Sacred Breath

The Journey of Selas – A Pre(white man)-Contact Story of Turtle Island

Introduction - Before Map, There Was Story

Here is a journey set in the time before borders.

Before maps.

Before the ink of empire named what was already known.

It's not history in the way some books remember it. But it is memory.

A remembering of the land as it once was — alive with forest and fire, song and silence, where rivers wove all life,

and sky was a place of story.

It follows the path of one girl — **Selas**, whose name means *Sacred Breath*.

She is not from one Nation, but of many.

Not a symbol, but a soul.

Her journey carries her from the mist-laced inlets of the West to the great rivers of the East —

from cedar to sage, mountain to council fire.

Along the way, she listens.

To the old ones. To the wind. To the voices that call from the stone. Her footsteps do not conquer. They remember.

These vignettes are glimpses.

Windows.

They do not seek to explain. Only to evoke.

Each one honours a different land, a different rhythm, a way of life that was vibrant, sovereign, and whole long before contact changed its course.

The names spoken here — Tkaronto, Tiohtià:ke, Wendake — are not past tense.

They are alive.

And perhaps,

if you read slowly,

if you walk gently, you may feel this too.

Selas.

Sacred breath.

Spirit of remembering.

Voice between worlds.

The Gathering Shore

Coast Salish territory - (now Vancouver), early summer, 1400s

The tide had just begun to fall when she reached the inlet.

Soft light slid between the trunks of the cedars. The ferns—tall as her chest—dripped with last night's mist, and her bare feet left no trace on the mossed path. She carried nothing but a cedar basket and her grandmother's song in her mouth.

Behind her, the longhouse smoke still curled into the morning. Ahead: the sea.

She reached the edge of land where rock met tide and crouched without sound. Her fingers brushing the warm stone and then the mussels. She hummed as she worked, soft and low. The shellfish released willingly today. This was a good sign.

Today, they would gather not just food, but stories.

This was the time of canoes.

From up the coast and inland, families were arriving—carved cedar vessels slicing through the saltwater, bringing salmon, obsidian, songs, and faces she hadn't seen since last summer's moon. They arrived when the sun was high, their paddles in rhythm with the tide. The elders would drum. The children would run. Dogs would howl and then nap beneath driftwood.

And she—she was old enough now to carry water from the stream and bring it to the fire.

She tucked the last mussel into her basket, stood, and lifted her face to the salt-laced air.

Far out beyond the islands, she saw three canoes, dark against the light, and smiled.

By evening, the cove was filled with life.

Fish turned over coals, and children chased each other across the sand, their footprints already softening beneath the wind. Old women with long grey braids rubbed oil into cedar bark. Hunters compared hooks and

weavings. Stories were told beside flickering flames—about bear dreams, salmon queens, and men who walked into mountains and came back changed.

She listened closely. Her grandmother had told her: one day, she would carry the stories herself.

That night, she lay beside the others on woven mats under the longhouse roof. Fire shadows danced across the beams above her, where her ancestors' clan symbols curled into the smoke. Somewhere a drum pulsed low, like the inside of the earth speaking.

She dreamed of whales moving beneath her canoe. Not chasing, but guiding.

And when she woke, the stars were still out. Her grandmother sat beside her, placing red ochre on her cheekbone with a fingertip.

"You are growing into your name," her grandmother whispered.

She nodded.

Her name was **Selas** — sacred breath, the wind that carries life. A name given by dream, not birth. A name that would grow as she did.

"Today you paddle with us," her grandmother said.

And Selas knew: the world was wider than she had thought. And she would not watch from shore anymore.

The River Between Hills

Secwépemc territory – (near present-day Kamloops), early summer, 1400s

She had never been this far inland before.

The sea had always been her rhythm — the pulse of the tides, the salt-sweet scent on her skin, the memory of whales in the dark. But now she walked among hills the colour of fire-warmed sage, where grass bent beneath her footsteps and the wind carried only dust and pine.

The cedar trees here were taller and fewer. Their voices quieter. She missed the ocean, but she did not say so. She was thirteen now. Her braid hung longer. Her steps had their own sound.

They'd travelled for four days — her aunt, her cousin, two women from the neighbouring inlet, and her. They rose with the sun, slept in hollows where elk had once lain, and followed a trail older than language. Her aunt called it the trade path — the way of obsidian, salmon, dried berries, and stories.

On the fifth morning, the hills opened.

Below them, two rivers met in a wide bowl of land — the North and South arms of a great waterway. The river curled like smoke, blue and gold under the sky, and on its banks rose the summer lodges of the Secwépemc people.

