

Farm Island Anthology

By Penny J. Niemi

Farm Islands

Atolls riding seas of blackened earth, farm islands dot the flat plain sky to sky, their shimmering silo sentinels securing rocky banks, their woody canopies sheltering against both sun and storm.

Here the cottonwood-lined reefs cut distant shores, and pebbled channels reach to blue horizons, sole entry for friends, for news, for life.

On farm islands, safe harbors persevere, carried on the whispers and the wisdom of sturdy islanders who have gone before.

Farm Islanders

Farm Islanders are mountain men, ranching men, pioneers with cowboy souls,
whose spirits long for wilderness and solitude.

Stubbornly rooted in the loam and open spaces, they are “forever residents”
cemented in the countless yesterdays of forefathers who cut the trees and turned
the virgin soil.

For these self-reliant men, the ground is their horse,
to be
saddled,
ridden,
worked.

Believing in its promise to provide, they have nurtured the land and the land has nurtured
them, in a synergistic dance.

Moored here by choice, they live their lives tenaciously protecting fragile shores,
and
how to stay is their abiding mission.

Island Man

His
face is old cow leather, ploughed deep by winters' winds and scorched by island
sunbeams.
One cheek houses his favorite chew, and a roguish grin lurks just beyond the teasing
glimmer of eyes the blue of meadow chicory.
Sun-washed denim is his uniform, worn proudly, its sleeves rolled halfway up,
and
grains of tractor grease lay wedged beneath torn nails on hands that undulate in river
valley contours.
On snowy legs that have never been undressed to shorts, stout boots laced ankle-length
forever guard his pale toes from sandal nakedness.
Excepting Sunday church folk or the café coffee crew, few friends know his thinning hair
has streaked to gray and white beneath the stained seed cap.
The scent of cows and hay wafts with him.

With nails toughness, work-pumped biceps smoothly slam baled hay to wagon bed.
With cotton candy tenderness each new calf receives its name.

He
is
the last of the original Finnish family who migrated to this island in the twenties of the
last Century, clearing and homesteading ten hundred acres and living off
the harvest of wild game, crops and land.
Birthed here, raised here, he is father to four and grandfather to ten.
His every joy and every desolation have been flung across this dusty ocean, a legacy of
near 300 seasons in these uncharted waters.

Deliberate of words, persistent, hard working, authentic, kind,
he
is this island's undisputed lord and leader.

He
is
Island Man.

Barn

It rises from the heart of island earth in a born-again coat of red, its starched Dutch cap of shimmering roof clasping in a tight embrace this island's pulsing center:

nerve center,
muscle center,
heart center,
life center.

Sturdy timbers, stone, cement define this vital space,
and
high above a yawning hayloft mouth perfumed in clover sweetness, the weather vane prognosticator charts the course through calm and storm.

Alee,
strong, double masted silo spires hold it at ground and anchor,
while out behind,
a weathered shed, all swayed and broken like an old mare's back, lists helplessly, door
dangling by cobweb threads.

Pre-dawn till long past dusk, lights blaze from window squares,
and
furry balls of jumbled polka dots and stripes tumble from their lairs, to mew and bounce
and chase with leaping legs between the farmer's boots as milk is drawn:
whoosh, psssss, whoosh, psssss.
No sick days, snow days, holidays, vacation days;
when cows are ready, farmer must be too.

Barns never sleep,
not while action churns and pumps and ebbs and flows like swirling ocean tides
through this island's red cloaked
nerve center,
muscle center,
heart center,
life center.

Island Woman

"Come on in!" echoes warmly as her sunshine smile swells to a toothy hug that reaches
from beyond the porch screen door.
Fresh coffee and the kindness of this kitchen mingle with bread's just-baked sweetness
and the chocolaty aroma of gooey brownies cooling at the open window.

She
is
mistress and co-captain of this island
and
this kitchen space is *her* space.
An animated, vibrant space
defined by authenticity.
Free from discontent of dreams undone,
this space has birthed her joy.
Here
childcare, cooking, cleaning, canning personify her creativity.
No sameness marks her days.

