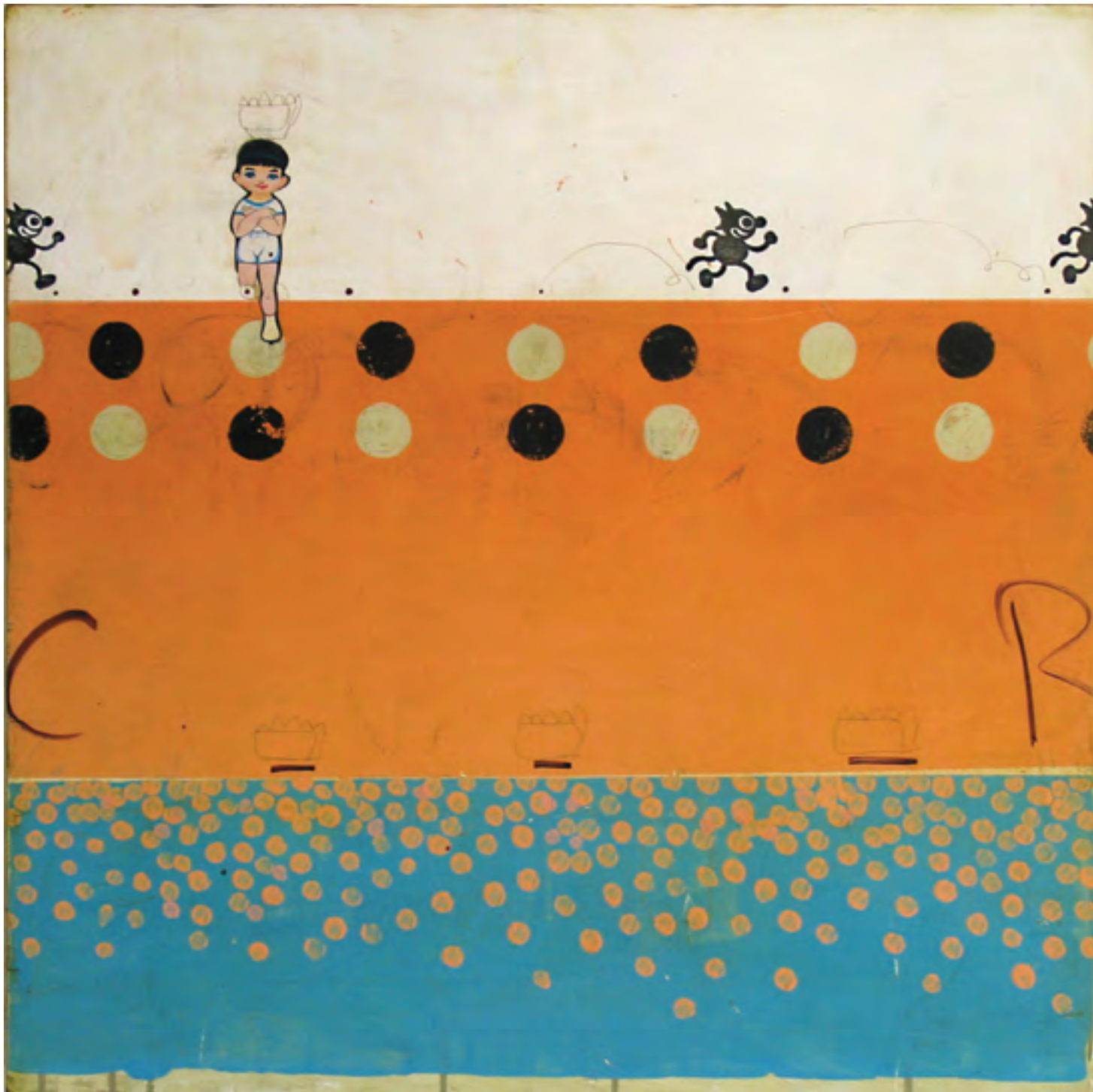


## MICHAEL CUTLIP

*Run for It*, 2008  
Mixed Media on Panel, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## DOUG THORPE

# Sharing the Earth Household

## The Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder

*Pound was an axe,  
Chen was an axe, I am an axe  
And my son a handle, soon  
To be shaping again, model  
And tool, craft of culture,  
How we go on.*

—Gary Snyder, “Axe Handles”

**Y**ou can see the two of them on the cover of *Distant Neighbors: The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder*. Snyder is taut and lean in short sleeves and vest, a coyote trickster figure with his hands in his pockets and a slight grin, his eyes squinting as he stands in front of the Grumblefinger bookstore in Nevada City; to his left, Berry is in what look to be corduroy pants and a long-sleeved shirt, with crossed arms, facing the camera like a kindly country uncle.

