is falling on me like a private Niagara Falls in my soul. I'm not trying to dissuade you from coming up here, Rosita, no. I'm only trying to tell you about the pleasure one can find here and also tell you that everything has an end. (For some peculiar reason these two seem to go together; it's hard to distinguish between them.) But most importantly, I am trying to tell you about all those things we leave behind.

Only yesterday, Ali, my neighbour, asked me if by any chance I had a flask of pills or a gun of some kind. I guess he hasn't got someone like you in his hometown he could write about the wonders of this land that grows more foreign as time goes by. Forever yours,

Ramon Rascacielos (Ramon Skyscraper)

THOMAS KING

(b. 1943)

Although the question of what it means to be Indian is not the one that concerns Thomas King as much personally as he says in an interview, it is an important question in his fiction. Because it's a question that other people always ask. It's part of that demand for authenticity with which I'm familiar. It's the question that Native people have to put up with. And it's also the one that we get beaten with: 'Are you a good enough Indian to speak as an Indian?'

King's treatment of these questions relies formally on both the Native oral storytelling and the Western narrative traditions, thus reflecting his life and personal heritage. The son of a mother of Greek and German origins, and a Cherokee father, King was born in Oklahoma, but he doesn't think of Oklahoma as home. If I think of any place as home, it's the Alberta prairies, where I spent ten years with the Blackfoot people. Although he is both a Canadian and an American citizen, King thinks of himself as a Canadian writer because that's where he wrote most of his work. If anything, his double citizenship and mixed heritage—With my good, he's an American—could have made him all the more aware of borders—between countries, between Native and white people, between men and women, between urban Natives and Native living on reserves. As he says, for Native people, 'identity comes from community, and it varies from community to community. I wouldn't define myself as an Indian in the same way that someone living on a reserve would. That whole idea of Indian' becomes, in part, a construct. It's fluid. We make it up as we go along.'

King, who holds a Ph.D. in English and American Studies from the University of Utah, was professor of Native Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, for ten years, where he had an enormous impact on young Native writers and began writing creatively himself. Subsequently, he was professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he also served as Chair of the Department. Before joining the Department of English at Guelph University, King lived in Toronto (1993-94) where he was Story Editor for The Four Directions, a CBC-TV dramatic production about Native people. King, whose short stories and poems have appeared in many literary magazines in Canada, was the editor of the special issue of Canadian Fiction Magazine (1987) on Native writers, and of All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Writing (1990).

King's first book was the novel Medicine River (1990), which has been dramatized by CBC-TV. It was followed by a children's book, Coyote Columbus Story (1992), which won him his first Governor General's Award nomination. His second nomination came with the publication of his second novel, Green Grass, Running Water (1993). His short stories have been collected in One Good Story, That One (1993).

King's fiction, as is the case with the story that follows, illustrates that the range of 'Indian' is not as narrow as many people try to make it. Through the Coyote trickster figure, which he often uses as a 'laid clown', through puns, which he has learned from telling stories and to Native people, and through humor—"Comedy," he says, "is simply my strategy"—King has proven himself to be one of the most innovative and popular Canadian Native writers.

THE ONE ABOUT COYOTE GOING WEST

This one is about Coyote. She was going west. Visiting her relatives. That's what she said. You got to watch that one. Tricky one. Full of bad business. No, no, no, that one isn't. It's just visiting. Going to see Raven.
Boy, I say. That's another tricky one.

Coyote comes by my place. She wag her tail. Make them happy noises. Sit on my porch. Look around. With them teeth. With that smile. Coyote put her nose in my tea. My good tea.

Get that nose out of my tea, I says. I'm going to see my friends, she says. Tell those stories. Fix this world. Straighten it up.

Oh boy, pretty scary that, Coyote fix the world, again. Sit down, I says. Eat some food. Hard work that, fix up the world. Maybe you have a song. Maybe you have a good joke.

