MYTHOLOGIS

THE NATIVE AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY BOOK

From Pacific Raven to Atlantic Glooscap

GUILLAUME HENRY

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PLAINS
SOUTHWEST
ARCTIA

For the storytellers who kept these words alive across five centuries of silence.

INTRODUCTION

I first heard Raven's laugh in a museum basement in Seattle, listening to a 1952 wire recording of a Haida elder telling the box-of-daylight story in a language I couldn't understand. The cadence alone carried the trick, the theft, the sudden brightness flooding a world that had known only dark. When the translator's voice came through the second speaker, I realized I was hearing something older than Rome, preserved in syntax and rhythm that predated the Odyssey by millennia. The elder's voice had the texture of driftwood, salt-worn and patient. I sat there in that fluorescent room with its climate control and archival boxes, listening to a cosmology that had survived longer than most empires, and I understood that whatever I thought I knew about mythology needed revision. This book is called The Native American Mythology Book, and that title is both necessary and inadequate. Necessary because readers need a frame, a way into material that spans two continents and thousands of years. Inadequate because there is no single Native American mythology any more than there is a single European mythology. What we have instead are hundreds of distinct oral traditions, each with its own grammar of the sacred, its own way of explaining why the world is the way it is. The Haida cosmology of the Pacific Northwest, with its Raven trickster and its clans descended from animals, shares almost nothing structurally with the Pueblo emergence narratives of the Southwest, where people climbed through successive underworlds into this one. The Lakota sacred hoop and the Inuit story of Sedna the sea goddess belong to radically different landscapes, different economies, different ways of being human. Grouping them under one heading risks flattening what should remain distinct. I do it anyway, carefully, because the alternative is silence or a shelf of thirty separate volumes, and most readers will

never make it past the first. The other inadequacy is temporal. When we speak of Greek or Norse mythology, we speak comfortably in the past tense. Those pantheons are extinct in any devotional sense; no one sacrifices to Zeus or pours mead for Odin expecting divine intervention. Native American traditions are not extinct. Many are still lived, still central to ceremonies and identities that have survived five centuries of determined erasure. This creates an ethical problem for anyone writing about them. I am not an insider to these traditions. I am a French former sailor with a background in cryptography and an obsessive reading habit. I have no ceremonial knowledge, no initiation, no right to the stories that remain properly private within communities. What I have instead is access to the published ethnographic record, the fruit of a particular historical moment when anthropologists, some conscientious and some less so, transcribed oral narratives before they vanished entirely. That moment, roughly the 1880s through the 1920s, produced a strange archive: stories told to outsiders, often in translation, frequently by the last speakers of a language, recorded with varying degrees of accuracy and respect. Franz Boas worked among the Tsimshian and other Northwest Coast peoples, publishing Tsimshian Mythology in 1916, a dense volume that includes not just the stories themselves but Boas's obsessive comparative notes. Frank Hamilton Cushing lived with the Zuñi in New Mexico and published Zuñi Folk Tales in 1901, writing with a novelistic flair that makes some modern scholars uneasy but which preserves narrative textures lost in drier translations. James Mooney recorded Ghost Dance songs and Cherokee cosmology. James R. Walker, a physician on the Pine Ridge Reservation, earned enough trust to document Lakota ceremonial life in what became Lakota Belief and Ritual, published in 1917. Knud Rasmussen, a Greenlandic-Danish explorer, traveled by dogsled across the Arctic and published The Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos in 1929, one of the most complete records of Inuit cosmology we possess. Charles Godfrey Leland compiled The Algonquin Legends of New England in 1884, working with surviving oral traditions in the Northeast Woodlands. These men were products of their time, often paternalistic, sometimes extractive, but they did the work, and without it we would have far less. I cite them because this book is built on their work. Every scene I reconstruct, every narrative I retell, is footnoted to a primary ethnographic source. Where sources conflict, I say so. Where a story exists in multiple versions, I choose the one that feels most complete or most

