

## Small Lights.

### On Poems, Coming-to-consciousness, and Conscience

CAROLYN FORCHÉ AND CORNELIA GRÄBNER

**ABSTRACT:** The essay re-arranges elements of three conversations between the authors that took place online in May and June 2022. Throughout these conversations the authors explored themes around the poetics of dissent, oppositional consciousness, dissidence, and poetry of witness, always in relation to the process of coming-to-consciousness. The essay translates the resonant – as distinct to, linear – dynamic of the conversations into writing, and arranges the content in five central sections: Stepping Out, Immersions and Accompaniments, Countering Acquiescence, Being Present, Extremity, and Dissidence. Each section is introduced first by a quote by Forché, then by a brief reflection and conceptual conceptualization by Gräbner, and a key thought or term then introduces each train of thought, or paragraph. The themes emerge within a poetic, conceptual and political reflection on consciousness and conscience.

**KEYWORDS:** Poetry, Activism, Conscientización, Witness, Extremity

*“On the Bridge, between worlds, and in a state of perpetual midnight meditations on how to truly effect change, and on how to truly effect awareness of the need for structural change.”*

Carolyn and I met on that metaphorical bridge, online, for three long, non-linear conversations. With the Atlantic Ocean between us, we embarked on an exploration, one that was instigated by a shared curiosity about poetry and dissent, oppositional consciousness, and dissidence. Our journey was guided by attention, not intention. We found ourselves in the presence of much that could not be articulated through the terms of our initial curiosity. We created resonance instead of asking each other direct questions. Our conversations became like an attuned chime of words, ideas, principles, experiences, questionings; a chime that created its very own, unpredictable sound world.

This sound world refused to be turned into a structured piece of writing with contoured thoughts, outcomes, and conclusions. Chimes do not harmonize with the page. Transcription evens out pace and flattens timbre. The hesitations disappear. The attentiveness of listening does not translate into letters, nor does the fluid attuning and retuning to the other person's presence. So I turned the chime into an essay of sorts. With readability in mind, I have structured it into five sections, modelled on the tubes of the windchime. These metaphorical tubes are suspended from a central platform: the idea and practice of *conscientización*, of coming-to consciousness, which holds the tubes and arranges them in their spatial relation to each other.

'Coming-to-consciousness' ('conscientización', in Spanish) refers to our process of becoming critically aware of, and inhabit, the world we have been placed within. 'Conscience of the world', Paulo Freire wrote, 'engenders conscience of the self, and of others in the world, and with the world. It is by acting in the world that we make ourselves. Therefore, it is by inserting ourselves into the world, not by adapting to it, that we become historical and ethical beings, capable of opting, of deciding, of breaking away.'<sup>1</sup> Consciousness requires our presence in the situations that make up our world, before we can even start to apprehend

these situations and come to consciousness within them. If we refuse the world our full presence, we refuse to come to consciousness within it.

Carolyn and I, from sometimes different and sometimes similar vantage points, are moved and motivated by poets whose conscience is built through and from within this process. When Carolyn ‘makes’ a poem, it becomes an intervention in the Freirean sense: it originates from a consciousness that “is a commitment *to* the world by a being who is *presence in the world*”. This commitment, Freire writes, is the precondition for intervention and therefore, for hope: “In place of *adherence*, of *adaptation*, there is *intervention* in the world, *insertion* in it.”<sup>2</sup>

During our conversations we sometimes reference a few chronological anchor points, Carolyn’s books. The poetry collections *Gathering the Tribes* (1975), *The Country Between Us* (1981), *The Angel of History* (1994), *Blue Hour* (2003), and *In the Lateness of the World* (2020) each mark the beginning or the culmination of a process of coming-to-consciousness. So does Carolyn’s translation of Claribel Alegria’s poems, published as *Flowers from the Volcano* (1982). The two *Poetry of Witness* anthologies<sup>3</sup> respond to the isolation and the backlash she experienced after the publication of *The Country* and her activism to educate the U.S. public about their official support for the Salvadorean army and their unofficial complicity with the death squads. These anthologies conceptualize, transnationally and transculturally, a genre of poetry crafted on the intersections of consciousness and conscience, as Carolyn puts it. Carolyn’s memoir *What You Have Heard is True* (2019) is a narrative reflection on the pivotal process of coming-to-consciousness she underwent in the late 1970s in El Salvador.

## STEPPING OUT

“We are always trying to step out of the fog of our unwitting connivance with the ideology that is pervasive when we’re coming of age.”

