

supervisors did at those schools.
 We all left, all of us.
 Confusion was in our wind.
 We no longer knew
 where to turn.

That is where my footsteps began
 where my footprints
 appear in snow, in grass.
 I don't like walking backwards.

Old ones haunt my thoughts
 tiny spirits that brush
 the colour off my wings.
 I need them now
 to help others understand what happened.
 It wasn't their fault.
 It wasn't our fault.

Confusion was the ultimate glutton.
 He came from far away
 wore black robes and carried a crucifix.
 He was armed with laws, blankets
 and guns.
 He fixed us with a treaty
 that he soon forgot.

Sometimes the end is told before the beginning.
 One must walk backwards on footprints
 that walked forward
 for the story to be told.

I will try this backward walk.

—2015

John Cuthand

Plains Cree • b. 1953 • Little Pine

John Cuthand was born in Prince Albert. He began a career in journalism in 1974 after he "wrote an angry rebuttal to a Canadian

politician's remarks about Indians." Over the next decade he worked as a writer and editor for several Indian newspapers.

Cuthand's stories reflect over three centuries of his family's stories. "Naska" captures a vivid picture of the spiritual significance of the Saskatchewan River. While "The Search for Chief Lucky Man" was

originally published in 1985, a significant change was made in 2016 to indicate that the author is the last living person of the many who worked together in the search for Lucky Man.

Naska

Her home was the deep water pools of the South Saskatchewan River. Here among the water plants, rocks and sandbars she passed the day and avoided the only enemy she ever knew—the bright burning sun. She hunted alone and without remorse, for such is the way of the big northern pike.

Her name was Naska. She was in her prime, weighing over thirty-five pounds and stretching almost a yard. Her shining, well-muscled body was white on the bottom, a mottled green and white along the sides and dark green on top. Her mouth was a maze of needle-sharp teeth. Smaller fish avoided her. And only the hard-shelled painted turtle could afford to ignore her approach.

When the hot summer sun drove her into the deepest reaches of the river, she would hover, her fins circling, facing the current a foot or so above the bottom. It was here, in these long hours, that the waters told her stories. The river sang as it flowed over and around the deep water rocks. It spoke in the soft rustle of the water weeds and in the gurgle and murmur of water pouring around the few scattered boulders breaking the glassy surface.

The voice said, "I am the ancient daughter of ice mountain, born when the freezing sky allowed him dominion over the south. I am the blood of ice mountain, born from his death before the warming sky. I am ancient and I am mystery. I am swift-flowing water. I am Saskatchewan."

In the black of the late night she rose with the morning star. She fed until the star was high and fading. When the first rays of the shimmering sun cast long shadows, she herself was like a shadow sinking into her deep water pools. She surfaced with the setting of the sun, fed, then slid deeper when the night became black.

On cloudy days she ranged beyond her familiar haunts. In the fall, with the gradual cooling of the water, her range extended further still. In winter, when the ice sealed off the surface and the sun no longer warmed the water, she roamed as she pleased. She much preferred the colder water. In mid-summer she was sluggish, but that was also the time when the river sang to her.

One time it told her ice mountain had never been entirely defeated by warming sky. "He rules still in one quarter of the sun's cycle. He covers me with his cloak and speaks to me in the booming thunder of my cracking ice mantle. He is father. In his death I was born. In his rebirth, I die. I am ancient but he is ageless."

In the time of the full moon Naska would rise and seek different prey. The moon's glow concealed her, but she could see them. They were the night creatures that live between water and land. For them the beckoning, seemingly peaceful waters held terror. Quick, violent death came with a splash and a swirl of black water. Where a gosling or a baby muskrat once swam, all that remained was an expanding ripple.

The big fish did not think in terms of right and wrong. Hunger, insatiable hunger, drove her and she killed only to live.

Among her moonlit prey the story spread of a water demon in the form of an enormous fish. The story was told in the haunting lonely laughter of the loons, the croaking chorus of the frightened frogs, and the chatterings of the milling ducks. The moonlight sighting of a long, shining back lolling over the water drove them further down the sandy bank away from that terrible place. The hunted lived in fear and they feared her most of all. If Naska knew of their fear, she didn't care. Generations of her kind before her and from her had ruled and would rule the river's waters. For the river in its mysterious way had willed it so.

She had been the mother of many. Perhaps some were among her kill, for the female pike takes no part in the raising of her young. Perhaps one or two would grow to her size if they survived the slaughter of the first years. One and one alone, however, was destined to become mistress of the river. The river in its way had willed it so. Naska was the survivor and heir of a mother who once ruled these waters as she did. This she did not know. She knew only that the river was her home and the river's spirit her sole benefactor.

