kiyâm
Mingling Voices draws on the work of both new and established poets, novelists, and writers of short stories. The series especially, but not exclusively, aims to promote authors who challenge traditions and cultural stereotypes. It is designed to reach a wide variety of readers, both generalists and specialists. Mingling Voices is also open to literary works that delineate the immigrant experience in Canada.

Give us wholeness, for we are broken.
But who are we asking, and why do we ask?
— Phyllis Webb

Poems for a Small Park
E.D. Blodgett

Dreamwork
Jonathan Locke Hart

Windfall Apples: Tanka and Kyoka
Richard Stevenson

The dust of just beginning
Don Kerr

Roy & Me: This Is Not a Memoir
Maurice Yacowar

Zeus and the Giant Iced Tea
Leopold McGinnis

Musing
Jonathan Locke Hart

Praha
E.D. Blodgett

Dustship Glory
Andreas Schroeder

The Kindness Colder Than the Elements
Charles Noble

The Metabolism of Desire:
The Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti
Translated by David R. Slavitt

kiyâm
Naomi McIlwraith
kiyâm

poems by Naomi McIlwraith
For my family: those who came before, those who will come after, those who are nearby, and those who are far away, but especially for my parents, Lavona Lillian McIlwraith and the late Mowat Edgar McIlwraith.

ay hay!
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I mean no wrong in writing
or speaking your language. I mean
to understand you on your terms,
in your words.

NAOMI McILWRAITH

kiyâm is a beautiful and contentious collection that explores the ways in which a writer may speak stories from a world many consider her not part of, but one to which she is spiritually very close. Naomi McIlwraith addresses these concerns through her poetry and its liminal navigations of the borders between English and Cree, between written and spoken texts. She brings to the forefront her concerns about voice and the right to speak certain stories, but rather than allowing voice to become something that circumscribes and limits her, she attempts to represent a variety of histories and stories in a respectful manner and with a careful ear for the essential musicality of language. She engages with an intersection of cultures and histories in a way that pays great honour to all these histories and to the overarching power of the personal narrative — in her case, the one connecting strand that pulls all of her divergent worlds together. McIlwraith strives to engage with each of her worlds with understanding, but she is also wry, humorous, and deeply honest. Her voice is a clear and engaging one, navigating the uneasy waters of translation/transliteration with care and grace.
kiyâm is a direct engagement with European literary tradition and the history/baggage of the written word, held up against the oral tradition of the First Nations and Métis. The collection provides an intriguing view of a woman and a writer treading the pathways between those worlds, knowing that certain stories are in danger of being lost and that moving them from the oral world to the written world is one of the most certain ways of preserving them, yet knowing at the same time that this move alters their essential meaning and form.

This is an important collection in its negotiation of two vastly different linguistic worlds. Possessing a deep-felt respect, as well as many moments of startling beauty, kiyâm is a collection that is sure to challenge and inspire, and, most certainly, to resonate.

JENNA BUTLER
the sounds of plains cree:
a guide to pronunciation

Drawing on the scholarship of Arok Wolvengrey, Jean Okimâsis, and others at the Cree Editing Council in Saskatchewan, as well as on that of Freda Ahenakew and H. Christoph Wolfart, I have used the Standard Roman Orthography (SRO) to represent the sounds of nêhiyawêwin, the Plains Cree language. The work of these scholars has contributed greatly to the accurate preservation of Plains Cree pronunciation. The description below is based on Okimâsis and Wolvengrey’s How to Spell It in Cree, especially chapter 3, “What to Use to Spell in Cree.”

Plains Cree has ten consonants: \(c, b, k, m, n, p, s, t, w, \) and \(y\). The consonants \(b, m, n, s, w, \) and \(y\) sound very similar to their counterparts in English. The consonants \(c, k, p, \) and \(t, \) however, differ from their English counterparts.

The letter \(c\) most commonly represents the \(ts\) sound we hear in the English word “bats,” although in some dialects or regional variations of Plains Cree, the \(c\) sounds more like the \(ch\) in “batch.” In contrast to English, the \(c\) never represents the sound of a \(k\) (“call”) or an \(s\) (“cinnamon”).

The letter \(k\) sounds like the \(k\) in “skate,” falling roughly between the \(k\) in “Kate” and the \(g\) in “gate.”

The letter \(p\) sounds like the \(p\) in “spit,” falling roughly between the \(p\) in “pit” and the \(b\) in “bit.”
The letter t sounds like the t in “steal,” falling roughly between the t in “teal” and the d in “deal.”

Plains Cree has three short vowels (a, i, o) and four long vowels (â, i, ô, and ê).

a sounds like the English a in “above” and the English u in “upheaval,” but never like the u in “use” or “put”

â sounds somewhat like the English a in “rather” or the a in the word “father” if it were spoken with an Irish accent (Okimâsis and Wolvengrey, 7)

i sounds like the English i in “pit” or “mitt,” but never like the i in “pine” or “mine”

î sounds like the English i in “nectarine,” but never like the i in “fine”

o sounds like the English o in “only” or the oo in “foot” or the u in “put”

ô sounds like the English o in “toe” or oa in “coat,” and sometimes like the oo in “moose”

ê sounds like the English ay in “bay” or ai in “grain.” The vowel ê has no short counterpart.

The “h-consonant” cluster, as Okimâsis and Wolvengrey call it, occurs whenever an h precedes any consonant C. It has a significant effect on the vowel that precedes the h, in most cases equalizing the difference between long and short. This means that it can be very
difficult to distinguish between a short and a long vowel before an $hC$ cluster.

Plains Cree has distinct and predictable patterns of stress, which are quite independent of vowel length. Two-syllable words generally place the stress on the last or ultimate syllable, as in $pêyak$ (pay *yuk*) or $atim$ (uh *tim*). Words with three or more syllables place the greatest stress on the third to last, or antepenultimate, syllable, as in $awâsis$ (uh *waa sis*) or $awâsisak$ (uh *waa* sis suk). Words of five or more syllables place a slight secondary stress on every second syllable preceding the antepenultimate syllable. For example, $nitâniskotâpân$ is pronounced “ni *taa nis ko* taa paan.” These patterns of stress lend a melodic quality to Plains Cree speech that makes the language very pleasurable to hear.

Readers interested in learning more about Plains Cree grammar and pronunciation will find a variety of sources listed in the bibliography. This book is also accompanied by an audio version, available on the AU Press website.
kiyâm
FAMILY POEMS
The Road to Writer’s Block (A Poem to Myself)

Turn left at desire. Take this burden
and never let go. Cling
as a burr latches onto fleece.
Be sure that your load includes
the self-imposed responsibility to learn
a threatened language: namely nêhiyawêwin.
Go home: kîwê.
Head north: kîwêtinohk itohtê.
Take a route unknown to you.
Do not plan too far
into the future. Do step forth with mute
naïveté. Invent a folktale so fantastic it can’t
be disbelieved. Do this in the same way
you would mould green truth from fact, tender
as the first prairie crocus — wâpikwanîs.

The story must tell of your entitlement:
your right to write
poetry in this native tongue. Approach
this task without foresight,
as you would a one-way street on a dark night,
backwards: naspâci.
Entitlement: a provocative word
when it comes to language and culture,
a word so easily twisted to mean ownership. Worry about this enough that it becomes humiliating. Try reading and writing your second mother tongue before listening and speaking. Forget that poetry and Cree were spoken before written. Forget this as you might your toothbrush, aspirins, or first-aid kit. Forget not your Cree dictionaries, because for all your literacy your aural memory will be poor when you see the words in print, twenty-five or even fifty times. Bear the millstone of language loss the way a woman drags home the last buffalo: *paskwâwi-mostos*, as you confront the colonial tongue. *âkayâsimowin*: the only patois you’ll ever perform with any finesse.

Learn how you’ve not learned another mother tongue, well, a father tongue: Scots Gaelic. Never mind provisions other than baggage so heavy it will take you years to reach your destination. Don’t forget your heaviest tool,
a wrench to repair the damage you wrought
in admonishing your father for speaking
in code: namely nêhiyawêwin.
Take a course so meandering you’ll forget
where you’re going. Learn the Latin terms,
and then forget them,
for beauty you’ll behold before
even considering their Cree existence:
pelicans, bitterns, Great Blue herons, mergansers.
Now, write these bird words in nêhiyawêwin:
cahcahiwak, môhkâhâsiwak, misi-môhkâhâsiwak, asihkwak.

Detour around decades of indifference
until you’re so far past puberty
that learning a second language disorients
you the way adolescence
attacks all its victims,
the way an overturned canoe crashes
through wild rapids.
Become so encumbered procrastination
offers your only reprieve. Argue with your sister
with such intensity she is moved
to leave a message on your answering machine,
how she couldn’t sleep last night: a wrangle
about history and pioneers and Indians, the *Indian Act* and racism and loss. Argue from the passenger seat of her parked car, so ferociously you can’t quite separate one issue from the other, or even remember what your position is. Fathom your frustration. Negotiate an awkward amnesty two nights later in a telephone conversation, but contemplate your confusion as a monk might meditate on meaning.

Once you find your way back to a quest choked with bus fumes, stinging nettles, and inarticulateness, ruminate on your lack of fluency:

*namōya nipakaski-nêhiyawân.*

Embark on this pilgrimage in the midst of your father’s passing. Start a poem for your father, two weeks after he dies, and title it *tawâw,* but leave it for a year because it’s just too hard to write. Tell Cree people why you,
a mônîyâskwêw,
try to write poetry in Cree and English. Tell
them in nêhiyawêwin as they lean
toward your crude Cree, trying
to understand, trying to give you some of their loss.
Speak these words, over and over, rehearsing them until you know
you sound fluent:

ninôhtê-nêhiyawân ayisk ê-ki-pakaskit nohtâwîpan. ayiki-sâkahikanihk
obci wiya mâka môya ê-ki-nêhiyâwit, ki-mônîyâwiw.
êkwa mîna ê-âpihtawikosisâniskwêwit nikâwiy.

Say these words because they’re the most important. Consider
your mother’s experience, because she’s old enough to want
not to talk about being Métis. Study
the boundaries of the Métis National Council and then
don’t worry about them because they’re just like
four first-place ribbons at a local track meet. Stop
short of immersing yourself in a Cree community, the most
effective means of achieving fluency.

Learn about Cree syllabics:

Become so literate

you can teach them and maybe even
Standard Roman Orthography,
but don’t expect fluency in a classroom.
When you write that word—

cahkipéhikanak,
doubt your tongue and consult your grammar
guide yet again just to make sure
you got the plural suffix right. Now quit
doubting yourself because your tongue remembers.

Take on transcribing and transliterating
a Catholic prayer book—written entirely
in Cree syllabics—that takes
only God knows how long to complete,
agreeing to translate the last fifty pages:
hand-numbing, elbow-aching, mind-worrying,
tongue-stuttering work as you labour over the words
in their strange Oblate orthography. Trust
only Dorothy, awa iskwêw é-miyo-ôtêmimisk êkwa ê-pakaskit,
and Jean and Arok from Saskatchewan
to verify your work.

Discover that you’re a visual learner,
not aural. Then read everything written
about language and culture and with a certain innocence
partake in Indian identity and language politics
always brooding over Cree poetics.
Take so many Cree classes you lose count. But
kiskinohamâkosi tânisi ka-isi-nêhiyaw-akihcikéyan:
pêyak, nîso, nîsto…

You cannot circumvent this unbeaten path, cannot skirt
the boulders and roots and loneliness of this mission.
But remember pen and paper anyway:
you’ll need them each time you learn a new Cree word.
Then throw away your writing materials: wêpina,
or stuff them so far down into your grizzled,
arthritic backpack they’ll be too deep to dig out.
Now listen.
nîtohta êkwa.
Listen hard.
nâkatobké.
Listen to these Cree words, these beautiful Cree words:
nîtohta ôbi nêhiyaw itwêwina, ôbi kâ-katawasisiki nêhiyaw itwêwina.
Maybe then you’ll become not so much
a fluent Cree speaker but
a fluent Cree listener.

But hurry! You haven’t much time.
mâka kakwêyâho! mōya kitaŵipayihikon.
Trademark Translation

“Dad,” I ask, enthralled by the irony of our identity, “How would you say, ‘My wife is Métis,’ in Cree?” Without hesitation, with skin as pale as mine, Dad looks straight into my eyes, the colour of the North Saskatchewan sky, says with the ease and contraction of a fluent speaker, “nit’skwêm ap’sis nêhiyaw.” He knows I understand, knows Mom doesn’t. Then despite hair white and downy as a whisper, twenty-one, a young man again, he ducks his head and turns toward Mom, his eyes the colour of the aspen parkland in autumn, hers the colour of warm Saskatchewan loam. He looks into them to translate with his trademark grin, “My woman is a little bit Cree.”
Why is it called Seneca root? Why, for so long, have I only known it as Seneca root? When will I learn to see it on the prairie? Will there be any prairie left even to look for Seneca root? Who brought this name—Seneca root—forward? As Grandma pulled that Seneca root on the wild Saskatchewan grassland surrounding Bankend, which is, by the way, on the map but not in the dictionary, she knew what it was good for, but did she know it as Seneca root or as mînisîhkês? She was born too late to witness the stamping, steaming, heavy-breathing, massive, mammal-smelling buffalo, but did she know the Cree called them paskwâwi-mostoswak? Did she taste paskwâwi-mostosowiyâs growing up there on that boundless plain? If the prairie is called paskwâw, a cow mostos, and a buffalo paskwâwi-mostos—prairie cow—which came first, the buffalo, the cow, or the prairie? Does it really matter? êha! Yes, because if Grandma didn’t know the word for grandma—nôhkom—and buffalo—paskwâwi-mostos—that’s where it started. Or ended. Why do I have to look up Seneca root in the English-Cree dictionary to find mînisîhkês and then again on the internet to find out what it’s good for? What disguises itself as twisted coincidence in my sore throat and sneezing this cold February morning as I ponder this? Wasn’t Seneca some Greek sophist, and if a snake in Cree is kinêpik and Seneca root is also known as snake root, how
on God’s good green ground did a Roman rhetorician end up on the Saskatchewan prairie — *paskwâhk* — in Plains Cree country — *paskwâwiyininâhk* — where the Plains Cree — *paskwâwiyiniwak* — spoke, speak the Plains Cree language — *è-paskwâwimocik*? How many of the Plains Cree people spoke Ojibwe — *nahkawêwin* — or Assiniboine — *pwâsimowin*. *tânitahto aniki paskwâwiyiniwak kâ-nêhiyâwicik ki-nahkawêwak abpô ci kî-pwâsimowak*? How did the big, open prairie — *ôma kâ-paskwâk* — become so unilingually, monolingually unknowing? *tânêhki êkâ kâ-ki-kiskêyimâcik anibi iyiniwa ôki opitatowêwak*? And how is it that I’ve finally come to realize — to hear — how *kâ-ki-kiskêyimâcik* — “they knew them” — sounds so very much like *kâ-ki-kistêyimâcik* — “they held them in high regard”? Wouldn’t that have been a better history? If we really know each other then we can really respect each other: *kîspin tâpwê kiskêyimitoyahki tâpwê ka-ki-kistêyimitonânaw*. Why do I learn at forty-three, and not at twenty-three or thirteen, that Grandma’s grandparents were Ojibwa? Are some stories that hard to tell? Was Grandma Cree? Ojibwa? White? *éha, êkwa nôhkomipan mina ê-kî-nihtâ-mônabicêpihkêt.*
You died, Dad, and the skies darkened as an eclipse extinguishes the day, pushes the sun into the ground.

But soon enough I hear you echo. And you shine clear as the Leaf-Falling Moon.

