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**“Who Was Ever Only Themselves?” —  
Precocity, Vulnerability, and Interbeing  
in Forrest Gander’s *Be With***

Abstract

This article aims to read Forrest Gander’s Pulitzer-winning 2018 volume, *Be With*, in the context of Judith Butler’s notion of vulnerability and the Buddhist concept of interbeing, introduced by Thích Nhất Hạnh. Gander’s search for a poetics of listening reaches a new intensity in *Be With*, a poetic lament for a deceased beloved. In this groundbreaking work, grief becomes a means of knowing the world where knowledge is understood “not as recitation but as/ the unhinging somatic event” (Gander 2018, 28). The new way of engaging with the world triggers a subjective reconfiguration that leads to the articulation of a deeply empathic poetics of vulnerability which becomes the basis for telling new stories of human, interspecies, and mineral entanglements.

Keywords

Forrest Gander, Eco-poetics, Mourning, Geology, Precocity, Vulnerability, Interbeing, Entanglement, Deep Time

In a recent interview with Masha Gessen, Judith Butler proposes: “If we were to rethink ourselves as social creatures who are fundamentally dependent upon one another—and there’s no shame, no humiliation, no ‘feminization’ in that—I think that we would treat each other differently because our very conception of self would not be defined by individual self-interest” (Gessen 2020). Butler’s critique of individualism and her insistence on the inseparability of the self and the other that sustains and/or threatens it is bound up

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with her ongoing exploration of the notions of precocity and vulnerability. In her most recent book, *The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethical in the Political*, she notes that individualism “fails to capture the condition of vulnerability” as it focuses on the individual’s right to persistence. The notion that this “right” belongs to an individual is in fact an illusion since the very notion of “right” depends on the existence of a social network that grants or denies it. There is no “I” without a “you,” moreover, “both the “I” and the “you” require a sustaining world” (Butler 2020, 200). What follows is that there can be no individual survival since an individual’s life is entangled with countless other lives, both human and more-than-human, a condition which finds its emphatic confirmation in our current pandemic state. One’s inevitable dependence on multiple others who are in their turn not independent translates into a concept of vulnerability understood as an irreducible condition of embodied existence.

Butler’s articulation of vulnerability and its relation to bodily and environmental situatedness of the subject provides one of the keys for my reading of Gander’s newest work. The other key derives from the notion of interbeing, as developed by the Vietnamese monk, peace activist and poet Thích Nhất Hạnh, based on one of the fundamental Buddhist scriptures, the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (known in English as “Flower Garland Sutra” or “Flower Ornament Scripture”). Even though Butler and Nhất Hạnh represent very different philosophical traditions—Judaism and Buddhism respectively—their writings express similar ethical intuitions, linking vulnerability with compassion where the latter becomes a form of non-violent force. I would like to argue that Gander’s relentlessly experimental poetry works within the field of that force, searching for new ways to express an individual’s entanglement with others and the ethical and spiritual consequences of that entanglement. Among those consequences is an acute awareness of complex material interdependencies between living beings trying to survive “in capitalist ruins,” to borrow the phrase from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing,<sup>1</sup> but also of multi-species alliances that reach beyond the biological. Though the costs of planetary catastrophe are not distributed equally or justly among human

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing chooses a fungi species, matsutake, to reflect on complex inter-species entanglements of Capitalocene, foregrounding the fact that “life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings.” To express that fundamental fact, we need “new ways of telling true stories beyond civilizational first principles” (2015, vii). In my view, Forrest Gander’s poetry provides some of “the new ways of telling” by exploring the spiritual implications of intra—and inter- species entanglements.

and non-human actors, the universality of the damage creates a queer sense of intimacy, or "intimately/ lethal gesture of our common existence" as Gander puts it in the "Epitaph" (2018, 15). To experience the intimacy of the Anthropocene is to form a new kind of knowledge that is inseparable from grief (Head 2016).

