

*An Artist's
Musings: Poetry
Written and
Illustrated at
Ernest Gruening
State Historical
Site in Juneau,
Alaska*

by Robert A.
Winfree

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*Robert A. Winfree
Artist-in-Residence
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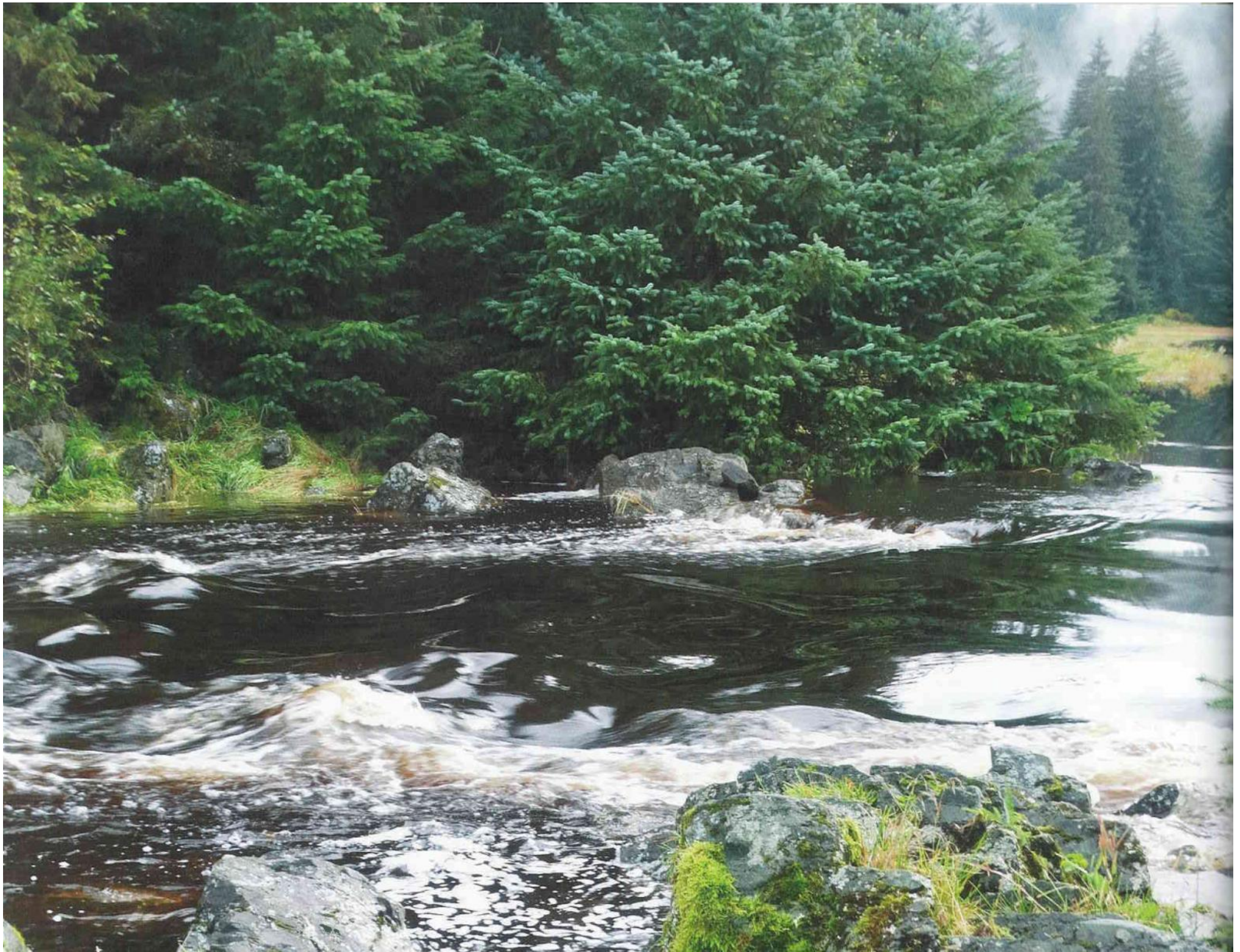
The Family at Eagle Rock

Sipping my morning coffee and wiping my bleary eyes,
I looked out the bay view window, when to my great surprise,
two eagles came into my view, flying up and away from the beach.
I grabbed right away for my camera, and fiddled with knobs I could reach.
The first was a mottled brown youngster and that one flew straight at me,
then banked at the front porch window, and dove for a branch in the tree.
His white-headed parent passed over, and rose to perch on a snag.
But my stiff old fingers moved slowly, and barely one photo I'd bagged,
when another one flew past our window, adding wonder to my shock.
Thus was my first introduction to the family at Eagle Rock.
I saw them in the weeks that followed, at least daily they came to our tree.
We grew to love this family of eagles, two bald and one brown, did we.



