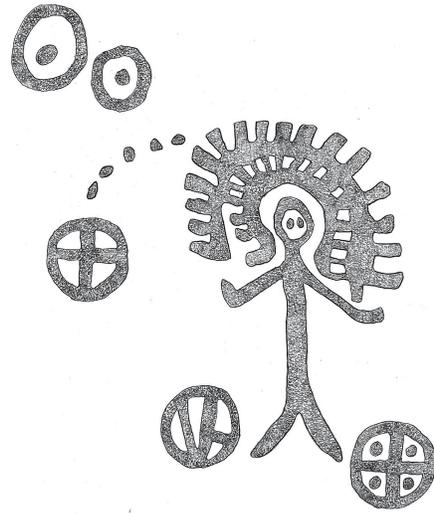
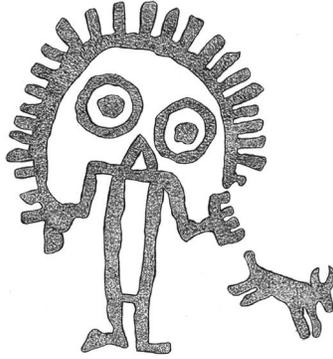


Latgawa

Thomas Doty



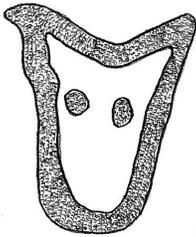
Latgawa



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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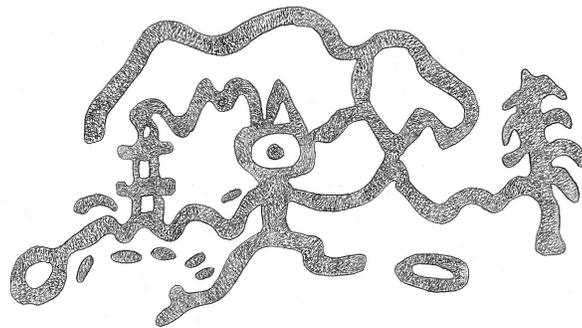
www.DotyCoyote.com

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December 20. Clouds.

For a week, clouds have pressed onto the Rogue Valley. No moon spreads pale light across the night, and no stars blaze. The sun is a faint glow during the day. Clouds hide hills and mountains that circle the valley. Without far-off horizons to gaze on, I look inward. I crawl comfortably into meditations on stories and memories and personal landscapes, and my thoughts find a presence in this journal.



I have always made a linguistic connection between the words “journey” and “journal.” Also with “history” and “his story.” And with “mist” and “myth,” “mystery” and “memory.” I realize these word connections exist only in my imagination or because I like the way they sound when spoken out loud, especially one after another. As I don’t desire to dull the keenness of my delusions — I work hard to create and maintain them — I have never researched the origins of these words. So I remain romantically and blissfully ignorant.

When I look at a landscape sculpted by clouds, with fog and mist hanging from every dripping branch of every tree, I yearn to go inside some Old Time winter plank house, cozy up to the fire and listen to stories. Or better still, I stroll past the house and into a story itself. Whether my journey is a meandering through Mythtime, or a mysterious walk into the mountains, or a rambling through my memory, these journeys find their way home in words scribbled into this journal ... my story ... my history ... my myth....

With a few days for sauntering, and with seasons eager to turn from fall into winter, the urge to journey deeper into the clouds is upon me. I want to have a look inside my spirit, to listen and hear what he has to say. I want to explore the mystery. So I make the trek into the Cascade Mountains to Camp Latgawa.

When I arrive, the camp is empty. Those who call the camp their home have gone into town. Clouds hide crowns of firs and pines and madrones, crawl up the slopes of breakneck ridges, and dive back into the camp where they shapeshift into fog and tumble along the creek. The camp seems to be enjoying this time to itself, and I don't feel like intruding. With the lodge and cabins shrouded in mist, the camp looks like any native village in any mountain cranny anywhere on the planet. It feels isolated, defined only by itself. It is the last bit of human-framed architecture before that steep climb into the mountains toward a lonely solitude where one's spirit finds a voice. It is the rabbit hole into Wonderland, the wardrobe one steps through to enter Narnia, the gateway into the mirror of who I am. It whispers, "Don't stop here. Make the journey. And tell me about it when you return." I walk through the camp, start up the trail along the creek, and into the mountains.

