
kiyâm

MINGLING VOICES

Series editor: Manijeh Mannani

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

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.

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kiyâm
Naomi McIlwraith

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poems by Naomi McIlwraith

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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!

kîkwaya kâ-masinahikâtêki ôta ∽ contents

A FEW IDEAS FROM *amiskwacî-wâskahikanihk*

HISTORY POEMS

foreword

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***, ***h***, ***k***, ***m***, ***n***, ***p***, ***s***, ***t***, ***w***, and ***y***. The consonants ***h***, ***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 "ba**ts**," although in some dialects or regional variations of Plains Cree, the **c** sounds more like the ***ch*** in "bat**ch**." In contrast to English, the **c** never represents the sound of a ***k*** ("**c**all") or an ***s*** ("**c**innamon").
>
> The letter **k** sounds like the ***k*** in "s**k**ate," falling roughly between the ***k*** in "**K**ate" and the ***g*** in "**g**ate."
>
> The letter **p** sounds like the ***p*** in "s**p**it," falling roughly between the ***p*** in "**p**it" and the ***b*** in "**b**it."

The letter **t** sounds like the ***t*** in "s**t**eal," falling roughly between the ***t*** in "**t**eal" and the ***d*** in "**d**eal."

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

a sounds like the English ***a*** in "**a**bove" and the English ***u*** in "**u**pheaval," but never like the ***u*** in "use" or "put"

â sounds somewhat like the English ***a*** in "r**a**ther" or the ***a*** in the word "f**a**ther" if it were spoken with an Irish accent (Okimâsis and Wolvengrey, 7)

i sounds like the English ***i*** in "p**i**t" or "m**i**tt," but never like the ***i*** in "p**i**ne" or "m**i**ne"

î sounds like the English ***i*** in "nectar**i**ne," but never like the ***i*** in "f**i**ne"

o sounds like the English ***o*** in "**o**nly" or the ***oo*** in "f**oo**t" or the ***u*** in "p**u**t"

ô sounds like the English ***o*** in "t**o**e" or ***oa*** in "c**oa**t," and sometimes like the ***oo*** in "m**oo**se"

ê sounds like the English ***ay*** in "b**ay**" or ***ai*** in "gr**ai**n." 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.
âkayâsîmowin: 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:*
cahcahkiwak, môhkahâsiwak, misi-môhkahâsiwak, 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:
namôya 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 *môniyâskwêw,*
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-kî-pakaskît nohtâwîpan. ayîki-sâkahikanihk
ohci wiya mâka môya ê-kî-nêhiyâwit, kî-môniyâwiw.
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 —

cahkipêhikanak,

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 ê-miyo-otôtêmimisk êkwa ê-pakaskît,*
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-akihcikêyan:
pêyak, nîso, nisto…

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.
nitohta êkwa.
Listen hard.
nâkatohkê.
Listen to these Cree words, these beautiful Cree words:
nitohta ôhi nêhiyaw itwêwina, ôhi 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! môya kitawipayihikon.

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."

paskwâhk ⤻ On the Prairie

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 — *paskwâwiyinînâhk* — where the Plains Cree — *paskwâwiyiniwak* — spoke, speak the Plains Cree language — *ê-paskwâwinîmocik?* How many of the Plains Cree people spoke Ojibwe — *nahkawêwin* — or Assiniboine — *pwâsîmowin*. *tânitahto aniki paskwâwiyiniwak kâ-nêhiyâwicik kî-nahkawêwak ahpô cî kî-pwâsîmowak?* How did the big, open prairie — *ôma kâ-paskwâk* — become so unilingually, monolingually unknowing? *tânêhki êkâ kâ-kî-kiskêyimâcik anihi iyiniwa ôki opîtatowêwak?* And how is it that I've finally come to realize — to hear — how *kâ-kî-kiskêyimâcik* — "they knew them" — sounds so very much like *kâ-kî-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-kî-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? *êha, êkwa nôhkomipan mîna ê-kî-nihtâ-mônahicêpihkêt*.

kiya kâ-pakaski-nîmihitoyan ∽ You Who Dance So Brightly

You died, Dad, and the skies darkened
as an eclipse extinguishes
the day, pushes the sun
into the ground.
wanitipiskipayin, kotâwîwipîsim.
But soon enough I hear
you echo. *wîpac ka-pêhtâtin ê-cîstâwêyan,*
and you shine clear as the Leaf-Falling Moon.
ê-kîhkâyâsowêyan
tâpiskôc awa
pinâskowi-pîsim
ê-kîsikâyâstêk.

I tell everyone your story,
how you spoke Cree so well,
so brilliantly I say,
ê-kî-pakaskît nohtâwiy,
in *nêhiyawêwin.*
As if you are a colour
shimmering keenly
as those ghosts who dance, ablaze
in the northern sky. *kitaspâsowân*
mwêhci aniki
cîpayak kâ-nîmihitocik.

Red like the sky as the sun retires,
tâpiskôc kâ-mihkwaskâk ispîhk
kâ-pahkisimok. Yellow, when
the sun emerges from slumber,
dawn beckons from a distance, *osâwinâkwan*
tâpiskôc ispîhk ê-pê-sâkâstêk.
Green, deepened as a forest
by winter's interlude,
askîhtakoskâw
wâwîs kâ-pipohk.
Lucid as the hues in heaven
when *kisê-manitow* opens
the gates for you,
pakaski-kihci-kîsikohk
ispîhk ê-yôhtêpitamâsk
kihci-kîsikowi-yôhtênawêwina
kisê-manitow.
I am told not to look *osâm*
ê-cîpayâmatisoyân ispîhk
kiya ê-cîpayikawiyan
kâ-pakaski-nîmihitoyan
mâka kipêhtâtin
ê-cîstâwêyan êkwa
ê-pakaskîhtâkosiyan.

tawâw ∽ 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.
kikî-wâpahtên ê-misi-tawâk
êkwa ita ka-wîkihk.

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.

ê-kî-tawatahamêk.

Along we all came, your children,
grandchildren, 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 nikâwînân ê-kî-tawinamawiyâhk.

There was so much space around me
I couldn't see it
until, your circle complete,
you made more space.
ayiwâk nawac kikî-tawinikân.

There was room in your mind
for this Cree language
ôma nêhiyawêwin,
for this Cree culture
êkwa ôma nêhiyaw-isîhcikêwin,
but I didn't hear you.
Too busy, I wasn't listening.
ê-kî-otamihoyân êkosi môya
kikî-pêhtâtin osâm
môya ê-kî-nitohtâtân.

Now, I wish I could have seen
and heard more,
anohc êkwa pitanê ka-kî-wâpahtamân
mîna ka-kî-pêhtamân ayiwâk kîkway,
wish I could have been more open
to your special way of living,
nimihtâtên êkâ ê-kî-nâkatôhkêyân
pîtos kâ-kî-isi-waskawîyan.

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.
pitanê ayiwâk ka-kî-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 êtikwê ka-kî-sôhki-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-tapahtêyimison
nika-kakwê-wânaskân.

tawastêw ∽ The Passage Is Safe

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,
nêhiyawêwin, 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-têhtapahipêyâhk
nipîhk kâ-âstêkamik,
ê-kiskêyimâyâhk kisê-manitow
kîsikohk ê-tawinamâsk.

You walk through the opening,
having not walked for nearly a year.
kisâpohtawêhtân.

Relief comes slowly, gently,
as an ending opens the beginning,
as we know you surpassed your suffering.
The Creator
kîsikohk ê-tawinamâsk.

We hear this gracious
Innkeeper beckoning,
tawâw ôta. maht êsa pîhtokwê. ôta ka-kî-aywêpin.
"There is room here. Please come in. You can rest here."

The passage is open, safe.
tawastêw.

paḥkwêsikan ∽ 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-kî-mâḥ-mâwaci-miyo-paḥkwêsikanihkêt
paḥkisimotâḥk isi
mihkwâkamîwi-sîpîḥk 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-kî-mâh-mâwaci-miyo-pahkwêsikanihkêt
pahkisimotâhk isi
mihkwâkamîwi-sîpîhk ohci.

Winter 1988.
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.
namôya nikiskêyihtên ê-kî-nêhiyawêt
nôhkom, mâka ê-nisitawêyihtamân
ê-kî-mâh-mâwaci-miyo-pahkwêsikanihkêt
pahkisimotâhk isi
mihkwâkamîwi-sîpîhk ohci.

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 *nôhkom* 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.

âkayâsiwak, môya ôki
âkayâsîmowak, ôki
kâ-pîkiskwêcik anima kotak
pîkiskwêwin, ôki
ê-kî-pêsiwâcik pahkwêsikana
ôtê êkotê ohci.

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

ôtê ê-ohcîmakahk pimîhkân.

êkotê ê-ohcît 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-kî-îwahikanihkêyân,
ê-kî-sîkinamân kisâkamicêwâpôs ohpihkasikanihk,
ê-kî-kiskinohamâkosiyân ka-wîtisânîhitoyâhk
kiyâm ôtê ka-ohcîyâhk
êkwa kiyâm pêskis êkotê ka-ohcîyâhk.

ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwêwin ⤻ Language Family

ê-nêhiyawi-kiskinohamâkosiyân
I am learning to speak Cree
and I hear the language
rooted
in the land
not uprooted by *sôniyâw*.

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

I learned a Cree word
and I really like it.
kôhkomipaninawak.
We use it to mean cucumbers.
Let me "do a derivation" for you
to illustrate
the logic of the language.

ohkom-: the root for "grandmother"
nôhkom: "my grandmother"
kôhkom: "your grandmother"
kôhkominaw: "our grandmother"
You can already hear the logic of *nêhiyawêwin*.

-pan means "late," "someone passed on or deceased."
So the literal translation for *kôhkomipaninawak*
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.

kôhkomipaninawak 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-miyohtwâw ê-kî-âpihtawikosisâniskwêwit
êkwa mistahi nikî-sâkihâw.
Listen. Can you hear the lyricism in the language
of *nêhiyawak?*

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.
nohtâwiy 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-pîkiskwêt 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.
kôhkomipaninawak — 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.

êkwa kâ-nîmihitocik mistahi katawasisiwak.

ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk êkwa ê-pêyâhtakowêyâhk ⤻ Relative Clause

nisîmê, 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 ê-isi-tôtaman, nisîmê.
tânisi anima ê-isi-kisiskâ-mâmitonêyihtaman?

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.
naniwêyitwê, nisîmê, anima âcimowin
kâ-mâci-pâhpiyâhk mâna ahpô piko
tahtwâw kâ-âcimoyan.

nisîmê, 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.
nimiywêyihtênân
ka-pêhtâtâhk kâ-kêyakâhpisiyan,
nisîmê, anima kêyakâhpisiwin
kâ-ohci-pâhpiyâhk.

nisîmê, 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 nisîmê, pâhpi
anima kêyakâhpisiwin,
tâpiskôc ana awâsis

kâ-kêyakâhpisit;
mâto anima mâtowin
tâpiskôc nâpêw kâ-isi-mâtot.

nisîmê, my younger sister,
you are the youngest and the oldest.
Born of a different mother,
but my sister anyhow.
nisîmê, 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, *nisîmê.*
Laugh, my sister. Celebrate
your children, those children
the ones you love, with laughter.
manâcihik kitawâsimisak
ôma pwâwatêwin ohci.
pâhpi nisîmê. miyawâsik
kitawâsimisak,
aniki awâsisak
kâ-sâkihacik,
miyawâsik, asici pâhpiwin.

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;
têpwê-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-kî-nahêyihtamihikoyahk.

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-wîkimâyêkok nîtisânak,
nitânisak êkwa nistimak, nitihkwatimak êkwa nikosisak,
nikâwîsak êkwa nôhcâwîsak,
niciwâmiskwêmak, nitawêmâwak, nicâhkosak êkwa nikêhtê-ayimak,
aniki nistam kâ-kî-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 cîstâwêwin,
êwako êkâ kâ-pônihtâkwahk.

Critical Race Theory at Canadian Tire

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 *nêhiyawêwin* 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 *nâpêw âpacihcikan* is inanimate.
The men are somewhat relieved to discover the animacy of the *nâpêw isîhcikâsowin*.

We learn some verbs.
nimîcisonân: we eat.
nimêtawânân: we play.
ê-nikamoyâhk: we are singing.
ê-nîmihitoyâhk: 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 *môniyâw* marries a *nêhiyawiskwêw*.
The *nâpêw* commits to learning *nêhiyawêwin,*
but his progress is slow until *owîkimâkana* 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 êkwa ê-kiskinohamâkosiyâhk.
We are not yet fluent
but our bond with *nêhiyawêwin*
grows tighter.

tânisi ka-isi-nihtâ-âhpinihkêyan ∽ How to Tan a Hide

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 *mihkihkwan*.
Don't let the smell
bother you. Remember
to work the flesh side first.
kiskisi nîkân ka-mihkitaman itê kâ-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-itâpacihtât ôma mâtahikan.

Listen
for how the *mâtahikan* sounds
different from the *mihkihkwan*.
nitohta.
nâkatohkê êkwa kika-pêhtên
tânisi pîtos mâtahikan
ê-itihtâkwahk ispîhci 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 mîna kîsta.
kiskisitota ôma kâ-itihtâkwahk.

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,*
wiyîtihpa ôhi ê-âpacihtâhk ka-yôskinamihk askêkin.

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.

wîtapim kôhkom.
wîcih ka-mâtahikêt.
kaskâpasikê.

Listen very carefully.
Remember, the brains soften the hide.
Remember
so you will know.

nâkatohkê.
kiskisi wiyîtihpa anihi ê-âpacihtâhk ka-yôskinamihk askêkin.
kiskisi
êkosi kika-nakacihtân.

aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik ⤻ Two Men Talking

ohci Mowat Edgar McIlwraith *êkwa* Dr. Harold Cardinal

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 *nêhiyawêwin*
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.
nipêhtên ê-takahkihtâkwahk
pêyâhtakêyimowin.

As I catch the cadence
of Plains Cree speech
kisiskâciwani-sîpiy
flows swiftly but peacefully.
kisiskâciwan mâka ê-cîwêk êkwa ê-pêhtamân
ê-takahkihtâkwahk
pêyâhtakêyimowin.

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 ê-manâcimitoyêk
êkwa 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 ê-nitawêyihtamêk
ka-kipihtowêyêk.

nôhtâwiy opîkiskwêwin ⤻ Father Tongue

I read about the *-ikawi* 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—
pahkwêsikan, maskihkîwâpoy,
êkwa nipiy.

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

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

Weather words like snow and rain,
sunshine and wind—
mispon êkwa kimiwan,
wâsêskwan êkwa yôtin.

More food words like cookie,
tomato, and cheese —
wîhki-pahkwêsikanis,
kihci-okiniy, êkwa
âpakosîsi-mîciwin.

Nature words for lake, mountain,
prairie —
sâkahikan, asinîwaciy,
paskwâw.
How to say picnic and camping —
papâ-mîcisowin êkwa kapêsiwin.
How we always picked bottles
when we went picnicking or camping —
kâkikê ê-kî-môsâhkinamâhk
môtêyâpiskwa ispî
kâ-kî-papâ-mîcisoyâhk
ahpô ê-nitawi-kapêsiyâhk.

How the sky is blue just now,
when it's been grey for so long.
sîpihkonâkwan mêkwâc kîsik
mâka kinwês ê-kî-pihkonâkwahk.

I want to hear words for car and canoe
and toboggan and cradleboard —
sêhkêpayîs êkwa cîmân
napakitâpânâsk êkwa tihkinâkan.
Baby, boy, girl, man, and woman —
oskawâsis, nâpêsis, iskwêsis, nâpêw, êkwa iskwêw.
Boyfriend and girlfriend —
nîcimos êkwa nîcimos.

Kinship terms like mother and father —
nikâwiy êkwa nôhtâwiy.
Grandmother and grandfather —
nôhkom êkwa nimosôm.
My little siblings, sister and brother —
nîcisânak, nimis êkwa nistês.
Auntie and uncle —
nikâwîs êkwa nôhcâwîs.

If only I had stopped long enough
to say "my girl" or "my boy" —
"nitânis" êkwa "nikosis."

Words for old woman and old man —
nôcokwêsîs êkwa kisêyinîs

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-kî-manâcimiyâhk
tâpiskôc kimiwan,
ê-pahkipêstâk
itê ê-pâhkwahcâk.

Maybe that's why you sound
so far away now —
kiyâwihtâkosin êkwa anohc.
Verbs for listening and persevering —

ê-nitohtawiyan êkwa ê-âhkamêyihtamohiyan,
and loving and raising children —
ê-kî-sâkihiyâhk êkwa
kiya êkwa nikâwînân
ê-kî-nihtâwôsêyêk.
Words for birth and death and funeral —
ê-kî-miyo-pimâtisiyan, mâka
ispîhk ê-kî-kisipipayiyan
êkwa kikî-âstêsinin kitaywêpiwinihk.

Verbs for kind and just
and humble and soft-spoken —
ê-kî-kisêwâtisiyan
êkwa ê-kî-kwayaskwâtisiyan,
ê-kî-tapahtêyimisoyan
êkwa ê-kî-pêyâhtakowêyan.

The verb for soft-hearted —
ê-kî-yôskâtisiyan,
and how you had a soft spot
in your heart for all
Cree people —
ê-kî-yôskitêhêstawacik
kahkiyaw nêhiyawak.

Verbs for generous and caring —
ê-kî-sawêyimacik êkwa ê-kî-nâkatêyimacik.
Words for thoughtful and oh,
such good Cree speech —
ê-kî-kâh-kakihcihiwêyan,
ê-kî-miyo-tôtaman
tahtwâw ê-kî-nêhiyawêyan.

Words for being so good
at so many things —
ê-kî-nahîyan mistahi kîkway.

