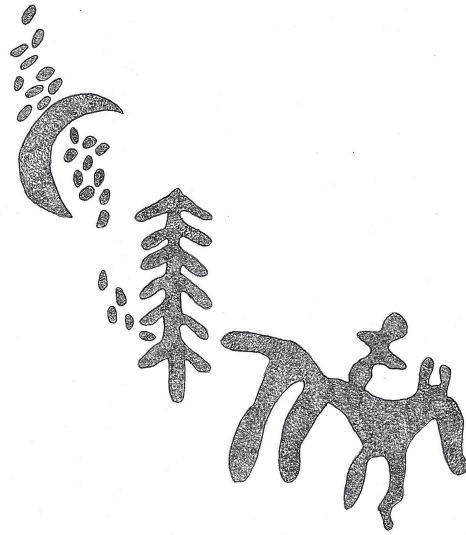
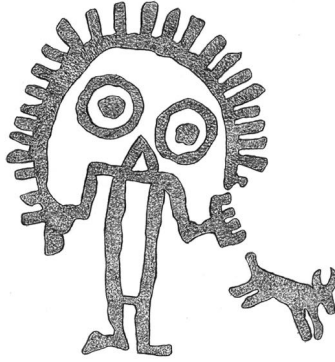


Night of Ghosts, Night of Stories

Thomas Doty



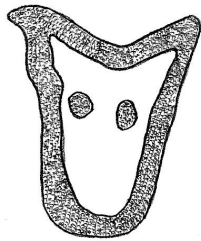
Night of Ghosts, Night of Stories



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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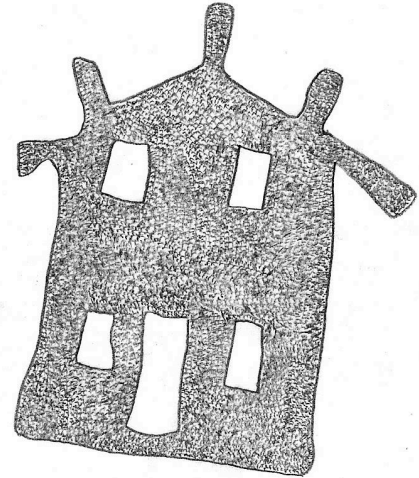
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On a late night in October, a bright moon peers down on Dragonfly Place, where Coyote and I live in the Siskiyou Mountains. Deer move out of the trees and browse across a mountain meadow turned white by moonlight. Two owls call to each other from the depths of the woods. In the deep silence of the night, I am startled awake by unsettling images that linger from a dream. I wake up with the thought that a story awaits me down the valley at Rock Point, and I need to go have a look.



I shake Coyote awake. “Want to go for a ride?”

“Nice try, Doty. That only works on the lesser breeds.”

“Ah, come on. I thought coyotes were somewhat nocturnal. Doesn’t any coyote worth his gophers yearn to be out in the thick of things? Aren’t you curious?”

“Nope. You must be thinking of those poor workhorse pooches who have to sweat for a meal.”

“But there’s a story waiting for us, and you’re in it and there is a creepy cemetery with fog. And ghosts! You don’t want to miss yet another chance at mythic immortality, do you?”

“Now you’re talking my lingo, Mister Storyteller. Make me a cozy bed in your rig, and I’ll come along.”

In an unexpected leap of energy, Coyote is out the door and down the steps before I can think of a satisfactory reply. I hear Coyote outside.

“Hi–yo, Doty’s rig! Away!”

In the white light of the moon, Coyote and I drive down the mountain ridge. On modern roads, we follow the old stagecoach route through Jacksonville and around the fringe of the Rogue Valley. Moonlight is everywhere ... on the peak of Mount McLoughlin, slanting across the flat tops of the Table Rocks. As we cross the Rogue River, moonlight sparkles on riffles and rapids.

I park my rig in the parking lot near the old hotel which is now a tasting room for the vineyards. Behind the hotel and from the edge of nearby Rock Point Cemetery, rows of grapevines climb the hillside. A few cars speed down the road and disappear into darkness. The moon hangs over the night.

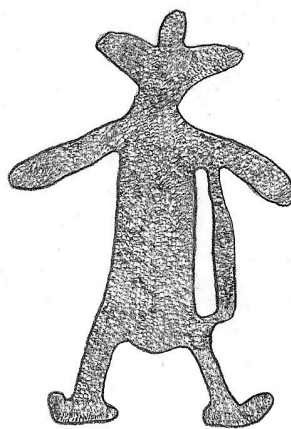
As I wait for some interesting story to arrive and reveal itself, Coyote gets bored and curls into doggy sleep. An hour creeps by. My eyelids grow heavy and I begin to drift into a dream of a story. An old picture of this place from the late 1800s forms in my mind, and Coyote and I wander into that picture.

