

THE WISHING BONE CYCLE

NARRATIVE POEMS FROM THE SWAMPY CREE INDIANS

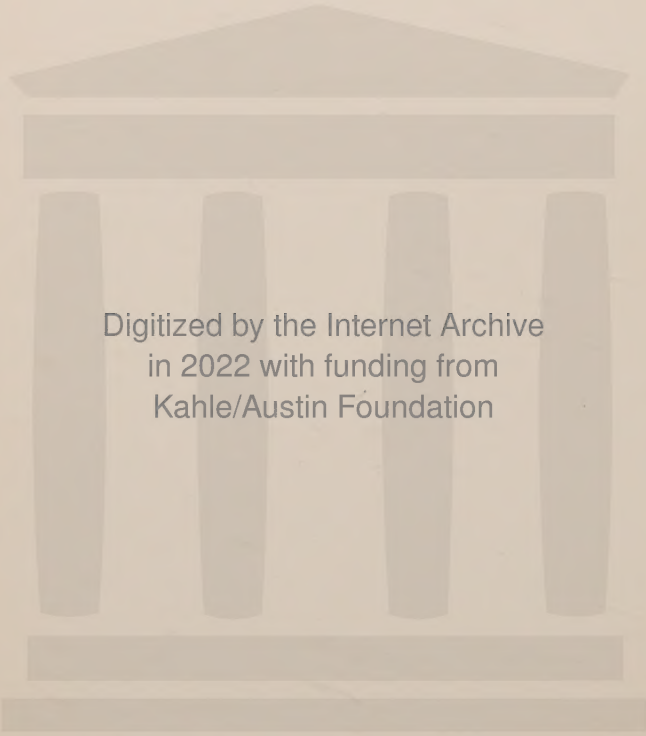
GATHERED AND TRANSLATED

BY HOWARD A. NORMAN



PRE-FACE BY
JEROME ROTHENBERG

EXPANDED EDITION INCLUDING **WHO MET THE ICE LYNX,**
AND **WHY OWLS DIE WITH WINGS OUTSPREAD**



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WHO MET THE ICE LYNX

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WHY OWLS DIE WITH WINGS OUTSPREAD

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Also by Howard Norman:

THE WOE SHIRT (stories from the Creole of Paule Barton), 1980
WHERE THE CHILL CAME FROM: CREE WINDIGO TALES &
JOURNEYS, 1981.

INCIDENT AT QUILL (prose, forthcoming)

For my family.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Nibenegenesabe family for generosity and friendship; to John Rains for his patient help with the translations; to T. Rinehart and the Rothenberg family who opened their homes to me during various periods of transiency; to Dr. John McCafferty, whose knowledge of Canadian animals was vital to this book. During the compilation of this new edition, David Guss, Job Walks, Laura Kullenberg, Jenny Sernik, Helene Montmi, and Anna Jaffe were of invaluable help. And thanks to Jon Cott and Richard LeMon for all the helpful conversations concerning this book.

Special thanks to Fredica Landon

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Pre-face by Jerome Rothenberg

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WHO MET THE ICE LYNX:

Naming Stories of the Swampy Cree People

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The *Muska koo*, Swampy Cree, an Algonquian Indian people, are primarily hunters, trappers, and fishermen, whose communities (throughout history) have been located across the Canadian subarctic, from Hudson Bay's SW peripheral muskeg shields, through the central moist, coniferous forests, swamp and lake regions, and occasionally into the "Grove Belt" (poplar savannah) of southcentral Canada. The Swampy's dialect of Cree, in which the specific narratives (and songs) in this book were heard, is generally spoken in the north-central regions of the Province of Manitoba to the NE to Hudson Bay.

PRE-FACE

Our only measure of truth is . . . our perception of truth. The undeniable tradition of metamorphosis teaches us that things do not remain always the same. They become other things by swift and unanalysable process. It was only when men began to mistrust the myths and tell nasty lies for a moral purpose that these matters became hopelessly confused. (Ezra Pound, 1918)

Take that as a start: Pound's version of what has come to be one of our chief poetic insights. A poetry of changes as a notion fundamental to our oldest memories as human beings. And that lovely condensation flashed to mind the first time I had a look at Howard Norman's versions from the Cree. Their beauty (gentle, crazy) was so much tied up with where they came from: not the contrivance of the kind of poetry sophisticates we're sometimes thought to be but of another breed of individuals who remain our masters. To get to where those others are, we've had to break the mind-set of our culture—doing that to re-invent what is still possible in theirs, adherence through tradition to what Cassirer called the “law of metamorphosis in thought & word.”

Jacob Nibènegenesábe & Samuel Makidemewabe are traditional Cree story-tellers (oral poets, in brief), & Howard Norman is one who learns from them as well. The *telling* is for them & him & us an act of “going backward/looking forward,” in which past & future intersect; in which traditional ways (as process) do not imprison but free the mind to new beginnings & speculations. This is the basis of the “oral” as a liberating possibility: an

interplay that preserves the mind's capacity for transformation—as important in an ecological sense as that other preservation (of earth & living forms, etc.) that we now recognize not as nostalgia but a necessary tool for human survival. And that capacity is not a blind, collective process then or now—not by a long shot. The poets here represented are no automatons of culture but real people, individuals with names & voices & the power to invent & make things new. They are what Aristotle called the old Greek “tragic” poets (goat-song men): the makers (*poetes*) of the story (*mythos*), i.e., the poets of the myth. The implications of *all* of that is what this book is secretly about.

So if you read on, you'll see that the culture doesn't so much provide the stories (only the long tale about the walking trickster is so handed down, & even there the stress on the performance makes it different every time) as the capacity to make & tell them. The Wishing Bone Cycle (Nibènegenesábe's masterwork) is the best instance of the way it goes.

The process? Well, start with a single, not too implausible, event, & turn it. See what can go wrong. A kind of test of circumstance. Thus: wish or think up a hammock for a tired man. But the hammock is a whole valley—initial complication—and there's snow in it. That's trouble. And around the valley & the sleeping man are wolves. So make a further complication for the fun, the play of it, & give the man a pair of antlers. Let him start farting like a moose (why not?) until the wolves get curious. But add a further complication still: when they get there they can't see the man. So have him sneeze, & so on.

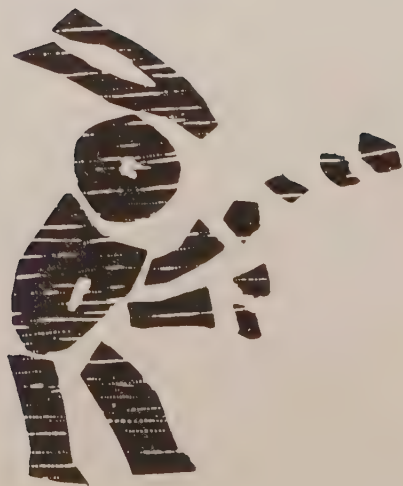
The meaning (no “moral” but “meaning”) is tied to the quick changes. And the changes are everywhere & are a testimony to a view of life which finds us all in motion for as long as we can think & speak of it. The trickster of the final story is the religious embodiment of that process—as

the “wishing bone” is Nibènegenesábe’s personal one. He is not like the god we know, but one who changes (himself & others) & often does it badly. (Or in that sense: he is *really* like the god we know; only he doesn’t have to keep up a front.) The moral is happily deferred, but the energies are undeniable & very human.

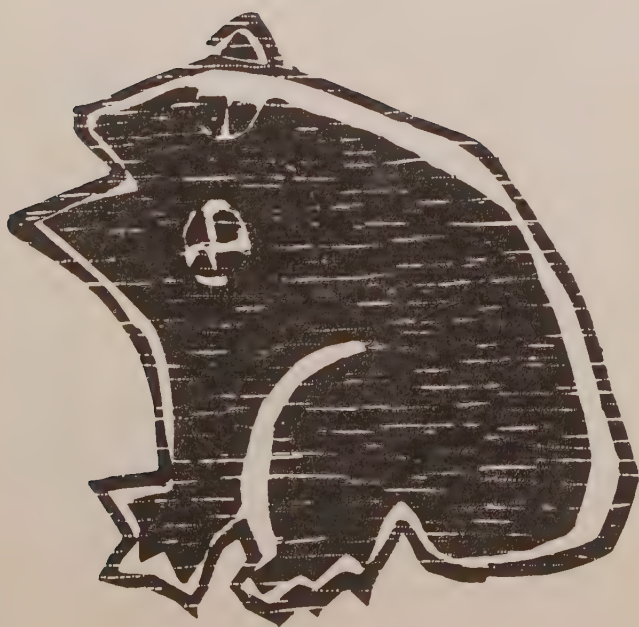
Those energies of course are what informs the one who tells about them & the ones who learn by listening. In their transmission—which is what our lives are all about in art & poetry—the messages continue & are changed. They also change the tellers, in this instance Howard Norman. For he has learned, as he would have had to, not merely to translate spoken words into written, but at the insistence of his teacher’s (story-tellers he has known from childhood) to tell the tale himself. I think of him as I first got to know him: telling the stories of the wishing bone or sitting at a table with a stack of wishing bones provided by old friends in gratitude. *I wished the wishing bones to be a book of words, & here it is. And now I wish the words to speak, & when they do I wish they all speak with your voice. I wish you all to tell their story & your own.*

JEROME ROTHENBERG

January 1976



THE WISHING BONE CYCLE
"TRICKSTER" NARRATIVES



THE *Wishing Bone* narratives constitute a Trickster cycle, spoken of as the oldest of traditional Cree stories. The inventor and initiator of these particular narrative poems was Jacob Nibenegenesabe, who lived for some ninety-four years northeast of Lake Winnipeg, Canada. Nibenegenesabe was considered an excellent teller (or *achimoo*) of trickster narratives from an older time, as represented by Wichikapache Goes Walking, Walking. Although I never directly asked his reasons for originating the *Wishing Bone* poems, I would say he obviously enjoyed the wide latitude of invention the concept of a "wishing bone" afforded him. One might also point to statements of his, such as "I was curious to tell things since the old others..." (meaning things not necessarily discussed in older tales). And, further, "Someone comes to ask me 'How did this or that happen?' At first I might not know the answer. But later these stories let me remember." In conversations about storytelling, he often referred to the *Wishing Bone* narratives, never solely to assign them some historical validity but to acknowledge the fertile procedure of continually "thinking things up."

The first-person narrator (who now can be anyone) has found the wishbone of a snow goose who has wandered into the Swampy Cree region and was killed by a lynx. This person now has a wand of metamorphosis allowing him to wish anything into existence; himself into any situation.

I try to make wishes right
but sometimes it doesn't work.
Once, I wished a tree upside down
and its branches
were where the roots should have been!
The squirrels had to ask the moles
"How do we get down there
to get home?"
One time it happened that way.
Then there was the time, I remember now,
I wished a man upside down
and his feet were where his hands
should have been!
In the morning his shoes
had to ask the birds
"How do we fly up there
to get home?"
One time it happened that way.

This is for turtles, that's why
I'm telling it close to water.
Next time I might stick my head right in!
I say this
"Turtle, you bite me again
it's trouble!
I see you laughing those bubbles.
They come up and I break them
and laughing comes out.
Yesterday I was with my toes
in the river
and drinking some sun
from the top of the water.
Otter was there too with his toes.
But you got my toes!
Did you make a deal with Otter?"

One time I wished myself
into a moose deer.
I was lying down and sleeping
with my own shadow
and then you came along
saying the sun was in your mouth,
saying you were thirsty!
I wished you to where you drank tears.
It was a lake
everyone cried into,
full of people's tears.
At night
some of the tears left
to look for sad faces
to fall down.
Then the whole lake cried.
Some said it was the loons.

One time I wished myself in love.
I was the little squirrel
with dark stripes.
I climbed shaky limbs for fruit for her.
I even swam with the moon on the water
to reach her.
That was a time little troubled me.
I worked all day to gather food
and watched her sleep all night.
It is not the same way now
but my heart still sings
when I hear her
over the leaves.

There was a storm once.
That's when I wished myself
into a turtle.
But I meant on land!
The one that carries a hard tent
on his back.
I didn't want to be floating!
I wanted to pull everything inside
and dry.
Here comes the waves
shaking me,
and I'm getting sick in the insides.
I wanted to be the turtle
eating buds and flowers and berries.
I've got to wish things exactly!
That's the way it is
from now on.

One time I saw
a tree with no animals in it.
I started walking around it.
That's when each of my eyes
saw a different animal,
a bird and a porcupine.
So I wished them up in that tree.
But only one animal got up there.
He was a porcupine and bird in the same body!
How did that happen?
He flew up and got stuck in the clouds
with his quills.
Then he came down into some bush thorns
and lost some feathers.
The only place he could live
was in that tree.
He made friends with the wind there.
When the wind came
to shake the tree
the wind cleaned his quills.
When the wind came
looking for someone to fly with
under the clouds
the animal went.

I'll tell you
how that salamander got legs.
It was a worm once.
I'll say that first.
A fat worm.
One day it came up to see
if the ground
still had sun on it.
That's when a bird came after it.
The worm crawled slow
looking for a hole.
But its tail and head found a hole
at the same time!
It was going two ways
into the ground
and stretching.
Here comes the bird!
So I wished the worm some legs
and it ran under a log.
Later, it lived in a wet stump.
Then I wished salamanders all over
sleeping under leaves
with their eyes and tails and legs.
But the worm
is still inside them somewhere.

One night I was wishing things all over.
Then, I thought there were too many stars
in the sky
and not enough light down under,
in the earth.
That's when I wished a star down
for that mole
to carry on his nose.
He took it down under.
He walked around with it under there
and tried it out.
Now he comes up sometimes
to let his star talk to the other stars
in the sky.
It's dark down there
but his nose sees where he's going.

A snake lost his eyes once.
Don't blame this one on me!
It was the snowy owl.
He was playing the moon.
That owl closed his eyes
and sat in a fog tree
with his white face.
The snake looked up through the fog
and saw that round face
and said, "Moon, show me a meal!"
Then that moon came down and took his eyes.

One time I was tired of being young.
So, I wished myself into an old man.
But I was dying!
The children gathered around
saying
“Do not die.
Let’s go out and have a day.
Look! the moon is forgiving us
with another sun.”
But I was sweating, and said
“It is time.
That log has hollowed itself out
and waits for me.
My old spirit already has its shoes on.”
Then I crawled into the log
with the moon just beginning
to forgive me.

Sure I saw the water monster!
Why do you think I got back here so fast?
Yes, that was me
sitting in a tree by the lake
wishing myself into a walking stick
and making cracking-leaves sounds
and making wishes on myself.
That's when I saw him!
I couldn't think straight so thought crooked,
which is how I got to be
a snake
come winding out
and safe at home.
All because I saw him.

Once when I was walking
I saw an owl-beak
with no owl-face around it!
It was sitting
in a tree
and singing.
This wasn't my trick!
I'd never leave my mouth
up in a tree
just to come down to the ground
to hear it sing.
Then the beak flew down onto a mouse.
I sure wasn't that hungry.
It wasn't me.
Then the beak
flew up to a hole nest in a tree
with two little owl-beaks in it.
They were hungry
and ate up the mouse.
This really happened!
It wasn't my doing, heh heh.

I'll tell you what it's like
being the biggest fish
in the lake.
I know this, since I wished myself
to be a sturgeon.
The smaller fish call me
with their voices,
and the water birds too.
"Your big mouth,
use it to eat our enemies!"
That's what they say.
But then I get hungry for them!

One day I wished myself
among frogs
and have been living with them
trying to get their medicine.
A day a while ago
I left the swamp and returned home.
But all my wife wanted
was my legs!
She said
“YOU LOOK LIKE A FROG NOW!”
Now I’m back
trying to get the medicine.
It’s been half my life now.
Do you think they’re tricking me?

Once there was a duck who lightened up the swamp.
I just happened to be there.
“Ho! lantern on the water!”
some men called.

But the duck said nothing.
It sat deep
in the swamp
and glowed.

“It’s where the sun goes at night!”
one man called, “inside that duck!”
Then he called
“We know you’ve swallowed the sun, duck.
Let it go. It’s near morning!”

But the duck said nothing.
It lightened up the swamp.

Then the men tried to capture the duck.
They grew very quiet, and got close.
Then they leaped toward the duck,
but all they caught
was mud in their mouths.

“Look, over there!” one man called.
Then they saw the duck sitting far away
on the water.
It was lighting up the swamp again!

I just happened to be there.
But in the morning we were both gone.

There was an old woman I wished up.
She was the wife
of an old pond.
You could watch her swim in her husband
if you were
in the hiding bushes.
She spoke to him by the way she swam
gently.
One time in their lives there was no rain
and the sun began making the pond smaller.
Soon the sun took the whole pond!
For many nights the old woman slept
near the hole where her husband once lived.
Then, one night, a storm came
but in the morning there still was no water
in her husband's old house.
So she set out on a journey to find her husband
and followed the puddles on the ground
which were the storm's footprints.
She followed them for many miles.
Finally she came upon her husband
sitting in a hole. But he was in the wrong hole!
So the old woman brought her husband home
little by little in her hands.
You could have seen him come home
if you were
in the hiding bushes.

One day I wished
that the squirrels all had their tails
pointing north.

I made them point north just by wishing it!
It looked as if a wind was blowing north
and trying to take those squirrel tails
with it.

I walked down a path
and saw squirrels in trees and on the ground.
All with their tails pointing north.

“It’s so strange
you would do this to us,”
one squirrel said.

I said, “I got lost once, and couldn’t find north.
If that ever happens again, I’ll just follow
your tails.”

Then the squirrels called someone
for help. It was a skunk!
I wasn’t too happy about this.

I was standing just north
of that skunk, close to him.
He said, “Let their tails go!
I’ll show you which way
north is.”

Then he pointed his tail north.
At me!

I wished the squirrel tails back
their old way.

The skunk still had his tail
pointed at me.
I tried to get away, but it was too late.

Awgh! I ran south
shouting, "He sprayed me!"

For days everyone knew
in their noses
which way south was,
because of me.

I went around the village
bragging that I had the best ears,
that I could hear things
in the distance before anyone.
And I was right! Until the lynx came along.
He walked in and said, "I have better ears."
So, we had a contest. Both of us
sat in the middle of the village,
listening.
I wished mud into the lynx's ears
but he cleaned it out.
Then I saw his ears lean!
He was hearing something.
He kept hearing it
and leaning his ears.
I wished whitefish oil, mud, and moss
into his ears
but it was too late.
Finally, he said, "A wolf has just given up
hunting
at the beaver pond."
Everyone was puzzled.

"I didn't hear anything," I said.

"I heard the whole thing
happen," he said,
as he was cleaning his ears again.

Then, one man left for the beaver pond.
He came back and said, "It's true!
There are wolf tracks all around,
and so much tail-slapping went on
by those beavers to warn each other,
that there are big waves in the pond!"

“I heard it all along,”
the lynx said.

I got angry. I said, “The wolf told him
where he was going to hunt ahead of time . . . no,
I mean the beavers knew . . . no, I mean that mud
I wished into his ears somehow helped him . . .
what I mean is, there should be another contest
to give me a fair chance!”

But it was too late. They all
had put mud in their ears
not to listen to me.

One time I wished up
a footprint tree.
It had the footprints of many animals
for leaves.
Footprints left behind
in mud and snow
were all hanging on that tree!
I wished all kinds of weather
into that tree, too.
It stayed cold
around the snow footprints
and warmer
around the mud footprints.
I wanted them to stay just as they were
when they were left behind.
That is how it was in the tree.
When a bear walked by
some old bear tracks
would leap off the tree
and come sniffing up to its feet!
They would be looking
for a home.
If the bear was the same one
who left them behind
long ago
they would leap back on
the bear's feet
and go back to living there.
Until the bear walked in snow
or mud again.
Those leaves leaped down!
Bear footprints
made a loud sound
when they hit the ground
and often

bird footprints flew away in the wind
trying to catch up with birds!
Bird-footprint leaves could be seen floating
in the air!
I tell you I was happy after wishing that tree up!
Except, later, I had leaves
from the mud and snow I'd walked in
sniffing around my feet too.

