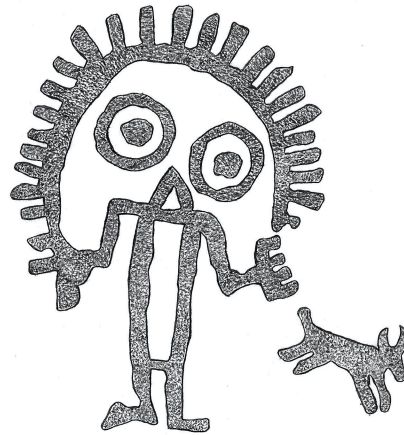
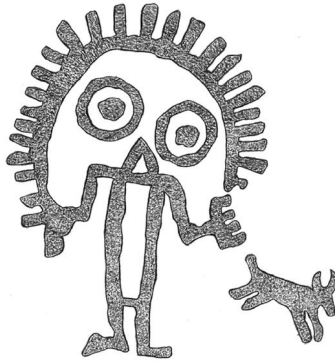


Doty Meets Coyote

Thomas Doty



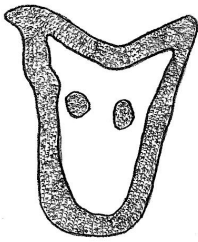
Doty Meets Coyote



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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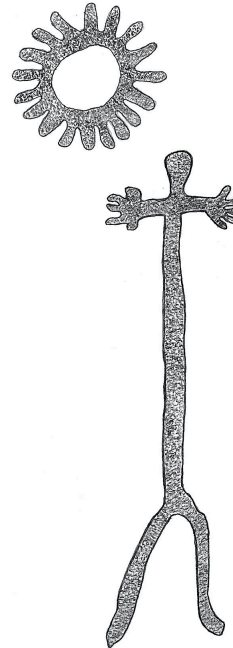
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There I go, wandering from town to town, weaving tales of Coyote and Bear and Bluejay. It has always been my dream — the dream of any storyteller worth his salted salmon — to “become” the stories I tell.



Someday I’ll disappear into the wilderness, the heart of where stories come from. Folks in town will tell stories of a long-haired, wild-eyed fellow as completely at home in the woods as Raven or Skunk, this mad spirit of stories who waylays weary hikers and tells them myths so vivid, so alive, that animal and human shapes leap out of their campfires and dance in their minds. My stories will be so much a part of the woods that at the end I’ll disappear into the shadows of trees without a trace, my words drifting through the wood smoke. This is my dream to be a story.

So imagine my joy when one day near my hometown of Ashland, where the town ends and the woods begin, I get a long look at a coyote as he crosses my path and saunters into the woods. Not just any scraggly and curious coyote, but the scraggly and curious Coyote of story fame, that doggy buffoon and chief trickster, that out-of-focus mirror of humankind.

I pause and ponder the possibilities. Is this pooch my guide to realizing my dream? I shake my head and free myself of the moment. I start to walk home.

But this isn’t the end. Coyote is always up to something. He follows me, lurking in the trees, listening, watching, until he can’t stand it any more. He leaps onto my path and howls, “Hold up!

Hold up! You just get to the best part and quit? Maybe you need a little rest in the country. Sit down and be quiet and I'll finish this story.

“So Doty takes a step beyond his dream of becoming a story. He meets the lifeblood of myth, the dramatist of truth, the most handsome, intelligent fellow ever put into words, the unkillable, enduring bringer of good fortune, this well-groomed charmer of wit, this life of the eternal party of wisdom — me! — Mister Coyote myself.

“So Coyote, taking pity on Doty, lowers his standards and allows the lesser wordsmith to accompany him on his travels, adventure after adventure. They head out of town, Doty stupidly but happily trotting behind.”

So begins the friendship of me and Coyote, the storyteller and the story, a friendship as old as the woods.

I'm still working on becoming my stories. One thing I know: with legendary Coyote along for the ride, my dream has become a journey through the landscape of Mythtime, where anything is possible. So far, it's been a wild and wonderful journey.

That evening, Coyote and I drive in my rig from our Rogue Valley home along the curves of a mountain road, and into the cradle of the Cascade Mountains.

In my home, there is a photograph of me sitting on a log in a forest next to a blazing fire. It is twilight. There is a silhouette of firs and pines behind me, and through the trees is the purple shimmer of Lake of the Woods, and beyond that the wild wilderness of the Cascades. I am long-haired and long-bearded. I am wearing a muslin shirt and jeans faded in the knees, and I am barefoot. It is July, and I am just a few months old as a storyteller.

