



“The Great Blue Heron and The Great Rainbow Trout Yogi in Phenomenal Space, Mental Space and The Space of Consciousness” (1979)

Eel River Watershed

Morris Graves

CASCADIAN zen

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writings
on cascadia
here and now

volume two

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Introduction: Another Name for Time

It never stops. Right under your feet, on the earth's surface, there are rocks four billion years old, and others that are geologically brand new. Here in Cascadia, quite a lot of rock was formed on Mount Hood around 1780, and near the Iskut River in British Columbia between 1860 and 1900, and on Mount Saint Helens in 1980. More new rock has formed on Saint Helens since, some as recently as 2008. Old or new, rocks are also always on the move.

A hundred twenty million years ago, North America was vaguely its present shape, and in vaguely its present location on the planetary surface, but South America was then connected to Africa, not to North America, and Greenland was welded to Quebec. Europe was an archipelago off the west coast of Asia. The Mediterranean was a strait, open wider to the east than to the west. Biologically too, though the world was recognizably itself, it wasn't quite the world we know. There were no hominins or hominids nor even any primates then; no ungulates, no elephants, no whales; but insects, frogs, fish, birds, mammals, and flowering plants were spreading rapidly over the planet. They weren't, however, spreading to Cascadia, because Cascadia didn't exist. Most of the rocks that compose it were still making their way here. Some were out in the Pacific, moving slowly north and east; some were in the earth's womb, molten and unborn.

As Cascadia was forming, the rest of North America changed too. It split, first of all, into three gigantic pieces: West, Southeast, and North. Less than seventy million years ago, as these came back together, leaving Greenland on its own, the planet's vibrant biological fabric was shredded. There is mounting evidence that an asteroid roughly the size of Mount Everest smashed into the coast of Yucatan. Waves a mile high erupted in the oceans and surged across the land. Molten rock flew up and dropped back down, setting the forests on fire. Sulfites spread throughout the atmosphere, acidifying the oceans and provoking a swift collapse of the global food chain. Within days, the asteroid did as much damage as humans have done in the last 2,000 years—and with much the same result. Then as now, the damage done had momentum enough to go forward on its own. Within a century or two, three quarters of all species living on earth had ceased to exist.

But it never stops. Over the next few million years, in ecologies that were full of empty niches, new and different species were born. The earliest primates—our own ancestral line—were among them. And so, concealed in the great new flowering, sixty million years ago, were the seeds of the next great devastation. Creation never stops, and so destruction doesn't either. Or the other way around, or both at once. The inextricability of life and death is older than life or death. Creation and destruction, taken together, are another name for time.

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Fast forward to 20,000 years ago. All the other species in the genus *Homo* had died off or been killed. So had all the other Australopithecines—all the other genera, in other words, that once made up our subtribe of the hominids. Humans were alone on their own twig of the evolutionary tree, and they had colonized most of the planet. People keep looking for proof that humans had come to Cascadia by that time, and the proof may be there, hiding. But at that date the northern half of Cascadia lay frozen under a heavy lid of ice—so heavy it was a mile thick in places. Most of the southern part of the region was scrubland and tundra. There were

trees in some locations, but not many and not large. And there were mountains, white year-round except where the volcanoes were erupting. A hundred thousand years before that, Cascadia had been much warmer, wetter, and heavily forested. Humans would have loved the place if they'd been here. Then, over several millennia, it cooled, the ice sheets formed, and for 100,000 years the climate shifted back and forth.

There were at least two dozen temperate intervals during those years. In the temperate intervals it was chilly. The rest of the time, which was most of the time, it was cold. Biomass was low in the southern part of the region and almost absent in the north.

Some 15,000 years ago, it began to get wetter and warmer in earnest again. There was one more twelve-century cold snap still to come—an event that geologists call the Younger Dryas, which was the last gasp of the Pleistocene—but a climatological corner had been turned. Ferns, fungi, and conifers, flowering plants, fishes and worms, insects and spiders, snakes and amphibians, birds and mammals wandered into Cascadia and stayed. Some of these species had been here before; others had not. This wave of repopulation and colonization hasn't yet stopped—but in the last few hundred years it has entered a new phase: another big corner is being turned.

The new phase is not, of course, confined to Cascadia alone. It affects the continent, the hemisphere, the globe. But each specific place, in each specific moment—and each particular organism, gripped by its own challenges—responds however it can. The dense felt of climate-crisis stories will pretty soon be thicker than the ice sheet ever was.

