

Writing Poems: The Thrill of Discovery

By Jeffrey Mehr

What does it take to be a poet? An interview with alumnus Galway Kinnell.

"I am become a name," moans Tennyson's Ulysses, complaining that life after fame is not all that idyllic. Galway Kinnell is also "become a name"—some say the biggest name in contemporary poetry—but you don't hear him moaning.

Although both critics and fellow poets acknowledge his skills (Denise Levertov, for instance, sums up his *Book of Nightmares*, very simply, as "magnificent"), Galway, as his two children call him, never actually decided to become a poet. "Some careers are chosen," he says. "You go to law school, for instance, because certain possibilities will then open up to you. But when you think of somebody who does one thing well and who loves that activity—take a baseball player, for example, who discovers that just hitting fly balls all afternoon is fascinating. And then he discovers, when he has a game, that he gets more hits than he thought he was going to get, and actually feels more alive playing baseball than when he's not. It's not that he has decided, it's just that he's gradually become a baseball player. I think poetry

is like that: It's just something you do because you like doing it."

Kinnell earned his master's degree in English at Rochester in 1949. This, and his later achievements in writing, opened the door to academia. He has taught at universities and colleges across the country, most recently beginning a three-year professorship at New York University. Kinnell once remarked that English departments didn't seem to trust him to teach literature, only creative writing.

"I was just kidding, really. But I *have* taught mostly creative writing, and that's what I'm mostly teaching at NYU. I like teaching creative writing. I've gotten good at it."

A trim man with strong wrists beneath the cuffs of his corduroy blazer, Kinnell seems to have spent more of his life outdoors than in. "Sometimes I wouldn't sleep under a roof for six months at a time. I had a little Plymouth coupe with the trunk rigged so that a bed would fold out, and a mosquito net would come over the trunk lid. On rainy nights I could sleep right in the trunk of the car. Clear nights I'd just sleep out on the ground."

Galway Mills Kinnell grew up the son of a carpenter in Providence, Rhode Island, and acquired his father's skills



As critic and novelist Harold Bloom says, Galway Kinnell's poems are informed with "eloquent simplicities." Kinnell does much of his work in the uncluttered setting of his "retreat from the rest of America" in Sheffield, Vermont.

with hammer, saw, and drill. In the 1960s he bought a ramshackle house near Sheffield, Vermont, which he has rebuilt into a "retreat from the rest of America," with airy, spacious rooms. His capacious study contains furniture in C-clamps as well as typewriters with manuscripts, the glue still setting in one, the words coalescing on the other. He once erected a separate house, on stilts among the fir and spruce woods, in which to write. But he doesn't use it. Instead, the new study sits over the garage.

"It was purely a practical matter. If I forget something down here [at the house], or want some coffee, or if I only have an hour to go up there, it's quite a ways to go. Furthermore, the grass is quite high and you get soaked up to your waist, practically, walking up there on a dewy morning. It's not that the place isn't suitable, it's just a little inconvenient."

But convenience isn't high on a poet's priority list, is it? Certainly a poet is supernatural, somehow—at least romantic—and has more cosmic concerns?

"Poets are all different," says Kinnell. "I think 'The Poet' is a fictional being. Some poets are clearly kind of prophetic, attach themselves to absolutes, and become critics of the present world—see through everything; and some are just sort of homely discoverers of the beautiful and the interesting behind simple events." Where does Kinnell fit in? He chuckles. "Well, you've got to leave something for critics to discover, right?"

Perhaps. But certainly some of Kinnell's poems fall under either category. *What A Kingdom It Was*, his first volume of poems, appeared in 1960 and contained short poems in innovative, yet traditional forms, and one long poem, "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," whose elastic, exultant lines clearly owed a debt to Whitman.

There followed more books of poems: *Flower Herding on Monadnock* (1963), *Body Rags* (1966), *The Book of Nightmares* (1971), and *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* (1980). He has also published translations of Yvan Goll, Yves Bonnefoy, and *The Poems of Francois Villon* (1977); a novel, *Black Light* (1966, revised 1980); and a book of interviews, *Walking Down the Stairs* (1978).

