

BREATHING THROUGH THE FEET

An Autobiographical Meditation

Robert Bringhurst

NYOGEN SENZAKI, A ZEN TEACHER of particular importance to me, and one whose path I have often crossed, though he was a man I never met, used to urge his students to breathe through their feet. It seems to me very good advice, and I hope that in some of my poems, if not in my life, I've been able to do what Senzaki suggested.

Some of those poems, which I wish were as empty and clean as a zendo, are actually as cluttered as a backwoods cabin yard. But it may be the cluttered ones after all which breathe through their feet, or which breathe through the feet of the reader. The clean ones, some of them, scarcely seem to breathe at all.

The distinction comes, as far as I can tell, from my sitting on the fence, or moving back and forth across the border, between the diseased yet powerful cadaver of western culture and the living body of the world, still tangible in those pockets we call by the strange name of wilderness.

Poetry, I think, has a lot to do with the crossing of borders. That is what *metaphor* seems to mean, and that is what the loons and the goldeneyes do as they dive in the bay which is ten yards down and five yards out from my open door.

That and other local references notwithstanding, it seems to me that my personal history has, and should have, very little to do with my writing. Many of my contemporaries, of course, prefer to let the facts and accidents of their lives and the language they speak set the shape of their poems. But myth, as opposed to "mere literature," never works in this way. In myth, form and content are not identical, nor is one an extension of the other, though there is interplay, and frequently tension, between them. By form, however, I don't mean mere verse form; I mean narrative or meditative shape: plot, *mythos*, structure: the higher grammar of image and event. (And by content I mean, among other things, what José Ortega y Gasset had the wisdom to call the higher algebra of metaphor.)

Where I have been, what I have done, provides the lumber for the poems, but that lumber does not generate the shape. The shape is given to me from elsewhere — unearthed or inherited — and this is the way in which I transpose my own life

into the myths and the myths into my own life. Seen in this way, it turns out not to be “my life” at all, but merely my sense of the world I live in, with the emphasis on the world, not on the I who is doing the sensing.

So for example my own experiences in the Sinai in the wake of the Six Day War, and in the red rock deserts of southern Utah, are fed to the ghost of Moses in a poem called “Deuteronomy”; a story from the Cowichan River on Vancouver Island is fueled with my own experience of the Coast Range in *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*; an Algonkian ritual is transposed to the High Cascades in “Tending the Fire,” and in a piece called “The Stonecutter’s Horses,” Francesco Petrarca is made to sound as though he had just been hiking the Siskiyou, which straddle the Oregon/California line.

For years I kept tacked to my studio wall a *New Yorker* cartoon which I’d captioned Portrait of the Artist. In it, a man, nearly drowned, was being lugged up the beach by a taciturn lifeguard. “My whole life passed before me,” coughed the limp, drenched figure: “My whole life passed before me, and I wasn’t in it.”

“All good writing,” Scott Fitzgerald said, “is swimming under water and holding your breath.” But I am inclined to think that more real poetry is swimming under water and breathing.

This nevertheless is a rankly self-centred meditation not on swimming but on walking, breathing through the feet, and sneaking through the lines.

I was born in the post-Depression diaspora at the close of the Second World War, the only child of itinerant parents — ambitious father, obedient mother — and raised in the mountains of western North America, moving often and liking it well. I remember as foci the Absaroka Ranges in Montana, the Valley of the Little Bighorn and the Wind River Mountains and the Southern Absarokas in Wyoming, the Maligne Mountains and the Goat Range in Alberta, and the Virgin River country in southern Utah. In later years, I have felt myself at home in a thousand named and nameless places in that long spine of mountains, steppe, and desert which I’ve wandered from the Yukon to Peru. Much as I’ve loved the few cities I’ve lived in — Boston, Beirut, London, Vancouver — I’ve never been at ease in urban spaces. And I’ve felt especially uncomfortable in the large, self-confident capitals of eastern North America, where so many decisions that affect the world I prefer to live in are now made.

