

ALSO BY CAROLYN FORCHÉ:

Poetry:

The Country Between Us

Gathering the Tribes

Translations:

The Selected Poems of Robert Desnos (with William Kulik)

Flowers from the Volcano by Claribel Alegría

A g a i n s t
F o r g e t t i n g



Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness

*Edited and with an Introduction by
Carolyn Forché*

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK / LONDON

1993

LIBRARY

1993

Introduction

In 1944, the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti was sent to a forced-labor camp in what became Yugoslavia. While there, he was able to procure a small notebook, in which he wrote his last ten poems, along with the following message in Hungarian, Croatian, German, French, and English: “. . . [this] contains the poems of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti . . . to Mr. Gyula Ortutay, Budapest University lecturer. . . . Thank you in advance.”

When it was clear that they would be defeated, the Germans decided to evacuate the camp and return the workers to Hungary. Radnóti, assuming that the first column would be the safest, volunteered for the march and recorded it in his poetry. Once in Hungary, the soldiers in charge, unable to find hospital room for these prisoners, took Radnóti and twenty-one others to a mass grave and executed them. Had Radnóti not volunteered to return to Hungary, he might have been saved by Marshal Tito's partisans. However, the story does not end—as millions of such stories ended—with execution and the anonymity of a mass grave. After the war was over, Radnóti's wife was among those who found and exhumed the mass grave in the village of Abda. The coroner's report for corpse #12 read:

A visiting card with the name Dr. Miklós Radnóti printed on it. An ID card stating the mother's name as Ilona Grosz. Father's name illegible. Born in Budapest, May 5, 1909. Cause of death: shot in the nape. In the back pocket of the trousers a small notebook was found soaked in the fluids of the body and blackened by wet earth. This was cleaned and dried in the sun.

Radnóti's final poems are represented in this anthology, along with the poems of 144 other significant poets who endured conditions of historical and social extremity during the twentieth century—through exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination. Many poets did not survive, but their works remain with us as poetic witness to the dark times in which they lived.

This attempt to assemble such work in a single volume is the result of a thirteen-year effort to understand the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination. My own journey began in 1980, upon my return from El Salvador—where I had worked as a human rights activist—and led me through the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, and South Africa. Something happened along the way to the introspective poet I had been. My new work seemed controversial to my American contemporaries, who argued against its “subject matter,” or against the right of a North American to contemplate such issues in her work, or against any mixing of what they saw as the mutually exclusive realms of the personal and the political. Like many other poets, I felt that I had no real choice regarding the impulse of my poems, and had only to wait, in meditative expectancy. In attempting to come to terms with the question of poetry and politics, and seeking the solace of poetic camaraderie, I turned to the works of Anna Akhmatova, Yannis Ritsos, Paul Celan, Federico García Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, and others. I began collecting their work, and soon found myself a repository of what began to be called “the poetry of witness.” In thinking about these poems, I realized that the arguments about poetry and politics had been too narrowly defined. Regardless of “subject matter,” these poems bear the trace of extremity within them, and they are, as such, evidence of what occurred. They are also poems which are as much “about” language as are poems that have no subject other than language itself.

This anthological history of our century begins with the genocide of the Armenians and follows extremity in its various forms. The volume is arranged in sections according to regions and major events, with historical headnotes. Within each section, poets appear in chronological order by date of birth, with biographical notes to illuminate the experience of extremity for each poet, and a selection of poetry from available works in the English originals or in translation. The criteria for inclusion were these: poets must have personally endured such conditions; they must be considered important to their national literatures; and their work, if not in English, must be available in a quality translation. The necessarily brief biographies included here provide information relevant to the poets’ experience of extremity. In instances where it was possible to place poets in more than one section, they appear according to their first significant experience of this kind, even though their poems might reflect later experiences as well. Finally, not all poems address extreme conditions, nor do all appear relevant in terms of their subject matter. I was interested in what these poets wrote, regardless of the explicit content.

This collection reflects the abundance of works in translation from European languages, but unfortunately underscores the scarcity of works translated from Asian and African literatures. In addition, fewer

women poets seem to have survived the horrors of our century than their male counterparts, and many fewer have been translated. Despite these limitations, the present volume makes available only about one quarter of the material I was able to gather. It is, however, not my intention to propose a canon of such works; this is, rather, a poetic memorial to those who suffered and resisted through poetry itself.

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between “personal” and “political” poems—the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality.

We need a third term, one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal. Let us call this space “the social.” As North Americans, we have been fortunate: wars for us (provided we are not combatants) are fought elsewhere, in other countries. The cities bombed are other people’s cities. The houses destroyed are other people’s houses. We are also fortunate in that we do not live under martial law; there are nominal restrictions on state censorship; our citizens are not sent into exile. We are legally and juridically free to choose our associates, and to determine our communal lives. But perhaps we should not consider our social lives as merely the products of our choice: the social is a place of resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice.

