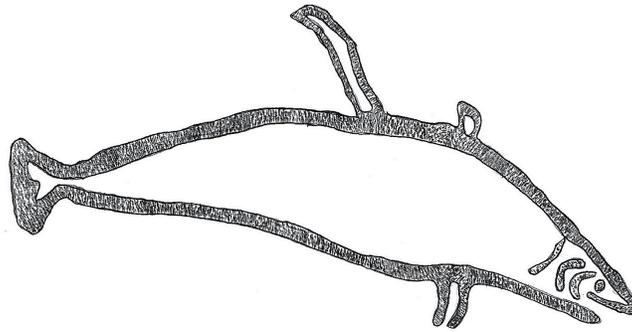
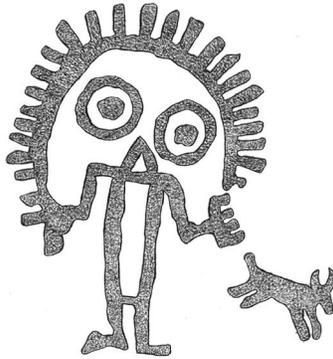


# All Night Salmon Leap the Falls

Thomas Doty



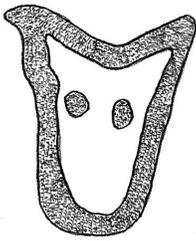
# All Night Salmon Leap the Falls



**A Doty & Coyote Story**

Thomas Doty

**Ashland, Oregon • 2020**



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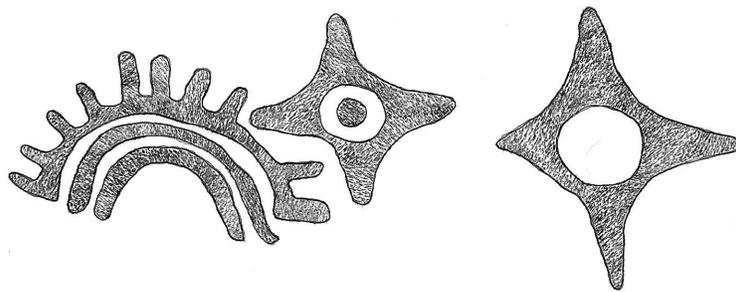
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Evening Star kindles himself in the sky and sends his reflection to the surface of the river. On the eve of the spring salmon run, he flares in the purple twilight. He glances toward the growing light on the eastern horizon, anticipating the rising of the full moon. For centuries beyond remembering, native Takelmas have called this moon, When the Salmon Have Sore Backs. Evening Star listens to the drumming of the falls swelled with snowmelt and the barking of geese as they glide in and settle for the night. The moon clears the ridge and sends light flooding up and down the river, calling the sore-backed salmon home.



Evening Star gazes onto that place near the falls where the ancient village of Ti'lomikh once thrived. He sees thousand-year-old shadows of native people walking from plank house to house, preparing for the Sacred Salmon Ceremony — a net tossed in the rapids, the glint of a spear, the drying racks laid out — and around the glimmer of many fires, the sharing of stories and songs that celebrate the arrival of the Salmon People.

The moon travels the sky. The first salmon of the run strains his battered sides against the force of the falls. In sheltered nooks and crannies, the geese drift toward dreams.

Evening Star blazes in the sky and on the water. He listens to age-old whispers that linger in the shadows and to the unceasing pounding of the falls. Under his watchful eye, nighttime floats downriver as salmon strain against the current.

Someone once told me that in an old house in the woods, a half mile from the Rogue River, there is a box of manuscripts by a river poet called Lampman. On a night in mid-June, Coyote and I go have a look.

The old wood-and-brick house looks abandoned, bathed in what bit of moonlight finds its path through overlapping branches of oaks and madrones. At the suggestion of Coyote, the place

looks haunted. As Coyote and I approach the house, we see the yellow light of an oil lamp burning in the attic window.

Coyote glowers at the light and says, “This place starts all my dogs barking.”

