

Review · *Carolyn Wright*

The Country Between Us. Carolyn Forché.
New York: Harper and Row, 1982. \$11.50
cloth, \$5.95 paper. Copper Canyon Press,
1982. Limited, signed letterpress edition,
\$50.00.

Carolyn Forché's *The Country Between Us*, the Lamont Poetry Selection for 1982, ranks among the most notable books by a young poet in recent years; and it has certainly been one of the most talked-about. Its highly political subject matter—and the orientation that allows Forché to be impelled by such subject matter—is clear-cut, accessible, and indisputably “worth writing about.” Of course, the inherent worthiness of a writer's subject has never guaranteed that the writing itself will have a corresponding value; but in this relatively short (22 poems) collection, Forché has succeeded in maintaining a consistent intensity of tone, in spite of her occasional clumsiness or flatness of statement, and has accomplished what few young American poets have attempted: a merging of attitudes Denise Levertov has called “personal and political, lyrical and engaged.”

This is not poetry that justifies itself by purely aesthetic criteria: there is no “art for art's sake,” here, and very little private self-absorption. Even the most personal poems—those addressed to lovers, friends, and the numinous presence of Anna, the deceased Slovak grandmother—make reference to the larger world of international affairs that most of us experience solely through the news media: the world where the “mass graves of the century's dead” are, where war casualties are “boys sent back in trash bags,” where half a generation is “dead or quiet/or lost.” This poetry is strong stuff, but no more harsh than what we read in the newspaper; perhaps it is the direct transfer of such harsh facts to poetry that seems overwhelming to some, although we would not be surprised by similar details in the work of Vallejo or Neruda, Ritsos or Radnóti. Whatever we may feel about Forché's choice of material, we must admit that her work is direct and immediate; and that it attempts to return us to our stern priorities—priorities that exist for poets and non-poets alike.

It is, of course, for the sequence of poems called “El Salvador”—where Forché worked from 1978-80 as a journalist and investigator for Amnesty International—that *The Country Between Us* attained its initial prominence in poetry circles; and given the concomitant escalation of

conflict in that nation, the ubiquity of front-page articles detailing atrocities committed by the Salvadorean military forces, and the long-awaited national elections—held only a few weeks after the book’s publication—the collection could not have been more timely. The horrors that Forché relates in these principally narrative poems would overwhelm the efforts of lesser poets; but Forché, who seems to have resisted the temptation to rush “hot” poems into print, never allows the power of the message to run away with the medium, never allows her work to deteriorate into sensationalism or mere reportage. An example:

We were going to die there.
I remember the moon notching its way
through the palms and the calm sense that came
for me at the end of my life. In that moment
the woman beside me became my sister,
her hand cupping her mouth, the blood
that would later spill from her face
if what we believed were the truth.
Her blood would crawl black and belly-down
onto a balcony of hands and flashlights,
cameras, flowers, propaganda.

(“Ourselves or Nothing”)

By employing synecdoche here (in the figures of blood, and of the balcony full of political celebrities), Forché avoids the temptation to sensationalize; she knows that restraint is a *sine qua non* in the transformation of terrible fact to literature. How unlike the brutal remark of the Colonel (in the poem of the same title) as he spills the sack of dried human ears onto the table. “Something for your poetry, no?” he sneers. The irony here is that Forché has accepted his challenge and written the poem—but through the filter of her sensibility, it becomes an indictment of political repression and human cruelty.

In a letter written near the end of her life, Simone Weil said, “In this world, only human beings reduced to the lowest degree of humiliation . . . have the possibility of telling the truth.” Forché’s poetry documents (if I may use such a journalistic term) her efforts to speak for the humiliated and silenced in El Salvador—in *our* language, so that we may understand—with no condescension toward her subjects. Having ex-

posed herself to their sufferings, she consistently identifies with those who cannot leave the arena of struggle. In “Message,” she speaks directly, by name, to her comrades:

Margarita, you slip from your house
with plastiques wrapped in newsprint,
the dossier of your dearest friend
whose hair grew to the floor of her cell.
Leonel, you load your few bare guns
with an idea for a water pump and
cooperative farm.

Then she signals the destinies that will take them in opposing directions:

You will fight
and fighting, you will die. I will live
and living cry out until my voice is gone
to its hollow of earth, where with
hands and by the lives we have chosen
we will dig deep into our deaths.
I have done all that I could do.

