LODGE DOOR

Journal of Giiwedin Ishkode-ishkodekwe

Mah Je Gwoz
"Margaret Songab"

By the Hand of MahJeGwoz

For My Grandson, Little Clam
Spring, 1864

My sweet grandson, Little Clam,
I write these words for you with hands that tremble like birch leaves in the early wind. Soon you will leave me to go north, to stay with your uncle Miscomuqua, and I fear my voice will fade when you are gone. Before my breath becomes only memory, I must place these stories into your hands, stories that were placed into mine when I was younger than you are now.

I do not want our family to vanish from the earth. I do not want you to forget who you are. So listen, my boy, even after I am gone.

You come from the Two Brothers, my grandfathers. Men of Honor, dignity, remembrance. Remember me.

When I was a girl, before the traders came thick as mosquitoes, before my hair held even a strand of white, I would sit beside my grandmother's fire. She told me of two brothers, born long before her, yet close to her heart as her own ribs.

She would say their names softly, as if the night itself listened: Wáȟpe Šá, Red Leaf Mamaangĕzide, The One Who Walks Firm, Sound of the Loon's Foot, "One Dakota," she told me, "and one Ojibwe. Sons of one mother, Fox Woman, Wabasha, but raised under two skies."

And here, my boy, is where the world split. Not only for them. but for all of us who came after.

Their mother, a woman with eyes sharp as the winter moon, had married across the old line, the line that once meant nothing because the people traveled freely, marrying, feasting, sharing breath from the same bowl. But when the two nations, Dakota and Ojibwe, began to fear each other again, the soft threads of kinship snapped.

Grandmothers still cry when they speak of that parting. I do too. They say Fox Woman had to run for her life with her youngest child. They say Wáȟpe Šá watched her go and could not follow. They say the forest swallowed the sound of her weeping.

The Meeting in the Hunting Grounds When I was about your age, Little Clam, my uncle told me the rest. Mamaangĕzide grew strong, a man who could walk silently on snow crust without sinking, who could track a deer across bare stone. He was careful, but bold, too bold, some said, for he hunted deep in Dakota country.

One winter, danger found him. His small party, just kin, not warriors, was fired upon. The air broke open with gunshot. My uncle always paused here in the story, letting the fire pop like gunfire. It made my heart jump into my throat. Mamaangĕzide could have fought.
He could have died.
We could all be different today. But instead he called out, in Dakota. Called a name the Dakota could not ignore. "Is my brother Wáȟpe Šá among you?" And the world, they say, held still. The shooting stopped. A figure stepped from the trees. Tall. Stern. Eyes like a river breaking free of ice. His brother.

Two men, raised apart, taught to fear one another, once divided by their parents' forced sorrow, standing now face to face in the place where so many had died. But they did not kill each other. They embraced. And that moment, that single moment, carried our family through generations of storm and grief and loss. You would not be sitting here today, Little Clam, if not for that embrace.

How Our Lines Became One My grandmother told me the rest quietly, as though afraid that speaking such miracles too loudly would break them. Peace was made. Families intertwined again, not perfectly, not without pain, but enough for life to continue. The children of those lines married. Dakota to Ojibwe, Ojibwe to Dakota. Red Leaf to Star Woman, Bear Clan to Crane Clan, old wounds stitched into new skin.

Those unions, grandson, flow in your blood and in mine. That is why you must never say you are only one thing. You are all of them. You are the memory of people who tried to kill each other yet chose, for a breath, to be brothers again. Why I Write This; I feel the weight of years pressing on my bones. My lungs are tired. The world around me changes faster than I can hold it.

But this, this, you must hold. I do not know what the white men will do. I do not know what wars will come. I do not know if our names will be erased, crossed out like pencil marks in a trader's book. But as long as you remember this story, as long as you speak it to your children one day, then I, MahJeGwoz your grandmother, your memory-keeper, your trembling old bird will not be forgotten. Carry this with you, Little Clam, and let no one steal it from your heart.

Written by my own hand,
In the fading light of Spring,
The last days of May, 1864

April 28, 1864

Miscomuqua came today.

I had almost forgotten the way his footsteps sound, slow, measured, but with that same certainty he carried as a boy when we ran through the pines at Lake of the Woods. How I missed him. I did not know how much until I saw him stepping through the doorway, the smoke behind him rising like an old spirit trying to follow.

He looks older now.
We both do.

But in his eyes I still see Mizhibinaabikizhiikwe's strength, our mother's calm water, our father's firelight, and the iron certainty of Grandfather Mamongazide. I could almost hear Grandfather's voice again, calling me "Équaywid", the name rolling off his tongue like a warm wind from home. No one says it like he did. No one ever will.

Miscomuqua did not stay long. He is traveling east, he says, to speak with the president. He talks of a place of restoration "on the grounds of the burning lodge." I know what he means. Pembina. Our homeland. A place where the bones of our people still warm the earth. He speaks of it like a promise. I hear it like a wound.

He asked me if I remembered the old stories.
How could I forget?

Our great-grandfather perished in that death, one of many when the fires took the lodge and scattered our people like frightened birds. I still see it in my dreams: the red glow against the night, the smell of burnt cedar, the screams swallowed by the wind. I was young, but not so young that memory allowed mercy.

So much was lost then.
So much continues to be lost now.

