Classic Poetry Series

Katherine Gallagher

- 20 poems -

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Katherine Gallagher (7 September 1935 -)

Katherine Gallagher is an Australian poet resident in London.

Gallagher's poems have been published in French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Romanian and Serbian.

Gallagher translated from French to English Jean-Jacques Celly's poems in The Sleepwalker with Eyes of Clay.

Career

Writer in Residence at Railway Fields Nature Reserve, Harringay, in 2002. Writers Inc/Blue Nose Poets' Education Officer until 2008. In 2004/2005 this included coordinating the Young Writer's Mentorship Project funded by the Arts Council.

Poet in Residence for Havering Council's third annual Parks and Arts Healthy Lifestyle Walk in Hornchurch Country Park on 17 July 2006.

Founder of the Poetry Society Stanza Group (London North), started in March 2007.

Awards

1978, Australian Literature Board Fellowship
1981, Brisbane Warana Prize
1986, nomination of "Passengers to the City" for the John Bray National Poetry Award.
2000, Royal Literary Fund award
2008, London Society of Authors' Foundation award

After Kandinsky: Blue Painting (1924)

Let the eye investigate blue
and all the arrows focus gravity.

Across the spectrum — cerulean,
prussian, cobalt —

a patchworld of hues
quilts galaxies.

Remember Earth,
the Blue Planet,

how it takes you into backdrops
for a rose, a hyacinth,

the single flowers
multiplied under a clean sky.

Katherine Gallagher

After Kandinsky: Yellow, Red, Blue (1925)

Watch the animal eyes that whisk corners
faster than an angel breathing passwords
in a mesh of yellow. Cloud-sure, life flags itself on.
Circle after circle is mapped in the mystery
of a line quicker than an arrow, shot from left to right,
the dark corners turned in on themselves,
while the sea advances up the cliffs.

Presently a cat walks tall out of the waves,
eyes open, heading for the fire at the centre,
the red waves fanned, turned crimson,
surrounded by purples that ferry
the jigsaw's spell. Choices multiply,
resonate, form patterns for love-songs
the heart claims again and again.

In the background, dark moons, resilient,
juggle patchwork squares, lines, and curves.
Light bounces off them as finally the perfect blue
you've been waiting for, dips, tumbles
into the still of the storm, among reds, purples,
all shades — this country you keep coming back to,
that walks you home to yourself.

Katherine Gallagher

Dog

Dog waits in and out of shadows.

Dog dives around chairs and feet.

Dog looks for the spill of hands.

Dog sings the Ballad of Less and More.

Dog sleeps with one eye open.

Dog’s life isn’t negotiable.

Dog circles moons of language.

Dog barks for homecomings.

Dog is a name away.

Remember you can’t lose Dog.

Sooner or later, Dog will find you.

Katherine Gallagher

Eastville, 1939

That day Uncle Tom was a hero.
Mostly he was unpopular just for
living with us in the old family home —
taking up space, thinking it was his.

Occasionally he and Dad, bush-boxers,
had bloody fist-fights. But I worshipped him,
would tell my sister, "Tom's my Dad,
Daddy's your Dad." The grown-ups laughed.

That morning driving home from Mass
we were skylarking on the back seat —
the Dodge door swung. . . a strip of gravel
and yellow dust, my sister flew out.

Amidst the cries, Tom grabbed her
by one leg. They called it a miracle.

Katherine Gallagher

For Julien At Six Weeks

Already
you have taken the world
by your fingertips
small hands closing on
grapes of air,
first fruits that you touch
and hold at arm’s length
to choose and choose again.

Soon you will learn
how days are layered with secrets,
how the sun always combs back
its fields of light,
how the wind unveils its colours.

You have all the time you want —
a careful mime
rehearsing routines
as old as the eye.

Katherine Gallagher

Getting The Electricity On

The farm has changed, face-lifted
since we put away the lamps
or hung them up with lanterns, as antiques.
The house is new-veined, lush.

