

**PRECIOUS LITTLE**

**A Novel**

by © Camille Fouillard

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
A note to the reader .....	vii
Chapter I.....	1
Chapter II .....	4
Chapter III.....	24
Chapter IV.....	33
Chapter V .....	37
Chapter VI .....	49
Chapter VII .....	57
Chapter VIII .....	70
Chapter IX.....	77
Chapter X .....	81
Chapter XI .....	86
Chapter XII .....	103
Chapter XIII .....	110
Chapter XIV .....	118
Chapter XV .....	136
Chapter XVI .....	147
Chapter XVII .....	156
Chapter XVIII .....	164
Chapter XIX .....	170
Chapter XX .....	174
Chapter XXI .....	183
Chapter XXII .....	187
Glossary of Innu words and names .....	198
Bibliography.....	202

## **Abstract**

This novel is an exploration of my participation, as a white French-Canadian woman and educator, in a people's inquiry—an Innu community self-examination after six children died in a house fire in Davis Inlet, Labrador in 1992. It is an attempt to make meaning and learn from my 35 years of living and working with the Innu in various capacities, often from the privileged perspective of an invited guest. The research encompasses reflexive autobiography and creative writing as methods of inquiry (Clandinin 1994, Neilsen et al 2001, Ellis and Bochner 2003, Richardson 2003, Sinner et al 2006, Leavy 2013). The act of writing meshes memories and creativity, interweaving stories and voices, conversations with Innu colleagues and mentors, professors and friends; snippets of letters, emails, journals, photographs and musty files; as well as multiple readings of a wide variety of texts. I explore embodied experiences, thoughts, emotions, intuition, silences, dreams and other uncharted and unarticulated nuances, complexities, layers and territories of my work with the Innu. Postcolonial, Indigenous, feminist and critical race scholars inform investigations of representation and voice—both mine and Innu—within constructs of power, culture, class, race, gender, appropriation, subversion and complicity. I challenge assumptions about research, knowledge, truth, universality, translation, worldview and how these assumptions have failed the Innu (Spivak 1988, hooks 1990, Battiste 2004). The writing is an exercise in decolonizing my mind, of learning to learn from the disenfranchised and practicing a pedagogy of love (Freire 1970). This work responds to a call from Gail Valaskakis (2005) for new Canadian narratives to replace existing ones that pit First Peoples and newcomers against each other. The novel serves as data in support of my research, as well as a representation and report of my findings.

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## **A note to the reader**

This novel is a work of fiction. I wrote this story always thinking of my experiences in Nitassinan with the Innu people. However, while some of the facts are true and geographic place names are real, the incidents and all the characters in this book, including the main character, are products of my imagination. I have known people of the type I describe in the novel, and the main event is similar to one that occurred, but the details are made up. As well, I take great liberties with geography and time, moving events forward and backward and from place to place to suit the narrative.

I know precious little, but I do know that I've been called to bear witness with the Innu to loss and grief, trauma, stories, resistance and joy. Why tell and how to tell? What is it like to tell? This is my story, flawed and incomplete, and only mine—an attempt to make a coherent whole of many separate and disparate bits and pieces, fragments of experiences, emotions, intuitions and knowledge, including the gaps and the unknowable of the Innu world.

I invite the reader to come along with me, to also witness and question everything, to believe my story, or suspend disbelief, to know in a different way, with no answers. I will not claim final authority of this story, nor say with any certainty what it all means.

Finally, for any mistakes I have made in my writing, interpretation, renderings and thoughts, I am deeply sorry.

*Stories are wondrous things, and they are dangerous.*  
~ Thomas King

*Try to feel, in your heart's core, the reality of others. This is the most painful thing in the world, probably, and the most necessary.*  
~ Margaret Lawrence

*It is true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, that it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are ... The reward of storytelling is to be able to let go. When the storyteller is loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence. To let go is an act of reconciliation.*  
~ Hannah Arendt

*White people use different words, and it is hard to understand them. It is the same with the true Innu people. They speak hard Innu words, and some people don't understand them.*

~ Kaniuekutat



## Precious little

We need your help.

No 'hello' or 'how are you?' but I know who it is.

I highly doubt that, I respond, the calm of my morning coffee and bagel ruffled. I cradle the phone against my shoulder and wrap my cardigan tighter around my pyjamas. I imagine Manish sitting at her own kitchen table at home, a white abandoned construction crew trailer.

We're doing a people's inquiry. We want you to lead it, she says.

A 'people's inquiry.' Doesn't sound very Innu. Oh, and not a chance.

It's about the house fire and the kids dying.

I stop chewing. A wave of sadness engulfs me. I resurface and lean into the phone; I've heard the change in Manish's voice, constricted, diminished.

Honestly, this sounds like a good idea, I say. But I'm not your person.

The sky outside my window looking over the St. John's harbour is thick with steely grey clouds.

You *are* the person we need.

Need? I say, my brow knitting. How are your kids? Since the fire?

A faint echo of my voice scratches back to me over the phone line.

Bad.

I imagine breakfast with her three kids, huddled on the couch watching Sesame Street, slurping their milk and Fruit Loops.

Don't change the subject, she adds.

I've been thinking a lot about all of you.

When I'd first heard the news about the fire on the radio just before dawn, I'd closed my eyes in a veil of tears and lay awake. Michael was away and the bed vast and bereft. Eventually I'd gone down to the kitchen, boiled the kettle for a cup of coffee, stared at the stain at the bottom of my cup. I drank my coffee, watching the light of the rising sun, dulled by grey clouds, meshing with the grey rock and gray buildings and fading snow. I'd called Manish later that morning, but she couldn't talk.

She still can't talk about it.

So, will you do this? Manish asks again.

Do I really need to remind you about what happened the last time I came up your way to work? The land claims meetings?

What?

Mostly nothing, remember? Did you even come?

It wasn't about you. Don't take it personally.

Well when Bay Street Bob showed up, abracadabra, people got real interested. Maybe I just need a law degree. Or a penis?

Manish's laugh explodes on the other end of the line.

We're interested this time. Honest, she says.

Come on! The only interest I got was when I was heading home, walking to the airstrip. Suddenly there were 3 ATV's lining up, Tanien, Tapit and Tshani, all offering me a ride to make damn sure I didn't miss my plane.

Manish laughs again, a girlish giggle.

Well you can be a pain in the ass. Plus, you never give up, she says.

Trying to butter me up?

We really want you.

I don't know.

Seriously, we got turned down by the feds. We have to do our own inquiry. You'd work with a team of Innu.

Well even if *you* might think I'm the right person, what about the *guys*?

Your name is the only one that's come up. You always say we need to give people a voice, and how we should hold meetings to find out what people want. Now's your big chance.

A silence stretches out between us.

The guys are all on good behaviour too, she adds. No booze charters, I promise.

As if she could even follow through on such a promise.

*Nikaun*, I hear a faraway child. Manish is being summoned.

I'll take you hunting, she adds.

Let me think about it.

Later that night, I call Manish back.

I'll work with you, I say, but I ain't leading nothing.

## II.

Buckle your seat belt...if you have one, the copilot shouts from the cockpit of the red Twin Otter just before takeoff. I sit alert, immersed in the stink of fuel and cigarette smoke. It's been a week since the phone call, and I'm headed to Utshimassits, wearing my sealskin boots, shiny black and waterproof leather. An Inuit elder from Nain had chewed the leather to soften it into gathers at the toes. At first I was a skeptic, and I'd jumped into puddles to test them.

Heat blasts at my toasty dry feet now, but a draft escapes from the frosted window. I shiver, a chill persisting despite my snow pants, down jacket, long woolen underwear, hat and mitts. All around me passengers sit packed in down parkas sporting hoods trimmed with fox or wolf tails. The plane's interior is grey painted metal and cigarette butts litter the floor. The seats look like movie directors' chairs, vinyl fabric wrapped around metal frames. Cargo occupies some seats, strapped in and blocking windows.

I can feel everyone's glance pause on me. A few say hello and smile. I smile back, enjoying the banter in *Innu-aimun*, peppered with laughter and the odd cough. I'd like to know the scuttlebutt. A couple of women sit tête-a-tête in the front seat, bright-eyed toddlers propped on their knees, the two cuffing and pawing at each other like puppies. There's Maniaten who spent the year in St. John's getting her teacher's certificate. I'd taken her to a huge bingo in Pleasantville and she kept shushing me, leaning over onto my cards to stamp a number I'd missed. Just across the aisle from me is Toni, greasy hair

falling into his eyes, and a fancy down jacket. I'm pretty sure he's making a little side money, spying for the military, or CSIS. They must be giving him cash for his efforts, unlike my Sheshatshiu friend Etuet who used to get mickeys of rum for his indiscretions.

And Emma is sitting just in front of Toni. She's a member of the health council, the first Innu nurse who as a single mom took her five kids and travelled to North Bay to study for her diploma. The Newfoundland government won't recognize her credentials even if every other province does. Same thing happened with the tribal police who got their training in BC. Fortunately the Band hired the lot of them anyway.

Shusi sits a couple of rows ahead of me, across the aisle. She'd stayed at my house when she was about to pop her last baby. She was in jail and they'd released her early because she was so pregnant and she couldn't fly home. I took her to the hospital when she went into labour in the middle of the night. The baby was huge and breech. She'd almost broken my hand, grasping so tightly as the doctor made the caesarean cut. Something had gone wrong on the other side of the screen they'd set up so we couldn't see the procedure.

You need to leave, the doctor had said. Right now.

The doctor said you have to go, the nurse echoed.

But Shusi had kept her grip on me, squeezing my hand so I could barely contain a scream, and I'd stayed, and the baby was dimpled and perfect with a full head of hair standing straight on end. Two days later the social worker came to fetch the baby and Shusi had gone home alone. For seven months, no one in the penitentiary had talked to her about what she might do to be able to keep her baby.

Shusi smiles my way now, her hand fluttering a wee wave.

I'm relieved to be gone from St. John's, having bowed out of a contract—the task of mediating simmering politics among the women's center staff. A sure case of post-pseudo-feminist-collective-syndrome. And saying goodbye to Michael wasn't hard with his chronic 'am I the bad guy?' or 'have I become unattractive?' Yet still patting himself on the back for doing dishes, making coffee, folding laundry, as if he's doing me a favour. And lately he's been all doom and gloom, a dark ominous cloud hanging overhead (my head), insisting that the government is going to call for a moratorium on the cod fishery. Like it was a personal affront. He claims before the end of this year! I know he works for the union but is that even possible? We love each other. We're just not very good at it.

I'm happy for the break, even with a little Jiminy Cricket whispering on the edge of my consciousness: do you know what you're doing? Are you sure about this?

The plane begins to move, snow-clouds erupt behind the propellers as it turns towards the runway, rambles over to one end, turns again, accelerates, and takes off into a brilliant blue sky.

The first time I visited Davis Inlet—Utshimassits to the Innu—was when Manish invited me to lead a workshop on women's health. About ten years ago. We'd met at a conference in Nain. I loved her face, the freckles across her nose and high cheek bones, an impish smile of even teeth between full lips, searching and intelligent eyes, long thick black hair, a handy laugh, her ease with white people. *Kakeshau* is the word for white people, she'd told me, eager to teach me her language. I sat with her and elders Anpinamen and Manipia, honing in on the three who were like sisters, heads hunched

together, talking *Innu-aimun*, a song whose rhythm and intonation I'd never heard, and laughing their infectious Innu laugh.

Come visit us, Manish had said, and so I did. What I remember of the workshop was Manish struggling to translate for the group.

We don't have a word for 'health' in our language.

I wondered what else didn't translate, what else I didn't know, couldn't know. And a flash of things I needed to unknow: like the things I'd heard the previous weekend at Tim's dinner party in Goose Bay.

You're going to Davis Inlet? Tim had asked. By yourself? Be careful. Don't go out at night.

Yeah, I've been invited to meet with the women. I think I'll be okay.

So you know those Davis Inlet Indians were given houses? Tim's girlfriend Liz had jumped in. Free houses. Built by government. Our taxes.

Your point is? I asked.

I knew where this was going.

I heard when they first got houses they started dismantling the insides, she said. Two-by-four by two-by-four, wall by wall, for wood to burn in their stoves.

She pulled her hair behind her ear, seemed pleased with the image she'd just drawn.

I think that story is urban legend, I'd said. Without the urban.

No no, it's true. They're still getting houses now, and apparently that's not enough.

I thought they got houses because of Churchill Falls, I said. It wouldn't look good to have people drowning when Meshikamau was flooded.

I'd read about all this in the Native People's Support Group newsletter.

I'm so sick of all the complaining, the constant negativity, Liz said. She'd removed the gloves by then, her eyes afire. Like my going to Utshimassits was some kind of personal affront.

There's no pleasing those people, she continued. It is the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you know. We all have challenges; it's called life. At what point does the government say 'enough?'

What's your solution then? I'd asked, looking up at Tim choosing to stay out of it, fervently chopping his celery.

And this talk about abuse from priests and teachers. Lickings—we called it discipline. Back in the day, it was common. And sexual abuse. Give me a break. The teachers and priests in my life taught me respect and morals.

Why would they make up those stories? I asked, about to quietly pop a blood vessel. It's time Tim said something.

Money, all they want is money, Liz continued. They have to stop living in the past. And their talk about 'stolen lands.' What happened to conquered lands? 'They're not a part of Canada.' What a pile of crap!

When were they conquered? I asked, trying to keep my voice innocent, regain some composure. And they never signed any treaty. How'd you like it if a bunch of Innu walked into your house, or set up their tent in your yard, made themselves at home, picked a few potatoes out of your garden, can they just get another bucket of water, use your toilet? You never invited them, but you don't mind, do you?

I'd been avoiding her gaze, but I looked at her then, catching my impotence in her eyes. I waited for her to start talking about Innu cannibalism and their Animal Gods, how



they didn't know how to mind their manners. I was surprised she didn't quote the CBC reporter who'd called the Innu zombies and walking dead. Our national broadcaster. Speaking of tax dollars.

Maybe we should change the subject, Tim said finally, in the chasm of our silence.

Now I wish I could have told them the story of that first visit to Utshimassits, when a group of women of all ages had made a place for me in their circle.

Let's tell stories, I'd suggested to the group, about what it's like to live here in Utshimassits. As women.

First they wanted to know about me.

Are you married? Where are your mother and father?

I decided against disclosing my allergy to marriage, that I agree with feminists and Robert Louis Stevenson that marriage is a sort of friendship recognized by police.

I don't have a husband, I said. And my parents live in Manitoba, in the middle of Canada.

I pointed West. It dawned on me in that moment I didn't know on whose prairie lands the village of my childhood had been settled.

Do you have a baby? one of the younger women asked in English.

No baby. The women discussed this and Manish translated.

The women said maybe you could have five babies by now, at least three.

My mom had five babies by the time she was 27, I proffered, as compensation.

My status established, the women shared stories around the circle, bits about their lives since the government had forced them to settle. The talk was lively and each woman seemed impelled to tell her story. Manish wrote scant notes to translate for me:

*son-in-law beats her daughter, medevac to hospital in Goose Bay*

*she say she can't talk to her grandson anymore he don't know the Innu words only in bush sometimes he listen he work so hard in bush he very proud*

*when priest come to live here he deliver babies her husband say not priest job we deliver own babies in old days*

*she have baby when 16 years old, nurse ask her to sign paper she don't know paper say social worker take baby to NF give to family where her daughter no one help her see daughter again*

I'd read the scribbled words on the foolscap, sat dumb and receptive, looked at each woman and nodded to show somehow that I was listening, understood what was being said. Finally I spoke.

This must be hard, I said.

The women talked at length back and forth about these meager words and eventually Manish offered a tidbit of their conversation.

The women are saying these are things that have to be lived with, she said.

Manipia, who I recognized from the Nain conference, spoke next, while women got up to pour themselves a cup of tea, still listening, heeding the story and nodding in

agreement. Manish was no longer taking notes, but finally she provided a summary in English.

She talk about how we were put on this island, she said. And we face so many problems, just like what happened to the boy Aieshu in the legend. His father left him on an island to die, but he survive, after he ride on the back of a Sea Caribou with antlers and conquer many obstacles. In the end he killed his father and rescued his mother.

I wondered about what the Sea Caribou stood for and who was the father, and if it was time for me to try to facilitate. There were so many threads to pursue. But with no segue the women carried on, darting occasional glances at me.

They want you to help us form a women's group, Manish finally explained.

What kind of help? I asked, wondering what I could tell them about the purpose and ways of a women's group in Utshimassits. Precious little. Before I could get an answer, the women rose and scurried out the door. On her way, Manipia handed me a plastic bag.

A present, she said, surprising me with her English. She spoke again to Manish.

The women say you can help us get money from the government, Manish translated, as Manipia headed for the door.

The two of us lingered as we folded up chairs and tables, and took down the flip chart stand. The page stood blank. I paused with my hands on the back of the chair.

How do you think it went tonight? I asked.

It's good for the women to share their stories—*tipatshimuna*. We all have one.

We do. What should we do now? Will we write a proposal together?

I never wrote one before.

Me neither, but I'm sure we can figure it out.

Inside the bag I found a pair of beaded moccasins trimmed with rabbit fur, just the right size.

Ten years later those moccasins are tucked away in my suitcase. I stare out the window at the whirl of the propeller, drawing the plane forward through the icy air. I never asked Manish who was going to fund this inquiry if not the government. Inquiry—that word is getting on my nerves. Through the portal windows on both sides of the plane I catch the black and white landscape, stretches of snowy barrens, endless mountains, bald rock, trees, rivers and valleys, marshlands, barrens, frozen ocean, deep blue sea on the far horizon. Not one solitary road. I spot an occasional snowmobile track, most visible on the ice along the shoreline or across a frozen lake or bay.

My eyes rest on the breadth of the Innu man's shoulders in front of me. He's also staring intently out of the window. I imagine him spotting animals, invisible to me—outside my consciousness. Like the time I drove across London, England in a taxi with two Innu elders. We were on a European tour to lobby against NATO jets practicing to kill by dropping bombs over Innu lands. I'd queried Shimun about what he thought of London's urban sprawl. He wanted to know about the small porcupine-like critter he'd spotted by a riverbank, a hedgehog, and when was duck season?

*Atikuats!* the man in front of me calls out, points a finger westward. A buzz spreads across the cabin. I look down at an endless stream of caribou below, thousands, tens of thousands, like flowing beige ribbons in the wind. The plane drops altitude and follows the procession, now running faster as the plane descends. All in a row like ants,

they occasionally disperse, a break in the line, and then rally back in succession. I wonder how much of their lives caribou spend on the run—running for food, from wolves, black flies, bad weather, snowmobiles, hunters and planes, especially the bombers that fly at treetop level. I'd heard Tuminik, an Innu elder, talk about caribou on the run, how it was hard on them. He'd talked about the moss they ate, how the moss was impregnated with Chernobyl's fallout.

They don't have any fat on their flesh anymore, he said. They don't taste the same.

Last spring I flew in a Beaver with seven dead caribou. Tanien Pasteen invited me along for the ride.

Hop on! Like he was asking me to jump into the back of a pick-up truck. He and a posse of hunters had shot the caribou in the Ashuapun area, near an abandoned runway and weather station at Border Beacon by the Quebec-Labrador border. An early spring thaw made it impossible for the hunters to haul the beasts back to the village by snowmobile, so the band council chartered a plane to fetch them. I got off the plane with Tanien and watched him throw each carcass one after another over his shoulder like large sacs of flour, piling them up in the back of the plane. The two of us climbed back aboard inching our way around the new freight. I fastened my seat belt. We took off and soon after, the unsecured mountain of carcasses, shifted and jumped as the plane hit an air pocket, unnerving me. I imagined whirling around the cabin with the caribou in complete rigor mortis, the plane in a tailspin. It regained its composure and I turned to examine the large male caribou nearest me, his white penis sheath and his three-foot wide antlers. I wanted to touch his small, well-furred ears, broad and blunt muzzle and his short tail. I reached over to inspect his hooves hollowed out like a scoop with crescent-shaped toes,

and others higher up the leg. Sharp-edged hooves for good purchase on rocks or ice. I tried to imagine these hooves supporting the animal's bulk walking in deep snow and bog, or paddling through water and digging through snow in search of food. A musky smell of boreal forest and bog filled the cabin.

I sat back, looked over at Tanien and nodded over to the mass of caribou.

The band council hired you to go on this hunt? I asked, shouting at him over the drone of the engine. I was pretty sure the Innu bookkeeper had cooked the books, wondered how he had balanced profit and loss with rectitude, or not. How he took payments in and paid salaries out, at the whims and patronage of the chief. *Shuniau* took on a new meaning in this world. Did the bookkeeper have a ledger column for caribou hunts?

Yup, Tanien said. And the Band pay for our gas. Four skidoos.

What'll happen to these caribou now? I was calculating the expense of the hunt. A cost benefit analysis: gas, ammunition, salaries, the charter—for how many pounds of meat?

We cut 'em up and make sure everybody get some. Elders first. And Tshinetshishepateu, the first elder, because he tell us where to go. We have Innu rules about how we have to share. Innu laws. Innu accountability he'd said, grinning at me.

How did he know where the caribou were?

He read the caribou bone, the shoulder bone.

You mean the scapula.

Is that the word? In Innu is *utinikan*.

What do you mean 'he read the bone'?

You put the bone over candle flame. The fire make marks when it burn the bone, like a black line or some spots. You look at the marks and you see a place, maybe a mountain or a river. I don't know. I never do it. But Tshinetshishepateu say he see a river and a lake, like where the Adlatok River go out of Ashuapun Lake. A place where caribou cross the river all the time.

Wow, how do you learn to do that? I asked.

You have to be good hunter. And you dream.

That's cool.

The best part of the hunt was my son Mishen kill his first caribou. Twelve year old. I take him with me.

He shot a gun? Does he have a license?

You should seen the look on his face. He couldn't wait to get home to tell his friends and mom.

That's what they say, the best part of the hunt is the story you get to tell.

True. Now Mishen can't wait to take some meat to Tshinetshishepateu. He want to help prepare *makushan*. He want to see how you crush the caribou bones and make *pimin* from the bone marrow. He say he want to ask Tshinetshishepateu to make a drum dance too. We have a feast.

Can I come?

Sure, but you dance like a chicken.

Haha. I'm not that bad.

My voice was getting hoarse from shouting over the engine. I wanted to ask about *Katipenimitau*, the Caribou Master, or God or Spirit. That word was translated in so

many different ways. Which was it? I wanted to learn more about *Katipenimitau's* laws, but I knew some elders don't like to talk to non-Innu about this stuff and I wanted to respect that.

I stare out of the window again, at the endless stream of caribou still charging forward. I have to be vigilant about respecting these cultural boundaries. This is precarious territory for me. My curiosity often has me trespassing, or so my radar around cultural appropriation is often sounding. But I can't seem to help myself. Is it okay to hope that *Katipenimitau* will lead the caribou all the way into Utshimassits.

The plane shakes and shudders and points its nose in a determined downward slant to start its descent. The last time I'd come, the plane landed with pontoons and the water had swished and splashed and roiled around the pilings of the wharf. Today I peer out of the frosted window as the plane circles above the village, a smattering of tiny prefab houses scattered in random rows, jammed between the water and hills on three sides. Wisps of smoke escape from chimneys and I spot caribou carcasses on a few roofs. Snowmobiles skim their way over the snow to the airstrip, north and then west around the bend along the coastline, past the garbage dump. The plane bounces with a sudden jerk as it lands on a snow-covered gravel runway. It turns and heads for the hangar.

The co-pilot pulls open the door and drops the ladder. I wait my turn, grab my knapsack and step out into a snapping cold, the wind whipping around me. The co-pilot begins to toss the luggage out helter skelter. I scramble with the other passengers to claim mine.



I spot Manish standing by the chain link fence, a big grin on her face, a fleecy hat sitting lopsided on her head. She walks over and slaps me on the back.

Wanna ride? she asks.

You just want to dump me in a snowbank, I say.

I'd never do that, she says with a little too much gusto. She leads me to her snowmobile, throws my bag into the komatik, sits and settles, and signals for me to climb on behind her, like on horseback. As I grab on to her jacket, she takes off full throttle like a bullet.

I got no brakes, she yells out.

Excellent! I shout back. The two of us bump and bounce through the air. The cold slaps me in the face, slicing through my windproof clothing. I try to crouch behind Manish to block the wind, try to hold fast to her nylon jacket, covered in engine oil, like a mechanic's. We blast over to the government store and stop as abruptly as we took off.

You want to pick up some food before I take you to the Pasteens? Manish asks. I'll go drop off your gear and come back for you and your groceries.

Sounds like a plan, I say. Manish kicks off and I walk into the store to fluorescent lights beaming down on me. Eyes that say what is she doing here? Except Munik, an elder I've often seen at meetings. She shuffles over in her moccasins to give me a peck on both cheeks.

Welcome back Anna, she says. In English!

I grab a cart looking around at paltry offerings on the shelves and walk over to the produce cooler that sports three bags of apples, a half a dozen cabbages, a small heap of oranges, two bunches of blackened bananas, small pickings of turnips, potatoes and

yellow onions. I pick out an orange, a cabbage -- ignoring the \$8 price tag, and one onion. Eyes follow me around; a few catch mine. My smile goes unheeded. I head to the freezer hoping to find more vegetables and decide French fries don't qualify. I used to be a vegetarian, before Labrador. Down an aisle, I pick up a jar of pasta sauce to study the ingredients. Apart from the high sodium content, the best before date has come and gone. I finally decide on cans of kidney beans and tomatoes, chili powder, a bag of rice, a box of cereal, flour, baking powder, margarine, a box of UHT milk, eggs, chocolate chip cookies, and a dozen candles. As the cashier tallies up my groceries, I eye a pile of last year's advent calendars selling for \$25 behind the till. I abandon small talk to the cashier's barely audible monosyllabic responses. I pay up, pack my groceries into two plastic bags and exit to find Manish sitting on her snowmobile, smoking a cigarette.

I'm staying at the Pasteens?

They said you can stay in the tent behind their house. No water and sewer, just like you asked for, Manish says, with a smirk.

I get no respect from that woman. I'd hoped to stay with an Innu family. Last time I boarded at the nuns' house, and one night I found myself staring at a poster of Our Sacred Heart of Jesus hung above the toilet with the words 'Yes, Lord God, I believe!', while I listened to kids sniffing gas out of plastic garbage bags outside the window, their laughter eerie and unholy. Like a cat in heat howling. It still baffles me how I went back to bed, tossed and turned and ignored them, heeding Manish's advice.

Leave them alone, she'd said. You don't know what they might do.

I didn't like staying in the enclave of houses for white people in the village. It annoyed me to no end that they all had running water while the Innu had to haul buckets from a tap outside the band office.

Good thing I brought my sleeping bag, I say now. But will I need to get wood?

Don't worry, the Pasteens have three boys who can help. And if you want a shower, the mission sometimes lets people wash up there. You might have to go to confession first, but Sister Alice has the key.

I like the idea of having my own space, of fetching water, cooking on a wood stove, keeping busy. I've brought knitting to make hats out of Newfoundland sheep's wool spun in cheery colours to help stave off melancholy, idle thoughts, panic.

Hop on, Manish orders and I do, my two bags of groceries set between us. We drive past the Band Council building made of BC logs and the mission building with its makeshift bell tower and a side wall with a spray painted graffiti image of a stick figure with a collar behind bars and 'jail the priest' scrawled underneath. We continue along the row of teachers' duplex residences and past a cavorting group of teenagers scantily dressed for the weather. The school, with its red iron siding and blue doors, flashes by on the right before we slide up over a big rock, a hub for gossip or ceremony, like a mass or wedding or drum dance. As Manish pulls back a little on the throttle, a couple of boys chase the skidoo, trying to grab a free ride.

*Nakate, nakate*, Manish shouts in a shrill voice, as she turns the skidoo right, steers around the back of a house and stops just short of a tent doorway. The canvas sides are banked high with snow. I grab my groceries in one hand, swing the canvas door aside and step in. A plywood floor has replaced the usual neatly woven fir boughs of a

*nutshimits* tent. A fire crackles in a sheet metal wood stove to welcome me. A small table and two chairs sit in a far corner, next to a small shelf concocted out of scrap wood. In the left corner is a closet with a covered honey bucket and a curtain for a doorway, and on the back wall lies a thin foam mattress next to my luggage. I carry my grocery bags over to the shelf and begin to unload. This is where my quest to know ancient Innu secrets and the mysteries of Mother Earth has landed me. On a plywood floor in subzero March weather, with a honey bucket to dump cavalierly, like everyone else, not too close to anyone's doorway.

Should I worry about my camera and computer? I ask Manish, still standing in the doorway.

And sexy underwear. Don't leave them around if you're not here.

Gotcha.

A skidoo roars up to the tent, and stops abruptly. Sepastien pokes his head through the door.

Hey Sepastien, how's it going? I say.

He enters with his long-legged gait.

*Pushu, pushu.* He reaches out to take both my hands in his and shakes them up and down with enthusiasm. He smells of wood smoke and cigarettes and fuel and spruce trees.

Akat want to know if you need anything? he asks, casing the joint. What you got to sleep with?

An Arctic down sleeping bag and a camping mattress.

That's no good.

It's supposed to be good for - 40.

That little thing?

Sepastien turns and leaves. Manish and I follow him out of the tent as he climbs onto his snowmobile. We make our way over to the big rock. A couple of women, talking in hushed voices, look over at me.

*Tan etin?* I say. How's it going? The women giggle and ignore me, carry on with their conversation. The warble and chatter of children rushes down from the hill behind us, their laughter rising and falling, as they run and whirl and stumble and push a toboggan back up over the hill.

Sepastien suddenly appears again, carrying a bundle under his arm. Manish and I follow him back into the tent as he unrolls two caribou skins.

One for under your sleeping bag and one over you, he says, with hand gestures to demonstrate.

Nice. I size up the skins, running my hands along the fur, tan and oatmeal coloured like unbleached linen, just the right length to cover my whole body.

Will they bring good dreams? I ask.

I don't know, but they keep you warm.

*Tshinashkumitin.* I thank Sepastien. I should also probably be giving thanks to *Katipenimitau.*

You can't sleep here by yourself, Sepastien says, still assessing my situation. I'll send the kids over, Shuni or Shuash. Do you need anything else?

A radio? I totally forgot mine. Do you know anyone who has a spare one?

I'll send one with the kids. He leaves again and Manish follows him out.

Meeting with the elders tomorrow, she says to me. I'll pick you up on my way.

What time?

Don't know. Innu time, she says with a smile. We should have tea and a snack for them. I can make Innu donuts.

Let's make them here and you can show me how?

Okay I'll pick up the stuff to make them and come by first thing in the morning.

Manish takes off and I follow her out of the tent to grab some wood for the night and early morning. A few junks lie scattered on the ground, but I'm not sure of the arrangements Manish has made for my accommodation. I knock on the Pasteens' back door, which has no doorknob, a piece of nylon twine threaded through the hole to open and close it. No one answers. I can't just help myself, can I?

Best I resuscitate my inner lumberjack. I spot an axe plunged into a large log for storage, yank it free and grab a piece of bucked wood from a small pile. I'd befriended neither the chainsaw nor the axe during the two years I lived in Sheshatshiu, but I know I can do this. I can. Tear wood asunder like at least some of my ancestors did for millennia. I stand with my feet apart, shoulder width and square to my target, knees slightly bent. I swing the axe straight back over my head and surrender to its weight and power soaring through the air and smack into the far middle back of the round. Thunk! The two halves fall in opposite directions, the wood brittle from the cold. My heartbeat like a sledge hammer in my chest, I center one of the halves and strike again. Bingo! There is no one around to see my triumph. By the time I've accumulated a couple of armfuls of splits, my shoulders ache from the concussive force of blow after blow. I pile the wood into a

curved arm and haul it into the tent. Just in the nick of time. I open the stove door, coax the embers to the front of the stove and fill it to the brim.

I'd planned to whip up a chili, but can't be bothered. I fry up an egg in a small frying pan that looks barely wiped from its last use. I toast a slice of bread directly on the stovetop, and boil a kettle for tea while I devour my egg and toast and peanut butter. Vegetables will wait for tomorrow. They'll freeze overnight, but what odds. The bucket holds barely enough water for dishes. I head for the band council building to fetch more, and maybe to find the radio that never showed up.