Both men were born between the wars: Snyder in 1930 in Washington State, in an area now part of Seattle that was then farmland; and Berry four years later in Henry County, Kentucky, the child of five generations of farmers. Too young for the Second World War and a little old for Vietnam, Snyder graduated from Reed College in Oregon in 1951, and Berry finished at the University of Kentucky with a BA and an MA in 1957. Their peers are the slightly older poets Galway Kinnell (1927), Donald Hall (1928), James Wright (1927), and Allen Ginsberg (1926). (James Dean, 1931. Elvis, 1935.)

At Reed, Snyder discovered Waley’s and Pound’s translations from the Chinese, although (as Lee Bartlett writes in *The Sun Is But a Morning Star*):

His own interest in Chinese poetry was already primed by his experience looking at Chinese landscape paintings in the Seattle Art Museum: “My shock of recognition was very simple: ‘It looks just like the Cascades...’” [*The Sun is But a Morning Star*, p. 82.]

He was soon heading south to the Bay Area for graduate school, meeting Kenneth Rexroth in 1953. (Bartlett quotes Robert Duncan: “The person who is straight-line Rexroth is Gary Snyder. He had the same bookshelf.”) In 1955, while Berry was getting his master’s, Snyder took part in the reading at Six Gallery where Ginsberg read “Howl.” He met Kerouac, lured him up to the Cascades and the fire lookouts (a story well told in *Poets on the Peaks* and fictionalized in *The Dharma Bums*), and then left for Japan for an immersion in Zen. He returned to the States periodically, participating in the January 1967 “Human Be-In” at Golden Gate Park with Allen Ginsberg—a reminder of the very different roads Snyder and Berry travelled before meeting. Berry went west to California in 1957 after receiving

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a Wallace Stegner Fellowship to study creative writing at Stanford. There, he was in good company: he was joined by Ernest Gaines, Ken Kesey, Tillie Olsen, Robert Stone, Edward Abbey, and Larry McMurtry.

For all of their differences—made even clearer by comparing *The Selected Letters of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder*, also published by Counterpoint Press—there is a deep underground current that connects Henry County, Kentucky, and Snyder's eventual home in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Berry speaks of "Home Economics," recognizing the redundancy in the title, since "economics" derives from *oikos*, the household or community—which Snyder points to early in his career as the "Earth House Hold." It was Snyder's book of this title that their soon-to-be editor Jack Shoemaker read in 1969, about the same time that he discovered Wendell Berry's *The Long-Legged House*. Shoemaker later commented (as quoted by Chad Wriglesworth, the editor of these letters) that "where Snyder's book celebrated the exotic and otherness of life, from Zen in Japan to working as a merchant mariner and a fire lookout in the Sierras, Berry's book explored and celebrated the familiar, the possible, an American life that [he] could imagine living." [*Distant Neighbors*, p. xii.]

Shoemaker visited Berry the next year, then published work associated with both authors in the early seventies, which led to Snyder's first letter to Berry, expressing thanks for the latter's *A Continuous Harmony* (published in 1972). This volume included a much recopied essay, "Think

Little," published in the *Whole Earth Catalog*, as well as thoughtful comments on Snyder's poetry in the book's opening essay. It was the beginning of a correspondence and a friendship that continues to this day: the final letters included in the book date from July 2013.

Snyder and Berry first met when Snyder was traveling to Ohio for readings. Typically, one of Snyder's first letters to Berry said that he hoped to stay with Berry a couple of days "to help with work around the place. And talk some."