As I walk, I contemplate names. Latgawa, also called Latgau or Latgawk, is the name of a Takelma village in the eastern uplands. When referring to the place in the Takelma myth where the first war was fought, that same village is called Lawaya, which means "Knife in Belly." It is somewhere near Cottonwood Glades, just over the ridge from the headwaters of Dead Indian Creek. That's another name: Dead Indian, the name not only for the creek but also for a mountain or high country plateau, and a road. A less dramatic English version of "Knife in Belly?" Perhaps. The Old Time stories point that way.

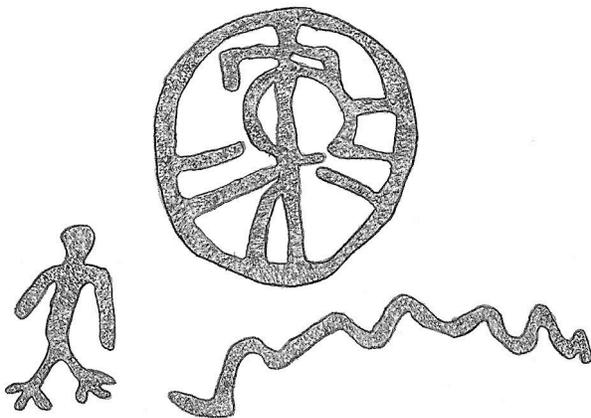
But the name is also derived from a story from 1854 when settlers found two dead Takelma Indians in their summer shelters and named the nearby creek Dead Indian. They assumed they were killed by Klamaths in a fight. This is sketchy as it comes from the time of the Rogue River War when certain whites who called themselves "The Exterminators" were quick to blame their own murders of "Rogue Indians" on others. Also, in 1854, most of the Takelmas were holed up down the valley and at war. Not much time to leisurely spend that summer in the mountains waiting to be killed by Klamaths.

A few years later, another story surfaces. When the old wagon road was relocated a few hundred yards to the west, an Indian graveyard was discovered during construction. More dead Indians. Still other stories and fragments of stories float through the oral tradition. Some are hidden away in obscure reams of unpublished field notes. A few have been made more recently.

True native folks rarely have problems with multiple names and stories for places. Truths are many, and to truly understand a place is to know the layers of stories where the names come

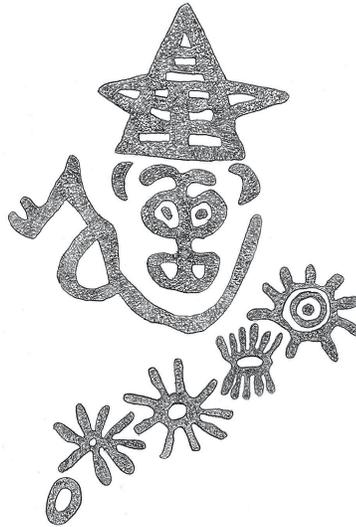
from. It's also a good idea to spend time in each place and pay attention to what the place tells you. Look around, listen carefully, and a story reveals itself in the language of the landscape. Around 200 A.D. Lu Chi wrote, "When cutting an axe handle with an axe, surely the model is close at hand."

For me, Latgawa is a symbol of the eternal conflict between our desire to live spiritual lives and the messy business of the real world getting in the way. Latgawa is the beginning of the path into the mountains, toward the headwaters of creeks and rivers, east toward creation and the rising sun, deep into the wilderness where one's spirit finds a voice. But Latgawa is also a grim reminder of the "Knife in Belly" reality of what happens when certain folks forget to listen to their spirits and wage violence on others and on the sacred places they call home. All the stories have truths, and all of them are relevant ... our stories ... our histories ... our myths....



I cover miles in silence. I walk along the creek, listening to her tricklings and tumblings. I walk through fog that swishes as we pass each other. I walk into a forest so silent my own thoughts seem loud. Each sound is part of the story of this journey. The higher I go, the thicker the clouds, and sounds become muffled. I strain to hear a landscape I cannot see, searching for a way to live inside every aspect of this journey.

