

Yaquina Bay

Rick Bartow



Bear

CASCADIAN zen

bioregional
writings
on cascadia
here and now

volume one

Paul E. Nelson
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with Theresa Whitehill
editors



Watershed Press
Seattle, Washington, Cascadia
MMXXIII

empty
bowl

basket two

Kwakiutl

Kwakkwaka'wakw'

Lillooet

Lillooet

Thompson

Nicola –
Kamloops –
Thompson
Plateau

Ish River –

Squamish

West Coast –
Nuu-chah-nulth

Salish

xʷməθkʷəy̓əm
(Musqueam)

Vancouver

Fraser

Similkameen –
Sinlahekin

Skagit

Sea

Mtn.
Valleys –
Methow –
Wenatchee

Empty Bowl Press

Olympic

Snohomish

Skykomish

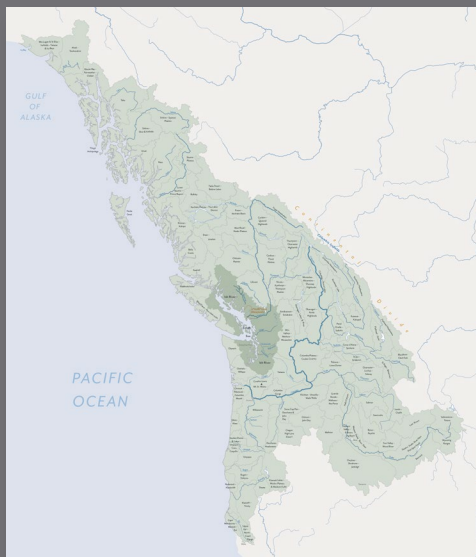
Seattle

Snoqualmie

Ish River

Chehalis –
Willapa

Yakama





What the Water Knows, for Sam Hamill

Galen Garwood

Of Cascadia

I came here nearly forty years ago,
 broke and half broken, having chosen
 the mud, the dirt road, alder pollen and
 a hundred avenues of gray across the sky
 to be my teachers and my muses.
 I chose a temple made of words and made a vow.

I scratched a life in hardpan. If I cried
 for mercy or cried out in delight,
 it was because I was a man choosing
 carefully his way and his words, growing
 as slowly as the trunks of cedars
 in the sunlit garden.

Let the ferns and the moss remember
 all that I have lost or loved, for I carry
 no regrets, no ambition to live it
 all again. I can't make it better
 than it's been or will be again
 as the seasons turn and an old man's heart

turns nostalgic as he drinks alone.
 I have lived in Cascadia, no paradise
 nor any hell, but both at once and made,
 as Elytis said, of the same material.
 A poor poet, I studied war and love.
 But Cascadia is what I'm of.

True Peace

Half broken on that smoky night,
 hunched over sake in a serviceman's dive
 somewhere in Naha, Okinawa,
 nearly fifty years ago,

I read of the Saigon Buddhist monks
 who stopped the traffic on a downtown thoroughfare
 so their master, Thích Quảng Đức, could take up
 the lotus posture in the middle of the street.
 And they baptized him there with gas
 and kerosene, and he struck a match
 and burst into flame.

That was June, nineteen-sixty-three,
 and I was twenty, a U.S. Marine.

The master did not move, did not squirm,
 he did not scream
 in pain as his body was consumed.

Neither child nor yet a man,
 I wondered to my Okinawan friend,
 what can it possibly mean

to make such a sacrifice, to give one's life
 with such horror, but with dignity and conviction.
 How can any man endure such pain
 and never cry and never blink.

And my friend said simply, "Thích Quảng Đức
 had achieved true peace."

And I knew that night true peace
 for me would never come.
 Not for me, Nirvana. This suffering world
 is mine, mine to suffer in its grief.

Half a century later, I think
 of Bồ tát Thích Quảng Đức,
 revered as a bodhisattva now—his lifetime
 building temples, teaching peace,
 and of his death and the statement that it made.

Like Shelley's, his heart refused to burn,
 even when they burned his ashes once again
 in the crematorium—his generous heart
 turned magically to stone.

What is true peace, I cannot know.
 A hundred wars have come and gone
 as I've grown old. I bear their burdens in my bones.
 Mine's the heart that burns
 today, mine the thirst, the hunger in the soul.

Old master, old teacher,
 what is it that I've learned?

What the Water Knows

What the mouth sings, the soul must learn to forgive.
 A rat's as moral as a monk in the eyes of the real world.
 Still, the heart is a river
 pouring from itself, a river that cannot be crossed.

It opens on a bay
 and turns back upon itself as the tide comes in,
 it carries the cry of the loon and the salts
 of the unutterably human.

A distant eagle enters the mouth of a river
 salmon no longer run and his wide wings glide
 upstream until he disappears
 into the nothing from which he came. Only the thought remains.

Lacking the eagle's cunning or the wisdom of the sparrow,
 where shall I turn, drowning in sorrow?
 Who will know what the trees know, the spidery patience
 of young maple or what the willows confess?

Let me be water. The heart pours out in waves.
 Listen to what the water says.
 Wind, be a friend.
 There's nothing I couldn't forgive.

The Almost-Island

The woods which give me their silence,
 their ancient Douglas firs and red cedars, their ferns,
 are not the wilderness. They're contained
 in the two-mile circumference of an almost-island,
 a park in city limits. Pleasure-boats crowd at weekends
 into the small bay. The veils hiding the mountain
 are not always natural cloud. Eagle and heron
 speak of solitude, but when you emerge from forest shade
 the downtown skyline rears up, phantasmagoric but near,
 across the water. Yet the woods, the lake,
 the great-winged birds, the vast mountain at the horizon,
 are Nature: metonymy of the spirit's understanding
 knows them to be a concentrate
 of all Thoreau or Wordsworth knew by that word,
 Nature: 'a never-failing principle
 of joy and purest passion.' Thoreau's own pond
 was bounded by the railroad, punctuated
 by the 'telegraph trees' and their Aeolian wires.
 All of my dread and all of my longing hope that Earth
 may outwit the huge stupidity of its humans,
 can find their signs and portents here, their recapitulations

of joy and awe. This fine, incised two inches
of goldsmith-work just drifted down, can speak
as well for tree as a thousand forest acres,
and tree means depth of roots, uprisen height, outreaching branches.
This musical speech of wavelets jounced against reeds
as a boat's wake tardily reaches the shore,
is voice of the waters, voice of all the blue
encircling the terrestrial globe
which as a child I loved to spin
slowly upon its creaking axis—blue globe
we have seen now, round, small as an apple,
afloat in the wilderness we name
so casually, as if we knew it
or ever could know it, 'Space.'

Mid-December

Westering a sun a mist of gold
between solemnities of crowded vertical
poplar twigs. The mountain's
western slope is touched
weightlessly with what will be, soon,
the afterglow.

A Clearing

What lies at the end of enticing
country driveways, curving
off among trees? Often only
a car graveyard, a house-trailer,
a trashy bungalow. But this one,

for once, brings you
through the shade of its green tunnel
to a paradise of cedars,
of lawns mown but not too closely,
of iris, moss, fern, rivers of stone rounded
by sea or stream,
of a wooden unassertive large-windowed house.
The big trees enclose
an expanse of sky, trees and sky
together protect the clearing.
One is sheltered here
from the assaultive world
as if escaped from it, and yet
once arrived, is given (oneself
and others being a part of that world)
a generous welcome.

It's paradise

as a paradigm for how
to live on earth,
how to be private and open
quiet and richly eloquent.
Everything man-made here
was truly made by the hands
of those who live here, of those
who live with what they have made.
It took time, and is growing still
because it's alive.
It is paradise, and paradise
is a kind of poem; it has
a poem's characteristics:
inspiration; starting with the given;
unexpected harmonies; revelations.
It's rare among
the worlds one finds
at the end of enticing driveways.

Above Hoh Valley

1.

In the late slant of mountain light,
a silver ribbon follows after itself.
River music lifts
through spruce and hemlock
a mile below.

2.

A low sea of cloud
hems the foothills
while a finger of mist
sifts past the first swells of mountain,
drifts upstream.

3.

Along a furrow
in a sandstone wall,
the slightest star-shaped flower
steals something from the southern sky.

4.

Snow trickles into a still pool;
a sheet of glass
widens across the stars.

Night, Sourdough Mountain Lookout

A late-summer sun
threads the needles of McMillan Spires
and disappears in a reef of coral cloud.

Winds roil the mountain trees,
batter the shutter props.

I light a candle with the coming dark.
Its reflection in the window glass
flickers over mountains and
shadowed valleys
seventeen miles north to Canada.

Not another light.

The lookout is a dim star
anchored to a rib of the planet
like a skiff to a shoal
in a wheeling sea of stars.

Night sky at full flood.

Wildly awake.

Hunting the Hunter

—for Bruce Schade

It is all like dreamwork...
 rounded blue hills
that make a place for the river,
 broken-up cloud
that lets the eagle who soars
 toward the blue
 thru,

a sudden two-point buck
 splashing juncos from a field
and a red-capped hunter
 in a pick-up.

The pop pop of distant fire;
a lick of breeze from the west.

Crouched under gold vermilion maple,
 the poet aims his heart
 at the heart.

Suzuki, Sasaki, Suzuki

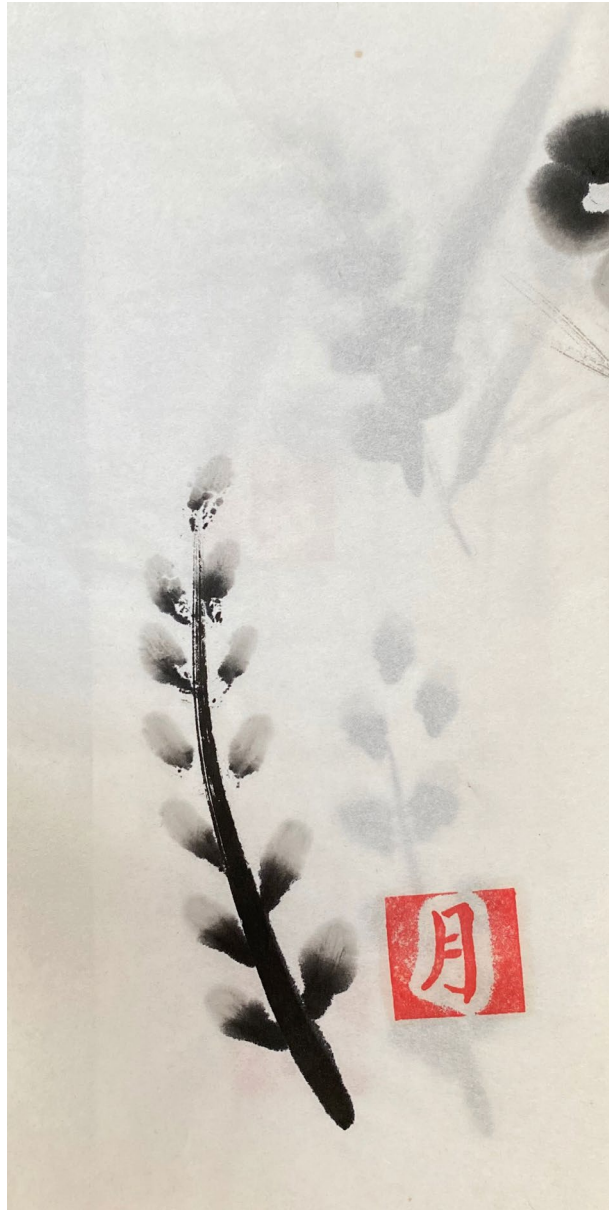
—for Jess Miller

Jesse scurries from fireplace
 to stove,
madrone and cedar kindling
 in his arms.
Tim puts tea in the rainwater
 in the tea-kettle
 on the drum stove,
and twists the wick down
to a neat and smokeless glow.