I tell everyone your story, how you spoke Cree so well, so brilliantly I say, As if you are a colour shimmering keenly as those ghosts who dance, ablaze in the northern sky.
Red like the sky as the sun retires, 
	tâpiskóc kâ-mihkwaskâk ispîhk 
kâ-pabhkisimok. Yellow, when 
the sun emerges from slumber, 
dawn beckons from a distance, osâwinâkwan 
tâpiskóc ispîhk è-pé-sâkâstêk. 
Green, deepened as a forest 
by winter’s interlude, 
askihtakoskâw 
wâwîs kâ-pipohk. 
Lucid as the hues in heaven 
when kisê-manitow opens 
the gates for you, 
pakaski-kihci-kisikohk 
ispîhk è-yôhtépitamâsk 
kihci-kisikowi-yôhténawêwina 
kisê-manitow. 
I am told not to look osâm 
è-cîpayâmatisoyân ispîhk 
kiya è-cîpayikawiyân 
kâ-pakaski-nîmihitoyan 
mâka kîpêhtâtîn 
è-cistâwêyan âkwa 
è-pakaskihtâkosiyân.
tawàw  ➔  There Is Room, Always Room for One More

Mom tells the story of how
you didn’t barge in, how
you waited until the other guy
didn’t even know what he had lost,
how you told him
you were an opportunist
moving in where others leave room.

You saw the space,
saw lots of room for living.

You asked her and she said, “Yes.”
There you were, the two of you,
your life to fashion together.
Lots of room, but no directions,
so off you went stepping gently,
leaving just enough of a trace
and just enough room
for others to follow.

è-ki-tawatahamèk.
Along we all came, your children, grandparents, foster children, cats, kittens, too many to count, even a bird or two once or twice: you and Mom cleared a space for all of us.

*kiya êkwa nikâwinân ê-ki-tawinamawiyåhk.*

There was so much space around me I couldn’t see it until, your circle complete, you made more space.

*ayiwâk nawac kiki-tawinikân.*

There was room in your mind for this Cree language

*ôma nêhiyawêwin,*

for this Cree culture

*êkwa ôma nêhiyaw–isihcikêwin,*

but I didn’t hear you. Too busy, I wasn’t listening.

*ê-ki-otamihoyân êkosi móya kiki-pêhtåtin osâm móya ê-ki-nitohtâtân.*
Now, I wish I could have seen
and heard more,
*anohc ēkwa pitanè ka-kì-wâpahtamân
mina ka-kì-pêhtamân ayîwâk kikway*,
wish I could have been more open
to your special way of living,
*nimihtâtên ēkâ ê-kì-nâkatôhkêyân
pîtos kâ-kì-isi-waskawiyan.*

What do you think of me, Dad,
writing this in Cree?
Could there have been more room
for a Cree conversation,
for a Cree understanding,
for a daughter’s understanding
her father’s honour
in the space between, *tâwâyihk*,
your childhood and your passing.
Is it enough that I’ve
cleared a space on my desk
to light this candle for you?

Would that I could
have made more room.
*pitanè ayîwâk ka-kì-tawinamâtân.*
Perfect Not Perfect

**PAST PERFECT**
If I had understood
a bit of Cree,
a bit of how Cree
had shaped you, I might not
have misunderstood you.

*ahpô étikwê ka-ki-sôbki-kotêyihtamân ka-nitohtâtân.*

**PRESENT PERFECT**
I have tried
to make peace with my tribe
as a wise woman
once advised.

*ê-wîtisânihitoyahk ôma kiyânaw kiyawâw kâ-wâhkômiyêk.*

**FUTURE PERFECT**
When I finish this task I will
have learned not to frown, but to lean
into the perfect pitch of your speech:
your voice, Tamarack tympanum.

*nika-kakwê-tapahtéyimison nika-kakwê-wânaskân.*
Above your hospital bed a sign: 
*tawâw.*
An Irish chaplain visits us, 
reads the other sign: *Céad míle fáilte.*
A hundred thousand welcomes, she says, 
then tells us she learned Gaelic 
as a child. *tawâw* says the sign 
in the language you learned as a child, 
*nêhiyawéwin,* beside the Gaelic welcome.

She sings a song in Gaelic, 
about a little boat 
looking for a safe harbour, 
a haven with an opening. 
*tawâw,* just like the word says, 
there is room, always room for one more.

We float on this metaphor 
knowing that the Creator 
makes room for you.

*ê-tēhtapahipéyâhk*  
*nîpihk kâ-âstêkamik,*  
*ê-kiskéyimâyâhk kîsê-manitow*  
*kisikohk ê-tawinamâsk.*
You walk through the opening, 
having not walked for nearly a year. 
\textit{kisâpohtawêhtân}.

Relief comes slowly, gently,  
as an ending opens the beginning,  
as we know you surpassed your suffering.  
The Creator 
\textit{kisikohk ê-tawinamâsk}.

We hear this gracious  
Innkeeper beckoning,  
\textit{tawâw óta. maht èsa pihtokwê. óta ka-kì-aywêpin}.  
“There is room here. Please come in. You can rest here.”

The passage is open, safe.  
\textit{tawastêw}.
*pahkwēsikan ➞ Bread*

How Grandma baked the best bread between Red River Colony and Beaver Mountain House.

Dad approaching Grandma and Grandpa asking permission to marry their daughter. Because he loved Mom, loved Grandma’s bread, and maybe Grandma could speak a little Cree.

I only heard Grandma speak one Cree word. She baked the best bread west of Red River.

\[ê-ki-māh-māwaci-miyo-pahkwēsikanihkkēt\]
\[pahkisimotāhk isi\]
\[mihkwâkamīwi-sîpīhk ohci.\]

August 1975. Mom and Dad married nearly fifteen years and Grandpa passes on. Dad welcomes Grandma into his home thirteen years before it’s necessary. “When it’s time and you’re ready,” he says, “you have a home in our home.”
How Grandma baked all those dozens of loaves for Ack Hall and the Sigurdsons as a teenaged Métis girl on the wide Saskatchewan prairie. The way Ack Hall and the Sigurdsons find their way into this poem. Like the way Grandma took her bread-baking into Beaver Mountain House and Mom and Dad’s house.

ê-ki-mâh-mâwaci-miyo-pahkwësikanihkêt pahkisimotâhk isi mihkwâkamîwi-sîpîhk ohsi.

How Grandma didn’t trust the modern oven, electric heat faulty, by hook or by crook. She’d open the door and stick her arm in, testing the temperature, remembering the wood-warmth of Ack’s oven. Sixteen loaves at a time, her house, and now Mom and Dad’s house, a big bread oven emanating heat and yeast and toasty love.
I don’t know how much Cree she spoke, but I do know Grandma baked the best bread west of Red River.

Christmas 1998. Breakfast table arrayed with porridge, bacon, chokecherry jam and bread the colour of a Saskatchewan wheat field, bread fresh and warmhearted as a prairie harvest. Grandma thanks God for life and food and family, says “Amen,” then says “pahkwêsikan.” Dad, her son-in-law, sitting kitty-corner to her, the only one who understands pahkwêsikan, passes nôhkôm the bread.

How Grandma tells the story of bread on the table when she was a girl. Bread neatly sliced, and ten kids hurly-burlying for the crust. One brother grabs the heel, sticks it in his armpit,
returns it to the plate. Another brother seizes another heel, licks it, returns it to the plate. After that, no one wants the crust.

The way my sister knows how to bake bannock because Grandma taught her. The way I bake bread in the clay oven at Fort Edmonton, tell visitors that the Scots brought bannock over here from over there.

àkayâsiwak, móya ôki
àkayâsimowak, ôki
kâ–pîkiskwêcik anima kotak
pîkiskwêwin, ôki
ê-kî-pêsiwâcik pahkwêsikana
ôtê êkotê obci.

The way I explain that my Cree foremothers taught my Orkney forefathers about pimihkân. Beaver Mountain House, a towering pemmican processing plant.

ôtê ê-ohcimakahk pimihkân.
êkotê ê-oheit pahkwêsikan.

Pemmican from over here.
Bread from over there.

November 2006.
Winter hurries in hard this year.
How I notice pahkwêsikan near pahkwênêw in the dictionary, pahkwêsikan meaning bread, pahkwênêw meaning to break a piece off by hand, as in bread. How I wonder, which came first the bread or the breaking.

I have pounded meat, poured warm water over yeast, learned that to be a family, it’s okay to be from over here and to be from over there.

ê-ki-iwahikanihkéyân,
ê-ki-sikinamàn kisâkamicêwâpôs ohpikasikanihk,
ê-ki-kiskinohamâkosiyân ka-witisânihitoyâhk
kiyâm ôtê ka-ohciyâhk
êkwa kiyâm pêskis êkotê ka-ohciyâhk.
I am learning to speak Cree and I hear the language rooted in the land not uprooted by sôniyàw.

Some may wish to call me móniyàw because of the colour of my skin. Let me tell you about my roots.

I learned a Cree word and I really like it. kôhkominaw: “our grandmother”

You can already hear the logic of nêhiyawêwin.
-pan means “late,” “someone passed on or deceased.”
So the literal translation for kôhkominpaninawak
is “Our late grandmothers.”
But we also use the word to mean cucumbers.

“Where is the logic in cucumbers?” you ask.

Be patient, nitôtêm, be patient
and I will tell you.

When you plant a cucumber seed it grows
and spreads all over the place.
A whole bunch of cucumbers all over…
when you pick them, of course, each time you pick them
new little ones will sprout and grow.

kôhkominpaninawak tells of the grandmother’s lineage.
nôtokwêw is “Old Woman.”
An endearing term, complimentary.
See the proud grandmother in her garden
full of children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.
Her lineage, rooted in the land.
Her kinfolk, cucumbers multiplying.
My mother’s mother, 
*nôhkom* didn’t speak a lot of Cree because she was born at a time when 
*kihc-ôkimânâhk* told her she couldn’t be an Indian.

But Grandma planted *kôhkomipaninawak* anyway. 
*nôhkom* mistahi *kî-miyotrwâw* è-*kî-ápihtawikosisâniskwêwit èkwa mistahi niki-sâkihâw. 
Listen. Can you hear the lyricism in the language of *néhiyawak*?

*nôhkom* mistahi *kisâkihitin*.

*ohtâwîmâw*: the word for “father,”  
*kohtâwiy*: “your father.”  
Sweet logic says *nohtâwiy* is “my father.”

A woman once told my father it didn’t matter how well he spoke Cree, she wouldn’t like him because he was a *môniyâw*. 
nohtâwiy namôya nêhiyaw mâka mistahi pakaski–nêhiyawêw.
ohtâwiy mistahi miyohtwâw môniyâw.

nohtâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin.

okâwîmâw: the word for “mother,”
kikâwiy: “your mother.”
Logic and love tell me
nikâwiy is “my mother.”

A colleague asked my mother, over and over,
“What nationality are you?”
“Métis,” said my mother, “does it matter?”
The colleague didn’t have much to say
to my mother after that.

nikâwiy namôya nêhiyawêw mâka mistahi ê–pakaski–piiskwêt sâkihiwêwin.
nikâwiy mistahi miyohtwâw ê–âpihtawikosisâniskwêwit.

nikâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin.

This is the colour of my skin: nasakay wâpiskisiw.
This is the colour of my blood: nimihkom mihkwâw.
Did you know, it’s the same colour as your blood?
This is the colour of my roots: mihkwâw.
Kinship means much in *nêhiyawêwin*.

I learned a Cree word.
I quite like it.
*kôhkomininawak* — cucumbers.
All these little roots: they sprout, they spread, they grow.
Language and land, logic and love, lineage and lyricism.
If you pick the cucumbers, of course, they will spread all over the place.

*èkwa kâ-nimihitocik mistahi katawasisiwak.*
nísímê, my sister, your jokes,
those cracks you’re always looking
for, cracks in the sidewalk, cracks
in the foundation, anything
to goad the gloom.
How do you do it, my sister;
how do you think so fast?
tânisi anima è-isi-tôtaman, nísímê.
tânisi anima è-isi-kiskâ-mâmînotêyîhtaman?

You’re the Mother Magpie.
Such a sense of humour
have you, you don’t mind
presiding over a clutch of crows.
Tell a joke, my sister, that story
the one that makes us laugh
no matter how many times
you tell it.
nâniwêyitwê, nísímê, anima âcimowin
kâ-mâci-pâhpiyâhk mâna ahpô piko
tahtwâw kâ-âcimoyân.

nísímê, my brother, your giggle,
that one you laugh when you forget
you’re an adult, yes, that one.
It tickles all who hear.
Your children, your sister’s children, adults, we’re all amused when something enchants you.
We like to hear your giggle, that one, the one that beguiles the blahs.

*nimiywêyihténân
*ka-pêhtâtâhk kâ-kêyakâhpisiyan,
nisimê, anima kêyakâhpisiwin
kâ-ohci-pâhpiyâhk.*

*nisimê, yes you, my only brother, the one who most bears the evidence of our Cree inheritance, the baby blue lumbar bruise, the one who has to explain he’s not Lebanese but Métis. Giggle, my brother, giggle when your funny-bone itches, and cry when your heart hurts. It’s okay my brother, giggle your child’s giggle, cry your grown man’s cry.*

*kiyâm nisimê, pâhpi
anima kêyakâhpisiwin,
tâpiskóc ana awâsis*
nîsimê, my younger sister,
you are the youngest and the oldest.
Born of a different mother,
but my sister anyhow.
nîsimê, having borne children
yourself, and the burning worry
of a vessel filled with a history
so diagnosable it’s preventable. Protect
your children from this burden, nîsimê.
Laugh, my sister. Celebrate
your children, those children
the ones you love, with laughter.
manâcihik kitaẉ̂asimisâk
ôma pwâwatêwin ohci.
pâhpi nîsimê. miyawâsîk
kitawâsimisâk,
aniki awâsisâk
kâ-sâkihacîk,
miyawâsîk, asici pâhpiwîn.
Your smile, my youngest sister, could fill your children’s hearts to the brim. Fill their hearts, my sister, with love. Leave no room for liquid misgivings. 

*sâkihik kitawâsimisak, nisîmê.*

Mom, *nikâ*, I heard you say twice you wished you had learned to speak Cree. Is that so, Mom, or have the curious stares, restaurant chairs empty and unavailable, neighbours from afar, bad neighbours, ungrateful guests, have they discouraged you? Laugh at them, Mom; laugh in their faces. 

*pâhpihik, nikâ, pâhpihik; tépwê-pâhpihik.*

I remember you told us, Mom, when the leaves on black poplars turn upwards, it will rain. Did you know, Mom, this is a natural sign the Cree use? Remember Dad’s laugh?
Remember how his whole body
would shake with delight?
He’s gone now, Mom, but remember
his laugh, that laugh, the one
that made us all feel better.
ê-kî-nakatikoyahk êkwa,
nikâ, mâka kiskisitota
opâhpiwin, anima pâhpiwin
kâ-ki-nahêyihtamibikoyahk.

All my relatives, you, the ones who
married my siblings,
my nieces and nephews,
my aunties and uncles,
my cousins, my grandparents,
the ones who came before,
the ones who will come after.

kahkiyaw niwâhkômâkanak, kiyawâw
kâ-wikimâyêkok nitisânak,
nitânisak ëkwa nistimak, nitihkwatimak ëkwa nikosisak,
nikâwisak ëkwa nôhcâwisak,
niciwâmiskwêmak, nitawêmâwak, nicâhkosak ëkwa nikêhtê-ayimak,
aniki nistam kâ-ki-pê-takosihkik,
aniki mwêstas kê-takosihkik.
Some of you are Cree,
some of you are not,
but we all live in Cree country.
Close your eyes for just a moment.
Listen for the rhythms
of the region,
pulse of the prairie.
Can you hear it?
Shhhh, now
kiyâmapi êkwa. Try to block
out all that other noise. There,
you can hear it in the dirges
of the birches, and spruces tuned
with the wind. And there,
in the declarations
of history. In the laughter
of old and young,
then and now.
Shhhh. kiyâmapi.
It’s a pleasing refrain,
that echo,
the one that won’t go away.
miyohtâkwan
anima cisâwêwin,
êwako êkâ kâ-pônihtâkwhk.
Three days after submitting Chapter Four
I’m still unable to be angry
in Cree. So let me
be angry in English.