“It’s about time,” I say. “Not all of them have been awake at once for quite a spell.”

“Just the same, this place wakes up my fleas and makes my fur crawl.”

“Easy, boy, nothing here to fear.”

“Are you crazy? We are going into an abandoned house on a full-moon night in search of some poet’s old scribbling, and already there’s a light in the attic as if we are expected. I’ll take an old graveyard over this spooky house in these dark woods any night. At least we’d be in the open.”

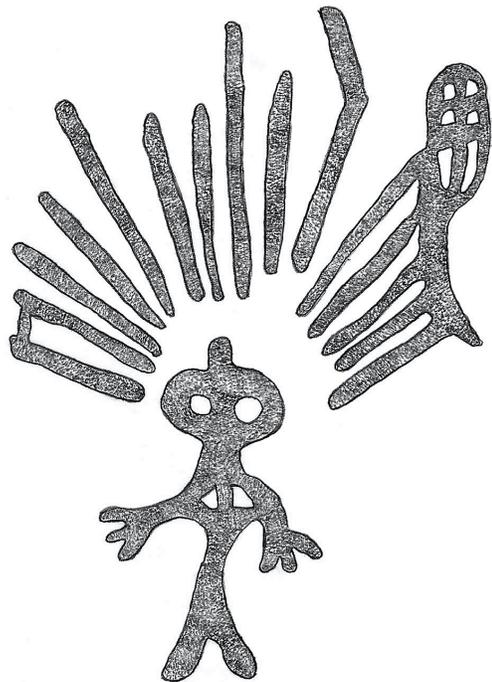
“Ah, yes, the power of a century of stories about this place. You think you see everything, don’t you? Well, don’t let those doggy eyes of yours see more than is there. Perk up your ears. Sniff the air. See for yourself. The light looks friendly. And aren’t you curious, you of all dogs?”

I push on the front door and it creaks open.

“Classic. We might as well be in some horror film. Been nice knowing you, Mister Storyteller.”

Once inside, Coyote expects to see dust and cobwebs, peeling wallpaper, rotting floorboards, a scuttling of critters from spiders to snooty mice to who-knows-what disgusting, coyote-gnawing, bloated bugs, and eyes — huge eyes — glowing out of the shadows ... any scrap of haunted-house lore Coyote’s uneasy imagination might conjure up. But what he sees inside fails to match the spirit of what he saw outside. The rooms are clean and tidy. No cobwebs. No dust anywhere, not even on the furniture. And it appears that Coyote is the only critter in the house.

We draw deep breaths as we make our way up the stairs toward the attic. We pass an open window, and night sounds drift in: the dry-leaf crackle of deer walking through the woods, the



hoot of a barn owl from out back, the distant whoosh of the falls.

We walk into a flood of light in the attic. The roof is low, and there are boxes stacked along the walls. Near the window is a wood table with two chairs. An oil lamp burns in the center of the table, and near the lamp is a small box without a top. Inside is a stack of handwritten manuscripts.

“Whoa,” says Coyote, glancing through the room with a worried look. “This is too weird. What a set-up!”

“Perfect,” I say. “An attic that lives up to its best reputation.”

“Which is?”

“A model of the world. Just listen and look around. Everything is here. There are sounds from outside ... the river, animals in the woods. And here’s this room that looks like any cozy shelter from any corner of the world in any century, with moonlight coming through the window. In the shadows are boxes packed with the debris of humanity. Might as well be a trash midden at the edge of some ancient village site. And look here, a hearth in the form of a lamp — warmth and light to keep at bay what looms beyond what we can see and understand. And here’s a poet’s table, a place to create stories of who we are and what we’ve done and seen, and a stack of manuscripts to give us a glimpse into a time we have almost forgotten. Pay attention, Pooch. This is not some spook playing a trick. This room might be a cave with a fire blazing and ancient writings painted on the walls. It’s an invitation. Let’s have a look at these papers, eh?”

Coyote and I sit in the chairs. I pick up a page yellowed at the edges and read out loud.

