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Katherine is a Ph.D. candidate in the history department, hoping to graduate December 2005. She wrote "Walking with Winter" in October 2000, while attending the Bristol Bay Fish Conference in Naknek, Alaska. She spent most summers in the area because her dad was a salmon cannery superintendent. She works as a historian for the National Park Service, and lives with her soon-to-be-husband, Eric, and my cat Jane in Eagle River, Alaska.

On the north side of the Naknek River, during the first snowstorm of the season, I walk with winter along a stony beach, struggling to hold on to the edge of the world. Bristol Bay exhales winds that heave across the mudflats, blasting Alaska's blunt western coastline. It is here, where land meets sea, that such volatile and unpredictable weather patterns form. Pulling my cap tight over my ears, I turn against the October winds and notice my footprints filling with tiny flakes of snow.

Each summer, before the king salmon hit subsistence nets, I come to Bristol Bay. When the last red salmon escape commercial nets and return home to spawn, I also return from where I came. This year is different, though. Along with biologists, oceanographers, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientists and other fishery experts, I've come to Bristol Bay to attend the 1998 Fall Fisheries Conference. I've since graduated from salmon slimer to fisheries historian, and now, I tell fish stories for a living. In the hours before I'm scheduled to speak, I spend them mute on this beach, staring into the storm, watching winter come home to Bristol Bay.

The scientists gathered for the Fall Fisheries Conference watch weather, too. In 1997 the famed Bristol Bay Reds disappeared somewhere between Port Moller and Egegik. That summer, ocean temperatures reached the warmest on record, while a phytoplankton bloom the size of Kansas appeared in the Bering Sea. The fishing season was deemed a disaster, but the salmon mystery remained: "What happened to the missing reds?"

Everyone had a theory. Fishermen pointed fingers at high seas factory trawlers, others blamed beluga whales. Late-night loungers with too much time and liquor suspected space aliens. But when oceanographers discovered a major oscillation shift in the Pacific, fish biologists developed their own theory. They found that historic fish catches fluctuated simultaneously with the changing climate. In other words, the culprit causing Alaska's salmon runs to decline

just might be bad weather.

I am no expert on Alaskan weather, but I am no stranger to it, either. In Fairbanks, where I attended graduate school, just when sandhill cranes leave Creamers Field, frigid temperatures begin to seize the Tanana Flats. Each day, as the sun's rays strain to reach beyond the Alaskan Range, winter drains the interior of motion, bringing it to a near-halt. Rivers freeze, forests crystallize and people stay indoors. Not even wind can bluster up the energy to penetrate Fairbanks's brutal cold.

But here on the Alaska Peninsula, it seems that winter weather is alive, like a shark that never stops moving. Bristol Bay's prevailing southwest winds continuously attack the advancing boreal forests, which extends across North America, eastward to Nova Scotia. The williwahs stunt and disfigure renegade spruce, which try to occupy the tundra and the barren Aleutian Chain. And despite my thick gloves and insulated boots, splinters of ice bite my raw fingers and toes.

Bristol Bay weather has other faces, too. It can be a prima donna, forcing anyone who goes outside to pay attention to it. The weather never lets you forget you live in Alaska. The weather can also be a trickster that transforms a calm lake into a cankerous slur of waves. And it is an enigma, for even during the worst of storms, a thin, blue atmospheric light lovingly caresses this northern landscape, bringing clarity and warmth to a complex and harsh environment. I close my eyes, and imprinted on the inside of my eyelids, still burning, is the empty northern sky.

I open them to see a raven investigating me as I trespass on what surely he thinks is his beach. I eyeball him respectfully – I don't want to challenge the Trickster, thief of the sun. Many Alaska legends say Raven is also the Creator, a fickle Creator, however, one who is as unpredictable as nature and the season he controls.

Raven soars on top of thermals, surfing on the sky currents. Like the weather, raven always moves, always looks, always gazes out across his world, watching for some mischief to get into

prevailing southwest winds continuously attack the advancing boreal forests, which extends across North America to the Aleutian Chain. And despite my thick gloves and insulated boots, splinters of ice bite my raw fingers and toes. The weather never lets you forget you live in Alaska. The weather can also be a trickster that transforms a calm lake into a rapids. The weather caresses this northern landscape, bringing clarity and warmth to a complex and harsh environment. I close my eyes and imagine me as I trespass on what surely he thinks is his beach. I eyeball him respectfully – I don't want to challenge the unpredictable as nature and the season he controls. Raven soars on top of thermals, surfing on the sky currents. Like a bird of prey, he seems amused by this wild weather. I wonder if Raven is making the

or something to eat. Plunging and tumbling, he seems amused by this wild weather. I wonder if Raven is making the snow fall harder now. In the beginning, Raven was as white as the snow, but when he stole freshwater from Ganook he got stuck in a smokehole that turned his feathers black. As it turns out, we benefited by Raven's greed. For when he flew out of the smokehole, Raven spit drops of water to the earth that became rivers and streams.