Forrest Gander is a poet, fiction writer, essayist, and translator who also holds a degree in geology. His poetry mainly focuses on landscape and the multiple ways in which it shapes human subjectivity and selfhood. A landscape is more than visual, it is a site where different agencies and different temporalities interact, including the deep time of geological Earth. Gander's work articulates an interconnectedness of all beings, phenomena, and processes emphasizing more-than-human agents' role in making the worlds we inhabit. The entanglements that bound us with the rest of the universe are not only material but also, inevitably, emotional and spiritual. For his unique blend of science and spirituality, Gander is sometimes described as an "ecopoet," but as he declares in *Redstart. An Ecological Poetics* (written in collaboration with John Kinsella), what interests him is not so much "nature poetry,' where nature features as a theme," but "poetry that investigates—both thematically and formally—the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception" (Gander, Kinsella 2012, 2). Unlike some other poets and critics who use the term, Gander does not define ecopoetics in terms of a particular kind or genre of poetry, rather, he suggests a territory of poetic and environmental inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

Gander often states in his essayistic prose and interviews that he does not believe poetry has a message to deliver. Rather, poetry *listens*. In "Nymph-Stick Insect: Observations on Poetry, Science and Creation" (2005a), he underscores an important similarity between poetry and science: both need to overcome their assumptions, their accumulated pieces of knowledge and venture into the realm of that which is unknown and perhaps unthinkable. In this endeavor, he suggests, "we may be led best by

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<sup>2</sup> J. Scott Bryson's *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2012) is an example of a prescriptive approach attempting to define „ecopoetry“ as a genre. Bryson proposes a series of criteria that a properly ecological poem must meet, thus indirectly demanding that poets write in a certain way in order to be ecological. Gander distances himself from such a prescriptive approach. In contrast, the work of Jonathan Skinner (2017), Lynn Keller (2017) or Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (2018) looks at the actual poetic practices of the Anthropocene. My own view of ecopoetics in the context of experimental poetry is outlined in *Ekopoetyka/Ecopoética/Ecopoetics* (Fiedorczuk and Beltrán 2020). For the discussion of Forrest Gander's ecopoetics see pages 260-261.

silence, an almost religious gesture of openness.”<sup>3</sup> I would like to investigate this gesture of openness as that is what lies at the heart of Gander’s poetic experiment as it unfolds through multiple encounters between self and other, landscape and eye, sense and non-sense. The poet describes the gesture as “almost religious.” Listening, making room for silence (for periods of time or even permanently) is in fact recommended by many religious traditions. For Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and a student of Asian religions—considered by the Zen master Shunryū Suzuki as one of the few westerners who understood Buddhism—silence was a bridge between East and West. Mystics, regardless of their confessed faith, fall silent under the delightful weight of their unspeakable experience. Monks and lay practitioners of contemplative traditions keep silence to develop self-knowledge, live more harmoniously in their environment, or refrain from adding to the already existing clutter of the world. John Cage, like Merton a student of Suzuki, used silence as a tool that allowed him to meditate on the notion of sound. While not subscribing to any religious faith, Gander’s work, informed by poetic traditions of both West and East, adds its unique, science-informed practice to the contemplative current in modern American poetry.

The gesture of “an almost religious” openness has been present in Gander’s poetry from the start and even though much of his early work foregrounds the sense of vision rather than hearing, the *attitude* is that of listening. In “Bridge & Swimmer” (2005b), a poem written as a response to a photograph by Sally Mann, the enigmatic openness manifests itself as a blemish on the otherwise coherent image:

Our eye goes past the hieroglyphic tree to the swimmer  
 carving a wake in the water. And almost to the railroad bridge  
 from which the swimmer might have dived. Then, as though  
 come to the end of its tether,  
 our gaze returns, pulling towards the blemish  
 on the surface of the print. An L-shaped chemical dribble,  
 it sabotages the scene’s transparency  
 and siphons off its easy appeal.

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<sup>3</sup> The fragment continues: “It is said that the powers of a Noh actor can be assessed simply on the basis of his *kamae*, an immobile position giving the impression of unshakable balance and intense presence. His muscles are not tight, but neither are they relaxed. Consciousness is focused on all parts of the body simultaneously. *Kamae* is a posture open to all eventualities” (Gander 2005a, 7).

