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Carolyn Forche: 11-04-1982

Carolyn Forche

Stan Sanvel Rubin

Harriet Susskind

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Forche: Endurance.

In Belgrade, the windows of the tourist hotel opened over seven stories of lilacs, rain clearing sidewalk tables of linens and liquor, the silk flags of the non-aligned nations like colorful underthings pinned to the wind. Tito was living. I bought English, was mistaken for Czech, walked to the fountains, the market of garlic and tents, where I saw my dead Anna again and again, hard yellow beans in her lap, her babushka of white summer cotton, her eyes the hard pits of her past. She was gossiping among her friends, saying the rosary or trying to sell me something. Anna, peeling her hands with a paring knife, saying in your country you have nothing. Each word was the tusk of a vegetable tossed to the street or a mountain rounded by trains with cargoes of sheep-dung and grief. I searched in Belgrade for some holy face painted without hands as when an ikon painter goes to sleep and awakens with an image come from the dead. On each corner Anna dropped her work in her lap and looked up. I am a childless poet, I said. I have not painted an egg, made prayers or finished my Easter duty in years. I left Belgrade for Frankfurt last summer, Frankfurt for New York, New York for the Roanoke Valley where mountains hold the breath of the dead between them and to each morning a fresh bandage of mist. New York, Roanoke, the valley to this Cape where in the dunes the wind takes a body of its own and a fir tree comes to the window at night, tapping on the glass like a woman who has lived too much.

"Piskata, hold your tongue", she says.

"I am trying to tell you something."

[Music]

Narrator: Brockport Writer's Forum presents another in its exclusive and continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries. Today, the poetry and politics of Carolyn Forche. Here to introduce the participants in guest is today's program host, Stan Sanvel Rubin, Department of English, State University of New York College at Brockport.

Rubin: Our guest today, Carolyn Forche was born in Detroit, Michigan and earned a BA in international relations and creative writing from the Justin Morrill College of Michigan State University and an MFA from Bowling Green State University. She's published extensively both poetry and political commentary. Her books include the "Gathering of Tribes" which was the Yale Series of Younger Poets winner in 1976, and this year, "The Country Between Us" the Lamont Poetry selection, a book which draws on her experiences from 1978 to 1980 in El Salvador. From those experiences she's also published a series of articles in American Poetry Review, The Nation, Forthcoming in Foreign Policy, and she's very closely identified at this time with our knowledge of the problems of El Salvador. In addition, her poetry has won numerous awards including the Emily Clark Balch Prize in 1979, Di Castagnoli Award of the Poetry Society of America in 1981, the Tennessee Williams Fellowship in Poetry of Guggenheim, and on and on. Carolyn, it's a pleasure to have you here.

Forche: Thank you so much.

Rubin: Speaking with us today will be Harriet Susskind. A poet and a visiting professor in the Department of English at the State University College of Brockport. Harriet. I'd like to begin by asking you something about the poem you read, because it seems to me to say something about really your uniqueness as a poet by now. It has a political content or a theme, it puts you in another country at another time, you know, at a certain time in its political history and it draws so intensely on your

own memory of this woman, on your own grandmother. Would you say something about the conjunction of those two things and you as a poet?

Forche: Well I was raised by my Slovak grandmother, my father's mother. She lived with us when we were little and she was an old peasant woman from Slovakia and she had legs that were like elephant legs and Etta Gennick shoes and little round wire-rimmed glasses and a babushka, and she used to speak Slovak to us. My mother used to say that she told us a lot of lies and stories. My mother and my grandmother didn't get along all that well all the time and partially be mother-in-law business and partially it was cultural in many things and I as the oldest daughter; seven children, was the bridge in between my mother and my Slovak grandmother. And this poem came out of a story that I remembered her telling us when we were little and it was that, in the old country she would always say "everything is so much better in the old country" and you have this in the old country and that in the country, and "in this country there is nothing", you know, she would always say that. And she said once, "In the old country, there are no weeds in the woods and there are only nice; there's a nice carpet of grass between all of the trees." And my mother said, "No that can't be true." She said, "Not like you have here all of this junk between the trees." So, years later I went to Belgrade to observe the conference of non-aligned nations which was held in 1978 in the summer under Tito's sponsorship when he was still alive. And after the Belgrade conference, I was interested in the non-aligned movement at that time so I was going there. I went to Serbia to go on a little vacation to a little village called [foreign word spoken], and in, on the train going into the village, we had to enter a woods for the first time, my first eastern European woods and there it was, the nice carpet of grass between the trees with no weeds and I stood up on the train and I said to everyone, "There are no weeds in the woods" and everyone was laughing at me and sort of looking at me very peculiarly. They didn't understand what I was saying, but they thought maybe I had too much heat, too much on the train and they wanted me to get off and get some air at the next stop and I said, "No, you don't understand. This means that Anna was telling me the truth." And I tried to say this in Serbian, in French, in English and I couldn't communicate it. I probably never would have even if I spoke fluent Serbian, but I was trying in this poem than to write a poem about Anna and my life with her and then this business of going to Eastern Europe for the first time and being able to see what she was talking about all that time.