### III.

I walk right into Sepastien's kitchen without knocking, surprised to find no one home. No gaggle of kids, no heat. Cupboards ripped out of the wall, a stack of gyproc and a table saw in the middle of the floor. I walk out and around the house.

Tshinetshishepateu stands by a half-built canoe, its bare ribs jutting out of the snow. Last summer I'd watched him hammer and shape those ribs in perfect symmetry onto the frame, no measurement tool in sight.

*Tanite Sepastien mak Akat?* I ask in my halting *Innu-aimun*, failing as always to capture the cadence and inflection. The old man points to a tent perched on the hill behind the two houses, then to an extension cord running out of Sepastien's house. The whole time he speaks in *Innu-aimun*.

*Tshinashkumitin*. I smile shyly.

I follow the cord, which leads to another and nine more through metre-deep snow up the hill before I reach the tent nestled in a grove of spruce trees—a *nutshimits* tent. I poke my head in the small opening above the door flap. The heat and stench of burning hair and bone assaults me, but I step in, my nose crinkled up in distaste. A caribou head, staked with a stick through the neck and thrust into the ground, grazes the side of the stove and stares up at me as it roasts. White bulging eyes with no pupils. Charred bone smoking and flesh sizzling where the fur has burnt away.

Come in, come in. Sepastien sits on an upside down beef bucket, while Akat crouches at the back of the tent changing a baby's disposable diaper. I walk over and lean



forward to give Akat a big awkward bear hug with her still sitting. With her small nicotine-stained hands, she grabs mine, squeezes and smiles. A smile that makes me feel like everything will be okay.

*Nussim*, she says, my granddaughter, as she stands with the babbling baby. She tucks her into a *ueuepishun*, a tiny hammock strung between two tent poles. She motions for me to sit on the floor of boughs. I love Akat, although the smattering of words we know in each other's languages turns most visits awkward in the time it takes to stoke the fire and throw another junk into the stove. I step around a box of dishes and random kitchen paraphernalia to sit down. To the left of the door on a trunk sits a 32-inch television blasting out news from Bangor, Maine. Sepastien leans over, shifts the caribou head sideways, carves out a grilled cheek with a knife and pops the flesh into his mouth.

Want some? he asks me. I shake my head.

We don't waste any of the caribou, he says. He must be calculating my thoughts.

Tomorrow Akat will use the brain to tan the skin, he adds

Speaking of skins, are you sure you can spare the ones you gave me today? I didn't realize you're also staying in a tent.

Just 'til the band council fixes our house. You keep the skins. We have more.

But I don't see any amongst the mountain of bedding in the corner. Sepastien stands and flings the door flap open to freshen the air and I can see the last breaths of the sunset's reflection on the ice across the bay. The days are getting longer.

*Nipishapun?* asks Akat as she stands to pour me a cup of tea from a kettle on the stove. She offers me milk and sugar as well, *tshitshinapun*—the same word as

'breastmilk'—and *kashiuasht*. I scoop a spoonful of sugar and shake a few drops from the can of Carnation milk into my cup to tame the tannins of the boiled tea.

Akat is speaking to Sepastien and I hear *utauna* more than once.

She's talking about my father? I ask.

Yeah, she says to tell you she's sorry to hear he passed away, Sepastien says.

Thanks, I smile at Akat, but tears well up.

He died so fast, I say. The doctors said he had cancer and three weeks later he was gone.

Were you there? Sepastien asks.

The whole family was there, I say, swallowing hard. I got to say goodbye.

Sepastien translates and Akat looks over at me and nods.

But the funeral was awful, I continue. I wish our funerals were more like yours.

What do you mean?

People seem closer here—the homemade coffin and the women dressing the body. The way everybody comes to the church and kisses the person, throws a handful of dirt on the coffin at the cemetery.

What happened with your father?

The undertaker—a total stranger—took the body away. I never had a chance to sit with him one last time. I couldn't recognize him in the fancy coffin. They wired his jaw shut. And the stuff they use to embalm, formaldehyde, stinky. It was weird.

As Sepastien translates for Akat, I am back at the church, the only one to kiss his cold cheek. I looked up at the altar boy swinging the thurible of burning incense, the vases of flowers and pillar candles decorating the altar. We sang *The Lord is my Shepherd*

and I got to read a pagan prayer by Starhawk, because the priest didn't know how to say no to my mother who was doing the books for the church. 'I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters...' We left the church to *Ave Maria* and made our way up the hill along the coulee to the graveyard where the coffin lay in a subzero hole, lined with a green rug and brass fence, like he was being laid to rest in a living room.

The television screen disrupts my reverie as it switches from Bangor news to a WWF wrestling match.

What happened? I ask. This is the first time I've seen a TV up this way.

Somebody at the band office switch the channel, Sepastien says.

So *your* channel changed?

Yeah.

That sucks.

Not so bad. As long as it's not *All my Children*, Sepastien says.

I can't imagine what Akat must think of soap operas: all the beautiful people, shining chandeliers and chintzy pastel swaths of florals across Victorian furniture and valances. Powder rooms and gilded bathrooms. What's it like to go from no TV at all to having satellite TV?

What does Akat think about having TV? I ask, wondering if it's replaced the community radio station as the soundtrack in every home.

She likes Mr. Bean, Sepastien responds as Akat looks up and smiles. I nod to concur. Her large square glasses are oversized for her face and have snuck down her nose. I'd rather not wonder why her face seems disfigured and asymmetrical, reconfigured from

damaged tendons and fractured bones. Sepastien has hinted at their troubles, and I've not pressed for details. I wonder about the Pretty Girl Sepastien once knew. Fine and delicate features, aristocratic and aquiline, that now only hint at why they call her *Minushkuess*. When I lived in Sheshatshiu, my neighbor Nishapet occasionally came knocking on my door, looking for shelter for the night.

How did you two meet? I ask now, trying to imagine the two as teens.

We were at a gathering in Sheshatshiu, before many houses built, Sepastien says. In old days gatherings were when kids get matched up and married. I see Akat. She is a hard worker. I really want to marry her, but I can't just go up to her. I have to ask her parents.

So what happened? I ask.

I can see that Akat is listening keenly.

I am scared so I send my uncle to talk to them, Sepastien says. He have to go two times. I think she don't want me.

And did she?

Akat is smiling now, looking coy. She jumps in with her own version.

She say no one bother to talk to her, Sepastien translates. She don't even know her parents give her away to be married.

What did she think of that?

I'm looking at Akat as she responds, no need for translation.

She say she don't want to come near me.

Sepastien does not crack a smile, while Akat laughs, both hands on her mouth.

Did you have another boyfriend, *tshitimush*?

My question inspires gales of laughter from Akat, slapping her hands on her thighs.

*Tapue, tapue*, she nods her head. Scared and other man, the two things, she manages in English. She laughs with an even deeper hilarity, and continues, her face animated.

Sepastien translates, with a poker face.

She say she too shy to marry me. I'm pretty good looking, but my hair too much like Johnny Cash and I dress bad.

Akat bursts into laughter again, a contagious cackle, enough to cause Sepastien to finally surrender, the two now in a counterpoint of he-he-he-he.

Nice story, I say. I'd love to see a picture of your wedding.

I borrow a suit and she borrow the white dress, Sepastien says. And even we borrow the rings. But the priest did not take our picture. He say I'm too drunk. His voice wanders. Who cares...

So why are you back here? he asks, changing the subject.

Manish called me to ask if I'd help organize a people's inquiry, I say. About the kids dying in the fire.

*Tshekuan* 'inquiry'?

I'm not sure what an inquiry is or does, and to be honest, I've never been part of one. We'll have to talk and figure it out.

I hope it doesn't have anything to do with the police going around asking questions.

Are they going to lay charges? I ask.

I'd been thinking about running into the parents whose children died, what it would be like to look into their eyes.

Lay charges? Sepastien shoots a look over at me.

Against the parents. For leaving the kids alone?

Well, they have to go to hospital to charge Manishan. She say she just want to die. Tshani is on suicide watch too. They lost all four kids. And the others, you want to charge them too? Sepastien has stopped translating.

You don't think the parents should be held responsible?

By going to jail?

I don't know?

They go stand in front of one of your so-called judges, they say guilty or not guilty. Then they live in a cage and sleep in a bed next to a toilet. That teach them a lesson?

So what do you think should happen?

In jail they have no freedom. But what about their memories, thinking about their kids all the time. All the time. Will they be free from that? Ever? You want to punish them more?

I don't know.

You don't know? But you *kakeshauts* always know everything.

Akat looks sullen as she gently sways the *ueuepishun*. Sepastien translates the conversation for her, his voice thick and shaky, a hoarse rasp. I sit a little stunned and blink back tears. The wind outside howls and sucks the heat out of the wood stove and straight up into the sky.

They make a mistake, he adds, as he turns to open the cooler next to him. He takes out a bundle in a grocery bag, and heaves it at me. Here, from my net this morning. Breakfast tomorrow. Go home now.

Akat does not look at me. I take his gift, open the bag to find a small char, spotted grey, steely turquoise and white, the fins on its belly coral, hinting at the colour of its flesh.

Thanks. I shift to stand. *Iame, iame apishish*. Little goodbye, I say, as I get up, my voice also like it's on hands and knees. I grab my water bucket and exit smack into the icy chill. I slip and slide and sink out of control down the hill through the snow and faint shadows of the half moon. No streetlamps to illuminate the way home.

That'll teach them a lesson?

I stare up at the Milky Way, its billions of stars spilled across the night sky.

You white people always know everything.

I have no damn business here. I reach a snowmobile track at the bottom of the hill, slow down and trudge along gloomily. A chill shivers through me. There's no solution to some things. No peace, no absolution, no restitution. There is a price for everything. The fire in my stove will be out when I get home.

I stop at the town tap to fill my bucket and continue on my way. Footsteps crunch behind me, someone running to catch up on the packed snow. I turn to see who it is. Tall and lanky Shuni, a purple wool beret barely covering her ears, pretty wisps of hair and a long braid, her gait agile, restless like a pony. I want to zip up her jacket. She's coiled a sleeping bag around her neck like a scarf and carries a pillow under one arm.

Hey Shuni.

You thinking real hard, she says.

How can you tell?

I call you many times and you never answer.

Sorry. I can't hear very well with my hood on. So where are you off to?

My dad say I come and stay with you. And he say to give you this.

She hands over a small transistor radio.



#### IV.

I wake in a pool of grief this morning. I thought I'd never see my father again, but there he was in my dream last night. I don't usually remember them, but this dream is so vivid. I was watching a play at the LSPU hall in St. John's, a spectator, but strangely also an actor getting ready in a small room backstage to play an Innu woman. I placed a traditional Innu hat over my sassy hair. The hat was made of black and red wool felt and decorated with beads and a brocade ribbon. Attached to it were two small coils of hair wrapped in black cloth that hung over my ears. I was wearing a simple long shift of supple beige caribou skin, embellished with a crosshatch of red, yellow and blue designs painted along the hem: parallel lines, triangles flanked by paired curves with end spirals, a zigzag of circular medallions. Designs infused with the magic of the sun and moon, river, mountain and hunting trail, sexual potency, the heart and soul of *Katipenimetau*, all to be revealed during the play. I started to apply make-up, to make myself look Innu. I applied it carefully, evenly, and just as I thought the job was perfect, it began to fade, turning white, the white face of a mime. I wiped it off and started over. Over and over I dabbed and smeared the rich milk chocolate make-up on to my face and neck, but no sooner had I completed the application, it faded into a brash white. I started to panic, my heartbeat accelerating. Again and again, I gobbed it on. It began to pool and bead up and soon thick white streaks covered my face. I heard a knock on the door. I opened it to find my father, drunk and a little scary. But he said calm down, and between the two of us we managed to remove the make-up. I'd have to go as I was. Then he grabbed my hands, and started to

dance a silly dance. My father who never danced. I worried he'd follow me on stage, drunk and then everyone would know. I broke into a sweat, and heard the curtain call.

Break a leg, he whispered as he let go of my hand and pushed me gently out of the dressing room. But instead of a stage I was in my bedroom in St. John's, flowery wallpaper, cozy in a warm golden light. I stepped into the hallway, which was not a hallway at all, but a doorless narrow passage, miles and miles long. I no longer knew where I was. I didn't know anything. I walked and walked around several corners, and finally came to a flight of stairs that crumbled as I descended. I fell into a white expanse of nothingness. Finally I might be in Labrador. What a relief! The set was supposed to be in *nutshimits*, but there were no hills, no bay, no tents, no forest, no barrens. Nothing. I looked around, a panicked scream rising in my throat. How would I find my way? The curtain came down and the audience stood to applause.

The dream has left me out of breath and immobilized, my body still snared in a deep sleep. I take slow deep breaths, and like an archaeologist, I try to separate out each bone until I feel that my skeleton is intact, a precise and beautiful instrument. This exercise calms me, but still a feeling washes over me that I will never come out of this whole.

I fell asleep last night thinking about grief, how it's almost a relief to be here. This job might be a distraction and surely a haven. In some strange way. I've not known Innu much for giving advice. What should I do, I've often asked, and *muk<sup>u</sup> tshin* is the usual response. It's up to you.

No one here will try to tell me to write in my journal, or go to a grief support

group, or give me books about grieving, suggest I take an art course or get a dog. It's time to pull up my boot straps. I won't have to worry about how sad I look, or watch people sway to a safer topic or cross the street to avoid me altogether.

Shuni hasn't stirred yet. I heard her get up in the middle of the night to light the fire. Does a stove fire stir up memories, remind her of what happened? She had to know those kids. I might ask her about it sometime. I've heard people here say that for days after the person has passed, elders will tell children not to go outside, especially not at night, for fear the spirits will take them along with them on their journey. Maybe this is what I felt the night my father died. I ended up sleeping in the bed with my mother—every other bed in our family home occupied. I felt him there, like there were three of us in the bed. It was crowded.

At least the Innu here all seem to believe in an afterlife. I mainly believe dead is dead. I might see my father in a dream, but I'll never really see him again, never again chat with him as we drive around the farm to check on the crops, or fry up partridge and add brown sugar to cantaloupe, pick baby dandelion greens in the spring, argue about the NDP, or pour him a glass of scotch against my better judgment. I'll never again laugh at his quirky wit, or answer his questions with explanations he'll never understand. Why are you working up there? Why don't you buy yourself a car?

I shake off the caribou skin and slip out of my sleeping bag, into my moccasins and parka, and step out the door as stealthily as possible. As I reach the big rock, the sun is slowly peering over the horizon, its light filtering through a crystal fog that has drifted in from the night. Heavy and laden, this cold white and amber ghost of the frozen Labrador sea crawls through the village and beyond to blanket the hills and trees. A few

stars linger. I catch a whiff of smoke puffing out of nearby chimneys and lamplight glows from the Pasteens' living room window. I want to see inside, but my view is masked by dirt, frost and condensation. We still haven't talked about rent and wood. I will want a fixed and fair amount, they will want their share of what's available, and I never seem to know what that means. I walk over the big rock and as far as I can see and hear there is no one else stirring out of doors.

I return to the tent to find Shuni has disappeared and I'm relieved, not being much of a morning person. I lift the lid off the water bucket to find a sheet of ice has formed, enough that I need to fetch the axe outside to crack it. I pour a little water into the washbasin and scoop some up with my two hands to splash over my face. The icy water shocks. Catches my breath. I pour some into the kettle and open the stove door to light the fire, a task I love. I stack a handful of twigs around a crinkled sheet of *The Labradorian*, teepee style to let the air circulate, and strike a match to light the paper. Then I add two small junks and once the flame is snapping with confidence, a large one.

The caribou skin dress from my dream is still with me, in the corner of my eye. I wish I could touch it. At least the whole costume seemed like real Innu, and not braids, random beads and a feather headdress.

V.

I'm just finishing my morning coffee, when Manish arrives with the fixings for making donuts: flour, brown sugar, baking powder, raisins, corn oil and her own frying pan. I watch as she throws together intuitive amounts of the ingredients into a bowl, adds water and stirs the whole into a batter. She spoons out a small ball of dough, stretches it out to make a hole in the middle and drops it into a hot sizzling pan of oil on the stove. I've made sure to keep the fire blasting heat and I pull the door flap open for relief.

My morning consternation has dissipated and I feel buoyed at the thought of meeting with the elders.

Where are we meeting? I ask.

I'm thinking Innu Nation office, even if it's not the best space, Manish says.

What about the band council rec hall?

The steps are too steep for some *tshishenuats*.

And the mission hall?

I don't want the priest walking in.

I know what you mean.

I'd organized a Native education conference a couple years back, when Sepastien and Kistin, who worked as a teacher's aide, had talked of problems with the school: the furnace was often broken, sometimes there was no water, some teachers were hitting kids, and the kids were only learning *kakeshau* culture, why couldn't school give kids a credit for learning about the beaver in *nutshimits*? For these highly inflammatory statements, the

priest had seen fit to call them both out during the Sunday service. The way I heard it, even Sister Alice had walked out.

The Innu Nation office is cozier anyway, I add. We can sit in a circle instead of rows of chairs.

Manish is okay with that. I hesitate to ask her if it'll be a real elders' meeting. The last one I'd been at was about land claims with lawyers and government negotiators. Sepastien was meant to translate, but it seemed to me he barely did his job. Of course I wasn't sure. Too many impossible words probably. Through the presentations by lawyers and Chief Negotiator Tapit, and during the discussion that ensued, almost all in English, the elders just sat, shuffling, sometimes dozing off. The talk was about non-renewable resources and surface and subsurface rights, land classifications, royalties, compensation, FEARO, expropriation, impact benefit agreements, the short list and interim measures. I was so relieved when Tapit finally turned to ask the elder Mishte-Pinip to speak. I'd been in the office earlier when it seemed like Tapit in a veiled kind of way was trying to coach the old man about what the meeting would be about and what he should say. I could relate to this uneasy straddling of worlds.

Mishte-Pinip rose to speak. I was sitting next to Sepastien and when I looked at him pleadingly, he leaned over to whisper the gist of the old man's oration. The old man pronounced on how he had pulled a toboggan as a child when his family travelled from Uashat to Fort Chimo, how he never went to school—his school was *nutshimits*, how the mission showed cowboy and Indian movies in the church hall. He talked about how rocks could move on their own and how bears wore ties and suits and could speak *kakeshau*, how an evil creature spirit—*Manitu-utshu*—lived in the mountain by Muskrat Falls. He

decreed how he'd lost a canoe and cache with the flooding of Meshikamau, and his grandfather's grave was also flooded. He added that his father was a *kamanitushit* who used his powers for good, not like that other *kamanitushit* who shall remain unnamed, and whatever had become of his grandchildren? He could no longer understand them.

I was pretty sure that Tapit was shaking his head on the inside. Minutes after Mishte-Pinip sat down, the meeting was adjourned.

Manish now spoons a donut out of the frying pan and adds it to the small mountain of them on the table.

I'll get the coffee urn at the band office, Manish says. Can you pick up tea bags, sugar and Carnation milk at the store? I'll meet you at the office after lunch. I'll make sure the elders have a ride if they need one. Tapit and Shuash can help with that. You can set up.

Sure thing *Utshimashkueu*.

I like it when she's Boss Woman.

And don't you forget it, she says.

I am setting up the flip chart stand when Tshinetshishepateu and Manikanet, the oldest couple of the village, hobble in, soon followed by Shushana, who is tiny and hunchbacked. They walk bow-legged, like an archer's bow, shaped by decades of walking in bear paw snowshoes and sitting on boughs. Tshenish and Anpinamen arrive, then Shinipest, Tuma, Etuët, Manipia, Akat's parents Mishte-Pinip and Manteskueu, and finally the Katshinaks, Tshakapeshes and Mistenapeos. I'm glad to see that both the

drinking and non-drinking factions are represented. I'm longing to take pictures, but that would be so annoying and *kakeshau*, even if people do mostly seem to love to get their pictures taken. The women wear long plaid or flowery cotton skirts over dark pants, their hair tucked under a tuque or a woolen red, green or blue Ukrainian scarf. On their feet are tanned caribou skin moccasins with colourful beadwork, and rainbow striped socks. A few of them wear chain necklaces with crosses almost as big as my hand. Some of the men are wearing green and black hunting jackets, a couple sport aviator bifocal glasses, and Tuma has wrapped a faded and grimy yellow cloth around his head. He reminds me of Innu people in Father Whitehead's old photographs, taken when people say life was simple and they only ran into a priest or government agent once or twice a year.

Manish asks Manteskueu to say a prayer. I like prayers in *Innu-aimun*, when I can't understand a word they're saying. I should say my own prayer. I'm so grateful for this meeting, a chance to hear from elders early in the game before any plans get made. Tshani, Sepastien, Shushep and Tapit are here, but Manish is the one leading the meeting.

We've asked you to this meeting to talk about the fire, I imagine her saying. She stops after a mere couple of sentences. Her face tightens, tears welling up. She looks over at me, and signals to the flip chart. I don't know what she's saying. I wonder if she wants me to continue, but instead I nod and smile.

I marvel at her standing up front, presiding. There was a time when everyone insisted I facilitate meetings. I'm not even sure meetings are 'chaired' in the Innu world. And the last time I'd been here and gone door-to-door or stopped women on the road to ask them to come to the land claims meeting, some told me their husbands wouldn't allow it.



We need to talk about this. It's one of the saddest things that ever happened to us, Manish says in English now, then switches back to *Innu-aimun*, having regained her bearings.

I don't need translation. We talked about how she'd start the meeting. She's reminding them about the Rich family who drowned not so long ago, and all the young people they've lost over the last few years. How something needs to be done. For the children.

Tshinetshishepateu, as the oldest in the community, is the first to respond. He takes his pipe out of his mouth and tucks it into his breast pocket. He leans forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, his head hunched over and cradled in his hands. He speaks a long time. I catch the occasional and predictable word: *auassats*, *tshishennuats*, *utshimauts*, *ishkuteu*, *mitshuap* – children, elders, leaders, fire, house, but not enough to know what he's saying. Finally, he leans back.

*Shash*, he says, signaling he's said enough. No one translates into English.

Each elder speaks in turn. I know they're telling their stories and I am almost lulled to sleep by the muted and deep music of each voice on its journey, a song whose words I don't understand. They talk on and on, like the interminable prayers of my childhood, the droning incantation of a rosary recited, a soundtrack to my thoughts. I know it would make no sense to translate everything for me. This is a conversation they need to have amongst themselves. Translation can kill most meetings, stretching the conversation to numb everyone's mind, double the time and sometimes more. Vital threads lost with the starting and stopping.

I look around the office, a concoction of two trailers merged. Everything and everyone working here look a little worn and tired. The walls are painted a steely blue that sucks up the light. Two windows on the back end of the room are boarded up. The fluorescent lights buzz a low-level white noise and reflect a jaundiced light on everyone. I wonder how much mercury vapour gas they are discharging. I'd tried to sweep the floor earlier, but my efforts barely touched the years of accumulated dirt and grime. There's no water or bathroom in the building.

A large topographical map hangs on the wall by the entrance. I stare at it now from across the room. This morning I'd looked more closely at all the place names, so many names for such a large 'uninhabited' place, or that's what DND likes to say when they're trying to promote their low-level flight training. Someone's scratched out a bunch of English names on the map and replaced them with Innu names. Mushuau-shipu for George River, Mishta-shantesh for Daniel's Rattle, Mishta-shipu for Churchill River, Uashat for Sept Iles, Akamiuapishk<sup>u</sup> for the Mealy Mountains. Dozens and dozens of them. I know there are hundreds. I've so often seen people, who can hardly read and write, take quickly to a map.

This is the world I want to enter—the one with Innu names. I'm not much interested in reading anthropological accounts 'about' the Innu. I've always been a little skeptical, often wondering, 'where are the women?' And I don't like to leave those books lying around for the Innu to see. Like I'm in on some secret about them that they don't know.

I'd rather the experience. I want to step into the world of this map, to enter the old photographs, smell the tobacco from the old man's pipe, try on the woman's hat, tickle

the children and let them teach me some *Innu-aimun*, sit in the circle in a teepee covered in caribou skins.

I'm starting to feel restless. Tshenish is speaking now, and he always has something interesting to say. I leave my perch by the flip chart, grab a note pad and pen from the table along the wall, and slip into the chair by Sepastien. I hand him the pen and paper, signal him to write. And he does.

*He say his grandson who die last year he come knock on his  
his grandson who die last year come outside his door night before  
fire tell him something bad will happen*

Tshenish pauses, as if to listen but no one speaks. And then he goes on and Sepastien keeps writing.

*He say reason children die is we not look after caribou bones  
make Katipenimitak Caribou Master angry we throw the bones for dogs  
bones everywhere we should take care caribou bones*

This gets everybody going again as the conversation makes its way around the circle one more time. I point to the paper on Sepastien's lap, but he only shrugs. I'm on my own.

There are ghosts and caribou bones, and spiritual practices and meaning and social order that make no sense to me, and I cannot be party to. I was raised to believe in a virgin mother, and sins as black as tar etched onto my soul lodged somewhere in my abdomen, in guardian angels and receiving God in a little pasty host placed on my tongue by a priest in long robes. We eat and drink the body and blood of our saviour. Like cannibals.

Finally Manish looks over at me.

They think it's a good idea, that we talk about the fire, she says. They said we need to talk to everybody. To hear everybody's story.

Can we really talk to hundreds of people? I ask. That would be hundreds wouldn't it?

We can't leave anybody out.

Okay, I say, without explaining my reservations.

What about the *kakeshauts*? Teachers, Sister Alice and Sister Marie, the priest, nurse, social worker?

*Mauats*, Manish says before she has even translated for the elders. They are nodding in agreement.

Did they say exactly what we should ask people to talk about? I ask.

Manish translates my question and the conversation starts up again, still animated, no slouching, squirming in chairs, or escape artists. I get up to serve tea and donuts. I'm pouring a cup for Tuma, when Manish finally summarizes their discussion.

They want us to ask people what has happened to us since the white man came into our lives, she says. How has the church changed our lives? How has Social Services changed us? And the school, the police, doctors, nurses, the store, government. All of them.

Good questions, I say, as I'm offering milk and sugar to Kanani.

There are no direct questions about the fire.

You might also want to ask people what needs to be done to stop these things from happening? I suggest.

Manish translates this and again the elders are nodding before she's finished.

Who will do this work? I ask. You'll need a team who's able to talk to everybody. Men and women, different clans, drinkers and non-drinkers, all ages.

This spurs more talk as I pass the plate of donuts around the circle. By the time everyone has swallowed their last bite, Manish walks over to the flip chart and writes down four names.

Sepastien is really good writer, and he talk to everybody. He's not shy. Shustin work with Social Services. Her English is good, she's a hard worker. She work at school before and kids like her too. Kanani is an elder, so people know this is a serious thing we're doing. She work in school too in the past, and everybody family to her: cousin, brother, auntie, son-in-law. She's related to so many people.

Sounds good.

I never like to talk about money, and I won't look after it, but I want to know about salaries.

It would be good if we all get paid the same, those of us working on this, I say.

Manish translates and the elders nod. Mishte-Pinip makes a comment that cracks everybody up. I look around curious, my eyebrows raised, but no one translates the joke.

I have one more question, I say. 'People's inquiry,' it doesn't sound very friendly, in English anyway. It's a word for government and lawyers. How will you explain it in *Innu-aimun*? What will you call it?

Another lively chat and Manish turns again to write on the flip chart: *Mamunitau Staianimu*.

It means Gathering Voices, she says.

Way more inviting. I say. Anything else?

Mishte-Pinip speaks up and I can hear Mr. Bean. His favourite show, Manish mouths to me from across the room and points to her watch. Mr. Bean apparently has taken the village by storm. Manish thanks everyone, and the elders get up. Tshinetshishepateu and Manikanet walk over to me.

*Miam miam, tshinashkumitin*, Tshinetshishepateu says as he shakes my hand, and Manikanet follows suit. My heart does a little dance. I haven't done any writing at all on the flip chart, but I feel rather capital letters and exclamation marks inside.

Good stuff, I say to Tapit as we leave the building.

I don't know. People fight too much, he says. I just can't see it, how it'll work.

You may know better than me, but it feels like a good start.

Maybe. He climbs on to his snowmobile and takes off in a cloud of snow.

Manish has followed us out. She looks despondent.

Why so glum? I thought that meeting went great, I say. We're both headed home towards the big rock.

So embarrassed, she says. Crying like that.

You're not the last person who'll be crying about this.

She doesn't respond and we walk on, our footsteps a syncopated beat, crunching on the hard path. Snowflakes fall gently and define the whispers of the wind. We reach her trailer.

You coming in? she asks. We step straight into her living room, dark with wood paneling and a beat up rug that's never seen a vacuum. Long strips of what must be caribou meat are drying above the woodstove in the corner. Manish sees me looking at the *passauaia*.

Wanna try some?

Sure. I take a tentative bite. It still has a slight coppery taste of blood, like sucking on a paper cut. Very chewy.

Hi Pien, I say. Manish's husband sits on the couch, scowling at me. He barely grunts a response, and gets up to go into the bedroom. Shuts the door.

You're spending more time on the land, I say to Manish, as I look around the room. Moccasins and socks, hats and scarves are draped on a string by the stove, four rifles sit on a wall rack, and in the corner of the cluttered kitchen stands a half-filled snowshoe with a ball of sinew hanging from it.

I won't when I'm chief.

What do you mean, when you're chief?

The guys have decided I should be chief. They're all worried about this inquiry. No one wants to be left holding the bag.

That'll be good. I mean you as chief.

They're pretty sure I can win. The election is set for next week.

That's fast, I say. Although I know it means I won't have much to do in the meantime.

So now you've got a campaign to run.

My only campaign is no booze. I won't buy votes.

A woman and no booze. That should be interesting.

Manish smiles conspiratorially.

We'll need to find a place for you to stay, she says. There might be a little too much action around town for you in the tent. I'll ask around.

Okay... You don't mind being chief?

I'm a bit worried about my kids. Will I be able to take them on the land? And all those meetings with government... She grimaces.

You'll be good for them.

The two of us drink our tea with Carnation milk and sugar and Purity cookies.

At least Sepastien is not bootlegging any more, Manish says. It wouldn't look good for the inquiry.

Shagger, I say. I talked to him about that last summer, told him I'd tell his sister and sick her on him if he didn't quit.

You think that worked?

Who knows? I shrug. I best get home. I think I'm out of water.

Wanna ride?

*Mauats*. I'm working on my muscles, I say, as I raise my forearm, flex it and head out the door. I decide against yelling out to Pien that he can come out now.



## VI.

Over the next week I catch a few candidates' posters—photocopied pictures with marker-scrawled names—hung at the store and in offices around the village. One morning I hear Manish speaking on the radio and I think she may be talking up the Inquiry. So she *is* campaigning.

I decide to put together a flyer about the Gathering Voices to hand out door-to-door.

Sure, Manish says when I ask her if it's a good idea.

I've moved in with Shustin. I have my own room but she says I haven't displaced anyone. They haul out mattresses into the living room every night, and the lot of them sleep together as a family. Just like in a tent.

We always do that, she said to me. So we don't get lonely.

I ask her kids if they like to draw, how I need a picture to put on the flyer. Napess volunteers and spends the better part of the night crouched over his sheet of paper, sketching with a sure hand an Innu drum filled with a *nutshimits* scene – Canada geese and ducks flying over a rising sun and hills, two Innu paddling in a canoe, a caribou and bear and fox on the lakeshore. I'd hug him but I don't want to embarrass him. Instead I rave about his masterpiece and suggest the Band might agree to pay him for it. His face beams.

The flyer needs to be bilingual. Shustin is not sure how to write *Innu-aimun*, but between the two of us we manage to sound out the words phonetically, how most people

write anyway. I'm always being told how no *kakeshau* linguist is going to tell them how to write their own language, and no one has cottoned on to the beauty of standardized spellings.

*Tipatshimu* we spell out; share your story, we write in each language.

The following morning I shrink Napess's drawing with the photocopier at the band office. I cut and paste the image onto a clean sheet, type the text in a simple and bold font, which looks like twigs lined up in the shape of letters. The creaking photocopier manages to spit out 100 copies, but with a lamentable streak running through them. It'll have to do.

