

From the Top of a Hundred-Foot Pole

Kouonji (廣園寺), 1982–1984

The poet faces in two directions: “one is to the world of people and language and society, and the other is to the nonhuman, nonverbal world, which is nature as nature is itself; and the world of human nature—the inner world—as it is in itself, before language, before custom, before culture. There are no words in that world. There aren’t any rules that we know and that’s the area that Buddhism studies.”

—Gary Snyder

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1

I ascend the mountain alone.
The winding paths lead nowhere.

From the top I can see
the outline of a city.
Behind me the peaks
seem to go on forever.

2

I grew up believing.

It took a long time
unlearning
what I's been taught.

A mind
purged of beliefs
is a mind cleansed.

3

Who could be satisfied
with nothing but travelers' tales?

Go.

Find out for yourself.
Chart your own course.
Light your own path.

4

At the temple
offering my prayers
to no one.

5

Leaves fall
as if blown
by the wind.

A robe
is draped carelessly
over his shoulders.

Legs crossed,
hands touch
in his lap.

In emptiness
there is not
even serenity.

The Buddha's
gold face
is unchanging.

6

Aching legs,
breathing irregular:

Everything's so
out of sync.

A patch of sunlight's
my cushion.

7

Lanterns on every hilltop,
 voices shouting across valleys,
 listening for an echo
 in the windless autumn night.

Inhaling in the earth
 through wide-open nostrils,
 tasting the sky
 with outstretched fingers.

Positioned squarely on the ground
 knees in the dirt, firm and unmovable,
 floating along with this world
 one hand in my lap.

8

KYŌSAKU

The stick comes down
 and strikes my shoulder.

Instantly my stooping body
 is erect.

In humiliation
 dignity is restored.

For one fleeting moment
 my sins have been forgiven.

Everything is clean again
 like the cold winter air.

9

Sitting,
just sitting—
breathing
the wind
in and then out.

10

YAZA

Above
the trees
a star rises.

Sitting like a rock
in this garden.

Mountains
roll in waves,
the same
but always changing.

A thousand moons
live inside me.

In the no-light
not even the shadows
of stones and flowers.

The silence of a bell
before it rings—
there will be no-sound
even when you strike it.

We will sleep
with our eyes
wide-open.

11

MA

The empty spaces
 in this garden
 where the leaves
 did not fall....

12

Who is it
 that hears
 the stones
 when they sing?

13

In the silence
 broken only by the bell
 I sit alone with the others
 breathing in cold air.

Light filtering
 through the windows
 into clear open eyes
 reaches the center unclouded.

Once my soul
 was a clean, bright mirror
 reflecting the world
 indiscriminately.

Now that mirror is broken.
 The universe itself is shattered.
 The pure, the impure—
 dust cannot gather.

14

My breath
 curls from my mouth.
My toes
 are numb with cold.
My body
 trembles with shivers.

I sought out
 pagodas and temples,
the smell of incense,
 the beat of a drum.

I sat on my cushion
 in a half-aware silence,
counting my breaths,
 listening to the quiet heavings
of my chest,
 folding my hands
on top of crossed legs.

And now returning,
 going back in my mind
to an almost-forgotten land
 with empty arms
and hours of wordless sermons.

15

Do not disturb
 the silence
of what can never
 be spoken,
what voices
 cannot say,
what ears
 can never hear.

16

Face against the wall,
 my cup
 is almost empty.

17

There is no need to say
 what cannot be said.
 Silence shouts.
 Words are speechless.

18

Welcome the peripheral.
 Await it with anticipation.
 Be attentive when it comes.

19

TOKINOGE

The stained-glass
 windows are black.

No light but my own
 going home.

20

Doing zazen
 on the toilet—
 no movement.

21

The journey ends
right here,
not a step
from where we started.

22

To the marketplace
he returns
with helping hands.

23

Light
from a blown-out candle,
darkness so bright
you can't see it.

24

From the top
of a hundred-foot pole
climb higher,
climb lower.
Don't rest there
even a second.

Annotations

The title is derived from *Mumonkan* (無門関, *The Gateless Gate*), #47. The epigraph is from Gary Snyder, quoted in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 1261.

#8: A *kyōsaku* (警策, “encouragement stick”) is a flat wooden stick used by the monk in charge of meditation sessions at a Zen Buddhist temple to strike practitioners who request it as a way to help them refocus on their meditation.

#10: *Yaza* (夜坐, “evening sit”) is a *zazen* (座禪, “sitting meditation”) session performed during *sesshin* (接心, “intensive overnight retreats”) at Zen temples after the formal meditation sessions are over; participants go to various parts of the temple grounds for individual mediation before retiring.

#11: *Ma* (間, “negative space”) refers to the empty space surrounding or between figures in a work of art.

#19: *Tokenoge* (投機の偈, “enlightenment verse”) is a poem which expresses the moment of *satori* in Zen Buddhism.