Humans are one of the new animal species that have been coming to Cascadia, liking it here, and making themselves a part of the place for 15,000 years and maybe longer.

But only in the last few centuries have people come here hoping, as we say, to *make a killing*. Hoping, that is, to dig up, cut down, and sell off everything of value and walk off with the proceeds. Geologically speaking, there's nothing abnormal in making a killing or making a mess. It's the kind of thing that landslides, earthquakes, and asteroid strikes have been doing for billions of years. But those—so it is said—are inanimate

forces, not sentient beings. Maybe it's true that inanimate forces have no feelings, no perceptions, no intentions. But they do have a kind of moral integrity. Earthquakes and landslides don't sell their souls. They can't be bought off. They also don't enlarge their operations or decide to come more often just because there's money to be made.

Humanity is no more than a fine scratch on the geological calendar. The earth is 20,000 times older than we are as a species. But the human population has ballooned in recent centuries. At the same time, humans have got their hands on the levers of power: large-scale mechanization, fossil fuels, electricity, electronics, nuclear fission and fusion, and genetic modification, coupled with big-time economic and political organization. Can humans be trusted with that power, which formerly belonged to the gods alone? Could the gods, for that matter, be trusted with such power when they alone possessed it? Poets have not been slow to ask such questions. They occur in the earliest traces of human literature, thousands of years before humans became the global nightmare we are now. And poets have floated a number of answers. Some of their answers are comedies; more by far are tragedies. A few of their answers—often the most popular—are romances. But these particular romances, whether you find them in religious scripture and commentary or in poetry and science fiction, tend to have an eerie twist. They mostly end in another world—a place called paradise or heaven, or another planet in another solar system: another Eden to which the chosen are whisked away as earth is destroyed.

Humans aren't the only species that will cheerfully demolish the very things it needs. Mice, rats, cowbirds, cuckoos, pine beetles, hairworms, rusts, some bacteria, some viruses, and many other creatures will trash their own environments when they can—which is to say, when the forces that normally hold them in check fail to function. Perhaps there is no living species that wouldn't wreck the world if it were suddenly made king. But there is also no species that isn't part of an ecological fabric. An ecology is a system of checks and balances—animate but leaderless and decentralized. Ecologies aren't omnipotent or immortal, but because they are decentralized, they can and do have some of the egoless moral integrity we expect from inanimate forces. Under normal conditions, the

ambient ecology restrains each species from acquiring too much power or a disproportionate population. Humans have tried hard to cut themselves free of these restrictions. We've ripped a hole in the ecological cloth. Does that mean *Homo sapiens* is divinely ordained or uniquely malicious? Not very likely. We did the planet no more damage than many other species during the first 98% or 99% of our existence. We are not the only species that runs amok when conditions permit, and we are hardly the only species unwilling to learn from its own mistakes. What's unsettling is that, right here and now, we have a ringside seat at our own funeral games, and some of us are watching while some of us are not, because a lot of us are busy playing out those very games on an unprecedented scale. For those who *are* watching, the social schizophrenia implicit in this arrangement is something of a strain.

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Locusts, I think, are a useful point of reference. Locusts are not a maniacal species that flies in out of nowhere, strips the fields, and then moves on. Locusts are ordinary grasshoppers engaged in peculiar behavior. Grasshoppers in general have populations of modest density and live fairly solitary lives. Many creatures eat them. They in turn eat mostly grass. But some grasshopper species will form gigantic swarms if the food supply, the weather, and lazy predators allow them to get away with it. (Food supply in particular is significant. Serious locust plagues and large-scale agriculture are closely related phenomena.) When their populations swell, grasshoppers start to live in a social bubble, engaging more with each other than with the world. So long as they are in that bubble, it's as if they were blind to nature *as an environment* and blind to themselves *in relation to that environment*. As if the world were just one party after another, a string of feasts to be continued until all the cupboards are bare. A swarm of locusts is decentralized, like an ecology, but it isn't an ecology; it's a composite entity with a personality gone wrong.