“A river at night whispers her secrets, and her words sound like dreams. Riverbank and meadow listen in silence. The half-moon comes closer.”

Coyote and I gaze at each other. We nod without a word as if we had discovered a voice as familiar as our own and friendly words about a place we know well. I continue.

“Upriver are the faint voices of waterfowl and the mournful cry of some bird no one knows the name of. Then there is silence, and the river flows on.”

I pause and look at Coyote. We are both aware that there is a second voice in the room, speaking softly, matching word for word what I am reading. A bit hesitantly, I read a few more words, and the second voice grows louder.



“Nothing is so good as listening to the river at night. Not anything.”

Coyote and I turn in our chairs and look toward the sound of the voice. Beside a stack of boxes, barely visible in the interplay of shadows and moonlight and flickering lamplight, an old man stands with his hands in his pockets, smiling. He wears a white shirt with suspenders, dark wool trousers with cuffs, and a long, black overcoat. His eyes are friendly and shine in the faint light.

We watch the man, amazed, unable to speak. The man smiles and says, “You read well. You seem to know the words as though they were your own.” He stops and looks toward the window. Everyone listens. The sound of drumming drifts into the attic.

“The salmon are coming,” says the man. “Let’s go have a look.” He glances at Coyote. “You do like salmon, don’t you?”

Coyote nods. Not knowing what else to do and sensing no danger, we follow the man toward the attic door.

As we leave the room, Coyote asks, “Who are you? What’s your name?”

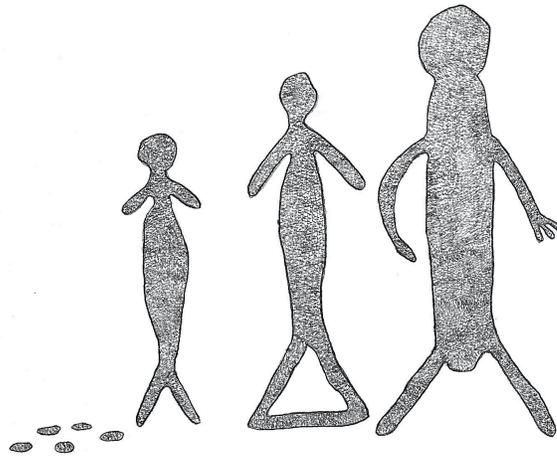
The man looks back toward the lamp as we start down the stairs. “Lampman,” he says. “Just Lampman.”

As we step out the back door and into the woods, Lampman says to Coyote, “I once had a dog, and he was as fine as any man I ever knew.”

Lampman leads the way into the shadows of the woods, toward the river, Coyote trotting at his heels. I bring up the rear.

No light comes through these woods. Utter darkness brings a timelessness of all nights made into one, and this night might be any night in the history of forests. Not even the light of the full

moon finds its way past the canopy of trees. I am thinking that were Lampman not with us, I would never find even a trace of this woodland path. I follow Lampman and Coyote not by sight, but by sound, and our walking is not the only sound. Despite the darkness, the forest breathes life. The overhead maze of twisted branches is a sanctuary for birds. As the three of us walk through the woods, the songs and calls and stirrings of night birds float out of the trees. They mix with the cool air and swirl around them like a gentle breeze, or air moved by the soft-feathered wings of birds, or the breathing of ancient trees. Each step is a step out of time and into the depths of nighttime as it has always been.



As we approach the edge of the woods we see a glimmer of moonlight, and an orange glow from the fires at the village of Ti'lomikh. We walk out of the trees and into a meadow. The sounds of the village are distinct. We hear the singing of each word of each song, each drumbeat, the foot-stamping of dancing, choruses of conversation. The night pounds with the electric pulse of a village celebrating the arrival of the salmon.

Lampman breaks the silence of their voices. He turns and asks me, “Have you heard stories of the Salmon Ceremony?”

“Sure,” I say.

“And being a storyteller, you are aware of the power of stories to take us beyond what we might imagine?”

