

Durable Breath

for Peter Kalifornsky

Outside my cabin window
I hear Raven's muffled caw
rise from the river.

A lamp burns low upon my
table, the air is still in the
silence of the room.

I think often of that night in
your trailer at Nikiski,
of the old stories you shared
with me —

Dena'ina Suk'dua

"That which is written on
the people's tongues."

As a child you were beaten
with a stick
for speaking your native
tongue. My father,
born at Indian River,

does not know his mother's
language.

Tonight, Kenaitze Indians
gather
at a Russian Orthodox
Church

to mourn in altered
syllables among
white-washed
crosses and tarnished silver
ikons.

As I lean toward darkness,
it is your voice that lifts

Raven's wings above the
riverbank,
his ancient syllables rising
like an ochre tide.