Gold rushes, oil rushes, the great American buffalo slaughter, the near-annihilation of the whales, and the continuing destruction of the

world's great forests are swarm behavior in humans. But buffalo herds and whales and old-growth forests aren't annual crops and can't be replanted like fields of grain. The swarm can only demolish them once. When the feast is finished, there's managerial work to do, finding the swarm a different game. Whaling and logging are also difficult, dangerous work, so human swarming can be socially complex. There may, for example, be fallers and riggers and choker-setters, grapple yarder operators, boom-men and boom-boat drivers, barge hands and barge skippers, foremen and bosses and shareholders, publicists and lobbyists, and much else in between. In other environments, from pigeon hunts to the internet, human swarms can be more homogeneous, like locusts. Unlike locusts, humans can also invent nutritionless, imaginary crops that swarms of real humans will feed on. But hierarchical or not, managed or not, hoodwinked or not, happy or not, a swarm is unchecked and unbalanced. It doesn't fit in. So it can't, like an ecology, sustain itself for long.

Locusts turn back into grasshoppers by laying their eggs in the soil and then dying, giving the next generation a fresh start. This works for them, where more elaborate methods wouldn't, because adult grasshoppers live for only a few months. When the nymphs emerge from the egg, their parents and elders are already dead. The young are wholly on their own. That option isn't available to mammals, nor to birds. We feed and educate our young because, if we don't, our young will perish. But how do we raise them to be humans, rather than locusts in human disguise?

One way we try to do this is, of course, by telling stories. The stories of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Odysseus and Achilles, Iphigeneia and Antigone, Lear and Macbeth and Othello—and the story of Svend Foyn, inventor of the steam-powered whale catcher, the bow mounted harpoon cannon, and the grenade-headed harpoon. Some of us, at least, tell our children and ourselves how Foyn's inventions made him rich but made the world's oceans and the planet as a whole immeasurably poorer. We tell ourselves how even Foyn's philanthropy helped impoverish the world, because—as the very word philanthropy implies—it too was unchecked and unbalanced: it sought to benefit humans alone.

We also try to teach our children and each other how the world actu-

ally works. How an ecological web restrains and also benefits the species that compose it. How mosses are different from grasses and grasses from ferns, angiosperms from gymnosperms, vertebrates from invertebrates. How old-growth forests are different from cornfields, and how forestry, as a consequence, can't be effectively practised as if it were agriculture. We learn what we can learn, and try to teach what we are learning, in the hope that this will keep more human mobs and swarms from forming. Inanimate forces don't work that way, nor grasshoppers either, but human cultures do—if they haven't escaped from the ecological fabric. A real culture is in itself an ecological fabric, or part of one. It won't work well for long in isolation, confined to the computer screen, the board room, or the classroom.

Human cultures work best when fully engaged with the real, non-human world. There is no sustainable culture without nature. You can't transplant culture to paradise. That's part of the meaning of Nāgārjuna's famous equation *samsara = nirvana*, a perception just as important in Zen economics as it is in Zen meditation.

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A recent census¹ shows that, by weight, about four-fifths of life on earth is currently plants. The next weightiest group consists of creatures you may never see: bacteria and archaea, many of which are subterranean. They are probably about a seventh of total biomass. Fungi are estimated at 2% of the total. Protists (single-celled creatures ancestral to both animals and plants) are now something like 1%. Animals account for less than half of one per cent of total biomass, and viruses for a tenth of that: about 0.04%. Nearly two-thirds of animal biomass is invertebrates, and roughly 30% is fish. Humans, who a thousand years ago were 0.05% of the animal sub-total, are now at 2.5%. That's still just 0.01% of total biomass: a quarter of

1. Yinon M. Bar-On et al. "The Biomass Distribution on Earth," PNAS [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA] 115.25 (2018): 6506-11. See also Griffin Chure et al, "The Anthropocene by the Numbers: A Quantitative Snapshot of Humanity's Influence on the Planet," forthcoming in *Physics and Society* (2021 preprint at <https://arxiv.org/abs/2101.09620>). And see the Human Impacts Database, <http://www.anthroponumbers.org>.

the estimated biomass of viruses. But we are a single species; viruses are a whole taxonomic domain. No other group or species has acquired the leverage that we have, and no other is increasing at our rate. There are so many of us now that we, as a single species, outweigh and outnumber the 6,000 species of wild mammals ten to one. All 35,000 species of fish, taken together, outweigh *Homo sapiens* to roughly the same degree, but it won't be that way for long. Fish populations are rapidly falling as ours continues to rise.

