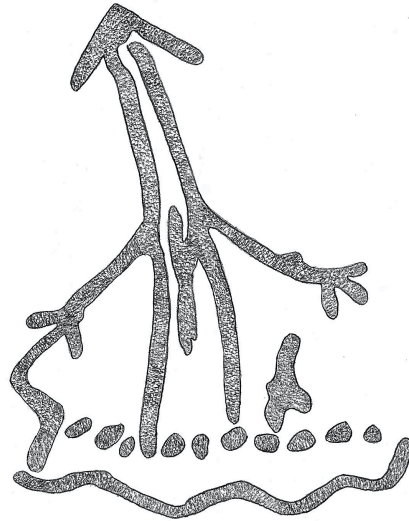
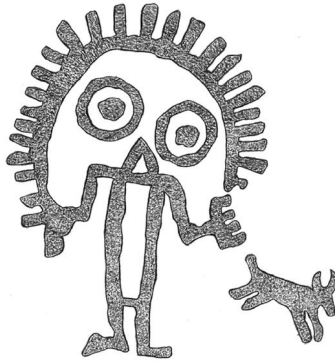


The Day Tule Lake Came Back

Thomas Doty



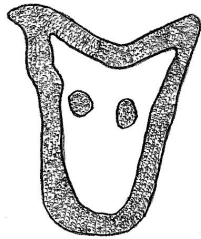
The Day Tule Lake Came Back



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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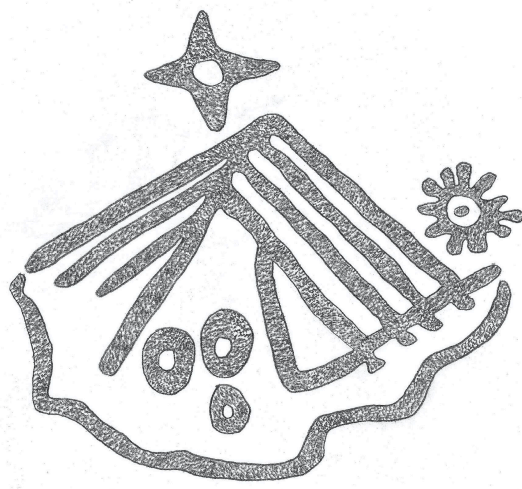
www.DotyCoyote.com

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It is May at Lava Beds National Monument in northeast California. After walking the ancient shoreline of Tule Lake and visiting sacred places where old stories still thrive, Coyote and Fox Girl and I find ourselves on the knoll that was once the Modoc village of Gumbat, that village among the rocks.

We look out over the remains of a vast lake, reduced to several rectangular sumps that provide a smidgen of habitat for waterfowl and an abundance of irrigation water for farmers. In a few days, this arm of the lake will be flooded for the first time since it was drained in the 1920s. Soon the sounds of geese splashing in the waves will once again smother the old village. Once again lake and village will be neighbors. This semblance of a step back in time is happening now. A modern, monster machine puffs and grinds and clatters, digging and scooping and scraping a ditch for the water.



Coyote and Fox Girl and I wandered in here in the drowsy desert heat of afternoon, and for several hours we have been napping. Our dreams brim with images from stories we have heard all our lives, scraps of narration, memories and visions of this place, and the voices of those who lived here. Thin layers of tule fog swirl around the edges of the lake, hugging the shape of the dry lakeshore like an old friend, a memory, making a pale picture of how this lake looked long ago. Overhead, the sky dims and readies itself for the stars.

One by one we wake up. The village is quiet, except for sounds which have always been here ... a breeze playing with fog as it whispers through sage and bunchgrass, the songs of birds, the distant yipping of a coyote.... The machinery has been shut down and the worker has gone home. As twilight settles over the basin, Fox Girl and I light a fire to welcome the stars. We whisper to each other about which stories to tell tonight. Coyote's ears twitch, and soon he takes the matter of stories to task, molding the evening into a mythic event of his own making....

Coyote yawns, stretches, slowly gets to his feet, and leaning on his sauntering stick, he croons into the night.

“Ladies and gentlemen, and all friendly critters lurking in the fog and the shadows, I present to you the Players Among the Rocks. Tonight we will perform *Making the World in the Spring*, an improvisational adaptation of various creation stories and original ideas and timeless philosophies. Doty will play the Narrator and Mister Bear because they look somewhat alike. Fox Girl will play that ancient and ever-modern, husky-voiced matron of the Old Time, Basket Woman, and I will play myself, or some shadow of a not-so-distant ancestor. It’s all the same in Mythtime, you know. Members of the ensemble will play various Rock People and Tree People and other folks as they come up. So enjoy the players as they play inside their play, here among the rocks, under the desert stars. Our story begins right here in the Tule Lake country.

