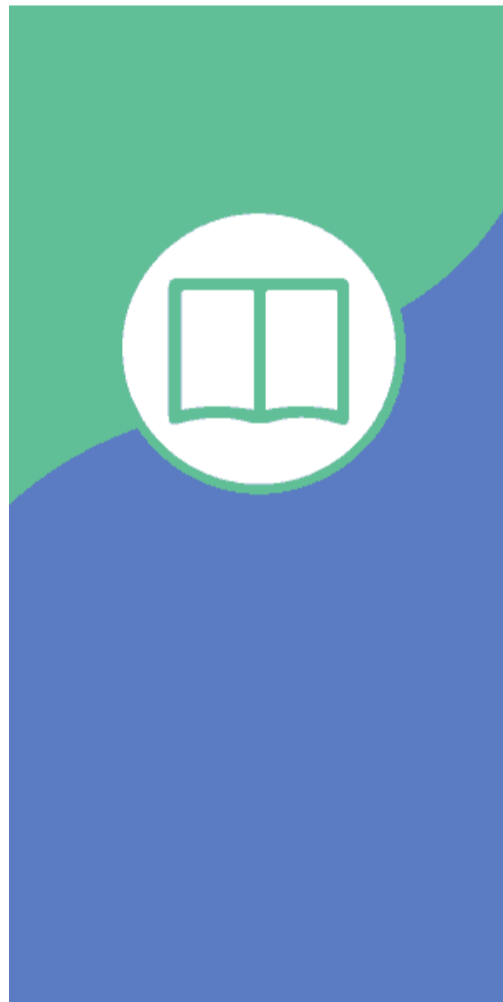


## Where the Language Changes

Bathsheba Demuth

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**T**he trees that form the boreal forest along the Yukon River mark the time elapsed since the last cataclysm. In the wake of fire or flood or axe, willows and alders are the first to root. Balsam poplar grow into the majority after two decades; white spruce after two centuries; black spruce emerge as sentinels of land that has gone the better part of a millennium without great disturbance. Seen from our boat on the river, the passing trees offer a history in the vertical, the measure of years visible in greens from silver-pale to inky dark.

We are on the Porcupine River, half a day's travel still from its confluence with the Yukon River. Gwich'in land. Stanley Njootli and I have known each other since I moved to his village on the Porcupine as his dog-sledding apprentice more than twenty years ago. Now in his seventies, he's

become like a second father, and he remains spry and keen to spend weeks with our lives tethered to his flat-bottomed aluminum boat as we travel towards the Yukon's Delta, where in the long meeting of the river with the Bering Sea the channel grows to half a mile wide. Stanley has friends in every village, and family in many of them. I know no one who can better read the tempers of water, or of people.

It is June, when the Arctic sun's only concession to darkness is a brief 2 a.m. twilight. The solar glut makes the willow and poplar so dense with new leaf they can conceal a thousand-pound young bull moose and his shadow. Amid this vegetation, it's several days before I discern the signs of people. A triangle where a cabin roof meets walls. The right angles of tent poles lashed to hold canvas. The stakes of a fish rack, ready to hold the split bodies of salmon over smoke. Tree growth carries a touch of the circular. Human geometry snags the eye. The exception is where beavers are at work. From mid-river, their felled poplars look like the beams of a cabin in early construction. It's only when we pull near to the bank that we can tell who cut the line in the trees.

Between here and the sea, more than a thousand miles, no village on the Porcupine or Yukon can be reached by road. Or rather, the river is the road and has been as far back as there are stories. It is fitting, then, that we are heading downriver following a particular story, that of a place called Nulato.

‘**T**here is only one way to settle ourselves in this country,’ wrote Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangel’ in 1832. ‘Namely, to settle on the Kvikpak River itself.’ Wrangel’, who managed the empire’s colonial venture in Alaska, the Russian-American Company, did not know that Kuigpak meant *big river* in Yup’ik, the language of the people of the Yukon Delta. Nor did he know how far inland the river ran, how many people lived along it, or what they called themselves in what languages. Yet, ‘No matter the difficulty of this undertaking, I will stop at nothing,’ Wrangel’ wrote of moving onto the river now known as the Yukon. He knew the upriver country was rich in beavers, and he was on the hunt for pelts.

