



## Hurled to the Shark

Leslie Leyland Fields

Today is put-out, the day we stretch and drop our nets back into the water, the day we load them from the racks on the beach where we have stood for four days, stopping only for sleep and food, to mend the holes punched by sea lions swatting their lunch from the net, from sharks who have rolled themselves nearly end over end, like a cocoon, their skin sanding vents through our nets as huge as their bulk. I am grim already. Already because it is only my first season, 1978, and yet I know exactly what will happen in the day and night ahead. I have done this four times by now, which makes me still a nervous greenhorn, since Duncan, his two brothers and his father have been fishing here, off a tiny island off Kodiak Island, Alaska for twenty years.

Now I stand in the beached skiff as it sits sideways, loading each of the eight nets into the skiffs. We are clawing the net, our hands like rakes, pulling the green webbing from the racks over the sand and up and over the skiff sides. My husband, Duncan, is pulling the leads, the heaviest weight, Wallace, his younger brother, is pulling the corks, the most awkward job, and I am in the middle with the fine thread of web between the gather and stack in a silken pile. The nets must be stacked precisely in the skiffs so they will drop clean into the water, spin out over the stern without a knot to pull our boot, or all of us after it.

All the nets are loaded now, eight nets then, in three skiffs. We step out of the last skiff, and I glance behind me as I leave the beach, our little battleships loaded and ready.

These are set nets, attached to shore, which makes them more or less stationary. The net is fixed---it is the fish that move. Each net extends out anywhere from 50 to 150

fathoms. We catch fish not by encircling them and scooping them up, as the seiners do, but by waiting and hoping that as they journey home to the streambed to spawn, that they will not notice the green ocean-colored web strung out in front of them, meshes sized to snag on their gills and body as they try to pass through. Our job, then, is to come along in a skiff, pull up the net and extract each salmon by hand. Our hands, like a violinist or world-class pianist, are our precision tools. Not machines, or nets, traps, pots, or any kind of technology---just our hands. Wallace told me one day, as an aside, “Do you realize that we’re fishing the same way people have for hundreds of years, excepting the outboard, of course?” Yes. Our machinery is the same as theirs: backs, shoulders, and hands.

The nets are loaded now. It’s time to go. We head up to the porch where the gear hangs on rows of hooks. I wear nearly the same outfit as the others. The wool socks on first, two pairs, pulled up over my Levi jeans, an old pair I found in the attic of my parents-in-law’s cabin. A wool plaid shirt, and over it two hooded sweatshirts, then the black rubber hip boots that were too big, the Helly Hanson dark green rainpants, the same brand rain coat, an extra I found hanging in the gearshed. My black hair is a hip length braid I stuff up under a white brimmed cap, then white cotton gloves for my hands. The gloves absorb water like a sponge and do little to keep our hands warm, but they give traction on slippery fish. It is hopeless to try and pick fish with bare hands. The uniform. It adds 20 pounds to my 115 and feels as though it doubles my bulk, but already I am used to it.

I like this uniform better than the one I had worn the previous four summer back at home in New Hampshire----a stiff orange polyester dress with an orange and white plaid apron that buttoned down the front, hair in the same braid but pinned up, and if Howard Johnson’s was worried about inspection a hair net to complete the ensemble. My uniform

was often stained with brown gravy, or strawberry sauce from a sundae, a patch of mashed potatoes from the tray I saved from a near dump. It was hideous, of course, but glamour was not the lure of waitressing. Tips were, which meant money to go to college and money to keep my 1964 station wagon in gas. A single year separates me from that world; a single year separates me from being a teenager, and a single year separates me from being a girl. The month after I turned twenty, I married. I would be there at Howard Johnsons this very summer had I not married Duncan. I am now 5,000 miles away and I do not even know that former world yet as memory, not good or bad or anything---it has simply vanished.

