"S

Nativ
explo
how
peopl
exper
injust
tempo
Native

With
events
Califo
Native
discus
Indiar
Indiar
reason
simply

That
Ameri
Native
Marm
and o
tives o
past, c
King
Native,
and m
years t
life di
story.

Indigenous Americas

Robert Warrior and Jace Weaver, Series Editors

THE TRUTH ABOUT STORIES

A Native Narrative

THOMAS KING

2005

Indigenous Americas

MINNESOTA

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis

"S t
a
Native
explore
how w
people
experi
injusti
tempo
Native

With w
events
Califo
Native
discus
Indian
Indian
reason
simply

That
Ameri
Native
Marm
and o
tives o
past, c
King
Native
and m
years t
life d
story.

I

"YOU'LL NEVER BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENED" IS ALWAYS A GREAT WAY TO START

THERE IS A STORY I KNOW. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away.

One time, it was in Prince Rupert I think, a young girl in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.

The girl began to laugh, enjoying the game, I imagine. So how many turtles are there? she wanted to know. The

storyteller shrugged. No one knows for sure, he told her, but it's turtles all the way down.

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. The Okanagan storyteller Jeannette Armstrong tells us that "Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns."[1]

When I was a kid, I was partial to stories about other worlds and interplanetary travel. I used to imagine that I could just gaze off into space and be whisked to another planet, much like John Carter in Edgar Rice Burroughs's Mars series. I'd like to tell you that I was interested in outer space or that the stars fascinated me or that I was curious about the shape and nature of the universe. Fact of the matter was I just wanted to get out of town. Wanted to get as far away from where I was as I could. At fifteen, Pluto looked good. Tiny, cold, lonely. As far from the sun as you could get.

I'm sure part of it was teenage angst, and part of it was being poor in a rich country, and part of it was knowing that white was more than just a colour. And part of it was seeing the world through my mother's eyes.

My mother raised my brother and me by herself, in an era when women were not welcome in the workforce, when their proper place was out of sight in the home. It was supposed to be a luxury granted women by men. But

having misplaced her man, or more properly having had him misplace himself, she had no such luxury and was caught between what she was supposed to be — invisible and female — and what circumstances dictated she become — visible and, well, not male. Self-supporting perhaps. That was it. Visible and self-supporting.

As a child and as a young man, I watched her make her way from doing hair in a converted garage to designing tools for the aerospace industry. It was a long, slow journey. At Aerojet in California, she began as a filing clerk. By the end of the first year, she was doing drafting work, though she was still classified and paid as a filing clerk. By the end of the second year, with night school stuffed into the cracks, she was doing numerical-control engineering and was still classified and paid as a filing clerk.

It was, after all, a man's world, and each step she took had to be made as quietly as possible, each movement camouflaged against complaint. For over thirty years, she held to the shadows, stayed in the shade.

I knew the men she worked with. They were our neighbours and our friends. I listened to their stories about work and play, about their dreams and their disappointments. Your mother, they liked to tell me, is just one of the boys. But she wasn't. I knew it. She knew it better.

In 1963, my mother and five of her colleagues were recruited by the Boeing Company to come to Seattle, Washington, as part of a numerical-control team. Everyone was promised equal status, which, for my mother, meant being brought into Boeing as a fully fledged, salaried engineer.

So she went. It was more money, more prestige. And when she got there, she was told that, while everyone else would be salaried and would have engineer status, she would be an hourly employee and would have the same status as the other two women in the department, who were production assistants. So after selling everything in order to make the move, she found herself in a job where she made considerably less than the other members of the team, where she had to punch a time clock, and where she wasn't even eligible for benefits or a pension.

She objected. That wasn't the promise, she told her supervisor. You brought everyone else in as equals, why not me?

She didn't really have to ask that question. She knew the answer. You probably know it, too. The other five members of the team were men. She was the only woman. Don't worry, she was told, if your work is good, you'll get promoted at the end of the first year.

So she waited. There wasn't much she could do about it. And at the end of the first year, when the review of her work came back satisfactory, she was told she would have to wait another year. And when that year was up . . .

I told her she was crazy to allow people to treat her like that. But she knew the nature of the world in which she lived, and I did not. And yet she has lived her life with an optimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will. She understands the world as a good place where good deeds should beget good rewards. At eighty-one, she still believes that that world is possible, even though

she will now admit she never found it, never even caught a glimpse of it.

My father is a different story. I didn't know him. He left when I was three or four. I have one memory of a man who took me to a small café that had wooden booths with high backs and a green parrot that pulled at my hair. I don't think this was my father. But it might have been.

For a long time I told my friends that my father had died, which was easier than explaining that he had left us. Then when I was nine, I think, my mother got a call from him asking if he could come home and start over. My mother said okay. I'll be home in three days, he told her.

And that was the last we ever heard from him.

My mother was sure that something had happened to him. Somewhere between Chicago and California. No one would call to say they were coming home and then not show up, unless they had been injured or killed. So she waited for him. So did I.

And then when I was fifty-six or fifty-seven, my brother called me. Sit down, Christopher said, I've got some news. I was living in Ontario, and I figured that if my brother was calling me all the way from California, telling me to sit down, it had to be bad news, something to do with my mother.

But it wasn't.

You'll never believe what happened, my brother said.

That's always a good way to start a story, you know: you'll never believe what happened.

And he was right.

We found our father. That's exactly what he said. We found our father.

I had dreamed about such an occurrence. Finding my father. Not as a child, but as a grown man. One of my more persistent fictions was to catch up with him in a bar, sitting on a stool, having a beer. A dark, dank bar, stinking of sorrow, a bar where men who had deserted their families went to drink and die.

He wouldn't recognize me. I'd sit next to him, and after a while the two of us would strike up a conversation.

What do you do for a living? How do you like the new Ford? You believe those Blue Jays?

Guy talk. Short sentences. Lots of nodding.

You married? Any kids?

And then I'd give him a good look at me. A good, long look. And just as he began to remember, just as he began to realize who I might be, I'd leave. *Hasta la vista.* Toodle-oo. See you around. I wouldn't tell him about my life or what I had been able to accomplish, or how many grandchildren he had or how much I had missed not having a father in my life.

Screw him. I had better things to do than sit around with some old bastard and talk about life and responsibility.

So when my brother called to tell me that we had found our father, I ran through the bar scene one more time. So I'd be ready.

Here's what had happened. My father had two sisters. We didn't know them very well, and, when my father disappeared, we lost track of that side of the family. So we

had no way of knowing that when my father left us, he vanished from his sisters' lives as well. I suppose they thought he was dead, too. But evidently his oldest sister wasn't sure, and, after she had retired and was getting on in years, she decided to make one last attempt to find out what had happened to him.

She was not a rich woman, but she spotted an advertisement in a local newspaper that offered the services of a detective who would find lost or missing relatives for $75. Flat rate. Satisfaction guaranteed.

My brother took a long time in telling this story, drawing out the details, repeating the good parts, making me wait.

The detective, it turned out, was a retired railroad employee who knew how to use a computer and a phone book. If Robert King was alive and if he hadn't changed his name, he'd have a phone and an address. If he was dead, there should be a death certificate floating around somewhere. The detective's name was Fred or George, I don't remember, and he was a bulldog.

It took him two days. Robert King was alive and well, in Illinois.

Christopher stopped at this point in the story to let me catch my breath. I was already making reservations to fly to Chicago, to rent a car, to find that bar.

That's the good news, my brother told me.

One of the tricks to storytelling is, never to tell everything at once, to make your audience wait, to keep everyone in suspense.

My father had married two more times. Christopher

had all the details. Seven other children. Seven brothers and sisters we had never known about. Barbara, Robert, Kelly.

What's the bad news? I wanted to know.

Oh, that, said my brother. The bad news is he's dead.

Evidently, just after the railroad detective found him, my father slipped in a river, hit his head on a rock, and died in a hospital. My aunt, the one who had hired the detective, went to Illinois for the funeral and to meet her brother's other families for the first time.

You're going to like the next part, my brother told me.

I should warn you that my brother has a particular fondness for irony.

When my aunt got to the funeral, the oldest boy, Robert King Jr., evidently began a sentence with "I guess as the oldest boy . . ." Whereupon my aunt told the family about Christopher and me.

They knew about each other. The two families. Were actually close, but they had never heard about us. My father had never mentioned us. It was as though he had disposed of us somewhere along the way, dropped us in a trash can by the side of the road.

That's my family. These are their stories.

So what? I've heard worse stories. So have you. Open today's paper and you'll find two or three that make mine sound like a Disney trailer. Starvation. Land mines. Suicide bombings. Sectarian violence. Sexual abuse. Children stacked up like cordwood in refugee camps around the globe. So what makes my mother's sacrifice special? What makes my father's desertion unusual?

Absolutely nothing.

Matter of fact, the only people who have any interest in either of these stories are my brother and me. I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live.

Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous. The Native novelist Leslie Silko, in her book *Ceremony*, tells how evil came into the world. It was witch people. Not Whites or Indians or Blacks or Asians or Hispanics. Witch people. Witch people from all over the world, way back when, and they all came together for a witches' conference. In a cave. Having a good time. A contest, actually. To see who could come up with the scariest thing. Some of them brewed up potions in pots. Some of them jumped in and out of animal skins. Some of them thought up charms and spells.

It must have been fun to watch.

Until finally there was only one witch left who hadn't done anything. No one knew where this witch came from or if the witch was male or female. And all this witch had was a story.

Unfortunately the story this witch told was an awful thing full of fear and slaughter, disease and blood. A story of murderous mischief. And when the telling was done, the other witches quickly agreed that this witch had won the prize.

"Okay you win," they said. "[B]ut what you said just now — it isn't so funny. It doesn't sound so good. We are doing okay without it. We can get along without that kind of thing. Take it back. Call that story back."[2]

But, of course, it was too late. For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world.

So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told. But if I ever get to Pluto, that's how I would like to begin. With a story. Maybe I'd tell the inhabitants of Pluto one of the stories I know. Maybe they'd tell me one of theirs. It wouldn't matter who went first. But which story? That's the real question. Personally, I'd want to hear a creation story, a story that recounts how the world was formed, how things came to be, for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist.

And, as luck would have it, I happen to know a few. But I have a favourite. It's about a woman who fell from the sky. And it goes like this.

Back at the beginning of imagination, the world we know as earth was nothing but water, while above the earth, somewhere in space, was a larger, more ancient world. And on that world was a woman.

A crazy woman.

Well, she wasn't exactly crazy. She was more nosy. Curious. The kind of curious that doesn't give up. The

kind that follows you around. Now, we all know that being curious is healthy, but being *curious* can get you into trouble.

Don't be too curious, the Birds told her.

Okay, she said, I won't.

But you know what? That's right. She kept on being curious.

One day while she was bathing in the river, she happened to look at her feet and discovered that she had five toes on each foot. One big one and four smaller ones. They had been there all along, of course, but now that the woman noticed them for the first time, she wondered why she had five toes instead of three. Or eight. And she wondered if more toes were better than fewer toes.

So she asked her Toes. Hey, she said, how come there are only five of you?

You're being curious again, said her Toes.

Another day, the woman was walking through the forest and found a moose relaxing in the shade by a lake.

Hello, said the Moose. Aren't you that nosy woman?

Yes, I am, said the woman, and what I want to know is why you are so much larger than me.

That's easy, said the Moose, and he walked into the lake and disappeared.

Don't you love cryptic stories? I certainly do.

Now before we go any further, we should give this woman a name so we don't have to keep calling her "the woman." How about Blanche? Catherine? Thelma? Okay, I know expressing an opinion can be embarrassing. So let's do it the way we always do it and let someone else

make the decision for us. Someone we trust. Someone who will promise to lower taxes. Someone like me.

I say we call her Charm. Don't worry. We can change it later on if we want to.

So one day the woman we've decided to call Charm went looking for something good to eat. She looked at the fish, but she was not in the mood for fish. She looked at the rabbit, but she didn't feel like eating rabbit either.

I've got this craving, said Charm.

What kind of craving? said Fish.

I want to eat something, but I don't know what it is.

Maybe you're pregnant, said Rabbit. Whenever I get pregnant, I get cravings.

Hmmmm, said Charm, maybe I am.

And you know what? She was.

What you need, Fish and Rabbit told Charm, is some Red Fern Foot.

