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Calvin Forbes: poet

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Forbes:

Kindness is like a fairytale, the [inaudible] clouds, folic operations, fallacies of delight, misty fables, like the kind a dirty young man would write if he wanted to fool the senses, mothers and salespersons with symbols.

What's it like, you ask, as if I knew kindness well.

I can only guess it's like a wonderful [inaudible] I'll meet one morning on my way to the supermarket.

Meanwhile, I'm only thinking of something wholly imaginary, but it's impossible to explain, except by saying I hugged the fog, enjoyed every chill of it, just like I do you and I hope we have a nice ending and as fun getting there, though we might be sad.

Black:

Welcome to the Brockport Writers Forum, a continuing series of conversations with contemporary writers. I'm Ralph Black, co-director of the forum, joined today by my colleague Ed Schelb from the English Department, and our guest, the poet Calvin Forbes.

Calvin Forbes was born in Newark, New Jersey, the seventh of eight children. He was educated at the New School for Social Research in New York and at Brown University, where he received an MFA. He's taught widely at Emerson College and Howard University, and has spent the past ten years teaching Creative Writing and the History of Jazz at the Art Institute of Chicago. He's lived for periods of time in Jamaica, where he taught at the University of the West Indies, and in Europe, where he was a Fulbright lecturer in Denmark, France and England, I believe, in the mid '70s. He's been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the D.C., Washington, D.C. Commission on the Arts, as well as the New Jersey and Illinois Arts Councils. His first book, "Blue Monday," was published by Wesleyan in 1974. From the book of "Shine" from the small press Burning Deck Press in 1979, and most recently the Shine poems came out from Louisiana State University Press in 2001.

Forbes:

2001, yes.

Black:

2001. Welcome to Brockport, Calvin.

Forbes:

Well, thank you.

I'm glad to be here

Black:

It's a pressure to have you here.

Beautiful fall day outside

Forbes:

Yes, sir.

Black:

And you're here for a few days for a reading and a performance, and a jazz poetry performance tomorrow night and -

Forbes:

Right.

Black:

We'll talk about that in a minute. I wanted to start though with the poem that you just read, "Kindness."

Forbes:

Okay.

Black:

I know that your work, among other things, is deeply influenced by music, by jazz and by the blues, and some obvious connections in terms of influence might be Langston Hughes or Gwendolyn Brooks, or more recently, Michael Harper, but we talked last night about your early reading of John Donne and his influence on your work. In a way this poem, the intricacy of the poem and the way the poem sort of unfolds, I see some echoes of Donne. Can you talk about some of your early experiences as a reader and writer and sort of how you got here?

Forbes:

Well, in college one of the classes I enjoyed very much was a class on metaphysical poetry, and I began to study that more in depth; Thomas Wyatt, see if I can remember all those names, Donne and many others. I read a great in depth that period, Elizabethan poetry. Ben Johnson, I really loved his work. And I read books about metaphysical poetry, the school of Donne and all those kinds of things and I began to understand the concept of the conceit that I think was or someone had, you know, talked about the concept of the conceit that Donne had used in his work and how the kind of central metaphor, and so forth and so on like that.

Black:

Yeah, yeah.

Forbes:

And so I borrowed that, I used that in my work consciously, and I began to think about that type of an affinity in terms of the imagery that you often see in the blues, and that this notion of how metaphor is used and imagery as in terms of the structural device. So I put those two together and came up with a way of structuring poems, you know, that I could work within that I liked a lot.

Black:

I mean, did you do that because you were I mean, from the very beginning as a younger poet, because you were just trying to find a form for your work?

Forbes:

I was trying to find a form, but it's also something that I was trying to find something I liked. I often tell students that I work with that I ask them who do they read and I ask them what do they like. And so the point is that what you like to a certain extent will affect your own work and that your work grows out of your own your sensibility in that respect. So for whatever reason, I was very intrigued by that, the way Donne worked

and the way Ben Johnson worked. You know, one of my favorite poems continues to be Ben Johnson's "Inviting a Friend for Supper," I think it's called. I mean, I really love that poem and I really I like, you know, I like, you know, stories about Ben Johnson, you know, all the I got into that whole thing. And so I enjoy that period a great deal and I enjoy that work. I really enjoy Thomas Wyatt, Sir Walter Raleigh. And, I mean, I read in that period a lot of in depth. And I didn't read the romantic poets in depth until much later, so they didn't I mean, of course, I read Blake. But, I mean, Blake interests me, but now Wordsworth I came to like. But the period of English poetry history that really affected me was Elizabethan metaphysical poets.

