



Winter. Days grow dark and the sun creeps low across the southern sky. Not that precise eyes would detect these celestial goings-on: thick grey overcast conceals solar positions, and natural light, muted, shuffles down to us along innumerable, circuitous paths. Fireplace fires and bright electric lights cast sharp shadows on interior walls while outdoor shadows are vague and grey - one strains to discern their borders.

On those rare sunny days of winter, hunkered down in cedar-plank houses, this coast's indigenous inhabitants would mark northern wall planks where sunlight shafts struck, having stolen in through holes in south side walls. Anthropologists (east coasters all of them, itinerant summer travelers in this soggy neck of the woods) made guesses - that this was a way of marking time, of charting the predictable to-and-fro travels of the sun. This sounds suspect to local ears. I say: native peoples who marked walls did so out of total astonishment. Here is where light fell sharp on that day the sun broke free. Mark this place.

Remember. For winter is a time when the dark and decomposition are punctuated by memories of fecund times past, and hopes that things once departed shall return: crops, game, loved ones and secure childhood scenes, outdoor warmth, sun. In these latitudes, attentions turn away from the moist and darkening scene beyond the door; long nights draw introspective attentions and invite reflection on things less mundane. Tales are told. Gods are beseeched. For northern peoples of any era or religious bent, late December is a time of high holy days. Celebrated in anxious solstice darkness, diverse traditions find themselves united by a central theme: the potential for resurrection. (Western symbols buck wintertime trends, invoking evergreen trees and holly, birth, feasting, festivals of light, survival in this world or the next.) Living on stored provisions and borrowed time, we have asked that nature's many death sentences be commuted.

Such metaphysical cabin fever loomed large in north coast native life. As peak salmon runs waned and storms grew fierce, kin converged in bay- and beach-front homes. Food gathering ceased. Stored salmon, smoke-dried, served as a staple until spoiling, a casualty to late-winter mildews. Smoked shellfish, rockfish, and elk perched in rafters. Huckleberries and salal berries, dried and pounded, sat submerged and preserved in oil-filled containers for future use, alongside baskets and boxes of root foods - camas bulbs, rhizomes of silverweed and springbank clover. Canoes were abandoned as winter surf went wild, ushering in the season of travels by trail, along ancient routes still outlined by State Park paths. Travelers' forms were concealed by waterproof capes of woven cedar bark, peeled and pounded cotton-soft, and conical hats, intricately woven from the smallest roots of the largest spruces.

As the outdoor world grew dark, the world of spirits pulled in close around village perimeters. Both the social world inside the longhouse, and the natural world beyond its walls entered formative, precarious phases. Plants sat dead and dormant; animals grew scarce. To the native eye, their disappearance hinted at cosmological tensions, an annual crisis as much moral as it was material. As provisions slowly dwindled, native peoples watched for signs of reprieve. In longhouse interiors, perpetually lit with pit fires, shamans would seek to intervene. Fresh dry sand was spread over cold dirt floors, and bright red kinnickinnick berries were scattered diffusely on the ground. Spruce-pitch torches flickered and hissed as people danced late into the night, fasting, singing, marking the darkest time of year and seeking to hasten its passage. Women beat cedar board drums while shamans pounded carved poles, narrow and totem-like, against ceiling planks. Oregon coast peoples danced mask-less, it seems, but dancers were adorned in bold colors, bedecked in woodpecker feather capes and shell regalia. One's spirit was vulnerable to these celestial events, and a person's personal life was to be put in order in this darkest time of the year. One repaid material and ceremonial debts. Animal and ancestral spirits gave moral guidance and offered impromptu career counseling. Failing to get one's life in order, one was doomed, finding no peace until future winters when, once again, the lines between the human and spirit worlds blurred and the cosmological order grew malleable and tenuous. As the solstice approached, stormy south winds blew wild across north coast beaches, and ceremonial life surged: this was the time of tales.

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On long dark nights, mythic winter figures both entertained and instructed, and none was as important as South Wind. South Wind the trickster, South Wind the transformer: like Raven to the north, or Coyote to the east, South Wind emerged as a powerful figure amidst myth-time chaos and brought order to the lived-in world. In transformative times, South Wind walked the land and shaped the land, gluttonous, bungling, and lewd, following the northern Oregon coast from south to north, capriciously creating customs and landmarks. His handiwork persists: in the awesome cliffs of Neahkahnie, in the near-shore rocks of Silver Point, in the hulking form of Haystack Rock, in broken spruce tree branches and crashing winter surf. Like the south winds which rattled roof planks and howled at longhouse doors, seldom stopping throughout the winter, South Wind toppled trees and tore at shoreline lands with the help of Ocean. For peoples huddled in winter longhouses South Wind tales placed a human face on the incessant winter roar beyond the door.

