

**Sean Kane**

# Skaay on the Cosmos

## 1

Since its translation by Robert Bringhurst\*, the work of Skaay of Qquuna (?1827-?1905) has acquired a following among non-Haida readers, most notably Margaret Atwood. She perceives in Skaay's Raven myth "a philosophical meditation on the nature of Being," though she leaves its elucidation to those "more skilled at such arguments" than herself (10).<sup>1</sup>

I am not skilled in philosophical argument either, but I cannot help viewing in Skaay's work an account of the meaning of life, arranged in a systematic exposition. The trouble is that, unlike conceptual prose, Skaay's thought is narrated. It is narrated in images of killer whales and mist-covered mountains, of mice turning into radiant goddesses, of abandoned children rescued by sexy witches, and the sea charging up the beach like a bear. This is oral philosophy, unrestricted by the written page, where ideas dance together musically instead of standing to attention for interrogation, one prisoner at a time. It takes a certain amount not of argumentative but imaginative skill to read thought that is embodied as story, but isn't that just the way, Plotinus asks, we read the body language of another human being? "For instance, we can come to conclusions about someone's character, and also about the dangers that beset him and the precautions to be taken, by looking at his eyes or some other part of his body" (2.3.7). In the cosmos, too, "All things are filled full of signs, and it is a wise man who can learn about one thing from another." Plotinus is talking about what he calls "the non-discursiveness of

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the intelligible world.” Concepts cannot catch it because the cosmos is a dance. But images can—like the ideograms he admires on Egyptian temple walls, in which “every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is a subject of statements, all together in one, and not a discourse or deliberation” (5.8.6).

Helpful to the reader of Skaay’s danced philosophy was the fact that he performed his work in five sets of three movements each, followed by an echoing shorter performance having the same structure. Bringhurst calls these compositions the “Qquuna Cycle” and the “Raven Poem”; I am inclined to call them “The First Theology” and “The Second Theology”—but whatever we call them, the point is that Skaay insisted on this double experience when he told his myths for anthropologist John Swanton in 1900, and Bringhurst’s translation honours it. As a result, the Haida have a single coherent storytelling of the cosmos and their place in it, and world literature has what Atwood distinguishes as a masterpiece that “can stand with the best, because it goes beyond its culture of origin to stand side by side with the great myth-based artistic creations of the world” (10). I might add that Canada has in the figure of Skaay surely its first philosopher and one of the world’s great minds.

These are heady claims, and difficult to illustrate in a composition that is orchestrated polyphonically. But there is one part of the Qquuna Cycle where the gritty, tangy, squishy, ovoid beachwalk that is Skaay’s storytelling assumes a clarity about the physical world that readers can recognize by contrast with other mythological traditions. I refer to the finale of the Qquuna Cycle. Called “Born Through Her Wound” (*Ghahljuung ghii Nang Diquis*), it is a short narrative of 516 lines (in Bringhurst’s translation), recounting an apocalyptic battle for control of the world by two adversaries—a mysteriously born boy, and a being of unimaginable age and power who turns out to be the boy’s absent father. I use the word “apocalyptic” because the myth functions in relation to its preceding oral scripture like the great fugue of symbolic echoes that came in a dream to John of Patmos, who also speaks of a father and son reconciliation. The word comes from *apo*—“from” + *kalyptein*—“to cover, conceal,” hence a “revelation,” specifically a recognition that the universe is meaningful. But the word carries from its origin, in a host of agitated prophesies of its time, the sense of a final cataclysmic doom. In Skaay’s vision of time and timelessness, a similar great reckoning is not the end of our beautiful world, but its perpetual beginning. This is one significant respect in which Stone Age

Thought (if I can use that term) differs from the earth-denying transcendence of the religions that emerged out of the late Neolithic. Skaay offers not a way back but inspiration for a way forward, beyond the culture *versus* nature impasses of human world-management.

## 2

“Born Through Her Wound” takes its name from the hero who emerged from a suppurating sore on his mother’s hip. An only child, he is born after his sick mother is abandoned by her father, the village chief. The child grows precociously: he is walking even before he starts to eat; he is bawling for a bow and arrows, which his hard-pressed mother fashions; he isn’t satisfied until she hammers a set out of divine copper. Out he goes, and brings back the bodies of birds, the practice prey of novice hunters—wrens, sparrows, mallards, geese—graduating quickly to a porpoise, a seal, and a humpback whale. Then, he demands that his mother make a set of blankets for him. They are to be woven from the sinews and feathers of Redshafted Flickers, Red-headed Sapsuckers, Scarlet Tanagers, Pine Siskins, and Golden or, more likely, Ruby-crowned Kinglets – five blankets in all. When held up, the blankets fly like flocks of birds, and one can imagine them, in an allegorical moment, filling the sky like so many sunsets (these are mostly crimson birds).