I am the last to gear up. I run down the grass yard, onto the sand, leap into the skiff and we are off, the five of us, all looking alike in the same raingear, out to skiffs all painted red, white, and black. Because of our uniformity, not only our clothes but our gear, the skiffs, the cabins all painted red and white, it feels like an industry, an enterprise so much larger than the facts at hand: a core of three brothers, a 64 year old father, seven skiffs, and nine nets, and now me, a 20 year old east coast woman-girl. For a moment I see us, Weston in the stern running the kicker, eyes squinted in concentration as he maps out the afternoon and evening. Duncan solemn as he watches the water, Wallace, just 17, with the same air as his brothers, and their father, DeWitt, And me, my face no different, not because I am strategizing, as they are---who puts out what nets, in what order, will the NE get worse?---but because I have taken this world on like a face, except it goes deep already. I am one of them, I think, then no, I am not, but I will be, if I can.

It takes nearly three hours to get the nets in the water. Then it happens, what all of this is for--the fish. Sometimes, as soon as the net is wet behind us, we see silver lifting it

back up out of the water, a furious thrash of anger as three, four, a group of salmon hit together. And we stop, no matter what we're doing, smile at one another at the instant logic and mathematics of it---yes, a year of ordering supplies, a month of 14 hour work days for this moment, for these salmon behind us and at our feet.

If the fish keep hitting that night, and they are this night, we pick. I would like to go ashore and be done for the day. What perfect closure, move on from one task to the next, a night's sleep in between. But we don't work that way. The time clock for fishing follows Alaska's summer sun; in May and June, night and day are twins, one a slightly paler version of the other. We nap in the day and work in the night; pick fish in the day, pick fish at night; these nets, these fish, are no respecter of person or sleep or fatigue.

So then, now comes the beginning of the rest of the work. We've been out six hours now, it's nine o'clock. We've missed dinner and we're hungry. I have to pee, and so does Duncan and his father.

"Well, I guess I gotta shake the dew off my lily," DeWitt intones in a homey father's voice, his Oklahoma accent still traceable, though he left during the dust bowl of the early 30's.

I smile at Duncan, he smiles indulgently and I turn around. I like this, that we can live together this way. When they're done, it's my turn. "Let me off on that rock over there, Duncan." I point to a cove with a shelf of rock jutting out. If we were alone, I would go right there in the skiff in a bucket. It's not quick, with layers of raingear and lifejackets and wet gloves on, but it is nothing to me, just a necessity that has nothing to do with dignity or culture or the loss of.

While I am getting the luxury of my own private rock for today, Duncan and DeWitt pull out the candy bars and pop.

"What do you want, Leslie, a Hershey's or a Uno?" Duncan asks, holding both up. He's sitting on the seat in the stern, with a Root Beer beside him.

"Hershey's, of course" I say as I reach for it. "Ugh!! How can you eat those things!

They're just chocolate covered Crisco," I roll my eyes as he takes an exaggerated bite. It shocks me, still, the consumption of sugar and fat here. I take the offered Hershey's with a faint twinge. On shore, I would never consider eating a candy bar or drinking a pop, but it's different out on the water. When I can see for two hundred miles, when more than half a mile of net filled with kelp, grass, and fish who have swum thousands of miles waits for our hands only, when the work subsumes even time itself, how is a candy bar significant in an economy like this? I unwrap my Hershey's and pop my Coke.

We sit there, the three of us, our skiff tied to the net, slapping the water gently. Duncan and I are sitting together as we eat, our rubberized and raingearred legs pressing against each other on the seat. Duncan leans over and gives me a kiss, leaving a wet spot on my face where his nose dripped. He's got a couple of scales on his cheek, and a smudge of fish blood on his forehead. I've got something dried on my jawline; my gloves are a blend of blood and gurry. I'm not feeling romantic. He's yelled at me three times already this put-out. I know later he'll explain that a job's got to be done no matter who it is, wife or crew or anyone. Then I'll complain that he treats me like a crewman and he'll say, Well, you are. Then I'll say no, I'm your wife and you can't step in and out of marriage just because you're climbing in and out of a skiff, and so it will go. I did not expect the skiff to be run democratically, but neither did I expect such a pronounced hierarchy. I'm not sure what to do about this, how to establish in this geography the kind of balance and equity we have in the other parts of our lives.

