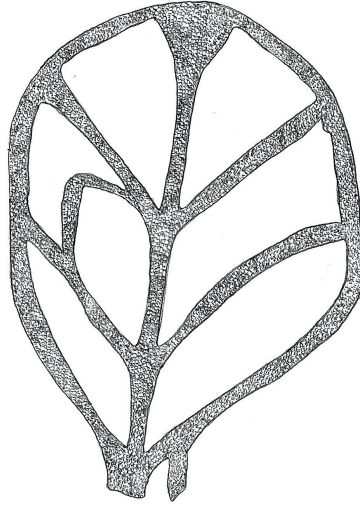
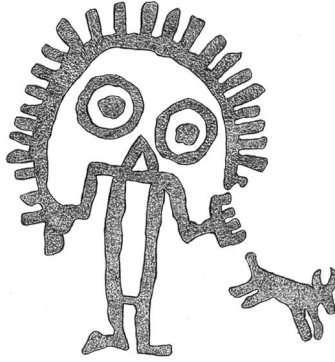


Voices of the Rock People

Thomas Doty



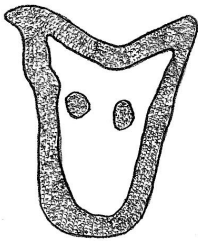
Voices of the Rock People



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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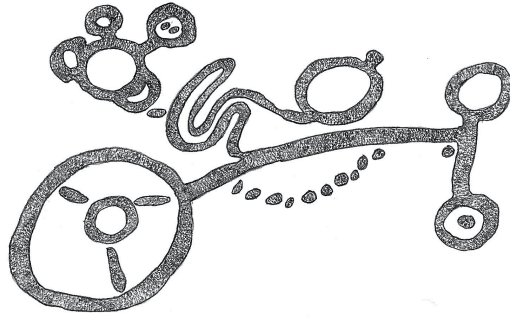
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Fern Ridge Reservoir is nearly dry, drained to allow the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to repair their dam. As the water lowers, the Long Tom River and Coyote Creek slip back into their pre-dam courses, and an ancient landscape sacred to the native Chela Mela Kalapuyans is briefly visible. Coyote and I take a journey to find the storied place where the two streams meet. But not before we have a little chat about it.



“How can you resist?” smirks Coyote.

“Resist what?” I ask.

“An adventure along Coyote Creek.”

“It might rain.”

“It has a magical name.”

“It’s a muddy creek, and even more muddy after it rains.”

“Same color as me?”

“Named after some poor critter shot-gunned into eternity and strung up by his paws for passersby to admire. Yes, the same color as you.”

“Oh.”

“Some folks called it Rock Creek for a spell.”

“After the Old Ones? The Rock People?”

“Or the carved medicine rock.”

“Yes?”

“Or the rocky stretch of the creek at the old crossing.”

“That proves it’s a good creek. It has lots of stories.”

“Or a vague history. Or both.”

“Maybe it’s just complex.”

“That, too. So yes, it’s your color and it’s complex, just like you. It flows into the Long Tom River, you know.”

“You must like that name, Mister First–Name–Tom.”

“It used to be called Long Tom Bath.”

“Ha! Like you need one!”

“Cute. Long Tom Bath is a corruption of Lam Tam Buff, the Kalapuya name for the river.”

“Not much is clear about this creek and river, is it? Maybe where they come together is a power place. We might have a look.”

“They've wandered around a lot over the years.”

“In and out of each other's lives? Like us?”

“They divide into forks in some places. Other places they come back together. Sometimes they never do. They're complicated. Yes, like us.”

“Are there stories about me out there?”

“And more. There's a wagon road, the Trappers Trail and a Trail of Tears, all following the Long Tom through what was called Grande Prairie.”

“Our kind of place?”

“It's underwater. There's a dam that normally makes a reservoir.”

“Normally?”

“Things are abnormal these days.”

“You're telling me!”

“I was referring to the dam. It's being repaired and the reservoir is mostly dry. The old creek and riverbeds are exposed.”

“What are we waiting for?”

“For you to stop asking questions.”

“Oh, right. Can we go now?”

“How can we resist?”

“So you found one of the Rock People who tells stories.”

In the dim, first light of morning, an old man steps out of the woods and walks toward Coyote and me. The three of us stand around a carved rock on the bank of Coyote Creek. The old man's face is creased with age, his beard long and stringy, and he is missing several teeth. A gold headband holds his gray hair in place like a halo that long ago floated down from a golden

sunrise and wrapped itself around his head. His wool vest and trousers are worn thin. They look like they were handed down from another century.

He might be one of the Old Ones, I am thinking, descended from a nearly forgotten lineage of humans and mythological beings.