This new form of sky-blanket is, of course, a provocation to the Powers That Be, especially if those powers regard themselves as commanding the weather. But that anticipated reaction must wait its place in the order of storytelling, for first, right on cue, the splendid hero goes out and gets himself a wife. She is the daughter of a self-involved headman who was driven inland to wander. The behaviour indicates that the boy has married into shamanism. Nothing more is said of the wife, who stands briefly in the story as a symbol of the concerns of the forest world.

Then, the threats come. They are preceded in each case by a voice under the pillow: «Born Through Her Wound, are you awake?» it asks.

«Doesn’t it seem to you  
that spirit beings you haven’t so much as imagined  
might be gathering against you?» (158-161)

Unsettled, the youth enlists the help of an elder who appears suddenly in the story. The elder, who is the most provocatively mysterious personage in the myth, appears first in the shape of a Great Blue Heron, later as a

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carpenter patching a canoe. With his easy laconic style, he has no trouble distinguishing for the boy the threats that are ranged against him.

Those threats come from the sea: the hero's first impulse is to peer "throughout the ocean depths" (173) for their source. The first threat materializes above him in the form of a thunderbird—the spirit of heavy weather—carrying an entire village in its talons. «Grandfather, they're after me» (179). The old one replies: «How are the prows of their canoes?»—a strange question to ask, except that this myth has the childlike quality, and pleasure, of allegory. The elder is referring to the fronts and sides of spawning salmon which are red (coho) or streaked (chum). The colouration sets the struggle in autumn just before the sea begins to turn rampant. Following the wise one's counsel, the boy puts an arrow to his bow. "He aimed at it with the one [arrow] that bore the image of a mouse" (185)—here Mouse Woman and her concern for boundary is present in the story—and hits the flying village so that it splits open, revealing a population of skeletons which the youth revives. Skaay then says ineffably that it was the boy's "grandfather's town that he restored" (192). Since there is no further mention of it—no grandfather, no previous town—one must take the event as a symbol. Whoever sent the thunderbird destroys whole villages with oceanic storms. The grandfather in question is interested in having his people saved from the all-devouring sea. Presumably, Mouse Woman, a forest goddess, is too.

The hero's shamanic power established, now the awesome adversary raises the ante. The symbolic threats come thick and fast. First, ten (that is, a lot of) canoes with crimson prows («Grandfather, they're coming to hunt me down»—203). Coho salmon, they are stopped dead with a display of rice lilies scattered on the beach. Next, canoes with streaked bows—chum salmon, killed according to the elder's stratagem, with the same land plant. Then, canoes with formline paintings on their fronts—sand fleas. They, and the beach fleas that follow, are stopped by the hero putting urine in their path. These simple allegories depict a boundary war. The boundary is the beach, where Haida villagers traditionally went to urinate, and the contest is between the rising ocean and the beleaguered land.

Not so routine is the fifth assault by the sea, however. Here is the prospect of the surface world sinking and the fire of the heavens meeting the flood of the sea, sweeping all existence away. «The horizon is on fire» cries Born Through Her Wound, watching flames raging toward him across the sea surface. This time, the elder proposes to stop the march of destruction by

marking the beach with coffin bones, the coffins themselves placed facing seaward as they are in Haida tradition: «That's the custom in such cases, hero» (282). The bones of ancestors, kept in coffin poles erected along the beachfront, are authenticating deeds-of-land which say, in effect, "We've been here quite a while; we own this place because we've died here." But the unrelenting sea rises over this boundary marker—the seagod is changing the very outline of the world.

After three stalemates in the struggle between land and sea, the ocean finally breaks its limits, driving the hero and his wife and mother toward the highest part of the island. Voices of the land offer the dubious protection of allegorical tree houses. Each time the refuge is inadequate: the blazing flood pushes higher, past sea-level trees like "Toppled Over in the Waters," then past higher-ground trees like Yellowcedar, Yew and Spruce, and finally even to the highest safety represented by Rock. By this time, the hero has watched his magic blankets burn away and his mother with them. (His wife suddenly disappears later.) The boy finds protection in "the Marshland's house," and there finally at that ambiguous boundary of water and land the incursion ends. And that is the way it is today. The state of geography reached in myth-time is the one that the Haida and others know, with the Islands of the People sticking up everywhere like scattered defeats surrounded by an abeyance. Perhaps that is why Skaay now uses the phrase "these islands" (*aanis gwaayaay*) for the first time in the myth (358).

This is the way things stand today—but the performance is not done. Born Through Her Wound must recover his wife and mother and his blankets. The elder mysteriously reappears as a carpenter repairing a canoe. «At this moment,» the carpenter tells him, speaking of the blankets, «they are raising someone's status / over on the other side» (402-403). So the hero is guided by the elder across the ocean to the mythhouse of his adversary Fire in the Sky (*Qwiisjiin-ghwas*).

