

From Self to Other : A Study of Carolyn Forché's *The Country Between Us*

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Carolyn Forché's first two books of poetry have been well-received, the first, *Gathering The Tribes*, winning the Yale Younger Poets award, and *The Country Between Us* winning the Poetry Society of America's award for the best manuscript in progress and then the Lamont Poetry Selection award. Though not meaning to detract from her first book, I feel that the five years between its publication and that of *The Country Between Us* was a period of significant growth and maturation. Whereas the first book can be seen as a finely-wrought declaration of self-discovery and independence, it isn't until the second book that she is able to make the leap from self to other in a political, as well as personal, way.

It is in the poems about the sufferings of the people in El Salvador's civil war in the first section of *The Country Between Us*, titled "In Salvadon, 1978-80," with their predominant images of touching, speaking and hearing, that the poetry mediates between the self and other and comes to take on a ritualistic significance, as if the poetry had become the sacrament of secular communion. And the concluding section of the book, a long poem titled "Ourselves Or Nothing," is an intense fusion of love, politics and compassion for the sufferings of all men. It echoes the first section of the book with its very morally existential outlook: The only choice men have over a meaningless death is commitment to self which necessitates commitment to others.

(All of the poems of *The Country Between Us* which are partially quoted in the text of this paper can be found in their entirety in the appendix at the end.)

Forché's poetry is not for the faint-hearted ; it is both brutal and brutalizing. She talks without timidity of sadistic masturbation and maimings, torture and starvation, rape and retaliation ; in short, the standard fare of man's inhumanity to man :

And so, you say, you've learned a little
about starvation : a child like a supper scrap
filling with worms, many children strung
together, as if they were cut from paper
and all in a delicate chain. And that people
who rescue physicists, lawyers and poets
lie in their beds at night with reports
of mice introduced into women, of men
whose testicles are crushed like eggs.
That they cup their own parts
with their bedsheets and move themselves
slowly, imagining bracelets affixing
their wrists to a wall where the naked
are pinned, where the naked are tied open
and left to the hands of those who erase
what they touch. We are all erased
by them, and no longer resemble decent
men. We no longer have the hearts,
the strength, the lives of women. ("Return")

But what underlies all of the brutality of the war in El Salvador, even for those of us so distantly removed from it in whatever tenuous sanctuary of the world we may inhabit, is the fact that it touches all of us. It seeps either directly or indirectly into our lives, polluting even the quality of our imaginations.

For the most part in this paper I will be examining the poems in

the first and third sections of *The Country Between Us*, with the aim of showing how Forché takes the specific example of the war in El Salvador and lays bare its cost in human, not economic, terms in "In Salvador, 1978-80," and then how, in the final section of the book, she makes her theme the waste of all war, the universal human cost; how she challenges contemporary man to authenticity and responsibility in meeting the constant threats to human dignity and independence, most pointedly exemplified in war.

My reason for largely ignoring the middle section of the book is not a reflection on the quality of the poems there presented. Indeed, many are fine poetry. It is just that the poems in "Reunion" are more eclectic, moving back and forth in time, ranging over a variety of themes. Sections I and III can be read almost as one extended poem, a fugue, if you will, on war, and while some of the poems in the second section do counterpoint that theme, there is the tendency for the "extraneous" material to distract the reader from the momentum that could be attained had they been excised. I realize this is an extremely subjective reading of the book. For an alternate reading of these centrally located poems, in addition to one I will present later, the reader is referred to Sharon Doubiago: "Towards An American Criticism: A Reading of Carolyn Forché's *The Country Between Us*" (1983).