After several miles, and so many twists and turns that I'm not sure which way is which, I climb to the top of a high ridge, and everything changes. A picture of the place is added to how it sounds. The countryside opens up. Clouds burn away. Sunshine warms the ridge. Mount McLoughlin stares huge and white, just across the valley. I look around. I know this place. It has a name: Deer Creek. I was here years before. It is one of the Takelma solstice sites: five cairns built from columnar basalt cover the knoll on the edge of the ridge. They line up with the sun rising over Mount McLoughlin on the morning of the winter solstice. Tomorrow. I wait for this place to tell me more about where I am. If I am still enough, perhaps a story will settle into my dreams. I kindle a small fire and wrap a blanket around me. I watch the sun shatter into sunset. I watch sparks spiral into a sky that slowly fills with stars.



December 21. Sunrise. Day and Night.

It is freezing. The morning chills me just enough to make sure I am awake and my thinking keen. I look around. My eyes focus on the first glimmer of morning sunlight behind the steep slope of Mount McLoughlin. The winter solstice ceremony is brief and silent. Almost predictable. The sun-glow grows behind the mountain. A shaft of sunlight streaks across the sky. The eye of the sun fully opens, peers around the mountain and stares straight across the lineup of cairns to where I sit and watch, just as it's done for others for a few thousand years. Impressive. But is this it? There must be more. I close my eyes and concentrate.

I recall visiting rock paintings in a cave not far from here. I was invited by an elder. I asked him how old the paintings were, and he said that it was hard to tell. "You see, they weren't done by just one person. People added their own stories to the picture and over many years, more symbols were painted on the rock. And then there's the spiritual sense of this place. You and I just being inside this cave adds more to the story. The longer we stay, the bigger the picture gets and the more the story becomes our own."

I open my eyes and stare at the eye of the sun, and he stares back. I am not alone. The day goes by, and another cold night. The sun shatters himself into sparks of light that appear as stars. I sleep. I dream. I wake up. The sun wakes up. We both open our eyes. We focus. We piece together the fragments of the night. Each day passes as slowly as a century, and each long night is a reach of time undefined by the passing of time ... Mythtime, Dreamtime, the time when all beings speak the same language.... I sit quietly and more scraps of the story come to mind. I look

around and begin to see symbols, motifs, constellations of memories and experiences. Some of these patterns are as familiar as my own childhood. Others emerge from the choir of storytellers who evoke the wonder of each story with these words: “In the Beginning, In the Old Time, Once Upon a Time....” Other patterns appear to live among the cairns, to sleep, to dream, to wake each morning as I wake. The longer I sit on this ridge, the more I am certain that I am not alone. Here is a mystery that yearns to be discovered.

December 22. Memories.

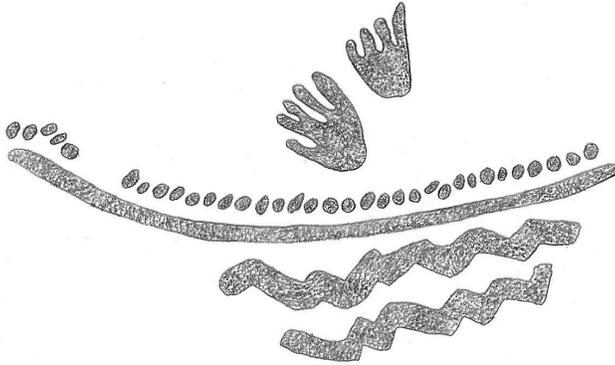
In their creative attempts to remind us how precious our lives are and how beautifully fragile our home is, folks world-over have come up with stories with universal themes. They make the stories local with settings in their homeland and people them with familiar characters. Many of these stories end tragically with the destruction of the world, or at least in all that we hold dear. Local native mythologies swell with these stories. And it’s no mystery that the tricky dog called Coyote — with more humanness than we are often comfortable admitting — is often the cause. On a few occasions he is also the salvation of his own mess.

There’s the story of the great flood that destroys the world. And the story of fire being brought to the people, with its mixed blessing of warmth for the hearth and the terror of firestorms that rip through these woods. Sometimes the people themselves — with overly eager assistance from Coyote — wage their own war on the environment, and ultimately on themselves.

I sit and look across the valley. I search my memory for the words of Old Time stories. I watch an ocean of fog and clouds climb the slopes of this ridge and fill the valley until waves ebb and flow against the mountain slopes like rolling waves and tides of a great inland sea. I meditate on one of several flood stories....

