

But not the kind of outlaws we have in St. Louis that three blocks from my house murdered a man and his pregnant wife last night.

Obviously, that's the intellectual—that's the problem with the metaphor. At least Floyd, in his early days, was a kind of Robin Hood. He later turned into a much more vicious killer. And I want to deal with why somebody who started out as a pretty decent guy, who became a crook because he was poor, turned into this hired killer. The guy who killed the pregnant woman in your neighborhood, that's not the kind of outlaw I'm talking about.

When can we look for this novel?

I don't know. Maybe a couple years. And I may not do it. I'm having real problems with it, partly for the reasons you suggest. In the newspaper, there's a report that Floyd began his criminal career in St. Louis in 1925 by holding up a Kroger payroll for \$12,000. I found he was accused, along with three or four companions—it's a little unclear, but it seems to be statutory rape, involving some women camping on the Meramec River. I don't want my hero to be a rapist. Not at that point, at least. I could see that happening later, because I think that many, many people get corrupted, but—so I'm having problems. I'm not trying to make him politically correct; I'm having trouble dealing with that concept of a hero.

Tess Gallagher

POET



From *Amplitudes*

WOMEN'S TUG OF WAR AT LOUGH ARROW

In a borrowed field they dig in their feet
and clasp the rope. Balanced
against neighboring women, they hold
the ground by the little gained
and leaning like boatmen rowing into
the damp earth, they pull
to themselves the invisible waves, waters
overcalmed by desertion
or the narrow look trained to a brow.
The steady rain has made girls of them,
their hair in ringlets. Now they haul
the live weight to the cries
of husbands and children, until the rope
runs slack, runs free
and all are bound again by the arms
of those who held them, not until, but so
they gave.

Amplitudes, St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1987. Used with permission.

For this interview, done while Tess Gallagher was in St. Louis to promote two new books, I was able to describe what was on her and Raymond Carver's coffee table because I had been to their house and seen it. At Syracuse University, Gallagher taught a graduate course called "Poetry in Translation," and I was one of her students. In the spring of 1988 Tess and her companion Raymond Carver hosted a party celebrating her new book, *Amplitudes: Poems Selected and New*, culled from her first three books of poetry. That was the first and last time I met Carver. The star instructor of the university's master's-level creative-writing program for some years, he was off doing something else when I got to Syracuse. His fiction, labeled "minimalism," made me think: Steinbeck divided by Hemingway = Ray Carver. I preferred Tess's poetry. She wrote lovely, liquid lines. She'd also published essays and short fiction. Unlike any other female writer I had met, she knew her own worth and never devalued herself. She was even glamorous. Citing the example of Anna Akhmatova, she told our class, "Part of being a great poet is having great pictures taken of yourself." But behind her glamour was substance. It was like the glamour of royalty.

Carver was then fatally ill, and meek, and murmurous; a small man further diminished by suffering. Nonetheless he was scheduled to do a public reading of his work in the near future and was taking suggestions as to what to read. Carver's story collection *Cathedral* (1983) and the selected-stories collection *Where I'm Calling From* (1988), had pulled all the right levers for all the right people, catapulting him, and Tess, on a world tour, and into the pages of gossip *People* magazine. Then Carver developed lung cancer, and died August 2, 1988, at age 50.

When I met Gallagher in St. Louis for this interview, four years had passed, and I wondered beforehand if she would remember me. Of course she did.

Gallagher was born in Washington State and attended the University of Washington, receiving a B.A. degree in education in 1967, and an M.A. in English in 1971. Since the time of this interview she has published *At the Owl Woman Saloon: Stories* (Scribners, 1999), another volume of selected poems, *My Black Horse* (Bloodaxe Books, 2000), and a volume of selected stories. *Moon Crossing Bridge* was reissued by Graywolf in 2002. Fourteen years elapsed between the time of this interview and Gallagher's next book of new poems, *Dear Ghosts* (Graywolf, 2006).

