

# Tamsen Donner

by Danica Colic

*"One of the death-stricken at Donner Lake may have said, with tremulous voice: 'Look! There, just above us, is a beautiful house.'"*

—C.F. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party*

## *Frontier*

Dear Sister, our house is made of hides  
lashed to branches; it tips in the gusts  
and down come the Bible and ladle,

four tea cups, the children's stiff rag dolls, all  
from the mantle of ice, and up again

when the wind dies and I set it to rights  
and turn back to kettle and coaxing the fire,

pouring the endless weak brew gone  
half-cold before it meets their blue lips.

How quickly the warmth is snuffed out of all things,

how grateful we are for our chores.

The children progress in their lessons.  
At daybreak, the fine winter sun  
lights the veins in the walls  
and their faces, crept over by frost.

*Slates*

In the first fortnight, Dear Sister, I dreamt the farm and cursed our guts and in moments of fugue would hum in the pantry while taking down foodstuffs, for instance, or sweeping the floor. I would hear the scratching of its straws, so real was the sensation. Or, I would rush through the front rooms, turning the shutter-cranks to drive out the cold. Then know myself as suddenly to be kneeling on the hardened snow, writing the children's lesson in a steady hand.

*I Wake in the Night*

Dearest, it is lightless without hope  
of wick or flint, and so brutal  
the cold that I am quite senseless of their bodies  
beside mine—mine?  
Mine is constant and discarnate. Are these blankets?  
Are these my children, their seizing breaths  
evidence of my own form?

*On the Death of Our Trusted Dog, Uno*

My only S., it was one of the drivers who asked—  
he came to me ashamed—Ma'am, he said—what sort of name is that  
for a creature as myself—when I had thought of it, myself—first  
two weeks ago?—The only decorum I requested:—In the woods,  
where the children do not venture, and away  
from their ears—He was allowed, at home, to sprawl  
before the hearth—The wedding china from Boston,

the full-blown roses.

*Sister, Keep My Memory in Your House*

What am I to you but nearly forgotten—the reflection of your skirts  
on the polished floor— you roam the halls with purpose, the ring of  
keys  
at your waist— The girl in the kitchen in your mended blue—

her eyes are narrow, covetous  
—take care.

Our lessons, our hoops, our tightly woven hair—Sundays  
bent over embroidery and verse after verse—

There was a time we imagined it—the girls and the boys in their  
rough quarters—the girls in our mended dresses, the girls and their  
boys  
in the fields

although we never spoke it, although we lay as near to one flesh  
beneath the quilts in winter, the lamp oil singeing the glassed air.

*The Skeleton*

My witness. It was all was left  
after we scraped the hair from the hides  
and tore them in stripes  
and boiled them to paste

—a tracery of branches useless

against the snow. We wake at night  
and shake ourselves and sleep and wake  
to grind the skins between our teeth.

Do you recall our meager girlhood?  
The dull winters, the coarse meal  
bubbling long on the fire,  
somewhere in the pot a dice of bacon  
chased by the long-handled spoon?

How do we swallow now?  
We eat the skins; the last a lap-robe  
with rot in the fringe; it had been the door.

No door, no roof, no sound but snow,  
no light but from the coals  
beneath the kettle, no souls but these,  
fed by the hide, shaking within the house of sticks  
that is no shelter.

### *Foxes*

It is our impulse, Sister,  
to curl around what ember remains,  
unlike these creatures  
so brave of the cold and  
all through the ordeal fearless of us,

yipping on the rocks  
above our heads, their ribs  
girded in ice, these beauties  
who look me in the eye,  
unlike the reverend who blushed when

I confessed the feeling of spirit  
leaving body during certain hymns,  
and you laughed at me in the  
carriage home because I was  
too thin and given to strong  
emotion and you couldn't fathom  
the desire to leave  
your plump trappings—

and the mornings I rose  
early and walked the fields  
where the foxes knew to fear us and  
I wanted keenly to touch them,  
to be fox or wind or long grass, not  
a human girl—and how

it grieves me now to think of rising  
and pinning my hair, the heavy  
oak bedstead, our thick flannel gowns  
and the piano alone in the parlor because  
it was not only that spectral line  
that tied me, but these things, your dear face  
grumbling inside your tilted bonnet  
about the long cold service, our steaming  
feet by the fire and

there was never, truly, the wish  
to leave entirely, only  
to be nearer  
those things that escaped me,  
Sister.