Getting the current switched through — such
fever, a district-do to celebrate:
"We'll be like the townsfolk now," we sang.
My mother saw the world transformed
by a washing-machine and fridge.

My father, caught by progress in a skein
that swept about his ears,
tracked voyages round the farm
reassured by the sameness of the stars
and lanterns lighting his mind.

Katherine Gallagher

Homecoming

The coastline
lies in its lace-edge

its rhythms of itself
continuous, familiarizing

contours of geography — pages
from school-lessons, templates

I am busy unlocking
through hours in a plane

and barriers of light
flashed evenly over trees

grown more vivid with absence,
and birds I magnify

like the magpie, ubiquitous,
sitting within its song

as clouds circle, drift.
Everywhere, we are joined by heat:

I drink it, feel new in it,
ponder its sheet-distance from cold

finding myself like a miner
surfacing, clutching at the sky

the weight of sun suddenly
held on his hands.

Katherine Gallagher

Hybrid

I have swallowed a country,
it sits quietly inside me.
Days go by when I scarcely
realise it is there. . .

I talk to this country,
tell it, You’re not forgotten,
nor ever could be.
I depend on you —

cornucopia packed close
with daylight moons
and bony coasts,
the dust of eucalyptus

on my teeth; mudded rivers
burnished smooth
under the cobalt crystal
of a lucent sky.

It is my reference-point
for other landscapes
that, after thirty years,
have multiplied my skies.

Katherine Gallagher

International

I take my countries as they come,
fall in beside other travellers
lifting their lives like lightweight
suitcases carried under the heart
— no questions asked.

On this trail I stake my futures,
know that beginnings are old hat
to be recognised like the moon’s stare.

I tell myself this is no fool’s
paradise, floating on clouds. Here
I ape survival, sing my cagey repertoire
and occasionally see myself dancing
in a space where hemispheres meet.

Katherine Gallagher

Itinerant

Polishing my square-toed brogues,
I think about journey, that measure
of breaking out of myself
which never leaves me.

I catch each venture like a living thing;
improvised, it cuts free — shoe-inviting,
pressing the day; my heart drums fast, faster.

I tell myself, Your feet have never
failed you . . . Whatever happens,
the journey’s always there:
sometimes dark, sometimes clear,
the way — on this road you’re wedded
to — a mountain will appear, climbing
suddenly out of a wall of mist.

Katherine Gallagher

Kathe Kollwitz 'The Face Of War'

'The exhibition must mean something, for all the works were extracted from my life...'
Kathe Kollwitz, in a letter, April 16, 1917
I

Black paint grits under my nails.
Always death, his death
leaping ahead. My son, eighteen,
how I begged him not to go.
I do not know the squalor he died in,
I only know how grief without hope
is waste.

I make hundreds of pictures
without their bringing me
closer to him — it is as though
I have lost the gift
to put my life into the work.

I am caught at forty-nine
fraught forever by what I cannot change.

II

In every house, there is death —
we are mesmerised, submerged.

For two years I have tried
to draw the mother
who takes her dead child in her arms —
I seek my son as I might find him
in the work, but nothing comes.

Only the tumult of the search
has dragged me on
to that point where
language has changed,
where I have changed.
I feared his death too much.

Katherine Gallagher

Learning Red

Haunting, the way they discovered them —
selves in spiralling night messages —
a web of promises broken, abandoned
under the eye’s disdain: cool words
ground to salt. Remembering
the way they dressed and left each morning
for a mild day away — shelving
their secret lives, small freedoms: how finally
they walked out past day’s first light,
the flowers never offered, the chagrin,
stepping away from blue cool,
what they couldn’t own
into midday’s fury, the red of it.

Katherine Gallagher

Love Cinquains

Taking
my time to dance
in rhythm with your feet,
I notice that our toes at least
are close.

In love
for the first time,
it felt as if the sky
had gathered in all its spaces —
so still.

