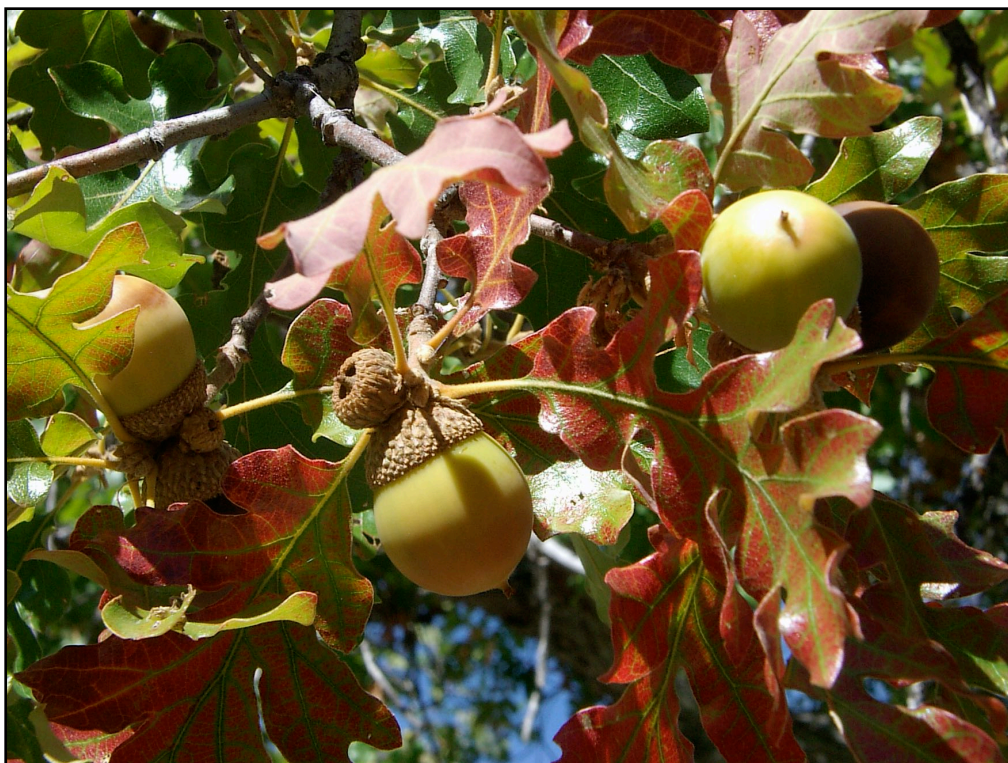
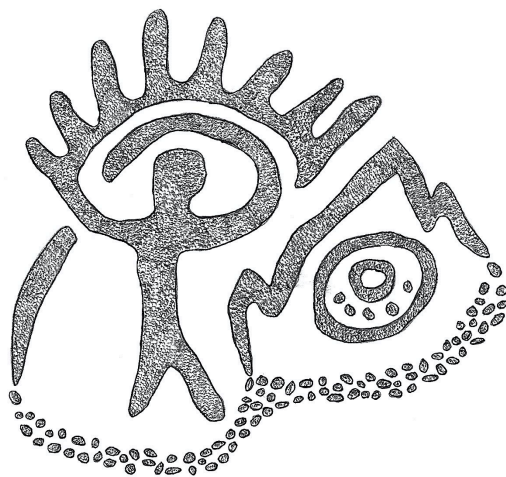
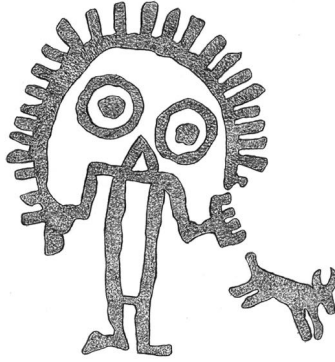


Go Gather Seeds and Eat Them

Thomas Doty



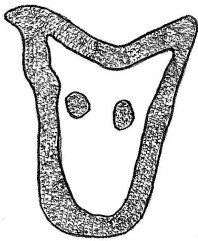
Go Gather Seeds and Eat Them



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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On an evening in late fall, I am poking around outside the Ashland Food Co-op. Coyote is following close behind. We saunter up and down the walkways, across the plaza, circling the store, trying to imagine the ancient Takelma village that once stood here. I squint to see the plank houses, the larger dance lodge, the footpath to the spring, and the Old Time trails that lead out of the village. One trail follows the creek down the valley toward the river, another rises into the alpine country and beyond....