“Are we ready?” Everyone nods.

“Here we go! Lights....” Fox Girl carefully places another log on the fire and sparks twinkle into the night.

“Concentration!”

“Right,” says everyone at once.

“Action!!!”

Whoooooosh.... A hush sweeps along the lakeshore and settles onto the village. A seasoned storyteller about to tell a story knows this hush well. It is a familiar held breath that anticipates the tale, a dramatic tension as ancient as stories themselves.

I step out of the shadows and into the firelight, and the play begins....

Narrator: Welcome to our play.

It was early morning in the Old Time, in the ancient village called Gumbat....

Coyote Old Man was snoring inside his house. He and Basket Woman had been up all night telling stories and they were both sawing logs. The fire in the middle of the house was a near-dead glow of coals. Now sunlight slanted across Tule Lake and some of it shown down the smoke hole, lighting the inside of the house.

There came a voice that sounded like wind, and that’s just what it was....



South Wind: Wake up, wake up, wake up....

Basket Woman (crawling out of bed): Good idea. Listen to that South Wind. Spring's on its way. Come on, everyone, time to get up!

Crow: Haaaaa! Haaaaa! Haaaaa!

Pine Tree: What a voice to wake up to. Just when I'm trying to grow some new needles, here comes Crow and sits down right on my limbs and makes a racket that sounds more like winter than anything else!

Basket Woman: Quit your belly-aching! Just because Crow doesn't have a voice that sounds like spring doesn't mean he doesn't have anything to say about it. Everybody's got a different way of sounding and a different way of saying things.

South Wind: Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!

Narrator: Coyote Old man opened one eye. And another. He peered out from under his blanket.

Coyote Old Man: What's all this chatter? Can't you let an old man sleep? It's always the same, eh South Wind? You always start your snow melting and your weather changing on a morning after we've been up all night.

South Wind: Come on, Coyote. The sun is shining. It's a new world out here. Time to come outside.

Fire (sputtering): And time to give me some wood. There's hardly anything left of me. You've slept long enough.

Narrator: In the time it took Coyote Old Man to crawl out of bed, Basket Woman had already got up, climbed out of the house through the smoke hole, trotted down to the lake on her stumpy

legs, gathered firewood, dipped water into herself, trotted back, fed Fire, and was dropping hot rocks into her belly to heat up the water.

And by the time Coyote Old Man was actually standing up and looking like the wise old coyote he thought he should look like — though still a bit sleepy — there was a fine basket of mush, already mixed and warm and waiting to be eaten.

Outside, everybody was busy. Pine Tree was working hard on a fine bunch of new needles, and Crow was singing his spring song....

Crow: Haaaaa! Haaaaa! Haaaaa!

Narrator: ... and he was doing such a fine job of it, even Pine Tree thought it sounded sort of nice.

After breakfast, Coyote Old Man and Basket Woman went for a swim. Basket Woman grabbed a flaming stick off Fire so they could have part of him on the shore, and they went on down to the lake.

Making tracks through the woods ... making tracks through the meadow ... making tracks through the reeds to the lake....

After their swim, Coyote and Basket Woman sat on the shore by Fire. They looked across the water. The sun was getting warm. Between Fire and the sun and South Wind, they were quickly getting dry.

Ducks and geese and pelicans floated on the lake, some dozing, some swimming in and out of the reeds, others winging in from the south on the wind.

Coyote Old Man: That's a lot of water.

Basket Woman: That's what Koomookumpts said about this lake when he made the world.

Coyote Old Man: I know. I think I was there. It was me or somebody like me. I'm sure of it.

Basket Woman: Well, the way the Tule Lake People tell it, you weren't there at all. It was just Koomookumpts.

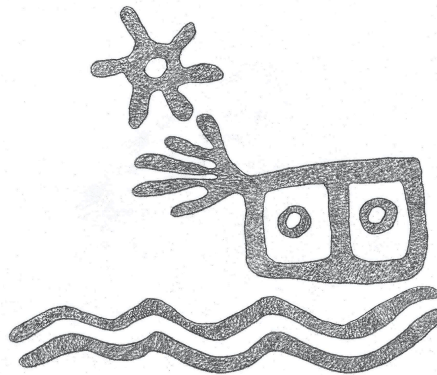
Narrator: Coyote Old Man pulled out his pipe and got the tobacco going good with a stick from Fire. He passed the pipe to Basket Woman and watched the smoke curl upward, joining the smoke from Fire and making the only cloud in the sky.