By situating poetry in this social space, we can avoid some of our residual prejudices. A poem that calls on us from the other side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged by simplistic notions of “accuracy” or “truth to life.” It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confessions, by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth. In fact, the poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence. As such, there will be nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being “objectively” true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence. Radnóti’s final notebook entry, dated October 31, 1944, read:

I fell beside him; his body turned over,
 already taut as a string about to snap.
 Shot in the back of the neck. That's how you too will end,
 I whispered to myself; just lie quietly.
 Patience now flowers into death.
Der springt noch auf, a voice said above me.
 On my ear, blood dried, mixed with filth.

This verse describes the death of his fellow prisoner Miklós Lorsi, a violinist, and remains the only trace of his dying.

Miklós Radnóti's poems evade easy categories. They are not merely personal, nor are they, strictly speaking, political. What is one to make of the first lines of "Forced March"?:

The man who, having collapsed, rises, takes steps, is insane;
 he'll move an ankle, a knee, an errant mass of pain,
 and take to the road again . . .

The poem becomes an apostrophe to a fellow marcher, and so it is not only a record of experience but an exhortation and a plea against despair. It is not a cry for sympathy but a call for strength. The hope that the poem relies on, however, is not "political" as such: it is not a celebration of solidarity in the name of a class or common enemy. It is not partisan in any accepted sense. It opposes the dream of future satisfaction to the reality of current pain. One could argue that it uses the promise of personal happiness against a politically induced misery, but it does so in the name of the poet's fellows, in a spirit of communal-ity.

We all know that atrocities have taken place on an unprecedented scale in the last one hundred years. Such monstrous acts have come to seem almost normal. It becomes easier to forget than to remember, and this forgetfulness becomes our defense against remembering—a rejection of unnecessary sentimentality, a hardheaded acceptance of "reality." Modernity, as twentieth-century German Jewish philosophers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno argued, is marked by a superstitious worship of oppressive force and by a concomitant reliance on oblivion. Such forgetfulness, they argue, is willful and isolating: it drives wedges between the individual and the collective fate to which he or she is forced to submit. These poems will not permit us diseased complacency. They come to us with claims that have yet to be filled, as attempts to mark us as they have themselves been marked.

How do these poems try to remind us? The musical title of Holocaust survivor Paul Celan's "Todesfuge"—his "Death Fugue"—warns us that the poem will not represent the world "directly." And

indeed it begins on the unexplained (and ultimately irreducible) vehicle of metaphor: "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening." There is no mention of who this "we" might be or what the milk is, nor is there any need to be explicit: the poem works through repetition and suggests meaning through juxtaposition. There are, of course, hints: the poem mentions Jews, and calls death "a master from Deutschland." In John Felstiner's translation, the German remains, and it remains out of terror. The German of the camps was an alien tongue, spoken gutturally to those who frequently knew no German, and who would have to construct its meaning out of their own fear and for their own survival. This poem, written by a Romanian Jew in France in German, is itself evidence of the experience it describes. "*Meister*" in German is not merely "master": in fact, *Herr* serves as Lord and Master as well. *Meister* also denotes mastery of a craft, the acceptance into a guild; to enter the poem, either in the original or in this translation, is to enter the world of death, to become a member of a guild whose language the poem can neither translate nor deny.

It is impossible to translate Celan into an accessible English, an English of contemporary fluency. Rather, to encompass Celan, we might have to translate English into him, that is, denature our language just as he denatured German. Benjamin argued that a poem brought into a new language had to transform that language: a good translation would enrich its adoptive tongue as it had changed the linguistic world of its original. Perhaps all the poems in this anthology—even those written in English—are attempts at such translation, an attempt to mark, to change, to impress, but never to leave things as they are.

To talk about a poem as the sole trace of an event, to see it in purely evidentiary terms, is perhaps to believe our own figures of speech too rigorously. If, as Benjamin indicates, a poem is *itself* an event, a trauma that changes both a common language and an individual psyche, it is a specific kind of event, a specific kind of trauma. It is an experience entered into voluntarily. Unlike an aerial attack, a poem does not come at one unexpectedly. One has to read or listen, one has to be willing to accept the trauma. So, if a poem is an event and the trace of an event, it has, by definition, to belong to a different order of being from the trauma that marked its language in the first place.

Not surprisingly, a large number of poems in this selection, written in conditions of extremity, rely on the immediacies of direct address. There are few writings as intimate as a letter to a spouse. Nazim Hikmet, the Turkish Communist who spent a large portion of his adult life in prison, writes from solitary confinement:

It's spring outside, my dear wife, spring.
 Outside on the plain, suddenly the smell

of fresh earth, birds singing, etc.
 It's spring, my dear wife,
 the plain outside sparkles . . .
 And inside the bed comes alive with bugs,
 the water jug no longer freezes.

