

WINDIGO FOOTPRINTS

In the winter brilliance, the only sounds are the rub of my jacket against itself, the soft *ploompf* of my snowshoes, the rifle-shot crack of trees bursting their hearts in the freezing temperatures, and the beating of my own heart, pumping hot blood to fingers still tingling in double mittens. In the break between squalls, the sky is painfully blue. The snowfields sparkle below like shattered glass.

This last storm has sculpted the drifts like surf on a frozen sea. Earlier, my tracks were filled with pink and yellow shadows; now they deepen to blue in the fading light. I walk alongside fox tracks, vole tunnels, and a bright-red spatter in the snow framed by the imprint of hawk wings.

Everybody's hungry.

When the wind picks up again I can smell more snow coming and within minutes the squall line roars over the treetops, carrying flakes like a gray curtain blowing straight at me. I turn to get to shelter before full dark, retracing my steps, which have already begun to fill. When I look more closely I can see that inside each of my tracks is another print that is not my tread. I scan the growing darkness for a figure, but the snow is too heavy to see. The trees thrash beneath racing clouds. A howl rises behind me. Maybe it's just the wind.

It is on nights like this that the Windigo is afoot. You can hear its unearthly shrieks as it hunts through the blizzard.

The Windigo is the legendary monster of our Anishinaabe people, the villain of a tale told on freezing nights in the north woods. You can feel it lurking behind you, a being in the shape of an outsized man, ten feet tall, with frost-white hair hanging from its shaking body. With arms like tree trunks, feet as big as snowshoes, it travels easily through the blizzards of the hungry time, stalking us. The hideous stench of its carrion breath poisons the clean scent of snow as it pants behind us. Yellow fangs hang from its mouth that is raw where it has chewed off its lips from hunger. Most telling of all, its heart is made of ice.

Windigo stories were told around the fire to scare children into safe behavior lest this Ojibwe boogeyman make a meal of them. Or worse. This monster is no bear or howling wolf, no natural beast. Windigos are not born, they are made. The Windigo is a human being who has become a cannibal monster. Its bite will transform victims into cannibals too.

When I come in from the rising blizzard and peel off my ice-coated clothes, there is a fire in the woodstove and a simmering pot of stew. It wasn't always that way for our people, when the storms would bury the lodges and the food was gone. They named this time—when the snow is too deep and the deer are gone and the caches are empty—the Hunger Moon. It is the time when an elder leaves to hunt and never returns. When sucking a bone is not enough, the infants follow. After too many days, desperation is the only soup.

Starvation in winter was a reality for our people, particularly in the era of the Little Ice Age when winters were especially hard and long. Some scholars suggest that Windigo mythology also spread quickly in the time of the fur trade, when overexploitation of game brought famine to the villages. The ever-present fear of winter famine is embodied in the icy hunger and gaping maw of the Windigo.

As the monster shrieked on the wind, the Windigo stories reinforced the taboo against cannibalism, when the madness of hunger and isolation rustled at the edge of winter lodges. Succumbing to such a repulsive urge doomed the gnawer of bones to wander as a Windigo for the rest

of time. It is said that the Windigo will never enter the spirit world but will suffer the eternal pain of need, its essence a hunger that will never be sated. The more a Windigo eats, the more ravenous it becomes. It shrieks with its craving, its mind a torture of unmet want. Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind.

But the Windigo is more than just a mythic monster intended to frighten children. Creation stories offer a glimpse into the worldview of a people, of how they understand themselves, their place in the world, and the ideals to which they aspire. Likewise, the collective fears and deepest values of a people are also seen in the visage of the monsters they create. Born of our fears and our failings, Windigo is the name for that within us which cares more for its own survival than for anything else.

In terms of systems science, the Windigo is a case study of a positive feedback loop, in which a change in one entity promotes a similar change in another, connected part of the system. In this case, an increase in Windigo hunger causes an increase in Windigo eating, and that increased eating promotes only more rampant hunger in an eventual frenzy of uncontrolled consumption. In the natural as well as the built environment, positive feedback leads inexorably to change. Sometimes to growth, sometimes to destruction. When growth is unbalanced, however, you can't always tell the difference.

Stable, balanced systems are typified by negative feedback loops, in which a change in one component incites an opposite change in another, so they balance each other out. When hunger causes increased eating, eating causes decreased hunger; satiety is possible. Negative feedback is a form of reciprocity, a coupling of forces that create balance and sustainability.

Windigo stories sought to encourage negative feedback loops in the minds of listeners. Traditional upbringing was designed to strengthen self-discipline, to build resistance against the insidious germ of taking

too much. The old teachings recognized that Windigo nature is in each of us, so the monster was created in stories, that we might learn why we should recoil from the greedy part of ourselves. This is why Anishinaabe elders like Stewart King remind us to always acknowledge the two faces—the light and the dark side of life—in order to understand ourselves. See the dark, recognize its power, but do not feed it.