However, I find the biographical data that Ms. Doubiago presents to be most helpful in authenticating the experiences that gave rise to the book as a whole. The poems themselves do not need this information for their worth to be assessed, but it is nonetheless heartening to find a poet who acts on what she preaches, especially when the book ends as it does with a call for man to meet the political challenges that confront him:

There is a cyclone fence between
ourselves and the slaughter and behind it

we hover in a calm protected world like
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.
It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or nothing. (“Ourselves Or Nothing”)

Ms. Doubiago relates and comments on Ms. Forche’s own account of her El Salvador experience at a Minneapolis workshop, “The Poetry of Witness”:

‘One day two men knocked on my door in San Diego. . . . They had driven up in an old truck from Salvador.’ They came because she is a Northamerican poet, translator of the poetry of one of the men’s aunt, Claribel Aligria. In other words they sought her out *as a poet*. ‘It was thought important that a few Northamericans, particularly writers, be sensitized to Salvador prior to any military conflict. They spent the next seventy-two hours in my kitchen explaining the situation of Salvador. They wanted me to go back with them. . . . I am not a guerrilla. I see now that I am most effective as a writer, as a witness.’ . . . ‘They would take me down a street and ask me what I saw. What I saw was hardly what was there. So they would take me back down it again. And again, until I *saw* and could remember long enough to report it.’ They took her from coffee plantations to poverty-ridden villages. . . . ‘Document it, they said, “Go back and tell them what you’ve seen.” They did not tell me what to say or how to say it. They just took me to the places to see for myself.’

(Doubiago, p. 36)

There is one very interesting poem in the “Reunion” section that I would like to present for discussion, one that does “fit” and which serves as a transition between the Salvador poems and the final

poem :

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.

This poem is a bridge between wars, the Vietnam War and those that come after it, including the conflict in El Salvador : “our people are building/their armies again, short years after/body bags, after burnings.” The two lovers continue their affair in a world they feel has

reached a stage where “it is too late/to have children,” a world in which forms of suicide have become rational alternatives: “In what place/that we consider the various ways to leave?” She seems to be saying that human memory is so short and that even for the youth of today, Vietnam is little more than a name in a history book, but for her generation, because of it, “Half of us are dead or quiet/or lost,” a quiet parody of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl.” The irony of making angels in the show with the imprint of one’s body is that what was once done in innocence in childhood has now become tainted by the reality of death, as has become all of our life and play. The poem stands then as a “witness” to the youth of today of what has become of those who came immediately before them, and the very personal implications of the draft.

One of the problems that Ms. Forché has addressed in her Salvador poems is the ignorance of the American people of political realities, their ignorance of what happens outside their immediate experience. Larry Levis has pointed out that this is a universal problem in war poetry, the making believable of “improbable tales” (Levis, p. 8). The opening poem of her book is therefore very appropriate in addressing American complacency in the face of a conflict they feel doesn’t concern them:

San Onofre, California

We have come far south.
Beyond here, the oldest women
shelling limas into black shwls.
Portillo scratching his name
on the walls, the slender ribbons
of piss, children patting the mud.
If we go on, we might stop
in the street in the very place
where someone disappeared

and the words Come with us! we might
hear them. If that happened, we would
lead our lives with our hands
tied together. That is why we feel
it is enough to listen
to the wind jostling lemons,
to dogs ticking across the terraces,
knowing that while birds and warmer
weather are forever moving north,
the cries of those who vanish
might take years to get here.

1977

The thrust of this poem is that we choose to ignore what is going on not because we are lazy or cruel or prejudiced, but afraid, for if we were to go and see and hear what is going on, "we would/lead our lives with our hands/tied together." Complacency, therefore, and disbelief, are walls behind which we hide to evade our responsibility of sharing in the human condition, which nonetheless bind us in a complicity of guilt.

"Return," from which I quoted earlier, is perhaps the most bitterly ironic of the poems in the book, a dramatic monologue in which the poet addresses her friend and her friend's reactions to her tales of atrocity and perversion in El Salvador. And in spite of Josephine's seeming understanding of the situation—"So you've come to understand why/men and women of good will read/torture reports with fascination"—it is the poet herself who can't come to terms with her return to an America where people have not experienced what she has and who can in no way comprehend and feel the way she does about those "improbable tales." The poet's desire for others to act on her experience, to take up the cause, simply increases her own isolation, her own reverse culture shock :

I have not rested, not since I drove
those streets with a gun in my lap,
not since all manner of speaking has
failed and the remnant of my life
continues onward. I go mad, for example,
in the Safeway, at the many heads
of lettuce, papayas and sugar, pineapples
and coffee, especially the coffee.
And when I speak with American men,
there is some absence of recognition...
.....I cannot
keep going.

...