The poem depends on bare-boned simplicity, for it marks the difference between inside and outside, between prison and the world, through small, disturbing details. Spring on the outside is easily evoked by cliché, so Hikmet can cut his list short with an offhand "etc." On the inside, however, spring is measured in the resurgence of lice and the lack of ice in the water jug. Of course, the fact that the jug freezes indicates just how cold the cell is. And so, while Hikmet is willing to greet the spring, he does so in terms of prison's stark dichotomies. Life there seems to consist of two seasons: the frozen and the vermin-ridden. In spring, on the outside and the inside, a man dreams of freedom. How does the poet know this? From experience. It is difficult to read these lines. Does Hikmet only retrieve the "demon called freedom" from memory, or does the demon possess him, even now, in solitary confinement? I am inclined to favor the second reading (although both are possible), because in this way the final lines of the poem have an added pathos. Out in the yard, in the sun, the poet rests his back against a wall:

For a moment no trap to fall into,
 no struggle, no freedom, no wife.
 Only earth, sun and me . . .
 I am happy.

The demon of freedom, like the pull of a wife, is a torment to a man in solitary, who is alone and most distinctly unfree. Happiness comes to the prisoner when he can forget his privations, his situation, and the claims of the outside. The contentment he feels might be viewed as a victory for his humanity, for his perseverance, but it contains a negative judgment as well. It is bought at a very dear price: the fleeting forgetfulness of who and where he is.

The epistolary mode, while intimate and private, is also deeply public. It has always been the poetry of the middle style, of a conscientious communality, an attempt to speak for more than one and to engage all others. So it is when Bertolt Brecht addresses *die Nachgeborenen*, the generations that come after him. His poem is a self-laceration ("To sleep I lay down among murderers") but also a demand for humility from the future:

Remember
 When you speak of our failings
 The dark time too
 Which you have escaped.

These lines might be read as an attempt at exculpation, but such a reading does not do justice to the rest of the poem. Brecht writes to the future to remind it of the ease of moral disaster and ethical complacency.

More modern, perhaps, than the traditional letter or address, is the postcard. Pithier than the letter, the postcard as it appears in this anthology is freighted with irony. Radnóti writes:

Bloody saliva hangs on the mouths of the oxen.
 Blood shows in every man's urine.
 The company stands in wild knots, stinking.
 Death blows overhead, revolting.

This card is not backed by a picture: it is itself a picture. Its brevity cuts to the horror of the situation. If extremity produces a new kind of postcard, it can only view the traditional cards with a mixture of nostalgia and mockery. So Günter Eich's "Old Postcards" from before the war are shadowed by the war itself. The carnival atmosphere of the eighth postcard is undercut by the final figure, where the Renaissance staircase becomes an unspecified but evidently determinate number of prisoners' steps. The odd current of distress that runs through the poem, the hint of conflict and the motifs of war, leads to the final card:

Fine,
 fine.
 But when the war is over
 we'll go to Minsk
 and pick up Grandmother.

Let us assume that the war in question is either World War I or World War II. (We can make this presumption from the reference to Sedan Day, a now-forgotten German holiday to commemorate defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian War.) The card seems to assure us of a German victory over the Russians, hence the writer's ability to pick up Grandmother in the city of Minsk. At the time of writing the poem, however, it would be impossible to "pick up Grandmother" in the Russian city: the course of history has made such ease of travel impossible. Hence the postcard comes to us (readers from the Cold War) as

news from another time as well as another place: a time in which the world was so different as to be another place altogether. The poem also comments ironically on a certain chauvinism, and the belief in German military superiority and territorial hegemony. The victory that the poem indicates was nothing more than a vicious and dangerous dream.

It should come as no surprise that poets who urgently desire to influence a public have also used the news media as models, even if somewhat negative ones. Thus the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert sends his "Report from the Besieged City," a fabular place that is an "everywhere." His is an "objective" report, a product of willed disinterest:

I avoid any commentary I keep a tight hold on my emotions I write about
the facts
only they it seems are appreciated in foreign markets

There is despair in this flatness of tone: markets define the news, not the experience of the besieged. Foreigners want to hear nothing but the facts because they do not wish to be disturbed by their complicity in the sufferings of the city. In a similar way, writing about Vietnam, John Balaban explodes the myth of the impartiality of the media in "News Update," in which he celebrates the sometimes partisan heroism of the journalist (which does not make the news) and the silly stories that seem—to editors at least—worthy of public attention. In these two poems, Herbert and Balaban use the news media to stress the importance of poetry: what comes to us in the newspapers and on television is not necessarily factual, nor is it necessarily cogent. Determined by the market and by the tender conscience of the distant consumer, the news is a degenerate form of art, neither wholly fact nor wholly fiction, never true to objective truth or subjective reality. The demands of modernist literary communication, with its stress on close reading, irony, and the fiction of textual depth, open up more complex visions of historical circumstance than are otherwise available.

