

## Risking Exile

### An Interview With Carolyn Wright

by Stephanie Painter

During her tenure as visiting professor of creative writing at the University of Wyoming in 1997, Carolyn Wright and I began a dialogue about poetry and writing in general. We met again a year later at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, where she was conducting a workshop entitled “Waking the Dragon: The Art of Narrative Poetry.” Those talks evolved into telephone conversations, letters, and e-mails as distance separated us. Early in 2003 I decided to distill some of our discussions into this interview, conducted mainly electronically between my home in Casper, Wyoming, and Wright’s home in Norman, Oklahoma, where she was visiting associate professor of creative writing at Oklahoma State University.

Wright’s most recent book, *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire*, winner of the 1999 Blue Lynx Poetry Prize selected by Yusef Komunyakaa, was also chosen for the Oklahoma Book Award in Poetry for 2001 and an American Book Award for 2001 from the Before Columbus Foundation. One of the poems in that collection, “Flowers in Winter,” won the John Williams Andrews Narrative Poetry Prize from *Poet Lore*/The Writer’s Center. Wright’s first book was published in 1978, and was followed by six more books and chapbooks of poetry, an essay collection, and three volumes of translation from Spanish and Bengali. In addition to the awards mentioned above, Wright has won the Academy of American Poets Prize, the Pablo Neruda Prize from *Nimrod*; the Celia B. Wagner, Cecil Hemley, Lucille Medwick, and John Masefield Memorial Awards from the Poetry Society of America; the Erika Mumford Prize from the New England Poetry Club; and the Milton Dorfman Poetry Prize from the Rome Arts and Community Center. She has held research associateships at Harvard’s Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies and Wellesley College’s Center for Research on Women, a fellowship from the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, and received many additional honors.

Wright’s life has been one of migration. She began her odyssey in Seattle, where she grew up and attended Seattle University. Later she acquired master’s and doctoral degrees in English and creative writing from Syracuse University. Between coasts and degrees, Wright was a Fulbright Fellow in Chile during the Allende years. She has lived in India, Bangladesh, and Germany as well as Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and many places in between. These places make the raw material she

has transformed into poetry.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** In a recent annotation, I described the narrator of *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire* as an outsider, a person edging between fear and desire, and a woman traveling through Third World countries as well as prosperous ones, meeting people on the fringes of poverty, war, and civility. Do you agree with that analysis?

**Carolyn Wright:** Yes, though I would also emphasize the outsider’s urge toward discovery, openness to these countries and people, and the moments of beauty and unexpected connection with them—not only the fear and desire generated by the extreme political and economic conditions this outsider often encounters. The narrator/speaker of many poems in *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire* is in some sense self-exiled, impelled to enter into cultures not her own and come to understand these cultures and countries on their own terms, in their own languages, and with their own sets of references and stances toward the world. Why? She’s not a

**A Carolyn Wright Book List**  
**A Choice of Fidelities: Lectures and Readings**  
**From a Writer’s Life** (Ashland Poetry Press, 1994)  
**From a White Woman’s Journal**  
(Water Mark Press, 1985)  
**Premonitions of an Uneasy Guest**  
(Hardin-Simmons University, 1983)  
**Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire**  
(Lynx House Press, 2000)  
**Stealing the Children**  
(Boise State University Bookstore, 1978)

tourist or a cultural dilettante, but someone from outside that culture who needs to be inside it as best she can, somehow to bridge the gulf of incidental differences, to touch the common humanity that unites us all. This speaker—as in “My Last Night in Bahia”—finds herself in awkward situations, sometimes abandoned or stranded, but never for long, because people, often the most unexpected people, surprise her with acts of kindness and generosity. And at that point, she realizes what she seeks—both comes to understand what it is and feels fulfilled with it. Her goal is to enter into a broader communion and sense of community with all people, not just those of the same educational background and nationality and mother tongue and socioeconomic class, who would be “easy” to get close to. In all her travels and interactions both at home and abroad, with people both advantaged and on the margins, including those exiled by political circumstances, she means to feel at home anywhere in the world.

**I guess I’ve always been a survivor; I intended to survive whatever I felt I needed to experience in order to be a more complete human being.**

Sometimes this speaker goes almost too far, almost losing herself in this merging with another culture, as in “Flowers in Winter,” but so far she has not lost her life either literally or figuratively. This sort of risk-taking is what makes her feel most fully and deeply human—that is one of the thematic threads that runs through most of the poems in *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire*. Of course, when she goes home, she can perceive all that makes her own country a strange and unnerving place, as in “The Retarded Woman on Cooper Street” or “The Grade School Teacher During Recess,” or “The Peace Corps Volunteer Goes Home,” all that makes her

distinct and different among her supposed own kind.