By the time we get to the next set, the Outside, we call it, because it sits straight into the Shelikof Strait and is unprotected, the wind has picked up, a Northeast, blowing now maybe 20. The forecast is for NE 35. It has happened in minutes, which means the 35 could stew over us in minutes as well. I never knew weather anywhere could change as fast as it does here. "Please Lord, let us finish and go in before it blows harder," I offer

silently as a wish-prayer. The wind hits my face under the brim of my hat, spray lashes us now from both sides. “Get ready to grab the net!” Duncan yells to me above the wind. He is running hard up to the net against the wind. He’ll slow and aim the bow at the net and just before it hits, he’ll go into neutral, then reverse to swing the stern around so we are parallel to the net. My job is to lean over the side, grab the net in the water as soon as I can and then hold on no matter what happens. In calm weather, and if the tide is not running too strong, this is not a difficult maneuver, but now . . . I pull my cap tighter and lower over my head, lean out poised for the net as we approach, the water white around us and just a roar and howling in my ears. All of me is focused on that cork, there. We speed toward it, my hand is out, I’m leaning almost over the side---Now! My arm pounces, makes a swipe--I missed! Again, lean a little further, arm into the water now past my elbow, can’t get it! The net is too tight, like a steel bar. It won’t pull to me at all. I straighten, look apologetically at Duncan, who doesn’t change his expression. He wheels the skiff around in the wind, readies for another approach, and I know I’ve broken a rule, the rule that you get it the first time, not the second or third, especially when it’s blowing. I will do it this time. I have to.

Duncan turns the skiff again for another try. I want to scream at him, “ Why is this so important?? Can’t we just leave it until the weather calms? But I know the answer. I glance back. He stands darkly resolute, as if there is no storm blasting around us, the only upright and seemingly untouched object in my entire vista. I can find no island of calm within me, just storm inside and out. This time, I vow, I will hang on until my arms pull out of their sockets, if need be. It seems a small sacrifice. Once again, the head-down approach straight into the wind, my arm out, my stomach hard on the skiff edge as my fulcrum. A breaking wave catches me on the face and shoulder; an icy stream finds my neck and trails down my back as I hang like a tortured figurehead, poised, and then “Got it!” I yell behind me, then the second arm joins the first, and two-armed, ready to hang on till death, I wait for the maneuver, and it works. Duncan angles the stern over to the net,

he leans in a flash and has the net, and together with one mighty pull we lift it over the side and into our skiff. I am exhausted, immensely relieved, and the pick for this net begins.

We work three more nets after this one until near dark. I am so tired I can hardly stand. Duncan is tired, too, but he doesn't complain. No one ever complains. For some reason I want someone to, as if that would help somehow.

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I am not completely shocked by this world of work. Growing up, my family restored old colonial houses. We moved in first, and then tried to live around the work. By the time I was five, we had moved five times, from one town to another in New Hampshire, from one house with a handpump in it for the kitchen sink and no indoor plumbing, my mother with four of us under the age of five then. Then we lived in Amherst, outcasts in a country-club town, down a back road in a big yellow colonial. It was 200 years old and the worse for its age. We lived there for five years, my mother managing six of us now, and working on the house every moment she could. She replaced the floors, using wooden pegs as nails, as the early colonial houses did. She scraped layers of old wallpaper and re-plastered and re-papered every room in the twelve room house hoping she could sell it for a profit. By herself, and with such help as we gave, she completely rebuilt the house. During those five years, somehow she was able to buy a series of small derelict houses in other towns. On weekends we went there to those, painting, scraping, tearing up floorboards, replacing windows. When the Amherst house sold for a profit, it was begun, the cycle that defined our lives growing up.

The most derelict house of all was the house near the end of a maze of back roads in a town called Allenstown. Our first task was to jack the house up and replaced a rotten sill, which my mother had discovered to her dismay when tearing up the old floor. For a week

we had no kitchen floor and balanced about on joists, with the dirt cellar underneath us. For months after, the outside wall was only partially repaired, since we had run out of money already. There were holes in the walls as it snowed. We sat around our only heat, a woodstove in the kitchen, with blankets wrapped around our heads. Over my high school years, on weekends and when we got home from school we worked under mother's charge and changed all the windows in the house, tore off a front porch, knocked down walls built later to add more rooms, tore off the plaster that sealed off the three original fireplaces, scraped and steamed off seven layers of wallpaper, laid new wood floors, put up sheet rock, taped and painted them---the house was restored gradually, with no joy or even relief. Each of those four years, as winter approached, the work slowed, then stopped as the inside temperature: the house had no insulation. We never had enough money to put in a furnace, so our single heat source remained a single woodstove. We slept under piles of sleeping bags, took hot bricks from the stove up to bed with us on the coldest nights, wore hats, mitten, scarves, two pairs of socks and buried ourselves underneath our covers every night with just our noses sticking out.

