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Gary Snyder

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Gary Snyder
"Poetry Reading"
November 11, 1974
Portland State University

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[Note on the transcript: In this recording, Gary Snyder reads from his published works, which are subject to copyright. This transcript includes the titles and the first lines of his readings, but does not reprint the full text of any poems.]

GARY SNYDER: Well, I should tell you something, this is the building I went to high school in, and it's a really strange feeling to be giving a poetry reading in the basement of the building I went to high school in. It's not one of those things that you think would happen to you in your own lifetime. [laughter] This is the old Lincoln High School. I graduated in 1947, but I don't remember this room, I don't believe it was here then. Maybe this was the boiler room.

[audience member says something in background]

SNYDER: ...For faculty? [laughter] Well, I remember speaking somewhere in this building, but I think the auditorium was upstairs. I once ran for student body president on a kind of a reactionary... well, it was a regressive ticket. [laughter] It was all for a kind of joke. And it's a pleasure to be in the Northwest again after an absence of five years or six years. Because of that, I want to read a few early poems that were the first poems that I did that I liked that came out of having grown up in Washington and Oregon, having grown up close to the work that was here then, and is here now. These are a few poems about choker setting.

This is from *Myths and Texts*, from the “Logging” section.

“But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves.” Exodus 34:13.
[reads poem beginning: “The ancient forests of China were logged / and the hills slipped into the Yellow Sea.”]

This is “Camp A, Warm Springs,” that I was working at when I was working on these poems.
“Lodgepole pine: the wonderful reproductive power of this species on areas over which it stands which has been killed by fire, is dependent upon the ability of the closed cones to endure a fire which kills the tree without injuring its seed. After fire, the cones open and shed their seeds on the bared ground and a new growth springs up.” Sudworth, *Forestries of the Pacific Slope*.” [reads poem beginning with lines: “Stood straight / holding the choker high / as the Cat swung back the arch / piss-firs falling, / limbs snapping on the tin hat / bright D-8 Cat caught on swinging butt hooks / swinging against cold steel.”]

Soldiers of Discontent is a song by Charlie Ashley, which was one of the IWW songs after 1915, about.

In 1947, Kenneth Rexroth was in Paris, in kind of a communist party cabaret, drinking, and he saw a man that he thought he recognized at the bar, and he went up and started talking to him and he said, “Hey, aren’t you Charlie Ashley?” He said, “Yes, I’m Charlie Ashley. Been living in France for the last 15 years.” Little bit of IWW history kind of filled out there...

[laughter]

[Reads poem “The Groves are Down,” beginning with lines: “The groves are down / cut down / Groves of Ahab, of Cybele.”]

And the two end poems from *Myths and Texts*, from the “Burning” section.

[Reads poem beginning: “Wash me on home, mama / the song of the kelp. / The chief’s wife sat with her back to the sun on the sandy beach / shredding cedar bark.”]

[Continues from *Myths and Texts*: “The text / Sourdough Mountain called a fire in, up Thunder Creek high on a ridge.”]

[Continues from *Myths and Texts*: “The myth / Fire, up Thunder Creek and the mountain— / Troy’s burning / The cloud mutters / The mountains are your mind.”]

[applause]

SNYDER: Okay, those were written about '56. What I'll be doing mostly now is from a new collection of poems that I just got a copy of, it's not in the streets yet, called *Turtle Island*. These poems are all written since 1969 or '70 when I came back from Japan. They're all out of America, out of Turtle Island. Turtle Island is the name that the Indian militants started giving North America about eight years ago, seven years ago, in some of their magazines and newspapers, on the very respectable premise that the name America was given it by people who didn't know where they were even, exactly, after some European. It draws on, of course the American Indians in pre-Columbian times... didn't know, didn't have a sense of the whole continent as one complete space, so the name Turtle Island is a new name, but it's given in a context of creation mythology based on a lot of turtle lore both East Coast and West Coast; several possible versions of that.