Sure, says Coyote. That one wink her ear. Lick her whiskers.

I took my feet under that chair. Got to hide my toes. Sometimes that tricky one leave her skin sit in that chair. Coyote skin. No Coyote. Sneak around. Bite them toes. Make you jump.

I been reading those books, she says. You must be one smart Coyote, I says. You bet, she says.

Maybe you got a good story for me, I says.

I been reading about that history, says Coyote. She sticks that nose back in my tea. And about who found us Indians.

Ho, I says. Like those old ones. Them ones are the best. You tell me your story, I says. Maybe some biscuits will visit us. Maybe some moose-meat stew come along, listen to your story.

Okay, she says and she sings her story song.

Snow's on the ground the snakes are asleep.

Snow's on the ground my voice is strong.

Snow's on the ground the snakes are asleep.

She spins like that. With that tail, wagging. With that smile. Sitting there.

Maybe I tell you the one about Eric the Lucky and the Vikings play hockey for the Oddsmen, find us Indians in Newfoundland, she says. Maybe I tell you the one about Christopher Cutter looking for something good to eat. Find us Indians in a restaurant in Montreal. Maybe I tell you the one about Jacques Columbus come along that river. Indians waiting for him. We all wave and say, here we are, here we are.


No, no, no, says that Coyote. I read these ones in that old book.

Ho, I says. You are trying to bite my toes. Everyone knows who found us Indians. Eric the Lucky and that Christopher Cutter and that Jacques Columbus come along later. Those ones get lost. Float about. Walk around. Get rain up. Ho, ho, ho, ho, those ones cry, we are lost. So we got to find them. Help them out. Feed them. Show them around. Boy, I says. Bad mistake that one.
But that's not what Coyote sings. She sings a song to make the mistake smaller. It's that mistake that she can't sing. And that one jumps up and down on Coyote until she is happy. Then that one leaps out of that hole, waddles around looking for things to do.

Well, Coyote is feeling pretty bad, all that noise for coat full of stump holes. So she thinks hard, and she thinks about a healing song. And she tries to sing a healing song, but her mouth is in other places. So she tries harder and tries to sing that song through her nose. But that nose doesn't make any sound, just drip a lot. She tries to sing that song out of her ears, but those ears don't hear anything.

So, that silly one thinks real hard and tries to sing out her butt hole. Paas! Paas! That's what that butt hole says, and right away things don't smell so good in that hole. Paas! Paas! Boy, Coyote thinks. Something smells.

That Coyote lies there flat and practise and practice. Pretty soon, maybe two days, or maybe one year, she teach that butt hole to sing. That song. That healing song. So that butt hole sings that song. And Coyote begins to feel better. And Coyote don't feel so bad anymore. Paas! Paas! Things smell pretty bad, but Coyote is okay.

That one look around in that hole. Find her mouth. Put that mouth back. So, she says, that butt hole. Okay, you can stop singing now. You can stop making them smell now. But you know, that butt hole is liking all that singing, and so that butt hole keeps on singing.

Stop that, says Coyote. You are going to stink up the whole world. But it doesn't. So Coyote jumps out of that hole and runs across the prairies real fast. But that butt hole follows her. Paas! Paas! Coyote jumps into a lake, but that butt hole don't drown. It just keeps on singing.

Hey, who is doing all that singing, someone says.

Yes, and who is making that bad smell, says another voice.

It must be Coyote, says a third voice.

Yes, says a fourth voice. I believe it is Coyote.

That Coyote sit in her chair, put her nose in my tea, says, I know who that voice is. It is that big mistake playing a trick. Nothing else is made yet.

No, says a fifth voice. That mistake is doing other things. Then those voices are spirits, says Coyote.

No, says a sixth voice. They voices belong to them ducks.

Coyote stand up on my chair. Hey, she says, where did them ducks come from?

Calm down, says. This story is going to be okay. This story is doing just fine. The story knows where it is going. Sit down. Keep your skin on.