*So that we can come to consciousness, the hold that ideology has over us must be broken. Carolyn narrates her own processes of coming-to-consciousness through moments when she ‘stepped out’ and immersed herself into a context that radically questioned the one she was usually immersed in. As she gives her full presence to these situations, she steps out of the ideology that defines her consciousness. Subsequently, ideology shatters and her way of being in the world changes. Since Carolyn’s poems are her way of being present in the world, her poems are crafted from within this new consciousness.*

*In her memoir What You Have Heard is True, Carolyn tells of crucial instances of her stepping out, of ideology shattering, and her coming into consciousness. She first ‘steps out’ when she leaves behind her familiar environment in Michigan for a trip to New Mexico. There, she makes friends with a Pueblo couple, and lives with them for a while. Her first book, Gathering the Tribes, emerges from the realization that her compass for navigating the world as she knew it, did not work in the situation she was in.*

*In 1978, Carolyn ‘steps out’ again. She travels to Mallorca with her friend Maya Flakoll, to visit the poet Claribel Alegria – Maya’s mother – whose work she is in the process of translating. In Claribel’s house she meets refugees from the Southern Cone and realizes how deeply the U.S. is implicated in the repressive regimes there. Her translation of Alegria’s poems, and her introduction to this book, are the outcome of this shift in consciousness.*

*This second shift in consciousness prepares a third, brought on by Leonel Gómez Vides, Claribel Alegria’s cousin, who takes her to El Salvador and acts as a catalyst for the*

*most pivotal process of conscientización that Carolyn experiences. After her return from El Salvador, she travels to Beirut, to Northern Ireland, to South Africa, and to Central European countries that are undergoing a structurally violent transition to extreme forms of capitalism after 1989, now drawing on the consciousness and the attentiveness she has built previously.*

*The decision to ‘step out’ is foreshadowed by a – sometimes eerie – sense of disquiet, a discomfort, an awareness that things are not what they appear and that the safety a particular environment appears to offer us, is false or comes at others’ expense. People who have that sense of disquiet recognize it in others, and this is how I first became interested in Carolyn’s work. I do not know whether it comes from the family history of displacement that we share, or whether it comes from family histories which have been marked by the experience that none of the existing political systems offer truthful proposals for a more dignified world. It might come from the recognition that in times of extremity or crisis, when everything breaks away and few things remain comprehensible, only our conscience in its dialogue with our ever-evolving consciousness can act as a reliable compass. And this brings on a desire to know, to be clear, a desire for lucidity.*

**Now.** I wrote something recently for a Zoom together with poets in Ukraine. It wasn’t a poem. It was an immediate and urgent response. It was letters in an emergency. It was not worked on. It was an immediate transfer of message across continents. It was the first time I released something into the public sphere without objectifying it and working on it first. It was not a poem. I realized that when I hesitated to release that piece of writing, I was under a false idea of what a poem was and what it could be in the world. It was the first time that I stepped outside of the literary sphere of considerations. I had written very directly out of political experience before, I had spent time with those works and made them into something

for the page. This time that didn't happen, but they went to the page anyway. I found this breakthrough really interesting, and I'm happy that I did that.<sup>4</sup>

I was supposed to do this Zoom, and I had a couple of poems to read for them. I wanted to be in that Zoom to be present for them. In some of the ambient background noise, you could hear noises from outside that sounded like artillery shelling, and the rest of the Zooms were quiet. All of the poets were waiting in a pensive quiet for what they knew would come. I was going to read my poems if they wanted them, but I wanted to hear their poems, and I just wanted to be there for them, to be in connection with them. [...] Just before I went on, I wanted to say something, and I thought if I waited until the Zoom was on I would be speechless. And so I wrote it instead, but I wrote it a couple of minutes before the Zoom started, really fast, and I read it to them. It was very powerful for me, and, they say, for them.

**Peeling away the surface of things.** Very early in my life I knew that there was an elsewhere, that there was something I wasn't getting. I saw as a very young girl that my reality was constructed. I was always trying to peel away the surface of things. I wandered around in the American wilderness. I didn't have the means to travel at that point in my life. I went away to immerse myself in an indigenous culture. They taught me a great deal, and Leonel told me later that the reason he thought I could do that thing in El Salvador was that I had done *that* before. I had already been in an immersive situation, where you can let go. Not everyone can immerse. Some people have to remain precisely who they were formed to be and can't let go of any of that in order to be open.

**Alienation.** I was not prepared to enter the literary world as it was at the time [when *Gathering the Tribes* was published]. I was too young, and my gender was a problem, because the literary world was still very male-dominated at that time, and I was not equipped

for that. I didn't understand that world at all. I gave a lot of poetry readings, I had a lot of solicitations from older men; it was very confusing and disturbing. By the time I published *Gathering the Tribes* I was already teaching at the University of San Diego. Meeting Maya Flakoll and beginning to translate Claribel was a kind of escape hatch for me. I could get out of the poetry world for a while: I was translating someone else, I wasn't writing my own poetry. I couldn't write my own poetry after that first book was published. I was frozen. I was trapped. Something had happened to me. For a while, I thought it was because I had published a book. For a while, I thought I'd had this very special thing, my relationship with language and paper and ink. The fact that I could pull these things out of myself. And, for its own sake, it was very gratifying and difficult and amazing, and I thought I'd given that all up to publish a book. It had abandoned me because I had transgressed, I had gone public. ... I stopped being able to write, and I started to translate Claribel.

