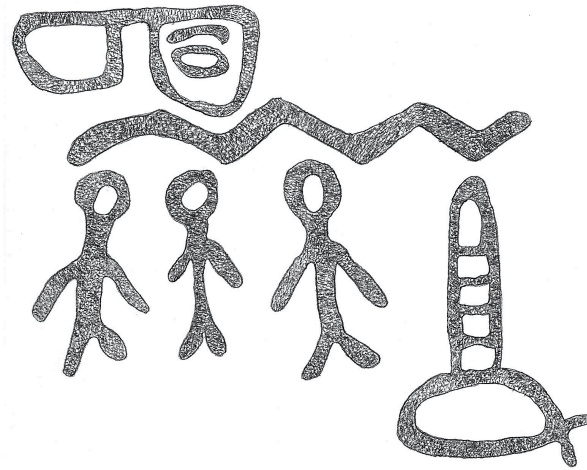
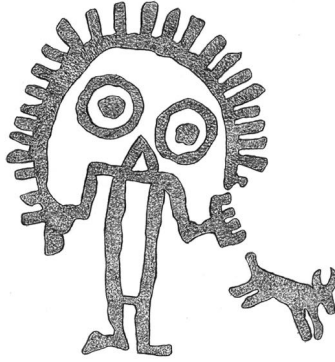


Long Walk Home

Thomas Doty



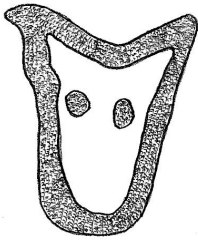
Long Walk Home



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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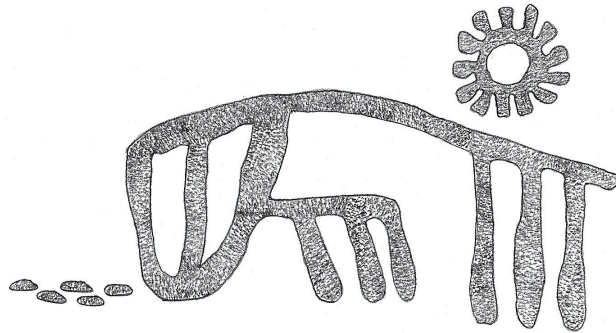
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Nothing is left of the houses at the Takelma village of Ti'lomikh. Not a trace. Nothing to come home to. And yet it feels like home. I have known this mile-long sacred stretch of soil since I was a child. Growing up I was told stories of the centuries of visitors who found their way along the Rogue River to Ti'lomikh. Imagine this in the mists of Mythtime: the Dragonfly brothers meet Coyote here. Soon after that, the people arrive. Hapkemnas, the creator, shows them how to build houses. This begins a happy village life-cycle that lasts for thousands of years.



In 1827, the river brings another visitor, Peter Skene Ogden, a Hudson's Bay fur trapper. A few months earlier, he visits the Modoc village of Gumbat and writes in his journal: "We took the liberty of demolishing their Huts for fire wood.... I should certainly regret that our side should cause a quarrel with these Indians, for so far their conduct toward us has been certainly most correct and orderly and worthy of imitation by all." He leaves Ti'lomikh intact, but his visit marks the blip in time when the concept of home begins to be redefined by people new to the neighborhood. More come in a flood. Fifty years later, following a bloody war for sod, the original people are gone, forced to make new homes on reservations up north.

Yet Ti'lomikh still feels like home. Native people know that the village is more than the houses and graveyards that define its boundaries. It is a story told by Mother Landscape, the sound of the river, the smell of pines. It is the old man who sits in the stone chair above the falls, watching the first spring salmon swimming up the Rogue River. Weeks before, he had seen their shadows leaping the falls, and he knew they were coming. The river is the lifeblood of the world, the wind her breath. The old man feels the breeze made by the power of the falls. The world is alive, and this is what home is all about.

