Tending the Fire

Robert Bringhurst
This story belongs to Ron Evans of Saskatchewan and to Jesús Elciaga of Oaxaca and to others from whom I have heard it, in one shape or another, in Tamazulapán and the Sawtooth Mountains and Toronto. In some lesser way the words, and also the places, through which it is told in this version belong to me. What interests me, though, isn't the shifting and tenuous ways in which the story belongs to one or another of us, but the deeper ways in which we all (all of us here, now, in this moment which repeats through space and time) belong to the story — and belong to the places through which it is or might be told. It is a simple — some say much too simple — story after all. As well as a true one.
It was either a little or a long time ago, and the old woman who made the world, day before yesterday, had only just made it. The wind picked up, and the sunlight cut through the air, where it had never been before, and the old woman who made the world pitched her camp in a high meadow not very far from the middle of things, and looked at the world, and said to her dog, Well, Dog, do you think it'll do? (She was fishing for compliments, I guess, which is usually dangerous, but she did it. She said to the dog, Do you think it'll do?)

And the dog said, Grandmother, yes, it's the way I have always imagined the world. The spruce trees look like spruce trees, the mountain larches look like mountain larches, the balsam firs have the unmistakable odor of firs. But Grandmother, these and the others seem to have places to be in the world. The rabbit, the mountain cat, the blacktailed deer, the varied thrush, the squirrel all have their places, like the mosses on the rocks and the bright green lichen hanging in the lodgepole pine. I'm the only one here, Grandmother, with no one to chase or to run from or to run to, and I'm lonely in this world.

The old woman poked up the fire and sighed and said, Dog, I should make you someone to love and look after if that's how it is. And she made men and women, then, as a gift, to cure the loneliness of the dog.

And the dog said, Grandmother, thank you, and guided his humans out into the world.
The old woman sat there, thinking, alone
in the high meadow, tending her fire,
watching the anemone and yellow lily
sprout through the snow, and the phlox and the grouseberry
flower. Then she thought she saw something travelling
up the valley, dodging the fallen-log
bridges, sloshing through each of the streams.
The dog reappeared at the edge of the meadow
and trotted up close to the old woman's fire.

You're back for a visit already, said
the old woman. Dog, is anything wrong?

The dog said, Grandmother, now that you ask,
yes: it's those humans you gave me.
They listen, you know, but they don't seem to learn,
and I came back to ask you to give them something
I think they should have. Grandmother, please,
would you teach them to speak? Would you teach them
words, so they can tell one another their lies
instead of keeping them secret?

The old woman
shifted a burned stick farther
into the fire and reached down a little ways into
the ground, and found a jagged, black stone,
like a piece of black basalt, and washed it in the stream,
and set it in the north end of the meadow,
and then she said, Dog, that stone
is the stone of speech and storytelling.
Those humans will be able to say what they choose to say
as long as it's there. And no one I know
would want to disturb it.

Grandmother, thank you,
said the dog, and he turned and headed down
the valley, to be with his humans again.
The old woman sat in the high meadow
not too far from the middle of things.
She watched the swelling swamp-laurel shells
and the ripening willow galls and the wind.
She watched the purple saxifrage, the yellow
heather and the partridgefoot flower,
and she saw way off, once again, a dark
shape making its way up the valley.
The dog reappeared at the edge of the meadow
and ambled with his long tongue up by the fire.

_You’re back again, dog. Is anything wrong?_

_Grandmother, yes. It’s the humans again._
_You remember I asked you to teach them to talk._
_ but now they just talk and talk all the time._
_It isn’t enough, and it’s too much._
_Grandmother, please, would you teach them to laugh?_

The old woman who made the world
picked up a stick and poked at her fire
and reached a little deeper into the ground
and took a crooked, yellow stone — pale,
like yellow quartz — and scrubbed it in the stream
and set it in the east end of the meadow.
Then she said, _That stone, dog,_
_is the stone of laughter and the stone of dreams._
_Those humans will be able to laugh_
_just fine, and maybe have a few_
_new things to talk about too,_
_when you see them again._

_Thank you_, said the dog,
and he went right back to his humans again.
The old woman who made the world
sat watching the mountain windflowers spilling
their plumes, and the willow leaves turning
and the aspen leaves starting to turn,
and then the aspen leaves falling,
and the fir scales floating down out of the firs,
and then she saw something far off, moving
once again. It had four feet and a tail,
and it was headed straight for the meadow.
The dog came wearily up by the fire.

*Here you are again, dog,* the old woman said.
*Is something still wrong?*

*Yes, Grandmother,*
*I asked you to teach them to talk and to laugh,*
*and they talk and they laugh just fine, Grandmother.*
*No matter what happens, no matter what*
*their dreams say, they keep on talking, no matter what*
*their stories say, they just laugh.*

*Grandmother, please, would you teach them to cry?*

The old woman looked a long time into the fire,
and she reached down deeply into the ground
and found a smooth, grey pebble,
like a piece of stream gravel, and cleaned it.
She set it in the south end of the meadow,
and then she said, *dog, that stone*
*is the stone of weeping and the stone of prayer,*
*and those humans'll have tears in their eyes when you see them again.*

*Thank you,* said the dog,
and he vanished into the bush
and made his way back to the humans again.
The old woman who made the world
sat in her camp in the high meadow,
listening to the geese bark in the darkness
overhead and watching the winter wrens
flit through the rhododendron
in the shortening afternoon, and the troops
of waxwings stripping the blueberries bare.
The first snow fell and melted, and the rabbits
moulted, and the marmots disappeared.
And the old woman saw something slogging
up the valley, through the leaf litter
and new snow, breaking trail. The dog reappeared,
chewing his paws, at the edge of the meadow
and came and curled up close by the fire.

You've been gone a bit longer this time, the old woman
said, but you're back even so. How
are the humans doing?

Better, grandmother,
said the dog, but something is missing.

The old woman who made the world
stirred her fire and watched how the coals
glowed pus-yellow, blood-red, bone-white and grey
before they went black. Choose carefully,
dog, she said. Choose very carefully,
dog, because the circle is closing.

Grandmother, said the dog, heading
up here today, wading through the deep snow,
I knew what I wanted to ask. Grandmother,
please, would you teach them to dance?

The old woman
shifted a glowing log deep in the fire
and reached down a great distance into the ground
and grabbed a half-round, blood-red

(no stanza break)
stone, like jasper or red chert,
and rubbed it with snowmelt and new snow
and set it in the west end of the meadow
and sat back down by the side of the fire
and shifted another log.

That stone, dog,
is the stone of dancing and the stone of song.
Those humans can dance now, and sing.
And they can talk and tell stories
and laugh and dream and cry and pray,
and I hope it is enough, because the circle
is closed.

And those were your gifts, dog.
They were yours, and you gave them away.
Whatever those humans say from now
on, you'll only hear the pain
and pleasure in their voices. Soon you'll forget
you ever heard the words. Now nothing
but barks and yips and howls will form
in your own throat. Now when they laugh,
you'll make no sound. They'll weep,
and you'll whimper. Now when they dance,
you'll scamper between their legs. You'll jump
up and down, but the music will never
enter your body. The words and the music
and the tears and the laughter will be theirs.
They owe you all this, dog, and I somehow
think they may never remember to thank you.

— Robert Bringhurst