I arrange the clackers,
incense and bell
near the jiki-jitsu's cushion
in Steve's chilly, matted floor.

And then we chant
and then we quiet down:

Three bells, our breaths
and bay waves breaking
on the shore, and everyone
tries to go
 where *nothing* goes.



Pussy Willows and Shadows

from **Romance with the Unexpected**

*This is how good you are:
 in this room, where you often appear,
 windows filled with swirls of river meander
 from glacial drip to the bay's wild crush
 while you lean on a windowsill
 and wonder beyond the rooftops.
 In this room, where sometimes you dance,
 I envy your romance with the unexpected—
 boughs weighted by buds jeweled in spring rain,
 sheen of goldfinch darkened
 on the tip of thin yew branch.
 And in this room, I sort through notes you drop
 from sometimes-troubled hearts,
 drafts I don't promise not to steal,
 hold up to the light. and search
 for gold-tipped songbirds.*

That was the sincerest year.

The young undeceived by truth
 left the room for a lie.
 Who, that age, owned the mind?
 I learned I must train to be patient

with my hollowed-out instrument,
 tried to practice a slow honest breath.
 The poem was a spool of silk
 and as John Dewey said
 of a child touching flame,
The burn is the original seeing.
 The muse was my classroom teacher
 a little appalled I was so cryptic
 I wouldn't raise my hand to answer
 (was that prideful?) to the curl she unspooled
 off the tip of the poem
 or her shout to the class:

Who has ears to hear giants?

So I stepped up, but then I awoke
 and the brain as always kept talking,
 the feet slipped into their slippers,
 the hand groped for its pencil
 and the eye, from the sleep of fire,
 hunted her ferocious glare.

When I came into the Northwest
 without wind or sun,
 I arrived on psilocybin
 in a fog soup up the fjord
 where herons stalked
 what we can never know.
 A white stallion missing,
 1972, a hazy October morning
 in a Pacific cove.
 I have already saved Sue
 from the pervert in a dented Lincoln
 who *might*, he said, drop her at Carson City:
 the hate wells up still.
 The next ride was the last, north, a Chevy Nova.

I remember only the slow
 tires' paddle up 101.
 No one knew what this was—
Puget's Sound, said Danny at the wheel
 passing his jug of electric wine.
 Impossible trees along the bank
 vanish at their crown
 into what could be cloud
 or thickets of air
 where vines and mist drip
 on boughs, nests, the architect spider.
 I've been sitting here all this time,
 sun embedded in the same fog
 where chickadees invited me
 into the bigleaf maple
 where frenetic Anna's humming her wings,
 her beak in the Hotlip petals
 and a nuthatch at the suet,
 where a fearless ground squirrel's articulated paw
 poises to leap, where shadows cross the grass
 and a maple holds back dawn
 from the sea's depth pale sunlight can't touch,
 half of earth covered in lightless water miles-deep
 dark since the beginning of the world.

✽

Dark below the world of forms, my mother's voice gone
 though I still hear inside her last breath,
 her granddaughter in tears collapsed against
 the fluttering shadow
 as she rose from the cave-in of death rattle and asked:
What? What?
Why are you crying?

and we never heard her utter
another human sound.

At the Care Center
a half-dozen miles from home,
of all the women in the hall
the one who spoke so musically in
undocumented accent often
came to her door with two cups of coffee
or else my mother lay days in wool blankets,
newscaster chat the only human sound.
Tonight I can't take the News,
misery recounted by talented voices,
so I play a record
as I mince the garlic
and drown potatoes.
Bill Evans usually eases my sadness for
her heart shaped stone thousands of miles away.
Late at night he can pounce
back in my ears
—a tune we love might turn its needle
on the brain.
This morning in the kitchen
I sang to the dogs—for her, gone
beyond us, my voice imitating Fats Waller's
as I fried the bacon, "I'm gonna sit
right down and write myself
a lettah..." *food*, pant the dogs,
food, food—Willa, wounded
at the dog park, Juni, my son's
affable Newfie, "...and make believe it
came from you..." *food, food, food*
before song.
Just now the Navy jets
sliced the tips of hemlocks,

their wargames hush our
neighborhood songbirds.
A Growler from the air base,
it flattens the solo Evans
recorded at Sander's Theater—
those lyrics mocked
our war in Korea:
"Suicide is Painless,"
the *Theme from Mash*—
my salt fingertips tap
to his effortless piano.
(Once, I was a "Random Citoyen,"
on Sanders' stage in Brecht's
Last Days of the Paris Commune.
Wouldn't cut my hair so I lost the lead,
and *The Internationale* blazed
my ears for decades.)
In the attic room she gave me,
on winter nights I drummed out
Cantos with a wooden spoon,
and on espresso eked out a *Paradiso* translation.
Memory's idyllic now
but still I can croon her back
into my life.
Though today random
citizens scrape out diseased infernos,
mingling in iced ditches,
those nights when scrolled names
were the dead coming home from Vietnam
—the TV with no human sound,
wind mewling above snow—
she gave me her last wool blanket.
Those nights, my radio coiled low,
I inhabited a risky peace.

It abides even now as I tweeze this
parsley swag for a garnish,
and bounce to John Coltrane
who hammers on an iron wall to the
angels of thinnest air—and of terror—
I call you down from the nine circles of ice:
a love supreme, a love supreme, a love supreme.

from **Postcards in Autumn**

We expect nothing
yet we know so much
before it occurs.
Then a ray of moonlight
dazzles the hallway floor.
Where was that
before it arose at my feet?
And who am I to step
over it?

‡

The allure of the
feminine endings
in our mental objects
comes up hard against
Germanic consonants
and guttural shifts
making the sea's music
the more cleansing
and a ringing cell
out of the blue ends one
thing to begin another.

‡

For danger
we sometimes holler
“Bees!” and to the rescue
comes the smart kid
with his open window
or the old keeper
with those fat fingers
speaking German or Czech
who takes their honey
out to the kitchen
and praises
their dangerous song.

‡

Had a stately girlfriend once.
Over the moon we were.
The meaning of that allusion has
always eluded me who
with stars in his eyes parades
along the trail, holocaust victims
always in my mind and how
could she and I ever have
tripped out in foreign squares
without the grief for humanity
overcoming us—how
for Christ sake, did we ever kiss
in a world scoured by monsters?

Among the Zen masters who made poetry their primary means of conveying the Dharma, Stonehouse is my favorite. He was born in the Yangzi Delta town of Changshu 常熟 in 1272 and became a monk at the age of twenty. His monastic name was Qinghong 清珙, but he became better known by the name Shiwu 石屋 (Stonehouse), after a cave in his hometown. After apprenticing himself with two of the most famous Zen masters of his day, first in Hangzhou 杭州 and later in Chuzhou 滁州, he decided monastic life wasn't for him, and he spent all but eight of his last fifty years living in a hut on Xiamushan 霞暮山, a couple days walk from where he grew up. The following selection, translated by me, is from a collection that one of Stonehouse's disciples put together after his death. The entire collection can be found in *Stonehouse's Poems for Zen Monks*, published by Empty Bowl Press.

Four Mountain Postures

Walking in the mountains
unconsciously trudging along
grab a vine
climb another ridge

Standing in the mountains

how many dawns become dusk
plant a pine
a tree of growing shade

Sitting in the mountains
zig-zag yellow leaves fall
nobody comes
close the door and make a big fire

Lying in the mountains
pine wind passes through the ears
for no good reason
beautiful dreams are blown apart

Below High Cliffs—Ten Poems

I
Below high cliffs
I slash and I burn
there's vegetables and grain
to boil or steam
to satisfy the present
to brighten my remaining days
looking at a tree in the yard
I count its falls and springs

II
Below high cliffs
my companions are the ancients
having found the source
I understood then stopped
others of more mystic persuasions

study koans to death
 wait beside stumps for passing rabbits
 notch boats to find dropped swords

III
 Below high cliffs
 I spend my days with plants
 no sign of people
 just leaves in the wind
 valley birds call at dusk
 the mountain moon lights the night
 a crane taking off from a pine
 showers my robe with dew

IV
 Below high cliffs
 tigers and snakes are my neighbors
 once I forgot my mind
 their natures too turned tame
 people who live in this world
 all have something divine
 mouths of teeth heads of hair
 why can't they be kind

V
 Below high cliffs
 still unaware of what's real
 meeting this then that
 chaos and confusion
 why not awaken to the truth
 look beyond your senses
 it's been this way forever
 a spring flows all around you

VI
 Below high cliffs
 I live in a quiet place
 beyond the reach of time
 my mind and the world are one
 the crescent moon in the window
 the dying fire in the stove
 I pity the sleeping man
 his butterfly dream so real

VII
 Below high cliffs
 a white-haired old man
 a patched robe with no hem
 pants with no legs
 meditating at night
 spending days in a field
 the Way is right here
 where else could it be

VIII
 Below high cliffs
 facing a thousand mountains
 one sense finds the source
 all six relax
 white clouds drift by
 green water ripples past
 beyond movement and stillness
 there's another world

IX
 Below high cliffs
 I don't pay attention to my body
 I eat wild fruit and wear grass

hemp socks and braided shoes
a wall of bamboo darkens my windows
thick moss covers the steps
desires fade in the quiet
cares disappear it's so still

x
Below high cliffs
sleeping and eating your fill
indulging whims and desires
you idle away the months and years
until the ills of old age arrive
along with a host of pains
digging a well when you're thirsty
you suffer the heat in vain



Poetry Plaque 3

Dennis Parks
Owyhee River

Poets Traveling Water

in memory of Judith Roche

1
The leaden clouds lower,
even red mutes in the threatening rain.
In three canoes, twelve poets to each,
we heft the paddles, balance the weight
of self among others. The girl tells us
to hold our oars thus, to stab the water,
pull, lift, and arc the oar back to the stab.

We ask, "What do we do if there's a crisis?"
"There will be no crisis," she says.
We freeze. We know that any water rises fast
in sorrow or joy, lust or too much dancing.
She says, "Look to me. I'll point, not to the threat
but to where I want you to swim."
We consider the roiling current, the banks mucky
with silt and thick with prickery Nootka rose.