Our fame, our bloodline, the children who survived, thin threads holding together a garment that once clothed a nation. I watch it fray more each season. The soldiers are cruel. Their orders colder than their eyes. They look at us as though we are shadows. Sometimes I fear we are becoming exactly that.

But then there is little Clam, my John.
My bright, laughing boy.

His small hands, his curious eyes, the way he brings his treasures to me as if I were still young enough to run the trails with him. He does not know what waits for children like him. Tayoduta blessed him; I still hear his voice saying John would be "the branch through which restoration comes." I pray he is right. I pray the winds of this world do not break that small branch before it has a chance to grow.

I spend my days singing songs no one knows now.

Songs of women, of mothers, of the shoreline where the reeds whisper to the sky. Clay pots cooling in the shade. Birchbark cradles. Winter counting. The smell of sweetgrass drying on the mat. My mother's hands brushing the hair from my eyes.

They say Lake of the Woods is part of Wisconsin now.
How can a land be renamed and still taste the same on my tongue?
How can it be familiar and yet somehow foreign?
These maps make no sense to me.

Tonight, after Miscomuqua left, I cried.
I am honest here because this book is the only witness who will not turn away.

The world is falling apart in ways I cannot mend.
But for a moment, just a breath, when my brother stood before me, it felt whole again.

I pray Creator walks with him on this road.
And with my John.
And with whatever remains of us when the breaking is done.

— Lodge Door

Unknown 1863 date of entry I

A Poem of Longing

I remember
when the world was young around me,
when I was small enough
to fit beneath my mother's shadow
and still see the sun.

My mother's hands
smelled of earth and sweetgrass.
She braided my hair
as if she were braiding the seasons together
spring into summer,
summer into the promise of fall.
She said I was born in a good wind,
and that good winds remember their children.

My father walked like a man
who knew the land listened.
His footsteps were quiet,
but the earth always answered him.
He taught me
that a river carries more than water
it carries stories that refuse to die.
He said I must learn to listen
to the part of the river that speaks without sound.

Those were the years
when I believed everything had a spirit
that watched over us:
the stones,
the plants,
the breath of dawn
when the world held its first light.

Those were the years
when hope was a bird
that lived in my chest
and did not fear the winter.

But seasons change,
even the ones inside us.
Hope flew off one morning
and did not return.
It left its feathers in my hands
small, soft things
that dissolved when I tried to keep them.

Now I am old,
and the earth lies quiet around me.
I walk with memories
the way others walk with canes
leaning on the past
to keep from falling forward.

I miss my mother's shadow.
I miss my father's river-voice.
I miss the girl I was
before trust became a wound
and the world taught me
how easily a promise can be broken.

Yet still, something in me waits
a single ember,
a quiet warmth
that refuses to die.

If hope returns,
even for a moment,
I will let her in.
I will not close the door.

For even at the end,
a grandmother can dream
of the child she once was
the one who danced in the spring wind
and believed the world
was made of stories
that would always return home.

Unknown 1863 date of entry II

I write tonight because the words will not leave me in peace.
The fire burns low, and the men think I sleep, but my eyes stay open. Age has thinned the walls between this world and the next; the ancestors breathe close enough that I feel their warmth on my cheek.

I told them I would speak at the beginning, but the beginning belongs first to the page. My voice trembles too much to carry the weight alone. I know I will soon go to my mother.

So I will let the paper gather it for me.

I no longer trust the counting of winters. But I know this: my journey is nearly done. I feel it in my knees, in my breath, in the slow way my heart keeps time.

If my brother Miscomuqua still walks the earth, he walks far from me.
I dream of him more often now, his face half in shadow, half in sunlight, calling me westward. But I am too old to follow trails I can no longer see with both eyes. If he waits for me, he will have to wait a little longer, until I cross into the place where all trails meet.

Tonight the children ran between the lodges, their laughter sharp as bird cries in the cold. I watched them and felt both sorrow and pride settle in my bones. They carry the future without knowing its weight.

They are the burden. Yes.
But they are also the only promise the world has not broken.

The men who shelter me here call me Grandmother. They do not know my name, not the true one. They do not need to. They carry their own broken histories, their own shattered trusts. I sit with them because their hearts are gentle, even if their lives have been carved with a knife.

My life feels like a dream, did it happen if only I remember?

I took out the ancient tablet tonight, the one that has been with me longer than any husband, longer than any child. I traced the carvings, the old symbols whose meanings shift like the river when the ice breaks. I used to believe I understood them. Now I only hope I have carried them faithfully.

A path. A circle. A hand. A broken line.
I see my whole life inside those shapes.

The path is the long road I have walked, trading, learning, losing, surviving.
The circle is the lodge, the family, the teachings that held me when the world shook.
The hand is the one I stretched out too often, and sometimes not soon enough.
And the broken line... that is trust. The kind that once tied nations together. The kind that cracked in my lifetime, again and again.

I mourn that most of all.

I feel the snow coming. The air carries a softness now, the kind that comes before a storm. My grandmother used to say that snow is the sky's way of covering the earth when it is tired, giving it rest.

Maybe the sky knows I am tired too. I will write again when the fire is higher. Or when the memory presses too hard. For now, I will sleep. Or I will dream. The difference grows smaller every night.

— Lodge Door

April 4, 1863

I do not know why I still write.
My hands tremble like tired leaves, and the fire gives more smoke than heat tonight. But something inside me insists that these words must be placed somewhere, on hide, on bark, on the thin paper the traders carry, so that when my breath is gone, the story does not vanish with it.

