

PROFILES OCTOBER 20, 2008 ISSUE

## ZEN MASTER

*Gary Snyder and the art of life.*

By Dana Goodyear

Gary Snyder, the Zen poet, lives on a hundred backcountry acres in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, meditates mornings, and thanks his food before he eats it, clapping his hands together and saying “*Itadakimasu*,” which is Japanese for “Thank you very much.” He likes a boilermaker at dinnertime (a shot of bourbon and a tall glass of beer) and, on occasion, the bullfrogs from his pond. “I follow the ‘Joy of Cooking,’” he says. “You’ve got to skin them and brine them overnight. She recommends rolling them in bread crumbs and frying them.” He finds that vulture feathers make the best pens for calligraphy, and collects them when he hikes. Some nights, he takes a blanket and a thermos of *sake* and a star map, walks along a gravel riverbed not far from his house to a spot among the mounded diggings left by the gold-mining ventures of the past two centuries, and, by the light of a red torch, works on the constellations.

Snyder, who is seventy-eight, has written nineteen books of poems and essays that are engaged with watersheds, geology, logging, backpacking, ethno-poetics, Native American oral storytelling, communal living, sex, coyotes, bears, Tibetan deities, Chinese landscape painting, Japanese Noh drama, and the intimacies of family life. His reach extends far beyond the usual small audience for poetry; “*Turtle Island*,” a collection of poems that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975, has sold a hundred thousand copies. (“*Turtle Island swims / in the ocean-sky swirl-void / biting its tail while the worlds go / on-and-off / winking.*”) He is, notably, a poet of the Pacific Rim. He told me, “I think of my territory as that which I have walked in person and know the weather at a given time of year, know a lot of the critters, and know a lot of the people. That would be from around Baja up to Alaska, through the Aleutian Islands, then pick up again in Hokkaido, down Japan and into Taiwan and the south coast of China, and the Pacific, which I know pretty well, having sailed it half a dozen times by a nice slow boat going fourteen knots, day and night.” But if you met him in a bar in Japan or China or Korea, and asked him what he did, he’d probably say, “I do my best as a teacher and I’m kind of a clumsy farmer.” (He taught in the English department at the University of California at Davis from 1986 until 2001, and has a small orchard.) The last book he wants to write, he says, is a

“personal dharma memoir,” a chronicle of Buddhism in the late twentieth century. “Like the rock climbers say, having fun doesn’t mean you have to have fun,” he says. “Being a Buddhist doesn’t necessarily mean you have to be a good Buddhist.”

A few months ago, looking over the wine list in a fine restaurant in nearby Nevada City, Snyder said, “I’ve got a twenty-five-year-old Cab I’m saving for venison—for when we get a deer again, on the road. In the winter season, I always drive with a giant black garbage bag in the car and a hunting knife or two.” He pulled out a thick-bladed knife and laid it on the table. An appetizer of goat-cheese cakes, dotted with arugula pesto, kalamata tapenade, and roasted red peppers and truffle oil, arrived. Snyder lifted the knife and cut the cakes precisely in two. Later, when he got up from the table for a moment, a young, heavily lipsticked waitress came over and said excitedly, “He’s one of my absolute heroes.”

Snyder is shortish and solid and exudes physical confidence. A boy of the Pacific Northwest—born in San Francisco, brought up outside Seattle—he climbed Mt. St. Helens at fifteen; as a young man, he worked in Indian logging camps and fire-lookout cabins in the wilderness and on a trail crew in the Sierra Nevada, where he wrote the first poems that he wanted to keep. He wears a beard and has a turquoise stud in his left ear—it’s been pierced since 1950—and has gray-green eyes that disappear into the planes of his face, like puddles in a dry season. One of his incisors is capped in gold, which gives him the rascally look of an old mountain man when he smiles. When I repeated the waitress’s remark, he said, “You shouldn’t have told me that.”

**M**asa Uehara, Snyder’s wife, sits on a rock—pretty, pregnant, her hair covered with a bandanna, wearing a long-sleeved shirt and jeans. The green Yuba River swirls around her. Snyder is in the water, naked, hoisting a naked baby boy (their first son, Kai) over his shoulder. The photograph ran as a centerfold in *Look* in 1969, with a caption that read, “Author Gary Snyder and family, in the Sierras, look forward to a new Neolithic age that will combine the love of nature, sex and life based on mythical truths.”