Mom, having never before told me
she has bad days, let alone rough weeks,
has had a rough week. She tells me
two stories. Two things happened to her
but she wanted to wait
until I’d finished Chapter Four
before telling me.

I think I’ve had it rough,
accused of appropriation,
misrepresentation,
for writing in Cree
while wearing white,
skin that is.

Mom’s first story, involving
toilet paper, has the potential
for great humour. This first story,
however, is far from funny.
While shopping at Canadian Tire
Mom spies a brand of toilet paper
she likes in someone’s buggy.
“Where did you find that toilet paper?”
she asks the woman with the buggy.
“What!” snaps the woman.
“What aisle did you find
that toilet paper in?”
Mom asks again.

“You’re an Indian,
and I don’t help Indians!”
sneers the woman from another country,
let’s just say a warm country.

The woman probably thinks my mother,
who neither has nor wants
treaty entitlements,
is a freeloader.

The second story is still
too hard to tell.
RECLAMATION POEMS
Cree Lessons

We are keen, though some of us have better ears than others. The teacher’s voice inflects the pulse of néhiyawêwin as he teaches us. He says a prayer in the first class.

Nouns, we learn, have a gender. In French, nouns are male or female, but in Cree, nouns are living or non-living, animate or inanimate. A chair, têhtapiwin, is inanimate. tohtôsâpoy, or milk, is also inanimate. But the breast it comes from is animate. So, too, are the female private parts... animate. To the great disturbance of the men in our class, the nápèw âpacihcikan is inanimate. The men are somewhat relieved to discover the animacy of the nápèw isihcikâsowin.

We learn some verbs. nimicisonân: we eat. nimétawânân: we play. ê-nikamoyâhk: we are singing. ê-nimihitoyâhk: we are dancing. ê-pâhpiyâhk: we are laughing.

We try conjugating noun with verb. We are, after all, men and women, old enough to conjugate, though not experienced enough to follow the rules.
Our Cree teacher tells an inspirational story.
A mînoyâw marries a nêhiyawiskwêw.
The nâpêw commits to learning nêhiyawêwin,
but his progress is slow until owikimâkâna says,
“nêhiyawê, or you’re sleeping on the couch.”
Soon, very soon, that man mistahi nihtâ-nêhiyawêw.

Another story, another lesson.
A sick old woman lay in her lodge speaking quietly,
calling for her husband.
“Sam nâs,
Sam nâs.”
“Go get Sam,
Go get Sam.”
An old man, not her husband, walked by and heard her call,
“sâminâs,
sâminâs.”
“Touch it softly,
touch it softly.”

ê-pâhpiyâhk èkwa ê-kiskinohamâkosiyâhk.
We are not yet fluent
but our bond with nêhiyawêwin
grows tighter.
Watch how your grandmother does it. Listen because the scraper sounds differently from the flesher. Remember that sound.
kiskisitota ôma kâ-itihtâkwahk.

Get four strong saplings for the frame. Watch the way your grandmother ties them together with rawhide laces. Pull the cords tight if her hands are aflame with arthritis. It’s important to work the flesh side first. Remove fat, muscle. With the mîhkîhkwan. Don’t let the smell bother you. Remember to work the flesh side first.
kiskisinikânka-mihkitamanitiêkâ-wiyâsiwik.

Help your grandmother prepare the meat for drying. This will take about four days with a smudge under the hot sun. Remember the feel of the meat when it curls around. Brittle enough to break. Taste it
to be sure. Remember.
kiskisi because one day you, too,
will be a grandmother.

Turn the frame over so the fur side
is up. Now watch how your grandmother
scrapes the fur off. Uses the scraper.
wâpam tânisi ê-itâpacïhtât ôma mâtabikan.

Listen
for how the mâtabikan sounds
different from the mihkihkwan.
nitohta.
nâkatobkê êkwa kika-pêhtên
tânisi pîtos mâtabikan
ê-itïhtâkwahk ispïhci mihkihkwan.
Your grandmother will show you just how
to scrape the hide so it’s the same
thickness all over. Watch the way kôhkom
taps it. Listens for the sound. Checks
for even thickness. You listen too.
Remember that sound.
nitohta mina kîsta.
kiskisitota ôma kâ-itïhtâkwahk.
Once all the fur is removed you’re ready to oil the hide.Brains of the animal work just fine. Boil them in a small amount of water, about a bucket full. Watch as your grandmother works the brains into the hide over and over again, until the hide begins to soften. Until the brains saturate the hide. Remember, the brains soften the hide. *kiskisi,* *wiyitihipa ohi ê-ápačíhtáhkh ka-yóskinamihkh askèkin.*

Once softened, the hide is ready for tanning. Listen to your grandmother. She’ll tell you what kind of wood to collect. Look for a fallen tree that has progressed nearly to soil. The underside might be earth but the wood inside is perfect: that pulpy, spongy wood that won’t flame but makes good smoke. Watch closely as your grandmother hangs that hide over the smudge. Stay with your grandmother. Help her with that hide. Feed the smoke.
Listen very carefully.
Remember, the brains soften the hide.
Remember
so you will know.

nâkatobkê.
kiskisi wiyitihpa anihi ê-âpacihtâhk ka-yôskinamihk askékin.
kiskisi
ékosi kika-nakacihtân.
When I think of how
you might have sounded
had you talked, I imagine
the persistent thrum of peace.

nipêhtên ê-takahkihtâkwahk
pêyâhtakêyimowin.

If I listen carefully
I hear buds opening
in May, as you parley
in harmony.

nipêhtên ê-takahkihtâkwahk
pêyâhtakêyimowin.

If I lean into the rhythms
of néhiyawêwin
as you converse on a summer
morning the aspens clap
their shy applause.

nipêhtên ê-takahkihtâkwahk
pêyâhtakêyimowin.
When I consider your debate
I hear water trickling
over pebbles set expressly
for the timbre of soft talk.

nipēhtēn ē-takahkihtâkwahk
pēyâhtakéyimowin.

As I catch the cadence
of Plains Cree speech
kisiskâciwani-sïpiy
flows swiftly but peacefully.

kisiskâciwan mâka ē-ciwēk ē-kwa ē-pēhtamân
ē-takahkihtâkwahk
pēyâhtakéyimowin.

When I think I recognize
your thoughts on this fall day
I hear a pause:
you both wait patiently
for understanding, you hold
your words carefully, offering
them only when you’re sure
they’re a gift.
kiyawâw kipîkiskwâtitonâwâw
 mâka é-manâcimitoyêk
 èkwa kinisitohtâtonâwâw.
 kiyawâw nîso nâpêwak
 kâ-pîkiskwêyêk.

Two snowflakes, suspended on air,
tarrying, not wanting
the conversation to end.

nîso pîwâkonisak
ê-nôhtê-âhkami-pîkiskwâtitoyêk,
môy é-nitawêyihtamêk
ka-kiipihtowêyêk.
I read about the -ikwi suffix and the unspecified actor form, wonder about the curiosities of active or passive voice in Cree, but mostly I yearn to learn real Cree words, am eager to hear nêhiyawêwin itwêwina in the air. Want to hear your voice.

Food words like bread and tea and water — pakhwêsikan, maskihkîwâpoy, êkwa nipiy.

Words for tree and bud and leaf — mistik, osimisk, êkwa nipiy.

Seasonal words for winter, spring, summer, and fall — pipon, miyoskamin, nipin, êkwa takwâkin.

Weather words like snow and rain, sunshine and wind — mispon êkwa kimîwan, wāsêskwan êkwa yôtin.
More food words like cookie, tomato, and cheese—
wihtki-pahkwesikanis, kihci-okiniy, èkwa âpakosisi-miciwin.

Nature words for lake, mountain, prairie—
sâkahikan, asiniwaci, paskwâw.
How to say picnic and camping—
papâ-micisowin èkwa kapësiwin. How we always picked bottles when we went picnicking or camping—
kâkikê è-ki-môsâhkinamâhk môtêyâpiskwa ispî kâ-ki-papâ-micisoyâhk abpô è-nitawi-kapësiyâhk.

How the sky is blue just now, when it’s been grey for so long.
sîpihkonâkwan mêkwâc kîsik mâka kinwês è-ki-pihkonâkwahk.
I want to hear words for car and canoe
and toboggan and cradleboard —
*sêhkêpâis èkwa cîmân*
*nâpakitâpânâsk èkwa tihkinâkan.*
Baby, boy, man, and woman —
*oskawâsis, nâpêsis, iskwêsis, nâpêw, èkwa iskwêw.*
Boyfriend and girlfriend —
*nicimôs èkwa nicimôs.*

Kinship terms like mother and father —
*nikâwîy èkwa nôhtâwîy.*
Grandmother and grandfather —
*nôhkôm èkwa nimosôm.*
My little siblings, sister and brother —
*nícisânak, nimis èkwa nistês.*
Auntie and uncle —
*nikâwîs èkwa nôhcâwîs.*

If only I had stopped long enough
to say “my girl” or “my boy” —
“*nitânîs* èkwa “*nikosis*.”

Words for old woman and old man —
*nôcokwêsîs èkwa kiséyînis*
Words for hard and soft, loud and quiet —
ê-maskawâk êkwa ê-yôskâk
ê-sôhkihtâkwahk êkwa
ê-kâmwâtahk.

Words for the ground is hard —
ê-maskawahcâk,
the silence is loud —
ê-sôhkihtâkwahk kipihtowêwin,
your voice soft and quiet —
ê-miyotâmoyan êkwa ê-kâmwâtahk.

You always spoke so softly like a steady rain on parched land.
kâkikê ê-ki-manâcimiyâhk
tâpiskôc kimiwan,
ê-phahkîpstâk
itê ê-phahkwhâhcâk.

Maybe that’s why you sound so far away now —
kiyâwihtâkosin êkwa anohc.
Verbs for listening and persevering —
è-nitohtawiyân èkwa è-âhkamêyihântamohiyan, 
and loving and raising children—
è-ki-sâkihiyâhk èkwa
kiya èkwa nikàwinân
è-ki-nihtâwâsîyêk.
Words for birth and death and funeral—
è-ki-miyo-pimâtisiyan, mâka
ispîhk è-ki-kisîpîpiyân
èkwa kiki-âstêsînin kitaywêpiwinîhk.

Verbs for kind and just
and humble and soft-spoken—
è-ki-kisêwâtisiyan
èkwa è-ki-kwayaskwâtisiyan,
è-ki-tapahêyimisoyan
èkwa è-ki-pêyâhtakowêyân.

The verb for soft-hearted—
è-ki-yôskâtisiyan,
and how you had a soft spot
in your heart for all
Cree people—
è-ki-yôskitêhêstawacîk
kahkiyaw nêhiyawîwak.
Verbs for generous and caring —
ê-ki-sawêyimacik êkwa ê-ki-nâkatéyimacik.
Words for thoughtful and oh, such good Cree speech —
ê-ki-kâh-kâkihcïhiwêyan,
ê-ki-miyo-tôtaman
tahtwâw ê-ki-nébiyawêyan.

Words for being so good at so many things —
ê-ki-nâhiyan mistahi kikway.

Words for sadness and regret —
nipikiskâtisin êkwa kikisinâtêyïhtamâtin.
Because sickness stole your speech and I came too late to listen —
osâm kitâhkosiwin
kipikiskwêwin ê-kimotamâkoyan
êkwa ê-ki-mwêstasisiniyân
ka-nitohtâtân.

Yet now you’re whispering and I’m listening —
mâka êkwa anohc âta ê-kimwêyan
kina-nahihtâtatin.
môya ninôhtê–wanitôtân ispîhk nêhiyawascikêyâni
ahpô nêhiyawêyâni. ninitawêyihtân
ka–nisitohtatâkok kinêhiyawihîtwinêhêwiniwâwa
kipîkiskwêwinêhêwiniwâwa.

I mean no wrong in writing
or speaking your language. I mean
to understand you on your terms,
in your words.

tahto itwêwin ê-miyonâkwahk
tâpiskôc anima kâ–yikopîwik niwâsênâmânîhk,
anohc kâ–kîkisêpâyâk kiwêtinohk. tahto cahkasinhikan
tâpiskôc mikwan isinâkwan wâsênâmânîhk.

Each word intricately embroidered
like the frost on my window this cold,
northern morning. Each inflection
a feathered essence on the glass.

tâpiskôc piyêsîs ê–nikamot itihtâkwan tahto itwêwin
mayaw kâ–kitoyêk. tânisi mâka
ka–kipa–kaskihtâyân ka–otinamâsosoyân
kipikohekêwinêhêwâw?
Each word a songbird as soon
as you speak it. How
could I possibly steal
your music?

kitasotamâtitinâwâw:
môya niwi-otinamâson,
ôki mikwanak wâsênamânihk è-ayâcik,
kitiwêwiniwâwa.

I give you my word;
I won’t take what’s not mine.
These feathers on my window,
your words.

nika-nitohîn kikitohcikêwiniwâw, itwêwina
tâpiskôc piyêsîsak kâ-takahkihtâkosicik, è-ohpahocik,
è-nikamocik, onikamowiniwâwa è-itwêmakaniyiki,
è-kistêyihtâkosicik, è-miyohiâkwanîyiki kâ-kîkisêpâyâyik.

I will listen for your music,
winged words of warblers, swooping
mightily in song, metres
of meaning, melodies of the morning.
I return your words, thanking you for loaning them to me.
Thank you, my Cree friends, all my friends, may we speak again.

*kâwi kimiyitinâwâw kititwêwiniwâwâ.*
*kinanâskomitinâwâw ë-awihiyêk.*
*ay-hay, nitôtêmitik nêhiyawak, kahkiyaw nitôtêmitik,*
*kihtwâm ka-pikiskwâtitonaw.*
Did you know, to understand Cree is not merely to write in Cree?

Listen. Try to understand.
Mid-June 2004 and it feels like January. Wind stirs up white caps on the small lake, on the small reserve, where on a big hill stands an amphitheatre with a roof but no walls.

We will not dance the Ghost Dance on that hill. Over there, where the young men construct a lodge from the trunks of young black poplar trees, there we will dance with kímosômîpaninawak, kôhkomîpaninawak èkwa kahkiyaw kicâpâninawak èkota kika-wîci-nîmîhitômânanawak.

Two tripods hold up the lodge; a small fire burns near each tripod. Flames leap like the Northern Lights. Blankets cover the cold ground. Containers filled with food cover the blankets at one end of the lodge, the end where the women sit.
Seven men sit along one angle
of the elliptical structure, share
four drums, sing,
sing, sing the Ghost Dance song.
ê-nikamocik sâpohtawân nikamowin.
One man has a voice
sweet as saskatoon syrup.
Another man doesn’t sing
but pretends he’s a chicken.
Everyone laughs when this trickster —
awa möhcohkân —
crows at unpredictable times.

A helper — oskâpêwis — serves pimîhkân
near the tripod at the men’s end of the lodge.
We dance several circles,
the chicken-man sings several chicken songs,
and everyone laughs at this funny man.
êkwa kahkiyaw ê-pâhpibâyahk
awa ê-wawiyatêyihtâkosit nâpêw.

Then we sit on the blankets on the ground,
ready to feast. A young man
quietly tells me not to sit cross-
I have since learned
to sit properly.
êkospîhk ê–ki–kiskinohamâkosiyân
ka–isi–kwayaskapiyân.

The food, prepared by the women,
is now served by the men.
The men serve the guests first.
All manner of food, Cree and not,
including a bucket
of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

We dance some more.
ayiwâk ninimihitonân
Chicken-man, from Onion Lake,
cackles some more.
kâh–kitow ayiwâk awa môhcohkân.
We eat more food.
ayiwâk nimicisonân.
The man with the voice sweet
as saskatoon syrup sings some more.
ê–nikamot ayiwâk awa nâpêw
kâ–miyatâmôt tâpiskôc
misâskwatôminâpoy ê–sîwâk.
Two years after the Ghost Dance,  
a year and a half after Dad  
walks through the opening,  
someone tells me that the Cree call the  
Ghost Dance *sâpohtawân*  
because the ghosts walk through.  
They pass right through.  
*sâpohtêwak* just like Dad:  
ê-ki-sâpohtawêhtêt.  
And those ghosts who are dancing,  
the ones we dance with,  
they are very beautiful.  
êkwa aniki kà-nimihitocîk,  
kà-wici-nimihitômâyâhkîk,  
mistahi katawasisiwak.
We followed the moon
from January to February
from dusk toward dawn.

