

## 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.

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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*.

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*Nicole Stellon 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*