Summers and Falls moved our work back outside. On weekends, we moved into the woods to our own land, where we chainsawed down maples, birch, alder, sawed and stacked them into an old truck, then to our shed, working from morning until the summer light faded. On sunny days, when the fields were dry and the grass long, my mother joined us out in the hayfield hand mowing and raking a winter supply of feed for our ten milking goats. We didn't have a tractor, and had no money to buy one no matter what the vintage, so my younger brother Todd and older brother, Scott, rigged up a Leyland special, the engine and hood of our father's old Mercedes with a back half of a wood wagon attached. We hand-scythed the hay, then returned later to fork it up into our "tractor". We laughed at our contraption and were glad we lived so far out. No one would see it. If they did, perhaps they would begin to guess the truth. It served as the perfect symbol for our lives. Outside we wore the veneer of the middle and upper class:

my mother drove a black Mercedes; our dog was not a spaniel or a mutt but a Russian Wolfhound; we lived in a gorgeous appearing house. Yet, the reality: the Mercedes was eight years old, haggled down to less than \$3,000; we had only purebred dogs as pets in case we needed to sell them; our house was below freezing five months of the year; our food was painfully doled out; and we spent much of our time, when our friends were playing, in the house, in the fields and woods, working.

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Finally the nets are judged done enough for the night. Weston and Wallace come up beside us in their skiff, both looking tired, but wearing the same expression I see on Duncan. They decide the mechanics of who will take what skiff to the tender to deliver, and I am hoping they will not need me. I won't ask to go ashore, though. "You can go in," Duncan finally says to me in my ear. "I know it was a tough one, but you did great. You really worked hard. Thanks, Leslie."

At the beginning of the season I might have protested, but in these weeks I have become grateful for any concessions Duncan makes for me, but at the same time, I feel weak and guilty that I need them. I never needed them before. I was the one out of a hundred Ninth grade girls who could climb the gym rope to the ceiling in six seconds, beating everyone else. In Tenth grade, I could still beat some of guys in arm wrestling. I could match my three brothers on most tasks. Why couldn't I work as hard and long as these men?

I slide out of the skiff, trudge through the black night water up to the beach to the warehouse where we sleep. The wind has not abated any, and though it is sucking sound in the opposite direction, I can hear the skiffs straining under their loads, still going in the dark, just arriving at the tender. I have no energy left to pity them; indeed I do not, for haven't they grown up with this? Doesn't Duncan profess love for this? Then up the

ladder and into our attic loft, a tiny room we built last month, just big enough to stand up in the middle, with just enough room for a bed, a chair and a woodstove. It is cold in there without heat, and the tin roof is banging, and something else is whistling with the wind but I don't care. I climb under the three sleeping bags and sleep. It is 12:30 am.

When our nets aren't working us, we work the nets. On closures, when Fish and Game closed fishing for a few days to let the salmon up the streams to spawn, we untie the nets and pull them up, this time using not the kicker to unravel them, but our arms, dragging them up from the ocean floor, heavy with kelp sometimes, sometimes fresh fish just hit. The nets have to be out of the water, not a shred remaining, by 9 p.m.. To keep everyone honest, Fish and Game flies over regularly. Take-ups are just as intense as put out, with one ameliorating factor. The speed is our own, not motorized, and so within our control. We are fast. We pull up 100 fathom nets regularly in twelve minutes going all-out, hardly stopping for breath, hand over hand as fast as hands can move in web, as fast as arms can pull a heavy leadline from the ocean floor to the skiff bottom. The take-up of a single net is a like the 400 yard dash. Not a sprint, because you couldn't poop out halfway and then just walk the rest. And even if you pace the first net perfectly, so that you make it to the end, there still were three more nets to go. We are always up against the clock, and timing and pacing are everything. We work together like finely oiled machines, and take unspoken pride in that. I do as well. That three people can work in such concert, aiming so single-mindedly toward this one task, and that it is done so proficiently regardless of the forces against us: the numbers of fish in the net, the size of the sea under us, the pull of the wind at our faces, our own level of fatigue, and still, almost no matter what, when the last piece of web slid into the boat, it is 9 p.m. precisely.

