

VERSIONS
OF THE
TRADITIONAL

A Journal of Translations
From Indigenous Cultures

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COVER:
Red Eskimo painting, Cook Inlet, Alaska.
Redrawn from Frederica de Laguna, 1933.

Introduction

This is the first issue of a publication which grew out of a series of public readings by poets, anthropologists and story-tellers concerned with translating and rendering the mythic and poetic material of indigenous cultures. The readings, entitled Versions of the Traditional, began in 1978 and were a joint effort of The Touchstone Center and the American Museum of Natural History, where each of the readings have taken place since the inception of the series. As part of the 10th Anniversary of these readings in May of 1989, we, at the Touchstone Center felt it appropriate to begin a journal which could extend the audience of the rich material shared with listeners over the years, as well as to establish a publication dedicated to an area of translation deserving of a wider reading public.

The contents of this first issue is made up of personal selections by some of the original translators who participated in the reading series at the Museum. In subsequent issues we hope to continue publishing the work of these participants along with other persons engaged in the important task of preserving the myth and poetry of indigenous cultures.

The Center would like to thank all of the contributors to this issue along with a special thanks to Flo Stone, Terri Williams and Malcolm Arth, and most recently Nat Johnson, who have been the supportive staff at the Museum who collaborated with the Center in making these readings a reality. The ongoing financial support of the New York State Council on the Arts, and in particular the Literature Division, under the direction of Gregory Kolovaks, have, of course, been key to keeping the series an annual event since its first days in 1978. We look forward to the future of Versions of the Traditional as a way of giving new life to the beauty and meaning of some of the world's most enduring literature.

— *Richard Lewis*
Director
The Touchstone Center

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THE SHINING MOUNTAIN

Let us go together
up the shining mountain

let us sit and watch
the sun go down in beauty

Nanibonsak, the Moon
the Night Traveler
will climb into the sky land

The Awatawesu,
those far-off beings overhead,
the small stars will follow

now we hear
the drums of Thunder
now sparks fly from
the pipe of the Lightning

now Great Owl sings
all must sleep
the Awatawesu and their chief
are in flight across the sky

but though our bodies
urge us towards sleep
we sit together in beauty
upon the shining mountain

—Western Abenaki
Translated by Joseph Bruchac¹

GLUSKABE AND DZIDZIZ

One day Gluskabe came into his Grandmother's lodge.

"Grandmother," he said, "there is nothing left for me to do. I have conquered all of the monsters. There is no one who can defeat me."

Grandmother Woodchuck shook her head. "That is not so, Grandson. There is one whom you cannot overcome."

"How can this be so?" Gluskabe said. "I have defeated the magician, Grasshopper. I was stronger than Aglebemü, who captured all the water in the world. I tied the wings of the Wind Eagle and transformed the animals. I am sure there is no one on this earth I cannot overcome."

Grandmother Woodchuck shook her head again. "Gluskabe," she said, "soon it will be time for us to leave and let our children and our children's children take care of the earth. This world is changing and there is one whom you cannot defeat. He is called Dzidziz."

"Hunnh," said Gluskabe. "Where can I find this mighty one?"

"You can find him near the Place of White Stone. He lives there in the lodge of Nigawes."

So Gluskabe went to the Place of White Stone. There was an Indian village there and he walked into it with his head held high. "Where is Dzidziz?" he said. "I have been told he is in the lodge of Nigawes."

"That is so," said an old woman. "Dzidziz is in that lodge there. You are lucky to have arrived now. He has just wakened from his nap or you would not be able to see him."

"Is this Dzidziz so mighty that no one dares wake him when he is sleeping?" Gluskabe said.

The old woman smiled. "You might say that."

Gluskabe entered the lodge. A woman was sitting by the fire.

"I have come to see Dzidziz," Gluskabe said. "Kuail!" said the woman. "You are welcome to our lodge. Dzidziz is over there." She motioned with her chin to the other side of the fire. There a small baby was crawling on a blanket made of bearskins. Gluskabe had never seen a baby before and did not know that dzidziz is simply the world which means "baby" and that nigawes just means mother.

"Kuail!" said Gluskabe to the baby. But Dzidziz did not answer.

"Hunnh," said Gluskabe. "You think you are too strong to answer me. But I command you to do so! Kuail!" But Dzidziz paid no attention. He continued to crawl about on his blanket.

"So," Gluskabe said, "you are challenging me? But I can do anything you can do."

Then Gluskabe crawled around on his hands and knees just as Dzidziz was doing. He did it very well, just as well as the baby. Before long, however, Dzidziz grew tired of crawling. He rolled over onto his back and began to play with his toes.

"Ah-hah," Gluskabe said. "You challenge me again? But I can do this, too."

Then Gluskabe rolled over on his back. He took off his moccasins and began to play with his toes also, watching the baby closely to be sure he did everything just as Dzidziz did. After a while Dzidziz pulled one of his feet up to his mouth and began to suck on his toes.

"You cannot defeat me!" Gluskabe said. He pulled and tugged at his leg and finally got his foot up close enough to his mouth so that he, too, could suck on his toes.

