



ARTWORK BY FAWN WATERFIELD

LESSON PLAN



# WHAT DOES RAVEN FEED HER BABIES, ANYWAY

A storyteller's initiation  
on the Alaska ferry

By Keema Waterfield

## Creating the new media artwork Songbirds: What Does Mama Raven Feed Her Babies?

This was such a fun piece to make (*left*). Keema says old hippies didn't take a lot of pictures like people do today with our digital cameras. It's true! But when she asked me to *create* an image for her piece "What Does Raven Feed Her Babies, Anyway?" I instantly remembered this image of Keema and her sister Tekla at well-loved Alaskan folk musician Myrna Ukelele's colony home in Palmer, hamming it up by playing Tin Pan Alley divas, trying to make me laugh.

Keema's story is based on events the summer after this photo was taken when we traveled with the Heliotroupe. The Heliotroupe performed a variety of musical and performing art concerts and public school presentations in Alaska towns supported by grant funding through the Alaska State Council on the Arts, with travel contributions through Alaska Airlines and the Alaska Marine Highway System. The Raven overlay is from artwork Keema created as a gift to me a few years ago.

Find more of my work at Fawn Waterfield (@fwaterfield) on Twitter, or search for Fawn Waterfield Lightworks on YouTube.

— Fawn Waterfield

**W**E WERE 10 AND 11 YEARS OLD the summer Mom invited my sister, Tekla, and me to join her on tour with Heliotroupe. It wasn't quite a band, but a mishmash group of revolving artists with the vibe of a traveling folk festival. You had your sitar and standup bass players, multiple guitarists, a mandolinist, a cellist who also played fiddle, a Celtic drummer on bodhran and pennywhistle, and an actor. Plus, my little sister and me—because we could sing, but also because that's the price you paid for bringing a single mom on tour in Southeast Alaska in 1991.

We traveled by ferry on a grant from the Alaska Arts Council, performing twice a day aboard a ship in exchange for passage. Then again later, at local schools and performance halls when we reached wherever we were going.

To pass the time between ports, I practiced telling stories in a lounge below decks with the troupe's thespian, Jeff Freeman. He had dark hair, hazel eyes, and a moodiness my mother called thoughtful. "If you're nervous, find one friendly face to look at on either side of you," Jeff instructed. "Or look right above everyone, like there's a real tall guy standing way in the back." He stared at a blank spot on the wall to demonstrate. I pulled my shoulders back, turned to face my imaginary audience, and smiled. Easy, I thought.

Jeff didn't realize that I'd had my musical debut at the ripe old age of four—Uncle Rocky's wedding in Ketchikan, and the church pews so full that guests were crammed all the way through the arctic entryway. We'd taken to the stage in frilly white dresses with thick tights and white shoes, Tekla already taller than me. Despite my fourteen-month lead on her, I was a runty little thing.

Jeff gave me his nod of approval after a handful of practice sessions, and I told my first story to a lunch crowd already loose and laughing from twenty minutes of jumping bluegrass. "Stop me if you've heard this one," I began, launching into a whimsical tale about a wide-mouth frog who doesn't know what to feed her babies and asks all sorts of animals for advice. I loved that I could add as many animals as I wanted to stretch the performance out.

I stood before the crowd as fierce and focused as the bawdy wench at a Renaissance faire. Who cared that my hair was a wind-tied knot from camping up on the solarium deck for a week, or that my last

bath had been in the public hot springs in Tenakee Springs days earlier? For a few minutes, I felt like a diva in thrifted Chuck Taylors.

I'd introduced my frog mother to a cat, a moose, and a raven when I realized that every eyeball in the room had just one thing to focus on: me. Sweat stung my neck, burning as if every mosquito I'd ever smashed had come back to bite me again.

This was different than singing a duet with Tekla or jumping in on harmonies with Mom. I couldn't hide a missed note in a sea of other voices like I was used to. And I couldn't, not even for a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill—and despite a lifetime spent cawing after them on rocky Southeast Alaska beaches—think what a raven fed to her babies.

**The smell of fried halibut drifted from the galley kitchen. Dishes rattled. A child coughed.**

I pinned my eyes to a spot just above a grey-haired gentleman trying to hide a yawn in his drooping mustache and begged the dusty chalkboard of my mind to fill with words that made sense. The

smell of fried halibut drifted from the galley kitchen. Dishes rattled. A child coughed.

Raven feeds her babies puny little redheads who think they know how to tell a story as easy as singing, I thought.

I crouched down and casually turned to look at Jeff for help. His return shrug said, abandon ship, kid. Why hadn't I thought of that?

I cocked my head and scanned the room, pretending this was all a part of the show.

"I feed my babies whatever I want to feed them," I said, mangling the punch line. "But especially, I feed my babies wide mouth frogs like you," I lunged at a kid crawling on the floor, who fell over laughing. I wanted to do that, too, but feared I would wet myself with relief.

A middle-aged woman in a floppy black sun visor rose from the seat nearest me. She smiled vaguely, buttoning her windbreaker. She didn't clap, but most everyone else offered polite applause.

Tekla hooked an arm around my neck and loud whispered, "I can't believe you pulled that off!"

"Me either," I said. But I knew already that I would keep telling stories until, one day, I could spin a yarn so deftly it would make even sun visor lady's bored hands smack together in delight. ■

*Keema Waterfield is the award-winning author of Inside Passage, a nomadic childhood memoir set along the wild coast of Southeast Alaska. Waterfield has written for The New York Times, WIRED, Brevity, Scary Mommy, INSIDER, and others. She lives in Missoula, Montana, where she moonlights as a stand-up comic when she's not wrangling her husband and two children, a bunch of extra instruments she doesn't know how to play, and a revolving cast of rescue animals. She lives and writes on Séliš and Qlisépé land. Find her on Twitter and Instagram @keemasaurusrex.*



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