

Notion of Nostalgia in the Poetic Oeuvre of Katherine Gallagher

***Dr. Guman Singh Gehlot**

Abstract:

Gallagher seems to have experienced a conflict between resisting and giving in to the feelings of nostalgia. The notion of nostalgia is tangled up with the memories of the past, the physical land, the semi-arid and sub-tropical climate of Australia, its flora and fauna, the mother figure and family members, and childhood reminiscences. Gallagher takes nostalgia as an essential medium to express her identity.

Key words: Conflict, nostalgia, memory, reminiscences, identity.

Nostalgia is a common feeling amongst members of a diasporic community and it appears as a distinct theme throughout the oeuvre of Gallagher, residing and writing from Britain. Gallagher seems to experience a conflict between resisting and giving in to nostalgia, and this is evident in her poetry. Boym suggests that nostalgia (from the Greek, *nostos*-return home, and *algia*-longing) is a "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a constant sense of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy".¹ Nostalgia is also, "the expression of yearning for an earlier time or place or a significant person in one's history, the memory and significance of which or whom contributes to the sense of the self in the present moment".²

In the poetry of Gallagher, there seems a subtle line between Gallagher's emotional outpouring of the nostalgic feelings and recollections of past moments. The notion of nostalgia is tangled up with memories of the past, the physical land, the semi-arid and subtropical climate of Australia, its flora and fauna, the mother figure and family members, and childhood reminiscences. While living as an expatriate for such a long period in England, she finds herself unable to resist writing nostalgically with a sense of belonging for her Australian homeland. Gallagher seems to make nostalgic feelings a medium to give vent expression to her experiences as a daughter, sister, lover and a child and tries to celebrate those moments.

Gallagher, in her collection, *Tigers on the Silk Road*, overtly addresses the experience of nostalgia. She has portrayed the memories of her brother Brian in her poem "In Memoriam for My Brother". The occasion of creation of the poem is very much similar to that of William Blake's "On Receipt of My Mother's Picture." Finding a photograph of Brian by a mere chance, she sank into the old memories. Though the picture was taken "sitting among rocks at Barbizon" in France, but it had evoked the past times they had spent in Australia :

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Behind us, Australia beckoned-
a grand water-lily
squat on the Pacific.

(*Tigers on the Silk Road*, 13)

The metaphor of water lily traditionally stands for peace and spiritual rebirth. The water-lily has a special significance in Buddhism and Hinduism. In these religions, it symbolizes resurrection. As the continent had been unacknowledged through the ages and found its revival after its discovery and followed by later events, it seems to be at peace just like Buddha sitting in his peaceful posture and having a seraphic smile. There is a wistful longing for their happy childhood days in the rhetorical question which is in italic : "*Would we ever make it here*"? The statement reveals her inability as immigrant to disentangle herself from the past, in order to live in the future. At another level, their life was at peace and they were in their heydays but then peace was disturbed by the breaking-up of the relations :

Those days, leaves scattering:
your skidding marriage;
my stalled affair.

(*Tigers on the Silk Road*, 13)

Here again, the metaphor of water lily reaches at different level. The metaphor "leaves scattering" is suggestive of the turbulences their family plant faced. Those painful moments shuddered their lives. She remembers about her brother's marred conjugal life followed by his premature death, and her hampered love affair. She remembers :

..... my brother Brian, who died in a car accident at a crossroads in his new VW car. A lovely guy. So we were diminished by death, Joe only 35. Brian 20 when they died.³

Gallagher uses a slang "a ladybird" for her brother's wife to express her resentment over her being unfair and disloyal to her brother. Consequently, her brother had a heartbreak :

A ladybird, burnt scarlet,
blazed up your sleeve,
paused, turning back
on its path. You murmured *Hello*
and your eyes followed as it
flew off in dust-dry air.

