

The Ash and The Elder
Five Creation Myths from Around the World

by

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INTRODUCTION

MYTHS

In her note at the beginning of *Ragnarok*, A.S. Byatt writes, “This story has been made from many stories in many languages....Myths change in the mind depending on the telling—there is no overall correct version.”¹ This statement rings equally true for *The Ash and The Elder*. The myths used in the show have passed through many languages, writers, and forms, and to try to find an “original” among them is to overlook the importance of the stories themselves. The myths we read now were not designed for the page—they began as oral tales, passed on through generations from storyteller to listener.

As I reflected on how to approach myths in a way that considers their origins, I began to think about adapting these ancient stories into a play. These myths come to us in books, typically written down or translated by foreigners to the society that created the story. Even myths such as the Norse tales in *The Prose Edda*, which were recorded by “insiders,” were written down when the stories were common knowledge, hundreds of years after they were formulated. In the original tellings, the voice of the story would not be a detached third-person narrator commenting on long-ago events, but rather a second or first-person plural narrator: someone who tells a tale that affects her and her listeners personally, and who narrates in order to rationalize the world in which she lives. Those who first spoke of Qat and Marawa, Tiamat and Marduk, and Tepeu and Gucumatx did so to understand the world they saw around them.

¹ A.S. Byatt, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (New York: Canongate, 2011), p. iii.

By adapting these creation myths into a play, I hope to bring them closer to their roots as oral stories than they are in the texts in which I found them. In the script, I turned the narration found in the myths into the voice of the storyteller in each scene: a narrator who shapes the action onstage not from outside the story, but from within its world. The narrator can therefore enter the story to become a character, enable characters to take certain actions, and be in danger himself from elements in the stories.

Furthermore, because theater is an essentially communal art, it offers the perfect parallel to the communal production of myths. Rather than assuming a didactic tone as the narrator of the Bible does, the narrator's voice in these myths is more like Hesiod of the *Theogony*, who begins his poem with a communal invocation to the muses: "Begin *our* singing with the Helikonian Muses."² The early tellers of these tales were like mouthpieces of a culture, recounting communally-created myths. The different styles of narration in the creation story of the Judeo-Christian Bible and the stories of *The Ash and The Elder* are rooted in a fundamental difference in the god(s) of these stories: while the Biblical God is (for the most part) removed from the activities of human actors, the gods of the myths in the play walk the land, speak with humans, receive help from other creatures, and intervene directly and physically on earth. It is true, of course, that in Genesis, God is physically engaged with the world, but as the story continues, the Biblical God becomes more removed from human beings. The gods of the myths in *The Ash and The Elder* therefore exemplify a different notion of divinity than the Judeo-Christian conception of God, particularly

² Hesiod, *Works and Days; Theogony*, translated by Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 61; emphasis added.

in their relationships with human beings. These divergent ideas of divinity and humanity are worth examining as examples of different ways of understanding our role in the cosmos, and the ways in which human beings throughout history have considered themselves and their place in the world.

* * *

THE MYTHS OF *THE ASH AND THE ELDER*

The opening myth of *The Ash and The Elder* comes from the Dogon people of West Africa. It was recorded by Marcel Griaule, a French ethnologist who lived and worked among the Dogon for many years before he was finally permitted to hear their mythology from Ogotemmel, a wise man who had been designated to tell the story.³ It made the perfect opening to the play, since the text of the myth took the form of a storyteller speaking to a listener. This provided the opportunity for the production to recognize the original nature of these stories as oral tales: the show begins with straight narration and slowly transitions into a more theatrical form of storytelling as The Storyteller and The Listener both become characters in the myth. I was also especially interested in the way that twins play such an important role in this story. The idea that humans began as twin beings, both male and female, can be found elsewhere (such as Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*), and the notion that the human soul is both male and female resonates with contemporary theories about the spectrum of human sexuality.

Following the Dogon myth is a myth from the Banks Islands, a group of islands in northern Vanuatu in the South Pacific. The versions that I have read were

³ Barbara Sproul, *Primal Myths* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 49.

adapted from a study by R.H. Codrington, a “Christian missionary to Melanesia and scholar of Melanesian languages and cultures.”⁴ The drumming and dancing central to the creation of humans made this myth particularly stage-ready, and I found the characters of Qat and Marawa to be very entertaining, and different from many of the gods in other myths. Rather than beginning in darkness, moreover, this myth opens with a world that has too much light, which I thought was an interesting distinction from other creation stories.

The next myth is from the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, a text whose primary function was not to explain creation but rather to establish Marduk, a local god, as the head of the Babylonian pantheon.⁵ The myth was likely a “relatively late”⁶ text, written to be recited, and was enacted every year during the New Year’s Festival in a symbolic recreation and reconfirmation of the world:

The king knelt before the high priest of Marduk and submitted himself (and the state he represented) to humiliation before the god and his power. Rededicating himself in this fashion, the world was re-established, the divine lease renewed, and the connection between the absolute and the relative, the eternal and the temporal restored.⁷

The myth that follows is from the Quiché Maya in what is now Guatemala. The text, called the *Popol Vuh*, or “Book of the Community,” contains the “sacred history of the Quiché....written down several centuries after the decline of the Mayan civilization.”⁸ It was destroyed during the Spanish conquest and then rewritten in the Quiché language with the Latin alphabet. Though this version was also lost, a copy

⁴ “Codrington, R. H.,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 ed. p. 1847.

