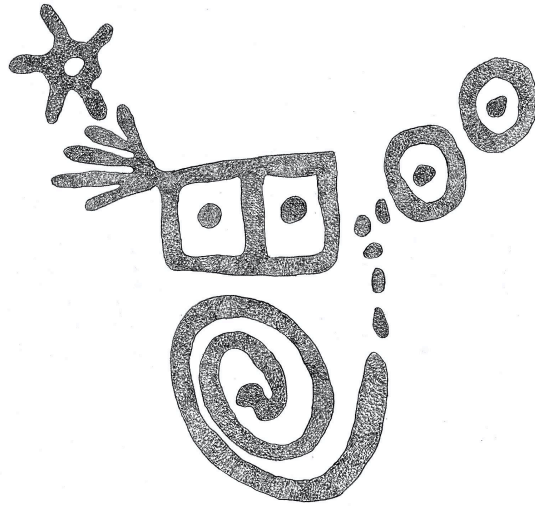
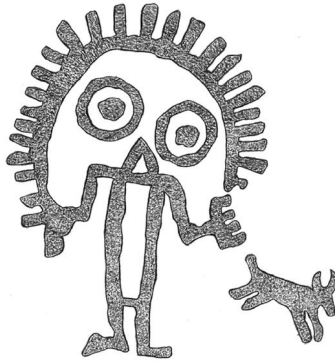


Ribs of the Animal

Thomas Doty



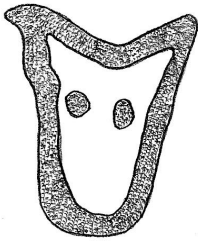
Ribs of the Animal



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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At home in the Siskiyou Mountains, I am knee-deep in my manuscripts in the upstairs library. I read out loud to myself....

“Through the eyes of the Takelma people, the earth’s body is a great animal. The neck is to the east at Boundary Springs, the ribs alongside the Rogue River at the Table Rocks, and the tail at Gold Beach where the river flows into the ocean. The river is this animal’s lifeblood, pulsing and throbbing through the Takelma world.

“Hmmm.... I know there’s more pages of this story around here somewhere.”

Coyote wanders down the hallway and pokes his nose in. He gazes through the library window and gestures at the expansive view of the Rogue Valley.

“The world’s out there, Mister Storyteller, and so are the stories. Libraries. Humph!”

That gives me an idea. I disappear into a closet. I push a few boxes aside. From the back I lift a dust-covered buckskin bag and hold it front of Coyote’s curious nose.

“Isn’t this your bag of masks?” I ask.

“Perhaps.”

“I haven’t seen you wearing them for quite a spell.”

Coyote smirks. “I don’t need them anymore.”

“How so?”

“Let’s just say that I have embraced my inner spirit pup and I now shapeshift without the aid of external doodads. I am the master shapeshifter of Mythtime, and a much-admired powerful pooch without props. I do it all! This comes from spending time outside in the sunshine and not in libraries.”

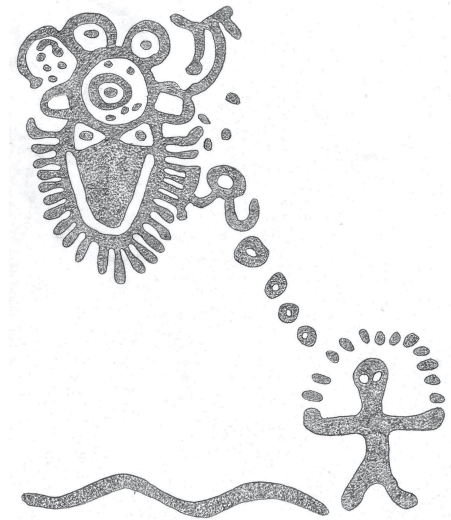
“Right. Well, since you’re not using them, do you mind if I borrow your masks?”

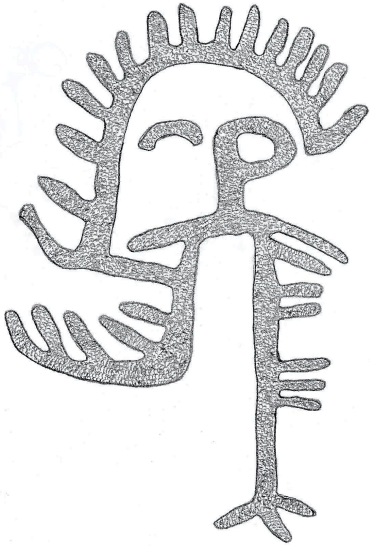
“Not at all. But I should warn you. They aren’t your usual human-carved, flimsy-facade masks. They are old, carved in a ceremonial way, and they have magic.”

