
FOUR POEMS BY SAMUEL MAKIDEMEWABE

These are translations of Canadian Swampy Cree personal name origins. They were told by Samuel Makidemewabe during a long apprenticeship period in which I also learned the specifics of the naming process as related to both these "earned" names and clan-affiliate names. I began the actual process of translation about 1968

—Howard Norman

Born Tying Knots / Samuel Makidemewabe

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

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

This river came from
a dream he had.

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

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

After the dream no longer came,
he stopped tying things
EXCEPT for the one night he tied up

a small fire.
Tied up a small-stick fire!
The fire got loose its own way.

Sat in the Center / Samuel Makidemewabe

This boy went out in a snow blizzard
to catch fish. He went out on the swamp ice
and brought his ice chisel with him
to dig a hole through it.
He went singing.
In summer we could hear that swamp
sing all its birds and frogs together, BUT THIS WAS
IN WINTER.
He was the only one singing.

We heard him dig the ice hole
in the distance, but we could not see
this. It was a chewing sound
his work made. After a while we got worried
he fell in.
Or that the snow snakes curled him
away.

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

He stayed out on the ice
until night. Then we saw his torch-stick fire
moving toward us, in the dark,
and he came BACK HOME to put the fish he caught
on the fire.
Our worrying did not stop there.
He sat with us and watched the fish thaw
and cook on the fire.

He sat with us
in the center, shivering.
THEN we heard his laughing thaw out
too.
That's when our worrying stopped.