Yes, said Charm, that sounds delicious. What is it?

It's a root, said Fish, and it only grows under the oldest trees. And it's the perfect thing for pregnant humans.

Now, you're probably thinking that this is getting pretty silly, what with chatty fish and friendly rabbits, with moose disappearing into lakes and talking toes. And you're probably wondering how in the world I expect you to believe any of this, given the fact that we live in a predominantly scientific, capitalistic, Judeo-Christian world governed by physical laws, economic imperatives, and spiritual precepts.

Is that what you're thinking?

It's okay. You won't hurt my feelings.

So Charm went looking for some Red Fern Foot. She dug around this tree and she dug around that tree, but she couldn't find any. Finally she came to the oldest tree in the forest and she began digging around its base. By now she was very hungry, and she was very keen on some Red Fern Foot, so she really got into the digging. And before long she had dug a rather deep hole.

Don't dig too deep, Badger told her.

Mind your own business, Charm told him.

Okay, said Badger, but don't blame me if you make a mistake.

You can probably guess what happened. That's right, Charm dug right through to the other side of the world.

That's curious, said Charm, and she stuck her head into that hole so she could get a better view.

That's very curious, she said again, and she stuck her head even farther into the hole.

Sometimes when I tell this story to children, I slow it down and have Charm stick her head into that hole by degrees. But most of you are adults and have already figured out that Charm is going to stick her head into that hole so far that she's either going to get stuck or she's going to fall through.

And sure enough, she fell through. Right through that hole and into the sky.

Uh-oh, Charm thought to herself. That wasn't too smart.

But she couldn't do much about it now. And she began to tumble through the sky, began to fall and fall and fall and fall. Spinning and turning, floating through the vast expanse of space.

And off in the distance, just on the edge of sight, was a small blue dot floating in the heavens. And as Charm tumbled down through the black sky, the dot got bigger and bigger.

You've probably figured this part out, too, but just so there's no question, this blue dot is the earth. Well, sort of. It's the earth when it was young. When there was nothing but water. When it was simply a water world.

And Charm was heading right for it.

In the meantime, on this water world, on earth, a bunch of water animals were swimming and floating around and diving and talking about how much fun water is.

Water, water, water, said the Ducks. There's nothing like water.

Yes, said the Muskrats, we certainly like being wet.

It's even better when you're under water, said the Sunfish.

Try jumping into it, said the Dolphins. And just as the Dolphins said this, they looked up into the sky.

Uh-oh, said the Dolphins, and everyone looked up in time to see Charm falling toward them. And as she came around the moon, the water animals were suddenly faced with four variables — mass, velocity, compression, and displacement — and with two problems.

The Ducks, who have great eyesight, could see that Charm weighed in at about 150 pounds. And the Beavers, who have a head for physics and math, knew that she was coming in fast. Accelerating at thirty-two feet per second per second to be precise (give or take a little for drag

and atmospheric friction). And the Whales knew from many years of study that water does not compress, while the Dolphins could tell anyone who asked that while it won't compress, water will displace.

Which brought the animals to the first of the two problems. If Charm hit the water at full speed, it was going to create one very large tidal wave and ruin everyone's day.

So quick as they could, all the water birds flew up and formed a net with their bodies, and, as Charm came streaking down, the birds caught her, broke her fall, and brought her gently to the surface of the water.

Just in time.

To deal with the second of the two problems. Where to put her.

They could just dump her in the water, but it didn't take a pelican to see that Charm was not a water creature.

Can you swim? asked the Sharks.

Not very well, said Charm.

How about holding your breath for a long time? asked the Sea Horses.

Maybe for a minute or two, said Charm.

Floating? said the Seals. Can you float?

I don't know, said Charm. I never really tried floating.

So what are we going to do with you? said the Lobsters.

Hurry up, said the Birds, flapping their wings as hard as they could.

Perhaps you could put me on something large and flat, Charm told the water animals.

Well, as it turns out, the only place in this water world that was large and flat was the back of the Turtle.

Oh, okay, said Turtle. But if anyone else falls out of the sky, she's on her own.

So the water animals put Charm on the back of the Turtle, and everyone was happy. Well, at least for the next month or so. Until the animals noticed that Charm was going to have a baby.

It's going to get a little crowded, said the Muskrats.

What are we going to do? said the Geese.

It wouldn't be so crowded, Charm told the water animals, if we had some dry land.

Sure, agreed the water animals, even though they had no idea what dry land was.

Charm looked over the side of the Turtle, down into the water, and then she turned to the water animals.

Who's the best diver? she asked.

A contest! screamed the Ducks.

All right! shouted the Muskrats.

What do we have to do? asked the Eels.

It's easy, said Charm. One of you has to dive down to the bottom of the water and bring up some mud.

Sure, said all the water animals, even though they had no idea what mud was.

So, said Charm, who wants to try first?

Me! said Pelican, and he flew into the sky as high as he could and then dropped like a knife into the water. And he was gone for a long time. But when he floated to the surface, out of breath, he didn't have any mud.

It was real dark down there, said Pelican, and cold.

The next animal to try was Walrus.

I don't mind the dark, said Walrus, and my blubber will keep me warm. So down she went, and she was gone for much longer than Pelican, but when she came to the surface coughing up water, she didn't have any mud, either.

I don't think the water has a bottom, said Walrus. Sorry.

I'm sure you're beginning to wonder if there's a point to this story or if I'm just going to work my way through all the water animals one by one.

So one by one all the water animals tried to find the mud at the bottom of the ocean, and all of them failed until the only animal left was Otter. Otter, however, wasn't particularly interested in finding mud.

Is it fun to play with? asked Otter.

Not really, said Charm.

Is it good to eat? asked Otter.

Not really, said Charm.

Then why do you want to find it? said Otter.

For the magic, said Charm.

Oh, said Otter. I like magic.

So Otter took a deep breath and dove into the water. And she didn't come up. Day after day, Charm and the animals waited for Otter to come to the surface. Finally, on the morning of the fourth day, just as the sun was rising, Otter's body floated up out of the depths.

Oh, no, said all the animals, Otter has drowned trying

to find the mud. And they hoisted Otter's body onto the back of the Turtle.

Now, when they hoisted Otter's body onto the back of the Turtle, they noticed that her little paws were clenched shut, and when they opened her paws, they discovered something dark and gooey that wasn't water.

Is this mud? asked the Ducks.

Yes, it is, said Charm. Otter has found the mud.

Of course I found the mud, whispered Otter, who wasn't so much dead as she was tired and out of breath. This magic better be worth it.

Charm set the lump of mud on the back of the Turtle, and she sang and she danced, and the animals sang and danced with her, and very slowly the lump of mud began to grow. It grew and grew and grew into a world, part water, part mud. That was a good trick, said the water animals. But now there's not enough room for all of us in the water. Some of us are going to have to live on land.

Not that anyone wanted to live on the land. It was nothing but mud. Mud as far as the eye could see. Great jumbled lumps of mud.

But before the animals could decide who was going to live where or what to do about the mud-lump world, Charm had her baby.

Or rather, she had her babies.

Twins.

A boy and a girl. One light, one dark. One right-handed, one left-handed.

Nice-looking babies, said the Cormorants. Hope they like mud.

And as it turned out, they did. The right-handed Twin smoothed all the mud lumps until the land was absolutely flat.

Wow! said all the animals. That was pretty clever. Now we can see in all directions.

But before the animals could get used to all the nice flat land, the left-handed Twin stomped around in the mud, piled it up, and created deep valleys and tall mountains.

Okay, said the animals, that could work.

And while the animals were admiring the new landscape, the Twins really got busy. The right-handed Twin dug nice straight trenches and filled them with water.

These are rivers, he told the animals, and I've made the water flow in both directions so that it'll be easy to come and go as you please.

That's handy, said the animals.

But as soon as her brother had finished, the left-handed Twin made the rivers crooked and put rocks in the water and made it flow in only one direction.

This is much more exciting, she told the animals.

Could you put in some waterfalls? said the animals. Everyone likes waterfalls.

Sure, said the left-handed Twin. And she did.

The right-handed Twin created forests with all the trees lined up so you could go into the woods and not get lost. The left-handed Twin came along and moved the trees around, so that some of the forest was dense and difficult, and other parts were open and easy.

How about some trees with nuts and fruit? said the animals. In case we get hungry.

That's a good idea, said the right-handed Twin. And he did.

The right-handed Twin created roses. The left-handed Twin put thorns on the stems. The right-handed Twin created summer. The left-handed Twin created winter. The right-handed Twin created sunshine. The left-handed Twin created shadows.

Have we forgotten anything? the Twins asked the animals.

What about human beings? said the animals. Do you think we need human beings?

Why not? said the Twins. And quick as they could the right-handed Twin created women, and the left-handed Twin created men.

They don't look too bright, said the animals. We hope they won't be a problem.

Don't worry, said the Twins, you guys are going to get along just fine.

The animals and the humans and the Twins and Charm looked around at the world that they had created. Boy, they said, this is as good as it gets. This is one beautiful world.

It's a neat story, isn't it? A little long, but different. Maybe even a little exotic. Sort of like the manure-fired pots or the hand-painted plates or the woven palm hats or the coconuts carved to look like monkey faces or the colourful T-shirts that we buy on vacation.

Souvenirs. Snapshots of a moment. And when the moment has passed, the hats are tossed into closets, the

T-shirts are stuffed into drawers, the pots and plates and coconuts are left to gather dust on shelves. Eventually everything is shipped off to a garage sale or slipped into the trash.

As for stories such as the Woman Who Fell from the Sky, well, we listen to them and then we forget them, for amidst the thunder of Christian monologues, they have neither purchase nor place. After all, within the North American paradigm we have a perfectly serviceable creation story.

And it goes like this.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, let there be light, and there was light.

You can't beat the King James version of the Bible for the beauty of the language. But it's the story that captures the imagination. God creates night and day, the sun and the moon, all the creatures of the world, and finally, toward the end of his labours, he creates humans. Man first and then woman. Adam and Eve. And he places everything and everyone in a garden, a perfect world. No sickness, no death, no hate, no hunger.

And there's only one rule.

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

One rule. Don't break it.

But that's exactly what happens. Adam and Eve break the rule. Doesn't matter how it happens. If you like the orthodox version, you can blame Eve. She eats the apple and brings it back to Adam. Not that Adam says no. A less misogynist reading would blame them both, would chalk up the debacle that followed as an unavoidable mistake. A wrong step. Youthful enthusiasm. A misunderstanding. Wilfulness.

But whatever you wish to call it, the rule has been broken, and that is the end of the garden. God seals it off and places an angel with a fiery sword at the entrance and tosses Adam and Eve into a howling wilderness to fend for themselves, a wilderness in which sickness and death, hate and hunger are their constant companions.

Okay. Two creation stories. One Native, one Christian. The first thing you probably noticed was that I spent more time with the Woman Who Fell from the Sky than I did with Genesis. I'm assuming that most of you have heard of Adam and Eve, but few, I imagine, have ever met Charm. I also used different strategies in the telling of these stories. In the Native story, I tried to recreate an oral storytelling voice and craft the story in terms of a performance for a general audience. In the Christian story, I tried to maintain a sense of rhetorical distance and decorum while organizing the story for a knowledgeable gathering. These strategies colour the stories and suggest values that may be neither inherent nor warranted. In the Native story, the conversational voice tends to highlight

the exuberance of the story but diminishes its authority, while the sober voice in the Christian story makes for a formal recitation but creates a sense of veracity.

Basil Johnston, the Anishinabe storyteller, in his essay "How Do We Learn Language?" describes the role of comedy and laughter in stories by reminding us that Native peoples have always loved to laugh: "It is precisely because our tribal stories are comical and evoke laughter that they have never been taken seriously outside the tribe. . . . But behind and beneath the comic characters and the comic situations exists the real meaning of the story . . . what the tribe understood about human growth and development."[3]

Of course, none of you would make the mistake of confusing storytelling strategies with the value or sophistication of a story. And we know enough about the complexities of cultures to avoid the error of imagining animism and polytheism to be no more than primitive versions of monotheism. Don't we?

Nonetheless, the talking animals are a problem.

A theologian might argue that these two creation stories are essentially the same. Each tells about the creation of the world and the appearance of human beings. But a storyteller would tell you that these two stories are quite different, for whether you read the Bible as sacred text or secular metaphor, the elements in Genesis create a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies — God, man, animals, plants — that celebrate law, order, and good government, while in our Native story, the universe is governed by a series of co-operations — Charm, the

Twins, animals, humans — that celebrate equality and balance.

