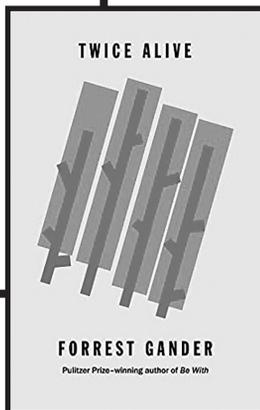


I FOR INVOLVED— AN ECOPOETIC CONVERSATION



A Conversation with FORREST GANDER



ABRAHAM SMITH

*Forrest Gander is every kind of writer: poet, translator, essayist, novelist. He is professor emeritus at Brown University, a Chancellor for the Academy of American Poets, and an elected member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is a United States Rockefeller Fellow and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim, Whiting, and Howard Foundations, among many others. He is a Pulitzer Prize winner and one of the world's foremost translators. And he is one of the most generous poets I have had the lucky fortune to know: always ready to lend a hand to up-and-comers, always advocating for broader, brighter spotlights on the sometimes underseen avant-garde, and always finding new inroads into the myriad delights alive in collaboration. Gander's latest poetry collection, *Twice Alive*, takes us ever deeper into love, loss, the fecund, the failing, lichens, and mushrooms. If William Blake was right when he called the inlets to the soul the five senses, then Gander's latest poems, so richly threaded and textured through the poet's acute sensory antennae, are surely some of the finest soul musics going.*

Gander gave a public reading as part of his residency in Weber State University's Creative Writing Program in Fall 2021. The interview below follows that format, beginning with Gander's elaborations on some of his poems and a conversation that, eventually, opened up to into a Q & A with the audience. Thank you, Forrest!

We are living in this time of real ecological exigency. It's a time during which, if we're not paying attention, our children will experience much less of the world because there will *be* much less of the world. The ecological situation is connected to political situations. The people who will suffer most are the poor, people in hot climates, and people of color. Some scientists are saying it's already too late for our seas, that the coral will die, and that the fish will continue to diminish. It's a time when we can't NOT pay attention as responsible human beings. Short-term gain is always more attractive than long-term thinking. Our perspective tends to be focused almost exclusively on human-beings, even though we are in relation with so many other species of plants and animals. In fact, they are a part of us, in our own bodies. There are, attached to our DNA, DNA from parasites that long ago became incorporated into our system. Other creatures, microbes and parasites, live all over and inside of us; some help us to digest food. We aren't a singularity. We need to develop the kind of thinking that connects us to others, both human and non-human, and that may redeem us.

Scientists have been saying for a long time that we're in trouble, that species are disappearing, that the Earth is heating up. The science is there, but science isn't always all that effective at persuading people. That's why writers can come into the picture, and artists, and others, who take scientific information and integrate it with psychological and emotional perspectives that can be more persuasive on a larger scale. Some of that kind of integration has come to be called eco-poetics or ecological poetics. I'll read an example of a poem that might be considered an ecological poem. A lot of the poems I'll read today are influenced by a poetry called Sangam that flourished in Southern India about 2,000 years ago. The writers of Sangam poetry—especially the kind called akam—thought that it was impossible to

write about human emotion without writing about the landscape in which emotion takes place, because the landscape is connected to our emotions. Here's a poem based on Sangam poems called "Forest." And that's with one "r," not like my name (Laughter).

I was hiking around with a biologist named Maya Khosla, whose specialty is the study of post-burn fire zones. As you know, rising temperatures have made trees weaker and more vulnerable to beetles. That's a significant problem. But it's complicated by the fact that the forest agency in California is very much in bed with the timber companies. So, when a wildfire comes through California, the Park Service often turns the burned land over to the timber industry which comes in and clear-cuts everything, dead and living. Then they plant a monocot forest (just one species) to replace the varied forest which burned. But the forest, if it were left alone, returns to life very quickly. Maya Khosla's job involves going into burned areas to look for signs of life coming back. She reports those signs to try to keep the forest from being handed over to the timber industry. One of the first species to come back to a burned forest in California is the black-backed woodpecker, a really beautiful bird. Also, I might mention, I was writing this poem in the wreckage of my own life, after my wife died, and along with the biologist I was walking with someone who has become my partner now, who is really full of life. I was trying to navigate between the burned-out forest, my burned-out emotions, and this confrontation with personal and ecological hopefulness.

You use a lot of innovative structures and line break choices in your poems. How did you come to inhabit these structures, these lines?

