The Garden Shukkei-en Study Guide

The Garden Shukkei-en by Carolyn Forché

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Introduction

Carolyn Forché initially published "The Garden Shukkei-en" in *Provincetown Arts* in 1988 and included it in her third collection, *The Angel of History* (1994). The poem was also shown in conjunction with Danz Macabre photographic art exhibit at the School of Art, Arizona State University at Tempe and is included in the portfolio of show photographs, *So to Speak* . Forché takes the title and epigraph of *The Angel of History* from Walter Benjamin's essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In haunting disembodied voices, the poems in the collection detail the atrocities of various twentieth-century horrors such as the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. In "The Garden Shukkei-en," which appears towards the end of the collection, a Japanese woman who survived the bombing recounts the horrors of that time and how it has come to shape the ways in which she remembers the past and interacts with the world.

Known as a strolling garden, Shukkei-en is dotted with islets of various sizes and surrounded by a range of hillocks on its north shore. The name "Shukkei-en" means "the Garden of Condensed Scenic Beauty." It was heavily damaged when the *Enola Gay,* an American Boeing B-29 bomber, dropped an atomic bomb dubbed "Little Boy" on Hiroshima at 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945. The survivor in the poem remembers the death and destruction she witnessed during the bombing. Primarily a descriptive poem, "The Garden Shukkei-en" uses two voices, the Japanese survivor's and a woman who accompanies her, to structure the poem.

Author Biography

Carolyn Louise Forché has built a reputation as a poet interested in chronicling injustices throughout the world. Her writing gives voice to the silenced and the oppressed and serves as a reminder of historical atrocities such as the Holocaust. Born in Detroit, Michigan, on April 28, 1950, to Michael Joseph and Louise Nada Blackford Sidlosky, Forché was raised in a city torn by racial tension and grinding poverty, facts that helped shape her world-view. Forché's grandmother, a Czechoslovakian immigrant, inspired her granddaughter with her refusal to adopt American ways and encouraged her to learn about experiences of people from other countries and cultures. Forché was also heavily influenced by Our Lady of Sorrows School, which she attended for twelve years, and its emphasis on morality and social issues.

In 1972, Forché graduated from Michigan State University and, in 1975, she received a master of fine arts degree from Bowling Green State University. In 1976, she published her first collection of poems, *Gathering the Tribes,* which received the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. In these poems, Forché introduced the subject that she would develop throughout her career: the individual's responsibility to the past and to others. During the 1970s, Forché traveled to war-torn El Salvador, serving as a correspondent for National Public Radio and as a human rights observer for Amnesty International. Much of the material in her 1981 collection, *The Country Between Us,* derives from her experiences there. The book, which sold tens of thousands of copies, was the Academy of American Poets' 1981 Lamont Poetry Selection and helped cement Forché's reputation as a poet of political passions. In her third collection, *The Angel of History,* the title of which derives from an essay by critic Walter Benjamin, she evokes the loss and pain of those who have suffered from the consequences of twentieth-century wars. The poem, "The Garden Shukkei-en," for example, interweaves the ghostly voice of the narrator with that of a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing during World War II. The collection won the 1994 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for poetry.

In addition to her poetry collections, Forché has edited the popular poetry anthology *Against Forgetting* (1993), contributed text for various collections of photography, and translated the poetry of Robert Desnos, Claribel Alegría, and Mahmoud Darwish, among others. Her next collection, *The Blue Hour,* will be published in March of 2003. Her numerous awards include the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay di Castagnola Award for *The Country Between Us,* three fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Lannan Foundation Literary Fellowship. She is also the recipient of the Edita and Ira Morris Hiroshima

Foundation for Peace and Culture Award. Forché teaches in the master of fine arts program in poetry at George Mason University in Virginia.

Poem Text

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.

35 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
40 it is the bell to awaken God that we've heard ringing.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

With its haunting simile, the opening lines of "The Garden Shukkei-en" create the tone for the poem. The speaker compares crossing a river "by way of a vanished bridge" to the way "a cloud of lifted snow would ascend a mountain." This imagery evokes an otherworldly place, where the details of the present are barely visible. The "she" of the third line refers to the speaker's companion, a Japanese survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima.

