

The First Christmas Tree

AN INNU TALE



OVILA FONTAINE

ILLUSTRATED BY
CHARLOTTE PARENT

A perfect tree brings joy in the coldest season.

It is very cold in the Far North. The Great Manitou knows that winter is the harshest season for the Innu, so he decides to find a way to make their winters a little brighter.

He searches through the trees in the forest to find one who will bring joy, beauty and warmth to all. Could it be the larch, the tree that the Innu use to make sleds, bows or ointments? The birch, malleable and robust? Or the magnificent black spruce? “Do you want to become the Christmas tree?” he asks each one. But one after the other, the trees decline his offer. All except one, the little fir tree, whom the Great Manitou had initially overlooked.

Innu Elder Ovila Fontaine combined Indigenous and Christian traditions in this vibrant Christmas tale. A glossary of Innu words is included in the back of the book.

An English translation of the Govenor General’s award-winning book *Le premier arbre de Noël*.

This is an advance reading copy of the uncorrected proofs and is not for sale. Changes may be made to the text before publication, so **all quotations for review must be checked against the final bound book.**

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The First Christmas Tree, An Innu Tale

Author: Ovila Fontaine

Illustrator: Charlotte Parent

October 14, 2025
Translator: Ann Marie Boulanger

In this illustrated picture book, the Great Manitou searches for the right tree to give the Innu for their first Christmas tree in the cold northern winter.

FORMAT

8.5 × 10.75"

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Key Selling Points

- In this vibrant picture book, the Great Manitou searches for the first Christmas tree to brighten up the winters for the Innu.
- The author, an Innu Elder, has created an original Christmas tale that marries Indigenous and Christian traditions in a respectful way. A glossary of Innu words is included in the back of the book.
- The Creator, the Great Manitou, is depicted in the illustrations as different animals that make their home in the North, which provides an innovative perspective that reflects an animistic worldview.
- While the Innu characters are enduring a hard winter, they are depicted as resourceful, resilient and merry.
- The back matter includes a selection of Innu words for the animals, trees and other objects in the story.
- The book shares the many traditional uses of the trees in the North that have allowed the Innu people to survive.
- The French version of this title, *Le premier arbre de Noël*, won the 2024 Governor General's Literary Award for illustrated French books.



About the author

Ovila Fontaine is an Innu Elder from the community of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, where he has lived and worked all his life. From an early age he was interested in hunting and life in the forest. When he became a father, he embarked on a quest for his own history and culture. Today Ovila is an accomplished presenter, skilled at explaining the fundamentals of Innu culture and philosophy to the uninitiated. He is often called upon to act as a cultural ambassador for many organizations.



About the illustrator

Charlotte Parent is an illustrator based in Montreal. In 2017, she obtained her bachelor's degree in fine arts from Concordia University, where she focused on drawing. Passionate about picture books, she now creates illustrations in colored pencil or gouache for children's literature. Charlotte likes to depict the magic of the ordinary in her gentle and playful illustrations. *The First Christmas Tree* is her second picture book.



About the translator

Ann Marie Boulanger is a certified translator and owner of Traduction Proteus Inc. When she's not translating commercial texts, she's an accomplished translator of adult and children's literature. Her translation of *The Woman in Valencia*, by Annie Perreault, was named a World Literature Today Notable Translation of 2021. She's also a part-time lecturer at McGill University and co-founder of LION Translation Academy, which offers business, tech and language training workshops for translators.

Promotional plans include

- Print and online advertising campaigns
- Promotion at national and regional school, library and trade conferences
- Extensive ARC distribution, including Edelweiss
- Blog and social media promotion
- Outreach in Orca's newsletter program, including targeted emails to educators, librarians and booksellers in Canada and the United States

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JUV030090 JUVENILE FICTION / Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island

JUV017010 JUVENILE FICTION / Holidays & Celebrations / Christmas & Advent

JUV012030 JUVENILE FICTION / Fairy Tales & Folklore / General

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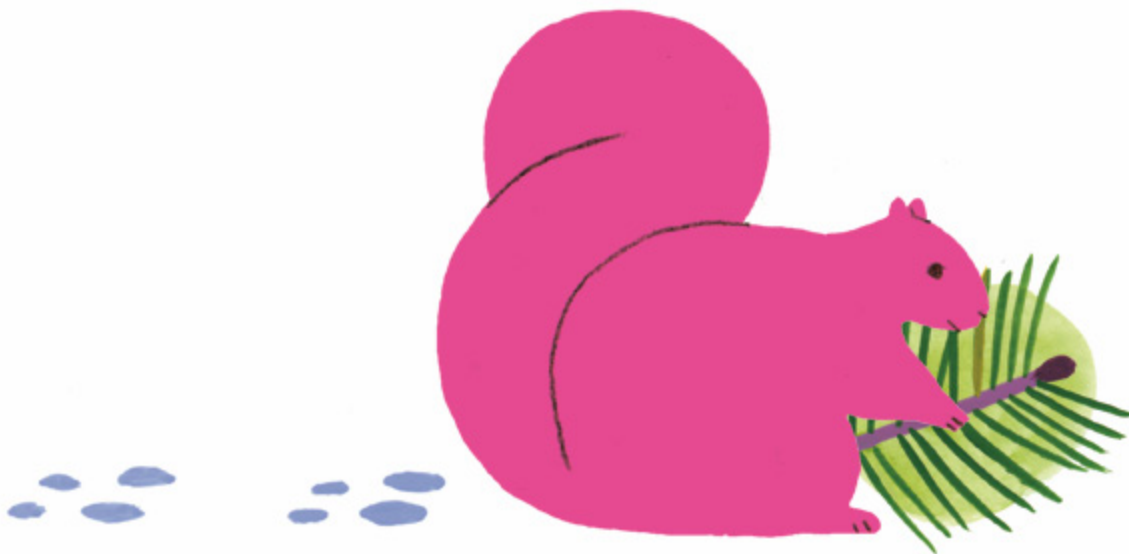
The First Christmas Tree

AN INNU TALE


OVILA FONTAINE

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLOTTE PARENT

TRANSLATED BY ANN MARIE BOULANGER




ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS



A very long time ago, in the northern forest, the Great Manitou looked down upon the Innu. It was winter, and their vast land was in the grip of a deep cold.