My name is Giiwedin Ishkode-ishkodekwe, but the people here call me Lodge Door. They say I am the one who keeps the threshold, who knows what is behind and what is ahead. I do not feel so wise now. I feel only the weight of years pressing into my bones.

The men who travel with me, Black men, some free, some who fled the South, are asleep or pretending to be. They are kind, though they have walked through fire. They share what little they have. They listen when I speak, even if they do not understand my words. They call me Grandmother. I do not correct them.

I cough when the wind shifts. I hide the blood-stain in my handkerchief. I know what it means.

I will not see Montana.
I whisper that truth only here, on this page.

My brother Miscomuqua is somewhere west of us, following the trails he believes were lit by our ancestors. Sometimes I think I hear his footsteps behind me, but it is only the wind combing the riverbank. I pray the spirits do not close their hands around him before he finds what he seeks. We have lost too many.

Tonight Kapóža feels strange, neither living nor dead. A hollow place. The Dakota still stand proud in their way, but the world presses hard against them. I remember them as they once were, mighty, certain, the river bending itself to their will. Now I see too much fear in their eyes. Too many promises broken by those pale men who speak with flat tongues and deeper pockets than hearts.

It is not the land we have lost, no, I could lose every river, every ridge, and still breathe.

It is trust that has gone.
Trust in those who claim peace while hiding knives.
Trust in kin who barter memory for comfort.
Trust in myself, sometimes.

I look at the carved tablet I carry. The symbols shine faintly in the firelight, though no fire touches them. I do not know if anyone living remembers how to read them fully. Maybe that is why I am still alive, to speak what the carvings can no longer explain.

The children run past the lodge this evening, their feet kicking up little clouds of thawing dirt. They laugh. Their laughter hurts me more than my cough, because it reminds me that we have handed them a world already wounded. They will carry the burden I could not set down.

I am tired.
The kind of tired that sits inside the bones, not the muscles.
The kind that does not lift with sleep.

But I must finish the story before I leave. Someone must know where we have walked. Someone must guard the lodge when I am gone.

The fire is low.
My eyes sting from the smoke.

I will write more when the sun rises—if the sun still rises for me.

— Lodge Door

April 6, 1862

The snow fell again last night.

I heard it before I saw it, soft against the lodge roof, then gathering around the doorway like an animal settling down to sleep. Spring should be here by now, but the seasons no longer move as they once did. Everything feels late. Even the sun feels tired.

I woke before the men stirred. Their breathing rose and fell like waves against a distant shore. Good men. Bruised by this world, but good. They guard me without knowing why. I do not tell them. They believe it is because I am old, because I limp when the cold takes my joints. But it is not age they are guarding. It is memory.

Today I carried the carved tablet down to the river.
I did not mean to go so far, but the water called me.

The river was half-frozen still, dark under its skin of ice. I sat on a fallen cottonwood and held the carvings up to the light. The marks are fading. Or perhaps my eyes are. I try to trace them the way my grandmother taught me, sunwise, slow, patient, but my hands shake now. Still, I found the spiral. I always find the spiral. It reminds me that nothing truly ends; everything just circles back until we are ready to meet it again.

My brother should have been the one to keep these.
Miscomuqua had the steadier hand, the clearer voice.
But he left for the mountains before the war drums began their new beating in the east. He said the ancestors were walking ahead of him, showing him a land where our children could breathe without fear. I wanted to follow him, but duty held me by the wrist.

Today I wondered if he is still alive.

The wind changed when I thought it, which is usually an answer, though I do not know what kind.

Kapóža feels restless. The Dakota women watch the horizon as if expecting someone, soldiers perhaps, or messengers, or bad news carried by riders who do not slow their horses. I am not Dakota by clan, but their sorrow feels familiar. Our nations breathe the same air now, taste the same bitterness in our food. Loss speaks the same language everywhere.

A child brought me bread this evening.
I recognized her face but not her name. She stared at the carvings on the tablet as if she could see something living in them. I covered it quickly. These symbols are not meant for young eyes. Not yet.

Tonight the fire burns low. My hands ache from writing. I should sleep, but sleep comes like an untrustworthy friend these days, late, and only when it pleases. I hear the owls outside. One hoots twice, pauses, then again. That is a message. I will think on it when my mind is not so heavy.

I do not know how many more pages I will fill.
But I know I must keep writing.

Someone will need these words when I am gone.

February 1, 1862

I miss my mother tonight.
Claire.
I write her name and it trembles on the page, as if the ink itself remembers her kindness.
I long for the way my grandfather Mamongazide used to call her she, Équaywid, his voice soft, rolling the syllables like smoke from a cedar fire. I can still hear it if I close my eyes, if I let the wind carry me backwards to those forests near Lake of the Woods.

They say it is Wisconsin now. It will always be Meskousing to me.
A strange name for a place whose songs I once knew by heart.

How can a land be familiar and yet foreign at the same time?
How can a grove of birch trees recognize me when the people do not?
These maps the soldiers draw, sharp lines, straight edges, they do not understand how a place can live, breathe, remember.

If land remembers, then it must remember me.
But people forget.
People forget too easily.

