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The Rolling Head's "Grave" yard

Louise Bernice Halfe Skydancer

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

No one knows the origins of the ancient story "The Rolling Head." It has been told in many ways by many bands and in many families. An effort to unravel the story's philosophy, psychology and spirituality through an exploration of its major symbols leads to more questions than answers. For Halfe, examining the emotional immediacy of Cihicipistikwan, the Rolling Head, the Elders, and boys, and other symbolic elements in the tale reveals its cultural richness but the story ultimately defies explanation. David Suzuki's The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature offers useful insights when considering this ageless and complex narrative.

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Keynote Address: The Rolling Head's "Grave" yard

Louise Bernice Halfe Skydancer

Nestled deep in the woods, sitting on a knoll, is a dilapidated cabin. The logs have rotted and caved; the door is jammed and leans; the windows have long been shattered. The glass is dull and the edges lost from years of sun and rain and snow. The mud and straw that was used to insulate the walls have returned to the earth. For years and years I have walked a rutted road, where horse and wagon and eventually an old jalopy have bounced. It leads to this cabin, which to most would be nothing more than a hunter's shack. However, for a child this was home, a refuge from what would lie ahead. On this road a small white dog, Choo choo, her son Rusty, and my pig would wait. When the school bus dropped us off, I'd break the sandwich I saved all day in three and my loyal pets would receive holy communion. I would then attempt to ride the pig home while he squealed in protest. I paint you this image, for this landscape exists only in memory and is stored in my body.

It also remembers the smell of my father's homemade cigarettes, it remembers how they hung from his mouth and how my child's clumsy fingers helped to roll them. It remembers the smell of mother's jelly rolls, her freshly baked bread, the heat of the woodstove, the sound of the stove lid as she dragged it to shove the wood into the mouth of the hungry flames, and the sight of her sweat as it poured down her face. It remembers the sound of the dipper splash at the opening of dawn as the water was poured into the basin. It remembers the snow we collected and melted in buckets, the drizzle and sizzle, the smell of the evaporated water on cast iron. It remembers four small children of various ages huddled together, eager to hear the winter legends, bodies trembling in anticipation.

I grew up listening to stories. Books and the written word were not yet the flavour and never were for as long as both my parents lived. One of these stories was "The Creation Legend," a long and convoluted epic.

"The Sacred Story of the Rolling Head" *(Cihcipistikwan-Atayohkewin)* is part of it, and the part I wish to discuss today.

This story is ancient. No one knows its origins, and no one knows how much of it has been framed to suit the needs of a society in transition. Unfortunately, Catholicism continues to wave its twisted tongue and confuse our stories and our beliefs.

I have made an effort to understand the depths of this story. In the attempt to arrive at the interior I have had to delve deeper into the Cree language. Within the language lies the philosophy, the psychology, and the spirituality of our people. I have also explored other snake ideologies. Perhaps all I can offer at this time is a whirlwind of Cree thought. Therefore, what I will share is only my version of "The Rolling Head": an exploration of a story told in many ways by many bands and in many families. In spite of the various ways of telling, there remain some constants and similar characteristics, none of which I want to examine or elaborate on at this time. However, for anyone who wishes to hear other variations of the story when the snow lies deep, I would recommand two books: *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (James R. Stevens, McClel-land & Stewart, c. 1971) and *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (Leonard Bloomfield, F.A. Acland, 1930)

Now the story and the discussion:

A man and a woman left the main camp with their two young boys. (One boy's name was wisahkecahkw, the other's mahihkan; however, this detail is not known at the onset of the story). They travelled for a long, long time. Sometimes thick in the forest, at other times their thighs sucked deep by muskeg. Mosquitoes fell in hordes, and the young boys cried. In the pines they gathered blueberries, cranberries, and what the chickadees and sparrows left of dried saskatoons, chokecherries, and rosehips. Eventually they camped in a clearing surrounded by aspen, birch, and flowers. They were certain they'd find honey when the earth completed its turn. Not far away a brook sang. Before the sun rose the man left with his bow and arrows to stalk the woods for the offered game. He was a great hunter. However, each evening when he returned with food, supper was often late. He noticed that his boys hadn't gathered enough wood, and his wife hadn't tanned many hides.

The father asked the boys what their mother did all day. The boys wrestled with their tongues, and when the eldest spoke, butterflies fluttered. "After she feeds us and gives us our chores she instructs us never ever to follow her." Their

mouths pointed to a light trail leading into the forest. For days the father followed his wife's every movement. He shadowed among the trees. One day he took his tobacco pouch, stone ax and arrows, and strung his bow with fresh sinew. He took his sons aside and gave them a sharp bone, a file, a flint, and a beaver tooth. He filled their heads with plans should he not return.

