

Born in Nicaragua in 1924, Claribel Alegría is one of the world's greatest living poets. Winner of the esteemed Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2006, author of numerous books of poetry and prose, and formative member of "la generacion comprometida" (the committed generation), Alegría has secured a permanent place in the history of Central American literature.

In this feature, we reprint several of her classic poems, and also publish (with triumphant joy) a section of her latest work—a long poem entitled *Amor sin Fín (Love without End)*. The feature also reprints two translator's introductions by Carolyn Forché, prefaced by a personal note in which Forché thanks Alegría for her invaluable poetic and political mentorship. In addition, we include a scholarly tribute by a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at Chapel Hill, and an interview conducted with Alegría in July 2015 (she was 91 years old at the time) at her home in Managua.

The editors wish to thank, above all, Claribel Alegría for agreeing to be featured in *BPR*. Our deepest gratitude extends, as well, to her son Erik Flakoll Alegría, who provided guidance and support at every turn. We would like to acknowledge the professionalism and generosity of Liz Hamilton and Margie Bachman, who handle reprint rights at Northwestern University Press and the University of Pittsburgh Press, respectively. Special thanks also go to Alegría's translators, including Daisy Zamora and George Evans, Carolyn Forché, and Margaret Sayers Peden, as well as to Claribel's late husband Darwin J. "Bud" Flakoll and their daughter Maya Flakoll Gross.

You wrote *only a tissue of time, a tissue separates us*. It is now forty years since that summer we spent together in Deya, in the house you named C'an Blau Vell, the blue-doored and blue-shuttered stone house facing a rushing stream on the island of Mallorca. You were forty-seven years old that summer, nearly twenty years younger than I am now, and I was twenty-seven, and in Europe for the first time. You knew that my Spanish was terrible, yet you gave permission for me to translate your poems into English. You were patient with my naïveté regarding history, politics, oppression, the complicity of my government in the sufferings of the two countries from which you were exiled: Nicaragua and El Salvador. I learned that summer how little I knew about the world, my country, or myself, and that was an important lesson and perhaps the first step toward awareness: to know that one knows nothing. So despite the Mallorquin music carried on the sirocco through olive and lemon groves, the shower of almond blossoms, the lemons like lights in the dark trees, despite all that beauty, and your infinite hospitality, the summer was not an entirely happy one for me, and you sensed that. I felt helpless with my new knowledge and inadequate to the task of carrying your poems across the abyss between our languages. I wanted to do something about the suffering you revealed to me, but I didn't know what. I remember being told by one of the writers who gathered on your terrace: "There is nothing you can do. Change your government. Enjoy your summer." I studied you then, Claribel, to learn how a poet should comport herself, and this is what you taught me: that I should go to my desk every morning and wait with pen in hand or fingers on the keys; that I should read everything, and enter as many languages as I could master; that I should take a stand against tyranny, brutality, and injustice; and that I should embrace life, the whole of it, with no holding back. When the

time came for me to emulate your courage and clarity, I hoped I would be sufficiently able, and would have your blessing. Thank you for walking ahead of me on the path we made as we walked.

The following essays were written seventeen years apart, at the beginning, and toward the present.

—Carolyn Forché

Preface to Flores del Volcan (Flowers from the Volcano)

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With Tears, Fingernails, and Coal

“I have no *fusil* [rifle] in my hand, but only my testimony.” Her hands sculpt her language as she speaks. The late sun dissolves in the Mediterranean, the hour’s bells drop down the terraces of Mallorca. She moves into another of her memories.

“I was attending a conference of writers and intellectuals. We Latin Americans were sitting around our table and it seems that there was a package addressed to us. It was casually tossed from one mailboy to another. The one who caught it was killed. The other was injured in the explosion. Months later, in another part of the world, I was asked what I would have done if we had been issued rifles. I explained that I could not take up the gun, that I would not be good with a gun. I would have asked for bandages and medicines instead—this is the one thing I know how to use. The other is the word.”

The ink of memory washed in blood, clouds that are wrapped around the open wounds of the *Cordillera*. Claribel Alegría is a poet who has called herself a cemetery, willing to provide herself as a resting place for those whose bodies have never been recovered, the friends whose flesh has been mutilated beyond recognition. They are the dead who have become “too many to bury,” who do not cease to exist and who seem to besiege surviving poets with pleas to witness on their behalf, to add their names to a litany and, in so doing, illuminate a senseless brutality.