**Escape hatch.** Then I spent those months in Spain [in 1978], and I was listening to testimonies from people from the Southern Cone. People from Chile, from Argentina, from Uruguay, people my own age. I was changed. I realized that the United States was deeply implicated, not only in El Salvador and Nicaragua, but also throughout all of Latin America, especially in the dictatorships of the Southern Cone. I had a profound reaction to it. I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what. And I was embarrassed to be an American. I wanted to be something else, anything. To feel that way was in such contrast to the way I was raised to feel. I came back to the United States and I joined Amnesty International. Those were the circumstances I was in when Leonel rang the doorbell. And what did he do? He offered another escape hatch. He said "You want to do this? Let's go." And I said "Yes."

**An illusory screen.** Early on, in certain situations in El Salvador, when things were really dangerous, when I thought I could die, Leonel said: ‘It doesn’t matter that you’re an American. It doesn’t make any difference that you have a passport, it doesn’t make any difference that you have a ticket home. *This* is the situation we’re in right now. You have to understand the situation you are in.’ He also said to me: ‘This isn’t a film. This isn’t a movie’. Because he knew there was a way in which I, because of the way in which my consciousness was formed, could create an imaginary, an illusory screen of experience to separate myself from what I was seeing. I could stand back, and it would be a screen I was watching, rather than something that I was inextricably a part of. You can have that illusion for a while. Some people never lose it.

**Being present.** Some people who read the memoir have said to me: ‘Why didn’t you just go home at that point?’ And I would say, ‘Because it wasn’t an option for me anymore. That would have been a horrible thing to do at that time.’ By the time I’m in this situation, that’s not something I would dream of doing. Those who ask me this question, they don’t imagine how *I* can be changed in such a way that leaving was out of the question. They imagine themselves as they are now. They would get a taxi, and they would go to the airport, because they hadn’t been changed at all, because they hadn’t imagined what that change would even be. In the beginning, I would try to answer this question logically: ‘Well, because I had friends...’ I would try to give reasons, and then I realized that I didn’t leave because that wasn’t who I was anymore. Even if my friends weren’t there, I wasn’t the person who would leave. I still can’t quite communicate that in most situations in the United States.

**Warfare.** Then I went to Lebanon. My husband was working for *Time* magazine and I got a credential from National Public Radio. [...] That was my first experience of conventional



warfare, of militia warfare and an international peacekeeping force, and of what that means on the ground in a proxy war, which Lebanon was, even though there were internal reasons for that war. I learned a great deal then. I was under shellfire for about a week, and that focuses the mind. After that I felt that kaleidoscopic effect, my mind was not . . . I couldn't settle. I wasn't able to focus or concentrate for a long time. I couldn't write anything that felt particularly coherent to me, and some of the images that were in my consciousness were almost interchangeable with images from other situations and in the past. It was all simultaneous. It was all happening at once. Violence resembled violence. I went out of Lebanon right after they activated the nuclear weapons on the Sixth Fleet. I participated in an evacuation from the beach in Beirut to a ship which was an amphibious landing vessel. I was one of hundreds, maybe thousands. I don't know how many of us there were who were on those ships in the Sixth Fleet, taken from Lebanon to Cyprus during the night of February 11<sup>th</sup> – I think it was 1984. It was interesting to be rescued by the American military. Then I saw that from that side and what they were up to and what they were doing, and immediately I wanted to go back to Lebanon.

**Coming-to-consciousness.** I knew I had a choice, but I always said yes. I said yes to being completely and irrevocably changed, and I don't have any regrets about that at all; in fact, I'm deeply grateful for it. But it leaves me where I'm now, on the bridge between worlds, and in a state of perpetual midnight meditations on how to truly effect change, and on how to truly effect awareness of the need for structural change.

## **IMMERSIONS. ACCOMPANIMENTS.**

“Walk with me and in the end, if you want to, we can talk about it.”

*When we come to consciousness in a situation so far unknown to us, we are out at sea, with no knowledge of how to read and navigate the currents of wind and water that we find ourselves in. We have no navigation aid beside the internal compass of our conscience, and even our conscience is not yet connected to the world around us through our consciousness. When we are thus immersed, nothing is more valuable than a guardian, a person who teaches us to navigate these situations without determining on our behalf the direction we will take. They catalyse for us the vague discomfort and sense of eeriness in the process of coming-to-consciousness. Few people are lucid enough to become such catalysts, and even fewer are willing to take on the responsibility of caring for the person who is going through this process. But without a catalyst, the possibility of conscientización often remains only an eerie foreshadowing.*

*In Carolyn's case – and this thought I did share with her – her first poetry collection and her commitment to translate Claribel Alegria's poetry expressed her desire to 'peel away the surface of things', as she puts it, and of her search for the 'elsewhere' that is made possibly only by the shattering of a mystifying state of mind and ideology. The Alegria – Flakoll family in Mallorca nurtured her through the early stages of this shattering. Leonel Gómez then recognized this search within her and identified her as a person to join forces with.*

*When Carolyn speaks about her experiences of 'stepping out' and about how her immersion into different contexts shatters a prevailing ideolog, she sounds as if it was obvious or normal that one allows ideology to shatter when it cannot withstand the weight of experience. As far as I can tell, this is neither normal nor obvious. Most people take their ideology with them wherever they go and force every new context into it.*

