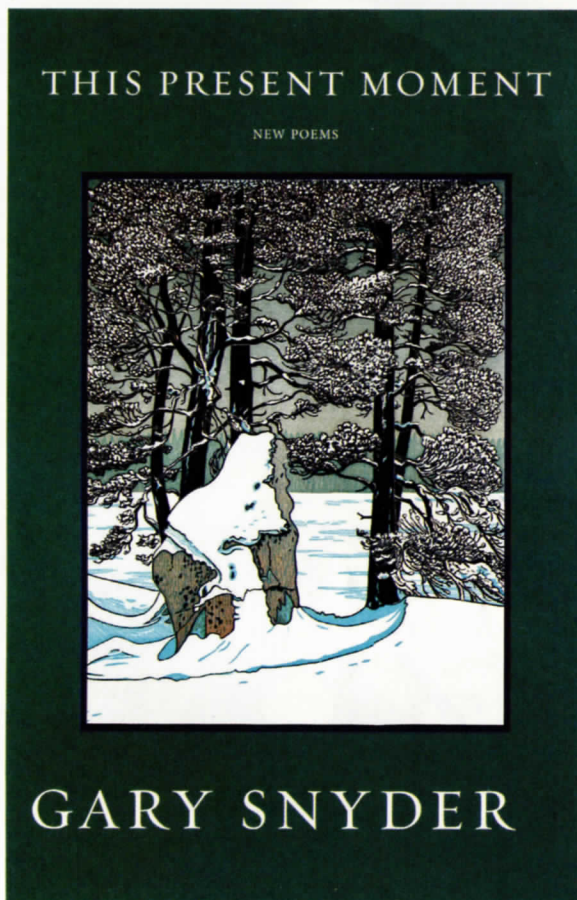


# Gary Snyder's Tracks

BY ANDREW SCHELLING



*This Present Moment:  
New Poems*  
Gary Snyder  
COUNTERPOINT PRESS, 2015  
88 pp.; \$22.00 (Cloth)

posting. These can give rise to compassion. The second is the recognition that some teachings should be held back. They are not for everybody. You keep them in reserve until the student is prepared.

The two books are notably different. *A Sense of the Whole: Reading Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers Without End*, contains papers gathered and edited by the American scholar Mark Gonnerman. In 1997, Gonnerman organized a year-long workshop at Stanford University around Snyder's newly released, 40-years-in-the-making long poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. During the course of his workshop he invited poets, critics, and Buddhist scholars to meet with students and address the multiple layers of history, poetry, Buddhism, ecology, geography, and Native American studies that the poem braids together.

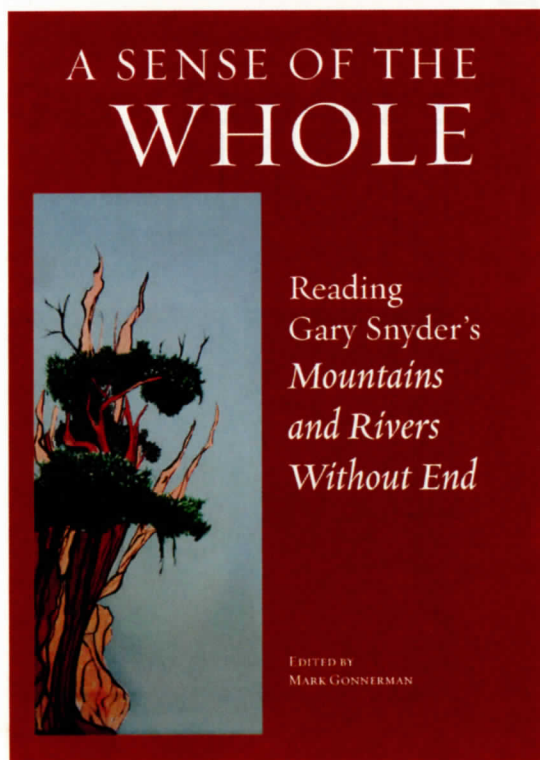
One thing to remember with the appearance of Gonnerman's collection is that Gary Snyder writes poems of varying degrees of difficulty. Using the terms of white water rafting, or "river-running," he likens much of his poetry to Class III runs, "where you will do just fine on your own." His long poem, though, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, "is more like Class V: if you're going to make it to take-out you might need a guide." Gonnerman's collection is not exactly a field guide, but a kind of rucksack filled with necessary gear.

