

The Voyage Forward a Poetry Duet by Colleen Machut.

The following poem is based on interviews with Sheboygan native Deb Sabol-Williams about her experiences interviewing family members who lived during the time of the historic women's rights movement in Wisconsin. This poem presents two perspectives on the women's rights/suffragist movement.

Section 1 (Agda - an immigrant, not involved in women's rights movement)

Why force foot to pavement
when priority is beaten breathless
by pangs that ricochet through bellies,
and preoccupy minds with each visceral bellow...

...when pale arms,
thin and trembling,
reach to be nourished,
but love alone is not enough
to soften the edges
of protruding ribs
and fill the emptiness of mouths
with portions equal to hunger.

...when I baptize my home with bristle-brush water,
rinsing filth from the faces of plates
to fortify my family
against contamination,
which lurks in the shadows of cupboards
and looms with tendril fingers
over scant supplies of sustenance.

...when hands fold and heads bow
and prayers are mumbled in the darkness,
requesting guidance
as we combine with a new world,
teaching our youth to preserve
the twists and turns of our native words
on the curves of their tongues
and in the cadence of their songs,
singing as our ancestors have sung.

Why force foot to pavement,
when our history must be heard;
when our story is not done...

Section 2 (Ida - women's rights advocate)

I must force foot to pavement
 when spirits need leading
 and fires need lighting in the souls of daughters
 who reject dismissal and decapitate domination;
 who nourish the flame of liberation
 without the need for validation.

...when pale arms,
 thin and trembling,
 reach for signs
 and hold them high,
 for love alone is not enough
 to soften the edges
 of lines of oppression
 and fill the emptiness of mouths
 with songs of equality.

...when I am called to claw with bristling spine,
 scratching filth from the faces of power,
 and fortify hearts against slant-eyed placation
 which silently sifts through society's foundation,
 laughing as it lingers
 in the cracks of words and phrases.

...when hands hold and heads lift
 and prayers are welded with gifts of plenty
 to galvanize words into actions
 whose aims will someday be won.

I must force foot to pavement
 when our future must be forged;
 when our story has just begun.

Section 3 (Ida and Agda)

Both (Staggered - Agda starts first): I must teach

Agda: my children

Ida: the next generation

Agda: to re-read our words

Ida: to re-write the words

Ida: and fight

Agda: for a sense of self.

Agda: I want us to survive.

Ida: I want more than to survive.

Agda: So with my eyes dry,

Ida: So with my eyes lit,

Agda: congratulating my calluses,

Ida: thanking my thickened skin,

Both: I voyage forward.