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Author

Nazarene, Robert

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The Day Kekaiax Lost His Salmon but Found a Little Light

DUANE NIATUM

Children from the Village of White Fir were sitting around the fire on the beach. They were waiting for another story from their grandfather. A young boy of nine or ten began to twist and turn, dig his toes deeper into the sand, and fill his pockets with impatience. He looked straight at his grandfather who seemed to be lost in the flicker of flames. The elder was sitting so close to the fire that the boy thought he was listening to the sparks tell their story. Yet even with this knowledge, the boy was unable to contain himself and blurted out, "Grandpa, aren't you going to tell us another story before bedtime? You said we could hear another adventure of Kekaiax, the one who talks to tree and slug. And grandpa, this sure makes us wonder how he ever finds his way along that stinger-nettle path. The guy's weird, Grandpa. It makes my hair itch and teeth grind to hear tales of the one with a pond full of surprises. But my folks know I'm curious about almost everything. So, please, Grandpa, can we hear one more story?"

"Oh, Oh, grandson, your voice snaps like a cricket's. But you did wake me up. I wasn't dreaming long, was I? There are days we need to listen to the flames and turn the inner rages down to whimpers. Grandchildren, the light from those flames could make our lives a little easier. They have secrets we need to hear when the storm peels away our skins and the world calls us, the untouchables. Keep that in mind the next time you want to holler at someone. It's understandable that you can't wait to hear what Kekaiax is doing to make our day a more interesting puzzle. Do I have an eye on your story?"

The Crooked Beak of Love, Duane Niatum's sixth book of poetry, was published by West End Press in Winter 2000 and *The Pull of the Green Kite* was recently accepted for publication by a university press. He presently teaches in the Department of English at Western Washington University.

“Oh, Grandpa!” All the children answered but the boy with six fidgets stretched to stand on his tiptoes. He was doing his utmost to look as tall as the nearest sapling. Then he looked directly at his grandpa and hollered: “Grandpa’s a cheat!” Embarrassed, the other children looked down and tried to hide in their shoes. Yet the elder paid no attention to the boy sulking and biting on his lower lip like a piece of gum. His grandfather simply continued with the story.

“Many, many seasons ago, when our canoes were high on the beach and upside down, drying in the sun, and the women were off to weave themselves into a basket circle, we looked to the side and saw Kekaiax walk by with the face of an unsolved puzzle. And my young friends, you can well imagine that everyone in our village thought there was no man more complicated, and that he was an elder with several boxes of spirit power. Yet this particular story of his, you might say, is about how his salmon disappeared or was eaten or turned into a cave drawing. Kekaiax stepped across the beach like a mountain lion and whistled to the chipmunks and crows. He had caught a spring salmon and roasted it by the fire. But suddenly his eyelids began to droop, two windless canoe sails. Kekaiax was, of course, not any older than the village stumps. And if Blue Jay can be believed, Kekaiax told the blue gossip that he was noticing in his bones it might be time to quit pretending he is the same old spring bear ready to do his happy dance at the feet of a beautiful maiden. So Kekaiax decided to take a little nap before his singular feast. He was deep in meditation and felt that to dream of that salmon would bring on a peaceful snooze. A dream would surely make that fresh fish a bit tastier. He lay down on his cedar-mat and fell fast asleep. His snores scattered through the air like raven cackles which drove Kingfisher to fly to another pine a good distance down the beach.

“Still, it wasn’t any longer than it takes a honeybee, butterfly, or hummingbird to find a blossom, when a rather large, white-capped bird flew and landed a foot from Kekaiax’s head. Eagle stood as still as a lodgepole; he watched Kekaiax sleep, a man undoubtedly possessed of fabulous dreams, but his eyes were really glued to that roasted salmon on a stick by the fire. If Kekaiax never had dreams of salmon swimming into his mouth, Eagle did. He even started to drool over the thought. And before the flies could go into council about what delicious fragrance hung in the air like Chinook-salmon clouds, Eagle devoured that fish as if he hadn’t eaten in a year. However, because Kekaiax looked like a half-starved wolf asleep on that mat, Eagle decided it best to stick all the little salmon bones in Kekaiax’s teeth. Not long after Kekaiax awoke and sat up, he noticed that his salmon must have jumped back into the lower depths. ‘What else could it be?’ he said to himself. Nevertheless, he smiled a smile broader than the valley of the spirits, and patted his stomach, feeling very full, and said coyly, ‘I must’ve eaten that great salmon in my dream; I’ve all its shiny white-bones in my teeth.’”

“Oh, grandpa, that was a funny story,” said a girl named Evening Violet. “Can you tell another one about Kekaiax? He’s awesome! I’m going to let my uncle know about that funny story. My uncle’s almost an old-growth cedar-crow himself.”

“Granddaughter, you sit the way Rabbit would hide in an oak tree, and watch the sparks in the fire, and I bet someday Kekaiax will appear right beside you and tell his story. Now let me continue with the tale. Are your ears pointed toward the dark like Bat’s?”