I am on the hunt for the Russian Empire, or what traces might still exist of its colonial enterprise, which ended a mere thirty-five years after Wrangel’ wrote his letter. In the stories that define Alaska’s history, the Russian presence here is usually passed over for the gold rushes and oil wells, for earth-searing damage. What Russia took – the lives of animals – can regenerate. But the act of taking has a legacy even if the most visible scars have faded. No theft is free.

On the river, time is marked in other ways, and by other cataclysms. I first heard of the tensions between the Russian traders and Native peoples on the Yukon when I came north to work with Stanley’s dog team. By day, depending on the season, I trained huskies or fished or cut wood. By night, I listened to stories. This was long before I became a historian by trade – at eighteen I barely knew Russia had once been an empire – but I kept a sporadic journal. One entry, near-illegible from water stains, reads: ‘C.A. says the Gwich’in once went downriver to repel the Russians.’ My notes are not generous, but the line was an aside, told midstream in a story about conflicts in Gwich’in history that I was too shy to interrupt. But I remember the emotional peal, the sensation of dread and curiosity, because of the next word in my journal, now smudged: *massacre*.

And so, even before I even knew its name, I have wanted to see Nulato. I have gone looking for it in archives – in the records of the Russian-American Company, where Nulato is listed as a trading post with tallies of beaver furs, or in a file of old photographs at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. One photograph in that collection shows a wooden cross, inscribed: **DERIABIN: KILLED BY KOYUKOK INDIANS IN THE NULATO MASSACRE, FEB 16 1851**. But much of the history of the Yukon River lives with the river. We are traveling downstream looking for the signs of the past that are inseparable from place.

I hear the beaver first, a percussive sound breaking over the grumbling hum of our Honda outboard. Beavers, when aggrieved, slap the water broadside with their tails, a crack and splash before they dive. I signal to Stanley and he throttles back the engine. We wait to see where the whiskered head will rise.

The beaver surfaces fifty feet downstream, just the break of water over the muzzle showing, and the glint of the black eyes. Vigilant, but not warning us of trespass. Water is a beaver's element: their paws webbed, their tail a paddle, their body kept dry by a dense, almost downy coat under sleek guard hairs. Few furs are warmer, or more resistant to damp. The beaver dives again. Stanley turns the boat back into the main channel. A bright afternoon, tender and warm. A few clouds pass delicate shadows over the far hills, black spruce and blueberry brambles.

We come to the first village, Fort Yukon, in the evening. Gravel roads, dusty with summer heat. Children shrieking with glee from bicycles. White spruce thick behind town. A history of past floods, some houses sitting empty and shifted askew by the power of high Yukon water, others bright with new paint. We have a lot of visiting to do – I have friends here, and Stanley says, not really joking, that half the town are his relatives.

My first stop is to see Richard Carroll. Brisk and with the build of a man who chops his own firewood, we met last time I was in Fort Yukon and have corresponded ever since. He is a historian of this part of Gwich'in country, and texts me periodically – always in all caps, often at 1 a.m. – to see if I might have a document he needs. I come bearing copies of census records: a trade, of a kind, as I have questions about the Russian Empire.

I find Richard pottering in part of an old cabin that is now his office, surrounded by sloping piles of church registers and books about the fur trade. While he heats water for tea, the conversation loops through the past distant and proximate – the forest fire twenty years ago that changed caribou migration, the height of the river (too high), the temperature this summer (too warm). With steam rising from mugs of Lipton, Richard turns to the serious history, a story about Shahnuti', the nineteenth-century Gwich'in leader from Fort Yukon so formidable he survived being bitten by a grizzly. I ask if Richard has ever heard about a Gwich'in altercation with the Russians. Richard considers. 'Well, no,' he says, speaking of the past in the present tense. 'Not fighting, not us going down that way to fight, I don't think.' He pauses. 'But we do hear things, even that far away. How many people downriver died of smallpox, I think it was. Some epidemic. We hear stories up this way of their men bothering women.' He gives me a sharp look. 'And I tell you, what I know about Nulato is, you kill two white people, that's a massacre.'

In 1835, three years after Wrangel' had promised to build settlements on the Yukon River, a Russian-American Company agent named Vasili Donskoi opened an odinochka – a small trading post, no more than a log cabin – in the village of Iqugmiut, two hundred miles inland on the Yukon. In his first season, Donskoi sent 850 beaver skins back to Russia.