The place I was born used to be the country of the Kumivit — people who spoke a language related to Hopi, Shoshone, and Nahuatl, who lived in large domed houses of bulrush and watergrass, drank a broth of the sacred datura in quest of their visions, and shared a profound tradition of abstract art with their physically close but linguistically distant neighbours the Chumash.

A Portuguese sailed into one of their bays in 1542 and gave it a name on his chart but left it alone. The Spanish stole it from the Kumivit in 1769, and renamed my particular part of it El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los

Angeles de Porciúncula — in honour, improbably enough, of the madonna of St. Francis of Assisi. The U.S. Army stole it from the Spanish in 1846, and I arrived myself, somewhat more quietly, exactly a century later. The Kumivit were then extinct, and the Spanish colonial culture, bloody as it was, had been prettified into picturesque decor. The Kumivit village of Yangna had become the chrome-and-neon compost known to all aficionados of American nonculture as L.A.

I've often pretended I was born elsewhere, in some deeper layer of that midden or on some height or beach or raft where less imperial detritus had accrued. But my birth certificate says it was there.

And it was, in fact, a compost. Lifeforms thrived within the garbage, and almost anything could be found there. To take one improbable example, a Siberian-born renegade Zen monk, trained at Engakuji, who read Thomas Carlyle (and everything else) in his spare time, was wandering the city. He was the teacher I've already mentioned, Nyogen Senzaki, and he was a great crosser of borders. In 1946 he was freshly returned, with many other Japanese, from the Heart Mountain prison camp in northern Wyoming — a place in which, years later, knowing nothing yet of Senzaki, I also spent some time. The barbed wire was still up then too, though only the ghosts were still imprisoned. Heart Mountain was the first *ruin* I had ever seen, and it sits vivid on my mind, alongside Baalbek, Chaco Canyon, Delphi and other places, larger but seen later, which dwarf it in space and time.

The north end of Watts, where my parents were living in the mid 1940's; the Heart Mountain compound; Red Lodge, Montana; Calgary; Butte; the wild valleys I hiked as a child — those of the San Juan River and the Green — which are now under water, while the huge reservoirs they contain are filling with speedboats and marinas. . . . A litany of places, to conjure the long spaces between them. The earth itself is a living body, and a kind of brain. It is living information, like the cortex and the genes. We flood it with water and asphalt and concrete and standardized grass, and with signs which say Fried Chicken or Mountain Estates or Colour TV in Every Room or Jesus Saves, and we think *that* is information. I was born in the home of the celluloid vision and the armour-plated American dream, but I cannot remember a time when I was not horrified by the face of America: by its superficial brilliance, its arrogant self-assurance, its love of itself, its insentience, its greed.

Thus, while most of my colleagues in the Canadian and American poetry racket devote themselves to speaking for and within the colonial culture to which they belong — and which, of course, contains a great deal of profundity and of beauty — I have spent my own career learning to speak across and against it. I have tried to pack up into my poems all it contained that looked worth stealing, and to resituate that wealth, that salvageable wisdom, in someplace spiritually distinct: some other dimension of the physical space I inhabit, and which the maze of

governments, real estate agencies and development corporations supposes it owns.

This is a fruitless task, of course, for the machinery of progress and industrial development is destroying the non-human world far faster than a few ecologists, poets, or terrorists can protect it. But there is nothing else to do, for there is nowhere else to go. Home is where the stones have not stopped breathing and the light is still alive.

The pre- and now postmodernist assumption, that the world of colonial America, as heir to the ages and its spaces, is a universal world, and indeed a habitable world, is one I may yet help, in spite of myself, to prove. It is one which I nevertheless decry. I, like the audience I try to write for, live not in but on the fringes of that world — escaping it, contradicting it, pillaging it, and ignoring it as best I can. As a creature of the edges, and not of the collapsing centre, I have made it my business not to parody or portray the central insanities of that world — which is what much current writing is about — nor even to praise the still functioning graces — which are many after all, and which again much current writing is about. I have made it my business simply to find what I thought I could salvage and preserve, and to pack it out into another, coterminous world. There, with no hope of enduring success — and with no need of a new physical structure, so numerous are the ruins — I have been trying to live on closer, less arrogant terms with the real — which is, I repeat, for the most part non-human.