Lines 4-7

In these lines, the speaker is reporting on the memories of her companion, who is haunted by images of the past. The people "crying for help" are victims of the atomic bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima. The bomb destroyed the city and killed more than half of its 400,000 residents. The shock of the bombing was such that neither "tears nor lamentation" made any difference to the burnt corpses that filled the river Ota or to the thousands crying for help.

Lines 8-16

A "matsu" is a type of pine tree. The speaker juxtaposes the image of the tree with the image of "barbed wire" to shock the reader and to evoke a sense of both beauty and horror. Lines 9-16 are spoken in the voice of the Japanese survivor, who is remembering what used to be in the garden and comparing it to what she sees now. She is so consumed with the past that she hallucinates a teahouse that is no longer in the garden and in it the victims of the bombing. The Ota is a river that runs through Hiroshima. When the speaker says that the weeping willow "etches its memory of their faces into the water," she is figuratively saying that the tree's branches form shadows on the water that resemble the Japanese character for heart.

Lines 17-24

In these lines, the companion speaks, and then the Japanese woman speaks. The "burnt trunk wrapped in straw" is a memorial to those who died in Hiroshima, and touching it reminds the survivor of the physical effect the bomb had on her. The heat from the radiation was so intense that it literally melted the skin of people close to the blast. Her question, "Do you think for a moment we were human beings to them?" is rhetorical, which means that she obviously does not think that the Americans thought the Japanese were human beings. The woman's confusion of the angel and the woman further underscores her inability to live in the present and shows the powerful hold that her memories have on her. The image of clapping hands to call the fish to the surface

evokes the way that memory often responds to sensory stimuli. Line 24 echoes line 19. The woman does not believe the Americans think of the Hiroshima survivors. This line also suggests that the survivor's companion is an American.

Lines 25-29

The survivor tells her companion that "nothing I say will be enough," meaning that words cannot adequately represent the anguish of her experience. The image of dressing (that is, treating) radiation burns with vegetable oil illustrates the desperation of the survivors to ease their pain. The speaker compares the survivor's mind to "the white froth of rice rising up kettlesides" to highlight her emotional and mental instability.

Lines 30-34

Forché links a common Japanese greeting to the Hiroshima bombing. The *hibakusha* refer to survivors of the Hiroshima bombing. By referring to Hiroshima as a "child's city," Forché links the past to the present and shows how the effects of the bomb, dropped more than fifty years ago, continue today in the emotional torment of the survivors. The graphic image of the crushed brain shows the persistence of memory and how the survivor cannot escape the past.

Lines 35-40

The survivor wonders if she is adequately expressing her experience to the companion, but ironically she worries that her words are "too precise" rather than too vague, a more common problem with communication, especially cross-cultural communication. In these last lines, the survivor shifts to a more abstract, less detailed language in her attempt to represent her experience since the bombing. She tells her companion that, regardless of circumstances, she and other *hibakusha* have managed to live their lives with some degree of normalcy, though always carrying with them the memory of the war and the bombing. The final image suggests a kind of moral awakening for the human race as to the potentially world-ending capacity of atomic warfare.

Themes

Language and Meaning

Forché's poem shows the insufficiency of language to accurately represent the horrors of violence and war. By using two voices, one a report on the survivor's experience and the other direct speech from the survivor, Forché attempts to show the victim's trauma from two perspectives, as if testimony from the survivor herself were not enough. The survivor tells her companion, "If you want, I'll tell you, but nothing I say will be enough," and at another point she asks, "Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore too difficult to understand?" The survivor's distrust of language to adequately convey her experience is a distrust shared by many poets and writers, who experiment with point of view, word choice, and narration to evoke rather than represent emotion and events. The shift in the survivor's speech at the end of the poem from concrete to abstract and her noting of the "silence surrounding what happened to us" also underscore this point. The "silence," however, is also literal.

During the American occupation of Japan following World War II, the Japanese were strongly discouraged from discussing the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki because it was considered a sign of anti-Americanism.

