

Classic Poetry Series

**Katherine Gallagher**  
**- 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*.

## <b>Career</b>

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.

## <b>Awards</b>

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

# 1942

They'd hoped he'd be back for Christmas -  
the lights shining down on him, the tree  
somehow shielding off the horror. A break.  
The family hadn't seen him as a soldier,  
in his uniform, among harvested paddocks,  
the dried stubble that pricked your legs.

Arriving home, he said Merry Christmas,  
hugged people and slapped them on the back.  
Wandered about the place, eyes crinkled  
with strain, lines dug  
into his forehead. So young, he seemed  
to be either laughing or very sad  
as though, in between,  
there was nothing.

Katherine Gallagher

# 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

# Cloud-Eye

The sting in a limbering spring day  
foreshadows summer. Through her window  
roses plait themselves together beside young-  
leafed eucalypts as she, too ill to speak,  
slowly becomes my eye in the clouds, the gap  
I will see through. No one knows me better  
than she who circled my first flight.

I've tried to prepare myself, remembering  
her cyclopaedic mind, her gift for solutions.  
My bird-mother. I reach out, hold her hands.

She slides down into sleep and wakes again  
on this final island, where touch is more important  
than words. She grimaces, begs for morphine . . .  
Our world divides. We'll fly differently now.

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