

Gary Snyder

danger on peaks

poems

Shoemaker  Hoard Washington, D.C.

Books by Gary Snyder

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Mountains and Rivers Without End

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The Gary Snyder Reader

The High Sierra of California (with Tom Killion)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Snyder, Gary, 1930–

Danger on Peaks : poems / Gary Snyder.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-59376-041-8

I. Title.

PS3569.N88D36 2004

811'.54—dc22 2004011649

Text design by David Bullen

Printed in the United States of America

Shoemaker |  Hoard

A Division of Avalon Publishing Group Inc.

Distributed by Publishers Group West

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

For Carole

“... *danger on peaks*”

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danger on peaks

I

Mount St. Helens

Loowit

from Sahaptin / lawilayt-Lá / "Smoker, Smoky"

▫ The Mountain

From the doab of the Willamette and the Columbia, slightly higher ground, three snowpeaks can be seen when it's clear—Mt. Hood, Mt. Adams, and Mt. St. Helens. A fourth, Mt. Rainier, farther away, is only visible from certain spots. In a gentle landscape like the western slope, snowpeaks hold much power, with their late afternoon or early morning glow, light play all day, and always snow. The Columbia is a massive river with a steady flow. Those peaks and the great river, and the many little rivers, set the basic form of this green wooded Northwest landscape. Whether suburban, rural, or urban the rivers go through it and the mountains rise above.

Mt. St. Helens, “Loowit” (said to be the “Indian name”)—a perfect snowcapped volcanic cone, rising from almost sea level to (back then) 9,677 feet. I always wanted to go there. Hidden on the north side in a perched basin is a large deep lake.

Spirit Lake

When I first saw Spirit Lake I was thirteen. It was clear and still, faint wisps of fog on the smooth silvery surface, encircled by steep hills of old fir. The paved road ended at the outlet, right by the Spirit Lake Lodge. A ways down the dirt road was a little shingle Forest Service Ranger Station. Farther down was a camp.

Looking out on the lake and across, only forested hills. Cool silence. South of the ranger station a dirt road climbed steadily up to a lighter drier zone. It was three miles to timberline. The mountain above the lake: they reflected each other. Maybe the mountain in the lake survives.

The camp had tent platforms under the big trees in a web of soft fir-floor trails. They were all near the water. It was so dark on the forest

floor that there was almost no undergrowth, just a few skinny huckleberries. The camp had a big solid wood and stone kitchen building, and a simple half-open dining hall. There was one two-story lodge in the rustic stone and log construction that flourished (making work for skilled carpenters) during the Depression.

From the camp by the lake we went out on several-day hikes. Loading Trapper Nelson packboards, rolling our kapok sleeping bags tight, and dividing the loads of groceries and blackened #10 can cook pots with wire bail handles. The trails took us around the lake and up to the ridges: Coldwater Mt. Lookout and on to Mt. Margaret and beyond, into a basin of lakes and snowfields nestled below. From the ridges we could look back to Spirit Lake and the mountain with its symmetry and snowfields. We walked through alpine flowers, kicked steps traversing snowfields, glissaded down and settled in by rocky lakes to boisterous campsites and smoky crusty tinned meals all cooked by boys.

▫ The Climb

Walking the nearby ridges and perching on the cliffs of Coldwater Mountain, I memorized the upper volcano. The big and little Lizards (lava ridges with their heads uphill), the Dogshead, with a broad bulge of brown rock and white snowpatches making it look faintly like a St. Bernard. The higher-up icefields with the schrund and wide crevasses, and the approach slopes from timberline. Who wouldn't take the chance to climb a snowpeak and get the long view?

Two years later the chance came. Our guide was a old-time Mazama from Tigard in Oregon. His climbing life went back to World War One. Then he got a big orchard. He wore a tall black felt hunting hat, high corked loggers-boots, staged-off pants, and carried the old style alpenstock. We put white zinc oxide paste on our noses and foreheads, each got our own alpenstock, and we wore metal-rimmed dark goggles like Sherpas in the thirties. We set out climbing the slidey pumice lower slopes well before dawn.