One night, when the autumn moon was full and the great fish was on the hunt, a wandering band of antelope came to the river's edge. They waded out into the shallows and were drinking their fill, when their sharp-eyed leader spied a great shining back coming toward them. He watched intently, expecting an enormous snake, for snakes were creatures they knew well. A great finned tail curved upward, then sliced down, scarcely breaking the surface. "This is no snake," thought the antelope, "it is a creature solely bound to the water spirit."

The great fish felt a curious pulse from the shallows and veered toward it. This was not the fluttering sound of webbed feet, her usual prey. It was the feel of something large, many large creatures.

The antelope, alert as always, sensed that something very alien was close. They stiffened, raising their heads to sniff the wind. Only the leader gazed at the smooth, flowing water directly in front of them.

Naska followed the river bottom and rose as it rose. She came as close as boldness could take her before caution and the rising river bottom forced her off.

The leader was the first to notice the ruffled water above the shallow-running fish. The V-shaped wake came directly toward them, then moved away in a sharp

curve. The antelope were nervous but their curiosity got the better of them. They watched in fascination as the dark shadow beneath the now churning water glided by, first one way then another, more slowly and closer with every pass.

Naska could not see straight ahead, because her eyes were on either side of her head. Cruising first one way then another allowed each eye to scrutinize in turn. The antelope froze in place, only their eyes tracked the meandering fish.

The shadow slowed, then hung motionless, her body curved in an arc, head and tail lowered—the defiant attack stance of her kind. Her cold, unblinking eye peered from beneath the water. The antelope peered back. Both sensed danger, but both were too fascinated to turn back. Neither one moved. All was quiet and still except for the murmuring water and the distant night sounds. The stand-off was finally broken by a single, curious antelope advancing a few hesitant steps. It paused in mid-step, ears forward, eyes shining. The dark shadow turned to meet him. The pronghorn's nostrils flared. Genuine fear was rising in him now, in spite of his curiosity.

In this position Naska could not see, but other more acute senses compensated. Her body felt the change in water pressure. Sensitive pores surrounding her mouth tasted the water. The tingling of these senses was her warning, but she wasn't quick enough. Her world exploded. The pronghorn struck with slashing hooves. He felt his first strike hit, then searing pain gripped his left front leg. He turned and leapt to the river bank. The others, as if one, instantly followed.

The herd left the river valley, trotting toward the rising morning star, now above the high prairie hills to the east. One limped, streaming blood from a deep gash to its front leg.

The pronghorn's slashing attack had cut deep, narrowly missing Naska's spine. Her reaction had been fast: a violent counter attack followed by a darting retreat. She left tasting blood.

The fight was brief but the effects devastating. Naska's needle-like sharp teeth had torn flesh as she shook her massive head from side to side. The pronghorn's small hooves, honed to a fine edge by climbing the rocky high ground, cut and crushed. Naska was lucky to be alive.

She retreated to the safety of deep water where, unmoving for many days, she nursed her wounds.

As she hovered, death close at hand, the river spoke to her again. "My riddles are written in your colours and patterns, in the coiled shell of the water snail and in the advance and retreat of my morning mist. All is there for those who seek. The willows know and bow before the river winds. I am as the veins of their stems and that of the animals. My sisters both young and old bring life to the land in the endless cycle of wind and water. We are ancient and honour only ice mountain and his creator. My father feels the deep stirrings of growth again.

His advance will come soon, with the passing of ten thousand cycles of the sun. Death is always close at hand, but you, my defiant one, will live to hunt again."

The cold water of winter revived her. For the remainder of her days, though, she wore a distinct crescent-shaped scar high upon her back.

The spring brought high, murky water. The great, restless river cut new channels and deep holes. Fish, both hunter and prey, sought the sanctuary of the river's deepest pools. A strange truce resulted. Clustered together in desperate, common survival they faced into the current, awaiting the river's ebb. They ignored one another; choosing not to eat until the peril passed. Overhead, the river carried a deadly cargo of uprooted trees and smaller debris. In another time the fish would welcome the shade and shelter of a beached river log, but for now the debris was an adversary to be avoided. The gentle river was showing its wrathful side.

Naska's strong body was rocked by the swirling water and her sensitive gills ached from the heavily silted water.