I am a self-appointed old west wordsmith. Me and my legendary sidekick, Cowpoke Coyote, arrive by stagecoach at the Rock Point Hotel and Stage Station. It is Halloween night along the Rogue River. Among trees and tombstones, a green fog forms in the cemetery, creeps across the moon-white field toward the river and mixes with dust kicked up by the stage as it rattles to a stop. Coyote and I walk through fog toward the hotel and into a spooky night of stories.

The hotel is a classic stage station, a two-story white building with a balcony that juts out from its second floor ballroom. A white fence surrounds the yard, and firs and pines spread speckled shadows of their limbs across the roof and walls. Guest rooms are upstairs, and downstairs are parlors and a kitchen. On this night, the stage station shines ghostly white in the moonlight.

Cowpoke Coyote's ears poke through his cowboy hat. "Nothing I like better than poking cows," smirks Coyote. He says this to me as he pulls his hat off his ears, and we walk inside.

"Are you a cowboy or a coyote man?" I ask.



"Both," says Coyote. "And more! I'm Every Coyote. I'm older than any cowboy around here, and as wise as any old man soon to be a ghost. I'm as young in spirit as any boy, and I can herd entire landscapes of cows with a single howl." Coyote stops dead in his tracks. "Wait a minute, what's that?"

Coyote notices a young boy and his black, one-eyed cocker spaniel. The two pooches eye each other cautiously, but their stares soften as they sense a familiar camaraderie. The hounds curl into snoozing postures on opposite ends of the stone hearth, near the blaze of the fire. I watch the boy and remember my youth, and the hours I spent sitting in firelight listening to stories.

Gwisgwashan, a native elder, walks slowly down the stairs from her room. In shifting shadows and flickering firelight, she looks ancient, her face wrinkled and creased. She is the Keeper of Stories. Her people have lived here for a long time.

Gwisgwashan leans toward the boy. “Well, Tommy. Do you think that this is a good night for stories?” The boy nods with youthful enthusiasm. His dog Tippy dusts the hearth with her tail.

A short woman smelling of lilacs comes in from the kitchen, carrying steaming cider and mulled wine on a tray. “Something to warm your bellies on a chilly night?” She leaves the drinks and disappears into the back of the hotel.

I glance through the window into moonlight. I see a man walking across the field toward the hotel. He wears a hooded cloak and carries a lantern that sways from side to side with each step. As he walks through the fog, the hooded man vanishes and reappears, and the lantern glows green. The man approaches the hotel, opens the door and enters. He sets his lantern on the mantel, and keeps his cloak on as he settles into a chair near the fire. The hood flops over his forehead and hides his eyes.

Gwisgwashan turns his way. “Mr. Lampman. Welcome. Good to see you. I was about to tell Tommy an Old Time story.” Lampman raises his arm in a gesture that encourages Gwisgwashan to tell her tale.

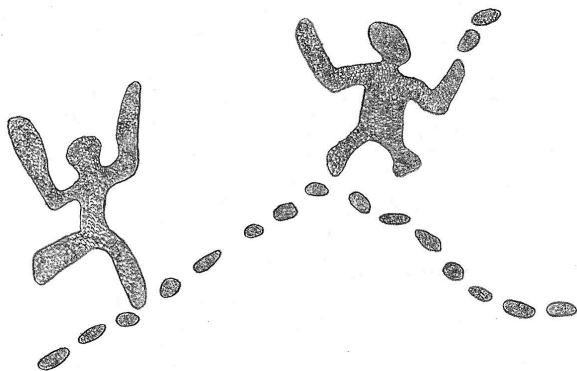
Gwisgwashan sits on a short stool in front of the fire. She is a silhouette, her face hidden in darkness as though the words were all that mattered in her story. But suddenly she turns and the light catches her face sideways. Her eyes shine, and with the sweep of an arm gesturing the start of a story, she begins....

The old stories tell us that spirits wandered this place long before the cemetery or this hotel was here. This stretch of river has always been a gathering place for stories. Some stories

dramatize our hopes, others give life to our fears. Some drift in and out as ghosts, some mingle with the fog and move along the river. Some of the stories are older than anyone can remember.

Along the Rogue River here at Rock Point, this place we call Titankh, on a night when the oak trees were wintertime bare and the water cold, and the air green with fog, Coyote was creeping along, looking for a meal: creep ... creep ... creep ... creep ... creep....