The Great Manitou saw how the Innu struggled with the cold, harsh winter. He thought to himself, I will give them a Christmas tree to make their winters a little brighter.





The Great Manitou explored the forest he had created, searching for the perfect tree—the tree that would bring joy during the harshest of seasons.



He carefully examined all
the trees in the North.

His eyes landed on the birch tree. The birch had very noble properties. It was both flexible and strong. The Innu used it to make snowshoes, bowls, harpoons, canoes and drums.






Thanks to the birch tree, the Innu could walk on the snow, collect berries, glide over lakes and rivers, and fish for food. The birch tree inspired many songs of thanks and praise to the Great Manitou.

Yes, indeed! The birch was an impressive tree.





The Great Manitou approached the birch tree and said, “You are a very noble tree. Would you like to become a Christmas tree?”

But the birch, aware of its many uses, had become rather self-important. It believed itself much better than the other trees.



It knew the Innu could not survive without it.

The birch tree replied, “No! I do not want to be a Christmas tree. I do not want to be decorated. I am already beautiful.”

The Great Manitou did not argue. He carried on walking through the forest.



He noticed a fir tree in the distance...



but he kept walking.

Nearby, he came across a larch tree. The larch tree grew on the plains, near lakes and rivers. Its wood was very hard. The Innu used it to make bows and sleds. They had many uses for the larch tree.




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Thanks to the larch tree, they could hunt, carry heavy loads and heal their sick. They even used its bark to make a paste that could soothe cuts and scrapes.





The Great Manitou stopped
in front of the larch tree and said,
“You are strong and solid. Would
you like to become a Christmas tree
and bring joy to Innu children?”



But, like its wood, the larch tree had become hard and unbending.

In a firm voice it replied, “No, I do not want to be a Christmas tree.”

The Great Manitou did not argue. He carried on walking through the forest.



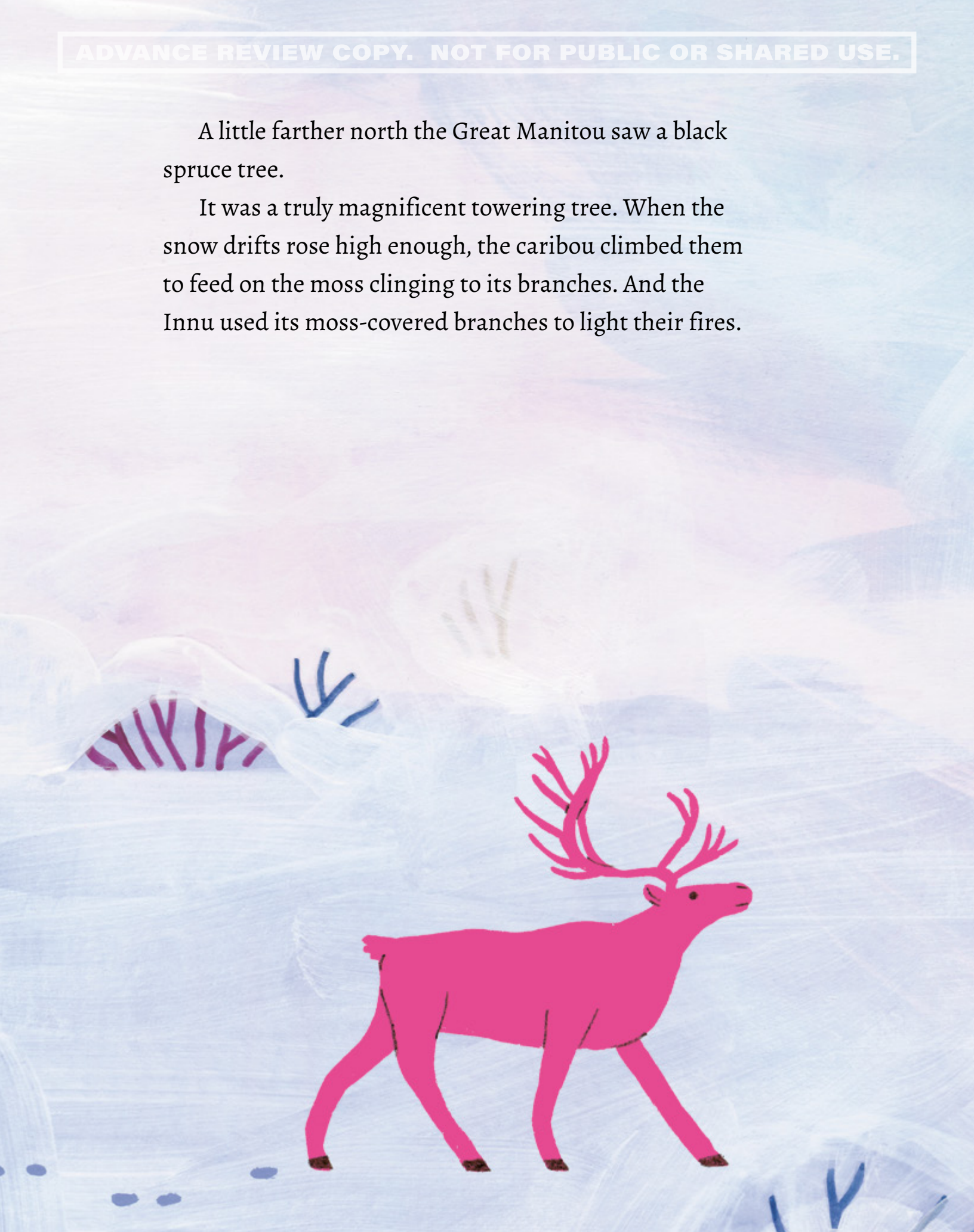
He spotted another fir tree. He spent a few minutes studying it from afar. Then he noticed its sticky branches.