“Magic? Not a typical bag of Coyote tricks?”

“You’ll see. Mind if I tag along? This might be entertaining.”

“No problem,” I say.





“So you say,” says Coyote.

“Right again.”

Through the course of a year, I take Coyote’s buckskin bag of magical masks on several treks down the valley to the Table Rocks along the Rogue River ... the Ribs of the Animal ... the heart of our Takelma universe.

The Rock People mask is the oldest mask in the bag. It is gray and brown and the eyes are large, as if they have been open for a long time and have witnessed many amazing and profound events. The stories of the Rock People are so old that they survive in fragments. Some of these fragments are echoes of the first tellers. The memories of their stories are carved and painted on boulders and cliff faces. Before the Table Rocks stood at this place, their Rock ancestors lived here at Dat’gayawada, Alongside the Earth’s Ribs.

I put on the Rock People mask and walk slowly along the river. I look through the ancient eyeholes and feel as if I have journeyed into the first days of Mythtime.

“The Rock People are here,” I whisper to myself.

In the spring sunshine, I walk the old Indian trail along the river. New grass has grown up along the banks, and oak trees are green with new leaves. Across the river, plum blossoms are thick on branches that hang over the water. The river flows gray–green with snowmelt.

In the middle is an ancient rock with its top sticking out of the riffles. A black otter–like animal slips out of the water, climbs to the top of the rock, and looks around. He notices me, dives back in and disappears below the surface. This is one of the Old Time healing animals, the first neighbors of the Rock People. Centuries later, when the whites showed up, these animals slipped into the deepest shadows of the ancient world and are rarely seen these days.

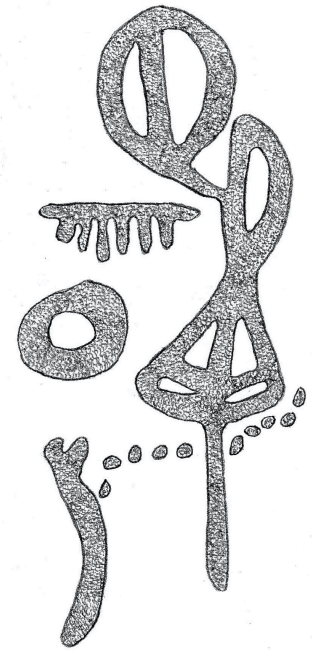
I walk downriver past the long lake where two spotted magical dogs live in their stone house. They come out and bark at me as I walk by, friendly woofs that acknowledge me as an old friend.

“Must be the mask,” I say to myself.

I walk past places in the myths. Coyote lives here with his wife, Crane. Their daughter gave birth to Rock Boy, one of the Rock People. Some of his relations are healers. Farther along the trail, in the shadow of Sexton Mountain, lives Rock Old Woman. She watches over her people, attends to their needs and keeps them healthy. People who pass by thank her for their good health.

I remove the mask and walk back along the trail. I see the world as it is now. The lake is dry. The rock in the river has shifted and leans against the riverbank. The Table Rocks are here, and this is good, but power lines wrap around their bases as if holding them together. The few healers who still live at the center of the world seldom show themselves. Not far away, the remains of Rock Old Woman lie buried under the asphalt lanes of Interstate 5.

I am thinking that there must be more to this world than good things gone bad. There are many ways of looking at the landscape. I am determined to try them all until I discover a path that allows me to walk between ancient and modern worlds, and share stories from both.



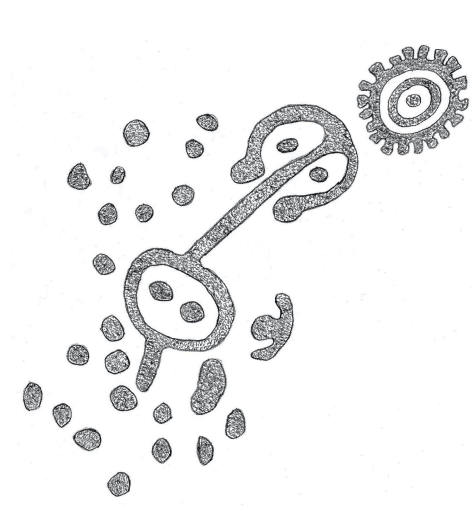
The Great Animal mask is not what it first appears to be. The eyeholes and mouth seem open but are covered on the inside. The mask wearer cannot see or talk. The ears are open, however, and anyone who wears the mask has exceptional hearing. There are stories that the mask changes colors as the seasons shift. It is an ancient tradition for the mask wearer to sit in the heart of the world and listen to the language of the landscape.