In “The Island,” where Forché first learned directly of El Salvador’s plight, in the months she lived with and translated the work of self-exiled Salvadorean poet Claribel Alegria, she summarizes those characteristics that differentiate and separate her from this strong, proud Latin American woman grieving for her country. Then she states that which confirms for her the similarity of their sensibilities:

But we are not unalike.
When we look at someone, we are seeing
someone else. When we listen
we hear something taking place
in the past. When I talk to her
I know what I will be saying
twenty years from now.

It is in more than physical traits—the speaker’s “pale hair” and “fatty eyelids of a Slavic factory girl”—that the two women differ: Forché feels

the blunting of the political sense that results from having lived always within a wealthy and powerful country. She has never heard “the heart of the beast” which Jose Martí knew so well, pounding inside her: as an American she has trivialized it or explained it away. But after her first encounter with the political realities of El Salvador in the person of Alegría, the speaker perceives that she has the same capacity to become obsessed with that reality as has her mentor; and that obsession will translate, as it has for Alegría, into words. A not-uncompromised translation, either: in the last couplet, the Salvadorean poet asks her, who could not possibly yet apprehend from experience, “Carolina, do you know how long it takes/any one voice to reach another?”

The young American poet learns quickly; and the result is taut, startling, and fresh poetry—faithful to the harshness it portrays, but sensitive also to the human decency and compassion that survive, and in some cases, find unique arenas in which to flourish. In “Return,” she relates the instance of the ne’er-do-well American attache’s intrepid wife, who, “tired of covering up” for him, flies her own plane into the *campo* and announces to the campesinos that “she was there to help.” Foolish or ineffective as her “drunken kindness” may be, it is at least *human*: not the statistical insensitivity of official reports, the systematic brutality of the military machine.

Even in the most gruesome passages, Forché maintains the same control over her language as she had to over her own actions in El Salvador itself, when she “drove/those streets with a gun in [her] lap,” or when she entered “la oscura”—the dark place—of Ahuachapán Prison, where men were kept in cages and where her guide, like a latter-day Vergil in a true hell, warned her to betray nothing on her face when she walked out (cf. “El Salvador: An Aide Memoire,” *American Poetry Review*, 10, No. 5, 1981). She balances the horror of what she has witnessed against the ironic injunction of those comrades embittered by the struggle to give the sensation-seekers “what they want”:

... Lil Milagro Ramírez,
who after years of confinement did not
know what year it was, how she walked
with help and was forced to shit in public.
Tell them about the razor, the live wire,
dry ice and concrete, grey rats and above all
who fucked her, how many times and when.
 (“The Return”)

At the end of this catalogue of brutalities, Forché indicts those “men and women of good will [who] read torture reports with fascination,” and we are compelled here to ask ourselves: is she speaking also of us? Are we not sometimes reading her poetry—for all its dignity and restraint—with the same fascination?

Not all the poems in this collection are partisan, however; personal lyrics and narratives comprise half the book, and evince the same immediacy, the same alertness to detail, the same tensions just beneath the surface of place names, brief descriptions and telescoped sequences that characterize Forché’s style in the El Salvador group. Many of these are love poems; but love here is a key to knowledge, even wisdom—the compassionate understanding of the lover or friend that is not unmixed, when appropriate, with irony. And even love poems are like figures set against the ever-present ground of global events.

In “Expatriate,” for example, Forché apostrophizes the “twenty-year-old” would-be political poet who believes that “American life is not possible,” and yet passes winters in Syracuse with pictures of Trotsky, boxes of imported cigarettes, and viewings of erotic foreign films. When he finally does find himself overseas, in Turkey, he is so eager to pass “for other than American” that he ignores the very real dangers of so doing. The inconsistencies of his revolutionary posturing are delineated in his love for a Turkish girl who speaks no English, who is trained to cook and to cater to male pleasure, who is a “veiled face/and jewelled belly” rather than a whole woman. With gentle scorn for his hypocrisy, Forché agrees with him that “It would be good if you could wind up/in prison and so write your prison poems.” But there is an undertone to the irony of such planned, self-conscious tactics: perhaps it *would* be good for this young man actually to suffer something genuine. We cannot just choose to be political dissidents, especially if we are so caught up in playing the role that we remain oblivious to the poverty, violence, political injustices and degradations that motivate the true revolutionary. As if to underscore her point, Forché follows this poem with “Letter from Prague, 1968-78,” in which a Czech student—who at age twenty-eight and in his tenth year of imprisonment for anti-Soviet sentiments—regrets his foolhardiness and the waste of his life.