Postcards, letters, and reports on the news—all these are communal forms, ways of writing that stress the interpersonal aspects of poetry, the public side of literature. They underline the collective urgency that propels a literature of the social. In Latin America we find the *testimonio*, the act of judicial witness. Bearing witness in such a poem becomes literal: the poet imagines himself or herself in a court of law. The *testimonio* casts a large shadow in this anthology (and on my conception of the poetry of extremity). In an age of atrocity, witness becomes an imperative and a problem: how does one bear witness to suffering and before what court of law? Such is the dilemma of Ariel Dorfman, in "Vocabulary":

But how can I tell their story
if I was not there?

The poet claims he cannot find the words to tell the story of people who have been tortured, raped, and murdered. Nevertheless, it is vitally important that the story be told. Who shall tell it? The poet answers:

Let them speak for themselves.

It is not callousness that prompts Dorfman to write this line, but a sense that the story belongs to those who have undergone the extremity, and should not be determined, as in Herbert's poem, by foreign readers. Humility brings the poet before an ethical tribunal, a place where the writer must recognize the claims of difference, the otherness of others, and the specificities of their experience. Witness, in this light, is problematic: even if one has witnessed atrocity, one cannot necessarily speak *about* it, let alone *for* it.

The gap between self and other opens up the problem of relativism that has bedeviled modern philosophy, politics, and poetry. Respect for otherness seems always to release the specter of an infinite regress. The language of religion therefore becomes quite important in this supposedly secular century, for religion traditionally makes claims for universality and unimpeachable truth. Furthermore, some of the most flagrant forms of institutionalized violence in our era have been directed toward specific religions (during the Holocaust) or against religion in general (as in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe). Anna Akhmatova composes in the language of Christianity in her poem "Requiem," and even the title of this attack on both Stalinism and war becomes an act of protest, a religious form of memory that seeks to sanctify the dead and ease them on their way into the afterlife. Where Stalin erased the past and the present for the supposed good of the future, the poet asks the past and the present to stake a claim on that future:

This woman is sick to her marrow-bone
this woman is utterly alone,

with husband dead, with son away
in jail. Pray for me. Pray.

The appeal for prayer is both a request for help and a stroke against solitude: to pray for this woman is to express sympathy, to establish a communality through the medium of religion. It is to give help in the

only way left to the powerless. Where there is nothing else, there is prayer.

If religion can provide a countersolidarity to the enforced communalism of the Stalinist era, it can also lend meaning to the desperate experiences of that time. The death of the son in Akhmatova's poem becomes a form of crucifixion: the apparent meaninglessness of terror is transfigured when it is mapped onto the story of Christ's Passion. Furthermore, it transforms that story by giving a special place to the Virgin Mary. Akhmatova's poem enters into a discreet dialogue with Christianity, a mutually informing interchange of meaning and pathos that indicates an enduring place for the explanatory possibility of religion: its ability to speak about us and to include us.

In countries where religion has been more firmly institutionalized, more central to the workings of the state, its conventions could provide an ironic counterpoint to the official version of extreme events. Wilfred Owen, himself killed in World War I, writes an anthem, a hymn of national praise and victory, for "doomed youth." Bells rung for the newly dead, prayers, candles—all the ritual counterments of mourning—have been superseded by the realities of modern warfare:

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells . . .

The dead are mourned not by human song, but by the cacophony of new technologies and armaments. The comforts of religion seem to have no place in this poem. They only remind us of the lack of comfort of the present.

Religion in an age of atrocity, as Owen's anthem indicates, can itself bear a heavy responsibility for suffering. For Owen, the difficulty arises from the marriage of religion and the state, of the belligerent and nationalistic aspect of the very notion of the anthem itself. For other writers, religious qualms arise from the sheer prevalence of evil in this century, from the assault on theodicy that genocide, torture, and imposed misery present. This is perhaps most evident in the writings of Jewish poets, like Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès, where the reality of the Shoah (the Hebrew term for what is known as the Holocaust) seems to come into direct conflict with the traditional mission of the Jews. In "There Was Earth Inside Them" Celan writes of people who do not praise the Creator because He had willed their abjection. This refusal—apparently natural enough—leads to silence:

They dug and heard nothing more;
they did not grow wise, invented no song,

thought up for themselves no language.
They dug.

Theology, poetry, and words are all bound together—their antithesis, it seems, is the wormlike act of digging. The poem ends oddly, with an invocation to an absent other and the apparent inclusion of the poet among the silent diggers:

O one, o none, o no one, o you
Where did the way lead when it led nowhere?
O you dig and I dig, and I dig towards you,
and on our finger the ring awakes.