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At the same time, the blemish  
joins together the realms  
of seer and swimmer  
in our experience of plunging  
in and out of the image.

Gander 2005b, 55.

The blemish, interpreted by the poet as the letter L, attracts our attention to the surface of the image, to its making, to the very process of representation, laying bare the device, reminding us that the image is the effect of a collaboration between the physical world and our senses (augmented in this case by the lens of a camera), that it is, in other words, a kind of illusion. The image both joins us with the world and separates us from it. In this respect, it might be compared to a semi-permeable membrane of a cell which both defines the cell as a separate entity and serves as its means of communication with the external world.<sup>4</sup> The blemish on the image sabotages the coherence of the picture, unseals it, introduces an enigma. It is a sign that cannot be read, only taken in, even though it is shaped like a letter. Incidentally, the letter L also appears in "A Theological Definition" by George Oppen, a poem describing a room, whose windows open on to the sea.<sup>5</sup> In both poems, the letter L stands for a mysterious message whose unique materiality cannot be separated from its content. As a result, the message can only be intuited—not understood or paraphrased. Poetic intuition respects the enigma of the more-than-human world, makes room for its independent existence and communicativeness, "it has no message to deliver, rather—it listens." In "River and Trees," another poem from the same sequence, the landscape is considered as an active maker of the image:

There,

in the rumpled quiet of the trees, we catch the most  
animate qualities. In the ruffle of leafy detail, we sense the  
respiration of the forest.

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<sup>4</sup> Biosemiotics maintains that life involves a form of psychic functioning from the start. As Wendy Wheeler puts it, "every cell has what we must call a 'cognitive' element" (2014, 79); this elementary cognition depends on the existence of a semi-permeable membrane.

<sup>5</sup> "A small room, the varnished floor / Making an L around the bed, // What is or is true as / Happiness // windows opening on the sea [...]" (Oppen 2002, 203).

And while we absorb this disturbance in a merely apparent  
 repose, our stomach rolls—as when an elevator begins to descend.  
 We detect in the blurred trees a peristaltic contraction. We feel  
 the landscape giving birth to our vision.

Gander, 2005b, 39.

Gander's Pulitzer-winning volume *Be With*, written after the sudden death of his wife, the poet Carolyn D. Wright, continues his eco-poetic explorations but does so in the context of personal loss and mourning. Though the poems grow out of an experience which is so unique as to be incommunicable, Gander manages to articulate a poetics that, even as it cannot express the particularity of loss, makes that very impossibility acutely felt, thus creating a space in which vulnerability can be experienced as a shared condition of embodied existence in our "world of wounds."<sup>6</sup> As Charles Altieri said of the book, it turns grief into a kind of "epistemic instrument" by means of which the poet reconfigures his relationship with the world. In my view, this reconfiguration is best understood as the incorporation of vulnerability which, as proposed by Butler, is a real condition of embodied selfhood. Despite individual bodies' differing access to power and violence, vulnerability is an irreducible aspect of life. In death, the body leaves the realm of the biological and becomes mineral, "rolled round in earth's diurnal course," as Wordsworth famously put it in "A Slumber did My Spirit Steal." Gander's work performs vulnerability through experimental poetics whose aim is to demonstrate the subject's radical dependence on others as well as life's dependence on the geological planet. Grief destabilizes subjectivity, exposing the fiction of self-sufficient ego. Writing out of the experience of subjective destitution Gander makes manifest the bond that connects an individual with other beings and with our shared, rapidly shrinking environments as well as the deep time of the Earth. "When are your poetics, your politics, not implicated in another's?", he asked in *Redstart* (Gander, Kinsella 2012, 1). In *Be With* this implication is felt very deeply, both as a material interpenetration of one's body with other bodies and as a spiritual "being with"—or *interbeing*—with others, both present and absent, across matter, space, and time. The form of knowledge that is produced in the poems is not "a recitation" but "the unhinging somatic event," as it is phrased in "Where Once a Solid House" (Gander 2018, 28).