These poems are testimonies to the value of a single human memory, political in the sense that there is no life apart from our common destiny. They are poems of passionate witness and confrontation. Responding to those who would state that politics has no place in poetry, that expressions of the human spirit in art should be isolated in aesthetics, she would add her voice to that of Neruda’s: *we do not wish to please them*.

In her poems, we listen to the stark cry of the human spirit, stripped by necessity of its natural lyricism, deprived of the luxuries of cleverness and virtuosity enjoyed by poets of the North. It is enough that the poet succeed in denying herself any justifiable indulgence.

In translating the work of contemporary Latin Americans, it is marginally possible to reproduce essential content, but in altering substance, there are always precipitates: those of music and atmosphere, specifics of tone. The unique characteristics are lost—in the case of Spanish, which has been called “the verbal medium of the spirit” (Castelar), its onomatopoeic and emphatic qualities, its syntactical freedom and a subtlety that survives abbreviation.

But in these we are not talking about the real difficulty—that of translating the human condition, the reality of one world, so that it may be intelligible to those of a world which has been spared its harshness.

Claribel Alegría’s memory is suffused with death, the recurring vision of a young poet whose waterlogged body never washed ashore. She echoes the primitive wisdom: *there are lies more believable than truth*. The crises of those who vanish assail her with accounts of torture and disappearance, the “blue theater” where a close friend witnessed the methodic dismemberment of a young man, whose flesh was sliced from him until death. It is a world of live wires touched to genitals, of beatings, ice-water plunges, the parrot’s perch, and of food, water, and sleep deprivation. The techniques of torture have been so refined that victims are forgiven their indiscretions. Few talk. The rest seem to have an almost yogic ability to sever mind from body. I was told of the “helmet,” a sound chamber affixed to the skull that intensifies the screams of the victim until he can no longer bear the sound of his own voice.

That voice, after death, continues to cry out in the poetry of the impassioned. It becomes one of the “rosary of names” that must be whispered, both because they have become prayers and because their very mention can, at times, endanger the living.

Due to the social and familial circumstances of her life, Claribel Alegría has not lived in her adopted homeland of El Salvador for many years. Her residences in Mexico, Chile, and Uruguay have broadened her sense of geopolitical identity to embrace the continent. Her years in North America and Europe have necessitated an integration of identities—a truce between a consciousness that is distinctly and essentially Latin American and one that is globally aware of human fragility and mutual dependencies, social, political, economic, and cultural—that has moved many Latin Americans living abroad to question the validity of the term “exile” in the modern world.

She is nostalgic for the music of her own language, for the fraternity of dipping a warm tortilla into a common pot of beans and meat. Her poetry fills with verdant jungles, volcanos, the glow of their craters, the spillage of black rock; with olive trees twisted by time, trees that are wisely neglected to ensure that their fruit will be moist and firm. We are immersed in memories of crumbling aristocratic elegance: French wines, leather-spined books, English roses that have since been supplanted for her by flowers splashing down the volcanos in the arms of *campesino* children.

She carries within her the heavy, ancient blood of the Pipiles and laces her language with a mestizo richness, words like the stones of a land where mystery is still palpable. She is attentive to her dreams, trusting them for news of her homeland, and she is comfortable with the deceased, with the powers of amulets and herbs and the gifts of understanding the language of

coincidence and omen.

Had she realized her dream to become a painter, she would have applied her pigments with a palette knife, with the decisive strokes of a poet not afraid to speak plainly. Like Chagall, whom she loves, her canvases would have reflected a private reality, unique in its perceptions. In my days with her, I have grown to understand that I have been in the presence of a woman whose imagination was nurtured by a culture that persists to encourage wonder in the twentieth century, where the sixth sense is an empirical one.

In these poems, we have her account of her search for the grave of García Lorca in Andalusia, undertaken while Franco was still alive. An impossible search. We are invited to explore the candle-lit village of Santa Ana where she spent her childhood, a place stripped of hope now, strafed by DDT and altered by the calm history of disintegration. We glimpse condors, tangos, the smoke of *copal*, a particular kind of light, *izote*, the constant presence of death, the face of an assassin transformed by traffic lights until he is seen as one of the many faces of his kind.

The poet is finally silenced herself, taking on the persona of the imprisoned, where she continues her poem “with tears, with fingernails and coal—the poem we are all writing.”

It is now five years since Claribel Alegría and I met in Mallorca, and during this time more than 40,000 people have died in El Salvador at the hands of security forces. In our travels to bear witness to this brutal repression, we have more than once missed each other by days. She is at this writing at work in Managua. As a volume of poems is more likely to endure than any letter I might send, I would like to express my gratitude to Claribel for that summer of purpose and grace, for her dignity and dedication to justice. May we remain alive, continue to work, and meet again. Abrazos.

