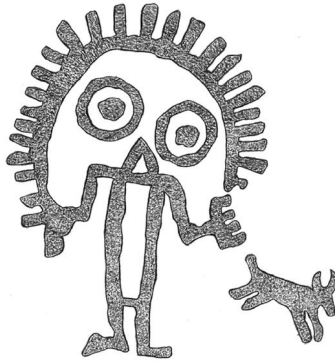


Waiting for Rock Old woman

Thomas Doty



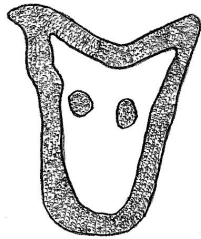
Waiting for Rock Old Woman



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

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At the covered bridge near Sunny Valley, Coyote and I begin our search for the ancient rock that represents Rock Old Woman, a medicine woman in Takelma myths and folklore, and one who lives in the hearts of the people.



“Trust me,” says Coyote.

“Right,” I say.

“Really,” says Coyote. “I know where she is.”

“Perhaps.”

“Good. It’s inspiring to watch a human attempt to gaze beyond his limited vision and ponder mythic possibilities. There’s still hope for your folks! Perhaps you might stretch your brain and try to understand that there is a difference between the eternal spirit of Rock Old Woman and the rock that people say looks like her. If you can do that, we’ll get to somewhere interesting in this story.”

Coyote’s smirk shifts to a scowl as he concentrates on a new thought.

“Well, it seems you’re right about one thing. That rock is sacred to the human beings. That’s where Rock Old Woman sat down to rest. And for a few short centuries it’s been a handy place to leave offerings. But not so long ago, she stood up and went for a walk. She’s still wandering around. Stick with me, Mister Storyteller, and you’ll learn something. It’s time we arrived at the source.”

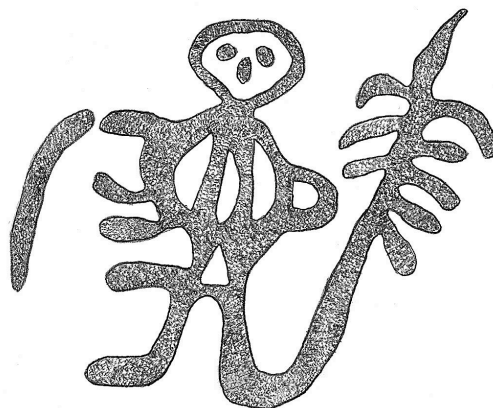
On these rare occasions when Coyote is right, he makes a long speech about it. Every full moon or so, a crumb of doggy wisdom pounces out of the depths of Coyote’s narcissistic brain and makes sense to me. Mostly in agreement, and up for an adventure, we drive toward Sunny Valley, identified by Coyote as “the source.” As we journey through the mountain landscape, my memory time-travels. To feel inside the story, I speak the words out loud. Coyote pretends to be napping....

For years I search for the medicine rock called Rock Old Woman. I walk traces of Old Time Indian trails, down gullies, through shady woods of ferns and creeks, along the ruts of wagon roads, down the car-body-littered roadbeds of Pacific Highway and Route 99, and along the

graveled shoulder of Interstate 5. I search for the clearing, the exact place where she stood. For years I see her ghost in every flat-topped, mossy rock along the way. I carry with me old maps, scraps of stories scribbled in field notes and bits of narratives that survive from native oral literature. But maps and stories and intuition bring me back to the gash in the mountain called Sexton Summit and the rumble and diesel stink of long-haul trucks crawling through the pass.

Standing on what's left of the old highway above the pass, my mind fills in the landscape that was blasted away to improve the road. I see a grassy valley, the old Indian trail crossing the summit, Rock Old Woman covered with offerings of salmon and camas and Indian plums. Years later there is a stage stop, a ranch house, a barn, and an orchard of apple and plum trees. With the first wagons, the last native people to walk the trail pause at the summit and thank Rock Old Woman for their good health as their ancestors have done for centuries. They leave their gifts of food and whisper her name. Those who know Rock Old Woman well call her Grandmother. They sit in silence and listen to her song. They hear other words in the breeze that journeys gently through the pass, rustling the leaves of madrones and oaks. In the distant village called Daldanik, away from the medicine rock in a rocky place along the creek, someone is telling her story.

