

Terry Harrington

REVIEW

Katherine Gallagher, *Passengers to the City*, Hale & Iremonger, 1985. \$8.95

My attention was first drawn to Katherine Gallagher's work in 1975, partly because we were both brought up in Bendigo, and partly through my reading of a first small collection, *The Eye's Circle* (Rigmarole Productions). At that time she was living in Paris, and is now in London. It is with much interest ten years later, after one intervening publication, *Tributaries of the Love-Song* (1978), that I have read what I believe is Katherine Gallagher's best and most significant collection, *Passengers to the City*.

This book is not full of wild surprises in technique or content. Gallagher's work has always centred on relationships and in *Passengers to the City* it has continued to develop further in this area, away from the introspection found in *The Eye's Circle*.

Passengers to the City is presented in six sections, each loosely grouped around an unstated theme. Part I concerns the intimacies between a mother and a child, as far as the child's third birthday. The poems develop the picture of a tender, uncomplicated relationship. The warm concern of motherhood is not forced on the child or on the reader:

“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.”

(‘For Julien at Six Weeks’)

‘Distances’ in my view is the best poem in this section. The section opens with a poem called ‘My Child's Voice’, and ‘Distances’ ends with a picture of the poet's mother and her voice (“There are many kinds of love / and I have lived some of them”). This group of poems has an intense personal meaning for the poet, but the reader is able to share in it.

Part II offers a number of portraits: of a trapeze-artist, a ballerina, Mona Lisa, a Russian dissident, photographs, and Maldon, the mining town. They have themes of movement and wandering. In 'the Trapeze-Artist's First Performance' the artist requires the involvement of her audience to perform:

"She throws her act to the audience —
it carries her to them, their rows
of faces. And it is her sky
they give back,
balancing her with their eyes."

There are several references to gypsies in the book, widening the theme of movement, expressed also in the views of the poet's child playing on swings, or of the ballerina's dance. Part II ends with 'Homecoming', a celebration of returning to Australia, although there is a feeling that the return may be temporary. It winds up the poet's wanderings through times, places, and poems, but it is an uneasy settlement that is finally attained.

Part III explores the environment, dealing especially with drought. The landscape is observed but not directly experienced, a perspective evident in such titles as 'Wimmera Windscreen' and 'Farmers in a Time of Drought'. Situations described in some of these poems strike the reader as second-hand: lines are too heavily carved and semi-platitudes are uttered, such as,

". . . weather is the winner
where there are no odds
in the balance left over
from the good season."

(*'Drought Sequence'*)

Part IV looks at war, and cathedrals where memories of war seem to linger:

"Wherever I looked
I saw faces of the dead,
their naked lives
spread out like warnings."

(*'Amiens Cathedral'*)

The fifth section concentrates mainly on relationships and domesticity, while Part VI expands into the larger worlds of politics and society. While the earlier sections in the book make for pleasant reading, it is in Part VI that the poetry becomes complex and pithy. Poems like 'Domestic' and 'Passengers to the City' have complex textures and contain some witty lines. I like 'Passengers to the City' particularly; it is the most accomplished poem in the collection. The two travellers are portrayed in simple but suggestive strokes, building

up the image of a relationship that will never be complete.

In Part VI there are also excursions into other subjects and styles. 'Woman in a Tableau', 'Finsbury Park, Mid-March' and 'Lost' are the most original poems in the section. The book ends with two strong images of women. The first reveals perhaps how the poet feels she might have been herself, with

"The seasons escaping her
like a rosary; sidelong glances
at other women's children,
the waiting-rite relentlessly hers
praying like Sarah to be chosen."

(*'Childless Woman'*)

In the second, the haunting figure of the poet's mother arises unexpectedly out of an incident about a lost child:

"Suddenly my mother, stern heart
moored between separations, deaths
and years of loving, stood there
marking time, waiting too."

(*'Lost'*)

An awareness of the mother and of the living, changing reality of relationships is constant in this collection. At its highest moments, the language is controlled and elegant, and the poems improve with re-reading. In *Passengers to the City* Katherine Gallagher has continued to explore both the potentials of her craft and the most sensitive areas of our experience.