"The Nuclear Physics of Loss"

First published in *The Riverfront Times*, June 3, 1992

"We really did have a life that was bound up in each other's work," says poet Tess Gallagher of her nine-year association with fiction writer Raymond Carver, who died of lung cancer in 1988. Together they became a literary industry, with Carver writing the best fiction of his life and dabbling in poetry, and Gallagher writing her prize-winning poetry and a book of short stories, recently reissued,

titled *The Lover of Horses* (Graywolf Press); both wrote essays and officially collaborated on a screenplay.

Their partnership brought them media attention of the kind serious writers rarely get. They were written up in *Vanity Fair* and *People*, and proudly displayed these magazines on the coffee table in their home in Syracuse, N.Y. Carver had taught fiction writing at Syracuse University, Jay McInerney (*Bright Lights, Big City*) being his best-known disciple, and Gallagher taught poetry writing there from 1980 through 1989. Through translations of their work and invitations to South America, Europe, and Japan, they were becoming international literary figures. In this first, belated rush of fame, Carver fell ill.

The two married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel shortly before Carver's death; it was his second marriage and her third. Gallagher, now 49, has since worked to complete and publish Carver's unfinished projects, and it is, unfortunately, for this that she is most widely (I almost wrote "wifely") known. It is ironic, and sexist, she said, that work wholly her own should be assessed in the light of her relationship with Carver. Gallagher, author of four previous books of poetry, has just published two utterly astonishing new books, *Moon Crossing Bridge* (Graywolf) and *Portable Kisses* (Capra), the first a powerful exploration of widowhood and love beyond death, and the second a series of playful love poems that test the limits of the lyric. They are nothing like her previous work, accomplished as it was. If *Moon Crossing Bridge* has an analogue in American poetry, it would have to be Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, such is its originality and daring.

Gallagher, who was born and now lives in Port Angeles, Washington, recently made her first visit to St. Louis, the last of 12 cities on a national tour. Her mother, Georgia Morris Bond, is a southwest Missouri native, so Gallagher felt, she said, at home. Gallagher is a dramatic presence, with her colleen's bright-white skin, waist-length black hair, penciled brows and sweet, symbolic jewelry: a crystal heart pendant, red enamel heart-shaped earrings, a silver ring that is the subject of a poem in *Moon Crossing Bridge*, and—still—her gold wedding band. Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* lay bookmarked on the motel-room bed. Asked to autograph *Portable Kisses* ("Ideally," she wrote in its introduction, "a reader should finish this book, then find somebody to kiss"), she inscribed it with her favorite fountain pen, then lipsticked her mouth and signed the title page with a dark pink kiss mark.

CATHERINE RANKOVIC: *Will you tell us how Moon Crossing Bridge got written?*

TESS GALLAGHER: I began to write it in January of 1989. I had just done a lot of work on Ray's last book, *A New Path to the Waterfall*, in the sense of really getting it to press. I was asked to write an introduction, and that hadn't been part of what Ray and I thought to do with the book. But because his death came so early—he was only 50—and because he was ending with a book of poems instead of stories, and because the book was a kind of joint making in the sense that I worked with him very closely on the drafts, I thought it would be honest and good to place the poems in the kind of time in which they occurred and in that relationship.

I wrote a few of the *Moon Crossing Bridge* poems in January of '89, just enough so I sensed there was a large body of material. It was the first time I had done this in my writing. I felt if I didn't attend to it, I would lose it. I thought I needed at least three years to do what I had to do, so I attempted to get a leave of absence. But in universities there's no such thing as a three-year leave, so Syracuse just politely told me that wasn't possible, and I then decided to resign. I didn't resign without thought, because I loved my vocation as a teacher also. But I really wanted to write these poems. I was writing and working on the book right up into September 1991.

There was a point at which I thought the book was pretty well finished, and that was with the poem "Glow." That was overturned by the fact that I continued to write poems all through spring and summer of last year. The result of that was this little book, *Portable Kisses*, and the sixth section of *Moon Crossing Bridge*, which I originally thought might be going into *Portable Kisses*. I talked to my editor about this and decided to move them into *Moon Crossing Bridge*. I think it was the right thing to do. It sort of got us across the bridge entirely in those last poems. Both books went to press simultaneously.

The books give the impression of having been written by two different people.

