After the Clearcut

Gary Snyder

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We had a tiny dairy farm between Puget Sound and the north end of Lake Washington, out in the cutover countryside. The bioregionalists call that part of northwestern Washington state "Ish" after the suffix that means "river" in Salish. Rivers flowing into Puget Sound are the Snohomish, Skykomish, Samamish, Duwamish, Stillaguamish.

I remember my father dynamiting stumps and pulling the shards out with a team. He cleared two acres and fenced it for three Guernseys. He built a two-story barn with stalls and storage for the cows below and chickens above. He and my mother planted fruit trees, kept geese, sold milk. Behind the back fence were the woods: a second-growth jungle of alder and cascara trees with native blackberry vines sprawling over the stumps. Some of the stumps were ten feet high and eight or ten feet in diameter at the ground. High up the sides were the notches the fallers had chopped in to support the steel — tipped planks, the springboards, they stood on while felling. This got them above the huge swell of girth at the bottom. Two or three of the old trees had survived — small ones by comparison — and I climbed those, especially one Western Red Cedar (*xelpai'its* in Sno-homish) that I fancied became my advisor. Over the years I roamed the second-growth Douglas Fir, Western Hemlock, and cedar forest beyond the cow pasture, across the swamp, up a long slope, and into a droughty stand of pines. The woods were more of a home than home. I had a permanent campsite where I would sometimes cook and spend the night.

When I was older I hiked into the old-growth stands of the foothill valleys of the Cascades and the Olympics where the shade-tolerant skunk cabbage and devil's club underbrush is higher than your head and the moss carpets are a foot thick. Here there is always a deep aroma of crumbled wet organisms — fungus — and red rotten logs and a few bushes of tart red thimbleberries. At the forest edges are the thickets of salal with their bland seedy berries, the yellow salmonberries, and the tangles of vine-maples. Standing in the shade you look out into the burns and the logged-off land and see the fireweed in bloom.

A bit older, I made it into the high mountains. The snowpeaks were visible from near our place: in particular Mt. Baker and Glacier Peak to the north and Mt. Rainier to the south. To the west, across Puget Sound, the Olympics. Those unearthly glowing floating snowy summits are a promise to the spirit. I first experienced one of those distant peaks up close at fifteen, when I climbed Mt. Saint Helens. Rising at 3 A.M. at timberline and breaking camp so as to be on glacier ice by six; standing in the rosy sunrise at nine thousand feet on a frozen slope to the crisp tinkle of crampon points on ice — these are some of the esoteric delights of mountaineering. To be immersed in ice and rock and cold and upper space is to undergo an eery, rigorous initiation and transformation. Being above all the clouds with only a few other high mountains also in the sunshine, the human world still asleep under its gray dawn cloud blanket, is one of the first small steps toward Aldo Leopold's "think like a mountain." I made my way to most of the summits of the Northwest — Mt. Hood, Mt. Baker, Mt. Rainier, Mt. Adams, Mt. Stuart, and more — in subsequent years.

At the same time, I became more aware of the lowlands. Trucks ceaselessly rolled down the river valleys out of the Cascades loaded with great logs. Walking the low hills around our place near Lake City I realized that I had grown up in the aftermath of a clearcut, and that it had been only thirty-five or forty years since all those hills had been logged. I know now that the area had been home to some of the largest and finest trees the world has ever seen, an ancient forest of hemlock and Douglas Fir, a temperate-zone rainforest since before the glaciers. And I suspect that I was to some extent instructed by the ghosts of those ancient trees as they hovered near their stumps. I joined the Wilderness Society at seventeen, subscribed to *Living Wilderness*, and wrote letters to Congress about forestry issues in the Olympics.

But I was also instructed by the kind of work done by my uncles, our neighbors, the workers of the whole Pacific Northwest. My father put me on one end of a two-man crosscut saw when I was ten and gave me the classic instruction of "don't ride the saw" — don't push, only pull — and I loved the clean swish and ring of the blade, the rhythm, the comradeship, the white curl of the wood that came out with the rakers, the ritual of setting the handles, and the sprinkle of kerosene (to dissolve pitch) on the blade and into the kerf. We cut rounds out of down logs to split for firewood. (Unemployed men during the Depression felled the tall cedar stumps left from the first round of logging to buck them into blanks and split them with froes for the hand-split cedar shake trade.) We felled trees to clear pasture. We burned huge brush-piles.

People love to do hard work together and to feel that the work is real; that is to say primary, productive, needed. Knowing and enjoying the skills of our hands and our well-made tools is fundamental. It is a tragic dilemma that much of the best work men do together is no longer quite right. The fine information on the techniques of hand-whaling and all the steps of the flensing and rendering described in *Moby Dick* must now, we know, be measured against the terrible specter of the extinction of whales. Even the farmer or the carpenter is uneasy: pesticides, herbicides, creepy subsidies, welfare water, cheap materials, ugly subdivisions, walls that won't last. Who can be proud? And our conservationist-environmentalist-moral outrage is often (in its frustration) aimed at the logger or the rancher, when the real power is in the hands of people who make unimaginably larger sums of money, people impeccably groomed, excellently educated at the best universities — male and female alike — eating fine foods and reading classy literature, while orchestrating the investment and legislation that ruin the world. As I grew into young manhood in the Pacific Northwest, advised by a cedar tree, learning the history of my region, practicing mountaineering, studying the native cultures, and inventing the little rituals that kept my spirit sane, I was often supporting myself by the woodcutting skills I learned on the Depression stump-farm.

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