So.

Coyote look around, and she see them four ducks. In that lake. Ho, she says. What did you ducks come from?

Yes, says them ducks. We were waiting around, but you didn't come. So we get tired of waiting. So we did it ourselves.

I was in a hole, says Coyote.

Paas! Paas!

What's that noise, says them ducks. What's that bad smell?

Never mind, says Coyote. Maybe you've seen something go by. Maybe you can help me find something I lost. Maybe you can help me get it back.

These ducks swim around and talk to themselves. Was it something awful to look at?

Yes, says Coyote. It certainly was.

Was it something with ugly feet?

Yes, says Coyote. I think it had that, too.

Was it something that made a lot of noise, sake them ducks.

Yes, it was pretty noisy, says Coyote.

Did it smell bad, them ducks want to know.

Yes, says Coyote. I guess you ducks have seen my something.

Yes, says them ducks. It is right there behind you.

So that Coyote turn around, and there is nothing there.

It's still behind you, says those ducks.

Coyote turn around again but she don't see anything.

Paas! Paas!

Boy, says those ducks. What a noise! What a smell! They say that, too. What an ugly thing with all that fur.

Never mind, says that Coyote. That is not what I'm looking for. I'm looking for something else.

Maybe you're looking for Indians, says those ducks.

Well, that Coyote is real surprised because she hasn't created Indians, either. Boy, says that one, mischief is everywhere. This world is getting bent.

All right.

So Coyote and those ducks are talking, and pretty soon they hear a noise. And pretty soon there is something coming. And those ducks says, oh, oh, oh. They say that like they see trouble, but it is not trouble. What comes along is a river.

Hello, says that river. Nice day. Maybe you want to take a swim. But Coyote don't want to swim, and she looks at that river and she looks at that river again. Something's not right here, she says. Where are those rocks? Where are those rapids? What did you do with them waterfalls? How come you're so straight?

And Coyote is right. That river is nice and straight and smooth without any bumps or twists. It runs both ways, too, not like a modern river.

We got to fix this, says Coyote, and she does. She puts some rocks in that river, and she fixes it so it only runs one way. She puts a couple of waterfalls in and makes a bunch of rapids where things get shallow fast.

Coyote is tired with all this work, and those ducks are tired just watching. So that Coyote sits down. So she closes her eyes. So she puts her nose in her tail. So those ducks there, wake up, wake up! Something big is heading this way! And they are right.

Mountain come sliding along, whistling. Real happy mountain. Nice and round. This mountain is full of grapes and other good things to eat. Apples, peaches, cherries. Howdy-doo says that polite mountain, nice day for whistling.

Coyote looks at that mountain, and that one shakes her head. Oh, no, she says, this mountain is all wrong. How come you're so nice and round? Where are those craggy peaks? Where are them cliffs? What happened to all that snow? Boy, we got to fix this thing too. So she does.

Grandfather, grandfather, says that Coyote, sit in my chair put her nose in my tea.
But that's not what Coyote sings. She sings a song to make the mistake smaller. She mistakes her ears. And that mistake grabs Coyote's nose. And that one pulls out of his mouth so she can't sing. And that one jumps up and down on Coyote until she is.

Then that one leaves out of that hole, wanders around looking for things to do.

Well, Coyote is feeling pretty bad, all that eerie nose cover full of stumpy holes, so she thinks hard, and she thinks about a healing song. And she tries to sing a healing song, to her mouth is in other places. So she thinks harder and tries to sing that song through her nose. But that nose don't make any sound, just drip a lot. She tries to sing that song, and her ears, but those ears don't hear anything.

So, that silly one thinks real hard and tries to sing out her butt hole. Pass! Pass! That is what that butt hole says, and right away things don't smell so good in that hole. Pass! Pass! Coyote thinks, something smells.

