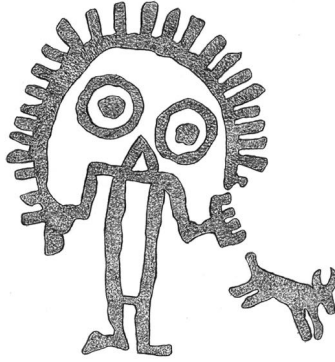


Story Tree at Kilchis Point

Thomas Doty



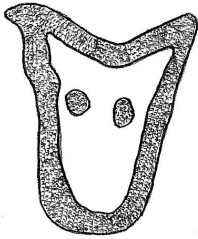
Story Tree at Kilchis Point



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

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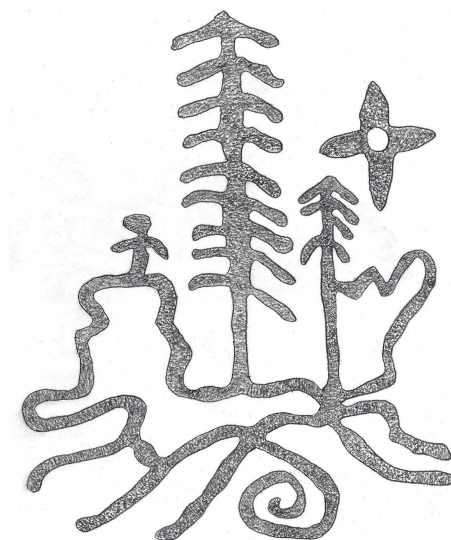
www.DotyCoyote.com

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I have heard the legend about the great grandmother tree that takes care of native stories, holding them carefully inside her trunk for a long, long time. This is not only a legend about the oldest Keeper of Stories in the Tillamook country, it is also about storytelling. Being a tale-teller myself, I am determined to find the tree.

The Old Ones call the Tree People the One Leggeds. Though deep-rooted, they've been known to travel a bit. And they all look different. There are forest trees, family trees, history trees, legendary trees, ceremonial trees.... There are young trunks with their stories still attached, old trunks who have dropped their stories to the ground, whole groves of trees whose stories have been scattered to the winds by wild winter storms or burned to ash by fires or cut down to build houses, villages, ships.



I walk along the abandoned railroad tracks and into the woods. If I were the Story Tree, I would find a protected place, an ancient nook in the depths of the forest, and I'd call that home. For a long, long time.

After crossing a short trestle, I turn onto an old trail and follow it into the forest. Though it's a sunny autumn afternoon, these woods are dark with deep shadows. A breeze rolls in from the bay and makes the shadows sway. I squint and watch the One Leggeds dance!

I keep walking. Years ago, I met an old woman whose ancestors lived near here where the Kilchis River flows into Tillamook Bay. She told me about the tree as a way of explaining the art of native storytelling: "If the stories are well told," she said, "listeners feel invited to step into the narrative. They journey across the ocean and back again, up and down rivers and creeks, along

beaches at sunset, through shadowy forests. They meet South Wind face to face. They watch Wild Woman dance in her winter lodge and Ice Man slide slowly along the coast. They hear the creak of Spanish ships as they sail into the bay. They revel in the adventure of each tale and dodge the dangers. In the end — if the storyteller knows his art — they come home to find themselves sitting in the cozy firelight under the sheltering boughs of the Story Tree. Though this setting is familiar as the place where the first story began, the night feels somehow different, and so do the people. When the last word is spoken, the stories are stored inside the tree where they safely await a new teller and a new telling. And there's always room for one more story.”

In the dim light I sense movement, probably a critter who sees me before I see him and decides to disappear into the trees. Once I stumble across a pile of rocks, an ancient cairn someone built so many years ago it is now covered with moss. Once I slip-slide across a deep pool on a slippery log.

I follow the path and eventually walk into a meadow by the river. This must be the site of Kilharnar, the largest Tillamook village on this part of the coast. It's the perfect place to live ... the river, the forest, a meadow full of sweet-tasting roots, the sea nearby with her abundance of food, a mostly-mild climate....

I walk along the river and down to the beach on the edge of the bay, then north, wading across the mouths of creeks. I gaze at the last bit of sunlight across the bay as it lights Memaloose Point. It'll be fully dark soon. Just then I see her, rising above the other trees, a giant grandmother spruce that looks like she's been here since time began. Maybe she is the Story Tree. I turn back into the woods and the shadows, and scrape my way through the thick brush toward the tree.