There was a man who was very tired.
So, I wished him up
a hammock.
It was a whole valley!
With snow!
This hammock was held up by pine trees
at both ends
and I wished him down there
sleeping in it.
He slept in the center of this hammock
even though wolves
were gathering on its rim.
He went on sleeping!
So, for fun, I wished some antlers
on that man
and made him fart out like a moose!
The wolves were puzzled
but interested.
The man went on sleeping.
Then, the wolves began to run down
into the valley
to investigate this.
That's when I wished a tremendous snow storm up!
The wolves could not see the man
or each other. And, to make things more interesting,
I wished the man sneezing in echoes!
Echoes were flying all over the valley.
Sneeze echoes!
The wolves began blaming each other
for making too much noise
on this hunt.
"Stop sneezing!" one wolf called
to another wolf.
"No, you stop sneezing!" the wolf said back.
I can't begin to tell you

how I was laughing at this
the whole time!
The man went on sleeping and causing trouble.
The wolves finally gave up
and went back up the hill.
The crows who watched this whole thing too
never did let those wolves forget it.
You could always hear those crows
teasing.
And that man,
he just went on sleeping.
Until I wished him awake.
I don't think he ever knew what went on.

One time I wanted two moons
in the sky.
But I needed someone to look up and see
those two moons
because I wanted to hear him
try and convince the others in the village
of what he saw.
I knew it would be funny.
So, I did it.
I wished another moon up!
There it was, across the sky from the old moon.
Along came a man.
Of course I wished him down that open path.
He looked up in the sky.
He had to see that other moon!
One moon for each of his eyes!
He stood looking
up in the sky
a long time.
Then he suspected me, I think.
He looked into the trees
where he thought I might be.
But he could not see me
since I was disguised as the whole night itself!
Sometimes
I wish myself into looking like the whole day,
but this time
I was dressed like the whole night.
Then he said,
“There is something strange
in the sky tonight.”
He said it out loud.
I heard it clearly.
Then he hurried home
and I followed him.

He told the others, "You will not believe this,
but there are ONLY two moons
in the sky tonight."
He had a funny look on his face.
Then, all the others began looking into the woods.
Looking for me, no doubt!
"Only two moons, ha! Who can believe you?
We won't fall for that!" they all said to him.
They were trying to send the trick back at me!
This was clear to me!
So, I quickly wished a third moon up there
in the sky.
They looked up and saw three moons.
They had to see them!
Then one man
said out loud, "Ah, there, look up!
up there!
There is only one moon!
Well, let's go sleep on this
and in the morning
we will try and figure it out."
They all agreed, and went in their houses
to sleep.
I was left standing there
with three moons shining on me.
There were three . . . I was sure of it.

There were two caribou deer
fighting with their antlers.
I was out walking
and heard them crashing
into each other.
“What are you fighting over?” I asked,
“I’m interested.”
Both of them stopped
and turned their antlers toward me!
I figured out which tree to climb
quickly.
From up there I wished their antlers
locked together!
“I think we’re stuck,” one said.
Dust was still flying up
all around
from their fighting
and going into their mouths.
“Well, I’m thirsty
and I’m going to the lily pad lake
to drink.
It’s my favorite place.”
Then he began to walk
toward the lily pad lake.
“Wait!” the other caribou said,
“I want to go to the lake
pine cones
are often floating on!
The water there is sweet and good.”
Then that caribou
began heading toward the pine cone lake.
They were both trying
to drag each other
a different way!
They were getting nowhere.

They made a nice dust-swirl storm again though.

“This dust
is getting us more thirsty!” one said.

It was time
for me to help out,
but not completely.

So, I wished both of their favorite lakes
close to them.

Those caribou were on a small piece of dry land
between two lakes!

Their thirst was growing more, too,
because they were so close to the water now.

Then I appeared in front of them.

“All right, I’ll tell you
what we were fighting about
if you’ll wish us
out of this mess!” one caribou said to me.

I agreed to it.

He said,
“We were fighting about which lake
was best to drink from. That’s what.”

I didn’t believe him
but enjoyed
his quick thinking.

“Sometimes it’s the lake
you are closest to,”

I said.

Then I wished their antlers apart.
As I left, they both were drinking.

Once I wished up a coat
wearing a man inside.
The man was sleeping
and when he woke
the coat was on him!
This was in summer, so many asked him
“Why do you have that coat on?”
“It has me in it!”
he would answer.
He tried to take it off
but I wished his memory shivering with cold
so it wouldn’t want to remember
how to take a coat off.
That way it would stay warm.
I congratulated myself on thinking of that.
Then his friends came,
put coats on,
and slowly showed him how they took coats off.
Even that didn’t work.
Things were getting interesting.
Then his friends
tried to confuse the coat
into thinking it was a man.
“Good morning,” they said to it,
“Did you get
your share of fish?”
and other things too.
Some even invited the coat to gossip.
It got to be late summer
and someone said to the coat
“It is getting colder.
You better go out
and find a coat to wear.”

The coat agreed!

Ha! I was too busy laughing
to stop that dumb coat
from leaving the man it wore
inside.

I didn't care.

I went following the coat.

Things were getting interesting.

There was a man
having much trouble hunting.
Of course I was the cause of his trouble.
If he came upon a deer
I'd make him very clumsy
and he would stumble
or step on a twig.
The deer ran off!
If he came upon a family of pheasants
I'd wish a lynx
leaping right in the middle of them
and they would scatter and fly!
The man grew very confused.
Then, I switched things around.
I made things very easy for him.
If he went out
to hunt deer
I would make the shape of a deer
out of the dust.
Then those dust deer led him to the real deer!
Just up ahead!
See how that worked?
I made pheasants out of leaves
which swirled toward
the real pheasants!
And one time he came upon a trout made of wood
hovering above a lake
he never knew trout lived in!
But he fished there and caught many!
The man knew
it was me doing this for him.
He said, "You are just helping me now
so I will trust you
and you can trick me good later on!"
But I hadn't thought of that.
Until then.

One day I came upon a flock of crows.
They were sitting on snow
and making crow noises.
I could see them clearly on white snow
This gave me an idea.
I wished those crows white,
except for their beaks.
I left the beaks black in color.
Then I called
to them,
“Crows, you are white!”
They looked at each other
and saw it was true.
It so happened
a coyote was out looking
for something to eat.
The coyote was coming their way.
The crows saw him
and said, “Let’s fly up!”
But that
was too easy.
I wished their wings frozen.
They couldn’t fly.
So, they stuck their black beaks
into the snow
so only their white bodies were sticking up.
The whole flock
did this!
And the coyote walked right past them!
Sure, he stopped
and sniffed the air.
He knew those crows were around somewhere
but he couldn’t see them
against the snow.
I bet the crows really thought they were safe then.

But no,
that was too easy.
I wished all the snow around them
melted
and there were those crows
stuck in the ground
by their beaks!
They were still white so were seen clearly now!
The coyote turned around quickly.
He started for them.
But that was too easy
since those crows
were stuck in the ground.
So, I wished a steep hill in front
of the coyote.
The steepest hill around.
Then I called to him,
“You are very old, coyote,
and this might be
the hill you die on
trying to get to those crows!”
He had a decision to make then.
It wasn't easy.
I watched.
The crows waited, stuck by their beaks.
Everyone's heart beat fast.
Finally, the coyote said,
“I'm not hungry enough
to die on this hill,”
and he trotted off.
Then I wished the crows free too.
After all that.

One time
all the noises met.
All the noises in the world
met in one place
and I was there
because they met in my house.
My wife said, "Who sent them?"
I said, "Fox or Rabbit,
yes one of those two.
They're both out for tricking me back today.
Both of them
are mad at me.
Rabbit is mad because I pulled
his brother's ear
and held him up that way.
Then I ate him.
And Fox is mad because he wanted
to do those things first."

"Yes, then it had to be one of them,"
my wife said.

So, all the noises
were there.
These things happen.
Falling-tree noise was there.
Falling-rock noise was there.
Otter-mud-sliding noise was there.
All those noises, and more,
in my house.

"How long do you expect to stay?"
my wife asked them. "We need some sleep!"

They all answered at once!

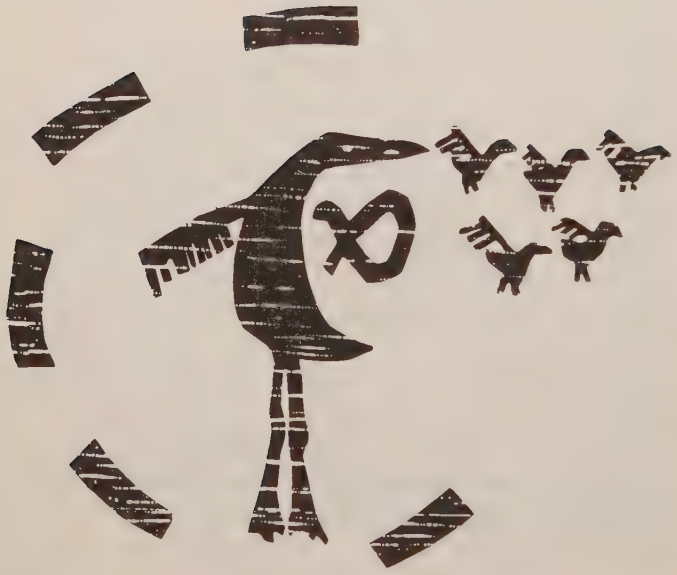
That's why now my wife and I
sometimes can't hear well.
I should have wished them all away
first thing.

One night
a bear was standing in a field.
There was a full moon out.
Suddenly, the hair on top of the bear's head
flew up toward the moon!
I turned away quickly
and pretended to be taking a thorn
out of my foot.
The bear
saw his hair floating in moonlight.
He climbed a tree
and as he got close to his hair
more flew off toward the moon!
I was still taking the thorn out of my foot.
"You took my hair,"
the bear called down to me.
"No, the moon
took it," I answered.
The bear
climbed higher in the tree.
"I wouldn't advise that!" I called,
"That moon
wants you on it!"
The bear climbed higher.
I couldn't help myself.
I wished him floating in the moonlight!
First, I made him rise in the air.
Then I let him down lower.
I did this many times.
I kept working at the thorn in my foot
the whole time.
"O.K. moon, either take me
or let me down!" the bear shouted.
I wished him down.

Then he came running toward me!
He knew it was me tricking him!
I ran. You should have seen me run!
“You sure run quickly
with a thorn
in your foot!” the bear called
after me.

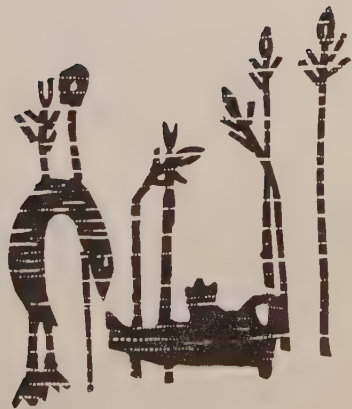
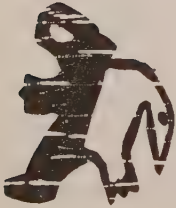
This happened in autumn.
I was looking for something to do
Then I saw a man go out
to gather sticks
for his fire.
Well, he found a good stick
and leaned down
to pick it up.
It flew up and turned into a bird!
When he turned back
to the pile of sticks
he had gathered
they all were flying!
In a circle they flew, high in the air!
Some landed in trees.
Some began singing.
One built a nest
made out of
a bunch of the others!
I was there
and happy my wishing was going so well
This was in autumn, I say again.
Some flocks were leaving
south.
You should have seen the look
on his face
when he saw those sticks flying south too!
Right behind some geese!
Ha!
One more good wish to do next year
on someone else.

“I see you bird bones!
You better get up and back together!
Where are the feathers?
It’s cold and my teeth are rattling
the rest of me.
The ice trees are coming
and the weasel has his snow
all over him already!”
I said this at the beginning of winter.
I found those other bones lying there
and leaped in with them.
Then we went looking for the feathers.
I had my sack of old wishes with me.
Then, we found the feathers.
They were on a little tree
that had no leaves, and trying
to make it fly!
Ha! They thought those twigs were bones!
Then all the feathers leaped on us
and we flew south. This is what happened.
This is how I went to make wishes somewhere else.
I brought my sack of old wishes with me.



BORN TYING KNOTS PERSONAL NAME ORIGINS

To say the name is to begin the story.



AFFILIATIONS with animals are the most common sources of the old ways of naming in Swampy Cree tradition (i.e., those not designated under the auspices of a church). Names may be acquired several ways. A boy called "Loud Lynx," for example, may have inherited the name from a grandfather who said it still had useful powers. Or his parents may have requested an elder or "medicine-seer" to interpret his next dream or vision into a name.¹ In this case, the elder or seer consents, and in the dream or vision a loud lynx indeed appears, and the consequent responsibility for naming the child accordingly is carried out. In either case, the boy lives under the protection and council of the lynx.²

The name "Born Tying Knots" was given because of an incident at birth in which the umbilical cord was knotted around the baby's toes. Subsequently

...he heard his birth
story.

It caused him to begin tying knots again.
He tied things up near his home,
TIGHT, as if everything might float away
in a river.

In this instance one may be led to speculate upon the ways

¹ The dreams, or visions, might not include an animal at all. The name "Turned Over Twice," for instance, came out of a seer's vision of a boy sleeping near a cliff. The boy (in the vision) turned over once, nearing the cliff-edge, then turned back over safely. I never found out if the vision (and, consequently, the name) was in fact oracular.

² I use lynx in the general sense of an animal namesake. Affiliations with specific animals are complex or simple depending on variable cultural factors, including the position and power of that animal in the belief-system of the community.

names affect behavior (or to consider how much any name-origin has a teller's embroidery).

The following account was told in August, 1973, by Yakwama yetum (He is Cautious):

I'd found a good name to fill up with someone. I'll tell you about it. I was standing on a high place, much to the north. I was traveling there, in that northern land. I saw a herd of caribou. They were feeding. There were many, but I picked one out and watched him. Soon, the reason I picked him out became clear to me. He began jerking his head up and down fast. He did this many times. Also he tried to trip one front leg with the other [as if] trying to trip himself! The whole herd was moving slowly. They were walking. But this was not enough moving for him. No, he had to be restless in other ways. I watched him more. Then I went back home. I told some new parents: I have a good, strong name. It is "Restless Caribou." They took the name for their son. This was after I told them the story. That's what happened.

* * *

Two weeks travel on foot, northeast from Lake Winnipeg, along certain stretches of one river here, Echoing River, trees come right down to the rocky banks forming acoustic corridors. You can echo your voice best here. The Cree also call this place Mwoakoopawmikotuskwi, or roughly, "Loon Wind Throat," for the eery vibratos that are sent out among the rocks, air, water and trees. The sound of a duck splashing with its wings as it lifts from the river echoes a long way. So does a moose call, or the human voice.

There's a place near Split Lake named Achewitahotowuk, or "their-horns-are-locked," after a stand of trees

whose branches are intertwined high up. From a distance they look like great racks of antlers.

The whole of the country is in effect an oral map, for the specific place-names should be spoken aloud upon arriving at each one. This way you bring alive what happened, or still happens there. When you arrive at a place and live there in an attentive manner, you see where its name comes from. "Many weathers place," "Place Otters Slide to the Left," and so on.

* * *

In Cree the lynx is called Pi Sew, or Wild Cat. But there is an older name. Sometimes it shows up during the telling of a Wichikapache (trickster) story about a time when only animals and Wichikapache roamed the earth. The language gets older during these stories. Often, when the lynx is mentioned, he is called: "Cat who nightly screams from high trees." Think, if you will, what this name encompasses in terms of the compactness of the Cree language, what specific knowledge it has gathered in, then how this knowledge places the lynx into a larger realm of life. We know it is a cat; we know one of his sounds; we know one time to listen, one place to look for him.

* * *

The personal name-origins translated here were told by Samuel Makidemewabe, a Swampy Cree elder. He lived several places in north-central Manitoba Province. One of the jobs in the community was to chronicle, in stories, how people earned their names, mainly during childhood. The names included here are kuskatchikaos, or "earned" names. Makidemewabe wasn't present for all the incidences from which these names derived. He was right there for some of them. With the others, basic information was brought to

him. These stories, then, illumine every storyteller's option to embellish as long as the necessary core of historical fact is clearly preserved. Every teller knows this about his craft. Some of these people whose names I heard about are still alive. To my knowledge, the youngest is Many Talks, who must be at least eighty. Some of these people I never was introduced to, except through these stories which certainly are intimate in their own ways. Makidemewabe said, "To say the name is to begin the story," which leads us into these name-origins.

TREE OLD WOMAN

She stood close to a tree and wrinkled
her face, TIGHT,
and this was her tree-bark face.
It felt like bark, too, when you ran fingers
over it.

Tree old woman,
even when she was young.

Then her face would smooth out
into a young girl again. Once, after doing
her tree-bark face, she said,
“I *was* a tree and I saw a woodpecker
who wanted my head! That’s why
I smoothed out my face so quickly!”

We looked up in the trees for that woodpecker,
but it wasn’t there. So, our eyes
turned back to her. She was gone too!
We found her in a lake. She was holding on
to some shore reeds
with her legs floating out behind.
She looked up at us WITH THE WRINKLED FACE
OF A FROG! We were certain of it!
Then she smoothed her face out,
saying, “The largest turtle in the world
was swimming for me, thinking I was a frog!
That’s why I smoothed my face out
so quickly!”

We didn’t even look
for that turtle.

This time we kept our eyes on her
as she went to sit
by an old man, the oldest
in the village.
She sat down next to him.

Their two faces were close together,
and hers began
to wrinkle up again.

SAT IN THE CENTER

This boy went out in a snow blizzard
to catch fish. He went out on the swamp ice
and brought his chisel with him
to dig a hole through it.

He went singing.

In summer we could hear that swamp
sing all its birds and frogs together,

BUT THIS WAS IN WINTER.

He was the only one singing.

We heard him dig the hole
in the distance, but could not see this.

It was a chewing sound
his work made. After a while we got worried
he fell in,
or that the snow snakes
curled him away.

Worried we would never again
see him bob up among the wood duck
decoys, **LAUGHING!**

In summer.

He stayed out on the ice
until night. Then we saw his torch-stick fire
moving toward us,
and he came back home to put the fish he caught
on the fire.

Our worrying did not stop there.

He sat with us and watched the fish
thaw and cook.

He sat with us
in the center, shivering.
Then, we heard his laughter thaw out!
That's when our worrying stopped.

RAIN STRAIGHT DOWN

For a long time we thought this boy
loved only things that fell
straight down. He didn't seem to care
about anything else.

We were afraid he could only HEAR
things that fell straight down!

We watched him stand outside
in rain. Later, it was said
he put a tiny pond of rain water
in his wife's ear
while she slept. And leaned over
to listen to it.

I remember he was happiest talking
about all the kinds of rain.

The kind that comes off herons' wings
when they fly up from a lake. I know
he wanted some of that heron rain
for his wife's ear too!

He walked out in spring to watch
the young girls rub wild onion under their eyes
until tears came out.
He knew a name for that rain too.

Sad onion rain.

That rain fell straight down
too, off their faces,
and he saw it.

WHOSE WEAVING MELTED

Even when the coldest day of that winter
waited for her toes and face
she carried two quill needles
outside
and tried to weave a blanket
out of snow. She tried it that way.
Soon she found she had to use her hands
to *pack* the snow together, though,
and packed it on her sled
in the shape of a blanket.