Smoke drifted from hearths. Children ran laughing into the shallows. Canoes lay pulled ashore, filled with sturgeon and trout. Dogs barked, women sang, and men brought bundles of tanned hides on their shoulders.

The girl stood still.

She had known many gatherings on the coast, but this was different. This land opened like a bowl — a place of offering. A place of rest.

Her aunt touched her shoulder.

"This is Tk'emlúps," she said. "Where the waters meet."

They were welcomed with cedar smoke and warm food.

Her cousin ran off with boys his age to swim in the river. She stayed near the fire circle, helping unpack the gifts they had carried: dried herring, shell beads, oolichan oil in carved boxes. In return, they received pine salves, duck down, and ropes of cured meat.

That evening, drumming began.

Men from northern lakes sang hunting songs, the rhythm rising like wind on open water. Women danced with arms raised like wings. Elders passed a carved pipe between them, blessing the land in a language she didn't know but felt in her bones.

She sat quietly beside her aunt. Sparks drifted upward like stars.

That night, she slept under a lean-to of pine boughs, wrapped in woven blankets. The ground was warm, and her dreams returned.

She walked through a meadow where blue camas bloomed in the dusk. A deer waited at the edge of the clearing. It did not flee. It watched. And in the deer's eyes, she saw her own.

She woke before the sun.

The camp still slept, but the river moved — always. She followed it. The air smelled of cold stone and cottonwood sap. Dragonflies stitched the morning.

By the water's edge, a girl about her age stood waiting.

She wore her hair in two long braids, and a thin white line was painted down the center of her nose.

"I saw you last night," the girl said.

She nodded.

"You listened. Not everyone does."

"I try," she said quietly.

The girl's eyes softened. "Come. I'll show you the singing stone."

They followed a small trail upstream, where the river narrowed and the wind quieted.

There, half-buried in moss, lay a boulder shaped like the back of a bear. The girl pressed her hand to it. She did the same.

A hum pulsed from the stone — low, steady, ancient. Not a sound, but a hum.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"It marks the place where stories begin again," the girl replied.

She nodded. Her hand stayed on the stone long after the girl had gone.

They left Tk'emlúps three days later.

As they climbed out of the valley, she turned once to look back. The river shone behind them, threading the land like memory.

Her aunt glanced sideways at her.

"You are walking deeper into your name," she said.

The girl said nothing. She only smiled.

She was **Selas** — sacred breath, named for the wind that moves through all things.

And the river, she now knew, would carry her far beyond what she could see.

Pass of the Sky Elders

Rocky Mountains – (near present-day Jasper), late summer, 1400s

The mountains rose like sleeping elders — draped in silence and sky.

Selas had never seen stone stand so tall. It wasn't just height, it was presence. As though the land itself had chosen to speak in peaks, rather than words.

They came through the pass on foot, weaving along glacial valleys and narrow game trails worn by elk and bighorn. The air grew thinner each day. Nights were colder. Birch gave way to spruce. The wind carried the high cry of a hawk somewhere unseen.

It was her first time traveling with the men — her uncle had invited her, saying only, "You are ready." She had not argued. She had only wrapped her bundle tighter and followed.

There were six of them in all. Two hunters. Her uncle. A young man who walked ahead without speaking. And an elder named K'aniye — thin as smoke, eyes lined deep as riverbeds, who carried nothing but a pouch of herbs and a walking stick carved with thunderbirds.

Selas walked behind him.

He did not speak for three days. He only moved — his feet sure, his head high, listening to things she could not yet hear.

On the fourth morning, they reached a lake tucked beneath a wall of stone. The water was clear, almost impossibly so — it reflected sky, tree, and face as if time had no hold on it.

The men set camp nearby, fanning out to scout, fish, and gather.

Selas stayed by the lake.

Something here pressed at her chest. Not grief. Not fear. But pressure — like a thread pulling from within.

"You feel it."

It was K'aniye. He had appeared beside her soundlessly.

She nodded. "It's like I've been here before."

He sat, bones crackling, and pointed toward the far side of the lake.

"There is a cave in that mountain. Inside it, people placed offerings so long ago the trees no longer remember. But the rock does."

Selas didn't speak.

