On cultivating openness

Poet and translator Forrest Gander on walking the San Andreas Fault, translation as a giving up of ego, and deepening your ability to create complex work.

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As told to Niina Pollari, 3334 words.

Tags: Poetry, Translation, Process, Inspiration, Collaboration, Family, Day jobs, Health.

You're best known as a poet, but you also work as a translator, and you've written a novel and essays and much more. You've also said in the past that genres are porous, and that you are not interested in defining them as a reader or a writer. Do you consider poetry to be your main art?

Poetry has informed the way that I write everything else, so I do. But I'm much less interested in genre than some people are. Translation has been enormously influential to my work, and I feel like it's constantly expanding my own wingspan, my sense of possibility. The slippery syntax of the Mexican poet, Coral Bracho, has been very influential to me. And Raúl Zurita, the great Chilean poet. He includes sonograms and shaped poems and bleeding pronouns that shift around. That work has been very important to me, and has marked a direction that I've wanted to move my own work in.

In the most recent book, *Mojave Ghost*, I still feel like I'm metabolizing grief even as I experience happiness and a new relationship. But navigating those things has made me write a book that's the least acrobatic linguistically. I think [you and I] share a number of decisions that we made, or that were made for us, by the material that we were given, including sharp juxtapositions instead of ameliorating transitions. And that mixing of pronouns, which I do a lot–grappling with variations on narrative arc. I'm interested in trying to undo that arc by talking about time being simultaneous.

Let's talk about that simultaneity of time. In the book, your narrator (who is you) walks the San Andreas Fault while uncovering layers of his own self. And so he's a child, and a man grieving, and also a man newly in love. Our identities, as long as we have the privilege of stomping this earth, keep changing. I want to ask you about the geological metaphor here. How did the fault line work together with time in this book?

Well, we had this project, this sort of crazy project of hiking the San Andreas Fault, which covers most of the state. And of course, it's nothing like a line that you can follow. It's a territory with lots of divigating earthquake faults that are considered part of the San Andreas Fault. But that became an obvious metaphor, even though we didn't take it up that way. We took it up as a kind of meditation on this landscape that we're living in.

I love the California landscape. But walking along it, I became very conscious of how even plates aren't a fixed point–one plate is overriding another plate, and sliding by, and the earth is screaming and vibrating. And that came to seem very metaphorical for what was going on in me as well.

The thing that we think of metaphorically as our most sturdy and trusted thing, the very earth underfoot, is ever-changing and shifting, like identity.

A favorite quote of mine from one of my favorite poets, also a California poet, George Oppen, he said:

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.

We want to be here.

The act of being, the act of being
More than oneself.

You have spent time in your life in many different locations, and traveled extensively. I've moved around too, and I find that my poetics has changed shape from changes in location. Because of this, I've been thinking a lot about how landscapes affect the way we think. What to you is the connection between the writer and the writer's surroundings?

I'm just fascinated by that, too. That's one of my biggest interests. And one of the books that really influenced the way I think about this is Mary Austin's 1923 book called *The American Rhythm*. She talks about how place might influence language, language rhythms, our use of language in variable ways. One of her famous examples is that if you listen to the Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln, what you hear are the rhythms of a man who spent much of his life chopping wood.

But in Arkansas, where I lived in a very rural place, if you're walking with someone down a dirt road with a hump in it, you're separated, there's a caesura between you. You're looking at them, but behind them is a screen of trees, and behind the trees there's a mountain, and those ways of conversing and seeing I think do affect our language.

Heiddeger has that nice short little book called *Conversation on a Country Path* where he talks about how walking with someone, you literally are sharing a vision and the pace, and that kind of walking changes if you're in the city or if you're in the country. I think an attentiveness to the way that place influences and is a part of human perception is something that we haven't always taken into account.

There's the tradition of Sangam poetry in southern India, which means convergence. And one of the two poetries that developed from that, called Akam, is this big body of poetry in which it was considered not only unethical, but really impossible to write about human subjectivity or your feelings without taking into account the world immediately around you, which was influencing you in all sorts of ways that you might not have wanted to admit. So I'm very interested in attunement to local landscapes.

Where are you talking to me from right now?

I live in a rural unincorporated town called Penngrove, California. It's about an hour and a half north of San Francisco, and it's filled with, right now, wild turkeys everywhere. They've just had their hatchlings and every time I take a walk, there's scores of huge turkeys. They're enormous creatures. They really do look like dinosaurs. And the neighbors have caught a mountain lion, and a bobcat ran through our yard and jumped over our fence. We have a lot of fruit trees that were planted by an Iranian physicist who lived here and missed the fruit from back home.

I think that [moving] strips away kind of ruts of perception that we develop in any one place, and makes us more vulnerable and open to seeing differently. I think it can be a really healthy way of expanding the ways that we relate to what's around us.

