

## 1 Goose Food

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A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida  
Mythtellers and Their World,  
by Robert Bringhurst

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**T**HE LARGEST AND MOST COMPLEX works of classical Haida literature belong to a genre known as *qqaygaang*. *Qqay*, the root, means *full* or *old* or *round*; the suffix *-gaang* means *enduring* or *continuing to be*. The word is often rendered in English as *story*, *myth* or *tale*, and these are sensible translations, but they give no overt clue to the artistry involved. Like all works of literature, the *qqaygaang* are constructed from inherited materials and filled with shared ideas, but they are made, in every case, by individuals. How they are built is a matter of personal skill and sensitivity and style. The best transcriptions that we have of classical Haida myth, and the best performances occurring in the present day, are works of art, like the finest pieces of Haida weaving, painting and sculpture. The *qqaygaang* are what people fond of literature call oral narrative poems.

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Haida Gwaii and years more making sense of what he learned while he was there. He became, by what we might call accident, a figure of considerable importance in Haida cultural history.

A third important person joined Ghandl and Swanton at each session: a young bilingual Haida whose Christian name was Henry Moody (c. 1871–1945). He was Swanton’s tutor, assistant and guide, and during these long sessions of dictation – typically six hours a day – he was the storyteller’s primary audience and the linguist’s second tongue and set of ears. His task was to listen to the poem and repeat it sentence by sentence in a loud, clear, slow voice, proving to the poet he had heard each word and giving Swanton time to write it down.<sup>7</sup> Ghandl spoke, a sentence or two at a time, Moody repeated, and Swanton wrote, hour after hour, day after day. On one of those wet November days, Ghandl began a poem with the following words:

*Ll gidaagang wansuuga.  
Kkuxu gyaa’at gutgu lla giistingdas.  
Ll xhitiit ttsinhlghwaanggwang qawdi  
llanagaay diitsi qahlagaagang wansuuga.*

*Ttsalaay waghii gwatxhaawasi* 5  
*suughii lla qaagyaganggandi xhan*  
*ll gyuugha hlgitghun kyingaangas.*  
*Gyaanhaw gha la qaagasi.*

*Ga jaada sting suugha ghaadangdyas.*  
*Tlaagi giina sqqagidaasi gu* 10  
*hlgitghun qqaal ttlsting xhaxiiwas.*  
*Kkit qqul ghaada qqaghattiisgasi*

*Lla qindi qawdihaw*  
*lla dawghattlxhasi...<sup>8</sup>* 14

CHAPTER ONE: *Goose Food*

*T*here was a child of good family, they say.  
He wore two marten-skin blankets.  
After he took up the shooting of birds,  
he went inland, uphill from the village, they say.

*Going through the pines,  
just to where the ponds lay,  
he heard geese calling.  
Then he went in that direction.*

*There were two women bathing in a lake.  
Something lay there on the shore. 10  
Two goose skins were thrown over it.  
Under their tails were patches of white.*

*After watching for a while,  
he swooped in.  
He sat on the two skins.  
The women asked to have them back.*

*He asked the better-looking one to marry him.  
The other one replied.  
«Don't marry my younger sister.  
I am smarter. Marry me.» 20*

*«No. I will marry your younger sister.»*

*And she said that she accepted him, they say.*

*«Well then! Marry my younger sister.  
You caught us bathing in a lake  
that belongs to our father.  
Now give me my skin.»*

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*He gave it back.  
She slipped it on  
while she was swimming in the lake.*

*A goose swam in the lake then, 30  
and then she started calling,  
and then she flew, they say,  
though leaving her younger sister  
sickened her heart.*

*She circled above them.  
Then she flew off, they say.  
She passed through the sky.*

*He gave the younger woman one of his marten-skin blankets,  
and he brought her home, they say.*

*A two-headed redcedar stood at the edge of the village, 40  
and he put his wife's skin between the trunks.  
Then he brought her into his father's house.*

**T***he headman's son had taken a wife.  
So his father invited the people, they say.  
They offered her food.  
She did nothing but smell it.  
She would eat no human food.*

*Later, her husband's mother  
started steaming silverweed,<sup>9</sup> they say.  
Then she paid closer attention.  
When her husband's mother was still busy cooking, 50  
she asked her husband  
to ask her to hurry, they say.*

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*They placed it before her.  
It vanished.  
And then they began to feed her this only, they say.*

*A*fter a time, as he was sleeping,  
his wife lay down beside him,  
and her skin was cold.  
When it happened again,  
he decided to watch her, they say.