The pelts were bound for places that had slaughtered their local beavers. The Eurasian species, *Castor fiber*, had been extinct in Britain and was rare across much of Europe since the 1500s. In western Russia, hunters trapped fur species to scarcity and exported their pelts. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Russian Empire answered this lack by sending trappers and Cossacks east into the Siberian taiga. Musket-armed soldiers coerced the Ket, Even, Selkup, Koryak, and Siberia's other indigenous peoples to pay tribute in pelts; animal death became the price of stopping violence or restoring hostages. The land claimed by the tsars doubled by 1620, with fur revenues filling state coffers. French furriers began calling beaver *Castor de Mosckvie* for its association with Russia. Puritans wore felted beaver – produced using a Russian technique – across the Atlantic. Rembrandt drew himself in a beaver hat. Vermeer painted the lush sheen

of light on beaver fur. Napoleon Bonaparte wore a beaver bicorn at Waterloo. Even the dried-stiff bundles of North American beaver, *Castor canadensis*, arriving from the British, Dutch and French colonies could not sate the demand.

A beaver gives birth only once a year, and four kits is a large litter. Already by 1683, Siberia's military governors had reported that the 'forest-dwelling natives have trapped all the available animals'. One response, in the face of such visible extermination, would be to restrain the pace of killing. Russia's imperial leaders kept driving eastward. Wrangel' knew the pattern: eradicate and move on. Even with good returns from the outpost in Iqumiut, he ordered traders to continue up the Yukon. The river's beavers were, by then, among the last in the world unharmed by imperial commerce.

**I**n Fort Yukon, we check the propeller for dents, repack tools, tents and coffee – 'a disaster to run out', Stanley says, more than once, so we have five pounds – along with blue plastic bins of pancake mix, Toll House cookies, and pilot bread, an indestructible round cracker best eaten with bone marrow or seal fat. The wind is calm, the sun is at its perennial summer slant, never far above the horizon. Ahead, the river eases into the slow, braided channels of the Yukon Flats, unrestrained by hills for nearly two hundred miles. It is a country with fewer people than moose.

As we travel, I look into sloughs for chewed branches, a paw-mark in mud – signs of beaver life, and also the life that their work shelters. The habit of selecting alder and birch for building dams and lodges shapes the forest, as does their method of coppicing willows. The ponds, which beavers form into moats against lynxes and wolves, are home to insects that feed bivalves, bivalves that feed fish, fish that feed eagles and bears. In ecological terms, their presence makes the land home to more life, in both kind and quantity. A beaver lodge marks a diffuse, vital abundance.

When we reach the next village, a day later, Stanley and I visit with Paul Williams Senior and his son, Paul Williams Junior. We spend a languid day cooking caribou meat in the yard and telling stories, or listening, in my case. The men are all fluent in Gwich'in and in speaking it their faces carry the joy of a thirst sated. I grow drowsy from food and the hot sun – 'Too hot,' Paul Junior says. 'The sun is too strong these days.' Stanley leans over. 'He says it was Shahnuti,' Stanley nods to Paul Senior, 'who went downriver by canoe. With many men, cooperating with the Koyukon, because of how the Russians were acting.' Stanley pauses. 'There is a story that the first white man's boats we saw were around that time, near here.'

There are many stories about Shahnuti' in Gwich'in country – Richard Carroll's was one of them. Stanley has many. In the middle of the nineteenth century, he was the most formidable man in this part of the world, brilliant and terrible by turns. His grave is perhaps a hundred and fifty miles upriver from us, a known place – and a reminder that not so long ago, no tsar or foreign market set the terms of life here.

That evening, in my orange tent on the riverbank, I dig through my Helly Hansen rain gear and mosquito repellent for the waterproof bag that holds my computer and its scans of the Russian-American Company records, the correspondence of Wrangel'. I do not expect to find Shahnuti's name; the letters are sparse in such detail. But there is always a hope that the past will slot itself into a clear joint, this fact meeting another fact, the right angle of interpretation obvious. I fall asleep in a thicket of nineteenth-century Cyrillic handwriting, one word arcing into the next, a directive from long ago: 'You are advised to go until you reach the place where the language changes and the forests begin.'