Black:

So some of your early education was in school, but also out of school reading. We were talking last night about, you know, your discovery of anthologies of poems as a child, eight or nine years old.

Forbes:

Right.

Black:

And then some of your education though also was pretty far out of school. You dropped out of college, did you, and

Forbes:

Yeah.

Black:

hitchhiked around the country and traveled in Europe?

Forbes:

I hitchhiked across the country a couple times from New York to the west coast and back, up and down and around. I dropped out of college, worked, came back, dropped out again, and then I went to Europe for a while and hitchhiked around there and lived there and hung out there for a while, and then I finally came back. I just had to grow up and get a job and go to college and finish. I was getting a lot of pressure from home, and so forth. So that took about 10, 12 years to do all that.

Black:

A pretty nice hiatus.

Forbes:

Yeah, it was. You know, I didn't think about it because I didn't think that I was doing anything different because lots of people were doing that. Going to college was a lot cheaper, you could always get jobs, manual labor jobs. I had no problem getting a job, go downtown and get a job. You know, as long as you have a strong back you can find work.

Black:

Yeah.

Forbes:

You know, McDonald's wasn't around then too much.

It wasn't a question of getting a McDonald's job, but you could get a job in a warehouse. You know, all kinds of work I did. I always made money, you know, paid rent or whatever so I didn't have a problem with that. And I was reading a great deal and I was studying. When I was a kid growing up, in the Newark Public Library they had open stacks so you could go back there and just pick out books. And I figured out through the Dewey Decimal System where the literature section was, novels and poetry. Poetry was 810, 812.

Black:

Right.

Forbes:

in the Dewey and so I would just go to 810 and just read, just take books out and read like that. And, you know, I really owe the public library a debt, you know, and I still have some of those books I never returned, but that was a very important part of it. Because some libraries you're not allowed to do that, you can't go back into the stacks and get books out like that. And, I mean, years later I actually worked at a library. I worked in the New York Public Library, the main branch on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. That was a great learning experience, too, because I went into stacks again and just, you know, picked out books to read and I had a great education through that.

Schelb:

Okay. If we can return to the Donne idea for a minute.

Forbes:

Okay.

Schelb:

As I was reading through your poetry it struck me that your poetry seemed to be a poetry of the auditory imagination, rather than the visual imagination, you know, and of the metaphysical poets or the Renaissance poets, who I think of Campion, who sustains his entire poetry through the purity of his diction, the musicality of his lines. Right. You know, he's not this kind of fierce intellectualism that you find in, say, Donne. So I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the role that the image plays. Do you see yourself primarily as an imagistic poet, or are you trying to develop more of kind of a melodic line that sort of works against kind of concrete imagery?

Forbes:

Well, maybe both. I did read and study the imagist writers of the early '20s, early 20th century. Amy Lowell, I think, H.D. In fact, a couple weeks ago I picked up an old book by H.D. I found in a used book store. And I read a lot of that as well. So I was aware of the notion of the image as an essential motif for the poem, but I didn't really like the idea of the poem or the concept of the image as a visual idea. I saw the image and how it related to the metaphor. I was really, I still am, involved in the notion of metaphor, and I've read some in linguistics about the metaphorical language. I did some reading on about semantics, in terms of how language works. So I was very involved in that type of thing, in terms of trying to understand the relationship of metaphor to

thought to dialogue in terms of all of that. My language, I was also very interested in maybe this came out of the romantic poets. I don't know. And back in the '70s, and late '60s as well, this motion I was living in Boston and there were a group of poets hanging out in Cambridge that I was familiar with and hung out with then, and one of the things that -- people like Bill Corbett, for instance, who lives in Boston, and we talked about the notion of common speech, and I picked that up from Wordsworth, too, you know. And so I was very involved in the idea of the natural speech patterns, but at the same time trying to give them a rhythmic pulse. You know, I studied things like meter you know, my earlier work I used a longer line, then I shrunk it down, and that was a radical change-out for me. And more recently I've gone back to a longer line, measured it out, the timing, you know, and so forth like that. So I was very interested in those kinds of ways in which the language worked as music and sound. Because that's how I heard poetry originally, I heard poetry of sound and, you know, but since added on to it, you know, but that's how I heard poetry.