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<sup>6</sup> It was Aldo Leopold who famously noted that "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds" (1949).

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The first poem in the collection is titled "Son" and begins with the description of a silence which divides family members in their singular, intimate experiences of grief:

It's not a mirror that is draped, but  
what remains unspoken between us. Why

say anything about death, inevitability, how  
a body comes to deploy the myriad worm

as if it were a manageable concept not  
searing exquisite singularity.

Gander 2018, 11.

It is impossible to say anything about death because death is not a concept, surely not when it concerns ourselves or the people that we love. The "searing exquisite singularity" is at odds with the conventionality and iterability of words. But even though the poet's "grief-sounds" occasionally "ricochet outside of language," not speaking is not a possibility either because it is only through words that grief can be shared—and it must be shared for life to continue. Whose life is it? The question of who survives the loss—in other words, of who one becomes through the process of grieving—is one of the central concerns of the book:

[...] You lug a bacterial swarm  
in the crook of your knee, and through my guts

withe helmet parasites. Who was ever only themselves?

Gander 2018, 12.

The implied answer is, of course, no-one. No-one has ever been only themselves because every organism is a hybrid (the human body contains more microbial cells than human cells) but also because of the radical dependence of our bodies on the life-sustaining systems of the earth and the meaning-sustaining bonds with other human and non-human beings. No-one has ever been only themselves because we never are, we always *inter-are*.

Interbeing describes the infinitely complex network of inter-dependencies between all the elements of the universe, what accounts for the notion of independent co-origination, articulated in one of the fundamental Buddhist texts, the so-called *Flower Ornament Scripture* (Avataṃsaka Sūtra) through the metaphor of Indra's Net—a huge, diamond-studded net in which every diamond reflects and is in turn reflected by all the other diamonds. According to the sutra, each existence multiplies and is multiplied by all other existences, just like the diamonds in the net (Cleary, 1993). However appealing that image might be, the truth of interbeing is not always easy for the confused mind to accept because it exposes the illusory character of the individual ego, its precocity, and dependence on others. According to Judith Butler, our interdependency serves as the basis of our ethical obligations to one another: „When we strike at one another, we strike at that very bond”, she says. The existence of the bond is never so obvious as it is in loss, as the poet makes clear in “Epitaph:”

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.*

Gander 2018, 14.

One exists at least in part through being revealed and multiplied in a beloved's eyes as if those eyes were the diamonds of Indra's Net. To lose a beloved is to lose part of oneself—to die a little.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, we also die a little when we lose landscapes, species, the wild.<sup>8</sup> This is made clear for instance

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<sup>7</sup> Gander speaks about this experience, and about poetry as a way of metabolising grief, in an interview for *Przekrój*, pointing out that loss is „a useless word” when it comes to such a fundamental bereavement (Fiedorczyk 2020, [online] <https://przekroj.pl/kultura/strata-slowo-bezuzyteczne-julia-fiedorczyk>).

<sup>8</sup> The question of mourning the losses of the Anthropocene has been tackled by a number of theorists, notably, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands who links environmental melancholia with queer melancholia and postulates the necessity of going through the process of



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in "Evaporación: A Border History," a bi-lingual (Spanish-English) poetic exploration of the violence-infused landscape of the US-Mexican border, depicting layers of geological and human time, of human and more-than human histories. "Who was ever only themselves?" No-one. And yet we tend to pretend that we are, turning away from our own fragility and the fragility of other beings around us, "striking at the very bond" which provides the ground of our ethical obligations to one another and the earth.