In Genesis, all creative power is vested in a single deity who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The universe begins with his thought, and it is through his actions and only his actions that it comes into being. In the Earth Diver story, and in many other Native creation stories for that matter, deities are generally figures of limited power and persuasion, and the acts of creation and the decisions that affect the world are shared with other characters in the drama.

In Genesis, we begin with a perfect world, but after the Fall, while we gain knowledge, we lose the harmony and safety of the garden and are forced into a chaotic world of harsh landscapes and dangerous shadows.

In our Native story, we begin with water and mud, and, through the good offices of Charm, her twins, and the animals, move by degrees and adjustments from a formless, featureless world to a world that is rich in its diversity, a world that is complex and complete.

Finally, in Genesis, the post-garden world we inherit is decidedly martial in nature, a world at war — God vs. the Devil, humans vs. the elements. Or to put things into corporate parlance, competitive. In our Native story, the world is at peace, and the pivotal concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil but with the issue of balance.

So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and

slides toward chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves toward harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation.

And there's the problem.

If we see the world through Adam's eyes, we are necessarily blind to the world that Charm and the Twins and the animals help to create. If we believe one story to be sacred, we must see the other as secular.

You'll recognize this pairing as a dichotomy, the elemental structure of Western society. And cranky old Jacques Derrida notwithstanding, we do love our dichotomies. Rich/poor, white/black, strong/weak, right/wrong, culture/nature, male/female, written/oral, civilized/barbaric, success/failure, individual/communal. We trust easy oppositions. We are suspicious of complexities, distrustful of contradictions, fearful of enigmas.

Enigmas like my father.

I have a couple of old black-and-white pictures of him holding a baby with my mother looking on. He looks young in those photos. And happy. I'm sure he didn't leave because he hated me, just as I'm sure that my mother didn't stay because she loved me. Yet this is the story I continue to tell myself, because it's easy and contains all my anger, and because, in all the years, in all the tellings, I've honed it sharp enough to cut bone.

If we had to have a patron story for North America, we could do worse than the one about Alexander the Great, who, when faced with the puzzle of the Gordian knot, solved that problem with nothing more than a strong arm and a sharp sword.

Perhaps this is why we delight in telling stories about heroes battling the odds and the elements, rather than about the magic of seasonal change. Why we relish stories that lionize individuals who start at the bottom and fight their way to the top, rather than stories that frame these forms of competition as varying degrees of insanity. Why we tell our children that life is hard, when we could just as easily tell them that it is sweet.

Is it our nature? Do the stories we tell reflect the world as it truly is, or did we simply start off with the wrong story? Like Silko's witches in the cave, conjuring up things to impress each other.

Making magic.

Making faces.

Making mistakes.

I'm dying to remind myself that the basis of Christian doctrine is rectitude and reward, crime and punishment, even though my partner has warned me that this is probably not a good idea. Tell a story, she told me. Don't preach. Don't try to sound profound. It's unbecoming, and you do it poorly. Don't show them your mind. Show them your imagination.

So am I such an ass as to disregard this good advice and suggest that the stories contained within the matrix of Christianity and the complex of nationalism are responsible for the social, political, and economic problems we face? Am I really arguing that the martial and hierarchical nature of Western religion and Western privilege has fostered stories that encourage egotism and self-interest? Am I suggesting that, if we hope to create a

truly civil society, we must first burn all the flags and kill all the gods, because in such a world we could no longer tolerate such weapons of mass destruction?

No, I wouldn't do that.

Though certainly we understand that we clear-cut forests not to enrich the lives of animals but to make profit. We know that we dam(n) rivers not to improve water quality but to create electricity and protect private property. We make race and gender discriminatory markers for no other reason than that we can. And we maintain and tolerate poverty not because we believe adversity makes you strong, but because we're unwilling to share.

Ah. You've heard all this before, haven't you.

You may have already leaned over to a friend and whispered, Platitude. Platitude, platitude, platitude. Thomas King the duck-billed platitude.

But give this a thought. What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid? Someone who, in the process of creation, found herself lost from time to time and in need of advice, someone who was willing to accept a little help with the more difficult decisions?

What if the animals had decided on their own names? What if Adam and Eve had simply been admonished for their foolishness?

I love you, God could have said, but I'm not happy with your behaviour. Let's talk this over. Try to do better next time.

What kind of a world might we have created with that kind of story?

Unfortunately, by the time we arrived in the wilderness, broke and homeless, the story of being made in God's image, of living in paradise, of naming the animals must have gone to our heads, for while we weren't the strongest or the fastest or the fiercest creatures on the planet, we were, certainly, as it turned out, the most arrogant.

God's Chosen People. The Alpha and the Omega. Masters of the Universe.

It is this conceit we continue to elaborate as we fill up our tanks at the gas station, the myth we embrace as we bolt our doors at night, the romance we pursue as we search our guidebooks for just the right phrase. The lie we dangle in front of our appetites as we chase progress to the grave.

Or as Linda McQuaig so delightfully puts it in her book *All You Can Eat: Greed, Lust and the New Capitalism*, "The central character in economics is Homo Economicus, the human prototype, who is pretty much just a walking set of insatiable material desires. He uses his rational abilities to ensure the satisfaction of all his wants, which are the key to his motivation. And he isn't considered some weirdo; the whole point of him is that he represents traits basic to all of us — Homo Economicus 'R' Us, as it were."[4]

It was Sir Isaac Newton who said, "To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction." Had he been

a writer, he might have simply said, "To every action there is a story."

Take Charm's story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.

II

YOU'RE NOT THE INDIAN I HAD IN MIND

THERE IS A STORY I KNOW. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away.

One time, it was in Lethbridge I think, a young boy in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of the turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told him. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.

The boy began to laugh, enjoying the game, I imagine. So how many turtles are there? he wanted to know. The

storyteller shrugged. No one knows for sure, she told him, but it's turtles all the way down.

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. "You can't understand the world without telling a story," the Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor tells us. "There isn't any center to the world but a story."[1]

In 1994, I came up with the bright idea of travelling around North America and taking black-and-white portraits of Native artists. For a book. A millennium project. I figured I'd spend a couple of months each year on the road travelling to cities and towns and reserves in Canada and the United States, and when 2000 rolled around, there I'd be with a terrific coffee-table book to welcome the next thousand years.

I should tell you that I had not come up with this idea on my own. As a matter of fact, Edward Sheriff Curtis had already done it. Photographed Indians, that is. Indeed, Curtis is probably the most famous of the Indian photographers. He started his project of photographing the Indians of North America around 1900, and for the next thirty years he roamed the continent, producing some forty thousand negatives, of which more than twenty-two hundred were published.

Curtis was fascinated by the idea of the North American Indian, obsessed with it. And he was determined to capture that idea, that image, before it vanished. This was a common concern among many intellectuals and artists and social scientists at the turn of the nineteenth century, who believed that, while Europeans in the New World

were poised on the brink of a new adventure, the Indian was poised on the brink of extinction.

In literature in the United States, this particular span of time is known as the American Romantic Period, and the Indian was tailor-made for it. With its emphasis on feeling, its interest in nature, its fascination with exoticism, mysticism, and eroticism, and its preoccupation with the glorification of the past, American Romanticism found in the Indian a symbol in which all these concerns could be united. Prior to the nineteenth century, the prevalent image of the Indian had been that of an inferior being. The Romantics imagined their Indian as dying. But in that dying, in that passing away, in that disappearing from the stage of human progress, there was also a sense of nobility.

One of the favourite narrative strategies was to create a single, heroic Indian (male, of course) — James Fenimore Cooper's Chingachgook, John Augustus Stone's Metamora, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Hiawatha — who was the last of his race. Indeed, during this period, death and nobility were sympathetic ideas that complemented one another, and writers during the first half of the nineteenth century used them in close association, creating a literary shroud in which to wrap the Indian. And bury him.

Edgar Allan Poe believed that the most poetic topic in the world was the death of a beautiful woman. From the literature produced during the nineteenth century, second place would have to go to the death of the Indian.

Not that Indians were dying. To be sure, while many

of the tribes who lived along the east coast of North America, in the interior of Lower Canada, and in the Connecticut, Ohio, and St. Lawrence river valleys had been injured and disoriented by the years of almost continuous warfare, by European diseases, and by the destructive push of settlers for cheap land, the vast majority of the tribes were a comfortable distance away from the grave.

This was the Indian of fact.

In 1830, when the American president, Andrew Jackson, fulfilling an election promise to his western and southern supporters, pushed the Removal Act through Congress, he did so in order to get rid of thousands of Indians — particularly the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles — who were not dying and not particularly interested in going anywhere.

These were not the Indians Curtis went west to find.

Curtis was looking for the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct. And to make sure that he would find what he wanted to find, he took along boxes of "Indian" paraphernalia — wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing — in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look.

I collect postcards. Old ones, new ones. Postcards that depict Indians or Indian subjects. I have one from the 1920s that shows an Indian lacrosse team in Oklahoma. Another is a hand-coloured rendering of the Sherman Indian School in California. A third is a cartoon of an Indian man fishing in the background while, in the

foreground, a tourist takes a picture of the man's wife and their seven kids with the rather puerile caption "And what does the chief do when he's not fishing?"

One of my favourites is a photograph of a group of Indians, in full headdresses, golfing at the Banff Springs Hotel golf course in 1903. The photograph was taken by Byron Harmon and shows Jim Brewster and Norman Luxton, two Banff locals, caddying for what looks to be five Indians who are identified only as "two Stoney Indian Chiefs." I like this particular postcard because there is an element of play in the image of Indians in beaded outfits and full headdresses leaning on their golf clubs while their horses graze in the background, and because I can't tell if the person on the tee with bobbed hair, wearing what looks to be a dress and swinging the club, is an Indian or a White, a man or a woman.

But the vast majority of my postcards offer no such mysteries. They are simply pictures and paintings of Indians in feathers and leathers, sitting in or around tipis or chasing buffalo on pinto ponies.

Some of these postcards are old, but many of them are brand new, right off the rack. Two are contemporary pieces from the Postcard Factory in Markham, Ontario. The first shows an older Indian man in a full beaded and fringed leather outfit with an eagle feather war bonnet and a lance, sitting on a horse, set against a backdrop of trees and mountains. The second is a group of five Indians, one older man in a full headdress sitting on a horse and four younger men on foot: two with bone breastplates, one with a leather vest, and one bare chested.

The interesting thing about these two postcards is that the solitary man on his horse is identified only as a "Cree Indian," while the group of five is designated as "Native Indians," much like the golfers, as if none of them had names or identities other than the cliché. Though to give them identities, to reveal them to be actual people, would be, I suppose, a violation of the physical laws governing matter and antimatter, that the Indian and Indians cannot exist in the same imagination.

Which must be why the White caddies on the Banff postcard have names.

And the Indians do not.

It is my postcard Indian that Curtis was after. And in spite of the fact that Curtis met a great variety of Native people who would have given the lie to the construction, in spite of the fact that he fought vigorously for Native rights and published articles and books that railed against the government's treatment of Indians, this was the Indian that Curtis believed in.

I probably sound a little cranky. I don't mean to. I know Curtis paid Indians to shave away any facial hair. I know he talked them into wearing wigs. I know that he would provide one tribe of Indians with clothing from another tribe because the clothing looked more "Indian."

So his photographs would look authentic.

And while there is a part of me that would have preferred that Curtis had photographed his Indians as he found them, the men with crewcuts and moustaches, the women in cotton print dresses, I am grateful that we have his images at all, for the faces of the mothers and fathers,

aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers who look at you from the depths of these photographs are not romantic illusions, they are real people.

Native culture, as with any culture, is a vibrant, changing thing, and when Curtis happened upon it, it was changing from what it had been to what it would become next. But the idea of "the Indian" was already fixed in time and space. Even before Curtis built his first camera, that image had been set. His task as he visited tribe after tribe was to sort through what he saw in order to find what he needed.

But to accuse Curtis of romantic myopia is to be petty and to ignore the immensity of the project and the personal and economic ordeal that he undertook. He spent his life photographing and writing about Indians. He died harnessed to that endeavour, and, when I look at his photographs, I can imagine this solitary man moving across the prairies, through the forests, along the coast, dragging behind him an enormous camera and tripod and the cultural expectations of an emerging nation, and I am humbled.