Your problem is not your life as it is
in America, not that your hands, as you
tell me, are tied to do something. It is
that you were born to an island of greed
and grace where you have this sense
of yourself as apart from others. It is
not your right to feel powerless. Better
people than you were powerless.

You have not returned to your country,
but to a life you never left.

("Return")

The psychic toll that the El Salvador experience has taken on the poet is that she has been forced "apart from others" herself. This then is a transition poem with the poet still in shock, the actual synthesis of her experience yet to come in the future. Its histrionic self-irony, however, does not exonerate the reader. Its purpose is more to draw him into the experience that he may begin to feel his "hands/tied together," for as the poem tries to make clear, "We are all watched. We are/all assembled."

Another interesting aspect of "Return" is that it is the only poem in "In Salvador" in which the poet loses her composure. I think this says more about the nature of experience in general than about the poet in particular, and perhaps this is one of the poem's intents, to show the way in which our consciousness of what has become commonplace is sublimated, made subconscious, until we are jolted by the out-of-the-ordinary, and then returned to see a vision of ourselves as we were before. In this respect, Josephine has become a mirror of the poet before her initiation into the experience of war, and the poet is castigating that image of herself, that typical American consciousness, as much as the atrocities she has witnessed.

Compare, for example, the very emotional tone of "Return" with that of "The Colonel," which immediately precedes it :

The Colonel

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon slung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes : say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one

of them in his hand, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

May 1978

This poem, without the additional problem of dealing with a listener who does not wish to hear, can present its horror in very matter-of-fact fashion, and one wonders at first if it is not an article on interior decorating, or the preface to an interview in a magazine. What this poem does, however, is shock the reader even more by showing the bestiality, the savagery, that coexists beneath the domestic facade of the elite ruling class. Here the subject is such that direct reportage in the prose-poem style enhances the repugnance that we ultimately feel and this comes closest to the poetry of witness that Forche discussed earlier.

It is at this point that a discussion of the recurring images of ears, tongues, lips, and in fact anything symbolic of the communication process between individuals, becomes appropriate. In many of the poems in "In Salvador" (six of the eight poems), images of speech and listening and the organs thereof are presented. For example, we have, in addition to "The Colonel" above:

If we go on, we might stop
in the street in the very place
where someone disappeared
and the words Come with us! we
might hear them. ("San Onofre, California")

Carolina, do you know how long it takes

any one voice to reach another? (“The Island”)

The *paella* comes, a bed of rice
and *camarones*, fingers and shells,
the lips of those whose lips
have been removed, mussels
the soft blue of a leg socket.

...

These are not flowers we bought
this morning, the dahlias tossed
on his grave and bells
waiting with their tongues cut out
for this particular silence. (“The Memory of Elena”)

 You know the mix
of machetes with whiskey, the slip of the tongue
that sots hundreds of deaths. (“Return”)

Your voices sprayed over the walls
dry to the touch by morning.

...

 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. . . (“Message”)

When we add to these examples the somewhat surrealistic ending of “The Colonel,” I think we find emerging a very sacred responsibility of the poet to communicate his own voice and the voices of those who cannot be heard, to speak the truth for the sake of mankind’s dignity. The irony of “The Colonel” is that those who are listening hardest, who are witnessing with most attention, are those who can no longer hear, the dead. Poetry for Forché is a communion between individuals, across time and distance, and even

between life and death.

What also emerges from the Salvador poems is Forché's very sensual awareness of life, and her depiction of that awareness in very tactile images in her art. Sexuality, in its perverted expressions ("Return"), or desperate expressions ("The Visitor"), is but one aspect of that sensuality. Hands become very important in her poems for all that they can do in terms of giving comfort, pleasure, creating art or for being the instruments of torture. In "Return" there was the image of "retaliation: José lying/on the flat bed truck, waving his stumps/in your face, his hands cut off by his captors and thrown to the many acres/of cotton, lost, still, and holding/the last few lumps of leeches earth." Compare this image with the very ironic one in the last poem of the section:

Because One is Always Forgotten

In Memoriam, Jose Rudolfo Viera

1939 • 1981 : El Salvador

WHEN Viera was buried we knew it had come to an end,
his coffin rocking into the ground like a boat or a cradle.

