An Interview with Forrest Gander

By Michael J Pagan

Born in Barstow, California in 1956, Forrest Gander is an American poet, essayist, novelist, translator, and critic. His work includes the poetry collection *Eye Against Eye* (New Directions Press, 2005), the translation *Firefly Under the Tongue: Selected Poems of Coral Bracho* (2008), and a collection of essays, *A Faithful Existence*, published in 2005. His honors include fellowships to the Whiting, National Endowment for the Arts, Guggenheim, and Howard foundations and a PEN Translation Award. Most recently, he has accepted the Writer-in-Residence position at Florida Atlantic University. Parts shape-shifter, parts geologist, Gander shares his aim at crossing genre in hopes of transcribing experience, situation and place. He shares his insights on his most recent work of fiction: his acclaimed novel *As a Friend*, his most recent work of poetry, *Eye Against Eye*, and his translation of Coral Bracho’s poetry collection, *Firefly Under the Tongue*. Gander seeks out the physical history of being human within its natural process. For Gander, the language is hidden not only in the shifting, and not only in the movements, but within the in-between spaces. For Gander, there are no blank spaces--only possibility.

**Coastlines**: The movement of your novel, *As A Friend*, paragraph by paragraph, seems to move similarly to that of a stanza or verse in poetry. Additionally, the movement of the exposition (particularly when in third-person) seems to move similarly to that of stage directions in a play. Was this commingling of genres intentional, or were they more of an effect brought on by the aim of your aesthetic project?

**Gander**: It took me a long time—close to twenty years—to write this small novel, to learn how to apply to prose everything I’d learned as a poet. But even in my poems, I’ve been interested in crossing the borders of genre. The section
of my novel called “Sarah’s Tale” is considered by some people to be the most poetic, and yet I think of it in connection with the prose of David Markson or the procedural statements of Wittgenstein.

**Coastlines:** A title such as *Eye Against Eye* (I against I, possibly?), the Edmond Jabes’ epigraph at the beginning of to your novel, particularly the last two lines: “the friendship of a stranger become our double, adversary and accomplice,” and the differing yet interchangeable understandings of the character Les by Clay, Sarah (and even Les himself for that matter) in *As A Friend*, hints at the idea of an alter-ego, or other, of Forrest Gander that is at play; a relationship that at times appears to take place in real-time as a piece progresses. Do you view yourself (as writer) as both adversary and accomplice? Do you see the reader/writer relationship as being one adversary and one accomplice? Or both?

**Gander:** Don’t you think that to be a human being at all is to be engaged with others, to be involved, invested—even if we’re monks—in a world, a language, etc. that we can’t claim to have created? As a writer, I’m interested in trying to get to the complexity of experience. For me, that has led—in poetry—to counterpoint, polyrhythms, and clausal layering. In the novel, I wanted to explore valences of friendship: eroticism, jealousy, emulation, compassion. Like my readers, I’m very likely a congeries of contradictory and shifting selves.

**Coastlines:** You write in your novel: “I don’t think poets tell things at all, you said. Poetry listens.” Or, could you talk a little more about that as it relates to your own poetry?

**Gander:** At least in my practice, poetry is connected not only to music but to silence—which is why I think so many American readers are baffled by it. And for me, poetry comes about through attentiveness, what Simone Weil calls prayer and what Miles Davis calls not just listening, but “listening into.” Essays tell about things. But it seems to me that poetry is a kind of tuning to situation and place, to the felt rhythms and lexicon and syntax of a particular engagement and stance.

**Coastlines:** It appears that each character section of *As A Friend* reflects each form of writing you’ve adopted; Clay/Fiction, Sarah/Poetry, Les/Non-Fiction, with translations woven in across some of the sections. Was this a conscious strategy?

**Gander:** Whatever we come to call a “feeling” for a character comes—at least for me—as measure, a rhythm of perception and response. I was looking for the form for the emotional conditions of the different characters. I was thinking about their bodies, the way they would move through a space. It wasn’t important to me to establish clear realms of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction,
but I felt I had every genre to draw from.

**Coastlines:** There’s a passage in Michael Ondaatje’s Divisadero that reads: “In the past, Rafael had traveled from village to village, argued a salary, invented melodies, stolen chords, slashed the legs off of an old song to use just the torso—but he had come to love now most of all the playing of music with no one there. Could you waste your life on a gift? If you did not use your gift, was it a betrayal?” Would you say that Les spent his short life using his own gift? Because he could no longer use his gift, or rather, once his gift became exposed to his wife and Sarah, could his suicide be read as “collateral damage” to Clay’s betrayal rather than Les betraying the other characters? If Les had chosen the straight and narrow, would he have betrayed himself?

**Gander:** Ahh, those are just the questions I hope the book provokes and I feel a whelm of gratefulness that you have articulated them.