People wander out of the Co-op carrying shopping bags. A glimmer of autumn light sends long shadows across the Rogue Valley and turns the foothills golden. To the south, storm clouds clutch the high ridges of the Siskiyou Mountains as daytime slips toward twilight.

Coyote's eyes scan the parking lot and he wags his tail. "These are smart shoppers," he announces.

"How do you know?" I say.

"Check out the smudgy windows on those cars. Lots of these folks have dogs with wet noses."

"Right," I say.

"And lucky dogs, too."

"How so?"

"Makes me drool to imagine leftovers from a store like this. I bet these pooches get organic doggy treats! Even that old woodcarver guy over there has a healthy looking mutt. We fit right in for a change."

Coyote's mention of the woodcarver draws my attention. The old man sits on a bench near the entrance to the Co-op, a mixed-breed dog curled at his feet. He mumbles to himself as he concentrates on his carving. When someone pauses to watch him work, the old man's eyes sparkle and his words become clearer.

"It's a Takelma woman coming home in the fall from gathering food. Here's her basket and her digging stick. It's from an Old Time story."

When it's clear that the old man is going to share the story of his carving, Coyote and I and a few other folks sit down on benches around him. In rich evening light just right for a story, the old man tells his tale....

All through that autumn, the days were warm. The people had returned to the village with their baskets brimming with roots and berries, dried salmon and deer meat. They were ready for a snug winter of good food and rich stories. The words spoken at the end of each myth had come into full meaning. At the closing of the winter storytelling season, the storyteller said, "Go gather seeds and eat them." This sent the people traveling. Through spring and summer and into the fall the people visited the ancient food-gathering meadows, and the good places to fish and hunt. They met friends and relations who had journeyed from other villages. Warm-weather stories were told and retold in camps along salmon-swelled rivers, and in summer settings scattered through the foothills and into the mountains. These gathering places had been visited by generations of Takelmas, back to the beginnings of the myths and the first memories of the people. Moon after moon traveled the skies through the seasons ... Moon of the Swelling Berries, When the Salmon Have Sore Backs, Snowy Mountains in the Morning.... For months the people gathered seeds. Now it was time to eat them.

The old man pauses. I close my eyes and picture the Mythtime landscape around me ... the houses of the village, the first fall smoke spiraling from smoke holes, the people gathering in firelight in the dance lodge where the myths are told, the empty path leading into the Siskiyou.... I see myself and Mister Coyote on the fringe of the story, tucked into the narrative, with a clear view of each scene. For Coyote, I'm thinking, and perhaps for myself, it's a short leap from the audience into the heart of the story.

The old man concentrates on a delicate moment in his carving. He skillfully slices a sliver of wood from the woman's digging stick. His dog blinks his eyes and closes them, settling into the familiar rhythm of the words as the old man continues his story....

On the edge of the village, a young man speaks to his wife.

"There's time for one more trip. Then we'll have enough food. You heard the grandmothers whispering. The winter storms will be long and cold. We need more food."

The woman nods. "We'll be quick and travel light."

With a nearly-empty burden basket riding lightly on her back, and with digging stick in hand, she walks with her husband out of the village. Two figures follow close behind. Their names are Doty and Coyote.

The woman leads. The knowledge of where and how to gather food has been passed from grandmother to mother to daughter. Though she is young, she knows the way.

"This is good," says Coyote to himself. "A jaunt toward a fat meal is always the best kind of journey. I'm starving!"

The young woman leads them along an ancient trail. They walk through lowland woods of madrones and oaks, climbing higher into the rugged country of granite canyons, alpine meadows and dense forests of firs and pines. Clouds gather on the ridges and swirl around them. The air has a cold nip as if winter is biting at the bit to be let into the mountains. By midday they are high in the Siskiyoues and they stop to rest.

From the edge of the woods, Doty watches the next scene of the story....