So when I set out in the fall of 1995 on what I had pompously decided to call the Medicine River Photographic Expedition, I was stuffed full of high expectations. My brother Christopher, who is a fine woodworker and three years younger than I, wanted to come along. He told me that the expedition sounded like fun and the prospect of meeting other Native artists was appealing.

My mother, fearful that her only children might get lost in the heart of the heart of the country, cooked and packed us six roast chickens, twenty dozen chocolate chip cookies, an entire tree of bananas, a vineyard of grapes, an orchard of apples and oranges, four loaves of bread, a case of drinking water, candy (in case we ran out of cookies, I guess), and four pounds of butter. Along with a complete set of maps of the provinces and states, three flashlights of varying sizes, a highway hazard warning light, a car-battery charging system with an electrical tire inflater, several pamphlets on how to survive in the wilderness, and a compass.

After we had packed and said our goodbyes, she walked alongside the car all the way to the street and had us roll down the window so she could tell us to drive carefully.

As we slipped onto the interstate, the Volvo stuffed with camera gear and the better part of a grocery store, and began following my bright idea down to the American Southwest, I can remember thinking that Curtis couldn't have been any better outfitted.

In Roseville, California, where I grew up, race was little more than a series of cultural tributaries that flowed through the town, coming together in confluences, swinging away into eddies. There were at least three main streams, Mexicans, the Mediterranean folk — Italians and Greeks — and the general mix of Anglo-Saxons that a Japanese friend of mine, years later, would refer to as the Crazy Caucasoids. But in Roseville in the late 1950s and

early 1960s, there were no Asian families that I can remember, and the picture I have of my 1961 graduating class does not contain a single black face.

If there was a racial divide in the town, it was the line between the Mexicans and everyone else. Some of the Mexican families had been in the area long before California fell to the Americans in 1848 as a spoil of war. The rest had come north later to work the fields and had settled in Roseville and the other small towns — Elk Grove, Lodi, Stockton, Turlock, Merced, Fresno — that ran through the heart of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys.

I went to school with Hernandezes and Gomezes. But I didn't socialize with them, didn't even know where they lived. My brother and I kept pretty much to our own neighbourhood, a five- or six-block area on the northwestern edge of town bounded by auction yards and an ocean of open fields.

Racism is a funny thing, you know. Dead quiet on occasion. Often dangerous. But sometimes it has a peculiar sense of humour. The guys I ran with looked at Mexicans with a certain disdain. I'd like to say that I didn't, but that wasn't true. No humour here. Except that while I was looking at Mexicans, other people, as it turned out, were looking at me.

In my last year of high school, I mustered enough courage to ask Karen Butler to go to the prom with me. That's not her real name, of course. I've changed it so I don't run the risk of embarrassing her for something that wasn't her fault.

I should probably begin by saying that at eighteen, I was not the prettiest of creatures. Tall and skinny, with no more co-ordination than a three-legged stepladder, I also had drawn the pimple card to brighten my adolescence.

Pimples. The word has an almost dainty sound to it. Like "dimples." But my pimples were not annoying little flares that appeared here and there but rather large, erupting pustules that hurled magma and spewed lava. They crowded against the sides of my nose, burrowed around my lips, and spread out across my chin and forehead like a cluster of volcanic islands.

Roseville was a railroad town. Until the hospital and the shopping centre were built on the southeast side, most everyone lived north of the tracks. Karen was from the south side, one of the new subdivisions, what cultural theorists in the late twentieth century would call "havens of homogeneity."

Karen's mother was a schoolteacher. Her father was a doctor. My mother ran a small beauty shop out of a converted garage. Karen's family was upper middle class. We weren't. Still, there was a levelling of sorts, for Karen had a heart defect. It didn't affect her so far as I could tell, but I figured that being well off with a heart defect was pretty much the same as being poor with pimples. So I asked her if she wanted to go to the prom with me, and she said yes.

Then about a week before the big evening, Karen called me to say that she couldn't go to the dance after all. I'm sorry, she told me. It's my father. He doesn't want me dating Mexicans.

It took my brother and me four days to drive to New Mexico. We could have made the trip in three days, but we kept getting sidetracked by interesting stops. My favourite was a McDonald's on the Will Rogers Turnpike near Claremore, Oklahoma. I generally avoid places like McDonald's but this one had a tiny Will Rogers museum on the first floor of the restaurant, as well a statue of Rogers himself in the parking lot standing next to a flagpole, twirling a rope.

Tourists pulling off the turnpike and seeing the statue for the first time would probably think Rogers was some kind of famous cowboy. In fact, he was a famous Indian, a sort of Indian/cowboy, a Cherokee to be exact.

But most importantly, he was what the political and literary theorist Antonio Gramsci called an "organic" intellectual, an individual who articulates the understandings of a community or a nation. During the 1930s Rogers was probably the most famous man in North America. He performed in circuses and Wild West shows. He starred in the Ziegfeld Follies, and from 1933 to 1935 he was the top male motion-picture box-office attraction. Over forty million people read his newspaper columns on everything from gun control to Congress, and even more listened to his weekly radio show. He did just about everything with the exception of running for office. "I ain't going to try that," he said. "I've got some pride left."

Rogers was born near Claremore, Oklahoma, and his family was prominent in the Cherokee Nation. But he didn't look Indian. Not in that constructed way. Certainly not in the way Curtis wanted Indians to look.

And tourists pulling into the parking lot and seeing the statue for the first time would never know that this was an Indian as famous as Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse or Geronimo.

Christopher must have read my mind. The Indians we're going to photograph, he said, walking over to the statue. What if they all look like Rogers? I know he's Indian, said my brother, and you know he's Indian, but how is anyone else going to be able to tell?

Curtis wasn't the only photographer in the early twentieth century who was taking pictures of Indians. So was Richard Throssel. Unless you're a photography buff, you won't know the name and will therefore have no way of knowing that Throssel was not only a contemporary of Curtis's, but that he was also Native. Cree to be exact. Adopted by the Crow. Throssel even met Curtis, when Curtis came to the Crow reservation.

Throssel took many of the same sort of romantic photographs as Curtis, photographs such as "The Sentinel," which shows an Indian in a feathered headdress, holding a lance, and sitting on a horse, all in silhouette, set against a dramatic sky, or "The Feathered Horsemen," which records a party of Indians on horses coming through a stand of tipis, the men wearing feathered headdresses and carrying bows and arrows and lances.

But he also took other photographs, photographs that moved away from romance toward environmental and social comment, photographs that did not imagine the Indian as dying or particularly noble, photographs that

suggested that Indians were contemporary as well as historical figures. His photograph of Bull Over the Hill's home titled "The Old and the New," which shows a log house with a tipi in the background, and his 1910 photograph "Interior of the Best Indian Kitchen on the Crow Reservation," which shows an Indian family dressed in "traditional" clothing sitting at an elegantly set table in their very contemporary house having tea, suggest that Native people could negotiate the past and the present with relative ease. His untitled camp scene that juxtaposes traditional tipis with contemporary buggies and a family of pigs, rather than with unshod ponies and the prerequisite herd of buffalo, suggests, at least to my contemporary sensibilities, that Throssel had a penchant for satiric play.

But I'm probably imagining the humour. Throssel was, after all, a serious photographer trying to capture a moment, perhaps not realizing that tripping the shutter captures nothing, that everything on the ground glass changes before the light hits the film plane. What the camera allows you to do is to invent, to create. That's really what photographs are. Not records of moments, but rather imaginative acts.

Still, neither Curtis nor Throssel had to deal with the Rogers conundrum. Or perhaps neither chose to. Throssel's Indians, even the ones set against contemporary backdrops, were, like Curtis's Indians, all visually Indian. And when we look at his photographs, we see what we expect to see.

The Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish writer Louis Owens, in

his memoir *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions*, deals with the issue of photographs and expectations. Looking through a collection of old photographs of his mixed-blood family, Owens can find no "Indians." "This family from whom I am descended," he says, "wears no recognizably Indian cultural artifacts; nor are they surrounded by any such signifiers. (Though there is possibility in the blanket nailed across the cabin door: what if my great-grandfather had perversely wrapped the blanket around himself for this picture?) . . . To find the Indian in the photographic cupboard, I must narratively construct him out of his missing presence, for my great-grandfather was Indian but not *an Indian*."[2]

Of course, all this — my expedition, Throssel's images, Owens's family portraits — are reminders of how hard it is to break free from the parochial and paradoxical considerations of identity and authenticity. Owens, in a particularly wry moment, notes that "few looking at [these] photos of mixedbloods would be likely to say, 'But they don't look like Irishmen,' but everyone seems obligated to offer an opinion regarding the degree of Indianness represented."[3]

In Curtis's magnum opus, *Portraits from North American Indian Life*, we don't see a collection of photographs of Indian people. We see race. Never mind that race is a construction and an illusion. Never mind that it does not exist in either biology or theology, though both have, from time to time, been enlisted in the cause of racism. Never mind that we can't hear it or smell it or taste it or feel it. The important thing is that we believe we can see it.

In fact, we hope we can see it. For one of the conundrums of the late twentieth century that we've hauled into the twenty-first is that many of our mothers and fathers, who were pursued by missionaries, educators, and government officials (armed with residential schools, European history, legislation such as the Indian Act, the Termination Act, and the Relocation Program of the 1950s), who were forcibly encouraged to give up their identities, now have children who are *determined* to be *seen* as Indians. Louis Owens isn't the only Native person who has sorted through old photographs and looked in cold mirrors for that visual confirmation.

When I was going to university, there was an almost irresistible pull to become what Gerald Vizenor calls a "cultural ritualist," a kind of "pretend" Indian, an Indian who has to dress up like an Indian and act like an Indian in order to be recognized as an Indian. And in the 1970s, being recognized as an Indian was critical. And here tribal affiliation was not a major consideration. We didn't dress up as nineteenth-century Cherokees or as the Apache, Choctaw, Lakota, Tlingit, Ojibway, Blackfoot, or Haida had dressed. We dressed up as the "Indian" dressed. We dressed up in a manner to substantiate the cultural lie that had trapped us, and we did so with a passion. I have my own box of photographs. Pictures of me in my "Indian" outfits, pictures of me being "Indian," pictures of me in groups of other "Indians."

Not wanting to be mistaken for a Mexican or a White, I grew my hair long, bought a fringed leather pouch to hang off my belt, threw a four-strand bone choker around

my neck, made a headband out of an old neckerchief, and strapped on a beaded belt buckle that I had bought at a trading post on a reservation in Wyoming. Trinkets of the trade.

I did resist feathers but that was my only concession to cultural sanity.

Not that university was my first experience with the narrow parameters of race. In 1964, I fell into a job as a junior executive at the Bank of America in San Francisco. Junior executive sounds grand, but as I discovered after the first few days, this was what the bank called men who worked as tellers, as opposed to the women who worked as tellers and who were just called tellers. These terms, though I didn't understand it at the time, were innate promises that men had possibilities of advancement, while women did not.

In any case, it was a boring job, and by the end of the first month I was looking for another career. I didn't find it, but I did meet a woman who worked for a steamship company. Each week, on Friday, she would come in and deposit the company's earnings. I was bored. She was bored. So we talked. The steamship company she worked for was called Columbus Lines, an irony that was not lost on me, and, occasionally, she told me, they would take on "passengers" who could earn their one-way passage to Australia by working aboard the ship.

As it happened, I knew quite a bit about Australia. Just before I moved to San Francisco, I had worked at South Shore Lake Tahoe, a gambling, fun-in-the-sun mecca in the

Sierra Nevada Mountains, where I had dated a woman from Australia. Her name was Sharon or Sherry and she told me all about the country, its beaches, the outback, the sharks. To hear her tell it, the place was bristling with adventure, and, three weeks into our relationship, I applied for an immigration visa. At eight weeks our relationship was over. At the twelve-week mark, just as I was packing to go to San Francisco, my visa arrived. I put it in the box with the books and forgot about it.

Amazing the way things come around.

The next week I asked the woman from the steamship company what the chances were of my getting a one-way job on one of the company's ships, and she told me she thought they were good. I must admit I could hardly contain my excitement.

Tom King, on a tramp steamer. Tom King, sailing off on a great adventure. Tom King, explorer of known worlds.