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(Tigers on the Silk Road, 13)

“To Joe : In Memoriam” is another dedication to her brother, this time to Joseph, where she demonstrates how he had been a constant source of motivation in her happy and hard times as well :

When we run you say, ‘Lift your feet,
lift your feet,’ encouraging me
as you encouraged me out of hopeless
love - affairs.

(Fish-Rings on Water, 36)

Her brother's company in France filled her life with hopes and aspirations even though they had left their land out of despair “I am running after you, brother, we are sifting gold in a hollow afternoon”. Even in the emptiness in their life she is hoping against hope and in that she seems to be very near to T. S. Eliot in concluding lines of his “Preludes” with a touch of sardonic humour :

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and
Laugh; the worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

(Eliot, T.S., “Preludes”, 55-58)

She conveys about the background of the poem and reminisces Joe, how he played a key role to obtain job for her and their survival in Europe :

This poem is for Joe about our time in Paris, but the (poem of course) was written after his passing, after his heart attack and death. Joe had gone to Paris in June, 1969. ... I came to London as you know, leaving in February, 1969, arriving in April, 1969. When it looked as if I'd have to leave London because of not having residency rights, (Note I'm here now because of having married Bernard, who is French and being given residency rights in 1979 when we came here) and having to go back to Australia due to the UK joining the European CMarket, Joe said, ‘Oh don't go back to Australia yet, I'll get you a job over here.’ And in September, 1971, with another Australian friend Diana, I left for Paris, he did get us jobs, and we 3 Aussies lived in Paris and got to know French and had a great time. There were vacancies for English speaker-teachers at this time.⁴

Gallagher imbues her poetry with a sense of contentment as well as of fear, and often includes realistic, harsh aspects of her childhood in Australia. Her poetry is a blend of realistic sense of home, which resists a sense of nostalgia that is wholly positive and idealistic, while also displaying a ‘longing’ for her mother and motherland, which does seem to exhibit nostalgia. These disparate

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notions of nostalgia seem to suggest that even when the immigrant is aware of nostalgia as selectively positive, they are still unable to resist referring to their homeland with a sense of longing and nostalgia. Through her poems, she endeavours to fill the gaps of time and distances by visualizing her mother, in Australia. The poems like "Distances", "Genealogy", and "Cloud-Eye" are like a homage to her mother. The images of her mother, being calm and unbothered even while ailing and 'half covered by shadow' of death and bidding adieu smilingly have a lasting impression on Gallagher's mind :

I see my mother waving - her unfussed
smiling *au revoir*, alone on her verandah,
a small figure half-covered by shadow.
I hold her wave, see myself sharing it
eight fold, once for each of us - a wave
we have grown into

(*Passengers to the City*, 20)

As Gallagher points out in one of her emails to the present researcher :

One of my lasting images of her, especially after our growing up and leaving home to go to work in Bendigo, or study (in Melbourne) or just leave, the image in my mind was of her waving 'goodbye' and saying 'Be careful' The thought of losing one of us was always on her mind.⁵

Her mother seemed to have perfected this waving after she had undergone the pain of losing her children :

as she perfected it, voiced it over years
listening for the two who died,
losses she carried into her skin,
her children - the only trophies
she even wanted.

(*Passengers to the City*, 20)

When the poet visualizes her mother's wavings from the vantage point of time, she is now able to discern and decipher her mother's bonding with her children :

Now I search her face
contained, real as light,
hear over her words sewn into
the wave, 'There are many kinds of love
and I have lived some of them'.

(*Passengers to the City*, 20)

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Her mother seems to have some metaphysical and spiritual heights in love for her children which is beyond her corporeal presence. Writing about her mother's poetic potential, Gallagher points out that what she said in "Distances" is what she actually said about love. She was a poet (not actually) but I guess if she were starting out today, she might have written a lot of poetry...⁶ Similar adoration for her mother and a sentimental summon up of past memories of her day of demise can be seen in the poem "Cloud-Eye." She was suffering a lot due to cancer. The whole of the atmosphere around her seemed to have been sympathetic towards her. Gallagher, using the device pathetic fallacy describes the afternoon in the poem "Cloud-eye" :

Through her window
roses plait themselves together beside young
leafed eucalypts as she, too ill to speak,
slowly becomes my eye in the clouds, the gap
I will see through.