Like the Old Ones say, the One Leggeds are tricky in their travels. I cannot find the tree I thought I saw. I swear she slipped away when I blinked, and in her place is a different tree. Nearby is an old fire ring and a bit of modern trash that has nothing mythic about it. However, I spot the beginning of an old trail that winds even deeper into the woods. This trace is a bit overgrown but there is just enough light to find my way.

I follow the path past several giant trees, and not one of them feels like her. Evening is here. Shadows are fringed with purple twilight. Near the edge of the forest I pause under another spruce to catch my breath. I sit and watch the last colors in the sky fade and the first stars blink on.

This tree is not huge but she's interesting. Several large roots show above ground, twisting into mysterious shapes. At the base of the trunk is a hollow space big enough for some critter to make a lair in, or at least a dry place to crawl into on a wild, wet night. Yes, she's an interesting tree.

Now things start to happen.



I hear the creak of an ancient door opening slowly. I can't tell where it's coming from. I stand up and walk toward the sound. Shadows are thicker, and I put my hands in front of me to keep from running into branches. Instead, I bump into what feels like a wall. The creaking sound shifts. Now it's behind me. I walk back past the tree and there's another wall. It feels like I'm inside a room. I walk around the back side of the tree. The creaking grows louder. I stare at the tree until my eyes adjust and make out a crack in the trunk. As the crack widens, light flares from inside. A figure steps out, and I recognize my old friend Coyote.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Hiding," says Coyote. "Like my door?"

"That was a door? Looked more like a crack in the wood."

"Of course that's what you saw. You're not me!"

"Thank goodness for that. Who are you hiding from?"

"The locals. No one knows who I am. These folks think I'm nothing more than a bothersome domestic dog. They have no myths about the real me. I've been un-famed, turned invisible, a mythic hero shrunk down, a common ... beastie.... They've replaced me with some breathy guy who knows a few parlor tricks. South Wind is the villain's name."

"It's getting dark. I should go."

"How about a fire and some stories? It's lonely around here."

"We can't build a fire. Too many branches overhead. And it's been a dry summer. Too dangerous, and...."

Before I finish, the darkness is complete. But not for long. A few feet away, near the hollow trunk of the tree, a faint light flickers into a small fire. The flames grow and reveal that we are indeed inside what appears to be an Old Time native lodge. The fire and tree are in the center, and there is a hole in the roof large enough for both the tree and smoke from the fire to escape into the night sky. Perched on twisted roots are four figures who look like they just stepped out of a myth.

“Cool,” says Coyote. “It’s nice to have company.”

I’m surprised that Coyote’s voice doesn’t startle the figures. They pay no attention to the pooch. For them, he’s not even there. Instead, their eyes focus on me.

One is clearly a woman, and old. The wrinkles in her face are deep, her eyes even deeper, with a wild look about them. She glances nervously from one figure to another. With each glance, her face changes, exactly expressing the mood of who she’s looking at. She expects someone else to talk. Anyone but her.

Sitting next to Wild Woman is an ice sculpture in the shape of a man. I see him breathing, slowly but deeply. He’s so transparent I see firelight through him. He’s worn smooth in places, and water drips from his edges. He looks like he’s been around for a long time.

As Ice Man scoots slowly back from the fire, I notice someone else. He’s a fidgety fellow. He stands up, walks around and sits down in another place. His hands form gesture after gesture. Then he stands again and walks swiftly around the fire. He’s always moving. Even his clothes are wispy, made of thin cloth that swirls and twirls with every movement. I can’t see his face. His garment has a hood and it’s pulled down onto his forehead, hiding his eyes and casting shadows onto his cheeks. He whispers to himself. His words fly away before I can make them out, except for these two: “South Wind, South Wind, South Wind,” repeated over and over.

The only fellow that looks like he comes from some version of this world is a young man sitting close to the fire. He is draped in a robe. After staring into the flames, he pulls out a notebook and scribbles into it. When he looks my way, I see an Asian face.

He’s the first one to speak. He stands by the fire, squints at his notebook, and says, “I gaze at the old woman’s face. She looks abandoned. The moon is her only friend.”

Wild Woman perks up and does a rowdy circle dance around the fire. The South Wind man with wispy clothes joins her, dancing two steps to each of hers. Ice Man glares and doesn’t move a muscle.

Coyote says, “This is as weird as anything that I could dream up.”

“Strange,” I say, and everyone looks my way.

The man in the robe clears his throat and draws their attention. “I have more,” he says. He raises his notebook and reads from the cover, “Poems by Bashō. That’s me.” He opens the notebook.