I walk among such suffering.
The soldiers... I try not to look into their eyes.
Cruelty is its own kind of fever, and it has swept through these camps like sickness.
I see families torn apart for no reason but command.
I hear crying at night that the stars pretend not to hear.

Yet even in all this darkness, my heart is not empty.

My grandson, Little Clam, brings light where there should be none.
Six winters old and already asking questions that men twice his height cannot answer.
I still see the moment Tayoduta placed his hand upon him, blessing him with that old solemn fire in his eyes.
He told me my grandson would be "the branch through which restoration comes."

I want to believe him.
I want to believe there is still a thread of goodness stretching forward from this broken day to some brighter morning.

But I am afraid.
Afraid of what will become of him, my little John.
He does not yet understand the world he is stepping into, one where a child can be marked for what he is, what he is not, or what others decide he must be.

I wish I could take him back with me to the old forests, to the lodges where songs curled up the smokehole like prayers returning home.
But those places live only in memory now.
And memory cannot shelter a child.

So I sing.
I spend my days singing the old songs, the ones no one remembers.
A few of the men pause when they hear me strangers who look at me with uncertain kindness.
But their ears do not know the language, and the meanings slip past them like fish through reeds.

Still, singing keeps me alive.
Singing keeps my mother close.
Singing keeps the world from collapsing entirely.

If anyone ever reads these words, I hope they can hear her voice in them.
Claire.
My first home, my first morning light.
If I carried any goodness into this world, it was because she placed it in my hands.

Grandfather would tell my mother, "Équaywid, you walk the path of the heart. Do not forget where it leads."

I have not forgotten.
But tonight the path is dark, and I walk slowly, feeling for it with trembling feet.

June 14, 1862

The council fire burned low tonight, yet the lodge was warm with breath and memory.
I am tired, but I must set these words down before sleep takes them from me.

Today, Taóyate Dúta, Little Crow, came into my lodge.

I had not heard my sacred name, Giiwedin-ikwe, spoken with such respect in many decades.
He used the old pronunciation, the way my grandfather Mamongazide used to say it, slowly, carefully, as if each syllable were a living thing that could bruise.

The chiefs gathered because trouble moves like smoke through the valleys.
Food is short.
Promises made by the agents lie rotting like a broken snare.
Young men grow restless.
Even the old men shift in their blankets when they speak of the annuity delays.

Little Crow sat close to the fire, his face lined with the burdens of too many winters.
He carries both worlds on his shoulders, the red blanket of his ancestors and the stiff cloth coat of the whites.
He speaks softly now, not like the young brave who once raced horses across the flats of Kapóža.

He asked me what the ancestors would say of the anger rising among the people.

I told him:

"The river becomes dangerous when its banks forget how to hold it."
He bowed his head as if those words had weight.

We spoke long.
He said he fears the young men will force his hand.
He said, quietly, that the Great Father's men have already broken what once held peace together.

He looked at me then with old sorrow in his eyes.

"Giiwedin-ikwe," he said,
"you have seen more winters than any of us. Tell me if war can still be turned aside."

I told him truthfully: I do not see war clearly, only the wounds it will leave.

Outside the lodge, the night was restless.
Drums carried far along the river.
Even the cottonwoods seemed uneasy.

When they left, Little Crow touched my hand.
He said he would return in two days, and that the chiefs wish for my counsel again.

It shames me that I have so few answers. But they honor me still, an old woman with a fading voice. I pray the ancestors guide me before the young men choose blood over patience. Tomorrow I will speak to Wabasha, if he will hear me.

My bones ache. I feel the world shifting, as if something large has already begun to move beneath the earth.

— Giiwedin-ikwe

April 5, 1862

The frost did not lift today.
Even by the hour the light bent low across the river, the cold sat thick as a blanket over Kapóža.
The village seems to hold its breath; I feel it in the cedar poles of this lodge, in the way the smoke lingers before drifting upward.

Word of yesterday's council has traveled fast.

This morning Wabasha, Wapiya Duta, Red Leaf, sent a runner asking if he could come before the sun climbed high. He is younger than I remember, or perhaps I have only grown older. When he entered, he pressed his palm to the ground before me in the old way, as my grandfather Mamongazide once did for his elders. It startled me. I had not expected such honor anymore.

He asked what I saw in the signs, the treaties left hollow, the traders swelling with goods while our people thin with hunger, the soldiers pacing the river like wolves that have forgotten fear.

He asked if this path leads to war.

I told him the truth: that I see fire behind the horizon, but not its shape; that the land trembles not from horses but from betrayal; that war is not born from a single act but from a long breaking of trust.

He listened, eyes fixed on the firepit, hands folded the way he used to fold them as a child when he sat at the edge of the teaching lodge. I remembered him as that quiet boy who followed his grandmother like a shadow.

Before he left, he asked me something I was not ready for:

"Grandmother Lodge, if the fighting comes, will the spirits still hear us?"

I told him yes. But inside, my heart did not answer with such certainty.

Later, Wakinyan Tanka (Big Thunder) came as well, Hushasha's cousin by marriage. He did not speak long, only long enough to say that the anger in the young men grows like late-season lightning: suddenly, without rain. He asked if I might speak to them. I do not know if my voice still carries weight. Yet he bowed as though it did.

Tonight, the soldiers' fires burn far across the field. I see them like fallen stars scattered on unfamiliar ground.

I miss my mother, Claire, more than usual on nights like this.
She would have known what to say to the chiefs.
She would have known how to steady a trembling world.