2
We detour up Disappearing Creek
to the pilings holding Robert's shack
hand built with pickings from the river's flush.
Chilled, we crowd in for tea, and Tim
reading from Robert's poem:
"...the little bird that is going to heal me..."

Then we are ready, warmed, poets paddling
downstream. We brace hard, turn our canoes
to where a space of land lowers, a bar between
the Skagit's fresh water and the Pacific's brine.
We skim toward escape from the narrow river.

We join the shout "Paddle! Paddle hard,"
and we do the rush of it, Judith now again with us,
water shallowing under our keels, lifting over
the break where the river pulses and waves break.
We cross from new water to old water,
from fresh to salt, from one-way flow
to the cycling energy of the ocean.
We proceed, each canoe, steady as she goes,
landing onto the full flood tide.

Bunch Grass 34

Five magpies
stand in a circle at the edge of the road,
like old jobless men leaning on a pier,
looking down into the glazed water,
each one about to
reveal the secrets of his past.
A wheat truck roars by.
The magpies
leap clumsily into the air and disperse,
leaving behind
the body of a pheasant.
In the truck's wake, one wing rises like a sail,
then falls slack.
A few loose feathers
catch light gusts of wind
and glide
over the scattered wheat and gravel.

Homage to Ryōkan

A little grey feather from somewhere
floated down onto my writing paper.
How frail!
 an inch long
 arched on its slim bone body
 more like a mist than anything else
 rolling over the white paper,
 soon gone
 a light wind claims it.
My only
visitor today.

Laura's Birthday

One blooming
 skunk cabbage
upgrades
 the whole neighborhood!

Hérons and Swallows

for Rusty North

I
Long spells of heron-watching,
Now that the swallows have gone.

2
 In April,
 when the swallows return,
 The old heron will have less to do.

April has Turned Cold

April has turned cold.
 The evening light fades through the clouds.
 A string of geese calls me out
 to sing a farewell, and
 I wish them luck as they go from Ish River,
 away out over the ocean,
 long long sweeps of rippling wings
 bound for Siberia.
 Their wild song they take with them,
 and leave some behind.
 They leave enough so
 I don't have to leave home any more.

The Rest of the Way

Our fathers
 carried us
 a long way into the world.
 They leave us one day, and die.
 And we carry them
 the rest of the way.

for Sally and Sam Green

A simple path and wild roses greet us.
 Dry grass sings the praises of water.
 At dusk hills join together.
 The woman-shadows and the tree-shadows
 like the waves at sea
 roll an old sad stone through the woods,
 grief wrung out of grief.

A cold morning and slowly growing light.
 The birds start up,
 one by one.

From Notes from Disappearing Lake

July, 1973

Snipe walking through the
 flowers & grasses
 picking worms & bugs out of
 the mud—

Wren on the front porch
 tiny feet
 tick tick.

Robin, swallow
 crow, seagull, heron
 goldfinch, duck
 blackbird...

Who needs a radio?

Song at morning
song at evening
and all day long . . .

This is the real news:
Local, regional, & world-wide.

April 24, 1977 (4 a.m.)

In the excited mind
words fly.

The night is still, the water still—
& suddenly, in the mind

(as on the night river
a beaver
breaks the silence)

the first ripple of a poem
swims almost invisible by the river bank.

Blades of grass standing in the water
feel the waves rise and
pass through them.

May 24, 1978

On the evening tide
my neighbor Lyle
rowed up the creek.

We stood on our porches and
talked back and forth.

I said: "I saw a *Cinnamon*

Teal today—old soft
red color—

the first one I ever have seen.

I looked it up in my

bird book—it

says you rarely see them

west of the Cascades...

Maybe they got lost in a
storm."

"Maybe they didn't
read the book," Lyle said.

A Dream of the Poet Robert Sund

On a rocky shore, I open my other eyes.

This is the small cold rain of Puget Sound.
And there, on the promised water, in a skiff, is Robert.

He rows up onto the land, through woods.

He steps out, I join him, and we dance a two-step
there on the forest floor,
weightless as time, drunk on the greenish drifts.

In Robert Sund's Shack

On the desk by the east window
calligraphy practiced
on a piece of white card stock
repeats: "Cherry blossoms."

Under the west window
a small bowl of cherries
has been placed on the table
for tomorrow.

Portrait of Arthur

As you sit in the zendo,
long white hair motionless,
a wind whips about outside,
it tosses the dust up, it loses itself.

You sit with eyes closed
as boughs batter each other,
thrashing, bending, scraping.
Beneath your eyelids, eyes sparkle.

Mountains are shaking,
but before they existed
you were pouring wine, I heard you
playing your guitar before I was born.

Postcard to Han Shan from Haro Strait

for Bill and Rudi

A fir outside the guest room window is scribbling unreadable grass script in wind coming off the Strait. The moon floats in the sky like a jellyfish on a dark bay. Inside this friendly house a clock's face glows red. The furnace blows on, off, on, off—as I imagine an old tiger breathes in winter sleep. How did it feel when you crept from your high mountain cave or hut for visits down below? It must have been good to get warm by the monastery stove, bowls on the table full of thick soup, a little poor wine in rough pottery mugs. Mostly you spoke with the boy who broomed out the kitchen. I wish I could keep such silence as you. Even among friends I sound like a gull dragging a clam across beach stones. The moon wanes, & so do we, old hermit, our pockets full of bread, gratefully turning from sea or valley the color of a well-used inkstone, beginning the long, familiar climb toward home.

Shoveling the Outhouse on Gary Snyder's Birthday

*“Light that shines on dung
is not part of the dung.”
—Rumi*

Because we pour our piss in the compost,
there's only the smell of must & damp
stove ash from a thousand fires. Everything

is dry. I built hinges into the floor,
so it lifts with only a little scraping. When light
angles in, spiders the size of a fingertip wake

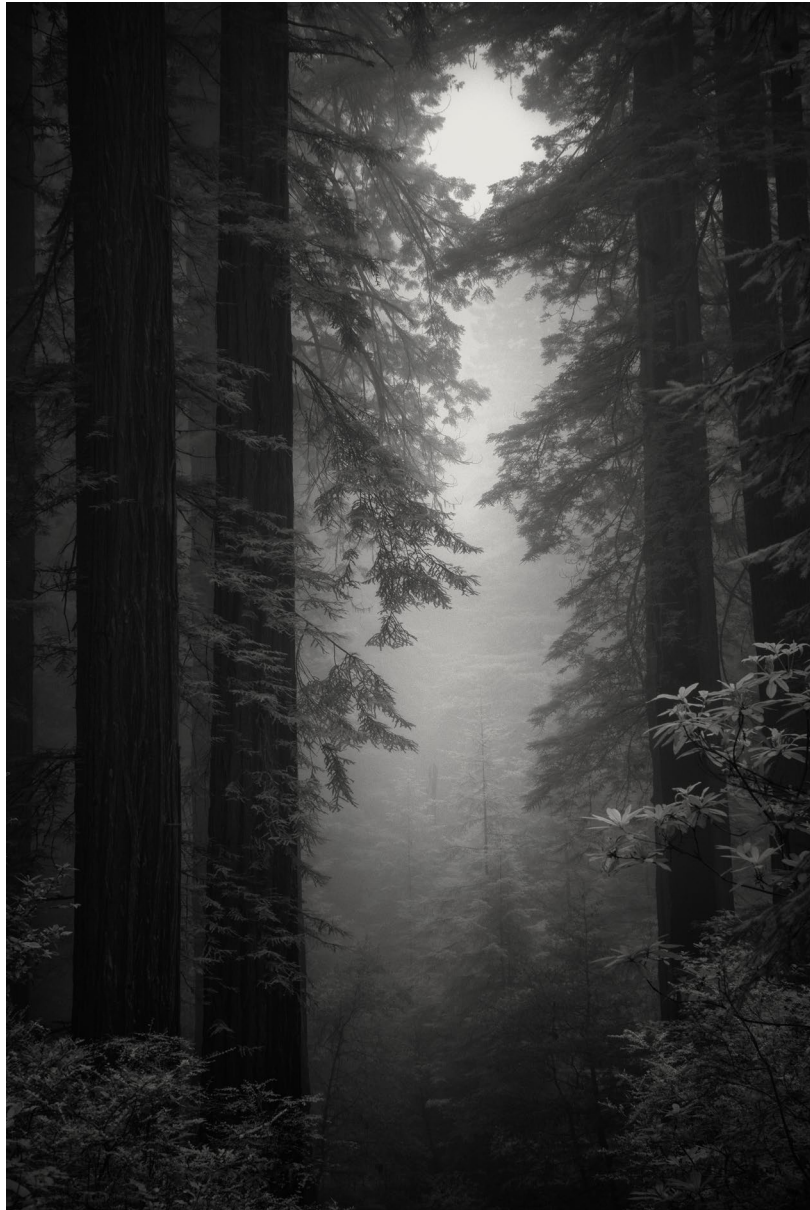
from their daily practice & find whatever cracks
they can in the cedar shakes, or simply curl back
into themselves & wait. The shovel is an old one,

long-handled hickory slick with a coat
of linseed oil, the blade a little bright
at its tip. In two hours, ten wheelbarrows

of song-bird phrases, owl calls, the smoky flourishes
of breath on frosted mornings, go to fill a bowl
in the ground near a rotted nurse log, shades

of brown, black & gray combed & leveled, nothing
like the patterns a monk might make with a *kumade*,
a wood-tined rake, no cloud patterns, no currents

of sea or wind-wiped lake. Star flowers there
next spring, heal-all, fringe-cup & another two years
of space to use & leave the self behind.



Among Giants

Re-reading Du Fu Thirty Years Later

Somewhere it's still spring in the mountains.
All these years I've come alone, seeking you,

far off in your land, your own century. You took
to the road with your quill pen, emptied

a bottle each night with friends, still rose
at dawn to write your bittersweet poems

that ring, temple bells across these centuries.
For years I imagined I might find you

wandering the jagged ridge, catch you
and Li Bo late some night, drunk

on the cold moon. Tell me, who
was the *you* in that poem I committed

to memory at twenty-two, seeking
a life other than my own?

So many seasons to see what's here.
And so many years later, who is the *you*

that still wants to become you, even
knowing now what it means:

an empty boat, drifting?

Shishi Odoshi

for Sue

Listen: how smoothly
stream slips over stones
downhill to where
hollow bamboo waits

for cool water
to fill its dry throat
then the *thok*
against stone

as it dips like
a heron darting
for fish, fast,
a simple movement

to frighten the boars
that roamed the gardens
of the Zen monks
in the 14th century.

Six centuries later I listen
to the sound of emptiness
filling until it pivots, the
molecule of water

that carries it over
no different from the rest
but the movement quick
as the heart without mind.

Empty and fill,
fill and empty,
neither first nor last
but flowing together,

the movement of filling
carrying the emptying,
as the hollow vase
carries air

as the heart empties
and fills each day with
ten thousand sorrows
and ten thousand joys.