Words for sadness and regret —
nipîkiskâtisin êkwa kikîsinâtêyihtamâtin.
Because sickness stole your speech
and I came too late to listen —
osâm kitâhkosiwin
kipîkiskwêwin ê-kimotamâkoyan
êkwa ê-kî-mwêstasisiniyân
ka-nitohtâtân.

Yet now you're whispering
and I'm listening —
mâka êkwa anohc âta ê-kîmwêyan
kina-nahihtâtin.

ninitâhtâmon kititwêwiniwâwa ∽ I Borrow Your Words

môya ninôhtê-wanitôtên ispîhk nêhiyawascikêyâni
ahpô nêhiyawêyâni. ninitawêyihtên
ka-nisitohtâtakok kinêhiyawîhtwâwiniwâwa
kipîkiskwêwiniwâwa.

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-yîkopîwik niwâsênamânihk,
anohc kâ-kîkisêpâyâk kîwêtinohk. tahto cahkasinahikan
tâpiskôc mîkwan isinâkwan wâsênamânihk.

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-kî-kaskihtâyân ka-otinamâsoyân
kikitohcikêwiniwâw?

Each word a songbird as soon
as you speak it. How
could I possibly steal
your music?

kitasotamâtitinâwâw:
môya niwî-otinamâson,
ôki mîkwanak wâsênamânihk ê-ayâcik,
kitiwêwiniwâwa.

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

nika-nitohtên kikitohcikêwiniwâw, itwêwina
tâpiskôc piyêsîsak kâ-takahkihtâkosicik, ê-ohpahocik,
ê-nikamocik, onikamowiniwâwa ê-itwêmakaniyiki,
ê-kistêyihtâkosicik, ê-miyohtâkwaniyiki 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 kititwêwiniwâwa.
kinanâskomitinâwâw ê-awihiyêk.
ay-hay, nitôtêmitik nêhiyawak, kahkiyaw nitôtêmitik,
kîhtwâm ka-pîkiskwâtitonaw.

aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-masinahikêcik ∽ Two Men Writing

John Searle *êkwa* Jacques Derrida

ê-kî-kiskêyihtamêk cî
môy anima ê-nihtâ-nêhiyawêyêk
nêhiyawasinahikêyêko?

nitohtamok.
kakwê-nisitohtamok.

Did you know,
to understand Cree
is not merely to write in Cree?

Listen.
Try to understand.

sâpohtawân ∽ Ghost Dance

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 *kimosômipaninawak, kôhkomipaninawak*
êkwa kahkiyaw kicâpâninawak
êkota kika-wîci-nîmihitômânawak.

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 môhcohkân—
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-pâhpihâyâhk
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-
legged. *"êkâ êkosi itapi, kitôhkapin anima," ê-isit.*

I have since learned
to sit properly.
êkospîhk ê-kî-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 ninîmihitonân
Chicken-man, from Onion Lake,
cackles some more.
kâh-kitow ayiwâk awa môhcohkân.
We eat more food.
ayiwâk nimîcisonân.
The man with the voice sweet
as saskatoon syrup sings some more.
ê-nikamot ayiwâk awa nâpêw
kâ-miyotâmot 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-kî-sâpohtawêhtêt.
And those ghosts who are dancing,
the ones we dance with,
they are very beautiful.
êkwa aniki kâ-nîmihitocik,
kâ-wîci-nîmihitômâyâhkik,
mistahi katawasisiwak.

ê-kî-pîcicîyâhk ∽ We Danced Round Dance

We followed the moon
from January to February
ê-kî-pîcicîyâhk
from dusk toward dawn.

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

ê-kî-pîcicîyâhk
kâh-kîhtwâm
tâpiskôc pîsim kâ-isi-waskawît
kâh-kîhtwâm

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

ê-takahkwêwêtitâcik
êkwa ê-matwêwêhwâcik

Aspen-Raine, her long
brown legs, her long brown hair,
her deep brown eyes, her

nine-year-old hope, dances
round and round
kâh-kîhtwâm
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,
aspire to be big-hearted men
pounding the drum.

ê-takahkwêwêtitâcik
êkwa ê-mâ-matwêwêhwâcik

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.

ê-kî-pîcicîyâhk
kâh-kîhtwâm
tâpiskôc pîsim kâ-isi-waskawît
kâh-kîhtwâm

And the pounding can be heard
from far away.

ê-takahkwêwêtitâcik
êkwa ê-mâ-matwêwêhwâcik

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.

ê-kî-pîcicîyâhk
kâh-kîhtwâm
tâpiskôc pîsim kâ-isi-waskawît
kâh-kîhtwâm

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-kî-pîcicîyâhk
kâh-kîhtwâm
tâpiskôc pîsim kâ-isi-waskawît
kâh-kîhtwâm
ê-takahkwêwêtitâcik
êkwa ê-mâ-matwêwêhwâcik

A FEW IDEAS FROM *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-niht̂â-pimîhkêyan ⤻ 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 *nîpawiwin*), 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 *pimîhkân* (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.

êkosi, 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 progessing 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! *êkosi,* 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 excruciating 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 netherlands, I mean 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 *pimîhkân*.

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 *pimîhkân*. 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 *pimîhkân?* 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 *pimîhkân*. 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 *pimîhkân* was the equivalent of a pound of fresh meat, so men might eat about two pounds of *pimîhkân* 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 *pimîhkân* 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, *pimîhkân* 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 *pimîhkân,* 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 *pimîhkân*. I would say that my third effort at Fort Edmonton was very close to the *pimîhkân* I tasted at Kehewin.

HISTORY POEMS

maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw ôma wiya ohci ⤻ For Medicine Bear Woman

14 ayîki-pîsim 2004

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.

kikî-pîkiskwâsin anima êkospîhk.
kikî-nanâskominân ê-kî-pê-nitohtâtâhk.
nistam anima êkospîhk kâ-kî-pêhtamân kititwêwina ê-pîkiskwêyan.
pîkiskwê, nitôtêm, pîkiskwê. kititwêwina kinanâtawihikon.

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

awiyak kikî-kakwêcimik kîkwây ê-kiskinohamâkosiyan kwayask wiyasiwêwin ohci.
ômisi kikî-itwân "namôya kwayask wiyasiwêwin ihtakon.
kiyânaw ôma piko êkwa kotakak wiyawâw kahkiyaw."

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.

wîhtamawin, ê-nôhtê-nisitohtâtân.
ninôhtê-nisitawinawâwak aniki kâ-kwayaskwâtisicik.
tâpiskôc ana owiyasiwêw kâ-kî-miyisk sôhkihtâkosiwin.

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."

kikî-wâpamitin êkwa kikî-nânâhkasîhtâtin,
kikî-nitohtâtin êkwa kikî-nânâhkasîhtâtin.
kikî-pîkiskwâsin isi kâ-kî-nânâhkasîhtâtân.
ômisi kikî-itwân: "namôya ôma ê-mac-âyiwiyân.
namôya macikwanâs osîhtâw kisê-manitow."

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.

awiyak kikî-kakwêcimik tânisi êkwa ê-isi-nâkatawêyihtaman
kikisiwâsiwin.
ômisi kikî-itwân: "nitâ-ay-âsîhtân kîspin kaskihtâyâni."
ispîhk kâ-mâmiskôtaman anima tâpasinahikêwin kâ-kî-osîhtâyan,
awîna êtikwê ana kâ-kî-mâyitôtâsk nikî-ay-itêyihtên.
matwân cî anima êwak ohci kâ-kî-mâyinikêyan.

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 ê-isi-miyikoyan maskawisîwin pîkiskwêwina êkwa itwêwina.

kikî-itwân, "pîkiskwêwina êkwa itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa mâka namôya maskawisîmakanwa kîspin nam awiyak nitohtâhki."

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

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."

anohc êkwa nitayamihtân anihi kipîkiskwêwina kâ-kî-masinahaman.

kitâniskotâpân, mistahi-maskwa, ômisi kî-itwêw, "itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa."

kititwân kiya, "kîspin nam awiyak êkâ pîkiskwêci anihi itwêwina ka-kî-pîkiskwêhk, êwako kâmwâtisiwin kika-nisiwanâcihikon."

I listen to you on the outside.
Can you hear me listening?
kinitohtâtin kâ-kî-isi-nânâhkasîhtâtân.
ka-kî-pêhtawin cî kâ-kî-isi-nânâhkasîhtâtân?

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

Speak, Medicine Bear Woman.
pîkiskwê, maskihkiy 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.
nimihtâtên ê-kî-kakwê-pîkiskwêstamâwak
anohc nitapahtêyimison êkâ ê-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 *pîsâkanâpiy* 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
pîsâkanâpiy 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 *pîsâkanâpiy mêskanaw*.

The knot in this rope *âniskohpicikan pîsâkanâpîhk*
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 pîsâkanâpîhk
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 pîwâpiskwêyâpiya
kâ-kî-âpacihtâhk ka-sakahpitiht ana kisêyiniw
asinîwaciy kipahotowikamikohk.

