Leaning in

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

Auntie told me to paddle down the river to Chi’Niibish. When I get to the lake, she said to turn west and paddle along the shore until I see the mist of Niagara Falls. As soon as I can see the mist, that’s the spot to lean into the lake and cross. She said that’s how those old Mississauga Nishnaabeg Ashkiwiwininiwag did it, hypnotic hard paddling drowning out the screams of tired arms and aching shoulders, keeping the mist in sight, of the corner of their right eyes.

I’m sitting on the shore of the lake thinking about you, at the spot where I’m supposed to be turning and crossing. I always forget how big the lake is. I always forget how blue the lake is, the clean wind picking up drops so I can breathe them in. I’m imagining you’re here and we’re talking about you, and me and us, and things that matter. How we got here. Where we’re going. What’s to be done. My impulse is to push it somewhere it shouldn’t go, somewhere it doesn’t need to go, and I catch myself. I stay centred. I need to have just one conversation with you so I can write this. I just need to see your movements, your face,

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1 This essay was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Windsor and published in *The Tecumseh Papers*, an artist catalogue that accompanied a solo exhibition of the same name by Bonnie Devine, a member of the Serpent River First Nation of Northern Ontario, that took place from September 27, 2013 - January 5, 2014, Art Gallery of Windsor.

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your response to the tiny moments of life most never even notice. I need to feel your beautiful boy-spirit rise as you lie down on the cedar bows, lean in towards the fire and listen to your Kokum’s quiet singing on Zhaawanoog land.

It can’t just be lists of battles, speeches, failed marriages and betrayals.

We can’t be that different you and me.
We sit in the same place.
Facing the same thing.
We can both boil it down to a single statement:
“They want all of the land.”
We both see how it ends.

Auntie says we don’t count our dead because it’s like calling them back, so I’m more careful and I say it in a circle: Tkamse, my Taagaamose, it shines across, a burst of light, a tiny explosion in the sky, a crossing over. Tkamse, my Taagaamose, bizhiw gidoodem, my clan brother. Tkamse, my Taagaamose, our Zhaawanoog relative. Tkamse, my beautiful Taagaamose, eniigaanzijid.

This tiny moment: It was Binaakwe Giizis. The light was rich and gold. The leaves had turned and, like you, they were ready to let go. The river was low to the ground and moving cold. You already knew. You gave each of your weapons away: bravery to Ipperwash, honour to Oka, persistence to the Zhaawanoog, clarity to anyone who was willing to see. You stopped breathing the next day and our homelands were erased. You stopped breathing and a million Tkamse’s were born.

Zhaawan and Niibin were waiting for you at the stopping place near Deshkaan Ziibing. They were waiting so that you were not alone. They were waiting to wrap your bones in warmth the second you no longer had to be the warrior. They built a lodge around you and protected you, like you protected me. They used our sweet, sweet, grass to smudge away hurt. They took turns holding you, like you were their child. They sung quiet songs near your earlobes. They
massaged your muscles until you could let go and breath full breaths. They used careful stitches to sew up old wounds. They recorded every word your lips spoke, and they sat with every tear. They waited while you made your final visits. When you were ready, Niibin took your hand, kissed your cheek and lead you to the canoe, which you paddled down the river to the west, crossing back over the sky, into a better world. When they lost sight of you, Niibin gave your bones to those old ones at Bkejwanong, because those ones still knew what to do.

And after you were gone, Zhaawan leaned in and sang the song that says thank you for giving me this life.

Miigwech my Tkamse,
we remember.

Chi’Niibish is Lake Ontario; Ashkiwiwininiwag, according to Elder Doug Williams, were Mississauga Nishnaabeg guerilla fighters that were named because they surprised their foe like they were jumping out of piles of leaves; Zhaawanoog (Zhauwunook) literally means “the people of the south” and is the Anishinaabe name for the Shawnee, according to Basil Johnson in his Anishinaubaue Thesaurus; Tkamse and Taagaamose are Anishinaabeg names meaning Tecumseh. Taagaamose comes from Dr. Tobasanakwet Kinew and is used with the permission of his son, Wab Kinew. Both Taagaamose and Tkamse have the same meaning as the Shawnee “Tecumseh”, but are different dialects of the Nishnaabe language. Bizhiw gidoodem means “lynx is your clan”. Eniigaanizijig means leader. Deshkaan Ziibing is the antler river and is the Anishinaabe name for the Thames River, along which Tecumseh died. I learned this word from Eva Jewell. Binaakwe Giizis is October. Zhaawan (South) and Niibin (Summer) are two spirits in Anishinaabe culture. Bkejiwanong is Wapole Island.