

An impressionistic painting of sunflowers in various stages of bloom. The colors are vibrant yellows, oranges, and greens, with visible brushstrokes and a textured surface. The sunflowers are the central focus, with some in full bloom and others as buds or partially open. The background is a mix of light and dark green and blue tones, suggesting foliage and sky. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

# ROWBOAT

POETRY IN TRANSLATION

*Issue Number Four*



## Striking Sparks: An Interview with Forrest Gander

By Norman Minnick

Born in the Mojave Desert in Barstow, California, Forrest Gander grew up in Virginia and spent significant periods in San Francisco, Dolores Hidalgo (Mexico), and Eureka Springs, Arkansas before moving to Rhode Island. He holds degrees in both English literature and geology. Gander teaches courses such as "Poetry & Ethics," "EcoPoetics," "Latin American Death Trip," and "Translation Theory & Practice."

He is the author of numerous books of poetry, including *Core Samples from the World*, *Eye Against Eye*, and *Science & Steepleflower*, all from New Directions. His most recent translations are *Watchword* by Pura López Colomé (which won the Villaurrutia Prize); *Spectacle & Pigsty* by Kiwao Nomura (co-translated with Kyoko Yoshida); and *Firefly Under the Tongue: Selected Poems of Coral Bracho* (Finalist, PEN Translation Prize).

I first encountered Gander's translations in the anthology *Mouth to Mouth: Poetry by 12 Contemporary Mexican Women* (Milkweed Editions). As I mention in the interview, I found the voices in this collection to be very fresh and alive. I still return to these poets from time to time. His book of essays, *A Faithful Existence*, is an indispensable collection for anyone interested in the craft of writing, translation, or simply reading.

This interview took place via e-mail in February of 2012.

*In the essay "Nymph Stick Insect: Observations on Poetry, Science, and Creation" you say that you are "interested in evolution and in the proliferation of poetries." You are not merely translating poetry but also acting as a sort of anthropologist of poetry from other cultures, and as an advocate of the poets you are translating.*

*How do we expose our youth to this international poetry? Here in Indiana the state standard for high school provides a list of poets for teachers to choose from. The only non-American, non-Anglo-European poet on the list is Pablo Neruda. Among the 26 poets on this short list are Carl Sandburg, Sylvia Plath, Amy Lowell, Tennyson, James Whitcomb Riley, Maya Angelou, Poe, Masters, and Rita Dove. Not that there is anything wrong with these poets, but the list seems a little outdated and, quite frankly, bland.*

Helen Vendler and others think that students need to be exposed first to their historical heritage; only then can they begin to understand contemporary poems. Otherwise, they are trying to join the tail-end of a conversation already in progress. I think somewhat differently. For one thing, the conversation is always in progress no matter where you come into the room. You don't need to study classical music to feel connected to jazz. It often seems to me that students are naturally given to engage with the language of their own moment and that once they are interested, turned on to contemporary poetry, they want to read the earlier poetry in order to make connections, to get more information, because their curiosity has been stimulated, just as when you fall in love, you want to hear about your lover's past so that you know how to love better; you want to know more deeply *who* it is that you love. But finally, I think that what matters most in school settings is that teachers have an understanding of and a passion for *any* kind of poetry. Passion gets translated and strikes sparks in multiple directions. I think it matters less whether a teacher is passionate about Anne Bradstreet or Richard Hell than that the teacher loves poetry and knows how to teach it.

*How do you teach translation when surely the students don't know all the original languages? Even if you provide them with a pony, how do they work out the subtleties and nuances—metaphors, irony, allusions, etc.—of the original language without being able to work*



*with someone who knows the language or, even better, the poet, and when the students do not have a thorough knowledge of the culture from which the poem developed?*

Those are the questions that make studying translation so fascinating. Much of the theory is applicable no matter what languages are being translated. What is the aim of the translation? What are the ethical implications of that aim? How is sound, rhythm, texture involved? What makes the original function as a poem? What are the cultural contexts, the linguistic nuances? I don't "teach translation" so much as I teach a sense of responsibility for approaching such questions. I teach a course called "New Books of Poetry in Translation" where students don't necessarily need to have another language. In my Translation Workshops, students do speak and write at least two languages.

