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## Returning the Gift

John Smelcer

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## Returning the Gift

All summer, I have been feeding a raven  
who comes to the river asking for salmon.

For weeks, we talk of the origin of things  
while I cut fish to dry in the sun.

Months later, when geese fly overhead  
in long, slow arrows, I am lost moose hunting.

When night falls upon its dark knees and the moon  
is a fingernail at the rim of the world,

I listen to tight-stringed wind  
from inside my fluttering tent, and by morning,

in a shudder, the world is wintered.  
Quietly, through the gray wolf of the north

I watch the raven arrive to lead me from the forest,  
tree by tree, until I am home and we speak for the last time.

Tsin'aen, Saghani Ggaay. Tsin'aen.  
"Thank you, Great Raven. Thank you."

As he flies toward far ochre mountains,  
I can hear him singing and singing.

*John Smelcer*

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JOHN SMELCER's 50 books include his poetry book *Indian Giver* (Leapfrog, 2016) and *The Raven and the Totem* (Leapfrog Press, 2019). He is the last living member of the Ahtna tribe of Alaska who can read, write, and speak in their severely endangered language.

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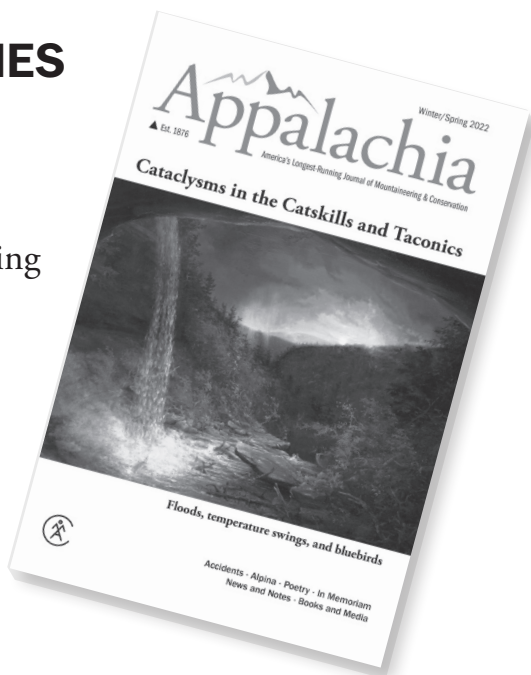
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