Spruce Cones

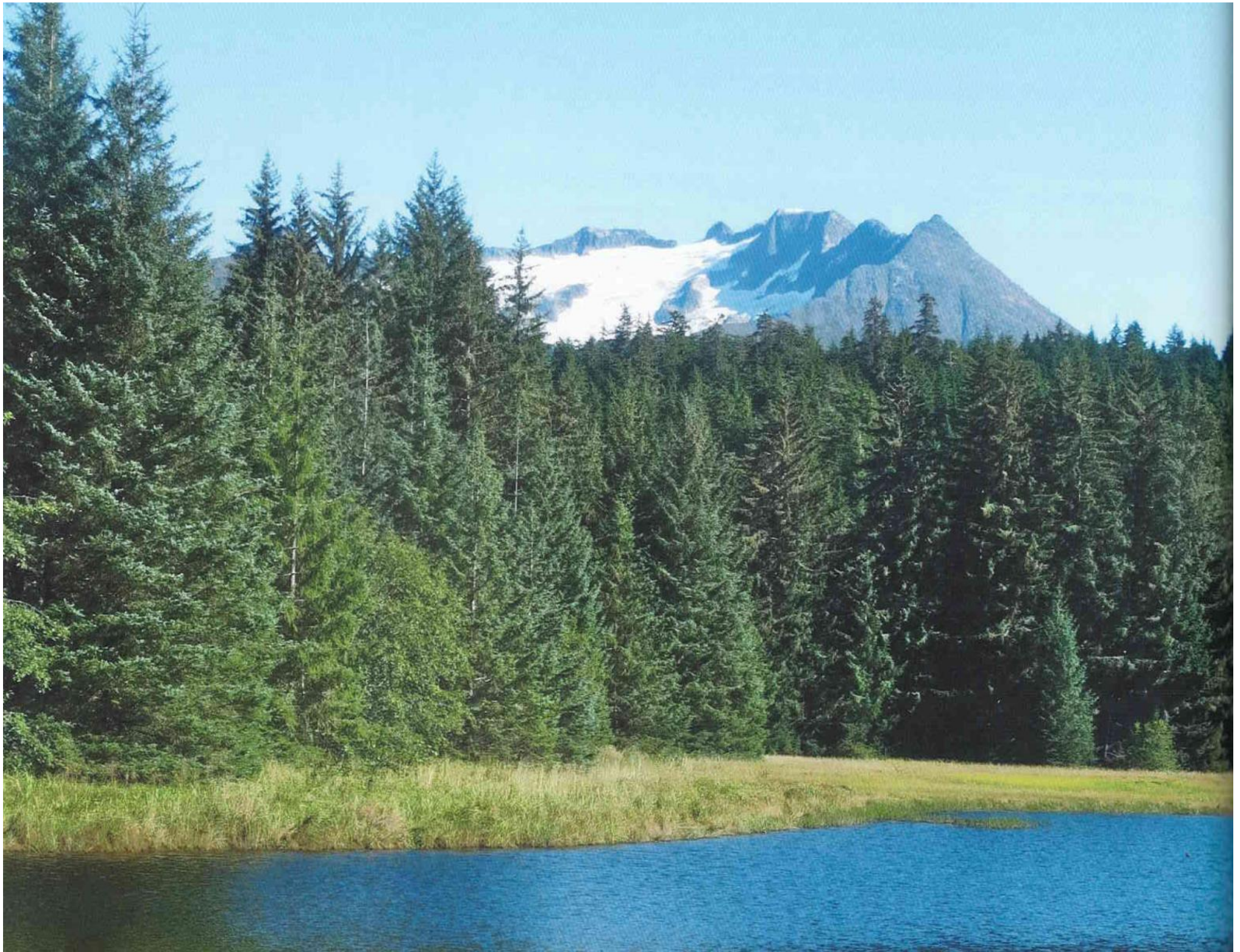
Red squirrel high in yonder tree,
Why do you throw your spruce cones down on me?
"Chi-chi-chi-chills" he sounds an alarm,
"You should know I mean you no harm.
For you can see my aim's not true,
it's towards ground that I toss them, not at you.
There's holes about in tree stumps, and still,
holes in roots, and in moss, all these I must fill.
I remember not where I put my stash,
so every hole must become a cache.
I'll chew round and round the cones that I bring,
and store the seeds so I'll have food until spring.
And when I awake from winter's deep sleep,
there will be food enough for my fill to keep.
Just leave me here, go away, I don't care,
and seek your shelter somewhere else - over there."