Again, I am trying to think of the poem in relation to where the poem takes place. Using the blank page as another kind of landscape, the poem finds its form. The poem's arrange-

ment on the page can communicate, visually and rhythmically, the energy of its concerns. In “Wasteland: for Santa Rosa,” the jump-cutting lines enact the movement of fire. In some of my other poems in *Twice Alive*, I use different kinds of caesurae, or pauses, spaces that break up the ways we might expect speech to sound. In English, we often default to a sort of iambic pentameter. The rhythms of our natural conversation often take place in iambic pentameter. With my use of caesuras—spaces, pauses—I’m trying to create a little hesitation so that we feel almost an erotic longing (for syntactical completion) between phrases. Those little pauses are full of tension that makes us pay closer attention to the words. I think of poetry as being very connected to the body, and the rhythms of a poem as being connected to perception and feeling.

In our education system, we learn pretty early on that there’s the science-mind and there’s the artist-mind. But you’re trained as a geologist, steeped in literature, and you have had a very long life in poetry. What has been the greatest benefit that your science-mind has brought to your poetry, and the other way around?

Geology was a great educator for me. It educated my vision, how I looked at the world. Because in geology, you’re constantly going back and forth from looking at large scale, looking at, say, that mountain (gestures to nearby mountain) and looking at large-scale fold patterns to understand what created the mountain. Where it folds, where it’s been uplifted, where it’s been run through with magmatic intrusions. But then, to really know what’s happened, you need to look microscopically. Under the microscope, you see the residue of shear patterns, you see crystalline structures. And so it’s by moving back and forth between the big view and the microscopic view that you learn about what you are seeing. I learned, through geology, a particular way of looking at the world. It’s

definitely influenced my poetry, which also tends to move back and forth between the large-scale and the small-scale. That’s one of the ways science has been useful to me.

But the way poetry has been useful to me is in terms of emotion and intuition. It’s true that in every human culture that has been studied, there has been some form of poetry. Anthropologists say there are three things almost every human culture has had—some sort of rules about incest, a formality with regard to burying their dead, and poetry. From the beginning, poetry has been connected to shamanism, to healing, and vision. Through language, we are able to offer our world to others. It’s only very recently that human beings have been so dependent on rational language, as if logic were the only way to experience the world. I think that our recent dependence upon rational and transactional language has had unfortunate consequences for our emotional selves, our emotional and psychological intelligence. Poetry accesses our non-rational, non-transactional capacities

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for knowledge. Now, in a time when media has bewitched us all, we are in love with the visual experience and with extravaganza. The full complexity of our daily language is shrinking down into Twitter feeds and Facebook emojis, which are fine, those are also forms of language. But our language muscles are atrophying. I think poetry can help articulate our language of feeling. Because when we don't have language for experience, we often respond with violence, historically. So, I am interested in how poetry might access and expand the nuance for feeling.

What do you see as the potential roles that poetry can play? Does it lean more toward motivating us to act, or does it perhaps lean more toward a healing place?

Poetry is a big place, lots of stuff can happen in poetry. I would never say that poetry should do this, or it should teach a lesson, or it should be about self-healing. But those are some of the things that it does do. One of the fascinating things for me right now, in this moment where we are all drawn toward spectacle, is that poetry has become more important culturally. There was a recent survey that revealed that people are reading more poetry now than ever before in the United States, and the vast majority of those new readers are young people and people of color. So, clearly, we are not being completely fulfilled by what social media and entertainment offer us, and we are looking elsewhere for something to harrow our souls. We're looking for a richer mud to anchor ourselves in.

How do you make poetry more accessible to a large audience? I have friends that don't feel like they understand poetry.

All of us know what that's like, and there's lots of bad poetry that's really hard to understand—or too easy to understand. Oftentimes, people have been trained badly in elementary school to think that poetry is a rare kind of enigmatic text that you have

to search for semantic meaning. But it's like when you look at the moon and you've got your arm around your lover, and you say, "Wow, look at the moon." It's not like you're saying, hey, what exactly does that mean to you, babe? It's an experience. It's an intellectual, psychological, and emotional experience. Just like art, for instance looking at a painting, you need to let it happen to you. The poet John Keats talks about giving up the need to scramble after meaning. He suggests that we let a poem wash over us and that we just allow ourselves to feel it.

That notion that the meaning of language is only semantic is a recent phenomenon. Language has meaning even before we wrestle with the semantics of words. Which is why in every language, women talk to babies with an uplifting tilt to their voice. Why in almost every language, a rhythmic pattern like this "bang, bang, bang" (bangs table) means "no." Why in almost every language, including Chinese and Japanese, the deeper vowel sounds, the "oh" and "oo," are connected to deeper emotions than the tweeter vowel sounds. Those sounds are registering in our bodies before we ever make out what the words, semantically, mean.