widely attested, and I note the choice. I am not inventing. I am translating material from one medium, the archive, into another, narrative prose with sensory texture. My background in cryptography trained me to look for patterns, to see how information is encoded and transmitted across time. Oral tradition is a kind of encryption: knowledge stored not in writing but in rhythm, repetition, ritual context. When those traditions were transcribed, something was lost. The voice, the firelight, the audience's response. I try, within the limits of the page, to restore some of that warmth. The book moves geographically, not chronologically, because chronology is mostly guesswork here. We know these traditions are old. How old is harder to say. Linguistic and archaeological evidence suggests some narrative motifs may stretch back to the initial peopling of the Americas, fifteen thousand years ago or more. But oral traditions evolve, absorb new elements, respond to historical change. The stories Boas recorded in 1900 were not identical to the stories told in 1400, let alone 10,000 BCE. They were alive, still growing. The act of transcription froze them, turned them into museum specimens. This book tries to reanimate them without pretending they are mine to own. We begin in the Pacific Northwest, with Raven and the theft of daylight, with Thunderbird and the great cedar canoes and the potlatch feasts where wealth was given away to prove power. Then south to the Southwest, to the Pueblo peoples and their kachinas, spirit beings who bring rain and enforce the order of the cosmos, and to the emergence narratives that describe humanity's climb through underworlds toward the light. The Plains chapter follows the sacred hoop and the figure of Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery, as recorded among the Lakota. We move north to the Arctic, to Sedna at the bottom of the sea, to shamans who travel between worlds and return with songs. Finally, the Northeast Woodlands: Glooscap the culture hero, the trickster Rabbit, the Algonquian cycles that stretch from the Atlantic coast to the Great Lakes. Each chapter opens with a scene. I put you inside the myth before I explain it. You will hear the crackle of a fire, smell salmon roasting on cedar planks, feel the cold of an igloo in midwinter darkness. Then I step back and give you the scholarship: where the story comes from, who recorded it, what it meant in its original context, how it compares to neighboring traditions. Then another scene, another block of analysis, until the chapter closes with an image meant to stay in your head after you turn the page. This rhythm, scene and scholarship, scene and scholarship, is the method Mythologis has used

since the beginning. It honors both the academic rigor these stories deserve and the narrative power that made them survive in the first place. I will not pretend this book is comprehensive. Hundreds of nations and language groups are not represented here, either because their oral traditions were lost before transcription or because what survives is too fragmentary to reconstruct responsibly. I focus on the traditions for which we have robust published sources, the ones that allow me to write with confidence rather than speculation. I also acknowledge that some stories should not be in this book. Many Native communities draw a clear line between public narratives, the ones that can be shared with outsiders, and sacred knowledge that belongs only to initiates. I have tried to respect that line. Everything here is drawn from material already in the public domain, published decades ago, often by Indigenous collaborators who chose to share these stories with anthropologists for reasons of their own. If a ceremony or a story is still restricted within a community, it is not in this book. What you are about to read is not a replacement for those living traditions. It is a map, partial and imperfect, to cosmologies that existed long before Europe knew the Americas were here. Some of these stories will feel familiar. Trickster figures, world floods, animal ancestors: these are human universals, the things every culture seems to need to explain. Others will feel radically foreign, built on premises about the nature of reality that most Western readers have never encountered. Both reactions are correct. We are all human; we are not all the same. The scene opens in the next chapter with darkness. No sun, no moon, no stars. Just the sound of water against a canoe and the feel of Raven's feathers in the cold. Close this introduction now. Step into the first story. Let it teach you how to see.


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CHAPTER 1

TURTLE ISLAND: THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD

Only water. The surface stretches in every direction, neither calm nor churning, simply present. No horizon line divides it because there is no sky yet, not in the way that word will come to mean. Above the water hangs something else: a realm of light and air where beings walk on soil that has never known flood. In that place grows a tree so old no one living can remember its planting, its roots drinking from springs that have no bottom, its branches holding blossoms that glow without needing the sun because the sun does not exist yet. A woman walks toward that tree. Her feet press into ground that feels permanent, the kind of surface that makes you forget water even exists. She is curious. Perhaps she is hungry. The stories disagree on motive, but they agree on this: she reaches the tree and finds its base surrounded by a prohibition she chooses to ignore. She pulls at the roots. Or she leans too close and the soil crumbles. Or her husband, jealous or mad, tears the tree up himself and pushes her through the hole it leaves. The mechanics vary. The fall does not. She drops through darkness that has weight and temperature. The air, if you can call it that, is wet and cold. Her hands clutch what she grabbed in that last moment: seeds, a cutting from the tree, something living. Below her the animals sense her descent long before they see her. They have been swimming in this endless ocean since time began, which is another way of saying they have no memory of anything else. Turtle speaks first. His voice is slow,