(Circus-Apprentice, 84)

Gallagher's mother had been a guiding force and a ready reckoner for all her puzzles of life, as the poet remembers. The metaphors of "flight" and "bird-mother" are suggestive of affectionate mother-daughter relations between them. Being elegiac, the poet feels that. Giving a glowing tribute to her mother she says :

No one knows me better
than she who circled my first flight.
She slides down into sleep and wakes again
on this final island, where touch is more important
than words.

(Circus - Apprentice, 84)

And it was a sense of deep solace to the poet that she was present there with her mother while she was taking off her final flight from "this final island". Enduring severe pain, she succumbed to death by the evening :

She grimaces, begs for morphine ...
Our world divides. We'll fly differently now.

(Circus-Apprentice, 84)

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The poems like “My Mother's Garden” and “Thinking of My Mother on the Anniversary of Her Death” are an appreciation of her mother's love of nature which arouses a sense of longing for Australia in her :

Long summer evenings she'd walk
among the fragrances - lavender, jasmine, rose.
Leaning into the plants, talking to them,
pulling off dried leaves, dead-heading blooms.

(Tigers on the Silk Road, 32)

To keep her mother's memories fresh and alive she keeps on coming constantly to her homeland and visits “her Park” :

My feet don't tire of this walk
I've come back to for her sake and mine.
The current owners of the house left the gate open –
they may come back, tell me to go. I have my alibi,
talk to my mother through the soles of my feet.

(Tigers on the Silk Road, 32)

Gallagher perceives a sense of association and reconnects to her mother “through the soles of my feet”. The sights, sounds and smells of the lost mother/ mother-land draws her to search, and reconnect and for that she visited the home once owned by her mother. In her book, *Home matters : Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, Roberta Rubenstein comments that nostalgia signifies “the longing for an absent, emotionally important figure who is strongly associated with it [home].”⁷ She adds that “memory traces of *home* are inevitably linked to those of mother”.⁸

There is a comfort in both the mother and Australian motherland that can be equated with the warmth and nurturing qualities of the womb. Indeed, this feeling goes beyond comfort to a real love. As Caribbean poet Marlene Nourbese Philip says in an interview, “[y]ou see, one of the things that I feel very strongly about... is that if you never form a bond with that place which is the equivalent of your natural mother, then it's very hard, I believe to love another place”.⁹ In “Sightings” the poet Philip reveals the daughter desperately searching to recognize her lost mother/motherland through the sensory triggers of smell, sound and sight :

Nose to ground – on all fours – I did once

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smell that smell,
 on a day of once –
 upon a time, tropic with blue
 when the sew, newer and newest of leaves compete,
 in the season of suspicion she passed,
 then and ago trailed the wet and lost of smell;
 was it a trompe d'oeil
 the voice of her sound, or didn't I once
 see her song, hear her image call
 me by name ...
 the sound of a song sung long past time.

(Philip, Marlene Nourbese, *She Tries Her Tongue Her Silence Softy
 Breaks*, 35)

Here we can see Philip's clever association between a nostalgic longing and the function of imagination. By incorporating the fairy-tale phrase, 'once-/upon a time', Philip is stressing the way in which the imagination is able to exaggerate aspects of a lost home. Gallagher's "Frost Country" is a reminiscence of the humble evenings their big Irish-Australian family spent together on their farm. It provides insight into in what way her forefathers adopted the occupation of farming and animal husbandary. Actually they had migrated from Ireland and settled in Australia for trying their fortune in line of work of gold digging. While, in the evening, they used to listen 'news over dinner' on radio, the children used to prattle and their mother chiding them to be quiet. In between their father gallops through his childhood stories :

his childhood here,
 the'14 drought, hand-feeding cattle,
 putting the Ninety Acre in
 for the first time, how
 gold diggers turned farmers.