This scene, which is told with extreme concision by Skaay, goes by in a flash, and readers have to be patient with what can be achieved by the oral voice enacting the very thing it describes—a trance. We are at the house of Fire in the Sky in that region of the cosmos where the spirits habitually take the forms of birds. Born Through Her Wound has taken the form of a Sandhill Crane, and now he is going to perform a dance. What Fire in the Sky's people don't seem to recognize, however, is that the hero, in the shape of a crane, is going to sponsor a dance *for his wife*. Sandhill Cranes don't ever dance alone. They dance at mating time for their spouses, and they do

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so in marshland. The boy has just come from marshland, the one place he seemed passably safe, and now as a Sandhill Crane he is about to stage a dance for his wife who sits at the back of the seagod's immense house. But the actual person detailed to do the crane dance for the boy is kept in a box he carries. That dancing figure is referred to by the seagod's people, in an excited buzz of recognition, as "his sister's son" (416). It is the Carpenter God huddled in diminutive form in the box, also in the shape of a crane. He is evidently masquerading as his own nephew, according to the observation of the spectators, an observation which the Carpenter himself confirms with the joking phrase "your good-for-nothing nephew" (421). It is part of the magic of the scene that maternal uncle and maternal nephew can seem to switch roles. The Carpenter Uncle instructs from within his box: «As you go in, / look behind the fire» (419-420), meaning as you, Born Through Her Wound, enter the god's house, look behind the fire for your wife (there is a typo in the published text). Meanwhile, the Carpenter says, he is going to emerge from the box and do tricks. First, he will do the Sandhill Crane dance, then he will turn into a weasel, a sapsucker, and a brown creeper. The pronouns in the passage I will quote refer to the boy apprentice hunched up then standing tall like a crane. However, it is actually the Carpenter who, dancing around his box, begins by holding his wingtip to his beak in the crane dance.

I cannot visualize this pose without thinking of another instance of the crane dance in mythological literature. This is the glimpse in the *Iliad* of what was evidently an ancient Greek custom. It is relevant because the person who is said to have first made the dance possible is the semi-divine artificer Daedalus, who builds a *choros* or dancing place for Ariadne. She has been rescued from the Minotaur, son of the sea-bull, by the hero Theseus. Skaay's piece of theatre, also intended to rescue a wife from a sea god, is orchestrated by the Heron elder, who as a patcher of canoes is clearly an artisan as well. In Homer, the dance was part of the design of Achilles' shield on which the artificer-god Hephaistos modelled the cosmos.

A dancing floor [choros] as well he fashioned,  
like that one in royal Knossos  
Daidalos made for the Princess Ariadne.  
Here young men and the most desired young girls  
were dancing, linked, touching each other's wrists,  
the girls in linen, soft gowns, the men  
in well-knit khitons given a gloss with oil;

the girls wore garlands, and the men had daggers  
golden-hilted, hung on silver lanyards.  
Trained and adept, they circled there with ease  
the way a potter sitting at his wheel  
will give it a practice twirl between his palms  
to see it run; or else, again, in lines  
as though in ranks, they moved on one another;  
magical dancing! All round, a crowd  
stood spellbound as two tumblers led the beat  
with spins and handsprings through the company. (18.590-605)

In Skaay's account of a crane dance, the whole submarine household together with its dreadful chief is mesmerized by a display it has never seen or heard of—a mating ritual marking the start of a season that will come to be known as Spring:

He walked up to the house,  
and he was carrying his bentwood box.  
(He also had a cane.)

He kept himself hunched up,  
but once he got inside,  
he stretched up tall.  
Behind the fire – yes! – the blankets  
flapped their wings at him.  
His mother sat beneath them too.

He took his place there, just midway along the side.  
The firepit was ten tiers deep.

Then he poked around inside his bentwood box.  
He took his nephew out of it.  
Oooooooooooh my!

And then he stood him up.  
That one struck a pose.  
He held his wingtip in his beak.

When he had pranced around the box a little while,  
the people in the house went Ssssssssss.  
All those in the first row fell asleep. (424-442)

Born Through Her Wound does more tricks with the prancing nephew. Tossing him in the air, he transforms him into a weasel scampering up his wand. Now, he's a sapsucker rapping the staff with his beak. Now, a brown creeper. Row after row of spectators fall asleep in the house with its fabulous ten tiers surrounding the fire-pit. Then the hero puts his magician's assistant back in the box, remarking with a performer's self-satisfaction—

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«That's all for now.  
Better keep a treasure for a long time  
than dance it all away at once.» (462-464)

The hero snatches his blankets, his wife, and his mother too, and the little raiding party takes off in a rush. Hardly are they halfway back when the tricked god comes raging across the sea as fire.

As it came close  
he showed that he was frightened.  
Right there is where it stopped. (475-477)

Blankets, mother, his wife as well, are burned away and go back to “the other side” (483). Whatever has been achieved in the raid—that brief mating dance, that short respite in which the god of storms has been lulled to sleep—is temporary.