This is the story I want to find. How do I reassemble the fragments that remain? How do I step outside the outrages of history and live in a time that makes sense? Hapkemnas is my

neighbor. Mother Landscape is the village storyteller. The Salmon People stop by for a visit. How do I find my way into the essence of this story?

Simple. I tell Coyote. Seriously. And here's what happens. Not long after, in the middle of the night, he startles me out of bed with his signature howl. He convinces me that significant lessons in mythic time travel are mine for the grabbing. After some dickering, I agree to hire him as my guide and to follow his instructions. Before sunrise, we arrive at Ti'lomikh. We stand on the riverbank and wait for the first light.

This is a quiet moment that has not changed for centuries, this slow transition from darkness to light. Millions of stars give way to one giant star that blazes a path through the morning, eventually finding its way to the village.

"It's time," says Coyote. "Let's head home. We'll take the scenic tour."

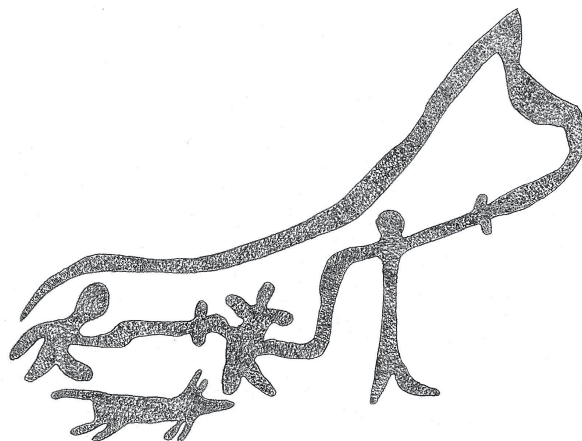
Coyote and I walk into the nearby town of Gold Hill and board the Greyhound bus. Sunlight brushes the hills and ridges above the river. The bus jerks into motion, crawls out of town and rumbles downriver along Highway 99.

"Remind me again why we're riding this bus to Siletz?" I ask.

"So we can walk back."

"That's what I thought. It's a few hundred miles, you know."

"That's right. But you might find walking with us mythic folks is a little different. We cover a lot of distance in less time than you humans, and we see more along the way. Reality is so boring. Remember you promised to trust me on this one?"



"I remember. So, Mister Magical Mythtime, can you get this Greyhound to trot a little faster?"

"I don't mess with domestic dogs. Grandmother is patient. She'll wait for us to get there."

“Of course. So tell me about your grandmother. You’ve never mentioned her.”

“I’ve always had a grandmother. Grandmother Coyote. Don’t you listen to the stories you tell?”

“Sometimes I forget that you claim to be all of the coyotes in the stories ... Mister Coyote, Coyote Old Man, Sleuth Hound Coyote, Troublemaker Coyote, Harebrained Coyote....”

“Don’t you forget it!”

“It seems that your many incarnations never do. And now your grandmother wants to walk from the reservation to her homeland. A sort of reverse replay of the Trail of Tears? Think she can make it? How old is she?”

“She’s as old as I am. We Coyotes never age or get feeble. We simply endure.”

“Being a storyteller, I suppose I have myself to thank for that.”

“Right again. Wow, you’re like this bus.”

“How so?”

“You’re slow, but you’re on a roll!”

This is enough banter for me. I turn and gaze out the window.

The Rogue River appears to flow faster as we travel downstream. The landscape whirs by at highway speeds, even though the bus gets tired and stops to rest at every doughnut shop in every small town. River and highway part ways and the bus lumbers over the Coast Range. Several miles south of the mouth of the river, the bus turns right and heads up the Pacific coast. I imagine the ocean just a few feet away. I feel a sense of floating north as the waves caress the edge of the highway, sometimes leaping inland and lapping the wheels of the bus.

Coyote watches me. He knows the shape of my eyes as I slip into a daydream.

“Just wait,” says Coyote. “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

Hours later, hungry, dog-tired, ears numb from the whine of the bus engine and noses and throats stinging with diesel fumes, we arrive at Siletz.