I think that's true. I was a child who immigrated at a very young age, and so some of my earliest memories, earliest as what I consider a thinking being, are of having been uprooted and figuring out who I am in another country.

Emma Ramadan, in her interview, talks very articulately about her own experience that way, of being Lebanese but not speaking Arabic and being disconnected from that culture, but feeling different in this culture.

I want to ask you about a subject that pops up in the new book time and again, which is the paying of attention. You say: "How to sustain attentiveness, how to keep / the mind from dropping its needle / into the worn grooves of association?" Both in working your way through grief, but also at a time when our attention is constantly divided and fragmented, how do you sustain your attention?

I was really interested in Joyelle McSweeney's new book [*Death Styles*, which is about] how she, who has all these pressures on her, can't sit down with a plan to write something. So she just sits down and hooks onto almost anything, any event, any object, just to have something to move from, because it seems almost unethical for her to plot some structure larger than that because it's almost like all she can do is just react to the world.

Of course, there's lots of different practices that people have for stepping out of their customary ways of seeing things. Translation is one. Translation displaces me from my own mind, from the music in my mind, and allows me to see things I wouldn't ordinarily have come across. But I think it's the cultivation of a condition of openness, which involves a lot of vulnerability, which our culture doesn't encourage us to feel. We're so often protecting ourselves. But to cultivate an openness is a lifelong artistic project. I do practice meditation and I spend time alone. But solitary time is really important to me. I don't do any social media. I'm not critical of other people doing it, but it's just not what I want to do with my time.

Well, who's to say that the digital space doesn't also influence your thinking the same way as a physical space does.

At this moment in our culture, where there is so much cliché and so many soundbites, and where our writing is corrected even as we're making a sentence by a computer that's using algorithms to move us toward the most conventional possibilities and sentence formation, and where our lexicon is also being diminished by the spaces we have to write in, like how many characters in a tweet, one of the things poetry offers is a more expansive repertoire of language for the expression of the nuances of our feelings and thinking.

Do people ever ask you to define poetry? Because that is as good a definition as any.

All the time. I like an answer that Frank Stanford gave. He said, "Poetry is a beautiful white dog that throws up all over the house."

Oh, boy. I don't have any pets. Do you?

I do. I've grown up with dogs all my life and really love dogs. But I've traveled too much now to have one. And my wife, [the artist] Ashwini Bhat, has always had cats. And so we've adopted two cats to which I'm allergic, but also I'm very fond of them.

I'm sure you didn't foresee cat ownership for yourself, but that's the beauty of partnership, is that you're open to new possibility.

Yeah.

Speaking of partnership – collaboration has been super important to you as an artist. You've collaborated with many artists across media. How do you sustain your own voice, but also relinquish it, in collaboration? Or is the result always some kind of a third thing?

I collaborate a lot. Recently, I've been collaborating with a photographer named Lukas Felzmann. He had a project of traveling to all 58 counties of California and photographing the dirt or the land or some part of the dirt. And because I have a degree in geology and I'm interested in the dirt and what it is we stand on, in every way, I wrote for him.

What I love about collaboration is how it lifts us out of the ruts of our perception, so that we're seeing someone else's vision. We're also having to give up how we might control dealing with the material. And in that

giving up, once again, I find a model for the kind of social engagement that I want to practice in my life. And think of translation as being that also, giving up of ego. There are some translators who, no matter who they're translating, it sounds like translator's work. And that's been an anti-mob for me of how to encounter otherness.

I like that. I haven't translated too many different individuals, but I need to endeavor to work with more artists who are very different from me.

That's why Jennifer Croft's book, *The Extinction of Irena Rey*, was so fun, because it sort of sets up these different translation models and puts them in argument with each other and then overlays it with other ideas about translation.

Your writing contains a lot of olfactory elements. There are dead animals, rotting leaves, exhaling fissures. What role does scent play in memory for you?

I think most scientists say that it's the most distinct of the memory-forming senses that we have, even though we depend much more on vision. But scent is really subtle, and I think it interfaces in our interactions with others in ways that we may not even be conscious of, that we all carry a particular scent with us and respond chemically to the scents of others. So it's a way, again, of trying to be attentive because it's also a very diminished sense in us. Evidently, the possibility of us smelling much more than we do smell is really great. We have the equipment for it. But we have sort of trained ourselves not to be focused there. But it's so intimate, isn't it?

Did you have any of those moments during your walk along the fault line where you smelled something and were transported?

Well, the Salton sea, which is really salty. That smell was really rich and brought up memories from my childhood of the first times I went to the ocean with my mother, who raised me. And she was raising us on a salary of an elementary school teacher, so we weren't doing a lot of vacations. So that first time to the ocean was really startling, and that was a moment of, "Wow, this scent." There's the smell of rock, the dust on certain rock that I just love and that I've found at different times in my life in different places. And that would be really hard to describe.