Disconsolate, the hero wanders aimlessly, weeping like Orpheus returned from the Underworld. All of nature weeps with him, the ocean creatures as well as the creatures of the forest. But he hears an assembly of beings “chattering and laughing / as the birds do in the morning” (494).<sup>2</sup> Born Through Her Wound approaches the celebration, to discover some gods shooting leaves off a great tree. To their cheers, he fells the tree with a single arrow. The tree turns out to be a progenitor of tobacco plants—a mighty ancestor, since tobacco grows close to the ground. The hero now calls upon a goddess named Woman of the Clouds to plant the seeds throughout the islands, which she does, thereby preparing the ground for Haida civilization. Named only twice by Skaay—here (509) and in *Raven Travelling* (5.1291)—Cloud Woman (or Mist Woman: *Yaanang Jaat*) has no other function in the story. The hero calls her “my father’s sister” (509), and she travels by canoe across the ocean to join her nephew. The genealogy reminds listeners of what they knew but may not have known that they knew—that the hero’s fearsome opponent, controller of maritime weather, is none other than *Tangghwan Llaana*, The One In The Sea – and he is the boy’s absent father.

### 3

Stories of ingenious sons matching wits with jealous fathers are common in mythology, as they are in life. Restless novelty must make a space for itself against self-satisfied order. This state of affairs gives us Zeus and Cronos, Ananse and the Sun God, Jesus of Nazareth and the Father Almighty. In the cosmic struggle between Born Through Her Wound and *Tangghwan Llaana*,

a mythology is probably adjusting itself to receive a new deity. Like fathers and sons in life, it is not an easy business. The worlds could fall apart over this issue. Usually in myths of fathers and sons, the reign of the new order is absolute, but not without anxiety that the titanic old order might break through in one final débâcle, as it does in the Norse *Edda*. What is alluring about Skaay's myth is that the father's identity is hidden from the son until the end, so that the boy's campaign to recover his power is also a quest to uncover his father. There is one myth that is like this—though it was told far away on another misty island.

It is the story of the Irish sky-god Lugh and his struggle with Balor, a god of the ocean. The myth comes down to us mainly in the historical and antiquarian speculations of the *Lebor Gabála / The Book of Invasions* (1939: 270-271; 1940: 10-15, 122-126, 134-143), and in an eleventh-century text, *Cath Maige Tuired / The Battle of Moytirra*. These manuscripts recount the conquest of the indigenous gods of Ireland, called the *Fomhóire*, by the invading *Tuatha Dé Danann* ("People of the Goddess Dana"), a family of continental gods who were brought by Celtic tribes that settled Ireland after 500 B.C. This war of the gods is a cosmological, as well as a historical, struggle. Lugh is the sun-god of mainland Celtic tradition. Balor is a chief of the *Fomhóire*, who are evidently "under" (*fo*) "spirits" (*mór*) or under "water" (*muir*) spirits concerned with the fertility of the soil. They may be under the damp earth or, as various texts have it, across the sea northward of Ireland. Balor can bring destruction: he has a great eye in the middle of his forehead which burns enemies to ashes. He is Lugh's maternal grandfather, but neither opponent knows of this relationship.

The time of their confrontation is *Samhain* ("summer's end"), the feast of the night before November when existence disappears into the dark half of the year. The location of the battle is Magh ("plain") Taireadh ("of the pillar"), now Moytirra in County Sligo. A place of evocative ruins even today, it inspired medieval storyteller-writers to tie the myth firmly to that landscape. Yet echoes of old sources in the *Lebor Gabála* speak of a tower, not a pillar, which the new gods wrest from *Fomhóire* control. In Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* §13 of the ninth century the tower is a tower of glass. Again, this could be a confusion of words: the genitive of *tor* ("tower") is *tuir* which sounds on the lips like *tuire*, meaning "pillar"—but I suspect the glass pillar is an ancient cosmological concept belonging to the indigenous civilization of the 3rd millennium B.C., whose cairns, dolmens, megaliths, passage-graves and tumuli must have astonished the incoming Celts. Irish

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mythtelling as it survives in the Welsh *Mabinogion* speaks discreetly and gravely of a world-tree that extends up to a revolving castle made of light, the abode of souls, which we know as the Milky Way. *Lleu*, a Welsh form of the sun-god, dies and ascends this cosmic tree whose trunk is the pillar of the worlds and the axis on which the earth spins and wobbles, causing the seasons. He is brought back from spirit to physical form by his magician uncle singing a shamanic chant (58-60). Who shall control this invisible pillar which is the key to the procession of the seasons and to agricultural prediction? Who shall control the weather?

