

Elegy for Galway Kinnell

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November, the first snowfall, a confectionary sugar,
is turning now to sleet, the evening's tempo quickening
as it taps a rapid code against the siding. When you died,
three weeks past, the afternoon was warm enough
to take my coffee to the back steps. On the radio,
Rhode Island claimed you as its own—Providence-born,
Pawtucket-raised—but the anchor stumbled on your name,
pronouncing it *kennel*, landing hard on that first syllable.
What survives? I know a woman, a painter, with a line
of yours tattooed along her wrist, a permanent bracelet
she masks now, most days, with a watchband. She was
twenty, she explains, tipsy, a little dramatic, and so in love
with *The Book of Nightmares* she'd spent a semester
creating what she imagined you'd imagined. Tonight,
I'm imagining the mortician, decades from now, who
leans in close to puzzle out your words on skin gone
thin as silk: *this corpse will not stop burning*.
He doesn't think of Vietnam or of the soldier into whom
you breathed life. But all morning, he weighs the line
against what he's discovered on other bodies
while he washes her efficiently, applies polish
to her nails, fastens the jewelry she'll wear to the bone.