*Sometimes such attitudes produce self-limiting, hazardous and ignorant actions, where people wish to assert themselves on the basis of ideas and behaviours that originate from a different experiential context. When women from the Global North travel to Latin America, their compatriots usually expect just that, especially when they go through dangerous situations in the company of Latin American men. Not asserting oneself is interpreted as submissive and as conforming to the – wildly popular and mostly unquestioned – stereotype about Latin American men: that they will make advances on Northern women; and the women will inevitably surrender to such advances. The assumption is that only the Global North variety of 'feminist' behaviour can prevent this; an assumption that invites hazardous and self-limiting behaviour. In reading What You Have Heard, I was struck by the complete absence of any disposition in Carolyn to behave in such a way, when she was in the care of Leonel Gómez Vides. When talking to other readers, I learnt that some found her submissive to Leonel, arguing that she was not assertive enough. And then there was the suspicion that, after all, there must have been a romance.*

*Leonel and Carolyn were bound to each other in a relationship the Spanish term for cannot be adequately translated into English: *compañerismo*. Neither camaraderie nor comradeship denote the experiential and affective depth and breadth of *compañerismo*. It is created dynamically within an – often rapidly changing – constellation of external factors; those involved in it are bound to each other by a shared commitment. They face these externalities together, drawing on shared principles. The shared presence in situations of intensity are the focus and intention of this type of relationship, and clear boundaries are essential in sustaining it. This creates intimacy and profound trust. People whose consciousness and awareness are defined by Western affective conventions tend to misidentify *compañerismo* as romance. However, intimacy and trust are focused, directed*

*and nurtured differently, to such a point that usually, and with few exceptions, romance and compañerismo are mutually exclusive.*

*When Carolyn returned to the U.S., she had to leave those with whom she had formed such intense bonds. Poems are a way of accompanying her compañerxs and friends, even when she was very much alone and far away from them. Through such poems, the poet becomes a 'conduit' of their voices.*

**Compañerismo.** I don't have an answer for the people who thought that I had to be romantically involved with Leonel, because a man and a woman can't have that kind of teamwork without there being any romance. That's not the kind of relationship we developed. Leonel wanted me to push back. He was studying me, too. He wanted to understand Americans. I said, 'Good luck with that. You want to study *me*? To understand *Americans*?' He'd get angry whenever I wanted him to just tell me what was going on. Sometimes I'd get mad at him because of this, and he would say 'No, it doesn't work that way.' The last thing he wanted was for me to subsume my selfhood and being and ego to his. The whole thing would have stopped if that had started happening.

**Accompanying.** In order to understand what was happening to people in El Salvador, you had to have a capacity to feel it, not just to see it and report it and analyse it and think it. You had to actually let it into you, deeply.

**Voices.** I was under no illusions about the status of poetry or literary culture in the United States, and I was under no illusions about my lack of standing to speak about El Salvador. I told Monseñor Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador, and other people from the Archdiocese that I would not be able to speak publicly about El Salvador, because I simply

wouldn't have the opportunity. Poets are not consulted on foreign policy matters in the U.S. Poets are not taken seriously in the U.S., and that is still the case, I believe, although there have been some changes in the way that they are not taken seriously. I was sure that I would not have the chance. And they were sure that it was absolutely necessary that I would speak as much as possible, *and speak as a poet*, not as someone else. They had enormous faith in the power of the language, and in the language of poetry. [...] So I had to adjust my thinking to theirs, and I began to understand poetry from their point of view.

**Community.** Leonel did not believe that poets and artists were separate. He couldn't even conceive of how one would imagine that they would be. You know, poets and artists are part of their society as a whole. They're part of their community as a whole. You can't escape that. To be political is to be conscious that you are within community. Of course, you're within community whether or not you're conscious of it. Political awareness is consciousness of it.

**Fires.** I went to the Helsinki Watch office, wherever I was. I always wanted to go and get their take on things and find out what was important. Whenever I went to them, I recognized just how you see things repeated, country after country. There was always a woman in the Helsinki Watch Office, surrounded by papers. She was always chain smoking. She had short hair. She worked night and day. She had no resources. She had a filing cabinet filled to overflowing. She would talk to me about whatever I needed to know. And she was desperate and understaffed. She *was* the staff. And she was there, in every country, a version of her. And I thought: This is what it means to do that kind of documentation, and this is the effect it has. They don't eat very well. They smoke a lot. They're nervous, they can't do enough, but there's way too much for them. I realized that such people don't have a whole lot of help. So

they exhaust themselves, and they have to work much more to make up for the fact that they don't have help. That's how I learned about activism. From them. I learned what it took to counter something. I had enormous respect for these people. In each place I learned something else, and I used to wonder why am I here? Why this place? What am I doing with this? What am I supposed to know about this? What am I supposed to write about this? I began to have this weird form of magical thinking: I imagined that everything was for a purpose, that everything I was experiencing would be put to some use. And I was just this vehicle for this use. I still feel that way a lot of the time, and not all of those experiences have fallen into place, with answers. But you know, it's about those fires lit in the world. Those women are some of those fires.