Step by step, breath by breath — no rush, no pain. Onto the snow on Forsyth Glacier, over the rocks of the Dogshead, getting a lesson in alpenstock self-arrest, a talk on safety and patience, and then on to the next phase: ice. Threading around crevasses, climbing slow, we made our way to the summit just like Issa's

“Inch by inch
little snail
creep up Mt. Fuji”

West Coast snowpeaks are too much! They are too far above the surrounding lands. There is a break between. They are in a different world. If you want to get a view of the world you live in, climb a little rocky mountain with a neat small peak. But the big snowpeaks pierce the realm of clouds and cranes, rest in the zone of five-colored banners and writhing crackling dragons in veils of ragged mist and frost-crystals, into a pure transparency of blue.

St. Helens' summit is smooth and broad, a place to nod, to sit and write, to watch what's higher in the sky and do a little dance. Whatever the numbers say, snowpeaks are always far higher than the highest airplanes ever get. I made my petition to the shapely mountain, "Please help this life." When I tried to look over and down to the world below — *there was nothing there*.

And then we grouped up to descend. The afternoon snow was perfect for glissade and leaning on our stocks we slid and skidded between cracks and thumps into soft snow, dodged lava slabs, got into the open snowfield slopes and almost flew to the soft pumice ridges below. Coming down is so fast! Still high we walked the three-mile dirt road back to the lake.

▫ Atomic Dawn

The day I first climbed Mt. St. Helens was August 13, 1945.

Spirit Lake was far from the cities of the valley and news came slow. Though the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima August 6 and the second dropped on Nagasaki August 9, photographs didn't appear in the *Portland Oregonian* until August 12. Those papers must have been driven in to Spirit Lake on the 13th. Early the morning of the 14th I walked over to the lodge to check the bulletin board. There were whole pages of the paper pinned up: photos of a blasted city from the air, the estimate of 150,000 dead in Hiroshima alone, the American scientist quoted saying "nothing will grow there again for seventy years." The morning sun on my shoulders, the fir forest smell and the big tree shadows; feet in thin moccasins feeling the ground, and my heart still one with the snowpeak mountain at my back. Horrified, blaming scientists and politicians and the governments of the world, I swore a vow to myself, something like, "By the purity and beauty and permanence of Mt. St. Helens, I will fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all my life."

▫ Some Fate

Climbed Loowit—Sahaptin name—three more times.
July of '46 with sister Thea
(went to Venezuela & Cartagena as a seaman summer of 1948)
June of '49 with dear friend Robin who danced shimmering in the
snow, and again with her late that summer

This wide Pacific land blue haze edges
mists and far gleams broad Columbia River
eastern Pacific somewhere west
us at a still place in the wheel of the day
right at home at the gateway to nothing
can only keep going.

Sit on a rock and gaze out into space
leave names in the summit book,
prepare to descend

on down to some fate in the world

▫ 1980: Letting Go

Centuries, years and months of—

let off a little steam
cloud up and sizzle
growl stamp-dance
quiver swell, glow
glare bulge

swarms of earthquakes, tremors, rumbles

she goes

8.32 AM 18 May 1980

superheated steams and gasses
white-hot crumbling boulders lift and fly in a
burning sky-river wind of
searing lava droplet hail,
huge icebergs in the storm, exploding mud,
shoots out flat and rolls a swelling billowing
cloud of rock bits,
crystals, pumice, shards of glass
dead ahead blasting away—
a heavenly host of tall trees goes flat down
lightning dances through the giant smoke

a calm voice on the two-way
ex-navy radioman and volunteer
describes the spectacle—then
says, the hot black cloud is
rolling toward him—no way
but wait his fate

a photographer's burnt camera
full of half melted pictures,
three fallers and their trucks
chainsaws in back, tumbled gray and still,
two horses swept off struggling in hot mud
a motionless child laid back in a stranded ashy pickup

roiling earth-gut-trash cloud tephra twelve miles high
ash falls like snow on wheatfields and orchards to the east
five hundred Hiroshima bombs

in Yakima, darkness at noon

▫ Blast Zone

Late August 2000.