The weathergod Balor, in the Irish redactions, strikes an accord with the invading *Tuatha*. He gives his daughter Eithne in marriage to Cian, one of their leaders. They become the mother and father of Lugh. But this is too easy for mythtelling, for history, and for the psychology of father-figures and sons. Another tradition has Cian stealing into the tower where Eithne is locked away on account of Balor's fear that a child of his daughter will one day do him in. When Lugh, this nemesis, is born from the tryst, the angry father casts grandson and daughter to their fate – but the boat they are cast away in is found by Gobhniu, the god of artificers. Gobhniu has a fabulous cow, which Balor has taken, and the adventure is to get it back. Crossing the sea, the artisan god retrieves the cow's halter, and the cow follows, swimming across the ocean after it. Balor follows too, in a rage. The storm-god's fate is sealed when he opens his massive eye upon his grandson Lugh, and Lugh casts a sling-stone into it. In a myth, found in *Cath Maige Tuired*, Lugh and two others pursue the fleeing *Fomhóire* to their banquet hall where the harp of the *Tuatha* has been stolen. This harp has the power to play on its own, and it plays the three tunes that lull listeners to sleep. It does just that to the assembled *Fomhóire*, allowing Lugh and his companions to escape with their prize. All this subterfuge is directed by Gobhniu, who stands to Lugh in the role of druid elder to young hero. It shouldn't surprise us that the patron god of artisans is a presence in the myth. After all, the myth is about the *kosmoi* or orders of things, which are the responsibility of a divine craftsman. Homer, as we saw, alludes to the artificer god Daedalus immediately after describing the shield of Achilles, which is a model of the cosmos.

A boy who represents the spring sky, his uncle a magician-artificer who knows the *kosmoi*, a baleful opponent, the storm god – similarities between myths are uncanny because the earth is uncanny. Certainly, cultures as unique as the traditional Haida and the ancient Irish have their own historicity. But myth, while facing inward to provide a mirror in which a society

recognizes itself, also faces outward to the unseen, toward certain cosmic truths. If you go to Ireland, you will find cosmic resemblances to Haida Gwaii. One of them is the weather—the tense, prolonged, bitter drama of the weather. In November in Ireland, after the salmon runs, after the fair-weather clouds, the wind blows from the northwest, bringing an unending succession of dark Atlantic gales. The temperature falls; tides increase; water pours down mountain gullies; low-lying areas are flooded, and the whole land is covered with winter lakes. It seems like some cosmic shift of power has happened.

Myth says that is because the *Fomhóire* have taken over the weather. From their island tower out in the north Atlantic, they threaten to drown civilization and all its arts. Yet their rain-giving fertility leads nine months later to the August harvest. Three months after that is the year's quarterday, *Samhain*, when the rain cycle starts again—but also when Lugh sent the *Fomhóire* back to the sea where they came from, thereby limiting their dominion.

This meteorological struggle should be familiar to a resident of Haida Gwaii. Especially the brief summer. It feels like an interval, an introduced measure to existence. The periodic respite is figured in the quelling of the sea gods by the crane dance («Better keep a treasure for a long time / than dance it all away at once»). Its Irish counterpart is the lulling music of Lugh's harp. But there are other similarities. Born Through Her Wound made sky blankets for himself out of the feathers of scarlet birds. In O'Hógain's compilation of references, Lugh is called *leathshuanach* ("side-mantled") because "a red colour used to be on him from sunset to morning"; in one myth, he wears a beautiful shirt of woven red and gold (275). But his usual appellation is *Lugh Lámhfhada* in the Irish ("long-armed," because no one could escape his weapons), or *Lleu Llwg Gyffes* ("deft arm") in the Welsh. He is as skilled in shooting as Born Through Her Wound, who asks for a copper bow, and the infant Apollo, who calls for a bow and arrows on his fourth morning. "The man of every single art," Lugh is a paragon of that civilization which flourishes briefly when the dark weather abates. Those arts of civilization are personified in Lugh's shaman-guide, Gobhniu, the god of smithcraft or, in later legendary mentions, *Gobán Saor*—*saor* means "artificer"—who as a master builder is the son of a being who threw a hatchet against the tide to stop it from rising too high (241). Skaay's unnamed repairer of leaks (361) is a carpenter, as well as the bird who wades along boundaries. He re-appears to his apprentice shortly after the sea's inundation has left the marshland as

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a final refuge. Marsh and swamp is the state of much of the Queen Charlottes during the winter storms, as it is in Ireland. This resaturation comes after the sea has brought the spawning coho and chum salmon («How are the prows of their canoes?») and the beginning of the November gales.

The Irish mythtellers thought of the period after *Samhain* as the gestating time of the year. One got through it, as hibernating animals did, by dreaming, or by the indoor enchantments of singing and storytelling which are practically the same thing. The mythtellers recognized that the rains sent by the *Fomhóire* were necessary to the fecundity of the land, and kinship with these dark forces was remembered in Lugh's birth from the daughter of Balor. Skaay outlines a similar contradictory kinship on the part of his hero with the gods of maritime weather. Through that kinship Born Through Her Wound gains the help of Woman of the Clouds. Sister of the seagod, she leaves the company of the storm spirits, to cross the ocean as the fair-weather clouds, ensuring a brief time that permits the planting and harvesting of tobacco. This was the only plant cultivated by the Haida in times past. For the Irish, there was considerably more planting and harvesting, siring and birthing, involved with the seasons, whose accurate prediction was made by standing stones and passage graves taken over from the old race. According to the *Book of Invasions*, Lugh and the *Tuatha Dé* extract the secrets of agriculture from the surviving *Fomhóire*. Lugh is thereafter the god of ripening wheat and the harvest, celebrated at *Lughnasadh*, the eve of the modern Irish *Lúnasa* or August. Yet it is not forgotten that he was a child of the *Fomhóire* through his mother, Balor's daughter, and Balor with his blazing eye brings fire and flood. Born Through Her Wound is similarly opposed, as son, to Fire in the Sky.