At the Salt Chuck

They remember the taste and through oceans fish go,
back to falls in Alaska where their natal streams flow.
But the creek is so full, no more space can provide,
so biologists built a weir to keep others outside.
For food, sport and cash, they all take their share,
of steelhead and salmon, below the Salt Chuck is where.
Their quest's near an end, when salmon spawn and die,
leaving bodies on sand bars and rocks where they lie.
Gulls, ravens, and minks all dine very well,
and bears come too, drawn here by the smell.
The animals turn fish into urine and feces,
that nourish the trees and other plant species.
Our air becomes thick with smells of dead fish,
for the tide is low - for high waters I wish.
Clouds open above and comes a torrent of rain,
washing nutrients downstream, towards the sea whence they came.
Life's cycle's complete, but as months go by,
it starts over again, when fish eggs hatch into fry.

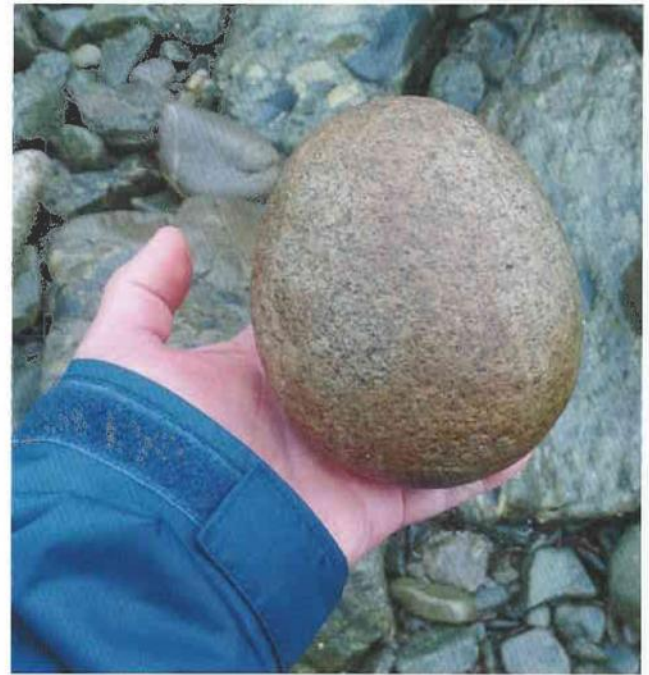




Cabin Below the Glacier

Cabin below the glacier, if only your walls could speak,
you'd tell stories of your people, who rest high on the nearby peak.
That glacier above you shows ages, through its depth of ice and snow.
Perhaps it was here when the first people appeared, but I'm not the one to know.
Imagine, I do, of them coming, from places so distant and far.
Some sought wealth from gold, fish, and fur or just a home 'neath the Northern Star.
I've thumbed through the books on your mantle, recounting Alaskan legends so clear,
about the battles they fought for resources, that America still holds so dear.
My leave I'll soon take, but give heartfelt thanks, I do,
for your welcome and gracious invitation to stay - here with you.
I thank also the people who built you, placing windows of glass towards the sea,
and for all they've done for Alaska, and their stories that were penned by H.G.

(Inspired by the Eaglerock Story by H.G. Gruening)



Realm of the Sea Dragon

Who left on beach these egg-shaped rocks,
and wounded the stones with sharp claws, like cocks?
The scientists tell us these stones are quite old,
from the times of great beasts - long ago, I'm told.
"Those are only cobbles from an ancient stream,
with cracks once filled with mineral cream."
But I refuse to let science worry my head,
For me these be eggs, and the scratches - their bed.
Why bother with facts about fossils and stones,
when imagination sees dragon's eggs, claws and bones?