The sap dripping from its trunk and branches was unappealing. The Great Manitou walked past the fir tree without looking back.

A little farther north the Great Manitou saw a black spruce tree.

It was a truly magnificent towering tree. When the snow drifts rose high enough, the caribou climbed them to feed on the moss clinging to its branches. And the Innu used its moss-covered branches to light their fires.






Logs from the black spruce warmed the Innu's tents,
burning with a heat unlike any other wood.



ADVANCED USE. The Great Manitou approached the black spruce tree and said,

“You are a warm, handsome tree. Would you like to become the first Christmas tree and give the Innu children something to admire during the long, cold winter months?”



The background is a stylized illustration of a black spruce tree branch. The needles are represented by various shades of green and blue brushstrokes. A large, white, textured shape representing snow is draped over the top right portion of the branch. At the bottom of the image, there is a solid, bright pink shape that resembles a snowflake or a decorative element.

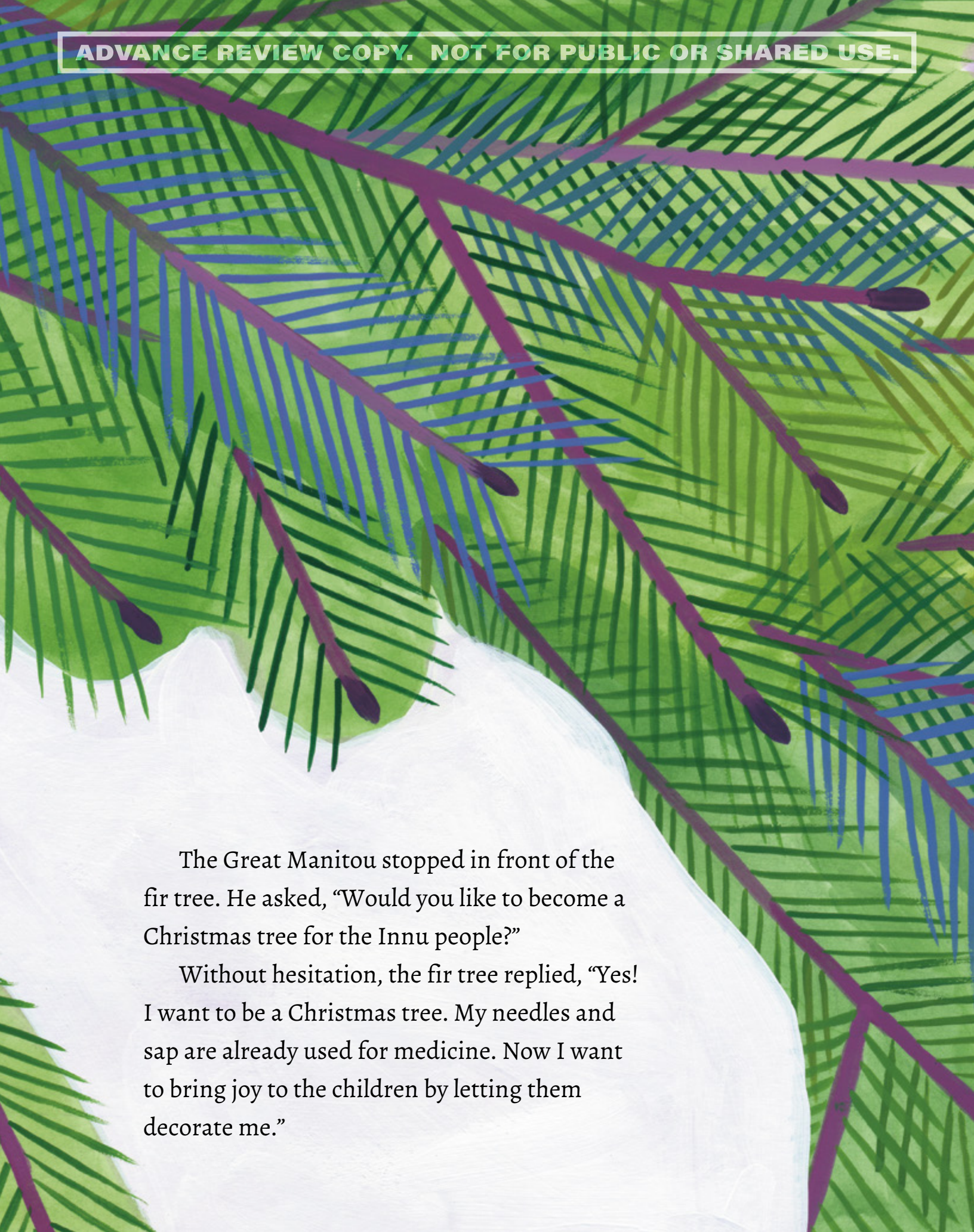
But the black spruce tree wanted to grow bigger and fuller. It replied, “No! I do not want to be a Christmas tree.”

The Great Manitou did not argue.