⁵ Barbara Sproul, *Primal Myths* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 91.

⁶ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 229.

⁷ Barbara Sproul, *Primal Myths* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

and translation by Father Francisco Ximénez survives.⁹ I found the tone of the *Popol Vuh* to be particularly poetic, and a nice contrast to the more brutal *Enuma Elish*. The multiple failed creations of humans also made this story particularly interesting and relevant to my project.

Information about the Norse myths comes to us primarily from the *Poetic Edda*, found in the *Codex Regius*, written around 1270, and the *Prose Edda* or Snorri's *Edda*.¹⁰ These were works of history as well as mythology, since Snorri Sturluson has also been described as "Iceland's greatest historian."¹¹ Much of the story presented in *The Ash and The Elder* is found in the *Voluspá*, or Prophecy of the Seeress, in which a sybil whom Odin has raised from the underworld tells Odin about the creation of the world and its end in Ragnarok.¹² This knowledge is a burden that Odin must bear until Ragnarok comes. Sources differ on whether these poems were written by Christians, but there seems to be at least some "syncretic use of Christian material"¹³ in the *Poetic Edda*, and Snorri Sturluson himself was likely a Christian.¹⁴ The text in the script comes mostly from contemporary retellings by the D'Aulaires and Kevin Crossley-Holland (see Note on Sources" below.)

* * *

⁹ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 30.

¹⁰ "Eddas," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 ed. p. 2691.

¹¹ "Snorri Sturluson," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 ed. p. 8460.

¹² "Eddas," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 ed. p. 2692.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. xxxiv.

CREATION

Of all types of myths, creation myths are particularly interesting because they point to a fundamental analogy between gods and human beings: humans tell of how the gods created and ordered the world, and in doing so, they order the world they see around them and create a narrative for themselves. Since creation myths tend to be essentially about how humans find their place in the world, I chose five stories that particularly emphasized the role of human beings through the method by which they are created and their intended purpose.

The Dogon myth imagines people as a replacement for the God Amma's defiled sexual partner. The Melanesian myth supposes a near-equality between gods and humans, since not all gods are as intelligent and powerful as Qat. In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, Marduk and Ea create humans to take over the labor of the gods so that deities can rest, while the gods of the Mayan *Popol Vuh* spend much of creation trying (and failing) to create people, who eventually serve the purpose of nourishing and sustaining them. Similarly, the Norse Aesir gods create humans as praisegivers and worshippers before giving them the Earth and dominion over it. Furthermore, the human man is carved from the same wood as the ash tree Yggdrasill, the "cosmic tree" that will survive the death of the gods and the end of world, sheltering two humans inside it so that the human race can continue.¹⁵ The common material of man and world—the wood of the ash tree—suggests an important correspondence between the enduring world and human beings. There is something special, even eternal, about humanity.

¹⁵ "Center of the World," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 ed. p. 1502.

The name *The Ash and The Elder* emphasizes the crucial role of humans both within the myths and as storytellers and creators of myth. Though these stories explore the power and praiseworthiness of the gods, the two-way dependence relationship between gods and people highlights the power of human beings through their special treatment. Since gods often need human recognition and honor to sustain them, it might even be argued that humans are more independent from the gods than the gods are from them.

Cosmological creation also has an artistic parallel. The minimalist design of the show is based on this idea: the fewer materials that we have to work with in the production, the more creative we must be with them. To this end, we have only wooden sticks, two half-barrels, and two easels with paper on them. From these elements, the production aims to create a “world” in each myth. By staging similar events differently (for example, humans are carved from trees in three of the myths), the production shows the flexibility and versatility that these props and setpieces acquire when actors imbue them with different meanings. The transitions between scenes provide time for the breakdown of the previous world—created largely by the cast rather than by setpieces—and the segue into the beginning of the next myth: a new opportunity for creation. Each scene establishes a new world, different in tone and style from the scenes and the worlds preceding and following it.

* * *

DESTRUCTION

How does one end a play about beginnings? The natural choice for me was with a story about endings. The Norse tale of Ragnarok, the death of the gods, is a

fitting end to *The Ash and The Elder* because it is also a story of creation. The world is burned and destroyed and gods and humans kill each other in great battles. However, after the earth sinks into the sea, it rises again, refreshed and reborn. In fact, in several versions of the Norse myths, the Ragnarok tale is inextricably bound up with the creation of the world, since it is foreshadowed in the very first lines of the story: “In the south is a region called Muspell...Black Surt is there...already waiting for the end when he will rise...and whelm the whole world with fire.”¹⁶ Ragnarok is the logical end to the play because it places a period where in the other scenes, there is only a semicolon: each myth ends with or near the creation of humans, and the scene is disassembled and prepared for the next myth, which starts with the beginning of a new world. Though Ragnarok is a violent event, it too ends with hope: a rejuvenated earth ready for a new age. Even the apocalypse can be a fresh start, for as T.S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*, “to make an end is to make a beginning.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 3.

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1943), “Little Gidding,” sec. V, l. 2.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

I used various sources in compiling the text of *The Ash and The Elder*. The adapted script refers to the following translations with minor modifications:

* Bray, Olive (ed. and trans.). *The Elder or Poetic Edda. The Mythological Poems*, Part 1. Viking Club Translation Series, Vol. 2. London: Viking Club, 1908, pp. 277-283.

