

*And drips and drips
On his toesy toes
Then he slips and slips on
His nosy nose*

And that's why

China has a bitty nose

When the song was over, they cleaned up the camp and put out the last of the fire. As the steam rose into the dark they got into Alma's truck and took Wendell into town, where his family hugged him goodbye on the sidewalk out in front of the police station. Only Alvin went with Wendell inside the station to see him go through the metal door. It was five-twenty-nine.

* * *

Months later, Wendell was halfway through his bid. He had accepted a job with China and would be going to work for her in the late winter getting their boat and the tools together. He was in jail over in Lemon Creek Correctional Center in Juneau and would be due for going into a halfway house in about three weeks but it was crowded and there hadn't been an opening for him in months. He had been sober for ten months. He had been taking Tlingit language and culture classes. He had gained thirty pounds and didn't feel fat. He had a job on the grounds crew and he was turning the flowerbeds over for the winter while the ravens hopped along beside the crew, looking for worms. Today there was a big raven in the group and it was close to Wendell. As Wendell pushed his shovel into the ground, it hit something hard, with a clink.

Distinctly. "Clink" like a piece of glass or a chunk of glacier ice and the big raven hopped right up on the edge of the raised flower bed. The raven had a mane like a lion, and as clearly as a voice on a small radio, the bird said, "What you gonna do?"

"I beg your pardon?" Wendell asked.

"I asked, what you gonna do?" the raven replied. Then Wendell looked down and he turned up his shovel and he turned up a full bottle of B&B brandy that apparently some other inmate had stashed in the bed long ago. "Welllllll?" the bird asked.

"Hey guard! Hey guard!" Wendell started calling out up to the tower and over toward the corner of the yard where the man with the rifle and the radio was standing. He never touched it with his hands but lifted it up with his shovel and gave it to the guard, who thanked him and nodded in approval and noted it on his sheet, helping him get into the halfway house a little sooner.

"Hey, hey, hey, way to go!" the big lion-headed bird yelled at him after the guard left.

"Like you care one way or the other," Wendell said to the Raven.

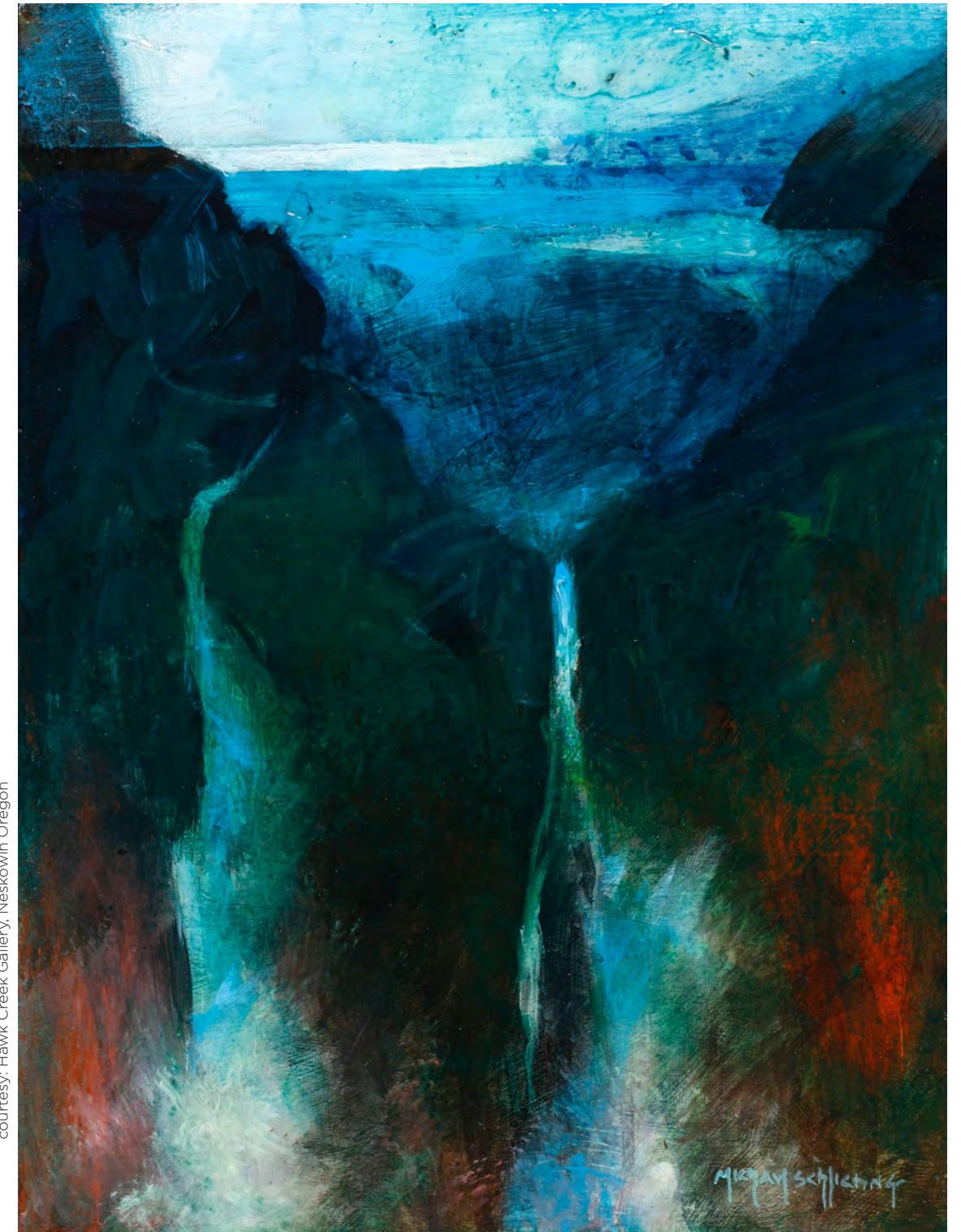
"That's the great thing about me," said the Raven. "I always care, one way or the other."

And they spread their wings there in the prison garden and danced a dance to the new/old reality. Their wings bent, their legs spread, both of them reveling in their power, just about ready to take flight. Then he, as the bird, spread his wings and lifted up and out over the yard and the guards did not lift their rifles up off of their slings. Wendell as the bird rose up over Lemon Creek and Costco and Home Depot and back up over the updraft of cold air that slid like a river off the glacier, up to the white mountains where the wind lifts the snow up the ridge lines like the skirts up off a pretty girl's legs. That tricky bird rose up away from that prison. He rose over the lakes and waterways he created. Wendell as the Raven rose straight toward the sun and the moon and the stars that he and his southern cousin had liberated from the old man far up the Nass River. This old man had a beautiful daughter whom Wendell and the Raven had tricked into being both of their mothers just before they stole all of the light in the universe.

John Straley is a criminal defense investigator for the Public Defender Agency in Sitka, Alaska. He is the author of eight crime novels set in southeastern Alaska and a book of poetry published by the University of Alaska Press. He was appointed by Governor Murkowski as the twelfth Alaska Writer Laureate, and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. His new novel, *Cold Storage, Alaska* is due out in 2014 with Soho Press. He lives with his wife Jan in a bright green house on the beach.

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Ventisquero Colgante, 2013
Acrylic on Paper, 12 in x 9 in



courtesy: Hawk Creek Gallery, Neskowin Oregon