

"I remember many poems by Philip Whalen and Diane di Prima also written at Tassajara ... Of all the writing Tassajara has inspired though, Gail Sher's must be the most fully generated out of that canyon, its geothermal forces, its healing hot springs."

—ANDREW SCHELLING

Gail Sher is an ordained lay disciple of Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, the person credited with bringing Soto Zen Buddhism to the West. She practiced Zen at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, San Francisco City Center and the Berkeley Zen Center alternately for 11 years.

Although all of her writing draws on her practice of Buddhism, two of her works come directly out of her experience at Tassajara: *Moon of the Swaying Buds*, an autobiographical account written in the ancient Japanese form of *haibun* (prose combined with haiku) and this work, *Pale Sky*, a poetic evocation of the Tassajara zendo during an intensive week-long meditation retreat on the day Suzuki Roshi died.

Gail Sher writes, teaches and practices psychotherapy in San Francisco's East Bay. For more information, visit www.gailsher.com.

Pale Sky

GAIL SHER



Pale Sky

Also by Gail Sher

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RAGA

Look at That Dog All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms

Moon of The Swaying Buds

Marginalia

La

Kuklos

Cops

Broke Aide

Rouge to Beak Having Me

(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem

From Another Point of View The Woman Seems to Be Resting

Pale Sky

Gail Sher



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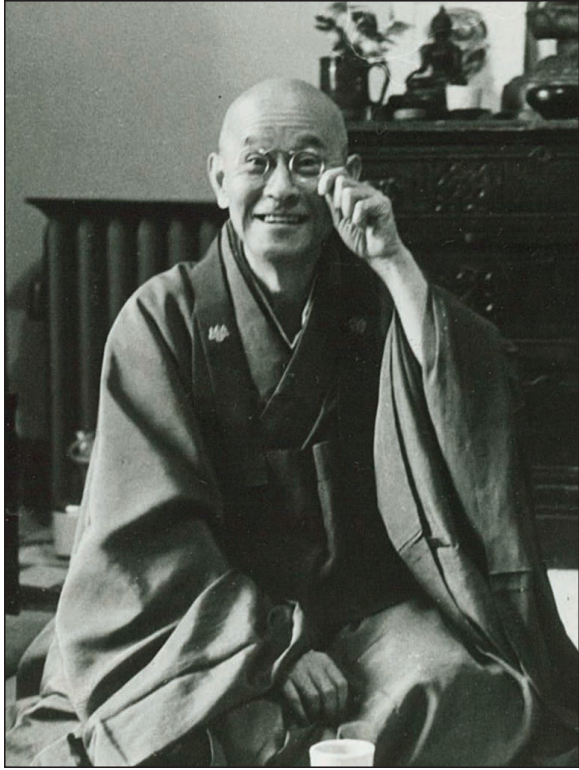
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for Brendan



In Memory of My Teacher
Shunryu Suzuki-roshi
May 18, 1904—December 4, 1971

Rohatsu Sesshin
December 4, 1971

CLANG CLANG clang clang clang clang clang.
The obstreperous bell, having awakened her at its
loudest, was fading.

Eliza gazed into the sky.

Millions. Trillions. Gazillions of unbelievably
sparkling stars shone from a blanket of blackness.

“This blackness is endless and arises from inside
me,” she sighed wistfully.

She lay staring at a star and, beyond it, the rising
triangle of some nameless constellation.

*From the first moment I enter the zendo¹ I am
changed.*

*The fragrance, the clarity stir a deadness in me that
I've lugged around and lugged around.*

*I recognize it with my teeth, behind my ears, between
my toes, the bottoms of my feet.*

It is startling and immediate.

¹ See Glossary for italicized Buddhist terms.

*The same sense—almost a nostalgia—filters through
the air, the grounds, the trees.*

*People talking, jays cawing. It's just a caw but its
rawness makes a point and repeats the point and
repeats the point.*

*I'm hearing the empty beginning, before the person or
the jay get involved.*

Even the air rattles with its mind.

The sound is fresh. It stays cool in the heat. Beyond immaculate, its cleanness is original.