**P**etr Malakhov – his father a Russian-American Company employee, his mother Unanga from the Aleutian Islands – journeyed far enough up the river in 1838 that he reached a point where the language changed: from Yup'ik land, where the river was known as Kuigpak, into

Koyukon country, where the river's name was Yookkene. Among domed hills and black spruce swamps over four hundred river miles from the Bering Sea, Malakhov found a community of thirty or so people led by a man named Unillu. Fed and sheltered by Unillu's family, Malakhov learned the name of the place – Noolaaghado – and that in spring, Koyukon people gathered there to celebrate and to trade and dry fish. Malakhov carried a report back to the Russian-American Company that Nulato, in his transcription, was well situated for an odinotchka.

The place was right, but the time was not. Russian power in Alaska was slight, particularly away from the coasts, where too few people were scattered across too much land for them to attempt the brutal policies used in Siberia. But the arrival of traders still brought violence. As Malakhov prepared a dog team to haul supplies to Nulato, intending to open a trading post, smallpox loosed from Russian ships cut up the Yukon. In March 1839, Malakhov found Unillu mourning the deaths of most of his people, including several of his children; grief-mad, he burned himself in his home. For the next two years, the Koyukon came to Nulato only when Russian traders were absent, and only to burn the cabins and storehouse. Downriver, Yup'ik attacked the Iqumiut odinotchka for bringing so much suffering. Malakhov accidentally killed a fellow trader that spring, and although acquitted of any wrongdoing, never returned to the Yukon.

Yet there was still the lure of beavers. In the 1840s, the empire returned to Nulato, opening a post that, under the direction of another trader, Vasili Deriabin, grew to a barracks and large cabin, a banya and several storehouses. Born a peasant in Archangelsk, on the northern coast of Russia, Deriabin made a home of Nulato – taking in Unillu's surviving children, marrying a Koyukon woman from upriver, and having children of his own. How did he make sense of his presence in the hollowness that smallpox left along the river? Did he hear, from the community around him, from his own family, of the spiritual disputes growing between the Koyukon, or the conflicts brewing upriver to restore balance to the world? Deriabin was warned, like all men working for the Company, that his trade was an invasion, that the odinotchka might challenge powerful people. But despite orders from the Company to fortify the post, Deriabin never built a stockade at Nulato.

Perhaps Deriabin's worries were dulled by his remit: to separate beavers from their lives. At this, he was exceptional. Nulato could send up to three thousand beaver pelts westward a year. The Russian Empire's act – the fundamental act of all colonial extraction – was to maraud through the intricate and knotted bonds that hold people and place together, the bonds of an ecosystem and of a society, and render them down to a single element: gold, zinc, beaver.

**E**mpire advances on acts of subtraction – skins from beavers and beavers from the land they help make. We cannot know what small havocs came to the pools near all those untended dams; whether the bears or the eagles noticed, if the bivalves and fish diminished – but when empire moved on, the beavers returned. The lodges that Stanley and I see along the river are living places, built with pale new branches worked in with age-darkened wood. Inside, this season's kits will swim within days of birth.

Fifty miles upriver from Nulato, in the town of Galena, we rest for several days. This is Koyukon country, past where Stanley has relatives, but he has traveled here before. In the midnight light we gather by the bank. People meander in and out with news. Not many moose this summer, so many died in floods in the spring. The Yukon is so warm this year that kids are swimming in it, something they never could have done twenty years ago. Sheefish guts and moose meat fry over a driftwood fire. Gulls swoop over the bright, slivering river.

We borrow a truck to fill our 20-gallon fuel drums. Mosquitos drift and bother. There is one petrol pump open, a few miles from the Yukon: a metered hose attached directly to a 5,000-gallon tank. Waiting customers – someone from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, two young men in orange coveralls with all-terrain vehicles, red jerrycans tied over the back fenders – talk over the rippling gasoline fumes. The salmon are not running this summer: too much commercial fishing the past few years. The water is awfully, unusually high. Ravens croak from the white spruce. As I pay, the man at the pump nods toward the radio where a report about the Manh Choh mine comes in with the static. ‘A new damn gold rush,’ he says. ‘Same thing different day.’