I could take my heart, he said, and give it to a *campesino*
and he would cut it up and give it back :

you can't eat heart in those four dark
chambers where a man can be kept years.

A boy soldier in the bone-hot sun works his knife
to peel the face from a dead man

and hang it from the branch of a tree
flowering with such faces.

The heart is the toughest part of the body.
Tenderness is in the hands.

In this poem we have a combination of the artistic with the sadistic, the very best and the very worst that man is capable of, caught in the image of the hand, man's most sensitive tactile and expressive organ. Hands then stand as a symbol of all man is capable of doing (and feeling) in the world, and the ultimate perversion of those possibilities through the hardness of man's heart.

Larry Levis makes a very pointed example of this perversion of man's artistic impulses in his examination of war poetry in "War As Parable And War As Fact : Herbert and Forché." In that article he relates his viewing of a photo by Susan Meiselas of a dead and mutilated Nicaraguan,

... in all probability, one who rebelled against the deposed dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle. . . . Actually, the photograph shows only half a man --the legs, clad in jeans, and above them, a spine with all of the ribs snapped off or hacked off by some sort of machete or tool. . . . But what one notices is a spine. The rebel is not only dead, but mutilated beyond any purpose one might have who thinks of burial. There is no suggestion that his ribs were cut off and strewn in this field out of rage ; it looks too much like a calculated design, a design which is, at the same time casual. After a few moments I realize the intention of this : mutilation, too, has become a kind of art. (Levis, p. 10)

The poems in "In Salvador" then, are for the most part raw, photographs of the open wound, the cut-off hands, the severed ears still waiting to hear what the poet can say to redeem such wastage. Unfortunately, in the first section of the book the experience is too close at hand, too overpowering and horrific to reach any synthesis. And just as the poet experienced a form of reverse culture shock in "Return," the reader needs time to assimilate and reevaluate his

relationship with himself and the realities of his country, both socially and politically. Perhaps the poems in the second section of the book, "Reunion," therefore serve as a kind of breather, a respite from the scenes of war so directly presented, so as to allow the final long poem of the book to make its greatest impression.

To "Ourselves Or Nothing" we will now turn. (Before continuing this discussion I would like to ask the reader to please read that poem in the appendix.) "Ourselves Or Nothing" is a bitter-sweet love poem and a meditation on the nature of man in his relationship to war, to suffering, to survival, to himself.

There is something of the master/disciple relationship between the two lovers in this poem. The woman came into the writer's life as he was working on a long book, *The Survivor*, a book about the wars, the massacres, that have run through the Twentieth Century: "Go after that which is lost/and all the mass graves of the century's dead/will open into your early waking hours:/Belsen, Dachau, Saigon, Phnom Penh/and the one meaning Bridge of Ravens,/Sao Paulo, Armagh, Calcutta, Salvador..." It is a work that takes a tremendous toll on the writer in alcohol and sleeplessness, in waking nightmares of what man has done to man. Yet the theme of the work is survival and recovery, and it carries the writer to the completion of his task. At the same time it is an inspiration to the women (Forché herself, it seems) and in the course of the poem her own involvement in El Salvador comes to parallel his work on his book. She seems to find the ability to carry on by taking courage from what he has written.

Toward the end to the poem she recalls a moment in El Salvador when she feared she and her friends were about to be assassinated. Although it is ambiguous whether the woman next to her actually was killed, she quotes from *The Survivor* as having direct bearing on the woman's fate:

*all things human take time,
time which the damned never have, time for life
to repair at least the worst of its wounds ;
it took time to wake, time for horror
to incite revolt, time for recovery
of lucidity and will. ("Ourselves Or Nothing")*

The world is ultimately seen by her as a vast political arena, political coming to mean more than just governmental politics, but a fundamental realization that each of us is related to all other men and that we don't have the right to remain silent about injustice anywhere, not even "in Salvador/where the blood will never soak/into the ground, everywhere and always/go after that which is lost."

And it seems that which has been lost, ignoring for the moment the more obvious examples of mutilation and murder, are just those most human of virtues, "lucidity and will." In this respect complacency that ignores the human condition willfully, as we saw in the first poem of the book, "San Onofre, California," is further challenged here. What man can be called human or sane who doesn't have the presence of mind to empathize with and help his fellow creatures? Have we not lost our own lucidity and will for the sake of physical comfort and security?