Now Coyote gets killed a lot but he never really dies. After he gets dumped by some flashy star, he falls out of the sky, goes splat and makes Crater Lake. He gets up again, puts himself back together and goes walking around the rim of the lake.

Coyote’s noisy presence is enough to irritate some folks, and the big-eared spirit that lives in the deep-blue depths of Crater Lake is no different. He can’t stand the clatter Coyote makes as he stumbles along.



“No one’s got any right to go walking around my lake, especially that nosey, noisy dog of a dog!”

The spirit flaps his big ears and swims up to the surface of the lake. There is a wild exchange of taunts and insults between Coyote and the spirit, and Mister Big Ears gets angry and sends the lake water after Coyote. That water chases Coyote all over the countryside, down the mountains, across the valleys, all along the ridges, and finally, panting and with his tongue dragging the ground, Coyote struggles to the top of Mount Shasta, the only dry land left for as far as Coyote can see. His entire world is flooded.

Coyote builds a fire. Other critters see that fire and swim over to the mountain peak that has become an island in an endless sea. It is a refuge for Deer and Black Bear, an ark for Gray Squirrel, Elk and Badger, a safe place for Jackrabbit and Ground Squirrel and Panther, and all the others. They huddle around Coyote’s fire until the great flood goes away.

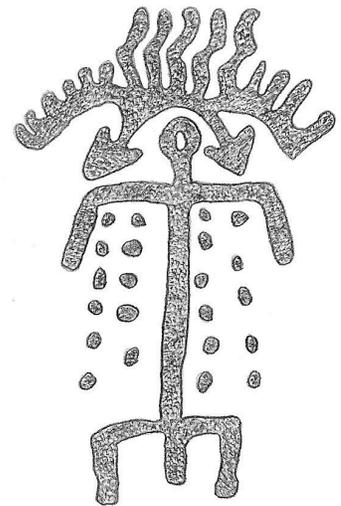
Water drains down, swelling rivers, spreading into lakes, leaving dry land and marshes and all kinds of different country. The Animal People climb down the mountain and scatter all over the world, making new homes for themselves. They become the ancestors of all the animals who live here today. And Coyote — not one to think too much about anything important or he gets bored — goes walking up and down the rivers, looking for more things to do in the world.

I sit close to my small fire and look up the slope behind me. I notice charred trees from last summer’s forest fire. It burned to within a hundred yards of these cairns. Smoke filled the valleys

for weeks. I imagine I was here and watched the flames leap from tree to tree. Remembering the fury of that wildfire gets me to thinking about the time when people had no fire at all....

Fire Keeper keeps the fire in his house far to the east and he isn't about to let anyone get hold of it. But Coyote has a different view. He wants that fire. Without it, he's had to put up with raw gophers and rabbits, and raw mussels and clams — an insult to his delicate palette — and the cold nights are more than he can stand. Coyote is a dog made for comfort, and no one knows that better than himself.

So Coyote rouses his friends Beaver and Fire Tong and they travel east to Fire Keeper's house. After some sneaky maneuvers by Coyote, Fire Keeper agrees to play a gambling game. Coyote concocts a series of distractions and with swift sneakiness that only Coyote might bring to a story, he and his friends swipe the fire from under Fire Keeper's nose, and relay it home to the people. They hide it in a cedar tree out of Fire Keeper's sight. Coyote tells the people, "Keep fire hidden in this tree until this fellow cools down a bit. Then when you need some, take a cedar drill and make just what you need. Just be careful which way that Fire Keeper might be looking."



I suspect that not long after that, Coyote ignores his own advice and lets loose more fire than anyone ever imagined. The fury of that first wildfire returns to this mountain every few years and we are reminded of the awesome power of too much of a good thing.

I sit and gaze across the valley. I see a clear-cut mountain slope that once was a forest. It looks like a battlefield. I remember another Old Time story....

Coyote is out walking around and spots Jackrabbit. That wild-eyed bunny has gone crazy and is hacking down all the trees. He cuts pine trees which give the people planks and beams for their houses. He cuts oak trees, the sons and daughters of Acorn Woman who provides food. He even cuts the medicine trees whose bark and sap and leaves keep the people healthy. He cuts every tree in sight. He works in a frenzy, cutting trees brilliant in their fall colors.

