

A Conversation with Nokmes (My Grandmother) in Poetry

by Browning Neddeau



Shishibeniye **ndebendagwes**, I am enrolled Citizen Potawatomi Nation. In my Tribe, our cultural ways include honoring the seven generations before and after our time. My people have survived the cultural genocide of the present-day United States of America. Despite forced removals (for example, the Trail of Death in 1838) from our homelands and the U.S. failing to uphold numerous treaties (see [treaties](#) from 1832, 1834, and 1836 as examples), Potawatomi People remain steadfast in our cultural ways of knowing and doing.

As a young child, I vividly recall traveling to present-day Oklahoma to visit my paternal grandmother. She lived near our Tribe's agency, more commonly known (perhaps) as Shawnee, Oklahoma. The poem reflects back on my relationship with *nokmes* (my grandmother) while thinking about future generations. Because my parents were both public school teachers and ended the school year in June, we traveled to Oklahoma from present-day California during the hottest and most humid time of the year—summer. If you live on the coast where an ocean breeze is nearby and high humidity is a foreign concept, then you begin to understand my perspective of visiting Oklahoma during the summertime—where an ocean breeze is nonexistent.

About the photos: Marjorie Lucy Neddeau, Te-Quah and Browning Michael Neddeau, P-Nos-Wah.

Perhaps it was my naivety and simply being a child, but the summer months frequently ended much too soon. I remember enjoying watermelon on the front porch of my grandmother's home, catching fireflies—something that I did not see in California—participating in powwows. There were always so many stories to share, create, and understand by the time we had to return to California. My grandmother walked on before my teenage years. About a year ago, I sensed a need to speak with my grandmother and returned to an interest of mine: poetry. I thought I could create a poem through which I could talk with her again.

In my Tribe, storytelling is important. The words we use, engagement with the telling and listening, and the opportunity to learn and grow are all present in the stories we tell. Certain stories are only told during specific seasons while other stories can be shared throughout the year. The [National Storytelling Network](#) affirms these elements of storytelling and offers physical movement and active imagination among additional points in telling. I returned to how to write a poem to my grandmother that tells a story with these elements in mind.

My paternal grandmother, Marjorie Lucy Neddeau (Battese), was born April 18, 1907. Her Potawatomi name is Te-Quah. She spoke Potawatomi and English. As a proud Bodewadmi kwe (Potawatomi woman), she worked as a federal government nurse in a hospital that served patients with tuberculosis. She dedicated her service to fighting a disease that was foreign to our Potawatomi people yet impacted our tribal communities in ways that would transcend generations to come after her. In our ways, she passed her wisdom to my father, Donald LeRoy Neddeau, born October 1, 1936. As a Potawatomi person, I must keep the fire burning. Vizenor's (2009) scholarship concerning survivance is similar to fire keeping and burning. He defines survivance, in part, as a resistance to absence and nihility. To keep the fire burning, we must not only be told stories, but we must also tell stories. King (2005) reminds us that stories help us understand the world we share. I wanted to talk to my grandmother, but I also wanted to tell her story. How could I capture the importance of ancestral stories and lived experience in a poem?

When we tell a story, the words we use matter. As I planned my poem, it quickly became clear to me that I needed to find voices. I wanted readers to see the conversation I am having with my grandmother. To honor our Potawatomi language, I decided to write the poem in Potawatomi. However, I realized that not many people would be able to share in our conversation. Was my conversation to be public? I decided to add English to my poem. As I reflect on this work, I wonder if the conversation is an entry point for understanding or exploring language revitalization. Have we lost nuances in the Potawatomi language or have such nuances merely been reshaped in culturally sustaining and revitalizing ways?

The poem soon transformed into a piece that could be read in three different ways. The various ways to read it also presented new meanings. One way to read the poem is from left to right where you read the grandparent, together, and grandchild voices. A second way is to read the grandparent voice in the poem and the together voice in the reading. The third way to read the poem is the grandchild's voice and the together voice. If you read from the grandparent's voice, for example, you would read Ngot. Nish. Gowabmen. (I am watching you.) Ngot. Nish. Ngot. Nish.