Susskind: I think it's just marvelous because what happens in your poems, you kind of step into the truth. You step into a reality and then the language and the form come together so beautifully. I fell in love with Anna from the first book in "Gathering the Tribes", and I hope it won't embarrass you, but I want to read something that Stanley Kunitz said about you which I think is absolutely prophetic. This in the Yale, the first book, he says "Carolyn Forche's poems give an illusion of artlessness because they spring from the simplest and deepest human feelings, from an earthling's awareness of the systemic pulse of creation. The poems tell us she is at home anyplace under the stars wherever there are fields or mountains, lakes or rivers, persons who stir her atavistic fond sense." And then he says the most wonderful thing about Carolyn. He says, "She listens." And I think from that impulses obviously come this wonderful kind of sense of history in the poem, but

also the sense of life and they just come together. I'm just delighted with that.

Ruben: You have written, for example in the American Poetry Review, memoirs that you're not a political poet, you reject that kind of label even though you draw; your poetry draws on the experience of other cultures really including the first book dealing with American Indians. Would you say something about that, you say "I'm not a political poet., but for life that's political."

Forche: Yes, well I began to realize my poetry always reflected my experience and what my deepest obsessions and concerns were and it happened that, as I began working for Amnesty International and translating poetry and eventually going to Central America, that my deepest concerns were about Central America and particularly, about El Salvador; this tiny country that I was able to begin to learn about in an earlier stage and to watch the terrible tragedy of what's occurred there. And so, I wrote out of that and they were really privately written as all the poems are, they occur in moments of great intimate resonance with experience and memory and they come really out of a need to get something on paper that will exhaust a particular emotional knot, almost loosen a knot or something to take an experience and render it on the page. This is what I felt. Now, when the poems began to be published and read, they were labeled immediately, "Well, this is political poetry" and "Isn't this unusual, because it's so political?" And I thought, well it must be that people think that if you write poetry which takes place in a country associated with political turmoil that that automatically makes it a political poem. Most people think of political poetry as in negative terms. They think of it as strident, polemical, argumentative, and really sort of flat and weak and aesthetically not very, very good, not very strong or resonant as language. For me, I began to puzzle about this idea of political and the label that is being applied, and I've realized, I've come to feel that all poetry in a sense is political and all language in a sense is political, because all of it arises, comes, is the product of a sensibility, a certain consciousness. And whatever, and this consciousness is shaped. None of us can escape this. We are shaped socially and historically and philosophically in terms of our time and our culture and our national, our identity in the world and so that whatever language we use and whatever subjects occur to us and whatever obsessions we cultivate or embrace, they will be reflected in the work. Now, those which uphold and celebrate what is perceived to be the status quo are never viewed as political. Only those which are in opposition or seem to look at the world slightly askew in different terms than is generally held to be the case say in this country, then you'll have the label. So, because I'm talking about a different country and maybe a slightly different way of viewing the world and history on the society than I am political, and so be it, alright. But, I feel that in terms of the actual making of the poem, is absolutely the same as the making of a poem on any other subject for me.

Susskind: I think that's a very important statement to make, because otherwise it kind of debases what a poem is, which is a totally audited, redefined transformation into an art form and I liked you're definition of politics then, because it becomes all encompassing. It is not a statement merely about men and laws, but about your whole life; our whole life and I think we have to know that.

Ruben: I would like to pursue that in terms of "The Country Between Us", the making of that book. You were actually writing these during a very intense time which you have described elsewhere that you were in El Salvador, right?

Forche: Yes.

Ruben: Did you write other poems at that time? Did you find a love poem or a poem of a childhood memory that had nothing to do directly with the experiences of the day coming to you? One would imagine you might, but I'm wondering what they were.