Take this poem and tell *mistahi-maskwa* I've learned
that *cêskwa!* means "Wait!"
and *nakî!* means "Stop!"
Tell him that *ê-tapahtiskwêkâpawiyân*
osâm nika-âpahên âniskohpicikan nahiyikohk
ka-nisitohtamân ê-kî-nôhtê-pîkiskwâtât ostêsimâwa
anihi kâ-wâpiskisiyit ostêsimâwa
kâ-kî-masinahamiyit ostêsimâwasinahikan.
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
ninôhtê-paskisên pîsâkanâpiy
êkwa ê-nôhtê-wîci-pîkiskwêmimak otayisiyinîma.
namôya kîkway ayiwâk.
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-wîcihat 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.

nîpawi kitâpwêwinihk

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 tâpiskôc 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.

wîci-kâpawîstâtok 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 êkospîhk nimiyo-tôtêm

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.

pêyakokâpawi kîspin êkosi ispayiki, mâka wîci-kâpawîstawik mîna 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.

ômisi isikâpawi tâpiskôc kâ-isi-sâkâkonêkâpawit apiscâpakwanîs.

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.

kinokâpawi ayisk kisôhkisin.

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

nêhiyaw cistêmâw

"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 ôhi 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.
cîpacikâpawi anita kitâpwêwinihk.

kâh-kîhtwâm ∽ Again and Again

"kinisitohtên cî?" 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 nikî-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-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân
kâh-kîhtwâm.

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.

ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin
ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân
kâh-kîhtwâm.

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—
niski-pîsim—as March slips

into April and *ayîki-pîsim*
echoes with the exuberant exclamations
of *ayîkisak* for their mates,
aniki ayîkisak kâ-nikamocik
kâ-nâ-nikamocik,
to understand Cree is to listen
to Cree, again and again.

ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin
ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân
kâh-kîhtwâm.

As our hearts beat
over and over,
ê-pâh-pahkahokoyahk kâh-kîhtwâm.
As we take in
the clean air of life,
ê-yâ-yêhyêyahk kâh-kîhtwâm.
The way water washes
thirst from our lips,
ê-mâ-minihkwêyahk nipiy kâh-kîhtwâm.
Just as the North Saskatchewan River
courses continually
through the carotid of the prairies,
ê-pâ-pimiciwahk kisiskâciwani-sîpiy kâkikê.

How a mother bear protects her young,
êkosi ê-mâ-manâcihât otoskawâsisa
aniki tâpiskôc maskosisak
kâ-mâ-mêcawêsiyit kâh-kîhtwâm.

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-kîwêcik
câhcahkêwin aniwâhk,
tâpiskan ôma kâ-wâ-wâkamok
ê-isi-pâh-pâhpisit, ahpô ê-kâ-kinwâk
êkwa ê-sâsôhkahk 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 omosômimâwak
ocâpânimiwâwa kotak âcimowin
ka-nêhiyawi-nisitohtamihk
ka-kî-nâ-nitohtamihk nêhiyawêwin
kâh-kîhtwâm.

nikî-pê-pimiskân ⤻ I Came This Way by Canoe

kayâs-âyiwan anima mêskanâs ê-kî-pisci-miskamân, kâ-kî-âpacihtâcik nitâniskêwiyiniwak
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:
nikî-pêtâpoyon,
There, on another river:
êkota kotak sîpîhk,
wînipêk sîpîhk.

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.

nitihtimaninâna, nispiskwaninâna, nitaskatayinâna,
ê-maskawisîwiyiniwiyâhk.
nitâhkami-mâ-miyo-pimâtisinân.

êkota ê-kî-nîpawiyân.
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.

ê-kîmohtawakik nitâniskêwiyiniwak.
anohc êkwa nipêhtên ê-matwê-pimohtêcik, ê-paswêwêki, kayâs nâway ohci.

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.

ê-na-nîpawiyân ôta: ê-âpasâpahtamân, ê-âsôsimoyân.
niyêhyân,
nipimâtisin,
ê-nôhtê-kiskêyihtamân awîna niya,
ê-nanâtawâpamakik awînipanak wiyawâw.

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, fingering 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.

tâpiskôc otisiyêyâpiy pîsimwêyâpiy
ê-itâpêkamohtât askihk kîsikohk ohci
ê-âkwaskitinitocik awâsis êkwa okâwîmâw.

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

tâpiskôc pîsâkanâpiy pîkiskwêyâpîsa
ê-tipahpitahk miyikowisiwin âcimowin êkwa nikamowin
ê-âkwaskitinitocik mosôm êkwa 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.

tâpiskôc kâ-tâpisahoht mîkis, nitâniskotâpân
apîstawêw owâhkômâkana nahiyikohk
kici-têpinamwak ocihciya.

ihkatawâw ay-itwêhiwêw ⤻ The Marsh Sends a Message

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 nipiy. 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-kîmwêcik, ê-âtotahkik ôma kihci-askiy.

kakwêcihkêmowin ohci kânata otâcimowina ⤻
A Question for Canadian History

awa pêyak nêhiyaw
awîn âna wiya
kâ-kî-nakiskawât
Henry Hudsonwa?

This one Cree,
who was he,
that one who met
Henry Hudson?

kiskinohamâkêwin ohci kânata otâcimowina ⌣
An Instruction for Canadian History

kiyâmapi.
pêho êkwa…
ahpô êtikwê kika-pêhtên kîkway
kipihtowêwinihk.

Be quiet for a minute.
Wait now…
You might hear something
in the silence.

kiyâm ⌣ Let It Be

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," nipêhtawâw awiyak ê-it-wêt,
"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.

pahkwêsikan ⌓ BREAD

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

ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk êkwa ê-pêyâhtakowêyâhk ⌓ 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-nitawêyihtaman 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-isi-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-sawêyim**ikawi**yân* means "I am blessed"; *ê-it**ikawi**yân* means "I am called." Although there is some resemblance between indefinite actor verbs and the agentless passive in English, *ê-kakêskim**ikawi**yân* — 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-pîcicîyâhk ⌓ 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 Bielawksi for hosting the Round Dance at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, in Camrose, 29 January 2011: *ohci kihiwîkwan ay ay mistahi nitôtêmtik!* 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-ʔ), e.g., *ayohpikiw* 'he grows up.' (66)

This poem contains numerous examples of reduplication: *ê-nâ-nitohtawak, ê-pâh-pêhtawak, ê-pâh-pahkahokoyahk kâh-kîhtwâm, ê-yâ-yêhyêyahk kâh-kîhtwâm, ê-mâ-minihkwêyahk nipiy 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
kîwê	go home
kîwêtinohk itohtê	go north, northwards (towards the north wind)
wâpikwanîs	flower
naspâci	opposite, contrarily
paskwâwi-mostos	buffalo
âkayâsîmowin	the English language; speaking English
cahcahkiwak	pelicans
môhkahâsiwak	bitterns
misi-môhkahâsiwak	Great Blue herons
asihkwak	mergansers
namôya nipakaski-nêhiyawân.	I do not speak good Cree.
tawâw	come in; you're welcome; there is room
môniyâskwêw	white woman
ninôhtê-nêhiyawân ayisk ê-kî-pakaskît nohtâwîpan.	I want to speak Cree because my late father, he spoke Cree brilliantly.
ayîki-sâkahikanihk ohci wiya mâka môya ê-kî-nêhiyâwit, kî-môniyâwiw.	He was from Frog Lake, but he was not Cree; he was white.
êkwa mîna ê-âpihtawikosisâniskwêwit nikâwiy.	And my mother is a Métis woman.
cahkipêhikanak	diacritical marks in a syllabary; syllabic symbols

awa iskwêw ê-miyo-otôtêmimisk êkwa kâ-pakaskît	This woman, the one who is a good friend to you and who speaks Cree brilliantly
kiskinohamâkosi tânisi ka-isi-nêhiyaw-akihcikêyan: pêyak, nîso, nisto . . .	Learn how to count in Cree: one, two, three . . .
wêpina	throw them away
nitohta êkwa	now listen
nâkatohkê	listen attentively
nitohta ôhi nêhiyaw itwêwina, ôhi kâ-katawasisiki nêhiyaw itwêwina.	Listen to these Cree words, these beautiful Cree words.
mâka kakwêyâho! môya kitawipayihikon.	But hurry! You haven't much time.

TRADEMARK TRANSLATION

nit'skwêm ap'sis nêhiyaw.	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 (plural: *paskwâwi-mostoswak*)
paskwâwi-mostosowiyâs	buffalo meat
êha	yes
nôhkom	my grandmother
kinêpik	a snake
paskwâwiyinînâhk	in Plains Cree country
paskwâwiyiniwak	Plains Cree people

ê-paskwâwinîmocik	they speak the Plains Cree language
nahkawêwin	the Ojibwe language
pwâsîmowin	the Assiniboine language
tânitahto aniki paskwâwiyiniwak kâ-nêhiyâwicik kî-nahkawêwak ahpô cî kî-pwâsîmowak?	How many of those Plains Indians, who were Cree, spoke Ojibwe or Assiniboine?
ôma kâ-paskwâk.	It is open country.
tânêhki êkâ kâ-kî-kiskêyimâcik anihi iyiniwa ôki opîtatowêwak?	How did the Europeans not know the Indians?
kâ-kî-kiskêyimâcik	They knew them
kâ-kî-kistêyimâcik	They held them in high regard
kîspin tâpwê kiskêyimitoyahki tâpwê ka-kî-kistêyimitonânaw.	If we truly know each other, we can truly respect each other.
êha, êkwa nôhkomipan mîna ê-kî-nihtâ-mônahicêpihkêt.	Yes, and she was my Grandma, and she was good at pulling Seneca Root.

