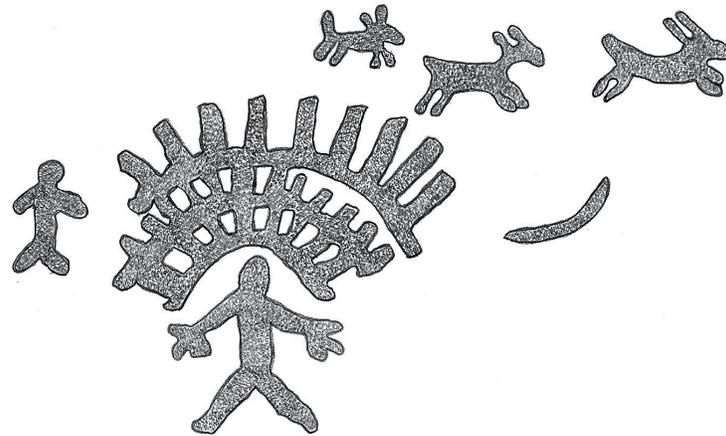
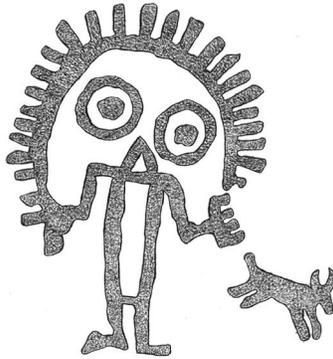


Breath of the Earth

Thomas Doty



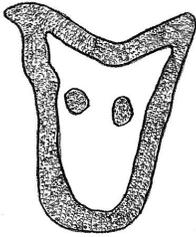
Breath of the Earth



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



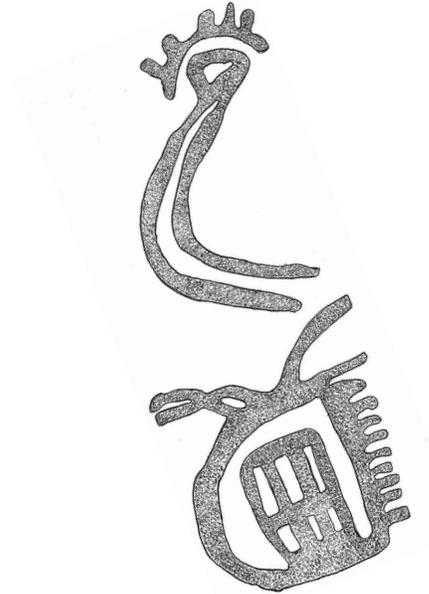
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The wind has howled for days, a strong, January wind out of the south, warming southern Oregon with California heat, bending fir trees, prodding manzanita bushes to twist and dance, and changing the shapes of clouds as they sweep the sky.



Coyote sniffs the wind. “Whoever is causing this big breeze must be nearly out of air.”

Coyote and I walk up Ashland Creek through Lithia Park, beyond where the tourists go, deep into the canyon, and out of the wind.

We sit by the creek and listen to the wind howl over our heads.

A drowsiness as full as summer settles into the canyon. We are soon consumed by one of our favorite ways to wile away an entire day. This activity is known to some as an escape and to others as a fine way to enhance their lives, a sort of purification and rejuvenation. To artists it is the beginning of inspiration. To visionaries it is a shadowy glimpse into the future. To those without imagination, it is considered a waste of time. But Coyote and I regard this activity as one of the most noble pursuits in either the human or the coyote world, and we generally refer to it as a nap.

Now our eyelids droop. Now our breathing slows. Now we slip into the reality of dreams.

We’re not a dozing duo for long. Soon an errant arm of wind escapes the current and sweeps its hand through the canyon with wild and dramatic gestures that startle us awake.

“A strong wind ruffles my fur,” complains Coyote.

“There’s something mysterious about wind like this. Some say it’s the breath of the earth, or Children Maker breathing life into the world, or the first storyteller speaking the first story, or giant birds from the Old Time trying their wings.”

“Perhaps it’s the invisible ghosts of dead people, traveling as fast as they can, trying to get beyond the sunset to the Land of the Dead.”

“Maybe so,” I say. “Maybe so.”

Mid afternoon, and the sun is already behind the ridge. Along the creek, trees and rocks are shadowy shapes. Coyote lights a fire. Above the canyon, high over our heads, the wind howls on, blurring the stars.