War

Forché highlights the atrocities of war by describing its effects on survivors more than fifty years after the fact. This strategy enables her to illustrate the lasting damage that war has on its victims, especially when those victims are children. Because the bomb was dropped in 1945, almost all of the Hiroshima survivors were children or adolescents at the time. Since the bombing, while attempting to live "normal" lives, they have had to re-live on a daily basis the horror of what they witnessed. By setting the poem in a garden known for its natural beauty and having a survivor speak about her experiences in that very garden when the bomb was dropped, Forché exploits the contrast between past and present, innocence and experience, underscoring the irrevocable losses that war incurs.

Memory

In a way, "The Garden Shukkei-en" is a sustained exploration of the power and persistence of memory. The survivor of the Hiroshima bombing cannot escape her memories of the event, as they continue to shape the ways in which she interacts with her present. She "sees" a teahouse that is no longer there "and the corpses of those who slept in it." Often, something she sees or touches triggers the intrusion of the past. For example, when she touches "a burnt trunk wrapped in straw," she remembers how her own skin fell off as a result of radiation burn. Survivors of violent events such as bombings often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychiatric disorder marked

by flashbacks, nightmares, and a general sense of estrangement from daily life. This would account for the survivor's dreamlike speech. Her emotional instability is also highlighted by the other speaker's comparison of the survivor's mind to "the white froth of rice rising up kettlesides."

Style

Voice

The term "voice" refers to the agent, or narrator, who is speaking through the poem. Throughout the *The Angel of History,* Forché uses multiple voices to illustrate the violence and tragedy of the twentieth century. Instead of using one speaker who witnesses a particular atrocity and attempts to convey that experience to readers, Forché employs a number of speakers who interrupt and, at times, babble incoherently. Her structure of polyglot and fragmented speech, quotations from other writers, and description creates a collage-like effect. By using two speakers in "The Garden Shukkei-en," a narrator who reports her experience walking through a garden with a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing and the survivor herself, Forché gives context and shape to the memories of the survivor, who has the last words in the poem. Other wellknown, twentieth-century poems that employ a similar structure include T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," William Carlos Williams's "Paterson," and Ezra Pound's cantos.

Imagery

Forché juxtaposes images of nature with images of war to create a landscape that is at once beautiful and fraught with danger. For example, she begins the poem comparing how the companion and the survivor cross a river "as a cloud of lifted snow would ascend a mountain." A few lines down, however, there is mention of "barbed wire" and corpses in a teahouse. However, because the war imagery is in the mind of the survivor, the danger (1981), and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) that launched Mel Gibson's career, are all set in the post-apocalypse outback of Australia and peopled with human survivors from World War III. Blockbuster movies such as the James Bond film *Octopussy* (1983) and director James Cameron's Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *The Terminator* (1984) similarly have scenarios in which the world is either on the brink of nuclear holocaust or dealing with its aftermath. Perhaps the most controversial film of this time is *The Day After* (1983), a television movie set in the Midwest that explores one family's response to global nuclear war. Images of American nuclear missiles taking off from silos and atomic bombs exploding on American soil ignited controversy and reminded a younger generation of Americans of the ever-looming threat of nuclear war.

The subject of nuclear war pervaded the music of the 1980s as well, including heavy metal, reggae, rock, and folk. Pink Floyd sang about the finality of nuclear war in "Two Suns in the Sunset," while Underworld's "Underneath the Radar" used early warning systems for nuclear war as a metaphor for love. Many songs protested the Reagan administration's pro-nuclear stance in their lyrics, such as Escape Club's tune, "Wild, Wild West": "Gotta live it up, live it up / Ronnie's got a new gun. / Headin' for the nineties, livin' in the eighties, / screamin' in the backroom, / waitin' for the big boom." Reagan did not help matters when, before one of his weekly Saturday radio addresses in 1984, he joked into the microphone (which he thought was turned off), that the United

States would commence bombing Russia in fifteen minutes. Musical groups including The Talking Heads incorporated his gaffe into their songs.