She could not have tried harder
to weave snow.

But when she pulled *that* blanket home
on her sled, and brought it inside
to sleep under, it MELTED
and ended up in soup broth!

Still, she did not want to use
the same things everyone else used
for weaving.

So, later, she gathered some
of her family and friends outside
and tried to weave together
the cold breath steam
you could SEE
coming out of their noses and mouths
into the air.

She went from one person to the other
QUICKLY, trying to weave together

the breaths you could see. It was taking
a long time, and no
one could tell
how it was going! Each piece of weaving-breath
melted too, into the air, and stopped
coming out altogether
once everyone took his nose and mouth
inside.

BORN TYING KNOTS

When he came out, into the world,
the umbilical cord
was around his toes.
This didn't trouble us,
that he was tying knots *that* early.
We untied it.

Later, he heard his birth
story.
It caused him to begin tying knots again.
He tied things up near his home,
TIGHT, as if everything might float away
in a river.

This river came from
a dream he had.

House things were tied up
at night. Shirts, other clothes too,
and a kettle. All those things
were tied to his feet
so they wouldn't float away
in the river he dreamed.
You could walk in
and see this.

Maybe the dream stopped
because it was no longer comfortable
to sleep with shirts tied to him.
Or a kettle.

After the dream stopped,
he quit tying things,

EXCEPT for the one night he tied up
a small fire.
Tied up a small-stick fire!
The fire got loose its own way.

WALKED TOWARD THE LYNX

He knew a lynx has two voices.
There is one that is a growl
and can teach a baby pheasant to fly QUICKLY,
and frightens us too, sometimes.
And one other voice. It is when a lynx
scratches its claws on bark.

This boy would hear that scratching
and walk toward it.

If he *was* a lynx-ear
he could have heard it close up!
Or a whisker.

Which is what he wanted,
I think.

I saw him climb trees where he'd seen
a lynx, and find the place
where the scratch marks were left.
Then he would rub his fingers over them.
One finger at a time, gently,
or all of them at once.
His fingers heard the lynx talk again
that way.

TURTLE WAIT

He always watched
turtles. One lived around here,
the one who caused his name.

At an early age he waited for turtles
to come up on their logs.
Everyone knew this
about him. He'd wait. Wait. And one turtle
would be the last out of the water.
He had moss, mud, sometimes sticks
on his back
and he was a slow one.

Other turtle watchers gave up. But he would
wait until *that* turtle came out
to tell *him* things
and no one else.

So, in that way the turtle
caused his name.
The last one to wait for.

Up on his rock or log.

MANY TALKS

This girl did not give up baskets easily.
She sewed many, and also traded for them
in this village
and all over, in other villages.
The baskets sat in rows on the ground,
each filled with talk. You see,
she put something important to her
in each basket. Something from her life.
Then you could pick one out
for her to talk about,
just by lifting the cover!

That way you let the talk out.

This is how she had many mouths
sitting in rows on the ground.

The time I picked one it had
a catfish skull in it!
She told about catching this fish
who was GRINNING under some rocks
when she caught it.
It was the first fish she ever caught.

She grinned all through
the telling.

WHO ONCE LIVED ALONE

One summer this boy chose to live
by himself. It was never a secret, no, he just
said, "I'm going to live
by the next lake, to the north."
We could tell he had thought about it
a long time. He built a dwelling there.
It had rain fall on it, and had sun fall on it.
And the foxes didn't try to move in,
so, then for certain, it was his home.
He lived there all summer. We seldom heard him,
or knew where he was, except some nights
we knew he was out on the lake
because the loons were quiet.

There also were nights we wondered
how well he was eating, and that's when
we walked to where he lived.

Walked out at night to see
the bending pole. It was a pole
he had stuck in the ground.

This came about because he fished with long
stick poles, and he had stuck one of them
in the ground near his dwelling. After each day's fishing
he bent *that* pole to let us know his luck.
When it was bent low by rocks tied to its string,
we knew
he was catching fish.

When the pole was straight up,
we left fish
for him.

FOLLOWED THE HERON SHADE

She knew two herons flew over
each morning, and sent their shadows
along the ground below them.

Those birds were going
to meet the cool mud
with their feet, in a far place
I still know about. But I don't walk there anymore
because my ankles are too old.

She would wake early and run
after their shadows, trying to keep
in their shade!

This was moving heron shade
she chased
along the ground.

Each time she had to stop at the edge
of a lake, and watch those shadows
float out
and become rafts shaped like herons
on the water.

That's what happened.
Finally, we saw how those herons
were giving us her name.

MANY VOICES

We were out gathering full ripe
berries.

The black ones with spitting seeds
in them. We were gathering those berries.

That's when she made a voice.

Her first one of the day!

It was not her own human voice, BUT IT CAME
OUT OF HER! It was fox-barking noise she made.

I listened hard to make sure.

I heard a fox bark
in that voice. Maybe she was *thinking*
of a fox barking, long ago,
and that thinking CAME OUT LOUD.

If that's the way it worked.

I sat in shade
to listen.

Then there was just the sound
of her picking berries again.

Until her basket filled up.

And belly.

On the way home I heard CRICKET
noises. I heard a cricket

and turned over some stones

to find it. And a stump.

I couldn't find one.

Then I looked

at her. I should have known!

She got quiet as if I had lifted a stone off HER.

When I looked straight at her
she got quiet, yes, because that's how it goes
with a cricket
when its stone is lifted.

ALWAYS SURPRISED

Owls started this.

When this boy went owl looking
it was night. He would hear one
up ahead
and squint his eyes to try and see it.

He tried to catch one
by not making noise.

Then that owl called at him
from BEHIND!
And he jumped.

He only heard owls from behind.

Always fooled by owls,
which was, in later days, the cause
of his name. He got jumpy.
Even if a leaf fell on his shoulder
he jumped, JUMPED as if he was
always being surprised.

Or the first drop
of rain he felt, too,
he'd turn and say
"WHICH OWL SPIT THAT ON ME?"

Even in daylight.

WOKE INTO A HERON

She was tall, you could see her
in the distance before anyone.

Once, in late summer,
she stood so long at the edge
of the swamp
we thought she was ready
to leave with the herons.

You could see her standing
very still.

The day the herons left
she stayed. The next day she woke as a girl
all right, but she began being a HERON!
She took long steps, slowly, as if she was
walking in water, hunting in water.
This is true, and she did this
making heron noises.

AND had thin sticks
tied out from her feet
to make heron tracks.

This went away
the next morning. Everyone
was happy she would no longer
go sleep in the water reeds.

This was the first time we saw someone
do this, so we named her
not to forget it.

SAW THROUGH TO THE BOTTOM

There was a muddy lake no one dared
to fish in. It was close by,
but that didn't matter. Also, it was told
if we drank mud water into us
all we would want to do
is go far away and curl up
on some moss.

That was part of the trouble.

One other story about that lake
was that the giant mud fish
lived in it. And this sounded right, yes,
because we knew a mud fish
spoke out mud
into the water, **OUT OF HIS MOUTH**,
so he would always have a muddy place to swim.

So, this kept us away too.

One night this small girl went to sit
by the mud lake! She had a stick
and a rock, if the mud fish came after
her feet. She sat there a long time.
She stayed all night, and didn't sleep.
Then, she saw through to the bottom
of the lake, **SAW THROUGH THE MUD ON TOP**,
and what she saw were sturgeon
swimming down there.

She told us this.

Some of us believed her and went to catch
those sturgeon. This got known around
and, later, others lost their fear too.
After *our* babies got fat
on sturgeon.

QUIET UNTIL THE THAW

Her name tells of how
it was with her.

The truth is, she did not speak
in winter.

Everyone learned not to
ask her questions in winter,
once this was known about her.

The first winter this happened
we looked in her mouth to see
if something was frozen. Her tongue
maybe, or something else in there.

But after the thaw she spoke again
and told us it was fine for her that way.

So each spring we
looked forward to that.

WHO CALLED THE MUD-PLACES

I'll tell you
he would always be out front
when our families went walking.
He would step in the mud
before anyone else.

Then he would call
back to us, "MUD! MUD!"

And when he found some mud ahead of us
we would lift the new-walking babies
up on our shoulders
so they wouldn't get stuck
in mud.

Then, into the lake LAUGHING!
He washed that mud
off his feet. Sometimes he had
mud all over him!

He called the mud-places
each time we went walking.

So his name got on him
that way.

GOT DIZZY

This name happened
under hawks.
When he was young he stood
facing UP, watching hawks
fly in circles.

Those hawks would hunt in circles
and you could see him turn too,
trying to keep up.

So, then, by doing this
he made a hawk begin circling
inside his head and feet.
BOTH PLACES IN HIM GOT DIZZY!

Sometimes
he fell.

In the morning
when a hawk flew out of a cloud
or tree to hunt, he was waiting.

I believe he loved hawks
to make him dizzy this way.

Later on, he did a shouting game
to try and fool other kinds of birds
and mix them all up
into HAWKS.
He shouted, "Black Crow, turn in circles
in the sky!"

“Woodpecker, turn in circles
on the tree!”

But those other birds
knew what was going on.

TOOK HONEY WITH HIS FACE

He knew how bears got away
with it. He watched one
stick her nose deep in a hive
and get good honey on her face.

He knew this way
from watching.

So he dressed that way too,
with an old bear skin all over him
and mud-leaves on his face and hands
And stuck his face in a hive!

STUCK HIS FACE IN!

Got his feet stung.

But he got honey that way.

No one told him to use the wet
torch-stick smoke
to get out those bees.
No one told him this for a long time.
They liked watching his way
too much!

He took honey that way
a few times.

Then someone told him
how to use smoke.

Or he saw it done
from hiding.

SLAPPED THE WATER

This girl knew pond noises well,
beaver tail-slapping
and the sound of trees falling
into water
because of beavers.
You could find her footprints going
down to the pond, and sometimes see her
listening *in it* through a reed.
She must have heard
other water noises that way.
But I didn't ask.

I didn't ask about that, no,
but once I saw her slap the water
with her hand
and laugh. Later, I looked in her teeth
for bark chips!
Then we both laughed.

I don't think she ever did
any tree chewing though.

I didn't ask.

LISTENED TO BIRDS CRACK OUT

I'll tell what I know
about him.

One time he was there, RIGHT THERE
when a bird egg cracked open
and one came out.
He heard that sound.

Then something
got into him. That sound got into him
and he wanted to hear every bird egg
crack open. EVERY ONE!

So he tried doing that
and ran from nest
to nest. He lay down with his ears
next to duck nests that were
in the reeds. Then he climbed
up to tree nests all over!

People saw him
at many places.

This went on.
He went looking for nest eggs
and later said he heard more
crack open.

He saved the shells
to remember how it went.

EYEBROWS MADE OF CROWS

If you looked hard enough CROWS were there
in those eyebrows that lived
on his forehead. Thick crow eyebrows, yes,
and when this boy yawned
those crows went UP,
then landed back down over his eyes.

When he began to get tired,
to yawn, the crows woke up more.

This happened when he laughed hard too.
One time joking stories were being told,
one after the other. This boy was laughing,
LAUGHING at each one. The crows
were rising and landing all the time
on his forehead. The harder the laughing got,
the higher those crows went.
We got worried they would fly away.
So we put maple-pitch
on those eyebrow crows,
to keep their feet stuck
home.

LARGER EARS

She had large ears, and this seemed
to please her. Even the time a man joked at her ears
and said they were BATS,
she chose to believe it! She said to him, “Yes,
you are right. They are bats!
I’m glad you came to tell me.
And I will send them into your house
THIS VERY NIGHT to hover
and listen over your face!”

This quickly stopped
his joking.

Also, she liked to listen to *large* sounds
with those large ears.
Maybe the two things
went together.
Before storms, she would sit along the edge
of a lake, EVEN AFTER IT BEGAN RAINING,
and listen to thunder.
Sometimes she shouted back
to it, “Louder, I can hardly hear you!”
Even though the rest of us
had our hands over our ears, as we sat
inside our houses.

Listening with our smaller ears.

TURNED WEEPING OVER

One time he came walking into the village
with a mossy-shell turtle
on the top of his head. He could balance things
that way, and it made us laugh.

Anyone who was weeping
and saw him with a basket on the end
of his thumb, or saw him do
some other kind of balancing,
got his weeping turned over by him
into laughing!

That time he walked in
with the mossy-shell turtle on his head,
everyone laughed!

Except the turtle.

That turtle had a straight face.

It was good to have him
in the village, that boy who did tricks
with his thumbs
and had the mossy-shell turtle
on the top of his head.

That one time.

DRIED THINGS OUT

One job she had was to dry fish
with smoke or in the sun,
and did this well. Some of her name
came from that.

Some days you could see her
stand in the water and find things
to dry there, too. Grasshoppers
or dragonflies the wind sent into the lake.

Or, they flew into the water themselves
because they saw clouds and high branches
reflected on the water
and thought they were flying UP
into the sky!

She would pick them up and hold them
in her hand, or put them
on a rock in the sun.
To dry their wings.

She would dry her wet skin, too,
sometimes with a dragonfly
on each knee.

All three drying in the sun.

Some of her name
came from that.

POLLEN LEGGINGS

She rolled in the flower fields.
That's one thing she did.
Sometimes pollen got all over her legs,
and they had the look
of yellow leggings.
LEGGINGS IN SUMMER!
That started us thinking of a name.

When she would come back to the village
one old woman always asked her,
"Do the flowers have pollen yet?"
This girl would sit down on a blanket,
then get up, leaving pollen from her legs
as the answer! It was a game
those two did just among themselves.

That went on, too.

Pollen leggings, yes. We saw the chance
to hear a winter *and* summer thing
in a name.
So we didn't let that pass by.

WHO TAPPED THE FROGS IN

First thing to know is
he was blind
so he walked along the stream
a different way.

He had a long stick and made his way
with it.

Frogs sat along the bank
listening and singing at the same time
until they heard that stick coming near
on the ground. Then each frog
jumped in!

And that's how this boy knew
where the water was, by the sound
those frogs made jumping in.
Now you know.

He followed the stream
out and back.

Keeping his feet dry that way.

All along the edge.

LEANED OVER

One night he tied a moose skull WITH ANTLERS
on his head, and tried to frighten us
with it. He leaned over a cliff above us.
He made loud moose noises! Then we heard
the first stones fall. Everyone scattered.

He had leaned over too far!
We saw him stuck
halfway down the cliff.

On our way to get him we spoke
of how we looked forward
to eating THIS MOOSE STUCK UP THERE,
and how we could almost smell the meat
on the fire.

“Let’s cook it right away!” I heard.

He heard this too, and quickly tried
to get out of the vines
he was stuck in.
We got closer,
saying how hungry we were.

That’s when he shouted LOUD,
in a human voice
this time.
He shouted that he wasn’t a moose.

But we began talking the way
moose talk, in throat echoes.
Grunting, and making moose calls!

He must have thought
the moose of all the lakes
were after him! He shouted, "I'm on
the other, far side of the cliff, moose!"
He tried that.

But we knew
where he was.

We got closer, and he saw us.
But we did not rescue him
right away. We stood talking
about how disappointed we were
THAT HE WASN'T A MOOSE.
How we were tricked.

"Let's go look for moose, then!"
someone said. It was agreed on.

We began to leave, which is when
he began making promises
not to frighten us, from then on.

Then, we got him down
from the cliff.

WHO HEARD SQUIRRELS

He would just stop in the middle
of talking, if he heard
squirrel noises.

And, he knew which tree to wait under
for squirrels. Even if he went out
in the dark
he knew which tree was going to be loud
before the squirrels got there!

I always remember this out loud
to people too: He would stop paddling
out near the center of a fishing lake,
to listen. Quietly. He would say nothing,
just chew on his knuckles
with his teeth
to show me he heard a squirrel.

I knew he wished his knuckles
were walnuts!

That far out in the lake I could hear
the paddles drip water all right,
but no squirrel noises!

But I saw a squirrel wake up
in *his* face, each time this happened.

SAW THE CLOUD LYNX

There was a boy in a village who made
wood stilts. Yes, he saw them made somewhere
and learned how. He spent a long time
knife whittling
and when he was finished
he walked on those stilts to the lake.
Walked around the shallows,
being tall.
Soon, others arrived to hunt fish
and he was UP IN THE AIR pointing out fish
to them.

He walked around with trees
for legs.

While he was up in the air he looked
far off in the distance
and saw a strange thing happen.
He saw a round cloud
grow an ear!
Then, it grew another ear!
He knew the wind did things such as this
to clouds, so he kept it to himself.
At first.

Then those ears
had a face between them.
It was
a lynx face!

The face was blowing toward THE LAKE
WHERE THEY WERE! He knew that giant lynx
would be coming toward them faster

as soon as it got the wind
to grow it legs.

That's when he told the others.

They ran, ha!
All the young ones!

Those wood stilts
stood STRAIGHT UP in mud
until he went back to get them.
After the sky cleared.

CHANGED HIS MIND

One night we were ready to put out the central fire, when he walked up and said, "Watch, I'll put it out with my hands!" We stood back. Then, instead of using his hands he threw some wet leaves on the fire and stomped on it until it was out. Thick smoke went up in front of us, so we did not see him disappear.

The next day we asked him about this, and he just said, "Wet leaves and feet are better for putting fires out."

That was one time.

Later, we had to make a tree bridge across a ravine. Many of us lifted a fallen tree and let it fall again across the ravine. That's when he appeared and said, "Watch, I'll test this bridge by walking across it on my hands!" He walked on his hands to begin with all right, but when he neared the tree he quickly stood up again and ran across it. ON HIS FEET! He didn't look back at us.

The next day we asked him about *this*, and he just seemed sad. He said, "Feet are better for that."

There was another time, too,
when we saw a snapping turtle
sitting on a log. He said, "I'll catch it
with my hands!"
Then, he began wading into the water
toward that turtle. He had his hands ready.
When he got close, the turtle
turned and looked right at him
WITH ITS MOUTH OPEN!
The boy splashed out to dry land, and
ran out saying, "Feet are better for this!"

He walked on his feet
home.



FAR NORTH BEAST
GHOSTS THE CLEARING:
SHORT POEMS



S HORT poems, like the ones translated in this chapter, may be spoken by anyone in a Cree community. Once told, even poems derived from the most personal experiences become community property. This process of assimilation allows for endless variation on an original theme. Thomas John's Bear, a fine Cree teller, told me: "I tell poems to a small pond first. I only tell them in summer. I throw a rock in. The circles go out from where it hits. Then I say, 'Water, you stutter! Water, calm down!' Then I tell a poem to calm it down. Later I bring it to other people and tell it to them. Each of us does it differently."

I heard these poems during conversations, ceremonies, and exchanges of stories in which I participated. The birth songs I heard in homes. They were sung to each child by his or her father, as well as for the benefit of gathered family and friends, who often accompanied the songs with the music of rattles.

Group exchanges of stories tend to involve poems told in the style of the older, much longer tales. Examples of these are the poems beginning "I never saw Wolverine" and "I wanted to travel with the porcupine," both of which feature dialogue, specific episodes, and the long timespans common to tales generally. John Rains once said: "Poems are told all the time. I'll complain one to you"—a statement he followed with:

*I am the poorest one.
I cook bark.
I have bad luck in hunting.
A duck caught my arrow
and used it
for her nest.*

*I am the poorest one.
I sit in mud and weep.
I have bad luck in hunting.
A goose caught my arrow
and broke it
in two.*

*I am old, old.
Don't bring me pity,
but food
yes.*

That far north beast
there, with icicle shag hair
hanging down.
That beast winter sits on.