That Coyote lies there flat and precise and precise. Pretty soon, maybe two days, maybe one year, she teaches that butt hole to sing. That song. That healing song. So she butt hole sings that song. And Coyote begins to feel better. And Coyote don't feel so bad anymore. Pass! Pass! Things smell pretty bad, but Coyote is okay.

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No, I says, That mistake is doing other things. Then those voices are spirits, says Coyote.

No, I says. Those voices belong to them ducks.

Coyote stand up on my chair. Hey, she says, where did them ducks come from?

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So, Coyote look around, and she see them four ducks. In that lake. Ho, she says. What did you ducks come from?

Yes, says them ducks. We was waiting around, but you didn't come. So we got tired of waiting. So we did it ourselves.

I was in a hole, says Coyote.


What is that noise, says them ducks. What is that bad smell?

Never mind, says Coyote. Maybe you've seen something go by. Maybe you can help me find something I lost. Maybe you can help me get it back.

Those ducks swim around and talk to themselves. Was it something awful to look at?

Yes, says Coyote, it certainly was.

Was it something with ugly feet?

Yes, says Coyote. I think it had that, too.

Was it something that made a lot of noise, ask them ducks.

Yes, it was pretty noisy, says Coyote.

Did it smell bad, them ducks want to know.

Yes, says Coyote. I guess you ducks have seen my something.

Yes, says them ducks. It is right there behind you.

So that Coyote turn around, and there is nothing there.

It's still behind you, says those ducks.

So Coyote turn around again but she don't see anything.

Pass! Pass!

Boy, says those ducks. What a noise! What a smell! They say that, too. What an ugly thing with all that fur!

Never mind, says that Coyote again. That is not what I'm looking for. I'm looking for something else.

Maybe you're looking for Indians, says those ducks.

Well, that Coyote is real surprised because she hasn't created Indians, either. Boy, says that one, mischief is everywhere. This world is getting bent.

All right.

So Coyote and those ducks are talking, and pretty soon they hear a noise. And pretty soon there is something coming. And those ducks say, oh, oh, oh. They say that like they see trouble, but it is not trouble. What comes along is a river.

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Coyote looks at that mountain, and that one shakes her head. Oh, no, she says, this mountain is all wrong. How come you're so nice and round? Where are those rough places? Where are all them cliffs? What happened to all that snow? Boy, we got to fix this thing too. So she does.

Grandfather, grandfather, says that Coyote, sit in my chair put her nose in my tea.
Why is that Coyote changing all those good things?
That is a real sly one, ask me that question. I look at those eyes. Grab them.
Squeeze that nose. Hey, let go my nose, that Coyote says.
Okay I says, Coyote still in Coyote skin. I bet you know why Coyote changes
happy river. Why she change that mountain sliding along whistling.
So, says Coyote, look around my house, lick her lips, make them baby nice.
Maybe it's because she is mean, I says.
Oh, no, says Coyote. That one is sweet and kind.
Maybe it's because that one is not too smart.
Oh, no, says Coyote. That Coyote is very wise.
Maybe it's because she made a mistake.
Oh, no, says Coyote. She made one of those already.
All right, I says. Then Coyote must be doing the right thing. She must be fixing
the world so it is perfect.
Yes, says Coyote. That must be it. What does that brilliant one do next?
Everyone knows what Coyote does next, I says. Little babies know what Coyote does
next.
Oh no, says Coyote. I have never heard this story. You are a wonderful storyteller. You
tell me your good Coyote story.
Boy, you got to watch that one all the time. Hide their toes.
Well, I says, Coyote thinks about that river. And she thinks about that mountain. And
she thinks somebody is flooding around. So she goes looking around. She goes looking in
that one who is messing up the world.
She goes to the north, and there is nothing. She goes to the south, and there is nothing
there either. She goes to the east, and there is still nothing there. She goes to the west,
and there is a pile of snow tires.
And there is some television. And there is some vacuum cleaners. And there is
a bunch of panty hose. And there is an air humidifier. And there is a big mistake sitting
Hello, says that mistake. Maybe you want a hydraulic jack.
No, says that Coyote, I don't want one of them. But she don't tell that mistake what
she wants because she don't want to miss her mouth again. But when she thinks about
being flat and full of stomch holes, that hurt hole wakes up and begins to sing. Page 259.
What's that noise? says that big mistake.
I'm looking for Indians, says that Coyote, real quick. Have you seen any?
What's that bad smell?
Never mind, says Coyote. Maybe you have some Indians around here.
I got some toaster ovens, says that mistake.
We don't need that stuff, says Coyote. You got to stop making all those things. You're
going to fill up the world.
Maybe you want a computer with a colour monitor. That mistake keeps looking
through that book and those things keep landing in piles all around Coyote.
Stop, stop, cries Coyote. Golf cart lands on her foot. Golf balls bounce off her head.