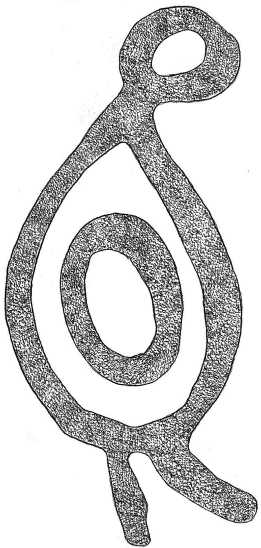
At first, the place seems empty. There are no cars in the parking lot. The tribal center is locked. I bang on the door. No answer. No one is around. We wander down the hill and find crowds of folks walking toward the dance house.

Inside, a hundred people crowd onto benches to listen to Coyote’s grandmother tell an ancient story. In firelight, native-brown eyes gleam like the eyes of the ancestors. The fire blazes.

The smell of smoke lives in the cedar planks. Coyote and I settle into the audience and the weariness of the long bus trip is soon forgotten.

Grandmother Coyote puts on the mask of the creator and balances the mood of the place ... the maleness of the fire, the traditional memory of the femaleness of the house, owned and run by women for longer than any man might want to remember, the female face behind the male mask, the womanly grace of movement and nurturing words as she describes the journey of Hapkemnas through the world he has created.

“First I dig into Mother Landscape, into the rich soil of the earth. This releases the myths. Now every home will be filled with stories. Then I put a post at each corner of the house pit, connect them with rafters, and balance a ridge pole over the top.”



Her story of Hapkemnas travels the night along the length of the river, from Daldal's house at the mouth to the dwelling places of Old Time spirits at Boundary Springs. Each house along the river's path has a story, and the people who live there are eager to share. At the first glimmer of morning light, as the fire glows in its bed of orange coals, she removes the mask. Her face and the mask have the same deep creases as if they share the hills and valleys of the landscape. Perhaps they were both present at creation. No native storyteller who knows Old Time myths would argue which was older: Hapkemnas stories or Coyote stories. The fashioning of the homeland and the trickster-inspired reshaping of that landscape have common beginnings and speak as strongly to native people today as they did to their ancestors centuries ago.

“You have heard enough of this story. Too many words and your ears will grow long from too much listening. Now it's time for you people who come from the creator to go out and greet the morning and live in the wide world. Gweldi. Baybit leplap. This story is finished.”

Grandmother Coyote notices Coyote and me at the back of the lodge. She glances toward the door and whispers to herself, “It's time to go on a journey.”

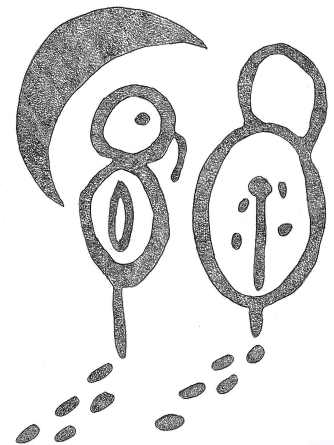
The three of us walk. Before Mythtime, what is here is the land. Like a camera lens focusing on the main image for a film, Mother Landscape comes into focus. Each hill, each rock, each bend in each river, has a story that is told in sight and sound ... in the reddish blush of the first

sunrise and the silver rising of the first moon, the flash of each star blinking on, the gurgling of springs in the mountains, the swish and swoosh of rapids and riffles, the stretching sound of roots as they push the first plants and trees into meadows along rivers and creeks. On this morning, a breeze rattles spring leaves. Fields are lush with new grass, tinted blue with blooming camas. Before Human People, before the Dragonfly brothers, before Hapkemnas, many of the Old Time stories are already here. Mother Landscape, the oldest storyteller, is always ready for an audience who is willing to watch and to listen.