From out of the fog, Coyote heard voices. “Ghosts are taking away people.” That’s all he heard. “Ghosts are taking away people.”



Coyote stopped. “What does it mean when people say that? I’d better go downriver and find out. When people die, they are not supposed to take others with them, yet now I hear people saying, ‘Ghosts are taking away people.’ I’d better find out why they are saying such things.

Coyote walked downriver along the ghost trail toward the Land of the Dead: creep ... creep ... creep ... creep ... creep....

Moonlight cast a narrow trail of light upon the river, pointing the way. Along the riverbank, shadows of trees seemed to move as Coyote and the ghosts moved. As Coyote went along, ghosts walked beside him: chirp ... chirp ... chirp ... chirp ... chirp....

Coyote picked up a pine cone and threw it toward the sound of the ghosts and kept on walking, following the ghost trail: creep ... creep ... creep ... creep ... creep....

He walked on and on, downriver into thicker fog, into deep cold, into darker forests. He arrived at a meadow across the river from the Land of the Dead. He heard ghosts talking on the other side.

“Look! Coyote has come here. Someone take him a canoe so he can come across. Let’s invite him to visit his death.”

Coyote squinted. Through the fog he saw the dim shapes of the ghosts. They were dancing a young woman dance. They wore the clothes they had been buried in, hanging in strips and tatters. They were dancing: chirp ... chirp ... chirp ... chirp ... chirp....

Now Coyote sat on the edge of the river and built a fire. As he was smoking his pipe, a young girl brought him a canoe. She waded toward the bank, through the fog and the cold water, holding onto the canoe.

“Come on up here on the land, child,” said Coyote. “That water is cold. Come up here and share my fire.”

“Oh, no, Coyote. I know your tricks. You come down here and I’ll take you across. Aren’t you curious?”

“Now why would I want to go over there? Come to the riverbank, child.”

“No, Coyote. Quick, come to the canoe and I’ll paddle you across.”

Coyote got mad. “Come to the land!”

The young girl came up on the bank and stood next to Coyote.

“Quick, Coyote, let me take you across.”

Coyote reached to the fire and grabbed a flaming stick off the top. It looked like he was about to light his pipe again, but in a sudden movement, he turned and lit the girl’s skirt on fire.

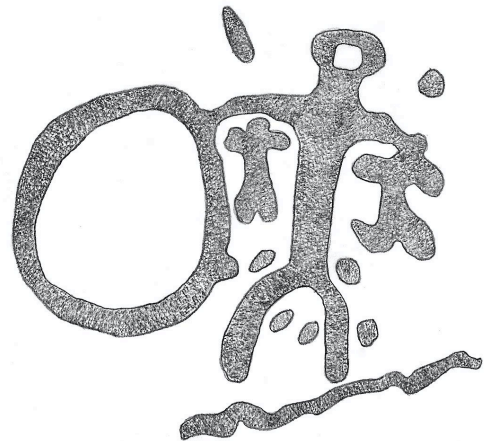
That girl was a ghost and she started burning: doo ... doo ... doo ... doo ... doo.... She ran to the water, got in her canoe and paddled across the river. The canoe blazed as it crossed the river to the Land of the Dead.

The ghosts were still dancing: chirp ... chirp ... chirp ... chirp ... chirp....

The young girl ran in among them and started dancing, and her burning skirt set fire to all of the dancers. Now they were burning. The ghosts were blazing in one big circle dance of fire: doo ... doo ... doo ... doo ... doo....

Late in the night, the flames died down and the fire smoldered, its pale smoke mingling with the fog.

Coyote called out, “Now you are dead! You will no longer take people with you when you die. In later times, your place will be a place of sunshine. People will come here and live happy lives after they have died. But they will not bring living people with them!”



In the first light of morning, Coyote walked back upriver toward his home, looking for food: creep ... creep ... creep ... creep ... creep.... The sun sparkled on the river. Flowers started blooming. The river rushed along through the first warm air of spring.

The ghosts had been killed.

Before anyone says a word, Lampman pulls back his hood. His eyes flare wild in the flickering light. He speaks with a voice that is deliberate as if the words come not from himself but from deep inside his story.

“Perhaps Coyote burned those Old Time ghosts but he didn’t burn them all. Others have arrived since then and more are yet to come. Some are with us now. I walk among trees, between graves, along the river, and I have seen things.