He placed a small bundle in her palm — tobacco, sweetgrass, a stone worn smooth. "If you are called, you will find your way." She waited until the sun was low, then followed a deer trail around the edge of the lake. The path narrowed. Rocks shifted. Her breath came fast, and her limbs felt light — as if the air itself was watching her. When she found the cave, she knew it instantly. No markings. No torch. Just shadow and stone. She stepped inside. It was not deep, but it was old. The walls held soot from hundreds of fires. Bones of animals rested in ${\it niches.}\ Charcoal\ lines\ formed\ symbols\ --\ mountain,\ claw,\ moon,\ eye\ --\ echoes\ from\ an\ older\ world.$ She knelt, placed the offering gently on the earth, and whispered her name. Selas. Sacred breath. And in that stillness, something answered. It wasn't a voice. It wasn't sound. It was vision. She saw herself — older. Dressed in white buckskin. Standing in a circle of stone, hands outstretched. Around her, women. Behind her, stars. She blinked. The image faded. But the feeling remained. When she returned, night had fallen. K'aniye sat by the fire, feeding it slowly. He did not look up. She sat across from him, her eyes reflecting flame. "I saw something," she whispered.

"I know," he said.

He added a sprig of sage to the coals.

"For some," he said, "the mountain gives dreams. For others, it gives instruction."

Selas closed her eyes.

"What did it give you?" he asked.

She opened them again.

"A name I haven't grown into yet."

He nodded.

"Then grow. The next trail is longer."

In the morning, she rose before the others.

Mist clung to the lake like breath that hadn't yet spoken.

She touched her feet to the earth, her fingers to the water.

And silently, with the mountain watching,

She offered thanks.

A Mirror Within the Stone

Stoney Nakoda territory – (present-day Lake Louise), early autumn, 1400s

The mountains here were different.

They did not watch with weight, like elders carved in granite. They listened.

The air was thinner now. The forests quieter. The scent of pine sharper, edged with the crispness of first frost. Berries had thinned on the slopes. Leaves fell in golden whorls. And the lake — oh, the lake — its glory the blue of the brightest sky.

They reached it just before the moon turned. Her aunt said the old ones called it the *Lake of the Little Fishes*, and before that, it had no name. It was simply known. A place where silence sharpened, and reflection spoke louder than words.

Selas had never seen water like this.

Still as glass. Deep as thought. Its color was not blue, not green — but a veil between both. The kind of water that seemed to look back. "This is where I stood," her aunt said softly, placing a hand on Selas' shoulder. "And a vision came to me." Selas didn't ask what the vision had shown. Some things are not meant to be told. They built no fire. Just a lean-to against the trees, where the wind whispered low and the stars came early. Selas ate little that first day. She walked instead. Circled the lake slowly. Her footsteps soft on earth. In the trees above, a raven watched. Not with menace. With memory. That night, she curled alone beneath a blanket woven with cedar bark and hide. Her aunt had left her with a gourd of water, a pinch of sweetgrass, and silence. This was not a test. It was a welcome. A dream came before dawn. She stood on the lake — not beside it. Upon it. The surface held her like earth. In the distance, she saw the outline of a woman — cloaked in white, hair streaked with ochre, feathers hanging from her wrists. The woman raised a hand. Selas raised hers in return. Their fingers did not meet, but something passed between them. A warmth. A vibration.

She woke with tears on her cheeks in joyful recognition.

Then the woman became smoke — curling into the mountain, rising into stars.

Rising, she walked to the lake, and knelt.

The water held her reflection — moonlight woven with face.

She dipped her fingers in.

The ripple spread slowly.

And as it did, she whispered her name again — this time, not as a question, but as a remembering.

Selas.

Breath that carries.

Wind that listens.

Name of sky.

The water received it.

And in that moment, she knew she had crossed into the next part of herself.

Not a child now.

But a woman becoming.

The Circle Rekindled

Wendat Territory - (near present-day Wendake), early autumn, 1400s

The river had become her road.

For many moons now, Selas had travelled east — by canoe, by foot, sometimes by silence. She had left the mountains behind, watched the pines thin into deciduous forests, listened to loons call at dusk, and learned to read a different kind of sky.

Here, near a meeting of rivers, where cedars fragranced the air and maples burned gold in the sun, Selas arrived at a village ringed with tall palisades, each log staked upright and lashed with care, honouring the circle keeping people safe. Inside were bark-covered longhouses — smoke-scented, holding the living stories.

The Wendat called this place home — not for a season, but for generations. The land pulsed with roots that held memory. Smoke curled from each longhouse like song. Children ran between corn stalks. Women worked in rhythm — pounding corn, braiding herbs, telling stories that made sacred their work.

Selas had come with traders — a family from the Great Lakes who carried shell beads, dried fish, medicinal barks, and fine beaver pelts. She came not to trade, but to learn. And something in her chest told her this land already knew her.