Critical Overview

Although Forché has been widely lauded for her poetry and her humanitarian work, she has also been criticized for writing overtly political poetry. Critical reception for *The Angel of History,* in which "The Garden Shukkei-en" appears, however, has been mostly positive. Writing for *Magill Book Reviews,* David Buehrer notes Forché's penchant for preachiness as well as her lyric brilliance, observing, " *The Angel of History* preserves and critiques, in a moralistic if stark tone, crimes against humanity and decency." Don Bogen is effusive in his praise in his review of the book for the *Nation* . Bogen notes that Forché has changed her firstperson, "look at this" reportorial style she worked so well in her previous two collections, and he claims that *The Angel of History* is "clearly a breakthrough [volume]." A writer for *The Virginia Quarterly Review* gives the collection a mixed review, saying about Forché: "Her ambition is admirable, and the book is emotionally and intellectually moving." However, the reviewer criticizes the collection, claiming, "at times [it] feels like Forché is trying too hard to convey the importance of what she has to say." In a review for *World Literature Today,* Rochelle Owens faults Forché's poetry for being so much like everyone else's, asserting, "The writing is familiar in tone and reminiscent of sundry poets." Owens ends her review with this unflattering observation: " *The Angel of History* does demonstrate its familiarity with modern and postmodern stylistics, a safe and skillful miming of one of the major experimental enterprises of the day."

More recently, Alicia Ostriker has written about the collection for *American Poetry Review* . In her essay "Beyond Confession: The Poetics of Postmodern Witness," Ostriker sees Forché's collection as an attempt to engage the material horrors of twentieth- century violence: "Both in content and structure, Forché's poems attempt to represent both 'the pile of debris' that is twentieth-century history and the helpless yet indestructible impulse 'to make whole what has been smashed.'"

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature whose writing appears regularly in literary journals. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of witness in Forché's poem.

Forché is known for writing a poetry of witness. Her first two collections are full of firstperson poems, the "I" who sees this or that atrocity and reports on it. She became famous for poems such as "The Colonel," a thinly veiled autobiographical account of an experience in El Salvador with a diabolical military man. With her edited collection *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness,* Forché lets the victims speak for themselves. Poets such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Richard Wright, Bei Dao, and Dennis Brutus write about their direct experiences with racism, oppression, and war. In her introduction to that collection, Forché calls the poems "a poetry of witness," asserting that such a poetry "reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion."

The poems in *The Angel of History* also constitute a poetry of witness, but a different kind. Here, Forché tells readers (in her "Notes" to the poems) she has jettisoned the first-person narrative lyric in favor of a poetry that is "polyphonic, broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration." In these poems, she patches together a range of voices, each of which vies for the reader's attention and understanding. The "I" in the poems is never located, never identified fully, but rather floats in and out of the soup of other voices on the page. Sometimes, it is the angel of history who speaks. For example, in "The Garden Shukkeien," Forché uses two speakers, who have a particular function in relation to each other. By structuring her poem this way, Forché can tell the story of the survivors of the Hiroshima atomic bombing in two ways: through an eyewitness's point of view and through a witness to that eyewitness's suffering.

The first speaker opens the poem. She accompanies the woman later identified as a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing. The voice is spectral, haunting, and one can imagine the angel of history crossing the "vanished bridge." The first speaker has access to the survivor's thoughts, emotions, and actions. She tells readers about the woman with whom she travels:

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

It is a cold world that the speaker notes the woman remembers, one that "allowed neither tears nor lamentations." Such a description underscores the utter shock of being hit by an atomic bomb and the fact that history is unforgiving. Survivors of the blast often talk about the hordes of injured and crazed people shoving their way through the streets, pushing one another into the river. Events happened too quickly to allow for mourning or tears. The past is there now, to be witnessed, but never undone.

The survivor herself begins to talk in the tenth line:

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.