As I explored the three different ways to read the poem, a moment emerged that gave me pause. What does it mean if the grandparent speaks in Potawatomi and the grandchild responds in English? What if the grandparent only knows Potawatomi and the grandchild only knows English? Alternatively, the grandparent might have experienced boarding schools where Potawatomi was not to be spoken. The grandchild's use of Potawatomi indicates a revitalization of the Potawatomi language, a reawakening of a language. Can the two voices hear each other if they are not speaking the same language?

Once I decided that I wanted to write the poem as a conversation, I wanted to relive the moments I remembered with my grandmother many years ago. One of the earliest memories that stood out to me was participating in powwows in Oklahoma. I have been to powwows my entire life. My uncle, F. Browning Pipestem, welcomed me into the powwow arena when I was about five years old. He showed me how to dance around his shag carpeted living room in Norman, Oklahoma. I remember him sharing wisdom with me and preparing me for my first dance. We practiced, we danced. When I was ready, I danced at a powwow with my grandmother watching me from her folding chair. When I dance in powwows, I dance for my ancestors. They are watching me. Thus, I decided to have this poem take place at a powwow where I am dancing and my grandmother is watching me from her folding chair, wherever she may be with it. *Gnimedimen, we dance.*

My grandmother walked on many seasons ago. "Gnimedimen [We Dance]" gives me the conversation that I yearned for with my grandmother. Additionally, it provides me with a sense of place. Ngot (one), nish (two) are the sounds of my moccasins tapping gently on Mshike Mnise (Turtle Island). The steps repeat seven times in honor of the generations before and after my time. I feel honored that each time I dance, we dance.

I invite readers to explore "Gnimedimen [We Dance]" and think of your ancestors. If you could ask your ancestors one question, what would it be? My conversation and stories continue with my grandmother from the last time my moccasins touched Mshike Mnise and for that I am grateful.

Iw (End).

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Works Cited

King, Thomas. 2005. *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Vizenor Gerald. 2009. *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Urls

National Archives <https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/treaties/viewing-treaties>
The National Storytelling Network <https://storynet.org>

Gnimedimen (We Dance)

by Browning Neddeau

This poem can be read three different ways:

1. Read the poem from one side to the other as a conversation between grandparent and grandchild.
2. Read just the grandparent's side (including the "together" voices).
3. Read just the grandchild's side (including the "together" voices).

**Grandparent (mesho
[grandfather] or nokmes
[my grandmother])**

Together

Grandchild (Noseme)

Gowabmen.
(I am watching you.)

Ngot. Nish. [x1]

I dance for you.
(Nnimesi eko bwa nimesiyen:
I dance because you can't.)

Dewegen. Dewegen.
[sound of the heartbeat]

Ngot. Nish. [x2]
Ngot. Nish.

My moccasins move to the
sound of the heart.
(nMkeznen mdwewenon
gechwa wDe: My moccasins
they sound like a heart.)

Wawyetok dewegen.
(Circle the sound of the drum.)

Ngot. Nish. [x3]
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.

I look to you.
(Gkanabmen.)

Dewegen. Dewegen.

Ngot. Nish. [x4]
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.

Ngemdea
(You sing from your heart, I
feel your heart sing)

Nim'édiyen
(as you dance)

Ngot. Nish. [x5]
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.

Gowabmen.
(I am watching you.)

Ngot. Nish. [x6]
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.

Nim'edinak ndenwenmagnek
(Dance for all of our
relations.)

Gowawabmen.
(I am watching you like a
reflection; like looking into a
mirror.)

Ngot. Nish. [x7]
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.
Ngot. Nish.

You sing to me, though worlds
apart.
(Gngemtew, nesh je bnoch
yeyen: You sing to me, but
you are far away.)

I dance for you.
(Nnimesi eko bwa nimesiyen:
I dance because you can't.)

We'll never part.
(Cho wika gwi-webnegomen:
We will never break up.)