She was welcomed into a longhouse by a woman whose eyes were the color of storm-washed stone. Her name was **Yehwa**. Her presence was stillness woven with strength. She carried a small medicine bundle tied with deer sinew and sang to her pots as she cooked.

"You are from the west," she said to Selas on the first night, as they sat together before the central hearth.

Selas nodded.

"I have walked where your lakes pour mist," she replied. "I have stood where stone speaks to sky."

Yehwa smiled. "Then you'll understand — this place listens before it ever speaks."

"I have walked where your lakes pour mist," she said. "I have stood where stone speaks to sky."

Yehwa studied her. "Then you've heard the voice of the land."

She paused, her gaze steady.

"Yes, but here... the land does something else. It listens. And teaches.

In Wendake, the circle was sacred.

Everything moved in circles — the seasons, the ceremonies, the stories. Even the way they sat around the fire was a reminder: no one above, no one below. All faces lit. All voices heard.

Selas learned the planting songs — how the women sang to the corn as it rose. She learned how they braided tobacco with prayers and offered it before decisions. She sat beside the water keepers, who told her the river never flows the same way twice, but always remembers its first path.

And she listened to the fire stories — not just the ones of wolves and wind, but of women made of starlight, and ancestors who became trees, and the dreamers who walked between worlds.

One night, Yehwa placed her hand over Selas' and said:

"You carry many stories not yet told. But you must offer one of your own."

So Selas stood before the circle and spoke — her voice steady, her eyes on the flames.

She told of the singing stone above the lake. Of the woman in the dream. Of the name given by wind. She did not speak to impress. She spoke to remember.

When she finished, the circle was quiet.

And then one of the elders — old as the trees, bent like a branch in snow — nodded and said,

"She walks in time, this one. From place to place, but also from before to after."

Before Selas left Wendake, Yehwa gave her a small pouch filled with tobacco and petals.

"This is for where you go next," she said.

"Where is that?"

"Where the island narrows, and the mountain waits," Yehwa said. "There is a place where rivers meet and don't separate. You'll know it when you hear the drums beneath your feet."

Selas placed the pouch in her satchel.

She looked back only once — the longhouse smoke rising in the pale blue sky.

She knew now the circle was not just Wendat.

It lived in her breath.

And she would carry it east.

An Island Between Rivers

Tiohtià:ke – (present-day Montreal), mid-autumn, 1400s

She arrived by river — as all had before her.

Two currents braided at the island's shore, slow and wide, carrying leaves and voices. The canoes touched land in silence. No horns. No drums. Only the sound of paddle to water, soft and sacred.

The island was larger than she expected. Not in size, but in feeling. The air shifted here. It felt round, like a drumbeat held in the chest.

Tiohtià:ke. The place where currents meet.

She stepped ashore barefoot.

This was no village. Not a settlement. Not quite home.

It was something else.

A place of between.

Where many Nations came — the Kanien'kehá:ka from the south, the Anishinaabe from the north, Innu from the east, Wendat from the rivers.

They came in peace, with baskets of seeds, bundles of fur, carved stories, painted memories. And they camped in circles around the foot of the island's mountain.

At the centre of it all, the council fire.

Selas stayed near the edge at first, listening. Watching.

The mountain loomed behind her — not threatening, but present. It rose with a calm power, its slope covered in yellow leaves and the last wild apples of the season.

She had heard of this mountain from Yehwa.

"Walk it if you are called," she had said.

"But don't expect words. The mountain speaks through pulse."

That evening, Selas was invited to sit in the outer ring of the council. Her tobacco bundle from Wendake lay in her palm, warm from the fire.

Elders spoke of treaties, seasons, changes in the herds. Stories were traded like food — with ceremony, and slow generosity. A flute was played by a girl no older than herself, and Selas felt something in her ribs stretch open.

Later, alone, she climbed the slope.

Each footstep sank into the soft hush of fallen leaves. Halfway up, the trees thinned. She paused to breathe.

From here, she could see both rivers — one wide and quick, one slow and dark.

They didn't divide. They met.

It felt like a teaching.

She sat beside a stone shaped like a turtle's back and unwrapped her bundle.

One petal. A bit of sweetgrass. A pinch of tobacco. A strand of hair from Wendake, given in blessing.

She placed it on the earth and closed her eyes.