He watched his wife move among the trees like a deer. She sniffed, ensuring her moccasins were gentle where dew rolled off the grass. The plants, wise in their knowing, called the wind to bend their backs. She untied her raven braids till the freed strands kissed her cheeks. He followed, each movement watched. She sat on a large log and sang a song, fist drumming on the wood. A large snake slithered out, it stood tall on its tail as it swayed to and fro. It slowly slithered up her ankles, her waist, her shoulders and around her neck. The snake rubbed its head against her face, its sinuous body writhing against her. Small snakes crawled at her feet. Each squirmed at the delight of seeing her and feeling her warm hands on their cool long bodies. The man observed, his heart engorged with jealousy.

The following day the man went hunting as usual, though much, much earlier. He returned to the log and drummed it as his wife had done. As each snake slithered out the man chopped off their heads, till all lay scattered at his feet. He gathered the largest, returned home early and made a broth for his beloved. As she drank hungrily, commenting on the delightful flavour, he informed her of the destruction of her snake lover. The woman wept. Soon the tears turned into a burning rage and a roaring fight ensued. Bellows and screeches filled the air as the man and woman fought. He eventually severed her head from her body with his axe, and threw her torso into the sky. He too ascended into the heavens. There, in the night sky you see him, dressed in the golden fire of the morning star, while her torso is still pursuing him as the evening star, her gown a purple sun. However, her head remained on earth and began to roll where the grass bent.

In the distance the boys watched the sky. When they saw it turn blood red, and heard the thunder, they rechecked their bundles and ran.

The head wept, rolled and squeezed through the trails. Off in the distance the boys heard their mother's terrible cry. They ran. Their hearts raced ahead, wind cut their throats, bones bent and stretched. Their mother's breath was at their heels.

"Astum peke we. Come home. *I love you, my babies. My babies," she begged. But their father's wrath and words coiled inside their guts. With icy fingers the eldest son threw the sharp bone. Large stone hills with pointed*

rose with crevices and valleys so deep that she would surely fall to her death. Like a frustrated wolf she bayed. The head rolled back and forth searching for a trail, foam filled her mouth.

A fox came by. His heart was touched by the rolling head's sorrowful wail and desperation. He led her through a pass. She rolled and rolled, hurry-ing only as a head could rush.

She continued her restless roll. She called and called. Still the boys ran. Again she begged her sons as with painful breath she sang, "Oh love, oh love … come home to your mother's hearth." Again the eldest boy threw one of his father's gifts, this time a sharp file. The brambles, burs and rosehip thorns awoke. Sharp-chewed poplar stumps arose and crowded the rolling head. Trees lay everywhere. The head had to roll under and around wherever she could. Her cheeks were torn and gouged. Blood sprung from her wounds. She crashed through this tangle a matted mess. Still she called her sons, her voice pitiful and filled with pain.

"Oh come sweet precious ones, my boys, my boys," the head sang. Her voice ebbed and flowed as the wind's breath tore through the tall grass. Still the boys ran. The eldest dug in his bundle and threw one more gift. The flint sprung from the eldest boy's hand and hit the pebbled rocks. Here the fire awoke. Unable to stop her frantic chase she burned her face. It blistered and the skin hung in shreds. She continued her wretched roll.

"My babies. My babies. My tired babies. Come home. Come home. Come home to your mother's heart." The boys bled too. Their moccasins were eaten by their travel, their bellies empty, eyes swollen with tears and fear. They limped as they ran. The eldest threw his last gift of a beaver's tooth. It fell as before between the head and the boys. A great lake formed, thick as red-blood honey. The waves roared. The boys knew this was their last hope. They walked the shore, afraid the head would find a way to reach them. They gave themselves to the night. A large water bird spread its wings and offered the head a lift, but only if the head kept still, for the bird's back suffered some lonesome bones. Any movement caused great pain.

The head clung to the slick feathers, but was unable to maintain its grip and it crashed against the bird's backbone. The bird screeched and flopped. In the middle of the lake the head fell, deep into the black depths. The boys travelled on.

Cihcipistikwan (The Rolling Head*)* conjures excitement, fear, mystery, and even anger. It sends shivers, with immediate images of beheaded

women, violence, and a frantic chase. This fascination and ambivalence with women's power and their ultimate demonization has been with humankind since the beginning of time. Hence, my own bewitchment with this story began in childhood.