In time the river subsided. The fish returned to their former roles. Hunter stalked prey and sought the safety of weed beds and shallow water. Naska hunted with renewed vigor over a territory she now knew only by instinct. For the river bed had been forever changed by the river's rampage.

Just as the butterfly changes and renews itself in the cocoon so too did Saskatchewan in the cleansing flood of the early spring. Life more bounteous than before returned with the subsiding waters.

The spring also brought subtle but significant change. The fishes of the north moved south, and Naska challenged their invasion. Goldeye, pickerel and the odd wandering pike all bore the tell-tale wounds of Naska's wrath.

One day a new threat appeared. It was a creature she had never met before. It was big and moved slowly like a log carried by the current. Her other senses told her it was a living being.

At any other time her actions would have been predictable. But this intruder made her pause. It was bigger than she, much bigger. She approached slowly, her back arched and her broad tail making slow, deliberate sweeps. The stranger kept to its slow, steady course along the river bottom, unconcerned by her approach. Naska's fury rose. Her body tensed, then she shot out of the gloom in dauntless attack. Her jaws did not grip. The intruder was far too large. She came at it again and again. Her teeth broke on a craggy back. The fight was entirely her own. The giant fish did not fight back. Almost with contempt it seemed, the giant continued its fluid movement slowly and methodically down river.

Naska launched a final attack. By luck or misfortune she struck the giant's tail fin. She felt flesh tearing, then saw the huge fin sweeping toward her. A powerful blow stunned her. She recovered in time to witness the long tapering tail of Namew the sturgeon vanishing down river. Their chance encounter was over.

The ice mountain's rule had come and gone many times before Naska grew too tired for the hunt. The smaller fish grew bold and she found it hard to catch them. Almost in disdain they drifted by her jaws, only to dart away when she moved to attack. What once took but an instant was now painfully slow. Her lightning-quick reflexes were gone. Her meals became slow-moving crayfish and frogs. On her last hunts, in complete contempt, the little fish followed her, seeking the remains of what little food she could find but not swallow. Naska's body ached and she spent much more time in solitude on the river bottom. Here she awaited the return of the comforting voice of the river spirit, but no voice was heard.

The time came when the moon was full and no shining back was seen breaking the river's surface. The moon waned and the night creatures along the edge of the land and water felt safe.

The morning star was at its highest point and the eastern sky was bright with early dawn. The sun rose red and fairweather clouds of violet and gold floated across the sky.

Naska's movements were slowing. Her gills once flushed with red blood grew pale and sickly. She didn't know why, only instinct drew her from her hovering place to the weed bed. With painful effort she dosed her tired mouth over a single water plant. Then with a turn of her massive head she pulled it free. Straining against the current, she carried this hard-won prize back to her chosen place. No prey had taken so much effort as this simple task.

She faced into the current for the final time. The rising sun now bathed the river bottom in a soft half-light. Only the dying remained. Her gills stopped moving. Her mouth opened and closed a final time, freeing the water plant. Her tired body shook with her death rattle. She briefly drifted with the current, then rose slowly toward the sun. One eye saw blackness, the other a brilliant broken circle of light. The light grew in intensity. A bright light she would only see once filled her being. Then all was blackness.

Wind and current brought the limp corpse to the water's edge. It drifted to a sandbar where it rocked back and forth with the lapping waves. The birds of the air feasted. Before the coming of the next sunrise, mighty Naska's body was reduced to bones and a toothy, grinning skull.

The night creatures, once timid of her mere approach, now rejoiced in her death. And so began a night of steady tattoo, celebrating the end of their once formidable foe. The frogs croaked together of a great victory, but theirs was not a valid boast. Only death had won.

In the spring the rushing water swept the bones along the river bottom where they collected in a shallow river hollow. Swirling silt covered them. A stand of water plants began to grow thick and lush from the calcium-rich sediment.

Along the wandering river, in the back water of a shallow place, small fish—the survivors of uncountable hatchlings—flittered among weeds, pursuing water bugs and minute creatures. Others, much larger but no older, stalked tadpoles. They all feared the deep water where the larger fish lurked ever hungry for a meal of their kind. In time, the pull of instinct or perhaps destiny called the bold one to the deep, alluring water. She paused at a lush stand of water plants and hovered beside it. The water-filtered sun, moving in zebra-like patterns over her back, shone on a curious crescent-shaped birth mark. The singing river called her in the soft rustle of the water weeds and in the gurgle and murmur of water pouring around the few scattered boulders breaking the glassy surface.

The bold one swam deeper, down a sandy decline, past the last of the weed bed, and into the unknown reaches of the deep calling river.

—1985