The wind in the trees is crisper. Leaves are more defined.

Colors are subtler as if elsewhere, even elsewhere in the same range of mountains, this feeling is quelled by the lack of an inherited intelligence.

The legacy of mind, big mind, Zen mind, establishes the legitimacy, even of the pansies.

*Traipsing in my getas down the rain-drenched path,
my muscles know precisely the beyond-knowing of its
importance.*

*Like a nocturnal bird seeks a safe place to rest during
the day in a vacant attic.*

*Chirps and caws sprinkle through the air as dawn hits
the trees and pale sky colors the brick wall that I am
staring at.*

*It's this path but it's the sky and the eon's sky and the
yuga's sky and all the yugas' skies.*

“O n e . . .” she said mentally, listening to the soft stream of air through her nostrils.

“T w o . . .” started at the top while the air was in her nose but the sound, slower now and more nasal, seemed to be coming from her throat.

“T h r e e . . .” though the “three” came as an afterthought.

The person to her right was leaning forward on his knees trying to fit a third *zafu* under his buttocks, but the second one kept slipping out making the third one lopsided.

Eliza stayed still. Steadying her gaze she continued counting exhales, but her mind went to the day— she’d so wanted to make a personal connection.

“Is there anything I should bring?” She twiddled a strand of hair too tightly around a finger.

He yawned with his jaw, without opening his mouth. “You’ll be doing the personal lists.” It wasn’t really an answer.

Then he’d simply stood absorbed in looking out.

She wished he wouldn’t shift around on his pillows so much.

*“This morning early Roshi, peacefully, died. We
continue our efforts along with all beings.”*

The words entered the hall toward the beginning of
second period.

Silence. More silence. Bristling silence.

But it was soft.

New Year’s Eve
listen—
snow is falling

We just sit. It is like something happening in the great sky.

To express our way along with all beings—we sit for this and it will always be the same.

Whatever kind of bird, the sky doesn't care. That is the mind transmitted from the Buddha to us.

*Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, practicing deeply
Prajña Paramita . . .*

“How is your practice?” Her *dokusan* had been short.

“It’s so young!” she’d crooned afterwards, seeing a budding ginkgo bursting from itself, full of intention and purpose.

Its fragile limbs, every which way, jutted out awkwardly.

Extending her finger, gently to touch the blossoms, she was startled but felt an inexpressible affection for the plant.

“The mind of the great sage of India is intimately transmitted from west to east,” began the *Roshi*, carefully reading the translation.

It had been a typical *sesshin* day. Hot afternoon sun poured through the *zendo* windows.

He was winding down a series on the *Sandokai*, an ancient Chinese poem routinely chanted in the liturgy.

Clearly enjoying the task, he'd set up a blackboard next to his seat where he wrote and explained each of Sekito Kisen's characters.

Eliza wasn't listening. Instead she was attending to *him*.

“I made it up,” he grinned, when a student asked about a word.

“Is intimately transmitted,” the *Roshi* continued.
“*Mitsuni* means ‘exactly, without a gap between the two.’ The main purpose of the *Sandokai* is to show reality from two sides.”

It had rained till dawn, a warm summery rain, and the *zendo* was starting to feel stuffy.

“As I said, *san* means ‘many’; *do* means ‘one.’”

“What does it matter? I don’t care about the Japanese.”

“So ‘many’ is right, and ‘one’ is right,” she heard him say a few minutes later.

She was staring out the window.

“Do you have question?” It woke her up.

“Roshi, couldn’t we just work from the Japanese and forget the English translation?” It was a man. One of the older students.

“How could he want even *more* fussing?” her mind railed.

Yes he was trying to do that, the *Roshi* explained. The poem was full of technical terms that without understanding . . .

“O my god.” She closed her eyes to try to retrieve her centeredness.

“O my god.” It came again, less strong but still there.

“O my god . . . ” started to arise.

“how deep is it now?
has it buried the pampas grass
yet?”

The shijo rings. Early-morning zazen is over.

“But it’s not over. It’s never over. Morning zazen is till the end of time, but we pretend it’s over because there are things we need to do.”

