TOWARD A POETRY OF COMPASSION

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Toward a Poetry of Compassion

The objective of this paper is to introduce a new and emergent kind of poetry that is not yet in existence. This kind of poetry is termed “Poetry of Compassion,” and since it has yet to reach the page, it will be referred to in the future tense throughout this paper. In the extensive introduction of *Against Forgetting*, Carolyn Forché uses the term “places of extremity” or “extremity” to denote regions of political and social conflict where human violations are taking place or have taken place and I, too, will use this term throughout this paper for the same purposes.

There are three sections in this paper. The first is an examination of a kind of poetry —“Poetry of Witness”— which already exists and is similar to “Poetry of Compassion.” This section serves to establish a definition of “Poetry of Witness” and elements of this kind of poetry that are distinguishable and inherent. The “Poetry of Witness” serves as a first step in a “Poetry of Compassion,” making “Poetry of Compassion” an extension of “Poetry of Witness.”

The second section of this paper is organized to define what kind of poetry “Poetry of Compassion” is or would be, making note of similarities and differences. This section also includes two different poems: “After Forty Years,” an example of “Poetry of Witness” by Carolyne Wright from her book *Seasons of Mangoes and Brainfire*, and “Vitamins” by Shannon Smith as an example of “Poetry of Compassion.”

The third section contains a conclusion along with poems I assembled into a mini anthology consisting of examples of “Poetry of Compassion” and a few poems of “Poetry
of Witness” to function as a compare-and-contrast exercise between the two kinds of poetry. There are approximately 5-7 poems included here with brief commentary on each. This section will be followed by an Afterword on the subject of Samantha Power.
Part I. Examining “Poetry of Witness”

In order to discuss or examine a “Poetry of Witness,” we must first define this category of poetry. In *Against Forgetting*, an anthology of 144 poets and over 700 hundred pages, Carolyn Forché offers several definitions in the quite extensive 20-page introduction. Some of these definitions are so convoluted and excessively intricate that ultimately they aren't useful to the reader, making the definitions serve no purpose as demonstrated in the following excerpts from the introduction:

> “Poetry of Witness” presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between “personal” and political poems — the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 31)

We are offered other definitions throughout the introduction. Each definition lacks a certain degree of clarity but deserves a bit of consideration, as for example, the following:

> Poems included in the “Poetry of Witness” should include poems that work through repetition and suggestion meaning through juxtaposition. (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 33)

The most valuable element in the previous definition is that Forché suggests specific poetic devices be present in these poems (i.e., repetition and suggestion resulting in juxtaposition). There are approximately 700 poems in this anthology, and it would be a broad generalization to suggest that these poetic devices are present in each section of poems. The most convoluted of all provided definitions is the following: ““Poetry of
Witness’ frequently resorts to paradox and difficult equivocation, to the invocation of what is *not* here as if it were” (Forché Against Forgetting 40).

The reader is forced to create a workable definition based on thorough readings of these poems since provided definitions result in more questions than answers. At first glance, I made the assumption that a number of poems in this anthology were written by poets who took on the persona of a witness — therefore being a third person account of events of extremity. However, Forché tells us in the introduction that several poets in the anthology live or lived in places of extremity. Forché doesn't indicate the exact number of these poets.

Forché does give examples of such poets like Miklós Radnóti — tried for “incitement of rebellion” — and found guilty. Radnóti wrote 2 books of poetry, and it was the second book that resulted in forced military labor. He was called to forced labor intermittently from 1940 until his death. Radnóti is included in the section “The Holocaust, The Shoah” (1933-1945). When Radnóti’s body was exhumed from a mass grave in 1946, his widow, “going through his pockets, discovered a notebook full of poems” that includes the poems featured in this section of the anthology: ‘Forced March’ and ‘Letter to My Wife’” (Forché Against Forgetting 368). These poems are not witness persona poems; rather they are firsthand accounts of extremity. This is a good example that reinforces the idea of poems being proof that particular events have occurred. Radnóti was both witness and victim. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines witness as “one who furnishes evidence,” another example of poetry as proof. Radnóti is more an exception in this collection.
In the section of “The Armenian Genocide” (1909-1918), there is a poem titled “The Dance,” written by Atom Yarjanian and translated by Peter Balakian, in which the narrator voice is a secondhand witness, “a German woman, trying not to cry / told me the horror she witnessed” (Forché Against Forgetting stanzas 1&7, 57-59). Later in this poem, the woman asks, “How can I dig out my eyes?” Here the German woman is the actual witness who is compelled to tell the narrator what she has seen: “Don't be afraid. I must tell you what I saw, / so people will understand / the crimes men do to men” (Forché Against Forgetting stanza 4, 58).