*He lay still in the bed, 60  
and he felt her moving away from him slowly, they say.  
Then she went out.  
He followed behind her.*

*She walked along the beach in front of the village.  
She went where the skin was kept.  
From there, she flew.  
She landed beyond the point at the edge of town.*

*He started toward her.  
She was eating the eelgrass<sup>10</sup> that grew there,  
and the breaking waves were lifting her back toward shore. 70  
He saw her, they say.  
And then she flew back where they kept her skin.*

*He got back to the house  
before she did, they say.  
There he lay down,  
and soon his wife lay down beside him, cold.*

*A*famine began in the village, they say.  
One day, without leaving her seat, she said,  
«My father is sending things down through the clouds to me.»

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*Back of the village, geese began landing and honking. 80*  
*She went there.*  
*They followed her.*  
*Food of many kinds was lying there:*  
*silverweed and clover roots.<sup>11</sup>*  
*They carried it home.*  
*And her father-in-law invited the people, they say.*

*When that was entirely gone,*  
*she said it again:*  
*«My father is sending things down through the clouds to me.»*  
*Geese began landing and honking again in back of the village. 90*

*They went there.*  
*There were piles, again, of many kinds of food.*  
*Again they brought it home.*  
*And her father-in-law again invited the people.*

*Then, they say, someone in the village said,*  
*«She thinks very highly of goose food.»*

*The woman heard it.*  
*She got up to leave at that moment, they say.*  
*Her husband tried to dissuade her.*  
*No use. 100*  
*She had settled on leaving.*

*It was the same*  
*when he tried to dissuade her in front of the town.*  
*She went where her skin was.*  
*Then she flew.*  
*She flew in circles over the town,*  
*and leaving her husband sickened her heart, they say.*

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*And then she passed through the sky.  
After that, her husband was constantly weeping, they say.*

*A*n old man had a house at the edge of the village.  
He went there and asked, 110  
«Don't you know the trail that leads to my wife?»

«Headman's son, you married a woman  
whose mother and father are not of this world.»

*And the old man began to fit him out.  
He gave him a bone marlinspike  
for working with cedar-limb line.  
Then he said,  
«Now, sir, get some oil.  
Get two sharp wedges too.  
And a comb and a cord and salmon roe  
and a coho skin and a spearhead.  
Get all these.»*

*After he gathered what he needed, 120  
he came back to him, they say.  
«Old one, here are all the things you spoke of.»*

«Now, sir, you may go.  
Take the narrowest of the trails that lead from my house.»  
Then he set off.

*A*fter walking awhile,  
he came upon someone infested with lice.  
He was trying to catch the lice by turning around.

*After he had stared at him awhile,  
the other said, 130*

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*«Sir, don't just tickle me with your eyes.  
I have long been expecting you.»*

*Then he went up close,  
and he combed out his hair.  
He rubbed him with oil  
and picked off the lice.  
And he gave him the comb and the rest of the oil.*

*The other one said,  
«This is the trail that leads to your wife.»*

*A*gain he set off. 140  
*After walking awhile,  
he saw a small mouse in front of him.  
There was a cranberry in her mouth.*

*Then she came to a fallen tree,  
and she looked for a way to go over it.  
He let her step onto his open hand  
and put her across.*

*She laid her tail up between her ears  
and ran ahead.  
Not far away, she went under some ferns.* 150

*He rested there,  
and something said,  
«A headwoman asks if you wish to come in.»  
Then he parted the fronds of the ferns.*

*He was standing in front of a large house.  
He walked through the door.  
There was the headwoman dishing up cranberries.*

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*She spoke with grace.  
Her voice had big round eyes.*

*Once she had offered him something to eat,* 160  
*Mouse Woman said to him,  
«When I was bringing a bit of a cranberry  
back from my berry patch,  
you helped me.  
I intend to lend you something that I wore  
for stalking prey when I was younger.»*

*She brought out a box.  
She pulled out four more boxes within boxes.  
In the innermost box was the skin of a mouse  
with small bent claws.  
She said to him,  
«Put this on.»* 170

*Small though it was, he got into it.  
It was easy.  
He went up the wall and into the roof of the house.  
And Mouse Woman said to him,  
«You know what to do when you wear it.  
Be on your way.»*

**H***e set out again on the trail.  
After walking awhile,  
he heard someone grunting and straining.  
He went there.* 180

*A woman was hoisting a pile of stones.  
The cedar-limb line she was using kept slipping.  
He watched her awhile  
and then he went up to her.*

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«Excuse me,» he said,  
«But what are you doing?»

