
Margaret Noodin. *Gijigijigaaneshiinh Gikendaan / What the Chickadee Knows*. Wayne State University Press, 2020. 96 pp. ISBN: 9780814347508.

<https://www.wsupress.wayne.edu/books/detail/what-chickadee-knows>

As a student in Margaret Noodin's Ojibwe language class a few years ago, my imagination was captured by one word in particular: "aanikoobijigan." Often glossed as "relative" or "ancestor," Professor Noodin explained that aanikoobijigan actually refers to anyone more than two generations removed from the speaker—either a great-great-grandparent or a great-great grandchild. We learned that the stem of the word, "aanikaw-," indicates the act of binding or joining things together. For example, aanikoogwaade refers to something sewn together and aanikoobidoon means to extend through the act of tying. Therefore "aanikoobijiganag," as Prof. Noodin explained, describes those who bind us to the present—the relations who tie us to both our past and our future.

In the title poem of Noodin's latest collection, *What the Chickadee Knows*, such ties are of central concern. She writes, "Aanikoobijiganag, aanikoobidoowaad / wiingashk wiindamawiyangidwa / gashkibijigeg gegashk-akiing" ["The ancestors tied and extended it / the sweetgrass, telling us / make bundles, the world is not yet ripe"] (4-5). By watching *Gijigijigaaneshiinh*, the Chickadee, we might learn how to make such connections ourselves and ultimately realize that doing so is, in Noodin's words, "manidookeyaang manidoowiyaang" ["it's a ceremony, a way to be alive"] (4-5). This poem, like every other in the collection, was written in Ojibwemowin first, before being translated by Noodin into English. The resulting facing page translations offer a means of glimpsing the complexities and beauty of Ojibwemowin even for those, like me, whose capacity in the language is limited. By including English versions of the poems for non-speakers of Ojibwemowin, Noodin enacts another word that shares the "aanikaw-" stem. As she explains in a recent essay: "The verb 'translate' in Ojibwe is 'aanikanootan' which begins with the same stem as 'aanikoobidoon,' to be connected and 'aanikoobijigan,' the word for ancestor" (2021, 1). Over the course of this short collection, Noodin shows us the way in which such relations—whether it be to loved ones, to the world around us, or to those who will one day call us ancestors—are embedded in the very structure of Ojibwemowin.

What the Chickadee Knows is comprised of two sections, "E-Maaminonendamang" ["What We Notice"] and "Gaa-Ezhiwebag" ["History"], which operate on distinctly

different scales. The short, evocative lyrics of “E-Maaminonendamang” focus on relationships at the most intimate level and how they are sustained through acts of careful observation and reflection. In the poem “Agoozimakakiig Ildiwag” [“What the Peepers Say”], for instance, interpersonal connection is imagined as a call-and-response, like the chorus of spring frogs who “crawl into the swamp where / my calling becomes your calling” (9). In the Ojibwemowin original, the intimacy of observation is even more pronounced: “mii noopimidoodeyang maskiigong / biibaagiyan ani biibaagiyaan” (8). The agglutinative verb “noopimidoodeyang” implies not just movement, but the particular “forest-crawling” of the spring Peepers, as they leave their hibernation under fallen trees to spawn in newly thawed marshes. As the poem reminds us, “beshoganawaabmigag aawiyang” [“We are the details”]—that is, our collective existence is made up of innumerable beings whom we might closely watch and who, in turn, watch us (8-9). Throughout the section, Noodin dedicates many of the poems to Anishinaabe writers and artists, such as Jim Northrup, Linda LaGarde Grover, and Daphne Odjig, presenting her own poetry as a part of the larger process of call-and-response—the close observation and patient teaching of generations of *aanikoobijiganag*, by which Anishinaabe language and culture have been sustained.

