

Galway Kinnell and the Blue Button-Down

CINDY FRENKEL

SOME POETS ARE BRILLIANT WRITERS BUT DISAPPOINTING READERS; Galway did full justice to his work. His rich, eloquent voice resonated with conviction. I first heard Galway read in an auditorium in Ann Arbor in the early '80s, when I was an undergraduate studying literature and theater. He was intoxicating—tall and handsome, with a preppy yet somehow bohemian style. He combined a poetic sensitivity with the ruggedness of a man who spent much time outdoors.

What I remember best is the way he read “After Making Love We Hear Footsteps,” a poem about a young boy interrupting his parents just after their lovemaking. As he recited “...quiet, touching along the length of our bodies,/ familiar touch of the long-married,” a unanimous sigh arose from the packed auditorium, and when he read with obvious pleasure the lines describing his son Fergus: “and he appears—in his baseball pajamas, it happens,/the neck opening so small he has to screw them on—” we all burst into laughter. His domestic description was so tenderly rendered and loving that I thought: *I want a life like that!*

Some two years later, I sat opposite him in his office in lower Manhattan; I had come to ask if I could take a workshop with him in the MFA program he was just starting at New York University. I had been told to bring along my poetry, so I arrived with a folder of typewritten pages, straight from my job as an editorial assistant at *The New Yorker*.

Up close he was even more charismatic. He had a heady presence. His straight brown hair was combed back but kept falling over his forehead. When he smiled, his deeply etched dimples made a happy parenthesis around his mouth.

We talked for half an hour about his Ann Arbor reading, his writing, my writing, and poetry in general. When he asked what poets I read, I said, “Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Sharon Olds, and Galway Kinnell!” He had a good laugh. Then he opened my folder and intently read my work while I watched him with growing anxiety. After what seemed like a long while, he looked up and announced that I could “join the program.” *Join the MFA program?* I hadn’t formally applied. Completely flustered, I explained I wasn’t intending to go to graduate school right now; all I wanted was to take a poetry workshop with him. Could I do that and then see? Yes, I could.

From the start, our class shared a camaraderie that was warm and inclusive. We were keenly aware of what a privilege it was to dive deep into our writing with a poet of his stature. Our class met at night—nearly all the students worked during the day—and it was a particularly interesting group. One classmate, Marjorie Wentworth, would go on to become the poet laureate of South Carolina, and publish five books of poetry. Amy Bartlett, who died prematurely of cancer, was there as well—her collection *Afterwards* came out in 1985, a selection of the National Poetry Series.

We called him “Galway”—he must have told us to. When he critiqued a poem, he was gentle but direct; we savored his compliments because he framed them slowly and deliberately. He created an atmosphere of seriousness and safety that was tonic to young poets who felt personally exposed when sharing their work.

Not long into the semester, we began talking about getting together as a group outside of class—with Galway, of course. One student, John Chamberlain, offered his parents’ country house in New England for a weekend. I have pictures of us all reading our work on the Chamberlains’ porch. There’s Galway in tennis whites, striking an athletic pose with his racquet, and another with all of us alight with happiness. The autumnal weather was crisp, the trees in their full burst of color. He must have played tennis that weekend—or how did I get that photo? I also have others of our class sprawled out in a pre-war apartment, a gorgeous fireplace looming above, Christmas decorations everywhere. As always, we are immersed in poetry.

I’m sure my complicated relationship with my father was projected onto Galway, and he filled the need for a paternal figure. I certainly felt sheltered by his presence, and we also shared a sense of humor that veered from just plain silly to absurdly ludicrous. One night when the class gathered for drinks in the Chamberlains’ living room, a spark passed between us, and Galway and I started batting joking remarks back and forth as in a manic tennis match.

The next semester Carolyn Forché was scheduled to lead a poetry workshop and E.L. Doctorow was teaching a literature course. Both sounded exciting, so I decided it was time to formally enroll in NYU’s graduate program. That semester—this was in 1982—Galway won the Pulitzer Prize for *Selected Poems*. The award was announced on April 18th. Five days earlier he’d won the National Book Award for the same book. Of course, we students, past and present, were elated.

Some of us made plans to celebrate with him at a bar in Greenwich Village. We bought some hokey gifts, including a custom T-shirt with “The Bear” written on it and a little toy bear dangling from it—in homage to one of his best-known poems, “The Bear.” At the bar, I presented him with the shirt. In a wildly theatrical gesture (I laugh now just thinking about it), he stripped off his blue cotton button-down shirt—with the entire class clapping and yelling!—pulled on the T-shirt, and gave me the blue button-down as a gift. I have it to this day. (Inside its neck is a pen imprint: “GAL.”)

Although I was truly in my element at NYU, I didn't have the maturity or confidence to remain true to my dreams. When my father found out I was matriculating in graduate school, he insisted I apply to Columbia because he wanted to be able to say his daughter went to an Ivy League school. In those days, in my early 20s, I expended a lot of energy trying to please my parents; their approval was what I thought I wanted most, although it was an elusive, slippery and, ultimately, unattainable thing. My father and mother had a way of repeating "requests" until they got their way. Only later was I able to understand the difference between love and control. I could resist up to a point; eventually (say, by the twentieth repetition), I'd cave in.

Switching to Columbia would have meant giving up my daytime job at *The New Yorker*. In a panic, I polled friends and acquaintances, as I did often back then, to ask their opinion. One person I asked was Howard Moss, *The New Yorker's* poetry editor. "Stay with Galway and remain full-time at the magazine," he told me. Feeling disloyal to myself (and an idiot for asking Moss, then not following his advice), I transferred to Columbia. Fortunately, my exceedingly kind boss at the magazine, Harriet Walden, arranged for me to work part-time while I was in graduate school.

To please my father, I had abandoned Galway and his program. In reality, I'd abandoned myself. I was too chagrined to give Galway an explanation so I left without saying anything.

About six years ago I finally wrote Galway to explain why I'd left his program. I wanted him to know how much studying with him had meant to me. I also wanted to remind him of our class's wonderful weekend trip (I enclosed photos) and to share my memories of our celebration party. I wrote: "Remember the bear T-shirt the class gave you the day you won the Pulitzer? When I presented it to you, you gave me the shirt you were wearing—and I still have it, a joyful memento from being your student!" I confessed that transferring to Columbia to please my father was something I'd deeply regretted all these years. I added that I would love to see him again, although I was now living in Michigan.

I didn't hear back. I wasn't sure if he'd forgotten me or if he wasn't up to responding. After all, he was in his 80s.

Over a year passed before an envelope arrived, bearing his return address, but in someone else's handwriting. I burst into tears. Inside the envelope was a Metropolitan Museum of Art card: a Japanese woodblock of irises in soft blue, gold and green. Opening it with trembling hands, I felt a rush of relief to see a familiar script, messier now but unmistakably his. He thanked me and yes, he'd wondered why I'd left and "I remember those incidents you draw from the past!" As for seeing each other, "that would be great, but the Vermont/Michigan axis is not very encouraging."

In his own poetry, Galway took language to places I didn't know it could go. I can still hear his resonant voice reading "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps"—

and another favorite of mine, “Little Sleep’s-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight” about comforting his daughter Maud after she wakes from a nightmare:

...you cling to me
hard,
as if clinging could save us. I think
you think
I will never die, I think I exude
to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as
my broken arms heal themselves around you.

As I write this, I look up to see his blue button-down shirt hanging on my office door.