

The Difference Between A Battle And A Massacre
By Nicola Harwood

Community like whiskey
barely aged, the *uisge-beatha na h-Alba*, tastes of dirt and
leather.

The old woman rooted this family in Red River soil when she chose to graft
to this land. The old woman's tongue
a means
flour, seeds, powder, meat and shot spill
from her lips in

Gaelic, English, French and a working knowledge of Cree

Whiskey spills, blood spills.

*When English became the dominant language, we noticed pieces of our humour
went missing.*

I arrive at the prison. Lock phone, wallet in the car. Bring in only what I need to teach.
Poems. Pads of paper. Pens. I walk across the river on a small bridge. If any of the
residents are found on the other side of the river, they are considered escapees.
Residents is a polite word for prisoners. Politeness is understood as a national
characteristic of Canada.

At the gate I sign in and my bag is searched. The guards, a small army, barely meet my
eye. Protocol. Territory. I crack a joke just to see if we can –

Flicker of eye contact.

No.

Let's go.

The old woman built her first house on the east side of the Red River.

*River rose five feet perpendicular during the last twenty-four hours. Ice still so
thick and strong that even the present flush of waters have not sufficient force to
break it up. Sleet rain and snow. Wind S.E.*

*There is much argument among the settlers and the Canadians. She stares at the
table. The chair.*

The students arrange the chairs in a circle, waiting for my arrival.

This cloth I brought from home.

Eyes meet. Hands meet. Here the table, there the chair. Bodies arrange themselves in a circle. We sit, breath and with a sigh, begin.

The ice broke with an awful rush; carrying away cattle, houses, trees and everything else that came in its way. The river overflowed its banks everywhere, and carried the ice with great velocity to a greater distance from its course, than had ever been seen by the oldest inhabitants.

The man in the Manitoba Archives gives a talk on the Seven Oaks War but isn't sure if he should use the word battle or massacre or incident or conflict or collision. You could call it a swing set and any relatives in the audience would still be unhappy.

This narrative of

Desolation and distress.

The old woman builds a second house, a second flood and that house is gone. At sixty-five years old, she builds her third house across the river on the French side. A log house next to Riel, the father.

Louis, still a boy, bright and eager.
University.

Her grandchildren visit. They sit around the stove. Ice piles up. Stories pile up.

Inside prisons we sit in circle. Let's talk about what happened. What is happening.
Let's talk. About what doesn't
arrive. What refuses to
leave. What begs
translation.

Red river runs under the skin, the saddle of the riderless horse
blood stains
the wooden floor
of the old woman's log house, runs from
her grandson's chest. This new war thick with
men's stink. The woman's arthritic back
too sore to bend and clean
the mess. But she does it anyway, gets down on her knees
and begs the men.
Stop.

Authority a tall Englishman in a hat made of beaver fur holds in his fingers
titles and schemes to improve the colony. *Hudson Bay Company, Northwest Company,
Scottish Highland Agricultural Improvers Society, Correctional Services
Canada.*

So many fingers in the

pigheann
napatehkasikan
tarte
pie

Inside the prison, inside the circle, our talk reveals two centuries of violence you can't fit
that many words into any circle she
knows of. Most of the men inside this circle are Cree.
But we speak English in this prison.

Language batt(l)ing 0 for 4.

Those left on the field run a constant and exhausting act
of translation between bodies
of memory
easily
misread
murder from Old German, massacre a word with French origin. Word has it on the street
the Cree
didn't want to get
involved. Trade war an English translation
let's get clear
on who got clear
title out of this.

English became the language of trade.

Fake news traveled back to the continent in hands still wet
with ink. Bitter
blood
relatives
lift the pen or her grandson's head
once he's bled out on the floor and the parents
have left the room.

Language a force of twenty-two men.

Her knuckles swell.

*All they can take from you is your body.
All they can take
they take from your body.
They take your body.*

Exhausted from talk and the difficult passages we are making across this circle, across some river of history to where we might stand side by side, silence falls between us.

Language a technology not yet understood.

We stand up, stretch. Decide
to do the next thing we do
together. We play.

We throw ourselves to the floor like kids, we giggle and collapse, tag and freeze and run. Stand in lines based on how far from this place we were all born, see how we look to one another from across the room then side by side, I stand next to a student old as I am, who still plays hockey outside in the yard while I struggle to hold my back upright. We all fit, somehow, in this line. We all belong somewhere.

On break, laughter quiets
someone pulls out a guitar
and we sing.

Pleasure in this company, a brew that tastes of tobacco and leather. Just a dram. She sighs. For the arthritis in my back.
Just a song. Take us into the afternoon. Inside this prison language.
We find a way.

Her student's a lifer, which means he's in for life, which means he took a life, tells her his Métis cultural teachings are saving his life. Métis pemmican saved her ancestor's life, that first winter at Pembina. What community might feel like

Gaelic, English, French and a working knowledge of Cree.

when not "...urged on by the mischief of designing men..."

*The Scottish Highland emigrants, are... the most proper for the purpose...
the very circumstance of their using a different language [Gaelic] would
tend to keep them apart...*

Generations of blood language flood the land
lift the foundation of this place we want to call
home. The blood that chose or didn't.

What language
might mean
if we could only decode.

Hidden from the cameras
for a moment in the kitchen her student hands her a turquoise bead. He presses this gift
(honoring the teacher) into her hand, a gift that we might also call
contraband
in prison rare
affection that in Gaelic might be called
mùirn
in Cree might be called
môskipew

- it floats to the surface and reveals itself

What meaning decoded from language
might reveal.

Evidence.

On her wall a piece of beadwork, her grandmother tells her it came from Red River,
passed down from the old woman. A Cree friend tells her the beadwork is *Nihithaw*
design. She stares
at the beadwork, unconvinced that she will ever –

The prison holds the men inside. She walks away
turquoise stone in her pocket. A small, bright piece
of language that for a brief moment
made some kind of sense
between them.

But she knows how this story keeps ending. The prison guards, the fort, the massacre,
the battle, the titles and schemes. The English
language blanketing a bed of truth no one gets to sleep in. Beads are cheap insurance
and they never pay

out.

What was given.

Beatha. Life.

What was taken.

Her grandson in the back seat of the Subaru drills her on her knowledge of French. Not yet six, (not yet Cree) bright and eager. University.

How she might say thank you.

bu mhath leam taing a thoirt dhut an ainm na cuideachd

I would like to thank you in the name of every

body.