# Snow, writers and booze

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By Joann Gardner
Special to the Flambeau

A sense of inebriation or perpetual hangover comes naturally in Aspen. Some might be impressed by the real estate, the million dollar houses of Jack Nicholson or Martina Navratilova, the thrill of running into Goldie Hawn in the street ("She looked great!" reported a fellow participant) or Ed Bradley on a Bicycle (diamond ear stud fixed jauntily in place). But we had come in response to more ambitious impulses, the effects of altitude were complicated by cold artistic heights: the chance of meeting and working with some of the more celebrated writers of this generation: the likes of James Tate, Marge Piercy, Carollyn Forché.

For two weeks in July, the Aspen Writers' Conference occupied the village of Aspen—lived in its lodges, ate at its restaurants, met in its public buildings, patrolled its store-lined streets. Mornings were workshops; afternoons, lectures; evenings, readings by individual faculty members, followed by drinks and conversation at the Hotel Jerome. As the Aspen Music Festival pumped on around us, we created our own atmosphere of art. Week One focused on issues of craft and establishing group dynamics. Week Two brought editors from prominent publishing houses, panel discussions and provocative guest speakers. Sharon Olds read to us blistering verse. Grace Paley addressed us in her Bronx nasality, inserting urbane humor between snaps of gum.

"You're a spider suspended on a strand of your own spit," said Carolyn Forche of the act of creation. A brief survey of those around me indicated that we had all jumped from the security of the material world into the dubious air of this artistic dream. There was a librarian from Palo Alto who had won a prize for her first collection of poems, the editor of *Publisher* magazine who threatened to give up her six-figure salary for the intellectual lure of the academy, the director of New York Coty's Meals on Wheels program, who attended fiction workshops at night and wrote spare and moving chronicles of the Israeli experience. There were others—teachers, students, mothers and fathers-to-be—testing their talents, hoping to create from their own spit a web whereby they might sustain themselves. "The imagination is shapely," said Forche, so I sat at a table of poets and assumed the role of a student, sweating at remarks about stupid critics or the seeming blindness of college professors, finding that what I knew or the way I knew it was of little use in this context, starting all over again. At lectures and panel discussions, I learned that we were the caretakers of language and were responsible for what we saw in this world as well as what we did. At home, I discovered the attributes of commitment: the uncertainty of calling, the fear of failure, the quiet uncertainty of those who continue to write, well after adulthood has set in.

A young mother from New Mexico motored to classes from her campsite in the mountains because she could not afford to live in the accommodations provided by the conference. At our dining room table, she set up her typewriter and worked on her writing late into the night. She read at our house a story about a poor Mexican family whose father was dying, the mysterious voice of a Mexican peasant girl rising eerily from her text.

A Japanese=American spoke of his parents' internment in the detention camps during World War II and of his own problems of cultural identity. At one of the participants' readings, he gave an autobiographical account of plastic surgery, his longtime desire to Westernize his appearance in order to gain acceptance from others. His clear and sonorous voice came to us from behind features strangely deformed by the surgeon's knife.

I sat on the edge of the mountain near the timber line with Chip Lee, another participant in Carolyn Forché's workshop. We looked out over Cathedral Pass, waiting for a third member of our group to labor up the path to meet us. Chip sucked water from a plastic bottle. We talked about the workshop, what we had hoped to achieve. "Your poems are as good as any of them," he said, taking a bite from his peanut butter sandwich. I thanked him for that. After a week of exchanging and critiquing poems, I had little idea of where I stood.

The second week was drawing to a close. We had listened to Linda Hogan speak of the Native American experience, the threat of animal extinction, her closeness to the earth. "Some people think that T.S. Eliot created the Waste Land," she had said, "Now it is time to rebuild the language." We had heard William Kittredge's account of alcoholic adventures with Raymond Carver; his narrative tinged with pathos in light of Carver's recent death. And we had seen Marge Piercy, cranky and harsh about conference gigs in general, soften with allusions to her new husband, the writer Ira Wood. Jim Tate had stood at the podium, reeling and apologizing for having missed his morning conference and for not having prepared his lecture. "Would you believe it," he quipped, "someone slipped a mickey in my drink. Then, someone mugged me and stole my lecture." We saw him later that evening, staggering down Main Street, preparing to get in his car.

I sat knee-to-knee with Carolyn Forché in a sumptuous apartment overlooking Aspen. She gazed at me through opaque lenses, speaking of the demise of the current tradition of free verse and of our consequent responsibility to revitalize the language. There were three principal methods of poetry now developing in avant garde circles. She identified and dismissed them, ending with the method she thought would determine the future. "I think you can do this," she said. "I.m excited." She rattled off a list of titles, agreed to help me with my lines, promised to send me copies of her own new poems, providing I was honest in what I said. "Don't you want to do this?" she asked when I did not respond in the predictable manner. "Yes," I nodded. Yes. Of course I do.

I stood at the top of Cathedral Mountain and threw a snowball into Cathedral Lake. "The imagination is shapely," Forché had said. What you record of experience, or the way you remember it, contains its own order, however unlikely or confused. I thought of Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain, where mind and body are transfixed by the rituals of sickness and cure, and of Yeats' mountain in Ireland, where if one spends the night,

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one either dies, goes mad or becomes a poet. Then, I thought of these mountains where I had spent the last two weeks of my life and of the immaterial reward: a snowball melting in a pool, a sense of purpose that would disintegrate with resubmersion in the world.

On my mantle sits a rock chosen from the billions of chunks of rock thrown up by Colorado's glacial upheaval. The delicate threads of lichen blanch in this rich air; its horny protuberances crack and crumble. We are dependent on what we say in determining what is or was; weaving from our own spit a web that will sustain us.

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