Shukkei-en is a garden of miniatures, full of replicas of famous landscapes. It was built on the banks of the Kyobashi-gawa, which is modeled on Xihu (West Lake) in Hangzhou, China. The garden gains some of its effects, then, by manipulating space. Forché, in her collection in general and in this poem in particular, gains her poetic effects by manipulating time. The survivor witnesses a lake and pines in the present but cannot see them without also seeing the lake and pines of the past. In this way, she echoes the "seeing" of the angel of history. The figure of the angel comes from philosopher Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," an excerpt from which Forché uses as an epigraph for her collection:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

The perspective of the angel parallels the image of Hiroshima in the poem, depicted as "A cemetery seen from the air." It also parallels the idea of an adult looking back on the debris of her childhood, the suffering that formed her and continues to form her still. The image of childhood is central to this poem, because the victims of the bombing, the *hibakusha,* who are still alive today, were children in 1945. Their memories of the bombing are the memories of children, and Forché emphasizes this by making the voice of the survivor childlike and innocent. In the preface to his collection of first-person children's accounts of the bombing, *Children of Hiroshima,* Arata Osada writes:

These children, who had survived only by the merest of chances, had seen their parents, brothers and sisters, teachers or friends dying, crushed by the timbers of a fallen house, or being burned alive.

In their study of the psychological effects of living in an age of nuclear weaponry, *Indefensible Weapons,* Robert Jay Lifton and Richard Falk note that survivors of Hiroshima experienced "a permanent encounter with death" and "a lifelong identification with the dead." Falk and Lifton write that often the survivors behaved and lived "as-if dead." Forché evokes this kind of death-in-life existence by alternating between the voice of the survivor and the voice of her companion, which the text suggests is an American woman. If Forché wrote the poem in the first person *about* the survivor, she would be returning to the kind of lyric that dominated her first two collections and that she had sworn off. If she wrote the poem solely from the first-person point of view of the survivor, she might be accused of appropriating her experience. Alternating voices, often without any warning, dramatizes the poem, letting the action speak as well as the

characters. One example of this technique occurs after the description of the willow tree on the banks of the Ota. After the first speaker describes the survivor as stroking "a burnt trunk wrapped in straw," the survivor says, "I was weak and my skin hung from my fingertips like cloth."

The effect is something close to a voice-over in movies and deepens the texture of the poem, providing readers with more than one access point to the emotion, conscience, and thoughts of both speakers.

By using an American speaker and a Japanese speaker to illustrate the evils of atomic warfare, Forché foregrounds history itself rather than the travails of one individual. The Japanese survivor strolling through the garden is representative of the hundreds of thousands of other *hibakusha* . She is an example of how war can destroy lives but also of how good can come from evil. Her ability to survive more than fifty years after the atomic blast and after witnessing the incineration of her city attests to the strength of the human spirit and its capacity to cull hope from the grimmest of circumstances.

The city itself has been rebuilt as a monument to memory. Small reminders of the bomb, such as the burnt trunk wrapped in straw in Shukkei-en, appear throughout Hiroshima. The Genbaku Dome (ABomb Dome), one of the few surviving buildings from the bomb, stands as a memorial to the dead, and Heiwa-koen (Peace Memorial Park), close to the epicenter of the explosion, includes a cenotaph, which contains the names of all known victims of the tragedy.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Garden Shukkei-en," in *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Barnhisel directs the Writing Center at the University of Southern California. In this essay, Barnhisel discusses Forché's poem in the context of her larger concern with war, violence, and the effects of brutality on humans and their surroundings.

Against the common stereotype that poetry restricts its subject matter to the individual psyche stands the work of Carolyn Forché, a poet who has relentlessly explored the vicious and violent history of the twentieth century in her poems. Winner of the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Award for her book *Gathering the Tribes* in 1976, Forché soon turned her focus away from the themes of family and descent that characterized that work. In 1978, Forché met Leonel Gomez Vides, the nephew of the El Salvadorian poet Claribel Alegria (whose work Forché was translating), and Vides prodded Forché to use her Guggenheim Fellowship money to come to El Salvador and witness that country's poverty and growing violence.