So I was disappointed when she came back the next week to tell me that the list of people who wanted to work their way to Australia was quite long and that nothing would come open for at least a year. However, there was a ship sailing for New Zealand in a week, and there was one spot left on the crew. If I wanted it, she said, it was mine.

And so I went. Packed everything I owned into two cheap metal trunks and hauled them to the docks. By the end of the week, I was at sea.

The ship was a German vessel out of Hamburg, the SS *Cap Colorado*. The captain was German. The crew was German. The cook was German. I wasn't German. As a

matter of fact, none of the crew was sure what I was. When I told them I was Cherokee, or to keep matters simple, a North American Indian, they were intrigued.

And suspicious.

The cook, who could speak passable English, told me that he had read all of Karl May's novels and had a fair idea of what Indians were supposed to look like and that I wasn't what he had imagined.

"You're not the Indian I had in mind," he told me.

Here was a small dilemma. Of all the crew members on that ship, the one person I didn't want to offend was the cook. I knew that Indians came in all shapes and sizes and colours, but I hadn't read Karl May, had no idea who he was. The cook had read May but had never actually seen an Indian. So we compromised. I confessed that I was a mixed-blood, and he allowed that this was possible, since May had described full-blood Apaches and not mixed-blood Cherokees.

I discovered some years later that May had never seen an Indian, either, but on board that ship it was probably just as well that I did not know this.

I spent almost a year in New Zealand. I worked as a deer culler, a beer bottle sorter, a freezer packer, and a photographer. I liked the country and might well have stayed had it not been for a phone call I got early one morning. It was a British-sounding man who introduced himself as an official with the immigration department.

If I'm not mistaken, he said, clipping the edges off each consonant, you entered the country eleven months

ago on a thirty-day tourist visa and are therefore in violation of New Zealand immigration laws.

I agreed that he was probably correct.

When might we expect you to leave? he wanted to know.

As I said, I liked the place, had no plans to leave. So I asked him if there was any chance of applying for an immigration visa.

It turned out my immigration man had only newly arrived from England the month before to take up his duties and wasn't sure if this was possible. But he would check into it, he told me. In the meantime, would I give him some of my particulars.

It was the usual stuff. Name. Colour of hair. Colour of eyes. Height. Weight. Race.

Black, brown, six feet six inches, 230 pounds.

Indian.

Dear me, he said. I don't believe we take applications from Indians.

I have to admit I was stunned. Why not? I wanted to know.

Policy, said the immigration man.

Do you get many? I asked.

Oh, yes, he said. Thousands.

I hadn't heard of any mass exodus of Native peoples from Canada or the States. These Indians, I asked him, where are they from? Alberta? Saskatchewan? Arizona? South Dakota? Oklahoma?

Dear me, no, said my British voice. They're from, you know, New Delhi, Bombay . . .

When Karen told me her father wouldn't let me take her to the prom because he didn't want her dating Mexicans, I told her I wasn't Mexican. I was Indian.

When the immigration officer told me I couldn't apply for a visa because I was Indian, I told him I wasn't East Indian, I was North American Indian.

As if that was going to settle anything.

Without missing a beat, and at the same time injecting a note of enthusiasm into his otherwise precise voice, the immigration man said, What? Do you mean like cowboys and Indians?

The next week, I was on a ship for Australia. As it turned out, that immigration visa I had was still good. As for Karen, well, I went to the prom that year. But I went alone.

The first three or four months I was in Australia, I travelled around, working my way up the east coast and into the interior. At Rockhampton, I made pocket money helping a man and his son dismantle a small house. At Tennent Creek, I worked at a mine shovelling ore into sacks. In Adelaide, I cleaned trucks. But in all my travels, I never met an indigenous Australian. In New Zealand, I had met a great many Maoris, and while there had been friction between Maoris and Europeans, the two groups seemed to have organized themselves around an uneasy peace between equals. In Australia, there was no such peace. Just a damp, sweltering campaign of discrimination that you could feel on your skin and smell in your hair.

The Aboriginal people, I was told, were failing. They were dying off at such a rate that they wouldn't last another decade. It was sad to see them passing away, but their problem, according to the men who gathered in the bars after work, was that they did not have the same mental capacities as Whites. There was no point in educating them because they had no interest in improving their lot and were perfectly happy living in poverty and squalor.

The curious thing about these stories was I had heard them all before, knew them, in fact, by heart.

Eventually I wound up in Sydney and lied my way into a job as a journalist with a third-rate magazine called *Everybody's* — a disingenuous name if ever there was one. I got the job, in part, because I was an American and an Indian — the exotic combination being too much for folks to resist — and I was sent out on jobs that required the firm hand of a reporter of exotic background. I filed stories about teenagers having a good time drinking themselves into a stupor and jumping off cliffs into the ocean, about escorting a chimpanzee around the city and showing her the sights, about spending an exhilarating afternoon with the self-proclaimed king of tic-tac-toe, discussing strategies and secret moves.

Almost certainly, the high point of my journalistic career was dragging one of those plastic blow-up dollies around on a date that included dinner and a movie. You'll probably think poorly of me, but I didn't really mind doing these idiotic assignments. Actually, many of them were fun. Best of all, I had a professional job. Race, which

had periodically been something of a burden, was suddenly something of an advantage.

There was a photographer who worked for the magazine. Let's say that, after all these years, I've forgotten his name. So, we'll call him Lee. Lee was a decent enough guy, but on Friday afternoons when we got paid and adjourned to the local pub to drink and review the week, he would turn into a boor. The kind of boor who, after half a dozen beers and a few whisky chasers, liked to expound on what was wrong with the country. Government was at the top of his list, followed closely by Australia's "Abo" problem — "Abo" being Australia's derogatory term for the Aboriginal people. And because there were no Aboriginal people in the immediate vicinity, Lee spent many of these smoky evenings sharpening his soggy wit on me.

Lee didn't know any more about Indians than had the cook on the tramp steamer or Karl May or the immigration man, but he reckoned that North Americans had taken care of the problem in a reasonably expedient fashion. I'm embarrassed to repeat his exact words but the gist of it was that North Americans had shot Native men and bred Native women until they were White.

In a perverse way, I've always liked people like Lee. They are, by and large, easy to deal with. Their racism is honest and straightforward. You don't have to go looking for it in a phrase or a gesture. And you don't have to wonder if you're being too sensitive. Best of all, they remind me how the past continues to inform the present.

One Monday, Lee stopped by my desk with a present

for me. It was a cartoon that he had gotten one of the guys in the art department to work up. It showed a stereotypical Indian in feathers and leathers with a bull's eye on his crotch and flies buzzing around him. "Office of Chief Screaching [*sic*] Eagle Goldstein," the caption read. "Payola and bribes acceptable in the form of checks or money orders. No silver please." Just above the Indian was "Happy Barmizvah Keemosaby" and just below was "only living Cherokee Jew."

Lee stood at my desk, waiting for me to smile. I told him it was funny as hell, and he said, yeah, everyone he had showed it to thought it was a scream. I had the cartoon mounted on a board and stuck it on my desk.

I still have it. Just in case I forget.

So it was unanimous. Everyone knew who Indians were. Everyone knew what we looked like. Even Indians. But standing in that parking lot in Oklahoma with my brother, looking at the statue of Will Rogers, I realized, for perhaps the first time, that I didn't know. Or more accurately, I didn't know how I wanted to represent Indians. My brother was right. Will Rogers did not look like an Indian. Worse, as I cast my mind across the list of Native artists I had come west to photograph, many of them friends, I realized that a good number of them didn't look Indian, either.

Yet how can something that has never existed — the Indian — have form and power while something that is alive and kicking — Indians — are invisible?

Edward Sheriff Curtis.

James Fenimore Cooper, George Catlin, Paul Kane, Charles Bird King, Karl May, the Atlanta Braves, the Washington Redskins, the Chicago Blackhawks, Pontiac (the car, not the Indian), Land O'Lakes butter, Calumet baking soda, Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, *A Man Called Horse*, Iron Eyes Cody, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Searchers*, the Indian Motorcycle Company, American Spirit tobacco, Native American Barbie, Chippewa Springs Golf Course, John Augustus Stone, the Cleveland Indians, Disney's Pocahontas, Geronimo shoes, the Calgary Stampede, Cherokee brand underwear, the Improved Order of Red Men, Ralph Hubbard and his Boy Scout troop, Mutual of Omaha, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, the Boston Tea Party, Frank Hamilton Cushing, William Wadsworth Longfellow, the Bank of Montreal, Chief's Trucking, Grey Owl, *The Sioux Spaceman*, Red Man chewing tobacco, Grateful Dead concerts, Dreamcatcher perfume.

In the end, there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations.

But for those of us who are Indians, this disjunction between reality and imagination is akin to life and death. For to be seen as "real," for people to "imagine" us as Indians, we must be "authentic."

In the past, authenticity was simply in the eye of the beholder. Indians who looked Indian were authentic. Authenticity only became a problem for Native people in the twentieth century. While it is true that mixed-blood and full-blood rivalries predate this period, the question of who was an Indian and who was not was easier to settle. What made it easy was that most Indians lived on

reserves of one sort or another (out of sight of Europeans) and had strong ties to a particular community, and the majority of those people who "looked Indian" and those who did not at least had a culture and a language in common.

This is no longer as true as it once was, for many Native people now live in cities, with only tenuous ties to a reserve or a nation. Many no longer speak their Native language, a gift of colonialism, and the question of identity has become as much a personal matter as it is a matter of blood. N. Scott Momaday has suggested that being Native is an idea that an individual has of themselves. Momaday, who is Kiowa, is not suggesting that anyone who wants to can imagine themselves to be Indian. He is simply acknowledging that language and narrow definitions of culture are not the only ways identity can be constructed. Yet, in the absence of visual confirmation, these "touchstones" — race, culture, language, blood — still form a kind of authenticity test, a racial-reality game that contemporary Native people are forced to play. And here are some of the questions.

Were you born on a reserve? Small, rural towns with high Native populations will do. Cities will not.

Do you speak your Native language? Not a few phrases here and there. Fluency is the key. No fluency, no Indian.

Do you participate in your tribe's ceremonies? Being a singer or a dancer is a plus, but not absolutely required.

Are you a full-blood?

Are you a status Indian?

Are you enrolled?

You may suspect me of hyperbole, but many of these were questions that I was asked by a selection committee when I applied for a Ford Foundation Grant for American Indians in order to complete my Ph.D. I've told this story a number of times at various events, and each time I've told it, one or two non-Natives have come up to me afterwards and apologized for the stereotypical attitudes of a few misguided Whites. But the truth of the matter is that the selection committee was composed entirely of Native people. And the joke, if there is one, is that most of the committee couldn't pass this test, either, for these questions were not designed to measure academic potential or to ensure diversity, they were designed to exclude. For the real value of authenticity is in the rarity of a thing.

Of course, outside grant selection committees and possibly guards at the new and improved U.S. border crossings, not many people ask these questions. They don't have to. They're content simply looking at you. If you don't look Indian, you aren't. If you don't look White, you're not.

As I pulled out of the McDonald's parking lot, I began thinking about my dilemma in earnest. Edward Sheriff Curtis had been successful in raising money and getting his photographs in print because he was fulfilling a national fantasy, and because he documented the only antiquity that North America would ever have. Indians might not have been Greeks or Romans or Egyptians, but Indians were all the continent had to offer to a society that

relished the past. I could not photograph that particular antiquity, not because it had vanished, but because it had changed.

When I came up with my bright idea for a photographic expedition, I sat down with a number of granting agencies to see if there was any chance of getting some financial support for the project. Several of them thought the idea had merit, but they weren't sure why I wanted to do it.

Which Indians did I have in mind, they wanted to know. How would I find these Indians? How would taking photographs of Native artists benefit Native people?

Had J. P. Morgan asked that question of Edward Curtis, Curtis probably would have told him that such photographs were necessary because the Indian was dying, and if he hesitated, the Noble Red Man would be gone and that part of America's antiquity would be lost forever. Curtis might have even thrown up John Audubon and Audubon's great endeavour to paint the birds of North America, many of whom were on the verge of extinction and might well have been helped on their way, since, in order to paint the birds, Audubon first had to kill them.

So they wouldn't move and spoil the sitting.

How will taking photographs of Native artists benefit Native people?