“Who are you?” asks Coyote.

The old man answers with words that flow from an ancient myth. “I am a wanderer, a listener, a watcher, a friend of the Rock People. They are the oldest people and got time to spare for a visit. And they remember the stories. Years ago, in my own story, they gave me a name that sounds like creekwater swirling and splashing over stones. Sometimes I hear it whispered as I walk the old trails.”

“Are you a bum?” asks Coyote. “One of those homeless people?”

“I am without a homeland, but I’m no more of a bum than you, Mister Coyote, chief of all bindlestiffs.”

“That’s a good one,” I chuckle. “You’ve got this pooch figured out.”

“How did you find this place?” asks the old man. “What are you doing here?”

“Humph,” says Coyote. Forgetting this trip was his idea, he snaps, “You mean here in the middle of nowhere?”

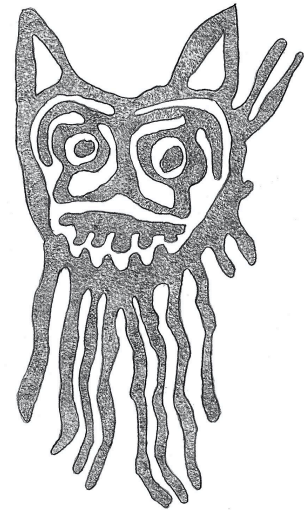
“I mean by this rock and along this creek. Yes, here in the middle of somewhere.”

Coyote starts to fling another smart remark, but the old man raises his hand in a gesture that says, “Shhh. Listen.”

Coyote twirls his ears. He stares at the carvings on the rock and remembers words from an age-old story. He hears them whispered, “Back in the Old Time, there was no water anywhere....” A curious Coyote looks at us. Our expressions say that we hear the words, too. Coyote smirks. “A voice from the Rock People,” he thinks. “Not just me this time.”

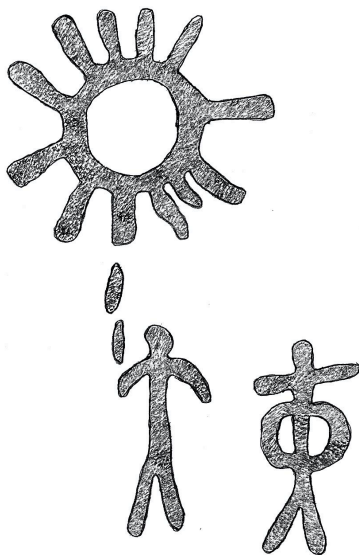
The voice follows the old man as he walks down the trail along the creek. Coyote and I follow. We hear pieces of the story.

“In the valley, on the edge of a forest, a baby girl played beside a fire. A small black rock jumped into the fire. It heated up and cracked and a fragment struck the child’s belly. Though she was just a year old, she became pregnant, and two moons later, she gave birth to a little boy.



“That boy talked within five days, in ten days he began walking, in fifteen days he was hunting birds, in twenty days he shot a pheasant, in twenty–five days he killed a small deer, in thirty days a large deer, in thirty–five days a small elk, and in forty days he killed a large elk. ‘My, I am thirsty,’ he said to his mother. ‘Do you see the moon, do you see the sun? That is where I shall find water.’ The boy picked up a rock, put it in a pouch, and started walking toward the house of the moon.”

Coyote and I and the old man walk along twists and turns in the creek where water splashes over rocks, along riffles and small rapids. We wade through the water at the rock–bottomed crossing where the ancient ones crossed the creek, where years later the fur trappers and emigrant wagons crossed. In 1856, the Takelmas from the south camped here along one of their Trails of Tears as they trudged north toward a new life on the reservation. Under the giant oak they buried one of many who died along the trail. Coyote and I and the old man walk across the gathering place called the Race Track, slip over the summit of a grassy hill, out of the trees and into an open meadow that stretches into the vast prairie of the dry lakebed.



“For five days, the boy walked through the woods and arrived at the moon’s house. The moon said, ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘I am just walking along,’ said the boy. ‘I am looking for water.’ ‘Well,’ said the moon. ‘If you’re going to visit the sun, here is some sweet–smelling grass. Give it to the sun’s daughter. She will smell it and give you water.’

“The boy walked east, climbed a ridge and came to the house of the sun. He saw the sun’s daughter. She was carrying an empty bucket. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘You smell pretty good for a boy.’ ‘Yes,’ said the boy. ‘Maybe I can help you fetch water.’ The girl nodded, and they walked down the back side of the ridge to a large lake. A canoe was on the shore. They got in and the boy started paddling.”