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

kiya kâ-pakaski-nîmihitoyan	You who are dancing so brightly
wanitipiskipayin, kotâwîwipîsim	to darken, as in an eclipse
wîpac ka-pêhtâtin ê-cîstâwêyan.	You make an echo soon.
ê-kîhkâyâsowêyan tâpiskôc awa pinâskowi-pîsim ê-kîsikâyâstêk.	You shine brightly just like the Leaf-Falling Moon.
ê-kî-pakaskît nohtâwiy	My father spoke Cree very fluently (lit., brightly).
nêhiyawêwin	the Plains Cree language
kitaspâsowân mwêhci aniki cîpayak kâ-nîmihitocik,	You shine brightly just like those ones, those ghosts who dance [the Northern Lights],
tâpiskôc kâ-mihkwaskâk ispîhk	like the red sky at sunset
kâ-pahkisimok	the sun that retires

osâwinâkwan tâpiskôc ispîhk ê-pê-sâkâstêk.	It is yellow when the sun rises.
askîhtakoskâw wâwîs kâ-pipohk.	The forest is green, especially in winter.
kisê-manitow	the Great Spirit
pakaski-kihci-kîsikohk ispîhk ê-yôhtêpitamâsk kihci-kîsikowi-yôhtênawêwina kisê-manitow.	Heaven is brilliant when the Great Spirit opens the gates for you.
osâm ê-cîpayâmatisoyân ispîhk kiya ê-cîpayikawiyan kâ-pakaski-nîmihitoyan mâka kipêhtâtin ê-cîstâwêyan êkwa ê-pakaskîhtâkosiyan.	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 ê-misi-tawâk êkwa ita ka-wîkihk.	You saw that there was lots of space and lots of room for living.
ê-kî-tawatahamêk.	The two of you blazed a trail.
kiya êkwa nikâwînân ê-kî-tawinamawiyâhk.	You and Mom, the two of you cleared a space by hand for us.
ayiwâk nawac kikî-tawinikân.	You made more space.
ôma nêhiyawêwin	this Cree language
êkwa ôma nêhiyaw-isîhcikêwin	and this Cree culture
ê-kî-otamihoyân êkosi môya kikî-pêhtâtin osâm môya ê-kî-nitohtâtân.	I was too busy, and I wasn't hearing you because I wasn't listening to you.
anohc êkwa pitanê ka-kî-wâpahtamân mîna ka-kî-pêhtamân ayiwâk kîkway	Now I wish I could have seen and heard more
nimihtâtên êkâ ê-kî-nâkatôhkêyân pîtos kâ-kî-isi-waskawîyan.	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 êtikwê ka-kî-sôhki-kotêyihtamân ka-nitohtâtân.	Perhaps I could have tried harder to listen to you.
ê-wîtisânîhitoyahk ôma kiyânaw.	We are a family
kiyawâw kâ-wâhkômiyêk	All of you, you are the ones who are my relations
nika-kakwê-tapahtêyimison.	I will try harder to be humble.
nika-kakwê-wânaskân.	I will try harder to be at peace.

tawastêw ⌓ THE PASSAGE IS SAFE

tawastêw	There is a safe passage
tawâw	come in; you're welcome; there is room
Céad míle fáilte	Gaelic for "One Hundred Thousand Welcomes"
nêhiyawêwin	the Cree language
ê-têhtapahipêyâhk	We are floating
nipîhk kâ-âstêkamik.	on this water, the water that is still and calm.
ê-kiskêyimâyâhk kisê-manitow	We know that the Creator [the Great Spirit]
kîsikohk ê-tawinamâsk.	makes room for you in heaven.
kisâpohtawêhtân.	You walk through the opening.
tawâw ôta. maht êsa pîhtokwê. ôta ka-kî-aywêpin.	There is room here. Please come in. Here you can rest.

pahkwêsikan ⌓ BREAD

pahkwêsikan	bannock, bread, flour
ê-kî-mâh-mâwaci-miyo-pahkwêsikanihkêt	She made really good bread
pahkisimotâhk isi	the best in the west

mihkwâkamîwi-sipîhk ohci.	of Red River.
namôya nikiskêyihtên ê-kî-nêhiyawêt	I don't know if Grandma spoke Cree
nôhkom, mâka ê-nisitawêyihtamân	but I do know
ê-kî-mâh-mâwaci-miyo-pahkwêsikanihkêt	she made really good bread
pahkisimotâhk isi	the best in the west
mihkwâkamîwi-sipîhk ohci.	of Red River.
nôhkom	my Grandmother
âkayâsiwak, môya ôki	The British, not those
âkayâsîmowak, ôki	ones who speak English, those
kâ-pîkiskwêcik anima kotak	ones who speak that other
pîkiskwêwin, ôki	language, those
ê-kî-pêsiwâcik pahkwêsikana	ones who brought bannock
ôtê êkotê ohci.	from over there to here.
pimîhkân	pemmican
ôtê ê-ohcîmakahk pimîhkân	pemmican from over here
êkotê ê-ohcît pahkwêsikan	bread from over there
pahkwênêw	she/he breaks a piece of something (e.g., bread) by hand
ê-kî-îwahikanihkêyân	I have pounded meat
ê-kî-sîkinamân kisâkamicêwâpôs ohpihkasikanihk	I have poured warm water over yeast
ê-kî-kiskinohamâkosiyân ka-wîtisânîhitoyâhk	I have learned that to be a family
kiyâm ôtê ka-ohcîyâhk	It is okay to be from here
êkwa kiyâm pêskis êkotê ka-ohcîyâhk.	and it is okay to be from over there.

ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwêwin ⤻ LANGUAGE FAMILY

ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwêwin.	We are related to each other and with the language.
ê-nêhiyawi-kiskinohamâkosiyân.	I am learning to speak Cree.
sôniyâw	money
môniyâw	a white person
kôhkomipaninawak	cucumbers
ohkom	grandmother
nôhkom	my grandmother
kôhkom	your grandmother
kôhkominaw	our grandmother
nêhiyawêwin	the Cree language
kôhkomipaninawak	our late grandmothers
nitôtêm	my friend
nôtokwêw	She is an old woman
kihc-ôkimânâhk	the government
nôhkom mistahi kî-miyohtwâw ê-kî-âpihtawikosisâniskwêwit êkwa mistahi nikî-sâkihaw.	My grandmother was a very kind Métis woman, and I loved her very much.
nêhiyawak	the Cree People
nôhkom mistahi kisâkihitin.	My Grandmother, I love you very much.
ohtâwîmâw	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 môniyâw.	My father is a very kind white man.
nohtâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin.	My Father, I love you very much.
okâwîmâw	mother
kikâwiy	your mother
nikâwiy	my mother
nikâwiy namôya nêhiyawêw mâka mistahi ê-pakaski-pîkiskwêt sâkihiwêwin.	My mother does not speak Cree, but she speaks love very well.
nikâwiy mistahi miyohtwâw ê-âpihtawikosisâniskwêwit.	My mother is a very kind Métis woman.
nikâwiy 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-nîmihitocik mistahi katawasisiwak.	And when the ancestral spirits dance, the Northern Lights are very beautiful.

ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk êkwa ê-pêyâhtakowêyâhk ⌓ RELATIVE CLAUSE

ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk êkwa ê-pêyâhtakowêyâhk	We are relatives and we are careful with our words
nisîm	my younger sibling (a younger brother or sister)
nisîmê	my younger sibling (vocative case)
tânisi anima ê-isi-tôtaman, nisîmê?	How do you do it, my sister?
tânisi anima ê-isi-kikiskâ-mâmitonêyihtaman?	How do you think so fast?
naniwêyitwê, nisîmê, anima âcimowin	Tell a joke, my sister, that story
kâ-mâci-pâhpiyâhk mâna ahpô piko	that makes us laugh no matter

tahtwâw kâ-âcimoyan.
nisîmê
nimiywêyihtênân
ka-pêhtâtâhk kâ-kêyakâhpisiyan
nisîmê, anima kêyakâhpisiwin
kâ-ohci-pâhpiyâhk.
kiyâm 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, miyawâsik
kitawâsimisak
aniki awâsisak
kâ-sâkihacik
miyawâsik, 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

nikâ, mâka kiskisitota	my mother, but remember
opâhpiwin, anima pâhpiwin	his laugh, that laugh
kâ-kî-nahêyihtamihikoyahk.	he made us all feel better.
kahkiyaw niwâhkômâkanak, kiyawâw	all my relatives, all of you
kâ-wîkimâyêkok nîtisânak	the ones who married my siblings
nitânisak êkwa nistimwak, nitihkwatimak êkwa nikosisak	my brother's daughters and my sister's daughters, my brother's son and my sister's sons
nikâwîsak êkwa nôhcâwîsak	my aunties and my uncles
niciwâmiskwêmak, nitawêmâwak, nicâhkosak êkwa nikêhtê-ayimak	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
aniki nistam kâ-kî-pê-takosihkik	the ones who came before
aniki mwêstas kê-takosihkik	the ones who will come after
kiyâmapi, êkwa.	Shhhh, now.
miyohtâkwan	it sounds pleasant
anima cîstâwêwin	that echo
êwako êkâ kâ-pônihtâkwahk.	it won't stop sounding.