The Great Manitou had reached the very end of the Innu territory. All the trees had refused his request. All except one. He returned to see the one tree he had ignored.

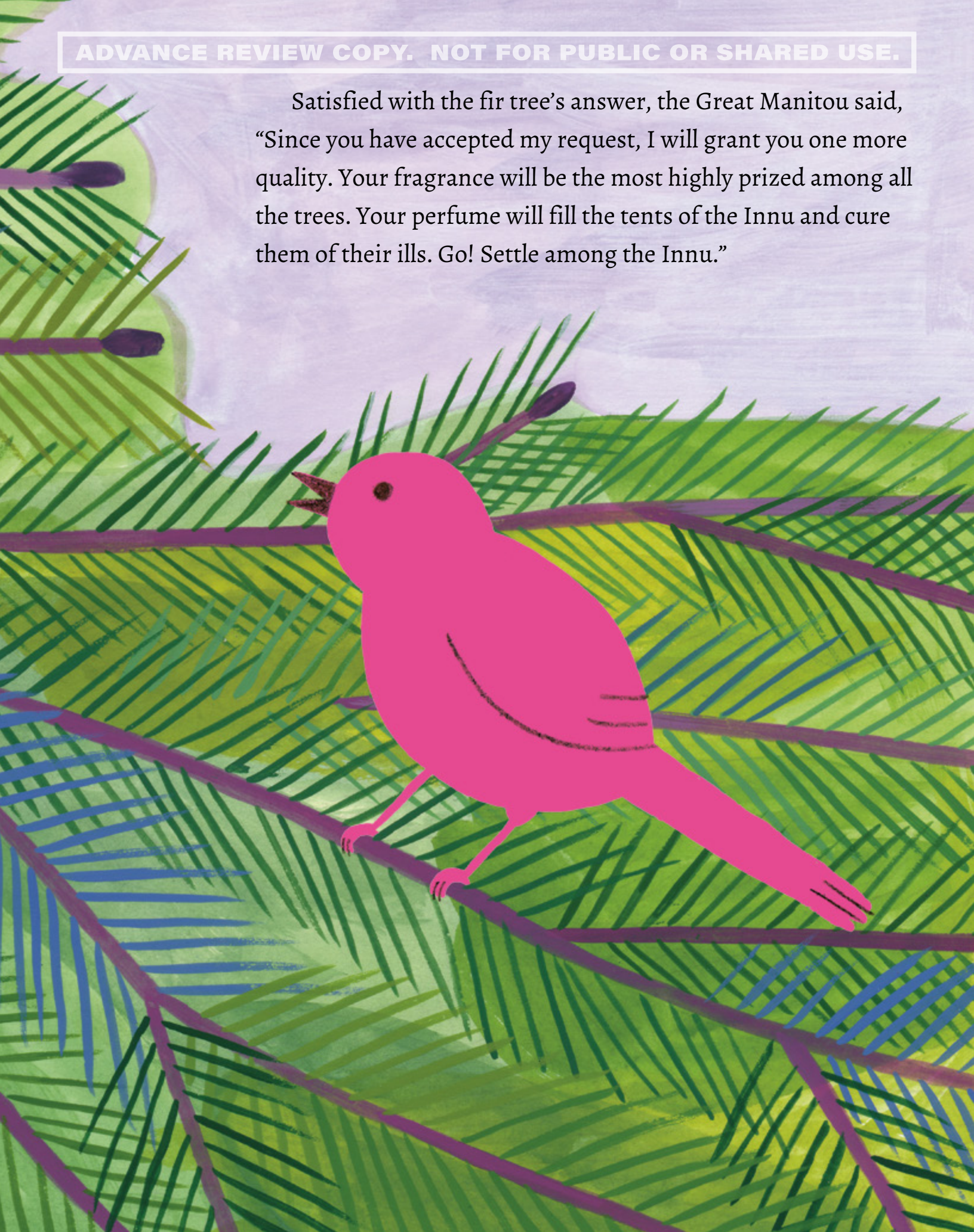


The background of the page is a stylized illustration. It features a white, textured shape at the bottom, resembling the head of a polar bear or a similar animal. Above this white shape, there are several branches of a tree or plant. The branches are rendered in shades of purple and blue, with fine, needle-like details in green and blue. The overall style is painterly and artistic.


The Great Manitou stopped in front of the fir tree. He asked, “Would you like to become a Christmas tree for the Innu people?”

Without hesitation, the fir tree replied, “Yes! I want to be a Christmas tree. My needles and sap are already used for medicine. Now I want to bring joy to the children by letting them decorate me.”


Satisfied with the fir tree's answer, the Great Manitou said, "Since you have accepted my request, I will grant you one more quality. Your fragrance will be the most highly prized among all the trees. Your perfume will fill the tents of the Innu and cure them of their ills. Go! Settle among the Innu."







Still not completely satisfied, the
Great Manitou retraced his steps.



He found what he was looking for—the birch tree.
He said, “Because you refused my request, every autumn until the end of time you will lose your leaves. One by one they will fall to the ground until you are bare and exposed. And you will stay that way all winter long.”

That is what he said to the birch tree.

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Then the Great Manitou went to see the larch tree. He said, “Like the birch tree, you refused my request. Because of that, you will lose your needles every autumn. They will turn yellow and fall to the ground. This will happen every year.”

That is what he said to the larch tree.

