



A Lesson Plan for Alaska Literature

Rachel Epstein

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A Lesson Plan for Alaska Literature.

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ISBN 979-8-9959874-0-6 (paper)
ISBN 979-8-9959874-1-3 (PDF)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026911706

Book design by Emily Tallman/Poetica
Cover art by Stephen D. Bolen

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A Lesson Plan for Alaska Literature

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Poems and artwork are presented with permission from Susie Bevins-Ericsen, Stephen D. Bolen, Anne Coray, Jerrod Galanin, Wilson Justin, Joan Naviyuk Kane, Michael Sweeney, X’unei Lance Twitchell, and Jennifer Angaiak Wood.

Dedication

My deepest gratitude goes to Susie Bevins-Ericsen for her art in public spaces that welcomed people living in Anchorage.

To Michael Brian Mitchell for our life, rich beyond measure.

And to the memory of my mother Florence Epstein and her life full of kindness.

In Order of Appearance: Poets and Artists

John Haines' Literary Recordings 1967 and 1992
T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"
Antonio Machado, "Has My Heart Gone To Sleep?"
Edwin Muir, "The Horses"
Robinson Jeffers, "Animals"
Wendell Berry, "Look Out"
Wallace Stevens, "Domination of Black"
William E. Stafford, "Accountability"
William Carlos Williams, "Spring and All"
Joan Naviyuk Kane, "Insomnia at North"
Joan Naviyuk Kane, "Milk Black Carbon"
Jo Going, "Legacy"
Jo Going, "Ermine in the Woodpile"
Anne Coray, "The Egyptians Had It All Wrong"
Anne Coray, "Common Measures"
Marie Tozier, "Approaching Winter"
Stephen D. Bolen, "Night Birds"
Stephen D. Bolen, "Friend"
Stephen D. Bolen, "301 Shore Avenue"
Stephen D. Bolen, "Home Again"
Wilson Justin, "I Heard the Mountain Call"
John Haines, from "The Legend"
dg nanouk okpik, from "Confluence"

Susie Bevins-Ericsen, *One With The Land*
Susie Bevins-Ericsen, *Flight From Tradition*
Jerrod Galanin, *People's Protection Variant III*
X'unei Lance Twitchell, *Du Xoonx'i Yan, Dleit Geedi/His Family, the Snowstorm*
Jennifer Angaiak Wood, *First Growth*

A Lesson Plan for Alaska Literature illustrates poetry's response to life's questions governing humanity. Using John Haines as an example, it features contemporary Alaska poets as well as the poets who inspired him throughout his life.

John Haines' poems are accessible via the digitized audio recordings of 1967 and 1992. His resonant voice in the stillness of words is mesmerizing. If the internet is not available *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer: Collected Poems by John Haines* and *May the Owl Call Again: A Return to Poet John Meade Haines, 1924-2011* can be substituted.

Many of the poem online links in Part Two include brief analyses that clarify the meaning of seemingly difficult American poems while the contemporary artwork introduces people to traditions in Alaska that can be visually grasped. To experience the immensity of American literature, it is best to read the printed essay and poems in Part Three a second time, in sequence, without referring to a critique or visual representation.

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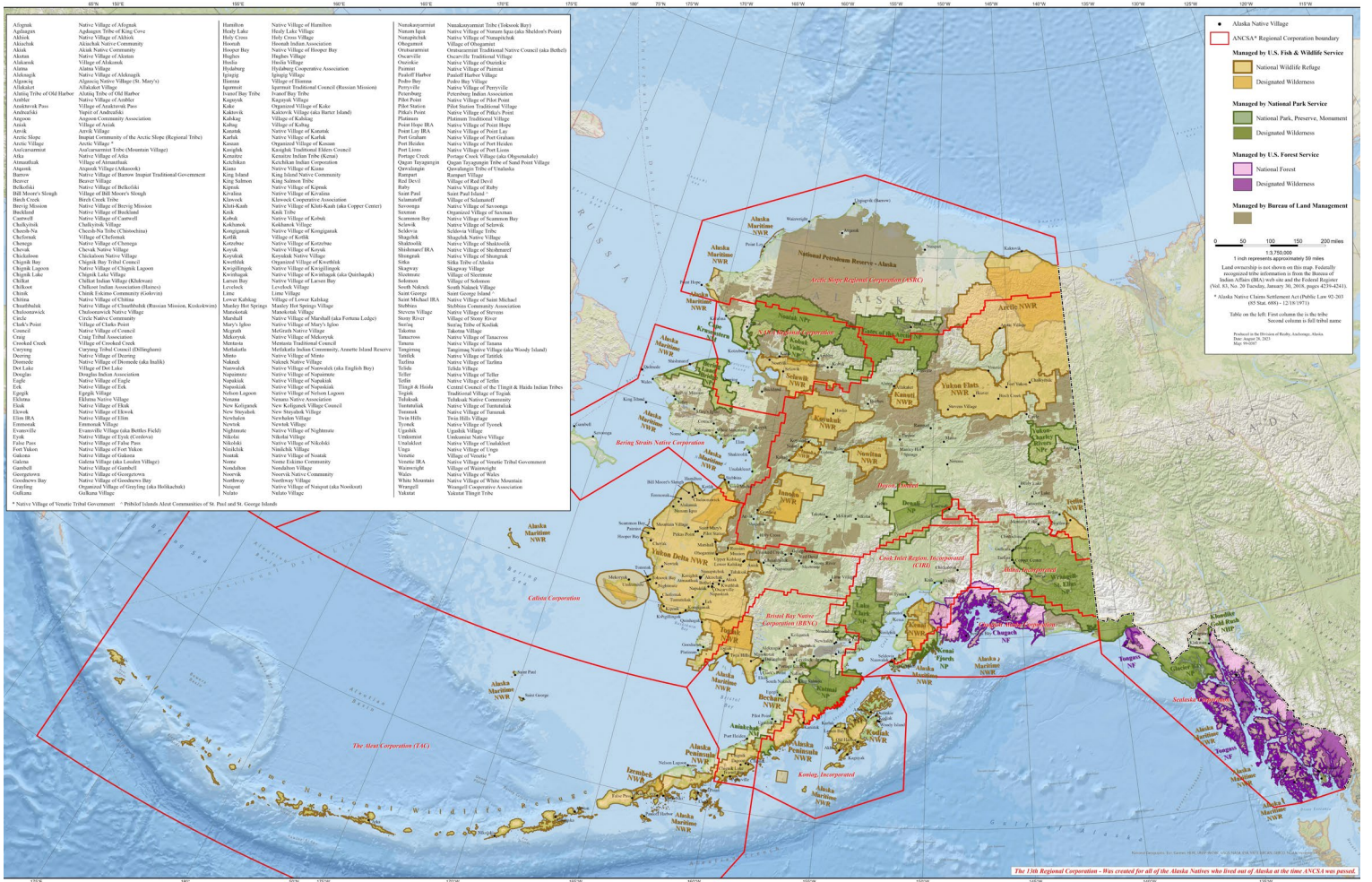
Preface