I feel fortunate that I was raised a political orphan, moving often across international borders, especially the U.S./Canada border, never learning to be at home with the sense of nationhood on either side. Even as a child, the only political act that made sense to me was to refuse to sing anyone's national anthem or mutter pieties to anyone's national flag. This unnationalism was, of course, the implicit tradition in North America until the eighteenth century, and it has survived, albeit perilously, into present times. It is the tradition of Dumont instead of Riel, Thoreau instead of Emerson, Melville instead of Whitman, Big Bear instead of Sir John Alexander Macdonald.

But because I was schooled, in the early years, much as everyone else was in colonial North America, I grew up with one foot in the confident world of western historicism. It took me a long time to find the other foot — the one I'd been standing on, as it turned out, all the while. I was thirty years old before I began the serious study of the languages and cultures native to the hemisphere I called home. Others, my elders — like Gary Snyder, Jerome Rothenberg, Jarold Ramsay, and even that strange old spectre Witter Bynner — had contemplated or taken this road before me. If I'd been less unsociable, or just quicker to learn, they might have saved me a great deal of time. As it is, I am still very glad of my little Greek and less Chinese — but the ten years I spent learning Arabic would, I now know, have been far better spent learning Hopi and Navajo.

I do still read the European and even colonial North American poets — primarily those at the two extremes of the history, ancient and modern. But I spend more time reading the works of biologists and anthropologists. I think of them often as the real poets of my age. And I read the remains of the native American oral literature. I think of *that* as what stands at the core of my heritage now. In the summer of 1984, I found in a Philadelphia library unpublished transcripts, in Haida, of performances by the great Haida mythteller Walter McGregor of the Qaiahlanas, recorded in 1901 in the Queen Charlotte Islands. And I felt then an excitement such as I think Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini felt in 1417, when, poking through manuscripts at a monastery in Italy, he uncovered the lost text of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*.

As recently as 1980, I taught, at a major Canadian university, a course in literature in which only the European and colonial tradition was mentioned, with the odd passing reference to India and China. I can no more imagine doing that now than I can imagine trying to reconstitute the British Empire — but it has been a long, slow road to learn.

ANOTHER TEACHER I NEVER MET, and who knew a lot about breathing, was Ezra Pound. But Pound also exemplifies the extraordinary factiousness, the imbalance, the self-righteousness and paranoia, and the fearful patriotism and pride of Euramerican civilization. When I was younger, I carried his books with me everywhere, and in 1965, on my way to Beirut, I went to Italy to see him. But as I neared the house I realized I had nothing whatever to tell him and nothing very interesting to ask him either, so I walked on. The thought that he might have something to tell *me* seems not to have entered my mind. In those days, I believed that a man could put everything and then some into his new books, and that another man could come along later and dig it all out again.

Oddly enough, I was not much troubled then by Pound's readiness to hate the Taoists, the Buddhists, the Jews, and any number of other groups. In him as in other large-hearted bigots, these hatreds were contradicted at every turn by individual friendships, but I was a long time in coming to wonder why, in that case, those hatreds were still there. At the time, I thought of them simply as a disease which Pound suffered and I didn't. It seems more obvious to me now that Pound suffered them in part because his cultural inheritance encouraged him to do so. It has given me plenty of unwanted encouragement of the same kind.

Pound himself touched another American bent in me too, and that was my prolonged fascination with craftsmanship and technique, with inward mechanics and outward physical forms. With Pound's example before me, I spent years on

the study of metrics. Not that I did daily exercises with the Welsh or French or Italian verse forms; I was never much interested in envelopes. But I studied prosodic systems and speech sounds, the acoustic as well as syntactic shaping of language. I focused for years on the audible half of the craft of polyphony — which in my trade means making a music one of whose voices sounds audibly in the throat while the others sound silently and differently, yet relatedly, in the mind.