RECLAMATION POEMS

CREE LESSONS

nêhiyawêwin	the Cree language
têhtapiwin	chair
tohtôsâpoy	milk
nâpêw âpacihcikan	the man's tool

nâpêw isîhcikâsowin	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-isi-nihtâ-âhpinihkêyan ⤻ HOW TO TAN A HIDE

tânisi ka-isi-nihtâ-âhpinihkêyan	how to tan a hide
kiskisitota ôma kâ-itihtâkwahk.	Remember that sound.
mihkihkwan	hide scraper
kiskisi nîkân ka-mihkitaman itê kâ-wiyâsiwik.	Remember to scrape the meat off first.
wâpam tânisi ê-itâpacihtât ôma mâtahikan.	Watch how she uses that hide scraper, the one that scrapes the fur off.
nitohta.	Listen.

nâkatohkê êkwa kika-pêhtên	Listen carefully and you will hear
tânisi pîtos mâtahikan	how the fur scraper does not
ê-itihtâkwahk ispîhci mihkihkwan.	sound the same as the flesh scraper.
kôhkom	your grandmother
nîtohta mîna kîsta.	You will also hear.
kiskisitota ôma kâ-itihtâkwahk.	Remember that sound.
kiskisi	Remember
wiyîtihpa ôhi ê-âpacihtâhk ka-yôskinamihk askêkin.	how she uses these brains to soften the hide.
wîtapim kôhkom.	Stay with your grandmother.
wîcih ka-mâtahikêt.	Help her to work that hide.
kaskâpasikê.	Keep up that fire.
nâkatohkê.	Listen carefully.
kiskisi wiyîtihpa anihi ê-âpacihtâhk ka-yôskinamihk askêkin.	Remember, the brains soften the hide.
kiskisi	Remember
êkosi kika-nakacihtân.	so that you will know.

aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik ⌒ TWO MEN TALKING

aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik	these two men, the ones who speak together
nipêhtên ê-takahkihtâkwahk	I can hear the pleasing sounds of
pêyâhtakêyimowin.	peace.
kisiskâciwani-sîpiy	North Saskatchewan River
kisiskâciwan mâka ê-cîwêk êkwa ê-pêhtamân	It flows swiftly but peacefully and I am hearing
ê-takahkihtâkwahk	the pleasing sounds of

pêyâhtakêyimowin.	peace.
kîyawâw kipîkiskwâtitonâwâw	You talk to each other
mâka ê-manâcimitoyêk	and you are careful with each other
êkwa kinisitohtâtonâwâw.	and you listen to each other.
kiyawâw nîso nâpêwak	these two men
kâ-pîkiskwêyêk	the ones who speak together
nîso pîwâkonisak	two snowflakes that float
ê-nôhtê-âhkami-pîkiskwâtitoyêk	you want to speak Cree with each other
môy ê-nitawêyihtamêk	you do not want
ka-kipihtowêyêk.	to stop talking.

nôhtâwiy opîkiskwêwin ⌓ FATHER TONGUE

nôhtâwiy opîkiskwêwin	My father, his language
-ikawi	(suffix)
nêhiyawêwin itwêwina	Cree words
pahkwêsikan, maskihkîwâpoy	bread, tea (lit., medicine water)
êkwa nipiy	and water
mistik, osimisk, êkwa nîpiy	tree, bud, and leaf
pipon, miyoskamin	winter, spring
nîpin, êkwa takwâkin	summer and fall
mispon êkwa kimiwan	snow and rain
wâsêskwan êkwa yôtin	sun and wind
wîhki-pahkwêsikanis	cookie
kihci-okiniy, êkwa	tomato and

âpakosîsi-mîciwin	cheese (lit., mouse food)
sâkahikan, asinîwaciy	lake, mountain
paskwâw	prairie
papâ-mîcisowin êkwa kapêsiwin	picnic and camping
kâkikê ê-kî-môsâhkinamâhk	We always picked bottles
môtêyâpiskwa ispî	bottles when
kâ-kî-papâ-mîcisoyâhk	we went picnicking
ahpô ê-nitawi-kapêsiyâhk.	or camping.
sîpihkonâkwan mêkwâc kîsik	The sky is blue now
mâka kinwês ê-kî-pihkonâkwahk.	but for a long time it has been grey.
sêhkêpayîs êkwa cîmân	car and canoe
napakitâpânâsk êkwa tihkinâkan	toboggan and cradleboard
oskawâsis, nâpêsis, iskwêsis, nâpêw, êkwa iskwêw	baby, boy, girl, man, and woman
nîcimos êkwa nîcimos	my boyfriend and my girlfriend (my sweetheart)
nikâwiy êkwa nôhtâwiy	my mother and my father
nôhkom êkwa nimosôm	my grandmother and my grandfather
nîcisânak, nimis êkwa nistês	my sister and my brother
nikâwîs êkwa nohcâwîs	my auntie (my mother's sister) and my uncle (my dad's brother)
"nitânis" êkwa "nikosis"	"my girl" and "my boy"
nôcokwêsis êkwa kisêyinîs	old woman and old man
ê-maskawâk êkwa ê-yôskâk.	It is hard and it is soft.
ê-sôhkihtâkwahk êkwa	It is loud and
ê-kâmwâtahk.	it is quiet.

ê-maskawahcâk	The ground is hard
ê-sôhkihtâkwahk kipihtowêwin	The silence is loud
ê-miyotâmoyan êkwa ê-kâmwâtahk.	Your voice is melodious and peaceful.
kâkikê ê-kî-manâcimiyâhk	You always spoke carefully
tâpiskôc kimiwan	just like rain
ê-pahkipêstâk	The raindrops are falling gently when
itê ê-pâhkwahcâk.	the ground is dried out.
kiyâwihtâkosin êkwa anohc.	You sound far away now.
ê-nitohtawiyan êkwa ê-âhkamêyihtamohiyan.	You listen and you persevere.
ê-kî-sâkihiyâhk êkwa	You and Mom loved us and
kiya êkwa nikâwînân	you and our mother
ê-kî-nihtâwôsêyêk.	raised up a good family.
ê-kî-miyo-pimâtisiyan, mâka	You lived a good life, but
ispîhk ê-kî-kisipipayiyan	then you went on ahead
êkwa kikî-âstêsinin kitaywêpiwinihk.	and you lay down to your rest in your resting place
ê-kî-kisêwâtisiyan	You were kind
êkwa ê-kî-kwayaskwâtisiyan	and you were honest and just
ê-kî-tapahtêyimisoyan	You were humble
êkwa ê-kî-pêyâhtakowêyan	You were soft-spoken
ê-kî-yôskâtisiyan	You had a gentle heart
ê-kî-yôskitêhêstawacik	You had a soft spot in your heart
kahkiyaw nêhiyawak.	for all Cree people.
ê-kî-sawêyimacik êkwa ê-kî-nâkatêyimacik.	You were generous and you cared for us.
ê-kî-kâh-kakihcihiwêyan	You were thoughtful

ê-kî-miyo-tôtaman	You did a good thing
tahtwâw ê-kî-nêhiyawêyan.	each time you spoke Cree.
ê-kî-nahîyan mistahi kîkway.	You were so good at so many things.
nipîkiskâtisin êkwa kikîsinâtêyihtamâtin	I am sad and I am regretful
osâm kitâhkosiwin	because sickness
kipîkiskwêwin ê-kimotamâkoyan	took away your talk
êkwa ê-kî-mwêstasisiniyân	and I came too late
ka-nitohtâtân.	to listen.
mâka êkwa anohc âta ê-kîmwêyan	But now you're whispering
kina-nahihtâtin.	and I'm listening.