I hint around for someone to go door-to-door to drop off the flyer, but no one bites. I guess that leaves me. I head out and make my way to a tiny ramshackle monopoly house, multiplied across the village.

I knock on the door. I know the only people who knock are the nurse, the priest or the nun, but I can't bring myself to just walk in. A ragamuffin girl, round-faced and rosy-cheeked, opens the door.

Hi, I say and she looks at me wide-eyed, runs back into the house. A large beef bucket is perched in the middle of the porch. That might be a honey bucket. I walk by it. A man sits by the stove smoking a pipe, and a girl is washing dishes in a plastic basin on a makeshift kitchen counter. Manipia, who was at the meeting of *tshissenuats*, sits at the table beading the upper part of a moccasin. A couple of kids are jumping on a bed in a bedroom that is no larger than two snowmobiles sitting side by side. Next to it is one of those infamous bathrooms with the useless toilet and tub. The room is now used for storage and strewn with *nutshimits* and sundry other gear. Before the government decided

to build and equip these houses in 1967, it should have conducted those engineering studies that say there is just no water to be had. Except for white people, of course.

This village must have been a bureaucrat's dream, the big job, starting from scratch, making all the decisions for the 'needy Indians.' They're used to living in tents, they don't need anything too big, we'll give them dollhouses, with pictures on the wall, tiny windows, mommy and daddy and Dick and Jane—no *nukum* or *nimushum*, adopted kids or slew of grandchildren built into this design.

Everyone is staring at the intruder. I look up at the familiar bare light bulb in the middle of the ceiling. All the walls intact, closing in on me. I don't want to be a voyeur.

Hi, I say again, with a smile. *Pushu*. The man looks over to Manipia.

*Auei e?* he asks, wondering if she knows who I am.

I just want to give you this, I say, and I hand a flyer to Manipia. About the *Mamunitau Staianimuanu*. I stumble through these endless syllables: mah-moo-nee-tah-oo stah-ya-nee-mwa-noo. I've been practicing.

*Enkuan miam*, Manipia says. It's good. She carries on, hopefully to explain more. The TV is on and a CNN newscaster is reporting how the Soviet Union is crumbling and it's the end of the Cold War. Great news. No more cowering under school desks to avoid the fallout of nuclear bombings. What's to become of our military industrial complex? Or low-level flight training in Labrador?

A teenage girl with a baby in her arms opens the door from the second bedroom, no larger than the first. The baby takes one look at me and starts screeching at the top of his lungs, a piercing scream. Everyone bursts into laughter.

He thinks I'm a nurse with a big bad needle, I say knowingly and Manipia nods. Next thing I know there's a cup of tea for me on the table. I still have 99 flyers, but I sit for a minute, look over at Manipia.

Good meeting with the *tshishennuats*, I say, and she nods. I don't want to say anything more about the fire. So far people have only talked about it in passing, with eyes squinted, as if they couldn't stand to have their eyes wide open, to see all of anything at once. I'm not much for asking questions to make conversation, which is what most *kakeshauts* do, and are expected to do. I'm no anthropologist. The TV is a distraction. Apparently Charles and Diana are splitting and Madonna has signed a \$60 million deal.

I listen to the conversation around me with its lilting cadence, back and forth. Sometimes they glance over and the heat from the stove envelops me as I fix my eyes on Manipia's hands sewing and weaving beads into a flower pattern on the caribou skin. Arthritic joints swollen on rounded fingers. I imagine these same hands dressing and undressing a baby, setting a snare, kneading bread, awkward with a pencil writing slowly and judiciously, conscious of each letter formed, each word written from the way it sounds. Does she know how to write? The ends of her fingernails are black the whole way around the edge. Veins crisscross the top of each hand.

I made moccasins once, I say. Small ones. Teinish showed me.

Manipia nods. She does not seem impressed.

More breaking news on TV. There must be no one in the band office. Everyone's eyes turn to the television set as a well-coiffed man announces that the police who beat Rodney King in Los Angeles have been acquitted. The video that captured their guilt is playing. The news shifts to South Africa where people have voted to end apartheid and

then Vandana Shiva—how did my all-time favourite environmentalist get on the news—is talking about thirty thousand children dying in her country Sri Lanka every year from bad water. Multiply six kids by five thousand.

The baby is cooing now. I even manage to elicit a smile from him before he buries his face in his mother's shoulder. I'd best get going. The sun has gone down and at this rate I'll never get these flyers delivered. I walk to the next house, and knock on the door.

I keep knocking the whole evening, all over the village surprising people, never sure what I'll find on the other side of the door. It's a quiet night. Most houses are overflowing with people, some are clean and tidy, others not so much, some friendly, others not so much. People walk or drive by me on snowmobiles. One of them stops.

*Auei tshin?* The handsome young driver wants to know who I am and why am I here?

Anna. I try to explain and hand him a flyer. He takes off again as I watch the flyer I gave him twirl into the air in his wake. I pick it up and carry on. Another man stops to talk to me.

I thought you were breaking into my house, he says, pointing to a door.

That's funny.

We exchange names, and I continue on my way.

Will people read the flyer? Can they? Have I wasted my time? It's certain to come in handy as firestarter. I might've at least piqued their curiosity. Why is a *kakeshau ishkuueu* knocking on doors and what is this Gathering Voices? It feels good to walk around and talk to anybody and everybody. Something concrete. Beats waiting around and speculating, which I can spend a lot of time doing.

At the other end of the harbourside row of houses, one is missing. My eyes struggle to make out a few details. The silhouette of a metal kitchen chair with no seat, a wood stove minus the stovepipe, a metal bedframe and scattered other debris.

The house.

I don't want to look—it's all too private, too awful. I'm grateful for the dark night. Manish had told me the story that morning. She'd come into the office while I was photocopying the flyer. She handed me a photo: six small coffins, three white, two gray and a blue one, lined up in a row below the altar at the front of the church. On each coffin was propped a sheet of construction paper with a snapshot of the child, and his or her name printed in marker underneath. A single plastic rose was draped over each coffin and a small red cross embroidered on the casket below it.

I'd laid the photo on the desk.

What happened Manish? I asked. I've only heard what was reported on the radio and in the papers.

For once, they pretty well got it right, she said. It was Valentine's Day and really freezing outside. A charter came in with booze that day and there was a dance at the school, a couple of parties. The kids were out on their own, from three different families; the oldest was twelve and the youngest was nine. They were brothers and sisters, cousins. They were sniffing gas, roaming around. The house was empty so they must have gone in out of the cold. No one's sure how the fire start, but by the time people see the smoke, flames are breaking through the roof. I can still see it, smoke, flames, a lot of flames. They had bags of gas. At first we didn't know who the kids are, trapped inside. There is nothing we can do. No water. No truck, no pump. We have no water.

She'd paused and looked up, staring at nothing.

When the sun come up, we saw the bones, she said.

Our eyes locked and we didn't speak for a long time.

What were their names? I finally asked.

Maniakat, Shinipest, Kanikuen, Simeon, Shunian and the youngest Kiti.

I couldn't fully grasp what she'd just told me. Who ran door to door, panicked, pumped with adrenaline and cortisol, maybe alcohol, screaming, are your children home? Did the purveyor of bad news hold the parents close as they told them? Or maybe they went home with them and sat up all night? Was it morning before they knew for sure, while the sun rose red and blazing, oblivious, a whole village staggering from the blow of the news.

Those are all the parents, sitting in the front row, Manish said, pointing at the picture.

I stared at their faces, as if they might hold answers. They looked so young, huddled and hunched, muffled in their winter jackets, tuques, scarves and beaver hats, as if the multiple layers of attire might stave off the sorrow as well as the cold. How many times does guilt amplify grief? At what point in human evolution would we be able to name it as something we could alter.

Hundreds of people were packed in behind the parents. An ocean of sad and somber faces. Some eyes cursed the camera; others looked down to avoid it. There had to be uncontrolled sobs, small children squirming and screaming everyone's desolation.

Outside, maybe the day was grim and stormy in pitiable sympathy with the pathos within. Had the priest managed to offer words of comfort or did he preach fire and

brimstone? Did he mention this is what happened when you left your children alone at night? I could not imagine what words he might have used. Easier to imagine what followed his words, how everyone including the little children, might have queued down the middle of the church to make their way to the caskets, to say a little prayer by each coffin, to lean over and plant a kiss on the cheeks of all the children to say a final goodbye. But no. After the fire, the coffins would have remained closed.

I wanted to find it in myself to be kind, compassionate. There was no other response. But in my heart was anger and right next to the anger, helplessness. Look after your children. Can we just look after our children?

This picture should go in the report, I finally said to Manish this morning. Lest we forget.

Now as I turn away from the remains of the house and head back to Shustin's, the darkness distorts. Images shape-shift through my tears, as I try to reassemble them into some sensible pattern, familiar, mundane. But there is none, only a zillion stars and no moon. The wind lashes my face. Could there possibly be a God? This is how a broken heart feels. All the people I spoke to tonight, the faces I held in my gaze, calm and fragile. Grief is all around me, hitting, over and over again, and no one is spared.



## VII.

I'm climbing the hill, when I run into Tami. Last time I'd seen him was in Goose Bay when he'd snuck me past the airline agent with her list of passengers on to a chartered plane to Utshimassits, The charter was already at capacity with the volleyball team, so three kids packed into one seat to make room for me. Tami was slick that way.

You coming to the party? he asks now.

What party?

I don't tell him I'm not much in the mood, how the charred remains of the house are clinging to me.

At my house. Come on in. Take a load off, Tami says, smiling a goofy grin, the ear flaps on his beaver hat flapping.

What's the occasion? I ask.

I was at his house with the flyer a mere hour or so ago and don't remember seeing any party. His smile is pretty inviting. I want to go and I shouldn't and it might be useful. It might be good for me, or not. Probably not. I'll have a better time sleeping.

Election party, Tami says. Napaen wants to be chief.

I didn't realize Napaen was also running... I don't know. I was just heading home.

Each word measured. I've vowed to myself I'd avoid this kind of revelry but here I am all kinds of indecisive. Just say no, do it. I've been warned and I should know better. Curiosity killed the cat.

Just one beer. Come on, Tami insists.

We're all lonely for something, wanting to demolish old things in our path. I follow him into his house and a cloud of tobacco smoke. I wish Michael was here; he always jumps at any party invitation. There are those sluggish days when I draw the curtains and he's always trying to get me to go out more. He's good for me that way. The room is blocked and it might be a good time to talk up the inquiry. Maybe not. Two towering stacks of 24 beer stand against the back wall by the couch.

That's a lot of beer. I say.

Imported them myself from Hopedale by komatik, Tami says.

I recognize a few faces. Matshiu from the 'job readiness training' program I taught when I lived in Sheshatshiu. He's a wicked cartoonist. My favourite was the one with the lumber truck snaking its way along the road, followed by a funeral procession of animals: caribou, bears, wolves, foxes, geese, rabbits, moles, partridge, as far as the eye could see, all standing upright like humans.

Shakanin sits at the kitchen table. I met her in Goose Bay at a court hearing over an illegal Innu caribou hunt. I had done my best to translate legalese into plain English for her.

Our way of life is a crime now, she'd said, her turn to translate for me.

She slides over to one side of her chair now, and points to the other half for me to share with her. On the couch sits Pien huddled between Napaen on one side and another large man on the other. All three are still wearing their parkas. Tami slumps himself into a padded chair next to me. I assume it's his wife who just gave up her seat for him and now sits perched on one of the armrests. Handsome Boy who was on the snowmobile earlier,

strums a guitar singing a country and western Innu song, something about the land and *Nimushum*, his grandfather.

When did you get here? Shakanin asks.

Last Friday.

Why are you here?

I'm working with the Band and Innu Nation to get people talking about the fire and what needs to be done.

Another *kakeshau* here to save the Innu, Pien says from across the room, his voice oily and manly. Scowling, same as he was a few days ago at his house.

What are you really doing here? he asks.

What's it to you, Pien? I say. I suck in a sip of my beer, the bottle firmly in my grasp.

That would be *Peter* to you *Ms. Anna*.

I generally try to use people's Innu names. It's what they call each other and even if I've been told to be careful about using Innu nicknames, I'm assuming it's a good thing—like if I use their Innu name our relationship can be different. But as with many things, I haven't talked about it with anybody. I've just tried it on for size. I don't know the rules, but it would seem a person has different names for different contexts. Most Innu have Christian names, a throwback from the Oblates, both an English and an Innu version. I'd heard Tshinetshishepateu once say at a meeting how people used to be given their names by *Katipenimitau* through dreams or singing. I knew this practice was pretty much gone—children now severed so soon after birth from their culture. But some Innu names persist as nicknames. There is *Petapan* and *Pipun* and *Ashini* and *Atikuss*, Dawn

and Winter and Rock and Baby Caribou. Some are harder to remember, like *Tshinetshishepateu* or Early Bird, and *Ketashtipeneu* and *Uinepapeu*, which have never been translated for me, or *Meshkaia* meaning Path. The odd young person has dropped his or her Christian name altogether, like Bernadette, or Penatet in Innu, prefers to be called *Pishum* by all and sundry, not just the Innu, and signs her name like it too. Who wouldn't prefer Sunshine to a saint's name? Some people seem to like it when I use their Innu name, some seem indifferent. And when I write reports, many are okay if I attach their Innu names to one of their quotes, but not their English one. This is the first time anyone has corrected me.

Whatever you wish, *Peter*.

You haven't answered my question.

I just said, we're working on an inquiry, Gathering Voices.

I know what he's doing. He's smart; I have not given him enough credit. I do that with men sometimes.

What the hell is an inquiry? he says. Cut the fancy talk.

Leave her alone, Shakanin says. I shoot her a grateful look.

My brother, she says, pointing her head up towards him. Pien snarls my way again and resumes his banter with Napaen.

How are your parents doing? I ask Shakanin.

Worried. About their grandchildren. Since the fire. Worried about me. My drinking.

She lifts her bottle of beer into the air to punctuate her statement.

I should go on home out of it, she adds.

Yeah, me too.

A toddler toddles in the midst of it all, his big sister, who must be around seven, in tow keeping an eye on him. The boy is playful, looks around the room with intelligent eyes, like he was born whole and awake. He wears only a diaper. He runs and stops and jumps and twirls, stretching the limits of his body, his sister follows almost in step, like in a synchronized dance.

Hey *kakeshau ishkueu*, I'm still waiting to find out why you're here, Pien says.

People are always talking about me as *kakeshau ishkueu* in my presence, but they use my name when they're talking to me directly. Except for towering Tapit, he calls me Shorty sometimes. Affectionately, I think.

I'm a government spy, collecting classified information, I say, to gales of laughter.

Apparently I can be hilarious and entertaining. Michael would be proud of me. I can do this. I can do this party.

*Tshekuan?* A woman from across the room has missed the joke. I'm impressed with the number of people keen to translate that statement. Sounds like there's a debate on about 'spy' and 'classified'. But Pien is clearly not impressed.

I spot a book at my feet, half sticking out from under Tami's chair, and I lean over to pick it up. Books are often my refuge and solace. They're rare around here. I've only ever seen Newfoundland joke books, the odd *Old Farmer's Almanac*, and Georg Henriksen's *Hunters of the Barrens*. I'm holding Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.

I've only vaguely heard about this book, the title always makes me pause. I know it's about colonization, which apparently he describes as a form of violence, and how it's not only the land that gets colonized, but also people's minds and souls.

I leaf through the pages; he's thrown in a poem, some kind of a musical work, and case studies. Not the usual dry academic fare. The cover has an image of a black man with a cage around his head. The cage is white and the man holds a key in his hand. I wonder if I could borrow this book. I should seriously read it, and what better place in which to do that?

I look up and the toddler has picked up a roll of duct tape. I watch as he rolls it across the floor towards me. He runs after it, but I grab and hand it back. Just as he reaches to catch it, I pull it away behind my back, and magically it reappears in my other hand. He squeals with delight, reaches guilelessly again and I hand it over. He snatches it and decides to sit at my feet to discover what else it can do. A bracelet, an anklet, a hat. Oops.

Somehow this child at my feet makes me feel safe. I leaf through the book, slowly turning pages to grasp the odd sentence. The language is dense, *the oppressors' language*, Fanon might call it—imperialism and phenomena and pacification, pathology and liberation, genocide and bourgeoisie and comrades. How about *epidermalization*? A simmering anger burns off each page.

I pause on a random page to read a few lines: *Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to oversimplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people.* That would be true around here.

Another page reads how the West has corrupted leaders of the colonized state, making them put their own interests above the interests of the people. And further down it says: *Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the*

*unreality of his 'nation,' and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure.* Efforts to get the Innu to admit the unreality of their 'nation' is not working so well here in *Nitassinan*. The Innu have used this argument in court—they honestly believe that this is their land, they've never signed a treaty, and Canada's law is a foreign law. And they've won at the colonizer's game, at least in court, setting precedence across the country.

Shakanin stands and walks over to the fridge. She must be looking for another cold one. I want to say, go on home out of it, but I'm one to talk. She closes the fridge door. Someone has pasted a poster onto it with masking tape. The poster is all dominant colours: red, blue and yellow with tiny little pictures of food: bread, eggs, lettuce, bananas, a carton of fresh milk, a bottle of ketchup, a fresh ear of corn, with 'What kind of food should you keep in the bottom of the refrigerator?' and 'What kind of food should you keep in the top of the refrigerator?' A burning issue up here. When was the last time they saw a fresh ear of corn?

A couple dozen or more beer bottles are now strewn across the table amidst the largest ashtray I ever saw, and a woman across the room butts her cigarette out on the floor with her boot. The decibel level in the room has risen. And I'm still here.

I escape back into the book. I might like to argue with Fanon about some of this. Would I get away with it, being of the *colonizer* class? I'm pretty sure he'd make mincemeat out of me. Still from my limited experience in the Innu world, I might try to argue that decolonization does not always involve a violent process. *At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the Native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.*

I'd have to get Penute to discuss this with Fanon. Penute's got the language and the experience to convince him that the non-violent protests of the Innu have accomplished the same thing—restored their self-respect. Although there is the problem of Canada sending in police and soldiers more than once to keep the Innu and others in check. And Fanon would likely come back and point out all the ways the violence is being turned inward.

This your book? I ask Tami.

Hans gave me that. For my bedtime reading, he told me.

You mean MUN anthropologist Hans from Germany?

Yeah, he photocopy it too and pass it around to some other guys.

You're one of the 'chosen ones?' I tease. A light and cheery read, isn't it?

I try to read some of it, Tami says. All those words: comrades and colonization?

Hans tell me what it's about, something like the black man need to be free from wanting to be white. I don't want to be white. I'm Innu.

I think you'd like some of his other ideas, I say.

Maybe. I don't read books very much.

Does Penute have a copy too? I ask. Is that where he gets those words, why he talks like that sometimes at meetings?

Yeah, that's why Innu people walk out sometimes, Tami says.

A lot of white people don't like that language either. People get called communists for talking like that.

I don't tell him the story of John Crosbie calling me a commie in public and more than once, or about the national magazine article on the Innu and low-level flying that



referred to me as a young anthropologist—which I'm not, and how I was 'of Marxist obedience'—give me a break, and spreading misinformation, manipulating the Natives. That's funny. I'm usually the one feeling manipulated. You'd think the journalist might have bothered to talk to me. I'd love to see my CSIS file.

What are communists, anyway? Tami asks.

It's what people who are trespassing and destroying your land will call you if you tell them you don't like it, I say.

I take a sip, the beer is bitter, lodges itself in my throat before I can swallow it. The red scare. Redbaiting. Red Indian lover. People believe that to hang out with the Innu is suspect. You must be an outsider. You must be a deviant, or disturbed, radical and more than likely a missionary. Or you're running away from something, maybe a new age romantic, an alcoholic, a codependent, a reject. Definitely a lost soul. You must be a bleeding heart. A needy bleeding heart. They bloody well scare me with their red scare.

My grandfather talk about this stuff all the time, Tami says. I rather listen to his stories. He say the same thing. How white people keep stealing our land. And our kids' minds too, with their school.

Handsome Boy has sidled over now and sits in the now vacant chair across the table. He looks like he's had one too many, no maybe three or four. I hadn't noticed when he was playing his guitar.

That's enough philosophy, he pronounces. He's been eavesdropping.

*Auei tshin?* I ask him.

Samish, he says. Hey, my band wrote a song. About the kids in the fire. Wanna hear it?

I nod. He brushes the strings of his guitar with a pick, a slow strum with a chord progression reminiscent of Kashtin's melancholic *Akua Tuta*, a warm and lush sound. He hums a couple bars before he begins to sing a plaintive lament. He can really play, even with a few too many. For a moment the room goes quiet.

Beautiful... and sad, I say when he's done. Even if I can't understand the words.

Sad thing that happen here, he says.

Can you write the words down for us to put in the report?

Sure thing, he says. So, where's your husband?

The chatter in the room has ramped up again.

My boyfriend's in St. John's, I say.

It really is time for me to take my exit. I can see where this could go, but before I can move Samish stands. The alcohol has contorted his beautiful face; his eyes are puffy and bloodshot. He walks right over to me, his guitar swinging cavalierly by his side, a grace in his swaying stagger. He leans in close, very close to whisper into my ear—as if the whole room isn't looking now, doesn't know what he's about to say.

Let's go to your tent, he says. His breath is laced with tobacco smoke. Alcohol emanates from his pores, mixed with an acrid underarm smell. He's right on top of me now.

No, and get off me, I say.

I can tell from the way people are looking that he will pay for this. He likely won't remember but he will be reminded and he won't like it. I'm trying to shove him away, my heartbeat pulsing in my temples. I should have left when the going was good. Teeth clenched, I force him back, my hand on his chest, my head tilted forward to shield him

off. I push again and he leans back in, and I push, again and again, in a back and forth dance. I hear laughter and a couple of beer bottles clinking, and then a crescendo of cheering. He will not easily live this one down. There may be a reckoning for me too.

Get off me. The dryness in my throat is thick and hoarse.

The outside door bangs against the wall. A very large and loud woman wearing an oversized camouflage hunting jacket barges in from outside. Heads turn and watch as she marches straight over to the action in our corner. I can't understand what she's saying. She must have been at another party. Her eyes look wild and mismatched.

Careful of the kids! I say.

She teeters around them as the children move to the side, grabs Samish with two hands, hauls him right off me, and as I'm thanking her I see that she's trying to rip off his t-shirt, one of the new Band Council ones with the Innu Nation flag silk-screened across the front.

*Pets mini*, she says. She wants the t-shirt with its green, white and blue bands running horizontally across the front, superimposed with caribou antlers bracketing a snowshoe in the middle. Goose bumps spread across Samish's now bare and hairless chest and his tiny nipples stand erect.

I finally get up to leave, step around Samish and the missus and the kids.

Hey *kakeshau ishkueu*, you done researching the 'psychology' of the drunk Innu? Pien is shouting now. I can't see him through the crowd or the backdrop of thoughts now whirling around my mind, disjointed, confused, elusive. I beeline it to the door.

And where's your man? he asks.

He's on a roll now, wants to make sure he gets me good before I'm gone.

Or you too good for men? Are you a fucking lesbian? Go the fuck home. You just here to stir up trouble with our women.

Thanks for the beer, I say under my breath to no one in particular. See ya.

Such a lame *kakeshau* thing to say. I could've at least told Pien to lay off. Or asked him what was wrong with lesbians? I run into Napaen in the porch, hauling a large beef bucket.

My secret recipe, he says. I assume he means a homebrew concoction: sugar, molasses and yeast stirred into boiling water and left overnight to ferment.

Samish has followed me. Shirtless, he squeezes into me against the side of the doorway, his arms trapping me. I tilt my head sideways to escape his breath, alcohol-laced, still metabolizing, a hint of the sweet and sour fermentation of stomach acids and sweat distilling, like fruit cocktail gone bad. The paint on the doorway is peeling.

Get off me. Let me go. I say. Go put a shirt on.

You lonely? I make you not lonely. I wan...

You want to let me go.

Napaen is just inside the door, he says something our way, loud enough for everyone to hear and the room cracks up. There is an edge in their laughter and Samish winces.

I slip under his arm and make my getaway, pick up my gait and don't look back.

I can be drawn to all the wrong things, settle into nothingness, a kind of non-being and I can accept that. I know drinking, being drunk. First you feel warm and cozy, one giant vibrating being, then everyone in the room is your best friend, you head for the bathroom and forget them forever. You stand up and lose your balance but that doesn't

stop you from hitting the dance floor. You stumble into people, or spill your drink all over them, the entire freaking world is suddenly beautiful, you're on top of it and ready to go to another party. Then your hearing dulls and everything gets slow-mo, and your skin is super-sensitive, the alcohol is visiting your brain, it's settled in, you're starved, and then you throw up and hopefully you're not alone and you make it home to your own bed without blacking out or waking up next to a stranger. And the next morning, it's pheww that was close.

Fight or flight. There is a loneliness in both, and all I want is to be left alone.

I scurry up the hill to Shustin's. I don't look over my shoulder. This is why the women wouldn't let me stay in the tent. A barely discernible howling of wolves follows me home. I walk by Manish's house and her lights are out. Shustin's door is locked. I knock hard and again. They're not opening to drunks.

Shustin, it's just me, Anna, I call out. I feel bad about waking the household. Finally I hear the click of the deadbolt slipping back into the door.

Sorry, I was just at a party at Tami's.

Go to bed, she says.

She's looking crooked. Not impressed.

I'm exhausted. In the bathroom I scoop out cold water from the bucket, pour it into the washbasin and splash some on my face. I look into the small mirror hanging on the wall. I splash more water and as I close my eyes, I can see again the charred remains of the woodstove, the skeletons of the chair and bedframe. I dry my face off and head to bed. I burrow under the blankets. The cold of my sadness creeps in and settles into bed with me.

## VIII.

It's Monday and the election has come and gone, uneventful, no calamity or major collective hangover to keep us from getting down to work. Maybe a tiny undercurrent of bitter aftermath, but I am not party to it. Napaen, the defeated candidate, has been given a job with the Inquiry to appease him for his loss.

He'll talk to the drinkers, Manish says. Her first decision as new Chief. What would the elders think?

I'm not thrilled, hoping he'll work out, at least stay out of our way and not badmouth us too much. I'm not holding my breath.

It's time to get down to business. I've been here for three weeks and feeling desperate to be 'doing' something. But as luck would have it, a March blizzard has moseyed into town and shut down the school, store, Band and Innu Nation offices. I trudge through blinding winds, head butting against drifting snow to let Shustin, Sepastien, Kanani and Napaen know we need to get started.

9:00 a.m. tomorrow, I say, like the predictable *kakeshau* I am.

I manage to get a key for the Innu Nation office from Kanani's daughter, who works there. Our team is about to invade her space. I reorganize chairs and tables in the main room, haul a large rectangular one to the centre, pull up a bunch of chairs and drag the other tables along the windowed wall. I pick up garbage, throw coffee mugs into my knapsack to bring them to my tent to wash. I've moved back now that the election is over.

Random sheets of paper are scattered on all surfaces—documents from lawyers, the Assembly of First Nations, Indian and Northern Affairs, and an audited statement by Barnes and Associates. Many are scrawled and doodled, people's names written over and over like they were practicing cursive writing. 'CONFIDENTIAL' is stamped on the right hand corner of some. I stack them all into a pile on a corner table.

Also strewn about are copies of *Windspeaker*, the national Aboriginal newspaper, but 'national' like the *Globe and Mail*—only the rare story from this province ever gets covered. March 16, 1992, a very recent issue. In this paper it's Elijah Harper and not Clyde Wells who scuttled the Meech Accord. With a soft-spoken 'no' at the back of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, he'd sunk the latest of Canada's attempts to pencil out constitutional rights for its First Peoples.

The headline below the paper's masthead reads "Healing Wounds from Bitter Memories in Kanesatake." I skim through the article. Two years after the 78-days standoff, women are calling for services to help people heal from the trauma and divisions in the community. The Mohawks are Kanien'kehà :ka of the Haudenosaunee, a nation ripped off multiple times over the last three centuries, first by the religious Order of the St. Sulpice, then government and finally the town of Oka. There's no reference to an 'Oka crisis', but a quote by a 16-year-old girl, stabbed by a soldier's bayonet when the army stormed the blockade, is highlighted in large text and giant quotation marks: "I was with my 4-year-old sister. I still have nightmares."

I'd followed that story really closely and I don't remember ever hearing about that stabbing.

There's a picture of a baby-faced warrior staring down a baby-faced soldier surrounded by tall pines in dappled sunlight, and next to is a line that someone has underlined with a red pen: For the Mohawks, it was one land grab too many.

Always it's about the land. People here mock 'land claims.' *Who* is claiming the land? Old Shimun had ranted about this at recent land claims meetings with government officials, including a couple of Ministers, after the lawyers had given their lowdown on the land claims process.

It is for *Tshishe-utshimau*—the government—to show us how he has walked and lived on this land, old Shimun said. Does the government know the different lakes and rivers and mountains, has he even seen them? The trees and plants and the medicines? The government needs to show us how he knows the animals and *ishpitenitamun*—how to show respect to them. I know every parcel of this land, from Uashkaikan to Uashat.

There was nothing of the braggart in his voice. Imagine, from Fort Chimo to Sept Iles!

Did your grandfather tell you stories about this land? he'd asked the Ministers. Did your people give a name to every stream on this land?

There was anger in his voice and there was love, also conveyed in the translation by Penute, his voice rising, intense. Did love for one's homeland carry any weight in the land claims process? What of the Gods and Spirits? Oral testimony? The Innu cite their references too: always they specify the person from whom they heard the story.

The winter following the blockade at Kanasetake, I'd stayed with Penute and his family while I worked on putting together a bilingual community newspaper about land



rights negotiations. His son Pashen was still living at home, with his girlfriend and their new baby. Pashen was the one who brought it up.

What you think of Oka? he'd asked me, sitting on the couch bouncing his baby on his lap.

I went to a powwow there, in Kanasatake. Those Pines are amazing, I said. I'm a tree hugger, I'd fight for them.

And they wanted to bulldoze the cemetery.

Yeah, to build a golf course, I said. It's crazy.

What you think of the Warriors? Pashen looked over at me, his eyes seeking mine to read my reaction, as he planted a kiss on the top of his baby's head.

I'll be honest. They scare me.

There's guys all over the country joining the military, training to be soldiers. Then they go home Warriors to their rez. To defend their lands.

There were lots of kisses when he'd said this. Little feather kisses pecked all over the top of the baby's head, as he continued to look me directly in the eye. I didn't know anyone from here in the military.

But they'll be up against the Canadian military, I'd said. Sure there were a thousand soldiers deployed with tanks at Kanasetake. What chance do they stand?

I was imagining my nose in the baby's fine hair, inhaling her sweet smell too.

At least they go down fighting, Pashen said, looking away. I'd started playing peekaboo with the baby, eliciting a two-toothed grin, then a cackle of laughter.

I don't trust guns, I said. Even if I like the idea of the Warriors taking directions from the clan mothers.

Pashen just smiled at this.

I wasn't entirely convinced about this chain of command, but what did I know?

No doubt chain of command was a foreign concept anyway.

The baby had started to fuss, a squeak of a whine, then insistent and building with each protest.

There must be a better way, I continued.

But I didn't know what that was. I'd been at national meetings where Aboriginal leaders had talked about how they dismantle the cities on their lands. In their mind. I had thought they were speaking metaphorically. But what were they to do? What about the Innu and their paperless culture required to document their land use within the government's process—someone else's game with someone else's rules. And in the meantime, anyone at all who wanted to stake a claim for mining anywhere in *Nitassinan*, only needed to fill out a few forms. There are 250,000 claims registered now. Easy peasy. No lawyers needed.

Yet Innu protests so far have all been peaceful. I'd stood outside the chain link fence of the Goose Bay airport a couple of years ago to take photos while women carrying babies, elders singing hymns, along with men, children and youth broke through to walk onto the runways and face off against NATO F-18s about to take off. These planes—killing machines—are designed to fly below radar to reach their targets, but to hear the Canadian military talk about clinical strikes, minimal collateral damage and soft targets (that would be human bodies), you'd swear they were providing a guide for proper etiquette, Amy Vanderbilt military style, the way things ought to be.