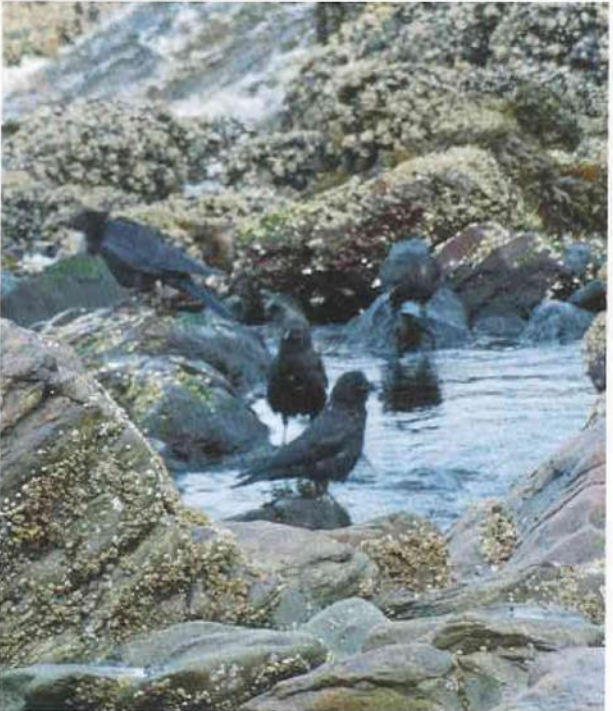
First Catch

Young angler by the salt pond, casting her line so true.
Her boyfriend tries to show her, but she's better than he knew.
Casts fly on a line still hoping, she has what it takes for this.
With a tug of the line she grins, for she's caught the first fish!



A Mother's Fear

Her family's too large and too fast to track,
she relies on her call "chit-chit-chit" to bring back.
Her kits by the riffles, above falls where they play,
should they venture too far, they'd be swept away.
Into the water one slides for a swim,
but currents cast hooks that swiftly catch him.
He cries to his sibling who plunges to aid,
and the current takes both. What a mess he's made!
Mother mink is frantic as she counts her kits,
one through four are okay, but where's five and six?
I feel for her loss and help search below falls,
where gulls, ravens and eagles make hungry calls.
We worried too soon, for one scampers back fast,
and when next I return, all are playing with the last.



Birds of a Feather

This story you've heard since almost forever,
that "birds of a feather - flock together."
But come here and listen, in time I will tell,
that there's more to this story, dirty secrets as well.
My work done for the day, I had time to kill,
so I went to the beach, where I'd sit very still.
I sat by the water, with no thought to the clocks,
spending time among snails and barnacles on rocks.
The tide was out, but the creek did now fill,
pools of fresh water, where a bird dipped her bill.
Blue heron stood near me, kingfisher above,
mergansers in water, but no signs of dove.
Seals fishing for salmon, swam close to my side,
from this human they saw, they'd have nothing to hide.
These animals cared little as I sat on my rock,
when without any warning - I became part of their flock.
Black birds by the dozens, no - a hundred or more,
landed all around me, as each took their tour.
They splashed in the stream, and in pools by my feet,
cawing and croaking with friends they did meet.
I watched what they did, and a thought did occur,
It's only half the story we've been told - for sure,
Embarrassed I'll tell you, it was both him and her,
for "birds of a feather flock - and bathe - together!"



The Finger of Stone

"Stay your course, you're almost home" it seems to say to me,
"Around the bend and up the hill" points the finger of rock by the sea.
With soggy boots and weary feet, I go where points the stone.
The waves are rough and the air is wet, where's the cabin to warm my bone?
It can't be far, cause I see the creek where seals and otters play,
And then I'll be home to write for a while and go out another day.



Where Bears Go in the Woods

There's a bear in the woods they told me, and fingers pointed the way.
"Over the hill and around the bend, that's where the bear does play."
Wet moss below, so soft and fine,
I thread through trees and look for his sign.
The raven above croaks his own advice.
"What you're soon to find, it may not be nice."
Then I stop in my tracks, for I know I should.
'Cause I've discovered where bears go in the wood.