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Snyder was just back from Japan, having spent much of the late fifties and the sixties in Kyoto, undergoing formal training as a Zen monk. He had left the West Coast in the spring of 1956, several months after participating in what to many remains the defining poetic event of the previous half century: the Six Gallery reading in San Francisco, at which Allen Ginsberg first read “Howl” in public, while Jack Kerouac shouted, “Go! Go! Go!” Snyder read “A Berry Feast,” an ode in praise of Coyote, a trickster figure from Native American myth: “Coyote the Nasty, the fat / Puppy that abused himself, the ugly gambler, / Bringer of goodies.” The poem, which traces the destruction of forests to the building of the suburban house—“a box to catch the biped in”—is infused with the Buddhist idea of impermanence. It forecasts a time of “People gone, death no disaster,” and ends with Coyote surveying a depopulated city where resilient nature still thrives —“Dead city in dry summer, / Where berries grow.”

Kenneth Rexroth—the m.c. of the Six Gallery reading and a renowned poet, critic, and translator—was the presiding elder of the city’s poetry scene, gathering young disciples around him for Friday-night instruction. Snyder had studied Native American oral traditions in the anthropology department at Reed College, and when he arrived in Berkeley to pursue graduate work in East Asian studies a friend took him to Rexroth’s house. They hit it off right away. Snyder was translating the poems of the T’ang-dynasty mountain hermit Han Shan—an exquisitely terse and funny suite later published as “Cold Mountain Poems”—and studying *sumi* painting with the artist Chiura Obata. The conversations at Rexroth’s ranged from discussions of Pound and Williams, both of whom he knew, to “The Tale of Genji” and the perfidies of Trotsky. “Rexroth was a great mentor,” Snyder told me. “He was a polymath, universalist, critical thinker, and he declared himself an anarcho-pacifist.”

Snyder’s politics were similarly radical. He had grown up poor in Stumpland—logged-out country that backed up onto second-growth woods, in what is now a suburb of Seattle. His grandfather was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies); his father, a sometime dairy farmer, was a union organizer on the Grand Coulee Dam project, and hosted meetings for a local league of unemployed workers, which was labelled a Communist front. At eighteen, Snyder joined the far-left Marine Cooks and Stewards union, and shipped out to the Caribbean for a summer.

Snyder dressed in thrift-store clothing and was proud of his working-class sympathies and his wilderness experience. Jack Spicer, another poet in Rexroth’s circle, called him the Boy Scout. The day after meeting Snyder, Ginsberg described him in a letter as a

“laconist, but warmhearted, nice looking with a little beard, thin, blond, rides a bicycle in Berkeley in red corduroy & levis & hungup on indians (ex-anthropologist student from some indian hometown) and writes well, his sideline besides zen which is apparently calm scholarly & serious with him.” Kerouac—whose manuscript “On the Road,” about his travels with the feckless Neal Cassady, had just been accepted by Viking when he met Snyder, in 1955—was sufficiently smitten to write a novel based on their friendship.

In “The Dharma Bums,” Japhy Ryder, a sprightly, cocksure poet with a background and a set of interests striking similar to Snyder’s, introduces the narrator, Ray Smith, to Zen Buddhism and mountaineering. The story revolves around an expedition led by Ryder to the peak of Yosemite’s Matterhorn, a trip that Snyder and Kerouac made together in the fall of 1955. Kerouac’s exposure to Snyder’s self-discipline and know-how inspired more than literary productivity: he decided to become a fire lookout himself, and spent a summer on Desolation Peak, in the North Cascades, near where Snyder had worked several years before. Describing Snyder’s deep effect on the Beats, the poet and playwright Michael McClure said, “Just look at Kerouac. He didn’t go back on Route 66, hugging Neal and weeping big sad tears. He climbed a mountain.”

In the novel, Alvah Goldbook (a character based on Allen Ginsberg) says of Ryder, “He’s really the wildest craziest sharpest cat we’ve ever met. And what I love about him is he’s the big hero of the West Coast. . . . Besides all the background he has, in Oriental scholarship, Pound, taking peyote and seeing visions, his mountainclimbing and bhikkuing, wow, Japhy Ryder is a great new hero of American culture.” Ryder was also something of a satyr, and, in a memorable scene, demonstrates with a limber, gray-eyed woman named Princess the Tibetan cross-legged sexual position *yabyum*. (Princess is obliging, and everyone has a go.) Later, Kerouac wrote to Snyder about signing a release form. “As you see, I’ve got you down pretty accurate but I made some changes in your personal life, girlfriends, etc. . . . to throw off the scent.”