Moon Phases at Deer Park Monastery

for Tess Gallagher

The first night, moon full.
Each night after, moon's light

in retreat, darkness standing by,
light held in the curve of space

it holds for itself, until fullness
fades, and the dipper empties

its cargo of stars into
the black cauldron of sky.

We arrive full, bags heavy
with books, heads brimming

with words. Each day
we let go what we can

see beauty in soup bowls,
shaved heads, brown robes.

Days pass in slow step,
moon arcs across the sky.

Then the last night we
walk arm in arm under

a black cloak of stars
share the ginger singe

of Black Black gum,
and stars wink back

each one a poem
we won't need to write.

What Cathal Said

You can sing sweet
and get the song sung
but to get to the third dimension
you have to sing it
rough, hurt the tune a little. Put
enough strength to it
that the notes slip. Then
something else happens. The song
gets large.

Cloud-Path

With steps freshened
by wearing a man's cast-off shoes,
I follow the rain-rutted road
as far as the fishing boats
turned upside down
on the soggy bank, their oars
secured elsewhere to provide
against thieves.

Mottled light through
waterside trees over the bows
and sterns means trading
fish for birds.

I take up the invisible oars
put by for just this
occasion: a banishing
scald of sun blotted inexactly
by a succession of windblown clouds
able to lift the entire flotilla.

A bird
flies through me. Then
a fish.

Celestial

Quiet inside yourself.
Quiet.
Where I find you, husband,
if not in the tossed-aside work gloves
if not in the drawer
I haven't cleared of your things.

Yes, inside.
Where you still reign
like this January super moon
hovering close.
Since the clouds have gone
to ice, it's haloed
in rainbow. That's

memory.

A Quarter Note

In the funnel of their leaves
over the winding canal road,
igniting the firs' dark hood,
October dusk dropping,
maybe I do feel bigleaf maples'
final shine before the fall.

Maybe I do see a glimpse
of our old life together.
While you drove, smoothing
the car through its curves,
I could listen
for yellow's quarter note

in the red's deep gong.
Risk that. *Don't be silly*,
you'd say. But I was,
you there, and I, careful
to hear the music, since anytime
might be the last.

January Quatrains

—after Shiwu

800 years from you on Redcloud Peak,
I hear your voice rise from rice paper
pages: "Everything's dew on the grass,
nothing's meant to last."

‡

On its way out of the dark, the morning
rain-light comes up through white clouds.
I spent years longing for the retired life.
Now it seems too tame.

‡

Into the stone Buddha's lap,
the dried, brown scales fall.
The Juniper is thick and green above,
raindrops glistening the branch ends.

‡

For two days the Wolf Moon's hidden
by thick cloud, leaving me only

the whole white sky and a leaning pine
dropping long needles to the grass.

Bardo

through frayed cuffs of gray cloud,
wafts of spun smoke,

through shreds of rain over fields and farms
our small plane hums

over the lightly ruffled waves
of island waters

all the grays above
and all the greens below

torn heaven
stitched earth

and we, rent creatures,
suspended in between

Backyard, April

Lilacs burst out of the green thicket
at the fence, its tangle of forsythia,
buddleia and quince—

Don't you love the word *thicket*—
slink of shadows,

small cries of the wrens,
the rabbit's stillness—
a hidden life, protected?

In a hazy sky, the full moon
a white lyric, drifts
in a slim thicket of cloud.

Earth Day

The hatchet makes a kindling song
of shingles split for the morning fire

(our tiny spurt of flame
on the cosmic clock).

Three hawks circle the blue envelope
over the clearing where

the cat chases a dark butterfly
over just-mowed grass.

In the silence after machines,
in April sun, the alders will unfurl

their chartreuse fringe and ferns
send up curled fiddleheads.

Far off, in deep woods
a woodpecker hammers the stillness.

“Sky Pesher”

James Turrell, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

You cross the bright, grassy hillside
and enter it:

a tunnel into the cement shelter,
 its bench around
 which everything
 seems to move
carved and tilted up

toward the square of plexiglass: blue stage
for the performance
of an October sky.

Witness to azure transparencies
in a space
for
apprehending the light,
you read time’s meter—

its blue gradient
framed above,

mistress
of wordless thought
at the aperture
of emptiness.

The Salish Prairies

Before us, lowland forests

ended only at the water

or opened out to clearings

where loose soil could not hold

its rain. Fire swept the openings

clear, licked the dry and jointed

grasses up, burned the seedling fir.

Deep camas bulbs survived

to sprout, bloom blue, then go,

puckering in late May to seed.

The bunched grass called *Festuca*

(Latin for straw, a mere nothing)

still arrays itself in knots,

provides its browse and seeds—

first to feed the voles,

then through these—

hawks' eyes

and coyote's sure, light lope.

Slough, Decay, and the Odor of Soil

*log decomposition research site,
Blue River Drainage, Oregon Cascades*

Trunks, once poised and upright, collapse toward a two-century graduation into beetle and vapor, moss, conk, and seed bed—their boles intermittently chiseled by woodpeckers uncoiling their barbed tongues and probing the grub-etched galleries within. Hibernacula. Loosened bark. Sap and heart wood riddled with crawlways where ants stalk wood-mining fungi, where inexorable ant-infesting mycelia reciprocate. The odor of must, cedar disintegrating through pungency to pulp and soil. The plush, ripe scent of continuous integration. What seemed solid, stains and softens decade by decade, to be torn apart by bears after ants—the flavor on their tongues that of dull sparks. All is relentlessly

hollowed, grain by grain, cell by cell, into sponge and grub dust, salamander refuge, slug haven, frog shelter, and moss—all deepening to opulent, pre-ultimate, humus and duff.

Found at a Homeless Camp on a Capitol Land Trust easement adjacent to The Evergreen State College

Among the 43 contractor-bags-full of debris (weight exceeding one ton)—materials from what were once a dwelling in a cedar tree and a 15-foot diameter teepee bound together with insulation stripped from copper wire:

Loads of visqueen & a pink plush orangutan. A rosary, a hand-sized wooden crucifix, several t-shirts displaying skulls and neon graphics, a Bible, and book of odd science. Prescription meds and a debit card, a well-and-hand-crafted wooden case for hand-rolls and a lighter. One empty gallon of Carlo Rossi and a spent 2-liter bottle of Australian Yellowtail. Multiple malt liquor cans. A bong with aged weed. One Grunge guitar effects box—which, as it turns out, still functions. One empty can of watermelon-flavored Four Loko (12% alcohol). A checkered pendant bearing a Maltese Cross and a “Live to Ride, Ride to Live” logo. A mattress on which a long poem has been inscribed with indelible marker. A small bag of coins from Hong Kong, India, Italy, Great Britain, Spain, France, Canada, and Mexico; a token for a bridge in Vancouver, British Columbia. Jewelry wire, beads, many skateboard wheels & one wheel-less board. Waterlogged coats, heavy-duty rain pants, a hand-drawn sign saying “Please Help”, a small (signal?) mirror silvered on both sides. Several cast-aluminum boat fittings, shoes, a cookbook from a famous Atlanta restaurant. Condoms, unused. A wrecked Coleman lantern, an Afro pic, a fluorescent orange dog chain. A soggy sleeping bag. A leather belt. CDs featuring Jackson Browne, Steve Martin, & Lou Reed.



10,000 Li

Maggie Creek

Joan Giannecchini

Feeding Frenzy

We run east through Skincuttle Inlet, past Low Black Rock, Elswa Rock, Bolkus Islands, Deluge Point, Inner Low Rock, and see at last, well out into the strait, the first blows. Ten, then twenty humpbacks. Even more, churning the surface, spouting as far north and south as we can distinguish.

Feeding, the whales of Hecate Strait roll and roil in the chop where krill & herring crackle, spat out of the sea in exhilarated terror—an awful hailstorm of food churning among sleek whale fuselages that flex, rise, and slew ecstatically to feast in mile-long bands on the blood-ochre of rising crustacean-clouds. Lit by the flash of herring, the humpbacks revel in a massage of frenzied food; gulp, sigh and say their grace and gratitude with grunts, groans and James Brown hallelujah shouts, Yow, I feel good!

##

The feast of whales continues as we depart for Rose Harbor where, once, whales such as these were flensed, dismembered, and rendered. Near rusting machinery, a small plaque faces the harbor:

IN MEMORY OF THE CHINESE AND JAPANESE WHO DIED IN THE EMPLOY OF CONSOLIDATED WHALING BETWEEN 1925 AND 1941

Encountering the Owl

“...What I came to say was,
teach the children about the cycles.
The life cycles. All the other cycles.
That’s what it’s all about, and it’s all forgot.”
 —For/From Lew, Gary Snyder

Resident bird—spotted yet hidden—silent and dappled
 as the forest floor itself: that placenta, that rich compost,
 that graveyard.

Begin anywhere. Ground-slope litter, say—needle duff,
 the ground strewn with big wood, wind-thrown roots
 and rot—equal parts earth, water, air, and the slow fire
 of decay. Here fungal mycelia encase the threaded

rootlets of hemlocks and monumental firs—trading
 sustenance from earth to tree, tree to tree, tree to truffle.
 The earth’s surface is, I think, a kind of skull for all the fungal
 nerve-and-synapse-weft-and-webbed fruiting of truffle

scents that lure the red-backed and long-tailed voles,
 the gliding squirrel, the spotted skunk to feast. All night
 it’s scurry, search, harvest, gnaw; spread the dust
 of spores with whiskers, scat, furred and trailing tails
 until the owl, its flight feathers muffled with fine serrations,

seizes the one less-wary or less-nimble meal of forest
 flesh for night-long sustenance or the nest’s fledgling.
 All this soon enough returned—bones coughed-up
 in pellets, vole scat, sprouting saprophytes, the blow-down
 melting decade-by-decade into seedbeds that nurse

saplings silent as owls’ feathers, mutually dappling
 the forest floor: that placenta, that rich compost,
 that graveyard.

Song to Wed By

for April and Tony

In one, we acclaim the craft of bent-wood frames, the rib cages
 of boats, cradles, and drums that carry us on sound and over
 water. In the other, the framing of the keen, edgy exuberance and flex
 of adolescent minds: how owls cough up vole sculpture
 and the bent-bone skulls of mice and shrews. In common and together
 we acclaim this ceremonial joining, with nodes, the nets of two
 wide families—woods walkers, vintners, permaculture-and-
 percussionists, maker-builder-restorers, and open-hearted
 bookmobile drivers.

We celebrate this celebration.

This is a song of wood-benders and courting frogs,
 taut cords and class bells. A canticle set to the saw
 stroke and the ratcheting racket of storm ponds, a canzone
 punctuated by the infant sleep, suck, wail, and squeal
 that scores that ancient, accelerating arc of sprout and bloom:
 from attention to dance, from dance to deduction.
 While the chorus—this congregation of biological musicians,
 in-laws, naturalists, magicians and scofflaws—pitches
 in with salads, baked desserts, and the polyphonic caw & crow,
 yip & yowl, murmur & low overlapping talk of conspiratorial
 celebrants: a fugue woven of cross-tribe affiliations, kin-traditions
 and a shy folk-wisdom that understands

that we see just a fraction of what is true.