After WWII, the goal to restructure all aspects of Alaska Native life failed in spite of:

- Forced assimilation of Alaska Native children in residential boarding schools
- Forced sterilization of Alaska Native and American Indian women by the Indian Health Service (1960s-1970s)
- Contamination of Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS) near villages
- The Soldiers' and Sailors' Homestead Act (1862-1986)
- Rapid military infrastructure expansion (roads and airports)
- Dramatic increase in the non-Native Alaska population stemming from the rise of federal and state employees, stationed military personnel, commercial seafood workers, and the influx of thousands of Prudhoe Bay Oil Field workers (*see map on page 5*)
- Increased rate of intermarriage and multiracial identities
- Explosion of global corporate resource extraction in mining, timber, and fishing
- The U.S. land acts:
(*see map on page 4*)
 - * Alaska Statehood Act, 1959 excluded aboriginal title to Native lands
 - * Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, 1971 (ANCSA) required Alaska Native Corporation members to prove one-quarter Alaska Native blood quantum and excluded corporation enrollments for people born after 1971; ANCSA was later amended in 1991 to grant each Alaska Native Corporation the right to determine membership eligibility
 - * ANCSA also established hundreds of Alaska Native Village Corporations with the right to determine tribal and community membership; however, except for a few exceptions, subsurface land rights were granted to regional Alaska Native Corporations
 - * ANCSA legitimized and enforced corporate governance over all aspects of Alaska Native political, economic, and social life
 - * Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, 1980 (ANILCA) and the expansion of National Park Service territory challenged the integrity of Alaska Native villages and subsistence lifestyle

John Haines rarely addressed the presence of Alaska Natives--the Lower Tanana Dene (Athabaskan), traditional subsistence lifestyle or the land rights issues of the day. In that vein, one can dismiss John Haines as having a self-centered, white settler mentality— that of a typical WWII veteran granted a land permit to take or do whatever he wanted to on vacant land — ignorant of the people intimately connected to that land for thousands of years. In another way, however, one can listen to John Haines and discover, perhaps for the first time, the beauty of poetry.