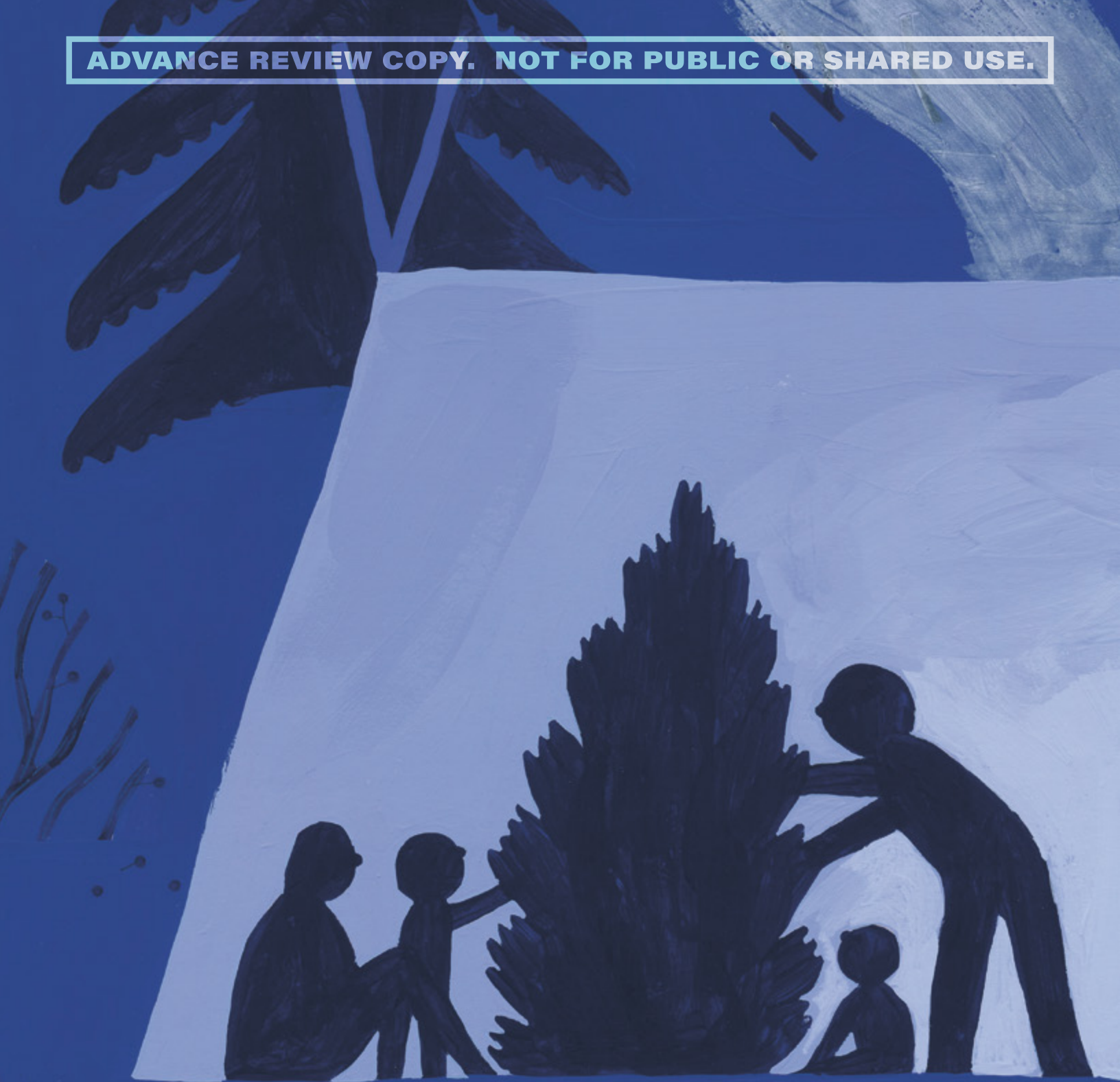
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Finally the Great Manitou went to see the black spruce tree. He said, “You were the most magnificent of all the trees. But like the birch and the larch trees, you refused my request. Now you will become stiff, and your needles will turn sharp and prickly. You will not grow any taller or wider. And because you chose not to share your beauty, you will forever remain in the North.”

That is what he said to the black spruce tree.






Meanwhile the fir tree moved into the tent of an Innu family. The children had great fun decorating it. Under the tree, the clan mother spread a tablecloth for their meal.

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It was Christmas.



His heart filled with joy,
the Great Manitou made food
appear on the tablecloth.
There was caribou, goose,
bear, blueberry and cranberry
jam, caribou fat and bannock.

It was a true feast. It was
the first Innu Christmas!

To give thanks to the fir tree, the Innu sang this song, which is still sung today on Christmas Eve:



The background is a dark blue, textured forest scene. It features several dark green, stylized evergreen trees of various sizes and shapes. A small, bright red bird is perched on a branch in the upper right. A red fox is walking across the middle left. A red bear is walking in the lower right. There are also some bare, thin branches scattered throughout the scene.

“Oh, Christmas tree...”