Now, though, Dzidziz grew tired of sucking his toes. He rolled back to his stomach and reached for his favorite toy, a piece of deerskin stuffed and sewed together to look like a turtle.

"Kaamoji!" Gluskabe said. "You are stronger than I thought. Come over here to me!" But Dzidziz paid no attention and started chewing on the leather turtle.

Gluskabe bent closer. "Is that what gives you your power?" he said. "Then I will take it from you." He pulled the leather turtle from the baby's hands. As soon as he did so the baby began to cry and scream. Gluskabe had never heard such a sound before. He thought it would break his ears and he covered them with his hands.

"Be silent!" Gluskabe shouted, but Dzidziz did not stop screaming. Then Gluskabe tried singing to the baby. He sang a song powerful enough to calm the strong winds and quiet the most powerful storm. All around the Place of White Stone the winds stopped blowing and the waters became calm. But within the wigwom Dzidziz still screamed.

"You have won," Gluskabe shouted. "Here." He gave the leather turtle back to the baby. But Dzidziz was not yet ready to stop crying. He continued to scream. He clenched his fists and his face grew red. Gluskabe looked around in despair.

"Is no one stronger than Dzidziz?" said Gluskabe. "Who can make him stop?"

Then the young woman, who had sat calmly through it all, leaned over and picked up the baby. She placed him on her shoulder and crooned a lullaby. Gradually Dzidziz stopped crying and became quiet. Before long he was asleep.

"Oleohneh," said Gluskabe. "Who are you who can calm the mighty Dzidziz?"

"I am Nigawes," said the woman. "I am his mother and this is my baby. Be quiet or you will wake him up."

Then Gluskabe tiptoes out of the wigwom. He went back to the lodge of his Grandmother Woodchuck.

"Grandmother," Gluskabe said, "you were right. I cannot defeat Dzidziz." Then Gluskabe smiled. "But he, too, is not the mightiest one on earth. Dzidziz is not mightier than Nigawes. The Mother is stronger than the Baby."

And so it is to this day. Nitatci notlokangan wa Gluskabe umetabegesin. And here this story of Gluskabe is ended.

—Abenaki
Rendering by Joseph Bruchac

A SONG FROM THE BALLADS OF THE LORDS OF NEW SPAIN

Friends, listen to this: "Let's have no more lordly
Marching. Let's forget war and conflict. Let those
things be done with here in this good world."

And they're still talking about me. Yesterday there was
the ball court. This is what they were saying, what
they were telling each other: "How can he be human?
How can he be sane?" Who knows all that they say?
But is it not true that I speak on earth?

The smoke is rising. Ohuaye. Let the conch horns scream
with me here on this earth. The budding swelling
flowers are scattering down. They come with
pleasure here on earth.

This is how it would be in the home of our father God, how
it would be in green places: Life Giver painting the
earth with plume flowers.

Jade log drums are sounding; God's loved one, jade-fluting
in the skies; swan feathers heavy with jewels,
bending on earth; a song shield spear mist, raining
on earth. And with these flower bells the skies are
roaring. There's gold shield dancing.

This I say, I Cacamatl: I recall King Nezahualpilli. And
Nezahualcoyotl, is he summoned? Is he seen? Here
beside the drum I recall them.

And who will pass away? Jades? Gold? Will someone pass
away? Am I a turquoise shield? Never again will I
be put together. I am arrayed in plume robes here
on earth. Here beside the drum I recall them.

—Aztec
Translated by John Bierhorst²

THE DANCERS

A tribe was compelled to seek new hunting-grounds in a wild, distant territory, near Bear lake. Busy with setting up their camp, they had little time for their children.

The children were growing lonesome, and to amuse themselves they went to a clearing in the forest where they made up dances about the deer and fish, the squirrels, the bluejay and the bear. They were especially fond of imitating the great birds which soar high in the sky, the eagle, hawk and falcon. They loved their dances and nothing could stop them.

One day a frail old man approached their dancing-ground. He was dressed in white feathers and his hair shone like silver. If his appearance frightened them, his words haunted them as well. For he said, 'Stop your dancing, or evil will come to you.' Then he disappeared. But little did the children heed the old man's warning, and they continued to take turns imitating the animals. The next day the man reappeared and repeated his warning, and the next day, and the next. The children danced on merrily.

Soon the children forgot about the old man. One day a little boy suggested that they have some food when they next met to dance. All the children agreed to ask their parents for a contribution to the little feast. But the parents didn't like this idea at all. One said, 'If you want to eat, you will have to stay home like everybody else.' Another parent said sternly, 'This is nonsense. You will waste good food. I will give you nothing.' The children gathered the next day the same as before, but they were disappointed. A little to eat after each dance would have made them very happy.

On a certain day the children were all in a circle dancing like birds. Their heads were growing light with hunger, and as they danced they rose little by little into the air. One of them said, 'Do not look back, for something strange is happening!' An old woman at the camp dropped her work as she saw them rising like smoke and called them back, to no avail. They kept circling slowly above the lake, beyond the beeches and the pines, up into the open sky. The woman alerted the parents of the children. When they saw what was happening they rushed into the lodges and brought out food in great quantities. Holding it outstretched in their arms, they piteously begged the children to return. But they would not and in fact could not return.