An early plane from Reno to Portland, meet Fred Swanson at the baggage claim. Out of the Portland airport and onto these new streets, new highways, there's a freeway bridge goes right across the Columbia, the 205, piers touch down on the mid-river island, but there's no way onto it. This is the skinny cottonwood island that Dick Meigs and I used to sail to and camp on the sandbars. Blackberries growing around the transmission towers.

In an instant we're in Washington State, and swinging north to join the main 5. Signs for Battleground, Cougar. Crossing the Lewis River, the Columbia to the left, the Kalama River, the old Trojan nuke plant towers, then on to Castle Rock. Freeway again, no sign of the towns—they're off to the west—and we turn into the Toutle River valley on a big new road. Old road, old bridges most all swept away.

(Remembering two lane highway 99, and how we'd stop for groceries in Castle Rock, a hunter/logger's bar with walls covered solid by racks of antlers. The road east toward Spirit Lake first climbed steeply out of town and then gradually up along the river. It was woodlots and pasture and little houses and barns, subsistence farms, farmer-loggers.) Air cool, clear day, bright green trees.

The new Silver Lake Mt. St. Helens Visitors Center is close enough to the freeway that travelers on the 5 can swing by here, take a look, and continue on. It's spacious, with a small movie theater in back and a volcano model in the center large enough to descend into, walk through, and at the center look down a skillful virtual rising column of molten magma coming up from the core of the earth.

The Center's crowded with people speaking various languages. Gazing around at the photographs and maps, I begin to get a sense of what transformations have been wrought. The Toutle River *lahar*

made it all the way to the Columbia River, some sixty miles, and deposited enough ash and mud into the main channel to block shipping until it was dredged, weeks later.

We go on up the highway. Swanson explains how all the agencies wanted to get in on the restoration money that was being raised locally (and finally by Congress). They each put forth proposals: the Soil Conservation Service wanted to drop \$16.5 million worth of grass seed and fertilizer over the whole thing, the Forest Service wanted to salvage-log and replant trees, and the Army Corps of Engineers wanted to build sediment retention dams. (They got to do some.) The Forest Ecology Mind (incarnated in many local people, the environmental public, and some active scientists) prevailed, and within the declared zone, zero restoration became the rule. Let natural succession go to work and take its time. Fred Swanson was trained as a geologist, then via soils went into forest and stream ecology research in the Andrews Forest in Oregon. He has been studying Mt. St. Helens from the beginning.

The Corps of Engineers went to work along the Toutle with hundreds of giant trucks and earth movers. Swanson takes a turn off the main road, just a few miles on, to a view of an earthwork dam that was built to help hold back further debris floods in the new river channel. The lookout parking lot had clearly been more of a tourist destination in the past than it is now, partly closed and getting overgrown with alders. Once the dump trucks stopped, the people didn't come so much to look. But there it is, lots of earth holding back what further mud and gravel might be coming down — for a while.

The color of the dam, the riverbanks, the roads, is "volcano-ash-gray." New bridges, new road, this has all been rebuilt. Swanson says that for some years after the eruption there was no access into the west side of Spirit Lake. To get closer to the lake and the mountain, people were driving a string of small roads north and around. You could drive up from the east to Windy Ridge. And then a new state highway from the 5 to the west side ridge above the lake got built. You still can't drive to the edge of the lake — all pumice, ash, and broken rock.

