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Title: The Time Being of Gary Snyder's "Stories in the Night"

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Citation style: Marszołek Gabriela. (2016). The Time Being of Gary Snyder's "Stories in the Night". W: P. Bogalecki, Z. Kadłubek, A. Mitek-Dziemba, K. Pospiszil (red.), "Polytropos : na drogach Tadeusza Sławka" (S. 228-251). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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The Time Being of Gary Snyder's “Stories in the Night”

*The time being has
the quality of flowing.
So-called today flows
into tomorrow,
today flows into yesterday,
yesterday flows into today,
and today flows into today,
tomorrow flows into
tomorrow.*

Dōgen Kigen, *Time Being Sutra*,
trans. Gary Snyder

“In Native California the winter was a storytelling time.”¹ This is how “Stories in the Night” begins. The poem comes from the section “Locals” from Gary Snyder’s recent book of poems *This Present Moment* (2015). I first listened to the poem during the poet’s reading in May 2013, at Miłosz Festival in Cracow, two years before the book actually came out. That morning discussion panel with the poet Gary Snyder was chaired by Professor Tadeusz Ślawek.

Back then, the story opened before us, unhurriedly flowing and filling the mind with what it had to offer. The clear and created space in the mind projected multicolored pictures of the three-thousand-foot elevation, the western slope of the northern Sierra Nevada, the Yuba River watershed, the community of Black Oak, Douglas Fir, Ponderosa Pine²; or, in other words, the third Planet from the Sun, Turtle Island, Shasta Bioregion, Kitkitdizsee. Words by words, piling up a polychromatic kaleidoscope of images, old creation myths, the spirits indwelling the lakes, rivers, and mountains; stories of those who had been there for millennia, grounds abundant in deer and acorn, the Nisenan, natives to what is now Nevada County, killed or driven away during the gold rush years; ground squirrel, grey squirrel, coyote, fox, deer, bear, bobcat, bluejay, sweet birch, manzanita, kitkitdizsee. Poems, once read or

1 Gary Snyder, “Stories in the Night,” in *This Present Moment. New Poems* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015), 29.

2 Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 41.

listened to, like spirits, stay dormant in the mind and flow up the moment they fit in.

The very first line of the poem redirects the reader's attention and takes its course to the long-lost times of evenings filled with stories told by the fire, of the world brimming with powerful spirits, the guardian spirits of mountains and rivers, lakes and waterfalls. The space beneath the line enhances reflection. There is time to clear the mind, to drive off the preconceptions of being towards something, to light off the calculating mind and enliven the mind of creation. Yet, the vision stops and there, for a four-line moment, you come to be an observer of a world being painted in front of your eyes, or, rather, of fragments of this world, the poet's place north of San Juan ridge – Kitkitdizsee, whose name was taken from a Wintun tribe to denote a shrub native to the Sierra, commonly referred to as bear clover. As the poet keeps on reading, images come out of the dark, the mind projects pictures, set in the "cold early morning in the dark,"³ of a breakdown in the solar power system. The energy stays dormant, the three generators stopped working, the light still enclosed, the mind clinging to the idea of giving up the plans and searching for solutions.

(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 – make some tea – relax with your tools and your problems, start enjoying the day.)⁴

Yet it wanders to the old days – kerosene lamps, candles, woodstoves still prove reliable. The memory delves for concrete images – the old objects of everyday use, and then drifts towards the fragments of the years gone by, the "first fifteen years" that the poet refers to, come in the form of artifacts enclosed in minimum words. This practice is resonant with Snyder's metaphor of poetry viewed as "riprap of things." Riprap literally is "a cobble of stone laid on steep, slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains."⁵ The words are like rocks, "placed solid, by hands /

3 Snyder, "Stories in the Night," 29.

4 Snyder, "Stories in the Night," 29.

5 Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), unpaginated.

In choice of place, set / Before the body of the mind”⁶
 Therefore, each word becomes a thing among thousands of things, a part of the multilayered universe, a “cobble of milky way”⁷; each opens a vast field of images it connotes, each becomes a tool that carves out daily existence and shapes the experience of place. And in this way, a “heavy tile roof in the shade of a huge pre-contact black oak,”⁸ juxtaposes the natural and homespace by making it one realm of life.

