

Image: Art, Faith, Mystery
Issue #38. Spring 2003
LESLIE LEYLAND-FIELDS

A Voice in the Wilderness

It is June 2. My arms full of children, I crouch in a ten-seater Cessna Caravan and ready myself and six others for the flight across Kodiak Island, Alaska. Every summer since 1978, I have left my winter island home for our fish camp, where my family and I commercial fish for salmon. We will fly sixty miles over wilderness, mountains, glaciers, and fjords to a mile-long island with a population of eight-our family alone. This place has no roads, cars, or electricity, except what we generate ourselves, and days will often pass there before I see a human being other than my children. Our only contact with the outside world is a quirky, on-again, off-again radio-phone.

When I am not fishing or tending children, I make my way down to a shed that sits on pilings over the Gulf of Alaska waters that beat time and tide against the foundations of my dwelling. I am surrounded by mountain and ocean wilderness that sucks the breath out of all who first see it. Out my window, I can see bald eagles and peregrine falcons stirring the winds; sea lions, otters, and whales cruise by in their own currents; volcanoes steam on the horizon.

It is here that I write-poetry, essays, nonfiction. I could not have chosen a geography or two occupations-fishing and writing-more freighted with the folklore of self-sufficiency, rugged individualism, and fierce independence.

These clichés happen to be real life for us. We built our own house and dug our own well; we fish by hand. Like a latter-day Adam and Eve, we dress and keep our own island world. For a writer, the romantic images are equally accurate-the author in pensive solitude, breathing in rarified inspiration from the lap of undefiled creation, the numbing din of popular culture thousands of miles away.

But I would give it all up in an iambic heartbeat. I know exactly what I am missing. As an undergraduate at a Christian college, I joined with faculty, students, and friends in the pursuit of integrating faith, art, and knowledge. How do we make every thought, every artistic expression captive to the Lordship of Christ? How do we redeem a language so fractured and bent it no longer references a recognizable world? We harnessed ourselves together in asking questions like

these, and in our attempts at answering them. We spoke the same language. We were many, yet we were one.

Since then, in my teaching career, I have created numerous writing workshops and learned that community is far more than people gathering in the same room to share and perfect their work. There were carnivorous groups, out for the hunt and spill of blood. Happy social groups, united in dodging the hard work of truth. Complainers who plotted subversion. Cheerleaders who thrilled to every trite, tripping phrase. The alchemy to produce writing groups where iron sharpens iron is elusive, at best.

This brings some comfort to me as I sit, writing, during the months of my fish camp exile. I worry that solitude will lapse into solipsism, and wish for fellowship around words, literature, poetry, faith. A few select journals and magazines assuage this ache and remind me I am not alone. But thankfully it is not enough. My need sends me further, to the final source of all community-the Word itself. It is here that the hardest work begins.

In the shed that serves as my prayer closet and writing studio, I open the Scriptures and enter a swirl of mysteries I cannot parse: Word and world, logos uttering forth cosmos, the aspiring spirit rattling the tongue of holy writ in my ear. This other world, these words, undo me. In their company, I am lost, I am found, I am freed from the suffocating bounds of self. As I work at writing memoir and nonfiction, holding up the tattered pieces of my life in a search for language to shape and redeem them, I invite the gaze of another-the Word-creator himself. This is the ultimate writing workshop.

Sometimes I am quiet, simply listening. Other times, I am Jacob, who, having ushered the rest of his family to a safe distance, then stolidly approaches the theophany, sweaty hands on his wrists, not letting go until the words he needs are spoken, the blessing given. This duel is a singular enterprise. No one can stand in for me. And though the prevailing metaphor for the church-the human body-is the quintessential image of community (many parts, one body), St. Paul admonishes us as well to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling." Whether we live in the heart of Manhattan or on an island in Alaska, this is the hard work done on our knees, alone. This is the hard work of writing, nothing less than a fearful working out of our daily salvation.

I write about the virtues of working in isolation because I must. In a few weeks, I will pack up house and children and make the flight out to our distant island. I will always long for community in this place, and in my winter island home as well, and will read journals and join conferences and workshops whenever possible, but I am reconciled to the boundaries set around me. I am learning not to fear isolation and need. Indeed, as a writer, I am fed by the tensions that define my life. Perhaps these are the same tensions that define the lives of believers everywhere—who stand every day with their two feet in oppositional worlds.

On the day that all longing is filled, will my pen fall silent? Or, perhaps, finally, in the company of redeemed fellow writers and artists, I will find my best and truest voice, a choral voice.

Leslie Leyland Fields (northernpen@alaska.com) is the author of four books, *Out on the Deep Blue*, *The Entangling Net*, *The Water under Fish*, and her most recent, a memoir, *Surviving the Island of Grace* .

Visit [Leslie Leyland-Fields](#) as Image Artist of the Month for September 2004