Always sensitive to the ways that war and political forces disrupt and destroy the lives of ordinary people, in El Salvador, Forché walked into a country that was about to descend into a decade of brutal war. A leftist insurgency, the FMLN, battled the conservative government. In response, the wealthy and the military organized paramilitary forces□death squads□to keep the population in fear. The election of Ronald Reagan to the U.S. presidency in 1980 provided the right-wing forces with moral, financial, and ultimately military support from the American superpower. During the 1980s, tens of thousands of Salvadorians died in battle and in acts of terrorism perpetrated largely by the military and death squads. These forces even killed Roman Catholic Cardinal Oscar Romero (who had asked Forché to return home for her own safety) and four American nuns. The brutality of those years in El Salvador is hard to overstate. Forché's response was to try to address the unrest in her verse. In one of her most famous poems, "The Colonel," she describes a Salvadorian military officer who dumps a sackful of human ears□ the ears of his torture victims□onto the table.

"They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this," the narrator remarks. The colonel says to the poem's narrator, "I am tired of fooling around . . . As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can f□ themselves." The poem ends with this haunting image: "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."

The Country Between Us, the collection containing "The Colonel" and Forché's other seven El Salvador poems, was very controversial. Many critics and poets complained that Forché had traded in pure poetry for an excessively political agenda. However, the book had great admirers in other quarters. Forché, for her part, defended the change in her poetry. In "El Salvador: An Aide-Memoire," she wrote that by her trip to El Salvador

I was to be blessed with the rarity of a moral and political education□what at times would seem an unbearable immersion, what eventually would become a focused obsession. It would change my life and work, propel me toward engagement, test my

endurance and find it wanting, and prevent me from ever viewing myself or my country again through precisely the same fog of unwitting connivance.

For Forché, after this experience in El Salvador, any poetry that did not address issues of oppression and violence would constitute "unwitting connivance" with the perpetrating forces. During the 1980s, Forché remained active in social and political causes, even working as a reporter for National Public Radio in war-torn Beirut in the early 1980s. In 1992, she published an anthology of poetry, *Against Forgetting,* that compiled what Forché called in an interview in the *Christian Science Monitor* "the poetry of witness" of poets across the world. Also in this interview, Forché described this book as "a symphony of utterance, a living memorial to those who had died and those who survived the horrors of the twentieth century." But, it was not until 1994 that Forché would publish another book of her own verse. In that year, *The Angel of History* appeared. Like *Against Forgetting* and *The Country Between Us, The Angel of History* takes as its subject witness: witness to the atrocities of the century, especially those of war. The title comes from the writings of the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, himself a victim of the Nazis. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (in a passage included as the *The Angel of History* 's epigraph), Benjamin writes that the angel of history was a spirit with his face turned toward the past. Benjamin writes

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole that which has been smashed. But, a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him toward the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

Benjamin's pessimistic idea of history□the belief that catastrophes will continue to happen and will even gain momentum, and are in fact not separate events but simply manifestations of a greater unitary violence and evil in the world□strongly influenced Forché's own view. In *The Angel of History,* Forché brings together the voices of victims of seemingly singular tragedies all over the world: the Holocaust in Europe, the "low-intensity conflicts" (a Pentagon term of the 1980s referring to the little wars around the globe) of the Cold War in the Americas and Africa, the atomic bombs in Japan. Her job is to record and to give voice, and by doing so to point out to her audience that all of these tragedies may not have the same causes, but they have the same effects on individual people. The Holocaust and the Cold War and the bombing of Hiroshima were very different events with different victims and different causes. Forché's work emphasizes the commonality of these events in terms of their impact on individuals without glossing over the events' differences.

"The Garden Shukkei-en" takes its name from a garden in Hiroshima, Japan. In 1940, the Asano family□the feudal dynastic family of the Hiroshima area□donated the park to the government. Five years later, the park saw the unimaginable destruction of the atomic bomb. Forché chooses this site in which to locate her poem primarily for the shocking juxtaposition, of course; the horrific aftermath of the bomb could not contrast more starkly with the characteristically Japanese beauty of a carefully-landscaped pond

with trees and even ceremonial tearooms. In the poem, a woman comes to the park, presumably accompanied by the narrator (who may or may not be Forché herself) and tells the narrator about her feelings about returning here, where she may have walked during the war. For Forché, violence and brutality change people and things fundamentally, in ways that only the survivors can understand or even perceive. Her poems are filled with images of survivors□both people and landscapes□that are somehow different after experiencing war. Forché conceives of this change as not exactly a scar; it is more of a transformation of the self. Yet, even in their alteration, the survivors bear witness to what has occurred.

