

Wallace Kaufman

Compassion is our common language. What we do is who we are.

In the winter of 1989 with my new amateur radio operator's license, I seized the opportunity to join four American and twelve Russian radio amateurs on an expedition to the Soviet arctic. I had an assignment to write an article about this first chance for Americans to broadcast from formerly closed regions of the Soviet Union. We were part of "glasnost" or the new openness that would eventually destroy the Communist regime. I had never been to Russia. I crammed my mind with a few dozen words and phrases. From the men and women who welcomed me to the endless whiteness of tundra and frozen ocean at 40 below zero, I learned much more than a new language.

LEARNING TO SPEAK: Chukotka 1989  
(for my friends in the USOSU Expedition)

Last year when it was over,  
when I took off Dimitri's parka  
Valery's boots and Sergei's fur hat  
that had kept me alive,  
we embraced and were very sad  
and looked at each other as if to say,  
"If only we could speak."  
From one station in a shipping crate  
from one antenna in the snows,  
across the pole and frozen Siberia  
around the world went our hope  
in two languages and Morse code  
speaking of one world.  
But looking at each other  
We could say only, "Good-bye and Dos Vi Danya."

Learning a new language at fifty  
is like learning ballet at seventy.  
I love the music of new words  
the dance of new thoughts,  
a drumbeat of names:  
Pevek and Anadyr, Roytan and Wrangel,  
Larisa, Volodya, Valya and Slava,  
Pyotr, Victor, Ludi, Villi, Yuri.  
I want to come back to the north  
and talk with you about polar bears,  
and the ice floes, about icebreakers,

and the long night,  
and the flowers on the tundra,  
about where you came from  
and where you are going,  
and if the arctic will still be white  
when our children have children.

I stumble along in Russian now,  
but my mind is like a bad fish net  
with many holes and often  
when I try to pull in a few words I need,  
they escape just as I think I have grasped them,  
especially the big ones.  
I have boxes and boxes of little cards  
with words and phrases on them.  
I am like a man building a tree  
out of dry leaves.  
In my own language I can write poems and stories  
that make people laugh and cry.  
But if you could hear and read  
the words and sentences  
exactly as I speak my new language  
you would have to laugh at me and cry for me,  
how I mangle your Russian words.  
That's okay.  
I trust you.  
We will laugh and cry together.  
So it is in the best families.