Grandfather called her Équaywid, the woman who makes a way.
I hear his voice sometimes when I am between sleep and waking.

If only she were here now, to make a way again.

I have advised two chiefs today. But who advises an old woman such as me?
Who tells me what comes next?

I am tired.
Yet tomorrow they will come again.
I can feel it like weather shifting in my bones.

May 2, 1862

Tonight, my lodge still holds the warmth of their footsteps.

The chiefs came again.
Wakinyanwaste, Good Thunder, was first to step inside, brushing the dust from his shoulders with that soft dignity he carries even in these troubled days. Then came Wamditanka, Big Eagle, whose voice always reminds me of the old drums my mother kept near the fire. And last, long after the shadows had swallowed the entrance, Taoyateduta himself stooped beneath the door frame.

Little Crow.
My nephew by clan, my elder by burden.

He called me by that name, Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin, the name only my grandfather Mamongazide dared use when I was still a child tugging at Claire's skirts. I had not heard it in so many winters that my breath caught like a trapped bird.
Even Miscomuqua stopped speaking it long ago.

They seated themselves close to the hearth. No one spoke at first. The fire told the early part of the story, it hissed at the dampness in the wood, spat sparks as if arguing with the air. Outside, children were still running between lodges, ignoring the late hour. Soon even they fell quiet, sensing something larger passing through the night.

Little Crow finally spoke.

He said the agents have delayed the annuity again. Said the traders' greed has grown even as the people's bellies shrink. Said he has walked the riverbank each morning, tracing the tracks of the settlers who inch ever closer, their fences biting into the land like cold teeth.

"Grandmother," he said, "the world is moving, and it does not carry us with it."

He asked what the old ones saw.
He asked what my grandfather would say if he sat at this fire tonight.

I told him the truth:
That Mamongazide would listen first. He would let the young men speak their anger, their fears, their hunger. He would not silence them. He would not shame their pain. Then he would lift his pipe and say, "When the river rises too fast, the beaver does not fight it. He builds higher."

Little Crow smiled at that, his rare, tired smile.
Big Eagle nodded slowly, the way a pine bows to the wind but never breaks.

But Good Thunder... he pressed his hands together and whispered that the young men want war. That they train in secret. That they no longer believe negotiations will save them. He said the old songs are being sung again, the ones that call the spirits of flame.

I felt the heaviness of it, like the sky lowering itself onto my shoulders.

They asked me what path the spirits favored.

What the tablets say.
What signs I have seen.

I could not lie.

I told them I saw a long shadow over the coming season. I saw a river choked with strangers and a land that forgets its own name. I saw our children learning to hide their laughter and our women clutching their babies tighter.

But I also saw embers that refused to die.

Little Crow listened in silence.
When he left, he touched my shoulder, lightly, as if I were made of ash.

“Your words are water to a thirsty tree,” he said.

But I fear even he does not know whether that tree will stand or be cut down.

Tonight the fire is low.
My grandson Little Clam sleeps beside me, curled like a young muskrat in spring reeds.
His breath is warm against my wrist.

I pray the spirits carry him farther than they will carry me.

April 29, 1862

Tonight the fire burns low, and I write by its last breath of light.

Little Crow came again to my lodge this morning.
Taóyate Dúta, Scarlet Nation, though he spoke my grandmother's name for him, the one whispered only inside the winter lodges when the spirits were patient enough to listen.

When he entered, he bowed, not low, but the way a man bows who carries the burden of nations on his shoulders. He called me Giiwitaawigiikwe, the Woman-at-the-Center, a name I have not heard since my youth on the Lake of the Woods, when the forest was my cradle and my mother Claire still lived.

My heart trembled.
My tongue almost forgot how to answer.

He sat beside my fire and spoke of the chiefs gathering, Wabasha, Wakute, and others whose eyes grow tired of broken promises and hungry children. The storehouses at the agency stand full, yet their doors stay shut. The soldiers watch us as though our breath is a threat. Already the young men mutter that patience feeds no one.

He asked me, "Grandmother, what does the old path say?"

So I told him.

I told him the words my grandfather Mamongazide would say when evening came:
"Équaywid, hold to your womanhood, hold to the line that does not bend."
He said that women carry the oldest law, older than quills, older than treaties, older than the stories carved into birch.

I told Little Crow that a starving man becomes dangerous, but a wounded people become desperate. And desperation is the fire that leaps without direction.

His face tightened.
He already knew this.

He said the agents refuse annuity payments again. He said some of his own council urge violence. He said others fear it would bring the end of our world.

He asked me, quietly, "Which road keeps the children alive?"

I had no easy answer.

I told him to sit with the ancestors; to wait for a sign, even a small one. I told him that war begins like a single spark, but peace requires water from many hands. I told him that if he must choose a path, choose the one that leaves a trail for the children to follow.

He pressed his hand to the earth as if to steady himself.
He looked older than his years.

Before he left, he placed tobacco at my feet.
A gift of respect.
A request for strength.

Tonight the lodge feels heavy with his questions.
I prayed long after sunset for him, for his people, for mine.

The wind outside speaks of storms to come.

And I am afraid.

May 6, 1862

The fire burned low tonight, only the blue edges left, like the wings of the little spirits that dance before dawn. My hands shake too much to carve, so I write instead. The words steady me.