Map of Federally Recognized Tribes in Alaska

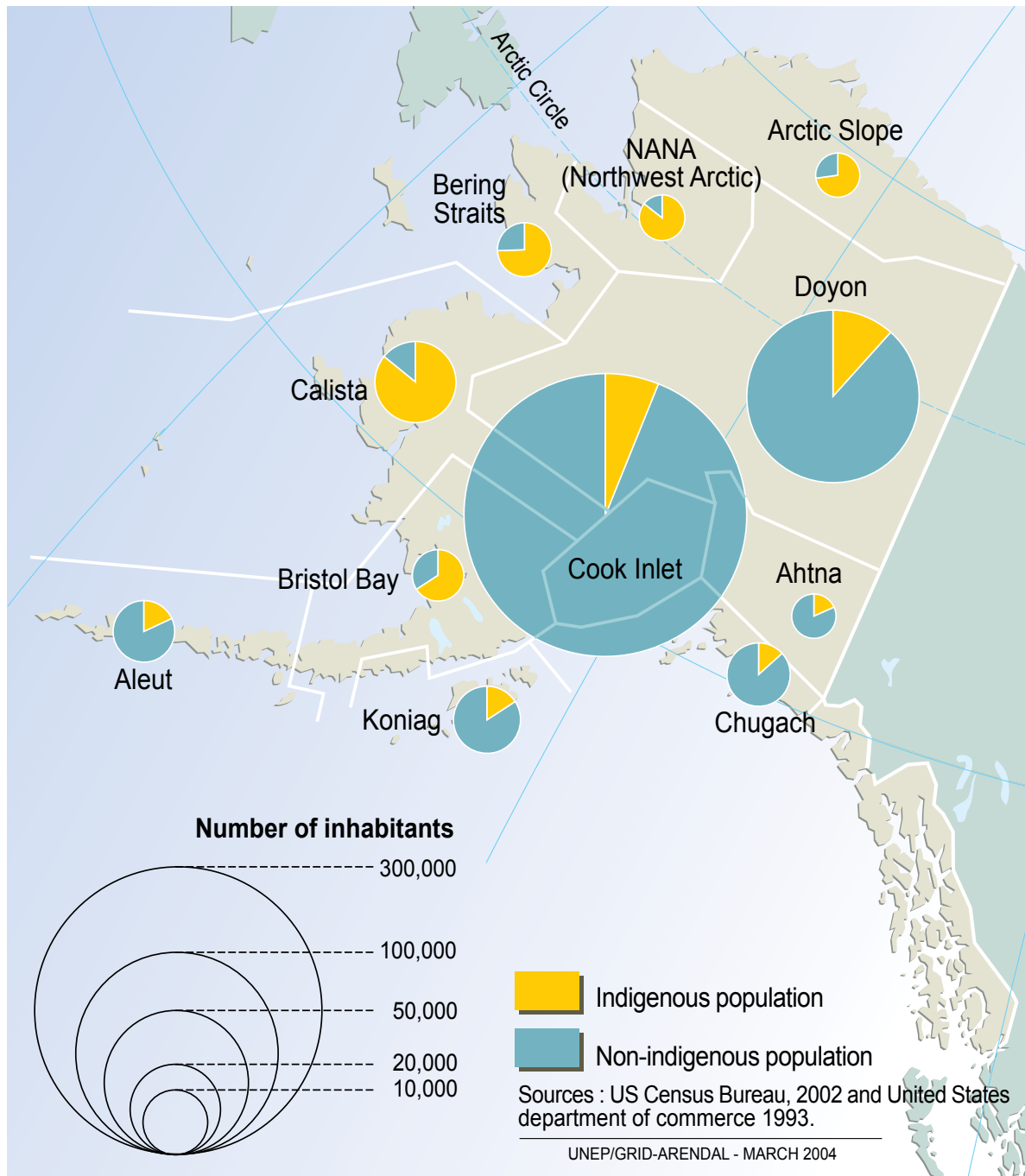


www.fws.gov/media/map-federally-recognized-tribes-alaska

Indigenous Population Distribution in Alaska GRID-Arendal

Cartographer Philippe Rekacewicz

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION IN ALASKA



<https://grida.no/resources/7656>

A Lesson Plan for Alaska Literature

Many people come to Alaska wanting to experience a life different from that of the lower 48. However, for those who reside in Alaska, home is not simply a contrast to the lower 48. It is in following the footsteps of people who passed before—a place seeded in cycles of darkness, coldness, and light—where home is made.

John Haines (1924-2011)

It was at Richardson that John Haines became a poet. It was at Richardson that he came to understand poetry and later *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Within Alaska he was known as a literary figure, one beyond academic and institutional structures. Today readers can discover the influences he transformed into an “Alaskan experience” with poetry, stories, fables, fables from nature--snow and starting over again. Unlike any other poet, he made a long-standing contribution to America’s literary tradition.

Part One

I. Background

Family and Education: Raised in a traditional Navy family, John Haines and his brother often moved from coast to coast. When young, after experiencing a traumatic earthquake in Long Beach, California and then after a man jumped to his death in front of him in Los Angeles, his family moved to the Pacific NW. There, his father read him children's books and Rudyard Kipling stories. In school he studied Latin, Catholic liturgy, Chaucer in Old English, the Scottish poet Robert Burns, and classic English literature, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau. After serving in the Pacific during WWII, he returned to school and studied art, painting and sculpture in Washington DC, NYC, and Provincetown, MA.

II. Richardson Homestead

John Haines described himself by saying "I am neither solitary nor strong, and I've been a 97 pound weakling most of my life." (Elliston Digital Archive U of Ohio Cincinnati.) At Richardson, when not completely engaged in maintaining/surviving a subsistence lifestyle—i.e. hunting, obtaining and preparing food, building shelter, sewing clothes, feeding animals, etc., John Haines spent time reading and writing. 30 literary journals first published poems that were collected in *News from the Glacier: Selected Poems 1960-1980*; and over the years various small presses published 11 poetry collections or chapbooks. He translated Spanish poems by Miguel Hernandez, Luis Cernuda, Gloria Fuertes; wrote poems after Li Po (Li Bai) and Tu Fu (Du Fu) and wrote poems with Horace, Friedrich Hölderlin, John Dryden, John Keats, William Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson, William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot influences. Wesleyan University Press published *Winter News* in 1966, *The Stone Harp* in 1971, and *News from the Glacier: Selected Poems 1960-1980* in 1982. Throughout his life he worked to refine his poetry and craft.

III. Women at Richardson

John Haines married Peggy Elizabeth Davis (1929-2012) and Jo Ella Hussey (1929-2006), both women he met at art school in New York City. He left Alaska in 1969 and moved back to Richardson in 1981-- “it took lots of work (being 57) to reestablish the homestead”. Having women live with him at Richardson, including 3 dedicated artists, affected John Haines’ language and perception in innumerable ways. His second wife Jo Ella Haines lived at Richardson for eleven years where she experimented with painting and crafting birch bark paper. Jo Going (1947-2024) encouraged his memoir and essay writing focus.

IV. Outside

While gaining popularity, John Haines developed the face of a demanding book reviewer and critic. Dismissive. Blunt. Relentless. Inflexible. Soon his literary reputation became smudged. Still, his poems about art, sculptors (Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti) and the history of sculpture linked to Richardson in language, images, and tone; poems that brought his cultural past into the present.

V. Literary Influences

The literary figures whom John Haines repeatedly deferred to were Antonio Machado (1875-1939), Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) and his recorded poems, Edwin Muir (1887-1959) and his history-fables, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). Each poet, however, seems unrelated. William E. Stafford (1914-1993) and Wendell Berry (1934-2026) were his good friends, but he had contentious disagreements with them about local, political, and environmental responsibilities. Poets William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) were/are very complex and present questions surrounding sound, poetic content, meaning, and form. Poet Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) who lived in secluded Carmel Point, Monterey, California, was unwavering antiwar, anti-WWII, and quite harsh; wrote Crow and Hawk poems.



Salcha River-Tanana River, 2017, photo credit Kris Harris

Part Two

VI. *The Power of Recitation: John Haines' Extraordinary Oratory Performance*

Listen carefully to these recordings or if the internet is not accessible *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*, Graywolf Press, 1996 and/or *May the Owl Call Again: A Return to Poet John Meade Haines, 1924-2011*, Cirque Press, 2024 can be substituted.