The relationship is unstable, and for anyone who lives in the tug-of-war that fills the atmosphere at the Boundary of the Worlds, strange weather is an ordinary fact of life. It is such an ordinary fact that it inspired a spontaneous storytelling jape between Skaay and his comrade Xhyuu, whose name means the Southeast Wind.<sup>3</sup> But a deep uneasiness underlies the jokes made about the weather. For the ancient Celts it showed nature's fragility, ever subject to an apocalyptic cataclysm. Strabo the celtographer reports a conversation between Alexander the Great and a Celtic chieftain. When asked by the emperor what the Celts feared most—"thinking that they would say himself"—the Celt replied instead that his people feared nothing, "unless it were that Heaven might fall on them" (7.3.8). The druids taught that "men's souls, and also the universe, are indestructible, although both fire and water

will at some time or other prevail over them” (4.4.4). This fear of a collapse of the Middle World, fire meeting water, defines the furious mortality of *Conchobar* in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*): “Are the heavens rent?” asks a chieftain. “Is the sea bursting its bounds? Is the end of the world upon us?” (§12, 218; see also 219 and 247). The weather might seem to swirl forever in the chaotic grip of the ocean, each change forgetting the one before. Or the weather might be part of some order that sparkles briefly through this sea of mutations.

For the Irish mythtellers, the answer to this question had everything to do with who controlled the axle-tree of the world. It is the periodic tilting of that axis which gives us the seasons. Unfortunately, very little narrative actually remains of this cosmology. Its appearances in the island “tower” that Lugh’s father penetrates, and the “pillar” that Lugh wrests from Balor at Moytirra, are brief mentions, leading one to chase for meaning in a memory that is no longer on record. With Skaay it is different. His mention of a magical staff, while equally brief and fleeting, evokes a whole cosmology.

The scene is the Crane Boy doing tricks with the “nephew” until an audience is stunned. The cosmology is that sketched in earlier parts of the Qquuna Cycle, especially “Honoured Standing Traveller” with its image of a great housepole holding the three realms of ocean, land and sky together, and “Sapsucker” with its divine tree, surrounded by the ocean, on which a fledgling bird is given its plumage. Skaay tells us that when earthquakes shake the construction of the worlds, a marten runs up the world-pole, not the weasel scampering up the magician’s staff but, as an allusion goes, close enough. The next transformation, of the nephew into a sapsucker rapping the staff, is, however, a direct allusion. It is underscored by the hero next turning staff and dancer into a brown creeper whose Haida name is “clings to his tree” (*qaaydang gu tldang*), again showing the vertical axis. From these allusions it seems that the artificer’s apprentice is displaying an inner knowledge of the world-pole. But just who is his master, that fabulous artificer who knows so much?

Skaay never lets his thought-music evaporate into concepts, so he does not expound on *Born Through Her Wound* and his serenely casual guide. Ghandl (?1850-?1920) does though. In “The Way the Weather Chose to Be Born” (37-48), he recounts the triumph of a hero, named *Sing*, over sea-floor adversaries. Pressing for elaboration, Swanton was told by Ghandl and others that the word *sing* could mean, in different contexts, “daylight,” “air,” “weather,” or “sky”—though the ordinary Haida word for “sky” is different.

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As a mythtelling personage, *Sing* has the appellation *Sins Sghaanaghwaay*, which Swanton translated poetically as “Power-of-the-Shining-Heavens.” The title is the exact equivalent of the Tsimshian *laxa*, literally “on the air,” therefore “the sky.” Swanton heard enough sayings and prayers in relation to *Sing*, this Spirit of the Atmosphere, to understand that he gave power to the other gods in the way supernaturals gave power to human beings. “[T]he clouds are represented as his blankets,” Swanton reports, even while clouds are more typically the “dressing up” of the Sea Dweller (1905a: 22). The majestic theophany of this god of the atmosphere seems the entire point and effect of Ghandl’s story. «I am going away,» the boy tells his mother, indicating that he is going to mark a boundary—and

«Whenever I sit where the Tallgrass River reaches the sea,  
no wind will blow from any direction.  
The sky will be mine.