*I love the three "Homage to Translation" sections in A Faithful Existence. They are more interesting and more buoyant to read than typical essays. The form allows more into the conversation. For example, I love the Ortega y Gasset claim that translations are not even of the same genre as the original. This reminds me of the famous remark Pablo Neruda made to Alastair Reid: "Don't just translate my poems...I want you to improve them!"*

*I have always been interested in the differences between translation, versions, imitations, and so on. On the one hand, I don't see why a translator even needs to put his or her name on the work. It should be about the poet. On the other hand, I have my favorite translators of certain poets just as I prefer Leonard Bernstein or Claudio Abado's Mahler or Laurence Olivier's Hamlet.*

*Yet, I appreciate, for example, that Lowell calls his "imitations." It lets him off the hook for taking liberties. I would argue that Akira*

*Kurosawa is the best "translator" of Shakespeare (Ran/King Lear, Throne of Blood/Macbeth). Perhaps I am hung up on a word, but I am curious about the liberties you take (if any) to, as you say, "re-create...the same degree of reader participation in the translation as in the original."*

We're definitely at odds, Norm, on the subject of whether translators should be credited for translations. You know, of course, that when you read a translation, every word you eyeball was written by the translator and could have been written otherwise, could have been another word, could have been extended into a phrase or absorbed into an implication, could have appeared elsewhere in the sentence structure, so you don't read *anything* as it was written by the original author. Someone has done something truly violent to the original. The translations that adhere most slavishly to the literal and syntactical template of the original are not, often, the more successful translations and they are usually the least satisfying to the author. Even if someone isn't, as in your example, actually setting out to "improve" Neruda—an ethically complicated intention that I don't think Alastair Reid attempts or accomplishes—a complex art is involved.

As for the extension and metaphorization of translation across genres, I'm right with you. I think translation has become, in physics, anthropology, literature, and philosophy, the dominant trope of the 21st century.

*In the U.S. we tend to categorize everything. Poetry is just as polarized as anything else; you are either in the avant-garde camp (which in my experience is now preferred by academics) or the school of quietude (pretty much anything Garrison Keillor will read on air). Do you find this in other cultures?*



Poetry's like that everywhere, but isn't everything, really? Philosophy camps start with continental vs. analytical and fine away into the thinnest of distinctions. If you like Radiohead you dismiss Coldplay. We all cut our teeth against each other, but in doing so, we often come to learn something about the other sides. I'm engaged by a wide range of poetries, which doesn't mean I don't have strong inclinations.

*The majority of the poets you translate are Mexican women. Is there a reason for this? The poems of Coral Bracho, Myriam Moscona, Verónica Volkow, Ekana Milán and others from the collection Mouth to Mouth are very fresh and alive. Is there something going on culturally that attributes to this?*

I started translating at a moment when a boom of small press activity began to even out the possibilities for publication in Latin America. Men still edited the major editorial houses and literary magazines where women simply weren't published much, but women took the helms of independent presses. In the 1980's in Mexico, there was an explosion of great books by women and I happened to be there reading like mad and trying to teach myself to translate. I started translating poetry I liked; it was coincidence that a great deal of it turned out to be by women. That experience led to *Mouth to Mouth: Poetry by 12 Contemporary Mexican Women*. Among the writers in that book, the poet I most wanted to spend more time with was Coral Bracho, whose work is so singular and influential. And that led to *Firefly Under the Tongue: Selected Poems of Coral Bracho*. Wesleyan University has just released *Watchword*, my second book of translations of poetry by Pura López Colomé. She's a kind of skeptical mystic for whom language is the only possible vehicle for redemption and transformation. And now I've turned my attentions to Spain where I'm translating some fantastic younger poets including Sandra Santana, Pilar Fraile Amador, and Ana Gorría Ferrín as

part of an anthology called *Panic Cure: Poetry from Spain for the 21st Century*.