It wasn't a question I would have ever asked. It was a question — and I understood this part clearly — that came out of a Western Judeo-Christian sense of responsibility and that contained the unexamined implication that

the lives of Native people needed improvement. I knew, without a doubt, that the pictures I was taking would not change the lives of the people I photographed any more than the arrivals and departures of, say, anthropologists on Native reserves had done anything to improve the lives of the people they came to study.

I teach at a university, so I know all about the enthusiasm for creating social change through intellectual and artistic activity, especially within what we ironically call the "humanities." And while we have had our fair share of literary critics who have believed in the potentials of literature — Sir Philip Sidney, Matthew Arnold, F. R. and Queenie Leavis — it goes without saying, I think, that, apart from recent feminist and Marxist critics who seek to engage literature in the enterprise of social and political transformation, the study of literature, especially in the wake of New Criticism, has not had a sustained political component.

So I was, in many ways, delighted to see postcolonial studies arrive on campus, not only because it expanded the canon by insisting that we read, consider, and teach the literatures of colonized peoples, but because it promised to give Native people a place at the table. I know that postcolonial studies is not a panacea for much of anything. I know that it never promised explicitly to make the colonized world a better place for colonized peoples. It did, however, carry with it the implicit expectation that, through exposure to new literatures and cultures and challenges to hegemonic assumptions and power structures, lives would be made better.

At least the lives of the theorists.

But perhaps that was it. Perhaps I was travelling around the country taking portraits of Native artists because the project promised to make my life better, to make me feel valuable, to make me feel important.

How will photographing Native artists benefit Native people? You see this basic kind of question in various guises on the "human study" portion of grant applications, and you hear it debated on talk shows and in churches. Politicians use it as a ploy because they know that political memory is not even short term. Advertisers transform the question into a glimmering promise that if you buy their products — deodorants, frozen pizzas, magic beans — your life will improve. It is the great Western come-on. The North American Con. The Caucasoid Sting.

Actually, I'm no better. If you've been paying attention, you will have noticed that I've defined identity politics in a rather narrow and self-serving fashion.

Appearance.

I want to look Indian so that you will see me as Indian because I want to be Indian, even though being Indian and looking Indian is more a disadvantage than it is a luxury.

Just not for me.

Middle-class Indians, such as myself, can, after all, afford the burden of looking Indian. There's little danger that *we'll* be stuffed into the trunk of a police cruiser and dropped off on the outskirts of Saskatoon. Not much chance that *we'll* come before the courts and be incarcerated for a longer period of time than our non-Indian

brethren. Hardly any risk that *our* children will be taken from us because we are unable to cope with the potentials of poverty.

That sort of thing happens to those other Indians.

My relatives. My friends.

Just not me.

To date, I've photographed about five hundred Native artists. In that time some of the people, such as the Navajo artist Carl Gorman, have died. Before I finish, more will pass away, and new ones will take their place. I may never finish the project, may never see the book I had imagined when my brother and I headed off that first time almost ten years ago. But it doesn't matter. The photographs themselves are no longer the issue. Neither are the questions of identity. What's important are the stories I've heard along the way. And the stories I've told. Stories we make up to try to set the world straight.

Take Will Rogers's story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Make it the topic of a discussion group at a scholarly conference. Put it on the Web. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.

III

LET ME ENTERTAIN YOU

THERE IS A STORY I KNOW. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away.

One time, it was in Peterborough I think, an older woman in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.

The woman began to smile, enjoying the game, I imagine. So how many turtles are there? she wanted

V

WHAT IS IT ABOUT US THAT YOU DON'T LIKE?

THERE IS A STORY I KNOW. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away.

One time, it was in Moncton I think, a woman with a baby in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.

The woman began to chuckle and rock her baby, enjoying the game, I imagine. So how many turtles are

there? she wanted to know. The storyteller shrugged. No one knows for sure, he told her, but it's turtles all the way down.

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

"There are stories that take seven days to tell," says the Cherokee storyteller Diane Glancy. "There are other stories that take you all your life."[1]

I like Coyote stories. And one of my favourites is the one about Coyote and the Ducks. Not the one where the Ducks dance around with their eyes shut while Coyote grabs them one by one and tosses them in his hunting bag. And not the one where he tries to talk the Ducks into teaching him how to fly.

The other one.

The one about the feathers.

And it goes like this.

In the days when everything was beginning, and animals were still talking to humans, Coyote had a beautiful fur coat of which he was very vain. Every day Coyote would come down to the river and look at his reflection.

Goodness, but I have a lovely coat, Coyote would whisper to the water, and then he would give himself a hug.

One day while he was admiring his fur coat, he saw six Ducks singing and dancing and swimming around in circles. Back and forth they went, spinning and turning and diving and leaping in the sunshine. Now, in those days, Ducks had lovely long feathers that shimmered and flashed like the Northern Lights. And when the Ducks

had finished singing and dancing and swimming around in circles, they carefully cleaned each feather and straightened it and fluffed it up, so that it glowed even more than before.

That is certainly a wonderful song, said Coyote, who was a little dizzy from watching the Ducks swim around in circles. And that is certainly a beautiful dance.

Yes, said the Ducks. We sing to keep everything in balance, and we dance for peace and generosity, and we swim around in circles to remind everyone of our relationship to the earth.

And those are certainly lovely feathers, said Coyote.

Yes, said those Ducks, they certainly are.

I would certainly like to have one of those lovely feathers, said Coyote. It would go so well with my excellent fur coat.

Now, in those days, Ducks were very agreeable. All right, they said. Just be careful with it, for we are quite fond of our feathers.

I will, said Coyote, and he stuck the feather behind his left ear and ran off to show it to all his friends.

What do you think of my feather? he asked everyone he saw.

It certainly is unusual, said Bear, who tended to be more critical than he needed to be. Too bad you only have one, for now you look a little lopsided.

Oh, dear, said Coyote, and he ran back to the river to find the Dancing Ducks.

Excuse me, Coyote shouted, would it be possible to get another feather?

Another feather? said the Ducks.

Yes, said Coyote, as you can see, having only one feather makes me appear lopsided.

Ah, said the Ducks. You're right. You do look a little lopsided. And the Ducks gave Coyote another feather. But this is the last one, they said. Don't ask for any more, for we need our feathers.

I won't, said Coyote. I promise.

And Coyote stuck the feather behind his right ear and ran off to show it to all his friends.

Aren't these the most beautiful feathers you've ever seen? said Coyote.

They certainly are, said Raven. And such an improvement on that ratty fur coat.

You don't like my wonderful fur coat? said Coyote.

Fur's okay, said Raven, but feathers are so much better.

They are? said Coyote.

Certainly, said Raven, stretching out one wing as far as she could. Anyone who is anyone has feathers.

Well, you can imagine poor Coyote's distress. If Raven was right, and she was seldom wrong, then fur had somehow fallen out of fashion. Oh dear, oh dear, said Coyote, I'm going to need more feathers. And back to the river he went.

When the Ducks saw Coyote waiting for them on the bank, they ruffled their feathers and looked quite annoyed.

We hope you haven't come to ask us for more feathers, said the Ducks.

I wouldn't do that, said Coyote, and he smiled so all his teeth showed. I've come to protect you.

Protect us? said the Ducks. From what?

Human Beings, said Coyote, who on occasion can be clever. I heard them talking. They plan to steal all your feathers.

Steal our feathers! shouted the Ducks.

They might even try to eat you, said Coyote.

Eat us! said the Ducks. Human Beings eat Ducks?

Coyote pretended to shudder. You'd be amazed what they will eat, he said.

But then who will sing for them? said the Ducks. Who will dance for them? Who will remind them of their relationship with the earth?

Never mind that stuff, said Coyote, and he lowered his eyes and lowered his voice and looked around to make sure no one was watching. I have a plan that might save you. You give me half of your feathers and I'll pretend to be a Duck and I'll let the Human Beings chase me around until they get tired and give up.

Half our feathers? said the Ducks.

You'll get to keep the other half, said Coyote. And you'll be safe.

So the Ducks talked it over, and they agreed that half their feathers was better than no feathers, and certainly better than being eaten.

But what happens if they catch you? said the Ducks.

Oh, don't worry, said Coyote, they won't catch me. For I am exceptionally fast and very tricky.

Well, you can imagine just how good Coyote looked with his long shimmering Duck feathers. Even Bear was impressed.

They're okay, said Bear. If you like that sort of thing.

Look at me, Coyote cried, as he ran through the woods and over the mountains and down into the valleys, the feathers trailing behind him, flashing in the light. Look at me!

But Coyote was not very careful with the feathers. He didn't clean them or straighten them or fluff them up as the Ducks had done, and, after a few weeks, the feathers were bent and dirty and ragged, and they looked very, very sad, for they no longer shimmered and glowed.

We can't have this, said Coyote, and he threw the feathers away and went back to the river.

When the Ducks saw Coyote without the feathers they had given him, they were concerned.

What happened to all our feathers? said the Ducks.

The Human Beings took them, said Coyote. They caught me while I was sleeping.

How horrible, said the Ducks.

What's worse, said Coyote, is I need more feathers.

More feathers! shrieked the Ducks. Absolutely not! No, no, no, no!

Then, said Coyote, puffing out his chest as best he could, we'll fight them together.

Fight? Fight whom? said the Ducks, who were well versed in the rules of grammar.

Human Beings, of course, said Coyote. For they can be very fierce when they don't get what they want.

Well, the Ducks didn't know what to do. They talked about flying away but their long feathers made flying tiring, and they talked about swimming away but they

didn't know where they would go, and they talked about running away but their legs were too short to do that. Besides, they were happy just where they were.

These Human Beings, said the Ducks, what is it about us that they don't like?

Oh, they like you well enough, said Coyote. They just like your feathers better.

Now, I could finish this story but you already know what's going to happen, don't you? The Ducks are going to keep giving up their beautiful long feathers. Coyote is going to make a mess of things. The world is going to change. And no one is going to be particularly happy.

Besides, this particular story is a long one that takes days to tell. A good storyteller can keep it going for a week. We don't really have the time. And there are other stories that are just as much fun and much shorter.

Such as the one we like to tell ourselves about injustices and atrocities and how most of them have happened in the past. We tell ourselves that, as we have progressed as a species, we have gotten smarter and more compassionate. We say of slavery, for example, yes, that was a horror. We know better now, and we won't make that mistake again. Of course, segregation was a problem, too, wasn't it.

And if we do make such a mistake in our lifetime, say, for instance, dumping raw sewage into the ocean or dropping bombs on people, we say that this was an aberration, a creature of the moment. We say that it was the times, that the fault was in our stars, that you had to have been

there. As if what we did was set in motion by natural forces outside our control, something that caught us unawares or took us by surprise.

Indians, for example.

One of the surprising things about Indians is that we're still here. After some five hundred years of vigorous encouragement to assimilate and disappear, we're still here.

Don't worry, this is not the prelude to a flock of sweeping generalizations and caustic complaints. I'm not going to carry on about genocide or residential schools or blankets infected with smallpox (no one has ever been able to prove that one anyway). I'm not going to mention Big Bear or Louis Riel or the Lubicon Lake Cree or the Mi'kmaq at Burnt Church or the Innu at Davis Inlet or Dudley George at Ipperwash or Neil Stonechild and the Saskatoon police.

I'm not going to talk about the forced removal of Indians from their homes or the reserve system or the paternalistic manner in which governments manage the affairs of Native people.

What I want to talk about is legislation.

In the old days, when we were still a problem, the military solution was as good as any. But after a hundred years or so of killing each other, both sides decided that wars were expensive. They cost money. They cost lives. And so, in North America, where Indians and the British and the French and the Americans spent a good deal of time and effort fighting each other, it was eventually

agreed that making treaties was better than making war. A rather enlightened decision, if I do say so. The problem was that, like the Ducks in the Coyote story, the first rule of treaties was that Indians had to give up most of their feathers in order to keep some of their feathers for themselves.

At the time, treaties were a poor deal for Indians and a good deal for Whites. But lately, they've been a better deal for Indians and not such a good deal for Whites, because like Coyote, Whites haven't been happy with only most of the feathers.

You might suppose that in the story about Coyote and the Ducks, eventually, Coyote winds up with all the Ducks' feathers, and, in fact, that is what happens.

Sort of.

