

Sidedoor S7 Ep. 11 Raven and the Box of Daylight Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, I want you to take a moment here with me and, if you're not driving or biking or balancing on something tall, close your eyes. Are your eyes closed? All right, take a deep breath. Feel the air on your skin and once all the residual speckles fade behind your eyelids, what do you see? Total darkness like a velvet cloak. And no matter how hard you try, you see nothing.

Emil Her Many Horses: Darkness. It's dark in there.

Lizzie Peabody: But you can hear.

Emil Her Many Horses: And there's rumbling.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Emil Her Many Horses, curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

Emil Her Many Horses: And then you hear voices. You hear the voices of community members talking.

Lizzie Peabody: Hearing these voices you see a form off in the distance. It almost looks like it's glowing white. You walk toward it and, as you get closer, you make out the curve of a beak, the thrust of a chest, pointy little feet, and the ridge of a folded wing. You're standing in front of a bird carved out of white glass. It's a raven poised to lead us through a story.

Ernestine Hayes: Before here was here, ravens only named Yeil. He was a white bird, and the world was in darkness.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, you can open your eyes now but remember that darkness because our story begins in a world before there was light. It's an origin story passed down by native peoples of the Pacific Northwest for generations. Do you know how old this story is?

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: No. A simple answer, no.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Miranda Belarde-Lewis, guest curator of the exhibition.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: There's a common phrase in native communities, we say, "Since time immemorial." Since forever basically. It's been around since forever.

Lizzie Peabody: Miranda's enrolled in Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico, and she grew up hearing this story from her Tlingit family on her mother's side.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: My mother's family is from the T'akdeintaan clan of the Tlingit Nation in southeast Alaska.

Lizzie Peabody: The Tlingit Nation is one of many indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Their native lands extend from southeast Alaska to Washington and Oregon, and Miranda says across this vast territory, wherever you go, you can find this story of raven and the box of daylight.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: It's an important story because it's one of those foundational stories that tells us how the world came to be. This is one of our most precious stories.

Lizzie Peabody: This story has survived through oral tradition.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Passing from one person's mouth to another person's ear.

Lizzie Peabody: But also-

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Before native peoples adopted text and writing, we documented our stories through art.

Preston Singletary: Behind every moment in a story there's an opportunity to create something that would represent that moment in an art form.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Tlingit glass artist Preston Singletary. In the exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, he illustrates this traditional Tlingit story through a series of glass sculptures.

Preston Singletary: I like to think about the metaphorical nature of the glass, the transformation from liquid to a solid. It's kind of also bringing new dimension to indigenous art.

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, Preston Singletary's Raven and the Box of Daylight. We'll plunge into darkness and follow Raven through a glittering 3D picture book of glass and hear a story from time immemorial told anew. Don't go away.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, before we jump into the story of Raven, let's get one thing straight.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Raven is a trickster.

Lizzie Peabody: This is curator Miranda Belarde-Lewis again.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: The thing that he's most associated with, and a lot of tricksters are, is shape shifting.

Emil Her Many Horses: Most native communities have a character of a trickster.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Smithsonian's Emil Her Many Horses. He says tricksters come in many forms. Emil is Lakota.

Emil Her Many Horses: For me it was called iktomi, which means a spider, and here it's the raven.

Lizzie Peabody: The trickster raven appears in many Tlingit stories, and in every story, he's motivated by his own curiosity.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Raven shows us the best and the worst qualities that we have as humans.

Lizzie Peabody: He's not a hero.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: No, and he's not a villain, and I think that's what makes trickster characters so different is that they're just doing their own thing and accidentally change the world.

Lizzie Peabody: All right, let's step together into the story of Raven and the Box of Daylight. Step into a time when the world was dark, and at the same time step literally into the exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, which we enter through a dimly lit hallway.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: We really wanted folks to feel like they were somewhere else.

Lizzie Peabody: Miranda helps guide us through the exhibition.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: So, as you walk down this hallway, you can see the mountains, you can see the clouds in the sky.

Lizzie Peabody: You see the silhouettes of tall pine trees on the walls, light projected on a curtain of fine threads that move slightly as you pass, like the trees are moving in a breeze.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: You can hear layers of Tlingit storytellers telling Raven stories in Tlingit.

Lizzie Peabody: And there, lit from above, is the white glass raven. This is where the story begins.

Ernestine Hayes: Before here was here, Raven was only named Yeil. He was a white bird and the world was in darkness.