You'll see him
ghost the clearing.
Snow falls on him, then
snow stops falling
and he's a pile of snow!
Eyes showing through,
ears shivering snow off,
whole body shaking snow,
snow flying around him.
So it snows off him.
So it does.

With you I want to carve
the owl stick.
With your help
we'll carve it.

The crow stick failed.
So what.
The duck stick failed.
So what.

This is different.
This time.

They'll see it fly, owl.
They'll hear it call, owl.
They'll say "Owl stick lives nearby."

And they'll stop gossiping
about those two old ones
always carving, night and day.

You don't believe it?
I'll prove it,
that shadows have thickness!
Here's the spot, out in the sun.

These were brought here
from all over,
in arms, on dog sleds,
flew in the wind too.
All to get here
piled up.

Come on, tell me,
is that a pile of shadows
or not?

Shadow of the blue eggs
in there,
and the nest
and the jay who came
to rob it all.

And that's just one
shadow-story.
It'll take you maybe five days
of your life
to count all the stories
stacked up here.
Better start now.

Skeleton of a bear,
white bones,
went and rolled in some mud.
The mud stuck on
but rain
washed his body away.

Skeleton of a bear,
white bones,
went and rolled in some ashes.
The ashes stuck on
but wind
blew his body away.

Skeleton of a bear,
who weeps for him?

Look at him,
all alone,
white bones
without a coat.

Look at me
living here alone
between two villages.
Why was I born here
between two villages?

Yes,
I visit each village
but I always come back here,
between.
And I know how to weep for those bear bones

in their loneliness.

I know how to weep for those bear bones
in their shivering.

But I'll go on wearing
his old coat that I hunted
over me
these cold nights.

Things that wash up
I live in.
Old dead reeds
wash up
at the edge
of the lake.
I curl up in them.
I live in them awhile.

I can do this.
I've no fear of this.

The shells
that wash up
in the river.
No snails in them.
All cleaned out by the water
tumbling.
I live in them awhile.

Anything.
All things.
Things that wash up
I live in.

So now I go walking
with the sounds of water
in my ears.
Little creek sound.
Swift river sound.
The sound of waves on a lake.
I walk toward them.

Oh wash up new things
for me to live in!

Owl.

Top of the pine owl.

That's not your body below you.

Do you think

your feathers are green needles?

Do you think

your bones are tree wood?

Do you think

a mouse couldn't hear you

miles away

as you came crashing through the forest

chasing after it,

if your body was that whole pine tree?

Owl.

Owl sitting on top of the pine.

Rise up and see!

It's better the way you are.

The goose is frozen in the lake.
I'm going to thaw it out.

The goose was hurt in the wings.
The ice came fast.
The others left without it.
The ice came fast.

I'll build a small fire
by the goose.
Frightened look in its eyes.
See, its neck is stretching
the way the others went.
It's got the south
in its neck,
stretching that way.
But the wings kept it here.
The broken wings.

I'm going to thaw it out.

Old jay, loudmouth of the tree!
Tell me the news.
What's that,
the lightning put a scar
on your tree?
"Crooked lightning, crooked scar!"
you call down
to me.

Old man crooked
from my village
goes walking.
Old man, bent over,
moves his hand
over the scar
on your tree.
Old jay, loudmouth,
tell him the news.
"There's crooked lightning in your back!"
you call down
to him.
Old jay, loudmouth
knows it.

Now we are outside
in spring!

These people who made it
through winter
sit together and talk.
See them!
They have many stories.
They rub their hands
over a fire
and sing "We rub hands.
We rub winter out
of our hands."

Now we are outside
in spring!

These people who made it
through winter
walk together.
See them!
They stop to rub their feet
and put them
on each other's bellies
for the warmth there.
They sing "We rub feet.
We rub winter out
of our feet."

This happens
each spring.

In my illness I saw a man born
out of a hive.

He flew
to work among flowers,
he had wings,
he was invisible sometimes
in the sun,
he did not know my face.
I saw him in my fever.
It was me I saw.

In my illness
gone on another day
I saw a man born
in a nest of rabbits.
He was left alone.
He was shivering in the sight
of many fireflies
in the woods.
The fireflies were the eyes
of floating wolves.
In my illness they were hungry.
In my fever it was me
they looked at.

In my illness
almost gone this day,
I remember these things.

So you came to surprise me
again today, wind!
First you tossed me down.
Then you brought rain in from somewhere
to soak my clothes
drying over a fire
while I slept.
Later you sent the smell
of my good deer liver
to the wasps
in one of your breezes.
They came and settled on it awhile.
Do you think I could get near it?
If I could find your legs I'd tie them.
If I could find your face I'd snap at it.
If I could find your hair I'd hire some lice.
All on this day,
wind!

I bind a long stick
to the shore
of the lake.
It's a long handle to the lake.
It's a long handle to the old spoon.

Lake, hollow spoon
before the rains filled you.
At the beginning
of the world
you were a giant hollow spoon.

Now we need the water.
We use it
in all seasons.
We bathe in it.
We float canoes on it.
We fish through the ice.
We see the moon on it.
All these things to do
in the spoon.

Take a little water
for broth.
Plenty of water for broth.

I bind a long stick
to the shore
of the lake.
It's a long handle to the lake.
It's a long handle to the old spoon.

A small lynx
lost his family.
He went out on his own
and began learning things.
He just set out.

One spring he saw
birds arrive
from the south.
He tasted some.
He learned those tastes.

One summer he nearly
drowned, but he saw his face
a long time
in that lake.
He learned his face then.

One autumn he was as big
as his parents,
and this made him think
about them.
That's how he learned
to remember.

Once, in the cold of winter,
he found an ice bird
who did not move.
That's how he learned weeping,
all down his face,
onto that bird.
He bent over it a long time.

I know his story,

what he learned.
I know it.
I tell it to you.
All these things!
I weep when I tell it.
I am Small Lynx.

I wake and see my wife.
My eyes are all right
another day!
So I go out looking.
I go out looking
for a quiet lake
to fish in.
I go out looking.
But the wind is hard
over all the lakes.
Wind swirling branches
into the water.
Wind howling
and birds trying to fly home
in it.
I go home too.
My eyes are good this day.
I find my way home.

I hear the wind in the far distance.
My ears are good another day!

I see the birds trying hard to get home
My eyes are good another day!

I smell the cooking fire outside.
My nose is good another day!

On this day that I stay home.

I'm in trouble swimming
in my shirt
made of moss.
I'm in big trouble
in this shirt.
The water was too cold.
I wanted to stay warm in my shirt.
The water soaks in!
The moss is drinking.
Stop drinking, moss!

Wait until summer to swim
you told me.

But I didn't listen.

Now I'm in big trouble
going under
in my shirt
made of moss.

If I had such cleverness
I would put thunder
in the ears
of my enemy
and lightning in his eyes
He would not be able
to find the way
to the place I live.

If I had such cleverness
I would tie my enemy
to the tail
of an otter sliding forever
in snow and mud.
No fighting this way.
I'd stay home.

If I knew how,
my sleeping
would be the grunts
of bears.
Those bears would fly out
and find my enemy,
and my enemy
would be stealing their berries.
I wouldn't hear a thing that went on

I'd be sleeping
far away.

The trees are creaking
in the wind.
The truth of it is
I am afraid this night
because it is the hardest wind
of my life.

I want to float out on the lake
in case a tree falls.
I want to fly above
in case it falls.
I want to go and sleep in a cave.
The tree could never
break through the rock
it has for a roof!

All this night
the creaking of trees.

Land of old men
Land of old women
moaning in those trees.

Maybe my own grandparents
in one.

All this night
the creaking of trees,
all through it
I stay awake.

I stay awake.

I am the poorest one.
I cook bark.
I have bad luck in hunting.
A duck caught my arrow
and used it
for her nest.

I am the poorest one.
I sit in mud and weep.
I have bad luck in hunting.
A goose caught my arrow
and broke it
in two.

I am old, old.
Don't bring me pity,
but food
yes.

That man!
That one whose fire
sends up only fog,
lives here.

There!
Fog rising above the trees.
It's him.

There he is, feeding sticks
to his fire.
Fog rises up instead of smoke.
Only his fire does this.

One time I was looking
at the knotholes of trees.
That's what they were,
knotholes.
Then he came along
and built his fire
among those trees.
The fog began rising!
All through the trees.
All around them.
Then the knotholes came out
of the fog at me.
I saw them differently.
Now they were faces.
Faces of seals.
Faces of foxes.
Many animal faces.

I saw those faces
because of him, that man
who causes fog.

Try to catch him,
he builds a fire.

Try to catch him,
the fog gets thick
around him.

Try to catch him,
and he's gone.

He's the one.

I wanted to travel with the porcupine.
He said, "No, you're too thin.
You're like an aspen stick!
The others would laugh at me
and say, '*Gnaw the bark off him
and go on walking.*'"
That's all he had to say to me.

So, I ate all day.
I did this five days.
The first day I got sick,
then I was all right.
And I was fat!

When I saw the porcupine again
he said, "Well, you're fat enough,
but your back is too smooth."
So I tied sticks
all over me.

Then he said, "That's good,
but now you have to learn
to be alone. Go climb up those rocks
and live in a cave some days.
I did that.
I lived alone in there many days and nights.
I talked to myself.
I sang to myself.
I was so lonely I would have
married the first thing
that came into the cave!
Then the porcupine said, "Come out."

For a long time after that
we travelled together.

I never saw Wolverine
but I knew of his cleverness.
I wanted to meet him,
tricky one, clever one.

But every one said,
“He’ll never come and talk with you.”

I tried to figure out
a way.

So, I started saying bad things
about him, rotten things,
all lies.
I said, “Wolverine shits out whole hills.”
The next day my house was covered.

Then I said, “Wolverine sneaks up on people.”
When I got home my wife was gone.

Then I shut up
because everything I said
about him turned true.

Well, one day he showed up.
We spoke at each other.
I said, “You’re rotten.
You’re a thief!”
He said, “Oh don’t be angry.
Let’s be friends. I’ve changed
for the better. I’ll get you a new wife.”

“Will she be fat?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

All this talk confused me.

I almost did not want
to jump on him anymore
and fight.

Suddenly, he threw off his face
and fur skin. It was my wife!

“Wolverine sent me! Ha!” she said.

Then she ran back
into the woods forever.

The truth is
I have mud on my hands
from digging roots

The truth is
I brought them to you

It is the truth
I worked to get them
and complained
while digging them up

The truth is
once I got back here
and saw your face
it didn't matter,

that work

Little snail
curled up

leaving a snail shape
in the blanket

when I lift you

If I popped out of the snow
with ten crows
tied to the top
of my head

you still would not wake

deepest sleeping one
I've ever seen

I'm no owl
don't you believe it

Just because my big
feather face
is so round
looking over yours
when you wake,
don't believe
I'll fly away
in the morning!

There's things I do
There's things I do

in happiness
of your arrival

Today I was out
stooping my shoulders
in the lily-pad water
with moose

O-HA!

so happy
it was all I could think
to do

Crow
sit down
shut up

can't you see
who's sleeping?

It's her
just born and not ready
to hear your crow noises yet

Sit down
shut up

I can't travel
away from you

rolling pine cone

Each time I go to leave
my shoes hide
in your dreams

All the warm nights
sleep in moonlight

keep letting it
go into you

do this
all your life

do this
you will shine outward
in old age

the moon will think
you are
the moon

Wild turkeys
dance
on a mound of earth

and the moles
under them
say
“We know the earth
is loud
with turkeys again”

But you,
not-yet-born,
when I tap my fingers
on the mound over you

do you know who dances?

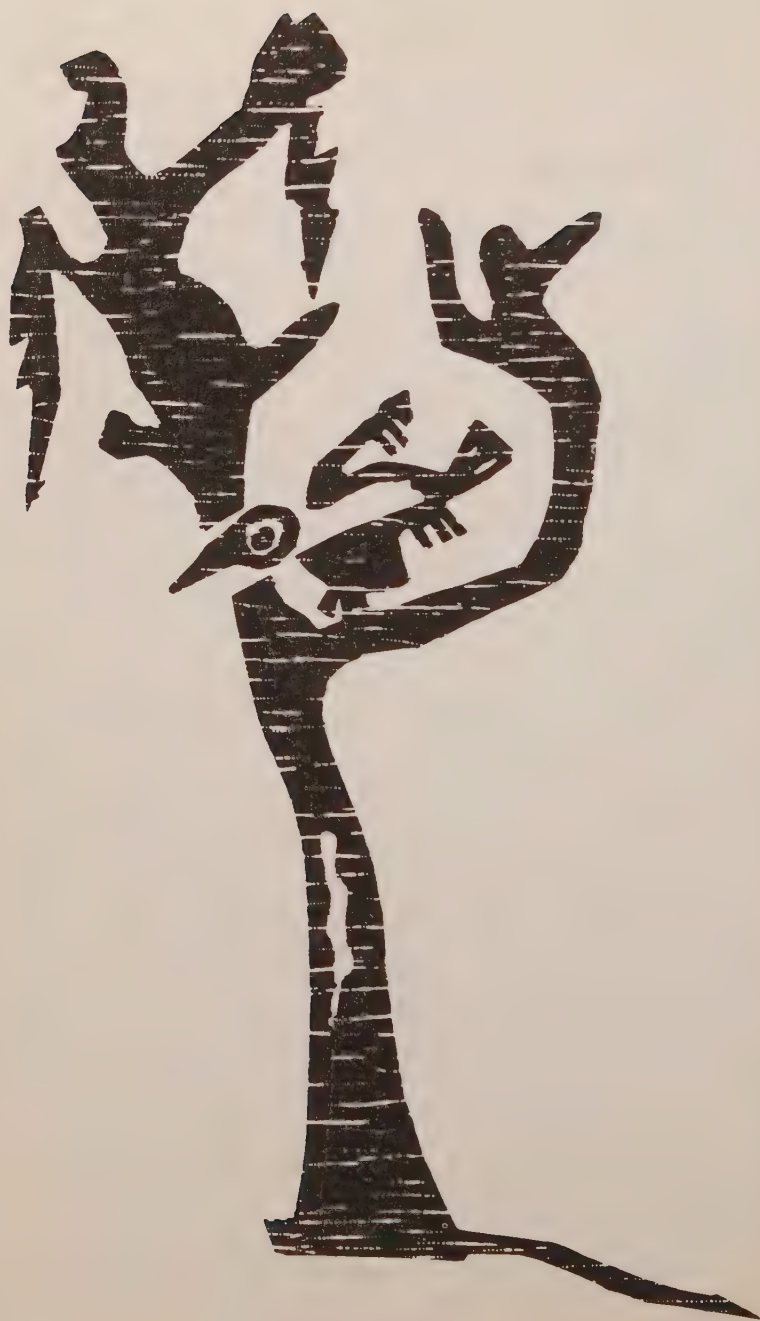
Old turtle
walked this far
to see

Who-woke-up-here

I'll pick you up
to see

Well,
here she is

wrinkled as you are



WICHIKAPACHE GOES
WALKING, WALKING:
A TALE



THE narrative translated here is one of the *atayoh-käwin* (this is more or less precisely a Plains Cree phonetic spelling), or “sacred stories,” concerned with a time when primarily totem ancestors and the Crees’ creator-trickster figure, *Wichikäpache*, roamed the earth. In this tale one can see how *Wichikäpache* continually reaffirms his creator role by shouting phrases such as “I MADE THIS WORLD!” and how other characters do the same by addressing him as “Elder Brother.” It may be generally said that *Wichikäpache* is a powerful character figure among the more eastern Algonquian groups, though certainly he is an omnipresent, illustrious figure having great inventive powers throughout the Algonquian world.

This translation is from a performance by Jacob *Nibènegenesábe*, on July 26, 1969, near Kiskito Lake, Manitoba. The performance was witnessed by about ten persons—all, except for myself, Cree.

In keeping with *Nibènegenesábe*’s style of telling, words spoken loudly are here represented by capital letters, and those spoken softly by italics. Traditionally, *Wichikäpache*’s name is often spoken loudly in tales, twice in a row, reaffirming the fact that a sacred story is in progress. In my translation of *Nibènegenesábe*’s telling, line breaks represent normal pauses in speech. The lines of three spaced periods, which generally follow the phrase He went walking (or a variation on that), indicate a much longer passage of time. These longer pauses, among Cree tellers, are often used for focused, dramatic effect. For instance, after *Wichikäpache*

assigns the weasel who helped him its winter and summer colors, it is said:

Wichikapache

• • •

went walking

“With all Wichikäpache’s walking, I get tired,” Nibènegenesábe stated after the tale. The active performance certainly exhausted many who participated in the listening. Some persons let out deep sighing breaths and slumped their shoulders when the tale was completed. Wichikäpache is always moving, even in sleep:

*In his dream
he went walking.*

Nutoka moo

Usa puyew usu wapiw

WICHIKAPACHE

packed up his few carrying things
and went walking. As he walked, he heard *animal noises*.

Animal noises,
all around.

Then, up ahead, he saw a moose deer
sloshing around in a marsh.

When the moose saw him
it began running.

“Wait a minute,” Wichikapache said, “Little Brother,
don’t run. Let’s talk!”

Let’s talk, yes, that’s what he said.

The moose stopped
and looked at him,
with great suspicion the moose looked at him.
It got quiet.

THE BIRDS STOPPED TALKING.

The squirrels stopped talking.

All the animals watched.

They watched.

Then, Wichikapache said, “Listen,
I’ve got troubles. I weep a lot lately.

My face swells up. Don’t you feel pity for me?
It’s my sorrow I tell you about.”

“What can I do
to help?”
the moose said.

“Just come over here. Over here,
and give me some sympathy,”

Wichikapache said.

The moose approached *carefully*,
but not careful
in its thinking.

“Why
you’re all hot from running,” Wichikapache said.
He touched the moose’s belly.

THEN,
he stabbed the moose
with a knife.
The moose died with this trick in its eyes.
It was Wichikapache’s trick
and it worked.

Well then,
he cut up the moose.
This was done then.
He cut it up into pieces.
He would eat some, and save some.
For later.
He cracked the bones
to get marrow.
Then,
he put the marrow fat inside a bag
made out of the bladder.

It was all done, then.
It was all done in a short time.

Wichikapache went
to the river.
He saw muskrats there.

They were swimming and eating.
He called to them, "Come here!
One of you, I need some help."

One swam over to him.
He said, "Muskrat, I want this marrow fat cooled.
I want it cooled in the water."
He tied the bag of it
to the tail
of the muskrat.
He watched the muskrat swim away,
trailing the bag of marrow.

Out in the water
the muskrat called back to Wichikapache,
"Don't frighten me now!
I know of your tricks.
So,
if you want this fat cooled properly,
leave me alone.
The work will get done."

Wichikapache watched from shore.
Then
he tied a bush to the top of his head,
covered his face with mud
and leaped out!
He shouted "SSSSSSSS AAAAGHH!"
The muskrat's heart flew up into his throat!
The muskrat swam
in circles.
He splashed and cried out
and spilled the marrow fat
It floated on the water.
Wichikapache jumped in

and began lapping it up.
“Men will call this stuff FOAM!”
he said.
“I’ll get back to you later, muskrat.”
Then
he swam to shore.

He went walking.

• • •

It became winter then.
The forest
was covered with snow.
Ahead,
he saw some huts.
Children were playing around them.
He called to one, “Come here Little Brother
I need your help.”
The child came over.
“Tell me,
where is the head man’s hut?
Which one is it?”
The child pointed at one.
Wichikapache went to it and walked in.

The man inside said, “Welcome,
sit down.”
He was given some food.

“Don’t get too comfortable,”
the man said.
“We move around a lot.
We’ve moved four times in the last five days
In fact,
in the morning we’ll move again.”