One child did look back and fell through the sky like a falling star. The others reached the sky, and are now a constellation. Each falling star recalls the story to the tribe, and they see in the ever-twinkling stars a merry band of dancing children.

—Onandaga
*Adaptation by Steven Lonsdale*³

THE ENERGY OF THE DANCE

A mythical creature named Da Tengt, a spider created by the spider goddess Biliku, was a renowned and crafty hunter. One day Da Tengt was roaming through the forest. And as he wandered, he asked all the plants and animals their names. Suddenly, he took two arrows from his quiver, strung his bow, and shot them at random. He found that the first arrow had stuck in a yam. He spoke to the yam, asking, "What is your name?" At first the yam did not answer. Tengt turned to go away. When he had gone a few steps he heard the yam call back, 'My name is gono.' Tengt replied, 'Oh, I didn't know. Why did you not say so before?' Then he found his second arrow in a large lump of resin. He took the arrow, and as he was going away, the resin called him back, saying, 'Here! My name is tug; you can take me along with you.' So Da Tengt put the yam and the resin in his pack. He also found a cicada, an insect famous for its shrill song, and took it along too. When he reached his tribe, he taught them how to cook the yam by burning the resin, and they feasted. But the cicada he crushed to death. The cicada screamed, and as his shrill cry pierced the air, the whole world grew dark for the first time ever.

All the creatures were frightened, since before they had known only the bright light of day. They took turns singing, thinking maybe their songs could bring the cicada back to life. But still darkness hung. Da Tengt, though, made his way in the darkness to the lumps of resin. He taught the others how to make torches. Next he showed them how to sing and dance at the same time. One by one, the creatures danced and sang, holding up high their torches. When they were all dancing in full swing, all the torches ablaze, dawn rose. And from that time onwards day and night succeeded one another. To this day the Andamanese dance late into the night in the belief that the energy of the dance urges the first rays of sun to shine down and warm the earth.

—Andamanese
Version by Steven Lonsdale⁴

JUST ANYONE

We line up in the village
like cars going over the blacktop:
Kuac Reu, Yual Bokyel Pinien, Kuac Dhiec Deng.
We were told never to do it again.
Tucuor, they said, if you saunter by
once more, you'll wish you hadn't.

Yes, Yat Nyuon, we were threatened with a gun
on the day of the dance, yesterday's dance:
Kar Bil Buoi, Ding Pinien, Ding Bul and Ding Car,
Dign Nyaluak, Pajie Kuon, Pajie Lul and Tek Galuak.

Keep your heart to the ground, Kuac Dhiec.
Tongues wagged that girls go to town
to do the work of loiterers, Nyalual Buony.
We silenced them, Biel.
We said: a girl doesn't sit
in her father's barn with just anyone.

—Nuer

Translated by Terese Svoboda⁵

ROAD TO THE CONGO

Yes, Jules sleeps but trouble
makes him toss and turn.
I wait for him across the border.
I've never seen Ethiopia but I know
he'll be where there's gunfire.

Bul Dieng, the village was torn apart
as if by weaverbirds.
Yes, Biel went to Khartoum;
Cuany went to Mading Buol.

We are all travel-weary.
We leave for Kator, for the town of Juba.
Let me say that on the road to the Congo
even the little girls of Riawang
answer us with a honk.

Yesterday, Tuyel, someone brought over his photo.
"Dieng, don't blow on the fire inside the house—
you are blinding me. Let me see.
Jiok Lual, who is this stranger?"
My heart filled with longing.

It will be a year before he returns, Gabriel.
Col Bejiok, I stay by the bridge
to answer his greeting.
Writing just puts me further from him.

—Nuer

Translated by Terese Svoboda⁶

This is an initiatory tale with many obvious and many secret meanings. Take away whatever you hear, and let the rest be transformed by fire into silence.

TORTOISE AND ESILI

The time had come to clear a patch in the forest. Time and the need for Tortoise and Esili to set forth, which they did, paloum paloum paliiii, paloum paliiii. Done with their clearing, Tortoise and Esili left the field to finish drying; and when it was time, they got up to go and burn the debris.

"Time to fire the field means time to give thought to where you'll be hiding, Esili," said Tortoise.

"I'm going to take shelter in my mother's thicket."

"As for me, when heat overtakes the field, I'll make for the pond over by my mother's place, where she sows her seeds," said Tortoise.

In good times, the friends arrived, paloum paloum paliiii, where the clearing had done drying. Now for the burning. Set fire to the field: Ssssss sssss, with assistance from the wind those flames began upping themselves and spreading everywhichway. Tortoise, seeing them like that, took off to plunge in her mother's pond, paloum paloum splash quickly. Esili, unsure of what to do, finally remembered, and as soon took off to scramble up his mother's thicket.

Well now, the fire began to come on strong, very strong, begat children. When some fire children reached the pond where Tortoise had plunged into water, hsssst! hsssst! those flames were finished. But then others pushed on in the opposite direction to arrive at Esili's mother's thicket, whoosht! those flames burned bush, finished thicket. Fire crackled, roared, hawaow! like this; then hush of ash, puhpuhpuh, like this. Hush of ash, followed by silence.

