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**Author**

Smelcer, John E.

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## Songs From An Outcast

Ahtna is one of the thirteen Athabaskan languages of Alaska. It is part of a larger proto-Athabaskan language family and has similarities to Navajo far to the southeast. Less than seventy elders still speak our language which has survived for more than a thousand years in the remote interior of Alaska in our many villages along the Copper River and its tributaries.

My grandmother, Morrie Secondchief, taught me our language, and now, at 35, I am the youngest speaker and the only living tribal member able to write in it. Ahtna had no written form until just this past two decades when university linguist James Kari began collaborating with elders to develop an orthographic system for writing in our language. Because of my interest in preserving and teaching our language and traditions, my tribe appointed me as the executive director of our Heritage Foundation in 1996. After more than two years of research and hundreds of interviews, I completed and published *The Ahtna Noun Dictionary*, a reference containing almost 3,000 Ahtna words and their pronunciation (using basic English grammar knowledge as a guide). During my years as the tribally-appointed cultural leader, I published several other books on our mythology and oral history, as well as a language poster series. *In the Shadows of Mountains* was released last year and featured an introduction by Pulitzer Prize author Gary Snyder. I am currently completing an oral history project in collaboration with renowned folklorist, Barre Toelken.

But always in my heart was my personal need to write poetry. Several years ago, I began to experiment with writing bilingual poetry in my Indian language. It was very difficult at first, not so much because I was not yet fluent in our tongue, but because our language has so few words compared to English. While Ahtna may have in all 4,000 words (including verbs and prepositions), English has over a million! I am limited as to what I can express (poetically) in Ahtna because there is often no word for what I envision. Translators of major world languages have some similar difficulty, but I imagine nothing compared to the limits prescribed by a language with such a small vocabulary.

Originally, I relied on several stacks of color-coded index cards to separate place names from animal and bird names, plant names, and the like. On one side of the card was the noun written in English, while on the other side was the Ahtna word. I'd lay these cards out on the floor searching for some connection, some linguistic string. I rarely had an idea of what the finished product would be when I started. It was always a process of discovery. Later I would read my work to elders who corrected minor problems. Nowadays, however, I am much more fluent in my writing, and while there still is a sense of discovery at the end, the path to that end is much more trodden and I rarely find myself as lost as in my first attempts to write poetry in the language of my father's ancestors.

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John E. Smelcer's recent poetry books include *The Snow Has No Voice* and *Changing Seasons*, and a nonfiction book, *In the Shadows of Mountains*, featuring an introduction by Gary Snyder. He is writing and humanities faculty at Embry-Riddle University.

The poems in this collection are among only a handful of poems written in Ahtna and translated into English in existence. I know that the reading audience (in Ahtna) is severely limited, but it is a beginning, a place from which other Native writers may begin and carry on in our continuing struggle to preserve our precious and precarious languages.

— *John E. Smelcer*

### **Animal Spirits**

Old men teach me animal spirits  
wander the forests where they once lived.

I remember as a boy  
chasing a moose  
across a frozen field  
until it vanished  
in a tangled forest  
of spruce and birch—

how I turned home on our trail  
and found only my tracks  
in the fresh crushed snow.

### **Nunyae Senk'aaze**

Da'atnae nii sii nunyae senk'aaze  
ghayaal tic'aa ikae daa.

Sii niic tah sii ciil  
yuul deniigi  
naan hwzaak'e  
k'e deniigi nak'  
yii dzaadze' tic'aa  
ts'abaeli 'el k'ey—

sii nake'taen hnax gha tene  
'el 'aen sk'e  
yii k'adiidi sesi.

— *John E. Smelcer*

### **Evening at Fielding Lake**

This evening at Fielding Lake  
a raven sits in thick-branched spruce  
while rain clouds  
move below a full moon  
turning the water black.

### **Talt'aezi Bene' Xeltse'e**

Hwt'aedze xelts'e'de kolaexi Talt'aezi Ben  
saghani ggaay ye ts'ezdaa  
ts'abaeli det'en  
luy'tninilt'iits k'ay' giis kanghilyaan  
tuu nelt' uuts'.

### **Loneliness**

While packing firewood  
I come upon a small lake  
and loonsong.

Flowers blossom,  
a pika calls from rock.

Suddenly there is a noise,  
loon dives into the water  
and I am alone again.

— *John E. Smelcer*

### Sneyaa

Tsets daghael  
sii ben deltaan  
dadzeni kedadetnes.

C'et'aan 'unetniigi,  
k'agi delk'ac.

C'isnatse dakuditniis,  
dadzeni ts'elbae tuu  
sii sedze'.

### Mourning Song for the Last Indian

When Indian People are no more  
trees will sing and weep  
mountains will shake  
wolves will howl  
and lakes and rivers will go dry.

When Indian People are no more  
a red moon will rise forever.

### Dzitaex C'eliis Xandenne Ahtna Koht'aene

Koht'aene tl'ahwdalnen  
ts'abaeli laa el tsaex  
dghelaay tsez  
tikaani ni'da'iyel  
el bene' el na' tsaet

Koht'aene tl'ahwdalnen  
deldel tets na'aaye' gge' niic 'udii.

— *John E. Smelcer*

### Muskrat Woman

I am reluctant to tell you about this.

At the head of St. Anne Lake  
faraway upriver  
I saw a muskrat swimming,  
making a wake like lightning  
flashing on glare ice.

I came close to her,  
her chin was tattooed beautifully.

I kissed her.

When three days passed  
she said I should go back barefooted,  
keep away from bears,  
be happy.

But I mourned three months.

### Dzen Ts'akae

Bedatnitnezelnic.

Ts'iisi Bene' ben k'etl'aa  
'uniidze  
Sii 'aen dzen lutaniniltse  
tsulatdebaes  
ten ts'iisi.

yu'niistas,  
yu'yida' naltats' kasuundze'.

Nangalyu'.

Taa'i hwneyelden  
yu' nii natxosdya' kets'iis 'aede,

tsaani uc'a' staniyaas,  
neniic uyighiyaa.

Sii kudyaak taa'i na'aaye'.

### The Widowers Dance

In January, the month of riddles,  
 beneath a red aurora—  
 “the fire in the sky that burns the cold,”  
 a husband danced on the ice  
 beside the burning wick of a stone oil lamp.

He danced the mourning dance  
 until the light of dawn arrived  
 and he cried himself to sleep.

### Kayaax C'edzes

C'edzak saa  
 dlii nadelk'ani—  
 kan' tents'iisi k'e nay'teldzes  
 k'ez nunak hwiidiile'.

Kan' dxitaex  
 yikaas k'edghildza'  
 dzi'tnelkaal.

—*John E. Smelcer*