But
Wichikapache undressed.
He took his clothes off
and hung them
over the fire to dry
from wet snow.
Smoke went into them.
Then
he lay down and fell asleep.

In his dream
he went walking.



In the morning
many ptarmigan flew up into the air!
Wichikapache found himself
lying on snow!
It was freezing cold.
His clothes
hung on the tree.
They looked like shirt
and pants
and coat icicles.
He built a fire under them
to turn them back into clothes.
WICHIKAPACHE ALMOST FROZE TO DEATH!
Those ptarmigan
had moved on!
He forgot he was warned
and got angry.

He shouted, "I MADE THIS WORLD.
I'LL FIND THOSE PTARMIGAN
AND TAKE CARE OF THEM!"

Then
he went walking.



He walked all winter.
Some said they saw him
living in trees,
under the ice,
and once
he poked his head out
of an owl nest.



Then
it was spring.
He was out walking again.
He came upon some young ptarmigan
in their nest.
“What do you go by?”
he asked them.

There was no answer.

“What do you go by, ptarmigan?”
he asked again.

“YOU JUST SAID IT,”
they answered.

“Yes,
but most things
get at least two names,”

Wichikapache said.

“For instance,
BORN OF OLD,
which is me.”

Then

the ptarmigan said, “O.K.
we’re called
FAT MUD FACES.”

“NO!” Wichikapache said,
“You joke me.”

“You’re right,” the ptarmigan said,
“Really
we are called MANY TOAD FEET.”

“No, you still joke me,”
Wichikapache said.

“Very well,
you see through us.
We are called SMALL WINGED STARTLERS,”
the ptarmigan said.

Just then
another group of ptarmigan flew up,
making a lot of noise.
WICHIKAPACHE’S HEART
flew up
into his mouth.
He remembered the muskrat.

“You see now,”
the ptarmigan said,

“in truth
that is what we’re called.”

Wichikapache felt tricked.
and began to think.
His fast breathing
made his heart
join in on the thinking.
Then
he shit on the ptarmigan’s nest.
Now you know
what he was thinking about.

He went walking.



Soon the older ptarmigan came home
to find their young
with shit on their feathers.
All over
the feathers.
The ptarmigan grew angry.
Some of them set out
to find Wichikapache.
They waited for him
by a stream.
“*Talk only to your own stomachs,*”
one said.
“*That way*
Wichikapache won’t hear you.”
They waited.



WICHIKAPACHE

came walking along.

He saw

the stream.

He leaned over to drink.

Then

he stood up

and shouted, "I'LL RUN AT THIS STREAM

FOUR TIMES!

THEN I'LL LEAP ACROSS IT!"

He backed up

and ran toward the stream.

Just before he got to it

he stopped.

The ptarmigan were watching

talking to their stomachs.

They were puzzled.

Well then,

Wichikapache did the same thing

three more times.

Then

he said, "NOW I've done that four times.

NOW

I leap across!"

He tried it,

and fell in.

FELL IN!

and began floating down the stream.

All his carrying things

were lost.

Floating

and tumbling away

they went.

WICHIKAPACHE

managed to get to shore.
He had lost everything.
Shells, meat, everything.
He dove back in the stream
to look for things.

*His things
and whatever else he might find.*

He looked in the stream
all day,
with no luck.

Then,
THEN he saw his things
hanging from a branch.
“AGH!
SOMEONE DID THIS TO ME!”
He got out of the stream.

He walked away from there.



While walking
he came upon a lake.
Ducks
were in it.
“Elder Brother,” one called,
“What is that
you have on your back?”

Wichikapache said,
“The shut-eye dance.”

“Show us then,”
the duck said.

“It’s very difficult,”
Wichikapache said.

“Let us try it at least,”
the duck said.

“All right.”
All right
Wichikapache said.

Then
Wichikapache built a dance lodge.
He gathered
many ducks
to dance.
They were ready.

“You must shut your eyes
for this dance,”
Wichikapache said.
“You must,”
is what he said.

Then
he began to sing.

The ducks danced
with their eyes closed.

Then, THEN And some say it was because
he thought the ducks had taken his clothes.
He began
killing the ducks.
I say
he was hungry too.

That was another thing here.
He killed a lot of them.
But a few had only one eye closed
because they had heard of Wichikapache's tricks
as they danced
these few had only one eye closed.
One of these shouted, "He's killing us!"
Some got away,
the diver duck
and one with a mask on.

WICHIKAPACHE

Wichikapache said, "I didn't have any dance!"
He said
he was hungry
and angry.
But
there was no one left to listen to him.

He began
to cook the ducks.
They were cooking on a fire.
So
he went walking.

• • •

Outside
he ran into a fox.
"Ho! Little Brother,
let's race.
Let's race
and whoever wins
gets to eat all the ducks.
What do you say?"

The fox said, "No, I have
a bad leg.

And
the wind put a knot in my tail,
so I am unbalanced."

"O.K. then," Wichikapache said,
"I'll tie some rocks
to my leg."

"That's fair enough," the fox said.
Fair enough
he said.

WICHIKAPACHE
tied rocks to his leg.
They began racing.
Wichikapache was going slow
because of the rocks.
The fox was limping along
and his tail was flopping from one side
over
to the other,
flopping.
They ran toward a hill,
and each of them
went a different way around it.
As soon as the fox is out of sight,
out of Wichikapache's sight,
he untied the knot in his tail
and ran well again.
He ran straight back to the ducks
racing with his nose
the way there
and quickly ate them.

He ate everything
except for the feet and bills.

Except
for those.

• • •

That night,
it took him until night

Wichikapache arrived there.

He pulled one duck
out of the ashes.

“I cooked him too long,” he said.

He pulled

ALL the duck feet and bills

out of the ashes.

“I COOKED THEM ALL TOO LONG!”

THEN, *then*

he understood.

He called out loud, “I MADE THIS WORLD
FOX,
I’LL FIND YOU!”

He went walking.

Looking.

• • •

And

he found the fox sleeping
and fat.

Wichikapache tried to think what to do.

He thought to himself,

"If I club him

I'll bruise the fur.

And I want it for a carrying pouch.

Well,

I'd better build a fire,

and let smoke go into his nose and mouth."

So

he set fire to sticks
around the fox.

The fox leaped awake!

He was encircled by fire.

"Ha!

You can't escape, fox!

You who ate all my ducks.

You who tricked me

and snuck back

to do some duck eating!"

Then

smoke went up all around.

When it subsided

there was no fox.

He had escaped.

"Where did you go
duck-breath thief?"

Wichikapache shouted.

"WHO DO YOU THINK MADE THIS WORLD?"

He went walking.

• • •

While he was out walking
he came upon some jays.
The jays
were pulling their eyes out
and juggling them.
The eyes flew up
and were caught.
Then
the jays tossed their eyes up
into some bushes.
They shook the bushes
and the eyes
flew back into place
in their faces.

“What’s the reason,
WHAT IS THE REASON FOR THIS?”
Wichikapache asked them.

“We
have headaches,”
one jay said.
“This cures it.”

“Yes?”
Wichikapache said,
“well, then show me how
because I have a bad headache.”

“It’s very difficult,”
a jay said.

“Please
show me.

I have this bad pain in my head.
At least ten woodpeckers are inside it.”

“All right,”
one jay said.
And he gave Wichikapache
four doses of a medicine.
This gave him the power
to pull out his eyes.

Wichikapache
went walking.

• • •

Soon
his headache got worse.
He said, “Awgh!
My head *my head inside it.*
More woodpeckers
got in somehow.”
He stepped into the bushes
and began juggling his eyes.
Then
he tossed his eyes up
into some bushes.
When he shook the bushes
his eyes fell back into place
in his head.
His headache was gone.
It was gone.

He began walking.

• • •

But soon
the headache returned.
It was worse than before.
He said, "Awgh! *woodpeckers.*"
Again he went into the bushes.
Again
he tossed up his eyes.
Again they stuck in the bushes.
All this went as before.
But
when he tugged at the bushes this time
his eyes were gone!
The fox had stolen his eyes.
He didn't know this at first,
WICHIKAPACHE *didn't know who it was.*
He kept tugging at the bushes
all day.
All day he tugged at them.
Now he was blind.

He went walking.

• • •

The fox saw him
and came up
and poked him in the eye sockets!
With a stick
he did that.
HE DID THAT!

"Oh no!"
Wichikapache said,
"I keep running
into low branches."

Then the fox
left him alone.

As he walked on
again he bumped into something.
“Are you a tree?”

“If so
what kind?”
Wichikapache asked.

“I’m a birch,”
was the answer.

“Not the kind I want,”
Wichikapache said.
He walked on.

He bumped into a tree.
“What kind are you?”
he asked it.

“A spruce,”
was the answer.

“Good.
You’re the kind I want.”
Wichikapache
rubbed his hands over the tree
to find spruce resin.
He found it
and put some in his eye sockets.
Those
were his eyes now.

Then he said, "I know it was the fox
who poked me in the eye sockets.
It took me a while to figure it out.
It took me a while.

Now, I'LL FIND YOU, FOX,
AND TAKE CARE OF YOU!"

He began

• • •

walking.

• • •

He walked
a long time.

Finally he heard the sound of a dance.
*He stopped walking to hear it
clearly.*

It was a goose dance.

Sure enough

some people were dressed in goose feathers
and walking around in a squat position.

Making goose noises.

How they looked like geese!

It was the dance of the goose walk.

Just then

Wichikapache saw the head of a deer.

It was lying on the ground.

It had flies on it.

The flies were busy

and Wichikapache admired them for their busyness.

"Little Brothers,

little little brothers," he said,
"I will become a fly now."

"It's difficult,"
one fly said.

"Let me be one," Wichikapache said.

"All right,"
one fly said,
"our Elder Brother
will become a small fly."

"NO!" Wichikapache said,
"A LARGE FLY!"

"No, please be satisfied
with being a small fly,"
one said.

"All right," Wichikapache said.

So
he became a fly.

THEN

quite suddenly he TURNED BACK INTO A HUMAN
SHAPE

and grabbed the whole deer head for himself.

He fastened it
over his own head
and went off.

He went slow because of the weight.
The deer head was over his own.

Again,
so again
he was blind.

Still
he walked along.

He came upon a stream,
tripped
and rolled in.
The water swirled him along.
He went over rocks.

Soon
the people who owned the deer head
went after it.

They saw it floating by in the stream!

One old woman took a heavy club
and went for the deer floating by.
One old man was going to whistle loud
in the deer's ears!
One young man said, "GET THAT DEER FLOATING
BY!"
Wichikapache got out of the stream
but tripped again
and fell against some rocks.
The club woman came running.
The whistling man came running.
But
the deer head had fallen off.
The old woman called out, "Ha!
It's only Wichikapache!"
They all were laughing.

They all laughed hard,
which gave him time to get away.
He went running.



He came upon some geese.
He said, "Little Brothers,
make me a goose!"
"Too difficult," one said.

"No,
do this for me,"
Wichikapache said.

*Do this for me
he said.*

"All right,"
one goose said.

Then
Wichikapache was a goose.
He received these instructions:
"WHENEVER YOU SEE PEOPLE, FLY."

Then they all ate in the lake.
They dove,
tails went up in the air.
They rattled teeth,
and talked.

Then
they flew up into the air.

Wichikapache looked for people.
Just to be difficult.
Just to be contrary he did this.
He saw some.
The other geese worried and fled.
But Wichikapache,
WICHIKAPACHE flew LOWER
and invited arrows into him.
The arrows flew up at him.
WICHIKAPACHE
started doing tricks in the air.
The arrows hit the air around him,
but missed Wichikapache.
Then
with all his twists and turns
he burst the goose skin!
IT BURST!
An old woman looked up
and said, "Ha! It's Wichikapache again!"
They stopped shooting arrows.

Then
he left that place.

He was hungry.

He went walking.

• • •

He was very hungry.

He came upon some skunks
who were carrying out a wrestling match
with their tails.

No, I can't eat skunks, Wichikapache thought to himself.
Then
he said out loud,
"No,
but I'll use them!"

"Ho!
Little Brothers,
how are you?"

When they saw who it was
the skunks kept wrestling.
They wanted no part of him.
They kept busy.

"I don't mean to disturb you,"
Wichikapache said,
"but I've made a big decision.
I want to be a skunk.
You seem to be the best animals.
Let me become a skunk.
I've thought about it."

"It's too difficult,"
one skunk told him.

"No,
I know I can do it,"
Wichikapache said.

A skunk then said,

“You must realize
that you will receive strange reactions
from the others around here.”

“Yes, I know,”
he said.

Yes I know this, Wichikapache said.

Then, THEN Wichikapache
became a skunk.

He walked over to some deer.
The deer plugged their noses
with weeds
but otherwise did nothing.

“Hello deer,”
he said.

“Hello skunk,”
the deer answered.

Then Wichikapache CHANGED BACK,
he changed back into a human shape,
leaped on one deer and killed it.
He had it planned out.

He sat down to eat.

When he was done
he went walking.

Again.

• • •
This time
he came upon a cabin.
A poorly built cabin.
Wichikapache heard howling noises inside.

Howling noises.

He sat down to listen.

The noises went on.

He got curious and approached

the house

he approached.

He looked in

and saw a Windigo

looking in a mirror.

A

Windigo.

Then

he heard the Windigo say

into the mirror,

“I am quite beautiful really.

I’ve been wasting my time.

I’ve wasted my skills,

eating meat all the time.

I’ll throw out my cache of meat!”

Then,

just then,

she threw out her supply of meat.

WICHIKAPACHE RAN,

he ran away.

The Windigo looked back in the mirror

and saw an ugly face,

frightening it was.

A frightening face.
"Wichikapache did this!"

The Windigo went out.
She went after Wichikapache.

• • •

When she caught him,
she said, "Get some sticks,
Wichikapache,
plenty of them."

WICHIKAPACHE

had to do this.

He gathered sticks.

He wept as he did this

because he knew the fire was to be for him.

Sure enough,
the Windigo
was building a cooking fire.

"Go get more sticks.
More!"
the Windigo said.

While he was gathering sticks
Wichikapache saw a weasel.

A weasel, he thought.

"Oh Little Brother,
please
come here,"

Wichikapache said.

“No!
You’ll hurt me,”
the weasel said.

Then Wichikapache wept.
Wept,
wept.
“The thing is,” he said,
“a Windigo
is going to kill me.
Try and do something to her.
If you do,
I’ll fix it so you are beautiful.”

“All right,”
the weasel said.

Then,
the weasel left.

• • •

The weasel went walking.

• • •

The weasel found the Windigo.
It slipped
into her mouth,
crawled down her throat,

and bit her heart!
Her *heart*.

The Windigo called out to Wichikapache,

“Hurry with those sticks.
With all this waiting,
I’ve got a strange feeling inside me.”

So Wichikapache went to her.
The Windigo,
feeling then she was dying,
clawed at Wichikapache.
She grabbed him.
THEY BOTH SCREAMED!
There was
screaming.
But when she died
Wichikapache was the only one still screaming.

The weasel
had done the job well.

“Thanks Little Brother,”
Wichikapache said.
“AND NOW,
now
in winter you will be white,
and your tail
will have a black tip on it.
And in summer
you will be brown
but your tail
will remain black.
Now, I leave.

Wichikapache

• • •

went walking.

• • •

Soon
he saw some people.

In a village there was much fighting,
much arguing
and calling of names.

You see,
there was a young man who wanted a wife.
But he couldn't find a good one.
He disliked all the women he saw.
Also,
he was quite conceited.

THIS,
this interested Wichikapache.
So he turned into a woman.

He turned into a woman.

Now
he was a beautiful woman.
He got a team of wolves
to draw his sled
into the village.
Also,
the wolves then put up his tent.

The young man quickly liked this woman.

“Family,”
the man said,
“please invite her.”

Wichikapache
was invited there.

The mother said,
“My son desires to marry you.”

“Well
I’ll tell you,”
Wichikapache said,
“the very reason I ran from my home
and ended up here
was because so many men wanted
to marry me.
My elder brother got so tired
of men coming around
he finally said, Go Away!”

The old woman said,
“Same with my son.
He went all over
but ended up here
because so many women wanted
to marry him.
He thought he could build a house
and live quietly.
But as you see
it was not true.
It kept going on.”

Well,
finally they met.

They were married
a long time.

Wichikapache was a good wife.
But, after a while,
he wanted to move on.
Before he did he had babies.
They happened to be wolf cubs.
He tied them up
and sent a messenger
to the grandparents.
Then,
in the night,
he left.
The grandparents arrived,
took up the babies,
and said, "These are wolf cubs!"

"Oh no!"
the grandfather cried out,
"that wife was Wichikapache!"

The others laughed
at the husband
because of his wolf children.

"It's really a great thing
that he has these wolf babies,"
one man said.

"Now
this great conceited man
hides nothing.
We know he had Wichikapache
for a wife!
Ha!"

“A man
for a wife!
Ha!”
one other man said.

Everyone
had his own way
of putting it.

The husband went away.
He said to himself,
“I don’t care how good looking she was
that wife.
WICHIKAPACHE
shamed me.”

Now
this man went walking.

• • •

He came upon a cabin.

He heard a woman’s voice inside.

So, he went in
and saw a very round woman.
He said to her, “Round one,
marry me?” *Marry me, he said in an asking voice.*
They got married.

They travelled together,
a long way
they travelled.

Upon arriving back at the man's home
somehow.

somehow

she was no longer very fat.

No longer this way.

WICHIKAPACHE

was waiting for them.

Of course,

Wichikapache.

Wichikapache said,

“What?

you have this beautiful woman

for a wife now?

This woman who is neither too round
or fat?”

Neither one, he saw.

“What about me,

your first wife?”

The man said,

“All right,

go take care of the wolf babies!

Suckle them.

Teeth them on your feet.

Get going!

Go!”

“No!”

Wichikapache said,

“I leave!”

He said this,

laughing to himself.

He went walking.

NOTES TO THE POEMS

OFTEN after a single performance or exchange of stories in Cree communities, talk ensues about the tellings. Everyone joins in. Viewpoints of performers and listeners hold equal weight; they could be called "discussions of craft." It is a good time to gain insight, from a Cree point of view, on the role of a teller. Such things as the quantity of tales remembered, the individual talents in presenting repertoires of gestures and voices, the ability to teach an apprentice tales, the knowledge of previous telling "sessions" (which themselves become told about)—all are commonly spoken of as criteria that determine the teller's efficacy.

One can also approach the teller's role by examining the specifics of an apprenticeship, as well as the seasonal and ceremonial circumstances in which certain stories are told. I've often posed the question to Cree people directly: "What makes a good teller?" Answers were incredibly varied, and in every instance, I received an explicative story in return. They took on the role in order to explain it. For example, this answer from William Smith Smith:

The best story teller is one who lets you live if the weather is bad and you are hungry. I'll talk about this more. One man I knew long ago. He told me stories. He watched animals. He heard about animals and talked about them. Out of the talk came something. Once he sat down with me and said: "This story has something about ice fishing in it. You should know this thing. Maybe it won't be easy to hear, inside the story, but it's there. Too easy to find you might think it was too easy to do." Well, then he told me the story. Sure enough, there was

an important thing in it about ice fishing. I heard it and remembered it. Later, I asked myself: What if a wind blew all the other people away and I was alone? Could I catch fish under the ice just going by what I learned in that story? And a little of what I saw done during ice fishing season? I said to myself: Yes! Then I knew he told a good story. Also, it made me laugh.

A.L. Kroeber has written: "Intelligible description of course is not random itemization but an organized presentation with sufficient elucidation of background and context to make it meaningful in the culture to which it is presented. If a body of information conveyed has significance in the originating culture, it will have some significance in the receiving culture, though not an identical one." The Cree talk about where their narratives come from. They discuss how geography, weather, and personality affect narratives and telling styles. They discuss which of their friends "talk interesting," i.e., give them ideas for stories. They even discuss the success and usefulness of variants of even the oldest motifs. I have heard twenty-minute introductions—full of time, place, related and tangential anecdotes—preceding a five-minute story. This talk is natural and useful. . .