I wish to thank Maya Flakoll, onlie begetter of this work, for her impeccable faith and assistance, and the Alegría-Flakoll family for their hospitality and warmth during the summer of 1977 in Deya.

—Carolyn Forché

Carolyn Forché

Introduction to Saudade (Sorrow)

reprinted with permission from Curbstone Books, 1999

The wind has arrived from the coast of North Africa, lemon-scented and gentle, but it is the beginning of a sirocco, the desert wind of sand and cries. We are sitting on the terrace of C’an Blau Vell, the house in Deya, Mallorca, where Claribel Alegría and her husband, Darwin “Bud” Flakoll, lived in self-imposed exile. This is a special evening: their daughters, Maya, Karen, and Patricia are here, along with the grandchildren. Robert Graves has walked down the hill on his wife Beryl’s steadying arm. Someone brings out a bottle of Spanish wine, and then from the

larder of the old stone house come ripe apricots, olives, and bread, little slivers of fish and sliced lemon. We take turns reading poems and translations of poems aloud. The sun slips behind the peak of the Teix, and the copper-belled goats descend along the goat-paths. For a moment, it is possible to hear the *torrente* rushing along its rockbed below a wall of morning glories which are closed for the night.

We talk about the little towns of the Americas' isthmus: Estelí, Santa Ana, San Miguel, distant places suffering brutal poverty and dictatorship, the landscape of Claribel's childhood. But the wars which would bring about the fall of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and the end of military rule in El Salvador have not yet begun. The countries are "at peace," as yet, which is the silence of misery endured.

A wind passes through the olive trees and silvers them. Bud takes Claribel's hand and they look into each other's eyes for a long time. Over their heads, bougainvillea blossoms in the thirtieth summer of their marriage, and it is apparent to all of us that what had begun as a passionate, whirlwind three-month romance in 1947, had, over years of child-raising on the wing, uprootedness that brought them to live in Mexico, Uruguay, Chile, France and Spain, become an unusual union: spiritual, conjugal, dedicated to art and literature but also awake to human suffering, such that it would bless the world in the seventeen years to come, when Claribel and Bud would end their exile and begin a new, collaborative work: that of developing the *testimonio* as a distinct and necessary form.

The grandchildren have fallen asleep and the stars have appeared; Robert Graves has tipped his wide-brimmed hat and said goodnight. In an hour we will go inside "the old blue house" and listen to tangos on the phonograph; there will be laughter and stories, and we will be grateful for these, because they will lift Claribel's spirits, assuaging the sadness peculiar to exiled life.

This is the summer when her poetry would enter the English language for the first time. Despite my inexperience, I had undertaken to translate her *Flores del Volcan (Flowers from the Volcano)*, a volume recalling her childhood in Sihuatehuacán, "the valley of beautiful witches," a world dimly lit and suffering, scented with jasmine, in which the poor harvest flowers from the craters of dead volcanoes, and bear them in their arms down its slopes. It is a book of loss, and also a poignant *cris de coeur*, raging against the violence of political repression, written at a time when the dead have become "too many to bury," and her memory, a cemetery of her dead. Mornings I struggle to inhabit this lyric otherness, and to bear her music across the river of a new language without spilling too much. Her obsessions are with love and death, as they had always been, but also with the mystery of time, presence, otherness, and the evanescence of the subject. One of the most ambitious poems of the collection, titled in English "Sorrow," recounts her search for the grave of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, and toward its closure she imagines herself imprisoned and writes: *una hoja de tiempo*, "only a tissue of time / a tissue separates us," the living from the dead. These lines seed a new exploration in her work, which will endure and flower in the present volume, *Sorrow*—an awareness of the mysteries of temporality, particularly as it bears upon the separation of the living from the dead.

The summer night in Deya is long, starry, and our festivities end near dawn. Within a year, I

will be in El Salvador, and within two, Claribel and Bud would leave Deya for Managua, Nicaragua, where they would research the history of the Sandinista revolution (*Nicaragua: La revolución sandinista*, Editorial ERA, 1982). Other than for brief periods of rest and writing, they will never live in C'an Blau Vell again. Their son and grandson will live and work in Nicaragua, and the daughters will visit. I will meet my future husband, the American photographer Harry Mattison, in a refugee compound in El Salvador in 1980, and we will marry four years later. Bud will assume the work of translating Claribel's subsequent poetry books into English, and together they will write many testimonies. I will see him again only twice, once in the United States, and once when they visit us in Paris after the birth of our son.