San Francisco State Poetry Center 1967; 61:10 min.

<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/poetrycenter/bundles/222896>

(Click Content for poem selection)

Elliston Collection: Poetry Readings and Lectures University of Cincinnati 1992; 56:54 min.

<https://drc.libraries.uc.edu/items/c2a68d42-2b50-41d4-9049-a5a082da7017>

(Tracks 10-18 from New Poems)

Poems were recorded for others to experience and contemplate; not only be read. At literary events John Haines discussed how certain poems were constructed: i.e. “Rain Country”, “The Flight”, “The Incurable Home”, “At Slim’s River”, “Into the Glacier”, “Fairbanks Under the Solstice”, “Prayer to the Snowy Owl”, “The Wax Museum”—with actual place, actual people, actual history, and actual fabrication in mind. From being inspired by Yeats (in “Rain Country”) to borrowing a line from a *Newsweek* magazine article (in “The Flight”) to creating a Northern place (in “Into the Glacier”), each poem was crafted with unseen skill.

VII. *Literary Exchanges: Meaning and Forms Shared*

The following poems express themes similar to those found in John Haines’ corpus. 20th century topics surrounding war, extinction and survival are reflected in many of the poems. Noted are the dates when poems were first published. (See Part Three, Essay and Poems on Paper to read poems without analysis.)

T. S. Eliot

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>

Antonio Machado

“Has My Heart Gone To Sleep?” (1907)

<https://allpoetry.com/Has-My-Heart-Gone-To-Sleep->

Antonio Machado

“¿Mi corazón se ha dormido?” (1907)

<https://www.poetasandaluces.com/poema/156/>

Edwin Muir

“The Horses” (1956)

<https://allpoetry.com/poem/8496359-The-Horses-by-Edwin-Muir>

Robinson Jeffers

“Animals” (1951)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robinson-jeffers>

Wendell Berry

“Look Out” (2005)

https://www.joanszymko.com/sites/joanszymko.com/files/sample_scores/JS-088_Look%20Out.rvsd24_perusal.pdf

Wallace Stevens

“Domination of Black” (1916)

<https://allpoetry.com/Domination-Of-Black>

William E. Stafford

“Accountability” (1976)

<https://allpoetry.com/Accountability>

William Carlos Williams

“Spring and All” (1923)

<https://allpoetry.com/Spring-And-All>

From these examples one can discern how John Haines’ voice, principles, language, and delicate tone stand firm within an American literary tradition.

VIII. A Literary Legacy

Study classics, poets and write poems. Consider sound, listen, contemplate words, share phrases. See how English comes alive. Or start with John Haines to appreciate the depths of poetry.

How remarkable John Haines is within the western literary tradition! He stands Alaskan. Puts environment first then self; nature has voice; and within the context of nature, he conjures human experience, consciousness, and feelings beyond description.

IX. Poets of Alaska: Creating a Literary Tradition

These poets convey a sensibility, closeness and immediacy to place that can be contrasted to and in line with John Haines' poetry and the western literary tradition upon which he drew. By highlighting their voices and creative achievements, one can add the label "Alaska" to their work and in doing so extend the range of American literature. (See Part Three, Essay and Poems on Paper)

Joan Naviyuk Kane

"Insomnia at North" (2006)

<https://agnionline.bu.edu/poetry/insomnia-at-north/>

Joan Naviyuk Kane

"Milk Black Carbon" (2017)

<https://pinwheeljournal.com/poets/joan-naviyuk-kane/>

Jo Going

"Legacy" (2014)

<https://www.washingtonsquarereview.com/jo-going>

Jo Going

"Ermine in the Woodpile" (2014)

<https://www.jogoinc.net/still%20and%20again/still%20and%20again.pdf>

Anne Coray

"The Egyptians Had It All Wrong" (2004)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=184&issue=5&page=26>

Anne Coray

“Common Measures” (2009)

<https://scarlettanager.com/bone-strings-poems-by-anne-coray/>

Marie Tozier

“Approaching Winter” (2017)

<https://www.aqreview.org/aqr-vol-33-number-3-and-4-winterspring-2017/category/Marie+Tozier>

Stephen D. Bolen

“301 Shore Avenue” (2014)

<https://49writers.org/alaska-short-301-shore-avenue-by/>

[Stephen D. Bolen’s “Night Birds”, “Friend”, and “Home Again” written in 2014 and Wilson Justin’s “I Heard the Mountain Call” written in 2026 are included in Part Three, Essay and Poems on Paper.]

X. Final Thoughts: John Haines and The Epic of Gilgamesh, a 4000-year-old story

For the strong man driven
to question,
and for him who, equally strong,
believes without asking,
sleep follows like a lasting shadow.

-- from “The Legend”

In his last book *Descent*, John Haines stated he was able to understand *The Epic of Gilgamesh* because of his experiences at Richardson. In the beginning life was in balance. Then came the existential crisis of separation, unfair separation, betrayal. At Richardson he had never felt that way. Yet later he finds himself deeply parted. He had abandoned Richardson in the late 1960s because “things changed”. Speaking requests had flooded in. He returned in 1981 to settle in. Then returned again, returned to poetry.

XI. Biographical Review

Michigan Quarterly Review

Vol. 16, no. 3 Summer 1977 “Nineteen Thirty-One”

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrarchive/act2080.0016.003>

Permafrost

Volume 3, no. 1 Fall 1979

https://scholarworks.alaska.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=uaf_permafrost

Jo Ella Haines was the featured artist in the *Alaska Magazine* February 1973 issue where she described her method for painting birds on handmade birch bark paper. Notably, she received the All Alaska Juried Artist Award in 1971 for watercolor and in 1982 the award for “Fall Tundra in Alaska” for oil.