Some poems, like "Angling, A Day" or "Blackberry Eating" in his newest book, deal almost entirely with the world of the five senses. Others, notably *The Book of Nightmares*, sound almost visionary. This volume is one long poem in ten sections, and is, as Kinnell has said, "from one point of view, nothing but an effort to face death and live with death."

Much of Kinnell's mastery appears as a playful delight in the sound of language. Here is how "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World" begins:

pcheek pcheek pcheek pcheek pcheek
They cry. The motherbirds thieve the air
To appease them. A tug on the East River
Blasts the bass-note of its passage, lifted
From the infra-bass of the sea. A broom
Swishes over the sidewalk like feet through leaves.
Valerio's pushcart Ice Coal Kerosene
Moves clack

clack

clack

On a broken wheelrim. Ringing in its chains

The New Star Laundry horse comes down the street
Like a roofleak whucking into a pail.
At the redlight, where a horn blares,
The Golden Harvest Bakery brakes on its gears,
Squeaks, and seethes in place. A propane-
gassed bus makes its way with big, airy sighs.

"For me, music is quite important," Kinnell says. "It seems the soul of poetry. Poetry has a body as well—the things of the world—so I find it more interesting than music. But often poetry seems to lack a soul. By listening to music, you recover the sense of what poetry must be."

At times the sound of the word lends it special meaning. In *Body Rags*, a porcupine "spartles" into the brush. In *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words*, blackberries "squinch" when eaten. "One thing that leads one into poetry," says Galway, "is an interest in words. Not words as written things with a referent, but words as sound that the body produces, that fill the mouth and that are therefore in some way psychically identified with the thing they're talking about. And that have a content which can't be reduced to a definition. Like 'spartled.'"

"Words," Kinnell continues, "clearly cast a spell, and—for the moment at least—all is changed. Basically I think the spell is one in which we are momentarily put in harmony with all that is, and so it's a very happy moment."

The flow of words doesn't completely enthrall him, though. In his novel, *Black Light*, one can almost see Kinnell smiling as his character Jamshid reflects, "That is the way with poetry. When it is incomprehensible it strikes you as profound, and when you do understand it, it lacks common sense."

"A certain kind of poetry, at least, hovers on the edge of being sublime or ridiculous," says Kinnell, "depending on what mood you're in when you read it. Rilke is such a poet, I think. And Hafez, also—the poet Jamshid is reading. But also, you know, Jamshid's limitations are as much the subject of that paragraph as are the characteristics of poetry."

Kinnell does not discount the idea of inspiration, that celestial Muse who touches the poet and prompts mystical truths to flow from his pen. "I think that image is a useful one. When you write well, there is a kind of special mood that comes upon you, different, I suppose, for every person, but for everyone different from just the normal, day-to-day way they feel. And words seem to come on their own. You're understanding them and shaping them, and yet they come out saying things that you didn't know you could say."

But don't assume that revision is unnecessary. Kinnell revises assiduously, because "What seemed absolutely vivid when you were writing might turn out to be quite dull when you read it a few days later, or what seemed clear then is now opaque. You have to delve into that and find out what it's really saying, bring that out into the human community, so to speak.

"The most interesting part of revision is when the poem stops too soon when you're writing it—a kind of instinct for safety and comfort comes to your rescue and tells you the poem is done, just at that moment when it might be touching on something somewhat disturbing. Later on you can see that the poem really got interesting just where it was ending. You have to start again at that point writing

what should have been brought forth at the time.”

It takes time, then, to know if a poem should hit the press. “One has to leave it around a while. Look at it a few months later and see if it still is a living organism, or if it’s just some dead matter—an intuitive recognition. It’s a profound difference, actually: the difference between a living being and a corpse, and the signs are as plentiful in the one case as in the other.”

The sensuous imagery of Kinnell’s poems is often disturbing, especially in addressing violence and death. Here is part of “The Porcupine” from *Body Rags*:

A farmer shot a porcupine three times
as it dozed on a tree limb. On
the way down it tore open its belly
on a broken
branch, hooked its gut,
and went on falling. On the ground
it sprang to its feet, and
paying out gut heaved
and spartled through a hundred feet of goldenrod
before
the abrupt emptiness.

