hirsch, published in 2017.

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message O = S. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"WJ WO JKF XWEF UE JKF
AMTOJCX, JKF CMAKWJFAJ UE
JKF EXCHF, JKF EWMF UE JKF
EMUOJ, JKF OUPX UE JKF
OPGRFCB. JKWO AMWOD
IWGJFM CWM WO EPXX UE WJ."
-YUKG RPMMUPNKO,
"IWGJFM OPGOKWGF"

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Wednesdays 3:00 - 5:00 p.m., Saturdays 10:00 a.m. to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi access available .

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, selectboard@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday & Tuesday, 8:00am-3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

YOGA CLASSES offered at Danforth Library, Mondays 9:00am - 10:30am with Amanda Anderson. Classes are by donation; for more information contact Amanda@innerliftyoga.com. Yoga Classes are also offered on Thursdays from 9-10:30 with Beth Umba. Contact Beth at: bethumba@gmail.com.

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm.
<https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore>

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click [here](#) for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm in 012 Oakes Hall, Vermont Law School. More information at <https://www.ecfiber.net/>

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

BARNARTS EVENTS - DECEMBER 2021

Holiday Cabaret - Artistree's Hayloft, December 11

Winter Carols - First Universalist Church of Barnard, December 17

For tickets and more information, go to www.barnarts.org

WCSU WINTER SPORTS UPDATE

Dear members of the community,

We've heard from people both in favor of and opposed to the recommendations for winter sports. Originally, the plan was to review this recommendation on December 22nd, before vacation, about a week and a half into the sports season. We will now schedule a special Board meeting on December 13th ahead of any winter season games, to discuss and Vote on procedures around winter sports. We will plan to have the Superintendent's recommendation out, 3 days prior to the meeting to review. The recommendation will be informed by the administration, faculty, students, and our District Physician with input considered from Board members, community members, and parents.

Thank you to all that have reached out to us this past week.

Bryce Sammel & Keri Bristow
WCUD School Board Chairs
Sherry Sousa
WCSU Superintendent

ARTISTREE PRESENTS CHRISTMAS AT THE GRANGE

DECEMBER 22 AND 23, 2021

Join Artistree for a fun-filled performance of Christmas songs and Holiday Broadway Hits sung by the Artistree Music Theatre Festival performers.

Artistree is offering two matinees at 2pm each day and two evening performances at 7:30pm each night.

There is special pricing available for area senior citizens. Call 802-457-3500 x 111, or email Artistree for details.

See artistreevt.org/christmas-at-the-grange-theatre.

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"It is the life of the crystal, the architect of the flake, the fire of the frost, the soul of the sunbeam. This crisp winter air is full of it."

- John Burroughs, "Winter Sunshine"

WCSU SCHOOL CALENDAR

Nov 24-26 Thanksgiving Recess (school closed)

Dec. 1 2 Hour Delayed Start (students)

Dec 23-31 Holiday Recess (school closed)

Jan. 5 2 Hour Delayed Start (students)

Jan 17 Martin Luther King Jr. Day (school closed)