The fire flares and sends sparks dancing whirligigs. My eyes shine wild. A few feet beyond the circle of firelight, nearly invisible in the shadows of the forest, is Coyote. He whispers to me, “Are you sure you want to do this? In a few minutes an entire Scout troop of adolescent boys will clamor into this picture and plop themselves down and expect to be, at the least, entertained with stories. One will make some sort of noise that only boys think is funny, and the rest will snicker. I hear they can be a tough audience.”

“No problem,” I say. “I'll just give them what they want.”

“What's that?”

“Something about girls, of course. And you're in it!”

“All right!” howls Coyote. “I’m all ears. Quiet now, I think I hear them coming.”

In a cloud of trail dust and flashlights and shouting, thirty boys roar into the firelight. They mostly settle into silence — save a few snickers — and the photograph comes alive as I start my story.

A long, long time ago, Coyote was living near Klamath Lake where he could see Llao Yaina, the mountain that was there before Crater Lake was made. He was living in an open meadow near the lake so he could watch the night sky.

Coyote loved watching the stars. All night long he’d stick his snout into the air and watch the stars walk across the sky, their trails making big arcs. Now Coyote always saw what he wanted to see. So he watched all those stars sticking out their chests and their noses, making a fine walking sound: badoop ... badoop ... badoop....

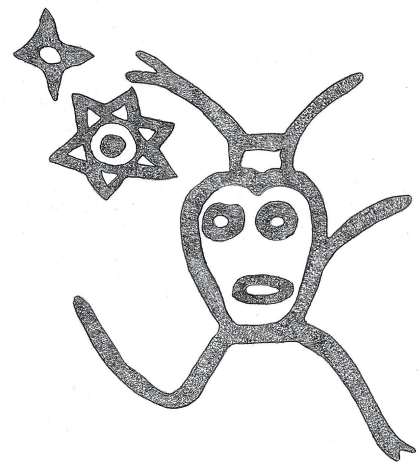
One night Coyote noticed a large star, a good looking star. She was more beautiful than the sun, even more beautiful than the moon. And the star was flashy. She flashed colors: yellows and reds. She was a good looking star.

Coyote likes flashy women. He’s that kind of dog. So he kept watching her, night after night after night, all night long, thinking, “Wowee! That’s a knockout of a star!”

Five nights went by and he started talking to her. But she never answered him. Not one word. She walked across the sky: badoop ... badoop ... badoop.... She looked way down on little Coyote — he was just a ball of fur down on the earth — but she wouldn’t utter a peep.

Coyote started getting wild around the eyes, his eyes bugging out a long ways. He started going crazy for that star. He walked around with his tongue wagging, his eyes bulging, saying, “Look at that star! Is she not a good looking star? Look how she walks, all flashy and everything. And look where she goes, so close to the top of that big mountain. Why, I could run up there, reach up and grab her.”

Coyote thought that was a great idea. He started running. He ran and he ran all through the night, his tongue wagging the whole way. He ran all the next day, his tongue starting to droop a



bit, and by late afternoon, he was all the way up the mountain, his tongue dragging the dirt. He was beyond tired.

But he was thinking of that star. “Well, I better not go to sleep. I might miss her. I’ve missed some pretty good things by sleeping too much. I’ll just walk back and forth on top of this mountain. That will keep me awake.”

So he paced back and forth across the mountain, covering the peak with his tracks. A long while went by, or so it seemed to Coyote.

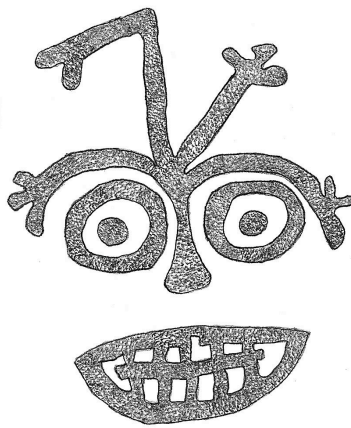
“This is taking forever. A person as important as I am shouldn’t have to wait so long. Besides, I really hate waiting for women. Makes my paws all sweaty.”

Coyote kept pacing. Pacing and waiting. Pacing and waiting. Then suddenly he stopped.

He bugged his eyes. “Look there. The sun’s going down. And there come the stars. One there, another over there. And look, those stars aren’t walking across the sky making that silly badoop noise. Those stars are dancing tonight, right across the sky!”

Coyote went to the edge of the peak to get a better look.

“Wowee! There she is. My star. She’s even better looking up close. And she’s dancing my way.”