The pattern is widespread: human population keeps increasing, and other populations keep going down, though not all at the same speed. In the past 3,000 years—which is 1% of our species' time on the planet—we've reduced the total biomass of plants by almost half. In just the past 300 years—0.1% of our lifetime—we've also reduced the total biomass of fish by roughly half and reduced the total biomass of sea mammals by more like 80%. In a single century, we've reduced the wild bird population by half. We lack historical figures for bacteria and archaea, but it's likely that subterranean life was safe and, as a proportion of the whole, subterranean populations were therefore rising until fifty years ago, when fracking began in earnest. They'll be going down rapidly by now.

Historical data on insect populations don't go back very far—certainly not as far as the records of pesticide use, which begin in Sumeria well over 4,000 years ago. DDT and other synthetic pesticides came into use in the 1940s, and Rachel Carson was writing almost at once about the danger these substances posed—writing but not publishing. Until *Silent Spring* (1962), very little of what she wrote about pesticides was accepted for publication.

The denials, the *ad feminam* attacks, and the outright lies that greeted Carson's scientific findings have also become a standard model for corporate response to inconvenient information.² They are, it seems, emblematic of the moral gulf between the sciences and the industries that depend on them. Carson is rightly revered, yet the practices she exposed have continued with hardly a pause. A comprehensive study of human

2. For a good account of Carson's life, see Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

impacts on insect populations has yet to be written, but a meticulous local study published in 2017³ showed that, in environmentally protected parts of Germany between 1989 and 2016, insect populations declined by an average of 76%. If you drove North American highways during that period, you'll have noticed a similar drop in the number of bugs you scraped from your windshield, headlights, and grill. If you're too young or too thoroughly urban to have done this, the very idea of washing masses of winged corpses off the front end of your car may sound implausible. But one day the Roshi may ask you, How clean was your windshield before you were born?

People walk in the second-growth forest and meet a wren, a hairy woodpecker, a squirrel, and a blacktailed deer, or they walk the beach and see a hermit crab, a harbor seal, some scoters, and perhaps a humpback whale, and some of them think they have witnessed primordial nature. This is like mistaking the first wink of insight for transformative realization. Meanwhile, back in the city and back on the farm, it is routinely claimed that the earth under human management is more productive and more glorious than it would be on its own. In places, such claims are locally, transiently true. There are lots of beautiful gardens, fields, and flower beds tended by humans. There are beautiful horses and dogs bred by humans, and indeed there are beautiful humans, some of them living in beautiful houses on beautiful streets and dressed in handsome clothes. On a grander scale, however, the claim is self-delusion—just like the claim that old-growth forests are “overmature” and therefore need to be cut down. It's true that skillful, modest thinning can benefit many forests, and skillful irrigation can in certain places make the desert bloom. But the earth overall is vastly less rich and productive now than it would be if we had allowed it to keep managing itself (and to keep managing us as part of the bargain).

It's also true that a few other species have found a demoralized and debased form of protection in the human shadow. Populations of cattle, sheep, pigs, and chickens are now at record levels. (Like us, they out-

3. Caspar A. Hallmann et al. “More than 75% Decline over 27 Years in Total Flying Insect Biomass in Protected Areas.” *PLoS One* 12.10 (2017): e0185809.

weigh wild birds and mammals ten to one.) Large numbers of farmed fish—mostly Atlantic salmon in Cascadia and Europe; mostly carp in the rest of the world—have recently joined them. How many of these creatures have a life worth living is, however, another question. My guess is, almost none have a death worth dying.

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Poultry and livestock aren't the only living things that have prospered and suffered, both at once, through prolonged association with human beings. There are also those extraordinary inorganic creatures we call languages. They're a special interest of mine.

Human languages are weightless, discontinuous mortal beings, and to use some still fancier language, they are obligate endosymbionts. That is to say, the only way they can survive is in a close two-way relationship with their host species, the humans whom they live within and among. Because they are weightless and almost intangible, no one has ever tried to calculate their biomass. In some ways, they are more like minds than brains. They also seem, in several ways, more like ecosystems than like individual organisms, but that is no surprise. Every earthworm, mushroom, shrub, and human—and also every cell and every organ in every plant or animal body—is an ecosystem too. Every creature, and every part of every creature, is itself and other things at the same time: it's also an environment and the community—a community of communities—that lives in that environment. This, I like to think, is the biological counterpart of fractal geometry. It's also a reason to think that humans are capable of behaving more like the ecosystems they are and less like the swarms they can so easily become.

The gestation of human languages is slow, their lifespans are generally long, and there are only a few thousand in existence. In an ordinary century—if such a thing existed—several would be born and several would die. But in recent centuries, in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, we have killed off human languages by the hundreds.