On a more practical level, by relating the many arenas of war around the world, yet focusing on the Salvador conflict, Forché is able to undercut that false sense of security that so many of us feel. In "The Island" she comments on Jose Martí's words, "we have lived our lives in the heart/of the beast." Unfortunately we are unaware, for "It is like/Americans to say it is only a bear/looking for something to eat/in the garbage," almost totally ignorant of what real danger might lurk there. By going after that which is lost we stand to recover our own lucidity and will, that which we have already lost unawares.

Forché insists on the meaningfulness of life only insofar as we are willing to make it thus through personal commitment to self and others. Again, it is the only choice man has over a meaningless death :

It is the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or *nothing*.

It is classic existential rhetoric ; it is one of the few valid ethical stances an agnostic can hold in today's world.

References

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Appendix

THE ISLAND

FOR CLARIBEL ALEGRÍA

1

In Deya when the mist
rises out of the rocks it comes
so close to her hands she could
tear it to pieces like bread.
She holds her drink and motions
with one hand to describe this:
what she would do with so many
baskets of bread.

Mi prieta, Asturias called her,
my dark little one. Neruda
used the word *negrila*, and it is
true: her eyes, her hair,
both violent, as black
as certain mornings have been
for the last fourteen years.
She wears a white cotton dress.
Tiny mirrors have been stitched
to it—when I look for myself
in her, I see the same face
over and over.

I have the fatty eyelids
of a Slavic factory girl,
the pale hair of mixed blood.
Although José Martí has said
we have lived our lives in the heart
of the beast, I have never heard

it pounding. When I have seen
an animal, I have never reached
for a knife. It is like
Americans to say it is only a bear
looking for something to eat
in the garbage.

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.

2

Last summer she returned
to Salvador again. It had been
ten years since *Ashes of Izalco*
was burned in a public place,
ten years without bushes
of coffee, since her eyes
crossed the finca like black
scattering birds.

It was simple. She was
there to embrace her mother.
As she walked through her village
the sight of her opened its windows.
It was simple. She had come
to flesh out the memory of a poet
whose body was never found.

Had it changed? It was different.
In Salvador nothing is changed.

3

Deya? A cluster of the teeth,
the bones of the world, greener
than Corsica. In English
you have no word for this. I can't
help you. I am safe here. I have
everything I could want.

In the morning I watch the peak
of the Teix knife into the clouds.
To my country I ship poetry instead
of bread, so I cut through nothing.

THE MEMORY OF ELENA

WE spend our morning
in the flower stalls counting
the dark tongues of bells
that hang from ropes waiting
for the silence of an hour.
We find a table, ask for *paella*,
cold soup and wine, where a *calm*
light trembles years behind us.

In Buenos Aires only three
years ago, it was the last time his hand
slipped into her dress, with pearls
cooling her throat and bells like
these, chipping at the night—

As she talks, the hollow
clipping of a horse, the sound
of bones touched together.

I give nothing, so you see I have
nothing, according to myself.

Deya has seven different shawls
of wind. The sky holds them
out to her, helps her into them.
I am *xaloc*, a wind
from the southwest as far away
as *my country* and there is nothing
to help me in or out of it.

Carolina, do you know how long it takes
any one voice to reach another?

1976-78

The *paella* comes, a bed of rice
and *camarones*, fingers and shells,
the lips of those whose lips
have been removed, mussels
the soft blue of a leg socket.

This is not *paella*, this is what
has become of those who remained
in Buenos Aires. This is the ring
of a rifle report on the stones,
her hand over her mouth,
her husband falling against her.

These are the flowers we bought
this morning, the dahlias tossed
on his grave and bells
waiting with their tongues cut out
for this particular silence.

1977

From Self to Other : A Study of Carolyn Forché's *The Country Between Us*

MASSAGE

Your voices sprayed over the walls
dry to the touch by morning.
Your women walk among *champas*
with baskets of live hens, grenades and fruit.
Tonight you begin to fight
for the most hopeless of revolutions.
Pedro, you place a host on each
man's chant of *Body of Christ Amen*.
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 bare few guns
with an idea for a water pump and
co-operative farm.