Coyote Old Man: Different people tell that story different ways. A bunch of us were watching the world getting made. Some of us did things and some of us didn't. Then we all went off and told our friends different stories. Things happen like that.

Now what's this story about Koomookumpts? I'd like to hear it.

Basket Woman (clearing her throat): Okay, Coyote. This is how I heard it....

Back in the Old Time, there was Koomookumpts and he was sitting on the east shore of Tule Lake. That's the opposite side there, where the sun is. Koomookumpts was sitting there and he was thinking the same thing you were. He was thinking, "Look at all that water. There's nothing anywhere but water. I wonder...."



Coyote Old Man: Wait a minute, Basket Woman. If there wasn't anything in the world but water, how is it Koomookumpts was sitting on the east shore of the lake? Was that water, too?

Basket Woman: I don't know. That's just the way the old people tell it. That's just the way things were. So don't worry about it.

Anyway, Koomookumpts was thinking about all that water and wondering what it would look like if there was some land.

Coyote Old Man: But Basket Woman, what's that he's sitting on?

Basket Woman: The shore, the shore! Maybe shore meant water back then, I don't know.

Narrator: Basket Woman waited for Coyote to put his pipe back in his mouth, then went on with the story.

Basket Woman: Koomookumpts was thinking about making some land so he reached down, way down to the bottom of Tule Lake. He reached down five times, and the fifth time he grabbed a handful of mud from the bottom and put it in front of him.

He started patting that mound of mud with his hands. And then he started shaping it. And the more he patted and shaped it, the bigger it became. It spread out and out and out, all the way around Tule Lake.

Koomookumpts said, "Look what that mud did. I didn't know it would do anything like that."

Now there was Koomookumpts sitting on an island in the middle of the lake. He reached to the land he had made and drew back some of the earth in the west and the north and made the mountains. Then he took his fingernails and cut grooves down the mountains so the snowmelt and the creeks and the rivers would flow into the lakes.

Koomookumpts got busy and pulled trees and plants right out of the earth. He put birds in the sky, fish in the water, and animals on the land.

Koomookumpts was making all kinds of things for the world. He shaped and decorated the world the same way a Tule Lake woman shapes and decorates a basket.

Narrator: Basket Woman hesitated. She let out a full grin and the designs on her body started shining in the sun.

Basket Woman: That's the best part of the story there, that part about baskets.

Coyote Old Man (grumbling): Humph. Quit your grinning and get on with the story.

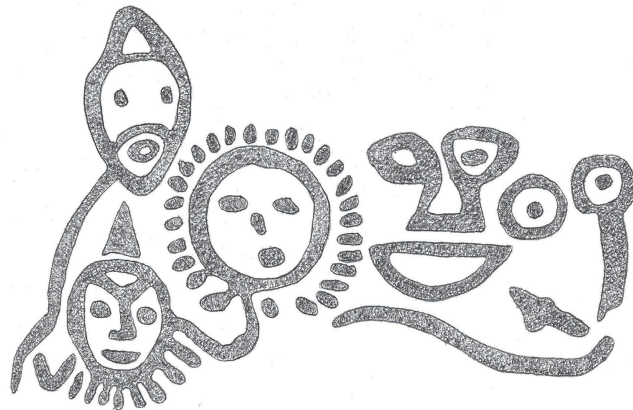
Narrator: Basket Woman pulled in a deep breath that made her sides bulge out.

Basket Woman: Okay, okay. So Koomookumpts worked hard. He made everything he could think of to put in the world and now he was tired. Winter was coming and he wanted a place to sleep. He wanted to sleep all winter like Bear does.

He dug himself a hole under the bottom of Tule Lake and he left his island on top to mark the spot. But it wasn't long before that mud island turned to solid rock.

Look out there in the lake, Coyote, see that rock? And see that hole through the top? That's where Koomookumpts dug with his fingernails to make a window so he could look out on the world he had made.

So Koomookumpts went to sleep and he's still sleeping. And the Tule Lake People say that someday a different people will come and they will drain the lake. They'll make this place a desert. Then Koomookumpts will wake up. He'll climb his rock and look through his window. He'll be so mad to see his world turned all dry, he'll put the water back in the lakebed and everything will be like it is now. Just like it was when Koomookumpts made the world.



Fire: Crack–crack–crackling good story.