Theoretically, the colonial era is over, yet the Indigenous-language death rate is still high: around a couple of dozen per year, which is roughly 2,500 per century. The birth rate would be maybe one per cent of that.

Thirty years ago my friend Michael Krauss (founder of the Alaska Native Language Center) tried to calculate how many languages might have been spoken at the dawn of the Neolithic, some 10,000 years ago.⁴ Hard data on this subject are difficult to come by, and Mike's answer was suitably broad: between 5,000 and 20,000 languages, in a world where the human population might have totalled five to ten million. The human population now is a thousand times what it was then, and rapidly increasing, yet the number of human languages is only about 6,000 and rapidly falling. There have, we think, been many local and regional waves of language-death over the past 10,000 years, and not so many episodes of rapid language-birth. The death waves are connected with major shifts in human population, such as the colonization of Europe by Indo-Europeans in the Bronze-Age and the colonization of the Americas during the past 500 years. And they're associated with major cultural changes, such as shifts to large-scale agriculture and shifts from oral to scribal to print to electronic communication. The present wave of language-death, which has been building for four centuries or more, is global in scope and driven by powerful, sometimes contradictory forces: metastasized economic and political ambition, religious fanaticism, ethnic self-righteousness. More recently, it's been driven also by the global reach of films and recorded music, and put into overdrive by electronic social immersion.

When Europeans started coming to North America, Cascadia and California were linguistically the richest part of the continent. The West Coast had both more languages and more speakers than the East Coast, and the languages of the West had greater taxonomic range (that is, more languages that were radically unlike each other). East of the Rockies, Algonquian, Siouan, Iroquoian, Caddoan, and Muskogean languages, with many

4. Michael Krauss, "Linguistics and Biology: Threatened Linguistic and Biological Diversity Compared." Pp 69-75 in *CLS 32: Papers from the Parasession on Theory and Data in Linguistics*. Chicago Linguistic Society, 1996. See also Krauss's essay "The World's Languages in Crisis." *Language* 68.1 (1992): 4-10.

regional dialects, were spoken across large areas. West of the Rockies was a dense quilt of highly varied languages spoken by smaller groups. There were, we think, at least half a million people in Cascadia in the sixteenth century but probably no language with more than 20,000 speakers, few with more than 10,000, many with closer to 2,000.

Some 80 languages were spoken in Cascadia when the Spanish and British and French and Russians arrived. Thirty-five of those eighty are still spoken at this moment, but that number keeps shrinking, and all thirty-five together now have fewer than 8,000 fluent speakers. Most now have fewer than a hundred speakers each; some have only one or two.

Human languages are not just ways of talking; they are repositories of knowledge and wisdom, organs of social and personal identity, irreplaceable tools for several kinds of thinking, and they are beautiful, subtle, intricate things in themselves. Nevertheless, in North America we have done to them what we did to the redwood forests, the passenger pigeon, the whooping crane and the California condor, the buffalo, the whales.

Stuffed buffalo, plastic mastodons, and whale skeletons mounted in museums have scientific and pedagogical value, and they have a kind of meaning, but their meaning doesn't breathe. It is approximately *nothing* compared to the meaning of a healthy population of buffalo or whales in the wild. This can happen to languages too. But languages bear a peculiar fruit called literature, which has properties not found in skin and bones. If there is nothing left of a language but its skeleton—a dictionary and grammar, let us say then that language is indeed just as depleted, just as dead, as the mounted skeleton of a whale. But ancestral languages *embodied in works of literature* can be as fully alive as paintings in the museum or string quartets in the concert hall.

How this works is explained in a story told in the fall of 1900 by the Haida poet Skaay. In §1.2 of Skaay's *Qquuna Cycle*, a young man and his kid brother are fleeing their village. They have good reason: a ravenous monster has entered their home and is impersonating their mother. The brothers head downriver in a canoe, and a woman invites them ashore. Skaay doesn't quite say so at this point, but we know from other clues that this is Mouse Woman. She brings the brothers, who have not eaten for

days, into her house and sets before them, on a little dish, a tiny scrap of salmon. She sees the disappointment in the older brother's face and says,

«*Jaa, hawdigu* II *ghiidas gyaxhanhaw*
sghaana qiidas II *tagaay ghaduu ghiitsgiiganga*
II *isxidang* II *taa.*»

“Well, small as it is,
when those who are spirit beings from birth
pick it up and eat it, they can't eat it all.”