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 our
hands and by the lives we have chosen
we will dig deep into our deaths.
I have done all that I could do.
Link hands, link arms with me
in the next of lives everafter,
where we will not know each other
or ourselves, where we will be a various
darkness among ideas that amounted
to nothing, among men who amounted
to nothing, with a belief that became
but small light
in the breadth of time where we began
among each other, where we lived
in the hour farthest from God.

1980-81

RETURN

for JOSEPHINE CRUM

Upon my return to America, Josephine :
the iced drinks and paper umbrellas, clean
toilets and Los Angeles plum trees moving
like lean women, I was afraid more than
I had been, even of motels so much so
that for months every tire blow-out
was final, every strange car near the house
kept watch and I strained even to remember
things impossible to forget. You took
my stories apart for hours, sitting
on your sofa with your legs under you
and fifty years in your face.

So you know

now, you said, what kind of money
is involved and that *campesinos* knife
one another and you know you should
not trust anyone and so you find a few
people you will trust. You know the mix
of machetes with whiskey, the slip of the tongue
that costs hundreds of deaths.
You've seen the pits where men and women
are kept the few days it takes without
food and water. You've heard the cocktail
conversation on which their release depends.
So you've come to understand why
men and women of good will read
torture reports with fascination.
Such things as water pumps

and co-op farms are of little importance
and take years.
It is not Che Guevara, this struggle.
Camillo Torres is dead. Victor Jara
was rounded up with the others, and José
Martí is a landing strip for planes
from Miami to Cuba. Go try on
Americans your long, dull story
of corruption, but better to give
them what they want: Lil Milagro Ramirez,
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.
Tell them about retaliation: José lying
on the flat bed truck, waving his stumps
in your face, his hands cut off by his
captors and thrown to the many acres
of cotton, lost, still, and holding
the last few lumps of leeches earth.
Tell them of José in his last few hours
and later how, many months later,
a labor leader was cut to pieces and buried.
Tell them how his friends found
the soldiers and made them dig him up
and ask forgiveness of the corpse, once
it was assembled again on the ground
like a man. As for the cars, of course
they watch you and for this don't flatter
yourself. We are all watched. We are
all assembled.

Josephine, I tell you
I have not rested, not since I drove

those streets with a gun in my lap,
not since all manner of speaking has
failed and the remnant of my life
continues onward. I go mad, for example,
in the Safeway, at the many heads
of lettuce, papayas and sugar, pineapples
and coffee, especially the coffee.
And when I speak with American men,
there is some absence of recognition:
their constant Scotch and fine white
hands, many hours of business, penises
hardened by motor inns and a faint
resemblance to their wives. I cannot
keep going. I remember the American
attaché in that country: his tanks
of fish, his clicking pen, his rapt
devotion to reports. His wife wrote
his reports. She said as much as she
gathered him each day from the embassy
compound, that she was tired of covering
up, sick of his drinking and the loss
of his last promotion. She was a woman
who flew her own plane, stalling out
after four martinis to taxi on an empty
field in the *campo* and to those men
and women announce she was there to help.
She flew where she pleased in that country
with her drunken kindness, while Marines
in white gloves were assigned to protect
her husband. It was difficult work, what
with the suspicion on the rise in smaller
countries that gringos die like other men.
I cannot, Josephine, talk to them.
And so, you say, you've learned a little
about starvation: a child like a supper scrap

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filling with worms, many children strung together, as if they were cut from paper and all in a delicate chain. And that people who rescue physicists, lawyers and poets lie in their beds at night with reports of mice introduced into women, of men whose testicles are crushed like eggs. That they cup their own parts with their bedsheets and move themselves slowly, imagining bracelets affixing their wrists to a wall where the naked are pinned, where the naked are tied open and left to the hands of those who erase what they touch. We are all erased

by them, and no longer resemble decent men. We no longer have the hearts, the strength, the lives of women. Your problem is not your life as it is in America, not that your hands, as you tell me, are tied to do something. It is that you were born to an island of greed and grace where you have this sense of yourself as apart from others. It is not your right to feel powerless. Better people than you were powerless. You have not returned to your country, but to a life you never left.

