



NAUETAKUAN,
a silence for a noise
a novel

Natasha Kanapé Fontaine
translated by Howard Scott

SAMPLE

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CRÉATIF

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Nauetakuan (ńauetakuan): the noise is heard very far away.
Pessamit pronunciation: [la:we:ta:kwən]

Innu Dictionary,
<https://dictionary.innu-aimun.ca/Words>

SAMPLE

Lives go by. People's names, the words of lovers, children's cries, screams of fear, the roar of engines. Cars stream past. Everywhere in the streets of Montreal, everywhere in other cities, the alleys, the country roads, in Nitassinan. Speeding trains, fingers on computer keyboards. Paddle strokes on winding rivers. Everywhere on the planet. Thousands of satellites, with all their static. Every second is filled with their vibrations.

Above our heads, airplanes fly to distant destinations. Sometimes we can make out the symbols of the countries they come from. They're so far above us, and yet I can recognize the drone of the different engines even from inside my apartment.

Down on the ground, every day, Pie-IX Boulevard fills up during rush hour. Waves and swells of cars. Last week, the neighbours on our left cut down several trees in the yard. Some of those still standing have already lost their leaves.

Sometimes I want to shut myself up in this apartment and just soak up the shadows. The sound of the fridge has filled our home for a long time. No one hears it anymore. I confuse it with silence. But everything that's happening outside, all around, seeps in. Inhabits our bodies. The soundtrack of a life we're trying to fill.

All of life is filled with itself, and yet human beings have the ability to ignore it. To hide from its meaning. Is it a perceptual disorder? Like a vision problem maybe. A sensitivity disorder? Like not knowing how to feel that another being is sharing the same room with you, the same time in the present. It's the cat.

Behind all of it, a dull sound persists, eluding awareness. They say Earth vibrates at 7.8 hertz, which changes according to natural phenomena like lightning. It can be neither named nor touched. How can you interpret a thing that is perceived but not seen? An ancient fir tree that falls in the middle of a forest during a fire.

These are the thoughts I'm having—about me, about my life now, that it's an empty shell. There's nothing that makes my heart beat faster, nothing that excites me. Everything has a noise inside.

And every day, on the street, cars honk, trucks growl, semis rumble like the storms of August, and even the children in strollers on the sidewalks are screaming for more.

The applause rings out, creating a festive feeling throughout the main hall of the Musée d'art contemporain. Shouting above the din, the curator invites guests to help themselves to some hors d'oeuvres to conclude the opening of the exhibition. Monica heads toward the food table, just ahead of other hungry patrons who are heading in the same direction. After grabbing some grapes and cheese cubes, she slips behind the mob now swarming around the trays and walks over to grab a glass of wine before moving away. She weaves slowly through the crowd, taking her first sips, when she stops and looks up at a work of art at the far end of the room, a little above the throng of enthusiastic visitors standing in front of it. The photograph is of a woman lying on her side, her back to the lens. Her black hair is streaked with platinum, a white sheet covers her hips, and there is a huge scar across her back, stitched with a row of red glass beads. There are also a few white threads that look like stitches. The whole image is both troubling and captivating.

Monica goes closer, walking around the small group of guests. Seconds tick by and her eyes scrutinize the woman's back. She's lying on a surface that looks like an immaculate hospital bed, but without metal bars. *Fringe.*

That's the title of the piece, a large photograph mounted in a lightbox. Monica feels something stir in her chest. It's not the time for her. It's too subtle to be analyzed. She tries to deny what she feels deep inside. Within her disordered thoughts, she tries to draw an uncertain parallel between those strings of red beads and her own life.

Strings like lines encircling the globe of the Earth. If only there were a direction to their trajectory, if only gravity were not the only force giving them movement.

Monica walks over to another piece by the Anishinaabe artist featured in the exhibition. All her work deals with the injustices experienced by First Peoples in Canada. Rebecca Belmore: that's the name on the labels for each installation, painting, and photograph...

Monica is still finding all this out at the retrospective's opening. Until now, she barely knew Belmore's name. Earlier that week, her colleagues at the Université du Québec à Montréal student newspaper suggested she cover the opening of the exhibition, which the museum seemed so proud to promote. Monica said yes without giving it much thought, because she wanted to see the original works, she told herself, instead of just scrolling through photos and bland criticism on her computer screen without getting a real feel for the effect.

The installation in front of her is gripping, instantly. On the floor, what looks like a teenager wearing a hoodie seen from behind, their head covered. Black hair tumbles out from under fabric, fanning out in all directions, and as far as Monica's feet. It hits her.

Monica moves on to another installation. This time, she stops in front of two big white facing walls on which two videos are simultaneously projected. A brown-skinned woman with dishevelled black hair, wearing

only a red coat made of light fabric that's too thin for the forest, the snow, and the cold, is running, out of breath, on a path that's barely visible in the white winter. A man follows her, apparently as panicked and desperate as she is. Monica contemplates the work for a moment, identifying with the lost woman. Both projections depict the same scene, with one small difference: one seems to be an external point of view, showing the couple's perspective, while the other sees the action through the eyes of their pursuers. Monica steps forward to read the label.