We danced round and round
again and again
just as the sun moves round and round
again and again.

They make a pleasing sound with the drums
so others can hear them from far away.

Aspen-Raine, her long
brown legs, her long brown hair,
her deep brown eyes, her
nine-year-old hope, dances
round and round
kâh-kihtwâm
with her long, brown Dad
with her Dad’s tall woman.

The drummers, hurtin’-hearted men,
pound the drums.
Standing in a circle
each drum a heartbeat,
as small big-hearted boys,
aspiré to be big-hearted men
pounding the drum.

ê-takahkwêwêwêtitâcik
êkwa ê-mâ-mêtêwêwhwâcik

And I hope my Dad and my Grandma
can hear the pounding from the earth
where they rest.
We danced round and round
again and again
just as the sun moves round and round
again and again.
And the pounding can be heard
from far away.

The women, strong-hearted ladies,
show us the way to take
steps small enough to meet
the hurtin’-hearted drums,
show us the way
to follow the moon
from January to February
from dusk toward dawn.
The hurtin’-hearted ladies know
just when the strong-hearted men
will tap those drums just so
softly, and the strong-hearted women
circle round the drums and the men,
and when those strong-hearted men
tap those drums just so,
those hurtin’-hearted ladies
sing a heart-song that resonates
with the beat of the drums
with the spirit of the heart.

ê-ki-piciciyâhk
kâh-kihtwâm
tâpiskôc pisim kâ-isi-waskawit
kâh-kihtwâm
ê-takahkwêwêtitâcik
êkwâ ê-mâ-matwêwêhwâcik
A FEW IDEAS FROM \textit{amiskwacî-wâskahikanihk}
The Young Linguist

A girl, perhaps five,
whose father will later tell me she speaks
English, French, and Armenian,
approaches me at Fort Edmonton Park.
“How do you say ‘Hi’ in the teepee way?”
she asks. Near the entrance
to the Indian Trade Store, guarded
by a six-sided stronghold, fortified
by twenty-foot bulwarks, and four
towering, aloof bastions, we regard
each other. I crouch down.
“Around here,” I reply, “the Cree say,
‘tânisi,’ or if you want to say,
‘Hello, how are you?’
we say, ‘tânisi kiya?’”
tânisi ka-isi-nihtâ-pimihkêyan  ⇒  How to Make Pemmican

You will need a very large cutting board or a very large, flat cutting surface, one really sharp and longish knife, a lot of practice, strong hands, a good sense of using a knife without de-limbing—or should I say de-digiting—yourself, and certainly some experienced tutelage from an old Cree woman, or a Dene woman, or an Ojibwe woman, or a Blackfoot woman, or an Apache woman. I was asked recently, “Why can’t men make pemmican?” No reason, other than the men were likely off hunting. The knife needs to be more than very sharp to make it easier for you to slice the buffalo meat into thin slices. Now, it doesn’t have to be buffalo meat; it could be deer or moose or muskox or elk, too, but I’ve made it with buffalo meat (paskwâwi-mostosowiyâs).

Now, I owe all my knowledge of pemmican to four individuals. Olive Modersohn and Alice Harkness, who are sisters, have worked at the Fort Edmonton Park Native Encampment for many years; they and their other sister, Mariah, taught me how to do this. I also credit Dr. Anne Anderson for her description, the one I read in a little book called Let’s Learn Cree: Namoya Ayiman. My Dad knew Dr. Anderson because he grew up at Frog Lake where Dr. Anderson lived, but unfortunately I did not have the honour of meeting her before she died.
Alice and Mariah are very good meat cutters. They and Olive are from Nipawin (correctly spelled in Cree nipawîwin), in Saskatchewan, and they learned from their own mother and grandmother there. I would say, based on my memory of doing this about six or seven years ago, to cut the meat about a quarter of an inch thick. I also remember that Mariah, who was especially good at cutting the meat, would study the meat very closely to determine the grain of it and then she would cut along that grain. Now, she would not cut right through the roast. She would stop cutting the meat maybe a quarter of an inch before cutting each slice right off; then she would turn the roast over and slice it through from that side. This way, the slices of meat would come off shaped almost like the two wings of a butterfly, each wing being about the size of one of my hands—palm and fingers included.

I understand if this is hard to visualize, but the written word does have its limitations!

êkosi, so now at this point the meat cutter must muster up as much patience as humanly possible and not be too frustrated by the chunky, choppy results she or he may be getting. Slicing the meat as expertly as Mariah, Alice, and Olive do takes decades of experience. Keep slicing the meat as best you can until you have it all sliced up. I should have mentioned you should also have a large stainless steel bowl to place the meat slices in.
Once all the meat is sliced you are ready for smoking and drying. Except you will have prepared your tripod or meat-drying rack (*akwâwân*) well in advance even of slicing the meat. For this very important phase in making *pimihkân* (correct Cree spelling) you will need a large fire pit over which you will set your drying rack. Now, before you bring the meat to the rack, it is very crucial that you build a large fire and let it burn into hot, hot coals. You will also need to have done considerable work gathering wood and chopping it into small firewood. You will need A LOT of small firewood, and it needs to be small because when you actually dry your meat YOU DO NOT WANT A FIRE. YOU WANT A SMUDGE. I apologize for yelling in the printed word, but it is really important that the meat is SMOKED AND NOT COOKED. This is also why you need to burn a fire for a long time before actually smoking the meat, so that you can build up a very hot bed of coals on which to put the small firewood. When you smoke the meat several conditions must exist. First the fire cannot be a fire: it must be a smudge. Oh yes, I already said that, but I think it merits saying again. Next, (sorry I have to shout again) YOU DO NOT WANT ANY MOISTURE AT ALL TO GET ONTO OR INTO THE MEAT. For this reason, you must smoke your meat only on a hot, sunny day. If it starts to rain, quickly gather up the meat, place a cloth over it, and run for cover. Two things will hasten the process of the dried meat going bad: heat and moisture.
èkosi, so I haven’t mentioned and should that if the environment around you has any moss or punky wood this is very useful material in quelling a smudge that is too big for its britches and wants to be a blaze. A blaze, like a fire, you definitely do not want. So, if you put your small firewood (chopped about the diameter and length of my forearm — and I am a rather smallish woman, in stature that is) onto the bed of coals and that damn chopped-up firewood is impudent, throw some moss or punky wood on it. What on earth do I mean by punky wood? Well, Olive showed me.

We went for a walk into the thick, prickly, brambly woods behind the teepee at Fort Edmonton, along the North Saskatchewan River. Now, I think Olive is about sixty-five years old so she knew what she was doing. We walked and looked, and before long she found what we were looking for: a tree that fell over kayâs (a long time ago) and that was now progressing into the finer state of earth, namely soil. This takes kâh-kinwês (quite a long time) and you will find that tree in varying states of progression (I think that’s the word that biologists use for this process of tree decomposition). Choose only the punky wood — that is, the wood that is thready and moist and almost earthy. Pretend like you are not a woman or a human being, but maybe a cat of some kind, yeah a cougar that does not mind wallowing around in the earth and getting a bit, well not dirty, but earthy. Now, you will need quite a lot of this punky wood so
hopefully you have a bucket or some other portable vessel into which you can gather it. We had a big, old, wooden wheelbarrow, on which we had placed a very large barrel, into which we poured punky wood from our two smaller buckets. We had to do this several times to fill up the barrel. This involved tromping up and down through the briars and the brambles and the prickles back and forth from the fallen, progressing tree down in the woods and the wheelbarrow up on the dirt road. I really forgot that I was a woman just then because I didn’t want Olive to get all scratched up, so we went and got another, younger historical interpreter to help with this labour.

One time, a few years after Olive showed me all this, I went for the punky wood search with another young, keen interpreter. We got all our gear ready and placed on the road and off I went down into the scratchy thick. I left Liam up on the road so I could shout at him, when I found the right tree in an excellent state of progression, to wheel the barrow over to the place on the road nearest me and the tree. As I walked I was watching very carefully for holes in the earth, because I had just missed stepping into one that was at least as deep as my short leg is long. Had I stepped into that hole I might have started progressing — that is, decomposing — myself! ēkosi, so then I found an appropriately progressed tree and called up to my young helper. He wheeled the barrow over and brought down two buckets and two fire irons. Oh yes, the fire irons. These we found extremely helpful
in digging around inside the tree and loosening the bark to get at the punky wood. I prefer an L-shaped fire iron because it works good. Once we filled up our two buckets, we turned to climb up to the road.

This time I narrowly missed stepping on a wasp’s nest. Yes, those damn buzzers nest in the ground too! Now, this would have been an exrruciating and possibly even worse experience if I had actually stepped on that wasp nest because at Fort Edmonton the woman interpreters inside the fort wear long, loose skirts that we often describe as the “pillow-case skirt.” Into Vogue magazine the skirt will not get you, but into serious trouble with a horde of wasps if they fly up your skirts into your nether regions, the skirt will take you. I always wore a pair of gym shorts under my skirt, precisely because of my fear of being stung you know where . . .

Whew!

Back to the pimîhkân. Get a real good smudge happening and then place your meat slices carefully on your drying rack. Please, please be sure that it’s not raining. If the wings of the butterfly have a spine, that would be the thicker part that actually contacts the drying rack. Watch that smudge closely and give it hell, I mean moss and/or punky wood, if it tries to be a fire. The more smoke the better, because that will scare away all the bugs, especially those wasps that have followed
you up from their hell in the ground. You will find the wasps particularly pesky, moreso than any other insect. Wasps are even more carnivorous than humans. Now, all that smoke might scare away the men too, but if a man is scared of smoke I don’t need him. I want a man that can live with me, smells and all!

How long do you smoke the meat? For several days, as long as those days are hot and sunny, and for as long as the day is long. I would say it takes about four or five days of smoking and drying until the meat is dried and brittle enough for pounding. If even one raindrop falls out of the sky, catch it on your tongue and get that meat to safety! As the meat smokes and dries it will curl up and change from a bright red colour to a darker brownish colour. Keep drying and smoking until it is brittle enough to tear and break off into pieces.

Once all the meat is really dried and smoked, break it into quite small pieces, as small as a toonie or a loonie if you can manage it. You want to do this because it will facilitate pounding the meat into as fine a powder as you can. It’s best to have a leather or rawhide bag in which you put the meat, because all that pounding with a rock really takes a toll on the bag. For all our efforts at Fort Edmonton Park, we didn’t have a rawhide bag so Alice made us two thick canvas bags with special stitching so they wouldn’t blow apart with the first blow. We had lots of help with the pounding, and we had
little kids and big dads and strong moms pounding the meat with us. It really needs to be pounded an awful lot, about ten times more than you will think it needs and about twenty times more than you will want to pound, because the finer the powder and the fewer the chunks the better the *pimihkân*.

With your bowl of pounded meat—you will notice the quantity seems a whole lot less than the big roast you started with because all that drying and smoking has evaporated all the moisture and reduced the size—prepare for the final stages of making the *pimihkân*. Ah yes, try to do this in mid-to-late July when either the saskatoons or a little later the chokecherries are ripe. Pick a bunch of berries and try not to eat too many. Dry them for a couple of days with your meat. Cheesecloth works good at the top of your drying rack. We constructed a little shelf up there with smaller sticks fastened onto the main branches of the tripod. Once your berries are dried, really dried, you can crush and grind them and pound them similarly to the way you made minced meat. If you use chokecherries it is okay to crush and grind the pits of the chokecherries too. But some people will tell you not to.

Okay, so now you have dried and pounded meat and berries. You need one more ingredient: rendered buffalo fat or the fat of whatever kind of meat you’ve dried. If there is anything that will attract a
wasp but scare a man away, it is rendering fat! That is one smelly job that stirs up quite a stink. Build another fire and get a big, cast iron pot that won’t mind being used for rendering fat. Throw the fat into the pot and place the pot over the fire. This takes some time too, as the fat needs to boil for awhile until the solid chunks separate. These solid chunks, by the way, will look and smell suspiciously like Kentucky Fried Chicken. As the fat cooks, remove the chunks. When the fat has cooked for quite some time and you’re quite certain all the chunks have emerged that are supposed to, you have finished rendering the fat.

This is one job you will definitely want to do in clothes that you don’t much care about.

Remember a ways back when I said there are two things you need to avoid in preparing pimïhkân? Heat and moisture. This means that when you add the fat to the meat and berries, you must LET IT COOL. Don’t cool it so much that it starts to solidify again; just cool it so that it’s tepid and you can touch it with your fingers. THE FAT CANNOT BE HOT. Mix the crushed berries with the pounded meat first; do this thoroughly. Now pour some cooled liquid fat onto this mixture. For the life of me, I can’t say with any exactness what the quantities are. I will stress, however, that you don’t want to overdo it with the fat because it will be too greasy.
Basically put only enough cooled, liquid grease in until the meat and berry mixture starts to bind or stick together.

This brings me to the nutritional value of *pimihkân*. The meat provides much-needed protein and good taste. The berries provide fibre and vitamin C and the fat acts both as a binding agent and somewhat as a preservative. Men in the fur trade carried the burdens of beasts and their employers needed to feed them accordingly. When meat was plentiful and competition stiff, men were allotted six to eight pounds of fresh meat per day. A quarter of a pound of *pimihkân* was the equivalent of a pound of fresh meat, so men might eat about two pounds of *pimihkân* per day, along with a loaf of bread and a fish or two.

I credit my knowledge to Alice, Olive, Mariah, and Dr. Anne Anderson, but I have read that Peter Pond, who worked for the Northwest Company, wrote in his journal of *pimihkân* in about 1779 when he made it up into Athabasca Country. I am taking all this from memory, including what I read of Peter Pond.

In my estimation, *pimihkân* is even more ingenious than more modern inventions, because Indigenous peoples were able to process meat for long-term storage in the absence of spices and refrigeration.
We had two responses to our *pimihkân*, and I think I have made it three times: great interest or great distaste. You will either like it or not like it, and, out of necessity, if you have to eat it for survival, you will grow to like it. I went to a real Ghost Dance at Kehewin First Nation about four years ago and I tasted their *pimihkân*. I would say that my third effort at Fort Edmonton was very close to the *pimihkân* I tasted at Kehewin.
HISTORY POEMS
You spoke to me that day.  
You thanked me and the others for listening.  
That day, I first heard your words as you spoke them.  
Speak, my friend, speak. Your words are your medicine.

Someone asked you what you have learned about justice.  
You said, “There is no justice.  
There’s just us and all the rest.”

Tell me, I want to understand you.  
I want to know about the just ones.  
Like that judge who gave you the power of speech.
I saw you on the outside.
I listened to you on the outside.
You talked to me on the outside.
You said, “I’m not a bad person inside.
The Creator doesn’t make junk.”

Someone asked you what you do with your anger now.
You said you make statements whenever you can.
When you spoke of what you made in art class,
I wondered who did bad things to you.
I wondered if that’s why you did that bad thing.