That "you" is both God and a loved one, God seen as a loved one and the loved one seen as God. The way to nowhere turns, through a difficult act of dialectics, into a road to somewhere, where the "no one" becomes a "someone" and that someone becomes a "you." Through this leap, the ring is not on one finger but on "our" finger: the same finger on different hands, or the one finger on a collective hand. It awakes because it has been asleep: the covenant, the truth, has been repledged. So for Celan (following perhaps the poetic precedent of Friedrich Hölderlin) the apparent absence of the Almighty leads us back to His presence. His absence is the mark of His presence. Divine absence in our time has two forms. One is the threat of the abyss, of the Death of God heralded by Nietzsche, and the other is the new technology of death presented by the death camps. To think religion through is to rediscover the holy in-between and in-spite-of this double negation, as Jabès has written: "I write in function of two limits. / On that side, there is the void. / On this side, the horror of Auschwitz."

The peculiar paradox, the insistence on God's existence in the face of His apparent disappearance, derives from the Kabbalah, the tradition of Jewish mysticism, in which the world in its imperfection is created by God's recession: He draws a curtain of darkness down before Himself in order to allow light to appear, darkness serving as the necessary foil for illumination. This thought rests at the center of Jabès's poetry, which turns on paradox and contradiction. Jabès writes in the final volume of his long work on the Shoah, *The Book of Questions*:

[G-d] is image in the absence of images, language in the absence of language, point in the absence of points.

The counterintuitive thrust of this thought leads to the imperative (in "Notebook II") that we have to "take the contradictions into our keeping. / At the edge of Emptiness." This is a religious thought without

irony because it stems from a religion based on the indispensability of irony, of dialectic and dialogue. There is a secular version of this theology, figured in the rhetorical trope of prosopopeia, where an absent other is given voice, invoked, engaged in conversation. Milosz summons forth the dead in his early poem "Dedication":

You whom I could not save
Listen to me.

In contradistinction to Milosz's later work, however, these dead are not desired. They are a burden:

They used to pour on graves millet or poppy seeds
To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once lived
So that you should visit us no more.

Milosz calls up the departed only to banish them again. His poetry is both a magical way of bringing the dead to life and a talisman against that life. He can only create the new by expelling the old through a ritual act.

The poetry of witness frequently resorts to paradox and difficult equivocation, to the invocation of what is *not* there as if it *were*, in order to bring forth the real. That it must defy common sense to speak of the common indicates that traditional modes of thought, the purview of common sense, no longer *make* sense, or only make sense if they are allowed to invert themselves. In the face of our increasingly unreal reality, then, fabulation, the writing of the blatantly fictitious, becomes the recourse of those who would describe the everyday. This is the basis for the Polish poet Aleksandr Wat's bleak parable in "Imagerie d'Epinal" where a young girl, given a lollipop by her father's executioner, carries his head in a parade:

With that pole she marched in a parade on a sunny, populous road,
under her school placard:

"Happiness to all—death to enemies . . ."

It is clear here that the slogans of repression and enforced solidarity are the expressions of absurdity, the voice of the fictional. Surrealism in this circumstance marks not only the utopian desire for secular transfiguration but also the attempt to come to terms with an untransfigured world. Fabulation and the surreal are also good ways of masking intent, of circumventing the censor's stricture.

Irony, paradox, and surrealism, for all the interpretive difficulties they present, might well be both the answer and a restatement of Adorno's often quoted and difficult contention that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Adorno wrote this just after World War II, and in the context of the essay in which it appears, his indictment extends to all forms of art. Art, Adorno felt, rested on the social inequities and objectifying tendencies that made Fascism not only possible but inevitable. Auschwitz, then, was contiguous with all the ornaments of Western art, for it stood as the culmination of culture where culture turned into its opposite. While the language of the everyday might appeal to Hikmet and Radnóti, it may not present an adequate language for *witness* in situations where the quotidian has been appropriated by oppressive powers. The colonization of language by the state renders that language inaccessible to a poetry that wants to register its protest against such depredations. The accepted languages of art might not be adequate either, for the sphere of art is frequently the first to be attacked: Hitler banished the work of the expressionists and celebrated Wagner. Socialist realism displaced all other forms of aesthetic expression under Stalinism.

The ultimate example of the cross-fertilization of culture and barbarity took place at Auschwitz, where the Jews were forced to play chamber music for their executioners. Art in such a world carries with it a dangerous complicity which it can neither refute nor ignore. Adorno did not wish to banish art from an ideal republic. He wanted art to become conscious of the sins it had to suffer and withstand. A better expression of his understanding of the task of poetry comes in an aphorism from his book *Minima Moralia*:

. . . there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.