These are good things, says that mistake. We need these things to make up the world.

One is going to need this stuff.

Don't ask any Indians, says Coyote.

That mistake can see that that's right. Maybe we better make some Indians, says
that mistake. So that one looks in that catalogue, but it don't have any Indians. And
they don't know how to do that either. She has already made four things.

We made four things already, she says. I got to have help.

We can help, says some voices and it is those ducks come swimming along. We can
make Coyote Indians, says that white duck. Yes, we can do that, says that green duck.
We have been thinking about this, says that blue duck. We have a plan, says that red
duck.

Well, that Coyote don't know what to do. So she tells them ducks to go ahead because
anyway is pretty long and it's getting late and everyone wants to go home.

You still awake, I says to Coyote. You still here?
Oh yes, grandmother, says Coyote. What do those clever ducks do?
So I tells Coyote that those ducks lay some eggs. Ducks do that, you know. That white
duck lay an egg, and it is blue. That red duck lay an egg, and it is green. That blue duck
lay an egg, and it is red. That green duck lay an egg, and it is white.

Come on, says those ducks. We got to sing a song. We got to go a dance. So they do
Coyote and that big mistake and those four ducks dance around the eggs. So they dance
and sing for a long time, and pretty soon Coyote gets hungry.

I know this dance, she says, but you got to close your eyes when you do it or nothing
will happen. You got to close your eyes tight. Okay, says those ducks. We can do that.

And they do. And that big mistake closes its eyes, too.

But Coyote, she don't close her eyes, and all of them start dancing again, and Coyote
dances up close to that white duck, and she grabs that white duck by her neck.
When Coyote grabs that duck, that duck flaps its wings, and that big mistake hears the
noise and opens them eyes. Say, says that big mistake, that's not the way the dance goes.
By golly, you're right, says Coyote, and she lets that duck go. I am getting it mixed up
with another dance.

So they start to dance again. And Coyote is very hungry, and she grabs that blue duck,
and she grabs his wings, too. But Coyote's stomach starts to make hungry noises, and that
mistake opens them eyes and see Coyote with the blue duck. Hey, says that mistake, you
got yourself mixed up again.

That's right, says Coyote, and she drops that duck and straightens out that neck. It
sure is good you're around to help me with this dance.

They all start that dance again, and, this time, Coyote grabs the green duck real quick
and tries to stuff it down that greedy throat, and there is nothing hanging out but their
yellow duck feet. But those feet are flapping in Coyote's eyes, and she can't see where she is
going, and she bumps into the big mistake and the big mistake turns around to see what
has happened.

He, says that big mistake, you can't see where you're going with them yellow duck
feet flapping in your eyes, and that mistake pulls that green duck out of Coyote's
throat. You could hurt yourself dancing like that.
You are a good friend, look after me like that, says Coyote. Those ducks start to dance again, and Coyote dances with them, but that red sky, says, we better dance with one eye open, so we can help Coyote with this dance. So Coyote dance some more, and, then, those eggs begin to move around, and those eggs crack open. And if you look hard, you can see something inside those eggs.