Portable Kisses has a wryness of spirit and loquaciousness and angularity, perhaps. And sensuality. And wit, not in the light sense, but in the sense of somebody who sees all sides of something. And that side of me that just likes to delight, that loves the pure lyric.

There's much more risk-taking with language in these two new books than in your previous books. How do you account for that?

I guess when you've faced the mortality of the person you loved most in the world, and fought the kind of battle we did in those 10 months, you've thrown everything you've had into an ultimate situation. You think, "Why not? Why not do this at its highest pitch? Why not require the most?" After all, the most is required of us in this life. So I didn't worry about even writing something that wouldn't be readable, in the sense that it would be costly to people's psychic energies and how much they could volunteer of their emotions. It's not a hobbyist's book.

You've written a great deal about Ray, have appeared in two documentaries about Ray's life, and have written the text for the book Carver Country. Don't you find this takes energy away from your own work?

Yes, it does. But I've found ways to handle it. I hired a secretary, for one thing. I realized I was doing the work of two, the living for two. Those were very necessary things to do, I think, and I was the only one who could do them. Ray had begun the *Carver Country* book, and so it was up to me to finish it.

What's your response to the criticism you've received for finishing so much of Ray's work and spending so much time living in his reputation?

It looks different to me than it does to others, because I of course remember the beginning of the relationship. I remember having had quite a career as a poet behind me, and being better known as a poet than Ray was, actually, as a fiction writer at the time we met. There was a coterie of fiction aficionados who knew about Ray, but Ray did not really get well known until after *Cathedral* came out in 1983.

When I first started to live with him in El Paso in 1979, and I wanted to go to Alaska, I told them there, "There's this man I'm attached to, and I want him to be able to come there if I come. Can you possibly find a venue for him? He's a fiction writer, Raymond Carver," and they said, "Raymond who?" He had his first job down there in Texas, in El Paso, after he got sober. Nobody was offering him much at all; El Paso is not the center of the literary world. In 1981 I was to go to Zurich for a week or two, and when I proposed bringing him, it was another situation where they didn't know Ray Carver. I sent his work; they were, I could

say, horrified, because they thought they were going to be entertaining this wild alcoholic man from his stories.

I've been writing poetry for 35 years. I have a book of essays, *A Concert of Tenses*. I've written two film scripts. If people want to continue to think of me as the girl from the sticks who happened to be married to Raymond Carver, then I think they're pretty silly. It doesn't matter very much to me, finally, what anybody thinks, because my writing is the main thing, and how the relationship was, how well we lived with each other.

What, if anything, does it mean to you to be a working-class writer, or a writer from the working class?

I think that the more you get able to use language at its highest power, the more you are separated from that place you came from, where people earned their livings by the sweat of their brows. My father was a logger and longshoreman. My brother is a logger, and another brother is a longshoreman. So whether you want it or not, you become an exile from the place and people you started from. I've tried to counter that by going back to live where I was born and be among those people. Ray and I would spend a good deal of our time in Port Angeles, doing the things you do there—seeing the children of the families, going fishing, having meals and holidays together, telling stories, listening to theirs. Ray got a lot of work done there and so did I.

So it has been the place which has nourished me all along, and I go back there with a sense of gratitude and protection and comfort from, probably, the emotional reserves of those people. They don't understand everything I write. But that's as it's going to be, because I'm not going to stop writing the nuclear physics of loss to pretend I can speak only on one level. I think I have poems for all levels.

Are you, right now, what you want to be and where you want to be?

Yes, I would say—with a rage of humility attached. I did the best I could writing out of this material. I have pretty well settled out a lot of the issues after Ray's death. There's one more book I can see I have to write an introduction for. His *No Heroics, Please* is coming out this summer. I've done all I can in a publicity way for *Moon Crossing Bridge* and *Portable Kisses*. I've got some international travel ahead

of me. When that settles down, I hope to get to this novel I've had a contract for since 1986. Instead of writing these books, I should by all rights have been writing that, but I did what I thought I had the best energy for, which was the poems, and have no regrets.

I feel good about having come through a lot and am looking forward to seeing what's next.

Jean-Claude Baker

BIOGRAPHER