GLOSSARY



snowy owl/uapakanu



caribou/atiku

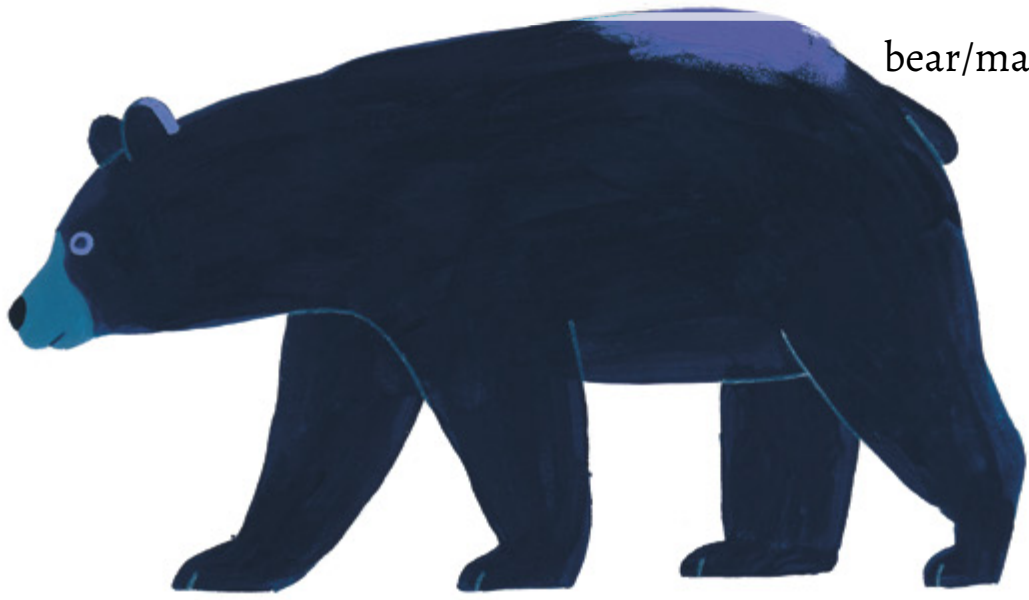


wolf/maikan



squirrel/anikutshash





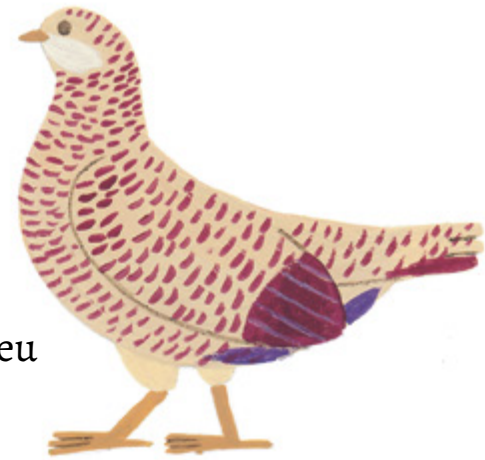
bear/mashku



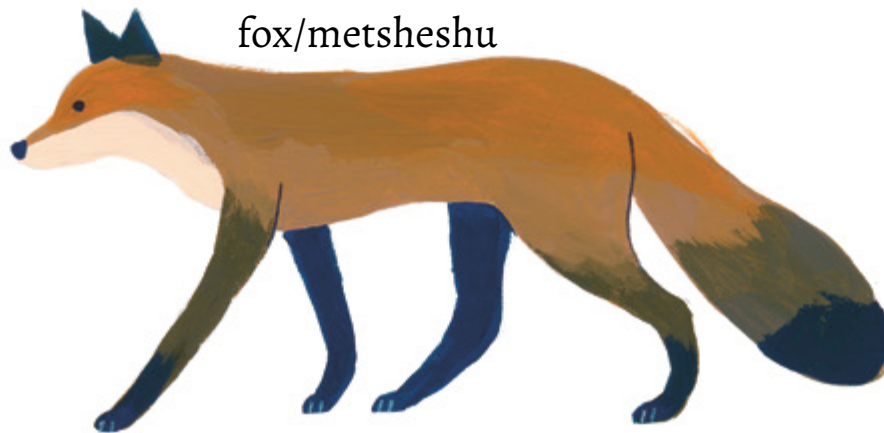
gray jay/uishkatshan



hare/uapush

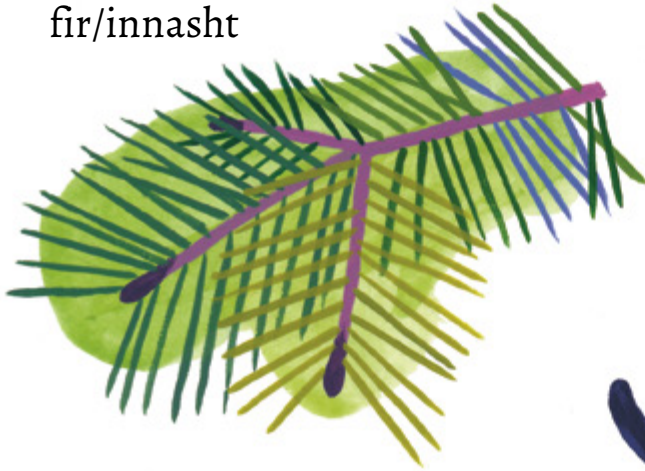


spruce grouse/innineu

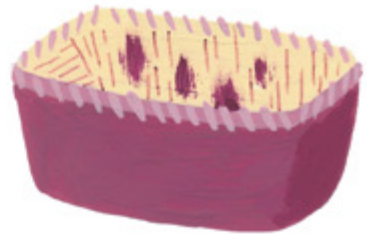


fox/metssheshu

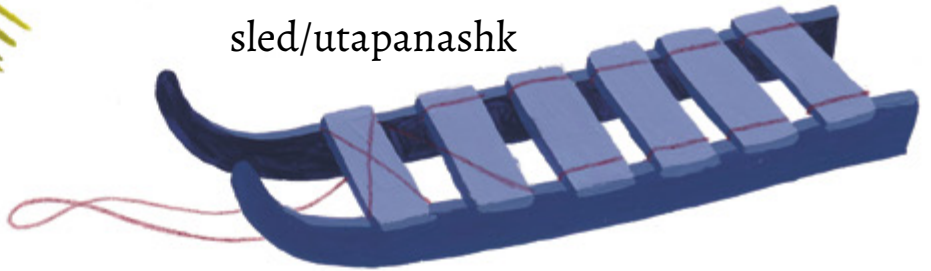
fir/innasht



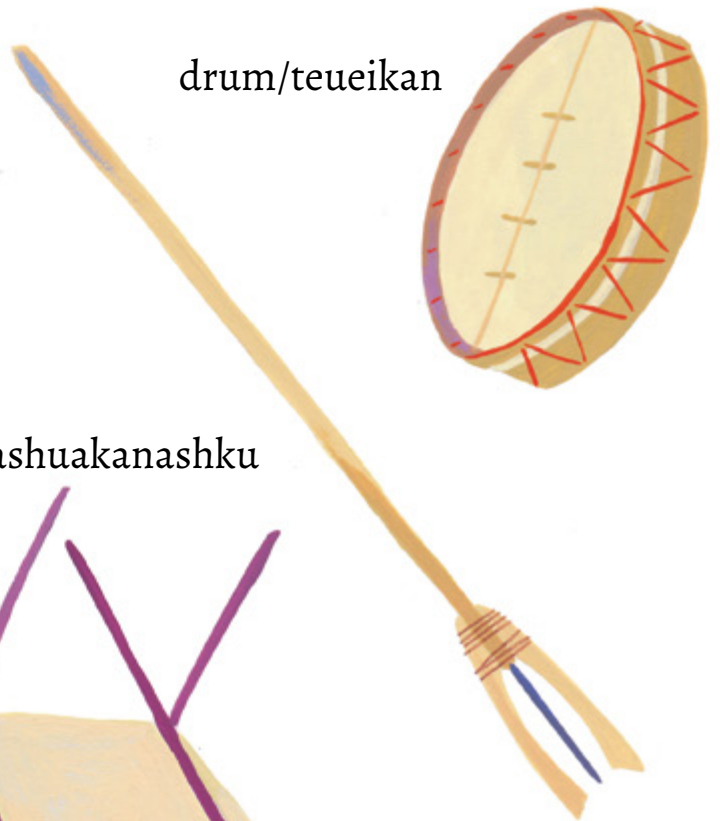
basket/ushkuenakan



sled/utapanashk