Is there the same shock and disgust in the writing of such passages as in the actual experience? “Wilfred Owen’s war poems, for example, are quite terrible in the degree to which he shows the carnage of battle; but I imagine when he wrote those poems that there was also operating not just the shock and terror of the actual event, but also some kind of joy. Joy of knowing, I guess; knowing, itself, is a joyful thing.

“Maybe joy isn’t quite the right word because it suggests, perhaps, merriment and laughter. I don’t mean that. But some sense of being more profoundly alive than ever.

“I’ve killed porcupines, and hated doing so. But when I was writing about the porcupine I think I felt the happiness (maybe happiness is the word) of understanding a few stages further than where I’d been before.”

It’s better to view poets as people than as prophets. “Poets become much more interesting, really, when—as they become familiar—they become mortal. One sees their virtues in a new light because they’re often hard-won and can recognize their stylistic vices without condemning the person or the poet.

“When I teach literature, I try to get my students to talk about these poets as equals. They come with such a reverent attitude to the notion of a poet that they think anything that’s written down and in their anthology must be wonderful. If they don’t like it, they think it’s their fault. I encourage them to criticize the poems they don’t like and to find out what in the poem offends them; and likewise to find out what may be in the same poem that they like. It’s possible to have mixed feelings about a poem.”

A good poem, says Kinnell, strikes a chord of recognition within the reader, and actively involves him or her in the experience. “The poem has actually become us, and we’re going through that drama; and the only way we can go through it is through our having had similar—but not identical—experience of life. Therefore the poem is slightly distorted, or let’s say it changes from person to person, each time it’s read truly meaningfully.”

A reader, then, must bring a life of his or her own to a

poem. Kinnell concedes, “I think that ‘curious knowledge’ and literary training can produce a certain grasp of the poems that is quite interesting. But I think anybody can read them. Personally, I think my poems are rather accessible.

“Most good poems address themselves to things that we all know about, and the only preparation we need, as readers, is a kind of paying of respect to our inner life, to the feelings we have that are of no practical importance: the sense of strangeness and the hauntedness of existence; the fragility of our position on the globe, and the fragility of the globe itself; this very peculiar situation we’re in, self-conscious creatures who know that we’re lost in some kind of existence that we don’t understand at all.”

“Words clearly cast a spell, and—for the moment at least—all is changed.”

Poets, as writers, need a different sort of self-consciousness, says Kinnell, almost an unaware self-consciousness. “It’s a matter of total concentration,” he explains. “The whole point of writing a poem is to discover. Ideally one is not at a remove from the thing he’s doing, but rather one is completely absorbed in it and totally unaware of what effect it might have on the curious reader. That self-consciousness—that lets you be an objective, dispassionate reader at the same time that you’re writing—mars total concentration.

“On the other hand, in total concentration there is total self-consciousness, too, because you’re completely aware of what is being said. Sometimes the words surprise you; but you’re completely aware of what they mean, even though you may be mistaken, even though, a week later, you may be puzzled. As to what they mean at that moment, they’re absolutely clear.”

Yet, in most other moments, we find existence itself baffling. “It’s completely beyond the power of our own minds,” he says. “To me that’s a fascinating and terrifying position to be in.

“One envies the animals their ignorance at this situation; and one envies the being that may be elsewhere that understands the situation much better. But our position—ignorant and, at the same time, acutely aware of our ignorance—is the source of poetry.”

Ignorance seems a strong accusation. We launched *Voyager* past Jupiter; we built the World Trade Center; we eradicated polio. Ignorance?

“At some point whenever you sit down and contemplate, ‘What is the cosmos? And what is beyond the cosmos?’ you realize, sooner for some and later for others, that you don’t know anything. That the very concepts your imagination is applying to your attempt to grasp reality seem to dissolve as you get to the edge of the human world. We know about the planets, and the sun and moon, and so on. But obviously, these things are not enclosed in a box. And if they were,” he shrugs, “who’s holding the box?”