“And more,” I say.

“Good,” says Lampman. “Then let’s walk into this story. If we pay attention, we’ll be different people by the time this story ends.”

“Talk, talk, talk,” says Coyote. “Are we there yet? When do we get to the salmon?”

“Patience, my hungry friend,” I say. “We’ve got all night, and more.”

Coyote bounds toward the river and I follow. Lampman pauses at the edge of the meadow, looks back to the trees, and speaks softly to himself....

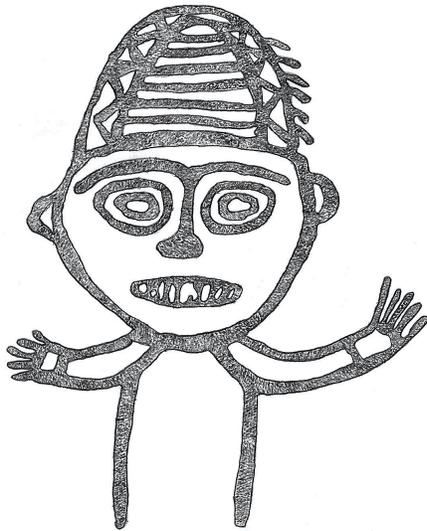
“Do you remember hearing the grouse? In the dark forest she sounds like the beating of a great heart, or, in the desert, an old man sitting in the moonlight beating an ancient drum. Do you remember?”

Lampman crosses the meadow and joins us. We climb down the steep bank to the river and enter the Old Time village of Ti’lomikh.

The village is swelled with people, those who live here as well as visitors from other villages: Daldani, Gwenpunk, Didalam, Hagwal, Gelyalk.

At one of many fires, an old woman of the village speaks to a gathering of travelers who have just arrived. She wears a traditional basket cap and buckskin dress decorated with beads and dentalium shells. A shawl covered with drawings of dragonflies is draped over her shoulders. She leans on a carved wooden cane. Her speech is a mixture of formal Takelma, Chinook Jargon, and native sign language flowing together in a way that makes clear the meaning and poetry of her message. Her speech is ancient and stylized. Only elders know how to do this well.

Coyote and Lampman and I join the others and listen.



“This river is Gelam, and we are Takelma, the people of the river. The salmon are our relations. Each year the Salmon People come to our village during this moon when their backs are strained. Like you, they have traveled along rivers and creeks. And like people everywhere, they have suffered. By the time the salmon reach this middle stretch of the river, they look battered. Their fins are torn and their sides bruised. They’ve struggled against miles of strong rapids and leaped many a waterfall on their journeys upriver. By the time the salmon reach our village of Ti’lomikh, their backs are sore, at the very least. This is a triumph and a time of celebration.

“As they pass our home, we pray and we sing for the salmon, we dance for the salmon, and we tell stories of the Salmon People. We also fish for the salmon. But in taking, we give back. The first salmon who offers himself to the net is caught and gutted and put on a drying rack. For as long as it takes for that salmon to dry, no more salmon are taken from the river. Thousands leap the falls and continue their journey to the beginning of their world. Like us and all our relations, they want to live a long time. To the sounds of flutes, divers return the bones of that first salmon to the bottom of the river. As soon as he has dried, the fishing starts again. And that night, we feast.”

Coyote and Lampman and I walk into the heart of the village. All night the drums beat, feet stamp, voices sing the old songs in honor of the Salmon People. Evening Star blazes bright in the sky. The moon travels overhead. The drumming of the falls fills the air. And all night salmon leap the falls, dancing their dance of survival.