Forche: Yes, they were; the whole book was written really in those years, because I began to work with El Salvador and with Latin Americans exiled in Europe from about 1977 and the book was completed in 1991, so all of these poems arose out of what became my most serious concerns during those years. And so, I suppose that that there is something, there's a relationship between all of these poems. There's a poem in here for example that in a terrible reaction I had to the news that the registration for the draft was going to proceed, and I was walking around on a university campus thinking how different; how much things had changed since I myself was a student on a university campus during a period of draft and so it would depend on all of these things were related to each other. Many of these poems are love poems.

Ruben: Yes.

Forche: They're not viewed that way, but they are.

Ruben: Well they truly are, that's true.

Forche: So, they're viewed as political because they're about El Salvador.

Susskind: I would like to have you read one of them

Ruben: I would like to have you read the one you just referred to.

Forche: Oh, "Selective Service" yeah.

Well this is a poem that I was in, as a matter of fact, Charlottesville, Virginia and I had been appearing before high school classes giving poetry readings, and these students, I began to realize, that how much time had passed since I was a student and how young they were. Not only that, but that many; they were born after President Kennedy died or they were two or three years old when that occurred and so it was very strange for me, because I began to realize how young they were during the Vietnam War and how much they really didn't know about it. And so, I thought well I need to write a poem for them that will be a letter from my generation to theirs, just as a little warning and a something. And they were always asking, you know, "What did you do? Were you a hippie? Were you against the war?" You know, so I wrote the "Selective Service" and it has in it that little game that children play in the snow where they spread their arms.

Susskind: Oh yes they make angels.

Forche: And legs and make angels. Yeah. "Selective Service"; We rise from the snow where we've lain on our backs and flown like children, from the imprint of perfect wings and cold gowns, and we stagger together wine-breathed into town where our people are building their armies again, short years after body bags, after burnings. There is a man I've come to love after thirty, and we have our rituals of coffee, of airports, regret. After love we smoke and sleep with magazines, two shot glasses and the black and white collapse of hours. In what time do we live that it is too late to have children? In what place that we consider the various ways to leave? There is no list long enough for a selective

service card shriveling under a match, the prison that comes of it, a flag in the wind eaten from its pole and boys sent back in trash bags. We'll tell you. You were at that time learning fractions. We'll tell you about fractions. Half of us are dead or quiet or lost. Let them speak for themselves. We lie down in the fields and leave behind the corpses of angels.

Ruben: I'd like to go back to Anna and ask you about your own childhood growing up with what seven?

Forche: Seven.

Ruben: Kids in the family and a Slovak grandmother who, as you were describing her, rejected America in part of?

Forche: Yes. I didn't even know I was in the United States.

Susskind: Really?

Ruben: So, tell me about how you came to poetry. Were you just born, the first time you got ahold of a pencil and paper you were scribbling poems or what?

Forche: Well no, but I did believe I had discovered a great; I discovered poetry at one part of my life, I thought that I was onto something.

Ruben: How old were you when you came to this string of activity that has brought you here?

Forche: Well, I read my first; I wrote my first poem when I was nine years old. I think I spent a lot of time playing with my mother's Royal typewriter and writing, I talked to myself and told myself stories and sometimes I wrote them down. But the first poem was written a day we were snowed in in Michigan and there was no school and my mother was absolutely beside herself, because she had all of us home in the house for a whole day and the snow was blocking the front door, and we were all wining, "What can I do?" You know, we have nothing to do and my mother said to me, "Why don't you write a poem." So, I said "Well, what is a poem?" So she took her college book down from the shelf and she said, "This is iambic pentameter" and she explained to me how the beat works and the words and everything. "This is how you do it and you make these lines and you count these numbers of words and you rhyme the last words." And she showed me the pattern. So, I sat down and wrote a poem about snow and that was the first one that I remember writing. And she was, I loved it. So, I began to do it as much as I could and I thought as I expanded the notion of what a poem could be I kept thinking that I was discovering these magical things, you know, that until I learned that there was a long history of poetry in the world.

Ruben: Did you bring them to school? Were you able to bring to all your teachers?

Forche: I went to a Catholic school for 12 years and we used to have to write paragraphs, topic sentence, three body sentences and a concluding sentence and very much of the time it was a description of something, and then also we were able to write poems, but the nuns believed from grades 6 to 10 that I was copying.

Susskind: You were too precocious then.