Coyote went to the highest place on the peak. “I’d better make myself a little better looking. This is a big-time date.” He started smoothing down his fur, straightening his tail, picking old food out of his teeth, rinsing his armpits with his tongue. “Nothing worse than Coyote pits on a first date.” He worked and he worked, getting himself all spruced up and slicked down.

Now the star danced toward Coyote.

“Come on, star,” whispered Coyote. “Dance a little closer. That’s it. Closer and closer.”

When the star was as close to Coyote as she was going to get, Coyote leaped into the air, panting, his tongue wagging, arms stretching up and up and up ... but he couldn't reach her.

“Hey, star! Reach down your hands. Take me up there with you. I can't quite reach you. This is powerful, lover-boy Coyote talking. Reach down and take me up there with you.”

The star reached down, grabbed Coyote by his sweaty paws, and they started dancing together up from the mountain.

They danced higher and higher into the sky, way over the earth.

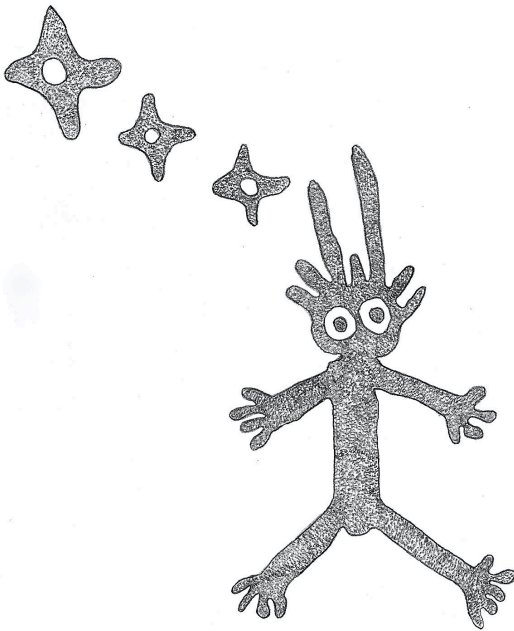
Up high, it was bitter cold. And quiet. None of those stars ever said a word.

Poor Coyote had never been up that high before. He was feeling dizzy, his eyeballs dancing around, and he was holding onto his stomach, trying to keep his last meal from flying out all over the place.

The star went higher and higher.

Coyote called out, “Hey, some of you other stars, this is powerful Coyote talking. Take me back down to the earth. I don't do so well up here. I think I'm going to get sick all over the sky. Take me back down!”

The star held on tight.



They danced higher and higher and higher. When they got to that cold place at the top of the sky, the star let go of Coyote.

She dumped him. Dumped him out of the sky. Dumped him out of love.

Now Coyote was falling like a furry comet, his eyes bugging out and flashing, his tail flying behind. People on the ground were watching. “Hey, look at that stupid Coyote falling out of the sky. Just the sort of thing he'd do just to get attention.”

Coyote fell and fell, picking up speed, getting closer to the earth. He was coming down on top of that mountain, Llao Yaina.

And SPLAT!

At the bottom of the mountain was Mister Bear. The splat of Coyote's liquid impact woke him up. Curious, though a little sleepy and more than a little grumpy, he climbed to what was left of the peak to have a look at things.

"That's Coyote all right," mumbled Bear in his slow, contemplative way. "He's hit the top of the mountain and made a big hole. And all that Coyote blood squirted and squished around until this hole was filled up with blood and bones and ears and eyeballs and fur and all of Coyote's parts. Looks like Coyote stew."

Mister Bear started ambling back down the mountain, still muttering to himself, "But not the kind you'd want to eat. Or smell. Or even get close to. Yuk!" Bear got disgusted and ambled faster.

Rain came, and cold weather, freezing rain and snow. Years and years of rain and snow filled the hole and slowly turned that big bowl of Coyote stew into water. It made a beautiful, deep-blue lake.

People nowadays call that lake Crater Lake, up in the Klamath country.

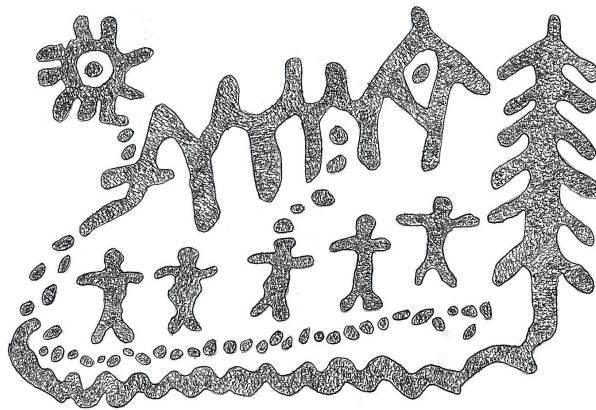
If you go to Crater Lake late at night, you might see Coyote's sons and daughters and grandchildren, all sitting on the rim above the lake, their snouts pointing to the sky, their mouths yapping away.