The bell brings me back. I put my rakusu on my head, chant the Robe Chant, let down my rakusu, fluff my cushion and line up in the aisle for prostrations.

Welcoming dawn, the light, the creek—all of this becomes a mere extension of me.

“The morning gaggle of birds is like the bottom of the ocean.” She was straightening her mat getting ready for the *sutras*.

A band of sun had caught a passing cloud and light trembled across her row.

These sermons of the Buddha, the “warp” of the dharma literally—“the never-ending of it all,” Eliza said to herself, not knowing exactly what she wanted from herself or how she wanted to see herself.

“no, not the scarlet peach blooms,
it’s the forsythia . . .”
I say to the flower-lady

Her mind flashed to the *Roshi*—the way he smiled, the way he leaned a little forward when he was thinking how to say, the way he misused English so that it made more sense, though it didn't make sense and yet it sparkled and was wonderful.

A dog had stopped and was studying the sky, panting with its tongue to one side.

“I know! I KNOW! He magnificently filled our lives and now we are left simply with our lives.”

She was vaguely aware of some jays squawking as if they were fighting, but she deliberately chose to ignore it.

*The umpan announces breakfast. Zendo students,
returning to their seats, open their oryokis.*

*Buddha, born at Kapilavastu,
attained the Way at Magadha,
preached at Varanashi,
entered Nirvana at Kushinagara.*

*Now as we spread the bowls of the Buddha
Tathagatha we make our vows
together with all beings;
we and this food and our eating are vacant.*

*The sound of the creek, spoons against bowls, the
caw of a jay, more caws from farther-off jays.*

The palpable formality of the meal at a certain moment is relaxed.

“How do you feel?” her roommate was asking, searching her face with concern.

“You fainted, you know. When I came back to change, you were on the floor in the bathroom.”

Eliza was still wearing her sweaty under-kimono.

“What time is it?” From the sun she guessed it would be late afternoon.

“It’s after tea, almost bath time. You’ve slept the whole day.”

Eliza smiled.

beyond the boughs
white, white sails
late sun floods through the window

I sleep. I sleep deeply and soundly and when I wake—"Is that snow?" In the mountains sometimes a snow like this falls and the leaves turn white like flowers.

Then the quiet. The air, composed of enormous quiet, melds into sky with its even larger quiet.

I reach to touch the sky—beautiful, clean, silent.

I feel I've slept close to it and all day long keep close to it.

“Eliza-san! I hardly recognized you with your chopped-off hair.”

“I’m very weak.” She’d just woken up from another long sleep.

“You’re even prettier. Like a boy,” Christiana said softly.

When she left she continued to just lay there.

“It must be after eleven,” she thought, nestling her head in the space between her elbow.

The morning sky was a single blue combed with cloud and a slip of moon.

“She fits in here,” Eliza mused, recalling Christiana’s mock-turtle t-shirt and how it morphed to some metallic fabric with shells and stones scattered as in the sea.

A horse fly nosed her leg. It was green. She watched its body paused in the sun for a long time.

She rolled over on her side. Stagnant, flea-filled pools were beginning to congeal in the creekbed.

The irises, she saw, were a watery blue, the whites so pink they appeared sore.

*The shijo sounds thrice and off that sound is sitting.
Sitting sitting sitting till it sounds again, two times.*

*Then kinhin, which is slow—not exactly walking but
anyway moving till the shijo signals another period of
zazen.*

*I place my feet carefully. I adjust my mudra,
straighten my spine, make my half-steps sharp.*

Yes it is important. No it's not important.

“Hey, girl!” Christiana’s cheeks, rosy from her walk and covered with little droplets, were swelling with pleasure as she entered.

Eliza stood at the window staring at a thunderous sky.

“Is it alright?” Half removing her gear, half plopping on a bed, she was referring to the fact that the bed belonged to a roommate.

Immediately she lit a lamp. A cozy glow warmed the room.

“I wouldn’t have thought of it,” Eliza muttered, still standing by the window looking stranded.

She wondered why such a simple thing as lighting a lamp in a darkening room would not have occurred to her.

