



BOOKS AUGUST 27, 2018 ISSUE

# FORREST GANDER'S GRIEF SOUNDS

*In his new collection, "Be With," the poet yearns, endures, and tries to spin the inchoate into words.*



By Dan Chiasson

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*The elegies in “Be With” chart the addled chronology of loss.* Illustration by Tom Bachtell

The title of Forrest Gander’s latest book of poems, *“Be With”* (New Directions), is a blurted command welling up from yearnings not quite expressible in language. Gander’s partner of more than thirty years, the poet C. D. Wright, died unexpectedly in her sleep in 2016. Later that year, a new volume by Wright, *“ShallCross,”* was published posthumously, with a dedication to Gander: *“for Forrest / line, lank and long, / be with.”* Gander borrows his title from that dedication, which reads like a message from beyond the grave. This collection of elegies for Wright confirms receipt of the message and returns it. Poetry often creates a supernatural-seeming rapport with the dead, but rarely has the communication between worlds felt so eerily reciprocal.

Gander, who teaches at Brown, is the author of eleven books of poems and two novels, plus multimedia collaborations and distinguished translations. In *“Be With,”* he is at once adamant about the ineffability of grief and committed to getting his inchoate “grief-sounds” somehow into words. The book’s sputtering, flinching style, with its syntactical dead ends and missed connections, feels like both an accommodation to the necessity of language and proof of its inadequacy. *“Beckoned”* is a poem about finding the words. The parallel structure of its sentences suggests hasty bulletins delivered in a narrowing span of consciousness. It



At which point my grief-sounds ricocheted outside of language.

Something like a drifting swarm of bees.

At which point in the tetric silence that followed

I was swarmed by those bees and lost consciousness.

At which point there was no way out for me either.

The heavy silences between these single-line stanzas suggest a blackout or a seizure, something more dire than a break for thought. Grief takes us back to the same “point” in time, again and again, even as the clock—and the book itself—moves forward. Coming to in this interstitial state, Gander finds himself suspended in a “semi-coma, dreaming I was awake,” where actions and symbols share a single plane:

At which point I grew old and it was like ripping open the beehive with my hands again.

At which point I conceived a realm more real than life.

At which point there was at least some possibility.

Some possibility, in which I didn't believe, of being with her once more.

The distant future gets the past tense: even the unknown trajectory of Gander's emotional life is described as fixed, and finished. There's nothing ahead for him except grieving. The “possibility” that he constructs contains both supreme hopefulness and self-cancelling disbelief. “I outlived my life,” he writes.

The book's title gives away its most tragic insight. “Be with”: the phrase is stripped of its object; the beloved has been ripped from the world. Reciprocity is suddenly broken, as though one player in a game had walked off the court mid-volley. “Who was ever only themselves?” Gander asks in “Son,” a poem addressed to his and Wright's “one arterial child.” In “Epitaph,” another jarring phrase substitutes for more mellifluous expressions:

To write *You*  
*existed me*  
would not be merely  
a deaf translation.

For there is no  
sequel to the passage when  
I saw—as you would  
*never again*  
*be revealed*—you see me  
as I would never  
*again be revealed.*



revisiting it. Birth and death are all there in that first glance: “*never again*” conveys irrevocable loss. The line break in the second instance—“*never / again*”—suggests that, for the living, the full emotional weight of eternity must “*be revealed*,” and endured, again and again.

To write about profound loss, you step inside a genre, elegy, that is full of haunting echoes. Gander’s poems call to mind those Thomas Hardy wrote after the sudden death of his wife, Emma. Hardy’s verse skips over his immediate, painful past to a moment “when our day was fair,” dwelling on the uncanny traces his wife left behind in “a room on returning thence.” Gander shares the intensity of Hardy’s grief—his morose fixation on moments squandered. The poems in “Be With” recall the happy parallel paths in life and in art that he and Wright followed—always within a holler of each other. After Wright’s death, Gander’s memories revolve around objects, landscapes, work, and routines—symbols that become nearly sentient in their embodiment of his pain:

The cabinet  
door’s squeaky  
dactylic remark:  
*Hap-pi-ness?*

What Gander calls the “spectacularization / of the trivial” occurs when the everyday—an ordinary cabinet, a mundane memory—“means just / what it feels like / it means.” We teach our objects how to speak our language. This poet’s cabinet even talks in meter.

“Be With” charts the addled chronology of personal loss. The linear march of time is scattered with vignettes from Gander and Wright’s life together, often out of order, often repeated. Early on, she candled eggs for a poultry farm while he played “frisbee on the green.” One night, instead of making love Wright takes a bath, her knees poking up “through the soap bubbles,” while Gander stargazes under the “Prawn Nebula.” Loss is what makes these memories visible; without it, what you have is just another evening of slightly divergent marital priorities. A more recent, more painful memory captures the contesting imperatives of finality and delay:

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“If you want  
to throw in  
some dirt,” the priest  
addressed the widower  
and his child generally  
but did not



The priest doesn't finish the sentence, but Gander must.

Meanwhile, the world proposes alternative measurements of time and loss. One day, Gander discovers that "the spider / vibrating on its long legs in the ceiling corner / over my desk doesn't exist now." The spider's work, so deeply associated with writing poetry, has been cut short. In an interview, Gander has said that one poem in the collection, a loose translation of the first ballad of St. John of the Cross, was literally interrupted by Wright's death. This breach is honored in real time: the poem suddenly veers off in a personal direction. The book as a whole replicates this effect: it is a self-suturing wound, equal parts bridge and void.

The fleeting moments that Gander assembles seek an order that is not merely chronological. He remembers a question from Wright: "If it's not all juxtaposition, she asked, what is the binding agent?" The most obvious answer is language, though, as Gander discovers, language often fails. "Creepy," he writes, "always to want to pin words on 'the emotional experience.'" Sometimes he gets rid of the binding agents altogether, as in "Deadout," a two-part poem that arranges fourteen sentence fragments into intelligible couplets, then scrambles them into dreamlike illogic. The result isn't nonsense; it's a haunting near-sense made by foiling cause and effect.

Gander has a degree in geology and is the author, with John Kinsella, of "Redstart," a pioneering hybrid treatise on ecopoetics, a movement in contemporary poetry that, according to Gander, explores "the economy of interrelationship between human and non-human realms." In the same way that the vocabulary of faith might aid a religious poet in a time of crisis, Gander's deep affinity for the natural world provides a kind of solace. There phenomena "rarely have discreet beginnings or endings" and instead reveal "layers, duration, and transitions." The impulse to go very small or very big, from the microscopic to the cosmic, is evident in the opening poem. "You lug a bacterial swarm / in the crook of your knee," Gander writes, while "through my guts / writhe helminth parasites."

The book's final section is titled "Littoral Zone"—the part of a body of water, usually near the shore, where enough light passes through for plants to grow. My Google search tells me that by the time sunlight reaches the bottom of the littoral zone it is usually one per cent or less of its surface strength. That's about as much comfort as arrives in this harrowing, sometimes despairing book. But even in near-darkness there's light enough for a new, strange kind of love poem:

. . . From  
afar, do you see me now  
briefly here in this phantasmic  
standoff riding  
pain's whirlforms?

The phrase "phantasmic standoff" is lifted directly from "Redstart," where it refers not to humans but to strange "nocturnal / pods," surging in the dark water. It was Nietzsche who defined human beings as "hybrids of plants and ghosts." The comfort of the littoral is, I take it, entirely figurative. ♦



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