Lizzie Peabody: Raven is about the size of a football. His luminous body looks almost frosty, like the surface of a glass chilled in the freezer. He has huge carved eyes, and down his folded wings, artist Preston Singletary has carved a pattern of markings distinctive to the artwork of the Pacific Northwest, ovals and circles and long curves with sort of little sharp points here and there.

Preston Singletary: Yes, this is what we refer to as form line, and it's a series of sort of pod shapes and U shapes.

Lizzie Peabody: And on Raven's chest are markings that look like eyes, nose, and a mouth. Why is there a face on his chest?

Preston Singletary: It kind of symbolizes what Raven personifies. He can transform from a bird into a human.

Lizzie Peabody: So, we find clues about his character in the visuals.

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Preston Singletary: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: And the biggest clue of all?

Preston Singletary: Raven is a white bird, and in most native cultures that signifies supernatural being, and Raven does have transformation powers in the story.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil decides that he will try and do something about the darkness for himself and for the world as he follows the Nass Heeni (Nass River), he encounters the fishermen of the night.

Lizzie Peabody: Turning the corner at the end of the hallway, you come to a sparkling river of blue glass that flows across the floor like sapphire lava. Above it are fish of all colors, and behind them a large canoe glows in red and black glass.

Ernestine Hayes: As Yeil approaches the canoe, the fisherman greet him with their paddles standing straight up in welcome. The fishermen tell Yeil of Naas Shaak Aankaawu, the nobleman at the head of the Nass River, that he is a wealthy man. That he and his family live in a house filled with wealth and that he has a beautiful daughter who drinks from the river every day. They tell Yeil the man has many treasures in his clan house, including beautifully carved boxes that house the light.

Lizzie Peabody: Once Raven knows that the nobleman is hoarding all the light in his clan house, he starts plotting how to get inside.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil knows he will not be welcome in his raven form and devises a plan to transform himself to a tiny speck of dirt. His plan is to float down the river into the drinking ladle of the young woman, Naas Shaak Aankaawu du Seek, the daughter of the nobleman at the head of the Nass River. That is how he will sneak into the clan house. Yeil turns himself into a piece of dirt and falls into the water. He floats into the young woman's ladle as she dips it into the river for a drink. Her servants test the purity of the water by dipping a feather plume into the ladle.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Because the daughter and Naas Shaak Aankaawu are wealthy people they have servants. There's a romanticized notion that pre-contact natives are egalitarian. We have a very, very clear class structure in Tlingit society. We even had slaves. It's a well-documented thing in our oral history as well as early ethnographers saw this class structure. And so, the servants of the daughter, they would test the purity of the water using a feather. And when Raven was hiding as a speck of dirt, the feather found him.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil, in dirt form, is discovered and thrown away.

Lizzie Peabody: In the exhibition space, next to the canoe in the river is a feather standing on end.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Oh, it's my favorite.

Lizzie Peabody: Its quill is the color of wheat. The plume is a deep purplish brown, and like Raven's wings, carved with swooping ovular patterns. At the very tip of the plume-

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Is this little droplet with a tiny little sparkle in it, and that is Raven as a speck of dirt at the bottom of this feather.

Lizzie Peabody: Disguised as a speck of dirt, Raven is caught by the feather, but he still wants to get to the light hidden away in the nobleman's clan house. He hatches a new plan to sneak into the daughter's drinking ladle.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil notices the color of the ladle is similar to the color hemlock boughs. On his second try, he transforms himself into a hemlock needle and floats into her ladle again.

Lizzie Peabody: And this time it works.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil is ingested by Naas Shaak Aankaawu du Seek and she becomes pregnant with Yeil.

Lizzie Peabody: A pair of glass busts show the nobleman and his daughter. The nobleman is opaque, but the daughter is sculpted of clear glass. She's transparent. She doesn't have the same solidity as the other two.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Right. The daughter also has a supernatural aspect to her in many ways. She's the chosen one to be Raven's mom.

Lizzie Peabody: So, kind of like the Virgin Mary.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Exactly. Exactly.

Ernestine Hayes: The family questions the Immaculate Conception, but ultimately accepts it. When it is time for the young woman to give birth, the servants line a shallow pit with fine furs in preparation for the high-ranking baby to be born. Naas Shaak Aankaawu du Seek struggles and cannot give birth. A wise woman is summoned, and she notices the fine furs. She knows the finery is making the birth difficult and orders them removed. The furs are replaced with a more humble lining of moss and old man's beard from trees, and Teyil T'ukaneiyi (Raven baby) is born in human form.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: And the medicine woman looked at the baby and said, "He has Raven's eyes." So, the medicine woman knew something was going on. But this is a human baby, so there you go.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil T'ukaneiyi grows into a precocious and precious human boy.