March 5, 1819 (2008). Demasduit, a Beothuk young woman, is captured by English settlers at Red Indian Lake. Her husband, Nonosabasut, dies trying to protect her.

A shiver raises the hair on Monica's arms.

How can anyone understand, at the moment it occurs, the first feelings of injustice that dare crawl under your skin? How can you avert the effects of that injustice entering your consciousness, the emotions it precedes and the emotions it follows, and that sometimes even lead to the meandering paths of memory?

Even born warriors have no armour at birth. The armour must be fashioned in the course of encounters, discoveries. Ideally, there would be some decently resistant material to use for protection as soon as the first challenges arise, a custom-made helmet, impenetrable protection.

Monica continues to walk through the exhibition, deeply moved, spellbound, thoughtful, silent. And suddenly it hits her. It doesn't change anything. But no one has spoken to her since she got there.

Who would anyway? Who knows her? *I'm an ordinary girl.* What would she have to say in the ambient noise, the fleeting conversations, the self-conscious laughter? *I'm not like these people.*

She forgets why she's in the museum today, why she came to the event. She's no longer there just for herself. It all speaks to her, it is all disturbing. An invisible shadow wraps around her, numbing her.

She ends up in a small black room, in front of a giant screen, around which a string of light bulbs glows with a reassuring orange-yellow light. A video is beginning. In this performance, Rebecca Belmore appears in an alley. The camera rotates briefly around her, revealing a small group of people off to one side, their arms close to their bodies. They are wearing sunglasses and sometimes they smile.

Belmore is sombre, serious, and she walks in a long red dress, looking down at the asphalt.

In her hand, she holds a heavy hammer.

She steps forward and stands in front of a utility pole near a tall grey fence.

She takes a big nail from a bucket and grabs a part of her dress. She nails the dress to the post, hammering hard.

Then she yanks her dress violently, as if to free herself from the sudden bond.

She repeats the gesture. Twice, three times, four. Each time, her dress tears, and scraps of fabric fall to the ground.

She continues for several minutes. She keeps going until there's nothing left but the sleeves, torn at the edges. Underneath, she wears white clothes, a soft tank top, panties. The contrast makes her dark skin look darker.

Her red dress, in tatters, lies at the foot of the post, which is riddled with nails.

Monica sits motionless on a little wooden bench in the dark room. Her tears flow of their own accord, without stopping. There are no sobs, no shuddering, only silence. Why is she crying? She tries to hold it all in. What's the warmth deep in her belly, the sudden whirlwind in her chest? What's with the tears?

Belmore opens a bag and pulls out a pair of jeans, which she puts on. On the ground are pails containing flowers. She solemnly takes a bunch of red roses and turns to the audience, who are still watching her in silence.

On her arms, several names are written in black Sharpie. A rose is clamped between her teeth, and she slides the flower from the stem end to remove the leaves and petals, which she spits out.

She shouts a name: *CINDYYYY!*

Cindy. Her voice bounces off the buildings, echoing through the empty spaces between them. Repeating the same gesture, she shouts other names: *Sarah, Mandy, Christine...* The names of women. Women never found. Murdered, disappeared. Missing women. The litany is piercing and charged with emotion, etched with the hope of bringing back their absent bodies. After the recitation, in the strange calm of the city, comes the coup de grâce: a child, in the far distance, on a balcony or in another alley, starts to cry. The unexpected weeping rings out like a soul looking for the way home. The effect is gripping, terrifying. Every person in the audience feels a shiver run up their spine.

Monica is weeping.

She opens her hands, which rest on her knees. For a

moment she considers the mascara streaks between the lines of her palms. That inert design, a trajectory deviating from its initial course.

A young woman comes into the small projection room. She walks softly, respecting the silence in the room, and sits down on the same bench, on Monica's left. The colour of the lights and of Rebecca's dress bathe her brown face in a warm glow. She watches the flickering screen for a moment. Monica shifts, and the woman, distracted, turns to her, noticing her open hands.

"Are you okay?"

Monica looks at the young woman with surprise, a little ashamed. Usually, she doesn't cry in public. Her eyes are still full of tears, her cheeks wet. It takes her an instant to read the features of the woman who pulled her from her ruminations—the high cheekbones, the smooth black hair shining in the darkness. They seem about the same age. The stranger is holding a purple jersey decorated with colourful birds.

"Yes, I'm okay." Monica snuffles and tries to hide her face with the back of her hand.

The young woman hands her her jersey, letting her know it's okay, she can use it to wipe her tears. "Here. I understand."

Both look up at the work that has been playing on a loop since the beginning of the exhibition, and for even longer before.

"That one really gets to me too," the woman goes on.

Monica contemplates the stranger's attentive eyes before turning back to the giant video screen. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That there are so many who go missing—Indigenous women?"