



# June McGlashan Dirks

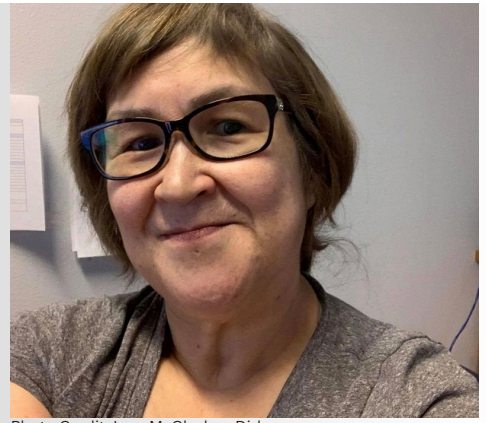


Photo Credit June McGlashan Dirks

**“They had children. They protected the children. And knew that the children will one day be the only living species left of the great sea-dwellers.”** *The Island of Women*

## Selected Poetry Discussion Guide

### About The Poet:

“June McGlashan began writing at the early age of 16. After receiving her high school diploma in Unalaska, she attended Sheldon Jackson College and received her A.A. degree. During her time at Sheldon Jackson she worked with and knew personally such Alaskan poets and writers as John Haines, Cheryl Morse, Fred Bigjim, and Sister Goodwin” (Bruchac, 1991).

Born in Akutan, Alaska, McGlashan Dirks’ poetry reflects her life in remote Aleutian Island communities, her Unangan ancestors, the lives of Unangan People today and the beautiful and rugged environment of the Islands. McGlashan Dirks’ work has been published in *Raven Tells Stories: An Anthology of Alaskan Native Writing*, *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, *Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators: The Expanded Edition* and *The Alaska Native Reader - History, Culture, Politics*. McGlashan resides in the Aleutian Islands, has four children and several grandchildren (McGlashan, 2024).

### Selected Poems:

June McGlashan Dirks shares of herself through her poetry, unveiling intimate moments from her life. Within these verses, she not only reveals glimpses of her own experiences but also portrays the enduring presence of ancestral Unangan values amidst the breathtaking yet unforgiving terrain of Unangam Tanangin (Aleutian Islands).

The harsh but beautiful landscape and weather of the Aleutian Islands is both hinted at in some of the poems and wholly articulated in others. In this section of the poem, “Night After the Storm,” McGlashan Dirks writes subtly about the weather; “Winter ravens become silent, as the seaotters again claim village harbors.” In contrast, in the piece, “The Wait,” she boldly writes, “The winds begin to williwaw. Colder snow piles on my doorstep.”

The poem, “Grandmama’s Visit,” published in *Raven Tells Stories: An Anthology of Alaskan Native Writing*, expresses the special connection between a grandchild and grandparent and highlights the

traditional values of respect, community and acting with kindness. This poem also reveals information about the poet's natural world.

In "The Wait," published in *Raven Tells Stories: An Anthology of Alaskan Native Writing*, McGlashan uses the common experience of waiting for the fishing fleet to safely return as a means to examine loneliness but she also provides hints into the harshness of the weather and landscape of the Aleutian Islands.

From 1912 until 1939 a whaling station was operated on Akutan Island. It was the only whaling station in the Aleutian Islands. This commercial whaling operation killed somewhere near 5,300 whales in its time of operation. The whales were killed to be rendered for oil (Coastview, 2023). The whole whale was not used. The body was thought of as useless trash. This is contrary to Unangan "right ways of being a real human being" including, "Live with and respect the land, sea and all nature" (University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2021). When a whale gifted itself to a hunter the hunter and the community showed respect by using the entire gift to sustain the community. McGlashan explores both the whaling station and the interrelationship of Unangan People and the whales that sustained them in "Whale Chief's Son," which was published in *Raven Tells Stories: An Anthology of Alaskan Native Writing*.

In June McGlashan's poem, "The Island of Women," published in *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, she speaks to women as survivors; hunting for the survival of the community and surviving the colonizer's ways. In this poem the role of women is unfortunately of victim, afterthought, and endurer, but also, shaman, healer, hunter, provider, mother and survivor. McGlashan's poem shares sacred hunting practices including showing respect to our animal relations.

"Night After the Storm" published in *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, is a descriptive piece about moving into winter. With the final line, "Every natural Being takes a bite of winter fever," the reader can almost feel the cold.

## Discussion Questions:

1. The Aleutian Islands are a unique area of the world. Describe this area using imagery from June McGlashan Dirks' poetry.
2. Considering the challenging environment depicted in the selected poems, which values do you believe are essential for survival amidst harsh weather and rugged terrain?
3. Does your community or culture have ancestral or traditional values? How are they similar or different to Unangan traditional values expressed in the selected poems?
4. The poem, "Grandmama's Visit," shares a sweet time of connection. How do you know you belong? What gives you that sense of belonging?
5. From the poem, "Whale Chief's Son," imagine the ancestors were watching the killing of five thousand three hundred whale relatives. What do you think they felt about the killing? Explore your feelings about environmental damage and overuse of resources. How does this poem explore the interconnectedness of ancestral values and more current events?
6. Using McGlashan Dirks' poems as a starting point, do you think we are moving toward a world back in balance? Share your reasoning.
7. Explore the different roles of women in the selected poems of June McGlashan Dirks. Do you feel, or have you felt, a connection to any of the roles presented?
8. Specifically referencing, "The Island of Women," how does McGlashan use cultural references to convey the changing roles of women?
9. Were Native women more at risk before or after colonization? In which ways?

10. After reading “The Island of Women,” do you think traumatic events had to be suppressed to keep surviving? What are your thoughts about generational trauma?
11. Is there a particular selected poem that spoke to you about the past, present and future? Did any of them provide you with a sense of hopefulness?



"[A fog-bound Aleutian island \(NOAA/unidentified fotog\)](#)" by [pingnews.com](#) Creative Commons

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