Coyote and I and the old man follow a stretch of Coyote Creek that is usually under the reservoir. We sit on a wave–worn log and watch the sun stretch its light across the dry lakebed. Young plants are everywhere. The prairie is springtime green. There are groves of stumps that used to be forests. It’s easy to imagine what was here when the boy and girl made their journey.

“I’ll finish this story,” says the old man. He glances upstream through the forest, imagining a picture of the carved rock. He listens for a moment and catches the words of the myth. Like one of the Rock People, he speaks in a slow, time-worn voice. “The water started moving. It spilled over the ridge and went all over the world. Now it had started. First it became the ocean, and then it made rivers and creeks and streams. It made all the different kinds of water. ‘I have finished the waters,’ said the boy. ‘Now when the new people arrive there will be lots of water. They will not be poor in water.’”

“The boy and girl walked into this new world. They followed a creek until they came to a boulder. The boy took the small rock out of his pouch and began to scrape symbols onto the boulder. One by one, the symbols told the story of his journey.”

I glance at the old man. Is he one of the first people? Out here between water and no-water, in an ancient landscape holding its breath before it once again disappears under the backwaters of the dam, a crack in time opens and allows me to gaze into a moment that is neither past or present — Mythtime in the eyes of the Old Ones. In this place and in this moment anything is possible. It is plausible that the old man is one of the Rock People, perhaps even the first teller of this story of beginnings.

By evening the three of us have walked into the heart of the dry lakebed. We build a small fire near where river and creek come together. No one is certain if this is the actual confluence of Long Tom River and Coyote Creek. We passed several through the day, and in the deepening twilight, this one looks no different than the others. But it will do for now.

As we settle in close to the fire, Coyote says, “I have a feeling about this place.”

“For good reason,” says the old man.

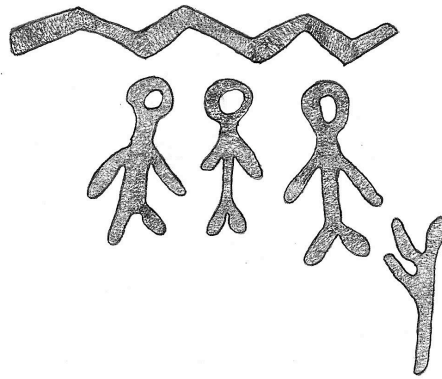
Clouds hide the moon and the night drifts into darkness. A light rain sprinkles the lakebed. The fire crackles and spits. I think through the story of the boy and the girl. When I shake loose of my thoughts and glance around, the old man is nowhere to be seen.

“The Old Ones are like that,” says Coyote. “Sometimes they just disappear.”

“Will he ever come back? Perhaps when the creeks and rivers return for good?”

“Maybe,” yawns Coyote. “Maybe not.”

Coyote is already snoozing by the time I feel sleepy. I stoke the fire, scoot closer and wrap myself in my coat. A dream reaches out and touches my mind, molding my thoughts into a story.



Coyote's grandmother walks out of nowhere as if she had been there all along. And behind her, I see myself and another Coyote. The three figures approach the camp. The rain has stopped. Startled, I frantically feed the fire as if I'm not sure what I'm seeing. The two Coyotes circle the fire, eyeballing each other, flashing their teeth.

Grandmother Coyote whispers to both of us Dotys, "Better stand back. It's best to be out of the way when their self-absorbed glares take over."

"What are you doing here?" says one Coyote. "This is my turf."

"My turf is everywhere," says the other Coyote. "And the stories prove it."

"Prove what? You're nothing. I'm the elder brother. I'm the hero of the stories."

"Who says you're the oldest?"

"I do."

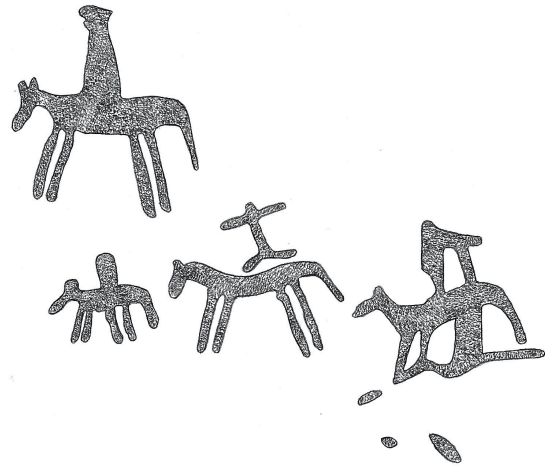
"Right. Like you're a reliable source for yourself! Being older hasn't made you any smarter, little boy. I'm the wiser one and everyone knows it!"