Poking her head out of the pond, Tortoise called, "Esili-o, Esili-o, Esili-o, come on, let us go back to the village."

Ashen silence. Again went up that voice to the sky: "Esili-o, Esili-o, come quickly-o!" Ashen silence. So Tortoise hunched herself out of the water completely and started walking with little steps, ka-lump, paloum, ka-lump, paloum, stopping calling, "Esili-o, Esili-o." Worried: "Esili-o, Esili-o?" More worried: "Esili-o, Esili-ooooo."

When Tortoise got to the place where thicket had been, she found nothing. Nothing but charred wood, charred twigs, nothing but cinders and ashes. So Tortoise began to sift through the remains. Sifting, finding all that was left of her friend, Esili: bones, mostly charred. Finally, sifting,

sifting, Tortoise picked up a pretty little bone — neither too long nor too short, white as white, and of this she began to fashion a delicate flute. In time when she had finished fashioning, Tortoise put the flute to her mouth and it began to sing with unusual beauty.

Esili gave me, Esili gave me	(chorus) <u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili gave me flute's saliva	<u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili-oooooo	<u>Zamenienele</u>
My friend, gone away...	<u>Zamenienele</u>

"But how? What sort of thing is this that speaks so well?" pondered Tortoise. Examining the flute with delicate wonder, then putting it to her mouth again, she heard the flute repeat:

Esili gave me, Esili gave me	chorus) <u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili gave me flute's saliva	<u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili-oooooo	<u>Zamenienele</u>
My friend, gone away...	<u>Zamenienele</u>

Tortoise only wanted to play it a little, testing the thing. Hardly had she taken flute from mouth when she saw Monkey. He comes, he comes, swinging from branch to branch, kalam kalam kondon, kalam kalam kondon. Drawing near Tortoise, perched on a branch of a nearby tree, Monkey said, "Tortoise, what a beautiful sounding thing I heard. Please play again while I listen closely." So Tortoise put flute to mouth and the song went out as before

Esili gave me, Esili gave me	chorus) <u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili gave me flute's saliva	<u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili-oooooo	<u>Zamenienele</u>
My friend, gone away...	<u>Zamenienele</u>

"O Tortoise," begged Monkey, "Please lend me that wonderful flute so that I may try to play it."

"No way!" exclaimed Tortoise. "Why should I be giving to you of all people something my dear brother left for me?"

"Please reconsider," begged Monkey. "Do you think I have the sort of nasty force inside of me that would want to keep your flute for myself? Try letting me play a little. I'll stay right here close by." Tortoise agreed. Stretching herself, she met his hand halfway. Putting flute to mouth, Monkey began to play:

Tortoise gave me, Tortoise gave me	(chorus) <u>Zamenienele</u>
Tortoise gave me flute's saliva...	<u>Zamenienele</u>

"Stop! That's not the way it goes! Give me back my thing!" demanded Tortoise.

Monkey pretended to agree, then zooooop took off for the further branch of a tree where, well out of reach, he again put flute to mouth:

Tortoise gave me, Tortoise gave me (chorus) Zamenienele
Tortoise na-eh! gave me flute's saliva... Zamenienele

"O Monkey, O Monkey," Tortoise cried, "Please give me back my thing!" Monkey now took his leave, kalam kalam kondon, kalam kalam kondon. Monkey proceeded to disappear completely. But the song could still be heard, faintly, in the distance.

"Tortoise gave me...! what slander," she reasoned with herself. And she began to walk in a new way, kpaak si kpaak (Greetings for your way of walking, Tortoise!) until she reached the house of Odimosolo, the all-seeing disentangler of intrigues. Seated on a raised platform amidst a tangle of aerial roots and creepers, Odimosolo greeted Tortoise in an ancient voice: "You find me eating a cricket's thigh, or so you think, heh heh. Wrong! It's the thigh of my father's wife who died yesterday. Speak up! Don't mumble, woman, I'm hard of hearing."

When Tortoise had finished pleading her case, "Now listen well," said the sage spirit, "and do precisely as I say. Go back to your village. Commence building houses, one of which will be fashioned entirely of dry leaves, heh heh. Then will be the time for you to invite all the animals to your celebration. When they will have finished arriving, then will be the time to indicate their respective accommodations. House of dry leaves, very crisp heh heh, for monkeys. When night comes on is the time for kindling. Shhhhhh, shhhhhh, crickets and thickets heh heh, and we shall see what we shall see."

Flattening herself on the ground before Odimosolo, "Sage spirit, I am grateful," said Tortoise. "Greetings for your infinite powers of extrication, O Mystery!"

Tortoise returned to her village. When she had followed Odimosolo's advice and constructed various houses out of various available materials, she climbed up onto the signal drum to summon all within hearing. Tum tum wa boom, wa boom. When all had arrived by lope or creep, she addressed them directly, saying, "I have invited you here to participate in funeral rites for my dearest friend. Tomorrow, dancing, singing and feasting will accompany the pouring of libations. Now is the time for everyone to go to bed early. See, houses have been provided for each family. Antelopes, here's your quiet abode. Leopards, royal mats have been laid for you at some distance from the rest. Birds, up here," she indicted. When each clan had been allotted its place, she added, as though in afterthought, "Ah yes, and over here is a well thatched hut for you mischievous monkeys."