Gary Snyder returned to California from Japan, where he was a lay adept of Zen, in 1968, to reconnect with Turtle Island, and eventually build a homestead on a black oak-manzanita-ponderosa pine land in the Sierra foothills. The images invoked in the mind of the poet making the repairs come one after another, they map out the scenes and places, invite the people whose names appear to sound for a moment (like Cheri, Siegfried – the locals, or Joanne, the poet’s second wife), for their lives compose the story, or, in other words, this story now being told is spun of stories whose momentous re-creation from the past renders the picture of the present an endless path of moments accomplished. While the hands are engaged in fixing the system, the mind is restless, it patiently wades through memory, shores at destinations, clings to thoughts and ideas that once engaged it, and some, years later, still do. Yet pieces enlivened by the forces of the mind continually interlace with the real work to be done around the homestead and nearby.

As the story unfolds and the coming pieces are being sewn together, the poet goes back to the early 1960s when he strolled around Hiroshima with Joanne and then visited Kyushu. The lines, composed only of that which is essential to depict the nature of the place, are there for a brief time only to leave the vibrant streets and bustling life, and – as if sliding through the greenness of gardens and “leafy trees” – transmute into a desolate setting of one of the largest calderas in the world, that is, in Aso Kujū National Park in Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan. “But at Mt. Aso, great caldera in the center of the island, crater 15 miles / across, saw sightseers from Nagasaki with the twisted shiny scarred burn- / faces of survivors from those days. And then read *Barefoot Gen*.”⁹

6 Snyder, “Riprap,” in *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, 32.

7 Snyder, “Riprap,” 32.

8 Snyder, “Stories in the Night,” 29.

9 Snyder, “Stories in the Night,” 29. *Barefoot Gen* is a graphic novel written by a person who lived through the bombing in Hiroshima.

This part of "Stories in the Night" is reminiscent of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in August 1945, while the volcano is evocative of Snyder's ascent of Loowit ('Smoker', 'Smoky' – a Sahaptin name for Mount St. Helens). On August 13, the same year, Gary Snyder first climbed this snowcapped mountain. However, to the Spirit Lake Lodge, which was far from the cities, news arrived late. Thus, August 14, 1945 – when young Snyder actually saw the news in *Portland Oregonian* along with the photos of the withered city, pinned up on the bulletin board in the lodge – became visualized by the poet as "atomic dawn." In "Stories" the feeling of the dawn solidifies out of the smoky caldera of Mt. Aso, where the sightseers from Nagasaki came into view. Mount Aso and back then Loowit both represent the powerful nature herself, the forces both destroying and reviving in her old perennial cycles, as contrasted with the fairly short history of man-created self-propelling power in his way to glorious victory. "What got to me about the Bomb was *too much power*. / And then temptation there to be ... the first. / The first to be 'The Emperor of the World.'"¹⁰ From the repository of stories that the human mind is, there reemerge issues that have preoccupied Snyder for a long time. Sixty-four years later (for "Stories" were written in 2009), Snyder – the philosopher of the wild – reminds us that this living and breathing organism that the earth is, unceasingly turning under our feet, is an unfathomable receptacle of both questions and answers as to the past, present, and future of the living world, whereas the human being, forever searching for that which can vouchsafe and explain his temporary stay on earth, is tempted to cling to powerful concepts, rules, and commandments, the rigor of which includes ones and excludes others at the same time ("... The Bible's 'Shall not kill' / leaves out the other realms of life ..." ¹¹). Yet the power issuing from this inconspicuous realm of life is to the human as are the forces of nature to the all-encompassing world. However, they have stood in relation for eons of time. In this way, the forces of nature – the seemingly slumbering magma forever turning and tossing in its old dream, the stories stored within, the long dislodged ghosts of mountains and lakes, indwelling in the sunken earth – the whole elemental world is interwoven with the story of humans. If not the planet that provided us with our shape, could we really be here – asks the poet in one of his essays in *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) and goes on to illustrate that the two conditions – that

¹⁰ Snyder, "Stories in the Night," 29.

¹¹ Snyder, "Stories in the Night," 30.

is, gravity and livable temperature have given us flesh and fluids, and “the trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us five fingers and toes. The place ... gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind.”¹²

The poet makes another digression here. “Stories,” therefore, bifurcates once again, and changes the direction our thoughts are following to suddenly find our way through a microscopic world, a truly living sphere where little critters lead their lives simultaneously to ours. The path, nonetheless, winds through the areas to most of the humans less frequented. Those paths and all the creatures living thereon and on the surrounding ground, the non-easily visible beings hiding in grasses and under the shadows of leaves, beneath the surface of the conspicuous and the palpable, within the presumably unimportant, thus neglected microcosm of tiny presences, tend to be withdrawn and made redundant in Judeo-Christian religions. “How could that be?” – ponders Snyder, the senator of the wild.