«Whenever my face is the same as my father painted it,  
no wind will blow from any direction.  
Humans will feed themselves through me.» (161-167)

It does little for mythtelling to say that Skaay and Ghandl’s youth of the copper bow is a kind of Celtic Lugh or Greek Apollo. It may do some good, however, to suggest that these fairweather deities of three cultures emerge as hypotheses out of similar perplexities about the cosmos, and carry those perplexities in their genealogies. The main perplexity in all three cases involves authority. Should this god, who is the source of sunshine and of the civilized arts and cultivations that flourish in the spring—should this god be seen as pre-eminent? And should he be pre-eminent over the storm deity who rules the physical world? Zeus himself is troubled enough by this predicament to keep a wary eye on Apollo, the brilliant son of Thetis of the older race of gods, who in the way of sons might easily usurp his reign. The potential of the upstart lurks in *Sins Sghaanaghwaay*, the only being to whom traditional Haida gave presents for luck, dropping the gifts over the side of their canoes at the outset of sea voyages. This fair-weather spirit enjoys an ambiguous supremacy. The solution of the Greek mythtellers, if it is a solution, to a similar marginal authority represented by Apollo is to leave the relationship of son to father as a tense paternity. The solution of the druidical mythtellers is to separate the adversaries by two generations, relaxing the conflict structurally while bringing it to a crisis in Lugh’s defeat of Balor. With the god of perpetual winter out of the picture, the new alternation of the seasons is represented by the intermarriage of the two families

of gods left over from the struggle, Lugh himself the product of that outcome. Clearly mythtellers are driven to reaches of narrative subtlety in explaining the grand designs of life.

Skaay explains the issue of who controls the cosmos as a conflict between a father and son unknown to each other, and he resolves the contradiction by setting it in motion. Boundaries in time and space are delineated; the distinctions give us the seasons. Once the angry father's power is regarded by the son with respect, paternal wrath abates and a boundary is established. But this cosmic novelty is not the all of it: there must be someone, some third party, who knows all about the necessity of boundary in the construction of the cosmos. Skaay does not name this boundary-dweller who takes the form of a heron and is discovered patching canoes. Ghandl, however, does name him: he is *Watghadagaang*, Master Carver (68). But as non-Haida readers we have to travel in a roundabout way to understand who he is.

#### 4

In "Born Through Her Wound," Skaay raises the cosmic concern of the Qquuna Cycle to its highest visionary power. While climactic in effect, the myth is light-spirited, even affectionately comic. The mythteller is deeply, gravely, concerned about how the physical world destroys all lives and hopes; he is confident of a happy outcome.

What concerns Skaay and mythtellers generally is the brutish overwhelming, arbitrariness of the Real. It sweeps life away. This devouring is primeval, a given. Haida artists personify that capricious and arbitrary force as a sea bear – its hackles are waves in a storm; its narrowed eyes guard the wealth it distributes randomly. King Lear, naked to elemental nature, knows who this being is: "Thou'ldst shun a bear; / But if thy flight lay toward the raging sea, / Thou'ldst meet the bear i' the mouth" (III.iv.9-11). What if this Shiva-like swirl of arms giving and taking away is all there is? It is a fair question to ask, especially on the Queen Charlottes. The Greek mythtellers, brooding on this melancholy fact of life, saw that arbitrary destruction-and-creation as cthonic. It came, as all biological life does, from *Okeanos* who circles the globe, Homer said (*Iliad* 16.201). Or it came out of an unimaginable "yawning" or "gaping" (*chainein*) abyss called "Chaos." That was what Hesiod said (*Theogony* 116). Centuries later, the civilized Giovanni Boccaccio is nervous about the conception. Reflecting on Hesiod, he thinks it a "folly of the ancients" to suppose that there was this "eternal being lurking in the

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bowels of the earth, generated by nobody and the father of all things.” Boccaccio would have been equally dubious about Skaay’s *Born Through Her Wound*, who is the expression of raw unhealing substance, and Ghandl’s god of the atmosphere, who issues as a wind in a cockleshell. He agrees with himself that chaos was not a principle of learned men but a superstition of “mountain dwellers and half-woodsmen” (I.i, vol. I, p. 13). Thus Boccaccio, spokesman of order. Yet feeling the tug of myth upon him, he goes on to name this awesome earthmind (from a scholiast of Statius, whom he misreads) *Demogorgon* “or rather the wisdom of the earth,” identifying it with God (I.i, vol. I, p. 15). Later Christian mythography as represented by Leone Hebreo denominates a son who, issuing from a disturbance in the womb of chaos, gives us days of music and delight, sweet spring and the wealth of autumn. This is Pan, who played the shepherd’s pipers and taught men to make many reeds with one wax. Pan is identified with “the All” (Greek *pan*, “all”), and Pan as the “all” of Nature with the son of God (108). This assimilation of pagan to Christian values does not quite hide the haunting prospect that the order of things emerges from chaos and that nature is wholly spiritualized. Even as austere a dogmatist as Calvin allows the possibility, saying: “I admit, indeed, that the expression ‘Nature is God’ may be piously used, if dictated by a pious mind”—though he adds that the phrase is “inaccurate and harsh (Nature being more properly *the order which has been established by God*)” (1.5.5). It is a roundabout of genealogy by which a son out of chaos becomes the “all” who gives chaos its measure. A similar narrative twist, and the anxiety that compels it, produces Lugh and *Born Through Her Wound*.