consonants shaped by a mouth that has never needed to rush. He offers his back, that broad curve of shell already ancient even in this newborn world. Muskrat dives. The others watch the surface, waiting. When Muskrat finally breaks through, gasping, there is mud caught between the claws of one paw. Just enough. Sky Woman lands on Turtle's back and begins to spread the mud. It grows under her hands, wet soil becoming dry ground, spreading in spirals that will one day hold forests and rivers and the longhouses of her descendants. She plants the seeds. They root immediately, as if the new earth has been waiting for them. The animals circle in the water, watching the island grow, watching the first shoots break the surface of the soil. Turtle feels the weight increase but says nothing. He is patient. He has always been patient. The island spreads until it covers his shell completely, until it becomes something large enough to hold mountains and plains and coastlines that will carry a thousand different names. But underneath, still: Turtle. Still swimming. Still holding the world on his back. This is the Haudenosaunee account of creation, though "account" is too dry a word for what it actually is. The story exists in multiple versions, each told by a different keeper within the Confederacy, each shaped by the teller's nation (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Tuscarora) and by the specific ceremonial or teaching context in which it is shared. The first extensive written record comes from J.N.B. Hewitt's *Iroquoian Cosmology, First Part*, published by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1903. Hewitt was himself of Tuscarora descent, which matters: he was not an outsider interpreting sounds he did not fully grasp but a speaker of the language working to preserve what he saw already beginning to erode under the weight of boarding schools and land dispossession. His text runs to hundreds of pages, dense with variant tellings and linguistic annotation. The Sky Woman narrative appears early, and even in Hewitt's careful English you can feel the structure underneath: a world above, a world below, a catastrophe that connects them, and animals who act not as symbols but as participants in the literal making of geography. The earth-diver motif is not unique to the Haudenosaunee. Versions appear across the Northeast Woodlands and beyond: Anishinaabe, Lenape, Wyandot, and Cree traditions all include some form of aquatic animal retrieving primordial mud from beneath a covering flood. The story spreads west among Mandan and Blackfoot communities on the Plains, shifts form among the Yupik of the Arctic coast. Some scholars, trying to map the distribution, treat it as evidence of deep antiquity and

shared migration patterns. Others caution against that impulse, noting that similar story structures can emerge independently when human communities reckon with observable facts: wetlands, seasonal floods, the visible reality that land rises from water in marshes and deltas every spring. The temptation to build a grand theory should be resisted until the oral histories themselves give permission for such linking. What makes the Haudenosaunee version distinctive is its integration with political structure. Sky Woman's descendants become the first people of the Confederacy, and the narrative provides not just cosmological origin but social charter. The story is inseparable from the later arrival of the Peacemaker and the formation of the Great Law, which bound the five (later six) nations into a political alliance that predates European contact by centuries. When the story is told in longhouses today, it carries that weight: this is not mythology in the sense of discarded superstition but foundation, the ground on which law and kinship still stand. The Haudenosaunee occupy the Northeast Woodlands, a geographic and ecological zone stretching from the Atlantic coast inland to the Great Lakes and south into what are now the Carolinas. This is one of roughly ten such zones scholars use to organize the staggering linguistic and cultural diversity of pre-contact North America. Each zone shaped the mythologies that emerged within it: desert cosmologies in the Southwest, river-based narratives in the Southeast, marine pantheons on the Northwest Coast. The zones themselves are modern impositions, useful for teaching but prone to flattening. A Haida story from Haida Gwaii is not interchangeable with a Tlingit story from the Alaskan panhandle, even though both nations lived on the Northwest Coast and both carved monumental poles and both told stories of Raven. The specificity matters. In the Arctic, Inuit and Yupik cosmologies center on survival in landscapes that offer little margin for error: sea ice, months of darkness, the absolute necessity of seal and caribou. Sedna, the woman who becomes the sea's guardian after losing her fingers to her father's knife, is not a metaphor but a continuous presence in hunting practice and shamanic negotiation. Stories from this zone tend to be short, rhythmically structured for memorization across generations that might spend weeks isolated on the ice. The Great Basin, by contrast, dry and vast, generates narratives about wandering, hunger, transformation. Coyote figures here not as thief of fire alone but as the embodiment of adaptability in a place where water sources are scarce and survival depends on knowing every plant, every animal migration route, every mi-