**TBR:** *I find it especially interesting that you describe your speaker as not having lost her life, because another constant in your writing is survival. No matter what your narrator is confronted with—danger, anger, lost love—she survives. She incorporates the experience into her bag of tricks and moves on. Do you discover the key to survival as you write, or does the survival that you have already experienced inform your writing?*

**CW:** That's a good question. Actually, both processes—discovering the key to survival as I write and infusing the writing with my own urge to survive—exist simultaneously. I guess I've always been a survivor; I intended to survive whatever I felt I needed to experience in order to be a more complete human being. I mean both physical survival and emotional/psychic survival. I am interested in how much control we have over these forms of survival, how much our own actions and decisions determine our chances of survival, and how much these chances are out of our control. The notion that character determines plot, or fate, is very attractive. Who we are affects what happens to us—I think that this notion may be more true in the realm of emotional dynamics.

We never have complete control over our physical survival. I guess I've always known this, and have been grateful for each ongoing day of this life. In the emotional sphere, I have always wanted to go on living, no matter how devastating an experience may have been, if only in order to learn all that I can from it. I hope this attitude infuses the poems, that there is a spirit of affirmation in them, even when they confront horrific circumstances, as in "KZ," where the speaker is walking through Dachau, thinking of all who died there during the Nazi Third Reich, or in the aptly titled "Survivor's Story," where the speaker converses with a Hungarian American Jewish doctor friend about the circumstances of his own life that have inspired him to his humanitarian profession.

As for emotional survival and its effect on physical survival: I am no Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton or John Berryman or any number of other poets I could name who have self-destructed, either through an act of suicide or more slowly through drinking, smoking, drug use. I have never been tempted to court annihilation—it just does not interest me or stimulate my imagination, as it clearly did the imaginations of these poets. Of course, I have been blessedly free of the neurological and psychosomatic conditions that affected their behavior and

inner life; and though I have experienced grief and loss in the personal sphere, I cannot let these experiences permanently traumatize or scar me. I continue to be willing to take risks,

within reason, in order to get close to people, to have the experiences of friendship and love that keep the adventure of human interaction alive and fresh. Also, I'm lucky to have very good physical health and, I think, ever-greater emotional balance and perspective—and, I hope, an ever-increasing freedom from self-absorption—that come with ongoing life experience.

In my early 20s, though, when most of the events of the poems set in Latin America take place, I was single-mindedly intent on having grand experiences of personal and cultural and political discovery. The survival issue didn't really concern me, except that my physical risk-taking was quietly tempered by what seemed to be caution. Of course, hitchhiking in big semi trucks in Brazil and bumping across the *altiplano* of Bolivia with Native Aymara villagers in the flatbeds of pickups may not look very cautious or prudent to other people. But I always paid attention to my surroundings. Only once or twice did I go ahead and do something against the warnings of my intuition.

**TBR:** *You mentioned the poem "Flowers in Winter," which won an award and is the final poem in your collection Seasons of Mangoes and*

*Brainfire. This poem seems to synthesize the various fears, desires, and alienations the persona grapples with, along with the overriding sense of survival. Please talk about the poem, about winning the award, and about how this poem ends one collection, but might serve as a springboard into your current work.*

**CW:** "Flowers in Winter" consists of one long narrative poem in 12 sections, set in Europe—West Germany, as it was then, especially in Nuremberg—at the height of the Iran-Iraq War. The poem chronicles an American woman's encounter with an Iranian man, tracing the interaction between these two lovers of opposing nations, and the cultural and political forces that draw them together and ultimately drive them apart. The poem is autobiographical, based on an encounter in the mid-1980s with an Iranian man of Azerbaijani ethnicity—we really did meet in a modest pension hotel in Nuremberg. This was a wonderful multiethnic irony, since Hitler—who loved this city in its original medieval beauty before the Allied bombings of 1945—would certainly have persecuted or killed this man with his Middle Eastern features—olive skin, dark hair—had this poem's events occurred

AFTER WE RECEIVED THE NEWS  
OF THE 100-MILE WIND

(Laramie to Cheyenne)

We thought the first lines we sent out  
would cover it—the stolen children  
gathered into the apron of the wind—  
but this gale chilled the farthest corners  
of our meaning. Empty hopper cars

lifted lightly as balsa off the tracks  
and our first warning—a warmth  
with a threatening undercurrent to it—  
was confirmed. All over town, children  
were opening drawers, pulling jackets  
from closets, hurrying down walks  
as if to the bus stop. Fists burrowing

their pockets for the proper change,  
they didn't notice how their parents' feet  
were rooted to the porches, their hands  
gnarling in the very act of waving *Wait!*  
*Come back!* Across the prairies,

wind revved up its engines,  
sucked in darkness like a fuel.  
The children vanished  
over the horizon. We drew our hands back,  
the last in a genealogy of shadows.  
Nothing we could have offered  
would ever have been enough.