Michael McClure, Snyder's long-time friend and fellow poet, likens *Mountains and Rivers Without End* to a medicine bundle. Its 39 separate poems, written "at the pace of about one a year," could be talismans that make up that bundle. Snyder began the poem in 1956, completing and publishing it 40 years later. When as a young poet he was setting forth on what he knew would be a lengthy project, Snyder recalls, "I found myself tracking about 25 things at the

A flat package arrived in the mail 15 years ago. When I opened the envelope it held a photocopy of the *Candamaharoshana Tantra*, both its original Sanskrit text and an English translation by the scholar Christopher S. George. A note Gary Snyder had tucked inside said, "I only give this to friends over 40, and married."

The *Candamaharoshana* is a dialogue between Shiva and his wife, Parvati. Its intent is to break both attachment and revulsion toward the body through the most extreme sexual practices of devo-

tion, cherishing the smells, the wastes, the hidden inward operations of digestion, excretion, salivation, and perspiration of the beloved's physical body. In talking about two recent books, one by Gary Snyder, one a compilation of talks and lectures around his work, I want to keep that gift with its little note in mind, because it reveals two practices that run through Snyder's writings. The first: it does no good to shy from the darker, more troubling aspects of life and death, the vegetative, the fermentative, the com-



*A Sense of the Whole:  
Reading Gary Snyder's  
Mountains and  
Rivers Without End*  
Edited by Mark  
Gonnerman  
COUNTERPOINT PRESS, 2015  
352 pp.; \$28.00 (Cloth)

same time. That meant I had to spread out over a lot of territory, going back and forth, you know, trying to pick up different traces as I went, staying on the trail.”

This is why *A Sense of the Whole* comes as a welcome commentary, a companion to the myths, histories, and scientific tracks that cross through Snyder’s work. You can read McClure’s thoughts, as well as insights by the poets Wendell Berry, Robert Hass, and Nanao Sakaki; by the Buddhist scholars Stephanie Kaza, Carl Bielefeldt, and others. In particular the contributors cast light on the poem’s use of East Asian landscape painting, its carefully informed encounter with the shamanic-Buddhist Noh theater of Japan, and on the geographical range of the poem. It is a poem that, Snyder observes, “I have come to think of as a sort of sutra—an extended poetic, philosophical, and mythic narrative of the female Buddha Tara.”

His latest poems—more like koans than sutras—come two decades after he finished *Mountains and Rivers*. The collection’s title, *This Present Moment*, is a

phrase that seems to be something of a personal mantra for the poet. The brief poem that provides the title might blow past without much effect at first. Best to give it some space and concentration, and let it slowly work its medicine.

This present moment  
that lives on

to become

long ago

What do I mean by calling it a personal mantra or likening it to a slow medicine? Mainly, its recurrence over the years. The poem showed up first as the final page in a collection Snyder published in 1999. It reappeared in a new context, as part of a *haibun* [a Japanese literary form that combines prose and haiku], in his 2004 book, *Danger on Peaks*. There it is the tiny haiku-like verse that caps a paragraph, set in a restaurant that had formerly been a bookshop, in which he meets an old friend, “an ex-longshore union worker” who was once married to

Snyder’s sister, Anthea. The passage of time, aging, change, and the disappearance of kin and comrades hang over the *haibun* as they do over the new collection. So do friendship, a long view of what time is, and a poignant sense of life’s preciousness.

Now the same stanza provides the title and also serves as the final word, the last page, the ceremonial closing, to this new book. It gestures at a recurrent theme Snyder has worked over the years. All beings—mountains and rivers, rocks, trees, mammals, birds, fish, and humans—are tender things emerging in this present moment; they have also embarked on a long journey of change that seems to start before birth and continues long after death. We ourselves, however present we might seem, will become “long ago.” Maybe that’s because—as the *Prajnaparamita* sutras keep repeating—there are no permanent beings.

And yet . . .