In such a world poetry will yearn after truth through indirection—will speak, in the terms Jabès used to describe Celan, in wounded words. Jabès also maintains: "To Adorno . . . I say that we must write. But we cannot write as before." When we find eclogues by Miklós Radnóti, elegies by Johannes Bobrowski, and ballads by Ondra Lysohorsky, we are also forced to notice that these forms have been modified and transformed. Let us take another example, Robert Desnos's "Ars Poetica":

Across the snout
Picked up in the mud and slime
Spit out, vomited, rejected—

I am the verse witness of my master's breath—
 Left over, cast off, garbage
 Like the diamond, the flame, and the blue of the sky
 Not pure, not virgin
 But fucked to the core
 fucked, pricked, sucked, ass fucked, raped
 I am the verse witness of my master's breath . . .

This is not the language of the "sweet and the useful," the *dulce et utile* that Horace prescribed. On the contrary, Desnos has written his own poetics of extremity, of situations where diamonds, flames, and the sky are reduced to refuse. Poetry, in order to be the witness of lived experience, of breath, will have to resort to a language more suitable to the time. The violence of Desnos's language, his willful assault on decorum, and his scabrous use of slang all attest to the violence of the age. In fact, Desnos chooses to leave the trace of extraliterary force by violating the codes of the literary. Thus Orpheus is turned into a "cold-blooded fucker." He has been translated—as has poetry itself—into a wild, nasty, and demotic modernity.

Extremity, as we have seen, demands new forms or alters older modes of poetic thought. It also breaks forms and creates forms from these breaks. The fragment is not new to poetry: it has a venerable history. Nor is it limited to the poetry of witness. Fragmentation is a standard feature of literary modernism. But the fragment gains urgency in the aftermath of extremity. It might well be the feature that binds this anthology together. Lines of poetry can be grammatical fragments, as in Desnos's poem. Poems themselves can be fragments. Or rather, they can be collections of fragments that indicate a whole, or a narrative that cannot be written. Dorfman's stuttering "Vocabulary" tells of the inability to tell a story. It evokes the story but leaves it unfinished, omits the details and the denouement. As in Eich's postcards, the reader is strangely aware of what has been left out, what cannot or has not been said. The French call this procedure *recit éclaté*—shattered, exploded, or splintered narrative. The story cannot travel over the chasm of time and space. Violence has rendered it unspeakable.

The psychiatrist Dore Laub has found that in the oral testimony of survivors of the Shoah, their accounts fragment as they approach the core of the trauma. The narrative of trauma is itself traumatized, and bears witness to extremity by its inability to articulate directly or completely. Hence the reduction of a century to a series of staccato images in Adonis's "Mirror for the Twentieth Century":

A coffin bearing the face of a boy
 A book

Written on the belly of a crow
 A wild beast hidden in a flower
 A rock
 Breathing with the lungs of a lunatic:
 This is it
 This is the Twentieth Century.

Our age lacks the structure of a story. Or perhaps it would be closer to Adonis's poem to say that narrative implies progress and completion. The history of our time does not allow for any of the bromides of progress, nor for the promise of successful closure. That this history can be retold in scattered images (while eluding them) indicates that the age repeats the same story over and over again, marking an infernal return of the same. In "Lines for Translation into Any Language," the contemporary British poet James Fenton offers the same bleak analysis: the story of war, of a shantytown in a cemetery and the plight of a noncombatant, has been broken down into discrete sections that can exist on their own or be organized into a narrative which seems to imply connections it does not state. The darkness of the vision is made clear by its title. The situation the poem describes can happen anywhere: it is not limited in time or space. For Fenton, as for Adonis, the tale of our time is one of infinite repetition.

The fact that extremity can be translated the world over—that institutionalized suffering has been globalized—means that fragmentation might also be global—that displacement has been rendered universal. Exile in this anthology is as much a linguistic condition as it is a question of citizenship. At the most obvious level, we find a number of poets writing in languages that are alien to the nation in which they write. Brecht wrote German poems in the United States. Milosz writes Polish poems in Berkeley, California. Vallejo wrote Spanish in Paris, and Faiz wrote in Urdu in the Arabic world. More interesting perhaps is a different kind of linguistic exile, where one comes to write in a foreign language or in a language that history has rendered foreign. We can compare here the different experiences of two Romanian Jews rendered homeless by World War II and its aftermath. Dan Pagis's native language was German. Pagis spent three years in a concentration camp and emigrated to Israel, where he became a leading Hebrew poet. His Hebrew was the result of history, of displacement—it was the very mark of his exile, a notion that is given great poignancy in his little graffiti poem "Written in Pencil in a Sealed Boxcar:"

here in this carload
 i am eve
 with abel my son

if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i

The language and the characters of the Bible have been translated into modern Europe: their Hebrew is the reason for their destruction.