*It is drizzly when we leave the hall. Oppressive
wetness mirrors my mood.*

*The break is a little longer but there's nothing I want
to do.*

*I straighten my room. Wash. The stranded feeling
intensifies.*

*A hawk flies over flapping its large wings. Soon
another one just like it flies in the same direction.*

Along with everyone Eliza spread her oryoki—cloths, bowls, chopsticks, spoon and her handmade eel-like setsu.

“For our sakes the clams and fishes give themselves unselfishly.”

“I am so unworthy. I am SO unworthy. Please fish, take yourselves back.” She felt herself starting to cry.

She remembered the *Roshi's* smile. “In the impossibility of being worthy, I *must* somehow be worthy.”

*Chanting begins. Buddha bowl raised and cradled
in my fingers I am taking in this privilege and, at
the same time, seeing the Roshi's back bending over
boulders he is placing in the creekbed.*

*"He's actually very jolly," I notice, watching his limber
body plying the eroded mud.*

*Butterflies flutter near iris whose leaves cast faint
shadows.*

*Sometimes his jisha spreads a cool, water-soaked cloth
on the top of his head.*

She'd been washing lettuce on the kitchen's back deck.

Slim and erect Christiana, punctually, had delivered
the vegetables for the day.

She'd catch Eliza's eye.

It *made* Eliza's morning.

shhhh . . . bees . . .

how white!

the first blossom

Eliza attached the hood to her raincoat and tugged on her boots. “Isn’t winter the most beautiful!” Swaths of cloud shone against the sky like black and silver mackerels.

“The land and sky are bleeding into one another and into our quiet,” she yawned dreamily.

“Listen . . . The parent birds are teaching their babies how to chirp”—she’d heard that . . . right at this spot—that fledglings must be taught—that chirping must be taught!

The air smelled new and the silence was padded.

“Hey! Let’s have a hair-cut.”

Summer session had ended. The day was fair. A few lenticular clouds, small and thick, floating around was all.

“You go first,” Eliza laughed, examining her friend. Dark black hair, parted in the middle and tucked behind her ears, poked out like dislocated ear muffs.

The barber looked to be in his twenties. He had on chinos and soft leather loafers with no socks.

“Next session I might be *anja*,” Christiana beamed, scooting back in her chair.

Eliza, standing, just stared at her in the mirror. From the look they exchanged it was clear how well they understood each other.

“Will *Okusan* be coming?”

Christiana shrugged. “I hope so. He listens to her. Sometimes.”

“How short are you going?” Piles of hair were spilling to the floor.

Christiana winked.

“Are *you* wanting to be ordained?” A seagull wheeled and barked overhead. Then a second one, slowly, circled through the air.

“*I AM ordained and have been since beginningless time,*” Eliza bellowed. This truth belonged to her most reserved privacy.

She studied the hem of her skirt. The stitching had come loose and a section flapped free.

“I came here to get ordained,” averred Christiana.

“I think you might be *doan*.”

“No seriously, I can’t stand her” came a voice through the warm salt air.

Two girls in flip-flops. One, hunched over her cell phone, looked to be texting. The other, the one who’d said, “No seriously,” was, from a thick wad of curls, scavenging some hairpins.

A swallow swooped and dived overhead.

“No seriously,” Eliza grinned. “How must it be for you—guys hitting on you a hundred times a day?”

“Not just guys.”

Eliza was still asleep, her back toward Christiana.

The top of the latter's quilt draped loosely around her body but it had worked its way down to just below her t-shirt.

She lay on her side, knees folded, feet sticking out where the quilt stopped.

Christiana went to wash.

Her movements had roused Eliza who with eyes open continued to lay still. From the light she could tell that they had napped for several hours.

"Did you have something you need to do?" she called over.

"Oh! You're up." Christiana laughed. "No. It's just a habit."

Day sounds from below rose in a kind of time warp.

"It's so beautiful." She'd moved closer to the window.

“*You’re* so beautiful!” Indeed Christiana’s beauty had, along with its gentleness, an almost frightening quality.

Christiana joined her on the bed. “I know,” she said, after staring out for a long while, then, realizing her mistake, blushed.