“According to the Old Ones, when the world was first made by Hapkemnas the Children Maker, Rock Old Woman was given the power to get rid of medicine people who were twisted in their ways and caused sickness and death. She was given a stone pipe, a rock bucket, several other stone tools, and most importantly, a song.



“As she sang her song and her victim smoked the pipe of death, Rock Old Woman heated stones and dropped them into the bucket, boiling the person's heart, stirring it with a paddle until the one who caused sickness and death in others had died. Sexton Mountain tied his hair into a

topknot like he was going to war. He dusted his forehead with white paint. He wrenched loose the medicine person's arm and danced with it, singing his medicine song from the red of sunset to the orange of sunrise. To this day, Sexton Mountain's topknot is visible in the shapes of trees on the summit.

“This is how we get rid of bad medicine. Since before the myths, we have included her name in our prayers for good health. She stands in stone with her tools around her, inspiration to soon-to-be medicine people and a contemplative image to those who live long lives without sickness. Her medicine always works. As we rest at the summit, we leave her gifts. Sometimes we lean against her and draw strength for our long walk ahead. We thank her and whisper, ‘Rock Old Woman ... Dan Mologol ... Grandmother.’ From deep in our memories of the myths, she answers us with her song.”

Down the slope from Sexton Summit, the old Indian trail crosses Leaf Creek near the covered bridge. Later, the Applegate Trail, Pacific Highway and Route 99 use this same crossing. In 1846, as an emigrant wagon train camps at the crossing, sixteen-year-old Martha Leland Crowley dies of typhoid fever. Family and friends bury her nearby. Since that day the creek is called Grave Creek. Though locals still passionately share her story, if one pauses by her grave, the story tells itself.

This ancient creek crossing is a place where stories linger after people have left. Without words, a story survives as a ghostly presence in the place where it lived. Stories find a voice in the crash of a waterfall, a fall breeze that twirls leaves into the creek, the night steps of deer browsing through a meadow. As people cross the creek, they carry their stories with them. Where they settle for a spell, their stories find a home. They mingle with the varied voices of the landscape. They mix with the lingering tales of generations of people who passed through before. They are retold by those who stop by for a visit. After the words are silent, a few of the stories remain. This crossing is such a place.

After years of searching, I begin to believe Rock Old Woman is gone from us forever. I picture her remains as a mound of gravel and debris under the truck-rutted lanes of Interstate 5. This belief vanishes one evening in October when Coyote insists that Rock Old Woman is still wandering the countryside, and with some patience, she will find us. Coyote and I arrive at Grave Creek at sunset and sit on rocks near the crossing.

“We’re done searching,” says Coyote. “Now we wait, and this is the right place.”

“How do you figure that?”

“You said it yourself. Everyone passes by here with stories in their satchels.”

“It’s getting dark.”

“Perfect,” says Coyote.

“Maybe we should build a fire.”

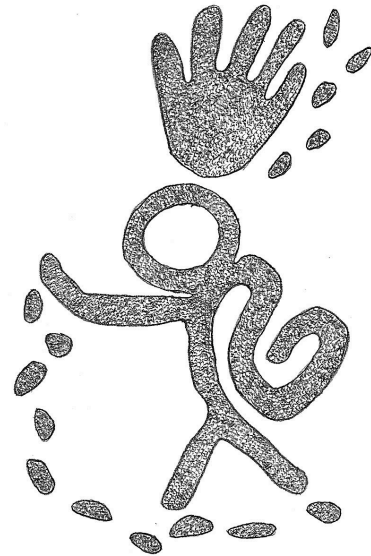
“Let’s keep it dark. We’ll see more. And look, the moon is paying us a visit.”

“Maybe you critters see more without the sun in Sunny Valley, but...”

“Hush,” says Coyote. “Someone’s coming.”

At first, I notice little beyond the blur of headlights and the rumble of the freeway. As my eyes adjust to the gathering darkness, I listen for sounds beyond the noise of traffic ... and the night world opens. Each shifting shadow flickers with an inner light as it becomes a story borrowed from history and myth. Whispered words and story sounds ride the ripples of the creek. An evening breeze slips down the mountain. It mixes the sounds and makes the shadows dance, reshaping the stories as it carries them across the creek.