Cooking
for a lover,
who can bear the challenge?
Best to throw everything in to-
gether.

Making
conversation,
“How was your day today?”
knowing that whatever you say
will bounce.

Katherine Gallagher

Nomad

That year you lost your husband
you wore one brave face after another.
Next thing, you kept changing countries.
Making a fresh start, you called it.

And still each new place sang,
claiming you against the dark.
He would have loved that —
you travelling solo pulled by both worlds.

His voice, breath — hand on your shoulder.
Arms and bodies linked on a bed
that moved like an ocean.
I wondered if you'd break.

Looking closer,
I saw you had broken —
you spent hours skeining days
that were all you had
to line your nomad shelter.

Katherine Gallagher

Priests

Be especially polite,
don’t be alone with them, never kiss them,
my grandmother said. It was simple,
they were God’s chosen.

There they were, prized men
off in a country of their own,
(that problem of their always
having the answers).

Priests were special visitors,
there to bless the house or for
afternoon-tea: occasions for the Royal
Doulton, silver teapot and chocolate cake.

My mother fussed around, finding cake forks,
making sure the cloth was ironed —
always guarded:

that incident when she was seventeen
decorating the church, and Father Shaw
with his onion-spiker tooth
bending to kiss
her freshwater face.

Katherine Gallagher

The Affair

He had a way of looking at the clock
when he arrived,

while undressing. She never
looked at the clock,

knew he’d leave
after an hour or two

and his fetish
was a way of letting her understand

he’d be home
as usual, for dinner.

Still, this was safe,
they could go on for years —

wait, phone-call, visit.
Not enough, but it was something.

How little, she realised one day
when he sent her flowers,

remembering her birthday
and she cried.

Katherine Gallagher

The Last War

There was only one war, and it was finishing
any day soon. Ears keyed to the wireless,
we waited. Then the news: Japan bombed,
gigantic clouds curling, skies burnt scarlet —
total destruction . . .

We've won, we've won, a conga-chant
round the schoolground, beating tins, sticks:
our teacher joining in — flags, jumbled cries —
uncles and cousins coming back. The war over.

Hiroshima, Nagasaki — ghost towns now.
Over two hundred thousand people
ghosts too. We couldn't imagine it.

The bomb entered our conversation,
a stranger who refused to leave.
Only years on did we become aware
of the pit of ash beneath our tongues.

Katherine Gallagher

The Lifeboat-Shed

(RNLI, Aldeburgh)
It’s that time, mid-autumn: an oil-base blue sky —
pebbles, rocks, a foothold for seagulls.
Clouds buckle, scoop grey on grey, mirror
the colours of the stones. Now, rose-tinged
the clouds fire up — a final show
before darkening. The boat shed stirs,
tugs on its moorings, flags down the breeze
as rows of street-lights flick on.

People shuffle by, shaped by anoraks, adrift
from the pack. They peer through the windows
of the lifeguards’ shop, lined into
the oldest dream, of being saved
no matter what sea.

Katherine Gallagher

Thinking Of My Mother On The Anniversary Of Her Death

I search her face across a hemisphere,
embark on one more journey:

Will you come?

She’s ready with the thermos,
wearing her brown gardening-shoes,
her glasses slipping forward on her nose.

Says she’s been planting dahlias
to make a summer show,

a new display for the place
she calls her Park.

Over the cloudbank it’s candescent,
close. I dare her to keep up with me.

She shuffles answers
to fit my questions. We float,

almost sisters
in the glide of it.

Katherine Gallagher

Unknown Soldier

We have covered him with real flowers
and taken him from country to country.

It’s always the same journey —
people standing in the streets
silently saluting
as we carry him by.

And our hands tremble
under his weight,
our eyes are shocked
by the riddle of tongues
presenting the same paradox
in every country —
the whole human voice as background
shrilled to fever
about keeping the guns at bay.

Katherine Gallagher