All of this is worth citing because it shows the redirection of earth-related values by spokesmen for a natural order seen to be stamped out of a superior mold or archetype. From the viewpoint of the architect’s mold or model (*typos*), which so fascinated Plato for its capacity to produce multiple copies, chaos is bound to be, in Ovid’s words, just a “rough unordered mass” (*rudis indigestaque moles*), ready to receive the divine imprint (1.7). But looking beyond these monumentalists, we hear the artisan-philosophers of Pre-socratic Greece saying something different. Workers in perishable wood and metal, instead of shapers of stone, for them chaos is the something in which measure appears. Chaos just came to be (*Chaos genet*), Hesiod says. It is a primeval space that was filled by heaven and earth (“wide-bosomed earth”), that aspect of the Real that is occupied by, made visible by, tangible rhythms and measures. On a smaller scale, it is the material from which

artisans extract their forms, just as the obscure underworld chaos, to which Hesiod later refers, is like the trash heap on a studio floor. Far from being the *opposite* condition to order, chaos is the invisible something which appears – which only appears – when it is given a significant arrangement (*kosmos*, from which we get the word “cosmetic”). According to Homer, the Greeks made the cosmos visible by dancing it. In the *Iliad*, he pictures the artisan-god Hephaistos making a cosmic dancing floor (*choros*) on Achilles’ shield. And when in the *Odyssey* he shows *Demódokos* the mythteller singing, the activity is happening while the young people dance, the dancing space having been created first.<sup>4</sup> These references bring us back to traditional Haida culture, which is a culture of artisan philosophers (a better term than “oral”), and to the curious role of Skaay’s artisan-god, sponsor of a dance right in the house of the sea, which has the result of giving chaos a measure experienced as the seasons.

Mythology is a fragile determination of the actual experience people have of an uncaring, random cosmos. Because of the fragility of myth, the cosmos has to be danced over and over; it has to be woven and rewoven; it has to be recreated daily. The philosophical outlook that is the expression of a culture of artisanship knows this provisionality, as it knows that no poetically made thing is absolute – each is a version, an interpretation, that cannot take the place of the Real. Skaay, I believe, addresses the concern by suggesting, not a legislator of wintry chaos and summer respite—for a legislator would mean an absolute order above nature—but rather an unnameable trickster who instigates the emergence of the *kosmoi*, or orders of things.

He appears as the elder whom Born Through Her Wound consults when the floods begin to rise. “That, they say, was the Great Blue Heron.” He tells the boy how to bring back to life his mother’s town from the catastrophe that has destroyed it. When the boy flees from this very destructiveness, voices guide him to a place of safety in the marshland, and for whatever safety high marshland offers from floods and fires, it is a boundary of sorts between water and land. It is also the usual dwelling-place of *Watghadagaang* whose name means literally “Maker of Flat Surfaces” and who likes to transform into a skunk cabbage (its leaves were used as sandpaper), which grows in marshland. The elder who repairs a canoe against sea leaks and takes the form of a heron is one who weaves dances and trances, who knows with serene confidence the behaviour of the sea and of the pole of the worlds. He reduces the household of the Sea Dweller to quiescence. Whereupon he vanishes from the story, into its charged unspoken surround.

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## NOTE

- \* In order to reflect the orality of the original, the author has retained Robert Bringhurst's use of guillemets as quotation markers for beings who speak in Skaay's text.
- 1 Reference is to Skaay (2001), which is based on the unpublished notebooks and typescripts of John R. Swanton, who transcribed the myths told to him at Skidegate in 1900, publishing the translations in 1905. The *aa* in Skaay's name is sounded like the *a* in "father," but lengthened.
  - 2 A keenly poetic phrase in the Haida, it is used pointedly two times in the Qquuna Cycle. In "Born Through Her Wound," the Haida is *giina ga siinuut xhagandyas*: "*giina* = something • *ga* = indefinite animate • *siinuut xhagandyas* = making the *siinuut*: noise"—that is, a sound like the dawn chorus, linked not only to spring and the morning but also to calm clear weather. In the earlier "Honoured Standing Traveller" (261), the phrase is *tll siinuut xhagandyas*, where the subject of the verb is "they" [*tll*] instead of "somebody" [*giina ga*]. I am grateful to Robert Bringhurst for access to Swanton's Haida text and the lexicon developed from it.
  - 3 Translated by Bringhurst as "Skaay's Flyting with the Southeast Wind," in Skaay, 273-280, discussed in Bringhurst, 213-220
  - 4 For these Homeric and Hesiodic words and their values, see Kahn and McEwen.

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