All the children clapped and jumped up and down and said, “Oh, grandpa, you’re too scary!” Their grandfather simply answered, “I hope none of you decide to run away because this is a hide-underneath-the-blanket story.”

“Kekaiax was rumored to be up to some mischief. He stepped along to every house in the village, and at each one he stole a child and told the parents they could not have the children back until they gave him fire. The parents were not terribly eager to respond to his request, but they did give him treasures galore to keep in his black bear-walks-across-the-back-of-the-bent box. He stood his ground, however, and would not accept anything else. He struck his drum three beats and asked for fire.

“When Kekaiax stole a child as a ransom to get fire, he passed the houses of almost every family in the village. After leaving each house, he would make the child cry. If the child did not cry right away, he would pinch it a second time. To avoid a third pinch, the child would utter its father’s name. Each time, the people said, ‘You bet. That’s the man’s child.’

“Kekaiax put the children away in a secret place and returned to his path until he reached a deserted ancient, ancient village. He went into a particular house and put on the clothes of the people who once lived there. The clothes of the Ancient Ones were made of feathers with elaborate designs of birds, animals, and supernatural beings. The parents who followed their child saw a man come out of each house they passed with different clothes on so they thought he was someone else. Since they watched a different man exit each lodge until they arrived at the last one, and yet another man walked out and moved on down the path, the parents became confused and were afraid to go any farther in search of their lost child.

“After the third time Kekaiax stepped around the village of the long ago people, searching from house to house, this first tribe of the evergreen forest and mountains offered him the choicest fire sticks. When he realized what the Ancient Ones had brought him, Kekaiax was determined to return to the village of your ancestors and share these fire sticks. So he wrapped the flame singers into two bundles and put them smoothly under his arms and headed straight for the village of your great great-grandparents. And when Kekaiax arrived at the threshold of the village, and could look deep into the river of their salmonberry eyes, he threw his spruce-root hat into the air. And that is why on a clear day as the crow flies, if you squint your eyes a little, you can see Kekaiax’s hat circle the moon and come back to the people riding on a wave. So my young friends, that’s how your Klallam ancestors first got fire and learned the fire stick dance.”

AFTERWORD

The inspiration for writing this adaptation of a Klallam sacred narrative was to lend support to all the Klallams at Lower Elwha, Jamestown, and Port Gamble, who are encouraging their young people to learn the language, songs, and stories of their ancestors. I hope the modern context for the story will help draw them into its world.

We have passed the point where we can ignore the fact that the Klallam language is endangered, and with it our oral traditions. For decades the forces of Euro-American culture, particularly those of the missionaries, federal government, and educators, succeeded in convincing or shaming Indian youth into ignoring or resisting all aspects of their tribal heritage. My own family is an example of how negative the power of assimilation can be. My grandmother and many of her offspring became contemptuous of their Indian blood and its ancient ways and lifestyle. However, this contempt in my family only inspired me to seek harder those physical and symbolic connections that would anchor me forever to my Indian ancestry, the way a barnacle anchors itself to a rock on one of our shores. Fortunately, my grandfather was proud to be an Indian and shared his knowledge of the old ways with me when I was a youth.

**Hole
(for Margie)**

i.

Sister.

You are the poem
I can't write, my
Hand too heavy to lift.

Heart—crushed
by the fist—(our family
crest).

Gone from the earth.

All is well.

ii.

Once we were seven.
Now, we are six.
 White crow rising

from a murder of blacks.

—Robert Nazarene

The Loup-Garou

My heart, discarded, curls 'round you like charred paper
burned bible-black. The red moon is my balm. My coat,
silver-gray. Lunge your sticks into my side, bleeding,
mustard-yellow. The night calls. Howling—I answer
to no one. Survival of the fittest. Paeans for the loup-
garou. Stalking your nightdreams—standing,
between you & what shines: I am beautiful—*still*.

—*Robert Nazarene*

Netherland

I pledge a lesion
to the flag
of The United States
of America—

and to the repugnance
for which it stands:
one nation, over God,
irrepressible—

with liberty & justice
—For Sale.

—*Robert Nazarene*

The High Horse

The high horse wields a lofty perch
over mice & men & minions.

But which hurts most: the climb or fall?,
to the dust of our shattered opinions.

For fall we must when all is lost,
& our mind makes a lonely companion.

—*Robert Nazarene*

Americuda

On the face of The Twenty-Dollar Bill it is written: *This Note Is Legal Tender For All Debts* (read: Deaths) *Public & Private*. Not to suggest that *love* (meaning: you) could ever be bought. But, shouldn't you know? There's more where this came from. (Corollary: If not, well—*Gentlemen, start your engines!*)

And on its ass:
In God We Trust. For,

—(*the joking voice, a gesture I love*)*

—cold comfort, esteem,
position.

O!
what a tangled web

we weave—
from sea to shining sea!

—Robert Nazarene

* Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art."