Night came on. Time to kindle the house of dry leaves in which monkeys were sleeping. The flames sssss sssss with assistance from the wind rose up and drove the monkeys out into the open. Tearfully, they fled. When the flames subsided again, Tortoise sifted the ashes in search

of her flute, made of a lovely little bone, white as white, all that was left of her dead companion.

At dawn she climbed upon the signal drum. Tum tum wa boom.
“Greeting, fellow creatures, for the new day. May you all have spent the night in peace. Except monkeys. I cannot imagine why they decided to set their house afire and go elsewhere. Well, let that be. Time for us to be beginning. I called you here to help me mourn my friend, Esili.” Putting flute to mouth, Tortoise began to sing; and everyone lent voice to support the chorus:

Esili gave me, Esili gave me	(chorus) <u>Zamenienele</u>
A flute that sings profound pain	<u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili-oooooo, Esili-eeeeee	<u>Zamenienele</u>
My friend, gone away...	<u>Zamenienele</u>
Esili gave me a flute to sing	<u>Zamenienele</u>
The pain I feel	<u>Zamenienele</u>
Death seized Esili, seized Esili	<u>Zamenienele</u>

(Repeat to the end...)

—Camerounian Songfable
English version by Judith Gleason⁷

AT THE COURT OF LORD FIVE THUNDER

Already under way is Act II of Xajoj Tun or Dance of the Trumpet, a four-act Mayan drama of human sacrifice. Man of Rabinal has just informed Lord Five Thunder, the King of Rabinal, that he has captured Man of Quiche, an ally who has betrayed him; Lord Five Thunder now responds to the news. Each raised dot in the script marks a deliberate pause.

LORD FIVE THUNDER

My brave • my man • thanks be to Sky • thanks be to Earth • you have arrived • here inside the great fortress • the great walls • before my mouth • before my face • I who am your lord • I who am the Lord Five Thunder • and thanks be to Sky • and thanks be to Earth • if Sky has given him up • if that brave • that man • has fallen • under the power of your weapon • the power of your shield • you have roped him • lassoed him • that brave • that man • quick now • bring him in here • before my mouth • before my face • I have yet to look him in the mouth • yet to look him in the face • to see how brave he may be • how manly.

But even so • you will advise that brave • that man • that he must not yowl • he must not shriek • when he enters here • through the gate of the great fortress • the great walls • since the ones we cherish are here • the ones we admire • inside the great fortress • the great walls • since the twelve older brothers are here • the twelve younger brothers • makers of objects of metal • makers of objects of jade • yet to be perfected • in their contours • in their features • perhaps this brave • will play a role in their perfection • their completion • inside the great fortress • the great walls.

Also here of course • are the Twelve Golden Eagles • Golden Jaguars • likewise unperfected • in their sharpness • in their stares • perhaps this brave • will play a role in their perfection.

Also here of course • are seats adorned with precious metal • clothes adorned with precious metal • but with fine raiment • or without fine raiment • perhaps this brave • perhaps this man • will come to be enthroned.

Also here of course • are the twelve drinks • the twelve drafts • Sudden Hummingbird by name • the brew that burns and bites • rasps and smarts • sweet as honey to my taste • here inside the great walled fortress • the Lord's Drink • perhaps this brave • will come to taste it.

Also here of course • are the double warp • the tamped weft • the weaving tightly done • work of my mother • my lady • perhaps this brave • perhaps this man • will come to open its folds • unfurl its face.

Also here of course • kept safe • is the Mother of Quetzal
Resplendence • the Mother of Glistening Green • Necklace of Jade • who
comes from String's End at Fish's Place • perhaps this brave • perhaps this
man • will come to display her contours • her facets • will come to dance
her round and round • here inside the great fortress • the great walls •
perhaps this brave • will play a role as a son-in-law, a brother-in-law •
inside the great fortress • inside the great walls • if he's the kind who
offers praise • if he's the kind who offers respect • if he bows down • if he
lowers his face • when he enters here.

So says my word • before Sky • before Earth • and so may Sky • and
Earth • be with you • Man of Rank • Man of Rabinal.

MAN OF RABINAL

Lord Five Thunder • if I may be allowed • before Sky • before Earth •
my word for you now says • whereas this strength of mine • this
manhood of mine • was your gift • your present to me • before my mouth
• before my face • I must therefore leave my weapon here • my shield
here • you must guard them • keep them safe • inside their chest • their
place of repose • that they may rest • as I may rest • since I will also
leave that brave with you • he who is the dream • from which we could
not awaken • inside the great fortress • inside the great walls.

So says my word • before Sky • before Earth • may Sky • and Earth •
be with you • my lord • my liege • Lord Five Thunder.

Next, Lord Five Thunder tells Man of Rabinal that it is too soon for
him to lay down his arms, since the prisoner might still be dangerous
(as indeed turns out to be the case).