Yes, and also not something that most people think of. You would ask someone, "What does a rock smell like?" And they would be like, "I don't think about that." But there's a simile in all of that, and to me, you are a master of the simile. You make a lot of beautiful and surprising ones: "Small exuberances hive in me like worms in a cadaver." The idea that exuberance, which to me is joyful, is also something taking you apart. Or "Only in your company do I concentrate and hold together, like the tightening vortex of a tornado." Always this combination of joy and destruction.

What you're describing right now is the capacity for very interior and deeply human complexes of intellect and feeling in an inventive language.

What does your writing routine look like on the daily, or on the weekly, or whatever increment of time you would like to discuss?

At certain times in my life, it was really regular. I would wake up at 5:00 A.M., and when I had a young child, I'd have to wake up even earlier to have an hour, an hour and a half before there was child, and then work, and then dinner, and then exhaustion.

This is me right now.

Yeah, I can relate. So I had to structure really vigorously then. And then as my life changed, now, it's more variable. I can go for months without writing, though I sort of think I'm writing in my head all the time. And I do a lot of reading. I read a lot, and I take notes on what I read, and I go back over those notes and I find them very generative. And when I'm home and not engaged in a lot of activity, then I have a very regular schedule. And

I write in the morning, try not to look at the news. I try not to look at my email. And I work on writing for a few hours. But it gets interrupted a lot by travel, by other engagements, by the need to see other people, and art, and also the business of literature where you're responding to people translating you or to people that you're translating, and you need to do other things.

Do you have any kind of routine or thing that puts you in the mindset to write? Do you have your specific talisman, or anything like that?

Well, my desk. Some people are really terrific at writing in cafes and insist on writing a cafes, but I'm most comfortable writing at my desk. I like taking notes in other places, but I can't really consider writing anything until it's spread out in front of me and I'm at this place with my books behind me. I like to have my resources as I write.

What else is on your desk?

There's a couple fantastic Mexican books: Muerte azteca-mexica, on death in Aztec culture in Mexico, and another on Shamanism in Mexico. And there's, oh, this nice notebook. The cover, which I've plastered on, is an image by the painter, Fi Jae Lee, who is the daughter of Korea's great contemporary poet, Kim Hyesoon. And then a book of my responses to things that I've read, which is not as thickly pasted in as George Oppen's notebooks, which are like landscapes, but it's full of notes and things I've pasted in. And then there's a nice letter from the son of the great translator of Sangam literature, Ramanujan.

I really like finding some kind of bonds, both with places that are important to me and with people. I've made trips everywhere just to meet someone, sometimes not having told them I'm coming, and that's formed a lot of important friendships. There are all these places in California where literary culture, especially the literary culture that I'm most interested in, took place, formed, had meetings. And I feel really called to those places and to those people.

Your work, particularly *Be With*, was one of my keystones during a time when I was trying to read other people navigating through darkness. So many grief books are so prescriptive that I found them to be disturbing. But really what happens is we circle back to these monumental events, and time passes, and we add another layer, the way that your narrator uncovers layers of his own personality. It's a record of time. The person in great pain is me, but I'm also a person with great joy in my life. And both are true. You must know what I mean.

Yeah, I do, the multiplicity that we are. As people are choosing the pronoun "they" to represent themselves, it has occurred to me that beyond the specifically gendered notion of what that means, that all artists… I think that we have to admit how much we're composed of others and how much that "I" is changing constantly.

I have one last kind of corny question written down, which is, what is the best advice you've ever been given about writing?

I thought I was a hot shot poet in high school, and my mom turned me onto poetry as a child. So I had a professor in my freshman year in college, professor David Jenkins, who, when I showed him my poems, looked at me with these sad basset hound eyes and said, "Forrest, these are terrible." And that was the most important poetic advice because it took me aback and I thought, "What am I missing?" I very quickly came to realize I hadn't been reading a lot of contemporary poetry and that it wasn't going to be just an art of my own self-expression, that I needed to study the art.

Forrest Gander recommends:

The Orange Tree by Dong Li— from U of Chicago.

A trip to Mono Lake in the eastern Sierra Nevada mountains to see the phalaropes.

Any installation by Ann Hamilton, or a performance work presented at Ann Hamilton's 8-story Tower at the Oliver Ranch in Sonoma County, CA.

A walk through the blue-washed casbah of Chefchaouen in the Rif mountains of Morocco.

Even if it involves selling your house to buy a ticket to Santiago, I recommend any opportunity to hear Raúl Zurita read his poetry in person.

Name
Forrest Gander

Vocation
poet