The Coyotes continue their circle dance in a whirl of taunts and glowers. It's impossible to tell one from the other. This ancient place at the confluence becomes a theatre of possibilities. Everything comes together here, no matter when or where it's from.

Just beyond the edge of the firelight, in the night-speckled shadows, another drama plays itself out. We two Dotys focus our eyes and ears beyond the dance of the Coyotes, and this is what we see and hear.

"Long ago," says Grandmother of the Old Ones, "before this world became a different place, there was a long stretch of seasons when we lived good lives. The moons danced a circle and we knew their names ... the Moon When the Camas Blooms, Midsummer Moon, Moon When We

Start Getting Sagittair Roots, Moon When We Move Inside and Tell Stories, Moon When We are Nearly Out of Food.... We followed the moons. The men hunted all the time. The women dug camas and gathered tarweed seeds. We gathered acorns and hazelnuts. We picked and dried blackberries. We spoke to each new moon, ‘We are still alive, too. You have come out and we see you. We are still here, too.’ We told stories and dreamed of those who went before us. When we saw a flame burn high in the air at night, we said, ‘Now someone has died. There is his heart starting his journey across the ocean to the Land of the Dead.’ Now the night is full of lights. Many hearts journey home. So few of us are left. The ancient hunting and food gathering grounds are flooded or plowed. Only the Talking Stones of the Rock People remain and speak the stories with the Old Time words. I hear them as I walk through the valley.”



The two Coyotes shatter the magic of the moment and turn the cultural spotlight back on themselves.

“You’ve always been a self-proclaimed smarty!” shouts one Coyote.

“That’s sure better than being a universally-known dummy!”

Grandmother Coyote howls, “Now stop it, you two. You’re both the same age and both of your harebrains work just fine! How about a story?”

We Dotys shrug, not sure what to do. Before anything more can be said, one of the Coyotes launches a narrative.

“I am going there, walking along looking for something good to do in the world.”

“More than likely you are looking for trouble. I’m with you. Let’s go!”

As the coyote dance increases in speed, fur and flashing teeth, gestures and words become one and blurred at the same time. The two Coyotes shapeshift into one skin. With mythic echoes of duality, they tell the story with a single voice....

We're thirsty. It's a hot day. Now anyone who knows anything about what's what will know this. The Frog People had all of the water. Anyone who wanted water to cook or wash had to get it from them. And they charged a lot of money. So we're out walking along and find a dead deer, and one of his rib bones looks just like a giant dentalium shell. That's Indian money, and that's a language these Frog People understand.

We trudge up the hill to the village of the Frog People. They live around a big lake that is behind a dam.

"Hey, Frogs," we say, "we have a big shell and we want a big drink of water."

"Give us that shell!" shout the Frog People. "You can drink all the water your fat bellies can hold."

"That's a good deal," we say, and we hand over the rib bone.

While those silly Frogs are admiring what they think is big money, we tell them, "Now we are going to keep our heads down for a long time. We're very thirsty. Don't you worry your slimy skin about it. It'll be a long drink."

"We won't worry. Take as long as you want."

We start drinking. We drink for a long time, loooooong time....

We come up once for air. "We sure are thirsty!" We plunge back down, loooooooooong time....

"Oh," says one of the Frogs.

Five days go by. One of the Frogs says, "Hey you Coyotes, you sure know how to drink. Maybe you better give us another big shell."

We pop our heads up. "We'll just finish this drink and be on our way."

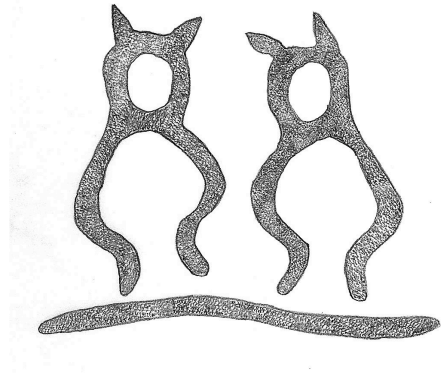
Down we go again.

Those Frog People scratch their heads and wonder with their little brains how we could drink so much water. One of the smarter ones thinks we might be up to something.

And he'd be right. We are digging out the base of the dam the whole time we are under the water. We stand up with a flourish and announce, "My, that was a good drink. Just what we need on this hot day!"

The dam collapses and all of the water from their lake pours into the valley and makes creeks and rivers and waterfalls. Perfect!

The Frog People yell at us, “You’ve taken all of the water, you bad Coyotes!”



“Ooooo,” we yell back as we scamper down the hill and into the valley. “Maybe so, but it’s not right for you slippery Frogs to keep all the water.”

