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View from an Empty Chair

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View from an Empty Chair



Photo by Patricia Ellis

Tess Gallagher teaches literature and poetry writing in the graduate writing program at Syracuse University. Her third book of poems, *Willingly*, will be published by Graywolf Press in March 1984. She has recently returned from a trip to China, which was partly sponsored by Syracuse University and hosted by the Chinese Writers' Union.

Late afternoon light between peach trees.
No movement. Just one child-voice
telling another, "I'll show you!"—then
heading into valor—sound of furious pedaling,
clash of spokes. A wash of sparrows
breathes from a rooftop where periscopes
of pipes and ducts cause the houses
to submerge in the deep air.

Behind me, the muzzle of a hound
snuffles the stone ledge. Mournfully, I
occur to him, an intonation of wrongness
in the landscape. I feel the danger I mean
to someone unknown and near.

Over the wall a coffee mug appears, then
upper torso. The woman lets the dog
bound against her. "He hates
men," she tells me. His soft, loose mouth
lunges against the guard-wire—proving
loyalty by insistence on threat.

She lives alone, has had tools
stolen from the patio. Visitors and
burglars chance the house-dog, a terrier
I hear as *terror*. (The air
is finely tuned.) One glance away
and her head is gone.

Country Western bleeds from a doorway
opened brightly to *there goes my
everything*, then shut so birds
come in as underscoring to a car
luffing past. My house, with quiet skill
intends to pull over me
with shadow.

The child recurs, imitating death pains
as comic and reversible. Taking up
my sweater and waterglass, I catch hold
of a child's drawing the wind has carried
into the yard. It has a friendly aspect,
the mouth like a hammock, though the hands
are levers and the eyes—demented
and aslant. We brighten once before
the house drops over us.

—Tess Gallagher