*Mamu, mamu.* Stay together, hold hands, Nush had said to the children as they crawled through the hole in the fence. Be good. On the runway she waved an Innu flag and the planes were stopped in their tracks. Watching all this I'd laughed through my fear, my heart pumping madly. The planes had turned around and headed back to the hangar. And I'd clicked away at the joy and camaraderie, so much giggling as soldiers dragged bodies, sitting on the ground and refusing to budge, onto a bus. No one was hurt, but a few were arrested. There was honour in being a ringleader, even behind bars. Back at the camp, Penute and Tapit quoted Ghandi to the CBC reporter, a sonorous language of 'civil disobedience' and 'reclaiming our homeland.'

Where peace groups failed, the Innu managed to bring attention to the lunacy of the Cold War. I seethe with paralyzing rage at the thought of this useless senseless ridiculous multi-billion dollar manifestation of patriarchal paranoia with its killer planes, toxic fuel, top guns, bombs, bombing ranges, smart and virile young men, someone's grandsons, sons, husbands, fathers, friends, lovers, even a few women nowadays. The waste of resources, wealth, genius. Thoughts I'm not allowed to have. Quick, put the lid on those. Too strident. Hysterical.

Hysteria is grossly under-rated.

You're being naïve, I'm told. You need to be realistic.

Why not try unreality for a change? Reality isn't working out so good.

The Innu were proud of their actions, but no closer than the Kanien'kehà :ka to settling any kind of land rights. But maybe the protests had made this inquiry possible? How people had got the strength and the confidence to attempt this courageous introspection?

I fold the newspaper in half. My reverie has distracted me. A dull headache has edged in and set up residence behind my eyes. Time for some fresh air. I put the newspaper down, gather up all the copies and stack them next to the pile of random paper.

I reach for one of the rolls of flip chart paper I've brought, and remove the elastic. I tear off sheets and tape multiple ones together until I can plaster one whole wall with them. There is possibility in large blank sheets of paper.

There is only one word for paper in *Innu-aimun*, *mashinanikan*—whether it's a book or document, report, court order, ticket, invoice, government form, poster, report card, flyer, newspaper, magazine, receipt, scribbler or journal. I should go home and map out an agenda for tomorrow. In my *mashinanikana*.

IX.

My agenda can wait. I'm off tobogganing with Shustin's daughter Epa this afternoon, in a world of whirling and swirling snowflakes. I moved back into the tent yesterday, and already I am missing the ease and warmth and laughter of their family cocoon, so I dropped by for a visit. It's also called procrastination. Shustin looked rather preoccupied preparing a caribou stew and *pakueshikai* for her parents, while the two boys tormented their little sister to entertain themselves. Might as well make myself useful. Only Epa bit when I suggested sliding to the three kids.

Epa is now bundled up in a boy's black snowsuit, her face framed in fox fur someone has sewed onto the hood, and a lime green scarf wrapped around her neck. I tuck in the ends of the scarf just to be safe. She plops herself down on the toboggan first and I squat and manoeuvre myself on the back of the sled, my legs stretched out on either side of her. We burrow a track down the hill and with each run tear down at increasing speeds. Epa's squeals are bloodcurdling.

Do you like Medusa, Epa shouts out to me at the top of her lungs as we rip down the hill yet again, hanging on tight, snowflakes smacking us in the face.

You mean the woman with the snakes for hair on her head? I ask.

We've landed at the bottom of the hill, Epa sprawled across me, her boot dangerously close to my nose.

Yeah.

No. She's creepy.

Epa slides her whole body over my head to get up.

She scary, she says.

How do you know about Medusa?

I see a picture in a book. What about people with black skin?

You mean, do I like them?

Yeah.

We head back up the hill.

Sure, why not? I say.

Me too. Epa pauses for a moment. She seems deep in thought.

Did those kids do something bad? she asks.

I don't register.

What kids? I ask.

The ones who die in the fire?

Oh of course you mean those kids. No Sweetie, it was not their fault.

The small girl inside of me is triggered, the one always on the verge of crying these days, the one who needs me to do a lot of crying for her.

Maybe it was the *atshen* come get them, Epa says. Or maybe somebody light fire to save the people.

A fire to save the people?

*Nimushum* tell me the story. The Grandfather Eagle was hungry, but his claws was no good.

Epa has curled her own claws, and is pawing at me as she continues her story.

The man make the Grandfather Eagle claws sharp for him so then he can hunt again. Now Grandfather Eagle claws so sharp he catch five caribou with one claw and five caribou with other claw.

Epa has thrown off her mitts and is showing me the five fingers on each of her hands.

Holee, I say.

Epa's eyes are wide open, as if she's only just heard this story for the first time herself. We stand close caressed by the falling snow. I am marveling at Epa's English, how quickly she's picked it up with only a couple years of schooling. Television must have helped. Or not?

The Grandfather give him all the caribou, she continues, because the man save his life.

He was a good Eagle, I say.

Yes, but his wife, Grandmother Eagle, she is bad, very bad. She eat the people. She try to kill the man. She throw him on a big rock. But he not dead so she take him back to the nest.

What happened?

The grandfather say he help the man, but he can't. Grandmother Eagle his wife fly faster than him. The man say he make fire in the nest. He tell Grandfather Eagle to stay away, but Grandfather Eagle say he stay and burn to help the man, because the man help him. That's what happen. Grandfather Eagle die in the fire.

What happened to the man?

When the fire gone, he take the back of Grandfather Eagle and put grass and rocks and make his back full. Like he filling a bag. Then he take a knife and cut the back in many pieces and throw the pieces all around.

Epa is swinging her hand around, throwing imaginary pieces.

The pieces turn into small animals, like *uapush* and *nitshik*<sup>u</sup>, she says.

And then?

The man go home and tell wife now he must save the people because Grandfather Eagle save him. The end, she says with a self-satisfied exclamation mark.

Wow you tell a mean story, Epa.

I don't ask her to explain what the story has to do with the fire, and the children, and saving the people? Too big a question and the snowfall has subsided and the sky is clearing. The moon appears behind a cloud against the blue sky. It holds itself in the sky beaming down on us.

Is it time for hot chocolate? I ask.

*Ehe*. Beat you to the house.

And she does.

I've been here for sixteen days. This is what I get paid for.



X.

I've stayed awake till the wee hours, tossed and turned for a couple of nights now, mulling over what we should do, as a team, to pull off this inquiry. The red digit number on the clock shifts relentlessly, one minute after the other, and still no sleep. The wind is banging on the window, the moon slowly crawling its way across the sky. I still need to exorcise 'inquiry' from my mind, expel thoughts of judges, a panel of experts, lawyers' arguments and witness testimonies. There will be no cross-examination.

This time I'd not bothered to go to the library before heading up here. I knew there'd be no handbook, no how-to manual on public inquiries. But I should have come more prepared. Was it confidence, audacity or common sense that had me here now so ill-prepared? Keep the slate blank, I'd thought, but it seemed like a better idea back in St. John's.

I've read volumes of books and journal articles full of theory and lingo and lofty ideas. I've parachuted into this village more than once filled with purpose and a spectacular plan. Like an alien from Mars. The spaceship touched down. Now what? What was I thinking, I'd soon realize, and sheesh that language and jargon, it'll never work.

Please let this not be another one of those times, when I wait around for people to tell me what to do, and they wait for me to tell them what to do.

Silence may be my plan and I will execute it rigorously.

I'm forgetting the elders' meeting. That went so well.

Someone is up and making their way to the bathroom. A door squeaks, a little quiet and then the lid on the honey bucket placed back. Door squeak again and footsteps in the hallway, and Shustin and husband are whispering through the walls for a long time, easy volleys of whispers, back and forth.

The last time I'd whispered was at my father's bedside the night before he died. It was my turn to spend the night at the hospital. I'd arrived early evening and as always I'd rushed to hug him and I'd hung on for a wordless moment to keep the tears at bay. I took hold of one of his hands, turned in on itself like the distorted pose of a modern dance. His limbs had shrunk to bone. His skin was mottled and no longer fit his body. His knees, his toes, his hands had turned blue. He smelled of soured scallion, the odor of a body no longer able to eat, whose tissues were shutting down, kidneys failing, the smell of infection he could no longer cough up. For days I'd been leaving the hospital each day with a pain in my side absorbed from him, a fist clenched around multiple organs. I wanted morphine too.

He could barely speak, now relegated to monosyllables. There was no more television, no pills and waiting for the tablets to labour down his throat to make sure he didn't choke. Only an IV and a bedpan. Mostly he slept, his breathing raspy, irregular, sometimes with pauses of thirty or forty seconds, than a feeble gasp. I'd swabbed glycerine in his mouth to keep it from drying out, like the nurse had shown us. She'd coddled us, the whole family, sensing each of our failings and letting us know it was okay, we were good, doing our best.

Hearing is the last sense to go, she'd said.

That night I'd leaned in close and whispered all the things I'd never talked to him about: why I split up with his favourite of my boyfriends, why I went through that phase where I shaved my head and not my legs, about my canoe trip down the Zambezi River and the family of elephants cavorting and showering each other with their trunks, how I wanted kids but I might not be able to have them, how this country was going to hell in a hand basket especially with Mulroney's free trade agreement, how I couldn't refuse invitations from the Innu to work with them, how I forgave him for that licking when I was sixteen, how death must be the absence of those you love.

And before sitting back into the chair again and laying my head down on the hand bar alongside the bed in search of sleep, I'd whispered one last thing.

You can go now. It's okay.

I had figured my way through that moment, so surely I can do this now. Time to take a few deep breaths. Savasana, the corpse pose in yoga, total relaxation. Still the mind, return to my breath, breath in and breath out, focus on the breath.

The body is more willing than the (flailing) mind.

I am the champion of second guessing myself. Creeping Self Doubt. A kind of anticipation of bad karma, a foreboding of 'the shouldawouldacouldas' that are about to exact revenge. It's too late. I'm doomed. Come on, you did your best under the circumstances. I can convince myself that this stringent standard of having prescience is not within the human realm of possibility. Still deep inside my body, I feel like no matter what I've done, how hard I've tried, it's never good enough.

Where's my audacity when I need it most?

Like when I'd worked in 'job readiness training' with Sheshatshiu adults a few

years back, that interminable fall of 1984. It was a program that allowed governments to volley people between unemployment insurance benefits, training allowances and welfare. The irony of me teaching people here any kind of 'life skills' was not lost on me or my students. I was meant to help them with their 'problem-solving, communication skills, personal qualities and work ethic, interpersonal and teamwork skills.' I had them journaling and doing role plays, prided myself in being a 'popular educator.' They were also meant to learn how to put together resumes and how to do interviews. All this to get them ready to apply for jobs that did not exist from here to kingdom come. The few jobs in the community tended to be patronage appointments by those in power, maybe with a similar protocol to the way they shared the kill from a hunt. Or so I imagined. I gave all my students A's. They should have been grading me. I was the one being trained.

For one assignment, my student Matshiu, the cartoonist, had handed me a sketch he'd drawn of two Innu guys in a canoe out at sea headed for an oil rig in the distance. In a bubble one guy was saying to the other: *All that role-playing and drawing pictures really help me get a job on this rig.* He thought I'd be pissed off, but I just laughed.

You should get a job with the Labradorian. They need a cartoonist, I told him.

Mostly be kind, that's what I thought my job was; don't let kindness slide through the cracks. Never. But I wasn't trying to be kind when I'd said that to him. I meant it. I should have helped him with his letter, but he didn't ask, I didn't want to be too pushy, I should have been pushy.

Now I need to take a chance. Do something radical. Push a little harder, do some theatre of the oppressed. I should have brought a video camera to produce material to play on the community channel. I need to expand my bag of tricks, surprise myself.

But it's not about me. This whole thing. Don't freak them out, don't let their eyes glaze over for a second, well maybe a minute, then step back and check in. Don't assume anything, especially that my English is making sense. Find a way to earn their trust and mostly convince them to trust themselves.

Just before I came up here this time a friend did a 'runes' reading for me. I'm curious about my pre-Christian roots, reclaiming my own tribe, before my ancestors were colonized by the Romans, when we might have lived much like the Innu. I've been known to gather with women and chant and drum and celebrate solstices and equinoxes, and cry for our Mother Earth. My friend had directed me to select a stone for the reading.

Glide your hand over these rocks and pick the stone that is calling to you, she said.

I'd picked one randomly.

Know that you do not know what to do, was the message. No kidding. Pre-patriarchal wisdom.

There is no escaping that tomorrow I need to facilitate something—start to do a kind of training, although that would presume that I know what we need to be doing. Develop a plan, and maybe practice doing interviews, map out a list of people to talk to, who would do what? Who could do what might be the most important. Start there. Figure it out. Together. Build on what people know. Find the right words for the questions, especially in *Innu-aimun*. Clear, precise.

Mostly this is not a performance. I need faith, not answers. Let this not be a failure. Let my white ass not do further harm.

I just hope people show up in the morning.

XI.

I'm thinking it would be good to spend some time ourselves talking about what's happened to the *Mushuau* Innu over the last twenty years or so, I say to the group. Our own little inquiry or Gathering Voices. Amongst ourselves. This'll warm us up so we can help other people tell their stories.

I've just cajoled the team from their chairs against the wall, sitting as far from each other and me as possible, to come close into a circle around the table, where we can all see each other. I've done the preamble, why we're here and a review of the elders' meeting and their mandate for us. And what my role is. They know what the nurse does, what the priest or teacher does, and the social worker, but I'm a different kind of creature.

I'm here to listen and learn, to try to understand, like you, and to help the group, all of us figure out how to do this job, I'd told them.

Sepastien's chin is pointed up, a kind of grimace on his face, the same expression he's had since he pulled up his chair. It's not a nod or a no, nor a smirk or a shrug, but I know he's not convinced. That might be an expensive Montreal Canadian hockey jersey he's got on. Napaen, still wearing his trapper hat, the flaps tied up, looks downright snarly.

Sound good? I ask, in spite of the body language.

Shustin translates for Kanani, and she's nodding.

All four are staring at me.

I'll try to write what you say on this paper, I say. Or I might draw it. And if I forget something, you can come up and fill in the blanks. Any questions?

No response.

What do you want to start with? I ask.

The school, Sepastien says.

I write 'SCHOOL' in the middle of a sheet and circle it, then add a simple line drawing of a sprawling building, trying to figure out where I might put the door and the windows.

What's the Innu word for it?

*Katshishkutamatshcutshuap.* Sepastien sounds it out syllable by syllable as

I write it in the circle.

By the way, maybe you want to take notes too, I say. It'll be good practice.

I point to the pads of paper and pens and markers on the table and they all grab some.

So let's talk about what's happened since the school came into your lives? I ask.

School is English and the kids don't learn Innu culture, Sepastien pitches in.

I hope he's not going to monopolize this process, but I say nothing. I learned the hard way that time Tapit told me off at a public meeting, when I suggested someone else might want a chance to speak.

You *kakeshauts* always think you can tell us what to do, he'd said.

Many people had walked out of the meeting during his admonishment, but then they'd slowly trickled back in once he sat down again, and afterwards some had made a

point of letting me know it was good to try to include others in the conversation. Maybe Tapit was just happy to monopolize, but even with a suggestion, I might have imposed, not hedged enough. Everyone listens to the hunter as he gives an account of his exploits. No one interrupts.

I write *no Innu culture* and draw a line to connect it to *SCHOOL*.

Can you explain that? I ask. And what happened then?

And I'm recording how there are no Innu teachers and only Innu assistants, no Innu books, history, geography or legends and games, almost no *Innu-aimun* instruction. Shustin talks about how *kakeshau* teachers have no experience, and how they hit kids with a ruler, how they explain things over and over, but no one understands because kids don't speak English, especially in the younger grades. I'm surprised because what about Epa who does speak a lot of English? I want to ask what it means that a small Innu girl can now speak English so well?

I'm drawing a little stick girl and boy with question marks over their heads, and a kid with a bubble over his head dreaming about caribou while the teacher is talking about giraffes. Then I draw a small stick person kid punching another one in the eye, his fist a small circle, and another kid running away from the school because she's quit.

Drawings I've learned are less likely to get lost in translation.

Kanani has been mostly quiet to this point, whispering an occasional comment in Shustin's ear, followed by a discussion between the two and eventually she says, *enkuan miam*, once she feels caught up. She seems in a bit of a trance, doodling with red, yellow and blue markers, drawing Innu graphics like the ones on the dress I wore in my dream



about performing at the LSPU hall. Sometimes she writes a few notes, and every so often she looks up when someone's speaking, and laughs and nods at the right moments.

The little bit of translating makes it easy to keep up with the recording.

Napaen, arms crossed, stares at the wall, rocking his chair back and forth making me nervous that he'll fall back. He's removed his hat and is sporting a Rod Stewart kind of haircut. He has yet to say anything.

There are leaks in the school and no running water, Shustin translates for Kanani. If this was *kakeshau* school, they shut it down.

Kids can't learn because they're hungry, Kanani continues. And they can't go in the country with their parents if they're in school.

Innu are like foreigners in their own school, Sepastien says.

What do you think Napaen, I finally ask. His hair is thick and assertive.

This is our school, not the *kakeshau* teacher school, he says. He's still rocking his chair back and forth, back and forth. As a child, my mother might have smacked me for doing that. We are breathing in his words, the impossible truth of them. I wait to see if he has anything else to add.

What about sexual abuse by teachers and brothers? he says after a long pause. Girls and boys. Write that down on your paper.

Do you want to say more about that? I ask, as I'm writing. I won't make a drawing of this one.

There's only cover-ups, every time. People talk to the principal and write letters to the school board, but they do nothing. First the *kakeshauts* take our land, then our

language, then our kids. They take our kids and do whatever they want. That's how the school change us.

I don't know how to respond. I want to say I'm sorry. Everyone is looking straight ahead and we sit for a moment in silence. Sepastien is leaning forward holding his head in his hands, his elbows propped on the table,

Does anyone else have something to add to what Napaen has shared? I ask finally.

It's true what he say, Sepastien says, looking up, shifting on his chair.

*Mishimenitakuan*, I say. It is sad. I wish I knew the word for horrible. *Tshishue matshen*, I add. It is bad, which doesn't quite cut it either.

Did people go the police? I ask.

Napaen mutters. I wish I knew what he was saying, but I dare not ask.

Time for a break, he says, as he pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket.

I'll plug in the kettle, I say. Can we all come back in fifteen?

Too bad you can't draw, Sepastien says as he sidles up to me and grabs a cup and teabag, plugs in the kettle before I get a chance.

We reconvene and Kanani is sitting at attention. I can tell she has something to say.

We were talking about abuse of the children, I say. The worst kind of abuse. Shall we continue from where we left off?

Kanani begins her story like she's ignoring my question, her words like they were practiced, indisputable. There are some Innu who speak, voice an opinion, tell a story, and although I cannot understand the words, I can tell what they speak is poetry.

This could take a while and how is it that I still can't speak this language? Lord knows I've tried. I used to carry a notebook with me, wrote new words down, constantly queried children who didn't mind repeating a word over and over until I got it right. And they didn't laugh at me.

Apparently I have limited capacity to remember what seems like an endless string and configuration of the same syllables since there are only twelve letters in the Innu alphabet—four vowels with maybe twice that many sounds and less than twenty consonant and cluster sounds. In English there are over two hundred.

I've written, read, typed, pronounced, repeated and practiced random words. I just wrote the word for school on the flip chart—*kashkutimatsheutshuap*—a common enough word? I've heard it often, but does it stick my mind? And how far is the journey to see my mother? *Tatutshishemitashumitannuetipaikan*. So many thousand miles long. I just made that one up to make my point. Actually I didn't. I found it in the Innu dictionary. It is actually that long. And I did learn it just for the sport of it, even if I do speak it like I have marbles in my mouth. And when I tried it on for size, I was told the Innu dictionary got it wrong.

Over and over I'm stumped by imperceptible accents, like with *namesh*, or *nimish*. The two sound exactly the same to me, but are either a fish or my older sister. And I end up telling someone I plan to cook my older sister for supper tonight.

'Fire' and 'woman' are also very similar: *ishkuteu* and *ishkueu*.

*Tan eshinikashuin?* I once asked a little boy in Utshimassits his name.

You Sheshatshiu Innu? he responded.

To make matters worse Sheshatshiu and Utshimassiu Innu barely understand each other. I have two dialects to learn.

Kanani is all revved up now, her eyes fierce, glinting and knowing behind her large square glasses that have slid down her nose. Curly wisps of her long black hair have escaped from her blue tam and frame her face. She is saying something about *utshimau*. One of those words that resists translation. Could she be talking about a principal or is she on some nomadic meandering that has nothing to do with the school. If she's talking about the old days, *utshimau* was the leader of the hunt, skilled, knowledgeable and experienced, someone who dreamed the hunt and played the drum and had good relations with the Animal Spirits. *Utshimau* nowadays is also an elected leader with the Band Council or Innu Nation. *Tshishe-utshimau* is the Big Boss, or government. And *utshimau* can be a goalie, store clerk or king. *Mitshim-utshimau*, Boss of the Food, is a social worker. One thing I'm pretty sure about is that a traditional Innu *utshimau* is more wise and generous than bossy and giving orders.

Then there's Innu grammar. There was a time when I puzzled over it, a herd of caribou would not have pulled me away from my studies. *The Language of the Montagnais and Naskapi in Labrador* gobbled up many of my nights, but I could barely get through the section on how to pronounce words. Maybe I smoked too much pot in university.

But I persevered. There is no real word order to learn, and what I might say in a sentence in English translates as a crazy long word in *Innu-aimun*. Many different bits of a single word add up to a whole sentence. There's not much good learning the odd word—like this is that; I have to learn the full sentence. I know a few rules and making

up words should be a game, but turning a root word into a sentence still mostly eludes me.

Kanani looks agitated now, her cheeks flushed, her voice at once vulnerable and angry. This is an old story, but she is freshly outraged. She taps her hand on the table like she's playing a drum, then points an index finger in the air three times. I barely grasp any word, but I can hear the confidence, the flow, the keen interest of those listening. I hear the melody of her Utshimassiu dialect, more nasal than Sheshatshiu's, which sounds more rhythmic, a song syncopated with accents to wake a baby in a mother's belly. I hear the lyricism of her world of black spruce and brilliant water and blue sky and galloping caribou. A world in which a helicopter is a dragonfly and a train is a fire-sled, where a star can be human, and July is the Moon of the Salmon.

If she used more anglicisms, I might understand a bit of what she's saying.

Have I given up trying to learn the language, my only real access to the Innu world? I always thought gender had to do with male or female, but in *Innu-aimun* the gender of a noun is either animate or inanimate. Gods are both male and female, 'she' and 'he' are the same word. Imagine, no differentiating between male and female. What does that say about a culture, how it views the world? Their gender involves speaking about everything—person, animal or thing—as alive or not alive. The whole grammar is based on this: verb conjugation, the plural and possessive, and hundreds of possible affixes encoded with little bits of meaning.

At first glance this might seem fairly straightforward—like animals, humans and gods are animate. But not so.

The most astonishing things are alive. Or not. Like stones and stars and the moon and the sun are animate. At least some stones are. The body is alive, but not its parts. A spruce tree, but not a juniper or berry; a snowshoe and an oar, but not a canoe. Bread, but not candy or beets. Snow is alive, but not fire, nor rivers and mountains. How could fire not be animate? And it's not just that they're spoken of as alive, but as if they were human. Animals are spoken of as 'who' and not 'what' or 'it'. A bear might even wear a suit and hold a conversation. This is why a man might take a caribou or a beaver for a wife, and a muskrat can be my brother.

And that's the easy part. Verbs are what will really defeated me, and there are way more verbs than nouns in this language. They are the engines of Innu speech, troublesome and impossible, suffused with endless possibility. In English there is one form of a verb, let's say 'write' with four possible endings—'s,' 'ed,' 'en' and 'ing,' while in *Innu-aimun* there are four possible forms of that verb, depending on whether the verb is transitive or intransitive—does it need an object to make sense—or whether what you're talking about is animate or inanimate. Maybe a linguist's eyes don't glaze over when they read about this grammar.

There's more. Verbs have their own affixes and Innu speakers can choose from any of hundreds of possibilities to indicate who did what to whom and how and when, and even the mood they were in with an adjective or adverb. Add the prefix *tshishu* to the verb root for walk—*shkateu* and the word now means someone pissed somebody else off by walking too far ahead of her, or him.

And these many prefixes and suffixes seem to have less to do with tense and more to do with whether something really happened, or in a dream, if it is secondhand information, and whether it is certain or possible or true.

*Atik<sup>u</sup>* is the word for caribou. *Uitshikassatikutshishu* —it really tastes like caribou.

Some words stick marvelously, like *mitike*, the word for penis in the Sheshatshiu dialect. It sounds a lot like mitigation, at least the first part of it, a word used frequently by bureaucrats and business people when they're discussing what they want to do to Innu land. Mention of the word mitigation cracks up a roomful of Innu every time. And the greatest insult you can hurl at anyone is *atim<sup>u</sup> mitike*, or dog's penis.

I mangle the language so bad I may as well be speaking Swahili or Japanese. Not to mention that my *Innu-aimun* is stored in my brain in the same file as the bit of Spanish I know. The two are nicely scrambled. c

On a rare occasion I might understand a string of sentences in a row, but even if I translate them and I'm correct I know no one is convinced that I know more than I do. The longer I stick around the more I understand that I can never enter the Innu world without knowing their words. I try to console myself that even if I may never learn much *Innu-aimun*, still I am learning to listen, to hear with another part of my brain. Maybe I'm learning how to live.

Someday I might speak as well as a two-year-old.

Surprisingly the noun 'word' is inanimate. Someone told me and I had to double check in the dictionary. But 'voice' apparently is animate.

*Akuatshitakushu*. Kanani has a voice and is making herself heard in a strong and exceptional manner.

Voices are alive and we are gathering them.

Finally Kanani stops, stands and heads over to the corner to fetch a cup of tea.

Sepastien responds to my pleading eyes.

Her story is long, he says. I will try to remember everything she say.

He sits up and looks out the window before he continues.

At first she talk about when she start work at the school, the principal bring her to the classroom and give her some books. After school she have to wash the floor like a janitor. Her pay is very low. She never have training. She ask for courses, but nobody listen. She have to quit.

She say in the old days there is no such thing as a school. Innu people used to teach the children. Everything they need to survive. The white people say we don't have an education but our elders, she say they know more than a professor in university.

I draw a stick person with a cane, words flowing out of his mouth turning into lines swirling all around, capturing words and drawings in their orbit, a tent, a caribou, a sun and a moon. Sepastien looks over to Kanani for a cue. What has he missed? She reminds him with a few sentences.

She say when she a small girl, the priest sometimes would show the children a little bit how to read and write. She didn't know what grade one was. Then in old Davis Inlet there was a teacher. That teacher was very dangerous, he beat up the kids a lot. He laugh and make fun of the clothes of the children. And then the nun try to teach the children Innu language. But most what we learn is the Bible.

My stick person has a collar and holds a book with a cross on the cover.



She talk about her late father, he tell her legends and stories, *tipatshimuna* and *atanukuna*, that is how she learn about the bush. She say she can see the picture in her mind, *nutshimits* and the animals. Then the school is build, and it is like the people are stuck in the community, like a jail. Families can't go to *nutshimits* without the children. The government say he take the children away if they don't go to school. He take some of our kids away anyway. And now kids don't want to go to *nutshimits* because they fail their grade if they miss school.

She say it's better and more easy to learn from our parents. Kids are afraid to fail, in school they fail all the time, and that change us a lot.

Sepastien looks over to Kanani again, and she prompts him with 'Sister Alice.'

Oh yes, she talk about when Sister Alice ask her to work in the school. And she go back. She is the one to teach *Innu-aimun*, and the kids listen and learning good. When people camp in the bays, the teachers visit the camps every Saturday. They understand more about Innu culture. One time the principal send a teacher to a camp in Sango Bay. She stay there and teach all the children in the camp. She just stay at the camp the whole time. The teachers back then always visit us, even at night in the village.

Now she say it seems the white teachers want the children to live like white people. And the white people are too proud to help the Innu. They are too proud to care about the Innu. I think that is everything she say.

Kanani is nodding.

I've done my best with words and drawings, and even what I have not captured on paper remains with us in our circle.

Have we missed anything? I ask. And how are these things connected? Everyone pitches in. I start to draw lines showing the relationships between topics and issues and stories and my stick people and pretty soon we have a tangly, chaotic, fascinating and beautiful and horrible web of a mess.

All of it. That's what happen to us, Sepastien said.

Everyone is staring at the wall.

We did good, Shustin says.

With that, they all get up and head for the door.

Great start, I call after them. Can you be back here for 1:00. This afternoon we'll do police and church.

Over the next couple of days, we contemplate the impact on the Innu of each of the various institutions. By the end of it we could fill a book to rival Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.

Now what? The group may be a team now, after the last two days of sharing, teasing, arguing, laughing, and on occasion tearing up.

The next thing is to figure out how we are going to do this, I say. Any suggestions?

A long pause follows.

We will go to the houses, talk to the people, have a kitchen meeting, says Sepastien, finally, the first to speak as usual. We drink some tea with them. Or we can go to their tents in *nutshimits*.

Kanani and I will go together, says Shustin. We can both write the notes. We talk about it and we want to show some old photos first. They have a slide show with the old pictures at the mission. I see Sister Alice at church and I already ask to borrow it. The elders really love the old pictures. Sister Alice is very nice and help the people.

We can make a paper with all the questions and give one to every house and leave some copies at the Band, Innu Nation and the store, Sepastien says.

And at the clinic and social services too, Shustin adds.

The suggestions are flying now.

We have to talk to the kids in school. And the workers at the Band and Innu Nation. The construction women trainees.

And the youth council and women working with family violence project.

My daughter Tepi is in a play at school. They getting ready for the festival. The name of the play is The Boneman *Kaiatshits*. She say it's a history play about Utshimassits. They talk about the same thing as us.

I could take pictures of it, I suggest. Pictures are good in a report. The pictures can tell their own story. Maybe some of you have good pictures too? That we can put in the report?

I have a box of them in my closet, Shustin says. I look and see.

*Miam*, I say. Now we need to figure out who will talk to whom?

Sepastien grabs a sheet of flip chart paper and a marker and starts to draw a map of the village, methodically, until every house has been logged. He starts writing down the family names on each tiny house, and the four of them begin to volunteer, discuss and bicker about who'll go to which house.

I'll make a face sheet, I say, so you can keep track of people, their names, ages, number of children, education, work, whether they're married, stuff like that.

What else should we be doing? I ask.

The Alcohol Program, they do a research. They have some numbers, Shustin says. They talk about them at interagency meeting. About the number of people who die because of alcohol. And how many people have drinking problem. They count the people in each house.

Mixed methods, it's called, I say. Some qualitative and some quantitative. We're doing good. No one asks me to explain this language.

Now the questions. What are we going to ask?

We can ask them if they think school destroy our culture. Yes or no, Sepastien suggests.

Asking people about how the school has changed people is a good question. But we want to stay away from yes or no questions.

Whatever you say, Boss, Sepastien says.

I am not *utshimashkueu*, I say. But it's better to have open questions, like, has the school changed us? Or how has the school changed us? Then people can talk about the good and the bad, and they can tell their stories. Does that make sense?

*Ehe*, okay, let's do it.

Even Napaen's gaze tells me he may be coming around. We did okay this week.

So we're asking how the school, church, social services, the store, the clinic, the police and government have changed people since you were settled in Utshimassits?

What else do we need to ask people?

Kanani speaks up, and her words have stilled the room. Shustin translates. She says we have to ask why the fire happened, but not just the fire, other tragedies, so many people dying. And we have to ask what do we do to stop this from happening. I look over to Kanani, as she wipes a tear with her index finger.

We decide on seven questions, including how people were settled in Utshimassits, what is happening with the children nowadays, what people need to do to regain control of their lives, and how to not bring the problems of Utshimassits when the community is moved to a new location.

I haven't heard about a relocation, I say.

We have no water, Shustin says. We have to move.

And we can't hunt on this island, for months, says Sepastien. Because of ice at Mishte-shantesh in spring and fall—you know Daniel's Rattle—we can't get to the mainland.