On a hot summer day, I arrive at the Ribs of the Animal. I take the mask of the Great Animal from the bag. It has many colors: sky-blue, leaf-green and the pale brown of summer-dried valley fields and hillsides. Wearing the mask, I sit quietly by the river for a long time. This mask makes its own darkness. Not even brilliant sunlight finds its way in. The mask forces me to listen in the old way of listening to stories. I look inside my mind, grasping some mental image of mythic memory. I imagine story characters in the firelight and shadows of the dance house,

moving to the words of the storyteller. I look beyond the dance and see the Great Animal that is the world. I listen to the voice of Mother Landscape tell the first story of this place.

We begin along the Rogue River. Gelam. Here live the People of the River. Takelma. In a house. Wili yowo. Here I speak the words. Here the story begins.

There is something ancient about a beginning, floating in the depths of human memory, a secret the oldest stories recall, a myth the river tells over and over. The beginning is a long time ago that is now.



Our world is the Great Animal. At the birth of the river is the head. Crater Lake. And the neck. Boundary Springs. Gwent'agabok'danda. The Nape of the Earth, its Neck. Here is the beginning, upriver to the east, toward the new light of the rising sun.

At the source of the river there are colors as bright as creation — yellow monkey flowers, green moss hugging logs that span the water, red and brown rocks coloring the bottom of the river, swarms of blue-green dragonflies that make the blue sky flow.

For thousands of years we have told stories of the river that rushes underground from the bottom of Crater Lake, then floods into a powerful river that is a source of food as well as a symbol of birth and life and death.

The river first gurgles then is born in a gush, rushing down the Cascades as fast as a child's growth. Out of control through the Rogue River Gorge, the rapids roar and scream our stories.

The river rushes past the rock home of the creator, Hapkemnas. Children Maker. He has lived here since he breathed life into the Great Animal. He lives in a cave — sharing his home with his oldest friends, the Rock People — and he watches the river rush past, day after day, season after season, century after century.

The river flows through its middle life, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, to the villages of the Human People and the Old Time homes of the Daldal brothers, the two dragonflies. In the center of the world are the Ribs of the Animal. Dat'gayawada. Here the river pauses and the deep pools speak our stories.

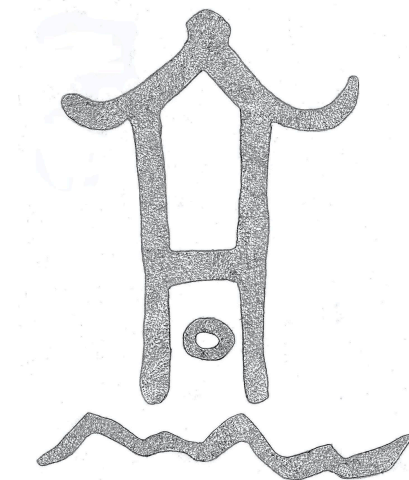
The river widens and slows through old age toward its death at Dit'agay'yuk!umada. Gold Beach. The Rear End of the Earth, its Tail. Near the Land of the Dead the river is swallowed by the sea, downriver to the west, toward the dying light of the setting sun.

Yet the river stretches a memory through the crash of waves, to the Village Beyond the Sunset where new beginnings are born. Far out on the sea, the river continues to tell our oldest stories.

Clouds form over the Pacific, drifting across the Cascades, bringing rain that feeds the springs that feed the river that keeps the stories going.

Here in the center of the world, along the Ribs of the Animal, I speak the ancient words and remember the beginning.

Wili yowo. Gelam. There is a house along the Rogue River.



As Mother Landscape's voice fades into the sound of the flowing river, I remove the mask of the Great Animal and summer sunshine fills the valley. This is the time to leave the winter villages, to wander to the best berry-picking places, the good hunting and fishing places, the food-gathering meadows, to the rocks where stories still live, renewing friendships and meeting relatives along the way. I saunter the long route home, exploring the Great Animal, looking for stories in the long light of the summer day and into the evening.