The one I know is Maidu, from Northern California. It goes like this: Coyote and Earthmaker were kind of floating around in a void, a stormy chaos void, where there was a lot of water and a lot of darkness, and Coyote started complaining. He said to Earthmaker, "Your name is Earthmaker, why don't you make an Earth or something? I'm tired of just blowing this way and that." So, Earthmaker said, "Well, if I just had a little bit of dirt, I could probably do something with it. We don't have any dirt at all." So Coyote said, "Why don't we get Turtle to get some dirt for us?" So, Turtle surfaced and stuck his head out, and said, "What do you boys want?" Earthmaker said, "You think you could get us a little bit of dirt?" Turtle said, "Well, I'll try." And so he dove down, and he dove down and he dove down, he was gone six years, it was so deep to the bottom. He got a big mouthful of mud and he started swimming back up, and it was a long time coming back up, and it kept washing out of the corners of his mouth. So that finally when he got back up to the top, he had just one little tiny grain of soil, and he passed it to Earthmaker. Earthmaker took it, [clap clap clap] like that, and he had enough ground to stand on, and then he stamped his feet and as far as you could look around, there was mud. And Coyote said, "Well, that's pretty good, but it doesn't look like much."

[laughter]

Well, the story goes on from there. They started walking along and Coyote kept complaining, "Well, don't you think we ought to have some scenery over here? How about some trees or something?" So, Earthmaker threw some trees over there. Coyote said, "Well, that looks like ponderosa pine. Let's call it ponderosa pine." So, that's how everything got its name. So that's one of the various stories that connects Turtle to the continent. But, there is one view too, that the whole continent is just one big turtle, and it's floating on the waters of chaos [laughs]. They have the same idea in India and in neolithic China. In neolithic Chinese cosmology, they've got a big turtle there. Although a friend of mine really got kind of literal about it and he looked at the map and he said, "Well, it is a turtle. See? Like Newfoundland is one front paw, and Alaska is

another front paw, and Florida is a hind paw, and Baja California is another hind paw, and Mexico is a big fat tail." [laughter] And he said magnetic north must be the brain. [laughter] That's where the compass always points.

So, here's a little introductory note I wrote for this collection of poems along the same lines: "Turtle Island, the old new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millenia, and reapplied by some of them to North America in recent years. Also, an idea found worldwide of the Earth or cosmos even, sustained by a great turtle or serpent of eternity. A name, that we may see ourselves more accurately on this continent of watersheds, life communities, plant zones, physiographic provinces, cultural areas, following natural boundaries. The USA and its states and counties are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here. The poems speak of place and the energy pathways that sustain life. Each living being is a swirl in the flow of formal turbulence, a song, the land, the planet itself also a living being, at another pace. Anglos, Black people, Chicanos, all others beached up on these shores, share such views at the deepest levels of their old cultural traditions. African, Asian, or European. Hark again to those roots to see our ancient solidarity, and then do the work of being together on Turtle Island."

[faint applause]

"The Way West, Underground." This is a little bit of bear religion poetry dealing with the circum-polar bear cult.

[noises and laughter]

A religion that used to run from Utah around through Northern California, the Pacific Northwest, and out across Northern Japan, touching on Northern Japan, all the way across Siberia and into Finland and Lapland, and anciently, like Middle Paleolithic or earlier, down into Europe too. Man's oldest religion, possibly; or at least the earliest thing we have any evidence of that has the appearance of being magical is the way bear skulls were treated in some of those caves in Bavaria. So how'd it get back to Europe, was the question that I put to myself.

[Reads "The Way West, Underground," beginning with lines: "The split cedar / smoked salmon / cloudy days of Oregon, / the thick fir forests."]

[applause]

[Reads "Without," beginning with lines: "The silence / of nature / within. / The power within. / The power / without. / The path is whatever passes—no / end in itself."

[Reads "The Dead By the Side of the Road," beginning with lines: "How did a great red-tailed hawk come to lie—all stiff and dry—on the shoulder of Interstate 5? Her wings for dance fans / Zach skinned a skunk with a crushed head, washed the pelt in gas."]

[applause]

Another food chain poem, called "Steak." [speaking to child] Why don't you go lie down and take it easy now? [child speaking, unintelligible] You want some tea? Want to try some? [No.] Then you go back and ask mommy to take you out and get you some water, she can find some. She can find it.

