

1-1-1996

What Happened Here Before

Gary Snyder

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Recommended Citation

Gary Snyder, *What Happened Here Before*, 3 HASTINGS WEST NORTHWEST J. OF ENVTL. L. & POL'Y 209 (1996)
Available at: https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings_environmental_law_journal/vol3/iss2/3

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What Happened Here Before

Gary Snyder

—300,000,000—

First a sea: soft sands, muds, and marls
 —loading, compressing, heating, crumpling,
 crushing, recrystallizing, infiltrating,
 several times lifted and submerged.
 intruding molten granite magma
 deep-cooled and speckling,
 gold quartz fills the cracks—

—80,000,000—

sea-bed strata raised and folded,
 granite far below.
 warm quiet centuries of rains
 (make dark red tropic soils)
 wear down two miles of surface,
 lay bare the veins and tumble heavy gold
 in streambeds
 slate and schist rock-riffles catch it—
 volcanic ash floats down and dams the streams,
 piles up the gold and gravel—

—3,000,000—

flowing north, two rivers joined,
 to make a wide long lake.
 and then it tilted and the rivers fell apart
 all running west
 to cut the gorges of the Feather,
 Bear, and Yuba.

Ponderosa pine, manzanita, black oak, mountain yew.
 deer, coyote, bluejay, gray squirrel,
 ground squirrel, fox, blacktail hare,
 ringtail, bobcat, bear,
 all came to live here.

—40,000—

And human people came with basket hats and nets
 winter-houses underground
 yew bows painted green,
 feasts and dances for the boys and girls
 songs and stories in the smoky dark.

—150—

Then came the white man: tossed up trees and
 boulders with big hoses,
 going after that old gravel and the gold.
 horses, apple-orchards, card-games,
 pistol-shooting, churches, county jail.

Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island*. Copyright © 1974 Gary Snyder.
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We asked, who the land belonged to.
 and where one pays tax.
 (two gents who never used it twenty years,
 and before them the widow
 of the son of the man
 who got him a patented deed
 on a worked-out mining claim,)
 laid hasty on land that was deer and acorn
 grounds of the Nisenan?
 branch of the Maidu?

(they never had a chance to speak, even,
 their name.)
 (and who remembers the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.)

the land belongs to itself.
 "no self in self; no self in things"
 Turtle Island swims
 in the ocean-sky swirl-void
 biting its tail while the worlds go
 on-and-off
 winking

& Mr. Toblissen, a Cousin Jack,
 assesses the county tax.
 (the tax is our body-mind, guest at the banquet
 Memorial and Annual, in honor
 of sunlight grown heavy and tasty
 while moving up food-chains
 in search of a body with eyes and a fairly large
 brain—
 to look back at itself
 on high.)

now,

we sit here near the diggings
 in the forest, by our fire, and watch
 the moon and planets and the shooting stars—

my sons ask, who are we?
 drying apples picked from homestead trees
 drying berries, curing meat,
 shooting arrows at a bale of straw.

military jets head northeast, roaring, every dawn.
 my sons ask, who are they?

WE SHALL SEE
 WHO KNOWS
 HOW TO BE

Bluejay screeches from a pine.