The new road is an expensive accomplishment. It runs above the old Toutle riverbed along the hillside with fancy bridges, then into the Coldwater Creek drainage (I hiked down this when it was old-growth forest, and trail was the only access); makes a big curve around the head of the valley and does a long switchback climb. In that upper cirque of Coldwater Creek there are plenty of old gray logs lying tossed about on the ground. Between and around the logs the hills are aflower in fireweed and pearly everlasting *Anaphalis margaritacea*. Little silver fir three to ten feet high are tucked in behind the logs, mixed in with the tall flowers.

Finally pull up to the high ridge, now named Johnston after the young geologist who died there, and walk to the edge. The end of the road. Suddenly there's all of Loowit and a bit of the lake basin! In a new shape, with smoking scattered vents in this violet-gray light.

The white dome peak whacked lower down,
open-sided crater on the northside, fumarole wisps
a long gray fan of all that slid and fell
angles down clear to the beach
dark old-growth forest gone no shadows
the lake afloat with white bone blowdown logs
scoured ridges round the rim, bare outcrop rocks
squint in the bright
ridgetop plaza packed with puzzled visitor gaze

no more White Goddess
but, under the fiery sign of Pele,
and Fudo — Lord of Heat
who sits on glowing lava with his noose
lassoing hardcore types
from hell against their will,

Luwit, lawilayt-lá — *Smoky*
is her name

▫ To Ghost Lake

Walk back down from the west side view ridge and drive back to Castle Rock and the 5. Start a drive-circumambulation of the mountain, going north and then east up the Cowlitz Valley. The Cowlitz River gets some of its water from the south side glaciers of Mt. Rainier and the northwest side of Mt. Adams. Dinner at “Carter’s Roadhouse”—old place, slow and funky service, a bar, small press local history books for sale. Then swing south on a forest road to the Iron Creek Campground on the Cispus River and lay out groundsheet in the dark.

Next morning walk the gravelly bar of the little Cispus, duck under droops of moss from old-growth cedar, hot tea on the fir needles. Drive to the Boundary Trail, winding higher on ridgerunning tracks, break out around a corner and there’s the mountain and then suddenly we are in the Blast Zone.

In a great swath around the lake basin, everything in direct line to the mountain is flat down: white clear logs, nothing left standing. Next zone of tree-suffering is dead snags still upright. Then a zone called “ashed trees” blighted by a fall of ash, but somehow alive. Last, lucky to be out of line with the blast, areas of green forest stand. A function of distance, direction, and slope. Finally, far enough back, healthy old forest stretches away.

New patterns march in from the edges, while within the zone occasional little islands of undamaged vegetation survive. In some cases a place still covered with snow and down in a dip. From Windy Ridge the carpet of floating logs on the lake is mostly at the north end.

Go out several miles walking along the ridge and onto slopes of the volcano. It’s all ash and rock now, no forest regrowth here, and the sun as hot and dry as Arizona.

At the car again and drive to the Norway Pass road turnoff (from the mountain road see an arrow, shot and sticking in a dead tree, up high, and from the downslope side. Why? How?) and go north for a look down at the Green River valley and beyond that the high Goat Mountain ridge. Too far north up there to be affected. Down in the Green River valley one can see the distinct boundary between the unmanaged “ecological zone” of the Volcanic Monument where natural succession rules, and the adjacent National Forest land that had soon been logged and planted. The planting took hold well. In the natural succession blast zone the conifers are rising — not quite tall enough to shade out down logs and flowers, but clearly flourishing. But over into the “planted” zone it’s striking to see how much taller and denser the growing plantation is. Well, no surprise. Wild natural process takes time, and allows for the odd and unexpected. We still know far too little about it. This natural regeneration project has special values of its own, aesthetic, spiritual, scientific. Both the wild and the managed sides will be instructive to watch for centuries to come.

Baby plantlife, spiky, firm and tender,
stiffly shaking in the same old breeze.