The Elders teach that "All life is related." The snake has been deemed evil by some and most feared. "Snakes bear symbolic connotations in many cultures, be they beneficent or ominous … for they combine in disturbing ways the comforting and familiar with the terrifying and repellent. Linking desire with fear, and attraction with repulsion, such images, often highly erotic, exercise a strong hold on the imagination" (Lapatin 76, 77, 79).

The command to take ownership over my fear of snakes came when I was quite young. I dangled a baby garter snake on a stick and ran after a man who made my skin crawl. That was the first time I sensed my power. In later years I tested my fear and wrapped pythons around my body and neck, and cradled their lovely heads on the palm of my hand. I thought of the Rolling Head as I explored their scaly reptilian bodies.

Snakes respond to sound, scent, and touch. Naturally when Ms. Rolling Head drummed on the log the snakes knew their beloved had arrived to give them affection. They would respond to the warmth of her hand and to her tenderness. They would know her scent and her familiarity. Perhaps they responded to her air of alienation or her loneliness. Her husband provided well, but apparently was unavailable otherwise. If you leave things or people to themselves they go elsewhere for nourishment. Hence the snakes reciprocated her affection and took pity upon her. Perhaps they rewarded her with medicines to heal her people, for snakes are closest to the earth. They feel the vibrations of the earth, hear her heartbeat, know her touch, know her sounds, and know her scents and medicines.

The story implies the large snake may have been Rolling Head's lover and the smaller snakes were the product of their union. Certainly the phallic imagery is not lost. The head is also round; both represent their respective genitalia.

The Rolling Head had every right to be outraged at the demise of her loved ones. Slaughtered and decapitated the snakes and the woman both "lost their heads." The snake's blood became a sacrificial offering to their caregiver. Perhaps this whole story has been misconstrued, however. Perhaps the woman's attachment to the snake-people was too great. They had much more medicine to offer in their death, but she could not

bring
gifts was too great.

The gifts of the snake are powerful. My Grandmother was a healer. She used snake skins to heal those in need, yet she received more fear than respect in spite of the healing that occurred.

Often a woman is perceived to "lose her head" during her menstrual cycle, which is as cyclic as the shedding of the snake's skin. Unbeknownst, in the slaughter of the snake and in the ritualistic offering of the blood, the husband may have empowered his wife. Perhaps indeed he blessed her, but the power was not balanced.

Let us now examine the boys. The husband prepared the boys for their escape and gave them small, but nonetheless powerful, tools to protect themselves from their mother: a sharp bone, a file, a flint, and a beaver's tooth. The appearance of the file in the story reflects a shift in the storytelling that may have occurred with a sociological and technological change within the culture. This is a colonial tool, whereas the others are fitting for early life. When this evolution occurred is hard to discern, but the teller shapes the story and rolls it out without losing its essence. The other tools are from the earth, natural, and thus hold magical or spiritual properties. The file is fixed with these same principles, perhaps because iron is derived from the earth and is a mineral found in water, or perhaps because the word relates to the stone precursor, the scrapers and smoothers. In essence, the community is still in touch with their belief system, although it has been tampered with. They remain committed to where all "things and life are interrelated" and thereby "filled with spirit":

> Spirit … is a powerful, mysterious world; … its meanings spread like an invisible web through every level of existence. It is air, … it is breath, and by extension it is life and it is speech. It is the power of divine creation, moving over the waters, and it is divinity itself … Spirits are volatile, invisible, powerful, and some are eternal. They may intoxicate, invigorate, inhabit, haunt, or they may express the essence of something. Above all, they animate the world. (Suzuki 188)

> Traditional cultures live in an animated world. Mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, winds and the sun may all have their presiding deities, while each tree, stone, and animal may have, or be, a spirit. The spirits of the dead … may also be — eternally present — acting powerfully in the living world, part of the endless circle of time. (Suzuki 188, 189)

The first tool is a sharp bone. We are not told if it is an awl. When the eldest boy threw down the bone, stone hills or mountains rose. The sharp bone manifests what it has always known: it confers structure, shape, and form — be it flesh or earth. Bone is akin to rock with its similar hardness, sharp edges, and contours. The eldest son, Creator-like, uses this tool to reshape the world.

The second tool is the file. The file has a rough surface that in this case disturbs, alters, and roughens the surface of the earth. From another perspective the file is toothed. "Teeth are the primigenial weapons of attack, and an expression of activity … teeth constitute the battlements, the wall and the fortifications of the inner man, fom the material or energetic point of view" (Walker 332). To be given a mere tooth from their father's mouth would not instill confidence in the frightened boys. Also, the man's vanity would not allow him to part with his teeth. The file therefore gives this substitution and representation. It is masculine, dangerous, and sharp as brambles, burrs, or thistles.