—Quiche
Translated by Dennis Tedlock⁴

SONG OF A SHAMAN WHO RETURNED FROM THE DEAD

I was seized
and taken far
to the very edge
of this world
by the spirit
the magic power
the crystal
ha wo ho

only then
was I healed
it was thrown
deep in me
the life-bringer
of the Wolves
the crystal
ha wo ho

I am a life-bringer
I come to heal
with the ways
of the Wolves
with the crystal
I will heal
ha wo ho

I have come
with living waters
these healing ways
of the Wolves
the living waters
the spirit crystal
ha wo ho

Lebid

—Kwakiutl, North West Coast
Version by David Cloutier⁸

TALKING GOD'S HOUSE SONG

The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

Earth Woman, her house,
From its back corner, beauty reaches out,
Now, Long-life-returning,
Now, Causing-happiness-everywhere, beauty reaches out.
The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

Mountain Woman, her house,
From its center, beauty reaches out,
Now, Long-life-returning,
Now, Causing-happiness-everywhere, beauty reaches out.
The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

Water Woman, her house,
From its fireside, beauty reaches out,
Now, Long-life-returning,
Now, Causing-happiness-everywhere, beauty reaches out.
The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

Corn Plant Woman, her house,
From its door-corners, beauty reaches out,
Now, Long-life-returning,
Now, Causing-happiness-everywhere, beauty reaches out.
The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

Corn Pollen, its house,
From its door-path, beauty reaches out,
Now, Long-life-returning,
Now, Causing-happiness-everywhere, beauty reaches out.
The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

The Ripener Fly, its house,
From all around it, beauty reaches out,
Now, Long-life-returning,
Now, Causing-happiness-everywhere, beauty reaches out.
The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

The woman, from her, beauty reaches out,
The woman, from her, beauty.

—Navajo
Translated by David P. McAllester^{9,1}

NAVAJO HOUSE BUILDING SONG

I plan it, I plan it,
I plan it, I plan it,
As I am planning, just as I wish,
Beautifully in place, it drops into position!

The East, from under there to here, my raised beam,
First, I lean it into position,
Long-life-returning, Causing-happiness-everywhere,
As I am planning, just as I wish,
Beautifully in place, it drops into position.

The West, from under there to here, my raised beam,
Next, I lean it into position,
Long-life-returning, Causing-happiness-everywhere,
As I am planning, just as I wish,
Beautifully in place, it drops into position.

The South, from under there to here, my raised beam,
Between, I lean it into position,
Long-life-returning, Causing-happiness-everywhere,
As I am planning, just as I wish,
Beautifully in place, it drops into position.

The North, from under there to here, my raised beam,
The last one, I lean it into position,
Long-life-returning, Causing-happiness-everywhere,
As I am planning, just as I wish,
Beautifully in place, it drops into position.

I plan it, I plan it,
I plan it, I plan it,
As I am planning, just as I wish,
Beautifully in place, it drops into position!

—Navajo
Translation by David A. McAllester^{9.2}

WIYU AND THE MAN WHO LIKED TO SHOOT DOLPHINS

Yes, Huasudi, the Rainbow, that's the crown.^{10A} Wiyu's crown. Didn't I tell you? There's lots of Wiyu, everywhere. They're like people. That mountain there. That's Wiyu's home. The mountains. We don't go near them. They're dangerous. But Wiyu isn't bad. It's the piache, the shaman. There are bad shamans and good shamans. This is what the piache tells us. The bad ones tell Wiyu to go kill someone, to harm them. So Wiyu obeys. Wiyu just obeys. He's just doing what the shaman tells him. Wiyu's not bad though.

How does Wiyu kill someone? He takes the soul, the akaato. The body he leaves. It dies little by little. In all sorts of ways. Remember Luis Gonzalez, Morrocoy, who died in La Paragua? He was out fishing and there was Huasudi, the Rainbow, and then below there was a little wind, like a whirlwind, a little tornado spinning about. And that started it. You know, he had those headaches and couldn't eat. Finally he died. But it began that day with Huasudi and that little wind. His wife told us.

Yes, it was Wiyu, and a shaman on the Caura who caused it. That's why there was nothing we could do for him. "Pobrecito," no? Isn't that what you say? "Pobrecito." What does it mean?

But you can die in many ways. It's different — fever, headache. Wiyu takes the spirit. Then the body dies. Listen. On the Ventuari we know this person, a Criollo, who told us this story.

He used to fish in this pool by Mount Kwaihuha, a big mountain on the Ventuari. He would fish at the foot of it. He like to shoot muna. What do you call them? Tonina, sea cows, manatee, dolphins. There are lots of them there, leaping around. This man would shoot them. Then, one day, he was fishing with the line there like that and two hands reached up like that and pulled it in. He went into the water and there were two girls there. Wiyu. they took him along under there, and he saw everything — their cities, the conucos (gardens), their homes. It was like Ciudad Ciudad Bolivar, Caracas. More! The rivers are their highways. They showed him everything. They took him to Brazil. They took him to those falls by Roraima. I can't remember the name. He came out there. He was with them for three days. His wife thought he was dead. She looked all over for him.