Narrator: Fire was feeling much better. He had plenty of wood and was burning in two places: there on the lakeshore and up in the house.

Coyote Old Man: Not bad. But I don't like hearing about other people coming and messing things up. Makes the mush in my stomach go sour.

Narrator: Coyote puffed such a cloud of smoke over the lake that it hung in the sky for a long time before a warm gust of South Wind scattered it every direction.

The sun shone warm for five days. Coyote Old Man and Basket Woman spent most of that time getting ready for a journey. They both liked stories — especially Coyote Old Man who liked Coyote stories more than any other kind — so they decided to do some traveling into the Klamath Lake country and see what the Klamath Lake People had to say about how the world got started.

They worked for five days. They made new moccasins and mended their blankets. Coyote made himself a buckskin bag to carry his pipe in. Basket Woman packed herself full of food they had stored in the house to get them through the winter.

On the morning of the sixth day, they were ready to go.

Coyote Old Man: Goodbye, Mister Pine Tree. Goodbye, Crow. We'll see you when we get back.

Pine Tree: Goodbye, Coyote. Goodbye, Basket Woman.

Narrator: Pine Tree was looking sharp and green with his new needles flashing on the ends of his branches. Crow was circling high overhead, singing his spring song better than ever.

Coyote and Basket Woman started down the trail.

Coyote Old Man (calling back): Goodbye, Fire.

Fire: Oh, no you don't! You've got to take me along. How else are you going to cook your mush in the mornings? If you leave me, I might not be here when you get back!

Narrator: Basket Woman made a torch out of sagebrush and pine pitch, put Fire on top of it, and they went on down the trail.

Making tracks through the woods ... making tracks through the reeds ... making tracks on the trail toward Klamath Lake country....

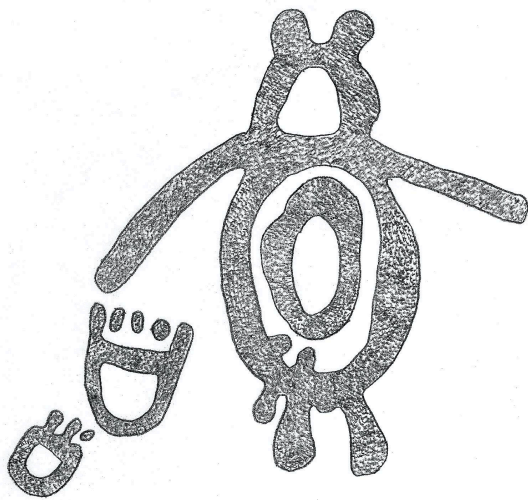
They'd been on the trail all morning when they came to the woods where Bear lived. Bear was sitting outside his house on a log singing his waking up song: hae-ya, hae-ya, hae-ya.... He'd been dozing all winter.

Now there are some things you should know about Bear. Though he looks big and clumsy, once he gets moving, he's as graceful as Deer and almost as fast. And though he talks in a dumb-sounding voice, he's not at all dumb. And though he can't see very well, he's got a nose that won't quit.

When Coyote and Basket Woman and Fire came up to his house, Bear was singing his waking up song in his dumb-sounding voice.

Bear (sniffs the air and stops singing): Hello, Mister Coyote. Hello, Basket Woman. Hello, Mister Fire. You're a long way from home.

Coyote Old Man: We're on a journey. We're going to visit the Klamath Lake People. We want to hear their story of how the world got made.



Bear: Oh, that's a good one. I've heard it myself a few times.

Fire (excited, sputtering): Mister Bear, Mister Bear! Would you tell us that story, pleeeaaase?

Bear: Oh, no. I don't know it that well. But listen, there's bound to be people down the trail who can tell it. Just keep walking and you'll find them.

Basket Woman: Why don't you come with us? You've been along this trail before. You could lead us.

Coyote Old Man (piping in): Good idea.

Fire: Yes, yes, yes!

Bear (yawning): All right, all right.

Narrator: And the four of them walked down the trail.

Making tracks past mother ducks with their ducklings ... making tracks through meadows full of spring flowers ... making tracks all afternoon under the warm sun....

They traveled for five days and by the fifth night, they were well into the Klamath Lake country, and they camped in a clearing near the lakeshore. They got Fire settled in and flaming, said goodnight to the lake and the stars and the night spirits, and then they all crawled under their blankets.

Fire was blazing happily inside a circle of rocks. When the others were half asleep, he whispered to the rocks....

Fire: Say, do any of you know how the world got started?

