

We Alaskans

Living Beautifully

✍ Author: **Helen Decker** ⌚ Updated: 14 hours ago 📅 Published 14 hours ago

Editor's note: In Sunday's *We Alaskans* we are celebrating the 35th annual creative writing contest sponsored by the University of Alaska and Alaska Dispatch News. Some 537 entries were submitted from across the state, including this piece by Helen Decker who had the editor's choice selection and was the winner of the nonfiction grades 10-12 category. Space is limited for what we can print in *We Alaskans*. Additional winners can be read at LitSite Alaska (litsite.org). This year's winning entries will be posted on or around May 14.

WRANGELL — Using the end of my picking hook, I peel scales off my face and scrape dried sea salt from my pores. Today marks day eight with no shower. My eyebrows are thick and crusted with something I guess is fish slime. Out of habit, I comb my fingers through my hair, stopping when I feel something hard. I rip it out to find three dried, solidified salmon eggs. The dark spots that speckle my face are shards of kelp. Purple-black streaks of jellyfish line my left cheek, until they're wiped away by tears that clean my littered face. My dad calls this an Alaskan facemask.

This day also marks day eight of my only human contact being my dad. I look across the boat's cabin and muster a smile at him. His skin is like mine, the days' worth of grime making our cheeks salty and stiff. The saltwater brine cracks our lips. We don't have the luxury of time to wash our faces after every set.

I hook up the cork line to the drum and have the net rolling on board in eight and a half seconds. I have fished commercially with my dad every summer since I was 7. Time has made me efficient over the years; no movements are wasted. I'm standing on the back deck in my raingear, boots and a shirt cut off at the sleeves, threadbare. I feel the sun blazing, almost unbearably, on the dark tops of my boots. Once this set is over, I'll dip my feet in the water, I tell myself. I can't let my mind think about it now, though. The sun beating down on my shoulders balances out the cool seawater dusting up over the stern roller as the net is reeled in. This is my favorite kind of day. When the sea is calm, the sun is high and the fishing is good.

Every so often, a breeze dances across the calm water and teases my hair across my neck. Off the water, reflects the happy shine of the midday sun. It streaks bright across my face, and I swear I can feel my freckles popping. Flopping over the stern roller, fish come four at a time. A smile floods to my face. In between fish, I glance out on the water. It's the most authentic beauty I've ever witnessed. A sea of rich blue topped with flickers of crystal, reflecting every passing thing.

Hard work is necessary on my dad's boat, but cleanliness is not. What I look like, with a crusty smile and hands that look twice my age, doesn't affect how much we produce on our boat. It's not a factor at all in how I choose to live my life. Every stroke of my rain pants sweeping past each other, each fish I toss forward, is just another reminder of how lucky I am to be working in such a genuinely breathtaking place. Every breath I take is honeyed with the reminder of how happy I am to be precisely here at this moment, living beautifully through hard work. This is the life.

Helen Decker attends Wrangell High School and her story was the Editor's Choice selection as well as winner of the Nonfiction Grades 10-12 category.

Commercial Fishing