Liú Xié, a Chinese critic writing fifteen hundred years before our time, saw literature as landscape and the other way around. Sun and moon and mountains and rivers, he says, are the wén of dào. They are, that is, the literature and culture of the Tao, the message-bearing legacy and wisdom of what-is.

The myths exist, most mythtellers say, independently of any human culture. We learn them from the others: other animals, the trees, the creeks, the ground. But wherever they are told in the words that humans use, they are told by individual human beings. Learning how to hear the telling of a myth means learning how to hear the myth itself and how to hear the one who tells it. Myth, like music, speaks when someone with the skill is willing to perform. It also speaks, like music, on behalf of the performer. For that to happen, the performer must step back instead of forward, and let the myth itself say what it can about the world. Rarely, but once in a while, a mythteller speaks of this process directly.

One day in March 1928, in the village of Husum, Washington, close to where the White Salmon River empties into the Columbia, a Sahaptin-speaking shaman known as Shláwtx’an began to tell a story. Áw iwachá tíín, he said: “Now there were people.” Iwachá tíín cháw’ilkwash, “There were people without fire.” As Shláwtxan soon explained, the people without fire were the people of the earth. Led by their headman-in-waiting, the Beaver, they went to steal fire from the people of the sky.

Two human beings were listening intently as the tale continued to unfold. One of the two was a young anthropologist, Melville Jacobs. He had studied, like John Swanton, with Franz Boas,
and he was busy, just as Swanton would have been, writing down what the mythteller said. When the story reached what was plainly a conclusion, Shláwtxán pronounced the conventional formula, *Íkunik iwá wat’ít’aash*, “So goes the myth,” which certified its close. Then he kept right on talking to Jacobs, and Jacobs kept on writing. What Shláwtxán said that day sheds light, I think, on all the indigenous literatures of western North America, and in its way on literature worldwide:

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Mínknash aníya ínk wat’ít’aash?
Cháw ínk.
Anamún itxánana tüichám,
mún itxánana tüín,
kúuk pä’anakwa tüinan tüichámnan.

Kúuk itxánana k’pínk anak’pínk iwachá tüín
k’pínk itxánana kákya,
itxánana waykáanash,
itxánana iwínat,
itxánana tmaanít,
itxánana xnít.

Tl’áaxw k’pínk kwnínkat íttáwaxna wat’ít’aash.

Cháw ichlaksim tüichámpa,
anakúlk iwhá tüichám.
Kwnák tl’áaxw tınıńx tüín,
kúushwí sínwit,
kúushwí tkwátat.

Anamíł íchi iwachá tüín.
Cháw qúyq tamónwit,
tüín itxánana tamánwitki.
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A STORY AS SHARP AS A KNIFE

Ittáwaxna {ínk} tün íchi íkuuk,
kăůk ikwítamsh kumánk,
anak’ínk shin kumánk ittáwayshamta.

Kúuk k’pínk iyikshana wat’ít’aashnan,
kă’k’pínk ipxwísha íchi íkuuk.
Ikunik ittáwaxnimá tiíchám kú wat’ít’aash
kumánk íchi íkuuk.

Áw cháw-wíyat tl’áxw k’pínk iwátsha wat’ít’aash.

Áw ínk xwisaaat,
kúmash watísha tl’áxwsímka,
wiyaanakwanísha wat’ít’ash.
Íxwinam páyiksháta ínk shííx.
Áwmash ní cháw-wíyat tl’áxw wat’ít’ash
íchnak tiíchámpa,
Xwátswaypam tiíchámp.

Kúñam áw páyksha.

How did I make the myths?
I didn’t.
After places came to be,
after people came to be,
the people and the places were destroyed.

Those who were previously people
turned into birds and furred animals,
turned into fish,
turned into elk and deer,
turned into fruit trees and berry bushes,
turned into root plants.
Those are the ones from whom the myths come.

Not just here in this place,
but in every place there is:
all the different kinds of people,
differing languages,
differing foods.

There were that many kinds of people here.
Rather than the white man’s law,
people lived by their own law.

People came to be here then,
and they have been here since,
the ones who will continue being born here.

They were listening to myths back then,
and they are thinking of them still.
The land and the myths have grown together this way
from then until now.

Now almost all those myths are disappearing.

I am old now,
telling you the whole of it,
leaving the myths behind.
Even so, you will keep on hearing me clearly.
Now I have given you almost all the myths
of this country,
the Klikitat country.

That is what you hear now.