



SURVIVING THROUGH THE DAYS

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1

Kwaw Labors to Form a World

ATSUGEWI

1996

DARRYL BABE WILSON

It is said by the old ones that a thought was floating in the vastness. Thought manifested itself into a voice. Voice matured into Yeja, an everlasting medicine song. Song sang itself into being as Kwaw, Silver Gray Fox. By continuing the song, Kwaw created all that we know. He sang the universe into being. His singing spawned Reason, but not sufficiently, so we shall never know all that moves within this universe.

It was Song, infusing itself with both beauty and power, that caused the outer world to tremble and the inner world to quake, and instructed the stars to become one with the vastness and the vastness to become one with the stars.

The “new” universe created a new kind of emptiness, within which Kwaw grew lonesome—wanting somebody to talk with. Laboring over what to do with so much nothingness, he decided to make another being, much like himself. Some haste on Kwaw’s part caused that being to be created with a defect: vanity. That being came to my people as Ma’kat’da, Old Coyote.

Kwaw instructed Ma’kat’da to sleep while he busied himself with making “something shiny.” Kwaw sang for a million years or more, and in

the distance something shiny appeared, a mist. Mist contained no voice and no song, but it possessed a magic.

Kwaw kicked Ma'kat'da awake, showing him the shiny mist. They sang together and Mist moved ever to them. It approached silently, like a soap bubble on a summer afternoon, floating upon the breeze. Kwaw caught it in his hands and it rested there. Ma'kat'da thought that Kwaw could not possibly know what to do with Mist, so he grabbed for it. There was a struggle. In the conflict, Kwaw dropped the mist. Ma'kat'da and Kwaw wrestled over the possession of Mist for eons. Meanwhile, Mist dropped slowly down, ever down. And, just before Mist struck Nothingness, Kwaw broke free from Ma'kat'da, reached under it, and gently nudged it back into the safety of his hands.

Here, then, if there ever was one, is “the beginning,” according to the keepers of our ancestral knowledge. For it was from the birth of the mist sung into being that all of the stars and moons of the universe were created; earth, also. Our earth, they say, is an infant, being fulfilled after all of the rest of the universe.

It is said that Mist took on substance, forming into something much more solid. It became more pliable, like bread dough, and they kneaded it and stretched it as they sang and danced. They danced harder and fragments separated from the mist-gel and moved out in a vast circle, tumbling ever away. These became the stars and the Milky Way.

Kwaw labored to form a world. But everything he created, Ma'kat'da changed. Vanity caused Ma'kat'da to think that he knew best. Kwaw created, Ma'kat'da changed. Then Ma'kat'da grew angry because all he could accomplish was “change.” He became destructive.

Seeing that he could not teach Ma'kat'da, Kwaw decided to remove himself. He entered his *chema-ha*, his sweat lodge, lifted the center post, and dropped down through into this world, carefully replacing the center post so Ma'kat'da would not see where it was disturbed. When he arrived here, there was only water. Kwaw sang land into being, then sang a *chema-ha* to rest upon the land. He created himself a fresh home upon new earth—with no Ma'kat'da!

Then Kwaw set about making the world as we know it today, thinking that Ma'kat'da would be satisfied with the world beyond the sky and would never come to this one. He made all that we know: the geese and

salmon, the mornings and the mountains, the rivers and streams, the seasons and the songs of all the birds. He made it wonderful and, it is said, he made it good.

Ma'kat'da searched for Kwaw in the world beyond the sky and could not find him. So Ma'kat'da, whose best power is fire, found a little basket in Kwaw's abandoned *chema-ha* and threatened it with cremation if it did not tell. Little Willow Basket, not wanting to perish in flames, said, "He went through there," pointing to the center post of the *chema-ha*. So Ma'kat'da, employing his own magic, came to this world like Kwaw after all . . .

This explanation came to me through Ramsey Bone Blake, who received it from White Horse Bob. White Horse Bob was given the song that Kwaw sang upon the inception of Life. The song was his *damagoomi*, his spirit helper. Ramsey couldn't remember the whole song, but often recalled fragments of it. However, he was not allowed to sing it, for the song already belonged to White Horse Bob.

Within this magic my people dwelled just a short time ago. More recently, our home has become the legal possession of strangers. We have been restricted from approaching our places of power and spirit. We have become mute witnesses while others despoil the air, the land, the wildlife, the rivers, and the ocean waters. It is said that Kwaw created this world for original native people, not for wanderers. But it is the wanderers who have brought a different rule, saying that our ancient laws are of no value.

This may be one of the reasons why we are in a spiritual quandary: not knowing how to become a functioning part of the invading American society, not remembering how to sustain a strict connection with the "knowing" that is our origin—and trembling in the presence of both.

With these thoughts in mind, then, proceed through the following "lesson-legends" realizing that it was not long ago that there was great magic in the land of my people—of all our Native people. That there was a wonder in the patterns of everyday life, and that there was much singing and dancing. For these were our instructions when the earth began turning around the sun, and the sun began moving with the universe, to a destination that may never be known to any of us but Kwaw.

NORTHWESTERN CALIFORNIA

You come upon a place you've never seen before,
and it has awesome beauty.

Everything above you,
below you,
and around you is so pure—

that is the beauty we call *merwerksergerh*,
and the pure person is also *merwerksergerh*.

Yurok, Florence Shaughnessy, at Requa
Peter Matthiessen, "Stop the GO Road"



Why is the water rough,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth?

Why is the water rough,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth?

By Rek'woy at the river mouth,
that is why they watch it,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth.

Near the houses the surf runs further up,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth.

Why is the water rough,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth?

Near the houses the surf runs further up,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth.

Why is the water rough,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth?

Near the houses the waves break further up,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth.

High in the air by Rek'woy,
that is why they watch it,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth.

Near the houses the surf runs further up,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth.

Why is the water rough,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth?

Near the houses the waves break further up,
by Rek'woy at the river mouth.