Moving a whole village is a big thing, I say.

We are going to move.

Okay, I'll take your word for it.

But I'm not convinced.

We spend the rest of the morning translating the questions, and the conversation goes on at length for each of them. They need to be clear and everyone has to be comfortable with the wording. I'm surprised at the amount of debate the exercise has evoked, around what seems like the most straightforward questions and wording.

Superfluous to this exercise, I make a few notes about what we've been doing and how the planning evolved. For the report. I draw up a calendar on a sheet of flip chart

paper, and tape it to the wall so we can track our work. Sepastien is writing down the questions in *Innu-aimun*, so I can type up a bilingual questionnaire.

In the afternoon they practice interviewing each other. They are self-conscious and shy and laughing and serious, thoughtful, talking and writing, really playing up a few of the characters in the community.

By the end of the day, they are firing questions at me.

Just have a chat, I say. The questions are only to guide you. Listen to their stories. Ask them to explain. Give them time. Ask them to slow down so you can catch up with taking notes. Easy.

But I know it is anything but.

## XII.

Every day this week the team has arrived with notes from their interviews. They pop in at different times with their scant jottings, barely two pages of foolscap from an interview when they've been gone all morning or afternoon. I long to sit in on the interviews, to know the full story, to grasp every nuance. I wonder whether this process is doing justice to the voices. I say little, only mete out small reminders.

Are you writing down their exact words, just like they said them? I ask. If they say, 'I did this' you should write those exact words down, not 'she said she did this.'

It's silly advice. While they're taking notes, listening and asking questions, they're also translating simultaneously what's been said into English. Except for Kanani's *Innu-aimun* in beautiful penmanship, just like the nuns would have taught her.

Maybe we should have used recorders, but machines can be intimidating, and transcribing interviews takes forever. We only have six weeks left and we're meant to talk to everybody.

I'm relieved to see a lot of overlap in Shustin and Kanani's notes, and sometimes differences where one of them has captured what the other missed. Shustin and Sepastien take turns translating Kanani's notes into English. Sometimes I ask questions of clarification and get responses, often small and profound and chiseled gems that come to life when spoken. Words to make my heart rejoice.

Shanut and Shinipest love the old pictures, Shustin says. They talk about how everybody so skinny, healthy. No diabetes. Shanut told us her grandfather story. He was

the first chief. The priest pick him. But then he can't play the drum no more. The priest walk into a *makushan* and just grab the drum from him. She was a little girl. She saw that. She feel sorry for her grandfather.

I add this information to their notes.

Sepastien's scrawls on the whole are more substantial and detailed. I'm curious to know how he learned to write so eloquently, with barely a couple years of schooling. I hope he's not editorializing. Napaen is doing his own thing. Sometimes his notes seem diligent and specific, sometimes pat and clichéd, sometimes a mere few words. Angry and concise.

*Hunting laws are fucking joke. The Innu can only hunt in fall. No food for so many months. Government trying to starve us, or poison us with store food.*

The face sheet is a problem, questions of education and employment put people on the spot. One woman has subverted by responding *Country of Higher Learning* for her education level. The next time I make copies I've added *nutshimits* as an education option, and *kanatuiut*, Innu hunter, for employment.

By the second week as the pile of transcripts grows, I begin to relax. I am handed notes with confidence. Who I am to doubt that? As the stories and details and facts and opinions accumulate, the promise of a bigger picture emerges, earnest and candid, even if there is still much that begs elaboration. When the man beats up the woman, what kind of



help does she need? What kind of help does the man need? What needs to happen to stop the violence?

At the same time, I am listening to all that is not being said. I am wondering about the truths that don't make it into the notes, imagining the body language of those being interviewed and the story it tells. But even if the stories are not being fully excavated or probed, there is truth in their incompleteness, in what is not being said, the silences, between the telling of what happened and explaining it. Sometimes these are the things that cry out to be heard.

Memory is a tricky thing, I said to Manish, when she asked me how things were going. I was telling her how rich the stories were, but how sometimes they raised more questions than they answered.

What do you mean? she asked.

No two people will tell a story the same way, I said. Even if they're talking about the same thing.

That's true. Depends on how they feel about it I guess.

Yeah, sometimes I can read the feelings in their words, like anger, sorrow, mercy. Sometimes I can tell people are confused by the question. Or maybe they don't want to share.

I guess people forget things too, or they are ashamed and want to protect somebody, maybe themselves, Manish said.

It's hard to talk about the hard things, I said. Our minds want to forget the really horrible things. Like my friend back home was raped as a girl, and her memories are only coming back to her now. We hide memories from ourselves. To survive maybe. One day

last summer, she woke up on a park bench in Bannerman Park and she had no idea how she got there, but she remembered what happened to her so many years ago. Makes you wonder what's true or real?

But she knows it happen, even if now her story is not exactly like it happen, Manish says.

She was right. The past is a fiction, a story lived, played out. No one can ever know or see again who they were in a memory. There might be the temptation to lie, consciously or unconsciously, to sculpt a story into one's own image. The past might seem like the only thing we have any control over: we can make it what we will. But still the truth will find its way.

And while there are contradictions in the stories we're gathering and even if some facts could be disputed, mostly people are recounting the same epic tale.

I've decided to trust the process. People share their story, and they are giving it away. And it feels like each time it is given, its burden is also shared. Our job will be to weave these stories together into a tapestry.

I love the way some people say things, a distilled glimpse into their mind.

*The clinic is here to save lives, not change them.*

*Does the government not know his school teach us to read and now we know how to read best before dates on the food in store?*

Sepastien has talked to someone with a lot to say about the justice system.

*I been to jail myself. When the police tell me I break the law, I don't know what he say. If a person don't speak English they just*

*say yes to the police. The police scare the person. The police write a paper, read it to you and then you just make signature with an X. With no person translate the kakeshau words. The police sometimes do a lot of damage to Innu. A drunk person is arrested, charge and send to jail. Once he get out, he learn nothing and he afraid to go back to jail. In jail, he just eat, work, play. No Innu people visit him. No counseling at all for his problem.*

It's time for another newsletter so I write up a two-pager outlining what we've been up to. 'Get in touch and talk to us' in capital letters and large font. I highlight interesting quotes I've plucked from the transcripts in bold font, a range of voices on a range of issues. Straight from the horse's mouth. Or kind of, since it's been translated into English and I've taken out at least two 'fucks' and cleaned up the grammar a tiny bit for comprehension. Then Sepastien has agreed to take that English version and translate it back into *Innu-aimun*. Hopefully the final product will bear some resemblance to the original voice.

*The social worker and the doctor are the only ones trying to help battered women, for the sake of the women's lives.*

*We listen to government too much. We depend on them too much. The government shouldn't control our lives. We should sue government for their actions in the past. Use the money for relocation.*

*The government give us a lot of money, but we spend the money on bills and food and building material. We give all the money back to the government store. Is like recycling. And then we pay the government taxes for working.*

*Some young people are very good hunters but they are like kakeshauts. They don't respect the animals. In my day, every part of the animal is important. The skull have to be hung on the tree. The elder should be teacher in school.*

Is it okay? I ask the team to read the newsletter over when they come by the office. I've scooped images and a bit of graphic art from copies of Windspeaker and government propaganda—copyright seems from another world up here. I play with some of these images: cut out the background with scissors or accentuate contours with a marker. I drop these in to break up the text, render the page more inviting.

I spend more blasted hours at the photocopier, refilling the paper tray, pressing the start button, unjamming paper, kicking and pounding the machine into submission. Shustin and Kanani help me compile and staple the pages together. They seem to need a break from being out there. I'm sure it takes some moxie to try to do something new and different in your own village, to approach neighbours, poke your head in a tent doorway, and ask people to talk about the thing they most want to forget right now. In the meantime, Sepastien has agreed to take the newsletter to the radio airwaves.

We have a team meeting at the end of the week. I bombard them with questions. How are you doing? How are you feeling? Are people ready to talk? How can I support you? Is there anything we can do better?

We're good.

Sometimes the best thing to do is nothing. Stay out of the way. I've made it a habit at the end of the day to track every little thing I might have done that someone here could be doing. If someone here can do a job, then it is exactly the opposite of what I should be

doing. Stop that, and I vow to do better the next day.

I might as well take a walk. I follow a snowmobile track the length of the village and up the hill along a coulee. The wind sweeps up the snow in long swaths. I stop to examine rabbit tracks and continue on my way. Ducks and geese will soon be heading north. The days are getting longer. In the old days of this world, there would have been just light and dark, the position of the sun and the moon and the stars, daylight shrinking and lengthening to signal the changing of the seasons. Time must have been measured by what could be done in the daylight available, what chores could be completed, the distance that could be travelled. More work is becoming possible now, at least for those communing with the Land. There are still metres of snow on the ground but the meltdown has started. Plants shiver below and the earth aches for a glimpse of the sun's rays, while the village continues to say a long goodbye to those they've lost. And we are listening.

### XIII.

On the weekend Shustin takes me ice-fishing with her mother Mishte-Pinamen. I'm the only one to catch a trout, and it's the biggest I ever caught, the length of a newborn baby. It flops on the ice so wildly I'm afraid to grab hold, but finally the life peters out of it and I give it to Mishte-Pinamen. She seems grateful and surprised. I don't know why because I'm only following Innu protocol. As I hand the fish over, she looks at me as if she was seeing me for the very first time.

Week four and everyone has disappeared. No one has shown up for any morning check-in and it's Wednesday. No more notes and there is so little time left. I've typed up all the transcripts into my laptop and started analyzing them, identifying recurring themes, points of agreements, opposing opinions, stories that illustrate and bring to life the issues. But it's really too early to be doing that. I compile the list of people we have interviewed so far, as well as those involved in the group interviews with women construction trainees and Innu classroom assistants. The list is starting to look impressive, but still a ways from the scope requested by the elders.

I wait around, trying to be patient, with an edge of apprehension. With each day, I am feeling more annoyed, slightly angry, but I know there is no reason to be. A hole is being whittled away in the belly of my self-defenses, and as it grows I'm standing more and more exposed. I feel my gut tighten, clenching, that familiar fiend of incompetency creeping into my cells and then my consciousness. I am the spectator, a little ridiculous and paranoid, outside the conversation and the action.

It's not just the work. I'm tired of all the stares I get in the course of each day here, sensing people see me as the benefactor, or interferer, opportunist, colonialist, imperialist, do-gooder, destroyer, ignoramus, meddler, thief—of the land or culture, stealing their image on a photograph, or stealing a job for sure.

I am a guest, invited, but still unwanted. I long to go home with stories of accomplishment and connections. All the photos I've taken might convince some people, but I know better.

My thoughts like a sleepless river. I go to bed early as village sounds outside my tent seep into my dreams. The cold of the night wakes me constantly. I am too lazy to get up and replenish the fire, but eventually my heart pumps warmth back into my waking body, and I fall asleep again. I toss and turn and it is not just from the cold. I am powerless—without words, a voice of my own, without comfort. Impotent. In a fleeting moment of lucidity I see myself with interested detachment, as if my behaviour might hold clues, check my body for sensation, do an inventory. The deep song within eludes me.

This morning I open my eyes, not rested. Again. I'm dreading the day. There is more than a constant fatigue that keeps me on the alert. I can't seem to get my footing. Off balance, a sense that I never quite know what it is I am to do or say. How is it I can't know what to do? After all these years. There must be something wrong with me. A hunger, restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of myself. Forever grasping at something far away, beyond my reach. I'm not made for this work.

I have called no one, spoken to no one. There has been no confession.

*Tan etin?* Pishum asks me this morning as I stroll into the office. What's happening?

She knows.

You look sad, she says.

I tear up. She's actually seen me.

I have a bit of a cold, I mumble, fumbling for a tissue.

I am unreachable. But my body is speaking. My bones say, you may be lenient or blind, or open or scared, or tolerant, or patient. But I am none of these. What am I? I can't possibly show her the austerity of my thinking.

My nose is running, but what I really am, is exhausted, mentally frayed. I've just walked across the village, looking sorrow in the eyes or in downtrodden gaits. I am not the first to be undone by this place.

I've read and reread the transcripts, from one story to the next, one godforsaken story to another and back again. I'm learning how the arteries of stories past pulse with their particular rhythm, tone and image, and I have let those sink in, settle in. These stories can never be got rid of now. Ever.

All of this week I have just gone through the motions of the practical stuff. At the end of the day, I walk home at a good trot to my tent. I need to speak to no one for the rest of the night, even as I hand money over to the boy Pun for the few chunks of wood he's chopped for me. I wave my twenty dollars wordlessly towards him and he takes it. I cook supper, wash dishes, sweep the floor, and run across the village yet again to fetch water, head home at a steady even gait with a bucket in each hand.



I'm forgetting to look the distance and contemplate the essential mysteries of things. My usual reveries about justice and meaning, even the beautiful peach and marine blue of dusk elude me. My world has been dismantled.

I fret about whether the elders will get the answers they need. I fret about the writing, and the price people could pay for their words. Who will write up these stories, and how to write them and neither exploit or betray?

Finally it's late but I muster the wherewithal to walk over to Shustin, Kanani, Sepastien and Napaen's houses. None of them are home and I leave a message. Could we meet the following morning?

They all stroll in surprisingly punctual, shortly after nine.

How are we doing? I ask, although I'm not about to divulge my state.

I only do one interview this week, Sepastien says, handing me his notes. I go hunting. I have no money to buy food. I have big family you know. I get only partridge, one porcupine and then I check my net, at least I get six char.

He does have those eight children to feed, and a grandchild. Just the disposable diapers must chew up his cheque pretty quick. In the old days I'm told they used caribou moss for diapers, cheaper and more ecological.

My niece is sniffing gas, says Shustin. I have to stay with her and my sister. She sniffing more since the fire. Sometimes she run away and we have to go find her. She almost freeze in a tent two nights ago.

Kanani speaks up in *Innu-aimun*, looking straight at me with piercing eyes. I'm not accusing anyone of anything. Shustin translates.

She say her two grandchildren living with her sick now for two weeks. She take them to the clinic two times, but they not getting any better. She worry about meningitis, her grandson die of it last year. The nurses finally give the kids some antibiotics, so she think maybe they get better now.

I had meant the question to be about work. I've been catapulted back into this world, and somehow out of my funk at the same time.

I went hunting, Napaen says, but from the look of him I'm pretty sure it was for home brew and not caribou.

Any luck? I ask. I'm tempted to ask if the *Tshishtakanapun* Master is looking after him. Whether he's shown the proper respect to the Alcohol Master, but that is likely to be a blasphemous thing to even think.

Then I have to stay home because of the rain, he says, trying again.

There'd been a bit of a drizzle on Monday, unusual for this time of the year. That was four days ago.

Acid rain, you know, he says for emphasis, with a wry smile, his eyes now with a glint of deeper knowing. Poking me, a sleight of hand, putting me in my place, or so it feels. Sulfuric and nitric acids, coming from the west and the south, from my people, killing waters and fish, and only the gods know what else. It's clear he feels no need to be reporting back to me. And I'm not asking anyone to report to me anyway.

I hardly recognize this hefty man from the scrawny kid I once knew not that long ago, his features now receded into his plumper face. He'd spent most of his childhood in a group home in Sheshatshiu. I remember him as a kid who could talk about nuclear bomb testing in Nevada and how the mushroom cloud had scattered all the way up here to

permeate Labrador's caribou moss. Or he could brag about how he blackmailed his uncle—'give me half your salary and I won't report you to police for what you're doing to your daughter.' He's still smart, knowledgeable, perhaps a little more law-abiding now, a resilient fellow.

The questions are no good, he says now. He knows he's got me.

The same questions suggested by the elders and that he had helped develop and translate. I decide not to defend them.

How are the rest of you finding the questions? I ask.

Sepastien responds, animated and forceful. He runs his hands through his hair slowly and pauses a moment at one point, pinching his nose with his index finger and thumb as he thinks and then goes on again at length.

*Enkuan miam*, Napaen says.

I tell him we are the commissioners doing this inquiry, Sepastien explains. It is very important for our people. Everything must be discuss. We can't have any cover-ups and we have to talk to everybody. If the questions don't work he just have to ask about the fire. How do we stop these thing from happening? I tell him the media and governments will hear about this and we need to do good job. If the government don't hear our voices this time, other voices will gather from all across Canada and other countries and government will have to listen.

I look long and hard at Sepastien, my heart racing with gladness and gratitude.

I've been wondering if I should help out with the interviews? I ask. We have so much ground to cover and there's not much time.

There's no harm in asking and they all seem relieved. That might even be a nod from Napaen. This is hard work, sorrowful work, and harder yet when you know the people.

Talk to the *utshimauts*, Sepastien suggests. I'm sure he means the elected ones, but I'm thinking I might chase down the odd informal leader too, the ones whose doorsteps are well trodden by visitors, especially when there's an issue in the village or camp that needs discussing. The ones who are at all the meetings and ask the right questions and short-circuit a racket, and who look after families when a baby is born or a loved one dies. People who have figured out how to use the English language to their advantage and aren't shy, and maybe even trust me.

Sepastien makes a few suggestions: Manish, Nush and Utshimaskueu. And I'm thinking Shuash who showed up at most of the protests against low-level flying when I was taking pictures and he'd told the German Commanding Officer to go fly his military jets supersonic at 100 feet over his own house and kids. The CO's wife had giggled.

Next week we all do interviews at the gathering, Shustin says. People visit a lot in *nutshimits*. A good place to talk.

Will we have a meeting at the gathering? Or a workshop?

*Ehe, ehe*, Sepastien says.

Do we need to plan it?

*Mauats*, he says. Don't have to worry about it. It happen, Innu time, Innu way.

I'd have to take his word for it. We'd spontaneously spring up and gather as in other years. Would there be Innu games again this year? A couple of years ago, there'd been an Alcohol Program Meeting with a Uashat Innu family counselor presiding.

There'd likely be a women's meeting, and I'd heard people wanted a meeting to talk about relocation. That's why the gathering was being held at Natuashish. There'd be a *makushan*, the village was teeming with caribou meat, a carcass on almost every roof, and no doubt there would be all manner of socializing and visiting. Like the woman wrote in her questionnaire:

*This is time of year. I really miss my late parents. They would be the first ones. Going out to NUTSHIMITS. In beautiful land. My parents wasn't just alcoholics. They both working hard in NUTSHIMITS. They both doing things together. They good as team work. I guess we raise good in ways we learn everything from them. Like sewing. weaving snowshoes. Etc. We don't need to depend on anybody when we are out on NUTSHIMITS. And we know how live off the land. I miss them everyday especially in spring time. When everybody is ready to go. Like soon we go on gathering.*

I head home for lunch. The sun pokes its face out from behind a cloud and winks at me. I pass other walkers, pedestrians if they were in the city. Could Innu, who until recently walked the whole of the Ungava peninsula, be called pedestrians? Our kind of pedestrianizing is pedestrian in comparison.

#### XIV.

The whole village is hustling and bustling, and I'm all packed up: knapsack with a change of clothes, a hand soap and a toothbrush; sleeping bag and caribou skins; camera and extra film; notebook, pens, paper, flip chart and markers. I'm surprised my nickname isn't Flip Chart Woman: *Mashinanikan Ishkueu*; I'm quite sure that's not the proper Innu-aimun. I also pack an extra sweater, pair of mitts and socks; moccasins and snowshoes; binoculars, candles and matches; a novel, a box of food and it's always good to have an extra roll of toilet paper. Natuashish, where we're headed, is some twenty miles away on the mainland, at the head of Little Sango Bay.

I walk over to the big rock to wait for my ride. Against a shocking blue sky, a spiky edge of spruce tops outlines the top of the island out in the bay. Snowmobiles pulling komatiks loaded to bust zoom back and forth. Shustin arrives, her kids stuffed into their blankets in the komatik among the gear: tent, stove, tools and traps, garbage bags of bedding, boxes of food. At a glance I can see bags of flour, teabags, Carnation milk, sugar, margarine, Kraft Dinner, a couple bags of navy beans, and chocolate chip cookies. She grabs my backpack, orders Napess to stand, and places my bag under him to sit on. She pokes the rest of my stuff between and betwixt. She points to the starter cord on the snowmobile's engine.

Start her up, she says. I grab the cord with both hands. This must be a test.

Stand back, I say. Or you might end up in the nursing station.

Let this be one of those machines that can be incited to life with an easy rip of the cord. I give it my best, pull back with all my might to a weak heartless burp from the motor. I used to do this as a kid, spent hours frolicking on snowmobiles with cousins on snowbound wheat fields. I don't look at Shustin, take a deep breath and pull the starter cord again.

Gahroooooom!

You could break a man's jaw doing that, Shustin shouts over the motor's assertive rumble.

Now then, she wouldn't want my head to swell.

We drive over to Manishan's, then to Shustin's mom Mishte-Pinamen and finally to Matshikuaniss's, a name that always elicits a tiny inner smile: 'Little Big Cheeks.' With each stop I am convinced there is not a square inch of space for either stuff or human bodies, but the loads get rearranged and more is piled on, and people jump into the komatiks or onto the machines. Finally the three snowmobiles leave in convoy, trundling off in the bright new snow. I glance back at the village looking lonesome and dramatic. We drive up over a hill and down, through a stubby forest, and onto a bay. Shustin's snowmobile is big and strong and she can easily leave the packed trail to give way to oncoming traffic. The snowmobile grinds and heaves in the deep snow while the komatik churns it up and heaves it out as a cloud in its wake. Whether this was a Band Council purchase or a couple of months' salary, throw in occasional social assistance, the family managed to get a good one. Maybe they went hungry for a few days or weeks to get it.

I gaze at the vast unmoving snow-sculptured expanse of ice and breathe in the sharp air. I bend my head to avoid the slicing wind and hang on to Shustin, follow her

dance as she throws her weight into driving, shifting from side to side as required to keep us upright and afloat. My hair and the fur on my parka frost up, my toes begin to tingle, then ache from the cold. Soon they feel numb. We cross a marsh and weave our way between spindly and stoic trees, then through a thick colony of spruce, interspersed with pine and fir, tall and stately along the bay. We drive up onto a barren hillside and Shustin turns off the snowmobile. She jumps off and points to a nearby pile of rocks.

A *kamanitushit* is buried here, she says. The rocks that mark his grave jut out of the snow.

His name was Ustinitshu.

The wind has blown the rocks bald of snow. These decades later the rocks conjure a moment of ceremony, when the Innu still wore caribou clothing and lived in teepees. Silence prevails now in his honour. Shustin has removed her goggles and her eyes squint from the sun.

The night before he die, she says finally, Ustinitshu play his drum and he sing.

She's brought me here for a purpose.

He sing all his songs, she continued. There was no *makushan* or *kushapatshikan* or wedding, but he just sing and sing. He sing his hunting songs. He give them away.

He gave away his songs? I ask.

Maybe his friend come and tell him to keep some, but he come too late. The old man give away all his songs. And the next morning he never wake up. He pass away. He die. *Nukum* tell me this story. She say if the old man save some of his songs, maybe he live longer.



Wow, I say. A flimsy response to the magic and beauty of her story. This is a place where a person can sing to beckon his death when his time has come. Where songs are a parting gift.

Overhead a jet plane flies very high. There is another world out there. Passengers dressed in their travel clothes, hurtling through the air towards yet another world. Eating bad food. Avoiding each other or spilling their life stories. Maybe they've managed to make a connection, become a little more human, in the way we are meant to every day.

We hop back onto the snowmobile after checking in on the kids in the komatik. I glance one last time at the grave as a parting homage to Ustinitshu, and we're off. Shustin's hand is heavy on the throttle, and we soon arrive in Natuashish, a large flat expanse stretching out from the shore of the bay and surrounded by hills on three sides. Across the bay stands a range of imposing snow clad mountains, majestic. Before me, thickets of spruce and fir, and a few tamaracks and rare white birches are scattered across a long even tract of land. In this starkly black and white landscape, a tent village has already popped up—fifty, sixty, maybe seventy tents erected higgledy-piggledy. There is no doubt a rhyme and reason to their distribution, many calculated choices, but this is no provincial campground with a grid of uniform campsites.

Shustin pulls up beside a stand of spruce and kills the motor. I'm staying with Sepastien and Akat. The tent isn't up yet. Shuni is stacking an armload of fir boughs into a tidy pile next to others. We unload my gear and I haul my bear paw snowshoes on, to head for the woods behind the tent. I gotta go. I snowshoe a ways, not keen to get caught with my pants down. Crouched down, I see something flicker in the shadows of a grove of tamaracks peering up from a tiny gully.

You need to look hard whenever you see something move, Sepastien had advised one time. Otherwise the animal be the same as the background, blend in and you never see it.

I spot a *uishkatshan*, a gray jay and stop in my tracks. Wait to stand, bum exposed. Rather than fly away, it flutters towards me, jumping from one branch to the other until it is there right with me, only a foot or so above my head, trusting me. Gray jays seem to follow me around.

Coo loo coo coo, coo coo coo coo! it says, welcoming me. Its bill is short and black. From up close, its plumage looks thick and fluffy—why it survives subzero winters. This is no hawk or crow or eagle, not in-your-face with gaudiness or power.

I have a soft spot for this bird, its back and tail a subdued medium gray, the underparts a slightly lighter shade, the whole contrasting with its head crowned black and white, like the nuns of my childhood. That same stare with large black beady eyes. But naughtier. This bird might convince you that it is mild-mannered, but they can be cheeky little buggers. One time I'd been lounging on a deck by a lake, and a jay had dive-bombed right by my nose and scooped up my piece of blueberry shortcake half its size right out of my plate. Trickster. Clever. Pilferer.

This jay is not scavenging. It is still singing but now a whisper song, a long medley of sweet melodious notes interspersed with quiet clicks. I stand up gently and it takes off and lands a few trees away. It pokes its beak into the tree trunk, as if to move the bark aside, grabs a morsel of something, and hops another few trees over.

Shustin had told me once how birds converse, the robin sings for sunny weather and the white-throated sparrow sings for rain, a perfect fourth interval: ta-too-too-too-too.

Years ago when I'd gone geese hunting with Sepastien, his son Patnik had hurled a small stick at a *uishkatshan*, striking the bird and causing it to flounder and wobble awkwardly midflight, before recovering and landing on a nearby spruce branch.

Sepastien had berated Patnik. It was unusual to see Sepastien irritated, scolding. I wondered what the to-do was about. I'd often seen children shooting at birds or squirrels with their slingshots. I sat waiting curiously. Patnik seemed sheepish, shrunken into his parka. He mumbled something, maybe he was apologizing. Later Sepastien had told me what he'd said to his son.

That was a mistake to not respect the *uishkatshan*, my son, I tell him, Sepastien said. I say to him that sometime, I don't know when, but before we go back home, you will have problem, or maybe one of us. A big problem. Something will go wrong and it's because of the stick you throw at that little bird!

The geese eluded us that whole day, and I had the feeling Sepastien was blaming Patnik. And later that evening on our way home, Sepastien's skidoo broke down, leaving him stranded. There was no fixing it, his spare spark plug did not do the trick, and the icy night sky promised no relief. The rest of us had rushed ahead and it was a long time before anyone noticed he was not following us. Eventually Patnik looked back and saw that his father was no longer following us, and he turned around to find him.

Things might have been worse.

A lot worse, Sepastien said to me later. This is not because of bad luck. I know this happen when we don't respect the *uishkatshan*.

I love the idea of having to respect a wee bird.

I make small clicking noises to catch the bird's attention now, wonder about its powers. He spreads his wings and flies off and I head back, retracing my snowshoe tracks.

The camp throbs with life all around: gossip, drying meat and frying fish, Nishabet sits on a red salt meat bucket, scraping a caribou skin surrounded by a gaggle of children. There's a steady roar of chainsaws, the whacking noise of chopping and splitting wood, smoke swirling from stove pipes, children running and screaming and laughing, burying each other in the snow or throwing snowballs, stopping to watch and learn something new. Sometimes trying their hand at it—Petshish now scraping that skin, sitting on her grandmother's lap in the splendid sunshine. And her little brother deftly holding a roaring chainsaw as he slices through a log, like this was not his first time.

Back at Sepastien and Akat's campsite, I find another *kakeshau ishkuueu*.

Hi, I'm Deborah. From Indian Affairs.

Anna, I say, as she extends her hand to shake mine. This is not really a shaking hands kind of world, but whatever. I know her department has thrown money at this gathering and I guess she's come to check up on their investment. Her northern adventure. Is it okay for them to get spark plugs, how about flour for the elders, a length of cord for a *ueuepishun*? What about Sepastien's snowshoes? Is she here to help the Innu itemize these purchases in their report? Make sure that they're holding the meetings they promised, and this gathering is not just a glorified camping trip?

God bless Sepastien for his generosity, but now with Deborah, the tent will be even more crowded. One more body on top of their crowd of kids and granddaughter. This is not a big tent.

Is that a pleading look from Deborah? *Kakeshauts* sometimes try to latch on to me, like any of the goodwill or respect I've possibly earned from the Innu might rub off on them. Or they see me as competition, as if earning the trust or affection of Innu people might be a contest. Why Will, parachuted in to work with the Alcohol Program after the fire, seemed to be trying to sabotage our process, or at least present roadblocks. I'd seen him around town, his quick humour and easy rapport with people. I liked his style. But when I'd phoned him twice, and even dropped by to try to get the stats the Program had compiled on alcohol-related deaths over the last twenty-five years, I couldn't figure out the cold shoulder. No easy banter or jokes with me.

The Innu will have to decide what they want to do with these numbers, he'd said.

Well the Innu are the ones asking for them now, I said. They asked me to get them so we can put them in the report.

I will have to talk to my staff and board.

When I'd asked Sepastien if he could go and try to get a copy, sure enough he'd scored. Maybe Will was annoyed he hadn't been asked to do an interview. It wasn't my decision.

I don't know this woman, but as I eye Deborah's gear, I can barely hide my disappointment. We'll be that much more crowded. Her military issue sleeping bag will consume a couple of spots. And her mattress! We are already eleven in the tent and I'll be no doubt assigned to sleep next to her. That'd be some of my space she'll be taking up. I'd prefer sleeping next to one of the kids, curling into me at night for warmth, like a puppy.

Maybe I should check my assumptions, but I bet she's vegetarian, a condition that always takes up too much attention, and time and precious stove space. Lentils and beans and brown rice. Not to mention how it subverts sharing. The Innu prefer their fresh char, and so do I.

Give the girl a break, but I'm still wondering if she'll be a schmoozer, or more in-your-face paternalistic. A bureaucrat or a public servant?

I'm so relieved that the inquiry is not dependent on government funding. Bob, the lawyer for the Innu, has managed to secure dollars from the Environmental Defense Fund, a crowd that believes the Innu are fit to figure out for themselves how to spend this money and how to conduct their own inquiry.

I've sat in on too many meetings, listening to non-Innu—government officials or hit-and-run consultants—pontificate about Innu culture, how 'we' had to do things the Innu way, while Innu at the meeting sat mute. Way too often, I've watched *kakeshauts* arrive with their agenda and share just the information required to make every decision a foregone conclusion.

*Tshishe-utshimau* always seems to know exactly how to play Big Daddy Knows Best and how to take the life right out of a good idea. So nineteenth century. The Innu are right. Some bureaucrat is always trying to trick them into signing a document.

I'm guilty too, even with my best of intentions, of sometimes talking down, or other-ing, like the Innu are exotic or they just don't know how things work. Could they just be a little more predictable? Meaning what? How do you apologize for that, how do you intercept that brain flash that you know to be so awful? Like changing your DNA. But I keep trying.

How can I help? Deborah asks. She is dressed in a jacket that's a trendy teal colour, made of a high tech fabric and insulation, with matching hat and mitts, neck warmer and fleecy liner. At least it's not red, like the parka I'd worn the month I spent in *nutshimits* with the Penunsi family. Red apparently scares off the animals, and it was the only coat I had.

We spend much of the rest of the day setting up the tent. The boys have sawed down a couple dozen trees and shaved off all the branches. The resulting poles will be placed along the inside of the tent to hold it up. A large one will serve as a central beam, running across the middle of the ceiling, and tied to two poles crossed on each end to hold it up. On the outside, four strings will reach out to poles on either side of the tent to stretch it perfectly taut, to prevent dripping and keep us all nice and dry.