With Coyote's bag of masks, I'll return to the river in the fall.

The Daldal mask is two masks, one over the other. The top mask is in the shape of a dragonfly with a set of large eyeholes. Underneath is a second mask with two faces, each half-human and half-dragonfly, with two sets of eyeholes and two mouths, all overlapping. Both masks are blue-green, reminiscent of the river.

Fall is a time for coming home. In the old days the people return to their houses along the river for a time of feasting and dancing and preparation for winter. Fall is also a time for transformation.

In the Takelma mythology, the Daldal brothers journey up the Rogue River in the fall to prepare the world for the coming of the Human People.

In the spirit of the season, I return to the Ribs of the Animal on a fall day when leaves twirl off the oak trees and make rafts as they float down the river, and Indian plums are plump and ripe.

I take the Daldal mask out of the bag and put it on. I look at the river and see pieces of bodies floating past. At first I am startled. I lean over the water. Arms and legs and bobbing heads look real but not quite of this world. I turn away and hear the crash of ocean waves downriver. I know this story. I climb on top of a rock on the riverbank, gaze westward and wait for the story to come to me....

Wili yowo. There was a house at the place the Rogue River flowed wide and quiet, then mixed with the ocean at the river's mouth where waves crashed over sand bars, and in that house lived Daldal, the Giant Dragonfly with big blue wings and two heads.

Daldal stood on a hill that overlooked the river, and he saw bodies all cut through floating down the river, people with limbs all lopped off.

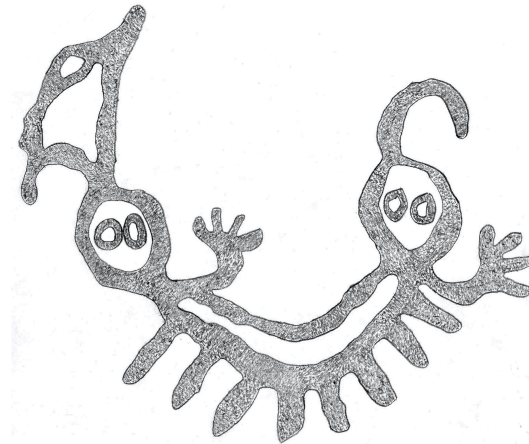
He said to himself, "Where do they come from? What is the matter?" For a long time people floated down the river with their legs cut right through.

Daldal packed his things and started walking upriver to find out who was killing people. A little ways up the trail he spotted a lark. He pulled out his bow, fitted an arrow, and shot. The arrow whizzed up and up and up, went through the lark's nose, piercing his nose through the middle. This was the first piercing.

The lark said, "Thank you, nephew, I am glad you made this fine hole in my nose. But you'd better watch that arrow!"

The arrow whizzed down and down and down, came straight down — THUNK! — between Daldal’s two heads, went all the way through his body, and split him in half.

Now there were two of them, Elder Daldal and Younger Daldal, the dragonfly brothers. And they both went upriver looking for who was cutting up people.



I remove the outer mask, but I’m unsure which set of eyeholes to look through. Each gives me a different view of the river, and the sounds are different. I juggle the mask and find a spot where the two views come together. I gaze downriver and pick up the story....

While they walked, Younger Daldal talked all the time. His feet went clunk! on this rock, clack! on that rock, and the only time you couldn’t hear him half a forest away was when they passed a thundering rapids.

Elder Daldal was quiet. He hardly said a word, and as they passed the slow, wide places in the river, his footsteps were as quiet as the flowing.

On their way they wrestled with all kinds of beings, each in his own way. They wrestled oaks bearing white acorns, oaks bearing black acorns, firs and pines and bushes and rocks. They wrestled all sorts of beings to make them strong.

Younger Daldal jumped full-body onto a tree and with a great lot of grunting and shouting, he pulled the tree, roots and all, from the ground and tossed it into the river. “Hey, Big-nosed Daldal! Let’s see you top that!”

Elder Daldal looked amused. He walked up to a tree and with sudden, intense eyes held the tree so tight in his stare, the tree finally said, “Enough!”

In this way they traveled upriver.

They arrived at a house. Inside, in the voice of an old woman, someone was saying, “Warrmm your back! Warrmm your back! Warrmm your back!”