“Not everyone writes poems, but everyone is aware of the problem in all sorts of ways. Maybe the most difficult

and unavoidable way is the fact that we die. Nobody knows what death is, and no self-conscious being can easily accept it. We presume the animals go to their deaths without complaint, because they lack that self-consciousness that would allow them to foresee their death. But for us, it's acutely painful to think that all that is—namely, human consciousness—is born, blossoms, and then is crushed."

Kinnell grapples with this pain most explicitly in *The Book of Nightmares*. But you find his sense of humor at work as well. An excerpt:

This is the tenth poem
and it is the last. It is right
at the last, that one
and zero
walk off together,
walk off the end of these pages together,
one creature
walking away side by side with the emptiness.

Lastness
is brightness. It is the brightness
gathered up of all that went before. It lasts.
And when it does end
there is nothing, nothing
left,

in the rust of old cars,
in the hole torn open in the body of the Archer,
in river-mist smelling of the weariness of stones,
the dead lie,
empty, filled, at the beginning,

and the first
voice comes craving again out of their mouths.

Humor, perhaps, keeps Kinnell from appearing too much the self-important seer. An entire section of *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* contains "small, not terribly serious little poems" like "Kissing the Toad" or "Crying." In fact, he has used "Crying" now and then to warm up a cold audience at a public reading.

"To me the poem is somewhat comical," Kinnell says. "I don't actually believe it entirely. When the audience has been in a slump, I've tried to get someone from the group who was a singer to come up and sing the 'Ha ha!' part of it—belt it out—and it's been a good way to cheer things up."

Kinnell has traveled widely since his undergraduate days at Princeton. Those days became "under-graduate" days at Rochester, when he lived for a semester in a basement cubicle of Fauver Stadium. He has been poet-in-residence at several universities in this country, and has taught at the University of Nice, the University of Grenoble, and at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

In 1959, a six-month Fulbright Professorship took him to lecture at the University of Tehran, and he stayed on another six months, writing a weekly column for a local English language newspaper and accumulating a feel for the country which would eventually result in *Black Light*.

"Iran was a very wonderful subject to study," he remembers, "a rich, ancient, and complicated society. I felt I understood more about what human life used to be like before modern times. Apart from the capital of Tehran—which was then a rather small city—the whole country was living in a way very similar to the way it must have been living a thousand years earlier."

Does Kinnell yearn for earlier times? "There's no matter of wishing about it. We are born into our time, and I think



you have to grasp the peculiar character of the time and make the most of it."

For Kinnell, good poetry is always new under the sun. "Those people who say, 'Homer was writing about exactly the same thing as a writer today,' are, I think, completely wrong. It seems quite clear that our consciousness evolves, and that we know things differently. We know more things—new things, actually—and we forget things.

"For example, Homer didn't really know that it was intolerable to die. We do. The authors of the New Testament knew that. So the whole Passion of Christ had to do, I think, with the discovery of how intolerable it is. In the Greek world, probably that happened with the death of Socrates: Plato grasped the intolerability of it."

In over twenty years of publishing his work, Kinnell has earned both awards and favorable criticism. "I feel quite lucky with respect to all those things. I've never had a Pulitzer Prize or a National Book Award, but there are people who actually read my books and like my poems. And that matters to me."

No National Book Award? Not yet perhaps. But Kinnell did receive special mention by its judges in 1969 for *Body Rags*. Other awards include two Guggenheim fellowships, the Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Institute's Medal of Merit, and two coveted prizes from *Poetry* magazine.

Criticism has varied from accolade to indictment. "With criticism and reviews," Kinnell borrows a phrase from his mentor, Yeats, "you have to look at them with kind of a cold eye, really, and not take them too seriously. I've had lots of nice reviews, and I've had lots of attacks on my poetry. So I'm not too overjoyed by one or depressed by the other."

What of a negative review in *The Nation*? "She didn't have a feel for the jugular." He grins. "The only reviews that really can strike dread into your heart are those that actually see what you feel is weakest and then drive the nail right in there. She didn't do that; she just expressed her own opinions. It's obvious that nobody is liked by everybody."