**To amplify.** When I'm sharing my work publicly, whether in publication or in public readings or talks or anything like that I've tended to use the gift I've been given; the opportunity to amplify messages of solidarity organizations. Whether that's having to do with environmental degradation, or whether that has to do with opposition to tyrannical fascist governments, or whatever it is. For a long time, I saw myself as someone who could who could support and amplify, and I also saw that as something that was critically needed, because most literary writers try not to take positions of solidarity and amplification. I don't know whether it's peculiar to the United States, but literary writers in particular, whatever their genre, are quite averse to appearing to be at all political. Even when the themes of their work can be seen as political, they themselves have retained vestiges of that earlier consciousness that imagines that art is apart from other human activity. And they still believe that, if they were to be perceived as political, to be in solidarity with others in an active way, then they would not be regarded seriously as artists and writers, because they had not retained that elusive illusion.

## COUNTERING ACQUIESCENCE.

“How to bridge that chasm between us? What do you say? What can you say? You can’t.”

*Confronting the acquiescence of the U.S. public by means of poetry – which is essentially what her Salvadoran allies asked of Carolyn – is a Quixotic endeavour. Poetry might not have been Carolyn’s chosen weapon in that fight; however, the Salvadorans insisted on it, and she was determined to make good on her promise to them. This required a cultural transformation of her poetry in the spirit of the Salvadoran belief in its capacities. Carolyn had to pry the poetic tradition away from the poetic establishment, extricate poetry from its own ideology, and then counter the acquiescence of the U.S. public by speaking as a poet.*

*Acquiescence is the antithesis of *concientización*. It is a form of entanglement and requires surrender to one’s own entanglement. Acquiescence and denial come hand in hand. They produce the end of hope; when we ‘adapt,’ as Freire calls it, by denying the world around us, by acquiescing to the demands or the conventions of a world that is fundamentally unjust, we relinquish our capacity to intervene. The future becomes ‘inexorable’; it cannot be changed.*

*Carolyn had committed to acting on the Salvadoran’s view of poetry, she had to pry poetry away from the ideology that holds poets captive within notions of traditional autonomy. According to the traditional view, the poet is apart from others, and so is their lyric I or voice. But this does not allow for Carolyn’s practice of the poet-as-conduit, which is often misread as a loss of self. Carolyn’s *Poetry of Witness* anthologies show that there is an entire poetic tradition which does not work with a lyric voice constituted within the*

*framework of traditional autonomy; instead, the poetic voice is defined by relational autonomy. When I first found Against Forgetting in the late 1990s, I recognized the practice of selfhood and the openness to the world in the imaginary community of these poets, and they have been sustenance on the unacknowledged battlegrounds of acquiescent life.*

**Estrangement.** I don't know if I can talk about how estranged I was when I came back to the United States [from El Salvador]. It was a terrifying estrangement. I realized that there were very few people I would be able to talk to. I would be living my life, but I would not be able to communicate certain things that were very important for me.

**Being good.** Americans have to be right, they have to be good; this impression they have of themselves is the sine qua non of their existence as a nation. They have to believe in their goodness. I'm not sure where this comes from. I think it probably comes from the occulted memory of the founding genocide and from slavery, and the force that it takes to deny those two things. And they had their brief experience in the Second World War, allowing them to be seen as heroic, when in fact, they were late in getting involved, and it was the Russians who actually won the war in Europe. [...] What I learned after El Salvador was not only do Americans think this, it is also vital that this belief be preserved for their consciousness. When things go wrong, when things go brutally and horrifically wrong, they say, 'This is not who we are', when in fact it is exactly who we are. This need to feel that one is right and good is paralyzing. Among other things, it causes them to be ineffectual, to lack agency, to imagine that they're fundamentally alright, that they can just get on with their lives. So there is nothing they have to rectify, and there is nothing they are responsible for, that they may have to redefine themselves with respect to. And this goes for their foreign wars – Iraq, Afghanistan – but it goes all the way back. The reality that was inside those seven poems was



in deep conflict with this essential need, a need not so much for innocence but for fundamental goodness.

**Poems.** The poem 'The Colonel' was written for a prose book, which is why it is in prose.<sup>5</sup> It was inadvertently placed in the folder with my poems, and so it became part of this manuscript. When I discovered it, I thought, 'This was a mistake'. I was going to take it out, and a Yeats scholar convinced me to leave it. He said 'No, this is important, you must leave it in this manuscript.' I said, 'It's not a poem', and he said, 'You are wrong about that.' I trusted him because he was a Yeats scholar, and so I left it. And it became *the* notorious poem.

That poem affected Americans. It wasn't particularly surprising for Salvadorans. It wasn't such an unusual occurrence for them. [...] In the U.S., 'The Colonel' poem drew the most incredulity. It was the poem that Americans least believed. I wasn't sure whether it was because the incident took place at a dinner party, and they couldn't process that. If it had happened in some clandestine detention facility, maybe that would have appeared more congruous. A friend of mine said that when people read that poem, they can't escape it, like a moth flying into a wall. They can't escape what occurs in that poem. You can either deny that it's real, you can say that it's something that came from my imagination, or you can accept that it's real, and then you have to challenge the aid that is given to that very colonel.

**Barriers.** Some of what I saw – which I laid down as factually and clearly and precisely as I could – was intrinsically not credible. I now believe that, due to my gender, due to my age, and partly because it could not be true, if the U.S. was also supporting the dictatorship. The dictatorship could not plausibly be guilty of these crimes, if the United States was on the same side.

