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**The following story is a composite of various accounts: by Jonas Hayes to Herbert J. Spinden, (Harvard University, 1907), by Wayilaipu to her son Archie Phinney in 1929-30, and by Mari Watters, “Coyote and the Swallowing Monster” (University of Idaho, 1991).

A Heart. A Monster.

by Jeanine Pfeiffer



“Long before people, when only animals lived here,

Coyote was building a fish ladder to help salmon get up the river.

Magpie told him a Great Monster had already eaten them all up.

“Oh, so that’s why there’s no one to help me!”

grumbled Coyote, setting out to see what he could do.

First, he cleaned himself up real nice and took a sweat bath.

He wanted to make himself tasty to the Monster.”

1. The griddle master at The County Seat diner pegs me for Sriracha hot sauce. “I can tell the kind you want because it’s my job to know these things,” he announces, waving his spatula and steering me away from lactose-laden gravy in the Breakfast Special. I ask for bacon on the side. Two seats down, the gentleman on my right catches me eyeing his plate. “Fried Mash,” he explains, insisting on carving off a bite of his polenta grits for me to taste.

During an ebb in our countertop conversation, the man on my left makes a disparaging remark about the local Latinos and his town’s changing demographics. I respond with a gentle reminder of Who Was Here First.

“I’m sick of hearing that argument,” says he. “My people came here in 1721. We were God-fearing, hardworking folk. The Indians turned their back on God. That’s why He allowed them to be killed off.”

“Ascending the ridges, Coyote looked out over the land.

Suddenly he saw a great head; off in the distance loomed a huge body.

Coyote had never seen anything like it.

The Monster couldn't see him: Coyote had covered himself with clay.

Using hemp ropes, Coyote tied himself to three mountains

before calling out to the Monster,

'You have already swallowed all the other animals.

why don't you swallow me, too, so I won't be lonely?''

2. I turn in place and take a good, long look at that man, picturing insides poisoned by unbearable pain. Who feeds us these diets of inadequacy/anger/abandonment? And why do we keep swallowing?

When we find ourselves crowded into white-flour-high-fructose-corn-syrup supermarket aisles, mesmerized by rows upon rows of compromises labeled with unpronounceables, what does it take to walk outside and kneel upon the earth, seeds cupped in trembling hands, not once, but hundreds of times?

"The Monster did not know Coyote carried with him

a fire-making kit and five stone knives.

So the Monster inhaled, like a mighty wind.

He inhaled so hard the ropes broke

and Coyote was carried right into his gaping mouth.

Walking down the wide throat of the Monster, Coyote looked around.

Seeing many bones, he thought, many animals have died.

Just then, Grizzly Bear rushed at him, roaring and growling. Coyote said, 'so, you make yourself scary only to me?' and he kicked the bear on the nose. That is why the grizzly bear has a short nose.

As Coyote continued along toward the Heart of the Monster,

Rattlesnake rattled at him threateningly.

'So, only towards me you are vicious?' said Coyote.

Then he stepped on the snake's head, making it flat – it is still that way today.

3. Another café, another day. “I was the last one to live in the Valley. Ours was the last family left after the genocides,” says Auntie to the deputy sheriff standing nearby.

He doesn't reply, distracted by his order.

“As Coyote walked further along,

the animals began to greet him, 'Hello, hello!'

When he finally reached the Monster's Heart,

he cut slabs of fat from it for the animals to eat,

then he built a fire with his flints.

*The smoke drifted up through the Monster's eyes, ears, nose,
and anus.*

With his stone knives, Coyote continued

slicing up the Monster's heart.

One by one the knives began to break,

but he kept on cutting.

When his last knife broke,

Coyote grabbed the heart,

tore it loose with his own hands."

4. Throughout wind-swept, god-forsaken, overexposed and fracked country, I park in casino lots and cross scorched asphalt to enter smoky dankness lit by screens featuring Coyote and Bear. I repeatedly push buttons, bleed money before tearing myself away.

"At that moment, the Great Monster died.

All the animals went out the openings of his body.

Muskrat was last to come out, and they all had to help him

because he was caught by the tail:

that is why the muskrat has no hair on his tail to this day.”

5. In newly-peeled skin, I can't stop cowering before monstrosities. I fail to resurrect the fearlessness triggered to protect others—bestowed upon everyone except, notoriously, myself.

“After everyone helped to carve the Monster into large pieces,

Coyote threw the pieces outward in every direction.

Where they landed, nations of people sprang up:

the Cayuse, the Blackfeet, the Flatheads, the Umatilla,

the Shoshone, the Assiniboine, the Navajos,

the Cour d'Alenes, the Yakimas.

When Coyote finished, Fox came up and said,

‘what about the people here?’

You have used up the body of the Monster and given it to faraway lands.

Is there nothing left for this place?’

‘Well,’ snarled Coyote, ‘why didn’t you tell me this before?’

Get me some water.’

Coyote washed his bloody hands,

sprinkled the drops on the ground here.

From this ground came the Nimiipuu, the Nez Perce.

The Heart of the Great Monster, now turned to stone,

still marks the place of their beginning.”

6. I was introduced to the Heart of the Monster – a rock-encrusted, grassy knoll on the rez – by a person who left me before I returned the favor. Somehow we remain part of each other’s life support systems, recognition begetting forgiveness begetting persistence.

Each time I visit, I activate a recording, listen to a disembodied voice speak of Coyote.

Could an ancient tearing loose, carving up, and flinging about become a shared story?

Can new beings emerge from the mutilated innards of monsters? Even – nay, especially – when it is *only toward ourselves* that we are vicious?