*Plumping her cushions, Eliza, kneeling, kept
mindlessly plumping while others were getting settled.*

The juddering sun from her break was already
disappearing.

“The Buddha’s Way is endless. I vow to attain it,”
she reminded herself, encouraging herself, but even
those words, which she felt to the core and sensed
they held the answer . . .

“Since the Buddha attained it, there must be a way
to attain it,” she thought, before remembering that
that’s what she was doing here.

Was it what she was doing here?

“I think about my girl,” smirked a kitchen friend, shrugging his broad shoulders.

He’d pulled out a photo. A tall, thin beauty wearing a jacket over a kilt and knee-high boots was hiking across a fen. Her expression—coy, radiant, full of life and living—he’d caught in a backward glance.

“You’re useless. *Useless*,” she scolded her underkimono, yanking its several closures.

She was tugging on a sweater.

“Did you knit it?”

Eliza flushed. “It was on sale,” she’d admitted sheepishly.

A hollow cackle of a crow pierced the air, its call bringing back the beginning of another period.

Long low light gradually opened and settled like fur on the outlines of the trees.

“The quiet too is sitting. It has will and won’t be budged.”

“You should tell the *Roshi*. He asks about your practice.”

Her eyes popped open. There was a stiffness around the rims creating a buzz-like thought, but it wasn't a thought. It was an intensity.

“The *Roshi* is dead. You should have told him a long time ago.”

The intensity was a knife and it was digging behind her eyes prying up something terrifying.

SMACK. A loud crack filled the hall.

Then a second one, though in the delay, since she'd forgotten there'd be another, it too came as a shock.

SMACK. SMACK. This time it was quick.

From the corner of her eye she thought she could see the carrier entering her aisle.

“Should I bow?” She *did* feel sleepy and the *kyosaku* *did* help. No one else was asking so he was approaching fast.

Instinctively she *gashoed*. The stick touched then hit, touched the other shoulder then hit.

She bowed again feeling the person, stick turned lengthwise and raised overhead, likewise bowing, honoring her practice.

For a split second she could also honor her practice.

“I didn’t realize,” Eliza thought, as she carefully placed one foot at a time on the cold clean wood between the rows of cushions.

Rain was falling in a slow patter soaking the world outside.

All her ideas about ordination, her plans about how she would organize her life—all this now struck her as childish.

She also knew there was something she hadn’t understood, maybe now even less . . . but it was coming from the inside, not from the outside, as had everything in her life previously.

Even the teachings, even Buddhism—it felt like she was coming closer because from the inside she felt closer, more certain, more solid.

“It’s just that I’m me. First I need to be me.”

A scrub jay cawed. Then cawed again.

Against the drips it sounded bereft.

It rains. The color of no sky peers from a hollow hole.

“A gentle sound, full of patience,” I marvel, hearing the classical music station play a glorious, lilting trumpet concerto.

The air is alive with crickets. The field redolent with blue.

A young bird shrieks. The weather by late afternoon has grown worse.

*“Maybe they are robins,” I think, picturing plump little
breasts hopping about, searching for food.*

*There are fewer of them now. How must they manage
I wonder.*

*I shut my eyes and listen to the cheeps. Frail thin
things.*

*windy night
loosely fastened beyond the moor –
to whom might it belong*

“*Was that a moan?*” The person to Eliza’s right had started squirming again.

Her head shot to the right. “It’s like a lovely white seashell!”

Light from the window was falling on the near side of his body.

“You sounded just like *Roshi*—just then, when you said that”—the memory of having said that—then, touching her knee—“There is something the matter here.”

She wished she could remember his name.

It bothered her that she forgot. And others whose names or even persons were, for her, as if they had never existed.

“And me too. I’m an ‘other.’ How many people care?”

“The point is for *me* to care,” but her heart was cold. She couldn’t find her caring.

that crow where we hang the wash
looks at me
looks away

She looked out at the rain waiting for it to break and saw a crow, head bowed, feathers so wet they shone like tar.

She wanted the bird to move, but it sat sodden and seemingly miserable.

There was no wind. The branches of a tree arching to the ground were quiet, as if lost in thought.