“My tale takes place a few years after the white man’s war on the native people of this land. The Takelmas had been force-marched from here to the coast, and those who didn’t die of sadness along the way, were locked up on the reservation. But a few stayed behind in their homeland, hiding out in the mountains and here along the river.

“There was a night when the cemetery stretched and reached deep into the woods, its craggy fingers grabbing at the green fog of the ancient forest. I had been told by an Indian friend of mine that this green fog was the spirit of the Tree People reaching out to claim the homeland that once was theirs ... now cleared fields, stage roads, towns.

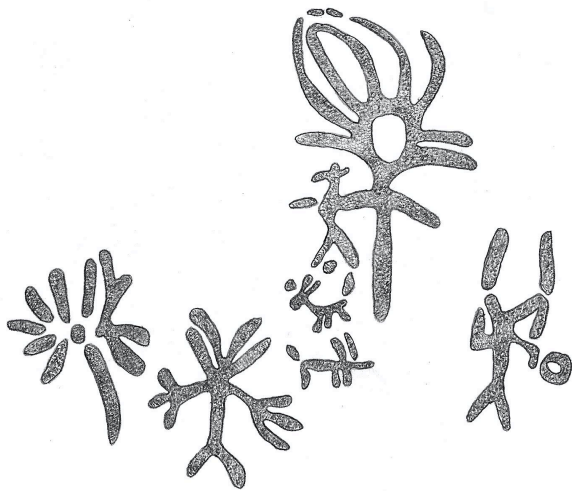
“I walked through fog upriver to one of the old village sites. In the last glimmer of twilight, I heard drumming and singing. As I walked closer, I saw a campfire, and in that light five dancers circled a giant pine that had been girdled partway up, its bark removed. The pine tree rose from a jumble of cairns, all that remained of the village graveyard. The dancers sang the songs of their ancestors, dancing their ghosts to life, coaxing them out of their graves with familiar songs.

“I moved in closer, and listened and watched. The dance rebuilt the village. Plank houses and sweat lodges rose from the soil, several dance rings emerged, and many fires flared through the night.

“The faces of the dead wore masks. They moved among the living, transparent in the firelight. Some were animals, some human, and a few wore the expressions of the sun and moon. I saw the faces of the White Duck Women, Panther and Wildcat, Salmon Boy, Rock Old Woman.

They were joined by others until generations of this village danced together. Some ghosts traveled far from their lives in the myths. Others arrived from a few years back.

“Years before, ghost dances had been held to raise the native dead into a force of warriors and drive away those who had taken everything from them that had been sacred in their lives. But this dance was different. The people sang and danced to share this night in their ancient village. It was a dance of sadness and celebration. It was too late for anything else.



“The dance went on until the first sunlight sent the spirits back to their graves and to their lives beyond the dead. The village collapsed into a jumble of cairns.

“Perhaps this dance had some of the power of previous dances. It worked on me. I walked away from the village and never went back.

“Some ghosts still wander this land. Coyote didn’t burn them all.”

“Hey! I’ve got a ghost story,” says Tommy. “May I tell it? Please? It’s my turn, isn’t it?”

Tippy and Coyote perk up when they hear the boy’s voice, wagging their tails with encouragement. Lampman draws down his hood and sips his wine. I lean forward in my chair, watching Tommy closely. This boy seems familiar.

“Of course,” says Gwisgwashan. “The more stories the better.”

Tommy stands up and walks toward the fire. He leans against the mantel and tells his story in a whisper.

“Friends of ours built a ranch house along the river not far from here. When they got settled in, they had a house warming party. And a strange thing happened. I was at that party so I know that this is a true story.

“Around midnight we gathered in the living room around the fire. We were admiring the large mantelpiece and we listened to the story of how the wood had once been the central beam in the rafters of an old barn.

“As the clock chimed twelve, we heard a loud creak, creak, creak coming from the mantelpiece. There were also sounds of choking and horses whinnying and stomping and hoof beats like someone quickly riding away.

“The owners of the house asked around and found that on that night, years before, a gang of outlaws hanged a man at midnight from that same beam in the barn, and then they quickly fled their crime on horseback.

“Every year at midnight, on the anniversary of the hanging, the choking man is heard swinging from the rafters until he is dead. Creak, creak, creak....”

The fire crackles and collapses into coals. Lampman’s lantern sputters and goes out. Hoof beats shatter the silence.

The short woman smelling of lilacs rushes into the room. “What’s this? There’s no stage expected tonight. Not this late. And why are they going so fast?”

