A Life, Wild With Language

By Conger Beasley Jr.

Book Review:

Danger on Peaks, by Gary Snyder. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.

Danger on Peaks is Gary Snyder's 10th volume of poetry, and his first collection of new poems in 20 years. All the elements that we have come to expect in his verse—the chiseled lines, the keen ear, the accelerated syntax, the solid learning—are present here.

Snyder rarely writes a bad or even mediocre poem. There are certainly no clinkers in this collection; there have been few in his career, including the "leftovers"—those that failed to make the cut in earlier volumes—he assembled in 1986 for a volume entitled *Left Out in the Rain*.

The faults that plague other poets—abstruse rhetoric, narcissistic primping, sly didacticism—don't seem to be part of his repertoire. As a poet, he makes fewer mistakes than anyone writing today. His poems always satisfy, some to a greater degree than others, but they always look and scan with a kind of terse effortlessness. The bone and sinew underpinning of insight and sensibility they're braced with, keeps them from sounding slack or self-indulgent.

Nobody conveys factual information with the same precision and celerity. Snyder always says exactly what he means, no more, no less, in the span of time required by the length of the line to say it. What he means is frequently no more than a depiction of the basic components of what he sees. Consider the opening lines of an American/Japanese hybrid, part haibun, part haiku, entitled "Night Herons":

> At Putah Creek a dense grove of live oaks. Step out
> of the sun and into the leafy low opening—from within
> the tree comes a steady banter, elusive little birds

—they shift back, move up, stay out of sight. It's a
great dark hall arched over with shimmering leaves—
a high network of live oak limbs and twigs—four or
five big trees woven together.

Danger on Peaks is made up of six parts, cast in a variety of styles, each of which illuminates a period in the poet's life. Section One, "Mount St. Helens," begins with an account of Snyder's first ascent of the famous volcano in 1945, where he learned of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The effect on the teenage lad (Snyder was born in 1930) was sobering, to say the least. Horrified, blaming scientists and politicians and the governments of the world, he swore a vow to himself that by "the purity and beauty and permanence of Mt. St. Helens," he would "fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all [his] life."

The quest becomes more complex when at precisely 8:32 a.m. on the morning of May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens erupts with a blast rivaling 500 Hiroshima bombs:

superheated steams and gasses
white-hot crumbling boulders lift and fly in a
burning sky-river wind of
searing lava droplet hail

How to reconcile these devastating blasts, man-made and natural? How to make sense of them, in the context of the moments in which they occurred?

Twenty years later, August 2000, Snyder visits the site of the eruption to assess, not just the damage, but the degree to which the mountain's ecological system has repaired itself in the two decades since it first blew. Those zones replanted by the National Forest Service feature trees that are taller and denser than the trees left to sprout and rise on their own.

"Well, no surprise," Snyder concludes. "Wild natural process takes time, and allows for the odd and unexpected." Which says

just about everything there is to say about why people are drawn to old-growth forests as opposed to second-generation, micro-managed, tree crops. Like nature, Snyder believes the imagination of the poet should be feral, wild with language and ideas, blooming in raw profusion, fearless.

Humor always has been a lively component of Snyder's work. Earlier volumes, such as *Myths and Texts,* showcase reworkings of found stories and tales, especially material relating to the shenanigans of Coyote, the North American trickster figure. The same puckish sense of humor is evident in *Danger on Peaks*:

STANDUP COMICS

A parking meter that won't take coins
a giant sprinkler valve wheel chained and locked
a red and white fire hydrant
a young dandelion at the edge of the pavement

Snyder's mirth, his ability to poke fun at himself and others of similar ecological ilk, is one of his appealing features. He is a deeply serious man, and yet he understands, as few contemporary poets do, the potential of humor as a regenerative force. Many nature-minded people bear their cross with dour severity. Not Gary Snyder. He likes to laugh, not just in private but in public; at times he'll tease and taunt his audience like a *koshare* (clown) at a Pueblo Indian ceremony. Laughter as a means of keeping us balanced. Laughter as a way of realigning the world into a more appealing paradigm.

A consistent theme in *Danger on Peaks* is the distinction between man-made and natural calamities. The book opens with the teenage Gary Snyder first hearing about the atomic bombs that devastated Japan in 1945. It closes with a sequence about the events of 9/11 and the destruction of the giant carved-out Buddhas standing in their stone cave-niches at the edge of the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan.

Natural disasters such as Mount St. Helens can be understood

in the context of the organic world and the ceaseless changes that chronically affect it:

> Things spread out
> rolling and unrolling, packing and unpacking,
> —this painful impermanent world.

Human-inspired calamities are much more difficult to comprehend. "Falling from a Height, Holding Hands" is a stunning poem that evokes both the terror of that terrible day at the World Trade Center and suggests (as the best poets always do) a possible resolution. The poem is Snyder at his understated best, and deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

> What was that?
> storms of flying glass
> & billowing flames
>
> a clear day to the far sky—
> better than burning,
> hold hands.
>
> We will be
> two peregrines diving
>
> all the way down

Despite the chronic plowing under of the dwindling wilderness of the California landscape, Snyder stays focused and even optimistic. In a poem entitled "Really the Real," he looks for, and finds, those pockets of wildness in the San Joaquin Valley that persist despite suburban development and agricultural expansion:

> Driving along, don't see much, I had hoped, but about
> to give up.
> Make a turn around and stand on the shoulder,
> glass the field:

flat farmland—fallow—flooded with water—
full of birds. Scanning the farther sections
hundreds of sandhill cranes are pacing . . .

"What's going on?" he adds. "Just a few miles west of the 5 [Interstate 5]: / in the wetlands, in the ongoing elder what you might call / really the real, world."

Nature will outlast us, Snyder concludes. When the ruination we have wrought on the earth finally ceases, nature will reassert itself:

we're loose on earth
half a million years
our weird blast spreading—

and after,
rubble—millenia to weather,
soften, fragment,
sprout, and green again

Gary Snyder will forever be linked to the 1950s Beat generation because of his friendships with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. The folksy character Japhy Ryder in Kerouac's finest novel, *The Dharma Bums*, is based on Snyder. The Beats blew through American postwar culture like a tornado, flattening entire towns and reshaping the landscape. Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote freely and associatively, in extended improvisatory riffs, hoping to mimic the pulse of the momentous changes taking place at every level of society.

Snyder, by contrast, got on a tramp steamer and sailed to Japan, the first of several trips. There, he immersed himself in Eastern religions and began grounding his poetry in the classical formality of such Chinese bards as the T'ang poet Han-shan (*Cold Mountain Poems*, which Snyder translated and published in 1969). What he learned and what he has given back to us over a long and distinguished career is nothing less than a manner of living that holds out the greatest hope for personal and cultural renewal. "Hail

all noble woke-up big-heart beings," he says in the last poem of his new book: "hail—great wisdom of the path that goes beyond."

To be able, with the stroke of a pen, like a Chinese calligrapher, to make a mark on a blank sheet of paper that hints at perfection, is a gift few artists or poets can boast of. The temptation as a writer is to keep fiddling, to add and subtract, to pile it up and take it off, like a man trying on suit after suit of clothes until he thinks he has found the right fit. Snyder satisfies as a poet because early on he found a form—the Chinese and Japanese lyric of direct expression—and stuck to it till he infused the form with his own material. This doesn't mean that he hasn't experimented, or played with different genres, or spun off in his own direction at times. He is that rarity in any art, any age—an innovative formalist—a man who, by personal example as well as poetic expression, has always managed to "make it new."