

Academy Meetings

A Poetry Reading by Galway Kinnell

Introduction by Rosanna Warren

This presentation was given at the 1913th Stated Meeting of the Academy and Joint Meeting with the Boston Athenaeum, held at the House of the Academy in Cambridge on March 27, 2007. Two of the poems that Galway Kinnell read that evening are reprinted below.



Photo by Mike Minehan

Rosanna Warren

Rosanna Warren is Emma MacLachlan Metcalf Professor in the Humanities at Boston University. She has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1997.

Introduction

You can see a portrait of Galway Kinnell in his poem “The Past”:

“A chair under one arm,
a desktop under the other,
the same Smith-Corona
on my back I even now batter
words into visibility with . . .”

Battering words into visibility: that is what he has been doing now through eleven books of poems. Did you think you knew the English language? Think again. Some of the words Kinnell batters into sight are not even in the OED – or if they are, only under “obsolete,” or “origin unknown.” Like shinicle, clart, hirple, drouk, scummage, and dunch, all from just two poems in the blazing new book, *Strong Is Your Hold*.

Kinnell has never shied away from the sublime, or the elemental. In his earlier days his ambition took an almost psalmodic form:

“. . . 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 to be
broken again,
over and over, on earth.”

(“Under the Maud Moon,” *The Book of Nightmares*, 1971).

He inhabited animals as a shaman – the bear, famously; the sow; the gray heron; he pried into birth, into dying, grandly, kabbalistically: “I thought suddenly / I could read the cosmos spelling itself.”

(“The Hen Flower,” *The Book of Nightmares*).

And as a side effect of this visionary exuberance, Kinnell’s *Selected Poems* won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1982, compounded by a MacArthur Fellowship and his Erich Maria Remarque Professorship at NYU. But prizes are by the by. He has always been out for the big prize, the prize of vision, which humbles us over and over.

What began happening in his next book, *The Past*, in 1985, is a tougher story, the story where art compresses itself, endangers itself in new ways, exposes itself to greater psychic risk, and finds new form and tone in that risk. Here is another self-portrait from that period:

“What about the man splitting wood in the daybreak,
who looked strong? That was years ago. That was me.”

(“The Man Splitting Wood in the Daybreak,” *The Past*).

For subtlety, for economy of means, for a sublimity by implication, listen to this three-line poem from *The Past*, all torqued on its syntax, which is a form of knowledge in action, a kind of Lord’s Prayer:

“Prayer”

“Whatever happens. Whatever
what is is what
I want. Only that. But that.”

Kinnell is now an artist so fully a master of his means, he can reinvent the sublime, in large or small format, in basso profundo or in a whisper. Watch him do it here, in “Oatmeal,” from the book *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone* (1990):

“Maybe there is no sublime; only the shining
of the amnion’s tatters.”

His new book, *Strong Is Your Hold*, is a triumph of unflinching matter of fact, the erotic, the mortal, the generous, in which spit and spirit mingle as they did in the book of Genesis and as they do again in Kinnell the snake shaman who inadvertently burns a snake in a brush-fire and pulls it out, “. . . a small blackened snake, the rear half / burnt away, the forepart alive . . .” This unbearable, important poem brings life out of death, brings live words out of a language sleeping if not dead, and provides us with an *ars poetica* for this poet seer of the real.

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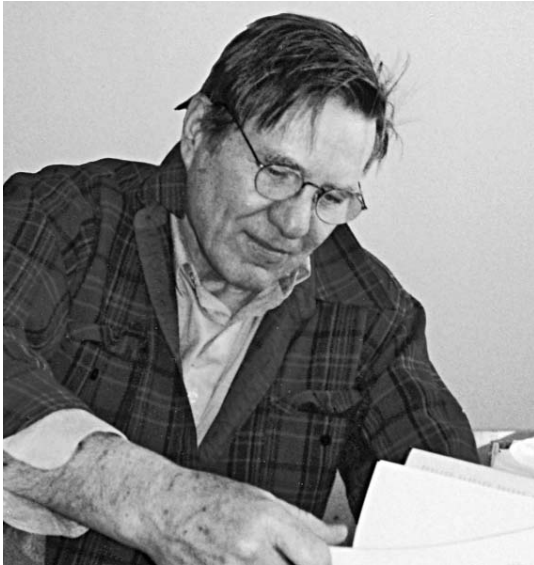


Photo by Bobbie Kinnell

Galway Kinnell

Galway Kinnell, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1997, has been a MacArthur Fellow and the state poet of Vermont. For many years he was the Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Creative Writing at New York University. He is currently a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Reading

“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 this time
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.”

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“The Room”

The door closes on pain and confusion.
The candle flame wavers from side to side
as though trying to break itself in half
to color the shadows too with living light.
The andante movement plays over and over
its many triplets, like farm dogs yapping
at a melody made of the stylized
gratification-cries of cocks. I will not stay long.
Nothing in experience led me to imagine
having. Having is destroying, said
my version of the vow of impoverishment.
But here, in this brief, waxen light,
I have, and nothing is destroyed. The flute
that guttered those owl’s notes into the waste hours
of childhood joins with the piano
and they play, *Being is having*. Having
may be nothing but the grace of the shell
moving without hesitation, with lively pride,
down the stubborn river of woe. At the far end,
a door no one dares open begins opening.
To go through it will awaken such regret
as only closing it behind can obliterate.
The candle flame’s staggering makes the room
wobble and shift – matter itself, laughing.
I can’t come back. I won’t change.
I have the usual capacity for wanting
what may not exist. Don’t worry.
That is the dew wetting my face.
You see? Nothing that enters the room
can have only its own meaning ever again.

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