Another food chain poem. I'm not a vegetarian. Up on the bluff... this is called "Steak." [Reads poem beginning with lines: "Up on the bluff / the steakhouses called "The Embers," / called "Fireside" / With a smiling Disney cow on the sign."]

[applause]

I'm going to ask you to do something, and that is to withhold applause between poems, because sometimes I like to cut right on to another one and save it till the end or something. No matter, nevermind. The father—this is Japanese creation mythology, as best I can make it out—the father is the void. The wife waves. Their child is matter. Matter makes it with his mother and their child is life, a daughter. The daughter is the great mother who with her father, brother, matter as her lover gives birth to the mind.

[laughter] No matter. Never mind. [laughter]

And thus we destroy dualism in one blow. [laughter]

Where we live we don't have electricity and this is because we can't get it. It's not for any foppish reasons. [laughter] In fact, we can't even get propane in there. So, everything has to be done with firewood, which is fine. The best bathing system you can come up with, using nothing but firewood, is a sauna which we installed. So, this is a poem about the bath. "The Bath." I want you to get one sense of the sauna as it is in Finland and is very much the way we feel it. The sauna is a temple. Is *the* temple of the ancient Finnish people of the pre-Christian... and of traditional rural people up until quite recently. It was a place where you not only bathed,

but you were supposed to make an effort to think good thoughts, and not say harsh words to each other or argue, and it was where people went when they were ready to die. They died in the sauna and it was where women gave birth, too, it was the place for childbirth. And there is a god of the sauna.

[Reads poem "The Bath," beginning with lines: "Washing Kai in the sauna / the kerosene lantern set on a box / outside the ground-level window, / lights up the end of the iron stove and the / washtub down on the slab."]

A little cycle of songs within this called "Magpie's Song" starts with a found poem called "Facts." I got all of these facts out of one issue of the *Christian Science Monitor* that was put in my mailbox by mistake. [laughter] Looking through it randomly, and coming on these. Each of which seems its own way uniquely significant.

[Reads poem beginning with lines: "92% of Japan's three-million-ton import of soybeans comes from the United States." and concludes "Our primary source of food is the sun."]

[Reads "Pine Tree Tops," beginning: "In the blue night / frost haze / the sky glows with the moon. / Pine tree tops bend / snow blue."]

Now, this poem called "Night Herons" is a city poem in what I think is the best sense of city. A poem that was made possible for me, by a friend who is an architect in San Francisco. An extremely subtle man, who understands urban ecosystems. Who knows the spiders who live on the rooftops and can chart out the drainages that were originally there under the streets. And for his own study he has maps on the wall of all of the sewer routes underground and all of the power lines coming in. So, he took me on a walk one time down by Aquatic Park, and just to the west of Aquatic Park, on the waterfront there, just next to Fisherman's Wharf—those of you that have seen it may have noticed a giant brick smokestack in a kind of a brick facility there. I had seen it over the years and had never questioned what it was. You know, you take civilization for granted. It turns out that it was built after the earthquake, and has a permanent pumping facility; the steam is up on it 24 hours a day, and has been since 1915. They keep steam on it continuously in case of another earthquake, so they can pump salt water into the city's firefighting system. Because the fresh water mains will presumably all break, and they won't have any firefighting possibilities.

Right next to that is a cluster of Monterey cypress, a clump of Monterey cypress, which my friend introduced me to and showed me that night herons were living in it. And that the night herons, as he explained it to me, had been absent from that little tiny rookery for around sixty years, but then about three years ago they came back from the big rookeries up near Bolinas.

So he said, "San Francisco can't be all bad if the night herons are coming back." [laughter] So, this is a poem about that.

[Reads "Night Herons," beginning with lines: "Night herons nest in the cypress / by the San Francisco stationary boilers /with the high smokestack at the edge of the waters."]

A little poem for my boys, that has a little turn on the end that is based on a Tang Dynasty poem by Liu Zongyuan. It's called "The Uses of Light." [Reads poem beginning with lines: "*It warms my bones, say the stones. I take it into me and grow, say the trees. Leaves above, roots below.*"]

"By Frazier Creek Falls." This is just north of Sierra Buttes in Plumas County, California. Not a particularly striking place, but I was standing there one time vacantly looking around and I found myself willy-nilly for the moment, sort of looking through the veil. A very special veil, which is the line between us and the rest of the material universe. [Reads poem beginning with lines: Standing up on lifted folded rock / looking out and down / The creek falls to a far valley."]