Bloomsbury Review Vol. 24 #4 2004

<https://bloomsburyreview.com/Archives/2004/John%20Haines.pdf>

“The Legend”

published in *The New Criterion*, May 1997

<https://newcriterion.com/article/the-legend/>

Also published in *Descent*, CavanKerry Press, 2010

XII. Conclusion

Although I had a familiarity with famous American poets, my desire to understand John Haines’ life led me to revisit the poets he revered. In this way my appreciation for poetry grew and a new respect for poets from Alaska developed. The challenge, though, to incorporate an American English expression in line with Alaska still remains a daunting task.

Rooted in song and oral tradition; bringing the past into the present; the nature of poetry (and poetic art) continues to propel humanity onward.

from “Confluence” by dg nanouk okpik

I am human: an ego-syntonic woman;
water; I am contradiction, water & blood
on a page of words joining; meeting; in union;
a collision of squid ink; salmon; & paper.

Blood Snow, Wave Books, 2002

Alaska Poetic Art



Susie Bevins-Ericsen
One With The Land

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution
Catalog Number (26/4320) Photo by NMAI Photo Services



Susie Bevins-Ericsen
Flight From Tradition

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution
Catalog Number (226/4358) Photo by NMAI Photo Services



Jerrod Galanin
People's Protection Variant III



X'unei Lance Twitchell
Du Xoonx'i Yan, Dleit Geedi
His Family, the Snowstorm



Jennifer Angaiak Wood
First Growth

(from the Weapons of War, Tools of Renewal series)

Part Three

XIII. Essay and Poems on Paper

Tradition and the Individual Talent, T. S. Eliot

I.

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to “the tradition” or to “a tradition”; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and-so is “traditional” or even “too traditional.” Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure. If otherwise, it is vaguely approbative, with the implication, as to the work approved, of some pleasing archaeological reconstruction. You can hardly make the word agreeable to English ears without this comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology.

Certainly the word is not likely to appear in our appreciations of living or dead writers. Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius. We know, or think we know, from the enormous mass of critical writing that has appeared in the French language the critical method or habit of the French; we only conclude (we are such unconscious people) that the French are “more critical” than we, and sometimes even plume ourselves a little with the fact, as if the French were the less spontaneous. Perhaps they are; but we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism. One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be

enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, “tradition” should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.

In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. To conform merely would be for the new work

not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and many conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other.

To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past: he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period. The first course is inadmissible, the second is an important experience of youth, and the third is a pleasant and highly desirable supplement. The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery. But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.

Someone said: “The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.” Precisely, and they are that which we know.

I am alive to a usual objection to what is clearly part of my programme for the *métier* of poetry. The objection is that the doctrine requires a ridiculous amount of erudition (pedantry), a claim which can be rejected by appeal to the lives of poets in any pantheon. It will even be affirmed that much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility. While, however, we persist in believing that a poet ought to know as much as will not encroach upon his necessary receptivity and necessary laziness, it is not desirable to confine knowledge to whatever can be put into a useful shape for examinations, drawing-rooms, or the still more pretentious modes of publicity. Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum. What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

II.

Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. If we attend to the confused cries of the newspaper critics and the susurrus of popular repetition that follows, we shall hear the names of poets in great numbers; if we seek not Blue-book knowledge but the enjoyment of poetry, and ask for a poem, we shall seldom find it. I have tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. And I hinted, by an analogy, that the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of “personality,” not being necessarily more interesting, or having “more to say,” but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings. The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed

out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result. Or great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever: composed out of feelings solely. Canto XV of the *Inferno* (Brunetto Latini) is a working up of the emotion evident in the situation; but the effect, though single as that of any work of art, is obtained by considerable complexity of detail. The last quatrain gives an image, a feeling attaching to an image, which “came,” which did not develop simply out of what precedes, but which was probably in suspension in the poet’s mind until the proper combination arrived for it to add itself to. The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.

If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is the variety of types of combination, and also how completely any semi-ethical criterion of “sublimity” misses the mark. For it is not the “greatness,” the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts. The episode of Paolo and Francesca employs a definite emotion, but the intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity in the supposed experience it may give the impression of. It is no more intense, furthermore, than Canto XXVI, the voyage of Ulysses, which has not the direct dependence upon an emotion. Great variety is possible in the process of transmutation of emotion: the murder of Agamemnon, or the agony of Othello, gives an artistic effect apparently closer to a possible original than the scenes from Dante. In the Agamemnon, the artistic emotion approximates to the emotion of an actual spectator; in Othello to the emotion of the protagonist himself. But the difference between art and the event is always absolute; the combination which is the murder of Agamemnon is probably as complex as that which is the voyage of Ulysses. In either case there has been a fusion of elements. The ode of Keats contains a number of feelings which have nothing particular to do with the nightingale, but which the nightingale, partly, perhaps, because of its attractive name, and partly because of its reputation, served to bring together.

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.

I will quote a passage which is unfamiliar enough to be regarded with fresh attention in the light—or darkness—of these observations:

*And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
For doating on her beauty, though her death
Shall be revenged after no common action.
Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewildering minute?
Why does yon fellow falsify highways,
And put his life between the judge's lips,
To refine such a thing—keeps horse and men
To beat their valours for her? . . .*

In this passage (as is evident if it is taken in its context) there is a combination of positive and negative emotions: an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it. This balance of contrasted emotion is in the dramatic situation to which the speech is pertinent, but that situation alone is inadequate to it. This is, so to speak, the structural emotion, provided by the drama. But the whole effect, the dominant tone, is due to the fact that a number of floating feelings, having an affinity to this emotion by no means superficially evident, have combined with it to give us a new art emotion.

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that “emotion recollected in tranquillity” is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not “recollected,” and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is “tranquil” only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to

be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him “personal.” Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

III.