Sometime after this visit, Berry enclosed in a letter to Snyder the poem "To Gary Snyder." In a joint reading—their first—at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Berry explained a little about the poem:

The day that Gary left to go to the airport, my boy Den and I went on up to visit the neighbor up a creek. The river was up and we were going along the edge of a backwater and we became aware that we were coming up on a rather large flock of mallards that had come down on the backwater. So we began to ease along to see if we could get up close to them. And we did. We got very close, crawling along on our bellies. And we stayed and watched a long time, got into that companionable spirit that you can get into with creatures—especially ducks, who are very conversational. And then, for some reason, we did a thing neither one of us anticipated. We said, "Well, we got to be going now" and the ducks didn't move.... The reason we had spoken, I think, was because we hated to break it up.... And we were walking along together, being sort of amazed at ourselves and pleased, and Den said, "I wish Mr. Snyder had been here." And I knew exactly what he meant and I wrote a poem about it. [*Distant Neighbors*, pp. xiii-xiv.]

The poem that followed already marks Wendell Berry's voice and style:

*To Gary Snyder*

After we saw the wild ducks  
and walked away, drawing out

the quiet that had held us,  
in wonder of them and of ourselves,  
Den said, "I wish Mr. Snyder  
had been here." And I said, "Yes."  
But many fine things will happen here  
that you will not see, and I  
am resigned to ignorance of many  
that will happen in your hills.  
It cannot often be as it was  
when we heard geese in the air  
and ran out of the house to see them  
wavering in long lines, high,  
southward, out of sight.  
By division we speak, out of wonder.

[*Distant Neighbors*, pp. xiv-xv.]

Berry's lines are not long—many are just seven syllables; a few expand to nine—and the diction is simple (mostly monosyllabic), but in a poem of sixteen lines there are just five sentences varying in length from four words to thirty-three. This syntactic rhythm accounts for some of the reflective quality I find in his work, but also the directness and simplicity there in that laconic "And I said, 'Yes.'" But this brief reply to his son then leads to another long reflection in two lengthy sentences, ending with the return to brevity in a final line: *By division we speak, out of wonder*.

Wriglesworth nicely comments on the poem, noting the move from father to son to the desire to include Snyder, an invitation coming delightfully and even poignantly from the son, which links the father and son in a moment of shared pleasure and longing—a memory that the poem clearly treasures and memorializes. But the moment also includes Snyder, whose absence creates the bond of memory for the two of them. He is there as the poet recalls that moment when Snyder was visiting and together they heard the geese and "ran out of the house to see them." The line break here allows that very "wavering" to gain a little extra energy: it catches, in its own dactylic three syllables and long initial vowel, something of the beauty of those birds. So, too, with the alliterative l's in "long lines," and the assonance between "lines" and "high"—sounds that help to widen out and lengthen that flight.

Which then leads to them moving "southward, out of sight." And a period, a climax, punctuated by that lovely final line—*By division we speak, out of wonder*—the comma nicely splitting the two movements of the poem: the first, the recognition of geographical separateness, which in turn reflects their philosophical, theological, and even aesthetic differences. But they also speak *by* division; division is in part *the means* by which they speak. The letters themselves exist because of the difference.

But then he adds the final realization: that they speak, yes, "by division," but also (*and* also) "out of wonder." This picks up his earlier use of the word—"in wonder of them and of ourselves"—and so once again expands the father and son to include Snyder. It is wonder, Berry suggests, that unites them, even as they are divided. And it is wonder that has the last word.

\* \* \*

A year later, Snyder stayed with the Berrys again. After returning to California, he sent the poem "Berry Territory" back—and we are struck by the differences in style:

Many soft leaf structures, bush or tree  
All, angiosperms, blossoms pinched by frost

Under dead leaves Tanya finds a tortoise  
matching leaves—legs pulled in—

Here, it's all close observation: people and other creatures seeing, acting; time and space compressed; a moment caught as language catches; the language itself in motion as we read; time both caught and moving as the animal's den goes back millennia to when this land was sea—

And woodchuck holes that dive in  
under limestone ledges  
seabottom strata  
(brush their furry backs  
on shell and coral).

Most holes with dry leaves scattered at the door  
nobody there.



A period there and a shift in vision—

A beech, silvery, smooth, “FJ 45”  
deep carved.

And another layer of time, another observation—

A Chestnut Oak—tall—in the woods on heights  
above Kentucky River, this one born  
back in Dream Time...

“Dream Time” adds another sort of reality that lives in these woods, with the line break here allowing us to linger on “born,” which to the ear could as easily be “borne / back” as we indeed are carried back—

it has a shining being in it,  
with eternal life!