The ears in "The Colonel" are now "dried peach halves," but they can still hear. In "The Notebook of Uprising," another poem from *The Angel of History,* Forché speaks extensively about the city of Prague and about how its inhabitants can sense the changes that first the Nazis and then the Soviets caused in the city as they crushed resistance. Throughout her work, Forché returns to a site very near the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, where in a basement a small Holocaust memorial served as one of Forché's first introductions to the changes that great violence can wreak upon a whole city. Paris is never just Paris to Forché; it is always different from what it might otherwise have been, in ways that survivors can sense.

Hiroshima's almost unique destruction (only Nagasaki can compare) transformed the woman in the poem in small, subtle ways. In what she says, the woman does not focus on the actual aftermath of the violence to any great extent; compared to the true carnage, the few images of horror (flesh hanging from her fingers "like cloth," a woman's brain crushed under a roof) are spare, yet they give an idea of how fundamentally this woman's mind must have been changed by what she saw. She is a *hibakusha,* an A-bomb survivor, and it is not hard to imagine that when she closes her eyes all she can see are the corpse-choked rivers and the hanging flesh. Happiness in its true sense is no longer possible for her, as she says at the end of the poem. All she can experience is "something close." By identifying herself as a member of a group (the *hibakusha*), she implicitly makes it clear that these experiences are shared by other survivors. The question of humanity is always close to the surface in Forché's poems, and this one is no different.

The Japanese woman poses the question, "Do you think for a moment we were human beings to them?" The answer, quite simply, is no. Acts of great violence strip victims of their humanity, transforming them into objects: the ears in El Salvador, the cattle car loads of Jews and Gypsies going to Nazi death camps, the 300,000 civilians turned instantaneously into corpses in Hiroshima. Conventional ethics demand that human beings treat each other always as ends in themselves, never as means to a greater end. In "The Garden Shukkei-en," the Japanese woman's rhetorical questions make it clear that in dropping the bomb the Americans have violated this ethical tenet and treated the inhabitants of Hiroshima merely as means, as objects, as less than human. The ironic corollary to this, Forché shows, is that the objects of violence are then transformed: once treated as something other than human, they are changed into something different, people whose lives merely "resemble" life.

Fundamentally, violence will always do this. "How can these fields continue as simple fields?" the narrator in "The Angel of History" (the first poem in the volume *The Angel of History*) asks about the fields of battle in France and Poland. In "The Garden Shukkei-en," the narrator says of the landscape that "where this lake is, there was a lake, / where these black pine grow, there grew black pine." It may seem identical but it is not. Not even sensations or emotions can remain unaltered by the experience of violence: the Japanese woman says that

We have not, in 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. Nothing, whether people or landscape or feelings themselves, can be the same after going through the trauma of war and violence.

Forché's poems rarely leave the reader with any kind of uplifting possibility, any question of transcending tragedy, and "The Garden Shukkeien" is no different. The victims of the A-bomb are surrounded by "silence": the silence of the grave, the silence of history, the silence of the garden itself. Providing faint comfort is the fact that in that silence they hear "the bell to awaken God." What this means is ominously left unsaid.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, Critical Essay on "The Garden Shukkei-en," in *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

The Watershed Foundation released an audiocassette of Forché reading from *The Country Between Us* in 1982.

In 1994, the Academy of American Poets released an audiocassette

Topics for Further Study

Research the American bombing of Nagasaki during World War II, and compare it to the bombing of Hiroshima in terms of lost lives, destroyed buildings, and defeated morale. Present your findings to the class.

Compare the two voices in the poem: the American's and the survivor's. Which is more powerful, and why? Write a short essay backing up your claim with well-developed reasons.