Younger Daldal said, “Big-nosed Daldal, put on style. Stay out here in the cold if you want, I’m going inside.”

He leaped onto the roof of the house, jumped down the smoke hole, and there was the old woman with her back to the fire. “Warrmm your back.”

Younger Daldal lay down by the fire. The old woman leaped up and rolled him toward the flames. Then she sat on him. It was in this way she liked to kill people.

Younger Daldal couldn’t move at all. He called out, “Oh, elder brother! I have blistered my back!”

Elder Daldal went inside and kicked her off his brother. Then he said in a quiet voice, “Do you think you will be a woman? People will call you camas. You will grow in the meadows. You will not be a human being. You will be food.”

Nowadays she can be seen blooming in the meadows along the river. She has become good food for the people.

Elder Daldal and Younger Daldal traveled on up the Rogue River, sometimes walking alongside the crashing rapids, sometimes along the deep pools where the river flows slowly. Younger Daldal pulled trees out of the ground and Elder Daldal stared hard. Each did his own kind of wrestling to keep him strong.

Now they heard: tut tut tut tut tut.

“Well, Big-nosed Daldal, put on style. I’m going to go see what makes that noise.”

Younger Daldal walked toward the sound until he saw a house. He jumped up on top and looked down the smoke hole. He saw two old women without eyes, blind, facing each other and pounding acorns: tut tut tut tut tut.

Younger Daldal reached down and stole their food from on top of their house.

One of the women said, “Well, sister, did you eat it all up?” She said that to the other woman, who said, “How so? Perhaps it was you who ate it all up.”

Younger Daldal reached down and tied their long hair together.

Now they started quarreling. One felt the other’s hair pull and said, “Now she is fighting me.” The other said the same thing and they took hold of each other’s hair, jumped at each other and banged their heads: TUT TUT TUT TUT TUT!

Younger Daldal started laughing, rolling around on the roof of the house until he nearly rolled off. “Big-nosed Daldal, put on style. This is funny!” The two old women stopped. “So it’s him!”

They grabbed sharp sticks and poked at him through the smoke hole. Then they jumped up on the roof and were about to poke out his eyes when Younger Daldal screamed, “Oh, elder brother!”

Elder Daldal climbed onto the roof and said, “So my grandmothers are without eyes.” He took the sharp sticks from them and went inside. Younger Daldal took off stumbling toward the trail.

Elder Daldal put the points of the sticks into the fire until they were red hot. Then he crawled back on the roof and carefully put the sharp sticks into each of their eye sockets: Fssst! Fssst! Fssst! Fssst!

“Now I have made you eyes,” said Elder Daldal. “Now look around you. See the trees and the river. Now you can see the world.”

Elder Daldal left the two old women and continued up the trail.

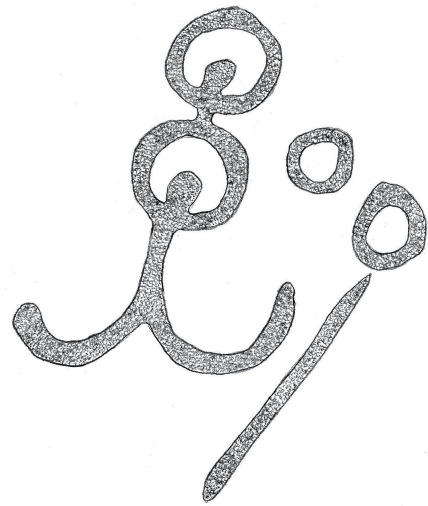
He caught up with his younger brother and the two of them traveled upriver together, now alongside the rapids, now past those pools that flowed slowly.

They came to many houses where people had been killed. Sometimes Elder Daldal helped people out of trouble. Those who were causing the problems he turned into salmon spear shafts, morning and evening stars, echoes that moved up and down the canyons, deer sinew to tie arrows with — all things to help the people.

Each place they went, Younger Daldal said, “Big-nosed Daldal, put on style.” Then he walked into trouble and a few minutes later he called out, “Oh, elder brother! Come and help me!”

In this way they traveled upriver, changing things.

They came across Coyote at the falls called Ti’lomikh. Coyote had snatched up a fishing net and was thinking, “I shall catch salmon in the river.”



Coyote tossed the net into the river and pulled it out, but the net was full of mice. He tossed the net back in and drew it out, but rabbits were all he caught! Again, he tossed the net. “Gophers?!”