While the Ducks do give up all their large feathers, the new feathers that grow in are much smaller, and they don't shimmer quite so much and they don't glow quite as brightly as before, and Coyote leaves the Ducks alone for the moment as he looks around for more valuable acquisitions.

With Native people, while our land base was drastically reduced in the early years of treaty making, that erosion has slowed. Even stopped in some areas. Mind you, we don't have much land left, but feathers are feathers. And even if all the large ones are gone, after a while, Coyote is going to come back, looking for the smaller ones. For he has an insatiable appetite.

However, there is a problem with this story: as long as there are Indians, there will be a plethora of "Indian

things." Feathers, if you will. Indian land. Indian rights. Indian resources. Indian claims.

Gnarly, difficult, tempting things that try the patience of governments, affront corporations, annoy the general public, and frighten the horses.

What to do?

What to do?

Indians. You can't live with them. You can't shoot them.

Well, not anymore.

So it's just as well we have legislation.

And legislation, in relation to Native people, has had two basic goals. One, to relieve us of our land, and two, to legalize us out of existence. I know that probably sounds like a rather harsh and cynical statement, and it's not completely true. In the Proclamation of 1763, for example, the British government, partly out of fear of the French presence in North America, allowed that each tribe was an independent nation subject only to tribal law and exempt from British law. But this was a mistake that, later, American and Canadian governments would not repeat.

In 1887, the U.S. Congress passed the General Allotment Act, or the Dawes Act as it was popularly known. Driven by the government's desire to control tribes, by the desire of settlers for cheap land, and by the popular notion that land set aside for Indians was the antithesis of North American values and fair play, the General Allotment Act sought to "re-imagine" tribes and tribal land.

Assisting in this matter was a group of reformers, known euphemistically as "Friends of the Indian," who

felt that breaking up the tribal estate and turning Native people into landowners would help rescue them from their communal but primitive state and hurry them into the mainstream as full and functioning members of society. The key to this, as far as the Friends were concerned, was private ownership of land and an appreciation for the concept of profit.

Merrill E. Gates, one of the Friends, summed it up in a speech on Indian reform. "We have, to begin with," said Gates, "the absolute need of awakening in the savage Indian broader desires and ampler wants. To bring him out of savagery into citizenship we must make the Indian more intelligently selfish before we can make him unselfishly intelligent. We need to awaken in him wants. In his dull savagery he must be touched by the wings of the divine angel of discontent. The desire for property of his own may become an intense educating force. The wish for a home of his own awakens him to new efforts. Discontent with the teepee and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers — and trousers with pockets in them, and with a pocket that aches to be filled with dollars."[2]

And the Ducks thought they had problems.

The heart of the act lay in the division of each reservation into pieces. Indians got some of the pieces — as a rule, 160 acres went to each head of household — while the surplus was auctioned off or sold to White settlers. Indians would become citizens, and magic, presto, be transformed into . . . well, not Indians.

Of course, this isn't exactly what happened, but while the act was in effect — from 1887 to 1934 — the legislation was able to reduce the tribal estate in the United States from 150 million acres to about 48 million acres. Native people would have probably lost more land but the act was repealed in 1934 and besides, by then, much of the land that was left was desert.

Canada, which is generally seen as lagging behind the United States in most things — capitalism, taxation, aggression — actually took the lead in legislating Indians out of existence with the 1876 Indian Act.

It would be too torturous a journey to try to explicate the Indian Act at one sitting, for it is a magical piece of legislation that twists and slides through time, transforming itself and the lives of Native people at every turn. And sprinkled throughout the act, which, among other things, paternalistically defines who is an Indian and who is not, are amendments that can make Indians disappear in a twinkle.

An 1880 amendment allowed for the automatic enfranchisement of any Indian who obtained a university degree.

Get a degree and, poof, you're no longer an Indian.

Serve in the military and, abracadabra, you're no longer an Indian.

Become a clergyman or a lawyer and, presto, no more Indian.

Legislative magic.

Duncan Campbell Scott, the deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs (among other things), speaking

candidly in 1920 of Canadian Indian policy said, "Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department."[3]

Hocus-pocus!

Indians. Now you see them. Now you don't.

If you're a scholar of Native history, you're probably waiting for me to get to the U.S. Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Sometimes called the "Indian Magna Carta" (though I have no idea why), it marked a departure from the general run of legislation that sought to appropriate the Indian estate and to assimilate Indians.

In particular, the act guaranteed to Indians the right to practise traditional religions. It ended the General Allotment Act and allowed that any remaining surplus lands from that process should be returned to the appropriate tribes. It re-established tribal governments. It promoted bilingual education. It even provided the secretary of the interior with an annual appropriation of some two million dollars to buy back portions of Indian land that had been lost, and, from 1934 to 1947, the Native land base in the United States was actually increased by almost four million acres.

So why do I sound unhappy?

After all, the Indian Reorganization Act was a step in a different direction than North American legislation had been taking. Or, more properly, it was a stumble. For in spite of making its way through Congress and in spite of

having many of its ideas implemented, the Indian Reorganization Act went against the national temper.

That's a polite way of saying that it annoyed too many people to be successful or long lived. Politicians were opposed to it because it inhibited their free run at Indian land. The clergy, wanting to maintain their religious monopolies, were appalled that Indians could now choose between their traditional beliefs and Christianity. Bureaucrats, afraid that the basic premise of the act suggested that they had not done the job of advocating Indian interests, complained that the new rules and regulations were difficult to administer and impossible to enforce. Even Indians argued against it. After all, in every other instance when the government had come along with a program that was going to make their lives better, things usually got worse.

In 1964, I caught a tramp steamer out of San Francisco and worked my way to New Zealand. I don't know exactly why I went. Adventure, I suppose. That must have been it.

New Zealand was a beautiful country, but it had a problem. Deer. Some bright lad had decided to import deer so erstwhile hunters would have something bigger to shoot than possums and trout, and because the deer had no natural enemies — other than the aforementioned hunters — they multiplied and began eating up the countryside. This caused a great deal of erosion in forests and a great deal of consternation in the forest industry, and the government, in response to complaints from their

lumber constituents, put together a band of merry men to roam the woods and control the problem.

Deer cullers.

I needed a job, and deer culling, for reasons I can no longer remember, sounded exciting, and before the week was out, I found myself heading into the woods with the sun above me, a knapsack on my back, a rifle slung over my shoulder, a song in my heart.

Follow the stream, the government man had told me when he dropped me off at the trailhead. Eight miles in, start looking for the cabin.

Anyone who has ever gone hiking knows that eight miles along a stream in the woods is not the same as eight miles walking a paved road. By the time the sun disappeared, I wasn't sure I was any closer to the cabin than I had been when I started.

Indian lost in the woods.

It's a little embarrassing to admit this. But there I was. Lost. In the wilds of New Zealand, tripping over supplejack, wading through cold water, wondering if this was how the country got rid of tourists on thirty-day visas who tried to work illegally.

I was about to give up and find a cold spot to spend the night when I heard a voice and saw a light coming through the trees.

Hey! the voice said, over the clatter of the water. You the Indian?

The Indian Reorganization Act had a thirteen-year lifespan. Some scholars argue that World War II cut it short,

and this could be true because by the time Americans came home from Europe and the dust of conflict and nuclear bombs had settled, the Indian Reorganization Act was replaced by another piece of legislation that did not share the IRA's concern for the cultural, social, or political life of Native people.

In 1953 the U.S. Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108, more commonly known as the Termination Act. If anyone thought that the Indian Reorganization Act was a shift in the winds of racism, then they would have been surprised to see termination blow in from the west. But for those who knew that the IRA was just a lull in the storm, termination came as no surprise.

The goal of House Concurrent Resolution 108 was to abolish Indians. It sought to accomplish this by terminating federal treaty obligations and special concessions to all tribes, dismantling reservations and "liberating" Native people from poverty and exclusion, and moving them to more urban centres where assimilation would be quick and painless.

This effort was managed by the commissioner of Indian affairs, Dillon S. Myer, who, ironically, had been the director of the War Relocation Authority, which had imprisoned over one hundred thousand Japanese Americans during World War II, and by Arthur Watkins, a senator from Utah whose dislike for Indians was legendary, as was his insatiable appetite for Indian land and resources. Between 1954 and 1962, Congress stripped sixty-one tribes of all federal services and protection.

Coyotes and Ducks.

Canada followed suit sixteen years later with its own termination plan, the 1969 White Paper. Brought in under the Trudeau government with the able assistance of then minister of Indian affairs Jean Chrétien, the 1969 White Paper, even though it never became official government policy, was virtually a carbon copy of House Concurrent Resolution 108. Both had a single goal. To get government out of the "Indian business."

Or, conversely, to get Indians out of the government's business.

They were sorry. Governments, that is. Sorry that they had promised Indians anything. Sorry that they had made treaties with Native people. Sorry that they had given First Nations the impression that they had any special rights under Canadian or international law.

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

And while they were apologizing and complaining, governments were also convincing themselves that they had given these things to Native people out of the goodness of their hearts, that Native rights were something that had flowed from governmental largesse, or, to restate the matter in the dubious phrasing of philanthropic neologisms, that Native rights had been "gifted" to Native people.

It's a lovely sentiment, isn't it. Gifts. The Great White Mother and Father and their Red Children sitting around a Christmas tree, enjoying the holidays, the Indians eager to see what presents their parents have bought for them.

A Currier and Ives moment.

And if you point out that all of these so-called gifts were paid for by Native people, sometimes more than once, and that treaties are legal, binding documents that cannot be dispensed with just because one party suddenly finds them inconvenient, bureaucrats, politicians, and an uninformed public roll their collective eyes and mumble platitudes about the "need to move ahead" or the danger of "living in the past" or the fact that "times change."

Deer cullers worked in pairs. Two men in a small log cabin with a fireplace. No amenities unless you wanted to count silence. The guy who found me in the river trying to look, well, not lost was an ex-Australian named Paul Gibson and he was, by and large, an interesting guy. Most cullers saw the job as a temporary thing. Paul saw it as a career. Living simply in the woods, living off the land, culling deer until all the deer in the country had been culled.

There are things that have value, Paul told me that first night as we drank tea in the cabin, and there are things that don't, and the trick to happiness is knowing which one you are. Deer and sheep both eat the vegetation and can cause erosion that will ruin the forest industry, but sheep have value and deer don't, so that's why we shoot them.

It was an intriguing philosophy, one with a certain amount of merit.

Take me, for instance, he said. I don't have no value. That's why I stay here and hunt the deer. What about you?

I told him I thought I had some value.

No sense kidding yourself, he said. Guy like you runs away and comes to New Zealand to live in the woods with a guy like me and hunt deer. You see what I mean?

I told him I wasn't planning on staying forever, that I just needed some money to get started.

Indians, he said. They're pretty much like Maoris, aren't they?

More or less, I told him.

Then you and the deer should get along just fine.

Okay. Let's forget about the past for a moment.

After all, everything I've mentioned so far is at least thirty years old, most of it over a hundred. So let's look at the present, and, in particular, at the U.S. Indian Arts and Crafts Act and the Canadian Bill C-31.

Both are "termination" legislation (if you're American) or "enfranchisement" legislation (if you're Canadian), and unlike earlier legislation that implicitly asked the question "Who is an Indian?" these newer offerings ask the more modern question, "Whom will we allow to be an Indian?"

In the United States, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act was enacted to keep cheap reproductions of Native arts and crafts off the market and to ensure that, if something said "Made by an Indian," it was. Within the legislation were fines for fraudulent representation, but, more importantly, there were also rules and regulations that described who could be an Indian and who could not.

According to the act, an Indian tribe is any tribe, band, nation, Alaskan Native village, or other organized group

or community that is recognized as eligible for the special programs and services provided by the United States to Indians because of their status as Indians, or any Indian group that has been formally recognized as an Indian tribe by a state legislature or a state commission or similar organization legislatively vested with state tribal recognition authority.

The term "Indian" means any individual who is a member of an Indian tribe or, for the purposes of the act, is certified as an Indian artisan by an Indian tribe.

It's a well-meaning law that was aimed at unscrupulous businesses and individuals selling arts and crafts as "Indian made" when in fact they were not, and it allows members of the public to feel secure in their purchases. And the act has hefty punishments for violations. Individuals who violate the law can be fined up to $250,000 and sent to prison for five years, or both. Businesses that violate the act can face civil penalties and fines up to $1 million.