She
is
Island Mother,
whose healing fingers soothe hot, aching foreheads.
She
coaches daily homework, then labors at her own books,
chops firewood, then lullabies wee ones to sleep.
She
lines up and fills her canning jars, cuts patterns for new clothes,
and at her table hears confession, feeds her flock, and celebrates each day.

She
is
Island Woman,
cocooning her family in a waterfall of patience, harmony, and love unconditional.
And with a heart that lights the way, she steers them through the choppy tides of change.

Island Dog

They call him Panda,
an illusively lifeless lump of white and black fluff flopped in the shadow of a rusted red
pickup,
lids half-mast to the glow of autumn sunshine,
but
tattered left ear tented and alert, black eyes shrewdly vigilant,
lying in wait for any sign of trespass from pirates of two legs or marauders of two legs
times two.
This is his island kingdom and nothing passes without his permission.

He is the island dog, an indispensable farm worker, with lifelong employment guaranteed.

He is the boss of this barnyard, braving winter's blasts and summer's scorching sun, sheltered only by the shoulder of the farmhouse porch or the underbelly of the old red truck.

Eternally loyal and fiercely devoted to the island man,
he
tolerates the woman,
treats the children with aloof affection,
distains the island cats,
and
stands his ground to every stranger.

A four-legged jack-of-all-trades, this shaggy island hand chases home the cows and keeps the feisty cock in line.

With throaty woofs and warning circles, he fends off every barnyard threat.

Cared for but never pampered, his shabby topcoat gets a pruning only if he's in the haircut mood, and cleaning comes by way of dashes through the chilly creek.

When years and work erase his fluid gait and herding instincts fade to mostly memory,
this island's gallant dog can dream of bravely guarding one last time,
then,
with his master's gratitude, rest for an eternity beneath the shadow of that old red truck.

The Promise

He bends low over barbed wire fencing strands, chill autumn pink illuminating the furrows of a kindly face. Even now in semi-retirement, milking herd long sold off, his swollen, gnarled farmer's fingers faithfully mend these fences. Task completed, his gaze drifts across the sea of amber stubble to far-off glacial hills which, like his farm island, which, like him, are now crumbling remnants of the land's once rugged youth.

He ponders how long till stormy wave of house-upon-house invades these placid shores and perfect, sterile lawns erase for all time the integrity of bountiful farm islands and the island farmers who, with their very first and their very last breaths, have affixed their indelible stamp upon this land.

Will any of this brand new generation envision his island's promise?
Will *their* independent spirits long for wilderness and solitude?

But this grizzled islander's hopes will not yield,
for
yielding declares failure,
yielding ravages his dream,
yielding shreds his birthright,
leaving this oasis to wither and die with him.

Excitedly he stands, arthritic knees forgotten, arms raised as if in benediction.
Lips smiling, blue eyes dancing,
Farm Island Man invokes the promise of
another flood of
mountain men, of ranching men, of farm island men with pioneering souls.

About the Author

Penny J. Niemi

A freelance writer and poet, Penny Niemi's outdoor descriptive essays and profile articles have appeared in Michigan Out of Doors and Woods and Water News. Her non-fiction "View From a Train" was selected by contest judges in 2002 for publication in Voices of Michigan, an Anthology of Michigan Authors, Volume IV, and she recently exhibited at Tubac Center of the Arts, Tubac, AZ, in the Poetry of the Wild project. Niemi takes her outdoor observations to the page, characterizing people, landscapes and events in a highly descriptive, slightly detached writing style.

Small town mid-American values permeate Niemi's work, an outgrowth of her Minnesota roots. Her science and biology background and love of the natural world play heavily into her essays and poetry.

A retired dental hygienist and office manager with a bachelor's degree in journalism, she currently divides her year between northern Michigan and southern Arizona, where she actively engages her passion for gardening, history, hiking and travel. She volunteers for the Tubac Historical Society, the Tubac Presidio and the Anza Trail Coalition.