Coyote and I listen carefully, trying to make sense of the jumbled sounds we are hearing. Sounds invite pictures, and together they turn quickly into a tone poem of the past.



1933. A linguist in his Model T Ford drives across the covered bridge and parks. An old woman walks to the creek crossing. She stands silently, a concentrated look on her face as she digs deep into her memory to remember the Takelma name for Leaf Creek. “Takhta’asin,” she whispers. “They call it Grave Creek now.” Grass grows tall, covering graves in the meadow. Gold seekers drift past and take little notice.

Scrambling for precious metal shifts to grabbing for prime land. And war. Halloween, 1855. Soldiers die in the Battle of Hungry Hill ... the Battle of Bloody Spring ... their unmarked graves here, near Fort Leland. Twenty Indians die in the same battle, but no one knows where they are

buried. Nine years earlier, native shadows dart from tree to tree on ridgetops that ring the valley, watching the first wagon train rattle through the creek. A legend floats over Martha Leland Crowley's grave: five Indians from the Indian War buried in the same grave as her. Anything is possible. Some folks don't believe it. Before that, two decades of mountain men fur trappers splash through the creek on their treks into the mountains where trapping and hunting is good. New Ones share a fire with the last of the Old Ones who not only remember the ancient myths but still live them.

A procession of healers. Old Time medicine people cross the creek: Mudcat Woman, Acorn Woman, Medicine Fawn, Sparrow Hawk Who is Yellow Between His Claws, Husu Chicken Hawk Who is Red-Tailed Hawk. Medicine mountains are guardian spirits. They watch long-lived centuries pass by. Altawayakwa who is Sexton Mountain and his eastern brother, Altakanxita. The great canoe of beings rests on his slopes after surviving the Takelma world flood. Many mountain relations circle the Takelma world. As culture watchers, they keep an eye on things.

Native generations cross the creek to food-gathering meadows. They dig roots for making baskets on Hungry Hill. The old name is Takwelsaman, On Top of Roots. Generations cross the creek toward good fishing and hunting places. They visit relations in the villages of Ckactun, Lathpaltha, Daldanik, Titalam, on their way to the salmon ceremony at Ti'lomikh.

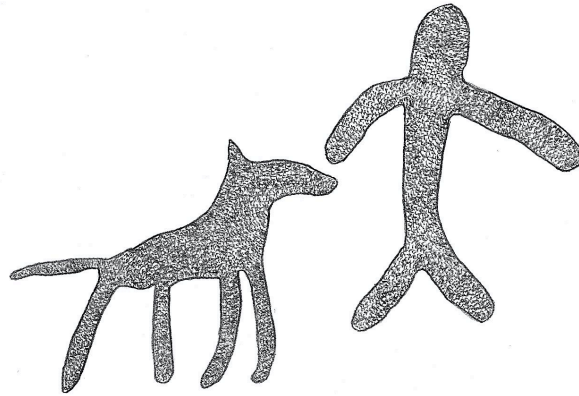
A procession of storytellers. Myth characters walk with them: Panther and his younger brother Wildcat, the Daldal brothers, the White Duck sisters, Coyote, Jackrabbit. A long procession molds the landscape into stories.

Five figures appear in the shadows. A native family crosses the creek. A young girl tugs on the skirt of her mother and asks, "Will we get to visit Dan Mologol tonight?" "Yes," her mother says. "She is waiting for us."

I'm on my feet and running down the trail, trying to keep up with the family. "Come on!" I yell to Coyote. "If we follow them, we'll find her!"

Coyote hesitates. He looks a little nervous about following what appear to be ghosts, but his adventurous spirit takes over. He pounces onto the trail and lays out his tail.

"I'm right behind you!"



Walking is easy along the road through town. We turn uphill, following the mostly abandoned Pacific Highway with its faded yellow line, cracked asphalt and concrete shoulders. Here the town lights fade out of sight and the woods turn deep and dark. A stray dog slinks across the road and disappears into the trees. I get glimpses of the family ahead of us. Sometimes they walk off the road and into the forest, following a trail invisible to me. Then they appear again, walking the road as if it lay over the top of the old trail. Despite changes in the landscape, they know the way. Coyote is close behind, unusually quiet.