Matshiu, the eldest and most handsome of the sons with his patrician nose and sweeping bang, seems to have come to life in *nutshimits*, wrapped in smells of smoke and spruce and fresh sunshine air, like he's driven by a strange spark of freedom. His eyes shine, I can almost feel the contraction of his calf muscle as he shoots his body to standing—one graceful sweeping movement—and heads out to collect firewood with his mammoth sized snowshoes, as unencumbered as if he were barefoot.

While the men erect the tent, I follow the women into the woods to fetch more spruce and fir boughs for the floor. Deborah tags along. She has no snowshoes so she's relegated to walking on snowmobile trails, and even then she may sink up to her knees.

We all return with boughs, some with armloads, others with mountains of them piled and tied onto a toboggan. Deborah's armload is impressive. Akat begins hauling the spruce boughs into the tent, scattering them pell-mell to provide a foot deep cushion and

insulation from the snow. We follow suit, until they're all used up. She grabs an armload of fir boughs and sends Shuni and Penatet to fetch more for the top layer. Deborah decides to follow them again. She's a trooper. Akat motions for me to grab my own pile of fir boughs and I follow her into the tent. We each pick a spot at the edge of the tent and begin to carefully weave them to create an even carpet over the lumpy spruce.

*Kapata, kapata*, Akat says to me. *Tshitapami*. I observe carefully, the bulging veins on her hands, knuckles swollen with arthritis, her index finger on the right hand bent north easterly, broken at one time. She plants and coaxes the branch between a couple of others, until it lies flat and secured. With eagle eyes she examines my next attempt to imitate her, and then nods.

*Enkuan, miam*, she says. Apparently I've cottoned on, but I have no idea what I've just done differently. After many years, the fine intricacies of placing boughs correctly still elude me.

She says something else and Shuni translates.

She say you half Innu woman.

I smile. Akat's standards are high. My friend in Sheshatshiu has told me more than once that I'm 'just like Innu woman.'

Outside the men are packing snow along the bottom of the tent to insulate and hold it in place. Matshiu enters carrying a sheet metal stove. To the left of the door opening, he hammers four sticks into the ground with the back of the axe to create a stand for the stove. He's carved out a wedge at the top of each stick on which to place and secure the stove. He inserts a stove pipe, attaches an elbow and another pipe and eases it through a hole in the tent, protected by a circle of sheet metal folded over the edges of the



canvas opening to keep it from burning. In the front of the stove is a small door attached with wires. He opens it, steps outside to collect a handful of old man's beard, a few splints and larger pieces of wood and in no time at all rouses a frisky fire. Soon we're all peeling off jackets and sweaters as the fire emits its warm comfort.

No sooner have Shuni and Deborah returned, Akat points to a bucket and motions to Shuni for her to grab it.

*Nipi*, Akat, says as she hands me a dipper and shoos us both out of the tent. We yank on our snowshoes and I follow Shuni across the camp to a stream, where someone has hacked a hole through the ice to expose a rush of shimmering water. I grab the bucket and crouch to begin to scoop up water with the dipper. I aim the dipper at Shuni, pretending to sprinkle her.

Be careful, she says. You have to watch out for *Missinak*<sup>u</sup>, she look after all the water animals.

Mee-ssee-nahkw, is that how you say it? I ask.

Yes *Missinak*<sup>u</sup>. She have all her children under water. That where they play and grow. Don't get too close. *Nukum* say never play around water hole. *Missinak*<sup>u</sup> might catch you.

I'll be careful, I say, my scoops now proper and subdued. I pour one last dipper of water into the bucket, glance into the water hole—a last nod to *Missinak*<sup>u</sup> and we head back to the camp.

Debbie, Sepastien says, you want food?

He speaks for Akat as she points to the pot of stewed partridge.

My name is Deborah.

Oh okay, Deborah. Are you hungry?

Sure.

Akat scoops up a serving for her, a breast—the best part and hands over the bowl with a large round *pakueshikai*, still warm.

Deborah takes the bowl and the bread. She seems uncertain what to do with the bread, shaped like a big thick frisbee. I motion for her to pass it over and break off a chunk for her, point to the tub of margarine next to the salt and sugar and teabags by the stove. I watch her as she takes the first bite, wondering if she'll like the strong sprucy taste of the partridge. She seems to and with great gusto chomps down the whole breast, lapping up the gravy with her *pakueshikai*. Partridge is my favourite and I too get a breast, tender in its complicated succulent flavor.

The kettle is boiled and I take charge of washing the dishes. Deborah dries them. By the time we're done night has fallen and Akat is lighting candles. She's counting on all twelve of us to not knock them over and burn down the tent. But the light is lovely, golden and gothic, casting a soft glow on our many tired faces, the flame flickering a dance of light against the canvas walls.

It's bedtime and there's much toing and froing, shifting and settling, a steady chatter, children jumping on and over bodies, not one word raised at them as they desperately try to spend every last bit of energy they can muster before surrendering to the inevitable. Penatet, Tshaki, Maku and Penute. Whenever the baby begins to whine in her *ueuepishun*, one or another of the children stop to give her a little swing until she settles. Akat works hard around their exuberance to lay a couple of blue tarps for extra

insulation. Blue tarps made in a Chinese factory town where the air lies low and thick, poisoning babies. I grab the other end of the tarp to help. She takes down the sponge mattresses that line the walls and places them over the tarps along the whole back of the tent. More jumping up and down up and down, bodies collapsing and piling up, squirming and giggling and standing again. Somehow no one has fallen on the baby as Shuni changes her diaper. Boxes and bags are bundled up and taken outside to make room. I grab my bag of toiletries and pack up my own bag, hating to surrender it to the great outdoors, hoping a bear or other petty thief won't get at it.

Deborah and I are assigned to the side of the tent by the door, more room than we deserve. She offers to place her mattress lengthwise to share it. Akat rejigs her mattresses and throws over a small one for the bottom half and I place my little blue foam one at our feet. Akat motions for Shuni and Penatet to sleep with us in our corner. Just enough space for everyone to be close enough to keep each other warm. The four of us stake our respective territories, lay out our sleeping bags and blankets and burrow in.

Storytime, Sepastien says. I tell you a story of when I'm a boy. He begins *sotto voce* and the children's chatter stops in anticipation.

When I'm a boy my family travel only by snowshoes, he says. In summer we travel in the canoe.

His voice is a gentle thrum of words. He is speaking English, for my sake and Deborah's. The cackle of the fire provides the soundtrack as his story circulates groundless between worlds, disembodied words floating as if contained by the walls of the canvas tent. I want the unself-conscious *Innu-aimun* version and wonder whether this version of the story is different, aimed at us and not his children, if it is white noise to

them? What would others in the camp think of his story for the *kakeshauts*? I may be assuming too much.

*Ishkuteu*, Akat cries out, as she jumps out of her blankets. Neither the children nor the *kakeshau* women have caught the sparks that have now burned a sizeable hole in the southeast corner of the tent, right above our heads. Akat trips over bodies toward the water bucket and scoops up a dipper, waves us out of the way, throws our blankets and mattresses aside, and flings the dipper of water at the creeping burn. She fingers the edges to make sure the fire is expired, then bunches up a scrap piece of canvas, shoves it into the hole, motions us to lie down again, and gingerly makes her way back to her bed.

Crisis averted and Sepastien continues with his story.

In the winter we walk very very far every day, for many days, he says. My mother pull a toboggan that carry my baby sister.

I can picture a baby swaddled and tied amongst supplies on the toboggan, covered with caribou skins, and the family walking all in a row on the *meshkaia*, each carrying or pulling their assigned weight of supplies and gear.

*Ua ua ua, ua*, Sepastien sings his mother's lullaby to shush the infant in his story, the children in this tent and the wind under the full moon of this early evening.

I was a small boy and I help her. I follow with a stick and push the toboggan. I feel like I am a big boy helping my mother.

I can see him chivvying the toboggan forward with his stick, too small to be walking amongst the men.

Sometimes my mother stop to feed the baby, Sepastien continues. I see her bending over, unbuttoning her coat and lifting her sweater to offer her breast to quell the

baby's hungry cry. Between Sepastien's words, I hear the boy's longing for the sweet and warm nectar of her breast.

This is the story Sepastien thinks the *kakeshau* women want to hear. It is a short story, a *tipatshimun*—a story of the more recent past—barely a story, but still a good one. As he continues with his patchwork of boyhood memories, how he shot his first caribou and couldn't wait to come back to the camp to share every detail with his mother, I want to take notes, so I can return home and write about these moments, about this boy with a quick smile and eager to please. Tall for his age, lanky, tanned and handsome, dressed in corduroy pants from the Old Davis Inlet church bins. A canvas jacket and caribou hat, socks knit by his *kukum*, or is it *ukuma*? He is a younger version of his son Matshiu, bangs falling over his eyes in a long straight sweep. Are my images true, or are they ruptured from their roots, starved and gasping? If I were to write them down and wrap them in fine words, an emotion, a calculated order, could I touch a reader with their offering? Would my words be too parsimonious? Could I avoid the sin of appropriation? This is why I only write in my journal, and not to share.

I hear a deep inhale coming from one of the kids, a sure sign he's gone to sleep. I can feel sleep creeping in on me too. I pull my down jacket over my face, turn on my side, curl up and wait until only the wind is awake, prying at the tent, hooting with the snow owl under the sultry gaze of the stars.

My *nutshimits* sleep is filled with dreams, fitful and disorienting, my subconscious gone wild in the wilderness. Visceral. This happens every time. I hardly ever remember my dreams back home. First I was in a prison, and the guard walked into my cell with the

blond head of a man on a platter. I was about to retch in my dream when I awoke to someone stuffing wood in the stove. I felt nauseous. Put my hand up to touch my neck. Go back to sleep. Next I dreamt I'd taken Napaen home to meet my family, and he was climbing my aunt Beatrice, scaling her body like a cliff. A different spectacle. An F-18 jet fighter showed up, the kind that crashed a couple of miles from an Innu bush camp last spring, way outside the training zone. I was running, bushwhacking through a boreal forest, like the ones around here, the plane chasing me because I wore white. I turned to look and the pilot leered at me, a long slimy piercing look in slow motion, a lapse in his supersonic flight. He'd pointed the nose of his plane straight up and flipped a full rotation, like in an air show. Showing off. Then the plane started to fall, spinning around and down in a jerky kind of way, still slow motion. Bigger than life, surreal, like I was watching a movie, but also in real life, the plane twisted and turned and turned like a top straight down. Crash, blasting into a massive inferno. I am screaming, wide awake and exhausted, my head, buried under my down parka, wet from my breath's condensation.

Maybe I'm not screaming, my heart surprisingly calm. But I'm exhausted. It's been a busy night. The wood in the stove snaps and pops with the hot knots of spruce, as flames greedily gasp for air and the baby babbles in her *ueuepishun*. A chorus of birds warble and cheep, calling out good morning, and the sun shimmers ripples of light and shadows off the tent canvas as breezes stir, rise and fall, a fleeting embrace of the tent.

I lie still and cradle my morning introspection, my senses aroused, snuggled in my bag, feet toasty in my wool socks, as my dream world evaporates. I'm reluctant to get up and face awkward small talk with Akat, words floating lifeless to their destination, with smiles, shrugs, nods and pointing to compensate. I roll over instead, but soon the heat

from the stove drives me out of my mummy bag. I rip it open and wriggle my body up to sitting.

Sepastien is gone, most likely to check his net, or maybe caribou hunting. Akat is busy, her tiny and taut body charged, as always moving, at something: changing a diaper, sewing a rip in Napess' jacket, filling a snowshoe, plucking a partridge, washing dishes, sewing the pleats into a pair of moccasins, stoking the fire, creating order from chaos. At this moment, she's kneading *pakueshikai*. Her hair cannot be contained in her ponytail and she is constantly jabbing her glasses into place with the back of her hand. She shapes the bread into a round disc and slaps it straight onto the stove. I am remembering last summer when she had dug a hole in the sand, buried her bread and built a fire on top for it to bake.

She smiles my way as she stands and walks over to the door, pulls back the flap to let in more air. Fresh snow whiffles about. A couple of dogs are charging around after each other, recreating another generation, delighted in their abundance. A chain saw roars and a snowmobile rumbles by. At a distance I hear laughter and chatter, a boombox on batteries playing a country and western song, a baby crying real tears, next door a mild argument. Snowflakes accumulate on the roof of the tent.

XV.

I've no sooner finished my breakfast of oatmeal pancakes, when Manish pokes her head into the tent.

The women are going hunting and you're coming, she says, as she hunches down and steps over the threshold log. She stands by the stove and inspects the pan of frying pancakes and pot of beaver stew cooking on the stove, then the hole in the corner of the tent.

Looks like you almost burned down the tent, she says, matter of fact.

Akat is our hero, she saved us, I say. Akat may not know what I said but she still smiles modestly.

We'll be gone all day, so dress warm, Manish says. Wear old stuff, not those. She points to my caribou mitts that reach almost to my elbow and are decorated with a beaded flower motif and trimmed with beaver fur. A gift from Akat. Fortunately I have another cozy pair, also leather but nowhere near as impressive, and from my world where the dye that makes them burgundy is a toxic concoction that poisons rivers.

I pack a lunch and fill my thermos with hot tea, laced with canned milk and sugar. I never drink sugar in my tea back home but this is a cup of tea in the woods. Akat hands me a couple of tea bags.

*Tshin* make fire, more *nipishapun*, she says. She also gives me a chunk of bannock smothered in red berry jam and wrapped in a paper towel, to complement my roasted cashews and raisins.



*Tshinashkumitin.*

I am here and visible and invited. Deborah has gone out, maybe for a walk. Too bad for her. We won't have to invite her along, although I'm not sure Manish would anyway.

Akat and Manish are talking and laughing now. Probably about me. I throw everything into my small backpack and follow Manish out the door. I struggle with the harness of my snowshoes, a simple strip of caribou skin that straps around my foot and slips across the back of my heel. We head out under the bright gimlet gaze of the sun.

Apparently, there'll be no meetings today.

Four other women are waiting for us at the other end of the camp. Shustin has left her kids with her mother, escaped for the day. Emma wears a Grenfell felt parka, a pullover trimmed with an abundant white wolf tail around the hood. I've been coveting that coat for a long time. Mata has on a striped hoodie under her unzipped coat, her scarf hanging loose and an orange hat over a single braid tied with a beaded leather hair clip. I can see my reflection in Teinish's sunglasses. She's the only one wearing them and hopefully the rest of us won't get snow blindness. Manish, Mata and Teinish have guns slung over their shoulders and diagonally across their backs.

You go first, Manish orders.

You're talking to me? I ask.

What could she be thinking?

Yes, we're going that way, she says, pointing to a snowmobile trail. Lead us to porcupine.

You're kidding.

No, go on now.

Okay, I say, with not a trace of conviction.

The others acquiesce and we trudge off through the powdery snow that covers the trail, a clean wind whipping from the northwest, not a whisper of spring in the air. Through the rising vapour of a subzero air, so crisp, so dry, the snow creaks underfoot. I need to focus on balance. If I step to either side of the snowmobile track, I'm liable to slip sideways and easily up to my waist. I hope someone has the wherewithal to look up to spot game. I stop to wipe my nose. I can feel my cheeks burning from the cold already, bright red in my downward glance. I rub my cheekbones and nose to warm them, but in vain.

Not time for a break yet, Manish calls out from behind, and I march on. The women follow, chatter non-stop and occasionally pile up behind me, tripping into each other on the heels of my clumsy steps.

*Kushkunu, kushkunu*, Manish commands. Go straight, go straight!

The snowmobile trail has veered off to the right, but we apparently are heading into the woods. Tree branches of pine and fir and spruce droop all around us, laden with snow. Sunlight slices through the trees and splashes off the white mountains to the southwest, throwing into relief its creases and folds, patches of trees, a coulee snaking its way down.

Now I am even breaking trail! I forge ahead, a fledgling warrior of the woods. The women continue to tag behind my every step, careful and deliberate. A subtle swing of my bear paw snowshoe as I stride forward; that's how it's done. We are on a trail, narrow and unobstructed, and below the meters of snow must be a covering of centuries old

moss. I am learning a different history as I walk. A wordless story settling into my body.

The women's chatter comes in spells now, punctuated with the inevitable laugh.

Prtrtrtrgrutruprahsutututut, one of the women lets loose an impressively loud fart. A low but high voltage fart with a side order of rotten eggs. Someone is bound to provide a translation for *Matshishkapeu*, the Fart Man.

Partridge, *Matshishkapeu* say there many partridge around here, Teinish cries out.

*Mauats mauats*, he say *kakeshau* woman need sex real bad, Mata says to great squealing giggles.

Some people are brilliant interpreters.

We might have better luck finding partridge than a man around here, I say.

Another round of laughs, more subdued this time.

I love *Matshishkapeu*. He pitches up spontaneously and you never know what he's up to. Apart from being a terrible tease, he might comment on the weather, the hunt, or what someone ate the night before. He can sing, mimic, settle an argument or predict the future. Sometimes he can be cryptic and hard to understand. Other times the interpretation is as quick as the outburst.

One time in the middle of a public meeting, people were arguing about whether the community should protest to shut down the new housekeeping course being offered by the college to teach Innu how to clean their houses properly. There was the insult and the issue of no running water and training allowances that would be lost. Things got pretty tense, emotions high, the discussion was heating up when Mishte-Pinip farted. I couldn't understand the interpretation, but everyone had laughed heartily and the tension in the room dissipated.

Mostly *Matshishkapeu* is a very funny guy, but apparently he's not just a comedian. He's also the Boss, really powerful, more so than even then *Katipenemitau*. This is what I read in a journal article by an anthropologist. Farting is a form of divination, he wrote. The Spirit of the Anus is not to be crossed, ever, or he will curse human or animal with a painful even deadly case of constipation.

This cold too can cause constipation. I know cold. I have inherited cold from my childhood prairie winters. I exhale and with every warm breath, ice crystals form on strands of hair that have escaped from my hat. I spit and my saliva freezes mid-air. My fingers and my feet are numb, but the cold has not yet fazed me. Don't eat the snow even if you're parched. Stop and feel your hands and feet, stretch your fingers and toes, slap your hands together and pound your feet down into the snow. Hard. Get the blood flowing. Keep walking.

*Pineu!* one of the women shouts behind me, with no attempt to keep her voice down and not frighten the partridge. *Matshishkapeu* was right. I turn to see Emma pointing about twenty feet away to a spruce partridge on a snowy branch sitting pretty and still, looking so much at home and burbling sweet nothings to us. Emma grabs her shotgun, aims and pulls the trigger. A stark high-pitched deafening blast cracks open the silence. Missed. Emma laughs self-consciously, and aims again.

The partridge has not moved, as if oblivious, awaiting its destiny, as if it exists on that branch merely to serve as our supper. I've seen this before, a partridge that flies around, lands on a perch, as if waiting to be seen, not hiding from its death. Shot after missed shot, the partridge continues to sit until finally the bullet pierces its heart. Emma walks over as she hauls off her hunting bag, scoops up the partridge and throws it in.

I am jumping up and down to keep warm, watching everyone's breath, like little balloons of fog. Little text balloons like in comics, shattering into a million pieces from the cold. The women decide to take a cigarette break and I keep jumping up and down, pause a moment to take a sip from my thermos.

Keep going. Manish is still ordering me around, and I head out further down the trail, the posse on my tail. Despite the cold, I'm feeling more secure and stable on my snowshoes. Maybe even confident.

These snowshoes are really the perfect technology, I say to Manish who is now directly behind me.

Yes, we are a simple and savage people living close to the earth. Using the natural resources of our tribal territory in a sustainable way to carry out our primitive way of life.

Shag off, I say. You know what I mean. Just last week you were going on about all the skill that goes into making them.

She had told me how her *ukuma* had shown her how to fill a snowshoe with babiche, beginning with the toe hole at the corner of the crossbar weaving in and around, over and under in a triangle, until it was completely filled.

We continue on our way until the sun has travelled almost halfway across the sky and the cold has slowly and with great determination crept in to occupy my body. I have led the women to six partridges. No porcupine. The thing is I'm not that partial to porcupine.

*Mitshim* and *nipishapun*, I hear behind me. We are stopping for a boil-up. My thermos is long empty and I'm famished. I want to shout out, finally! I want to say, let's make the biggest damn fire we can. I want to jump up and down again and make the

biggest damn fire ever. My body is cold. Forgive my cold body. There is the question of frailty and mortality. I won't have to burrow into the snow after all. We will make the biggest damn fire. Cells have burst. Frigid here. Burn there. My cold cheeks have gone from red to white, and tomorrow I expect they'll be black from frostbite.

We spread out in different directions to fetch wood—mainly dead branches and old man's beard. Shustin coaxes a flame to life with her cigarette lighter. The fire spits and swears, flames conflating and licking hungrily towards the cloudless sky, coils of smoke spiraling higher. Manish hauls out her kettle, and after filling it with snow many times over, we manage to get enough water boiling for each of us to have a small cup of tea. I pluck my bannock with partridge berry jam from my backpack and wolf it down, along with my cashews and raisins, many falling into the snow because there's no way I'm taking off my mitts to eat. I salivate as I watch the women chow down beef jerky and canned wieners. We all hover as close to the fire as possible, my hands inches away from the flames.

*Takau*, I say. The women all nod. I have spoken a word, cold, when what should escape from my mouth are bellows and wails as my fingers and toes begin to thaw. Throbbing pain, like the lightning strike of a hammer coming down on them. I break the circle, step away to slow down the thawing, but then step back close. I need to store up heat for the rest of our journey.

Time to head back, Manish says. I want to remain with the fire; I've only just reclaimed my extremities. I want to warn the women to stay for their own sake. But I follow Manish's order and head out, once again in the lead. One step in front of the other and as we retrace our tracks I feel better, surprisingly fresh and refueled. I have found my

stride. I've got swagger. I scan the tree line and spot the porcupine clinging high onto a gaunt spruce trunk along a craggy rock face.

*Kak<sup>u</sup>*, I cry into the wind and we all stop and stare as the porcupine's round body tries to scoot its way higher up the tree, but is soon defeated by a small branch in its way. Manish is reaching for her gun as we all stand watching. She is the chosen one.

It's a male, Manish says.

How do you know?

Its tail is longer, she said. It's not very big, but not a baby.

The porcupine looks directly down at us, at me, like his eyes are holding mine fast, forcing me to look full in the face of what we are about to do, what all life does. I had merely observed as I watched the partridges die, but with this, my first sighting, I'm spooked. I eat meat but I've never shot an animal. I'm still looking at him and I am staring my own death in his eyes. I am afraid, I know not what lies beyond. I want to tell him: 'Other direction buddy! Quick, slither down, or you'll end up in a pot!' But I'm quite sure that would not be appreciated, nor am I confident in my skills as a porcupine whisperer.

Manish aims. Her face is tight, her eyes focused and her breathing hard. She shoots and misses. Even with the sound of the gun blast, expected yet still loud and sudden, my solitary little friend stays immobile. She misses a second time. My ears are ringing. The smell is metallic, acrid and sour, a hint of sulfur and urine and ammonia. With each shot I expect the porcupine to slide down the tree, but he too sits, like the partridges, breathing silently, offering himself with no protest. Maybe he is not meant to die. Maybe someone has shown disrespect and *Uhuapeu*, the Porcupine Spirit, is angry.

This is what I've been told, that it happens all the time. Like with Sepastien's story of the *uishkatshan*. If the Innu don't handle the animal or the meat properly, the Animal Master or Spirit will not give them anything in return. Maybe a dog in the camp got hold of a porcupine bone. This withdrawal of privilege could go on for years. The Spirits want to protect themselves. This is life and death and infinity and people could run out of food. We are in this together.

One more shot and finally the porcupine tumbles down into the empty stillness of the snow below. Manish snowshoes over to it and I want to go too, to touch the little guy and hold him, feel his weight in my arms, examine his mess of quills up close. I am unsettled, my heartbeat accelerated, as if I had pulled the trigger. A feeling rises in me slowly, a small storm of uncertainty and grief and relief and remorse. Soul-wrenching awe. An encounter with animal and death, a thread of life snipped. A voice inside of me is howling at the top of my lungs.

I inhale and close my eyes for a brief moment and when I open them Manish is tying a rope to a front and back leg. Short legs and the soles of his paws hairless. His beady black eyes stare blankly now from its wee face, framed on each side with two tiny ears. Black and white quills spring out of his body like one of David Bowie's spiky hairstyles. The women watch in silence. A whiff of his smell stings my nostrils—a cross between human body odor and blue cheese. Manish swings the bundle over her head to carry it across her back like a bag. Blood drips onto her coat.

She points the way to signal it's time to go, and we continue on our *meshkaia*. The sky is still blue, unblinking.



My only encounter with a dead porcupine previous to this was as road kill, driving by in a car, oblivious as the creature lay on the shoulder of the road. Or making a game of it with my siblings: who can spot the largest number of road kill? Left to rot and waste.

Maybe the women too are contemplating beginnings and endings. We have all just been privy to a small bit of Nature's great pageant, a fleeting glimpse of the eternity of being. We are living within something larger than ourselves. There is a serenity to it all. We take life to live. This is honest food, not pumped with antibiotics, millions of animals across our continent unable to move, jam-packed in their own excrement, never to catch a moment's glimpse of the sun.

The women have quieted, no more repartee and ribbing. The only sound is the crunch of our snowshoes on the snow that has begun to harden with the setting sun. We are walking on land that is centuries, millennia unchanged. We are in *nutshimits*, 'in the bush' or 'in the country,' a translation that really doesn't cut it. People speak of *nutshimits* with such longing and love, as if this land was a place of comfort and healing and sustenance. I walk with these women feeling safe and tranquil, but I fear this land. I would not want to be alone. I am in awe of its wild beauty, but it is fierce and austere, uninhabitable. To me anyway. So bloody cold.

It is almost dusk and the full moon, like a perfect cool pearl, is rising in a purple pink sky to welcome us back to the camp—the sun in the west contained, a muted red ball. All I want now is to come in from the cold. My fingers and toes have long stopped screaming from pain. They barely even remember the pain. All I want is to lie down and go to sleep, cradled by the land. Maybe it is not so unforgiving. I have put on silence and ice. I walk in emptiness. I can hear Joni Mitchell crooning Come in from the Cold:

I feel renewed  
I feel disabled  
By these bonfires in my spine,  
I don't know who the arsonist was,  
Which incendiary soul,  
Come in from the cold,  
Come in, come in.

We walk by Manteskueu and Mishte-Pinip's tent. He sits on the threshold taking in fresh air. Manish stops and hands him the porcupine. Innu protocol: the porcupine is gifted to the first person the hunter sees back at the camp. I'm relieved I won't have to endure the oily, smoky burned bone smell of porcupine stewing that would fill up our tent and drive me out. I'd rather not have to see the bones, frighteningly human. I hope *Uhuapeu* can't read my thoughts.

## XVI.

Last night I was nodding off before I'd even finished washing dishes. Akat sent me to bed and I was asleep before the children. A herd of caribou outside the tent would not have kept me awake. A caribou inside the tent could not have prevented my slumber.

This morning I am achy and stiff as I roll over in my sleeping bag. I've avoided gangrene, although my cheeks are tender and the flesh feels hard, where the skin has turned black no doubt. I peek out of my bag and see that everyone is still asleep. It's barely dawn. I crawl out, pull on my extra sweater and my parka, make my way around bodies to the stove, and light the fire. Still no one stirs. I need to *shishi*, so I head out of the tent, slip on my snowshoes and make for the hill on the south side of the camp. I might be able to catch the sunrise. I can hear voices from a distant tent, and the neighbour's dog barks half-heartedly at me.

Shush, I say, not wanting my moment of solitude invaded.

My dream from last night follows me. Another vivid dream, powerful but gentle for a change. My father showed up again, sober this time. It seems I'm seeing him more often these days than when he was alive. I was walking in the woods on one of my usual grief-trudges and there he was sitting high up in a spruce tree, his legs wrapped around the trunk, not unlike yesterday's porcupine. I wasn't surprised to find him there or in that strange position. We chatted but I can't remember about what, and then he was gone. Poof, just like that. I looked around, but there was no sign of him, no prints in the snow around the tree where he'd sat.

I'd stared a long time at the spruce, watching the rhythm of the branches swaying in the wind, and slowly with each gust of wind the tree began to transform, to morph into the shape of a man, small branches on the top bending down and around to form a head, and below a burly chest, the trunk dividing into separate legs. Hollow inside his body of branches, Spruce Man stepped forward, towering over me. I wasn't frightened, only wonderstruck, again like the feeling I'd had yesterday when the porcupine was shot down. I blinked to see if Spruce Man was real and there he was still, larger than life. I wasn't sure he could see me as he walked right by heading clearly for the camp. I followed him, the breeze gently blowing around me, a tranquil and beneficent breath.

Rather like this morning's twilight breeze. I'm feeling plucky as I head back to the camp, as if I might just burst out of my skin. Maybe I can spot this strange kind of man of my dreams, as I scan a stand of spruce trees ahead of me. The sun is barely risen—an expansive swath of pink permeating fair weather cumulus clouds—yet the snow under my feet is crystalizing already, sinking slowly into the ground, spring creaking at the seams to manifest and bring new life. The sun is swelling over the horizon now, fully awake and prepared to shoo the clouds away. Today we dwellers will throb below the vernal sun.

You're stealing our dreams, Sepastien says when I ask him what it means.

How is that possible? I ask.

You need to ask an elder, Sepastien said. Akat's mother Manteskueu is very good to know about dreams. We ask her after breakfast.

I scramble eggs and fry up bacon that I've brought, dish out the food, and the whole time Akat and Sepastien talk in hushed tones.

Dishes can wait and the three of us head out for Mishte-Pinip and Manteskueu's tent. We walk by Manish and Pien's tent. She is holding the two back legs of a caribou lying on his back, while Pien skins the animal, now mostly naked, with his fleshy red thighs and lean and hollowed torso, guts removed, blood splashed across their pants and coats. Tshakapesh, who must be about eight, sits nearby watching intently. He flashes two red hands at us, covered in blood, gorgeously crimson. Kuekuatsheu, barely older, hovers, intent on helping. I could swear that's a smile Pien just shot my way. Amazing the effect a little fresh air can have on a person.

Pien did good yesterday, Manish says.

We got eleven, Pien adds, matter of fact, not a hint of boasting in his voice.

Sepastien and Pien carry on, no doubt dissecting every detail of the hunt, until Akat prompts us to carry on. A handful of kids are playing outside Mishte-Pinip and Manteskueu's tent, dressing a snowman with a scarf and mitts at the end of stick arms, spruce branches for long hair, like dread locks. One of the boys sports cool sunglasses and a Labrador flag tuque, green blue and white with a spruce twig. He sticks his tongue out at me followed by a giant smile. I fake punch him in the arm and pop my red tam on the snowman's head.

Akat pokes her head through the doorway to announce our arrival and we all step into the orderly tent, manoeuvre to find a spot to sit. Mishte-Pinip and Manteskueu sit side by side on a large trunk near the stove, both in short sleeves, his plaid, hers wedgewood blue with white flowers and leaves. A *pakueshikai* is cooking in a frying pan and a teakettle grumbles and boils. Manteskueu passes out cups and dippers, and points to the *kashiuasht* and *tshitshinapun* for us to help ourselves.

Akat explains our purpose. With no prompting from me, she describes my dream. Or so I imagine. And she goes on. I can tell it's made an impression on her too. I don't remember it being so elaborate. Her parents listen intently and there is much discussion back and forth between the two elders. Every so often they look my way quizzically. Mishte-Pinip is shaking his head, as he slips a cigarette into his mouth. Usually the guy is joking around. Not a word of translation yet.

A young man sticks his head in the tent and hands over a couple of partridges. Manteskueu takes them and begins plucking one as she continues to talk, deftly grabbing handfuls of feathers while the *pineu's* skin remains intact.