Watching snowfall blanket the beach I realize I have not escaped Raven's trickery. Before, my footprints carried winter behind me, now winter strides ahead. With each step my wet boots expose the dark beachrocks. Like Raven's transformation in the smokehole, my footsteps changed from white to black. Instead of winter, now each footstep contains hopes of spring. I can hear "ka ka ka," which I think sounds like "ha ha ha," as Raven flies away, into the white sky and over the river he created. Now I am cold and alone.

Maybe it's my loneliness seeking the familiar, but the vacancy of winter makes me aware of what is no longer here. The same way an artist can see his painting on a white canvas or a writer can visualize his story from a blank page, I can see a floating city emerge from Bristol Bay's empty waters. I see drift boats pulling nets, tenders full of fish, processors pressed against the horizon, helicopters and float planes buzzing overhead. My mind's eye sees a flurry of activity surrounding the setnet cabins that line the sloping bluffs behind me – fishermen mend nets, kids ride three-wheelers, dogs are barking, skiffs skip through whitecaps just off shore. I hear the sound of pulsating machines rising from canneries alive with production. A gentle breeze kisses tundra flowers. I see old friends in yellow raingear flicking salmon eyeballs across slime lines. I see an ageless fisherman who drowned in the waters that front me. I see the glorious midnight sun fan its golden rays across the sky, turning the world into a silhouette. Then, Bristol Bay sighs deeply and the cold seeps through me.

I am reminded that winter yields nothing easily, and the beach is empty again.

Still, there is something wonderful about walking with winter. Winter makes us aware of what we desire most: the warm sun, fish in our nets, good health to our family and friends. The turning seasons give us a glimpse into the past, and probably into the future. Just from where I stand now, I can see the path of ancient glaciers. I know Bristol Bay was once a land bridge, and in the distance rises Katolinat Mountain, where I once found seashells imbedded on its crest. I walk in winter to remind myself that nothing lasts forever.

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The Yupik people who once inhabited this beachhead understood that Bristol Bay is finite. They painted images on drums and drew designs on mudflats, only to watch their creations disappear with the beat or the rising tide. Shamen made elaborate goggled eyed and toothy grinning masks to honor animal spirits sacrificed to the hunt. When the ceremony ended, the masks were discarded into the tundra or burned. The artwork the Yupik created was never meant to survive – an admission, possibly, to the limits of Bristol Bay.

Perhaps I need to be more like the Raven, and learn to enjoy and embrace winter. Winter was a time to slow down and celebrate for the Yupik. On the fringe between weather and landscape, native peoples adapted behaviors to fit their environment. Because salmon was their main food source, summer was the time to fish. But when daylight grew shorter, and the salmon lay red and dying, the Yupik spent winter thanking the salmon for their sacrifice. For giving respect, they knew the fish would continue to feed them.

Surely, the prehistoric Yupik lacked the ecologic insight to comprehend that salmon feed the land, too, but we know it now. In the wake of the Ice Age, salmon populations probed the meltwater rivers. Migrating from rich ocean pastures, salmon brought nutrients to the starved soils. Trees and plants grew, streams stabilized, bears, eagles, wolves, lynx, even Raven thrived. Weather and salmon changed the world. This winter, scientists gather in Naknek to discuss strategies to save salmon, not celebrate them. But one day, the weather will change, glaciers will advance and it will be the salmon that saves us.

With numbing toes, I reach the end of my journey, but winter's journey is just beginning. The snow clouds have engulfed the alluvial plain, and move up the Naknek River towards the mountains. Taking a last look at the beach, I notice the tide lapping at the rocks. A lather of icy sea foam has washed my footprints away. In winter I see clearly; it is only in summer when I see illusions: inexhaustible natural resources, endless tundra, youthful fishermen, the Arctic sunlight. My own time here exists for only a limited time. Even the tides and salmon remain here temporarily, moving back and forth between the land and sea.

To me, this is the loveliest and saddest of landscapes. I navigate life recalling its tides and tundra, its light and shadows, its sun and snow. Within this landscape lies my compass, and its rivers always lead me home. |