They're scolding the star that killed their grandfather that long time ago.

I once heard a storyteller add a little epilogue to this story, and I share it with the boys.

"Hey, Coyote! There's that flashy star again. She's a luscious babe and tonight she's dancing close to that mountain, her tasty colors and lickable curves just out of reach. A delicious masquerade, a sweet-talking lure without the words. You've got that peckish, toe-tapping look in your eyes. You've puffed up the slope to the peak. You're ready to make the leap and whirl into the light fantastic. By now your gut is growling and you've forgotten how you suffer the messy results for the sake of your dance. You know what everyone says? Coyote is a reassembly-required kind of dog! And to boot, you're the untiring cliches you can never remember. What are they? Dance like no one is watching? Love like you've never been hurt? Hunger works just as well, right, old friend? Good luck, Mister Coyote! Gorge yourself on the moment! See you in the next story when you've put yourself back together. There you go! Yummy!!"

I tell stories through most of the night. One by one, sleepy boys sneak across camp and crawl into their sleeping bags, heading toward vivid dreams that come only after one has spent time in the forests, along the pebbly shores of these mountain lakes, high in the Cascades, and after nights of listening to stories by firelight. As they slip toward sleep, the boys whisper to each other about the animal shapes the flames and shadows seemed to make move, and how brilliant the stars are. But within each cluster of sleeping bags, the conversation eventually finds its way to the topic of girls, and there is no lack of snickering and giggling until the woods once again become silent, save the few sounds made by night critters who call this place home. Coyote and I — the pooch quite pleased to have heard an entire evening of stories about himself — crawl into our sleeping bags next to the fire. Soon I am snoozing and Coyote snoring, and in these few hours before the early rising of the summer sun, the mountain stars dance their circle dance, the shadows of the woods whisper their wisdoms, and there are more dreams in this forest than even the trees can remember.



When I was a boy, I helped build a footbridge across Dry Creek at that same camp at Lake of the Woods.

The bridge was at the junction of several trails. One led to the marsh where I watched pelicans dip for trout, another to the summit of Mount McLoughlin. Down yet another trail, I made the memorable mistake of killing a frog. The camp rule was: you kill it, you eat it. And I did.

Thirty years later, my memory connects the trails. I smell the dust of summer hiking, hear the chatter of trail talk. A breeze ripples the surface, blurring the lily-pod bottom.

Thirty years later, this bridge spans more than water.

Coyote and I traipse across the footbridge and head up the long trail that winds and winds through thick forests, curves around mountain lakes, and finally zigzags in switchbacks to the summit of Mount McLoughlin.

The Takelma name for this mountain is Wilamxa, “The Floating Mountain.”

Upon a time it floated through clouds of creation. Then under a boiling fume of ash and steam, it settled onto the Cascades and became the home of white-haired Acorn Woman. Every snowmelt she hangs her swelling skin on the oak trees and grows acorns, and every winter she sleeps on her mountain. Her white hair is the shape of the snow.

Since I was eleven, I have walked this trail many times. From the summit I have watched the shadow of the mountain float over forests and lakes. And sleeping there, I dreamed I was floating among stars.

At ninety-five-hundred feet, in dreams and shifts of the landscape, the old myths get retold.

After puffing and whining, grumbling and groaning, Coyote and I scramble up the basalt spine of the mountain, up the last thousand yards to the top.

From the heights of clouds, our world is a circle. We see the Rogue Valley that is our home and imagine, not far beyond, the blue Pacific reaching to the west. We see the immense and snowy height of Mount Shasta and the brown and rumpled hills of California’s Central Valley to the south, the nearby jagged thrust of Devil’s Peak, the basalt rim of Crater Lake, and the white peaks of the Cascades stepping to the north. We look east beyond the mountain lakes to Upper Klamath Lake on the edge of a high desert that stretches from the Medicine Lake Volcano to Newberry Caldera, and east into the dry, blue desert haze of distant horizons.

After several minutes of looking around, a few more of near-silent contemplation broken only by ooohs and ahhs, my canvas bag catches Coyote’s eye, and he says, “So what’s that bundle of notebooks you’ve got in your satchel? You never seem to be without them.”

“These are my scribblings, my collected works, everything from scratches of ideas to poems and stories — storyteller stuff. To us storytellers, our notebooks are the raw material for stories, and, of course, that modern version of salted salmon: paychecks.”

