

In 1918 Franz Boas, ethnologist and linguist
 passed through Laguna.
 His talented protégé
 Elsie Clews Parsons
 stayed behind to collect Laguna texts
 from which Boas planned to construct
 a grammar of the Laguna language.
 Boas, as it turns out
 was tone-deaf
 and the Laguna language is tonal
 so it is fortunate he allowed Ms. Parsons
 to do the actual collecting of the stories.

Although Boas was never able to construct the Laguna grammar
 he did distinguish himself

with the languages of Northwest Coast tribes
which are not tonal languages.

In the collection which Parsons made
there is a coyote story
told in Laguna
by my great-grandfather.
It is a very simple story
with a little song
which is repeated four times
the meadowlark teasing the she-coyote
calling her

“Coyote long-long-long-long mouth!”

Until Coyote gets so confused and upset
she spits out the water
she was carrying back to her pups.
Four times Coyote tries to carry the water back
and four times Meadowlark sings this song

“Coyote long-long-long-long mouth!”

and Coyote opens her mouth
spilling the water.
When she finally gets back to her pups
they are all dead from thirst.

A good deal of controversy surrounded
and still surrounds my great-grandfather and his brother
who both married Laguna women.

Ethnologists blame the Marmon brothers
for all kinds of factions and trouble at Laguna
and I am sure much of it is true—
their arrival was bound to complicate
the already complex politics at Laguna.
They came on the heels of a Baptist preacher named Gorman
who also must have upset Laguna ceremonialism.

All I know of my great-grandpa Marmon
are the stories my family told
and the old photographs which show him
a tall thin old white man
with a white beard
wearing a black suit coat
and derby hat.

He stands with his darker sons
and behind the wire-rim glasses he wore
I see in his eyes
he had come to understand this world
differently.

Maybe he chose that particular coyote story
to tell Parsons
because for him at Laguna
that was the one thing he had to remember:

No matter what is said to you by anyone
you must take care of those most dear to you.