“The Dharma Bums,” which was published in 1958, incited a “Rucksack Revolution” and fed a craze for Zen. It made Snyder famous, but he was not particularly grateful. “Since Dharma Bums came out I feel that you’ve been silent and disappointed about me,” Kerouac wrote to him. “I dont think the book was as bad as you think; when you look at it again in future years, when the world will’ve gotten worster, you’ll look back and appreciate the job I did on ‘you’ and on Dharma Bumism.” Snyder says now that although Kerouac’s description of the climbing trip was essentially accurate, the rest grew out of his friend’s imagination. “The sex scene in ‘The Dharma Bums’ was the result of me describing for Jack Kerouac Tantric sex in Tibetan Buddhism,” he told me. “Jack was fascinated by that. I always say, ‘Give the guy credit!’ He could write a novel. He wasn’t just always a journalist.” That point was a shade too subtle for the rest of the world. In

1960, when Snyder got married in Kyoto to Joanne Kyger, an American poet whom he had met in North Beach, the display type in one newspaper notice read, “Zen Poet Wed / Kerouac Character / SF’s Gary Snyder Married in Japan.” (They broke up a few years later, though they remain friends, and in 1967 he married Uehara, a Japanese graduate student.)

Snyder’s years in Japan were consumed with koan study. For his first, which took him a year and a half to answer, he was instructed to show what his face looked like before his parents met. He took the Buddhist name Chofu and early on fell in with some *yamabushi*—followers of an ancient folk religion that centers on mountaineering—who took him climbing. Snyder says, “They said, ‘O.K., we’re going to see if you are one of us.’ They told me to climb up a five-hundred-foot vertical rock pitch while chanting the Heart Sutra. Luckily, I knew the Heart Sutra, so that was O.K. Then they said, ‘Now we’re going to initiate you.’ They tied a rope around my ankles and hung me over a cliff and said, ‘We’ll drop you if you don’t tell the truth,’ and they started asking me questions. After that was over, they took me to a mountain temple with a dirt floor—it was small and dark and all smoky with incense—and we blew the conch for hours. I have some very wonderful overalls from them.”

As a student of Zen, Snyder lived an existence that was austere, and sometimes humorless. Once, after he had finished a week of intensive meditation, Kyger wrote in her journal, “Gary came home last Tuesday after the sesshin and said he had passed his koan plus 3 auxilliary ones. He refused to contract verbs—saying I will do it, instead of I’ll do it etc.” When they went to India with Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, Kyger told me recently, she coveted a “beggar’s necklace” made of dozens of semiprecious stones—red, orange, green, creamy, amber-colored. Snyder let her buy it only after she had memorized the name of each one.

In 1959, Snyder published “Riprap,” a group of short, tough poems composed, he wrote, to the rhythms of physical labor, and informed by his work laying cobblestones on the granite slab of the Sierra as part of a trail crew. The language itself is stony, a monosyllabic, Anglo-Saxon workingman’s vocabulary that reverberates when struck: “Lay down these words / Before your mind like rocks. / placed solid, by hands / In choice of place, set / Before the body of the mind / in space and time: / Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall / riprap of things.”

“I felt absolutely at home with the colloquial voice and the honest-to-god, honest-to-earth elemental content—the things of the poems,” Seamus Heaney, the Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet, said about his initial encounter with Snyder’s poems. “There is something unleavened about that first book. The elements of the poems are trustworthy,

and you feel there's a real coherence in the sensibility that's transmitting them to you. And, in the primal, mythic-poetry sense, he's back on the Hill of Parnassus."

In the middle of June, Snyder visited New York for a long weekend. With his younger son, Gen, who is thirty-eight, he went twice to the Met. They looked at rare pre-Columbian feather-working, Himalayan art, and samurai gear, and visited an exhibit on Chinese painting and calligraphy. "For one who knows the nature of the East Asian brush and what's possible, it was somewhat elementary, but very useful for the usual viewer," he wrote to me later.

On the Saturday of the trip, wearing jeans, a vest, and a long skull-and-bead necklace—a symbol of impermanence that he picked up at a Buddhist supply shop in Kyoto—Snyder reported to the Asia Society, on the Upper East Side, for a symposium devoted to his travels through India with Kyger, Ginsberg, and Orlovsky. "One of the most significant and transformative things for me was discovering the depth of time in the mythologies of India," Snyder told the audience. "That we live in a universe of millions of universes that has gone through millions and millions of years, kalpa after kalpa, aeon after aeon." Then he told a story about how he once blew the mind of Francis Crick, over lunch, when he explained to him that the Indian belief in reincarnation demonstrated an understanding of deep space and the history of the universe.