**The silence of misery endured.** Peace is just . . . I used to call it the silence of misery endured. Peace means a static state that people perceive as legitimate and enduring, and they perceive it as ‘normal, ‘natural’, but peace only means that the violence intrinsic to that society has not yet been addressed in any way that challenges the powers that inflict that injustice.

## **BEING PRESENT**

“It stopped being about intention, and it became about attention.”

*The conventions of the speaking voice in Anglo-Saxon poetry will not do when one writes poetry from consciousness / conscience. The hegemonic conventions of the lyric I consider poetry as apart from the world. But the foundation for conscious presence is attentiveness to the world that speaks to us.*

*Our entire conversation is predicated on the shared understanding that poetry is not separate from the world. For Carolyn, the conception of poetry as separate shattered in El Salvador and in the months after, when she had to adjust her thinking about poetry to that of her Salvadoran compañeros. For me, the conception of poetry as separate from the world was shattered two generations ago, with fascism and the violence it unleashed in the streets, in the public sphere, interpersonally, and on the battlefield. As Carolyn says, there is no turning back.*

*The practice of the poet as conduit – which draws on relational rather than traditional autonomy -- is made possible by the process of *concientización*. My responses to her thoughts and prompts were informed by an awareness I developed not so much in my*

*own academic formation in the poetic tradition, but through training in martial and healing arts. In those terms I think of poems as a force and of the poet as a conduit of that force; like martial artists and healing practitioners, the poet channels Ki. When this force has a positive impact on the world, it comes from the refusal to adapt to the world as it is, an adaptation which would amount to renouncing hope. Like the person who is willing to act as a catalyst, a poet who acts as a conduit takes on a tremendous responsibility. Her sense of Self and the strength of her conscience has to be such that she can act as a conduit without losing herself. From there comes presence.*

**The crack in my formation.** My consciousness was opened in El Salvador. My awareness of my ideological formation became apparent. Salvadorans guided me towards that, with their questions, by listening to me articulating my impressions. They taught me how to pay attention, they taught me how to question everything, including my own assumptions, and they taught me how to make connections. And when I had a realization about something, about U.S. involvement or something else, it was like an explosion. I don't have candid sentences to give you, because I haven't talked about this. I had to realize what was false about my upbringing, about my formation, about my consciousness as an American citizen. It's shocking, but it's also illuminating and helpful. I was feeling clear for the first time. I was feeling that things made sense that didn't make sense before. But you see, I was a poet, before that I simply wrote poetry and I was partially formed in the academy. My formation was to view poetry as an art form.

The crack in my formation appeared because of translation. I took on a project that I was not adequately prepared for, which was the first translation into English of Claribel Alegria's work. And we did this because her daughter and I decided that we had to make this happen.

**Writing.** When I came back to writing, in El Salvador, I wrote lying on floors between beds, during fighting outside. I wrote everything down so that I wouldn't forget it and also, when I was making the poems, I did it because I needed to be away for a bit, in my head. I'm scared to death that the death squads are going to come, I'm in Margarita's house, they're searching for her. Every night I was terrified – and so was everybody – that the death squads would pull us out of our houses and disappear us. And they wouldn't 'just' disappear us – it would be horrible. I wrote to escape thinking about *that*. And then, when I got a poetry book together, I sent it to a literary editor in New York who talked me into putting it away.

**Notebooks.** [When I started the memoir,] I hadn't yet come across those notebooks, from which I lifted little passages, which I put in the book. I found them when I cleaned out a storage space. At first I thought 'This is a great resource, I wish I'd had those all along, there are so many details!.' And then I read the language. It was a very different kind of language than my memoir. I decided that, rather than putting these occurrences into the calm narrative voice of the memoir, I would lift them out of the pages of this time intact, because they were written by a terrified person who was writing really fast, not even punctuating – just quick thoughts. And I decided that those pieces were best left alone, were best left to be as they were, so that the state of mind would be available to the reader, rather than interpreted by an adult me, an older self.

**Poetry.** I don't focus on producing poetry books. If I did, I'd have fifteen poetry books by now, like my peers do. I've never been interested in that kind of productivity, and it has never been possible for me, because I have to live through something, I have to change, I have to move and grow. It takes a decade, at least, so I don't think in terms of poetry books; I think in

terms of trying to see the world more, trying to be more clear, trying to be more precise, trying to figure things out. Just like we were trying to figure out earlier: where are we going, humanity? How are we going to resolve the situation we find ourselves in? I mentate a lot, I think about things, and poetry is an escape from mentation, too. Leonel taught me how to analyse, and how to pay attention. I used to daydream too much, and he taught me how to pay attention. And the whole experience in El Salvador taught me listening – it might not be evident at the moment, but it taught me how to listen.