I continue to wait for them to proclaim on my dream. Next to the stove sit two cardboard boxes, one for food and one for dishes, and beside those all in a row are a box of Purity crackers, a bag of flour, a yellow tub of Imperial Eversweet (indeed) margarine, a metal bowl with an uncooked *pakueshikai*. A large lantern flashlight and *passauaia* hang from the cross beam above the stove along with mitts and a pair of lumberjack socks. A hefty pile of wood junks is stacked tidily behind the stove. The *eshpishatshimeuan* made of a couple of sheets and hung at night like a tent inside the tent to contain body heat, has been pulled and tied back out of the way. Caribou skins rest behind a couple of tent poles, and a beaver skin stretched on a frame leans against the back wall.

Why would my dream warrant so much discussion? But then again when I ask my friend Annie to interpret a dream, she usually needs time to think about it. She's my dream guru back home. She'd tell me my father in my dream was a part of me, and Spruce Man too. She'd ask me about the surroundings and the weather, my feelings

during and after the dream. And I'd tell her I was happy, and curiously uncurious about why my father was up in a tree, and how exquisite Spruce Man was, and how I would follow him to the ends of the world.

We might ponder the meaning of Tree. There are expressions and idioms: go climb a tree, and I could be out of my tree, or find myself up a tree. I can't see the forest for the trees and money doesn't grow on trees. There's the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge and the Family Tree. Tree as Totem and the Tree as May Pole. May Poles would be part of my heritage. I'd never given much thought about how my medieval ancestors would've gone in search of the perfect tree, chopped it down, peeled off the bark, decorated it with ribbons, and had girls dance around it. Bathed in sunshine, ushering spring and fecundity. And there's the Christmas tree, and the tree or maybe two of the holy cross of Jesus crucified. Trees are the earth's lung: exhaling oxygen we inhale and inhaling carbon dioxide we exhale.

So what does it mean? I ask, my patience waning.

It's my dream after all they're discussing.

They all look over at me, as if reminded of my presence.

I'd like to know what you think it means? I ask again. My silence will not protect me. I will die sooner or later, whether I have spoken or not.

You're stealing our dreams, Sepastien says. Manteskueu say the same thing.

I thought he might've meant it as a joke earlier, but there is not a hint of teasing in either of their faces. That might even be a look of annoyance on Mishte-Pinip's face, lines etched across his contracted brow. Or could it be puzzlement, or worry? I'd heard Pien, a Sheshatshiu elder speaking at a meeting about the school, talking about how young Innu

were no longer dreaming, and this was why they were losing their way.

Manteskueu is speaking again. She's just stood up to flip the *pakueshikai* in the frying pan. She speaks also with her hands, holding both together pointing them out, and up to her lips, then rubbing them together, waving one of them my way, then holding them out, palms up. Wrapping her words into an offering.

Maybe she's thinking that I am like an Innu child. Children, I've been told are too immature to talk about their dreams, and doing so can bring bad luck.

She say your father is lonely, Sepastien translates.

I don't remember getting that feeling when we were talking, I say.

If a person pass away and come in your dream, it mean he want you to go with him, Sepastien says.

Go with him where? I ask.

Manteskueu say she know what the dream mean for Innu, but maybe not in your culture. Maybe it is for you to try to understand it.

I ignore his last words.

My father disappeared in my dream, I say. How could I follow him?

Manteskueu say the tree is strong, very strong, Sepastien says, ignoring my question. The tree is shelter and wood for fire, and it give us snowshoes and canoes and toboggan and tools. A stick to help us walk. It protect us.

What does that have to do with me?

The tree bring earth and sky together. It grow into the sky and the roots go deep in the ground. The roots are ancestors. Your tree man have no roots, he is ripped out of the ground. Manteskueu say you must respect the ancestors. And respect the tree.



Respect the tree? What tree?

A dream is not to play with, Sepastien says.

Who's playing, I think. And I want to say, now I'm more confused and forget it and I can't. I thought this was a happy dream.

Manteskueu has just disemboweled one of the partridges, placed the heart and gizzard on the lid of the margarine tub. She grabs the other scrawny bird and cuts along the crop, where spruce needles and other digestables reside part way down the gullet before entering the stomach and being macerated and digested. The crop is blocked with spruce needles, green and pungent. No berries at this time of the year, only in the fall and spring. I've never considered how partridges are reconstituted spruce needles and berries. This white partridge is a rearrangement, a kind of revisioning of spruce needles and berries. The wispy feathers, smeared in blood are all versions of the same thing. So what did that make me?

Akat wraps all the feathers tinged with blood into a sheet of newspaper and places them in a plastic bag.

I am a tree hugger, but my Spruce Man might be asking a lot of me coming from a culture that is wanton in its destruction of said trees, thousands of square hectares clearcut all over Newfoundland, leaving just a small strip along roads or vistas so most people can't see, only from planes. The earth skinned alive in a godless world.

And Sepastien's right. I am fascinated with my dreams, carry them around in my awake mind, but I contemplate them with my head cocked, one eye closed. It is a random world, strange and madcap, scary and freaky—a little too close to the world that had my grandmother strapped onto a hospital bed, electrode pads attached to each side of her

head, a rubber tube between her teeth while the doctor pressed a button to send electricity coursing through her brain.

Dreams sneak up unannounced, sometimes a spectacle, a horror show, entertaining, other times an arm around my shoulder, a pool to bask in, a lark, stark and naked, shameful, unforthcoming, almost always a mirror whether I like it or not, or a sledge hammer, duh, how could I not know that? Sometimes my dreams possess me, they are in control. I can't tell them to go away, they keep returning. Is it possible they are mere electrical impulses in my gray matter?

We sleep for one third of our lives, like a total of twenty-five or more years, yet we, from my world, give little credence to this parallel life.

And respect my ancestors? Really I love some of them dearly—the survivors, comedians, good and generous hearts—but what of the colonizers and racists, the drunks and merciless Catholics, you can beat up an old man, hang on to your grudges like your life depends on it. Where is the heart and backbone in superiority? And women should just fall in line, you made your bed and now you must lie in it, do not step outside the bounds, you are a sinner, repent, even before you've done anything wrong, repent for your sins and all sins, and don't think that you are equal to the boys, polish your husband's shoes and iron his shirts and if you are angry, dare not speak your thoughts, do not express your needs, you're not allowed needs, and don't speak family secrets and procreation is your destiny, it is a sin to be seen, boastful, vain. Well, maybe that's more the patriarchy and the church than my family, but look at what happened to my grandmother?

What Manteskueu is saying is that in the Innu cosmos a dream is not to be doubted. A dream is a deep place of knowing where the dead can speak. Pay attention. Dreams are what it means to be alive. She is telling me my dream is a meditation, a message, an omen. If I were Innu and a believer, my dream would be my power, a direct channel to the Spirits and Gods. A believer who dreams of playing the drum on three different occasions, has the right to play the drum awake, and while playing he can be drawn back into his dream, a dream now sweeping with powers. And it's not just men but women too who have these dreams.

I look at the four of them. Helpless. I guess I should thank them; my *tshinashkumitin* is feeble. I step out into the uncompromising blue sky, grab my tam back off the snowman as I walk by. I might need it to go study my dream. Find a tree to lean on. For comfort. Immersed in their world, but stuck in mine, even if they think I'm stealing their dreams. Tears are lifting up inside me. Can I ever go back from this? This is nowhere and the only place.

I'd stumbled into an imposing truth in the forest—a temple for a strange dream wrapped in snow and sunlight. Like the winter's snow mountains all around me in mid-April, my dream was beginning to melt and trickle away.

One time Michael had brought me breakfast in bed on a tray, with daisies sitting pretty in a vase, a perfect piece of birch bark wrapped around it, with our initials carved inside a heart. I thought it was the best present ever.

## XVII.

Back in the village, the team has organized a workshop for school kids at the mission. We're waiting with our flip chart paper and markers when they pile in, rushing pushing strutting until the hall is overrun and buzzing with their anarchy. Grades 4 to 8. Curious and shy, some brazen, demanding, laughing and shoving. Perfect teeth and rotting teeth. Smearly faces. Psychedelic and camouflage and two-toned jackets. Runny noses. A white and red crocheted tuque with Davis Inlet across the rim.

We can't do this workshop at school, Sepastien had said, and no teachers. We'd all nodded in agreement. We weren't looking for correct answers. But now I wonder how we'll manage. I sit in a corner with Shustin while Kanani calls the scalliwags to attention. I'm surprised to see the children settle so quickly.

Good thing Kanani used to work in the school, Shustin whispers. Now the children are all mumbling in a tottering unison. Not a subtle misbehaviour. She must have asked them to say a prayer for their friends who died. I keep hoping for an Innu prayer, calling out to the grandmothers and grandfathers, the ancestors, the Animal Masters, the Spirits of the Sun and the Moon and the Earth, to ask for their help, to show us all the way, lead these children back to a place where life and death make sense. But I have to settle for what I suspect is 'Our Father'.

Sepastien takes over and the children are riveted, fixed on his every word, *ishkuteu* and *auassats* and *mitshuap*. They're all still wearing their jackets and skidoo boots and moccasins and hats, for a quick getaway maybe.

I scan each of their faces, try to catch their eye. Was the desk next to hers in class now empty? What if I could look deep into his eyes?

Sepastien is still talking. He must be directing them to think about what it's like being a kid in Utshimassits. What's good about it and what are the bad things? And what's good and bad about being in *nutshimits*. We want them to draw their answers. Hopefully he's told them why we're doing this.

Now he's pointing at me and in a split second I'm surrounded by kids.

I need paper.

Me too.

And me! Me! Me!

I rip off sheets from the flip chart pad and hand them over with a random assortment of coloured markers. I'd had the foresight to bring these from St. John's. If nothing else I knew the inquiry would require coloured markers.

Can you say the instructions in English? Shustin asks.

I do, hoping my words correspond to Sepastien's, and a few kids are looking at me. I write down the two questions and tape the sheet of flip chart paper on the wall.

After some jostling and negotiating, the kids go off in groups and plop themselves with their sheets and markers hither and tither around the room. A couple groups sit on the floor, they've found a dry spot, and they get right down to business like they've been waiting a long time to do this.

Tshipesh, a boy I recognize from the gathering, has taken the lead in his group, pointing his marker in the air as he speaks. Sharing or prompting, I can't tell. His baseball cap sits backward over his long jet black straight hair, and a racing stripe runs down the

sleeve of his jacket. Heads huddle around the sheet as he begins to write stuff down. Another kid whose hair is straight and punk, draws on the other side of the sheet. The artist needs no words.

Sepastien, Shustin and Kanani have each joined less enterprising groups. I wish I could offer my assistance too, but they might take me for a teacher.

Concentration continues to still the room. I snap pictures and most kids seem oblivious to my camera. Except for Kanani's group. They pose, a string of huge grins beaming in semi-circle with beautiful Kanani in the middle. In another group, where the children have pulled their chairs up to a table, each child is drawing in their own corner of the sheet. No talking, they are in their own private worlds. They don't even look up when I capture them on celluloid. Another group sits on the floor and the conversation is quiet but animated. One girl is raising her hand and bouncing up and down on her bum, as if in school and desperate to share her answer. She knows. She knows. I wish I had a video camera.

Tshipesh is waving his hand at me now, from the other side of the room.

We need another paper, he says.

I bring a sheet over to his circle.

Shuni and another girl from his group sidle over to me. Both have perfect bangs falling just short of their eyes, the kind my curls have denied me. They're wearing identical sweatshirts with the Band Council logo, the same one coveted and stripped off Penute at the party a couple of weeks ago. I instruct the girls to stand close, arms around each other; I focus and snap.

*Auei tshin?* Shuni's friend asks, guileless wide-set dark eyes smiling at me.

Anna. *Mak tshin?*

Nanishi, she says, introducing herself. You speak Innu?

*Apishish.* A rat-a-tat of questions follows from Nanishi, while Shuni stands beside her with a half-smile. Where's my husband, have I been 'on' the movies? The predictable 'where you live' and 'do you have baby?'

Do you like here? Nanishi asks. Shuni shoots me a glance to see my reaction.

*Ehe,* I keep coming back, I say.

Yeah, I see you before.

I'm being evasive. These girls can't know what it feels like to be here and not from here. I arrive and then I leave, and I can't really explain why I keep coming back. How I love that there's no pressure to fit in. I can be eccentric. Of course I'm an outsider, I don't need to fret about it.

Are you teacher? Nurse?

Nope. I'm helping Kanani and Sepastien and Shustin with their work.

What about when you is a kid? What was good and bad things?

The question catches me off guard. I had given up thinking too much about my childhood—those amorphous years when memory had just begun, when life was implacable and full of beginnings, and everything was prairie dust and blue sky and forbidden and forever.

The good, let me think, I say. Friends and skating, swimming. Books, Yeah I love to read books. And the bad? I pause. That would be school and mean people... too much drinking... And the word 'no,' I never liked that word.

The question sticks with me but I don't get into details: how I loved pickles and olives, sunsets, thunderstorms, playing baseball, catching frogs and chasing gophers, reciting limericks, standing on my head, my doll collection, all my girl cousins and my uncle Denis, tree houses, playing scrabble, riding my brother's horse, my mom's cinnamon buns. How I listened obsessively to Crosby Stills Nash and Young and played Chopin waltzes on the piano with a similar compulsion.

Language fails me and I can't tell them about the smell and fear of my father's drinking that clung to me like a fruit bat on a branch, or my drunken uncle flaunting the medal he had stolen from a Sioux grave. I don't mention the put-downs and screaming, and I don't tell them about my Métis friend Alice or how mean we were to James, who was also Métis, sticking not one but multiple thumb tacks on his desk chair, stifling our giggles when he sat on them to avoid the teacher's wrath.

You are not to go to that girl's house, my mother had said about Alice.

Why not? I asked.

Because I said.

No explanation, but I'd learned why in school. This lesson was not in the curriculum, but it was the one that mattered the most. I had learned that Alice and James were Métis and I was white and this distinction came with rules about who we could associate with, who was most likely to get strapped and put in detention in the dark closet, about where we lived and whether we got to eat, the clothes we wore, the music we listened to, and what we could become when we grew up. And then there was the actual curriculum the three of us both learned: that Canada was the true north strong and free, Columbus, Cabot, Cartier and Champlain sailed the ocean blue to the 'New World,' there



were two founding nations, Indians scalped the godly missionaries, Louis Riel was a crazed man executed for treason. Alice and James must have got a different version of history at home, like how Riel was a hero of the people, a democratically elected Member of Parliament, even if he was expelled twice from the House by some forgettable Ontario Orangeman.

The tribalism of my childhood went beyond this divide. It was all-encompassing. There were Limeys, Polacks, Galiceans, Krauts, Savages, Chinks, Kikes, Niggers and we were Frogs. Those distinctions had faded with my generation, but those words were still lodged in my head. We are all disinherited.

Would I score points with these two girls if I told them how I sassed teachers and got kicked out of class more than once, but I decide against it.

When I first came to Labrador to live with the Innu, I thought I might be free, free to be whoever I wanted. No one would know me. I could tell them as much or as little about myself as I wanted. I was glad to be away, away from friends and family. Could I be more truly, wildly, wondrously, messily who I was? Escape from this psychic straightjacket that kept me contained and diminished, people pleasing and whatever other unknown script I'd been handed down, maybe in my DNA?

Do we get to change our minds about who we are? My parents never told me anything about that. They told me what I should do, but not about how to do what I wanted to do. And there was the school to help me unlearn to be me. It's not easy to stop being who I'm not.

Up here I was hoping to touch down, be made visible, figure out how one pole of experience is caught up with the other, and know deep inside my body how to live in a

world gone terribly awry. I am a stranger in my own country now. Ever more. It's not that I don't have friends or a community or a sister I adore. Still I am the outlier, but I've learnt I get to change my mind, figure out each and every day what I no longer agree to.

I look from one girl to the other and they have no idea how beautiful they are, both of them. It's not that they look exotic or novel. No, they are beautiful in the most elementary and innocent way: young and full of life and courage, vulnerable and still standing. And saucy, like I used to be.

I'll send you a copy of the picture if you give me your address. I hand over my notebook and a pen and they each scrawl down their information.

During this interlude, things have fallen apart. As quickly as they were hushed, the place has turned into mayhem. Two boys are ripping sheets of flip chart paper, rolling them into a ball and throwing them around like snowballs. Girls and boys leap over and into chairs in what looks like a riotous game of tag. One little varmint knocks a table over. I hold my camera close to me, and gather the sheets with drawings and words, roll them up into a tube for safekeeping. I help a boy off the floor who has literally just bounced off the wall, flown airborne and dropped. Two boys are fist fighting. And then as suddenly as the bedlam started, a little crowd gathers at the door, and one after another they begin to slide out, disappear in their jackets and boots. Sepastien calls them back. He looks over at me and shrugs. Soon the hall is empty, except for us.

That's it, he says.

We had wanted the groups to report back to each other.

We did it, Shustin says and the three of them explode into laughter. I don't know

what the joke is. I feel like I've just been spun like a top.

I think we can call it a day, Sepastien says. I grab my jacket, hat and mitts and camera, and head home with the roll of kids' drawings tucked under my arm.

## XVIII.

Back at my tent I unroll the drawings one by one and lay them out on the floor. The line drawings are mostly simple and spare, some more stylized and anime. A stick character with punk hair claims *It's good to be cool*. Skulls and crossbones, daunting cans of gas, bottles of alcohol—one with 50% on the label, and large monstrous heads without bodies dominate the drawings. One kid has written, *Things I don't like: 1. vandalism, 2. lists 3. irony.*

In the drawings, chaos rules in the community. Nothing is as it should be. No order or equilibrium. The heads look ravenous and frightening—some kind of *atshen* or man-eating monster, and *GAS SNIFFERS* and *DRINKING* is scrawled across the page. There are unhappy faces, people with bags jammed in their faces, and others seeing stars. In more than one drawing small hands have drawn dead people splayed on the ground, larger than life.

Some drawings tell a story.

*See me drink. See me drive. See me die!!* with corresponding line drawings. This one has a numbered sequence of events: 1) *children left alone*, next to a drawing of two kids sleeping in a bunk bed beside a woman with a bottle; 2) *woman beaten*, with a stick man punching a woman with a black eye, the bottle strewn to the ground; 3) *badly beat up*, the woman lies in a hospital bed on life support, with a tiny

and solitary visitor; 4) *death*, a coffin with a cross on it, next to a line-up of stick people.

The drama builds with each image and the people appear to be running from the casket.

In contrast to the community drawings, there is peace and balance in the world of *nutshimits*. Things are where and as they should be. Stars shine in the night sky next to the moon and not around people's heads. The bunny is cute with its whiskers and lopsided ears. It's a place where *Families stay together* and you see the *father fishing with the children* or *cutting wood*. The sun is shining, the woman with the happy face is running into the tent, the hunter got his fox, the dogs pull children on a sled, and the people and tents are protected by trees. In this world, the kid with the punk hair is ice fishing. Things are drawn in proportion, balanced.

One drawing appears more like scribbles on first glance. Big and small people with glum faces stand idle around a house. Scribbles fly out of the roof. They are flames and below these and between them inside the house are small people with *help me* and *help me* and *help me* in text bubbles. A small person standing next to a gas can and away from the house, is also calling out *help me*.

I am face to face with the naked truth. From the mouths of babes. This is not something I could ask about, nor could it be spoken. I don't want this image, but I can't stop it from penetrating. I have circled this story, come close enough to touch it, let it touch me, and retreated as fast as I could. But now try as I may, I cannot skim over the experience.

I am there. Outside the house in the bitter cold, forced into those minutes, caught in a scrum of people, half-dressed, gathering, and running around from person to person. How many heard the commotion, left the party or crawled out of bed to see what was happening? Caught a whiff of the smoke, saw the flames sucked into the wind's demonic frenzy leaping into the sky.

Is anyone in the house? What happened? Asked over and over, and the answer is unadorned and there are the sobs and the children calling *Nikaun*, and help me, and they are calling out to be rescued, or they are calling for mercy. Screaming. Their panic is under my skin. Their panic is inside me.

Oh mercy that their small bodies shut down instantly—a quick surrender, an inhalation. Shock. These children have gone ahead, they went on, to meet death. A blast of pain, a lightning rush into a forever sleep, and then nothing. Did they see a long white light, the warmth of a benevolent God? Death must be a merciful God and it is the unknowable, but these children knew death now, and those left behind are tripping and clutching each other.

With a marker in hand, a child has told the unfathomable, the unforgivable. Did anyone fall on their knees to pray, was it to God the Father or to *Mishtapeu*, crude prayers beseeching for an impossible starry-eyed ending. We must put this fire out. The fire was a raucous cackling, full of colours, yellow and red and blue and green, full of life, angry, gasping, hungry, insatiable, guzzling. A squealing whistle. Flames escaped windows, expanded until they also engulfed walls. The air was prickly and stinging, reeking of all manner of materials burning, melting.

Dogs circled the crowd, they did not bark, nor growl, nor bite, but they were sniffing and they were smelling fear and panic, the feverish powerlessness and vulnerability, the charred flesh. There was no entering the house, no pulling children out, nowhere to turn, nothing to be done, only the futile calculation of water buckets and the long haul from the band council tap, and the height of the flames and the walls collapsed. If there had been water, there would have been a water hydrant, there would have been a hose, water spraying, and there can be vindication in a spray of water, in the controlled jet of water, in the purposefulness of the jet.

I am cold with dread. I should light the fire and I can't bear to light a fire. Did someone go door-to-door to find out whose children were not home? Was it hours before people knew who and how many? The parents had no telephone. Who told the parents? Was a mother, a father able to produce words, did words escape somehow? A mother may have had a flash of a head tearing through the birth canal, a first cry, face bright red and squinting in shock; a father may have remembered the unbearable lightness of chubby cheeks and a two-toothed grin, a first step, a single memory that belonged to just that one child.

The children would have known fire, how to start one, keep it going, cool it down, put it out. They came in from the cold, hovered around the woodstove? They ran out of firewood, fell asleep, the curtain or dishcloth was too near a hotplate. Or one of them lit a cigarette, gasoline on his breath. Was this a pact? Had they held each other close, then changed their minds and called out?

My grade one teacher had shown our class a renaissance painting of hell, a dark abyss enveloped in flames with naked human bodies wrenched into various states of

agony plummeting into the bottomless chasm. Naked bodies. Shame mixed with dread, horror and impotent remorse.

This was hell.

At what point did the fire subside, did people walk away? How long did the glare of the fire continue to shine in their eyes. How did they tell the children who remained? Kids who witnessed the fire must have told brothers and sisters and friends, and the news spread like wild fire. When and how hard did they land from the cyclone that was this crisis, picking them all up, all their lives, setting them down in a slow spin, irrelevant and helpless.

Precious little children.

I wipe tears with the sleeve of my jacket, which I have yet to remove. My heart should be split wide open but it is beating as it always has, regularly, in my chest, just as the world remains placid, still, the milky way, the moon, the mountains, all intact, the branches still hanging from the trees.

How does anyone go back from this? All the things that matter in life, small and big passions, may arise and flare up, but this terror will return forever in dreams, in every possible waking moment. The fire will have permeated every blood cell, every thought. Parents will listen in the silence of their children's absence, and they will hear them stir in the morning, their footsteps coming in from the outdoor, their laughter, their cry for help.

Nothing has prepared me for this, none of the nightmares or sorrows of my own life, with my own family, the ravages of alcohol and electric shock treatments. I could survive visiting my grandmother as a little girl, when she cried sobs and tears while I sat on the bench in the corner by the door. I have survived my mother's unknown wound. My



father had died so fast and so completely. And the full nightmare beyond has not prepared me either. I have not come close enough to it, even if I have cried for the young men, our boys, our daughters too, who we send to fight our wars and keep the military industrial complex churning, and I have watched rapists freed, like the one who raped my best friend. There are children starved and animals tortured in laboratories and factory farms. I must be complicit but how? It's crazy to be sane and sane to be crazy. Now I have touched the truth, as it slips and slides around me once, and then again, and one more time, and there I am, feeling for a moment that it was sudden, I am gnawed to the bone, I have fallen as low as I can go without falling into oblivion. All of us in this heap, trying to embark on the wings of hope, but in the dark pit, fallen from grace. What have we done?

In all my weeks here, I had not heard one bad word spoken about the parents, not one word of reprimand. There is no punishment to be meted out. There was a then and there is a now. I am cold to the bone, and it hurts to stand and it hurts to lie down, and it hurts to open my eyes to the light and it hurts to shut them and all I can do is see the drawings. Help me.

## XIX.

The gym is blocked, busting with people, maxed out with the cries of babies, the consumptive coughs of elders and smokers, chairs being moved and shifted, scraped across the floor, children running and screaming, outbursts of laughter. The basketball hoops are raised and out of the way; rows of chairs are lined up with an aisle between and on each side. A boy on stage stacks a pile of wood teepee style, a campfire in front of a small Innu tent. Three large banners serve as backdrop; they are simple and stark, with silhouette figures of a crow, caribou, leaping char, goose in flight, bear and sun, each outlined in a halo of white against a shadow background.

A group of high school students are about to perform the play *Boneman - Kaiatshits*, which they've created with their teacher. A couple small kids have climbed on stage and are undoing the carefully stacked pile of wood. The boy stage manager quickly shoos them off. They ham up their exit by bowing and blowing kisses to the audience.

The lights go down. Four youth dressed in caribou skins walk onto the stage and sit in a circle around the campfire. The noise in the room abates. I stand on my chair at the back to snap a few pictures. I have a feeling that I'd really rather just watch and be swept away by the performance, but I promised I would take these pictures for the report. I've opted to go without the flash, high contrast black and white images with a soft focus.

One of the actors on stage stirs, a boy transformed into a man, an old trembling man. He reaches for his walking stick and pries himself up, his movements slow and studied. He is hunched over, his legs bow-legged. Mountains, rivers, lakes, trees, the sun

and moon have shaped this body. It's Tshipesh, I recognize him even without his signature baseball cap worn backwards. On stage now he sports a canvas Innu hunting hat, decorated with bric-a-brac, the earflaps tied up. It's hard to imagine he's the same guy who was at the school workshop and at the gathering, sliding down the hill standing on his toboggan, a natural athlete, brazen, joyful. Now he's absorbed the ancient sorrow and arthritic bones of an old man into his body and gait.

He leans into his stick and takes a few small and deliberate steps. He bends to pick something up reaching his hand down, teeters but regains his balance, grabs a large bone, perhaps a caribou femur, and continues on his way. Except for a few rustling noises, the audience sits in prayerful silence as he crosses the stage. Once he's disappeared, the others in the circle stand and run off stage.

I manage to capture a couple of shots. I keep snapping as each stark scene unfolds. The nurse enters a home, snatches the baby from a mother's arms and leaves, the mother with her hands cupped over her face, no one to console her. The store clerk stands a gun on its end and the Innu hunter slowly stacks a pile of skins to the height of the gun in order to purchase it. Words are spare, some in English and some in *Innu-aimun*, always at cross purposes. The actors shout them in a desperate attempt to outwit the impossible acoustics of a gymnasium, but this unnatural projection matters not one bit. Gestures are large and tell the story.

The priest with ghostly white make-up on his face walks over to the front on one end of the stage and begins to preach fire and brimstone, his voice hoarse and spooky.

Sinners, awake! You must repent or you will burn in the fires of hell!

The actor is a girl, Nanishi who was at the school workshop, and she is fearless and grotesque and arrogant and frightening. Her hair is pulled back uncompromisingly. On the other end of the stage, four Innu in their caribou skins circle around the old man, as if dancing to an Innu drum, but they circle closer and closer with each step more aggressive and focused, stomp, stomp, and soon the old man is trapped.

I want to talk to you about pagan ceremonies, the Makushan and the worship of false Gods, the priest proclaims. The power of the almighty Jesus Christ is the only power on earth. The power of God invested in me as a priest cannot and will not be challenged by such savage practices. They must come to an end.

Amen, amen, amen, the group of Innu respond, as they shove and push the old man across the stage, corral him over to a cross that stands by the banner with the crow basking under a bright yellow sun.

What shall we do with the Boneman? the priest calls out.

Crucify him, crucify him, crucify him, the group shouts back.

They are tying the arms of the old man to the cross, hammering a nail through the palm of his hand. He has surrendered to the whole ordeal and now his persecutors are kneeling around the cross and they are praying to their crucified Elder. From where I stand, the sun on the banner forms a halo around the old man's head.

I can barely see through my tears, as I capture this image in my viewfinder. The room is still and silent as if in shock. There is horror in heartbreak, little heartbreaks and big heartbreaks. An Innu shaman, *kamanitushit*, crucified by his own.

I'll have to wait to see if I've captured this distilled meditation in my photos. I step down from my chair and walk out into the night with a flood of other spectators, still

subdued. We are all too devastated to talk to anyone. I walk into the night air, stare at a caribou carcass across the road, lying on the roof of a house, away from the stray and starving dogs that roam the community. There shines no moon, and the night is so black we might all wonder at our existence.

XX.

We've had our last community meeting, mainly to talk about recommendations. What needs to change? Who needs to do what? There are not many more voices to be gathered, the clock is ticking and I need to get a start on the report. Manish says she trusts me to write it.

That's why we hired you, she says.

I've written a few reports before, essays, newsletters. But how does a white woman avoid making this a white-woman-speaks-for-the-Innu report? I ask Manish this very question.

Just write it, she said.

You're a good writer.

Yeah, but I'm chief, remember?

Okay, but you're in charge of the translation. Which you know will be one more step in losing the voices, don't you? From *Innu-aimun* to English, processed through my mind and back to *Innu-aimun*. Oh dear.

Manish shrugs.

What about grammar? I ask. I like the way people use English here, kind of like your own dialect. Should I standardize the grammar?

Are you getting uppity with me? She asks, staring at me hard.

No, but what should I do?

Just fix it, she says.

Better not ask her yet about writing the acknowledgements or a backgrounder on why this gathering of voices was held. It can wait.

I've typed and read over every word so many times, but I haven't been able to bring myself to write anything quite yet. Over the weekend I print out all the transcripts, cut them up, sort them and glue them onto sheets of flip chart paper by themes. I highlight words and quotes, tabulate, annotate, and remove, pull my hair out, step back, boil the kettle for a cup of tea. The whole day. More cutting and pasting, like I'm in kindergarten again. I cut up bits barely a whole line long. I make neat little piles of the bits that don't quite fit on any sheet, or fit on more than one, switch them back and forth between sections. Before I get a chance to rule on them, Tapit walks in from outside, and the wind sweeps and scatters my careful little piles away, like snowflakes falling soundlessly, aimlessly.

Having fun? Tapit asks, as we both scurry to pick them all up.

I'm nervous about this, I say.

Nervous about what? he asks.

The writing. I keep thinking about what Mishte-Pinip said at the land claims meeting. About how the Innu have never written about themselves in the past. This is not the Innu way, he said.

It's time we did, Tapit says, his eyes squinting.

But you know how Mishte-Pinip says writing is lying, and unfair, and always being used by *kakeshauts* to trick the Innu.

But this report is the stories of the people. The true stories. And no money was used, only to pay the workers. No one even ask to be paid for an interview.

Tapit is circling the table, scanning the sheets now, nodding indiscriminately, his lips pursed.

Weren't you at that meeting when Mishte-Pinip talked about how *kakeshauts* write things down, or Innu leaders when they go out to meetings? I ask. Remember he was so mad? 'They write every word down,' he said. 'But then those notes don't get shared with anybody.'

We try to have meeting sometimes to share things with the community, Tapit says. But they don't always work out. As you know. And it's so hard to explain to elders how there seems to be a secret hiding behind so many English words.

I really hope it's different this time. But I am the one writing, and in English.

We never did anything like this before. We'll have to see what happen, Tapit says with his usual optimism. I thought he might have something to say about the tangled mess he's just perused from the sheets.

See you. Don't work too hard, he says. And don't think too much.

Impossible, I say. *Iame apishish*.

A blast of cold air enters as he closes the door. I shiver and shudder. The 'true stories,' he said. Mishte-Pinip had ranted even longer about writing and truth. He'd talked about the knowledge of the elders, how the land was their library, and what I had understood was that Innu knowing was about doing, something about how Innu practices and ways were constantly being tested by the Gods or Spirits. Their knowledge was about their beliefs and connections with the Spirits. I wish I'd taken notes. He said Innu have to



always be hunting and on the land, communicating with the animals, to know the craft and care of canoes and toboggans, making and breaking camp, to know places and their names and stories, how to stalk game and set traps, never wasting anything, always watching for trouble, following protocol, planning ahead and learning from the past. You could hear a pin drop in the room.