Black:

So can I ask you to read, just to pick up on that idea of word and sound and the voice, the poem "Word," which is on 15?

Forbes:

Okay. The Word.

Cool's replaced okay as the all-American word.

Just be cool for Jesus.

Did I hear right?

Cool's gone kosher, laid back, easy on the larynx.

Okay's all right for a state.

Groovy, as in a groove, became a rut soon after liftoff.

Copacetic's passe as the next previous generation.

Okie dokie's so dorkie it's almost irie.

Solid passed into oblivion.

Cool stayed universal.

One of the two most admired temperatures worldwide, moderate, calming.

In a word, cool.

Black:

You know, the poem is it's a wonderful poem. It's full of this kind of jazz rhythms and these rifts as one image sort of gives way to another. Kind of wonderfully playful.

Forbes:

Yeah. Probably from my study of jazz. I was interested in the notion of rift and a pattern that can be established like that. I remember, well, back up into the '40s well, up maybe later, around the '60s or whenever, most records were two or three minutes long, you know. And Lester Young, the great jazz saxophone player, said basically if you can't say something in two or three minutes, then what's the point? And I've always been intrigued by this idea of having a great soloist improviser that what he is doing is editing as he plays; that you have to edit yourself, so to speak, and as you move through your pattern that you established. And so I took that from jazz, yes. I took that from the music, this notion that you establish a pattern and then you, you know,

quote/unquote, rift through it. And then you I'm interested in form, so I'm interested in how the poem ends. I remember a book, but I can't find it now, I believe I read it, I mean, a book called "Poetic Closures," how poems end. I swear I remember reading it, but I guess I anyhow, and what it was is it was a study about how poems end. I mean, because one of the problems you have in a poem, when is a poem finished and how do you end it. And so I was intrigued by that whole concept of trying to understand when is a poem finished, when does it reach a logical conclusion. And one way to think about that is to understand a pattern that you have established, and when you kind of fulfill that pattern, then the poem is finished. And just, you know, and using that as a model. So that's one of the things I'm thinking about. And also, there I like the way it kind of lilts around and the kind of playfulness that's there as well. And also, I mean, actually, someone did say that to be, be cool for Jesus, or something. I heard that phrase. I heard of it it was some phrase, someone used that in a statement. I don't know where. Be cool for Jesus. You know, maybe I paraphrased it or something like that, but that's where that came from. And okay, I believe, comes from the Native American. The word itself is Native American. It's one of the Native American words that have come into American English. Americans are the only one you know, it's always the American word. Like dude, I guess. I haven't used that in a poem yet. I don't know if I will. You know, it's one of those weird American things. It's like a few years ago somebody came up to me and said, hey, dude, do you know what time it is. And I looked at him, you know, like who is he talking to, you know. Because dude in the Western thing, you know, was a whole different meaning. So I don't know where dude came into play in vernacular. You know, I'm just fascinated by that type of language and how those kinds of things come up, like, you know, like dude. It's so common now, I wouldn't be surprised, you know.

Black:

Well, there's a lot of listening. I mean, just, you know, things that you're saying makes me think that there's so much listening going on in the poems. You know, you have your ear to the ground of music and jazz and those rhythms, and you have your ear to the language of the street, you know, hey dude, what's, you know. Just back to Wordsworth, you know, just the talk on the street, the talk in the pub.

Forbes:

Right. And I think that comes up in terms of colloquialisms.

Black:

Right.

Forbes:

I'm also interested in idiomatic speech, in terms of the way people put language together to make meaning in a very unorthodox way. One of the things I've been doing recently, I haven't, you know, really finished the project yet, is begin to collect ethnic colloquialisms. One of my favorite comes out of New York, it's kind of a [inaudible], all right already, you know. And, you know, I'm so words like that, in terms of they have so much meaning in a certain way, how do you translate what it means, it's difficult to say, and it's one of the problems of learning English. You know, any language, I guess, I mean, you study French, you

go to Paris and they you know, you don't understand because they use slang or idioms in such a way that you can't pick up and that your French classes haven't prepared you for. And for me that's for me, I'm interested in that and that's just stuff of poetry for me because people make up language all the time. They reinvent it and they do the job of poets and, you know, like that.