Three Rocks (all at once): I do!

Black Rock: It all started with Koomookumpts going across the big lake in his canoe. He was coming from the north.

Gray Rock: That's right. There wasn't anything anywhere but this lake.

White Rock (chanting): Old Koomookumpts in his canoe. Gliding along like a swan. Then it stopped and it stopped and it stopped.

Gray Rock: Koomookumpts shook his canoe.

White Rock: Koomookumpts yelled at his canoe.

Black Rock: Koomookumpts kicked his canoe.

Three Rocks (all at once): But he couldn't get it to move!

Gray Rock: Koomookumpts finally gave up. He looked below the surface of the lake, deep down as far as he could see. Way down near the bottom, he saw the roof of a house. That was Pocket Gopher's house.

White Rock: I'll be Gopher. I poked my nose out of my house and said, "Hello, Koomookumpts. Why don't you come down and talk with me?"

Black Rock: I'll be Koomookumpts. So I went down and down and down and started talking with Gopher. I said, "So what are we going to do? We've got to make the world. If you can do anything better than I can, Gopher, then you shall be Elder Brother. By the way, what do you think we should have for food?"

White Rock (acting out Gopher's part): I was sitting and listening and thinking about what to do, and I opened my mouth to yawn and out came nuts and roots and berries, all came out of my yawn.

Black Rock (bursting in): "Oh, look at you, Gopher, look what you can do. Looks like you're going to be Elder Brother!"



Gray Rock: This story needs a narrator. I'll be Narrator. So that night Gopher caused a deep sleep to fall on Koomookumpts. He burrowed under the bottom of the lake, and he pushed up and up and up, pushed hills and mountains clear above the water.

White Rock: I woke Koomookumpts up next morning, and I said to him, "Hey, Koomookumpts, you should come outside and have a look around."

Black Rock: Well, I went outside, and I said to Gopher, “Look what you’ve done. What good work. Just for that, I’m going to make your old home into a mountain.” And that’s just what I did. Then I asked Gopher, “What are the children going to do for fun?”

Gray Rock: Koomookumpts and Gopher made themselves spears. They played a game throwing spears at hills they used for targets. They knocked the top off Bare Island and it’s still that way today. Then they invented all the other games.

Then Gopher said....

White Rock: Wait a minute. I’m Gopher. I’ll tell you myself what I said. I said, “Who’s going to live in the world?”

Black Rock: I thought about that for a moment, then I said, “Mountain Lion, Deer, Bear, Elk, all the birds and all the beasts.”

White Rock (in Gopher’s voice): “What’s going to grow in the world?”

Black Rock: I thought about that but couldn’t think of an answer, so I said, “I think I’ll take a walk and see what I can do.”

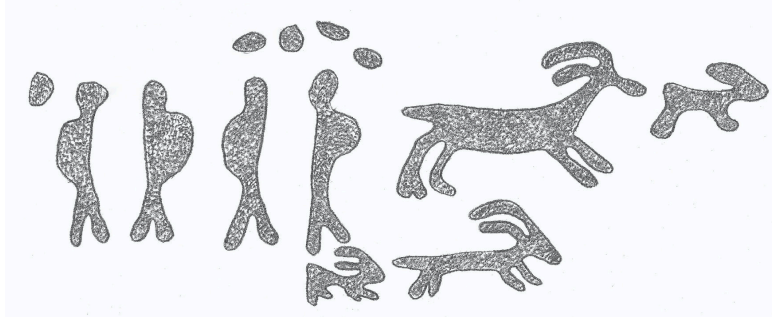
Gray Rock: So Koomookumpts walked all over the world. He went down where the Mountain People live, made them good homes and gave them marble. He made homes for the Groundhog Eaters over in the desert and gave them obsidian. He came back to where the Klamath Lake People live and gave them tules. But on his way back, he met Gopher and he said....

Black Rock: Hold it! My turn. I saw a lot of smoke in the valley and I said, “Look at all that smoke, Gopher. I wonder what’s wrong.”

White Rock: I stared back at Koomookumpts, and I said, “Oh, Koomookumpts! Look! You have won! You are Elder Brother! Who’s going to live in the world? Oh, I know, people, that’s who, people and their stories....”

Gray Rock: Gopher knew the smoke came from the fires of the people Koomookumpts had created. They stood and they listened and they heard folks talking and children playing and laughing. They heard a woman singing as she pounded seeds into flour.

After a time, the people became many people, and all the green things in the mountains and in the valleys, and all the birds and beasts, they became many. And that was the beginning of the Klamath Lake People's world.