Darkness thickens. Night sounds are a blend of wind blowing through the tops of trees, the creek singing through the canyon, the fire crackling and blazing. I’m thinking that this night, in this canyon, around this fire, is right for a story that begins in the winter twilight and grows in thick forests, a story that swells rivers, spills into the landscape and, like the wind, rides the surge of centuries. Here and now is right for a story that grows out of the shadowy mystery that darkness calls its friend.

I ask Coyote, “Have I ever told you about one of my more mythic treks up Lower Table Rock?”

“I dunno. Am I in the story?”

“Of course, silly.”

“Is there darkness and death and destruction?”

“Yes, plenty of that, too.”

“Oh, good.”

“There’s even alliteration, onomatopoeia, mythopoesis and a bit of poetic license.”

“Oh, well,” says Coyote. “I guess that’s okay. How about pawnotes?”

“Footnotes, you mean? Good grief, no! Footnotes get in the way of a good story. They were invented by Romans and caused the fall of their empire. After footnotes they had no original thoughts, and they died.”

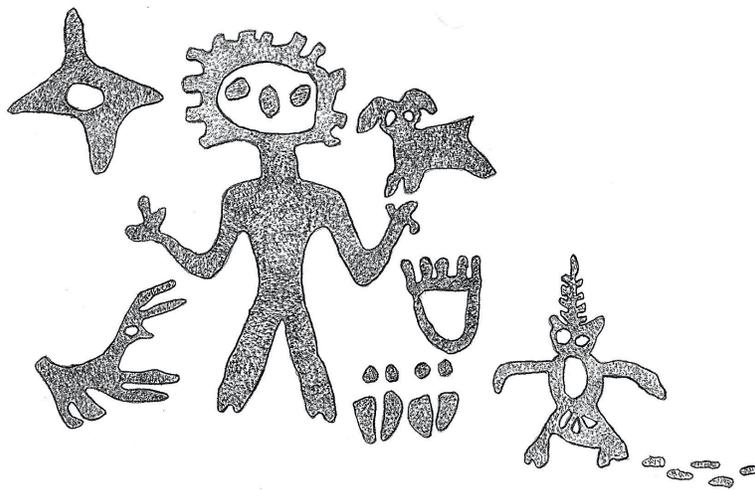
“I don’t know about that. I like pawnotes. How about if I provide them and call them Coyote’s Pawnotes of Original Thoughts? That way you can tell your story and I can make creative comments.”

“No way. Sounds like an excuse for you to interrupt.”

“All right, all right,” says Coyote. “Get on with the story now?”

“Only if you behave yourself.”

Firelight makes our eyes shine like stars. I look around me and see other eyes shining out of the darkness. Several animals have come into the canyon to spend the night out of the wind. I see Deer and Porcupine and Raccoon, Raven and Bluejay, and all of their friends. Coyote nods at them, and they move in closer to share the fire. Now that I have an audience of more than one, I inwardly shift from my conversational voice to my slightly formal storytelling voice. I take a deep breath, and choosing my words as carefully as a poet, I begin....



In the language of the Takelmas, wili yowo means “there was a house.” These words, like the first steps of a journey, begin every Takelma myth.

Though the Takelmas are mostly gone from their Rogue Valley world, their myths live on in the landscape of their homeland: in the thunder of the river, the hooting of owls on the Table Rocks, the movements of the sun and moon.

I recently took my own journey into the center of the Takelma myths, from the Rogue River up the old Indian trail to the top of Lower Table Rock. Spanning sunrise to sunrise, this journey became a story in itself. Everything I had learned about the myths became a personal experience, coming alive as I walked into the heart of where stories come from.

Wili yowo. There was a house along the Rogue River. There were many Takelma houses wrapped in a village. Morning sunlight slanted across their rooftops, drifting down smoke holes, the way it now skims the surface of the river and dives into its depths.

This river, called Gelam by the Takelmas, flows east to west as it has done since anyone can remember. In the myths, there are two directions: upriver and downriver. Upriver is to the east, toward the rising sun, toward creation. Downriver is to the west, toward the setting sun and the Land of the Dead. If you ask Coyote how to get to the Land of the Dead, he'll tell you, "It's to the west, beyond the sunset, across the river, always on the other side from where I am." This river is a symbol of birth and life and death.

It seems fitting that my own journey should begin here, as any journey into myth is also a journey into symbols. For thousands of years Takelma stories have traveled upriver and downriver, from village to village, breaths of words now riding the west wind, now the east wind, now swirling like fog over Lower Table Rock.