Even though loss happens outside of language, "the script" can only be hidden "in utterance" because that is what we, human beings, do—we speak. The line breaks in "Epitaph" reflect the complexity of the interdependence of self and other, speech and silence, presence and absence. The first line—"To write *you*"—could perhaps be read as an expression of a desire that causes these poems to come into existence in the first place. To *write* the lost beloved would be to save at least some part of her from dying. But the second verse—"existed *me*"—silences that desire, introducing a twist in syntax which expresses the fact that existence is not the property of the self but a gift bestowed on the self by the other. The line break after "no" points to absence—"there is no"—a paradoxical absence that can be evoked and thus made partly present, as a trace. The (non)presence of a trace takes the form of a possible (now impossible) future—a sequel to a story that could have had a sequel but now won't. Losing a beloved, we lose ourselves in the future. The future becomes an enigma, a void, an abyss.

The poems in *Be With* do not look away from that abyss. On the contrary, they confront that which is most difficult to accept and yet which must be accepted for a more ecological subjectivity to come into being—the transience of any embodied existence. The title of the volume—borrowed from C. D.'s dedication to the poet<sup>9</sup>—can be read as articulating precisely the kind of ethics Butler has in mind: the ethics of not turning away from that which

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grieving, which requires identifying the lost object in ways evading the contemporary "environmental spectacle" and accounting for the complexity of our connections with the environment" (2010). From a different Angle, Neville Ellis and Ashlee Cunsolo have written about the need to mourn expressed by the Inuit communities in the Inuit Land Claim Settlement Area of Nunatsiavut (Labrador, Canada) and by farmers in Western Australian Wheatbelt (2018). Gander's perspective combines personal grief with environmental grief. The subject-in-mourning becomes especially predisposed to witness to the losses of the Anthropocene because an acute sense of precocity excludes denial.

<sup>9</sup> The poet Carolyn D. Wright, Gander's partner of more than thirty years, died suddenly in her sleep in 2016. Later that year a posthumous volume of her poems was published under the title *ShallCross*, with a dedication: "for Forrest / line, lank and long, / be with" (Wright 2016, 3).

is most painful. *Staying* with the truth of our own and our loved one's mortality, *staying* with personal and environmental loss, *being with* the diminished nature of the Anthropocene is what Gander's poetic project achieves. "The Epitaph" does indeed broaden its reflections on "common existence" to include the non-human environment. While the speaker attempts to defend himself (as we all do)—"behind mixed instrumentalities", he finds it impossible not to notice that "cyanide drifts / from clouds to / the rivers" (2018, 15), that bears in China are "milked for bile" (2018, 18), or that the desert near the Mexican border is studded with "Vietnam-era seismic probes" (2018, 63). All these forms of destruction make up a part of who we now are.

Gander's poetry touches vulnerability through the attitude of listening. In *Redstart. An Ecological Poetics* Gander and Kinsella outlined some characteristics of the kind of poetics that they intended to practice. They included:

1. a dispersal of the ego-centered agency;
2. self-reflexivity ("the poem originates not within the self but the landscape");
3. describing "encounters" rather than permanent states;
4. "a rigorous attention to patterning";
5. a reorientation of objectivity towards intersubjectivity.

The most interesting of these points is attention to patterning, as it reorients the discussion from subject matter to the question of poetics, where ecology is understood as a principle of composition. In a similar vein, John Cage had postulated that art should imitate nature in its *manner of operation* (Jaeger 2013, 53) rather than treating it as a theme. Though both Cage and Gander can be described as ecological artists, their aspiration is neither to represent non-human nature nor to articulate an ideological standpoint, but to explore the patterns of the more-than-human-world. The patterns of nature that interest both Cage and Gander are perfect through a kind of imperfection. A motif that best illustrates this paradox is that of a web. Indra's net from the *Flower Ornament Scripture* and a common spiderweb (often associated with the work of a poet) share certain fundamental qualities, namely—they are dynamic and adaptable.<sup>10</sup> The patterns of nature, in other words,

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<sup>10</sup> Web is also a favoured metaphor in postmodern biology, gradually turning away from the notion of the „tree of life“ which was central to Modern Synthesis. According to Margaret McFall-Ngai, "classic notions of evolutionary descent and reproductive transmission of genes no longer hold," as they are complicated by the discovery of horizontal gene transfer and bacterial phylogeny. Eugene Koonin, a biologist focusing on comparative genomics, proposes phylogenetic diagrams that depict a web of life rather than a tree (McFall-Ngai 2017, 54-57).

are informed by "gesture of openness" resulting from the fact that they must be responsive to the conditions of the environment. As A. R. Ammons noticed at the beginning of the well-known poem "Identity:"

An individual spider web  
identifies a species:  
an order of instinct prevails  
through all accidents of circumstance,  
though possibility is  
high along the peripheries of  
spider  
webs [...]

