

God's own calmness is a sign of God.
 The surprisingly cold smell of potatoes or money.
 Solid pieces of silence.

From these diverse signs you can see
 how much work remains to do.
 Put away your sadness, it is a mantle of work.

1995

CAROLYN FORCHÉ (b. 1950)

Carolyn Forché was born in Detroit. Stanley Kunitz chose her first book, *Gathering the Tribes*, for the Yale Younger Poets series in 1976. Committed to a politically engaged poetics, Forché spent the following year in El Salvador working with the human rights activist Archbishop Oscar Humberto Romero. Her second book, *The Country Between Us* (1982), grew out of her experiences there, and sparked controversy for the overtly political nature of some of its poems. Forché has edited the anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), which she describes as "a symphony of utterance, a living memorial to those who had died and those who survived the horrors of the 20th century."

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 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.

1978