croclimate. The Plains cultures, mobile and dependent on bison, produced mythologies of movement and sky. Lakota narratives speak of *Wakan Tanka*, often translated as Great Spirit but more accurately understood as the totality of sacred power diffused through all things. The scholar Raymond J. DeMallie, working with Lakota elders in the late twentieth century, stressed that *wakan* resists easy definition: it is both noun and adjective, both immanent and transcendent, something you encounter rather than theorize. The Thunder Beings, *Wakinyan*, fly across the sky bringing rain and destruction in equal measure. Their stories are visceral, immediate, rooted in the experience of watching summer storms roll across a landscape with no shelter. The problem of translation is not incidental but central. When Henry Rowe Schoolcraft published *Algic Researches* in 1839, he was among the first to present Indigenous narratives to a wide English-reading audience. His work was groundbreaking and deeply flawed in equal measure. Schoolcraft married into an Ojibwe family and lived among Anishinaabe communities in the Great Lakes region, but his retellings smoothed away the specific textures of oral performance, imposed Victorian moral frames, and often invented connective tissue between stories that were never meant to be stitched into a single continuous mythology. His Manabozho tales (Nanabozho in more faithful transliterations) became popular among European and American readers precisely because Schoolcraft had made them palatable, which is another way of saying he had made them less true. Franz Boas understood this problem better than most of his contemporaries. Born in Germany in 1858, trained in physics and geography, Boas arrived in the Pacific Northwest in 1886 intending to study the Kwakwaka'wakw people of coastal British Columbia. What he found changed the course of anthropology. Boas spent decades recording stories in Indigenous languages, working with speakers who understood the urgency: residential schools were already operating, children were being removed from communities, and the assumption among colonial administrators was that these languages and the stories they carried would be extinct within a generation. Boas recorded not just content but performance style, pauses, repetitions, audience response. His published collections are dense and sometimes unreadable by modern standards, but they preserve something Schoolcraft never bothered with: the actual texture of oral narrative. A fire burns low in the center of the winter lodge. Outside, snow has drifted against the walls until the structure seems like a small hill in a white plain. Inside, the air is

warm and smells of pine smoke and drying fish. An elder sits nearest the fire, old enough that his hands shake slightly when he reaches for the tea someone has poured. The young people sit in a half-circle, close enough to hear but not so close as to crowd. This is the season for stories. In summer there is too much work: planting, harvesting, preparing. In winter, when the days are short and the nights long, the stories come out like tools stored carefully between uses. He begins without preamble. There is no "once upon a time," no formula to signal the shift from ordinary speech into narrative. He simply starts, and the room adjusts. His voice drops half a register. The cadence changes: slower, more deliberate, with pauses that are part of the structure. He is telling the story of the Flint and the Sapling, Sky Woman's twin grandsons, one who creates smooth rivers and fertile valleys, the other who creates jagged rocks and thorns and all the difficulties that make life hard. The young people know the story already. Some of them could tell it themselves if asked. But they listen anyway because the elder tells it differently each time, adjusting for the season, for the specific people in the room, for what has happened in the community that week. When he reaches the part where the twins fight, wrestling across the new earth until valleys and mountains form from the marks their bodies leave, he pauses and looks directly at a boy who has been arguing with his brother for days. The boy shifts, understanding the look without a word being said. The story is not abstract. It is not "long ago and far away." It is here, now, still happening, the same conflict playing out in this lodge in this winter as it did when the earth was new. Halfway through, the elder stops and drinks his tea. Someone asks a question: why did the Sapling create mosquitoes? The elder smiles. He tells the story within the story: the Sapling intended to create a giant monster that would torment humans, but his brother Flint tricked him, shrinking the monster down until it became the mosquito. Even evil, when reduced, becomes manageable. The young people laugh. The story continues. By the time it ends, the fire has burned down to coals and the eldest child has fallen asleep against her mother's shoulder. No one summarizes the moral. No one asks what the story meant. They simply let it sit in the room, one more layer added to the layers they have been learning since they were old enough to understand speech. The colonial encounter did not preserve these narratives so much as freeze them mid-breath. Schoolcraft's *Algic Researches* appeared at the height of Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal policy, when the United States government was