The woman replied,  
«They told me to hold up the mountains  
of the Islands on the Boundary between Worlds.  
That is what I am doing.»

Then he remembered his spruce-root cord 190  
and he said, «Let me help you.»

He made splices with the cord.  
«Now take the load on your back,» he said,  
and she hoisted it up on her back.  
It did not slip off.

And she said to him,  
«Sir, you have helped me.  
Here is the trail that leads to your wife.»

Then he went on.

**A**fter a time, he came to a hump in the muskeg. 200  
Something slender and red grew from the top of it.  
He went up close to it.  
All around the bottom of the tall, thin thing lay human bones.

He saw no way of going up.  
Then he entered the mouse skin.  
Pushing the salmon roe ahead of him, he climbed.  
He went up after it.  
When he came to the top,  
he pulled himself onto the sky.

The trail stretched ahead of him there too. 210

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*He walked along,  
After travelling awhile,  
he began to hear a noise.*

*After travelling further,  
he came to a river.  
It was running high.*

*Near it perched an eagle.  
A heron perched on the opposite bank.  
A kingfisher perched upstream.  
A black bear sat on the opposite bank,  
and he had no claws, they say.*

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*Then, they say, the black bear said to the eagle,  
«Lend me something, grandfather.»  
Then, they say, the eagle did as he asked.  
Then and there the black bear got his claws.*

*When the young man had been sitting there awhile,  
half of a person lurched by,  
leaning himself on a fishing spear.*

*He had one leg and one arm,  
and his head was half a head.  
He speared the coho that were swimming there  
and put them into his basket.*

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*The man unrolled his coho skin and put it on  
and swam in that direction.  
When the half man speared him,  
he was unable to pull him in.*

*The young man cut the spearhead from the spear, they say.  
And the half man said,*

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«Human beings sometimes do this sort of thing.»

The younger man went up to him then, they say. 240  
«Sir, did something take your spearhead?»

«Yes,» he said.

And the young man gave him the one he had.  
That was Stickwalking God, they say.

When he went up further,  
two men, old and fat, came out collecting firewood.  
They chopped at the roots of windfall trees,  
and they scattered the chips on the water.  
The coho were coming from there.

He went back of the fallen tree, 250  
pushing stones in from behind,  
and their wedges shattered, they say.  
And one of them said,  
«Ahhh! We'll get a beating!»

Then he went up to them.  
He gave them the two wedges that he had.  
And they stared at him and said,  
«This is your wife's house.»

Then he went up to it, they say.  
He stood waiting in front of the house. 260  
His wife came out to meet him.  
Then he went in with her.  
She was happy to see him.  
She was the village headman's daughter, they say.

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*In that village too, they were man and wife.  
And everything they gathered,  
he gathered as well.*

*A*fter living there for a time,  
he began to dislike the entire country.  
Then his wife spoke to her father. 270  
And his father-in-law called the villagers in.  
There in the house, he asked them, they say,  
«Who will carry my son-in-law back?»

*And a loon said,  
«I will carry your son-in-law back.»  
«How will you do it?» he asked.*

*The loon said,  
«I will put him under my tail  
and dive right in front here.  
Then I'll come up again at the edge of his father's town 280  
and release him.»*

*They thought he was too weak to do it, they say.*

*His father-in-law asked the question again.  
A grebe gave the same reply.  
They thought she was also too weak.*

*And a raven said he would carry him back.  
And they asked him, «How will you do it?»*

*«I will put him under my wing  
and fly with him from the edge of the village.  
When I am tired, 290  
I will let myself tumble and fall with him.»<sup>12</sup>*