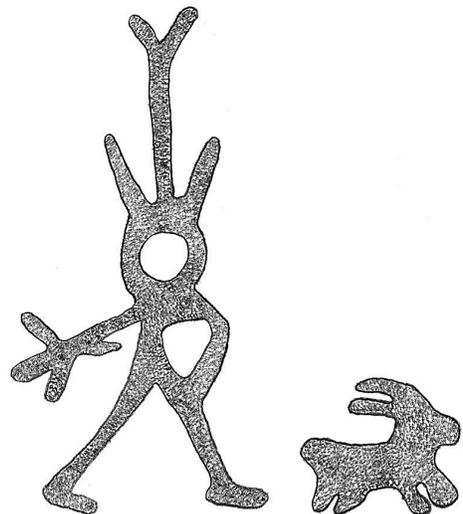
We walk past several plank houses. Singing and firelight spill out and flood the night. We walk past outdoor fires where more people gather. Some play guessing games, tossing gambling bones and singing. Some spin stories. Others gossip and talk with folks they haven’t seen for a spell. Coyote and Lampman and I make our way to the edge of the river and sit on the sand.

An old man sits on a stone chair. He fasted for five days to be the salmon myth teller, and now a crowd gathers to listen to his stories. The old man glances across the river to the rocks below the falls. As he watches an elderly fisherman toss a net into the river, the old man tells, with fluid gestures and a voice as full as the falls, the myth of the salmon.

“Evening Star and Morning Star were the first owners of this place. They wrestled everyone who came here and killed them. They allowed no one to fish.”

The old man describes how Elder Dragonfly, one of the culture-bringing brothers, pinned the two stars to their present places in the sky and made the salmon free to all the people.

“Later on, the Dragonfly Brothers came across Coyote here at the falls. Coyote had snatched up a fishing net and was trying to catch salmon. But all he caught were mice and rabbits and gophers.



“Elder Daldal sent him on his way. Then he carved a chair into the rock near the falls and a groove next to it to hold the handle of a dip net. He said to the river, ‘People will feed each other here. They shall not kill one another. It will be this way as long as the world goes on.’”

The old man points to the falls and says, “Look, the first visitor has arrived!”

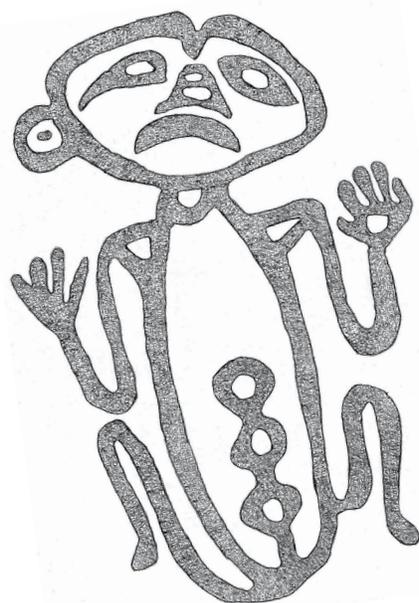
In the spray of the falls, the elderly fisherman pulls the first salmon from the net. He carries him to a drying rack on the rocks. Others gather around and help prepare the fish.

As the old storyteller stands up and starts to walk away from the story chair, he turns and says, “Does anyone else want to share a story?”

Coyote starts to stand up, but a glance and a gesture and a whispered “wait” from me holds him back. Several people aim encouraging nudges at their friends, but it is Lampman who finally stands up. He looks at the people, nods and smiles, and then gazes at the river. He walks to the chair, sits down, and with incredible skill, he weaves his story of the salmon.

A long time ago, an old woman told me this story.

We are all related, she said, the people of the sea, of the air, of the land. And the people who move between worlds: the Rock People, the Fire People, all our relations. There was a time when we spoke the same language. Perhaps that time is coming again. Meanwhile, our myths are as vivid as our memories of those times, and the stories — even the tragic ones — teach us to remember all of our relations and to care for them ... and what can happen if we forget.



In a village along the river, near the ocean, there was a boy who was always hungry. His parents fed him little, and what he did get was the meager leftovers of everyone else's meals. His mother gave him what was left of his father's catch after others had eaten their fill: the head of Dog Salmon, the tail of Water Snake, the guts of Seal. It was never enough. He left home hungry and journeyed to the mouth of the river and fell down on the sand. His belly roared with hunger. He struggled on the beach, writhing, the roar of the sea and the roar of hunger bursting his head, salt tears streaming down his face. He turned over like sea waves roared and turned over on the sand. He turned into someone new!