Taoyateduta came again today.
Little Crow. I have known him since he was a boy running along the river's bend, long before the agents and their ledgers tried to fix his life into a column of numbers. He carries himself with the weight of the whole Mdewakanton nation, but today he let the weight slip for a moment when he stepped inside my lodge.

He called me Nookomis Ikwe-wid, the name my grandfather Mamongazide used for me when I was still small enough to hide under his blanket. I had not heard it spoken by another living voice in thirty winters. The name filled the air, rich and warm as maple sugar. For a moment, I forgot the brokenness of this year.

He sat close to the fire. He did not speak quickly. He never does. But when he finally lifted his head, I saw the worry sitting behind his eyes like a winter wolf waiting for the thaw.

He said the people are starving.
The traders hold back the flour and pork, claiming they cannot release it until the government annuities arrive. The agents say the gold is "delayed." Always delayed. The children cough at night. Hunters return with little. The river is low, as if it too refuses to fill our bowls.

The other chiefs had gathered earlier, Wambdi Tanka, Mazasha, Wakan Ozanzan, each speaking in circles around the same fear. They ask for my counsel because I am old, because I have seen seasons they will never know, because I carry the stories of my grandfather's lodge, the old Red Bear lodge of the Pembina waters.

I told them what wisdom I had left:

"Hold your people close. Feed the children first. Stand firm, but do not let the fire jump from the lodge too soon. Once the flames rise, they do not listen to reason."
Little Crow listened with his eyes lowered, his hands folded tightly as if he wished to hold the whole world still. But he is trapped between anger and duty. Between the hunger of his people and the silence of Washington.

Before he left, he touched my shoulder, a rare thing for him. He said, "Nookomis, your words are the old road. We may be forced toward the new one. I fear its stones."

I fear them too.

Tonight the frogs sing, but the river smells wrong.
Something is moving under the surface of this year, something sharp and cold.

My grandson Little Clam fell asleep on my blanket with his face in my lap. His breath is soft. I pray the spirits hear it and remember mercy.

I will sleep now. Tomorrow the chiefs gather again, and they will expect me to speak. I will try.

But tonight I am only a grandmother missing her mother, her forest, and the days when the world was not so heavy.

August 20, 1862

I counsel with the Dakota chiefs. They are at war.

The night settles around me now, and I write by the flicker of a small tallow lamp. My bones ache from sitting so long in the council lodge, listening, weighing, remembering. Today was the second day the chiefs have gathered, and again they sent for me before sun-high.

Taoyateduta greeted me at the door of the lodge himself. He placed his hand on my shoulder and said the name I thought I would never hear again:

"Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin... come sit with us."

It is strange how a single name can pull the past forward like a net full of heavy stones. My mother Équaywid called me Giiwedin only in moments of solemn teaching, when the winds themselves were listening. To hear it again on the lips of Little Crow shook me more than I wished him to see.

Inside the lodge the chiefs were already seated in a circle, Wabasha, stern and grave; Wacouta, watching everything with the eyes of a man who trusts little; Shakopee, restless; and Big Eagle, who had spoken strongly yesterday and would again today.

They asked me again to speak of the people's suffering. They said the Dakota starve. They said the traders mock them. They said the agents lock the storehouses and tell them to eat grass. They said the young men are angry enough to choke the sun.

I told them what I have told them before: A starving people will do desperate things. A people pushed into a corner of their own homeland cannot be expected to bow their heads forever.

Big Eagle nodded, but his jaw was tight. Wabasha looked down at the earth. Taoyateduta kept his eyes on me, as though he wished to measure the weight of every word.

He asked me, quietly, so the others would not hear, what my grandfather Mamongazide would have counseled in such a time.
I told him the truth:
"Grandfather would have said the wind must be read carefully. He would have said there is a moment when caution becomes cowardice, but there is also a moment when courage becomes blindness."

He closed his eyes at that.

Later, as the council grew heated, I listened as one chief after another spoke of the treaties, the lies, the hunger, the years of humiliation. They spoke of the old days, when Kapóža was strong and the rivers fed everyone without division.

Shakopee struck the ground with his pipe stem and said,
"We cannot watch our children starve while the agents feed fat on our land."

Wacouta warned that every path forward is full of traps.
Wabasha begged them to wait, one more day, one more message, one more plea.

And Taoyateduta...
He sat with his hands folded, but the storm was in his eyes.

I fear what tomorrow will bring.

Tonight, as the lamp burns low, I think again of my mother Équaywid, and how she used to tell me,
"The wind woman carries warnings before she carries storms."

But I cannot tell now whether this wind is warning...
or already too late.

I will sleep now, if sleep will have me.

—Giiwedin

August 19, 1862

The night is heavy with smoke, and the ground still trembles with rumor.
I write with shaking hands.

Little Crow, Taóyate Dúta, returned at dawn.
He greeted me again as Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin.
He is the only one left alive who speaks it with the weight my grandfather Mamongazide once carried in his voice.
Hearing it again makes the years fold back upon themselves until I am a girl in the pines of Lake of the Woods, listening to Équaywid hum the morning songs.

But then the present rushes in, sharp as broken bone.

The lodge was full before the sun stood high.
Men of the Wakhéya (Thunder) lineage, men of the Kangi (Crow people), and elders of the Sisíthuŋwan and Wakpétuŋwan bands gathered with Little Crow.
Their faces showed the same two storms: hunger and betrayal.