As we walk through the film of our story, history looms in the fuzzy background and around the blurred edges. We get glimpses of fences and ranches, villages and towns, wagon roads and highways, people arriving and people leaving. Each night, in the light of our campfire, the background and edges of the film crowd closer into the center of what is seen and heard, images shapeshifting, stepping through shadows, in and out of flickering firelight, sounds of stories as words arrive one by one and join themselves into narratives. There are moments when the stories of this place, in all their wonder and their terror, become complete, when each image is fully in focus, when all of the characters have arrived and are ready to speak.

As we crest a hill and turn inland, I look back for a last glimpse of the ocean.

At the mouth of the Siletz River I see islands in the bay, stumps and logs carved by harsh coastal weather. From this distance, the islands rise through fog and hauntingly resemble Old Time Indian burials. I see the thousands of native people, shipped and force-marched hundreds of miles to a skeletal cluster of shacks and shelters that is the Siletz Indian Reservation of 1856. Government troops execute those who refuse to leave their homeland. They are shot in front of friends and relations to graphically illustrate that the U.S. Government is serious about relocating natives.



Leaving their homes of thousands of years behind them, with only a basket of food each and the clothes on their backs, the trip to the reservation is long and sad. Captain Ord writes in his journal: “It almost makes me shed tears to listen to their wailing as they totter along.” Many die

along the way of various diseases, and many more die during the first winter from starvation, exposure and sadness.

Housing is nearly nonexistent. New arrivals are sick from food unsuited to their usual diets. Many are fed flour normally sold as cattle feed, swept from the floors of Willamette Valley mills. Nightly bed checks keep track of who is where. Forts are built along the boundaries to prevent escapes. Family members are located in different areas. Indeed, early reservation life resembles life in a prison rather than in a community. Within a few years, an alarming number of native people will die from a depression of spirits. Ten years later, the dying will hardly slow. In the words of a Shasta elder: “Many of my people have died since they came here. Many are still dying. There will soon be none left of us. We are sick at heart. We are sad when we look on the graves of our families.”

On this morning, the coastal weather continues shaping the islands at the mouth of the river. I step through fog and walk along the beach. Just offshore, I hear a mixture of shouting and crying. I see the ghostly outline of an old steamship heading north. I squint and make out the name on the side: Columbia. The morning is cold. The ship is crowded with native people being hauled to the reservation. I hear soldiers singing: “Columbia’s sons and adopted daughters shriek aloud o’er land and waters. The Indians have come to quarters.”

I shake my head and try to free myself from the vision. I turn and see Grandmother Coyote watching me. “I know where you’ve been,” she says. The three of us walk in silence into the town of Dayton. We pass the old Fort Yamhill blockhouse and jail. Dark eyes stare out through the bars and follow our every step. We walk out of town, south through the Willamette Valley, toward home.

At the end of a long day, we arrive at Coyote Creek Crossing. A few inches below the surface is a rock shelf that inspired its earlier name of Rock Creek. This made for an easy bit of wading back in the old days and handy for wagons traveling the Old Trail. In 1856, the Trail of Tears crossed here. A Takelma woman is buried under the limbs of an age-old oak, one of several deaths along this trail. In the purple twilight, voices drift our way. We walk down the creek to have a look.

The path opens into a large meadow. We stand in the shadows just beyond a ring of light that comes from a campfire where Coyote Creek flows into the Long Tom River. What Coyote and I

see next is an eye-opener. There we are, both of us, sitting around that fire with the oldest man I have ever seen. I blink my eyes and he disappears.

“This is nothing,” whispers Grandmother Coyote. “Keep watching.”

The moon clears a ridge and moonlight brightens the meadow. We watch in amazement as the shadows of the three of us slip away and sneak into the firelight.



This is the first time I have actually seen the Shadow People. Each morning I call for my shadow to come home after he’s been out for the night visiting friends. Now there is a trio of Shadow People, mine among them, and I watch as if I am witnessing an old story that makes mythic images dance in my mind. Coyote’s shadow splits in half, and now there are two of them.

