

Book Review

Dear Ghosts,. Tess Gallagher. Graywolf Press, 2006 (hardback); 2008 (paperback).
\$20.00 (hardback); \$15.00 (paperback).

In the world of Raymond Carver studies, Tess Gallagher often ignites controversy. Her positive influence on Carver's life and writing during the post-alcoholic "good Raymond" years cannot be denied, but some Carver readers, most recently in the wake of Gallagher's move to publish the unedited versions of Carver's early stories, raise complex questions about the choices she makes as Carver's widow and literary executor. But any Carver aficionados who, because of such concerns, would choose not to read *Dear Ghosts*,—Gallagher's most recent collection of poetry—would be cheating themselves not only of poems that inform Carver studies but of poetry that is as vivid and evocative as any Gallagher has published in her long career as a writer.

Dear Ghosts, is the first poetry collection Gallagher has published since *Moon Crossing Bridge* in 1992, a volume that contained many elegiac poems that continued poetic conversations begun between her and Carver in the poems featured in Carver's last collection, *A New Path to the Waterfall*. The comma appended to Gallagher's title reflects the nature of the book, whose poems create epistles to the many people, living and dead, who shaped Gallagher's identity as a poet, including her new love after Carver's death, Josie Gray, and, of course, Raymond Carver himself.

Two poems that address Gallagher's relationship with Carver are "Black Beauty" and "Sixteenth Anniversary." "Black Beauty" pivots on Gallagher's memory of the

couple eating raspberries out of season at a since-demolished bar in the St. Regis Hotel. The image of the raspberries will likely remind Carver readers of one of his sparest and most haunting poems, “Simple.” But in Gallagher’s poem, the raspberries become a metaphor for the couple’s life together, rich and dearly paid for, as while eating they imagine a Latin American child gathering the fruits destined to be shipped to America, where the writers eat them in luxury enjoyed at a publisher’s expense. Despite the five-star setting, the couple recalls their blue-collar roots as they consume the fruits of the child’s labor. The poem ends, as do many later Carver poems, with the possibility of immortality:

Who said: *Raspberries do not keep*
or travel well? I’ll stake my lot
with those ancient seafaring Chinese
who believed trees shed blood, or that to eat
the fruit of the 10,000 foot high Cassia tree
would make them immortal.

“Sixteenth Anniversary,” as the title suggests, commemorates the sixteenth anniversary of Carver’s death in 1988. Always fascinated with doubles, Gallagher in the poem meets a man who acts as a kind of double for Carver, a Quileute-nation carver who teaches her how to say “I’m going home” in his native language. Gallagher is transformed by taking in his language, a transformation that hints at the change that emerged when she and Raymond Carver began sharing their lives and the work of language:

I felt an entirely other

spirit enter my body. It
made a shiver rise up in me
and I said so. The carver
nodded and smiled.

Yet many of the most powerful poems in *Dear Ghosts*, take up other subjects, including Gallagher's own battle with breast cancer, a battle which she hides neither in her poetry nor in the startling image of herself missing her characteristically long hair in the author photograph on the book's dust jacket. "The Women of Auschwitz" sensitively reflects on the many horrors that leave women stripped of parts of themselves, from genocide to disease. One of the best poems in the book, "Surgeon" describes her experience with and recovery from three breast cancer surgeries, honoring friends who gave her shelter as she healed. The motherly ministrations of her friend Susan Lytle render the poet childlike and comfortable, leaving her to declare in the poem's last line, "Don't talk to me of heaven."

As is characteristic of Gallagher's work, the poems often provide a space for the personal to meld with the political. "The Dogs of Bucharest" contrasts the productive but often restricted lives of women scientists and artists in eastern Europe with the relatively wealthy yet spiritually barren lives of solipsistic businessmen. "Lady Betty" imagines the life of an Irish woman who chose to become an executioner in exchange for dying herself as penalty for killing a member of her family. An elegy of sorts to Gallagher's father, Leslie Bond, "Fire Starter" connects Gallagher's birth in 1943, Bond's efforts as a working-class laborer in 1940s America, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1944.

Indeed, many of the poems of *Dear Ghosts*, are recognizably Gallagher, with their expansive and often associative meditations on idea and image and her frequent use of sometimes lengthy, almost always unexpected metaphors, some of which amplify her subject beautifully and some of which fly a bit too fancifully to accomplish Gallagher's poetic goals of long-term communication and connection among writer, subject and reader. But such missteps are rare for such a seasoned poet. And "Choices," arguably the finest poem in the volume, treats the speaker's decision not to fell a tree to gain a mountain view with such an imagistic economy of words that the poem practically sparkles. *Dear Ghosts*, is a fine collection that demonstrates the generosity of image and of spirit apparent in all of Gallagher's oeuvre and likewise shows the growth of a poet entering decidedly new phases of her life.

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