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## 'Loosening the Emotional Knot ': A Conversation with Carolyn Forche

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'Loosening the Emotional Knot':

A Conversation with Carolyn Forché

Edited by Earl Ingersoll and Stan Sanvel Rubin

Carolyn Forché has published two books of poetry, Gathering of Tribes, a winner in the 1976 Yale series of younger poets, and The Country Between Us, winner of the Lamont Prize for the best second collection by a poet in 1982.

The following conversation is a transcription of a videotaped interview which took place November 3, 1982, at the State University of New York College at Brockport where Carolyn Forché was a guest of the Brockport Writers Forum. Speaking with her were poets Harriet Susskind and Stan Sanvel Rubin, the current director of the Forum.

## Endurance

In Belgrade, the windows of the tourist  
hotel opened over seven storeys 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 husk  
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 lift  
from 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 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.**

**Rubin:** I'd like to begin by asking you about the poem you just read, "Endurance," because it seems to express your uniqueness as a poet. It puts you in another country at a particular time in its political history, and it draws so intensely on your own memory of this woman Anna, your own grandmother. Would you say something about the conjunction of those two things in your work?

**Forché:** I was raised by my Slovak grandmother, my father's mother. She was an old peasant woman with legs like an elephant's; she wore Etta Gennick shoes, little round wire-rimmed glasses, and a bubushka. 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 grandmother didn't get along all that well: partially it was the mother-in-law business, and partially it was a matter of cultural differences between them. As the oldest daughter--there were seven children--I was the bridge between my mother and my Slovak grandmother.

This poem came out of a story that I remembered her telling us when we were little. "In the old country," she'd always say, "everything is so much better. In the old country you have this, in the old country you have that, in this country there is nothing." She said once, "In the old country there are no weeds in the woods; there's a nice carpet of grass between all the trees." My mother said, "No, that can't be true."

Years later I went to Belgrade to observe the conference of non-aligned nations which was held in the summer of 1978, under Tito's sponsorship. I was interested in the non-alignment movement at that time. After the Belgrade conference, I went to

Serbia on a little vacation, on the train, we had to enter a woods, my first Eastern European woods. And there it was--a nice carpet of grass between the trees, and no weeds. I stood up on the train and said to everyone: "There are no weeds in the woods." Everyone was laughing at me and looking at me very peculiarly. They didn't understand what I was saying and thought that I'd had too much heat on the train. They wanted me to get off to get some air at the next stop. I said, "No, you don't understand. This means that Anna was telling me the truth." I tried to say this in Serbian and French and English, but I couldn't communicate. Probably I never could have, even if I had spoken fluent Serbian.

In this poem then I tried to write about Anna and my life with her as well as this business of going to Eastern Europe for the first time and being able to see what she was talking about when I was a child.

**Rubin:** You have written that you're not a political poet. You reject that kind of label, even though your poetry draws upon your experiences of other cultures, including your first book dealing with American Indians. Would you say something about that? You say, "I'm not a political poet; it's life that is political."

**Forché:** My poetry has always reflected my deepest obsessions and concerns. It happened that as I began working for Amnesty International and translating poetry I eventually went to Central America. My deepest concerns were Central America, particularly El Salvador, this tiny country that I began to learn about at an

earlier stage and to watch its terrible tragedy. They were privately written as all poems are. They occur in moments of great intimate resonance with the experience and memory, coming out of the need to get something on paper to loosen a particular emotional knot--to take an experience and render it on the page, to say, "This is what I felt."

When the poems were published and read, people immediately said, "This is political poetry," and "Isn't this unusual because it's so political?" I decided that people think writing poetry that takes place in a country associated with political turmoil automatically is political. Most people think of political poetry in negative terms, as strident, polemical, argumentative, aesthetically not very strong or resonant.

I began to be puzzled by the label "political." I've come to realize that all poetry in a sense is political, because all language in a sense, is political. It is a product of a sensibility, a certain consciousness, and this consciousness is shaped, in ways none of us can escape. Whatever language we use and whatever subjects occur to us and whatever obsessions we cultivate or embrace will all be reflected in our work.