The notes to the translations in this book attempt to illuminate some of the ways the Swampy Cree approach the world, as suggested both by things in the narratives themselves and by related conversations.

I try to make wishes right: Nibènegenesábe considered this the “first” of the narratives, telling it first in any sequence. And the line “but sometimes it doesn’t work” invites the impression that the speaker of the narratives is just beginning to try out this new-found wishing talent.

When the squirrels ask the moles “How do we get down there to get home?” we observe an example of interspecies communication found often in Cree narratives. Sometimes specific zoological facts are explicated. One example occurs in a story having partly to do with the migration of geese. An old goose, one who has flown many migrations, brings a fledgling goose to a hummingbird working in a flower field. The old goose asks the hummingbird: “Please, tell this young one how it is.” The hummingbird tells the young goose: “This is your first wandering south. When you are most tired, think of me *who beats my wings many migrations-worth each day*, even when I am not heading south. Think of me, yes, then go on flying to where you can finally dip your wings in water and rest.”

This is for turtles, that’s why: Bubbles, used here as vehicles for the turtle’s laughter, suggest the idea of consciously sending something out from the body, something animals do in many Cree stories. Furthermore, any part of the body, or any of the senses, can develop independent actions. Phrases such as the following are heard: “I sent my ears out to hear rain, while I stayed inside”; “The wolves sent their ears out, and their ears brought back the (snapped) ankle of a moose. So the wolves left for the moose”; “My nose went into four cooking fires.” In this Wishing Bone narrative it is also said: “Yesterday I was with my toes in the river.” Special focus is put on those parts of the body that have particular relevance to the narrative. (See also the naming-origin “Whose Weaving Melted.”)

One time I wished myself / into a moose deer: This narrative was Nibènegenesábe’s explanation for the naming of a nearby lake, Loon Lake. The phrase “some of the tears left / to look for sad faces / to fall down” is an example of the Cree’s vast vocabulary of animation.

One time I saw / a tree with no animals in it: In another story, the wind is again befriended, this time by a hare who asks it to bring in

snow to cover the hare's tracks, thus making it difficult for Fox to find him.

A snake lost his eyes once: Other instances of "camouflage" are occasionally heard in stories. In one, a wolf "plays" a mound of snow by covering himself with snow. This results in his surprising a deer.

Sure I saw the water monster! The line "I couldn't think straight so thought crooked" reveals an interesting relationship between *thought* and consequence, i.e., "which is how I got to be / a snake / come winding out."

In another Cree story, a bear who is hungrily daydreaming and babbling about food suddenly finds himself fat and in a hibernation cave.

There was a man who was very tired: The image of a huge valley as a hammock is related to the process of naming geographical places. Examples are numerous, and it would be useful to have a physiographic map of the area based entirely on Algonquian place names. Some place names are based on land forms found there, others on events which occurred there, and so on. One example, in a metaphorical vein, is a place in North Manitoba named *Achewita hotowuk* ("Their horns are locked"). This name refers to an area where there are about ten trees whose branches are intertwined, out of separate trunks, high in the air.

Crows are often seen following wolves, partly because they are carrion eaters. But they commonly "tease" wolves, too.

There were two caribou deer: Compare the use of the term "moose deer" in one of the other narratives in this cycle ("One time I wished myself.") Both indicate a form of Cree animal classification. Relationships among animals—how animals are classified, and how flexible those classifications are—is an intricate topic in itself. In one story, for instance, when otters speak underwater to fish they are called "Otter fish"; once back on land, they are called "Otters." Animal classifications extend into areas having to do with totem ancestries. One seldom—except in speaking in a classificatory manner—says the word "Bear" (*Mu skwa*) itself. Instead, the bear is referred to as "old man," or variants thereof.

These narratives were heard and translated between 1967 and 1973, primarily in the area of the Belanger and Cobham rivers.

Tree Old Woman: In this narrative, a girl begins to resemble, in her wrinkling face, whatever she gets close to: a tree, a frog, etc. Mimicry of, or close proximity to, animals can result in a sort of transformation. Another example is found in the naming-origin "Woke into a Heron," in which a girl, after watching and standing near herons, later takes on their characteristics. And in one Wishing Bone narrative ("One day I wished myself"), a man living half his life among frogs begins to resemble one. Again, the actions and physical characteristics of animals are often assimilated into songs and narratives.

Sat in the Center: "Snow snakes," mentioned in this narrative, are those whirls of snow and wind that rush along the surface of the earth.

Rain Straight Down: The phrase "kinds of rain" indicates a kind of metaphor in this narrative. I have seen Cree point to herons dripping water as they rise, and in fact speaking of it in a classificatory sense, as "heron rain."

Whose Weaving Melted: In many narratives, the parts of the body most relevant to the story are singled out, as in this one which contains the phrase "waited for her toes and face," as well as "everyone took his nose and mouth / inside."

Born Tying Knots: This is the only name in this selection given *at* birth. The line "The fire got loose its own way" implies a cognitive action by the fire. In another Cree story, a fire, out on its own, sits on wet leaves. "I can't live here!" it says; "Let me think about this. Over there is a dry place for me to live."

Walked toward the Lynx: The term *Pisewatik* is occasionally used to mean "Wild cat tree," a tree whose roots are used for the cure of cramps and muscle spasms, and/or a tree with the mentioned "scratch marks" of a lynx on it.

Many Talks: In this narrative the girl "grinned all through / the telling." In other words, she took on the "grinning" characteristic of

the catfish about which she spoke. Such animal mimicry would naturally be considered a good dramatic practice, since vocal and facial imitations are effective devices in story performances.

Many Voices: Again in this narrative one can see a definite connection between *thinking* and subsequent events: “. . . Maybe she was *thinking* / of a fox barking, long ago, / and that thinking CAME OUT LOUD.”

Always Surprised: “In these stories, animals can be (directly) involved in names,” Makidemewabe said. That is, animals can be aware of the process of earning a name, as indicated in the first line of this narrative: “Owls started this.”

It is interesting to compare the closing lines of the naming-origin “Followed the Heron Shade”: “Finally, we saw how those herons / were giving us her name.”

Saw through to the Bottom: Note the lines “because we knew a mud fish / spoke out mud / into the water, OUT OF HIS MOUTH, / so he would always have a muddy place to swim.” I have heard only one other Cree narrative in which an animal physiologically created his own environment. In that story, a fish got inside a bubble it blew from its “mouth spit” and travelled through rapids, protected from, and bouncing off, sharp rocks.

NOTES TO THE SHORT POEMS

That far north beast: This poem was told by Joseph Big Sandy, who said he was speaking in it of a Windigo. (See notes to the tale.)

With you I want to carve: Told by Joseph Big Sandy. “Bird sticks” are rattle-sticks used to accompany songs in which curing medicines are requested from certain birds. If the stick works, it may become the bird itself.

You don't believe it? Told by Joseph Big Sandy, who said it came out of an argument. According to him, several men were sitting on a porch when another man came up to them, saying: "I had a rough journey. On my way here I fell over some rocks. Later I fell over some shadow-roots" (i.e., the shadows of thick, surfaced tree roots). An argument ensued among the men as to whether shadows actually have "thickness." Joseph stated: "Later this poem came from me."

Skeleton of a bear: Told by John Rains, who commented: "Many nights I slept under a bear quilt, and thought of the bear. The poem came from that."

Owl; The goose is frozen in the lake; and Old jay, loudmouth of the tree! These three poems were told by Isaac Greys during a very long session of *tellings* near Otter Lake in Manitoba (August, 1967).

Now we are outside: Told by Yakwama Yetum, who said: "This is an old story, told by my grandfather. I tell it each spring."

In my illness . . . : Told by Charles Hoyt Backward Owl, who said it recounts what occurred during an illness accompanied by a high fever.

A small lynx: Told by Small Lynx, a man living (in 1970) near Cormorant Lake, Manitoba. He said he lost his parents at a young age.

The poems *I wake and see my wife; I'm in trouble swimming; If I had such cleverness; The trees are creaking; I am the poorest one; and That man!* were all told by John Rains.

The two poems *I wanted to travel with the porcupine* and *I never saw the Wolverine* were told by Joseph Badfoot Michael.

1. The discussion of names between Wīchikāpāche and the young ptarmigan he encounters deserves comment. Note that, initially, the ptarmigan give several false names. Among many Cree, it is considered improper to ask someone's name directly. A third party may introduce you. Often, if one does ask a name directly, he receives a "joking" answer, if any. In addition, the description of the other ptarmigan flying up and startling Wīchikāpāche, thus validating the name "small winged startlers," illustrates one way in which animals were named.

2. Note the description of an old Cree dance, the "goose dance," in which much goose behavior is mimicked.

3. In other Cree stories I have heard, talk with skunks is often somewhat more "delicate" and humorous than that with most other animals. One can see that Wīchikāpācht, even in his trickery, is a bit patronizing to the skunks, too.

4. The Windigo (there are varied pronunciations of this name throughout the Algonquian world) is a powerful, man-eating giant whose appetite is voracious and seemingly insatiable. There are both male and female Windigos. One of its many frightening attributes is that it is widely considered to have an ice heart. Windigos are completely impervious to cold and wear no clothes, although they occasionally cover themselves with spruce gum. Some say Windigos are most active in winter, others say in months when no snow is on the ground, because then their presence is not given away by tracks. Theories of origin are numerous. Some believe Windigos are misguided, transformed humans born in historical time out of the invention of incredibly cruel, devious shamans. Other Cree assert that Windigos have always lived on earth. Still others believe Windigos represent all those who have died of starvation.

5. After Wīchikāpā́che's transformation into a woman, Nibènegenesábe keeps the male gender active in speaking of him: "He turned into a woman. / Now / *he* was a beautiful woman. / *He* got a team of wolves / to draw his sled."

I inquired about this. Nibènegenesábe explained: "If Wīchikāpā́che turned a (male) animal into a woman animal *forever*, then it would be called 'she.' But Wīchikāpā́che stayed a man (even though) he was a wife and gave birth. It was part of the trick, the scheme. And he knew things would end up the way they did. He knew he would turn back into Wīchikāpā́che again."

WHY OWLS DIE WITH
WINGS OUTSPREAD



In Cree narratives owls are often trouble makers, though occasionally are benevolent, providing unusual gifts of food and good weather to hunt in. Across Cree regions, many tales leading up to the same explanation—Why Owls Die With Wings Outspread—are told. While the differences in these tales may seem few, subtleties which vary from place to place, from telling to telling, may be highly significant to each Cree village. In hearing many such owl tales, the two included here are representative of the general story line told throughout the Cree world.

WHY OWLS DIE WITH WINGS OUTSPREAD, I

In a hunting camp lived Kisewasewinokoko, an old man. He had many moods each day and did not hide them. Sometimes he threw a mood at you and other times he took them out on the ice to throw them around, away from people. It was also known his moods caused various owls.

One person said he saw a mood of Kisewasewinokoko cause a snowy owl out of a clump of snow. This happened up on a branch. The snow clump fell, and before it hit the ground it was an owl which flew away. That is how it went with his moods sometimes.

Another thing to know is one time his mood caused a decoy-mouse to scamper away! It came alive from his mood. That decoy-mouse was out inviting an owl down onto it—an owl from one of Kisewasewinokoko moods.

One time, also, while he was sitting in a cabin, an old woman was sweeping out the ashes from a fireplace. She swept them away down to a clean place, and there was some owl tracks, UNDER THOSE ASHES! It was at that time Kisewasewinokoko was seen walking out the door. . . .

In a nearby camp, Ohokoku the Horned Owl lived. He was a very powerful conjurer of the region. He was a very clever man, but sometimes did things cruel that were not understood by everyone. People said this was because he could not fly, for some reason. Also, in another nearby camp, lived Mukakosip, the old woman hermit. She lived alone now, though she had once lived in Kisewasewinokoko's camp. She had been sent away. . . .

Well, it was one morning Woman Hermit was out cutting wood and gathering twigs. She went about chopping a fallen tree, and wood-chips fell onto the ground. Suddenly she saw one of these chips move aside! She looked closely under it and saw there a Mamakwasew! A small human being orphan! She was very happy to find him and took him back to her matuhgwan. She kept him there a long time, and often said to him, "I have

tied one thing to another by finding you." She said this with much happiness.

He grew up to be a small person. He could stand and put his face to the Woman Hermit's knee, which he liked to do. He was a very small person. He often went to visit Kisewasewinokoko, but no one in his camp wanted to see this orphan. He always visited, but in that village they chased him around and hit him with sticks, and he cried often. Kisewasewinokoko's daughter was the one who disliked the orphan most, she said. She would run to scare him even before he reached the village, though no one knew how she always knew he was about to visit. The orphan told Woman Hermit all these things.

The old woman told the orphan, "You must watch that daughter very closely. When she pees on the ground, you do the same, on that spot!" This he did.

After some time passed, the daughter found she was pregnant! Her family did not understand this. They watched her closely and listened to her sleep for someone's name. They knew she had found a man to marry, but this man lived far away. When she found that her daughter was pregnant, Kisewasewinokoko's wife said to him, "Did any of your mood owls have the face of the man our daughter chose to marry? I thought I saw an owl fly into her matagwan one night!"

"No," he said.

When it was time, the baby was born. No one could tell who the father was, and this caused some anger; it is lucky that everyone in that village could not cause owls from their bad moods, or else they would be on every branch, everywhere. All over. The mother's anger made her forget things. She only kneaded bread with her thumbs some days. Her father's anger again caused some owls, some which flew crooked or upside down.

It was then they sent for all the men in the region. Ohokoku the Horned Owl arrived among them. *He walked there.* Everyone sat down to talk. But no one had asked the orphan to sit down and talk.

The old woman said to him, "Go and sit with them. You should be there, don't worry at what insults they throw at you. Go and sit with them." The orphan arrived there too and sat down. One other man said, "What is he doing here! He better get out!"

But then Kisewasewinokoko said, "No, he lives close by. He had a better chance than many of us to sleep with my daughter." The daughter said then, "GET HIM OUT OF HERE!" Then Kisewasewinokoko said, "He will sit quietly."

Then Kisewasewinokoko picked up the baby and said, "Here is a grandchild. I will pass him around. The baby will pee on the man who is father of this child." So with this the baby was passed around. Everyone watched carefully. Then the baby reached the Horned Owl. The owl rocked it back and forth and held it tightly. Suddenly the owl cried out, "It has peed on my chest!"

With this, the daughter looked as if she was shouting, but only a whisper came out. "I don't know this owl!" she said.

It was then that Kisewasewinokoko said, "I saw the owl spitting all over his own chest! That is your own spit!" Then he took the child from the owl. Then he said, "It is still not known who the father is!"

"What about the orphan?" a man called out.

"He is only a child," Horned Owl said.

"Yes, but he lives nearby," the man said again.

Kisewasewinokoko handed the child to the orphan's lap, and it was then the baby peed there. The orphan said, "Yes, this is the truth of it. This is my child. He knows it is true."

Then the orphan ran out of the matagwan with the baby in his arms. The family and the others all chased him, but he had disappeared in the woods—two small people could hide well there. When they returned from their search, everyone gathered up their belongings to leave. But before they left they stood around the daughter and said to her, "How can this be, how could you seduce a child?" They took off her clothes and burned

them, and left her there with little to eat. . . the orphan and the baby, and Woman Hermit watched all this from hiding.

Quickly then the old woman went back and got some clothes. Then she said to the orphan, "Here, take these things to her. And then bring her back to live with us." He went to the abandoned village and saw the daughter lying on the ground, howling out sob tears. He said, "My grandmother invites you to live with us." Then he led her back to their mataghwán.

On their way back they passed by the Horned Owl who was sitting on a tree stump. "I'll tell you something about your child," he said.

"You are known to be cruel," the girl said. "Why should we listen to you?" They also knew the owl had a few ways to tell things back from the future. "I'll say it out loud then. You don't have to believe it," the owl said.

They listened. The owl said, "One day you will help me. And then you won't see me for a long time. Then your son will be walking and he will find me again!"

That's what the owl said. Then he FLEW away, but they saw he flew with his wings held tight to his body! What a strange thing this was to see. But the three said nothing of it. They had never seen an owl do that. . . . They walked on. . . . They went walking. When they arrived home, the old woman said to the orphan, "Go back to this daughter's old camp and see if there is anything there now. If there is, toss these things into the air."

The orphan went back to the old camp again, and there he found some things! He found a piece of cloth and a length of thread. He tossed them into the air. The cloth became a moose hide, and the thread became a satchel for carrying things. With this, the orphan returned home where the old woman made a coat from the moose hide. She sewed the satchel to it. Then she gave all this to the girl.

The next day, the orphan said to the old woman, "I'm going to sleep. While I'm sleeping, kindly make a mataghwán for me to sweat in." He slept. When he woke, the mataghwán was com-

pleted. The orphan then said to the old woman, "Now I'm going to take the baby inside and sit." Then he said, "I'll be singing in there. When you hear me sing, don't look in at me! I won't harm the baby. He's got to be in there with me right now."

They went inside the mataghwan, and right away he began to sing. The old woman and the daughter stood leaning to hear inside. It was then they heard two voices inside! The singing had stopped, but talking had begun now.

There were two voices talking inside. One was lower than the other, but both got louder.

Then they grew louder still.

The girl was frightened and began to reach to uncover the mataghwan door blanket because she was worried about the baby's ears. "Cover his ears! Who's in there with you?" she shouted into the mataghwan.

"Don't look inside yet!" a voice told her.

Now it happened that the voices were getting closer alike to each other. They were coming from the same place in each throat. Then the girl heard, "Now is the time to uncover us!"

She uncovered the mataghwan. There she saw two young men standing in front of her!

"Which is my husband?" she asked. "Which is my son?" She could not tell.

They were nearly twins, they were both tall and very good to look at. The girl hugged them both. One of these men pointed to the other and said, "He is your husband." It was then the orphan-husband stripped some bark from a nearby birch tree and walked with it to the shore of a lake. He lay it down there and said, "Be a canoe. Now!" It was a canoe then.

"You see, this is what I dreamed I could make happen when I was asleep a while ago," he said.

Then he said to the girl, "If you are to be my wife, we must find some gifts for your parents." They went hunting, and killed a ptarmigan, and also they caught some fish. They made some fat and brought it all to the canoe. Then the orphan and his son got into the canoe and rowed to the new camp of the girl's parents.

When they landed there, they saw the owl was visiting. They saw owl tracks on the ground he had walked over to get there. The old people did not recognize the two men, but the owl did. Because of his conjuring powers, he could see who they were, yes. The owl pointed and said, "That one there is the orphan!"

"No!" the others said, "it can't be true! This is a full-grown man in front of us, not a small person."

"It's true, this is the orphan. He has changed and arrived here with his son," the owl said.

"HIS SON!" the parents cried out. . . . "Our grandson, you mean?" Kisewasewinokoko got ready to throw moods around, but he waited. He at first thought this was all lies.

"Yes," the owl said.

It was then the orphan said to his son, "Bring your grandparents the gifts." The son carried the gifts over and said, "These are sent by the old woman hermit and my mother whom you did not want anymore. . . ." Then he said, "Come back with us to our camp. We have all you need back there."

The owl watched this, then he spoke up, "Before you leave, let's test this orphan. After all, he was once a Mamakwasew, and who knows how he will act in this world now."

The orphan agreed before anyone could argue. "It must be a test of my own choosing," he said.

The owl agreed to this.

The orphan pointed to a particular spot on the ground and said, "Sit here. Be ready with your bow. When you see a deer pass by, aim and try to shoot one for food. They will pass by soon."