In town, we find Gilbert Huntington, a slight man probably in his late sixties, with a reputation as a fisher and musher. He speaks with a charismatic reserve that makes us lean in closer to hear, his stories handed down from his Koyukon grandmother Anna and her husband Sidney, a New Yorker who came north for gold in 1897 and never left. I ask about Nulato. Deriabin’s wife, Gilbert says, the one he married in Nulato, was the daughter of Larion, a Koyukon leader from upriver of the odinochka. Larion could tolerate the marriage, at first, up until a second daughter moved to the post.

‘There was a British man there,’ Gilbert says. ‘Barnard. Those Russians, they were polite. They knew who was powerful here. But Barnard wanted to talk to Larion, and just commanded him, told him to come.’ Lieutenant Barnard had been dispatched by one of the vessels searching for Sir John Franklin’s lost expedition, to follow a rumor of white men in the interior, and wanted information from Larion. There was also rumor of a relationship, or worse, with Larion’s second daughter.

Larion sent a messenger some five hundred miles upriver to Shahnuuti’ at Fort Yukon, Gilbert thinks, asking for a military alliance. Gwich’in men came down by canoe in the autumn to join the Koyukon. The rudeness, the family-stealing, the waves of illness, perhaps Shahnuuti’s wariness that Russian traders were moving further upriver: any welcome the foreigners at Nulato had was long overstayed.

By the time we leave Galena, the dimensions of a narrative have formed. Shahnuuti’ and Larion, the Gwich’in and Koyukon leaders, were part of an alliance against transgressions on their land, a push to make the Russians recognize indigenous sovereignty. On the cusp of unfathomable change – gold rushes and colonial rule – they knew to act. It is a seductive story. In the nearly two centuries since the Russian-American Company came here to strip value from the land, the acquisitive impulse of governments and companies has only expanded: not enough fish in the Yukon and too much heat everywhere. Looking forward is vertiginous. I want the past to have precise contours, to contain some lesson for how to weather the cataclysms to come.

**O**n a midwinter night in 1851, Deriabin left his cabin, perhaps for firewood or the outhouse or perhaps he could already hear screams from the Koyukon houses down the bank. The yard, bright from a waxing gibbous moon, was full of armed men. Shock turned to action – Deriabin seized, Deriabin stabbed, Deriabin stumbled back inside, where his wife barred the door. Deriabin dead. Terrible flames from the village, shouts, wailing, the panic of dogs. Barnard awoke in time to fire his rifle. He wrote to Edward Adams, a doctor from the same British rescue mission, the next morning: ‘I [am] dreadfully wounded in the abdomen – my entrails are hanging out. I don’t suppose I shall live long enough to see you. Nearly all the natives of the village are murdered – let out for this with all haste.’

Adams was wintering at a Russian-American Company outpost on the Bering Sea when the letter found him. It would take him a month to reach Nulato. The village was in ruins: over fifty Koyukon dead; homes burned; the survivors fearful. One man had his nose, eyes and ears sliced away, his temples gored by spears. Barnard had succumbed to his wounds. Adams

learned that the attackers were upriver Koyukon, but, out of his linguistic and political depth, he could only guess the motive. An insult from a trader, perhaps. Punishment for collaboration with the Russians. As the living scattered to their relatives, Adams carried the only written account of February 1851 back to Britain.

Two white men make a massacre. Adams's diary has yielded interpretations by outsiders and passers-through. The first histories were embellished to support that old colonial idol, the civilizing mission. Epidemics recede; Koyukon dead fade against Barnard's loss to irrational savagery on the frontier. A century later, the 'Nulato massacre' became an economic tale: the upriver Koyukon attacked Nulato out of revenge, angered that downstream Koyukon had trade advantage at the Russian post. In either version, the people at Nulato are familiar victims, collateral damage to advancing empire. A logic in which extraction, once it begins, contaminates all, every choice reduced to progress, profit, or death. But this is not such a singular story. The river is home to other kinds of cataclysm.

**W**e reach Nulato on a morning with the kind of dense calm and low haze that comes to the river as weather brews. We have traveled more than eight hundred miles to a town where, now, people speak English in everyday conversation, a legacy of the colonial order that succeeded the Russian Empire. The church is Catholic. The priest, Father Tsing, was born in Vietnam, and is as beloved for his mechanical expertise – 'I can go to the dump, get parts, there's enough to remake everyone's engines' – as for his spiritual guidance. When we meet him at the church, he agrees to drive us through hills now full of homes. Most of the village has retreated from the riverbank, abandoning houses too close to spring floods, only for the buildings to nearly burn down in a wildfire eight years ago. Charred black spruce remain, spire gray and stripped of branches. A forest of lines.