Forche: Well, they didn't believe it was my own work and they thought, well she's going home and copying or she's memorizing and writing it in school from her memory or something, but you, they thought I was copying. So, in 10th grade a first nun believed that it was my own work. She never imagined otherwise. She just decided perhaps not to read my records that I was plagiarizing and she, she made an announcement. She had assigned a writing project and she came in the next day and she said after she had

picked up our papers and she said, "I would like one of these papers to be read aloud" and she made a great wonderful to-do about it and then I'm petrified I had to go up in front of the class and read this paper. And after that, you know, you got you know the class clown and the class this and class that and I got to be the class writer which, of course, wasn't all the much currency in high school, but, but I had an identity then and someone who believed that it was my own, and it was someone who helped me to make it better.

Susskind: You have spoke about help and I'd like to say a few things about some of the early influences in college.

Forche: Oh, Linda Wagner.

Susskind: Yes.

Forche: Well, all of the, is in the time I went to the university opportunities for women were just beginning and it was still, I still believed and was told that I couldn't be a physician for example and all of that, because I was a woman and I was sure to get pregnant and waste the education and so on. Well, there was one woman professor at Michigan State University, Dr. Linda Wagner and most of my teachers had been men in the university, almost all of them, but here was a woman professor and she was brilliant and she was very, she had children and she was married, but she was a professor. And for me that was something she was my teacher, she encouraged my work and my poetry and all of that, and she took in-hand, but more important, she showed me you know I can, I can do that I can do anything. And she was there to be the living embodiment of that. So, she helped me a lot.

Susskind: Does it skew you now that perhaps you yourself are becoming a role model for other people, particularly women who want to go out and start to investigate something other than their own skin, their own bodies and find out about this logic perception, this world?

Forche: Well, I've been very concerned to emphasize to Americans in general that we have a mystification in our country of a political life, of foreign policy, of many areas and we think we can't know the truth, and so we feel powerless, we feel that well we can't, we really can't know we have to believe what we read in the papers, or we have to believe what we're told by our politicians because they know better; they have better access to information and not only that, but that we cannot possibly ever have even an approximation of an intelligent understanding, and so what I've been trying to encourage people to ask questions and to be demanding of their political figures and to demand a certain accountability and to believe that yes the can on a small scale in their own neighborhoods or on a larger scale get to the bottom of things more or less. And the only thing that makes me uncomfortable is when people believe that I can tell, just tell them the answer and that I know the answers, because I know many more questions than I know answers and I would rather people; I would rather have the effect of beginning of process, of encouraging people to begin the same process that was encouraged to me.

Ruben: A lot of this goes back to a very old idea that the poet's function is to purify language. That's what the poet does for society. Part of you going to Latin "America to El Salvador particularly was the notion that you were being invited as a poet because of respect, but I said Latin America because it's just cultural, the respect for a poet as a public figure and, of course, we know we don't have that in this country. East European writers in recent years have talked a lot about

that coming as exiles here and finding out that it's a double-barreled kind of thing because they don't have the impact they had at home or that they're free. I wonder if you would say something about your own feeling for language and I'd like to ask you how you actually go about working, for example, do you say your poems aloud to yourself? Do you do many drafts? Do you have a reader you give them to? I mean, how do you confront the language itself?

Forche: Well, I have to be; I have to put myself in a certain state of mind to write poetry and it's very special because it's not, it's reverie but it's not really reverie, but it is a suspension of certain kinds of thinking. And I have to be in this state of mind and then to allow the greatest resonance, you know, between the accidents of what maybe we call the subconscious or whatever and what I can consciously be aware of and what I can remember that all of those things can be, can have a sort of equal play. Then I work, I work through many revisions and it's a long process sometimes, a poem will be finished after three years and many different revisions and I begin to see it in emerge on the page and I don't know exactly what it's going to be until it's finished. And, you know, it's a process of discovering, in other words, I don't begin with an idea "Well I'm going to write a poem about this and it's going to be tonally, it's going to be this way and it's going to say these things, and it's going to have this metaphorical structure anything." I don't know those things until it's finished. I don't know what I think until after I read what I've written is what some people have said and I believe that. And so, I work very much in the revision process and very intuitively in poetry. And I think that with, the language for me is something that I have to hear in the world all the time and studying other languages helps me too.

Susskind: I was going to ask you that.