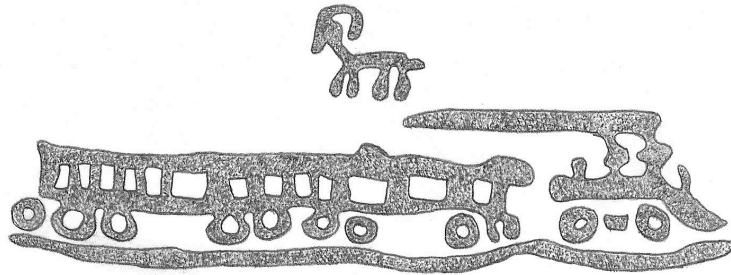
She peers through the window. “No one is there. This is spooky.”

Coyote and Tippy are up, ears erect, noses sniffing. Cowpoke Coyote has his hat on, ready to poke or punch whatever bovine specter might stampede through the door.

“Shhh,” whispers Gwisgwashan. “Listen for the story.”

There is the faint sound of a crying baby, and voices mixing with the sounds of many others wailing. Scattered words leak through the din. They are speaking Takelma. The native people are being forced from their homes. Those who escape their tears long enough to speak mutter to each other, asking questions and getting no answers as if no one knows their destination. One voice rises above the others, “Where are we going? Reservation? Land of the Dead?” Another voice shouts back, “Perhaps they are the same place!” They march downriver and into silence.

A train hoots and rumbles past the stage station, heading upriver. A man shouts after it, “You can take your idea of progress somewhere else. We don’t want no trains stopping around here!” Doors slam one after another. Men shout as they load furniture and boxes of possessions into wagons that rumble out of Rock Point, heading upriver toward the town of Gold Hill where the train has screeched to a stop.



There is silence and a feeling of emptiness as if this room of the hotel has become a ghost town.

Outside, the green fog spreads thin. Some fog joins the river and flows beyond sight, some creeps back into the cemetery, swirling around trees and tombstones, drawn back to its origins by those who still linger here from the old days.

Lampman lights his lantern, opens the door into moonlight and trudges across the field, disappearing into the fog. Gwisgwashan walks upstairs to her room, and soon after, Tommy and Tippy wander home. The short woman smelling of lilacs is nowhere to be seen. The fire sputters and dies.

As I open my eyes in my rig, the sun sends its first light across the river. I glance to the hotel and see a faint flicker of firelight through the window, and what looks like the shape of the short woman roaming from room to room. The morning smells like lilacs. I drift back to sleep.

A few hours later, a whisper from the back seat startles me fully awake.

“Chirp ... chirp ... chirp...”

“Stop it! You scared the living daylights out of me!”

“Not all the ghouls are dead, Mister Storyteller. Did you notice how that boy Tommy looks a lot like you? You might have been his ghost!”

“Wait a minute, how do you know about him? I thought that was my dream.”

“You silly human with such small visions of what is possible. You don’t know the old saying?”

“Yes?”

“Stories are dreams gone public. And I’ve seen them all.”

“Right,” I say. “Let’s head home to Dragonfly Place. I need to write out this story.”

“You mean write off those silly fears you humans have?”

“We worders don’t write things off. We write them down.”

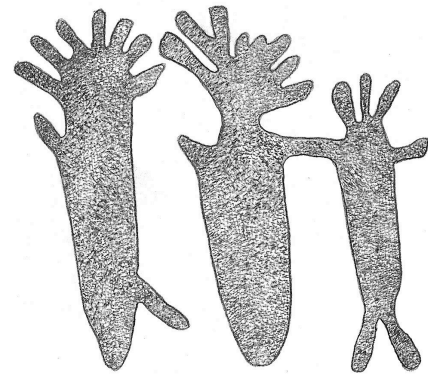
“Right,” says Coyote. “Let’s go home. You can write and scare yourself with your ghost stories. Just don’t forget I’m the main pooch in this tale. You can leave out that black one-eyed doggy. Remember, you promised me mythic immortality.”

“Right. I’ll scribble and you eat breakfast.”

“Hi–yo, Doty’s rig! Away!”

As we leave, the lights come on in the old hotel. An “Open” sign is hung on the fence and cars pull into the parking lot. People walk across the porch and into the tasting room where they sample wine.

I imagine this scene. The room fills with folks who have been traveling and wine flows like the river. Near the fireplace, people share their stories like they have always done, here at this place where stories gather. Stories swirl through the day and into the evening. They revisit the stage station like ghosts. A few of the tales are older than anyone can remember.



As we cross the river, the sun sparkles on the surface. Oaks along the riverbanks are bright with their October colors of yellow and gold. The river rushes along through the first warm air of mid–morning.

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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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