Carolyn Wright

For my mother

in the first half of the 1940s instead of 40 years later.

Despite her fascination with crossing borders and boundaries, with living her life in another language and culture almost as if she were a long-term member of that culture, the speaker does confront fears of being swallowed up in the relationship with someone whose culture she is able to enter into but who may not be able to enter into the culture from which she has emerged. As a Western woman in an intimate tie with a Middle Eastern Muslim man, in what ways might he—without intending ever to hurt or deprive her of her prized autonomy—find himself demanding that she live according to the ideals for women of his culture? Although he wanted to keep her, remain with her—and she appreciated his honorable intent here, his willingness to make a commitment, so unlike American men of her generation—she didn't believe that marriage to him would have worked. As a practical romantic, she sensed that in the long run she would be able to communicate with him across cultures only to a certain extent—not just because of cultural differences, but also because of differences of class and educational background, the same sorts of differences that would make her hesitate with men of her own culture.

I have called this poem autobiographical. It is, in great part. But I won't tell you which parts. Some of the narrative is heightened or more dramatic than the actual events. We really did find ourselves communicating mainly in German—from business travel and study he was quite fluent in that language, but had only rudimentary English. I knew no Farsi or Azeri, but found German fairly easy to learn from a small handbook and from my conversations with this man. Every element of this poem cohered from the beginning—the personal story of this couple intertwined with the greater public forces of history.

But being with him was a wonderful education and adventure. I hope that the poem conveys the beauty at the heart of the relationship. Remember that he belonged to an ethnic minority within Iran that had suffered persecution under the Shah's regime—and he could see both the moral virtues of the Ayatollah's regime and its narrow rigidity that oppressed every independent-minded Iranian. The speaker could see what a decent, principled man he was, an upholder of the best and highest values of Islam—seeing these values within one individual helped the speaker overcome her own preconceived notions about Muslim men. I also hope the poem conveys the stasis of indecision the speaker confronts—what to do about this man? His European travel documents are expiring, a younger brother is fighting on the Iran-Iraq battlefield, and he has familial obligations calling him home. But if she could not decide to give up her own life trajectory to go with him, then her uncertainty would let him slip away. In one sense their parting is a heartrending loss, in another a blessed release from an impossible quandary; the poem dramatizes the speaker's deep-seated ambivalence.

I was gratified that it ultimately won the awards it did. Poems about cross-cultural encounters had until quite recently been greeted with bafflement by readers in immense, monolingual, self-absorbed America. Of course, as so many people from

non-European nations move to America and bring their cultures and languages and religions with them, this country's view of the rest of the world, and of itself, is changing. In this context of cultural transformation, I think that there's more scope for poetry that deals with cross-cultural and intercultural issues.

**TBR:** *So don't keep us waiting. What has grown out of your winter flowers and mangoes?*

**CW:** Writing the poems in *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire*, particularly "Flowers in Winter," gave me a vision of a more complex poetics, as I've just described. How to dramatize ways in which large public events, the forces of history, impinge upon individual lives, the personal sphere: That's usually the realm of the lyric poem. Where did I go from there? Well, I was already working on other poetry manuscripts simultaneously, as is often the case with poets. Because of tone and/or subject matter, some poems go into one manuscript, others into another manuscript.

Another major project is to complete the investigative prose memoir of my experiences in Chile during the presidency of Salvador Allende, *The Road to Isla Negra*. This book grew originally out of the narrative poems in *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire*, because there were so many stories to tell, so many background details and social nuances that I could not convey fully in the poetry but that the reader needs to understand in order to participate more fully in the narrative, to follow it from within.