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* Leach, Maria. *The Beginning*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1956, pp. 178-181. –
Rewritten from R. H. Codrington. *The Melanesians: Studies in Their Anthropology and Folklore*. Oxford: 1891, pp. 156-158.

† “Maya: Secrets of their Ancient World.” Royal Ontario Museum. 100 Queen’s Park Toronto, ON, M5S 2C6. March 18, 2012.

* Recinos, Adrián. *The Popol Vuh*. Trans. Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, English trans. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950, pp. 81-92, 165-173, 186-190.

* Sandars, N. K. *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 73-111.

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* found in *Primal Myths*, edited by Barbara C. Sproul, cited below.

† This exhibit had a translation of the beginning of the *Popol Vuh* that I preferred to Tedlock's translation. The only place other than the exhibit that I could find the quote was on the ROM's website. This quote makes up the first three sentences of the Mayan scene.

I used the following sources for further research into the backgrounds of the myths:

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- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. "Marduk." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 8. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 5702-5703.
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THE ASH AND THE ELDER

Some notes on the text:

- 1) The Narrator should be played by a different actor in each story.
- 2) The Narrator is not necessarily safe from the action of the story—s/he may be in danger of getting trampled by giants or overrun in battles.
- 3) The gender of the characters is not rigid.
- 4) This play is about stories, with less of an emphasis on the cultures they come from.

The God Amma, The Jackal, and the First Language of the World – Dogon

The Storyteller/The God Amma

The Listener/The Jackal

The Earth

The Nummo (2 actors)

Two humans

(Dark. Lights come up on THE STORYTELLER, the oldest, wisest man around, and THE LISTENER, both seated. They are the only things visible on stage.)

(THE STORYTELLER strikes a match and lights a cigarette. He inhales deeply. He takes his time.)

THE STORYTELLER

Tobacco. Makes for right thinking.

(THE STORYTELLER tells the following to enlighten THE LISTENER. He takes his time, so THE LISTENER can understand. It takes a long time to explain the creation of the world.)

(THE STORYTELLER can address the audience as well as THE LISTENER.)

THE STORYTELLER

I will begin with the dawn of things. The stars above come from handfuls of earth flung out into space by the God Amma, the One God. He created the sun and moon through the art of pottery, the first invention of God. The sun is, in a sense, a pot, raised to white heat, and surrounded by a spiral of red copper. The moon is the same, only the copper is white, and it was heated only one quarter at a time.

It is quite true that in the course of time, women took down the stars to give them to their children. The children put spindles through them and spun them like fiery tops to show how the world turned. But that was only a game.

Now, to create the earth, the God Amma took a huge lump of clay, squeezed it in his hand and flung it from him, as he had done with the stars. The clay spread and fell from the north to the south of the world, which lay flat, north at the top and south at the bottom. With no other creature for company, Amma was lonely, and in time desired the earth. Though she tried to resist, Amma overcame the earth. That was the occasion of the first breach of the order of the universe. From this defective union was born not twins, as intended, but a single being, the jackal, the symbol of the difficulties of God.

(THE STORYTELLER is careful when talking about the difficulties of God, in case God hears him.)

As the God Amma had further intercourse with his earth-wife, water, the divine seed, entered the womb of the earth, and resulted in the birth of twins. They were green in color, sleek like the surface of water, half human and half serpent. These spirits, called Nummo, were products of God, of divine essence like himself, born perfect and complete, the ideal unit. Nummo, the Pair, are present in all water: seas, coasts, storms, and the spoonfuls we drink.

(As THE STORYTELLER speaks about NUMMO, two actors can be seen elsewhere on stage, born out of the earth.)

THE STORYTELLER

Without Nummo, it was not possible to create the earth, for the earth was molded from clay, and it is from water, from Nummo, that life is derived. Even in a stone there is this force, for there is moisture in everything.

The Nummo looked down from heaven and saw that their mother the earth lay naked and speechless as a consequence of the God Amma's original violation. It was necessary to put an end to this disorder. The Nummo came to earth and brought with them fibers pulled from plants in the heavenly regions. They wove a garment from these fibers to clothe the earth: the first act in the ordering of the universe. This fabric was full of water and words, and thus clothed, the earth had a language, the first and most primitive of all languages. Its syntax was elementary, its verbs few, and its vocabulary inelegant. The words were breathed sounds, scarcely different from one another, but nevertheless vehicles for communication and thought. This ill-defined speech sufficed for the great works of the beginnings of things.

Speech organizes—it is good—but from the start it let loose disorder. The jackal, the deceitful son of God, wanted nothing more than to lay his hands on the fiber of his mother's skirt and possess speech, that necessity of all beings.

(THE LISTENER, as THE JACKAL, leaps from his seat. He sneaks over to THE EARTH, who is dressed in the heavenly fabric containing speech. THE EARTH turns; sees him. There is a scuffle as THE JACKAL tries to absorb speech from THE EARTH. THE JACKAL overpowers THE EARTH, and knocks her to the ground.)

THE JACKAL
(realizing he can speak)

Please, I am so lonely, and there is no one else alive but you!

(The lights go out on them as THE JACKAL violently kisses THE EARTH; the beginning of an act of incest.)