In the next section, “Gaa-Ezhiwebag” [“History”], the scope of Noodin’s poems radically expands, in both time and space, to encompass relations on a global (even cosmic) scale. Despite taking on such weighty topics as the protests at Standing Rock and the rise of authoritarianism in American politics, the poems retain the language of intimacy. For example, in “Niizhosagoons gemaa Nisosagoons Daso-biboonagadoon” [“Two or Three Thousand Years”], the passage of millennia is treated with the same brief, off-handed familiarity one would use to describe a day at work:

Ishkwaa gaa-ningaabikide
 mikwaamiikaag ajina mii dash
 daashkikwading, bagonesigwaag
 ziibiins ani ziibi ziibiskaaj
 ziibing ziigwanindagwag

[After the minerals melted
 ice reigned for a while and then
 cracks and holes appeared
 streams became a river casually
 pouring seasons onto the land.] (46)

With the practiced ear of a language teacher, Noodin uses the repetition of sound to help us to see the underlying etymological connections in Ojibwemowin between the particular and the abstract. The line “ziibins ani ziibi ziibiskaaj,” for instance, describes the transformation of a stream (“ziibins”) into a river (“ziibi”) through an adverb that metaphorizes a leisurely activity as the slow flow of a river (“ziibiskaaj”). Similarly, the poems of “Gaa-Ezhiwebag” ask us to see a similar kind of repetition, for better or worse, as the basis of history itself—from the massacre of the Cheyenne at Sand Creek in 1864 to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. It is only by close observation of such repetitions, Noodin’s poems seem to suggest, that we might find a way of moving forward. As Noodin writes in the haunting poem “Ishkwaa Biinjwebinige” [“After the Vote”], “Ganabaj gimookawaadamin / ezhi-anjidimaajimowaad / mii miinwaa gaa-mooka’amang / da-bagidenindamang” [“Maybe we cry / as the stories change / and what we uncover / needs a proper burial”] (68-69).

In the interests of transparency, I should note that I was asked by the editors at Wayne State University Press to blurb *What the Chicakdee Knows* in March of 2020. Regarding the collection then, I wrote (somewhat blithely) that the poems were a celebration of “the vast web of relations that sustains us all.” Returning to it now, after nearly a year of isolation, fear, and uncertainty brought on by the Covid-19 epidemic, these poems have taken on a poignancy greater than I could have possibly imagined. Every connection we manage to forge, these poems remind us, also creates the potential for loss. Indeed, reading a poem like “Izhise” (“Time Flight”), it can be hard to remember that it *wasn’t* written to describe the collective disorientation and grief wrought by the current pandemic:

Ogii-inendaan wanising giizhig dibikong
 azhigwa waabandang aazhogan aawang
 bi-aazhogeyang, ni-aazhogeyang
 mii agwaashimiyangidwa biidaabang
 megwaa waagoshag aazhikwewaad.

Mii goshkozi nandawaabamaad
 gaa-gikenimaad jibwaa
 aanjised, aanjisenid
 debibidood gaagiigido-biiwaabikoons
 inaakonang waa-ezhiwebag noongom.

Waa-wenda-ishkwaase

ge-gezika-nisidotamang
bangibiisaag, animibiisaag
gaye aabitaa-dibikag
dibishkoo naawakwe-giizhigag.

[She used to think of night as a lost day
now she sees it is a bridge
for us to cross and recross
as we are saving each dawn
by the foxes screaming.

And he wakes up looking for
the one he knew before
one of them changed
grabbing a telephone
to chart the course of the new day.

All of this will end
with sudden insight
the way rain passes and midnight is
like noon.] (38-39)

The way in which Noodin's poetry speaks so perfectly to our present is no mere coincidence. Over the past year, we have all been reminded—often painfully—of the truth spoken on every page of *What the Chickadee Knows*. It is a truth that Margaret Noodin, following a long tradition of Anishinaabe thought, is at pains to show us in every word of both English and Ojibwemowin: we are nothing more than that which ties us together.

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Works Cited

Noodin, Margaret. "Margaret Noodin on 'Faoiseamh a Gheobhadsa.'" *Poetry Daily*. Accessed 25 Jan. 2021. <https://poems.com/features/what-sparks-poetry/>.