



## The Angel of History

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THE ANGEL OF HISTORY, Carolyn Forche's third collection of poetry, combines personal and public examples of human loss and victimization to create a moving elegy for our past century. Like her 1981 book THE COUNTRY BETWEEN US, which revealed Forche as a quintessential poet of conscience willing to confront the atrocities of civil war and political corruption in El Salvador, THE ANGEL OF HISTORY preserves and critiques, in a moralistic if stark tone, crimes against humanity and decency. Here, however, her scope is much broader, as she records, in fragmentary, imagistic fashion, far-reaching horrors such as the German Holocaust, Hiroshima, and Latin American genocide in order to give voice to this century's survivors and to meditate on memory's moral function.

Nevertheless, as Forche readily admits in a note at the book's close, simply memorializing the devastations wrecked on life and liberty that have marked the twentieth century's progress is no panacea for preventing fresh horrors to come. The poet calls THE ANGEL OF HISTORY "a gathering of utterances ... broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration." Hence, the form of the collection is fragmented, disjointed, and sparse—each shard or image culled from a particular historical moment is displayed baldly, with little attempt on the poet's part to link either the events recorded or the book's sections together.

Yet there seems a hauntingly self-reflective purpose behind such themes and forms: to record the past may be the only means to endure its compiled atrocities and, ultimately, transcend them. When Forche pronounces in "Elegy," one of the concluding fragments of THE ANGEL OF HISTORY, that "We revolt against silence with a bit of speaking," she expresses her belief that uttering the seemingly unutterable and keeping alive in memory what humans might more comfortably like to forget is a necessary moral task. Forche forces readers, at the very least, to confront their own complicity with history's barbarities and to grieve for those who have endured them. Only by facing this collective history, as Forche's verse does with such stark beauty, can readers also preserve their own humanity.

## Sources for Further Study

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