For Celan, the task was different. He wrote in his native German in France. This first alienation from his language—the daily experience of his alterity, his foreignness—was augmented by his fractured use of that language. He attempted to purify the tongue, render up its Nazi contamination, mark it historically. His quest led him to write in a fragmented, idiosyncratic dialect of his own construction, whose grammar was as tortured as its words were often new. Thus he was exiled within his own mother tongue, and used his mother tongue to register that exile.

A similar sense of exile, of linguistic alienation, can be seen in writers like Quincy Troupe, who write some of their poetry in the vocabulary of Black English and seek to create their own poetic idioms:

eye use to write poems about burning
down the motherfucking country for crazy
horse, geronimo & malcolm king
x, use to (w)rite about stabbing white folks
in their air-conditioned eyeballs with ice picks . . .

The thematized violence of Troupe's rejection of white America is repeated in the idiosyncrasies of spelling which seek to make visible the aural puns of the language, to uncover a depth in English which he can inhabit without undue self-sacrifice.

If modernity has established the norm of individual integrity which Troupe seeks to maintain, it should be obvious from much of the poetry in this anthology that the experience of this century has done much to undermine this norm. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry has written eloquently about the way that torture seeks to destroy the language and the world of its victim; the way it tries to unmake the victim's ability to objectify himself or herself in language. Thus when we come across a poem in this book where the poet addresses himself or herself, this form of apostrophe speaks from and against a violent self-alienation, of a self-alienation born of violence. Claribel Alegría addresses her childhood self in "From the Bridge":

Don't come any closer
there's a stench of carrion
surrounding me.

What separates the poet from the girl is precisely that smell of all the deaths the adult has witnessed, all the injustice the adult has seen. Similarly, Angel Cuadra writes of an inner split:

The common man I might have been
reproaches me now,
blaming me for his ostracism
his solitary shadow,
his silent exile.

In this poem, "In Brief," the unimportant man the poet could have become is compared with the poet that the man has become. It would seem that Cuadra confronts himself with the possibility of a life not lived alone, not lived in exile. Had he not been a poet, the logic goes, he would not be ostracized. But as the poem unfolds, Cuadra claims that there is no difference between the common man and the poet. It is not poetry that has banished him from Cuba, nor is it fame that has made him an exile. It is exile that has alienated himself from himself, and its violence that has split him asunder. The "I" that speaks the poem, that begins and ends it, is a protest against such violence, an attempt to redeem speech from the silence of pain, and integrity from the disintegrating forces of extremity.

The poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion. It often seeks to register through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and moral universes have been disrupted by events. When I began this project, I was hard pressed to find a significant poet who could not be included, who in some important way or another did *not* bear witness to the ravages of our time. But clearly it was impossible to contemplate a book of such length. I was therefore forced to develop criteria for inclusion that would do justice to the poets I would necessarily have to exclude, criteria that would begin to describe the trajectory of our modernity. I decided to limit the poets in the anthology to those for whom the social had been irrevocably invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract. The writers I have chosen are those for whom the normative promises of the nation-state have failed. They have not been afforded the legal or the physical protections that the modern state is supposed to lend its citizens, nor have they been able to enjoy the solidarity that the concept of the nation is supposed to provide. If my selection seems to include an inordinate number of writers whose human rights have been abused, it is because those rights, in the tradition of political theory, were supposed to police the boundaries be-

tween the government and personal self-determination, between citizenship and autonomy.

For decades, American literary criticism has sought to oppose "man" and "society," the individual against the communal, alterity against universality. Perhaps we can learn from the practice of the poets in this anthology that these are not oppositions based on mutual exclusion but are rather dialectical complementaries that invoke and pass through each other. Extremity is born of the simplifying desire to split these dyads into separate parts. It is the product of the drive to expunge one category in the name of another, to sacrifice the individual on the altar of the communal or vice versa. The poetry of witness is itself born in dialectical opposition to the extremity that has made such witness necessary. In the process, it restores the dynamic structure of dialectics.

Because the poetry of witness marks a resistance to false attempts at unification, it will take many forms. It will be impassioned or ironic. It will speak in the language of the common man or in an esoteric language of paradox or literary privilege. It will curse and it will bless; it will blaspheme against or ignore the holy. Its protest might rest on an odd grammatical inversion, on a heady peroration to an audience, or on a bizarre flight of fancy. It can be partisan in a limited sense but is more often partisan in the best of senses, that is, it speaks for what might, with less than crippling irony be called "the party of humanity." I do not mean this in an unreflective way, as a celebration of some mythological "inherent" goodness in man's "innate" nature. Rather, I take the partisanship of humanity as a rejection of unwarranted pain inflicted on some humans by others, of illegitimate domination. I am guided in this by Hannah Arendt's meditation on the self-justifications of collaboration with oppression, on the claim that the resistance of the single individual does not count in the face of the annihilating superiority of totalitarian regimes which make all resistance disappear into "holes of oblivion":

The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. . . . the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror, most people will comply but *some people will not*. . . . Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.