I know, I know, says that Coyote, jump up and down and on my chair, shake up my pot of tea. Indians come out of those eggs. I remember this story, now. Inside those eggs were Indians Coyote been looking for.

No, I says. You are one crazy Coyote. What comes out of those duck eggs are baby ducks. You better sit down, I says. You may fall and hurt yourself. You may spill my tea. You may fall on top of this story and make it flat.

Where are the Indians? says that Coyote. This story was about how Coyote found the Indians. Maybe the Indians are in the eggs with the baby ducks.

No, I says, nothing in those eggs but little baby ducks. Indians will be along in a while. Don’t lose your skin.

So, When those ducks see what has come out of the eggs, they says, boy, we didn’t get them quite right. We better try that again. So they do. They lay them eggs. They dance the dance. They sing that song. Those eggs crack open and out comes some more baby ducks.

By golly, says those four ducks. We got more ducks than we need. I guess we get too many ducks in.

And so they do that. Before Coyote or that big mistake can mess things up, those four ducks turn into Indians, two women and two men. Good-looking Indians, too. They don’t look at all like ducks any more.

But those duck-Indians aren’t too happy. They look at each other and they begin to cry. This is pretty disgusting, they says. All this ugly skin. All those bumpy bones. All that awful black hair. Where are our nice soft feathers? Where are our beautiful feet? What happened to our wonderful wings? It’s probably all that Coyote’s fault because he didn’t do the dance right, and those four duck-Indians come over and stomp all over Coyote, until he is flat like before. Then they leave. That big mistake leave, too. And that Coyote, she starts to think about a healing song.

Paht, Paah.

That’s it, I says, I is done.

But what happens to Coyote, says Coyote. That wonderful one is still flat.

Some of these stories are flat, I says. That’s what happens when you try to fix the world. This world is pretty good all by itself. Best to leave it alone. Stop messing around with it.

I better get going, says Coyote. I will tell Raven your good story. We are going to fix this world for sure. We know how to do it now. We know how to do it right.

So, Coyote drinks my tea and that one leave. And I can talk anymore because I got to watch the sky. Got to watch out for falling things that land in piles. When that Coyote’s wandering around looking to fix things, nobody in this world is safe.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE

MICHAEL ONDAATJE was nine years old when in 1943, his family moved from its home in Sri Lanka to a house in England. As he says, "I was part of that colonial migration of sending your kids off to school in England," and then you were supposed to go to Oxford or Cambridge and get a blue in tennis and return. But I never went to Oxford or Cambridge. I didn’t get a blue, and I didn’t need it.

Instead, Ondaatje moved to Canada in 1960 to attend Bishop’s University, and subsequently the University of Toronto where he received his B.A. in English (1965).

Immediately after he received his M.A. (1967) from York University, he began teaching in the English Department, University of Western Ontario, and in 1971 he joined the faculty of Glendon College, York University, with which he is still affiliated as a professor.

As a poet, novelist, critic, and documentary filmmaker, Ondaatje sees himself as belonging to the generation of writers that was the first of the native migration that still is alive and working.

"People," he says, "are a part of our human nature. They are part of our history. They are part of our culture. They are part of our language." This language is the key to understanding Ondaatje’s work. His writing is a way of connecting with the past and the present, of exploring the human experience.

Ondaatje’s work is characterized by a deep sense of place and a love of language. His writing is informed by his experiences in Sri Lanka and Canada, and his work reflects a sense of the interconnectedness of all things.

Ondaatje has published over 20 books, including novels, poetry, and non-fiction. His works have been translated into many languages and have been widely acclaimed both in Canada and around the world. Ondaatje’s newest novel, "The English Patient," was published in 1992 and has been translated into over 30 languages.

Ondaatje’s work is a testament to the power of language and the importance of storytelling. Through his writing, Ondaatje has opened up a window into the past and has given us a glimpse of the human experience in all its complexity and richness.