Taoyateduta spoke first, pacing like a man who knows the ridge beneath him is crumbling.

"The agents keep the food locked.
The traders will not give even a grain.
They say, 'Let them eat grass.'
What counsel have you for us, Grandmother?"

I answered as carefully as an old woman must when the world is leaning toward the fire.

I said that treaties made with men who do not honor their own words are like lodges built on river-ice. They melt beneath you even while you sleep.

Then Wabasha spoke, slow, thoughtful, pained.

"We waited. We starved. They do not see us as human.
Is patience not now just another name for surrender?"

He looked at me as though my bones might hold something he had lost. I told him patience is a virtue only when the other side holds any virtue at all.

Then Walking Spirit (Wakaŋ Mani) raised his voice.
He asked if the old prophecies were stirring, if I felt the signs my mother once spoke of—clouds that move without wind, birds that circle low.

I told him the truth. The world feels swollen with omen.

When the talking circled like hawks, Taoyateduta stopped them and asked me again:

"Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin... If we rise, will the people survive it?"

I could not lie.

I said rising or bowing would both bring suffering.
The difference is in what future the children inherit, chains or ashes. No one spoke after that.
Not for a long while. Tonight I hear weeping from the riverbank. Women who already know what tomorrow may bring.

I miss my grandson Little Clam. I miss the weight of him on my lap, the way Tayoduta blessed him and said he would be a branch of restoration. I pray that branch survives the coming storm.

I end this entry with a heaviness in my lungs. Even the sky seems unsure of its own strength.

— Giiwedin

August 18, 1862 – Night

Tonight the council fire burned low, the smoke rising in a straight, still column as though the sky itself wished to listen. The chiefs gathered again, Taoyateduta among them, and with him Wakinyan Bdežin, Mazamani, and old Wakan Ozanzan who speaks seldom but sees much.

Little Crow greeted me the same way he did yesterday, with his quiet "Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin... you come when the winds need turning."
He said it with no ceremony, yet it stirred something deep in me, something that remembered the lodge of my mother Équaywid, and my grandfather Mamongazide, who spoke my childhood name as though it were a blessing.

The men spoke for many hours.
Their words still echo in me.

Taoyateduta said the young warriors are restless, "They feel the hunger of the children, and they hear the promises breaking like thin ice."
He says the traders mock them openly now, telling them to "eat grass."
The chiefs know this cruelty is pushing the young ones toward rashness, even toward war.

Wakinyan Bdežin argued that if the annuities do not come soon, there will be more than hunger; there will be death.
He said the agents let the warehouses rot full while the people starve on the banks of the river.
He said this land feels "tight," as if the spirits themselves cannot breathe.

Mazamani believes we must send one more delegation to the agent, to demand the payments owed.
But Wakan Ozanzan shook his head and said simply:
"You cannot awaken a stone."

When they turned to me, when they asked again for my counsel, I felt the weight of many winters settle upon my shoulders.

I told them what I have told them before:
that anger is a fire that can warm a lodge or burn it to the ground, and right now the wind is high.
I told them the young ones will not wait much longer, not with their bellies empty and their hearts burning hotter than the summer sun.
I told them the settlers crowd the land like a rising flood, and floods do not ask permission.

Taoyateduta listened more deeply than the others.
I saw sorrow in his eyes tonight, a sorrow that reminded me of the old skies before a storm.
He whispered that he fears his own people will judge him weak if he urges patience.
And yet he said he fears the soldiers more, for they do not distinguish warrior from child.

Before he left, he touched my hand and said:
"Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin, you carry the old ways. Tell me, will this land swallow us, or can we still stand?"

I did not answer him. Not because I did not know. but because tonight, I feared my truth would break his heart. The fire died down. Only the coals glowed when I returned to my small lodge.

Now I sit alone, the night close around me, hearing only the river and the distant cries of wolves. These ten days will test them. They will test me. And they will test the old spirits who once guarded this valley.

Tomorrow will bring more questions.
May I still have the strength to answer.

August 18, 1862

The sun had barely crested the treeline when they summoned me again.

I walked slowly, my bones stiff from the night, yet every man in that lodge rose to his feet as I entered. Even the younger ones, hot with anger, restless as late-summer storms, bowed their heads. I have not seen such honor in many winters.

And today, Taoyateduta himself waited for me near the fire, his robe still dusted from riding, his face stern but not unkind. When he saw me approach, he spoke the name that shook something old inside me:

"Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin... come and sit. The people still need your wind of counsel."

I had not heard anyone call me that since the elders of Kapóža spoke it in my mother's lodge, before the hunger years, before the treaties that bled us, before the turning of everything familiar into something foreign.

I sat beside him. The chiefs formed a circle. They began to speak of what happened yesterday at Acton. Four settlers dead. Four Dakota boys who lost their heads to anger, and perhaps to despair. Now all Dakota stand beneath the threat of the soldiers.

Taoyateduta's voice was heavy as a water-soaked hide:

"If we do nothing, they will kill us slow.
If we rise, they will kill us fast."

Old Chief Waanatan struck the ground with his staff and said:

"The starving man will bite even his own hand.
How can our young men be blamed?"

Others argued the soldiers would come either way. Some said fight. Some said flee. Some said surrender the boys and hope for mercy.