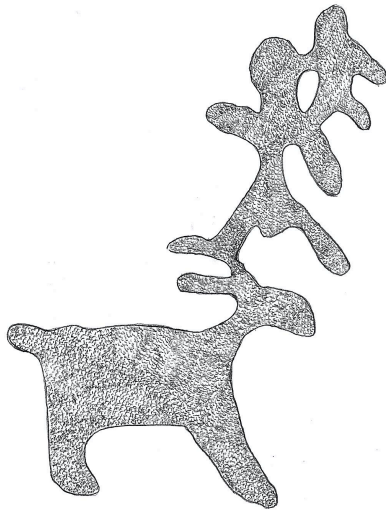
Coyote trots down the trail and approaches the couple. "Are we there yet?" He wags his tail for effect. "Is this a lunch stop?"

"Who are you?" asks the man.

"He's trouble," says the woman. "That's Coyote."

"Yeah?" says the man. "Are you really the old dog from the stories?"

"Hold on," says Coyote. "I'm only old in a literary way. And I'm not always bad news. I can be helpful and I'm good luck to those who follow my advice. I know everything from



before anything was known. Though I enjoy the perpetual good looks of a pooch in his prime, I've sniffed around the bend a few times. I know what's where and how to get there."

"The Old Ones say that your help has a high price," says the woman.

"What do they know? They're old! For a measly meal, I'll lead you to those root meadows you're headed for. No one knows the twists and turns through these mountains like I do. How about a short cut?"

Before anyone can object to Coyote's offer, he leaps off the trail and scrambles into the woods. "Follow me!"

"It's just a meal he wants," says the man, shrugging. "What's a few roots? He seems like a regular guy and he'll save us some time."

The woman nods, though a primal echo of maternal wisdom sends shivers through her heart. She knows the weather is turning and they must hurry to get back to the village. Thinking that Coyote's appetite might lead them quickly to the meadows and overrule any mischief his brain can concoct, she hesitates, and scurries after him into the woods.

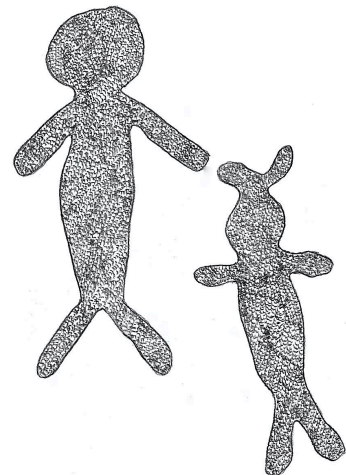
Coyote isn't thinking about eating roots. He's got salmon tickling his tummy. "I'll lead them as far as the river," he's thinking. "We'll catch the last of the salmon run. They'll do the work of fishing and I'll keep a watch out for thieves. We'll have fresh salmon for days and smoked salmon all winter!"

When Coyote glances back to make sure he has a following, he sees that his old friend Doty has caught up with the man and they are walking along together. "We're one big hungry family," he howls to himself. "We're all in this story together, and we're heading for a feast!"

"Hey, Mister Storyteller," says a young girl to the woodcarver. "Who's Doty and Coyote? How did they get into this story?"

The woodcarver's dog raises his head and gazes at the old man. For the first time that evening he looks awake and interested in what the woodcarver has to say.

"I don't know," chuckles the old man. "I guess they just imagined they were there, and I heard them and let them in. I'm the teller, after all. Don't you want to hear what happens next?"



The young girl nods. The woodcarver starts to set the carving on the bench next to him, but instead hands it to the girl.

“Here, you hold this, and I’ll finish the story.” The man’s dog stretches out and is once again asleep.

“I’ve been in the mountains when the first snow comes. Sometimes there is a silence so profound that one senses that mountains and lakes sit on the edge, lingering, and Tree People hold their breath in the stillness. They wait for the great event that brings snow as deep and silent as a long sleep. At other times, winter stomps in with wild howls and an icy bite. That’s how it happened in this story....”

Everyone follows Coyote into the whirling edge of the wind and soon they are surrounded by the beasts of the storm. These beasts have heavy steps. Their biting breaths swirl the snow sideways. They growl and stamp, tear and rip. Snow piles quickly into drifts, so thick that footprints disappear with each step. Wind blasts grow bigger and colder and the group is forced to seek shelter. They find a small cave under a jumble of granite boulders, and they allow themselves to be blown inside.

“Whew!” howls Coyote. “Who let that lunatic loose?”

“This storm might last a while,” says the woman. She gathers what wood is scattered around and soon has a fire blazing.

“Not a problem,” says Coyote. “We mythic heroes are survivors.”