Performance is an essential part of Snyder's poetry; it was the Six Gallery reading, he says, that first awakened him to the possibility of an oral poetry in America. "It made us realize that poetry was a social experience, more like storytelling," he says. Reading aloud is crucial to his process; he improvises, makes substitutions, supplies glosses on difficult words. Sometimes he sings a poem, or gestures with his hands, like a conductor before an orchestra. In India, he attended an all-night poetry reading, and several years ago he tried one himself, with dancers, musicians, and costumes. At the Asia Society, he was brief, reading one ten-minute poem: "An Offering for Tara"—the Buddhist goddess of compassion. The poem is one of his more esoteric works, a multivoiced, choral setting, but he didn't worry about comprehensibility. He says, "When people tell me they don't understand a poem, I say, 'Fine, just listen to it. The exposure to it is part of its power. Don't vex yourself with an intellectual understanding of it.' We don't expect to understand graphic art that way." Snyder read with his heels clicked together in back, a dancer in first position. He leaned into the stresses as if boosted by an updraft, making of each word a surprising curiosity. When he got to a Sanskrit prayer, "*Om tare tuttare ture swaha tare tare tare*," he chanted it—resonant, rapid, low. The audience was suffused with happy, baffled pleasure and good vibes.

Snyder sat down in the audience. Ed Sanders, of the Fugs, sang a reedy song to Ginsberg, “He was one of me *hee-eeee-roes*.” There was talk of “Omic laryngitis” and the Human Be-In, which Snyder opened by blowing on a conch. Ginsberg’s old harmonium was trotted out. Meanwhile, Snyder got to work. He put on a pair of glasses, and took a small notebook from the front pocket of his shirt. He paged through it, periodically jotting something down. Every once in a while, at the end of a number, he’d look up, remove his glasses and rub his eyes, and then resume note-taking.

“I live in the present. That’s why I get things done in the present,” Snyder told me later, explaining his impatience at being called a Beat writer. “I’m not a Beat in a literary sense,” he said. “I’m a historical part of that circle of friends, and I was part of the early sociological and cultural effect of it. My work did not fit with the critics’ and the media’s idea of Beat writing, ever. We were all so different from each other, all these unique cases. That makes it really kind of untidy.” Another time, he said, “Why I distanced myself from the Beats? Allen and I had that out even when we were in our twenties. We had mutual respect, and mutual disagreement. I am very symptomatic of the West Coast, and the West Coast is a slightly different culture from the rest of the country.”

**K**itkitdizze, named for a local plant, is Snyder’s place. It is on the San Juan Ridge, in the Yuba River watershed. “My pond runs right past San Francisco,” he says. “It goes into the creek downhill, from there into the South Yuba, then to the Feather, the Sacramento, through the delta to San Francisco Bay, and on out to the Pacific.”

Snyder bought the land in the mid-sixties, with Allen Ginsberg and Richard Baker, then the president of the San Francisco Zen Center. (Snyder bought them out, and Gen now lives in Bedrock Mortar, the twenty-by-twenty cabin that Ginsberg built, inscribing “HARE KRISHNA HARE KRISHNA JAI GURU RAMA OM HUM” on its foundation.) Snyder’s house is low-browed, and roofed in red tiles; the stain is grayish to match the woods around it, and the trim is the orange-red of manzanita bark. (He took a branch to a paint store and had the supplier mix the shade accordingly.) The floor in the kitchen is made from sandstone that Snyder harvested from California’s White Mountains, at nine thousand feet. “The job is very amateurish, not as smooth as it could be,” he said when I visited him there in late June. “It’s the first stone floor I ever laid.” The center of the house, now occupied by a dining-room table stacked with books and periodicals, was once an open fire pit, over which a huge kettle would hang, suspended from a hook that Snyder had carved out of an oak crotch that he found. A gable covers the old smoke hole.

In 1969, Snyder sought ten volunteers to help him build a home that was to be part Japanese farmhouse, part Indian lodge. They came—some from Berkeley, some from

Antioch College—in the summer of 1970, and, with Snyder and Uehara, built the house in a few months, using ponderosa pines from within three hundred feet of the site to frame, and local incense cedar for siding. The foundation stones came from the middle fork of the Yuba River. There was no electricity (Kitkitdizze is still off the grid, and nowadays runs on solar and generators), so they felled the trees with a two-man handsaw. Days were hot and nakedness prevailed.

Many of Snyder's poems come straight from his life. The topless women carpenters inspired "Alabaster," published in a mid-eighties collection, "Left Out in the Rain":

Tanya's bosom like a drawn bow

Holly like a load of flowers

Ann's gracious fruits

Masa brown and slimming down

from milky dark-veined weight

and, slighter than the rest,

But strongly dappled in the

weltering-shady mind,

Eddie's alabaster breasts.