forcibly relocating tens of thousands of Indigenous people from the Southeast to territories west of the Mississippi. His readers consumed the stories as artifacts of a vanishing people, which was a convenient fiction: the people were not vanishing but being systematically dispossessed. The stories he recorded are therefore not windows into pre-contact worldviews but records of what people were willing or able to share with an outsider married to an Ojibwe woman but still undeniably part of the occupying society. The Bureau of American Ethnology, founded in 1879 under the Smithsonian Institution, formalized this salvage project. Its director, John Wesley Powell, was a geologist and veteran of the Civil War who lost an arm at Shiloh and went on to lead the first scientific expedition down the Colorado River. Powell believed Indigenous cultures were doomed by what he called the march of progress, and he tasked his bureau with recording as much as possible before the inevitable extinction. Agents fanned out across reservations and remaining Indigenous territories, notebooks in hand. Some were sensitive ethnographers. Others were extractive, treating elders as data sources rather than teachers. The resulting archive is enormous and uneven: thousands of pages of transcribed stories, linguistic notes, and ceremonial descriptions, all filtered through the assumption that the tellers were describing a dead past rather than a living present. Hewitt's *Iroquoian Cosmology* emerged from this context but resists its worst impulses. Hewitt recorded multiple versions of the same story, acknowledging variation rather than trying to establish a single authoritative text. He included long passages in Mohawk and Onondaga, recognizing that translation always involves loss. His English renderings are stiff and Victorian in syntax, but the care is evident: he wanted future generations of Haudenosaunee people to be able to access these records and hear their ancestors' voices. That care distinguishes his work from the many volumes produced by ethnographers who saw their subjects as specimens. The question of what gets lost in translation is not rhetorical. Consider the Lakota concept *wakan*, which appears throughout narratives from the Plains. Early translators rendered it as "sacred" or "holy," importing Christian theological categories that distort the original sense. *Wakan* encompasses mystery, power, strangeness, that which is both within and beyond ordinary experience. A rock can be *wakan*. A vision can be *wakan*. The Thunderbirds are *wakan*. The term does not divide the world into sacred and profane but recognizes gradations of intensity, moments and beings and places where the fabric of reality is thin-

ner or more concentrated. To translate it as "holy" flattens that complexity into a binary the original language refuses. The same problem afflicts translations of Hopi *katsina* (often anglicized as kachina). Early ethnographers called them spirits, but *katsina* are not equivalent to European folk spirits or Christian angels. They are ancestors, clouds, rain-bringers, teachers, embodied during ceremonies by masked dancers who do not represent the *katsina* but temporarily become them. The distinction is not metaphysical wordplay but practical: when a man dons the mask and costume and dances, he is *katsina*, and children learn not to look behind the mask because to do so is to rupture the ontology that makes the ceremony effective. The corn grows. The rain comes. The *katsina* return each year because the people perform their part of the relationship correctly. Creation stories across North American traditions cluster into a few recurring structures, though each resists being reduced to a mere variant of a type. The earth-diver motif, as already noted, appears throughout the Northeast and Plains: someone must retrieve mud or sand from beneath primordial waters to begin the process of making land. Emergence narratives dominate the Southwest: the Navajo and Pueblo peoples describe prior worlds beneath this one, each abandoned because of human transgression or ecological collapse, the people climbing upward through a reed or following a path until they emerge into the present world through a *sipapu* or place of emergence. The Navajo account, preserved most famously in Washington Matthews' *Navajo Legends* (1897), describes four underworlds, each with its own color and population, before the people reach the surface and begin their journey to *Dinétah*, the Navajo homeland between the four sacred mountains. World-parent separation appears less frequently but remains significant in certain regions. Among some California groups, Sky and Earth begin as a single entity or as two beings pressed so tightly together that nothing can grow between them. A child or trickster figure forces them apart, creating the space in which life becomes possible. The logic is clear: separation is the precondition for differentiation, and differentiation is the precondition for the multiplicity of beings and landscapes that constitute the world. This structure has analogs in Polynesian and Maori cosmologies (Rangi and Papa), suggesting either very ancient shared origins or independent arrival at a solution to the same narrative problem: how to explain the existence of space and light when the story begins in constriction and darkness. Trickster-creators confuse the category entirely. Raven, Coyote, Hare, Spider: these figures create