The resistance to terror is what makes the world habitable: the protest against violence will not be forgotten and this insistent memory renders life possible in communal situations. As Desnos wrote in a poem called "Epitaph":

You who are living, what have you done with these treasures?
Do you regret the time of my struggle?
Have you raised your crops for a common harvest?
Have you made my town a richer place?

If we have not, if we do not, what, in the end, have we become? And if we do not, what, in the end, shall we be?

Carolyn Forché

THE VISITOR

IN Spanish he whispers there is no time left.
It is the sound of scythes arcing in wheat,
the ache of some field song in Salvador.
The wind along the prison, cautious
as Francisco's hands on the inside, touching
the walls as he walks, it is his wife's breath
slipping into his cell each night while he
imagines his hand to be hers. It is a small country.

There is nothing one man will not do to another.

1979

15

Carolyn Forché
The Country Between Us
NY: Harper & Row, 1981

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 swung 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 hands, 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

The Garden Shukkei-en

By way of a vanished bridge we cross this river
as a cloud of lifted snow would ascend a mountain.

She has always been afraid to come here.

It is the river she most
remembers, the living
and the dead both crying for help.

A world that allowed neither tears nor lamentation.

The *matsu* trees brush her hair as she passes
beneath them, as do the shining strands of barbed wire.

Where this lake is, there was a lake,
where these black pine grow, there grew black pine.

Where there is no teahouse I see a wooden teahouse
and the corpses of those who slept in it.

On the opposite bank of the Ota, a weeping willow
etches its memory of their faces into the water.

Where light touches the face, the character for heart is written.

She strokes a burnt trunk wrapped in straw:
I was weak and my skin hung from my fingertips like cloth

Do you think for a moment we were human beings to them?

She comes to the stone angel holding paper cranes.
Not an angel, but a woman where she once had been,

who walks through the garden Shukkei-en
calling the carp to the surface by clapping her hands.

Do Americans think of us?

So she began as we squatted over the toilets:
If you want, I'll tell you, but nothing I say will be enough.

We tried to dress our burns with vegetable oil.

Her hair is the white froth of rice rising up kettlesides, her mind also.
In the postwar years she thought deeply about how to live.

The common greeting *dozo-yiroshku* is please take care of me.
All *hibakusha* still alive were children then.

A cemetery seen from the air is a child's city.

I don't like this particular red flower because
it reminds me of a woman's brain crushed under a roof.

Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore difficult to understand?

We have not, all these years, felt what you call happiness.
But at times, with good fortune, we experience something close.
As our life resembles life, and this garden the garden.
And in the silence surrounding what happened to us

it is the bell to awaken God that we've heard ringing.

Carolyn Forché
The Angel of History
Harper Collins (NY), 1994

The Testimony of Light

Our life is a fire dampened, or a fire shut up in stone.

—JACOB BOEHME, *De Incarnatione Verbi*

Outside everything visible and invisible a blazing maple.
Daybreak: a seam at the curve of the world. The trousered legs of the women
shimmered.

They held their arms in front of them like ghosts.

The coal bones of the house clinked in a kimono of smoke.
An attention hovered over the dream where the world had been.

*For if Hiroshima in the morning, after the bomb has fallen,
is like a dream, one must ask whose dream it is.*

Must understand how not to speak would carry it with us.
With bones put into rice bowls.
While the baby crawled over its dead mother seeking milk.

Muga-muchu: without self, without center. Thrown up in the sky by a wind.

The way back is lost, the one obsession.
The worst is over.
The worst is yet to come.

Writing Kept Hidden

The black fire of ink on paper took hold of their souls—incorporeal fire.

There was no protection this fire couldn't touch nor darkness nor a moment.

It lasted as long as a dream it was no dream. Heteroglossia of nervous shortwave, cloud of blown walls.

In the barracks, those who had sketched themselves in coal and smoke became coal and smoke.

And the living remained, linking unknown things to the known: residue, scapular, matchlight, name on a tongue.

Then, for an hour, the war slept, and rain filled the cisterns with silence.

Our windows faced east, and on August evenings, the sky was a blue no longer spoken.

—Beirut, winter 1983

Carolyn Forché
Blue Hour
Harper Collins, 2003

In the Exclusion Zones

Ash over conifers and birches, over berry thickets. Resembling snow and its synonyms. Silvered fields of millet.

A silence approaching bees of the invisible or the scent of mint.

One need not go further than a white towel hung in an open door.