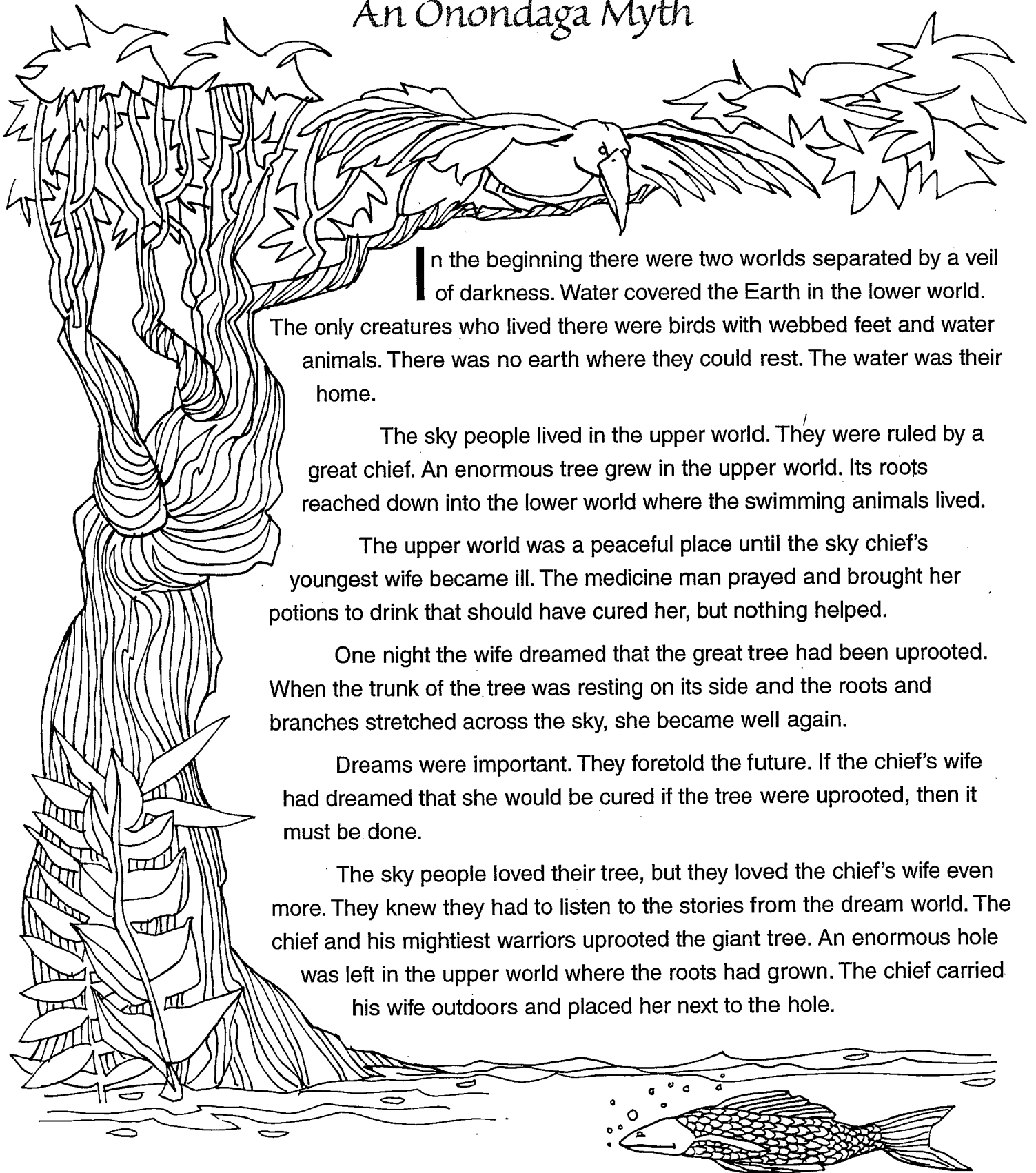


# The Sky Woman

## An Onondaga Myth



In the beginning there were two worlds separated by a veil of darkness. Water covered the Earth in the lower world. The only creatures who lived there were birds with webbed feet and water animals. There was no earth where they could rest. The water was their home.

The sky people lived in the upper world. They were ruled by a great chief. An enormous tree grew in the upper world. Its roots reached down into the lower world where the swimming animals lived.