Many of the volunteers—Holly and Tanya among them—decided to stay on San Juan Ridge. Some pooled their resources and bought the adjacent property, and this community became Snyder's testing ground for the ideas he was beginning to explore in print. In "Four Changes," a widely circulated environmental treatise he published in 1969 and made available for free, he warned of the dangers of overpopulation, pollution, and consumption—particularly of fossil fuels. Some of his ideas seem implausible now—polyandrous marriages as a remedy for overpopulation, walking the Coast Range as a way to get from San Francisco to L.A.—while others are straight out of the post-Gore environmental consciousness: bring your own bags to the grocery store, use natural fertilizer, recycle, carpool. He says, "It is not particularly gratifying to have been right."

"Gary was in the thick of Bay Area green activism at a time when it was being invented," Stewart Brand, the publisher of the "Whole Earth Catalogue" and one of many people who published "Four Changes," told me. According to Snyder's old friend Jack Shoemaker, of Counterpoint, his publisher since the early eighties, " 'Four Changes' really elevated him to be an environmental leader of the counterculture. It wasn't a hippie-



dippy, feather-wearing poem. It was a manifesto, and the national environmental movement had to take it seriously.” Snyder began to be recognized as a public intellectual, lecturing at universities and appearing at environmental conferences, including the historic United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in 1972. Shoemaker said, “The environmental movement needed a celebrity-like person, someone charismatic. The others were dull as paste. They needed someone attractive, and Gary understood something about his own attractiveness. He had a sense of his life as style, long before we had that term ‘life style.’”

Informed by the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa*, or non-harming, and also by Native American religious thought, Snyder argues that humans must take the nonhuman elements of the planet into account, not for our sakes but for theirs. Using *Kitkitdizze* as a prototype, he encourages others to inhabit more fully the places they live—settle down, get to know the neighbors (including, in his conception, the plants and animals), join the school board and the watershed council, and defend the local resources and way of life. Place, he writes, should be defined by natural indicators, like rivers and the flora and fauna they support. “The watershed is the first and last nation whose boundaries, though subtly shifting, are unarguable,” he wrote in an essay in the early nineties. “If public lands come under greater pressure to be opened for exploitation and use in the twenty-first century, it will be the local people, the watershed people, who will prove to be the last and possibly most effective line of defense.” Bill McKibben, writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 1991, asserted that “Snyder has emerged as perhaps the most eloquent American champion of what is called ‘bioregionalism,’ the idea that political boundaries should reflect the land we live on, and that decisions within those boundaries should respect that land.” He went on, “The long-held aesthetic arguments for a simpler life are suddenly being seen to coincide neatly with the hard-headed calculations of the atmospheric chemists. Snyder is among the first to sense this conjunction.” Snyder’s take on climate change is, however, typically independent. Humans may be in for some difficult times, but nature will take care of itself, he says. Accept impermanence.

In the early days, Snyder and his family hand-pumped their water, and lived by kerosene and firelight. In summer, they cooked outside and ate in an open-sided dining room. Uehara made her first birthday cake, for Kai, in a Dutch oven, over campfire coals. And, readers of “Turtle Island” know, they all bathed together in a sauna, an everyday experience that, in “The Bath,” Snyder transforms into a meditation on the sexual interconnectedness of father, mother, and child. (When the boys were old enough to care, they banned him from reading the poem on the West Coast.)

Sweating and panting in the stove-  
steam

hot-stone

cedar-planking wooden bucket

water-splashing

kerosene lantern-flicker wind-in-  
the-pines

out

sierra forest ridges night—

Masa comes in, letting fresh cool  
air

sweep down from the door

a deep sweet breath

And she tips him over gripping  
neatly, one

knee down

her hair falling hiding one whole  
side of

shoulder, breast, and belly,

Washes deftly Kai's head-hair

as he gets mad and yells—

The body of my lady, the winding  
valley

spine,

the space between the thighs I  
reach

through,

cup her curving vulva arch and  
hold it

from behind,

a soapy tickle    a hand of grail

The gates of Awe

That open back a turning double-  
mirror

world of

wombs in wombs, in rings,

that start in music,

*is this our body?*

The sauna still stands. Snyder told me that it can fit five or six comfortably, though it has sometimes held many more. Inside is a shelf of special objects—a piece of white brain coral, a perfectly round stone, and a little brass figurine of a man and a woman in *yabyum*. “But it’s much too hot in here to do anything like that,” he said. “You’d have a heart attack!”