He swam deep in the water, downriver toward the sea. He opened his eyes wide and saw far and deep. His mouth opened as he swam through the river's mouth. He breathed water as he once breathed air. He tasted the thickening salt of the sea. His eyes widened until he couldn't close them. They felt no sting of salt as he swam into the vastness of the ocean. He clearly saw the smallest stones at the bottom of the sea. They shimmered and shone like stars.

He had moved from one world to another. He had become one of the Salmon People. He was called Salmon Boy.

Ahead, in the dim depths of the sea, he saw his new relations. Their watery voices surrounded him, whispering of food.

"The flow of the river is strong and we are tired. We have come here to rest in the rocking of the sea. We are as hungry as you are. We must eat and grow strong for our final upriver journey. Help us find the Herring People. This is our feast day!"

With a swish of their green tails they turned and swam toward the home of the Herring People. Salmon Boy swam behind them, following close, swept along in the current of their desire for food.

He saw shapes of sea-myth characters grow out of the shimmering stones: She Who Walks Backwards Going Home, the woman who was half turned to stone by the lonely howls of Wolf Whale, Seal Mother who laughs at the antics of her children, the high whistle of Giant Sea Snake who haunts the depths, Loon Woman rising out of seaweed and flying through water as if it were air. And somewhere deep down below the shimmering star-stones, He Who Changes the World began to stir from his long sleep.

Salmon Boy followed his people to that place on the horizon where the sun and moon dipped into the sea, where day forever closed into night, and they arrived at the village of the Herring

People. It was a feast day indeed! The water was thick with eggs from the bottom to the surface of the sea. Salmon Boy swished through the eggs as he ate them, leaping out of the water and crying, “We are Hungry! Hungry! Hungry!”

But He Who Changes the World woke up and rattled his underwater realm. The great house posts that connected the sea to the sky shook and shifted. The moon shattered into pieces, and rain fell in a flood.

The salmon fled the village of the Herring People, swimming toward the mouth of the river, their mouths tasting the first swell of fresh water as they swam through the river’s mouth and started their upriver journey toward the end for which they were born.

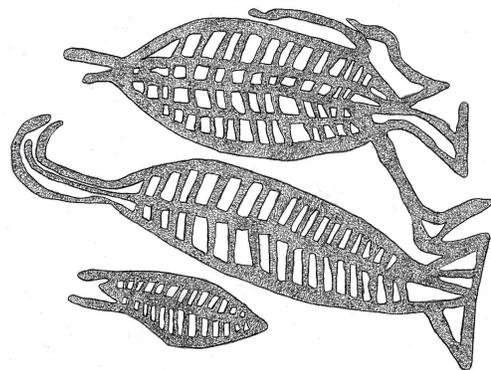
Salmon Boy was no longer hungry. His belly roared with fullness. He jumped as he swam, smacking his tail on the surface, screaming, “Heyo! I eat and I leap! I breathe! I am Salmon Boy!!”

He was fully himself. He breathed water. He tasted water. He felt joy in the water.

Then water turned to darkness.

As they passed the shores of his old village, he felt a spear–thrust move through him, felt it lift him out of the river, felt the shock of wind in his mouth. His wide eyes caught a glance of his own father the fisherman, spearing one more salmon for dinner.

He writhed on the riverbank, his eyes still and open. No voice of the sea came from his mouth as his father split him open and emptied his belly. No voice of the river came as his mother stretched him across the drying rack. All day he shriveled in the sun, his wide eyes staring upriver toward the beginning of the river, upriver toward the end of the salmon, upriver....



There is a long silence as the words settle into the hearts of the listeners. Then people start to whisper, and slowly, conversation grows back to normal. Lampman gets up and walks back along the river.