We Coyotes did that. Now everyone has water for cooking and drinking and swimming. That’s just how it happened a long time ago.

The two Coyotes stop their dance.

One of them says, “Now that’s a good story.”

“Guess we’re both pretty smart!”

“One of us, anyway!”

A lively tussle raises the dust, not easy to do after the rain. Fur flies, tails get pulled, muzzles smacked — sibling rivalry with a few coyote-twists. After yips and howls that give us Dotys the willies, the Coyotes retreat to opposite sides of the fire, tails drooping, tongues dragging the dirt, defeated looks in their eyes. Both had lost the fight.

Grandmother Coyote disappears into the shadows as if she had been there all along. One of the Coyotes and a Doty follow her, and soon the camp is quiet, except for the snores of Coyote and my own dream-breathing.

I gaze deeper into the shadows and Grandmother of the Old Ones shares another story.

“Long ago there were many Earth People living in this place. Now two women stole an infant from her mother, and they kept it a long, long time. It grew and dug roots. It became a girl. Flint Boy found her and took her home to her mother.

“This made the two women angry. They danced spirit dances and it rained for twenty days. The earth was flooded. Forests were drowned. Only the peaks of the tallest mountains were above the water. A few of the Earth People became Water Snake, Steelhead, Salmon, Crawfish,

Trout, all kinds of Water People. The rest of the people died except Flint Boy and the girl and the two women.

“Flint Boy hid the girl under his arm and the water went down. He found those two women and he burned them. He took their ashes and blew them into the sky. They made fog and mist and clouds. He said to them, ‘You will not go around on the earth. You will be Sky People. When the clouds become thick, it will rain.’”

“After three generations, Earth People were made from Flint Boy and the girl, and once again they filled the land. This is one time of many when the world changed from what it was and became a better place for all beings.”

“Wake up!” yells the old man. “You’ve been sleeping long enough. We’ve got things to do!”

Dark clouds press onto the lakebed and start dripping rain, a somber, cold drizzle that makes the coals of the fire sputter and hiss.

“What’s up?” I ask. “You’re back.”

“The dam has been fixed,” says the old man. “Pretty soon this sacred place will be underwater.”

“It’s not like this hasn’t happened before,” says Coyote. “After I made this world a good place full of stories about me, those Frog People increased their army and made a big, big lake that ruined my brilliant work. Now they take the water away and tease me. Now they make another flood. Humph! They haven’t heard the last of me! No smarmy little-brained gang of squatty Frogs will make a bathtub of my stories! I’ve got work to do!!”

Coyote scampers out of camp and across the lakebed. He howls medicine songs as he heads north toward the dam.

The old man laughs and mutters a few words to himself. Then he strings them together as a beginning for a new story. “Not so long ago, there were frog-shaped men operating the dam on Fern Ridge Reservoir. They controlled all of the water. One day, Coyote was going there....”

His story ends so abruptly that I turn to see why he stopped. The old man is nowhere within sight. He’s disappeared again.

As rain pours down on the lakebed, it drums an ancient rhythm. The creek and river rocks at the confluence turn wet. Their colors are vivid. Near the edge of the fire ring is a small black rock

cracked into many pieces by the heat of the fire. I hear Old Time words. I imagine that the Rock People are waking up and remembering their language sound by sound....

Li-Yuu. Prairie. Whilamut. Where the river ripples and runs fast.

I walk along the Long Tom River and find the wood pilings of an old bridge. As I cross over, I hear more words....

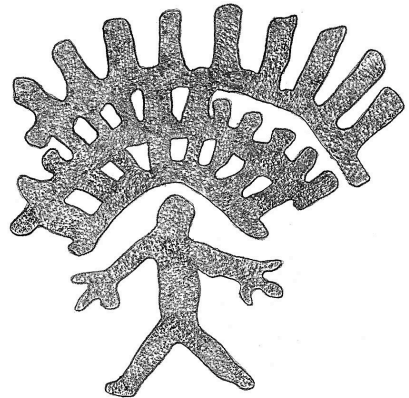
Kanaa. Going across place. Gaw-Ni. Trail through the woods.

I climb a small hill thick with trees. When the reservoir is full, this hill is an island. Another word....

Wha-Lik. Place by the water.

I cross the island and walk east toward the only glimmer of sunshine I can see. I stop at the top of a ridge and look back across the lakebed. I watch the water rise behind the dam and the new lake stretch its fingers toward the confluence of Long Tom River and Coyote Creek.

I stand in the sunlight and listen for more words. In the distance I hear the faint howls of Coyote and the voice of the old man, "Wake up! We've got things to do! Wake up!"



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



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

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

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