I start up the trail from the river through woods so thick it seems like twilight all the time. Behind me are sunlit meadows of camas and Indian plums and wild carrots, and the river swelled with salmon and sunlight. Morning shadows move like thunderheads through these woods. Voles tunnel under madrone leaves with a whisper and a crackle as if expecting a storm. Woodrats scamper into their nests of heaped-up twigs. Bones along the trail remind me that in these woods there is death as well as life.

Looking back, I no longer see the river, only shadows. I imagine all the monsters Takelmas have seen in the smoke and haze, in the blur of fall wind, in the frozen stillness of winter.

These woods seem long and dark like a winter night. I see oak leaves floating downriver. Oak trees push up like skeletons against the night. The cold moon moves across the sky, the same color as ice along the edge of the river before the sun rises up. Mist moves through these woods, rolls along the river.

Now is the time of hoot owls in the darkness, calling death and stealing children. Bad-hearted shamans cause sickness in people they don't like. Rolling skulls of dead people kill everyone they roll over. The river serpent squeezes people to death.

Now is the spirit time of dark nights. Fall wind swirls mist and fog over and over the burial mounds. The wind cries to the dead ones, far into winter.

I imagine I am inside a winter lodge, the storm howling down the smoke hole. A storyteller moves through smoke and shadows, his movement now slow like the purr of the fire, now wild with the storm.

These are his words.

Wili yowo. It had been cold for a long time. The Rogue River froze over and the snow fell and fell, making drifts all through the valley.

Coyote and Roasting Dead People lived along the river, each in his own house, each with a child. They were neighbors.

Snow drifted over the tops of their houses. They hadn't been able to go outside for days. They were running out of food, and Roasting Dead People's child was nearly dead from hunger.

Days went by, days went by, days went by....

The cold didn't let up. The entire world was snow and ice, and there was no food anywhere. And one morning, just as the weather broke, the child of Roasting Dead People died.

Roasting Dead People pushed on the door to his house, but it wouldn't open. He had to push hard to break open the door through the shell of ice that covered the house. He went next door and said to Coyote, "Say, Coyote, my friend. My child has died. Will you lend me a blanket so I can bury him properly?"

Coyote was annoyed. He yelled from inside his house, "Don't bother me! Don't you know that if you bury your child with a blanket he'll come back around this place? What's going to happen if dead people come back around here?"

So Roasting Dead People went home and buried his child, without a blanket.

Days went by, days went by....

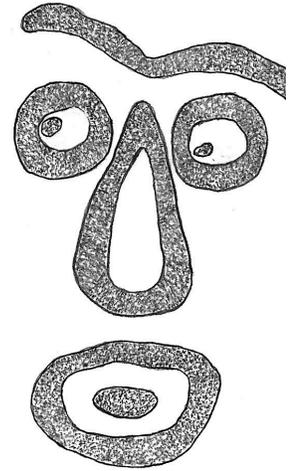
Winter turned into spring, which moved into summer, and fall brought the cold days again. When winter came, it was the coldest anyone could remember. The Rogue River froze over again. Snow piled high, and food was running short. And one morning, as clouds pulled apart and the sun started shining, Coyote's child got sick and died.

Coyote went next door and said to Roasting Dead People, "Give me a blanket. My child's kicked off, and I've got to bury the kid."

Roasting Dead People couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What's that you're saying? A year ago when I asked you the same thing, all you could say was, 'What's going to happen if dead people come back?' Now my child is rotting!"

Coyote went home and buried his child.

Days went by....



Coyote sat in the doorway to his house and watched winter turn into spring. Ice in the river melted away. Wildflowers started blooming along the riverbanks. And Coyote kept saying to himself, “People are never coming back after they die. Not ever, my child, not ever.”

Now this part of the story is finished, says the storyteller. Go gather seeds and eat them.

“Wait a minute, Mr. Storyteller,” says Coyote. “Time for a pawnote.”

“You said you wouldn’t interrupt.”

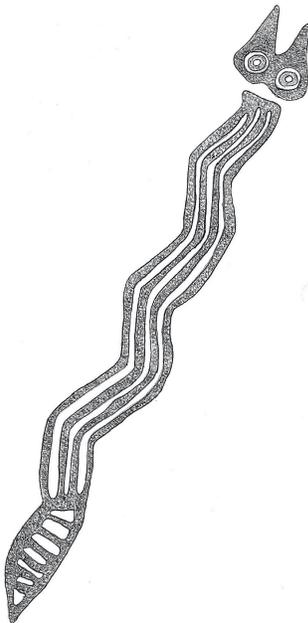
“But is this all I do in this story? Bring death into the world? I mean, where have you hidden my better qualities? Don’t you remember who is responsible for stars in the sky and this fire we’re sitting around, and tobacco? And can’t you remember who invented most of the fun and games between consenting adults?”