The other major project is a "memoir in poetry," entitled *Reflections in Blue*: a series of lyrical-narrative poems set principally in New Orleans and involving an interracial couple, artists, and writers. This is a deeply felt and nuanced series, involving all those negotiations between race, history, society; expectations from family and self; the challenge of finding a place together with both races, both families; shiftings and dislocations, both personal and political; and ultimately the personal conflicts that pull the couple apart. This collection should take the previous question you asked—about desires and fears—in new directions, and also demonstrate how individuals of the same nationality sometimes have to cross cultural boundaries and borders that stand between them and also exist within themselves. In this instance, both people are Americans, but of different races, different regional cultures, and different socio-economic classes—differences as great as those between people from different continents, but more insidious and harder to acknowledge because, as Americans, both members of this couple also share a deeply intertwined and compromised history.

I have several other manuscripts nearly completed or in progress: the full-length "Eulene" series of poems, featuring that incorrigible *sinvergüenza* [scoundrel], my alter-ego Eulene; more volumes of translations from Bengali, including the anthologies of work by Bengali women poets and writers; and a prose memoir of my years in Bengal.

**TBR:** *Your new manuscript, The Custody of the Eyes, seems to contrast with Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire, and actually with much of your other work. Would you talk a little about the structure and premise of the collection?*

**CW:** It's interesting to hear this manuscript called "new." About half of the poems are older; the rest I've written in the last few years. But these poems represent one of my voices, a voice that has been with me since the beginning. This poetry seems to come out of the same tradition as some of the older New Critical, Deep Image, and Formal American poets I've been reading since undergraduate days—Bishop, Eliot, Justice, Kinnell, Kumin, Lowell, Merwin, Roethke, Van Duyn, Wilbur, James Wright—poets often regarded as politically conservative (or "apolitical") members of the so-called literary establishment, in part because they often adhere to a rigid form. Granted, they draw from the English language's literary traditions and bring elements of that tradition into the present. This may be conservative in the sense of retaining and transmitting what is valuable from the past, but I don't think that writing in form or making allusions to Chaucer or Shakespeare or Dickinson should be linked to one's political views. I certainly write in form and draw upon literary predecessors in allusions, but I don't vote Republican! Other voices that have influenced mine in these poems are Hugo, Kizer, Rexroth, and Stafford, poets from my beloved Northwest and West Coast origins, many of whom are influenced by classical Chinese and Japanese poetry—traditions conserved and transmitted to English by way of translation—as well as by Native American culture and the landscape of the West.

*The Custody of the Eyes* evolved into a book of exploration of self and of dynamics between friends and family members and lovers, with fewer poems that locate these dynamics in a political context. Several poems are set in Europe and other locales of "western canon" high culture, and most of the poems' allusions and references are to figures of Western literature and history and aesthetics. Only a few refer directly to Latin America—but the poet's earlier experiences in Chile, Brazil, and Peru become part of the collection's ever-present background.

Many of the poems in this collection are in form—sestinas, pantoums, an acrostic, a three-sonnet narrative poem, a few double abecedarians—some of these are recent additions to the manuscript, others much older. I've been writing poems in form since graduate school—really since the workshop I had with Elizabeth Bishop at the University of Washington, which is the subject of one of the double abecedarians. In the last year I've added two ghazals to the manuscript, both of which are representatives of the form according to the late Agha Shahid Ali's rigorous Arabic-Persian-Urdu standards. One of these ghazals, which I started soon after September 11, 2001, is dedicated to the memory of this Kashmiri American poet, who died in early December 2001.

**TBR:** *Your prose memoir also sounds quite intriguing. Would you talk about the research that led you to this project?*

**CW:** I began to write prose because I could not fully tell in poetry all the stories about Chile and Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America. These seemed to demand a degree of detail, explanations of social and cultural background, and an externalizing of context into such prose elements as dialogue and

scene: elements which narrative poetry could not fully encompass, at least given current poetic conventions. I've written an essay that goes into more detail about this movement from poetry to prose, which was published in the small essay collection *A Choice of Fidelities: Lectures and Readings From a Writer's Life*. And the research—ah, the research. For years while I was in graduate school or moving around the country for fellowships or visiting teaching positions, my main research materials—notebooks, photographs and slides, maps and books of facts about Chile—were safely packed away in boxes in my parents' home in Seattle. The journals I had kept that year were sketchy, but my letters home—thanks to my mother—were preserved. They contained the sorts of incisive comments, descriptions, and narrations of daily events, travels, and conversations that I would find invaluable later. Besides these memory aids, I've read a lot of books from all political viewpoints about the Allende years. Not just for facts, though—I read in order to reenter the ambience of the Allende years, to stir up my own memories and initiate a momentum for my own writing.