The huge Mahayana cosmographies, which speak of billions upon billions of buddha realms throughout huge gulfs of time, seem too vast for our limited minds to keep in sight. Big visionary sutras can elude us or leave us coldly amazed. They don’t really convey the truths of suffering, old age, and death. For that, we need friendship and family, so that love, anger, and grief can move through us. Yet clues to the big mystery are all around, and humans can hesitantly read the marks. Waves and ripples in rock that recall prehistoric oceans; animal tracks left in the mud, dried out a million years back; fossils of ancient life forms. All of these, in their own way, point to the Buddha’s path. The 12th-century Zen master Dogen said, “Mountains and waters right now are the actualization of the ancient buddha way.” This is why traces of geological time run through Snyder’s poetry. They give glimpses we can almost comprehend of the vast journey all beings are on.

The poem “Wildfire News” opens:

For millions,  
for hundreds of millions of years  
there were fires. Fire after fire.  
Fire raging forest or jungle,  
giant lizards dashing away  
big necks from the sea



looking out at the land in surprise—

How does a human contend with the stretches of time covered by these seven lines? Snyder closes the poem by staring more closely at the giant sequoia, hold-overs from the age of great reptiles:

... they covered the continents  
ten lakhs of millennia or more.

I have to slow down my mind.  
slow down my mind  
Rome was built in a day.

The poems in this slender 88-page book range across our planet. There are pieces written in, or written about, Turtle Island (“the old-new name for North America” he called it decades ago, re-charging landscape with old myth), India, Madagascar, South Korea, Paris, and Rome. That last city seems close to the origins of what most Euro-Americans think of as civilization—yet from the viewpoint of deep time, Rome *was* “built in a day.” Her architecture pushes back into geology. Neither her buildings, her stones, nor her layers of language will stand in place for long.

*Roma*

Built back of old stones from old  
buildings,  
old bricks and stones on even older  
stones  
—always-changing languages  
broken tumbled talus slopes again

Many turn to Snyder’s poetry for teachings. Teachings on love, friendship, ecology, impermanence, politics, scholarship, Buddhist insight, child-raising. There are circles among the avant-garde too full of irony, too self-contained, often too cynical, to accept both those ancient imperatives of poetry, to delight and to instruct. They simply do not accept that poetry has the task of changing values; maybe they think it not possible. Snyder wrote in a 1977 letter to the poet and environmental activist Wendell Berry, quoted in *A Sense of the Whole*, “As poets, our politics mostly stand back from that flow of topical events; and the place we do our real work is in the unconscious,

or myth-consciousness of the culture; a place where people decide (without knowing it) to change their values.”

The hinge poem in *This Present Moment*, for me, is one full of instruction. “Stories in the Night” begins as an account of Snyder at his homestead in the Sierra Nevada foothills, working on a series of generators, inverters, and solar panels, which have quit working. His house, built in the early seventies, never on the electricity grid, depends on this setup.

I try to remember machinery can  
always be fixed—but be ready to  
give up the plans that were made for  
the day—go back to the manual—  
call up friends who know more

Suddenly the poem turns—it took my breath away the first time I read it—and the meditation on *power* flashes to earlier days, when he used kerosene, not solar, to read by. Then earlier days rise up: “In 1962 going all through Kyushu with Joanne, walked around Hiroshima.” There he sees the “twisty shiny scarred burn-faces of survivors” from the bombs of 1945. Abruptly power has become “*too much power*”—making ghastly and immediate the threat to all our planet’s creatures.

Over two dense pages the poem chews across history, politics, anthropology, and religion. With a wry humorous eye it glances at monotheism, with the appeal to a far-off, single source of power. Under the poem stir questions Snyder has wrangled with for decades. What do we really need for our lives? How much power is necessary? What is the source of real power? Does it come from outside or from within? He invokes “all the wriggling feelers and little fins, the spines, / the slimy necks,—eyes shiny in the night—paw prints in the snow,” that make the epic journey alongside humans. The poem then ends—imagine the poet alone, darkness coming on, his busted generator, the unlit bulbs he uses for study—

The old time people here in warm  
earth lodges thirty feet across  
burned pitchy pinewood slivers for  
their candles,

snow after snow for all those  
centuries before—  
lodgefire light and pitchy slivers  
burning—

don’t need much light for stories in  
the night.