A recurring motif in this section is that of the journey by train through winter landscapes, the speaker and the male companions she addresses curiously suspended, as it were, between worlds, in an ambience that owes allegiance to none of the countries it passes through.

The personae in these poems seem divested somehow of specific identities—

Between us, a tissue of smoke,
a bundle of belongings, luggage
that will seem to float beside us,
the currency we will change
and change again.

(“Departure”)

—as if identity were as easily interchanged as money. Indeed, the companion in this poem carries papers of a “man who vanished,/the one you will become when/the man you have been disappears.” In “For the Stranger,” the companion becomes a type for the many encountered on the journey—or is it flight? The figures of the “shaking platform,” the “wind’s broken teeth,” the “baled wheat . . . like missing coffins” suggest loss, uncertainty, danger, and the tenuousness of communication.

Although you mention Venice
keeping it on your tongue like a fruit pit
and I say yes, perhaps Bucharest, neither of us
really knows.

The dream-like quality of these poems hovers at the edge of nightmare, like images glimpsed in fever-sleep. “Each time,” the speaker reiterates, “the train slows . . . we lose people”; “each time I find you/again . . . telling me/your name over and over, hurrying your mouth into mine.” The repetition here is that of trance, of the obsessive rituals and hurried sexual encounters of the emotionally dispossessed. Mobility, Forché seems to be saying, the freedom of movement envied by the homebound, exacts its toll—the web of human relation is torn; and the psyche, made fragile by too many departures, cannot locate its fulcrum.

The toll is heaviest, of course, in marriage and love relationships: when one’s own sense of self is transient, so are the connections to the identities of others. Change may be inevitable, we know, but it is still astonishing, especially when we can imaginatively juxtapose past and present. The woman who received the “bundle of army letters/ . . . from

Southeast Asia/during '67 . . . who wanted/only to sleep . . .” is the woman whom the speaker “now least resemble[s].” In “Reunion,” the speaker remembers a fugitive love affair—the “room we took in every city,” the “tenderness we could/wedge between a stairwell/and a police lock”—her reminiscence accompanied by the phonograph voice “of a woman already dead for three/decades, singing of a man who could make her do anything.” The singer, her obsession metaphorically paralleled with the poet’s own, is undoubtedly Billie Holiday. The speaker is, in effect, making a progress report of her growth since her fingernails were “pecks of light/on [his] thighs.” These intervening years are measured, in part, by other lovers, their “tongues swishing in [her] dress,” and by the way she has “learned to leave a bed without being seen,” learned to adapt in some way to her sense of existential aloneness that no series of lovers can alleviate, and may only heighten.

Yet Forché is a poet primarily of intense relationship: most of these poems are addressed to or written about other people. There is “Joseph,” a tribute to the hometown lover who is still so shaken by his memories of Vietnam that he can no longer fit into “typical” American life—the routine of job, house, car, drinking, and hunting and fishing trips with his buddies. As he talks on and on about the experiences which haunt him, the poet recalls the shared sense of wonder toward the world that united them long ago, and tells him his current existence “is no life for you, Joseph.” Just as the poet no longer resembles her younger self, Joseph is irremediably altered: “It is another voice that calls me/after all this time.”

There is Anna, the Slovak grandmother who presided over *Gathering the Tribes*, whom Forché glimpses over and over again on a visit to Yugoslavia, in the old women in babushkas gossiping or peeling vegetables in the markets of Belgrade. And there is the relationship with herself years ago, at a time of mental crisis:

. . . myself at twenty, walking
 in frozen socks with sacks of clothes and letters,
 wearing three winter coats from Goodwill,
 keeping a footing on the slick silence
 of the hysterical deaf.

(“City Walk-Up, Winter 1969”)

Although she is now “cured of personal silence,” the speaker realizes

that she will not rid herself of the past as long as it exists in memory, the version of her life that she may or may not tell. And yet, it is in the dynamic interaction with memory that the hope of continuity and personal stability lies.

Since *Gathering the Tribes*, which won the Yale Prize for 1976, Forché's work has matured a great deal—unlike that of many who win major prizes and recognition at a very early age. This book is more balanced, more at ease with its rhythms and subject matter; the voices that speak here know themselves better, as is only to be hoped for. The self-conscious ethnicity—the chanting in obscure tongues for the sake of exotic effect without providing sufficient translation—is gone. In these poems, foreign words and phrases still enrich the prosodic texture, but do not obtrude or overwhelm the reader; rather, they seem more necessary, emerging naturally in the course of the lyric sequence. The reader is allowed to share the poet's "arcane" or specialized knowledge, instead of feeling excluded from it, probably because the poet herself has a deeper and more secure sense of her own ancestry, immediate family origins, and sources of thematic material.