This Sicilian saying, for one, might do:

Unu sulu nun è bonu mancu 'n paradisu.

“Even in Paradise, being alone is no good.”

Here at the edge of this ancient hemlock-fir-salal-and-sword-fern forest,

here in this valley of ice-melt, the clear-then-murky Nisqually,

here under the eye and loosening scree of the fire-hearted mountain

named Tahoma who makes the weather and watches over us

dusk and dawn, we praise, exult and revel! Dance and sing and toss

modest home-made blessings arching over this new-firm-tied

knot in the family net—

blessings to April and Tony and sweet baby James.

Land, Earth, Soil, Dirt: Some Notes Towards a Sense of Place

Years ago, the morning after an evening of beer drinking and poetry reciting, a hungover clot of revelers was walking back from breakfast. Northwest poet Robert Sund, whom I had met the night before, lagged behind the rest of us, preoccupied. He had stopped and was staring into a corner, a crack where two concrete buildings met. Curious, we went back; he looked up from a small, cranial-shaped pile of moss and said something like, “That’s our only hope.” We laughed nervously, a little shaken, it struck us all. The moss was patiently turning the buildings to soil, to dirt, to earth. That moment has haunted me since, and the idea of soil and its import has become a recurrent meditation for me.

I want to look at soil as a metaphor, as a self-darkened lens that bends light, dividing, revealing, obscuring; a lens to watch light thickened green by life and kneaded rich by death’s dark hands. I want to behold a rainbow as the faint echo of soil’s gravid hive. Imagine soil as the context, the textural background of other imaginations, an other, darker nature grounding culture, personality, language. A good place to start is in the words we use about soil. By examining, exhuming, the stories hidden in them, we reveal a strata of unconscious attitudes towards soil. We say “back to the land,” “mother earth,” “good ground,” “dirty,” but only vaguely know what we’re saying. Our descriptions lack discrimination,

want felt meaning. Reviewing the stories bidding in the words and following their instruction, we may resuscitate a poetic, a way of seeing and knowing the local world we walk upon.

Land is a word nearly synonymous with soil. We cultivate, plow and till the land. But these are activities originally germane to soil. Their use with land is an example of the natural poetic license that dwells in language. Land is from the Indo-European root *lendh* (“open land”). This sense still adheres to the cognates of *lendh*. Old English has *land* meaning specifically (“open land”). French has *lande* (“heath, moorland, especially infertile moorland”). Our word *lawn* comes to us from French *lande*. Old Slavic has *ledo* (“wasteland”).

German has additionally *landau* (“water meadow”) (land + *owa* [water]). Old Celtic has *landa* (“a valley”). Welsh and Cornish have *lann* (“an enclosure”). *Land* is a relatively abstract term that refers to boundaries. Its basic idea is open or closed space. Its root does not refer to any other specific aspect of landscape except its openness or closedness. At heart, it’s about “land shape,” about surface, not soil.

Land’s meaning for us is *owned topography*. The idea of property is the word’s current context. To express other qualities of landscape requires qualification: heart land, forest land. Land no longer constellates an image. We can “land” anywhere. There is a land romance: some of us went “back to the land.” But it is telling that we went back to the land (an abstraction) not to the Palouse, the Olympic Rain Forest, or even the heath, desert or forest. Part of the difficulty of the back-to-the-land movement is that its speech does not adequately inform its impulse. For us land is a concept, not a locality.

Earth is another word we substitute for *soil*. It is a word with a surprising spectrum of meanings. Its root is the Indo-European *er* (“earth, anciently and essentially the place between the heavens and the land of the dead”). It is the name of our planet, Earth, gravity’s burrow, the invisible genius that keeps our feet on the ground and tethers moons swole scythe-like magic. Gravity, whose pull prescribes and consecrates our orbit and allows our blue-green, fire-hearted dream to dance its tragic dance around a dying star.

We cannot yet “buy earth”—we find that hard to say. Historically, earth has meant or still means: the world, cosmos, soil, surface, country, chemical oxide, the place between heaven and hell, electrical ground (British), a grave, a burrow, a shelter. To condense all these meanings we might say earth is the place of fundamental, fateful connection.

Dirt is the unsavory side of our descriptions of soil. *Dirt* is from Old Norse *drit* (“excrement”). *Drit* is from Old Norse *drita* (“to shit”). It is telling that we use a word with that root to describe soil. Healthy soil digests shit and puts it to use, but dirt and soil are not the same. Granted, soil can be dangerous if fouled by poisons or diseased wastes, but we are missing the fundamental difference between soil and dirt when we confuse them. Soil is a “community enterprise.” Shit is potential nutrients “looking for work.” We do *dirt* dirty, using it as a synonym for soil or earth. We should maintain its specific connections to excrement. Earth and soil are not shit. An earthy mind and dirty mind are different gatherings. I wonder if there isn’t a ruling class prejudice hiding in the continued confusion of dirt and soil. It’s almost as if the soil were beneath us instead of holding us up.

Ground is another word associated with soil. Ground is from Old English *grund* (“foundation, earth”). *Ground* means bottom; a “groundling” was originally a name for a fish that lived on the bottom of ponds or a person who preferred, or could only afford, the pit in front of the stage. *Ground* means fundamental, basic. We run aground; we are well grounded in thought. Many disciplines use the word (carpentry, naval terminology, philosophy, engineering, art, etc.). Ground is cognate with Old English *grynde* (“abyss”). So, ground is cousin to depth and mystery. It is also used in reference to soil and landscape. We work the ground, the groin, also from *grynde* (“abyss”) of the earth. Perhaps we confuse soil and ground because soil grounds us, soil is *fundamental*; it *grounds* us. It completes the circuit.

Finally we come to soil, “the root metaphor,” “our only hope.” Soil is the secret sublimation of the land. It is the black, alchemic gold of this green earth, the re-enchantment of waste and death. It is the humming dignity of the gravid ground, the black honey of our sun-drenched hive.

Soil is an earthy, grounding term that is not land. Soil is not easily owned or domesticated. It suffers our earthly antics with motherly patience calmly awaiting our return. Soil's history as a term is fascinating. In time it has meant: a wild boar mire, a pool of water used as a refuge by hunted deer, sexual intercourse, composition of the ground, mold, staining, to purge a horse on green feed.

Etymologically, soil has two roots. First, soil is from Indo-European *su* ("to produce young"). Cognate words are sow, succulent, socket, hyena and hog. Pigs were sacred to the earth goddess. Pigs and snakes were her favored images. The sense that comes to us from this root is mire or stain, but behind these senses—"in the roots wild pigs are breeding and birthing at the mired edge of ancient oak forests; deer are dying near a hidden pool." "Soiled" we touch the sacred suckling succulent sow.

Soil's other sense (ground-earth) comes to us from Latin *solum* ("ground floor, threshing floor") and the obsolete ("solium, throne"). The Indo-European root is *sed* ("to sit, to settle"). *Soil's* cognates are nest, nestle, seat, soot, cathedral, sole. Soil is where we stand. The "soles" of our feet touch the soil, grounding us. "He's got his feet on the ground." Soil is a throne of bones where light nests, where we settle. The ancestors tickle our feet from its fertile shade.

Soil is a kind of bicameral word. Like a good two-house legislature, it "converses." The two root meanings, *fertility* and *seat*, have intertwined since Middle French, when the words became identical in sound and spelling. Indeed the sow is enthroned in soil. Soil is the throne, the nest that bears young, the queen's room. Soil is the land in hand, smelled and seen. Soil supports the living and receives the dead.

The science of ecology affirms the etymological complexity of soil. From *Ecology and Field Biology* by Robert Leo Smith: "Soil is the site where nutrient elements are brought into biological circulation by mineral weathering. It also harbors the bacteria that incorporate atmospheric nitrogen into the soil. Roots occupy a considerable portion of the soil. They serve to tie the vegetation to the soil and to pump water and its dissolved minerals to other parts of the plant for photosynthesis and other

biochemical processes—vegetation in turn influences soil development, its chemical and physical properties and organic matter content. *Thus soil acts as a 'sort of pathway' between the organic and mineral worlds.*"

In short, soil is the bridge between the living and the dead, both in one, a living death, a paradox. Geologist Robert Curry explains the crucial connection between soil and human life: "All (forms of) life, without exception, are dependent upon outside sources of nutrients for their support within a substrate upon which they nurture themselves. In all non-marine systems, the ultimate substrate is soil. Even marine systems are dependent upon weathered minerals derived by soil-forming processes throughout geologic time on land. Soil is not an inert inorganic blanket of varying thickness on the land that can be differentiated into subsoil and topsoil. Those naive terms belie a basic misunderstanding that permeates the agricultural advisory services of this country. Soil is generally recognized by soil scientists to be a dynamic, living assemblage of precisely bio-geochemically segregated macro- and micronutrient ions held in a series of remarkable storage sites. These nutrients are provided by slow weathering over geologic time and are translocated and reprocessed by soil organisms and plant activity. In general the living biomass beneath the ground equals or exceeds that above ground!

"Soil is thus not a mineral, geologic resource but a biospheric resource that, although renewable, can reform only at extremely slow geologic rates of tens of centuries. The soil nutrients within their delicately segregated geochemical levels represent precisely and literally the sum total of the long sustainable economic capital of the nation."

To paraphrase Curry, we might say soil is fate. This notion resonates with soil's connections to seats of power, the sow goddess, soil our destiny, our destination. Soil is the land in hand, a specific place. Soil embodies the meeting, is the meat of weather and rock; "remembers" them into trees and kingfishers, salamanders and salal. Each location knots that meeting differently. Your county soil survey becomes a kind of earth phrenology—soil is a live being, a dark leaf breathing water and light. Soil is myriad neural serpents writhing knotted on an infinity of their



Old Growth

discarded skins. It is its own renewable research, a porcine cannibal lover, phoenix, shit-eating alchemist, Ouroboros enshrined, an honest mother. Persephone, goddess of spring lives underground, ensoiled. She rises in spring, wife of wise Hades, King of Wealth and Death. Her name means “bringer of destruction.” Perhaps she is a personification of soil, the living death. Demeter’s virginal daughter married to the king of the dead. (Interestingly, in one of his myriad seductions, Zeus, the king of heaven, approached Persephone in the guise of a snake as she sat in the great cave of creation weaving the threads of destiny.) Plants and animals follow her back into the light. Soil blurs the distinction between the living and the dead, humbling us. Soil is the pious Confucian son tending the graves of the ancestors. It is husband and wife in one dark body. Soil is the dwelling wave, the archetypal, renewable resource. *Resource* from *re-surge* (“to surge back”), and *surge* is from Latin *subregere* (“to rule from below”). So, a resource surges back ruled by powers hidden from view. Soil is the paradoxical deathdark well of our living. Soil is the resurrecting, hidden ruler, fate-maker, dark-eyed, blossom-giddy girl weaving destiny deep in the ground.