On long winter nights, north coast peoples would trace his journeys, point-by-point, scene-by-scene, "talking the coastline" from south to north. Children, listening, taught stories rote, learned to navigate lands seen and unseen. Yet, in solstice darkness, South Wind tales had even greater powers. These tales were essential to the world's renewal: by telling South Wind's tales, orators recapitulated South Wind's walk, symbolically instigating the landscape's annual rebirth, ceremonially ensuring the return of fish, game, berries, and warm weather. Tell South Wind's tales during any other time of year - spring or summer - and one would reset the cosmological clock to wintertime, inviting cold storms and deprivation. Tell South Wind's tales in the winter, and one maintained nature's cycles, ushering the peoples of the coast through dark times, and - if the stories were told well - back to the abundant life and light of seasons to come. The winds continue to blow, though South Wind's orators have been silenced. This winter, sit back in the night, by the fire, and listen to the south winds blow.

A portion of the South Wind cycle can be found, alongside other Tillamook tales in Elizabeth Derr Jacobs' book, *Nehalem Tillamook Tales* (1990) (Northwest Reprints Series) Corvallis: Oregon State University Press. A much longer, annotated version of the South Wind cycle will be available by 1998 in: D. Deur and M. T. Thompson "South Wind's Journeys: A Tillamook Epic" in M.T. Thompson and S. Egesdal (eds.) *One People's Stories: A Collection of Salishan Myths and Legends*. (Smithsonian Native American Literatures Series). Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution. In the text above, I have drawn a phrase or two from the Smithsonian manuscript.

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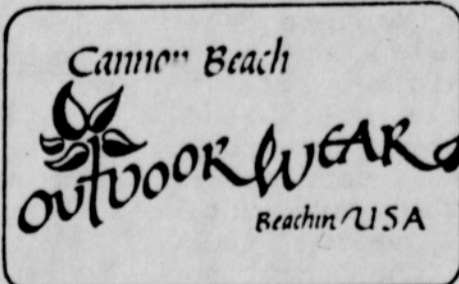
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Thankful, thank you, thanksgiving - what is it to thank? In English it is to show gratitude, to give credit. The French 'merci' and Spanish 'gracias' sound more like grace and mercy, as an offering or a blessing. Herein, possibly, lies the difference between the Romance and the Germanic perspective. What would a mercygiving celebration be like?

All that aside, we do have this holiday, a good holiday in theory, even though some rightly question its validity for the American Indian. It was, like all our other major holidays, borrowed I'll bet. The Pagans were more than likely to drag out all their goodies before the gods after harvest, while the frost is hedging into another long winter, to say "Please! give us more of the same next year, OK?"

Everyone knows a proper thank you note for a gift is good insurance for continued generosity on the part of the giver, or they used to anyway.

Now days, basic survival, for many, has been surpassed to the degree that real life experience of dire need is either non-existent, or far enough away to have lost its sting. Being truly thankful for something as simple as, say, food, requires a leap of the imagination. The abundance of stuff to eat all around us remains amazing. However, acknowledging this is still a good thing to do.

In my extended family, which is large, we have a thanksgiving custom. After the dinner things are cleared away, paper and pens are passed out before anyone leaves the table. The charge is to write a sentence or two completing the phrase, "I am thankful for...", and leave it nameless. The papers are folded and mixed in a basket. A reader is chosen, someone who can: 1. attempt a straight face. 2. not give away the writer's identity by reading grammatical errors.

The little offerings usually range from the sublimely serious, to the ridiculously funny. My brothers, especially, have taken to writing several apiece. This is not only allowed, it's encouraged. This is what you never got to do in school.

Each piece is read out loud the first time, while the writer is speculated upon, but not named, with much teasing and laughter. The pieces are read a second time, and this is when formal accusations are leveled and the writers are forced to reveal themselves. I hope I am explaining this to be as wonderfully fun and memorable as it always ends up being. If your holiday gathering has never tried this game, do. It's ten times more fun than TV football. You can do it using New Years resolutions too.

One year my grandfather wrote, "I am thankful to be alive." I can still see it, all in capitol letters. In two years he was gone from us forever, only then did I realize what he had really meant.

Always, during the holidays, my underlying wish, beneath my gratitude, is for an equitable world, where everyone would have the same abundance for which to be thankful. Will being grateful help us create that world?

Grace and mercy be yours in holiday celebrations with the people you love.



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