1980

OURSELVES OR NOTHING

FOR TERENCE DES PRES

AFTER seven years and as the wine leaves and black trunks of maples wait beyond the window, I think of you north, in the few lighted rooms of that ruined house, a candle in each open pane of breath, the absence of anyone, snow in a hurry to earth, my fingernails pressing half moons into the sill as I watched you pouring three then four fingers of Scotch over ice, the chill in your throat like a small blue bone, those years of your work on the Holocaust. 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. I was with you even then, your face the face of a clock as you swept through the memoirs of men and women who would not give up. In the short light of Decembers, you took suppers of whole white hens and pans of broth in a city of liquor bottles and light. Go after that which is lost and all the mass graves of the century's dead will open into your early waking hours: Belsen, Dachau, Saigon, Phnom Penh and the one meaning Bridge of Ravens, Sao Paulo, Armagh, Calcutta, Salvador, although these are not the same. You wrote too of Theresienstadt, that word that ran screaming into my girlhood, lifting its grey wool dress, the smoke in its violent plumes and feathers, the dark wormy heart of the human desire to die.

In Prague, Anna told me, there was bread,
stubborn potatoes and fish, armies and the women
who lie down with them, eggs perhaps but never
meat, never meat but the dead.
In Theresienstadt she said there was only the dying.
Never bread, potatoes, fish or women.
They were all as yet girls then.
Vast numbers of men and women died, you wrote,
because they did not have time, the blessing
of sheer time, to recover. You ration of time
was smaller then, a tin spoon of winter,
piano notes one at a time from the roof
to the gutter. I am only imagining this,
as I had not yet entered your life
like the dark fact of a gun on your pillow,
or Anna Akhmatova's "Requiem"
and its final *I can* when the faceless woman
before her asked *can you describe this?*
I was not yet in your life when you turned
the bullet toward the empty hole in yourself
and whispered: finish this or die.
But you lived and what you wrote became
The Survivor, that act of contrition for despair:
They turned to face the worst
straight-on, without sentiment or hope,
simply to keep watch over life. Now,
as you sleep face down on your papers,
the book pages turning of themselves
in your invisible breath, I climb
the stairs of that house, fragile
with age and the dry fear of burning
and I touch the needle to music to wake you,
the snow long past falling, something
by Vivaldi or Brahms.
I have come from our cacophonous
ordinary lives where I stood at the sink
last summer scrubbing mud from potatoes
and listening to the supper fish
in the skillet, my eyes on the narrowed
streets of rain through the window
as I thought of the long war
that misted country turned to the moon's surface,
grey and ring-wormed with ridges of light.
The women in their silk *ao daís* along
the river, those flowers under fire, rolled
at night in the desperate arms of American men.
Once I walked your rooms with my
nightdress open, a cigarette from my lips
to the darkness and back as you worked
at times through to the morning.
Always on my waking you were gone,
the blue holes of your path through snow
to the road, your face still haggard
in the white mirror, the pained note
where ten times you had written
the word *recalcitrance* and once:
you will die and live
under the name of someone
who has actually died.
I think of that night in a tropic hotel,
the man who danced with a tray over his head
and offered us free because we were *socialistas*,
not only that, he sang, but young and pretty.
Later as I lay on a cot in the heat naked
my friend was able to reach for the guns
and load them clicking in the moonlight
with only the barest of sounds;
he had heard them before me moving among the palms.
We were going to die there.
I remember the moon notching its way

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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.

Her name was Renée and without knowing
her you wrote: *all things human take time,*
time which the damned never have, time for life
to repair at least the worst of its wounds ;
it took time to wake, time for horror
to incite revolt, time for the recovery
of lucidity and will.

In the late afternoons you returned,
the long teeth shining from the eaves,
a clink in the wood half-burnt

and as you touched it alive :

ici repose un déporté inconnu.

In the mass graves, a woman's hand
caged in the ribs of her child,

a single stone in Spain beneath olives,

in Germany the silent windy fields,

in the Soviet Union where the snow

is scarred with wire, in Salvador

where the blood will never soak

into the ground, everywhere and always

go after that which is lost.

There is a cyclone fence between
ourselves and the slaughter and behind it
we hover in a calm protected world like
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.

It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or nothing.