Ammons 1986, 27.

The poem makes it clear that although just one spiderweb is enough to identify the species of the spider-artist, no two spiderwebs of the same species are ever identical. An individual spiderweb needs to respect the context ("all the accidents of circumstance"). If the pattern was too rigid, the spider would never find the perfect place in which to put the web. On the other hand, if it was too loose, it would no longer be a form, a style identifying the species. For Cage and Gander imitating nature in its manner of operation means looking for forms that do not reflect ego-agency but on the contrary, allow the artist to be freed from the constraints of the ego with its attempts to conquer and control the environment. For Gander, the exploration of natural forms is a way of "being with" the world even when that attitude brings pain. Gander's forms, meticulously made, are also very flexible and adaptable. The line-breaks and, more generally, the setting of stanzas on the page, often reflect some aspects of a poems' meaning. For instance, the poem titled "Archaic Mano," a meditation on an ancient Native American tool for grinding corn, takes the form of an irregular wave, materializing the gestures of a woman performing her daily task of grinding (Gander 2018, 34). The adaptability of poetic form relates to the practice of listening, defined by Gander as poetry's most important task.

Listening and speaking, however, are not mutually exclusive. In "Lecture on nothing" Cage addresses this paradox as follows: "What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking" (Cage 2010, 109).

Could silence be not opposed to speaking but a form of speaking? That clearly is the case for Cage for whom speech and silence do not form a dichotomy. Cage considers silence as a kind of sound (his favorite). Silence, in his view, is not opposed to sound but it is situated on the spectrum of

sound. Cage's continuous exploration of sound, noise, music, and silence can be interpreted as Buddhist teaching (Timmerman 2009). If silence is a form of sound, perhaps, by analogy, it is possible to think of listening as situated on the spectrum of speaking. I would like to propose that listening, as Gander understands it, constitutes an aspect of a conversation. It introduces silence a form of openness, flexibility, and adaptability, "an almost religious gesture" incorporated into speech which, in this poet's practice, is always dialogical.

One of the ways in which Gander practices listening and underscores the dialogical aspect of his poetics is through collaboration with other artists: photographers, scientists, potters, and dancers. Collaboration is a way to contest the rigidity of the individual ego. The last part of *Be With*, titled "Littoral Zone," grows out of a collaboration with the photographer Michael Flomen, whose work may be said to explore time, including the time of the planet Earth moving through space.

For the last 15 years, Flomen has practiced camera-less photography taking inspiration from various forms of water, firefly light, wind, and other natural phenomena. The "Littoral Zone" sequence was made by placing large sheets of photographic paper in streams and then allowing natural sources of light to "develop" images as they move across the sky. The photographs are oddly tantalizing. Though it is impossible to locate the reality that they represent (some of them are evocative of earthly landscapes, some—of outer space) one intuitively feels that they are not abstractions but what they invite the viewers to contemplate is the kind of temporality that is at odds with human perception—it is precisely "Earth's diurnal course" as Wordsworth put it, the time of the planet, of mineral entities and the dead. Gander first started writing in response to Flomen's images following the invitation of an experimental Dutch poetry magazine (alligatorzine). When composing *Be With*, the poet returned to the collaboration trying to find in Flomen's eerie landscapes a setting for a confrontation with his loss, attempting to initiate a kind of contact with the lost beloved. The poems—there are six of them in the cycle corresponding to the number of images—all follow the same pattern. Each consists of three parts. The first part always attempts to describe a given picture. The second part reflects on the conditions of perception. The third is a comment on the speaker's relationship with the deceased. Three of the pieces are titled "Entrance," three "Exit;" their alternation creates a pulsating rhythm. The fluctuation of sense and nonsense, of entering and exiting, of speech and silence—the littoral zone between life and death—evokes breathing. The last "Exit" begins with this description:

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Mobbed phosphorescence, gaseous swarm. And breath beats blazed into an invisible integument. To begin in intimacy on this volcanic tuff. Here to cling (Gander 2018, 89).