Toward the end of that summer, we had visitors, new fishermen from a site about four miles away from us. There were three of them. The youngest, a college student, bragged to me when we were in the room alone that they had pulled up their net in, and he paused

for dramatic effect---45 minutes! I smiled politely, said, “Wow, that’s fast,” and laughed proudly inside. I had signed on with the best.

Of all the work, mending net was the easiest, therefore the best. With a pair of delicate sewing scissors hung from mending twine around my neck, a white plastic needle in my hand, I could mend as fast as anyone, but no matter the pace, it was all solace. Net mending days meant rest for my shoulders and arms, especially the left shoulder that had started to hyper-extend lifting the slightest weight---picking too many fish and pulling too many taut lines. Though there was always pressure to get the nets done for the next opening, still, there was a relaxing rhythm to it, and the ground was solid under my feet. The scenery was magnificent, as always. I hadn’t tired of the swoop of ocean around our little island, of the mountains and volcanic spires of the Alaska Peninsula off to the south and west that trailed off into their own horizon, of the tides that flooded and drained with such constant drama. On rainy wind days, there was little pleasure in it; we endured the wet and cold that stiffened our hands and slowed our work to a numbed proficiency. Sunny days, though, when they came, were inspiring, filling us with air charged with the warmth of light, heating the chill from us, the moist that lingered always in our clothes, our bones.

Best of all, beyond and above the weather and scenery, though, was the conversation. Starved for communication other than that forged by the necessity of labor, this was mind time, spirit time, communion. We all craved it. I longed most for women-talk, poet-talk. My sister-in-law Beverly and I would maneuver ourselves inconspicuously to the same net, to face each other, working toward each other as much as possible. We waited days for this.

“Bev, I read this incredible poem last night. By Karl Shapiro.” I am cutting out web from a huge hole and keep my eyes on my fingers.

“Really?” Bev answers with interest, and a spark in her eyes. “How’d you have time to do that? Can you remember any of it?” She is finishing off a three-holer, with a deft snip from her scissor necklace, and she is done, now pulling through the web toward me searching for other holes.

“I’ve got it here in my pocket. Wait.” I look around, see everyone on the other nets intent on their own work. We’ve got until tomorrow to finish all eight nets, and we’re only on the third one now. This is no time for poetry. Stealthily I pull out the index card I copied the final verse on. I read quietly, but aim my words above the wind:

The body, what is it, Father, but a sign  
To love the force that grows us, to give back  
What in thy palm is senselessness and mud?  
Knead, knead the substance of our understanding  
Which must be beautiful in flesh to wake,  
That if Thou take me angrily in hand  
And hurl me to the shark, I shall not die!

I read the last two lines again, passionately, and we are silent. We don’t stop our work, now I am back to my patch and Bev has found a sea-lion hole. Then Bev looks up at me. Our eyes meet.

“It reminds me of your poem about Job,” I say finally, breaking the moment.

“Remember the quote? “Though He slay me/ yet will I trust Him.”

I sigh deeply. This verse scares me profoundly, and yet it gives comfort too. “Have you written anything this week?” I ask, though now I am counting the number of knots in the hole I’ve just cut out for the patch. “Hold it, don’t answer, I’ve got to count: sixteen, seventeen . . . Under my breath as I finger each knot, then “Okay, 23 by 16. Just a minute. Don’t say anything until I get my patch web.”

“Okay,” Bev laughs as she moves to another section of the net. This net, unimaginatively named the Seventh, is a mess, torn up by rocks and sea lions.

I am back, my patch web hung off my shoulder. “What have you written?” I ask, guessing she has written something. With her two toddlers, one of whom seldom sleeps, living in a half-built house, hauling her water the furthest of anyone and a husband always out fishing, Bev suffered more than the usual island claustrophobia, and I knew finding time to write was even harder for her than it was for me. Yet she had to write, just as I did.