Forché continues to fill her poems with absolute clauses to move forward the narrative and clarify the essential visual details, as here:

You had to walk
off the darkness, miles of winter
riverfront, windows the eyes in skulls
along the river, gratings in the streets
over jewelled human sewage, your breath
hanging about your face like tobacco.

("Ourselves or Nothing")

She still celebrates ordinary tasks—scrubbing potatoes, shelling peas, pouring wine into glasses—but not to the near-ritualistic extent of *Gathering the Tribes*. Her subject matter often parallels issues of current public or "popular" interest, but I do not get the feeling that she deliberately selects material because it will "sell." There is a continuity of concerns here; she has been preoccupied from the beginning of her career with what Stanley Kunitz called kinship—and now that relatedness extends beyond family, friends and lovers to a larger, international circle. This is not the poetry of wit or of polished literary and intellectu-

al allusion: if, on a visit to the Museum of Modern Art, Forché were confronted with the choice of writing about the paintings or about a group of elderly ladies eating bag lunches in the cafeteria, I think she would choose the ladies. If, however, “Guernica” were back on display, I’m not certain what her choice would be.

Forché has learned a great deal, it seems, from poets like Philip Levine—perhaps too much—but the consistent level of quality in this book redeems whatever literary debts she may have incurred. There are, nevertheless, “prose patches” here—where the speaker positions herself, as it were, for a startling image; or where she explains or qualifies it afterwards in much less interesting language—but the overall vision of the book transcends the occasional falls in diction. There are memorable poems here, poems we are able to recall with the same vividness as a well-told story.

Indeed, however terrifying some of these poems may be, how refreshing as well! How many of us, young American poets, are writing with urgency about subjects not only actual, but far larger in their scope than our own lives? Moving in the sheltered ambience of graduate school, writing workshops, and, for many, university or Poets-in-the-Schools teaching jobs, we rarely allow ourselves to be exposed to influences beyond our own language, culture and socio-economic class. We read the great poets of other countries—in good translations—and we notice how often their work deals with political issues, as those issues touch on their own lives. How many of us have attempted something similar?

Granted, we do have a number of often-political voices—Ginsberg, Baraka, Levertov, Rich, W.S. Merwin, C.K. Williams and Alan Dugan, to name just a few—but these are older poets, well along in their careers. What about the younger, M.F.A. program generation?

It’s not that we’re ill-informed or even apathetic about the issues; it may be that it doesn’t occur to us to write about public or political matters from our own experience. Or could it be that in our diligently-acquired literary aestheticism, we have decided, without even realizing it, that such topics are not “suitable” for poetry? I have been told that Forché’s Salvador poems were not especially well-received by university audiences (who loved the family and childhood material)—until the Lamont Prize conferred upon them the seal of academic approval. And I have heard Czeslaw Milosz apologize for burdening his listeners before he read “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto.”

Why is this? What does this say about the manner in which we have

educated our imaginations? Must literature be largely self-referential? I hope not. Surely many younger poets are capable of confronting the world out there, extending their subject matter beyond personal relationships, the rural landscape, the trauma of turning thirty, and the oft-elaborated tensions between the lives of Great Artists of the Past and their Art.

Am I implying that we must go out and attach ourselves to a cause, preferably a foreign one, in order to extend our range? No. We need only ride a city bus across town, or—since many of us live in older neighborhoods—take an updated version of Stevens' walk around the block. We need only be responsible observers; and we must possess that one irreducible quality that Forché's work (at least to my mind) demonstrates: we must care about what we see. If we don't care, if we only use the pathos of others to forward our own literary ends, we become, in effect, what Susan Sontag has called "literary predators."

Forché's success in *The Country Between Us*, that which lifts her voice above those of many who may write with greater technical mastery or image-making brilliance, is the fact that she does care; and to read this book is to experience the total immersion—physical, emotional, and, in retrospect, aesthetic—that she has lived. James Baldwin said in an interview once that we have to know what's happening around us in order to know what's happening to us, because we are part of everything around us. Forché has made herself part of what surrounded her in El Salvador, and in so doing has created a book that will be read—for its timeliness, energy, and accessibility, its uniting of the personal and political—by many who do not ordinarily read poetry.