Lla lla isxidas,
gyaan II *dawghanha ising* II *isxidas.*
Hawxhan gha II *isdasyasi.*

He picked it up,
and then his little brother picked it up. Even
so, it remained there.

Lla lla taadighu qawdi
ll skkiihdlgwas,
gyaan sihigaang giijiwas.

After they had eaten it awhile and
had their fill,
she put it away.⁵

Literature is like that piece of salmon. It's the magic food. If you are offered the real thing, you will find that you can never eat it all. It will nourish you, and you'll know that you've been nourished. You'll also

5. The Haida text is retranscribed from John Swanton's Skidegate Haida typescript, Mss ACLS N1.5, American Philosophical Society Library, Philadelphia, p 114. For a complete translation of the story, see *Being in Being: The Collected Works of Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2001), pp 65-84.

know you didn't take in everything there was. And the very piece that fed you will still be there, ready to feed your brother or anyone else who comes along.

All the Indigenous cultures of Cascadia were oral. When these cultures were torn to shreds—as all of them were—by European colonization, their oral literatures were torn to shreds as well. Nevertheless, some families hid out in remote locations, escaping the full force of the cultural carnage. Some children managed to stay with their grandparents, avoiding the state- and church-run schools, and therefore managed to get a real education. Some older people, even if they were surrounded by speakers of English, retained an indigenous language—or two, or three, or four. Some of them kept not only their languages but a large and sometimes multilingual oral library alive in their hearts and minds and mouths. And a trickle of ethnolinguists started coming around, first with their notebooks, then with their tape recorders too. Some of those linguists were oblivious to literature, but others were alert to it. Some were also immensely patient, perceptive, and technically skilled. Whenever an oral poet and a patient, intelligent linguist had a chance to work together, stories and songs could be transcribed. The magic food could be dried and stored.

It was, and still is, an extinction event, an American Shoah. The Indigenous population of Cascadia sank by some 80% in the course of the European colonization. More than half the indigenous languages have disappeared, with more to follow, and vast amounts of oral literature and learning have disappeared. Yet some wonderful things have survived. And in the aftermath—which is really just beginning—new and remarkable things are evolving.

There is something to read—not always much, but something—in about two-thirds of the eighty languages once spoken in Cascadia. In about a third of those eighty languages—Shoalwater Chinook, Haida, Hupa, Kato, Kiksht, Kathlamet, Kwakwala, and Lushootseed, for example—there is more than just something to read; there's an oral literary heritage, preserved now in writing, that is every bit as rich as you will find in celebrated languages such as Provençal, Old Norse, or Anglo-

Saxon. To put it another way: in twenty-five or thirty Cascadian languages there is a body of work that is well worth learning the language in order to read. And it isn't just folklore; it isn't anonymous oral tradition or rote repetition; it's oral literature. Basic plots and motifs are widely shared, as in any oral (or musical) tradition, but the actual compositions and performances are personal and unique. In a few Cascadian languages—Kwakwaka'wakw and Nuuchahnulth are examples—there is also a modest body of written literature, because some native speakers, raised in an oral culture, learned from linguists how to write and started writing. Written or dictated, the vast majority of the surviving texts are stories—sometimes long and complex chains of stories—told by thoughtful, talented people whose names and identities we know, and whose styles are clearly identifiable. In the best cases—the Haida poet Skaay is one example—what survives are works of literary genius.

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Every healthy human language has a literature. No central government, urban metropolis, or imperial pretension is required. No writing system or printing press is required. But where a writing system is absent—as it has been in most human cultures—both the literature and the language can quite easily disappear. When oral cultures are pulverized, as hundreds of Native American cultures have been, their literatures can evaporate in a single generation, even if the languages survive. Writing systems and printing presses give the illusion of permanence, but as every student of the Dharma knows, it is indeed an illusion. In the geological calendar, Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, English, French, and Spanish are as transient as the 20,000 languages that have vanished so completely we don't even know their names.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Native American mythtellers didn't aspire to become the borrowed literary history of the ravenous and gigantic colonial tribe that had pushed them off their lands. Aeschylus and Sophocles, Ovid and Virgil, Li Bai and Du Fu didn't aspire to become other people's borrowed literary antecedents either. But the

magic food is genuinely magic, and it is genuinely food. It feeds the hungry, and it feeds them wherever it can.