Then the two girls took him to the hospital. Yes, they have their own hospital, everything down there. And they took him to see all the patients he had wounded. The people he had hurt. He thought they were manatee. But under the water they were people. They showed him what he had done. They made him pull the spear head out of one that he had shot and wounded. All those there in the hospital were ones he had shot and wounded. Now he saw what he had done.

Then they took him to Kwaihuha again, to the pool where he had left. And he came out there again just fine. He was fine, ok. He had been gone for three days with his wife looking all over for him.

That man never went fishing again. Never. He used to fish all the time. He liked to just shoot the manatee there for fun. He didn't know. Now he never fished again. He told me. He's the comisario there at Manapiari. I don't know his name. We call him Warishidhirishi. Like Marimono, the monkey.^{10B}
He's a big black guy, uglier than anyone. Si, Senor. Wiyu.

—Yekuna

Recorded and translated by David Guss^{10C}

ISIS AND THE SECRET NAME OF RA

Isis was the daughter of the great Sun God Ra. She was also the Lady of Magic. She knew spells, chants and secret names. But she did not know the secret name of Ra.

The great Sun God Ra had lived for millions and millions of years. And he had grown old, so old that sometimes he slobbered and dribbled at the mouth. Spit often fell from his lips.

One morning at dawn, the great Sun God descended from the Sunboat, the Boat of a Million Years, to walk across the earth to admire his creations. As he walked, spit fell from his lips. Quick as lightning, Isis who was hiding caught his spit. She mixed the spit with dirt and fashioned a snake. She placed the snake at the crossroads where Ra often passed when he walked across the Two Lands.

The following morning when Ra descended from the Sunboat, the snake rose up and bit him.

"AIIIIIIIIIIIIII!" Ra roared. His scream immediately reached the Sunboat in the heavens.

"What has happened?" the gods cried out. "O mighty Ra, what has happened to you?"

But Ra could not answer. His jaw trembled. His body shook. He fell to the ground.

"Mighty Ra! Mighty Ra!" the gods called. "Tell us what has happened."

After a time, in a soft choking voice, Ra said, "I have been bitten. O my children, you who came into being from my body, come to me. My pain is great. O children, come to me. Help me!"

The younger gods went to Ra. They brought him presents. Thoth, the God of Justice, brought Ra a scroll. Maat, the Goddess of Destiny, brought him a feather. The Baboon God brought bananas. The gods spoke magic words. They cast spells. They chanted. They wept. But no one could help him.

Then, Isis, the Lady of Magic, went to Ra and said, "My father, what has happened to you?"

"Child, I have been bitten. I am so hot. I am so cold. Who did this to me? I am the one who rules the world."

"Tell me your name, father," Isis said, "and I shall drive away the poison with my words of power."

"Quickly then, take away the poison, for I have no strength. The poison spreads through me as swiftly as the Nile overflowing the land at floodtime."

"Tell me your secret name, father, and you shall live."

Then Ra said, "I am the one who made the heavens and the earth, the mountains, the wide sea, and the bull to please the cow. I stretched out the two horizons and placed the souls of the gods in the center. I am the one who made the Nile rise. I made the fire in the palaces. I made the hours, the days, and the festivals. There is no one greater than I am. I am Khepri at dawn, Ra at noon, and Atum in the evening. These are my names."

"Yes, father, these are your names. But tell me your secret name, the name your mother and father hid inside you when you were born."

Ra was silent. He did not want to tell. The hours passed.

Isis sat by his side. She thought of the time when she was alone in the marshes, nursing her infant Horus. Horus had been stung by a scorpion and she had cried to the gods for help. No one, not her father, not her mother, not her husband had come. Only the fisherpeople from the marshes had come. And they could not help. At last, at evening Thoth, the God of Justice, had descended from the Sunboat and with the power of Ra's secret name, he had cured her son.

Isis, the mother, sat by Ra's side. Ra trembled and shook. When evening came and the poison ran through his body like fire and he could scarcely breathe, Ra whispered to Isis, "you shall have my name."

The Sun God closed his eyes. There was darkness. He went into himself, deeper and deeper. Then he pulled Isis to him and placed his name in her hear. "One day," Ra whispered, "when he is ready, you will tell my name to your son, and my name will shine in his eyes."

Isis then began to chant:

Go, poison
return to the earth
The Great God has told his name.
He who tells his name lives.
Go, poison
return to the earth.
Let Ra live. -
Let Ra live and not die.

The poison entered the earth. Ra opened his eyes. There was light. Ra took his place with the other gods in the Sun Coat, the Boat of a Million Years. The Sun Boat ascended to the heavens.

Isis remained on earth. With the help of Ra's name, she was able to cure many people who came to her for help. And when her son Horus was of age, at the right moment, she placed Ra's secret name in his heart.

—Egyptian
*Retold by Diane Wolkstein*¹¹

If there is someone above
who knows what happens

You

today I have trouble
give me something to make it
not so

if there is someone inside the earth
who knows what happens

I have trouble today
give me something
to make it not so

whatever makes these things
now just as I am
I have enough

give me just for me
my death

I have enough sadness

—Crow

*Version by W.S. Merwin*¹²

It's today I'm supposed
to go away

I won't
I'll go
tomorrow

you'll see me go
playing a flute
made from a bone of a fly

carrying a flag
made from a spider's web

beating an ant's egg
drum

with a humming-bird's nest for a hat
with my head
in a humming-bird's nest

—Quechua

Adapted from Spanish by W.S. Merwin¹³

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this appeared originally in The American Poetry Review.

