

A Series: Sacajawea, Bird Woman, 1805-1806



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Rattlesnake Tea

Sacajawea, 1805

My time came in winter, and I had neither cohosh nor partridge berry prepared for it. I'd packed for my wee one, but thought little of my needs. I'd heard women scream in agony, but told myself they were not Shoshone. Pain started slowly, but soon bore down, wrenching and tearing. Pride flew away, and I screamed. I could not stop screaming. The medicine captain had naught for balky childbirth. Jessaume told him a snake's rattle soothes and hastens. The captain ground a bit, made tea, and gave it to me to drink. Soon my son was born. Charbonneau named him Jean Baptiste, but to me, he's Pomp, first born Shoshone. Come spring now, we're plagued by snakes, coiled about tree trunks, threaded through bushes. The men tiptoe, jumping at shadows, but I feel as safe as Pomp in his cradleboard, for I've drunk the snake's rattles.

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Riding a Horse
Aug 1805

The captains think Charbonneau womanish.
After he capsized the pirogue, he panicked,
crying, begging his god to deliver him.
They fault him for not helping me fish
out papers, medicines, instruments.
When the fox-haired captain sees him
slap me, he roars at him to stop.
I thank them for beatings I do not suffer.

A few days after the wreck, the captain
sets me and Pomp on a horse and orders
the horse to giddy-up. I've walked long
miles while Charbonneau rode lickity-split
up the trail. Now it's his turn to chase
a horse. I hear him cussing behind us.
To soothe Pomp, I sing a lullaby mother
sang to me. We jog along as easy as the wind.



Blue Beads
Nov-Dec 1805

The captains desire the white otter-skin
cloak, but the Chinook won't trade.
He points to my belt, demands "chief
beads." I can't give up my belt.
I earned it by excelling in woman's chores.
Women made it for me, their words
of acceptance. It's my wealth, honor,
my worth as woman. After Charbonneau
slaps or kicks me, it's my courage to get up
and go on. I see greed in the captains' eyes.
I clasp the belt to me, but how can I say no?
They helped me birth Pomp, doctor me,
protect me from Charbonneau. I loosen
it and give it to the medicine captain.
He trades it for the cloak, beautiful as new-
fallen snow, but it's a death mantle,
a lovely creature killed for man's vanity.
My precious belt in the hands of a filthy
killer. Later, the captains give me a coat
of blue cloth. It's pretty, but a sorry
trade for my blue beads. I take my digging
stick and basket and flee into the forest.
Only the coyote sees my tears. Pomp
is the captains' pet. The captain with hair
like a fox's brush will adopt him when
the journey's over. At the season of gift-
giving, I give him weasel tails because
he loves Pomp, because he will provide
for him like a father. Yet still I dream
of my blue beads. Vulture talons snatch
them from me. I sleep naked in falling snow.

My Best Dresses
Apr-Jul, 1806

I tan sheep's hide with buffalo brains,
sew seams with sinew, sew elk's teeth
and sheep's tails on the yoke, fringe
around the hem, scatter fringe here
and there for prettiness. Counting
from the sheep hunt to the day
a woman steps out of the house to aah's,
a dress is a long time coming together.
Charbonneau doesn't care about time
or my near nakedness. He rips my best
dresses from my hands and trades
them for a horse. A horse to replace
one he failed to picket. His new horse
steps in a badger hole and throws him.
While he lies on a sheepskin, groaning,
bruised from nose to shinbone,
Pomp and I go to the creek. We splash,
sing, laugh, happy as otters.