“I’ve started a poem I think I’ll call “God’s Whirlwind,” Bev says quietly. She starts in on another small hole. “Remember Elijah, how he stood waiting for God to speak---”

“And the windstorm came,” I interrupted, remembering, “and God wasn’t in the wind, and then what happens?”

“After the wind came, then there was a fire, and God wasn’t in the fire. Then, after it was quiet, and God spoke in the quiet in a very small voice. Elijah expected God to speak through some great display of power and drama, but He didn’t that time. Just when we think we know God,” Bev stopped mending and looked up, “He surprises us, again.”

I’m coming back up the second side of my patch. I look quickly up at Bev. “Maybe He wanted to make sure Elijah was still listening.” We watch other’s face, knowing all we are not saying, then quickly look down at our hands, still mending.

One morning, near the end of July, it happened, the run of pink salmon forecast by Fish and Game came running, and so did we. Fifteen million were forecast, and when we stumbled up the hill for breakfast, Duncan looked out in his usual visual check of the nets visible from shore, then, “Hey, where’s the hook of the third? We’ve either got a shark in it or it’s sunk with fish!” It was sunk with fish. And the derby began. We had fished and caught healthy amounts of salmon up until then, enough to keep us tired and reasonably sure of making our tuition payments that next year, but we hadn’t made enough for rent and living expenses. I had hoped for the flood of fish along with everyone else, but now,

as my heart fluttered and my stomach turned, as though I were about to go on stage, I wondered, if we haven't been catching many fish yet, what will it be like when we do? And then the answer: What I thought I knew about hard work became a romper room memory. There were pink salmon swarming all over Kodiak Island, filling the seiners' nets, sinking ours, the ones that got away choking the spawning streams. We stood in our skiffs in salmon up to our ankles, then our calves, then our knees, walking in them, falling on them as we still bent to pull the net in for more. Three weeks of days and nights nearly indistinguishable from one another, eating and sleeping around the fish, lunch twelve hours after breakfast, Duncan and his brothers' arms going dead-numb at night, their hands locking with carpal tunnel, my hands so sore and bleeding in the deep cracks between my fingers I wrap them with surgical tape before putting on the cotton gloves . . .

When the season was over, late in September, we flew from our island back to Kodiak. The first Sunday back in town, I stood beside Duncan in church, singing hymns, my eyes closed and face uplifted. After four months at fishcamp, the congregational voices washed over me like milk. At the end of the service, a family friend strode across the aisle to greet us.

"Duncan! Leslie! How did your season go?" he boomed, his hand extended to Duncan. I knew he was a business executive for a local native corporation. We had been invited over to his house once for a potluck, where I had heard his latest fishing stories--he fished a short subsistence net one day each summer to stock his freezer.

"Oh, we got a few fish," Duncan smiled, a bit wanly. We were both still shell shocked.

"A few fish, I bet!" he grinned knowingly. Then he turned to me. "Leslie, you pick any fish?"

"A few," I said, in the same killer understatement, too tired to care about accuracy or

making a good impression.

“Did you? Well, let’s see your hands! You know, you can tell a lot by someone’s hands,” he says, smiling a wink at Duncan.

I held my right hand out, palm up, looking away. He placed one hand beneath to steady it, with the other he pulled lightly on my fingers then brushed his fingertips over what was left of the skin. He looked up at me quickly. “Yeah, I guess you did pick a few.”

“She picked more than that,” Duncan said, putting his arm around my shoulder proudly and squeezing.

I smiled blandly at them both, unsure of what to say, only knowing that I had survived, that there were now eight other months before me to return to college and live a different life, and choosing then to believe that though the seasons would circle around again and bring me back to that island every summer for the rest of my life, surely I would live, again.

## Hurled to the Shark

**Leslie Leyland Fields** relates her first year setnetting salmon off an island in Alaska as a 20 year old newlywed,

trying to find her balance and her  
humanity in a world where all  
the rules are broken.

the dreams---Duncan pulling the covers off me hand over hand shouting  
“coil the line!” Mine--that the net snares my foot while putting out the nets  
and I go down, drowning over and over because of the fish, the overflow that  
runneth from our cups, our fish overfloweth, our cups run away, the fish, the  
fish, and I’m not listening anymore, can’t hear anything, I just want to sleep,  
to hear the sound of sleep curling up into my ears, and only that.