They turned to me. My heart trembled, not with fear, but with the weight of what my words might shape. I told them:

"The land remembers all choices. The ancestors watch the path taken when the night is darkest. Feed the people first. Feed the elders. Hunger drives even gentle men to madness. Whatever road you choose, choose it with a full heart, not one twisted by fear."

They were quiet after that. The fire popped like breaking bones. Taoyateduta looked at me long, his eyes carrying both grief and iron:

"Your mother Équaywid taught you wisdom, as mine taught me sorrow. Stay with us these ten days, until the wind shifts and we know our fate."

I bowed my head. But inside, I felt the sharp ache of missing her, my mother, the lake forests, the old days before everything was renamed and claimed by others. Tonight the drums are silent. Even the children play more quietly. The horses stomp in the dark like they sense the coming storm.

I pray the spirits guide my tongue. For these men stand at the edge of the world, and I with them.

August 17, 1862

The council fire is still glowing in my eyes, though I have stepped away from it and into the darkness of my own lodge. My hands tremble, not from age tonight, but from the weight of what I witnessed.

Little Crow sat before them, before all of us, like a man being torn by two winds. His hair shone with sweat. His voice was worn. The young ones pressed him to strike, the elders pressed him to hold. And I... I was called to speak between them.

He greeted me again as Équaywid, my mother's name, the one he used when we were young and all things seemed possible. Hearing it now... it carries more years than I can bear. I felt my mother standing behind me for a breath, her warmth at my shoulder, the scent of pine from her hands.

They asked me to speak of hunger. Of broken promises. Of how long a people can be patient when their children starve. They asked me whether the spirits have turned their faces or whether the world of the whites has drowned out their voices.

I told them the truth I feared would scorch the ears of all present: If a river is dammed too long, it does not simply wait. It breaks.

Some nodded. Some wept. Little Crow looked at me with a sorrow I have never seen in him. Even as a boy he carried pride like a shield. Tonight he looked unshielded.

He asked, "Grandmother, if we strike, will the ancestors walk with us?"

And I answered what I felt rise in my chest:
"They will walk with those who remember them. But they will not guide a hand raised in wrath alone."

Afterward, when most had dispersed, he lingered. He spoke softly, as if afraid the others might hear the youth still alive in his heart. "We are cornered, Équaywid," he said. "Cornered like wolves who smell their own blood."

I could not comfort him.
There is no comfort for a leader whose path leads through fire.

I fear tomorrow.
Not for myself, my years are behind me, but for the young men who sat at that fire, fists clenched, eyes bright with a kind of desperation I have not seen since my grandfather Mamongazide spoke of the burning lodge at Pembina.

Tonight I pray.
But even prayer feels thin against the hunger in this land.

May the ancestors show mercy.
May the spirits hold the children close.

And may Little Crow find clarity in the storm that is coming.

August 1862

I write this now because I cannot carry it all in silence. I am afraid that if I don't put these words down, everything they told me, everything they remembered of me, will vanish like breath on winter air.

They greeted me as Ogichidaa-ikwe Giiwedin. The name struck something deep in my chest, something older than my own memories. And when they said it, I felt the weight of people who had waited a long time for someone to finally listen.

For ten days straight, the Dakota chiefs came. They spoke with the steadiness of old stone. They were patient with my confusion, patient even as tears kept threatening the corners of my eyes. They told me things I never knew were mine to carry.

And then Wapáša came, my cousin, though generations stretch between us like long shadows. He looked at me only once before he began to cry. Not quiet tears. It shook his whole body. I felt it shake me too. I have never seen a man's grief fall from him like that, grief not of land or war or hunger but of hope almost lost.

I reminded him of the title of Wáȟpe Šá, Red Leaf, the ancestral name that had bound so many people together before divisions tore them apart. When I spoke it, his breath hitched. He put his hand on his chest like the name itself was a returning heartbeat.

They told me again the story of our lineage, the royal lines that braided Ojibwe and Dakota blood together long before any treaty, long before any map drew borders across our families.

I wrote their words down because I do not want them to die again.

They told of Fox Woman Wabasha (Eshipequag) and Chief Kadawibida Broken Tooth;
of the sons they raised across nations.
Wáȟpe Šá, who stayed Dakota,
and Mamaangĕzide, who became a pillar of the Lake Superior Ojibwe.

They told how the brothers met on a battlefield that should have ended in blood,
but instead ended in peace, because one man called out for his brother in the old language,
and his brother stepped forward.

Everything after that, the marriages, the reunions, the children who carried the blood of both nations, was not just genealogy. It was a testament of survival, a reminder that kinship sometimes wins over fear.

When Wapáša spoke of it, his voice broke again.

He looked at me like I was someone he thought he had already lost. Someone he wasn't sure he would ever see return.

His grief was not for land, or even for the ancestors who died before their stories were written. His grief was for the fear that we would be forgotten, that our names would fade, that the hope they carried, through war, separation, exile, and silence, would disappear with him.

He asked, quietly, if I would remember.

And I told him yes. But inside I wondered. How can I remember enough? How can one woman hold a whole broken bridge between nations? How can I make sure none of this is lost again?

Tonight I write because I do not want them, from the chiefs to my cousin to the mothers who carried these bloodlines, to vanish again into the shadows where history buried them.

I write because I feel the weight of what they told me. And because I am afraid
not of the stories, but of what happens if I fail to carry them forward. I don't want to be forgotten.
And I don't want them forgotten either.