Then the orphan stepped into the woods and disappeared. Everyone waited there, and the owl had his bow ready. Soon the deer appeared; one by one they showed themselves. The owl pulled on his bow. He then chose one deer to shoot at. . . this deer he chose was really the orphan in a deer disguise he conjured himself into. He knew the owl still would be able to recognize him, though no one else could. . . So by this he knew the

owl was trying to kill him! He finally learned what he had suspected of the owl.

The owl shot four times and each time missed the deer.

Now the orphan was back again. He said to the owl, "It's your turn now."

With this the owl disappeared. The orphan stood waiting. Soon the deer came by, all in a herd. And the owl, who was then also dressed as a deer, hid in the middle thinking the orphan would not recognize him in there. But the orphan picked him out right away, and shot him. The owl went off wounded in the disguise of a deer. The orphan followed, but the owl deer was gone!

Some days later, when everyone was back in the camp of Woman Hermit, the grandson went walking. He came upon the owl with his wings spread out stiff on the ground. He was nearly dead laying there.

The owl said, "I FLEW here to die."

*—translated from Swampy Cree
as told by Joby Maskunow, near
Family Lake, Manitoba, Canada.*

Kisewasewinokoko means, approximately, "Whose Moods (Passions) Cause Owls."

Mukakosip means "Swamp Duck."

Mamakwasew refers to one of a tribe of people, mostly dwelling in subterranean haunts; also spirits seen mainly on sea or lake rocks, somewhat related in concept to mermen, mermaids. Generally they have certain conjuring abilities.

Mataghwan, a dome lodge.

WHY OWLS DIE WITH WINGS OUTSPREAD, ii

Here is the story:

For some reason, Uskutawin was saying good-bye to the geese many times this year I speak of here. Each of the days they left the akwatukosa kuhikun, they flew off into the distance. And each time at night they circled back and landed by Uskutawin and say things to her. Sometimes they described land to the south she had never seen.

Now this girl became puzzled that the geese were not leaving for the south. It was late in autumn already!

The day before she had closed up a path of turtles by laying across it, as she hoped to enjoy one of them walking one more time over her back . . . but none arrived to do this, because they had long gone into the mud for winter.

She told the geese of this, and they grew angry with her. One goose said, "Of course we know this. You don't need to tell us about winter. We can see the snows approaching from the north when we fly up! We feel it sending us to the south in our insides!"

Each time they returned, and each time a little more ice had formed around the lake, and they had to land and swim further away from the girl because of that. They began to shout between them so their voices could reach. One day the geese left again. They said, "We will visit you again soon." So finally the girl got worried enough to go visit the old woman Asimoak. She was an old woman who lived alone. When the girl arrived at the old woman's mataghwan, she said at first, "Old Asimoak, why do you live alone?"

The old woman said, "This was not always so. Once I lived in a village with others. Then they accused me of sleeping with Ohokoku the owl!"

"Was it so?" said the girl.

The old woman suddenly looked up at the geese flying overhead and shouted, "Why do you wear that disguise?"

The girl did not understand this shouting. From below the geese looked as they always did from below. Then she saw the geese were going to land again and she went to meet them. As she left, the old woman said, "For me, say good-bye to *ten* geese. . . ."

The girl left then to meet the geese. When she arrived she counted the geese and found there were *eleven!* And it was then the owl appeared from among them.

She said, "Why do you fly among geese?"

The owl said, "I was searching for the oldest people. Now I've found them. They are the oldest women."

Then the owl said, "I'll tell you something that will happen to you." The girl listened. "You will one day go to a village, and there the two oldest women will be standing at the edge of the village. You will walk between them and then you will meet your husband. . . ."

The girl was surprised. She did not trust the owl because of his reputation for deceiving people and taking advantage of his powers over them. But also she knew he could do some powerful conjuring. The girl thought the owl wished to sleep with her.

The girl brought all this talk back to the old woman, Asimoak. She told it all to her. The old woman pointed up to the geese leaving, and they both saw there were only ten this time. They knew then the owl had stayed behind. Then the old woman said, "I know the village the owl mentioned. I'll give you a map to it. Here it is."

The girl saw the map had on it only drawings of birch trees, one after the other. Each gathering of birch trees was different. Some were bent, and some had a short tree by a tall one. The old woman then said, "Follow these birch trees, and when you get to two old trees standing just apart from each other, look closely at them."

The girl set out. As she was walking she grew tired. So she lay down on some moss to rest. She fell asleep. She had a dream then. In this dream she was very thirsty, and because of this she began crying out for water. She cried out loudly for water in her

sleep. It was then a Mamakwasew orphan heard her! He had been hiding nearby, and when he heard her cries he brought some water to her. He poured water down her throat into her sleep. Still she didn't wake up! But her cries stopped. Then it was the girl who peed on the ground in her sleep! Seeing this, the orphan did the same, on the same spot. Then he woke the girl up.

She saw him standing there, and she said to him, "It's clear I'm lost."

He said, "Where were you traveling to?"

She said, "To Two-Old-Trees-Place."

"Follow me," he said. "Did the old woman tell you how long this journey might take?"

"How did you know about her?" asked the girl in great surprise.

"Well, you mentioned it in your sleep," he said. "Let's set out."

They set out. It took many months to reach Two-Old-Trees-Place. And by this time the girl was almost ready to have a child! She knew this after a while, but was so puzzled by it she didn't know how to ask anyone. She also was puzzled that the orphan did not seem puzzled at all...!

Finally they saw two old trees. From a distance they were very old birch trees. They were gnarled, their knotholes appeared as the faces of old seals slightly under water. They were very old. When the two travelers got close, they saw the trees were really two old women!

Quickly they walked between these old women trees.

It was then the child was born, a boy. The old women trees helped with this birth. He grew up there, and no one asked who the father was. Everyone thought the father was dead because the owl told them that. Well, one day everyone in this village was remembering among themselves an argument. The argument had been between the old woman hermit and an old man about Ohokoku the owl... .

It went that the old man accused the old woman of sleeping with Ohokoku the owl! He said he didn't want two powerful conjurors in the village.

There was an argument then. The woman said, "No, I did not sleep with the owl." When the owl was asked about it he flew up to a branch and conjured snow all along it to sit in, even though this was in summer.

With that, the old woman said, "You see, he has gone already! He's sitting in winter! He's too far away to ask questions of now!" It was in that way the owl escaped the argument.

So, the village was remembering about this argument. It was then that the son, who was full grown then, said to everyone, "And who do you think my father is?"

The same old man who long ago had accused the old woman of sleeping with Ohokoku the owl spoke up then. He said, "I wasn't going to say anything, but you have asked. It's the owl who is your father!"

"That means you, the son, are a conjuror, too!" another man said. "There are too many now in our village."

The owl, who was present, said, "That's true. You must leave. I am the only conjuror to stay here!"

The young man then said, "Let's find out. We'll have a contest. If I win this contest, the old woman hermit must be allowed to join this village again. And the owl must leave. If the owl wins, we will travel away from here forever. . . ."

This was agreed on. Hearing this, the orphan went into the woods to practice his own conjuring which he had not used in a long time.

Then the contest was talked over. The young man said, "My idea is that you, owl, will wait here with your arrows. Soon some deer will come by and you'll be able to shoot one, if you can. The others will judge how well you do this." The owl agreed.

So the young man went into the woods. Doing this, he passed by the orphan. They spoke to each other. Soon a herd of deer walked in front of the village. The owl took aim. The orphan had conjured a deer hide over the young man who was walking among the deer. Quickly the owl aimed at him! Because of his powers the owl could tell he was not a deer. . . .!

The young man ducked all the owl's arrows, but by this time he

knew the owl was trying to kill him.

The herd of deer walked by, and soon after the young man found the orphan and thanked him. When he again appeared in the village he said to the owl, "Now it's your turn." Then he said, "Owl, you go chase the herd in front of me." The owl quickly did this.

Soon the herd walked by again. The owl, too, had conjured himself into a deer! It was the owl's intention to bounce the arrows off his antlers! But when the young man shot, he hit the owl deer directly! That deer ran, and just before it was out of sight, the young man saw it turn wholly into an owl again and fly off, but wobbly. Then it was gone.

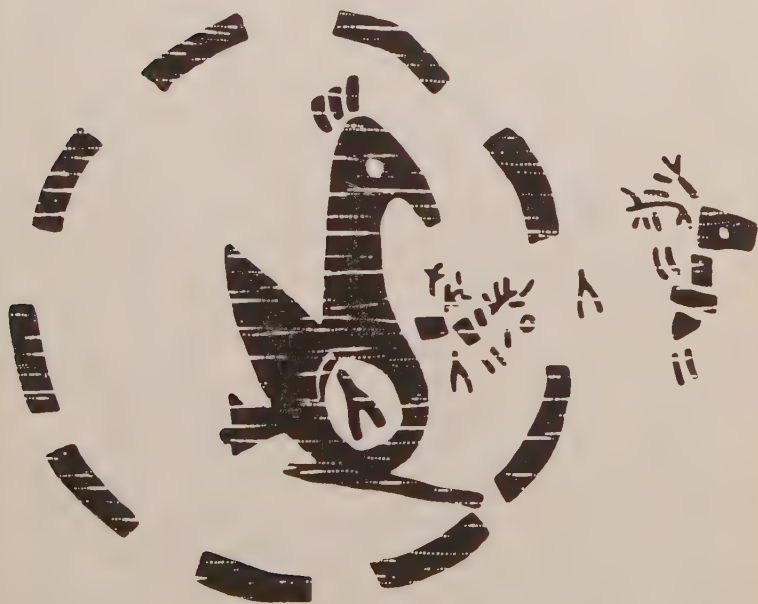
Everyone tried to find that wounded deer, but it was gone. They returned to the village. One man said, "In the morning we'll bring the old woman hermit here to live."

That night the young man went walking. In a field he found the owl laying there almost dead. This owl had just conjured some snow around him and the blood was red on it. The young man asked, "I see you've traveled to winter again. Did you sleep with the old woman hermit, many years ago?"

Then the owl spread his wings out and died.

*—translated from Swampy Cree
as told by Jasper Nutawaskao,
near Cormorant Lake, Mani-
toba, Canada.*

WHO MET THE ICE LYNX
NAMING STORIES OF THE SWAMPY
CREE PEOPLE



Many Swampy Cree stories allow us to hear the use of tipikochiyetim, or "opposite thinking."¹ In "Who Walked to the Fires and Back," for example, a boy with small feet is named Mukikusao (Large Feet), in the hope that his feet might grow into his name. In the same story, another use of opposite thinking occurs on a day without rain, when a jackfish appears in an inland puddle and causes a brush fire. Throughout the story, Mukikusao drinks water in mysterious fluctuations of thirst, dousing near and distant fires as if they are inside him.

A different kind of opposite thinking can be found in an autobiographical narrative of Sarah Greys, a Swampy Cree woman of about eighty years:

My first husband went blind. But I did not feel sorry for him in that he still saw birds. He could describe . . . His descriptions of birds went on to me, and others as well. He talked about them clearly, as if he had been out walking among them that morning. So, you see, it was not as if he saw nothing in his eyes. He often had summer birds in them . . . even during winter. They stayed all year in his eyes . . . and on days of much snow and cold he could talk easily about summer birds.²

I am, by turn, amazed, saddened or solaced by such circumstances. They keep life unpredictable, yet curiously accustom us to the advantages of paradox. The Swampy Cree say stories live in the world and may choose to inhabit people, who then have the option of telling them back out into the world again. This all can form a symbiotic relationship: If people nourish a story properly, it tells

things about life. The same is true with dreams and names.

The young Cree of these stories, unhappy with their original names for various reasons, request new names of their own invention.³ Their resolve is strong. And the culture of their particular villages allows for and initiates their earning of new names. Yet finally, in each instance, a name we have little inkling of surprises us and stays.

—Howard Norman
Cape Sable, Nova Scotia

1. The Swampy's dialect of Cree, in which these stories were heard, is generally spoken from the northcentral regions of Manitoba Province to the northeast of Hudson's Bay, Canada.

2. From *All The Bone Ladles Went To The Lake*, translated by Howard Norman, copyright 1977.

3. This request is usually made to someone who was involved with the original naming. This person might be a shaman or someone who brought the name into the village, described where it came from, and suggested its uses to the parents of the new-born child. The request can also be made to an elder of special importance or to a member of the family.

WHO ROSE QUICKLY FROM ASHES

A man named Wepoostikuk (Burnt Wood) is dead now. Wepoostikuk died when I was young. His grandson lives near here. I heard this story from him and from my father. This man Wepoostikuk had a son named Nisekooku (Wind Horned Owl). Well, one day this boy decided he wanted another name. He thought of a name he liked, one he could live inside. The name he thought of was *Niskepikutao* (Could Sleep In Hot Ashes). He wanted this name because it would indicate his bravery. He believed this. He wanted to change his name to *Niskepikutao*.

He then went to his father, who advised on such matters, and said, "I want to change my name to *Niskepikutao*."

Wepoostikuk said, "No. Your name was dreamed to you, and there seems no reason to change it. Am I right?"

With this, Nisekooku said, "I wish to change my name because I want to let everyone know about my bravery."

"Well, then," said Wepoostikuk, "we will have a contest between your old name and this new name you want. If the old name wins, you must apologize to me and to your old name. If the new name wins, you may own it."

Nisekooku said, "Alright."

Wepoostikuk summoned a large Horned Owl from the woods. The summoning took the whole day. When it was night, the owl arrived. He arrived dressed in a coat of ashes! He was carrying a large bundle of ashes. Ashes flew off him into the air! From every feather they flew off. He also had ashes along his beak, and he looked very happy!

"Hey, what are all those ashes doing there?" asked Nisekooku.

The owl said, "Ashes! I eat them! I carry them with me. I burn wood and make my bed in them. Ashes!"

With this, Nisekooku began thinking hard.

Just then, Wepoostikuk, a wise one, said, "It's time. Each of you build a fire. Then each of you sleep in the hot ashes. The one who sleeps in them the longest wins!"

Nisekooku thought this unfair. He spoke up loud, "BUT THE OWL ALWAYS SLEEPS IN ASHES!"

Wepoostikuk paid him no heed. The two fires were built. After a while, the ashes were there. They both lay down in them. Suddenly Nisekooku leaped up screaming AAAAGGGGHHHH!

Meanwhile, the owl was already into his second dream.

Nisekooku tried once again. Again he leaped up screaming AAAAGGGGHHHH! His clothes were burning. He was on fire! He ran around. Smoke was coming out of him.

Yes, it happened that smoke came out of his clothes.

The owl woke up and saw this. He said to Nisekooku, "What is your name?"

Nisekooku said loudly, "NISEKOOKU!"

With this, the owl conjured up a wind made of the flapping of many owl wings. The man and the boy could feel the strong wind, but they could not see the wings flapping in the woods. This put the fire out of Nisekooku.

Later, he was given a new name. It happened he did get a new name, yes. It was Wuniksawpikao (Who Rose Quick from Ashes). He'll have that name forever.

—This story was told by George Kasimiksew, near Pigeon Lake, Ontario, Canada.

WHO WALKED TO THE FIRES AND BACK

There was a boy named Mukikusao (Large Feet), who got that name when he was born with *small* feet. It was hoped those feet would grow into the name given, but it didn't work. One time some large moose hooves were hung on a pole and asked advice on this problem. But they said nothing, that time.

He had those very small feet, but it didn't matter. He was an excellent walker. He walked all over. He wanted to change his name to Pimituskumipasum (He Walks All Over the Earth). That was the name he wanted. He had outgrown that other name, even though his feet hadn't.

So, he went to ask an elder about changing his name. On his walk to this elder he saw a strange sight. He saw a jackfish start up a brush fire! He saw this! He went running back to the village and shouted, "I saw a brush fire!"

"So what?" one man said to him. "Calm down. Here, sit and squeeze your fists tight to calm down." This he did.

"Now," said the man, "you saw a brush fire. Did you put it out?"

"Oh!" the boy shouted, "I didn't do that! I just ran back here in a hurry."

All of a sudden the boy grew very thirsty, and asked for a drink of water. He drank deeply. Then he and the man ran back to put out the brush fire. But when they arrived at the place, the fire was out. The boy said, "One thing, I saw this fire started by a jackfish!"

The man looked at him in different ways.

Not much was said to the boy that day, but that evening everyone noticed he had a great thirst. He drank much water. He drank a lot of it. One woman said to him, "Why are you drinking so much water?" He said, "I don't know, but I am very thirsty. Pass some water to me."

"Look at him drink water!" the woman said. "Maybe tonight

he should sleep on a raft floating on the lake. In case he gets so thirsty, it will take that much water to satisfy him.”

This began to be discussed.

But that night he slept in the village. The main cooking fire was kept going with wood put on it, so that early in the morning it would be ready. In the night this boy woke up and saw the cooking fire growing huge! It grew upward and to the sides, and it looked interested in the wood huts everyone slept in. The boy was very thirsty as he watched this, and drank much water before going to warn the others. After he drank the water he saw the fire get smaller! He drank more water, and the fire got smaller yet! He saw this happen.

He did not wake anyone to tell them, and he stopped drinking water when the fire was going just strong enough to last the night. He went back to sleep. He dreamed of drinking a whole pond, and when he woke early, the cooking fire was out! He went about starting up the fire before anyone else woke.

The next day he came upon another brush fire. He was out walking to the elder again, and he found another fire. Next to it was a water puddle. This puzzled him, for he had slept outside and knew it had not rained. He began to cup water in his hands to try and put out the fire. Suddenly he felt something large in the puddle. It was a jackfish!

“Jackfish, what are you doing here?” he said. “It’s far from any lake, so how did you get here?”

The jackfish said, “No time to talk now. Drink this water.” The jackfish handed him a bowl of water, which he drank. He then heard a hissing sound, and turned to see the fire going out. He had not thrown any water on it! He turned to ask the jackfish about this, but the jackfish was gone! He heard coughing sounds in the distance.

This happened, it was believed, five times. Then, one time the boy decided to change things. He netted the jackfish in a puddle, and said, “I am tired of putting out fires by drinking water! I’m tired of this. I want to stop it.”

The jackfish said, “Oh, but I had many more planned for you

to find. One in some dry grass tomorrow, and one in some twigs the next day."

"Look," the boy said, "all I want to do is get over to speak to Kospipichew (Who Migrates to the Interior), the elder, about changing my name. But every time I walk out, I find a fire burning, and you in a puddle, and I have to take care of things!"

The jackfish said, "I can't help myself." Then he began coughing. A flock of coughs flew out of him, lifted him up, and the jackfish flew away on them quickly.

The boy saw this.

The next time he went walking, he came upon the jackfish and said to it, "Listen jackfish, cough fish, I will drink away two more fires. The one burning here in this dry grass, and the twig fire you told me about for tomorrow. Just those two. That is all. Then I want to go ask for a new name!"

This was agreed upon. The boy put out the two more fires, and then he made it to see the elder Kospipichew who oversaw the changing of names. Kospipichew had heard about his encounters with the fires, and gave the boy the new name of Maskietochakewaw (Who Walked to the Fires and Back). This name had much walking in it. The boy was happy with that name. Even though we do not hear the jackfish in the name, we know what part he had in the making of it.

*—This story was told by William
Tuskwikak, near the Poplar River
community, Ontario, Canada.*

WHO PADDLED BACKWARD WITH TROUT

There was a young man named Nupukatmakos (Trout Whose Nose is Flattened). It is known that, as a child, he often bumped into things and one time went right into the side of a hut. His nose was wider some days after that. When this happened, he had not yet been given a name. An elder in his village then told about a dream he had in which a clumsy trout kept bumping into rocks, and a log once. Nupukatmakos' parents asked the elder for this dream, and from it the boy was named.