We camped for the night on a ridgetop with long views both ways. A tiny fire, a warm breeze, cloudless starry sky. The faint whiffs of sulfur from the fumaroles. In the morning, cloud-fog rising covers the sun. Fog comes up the Columbia Valley and fills the deep-cut side-canyons clear back to here — floats awhile past our nearby truck.

Sit on folded groundsheets on the ashy pumice hard-packed soil and pick up our conversations again. Fred clarifies distinctions such as “original” and “restored.” What’s old? What’s new? What’s “renew”? I then held forth on the superiority of the Han’-gul writing system of Korea over all other alphabets, but what got me started on that? Our hissing Primus stove. I talked about ten years of living in Japan, “Two hundred miles of industrial city-strip along the railroad, and

tenth-growth forest mountains far as you can see. Went twice through Hiroshima, great noodles, full of activists, green and leafy — doing fine.”

Fred’s mind is as open as a summer morning in the Sierra. We talk about a lot. But when we come back to forests, eruptions, and the balance of economy and ecology, I shut up and listen.

Green tea hotwater
Sunball in the fog
Loowit cooled in white
New crater summit lightly dusted
Morning fumarole summit mist-wisps — “Hah” . . . “Hah”

One final trip before leaving: a walk to Ghost Lake: pearly everlasting, huckleberries and fireweed, all the way.

Out to Ghost Lake through white snags,
threading down tree deadfalls, no trail work lately here,
light chaco sandals leaping, nibbling huckleberries, walking logs
bare toed dusty feet
I worked around this lake in ’49
both green then

▫ Pearly Everlasting

Walk a trail down to the lake
mountain ash and elderberries red
old-growth log bodies blown about,
whacked down, tumbled in the new ash *wadis*.
Root-mats tipped up, veiled in tall straight fireweed,
fields of prone logs laid by blast
in-line north-south down and silvery
limbless barkless poles —
clear to the alpine ridgetop all you see
is toothpicks of dead trees
thousands of summers
at detritus-cycle rest
— hard and dry in the sun — the long life of the down tree yet to go
bedded in bushes of pearly everlasting
dense white flowers
saplings of bushy vibrant silver fir
the creek here once was “Harmony Falls”
The pristine mountain
just a little battered now
the smooth dome gone
ragged crown

the lake was shady *yin* —
now blinding water mirror of the sky
remembering days of fir and hemlock —
no blame to magma or the mountain
& sit on a clean down log at the the lake’s edge,
the water dark as tea.

I had asked Mt. St. Helens for help
the day I climbed it, so seems she did

The trees all lying flat like, after that big party
Siddhartha went to on the night he left the house for good,
crowd of young friends whipped from sexy dancing
dozens crashed out on the floor

angelic boys and girls, sleeping it off.
A palace orgy of the gods but what
“we” see is “Blast Zone” sprinkled with
clustered white flowers

“Do not be tricked by human-centered views,” says Dogen,
And Siddhartha looks it over, slips away — for another forest —
— to really get right down on life and death.

If you ask for help it comes.
But not in any way you’d ever know
— thank you Loowit, lawilayt-lá, *Smoky Má*
gracias xiexie grace

▫ Enjoy the Day

One morning on a ridgetop east of Loowit
after campstove coffee

looking at the youthful old volcano
breathing steam and sulfur
sunrise lava
bowls of snow

went up behind a mountain hemlock
asked my old advisors where they lay

what’s going on?

they say

“New friends and dear sweet old tree ghosts
here we are again. Enjoy the day.”

II

Yet Older Matters

▫ Brief Years

**Hanging Out by Putah
Creek with Younger Poets**

*Sitting on the dusty
dry-leaf crackly ground,
freeway rumble south,
black walnut shade,
crosslegged, hot,
 exchanging little poems*

Yet Older Matters

A rain of black rocks out of space
onto deep blue ice in Antarctica
nine thousand feet high scattered for miles.

Crunched inside yet older matter
from times before our very sun

*(from a conversation with Eldridge Moores
& Kim Stanley Robinson)*