Nature's Way

Only hours before I'd watched animals play,
where fresh waters met salt, and anglers sought, the salmon they hoped to fillet.
But then came a storm with raindrops so hard,
that our tin roof banged loud, like the songs of a bard.
Our creek swelled its banks, a torrent of foam and brown ale,
and flushed back to sea, spent salmon once free, but now smelling decidedly stale.
As the sky dumped its rain from buckets, the mountains were already filled,
and with cracking of limbs and tumbling of rocks, the forest came down the hill.
It landed on the road before us and carried with it a tall tree,
that it left mid-road, standing straight upright, a marvel for all to see.
Crews worked in the night to clear our route, while we patiently waited and penned,
"This storm is a strong one for sure, but this landslide won't be our end,
we can trust that tomorrow the sun will shine, again high up in the sky.
This is just Nature's way to clean her slate, and show her power to you and I."



Bubbles in My Beard

It's salmon tonight to be my meal, if only I had one yet.
I'll hold my place though waves beat rocks, and yes I'm all over wet.
My head's held high to get a good breath, but there's bubbles in my beard.
I'm going down, my end is near - but not the one I feared.
For I felt a salmon touch my tail, webbed feet, and fur so sleek,
I've got him now, a fish in my teeth. This seal's got a meal to eat.



Eyes Above Water

Who's eyes were these that watched me, from waters off the beach,
floating just above surface, like a ball cap out of reach.
Those eyes like a puppy's looked trusting, but their distance from me made it clear,
no matter how still I'm standing, they're wary to ever come near.
By morning and night I waited, whether warm or cold in the rain,
I always knew where I'd find him, and when he'd be there again.
So, I moved to the rocks behind me, and covered myself with my coat,
for it's land from which I'd be watching, not from off shore in a boat.

The tides rose fast and soon wet my feet,
and the waters were lapping the rocks 'neath my seat,
As the fog rolled in I thought I could hear,
his huffing and breathing so clear. He's near!
The ocean pup is approaching, can this finally be it?
The picture for which I've waited, and patiently watched and sit?
Thus did I find my subject and my picture of the seal,
while he and his friends went fishing for salmon and their next meal.



Miss Blackbird's Meal

It had rained all night, but the morning mist was lifting when Miss Blackbird flew down for breakfast.

The food had been set out buffet style by the falling tide, so she took one of her usual tables on a rock by the sea.

Blackbird was daintily picking at the mussels and limpets when Mr. Gull moved to her table and asked in his raucous voice "Is this seat taken?"

Blackbird said under her breath "It is now," and shuffled a bit to the side.

"With the tide so high, it's been hours since I've had my fill to eat, but last night's storm seems to have washed up some nice and tasty treats."

Mr. Seal and his friends watched from a pool with knowing eyes.

This Gull is a glutton with no manners to boot, they huffed before diving to eat below.

Gull pressed even closer to Blackbird when she picked at a morsel of fresh salmon, and she excused herself by saying, "Be my guest. I think I'll take a smaller table close to the water."

Gull gulped down the salmon with one bite and then flew closer to say, "I didn't mean to startle you. I only wanted some company."

But no sooner had Blackbird looked down at the snail by her feet, than Gull moved in once again. So on it went through their morning meal.

Blackbird moving from table to table, with Gull pouncing before she could take a bite.

A party of Mergansers had arrived around Blackbird when Gull made another move.

"Enough!" cried Mrs. Merganser, wings flapping and head held high.

"We serve all feathers and furs at this restaurant, but we don't serve bullies. If you can't accept that, then Gull - you'll just have to go!"