THE STORYTELLER

The jackal was alone from birth, and because of this he did more terrible things than can be told. Ever after, he had the power of language, and could reveal the designs of God to human diviners.

The God Amma was repulsed by the jackal's incestuous defilement of the earth. He rejected his earth spouse and decided to create new beings—humans.

(THE STORYTELLER, as THE GOD AMMA, paints two human outlines—one male and one female—on two easels. He sprinkles water on them, and the easels move aside to reveal one figure, both male and female—like THE NUMMO, two beings, joined.)

THE GOD AMMA

A twin being, half male and half female, so no human is ever alone.

(THE NUMMO inspect THE GOD AMMA's creation. THE NUMMO poke and prod THE HUMAN, who is agitated. Both halves try to move on their own, but cannot. They try to break from each other, but cannot. They try furiously to sit, walk, run, jump, etc. but they cannot function.)

THE NUMMO
(They speak in unison.)

This creature is not a god. Its life cannot support two souls in one being.

(THE NUMMO splits the human. This may be a painful process. It should be slow, ceremonial, and sacred. Once split, MAN and WOMAN face each other.)

THE NUMMO
(to *THE GOD AMMA*)

Each individual must merge into the sex for which it is best fitted. But every human will have a twin soul, male and female, to replace twin birth. This way, no one will be alone.

(to *THE HUMANS*)

Welcome to the beginning of the world.

(During the transition, the barrels are pushed out of sight, the paper outlines of the humans are crumpled and hidden, and the stage is empty again when the lights come up, extra bright, on the world of the next myth.)

Qat Finds Night – Banks Islands Melanesians

Narrator/Qong
Qat
Humans (4 actors)
Marawa

NARRATOR

In the beginning, there was light. It never dimmed, and there was no rest from it. Under the light was a huge stone, the mother Qatgoro. The stone split in two, and from it the god Qat and his brother Marawa were born. Qat had no father, and when he came forth, he named himself, and began making things right away.

Qat made mankind from the dracaena tree. He carved arms and legs and bellies and heads and ears and eyes and fingers and toes, and he fitted them together, slowly and carefully.

(A drumbeat, conducted by QAT, begins onstage. As the drummer(s) plays, THE HUMANS begin to move, animated by the rhythm. This should be dance-like: each movement corresponds to the drumbeat. THE HUMANS dance a simple, rhythmic dance conducted by QAT.)

NARRATOR

Meanwhile, Qat's brother Marawa, the stupid one, was watching. He decided to create people, too.

(MARAWA follows just what QAT did. MARAWA conducts a drummer for them as well, and his HUMANS animate just like QAT's did.)

NARRATOR

But Marawa the Fool was so stupid that he dug a pit, and buried the people he had just created.

Marawa the Fool forgot to check on his humans for a full week. When he remembered them, he scraped away the earth over the pit and found that the people inside had rotted. The smell was so bad that Marawa covered them with earth again, and thus death came into the world.

Meanwhile, Qat was busy creating pigs and canoes and food. But he did not know how to make darkness.

MARAWA

It is too bright! There is nothing but light all the time, Qat! Can't you do something?

NARRATOR

Qat set off for the far edge of the sky, to a place called Qong, or night. He brought Qong a pig, and in exchange, Qong gave him black eyebrows and taught him how to sleep.

QONG

Take this, and when you are ready, throw it into the sky. Night will come; everything will go dark. You must teach your people to sleep.

QAT

Spread this on the ground, and lie down.

(The lights dim, and then go out. As this happens:)

MARAWA

The sun is departing!

HUMANS

Will it come back?

What is spreading and covering the sky?

QAT

That is night. Lie down and stay quiet.

HUMAN

Are we dying?

QAT

This is just sleep. You will feel full and dreamy, and your eyes will grow heavy and close.

NARRATOR

Only the birds knew how long night should last, and when the day was ready to come back, the birds crowed and Qat took a piece of red obsidian for a knife, and cut a hole in the sky. The first light that seeped through was red, and soon all the light the night had swallowed shone once again. The gods and the humans opened their eyes and started the work of the day.

(Light begins to grow in the space, and everyone awakens.)

NARRATOR

That is the way it is. Night comes. We sleep. Birds call. We wake. Day comes. We work. All because of Qat.

ALL EXCEPT QAT

Day in, day out.

(As these final lines are spoken, the stage is cleared for the next myth.)

The Rise of Marduk (from the *Enuma Elish*) – Babylonian

Narrator
Ea
Apsu
Tiamat
Marduk
Qingu
Anshar
Monsters

NARRATOR

When in the heights heaven was not yet named, and no one had yet called the earth beneath, there was only Apsu, the freshwater sea, and Tiamat, the saltwater sea. Their waters mingled together as a single body and soul, and the sweet and bitter seas produced a whole lineage of gods, each one surpassing the next. The first gods grew for ages, and then Anshar and Kishar, the horizons of sky and earth, came into being. Anshar, king of the young gods, made his son Anu, the heavens, in his likeness. Anu brought Nudimmud-Ea, intellect and wisdom, into being, and Ea was the strongest of all the kindred.

(APSU and TIAMAT roll out 2 sheets of blue fabric: the waters.)

NARRATOR

The young gods began to order the chaotic new world, and they grew rebellious. Discord broke among the brothers, and with all their meeting and warring and dancing in the belly of Apsu and Tiamat, the seas' waters whirled and surged.