“It seems quite a lot of work to haul that stuff up here to the top of the world. Let me give you a piece of advice. We mythic creatures carry stories around in our heads. If you could learn

to do that, you would find the burden weighs far less and you'll avoid back problems in your old age."

"I'll work on it," I say.

"But since you did go to all that trouble," says Coyote, "it seems only natural that you might share something from one of your notebooks. We Coyotes like words and stories and all that stuff, and, well, here we are sitting right on top of a story herself, Ms. Acorn Woman. You got anything about her?"

"All right, friend, I will read you a piece I wrote on this very spot a number of years ago. Ready?"

"Ready."

From the summit of Mount McLoughlin, I scatter a friend's ashes to the wind. Ash drifts over the Cascade landscape of forests and lakes, some settling onto the peak and mixing with volcanic ash, which looks strikingly the same.

A Shasta storyteller once said, "Some people in the stories turned into mountains. When people dig tunnels, they find their bones."

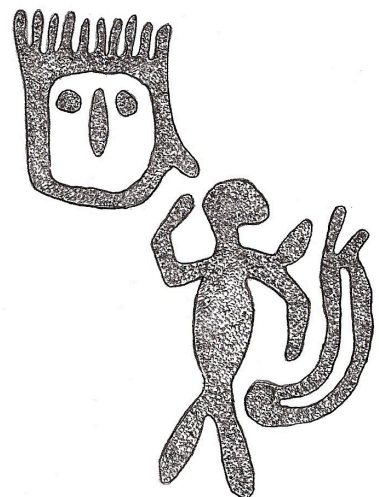
In a Takelma myth, the Table Rocks were once dragonfly brothers. Sexton Mountain was a dancer. Acorn Woman became Mount McLoughlin. And Koomookumpts, the Modoc creator, sleeps inside the remnants of an underwater volcano.

The ashes of my friend who was once a person drift over the Cascades and into my memory, like a story.

"So who was this friend?" asks Coyote.

"My teacher, of course, the fellow who taught me about stories. Everything I know about storytelling I learned from him, and now he's gone and become part of the mountain. He's become his own story."

The only sounds are the summer wind rushing across the peak, and the breathing of two friends sharing the thin air. It would be more within Coyote's character to make some rude, Coyote-like remark, but he holds his tongue. The July sun



beams warmth to where we sit. Cascade peaks surround us and define our world, and far, far below, between the floating shadow of the mountain and the more wispy shadows of clouds, lakes and forests shimmer in their summer skins of blue and green.

In the fall, after several months of sauntering around the West, telling and collecting and sharing stories, Coyote and me are back in the familiar pine-and-fir smell of the Cascades, and we stop by the camp on our way home. At sunset, Mount McLoughlin flares red — a rich autumn red — as if the molten lava of thousands of years ago still streams down her flanks, burns and smokes its way through the woods, and hisses as it reaches the glowing ripples of the lake.

We stand on the footbridge. New ice reflects clouds swirled into strange shapes by a chilly fall-to-winter wind. Lily pads droop and seem sleepy. The ice is so thin we see the dim shapes of rainbow trout dozing in watery depths made murky by fallen leaves and a long, dusty summer.

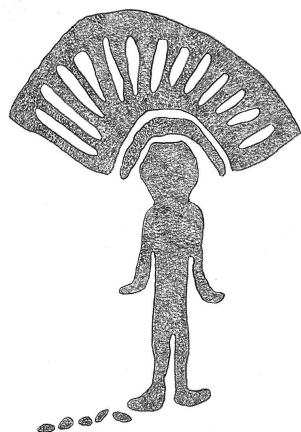
I scribble into my notebook....

In November I return to the bridge on Dry Creek at Lake of the Woods. Remembering my childhood, I visited here last July when the lake was full of ducks and pelicans and geese, the trees full of leaves, and the brimming creek running clear.

Now, fallen leaves stain the creek amber. Waterfowl have arrowed south. And standing on the bridge, I feel a chill to the breeze.

In this stark landscape, my mind moves beyond the gathering storm clouds, beyond cold nights freezing the creek to a standstill, beyond snowdrifts that cover the bridge.

My mind moves beyond winter to leaves and ducks and a boy on a bridge, gazing into a clear-running creek.



As snow blows down from the rim of Crater Lake and swirls in clouds around us, Coyote and I walk back to my rig, our coat collars pulled up around our necks. We walk with a silence that shows that we have grown from the ever-streaming conversations of new friends to the more subtle and deep communication of good friends. We start the slow drive down the snow-packed mountain road, through the forests, and back to our cozy home in Ashland.

“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”

“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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