Those who uphold and celebrate the status quo are never viewed as political--only those in opposition to the status quo. Because I'm talking about a different country, with maybe a slightly different way of viewing the world and history and society, I am "political." So be it! But the actual making of the poem is absolutely the same as the making of a poem on any other subject.

**Susskind:** I like your definition of politics because it's all-encompassing. It is not a statement merely about men and laws, but about our whole lives.

**Rubin:** I would like to pursue that in The Country Between Us. You were actually writing these poems during that very intense time you were in El Salvador. Did you write other poems at that time? Did you find that a love poem or a poem of your childhood memory that had nothing to do directly with the experiences of the day coming to you?

**Forché:** The whole book was written in those years, because I had begun to work with El Salvador and with Latin Americans exiled in Europe from about 1977, and the book was completed in 1981. All of those poems arose out of what became my most serious concerns during those years. I suppose that there is a relationship between all those poems. There is a poem here, for example, that came out of the terrible reaction I had to the news that the registration for the draft was going to proceed. I was walking on a university campus thinking how things had changed since I myself was a student on a university campus, during a period when the draft was in effect. All these things were related to each other. Many of those poems are love poems. They're not viewed that way, but they are. They're viewed as political because they're about El Salvador.

**Rubin:** I would like to have you read the one you just referred to--"Selective Service."

**Forché:** This is a poem that I wrote in Charlottesville, Virginia, after I had been appearing before high school classes

giving poetry readings. I began to realize how much time had passed since I had been a student and how young they were. Many were born after President Kennedy died, or they were two or three years old when that occurred. It was very strange for me as I began to realize how young they were during the Vietnam War and how much they really didn't know about it. I thought, I need to write a poem for them that will be a letter from my generation to theirs. They were always asking, "What did you do? Were you a hippie? Were you against the war? So I wrote "Selective Service" for them. It has in it that game that children play in the snow where they spread their arms and legs and "make angels."

#### 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 a 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. 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.

**Rubin:** That's a beautiful poem, expressing what a lot of us



veterans of the Sixties have felt.

Tell me how you came to poetry. Were you writing poems as soon as you got hold of a pencil and paper?

**Forché:** No, but I did believe I had discovered poetry at one point in my life. I thought that I was on to something! [Laughter] I wrote my first poem when I was nine years old. 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 on a day we were snowed in in Michigan. There was no school, and my mother was absolutely beside herself, because she had all of us in the house for a whole day and the snow was blocking the front door. We were all whining, "What can I do?" My mother said to me, "Why don't you write a poem?" I said, "Well, what is a poem?" She took her college books down from the shelf and said, "This is iambic pentameter," and she explained how the beat worked. "You make these lines, and you rhyme the last words," showing me the pattern. I sat down and wrote a poem about snow, and that was the first one I remember writing. I loved it! So I began to do it as much as I could. And I expanded my notion of what a poem could be, I kept thinking I was discovering these magical things, until I learned that there was a long history of poetry.

**Rubin:** Did you bring these early poems to your teacher?

**Forché:** I went to Catholic school for twelve years, and we used to have to write paragraphs, with topic sentences, three body sentences and a concluding sentence. Much of the time it was a

description of something. Also we were able to write poems, but the nuns believed from grade six to ten that I was copying.

**Susskind:** You were too precocious.

**Forché:** 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 them in school from memory.

In tenth grade a nun first believed it was my own work. She never imagined otherwise. Perhaps she just decided not to read my records that I was a plagiarizer. She had assigned a writing project, and when she came in the next day, she picked up our papers and said, "I would like one of these papers to be read aloud." She made a great to-do about it. Petrified, I had to go up in front of the class and read this paper. After that, I got to be known as the class writer. I had an identity and someone who believed that it was my own work, and someone who helped me to make it better.

**Susskind:** Who were some of the people who influenced you when you started to write?

**Forché:** At the time I went to the university, opportunities for women were just beginning. I was told, and I believed it, that I couldn't be a physician, for example, because I was a woman. I was sure to get pregnant and waste the education.

There was one woman professor at Michigan State--Linda Wagner--and she was brilliant. She was married and she had children, but she was a professor. For me that was something. She encouraged my work, and she took me in hand. But more important, she showed me that I could do anything. She was the

living embodiment of that.