Schelb:

There's a beautiful companion poem, "Likewise," which I like, which is very much in that same vein, as a kind of etymological jive, if you will, right, and as a playing around with the inflections of words, right, and really sort of making it into kind of a musical play, which I think is

Forbes:

Yeah.

Schelb:

marvelous.

Forbes:

I haven't studied it that much, but I understand that's really a factor in German. Germany has these long, compound words that have that the word itself could be multiple meanings, in terms of words coming together. And that's how I started thinking about "Likewise," yes, and I was very curious I was curious about how that word is used. Someone says likewise back to you, what does that mean, and the different ways you could turn it inside-out and and, you know, other words like that, of course. But I was you know, likewise seems so heavy -

Schelb:

Yeah.

Forbes:

in terms of its meaning it might have and the way people use it in common discussions. Though it's kind of an old-fashioned word so people don't you don't see it used that often probably. But, yes, I was fascinated by that. I continue to be fascinated by language, not words I use.

Schelb:

Now, do you set out when you are conceiving the poem, you know, you're talking about structures as if a jazz musician talking about receive melodies they improvise off of, and Hayd Carruth talks about his notion of jazz poetry as a very definite circumscription of form, right, that he has to fulfill. And then, of course, he gives the freedom to improvise within that. Now, do you have a general idea what your stanzas are going to look like, what your line lengths are when you start out, or does it do you start out with creating a certain stanza and then replicating it throughout the poem? How does that kind of creative process work for you?

Forbes:

It could work in either way. It could work I will set out with a particular form in mind that or later on, when I start to rewrite, change it around. "Cool" didn't start out looking that way, but as I began to fix it and change it that shape or that way of structure worked best for

me. And once I begin to shape it and put it in a particular form, the lines become more dictated by that form in some respects, and that helps me finish the poem and round it up, so to speak. And so I work in several different ways. Basically, if once I find either a line or a stanza that I like and that's workable, I use that as kind of the basic structure of the piece. And I try to change it and vary it from poem-to-poem to some degree because I want to keep on like moving forward so I don't write the same type of poem over and over again. Like when I wrote "Likewise" and the poem "Word," one of the things -- I didn't want to do another poem like that. I think there's only two or three poems like that in the [inaudible], and I didn't want to do another one like that because I thought that I was doing it I didn't want to fall back onto that. I mean, I didn't want to repeat myself, so to speak, in terms of the same stylistic thing. The other poem well, I don't know if it's similar in some respects, but I was very interested in the -- it's a poem about poverty, interested in how we think about what is poverty. And partly we think of poverty in a material way, and also poverty in the spiritual, and I was trying I don't think I don't know if I did it or not, but trying to talk about the difference between spiritual poverty and material poverty, and the difference and how that difference works out in terms of how we understand that. And I think one of the things in that poem that I was, you know, trying to deal with is just the definition of poverty and what that means and how it has political and spiritual implications.

Schelb:

Well, you're forced as a reader to shift definitions, right, at the very last line, you know. It compels you to you know, you can't read the poem otherwise, you know, so in that sense that you are deliberately, you know, pushing the issue and forcing the kind of the linguistic problem, right, in pushing it to the foreground, which I

Forbes:

Yeah.

Schelb:

-- like quite a lot.

Black:

And a lot of the poems, I think, do that. The line breaks sometimes turn -- you know, a word at the end of a line will kind of turn both ways, so you kind of open up all these wonderful possibilities of meaning in the poems.