**Coastlines:** The introduction to Coral Bracho’s poetry collection Firefly Under the Tongue, you write that if one tries “to put [their] finger on the meaning of a poem, the meaning seems to move elsewhere, and so [one] begins to focus on feeling the poem, engaging it as an active movement taking place on the page and also in [one’s] mind” (XII). Do you share that same approach in your own translations? Instead of hollowing out the meaning of the words, do you search for a feeling instead? A texture? An impression?

**Gander:** Texture, impression, feeling, meaning: to sliver away any of these aspects in a translation is to diminish the work—and that’s not only a literary failure but an ethical one. It’s a very mysterious process, translation. The translator must disappear into the original, must absorb the music of another’s mind. And then the translator must return full force, with everything she has ever learned about the art itself—about poetry if it is poetry she is translating. In its iterative obliterations and reincarnations, it’s much more a spiritual than a transcriptional activity.

**Coastlines:** Native speakers of a particular language (e.g. Spanish), whom attempt to translate a language similar to their native language (e.g. Portuguese), have a tendency to push the language through an assembly line of Portuguese to Spanish, followed by Spanish to English. When you read in Spanish, do you think in Spanish, or do you read Spanish and think in English?

**Gander:** In Spanish, I am someone else. The Mexican children call me Bosque, which means forest. I have a different rhythm to my thinking and speech. I talk in ways that, if they were plotted on some graph, wouldn’t correspond at all to my speech in English. I’m thinking in a modality distinct from my thoughts as an English speaker.
Coastlines: In your interview with Mario Hibert, you speak about how you think scientific language changed by embracing uncertainty; a parallel that also exists in poetic language. You mention being interested more in the “inquiry of capturing and articulating truth,” rather than pretense. Do you see translation as its own language?

Gander: Hmmm. If I say I’m trying to capture and articulate truth in that interview with Mario Hibert, there might be a mistranslation involved. I don’t really know what people would mean by “capturing truth.” Maybe it’s like capturing an electron. I’m not a relativist. I think we can say that this happened. The Holocaust happened. My father died. But I’ve got no choke hold on truth and certainly not THE truth. In fact, the intention in my work is to get at some of the fullness of experience, what Hopkins called the dappled nature of the world, some range at least of its varied and simultaneous tonalities and implications.

Coastlines: How does one’s poetic sensibilities evolve when discovering another language? How has your writing — and translations for that matter— evolved?

Gander: I’ve always been drawn to translations. Before I read the 19th century English novelists, I’d read the French and Russian ones in translation. Languages tune not only our ears but our minds in different keys. Certainly the work I have translated has penetrated my body and mind so deeply that the work I’ve written afterwards has been transformed in very specific ways that are sometimes obvious at least to me. Coral Bracho’s work stands as one example. Her slippery syntax provided me with possibilities I might not have imagined otherwise.

Coastlines: Some have referred to you as a “southern poet” or “poet of the south.” Outside of the obvious, geographical connotation, what exactly do these references imply? Is it aesthetic or thematic? Is it custom or culture? Is it simply voice? Do you see yourself as a southern writer, and—if so—in what ways?

Gander: My family has deep Virginia roots: Robert E. Lee, Lord Fairfax, we landed in Virginia with the first English ships and never left. I’m the only one in my family to leave the state. Growing up and going to camp in Rockbridge Baths, majoring in geology at William and Mary, collecting specimens of the state fossil, Chesapecten jeffersonius, along the James River—I was profoundly imprinted by Virginia’s landscape. Like A. R. Ammons who left the south but was forever marked by it, I’m a Yankee now but the landscape to which my heartstrings are tied is nine hours drive south of where I live. In terms of aesthetics, those old regional differences are quickly changing. I don’t think we can simply claim that Southern writers are formally conservative champions of
the farmer as exemplar of “the true man” anymore, if ever we could.

**Coastlines:** Poetry paired with photographs might be seen as another form of translation. How do you view the relationship between the two, and do you see the poems and the photographs as inextricable from one another?”

**Gander:** Hopefully, the poems work as poems on their own, and the photographs as photographs. But together, maybe they give rise to something more powerful yet. Maybe they call new ways of seeing and feeling and thinking into being. Out of their mutuality. My new book, *Core Samples from the World*—it won’t come out until 2011—is a series of collaborations with three photographers, the great Mexican master, Graciela Iturbide, and two remarkable North Americans, Raymond Meeks and Lucas Foglia.

**Coastlines:** Do you, or the photographer, feel it necessary to “fill-in-the-blanks” so to speak? Is that what’s taking place, or is it simply two sides to the same conversation? Is it a conversation, or a debate? Once both are viewed together, when taken apart after the fact, is something imminently lost?

**Gander:** No blanks. The empty spaces and the silences are active zones. So neither photograph nor poetry is a crutch for the other. What I hope is that each is a catalyst, altering and reshaping potentialities. Each becomes different the way your lover becomes different when you are together or separate. Not lesser, but otherwise.