English, a language indigenous to the central part of the southern half of a fair-sized island off the northwest coast of Europe—a tenth of one percent of the earth's surface—has become, through several amazing feats of political presumption, the first language of nearly half a billion people—6% of the global population—and the second language of at least a billion more. It's now the language almost certain to be reached for when speakers of Cree and speakers of Navajo, or of Mandarin and Hungarian, or Telugu and Turkish, need to talk to one other. And it's become the central reservoir: the language into which almost everything else stands a chance of being translated, for better or worse. In Cascadia and elsewhere in the last few centuries, speakers of English engaged in horrific cultural vandalism, trying to drive all Indigenous and Asian languages out. But English itself is innocent of all the crimes—and all the acts of merit, for that matter—in which it has been used. It is as innocent, and deserving of compassion, as Colonel Custer's horse.

English is also, at the moment, the primary language of Cascadia. That's one of the countless tragic and laughable facts of linguistic and literary history. Like many historical facts, it is unassailable but impermanent. Culture is always under construction and always rotting away. A mere thousand years from now, the landscape will be different. And if you look more closely, you'll see that it is different even now. English is a world-encircling language, too successful, perhaps, for its own good. Yet real people continue to speak it and real writers to write it. As a result, it is still a real language, not a monolithic, imperial entity. If it were the seamless monolith some people seem to dream of, it would have no literature at all, or none worth reading. Each place where it is spoken, and each person speaking, has her or his or its particular English, just as every blade of grass is that particular blade of grass: something transient and yet timeless, something worth our full attention.

Under our feet, the land itself is a geological assemblage of indigenous and immigrant rocks—autochthonous and allochthonous terranes, as geologists like to call them. Some of the plants growing out of those rocks

are circumpolar, while others—Sitka spruce and Garry Oak, river willow and yellowcedar, for example—are endemic: this is the place where they are native; this is the place where they evolved. Their ancestors came from somewhere else, but in the process of settling in, they really *have* settled in: they've evolved into something indigenous. Languages do that too, and literatures do that. That's why they have so much to teach us.



Trinidad Head State Park

Nathan Wirth **Novato Creek**

Cascadian Zen, Volume II: a Short User's Guide

This is the second volume of writings, essays, and interviews that speak from and toward the Cascadian bioregion. It is not a sequel to the first volume, but rather the second part of what we envisioned as a coherent whole, comprised of seven interlacing and intertextual baskets.

The first volume consists of the first three baskets: *The Buddha Way*, which collects poems that explicitly evoke Buddhist themes or are aligned with figures who do; *Empty Bowl*, which takes its inspiration from the legendary bioregional poetry and prose press founded in Western Washington in 1976 by Michael Daley and Bob Blair, and which collects poets who in some broad sense write in its ethos; and *Original Mind*, which collects writerly expressions dedicated to clarifying and developing the primal mind as it expresses itself in the Cascadian heart-mind-world.

The volume in your hands has the remaining four baskets.

Borders Without Binaries contains work that wiggles free of colonial mapping techniques and colonial sensibilities and contemplates boundaries that have no clear “A” starts here, while “B” starts over there. There is an unspoken awareness that political borders do not register in geological time, and will never divide flora and fauna, or alter the long reach of our coastline and the cascade of watersheds that flow into it. Borders in this respect are edges that bleed from and into other bioregions, marking an interdependence within and between them.

Freed of the burden generated by our imagined identities, Ed Dorn would simply be in his body, here on the land, experiencing the scent of the Sound, “felt on the wrists and neck, cold bands on the body...” Others would meld with the landscape. Deborah Poe finds “distance and intimacy underlined by the lake.” Deborah Woodard draws “down a flap of the gray sky.” Their poetry is an antidote to our extraction-based culture’s habit of living so divorced from the rhythms and nuances of the land that we have, in many cases, as poet Stephen Collis states, even extracted our “selves.”

Sadly, another thing the political border cannot divide is our shared history of genocide, compelling Indigenous poets such as Jordan Abel, severed from his Nisga’a heritage at an early age, to ask how “those who have been dispossessed/ and severed from the land/begin to think through what land means to them?” Severance is a knife with a ragged edge. Again, here, there is no place where “A” ends and “B” begins, only an examination of the ragged wound left in its wake.