**Susskind:** Does it scare 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 ~~this larger~~ perception their world?

**Forché:** I've been very concerned to ~~emphasize~~ to Americans in general that we have a mystification in our political life and in our foreign policy, making us think that we can't know the truth. We feel powerless, and we tell ourselves: "Well, 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 and they have better access to information." Not only that, but that we cannot possibly ever have an approximation of an intelligent understanding. I've been trying to encourage people to ask questions and to demand of their political figures a certain accountability--to believe that they can on a small scale, in their own neighborhoods, or on a larger scale get to the bottom of things. The only thing that makes me uncomfortable is people believing that I or anyone else can just tell them the answer, and that any one person knows the answers. I know many more questions than I know answers. I would rather encourage people to begin the same process that was encouraged in me.

**Rubin:** This goes back to a very old idea that the poet's function is to purify language for his society. Part of your going to Latin America, to El Salvador particularly, was the notion that you were being invited as a poet. I said, "Latin America" because respect for the poet as a public figure is part

of that culture. Of course we know that we don't have that in this country. East European writers in recent years have talked a lot about that--coming here as exiles and finding out that their loss is double-barreled because although they're free they don't have the respect they had at home.

I wonder if you'd say something about your own feeling for language. Also I'd like to ask you how you actually go about working on a poem. Do you say your poems aloud to yourself? Do you do many drafts? Do you have a reader you give them to? How do you confront the language itself?

**Forché:** I have to put myself into a certain state of mind to write poetry. It's like reverie, a suspension of certain kinds of thinking to allow the greatest resonance between the accidents of the subconscious and what I can consciously be aware of or remember; all those have an equal play.

I work through many revisions, and it's a long process sometimes. A poem will be finished after perhaps three years and many different revisions, as I begin to see it emerge on the page. And I don't know exactly what it's going to be until it's finished. It's a process of discovering. "I don't know what I think until I read what I have written," some people say. I agree. I work very intuitively in poetry.

**Susskind:** Does your work in other languages help your writing of poetry?

**Forché:** Using other languages helps with rhythm, with the sense of how languages function. It also expands your eagerness to make it possible to say more in your own language because you

know what it's possible to say in another. Translation feeds into that process too.

**Susskind:** I think you've worked that out very beautifully. As I hear the poems, they sound almost extemporaneous, yet each word is fit in so meticulously. It's that kind of glove fit where you are not conscious of any layering at all because it has become so much a part of you. I think that's what a poet hopes to achieve eventually--heightened but poetic speech.

**Forché:** It has to seem inevitable.

**Rubin:** Do you feel that you're writing, as many poets self-consciously do, American poetry, using American language ?

**Forché:** I'm a very great admirer of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson whom I consider the founders of our distinctly American poetry.

I'm very interested in that democratic sense of language and in a distinctly American use of narrative. I work now in lyrical narrative. I'm interested in the relationship between a narrative poem and the story from which it is drawn, or the story which it suggests or creates: how much of that story should actually be on the page, how much of what's on the page can just be a condensation, or what are the emotional implications of the story, rather than the story itself?

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. You train your ear to hear a rhythm in speech, and once you have, you can trust your ear.

**Rubin:** Would you advise young writers go through a stage of

working in forms?

**Forché:** I would advise them to write in forms or to memorize poems written in form. If they memorize and recite them, it schools the ear as much as writing them would. My students memorize a poem a week, and usually it is in form. There is an accumulation of the idea of language and rhythm if they do that. It also delights them to accomplish memorizing. It's funny because we hated having to memorize in grade school, but they us made memorize long passages from Shakespeare, and I think that helped me.

**Rubin:** The way poetry today gets divided and subdivided so that we have people who are called "language poets" because they seem to concentrate on language and poets who deal with other problems of form, I wonder sometimes if poetry isn't moving toward not only the apolitical but also the asocietal. How do you feel about poets with that kind of focus? Would you tell a young writer to deal with the world that's out there?

**Forché:** I appreciate many different kinds of poetry, including the "language" school, which I find interesting. But poets who decide to write in a way that is understood by very few readers must accept that they will be read by only a very few. It creates problems only when there is a conflict between what the poet desires in the way of receptivity from his culture and what he is willing to address in that society.