Forbes:

Right. So I'm very conscious of that in terms of how I compose a line, and once I set up a certain pattern in the poem, I'll follow that. I remember back in I don't know when it was. Oh, Denise Levertov and X.J. Kennedy, somebody set up a debate between them about form and content. It was one of those weird things, you know. And both people I like a great deal personally. I mean, I really like Denise's poetry, and she's really a wonderful woman as well. And X.J. Kennedy I liked, too. Anyhow, and this whole question of form and content, how the poem works in terms of those two disciplines, let's say, and, you know, I think it's kind of a

drag, really. I mean, you used to hear discussions like that, I think with Richard Wilbur, or somebody like that, too. And I think it changes from poem-to-poem, I mean, and from year to year, in terms of how you begin to shape a poem and how you begin to organize a poem. I mean, sometimes the content, quote/unquote, what the poem was about, dictates the form and others who formed it dictates the content. And it depends on, for me at least, on what I see in the poem as it's developing, which way is it going to go. And so, you know, that's age-old conflict about form and content, you know, why [inaudible] the sonnet has gone out of style, or why certain fixed forms have gone out of style. This notion that you set up to write a sonnet, 14 lines or whatever, that, you know, the lines can become too loaded because you're trying to stretch them out, and it weakens the poem and it has an artificial quality to it so, therefore, the form has to go out the window. And I'm not quite sure that I recognize writing a sonnet for contemporary poets is a, you know, very difficult thing to do. I mean, very few contemporary poets write in fixed forms. I mean, Marilyn Hacker does.

Schelb:

Right.

Forbes:

And a few others do.

Black:

So, I mean, do you see this contra I don't even want to ask about contradiction. To me, what I love in a poem like "Homing," is this wonderful balance between craft and form, the quatrains and all through this book are you know, the couplets, the quatrains, tercets, kind of this slant rhyme that's not quite a regular rhyme that goes all the way through the poem, and yet given that form, you have what sounds to my ear like an improvisatory kind of language the way that the poem moves. To hear you read it, and maybe you could read it, if you don't mind, I think that the formal qualities sort of are invisible in the poem. They get buried in some other things that are going on in the poem.

Forbes:

Well, that might be true. I mean, I think one of my favorite poets was [inaudible] Yeats and one of the things I loved about his work, like the poem Leda and the Swan, and all those great poems

Black:

Yeah.

Forbes:

is that you read it and then suddenly you realize you look at the rhyme scheme and you realize how skillful it is, you know, and so it flows, and so forth. And then only later do you realize how complicated really and subtle his formal devices are. And so Yeats was probably, if I had to choose, my favorite English poet, you know, writing in English language, would be Yeats. I mean, I also love Pablo Neruda. I mean, everybody did in the '70s. I mean, you couldn't go anywhere without, you know, a Pablo Neruda book in your knapsack, or whatever. But, you know, somebody was saying the same thing about, oh, W.S. Merwin. I tried to explain to a

younger poet once what W.S. Merwin meant to us in the '70s, you know, and he couldn't quite get it, you know. But everybody was reading W.S. Merwin in the '70s, and he was a massive, you know, impact, you know.

Black:

Yeah.

Forbes:

But anyhow, those kind of poets I've always been impressed by. But "Homing," some of the lines actually come out of a sermon I heard in church. And so, again, as you said, my ear was to the ground and I just borrowed some of the language. "Homing." The water's wonderful there and the women aren't bad neither when you look at them twice. But the blame lies in that glass from the tap for making me want to go back. I went looking for where they get it from, but I got a ticket for speeding, and when I said I'm Mister Shine, a black ghost, cop said that's too bad. Glow I was lost. But my sermon is about the water, how it's precious like family when you wanting something familiar. It made me happy. It tastes like baby's breath, like dew. I never knew sweeter water, but I'm a spook's spook. I stole this story from a dead man's mouth. He was a preacher from Virginia who before he expired said somewhere there's a well of sweet water, somewhere in Ohio or maybe Carolina.

Black:

Can you talk about it's one of the "Shine" poems from this selection in the back of the book. Can you talk a little bit about what I mean, how you see your "Shine" poems picking up from the character of Shine from African American folklore and from that whole oral tradition -- the tradition of toasting? I mean, do you see it as a kind of updating or a re imagining of him?

Forbes:

I think it's both an updating and a re imagining. For whatever reason, my Shine is more an edge. He's not as flamboyant as the folk character was. So he has more of an edge to him, I think. The other night I said the existentialist factor to him, you know, in the poem, for instance, where he looks over to the he's on a bridge thinking about suicide

Black:

Yeah.