Research the religions of Japan, and discuss how "The Garden Shukkei-en" can be considered a religious poem.

Compare "The Garden Shukkei-en" with the poem that comes after it, "The Testimony of Light," in terms of how each represents the catastrophe of Hiroshima. Which is more powerful, and why? Discuss your responses in groups.

Many historians continue to claim that the United States had to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki or else the war would never have ended. After researching the history of the decision to drop the bombs, hold a class debate arguing for and against the idea that the bombs had to be used.

In groups, compose a psychological profile of both speakers in the poem. Describe their values, emotional states, and desires. Be prepared to defend your descriptions with evidence from the poem.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: After a decade of astounding stock market gains, Japan's economy crashes in the late 1980s.

Today: After a decade of astounding stock market gains, the U.S. economy crashes in 2001.

1980s: President Ronald Reagan announces plans for a program to examine the feasibility of a missile defense system. Congressional critics deride the idea, calling it "Star Wars."

Today: Although China, Russia, and North Korea tell the United Nations Disarmament Commission that a U.S. missile defense system would threaten international security, trigger a new arms race, and undermine the Anti- Ballistic Missile Treaty, President Bush pushes to develop the system.

1980s: The Reagan administration develops close ties to Japan as a Cold War ally.

Today: The Bush administration cultivates closer ties to Japan, after the Clinton administration frequently clashed with Japan over trade issues.

What Do I Read Next?

In 1995, Coffee House Press released an anthology of poetry titled *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age,* addressing the possibility of nuclear apocalypse. The collection, edited by John Bradley, contains poems from more than one hundred poets, including Adrienne Rich and William Dickey.

Paul Brian's *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* (1986) provides a highly readable and detailed annotated bibliography of fiction depicting nuclear war and its aftermath.

Marguerite Duras's screenplay of Alain Resnais's 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* was reissued by Grove Press in 1987. The film tells the story of an unidentified French woman and a Japanese man, both married, who are having a brief love affair in Hiroshima many years after World War II. Both struggle to escape their past and live in the present.

John Hersey's classic *Hiroshima* (1946) focuses on the lives of six survivors of the Hiroshima bombing. It remains one of the most useful and provocative accounts of the bomb's aftermath.

James Merrill was a widely respected poet whose work often explored human responses to living in the nuclear age. Timothy Materer's *James Merrill's Apocalypse* (2000) shows how apocalyptic motifs inspire and inform Merrill's poetry.

Further Study

Gery, John, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary Poetry: Ways of Nothingness,* University Press of Florida, 1996.

Gery examines both the direct and the indirect impact of the nuclear threat on American poets from Gertrude Stein to James Merrill, providing detailed readings of over fifty poems and four general groups into which poems might be categorized: protest poetry, apocalyptic lyric poetry, psycho-historical poetry, and the poetry of uncertainty.

Forché, Carolyn, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness,* W. W. Norton, 1993.

In this extremely popular anthology, Forché collects the works of poets from around the world who bear witness in their poems to atrocities such as war, famine, and violent discrimination.

Lifton, Robert Jay, and Nicholas Humphrey, eds., *In a Dark Time,* Harvard University Press, 1984.

Psychiatrists Lifton and Humphrey have collected excerpts from literature of the last 2,500 years that comment on the psychological and imaginative confusion surrounding war. Lifton is known for his psychological studies of survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

Takaki, Ronald T., *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb,* Back Bay Books, 1996.

Takaki provides a concise exploration of America's use of atomic weapons during World War II and questions the military necessity of dropping the bomb, suggesting that desire for intimidation, anti-Asian sentiment, and Harry Truman's personality were all factors.

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□, "The Garden Shukkei-en," in *The Angel of History,* HarperCollins, 1994, pp. 70-71.

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Owens, Rochelle, "World Literature in Review: English," in *World Literature Today,* Vol. 68, Issue 4, Autumn 1994, p. 816.

Ratiner, Steven, "Carolyn Forché: The Poetry of Witness," in *Christian Science Monitor,* April 20, 1994.

BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535