“Bones beaten white by harsh weather. I’ll leave you to the cold winds that pierce your heart.”

Everyone sits in silence.

“I’ll tell you about the Lightning Door, and more,” says Bashō. “I heard about it from a man who journeyed across the ocean to my home.”

Everyone’s eyes are on him. No one says anything. He interprets their silence as permission to proceed and he starts his tale.

“I live on the other side of the sea. I was just a boy when a man who lived here along this coast came to visit my home. Here’s what he told me about his journey....”

“We call it the Lightning Door,” he said. “At the river’s mouth the door thunders open. Flashes of light reveal the path across the sea. Then the door smashes closed so quickly that many a man who tried to jump through was cut in half.

“I wasn’t the first one to journey beyond the sunset. Over the centuries, many made the trip. Each time they came back home to our coast, they described the ancient people who lived in bamboo forests that seemed so strange to us.

“One day, I decided to make the journey. I heard that Thunderbird lived close by and helped people get through the Lightning Door. Thunderbird was a huge condor, and when he flapped his wings, he made thunder. He lifted the door and held it open as I slipped through. Lightning flashed and faded, and as the sun shone again, I saw what I thought was a whale floating in the breakers. When I looked closely, I saw it was a giant canoe stretched with whale skin. As I got inside, Thunderbird perched on the edge of the boat, stretched his wings into a sail, and I started west across the ocean. That’s how my journey began.”



While Bashō tells the man's story, Wild Woman dances his words, her body creating each character, her face completely remaking its look. It's as if she swiftly changes costumes, switches masks. First the Lightning Door, stamping around the fire, her mouth opening and closing, then the far look in her eyes as she becomes one of the people who live across the sea, then huge Thunderbird, her arms wide, fierce eyes flashing lightning.

South Wind flies out of the smoke hole and whispers the story's antics from outside. It's hard to hear. But Coyote understands his lingo and he translates for me. "Now I blow and blow. Thunderbird turns his wings, and the canoe heads west. I blast north to make another story about myself."

Ice Man adds sounds to Bashō's tale. They seem old, from a time when the local language was young and words were scarce. Ice Man has a long memory, and making modern speech is difficult. Sounds come easy but slowly. It takes him a while to slip in a few words: "Time old winter. House it was. Ice before. Water after. People across. Back. And again. Time old."

I feel myself sinking into the story, drawn deeper into that place where myths and dreams talk to each other. I must have dozed for a moment. I hear Bashō say, "That's how he made the journey, and now I've traveled the other way, from my home to here, and here I share the story."

Bashō's story is finished before I realize it, and everyone starts clapping.

"Did I miss part of the story?" I ask Coyote.

"Maybe you'll hear it again sometime," smirks Coyote. "Or maybe you can check out the book from the Story Tree and read it yourself."

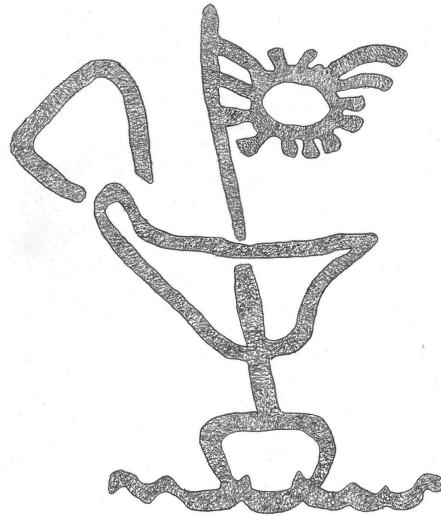
Applause fades into a deep silence. Everyone looks at me, like it's my turn to share.

"There they go again," says Coyote. "Ignoring me. Maybe you could tell them a Coyote story, and then they'd be able to see me. Something new that restores my heroic stature? How about a story set right here in these woods?"

I nod to Coyote and improvise....

A long time ago on a winter day, Coyote was wandering around Kilchis Point. The wind was cold. The rain was fierce. Coyote crawled up inside a hollow spruce tree, curled into a cozy ball and fell asleep.

It would have been a long nap for most folks, but it was short in Coyote's mind. Centuries flashed by. Critters came and went. The Tillamooks arrived and built a village of wood houses by the river. John Doty sailed along the coast with Drake on the Golden Hind. Joe Champion became a neighbor in a tree of his own. William Doughty helped sign the Oregon Territory into existence. Dotys and Doughtys and Doughertys came to town. Some folks cut down a few trees and built a ship. Other folks cut trees and built an industry.