Forbes:

or whatever. He looks over into the water and he thinks about that. In the folk poem he wouldn't have done that, but I wanted him to have an edge and the kind of a curiosity. I guess I must have felt that at some point about what's the meaning of it all, what's the purpose of it all, and so forth and so on like that. Not that I was thinking about jumping off the bridge. But it's in that great Robert Johnson blues, "Crossroad," all the symbolism there in that blues piece about being at a crossroads and you're trying to catch a ride and where you go from there, in which direction do you go, and what do you do if you don't get a ride. There's a great Lead Belly lyric that goes, "If your house catch on fire, ain't no water around, pull out your rocking chair and watch that shack burn down." I mean, to me that, you know, again, describes the type of

existentialist that, you know, yeah, your is burning down and there's no water around, and what are you going to do; are you going to sit there and cry, are you going to put your head down and moan or, you know, enjoy the fire -

Black:

Right.

Forbes:

you know, and watch that shack burn down. So it's not that you're giving up on life, so to speak, but you recognize. And lots of people, Ralph Ellison has written about the blues in this way, that you're recognizing that life can be arbitrary and it can also be not so much cruel, but arbitrary in terms of the devices that it plays against you. And Bessie Smith's great blues about the being caught up in a flood and what do you do, you know, who do you complain about.

Schelb:

Yeah. Can I ask a question, because I think this raises a lot of interesting facets of your work. There seems to be a tension in the work between the language of the church, right, you know, that common language, and the language of the street, religious belief and a sense of being betrayed by the church. Right. And also, this whole some tension between existentialism and political reality. Right. You know, so the whole idea of existentialism is a kind of a quietistic philosophy, you know. And I'm wondering if you could address, say, your relationship to someone like Amiri Baraka, right, who is also, you know, of course, heavily influenced by the jazz tradition and the blues. But, of course, his work took a different turn altogether. And so I'm wondering if you could address the kind of whole constellation of political and aesthetic issues.

Forbes:

Yeah, it's always a struggle, I think. I've defined politics in a very narrow way. I don't think of my work as being political. I define politics as being political in terms of not in terms of voting, but carrying signs, or whatever, whatever, a demonstration or whatever, or advocating for a particular end, and so I don't see my work that way. And I think that art, to make a grand statement, suffers when it's political. Partly because I also believe in ambiguity and politics doesn't allow for ambiguity, and I believe ambiguity can be a virtue because I'm a little suspicious about politicians, but also people who are convinced they're right. As a matter of philosophy, personally and aesthetically, or whatever, I'm a little frightened by people like that who have a very clear answer, and so I believe some type of ambiguity is morally better, as well as poetically or artistically better to and I think also it's just that a great deal of time we are confused or hesitant about which choices to make, you know, which direction do I go in. And, you know, in real life, so to speak, you know, we might choose to go here or there because we have to, we have to make a decision, you have to make up your mind, so to speak, but we still agonize over that. So I think ambiguity can have a you know, be a virtue like that. In terms of the church, I was raised, up until basically high school, I guess, I went to church regularly, you know, and a lot of my language comes out of that

experience, maybe consciously or unconsciously, because I there weren't that many books at home. I mean, the books I did have, and I read a lot, and the books I did have came from the library. One day, you know, where I live now, I looked at my house, and I have a, you know, room full of books, you know, hundreds of them, too many. You know, because one of the problems with books, when you move, you got to take them, you know. So, you know, you pack and, you know, CDs are easier, but if you remember back in the old days and LPs, you know, you pack a couple hundred LPs, you know

Black:

Break your back.

Forbes:

you break your back, so. But and books can, you know -- you know, and the last time I moved into my new house, the movers said what's all these boxes, and I said books. And they kind of looked at me like what's wrong with you, you have all these boxes of books. But, you know, and I was saying to myself when I was looking around my house that, you know, all those rows of book shelves I have, it wasn't like I grew up and there was this dichotomy. I'm comfortable with it, but I'm very much aware of the fact that my children, for instance, who grew up in that environment with books around them all the time, it's a very different environment than I grew up in because we had a few books in the house. Of course, we had a Bible. One of the books we had in the house, a series of books we had, was Reader's Digest condensed novels. I'm not ashamed to admit it. And we had things like that. And so I didn't grow up in a world of books at home. The books came from school, to a certain extent, but again, they came from the library because I had access to the library. I could go to the library on a regular basis, and I did. Also, at a certain point I had pocket money and I could go buy magazines and I began to read that. I also began, in my early teens, to read newspapers. I began to read the New York Times in high school, and things like that. So my exposure to the world of words and language came like that. But at the same time, the language that was deeply in my subconscious, or whatever, was the language of the church, the language of the Bible, the colloquial language I heard around me. That was the language that was a natural part of me. The language that I learned in college and school, and so forth, became a part of me, and so I think it's a healthy tension. I'm not schizoid about it.