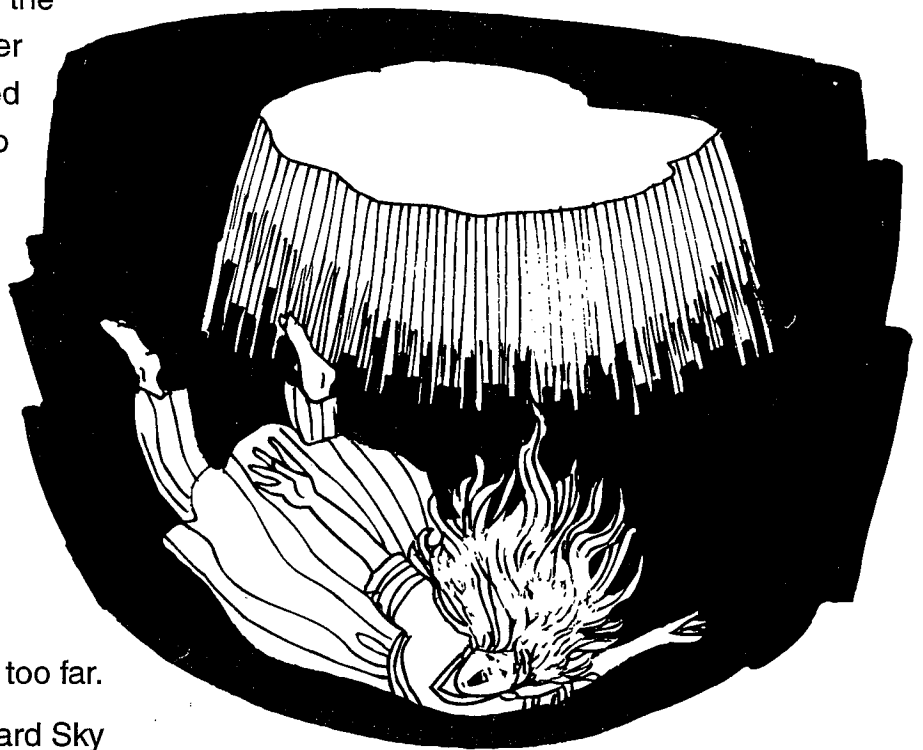
The upper world was a peaceful place until the sky chief's youngest wife became ill. The medicine man prayed and brought her potions to drink that should have cured her, but nothing helped.

One night the wife dreamed that the great tree had been uprooted. When the trunk of the tree was resting on its side and the roots and branches stretched across the sky, she became well again.

Dreams were important. They foretold the future. If the chief's wife had dreamed that she would be cured if the tree were uprooted, then it must be done.

The sky people loved their tree, but they loved the chief's wife even more. They knew they had to listen to the stories from the dream world. The chief and his mightiest warriors uprooted the giant tree. An enormous hole was left in the upper world where the roots had grown. The chief carried his wife outdoors and placed her next to the hole.

The chief's wife heard the animals splashing in the water in the lower world. She leaned over the hole and peered into the darkness below her. She saw shadowy figures and wanted to see them more clearly. She leaned over the hole a little more and slipped into the darkness. She tumbled downward, on and on, through the black mist. The Sky Woman called to her people. They tried to reach her, but she had fallen too far.



The water animals heard Sky Woman's cries and sent two swans to catch her. The swans flew up to Sky Woman and set her on their backs. Gently they floated down to the water. All the animals came to admire the beautiful woman from the upper world.

"What shall we do with her?" asked the loon. "The swans can't carry her on their backs forever. They must look for food and care for their young. She can't live in the water as we do. She doesn't have webbed feet. It's too far to fly to the sky world to take her home."

A great turtle swam up to the swans. "I will care for Sky Woman," he said. "Set her on my back."

"That is well enough for now," said the beaver, "but she needs a bigger place to live. She needs dirt so she can plant and harvest her food. Her home must be larger than a turtle's back."

"There is only one place where we can find dirt. There is land under the water, but it's so far down that no one has ever been there," said the goose.

"Well, then," the muskrat said, "it's time someone made the trip. Who will go first?"

"I'm on my way!" said the beaver. He dove below the surface. The animals watched for his return, but he didn't come back.

"I'll go see what happened," said the otter. "Beaver can't stay under the water this long. While I'm there, I'll find dirt for Sky Woman." The otter dove into the water. The animals waited. She didn't return.

"It was my idea," said the muskrat. "I must see what has happened to my friends. I'll dive all the way to the bottom and find the dirt for Sky Woman before I return." Down he went.

After the muskrat left, the beaver came to the surface. "I dove as far as I could, but I couldn't hold my breath long enough to reach the bottom. I had to come back without the dirt."

Next came the otter. She was almost dead. "I dove until the pain was so great I had to come back. No one can dive far enough to reach the dirt."

The animals waited and circled the water where the muskrat had gone down. They had given up hope of seeing their friend again, when his head bobbed out of the water.

"Is he alive?" asked the loon.

Muskrat was out of breath and he couldn't answer. He opened his paw. Inside was a ball of dirt. The loon took the dirt and gave it to Sky Woman. She spread a bit of dirt around the edge of turtle's shell. The turtle's shell grew bigger. Sky Woman spread more dirt on the shell until it grew into a great island.

Sky Woman felt well again. She built a lodge on the island and lived there happily with the animals.

Not too long after that, the sun, moon, and stars were created, bringing light to the lower world. Sky Woman never found a way to return to her home in the sky, but she was content with the island she had created.