**Partisanship and consciousness.** If you want to produce something like poetry, you can't do it prescriptively either from outside yourself or from within yourself. For there to be any force or power in the work at all, it has to arise from yourself, from deep within you, and you have to already have already achieved that consciousness that can produce it. You can't reflect a certain group's ideas; then it wouldn't have its origins in the right place. The language is already manufactured, it's already been digested, it's already been distributed. It doesn't have the kind of force of the work that I'm talking about. If you are really going to write, it will reflect the consciousness that you already have. It has to be already true of you. It can't be grafted on.

**Poetry's force.** I'm talking about utterly changing the artist in order to produce something. It's an energy. It's an active energy in the world, that you can work with.

## **EXTREMITY**

“Maybe that responsiveness to the world and to history opens us up to the horrors and the strangeness. And also, to the radiance.”

*What Carolyn refers to as the 'elusive illusion' that art stands apart from the world, breaks away in situations of extremity. Extremity and extreme violence – which 'pries open the status quo, peace' – are almost always present in Carolyn's work. But there is another, less obvious extremity to which she returns throughout our conversation: the extreme loneliness and estrangement that is brought about by a hegemonic consciousness that cannot be pried open. Acquiescence to the status quo requires sustained efforts at denial in order to maintain itself. That is an extreme situation which is often not recognized as extreme, but I would argue that it is; and also, that it produces extreme experiences of estrangement. The anthologies of witness create a community in moment of extreme loneliness produced by the intentionally isolating disinformation and subtle political pressure.*

*In her writings on the poetry of witness, Carolyn has insistently reflected on that relationship between the political and the social, and she has often expressed her preference for the 'social.' For me, the social existence of the self has never been strange, alien, or unknown. It lies at the heart of any project that is worth-while. It stands in stark opposition to any project that subsumes a person or makes them subservient to fascist and/or totalitarian notions of community-building.*

**Witness.** Witness is an availability and permeability, an openness to the world in a very deep way that allows one to be utterly transformed, and marked. When we're in the experience of extremity – that's an experience one cannot extricate oneself from. People imagine that you can be apart from it like a newspaper reporter, and that it doesn't affect you, you just report on what's happening, you write it down, you take pictures. They don't imagine that you are part of that situation. However, it is impossible to extricate yourself from extremity, and if you are in that kind of situation, you are marked by it. Your language is marked by it. Your

consciousness is incised, cut open, marked by it. Witness, for me, is not something one can *be*. It's not an identity. It is something one encounters and *does*, and is done to. It's being present for something in such a way that one can be completely altered by it. Then, whatever one writes in the aftermath is itself evidence of what happened, whether or not it explicitly addresses events.

An observer, for me, is someone who – by some means, or method, or practice, or position – imagines themselves to be apart, in such a way that one is not a part. I don't believe that independent observation is really possible. It's possible to simulate it by imagining oneself to be apart from what one is seeing. But in situations that have to do with extremity, or with something in human community that is an occasion to imagine witnessing, it's not possible to be independent. There is nothing one can experience without also being a part of it.

**Inadequate to the challenge.** The position that art is there for art's sake is broken, the same way that ideology is broken. It's the same process, whereby one begins to acknowledge one's own ideological assumptions and where they came from, and what the alternative might be, or what alternative views might be.

Right now, one of the forces that is rendering us inadequate to the challenges we are facing is that we have a similar assumption about the solidity of the natural world. It's with us; it is, of course, going to be here. People think it will just be a little different, but that it is still going to be here. Being able to conceive the death of the natural world around us is probably similar to conceiving of our own death, which we can't do. We project a kind of eternal solidity to the natural environment. The creek might have a little debris in it, but it will still be a creek, flowing around rocks, and the trees will still be here. There's no conception that there might not be any trees and that the forest will be burnt to such a degree

that it won't be there anymore. Someone said what we have to wrap our minds around the fact that the surface of the Earth is going to burn and the atmosphere is going to collapse. When you think about that sentence you begin to get a very different picture: burnt collapse that doesn't include us. We can't perceive our own extinction. We must worry about the elephants and the wildcats, but we can't perceive ourselves as being part of that mass extinction.

**The Colonel.** There were several officers, I'm told as many as five, who claimed to be him. Even though none of them were. In their circles, they *wanted* to be him. Also, the actual colonel was shown the poem, and I'm told that he liked it. He was proud to be in a poem. He laminated the poem in plastic, to preserve it, and he would show it to people, very proudly. I thought that was astonishing. He did not see my poem as critical of him at all. He was proud of his performance that night, and in the poem.

**Consciousness and conscience.** My work can be read always in the light of conscience, and it can be read intrinsically, always, as an embodied act of resistance. My language, my poetry – all of it is an embodied act of resistance, even when it's not explicitly addressing any concerns that one might identify as concerns of resistance, or dissidence, or critique. Subliminally, the work is always grounded there. All of my work occupies that region of human experience at the intersection of consciousness and conscience.

## **A POSITION OF DISSIDENCE**

“We have to live the most generous moral life that we can, for its own sake.”