(*Tigers on the Silk Road*, 22)

Gallagher tells about how her great-grandfather took to the job of a gold digger and how they

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(the family) had to leave the mining work due to lack of resources. Later, they adopted farming. She recalls in her email to Guman Singh Gehlot :

My father was born in 1899 – he died in 1976. That bit about gold-diggers becoming farmers came from me. My great-grandfather was a gold-digger, he'd found gold but couldn't go deep enough (deeper than 200 feet) because he didn't have machinery to mine what was reef-gold. . See(Maldon. Old Mining Town)p.30, Passengers to the C) One of Dad's stories was about my great-grandmother who smoked a clay-pipe and bore 8 children and who'd lived in a cottage like the one near Keith, South Australia. After the gold era (about 1860, the Gallaghers took up land.¹⁰

She recalls about how humble background their family had. Gallagher has got many stories of her father to tell. Gallagher's stories suggest about the pleasures and pastimes of rustic life and their struggle to settle in the new land which throws light on her background and biographical aspects so as to understand and interpret her poetry in a better way :

The First Nations (now-called that), Aboriginal population had been well dispersed (Note my comment on Laanecoorie sent a few days ago. My father's stories were often about horses, breaking them in; he loved horses, spoke to them. The farm depended on horses for gigs, drays, waggons as transport Some of his stories were about football. He kicked 2 goals the day I was born. You can gather he wasn't sitting around the hospital. Another story was about the Gallaghers (him and his brothers) having races in their gigs, with each other) on the way to church. There were 4 brothers and three sisters .. Uncle Tom still lived with us in the family house; Uncle Tim married Auntie Nellie and she kept the Post office. Uncle Jack, the eldest of the 4 brothers left and bought a farm north of Bendigo, about 90 kilometres away, 'as the crow flies' These brothers sometimes had fights. Boxing. They stopped fighting when I was about 5 I guess Mum prevailed on my father that it was no example to us children (so-called kids) for him to be fighting with his brother. . We had a piano and we liked to sing popular songs. Mum played the piano. Carmel and I played duets . The first car we had was a 1945 Model-T car . Dad bought it and drove it. 'Eastville 1939' was in that Model T. The 1914 drought was a very bad one . The 90-acre was a new paddock (soil not yet farmed).¹¹

The poet harks back to the frosty evenings and the following cold mornings of Eastville. The scene is about 1942-47. Their village was 'the hub of the universe' as his uncle used to say jockingly which she recalls as :

Primary-school-a picture of a small place, with a school, church and post-office 'not even on the maps', light came from the Kerosene lamp outside toilet. Electricity didn't come until the 1950s. I've written about it.¹²

She had a generous beginning at school in such a freezing cold mornings, She recalls "I

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started school at 4 and a half. They needed numbers to get the school open. At school, copying my sister, till the teacher caught me".¹³ She sketches her experiences at school with her sister in the poem "Frost Country" :

My fingers
will curl back with cold, beyond
their thrusts for information-sums,
copying my sister, half a column
behind, later the teacher shows me
how to add up, take-away-
maths with fingers, counting.

(Tigers on the Silk Road, 22)

Here, the word "Frost" in the title of the poem signifies about the memories of the poet's childhood which have gathered a sort of frosty layer/curtain over the years. The memories have become vague for her but they seem to give her a sort of renewal when she looks back. Many of her poems are based on her childhood recollections like this, she seems to wipe out these frosty layers to see or re-live here moments of the past through writing her childhood events.

Talking about the transformation in the way of their living after the electricity came in their village she juxtaposes their life without electricity in the poem "Frost Country" with that of after getting the current switched through in "Getting the Electricity on" :

Such
fever, a district-do to celebrate :
'we'll be like the townsfolk now'; we sang.
My mother saw the world transformed
by a washing-machine and fridge.
It was all unbelievable for them, specially for her father :
My father, caught by progress in a skein
that swept about his ears,
tracked voyages round the farm
reassured by the sameness of the stars

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and lanterns lighting his mind.