The *Wilson’s Bowl* basket is named after a perfectly round bowl-shaped petroglyph, believed to be a mortar rock, scooped from granite in the inner recesses of Long Harbour on Salt Spring Island in what was a large Coast Salish village site 7,000 years ago. Perhaps the bowl was used for grinding. However, as Phyllis Webb writes, “Moon floats here/belly, mouth, open-one-eye.” The image of the petroglyph serves as the nexus of stories, poems, and images related directly or indirectly to the work of anthropologist Wilson Duff who did groundbreaking work to introduce settler culture to the true nature of the Indigenous Peoples whose land they had stolen.

Issei Zen is a work of love that comes out of Barbara Johns’ deep study of Issei culture in the bioregion and demonstrates that the experience of Japanese immigrants is an enormous Zen lesson. *Dekita koto wa, shikata ga nai*, indeed! How must we take the challenges of our time and make art from the deepest part of ourselves? The Issei generation endured more than their fair share as they navigated their wartime illegal incarceration, but the determination of the writers and artists collected in this basket can also help us pilot our brave new world of ecological and cultural chaos.

The work in the *Storm Clouds* basket documents the dark and ominous elements looming in the bioregion, current and ongoing. Joanne Arnett notices that her ancestors have peopled her Zoom during the pandemic. Rob Lewis looks out his window and contemplates a clouded fragment of the Salish Sea where the apex predators, the Southern Resident orcas are starving. In a poem by Meredith Quartermain, a bartender gazes from a twilit dome car on *The Canadian* asking, “whatever is that/the stolen land of sawmills/cutting, cutting, cutting trees/to shrink-wrapped two-by-fours.”

Finally, we again conclude with the wisdom of David McCloskey, whose vision of Cascadia remains a lodestar.

Although this volume concludes the project as it is currently conceived, no doubt we will discover many painfully glaring omissions. We know that our work, and the work of Watershed Press more broadly, is only beginning and that these omissions will inspire another volume and other projects.

May all sentient beings flourish!

In Cascadia

summer 2024

For the protection of all beings in the bioregion of Cascadia

borders without binaries

Thompson –
Clearwater
Highlands

oo –
ser
teau

Thompson

Columbia

Columbia – A

Nicola –

Monashee
Mountains –
Shuswap
Highlands



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Okanagan

Similkameen –

Okanogan –
Kettle

basket four

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Columbia Icefields

Columbia Headwaters

Columbia

Columbia - Arrow Lakes

Kootenay Lake

Kootenay Headwaters

Kootenai



Petaluma River Basin

Richard Wagener



Olympic Tree

Desolation, first

1

a buck approaches the campsite (velvet antlers)
fireweed spreads like its name
the first plant to grow in forests
after fires burn back vegetation

but this is a day made of sun

still words swallow our tongues
we take them into our thighs, the height

2

trying to read the glacial flour—
the way glaciers grind against bedrock—

one knows more than the others

is it “tree” or “three”?
“desolation” or “elation”?

are we climbing to, or between?

3

motor and wed, sprayed with lake water, together in transport
fueled by westbound and pulse

deciphering the switchback, the back-and-forth re-
call

stories we tell only ourselves

the absent hair twirl
the geometry of eyelashes
mouths a name in three syllables
blue air that smells like memory
fresh coffee
nicks on the bamboo floor
from the mountain another mountain, peaked edges

let the afternoon swim beneath itself

4

much to learn of the relationship between silence and speech
comes from this day's trifacta

distance and intimacy underlined by the lake
insinuated through grounded needles and angled space

5

landscape lexicology

not a collage, but assemblage
less three filaments than terrain tapestry

boundaries without binaries

not what the scene is without
but all the breath it holds

Breath

mist stuck in lungs, as did the landscape.
breasts barring horizontally, in the old growth above, belong.
forming long-term pair bonds.
one waited to wander the island with such inseparability.
the division of one heart from all others delusion
as the natural tree hollows hold hatched young.
throat's catch. see also the heart leaf spring beauty,
claytonia cordifolia—in the forest understory or streambanks.
candy-shaped flowers materialize on meandering stems.

a mansion made of stone binds to self

small fingers coadunate mind and world
clockmaker or cartographer
there is a reason to resist home
over and over windows burst wide open

CASCADIAN zen

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

Cascadian Zen was typeset in Dante and Adobe Caslon Pro with titling in Albertsthal Typewriter and Franklin Gothic, Han characters in Adobe Kaiti, and ornaments in Mrs Eaves. The book was printed on 80# book paper and perfectbound into soft covers.

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bioregional
writings
on cascadia
here and now

volume two