

Barbara Drake

Life Map: Clatskanie

Here is Clatskanie, the town
where I learned to read when I was four.
The old library was a house at the top of town.
This, said mother, is the library.
They have books you can read.
I inhaled the sweet, dry smell,
recognized my natural atmosphere.

That was our house.
I watched from the sunroom one night
as across town the high school burned.
The pear tree in the yard—
can it be the same tree?
After sixty years it's not much bigger—
maybe in time some things grow smaller.

This is the crossing where Maisy,
my pretty cocker spaniel,
was hit by a car,
ran to my lap, and died.
On that hill was Canham's house.
Francis raised chickens
and gave me a chick to raise once.

Upstairs in this brick building
is where my brother was born. I stayed
with our friends the Starrs,
Helen and Dr. Starr and their children,
Billy, Louanne, and Jim,

while mother enjoyed
her leisurely ten-day confinement.
Helen's duck and dumplings were favorites
—Paul hunted, Helen cooked. I liked
the swift and tidy way, nurse fashion,
she mitered corners of bed sheets.
Next door to Starrs' were the Steeles
and their greenhouse. I learned to draw pears and apples from
 watching
a girl paint fruit on pots there.

Stretched on a blanket in Starrs' back yard
I first read *Little Women*
the summer after first grade,
and sometimes sat in the play room reading
volumes of Nancy Drew
passed on from the Evensons,
whose children were grown.

Downtown was Saville Dixon's drugstore
with ice cream cones—strawberry,
pistachio, black walnut—the Piggly Wiggly,
the frosty locker with its smell of meat,
the bakery on the same side of the street
as Jackie's father's tavern,
the candy shop where a girl named Willy,
cheeks pink, white-blond hair gleaming,
weighed out and sold
magnificent blocks of rocky road candy.

There is the park we walked by,
Louanne, Billy, and I,
on our way to school
and where we saw a giant snake once—

we thought it had escaped
from the carnival with fire-eaters and jugglers
that had been there the week before.
Our parents said it was just a vine.
I say it was a snake.

During the war, Father was
the telephone man of Clatskanie.
They sent him back from the draft
because he was the only one. It was up to him
to keep everything connected,
including the ammunition dump outside town.
When they called at odd hours
we'd drive out, Mom, Dad, and me,
and park at the gate. Inside was secret
so Mom and I waited in the truck
while Dad went in and fixed the trouble.

On the dike land, smell of mint fields
freshened and beckoned
from Earle Chartrey's farm.
At home our phone had a handle
to get the operator. If there was a siren
Dad would crank the handle, and say,
"Hello Central, Kansas here. Where's the trouble?"
Central always knew.
Sometimes I saw Central
if I went to work with dad.
She'd humor me with conversation
if she wasn't too busy plugging cords in,
connecting everyone.

It was my town and I knew it all,
for even though I was young and small,

children ran free then.

Best of all was the river
where we picnicked spring,
summer, and fall. I'll never forget
the molasses smell of baked beans,
pickle and egg odors of potato salad,
fried chicken and hot dogs,
scents and sounds of the slough
where the boathouse floated
on log pontoons
blackened with mildew.

An outboard motor took us
between close banks
till we reached the river,
then wind picked up and sails filled
with a shiver. I sometimes rode
with Louanne
in the front hatch of Starrs' boat. We let
waves blow spray into our faces
as we sailed to the river side
of Wallace Island.

There everyone spent the day playing.
Sometimes there were boat races
or treasure hunts. In August 1945 a radio
on a big sailboat from Astoria picked up the news: The war was over.
Our parents hugged and cheered
and the boys on the boat whooped
and jumped into the river.

I will always love the smell
of cottonwoods, wet sand,
odors of deck paint and boat gas,
wet canvas of life jacket

floating my skinny self.
I wanted to stay there forever,
to live on the island, to time
my heartbeat with the slap, slap, slap
of water lapping sand, like minutes passing.
Every moment was a tiny wave
pulling you under, holding you up.

Sailing back as dark came on
I lay in the boat and listened to the sounds:
up smack up smack run river run
up smack up smack run river run.
Growing sleepy, I fell into a dream
I may still be dreaming.



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Early March

Early March—
the flowering chestnut tree is still bare.
A florescence of red-winged blackbirds
fills it with watery fluting.

Old clear-cuts in the Coast Range
shine with remnants of snow.
White flags—the forest surrenders.

Dog-toothed violets, erythronium, fawn lilies—
whatever we call them—tips of dappled leaves
poke above ground like tongues:
yakkety, yakkety, yak yak.
I like this green chatter.

My rooster flaps his wings,
screams, races
across the front porch,
and disappears
under the skimmia bush.
Are you crazy, Rooster? I say.
Then look up
to see a hawk on the oak branch.
That rooster's not so dumb.

Baby chicks at the feed store
peep and scatter feed.
Araucanas, barred rocks,
silver wyandottes. I fantasize

fresh eggs: green, blue, pink, and brown
from these fluff bits.

I can't resist spring chicks,
maybe I'll get six.