“And we men are the best hunters!” shouts the man, gesturing a dramatic shot from a large bow.

“Right,” says Coyote. “We’ll be right back with a feast! No storm’s too big for the likes of us!!”

Each time Coyote and the man try to get out the entrance, the storm blows them back inside. They try this a few times and finally sit down by the fire.

The storm swallows all signs of time passing. No light sifts through cracks between boulders, and no one notices the arrival of night. The only light comes from the fire.

While the storm rages outside, Coyote and the man spend hours singing and gambling, puffing on their pipes, bragging loudly about their hunting skills. They boast tall tales about their adventures that grow taller with each telling. They gorge themselves with the last of the roots and dried meat the woman brought with her. Full and satisfied, they fall silent, dozing in the orange warmth of the coals. Doty sits quietly in the shadows, imagining where this story might lead.



Thinking everyone is asleep, the woman picks up her digging stick and her basket and walks to the entrance. She remembers the myth of Wild Woman who is the spirit of winter storms. Wild Woman took her children to dig roots. An early storm blew down from the mountains and the freezing wind drove her crazy. Instead of using her digging stick to uproot camas, she upturned the trees.

Doty watches the woman step into the wind and whisper an ancient poem to Wild Woman.

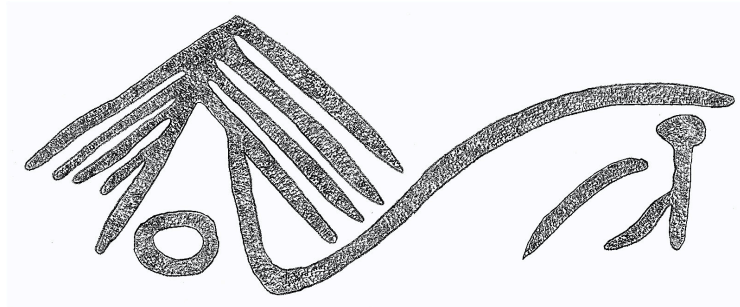
“He–dada hi na.... Pass away from here. Take your digging stick and your sifting basket–pan and go beyond the mountains. Take your digging stick and pass beyond Wilamxa. Do not come where I am. Do not come here! Perhaps your children touch dead people’s bones with their feet.”

The poem opens a path through the storm, and the woman walks down it. Doty tries to follow, but wind gusts close the way and push him back inside.

The path leads deeper into the woods, away from the storm. Starlight drifts through boughs of firs and speckles the shadows on the forest floor. The woman walks on to a cluster of plank houses that rise like mushrooms out of the duff. They have been there for a long, long time. The houses are half in the ground and half above, and their rooftops covered with grass and moss and plants the woman doesn’t recognize.

She has heard about villages like this, ancient places so remote that she would be lucky to see one in a lifetime. She hears a voice coming from the main lodge. She peeks inside. In the blazing light of a community fire, she sees the thin, wooden faces of people she thought only existed in stories. Dozens of Digging Stick Women circle the fire. Their long, slender bodies lean toward an old woman who is drawing their attention into an Old Time story.

The woman recognizes the teller. Gwisgwashan. She is known everywhere as the Keeper of Stories. Sitting next to her is Acorn Woman, a medicine woman and the ancient Keeper of Food. Her long white hair is the shape of the first snow that covers her winter home like a blanket ... Mount McLoughlin, Wilamxa, the Floating Mountain.... She must be traveling through. She is done with the seasonal business of food and is on her way home for the winter.



In this hidden place, the Digging Stick Women protect an ancient wisdom. The way here is a journey toward a knowledge of abundance. The woman remembers the words, “Gweldi. Baybit’ lep’lap. Finished! Go gather seeds and eat them.” Her mother explained it to her when she was a child. “After being fed the lessons of the stories, it’s time to eat food. Each is a kind of nourishment, and we need both to live.”

When Gwisgwashan notices the woman, she motions to her to come inside and join them. Sitting among the Digging Stick Women, the woman listens carefully as Gwisgwashan shares her story.

Panther and his younger brother Wildcat lived along the Rogue River. Deep into fall, the oak trees were nearly bare of their leaves. Panther hunted every day and brought home many deer. They had more meat than they could eat, so they ate the best pieces and let the rest rot. Though it was nearly winter, they didn’t dry any meat to store. They ate what they wanted and the rest spoiled. Panther hunted until the deer were as few as the leaves on the oak trees.