(THE GODS dance and fight among the swirling sheets. APSU and TIAMAT pick up the two blue sheets and tie them around themselves, clothing themselves in the seas. THE GODS continue to make a racket. EA alone listens to APSU and TIAMAT's conversation.)

APSU

Day and night there is no rest from these horrible offspring! They are overbearing and proud, and we suffer endlessly from their din. If we do not act against them now, they will wrest our world from us. Let us destroy them, all of their kind, and we will have peace at last and we will sleep again.

TIAMAT

Shall we unmake what we have made? Their ways are troublesome, but let us indulge them a little while.

APSU

I will not stand for this. If we destroy our children, we will have quiet in the daytime and at night when we sleep. I will not be swayed.

EA
(to THE GODS)

We must stay silent this night. Apsu plans to slaughter us, but I will not let this happen. Let Apsu lie tonight, and I will pour sleep upon him, and destroy him.

(Night. APSU and TIAMAT lay asleep. EA approaches APSU sings to charms the waters, placing a spell on APSU. After EA's spell, EA kills APSU by drowning him in his own waters.)

NARRATOR

Ea had slain his enemies, and he rested in peace in Apsu's depths with his wife. It was there that they bore Marduk, the Praised One, the Most Perfect.

(As THE NARRATOR speaks the following, MARDUK is born out of the water, fitted with attributes described.)

NARRATOR

Marduk's four eyes gave him limitless sight, and his four ears heard all. When he spoke, a tongue of fire burst from his lips.

And as Marduk grew, the god Anu was making the four winds. He gave them to young Marduk to play with, and day and night Marduk brought waves and foam to Tiamat's waters, and Tiamat churned and lurched. Unable to sleep or rest, she sought an end to the persistent uproar.

TIAMAT

When Ea killed Apsu my lover, I did not stir. I brought him no help. Now I see we are all being punished. But I will avenge the death of my husband, and march on the fairer gods.

Let us make monsters! Their bodies will rear up and never turn away, and whoever looks upon them will collapse in terror!

NARRATOR

Tiamat spawned the Viper, the Dragon, the Scorpion-Man, the Mad Dog, the Great Lion, and the Howling Storm—eleven terrible beasts in all. They had no pity, and no fear. The final monster was Qingu, and Tiamat made him the strongest among all the monsters, and the head of her army. She gave Qingu the Tables of Fate, so that his word would be irrevocable, and his judgments would last.

TIAMAT
(to the forces of monsters)

Let us march on the fairer gods: Ea, god of wisdom; Anu the winds; and Anshar, king of the gods. Let us avenge the death of Apsu!

NARRATOR

Ea looked on with fear, and reported all he had seen to Anshar, king of the gods.

EA
(to ANSHAR)

Grandfather, our mother Tiamat loathes us. I have seen her monstrous brood, and I know I cannot defeat them. Whoever looks upon them will collapse in terror!

ANSHAR

You are the hero who slew Apsu. Who else will face Tiamat in her rage?

EA

Which one of us is most powerful in battle? The hero Marduk! No one else can face Tiamat and return.

MARDUK

I will accomplish all that you wish me to. I will go before Tiamat and slay her. But if I am to be your champion, you must make me supreme. From now on Anshar, my word will replace yours as the word of destiny, and my decrees will be law. And whatever I create will remain unchanged.

ANSHAR

In return for annihilating Tiamat and her monsters, I will pass my authority to you. We will make you king of the gods and of all the universe, and you will have the power to create as you wish.

MARDUK

Why do you set your heart on faction? You are the mother of all, why must you mother war? You have abused the gods my ancestors and now you threaten your sons Anu and Anshar. You have marshaled your forces. Now stand up yourself and we will fight, you and I alone in battle.

TIAMAT
(to MARDUK)

Upstart! You are so young; your ambition is beyond you. You think yourself too great.

NARRATOR

Marduk harnessed all his strength, and Anu released the four winds to whip Tiamat's waters. Tiamat screamed poisons and cast spells, but Marduk let loose his arrows, and cut Tiamat in half. Tiamat's monsters trembled in terror, and Marduk smashed their weapons and ensnared them in a net.

Then began the work of creation. Marduk divided Tiamat's monstrous shape, and created marvels from it. With one half of Tiamat's body, Marduk created the arc of the sky, and made the images of the Great Gods in the stars. With the other half, he laid out the earth, a great dwelling above the waters of Apsu. He let the rivers Tigris and Euphrates flow from her eyes, and piled huge mountains over her body. At the gate of the great abyss of Apsu, Marduk placed Tiamat's eleven monsters, to make sure that she was never forgotten.

He measured the year, and gave it a beginning and end. He created the moon, giving the night to it, and making it the measure of a month as it grew from full to full.

And the gods crowned Marduk king, and he addressed them:

MARDUK

In the former time, you inhabited the void above the abyss, but I have made Earth as the mirror of Heaven, and have consolidated the soil for the foundations. There I shall build my city and my beloved home. When you come up from the deep, or descend from Heaven, you shall find lodging in Babylon, the home of the gods.

EA

This great lord was once our son, and now he is our king.

THE GODS

We invoke him as the blaze of light, the scepter of peace, and the war of the mace.
Let Ea be his architect, and draw the plan for his city, and we will be his bricklayers!