... What sort of world did they think this is?

With no account for all the wriggling feelers and the little fins, the spines, the slimy necks – eyes shiny in the night – paw prints in the snow.¹³

If taken with grace and care, the lessons nature teaches us illustrate that she cannot be viewed from the human perspective only, as our conscious view of that which stretches in front of our eyes can never be complete and reflect the ten thousand things, the multitudinous realms of the living world. There is more to that, since “nature is not a place to visit, it is *home* – and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places. Often there are areas that are difficult and remote, but all are *known* and even named.”¹⁴ As the philosopher of the wild, Snyder turns into the field of manifold forms, translucent beings and their ways, imprints they leave behind, the ephemeral

¹² Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 29.

¹³ Snyder, “Stories in the Night,” 30.

¹⁴ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 7.

nature of their presences; he goes off the trail, and off the trail is where the wild begins, yet before one can ever enter the wild, one needs to be on the path in the first place.¹⁵ The last two lines of the above-quoted fragment initiate the reader with the paths less known, but indubitably inscribed within the earthly cycles of births and deaths, just like the human. And those paths are "off the trail." They seem to transcend common dividing lines, dichotomies that tell apart the human and the natural, the spiritual and the innate. The next two stanzas of "Stories" go into the man-made divisions, inherently superficial disconnections, which – pinning for the eternal – are to guarantee the choice of the one right path, disregarding and neglecting all other ones engraved on the surface of the earth and in the minds of its inhabitants throughout millennia. By the use of simple, everyday words the shift is to the spiritual, the sphere not entirely free from fights and anxieties played in human hearts and minds.

And that other thing, can't have "no other gods before me" – like
 profound anxiety of power and jealousy and envy,
 what sort of god is that?
 worrying all the time?
 Plenty of little gods are waiting to begin their practice and learn
 just who
 they are.

In North India, Fourth Century AD, some Buddhist Tantrick
 Teacher Lady said, "That God called Yahweh to the west, he's
 really something. But too bad, he has this nutty thing that he's
 Creator of the world."
 A delusion that could really set you back.¹⁶

The strive for power, transforming and evolving on various levels of human existence, does not omit the spiritual. The lines make loose references to the fixed order of things that religions tend to base their precepts and commandments on; however, playful as they are, the references move across the borders of the sacred and, traversing the abstract, eventually return to the ten thousand things, that is, the physical world of the present moment. Human

¹⁵ Cf. "On the Path, Off the Trail," in *The Practice of the Wild*.

¹⁶ Snyder, "Stories in the Night," 30.

propensity to worship the creator seems to conceal the created. The commandments present the world that is made of outlasting choices, where the fixed and stable order of things, as well as the hierarchy created among the living, cannot change. “Stories” in fact is the poet’s mental travel across recollections, whose images appear vividly in his mind, or, in other words, it is the *bardo* states – transitional landscapes invoking pictures the thinker slowly rolls through in order to finally return through the narrow dim corridors to the physical world where his body has been held as if in abeyance. The travel also brings together long-held beliefs and doubts, delusions and disillusionments with the commonly accepted divisions and disunions embedded in the human mind. The return is to the place, the plans for the future, to the energy system drawing from the ultimate source of energy, that is, the sun. The narrow *bardo* passages end with the light, while the mind, free from preconceptions, prejudice, and constraints, projects the old times – the winter season illuminated with lodgefire light, redolent of pitchy pinewood slivers burning, vibrant with voices recounting old stories of how the world came to be, stories reaching for times when mountains were people, tales of lakes, rivers, and waterfalls, legends of rocks, and origins of forests, tales of the animal people, and of good and bad spirits in nature, and plenty of others. The light thus generated, enough to lit the lodge, thirty feet across, sufficed to keep the mind alert and one with the landscape and creatures therein dwelling. The light, unfolding and beaming through stories told by old time people, was enough to unveil the mysteries of the land and the mind reflecting on that which was there close enough to be learnt but also deep enough to conceal more. Old time people did not “need much light for stories in the night.”¹⁷ The poem seems to drift on the borderline between the dark and the light, the veiled and unveiled, the bygone and the time being of each moment, as

This present moment
that lives on

to become

long ago.¹⁸

¹⁷ Snyder, “Stories in the Night,” 30. Spacing original.

¹⁸ Snyder, *This Present Moment*, 67. Spacing original.