After twenty years of working at it, I can now sometimes think about orchestrating a poem instead of shaping a single line — which is why, I suppose, the word *form* no longer seems to me, as it once did, merely a synonym for versification. Along the way, it seems to me I have come to learn relatively less from other poets and more from artists of other kinds. I have learned more about composition from the late sonatas of Beethoven, more about silence from the late paintings of Borduas, and — though I cannot write like he could play — as much about tonality and broken timbre from John Coltrane, as from any poet I could name.

And I don't regret the time I've spent studying prosody, though it's clear to me now it has little to do with the essence of poetry. Like its visual counterpart, typography (another physical and mechanical business which, for me, has held mysterious fascinations), prosody is in its simplest forms a ceremonial tool and in its complex forms a sometimes burdensome luxury. At its best, it is a device for retaining and touching the poetry. It may be as useful and beautiful as a bowl, but a bowl is not water, and the untranslatable stuff of prosody is rarely, I think, essential to the poetry itself. Yet I value it highly, as I always have. To borrow a sentence from Pound, I value technique as a test of an author's sincerity. I value it as evidence of his commitment to something more than a private audience with the gods.

None of this means, of course, that poetry doesn't sing. It does sing, or seeks to sing — and will try to do so visually, as the hills do in winter, if it is prevented from doing so audibly, as the thrushes do in spring. It may for all that be no more scannable than the Kaskawulsh Glacier and no more tuneful than an arctic tern.

A language is a sort of lifeform, like a discontinuous animal or a symbiotic plant. Dead, it is like the intricate test of a sea urchin or the lifeless shell of a crab. Alive, it is a working form of intelligence, a part of the intellectual gene pool which has taken on specified, localized form. It is not, as many of my colleagues in the literature business like to say, the mother of poetry. Poetry has nothing essential to do with language. Language just happens to be the traditional means — but hardly the only available means — by which poetry is touched, in which it is temporarily captured, and through which it is served (or, as we all know, sometimes disserved). The poetry seems somehow always willing

to revisit certain old poems (it helps a lot if we remember how to pronounce them), just as the gods seem never to abandon certain old temples (it helps if we remember how to approach them). Yet there are many, more modern structures which neither poetry nor the gods seem willing to touch, no matter how skilfully those structures may be engineered.

So if poetry has nothing quintessential to do with language, what does it have to do with? It has to do, for one thing, with the other forms of attention. When I say that colonial American culture seems to me dead or insentient, this is what I have in mind. For all the scientists, poets, scholars, and trained observers of all kinds, all the professional attention-payers we have in western society, attention is precisely what seems to be absent from our daily lives. "Breathe through your feet" is a gentler, more informative, less self-centred and less frustrated form of the well-known adjuration, "Pay attention." It doesn't mean pay attention to *me*; it just means pay attention.

It is, for instance, what snails do under duress. The snail, who is almost all foot to begin with, though he has gills, can breathe through almost every pore in his body. I can imagine Nyogen Senzaki, in his snail incarnation, pushing still further, saying in Snail, "Breath through your shells." He was, as I've said, a great crosser of borders, and had little patience with excess baggage.

In the year of Senzaki's release from the Heart Mountain prison camp, Ezra Pound was interred at another such camp near Pisa. He was then indicted for treason as a result of his radio broadcasts from Italy during the war. But let us remember that the society which indicted him did so not for his lunatic promotion of racial hatred. His crime, as far as the U.S. government was concerned, was simply that he had urged rapprochement with Mussolini and an immediate end to the war. Let us also remember that the society which bore, bred, and indicted him was the same one which had imprisoned Nyogen Senzaki and thousands of others merely for being (or looking) Japanese. It was a society in which apartheid was legally sanctioned and almost universally practiced against Amerindians, Asians, and Africans. It has become since then a society whose principal business is the manufacture and deployment of the instruments of mass destruction. And it has remained a society whose relentless persecution of native Americans seems destined to continue until every Indian left alive has finally consented to the state religion, which is to say the industrial-mercantile economy, and with it the real estate ethic, that land can be freely bought and sold.