MARDUK

As it was Qingu who led the battle for Tiamat, I have cut his arteries from his body to
make man, and man will free the gods from their labor.

EA

Blood to blood I join,
Blood to bone I form
An original thing,
Its name is Man.

All his occupations
Are faithful service
The gods that fell
Will have rest.

The Four Creations of Man (from the *Popol Vuh*) – Quiché Maya

Narrator
Tepeu
Gucumatz
Ensemble (4 actors)

(A light comes on and we see only the NARRATOR.)

NARRATOR

This is the account of when all is still and placid. All is silent and calm. Hushed is the womb of the sky. This is the beginning of the Ancient Word, the source for everything in the nation of the Quiché people.

Whatever there is or might be was not there yet: there was neither man, nor animal, nor stones, caves, ravines, grasses, or forests; there was only the sky, the invisible face of the earth, and the calm sea. There was nothing that could make a sound.

Only the Maker and Heart of Sky, the Bearer and Begetter, the Forefathers Tepeu and Guccumatz, were in the water. They were the great thinkers, and they brought their words together, joined them with their thoughts, and planned creation. They conferred about life and light and dawn and sustenance. Their words and their thoughts were so clear that whatever they said came to be.

GUCUMATZ

How should it be sown, how should it dawn? Who is to be the provider and nurturer?

TEPEU

Let it be like this: that the water should be emptied. Let the emptiness be filled with the plate of the earth, to be made ready for sowing and brightening and warming. But there will be no high days and no bright praise for our work and our design until the rise of the human work and human design.

NARRATOR

They created the earth by saying it.

TEPEU AND GUCUMATZ

Earth!

NARRATOR

Instantly it was made. So it was that they perfected the work, after thinking and meditating on it. And they populated the earth with creatures.

TEPEU
(to the animals)

Speak, don't mutter or cry out. Talk, each one to each one, to each kind, to each group of you.

(A cacophony of animal sounds.)

GUCUMATZ

Say our names, praise the Mother and Father. Speak to us as who we are: Lightning Hurricane, Heart of Sky, Maker, Feathered Serpent.

(More squawks, warbles, roars.)

TEPEU

They have not named us. They cannot praise us, nourish us, or sustain us. We are their makers, and we will have to begin again.

GUCUMATZ
(to the animals)

You do not speak, so we will change you and remake you. You will serve, but you will not lead. You will sleep and eat in forests and canyons. You will be eaten. You will kill and be killed. You will stay low, since you cannot talk and you cannot praise your Mason and Sculptor.

NARRATOR

And as the Makers had not heard their speech among the animals of the First Creation, they tried again to create a foodbringer and a praisegiver, and quickly, because the planting time was coming. They built and worked with earth and mud, but their creation was damp and watery.

TEPEU

It cannot walk, it cannot make more of itself, and it will not last, it will only get wetter. Let it melt away and be just a thought.

(TEPEU and GUCUMATZ let THE HUMAN dissolve in the water.)

NARRATOR

So Tepeu and Gucumatz carved a man out of wood.

(TEPEU and GUCUMATZ carve a man of wood.)

GUCUMATZ

This one turned out nicely. He looks like a man.

NARRATOR

And so it was that men were carved out of wood. And they could speak and walk, and they multiplied. And the earth was full of their sons and daughters.

But they had no minds and no memories. They walked on all fours, and they had no hearts, and did not remember their makers, the Heart of Sky and Feathered Serpent.

So the Makers brought down a great flood upon the wooden ones, and they fell, just cutouts for humankind.

Some of the wooden creatures escaped into trees, and still live there. We call them monkeys, and they look human. Such was the scattering of the human work, the human design.

And the Bearer and Begetter spoke:

TEPEU

The dawn has approached, preparations have been made.

GUCUMATZ

Morning has come for the provider and nurturer, born and begotten in the light.

TEPEU AND GUCUMATZ

Morning has come for humankind, for the people of the face of the earth.

NARRATOR

And four animals approached the Makers: a fox, coyote, parrot, and crow.

ANIMALS

We have brought you yellow and white corn.

We come from Broken Place, where corn and food are plentiful.

We have brought you materials for a new race, and the food for them to eat.

TEPEU

Yellow and white corn for the flesh of humankind.

GUCUMATZ

Water for the blood.

TEPEU and GUCUMATZ

Thus the race of humans is born.

TEPEU

You are the ancestors. You are not born of mothers, but made.

GUCUMATZ

What do you know about your being? Do you look, do you listen? Is your speech good?

TEPEU

Do you know? Do you see?

FIRST HUMAN

We see everything under the sky perfectly.

SECOND HUMAN

We see what is far and near, what is great and small.

THIRD HUMAN

Our sight passes through trees and rocks, over mountains and plains.

FOURTH HUMAN

We have mouths, and we can talk.

THE HUMANS

Praise be to you, Makers, for having formed us. Three times thanks to have made us.

GUCUMATZ

You see and understand too much. That is not good. You do not need to know everything perfectly. You will come as great as gods with this vision.

TEPEU

Let it be like this: You are our designs, and you should not know or see as we do. So you shall see only what is near you, only a little of the face of the earth. Be satisfied with sowing and reaping, and reproducing.

(TEPEU and GUCUMATZ blow sand into the eyes of the humans, clouding their vision.)