Much of Snyder’s poetry does this. It brings you to the present moment, which already seems long ago. Even the bright rhyme of the final two phrases—“don’t need much light for stories in the night”—work to place you *here* and at the same instant *there*.

One task of his poetry is to continually set human frailty against stretches of time we can scarcely imagine. The effort to imagine the now, laid across a long-ago future, is exhilarating. It blows away our self-image. “Two of my best friends quit speaking,” he writes; “one said his wrath was like that of Achilles.” In a curious, matter-of-fact tone, Snyder dignifies the troubles we humans go through, setting them into a mythic past. The heroes we’ve heard about suffered turmoil and conflict just like us.

This might be Class III poetry, the poetics of living, where little glimpses of forgiveness or breathlessness glint. From a perch atop the Eiffel Tower, Snyder looks out and sees Europe’s extinct megafauna—aurochs and mammoths probably taken down by the spears of human ancestors—browsing the tundra. It takes practice to see these extinct mammals, but you can glimpse them: if you look with the eye of poetry, the eye of scholarship, or what Dogen called the true dharma eye. These are poems for the living.

The poetry of death, though, that’s something else. Would Snyder consider poems of death to be Class V rafting experiences—poems that need guides? Or might poems of real, not speculated, death hold secret teachings, beyond the expertise of a seasoned guide? Maybe these should be given only to readers who are spiritually prepared. Up to this point the book has been a volume of vintage Snyder. If anything he has become more colloquial, increasingly compressed in his language, his visions see farther, his admirable learning sits more lightly, his Buddhist training moves in his muscu-

lature. Then comes the final poem.

Gary Snyder's wife, the writer and eco-activist Carole Koda, died in 2006. *This Present Moment* ends with a funerary poem for her, "Go Now," unlike anything I have seen in poetry, in North America or anywhere else. It is both a prayer and an unflinching physical depiction of his wife's departure on the great journey. It opens with a tantric warning:

*You don't want to read this,  
reader,  
be warned, turn back  
from the darkness,  
go now.*

We have stepped near the realm of the *Candamaharoshana Tantra*. The poem is about to enter the place where love will be challenged by bodily fluids, the stench of decay; courage will be challenged by shrinkage and fear. To read it you may indeed need to be over 40, and married. The lessons have little to do with what you get out of books or inspirational lectures on Buddhism.

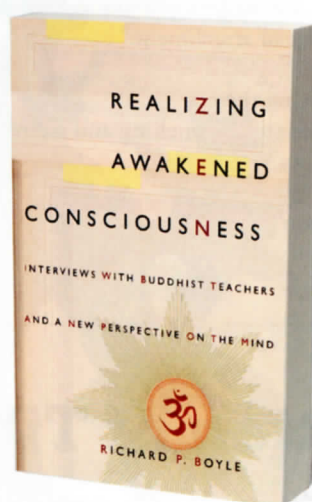
—about death and the  
death of a lover—it's not some vague  
meditation  
or a homily, not irony,  
no god or enlightenment or  
acceptance—or struggle—with the  
end of our life

Zen and tantra both use injunction to goad you toward practice. "Don't read all those books," Zen scowls, then amasses huge libraries. Turn back from the darkness, warns tantra. If you go in, carry strong medicine. The pages of "Go Now" may work as a medicine—bitter but fortifying. Ordinarily when a poem with unique medicinal power appears I urge companions to go out and read it. With this poem I've been cautious. Years ago Snyder wrote a lyric in which his poetry comrade Lew Welch appeared from the dead; when Snyder noted the tingling down his back, Welch replied, "There's a basic fear between your world and mine. I don't know why."

While I was reading *This Present Moment* a second time through, word came that my ex-wife had died out in



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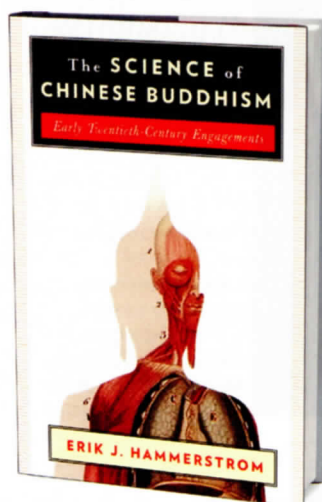
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California. Suddenly everything else I was working at paled. The task was to go there, accompany our daughter to formally identify her remains, do a ceremony over the body, and send her on for cremation.