(*Passengers to the City*, 40)

There is a juxtaposition again, of youth and growing age, of pleasure and pain, of agility and clumsiness, of power and experience, carefreeness and responsibility in the poems "Dancing on the Farm" and "The lesson". Gallagher's father was a good waltzer and this art of dancing attracted her greatly and developed a deep desire in her to learn dancing "jazz-waltz-foxtrot-jive- / to find some *joie-de-vivre* / that seemed to pass him by. The poet seems to have a realization of an underlying pain and vulnerability in her father in the phrases like "that seemed to pass him by", "I'm past it", "his face slightly pained", "a look that said he was vulnerable" and "the weight of days holding his feet to the boards." The poet expresses the worrisome state of his mind and her wish to open him up in the lines :

I didn't believe him, standing there on the edge
of my dream with his face slightly pained-
as if giving bad news
and the gentle side of him spoke :
a look that said he was vulnerable,
my Dad, opened up
the weight of days holding his feet
to the boards.

(*Circus-Apprentice*, 76-77)

Gallagher, thus, comments on the purpose behind dancing with her father and subsequent changes they all noticed in him :

Wrote it looking back, wanting my father to be happier. He was always worried about drought and money, a life-time response. He liked to sing. And when Carmel and I first went to local dances, he would take us, and ask us for a dance to get us started so we weren't left as 'wall-flowers' so - called. So dancing on the farm seemed a good idea, leaving him changed, 'Opened up' and of course, he was a waltzer.¹⁴

In this way, the poet and her sister adopted dancing as a tool and a medium to get their father away from "fever and fret" of life and as a sort of escape from the 'sound and fury' of his woeful life and "finally he is affected-opened up, but the 'weight' of his 'days' / life stops him from dancings."¹⁵

One of the several biographical experiences of learning is cycling which she has conveyed in

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'The Lesson'. It doesn't seem a lesson on learning mere cycling, it may be implied that she has learnt the art of balancing on the difficult terrains of her life's journey. While assisting her to teach the lessons on cycling her father gave her a dictum "Balance, it's all to do with balance" and she seems to have made this dictum as a "sutra" to solve the puzzles of her life. It appears that her father's guidance at different levels inculcated in her a sense of grit to combat all odds and obstructions in her life. Such lessons of learning helped her to make her own way on foreign lands and people. She adopted herself in France and learnt French to make a career in translation and writing. As a fledgling poet she struggled and gained recognition in British literary circle. Throughout this journey she kept the words of her father as a guideline for her :

Get your bloody balance right.

Maybe I should let you go?

Dad, don't, I screamed, please don't, Dad.

Okay, okay, but go easy.

Remember, it's up to you.

(Circus-Apprentice, 69)

These cautionary calls enthused in her a sort of self confidence and worked as a magic as she started to make balances while cycling :

Then as if by magic, just on dusk

I glided forward, swaying right

to left - moved away from him.

Slowly, my girl, he shouted, catching up,

steadying my wobbles again.

I couldn't see his face but I knew

that he was smiling.

(Circus-Apprentice, 70)

Here, Gallagher points towards fledgling artists' challenges while commencing their career. She presents the experience of a trapeze - artist in her maiden appearance in the poem titled "The Trapeze-Artist's First Performance." It seems that the fears and hesitations of the trapeze artist are the experiences of every artist and that of her own as well when she started writing and publishing her poetry because there remains great expectations as well as possibilities of some sort of rejection. Any artist has to create or manage balance between these fears and aspirations as the trapeze - artist makes balance with her sheer capability :

She throws her act to the audience -

it carries her to them, their rows

of faces. And it is her sky

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they give back,
balancing her with their eyes.

(Passengers to the City, 23)

One more incident of her various learning lessons of childhood is portrayed in "Girl On A Bolting Horse".