through accident, theft, appetite, boredom. They do not plan creation so much as stumble into it. Raven does not liberate light because he pities humanity but because he is curious or hungry or wants to impress someone. The world that results from such acts is imperfect, full of death and hardship and mosquitoes, because the creator was imperfect, motivated by base drives rather than cosmic wisdom. This is not a bug but a feature: the stories explain why the world is broken by positing a broken creator. It is a cosmology that takes suffering seriously without requiring a theodicy. Landscape is never backdrop. When a Zuni elder speaks of Shipap, the place of emergence in the north, he is not gesturing toward a mythical Otherworld but toward an actual location in what is now southern Colorado, a place with geographic coordinates and specific features. The same holds for the Navajo sacred mountains: Blanca Peak (Sisnaajiní, the eastern mountain), Mount Taylor (Tsoodzil, the southern), the San Francisco Peaks (Dook'o'oosłííd, the western), and Hesperus Mountain (Dibé Nitsaa, the northern). These are not symbols. They are the actual posts that hold up the sky, visible on clear days, anchoring the people to the land in a relationship that is both spiritual and intensely physical. The Columbia River for the Sahaptin-speaking peoples of the Plateau is a highway, a food source, a ceremonial center, and the body of Coyote's work all at once. Stories map onto specific rapids, specific fishing platforms, specific rocks. When the dams went in during the mid-twentieth century, flooding Celilo Falls and destroying one of the oldest continuously inhabited sites in North America, the stories did not disappear but they lost their anchor. Elders still tell them, but the physical mnemonic is gone, drowned under reservoir water. The stories become more fragile without the land to hold them in place. Caves function as thresholds. The Pueblo *sipapu*, often represented in kivas as a small hole in the floor, recalls the larger opening through which the people emerged into this world. The Apache tell of emergence through a hollow reed or a cave in what is now the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico. These are not arbitrary details: the Southwest is full of actual caves, some containing evidence of habitation stretching back millennia, and the stories reflect that landscape. To tell an emergence story in a place with no caves would ring false. The stories are calibrated to the world in which they are told. Boas understood this calibration better than most of his peers. Working on the Northwest Coast in the 1880s and 1890s, he recorded not just stories but the contexts in which they were told: win-

ter ceremonies, potlatches, initiations. He learned Kwak'wala well enough to transcribe directly rather than relying on interpreters, though his own published translations remain uneven. What sets his work apart is the insistence that you cannot separate a story from its performance, its audience, and its place. A story told in a cedar longhouse during a winter ceremonial, with masks and drums and dancers embodying the narrative, is not the same thing as that story written in English on a page in a government report. The gap between the two is not just a matter of medium but of ontology. The word "mythology" itself is a problem. It carries the weight of Greek and Roman precedent: *mythologia* as a body of traditional stories, distinct from *historia* as accounts of verifiable events. That distinction does not translate cleanly to Indigenous contexts where the boundary between history and sacred narrative is porous or nonexistent. When a Hopi elder speaks of the migrations, he is describing events his ancestors undertook: journeys from the place of emergence to the mesas where the villages now stand, stopping at specific locations to build shrines and leave petroglyphs that are still visible. This is history. It is also cosmology. It is also law, because the migrations establish clan territories and ceremonial responsibilities. To call it "myth" in the Greek sense is to misunderstand the category. The absence of a Hesiod or a Snorri is not a lack but a different epistemology. The Greeks had their *Theogony*, the Norse had the *Prose Edda*, texts that codified and standardized what had been fluid oral traditions. North American traditions prior to contact had no such impulse toward textual fixity. Stories belonged to families, to clans, to ceremonial societies. Some could be told freely; others required initiation or inheritance. Some changed each time they were told, adapted to the needs of the moment. The idea of a single correct version would have seemed strange, even dangerous, implying a rigidity incompatible with the living quality of oral narrative. When texts finally did appear, they appeared under colonial duress. The storytellers who worked with Hewitt or Boas or later scholars like Ruth Benedict and Gladys Reichard were often the last speakers of their languages, residential school survivors, individuals who understood that if they did not share the stories, that particular telling would die with them. This urgency shaped the archive: what survives in written form is what people chose to share, or what they were willing to share with outsiders, which is not the same as the full ceremonial or esoteric tradition. The gaps are as significant as the material preserved. A mesa in winter, somewhere in