“Well, then,” I say. “Maybe we should mention sickness. And who was it gave certain politicians big mouths?”

“Maybe we should just move this story along.”

“Right. Are you finally ready?”

“Ready.”



Sunlight rushes through me like summer wind. I move out of the woods to where the trail hugs the lower bones of the cliff, and up and up and onto the top of Lower Table Rock.

Midday heat is intense. Heat waves, like the wind, shimmer above summer-brown grasses. Voles are quiet in their cool, damp tunnels under mounds of earth. Rattlesnakes doze in the shadows. I walk across the rock to the best shade around: the cedar trees.

Wind hits my face. I watch vultures and eagles ride thermals out of the bowl and across the rock, then along the eastern cliff across the top and back into the bowl. Vultures circle low just to make sure I’m moving. Eagles watch from the heights of clouds. The wind is hot and dry, making sure I know it’s summer.

The Takelmas tell a story of a terrible drought. The river was so low there weren't any salmon to catch. Leaves fell off trees long before fall. There weren't any berries in the mountains. No water. No breeze to cool the air. Nothing but stale, stagnant heat.

They hired a fellow to make rain. He climbed to the top of the rock and turned on the rain. But he never turned it off. The river swelled to a lake that covered the entire Takelma world.

The man changed into a cedar tree, safe on the rock above the water. His son and his son's wife and their little boy fled the valley to join him, turning into rock pinnacles that jutted over the flood. Entire villages washed away and many Takelmas drowned.

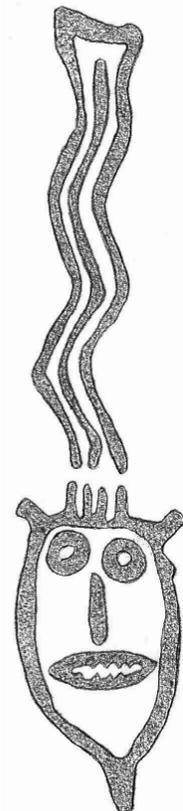
Angry survivors hired Beaver to chew down the rock. He chewed and he chewed, but when it occurred to him that he might get squashed by the falling rock, he quit. You can still see his teeth marks near the base of the cliff.

The first thing the people knew of the world returning to normal was the summer wind, a warm wind that stopped the rain and sent the river back within its banks. The Takelmas survived. But they never forgot the terror of the drought and the flood. And they never forgot the wind.

It feels good to sit in the shade of the cedar out of the midday heat and to feel the wind move across the rock, clearing the air.

The Old Ones have a medicine poem they say to the wind:

“Hey! From the lower part of my body you will drive away evil things bad. From the crown of my head you will drive them away. From over my hands you will drive them away. From within my backbone you will drive away evil things bad. From above my feet you will drive away evil things bad. OOOOO!” (The people blow to the wind.)



Almost sunset. I sit on the edge of the rock. I look east toward the beginning of the river, away from the Land of the Dead, here on Lower Table Rock, on the back of Younger Daldal, giant dragonfly and Takelma culture bringer. Along with his elder brother, nearby Upper Table Rock, he decided to stop here and live his life after their great journey up the Rogue River from the coast, changing things and making the world right.

The sun sets behind me. Stars open up. I close my eyes and imagine myself in an Old Time sweat house, dripping water on hot rocks, steam rising around me, getting hotter and hotter.

My head nearly bursts with heat. Stars shoot through the steam. A tunnel opens in the dirt floor.

I crawl down the tunnel, through the rock, and I hear the timbers of the sweat house creak as they shake with heat. Crawling toward the river, the creaking of the timbers becomes the creaking of the bones of generations of Takelmas, the entire rock shaking under their burial mounds. There is a faint light as I crawl out the end of the tunnel, toward the thunder of the river.

I sit on the riverbank, back at the beginning of the trail. The sun sends morning light across the river, and not long after, a sliver of new moon rises and moves with the sun across the sky. I sit and I listen, and I hear voices seep through cracks in the rock, voices from another time, yet still strong today. The voices rise with the rising of the new moon.

They say to the moon....

“I shall prosper, still longer I shall go. Even people, if they say of me, I wish you were dead. You! Just like I shall do, again I shall rise. Even many beings, when they devour you. Frogs, when they eat you up. Many beings, little snakes banded. Even those when they eat you, still again do you rise. You! Just like I shall do in time to come! BO!” (They yell and they yell and they yell.)