In the last several years, through some lucky coincidences, I established contact with a few key people I knew in Chile during that time. Through them, I can begin to answer the question "Where are they now?" Then in 1999 I made two return trips to Chile and observed the presidential election in December of that year. This election brought to power the first Socialist to head the country since Allende was freely elected. Another detail that most Americans don't know or may have forgotten: September 11 is the anniversary of the CIA-Nixon-Kissinger administration-aided military coup in Chile that overthrew and murdered Allende in 1973. The coup left many of Allende's supporters and sympathizers dead, disappeared, or exiled, and put into power the general who led the coup, Augusto Pinochet, whose regime lasted until 1990, when Chile's democracy—the most stable in Latin America up until the 1973 coup—was restored. So September 11 is a day that has lived in infamy in the memory of many Chileans for nearly 30 years. I hope to finish *The Road to Isla Negra* in the next year, by that 30th anniversary.

**TBR:** *Do you feel that the struggles you witnessed in Chile made you see the struggles within your own country more clearly?*

**CW:** Absolutely. I've said elsewhere that the year in Chile was my Vietnam—my pivotal political experience or rite of passage in young adulthood, the counterpart for many men of my generation of their service overseas. Clearly, I didn't see combat or experience hostility from antiwar protestors when I got home, but in Chile I had to confront the image of my military superpower country as an international bully, not the benign entity portrayed in my public school education. I too was disheartened, after I went home, by the massive indifference to Chile that I encountered in 1972 and 1973, when Americans were preoccupied (if they had any political preoccupations at all) with the deteriorating situation in Vietnam and the unfolding Watergate scandal. Even though I had marched against the Vietnam War and for civil rights and women's rights, I was politically naive when I first arrived in

Chile, but my eyes were opened there. In Chile, I could see how most new government policies or political actions had immediate, visible effects. There were no other power centers outside of Santiago, no widespread sheltering affluence, as in my own country, to diffuse public attention or provide economic buffering devices. Allende's presidency was as immense and divisive a national event in Chile as Vietnam was here, pitting conservatives against liberals, even within families.

Once I returned to the U.S., I applied the insights I had had in Chile to this country, and I have paid close attention to politics ever since—whenever I move I register anew to vote, and I have not missed any major election. I can see how governmental policies do indeed have tremendous effects, not just on the poor and working class, but on everyone; and how the differences in our socioeconomic backgrounds gear us to different concerns and political stances. The U.S. is not a classless society—that post-World War II canard has been retired, thankfully, and class interests are often in conflict, both on the public policy level and between individuals. In both the public and private sense, this country has been profoundly diverse and culturally divided for a long time!

Much of what I learned in Chile—represented in the poetry of *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire*—and am learning to narrate and dramatize in prose memoir form in *The Road to Isla Negra*, is thus applicable to the memoir in verse, *Reflections in Blue*. One African American poet declared to me several years ago that the relation between the races was America's most important subject. He may find it ironic and disconcerting that this has become one of my subjects, with the larger sociopolitical and racial issues embodied in microcosm in the dynamics between two individuals. Until quite recently, the common assumption has been that this subject would usually be the province of the minority writer. It's still uncommon, I think, to explore such dynamics from the perspective of the white, female member of the couple.

**TBR:** *You certainly are a versatile writer. In addition to all these projects, you do translations. Translation is said by many to be the first line of defense against war: Through understanding the literature of others, we come to have a better understanding of the culture of others in such a way that they no longer so strongly resemble "the other." It seems to me that translation, then, may serve as a contrast to your own work.*

**CW:** Yes, translation can certainly be a defense against war—it's much harder to fight with people if we understand them. This is particularly important in the practical realm—simultaneous translation at the United Nations or the international high court in The Hague—but literary translation also has a long-term effect on understanding between cultures. Actually, I regard the translation I do as an outgrowth or extension of my own work—the process of translating is another way to encounter a voice from another culture and attempt to understand it on its own terms. That's another vast subject, though—I could go on and on.

For the last few years, after the publication of three collections of poetry in my translation in the mid-1990s, I've concentrated on my own poetry and memoir. I haven't sent out

many queries and submissions of translation manuscripts. After three volumes of translation published in quick succession, I felt I should give priority to my own work. It's also good to finish projects I've started and then set aside for various reasons. I don't want to start any new books until a few more of these I've described are completed. But I do have some ideas, and pages written, for future works. ■

INTERVIEWER: **Stephanie Painter** is a writer who lives in Casper, WY.