

The Thing in the Wall

Joseph E. Thomas

A summer ago, before we had the gathering at Leshay, I was on one of my walks along the shoreline. I decided to walk in places I was unfamiliar with, which took me to a small river outlet near Hidden-Waters, where I came upon a peculiar rock wall with runes carved into it. I like to make note of landmarks in between my battles, particularly those which bear the marks of colonists. Whether I have been fighting in a canoe over the waters of the Sound, on a longship across the sea where the colonists come from, or on horseback over the mountains, wandering about afterwards helps bring me peace, finding painted stones depicting stories from across the sea or old carvings by explorers makes for good conversation. My father instilled into me the importance of history when I was a boy and told me all he knew about the arrival of the colonists and our conflicts with them on long walks through mountain trails.

The rock jutted out from the hillside; the bottom half caked in reddish orange clay smoothed by rain while the top contained some form of runic declaration. The clay reminded me of a sunset in the summer as smoke from wildfires blanketed the sky. When I approached the rock to examine it, sounds of the world around me dimmed. The waters of the stream faded away, alongside the calls of gulls, eagles, and insects. It was not particularly unusual to me at the time, drowning out distractions is common. I wanted to ensure that I memorized what was on the rock without having to make another trip back to such a remote spot on the shoreline. All I had on my person were my hat, the clothes on my back, a bag of jerky, a knife, and a modest stone hammer.

Deeply etched at the top, the runes said “Army-Wolf Thunder-Wolf’s son carved these runes during the fourth year of Glory-Protector’s reign”. Colonists and their funny names: This-That, That-This, “I am Raven-Pot, Leader-Spear’s son”. Though,

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I cannot deny the appeal of names like “Thunder-Bear”, “Glory-Wolf”, and “Victory-Helmet”. This must have been carved over a century ago in the early colonial period as their edges are worn from decades of rain. My father once told me about the runes he encountered at other sites along the shoreline, sometimes further away from the colonists than one would have expected.

Below the announcement by Army-Wolf, the tips of runes peaked out from the thick layer of clay. I thought that if there is something worth recording, then I should see the rest of the inscription and report it to tribal council. Wiping away the reddish orange mass caking the rock, the message beneath transitioned from a proud declaration by explorers to gibberish uttered by a madman. Nonsensical ramblings that ranged from semi-coherent yet vaguely threatening (“Thine legs are removed from mother and heart”), to deranged (“Call and answer and rejoice with bones”). The more I scraped away, the more incomprehensible the runes became. They themselves began to transition from professionally chiseled to childishly scratched into the rock, scrawling about as though the carver had forgotten what language was.

Under the ravings, a hole had been bored into the wall. I assumed it was the den of some creature, but it was unlike any muskrat hole I had ever seen. Squatting down, I could see small white and yellowed rocks spattered across from the mouth of the hole to under my feet. For a moment, I thought they resembled human teeth, but there are always rocks like that near certain streams. Further inside, thin roots lined the ceiling of the hole, hanging down like knotted hair. The clay under it was a dark red, reminding me of blood that had dried over. Further in the hole, just beyond what I could see from the light that seeped through, the clay appeared to shift to a reddish pink. I felt that something was looking back at me from the darkness and stepped away, not wanting to be scratched at by some rodent defending its nest.

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Above the hole lied a protrusion of stone that I felt I must have overlooked, cleared from the clay by my hand though I did not recall touching it. The stone had a blackish blue center surrounded by a reddish pink that gave way to the reddish orange stain of clay. To those used to violence, it bore a resemblance to the early stages of a black eye, swelling out from the stone. I tried wiping my hands off, but I found they they were beginning to tremble. I fumbled for my belt to grab a piece of jerky to gnaw on when I felt the smoothness of my stone hammer, providing me a moment to focus. It was then that a curious revelation struck me; my mother likes to collect neat rocks. From that, my thoughts single-mindedly turned to chipping it away from the wall and bringing it home to her as the hammer felt perfect for the job. After all, even though it is plain, I found it in a special place.

A few years ago, while hiking the trail of Tolma peak with my colonist friend, I came across a simple stone hammer by the lakeside. When I saw it, I was reminded of a narrative told at the Storytelling-House, one of the Changer and several Man-Eating Ogresses across the Sound. It goes that he was given reports of them preying upon early humans after luring them from their canoes. He went around and beat them to death with a stone hammer after pretending to be tricked by them. My friend thought the tale was hilarious and suggested that I take it with me and test it out on any foes who were not quite dead. I agreed, assuming that it had power and perhaps it was something I was gifted by the spirits at the lake.

Thinking of that experience, and the wonderful sight of the mountain one can see at Tolma peak brought me a sense of peace compared to this bizarre trepidation that being in front of this awful wall has inspired. I had almost forgotten that feeling until it began to creep back while my eyes were closed, more intensely than before. It reminded me of the feeling I get just before the outset of a terrible headache, the kind that almost blind me. Placing my hand over the

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smooth surface of the hammer helped me shake it off again as I pulled it out to prepare collecting this peculiar rock for my mother.

With that humble hammer and a light smack, I managed to crack off the “black eye” as though it were held on by a thread. There must have been an air pocket alongside it because reddish pink dust dispersed into the air with great force. I found myself nearly caked in the residue as though I had been playing in the mud earlier. As I brushed off the dust from my person, I noticed the cries of gulls and eagles returning as though they came from across the Sound. The stream burbled back into existence, and crickets resumed their chirping. It dawned on me that sweat dripped from my brow, I was breathing like I had just come up for air, and my heart was pounding like a drum. I decided to conclude my walk as the charm of the discovery wore off, returning to my home by the creek where good roots grow.

A month later, at the Story-Telling house, I spoke with a shaman friend of mine about the site, describing the experience to him. I recounted the babbling runes, the strangeness of the rockwall, and the remarkable stone that I collected for my mother. I knew he was more well-travelled than I was, so I brought the stone with me to see if he could tell me anything about what it could be. When I unveiled my memento from the wall; his eyes widened, revolting at the sight of the piece as though I presented him with the head of my latest kill during lunch. I understood that whatever it takes to shock a shaman is nothing but trouble, he confirmed my intuition by what he could croak out: “Throw it into the salt-water! Throw it so deep that it will never see sunlight again!”

I left the Story-Telling house and paddled my way out into the middle of the bay on my canoe, far from any other vessels. On the way, I prayed, sang my power songs, and put out of my mind the question of just what my shaman friend saw. I knew it would be better left unsaid, for while I have come across many strange and troubling sights, my experiences are no comparison to what shamans have encountered. They see ghosts,

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especially those who have come to bring the souls of their living loved ones to the Other Side, they can go to the Other Side to retrieve said souls and even bring extra back for families hoping for more children. I know of an account where one who was paid to use his power and target a man's wife, the man tied up the shaman and tried to force him to heal her, even hacking at him with a hatchet. Not only did the shaman resist the blows of the ax, he mocked the man through his own wife as she spoke and laughed with the shaman's voice.

When someone who can do that is taken aback by what appears to be just a colorful rock, it provides perspective of how dire the situation is. It is a hunter shuddering at the sound a child says they heard in the forest, a whaler staying put on solid ground when something terrible washes ashore, a warrior going wide-eyed as they find a battlefield too gruesome for them. Whatever it was, the thing in the wall that the proud colonists chiseled into that looks like a boulder, is something I refuse to treat lightly as if I were invincible, something the scars from my exploits would dispute.

As I reached the center of the bay, I hurled the rock into the cleansing salt-water, where it sank to such depths that sunlight was just a concept.