I’m thinking that as surely as the moon shall rise again and again, I will climb this rock many more times. I shall again journey into the mythic world of the Takelmas, into myths that teach me the dignity of death and the beauty of being alive.

Takelma myths have a traditional ending, “Gweldi. Baybit leplap,” which means “Finished! Now go collect seeds and eat them.” In other words you’ve been sitting around listening to stories long enough, so get up and go gather food. Now that you’ve gathered seeds of wisdom from the stories, it’s time to gather seeds for nourishment. Both kinds of seeds are necessary for the survival of humankind. Without food, there is no life. Without myths, life has no meaning.

As I finish my story the fire burns to coals, and the first winter sunlight of the day makes the top of the canyon glow. The animals gather their bags and baskets. After thanking me for the story, they leave the fire circle and wander back along the creek and into the trees, except for Coyote, who looks a little sleepy.

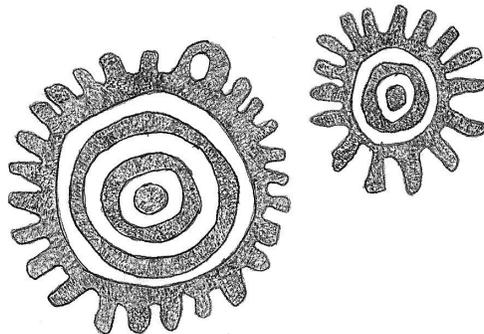
“So, friend, any pawnote you’d like to add?”

“I dunno,” says Coyote. “A story like that just takes the verbal tuck right out of me. Besides, a little snooze might be in order.”

“Am I hearing this right? Coyote lost for words? I suppose we can blame that on exhaustion, or long winter nights. Or maybe that nap you never got?”

Coyote yawns. “Right.”

So my mythic friend slips into Dreamtime where creeks and rivers flow, where fat geese and rabbits are abundant, where journeys eventually lead out of the wind to a cozy lair, and a meal and a nap, and where the best stories are brimmed with his own adventures.



I pull my notebooks out of my bag and scribble into one of them. I stoke the fire and lean back. Listening to the wind howling over the top of the canyon, I draw a breath and read to myself....

“The wind is the breath of the earth. To take a deep breath and slowly exhale is to imitate creation and give long life not only to yourself, but to everything around you: trees and soil, fog and clouds, sun, moon and stars, creeks and rivers that tumble and twist and feel the breeze as it ties the woods together.

“The wind blew when Children Maker breathed fog and made the world, when Coyote, trickster of a thousand myths, walked up and down the rivers and creeks, shaping the landscape.

“The wind blew when the first storyteller moved breath into words and told stories as winter storms screamed through the village. The stories taught the people to sing forgiveness to the deer before the hunt, to call trees their relations, to celebrate the aliveness of their world.

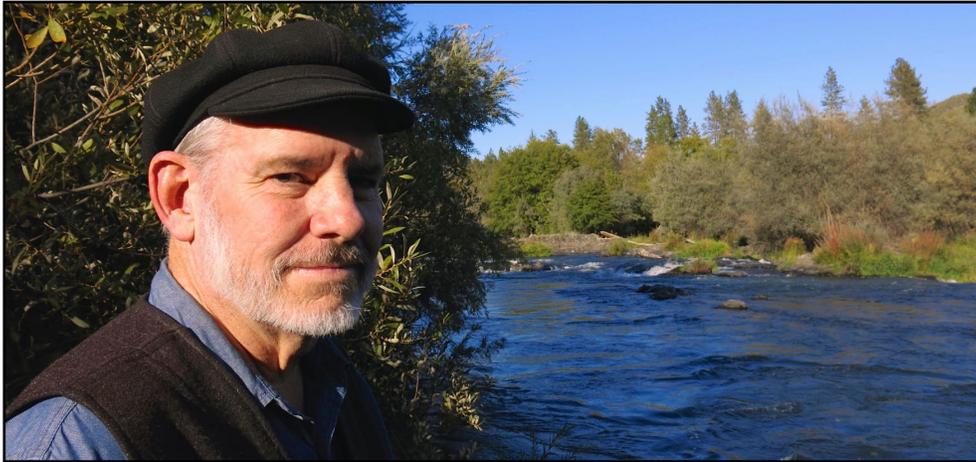
“The wind blew when roads swallowed the trails, when deer hid from a different kind of hunter, when the rip of saws cleared whole families of forests.

"The wind still blows. It is the breath of the earth, the music of the shaking leaves, the primal teller of all stories.

“The wind keeps the world going.”

“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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