

POEMS BY DENISE CALVETTI MICHAELS (the picky formatting)

My Dearest Sister,

Today is clear and cold, and a week since I thought I'd lose the baby. Please don't worry—the midwife says everything will be fine. This past winter I thought I'd lose my mind though everyone warned me—cabin fever, long dark days, rains that flood here in early November. By now, Sis, I've slept through my first rainy season—toppled trees, storm-tossed branches flung to the roof; resinous rain woven into the warp and weft of my nightmares and dreams, the wind's howl the first lullaby the little one will hear. Sometimes, middle of the night, to escape four walls, Darius gone a month on the Sauk felling cedar stumps for shingle bolts, I open the cabin door and stand on the threshold to welcome the deluge, our little plat like the muddy Missouri when we were girls, wading knee-deep, across the ditch, to fetch eggs in the barn—I held your hand, Pa made us the oak plank he swore would last forever. Writing to you helps, some things I didn't realize—road of our town all boulder and mud, clots of mud alongside wagon ruts, one tree, dear to us, the townspeople let stand between Eagle's Tavern and the Redmond bank—I'm grateful, a newcomer, trying to make a home, follow the path leading off the frame—Sister, no photograph is ever vast enough to capture a life—the hope I felt this morning when I came out of the dark woods into the clear-cut, the baby kicking, four girls dressed in their Sunday best standing in the muck like crocuses.

We Come from a Long Line of Women Who Wring Sheets and Sing Songs

We come from a long line of women who wring sheets
and sing songs.

The long line of women who sort wet
from dry tinder to feed fires.

The long line of women who scrub grit, pine pitch—
starch, iron and fold.

Women who find the good omen, make from scratch,
feed the hobo, haul water outback,

stitch and stir, bake and roast—
elk, partridge duck—grace before meals,

children to school, every child's lunch box full,
the long line—

librarians, teachers, nurses and nuns,
serving our town,

before there was the town,
only the logging camp,

the two of us not unlike any other sisters who share
a bed, whisper, *You are not alone*,

not unlike any other sisters
who love, and are loved.

Photo of Redmond Meat Market, 1898

I wonder about life expectancy,
eating a diet of wildcat, deer and bear.

Who has recipes?

If an apron could talk,
what would it tell?

And fur hats?
Who trapped and skinned?

So many questions to ask the butcher,
the women, the wagon driver,

and the absent one
it would have been an honor to meet—

Mary Louis
who took long walks,

lived to the age of 125—

“all alone she’d walk to Issaquah
(then Squak),

over the mountains to Yakima
to pick hops.”

Meditation

--Albert Magnuson, 1940

When I awake from this dream—

bird song,

cedar scent,

a sensory place.

If I begin with shadow

and light,

I'm alive

in the interlude of history.

In one thousand years,

who'll remember

boy with slingshot

to hunt bear?

I know only the topaz fox

sunning on rocks,

bleached bones of the lynx,

the tree where I carved my name

Redmond Derby Days Bike Race, 1940

Leary Way teens in saddle shoes and bobby socks hug
the sidelines, horizon a Doug fir fringe of second growth

when summer was a feather breeze, forty-eight golden
stars, agleam, on the American flag, behind town.

And Onlookers, look again! You're here to funnel
the riders beyond the willows the early settlers loved,

past Lake Sammamish, toward the trails of tomorrow.
For now, a slim girl maybe seven or nine, nearly

cropped from the frame, chin in her hand, bird-boned.
Did she become the reporter her English teacher

surmised, novelist, poet maybe, given a typewriter
for high school graduation? Great Auntie to nieces

who cycle Beijing Olympics, win Women's
first Soccer World Cup in Guangdong?

No one wears a helmet—and that power pole is a totem
with a sign posted far too high for the bystanders

to read but when the motorcycle escort revs up, message
is clear—Never give up! And when you can't imagine

how you'll sit in the saddle for twenty-six miles,
conjure the ancestors, named and unnamed,

who steered the old growth logs down greased skids,
to clear the way for you.

Gravel

Between the bunker and the toy store, submarine our parents rode to Education Hill.

Photo to remember we were children, living in a small town,
Americans.

In this field a net of abstractions, boys and girls under their desks.

We traced trapezoids at the sand table, imagined rockets, played.

Obedient under my desk I covered my head with my arms, squeezed eyes shut.

Some boys peed their pants—How far was the USSR, they asked?

Words are shaped to intersect with unanswered questions.

When you are seven the drill is to honor your teacher.

A Farm near the Slough

--for Melvin Kerwin, born in Redmond 1932, Navy Jet Pilot

There was a farm near the slough, blackberries
along the fence in September, and when
Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, I was nine years old.

Blackberries along the fence, Redmond a dairy
town, and when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor,
our population was 526.

Redmond a little town in Washington State;
beyond the field—fern and nettle, the willow
I climbed; townspeople fearful Japanese

troops would march south, cross the US border,
down from Canada, beyond fern and nettle,
the willow I climbed, townspeople fearful,

the whole town dark, regular air raid alarms,
blackout curtains to cover house windows,
observation tower scanning skies

for enemy planes; blackout curtains
covered our house windows, I knew
I wanted to fly, become a pilot, houses empty

of laughter and song, Japanese Americans waiting
at train stations—dishes washed, dried and
stowed away, my classmates from Redmond, boys

I knew from Bellevue, houses empty of song
and laughter, dishes washed, dried and stowed
away, blackberries along the fence in September.