GUCUMATZ

You are not gods, so you shall lose your complete knowledge of things. You shall know some, and a few among you shall know a little more. And we shall give you families, and you will be the root of the Quiché people.

NARRATOR

Such was the making and modeling of our first grandfathers, our fathers, by Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth, Tepeu and Gucumatz.

The Giant, The Ash, and The Elder & Ragnarok, The End of The World – Norse

Narrator

Ymir

Odin

Vili

Ve

Three Norns

Black Surt

Gods

NARRATOR

Burning ice and biting flame: that is how life began. Early in the morning of time there was no grass, no sea, no moon, and no earth. There was Niflheim, a wasteland of frozen fog, and Muspelheim, a land of raging flames. Black Surt lives there, brandishing his flaming sword and waiting for the end when he will rise against the gods and take the whole world with fire.

Between the fog and the fire was a gaping abyss called Ginungagap, and it was here that swirling ice and blazing flame met and kindled a spark of life. As fire began to melt the ice, life quickened in those drops, and took the form of a frost giant, Ymir, the first of the jotun race. At his side was an ice cow, whose four rivers of milk fed Ymir as he grew.

(YMIR and the COW appear onstage. YMIR is huge—he towers over everything else onstage.)

In time, Ymir fathered jotun children who grew from his left armpit and between his toes. He was the forefather of all the frost giants, and his children were huge and rough and wild. The ice cow had offspring as well. As she fed off the frozen land, she uncovered a man within the ice blocks. His name was Buri, and he was tall and strong and handsome, unlike Ymir's jotun children. In time, he had a son who married a jotun maiden, and they had three children: Odin, or Spirit, Vili, or Will, and Ve, or Warmth, the first of the great Aesir gods.

ODIN

If we are to create a world, we must get rid of the jotuns. They are brutal and unruly, and they are not capable of sharing an earth with other creatures.

VILI and VE

Agreed.

(A battle. It takes all three AESIR to overpower YMIR. As YMIR falls, the AESIR catch him and lay him down on the floor.)

NARRATOR

Odin, Vili, and Ve slew Ymir, and so much blood flowed from his wounds that it filled Ginungagap and drowned the jotuns, except for one jotun family who escaped into the farthest edges of the sea made by Ymir's blood. There, they established Jotunheim and sustained the giant race. That was the beginning of the bitterness between the jotuns and Aesir.

The Aesir shaped Midgard, the earth, from Ymir's flesh and the mountains from his bones. From his teeth and jaws they made rocks and boulders and stones, and they girdled the earth in the new seas that flowed from his body. They pushed Niflheim deep underground where its ice and frost would not freeze the young earth, and over land and sea they set Ymir's skull and made the dome of the sky. They dotted it with sparks and glowing embers from Muspelheim and called them sun and moon and stars, and they lit Midgard from the heavens above.

VILI

With the earth thus settled, it is time to populate it.

(VILI walks over to the easels, and begins to draw.)

VILI

From the worms deep in the ground will come gnomes, to live underground and mine precious metals and form them into tools.

VE

I have seen a jotun maiden, dark eyed and dark haired, called Night. She has a son called Day who is radiant and fair. They shall each have a chariot to be drawn by two horses, and they will ride across the sky each day, bringing light and darkness.

NARRATOR

But the jotuns were creatures of darkness and hated light. They released a wolf called Skoll to chase the sun across the sky, and that is why the sun is always so rushed. In the end, the wolf will catch him, and extinguish light on earth.

The Aesir made fish for the sea, birds for the sky, and beasts for the land and forests, and soon Midgard was teeming with creatures.

ODIN

The only thing missing is a being to praise and worship us. At the very edge of Midgard, where the land meets the sea, there are two fallen trees, an ash and an elder. From these we will create a new race, tall as gods and tough as wood.

(ODIN, VILI, and VE stand the two trees up on their feet.)

ODIN

I breathe into you the spirit of life, a spirit that will never die, even after your body is dust and ashes. Let your sap run warm in your veins!

VILI

I offer you sharp wits, and the will to think and move.

VE

I give you feeling and warmth, and hearing and sight.

(ASK and EMBLA twist into human form, standing upright.)

ODIN

You will be our greatest creations, so you must have names and clothing to separate you from beasts. Take our cloaks and cover yourselves until you learn to make your own clothing.

VILI

Take for yourselves the names of the trees you were carved from: Ask and Embla.

VE

The whole earth is yours for your home. And to keep the hostile jotun from spilling onto Midgard, we will fence off Jotunheim with Ymir's eyebrows, and you will be safe in your home.

NARRATOR

The Aesir created a home for themselves in Asgard, and from there they watched over Ask and Embla and all their offspring. The first generation had skin as rough as bark and gnarled joints, and they were brutish. However, with each successive generation, the human race improved. Ask and Embla's grandchildren tilled the soil, built houses for themselves, and sailed the seas, and their children were finer still. In

the disguise of a wise old wanderer, Odin would cross the rainbow bridge from Asgard to Midgard, and teach the humans hospitality and manners.

ODIN

Always keep your door open to the weary traveler. The man who comes to your house with shivering knees needs a place by the fire, dry clothes, and warm food.

When you enter the house of a stranger, take the seat that is offered to you, and listen more than you speak. That way, no one will notice how little you know.

Men die, cattle die, you yourselves must die as well. There is only one thing that will not die: the name, good or bad, that you have made for yourself.

