1983

View from an Empty Chair

Tess Gallagher

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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