The Old One

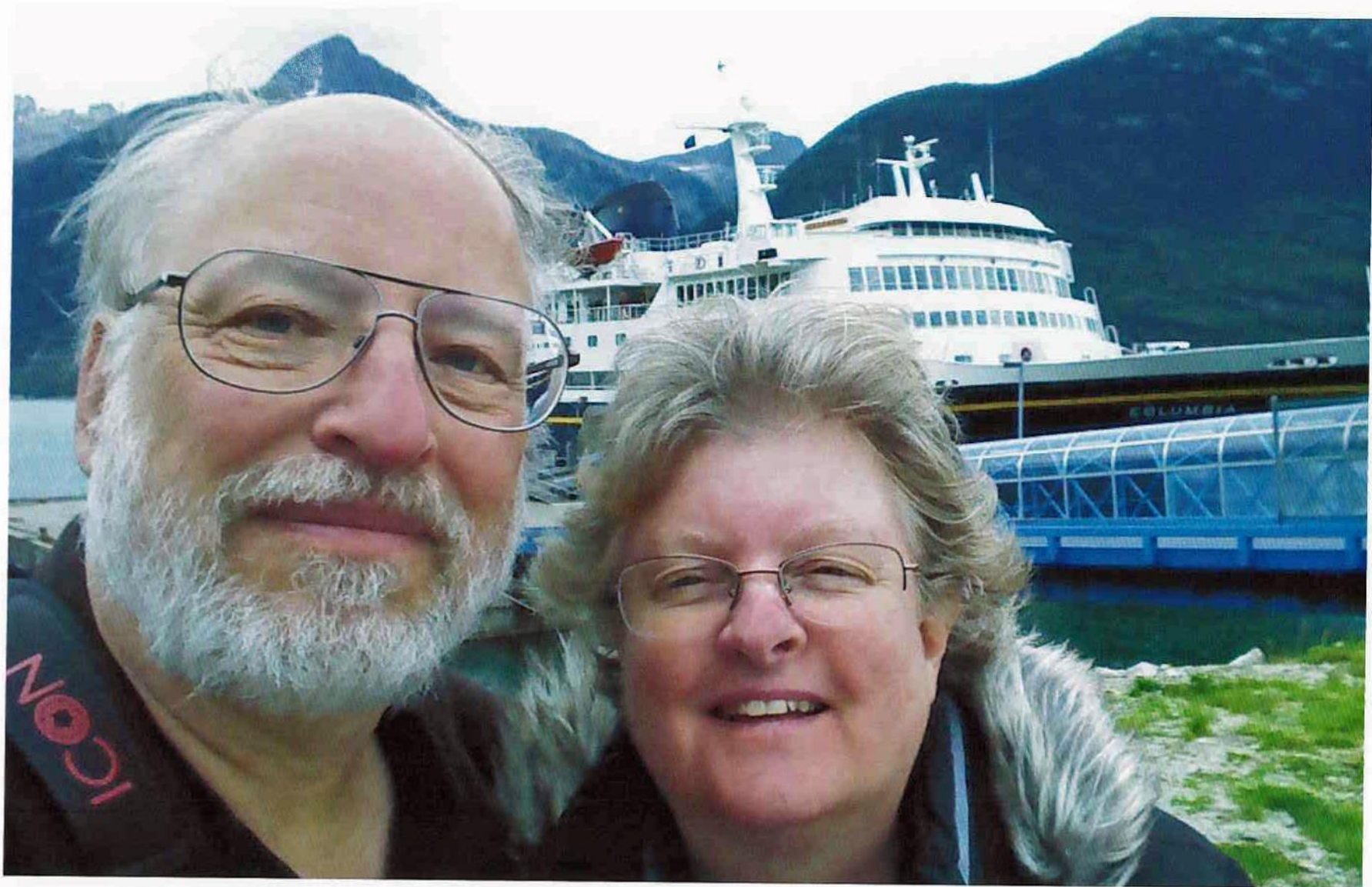
I found him by the beach again today,
nestled comfortably into a sunny spot with a clear view of the bay.
His ruddy color showed he'd been outside for too long,
but this was where I found him each time.
It was hard for him to get around now, but it hadn't always been that way.
He'd been a handsome sight in younger years - strong, well built, with a voice loud and clear.
He'd inspired confidence among strong men, who relied on his unfaltering determination to
bring them home from the edge of peril.
But age was no asset in his line of work.
Most of his peers had been retired long before him, but his time came too.
He'd made the good life possible for his family and had taken them on many an adventure.
Now these were just faded memories and pictures on their walls.
They'd grown older too, and had children, grandchildren, and responsibilities of their own.
In his condition, it was no longer possible to provide the kind of care he'd require.
His joints were stiff and they thought his heart was weak.
Perhaps he'd helped them to find this place, where he'd spend his final days.
Perhaps he'd even brought them here.
But today, he was all alone, except a few visitors and me.
There's a chill in the air and now it's turning dark.
He makes not a sound when I too turn away, from the ark's old engine left on rocks by the sea.

(The Arc of Juneau was an abandoned boat that beached in a storm and disintegrated near the Gruening cabin. It's engine remains visible on the rocks today.)