*I appreciate what you say in "The Transparency," "What I want is simple enough: to combine spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and technical elements into a resistant musical form. To summon the social and political meanings of sound and rhythm as well as meanings whose force lies beneath or above our syntax."*

*What do you mean by a "resistant musical form?" Will you elaborate on the social and political meanings of sound and rhythm?*

I remember Jack Gilbert telling me that when he begins to hear music in his work, he kills it. By resistant, I mean that I'm not interested in predictable orchestrations. Billie Holiday's voice is so often a beat behind the musical tempo. Nico Muhly distresses his lyric iterations in ways that unsettle and thrill me. Counterpoint and harmonics are essential to my sense of poetic lyricism.

*When I was in charge of the visiting writers series at Butler University shortly after 9/11/01, we brought in the Maya-K'iche' Indian poet Humberto Ak'abal from Guatemala and had him read alongside his translator Miguel Rivera. Humberto does not speak any English. He would recite his poems first in K'iche and then in Spanish. It was the most powerful poetry reading I had ever witnessed. Before we heard the translations, we could feel the poems. I swear, the floor in that room sank about three feet when he read. Many students had tears in their eyes. Not everyone has this opportunity. I'd like to ask you what you ask in "Homage to Translation: Benjamin in Japan:" "Where do you hear a poem when you read it to yourself? In your head, your throat, your thorax? How would you translate your body's involvement in what you write, what you read?"*



I'm sure you know that even the act of silent reading triggers inaudible responses from the larynx. I think both subtler and more obvious forms of response are elicited from the whole body: feet, genitalia and hair follicle. Whatever I think I know, I know in my body. This is one of the tenets of the great Bolivian poet Jaime Saenz. I think each poem draws a different response from us based on rhythm (our foot is almost tapping, our head dipping in cadence), image repertoire (our pupils dilating), sound (our emotional connection to a sequence of low vowels, for instance). We are making contact with something extraordinary, at once beyond and within ourselves. In an earlier book, I used the expression *Torn Awake*. The encounter with the poem is formidably physical.

## **“The Deepest Kind of Reading”: An Interview with Idra Novey**

by *Matthew Thorburn*

Over the past few years, Idra Novey has quickly made a name for herself as a poet and translator, as well as a teacher of both of those arts. She is the author of two books of poems, *The Next Country* (Alice James Books, 2008), a recipient of the Kinereth Gensler Award, and *Exit, Civilian* (University of Georgia Press, 2012), a National Poetry Series selection. In addition, she has translated four books: *The Clean Shirt of It* (BOA Editions, 2007), poems by Paulo Henriques Britto; *Birds for a Demolition* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2010), poems by Manoel de Barros; *On Elegance While Sleeping* (Dalkey Archive, 2010), a novel in prose poems by Viscount Lazcano Tegui, shortlisted for the 2010 Best Translated Book Award; and Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* (New Directions, 2012). The recipient of an NEA Literature Fellowship for Translation and a PEN Translation Fund Grant, among other honors, Idra Novey directs Literary Translation at Columbia and teaches in Columbia University's graduate creative writing program. Matthew Thorburn caught up with her to talk via email about the inseparable arts of translating and writing—what Novey calls “the chicken and the egg”—during the fall of 2011.

*How did you come to translate the poems of Paulo Henriques Britto and Manoel de Barros? What drew you to their work?*

I translated a number of Brazilian writers as an editor for the international journal *Rattapallax*, but they were the two poets whose work met Dylan Thomas' definition of poetry for me. Their poems made my toenails twinkle, they made me want to do this or that or nothing. Their work left me so dazzled I wanted to write back to it in my own poetry and not just once, as an experiment, but for the rest of my life.