The third tool is the flint, man's early fire starter. "Fire is both a symbol of transformation and regeneration" (Walker 188-89) and is used as a "purification or destruction of the forces of evil" (105). "Fire is ultra-life. It embraces both good (vital heat) and bad (destruction and conflagration). It implies the desire to annihilate time and to bring all things to their end. Fire is the archetypal image of phenomena in itself. To pass through fire is symbolic of transcending the human condition" (Walker 106). Fire is not only of the sun but lives in the interior of the earth and in all things. *Iskwew*, the Cree word for woman is related to the word *iskotew*, fire. The Rolling Head is scarred and transformed by fire but not destroyed.

The last tool is the beaver's tooth. The tooth masticates, gouges, digs, rips, tears, and pulverizes. The beaver is an industrious aquatic creature that moves comfortably on both land and water. Its teeth were used to scrape, shave, and shape wood. Its casting down gouges out the earth and creates a lake, just as a person would scrape a bowl. Ultimately, the Rolling Head sinks to the depths of the water. She is defeated by the water bird and by the aquatic beaver's tooth. "We are water — the oceans flow through our veins, and our cells are inflated by water …. Water ties us back in time to the very birthplace of all life" (Suzuki 75). In her apparent death, the Rolling Head sinks to dark, subconscious depths.

The bone, file, flint, and beaver's tooth are tools filled with spirit,

and they serve humankind. The tools were used to gouge flesh and pulverize it. The early inhabitants scraped the hide and pierced the skin to make clothing and shelter. Fire was used for warmth as well as for cooking and providing light. Further, it was used in hunting and as a weapon. These are also the Creator's tools. Mountains, forest, and underbrush, fire and water are given life and give form and shape to the earth.

In order for young boys to achieve manhood, the "umbilical cord must be cut." The woman's love for her offspring, as indicated in this story, has the potential to be destructive to young men. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the husband/father/man to help the young boys not only to grow to up, but also to sever the maternal "bond or tie." However, to sever this tie too early in a child's life is detrimental. This is told further in the story, which you, the audience, will have to seek for yourself when winter comes. The father, in this case, is unable to accept the circumstances of his wife's affection for the snakes and speeds up this "severing" by "demonizing" his wife. He does not question his inability to nurture his relationships, focusing instead on being the great hunter and provider. He instills a tremendous amount of fear in the boys so that they can successfully flee for their lives. He is rewarded ultimately by ascending to the heavens. Only the woman's torso is sent to the heavens. Her head remains "grounded" to go "rolling," to explore, to adventure and face the dangers, to be willing to risk death and, yes, even to take on death. In death one gives birth. Rolling Head eventually drowns. However, the "head" has its own symbolic meanings. It houses the brain and hosts much of humankind's ability to make moral judgements, decisions, thoughts; to create, imagine, and dream. When she entered the underworld, she sank into the silent dark depths of the waters, where she created dreams for the visionary, the poet, the dreamer, the singer, and the painter. She became a muse, as "water flows through our memory" (Suzuki 53).

The Elders tell us that the longest and most arduous task that humans will ever undertake is the journey between the head and the heart. Perhaps this story reflects just how hard it is to seek and find one's heart's desire with simply the head.

On the other hand, perhaps she is the manifestation of the creatures that inhabit the deeper waters. If this is the case she is experienced in lakes and rivers as monsters. Whatever the case, "The Sacred Story of the

Rolling Head" will continue to live in our imagination and puzzle those attempting to unravel her mystery.

My efforts to unravel the story's philosophy, its psychology and spirituality in my language did not lead me any closer to definitive truths. If anything, I am left with more questions. This, I believe, is the crux of an excellent story, which has conferred its longevity. I will be scratching "my head" and seeking to listen closely to "my heart" for a long, long time. The irony, as always, is that I am looking to the heavens for a part of myself, but only in death shall I be whole, unless the task of putting head and heart together can be achieved while the wind still breathes.

The Rolling Head's Promise

In this death
I sing you this.

When your Big Heavens slumber
the lightning sears
and thunder caresses the prairie
I'll enter your sleep.
Not land, nor water, wind, nor fire
rock, nor bone, tooth, nor file,
not a fisherman's net, or dreamcatcher
can impede my good grace.

Some will say
But … I never dream.

I will be in their barren walls
wide-eyed or in folded sleep
I will be water-borne, the shadow
in your paradise, the fantasy
in your nightmares, the sorcerer
in your illusions, the magician
in your desire.

I will harvest your bed.

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