Occasionally a bird landed unsteadily.

The branch quivered slightly.

“*What is it?*” Eliza muttered, leaning on her broom.
She had fifteen minutes.

ALL MY ANCIENT TWISTED KARMA . . . Inside
her sat a gigantic space, and inside *it* was waiting.

Around the waiting was dread, but the dread wasn’t
of anything . . .

ALL MY ANCIENT TWISTED KARMA . . . the
words came louder and felt more pressing.

She opened her door and swept the dirt outside.
Then she stepped outside and swept the stairs in
front of her cabin.

“O gone! Please please gone! Sva-ha sva-ha sva-ha
sva-ha,” she’d prayed, fervently, again and again, with
all her gatherable power.

“Eliza, I must caution you.”

“Caution me? About what?”

But the “what” was clear as day. Eliza stifled a groan.

“I don’t have the right to probe into your feelings,”
Christiana had finally said, modifying her tone.

“I was wearing a dress—blowing away some invisible speck—and a thin white cardigan, I remember.”

Playing the scene again, she watched the darkness loosen from the sky, a cold cobalt blue.

The hour being late it was almost hard to see.

“But it’s loud on the inside. Its *soul* is loud,” she whispered.

The sound, ineffable, INELUCTABLE, triggered a fear that this might be all she had.

“How beautiful,” she sighed, gazing at a strange, mother-of-pearl shell of white, fleecy cloud suspended above her head in the middle of darkening sky.

Finally it was bath time.

“It’s because of the mountains that night here falls so quickly.” She glanced up hoping to spot the shell but it had vanished.

“I can feel the sky’s reluctance.” She could also feel her own—and a large unnamable—she was about to say “unwillingness” but more accurate would be “refusal.”

Yes refusal. She not only refused to be here but refused to face her almost-total refusal to be here.

“But I *do* want to be here.”

Later, on her bed, waiting for the *han* to announce evening *zazen*, she began to wonder if she could possibly continue to be here.

In the stall Eliza paused, took off her kimono, then took off her *jibon*, then put back on her kimono.

Her tank top remained but its spaghetti straps, stretched to the point of drooping, even under her *jibon* had allowed her skinniness to show.

“*Avalokiteshavara Bodhisattva*, practicing deeply
Prajña Paramita . . .”

Oceans of birds, with clear, concise calls, cried out in the blackness.

Suddenly she had enough. “I can do this and it’s important. I *will* do it and it’s very *very* important.”

The storm had stopped but sails of rain hung between her and the hills.

After supper there would be several more periods and after that one was encouraged to stay on, to avail oneself of the energy, the silence, the accumulated force of accumulated days of effort.

Through the setting sun one cloud, suffused with dulled-pink, burned.

Clappers sound, supper begins.

The birds were quiet, the trees sulking. Christiana, standing by a window, was trying to see if the shirt she was making fit her properly.

“I like to sew,” she’d explained. They had never formally met.

Eliza sat down but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I like to sew too.”

“What are you making?” Christiana asked easily, seemingly truly interested.

“Nothing. I’m just making lines.”

“Can I see?” She walked over to the corner of the table where Eliza had placed her basket.

“It’s very beautiful.” Eliza felt her suddenly awake to her.

Billowy sun spread light on her cloth and the assortment of utensils she’d laid out on the wooden ledge.

“It’s a sycamore. Though it looks like a mulberry.
Have you ever seen one so big?”

Between her thumb and her forefinger she twirled
the fat stem as they slowly climbed her hill.

“Well, let’s talk about you now,” Eliza urged,
contorting her neck as if she wanted physically to
banish something that was bothering her.

Then, seeing the sun ricocheting off a leaf—a huge
red maple with wide fingers and knobby veins—she
had a moment of complete clarity.

“Did you make it!”

A white OM in a yellow circle lay on Christiana’s bed. Around this was a white six-pointed star, also bordered in yellow, and around that an eighteen-pointed star of yellow and red that seemed to fold out in pleats like a Japanese fan. Around *that* were bands of increasingly intense red, as if the light from the star, as it progressed further and further out, grew darker, verging on black toward the edges. The whole, intricately quilted by hand, was rimmed with a thin black and white design.