In general, the North American population — a term Forché uses in her introduction — is unaware of warfare or Geneva Convention violations, meaning prisoners of war must be treated humanely, and no physical or mental torture may be used as an interrogation method. I think as North American citizens, we rarely think to pick up a book of poetry to inform us of political foreign conflicts in distant regions of the world and the consequences of such conflicts. For example, most of us do not even know where the country of Burundi is, or that a genocidal conflict began in 1963 and continued to 2003. Often, it is relief and aid workers that serve as witnesses in modern / current times. This begs the question: Is it the role of the poet to inform the world of “the crimes men do to men” (Forché 57).

Please see below for a good example of “Poetry Witness.” This poem is especially horrific and not as similar to some of the other poems. Since these poems cover the last one hundred years, most of them are written in the past tense (as they should be), and often the past tense leads to a passive voice; many of the poems collected here often seem
too much alike. A witness, who would have a passive voice, is often in a helpless situation:

**THE DANCE**

In the town of Bardez where Armenians were still dying, a German woman, trying not to cry told me the horror she witnessed:

“This thing I’m telling you about, I saw with my own eyes. Behind my window of hell I clenched my teeth and watched with my pitiless eyes: the town of Bardez turned into a heap of ashes. Corpses piled high as trees. From the waters, from the springs, from the streams and the road, the stubborn murmur of your blood still revenges my ear.

Don't be afraid. I must tell you what I saw, so people will understand the crimes men do to men. For two days, by the road to the graveyard... Let the hearts of the whole world understand. It was Sunday morning, the first useless Sunday dawning on the corpses. From dusk to dawn in my room, with a stabbed woman, my tears wetting her death. Suddenly I heard from afar a dark crowd standing in a vineyard lashing twenty brides and singing dirty songs.

Leaving the half-dead girl on the straw mattress, I went to the balcony on my window and the crowd seemed to thicken like a clump of trees. An animal of a man shouted “you must dance, dance when our drum beats.”
With fury whips cracked
on the flesh of these women.
Hand in hand the brides began their circle dance.
Now, I envied my wounded neighbor
because with a calm snore
she cursed the universe
and gave her soul up to the stars...

In vain, I shook my fists at the crowd.
'Dance,' they raved,
'dance till you die, infidel beauties.
With your flapping tits, dance!
Smile for us.

You're abandoned now, you're naked slaves,
so dance like a bunch of fuckin' sluts.
We're hot for you all.'
Twenty graceful brides collapsed.
'Get up,' the crowd roared,
brandishing their swords.
Then someone brought a jug of kerosene.
Human justice, I spit in your face.
The brides were anointed.
'Dance,' they thundered--
here's a fragrance you can't get in Arabia.'
With a torch, they set
the naked brides on fire.
And the charred bodies rolled
and tumbled to their deaths...
I slammed the shutters
of my windows,
and went over to the dead girl
and asked: 'How can I dig out my eyes?'

Obviously, there is probably no living witness to tell this story, so the poem is truly the
proof or evidence that events actually occurred. As mentioned earlier, this poem is an
example of a secondhand witness. An innocent bystander is approached by a witness who
needs to tell the story of what she has seen. This poem is a bit more explicit than some of
the others collected in the anthology. This poem is written by Nevart Yaghilian and
translated by TR Balakian from Against Forgetting (Forché 57-59).
Part II. A Closer look at “Poetry of Compassion”

“Brokenness is the operative issue of our time broken souls, broken hearts, broken places.” —Samantha Power

At the most basic level, the poet has the job of turning language into art as opposed to being a news commentator by reporting to the public of social and political conflict in volatile regions around the world. News commentators report and analyze factual events of a particular subject, whereas a poet's lyrics are a form of personal expression. I propose “Poetry of Witness” as a category within the genre of poetry. I think if we begin to see more of this kind of poetry in frequency and quantity, it may be possible for the “Poetry of Witness” to become a genre within a genre or perhaps even a genre itself accompanied by a “Poetry of Compassion.” Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness is an impressive anthology edited by Carolyn Forché that establishes this kind of poetry as proof “of the century's various insults against humankind” (Forche p,ii). Generally speaking, I think a witness has very little power, and the witness persona is often an innocent bystander who has no way to prevent or interfere with the crime taking place. The witness persona in Forché's collection ultimately offers an account of crimes that have been observed. The kind of voice prevalent in this anthology can be perceived as helpless — the witness ultimately has no recourse aside from the written word of poems to serve as proof which may or may not reach a wide audience to provoke activism. “Poetry of Compassion” would be an extension of this kind of poetry but with significant similarities and notable differences.

