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## on Tess Gallagher

Robert Wrigley

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## A LEADERLESS DANCE

### STEPPING OUTSIDE

Poems by Tess Gallagher  
Penumbra Press  
Lisbon, Iowa

Somewhere in this country, in a well-lit, well-financed laboratory, scientists are programming computers to write poems. It's not surprising. In fact, I wouldn't be shocked if it were suddenly revealed that a good percentage of contemporary works were so written. With a finely-tuned efficiency common to machines, a number of poets are now turning out whole volumes of extended invoice, payroll-check poems. The effect this kind of writing has on its readers is ultimately the same as a form letter or an overdue bill notice. We read and say: *I am not dealing with a human being here. This poem has no poet!* Then a book appears, so rich in humanity, so convincing in its voice and imagination that you read it again and again, like a letter from home, and celebrate its marvelous information, its good news for years to come. This year one of those books is Tess Gallagher's *Stepping Outside*.

There are excursions here into that beautiful land between the poet's life and imagination. And while one loses oneself easily in the poems, there is always the firm foundation of experience on the one hand and vision on the other. The dependence of poetry on these two elements is always desirable, but for Gallagher it is vital. In "Two Stories," the most moving and perhaps the best poem in the collection, she calls down an author whose story "shaped for the market" the tale of her Uncle's murder. The writer evidently did not believe the details of the crime deserved much care:

I say it matters  
that the dog stays by the chimney  
for months, and a rain  
soft as the sleep of cats  
enters the land, emptied

of its cows, its wire gates pulled down  
by hands that never dug  
the single well, this whitened field.

But facts do not dilute or dominate the poems. Reality and thought merge in a beautiful, leaderless dance.

Frequent comings and goings, arrivals and departures, fill Tess Gallagher's poems. Fathers leave for work, daughters come home . . . But it is an odd movement; one that implies a certain stasis and dependability. One always returns or, rather, one never leaves. You cannot leave behind the raw materials of your life:

How he always came back; the drinking,  
the fishing all night, all  
the ruthless ships he unloaded.  
That was the miracle of our lives. Even now  
he won't stay out of what I have  
to say to you.

("Coming Home")

From these raw materials come the poems. When the poet leaves the tangible world for the world of the poem, the stuff of experience is always taken along. She is bound by it. It is inescapable:

So I'm always coming back like tonight,  
in a temper, brushing aside the azaleas  
on the doorstep. What did you mean  
by it, this tenderness  
that is a whip, a longing?

("Coming Home")

It wants to crow, flaps  
but will not fly. It struts  
in a circle, looks twice  
in the same direction, steps forward  
to be on the edge.

("Secret")

Sometimes I think it is too much to demand of poets that they live so intensely in their work, but there always comes along a Tess Gallagher, someone who meets and surpasses all demands. Hers is by no means confessional or cryptically personal writing, it is honest and believable. It is total poetry and not mere word play. *Stepping Outside* changes a reader, and the excitement the change gives can never be weakened. It is part of the dance: the experience and the

imagination step outside and meet on the middle-ground of the poem.

I must mention that there is no price listed on this collection. It is a very limited edition, (I had to borrow a review copy), just 230 copies, numbered and beautifully printed on handmade rice paper. I can only suggest that we hope and watch for a collection of Tess Gallagher's poems from a major press. I'm sure one will be forthcoming. That way we can all get letters from home.

*Robert Wrigley*

## THE GOOD OLE NOVEL

### WALTZ ACROSS TEXAS

Max Crawford

Farrar Straus & Giroux, \$8.95

Why did you want to kill somebody the last time you got the urge to flick the switchblade? Sex? Money? Revenge? None of the above? Some of the above are central to the plot of Max Crawford's *Waltz Across Texas*, in some combination.

Flash to "Sugar" Campbell, your basic good Joe, returning home to Flavannah, Texas from his collapsed business in California. His father is dead, the estate worthless, and this old pal "Son" Cunningham has offered Sugar a mysterious job. Bored, at loose ends, Sugar takes the job and finds loco weed growing right thick on the El Toro Ranch where Cunningham works. Old man Kitchens passed this faltering spread to his son "Tee" Kitchens (or "Tee" Texas or "Little Tee") hoping to run the place by proxy. But Tee seizes power spurred on by his city-bred wife, Adrienne ("A."). Tee's gigantic life insurance policy may play a sinister role in these