NARRATOR

The human beings were thankful to the Aesir, and they sacrificed to them and worshipped them. In return, the Aesir were fond of mankind, and protected them from the jotuns.

The axis of all the worlds was the living ash tree Yggdrasill. Its branches sheltered gods and men, giants and dwarves, elves and jotun, and it had three great roots. The first lay deep in Niflheim, where the dragon Nidhogg chewed on the root of the tree, trying to loosen its foundation and topple the eternal. The second root stretched into Asgard, and under it ran the well of Destiny, where the gods held their court of justice. The third root bore into Jotunheim, the realm of the frost giants. Under this root flowed another spring, the well of Wisdom, guarded by the wise old jotun Mimir. This well gave knowledge and insight to any who drunk from it, and Odin gave Mimir one of his eyes for a single sip. From this sip he gained not only wisdom, but a fierce hunger for more knowledge.

(ODIN slowly approaches Yggdrasill with a rope. He ties one end of the rope to the tree, and at the other end, he fastens a noose. He ties the noose around his neck, and pulls it tight.)

ODIN

I offer myself on Yggdrasill as a sacrifice to Odin, myself to myself.

(ODIN hangs for nine days and nine nights. Then he cuts himself down.)

ODIN

No one has known or ever will know the roots of that ancient tree. For nine days and nights, I stared at the world below without closing my eye. No one revived me with bread or water. I died and rose again, and I have won the wisdom possessed by the

dead to bring back to the world of the living. I have seen the branches of Yggdrasill fall into shapes and symbols—runes, from which I learned charms and spells. I will learn from giants, from seers raised from the dead, and from hanged men, for I have died and have risen again, I have sacrificed myself to myself and become the Lord of the Gallows, the All-Father.

NARRATOR

But for all his wisdom, it was not Odin, nor indeed any of the Aesir who decided the fate of every being, but the three Norns, Fate, Being, and Necessity. They dwelled in Asgard by the well of Destiny, and every day they sprinkled water on Yggdrasill's branches, and nourished the suffering tree. They knew what was, what is, and what will be, and to every newborn, they willed a life of luck or misery, a short or long life. They spun a thread for each human: gray for most people, but for farmers and freemen they spun threads of brighter colors, and for a great hero or prince, they spun a thread of bright gold. Even the Aesir had to bow to the will of the Norns, for like all things, they must die when the Norns decree it.

THE NORNS

Axe-age, sword-age; shields will be gashed:
Await a wind-age and wolf-age before the world is thrashed.

FIRST NORN

Ragnarok, the end of the world and the death of the gods, begins with war. For three winters, Midgard will be racked by wars. Brothers will kill brothers out of nothing but greed, fathers will be drenched in their children's blood, women will desert their men and bed their sons, and all ties of kinship will collapse.

SECOND NORN

Then will follow the winter of all winters. Snow and wind from all directions will batter Midgard. The sun will be of no use. There will be three of these winters, one after another, without summers in between.

THIRD NORN

So the end begins. The wolf Skoll, released long ago by the jotun to swallow the sun, will finally reach him, seize him between his jaws, and devour him. Skoll's brother Hati will mangle the moon, and the stars will vanish from the sky. Without its companions to light it, the earth will begin to shudder. Great trees will sway and topple, mountains will shake, and every bond and manacle will burst.

SECOND NORN

Three roosters crow: one to the giants in the bird-wood; one to wake the warriors in Valhalla, the hall of dead heroes; and one to raise the dead in the lands of Hel. The sea rears up as the terrible serpent Jormungand wrapped around Midgard thrashes in fury, working its way onto dry land. Upon the tossing sea will sail Naglfar, the ship made from dead men's fingernails, packed with giants and the dead risen from Hel's lair.

FIRST NORN

The jotun Black Surt has spent his ages waiting for this time, when he will lead monsters, giants, and the dead across the rainbow bridge to Asgard and do battle on that great plain. With his flaming sword and ghastly army, he marches into the realm of the gods, and in a great war, enemies meet to destroy each other.

(A battle. Gods are killed.)

THIRD NORN

Black Surt flings fire in every direction. Asgard and Midgard and Jotunheim and Niflheim are engulfed in flame and smoke and ashes.

SECOND NORN

The nine worlds burn. The ash tree Yggdrasill shivers and shakes as a man and a woman take refuge within it.

(The stage is bathed in red. Hissing, spitting fire sounds.)

VOICES

The gods die. Men and women and children die. Elves and dwarves and giants die. Birds and fish and monsters die. The earth sinks into the sea.

(Silence. The stage is cleared. A pause, in which we are not sure if the earth ever rises again.)

VOICES

The earth rises out of the water, green and fresh.

Birds fly out over the rivers.

Wheat ripens in fields never sown.

The sons of the god Thor will survive the fire and the flood, and make their way back to Asgard, to the shining plain where the palaces of the Aesir once stood. They will sit out in the light of a new sun, and call up memories of a world past. They will find among the grasses treasures once owned by the Aesir.

A man and woman emerge from deep within Yggdrasil. Surt's fire did not touch them, and through the ash tree's leaves and branches, they will see the light from the child of the sun they once knew.

They will bear children, and their children will bear children.

There will be life again, new and old.

That was the end. This is the beginning.

(Blackout.)