Uehara and Snyder divorced in 1990; she is remarried, and lives on a piece of land next door. “Gary was so social—still is,” she told me. “Out of seven days, maybe five of them we had someone for dinner. A natural, organic poetry salon was constantly happening in our living room. Ferlinghetti came, Ginsberg came, McClure, Lew Welch”—a poet Snyder had known since Reed. “They were in and out all the time. Gary would invite the neighbors who were interested in their ideas. I was doing all the cooking, with two little kids in diapers.” Snyder, she said, did the dishes.

In addition to the welcome guests, there was a stream of uninvited and, according to Uehara, ill-mannered hippies, who would arrive expecting to be edified and fed. Joanne Kyger told me, “There were an awful lot of Gary Snyder wannabes. His style of writing was very appealing in the seventies to young men looking for a poetic identity. He was a good example of a greened-out, dropout way to live.” The world of Kitkitdizze also attracted a more sophisticated type of seeker and scenester. “Gary became one of those figures, one of those cultural touchstones,” Shoemaker said. Robert Crumb, the cartoonist, visited with his band, and played a gig at the North San Juan Volunteer Fire Department Hall. The actor and writer Peter Coyote, who was living on a commune in West Marin with some of the Diggers, an anarchist group from Haight-Ashbury, met Snyder through Lew Welch and became a regular. “I began to study Gary,” Coyote told me. “I looked carefully at his house, at the level of thought that went into it. It’s so elegant, and has everything he needs without being expensive.” Following Snyder’s example, Coyote took up the practice of Zen. The only person I heard about who did not

relish going to Kitkitdizze was James Laughlin, the founder of New Directions, who published Snyder from the sixties through the eighties. Laughlin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti told me, was “a total Ivy League gentleman,” afraid to sit cross-legged on the floor in his wingtip cordovan shoes, much less take the shoes off, in compliance with the household’s Japanese rules.

In the early eighties, when Snyder built Ring of Bone, a beautiful *zendo* in the meadow behind his house, Jerry Brown, then the governor of California, came to meditate, and one time brought Snyder a sculpture of Fudo—the ferocious, sword-bearing, lariat-swinging deity. (“He’s a mountain figure,” Snyder says. “A kind of tattered, workingman’s Buddha. He’s always been one of my allies.”)

Brown visited Kitkitdizze occasionally in the seventies and eighties—it was just two hours from Sacramento—and appointed Snyder the first chairman of a new artist-run state arts commission. Brown liked the literary conversation—Snyder’s easy, learned references to Chinese and Japanese poetry—and valued their discussions of Zen and ecology. He even bought a parcel of land near the ridge. “What I really appreciated particularly about Gary was his knowledge of the land—the flora and fauna and what it could be,” Brown told me. “It was a perspective outside the hustle of political and business life. I like what he does. It’s very concrete. He knows how to sharpen an axe, and all those things you don’t learn in the city, or in school.” Snyder’s relationship with Brown represents the most classically Chinese moment in his career, and one that is extremely rare in America: the poet as a servant of the state. He got a few poems out of it, including one, collected in “Axe Handles” (1983), that describes how, after he and the Governor “spoke of farming, / of oil, and what would happen to the cars,” he took out a bow and arrow, and they started shooting at straw bales near the barn.

One day, visiting Snyder at Kitkitdizze, I met a young man who was working in the garden, Matthew O’Malley, from Sandwich, Massachusetts. He had moved to the ridge two years before, drawn to the community that has grown up around Snyder. “There’s a kind of lore about the reinhabitory culture there,” he told me a few weeks later, off the ridge. “I wanted to see if I could become part of it.” In college, at Villanova, he and his friends had a kind of philosophers’ circle where they read Snyder’s poems—“No one’s teaching that stuff in the Northeast!”—sat in meditation, drank red wine, wrote, pondered the idea of blue-collar poetry, and went backpacking together. When he graduated, he went to work on a trail crew. “Gary’s kind of an exemplar,” he said. “It’s not just the poems. A lot of it is how he’s lived his life.”

O’Malley has reddish-brown hair and a beard, wears little glasses, and keeps a notebook and a pencil tucked into the front pocket of a button-down shirt. His manner is serious;

he is an elderly twenty-six. He said he was studying at Ring of Bone and living in a school bus on China Flats, just below Uehara's house. He had got solar panels but hadn't hooked them up. "I have kerosene and candles," he said—enough light to read and write poems by. "It works. So many people up there were on kerosene for years."