The few remaining deer gathered in their mountain cave. “Panther is killing us off. We must do something.” They sent him a deer girl to marry.

Panther didn't know she was a deer. She covered herself with a blanket and kept to the shadows, back from the fire. From that day on, Panther found no more deer. He hunted morning to night, and he always came home empty handed.

Days got colder. Oak trees were skeletons, white with frost. There was no more meat in the house. Panther and Wildcat were dead hungry.

Panther's deer wife collected firewood covered with moss and stacked it inside. Next morning the moss was gone.

Panther was weak. His legs barely worked. He muttered, "Where have all the deer gone?" He stumbled along the riverbank, searching and searching. Wildcat tried to help his brother, but he was also hungry and weak.

Panther's deer wife stacked firewood. One evening, she took out her obsidian knife. She cut two strips of flesh from her own legs and put them into the fire to cook.

Panther and Wildcat came home, full of hunger. "Where have all the deer gone? We almost couldn't get home because we were so hungry."

Panther's deer wife pointed to the fire. The brothers each took a piece of meat. It was roasted, like venison. It was deer meat.

That night, Panther stayed awake, thinking, "Where did she get that meat?"

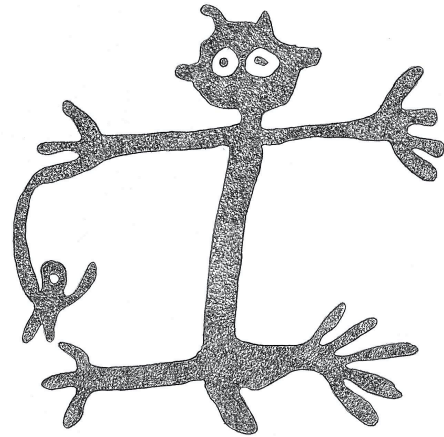
Outside, the wind screamed through the trees. Clouds slid down the mountains and rolled along the river. The night turned cold, white with blowing snow.

Panther's deer wife got out of bed, thinking, "He is asleep." She crept to the firewood and ate the moss off every piece. That's how she got her food.

While she was eating, Panther watched from the shadows. In the firelight, he saw her legs where they were cut away.

"You are a deer!" Panther grabbed his bow, fitted an arrow, shot at her ... and missed.

Panther's deer wife bounded across the house. She jumped at her husband, slashed his belly with her knife and ripped out his pancreas. In one giant leap she was out the door, carrying Panther's pancreas in her mouth. She disappeared into the blowing snow.



The storm blew away in the morning. The sun shone bright on a snow-covered field near the cave where the deer gathered. Panther's deer wife ran onto the field.

"That is Panther's pancreas!" the deer shouted. One of the deer rushed out and grabbed it.

"Catch up with him, One-Horned Deer!" One-Horned Deer rushed out, grabbed the pancreas and made long leaps to the other end of the field.

For the rest of the day, the deer played shinny ball under the winter sun, and they used Panther's pancreas for the ball.

All night along the river, Panther lay in a sweat house, losing his spirit. Wildcat sent people, through the snow and night shadows, to steal back his brother's pancreas. Medicine Fawn, a powerful doctor among the deer, danced around the fire, singing her medicine song:

Wa-ya-we-ne lo-wa-na.

Wa-ya-we-ne lo-wa-na.

Wa-ya-we-ne lo-wa-na.

Who creeps there about the shadows?

Who creeps there about the shadows?

Who creeps there about the shadows?

She discovered every thief, and the deer chased them out of their cave.

In the morning, Medicine Fawn traveled to the sweat house where Wildcat was watching his brother die. She jumped inside. "Ugly-faced Wildcat, your elder brother calls you 'Crack-bones!' You useless Wildcat, you do-nothing brother!"

That night Wildcat sent more people to steal the pancreas. Medicine Fawn danced and sang her medicine song, and the deer chased them all away.

Wildcat thought, "Maybe she is right. Maybe I'd better do it myself." He gathered moss off the oak trees and stuck it all over his body, even on his hands.

Wildcat went to the shinny ball field. He stood by himself, looking like a clump of moss in the trampled snow. One-Horned Deer ran toward him, carrying Panther's pancreas. When he got close to Wildcat he tossed the pancreas to another deer. Wildcat stretched out his arm, caught it in mid-flight and took off down the mountains.