*Conscience compels us to take a position, and it is one that will place us in opposition to the mystifying fog around our consciousness. Throughout this conversation, our terms of choice were ‘opposition’, ‘oppositional consciousness’, ‘dissent’ and ‘dissidence’. They imply awareness and consciousness, intensely lived experience and clear analysis. A position of dissidence is the result of lived experience-turned-consciousness, when consciousness can only be oppositional. One takes a position of dissidence because of the ethical impossibility to acquiesce, to give in to the tranquilizing force of denial that permits continued righteous and painless existence within the status quo – even when one knows better. Poetry, when it breaks through both the ideology of art for art’s sake and the marketized logic of commodification, has an oppositional, even revolutionary force, and it can join with other forces.*

*Both of us were formed by the transgenerationally transmitted experience of families who had had to say ‘no’ to political systems, who had had to set boundaries, and who had had to leave the certainties that come from being in the place where one is ‘from’. That experience compels one to be open to the experience of others, of those one comes to know only when one has been compelled to leave certainties behind because they were based on a falsity. That experience compels one to be open to the truths in the experiences of others, and this puts one in opposition to those who deny or reject the truths in these experiences.*

**Poetry and Dissidence.** I know now that I will be in a position of dissidence for the rest of my life. That’s not going to change. You have to be willing to go against what is happening. When you publish, you have to be willing to be identified as oppositional, whatever that costs and whatever that takes. Poets have been aware of this throughout history. Osip Mandelstam knew this, Nazim Hikmet, Miklós Radnóti, many. This is not how poetry is taught in the

U.S., though. Poetry is factionalized in the U.S. There are experimental poets, and then there are what they call ‘mainstream poets’. Poetry in the U.S. is thought of as a means of expressing the self – seriously!

**Consequences.** When I came back from El Salvador, I found myself in opposition to my government, and of course the government noticed. Much later I found out that there were files the government had, that the government was tracking me. They considered me an ‘unwitting dupe of international communism’. They characterized me as someone who suffered from misguided idealism. They didn’t characterize me in any criminal way, or as a terrorist. They characterized me as someone who had been misled, who was naïve, that I didn’t really understand what I had seen. I could feel the disinformation that was being spread about me, but I didn’t have any idea where it was coming from. I sensed it in the academy and in the poetry world, and I knew there were rumours that were intended to undermine me in a subtle way, portraying me as a young fantast, as a fabulist.

**The Bridge.** Translation has been very important, because for me it’s been the bridge into many realizations, into other cultures, into a deeper understanding of my own culture, the one I left behind on the other side of the bridge. As you know, people who have been deeply affected by a war or by another country, another culture – we can’t go back. We never go back. I survived my time in El Salvador, and I came back to the US, but not as the person I was. But you’re not of that culture either. There are a lot of us now. We live on bridges between worlds, between countries, between conditions, between war and so-called peace.

**Poetry.** Leonel did not believe in that position of art for art’s sake. He saw ways in which poetry could be a force, which I didn’t see at the time, because I was perceiving things in the

old way. I thought poetry was a poem on a page in a book in a library. I thought a poem was not something that most people were very much interested in. But Leonel saw poetry as a force, he saw art as a force. One of many forces. My experience is that it can be a disruptive, revolutionary force. ....

My friend the poet Ilya Kaminsky, who is originally from Ukraine, once said to me: ‘What does it mean to say that poetry is not political? That means what?’ And then I thought, yes, what *does* it mean to say that poetry is not political, that poetry should not be political? I haven’t heard anyone give an adequate answer to that. To say that poetry should not be political is just a throw-away comment; it is a way of dismissing both politics and poetry.

**Launch your boats.** I don’t feel either optimistic or pessimistic. I just feel that I must keep going. The only strong sense I have is to keep going. Don’t look back. Don’t worry, don’t try to measure, don’t feel like a failure. Don’t pat yourself on the back. And recognize the others who are doing the same thing and try to support them and amplify them. It’s pretty easy to recognize them, I find, and they’re everywhere. The one thing that makes me feel – I don’t know whether I would be hopeful, but at least happy – is that I see them everywhere, all over the world. I meet them everywhere. And they all have the same idea. Robert Desnos, whom I translated, had this idea that ‘the earth is a camp lit by thousands of spiritual fires. / At the vigil of battle one bivouacs all over the world.’<sup>6</sup> I took that idea and closed a poem with ‘Light your signal fires wherever you find yourselves / and come the morning, Launch your boats.’<sup>7</sup>

*“If you haven’t damaged the structure, you haven’t done anything. You have just painted the wall.”*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (London: New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 100

<sup>2</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation*, p. 100

<sup>3</sup> Forché, Carolyn, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, First edition. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); Forché, Carolyn and Duncan Wu, *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English 1500-2001* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Forché, 'If there is ink', *Massachusetts Review*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.massreview.org/node/10304> [07/02/2023].

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Forché, 'The Colonel', in *The Country Between Us* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2019) 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1981. You can hear Carolyn reading the poem at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49862/the-colonel> [accessed 07/02/2023].

<sup>6</sup> Robert Desnos (1900-1945) was a French poet who was not aligned with any political party. He joined the French Résistance, was arrested in 1944, tortured, and survived this as well as three concentration camps, before dying of typhus in Terezin. Carolyn refers to his poem 'The Night Watchman of Port-au-Change', which she translated and included in *Against Forgetting*.

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn Forché, 'Mourning', in *In the Lateness of the World* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2020), pp. 67-68.