2. Struggling to make sense of this cryptic song, a glossator has scrawled a hasty note in the manuscript: "Of Cacamatzin, last king of Texcoco, when he found himself in great difficulties, recalling the power and great majesty of his father and grandfather."

Cacamatzin (d.1520) was in fact preceded by Nezahualpilli and he in turn by the famous king Nezahualcoyotl; and all three names appear in the second-to-last stanza of this seven-stanza poem.

My own understanding, based on a comparison of 127 Aztec songs, is that the piece was composed in the mid-1500s by a singer scorning the new Aztec Christians who have criticized him for keeping up the Aztec warrior ethic. He promotes his view of the Christian God as a beneficent distributor of spirit warriors (called "flowers," "drums," "bells") that come raining down from the other world. Identifying with the warrior-king Cacamatzin, he summons other glorious figures from the Aztec past, imagining combat (against the Spanish invaders?), placing no value on his own life. Further discussion is in my Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs (Stanford, 1985).

The Ballads of the Lords of New Spain (Romances de los senores de la Nueva Espana) is manuscript G-59 in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin. My study of it, as yet unpublished, has been supported by a Translators Fellowship awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

3. From Animals and the Origins of Dance, by Steven Lonsdale, Thames and Hudson, 1981.

4. Version by Steven Lonsdale of an Andamanese myth from his book Animals and the Origins of Dance, Thames and Hudson, 1981.

5. The Nuer are an African people who live along the tributaries of the Nile in the Sudan and in southwest Ethiopia. Related to the Masai, they are the second tallest people in the world, with blue-black skin and Hamitic features. Cattle are their most prized possession, to the extent that every cow has a name, and that men and women sometimes take the name of their favorite ox. Because the bare savannah of the Nuer homeland provides little for material culture, song is their most highly developed art form. Most Nuer can sing hours of songs that they have composed and memorized. In the last four years the Sudanese Civil War has decimated the Nuer.

Nyagak Pinen sang while tending her charcoal stove, an oil can propped a few inches off the concrete floor of her kitchen. She lived in Malakal, the administrative center of Nuerland with a population of ten thousand. Her husband was a politician, and she was training to be a nurse, though she also cared for her four children.

In the song, she listed the names of her friends not only for the sake of posterity but because she felt they added euphony to the song. From: Cleaned the Crocodile's Teeth, by Terese Svoboda, Greenfield Press Review, 1985.

6. This song, also sung by Pinen, concerns a lover who was a guerrilla fighter hiding in Ethiopia during the last outbreak of Civil War, 1956-1973. From: Cleaned the Crocodile's Teeth, by Terese Svoboda, Greenfield Press Review, 1985.

7. This Camerounian Songfable was originally collected, transcribed and translated from the Bulu text into French by Eno Belinga.

8. Lebid died and went to the land of the dead. There, he met the chief of the wolves who healed him and gave him the power to cure. The crystal of the Kwakiutl shamans was considered the center of their supernatural power. A shaman's insides were believed to contain these crystals. Source: Franz Boas' *The Religion of the Kwakiutl*, page 47. From: Spirit Spirit: Shaman Songs versions by David Cloutier, Copper Beach Press, 1980

9.1 Long-life-returning, and Causing-happiness-Everywhere are the two key phrases in Navajo invocation. They not only have the literal meaning given here, but they also represent Earth and Sky, the parents of Changing Woman who is the Navajo Creator Deity. They also represent male and female and many other complementary pairs. From Hogans: Navajo Houses and House Songs, by David P. McAllester and Susan W. McAllester. Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1980, pp. 54-56. (Somewhat revised).

9.2 From Hogans: Navajo Houses and House Songs, by David P. McAllester and Susan W. McAllester. Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1980, pp. 28. (Somewhat revised).

10A. A supernatural anaconda many times larger than any visible one, Wiyu is the mistress of all water and the mother of everything in it. Quite literally the 'Plumed Serpent,' she wears the feathered rainbow (Hwasudi) and lives under the rapids with her mawadi people. Although referred to as feminine in her original incarnation, Wiyu is also described as any of a genus of highly feared water spirits (male or female) who form a complement to the malevolent Odoshankomo ones that inhabit the earth.

10B. Ateles belzebuth, most commonly known as the "spider monkey."

10C. Yekuna, told by Antonio Contreras on the Paragua River, Venezuela and recorded and translated by David Guss

11. From The Egyptian Book of the Dead or The Great Awakening. For Shmuel Blumberg © Diane Wolkstein 1988.

12. This version, from Robert Lowie's "Crow Texts" appears in Selected Translations, 1968-1978 by W.S. Merwin, Atheneum, 1979. Used with permission of W.S. Merwin.

13. From Selected Translations, 1968-1978 by W.S. Merwin, Atheneum, 1979. Used with permission of W.S. Merwin.

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