My shadow stands next to Grandmother Coyote’s shadow and we watch her two grandsons tell a story together. After arguments about which of them is the one true Coyote-hero of the myths, followed by a tail-pulling tussle, they settle into the narrative, content that the contrived substance of their version of the story will make them both look good.

They improve on the world the creator made, they trick a village of pudgy, self-serving Frog People and bring water to this vast meadow that will come to be known as Grand Prairie. It is a magical myth. The moon disappears into the clouds. The fire burns down, no longer providing a spotlight for the happy, vainglorious tellers. The story is done and our shadows return.

I feel whole. It's not just having my shadow home that brings this feeling of fulfillment. There's something about hearing a story in this place. Despite its Coyote-stilted telling, it fills the landscape in an authentic way. For a moment, this native world seems balanced and I feel like I fully belong here. The last words of the story echo in my head: "That's just how it happened a long time ago."

We walk back down the creek and camp at the crossing, throwing our bed rolls under the oak tree. Grandmother Coyote sits by the grave and sings to the night, "Let us dream of our ancestors. May their stories be with us as we journey home."

The next day we traipse through history and myth, newsreels and old photos in and out of focus as we walk out of the Willamette Valley and into the mountains. We pass a carved boulder that maps the pattern of local creeks and rivers. Grandmother Coyote tells me that an important Kalapuya man is buried under that rock. "A sacred place," she says. "Some say that the Rock People are his ancestors." We rest at Grave Creek Crossing. Another grave, another song, another prayer. We journey south deeper into spring. Blossoming fruit trees, hillsides purple with vetch, the people on the move ... new beginnings after long winter nights.... We follow our path as it climbs the slopes of Sexton Mountain.

As we crest the summit, we arrive at what appears to be a typical log home of the 1850s. But as we open the door and walk inside, we might just as well have stepped into a traditional plank house. The first home built by Hapkemnas would have looked much the same ... dirt floor pounded smooth, mat-covered ledges for sitting and sleeping, and a fire in the center sending smoke in spirals through an opening in the roof. The fire is the only light and it takes a few moments for me to notice an old woman sitting in the shadows. Her face looks as serious as stone, yet she is up in an instant, greeting Grandmother Coyote as if they were old friends. Her friendly gesture draws us farther inside.

Coyote elbows me. "Listen carefully to this one," he says. "She's never been one for chitchat. All of her news hides inside her story."

We all sit around the fire and the old woman starts her tale....



Rock Old Woman used to live here. The rock that looks like her is still out back. In the old days there were visitors every night. Those walking the path stopped by to leave an offering on the rock and thank her for their good health. Then the one who kept this house offered them a place to sleep, good food and good stories, and sent them on their way in the morning, their baskets fuller than when they arrived. Few folks stop by these days, except for you people, and one wanderer a while back.

He was a strange fellow. His hood covered most of his face. It was hard to see his eyes. He spoke with the voice of one who has been places.

“I have seen them,” he said. “Canoes filled with ghosts, all heading downriver toward the Land of the Dead.”

That’s all I could get out of him. I couldn’t tell if he was remembering the myth about Coyote killing the ghosts or had just seen the people forced from their homes. Or maybe something about the Ghost Dance. That night I did the talking until we both started dozing. In the morning, he was gone when I woke up. But he left behind a slip of paper with some writing on it. I guess that was his way of sharing his story. I remember the words....

“I fell sleep beside the river and dreamed of the Dark Woman. She walked lightly across a meadow. The crickets stopped singing. The woman stopped under a tree by the river and whispered a prayer. A gentle rain began to fall and woke me up, and she was gone. I caught a glimpse of her shadow as she walked upriver.”

That’s the end of her story. We stretch out on the mats and the old woman stokes the fire. My sleep is sound and dreamless. In the morning we say goodbye and thank her for her kindness. At midday we reach the Rogue River and begin the last part of our walk, upriver toward the village of Ti’lomikh.