ὁ δὲ νοῦς ἴσως Θειότερόν τι καὶ ἀπαθές ἐστιν

This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry. To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.

Has My Heart Gone To Sleep?, *Antonio Machado*

Has my heart gone to sleep?
Have the beehives of my dreams
stopped working, the waterwheel
of the mind run dry,
scoops turning empty,
only shadow inside?

No, my heart is not asleep.
It is awake, wide awake.
Not asleep, not dreaming—
its eyes are opened wide
watching distant signals, listening
on the rim of vast silence.

¿Mi corazón se ha dormido?, *Antonio Machado*

¿Mi corazón se ha dormido?
Colmenares de mis sueños,
¿ya no labráis? ¿Está seca
la noria del pensamiento,
los cangilones vacíos,
girando, de sombra llenos?
No; mi corazón no duerme.
Está despierto, despierto.
Ni duerme ni sueña; mira,
los claros ojos abiertos,
señas lejanas y escucha
a orillas del gran silencio.

The Horses, *Edwin Muir*

Barely a twelvemonth after
The seven days war that put the world to sleep,
Late in the evening the strange horses came.
By then we had made our covenant with silence,
But in the first few days it was so still
We listened to our breathing and were afraid.
On the second day
The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer.
On the third day a warship passed us, heading north,
Dead bodies piled on the deck. On the sixth day
A plane plunged over us into the sea. Thereafter
Nothing. The radios dumb;
And still they stand in corners of our kitchens,
And stand, perhaps, turned on, in a million rooms
All over the world. But now if they should speak,
If on a sudden they should speak again,
If on the stroke of noon a voice should speak,
We would not listen, we would not let it bring
That old bad world that swallowed its children quick
At one great gulp. We would not have it again.
Sometimes we think of the nations lying asleep,
Curled blindly in impenetrable sorrow,
And then the thought confounds us with its strangeness.
The tractors lie about our fields; at evening
They look like dank sea-monsters couched and waiting.
We leave them where they are and let them rust:
“They’ll molder away and be like other loam.”
We make our oxen drag our rusty plows,
Long laid aside. We have gone back
Far past our fathers’ land.
And then, that evening
Late in the summer the strange horses came.
We heard a distant tapping on the road,
A deepening drumming; it stopped, went on again
And at the corner changed to hollow thunder.

We saw the heads
Like a wild wave charging and were afraid.
We had sold our horses in our fathers' time
To buy new tractors. Now they were strange to us
As fabulous steeds set on an ancient shield.
Or illustrations in a book of knights.
We did not dare go near them. Yet they waited,
Stubborn and shy, as if they had been sent
By an old command to find our whereabouts
And that long-lost archaic companionship.
In the first moment we had never a thought
That they were creatures to be owned and used.
Among them were some half a dozen colts
Dropped in some wilderness of the broken world,
Yet new as if they had come from their own Eden.
Since then they have pulled our plows and borne our loads,
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.
Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

Animals, *Robinson Jeffers*

At dawn a knot of sea-lions lies off the shore
In the slow swell between the rock and the cliff,
Sharp flippers lifted, or great-eyed heads, as they roll
 in the sea,
Bigger than draft-horses, and barking like dogs
Their all-night song. It makes me wonder a little
That life near kin to human, intelligent, hot-blooded, idle
 and singing, can float at ease
In the ice-cold midwinter water. Then, yellow dawn
Colors the south, I think about the rapid and furious lives in
 the sun:
They have little to do with ours; they have nothing to do
 with oxygen and salted water; they would look
 monstrous
If we could see them: the beautiful passionate bodies of
 living flame, batlike flapping and screaming,
Tortured with burning lust and acute awareness, that ride
 the storm-tides
Of the great fire-globe. They are animals, as we are. There
 are many other chemistries of animal life
Besides the slow oxidation of carbohydrates and
 amino-acids.

Look Out, *Wendell Berry*

Come to the window, look out, and see
the valley turning green in remembrance
of all springs past and to come, the woods
perfecting with immortal patience
the leaves that are the work of all of time,
the sycamore whose white limbs shed
the history of a man's life with their old bark,
the river quivering under the morning's breath
like the touched skin of a horse, and you will see
also the shadow cast upon it by fire, the war
that lights its way by burning the earth.
Come to your windows, people of the world,
look out at whatever you see wherever you are,
and you will see dancing upon it that shadow.
You will see that your place, wherever it is,
your house, your garden, your shop, your forest, your farm,
bears the shadow of its destruction by war
which is the economy of greed which is plunder
which is the economy of wrath which is fire.
The Lords of War sell the earth to buy fire,
they sell the water and air of life to buy fire.
They are little men grown great by willingness
to drive whatever exists into its perfect absence.
Their intention to destroy any place is solidly founded
upon their willingness to destroy every place.

Every household of the world is at their mercy,
the households of the farmer and the otter and the owl
are at their mercy. They have no mercy.
Having hate, they can have no mercy.
Their greed is the hatred of mercy.
Their pockets jingle with the small change of the poor.
Their power is the willingness to destroy
everything for knowledge which is money
which is power which is victory
which is ashes sown by the wind.

Leave your windows and go out, people of the world,
go into the streets, go into the fields, go into the woods
and along the streams. Go together, go alone.
Say no to the Lords of War which is Money
which is Fire. Say no by saying yes
to the air, to the earth, to the trees,
yes to the grasses, to the rivers, to the birds
and the animals and every living thing, yes
to the small houses, yes to the children. Yes.

Domination of Black, *Wallace Stevens*

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
In the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.
I heard them cry — the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

Accountability, *William E. Stafford*

Cold nights outside the taverns in Wyoming
pickups and big semis lounge idling, letting their
haunches twitch now and then in gusts of powder snow,
their owners inside for hours, forgetting as well
as they can the miles, the circling plains, the still town
that connects to nothing but cold and space and a few
stray ribbons of pavement, icy guides to nothing
but bigger towns and other taverns that glitter and wait:
Denver, Cheyenne.