Younger Daldal was laughing so hard the ground was shaking.

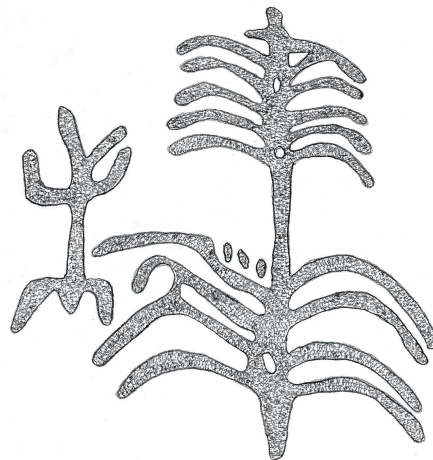
“Say, Coyote,” said Elder Daldal, “it is not your place to catch salmon. People will net and spear salmon. They will catch salmon here at the falls where the river runs fast. And here they will honor the Salmon People with stories and songs and a feast. And you, Coyote, you shall eat mice and rabbits and gophers as long as the world goes on.”

Coyote went on his way, poking his nose into holes, looking for someone to eat, thinking that someday he was going to change all that.

Farther upriver, Younger Daldal stopped and Elder Daldal walked on ahead. When he got to his place, he whistled like a lark, and the two brothers became flat-topped mountains along the Rogue River.

Younger Daldal is called Lower Table Rock, the one downriver towards the crashing ocean. And Elder Daldal is called Upper Table Rock, the one toward the beginning of the river, where it gurgles out of the ground.

Nowadays, in the twilight of a fall evening, anyone walking the trail from the river up the slope of either Table Rock might walk through buzzing swarms of giant dragonflies, so many that the air turns blue and loud. But up on top, the world is quiet.



From my rock on the river, I watch the myth arrive and surround me. I remove the Daldal mask and stand up. I find myself on top of an immense mesa-like rock.

I walk toward the edge across jumbled flows of basalt, past vernal pools swirling with new life, through rabbitbrush and groves of oaks and pines. The edge is an abrupt drop-off hundreds

of feet to the valley floor. I look downriver and see another rock in the distance, similar to the one I am on.

“The Dragonfly brothers are here,” I whisper. “More people will soon arrive.”

The Gwisgwashan mask is the face of a woman, an elder of her village. She is the Keeper of Stories. Seen in the shifting light and shadows of a fire, the mask shows many expressions and moods. The face is mostly human but seems to resemble different animals at times, often changing from story to story. She has long eyelashes and the shape of her mouth reveals a sense of wonder. There are lines of wisdom and humor around the eyeholes. One who looks through them can see beyond the circle of firelight and into the deep shadows of the forest.

Winter is the traditional storytelling season of the Takelmas. In twilight, I walk partway up the slope of Lower Table Rock to one of the old village sites. I build a small fire and take the Gwisgwashan mask out of its bag. As I put it on, the flames of the fire flicker faster and yet the fire doesn't burn down. Shadows whirl a circle dance around me. Many voices come out of one voice and join the dance, stringing together spontaneous mythic monologues that take but a moment to share yet took thousands of years to evolve.

The voices erupt at once. “I'm the best tree hacker there is!” shouts Jackrabbit. Medicine Fawn sings her medicine song, “Who creeps there about the shadows?” “I can get close to him,” whispers Mudcat Woman. “All of you just floated up, but I can get close to him.” Wildcat weeps for the death of his brother Panther, Grizzly Bear Woman for the loss of her children, Roasting Dead People for the death of his son. “Hey!” pleads Coyote. “Is there anyone out there? I'm stuck inside this tree!” Almost lost in the sound of the falls is the voice of an old woman: “We are Takelma, the people of the river. The salmon are our relations.”

The voices end so suddenly that they echo as a single sound through the depths of the woods before fading away completely.

I remove the Gwisgwashan mask. The fire burns to coals. Darkness and silence move into the village. The first snow of the season drifts up from the valley and buries what remains of the village until there is no sign that anyone was ever here.

In the spring, I return to the Ribs of the Animal. I climb Lower Table Rock, cross the top, and sit on the southern edge above the river. I have the bag of masks with me.

Like giant dragonflies out of the blue, two helicopter sky cranes whirl close to the rock on a test flight from a nearby factory. Far below, a huge machine stretches its mechanical arm and scoops sand and gravel from the heart of the river.