White Rock and Black Rock (together): That's right!

Narrator: Fire was half-asleep, but he had heard that part about the smoke and that made his coals glow brighter and brighter.

Next morning, Basket Woman and Coyote Old Man and Bear sat in sunshine as bright as the day the world began.

Bear: Say, did you hear anybody talking last night?

Coyote Old Man: I thought I heard three people telling the Klamath Lake creation story but I might have dreamed it.

Basket Woman: Have you ever heard that story before?

Coyote Old Man: No, I don't think so.

Basket Woman: Then how could you dream it?

Coyote Old Man: I dunno. Funny how that happened, isn't it?

Bear: Well, I've heard that story before and I heard it again last night, though with three voices it was a little different. But it was the same story, for the most part. People were telling that story. We weren't all having the same dream.

Coyote Old Man: Who could it have been?

Narrator: They all looked suspiciously at Fire. But Fire only crackled and whispered so low the others couldn't hear him....

Fire: Crack-crack-crackling good story.

Narrator: Bear was looking at all the new spring flowers, all the colors, feeling good in the morning sun, and he was thinking what a nice time spring is with South Wind and the sun making the days warm. And he was thinking about the story he'd heard the night before.

Bear (to himself): I've never heard that Klamath Lake story told quite like that. Maybe if everybody who tells that story uses his own words, it will be like making the world over and over again, just like springtime.

Narrator: They all got busy, packed everything up and started down the trail.

Making tracks along the lakeshore ... making tracks through the spring meadow ... making tracks under the warm sun all morning long....

“So that's it?” asks Coyote. “The end of the story? Where's the gold, the corporate contract, the prize for the hero? Shouldn't I get a mousey wife or something?”

“Not this time,” I say. “The prize is the story itself, and the story is the journey.”

“And no story ever ends,” says Fox Girl. “It just remakes itself each time it is told. The prize is knowing that the search goes on.”

“Humph,” says Coyote. “I'm tired of looking. I'd rather be smooching....”

“Maybe next time,” says Fox Girl.

“Well,” says Coyote. “I did enjoy this story. But maybe we can change the ending or tidy it up or add a few somewhat amorous scenes?”

“Perhaps,” I say. “Meanwhile, how about a nap?”

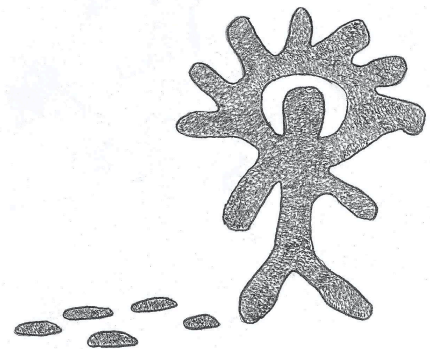
“Now you’re talking,” says Coyote.

“Almost as good as a prize?” says Fox Girl.

“Almost,” says Coyote. “Not quite what I wanted, but it’s not bad. It’ll do for now....”

Coyote and Fox Girl curl up on the knoll at Gumbat and watch the morning take shape. A worker climbs into the cab of the ditch-digging machine. This clickity-clack Koomookumps wakes up and groans as its mechanical arm with its long-fingered bucket starts scooping mud into a heap. Their eyes get heavy with the sleepy rhythm of the machine and the desert warmth of the rising sun.

Across the road a park ranger talks to a gathering of school kids. Her voice floats on the morning breeze and circles Gumbat with the rhythm of an ancient story that has spent centuries swirling through time and has yet to find its ending. “In the 1870s,” she says, “at the time of the Modoc War, Tule Lake was much higher. Standing where you are, you would be underwater.”



I sit on a rock and watch tule fog creep across the basin, cuddling the contours of the old lakeshore. I listen to the ranger’s voice. Something shifts inside me — there’s more than one way to make a lake, I’m thinking — and I scribble into my notebook....

Tule Lake came back today in waves of fog that splash the ancient shore line.

White waves roll, and above this sump-turned-lake, the geese fly and the sun beats the day into high desert blue sky like nothing strange had happened.

Weeks ago I warned a farmer friend of mine: “The old stories say the lake will come rolling back. Someday Koomookumpts will tire of this land drained for potatoes and bring back the waves. You ought to move to higher ground.”

He just smiled ... and stared....

But today it happened. The sun beats down. The geese fly over the ancient lake. White waves roll and roll, and make the Old Time stories smile.

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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.

www.DotyCoyote.com