Forche: Yeah. Because it helps you with your ear, the rhythm, a sense of how languages function and how they are arrhythmic and also it expands your eagerness to try to make it, make it possible to say more in your own language, because you know what's possible to say in another for example and so you try to find a way to say that in English and translation feeds into that process too of trying to expand what is possible to particularize in your own tongue.

Susskind: Yeah. I think you've worked that out very, very beautifully because as you hear the poems, they sound almost extemporaneous and yet each word fits so meticulously. It's that kind of glove fit that you are conscious of any layering at all because it has become so much a part of you, and I think that's what a poem or that's what a poet hopes to achieve eventually that it will so be part of your speech, but it is not just ordinary speech, it is the heightened but the poetic speech.

Forche: It has to seem inevitable.

Susskind: Exactly.

Ruben: Just to follow through, we said something about your own feeling for performance, someone who began at 8 or 9 writing sonnets. You said you've written sonnets for years yet last [inaudible].

Forche: Yes.

Ruben: What is your feeling for the language? Does it have an internal form? Do you feel that you're writing for example, as many poets self-subconsciously do, American poetry, American language, American speech?

Forche: Well I'm a very great admirer of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson whom I consider the sort of founders of our distinct American poetry.

Susskind: She's the mother of us all.

Forche: Yes. Well, I'm very interested in that work, in that democratic sense of language and in something distinctly American and what it is its narrative. I work in a lyrical narrative. And so that's what I'm interested in. And I'm interested now in the relationship between a narrative poem and the story upon which it is based or from which it draws or the story which it suggests or creates. And how much of that story should actually be on the page and how much of what's on the page can just be a condensation of it or a, or about the emotional implications of the story rather than the story itself and so that's what I'm interested formerly in now. I have not worked in traditional form since I was very young, but I did it so much then that now I just trust my ear to give me my line. It's something where you, you sort of train your ear and you begin, you can hear things. You can hear a rhythm in speech and once you train yourself to hear it, you can trust your own I think.

Ruben: Would you tell students generally that they should go through a stage of working in form as just what comes what's necessary to you?

Forche: I find that if either writing form or memorize poems written in form, if you memorize them and recite them all the time it schools your ear, as much as if you wrote them yourself. My students always memorize; they memorize a poem a week and usually it's in form and then there is an accumulation of an idea of language and rhythm if they do that. And also, it delights them to accomplish memorizing. I mean, that it's funny because we hated it in grade school, but they made me memorize long parts of Shakespeare and all of that, and I think that helped me.

Susskind: And you still know them, I bet by heart.

Forche: Yes, oh yes. I could still launch into the whole list of a prepositions even, I mean, I know all sorts of lists and everything from memory and that's good, because it trains your memory and it trains your sense of rhythm and language and everything all at the same time. So, I tell my students, "Look if you don't want to write in form because you consider it of another period or whatever fine, be of your time in your work, but memorize the work of earlier periods."

Susskind: And that does work.

Forche: Yes.

Susskind: Yes.

Forche: For me, for them it does. It seems to work and once they get over the notion, I tell them at first, "memorize three lines. You don't have to do any more than that, three lines a week." They begin to add-on themselves to it. And then finally I say, "Well it looks like you all are doing whole poems these days", you know, and they sort of laugh you know and they begin to entertain each other with they've found and memorized.

Ruben: Could I ask you, do you feel that you know the way poetry gets divided and subdivided, we have people that are being called "language poets" because they seem to concentrate on language and poets who deal with internal things, and it does seem sort of not only apolitical but sort of asocietal as if they're just a poet engaging language. Do you feel anything like any kind of remorse or displeasure let alone other more severe judgment towards poets who turn away from social things and who focus on themselves confessional language poets and that kind of thing; how do you feel about that choice? Would you say to a student you must deal with the world that's out there?

Forche: No. I like to feel very eclectic about poetry and work and I appreciate many different kinds of poetry including the language school which I find interesting, but people who decide to write in a way that is understood by very few must accept that they will only be read by a very few. The only time it creates problems is when there is a conflict between what the poet desires in terms of the receptivity of his culture toward his work and what he is willing to address in that society.

Ruben: Carolyn, Harriet thank you.

[Music]

Narrator: This is exclusive Brockport Writer's Forum program was recorded on videotape on November 4th, 1982 as part of the Writer's Forum, a Department or English Presentation, State University of New York College at Brockport. This has been a production of the Educational Communications Center, State University of New York College at Brockport.

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