The House That Gruening Built

The plaque on the wall had told us, that a statesman built this fine place.
On the mantle lay books about Gruening. In mind's eye I'm seeing his face.
Here the Governor drafted papers, powerful words of mystery,
for they made Alaska into a state, and for us - that's now history.
I imagine Ernest holding a pen, while Dorothy sketches the view,
of mountains and sea through bay windows, the same glass that now I gaze through.
The Gruening's cabin is now used by artists, and with it's lands become a State Park,
where artists can stay in the evening, while outdoors it's cold, wet, and dark.
Sketching on canvas in charcoal, and splashing colors acrylic and oil,
I paint to preserve the sunsets that darkness of night will spoil.
Animals in abundance, everywhere we could see,
There were eagles alighting on branches, and a bear playing behind the next tree.
Tall conifers above well-groomed paths, where red squirrels gathered their cones,
seals frolicking in waves below us, where seabirds picked among stones.
State Park staff friendly and gracious, we now fondly recall,
for they brought us fuel for our fire, drinking water, and all.
Three weeks we spent in that cabin,
another coming, and one back home again.
We'd threaded byways through Alaska - and then through Canada twice,
Reading poems by Service on mountains, and past rivers of glacier ice.
Our chariot brought us home again safely, though damaged and a broken window,
From an accidental meeting in Skagway, and a tumbling rock near Juneau.
Our story is now laid before you, and the artworks hang on a wall,
We give thanks to our hosts in Alaska, who preserve parks to benefit of all.

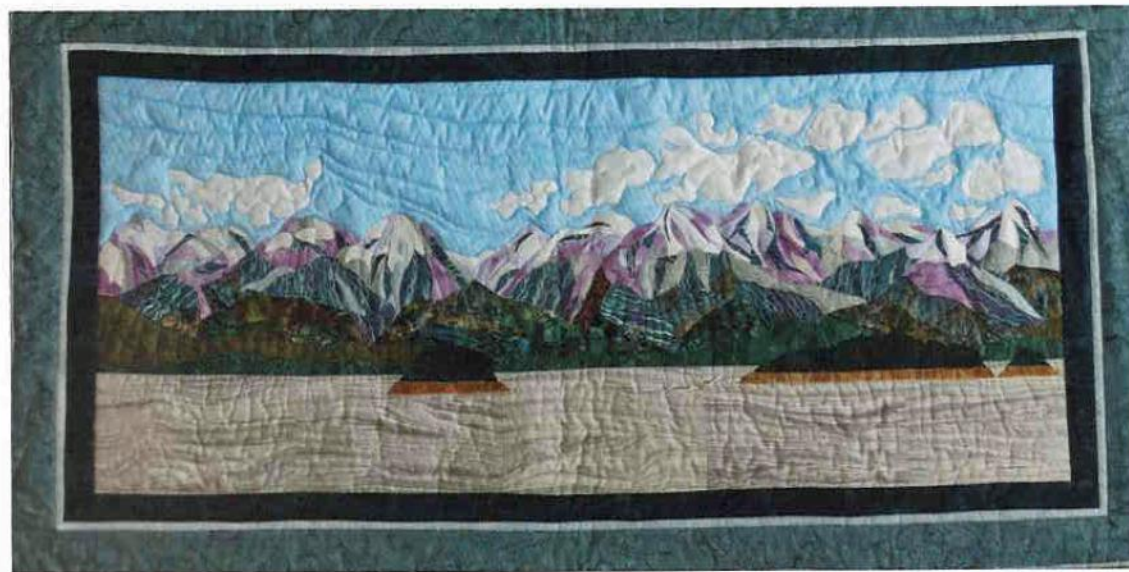


Robert and Sandy Winfree
Alaska State Park Artists-in-Residence
August-September, 2016

Poems, photos and sketches by Robert.
Quilts by Sandy. ©2016

Our Departure

Through the straights sail Alaska's ferries, it's LeConte the one that I see,
And I'm thinking that by tomorrow, it will sail again with me.
Wildlife we'll miss sorely. I'll think
of the seals, whales, and squirrels, eagles, and the family of mink.
New friends and acquaintance we've found,
in park staff, hikers and anglers, and the neighbors all around.
My canvas' in oils now racked,
and Sandy's quilts neatly folded and sacked.
Our time for departure grown near,
When bright rainbows of color appear,
reminds us that throughout this event,
our time as Artists-in-Residence was well spent!





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