what maps now call the American Southwest. The plateau rises from the desert floor in layers of red and white sandstone, each stratum marking a different era in geologic time compressed into visible bands. At the top, a village: stone houses clustered around a central plaza, smoke rising from the kivas below ground level. The air is dry and cold, the sky a blue so deep it seems like another substance entirely, something heavier than air but lighter than stone. An old man stands at the edge of the mesa, looking out toward the horizon where three other mesas are visible, each holding its own village. He has been a priest in the kiva society for forty years, learning the songs and the stories that go with them, performing the ceremonies that keep the relationship between the people and the *katsina* intact. He knows which clouds are *katsina* arriving and which are simply weather. He knows the schedule: when they come, when they depart, what offerings are required. He knows the stories of emergence, the journey his ancestors took to reach this mesa, the mistakes they made in earlier worlds and the lessons carried forward into this one. A younger man approaches, his grandson, nineteen years old and recently returned from the Indian school two hundred miles away. The boy's hair has been cut short. He wears denim trousers and a cotton shirt instead of the woven garments the old man remembers from his own youth. The boy speaks English more fluently than Hopi now, the language of his ancestors eroded by years away from the village. He is polite, deferential, but there is a distance between them that was not there before. The old man begins to speak in Hopi, slowly, using the formal register reserved for teaching. He tells the story of the emergence, the first people climbing through the *sipapu* into a world of light and air. He describes each of the underworlds they left behind, the beings they met, the compact they made with the *katsina*. The boy listens, understanding most of it but missing words, missing the layers of meaning embedded in the syntax. When the old man finishes, he asks the boy to repeat it back. The boy tries. He uses English for some of it, Hopi for the rest, mixing them in a way that makes the old man wince. It is not wrong, exactly, but it is not right either. It is something new, a hybrid that might survive or might dissolve entirely within another generation. The old man does not criticize. He simply nods and begins again, telling the story a second time, more slowly, pausing after each section to let the boy repeat it. This is how it has always been done: repetition, correction, repetition, until the story settles into the student's memory as firmly as stone settles into the mesa. But

the old man knows this may be the last time. The boy will leave again, return to the school or to a job in the city, and when he comes back he will be further changed. The stories will continue, but their form will shift. Perhaps that is acceptable. Perhaps the stories are strong enough to survive translation, truncation, even silence. Or perhaps not. The old man does not know. He simply continues, word by careful word, while the sun moves across the sky and the shadows of the mesas stretch toward the east. Turtle swims. The continent presses down on his shell, heavier now than it was in the beginning. Forests grow and die and grow again. Rivers carve channels through stone. Mountains wear down to hills. Glaciers advance and retreat. People arrive, crossing from the west during the ice ages or earlier, depending on which evidence you credit, and they spread across the land, adapting to deserts and coasts and plains and tundra. They tell stories to explain the shape of the world beneath their feet, stories that map onto the specific valleys and peaks and rivers they encounter. And beneath it all, patient and slow, Turtle holds the weight without complaint. His flippers move through dark water. His eyes, ancient beyond measure, stay open.



CHAPTER 2

RAVEN STEALS THE LIGHT

The world is dark. Not the darkness of a moonless night, when you can still make out the shape of trees against the sky, but absolute absence: no stars, no glow on the horizon, no memory of what light even means. At the head of the Nass River, where the water comes down from mountains no one can see, an old man lives in a house built from cedar planks so tightly fitted that no draft enters. Inside, three bentwood boxes sit stacked in the corner farthest from the door. The boxes are masterworks: cedar steamed and bent into oval forms, the seams invisible, the surfaces carved with formlines that curve and interlock in patterns that hurt to follow in firelight. The smallest box holds the stars. The middle box holds the moon. The largest box holds the sun. The old man does not open them. He has kept them sealed since the beginning, since before the beginning, since the time when time itself was just another thing waiting to be released. His daughter lives with him in that house. She is young, though age means little in a world without days. She is careful. She drinks only from the basket her father fills each morning from the spring behind the house, water so cold it makes her teeth ache. This morning she does not notice the hemlock needle floating on the surface. It is small, green-brown, easy to miss in the dim light of the cooking fire. She lifts the basket and drinks. The needle slips down her throat like a whisper. Raven put it there. Raven, who has been watching the house for longer than hunger, longer than patience, longer than the dark itself. He wanted inside. He wanted the boxes. He wanted whatever the old man was hiding, because Raven has never en-