“Well, Mister Storyteller,” says Coyote. “We’re almost home. Have you been following this narrative? Have you been scribbling notes?”

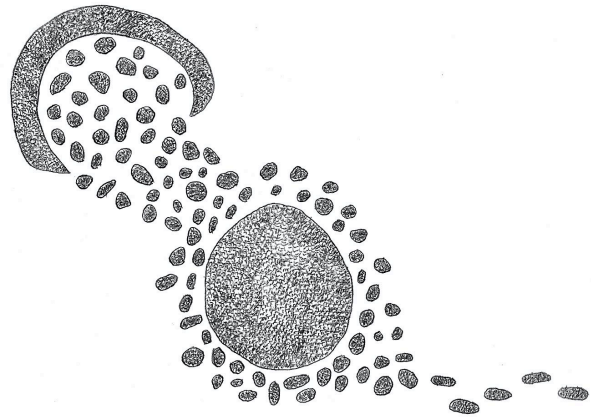
“I lost the sequence,” I say. “Time seems a little confusing, kind of chopped-up.”

“Welcome to how old stuff has become what it is now.”

“Oh, you Coyote guy,” says Grandmother Coyote. “Always chasing your own words.”

“That’s how it’s always been,” says Coyote. “We’ll soon be home where we started but not quite.”

I stretch my legs to get ahead, out of earshot. I stride upriver through the town of Gold Hill. It is evening when I cross the river and walk into the village. I stand by myself for a few moments. Then stories arrive and the village gets crowded.



Fog rolls into the village and smells of smoke. I walk past a smoldering house. The ridge pole has fallen and the house collapsed into its own pit. I hear shouting. A horse pulls a plow across a cleared field. With each clink of the plow’s blade, an old burial is exposed. Shouts erupt from a crowd of people. Each one paid an admission fee to watch the Indian graves get dug up. A young man bends down in the field. He is wearing a broad-brimmed hat and has a pipe in his mouth. He uses a trowel to dig. He removes bones and artifacts ... an obsidian blade, shells, pine seeds, a bone ornament.... The man scribbles in his notebook: “All undisturbed skeletons were lying on the left side with the head toward the south, facing west.”

Downriver, I’m thinking. Downriver toward the Land of the Dead.

I walk deeper into the village past the last house, out of the fog and the smoke, and into a large meadow. Coyote and his grandmother have somehow gotten ahead of me. They stand next to a yellow dome tent. A man sits on the grass, laptop on his knees, talking with Grandmother Coyote and typing away.

I walk up and Coyote whispers to me, “He’s a writer and he just got here. Now Grandmother is telling him about this place and he’s adding it to his own story.”

I gaze out across the river. The falls are wild with snowmelt. I imagine sitting on the rock above the falls. Loud, powerful, ancient. I turn back and Grandmother Coyote and the man have disappeared.

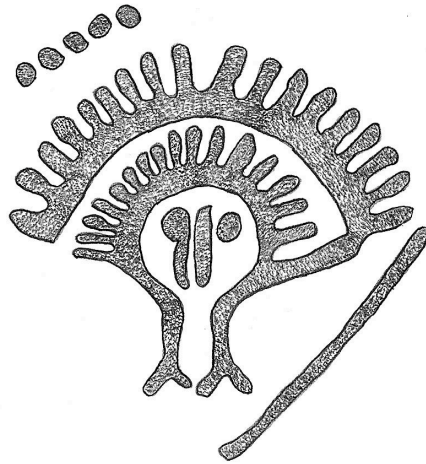
“Where did they go?” I ask.

“That writer fellow crawled into his tent.”

“What about your grandmother?”

“I’m not sure,” says Coyote. “Downriver somewhere. There were a lot of people walking toward the canoe landing. They were drumming and singing. I think she went with them.”

Coyote and I stand on the riverbank. Two bright blue dragonflies lift off a rock and fly across the water and disappear. The Rogue River flows toward the last bit of sunset. Ti’lomikh waits for a new day.



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“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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