“Wait a minute,” says Coyote. “I thought this story was about me. Get to the point!”

“Right,” I say, and continue.....

So Mister Coyote snored through the commotion, year after year. On one wild winter day, the grandfather storm of all storms descended onto the coast. The wind was jagged with ice. Snow blew in, piled up, filling the woods and blocking the trails.

Though the storm howled and raged and hammered his tree, Coyote slept on until his stomach gurgled and growled, and he woke up feeling hungry. He slid down to the hollow at the bottom of his tree. Where there was once an opening, there was now a wall of ice. He scampered back up, looking for holes, any way out. Nothing. He was trapped inside!

He talked to the tree. “Now listen here, Mister One Legged. I’m the boss of this forest and I command you to open up and let me out.”

The tree didn’t do anything.

“Open up! Open!” Coyote kicked the tree a few times and yelled all kinds of things I won’t repeat here.

The tree ignored Coyote.

He pounded on the inside of the trunk and called for help. “Hey, any fool passing by. This is Coyote. I’m trapped inside this tree. Come and get me out!”

Coyote put his ear to the trunk. At first he heard nothing, but soon there was the faintest flutter of wings as someone landed on a branch.

“Who’s out there?” asked Coyote.

“It’s me, Flicker. Got a problem, do you?”

“The storm trapped me inside this tree. I’ve got important things to do in the world. Drill a hole so I can get out!”

Amused, Flicker started drumming on the trunk. The noise was deafening! Coyote covered his ears. Flicker kept on. Coyote danced around inside the tree. Finally, he screamed, “Stop, you feathered varmint! You’re too loud!”

Flicker glided away in a huff.

There was a small hole in the trunk and Coyote stuck his eye up to it. Off in the snow, he could see Pileated Woodpecker flying from tree to tree.

“Hey, Woodpecker Man,” Coyote called. “Come and help me get out of this tree. I’m Coyote. I’m important. There will be a reward!”

Pileated Woodpecker flew to the tree and inspected the hole. He tapped around the edge, testing the wood. Then he went full bore, banging away and making the hole bigger.

Coyote screamed from inside the tree. “Stop! Stop! It’s too loud. You’re hurting me!”

Pileated Woodpecker flew off.

Coyote put both eyes up to the hole and looked out.

He saw Sapsucker on a nearby tree, and decided to take a different approach.

“Mister Sapsucker, how fine you are looking this morning with your feathers flashing red in the morning sun.”

Now Sapsucker was a sap for that kind of talk and he flew over to Coyote’s tree. “You think so?”

“Certainly,” said Coyote. “And there’s no describing the strength and beauty of your beak. It looks strong!”

“Like a hammer and a drill put together,” said Sapsucker. “Want to see?”

“Sure,” said Coyote. “Try it out on this hole.”

Sapsucker went to work, hammering at the hole. Coyote once again muffled his ears and repeated his “I’m going crazy” dance. He yelled out the hole. “Stop! Stop! Stop! You’re driving me nuts!”

Sapsucker flew off and landed on a distant tree and started smoothing his ruffled feathers.

When Coyote’s head stopped ringing, he inspected the hole. “It’s bigger,” he thought. “Not big enough to slip through, but if I take myself apart, and put my parts through the hole, I can put myself back together outside.”

That’s just what he did. First his feet, then his legs, then his tail, then his main body in parts, piece by piece, organ by organ. He was just tossing his intestines when Raven came gliding by.

“Haaaaa!” screamed Raven. “Look at all of this good stuff. I love intestines!”

All that was left of Coyote inside the tree was his head and his paws. He yelled through the hole.

“Now Raven, I’m going to need that stuff. You leave it alone!”

“Oh, it’s Coyote,” said Raven. “And here I thought you were a smart pooch. But look at all of this good stuff you’re throwing away!”

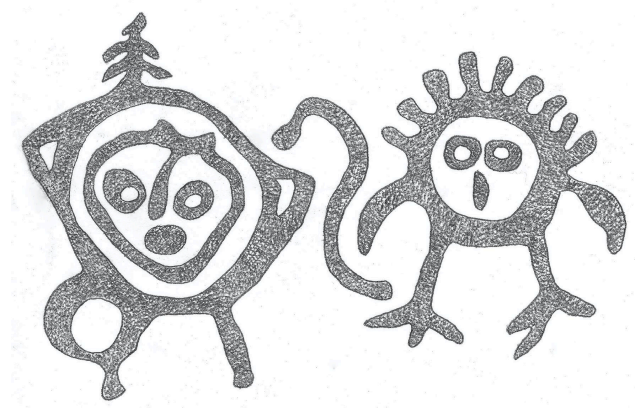
Raven slurped and swallowed Coyote’s intestines and flew off into the woods, chuckling as he went.