The primary similarity between “Poetry of Witness” and “Poetry of Compassion” is the location or physicality of where the poems take place, meaning regions of political
and social conflict accompanied by resulting human violations. The primary difference in “Poetry of Witness” and “Poetry of Compassion” is voice. In the majority of poems assembled in Against Forgetting, the voice is a voice of a witness. A witness is usually a person in a helpless position unable to interfere or change a crime he or she observes. This seems to lead to a passive voice along with the use of past tense. “Poetry of Compassion” would address current situations. The voice in this kind of poetry would be more active, using present tense to lend immediacy to a poem.

A definition of this kind of voice can be heard by Samantha Power — scholar, human rights activist, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide. Regarding the subject of Rwanda she points out that “there is a difference in an upstander and a bystander” (Power, “Shaking Hands with the Devil”, ted.com, web, film lecture 11/12/2008). Another individual with an active voice was Sérgio Vieira de Mello (Brazilian diplomat for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), who asks, “Doesn't anyone notice the planet is bleeding?” Vieira de Mello is also known for asking Mieke Bos (human rights officer in the Belgium embassy), “How can you sit behind a desk in an office when there is so much work to be done in the world?” (Power, Chasing the Flame p, 78). This is a challenge to poets as well.

There are several challenges and potential pitfalls for the poet who endeavors to write “Poetry of Compassion.” The poet should be cautious that the storytelling element does not become journalistic or take on the tone of reporting, since this could very well detract from the aesthetics of poetry writing, which is more about imagery, metaphors, voice, and form.
The poet must immerse himself in large quantities of historical research and current events on a particularly volatile region in order to portray an accurate depiction of the conflict situation in order to produce an authentic poem. The writer of these kinds of poems is in a difficult situation since the subject matter is so horrific and often disgusting. It will be a monumental challenge to avoid a journalistic tone while trying to include creative imagery and imaginative metaphors that are often considered hallmarks of good poetry.

This “Poetry of Compassion” would be crisp and use simple language. Flowery and adorned language would detract from the subject matter. Of course, details would need to be as accurate as possible to make this poetry exude authenticity, which would be an identifiable element in all “Poetry of Compassion.” Given that the poet is not a journalist or legislator, the difficulty of avoiding pitfalls of this nature will be just as strategic as avoiding land mines. I have attached two poems as examples of the two modes of poetry.

1. Poetry of Compassion: “Vitamins” by Shannon Smith
2. Poetry of Witness: “After Forty Years” from Season of Mangoes and Brainfire by Carolyne Wright (9).

**Vitamins**

This morning in Al Geneina,*
I am spending my time giving bananas and mangoes to refugee children.
All children need vitamins.
Famine and soldiers raging between North and South fill the sky with black smoke.
My morning children looking for places to hide before they become soldiers themselves.
Women rushing to finish chores before the storm like ants scurrying to build an ant hill for protection later. A house burning like the tongue of Satan himself legs, broken furniture, cups littering dirt roads. The roads I walked this morning to deliver fruit. Criminals are everywhere I turn. My vitamins delivering the children enough energy to run.

Notice the speaker is actively trying to help and the lyrics are in the present tense. The conflict is present day. Like “Poetry of Witness,” this poem provides authentic detail of the region, and its current situation:

*Darfur, Sudan present day

*Al Geneina—provincial capital where peacekeeping forces are currently trying to offer assistance.

* “Beginning almost 4 years ago, the Sudanese government began cracking down on a rebellion by using the one tool they frequently use to crack down on political unrest, and that tool is genocide. Systematically burning, raping, pillaging non Arab villages. The violence is Muslim on Muslim violence. People of Arab descent attacking non-Arabs. For all of the political protest from the US, there is almost no interest from other parts of the developed world” (Power, Samantha. “Boston's Night to Save Darfur”, web, CDIA@BU April, 27, 2007, film lecture).
After Forty Years

“Don't tell me about the ones of Mengele, the bones are alive and well.”
— Michael Dennis Browne

They've found the body of the Angel of Death, a bundle of brown bones and scraps of skin tossed like market produce in the gravedigger's tray.

He can be himself now for his loved ones—those who took no chances with the forged passports, bribes code words filing past the censors, never breaking the family silence.

Himself now, for those whose mouths gaped in silence survivors staring through barbed wire as the abandoned camps, stumbling change their messenger, those for whom the ones will always be alive and well.