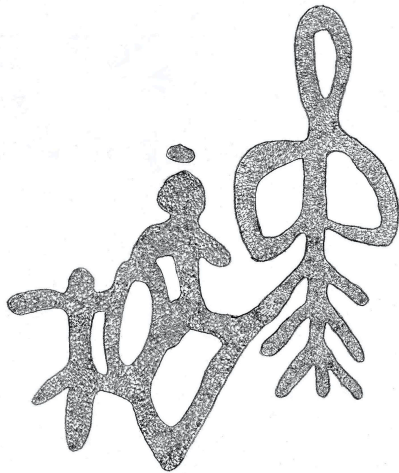
Are these the current culture bringers reshaping the landscape to make the world ready for the arrival of a new kind people? Are these technological trickster antics the source material for a new generation of stories?

I search through the bag for another mask to alter this intruding view of my native landscape. But all the masks have been used. I'm left with my own perspective.

I stand up and squint and the landscape shifts a little. "A clue," I whisper to myself. I take a few steps. "What's in front of me is not necessarily what I see."

As I walk, I think through the stories and the landscape shifts again. I imagine sitting on the back of a giant dragonfly, flying along the river that is the lifeblood of the world. I stretch my arms like wings and run across the rock. Again, the landscape shifts.

The words come back to me: "The beginning is a long time ago that is now." Each story leaves an impression, and Mother Landscape has a long memory. Looking through the eyeholes of the stories, I mentally shapeshift through the varied landscapes that have called the Ribs of the Animal their home.



I gaze to where the spotted magical dogs live. Coyote trots across the dry lakebed toward me. A modern magical dog? Coyote would surely think so.

"Well, what have we here?" asks Coyote. "Now that you're unmasked, what does Mister Storyteller see? The Ribs of the Animal perhaps? These are old bones for a magical pooch to gnaw on."

A springtime breeze rises from the river and dances across the top of the rock. Coyote mimes removing an imaginary mask from my face. He puts it on himself.

"Now I'm Doty the storyteller. Let's have a look... Wow, your words are somewhat delusional, aren't you?"

"You're a silly dog. Let's go home."

"To your manuscripts?"

“No, my friend, let’s sit outside on the porch. If we hurry, we can catch the last colors of the sunset over the Table Rocks.”

“That’s a story worth sharing. Shall we get out the masks?”

“Sometimes the masks are useful, but not this time. We don’t need props to watch the sunset.”

“That was profound. I think you’re catching on.”

“Possibly.”

“Now if you could just find a practical use for your pudgy manuscripts. Fire-starters perhaps? Or fresh lining for the floor of my dog house?”

“Let’s get going, my canine friend. We don’t want to miss daytime shapeshift into evening.”

“How poetic. Now who’s being funny?”

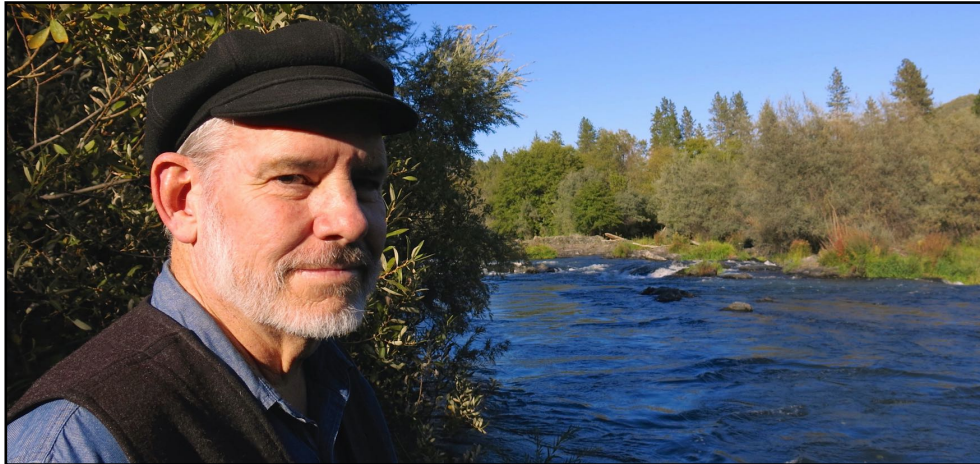
“Right. Ready?”

“I’m always ready.”

“Right again.”

“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