

## The General

A response to Carolyn Forché's poem The Colonel

The letter arrives in an oddly sized envelope with a quarter-sized blue postmark. *Dear Mr. B...* After ten years of working with Amnesty International writing letters to foreign leaders asking for the release of political prisoners, I finally got a response. It is from a general in Uruguay.

Reading the letter, I can see the general in his cocobolo paneled office in the old section of Montevideo. The balcony opens to the Isla de Flores. It is the season of llamadas and the raucous sound of a neighborhood candombe band drifts up through the open balcony doors.

He sits at his desk behind a pile of letters, his cuff studs clicking softly against the desktop. At his elbow, a picture of his daughter Francesca, with her high forehead and jaguar eyes that remind him so much of her mother. She barely made it into this world. A breech birth in a mountain camp without a doctor. Her mother's body a bloody rag doll. He had to go into the hills for two days so his men would not see him wild with grief.

This morning he is feeling generous. The music has made him so. He picks a letter at random from the pile and decides to answer it. He is not a bad man. Why do so many strangers around the world think otherwise? It is dark in his office, but the balcony is sunny. He walks to the railing and looks down. A street vendor is cooking garlic sausages. She is striking in her plaid shirt and wire earrings. She reminds him of Francesca, now away at college in Boston. She wants to be a journalist! What puts such ideas in a young woman's head? Does she listen to the lies? In the streets? And what is a lie anyway except a truth that is stillborn and must be buried to make way for the future. The woman cooking sausages looks up at him and looks away. He walks back to his desk, puts down his drink and picks up my letter.  
*Dear Mr. B... Thank you for your concern about señor Mujica.  
We are proud of our people. We treat everyone fairly.*

## Road Work

She's leaking hydraulic, he says  
and lowers the blade of his D8 dozer  
to the ground and shuts it down

The smell of newly exposed  
forest soil mixes  
with diesel exhaust

Robins drop from the trees  
to gorge on the sudden  
feast of nightcrawlers

There is a boulder in the road bed  
he needs to dynamite anyway  
He can replace the broken hose later

Jumping down from the track, out of the corner  
of his eye, an impossibly blue egg shell  
lies in the gravel at the edge of the cut bank

He drills an eighteen inch hole  
in the boulder and gently packs the hole  
with a full stick and backfills with gravel

He runs the wires  
two hundred feet back  
Yells for everyone to stay clear

Fire in the hole!  
He touches the wires  
to an old truck battery

When the deep thud hits his chest  
he stands still, looking straight up for falling rocks—  
every other time but this one

This time he forgot  
For no fucking reason  
he just forgot

## Sex Worker in Shinjuku

In the hard loud alone of Shinjuku  
in a small theater rows of local salarymen  
in white shirts pack together like eggs  
to watch a live sex show

One woman on stage uses a device  
and her well-trained muscles  
to shoot cigarettes from her vagina  
into the audience - *Hai!*

Another plays rock paper scissors  
to choose eager men from the front rows  
to have sex with her on stage  
One man can't get it up and she tells us  
behind his back with her drooping finger

I am embarrassed that my group  
of American business colleagues  
have urged our Japanese hosts to bring us here  
though our hosts seem to think nothing of it

After a while I am strangely bored  
As I get up to leave the pretty blond woman  
on stage with the salaryman wrapped  
around her like an abandoned carousel horse  
calls out to me in flat midwest English  
Goodbye she says over the heads of the crowd

## Thermopolis, Wyoming

The mineral water swimming pool in  
Thermopolis, Wyoming had a smooth gravel bottom  
My little kid feet were delighted to learn that  
The water tasted oily. People are shouting  
Women are wearing bathing caps with big  
flowers on them men and boys are in baggy trunks  
My brothers and I splash around like new spring  
frogs in the slippery grayish water

Decades later my wife finds some family postcards, long forgotten  
in her fathers desk after he died. There is one card from an aunt  
that is postmarked Thermopolis, Wyoming 1937

She writes to her fiancée. *Why haven't you come out to join me?*  
They were going to start a life together, here beneath the Bighorn range  
She talks of the late spring, the snowdrifts, the new town jail. The slow pace  
of her life drifts off the page like mist from a blue Yellowstone sulfur pool

The postcard was written in pencil. On the front is a drawing of the  
mineral water pool. Men in long bathing suits wearing moustaches  
women in longer bathing clothes. *The roads are ok now. I know  
they are slow, darling. It took me three days to get here from Laramie  
Why haven't you come?*

## Boxing Coach

Drop your hips when you punch  
and when you block. In close  
don't forget the upper cut

Be quick as a heart attack  
but don't show all at once  
Like a deadman's hill on a back road  
you don't see until you are right up on it

I bet Jesus had an uppercut  
Way he threw them money changers out the temple  
You need something to back that up  
Remember, drop your hips