Intimacy is one of Gander's favorite terms.<sup>11</sup> It relates to life, with the vulnerability of living bodies, here opposed to the dead rock of volcanic tuff. Life clings to rock like interpretation, a desire for meaning, clings to silence. The second part of the poem links perception and vulnerability:

*For though we have no criterion for how to see and are not sure what we are seeing, we are plunged into sensation. As into a novel ache. But what ever has dispassionate description delivered?*

Gander's poetry encounters the wound of personal loss, as well as the "novel ache" of a sensation, experienced deeply, without filters. It does not dilute despair with attempts at consolation. It stays with the absence—it listens to the silence of absence, registering the decomposition and recomposition of self in response to loss. It stays in the moment of subjective destitution and dwells in that impossible place. As a poetic practice of vulnerability, *Be With* materializes an ethical choice—*not* to be only oneself.

Even though Gander's recent book is more personal than his previous work and focuses on a human loss, his attention remains tuned in to the more-than-human world: the Earth with its geological layers and its deep time, a spider in the corner of a room, multiple species of plants and animals, and whole galaxies. The vulnerability exposed by the poems makes it impossible to repress the huge loss we are all suffering at present—the loss of life in the sixth great extinction event. If the question that comes to the mind of one who has lost a beloved is "who am I without you?", Gander's work forces the reader to ask this question of all of us who are now losing a million fellow species predicted to become extinct in the next decades.

To conclude, let us return to Butler once again: "Our interdependency serves as the basis of our ethical obligations to one another. When we strike at one another, we strike at that very bond." Pain makes that bond more acutely felt. For Gander, it becomes an instrument, a means to remain responsible. The last "Exit," and the whole book, ends with the heart-breaking stanza:

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<sup>11</sup> It is also a term often used by Zen practitioners of the Soto school, initiated by Dōgen (1200-1253), to describe the relationship with the world established through practice (Katagiri 2007). Intimacy, as it appears in Gander's writing, is both erotic and related to a kind of enlightenment, that is to say, to a direct experience of "unimpededness and interpenetration" (Cage 1961, 46).

Your impact marks  
 through the resin  
 of my mind. Declension,  
 a focal spasm. When your  
 eyelids release their tension,  
 nocturnal pods, in-  
 vertebrate and  
 membranous, surge  
 into my dreams. From  
 afar; do you see me now  
 briefly here in this phantasmic  
 standoff riding  
 pain's whirlforms?

The poetry of this fragment evokes entanglements of various kinds of materiality and mind, the pain, too, forming patterns. A “whirlform” is a paradoxical form, consisting in part of fire and ashes and in part of the wind. It comes into existence in the process of decomposition of other material forms. The fundamental question in *Be With* is the question dictated by grief, and it concerns the identity of the bereaved. As such, it requires such forms that can address the underlying emptiness of all identities, conceptualized by Buddhist thinking as interdependent co-origination.<sup>12</sup> That central question takes us outside of language, where all we can do is become open to the terrifying and beautiful transience of the world—and ourselves in it. In this wonderful and terrible openness, we listen and precariously live. We become who we are with our diminished, wounded world, with other humans, non-humans, and ghosts. The non-violent force of connection through shared pain sets all the jewels of Indra's net momentarily aglow.

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<sup>12</sup> In the words of *Flower Ornament Scripture*: “He who realises that the nature of things is without solidity / Appears in all the bounces lands of the ten directions: / Expounding the inconceivability of the real of buddhahood, / He causes all to return to the ocean of liberation” (Cleary 1993, 68).

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