Someone asked you what you do with your anger now.
You said you make statements whenever you can.
When you spoke of what you made in art class,
I wondered who did bad things to you.
I wondered if that’s why you did that bad thing.
I asked you how speech and words give you power.
You said, “Words and speech are power but they’re not power if there ain’t no one listening.”
I wondered if you felt the power of all of us listening to you.

\[ kikî-kakwêcimitin tânisi è-isi-miyikoyan maskawisîwin pikiskwêwina èkwa itwêwina. \]
\[ kikî-itwân, “pikiskwêwina èkwa itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa mâka namóya maskawisîmakanwa kîspin nam awiyak nitohtâbki.” \]
\[ matwân ci kiki-môsihtân nimaskawisîwinân kahkiyaw niyanân èkota kà-nitohtâtâbk. \]

Now I read your words as you wrote them.
Your great-grandfather, mistahi-maskwa, said, “Words are power.”
You say, “If no one ever speaks the words that should be spoken, the silence destroys you.”

\[ anohec èkwa nitayamihtân anihî kîpikiskwêwina kà-kî-masinahaman. \]
\[ kitâniskotâpân, mistahi-maskwa, òmisi ki-itwêw, “itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa.” \]
\[ kititwân kiya, “kîspin nam awiyak èkà pikiskwêci anihî itwêwina ka-kî-pikiskwêhk, èwako kâmrwâtísîwin kîka-nisiwanâcìhikon.” \]
I listen to you on the outside.
Can you hear me listening?
  *kinitohtâtin kâ-ki–isi–nânâhkasihtâtân.*
  *ka-ki-pêhtawin ci kâ-ki–isi–nânâhkasihtâtân?*

Speak, my friend. Your truth is your power.
I want to hear your power.
  *pîkiskwê, nitôtêm. kitâpwêwin anima kiwicihikowisiwin.*
  *kiwicihikowisiwin ninôhtê-pêhtên.*

Speak, Medicine Bear Woman.
  *pîkiskwê, maskibkiy maskwa iskwêw.*
mistahi-maskwa

Big Bear’s speech, as rendered by William Cameron

The charge was treason-felony and the verdict guilty. When Big Bear was brought before the court to learn his fate, Justice Richardson said:

“Big Bear, have you anything to say before sentence is passed upon you?”

The old man drew himself up with that imperious air that proclaimed him leader and fitted him so well; the thick nostrils expanded, the broad, deep chest was thrown out, the strong jaw looked aggressively prominent, the mouth was a straight line. He gave his head the little characteristic toss that always preceded his speeches.

“I think I should have something to say,” he began slowly, “about the occurrences which brought me here in chains!” He spoke in his native Cree, knowing no English. He paused. Then with the earnestness, the eloquence and the pathos that never failed to move an audience, red or white, he went on to speak of the troubles of the spring.

“I knew little of the killing at Frog Lake beyond hearing the shots fired. When any wrong was brewing I did my best to stop it in the beginning. The turbulent ones of the band got beyond my control and shed the blood of those I would have protected. I was away
from Frog Lake a part of the winter, hunting and fishing, and the rebellion had commenced before I got back. When white men were few in the country I gave them the hand of brotherhood. I am sorry so few are here who can witness for my friendly acts.

“Can anyone stand out and say that I ordered the death of a priest or an agent? You think I encouraged my people to take part in the trouble. I did not. I advised them against it. I felt sorry when they killed those men at Frog Lake, but the truth is when news of the fight at Duck Lake reached us my band ignored my authority and despised me because I did not side with the half-breeds. I did not so much as take a white man's horse. I always believed that by being the friend of the white man, I and my people would be helped by those of them who had wealth. I always thought it paid to do all the good I could. Now my heart is on the ground.

“I look around me in this room and see it crowded with handsome faces — faces far handsomer than my own” (laughter). “I have ruled my country for a long time. Now I am in chains and will be sent to prison, but I have no doubt the handsome faces I admire about me will be competent to govern the land” (laughter). “At present I am dead to my people. Many of my band are hiding in the woods, paralyzed with terror. Cannot this court send them a pardon? My own children! — perhaps they are starving and outcast, too, afraid to appear in the light of day. If the government does not come to them with help before the winter sets in, my band will surely perish.
“But I have too much confidence in the Great Grandmother to fear that starvation will be allowed to overtake my people. The time will come when the Indians of the North-West will be of much service to the Great Grandmother. I plead again,” he cried, stretching forth his hands, “to you, the chiefs of the white men’s laws, for pity and help to the outcasts of my band!

“I have only a few words more to say. Sometimes in the past I have spoken stiffly to the Indian agents, but when I did it was only in order to obtain my rights. The North-West belonged to me, but I perhaps will not live to see it again. I ask the court to publish my speech and to scatter it among the white people. It is my defense.

“I am old and ugly, but I have tried to do good. Pity the children of my tribe! Pity the old and helpless of my people! I speak with a single tongue; and because Big Bear has always been the friend of the white man, send out pardon and give them help!

“How! Aquisanee [ēkos āni] — I have spoken!”

(Blood Red the Sun, 197–99)
Take This Rope and This Poem (A Letter for Big Bear)

This is a poem with a rope around it
because I speak poorly.
These are the words I want to say
to the great-grandfather mistahi-maskwa
but first I must speak with the Elder’s helper.
Tell Big Bear I am sorry
for trying to speak for him.
nimihtâtèn è-ki-kakwê-pîkiskwêstamâwak
anohe nitapahéyimison èkà è-nihtâ-nêhiyawêyân.

This poem has a rope around it
the way a fence confines freedom,
the way words are crushed
when the land is sectioned, sold, stolen.
Like that rope Big Bear said would grab
his neck if he signed the treaty.
He said he didn’t want
to be bound and bridled like a horse,
but the corpulent treaty commissioners
thought mistahi-maskwa was afraid
of the hangman’s noose. Instead of hanging
the great-grandfather, they tethered him
to a jail cell in Manitoba.
There’s a knot in the rope clutching this poem.

*ayis mwêstas tahto–askiy kêyâpic
namôya ê–kaskihtâyân.*

Because after all these years of study, still
I am not capable.

What does it mean that it took
me twenty years to reclaim
the word *pisâkanâpiy* from
Shaganappi Trail? What
does it mean that it took me
twenty years to untangle the knot
of a traffic jam on a freeway
in Calgary and to recognize
*pisâkanâpiy* for what it is?
A rawhide rope.

Why did I have to go to a museum
to learn how to make rawhide?
What does it mean that I smell
diesel fuel in the frigid mid-winter
instead of the hot mucky membrane
of a hide scraped in the fever of mid-summer?
How has it come to this?
the roar of transit busses
instead of the rumble of buffalo: *paskwâwi-mostoswak*
the aftertaste of caffeine
instead of the tang of Labrador tea: maskêkwâpoy
Shaganappi Trail
instead of pisâkanâpiy mêskanaw.

The knot in this rope âniskohpicikan pisâkanâpihk
must surely be akin to the knot
stuck in his great-granddaughter’s throat.
Big Bear’s great-granddaughter, Yvonne, the one
who spent so many years unable to talk
because of a double-cleft palate.
What kind of malicious irony is this
when forked tongues knit together
like a steel foot-hold trap?

Tell the great-grandfather I’ve learned
that the knot in this poem
âniskohpicikan pisâkanâpihk
is not like a bead on a string
namôya tâpiskôc âniskôhôcikan ôma kâ-tâpisahoht,
and not at all like those chains
used to hold the old man
at Stony Mountain Penitentiary.
mwâc ahpô tâpiskôc anihi piwâpiskwêyâpiya
kâ-ki-àpacihtâhk ka-sakahpitiht ana kisêyiniw
asiniwaciy kipahotowikamikohk.
Take this poem and tell *mistahi-maskwa* I’ve learned that *cëskwa!* means “Wait!”
and *naki!* means “Stop!”
Tell him that *é-tapahtiskwëkâpawiyân*
*osâm nika-âpahên âniskohpicikan nahiyikohk*
*ka-nisitohtamân è-ki-nóhté-pîkiskwâtât ostësimâwa*
*anihi kâ-wâpiskisiyit ostësimâwa*
*kâ-ki-masinabamiyit ostësimâwasinahikan.*
I stand humble, my head bowed
because I will loosen the knot just enough
to understand that he only wanted to talk to his brothers,
those older white brothers who wrote the treaty.

Take this rope and this poem
and tell the old man
*ninóhté-pakisën pisâkanâpiy*
*èkwa è-nóhté-wici-pîkiskwêmimak otayisinyima.*
*namôya kikway ayîwâk.*
I want to cut the rope.
I want to speak with his people.
Nothing more.

*ay-hay* I say to you,
the one who helps Big Bear
*kiya kâ-wicihat mistahi-maskwa.*
sôhkikâpawi, nitôtêm  ⇐ Stand Strong, My Friend

You said, “Stand in your own truth,”
and now that’s where you’re standing:
on your own patch of truth.

nipawi kitâpewihk

Truth is firm enough to support
a straight tall tree. Straight
as a tamarack on a cold
north hill. True as those needles
a gold blaze splashing
from horizon to horizon
in late September.

kwayaskokâpawi tâpiskóč ana wâkinâkan

Truth secures unsheltered tamaracks
flagging eastward from a mean
northwesterly, ready
for the possibilities of dawn
on a frigid winter night. Truth
harbours hope, a fugitive in frost
on rough bark, as steady ground
embraces heavy snow—a haven for shed needles.
wici-kâpawistâtok anohc tâpiskôc aniki wâkinâkanak

Fatigued but fearless in ferocious
determination to defy deceit,
you stand sustained by truth,
even when corruption in a suit
and tie, or cowardice decked out
in denims and sneakers, hides
poised to strike.

sôhkikâpawi èkospîhk nimiyo-tôtém

Sometimes truth is a patch of land
big enough for only one to stand;
other times it might offer space
enough to pitch your tent.

péyakokâpawi kîspin èkosi ispayiki, mâka wici-kâpawistawik mina kotakak.

Truth, unyielding terrain, underlies the first
declarations of spring:
new growth of the crocus
emerging tender and rubbery
as a baby’s first cry.
A trail worn confidently
by courage, truth tracks sure as the first
spring raindrops refracting green
aroma after a monotone winter.
Rain that sharpens the earthy
tang of moist soil. Rain
that colours the pungent green
for those tuned into the truth
of a walk in the boreal forest.

kinokápawi ayisk kisôhkisin.

Black clean dirt under red
osier dogwood, truth is kinikinik.
Tobacco offered to an elder.

néhiyaw cistémâw

“Stand in your own truth,” you said.
And it seems to me that truth
lies solid beneath the sharp
clear call of sandhill cranes
needling northward, audible
only to those who listen
with an ear bent toward certainty.

*natohta tâpwêwin, nitôtêm.*

Truth bears ripe raspberries
red off the bush, or the near-black
purple of chokecherries in late July.
A small patch of earth, the sweet
anticipation of saskatoon pie,
promises emerging from truth.

*kiyâmikâpawi êkwa cîhkîsta ôbi asotamâkêwina.*

Truth is the sixth sense
of survival, primeval, prickly perhaps
but perfect, pure as the knowledge
that comes before uncertainty.

*sôhkikâpawi nimiyo-tôtêm, Ellen.*
*cipacikâpawi anita kitâpwêwinihk.*
“*kinisitohtën ci?*” Dad asked, and I didn’t, *môya,* because I hadn’t listened enough, hadn’t heard the words quite often enough, did not, could not, repeat what I hadn’t heard.

*môya niki-kaskihtân ka-tâpowêyân osâm*  
môya ê-kî-pâh-pêhtamân osâm  
môya tâpwê ê-kî-nâ-nitohtawak.

But even as I thought I didn’t understand because I hadn’t listened, suddenly I could hear that to understand Cree is to listen to Cree, repeatedly.

*ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin*  
*ka-ki-nâh-nêhiyawî-nitohtamân*  
kâh-kihtwâm.
More often than the sun lowers or lifts, 
the moon slumbers or stirs. 
Oftener even than I heft a pen
to wrench words 
from the recesses of thought.

Suddenly I could hear it. 
Can you hear it now,
as I repeat it? To understand 
Cree is to listen to Cree, 
repeatedly.

\textit{ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin} 
\textit{ka-ki-nâh-nêhiyawí-nitohtamân} 
\textit{kâh-kihtwâm}.

As the hands of the day 
rotate round the sun, 
as the North Star submits 
to the Morning Star, 
when geese depart in August 
and return in goose month —
\textit{niski-pism} — as March slips
into April and *ayiki-pisim*
echoes with the exuberant exclamations
of *ayikisak* for their mates,
*aniki ayikisak kâ-nikamocik
kâ-nå-nikamocik,*
to understand Cree is to listen
to Cree, again and again.

*ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin
ka-ki-nâh-nêhiyawî-nîtohtamân
kâh-kihtwâm.*

As our hearts beat
over and over,
*ê-påh-pahkahokoyahk kâh-kihtwâm.*
As we take in
the clean air of life,
*ê-yâ-yêhyêyahk kâh-kihtwâm.*
The way water washes
thirst from our lips,
*ê-mâ-minihkwêyahk nipiy kâh-kihtwâm.*
Just as the North Saskatchewan River
courses continually
through the carotid of the prairies,
*ê-pâ-pimiciwahk kisiskâciwani-sipiy kâkikê.*
How a mother bear protects her young,
êkosi ê-má-manâcíchât otoskawâsisâ
aniki tâpiskôc maskosisak
kâ-mâ-mécawésiyit kâh-kihtwâm.

When a freckle on a cheek,
a certain curve of jaw, a way of smiling,
or a long strong bone returns to the next
generation or the next one
after that, especially when
the great-grandchildren play
those same games, say those same words,
sing those same songs,
when the grandfathers tell the grandchildren
yet another story,
to understand Cree is to listen to Cree
again and again and again.
wâh-pâ-pê-kîwécik
câhcahkêwin aniwâhk,
tâpiskan ôma kâ-wâ-wâkamok
ê-isi-pâh-pâhpisit, abpô ê-kâ-kinwâk
êkwa ê-sâsîbkahk ôma oskan
wâh-pâ-pê-isinâkosit ohci wîtisânihitowin
âniskotâpân abpô kihc-âniskotâpân
éwako ani
wâwîs ci
wâh-mâ-mêcawêcik âniskotâpânak,
êwako anihi mécawêwina, wâh-pâ-pîkiskwêyit
êwako anihi itwêwina,
wâh-nâ-nikamoyit êwako anihi nikamowina,
wâh-ây-âcimostawácik omosómimâwak
ocâpânimiwâwa kotak âcimowin
ka-nêhiyawî-nisitohtamihk
ka-ki-nâ-nitohtamihk nêhiyawêwin
kâh-kihtwâm.
niki-pê-pimiskân  I Came This Way by Canoe

I stumbled upon that ancient trail, foot-fallen by my ancestors, overgrown with green, bramble, centuries of former lives.

That green, wet place where my grandmother’s mothers lived, breathed, died: Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba.

June, 1989:
niki-pêtâpoyon,
There, on another river:
êkota kotak sipîhk,
winipêk sipîhk.

We pulled our canoes up on shore, stood there sweating, swearing at the buzzing in our ears, peering through the peepholes of our mosquito netting.

Comrades paddled those canoes with me, sharing food, bugs, sunshine, rain; travelled with me as I explored former lives.
Others, a convoy of my ancestors,
in my paddle,
in my pack,
in my experience,
wraiths insisting on a presence.
Shoulders, backs, abdominals, we are
our muscles. We move those canoes.
We are
    perpetual
    motion.

\textit{nitihtimaninâna, nispiskwaninâna, nitaskatayinâna,}
è-maskawisîwiyinîwiyâhk.
nitâhkami-mâ-miyo-pimâtisinân.

\textit{èkota è-ki-nipawiyân.}
There I stood: worn like our trail, weary
like the grip on my paddle, smeared
with mud, sweating like the river, straining
to hear the whispers of my foremothers,
searching for the footprints of my forefathers.

Eavesdropping on my ancestors,
now I hear footfalls that echo through time.
My grandmother knows that insect-infested place, Lac du Bonnet. Her uncle drowned there, her mother was born there, and her grandmother before that.

Here I stand: looking, leaning back. I breathe, live, want to know who I am, search for who they were.
Spinning

My grandmother’s hands, veined with the labour of children, milking cows, kneading bread, and pulling Seneca root nimbly finger the wool.
She has warmed nine younger siblings with her knitting. Now, she and three sisters are the last to remember.
She twists the unspun wool into the spinning wool.

My hands, chafed with the work of canoes, children, and changing the oil, eagerly card the wool.

The secret, she says, is in the carding.
If you’re a good carder, then the wool will wear much better.