In their last decade and a half together in Central America, Claribel and Bud dedicated themselves to a community of souls engaged in work on behalf of social justice. They were tireless and, by all reports and despite disappointments and hardships, filled with joy and unflagging in their devotion to each other. Toward what was to become the end of their time together, they planned to undertake a journey to southern Asia, quietly and for themselves. They had long planned to take this trip, along with their friends, Julio Cortazar and his wife, Carol Dunlop. Now both Julio and Carol were dead. Claribel and Bud dreamed and talked of the places they would visit, and of course, the spirits of Julio and Carol would accompany them. But Bud was by now himself ill, and after a long battle, died on April 15, 1995. A month later, Claribel left for Singapore, as she has said, along with the soul of her husband; together they traveled on the Orient Express, together walked the streets of Bangkok, then they went by sea to Jakarta to visit the great and small temples of the Indonesian archipelago. Claribel whispered to Bud throughout the journey, describing what they were seeing together, the people they were meeting, the meals they took, the dreams in which they were once again together. After a month, she returned to Managua, and her posthumous dialogue with her husband entered her poems, those collected here in the book originally titled *Saudade*, a Portuguese word for a vague and persistent desire for something that cannot be, a time other than the present time, a turning toward the past or future, a sadness and yearning beyond sorrow, the pain which whispers through every happiness. It is the word which most corresponds in its intricacy of meaning to the profundity of intimate mourning at the loss of one's life companion.

In these poems, she resists her longing to join her beloved while somehow also preserving this longing. She resists the eternal transcendent, praising the most fleeting and fugitive of human moments. Exploring a more nuanced understanding of Ariadne's myth, as intertwining the sorrowful and celebratory aspects of marriage, she leaves her woolen thread for the beloved, but also becomes the one whose name, "Very Holy," can be invoked at such epiphanic moments as the realization of the deceased beloved's continuing presence.

By turns she writes of Artemis, goddess of women's transitions, who empowers her in grief, and of Hermes, the messenger god whose winged sandals erase his own footprints, and who knows how to call upon the dead. Her Sisyphus reaches the summit without the burden of his boulder, but finds only "a pebble / a grain of sand." Her Icarus desires flight but also death: "I am coming / the clouds are my tomb." Like Prometheus she is "tied to time / and cannot escape." She

beseeches Orpheus for his song, his word “a lyre forged / with the cords / of my being” so that she might descend into the underworld in search of her beloved. Life becomes dream, and dreaming allows her to confuse sleep with death. In a series of poignant apostrophes, she addresses her other, the absent one, who speaks to her in turn, but in a language she doesn’t always understand. Like Eugenio Montale of the *Mottetti*, her brief lyrics imagine world as oracle, as repository of the messages sent by those who are no longer. She tries to imagine their future reunion, as “particles of light” fusing or as wings folding together, but finally she refuses to settle for her beloved’s absence, for his ghost, and desires their encounter to be corporeal: it is his body she longs for, his touch, his hands, and his absence becomes “a crow / gnawing at my entrails.” She begins to contemplate the mysteries of metempsychosis, the soul’s transmigration, or passage from one body to another. Knowledge of this is, finally, denied the living, and so she achieves her peace in the recognition that a triumph over sadness is possible.

She has, however, in *Sorrow*, constructed a sensibility in which time can be “rearranged,” the past able to “cover” and “uncover” her. Her concept of time begins to correspond with its fluidity and spatiality, as membrane between present and future, living and dead, permeable and illusionary. Always already setting out for the future, this poet’s present is the point of departure and her passage is possible because she has “seized hold” of the beloved’s light. There are echoes of Paul Celan (“death / that drinks me / and drinks me”) in this transforming work of encountering otherness, as well as tributes to the long tradition of Spanish language love lyrics, but this poetry, is, finally, a work apart: a record of the passage of the human soul through searing grief and separation. “Happiness,” she writes, “is a peach tree,” and sadness, “a peach pecked by birds.” Sadness is, therefore, the fruit of happiness, and can be in that sense nourishment. And there is also, in these poems, a knowledge of the power the living have on behalf of the dead: that of raising them up by our acts of remembrance.

I am grateful to Bud Flakoll for teaching me to hear Claribel Alegría’s music, and to Claribel for inviting me back as translator following his death. This book is for all who have gone before and all who have remained behind to continue the journey.

—Carolyn Forché