—the exclamation bringing the poem to a sudden rise before we return to the earth, the human/humus of “Wendell, crouched down, / Sticks his face in a woodchuck hole” and smells what’s there, what was there, and Snyder follows—

I go on my knees,  
Put the opening to my face  
like a mask. No light;  
All smell: sour—warm—  
Splintered bones, scats? feathers?  
Wreathing bodies—wild—

Some home.

[*Distant Neighbors*, pp. xvii-xviii.]

The syntax is splintered like the bones, the quick stops and line breaks with period, semicolon, and colon within five single-syllable words—jagged ends of thoughts, the immediate world and the senses, “no light” but rich alliteration, sounds ripe like the smells, sour, scats, wreathing bodies, the dashes at the end with a faint hint of Dickinson—*wild*—and then concluding: *Some home*.

And that “home,” set off by space, leaves plenty of ways to be read. I hear it as a concluding fact, a truth—it is

“some home,” a simple matter of things being as they are. And yet it is also *some* home, a special home. *That’s some home you got there*.

And, quietly, as guest to Berry’s host (two words etymologically related, and so are in that way distant neighbors themselves), that final word brings us back to Berry’s home, where Snyder is visiting, and beyond that to Berry’s work, which above all else is about home. The work of being about home.

\* \* \*

The letters get most interesting as Snyder’s West Coast, Asia-facing individualism bumps up against Berry’s Bible- and Milton-quoting community roots. But the lesson throughout is how well each listens to the other, and how deeply and quickly they are able to trust each other’s good intentions. Berry responds to Snyder’s essay, “Good, Wild, Sacred,” a draft of which Snyder had sent to him, complaining about Snyder’s too easy dismissal of the Old Testament; Snyder in turn responds, “I must confess that, picking and choosing among mythologies to live by I am much more drawn to the polytheistic, pagan, fertility goddess world of the ancient near east, than that of the Old Testament”—no surprises there—and he concludes his letter with a postscript (“Wendell—Dear me; I hope you take this letter as just a scholar’s blunt way of talking and nothing personal”) to which Berry responds by mail: “Nothing in your long letter ... offended me. ‘A scholar’s blunt way of talking’ is welcome to me for the time it saves—so long as it’s not unfriendly, and I just *assume* your friendliness.” To which he then adds an extensive response to Snyder’s notion of Yahweh as a “projection” of the Israelites, all of this culminating—for the moment—with Snyder acknowledging his “cranky comments on Judeo-Christian matters” and noting that much of his thinking on the subject derived from Robert Graves and his own mother’s “lifelong revulsion to her Texas Methodist upbringing.” [*Distant Neighbors*, p.120.]

Even more interesting is Snyder’s long and detailed response to Berry’s paper “Preserving Wilderness” and Berry’s response in turn. Berry’s focus on community and the *use* of land shows us a shading of difference: in the middle they meet and agree (about community, gratitude), but for all of Snyder’s rootedness at Kitkitdizze (his home in the Sierra Nevada), we also see why Nathaniel

Tarn says that “for Snyder (so often) love is liquid, made in water.” Whereas few have written more eloquently than Berry about marriage rooted in a place. I still use in classes his terrific discussion (in *The Unsettling of America*) on the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, a marriage sealed by the secret of the bed which Odysseus himself carved out of a still-rooted olive tree. There, Berry’s deepest conservatism comes forth, just as Snyder’s own more watery sense of relationship manifests in his careful and honest letter to Berry about the ending of his marriage to his wife Masa, with whom he continued to be in a loving relationship even while she moved in with a friend down the mountain and Snyder co-habited with another woman, soon to be his fourth wife. This is a situation at which the Kentucky farmer might be expected to raise an eyebrow, but which instead elicits a loving response: “I’m grateful for your care and kindness in writing to me about your new arrangements. Of course, I will worry about you some, for the same reason that I wish you well: I am your friend. You are as welcome in my life as you ever were, and Carole is as welcome as you are.” [*Distant Neighbors*, p.159.]