ninitâhtâmon kititwêwiniwâwa ⤻ I BORROW YOUR WORDS

ninitâhtâmon kititwêwiniwâwa	I borrow your words
môya ninôhtê-wanitôtên ispîhk nêhiyawascikêyâni	I mean no wrong in writing
ahpô nêhiyawêyâni. ninitawêyihtên	or speaking your language. I mean
ka-nisitohtâtakok kinêhiyawîhtwâwiniwâwa	to understand you on your own terms
kipîkiskwêwiniwâwa.	in your words.
tahto itwêwin ê-miyonâkwahk	Each word intricately embroidered
tâpiskôc anima kâ-yîkopîwik niwâsênamânihk	like the frost on my window this cold
anohc kâ-kîkisêpâyâk kîwêtinohk. tahto cahkasinahikan	northern morning. Each inflection
tâpiskôc mîkwan isinâkwan wâsênamânihk	a feathered essence on the glass
tâpiskôc piyêsîs ê-nikamot itihtâkwan tahto itwêwin	Each word a songbird as soon

mayaw kâ-kitoyêk. tânisi mâka	As I speak it. How
ka-kî-kaskihtâyân ka-otinamâsoyân	could I possibly steal
kikitohcikêwiniwâw?	your music?
kitasotamâtitinâwâw	I give you my word
môya niwî-otinamâson.	I won't take what's not mine.
ôki mîkwanak wâsênamânihk ê-ayâcik	Those feathers on my window
kititwêwiniwâwa.	your words.
nika-nitohtên kikitohcikêwiniwâw itwêwina	I will listen for your music
tâpiskôc piyêsîsak kâ-takahkihtâkosicik, ê-ohpahocik	winged words of warblers, swooping
ê-nikamocik, onikamowiniwâwa ê-itwêmakaniyiki	mightily in song, metres
ê-kistêyihtâkosicik, ê-miyohtâkwaniyiki kâ-kîkisêpâyâyik.	of meaning, melodies of the morning.
kâwi kimiyitinâwâw kititwêwiniwâwa	I return your words,
kinanâskomitinâwâw ê-awihiyêk.	thanking your for loaning them to me.
ay-hay, nitôtêmitik nêhiyawak, kahkiyaw nitôtêmitik	Thank you, my Cree friends, all my friends
kîhtwâm ka-pîkiskwâtitonaw.	may we speak again.

aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-masinahikêcik — TWO MEN WRITING

aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-masinahikêcik	these two men, the ones who write
ê-kî-kiskêyihtamêk cî	Did you know
môy anima ê-nihtâ-nêhiyawêyêk	to understand Cree
nêhiyawasinahikêyêko?	is not merely to write in Cree?
nitohtamok	Listen
kakwê-nisitohtamok	Try to understand

sâpohtawân ⌓ GHOST DANCE

sâpohtawân	Ghost Dance
kimosômipaninawak, kôhkomipaninawak êkwa kahkiyaw kicâpâninawak	The grandfathers, the grandmothers, and all the ancestors
êkota kika-wîci-nîmihitômânawak.	There we will dance with the ancestors.
ê-nikamocik sâpohtawân nikamowin.	They sing the Ghost Dance song.
awa môhcohkân	this clown, trickster
oskâpêwis	helper
pimîhkân	pemmican
êkwa kahkiyaw ê-pâhpihâyâhk	and everyone laughs
awa ê-wawiyatêyihtâkosit nâpêw	at this funny man
"êkâ êkosi itapi, kitôhkapin anima" ê-isit.	"Don't sit like that," he says to me.
êkospîhk ê-kî-kiskinohamâkosiyân	I have since learned
ka-isi-kwayaskapiyân.	to sit properly.
ayiwâk ninîmihitonân.	We dance some more.
kâh-kitow ayiwâk awa môhcohkân.	That clown calls out some more.
ayiwâk nimîcisonân.	We eat more food.
ê-nikamot ayiwâk awa nâpêw.	The man sings some more.
kâ-miyotâmot tâpiskôc	He has a sweet voice just like
misâskwatôminâpoy ê-sîwâk.	saskatoon syrup.
sâpohtêwak.	They pass right through.
ê-kî-sâpohtawêhtêt.	He passed right through the opening.
êkwa aniki kâ-nîmihitocik	And those ghosts who are dancing
kâ-wîci-nîmihitômâyâhkik	the ones we dance with
mistahi katawasisiwak.	they are very beautiful.

ê-kî-pîcicîyâhk ⤻ WE DANCED ROUND DANCE

ê-kî-pîcicîyâhk	We danced round and round
kâh-kîhtwâm	again and again
tâpiskôc pîsim kâ-isi-waskawît	just as the sun moves round and round
kâh-kîhtwâm	again and again
ê-takahkwêwêtitâcik	They make a pleasing sound with the drums
êkwa ê-mâ-matwêwêhwâcik.	and they pound the drums so others can hear them from far away.

A FEW IDEAS FROM *amiskwacî-wâskahikanihk*

THE YOUNG LINGUIST

tânisi	Hello
tânisi kiya?	Hello, how are you?

tânisi ka-isi-nihtâ-pimîhkêyan ⤻ HOW TO MAKE PEMMICAN

tânisi ka-isi-nihtâ-pimîhkêyan	how to make pemican
paskwâwi-mostosowiyâs	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

maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw ôma wiya ohci — FOR MEDICINE BEAR WOMAN

maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw ôma wiya ohci	for Medicine Bear Woman
ayîki-pîsim	April
kikî-pîkiskwâsin anima êkospîhk.	You spoke to me that day.
kikî-nanâskominân ê-kî-pê-nitohtâtâhk.	You thanked me and the others for listening.
nistam anima êkospîhk kâ-kî-pêhtamân kititwêwina ê-pîkiskwêyan.	That day, I first heard your words as you spoke them.
pîkiskwê, nitôtêm, pîkiskwê. kititwêwina kinanâtawihikon.	Speak, my friend, speak. Your words are your medicine.
awiyak kikî-kakwêcimik kîkwây ê-kiskinohamâkosiyan kwayask wiyasiwêwin ohci.	Someone asked you what you have learned about justice.
ômisi kikî-itwân "namôya kwayask wiyasiwêwin ihtakon.	You said, "There is no justice.
kiyânaw ôma piko êkwa kotakak wiyawâw kahkiyaw."	There's just us and all the rest."
wîhtamawin, ê-nôhtê-nisitohtâtân.	Tell me, I want to understand you.
ninôhtê-nisitawinawâwak aniki kâ-kwayaskwâtisicik.	I want to know about the just ones.
tâpiskôc ana owiyasiwêw kâ-kî-miyisk sôhkihtâkosiwin.	Like that judge who gave you the power of speech.
kikî-wâpamitin êkwa kikî-nânâhkasîhtâtin.	I saw you on the outside.
kikî-nitohtâtin êkwa kikî-nânâhkasîhtâtin.	I listened to you on the outside.
kikî-pîkiskwâsin isi kâ-kî-nânâhkasîhtâtân.	You talked to me on the outside.
ômisi kikî-itwân: "namôya ôma ê-mac-âyiwiyân.	You said, "I'm not a bad person inside.
namôya macikwanâs osîhtâw kisê-manitow."	The Creator doesn't make junk."
awiyak kikî-kakwêcimik tânisi êkwa ê-isi-nâkatawêyihtaman kikisiwâsiwin.	Someone asked you what you do with your anger now.

ômisi kikî-itwân: "nitâ-ay-âsîhtân kîspin kaskihtâyâni"	You said you make statements whenever you can.
ispîhk kâ-mâmiskôtaman anima tâpasinahikêwin kâ-kî-osîhtâyan	When you spoke of what you made in art class
awîna êtikwê ana kâ-kî-mâyitôtâsk nikî-ay-itêyihtên.	I wondered who did bad things to you.
matwân cî anima êwak ohci kâ-kî-mâyinikêyan.	I wondered if that's why you did that bad thing.
kikî-kakwêcimitin tânisi ê-isi-miyikoyan maskawisîwin pîkiskwêwina êkwa itwêwina.	I asked you how speech and words give you power.
kikî-itwân, "pîkiskwêwina êkwa itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa mâka namôya maskwa-wisîmakanwa kîspin nam awiyak nitohtâhki."	You said, "Words and speech are power, but they're not power if there ain't no one listening."
matwân cî kikî-môsihtân nimaskawisîwinân kahkiyaw niyanân êkota kâ-nitohtâtâhk.	I wondered if you felt the power of all of us listening to you.
anohc êkwa nitayamihtân anihi kipîkiskwêwina kâ-kî-masinahaman.	Now I read your words as you wrote them.
kitâniskotâpân, mistahi-maskwa, ômisi kî-itwêw, "itwêwina maskawisîmakanwa."	Your great-grandfather, Big Bear, said, "Words are power."
kititwân kiya, "kîspin nam awiyak êkâ pîkiskwêci anihi itwêwina ka-kî-pîkiskwêhk, êwako kâmwâtisiwin kika-nisiwanâcihikon."	You say, "If no one ever speaks the words that should be spoken, the silence destroys you."
kinitohtâtin kâ-kî-isi-nânâhkasîhtâtân.	I listen to you on the outside.
ka-kî-pêhtawin cî kâ-kî-isi-nânâhkasîhtâtân?	Can you hear me listening?
pîkiskwê, nitôtêm. kitâpwêwin anima kiwîcihikowisiwin.	Speak, my friend. Your truth is your power.
kiwîcihikowisiwin ninôhtê-pêhtên.	I want to hear your power.
pîkiskwê, maskihkiy maskwa iskwêw.	Speak, Medicine Bear Woman.