**D**riving, Snyder dictates poems into a little tape recorder, along with their punctuation—double indent, space, comma, point. To him, the written texts of poems are musical scores; on the page their forms are fluid, loose, irregular. Blocks of indented lines indicate a shift in voice, and often a slight conceptual change, as when, Snyder says, "You're telling two closely related stories." White space in the middle of the line is for a caesura more substantial than a comma or a semicolon; white space between stanzas allows time to elapse. "His reasons are never visual, but arranging the line as he does is a way of announcing, 'This is less regimented, more dance-like,'" Robert Hass, who won this year's Pulitzer Prize for poetry, said. "Letting the poem breathe is another way of putting it."

Snyder's rhythms are accentual; like Pound, he hears stresses rather than stresses and syllables, as metrical poets do. To describe his mode as lyric does not quite capture it. Even Snyder's most intimate poems can have an impersonal quality: the "I," sometimes suppressed, is unobtrusive—a vehicle for exploring the world, not a world in itself. Snyder sees his poems as "mytho-poetic, magical-lyrical-oral, in a line from Blake." Seamus Heaney said, "Snyder is a poet of mind. The bare-handed encounter with the actual does not preclude a clearheaded vision of what's called for." The poems do feel instructional; the poet Brenda Hillman thinks of Snyder's body of work as a "Georgics." Reading him, you encounter a massive, assimilating intelligence, with a startling command of natural and human history. He possesses a scholar's exactitude, and occasionally a scholar's pedantry and attraction to the arcane fact—providing the Japanese translation of "boar meat" or positing the Finno-Ugric origins of the word "hemp." "It's a professorial thing to do," he says. "I realize that it's not going to be of use to a great number of people. However, it's part of the history of language, and it enriches how we understand language."

The poet Thom Gunn, in an admiring review of Snyder for the BBC's *The Listener*, remarked that the poems were "deceptively simple." Even an apparently obvious, diaristic poem like "Burning the Small Dead," from "The Back Country"—a volume, published in 1968, that prompted the *Partisan Review* to call Snyder's work "monotonous, flat and superficial"—is rich in information. The entire poem reads:

Burning the small dead

branches

broke from beneath  
 thick spreading  
 whitebark pine.  
 a hundred summers  
 snowmelt      rock      and air  
 hiss in a twisted bough.  
 sierra granite;  
 Mt. Ritter—  
 black rock twice as old.  
 Deneb, Altair  
 windy fire

The poem is an evocation of the expanse of geological time, and an exploration of the forces that shape the landscape. Its observations, so lightly offered, are accurate. Hass said, “Whitebark pine is a little scrubby pine that only appears at the tree line. If you know mountains, you know you’re probably at ten thousand feet. He’s picked off the dead branches and is making a fire, and he thinks about its life span. Then, thinking about things that burn, he says ‘sierra granite’—granite is twice-burned rock, forged out of fire. Looking south from the gray granite of Yosemite, you see a chocolate-colored rock—‘Mt. Ritter / black rock twice as old’—and it *is* twice as old. In summertime, you locate yourself by the summer triangle, two points of which are the stars Deneb and Altair. He goes from looking at the little fire he’s made to thinking about fire that forged the granite, to the stars, and says what Buddhists say: everything is burning.” I’d add that Vega, the third point in the summer triangle, is a star that, in Yosemite, appears to be directly overhead, making the “windy fire” its imaginative as well as its syntactic stand-in.

Although in recent years Snyder’s prose has been discovered by the emerging discipline of eco-literature—Lawrence Buell, a professor at Harvard, is one prominent critic in the field who teaches him—Snyder says that there has been, about his poetry, “a lot of silence from some quarters” of the literary establishment. “There are people who just don’t want to deal with it,” he says. “More in the East than in the West. A certain percentage of my poetry requires for a scholar to become more acquainted with Native American and East Asian thinking. It is considered somewhat marginal to mainstream America. Fair enough. The poetics itself is a little marginal, too, in that I have consciously been more

aware of the oral tradition than other poets.” Another problem is that he is sometimes categorized as a nature poet—“the kiss of death, actually.” He says, “Being called a nature poet is like being called a woman poet, as if it were a lower grade of writing, and one based in romanticism. I am a poet who has preferred not to distinguish in poetry between nature and humanity. Just like I would argue as a bioregionalist that all of these beings are part of my community, and I would like to be able to say hello to each of them.” But Snyder does not stand completely outside the mainstream poetry world: he is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and this year won the Ruth Lilly prize from the Poetry Foundation, one of several prestigious awards he has received.