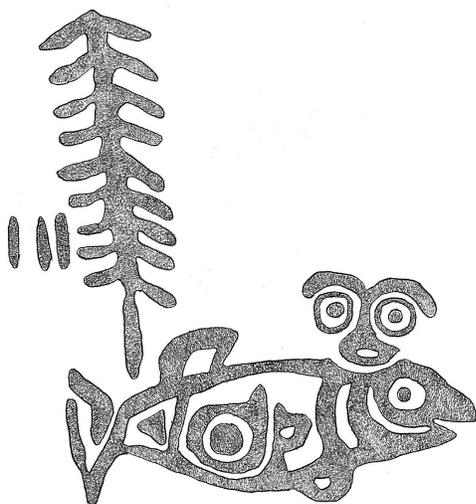
Coyote says to me, “Now that’s a pretty good story. But I want to hear all about Lampman’s dog. There are worse critters than poets who like dogs.”

Before Lampman can launch into his favorite dog story, the drumming around the fires suddenly stops. Singing stops. Talking stops. Except for the rush of the river, the village is quiet. People listen. Faint at first and then growing to fill the silence, the sound of flute music drifts across the river and into the village. The people at Ti'lomikh look to the slow-flowing water above the falls. They watch in silence as five young men leap into the icy water. Each one dives deep and places the bones of the first salmon in the gravel of the riverbed, back to the source. This sacred gesture is as ancient as the river itself, and all people born at Ti'lomikh are born with paintings of that moment already vivid in their memories.

Coyote and Lampman and I spend the night walking from fire to fire, listening to stories, dancing Old Time dances, singing songs that praise the salmon. As night grows old, each person in the village casts an inward eye to the night when the salmon feast begins, especially Coyote. He figures that he'll blend in just fine with the rest of the people and stuff himself with salmon until his doggy sides bulge.

At the edge of the village, in a quiet moment by himself, Lampman stands on the sand and speaks to the river.

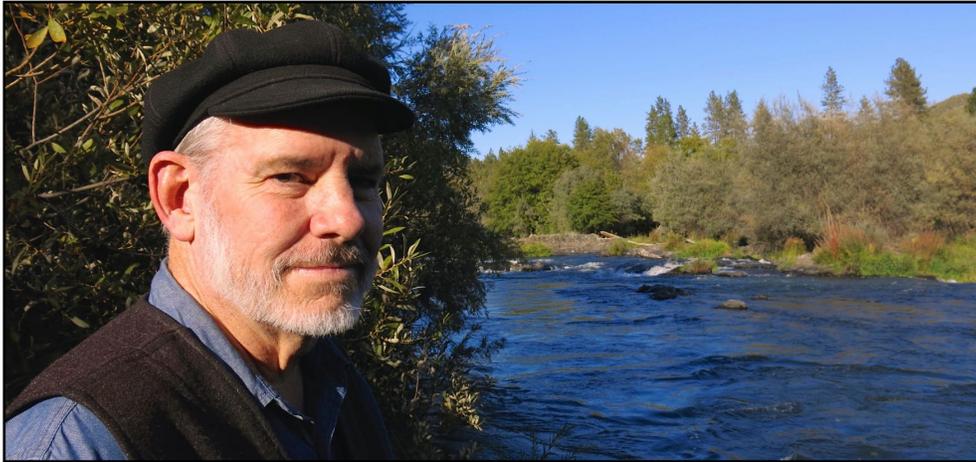
“Do you remember listening to the birds just before the sun rises up? They're still a little sleepy, and they sing of the world waking up, just like creation is happening all over again. Then light comes out of nighttime, like a mystery revealed, and the world wakes up and sings praise to the creator. Do you remember?”



In the dim moments before dawn, the fires burn low. The people at Ti'lomikh gather in close circles and speak prayers to the coming sun. Morning Star kindles himself in the sky. The moon disappears over the ridge, and the purple light of sunrise grows in the east. Geese wake up and take flight in a clamor of splashing and barking and flapping of wings. Under Morning Star's watchful eye, morning floats downriver as salmon continue their struggle against the strength of the falls.

**“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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