The horse's head forward, not surrendering,
the girl vertical in the stirrups
the black sky gathering steel.
Wind slicing the hair from her face,
the dark curve of herself going faster –
the blur of her brothers, standing transfixed;
she, holding her breath, bone-afraid
and flying...

Gallagher remembers that fearful horse riding experience in the following narrative:

This poem was a very sharp experience. My brother Kevin had just returned from going around the sheep on the horse - our pony who was used to everyone except me, obviously... And he said, Come on Kate, you're always wanting to ride a horse. So he helped me up ad the horse called Sox, just turned and bolted across the yard pulling up dead before the chaff-house. I guess she was hungry, didn't want this 'bone-afraid' person by this time, Kevin, very worried was there and helped me down. She had all but thrown me off as by now had feet out of the stirrups and was hanging on to her, my arms around her neck to stop me falling.¹⁶

Another childhood adventure of which she becomes nostalgic is recounted in 'Laanecoorie' where she celebrates the memories of one of the days on the bank of river Loddon. They used to go Laanecoorie, the town situated on river Loddon in Victoria, Australia. Gallagher cherishes her childhood memories :

One of the most important poems is Laanecoorie. The poem is a Pantoum, and looks back to childhood-ripe with memories. When one looks back, it is often towards childhood and its magical moments. We used to go to the Loddon River six miles away 'Eastville didn't have a river, and the Loddon River is one of Australia's biggest.¹⁷

The poem is a pantoum in form. In a pantoum the second and forth lines of the antecedent quatrain are repeated as the first and third liner of the following one as in the lines :

Laanecoorie on the Loddon, with its long Aboriginal name :
Laanecoorie, the strange sound of it not knowing what it meant.
The Loddon, fringed by stout red gums, with their Knotted roots

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reaching down into the riverbed, the stones, the mud.
 Laanecoorie, the strange sound of it, not knowing what it meant.
 The Loddon, my first river, measuring over my head
 and reaching down into the riverbed, the stones, the mud –
 more interesting than a dam or mere waterhole.

(Circus-Apprentice, 16)

The repetition produces magical sound which is suggestive of the flow of river in a whirling way with mud and stones. As the poet comments :

The repetitions of the poem reinforce the memories - swimming and fun times; also the name Laanecoorie resonated, 'the long aboriginal name', 'the strange sound of it', and 'not knowing what it meant'. Note how the pantoum form feeds into the feeling, the music of the piece.¹⁸

The music of the piece also arouses the memories of her two brothers and one cousin who have gone into oblivion due to their untimely demise :

Prickly January : there to see cousins, swim the Loddon –
 always ready to scream ourselves hoarse.
 Ted Malone dived and like a troupe of tumblers, we followed.
 Childlike, we trusted the river's bulges, its twists.

(Circus-Apprentice, 16)

As the poet throws light on the background of the lines quoted here :

It was written around 2006, looking back. Our auntie Abbie (Dad's sister) and her husband had 8 children, of whom their youngest was Ted. Three of their boys were away at the war - they were older than us. But in those days, Ted was about 15 and about 5 -7 years older than our eldest Carmel, Joe and Brian and I. Ted showed us the best places for swimming as I say in the 'Ted Malone dived and like a troupe of tumblers we followed' well as in the poem I'm now looking back. The two brothers and a cousin who are dead, lost to 'Lethe' are Joe and Brian (my brothers) and Ted (my cousin).¹⁹

She still carries the touch, the feel and the atmosphere of the place :

Carrying with us always the mud and the stones and the memory
 of Laanecoorie on the Loddon, with its long aboriginal name;
 aware only of the day, the heat of sun, the cool of water –
 the Loddon, fringed by stout red gums, with their knotted roots.