Mishte-Pinip was saying you could never learn these things from a book. *Innu tshissenitamun*—Innu knowledge is stored in stories, memories, paths, in the doing and making. It is a kind of ceremony, a covenant in wonder with the world.

Who will play the drum? Who will sing? he'd asked. Was he pleading for dreaming, rather than writing? I thought I'd heard a tone in his voice, saying that there was a kind of blasphemy in translating this knowledge onto the written page. How can the knowledge of dreaming be fixed?

Is this why I so often hear Innu qualify their words. They will repeat, 'this is what I have been told, this is what I have experienced, I am conveying second hand information, I am uncertain of the truth value of my words.' A *put*—which means maybe—sprinkled throughout any conversation. This is a kind of knowledge that is constantly interpreted and negotiated. Egoless and singular. But at the same time it would seem there is no room for freethinkers and infidels. Sustenance cannot be improvised; there can be no finagling and blundering. Audacity and impertinence are quickly thwarted. Autonomy is paramount, but there can be no outlier, no one making up their own rules, because if you believe and respect the knowledge, life will reward you and won't let you die before your time.

Something like that. This is what I had deciphered from the translation, Sepastien's scattered notes. And maybe I have created my own meaning from what was actually said.

Before I get immobilized with my lofty and right-minded thoughts, I need to write. I've not only typed and read, now I've touched these words with my hands, churned them in my mind. Time to channel. Stick to the transcripts, a chapter for each question. I extract the best quotes, let them tell the story and dominate the page, attach people's names to them. Forget confidentiality. People can be proud of what they said. This is a conversation. I swallow my hesitation and forge ahead. Trust my intuition, set a new course. A reckoning as remedy, form follows function and remember the process—the process is everything. Don't stray, stay with the words, the very words. What is not here is in the photographs and drawings. Trust it.

Before I know it, I'm writing 'we' instead of 'they'. I blaze away on my keyboard. I pluck whole sentences, sections even, for the summarizing text. Some people said this and some people said that. Cut and paste, only this time on the computer. Big time plagiarism. I'm writing their words.

I've tweaked the grammar, but clearly there is nothing to interpret, change or add to Utshimashkueu's words:

In the past, Innu lived in *innutshuap* with an open fire in the middle. Caribou hides were used to cover the teepees. It was hard times, but we didn't mind because it was our culture. We were safe in our teepees; we never had to worry about fires. Innu could also sleep outside, around a fire, for three nights. When the whites came to take and exploit our lands, they never asked permission from anyone. They never asked any Innu to sign a document saying they could take our land and destroy it so that he could make a living indefinitely off our land. The *kakeshauts* just came, gave us houses with no water and toilets, schools, a clinic, a tiny amount of money each month for each family. He did this to keep

us in one place so that he could take and destroy our land. With the same blow, he killed our culture and our language, stole our children from us, gave them to white parents, put them in a white school, stole their culture from them. Never was there a meeting held to talk to us about these things, to ask us what we might think about these changes. Never did a *kakeshau* say to us: We see that these beautiful and rich lands belong to the Innu, they are not ours. Never did the *kakeshauts* ask us if we would agree that they should come on our lands, that they should exploit its resources and destroy it. Never did they ask if they could dam our rivers and pollute our lakes. Never did the *kakeshauts* warn us that we might regret this onslaught, that once they came with their mines and their axes and their dams, they never asked how we would feel about drinking polluted water, eating the poisoned fish. They never asked how we would feel when we ate the animals they had soiled and ruined with their pollution. The *kakeshauts* never asked us about creating jobs off our lands that would only go to *kakeshauts*. How he might give us a job for a few months but then he would no longer need us? And then he never asked us what we would do to earn a living?

I've never been one who can write in a noisy coffee shop, yet this office, that is constantly full of people reading over my shoulder, doesn't rankle me. This is nothing like any writing I've done before. No sitting and reckoning, starting and deleting, cutting and bleeding on the page. Not the frightening solitude verging on madness, or staying up all night and sitting to the ominous point of searing pain in my hips, no longer able to carry on a conversation, hair like Medusa's, making it perfect, editing, and editing again.

There's no editing when you tell a story out loud.

I am out on a cliff, performing with the eagles, riding thermals and updrafts, foraging, more cutting and pasting, moving paragraphs around, creating a logical flow and trajectory. Some kind of an unconscious aerial current is steering me, without guile or trickery or confusion.

This is still a very painful time for us. This is not the first time tragedy has struck. Since 1973 we have lost 47 people to alcohol. Everyone here has been touched by tragedy. We decided to hold a People's Inquiry. It was time to stop and look at why these accidents and violent deaths are happening. Too many people have died. We thank the Minister of Indian Affairs for turning down our request for a public inquiry. He said they would do an engineering study. This would be his government's inquiry.

We thank him for giving us the opportunity to do our own. We hope this gathering of voices has broken the silence of a forgotten people. We hope this report will help us find a *meshkaia* for our children, so we will know where we are heading.

I peer over the edge of the cliff, alert, burning bright, alive and aware. The joy in breaking rules. Throwing stones at the Voice of Empirical Science that continues to hover. Is this honest? Should I be sharing my thought process, discussing the contradictions, revealing truths about how to bridge the worlds. What we did right and where we failed? Like I might really know? Do the Innu care about these preoccupations? What could I say about my intuition and performing with eagles?

Never mind. My computer and I are a kind of a séance and I am in a trance. Everyone sees the unseen in proportion to the clarity of their heart. I am letting my heart talk to me, to itself, its valves and arteries, and it is saying, listen to me. Listen closely. And what I am hearing in the words I have been given is a tone of you, you the uninvited, have lied to us and this is the truth and truth begets truth and we are crushing the power of the lies. I weave threads of belief within and between these words, words spoken unequivocally. There is nothing light-footed about these words, no code to crack. The possibilities in these words are a kind of alchemy. I am building a mosaic of their world—stories, opinions, rants, confessions, judgments, drawings, absolutions—nuanced and complex, and my own world is morphing word by word, minute by minute through their stories and trust in me.

It is time to get up now. We have been sleeping all along while the white people have been doing everything for us. Something woke us up, and it is the noise of the jets. When we woke up, we saw that the jets were not our only problem. There was a pile of other problems in our community. The government thought we would never wake up. It is time to clean up the mess while we were asleep. We need to solve our own problems.

I would never have mustered that eloquence myself.

As I finish a chapter, I print the draft and hand it over to the commissioners and leaders—Tapit, Shuash, Manish, Tanien, the office secretary Pishum, and Katnen or whoever else has just happened to drop by, and I watch from the corner of my eye as they read each line, swap chapters, take some home. Reading so quietly by themselves, for themselves. This is not a story shared in a circle, but a private act. Is this the danger of the written word? Can it be communal if they are all reading the same thing at the same time? Does the 'we' make it more communal.

Did I get it right? I ask. Should I change anything?

They hand the *mashinanikana* back.

*Miam*, Katnen says. It is good, they all say.

Not a solitary edit from any of them. I've been known to squabble, put my life on the line over a word, a point, a single comma. Could it be possible that there is not one thing to dispute about what I have written? Is it not appropriate to comment on someone else's story?

Should they not be thinking this is not my story?

Once this report is printed, we won't be able to change anything, I say.

It would seem this is a world where the story is never the last word, always evolving depending on the storyteller. Everyone has their own way.

No one asks me about the 'we', about what it feels like to be a ventriloquist. I'd tell them I was more like a surrogate mother. I am the vessel, giving birth, but this is not my baby. That could be my credit, on the cover—surrogate mother. There is no way my

name will be on this cover. No doubt people will wonder about the ghost writer. Let them.

I keep writing. Drugs, poverty or wild lovers are not what make a good writer. I am unable to judge this writing. There might be a ghost of my identity in it, but even I don't recognize myself. Should I be pondering the dishonesty; can my writing really be not my own? This rendering is my gift.

With all these questions I should be way more unsettled.

XXI.

I've been summoned? I say as I walk into Manish's office, a gentle tease in my voice.

Close the door, she says, her face deadpan, her demeanour even more opaque than usual. She's still bundled up in her parka, the same one she wore when we went hunting.

What's up? I ask.

It's not like Manish to be secretive. She's pretty good about speaking her mind. To say the least.

Penute wants to talk to you, she says.

She leans back in her chair behind the desk, a mess of disheveled papers, a stack of trays in one corner bulging with more of them. She's got the same filing system as me.

Penute, you mean president-of-the-Innu-Nation Penute? I ask.

He read your draft and he wants to talk about it. He's expecting your call. She points her head towards the phone as she collects several sheets of paper, bounces them vertically to line them up, staples them together and plops the assemblage into the top tray with a certain impatient aplomb.

I dial nine and the number and Penute answers on the first ring. Manish's eyes are fixed on me now.

You wanted to talk to me? I ask.

I read the report, your draft, he says.

He's probably sitting at his desk, reclining with his feet up, and the blown-up photograph of his grandfather hanging on the wall behind him.

You actually read it. That's good. I'm flattered.

This is *so* an oral culture, and I'm never sure that things get read, are actually readable. Manish's mouth stirs a hair, could that be a glint of a smile in her eyes?

This isn't a joke. Is this really your report? Penute asks.

I imagine him waving his hand dismissively at the document on his desk.

Outside the window behind Manish, a couple is arguing. I recognize Tuminik and Teinish. Their hollering penetrates the walls. His hand flails dangerously close to her face as she stands, looking cold and anxious in only a black shirt and jeans. Where is her jacket? Oh good, she's turning and walking away, and surprisingly Tuminik seems to be letting her go.

What's wrong with the report? I ask. And it's not 'my' report.

Penute's the guy who calls me regularly, to talk things through, to bounce ideas off me, figure things out. We're usually on the same page, or at least we end up there. Years back I'd lent him my car when he was going to high school in St. John's. I made a quilt for his firstborn son. His wife even trusts me.

What are you thinking? We can't give this to governments. The media?

Why not?

Tuminik is still out there shouting to what seems like the whole village now, stomping up and down, his long hair whirling wildly around his face, shaking his fist.

It's so... it seems so childish. Penute spits the last word into the phone.

What do you mean?



No one will take this seriously.

So what is it you want? I ask. Something more academic? More jargon, like policy recommendations or jurisdiction? Those ideas are in there, just not in that language.

I don't like it, Penute says.

I just tried to write it in a way that the reader could really hear people's voices. These are the words people used. This is the way they talk, at least in English. And I want people here to be able to read it, if they can, and to recognize themselves.

I sound strangely sure of myself.

It's not professional, he says.

I'm not a professional. That's why you hired me.

I glance back at Manish, my mouth clenched back and downward, and she smiles at my look of trepidation.

Silence. And outside the window Teinish is back face to face with Tuminik again. This time she's wearing her jacket. The hollering now at a heightened decibel, something about *kamatshishit*. She steps back from him, tears off her gloves and shoves them into her pockets. Geez, did she just haul off her wedding ring and throw it at him?

Penute, I think you're gonna have to trust me on this one, I say. This report does not need me explaining in my words what people said.

More silence. I hold the telephone up in the air, at Manish, hoping she'll take it and talk some sense into the guy. She shakes her head and waves her hand for me to continue. Thanks for the solidarity.

Penute? It's not like him to be without words.

Did Bob read it? he finally asks.

Yes, it's been vetted by the lawyers. I want to get snarky, but I catch myself.  
Arguing with Penute can make me feel confident.

What did Bob have to say? Penute asks.

He's worried about the deadline. Will we be able to get it translated into *Innu-aimun* on time? It's got to be at the printers before the end of next week, so it will be ready for the press conference in Ottawa the week after. It still needs to be translated. And the layout will take time.

I don't like it.

You're repeating yourself now. And you're sounding like a *kakeshau*.

Maybe if we weren't on the bloody phone, I could look him in the eye, reassure him.

It'll be okay Penute, I say. Sorry I really gotta go now. There's something I must do.

I plunk the phone down and march straight out of the office and out of the building, down the stairs and right up to Tumunik and Teinish. He's got her by the sleeve now and I grab each of their jackets and pull the two of them apart.

You guys need a little time out. Alone, I say. You go home Teinish, and I point her in the right direction. Tuminik, to your parents, or your grandparents, anywhere but not home.

The two of them head off in opposite directions, just as they're told.

Manish stands at the window looking out at me. Laughing and clapping and mouthing, 'you're crazy.'

There are times when it's no damn good just to stand there.

XXII.

Are you packed? Manish asks as she stands in the doorway of my tent, my humble abode of the last few months. I've just swept and tidied, left the buckets of water full.

Soon I'll be back in the land of toilets and candlelit bubble baths. Green vegetables.

Almost, I say, as I throw in my journal, untouched, pages blank and white, not one word, not one confession of love or swelling hurt or rage, no cloying feelings, humorous anecdotes or brilliant epiphany. Maybe when I get home, if I can ever remember anything. Oral tradition would die if it was up to me.

I tuck my moccasins into the side of my bag, and place the children's drawings, carefully folded on the top. I'm still trying to figure out how to shrink them to a size that will fit in the report. We might have to hire a proper photographer.

I'll drive you to the airport, Manish says.

I don't look at her. I'm trying to make a brave place in my heart. I'm going home, as home as any place can get for me on this planet. I can hear water dripping off the tree branches onto my tent. Spring has taken hold decisively, the days moved yet farther from the dark and sluggish hours. Still each day has continued to be a sad, sad day and I don't want to leave this cocoon of sorrow.

What will you do now? Manish asks. I look at her. The spring sun has tanned her face, coaxed more freckles across her cheeks. Freckles are a thing we have in common.

Well I have a ton to do yet on the report. Pages of *Innu-aimun* still to type up. Letter by jeezly letter, I say, articulating each syllable with my nose turned up in disgust.

Manish laughs, like a big laugh. Haha.

This is how I'd spent my last days. Manish had succeeded in finding a small army to help with the translation. Usually people run from translation work like flies avoiding a swat.

How will you find people? I'd asked her.

I'll bribe them, and if that doesn't work—threaten them, she said.

Those who'd read chapters signed up, and I'm pretty sure she hauled people off the road. She really did it.

Mouthing each letter individually so I wouldn't lose my place, I'd typed foolscap after foolscap of handwriting. That's what I get for typing 80 words a minute. Maybe 40 in *Innu-aimun*. Fortunately I don't need to look at the keyboard. I'd typed the same word spelled differently by different people, and sometimes even by the same person in the same paragraph. I was wary of straying into the no-white-person-is-going-to-tell-us-how-to-write-our-own-language arena.

But I did have my limits.

Where are the commas and periods on this one? I asked. I can't figure out where I am in the English text.

Why do you need to know that? Sepastien asked.

We need *some* commas and periods, I insisted, as I handed him the sheet.

I was grateful for his punctuations even if they hardly seemed to coincide with the original. I wanted to think that the report was in an English order that easily flowed into the grammar and syntax and cosmos of *Innu-aimun*. Wishful thinking.

Several bodies, a few committed souls, had worked well into the night with me. Moaning and groaning, joking and teasing me, as if they were doing me a favour. They looked at me like I was cracked when I asked them to proofread my typing. There must be dozens of typos. I'd have to do it myself, so I printed the files and checked them yet again letter by letter, although I've developed some word recognition by now.

The truth was I was relieved to have these last few days so busy.

You need to send me the acknowledgements and a foreword on why we did this, I say to Manish now. And the translation.

I'll fax it tomorrow, she says. What should I say?

You'll figure it out.

I grab my three films from the shelf and throw them into my backpack. Seventy-two shots. I'd used up the last of my films a couple days ago. The band *Ashuapun* had shown up in the afternoon with the words to their song about the children lost. All four members of the band wearing ball caps and fluorescent sunglasses, holding their instruments—a guitar, a bass, keyboard and drum sticks. I drove them outside into the sunshine to stand with the white ice of the sea behind them, the sky an ardent blue. Handsome Boy Samish looked sheepish until I called them to attention.

Look like you just killed a song, I said. I motioned for them to stand closer, and set the shutter speed to compensate for the bright light. My last two shots.

I'll send you a copy, for your first CD cover, I called out as they hurried away with their shyness in tact.

That's it, I say now as I zip my bag shut.

Manish grabs it, while I carry my backpack and snowshoes, and we head out to

her snowmobile. She decides to take the scenic route and heads for the melting ice, blasts the throttle and we're skimming over pools of turquoise water, the size of swimming pools. I didn't think it would come to this. Death on the ice. Above our heads *nishkats* form an immense white V against the cloudless azure skies.

We round the bend and soon we're at the airstrip. Sepastien, Akat, Shustin and Kanani are all there, and it's hugs all around. I'd said goodbye to Napaen yesterday, managed to get a half smile out of him.

Tapit is at the hangar too and walks over to shake both my hands. I carry my bag over to the plane just in time before the co-pilot shuts the luggage door. I run back to prolong the goodbyes.

By the way, your plane's leaving, Manish says, shooing me towards it.

She mouths a mute 'thank you.'

See you at the press conference, she says.

Ottawa won't know what hit it, I say. Are you sure I need to be there?

Oh Yeah.

*Iame apishish*, I say to the lot of them. It really is a little-goodbye and I will see them soon.

I can see myself running now to the plane, climbing the steps, turning to wave one last farewell. I beeline it to the nearest window seat. I am sitting and clutching my bag. I am not crying, and I am unaware of who else is sitting on this plane, and I am in sole possession of this aircraft as it turns, taxis to the end of the gravel runway, turns again and pauses to rev its engines.

I spot a wolf standing at the edge of the runway, long bushy tail, thick gray fur

with a swath of black across its back. His head and large broad muzzle point up, ears pulled back, eyes closed. I can see his breath, a glint of his teeth. I can't hear him above the plane's engines but he is howling, howling for his friends. A wild defiant howl of sorrow for all that has been and will be lost.

The pilot twiddles the throttle and nudges the plane forward. It rambles down the middle of the bumpy runway, gradually accelerating. I am still clutching my knapsack with my computer, the notes, my undeveloped films, as the large metal bird frees itself from the pull of gravity and rises. Up and up and I am looking east and from up here a whole world is melting away. Far out to sea, the turquoise ice seems tender, surrendering to the deep blue waters. There's no retrieving it.

I am crying now, and through my tears I can see children streaming out of the school for lunch, Anpinamen hobbling her way home from the store, two dogs circling with hackles raised, snowmobiles crisscrossing each other.

This is another world I have just been in surely. As real as the world I am going to. Borders are unframed and diminishing.

The village gives way to the barrens and mountains and ice glowing in the sun. The plane is bouncing over this vast world of black and white, through a light that is pure, glareless and transparent, and the relentlessness of the landscape reminds me of the prairies, a weary monotony of a different monumental kind, with its unbroken flow of land, the way in which the sky is open from one side of the horizon to the other. I carry this vista always somewhere inside my skull.

My nerve to return home is white-knuckled. There's Michael I'm going back to and it will not be a Hallmark card. Not the yellow brick road, with lovely trees on both

sides, constant sunshine and birdsong. I am not the same person. Each time I come here I am changed. This world has sunk into me deep this time. People will ask me how was it, and language will fail me. It is so much easier to listen to a story than tell one. What are the words for sorrow in a world that denies death? What are the words for bewilderment in a world that champions experts? Only a fool believes she understands the world.

And how could anyone understand without having experienced the backdrop—the longing created in this far north, a world of wood smoke and candlelight, aurora borealis, snow and ice and barrens, an old woman sitting on boughs lifting a hot dipper of tea to her lips, a baby cooing in his *ueuepishun*, where the forest is uncut, the animals are not penned up, so many rivers flow undammed, its land unmined. Ten thousand years of bodies rest in the ground here, feeding the life that still lives here: the Innu and the caribou, furry and feathered and water creatures, the spruce, the birch and the firs and the spruce, the lichen and fireweed.

I have to be here and I have to listen carefully to hear its wild call above the discordant melody sounding out of my own world. A world to be reckoned with, problems decades and centuries too big for me.

Dark clouds are growing out of the horizon to the south like a mountain range, casting blue shadows on the land ahead. We are flying through white clouds now, moving surely across the immense sky, their bottoms as even as if they had scraped themselves flat against the prairies.

The world I am returning to has moved on without me for years, long before I came in March. I don't know what I've missed in my absence, a season has passed in its long journey around the circle and I may be headed to a more familiar place, yet it is still



alien. What changes might have occurred in fashions this spring, what new songs have been released, books launched? Which new war has been waged and which of my friends have split, for what unforgivable transgression, and who is more right than the other? I am going back to the hypnotic drug of television and radio and newspaper, wildly inaccurate news reports delivered in smooth professional voices, all cloned, the voices of gods beyond doubting.

I will say to Michael, we are getting rid of that television. I'd said that very thing to Manish.

Get rid of your TV, I told her.

Rid of my TV? she looked puzzled.

It's trouble.

Yeah, I know, but my kids will never let me.

I'm asleep when we land in Goose Bay. I switch planes and continue on my way. We approach St. John's through the Narrows, the harbour engulfed in fog. The sun shines above it and the town's bright colours permeate its haze. My throat hurts and my ears are paining.

Michael is at the airport, one hand in his pocket, the other one waving as I walk down the stairs.

Anna, he calls out, even as he's looking at me. It's a voice scared of being wrong, like, is it really me walking towards him?

As I approach, he curves his arms into huge inviting brackets.

Hey, I say. I lay my backpack down and I let him hold me a while before I put my arms around him too, my hands against his broad back and my head resting on his chest. We stand like this uncertain for a long time. I can see part of the world to his side, figures rushing past unaware of us in each other's arms. From the corner of my eye I see an older couple by the luggage carousel watching us, both smiling with their own longing.

How was it? Michael asks finally.

I pull away. He fingers the collar on my coat.

It was another world, I say, looking down at the ground. It might take me a while to land.

It has started. How long will it take before I am able to tell him, to spin a story, and it's not just one story but a meta-story, a story of stories. Some of this story is mine and some of it is not. It's a dangerous story, between seasons and between worlds. I have been led into the wild unknown. Let me at the truth to refresh my broken mind. While the darkness has robbed me of my sight, my heart has stumbled on things I don't know. This is what the last few months have done to me—brought me to the precipice of unknowing.

We are in the car and I roll down the window to catch the breeze. We drive through the suburbs and then streets of brightly coloured houses, attached and clashing more often than not. We are silent, skirting conversation looking out our respective windows.

He parks and I step out and there are cracks in the sidewalks, and there is my home, leaning a little too much into the hill, the clapboard's paint peeling, and I arrive a little bit more. It is good to be home. There is a briny smell in the air, the sun shines on the South Side Hills, the crocuses are long gone, but tulips and daffodils shine yellow and

red and orange. Soon vast swaths of lupins will rise from the ground on those hills. Snow and ice are a forgotten memory here.

I light a candle and turn off the lights.

For my father, I say to Michael, and the children who died.

Oh yeah? he says with a tone of nervousness, like I have just shut him out.

Come in, come in, I want to say, but I don't. The candle burns as we eat our supper. When I'm done, I lean on the table with my elbows, cradling my chin in my hands. The flame's shadows shiver across the walls.

Michael sits with his red hair down over his eyes, his cheeks glowing in the light, freckles against very white skin. He has shaved for the occasion.

I lay my hand on his and look around the room, but I don't recognize myself in it. I know this is not the answer and I don't interrupt as Michael explains our situation to me.

This time apart has been good for us, he says.

I can't concentrate on his words. I can see he won't listen, or he won't be able to hear. And I don't know where I would start. So I must do something. In a minute I'll arrive, really arrive. There's something I must do. I can't remember what it is, I'm not sure, but I know it's important. It hurts more to not belong here.

In this other world, just a breath away, I am remembering that nature's substance is gnarled and knotted in its grain, so that no absolutely straight thing can come of it. I am thinking of the children. Help me. I am thinking about Manish, and Shustin and Sepastien and Akat and Kanani and Napaen, Mishte-Pinip, Manteskueu, the kids in the workshop, on stage in that play.

A lot has happened. I have no answers, but my relentless introspection is in contact with the awe and the anguish, exultation and exasperation, mystery and contradictions and lucidity, all of these riding within an undercurrent of beauty and imperfection.

I get up from the table, gather our plates, glasses and utensils and take them to the kitchen. I wash and dry the dishes and I put everything away.

What was it about my dream that Manteskueu had kept to herself? And Akat and Sepastien? They were in cahoots. Generous and patient, they had their limits. They were not going to talk to me, on that tree's behalf, on the land's behalf. The tree was speaking to me in its own mute way. I had got that close to it, and now I was too far away again to hear it. I'd have to continue to listen to the birds and to the wind, and the trees. Whatever life was in that outdoor world, whatever Great Spirit might reside there, I beseech it to teach me something, anything at all, any scrap of wisdom or insight or comfort.

The rain is beating down steady on the roof, a full gurgle of water flowing off the roof, through the pipes into the ground, pelting against the window. The devil is in the wind, a creature puffed up with its own breath and fierce outrage.

I come out of the kitchen and lean against the doorframe, my arms draped around me, hugging myself. Michael walks over, gathers me in his arms. The tangle in my heart lets go a little. I feel vulnerable and protected, standing here, listening to the sounds of the world this month of May.

Thank god I'm not still in a tent, I murmur.

Michael holds me tighter.

There is no dealing with my grief. There is no leaping off the road back to my own life now. It will take a while. I can't yet look back and see how the remembered moments and people and landmarks, that gathered and recollected in sequence, may reveal the truth, or not. I will continue to tear up when I think of my father, perhaps I always will. There is the making peace with the sorrows of my grandmother.

I had not thought grief could be a blessing. But in some way, working through it has me mourning so many other things I hadn't even known I needed to mourn. Things that kept me hurt or small or angry. Old things that clouded everything along the way.

That is both the good news and the bad news. The solution may be at hand. It would be very nice for nervous types like me if things were black-and-white, and I could tell where one thing ended and the next thing began, but there's always something ending and something beginning. I know myself differently in a circle that is never quite complete. Bound for better or for worse, in all sorts of complicated and beautiful and sometimes unknown ways.

## Glossary of Innu words and names

<i>Akamiuapishk<sup>u</sup></i>	Mealy Mountains
<i>akuatshitakushu</i>	s/he has a voice and is making him/herself heard
<i>Akua tuta</i>	take care, be careful
<i>apishish</i>	little
<i>ashini</i>	rock
<i>atanukuna</i>	legend or myth
<i>atik<sup>u</sup></i>	caribou, or plural <i>atikuats</i>
<i>Atikuss</i>	Little Caribou
<i>atshen</i>	flesh-eating being, monster
<i>atim<sup>u</sup></i>	dog
<i>auassats</i>	children
<i>aei e</i>	who is it?
<i>aei tshin</i>	who are you
<i>ehe</i>	yes
<i>enkuan miam</i>	I see, good
<i>eshpishatshimeuan</i>	fabric draped over sleeping area, like a tent within a tent
<i>iame</i>	goodbye, <i>iame apishish</i> , small goodbye, see you soon
<i>Innu-aimun</i>	Innu words or language
<i>innutshuap</i>	Innu tent
<i>ishkueu</i>	woman
<i>ishkuteu</i>	fire
<i>ishpitenitamun</i>	respect
<i>Kaiatshits</i>	Boneman
<i>kakeshau</i>	white, English-speaking, plural <i>kakeshaults</i>
<i>kak<sup>u</sup></i>	porcupine
<i>kamanitushit</i>	shaman, person with powers
<i>kamatshishit</i>	devil
<i>kanatuiut</i>	hunter
<i>kashiuasht</i>	sugar

<i>kapata</i>	wait
<i>Katipenimitau</i>	Caribou Master or Spirit, also spelled <i>Katipenimitak</i>
<i>katshishkutamatsheutshuap</i>	school
<i>kukum</i>	your grandmother
<i>kushapatshikan</i>	shaking tent
<i>kushkunu</i>	go straight
<i>mak</i>	and
<i>makushan</i>	Feast of the Caribou
<i>mamu</i>	all together
<i>Mamunitau Staianimuanu</i>	Gathering Voices, People's Inquiry
<i>Manitu-utshu</i>	Evil Spirit Mountain
<i>mashinanikan</i>	paper
<i>mashinanikana</i>	plural of paper, document, book, booklet, newspaper, etc.
<i>Matshishkapeu</i>	Fart Man/Spirit
<i>mauats</i>	no, also <i>mauat</i>
<i>meshkaia</i>	path
<i>miam</i>	good
<i>Minushkuess</i>	Pretty Girl
<i>mishimenitakuan</i>	it is sad
<i>Mishtapeu</i>	Great Spirit, Spirit-Helper of the shaman
<i>Mishta-shipu</i>	Churchill River
<i>Missinak<sup>u</sup></i>	Water Spirit, Master of the Water Creatures
<i>Mishti-Shantesh</i>	Daniel's Rattle
<i>mitike</i>	penis, standard Mushuau spelling <i>mitikan</i>
<i>mitshim</i>	food
<i>mitshim-utshimau</i>	social worker, Food Boss
<i>mitshuap</i>	house
<i>muk<sup>u</sup> tshin</i>	up to you
<i>Mushuau</i>	of the barrens, as in <i>Mushuau Innu</i>
<i>Mushuau-shipu</i>	George River

<i>mushuma</i>	his/her grandmother
<i>nakate</i>	go away
<i>namesh</i>	fish
<i>nikaun</i>	Mother, my mother
<i>nimish</i>	my older sister
<i>Nimushum</i>	Grandfather, my grandfather
<i>nipi</i>	water
<i>nipishapun</i>	tea
<i>nishkats</i>	geese
<i>Nitassinan</i>	Our Homeland
<i>nitshik<sup>u</sup></i>	otter
<i>nukum</i>	Grandmother, my grandmother
<i>nussim</i>	my grand-daughter
<i>nutshimits</i>	the bush or the country
<i>pakueshikai</i>	bread
<i>passauaia</i>	dried caribou meat
<i>petapan</i>	dawn
<i>pets mini</i>	give it to me
<i>pimin</i>	bone marrow (prepared for the <i>Makushan</i> )
<i>pineu</i>	partridge, plural <i>pineuts</i>
<i>pipun</i>	winter
<i>pishum<sup>u</sup></i>	sun
<i>pushu</i>	hello
<i>put</i>	maybe
<i>shash</i>	enough, done
<i>shishi</i>	pee
<i>shuniaiu</i>	money
<i>takau</i>	cold
<i>tan eshinishu</i>	what is your name?
<i>tan etin?</i>	what's happening?



<i>tanite</i>	where
<i>tapue</i>	yes, that's it, I agree
<i>tipatshimun</i>	story, plural <i>tipatshimuna</i>
<i>tshakuan</i>	what, what is it?
<i>Tshinetshishepateu</i>	Early Bird, s/he leaves walking early in the morning
<i>tshin</i>	you
<i>tshinashkumitin</i>	thank you
<i>tshipatshimuna</i>	your story
<i>tshishennuats</i>	elders
<i>tshishe-utshimau</i>	government
<i>tshishtakanapun</i>	alcohol, pronounced <i>shtakanapun</i>
<i>tshishue matshen</i>	it is bad
<i>tshishushkateu</i>	s/he pissed him/her off by walking too far ahead of him/her
<i>tshissenitamun</i>	knowledge
<i>tshitapami</i>	watch/look at me.
<i>tshitimush</i>	your boyfriend or girlfriend
<i>tshitshinapun</i>	milk or breastmilk
<i>uapush</i>	rabbit
<i>Uashat</i>	Sept Iles
<i>Uashkaikan</i>	Fort Chimo
<i>Uhuapeu</i>	Porcupine Spirit, also Owl Man, character in stories
<i>utauna</i>	her or his father
<i>uitshikassatikutshishu</i>	it really tastes like caribou
<i>ueuepishun</i>	small hammock for a baby
<i>uishkatshan</i>	grey jay
<i>ukuma</i>	his grandmother
<i>Utshimashkueu</i>	Boss Woman
<i>Utshimassits</i>	Place of the Boss, Davis Inlet
<i>utshimau</i>	leader, boss, plural <i>utshimauts</i>
<i>utinikan</i>	scapula

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