Hibernating in the library of the school on the hill
a few pieces by Thomas Aquinas or Saint Teresa
and the fragmentary explorations of people like Alfred
North Whitehead crouch and wait amid research folders
on energy and military recruitment posters glimpsed
by the hard stars. The school bus by the door, a yellow
mound, clangs open and shut as the wind finds a loose
door and worries it all night, letting the hollow
students count off and break up and blow away
over the frozen ground.

Spring and All, *William Carlos Williams*

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast – a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines –

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches –

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind –

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined –
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance – Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

Insomnia at North, *Joan Naviyuk Kane*

I shall yet have a long sleep
When the dark is at a stand
In the woods. The rocks
Along the ridge

Will no longer ring
Like bells, but will
Become simple, gray
And silent. I will be

Still then, and sleep
As night now sleeps,
Swaying the larch
Outside my window.

It is losing its needles.
Dry slivers of gold
Drop in the tall,
Sheltering grass.

These I shall hurry,
And envy their settle.

Milk Black Carbon, *Joan Naviyuk Kane*

Observe the coal dust over boats in the harbor,
the snow load on the glacier. Take in the woman
who pursues a myth to counter another myth.
What dazes, scatters and filters: each respiration
blurs an image. The coal tipple tilts in its new skin.
Meadows blonde. From open shelves, honey jars
tumble to split and spill in the gasp of a temblor.
The thick odor of a nearby smoke will signal the end
of something, not summer. The fire veins as sap does,
translating stands of beetle-killed spruce to crackle
and torch. She cannot hurt too much, too long—
take in the woman you have not become. And
then, take a little breath and hold your breathing.
Breathe, don't move, and hold your breath again.

Legacy, *Jo Going*

Stones must wait
for the glacier
to walk them
down to the sea.

It is a wait
of ten thousand years.

Meanwhile the stones
gather to themselves
a long silence,
recording the falling
of each infinite
snowflake
that once was a star.

Meanwhile the ice,
drop
by
drop,
melts
aqua
into
light.

Ermine in the Woodpile, *Jo Going*

Minus 60
and in the morning snow,
a tracery of delicate tracks
circling the cabin.

That slip of white,
here,
there,
then gone,
in
and out
of winter
and the woodpile.

On my birthday
I nailed moose meat, frozen
to the window ledge,

and she came,
and gnawed,
and watched me inside
by the wood stove
watching her.

My candle wish,
for us,
changings
in this
unforgiving arctic,

turning
black to light,
night to white,
slipping
in and out
of winter and the woodpile,

here,
there,
then gone.

The Egyptians Had It All Wrong, *Anne Coray*

All your life you must return to the moon,
To rill and light that have little to do with the sun.

To the scarabed wrist and the hawk
that tomb and tunnel the parched heart

you must say no. Though it will be difficult
to take up the lexicon that has crossed out:

star, monument, scent of spice and resin.
Laden so, you will never decipher

the pull of a line that refuses to be scrolled
or stamped by the pharaoh of some foreign country.

And you must abide the charms
that are always eyeing you from a secret cubicle,

that beg to be bundled and taken along.
But see, we aren't going.

*This is not about aftermath or even anything
that blooms, exotically, like lotus.*

I live North. I choose this home because it's what I know.
Of brick and scale I can say

there are other unfathomable things
that speak to both moment and beyond:

cold and wind and snow.
If anything remains, it will be nothing I create.

Like a scribed obelisk I can only hope
to crumble and spill back into a current

that moves and lifts so gently I scarcely feel it,
until I look up and still and again

enter the pool of that unframed face
assuring so quietly: *This. Only this.*

Common Measures, *Anne Coray*

If you listen long to the waves
you will learn to measure distance,
broad strum of wind from the valley,
short pluck and pick from the lake's edge.

Those mornings when a wing of light
glides up above the bay we watch.
We talk: nothing much. Last night was cool.
The lake is calm. We've berries still to harvest.

Dinner: potatoes, grouse, and lettuce and dill
from the garden. Preparing it, I ask,
"Is meaning synonymous with worth?" "Some questions,"
says my husband, "sure make a slow salad."

September twenty-fourth. The swans and geese are leaving.
Which ones fly first? Are they nervous or wiser?
To the north, a joining of snow
to mountains more luminous than a church.

Port Alsworth: one hundred resident Baptists.
We're thirteen miles away, and staying. In summer,
dust from the airstrip toils upward and stalls;
a pterodactylic signature of souls.

History's full of false holds, like this lake
dubbed over, named for Clark. He only passed through once,
with a reporter. Qizhjah Vena,
the Dena'ina called it. "Many peoples gather."

We live on sacred ground. Brown Carlson, long gone,
buried his first wife on this plot, and up the hill
a circle of stones for my brother Paul.
O curse us spirits, if we so close, not visit.

Mountain cloud, solo drummer. We can't beat joy out.
It comes sometimes in the form of color:
rose on scarp and peak just west of Copper,
backdrop rhythm of sky, blue-violet.

Soon it will snow, and rosehips outliving the last
glow of summer won't survive the storms. Memory,
dried stem, works hard to remember them, like breath,
urging the late night coals to a color almost translucent.

Approaching Winter, *Marie Tozier*

A lone gull makes its way
Across the exposed silt of the naked river:
Tide out—stinking of malukchuks and rotting willows,
Loose feathers and one discarded sock, which clings
To the anchor line of a dogged fisherman's net.
An abandoned snowmachine,
Sunk last spring, sits exposed near the far shore.
The young gull is white and mottled grey,
Ambling on pink legs, long pale-yellow beak
Raised in the air; as if she is a debutante,
Unsure of how to hike her ruffled gown.