I card the wool. Flecks of dust and hay and dung hang on. Like her five babies, four of them dead, like the memories that won’t let go.
She feeds the spinning wheel while I card the wool.

The travails of the Depression, dusty poverty, and caring for many children, not all of them her own, have shaped her slippered, arthritic foot, which now
deftly pumps the pedal. At the age of thirteen she went away to work. More bread, more laundry, and more cows, she helped to make the ends meet back home. *Don't hold too much*, she explains, fingerling the wool, *it goes on better a little at a time.*

*You try,* she tells me, and my clumsy, sweaty hands palm the wool. It goes on in clumps. *Don’t hold the wool too tight,*

*this part will join that part if you feed it through your thumb and fingers like this.*

Her brother Bud built her first spinning wheel from a bicycle wheel. He brought it home for her when she was twenty-two. Grandma’s nimble fingers were in demand when she worked that wheel. Her wool was known in the district and people paid for well-spun wool.

My fingers curl under in an inherited gesture. Grandma’s brown hands guide my pale hands; we make the ends meet. The ball of wool grows larger. The unspun wool meets the spun wool.
Practicing for My Defence

The Devil’s Advocate, dressed
as the mailman,
lives in my building, holds
open the door for me
while I check my mail,
asks me about my thesis.

I tell him I’m “doing”
my master’s in English, knowing
he won’t quite get it
if I tell him too much.

“Well, what’s it about?”

“I’m writing prose and poetry
in Cree and English.”

“Well, what’s it about?” he persists.

“I’m writing about linguistic
diversity and why that’s
important and the shame and
tragedy that so few care and
the wisdom we stand to lose
if we let it get down to one
colonial language like English.”

“Well, that sounds pretty subjective,”
he says, assessing my argument.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” I concede,
readying myself for the defence.

“Well, if it’s so subjective
how can you support it?”

“Have you ever taken a
graduate course?” I ask,
feeling the need to take
a cheap shot. I’m on a roll now.
“You betcha, I’ve got lots of support.
Just because something’s subjective
doesn’t make it any less valuable
than something that’s objective.
Just because something’s got a pile
of numbers and graphs and statistics
behind it doesn’t make it more
valid. That’s quantitative
research. Something that’s subjective is qualitative; sure it’s subjective but it’s artistic, more expressive.” I follow him up the stairs because he’s in 303 and I’m in 305. I manage to distract him, ask him about the weather and whether or not he’s ever wiped out on the blasted ice when he delivers the mail.
Like a Bead on a String

Like an umbilical cord, the rainbow connects sky to earth:
mother and child hold each other close.

\[ \text{tâpiskôc otisiyêyâpiy pisimwêyâpiy} \]
\[ \text{ê-itâpêkamohtât askihk kisikohk ohci} \]
\[ \text{ê-âkwasketinitocik awâsis èkwa okâwimâw.} \]

Like a rawhide rope, the vocal cords secure the gift of story and song:
grandfather and grandchild hold each other close.

\[ \text{tâpiskôc pisâkanâpiy pikiskwêyâpîsa} \]
\[ \text{ê-tipahpitahek miyikowisiwin âcimowin èkwa nikamowin} \]
\[ \text{ê-âkwasketinitocik mosôm èkwa ôsisima} \]

Like a bead on a string, my great-grandmother sits next to her kin just long enough for me to reach for her hands.

\[ \text{tâpiskôc kâ-tâpisahoht mikis, nitâniskotâpân} \]
\[ \text{apîstawêw owâhkómâkana nahiyikohk} \]
\[ \text{kici-têpinamwak ocihciya.} \]
Reeds breathe and I sense
that in this wet world
the breath utters a language
not yet lost, whispers words
not yet forgotten
cries a marsh message
that must be heard. âniskowaskwa
speak to me of kinosêw,
sâkahikan, manitow-sâkahikan,
êkwa nipi. Reeds
confident and eloquent
ê-sôhkêyimocik êkwa ê-nihtâwêcik
tell me a story
ê-âcimostawicik
âniskowaskwa, fluid and flowing
a fluent kind of knowing,
whispering a story about this great land.

ê-kimwêcik, ê-âtotahkik ôma kihci-askiy.
A Question for Canadian History

This one Cree,
who was he,
that one who met
Henry Hudson?
kiyâmapi.
pêho êkwa...
ahpô étikwê kika-pêhtên kikway
kipihtowêwinihk.

Be quiet for a minute.
Wait now…
You might hear something
in the silence.
The dictionary tells me it means “think nothing of it,” and “let’s go then,” “so much for this,” “let there be no further delay,” and a few other things like that.

I remember my Dad saying, “*kiyâmapik,*” when we wouldn’t settle down for the night. He’d come running upstairs and tell us to “*kiyâmapik.*” Which pretty much meant, “Go to sleep!”

The dictionary also says *kiyâm* means “never mind,” and “let it be,” or “oh well,” “it’s okay,” but I know some people are hurting too much to let anything be.
“kiyâmapi,” nipëhtawâw awiyak ê–itwêt,
“mah! kêhtê–ayak ê–ayamihâcik.”

“Shhhh,” I hear someone saying,
“Listen. The Elders are praying.”
notes on the poems

THE ROAD TO WRITER’S BLOCK (A POEM TO MYSELF)

Mark Abley, in his book *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*, gave me the idea that a fluent speaker must first be a fluent listener.

pahkwēsikan ≈ BREAD

“Beaver Mountain House”: The Cree people called Fort Edmonton *amiskwacî-wâskahikan*, “Beaver Mountain House,” after the nearby Beaver Hills.

ē-wītisānīhitoyāhk ēkwa ē-pēyāhtakowēyāhk ≈ RELATIVE CLAUSE

In Cree, relative clauses are introduced by the particle *kâ*- affixed to the verb, rather than by a relative pronoun such as “who,” “that,” or “which.” Relative clauses also occur more frequently in Cree than in English. As Jean Okimâsis points out, when we translate from Cree to English, we will often need to eliminate a relative clause in the Cree in order to produce an idiomatic English sentence, and, as a result, “the English translation does not capture the thought process of the Cree and the way they express that thought.” To borrow from her examples: the Cree *ê-nitawēyihtaman cî anihi maskisina kâ-mihkwâki*? literally means, “Do you want those shoes that are red?” But in English we would say, “Do you want those red shoes?” Similarly, *tânispîhk anima kisîmis kâ-kî-wâpamat*? literally means, “When was it that you saw your younger sibling?” But we would say simply, “When did you see your younger sibling?” (See Jean Okimâsis, *Cree: Language of the Plains = nêhiyawêwin: paskwâwi-pîkiskwêwin*, 147–48.)

“The evidence of our Cree / inheritance, the baby blue / lumbar bruise”: Children are sometimes born with a bluish mark on their backs, most often in the lower lumbar region — the so-called “Mongolian spot.” Such marks, which generally fade by the time the child reaches puberty, are significantly more common among children of colour than among Caucasians. For more information, see Alberto Cordova, “The Mongolian Spot: A Study of Ethnic Differences and Literature Review,” *Clinical Pediatrics* 20, no. 11 (1981): 714–19.

tânisi ka-isî-nihtâ-âhpinihkêyan ≈ HOW TO TAN A HIDE

I credit Alice Harkness, Olive Modersohn, and Dr. Anne Anderson for teaching me how to tan a hide, and I thank Cheri Fiddler and Jenny Baril for learning with me.
aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik — TWO MEN TALKING

When this poem appeared in the Edmonton Stroll of Poets anthology *Found in Translation* (2010), I included the following note on the poem:

I wrote “aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik: Two Men Talking” to honour my late father, Mowat Edgar McIlwraith, and the late Dr. Harold Cardinal, both of whom were bilingual in Cree and English. Sadly, they never conversed because they did not meet each other before sharing a hospital room in their last days, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) took away my father’s ability to speak *at all*.

I write in Cree and English for these reasons: to search for meaning, to express peace, and to express hope that we can keep this beautiful language — nêhiyawêwin — alive.

In the epigraph, “ohci Mowat Edgar McIlwraith êkwa Dr. Harold Cardinal,” ohci means “for,” and êkwa is “and.”

nohtâwiy opîkiskwêwin — FATHER TONGUE

Cree verb forms are extraordinarily complex. As in English, verbs can be transitive or intransitive, but they can also be animate or inanimate. The -ikawi suffix is added to the stem of transitive animate verbs to produce the “indefinite actor” form of the verb. It denotes that the action of the verb is performed by an unspecified actor. For example, ê-sawêyimikawiyan means “I am blessed”; ê-itikawiyan means “I am called.” Although there is some resemblance between indefinite actor verbs and the agentless passive in English, ê-kakêskimikawiyan — I have been cautioned — not to assume that the transitive animate indefinite actor verb form in Plains Cree is equivalent to the passive voice in English.

aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-masinahikêcik — TWO MEN WRITING

I wrote this poem after reading a written exchange between John Searle and Jacques Derrida on the subject of language and, in particular, speech act theory. It struck me that they were having a fistfight in words and that, in their preoccupation with delivering written blows, they had forgotten the spoken word and the power of conversation.
ê-kî-pîcîyâhk  WE DANCED ROUND DANCE

I thank Roger Epp, the Hobbema Elders, the University of Alberta Aboriginal Student Services Centre and Faculty of Native Studies, Shana Dion, Tracy Bear, and Ellen Bielawski for hosting the Round Dance at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, in Camrose, 29 January 2011: ohci kihiwîkwan ay ay mistahi nitôtêmtîk! I also thank Aspen-Raine Northwest and her parents, Carrie and James Northwest, for permission to include her name in this poem.

maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw ôma wiya ohci  FOR MEDICINE BEAR WOMAN

Early in the spring of 2004, I met Yvonne Johnson, the great-great-great granddaughter of the Cree leader mistahi-maskwa (Big Bear). She had been invited to speak at the University of Alberta. At the time, Yvonne was serving a life sentence at the Edmonton Institution for Women, a federal penitentiary not far from where I live in West Edmonton. Immediately after hearing Yvonne speak, I went to the U of A bookstore and bought Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman, which she wrote with Rudy Wiebe. Her story is disturbing. This poem expresses my amazement at the strange ironies of history: mistahi-maskwa’s oratory powers, Yvonne’s double cleft palate, which left her incapable of speech until she was in her late teens (when she underwent surgery), and current efforts to establish official language status for Plains Cree and other Indigenous languages, in the urgent hope that these languages will survive the relentless onslaught of English — that the ability to speak will not be lost.

The statements in the poem attributed to Yvonne and to Big Bear are from Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman (Toronto: Jackpine House, 1998). For reasons of euphony, I refer in the poem to Big Bear as Yvonne’s great-grandfather (and, in “Take This Rope and This Poem,” to Yvonne as Big Bear’s great-granddaughter).

mistahi-maskwa

In December 1882, after waiting six years for the Canadian government to deliver on broken promises, mistahi-maskwa finally agreed to sign Treaty Six. He was the last Plains Cree chief to do so, having understood that the government’s intentions were not honourable. Before signing the treaty, he harangued the treaty commissioners for several hours, suggesting metaphorically that he was being led around just like a horse with a rope round its neck. Two-and-a-half years later, at Easter 1885, mistahi-maskwa tried to stop what history now calls “The Frog Lake Massacre.”
Unfortunately, too many of his people were sick and hungry, and the young men were angry. Old man that he was, mistahi-maskwa could not stop the killing of nine white people, including two priests. Caught and incarcerated a few months later, mistahi-maskwa delivered this speech — in nêhiyawêwin — to the people in the courtroom after he was convicted of treason-felony. William Cameron provides this English translation, but we will, of course, never know precisely what mistahi-maskwa said.

**kâh-kîhtwâm ☭ AGAIN AND AGAIN**

In *Plains Cree: A Grammatical Study*, H. Christoph Wolfart says this about reduplication:

Verb and particle roots are freely reduplicated. Reduplication adds the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, etc. . . .

With roots beginning in a consonant, the reduplication syllable usually consists of the first consonant (also of a cluster) plus â, e.g., kâkîpa ‘over and over,’ mâmêscihtâsôw ‘he carried on his work of extermination,’ câcimatâw ‘he plants it upright (everywhere),’ etc. . . .

Where a root begins with a vowel, the reduplication is normally marked by ay- (or ây-?), e.g., ayohpikiw ‘he grows up.’ (66)

This poem contains numerous examples of reduplication: ê-nâ-nitohtawak, ê-pâh-péhtawak, ê-pâh-pahkahokoyahk kâh-kîhtwâm, ê-yâ-yêhyêyahk kâh-kîhtwâm, ê-mâ-minihwêyahk nipiê kâh-kîhtwâm, ê-wâh-ây-âcimostâcik, and so on.
cree–english correspondences

FAMILY POEMS

THE ROAD TO WRITER’S BLOCK (A POEM TO MYSELF)

nêhiyawêwin the Cree language, speaking Cree
kiwê go home
kiwêtinohk itohtê go north, northwards
(wowards the north wind)
wâpikwanîs flower
naspâci opposite, contrarily
paskwâwi-mostos buffalo
âkayäsîmowin the English language; speaking English
cahcâhîkiwak pelicans
môhkâhâsiwak bitterns
misi-môhkâhâsiwak Great Blue herons
asihkwâc I do not speak good Cree.
nâmôya nipakaski-nêhiyawân. come in; you’re welcome; there is room
môniyâskwêw white woman
tawâw I want to speak Cree because my late father,
môniyâskwêw he spoke Cree brilliantly.

ninôhtê-nêhiyawân ayîsk ê-kî-pâksâkî
nohtâwîpan. He was from Frog Lake, but he was not Cree;

ayîki-sâkahikanihk ohci wiya mâka môya and my mother is a Mêtis woman.
ë-kî-nêhiyawî, kî-môniyâwiw.
ëkwa mâna ê-âpihtawikosisânîskwêwit nikâwiy.
cahkipêhîkanak diacritical marks in a syllabary;
syllabic symbols
This woman, the one who is a good friend to you and who speaks Cree brilliantly
Learn how to count in Cree: one, two, three . . .
throw them away
now listen
listen attentively
Listen to these Cree words, these beautiful Cree words.
But hurry! You haven’t much time.

Trademark Translation
nit’skwêm ap’sis nëhiyaw.
My woman is a little bit Cree.

paskwâhk ➔ On the Prairie

paskwâw
prairie, plains
paskwâhk
on the prairie (locative case)
mînisîhkês
Seneca root
paskwâwi-mostos
buffalo, bison
(p plural: paskwâwi-mostoswak)
paskwâwi-mostosowiyâs
buffalo meat
êha
yes
nôhkom
my grandmother
kinêpik
a snake
paskwâwiyininâhk
in Plains Cree country
paskwâwiyiniwak
Plains Cree people
they speak the Plains Cree language
the Ojibwe language
the Assiniboine language
How many of those Plains Indians, who were Cree, spoke Ojibwe or Assiniboine?
It is open country.
How did the Europeans not know the Indians?
They knew them
They held them in high regard
If we truly know each other, we can truly respect each other.
Yes, and she was my Grandma, and she was good at pulling Seneca Root.

**kiya kâ-pakaski-nîmihitoyan**  
*YOU WHO DANCE SO BRIGHTLY*

You who are dancing so brightly
to darken, as in an eclipse
You make an echo soon.
You shine brightly just like the Leaf-Falling Moon.
My father spoke Cree very fluently (lit., brightly).
the Plains Cree language
You shine brightly just like those ones, those ghosts who dance [the Northern Lights],
like the red sky at sunset
the sun thatretires
osâwinâkwan tâpiskôc ispîhk ê-pê-sâkâstêk.

It is yellow when the sun rises.

askihtakoskâw wâwîs kâ-pipohk.

The forest is green, especially in winter.

kisê-manitow

the Great Spirit

pakaski-kihci-kîsikohk ispîhk ê-yôhtépitamâsk kihci-kîsikowi-yôhtênawêwina kisê-manitow.