(Circus-Apprentice, 17)

One such incident which she has given word to is in the poem "Lost" Where her niece Tracey

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and her friend Anita, and Julien were lost in the maze (a real maze as well as figurative of Kew Gardens in London). She and her husband Bernard were fearful of Julien's being stolen :

We alerted the police-patrols, and they told me to wait in one place. Eventually, we found him, he'd been with Tracey and her friend all along. But they were terrible times of waiting. It was 1981, and we didn't have mobile-phones then. Writing to my mum on an aerogramme in my bag was my only consolation.²⁰

In reply of which Katherine's mother 'reproved' her, "I never lost any of you" but the poet could easily trace the fear and worry on her face :

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

(*Passengers to the City*, 80)

"The View" is also an in memoriam poem for his brother Kevin. Kevin had been ailing for a long and was a convalescent. He was not so hopeful for his recovery and joining his paddocks at his farm again :

The operations had seared his sides-
ridges of scars, Snakes and Ladders,
with the strained muscles slowly folding in.
As he said, the omens weren't good.

(*Carnival Edge*, 164)

The poet recounts the pain her brother was undergoing in these pathetic lines :

I remember the air chafing, the odd fly
accompanying his body's shudders that
jolted him day and night, meeting
morphine that gave only brief respite...

(*Carnival Edge*, 164)

The images "stubble-prickly", "yellowed-brown", "ridges of scars", "Snakes and ladders", "a pulsing sun", are suggestive of his miserable physical and mental condition. Similarly, "Poinsettias" is a moving account of Gallagher's friend Mary, who suffered from cancer and eventually died of it in her forties. Katherine reminisces about her:

'Poinsettias' which is a major poem for my friend Mary, single Mum (Deserted Child) is written about her. She had two boys, similar in age to my son Julien, sadly she had a struggle for money and to exist. Anyway, she died from cancer. She liked to sing. Life as a single mum

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was difficult for her.²¹

While ailing, she had little hopes to survive and the past of her life paraded before her eyes like miniatures – her schooling, her wedding day, her son's graduation etc. In hope to revive, she had made poinsettias a sign. The red of the poinsettias provided a contrast with the way cancer ate her colour. These flowers are everywhere at Christmas and Mary and Katherine used to talk about this :

Her visitors trailed messages of fire.

She touched the poinsettias-

Velvet-strong petals, easily bruised.

If only some of their fire could stay for her,
help her sleep.

(Tigers on the Silk Road, 64)

Mary had undergone several operations. She had seen doctor's notes reading "Terminal" when they were left carelessly on her bed, which made her condition worst :

the tumour's shifts and moods,

as though her body had stopped

in its tracks, to remind her of the

recklessness of cells speeding up.

The word 'Terminal' hammered her.

If only she hadn't read it.

(Tigers on the Silk Road, 64)

Her care for poinsettias symbolically reflects her desire to live, she took the withering of the leaves as a sign of displacement of her own :

Without their red, the painted leaves,

she felt displaced, settled

into a green of hesitations,

willing herself to obey the plants :

Don't overfeed, use tepid water...

(Tigers on the Silk Road, 65)

As if, she needed the same kind of care the plants were given and in result she was following the precautions for the same. The doctors had been testing and experimenting various drugs on her body and she thought that her illness had caused a lot of burden for her children. Her friendship with Gallagher centred around their children, poetry, drama; she liked to recite poetry but didn't write it. She had such joie-de-vivre for life and she hoped for resurrection of her body as the christmas approaches near "Christmas is three months / away. It'll soon be time / for my poinsettias..." Gallagher

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expresses nostalgia as a deeply personal experience. Whether she admits to being rooted in her homeland with the intentions of always homing back, or whether she claims to “talk to this country”, the notion of nostalgia and the longing for the familiar pieces of her childhood in Australia is central to her expression of identity. In the writings of Gallagher, nostalgia for Australian homeland is often triggered by memories of Australian flora and fauna, its landscape, colours, and warmth of the sub-tropics in contrast to the winter landscape of Britain. However, nostalgia itself, as opposed to just memories of childhood, is essential to Gallagher’s expression of her identity. Gallagher seems to recognize that she is entrapped within a state of nostalgia, and whilst she recognizes her nostalgic memories of home as lost ones, she is unable to escape nostalgia, or avoid it in her poetry.

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