Black:

No, no.

Forbes:

I mean, I think relatively it's integrated, but I'm quite aware in fact, someone said it to me once; that very often I mix languages up in my speech, you know. Maybe everybody does. I don't know. I mix slang and colloquialisms up and then can talk about Freud, you know, and I can use that language. I can go back and forth and I can mix it up in the same sentence. One of my brothers married a German woman and they had two children and they lived in Germany. And I spent some time with them in Germany, as well as when they came back to the States briefly. But they

would switch back and forth between English the kids, between English and German in the middle of a sentence, and they didn't miss a beat.

Schelb:

Right.

Forbes:

And I think Conor Cruise O'Brien talks about this in one of his books. When you're actually bilingual, or trilingual, you know, if you can't find a word in German, you find it in English, you just throw it in there and you don't miss a beat.

Black:

Right.

Forbes:

And so I don't think that that produces a conflict. I think it's a question of how you integrate that. And so I try to consciously perhaps integrate the various languages I have that's embedded in me, because I did go from this one environment to this other environment and it came a question for me how it's going to bring them together because I needed both of them. I was comfortable in both of them to a certain extent so I wanted to bridge them, and so naturally the language in my poems hopefully reflect that.

Schelb:

You know, it's a beautiful bittersweet quality to the religious references, the language of religion in your work, because it's not completely affirmative, right, and it's not completely a negation, right, of that, but it's somewhere sort of a balance in between, kind of a limbo state, right, that you find your characters in, you know, and I think it suffuses the lines with [inaudible].

Black:

Is it one of the "Shine" poems that ends, one of the love poems, We make love like going to church?

Forbes:

Right, right.

Black:

Wonderful. I mean, you know, it kind of crystallizes that idea.

Forbes:

Yeah, yeah. And again, I'm very interested in that. My family was churchgoing, you know, everybody except me. Well, not everybody. My oldest brother doesn't go. His wife tries to get him to go lots of times. But I do come from that environment and I have respect for it and I recognize its relevancy, and I also recognize it both in terms of religion and spiritual growth, but also culturally. But just, you see it, I guess, in Catholic writers. J.F. Powers or, you know, [inaudible] O'Connor, and people like that, how Catholic writers are infused with this notion of the ritual of the church. When I was in college, one of my best friends, you know, he said that he was a Communist and a Catholic.

He didn't see that as a contradiction. I was always fascinated by that. You know, he was a Marxist and a Catholic, you know, and he didn't see that as a con he went to church, did mass and did all the things a good Catholic boy should do, but at the same time, you know, he was a dedicated Marxist, and even though he you know, and he kind of reconciled those kinds of contradictions.

Schelb:

Right.

Black:

Yeah. I mean, those kinds of tensions can fire off a lot of sparks, which can be really creative.

Forbes:

Right, right. And, you know, and I think they can also be healthy if you wrestle with them, so to speak.

Black:

Right. Yeah.

Forbes:

And so lots of people do that, I guess, in lots of different ways.

Black:

So I want to ask you a question about tomorrow night there's a someone connected to the dance department, J.J. Kaufmann, who has composed a suite of music to accompany your poems, has this happened with your work before; has anyone put your [inaudible]?

Forbes:

Not specifically like this. There have been stage readings of the work and a dance troupe in California did something with the work once. But I'm looking forward to that and see what happens. He's also working with singers.

Black:

Right, right.

Forbes:

That set of poems have actually been set to music. I'm interested in that in general because I recognize that there's a long tradition of that. Not so much the poem as lyrics. I'm not interested in writing song lyrics, you know, but I'm aware of the fact that a great many Western European composers, American composers have set poems to music.

Black:

Sure.