Heaven is brilliant when the Great Spirit opens the gates for you.

osâm ê-cîpayâmatisoyân ispîhk kiya ê-cîpayikawîyân kâ-pakaski-nîmîhîtôyân mákâ kipéhtâtân ê-cîstâwêyân èkwa è-pakaskihtâkosiyan.

because I am visited by ghosts when you are a ghost who is dancing so brightly, I can hear you, you are echoing and you are fluent.

tawâw  THERE IS ROOM, ALWAYS ROOM FOR ONE MORE

tawâw

come in; you’re welcome; there is room

kikî-wâpahtên è-misi-tawâk èkwa ita ka-wîkihk.

You saw that there was lots of space and lots of room for living.

è-kî-tawatahamêk.

The two of you blazed a trail.

kiya èkwa nikâwînân è-kî-tawinamawiyâhk.

You and Mom, the two of you cleared a space by hand for us.

ayiwâk nawac kikî-tawinikâñ.

You made more space.

ôma nêhiyawêwin
this Cree language

èkwa ôma nêhiyaw-isîhcikêwin

and this Cree culture

è-kî-otamihôyân èkosi mîyâ kikî-pêhtâtîn osâm mîyâ è-kî-nîtohtâtân.

I was too busy, and I wasn’t hearing you because I wasn’t listening to you.

anohc èkwa pitanê ka-kî-wâpahtamân mâna ka-kî-pêhtamân ayiwâk kîkway

Now I wish I could have seen and heard more

nimîhtâtên èkâ è-kî-nâkatôhkéyân pîtos kâ-kî-isi-waskawîyân.

I wish I could have been more open to our special way of living.

tâwâyihk

between the places, in the place between

pitanê ayiwâk ka-kî-tawinamâtân.

I wish that I could have made more room.
**PERFECT NOT PERFECT**

ahpô étikwê ka-kî-sôhkî-kotêyih tamân ka-ni tohtâtân.

é-wîtisânihitoyahk ôma kiyânaw.

kiyawâw kâ-wâhkômiyêk

nika-kakwê-tapahtêyimison.

nika-kakwê-wânaskân.

Perhaps I could have tried harder to listen to you.

We are a family

All of you, you are the ones who are my relations

I will try harder to be humble.

I will try harder to be at peace.

**tawastêw ☞ THE PASSAGE IS SAFE**

tawastêw

tawâw

Céad mile fáilte

nêhiyawêwin

é-têhtapahipéyâhk

nipîhk kâ-âstêkamik.

é-kiskéiyimâyâhk kisê-manitow

kisikohk ê-tawinamâsk.

kisâpohântâwêhtân.

tawâw ôta. maht ésa pîhtokwê. ôta ka-kî-aywêpin.

There is a safe passage

come in; you’re welcome; there is room

Gaelic for “One Hundred Thousand Welcomes”

the Cree language

We are floating

on this water, the water that is still and calm.

We know that the Creator [the Great Spirit]

makes room for you in heaven.

You walk through the opening.

There is room here. Please come in.

Here you can rest.

**pahkwêsikan ☞ BREAD**

pahkwêsikan

ê-kî-mâh-mâwaci-miyo-pahkwêsikanîhêk

pahkisimotâhk isi

bannock, bread, flour

She made really good bread

the best in the west
of Red River.
I don’t know if Grandma spoke Cree but I do know she made really good bread the best in the west of Red River.
my Grandmother
The British, not those ones who speak English, those ones who speak that other language, those ones who brought bannock from over there to here.
pemmican pemmican from over here bread from over there she/he breaks a piece of something (e.g., bread) by hand
I have pounded meat
I have poured warm water over yeast
I have learned that to be a family
It is okay to be from here and it is okay to be from over there.
ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwêwin We are related to each other and with the language.

ê-nêhiyawî-kiskinohamâko-siyân. I am learning to speak Cree.
sôniyâw money
môniyâw a white person
côhkomipinanawâk cucumbers
ôhkom grandmother
nôhkom my grandmother
ôhkom your grandmother
ôhkom our grandmother
nêhiyawêwin the Cree language
ôhkomipinanawâk our late grandmothers
nitôtêm my friend
nôtokwêw She is an old woman
kîhc-ôkimânâhk the government
ôhkom mistahi kî-miyotwâw ê-kî-ôpihtawikosisâniskwêwit êkwa mistahi nîkî-sâkihaw.
ôhkom mistahi kisâkîhitin. My grandmother was a very kind Métis woman, and I loved her very much.
nêhiyawak the Cree People
ôhkom mistahi kisâkîhitin. My Grandmother, I love you very much.
ohtâmâw father
kohtâwiy your father
nohtâwiy my father
nohtâwiy namôya nêhiyaw mâka mistahi pakaski-nêhiyawêw. My father is not a Cree person, but he speaks Cree brilliantly.
nohtâwiy mistahi miyohtwâw mônîyâw.  
My father is a very kind white man.

nohtâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin.  
My Father, I love you very much.

okâwîmâw  
mother

kîkâwîy  
your mother

nikâwîy  
my mother

nikâwîy namôya nêhiyawêw mâka mistahi  
ê-pakaski-pîkiskwêt sâkhiwêwin.  
My mother does not speak Cree, but she speaks  
love very well.

nikâwîy mistahi miyohtwâw  
ê-âpihtawikosisâniskwêt.  
My mother is a very kind Métis woman.

nikâwîy mistahi kisâkihitin  
My Mother, I love you very much

nasakay wâpiskisiw  
My skin is white.

nimihkom mihkwâw  
My blood is red.

mihkwâw  
It is red.

êkwa kâ-nîmihitocîk mistahi katawasisiwak.  
And when the ancestral spirits dance,  
the Northern Lights are very beautiful.

\[\text{é-wîtisisânîhitoyâhk \ ékwa \ é-pêyâhtakowêyâhk} \quad \Rightarrow \text{RELATIVE CLAUSE}\]

\[\text{é-wîtisisânîhitoyâhk \ ékwa \ é-pêyâhtakowêyâhk} \quad \text{We are relatives and we are careful with our words}\]

\[\text{nîsîm} \quad \text{my younger sibling} \quad \text{(a younger brother or sister)}\]

\[\text{nîsîmè} \quad \text{my younger sibling} \quad \text{(vocative case)}\]

\[\text{tânisi anima \ é-isi-tôtaman, nîsîmè?} \quad \text{How do you do it, my sister?}\]

\[\text{tânisi anima \ é-isi-kîkiskâ-mâmitonêyihtaman?} \quad \text{How do you think so fast?}\]

\[\text{naniwêyitwê, nîsîmè, anima \ âcimowin} \quad \text{Tell a joke, my sister, that story}\]

\[\text{kâ-mâci-pâhpiyâhk mâna ahpô piko} \quad \text{that makes us laugh no matter}\]
tahtwâw kâ-âcimôyan.
nisîmê
nimiywêyihtênnân
ka-pêhtâtâhk kâ-kêyakâhpisiyan
nisîmê, anima kêyakâhpisiwin
kâ-ohci-pâhpiyâhk.
kìyâm nisîmê, pâhpi
anima kêyakâhpisiwin
tâpiskôc ana awâsis
kâ-kêyakâhpisit
mâto anima mâtowin
tâpiskôc nâpêw kâ-isi-mâtot.
nisîmê
manâcihik kitawâsimisak
ôma pwâwatêwin ohci.
pâhpi nisîmê, miyawâsîk
kitawâsimisak
aniki awâsisak
kâ-sâkihacik
miyawâsîk, asici pâhpiwin
sâkihik kitawâsimisak, nisîmê
nikâ
pâhpihik, nikâ, pâhpihik
têpwê-pâhpihik.
ê-kî-nakatikoyahk êkwa

how many times you tell it.
my brother
We like
to hear you giggle
my brother, that giggle
the one that makes us all giggle.
It’s okay my brother, giggle
that little giggle
just like that child
the one who giggles
cry that cry
just like that grown man’s cry.
my younger sister
protect your children
from this heavy burden.
laugh my sister, celebrate
your children
these children
these ones you love
celebrate them with laughter
love your children, my sister
mother! (vocative case)
laugh, my mother, laugh
laugh in their faces.
He has left us now
my mother, but remember

his laugh, that laugh

he made us all feel better.

all my relatives, all of you

the ones who married my siblings

my brother’s daughters and my sister’s daughters, my brother’s son and my sister’s sons

my aunties and my uncles

my mother’s sister’s daughters, my mother’s sister’s son, my father’s brother’s son, my father’s brother’s daughters, and my grandparents

the ones who came before

the ones who will come after

Shhhh, now.

it sounds pleasant

that echo

it won’t stop sounding.

RECLAMATION POEMS

CREE LESSONS

nêhiyawêwin

têhtapiwin

tohtôsâpooy

nâpêw âpacihcikan

the Cree language

chair

milk

the man’s tool
nāpēw isihcikâsowin  the man's private parts
nimîcisonân  we eat
nimêtawânân  we play
ê-nikamoyâhk  we are singing
ê-nîmihitoyâhk  we are dancing
ê-pâhpiyâhk  we are laughing
môniyâw  a White man
nêhiyawiskwêw  a Cree woman
nâpêw  man
owîkimâkana  the man's wife
nêhiyawê  speak Cree
mistahi  a lot, very much
nihtâ-nêhiyawêw  she/he speaks Cree very well
nâs  to go and get someone
sâminâs  to touch something very softly
ê-pâhpiyâhk êkwa ê-kiskinohamâkosiyâhk  we are laughing and we are learning

tânisi ka-isî-nihtâ-âhpinihkêyan  HOW TO TAN A HIDE

tânisi ka-isî-nihtâ-âhpinihkêyan  how to tan a hide
kiskisitota ôma kâ-itihtâkwahk.  Remember that sound.
mihkikhwan  hide scraper
kiskisi nîkân ka-mihkitaman itê kâ-wiyâsiwik.  Remember to scrape the meat off first.
wâpam tânisi ê-itâpacïhtât ôma matahikan.  Watch how she uses that hide scraper, the one that scrapes the fur off.

nitohta.  Listen.
Listen carefully and you will hear how the fur scraper does not sound the same as the flesh scraper. Your grandmother will also hear. Remember that sound. Remember how she uses these brains to soften the hide. Stay with your grandmother. Help her to work that hide. Keep up that fire. Listen carefully. Remember, the brains soften the hide. Remember so that you will know.

**Aniki níso nápêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik**

these two men, the ones who speak together I can hear the pleasing sounds of North Saskatchewan River It flows swiftly but peacefully and I am hearing the pleasing sounds of
pêyâhtakêyimowin.
kiyawâw kipîkiskwâtitonâwâw
mâka ê-manâcimitoyêk
êkwa kinisitohtâtonâwâw.
kiyawâw nîso nâpêwak
kâ-pîkiskwêyêk
nîso pîwâkonisas
ê-nöhtê-âhkami-pîkiskwâtitoyêk
môy ê-nitawéyihtamêk
ka-kipihtowêyêk.

peace.
You talk to each other
and you are careful with each other
and you listen to each other.
these two men
the ones who speak together
two snowflakes that float
you want to speak Cree with each other
you do not want
to stop talking.

nôhtâwiy opîkiskwêwin  FATHER TONGUE
nôhtâwiy opîkiskwêwin
-ikawi
nêhiyawêwin itwêwina
pakhwêsikan, maskihkîwâpoy
êkwa nîpiy
mistik, osimisk, êkwa nîpiy
pipon, miyoskamin
nîpin, êkwa takwâkin
mispon êkwa kimiwan
wâsêskwan êkwa yôtin
wîhki-pakhwêsikanis
kihci-okiniy, êkwa

My father, his language
(suffix)
Cree words
bread, tea (lit., medicine water)
and water
tree, bud, and leaf
winter, spring
summer and fall
snow and rain
sun and wind
cookie
tomato and
ápak osísí-mîciwin

sâkahikan, asinîwaciɣ

paskwâw

papâ-mîcisowin èkwa kapêsîwin

kâkikê è-ki-môsâhkinamâhk

môtêyâpiskwa ispî

kâ-ki-papâ-mîcisoyâhk

ahpô è-nitawi-kapêsîyâhk.

sîpihkonâkwan mèkwâc kîsîk

mâkâ kinwês è-ki-pihkonâkwahk.

sêhkêpayîs èkwa cîmân

napakîtâpânâsk èkwa tihkinâkan

oskawâsis, nâpêsîs, iskwêsîs, nâpèw, èkwa iskwêw

nîcimos èkwa nîcimos

nikâwiy èkwa nôhtâwiy

nôhkom èkwa nimosôm

nîcisânak, nimis èkwa nistês

nikâwîs èkwa nohcâwîs

“nitânîs” èkwa “nikosis”

nôcokwêsîs èkwa kisêyînis

è-maskawâk èkwa è-yôskâk.

è-sôhkîhtâkwahk èkwa

è-kâmâwâtahk.

cheese (lit., mouse food)
lake, mountain
prairie
picnic and camping
We always picked bottles
bottles when
we went picnicking
or camping.
The sky is blue now
but for a long time it has been grey.
car and canoe
toboggan and cradleboard
baby, boy, girl, man, and woman
my boyfriend and my girlfriend (my sweetheart)
my mother and my father
my grandmother and my grandfather
my sister and my brother
my auntie (my mother’s sister) and my uncle (my dad’s brother)
“my girl” and “my boy”
old woman and old man
It is hard and it is soft.
It is loud and
it is quiet.
The ground is hard
The silence is loud
Your voice is melodious and peaceful.
You always spoke carefully
just like rain
The raindrops are falling gently when
the ground is dried out.
You sound far away now.
You listen and you persevere.
You and Mom loved us and
you and our mother
raised up a good family.
You lived a good life, but
then you went on ahead
and you lay down to your rest in your
resting place
You were kind
and you were honest and just
You were humble
You were soft-spoken
You had a gentle heart
You had a soft spot in your heart
for all Cree people.
You were generous and you cared for us.
You were thoughtful
You did a good thing each time you spoke Cree.
You were so good at so many things.
I am sad and I am regretful because sickness took away your talk and I came too late to listen.
But now you're whispering and I'm listening.

**ninitahtamon kititewiniwawa**  I BORROW YOUR WORDS

I borrow your words I mean no wrong in writing or speaking your language. I mean to understand you on your own terms in your words.

Each word intricately embroidered like the frost on my window this cold northern morning. Each inflection a feathered essence on the glass

Each word a songbird as soon
aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-masina'hikêcîk

These two men, the ones who write

Did you know

to understand Cree

is not merely to write in Cree?

Listen

Try to understand
sâpohtawân _ghost dance
sâpohtawân
kimosômipaninawak, kôhkomipaninawak
êkwa kahkiyaw kicâpâninawak
êkota kika-wîci-nîmihitômânawak.
ê-nikamocik sâpohtawân nikamowin.
awa môhcohkân
oskâpêwis
pimîhkân
êkwa kahkiyaw ê-pâhpihâyâhk
awa ê-wawiyatéyihtâkosit nâpéw
“êkâ êkosi itapi, kitôhkpin anima” ê-isit.
êkospîhk ê-kî-kiskinohamâkosiyân
ka-isi-wakâyaskapiyân.
ayiwâk ninîmihitonân.
kâh-kitow ayiwâk awa môhcohkân.
ayiwâk ninîmiciyônân.
ê-nikamot ayiwâk awa nâpéw.
kâ-miyotâmôt tôpiskôc
misâskwâtôminâpoy ê-siwas.
sâpohtêwak.
ê-ki-sâpohtawëhtêt.
êkwa aniki kâ-nîmihitôcik
kâ-wî-ci-nîmihitômâyâhkik
mistahi katawasisiwak.