Finally, the tribunal of EMBU, plain light of the TV anchor's day. Cameras cross-haired on the throats of witnesses who shrugged and said nothing, while for years ash drift, fosses of lime, the dead kept listening.

Notice the more subdued tone, less active, passive voice, and the excellent imagery. In this poem, the reader is given a list of observational details. Also in this poem the crimes have already taken place: “a bundle of brown bones...witnesses who shrugged and said nothing...” This poem certainly falls into the “Poetry of Witness” category which sometimes can seem like the sum total of a list of details based on observation.
Part III. A Small Anthology of Poems for Examples of “Poetry of Witness” and “Poetry of Compassion.”

The task of assembling a small anthology of poems for examples was challenging and difficult at times. It was during this task that I learned the boundaries between these two categories of poetry are somewhat blurred on occasion. The similarities between “Poetry of Witness” and “Poetry of Compassion” become more obvious when considering these poems for comparison and contrast. The primary similarity is subject matter which is extremity.

THE ISLAND
For Claribel Alegria

I
In Deya when the mist rises out of the rocks it comes so close to her hands she could tear it to pieces like bread. She holds her drink and motions with one hand to describe this: what she would do with so many baskets of bread.

*Mi prieta,* Asturias called her, my dark little one, Neruda used the word *negrita,* and it is true: her eyes, her hair, both violent, as black as certain mornings have been for the last fourteen years. She wears a white cotton dress. Tiny mirrors have been stitched to it—when I look for myself in her, I see the same face over and over.

I have the fatty eyelids of a Slavic factory girl,
the pale hair of mixed blood. Although Jose Marti has said we have lived our lives in the heart of the beast, I have never heard it pounding. When I have seen an animal, I have never reached for a knife. It is like Americans to say it is only a bear looking for something to eat in the garbage.

But we are not unalike. When we look at someone, we are seeing someone else. When we listen we hear something taking place in the past. When I talk to her I know what I will be saying twenty years from now.

2
Last summer she returned to Salvador again. It had been ten years since Ashes of Izalco was burned in a public place, ten years without bushes of coffee, since her eyes crossed the finca like black scattering birds.

It was simple. She was there to embrace her mother. As she walked through her village the sight of her opened its windows. It was simple. She had come to flesh out the memory of a poet whose body was never found.

(Forché The Country Between Us, 10-11)

This poem is from Forché's collection The Country Between Us. I would suggest this poem falls into the category of “Poetry of Witness.” This poem is written in the past tense which makes sense because the details appear to be drawn from memory or a blurred recollection. There is a slight hint of an auto biographical tone achieved by
suggestion and use of “I” usually meaning first person; this is demonstrated in the second stanza in the lines: “Tiny mirrors...to it — when I look for myself in her, I see the same face over and over.” Forché makes reference to mass atrocity using *Ashes of Izalco*, an essay by Claribel Alegría (whom she dedicates the poem to), which recounts the state sponsored massacre of over 30,000 indigenous peoples during the early 1930s in El Salvador. This poem is an exact example of a definition given by Forché earlier in the paper about the use of specific poetic devices being used in “Poetry of Witness.” The same definition from earlier in the paper also indicates the use of repetition which Forché uses in the last stanza, repeating: “It was simple” in the first and fifth lines. Also in the last stanza, Forché establishes a metaphor for country being the same as mother.

**OCTOBER POEM**

In crisis you may know me
beneath my smooth skin
emotions break like hard rain
corpse after corpse is thrown up
on deserted October shores
    October is my empire
    my gentle hands rule what is being lost
    my small eyes watch what is disappearing
    my soft ears hear the silence of what is dying

Though fear you may know me
in my plentiful blood
flows a time of total murder
fresh hunger shivers
in October's cold sky
    October is my empire
    my dead troops occupy all the wet cities
    my dead pilots circle above missing minds
    my dead populace signs documents for those still dying
(Forché *Against Forgetting* 335-336)
Interestingly, this poem encompasses elements from both categories “Poetry of Witness and “Poetry of Compassion.” “October Poem” is written in present tense by Tamura Ryuichi translated by T. R. Christopher Drake, and the reader has the sense that the activity in the poem is happening now: “emotions break like hard rain/”; “soft ears hear the silence...” This is the sort of language that distinguishes “Poetry of Compassion.” According to one of Forché’s definitions earlier in the paper that indicates repetition and suggestion working together to result in juxtaposition is present in this poem; the repetition is seen in the first line of the second stanza: “October is my empire” and again in the first line of the last stanza. This poem has no punctuation which might be a result of translation, or, perhaps, the absence of punctuation is intentional. This poem also has a slight sense of immediacy, an element that would be present in “Poetry of Compassion.”