Well, after I wrote that poem I had second thoughts. [laughter] And now, really, that's probably not true. But, then recently in a collection of papers called *Man the Hunter*, a bunch from some kind of anthropological symposium on hunting. Interesting article by a man named Laughlin on man as an animal. And he says that we have an inaccurate image of ourselves. We tend to think of ourselves—we've been taught to think of ourselves—as being so thoroughly creatures of civilization. So thoroughly conditioned by culture, that we are weak and helpless animals who couldn't take care of ourselves. He said this isn't true. That man is pound for pound one of the toughest animals on the planet right now. It's the only animal that can swim a river, run twenty miles, and then climb a tree. [laughter] And pound for pound, he says he's done tests, see... [laughing with the audience] He says, pound for pound a human can pull a heavier load than a chimpanzee. We have good teeth, he says, really good teeth. Good eyes. Pretty good hearing. And we are actually still in the body that we had 50,000 years ago. Not much change. When we were doing a good job of it in the tundra, forest, margins of Europe and North America and so forth. So, take heart. [laughter]

In 1972, the summer of 1972, Micheal McClure and I and a number of Hopi and Navajo Indian people went to Stockholm to the United Nations conference on the environment to be gadflies. We weren't invited; we went to raise trouble. In particular, in regard to the Black Mesa strip mining issue and the contracts that the [...] councils had signed with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and with the Peabody Mining Company that had not been submitted through the proper channels to the Indian people as a whole. And the traditional Indian leaders of Hopi were of course very upset about this. So it ended up that a number of us went to Stockholm to try to generate something about that. We had very little success; in fact, the whole Stockholm conference, as you've probably heard, was extremely frustrating. But, I did write this poem at

the end of that time. At the end of two weeks there. And I'd like to read it now. The key issue as it came out, revolving around all of that, was whaling, and of course since that time the Japanese have withdrawn from the International Whaling Commission and have refused to abide by any national consensus at all on how much whaling should be done. The mentions of Brazil and China and so forth in here all refer to things that took place during those two weeks in Stockholm.

"Mother Earth, Her Whales." Incidentally, this poem was first published as an editorial in the *New York Times*. I sent it in to the op-ed page; actually it was kind of interesting. I wrote it the night before the end of the conference and then a bunch of Swedish—young Swedish people from the labor unions' organization and I ran it off one night, a thousand or so copies, and we put a copy on the desk of every delegate to the UN conference, so that they found it on their desk that morning. And then I sent a copy to the *New York Times* and by golly, they published it. They only deleted one line, and it's the line about the Japanese putting methyl mercury in the sea. I had a line in it, "Like gonorrhoea," and they took the "gonorrhoea" out; they didn't want to offend the Japanese, I guess. You'll see how it works in the poem anyway.

[Reads "Mother Earth, Her Whales," beginning with lines: "An owl winks in the shadow / a lizard lifts on tiptoe breathing hard / a young male sparrow stretches up his neck / big head watching."]

[applause]

So I want to thank whoever brought this tea. It's really good. "Ethnobotany." We went up to the—what do you call it, the OSMI? The Oregon State Museum of Sci...

AUDIENCE: OMSI.

SNYDER: OMSI? [laughter] Om. Sí. [laughter] Spanish Hinduism. [laughing with the audience] Trying to catch the mycological exhibit, but it was already taken down. Apparently it was only for one day. Of course mushrooms are very fragile and impermanent. But, I'm another one of those people that has been drawn into the orbit of mushroom loving. A story about John Cage. You know John Cage? Besides being a composer, [he] is actually quite a well-known amateur mycologist. And when he visited Japan, I think about 1961, there were two greeting parties waiting for him at the airport. One was the Japanese mycological association, the other was a group of Japanese composers and musicians. And neither of them knew about the existence of the other group. [laughter] Nor did they know that John Cage had another identity. So I've heard.