“Catch up with him, One–Horned Deer!”

Wildcat ran until he was tired. He climbed a tree, but many deer were close behind. He was surrounded.

The deer used their antlers to uproot the tree. Wildcat leaned on the top so it would fall toward his trail. When the tree hit the snow, Wildcat scampered off and ran ahead of the deer.

“Catch up with him, One–Horned Deer!”

The chase went into the night. Wildcat climbed another tree. Again he was surrounded. But the deer were also tired and decided to rest before uprooting the tree. Soon they were sleeping.

Wildcat put more moss on himself. He crept down. He leapt lightly onto the antlers of the nearest deer, then onto another deer’s antlers. He moved across the antlers toward the trail. But as he landed on the last antlers, his leg brushed the face of the sleeping deer, and woke him up.

“Catch up with him!”

The deer bounded after Wildcat. He ran through the night, carrying the pancreas, winding through the snowy woods, trying to lose the deer. It was nearly sunrise when he got to the sweat house.

Inside, his brother lay belly up, mostly dead. Wildcat rushed in, tossed his brother’s pancreas between his ribs, and Panther jumped up. The deer surrounded the sweat house, snorting and stamping the snow. Both brothers grabbed their bows and started shooting. Panther shot at the large deer and Wildcat at the smaller ones. But all the arrows missed. The arrows sang as they whizzed through the air, “Don’t kill too many! Don’t kill too many!” And Panther and Wildcat heard their song.



The deer scattered, some into the mountains, some along the river, some down the valley. Through the rest of the winter, Panther and Wildcat hunted together. They killed only what they needed and wasted no meat. They had plenty of food, but never too much.

In the spring, many fawns were born, and the deer were as many as new leaves on the oak trees.

Gweldi. Baybit' lep'lap.

The woodcarver sits in silence.

“What happened to the woman?” asks the girl. “Did everyone get home all right?”

“Of course,” says the old man. “The Digging Stick Women filled her basket half full of good food and she walked back to the cave. She fed everyone enough, but not too much. She saved the rest to add to the winter stores. As the morning sun melted the snow on the trail, they walked back to the village. When the man asked his wife where she got the food, she just smiled. When Coyote asked her why the basket was only half full, the woman told him that she was leaving room for the story.”

“What story?” asks the girl.

“The one she told as they were walking home. She began it with these words, ‘Once there were two men who thought they knew everything. When their mouths weren’t flapping about how clever they were, they were filling those mouths with food. In the old days they were called Panther and Wildcat, but now they have different names and they live in a village not far from here....’ See where this is leading?”

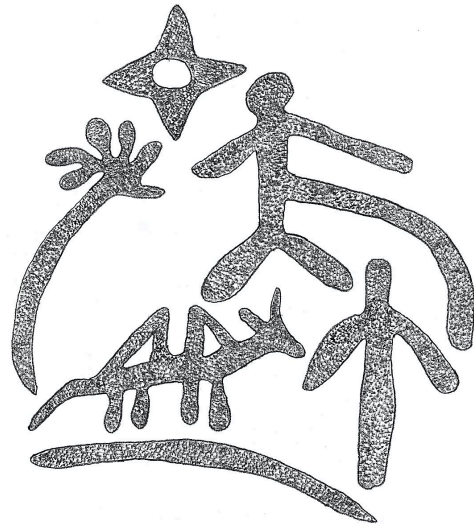
Everyone laughs, except Coyote. He’s distracted by the rustling of a paper bag. The woodcarver tosses a chewy biscuit to his dog, and one to Coyote. For the length of time it takes to say, “Go gather seeds and eat them,” nothing else matters in Coyote’s world.

The girl starts to hand the carving back to the old man, but he says, “Keep it. It’s a gift and it’ll help you remember the story.”

As the girl walks with her mother to the parking lot, she carefully places the carving into one of their shopping bags. “Plenty of room,” she whispers to herself.

Darkness settles over the Rogue Valley. I wander across the plaza in front of the Co-op. I feel dampness in the gathering clouds. I gaze toward the old village site and try out the first

words of a new story. “People have always lived here. On this autumn night they gather in the dance lodge for a feast that begins a season of stories....” With the first drops of rain, I call out, “Come on, Mister Coyote, let’s head home.”



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

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

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