Ghost Dance
The grandfathers, the grandmothers, and all the ancestors
There we will dance with the ancestors.
They sing the Ghost Dance song.
this clown, trickster
helper
pemmican
and everyone laughs
at this funny man
“Don’t sit like that,” he says to me.
I have since learned
to sit properly.
We dance some more.
That clown calls out some more.
We eat more food.
The man sings some more.
He has a sweet voice just like
saskatoon syrup.
They pass right through.
He passed right through the opening.
And those ghosts who are dancing
the ones we dance with
they are very beautiful.
ê-kî-pîciciyâhk  WE DANCED ROUND DANCE
ê-kî-pîciciyâhk       We danced round and round
kâh-kihtwâm           again and again
tàpiskóc pîsim kâ-isi-waskawît just as the sun moves round and round
kâh-kihtwâm           again and again
ê-takahkwêwêtitàcik    They make a pleasing sound with the drums
ekwa ê-mâ-matwêwêhwácîk. and they pound the drums so others can hear them from far away.

A FEW IDEAS FROM amiskwacî-wâskahikanihk

THE YOUNG LINGUIST

tànisi                 Hello
tànisi kiya?           Hello, how are you?

tànisi ka-isi-nihtâ-pimîhkêyan  HOW TO MAKE PEMMICAN
tànisi ka-isi-nihtâ-pimîhkêyan how to make pemican
paskwâwi-mostosowîyâs    buffalo meat
Namoya Ayiman
It's not difficult (the title of Anne Anderson's book Let's Learn Cree: Namoya Ayiman)
nîpawiwin               the standing place
êkosi                  so then
akwâwân                meat-drying rack
kayâs                  a long time ago
kâh-kinwês             quite a long time
History Poems

maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw ôma wiya ohci

maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw ôma wiya ohci

ayîki-pîsim

kikî-pîkiskwâsin anima êkospîhk.

kikî-nanâskominân ê-kî-pê-nîtohtûtâhk.

nistam anima êkospîhk kâ-kî-pêhtamân kititwêwina ê-pîkiskwêyan.

pîkiskwê, nitôtêm, pîkiskwê. kititwêwina kinanâtawihikon.

awiyak kikî-kakwêcînimik kikwây ê-kiskinohamâkosiyân kwayask wiyaśiwêwin ohci.

ômisi kikî-itwân “namôya kwayask wiyaśiwêwin ihtakon.

kiyânaw ôma pîko êkwa kotakak wiyaśawâw kahkiyaw.”

wihtamawin, ê-nôhtê-nisîtohtûtân.

ninôhtê-nisîtawinawâwak aniki kâ-kwayaskwâtisîcîk.

tâtîskôc ana owiyasiwêw kâ-kî-mîyisk sôhkihtâtakosiwin.

kikî-wâpamîtîn êkwa kikî-nânâhkasîhtâtîn.

kikî-nîtohtâtîn êkwa kikî-nânâhkasîhtâtîn.

kikî-pîkiskwâsin isi kâ-kî-nânâhkasîhtâtûtân.

ômisi kikî-itwân: “namôya ôma ê-mac-âyiwiyan.

namôya macîkwanâs osîhtâw kisê-manitow.”

awiyak kikî-kakwêcînimik tânisi êkwa ê-îsi-nâkatawêyihtaman kikisiwâsiwin.

for Medicine Bear Woman

April

You spoke to me that day.

You thanked me and the others for listening.

That day, I first heard your words as you spoke them.

Speak, my friend, speak. Your words are your medicine.

Someone asked you what you have learned about justice.

You said, “There is no justice.

There’s just us and all the rest.”

Tell me, I want to understand you.

I want to know about the just ones.

Like that judge who gave you the power of speech.

I saw you on the outside.

I listened to you on the outside.

You talked to me on the outside.

You said, “I’m not a bad person inside.

The Creator doesn’t make junk.”

Someone asked you what you do with your anger now.
ômisi kikî-itwân: “nitâ-ay-âsihtân kîspin kaskihtâyâni”

ispîhk kâ-mâmiskôtaman anima tâpasinahikêwin kâ-kî-osïhtâyan

awîna êtikwê ana kâ-kî-mâyitôtâsk nîkî-ay-itêyihtên.

matwân cî anima êwak ohci kâ-kî-mâyinikêyan.

kikî-kakwêcîmitin tânisi ê-isi-miyikoyan maskawisîwin pikiskwêwina êkwa itwêwina.

kikî-itwân, “pîkiskwêwina êkwa itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa mâka namôya maskwa-
wisîmakanwa kîspin nam awiyak nitohtâhki.”

matwân cî kikî-mösîhtân nimaskawisîwinân kahkiyaw niyanân êkota kâ-nitohtâtâhk.

anohc êkwa nitayamihtân anîhi kîpikiskwêwina kâ-kî-masînâhama.

kitâniskotâpân, mistahi-maskwa, ômisi kî-itwêw, “itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa.”

kitîtwân kiya, “kîspin nam awiyak êkâ pikiskwêci anîhi itwêwina ka-kî-pîkiskwêh, êwako kâmwâtisîwin kîka-nisiwanâcihikon.”

kînîtohtâtin kâ-kî-isi-nânâhkasîhtâtân.

ka-kî-pêhtawin cî kâ-kî-isi-nânâhkasîhtâtân?

pîkiskwê, nitôtêm. kitâpwêwin anima kiwîcihikowisiwin.

kiwîcihikowisiwin ninöhtê-pêhtên.

pîkiskwê, maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw.

You said you make statements whenever you can.

When you spoke of what you made in art class

I wondered who did bad things to you.

I wondered if that’s why you did that bad thing.

I asked you how speech and words give you power.

You said, “Words and speech are power, but they’re not power if there ain’t no one listening.”

I wondered if you felt the power of all of us listening to you.

Now I read your words as you wrote them.

Your great-grandfather, Big Bear, said, “Words are power.”

You say, “If no one ever speaks the words that should be spoken, the silence destroys you.”

I listen to you on the outside.

Can you hear me listening?

Speak, my friend. Your truth is your power.

I want to hear your power.

Speak, Medicine Bear Woman.
TAKE THIS ROPE AND THIS POEM (A LETTER FOR BIG BEAR)

mistahi-maskwa

I regret trying to speak for him.

nimihtâtên è-kî-kakwê-pîkiskwêstamâwak.

Now I am humbled because I do not speak Cree competently.

anohc nitapahtêyimison èkâ è-nihtâ-nêhiyawêyân.

Because after all these years,

ayis mwêstas tahto-askiyy kêyâpic

still I am not capable

namôya è-kaskihtâyân

a rawhide rope

pisâkanâpiy

buffalo

paskwâwi-mostoswak

muskeg tea (Labrador tea)

maskêkwâpoy

Rawhide Rope Road

pisâkanâpiy mêskanaw

a rope with a knot in it

âniskohpicikan pisâkanâpihk

not at all like a bead that has been threaded onto a string

namôya tâpiskâc èniskohôcikan ôma

not at all like those chains

kâ-tâpisahoht

used to hold him

mwâc ahpô tâpiskâc anihî pîwâpiskwêyâpiya

at Stony Mountain Penitentiary.

kâ-ki-âpachihtâhk ka-sakahpitiht ana kisêyiniw

Wait!

asinîwaciyy kipahotowikamikohk.

Stop!

cêskwa!

naki!

ê-tapahtiskwêkâpawiyân

I stand humble, my head bowed

osâm nikî-âpahên èniskohpicikan nahiyoikohk

because I will loosen the knot just enough

ka-nisitohtamân è-kî-nôhtê-pîkiskwâtât

to say I understand that he wanted to talk

ostêsimâwa

to his brothers

anihi kâ-wâpiskisiyit ostêsimâwa

those older white brothers who wrote the treaty

kâ-ki-masinahamiyit ostêsimâwasinahkân

these ones who signed the treaty

ninôhtê-paskisên pisâkanâpiy

I want to cut the rope
ênôhtê-wîci-pîkiskwêmimak otayisiyinîma
namôya kîkway ayiwâk.
ay hay.
kiya kâ-wîcihat mistahi-maskwa.

I want to speak with his people
Nothing more.
Thank you.
The one who helps Big Bear.

sôhkikâpawi, nitôtém ≈ STAND STRONG, MY FRIEND

sôhkikâpawi, nitôtém
Stand strong, my friend

nîpawi kitâpwêwinihk
Stand there in your own truth

kwayaskokâpawi tâpiskôc ana wâkinâkan.
Stand straight just like that tamarack tree.

wîci-kâpawîstâток anohc tâpiskôc aniki wâkinâkanak.
Stand with others now, just like those tamarack trees.

sôhkikâpawi èkospîhk nimio-tôtém.
Stand strong at those times, my friend.

pêyakokâpawi kîspin èkosi ispayiki, mâka wîci-kâpawîstawîk mîna kotakak.
Stand on your own if necessary, but also stand with others too.

ômisi isikâpawi tâpiskôc kâ-isi-sâkâkonêkâpawît apiscâpakwanîs.
Stand this way, like the little crocus that stands up sticking out of the snow.

kinokâpawi ayisk kisôhkisin.
Stand tall because you are strong.

nêhiyaw cîstêmâw
Cree tobacco

natohta tâpwêwin nitôtém.
Listen for the truth, my friend.

kiyâmikâpawi èkwa cîhkîsta ôhi asotamâkêwina.
Stand quietly and enjoy these promises.

sôhkikâpawi nimio-tôtém, Ellen.
Stand strong my good friend, Ellen.

cîpacikâpawi anita kitâpwêwinihk.
Stand very straight, there in your own truth.

kâh-kîhtwâm ≈ AGAIN AND AGAIN

kâh-kîhtwâm
again and again

kinisitohtân ci?
Do you understand?
môya
môya nikî-kaskihtân ka-tâpowêyân osâm
môya è-kî-pâh-pêhtamân osâm
môya tâpwe è-kî-nâ-nitohtawak.
ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin
ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawî-nitohtamân
kâh-kihtwâm.
ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin
ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawî-nitohtamân
kâh-kihtwâm.
niski-pîsim
ayîki-pîsim
ayîkisak
aniki ayîkisak kâ-nikamocik
kâ-nâ-nikamocik.
è-pâh-pahkahokoyahk kâh-kihtwâm
è-yâ-yëhyëyahk kâh-kihtwâm.
è-mâ-minihkwëyahk nipiy kâh-kihtwâm
è-pâ-pimiciwahk kisiskâciwani-sîpiy kâkikê.
èkosi è-mà-manâcîhât osotkawâsisâ
aniki tâpiskôc maskosisak
kâ-mâ-mècawèsîyit kâh-kihtwâm.
wâh-pâ-pè-kîwècik
câhcahkêwin aniwâhk

No
No, I could not repeat him because
I hadn't heard him repeatedly because
I did not listen enough.
To understand Cree
I must listen to Cree
again and again.
To understand Cree
you must listen to Cree
again and again.
March (Goose Month)
April (Frog Month)
frogs
those frogs who sing
and sing again and again.
As our hearts beat over and over
As we breathe in and out again and again.
As we drink water again and again
The North Saskatchewan River flows along
repeatedly.
The way a mother bear protects her children
Just as those young bears
play their games again and again.
When they return
a freckle on a cheek
tâpiskan ôma kâ-wâ-wâkamok
ê-isi-pâh-pâhpisit, ahpô ê-kâ-kinwâk
êkwa ê-sâsâhkâhk ôma oskan
wâh-pâ-pê-isinâkosit ohci wîtisânîhitowin
âniskotâpân ahpô kihc-âniskotâpân
êwako ani
wâwîs cî
wâh-mâ-mêcawêcik âniskotâpânak
êwako anihi mêcawêwina, wâh-pâ-pîkiskwêyit
êwako anihi itwêwina
wâh-nâ-nikamoyit êwako anihi nikamowina
wâh-ây-âcimostawâcik omosêmimâwak
ocâpânimiwâwa kotak âcimowin
ka-nêhiyawî-nisîtohtamihk
ka-ki-nâ-nîtohtamihk nêhiyawêwin
kâh-kihtwâm.

this jaw that curves
he smiles in this way, or it is long
and this bone is strong
when the next generation appears to be near
or the next one after that
and so after that
especially when
the children play
those same games, when they say
those same words
when they sing those same songs
when the grandfathers tell a story
yet another story to their great grandchildren
To understand Cree
they must listen to Cree
again and again.

**nikî-pê-pimiskân ☮ I CAME THIS WAY BY CANOE**

nikî-pê-pimiskân
I came by canoe
kayâs-âyiwan anima mêsikanâs ê-kî-pisci-
miskamân, kâ-kî-âpacihtâcik nitâniskêwiyiniwak
I stumbled upon that ancient trail, the one
my ancestors travelled
nikî-pêtâpoyon
I came this way
êkota kotak sîpîhk
There on another river
wînipêk sîpîhk
the Winnipeg River
nitihtimaninâna, nispiskwaninâna,
nitaskatayinâna
Our shoulders, our backs, our abdominal
muscles
We are our muscles.

We persist in living a good life.

There I stood.

I am eavesdropping on my ancestors.

Now I hear distant sounds, I am close enough to hear, they are echoes and they sound beautiful.

Here I stand: I am looking, leaning back.

I breathe

I live

I want to know who I am

I search for who they were.

LIKE A BEAD ON A STRING

tāpiskōc otisiyēyāpiy pīsimwēyāpiy

e-itāpēkamohtāt askīhk kīsheko kōsh

ē-ākwaskitinitocawk awāsīkēk i kwakōwāmāw.

tāpiskōc pīsākanāpiy pīkiskwēyāpisā

ē-tipahpita kik miyikowisiwin ̠ācimowin i kwa nikamowin

e-ākwaskitinitocawk mosōmē kōwak kōshīkōshī.

tāpiskōc kā-tāpisahok mīkis, nitāniskotāpān

apistawēw owāhkomākana nahiyikokh

kīci-tēpinamwak ochiyōk
ihkatawâw ay-itwêhiwêw  THE MARSH SENDS A MESSAGE
âniskowaskwa the reeds
kinosêw fish
sâkahikan, manitow-sâkahikan lake, God’s Lake
êkwa nipiy and water
é-sôhkêyimocik êkwa é-nihtâwêcik they are confident and they are eloquent
é-âcimostawicik they tell me a story
é-kîmwêcik ê-âtotahkik ôma kihci-askiy. They whisper a story about this great land.

kakwêcihkêmowin ohci kânata otâcimowina  A QUESTION FOR CANADIAN HISTORY
kakwêcihkêmowin ohci kânata otâcimowina a question for Canadian history
awa pêyak néhiyaw This one Cree
awîn âna wiya who was he
kâ-ki- nakiskawât Henry Hudsonwa? the one who met Henry Hudson?

kiskinohamâkêwin ohci kânata otâcimowina  AN INSTRUCTION FOR CANADIAN HISTORY
kiskinohamâkêwin ohci kânata otâcimowina an instruction for Canadian history
kiyâmapi Hush, now
pého êkwa and wait
ahpô étikwê kika-péhtên kîkway You might hear something
kipihtowêwinihk in the silence
kiyām .Link: LET IT BE

kiyām

kiyāmapik  

“kiyāmapi,” nipēhtawwāw awiyak ē-itwēt

“mah! kêhtē-ayak ē-ayamihâcik.”

hush; be quiet; it will be all right  

Be quiet you guys

“Shhh,” I hear someone saying

“Listen! The elders are praying.”
bibliography


publication credits

“Trademark Translation” was previously published in The Edmonton Stroll of Poets Anthology, 2006.

In November 2002, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation CBC Alberta Anthology aired “ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwêwin” (“Language Family”) on CBC Alberta Anthology under the title “I Am Learning to Speak Cree.”

“aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik ⇊ Two Men Talking” was first published in Found in Translation: An Anthology of Translations from the 2010 Edmonton Poetry Festival.

“The Young Linguist” was first published in The Edmonton Stroll of Poets Anthology, 2007.


An excerpt from “maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw ôma wiya ohci ⇊ For Medicine Bear Woman” was published in The Edmonton Stroll of Poets Anthology, 2004.

“Spinning” was first published in the Spring 1998 issue of Augustana University College’s student arts publication, HUH!?

“kakwêcihkêmowin ohci kânata otâcimowina” and “kiskinohamâkêwin ohci kânata otâcimowina” first appeared in The Edmonton Stroll of Poets Anthology, 2009.
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