We are all earth-born, literally and figuratively, and the word *human* confirms this assertion. Our words human, humble and homage all derive from Latin *humus* (“earth, soil, ground, region, country”). A human is earth-born, shares the quality of humus. It is well to remember that to our ancestors humus was local and that “humanity” was born, arose from a specific locale, a place. The people over the hill might not be quite human, in the sense of your local humus. Our language knows we are earth-born even if we think we are heaven sent.

Human awareness is the blossom in the fertile mix of two soils, the soil of language and the soil of place. The “soil” of language is not merely metaphoric, it is mortally real. Language wants a place, a locus, as much as you or I. Vernaculars are living proof of languages rooting and blooming where they land. Language grows into where it lives, symbiotic; old world metaphors re-sown into new landscapes. Our perceptions and our witness catch the stark light and green it into meaning. These meanings

compost and compose a deeper experience of where we are. Words are living beings; they borrow our breath for inspiration; they blossom, fruit, root and die.

Language in place, ensoiled, inevitably blooms culture. Culture in root means to plow, return, cycle. Understood etymologically, culture is soil homage. Culture grows out of and dies back into language in place; the stories enrich the words. Culture is the sacred blossom; it consecrates the ground, soul and soil of the same dark being.

Western society has abandoned the older notion of culture, the husbanding of human life in place. Our culture does not arrive through the discrimination of the different songs the wind rings in the several pines of the Sierra, or the terror of the child lost in the rain forest, or the shape of a fisherman's pipe; no, instead we buy our culture. It is a consumer item, an *uncouth* import.

Whether it was dire necessity or some fatal species-specific flaw, we took to the wind with a cross and sword. We learned to grow anywhere, choke out the natives. (Aboriginal peoples often die of homesickness.) We came to favor shallow roots, learned to grow in places we wasted. This may be what we really are, but our language once lived in a neighborhood where the word for tree and truth were the same—Indo-European *dru*, whence (“truth, tree, trust, druid”, etc.) Each speech has an accent, the odor of composted history. If left alone, our patterns of speech become localized, “dried” by the heat, made pungent by rain. But our electric neighborhood ignores locality; dialogue is now electrified. Blind as a volt, our tongues are in the radared air, groundless. TV is our tree.

The soil is where we return our dead; it is the home of the ancestors. This sense of soil is lacking for most of us. We are careless. I have not witnessed the lives and deaths of my kin. True to the American dream, we scattered, seeking private versions of wealth, ignoring Hades' dark treasure. I am less for my lack of witness. Human life grows in weight and intensity as people stay in one place. The ancestors form a wedge behind us, press us forward on the edge of that weight. Depending on our ability to bear the weight, to balance it, our located word is good and drives deeper into the haunt of home or it breaks and we float up into the vapid

torrent of commercial culture. Without the ancestors, without the soil of souls, we are potted plants, doomed in real weather. When we speak of living here, we should remember that perhaps the most important thing we will do here is die here, that our deaths will matter and be the first step in steadying our children's steps. Our graves will anchor them while they work the subtle weather of this cedar-green world. Soil supports the living and receives the dead.

Tilth

Tilth comes from Old English *tilian* (“to work hard for, to cultivate”), with associated words in Dutch, Celtic and German that mean opportunity, agreeable and pleasant. To till is to work hard, to strive for the good and agreeable. Tilth, then, is the quality of carefully tended and worked soil, a term that belongs to the farm and ancient soil of our speech. If we stay put long enough we might some day say of a good story teller, “Her words have tilth.”

The Three Bones in the Inner Ear Run on Trust Alone

for Mt. St. Helens

While computers raise the Titanic
the earth is splitting its skin like a baked apple.
I'm still trying to learn how to walk edges
and bounce off walls
while weaving my way through crowds.
I listen for what the deepest blood says to me
while running interference with the soft tissues.

The bones know but they don't tell.
Austere in their simple cleanliness,
they know they will outlast
the rest by 6,000 years
and can't be bribed.
I passionately wait for the next message
and I believe it perfectly.

The River with One Bank: Robert Sund in the Wake of Cascadian Zen

The evening river is level and motionless—
The spring colors just open to their full.
Suddenly a wave carries the moon away
And the tidal water comes with its freight of stars
—Yang Di

1. The Dao of the Tide

Throughout the history of Chinese poetry, Yang Di (569–618), poet and emperor of the Sui Dynasty, may rank among the first of the Chinese poets to explicitly invoke the power of water to reflect the moon and the stars. Indeed, one can easily imagine Yang Di gazing out at the evening river and observing the moon and the stars in the tidal water below. The power of the water to produce a reflection and even a mirage was not unknown to later Chinese poets, including Su Dongpo (1037–1101). His poem, “Mirage at Sea,” presciently describes the delight afforded from seeing a mirage off the coast of Teng-Chu, “Banked towers, blue-green hills rise in the frosty dawn—the mirage! a wonder to astound the elders.” The mirage suddenly appears, then disappears, “Late sun, a lone lost bird in boundless distance: I see only green sea—a buffed bronze mirror.” Inspired by his Daoist / Chan (Zen) lineage, Su’s poetry bears an awareness

that such a mirage reflects the illusory and transitory nature of all things, “To the east, clouds and sea: emptiness on emptiness; and do immortals come and go in that bright void? From undulations of the floating world all forms are born, but no gates of cowrie locked on palaces of pearl—it is all illusion!” (*Selected Poems of Su Tung-p’o* [Dongpo], 112).

If we are to imagine the undulations of this floating world as an illusion, we might even venture to sail across the sea to the great Kamakura period Zen master, Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253) and his fascicle, *Gabyō* [*Painting of a Rice Cake*] from his *Shōbōgenzō* (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*). Here Dōgen claims that “unsurpassed enlightenment”—*anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*—“is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting.” Among those ten thousand things that appear as Buddha Nature, “we should know that a painted rice cake is your face after your parents were born, your face before your parents were born” (*Master Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, Book 2, 279). Like the painted rice cake that we ourselves always already are, the mirage produced by the mirror of the sea is itself an expression of *this* floating world, the elemental ephemerality of not merely artistic production but ultimately all of Nature itself. Just as the tidal water momentarily seizes Yang Ti’s attention, the art of poetry embodies its own spontaneous rhythm of fluidity and evanescence. The rhythm of the poem oscillates between form and non-form akin to play of the *Tao* in the *Daodejing*, “as soft and yielding as water / Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible / nothing can surpass it.” If we are to return to the final two lines of Yang Ti’s poem, *Suddenly a wave carries the moon away / and the tidal water comes with its freight of stars*, we might choose to playfully invert the linear sequence of the poem if only to highlight the power of the moon to carry the wave. Since philosophers like Laozi and Confucius were intent upon providing a new reality for the role of the heavens, namely by presenting the heavens as an empirical phenomenon, the power of the heavens and indeed the moon to affect change upon the earth afforded the opportunity to introduce the central concept of the *Dao* as “the generative cosmological principle that drives change.” This conjoining of the heaven and earth is perhaps most evident among those coastal regions where the horizon of the sea reaches

the land and intermingles with the earth. It is precisely this confluence marked by both coastal and intertidal zones, where we might begin to appreciate the East Asian and Cascadian approach to the poetic word as remaining inseparable from the rhythm of the *Dao*.

If we are to truly listen to the *Dao* in the wake of a rabid intellectualism that has marked both the rise and demise of Western thinking, we now find ourselves called to inaugurate a return to the immanence of nature as the source of our own embodied lived experience. Observing how the earth comes into contact with the sky as we gaze out upon the horizon of the sea, we become ever more aware that the art of poetry and the elementality of art as a practice and an offering resides in the rhythmic motion of the tides. Here one cannot help but recall one story from the Indigenous history of Cascadia beginning with the Tlingit myth of the Raven, the Trickster, who lived near the shore of the “Big Water” before there were tides. Raven and his people enjoyed eating the clams that washed up along the beach. However, as their population grew, there was less food. The Great Spirit speaks to Raven in a dream requesting that Raven travel to a cave at the end of the world to visit an old woman who holds the tide line across her lap. Raven tricks the old woman into *letting go* of the line so that the water will fall. In the Tlingit culture, the tide becomes synonymous with the rhythms of the “Big Water” responsible for the survival of all life.

The ancient Greeks also understood the force of the tides as essential to their own survival. Prior to Plato’s *Timaeus* and the caricature of the earth as a living being and hence its tides as its breath, Empedocles explores the rhythm of the tides in conjunction with the themes of liquidity and love. Inspired by Thales’ own meditations on water, the motions of our thoughts are characterized by the rhythmic play of water in their coming and going. Such thinking does not occur in the brain but in the surging of blood around the heart. Although the subsequent histories of Western philosophy, including Plato, privilege the role of the head (*cephalos*) as the source of thinking, Empedocles’ contributions to a heart-centered thinking is unique since it parallels the ancient Chinese theme of heart-mind (*xin*). A predominant metaphor in early Chinese thinking, the heart-mind

is a dual source of cognition and affection. Such a relationship between cognition and affection retains a central importance in both Daoist and Confucian thought. Laozi, the founder of Taoism, perceives the heart as the source of the connection between the human being and nature, “Man is similar to heaven and earth in kind, and the heart is his master.” The unity of heart and mind is also conveyed in the writings of Lu Jiuyuan, “The universe is my heart, and my heart is the universe” (*Heart and Cognition in Ancient Chinese Philosophy*, 32).

II. The Wave of Cascadia

Turning our attention to the place where we find ourselves here in Cascadia, we might now listen to the voice of the Ish River Country poet, Robert Sund, whose own words resonate with the tidal rhythms of the heart-mind. In the Great Sea of Zen, and the wave that is Cascadia, Robert Sund’s poetry abides in its wake. Echoing the introduction to Robert Aitken Rōshi’s *A Zen Wave: Bashō’s Haiku and Zen* referring to Imakita Kōsen, an illustrious master of Engaku Monastery in Kamakura, Japan, who commented on the recorded sayings of Confucius and Mencius in a collection titled *Zenkai Ichiran (One Wave of the Zen Sea)*, how shall we make manifest the Great Zen Sea animating Sund’s poetry of Cascadia as “yet another wave of the great mind ocean that pervades all things?”