TAKE THIS ROPE AND THIS POEM (A LETTER FOR BIG BEAR)

mistahi-maskwa	Big Bear
nimihtâtên ê-kî-kakwê-pîkiskwêstamâwak.	I regret trying to speak for him.
anohc nitapahtêyimison êkâ ê-nihtâ-nêhiyawêyân.	Now I am humbled because I do not speak Cree competently.
ayis mwêstas tahto-askiy kêyâpic	Because after all these years,
namôya ê-kaskihtâyân	still I am not capable
pîsâkanâpiy	a rawhide rope
paskwâwi-mostoswak	buffalo
maskêkwâpoy	muskeg tea (Labrador tea)
pîsâkanâpiy mêskanaw	Rawhide Rope Road
âniskohpicikan pîsâkanâpihk	a rope with a knot in it
namôya tâpiskôc âniskôhôcikan ôma kâ-tâpisahoht	not at all like a bead that has been threaded onto a string
mwâc ahpô tâpiskôc anihi pîwâpiskwêyâpiya	not at all like those chains
kâ-kî-âpacihtâhk ka-sakahpitiht ana kisêyiniw	used to hold him
asinîwaciy kipahotowikamikohk.	at Stony Mountain Penitentiary.
cêskwa!	Wait!
nakî!	Stop!
ê-tapahtiskwêkâpawiyân	I stand humble, my head bowed
osâm nikî-âpahên âniskohpicikan nahiyikohk	because I will loosen the knot just enough
ka-nisitohtamân ê-kî-nôhtê-pîkiskwâtât ostêsimâwa	to say I understand that he wanted to talk to his brothers
anihi kâ-wâpiskisiyit ostêsimâwa	those older white brothers who wrote the treaty
kâ-kî-masinahamiyit ostêsimâwasinahikan	these ones who signed the treaty
ninôhtê-paskisên pîsâkanâpiy	I want to cut the rope

êkwa ê-nôhtê-wîci-pîkiskwêmimak otayisiyinîma	I want to speak with his people
namôya kîkway ayiwâk.	Nothing more.
ay hay.	Thank you.
kiya kâ-wîcihat mistahi-maskwa.	The one who helps Big Bear.

sôhkikâpawi, nitôtêm ⁀ STAND STRONG, MY FRIEND

sôhkikâpawi, nitôtêm	Stand strong, my friend
nîpawi kitâpwêwinihk	Stand there in your own truth
kwayaskokâpawi tâpiskôc ana wâkinâkan.	Stand straight just like that tamarack tree.
wîci-kâpawîstâtok anohc tâpiskôc aniki wâkinâkanak.	Stand with others now, just like those tamarack trees.
sôhkikâpawi êkospîhk nimiyo-tôtêm.	Stand strong at those times, my friend.
pêyakokâpawi kîspin êkosi ispayiki, mâka wîci-kâpawîstawik mîna kotakak.	Stand on your own if necessary, but also stand with others too.
ômisi isikâpawi tâpiskôc kâ-isi-sâkâkonêkâpawit 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 cistêmâw	Cree tobacco
natohta tâpwêwin nitôtêm.	Listen for the truth, my friend.
kiyâmikâpawi êkwa cîhkîsta ôhi asotamâkêwina.	Stand quietly and enjoy these promises.
sôhkikâpawi nimiyo-tôtêm, 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
kinisitohtên cî?	Do you understand?

môya	No
môya nikî-kaskihtân ka-tâpowêyân osâm	No, I could not repeat him because
môya ê-kî-pâh-pêhtamân osâm	I hadn't heard him repeatedly because
môya tâpwe ê-kî-nâ-nitohtawak.	I did not listen enough.
ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin	To understand Cree
ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân	I must listen to Cree
kâh-kîhtwâm.	again and again.
ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin	To understand Cree
ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân	you must listen to Cree
kâh-kîhtwâm.	again and again.
niski-pîsim	March (Goose Month)
ayîki-pîsim	April (Frog Month)
ayîkisak	frogs
aniki ayîkisak kâ-nikamocik	those frogs who sing
kâ-nâ-nikamocik.	and sing again and again.
ê-pâh-pahkahokoyahk kâh-kîhtwâm	As our hearts beat over and over
ê-yâ-yêhyêyahk kâh-kîhtwâm.	As we breathe in and out again and again.
ê-mâ-minihkwêyahk nipiy kâh-kîhtwâm	As we drink water again and again
ê-pâ-pimiciwahk kisiskâciwani-sîpiy kâkikê.	The North Saskatchewan River flows along repeatedly.
êkosi ê-mâ-manâcihât otoskawâsisa	The way a mother bear protects her children
aniki tâpiskôc maskosisak	Just as those young bears
kâ-mâ-mêcawêsiyit kâh-kîhtwâm.	play their games again and again.
wâh-pâ-pê-kîwêcik	When they return
câhcahkêwin aniwâhk	a freckle on a cheek

tâpiskan ôma kâ-wâ-wâkamok	this jaw that curves
ê-isi-pâh-pâhpisit, ahpô ê-kâ-kinwâk	he smiles in this way, or it is long
êkwa ê-sâsôhkahk ôma oskan	and this bone is strong
wâh-pâ-pê-isinâkosit ohci wîtisânîhitowin	when the next generation appears to be near
âniskotâpân ahpô kihc-âniskotâpân	or the next one after that
êwako ani	and so after that
wâwîs cî	especially when
wâh-mâ-mêcawêcik âniskotâpânak	the children play
êwako anihi mêcawêwina, wâh-pâ-pîkiskwêyit	those same games, when they say
êwako anihi itwêwina	those same words
wâh-nâ-nikamoyit êwako anihi nikamowina	when they sing those same songs
wâh-ây-âcimostawâcik omosômimâwak	when the grandfathers tell a story
ocâpânimiwâwa kotak âcimowin	yet another story to their great grandchildren
ka-nêhiyawi-nisitohtamihk	To understand Cree
ka-kî-nâ-nitohtamihk nêhiyawêwin	they must listen to Cree
kâh-kîhtwâm.	again and again.

nikî-pê-pimiskân ⌓ I CAME THIS WAY BY CANOE

nikî-pê-pimiskân	I came by canoe
kayâs-âyiwan anima mêskanâs 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

ê-maskawisîwiyiniwiyâhk.	We are our muscles.
nitâhkami-mâ-miyo-pimâtisinân.	We persist in living a good life.
êkota ê-kî-nîpawiyân	There I stood.
ê-kîmohtawakik nitâniskêwiyiniwak.	I am eavesdropping on my ancestors.
anohc êkwa nipêhtên ê-matwê-pimohtêcik, ê-paswêwêki, kayâs nâway ohci.	Now I hear distant sounds, I am close enough to hear, they are echoes and they sound beautiful.
ê-na-nîpawiyân ôta: ê-âpasâpahtamân, ê-âsôsimoyân.	Here I stand: I am looking, leaning back.
niyêhyân	I breathe
nipimâtisin	I live
ê-nôhtê-kiskêyihtamân awîna niya	I want to know who I am
ê-nanâtawâpamakik awînipanak wiyawâw.	I search for who they were.

LIKE A BEAD ON A STRING

tâpiskôc otisiyêyâpiy pîsimwêyâpiy	just like the umbilical cord, the rainbow
ê-itâpêkamohtât askîhk kîsikohk ohci	connect the earth and sky
ê-âkwaskitinitocik awâsis êkwa okâwîmâw.	Mother and child embrace each other.
tâpiskôc pîsâkanâpiy pîkiskwêyâpîsa	Just like a rawhide rope, the vocal cords
ê-tipahpitahk miyikowisiwin âcimowin êkwa nikamowin	secure the gift of story and song
ê-âkwaskitinitocik mosôm êkwa ôsisima.	The grandfather and his grandchild embrace each other.
tâpiskôc kâ-tâpisahoht mîkis, nitâniskotâpân	Like a bead on a string, my great grandmother
apîstawêw owâhkômâkana nahiyikohk	sits near to her relatives long enough
kici-têpinamwak ocihciya	so that I can reach for her hands

ihkatawâw ay-itwêhiwêw ⤻ THE MARSH SENDS A MESSAGE

âniskowaskwa	the reeds
kinosêw	fish
sâkahikan, manitow-sâkahikan	lake, God's Lake
êkwa nipiy	and water
ê-sôhkêyimocik êkwa ê-nihtâwêcik	they are confident and they are eloquent
ê-âcimostawicik	they tell me a story
ê-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 nêhiyaw	This one Cree
awîn âna wiya	who was he
kâ-kî- 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
pêho êkwa	and wait
ahpô êtikwê kika-pêhtên kîkway	You might hear something
kipihtowêwinihk	in the silence

kiyâm ⌣ LET IT BE

kiyâm	hush; be quiet; it will be all right
kiyâmapik	Be quiet you guys
"kiyâmapi," nipêhtawâw awiyak ê-itwêt	"Shhh," I hear someone saying
"mah! kêhtê-ayak ê-ayamihâcik."	"Listen! The elders are praying."

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