Lizzie Peabody: When we come back, the raven boy tries to get his hands on those boxes of light. After the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We're back, and we're following the story of Raven and the Box of Daylight, an ancient origin story of the Tlingit people, told today through glass sculptures created by artist Preston Singletary. After learning that the nobleman at the head of the Nass River is hoarding

all the light in his clan house, Raven decides to try to sneak inside. He transforms himself into a hemlock needle, is swallowed by the nobleman's daughter, and is born a human boy. That is how he gets into the clan house. And at this point in the exhibition, we step through a door and into a recreation of the nobleman's clan house.

Lizzie Peabody: I'm walking into the clan house.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: So, there's so much effort to get into the clan house that it's a shared sense of accomplishment for us all. We finally got in there and, oh my gosh, it is magnificent in here just the way that Raven imagined.

Lizzie Peabody: Inside are all the nobleman's precious treasures laid out on cedar boards. A glass rattle in the shape of an eagle head, a glass hook for catching halibut, tall ceremonial dance staffs. Beautiful glass baskets that look like they're woven from glass and they kind of glow from within. And you call these precious owned things, right?

Preston Singletary: Yeah, in the Tlingit culture we call it Ut-oo, which means ... It's kind of like an heirloom. Any family in any culture has things. A lot of times they're utilitarian, but in the Northwest Coast they were also ornamented with the designs. The bowls, the dishes, the spoons, they all had design work on them.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: The northern Northwest Coast, the food is so abundant that it just left a lot of time. Anthropologically this is the theory that there was just so much abundance that it left a whole lot of time to develop these extremely complex aesthetic styles.

Lizzie Peabody: People didn't have to spend all their time hunting so they had time to do art.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: And it's in this sumptuous setting that Raven grows from a baby to a young boy.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil K'atsk'u, the raven boy, is the beloved grandson of Naas Shaak Aank-áawu, the Nobleman at the head of the Nass River. Naas Shaak Aank-áawu spoils him, giving all he asks for. His grandfather cannot deny him.

Lizzie Peabody: Raven knows that the nobleman keeps his greatest treasure of all in a special room inside the clan house. From here we turn a corner into a dark room. The room is completely empty except for three large boxes side by side.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: You walk in and you see these three cases glowing with this otherworldly sense that there is this massive treasure inside of these boxes.

Ernestine Hayes: Three carved boxes contain Naas Shaak Aank-áawu's most prized possessions: the stars, the moon, and the daylight.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: The one with the stars, it's in a dark, dark, dark, almost black-colored glass.

Lizzie Peabody: Pinpricks of light shine through the glass like glittering stars.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil K'atsk'u asks for the boxes and is told he cannot have them. He cries and cries for the box of stars and eventually his grandfather relents. Naas Shaak Aank-áawu gives his grandson the box of stars, which he immediately opens. The stars slip through the smoke hole in the clan house and take their places in the sky. Naas Shaak Aank-áawu is furious with his grandson. He scolds him and Yeil K'atsk'u becomes inconsolable. His crying breaks his grandfather's heart, and he forgives his grandson for what he has done, but the boy still will not be comforted. The boy moves towards the box containing the moon. His grandfather hesitates but forgives his grandson again. He gives Yeil K'atsk'u the box with the moon.

Lizzie Peabody: Through the frosted glass of the box, you can just make out the hazy silhouette of the moon, a glowing orb of blue gray light.

Ernestine Hayes: Naas Shaak Aank-áawu du Seek' (Daughter of the Nobleman at the Head of the Nass River), the boy's mother, does not think her son should have the box, and she argues with her father. As they argue, Yeil K'atsk'u opens the box. He plays with the moon and then releases it. The moon silently slips through the smoke hole and takes its place in the sky.

Lizzie Peabody: The third box contains the sun, and it glows like an ember from behind glass walls.

Ernestine Hayes: The sun is the final treasure. Naas Shaak Aank-áawu protects it fiercely, but Yeil K'atsk'u eventually succeeds in releasing the daylight.

Lizzie Peabody: Why do you think the nobleman gives his grandson the sun even after he's released the stars and the moon?

Ernestine Hayes: Love.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: The grandfather loved his grandchild so much that he was willing to forgive him.

Lizzie Peabody: Once the sun is released, everything changes.

Ernestine Hayes: As the stars fill the sky and as the moon takes its place, light begins to fill the earth. When the sun takes its place in the sky, bringing daylight to the world, it is frightening to all those who have been in darkness. The people are able to see the world around them for the first time and are startled.