It is a monster more benign than many others; of this there is no doubt, but it is a monster nonetheless. I hope that my own slow and unobtrusive treason against the nation state I was born in, while it will never be as notorious as Pound's, will prove in the long run less boneheaded and more fruitful. I would like that as much as I'd like to write poetry which the rasp-tongued, mad old master might have admired.

I'VE BROODED HERE ON THE DISTINCTION between the colonial and native American cultures. But in the tangled roots of the European tradition lay cultures which must, in significant ways, have resembled the ones which, for three hundred years, we have worked to extinguish throughout North America. The remains of those old, now voiceless, cultures of Europe — from the paintings of Lascaux to the fragments of Empedokles and Herakleitos — though they come to us in pieces, speak of a wholeness which, in our rapacious industrial society, is almost unknown.

I have lived and worked with the discontinuous ghosts of the old philosopher-poets of Greece for a long time, and I admire about those poets in particular their refusal to be compartmentalized. I admire their assumption that poetry, philosophy, physics, biology, ethics, and even theology are all one pursuit. I admire, in other words, their moral and spiritual and intellectual integrity. And I admire, by the way, the fact that they were good ecologists, good environmentalists, though they'd have made no sense out of that compartment either.

I find that same integrity in many of the philosopher-poets of the Orient — in Saraha, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Seng Ts'an — and I think I sense it in St. Francis of Assisi, though hardly in the works of those who sailed to the New World in his name. But to me it seems clearest of all in some of the quiet, cornered voices of the native American tradition. It is there to be read in the salvaged scraps of oral literature, and it is still there to be heard in the mouths of a steadily shrinking number of native gardeners, hunters, and herders who live in the steadily shrinking real world — the lean tracts not yet consumed by an insatiable white society with the stupidest goals in the world: money and jobs. Not piety, grace, understanding, wisdom, intelligence, truth, beauty, virtue, compassion. None of these. Not real wealth either, but only factitious wealth; and not a relationship with or a place in the natural order, but life in a wholly consumptive, introverted scheme: money and jobs.

I find sustenance now for that archaic sense of integrity more among naturalists than among poets, more in broken country than in social order, more with marmots and great blue herons than with human beings. I hope that my own poems, like those of the Presocratics — and like the tales of Walter McGregor of the Qaiahllanas, and the great poem of Lucretius — are not about human beings exclusively, but about the world, and about the painful business of loving and living with the world. Breathing through the feet, while the colonial culture keeps tearing the air with its hands.

But speech is in its origins a set of social gestures, and a man who turns his back upon his fellows severs himself from the wellsprings of language. Silences puncture his speech. He grows inarticulate. What kind of sentence is that upon

a poet? Perhaps the best kind. A man who turns his back upon his fellows severs himself from the wellsprings of eloquence, but not from the sources of meaning.

So like the drunk who befriends the dog, because everyone else is too far off the floor to talk to, I keep the company, for preference, of the rocks and trees, the loons and the seaducks who at this moment are close out the door. I ignore you, reader, for something larger than you, which includes you or not, as you choose — though of course, in another sense, whatever you choose, it includes you. And you include it, and our fate rests not just on our own feet but in one another's hands.

RIDDLE

Robert Bringhurst

A man with no hands is still singing.
 A bird with no hands is asking the world,
 and the world is answering every day:
 earth is the only flesh of the song.

A man with no wings is crossing
 the sky's black rapids on his hands.
 His mother's bones lie slumped
 by the stumps of the cedars.

I carry my own bones in my hands
 into your country,
 and there are no kings; it is not a kingdom;
 and there is no legend; it is the land
 and a woman's body, and these are my bones.
 What do I owe to these strangers my brothers?