Snyder’s most complex and difficult work is “Mountains and Rivers Without End,” a poem cycle that absorbed him from 1956 until 1996, and whose title is taken from a category of Chinese landscape painting. “I’ve done a lot of short lyric poems and those are widely read, but my real challenge and what really interests me is the long narrative poem,” he told me. “The burden of information and story it can carry is huge. These poems can be about a whole tribe or clan or world.” The poem—which was published in 1997 and moves through terrains as varied as the Northwestern highway 99, New York City, and Kathmandu, invoking Buddhas, telling old folk stories, explaining geo-history, tracing rivers, meeting talking animals—is structured, to some extent, like a Noh play. “It follows *jo-ha-kyu*,” Snyder said. “*Jo* means ‘serene introduction.’ *Ha* means ‘extended and detailed narrative information.’ *Kyu* means ‘an ending which is surprisingly sudden.’ It’s much more interesting than the Aristotelian model of a beginning, middle, and end. The Japanese say, ‘Listen to the birdsong, it has a *jo*, a *ha*, and a *kyu*.’ To them it’s completely natural.”

“Mountains and Rivers” is Snyder’s most sustained effort at representing a bioregional world view. In an accompanying “making of” essay, he writes that the poem began to take shape when he arrived in Japan for the first time. “In Kyoto I lived in the Rinzaï Zen temple compound of Shokoku-ji. I immediately entered the local hilly forests, found the trails and shrines, and paid my respects to the local *kami*. In my small spare time I read geology and geomorphology. I came to see the yogic implications of ‘mountains’ and ‘rivers’ as the play between the tough spirit of willed self-discipline and the generous and loving spirit of concern for all beings.” He continues, “I could imagine this dyad as paralleled in the dynamics of mountain uplift, subduction, erosion, and the planetary water cycle.” The poem’s journey ends in the Black Rock desert of northwestern Nevada, a place beyond the project’s terms: “no waters, no mountains, no / bush no grass and / because no grass / no shade but your shadow. / No flatness because no not-flatness. / No loss, no gain. So— / nothing in the way! / —the ground is the sky / the sky is the ground, / no place between.” The final image is of a *sumi* paintbrush, lifting off the page.

The first weekend in August, Snyder was in the High Sierra of Yosemite, giving readings at Parsons Lodge, a one-room structure of granite porphyry and lodgepole beams designed by the Arts and Crafts architects Bernard Maybeck and Mark White for the Sierra Club, in 1915. The lodge was half a mile from the road, across a bright meadow studded with glacial erratics and tall lodgepole pines and pale-green sagebrush, through which the Tuolumne River ran. Snyder, in a crisp white shirt and hiking boots, and wearing a red backpack, set out across the meadow in the evening, as the light was growing cold and golden and the lodgepoles were beginning to cast long shadows. He knew the terrain well. Tuolumne Meadows, as the area is known, was the point from which his trail crew set out, in 1955, and he has been back, camping and hiking and climbing—researching—many times. “This is another sort of home, this country is,” he said.

More than three hundred people crowded in the large arched doorway of the lodge and leaned through the open French windows—the young and scruffy, the rangers in their uniforms, the old-timers in Texas with braided hair. Two Park Service poets—Guy McClellan, just graduated from Lewis and Clark, and Nick Ross-Rhudy, still at Reed—sat on a ledge under a window, elbows on knees. They were both aficionados of “Riprap.” Ross-Rhudy—tall and gangly with soft blue eyes and a conch pierce in his ear—was on a trail crew for the summer. “Something I really appreciate is that the language is our everyday language,” he said later. “He talks about things like the singlejack and pack strings—as a poet, those words just sound good. Doing trail-crew work, you love those words and what they represent.”

Snyder opened by reading “Off the Trail,” an easygoing love poem celebrating spontaneity, independence, and companionability. He dedicated it to his late wife, Carole Koda, a Japanese-American woman he married in the early nineties and who died two years ago. After the poem, he offered a short lesson on its moral, drawn from anthropology. “Throughout human history and prehistory, the trail was only to get you somewhere,” he said. “What was important was what was off the trail. Food, roots, berries, dye plants, glue plants, poisonous plants, recreational-drug plants, squirrel nests, bird nests, everything you might think you’d need. What’s way off the trail are the places you go to be alone and have a vision and your own spiritual trip, maybe with some of those recreational plants”—knowing snickers from the kids—“and then you come back.” For the rest of the night, he read from “Mountains and Rivers.” In response to a comment from the audience about the Heart Sutra, he recited it. Afterward, he retraced his steps across the meadow in the dark, stopping every few minutes to look up: Scorpio, with Antares, the fire star, burning orange; the polestar, which in ancient China was a symbol of the emperor; Vega, in the center of the sky. ♦





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