

*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.