We visit the village council building, compact and well lived-in, its narrow halls covered floor to ceiling with newspaper clippings featuring local people – the high school basketball team going to Fairbanks; the election of a new tribal government, who together manage social services, environmental projects, and employment. The main room is busy with a safety training session for construction crews – a prerequisite for oil or gold work. I overhear someone say there are too many beavers now. 'Too much to eat these days, too much willow can grow in these hot winters.' I ask Martha Turner, who works for the tribal government, if it is possible to visit the Nulato odinochka ruins. She pauses. 'That is a bad place.' Another pause. 'It is not a good place to bother.'

We hear versions of this all afternoon – *this is a place we do not go*. I ask after Miranda Wright, a Koyukon anthropologist rumored to be in town. I have been reading her writing in the evenings, a history of the world Adams could not see. From a collection of oral histories and discussions with Elders along the river, Wright pieced together how a *deyenenh* – a Koyukon person of great spiritual power, able to shape or trouble the cosmic order – killed many upriver people in the late 1840s. The deaths were terrible, not only for the immediate loss, but also because they signaled a tilt in the balance of the universe. Repair required the *deyenenh*'s death, and that his eyes and ears be cut away to dull his power, like the man with the mutilated face that Adams described in his account. In February 1851, the *deyenenh* – Wright learned his name, but will not write it – was in Nulato for a winter celebration.

Wright is in Fairbanks, so I cannot ask her if a pact between Larion and Shahnuti' makes any sense, in Nulato, or if theirs are stories that belong to upriver country. I cannot ask if Deriabin and Barnard were the targets that night or not. I cannot yet even articulate the real question: did I also come to the river assuming all conflict is over commerce? The pall that empire and its descendants cast over the world makes it easy to see it as the cause of any event, eliding other truths.

Father Tsing offers to drive us out toward what remains of the odinochka. The village is no longer close to the old Russian buildings, and the spruce growth means nothing can be seen from a distance. The gravel road toward the post is flooded. Quiet pools of coffee-colored water. Alder thicket above our heads. It would be possible to walk into the ruins, but we do not. The air is dense with something more than rain. Stanley and I exchange a look. Unsaid between us is the sense that to go farther is wrong. *That is a place we do not go.*

**W**e take to the river as a storm gathers. The light breaks from under the horizon-line of a thundercloud, turning the silt-thick Yukon purplish. The village recedes as the boat moves into the current, away from the bank. Somewhere, behind the curtain of trees, are the foundations of buildings I will never see.

I came to the Yukon to settle something in my mind – I came to solve and to find. But to find is also, often, to take – a pelt, a gold nugget, a lesson, a single history. A history of empire and its resisters. Yet the past is not simply a resource, a place to find answers for the present. It is a place to humble ourselves in the knowledge that we were not inevitable. Nothing as big and old as the Yukon will be home to one story, or even one story about what happened on a moonlit February night. Not everything can be reduced to certainty. Miranda Wright writes of how her father advised her, when she was training in archeology, to leave graves alone. ‘The work of the spiritual realm,’ he said, ‘and the cause of the death must remain a mystery.’

The anti-imperial, the move against the drive to rip value out of the land, is in florescence. The beavers, returning, and all that their dams bring with them. The trees rising. And stories that make room for one another. Shahnuti’ keeping the Russians at a distance. Barnard running afoul of local practice. The death of a deyenenh, full of meaning beyond trade.

We are a few hours downriver from Nulato when the rain comes. As I look out at the banks, dribbling mud as we pass, I remember with a jolt another photograph in the Fairbanks archive. It is from Nulato, probably the 1920s. The shifting course of the Yukon River has cut into a burial ground. Naked skeletons – once the Koyukon women, children, men, old, young who died in 1851 – are stark white against dark soil. A group of visitors, tourists from their casual dress, poses with the bones, holding them as if they are sports kit for a game of their own making.

*Artwork by Halin de Repentigny, Thunder on the Yukon River, 2022*





