

Poems



AT ATKA

In February at Atka
I stood on the black sands
below the trading post
and watched my husband
fade up the plank
stairway, a bag
in each hand.

*Happy you be here,
Prekaska's Wife.
Glad you was come,
Prekaska's Wife.*

The crowd hemmed
me in, smiled,
called me my new name.
*Prekaska: shopkeeper.
Wife: me.*

At the house
my luggage sat
on the bed,

waiting,
already settled.

THE FOOD, THE AMMUNITION

Late in May,
we sit at tea
at the neighbor's.

My husband haggles,
trying again
to take a pelt
for nothing.

We hear a cry,
Prekaska, Prekaska
come! The store
is on fire!

Running back
toward the crowd,
I think of my scrapbook,
the photos, the platinum
blue pelt that was
my engagement
present.

Inside, acrid
smoke chokes me
as I pack and bundle
at the dresser and then
run, the fur swaddling
paper and frames.

Outside, the Aleuts,
armed with water
and blankets, flail
and shout, help
put it out.

Standing under
our ruined ceiling,
my husband notices
my full arms,
needless jumble.

Angry, he asks
why I left the food,

the ammunition.

ON CLOTHING

Walking
the muddy path
in wool pants,
a sweater,
and rubber boots,
I remember
the clothes I packed
for my first journey.

A chalk-white crepe
dress with a sequined cape.
A blue gown for dining.
A navy suit in which
to lean nonchalantly
against the rail.

When my husband
opened the suitcase
he groaned,
*You won't need this
on the Aleutian Maid.*

Boxed in the storeroom,
they wait beside a stack
of blankets.

I haven't sent them back.

PAPER PARASOL

When the Japanese
anchor in the harbor,
the Aleuts close
their doors, leave
the boat unmet
at the shore.

Mr. Kojima calls
me Madame,
brings gifts:
a paper parasol,
handkerchiefs,

a silk shawl.

But my husband,
wary and rude,
keeps his eyes
on his pipe
as he packs
and lights it.

Kojima explains:
*If only we could
find a new harbor
on these islands.
If you would be willing
to point one out,
the Captain would
be forever indebted
to you.*

My husband smiles,
leans over the map.
There is a harbor here.
His finger traces
the edge of an island,

a passage lined with rocks.

SKIN

I sort the blue fox pelts
for my husband.

I've learned to judge
the quality of skin—
long guard hairs,
even markings,
pointed tails
stretching wrist
to elbow.

Once a Captain
gave me the pick of his lot
if I could find the best.

When I held up
a supple, flawless skin
the Captain laughed,
The lady has it.

As he left,
I ran my fingers
against the fur's grain

while my husband beamed
in the lamp's round light,
his hands folded on the books,
figures leaking from
the pen's tip.

Nicole Stellon O'Donnell

The poems in this sequence grew out of my reading of *Prekaska's Wife: A Year in the Aleutians*, a memoir published by Helen Wheaton in 1945. Wheaton was the wife of a fox-farmer and storekeeper in the Aleutian Islands. As I read her work, I was struck by her voice. As a reader, the self she cultivated stunned me. My modern self, a woman cultivated in a different way by a changed society, questioned her silences. These poems grew out of my questions. I began by borrowing her words and phrases as I enjoyed her mode of description. I found when I was done that tone was the place where Wheaton and I parted ways. "The Helen Poems" reveal what I see as the subtext of Wheaton's writing.

When I wrote *Steam Laundry*, a novel-in-poems published last year telling the story of Sarah Ellen Gibson, who came to Fairbanks, Alaska in 1903, I played with a different kind of appropriation. Instead of a public persona, constructed like Wheaton's voice in her memoir, Sarah Ellen Gibson's voice was private. Unlike Wheaton, who wrote with the goal of publishing, Gibson never intended her writing to be read by a wide audience. Her papers only survived in the archives because her son became a prominent Alaskan. He started the stage line from Fairbanks to Valdez and was the first person to drive a car between the two places. When he died, he passed on all his papers dealing with the motorcoach line to the archives. His mother's letters happened to be tucked in the pile. The documents I dealt with were receipts, personal letters, obituaries, photos, and contracts. Sarah Ellen Gibson appeared to me in fragments. I built a character out of them. While I worked hard to be true to the Sarah Ellen I met in the letters, to make a narrative, I had to fill in gaps. My material for filling those gaps came from my own experience of being a transplant, a woman, and a mother in Interior Alaska.

In some ways, I see my appropriation of these lives as an act of defiance. I began writing from historical documents as a function of my own resistance to writing about the details of my own life. When I began writing poetry, I felt like that was what was expected of me as a poet. Initially, my attraction to persona was borne of my resistance to the confessional mode. More recently, I question that, recognizing that many of the historical poems I write contain embedded confessions. The last poem in *Steam Laundry* is the most intensely

personal poem I've written. It's my truth housed in the frame of someone else's details. Because I had sunk myself into the details of Gibson's life and her relationship with her sons, I was able to reveal difficult truths of my relationship with my daughters.

When I began working with archival materials years ago, I foolishly assumed writing from historical documents was a novel idea, but it's not. It's a return to the root. Poetry's oldest form is a way of preserving the details of a story. In the case of the epic, poetry details a famous story, a culture-defining story. In the case of these poems, I'm preserving facts on a more personal scale, but I'm still keeping track of history in verse, and I'm mixing myself into that history.

Further Reading:

Helen Wheaton, *Prekaska's Wife: A Year in the Aleutians* (New York, 1945).

Other poems from this sequence have appeared in *The Women's Review of Books* and *Ice Floe*.

Nicole Stellan O'Donnell's novel-in-poems, Steam Laundry, won the 2013 Willa Literary Award for Poetry. Her poems have appeared in Prairie Schooner, Beloit Poetry Journal, Bellingham Review, The Women's Review of Books, and other journals. The Rasmuson Foundation granted her an Individual Artist Award to support the writing of Steam Laundry. She lives, writes, and teaches in Fairbanks, Alaska