

Paul Brooke

Calendar Strings

—(from 1805 to 1819)

Yakima Indian women carry a ball of string (iti tá mat) with different kinds of materials (kó-is) such as knots, yarn, or beads. Each kó-is marks a day of the year and a memory. One such calendar string was found to be 180 feet long and tied with 6600 simple knots.

knot

Winter whistles in the reed hollows.
The medicineman drops three pebbles,
three times and sings
to soothe the storm.

white yarn

Two tipis rip apart in a swirling wind.
I find smoked goat and salmon
at my feet. And I feel a pulsing,
the first arrows of pain
as the baby pushes down.

white dentalium shell

Snow settles all afternoon.
Two boys chase a snowshoe hare
into an underground burrow.
Deep inside me, it breathes.

All day and night I fight harder
than any man can imagine.
I want this child.

Brooke

knot with grizzly hair

A grizzly bear circles the village.
Doka and the other men chase it away.

Later, Doka tells me not to be afraid.
He gives me a wooden comb
with three deer etched on its edge.

knot

Mother holds my hand
and encourages me: "More.
A little more. Good."

Then when I am weak
like a newborn fawn,
the baby appears, glistening
like a star in the dark of the tipi.

clear blue bead

Every meadow is on fire
with tiny flowers. The deer
are moving down from the mountain
to drink at the river.

Doka tells me that he wanted a son
not a daughter. Going into the dark
woods, I cry. I love Kwona.

button

There are only women left
in the village when a group
of No-Sun men arrive.
Their faces are covered with hair.
Their bodies are covered with skins.

I touch one of their animals. It is
taller than I am, spotted from behind,
beautiful like rippling water.

A man turns to face me. He hands me
a small shell with two holes in it.

yellow yarn

We travel to the narrow river.
The salmon shoot by
as I sharpen my willow spear.
I balance on one foot,
thrust the stick forward,
and kill my first fish,
a female heavy with eggs.

Kwona carries the *t-kwi-nat*,
silver salmon, to Doka. The men
watch as Doka takes the fish,
squeezes the eggs
into a stone bowl,
cuts open the belly,
and flanges the flesh back
to remove all the intricate bones.
Handing the clean meat
wrapped in mint grass
to Kwona, he smiles.

small yellow bead

I pick the last flowers of the summer.
A deer and her fawn walk
the fringes of the meadow,
drink long at a spring,
and bound away.

Kwona plays on a deerskin,
fingering a grasshopper until
it spits brown juice on her hand.

Brooke

large yellow bead

Doka returns from hunting, tired.
He takes Kwona in his arms
for the first time and falls asleep.
I go outside to pound bark
into a dancing dress,
to boil roots,
and to cry.

knot

More No-Sun men have traveled
through our village. They stay
long, laugh hard, and trade with us
for all the animal skins we have.
Sometimes I cook deer meat
for them after I bake camas roots
and salmonberry shoots
in the earth oven.

They give me bright strips of cloth
which I will weave
into my black and white blankets.

knot

We move down to the flatlands
for winter is close again.

Miowa's child is ill
with heat fever.

Everyone stays away
from the boy
because they do not wish it.
I tend to him
after Miowa collapses

from exhaustion. She
is a thin reed, waiting
for her son's breath
to be strong again.

knot

The first snow falls, everything
is still and peaceful.

Miowa recovers and eats a handful
of preserved huckleberries
from a wooden bowl
We make her son drink
more water. His head
is hot like fire coals.

I am afraid he will die soon.

knot

Sometime during night
when the moon is whole,
Miowa's son screams out.

His body is too hot,
so we take away
all of his blankets.

He begins to shiver like his body
has been immersed
in a winter river.

knot with dried grass

I coil black and yellow
beargrass into a basket.

Brooke

When I wet the wild cherry bark
with my lips, I can taste
summer.

*Miowa's son is running
far ahead as we pick
handfuls of grass, cattails,
and rushes.*

amber-colored bead

The medicineman drops three pebbles,
three times and sings to capture
the fever spirit.

He grabs the fever and smears
it onto his newted skin. As he
does, the boy's warmth
disappears.

Miowa and I hold each other
tightly because we know her
son will live.

red yarn

It rained ice last night,
glazing the evergreens
and *a-no-tash* clear,
spattering the hills
with twinkling beads.

Mother died last night
in her sleep.

green yarn

Morning is too bright;
Sun flashing off snow.

Mother is buried
under a black rock slope;
two thin sticks mark the spot.

As I stand staring,
a falcon snatches a small bird
from the air. Blinking,
I look again; but the sky
is empty.

knot

A spirit sacred to Doka
has returned
from the Mountain.
For five days we will dance
the Guardian Spirit dance.

deerskin thong

The streams are filled
with melting snow as I gather
mountain goat wool
snagged on the hillside bushes.

Kwona is reaching her womantime.
She does not know
of strange changes
that will make her different.

I tell her my stories,
teach her this string.

white yarn

Hot breezes whip the flap
on the outside of the tipi.

Brooke

Kwona has started to bleed.
I paint her face, make a headdress
of soft fir boughs, and take her
to a meadow, close to where
mother was buried.

knot

The sun sets red. Kwona
sleeps far away from me
in a round bark hut.
She is alone to fast and pray,
to pile sticks, and to pick
needles off evergreen branches.

knot

Long ago, I too wondered
if the bleeding would ever stop...

To cleanse myself, I bathed
in an icy stream, ashamed
that I stained the water.

Later that year, Doka promised
himself to me.

two knots

Kwona has returned
to our round hut. She sits
quietly on the floor,
weaving a tule mat.

A young man has been leaving
love charms for her.

I saw him putting pine gum
on a hemlock, so he could tangle
the feet of a hummingbird.
It is said the miniature heart
is the best charm of all.

blue yarn

Around the fire, Doka and
a No-Sun man talk. Their
shadows ripple the dry air.

He is willing
to give ten blankets,
three steel traps, one kettle,
many firesticks, and one gun
if Kwona becomes his wife.

If she is married to this man,
I may only see her once a year.

yellow thread

At daybreak,
a young man is singing loudly
at the edge of the village,
“The sun rises,
I think of my love.
My love.”

Kwona does not look up
from her work; but I can tell
that she is smiling.

green yarn

Doka has decided to take
the No-Sun man’s offer. He tells me,

Brooke

“These tools will help us and
Kwona will be well taken care of.”

knot

I prepare Kwona
for the marriage ceremony:
wash her hair clean,
dress her in supple buckskin,
and tie the first knot in her string.

The presents have arrived
by canoe. Doka seems happy
to have so many good things.

I brush my comb through
Kwona's black hair.
The wooden comb is so worn
that I can only see two deer
browsing in the rich grass.