The only problem is that there are Indian tribes that are not federally or state recognized, and there are individual Indians who, for one reason or another, aren't federally recognized and don't have tribal status.

Shadow Indians.

Grey Indians.

Not really Indians at all.

And if these Shadow Indians produce any arts and crafts for sale, they may not refer to themselves as "Indian artists" or by a tribal designation. No matter what their ancestry, community, or background. Just how big is this

problem? How many Shadow Indians does this law affect? Does the value of the law outweigh the problems it might cause for a few individuals?

Well, those really aren't the questions, are they?

In the case of Canada's Bill C-31, you have a similar but different conundrum. In 1985, Bill C-31 amended the Indian Act, in part to redress the discrimination against Native women. Prior to C-31 any Indian woman who married a non-Indian or a non-status Indian automatically lost her status, as did any children. The same was not true for Indian men. If they married a non-Indian or a non-status Indian, the woman gained status, as did her children.

Bill C-31 allowed Native women who had lost status because of the Indian Act to regain status, along with their children. And in that respect, the bill was a great success.

Since the act was amended in 1985, some hundred thousand Native people who were non-status because of the discriminatory provisions of the Indian Act have been able to regain their status. And if we look at that figure alone, it would appear that Bill C-31 is about the business of creating new Indians (as it were) rather than legislating us out of existence.

So before Bill C-31, you could gain status or lose status through marriage depending on gender. After Bill C-31, no one could gain or lose status through marriage. You would suppose then that status is safe, protected by legislation, approved by the government, available to every treaty Indian in Canada.

Did I mention about appearances being deceiving? Status, as it is currently defined, is safe only as long as status Indians marry status Indians and their children marry status Indians. The minute a status Indian marries out of status, their children and their children's children are at risk.

Because, as it turns out, while you can't gain or lose status through marriage, your children can.

And here's how it works.

A status Indian marries a status Indian. They have two children, both of whom are status. One child marries a status person and the other child marries a non-status person. The children produced by the status/status couple are status. The children produced by the status/non-status couple are status.

Nothing amiss so far.

Now those children get married. The child from the status/status couple marries a status person and the child from the status/non-status couple marries another non-status person. The children from the status/status/status couple are status. The children from the status/non-status/non-status couple are not. Even if everyone married full-blood Indians. Even though everyone has status great-grandparents.

It's actually more fun than I'm making it, because within the category of status are two subcategories called, euphoniously enough, six-ones and six-twos, referring, of course, to the sections of the legislation that create status. Six-one Indians are status and, for legal purposes, are considered to be full-bloods even if they aren't, while

six-two Indians are status and for legal purposes considered to be half-bloods even if they aren't.

Now I won't swear that this is absolutely accurate, but as I understand it the effects of the Indian Act and Bill C-31 are as follows: Six-ones who marry six-ones produce six-one children. Six-ones who marry six-twos produce six-one children. Six-ones who marry non-status produce six-two children.

And six-twos who marry six-twos, or who marry non-status, produce non-status children. And those children can never, ever be status.

Now that's a good trick.

But what the hell happened?

If we were in the States, the answer would be blood quantum. But here in Canada we have what is called the "two-generation cut-off clause." Marry out of status for two generations, and the children from the last union are non-status.

Oh, you can continue to call yourself an Indian, but you can't live on a reserve. You can continue to tell people that you're Cree or Blackfoot or Ojibway or Mohawk, but you can't vote in band elections. You can go to powwows, sing at a drum, sell arts and crafts if you like, but you are no longer eligible for treaty benefits, and neither are your children or their children or their children right down to the end of time.

The two-generation cut-off clause.

No need to send in the cavalry with guns blazing. Legislation will do just as nicely.

And right now about 50 percent of status Indians are

marrying non-status folk. No one knows for sure how long it will take, but according to John Borrows and Leroy Little Bear, two of Canada's leading Aboriginal scholars and teachers, if this rate holds steady, in fifty to seventy-five years there will be no status Indians left in Canada. We'll still have the treaties and we'll still have treaty land held in trust for status Indians by the government.

We just won't have any Indians.

Legally, that is.

So, as the Ducks would say, what is it about us that you don't like?

At that cabin in the mountains of New Zealand, Paul spent the first morning showing me how to bake bread in a pot over an open fire, how to dress a deer haunch, how to sharpen a knife on a river stone. Useful stuff for a life in the woods. Paul was disappointed to discover that I didn't know how to track or read signs, but he reckoned that Indians raised in cities lose those skills.

Don't worry, he told me, in a year or so, you'll be as good as me.

For the next four days, I followed Paul around, watched him set up on a deer trail, watched him shoot deer, watched him cut off their tails so he would have proof that he was doing his job. On the morning of the fifth day, he sent me off on my own.

Make yourself useful, he said. Shoot as many of 'em as you can.

That morning I shot my first deer. That afternoon I packed up my stuff and left Paul a note.

Thanks, it said.

Then I hiked the eight miles out to the trailhead and caught a ride north with a trucker.

So what is it about us you don't like?

You're probably thinking racism is the answer.

Maybe.

Certainly part of it is racism. Not the same brand of racism that created apartheid in South Africa or slavery and segregation in the United States. It's a kinder racism that is cut with a genuine fondness for Natives and Native culture, a racism infused with a suffocating paternalism that can gently strangle the life out of a people. To be sure, it is an affection that is most times misplaced, an affection that is focused on the more exotic, erotic, mysterious, and spiritual aspects of Native life, but it is, nonetheless, an appreciation that is deeply felt and maintained.

So if it's not racism per se, maybe you don't like us because we control large tracts of land and valuable resources, or maybe it's because we get government subsidies and "special" privileges. But none of these should present a serious problem. Corporations own land. They own resources. They get government grants and subsidies. It's one of the benefits of a free-market economy, where the facade of capitalism is supported by public largesse. Matter of fact, if it weren't for the infusion of free public money into the private sector, capitalism would have a very difficult time maintaining itself. Just ask Air Canada or Bombardier or any of the major players in the Alberta oil industry.

Of course, we don't call it "free money." We refer to these public generosities as tax incentives, without mentioning that the incentive is not to create a better society but to make a profit.

Even the fact that Indian land is, by and large, unavailable to the general public shouldn't bother us much. Private hunting clubs own land that no one but club members can hunt on. Fishing clubs own stretches of river that are off-limits to the hoi polloi. Timber companies own vast stands of trees that no one but the company itself can harvest. Drive to the Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia, any day of the week and try to play a round of golf. If you're not a member, you can't tee up. Or drive to any one of the gated communities in North America and try to explain to the guard on duty that you just want to look around.

We understand the philosophy of ownership. We believe in the sanctity of property rights. We relish the mystique of exclusivity.

So just think of Indians as a business or an institution or a country club.

If it helps.

But, of course, it doesn't.

I didn't leave deer culling because I was afraid that Paul was right about the world, that things either had value or they didn't. And I didn't leave because I understood that if you believed in such a world, there would be no end to the killing.

Though I should have.

I left because there was no point in my staying. Killing one deer was more than enough, and having done it once, I could not imagine doing it again.

What is it about us you don't like?

Maybe the answer to the question is simply that you don't think we deserve the things we have. You don't think we've worked for them. You don't think we've earned them. You think that all we did was to sign our names to some prehistoric treaty, and, ever since, we've been living in a semi-uncomfortable welfare state of trust land and periodic benefits. Maybe you believe we're lazy/drunk/belligerent/stupid. Unable to look after our own affairs. Maybe you think all we want to do is conjure up the past and crawl into it.

People used to think these things, you know, and they used to say them out loud. Now they don't. Now they just think them.

But if we are successful in that middle-class or upper-middle-class way, if we are able to, as middle North America likes to say, make something of ourselves, and here you can find any number of good Canadian examples — John Kim Bell, Tomson Highway, Dr. Marlene Brant Castellano, Tom Jackson, Nellie Cournoyea, Douglas Cardinal, Mavis Callihoo, Dorothy Grant, Robbie Robertson, Maxine Noel, Daphne Odjig, Graham Greene, Susan Aglukark . . . me — then you tell us we're a credit to our race, the implication being that the rest of our people are not. Or you divide us up into categories where those of us who have not been successful in that

peculiar way that North America measures success are seen as authentic, while those of us who have become doctors and educators and artists and politicians and entrepreneurs are dismissed as counterfeit.

What is it about us that you don't like?

Let's look at the matter from a different angle. Why is the government concerned about defining who is an Indian and who is not? There's not an Italian Act that defines who is and who is not an Italian. Or a Russian Act. Or a Greek act. Mind you, in California, in the nineteenth century for a while, Mexicans were legally defined as "White," while Chinese were legally defined as "Indians." But even with the French in Quebec, who occupy much the same position in Canada as Native people do, there has been no legislative effort to distinguish between French and non-French. No French Act.

Yet, like Indians, the French float in a sea of English influence. They control an entire province, a larger land base and more resources than any of the tribes in all of North America. They seem to annoy the English as much as, if not more than, do Native people. And they have to deal with the attitude of many in this country who believe that the special rights the French enjoy — a distinct language, a distinct society — are benefits that, like Native rights, are unearned and undeserved.

The French, I'm sure, feel that they constantly have to reaffirm their right to exist, but they don't have to deal with laws that try to get rid of them. There are no legal divisions for status French and non-status French, the concept of the pure laine being a social construct, not a

legal one. Consequently if a French woman marries an English man and her children marry Italians and Greeks and their children marry Australians and Germans and maybe even Indians, they don't, by law, lose their claim to being French.

The only obvious difference between the French and the Indians is that the French represent a formidable voting block, which can decide who comes to power and who does not.

Ah, there's the rub.

And because there's no legal distinction, the French can go on creating more French no matter whom they marry. All they have to do is maintain their language and culture, and they will never lose status, while Indians can disappear even with their languages and cultures intact.

So is the right of identity simply a privilege of power?

Unlike most other ethnic groups, we have two identities, a cultural identity and a legal identity, and the argument that I want to make is that we should be able to take both of them with us wherever we go, whatever we do, and with whomever we do it. For the reality of identity legislation has not simply been to erase Indians from the political map of North America, it has also had the unforgivable consequence of setting Native against Native, destroying our ability and desire to associate with each other. This has been the true tragedy, the creation of legal categories that have made us our own enemy.

When Bill C-31 was passed, for instance, a number of band councils sought to deny members of their own nation — Indians who had reacquired status through the

legislation — membership in the band out of fear that the influx of C-31 Indians would drain the tribe's limited resources. And because they did not want to share with people they considered to be outsiders.

As soon as Bill C-31 was passed, it was challenged by three Alberta bands — the Sawridge First Nation, the Tsuu T'ina First Nation, and the Ermineskin First Nation — who insisted that the bands, and not bureaucrats in Ottawa, should be able to set their memberships. "It's not just where do you draw the line," Catherine Twinn, legal counsel for the bands, insisted, "but who draws the line."[4] A valid enough argument as long as you ignore the troublesome echoes of Merrill E. Gates and his "intelligently selfish" Indians.

The bands argued that their objection to Bill C-31 was neither racist nor sexist, that they had no objection to non-status people regaining status, only to the proposition that status and band membership were the same thing and that bands no longer had the legal right to control that membership.

The eight-month-long court case that followed was a montage of the horrors that legislative racism, judicial arrogance, and Native xenophobia can create. The government, which had originally stripped Indians of status, blithely gave it back with little regard to the potential consequences. The judge in the case characterized Indians as primitive and adolescent, in need of governmental control, and argued that oral-history testimony was unreliable and at odds with the authentic, written, historical record that had been created by non-Indians. And the

bands, in an unsightly display of fear and loathing, suggested that accepting back into membership people who, for various reasons, legal and personal, had neither lived on the reserve nor been part of the community could have disastrous consequences, including the possibility that the reinstated Indians could band together and vote to liquidate band assets and sell the land.

An ugly thing from all angles.

No doubt there is some clever cretin somewhere who will make the argument that termination legislation is, in fact, the answer to the Indian problem, that once every last legal Indian has been terminated/enfranchised/vanished, and once every reserve/reservation has been surveyed and sold, Indians will no longer have to deal with the barriers that status has created.

No more Ducks.

But then who will sing for us? Who will dance for us? Who will remind us of our relationship to the earth?

Who will tell our stories?

The one about Coyote and the Ducks, for instance.

Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to your children. Turn it into a play. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.