As we walk into the canyon, the road turns to gravel and parallels the freeway. The sudden appearance of oncoming headlights is blinding, but eventually the road turns back into the woods and the freeway is gone, save the sound of traffic. We wade a mountain creek and walk through a logging site where the road has been churned to mud and dried into deep ruts. Moonlight makes the cut-over land stark and dramatic. Back in the woods, I hear faint voices ahead of us but cannot see the family.

This short stretch of Pacific Highway is paved. Deeper into the trees, the pavement disappears under a layer of duff covered with moss. The moon hides behind ridges, and darkness fills the space where moonlight had shone. There is just enough light to follow the road. Here, for the first time, highway and old trail are indistinguishable. The forest has reclaimed this route and made it good for walking. This only lasts for a few feet. The road and woods end abruptly. There is a drop-off to the freeway many feet below. Ahead is a steep, bare slope of loose rock, criss-crossed by dangerous traces of animal trails. The only handholds across the slippery scree are a few old roots from trees that are no longer there. This way looks treacherous, chancy at best. The family is nowhere to be heard or seen.

Coyote trots up to me. “Whoa. You’re no longer the leader. There’s a better critter trail back a ways. You missed it. Follow me. I know the way.”

Back in the woods, I hear animals scurrying through thick brush and owls hooting from tree to tree.

“They speak an ancient language,” whispers Coyote. “If you stand here long enough, you’ll hear the words of the dead. Let’s get going!”

Walking into this woodland mixture of shifting shadows and strange night sounds feels like stumbling into Mythtime. What looks real might just as easily be the dream-like landscape of an Old Time story, remembered and shaped by generations of tellers as it travels along the moon-speckled path of oral tradition.

In the myths, supernatural beings roam these woods at night. They are half-animal, half-human. One of them lives here. He has a big light above his head. Another has the horns and body of a deer. And here I am, I’m thinking, a mad storyteller wandering these woods at night, led along trails I can barely see by some crazy light-headed, half-animal, half-human myth character. I whisper a few of his native nicknames ... Mister Coyote ... Coyote Old Man ... Grandfather...

We walk deeper into the shadows where the world of the woods looks jumbled, mixed up. The old trail splits in several directions, and moss-covered pieces of Pacific Highway are tilted on end, their jagged, broken ends draped with ferns. It looks like a scene from an end-of-the-world film. I expect to see the toppled ruins of the Statue of Liberty around the next bend. I imagine Rock Old Woman has come to a similar end. We have walked into a landscape that lives beyond geography. Here in the debris swell the seeds of a new generation of stories.

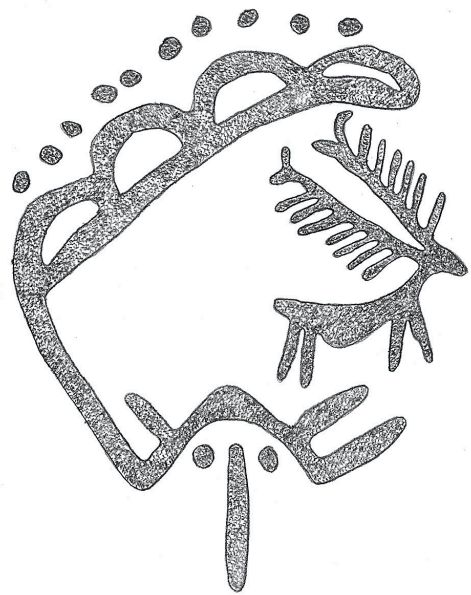
Coyote stares at the concrete-and-asphalt rubble and chuckles. “Maybe this is the future fate of the information highway.”

“You’re a funny pooch. Too many facts? Not enough stories about you?”

“That’s right!”

“More than likely,” I say, “this is what happens to the stories we forget to listen to.”

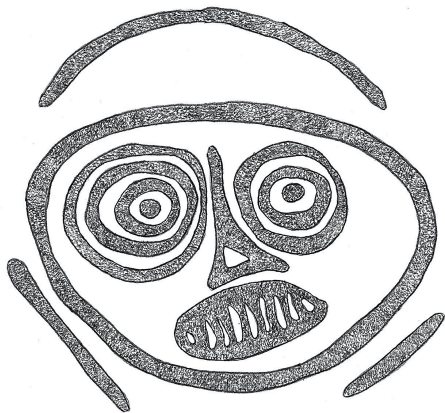
“Same thing.”



