

## Interview With Susan Rich

### Why did you write “Nomadic Life”?

I began this poem more than seven years after my Peace Corps service in Niger. Aisha was the mother of Sa-a, a young boy who came to visit me almost every day. I don't remember how I knew that Aisha was Sa-a's mother but I knew. I wanted her to approve of me. Sa-a was probably in his very early teens (although no one in Niger knows their exact birth date) and I thought perhaps it was a worry that he spent so much time with a foreigner.

Aisha and Sa-a were Wodaabe Fulanis, a nomadic people who travel the desert and have very little to do with Europeans or Americans—or even other Nigeriens. The Wodaabe don't attend school or learn to read or write. This is because any outside influence is seen as being corrosive to their culture and traditions. It was only due to severe drought that the Wodaabe had come into the town where I lived. I knew Sa-a much better than I knew Aisha.

After writing a poem about Sa-a, I had the idea to write about my visit with his mother, Aisha. “Nomadic Life” doesn't mention that Aisha was visiting my house because of Sa-a. Or perhaps Aisha wasn't only concerned for her son; perhaps she also came looking for food. Sa-a and his friends had lunch at my house almost every day. There was a bad drought the first year I was in Niger. The drought is what brought nomads like Aisha and Sa-a near the town.

During Aisha's visit, I brought out snacks. When I left the room for a moment, Aisha emptied them into her plastic sack. I didn't consider this to be stealing because I had served the food for her to enjoy. Of course, it was a cultural difference and one that probably wouldn't have happened between two Wodaabe women.

As the poem developed, I realized that we had both seen the other as a stranger in the most profound sense of that word. While thinking about Aisha I became slightly obsessed with what it would be like if we were able to switch identities and know what the other woman knew. Writing the poem is the closest way I know to have that kind of transformation.

### How has your Peace Corps service influenced your life? Your writing?

Growing up we all tend to surround ourselves whenever possible with people who think like we do, act like we do, even look a little like we do. Well, when you are the only white woman in the neighborhood there is nowhere to hide! Living in Niger gave me insight into a world far *(Continued on next page)*

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*(Continued from previous page)* different from my own. It left me curious about how others live and let me understand how much a person can learn about herself when living among people who uphold different values and have a different way of life.

As a teacher in Niger, I learned that humor was the educator's best defense if she wanted her students to listen to her; from the nomadic children who came to my home everyday looking for food and friendship, I learned that language was not needed in order to love; and from the challenges I faced daily by virtue of living in an African town, I came to see that I was more resilient than I'd ever known myself to be.

Many of the poems in my book *The Cartographer's Tongue: Poems of the World* are based on my Peace Corps experience, including the opening piece, "Lost by Way of Tchín-Tabarden." Peace Corps gave me a world outside of myself to explore and try to understand. I have continued to write about Africa even though it is now [many] years since I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Niger.

### **What advice would you give to aspiring young writers?**

Growing up, I was never one of the best poets or storytellers at school, although I always loved to write. In college, I had teachers who actively discouraged me from being a poet. For ten years after I graduated, I listened to those harsh voices that said I wasn't good enough to be a writer. Today, I teach college students myself and do my best to convince them that they are all writers. I can guide them, and hopefully teach them a thing or two; but as a writer what you really need is your own passion balanced with the discipline to learn all you can about your art. Read everything, go to poetry readings, and show your work to people other than parents and good friends. Don't worry about whether you are the next great American writer—it is impossible to know these things. Understand that every poem you write, every story you compose, is a way of finding out what you didn't know you knew. Enjoy the thrill of discovery, the thrill of finding the right word, the pleasure of creation.