Religion is on the surface a major place of difference for these two, and yet here they continue to educate each other (in the root sense of *educare*, to lead out). Berry (this is in 1980) flatly says, “I think you are wrong in your statement that ‘it is heretical for a Christian to aspire to be completely one with the maker,’” and goes on to speak of atonement as “at-one-ment” and to refer back to Dante, one of Berry’s own literary and spiritual authorities (as Milton and Blake and the Bible itself are others). He will then question not just institutional authority, with which he will readily agree with Snyder, but also “the authority of the individual’s conscience, or ‘inner light,’ or what you call ‘teachings direct from the human mind.’” All of this in a six-page letter written over the course of a week, ending with a lovely summary that also stands as Berry’s affirmation of much of Snyder’s own work:

Still, I think it’s wrong to think of anything that’s at hand as exotic—not if it’s available to your life and your doings. It’s [not] possible to truck a bunch of foreign stuff into your poetry and make it at home there when it remains alien in your life. But if I understand you correctly, you are not putting it into your poetry until

*Religion is on the surface a major place of difference for these two, and yet here they continue to educate each other..*

it is available in your life. That makes all the difference in the world. Your life *includes* poetry, along with much else. If Japanese Zen can help you to settle and live there in your place, then I think it belongs there with you, and you have as much right to use it as the plains Indians had to use horses. [*Distant Neighbors*, pp. 67–68.]

Less than three weeks after this pointed exchange, Berry will respond to Snyder’s collection of interviews, *The Real Work*, with what is clearly a sense of kinship:

I read this book with a delight and gratitude that I rarely feel for the work of a contemporary. Given our obvious differences of geographic origin, experience, etc., it is uncanny how much I feel myself spoken for by this book—and, when not spoken for, spoken to, instructed. It is a feeling I have only got elsewhere from hearing my brother speak in “environmental” controversies—the realization and joyful relief of hearing someone speak well out of deeply held beliefs that I share. And this always involves a pleasant quieting of my own often too insistent impulse to speak. [*Distant Neighbors*, p.71.]

\* \* \*

For decades, like so many others, I’ve found inspiration from each of these men; the anthology about work I put

together for Mercury House (then directed by Tom Christensen, who had edited many of the Snyder and Berry books at North Point), called *Work and the Life of the Spirit*, is deeply indebted to both of them. But that inspiration has been multiplied by an awareness that these two see themselves as allies. Berry understands how “wildness” *must* underlie the work of cultivation, just as Snyder responds with real sympathy to the work of the farmer (and relies on Berry as he begins to develop the land in the Sierras). They are like the biblical Mercy and Peace: they do meet and kiss.

And why? Certainly they came to admire each other’s work as writers, but clearly what formed the relationship was a shared vision based on the practicalities of living on and from the land. Both men have devoted much of their lives to just this practice, however differently that may appear from their geographical locations. They share a practice of place even as they share practical concerns about tractors and rototillers and daily weather.

\* \* \*

I took these letters with me when my wife and I headed over to the east side of the Cascades from Seattle, hiking up Icicle Ridge along the much maligned Fourth of July Trail, maligned because of its popularity among rattlesnakes and its relentless ascent (4,300 feet in just under six miles) on an east-facing slope. On a sunny day the heat and light are relentless. But we had some cloud cover as we moved through the burnt-over mountainside—ponderosa pines with blackened bark, thick-skinned and sturdy survivors, rising up a hundred feet and still sprouting a few live branches. And all around, we were seeing signs of life in the abundance of flowers which my wife named as we walked along—scarlet gilea, phlox, wild rose, paintbrush and lupine, pussytoes and Davidson’s penstemon, larkspur and monkeyflower, purple asters and valerian, yarrow and many others, all somehow finding life among the rocks.

Stopping to rest, I listened to the wind, which changed in shape and sound as we climbed, that familiar high and light feel to it as the land got emptier, the trees stunted, all of it speaking a kind of health and well-being even in the midst of the remnants of the 1994 fires, twenty years ago this summer—a fierce beauty in every direction. And of

course I found myself thinking about Snyder as we caught sight of Glacier Peak from the ridge, about which he wrote back in *Earth House Hold* some eight years before his correspondence with Wendell Berry began. And realizing that these two men have both passed into their eighties, thinking as I’m climbing how death makes sense up here, not that it’s easier but that it’s truer somehow, that it *fits*—a word Berry uses often, as in the letters—“What doesn’t fit is all probably a burden.”