Born on November 29, 1929, in Olympia Washington to Swede-Finn parents, Robert Sund was adopted as a young child by Evert and Elsa Sund of Elma, Chehalis Valley, growing up on the family farm on Swede Hill with his parents, grandparents, and brother. At the age of eighteen, Sund attended the University of Washington where he met his future teacher and mentor, the poet, Theodore Roethke, who set him on his life’s path. Like his Zen poet predecessor, Ryōkan Taigu, who was grounded in classical Chinese poetry, Sund’s gift was his poetic voice, having been born into the Swedish language claiming it as his mother tongue. As an inquisitive student of nature, Sund first became intrigued by medicine as his chosen course of study before finally finding his own medicine-man in Roethke, who drew him deeper and deeper into the natural rhythms of

language. In *Notes from Disappearing Lake: The River Journals of Robert Sund*, Sund recalls those poems that were to have the most influence upon him. “Aside from some of Theodore Roethke’s “North American Sequence” “about the only time I see in poetry what I’ve seen on the river is in the old Chinese poets, as in these lines by Yang Ti, an emperor of the Sui Dynasty more than 1,300 years ago: Suddenly a wave carries the moon away / And the tidal water comes with its freight of stars.” While working on a wheat harvest in Walla Walla during the summer of 1963, Sund learned that his beloved teacher, Roethke, had died, prompting him to pen his first collection of poems, *Bunch Grass* (1969). During his life as a wandering poet throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s, traveling from Seattle to the Yakima River Valley, to Everett, to Shi Shi Beach on the Olympic Peninsula, and finally to his fisherman’s shack near Fishtown on the North Fork of the Skagit River, Sund developed an interest and cultivated a practice in the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana tradition, encountering his teacher, Deschung Rinpoche, the cofounder of Sakya Monastery in Seattle. In a letter to the monastery composed before his death, Sund writes that Deschung Rinpoche presented him with his Tibetan name, Nyawang (Powerful Voice) Ton Yo. “Ever after, I have tried to honor his being, his generous spirit, and kindness to me.” In the tantric tradition of Vajrayana, Sund’s river journals reflect his own experience leading an itinerant life as endless ocean and limitless sky. Each moment reflects the spontaneity of one’s true nature. Like Sund who traveled extensively from city to city and coastal village to coastal village for over a decade before inhabiting his river-shack on the Skagit River outside of Fishtown, Ryōkan describes his middle years of wandering or pilgrimage (*angya*) as a monk drifting across the country, meditating, and camping under the stars: “On a grass pillow, / my journey’s lodging / changes night by night. / Dreams of my village remain.”

In his *Ish River* collection (1983), Sund invokes Ryōkan in a series of poems entitled, “Stumbling through Towns.” Traveling through “Seattle in April: Cloudy Day, High Wind: “In the miles and miles of this city, there is no house for me. I remember peaceful moments, away...I spend the afternoon closely looking at the map: roads, and rivers, and mountains” Exposed to the seasonal manifestations of nature, both Ryōkan and Sund

take to life on the road by practicing their own forms of austerity: "...No brush, how pathetic I am! / This morning again, / I walk with a cane / and knock on the temple door" (*Sky Above, Great Wind*, 6). However, such austerity also came with an unmatched generosity of spirit, especially Ryōkan's own interactions with children, "Children, / let's go to the mountain / to view violets. / If they scatter away tomorrow, / what can we do?" (*Sky Above, Great Wind*, 191). Such generosity is also poignantly expressed in Sund's own small gifts of poetry to his friends, "These little matchstick poems of mine make you smile. Their harmlessness is the talk of the town. But it's better to have a box of them in your pocket than to sleep with ten fire engines in the living room. And I'm satisfied if when you strike them, suddenly they light up my face and go out" (*Ish River Country*, 163).

Ryōkan's reputation as the Great Fool known for spontaneously expressing his own playful nature is most famously illustrated in a brief account of performing calligraphy for children, "When Ryōkan was begging in the highway station town Tsubame, a child with a sheet of paper came to him and said, "Rev. Ryōkan, please write something on this paper." Ryōkan asked, "What are you going to use it for?" "I am going to make a kite and fly it. Please write some words to call the wind." Right away, Ryōkan wrote four big characters, "Sky above, great wind," and gave the calligraphy to the child" (*Sky Above, Great Wind*, 7). Since Zen is sometimes described as "good for nothing," Ryōkan's calligraphy speaks to poetry as a skillful practice (*upāya*) as exemplified by the concluding verse of his *kanshi*, "My Poems aren't Poems," "Who says that my poems are poems? / My poems aren't poems at all / When you understand / that my poems really aren't poems / Then we can talk poetry together." In his introduction to *The Essential Bashō*, Sam Hamill similarly describes how the poet strives for the quality called *amari-no-kokoro*, in which the poem reaches far beyond the words themselves: "When he invokes the call of a cuckoo, its very name, *hototogisu* (pronounced with a virtually silent closing vowel), invokes its lonely cry. Things are as they are," Since the place of the poem and poetry are indistinguishable from the life and experience of the poet, it may be fitting that we reflect upon the theme of place in the poetry of Ryōkan and Sund, particularly Ryōkan's Go-go-an (Five Scoop

Hut) on Mount Kugami and Sund's fishing shack on the Skagit River in Ish River country. Inspired by the rustic simplicity of the Daoist and Chan (Zen) Buddhist poets of the Tang and Song Dynasties, especially the Tang poet, Li Bo (701–762), Song poet, Su Dongpo (1037–1101), and most decisively his Zen haiku friends, Bashō (1644–1694), Ryōkan (1758–1831), and Issa Kobayashi (1763–1828). Sund's abode among the flora and fauna of the Skagit River estuary cannot be detached from the playful spontaneity of his own artistic expression.

Beholden to the tidal rhythms of day and season, Sund refers to his own abode as "Disappearing Lake," a place where he would practice his crafts of poetry, calligraphy, and music. Marked by gradual shifts in the ebb and flow of the tide at Disappearing Lake, Sund's periods of residence in his river shack only further cultivated an acute attention to the myriad manifestations of the Buddha-dharma. In the intertidal zone where the inland sea brings heaven and earth together, Sund's daily rituals reflect the rhythmic interplay between isolation and community, solitude and friendship, "Winter weeds / outside my shack / High water / in the early morning / The tops of marsh grass / stick up / above the 12 foot tide / In the wind, bent grass / writes on the crests of waves / I sit alone with / my first cup of tea" (*Notes from Disappearing Lake*, 6). In kinship with those Chinese poets, Lu-Yu, Yang-Ti, Kojjū who sat by their bamboo houses unable to sleep, Sund composed much of his poetry by the light of the moon. Such lunar propensities also reflect Ryōkan's own poetic sensibility, "On a pitch-dark night road I get lost watching the moon set behind the far mountain" (*Sky Above, Great Wind*, 119) and "Won't you sing? I will get up and dance. How can I sleep with the timeless moon this evening" (*Sky Above, Great Wind*, 192). Ryōkan's meditations about the place of the moon within human consciousness are peppered by his own series of questions and interjections:

Forgetting both light and object who is this?
 ...Who in this evening looks at it?
 What does it illuminate?
 How many autumns come and go?
 Looking at the moon, facing the moon, there is

no end.
 ...Whose pond reflects the most luminescence?
 Which wanderer has the heart of fall?
 Don't you see Jiangxi,
 who on the night of moon gazing
 recognized that Puyuan alone had passed beyond
 forms?
 Don't you also hear
 Yaoshan's famous laughter under the moon
 resounding through the village from his solitary peak?
 These are the stories in ancient times that lead seekers of the way
 to look toward waxing and waning with empty minds.
 Having carried much longing for the ancient,
 I also face the moon, robe moistened by evening dew.
 —*Sky Above, Great Wind*, 128–129

Like Sund, Ryōkan also experienced the same oscillation between the poles of reclusive solitude and communal friendship as captured in the imagery of his poem, “Autumn Twilight”: “What quiet loneliness fills the autumn air! / As I lean on my staff, the wind turns cold / A solitary village lies shrouded in mist / By a country bridge, a figure passes / bound for home / An old crow comes to roost in the ancient forest / Lines of wild geese slant toward the horizon / Only a monk in black robes remains / Standing motionless before the river at twilight” (*Great Fool*, 117).

III. *The Great Zen Sea*

In an evening poetry gathering with friends presented in the documentary, *In the Hall of Light: The Work and Life of Robert Sund*, Sund returns to his favorite poem from Zen Master Eihei Dōgen: “To what shall I liken the world? / Moonlight, reflected / In dewdrops, / Shaken from a crane’s bill.” The poetic imagery of twilight, moonlight, and the shining of the stars in the heavens resurface in a collection of poems, *The River with One*



Olympic Coast II (Rialto Beach 2017)

Bank: Poems from Shi Shi, documenting Sund's seasonal pilgrimage to Shi Shi beach on the Olympic peninsula. The poem, "A Thousand Windows" retells Sund's experience of sitting by the fire at night and listening to the sea as he falls asleep and dreams, "And the sound of the sea is like / the feel of an open hand / At night, the sea is like a cardboard box / slapped down, / like a freight train, / a waterfall that suddenly dries up" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 127). The sounds of the sea are expressed in a cacophonous and kaleidoscopic series of images, "the sea is like an elephant, / like a paper-sack, / like a net of leaves flung into the air. / Like a man alone who / suddenly finds himself joyful. / The sea is like a glass of wine set down, / taste remembered-pool of grape / above the crystal stem"—presented in their confluence, not unlike a rising wave. The linear cadence accompanying the presentation of each new sound and image reaches a crescendo as Sund concludes by returning to the title of the poem, "And the sea has a thousand windows / and not one of them is broken" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 128). Despite the eccentricity of each sound and image disjoined from the preceding one, "letter slipped under the door, buffalo horns clashing, last page in the book, full starry sky after weeks of rain," when conjoined they present a vestigial purity to the sea, each window retaining its own incandescence. The eternal and unbroken incandescence of the sea illuminates each thing in their singularity and suchness. To live in harmony with the elemental offerings of the Great Sea is to live by the Taoist principle of *wu-wei*, one with the ebb and flow of the tides. In the poem that follows the incandescent sea of a thousand unbroken images, "In America," Sund details the detritus that the sea brings forth if we are to only open our hands to its great wealth, "In America, the sea brings up rubber gloves, / orange spots on the pure sand. / And egg cartons and grapefruit and glass jars... / washed up in this pure morning" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 129). Despite the garbage thrown into the sea, as evident by the floating island of trash off the Pacific Coast of North America, the sea bears within itself the power of generation and renewal.

To conclude, I shall now turn to the themes of generation and renewal with respect to Sund's distinctive attention to friendship. In his poem, "Friends" from *The River with One Bank: Poems from Shi Shi*, Sund describes

the bounty afforded by a life replete with friends, "Friends make us fuller / When friends leave, their light stays behind" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 134). Comparing the bright beacon of friendship in its radical exorbitance to "the blue sea that supports the white breakers that come and go," the blue sea is beset by a lunar power, a nocturnal vigilance, a fire at night that withstands the comings and goings of the day, "No matter how far I go / I long to return and be with friends. / It is never the same fire I left, but beneath it are the ashes / of all our meetings that have gone before" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 134). In another poem inspired by the Zen poet, Ryōkan, entitled "Autumn Equinox," Sund meditates on being taken by the sea as his lunar companion, "In the place between waves, especially / Shi Shi, carry me / deeper into your silences. / Take me down / to the pure speech of whales / down through swimming seals / and schools of salmon. / Take me far" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 37). Despite affirming his own demise as he is carried out by the receding tide, the sea remains Sund's friend and companion in the recantation, "be with me..." "Be with me, in the world of flying birds / and gulls / and the ravens / and the songbirds among the driftwood. / Be with me, on nights like this— / I can hear the earth crying for a voice! / Be with me when I sit looking out at the sea / and don't know what to do, / some days helpless, some days / like a lion rising" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 138). Sund's proximity to the sea at Shi Shi beach, like a lover who has never left him, steadies those fleeting moods of hope and despair, "While I go between these waves / of day and night / make the bottoms of my feet / tough as hide, and / keep my back strong." To live in intimacy with the Great Sea demands the surrender of the self to a way of life brimming with unbounded generosity. Attuned to the rhythms of the tide, Sund's poetry calls us to awaken to the Great Sea of Zen that is always here and now among us.