The poet at work, he maintains, can't worry about whether his poems are great. "That's out of your hands. You just write poems, and whether they create a grand aesthetic experience depends on the reader. For some readers they might; for most, they won't."

Many think that poetry is the most personal kind of expression. Well, says Galway, maybe in a way. "In a book of poems, the less you sound like yourself, really, the better. The more you can eliminate your personal limitations and just write as a person—as anybody—the better.

Poets do worry about originality, but Kinnell thinks such worries are ill-founded. "If your knowledge is borrowed from other poetry, your poems will be derivative and kind of tedious. But if you understand and experience the difficulty and the thrill in the life of your time, you *have* to be original, because the previous generation did not grasp things in the same way."

Looking back at his own poems, Kinnell finds the passage of time crucial. "I've read through them all recently, because I'm making a *Selected Poems*. Some I can read with intrinsic interest; some seem rather trivial. Some seem dreamed up, concocted. And a few seem quite nice.

"Poets become much more interesting, really, when—as they become familiar—they become mortal."

"I think that if I look at this book [*Mortal Acts, Mortal Words*] a few years from now, I'll find only a few stand up. So I don't think I'm getting any better at it, in that sense.

"It's just a matter of the fact that one probably writes only a handful of real poems. Anybody. And in the course of two or three years, you think you've written fifty real poems and so you publish a book; but some years later you look at those fifty poems and discover only five look like real poems. And maybe a hundred years from now somebody else will look at those five, and discover none of them are real poems. Time, really, is the only way. The longer the span of time, the more stringent the standards."

Kinnell has himself mentioned the perils of continuing to write after the Muse has deserted. Rimbaud stopped writing when still young, while Wordsworth continued to crank out what most critics acknowledge to be uninspired verse. Then there is Yeats, who wrote refreshing marvels of poems toward the end of his life. Does Galway worry about his talent drying up?

"You shouldn't worry too much about that, because then you get awfully self-conscious. 'Am I just dribbling out more leakage from the earlier poems, or is this something new and interesting?' I think one could probably tell that by how it feels to be writing. By the thrill of discovery. And if that's gone, there's really no point in churning out publishable verses."

Does he still revere Whitman, as he did when he was younger? "I've never really revered Whitman. I've *adored* Whitman, but I've always been aware of his faults. Yet his flaws are something I like about him.

"To revere someone is to make a guru out of him, and I've never had a guru. I'm not the type.

"To have a guru, a kind of passive dependence of character is required, and I don't think that's good for somebody who wants to write poetry. I think," says Galway with a hint of mischief in his smile, "a kind of terrible independence is required to be a poet."

Jeffrey Mehr '78 is himself a writer of poems.

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Three of these poems first appeared as follows: "Blackberry Eating" in *Harvard Magazine*, "The Porcupine" in *The Hudson Review*, "This is the tenth poem . . ." in *New American Review*.

Three Poems

By Galway Kinnell

Crying

*Crying only a little bit
is no use. You must cry
until your pillow is soaked!
Then you can get up and laugh.
Then you can jump in the shower
and splash-splash-splash!
Then you can throw open your window
and, "Ha ha! ha ha!"
And if people say, "Hey,
what's going on up there?"
"Ha ha!" sing back, "Happiness
was hiding in the last tear!
I wept it! Ha ha!"*

—From *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words*

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.*

—From *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words*

A Walk in Highland Park

*We came upon it suddenly—I said,
"Something red is burning in those leaves."
Leaves we would have thought, such shape they had,
The willow's leaves of fall. "That red depraves
The tree, it tells of the permanence of tears,
I think that only what is happy endures."*

*We turned and ran down through the yellow thorns,
But the wind about my ears played this one tune:
Upon that hill the winterberry burns,
And sorrow's coals are all that will remain.
Though quite a runner when my youth was young,
Now I cannot pace that winter song.*

—From *The Avenue Bearing the Initial
of Christ into the New World*