[Reads "Ethnobotany," beginning with lines: "In June two oak fell / rot in the roots / Chainsaw in September."]

Okay, while I'm on mushrooms. I'll do this one too. It's called "The Wild Mushroom"; it's a song. [Sings lines beginning: "While the sunset rays are shining / me and Kai have got our tools / a basket and a trowel / and a book with all the rules."]

[Reads "Two Immortals," beginning with lines: "Sitting on a bench by the Rogue River, Oregon / Looking at a land form map." and concluding: "it was the space inside the loop of the upper / Columbia, eastern Washington plateau country, that they call channeled scablands."]

A Buddhist poem, called "Avocado." [Reads poem with lines beginning: "The Dharma is like an avocado / Some parts so ripe, you can't believe it."]

[laughter and applause]

[Reads "Why log truck drivers rise earlier than students of Zen," beginning with lines: "In the high seat before dawn and dark / polished hubs gleam."]

"The Dazzle." This is for Richard and Michael. Sisto and Killigrew. [Reads poem with lines beginning: "The dazzle, the seduction, the design / intoxicated and quivering. / Bees? Is it flowers?"]

"One should not talk to a skilled hunter about what is forbidden by the Buddha." [laughter] That was said by the Tang Dynasty Zen master, Xuanyin. [Reads poem beginning with lines: "A grey fox, female, nine pounds three ounces / thirty nine and five-eighths inches long with tail."]

[Reads "L.M.F.B.R." beginning with lines: "Death himself / liquid, metal, fast, breeder, reactor / stands grinning, beckoning, plutonium tooth glow."]

So here's the final one in that little cycle, called "Magpie Sun." [Reads poem beginning with lines: "6 a.m., sat down on excavation gravel / by juniper and desert SP tracks / Interstate 80 not far off."]

[speaking] I'm going to cut out from that one for a second and read something from *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. I have this work in progress that I call *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, and it's actually going to be, when it's finished, a long poem consisting of long poems.

[tape cuts out and resumes in the midst of reading "What's Meant by Here," beginning with lines: ...smells of pungent, sticky flowers give way, climbing through Digger pine and into Black oak and Ponderosa pine. Sweet birch, manzanita, kitkitdizze. This is our home country, we dig wells and wonder where the water table comes from." Concludes with: "Watershed, west slope of the northern Sierra Nevada, south slope of the east-west running ridge above the south fork, at the level of Black oak mixed with Ponderosa pine."

That's how I can finally remember where I am. What happened here before, that's the here I was talking about, you see. This particular poem now with all of its specifics, I recommend to you as a poem that anybody can do anywhere, and probably should. [Reads poem beginning with lines: "Three hundred million. First, a sea. Soft sands, muds, and marls. Loading, compressing, heating, crumpling, crushing, recrystallizing, infiltrating, several times lifted, and submerged, intruding molten granite magma. Deep-cooled and speckling gold quartz fills the cracks." and concludes: "Military jets head northeast roaring every dawn. My sons ask, *who are they?* We shall see! Who knows! How to be! Blue jay screeches from up high."]

This is called "Tomorrow's Song." This kind of came out of some community labor brigade work days, and the spirit that we all got out of getting it on together doing a lot of work like that. And something that Robert Bly pointed out to me brought back to my consciousness, which is the line in Lao-Tsu where he says, "Am I different from other men? No, I am not different from other men. Only this, I worship the breasts of the mother." [Reads poem beginning with lines: "The USA slowly lost its mandate / in the middle and later 20th century / it never gave the mountains and rivers / the trees and animals / a vote."]

[Reads "Toward Climax," beginning with lines: "Salt seas, mountains, deserts / Cell mandala holding water / Nerve network linking toes and eyes."]

[Reads "For the Children," beginning with lines: "The rising hills, the slopes / the statistics lie before us / The steep climb of everything going up, up, as we all go down."]

I'm going to finish with a little poem called "As for Poets." [Reads poem beginning with lines: "As for poets / the Earth poets / who write small poems, / need help from no man." and concludes: "The poem / is seen from all sides / everywhere / at once."]

Thank you.

[applause; program ends]