One purpose of poetry—its archaic, struggling simplicity still makes it the strongest of the arts—is to point a way forward. Not forward in a prophetic sense; simply that those who have walked the trail already show how things can be properly done. In old India they believed

that poetry regulates the emotions and helps order society. All those surging, chaotic passions that swirl through, when you stand by the empty husk of someone once loved, have a settled place. They are, in Snyder's economical words, the "price of attachment."

being there,  
seeing and smelling and feeling it,  
thinking farewell

You lay a few flowers on the frightfully

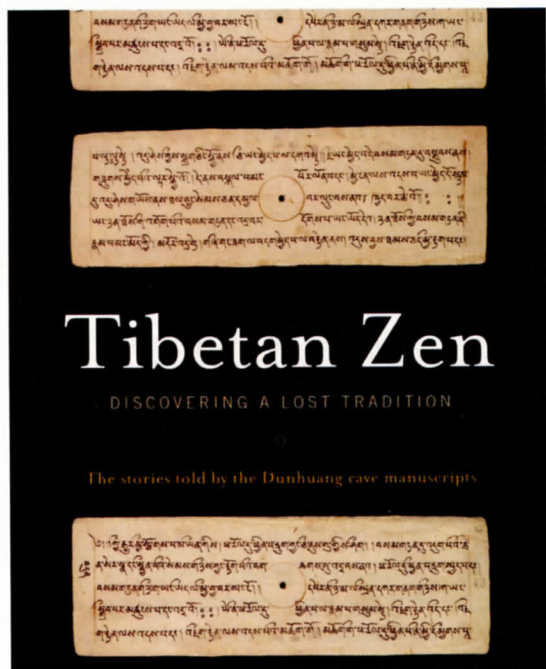
rigid breast; read a poem that both the living and the dead can hear; ring a bell if you've brought one into the crematorium. Then comfort the children as best you can. And walk back out onto the planet. It was worth it.

"Easily worth it—." ▼

**Andrew Schelling** is a poet, wilderness explorer, and translator. He teaches writing and Sanskrit at Naropa University. Among his 20 books is the recent *Love and the Turning Seasons: India's Poetry of Spiritual and Erotic Longing*.

## The Lost Tradition of Tibetan Zen

BY DAN ZIGMOND



*Tibetan Zen: Discovering a Lost Tradition*  
Sam van Schaik  
SNOW LION, 2015  
240 pp.; \$21.95 (Paper)

king, Trisong Detsen, decided it was time to take this new faith even more seriously. He built Tibet's first Buddhist monastery at the base of one of their holiest mountains and called it Samye, the Inconceivable.

A spirit of ecumenicalism pervaded Samye from the start. At its center stood a four-story temple designed to reflect the diverse architectural styles of all Tibet's neighbors. Smaller chapels and stupas populated the grounds around it, creating a huge mandala within the monastery's circular outer walls. Together these comprised a model of the entire universe, with every continent and ocean represented by the 108 separate structures. Buddhists from a variety of traditions were invited to teach there, and monks from both India and China soon took up residence.

It didn't last. Perhaps inevitably, conflicts arose between the various Buddhist schools at Samye. As the noted English Tibetologist Sam van Schaik explained in 2011 in his masterful book *Tibet: A History*, the Indian tantric Buddhists "insisted on the need to combine meditation with rational analysis and the basic practices of ethical conduct," while the Chinese Zen Buddhists felt that enlightenment only required that one "recognized the true nature of one's own mind."

The dharma arrived in Tibet as a wedding present. Legend has it that toward the end of the 7th century, the royal families of China and Nepal offered brides to Songsten Gampo, the first of Tibet's mighty kings to unify the country (and frighten its neighbors). These two princesses each brought with them an unusual dowry: a statue of the Buddha. Soon the

great Jokhang temple in Lhasa was built to house these precious gifts, which are still proudly displayed in the Tibetan capital. And these two remarkable women are remembered as the matriarchs of Tibetan Buddhism, together planting the first seeds of Buddha's teachings in the Land of Snows.

About a hundred years later, another

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