Forbes:

So, and I think it's a good connection between the two. A lot of I think it's very much a part of German music, German literature, you had this relationship.

Black:

So what's the I mean, for you, you know, who are so immersed in the culture of music and have been, I think, for many years, do you see a distinction between poetry and the song lyric?

Forbes:

Yes, partly because most song lyrics are meant to be heard and not read. So you get into this difference between what's on the page and what's, you know, just heard, say, on the radio, or whatever. On the page you [inaudible] like the notion of the spoken word in terms of the poem. On the page you can get into a level of complexity you can't really get into in most song lyrics, how Irving Berlin or Bob Dylan, or whatever -

Schelb:

Yeah.

Forbes:

you know. Or, I mean, if you look at a lot of the traditional not traditional from Tin Pan Alley songs from the '30s, Irving Berlin and Richard and Rodgers and all those. I mean, the language, the lyrics, is very witty and very sharp.

Black:

Right.

Forbes:

But it only goes so far. I think theoretically, I'm not speaking of my work per se, but good poems, the language goes farther in terms of the kinds of twists and turns that can occur beneath the surface of the poem. And song lyrics, by their very nature, can't do that.

Black:

Yeah.

Forbes:

Because they're not meant to do that.

Black:

You know, I have my students, my poetry students, memorizing and reciting poems all the time, and oftentimes somebody will come in and they'll start to recite a lyric, a song lyric from a popular song, and I always kind of shut them down and say, no, you can't do that, it doesn't count. And they kind of look at me like I'm crazy, and I try and explain sort of that distinction, that the lyric is I mean, they're wonderful lyricists, you know, as you said, but I think the music of poetry works more organically so it comes out of the center of it instead of something that's being imposed on the lyric formally.

Forbes:

Yeah. And, again, you can hear good lyrics, but again, they work on a very different level.

Black:

Well, you don't want to sit down with a book of Bob Dylan's lyrics, I don't think. I mean, they're great songs to hear, but I don't think you want to read them.

Forbes:

Well, if he hadn't sung them and put them out in a musical form, he wouldn't be famous as he is. I mean, that's just, you know, Bob Dylan on now, it might sound like a contradiction because I'm quoting the blues, because I'm interested in the blues, both in terms as a musical form, but also the lyrics. But I think that the difference between the lyrics in the blues and more contemporary songwriters is that there's a level of sophistication there that's very different because they weren't writing for pop 40, top 40 records or radio. And if you listen to the classic blues performers and the writers, there's a level of simplicity and complexity that goes together that I think is amazing, and partly because they weren't really writing because of particular type of expectations. There's a blues song I heard the other day, where he basically talks about picking cotton and how hard it was, or whatever, and he compares picking cotton to a rose bush and he says he doesn't want to see anything growing, not even a rose bush. And he just says it. He doesn't make a big deal of it. And it's really a beautiful transition that he makes from cotton to roses and that you really wouldn't be able to get in general in contemporary songwriters, whoever they might be, in general, you know. I mean, there's songwriters whose work I enjoy a great deal, a song, and, you know, but I see the distinction, in terms of how they work on the page and how they're working inside your head.

Black:

You have in your book several poems that reference the blues or, you know, are some blues poems. We're just about out of time. Can you take us out, as they say, with one of those poems maybe?

Forbes:

I'll read "Mama's Boy Blues".

Black:

Great.

Forbes:

Yeah. "Mama's Boy" is one of those -- they just want to calls you mama's boy. I don't know whether it can be positive on there. I think "Mama's Boy" is okay.

"Mama's Boy's Blues."

I told my in-laws, I told my out-laws, see how one hand treats the other. Sometimes the people closest to you turn out to be so far away.

You ever seen a grown woman cry, her face lonely as one eye.

I told my in laws, I told my out-laws, something's got to give.

It's time I gave up the ghosts.

You never seen a grown woman cry, like she's an angel calling you home, she rocks, she rocks.

I told my in laws, I told my out-laws,

you ever make your woman cry like your daddy did your mama?

Nobody cry pretty, not even a baby.

Black:

Calvin Forbes, thanks very much for joining us today.

Forbes:

Well, thank you. I've enjoyed it.

Black:

Thanks. Ed, thanks.

Schelb:

Thank you.