Much time passed. When the boy grew older, he saw his reflection in the water. He saw his nose was not that of a trout, or flat!

He quickly ran to his parents and said, "I do not have a flattened trout nose!"

The father said, "It was from that trout dream. An old man had it once and gave it to you for a name."

Nupukatmakos said, "I want another name."

With this, the boy went out and thought of another name. He decided on the name Nitchamatimao (Who Paddles with Excellence), for he felt paddling a canoe was his best skill. He told his parents, "I'd like the name Nitchamatimao."

His father said, "That man who gave us the name has now travelled away. He's gone now. So, you'll have to ask permission of the lake trout! Go paddle out and find it."

"But how will I know which one it is?" the boy asked.

The father said, "Just put your paddle in the water, out in the lake. Then wait for a trout to bump into it. That will be the clumsy one. When it gets stunned a little from this, lift him into the canoe and ask him permission for a new name. You can practice the paddling name you want on the way."

The boy began happily paddling out. But soon he had great difficulty, because the paddle became very heavy. He lifted it out of the water and saw a beaver had bit onto it! "Give me that paddle . . . it's from an old tree I want for my teeth!" the beaver called.

"No!" Nupkatumakos said, and he flung the beaver back into the lake. But when he looked, the other paddle was gone, being pulled away by another beaver!

Some time later in his paddling, the canoe began going in circles! When the boy stopped paddling, all was fine. But when he began again, the canoe went in circles! He jumped into the water and began pulling the canoe toward the middle of the lake. Then he climbed back in, put the one paddle he had into the water and waited for that trout to bump into it. He also began fishing. He fished some time with no luck. All the while he kept an eye on the paddle, in hopes the trout would bump into it. Then he caught something! He pulled it in after a long struggle, and saw it was the other paddle gnawed into the shape of a trout! It was gasping hard. This was the beaver's doing!

The boy said, "You're not the trout I'm looking for!"

Then the paddle said, "No, I'm not," and swam away.

The boy tried to catch it for proof, so those at home would believe him, but suddenly his paddling skills were poor again and it got away.

There were these things going on, in the middle of that lake.

Then he looked for his one paddle, but it was gone! He heard some beavers laughing on the shore.

He began fishing again, and soon caught a trout. He watched it dive deep, as they do. Finally, the trout began to rise to the surface, but it came right up into the bottom of the canoe! The boy felt it under one foot. Again he jumped into the water, and there he saw the trout he was looking for. The trout was speaking angrily at its tail, saying, "You paddled me into this canoe, tail!" Then the boy ran his fingers along the trout to see if he got splinters, to see if he was being tricked again. But he only got scratched by the gills.

Then he put the trout in the canoe, and climbed in himself. He said to the trout, "I'd like your permission for the name Nitchamatimao. Do I have it?"

The trout said, "Well, I don't know. Let me see you paddle around some."

The boy said, "I have no paddles left!"

"What happened to them?" asked the trout.

"Some beavers got them," he said.

"Well, I'll tow you back," the trout said, "and during that I'll think about all this." The boy tied a rope to the trout's tail, and the trout began pulling the canoe toward shore. As they approached shore, he saw the clumsy trout was leading the canoe toward some dangerous sharp rocks! He heard the trout saying, "Tail, stop that, not that way!"

Still, that's where they were heading. The boy looked around to invent something. It was getting late, toward those rocks. The boy reached into the water and grabbed the trout. He began using it as a paddle! Things were going on fast then, but he remembered to close his ears against the laughing of those beavers on shore. He used the trout to paddle backward, away from the dangerous rocks. They got to shore, and both rested, floating in the shallows. Then the trout said, "I'm going to get into your new name."

After that, the boy had the name of Kwepimikwusamakos (Who Paddled Backward with Trout), from what happened that day.

*—This story was told by George
Wayopete, Gods Lake, Manitoba,
Canada.*

WHO BALANCES WITH SKILL

There was a young girl named Pupatonumakos (Gasping Trout). She lived in the village of Utikosepe (Fawn River). She got her first name there. As a baby, she often made coughing sounds and flopped around in her blankets the way a trout on land does. She thought her crib was grass by the lake.

Her first name was from that.

Often, she made squirrel sounds, too, *chatikut chatiku ch ch ch tttt*. But the other animal, the trout, was her best voice.

When she got older, she said, "I am no longer a gasping trout. I want a new name."

Then she thought about this some days and came up with the new name of Papikikusoin (Who Balances with Skill). She was very fond of balancing things. She often did that. She was happy with this name and took it over to see a man named Papaseutik (Laughing Caribou). He was a leader in the village, and oversaw such things. She said to him, "I'd like to change my name."

He said, "What's the reason for this?"

"Because I am no longer a gasping trout, that's why," she said.

With this, Papaseutik said, "Let me speak to some others, and I'll tell you what they say tomorrow."

She waited then. It became night. During the night a storm arrived, and it rained hard for a long time. Then winds came. She heard those winds outside the hut she was in. She stuck her face outside, and quickly some mud flew into her face! Back inside she went, and tried to sleep. But all the time she heard the mud storm outside.

Then it was morning. She had fallen asleep, and now she woke up. She ran quickly to see Papaseutik. She found him rubbing clean a deer hide, and she said to him, "Well, what did the others say about my new name?"

He went on rubbing.

Again she said, "WHAT DID THE OTHERS SAY ABOUT MY NEW NAME?"

He went on rubbing.

With this she grew very confused. She went over to see Papaseutik's wife. Her name was Twemoostiukao (Who Did Not Cry in the Famine). She was cooking up some fish. The girl said, "Did your husband say anything about my new name?"

But this woman Twemoostiukao went on cooking. She just went about her cooking.

Again the girl said, "DID YOUR HUSBAND SAY ANYTHING ABOUT MY NEW NAME?"

She went about her cooking.

Again the girl grew confused and angry.

So it went, all over the village. There was no answer from anyone she asked. No one heard her! Then she saw they all had mud packed into their ears from the storm! She saw this by how, when the mud dried in their ears, some fell out and left a trail. It was then she realized why they could not hear her. So she went back to Papaseutik and tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped! He was very surprised and he said, "You should call Ho! before coming up on me."

She said nothing.

Then he said, "It is strange, but I have not heard any birds this morning." Still she said nothing.

Then he said, "What new name is it you want? We have decided in favor of a new name, if we agree on it.

Instead of saying anything, she began balancing pieces of wood—twig branches—straight up on her hands. Then she laid down on her back, balanced a twig branch on her forehead, and did a dance with her toes in the air! Papaseutik was quite pleased she was acting this out, and he watched happily. She was trying very hard to show her balancing skills. She tried so hard that, accidentally, one twig poked her in the face! She stopped to rub it. Papaseutik thought she was still in the acting, and was further pleased. He said, "Yes, that's a good name you want, Atepisa-sumik (Who Pokes Her Face)! I'm certain the others will agree to it." Then he went away, laughing.

With this, she grew confused once more. She ran ahead to see Twemoostiukao again. She tapped her on the shoulder and the old woman jumped! When she saw it was the girl, she said, "You

should not frighten me this way. You should call Ho! first, so I know you are arriving."

The girl said nothing.

Then Twemoostiukao said, "It is a strange morning, for I have not heard any birds."

The girl still said nothing. Then Twemoostiukao said, "We have decided in the night that we will favor a new name. Have you decided on one yet?"

Pupatonumakos began to balance twig branches again on her fingers. Twemoostiukao was very pleased and happy to see this Again it happened that the girl was on her back, on the ground, balancing a twig on her forehead. Again it poked her!

Again it happened that the one who watched began laughing. Twemoostiukao began laughing, as she was further pleased. She said, "This is good. You want a name with humor in it! I'll tell the others." With that, she left laughing.

The girl was confused. But it went on in this manner until the mud completely dried and fell out of everyone's ears, and there were thin trails of sand all over the village. It was then she was able to ask for her new name, out loud in words this time. Which she did. That is how it happened.

*—This story was told by George
Kasimiksew, near Pigeon Lake,
Ontario, Canada.*

WHO CAUGHT STUBBORNNESS FROM JAYS

This happened near Papistokaysetuch Lake (Lake of Many Arguing Stumps). How it went was . . .

You know the robber jays? There were some living in a tree. They were loud. As always, they were loud. There was a girl who often went to see them. Her name at the time was Pewipitumos (She Tears Things Up). Each time she saw the jays, she asked them, "You, jays, you ever see me tear things up?"

Well, each time they heard this those jays began arguing into the air. One would say, "Yes, I saw you tear up a tree stump!"

"No, I never did that!" she would call up.

"Then how come you got that name? *Skee-wah-chay-chay!*" one jay mocked her with his call.

Then another jay would scream, "I saw you bite up a feather robe and spit it out! *Skee skee-wah tch tch chay!*"

The girl then said, "No, I never did that. I hate to hear that. You see any feathers stuck in my teeth?"

"Just look," one jay then would say. With this, the girl would look, and each time she found some feathers stuck in her teeth.

"These feathers weren't in there when I arrived!" she'd say. "One of you conjured them between my teeth. Who did it?"

But the jays, altogether, made the whole tree seem to argue.

This made her angry, for she knew they threw lies down at her. She'd shout at them, "I'm going to argue louder than all of you!" Then they all made their noises down at her again. They made so much noise they couldn't hear her, and it looked to them as if she was just moving her mouth. And no words coming out!

One time she said, "There are more of you than I can see!" It must have seemed this way to her, standing under that jay tree.

After talking loud a long time she would arrive home with a sore throat. She talked in an old voice then. Her parents warned her, and her throat warned her, "Don't go argue with those jays."

Don't go argue with those jays.

One morning, she said to her parents, "I want a new name."

Her father said, "Why is that?"

She told him, "Because I no longer tear things up, is why."

Then she said, "I want the name Mechatayutitus (Able to Carry On Many Arguments At Once), which will help me against those jays!

Again, both her parents said, "Find another name. That one will only get your throat in more trouble."

Right away she went back and stood under that tree! She argued at the jays. She went on doing this. There was a stubbornness there, which made her like one of the jays. So she was given the new name Susepwestuwes (Who Caught Stubbornness from Jays).

—This story was told by Enoch Osehewonsaw near Pigeon Lake, Ontario, Canada.

A note on Papistokaysetuch Lake (Lake Of Many Arguing Stumps): Often a beaver, after having gnawed part-way into a particularly difficult tree, might abandon it, if only temporarily. If another beaver comes along, it will seldom start in on the same spot on the tree, but instead will gnaw further up or down on the trunk. If this beaver also abandons the tree, it may look like:



The Cree sometimes talk about "chewing arguments," and call such stumps "arguing stumps." The final toppling of the tree (in this drawing) was obviously made during winter when high snows elevated a beaver up from the ground.

WHO MET THE ICE LYNX

There was a boy named Kwenekepesim (Born During the Frog Month) who was born at that spring time of year, as you hear it in the name.

One day, when he was grown, he went looking for a new name. He wanted his name changed, and went looking for another one. He had travelled a long way, and got caught in a hard snow storm. He was caught in it! He tried to find shelter, but it was a long time before he did. He found a shack, and he went inside. The shack had its door open, and he saw it had a pile of snow in one corner. He shut the door and sat down. The snow fell many days, and the winds kept him from finding his way toward home. The winds kept the direction from him by causing snow snakes. The snow snakes were blown into his face, and then the only thing he could see were those snow snakes taking north with them.

They also took south, east and west after much snow blew up at Kwenekepesim, whenever he went outside.

He had to stay inside the shack.

He grew very hungry, for he was out of food. After many days without food, he said, "I've decided to fast!" So you can see how this hunger was affecting him.

It was at that time Kwenekepesim noticed the snow pile in the corner moving! He saw the snow move, and called out, "What kind of food animal are you? I'm hungry, so speak up!" The snow hunched in the corner again, and stayed quiet.

Then it was clear to Kwenekepesim that what was there in the corner was the ice lynx. That was true. He said, "So it is you making this cold storm outside so you can stay together and not melt!"

"That is true," the ice lynx finally spoke up. Now Kwenekepesim could see its mouth, and he could make out the rest of the ice lynx too. It shook off some snow and said, "Don't kill me Kwenekepesim! I got trapped in here when you shut the door,

and it was too warm so I had to leap into this pile of snow to keep cold!"

"But you have caused this storm outside, and given the four directions to the snow snakes! I'd like to get home," is what Kwenekepesim said then.

The lynx said, "Here is what we can agree upon. If you let me go without harm, I will head north, and then I will stop the storm. And by this, also, you will know again which way north is." So then this was what happened. Kwenekepesim opened the door, and out ran the ice lynx who broke off one whisker as he ran past the door. Kwenekepesim sucked on it for water on his way home. Because of this meeting with the ice lynx, he was named Nuhemuskwepisew (Who Met the Ice Lynx).

—This story was told by Steven Enumwaoosk, Winisk River, Manitoba, Canada.

Snow snakes are those swirls of snow which rush along the surface of the earth. They often have this animate form in Cree tales.

WHO SANG THE GEESE BOTH WAYS

In a winter hunting camp lived a boy named Apewstatayawun (Whose Yawn Takes Up His Whole Face). He did not like this name, since his yawns no longer took up his whole face. As a very small child, he had a thin face, so his yawns seemed bigger then.

But now his face was larger.

He went to see an old man named Awchewosemiskat (Holds a Grudge Against His Leg), who was no longer on speaking terms with his own right leg. This was because of a limp he once had, caused by a fall on some rocks. He said his leg tripped him! He still held a grudge against it, even though he walked fine now! One joke in that village was to give greeting to this leg when you visited Awchewosemiskat. This would anger him, and he would say, "Don't talk to that leg while I'm around!"

But how else could you talk to it? There was much laughing because of this.

So then the boy said, "Awchewosemiskat, you oversee the changing of names, so I've come to ask you for the new name of Kisiskiteskitak (Who Travels Swiftly in Any Weather).

The elder man thought awhile, then said, "Let us see if you can earn this new name."

"I can earn it. Just try me out," the boy said.

Awchewosemiskat said, "Here is a message. Travel to the next hunting camp to the north and sing this to one named Tuminisku (Kicking Goose), who lives there." Then he sang:

The geese are flying *north*

The geese are flying *north*

He sang this in a whisper into the boy's ear.

"But this is the middle of winter!" the boy shouted. "How can the geese be flying *north*?"

"Don't argue," Awchewosemiskat said. "Take this song and travel. It will help you earn a new name."

With this, the boy bundled up in warm traveling clothes and set out. He walked north on his snow shoes, thinking it would not be far. As he walked, he noticed ice cracking up on the rivers he passed. This puzzled him greatly.

He KNEW this was the middle of the winter he walked in.

He decided to practice the song. But also he decided to change the song to what sounded right for singing in winter, for he didn't want to sound foolish. He knew the geese *in winter* lived far to the south. So he changed the song to:

I send greetings
far to the south
to you,
geese

I send greetings
far to the south

He sang this out loud. Just then, he looked up and saw a flock of geese fly in front of the sun! They were flying NORTH! He saw this. There was a ray of sun riding on each goose, and by this he knew they took *summer* north with them.

For certain, the goose flying out front was honking the map NORTH to the others. He heard this.

The day got warmer. He went on traveling, very puzzled about things. He was warm in his traveling clothes, so he took off his coat. But soon he tired of carrying the coat. It grew heavy, and he was walking slowly.

His traveling was not going swiftly.

Finally, he arrived at the hunting camp. He found the man named Tuminisku and sang to him:

I send greetings
far to the south
to you,
geese

I send greetings
far to the south

"Get some sleep," Tuminisku said, "you look very tired."

"I will rest awake," the boy said, "now that I don't have to carry my coat and traveling bundle anymore, for now."

"No, I mean you are tired in the head," said Tuminisku.

"You insult me! Why is that?" asked the boy.

"Look around," said Tuminisku. "Do you see what we are doing here?"

The boy looked around and saw the people taking down their winter camp. They were taking down their winter hunting dwellings. Just then Tuminisku pointed to the sky and shouted, "Greetings, first geese who arrive!"

Then the boy looked up and saw geese in the distance landing to the north. He tried to sleep right away then, very puzzled.

The next morning, when he woke, the boy said to Tuminisku, "I am trying to change my name to Kisiskiteskitak. I am trying to earn this new name. That is why I was sent. That is all I know."

Tuminisku said, "I'll help you earn a new name. Travel farther north to the next camp, and sing this song to a man named Tukakataos (Short Legs), who lives there." Then he sang:

The geese are leaving,
the geese
are flying *south*
the geese are
flying *south*

"But I just saw them flying to the NORTH and landing there!" the boy shouted.

"Don't argue," Tuminisku said. "Now leave on your travels."

On his way, the boy came upon a river which was only half frozen. Also, there was snow on one shore. But there was no snow on the other shore! He sat down, and for some of the day he was afraid to travel farther.

Then he again traveled, and on his way he decided to practice

the song. Again he thought, in order not to sound foolish, he would change it. He believed the geese would already be near the camp he was now heading for. HE KNEW HE SAW THOSE GEESE FLYING NORTH THIS TIME! So, he changed the song to:

Greetings, first geese
arriving

Welcome first geese
Welcome, geese

He sang this out loud. He looked up at some familiar noise, and saw who was making that noise. It was a flock of geese flying SOUTH!

South they flew, and they did not seem puzzled by it.

Finally, he reached the hunting camp. He found the man named Tukakatsao, and sang this to him:

Greetings, first geese
arriving

Welcome, first geese
Welcome, geese

"Why did you sing that?" asked Tukakataos.

"What do you mean? Didn't you see the geese arrive?" the boy asked back.

"Look around," Tukakataos said. "Do you see what we are doing here?"

The boy then saw people were setting up a WINTER camp. They were putting up a winter dwelling, and stuffing moss in its cracks to keep the cold out. And gathering wood for fires.

With this, the boy sat down and told Tukakataos about his travels. He told about them in great detail. He told about wanting to change his name, and how he changed the songs. He also said, "Each time I sang a song, geese flew over."

"In which direction?" asked Tukakataos.

"Both north and south," the boy answered.

"Both ways?" asked Tukakataos

"Yes," said the boy.

"Then that will be your new name," said Tukakatoas. So that is how he received the new name of Nuskewehuniseweta (Who Sang the Geese Both Ways). Then he took his new name back south, to his winter hunting camp, home.

—This story was told by Jacob Sandy, near Winisk, Ontario, Canada.

The **WISHING BONE CYCLE** is a new and expanded edition of Howard Norman's highly acclaimed gathering of Swampy Cree oral narratives. The wishing bone stories included here themselves constitute a cycle of tales in which the narrator takes the role of a trickster figure who uses the wishbone of a snow goose to transform the world and himself into a shifting series of fantastic forms. Along with these, Norman presents a collection of naming stories, a full-blown trickster narrative from the Cree sacred tradition, a series of short Cree poems and songs, and the previously uncollected "Why Owls Die With Wings Outspread" and "Who Met the Ice Lynx."

"...What has been presented as Indian thought—even books such as 'Black Elk Speaks'...represents selective interpretations by the white man. There are exceptions of course, and one of them is a recent collection of songs and tales of the Swampy Cree called THE WISHING BONE CYCLE; they are fresh and amazing, earthy, very funny... (Howard Norman) is content with the pure spare beauty of the event."

—Peter Mattheissen, *Parabola*

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—Gary Snyder

Howard A. Norman has for years lived and traveled extensively in Manitoba and Ontario Provinces, Canada, and into the Northwest Territories. For his work in natural history writing, and in translating from several Algonquian dialects in which he is fluent, Mr. Norman has received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. *The Wishing Bone* was the recipient of the 1978 Harold Morton Landon Fellowship Translation from the Academy of American Poets.

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