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## In Search of Invisible Lives: A Review of John Gallaher's In a Landscape

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# In Search of Invisible Lives: A Review of John Gallaher's *In a Landscape*

Sometimes, while sitting on my bed in my dimly lit college dorm room cramming for a test, I consider the ways my life would be altered had only the smallest things worked out differently. What if my mother hadn't shielded me from seeing my cat get run over? What if I hadn't learned the hard lesson about bike riding and loose pants at eight years old? What if I had chosen to take Spanish instead of French in high school? It is this kind of prodding at one's own life that I imagine inspires John Gallaher's *In A Landscape*, a deeply reflective poem/memoir.

Gallaher has authored or co-authored five collections of poetry, the most recent two published by BOA Editions: *Your Father on the Train of Ghosts* with G.C. Waldrep in 2011, and *In a Landscape* in 2014. His 2007 collection *The Little Book of Guesses* won the Levis Poetry Prize. His poetry has been featured in a variety of magazines, literary journals, and anthologies, including the 2008 edition of *The Best American Poetry*.

To look at the cover of *In a Landscape* is to be instantly transported to the familiar. The simple sketch of a suburban neighborhood of square houses with two-car garages and front porches could be any town—almost so mun-

dane it bores us. Except for the single hand that floats above the cul-de-sac, pointing, reaching toward the houses, attempting to touch, grasp even, some bit of the lives of the people within them.

"Are you happy?" Gallaher opens the collection with this question, demanding that the reader become aware of her own mental and physical space as well as her role as reader of this poem. The address of this piece, as with most in the book, contains an *I* and a *you* which read as Gallaher himself speaking almost directly to the reader. Gallaher's poetics blur the lines of speaker and author, *you* as character versus *you* as audience, *we* as characters versus *we* as the universal or communal. This blurring allows for an intimacy that is at once uncomfortable and comforting. As the poems unfold Roman numeral after Roman numeral, we become more and more familiar with a speaker who we begin to understand is almost completely Gallaher himself.

This unfolding is another strength of the collection. Written in long-lined verse, which mimics prose, Gallaher's poems don't allow us to read them simply as narrative. Just as we feel we are being lulled into a narrative of memoir, a thought, a musing, a sudden new idea interrupts and jolts us—capturing the tendencies of human consciousness:

I also remember gluing a Popsicle stick to my upper lip, as a mustache. It burned. And now I'm reading that we all have invisible lives that encircle us, some imagined thing that defines us in some way, and I'm thinking it's more true to think that there's nothing invisible about us. This is what we are. Look around. We stagger because we stagger. It's where we get to.

It is through this ability to capture our inclinations of thought, and the power of association and dissociation, that Gallaher is able to achieve what his poetry seems to be reaching to do: to relate. As Gallaher becomes consumed in moments of his own life, he asks the reader to try to understand and relate to them. For instance, the memory of a four a.m. car ride, recalls another car ride, and reveals the invisible life of an ordinary moment: "But then, there's this other car ride, isn't there,/where I'm knowing it's the last moment with someone,/that it's the last moment we will still be in love, or something like it."

*In a Landscape* asks the reader to feel a deeply intimate and philosophical connection to the lines on the page, to experience an inescapable questioning of oneself and life through vignettes of a life at once foreign and familiar, to abandon the unwritten rule of poetry that insists that we not equate speaker and author. The collection asks the reader to push through the long-lined philosophizing, extensive use of memoir, and near-constant questioning that is frequently left to the reader to answer. Do so, and you will inevitably find

something which many other collections of poetry—though perhaps more traditionally beautiful or pleasing in form—fall short of achieving: An ability to bridge the deep disconnect that exists intrinsically within a population of human beings who above all else want to relate to each other. In the final poem, Gallaher writes:

And heaven is 7% smaller now, and has had to cut a couple  
whole departments. So we ask ourselves what's left there,  
and we don't know. But we start off anyway, because that's  
what we do. And then one day we just stop.

We exist as a result of infinite unknowns. Gallaher recognizes that it is these unknowns, as well as the moments unique to each life and the associations which link one life to another, that best allow us to understand each other. His ultimate vulnerability, as well as his undeniable craft, leaves the reader with a rare sense of intimacy. By the time the reader reaches the above excerpt, which ends the seventy-one section poem, she finds herself in a comfortable acceptance that she, somewhere along the course of this collection, has become a part of the “we” that doesn't know, but will “start off anyway.”