HARUMI

The year Salvador Allende died
she and I walked unlit paths
of the park along the river,
the only women in Santiago
who stayed out all night.
At the bridge she stopped
“Gringa, I’m sick and tired
of this town.”

Born in Hiroshima
seven years after the Bomb,
she had no time for fools.
Her mother arranged cut stems
before the lacquered screens,
her father the only karate teacher
in the city. Their apartment staked out
with azaleas and concealed alarms.
She worked late at the Art School, took buses to shacks by the river to hand out packets of dried milk to the women. Weekends, she waited by the stage of the Pena de los Parra for Horacio's second set to finish, playing along, tuning her charango down to his, watching his hands on the fast bars.

She was the one they talked about, the one in poncho with crow's-wing hair, practicing an Andean cane flute between classes. Bolivian, they said, to avoid their real thoughts.

At Horacio's house across the river we watched Allende's speeches on TV, and I asked the wrong question. Horacio turned on me: “You don't know anything about the Revolution.”

She took me to meetings where we learned the new means of production and someone snapped pictures— a roomful of students with straight black hair and armbands the color of the flag. She called me sister, and I almost convinced myself I belonged.

That night, she left my party early. I glimpsed her hours later from my window— walking alone, head down, guitar slung over one shoulder, her shadow under the street lamp belonging to no one. Along the river, walls were covered with slogans by morning.

She wrote me when I left. “Horacio's gone, I'm living with a Cuban now, it won't be long.
before we bring two roads together.”
That was August, 1973,
and I waited all season for her news.

September, they carried Allende
out of the capitol.
The darkened trains ran all night,
the ground hardly daring to shudder.
Her parents looked at each other
over photos whose outlines they traced
like Braille in their sleep.

What about letters that never arrived,
silence at the other end
of the telegraph? The city
of doorbells no one answered,
lights out in houses where shadows had no
permission to show themselves?

Will I ever know her story.
I ask myself what I'd give
for the forbidden speeches to be wound again
onto the brain’s spool, the photographs
to fall back into the ransacked drawers.
For hastily painted words to realign
like bones along the flooded river.

She was the only one who ever
called me what I could have been—
someone whose name fades from my book
of lost addresses. My hand that
forgets itself and writes.
(Wright 36)

This poem has elements of both categories of poetry. On the “Compassion” side
of the argument, the poem has an element of rebellion, of a woman who takes a role
within a rebel group against the Allende administration; she involves herself in rebel acts
like graffiti and wearing an arm band to demonstrate her partisanship. She is active
concerning her oppressed life. She is actively involved against her oppressor. On the
“Witness” side of the argument, this poem consists mainly of observation by someone who only takes action passively like accompanying the Japanese woman to rebel meetings: “— a room full of students with straight black hair...and armbands of the flag...”

I expect the observations depicted in this poem are truthful or factual, since the poet lived in Chile during the Allende administration which was a period of civil and political unrest. Allende ended up committing suicide after a successful rebel coup.
Afterword: Some Notes on Samantha Power

Samantha Power is the primary inspiration for this paper, as well as, the creative component of this thesis. Samantha Power is a journalist — who reported from the Balkans in the 1990's until 2003. It is here where Power first met Sergio Viera de Mello. Aside from her journalistic endeavors and accomplishments, Power is the Anna Lindh Professor of Practice of Global Leadership and Public Policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and she was the founding director of the Carr Center for Human Rights. Power asks us, meaning the US and Western World citizenry, some very important questions in her book “A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide which won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction; Power asks why Washington policymakers/leaders, who started the mass atrocity slogan “Never Again” derived from the Holocaust — Power asks why have we “repeatedly failed to stop genocide?” (Power, Samantha “Shaking Hands with the Devil” web, ted.com, film lecture Nov. 28, 2008). Her video lectures of speaking engagements are as equally inspiring as her books. Power explains the problems and difficulties of foreign policy as it pertains to what she names “endangered humans.” Power has worked in Rwanda and other war torn regions where insult to humankind takes place. She successfully inspires humanitarian activism, and she offers ways for the average citizen to have a voice in the war against genocide. Power says to call and write one's Senator or Representative from one's own district, and to contact their local office as well as their Washington office. Power has a passionate voice to provoke the bystander into becoming an “upstander.” Power has created her own terminology in her fight against human injustices.


Down the road toward evening / I know yo...Â» Â» Hat das Abendrot den See lichterloh umfahn...Â» Sergei Jessenin.Â > 2018-2020, Russian Poems In Translations, @ add translation.