Coyote is amazed, and he turns his tail and takes his version of the news to the people. He tells them that Jackrabbit is killing their relations. This is a half-truth. The trees are our

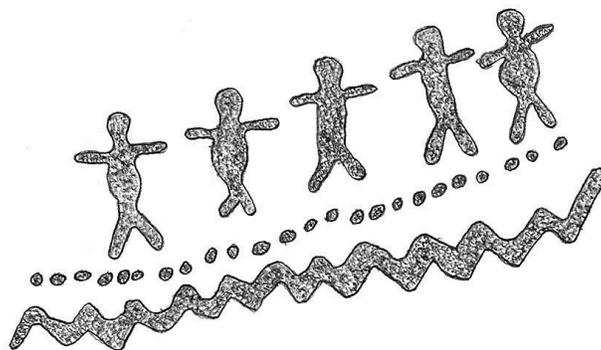
relations, of course, but the people believe Coyote is telling them that Jackrabbit is killing their human relations.

The people prepare for the first war there ever was. Led by Coyote, they follow the path of Jackrabbit's destruction. There is a bloody battle at the place called "Knife in Belly" and most everyone dies. It takes years to mourn the dead, and many more years for new trees to smooth the scars of Jackrabbit's work. Each winter this story is told to remind us what can happen when misinformation and an abuse of the environment guide our actions. "As long as the story lives the trees will live," says the storyteller. "If the story dies, that will be the end of us and the end of our relations, the trees."

Each story of worldly destruction is followed by a season of renewal, a purification of spirit, and a return of the people to their beloved homeland. We grow wiser with each life drama, and the stories remind us how it was then, how it is now, and how it might be if we forget the wisdoms of our stories. Coyote, however, grows wiser only by his own definition, and he's a slow learner at best. His concept of self-help is to eagerly help himself to whatever satisfies his appetite. Only rarely he raises his long nose to sniff out possible consequences.

At twilight, clouds swirl across the ridge. They join the darkness and hide the valley, the mountain peaks, the stars. I toss a log on my fire and flames leap. There is a circle of light, and my memory brings to my eyes a picture from last summer at Camp Latgawa.

I sense echoes from old stories ... smoke in the trees from forest fires in the mountains, and the clink and clatter of machines as workers build a new bridge across the creek. Over it all, the air vibrates with the hot talk of terrorism at home and war in the middle east.



I listen more carefully and hear sounds of something older. A few teenagers sit in the lodge and make music, singing, strumming guitars. Younger children play tag in the woods. Others toss

a ball. They laugh and tease in a friendly spirit that found a voice before there was language to express it. Nearby, an old man walks among the trees, praying for peace. Down by the creek, a man and a woman light a fire and heat stones for a sweat lodge they have built. Soon others arrive, and with a sense of community and spirit, they crawl into the sweat lodge and sit in the heat. They sprinkle water on hot rocks and steam fills the lodge. Bit by bit, they feel the sweaty weight of the world ooze out of their pores. As they step back into the cool night air, they feel pure, refreshed, able to walk into the world and do what needs to be done. In this moment of wellness, no one feels alone.

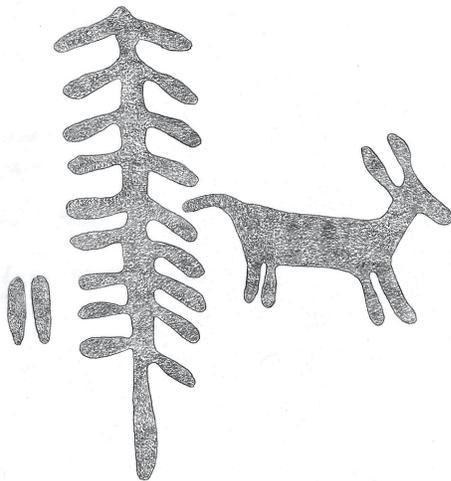
December 23. Conversation.

On this cloudless morning, I doze off into a daydream, and Mister Coyote shows up out of the blue. I have a conversation with Mister Dog.

Coyote: It's not always my fault, you know.

Me: What do you mean?

Coyote: All these floods and fires and wars need a bit of help from two-legged folks.



Me: Hmm... I suppose so.

Coyote: Besides, you only know me as I exist in the stories. There's more to me than that!