Coyote popped his head out through the hole, called for his paws, and started putting himself back together. The day was warming up. The snow was starting to melt. Even the ice around Coyote’s tree was looking thin.

Coyote went walking through the woods sniffing for something to eat.

He smelled smoke. “Hmmm. Where there’s smoke there’s fire, and where there’s fire there’s food.” Coyote followed his nose.

He came to a field that people had recently burned. Sure enough, scattered throughout the burned area, were roasted grasshoppers. Coyote’s favorite!



Careful not to scorch his paws, Coyote tiptoed through the burned area scarfing down grasshoppers. But he couldn't fill up. With no intestines, everything he ate went right through him. He was hungrier than ever!

Raven soared over the burn. "Hey, look at Coyote. He's spilling out all over the place. We thought you were a brainy Coyote, an astute Coyote, a Coyote oozing with wisdom. Guess we were wrong!"

Coyote chased his tail and looked behind him. "Oh, oh." He came to a smoldering log with a bit of pitch on it. He took some pitch, rolled it into a ball, and plugged up the problem. Then he went on gobbling grasshoppers.

Coyote came to a place where sparks were still flying around, and his plug of pitch caught fire. Coyote scampered onto the nearest patch of snow where he could soothe his burning bum.

He heard Raven laughing in the woods, "Haaaaa! Haaaaa! Haaaaa!"

Later that day, people from the village came to have a look at the field. They were amazed at what they found. Every place where Coyote had leaked out, the first bushes started growing. These were wiry evergreens with sticky globs and fragrant roots. In honor of our furry friend, folks called them Coyote Bushes. And the name stuck.

Now that's the end of this tale.

Coyote says, "That's a fine story. It shows me taking charge of the lesser critters who live in this place. In the end, I always win! And my name is everywhere!"

A bit of chatter breaks out inside South Wind's head and he speaks it aloud. Here's how it goes.

"What's he mean by lesser?"

"I don't know. Coyote kind of ignores the bad parts about himself, doesn't he?"

"And what's this about Coyote Bushes? I heard a version of that story down south. It was tobacco plants he made!"

"Coyote Bushes are good. They're shifty like Coyote. They take on different shapes in different places. And aren't they also called Dwarf Coyote Bushes? That's even better!"

"Here's another thing. I've never seen a tree around here with a door in it."

“Open your eyes. It’s this tree. If you stayed in one place for more than half a second, you’d know that the door is invisible to anyone but the one who lives here. At the moment, that’s Coyote.”

“You just made that up.”

“Didn’t! I heard the door slam when Coyote came out. That proves it’s both mythic and real.”

“Well, the story aside, this might be a good time to humor Coyote since he’s taken up digs in our neighborhood. We might pretend that the story makes him look good.”

“Right. Let’s keep him happy.”

Coyote doesn’t hear any of South Wind’s talk. He is wandering around in his thoughts. Suddenly he stands up, makes a series of gestures that suggest closing a book and putting it in his pocket. Then he scampers back inside his tree. I hear him rehearsing his story to a made-up audience. Smug with satisfaction, he howls, “A long time ago, there was an awesome hero named Coyote who lived inside a magnificent spruce with a magic door. He was the Big Boss of the Woods....”

As the fire dies down, the walls of the house give way to the forest. When I look back at the Story Tree, everyone is gone. There are scrapes in the dirt — not quite footprints — that lead into the woods and disappear.

Sunlight streaks over the hills and fills the forest. I walk along the edge of the woods to the bay. I find a good sitting rock, pull out a notebook and write out the beginnings of a new story. It’s my story this time ... the story of where I’ve been and where I’m going and who I’ve met along the way. Coyote plays a minor role.



I write all day under the autumn sun. I pace up and down the beach, trying out words and phrases. The tide pushes and pulls. I watch the sun move over the ancient gathering of Tree People who cover much of the country around Kilchis Point. I picture the cairn in the woods, the village in the meadow. I gaze across the bay and beyond to a distant land across the sea. With the first streak of purple from the sunset, I walk back to the Story Tree. I'm ready to share a different story under her boughs. I sit and wait for the shadows.

“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.

www.DotyCoyote.com