In his re-inhabitation of an abandoned fishing shack in a place that felt "far, far back" in time, Sund offers the gift of poetry to his old friends, Su Dongpo and Ryōkan, "Where are you, Su Tung-p'o? / I want to know / what are you thinking / this time of day / Frost in the marsh grass / and the tide rising" (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 206). Like Sund, Su Dongpo

also traversed the earth to finally return to the sea, “The new poem of woven words—what good is it, to follow and fade with all else when east wind blows?” (STP, 113). In playful dedication to his old friend, Ryōkan, Sund pens a poem in his name, “A little gray feather somewhere floated down in my writing paper / How frail! / An inch long arched on its slim bone body more like a mist than anything else rolling over the white paper soon gone / a light wind claims it / My only visitor today” (*Poems from Ish River Country*, 181). Although the great Zen bird, Ryōkan, remained attuned to the seasons like “a flutter of birds passing through heaven,” he also longed to return to the hermitage-nest of his thatched hut on Mount Kugami, “Ancient vines strangle the trees / Mountain torrents rush helter-skelter through ravines / Of ten paths I take, nine end up leading nowhere / But the old man who lives in the hills still remembers me from long ago And kindly sees me all the way to my hut” (*Great Fool*, 178). Such old friends, Su Dongpo, Li Bo, Bashō, Ryōkan, and Issa have become Sund’s shack medicine. In homage to his two great teachers, Roethke and Rinpoche, Sund’s practice of poetry, calligraphy, and kelp music also may serve to cultivate our own attention to the myriad manifestations of the Buddha-dharma in the Great Zen Sea, “Inspiration comes when it wants to like a bird that sings at night. Like rain that falls on a hill, or the sea at sunset when the waves burn like doors to eternity” (*Notes from Disappearing Lake*, 48). Like the great bell of the Gion Temple that reverberates into every human heart to wake us to the fact that all is impermanent and fleeting, the parting words of Robert Sund resonate throughout the mountains and rivers of Cascadia without end. Good tidings!

At the end of my life,
I will lie down in
a little boat,
and float out on
the sea of
these friendships.

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One's Own Good Nature: Sam Hamill and Cascadian Zen

I met Sam Hamill in Cascadia in 2005, in Vancouver, B.C., where I was interloping at an academic writing conference that was filled with angst but also a few glimmers of light. Through the auspices of the poet Steve Kuusisto I delivered a handful of my translations of the 12th century Tamil woman, poet, and saint Avvaiyar to Mr. Hamill, who liked them and invited me to lunch. That began thirteen years of sharing meals, sometimes in Port Townsend, sometimes in Seattle, sometimes in Anacortes, and sometimes in more far flung and exotic locations such as Columbus, Ohio.

Over those years, I came to think I was actually friends with two Sams instead of one. Or rather, two aspects of this one and sometimes very complicated figure. There was Sam Hamill the poet and translator, in whom the intellect could dance among the words. And there was also Sam Hamill the suffering human being, who could be as cruel as he was kind, and as ungenerous as he was generous. As can we all, in our own measure.

Sometimes I'd visit Sam and feel as we were talking that this time, I was hanging out with Sam Hamill the man, with everything else as far removed as before I arrived. Then seemingly out of nowhere the poet would emerge and I would recognize a voice that I knew from Sam's poems. It was as if Sam Hamill the poet existed within or inside Sam Hamill the man, only waiting for the right moment to emerge.

But as I've thought of him in the months since his death, I've begun to think it's equally true that Sam Hamill the man existed within or inside Sam Hamill the poet, and that there was, and continues to be, an intricate interrelationship between these two aspects of this singular person.

That's part of the mystery of who Sam was, and it's the mystery of that mystery that I most want to honor in these reflections.

✿

The heart of what I want to say is very simple. Poems of a certain kind can occasion transformation, both in their poet and in their listener, reader, speaker, or singer.

Similarly, Buddhist practice, Zen practice, can occasion transformation. It can foster deep healing and transformation of suffering, which is also transformation of the world.

For Sam Hamill, the practice of poetry and the practice of Zen are intertwined, almost to the point of being one.

And because he came to dwell and practice in Cascadia—is of, as he says, Cascadia—we could equally call his poetry and his practice “Cascadian Zen.”

✿

At the same time, such a name obscures as much as it reveals, as all names obscure and reveal.

This is particularly true with respect to Sam Hamill's practice because he not only went to school on the old Buddhist poets, but also on Confucius and Lao Tzu. He moves easily through “the three ways,” *san chiao*, of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Like Confucius, he sought clarity and precision with words.

Like Lao Tzu, he knew that no name names the unnameable.

And like the Buddha, he knew that hanging on to ideas, even Buddhist ideas, brings suffering.

And so, following the *Diamond Sūtra*, The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion, we might say:

What we may call Cascadian Zen
is not in fact Cascadian Zen.
That is why it is truly Cascadian Zen.

✽

Such a paradox serves to return us to practice. And among the gifts of Sam's poems are clear pointers for practice.

My favorite is the *ars poetica* that opens his book *Gratitude*, in which he speaks of the poem which

—for one brief moment

or an hour—reveals
the tragic human spirit
in the very act
of imagining itself
cured of the sickness of self.

This is to me the key starting point: our ill-conceived sense of self. As Sam says in "To Amy, before Her Wedding,"

I
must empty myself of self

before I can see
even the simplest of truths.

Or as he says in a poem to Hayden Carruth:

All wars begin at home
within the warring self.
No, our poems cannot stop
a war, not this nor any war,
but the one that rages from
within. Which is the first
and only step.

And how one takes that step? Sam's answer appears in the same *ars poetica* in *Gratitude*:

All
the suffering of this world
can be truly felt,
absorbed and transcended, just
by the act of listening

to that deepest voice
speaking from within.

✽

In a sense, there's nothing more to say. All we have to do is listen. All we have to do is offer attention. When I began my own stumbling attempts at meditation, Sam said to me, "Nothing like beginning the day with a little clarity."

And yet, as Sam himself has done in poem after poem, we can foster that clarity by continuing to listen. It is the continuing, the long practice, that transforms.

✽

One may ask what kind of transformation this is. Here I've found a lesser-known book by Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Transformation at the Base: Fifty Verses on the Nature of Consciousness*, to offer its own clarity.

At the base of our consciousness is what Thích Nhất Hạnh calls "Store Consciousness." Everything we experience—perceptions, feelings, thoughts, our sense of self—exist first as seeds in this deepest layer of our mind, which stores them. Hence the name. These seeds can be dormant, in which case we don't consciously experience them, or they can grow and take form in our experience and in the world. We may carry a seed, for instance, of anger or rage, though most of the time it may be sleeping and hidden. But given the right conditions within and without, it can erupt into waking life, bringing with it its own energy and dynamics.

The same is true for a seed of attentiveness, or compassion, or peace.

It is through mindful attention to what grows from these seeds that these forms—these mental formations—are transformed. This is why Thích Nhất Hạnh speaks of the miracle of mindfulness. As he puts it in the forty-fifth verse of his fifty:

When sunlight shines,
It helps all vegetation grow.
When mindfulness shines,
It transforms all mental formations.

As a person's practice deepens, this transformation may reach all the way down to store consciousness, where the seeds themselves are transformed. Then we have transformation at the base. And since our store consciousness is not merely our own, but also shared and collective, transformation at the base is also transformation of our shared and collective experience. It transforms the entire cosmos.

As Sam says in "A Pisan Canto,"

What's at stake is merely everything.

‡

Including what we call Cascadia. Or perhaps we should say the practice of Cascadia, which is simply the practice of being where we are—and being centered where we are—which of course is both simple and not simple at all, and simple because it is not simple.

"No place is special," says Sam in "Summer Rain,"

except we make it so
through myth or habitude.

And this happens in ordinary words:

ordinary words
that lead lives into transformation
every day, or can lead
lives into Hell, and do, every day

What matters, then, in the practice of both poetry and life is the quality of one's attention. That's what transforms within and without, and allows the possibility of paradise—made, as Sam liked to say, quoting Elytis, of the same material as hell.

Once more, "A Pisan Canto":

nor is Paradise artificial
but is one's own good nature.

‡

Here is one more way to put it. At the end of "Edible Earth," Sam writes,

Our prayers will not be answered
by some future heaven,
but by what's planted
in our hearts already

The practice of poetry, like the practice of Zen, offers the possibility that what is planted in our hearts, in the deepest layer of our consciousness, may grow and flourish and be present in the world. As Thích Nhất Hạnh puts it, “We can create paradise or hell in our own minds.” And because what seems to be in our minds also shapes what seems to be beyond our minds, we are again at the first and only step.

If this seems paradoxical, that’s because it is paradoxical. Only paradox can approach what lies at the edge of words and makes even the most ordinary and common experience numinous. As Sam wrote in a poem for Morris Graves:

The
dance of the intellect, the dance of wild
imagination, illuminates what
cannot otherwise be known—a kōan,
one’s rational and irrational mind
at one.

The last time I saw Sam, we happened to watch a documentary about Eihei-ji, Dōgen’s monastery, where Sam had spent a few days during his and Gray’s year living in Japan. As the documentary finished, he suddenly turned to me and said:

Fifty-five years of practice.
Same death as everyone else.

That too is a kōan. That too is a pointer for practice.

✱

So what is Cascadian Zen?

Cascadian Zen, we might say, is not simply Zen practiced *in* Cascadia—transformation *in* Cascadia—but also the practice *of* Cascadia, the transformation *of* Cascadia.

The healing and transformation of Cascadia is the healing and transformation of our own hearts.

As Sam once said in a poem to Adrienne Rich:

“I dreamed you were a poem,”

you wrote a lover,
and I often think you, too,
are a long poem
whose gift is the gift of change,
of sublime transformation—

And what is Cascadia
but a realm of transformation
the clear waters of earth and sky
cascading through time
offering what they offer
to all of us

CASCADIAN Zen

Cascadian Zen: Bioregional Writings on Cascadia Here and Now, Volume 1

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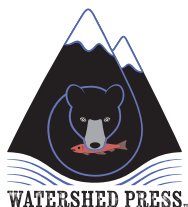
We publish work awakening the diversity of place in all manifestations.

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volume one