“It’s a mandala,” Christiana explained. “From when I was in Japan.”

“It’s stunning.”

“And your room is stunning.”

Along with the platform bed there was a Japanese desk, *zafu*, two kerosene lamps, an old Amish rug and in the corner a paulownia tansu.

The summer practice period essentially over, the closing *sesshin* had been everywhere in the air.

On the surface was the “chatter”—a kind of gathering busy-ness.

Underneath *that* was silence, the solidification of the intention that had brought them here in the first place.

No one *said* anything, but there was a general coming-to-terms. One could smell it in the air, taste it in the heat.

Even in the *zendo* there were fewer shiftings-around, clearing of throats, swishing away of flies.

BOP. There it was. “I should leave now,” she kept telling herself, but she kept not leaving, as if waiting for something.

High in the night, stars, exuberantly, ecstatically, coruscated.

“Where am I?” Eliza thought, rubbing her eyes. She rolled on her side, drew her knees to her chest and shoved her hands between them.

“What will I do?” She was still fully dressed.

It pours. Buckets of water hit the window hard.

I am seated on my zafu, robes tucked under a thin blanket which I allow myself because it is night and sesshin and “it does no harm,” I tell myself.

No one else has a blanket. No one else seems to be struggling.

Many seem actually to be relishing the opportunity to try harder, practice longer, exhaust themselves to an extent unavailable in the daily monastic routine.

Zazen ends. Kinhin begins. Tiredness and rain is all.

*Our steps become one with cavernous, thunderous
pounding.*

*They occur together—both the steps that we take
together and the steps plus the sound which, right
now, as exhaustion peaks and the day draws to an
end, presses time into forever.*

crows at four, sparrows at five
thus I reckon
the endless winter night

When she'd first arrived it had been spring—a lovely,
light-hearted spring.

The air smelled green and the sky, drenched with
such birdsong and life . . .

The tops of trees against a bluing swell of space
shook in the warmth of a burgeoning westerly wind,
and—

“It’s spring! Real spring,” everyone shouted.

The weather had never been so beautiful!

Everywhere the air, suffused with steam rising from the earth, shimmered.

Old grass and the emerging needles of new grass, gnarled trees with their wedges of ripening leaves . . .

It'd been that time of year, the turning point of light, when the meadow was high and Eliza had watched the surfing birds' wings and the colors on each wing's underside.

“They look all the more lovely from a distance,” she exuded.

She'd been squatting at the end of a row of peas trying to tuck her black hair both behind her ears *and* under her sun hat.

Excitement, an almost being-in-love excitement, had made her touch the earth.

For a long while she just stayed, kneeling, inhaling, listening to the birds, the wind and the earth itself, whose quiet and clean fresh richness filled her.

“DON’T MOVE.” The Head Monk’s voice pierced the hall.

Shock shot up her spine.

“DON’T MOVE.” The voice came again, high-pitched and more emphatic.

Her slouch straightened, her spine felt hot and her blood chased something relentless.

No one breathed. Or they did but the silence, now bottomless, absorbed it.

The period stretched on. And stretched on.

She forgot that it would end.

Glossary

Anja. The one of the Roshi's two personal assistants who takes care of matters pertaining to his space.

Clappers. The taku (clappers) are small pieces of hard wood approximately two by two by ten. They are held parallel and struck together making a sharp clack.

Doan. One of a small group of students whose job for the practice period is to attend to the monastery's "sound system" (including the bells and drums accompanying formal services) and to enforce the daily schedule.

Dokusan. A Soto Zen term for sanzen, a private interview with one's teacher.

Gasho. A Buddhist gesture of greeting, palms of hands placed together.

Han. A thick rectangular wooden board suspended by cords outside the zendo and struck with a wooden mallet. The resulting sound, hollow and sharp, creates a haunting echo.

Jibon. A vest-like undergarment worn under a kimono or sitting robe when a full-length underrobe would be either too hot or too heavy.

Jisha. The one of the Roshi's two personal assistants who takes care of matters pertaining to his time.

