

# Be With

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Forrest Gander, *Be With* (New Directions, 2018), 80pp.

At the 2011 International Poetry Nights in Hong Kong, the theme of which was *Words & the World*, C.D. Wright read "Like Hearing Your Name Called in a Language You Don't Understand." The poem contains the lines, "I have read what was written there, said, Gracias, and sat down again / ... / I have stood small and borracha and been glad / of not being thrown down the barranca alongside the pariah consul / in the celebrated book." For those of us who do not know Spanish, *borracha* and *barranca* do not represent things so much as become things, with almost as much opacity and tactility as a gorge (*barranca*), or as being drunk (*borracha*). We may not understand when we read what is written there, but as good travellers we should say *thank you* in whatever way we can.



The relationship between the world and the words we use to describe it is a question of ethics for literature. Too much attention to the world at the expense of the words portraying that world may put us on the moral high ground of realism, but it denies literariness and the functions and fun—and fundamental place *in the world*—of reading. Too much revelry in language and its games, though, with too little attention to the world described, yields incomprehensibility, a sense of too much work for too little reward. The best poetry, then, is like hearing your name called in a language you don't understand. A word calls you, but the word is accented, stressed to make it unfamiliar. It is understandable, but you must work to respond to it.

C.D. Wright was the wife of Forrest Gander, whose new collection of poems is under review here. Wright died unexpectedly in early 2016, from a clot that had formed inside a blood vessel on a flight home from Chile. Later in 2016 Gander published his translations of the lost poems of Pablo Neruda, *Then Come Back* (Copper Canyon), as well as *Alice Iris Red Horse* (New Directions), the selected poems of Yoshimasu Gōzō, which he edited, but *Be With* is his first book of his own poetry since Wright's death. It is, unsurprisingly, a book full of death, of questions of translation and translanguality, and of testing the relationship between words and the world.

Not that *Be With* is all about Wright. The last section of the book, "Littoral Zone," is a series of poems on photos by Michael Flomen. Six poems, five titled "Exit," the last "Entrance," react to Flomen's abstract photography in a mix of prose poetry and lineated verse: "*For though we have no criterion for how to see and are not sure what we are seeing, we are plunged into sensation*" (89). Ekphrasis is of course one way of meditating on the relationship between words and things, and in their way the poems are

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also about translation (the littoral zone is the part of a body of water closest to the shore, but can you hear “littoral” without also thinking of *literal*?). But in *Be With*, that relationship is also defined by paths. The last words of the book are,

From

afar, do you see me now  
briefly here in this phantasmic  
standoff riding  
pain’s whirlforms? (89)

Phantasms and pain are opposites in understanding the relationship between words and the world, the former unreal, the latter real, and the whirls that form between their fronts draw *Be With* into their cyclones. Moving backward through the book, before “Littoral Zone” is “Ruth,” about Gander’s caretaking of his mother, dying of Alzheimer’s; poetically it is the most accessible section of the book:

*Absolutely*

*nothing to look  
forward to, she says  
to whom if  
not you? (64)*

And the themes of the book still lurk. Ruth’s Alzheimer’s gives her “cipher-names of her husband and her grandchildren, a language of blanks” (73); her son implores himself “to forget you’ve heard it before and to receive her words as her first words or her last ones, for she repeats things not only because she’s forgotten but also so they will be remembered” (75). The simplicity of these poems both accommodates and address the deterioration of vocabulary Alzheimer’s has brought to their subject.

Before “Ruth” comes “*Evaporación: a Border History*,” and just as “Ruth” performs a reduced vocabulary, “*Evaporación*” enacts its subject through its bilingualism.

And what ventures into the afternoon heat? Only  
Pharoah ants.  
Only the insulated darkling beetle.  
En los dos lados del pavimento, magnetic sensors  
registran movimiento y dirección. Evening  
cicadas eclipse tree crickets. (63)

By rejecting translation in such moments, Gander, a translator, draws attention to the need for translation, for the need for borders to be crossed—even, or especially, when magnetic sensors register movement and direction on both sides of the pavement.

The poems of the first half of *Be With* establish the thesis of the book, on how a poet’s mourning a poet questions the word’s ability to translate the world. Their referents are less clear than in the poems that follow—and for this reason, they both address the underlying question of the relationship between words and the world and also seem addressed to the poet’s deceased wife. The poetry tells us how to read it: “It means just / what it feels like / it means” (“Tell Them No,” 44). “First Ballad: A Wreath” rewrites John 1:1 as a marriage poem that also proposes linguistic metaphysics in the vein of T.S. Eliot. In “Carbonized Forest,” Gander writes, “here is the untranslation of the world” (18).

“Beckoned” ends with “Some possibility, in which I didn’t believe, of being with her once more” (13). The book begins with “It’s not the mirror that is draped, but / what remains unspoken between us” (“Son,” 11), words that refer to sitting shiva and imply, obliquely, difficulties in communication.

But the poem that is for me at the broken heart of *Be With* is “What it Sounds Like.” Its middle lines read:

If it’s not all juxtaposition, she asked, what is the binding agent?  
Creepy always to want to pin words on “the emotional experience”

For me, these lines are both about poetics and personal relationships. I imagine the question to be something Wright asked Gander after reading a draft of his, or a question Wright and Gander discussed in relation to poets who, as I put it above, revel too much in language games (the structure of “What it Sounds Like” makes it sound like Bob Perelman’s poem “China”), yielding incomprehensibility—or, even worse, forgo emotional stakes. Yes, it is creepy to pin, as I’m doing in this review, a poet’s words on the imagined “emotional experience” of the poet. Yet that way of making sense of words as depicting a world creeps on, regardless. And as language cannot but refer—even if we as users of language must also at times doubt such referencing—then the postulating of references is the reader’s insertion of her or himself into what is read. Though we have no criterion for how to read and are not sure what we are reading, we are plunged into sensation. And in that sensation, beneath the second-guessing, the intertextuality, the untranslatability, lies an answer. The whirlforms of pain are the binding agent of *Be With*’s juxtapositions.

As my quotations only hint at, these poems also swarm with insects and arachnids, a detail I cannot figure out.

**Lucas Klein** is a father, writer, translator, and assistant professor at HKU. His translation of Xi Chuan (New Directions) won the 2013 Lucien Stryk Prize, and he has three books out in 2018: *October Dedications*, translations of Mang Ke (Zephyr); *Li Shangyin* (NYRB); and his monograph, *The Organization of Distance* (Brill).

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## One thought on “Be With”

**Gmt says:**

April 23, 2019 at 9:23 am

A beautiful organisation of the other distance, living forever with the silence, giving you sounds without distance of language.

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