Night Birds, *Stephen D. Bolen*

Have you ever heard the world cry out back at you
Stand upon the frozen ground in the winter's darkness
As all the creatures crawl down to meet your wailing nuances
Like a dalliance to the feed, when the boys say sorry over the radio
Or the daemon you've been doesn't recognize you any longer
I've known your bones says the crying night's wind

I've set the world afire around you wanting you to end
What do you say when that night begins to laugh back
Tells you that you should probably go home
Between the two cities' lights controlling the huffing of that breath you want to catch
What then when the angel doesn't have any more love to give
When the fire of hearts clears the air like frostbite sticking to your cheek.

Friend, *Stephen D. Bolen*

Words came alive as she read them
A solemn night my visitor came
Picked up a book and I couldn't regard her the same
Serpent and angel the voice I've known, it changed
Gleamed and glistened as her sweetness simply lightened-up the room
Her voice became enticing and everything I've been working toward went away
At least for a while until she had to leave ... her life.

301 Shore Avenue, *Stephen D. Bolen*

Still, now; the torn tin-wrapped two-story structure stands:
Towards a century ago; its tired timber and stone-age material met
To hold each other unconditionally;
To vanquish Kikiktagruk's seasons.
Legendary: a hunting-guide, a bush-pilot, a man;
Family spent and shared time and more time.
Liquor and grub given to many at "Marie's":
Before the hunt; Roy Rogers ate,
Hunger found Hank Williams Jr.,
Then Mr. Lincoln bagged the record bear: polar.
Floors plywood; careful were the feet of children.
Covered by linoleum; stairs steep, it changed.
Generations abandon their native hallways,
Sheltering memories of lives; so many,
We were raised by those rooms.
Upstairs at the front-room windows we all sat as children,
No matter the day, no matter the Sun.
None of us are around to cherish the crashing shores' whispers anymore,
Every one of us left;
All of us, but one.
She's with her home; they grow old alone,
Boxes and boxes; packed and stacked high.
It's almost deserted: haunting; she's fervid,
I wish we all hadn't left you...
Mother of mine.

Home Again, *Stephen D. Bolen*

The tides hit the soft beach rocks like a calming cataclysm
Shaping the day like the winds' torrent takes anything without weight
I'm home again and the autumnal sunsets are almost devastatingly gorgeous--
I'd be fraught with awe if I didn't have somewhere else to be.
Alone in this lost land, the city of a few thousand, the village of midnight children
running through the streets; all I can dream of is a woman.
Her black hair would fit in fine here, I'd bring her to the tundra
Just to watch her long legs step over and across the tussocks this cranberry season
I'll leave this place tomorrow with an old picture frame and I don't know when I'll come home
again. I don't know if I'll ever come home again.

I Heard the Mountain Call, *Wilson Justin*

I heard the mountain call
again, a whisper said
we are still here, still
holding the sunsets
and moving the evening
in faint wisps under the
blue skies.

Alone winged one
drifted above the trees
the field moved too, in drifts
a track left in song
by a lynx held its notes
and the singing so faint
now and so distant.

We are still here
waiting
holding the sunsets
and the evenings with
the blue skies
all still here.



Glennallen, 2025, photo credit Joris Beugels

Part Four

As we become more understanding, more generous, more human when studying literature, Alaska poetry opens up a world of discourse where students can have an important role.

Questions

1. How is John Haines a bridge from classic American Literature to Alaska Literature?
2. How is the term “tradition” an exclusive concept, how is the term empowering?
3. Is American individualism contrary to Alaska Native values and “ways of knowing”? Where do they intersect?
4. How do the titles of the selected Alaska Native artwork convey meaning?
5. How does the saying “poems waiting for a poet” apply to Alaska?
6. Is there a literary tradition in the U.S.?
7. Why is Alaska poetry important? What is its footprint?
8. Can nature be separated from humanity?
9. How is 21st Century American poetry different from 20th Century American poetry?
10. What are the advantages and disadvantages of English being the central global language for business and communication?
11. Can AI grasp the full meaning of poetry?

Today there are many extraordinary authors from Alaska--writing in every genre imaginable. Still, there is little room to give each the acclaim they deserve; recognition is brief even for those who have received national and international acclaim. I encourage educators, writers, and readers, then, to discover for themselves how multi-storied Alaska literature is.

Alaska Center for the Book

Alaska Center for the Book conducts Alaska Book Week, organizes Alaska Reads, and chooses books for the annual National Book Festival in Washington, DC.

www.alaskacenterforthebook.org

www.youtube.com/@alaskabookweek7541

Alaska Quarterly Review

Alaska Quarterly Review showcases the best of contemporary American literature and Alaska writers.

www.aqreview.org

www.youtube.com/c/AlaskaQuarterlyReview

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Acknowledgements

A Lesson Plan for Alaska Literature would not have come together without the aid of copyright master Frederick T. Courtright (Permissions Company, LLC) and book designer Emily Tallman (Poetica). My sense of gratitude cannot be overstated.

I would like to honor the memory of Joseph E. Senungetuk (1940-2023), artist and author of *Give or Take a Century: An Eskimo Chronicle*, for sharing his unflinching convictions and perspectives.

And I would like to thank all the people who, with an open mind, attend public events.

Author

Rachel Epstein was the Special Events Coordinator at the University of Alaska Anchorage Campus Bookstore from 1999-2020. She is the recipient of the 2012 Contributions to Literacy in Alaska Award (CLIA), the 2020 Alaska Governor's Award for Service to the Humanities in Education, and the 2023 University of Alaska Anchorage Meritorious Service Award. She is the author of *May the Owl Call Again: A Return to Poet John Meade Haines, 1924-2011*, published by Cirque Press, 2024.



Denali National Park, 2019, photo credit Joris Beugels



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