Lizzie Peabody: Imagine sitting comfortably in a dark room when all of the sudden the blinds snap open, that sharp brightness of sunlight burning into your eyes.

Ernestine Hayes: Those wearing animal regalia run to the woods and become the animal people. Those wearing bird regalia jump into the sky and become the winged people. Those wearing water animal regalia become the water people. Those who remain strong and stubborn become human people.

Lizzie Peabody: The final room of the exhibition is drenched in light. On the walls, projections show light filling the sky. 12 glass busts stand around the room, their hats and faces are carved with the markings of animals from the four realms: air, water, land, and human.

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Miranda Belarde-Lewis: The people that were just kind of dumbstruck and froze in place and just staring at the sun, they became the humans.

Lizzie Peabody: That's not very flattering, but all right.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: But if we're explaining ourselves then-

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, yeah, that checks out. But let's get back to Raven. He got what he wanted, but his trick comes at a price.

Ernestine Hayes: Yeil decides it is time to leave and transforms back into bird form. Naas Shaak Aank-áawu is devastated that his treasures have been released into the sky. He is so angry that he gathers all the pitch in the clan house in a big wood box and throws it into the fire. He catches Yeil as he tries to escape out of the smoke hole and holds on to his feet. Yeil is covered in the soot and smoke of the fire.

Lizzie Peabody: The last time we see Raven he is jet black, and in his beak, he holds a marble-like orb of glowing red glass.

Ernestine Hayes: He has transformed from a spiritual being into the black bird we know today. His color marks his sacrifice. His physical form is forever changed for bringing light into the world.

Lizzie Peabody: All told, more than 70 glass sculptures tell the story of Raven and the Box of Daylight. Each on its own is exquisite, but in concert they tell a timeless story about how the world came to be and about those who have carried the story from generation to generation.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: One of the things that I love about native art is that it's so tangible. It's right there, you can look at it. When you have somebody who's knowledgeable they can point out the different pieces that mean something to its home community. And by being able to share this story through this exhibition is just a way to point people towards something that makes Tlingit people Tlingit.

Lizzie Peabody: It's quite literally inviting people into a story that's very specific to one culture, but it's sort of inviting an understanding that can transcend those specific traditions.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Yes. And I really like that phrasing of inviting people in and doing it in a way that we have created. And for us to be able to do tell the story in a way that makes sense to us as Tlingit people marks a shift in representation and marks a shift in voice that has been absent for so long, especially in museum and gallery settings.

Lizzie Peabody: It's a claiming of a story, but also choosing to share it, which is very generous.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: Right.

Emil Her Many Horses: This artwork is a gift given to us.

Lizzie Peabody: Smithsonian's Emil Her Many Horses says almost every group of people known to history has an origin story. These stories endure from generation to generation, and as old as they are, something about them remains timeless. They help us to recognize ourselves.

Emil Her Many Horses: Some of the origin stories have people emerging from the earth or emerging from the sky, but native communities have, in their wisdom, understood and passed these stories along for us to understand who we are, where we come from.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: And on some level I think we're all just trying to understand this vast mysterious world.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: That we do have the privilege of living in for a little while.

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. Preston Singletary's Raven and the Box of Daylight was organized by the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington. It's installed here at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian through January 2023. So, come see it. If you can't make it out to D.C., we'll include pictures of Singletary's glass pieces in our newsletter. We'll also include some really cool videos of Preston working on these creations with 3,000-degree blowtorches in his hot shop. Subscribe at SI.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to artist Preston Singletary and curator Miranda Belarde-Lewis. Thanks also to multimedia arts company Zoe Juniper for the multisensory visitor experience created through sound and video. Big thanks to Rebecca Englehardt and her colleagues at the Museum of Glass, and to our colleagues at the National Museum of the American Indian, Amy Van Allen and Emil Her Many Horses.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks to author and professor Ernestine Hayes, for reading the text of Raven and the Box of Daylight. The story you heard comes from the exhibition text, which is itself a compilation of different tellings of the story from four different Tlingit elders translated into English.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We also want to acknowledge the late Tlingit historian Walter Porter. He worked with Preston on the development of this exhibition and studied the story of Raven and the Box of Daylight, drawing parallels between this origin story and others around the world.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tammi O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music, apart from the exhibition soundscape that you

heard, are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: It's amazing. If I didn't have such a moral compass, I might have made some moves on that feather.

Lizzie Peabody: If you were Raven-

Miranda Belarde-Lewis: That feather needs to be with me. If I was Raven, how could I get this feather into my home?