I follow Coyote as he pushes on through the trees. As we climb higher, the forest thins and the trail is easier to see. At the old summit, we walk into a clearing and the trail ends abruptly in a steep road cut.

Though they were ahead of us and there seems to be only one way through the woods, the Takelma family has vanished. I look around. No one. We are alone at the pass. Dozens of feet below is the roar and haste of Interstate 5. I pull a crumpled map out of my pocket. I angle it into the moonlight and turn it in my hands, trying to line up what's left of the landscape with the few lines on the map.

“See?” I say to Coyote. “We’re standing on the edge of what’s left of the old highway. Here’s a couple of apple and plum trees from the orchard. The old pass was a gentle slope from here to just across the freeway.” I point to the empty air above the pass. “The barn was there, and Rock Old Woman just behind the barn, about where those freeway lanes are....”



Coyote appears distracted. He’s humming some old song to himself, getting louder with each verse. He looks at the freeway and the empty space above it. He howls a long and angry howl. He leaps off the trail and into the air. When he comes down it’s as if he’s landed on a mythic stage crowded with listeners. Gesturing wildly, he screams a monologue that is spontaneous and dramatic.

“Imagine Dan Mologol’s final day here on the pass! The mountain called Altawayakwa moans with the creak and whine of heavy machinery. Some politician visits this place, some two-bit politician who gained votes from the building of a newfangled road. He’s walking around and hobnobbing with the workers when he spots a stone pipe on the ground. He picks it up and looks it over. Someone suggests that it looks like it could still be smoked. A pipe smoker himself, the politician is intrigued. He takes tobacco out of his coat pocket, packs the pipe, and draws a puff to see if it works. And work it does! Altawayakwa yanks his arm off and dances his Old Time dance, singing like the wind, waving the severed arm and shaking his topknot under a blood-red sunset, clear to the light of dawn! Ha!!”

Coyote grabs a dead branch from under an apple tree. He swings it over his head. He yips and howls. He skips down the trail.

He freezes in his tracks.

Sounds from deep in the woods bristle his tail. Old Time singing drifts up and over the pass like an evening breeze. Words flutter past us, getting louder as they gather speed and blow down the old Indian trail.

Coyote bounds after the song. Somehow this old dog of a trail guide knows every turn and twist. I jog to keep up. In half the time it took us to get to the summit, we are back at the creek crossing. When I catch up with Coyote, he's leaning against a rock, breathing easy like he never left the place. I sit down. We wait in silence.

In this still moment before sunrise, mist settles along Grave Creek. As the sun slips over the ridge and fills Sunny Valley with autumn light, we hear an echo of the Old Time song ... the song that inspires Rock Old Woman to take care of her people, the song she sings as she does her best healing, the song that reminds us to remember our stories. We hear her singing in the song of the rising sun, the song of the morning breeze moving across the valley, the song of many stories crossing the creek. I look up and catch a glimpse of an old woman. The singing gets louder as she wades the creek. She crosses the meadow, pauses at a grave, and disappears into the mist. The sun is fully up. Across the valley, Interstate 5 roars with morning traffic.

“See?” says Coyote.

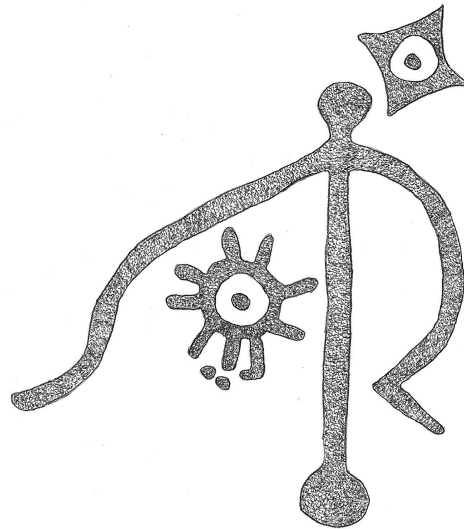
“What?” I say.

“I told you she was here.”

“Right.”

“Trust me,” says Coyote.

“All right,” I say. “Just this once.”



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

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



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

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

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