I teach science and I struggle with bringing an emotional engagement to the curriculum. Do you have any advice; are there authors whose work brings emotion and science at the same time?

It's the question that all of us who are teachers are asking ourselves constantly. Trying to figure out how to both engage people so they are excited about the subject and so they feel emotionally invested, but also to make sure that they feel responsible with regard to research and fact. There are lots of writers who manage informational and research language and the language of passion. Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, for example, is emotionally powerful, but also full of information. Barry Lopez and

Terry Tempest Williams are likewise writers who are able to use facts and connect those facts to feeling. Unless we connect facts to feeling, facts stay alienated from us.

It seems like the cartoon of the poet is this: up in the garret, pinching the fleas, trying to stay warm by burning lint. The solitude of it all. But you've made a rich poetic life inside collaboration. Was collaboration natural to you from the beginning? What have been the great fruits and challenges of your many collaborations?

I think that image of the genius poet in his—the image was usually male—garret is a very romanticized, patriarchal image. It doesn't take into account the way art really takes place. Cormac McCarthy says books are made from books. It's what you read that feeds you. It's the art that you've seen that inspires you to make your own art. Again, there's no such thing as, "I think therefore I am." Our language is something that we didn't invent. We were born into a language that preceded us. Every word we use has been used by others before us. We are inextricably involved with the language of others. In my own practice, I've found that letting go of trying to control everything and opening up to someone else's cooperative influence allows me to get places I would never have arrived on my own. And translating works the same way. In translating, you have to get out of your head. You have to get so far out of your head that it becomes a spiritual activity. Translators penetrate so deeply into someone else's head that they hear the music in the other writer's mind. I think translation is another form of collaboration, an intensive listening. Simone Weil said that prayer wasn't about asking for things, it was about listening.

Have you participated in intentional advocacy, and has some of your poetry been occasional — written for a particular activist-oriented event?

I think of poetry as an ethical activity. No one chooses poetry to become rich and famous or to influence huge numbers of people, even though poets have come to do that. Pablo Neruda read to football stadiums that were just packed full of people. I think of poetry as a way of living and that it is, in some sense, a form of advocacy because you're advocating for openness. All of us fall into patterns of perceptions and into patterns of speech, into what become ruts for how we live our lives and how we relate to people. What poetry and art can do is to bump us out of those ruts. Poetry can lead to a widening of human experience, which is the *modus operandi* of any sort of ethical outlook. I think art and poetry give us tools for thinking and feeling and so they are inherently activist.

A lot of the problems that we face right now are structural that need to be treated at scale, not just on a level of individual choice. How do we address those big structural changes?

Like Malcolm X says, "by any means necessary." For some people it will be writing letters to the editor, for some it will be writing

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poems, for some it will be performances on campus or mass protests. For all of us it will be voting. There are lots of ways to influence others, even on a small scale. I'm hopeful about the possibility that this is happening right now. All of us have some interest in thinking about these issues and in connecting our felt thoughts to others.

I was wondering, ecologically speaking, what's been keeping you up at night lately? And who has been a touchstone of hope for you lately – perhaps a few musicians, poets, or novelists that you turn to in those dark and quiet hours, or in those more jubilant and hopeful hours?

Biden's presidency has been encouraging me—for his focus on greenhouse gases, for the real ambitiousness of his programs. I think the world is beginning to shift toward an acknowledgement of our roles in climate change and its consequences. And there are a lot of writers all over the world addressing these same concerns. I mentioned Richard Powers. But there is also Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Riley, Camille Dungy, and Jorie Graham. Internationally, Julia Fiedorczuk in Poland, Coral Bracho in Mexico, Inger Christensen in Denmark, and Mats Söderlund in Swe-

den. If I were to recommend just one book, it would be Inger Christensen's *Alphabet*.

Do you have any advice or thoughts on translation in poetry?

Yeah, lots (Laughter). Living in the United States from where we export so much of our culture and language to the rest of the world, where so many other languages are disappearing, translation becomes not just a literary activity but an ethical activity. Translations swerve our attentions toward others. A translation that renders some of the differences of another language—different syntaxes, rhythms, image repertoires, etc.—serve as germs that infect, in the best way, our language, refreshing it. If any of you have a second language, even a little of one, I encourage you to try translating. If you find an untranslated contemporary poet, your translation is going to be the best translation in the world simply because there are no other translations. And usually you contact the writer that you want to translate, and that links you to another world. You end up traveling to meet your writers, and they introduce you to their friends who are artists and writers, and worlds open up for you. It's a really fruitful activity and a very important one.



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