Kinhin. The continuation of the practice of zazen done between formal periods of seated zazen. It consists of very slow (half-steps) walking.

Kyosaku. In the Soto school a kyosaku is a flat wooden stick used during zazen to remedy sleepiness or lapses of concentration. The kyosaku is always administered at the meditator's request by way of bowing one's head and putting up the palms in gassho and then exposing each shoulder to be struck in turn.

Mudra. Symbolic hand gestures associated especially with tantric meditation practices.

Oryoki. The oryoki consists of three nested bowls, a packet of eating utensils (chopsticks, spoon and setsu), a cotton napkin and a wrapping cloth which

also serves as a placemat. Each student is provided with an oryoki and oryoki instruction upon arrival at a monastery (otherwise one cannot eat in the zendo). Thereafter the oryoki is in one's care.

Prajña Paramita Sutra. Known as the “Heart Sutra” the Prajña Paramita Sutra is the classical condensation of the six-hundred-volume Prajña Paramita literature, translated into Chinese by Hsüan-tang in the seventh century.

Rakusu. A monastic or lay biblike vestment, a miniature version of the kesa or priest robe.

Rest Days. In Japanese Zen monasteries days with either a 4 or 9 in them are designated “rest days.” Time for sleep is lengthened slightly, there is no formal noon meal and no work periods at all. Most of the day—all the time between the end of breakfast in the zendo and a somewhat festive supper—is considered “personal time” to be spent as one wishes.

Robe Chant. “I wear the robe of liberation, the formless field of benefaction, the teachings of the

Tathagatha, saving all the many beings.” This verse of the rakusu is recited at dawn when priests put on their kesas and lay people their rakusus. It is also chanted privately whenever these garments are donned. The kesa and rakusu are the robes of the Buddha, treated respectfully and worn on all religious occasions.

Rohatsu. The Japanese word for “eighth day of the twelfth month.” December 8 has come to be the day Japanese Buddhists observe the enlightenment of the historical Buddha.

Rohatsu Sesshin. In Japanese Zen monasteries, the Rohatsu is the last day of a week-long sesshin, an intensive meditation retreat in which all of one’s waking time is dedicated to meditation. Traditionally each evening’s meditation period is to be longer than the previous evening’s. On the seventh night, meditation continues through the night and the sesshin ends after breakfast on the eighth morning.

Roshi. Historically the term *roshi* has been applied as a respectful honorific to a significantly older Zen

teacher considered to have matured in wisdom and to have attained a superior understanding and expression of the dharma. Nevertheless, in some modern Zen schools it is applied as a general title for a teacher regardless of the age of the individual who receives it.

Seiza. A traditional Japanese sitting posture wherein one's body rests on the knees and shins.

Setsu. A tool with a linen tip for cleaning one's oryoki bowls during a zendo meal.

Shijo. The shijo (Cease and Be Quiet) is about nine inches high and struck by a doan three times to signal the beginning of a period of zazen, twice to signal kinhin, and once to signal that another event is about to begin.

Sutra. The word sutra, a discourse of the Buddha (literally "a thread on which jewels are strung") loosely refers to an old Buddhist scripture or scripture to be chanted.

Umpan. The umpan (Cloud Plate) is a bronze plate

shaped like a fleur-de-lis. It hangs from cords in the kitchen and is struck with a hard wooden mallet to produce a clangorous sound signaling meals.

Zazen. The practice of sitting erect on cushions, on a low bench, or in a chair. In Soto Zen zazen is keyed to the breaths and takes the form either of counting them from one to ten or of shikantaza (sitting with no theme). “Zazen is itself enlightenment,” Dogen Kigen Zenji never tired of saying. This means that body and mind have dropped away and they continue to drop away endlessly. The self is forgotten and it continues to be forgotten more and more completely throughout all time.

Zen. A Japanese Buddhist school concerned with directly realizing the true nature of one’s mind.

Zendo. Zen meditation hall.

Pale Sky

is set in Minion, a typeface designed by Robert Slimbach in the spirit of the humanist typefaces of fifteenth-century Venice; it was released by Adobe Systems in 1990.

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