She dreamed again.
But this time, there was no figure. No voice.
Only the sound of many feet walking together.
Generations of them.
Some barefoot. Some in moccasins. Some with medicine bundles, others with song.
And Selas walked among them.
Not behind.
Not ahead.
But with.
She left the island at sunrise.
As the canoe pushed off the bank, she looked back at the mountain.
A bird circled once above it — neither a hawk, nor raven. Something between.
She breathed in.
And for a moment, the wind carried her name.
Selas.
And in the breath that followed, she heard no answer — only presence.

The Place of Trees and Water

Tkaronto – (present-day Toronto), late autumn, 1400s

They told her the name before she saw it.

Tkaronto.

Where trees stand in the water.

And that was enough.

As their canoe drifted toward the narrows, slender trunks rose from the shallows, bark darkened by time, woven with care, set with purpose.

A fish weir — yes —but also a marker, a rhythm laid into the river. Not only for the salmon. But for the people. A sign of return. They paddled past the weirs in silence. The water was wide here, but reflective. A mirror not just for faces, but for truth. This was a place of **between**. Selas felt it before her feet touched the shore. Not village. Not wilderness. Not passage. But pause. They landed on the islands first — low, braided stretches of sand, cedar, cattail, and sky. The Mississaugas gathered here each season, to smoke fish, bury their dead, receive dreams, and rest. There were no longhouses here. No fires unless needed. It was not for building. It was for remembering. Selas walked the edges barefoot, following a heron along the shore. The bird stopped near a birch tree, its roots reaching down through the water and into the earth. She sat close, arms wrapped around her knees. Water lapped softly at her feet, as she watched the lake disappear into the mist. An elder woman approached her later, her eyes lined like tree rings, her hands carrying sweetgrass and a string of shells. "You are young, but you've come far." Selas nodded. The woman sat beside her and began plaiting the sweetgrass with careful fingers. "This is where we come when we forget. The land here helps us remember." "Remember what?" Selas asked.

"Who we are. Who we were. Who we're becoming."
The woman finished the braid and placed it in Selas' hand.
"We don't take anything from this place. It gives what we need to receive."
At dusk, they lit a small fire. Only embers — no flame. Enough for warmth, not ceremony.
One by one, people came forward to speak into the dark.
A name they had carried. A fear they had shed. A vision they once received and still did not understand.
Selas waited.
When her time came, she did not speak right away.
Then she said: "I have walked many places. But here I feel as if the water has already met me."
The elder woman smiled.
"That's how you know it is sacred."
That night, Selas slept between two cedar trunks, her back against the sand, her heart full of quiet.
She dreamed of the weirs — the staked trees — but this time, they were glowing. As if the fish had become stars and swam between worlds.
She woke before dawn.
The lake was breathless.
And the mist moved like memory across the surface.
She left Tkaronto with a sweetgrass braid in her satchel.
Not as a souvenir,

but a thread — to this place.

Where the Spirit rises

Niagara (Niagara Falls) – late autumn, 1400s

They reached the edge near dusk.

The great falls curved before her like the rim of the world, water folding into water with a kind of soft violence — endless, ancient, alive.
Mist rose from the gorge like an offering.
And Selas stepped forward, alone, to meet it.
She opened her hands.
She opened her chest.
She let the sound move through her — not to cleanse, not to take, but to join.
The wind caught the edge of her braid and lifted it slightly.
She felt the memory of whales. The warmth of mountains. The deep glow of council fire. She felt every footprint she had ever left across the land.
And then — she felt nothing at all.
Only presence.
Only breath.
Only Selas.
Later, as the stars rose and they camped beneath the trees, she sat by herself, a cloak around her shoulders, watching a plume of mist rise against the moonlight.
A child asked her what the falls had said.
Selas didn't answer right away.
Then she said: "It didn't say anything."
She smiled gently. "It listened."

Epilogue – The Breath Remains

The story does not end where the water falls.

It does not begin at the shoreline.

It lives — in breath, in soil, in sky.

Selas walked her path long before names were written in stone.

She moved across territories not as borders, but as belonging.

She listened to mountain, river, fire, and star.

She left no scars.

Only presence.

No one recorded her age, her clan, her end.

But her story was carried forward —

in songs whispered to cedar,

in the hands that braid sweetgrass,

in the way a child pauses to feel the breeze shift across her cheek.

They say she lived many seasons more.

Some say she became a teacher.

Some, a grandmother.

Some, a spirit who walks between fires, still listening.

But those who listen to the breath of the land —

they don't ask where she went.

They simply know

She became the silence before ceremony.

The hush before the drum.

The breath taken before we speak of what is sacred.

Selas.

Still carried.

Still listening.

Still here.