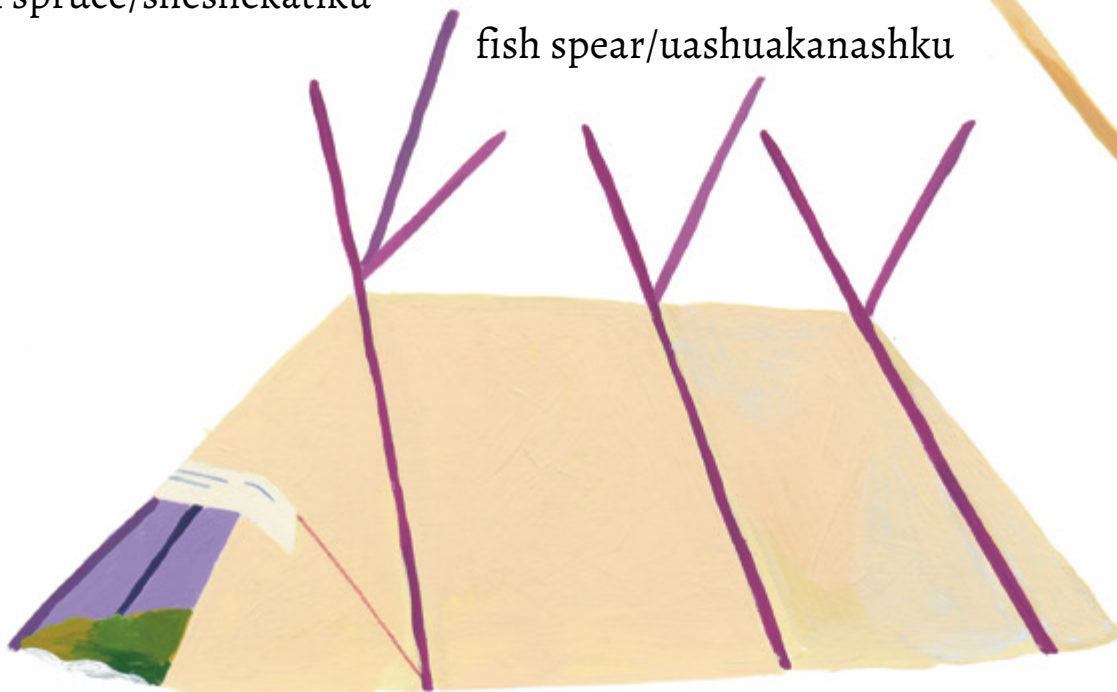


drum/teueikan



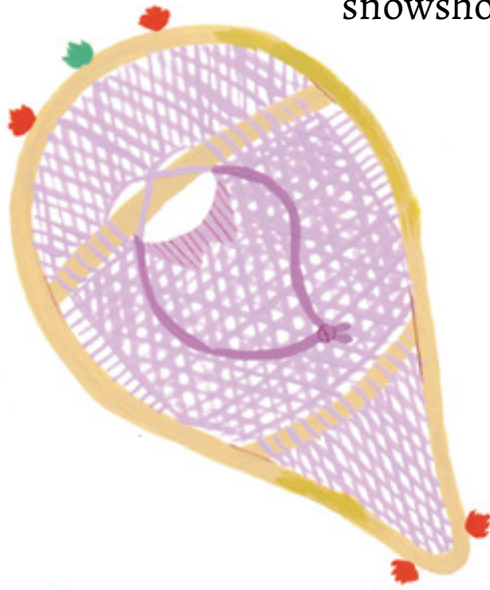
black spruce/sheshekatiku

fish spear/uashuakanashku

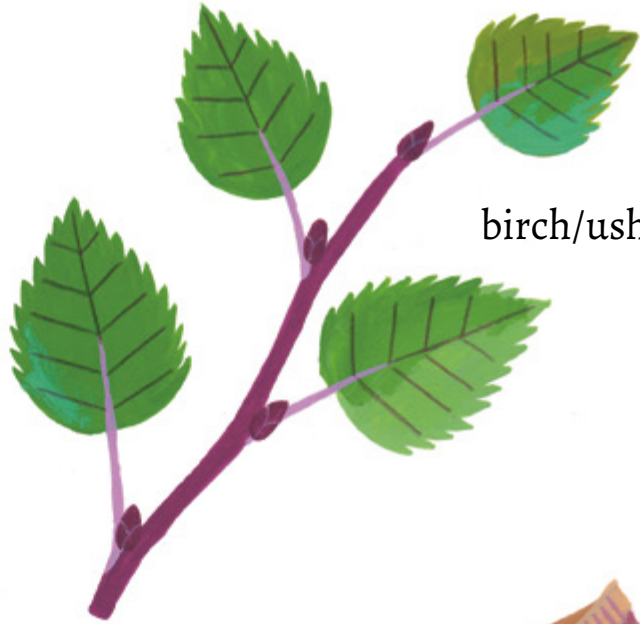


long tent with two doors/shaputuan

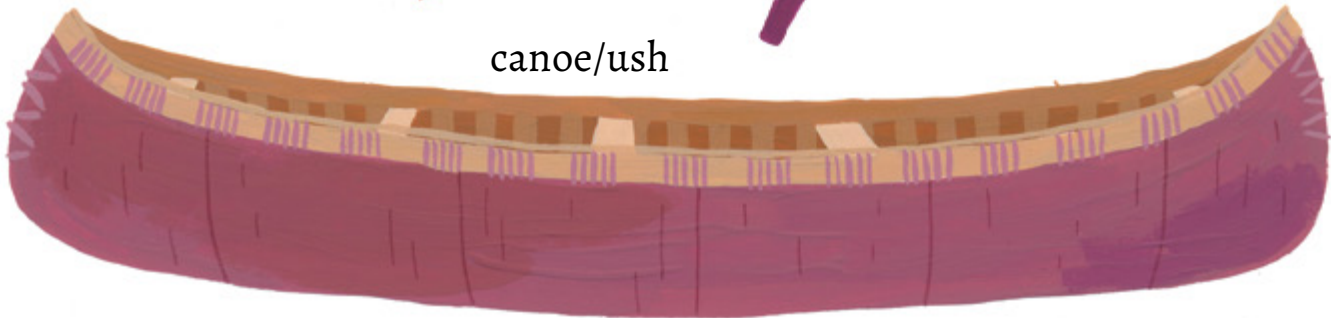
snowshoe/asham



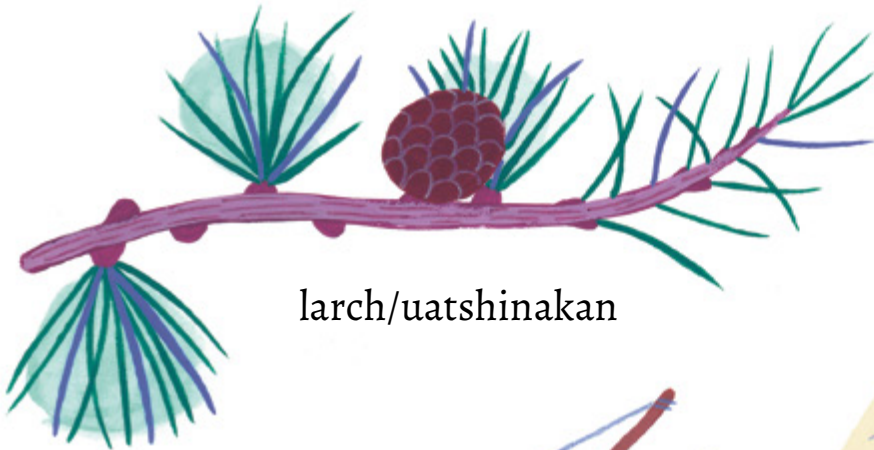
birch/ushkuai



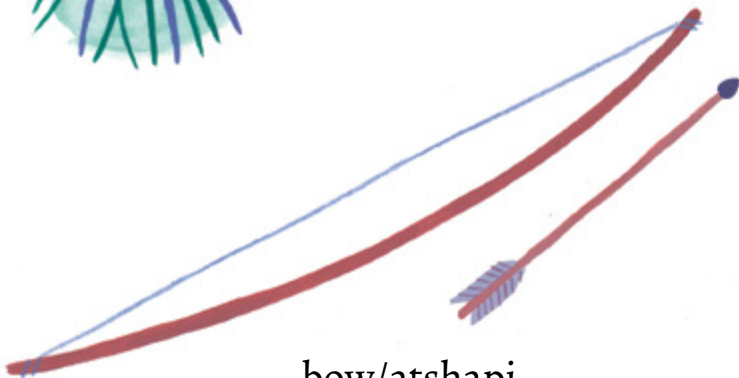
canoe/ush



larch/uatshinakan




bow/atshapi



conical tent/tashtuaikanitshuap





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OVILA FONTAINE is an Innu Elder from the community of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, where he has lived and worked all his life. From an early age he was interested in hunting and life in the forest. When he became a father, he embarked on a quest for his own history and culture. Today Ovila is an accomplished presenter, skilled at explaining the fundamentals of Innu culture and philosophy to the uninitiated. He is often called upon to act as a cultural ambassador for many organizations.



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