The beast has been called an evil spirit that devours mankind. The very word, *Windigo*, according to Ojibwe scholar Basil Johnston, can be derived from roots meaning “fat excess” or “thinking only of oneself.” Writer Steve Pitt states that “a Windigo was a human whose selfishness has overpowered their self-control to the point that satisfaction is no longer possible.”

No matter what they call it, Johnston and many other scholars point to the current epidemic of self-destructive practices—addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, technology, and more—as a sign that Windigo is alive and well. In Ojibwe ethics, Pitt says, “any overindulgent habit is self-destructive, and self-destruction is Windigo.” And just as Windigo’s bite is infectious, we all know too well that self-destruction drags along many more victims—in our human families as well as in the more-than-human world.

The native habitat of the Windigo is the north woods, but the range has expanded in the last few centuries. As Johnston suggests, multinational corporations have spawned a new breed of Windigo that insatiably devours the earth’s resources “not for need but for greed.” The footprints are all around us, once you know what to look for.

Our plane had to land for repairs on a short paved strip in the jungle at the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon oil fields, a few miles from the Colombian border. We flew in over unbroken rainforest, following the river shining like a blue satin ribbon below. But the water abruptly turned black when we flew over the raw gashes of red soil marking the paths of pipelines.

Our hotel was on a dirt street where dead dogs and prostitutes shared

the corners under a perpetually orange sky lit by the flaring stacks. When we got the room key, the concierge told us to push a dresser against the door and not leave our rooms during the night. In the lobby was a cage of scarlet macaws, staring dully at the street, where half-naked children were begging and AK47s hung from the shoulders of boys no older than twelve, standing guard outside the houses of the narcotraffickers. We passed the night without incident.

The next morning we flew out as the sun rose over the steaming jungle. Below us was the snarling town ringed with rainbow-colored lagoons of petrochemical waste, too many to count. The footprints of the Windigo.

They’re everywhere you look. They stomp in the industrial sludge of Onondaga Lake. And over a savagely clear-cut slope in the Oregon Coast Range where the earth is slumping into the river. You can see them where coal mines rip off mountaintops in West Virginia and in oil-slick footprints on the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico. A square mile of industrial soybeans. A diamond mine in Rwanda. A closet stuffed with clothes. Windigo footprints all, they are the tracks of insatiable consumption. So many have been bitten. You can see them walking the malls, eyeing your farm for a housing development, running for Congress.

We are all complicit. We’ve allowed the “market” to define what we value so that the redefined common good seems to depend on profligate lifestyles that enrich the sellers while impoverishing the soul and the earth.

Cautionary Windigo tales arose in a commons-based society where sharing was essential to survival and greed made any individual a danger to the whole. In the old times, individuals who endangered the community by taking too much for themselves were first counseled, then ostracized, and if the greed continued, they were eventually banished. The Windigo myth may have arisen from the remembrance of the banished, doomed to wander hungry and alone, wreaking vengeance on the ones who spurned them. It is a terrible punishment to be banished from the web of reciprocity, with no one to share with you and no one for you to care for.

I remember walking a street in Manhattan, where the warm light of a lavish home spilled out over the sidewalk on a man picking through the garbage for his dinner. Maybe we've all been banished to lonely corners by our obsession with private property. We've accepted banishment even from ourselves when we spend our beautiful, utterly singular lives on making more money, to buy more things that feed but never satisfy. It is the Windigo way that tricks us into believing that belongings will fill our hunger, when it is belonging that we crave.

On a grander scale, too, we seem to be living in an era of Windigo economics of fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption. What Native peoples once sought to rein in, we are now asked to unleash in a systematic policy of sanctioned greed.

The fear for me is far greater than just acknowledging the Windigo within. The fear for me is that the world has been turned inside out, the dark side made to seem light. Indulgent self-interest that our people once held to be monstrous is now celebrated as success. We are asked to admire what our people viewed as unforgivable. The consumption-driven mind-set masquerades as "quality of life" but eats us from within. It is as if we've been invited to a feast, but the table is laid with food that nourishes only emptiness, the black hole of the stomach that never fills. We have unleashed a monster.

Ecological economists argue for reforms that would ground economics in ecological principles and the constraints of thermodynamics. They urge the embrace of the radical notion that we must sustain natural capital and ecosystem services if we are to maintain quality of life. But governments still cling to the neoclassical fallacy that human consumption has no consequences. We continue to embrace economic systems that prescribe infinite growth on a finite planet, as if somehow the universe had repealed the laws of thermodynamics on our behalf. Perpetual growth is simply not compatible with natural law, and yet a leading economist like Lawrence Summers, of Harvard, the World Bank, and the U.S. National Economic Council, issues such statements as, "There are no limits to the carrying capacity of the earth that are

likely to bind at any time in the foreseeable future. The idea that we should put limits on growth because of some natural limit is a profound error." Our leaders willfully ignore the wisdom and the models of every other species on the planet—except of course those that have gone extinct. Windigo thinking.