Me: How so?

Coyote: Inside the words of storytellers, I walk on two legs. Out in the wild, where the world makes sense, I use all four.

Me: You're telling me that when you're the creation of people you have fewer feet on the ground?

Coyote: You've got it. I'm just like you. Rather uncomfortable, isn't it?

Me: So even the famous Mister Coyote walks between worlds?

Coyote: That's right. Maybe I'll see you in the next world when you've got more than just two legs to stand on.

Me: Very funny.

Coyote: Maybe. Maybe not.

With a blast of cold air, I wake up and feel refreshed. Coyote is nowhere to be seen. I watch clouds roll in. Another night saunters by, as slowly as a century.

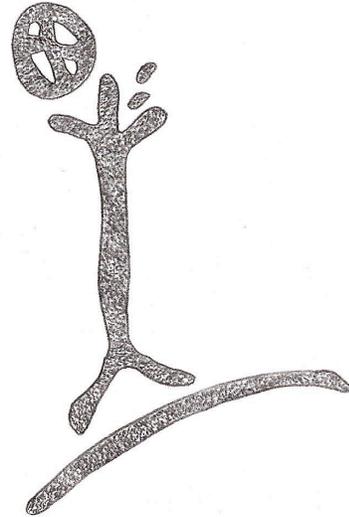
December 24. Snow.

As I start down toward the creek, snow clouds cover the ridge, and the first snow begins to fall. I walk through the afternoon, into the twilight and back into camp. Everything looks different. The snow is ankle deep. Folks have returned from town and they sit inside the lodge, near a blazing fire. I hear them talking and laughing and telling stories. Lights from the Christmas tree shine through the window and glitter like colored stars upon the snow. I open the door, walk inside, and someone says, "Hey, it's the storyteller! Give us a story."

I nod as I sit on the hearth in front of the fire. I start to open my journal but have second thoughts and put it aside. I begin to share the words of my journey from memory: "Latgawa. In the Beginning, In the Old Time, Once Upon a Time...." As I move through my story, disquieting images rush my mind. My ancient conflict emerges and picks at me. Latgawa. Here is a gateway that opens both directions. In my heart I feel the calm clarity of my gaze into the eye of the rising sun, and the revelation that I am not alone. But I also struggle with the pain of a jagged knife

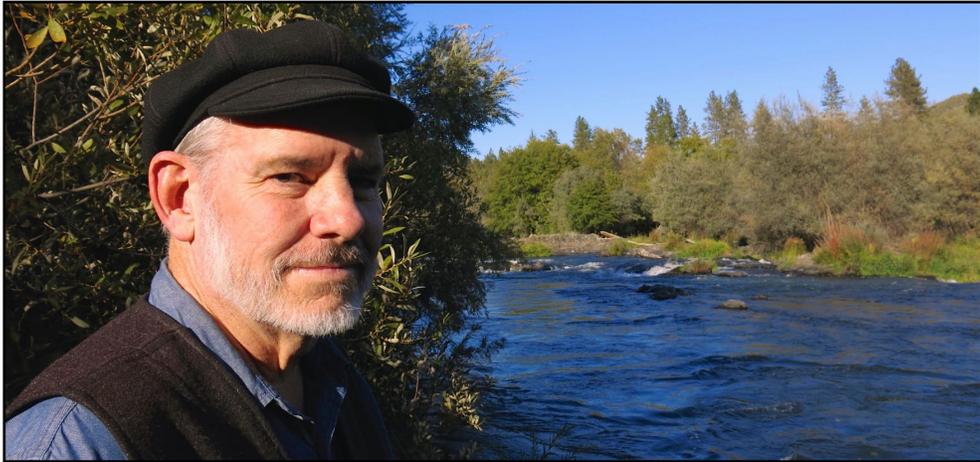
thrust into my belly. Latgawa. As always, the desire to journey into the interior of the spirit collides with the destructive violence of the world.

I stare at the fire. I watch sparks fly up the chimney and out into the night. I continue my story. In the sharing of each word, my struggle finds a place to calm itself. The mystery opens and is revealed. I speak one word after another ... my story ... my history ... my myth.... Outside, on this Christmas eve, snow falls heavily. If only for a moment, it remakes the world, smoothing the rough edges, layer upon layer, one flake at a time.



“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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