I finished the letters that night on the eastern slope of the Cascades. Today, back in Seattle at a coffee house on Phinney Ridge—stepping outside, I can see west to the Olympics and east to the Cascades—I haul with me a dozen or so books, copies of Snyder going back to the mid-seventies and continuing into this century—*Earth House Hold*, *Regarding Wave*, *Turtle Island*, *The Practice of the Wild*, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, *Danger on Peaks*—and a box full of Berry’s work pulled from a shelf at my office, including the revised edition of *A Place on Earth*, which I first discovered back in 1986 in a bookstore under the el tracks in Chicago. I took it with me on retreat that summer at St. Gregory’s Abbey in southern Michigan, and quickly realized that my choice was right, that there was something deeply contemplative about Berry’s writing even while it is also so often about work. Here there is no opposition between these two; work in his writing is at its best a kind of prayer, a giving over of oneself to something larger that fits—and being part of that fit. It’s like the sweet conclusion to George Herbert’s great sonnet on prayer: that it’s “something understood.” A rhyme is completed; we come home to ourselves, our true selves.

It may have been the influence of the abbey, but I immediately fell in love with the feel of Berry’s prose, the clean lines, the sense of order and beauty in his syntax even as he’s writing about war and loss. Here’s the beginning of *A Place on Earth*, a novel that deals with World War II and its aftermath—nothing fancy, but everything is in its place:

Frank Lathrop cleaned out the store after his son Jasper went into the Army at the beginning of the war; he left the door of the safe ajar for fear that if he closed it he would never be able to work the combination to open it again. He did not foresee that

he would ever want to open it again, but at the time the precaution seemed necessary, consistent with the careful neatness in which he had left the place.

Even in grief we see the precaution, the setting things right, and so we also see something of the character of the man, including the depth of his loss which is registered in the very care with which he acts. And the prose echoes that care. *He did not foresee ... but the precaution seemed necessary...* The precaution *is* a kind of foreseeing, but a foreseeing that knows how limited his own vision is—how little in fact he can predict and control the future.

This attitude is at the heart of Berry’s conservatism, in the root sense of the word. But he is also radical, in the root sense of that word—always going to the roots of something, just as Snyder will so often call up etymologies for the same reason.

Holding *A Place on Earth* in my hands back in 1986, reading it for the first time as I was filling my days with silence and chant, I knew I had my hands on something congruent with the abbey—its own quiet spaciousness, its rhythms, its rich roots in the Michigan soil. That congruence was even in the design and feel of the book (my introduction to the book design work of David Bullen): the paper slightly cream-colored, opaque enough to prevent see-through of the text on the reverse, like fine letterhead; a paperback, but with a dust jacket; compact and light, but with a sense of permanence to it, a sense of care taken. Through the elegance of their design I came to know the work not only of Wendell Berry but of others published by North Point Press.

And of course I didn’t know it then, but I was also getting to know the work of Jack Shoemaker, who brought Snyder and Berry together back when he was running a bookstore in Santa Barbara (the Unicorn) and then a small press, Sand Dollar Books, before cofounding North Point. Both Berry and Snyder (the latter after leaving New Directions) have followed Shoemaker through his various publishing incarnations, and both have even invested financially in Counterpoint, which published these letters. Clearly this relationship is not simply between the two writers.

Berry called his relationship with Snyder “binocular vision,” the way our own sight clarifies and deepens

through the lens of another, especially when that other has a gift for vision that Snyder brings, a rare combination of the practical woodsman and the visionary Buddhist/academic poet. “This leads,” as Wriglesworth writes, “to an awareness of their mutual existence in an expansive and generous source of energy that Snyder calls ‘mind,’ a place which both inhabit, and about which both are conscious and are consciously shaping and being shaped by.” Mind—or call it (as Jesus did) the Kingdom—is where we live, what we live in, what we live by, shaped and shaping, like that axe and axe handle Snyder wrote about. The craft of culture, the gifts handed down from poet to poet, from fathers and mothers to daughters and sons. It *is* how we go on. These letters remind us.

**Doug Thorpe** is the author of *A New Earth* (Catholic University of America); *Rapture of the Deep: Reflections on the Wild in Art, Wilderness and the Sacred* (Red Hen), which won the David Family Environmental Book Award; and *Wisdom Sings the World: Poetry, Creation and the Way of Dwelling* (Codhill), and is the editor of *Work and the Life of the Spirit* (Mercury House). A Professor of English at Seattle Pacific University, he has been known to play “Surfs Up” while teaching Wordsworth. An earlier version of this essay was published in *Mars Hill Review*.