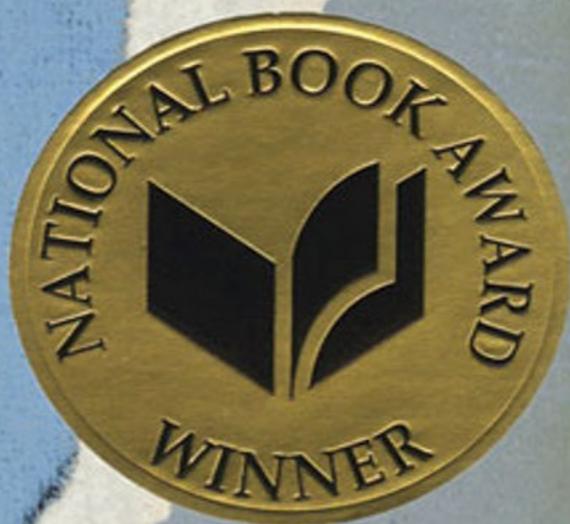


# Barry Lopez

## ARCTIC DREAMS



ICONIC EBOOKS FROM OPEN ROAD MEDIA

# Arctic Dreams

Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape

Barry Lopez



*For Sandra*

# Contents

[Epigraph](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Preface](#)

[Prologue: Pond's Bay, Baffin Island](#)

[One: Arktikós](#)

[Two: Banks Island: \*Ovibos moschatus\*](#)

[Three: Tôrnârssuk: \*Ursus maritimus\*](#)

[Four: Lancaster Sound: \*Monodon monoceros\*](#)

[Five: Migration: The Corridors of Breath](#)

[Six: Ice and Light](#)

[Seven: The Country of the Mind](#)

[Eight: The Intent of Monks](#)

[Nine: A Northern Passage](#)

[Epilogue: Saint Lawrence Island, Bering Sea](#)

[Notes](#)

[Appendices](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Index](#)

[Maps](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[A Biography of Barry Lopez](#)

The landscape conveys an impression of absolute permanence. It is not hostile. It is simply there—untouched, silent and complete. It is very lonely, yet the absence of all human traces gives you the feeling you understand this land and can take your place in it.

EDMUND CARPENTER

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience; to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder upon it, to dwell upon it.

He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it.

He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of the moon and the colors of the dawn and dusk.

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

## *Author's Note*

THE SCIENTIFIC NAMES OF northern animals and plants, and geographic coordinates for named places in the North, are listed in the appendices. Bibliographic information is in the text itself, in footnotes, in the Notes section beginning on [page 417](#), and in a selected bibliography on [page 445](#), depending on where its appearance is most appropriate. Maps in the Maps section are cartographically accurate. Maps in the text are mostly simplified sketches and not drawn to scale. Eskimo terms, unless otherwise noted, are from the Inuktitut dialects of the eastern Canadian Arctic. Eskimo words in common English usage, such as “iglu” (house), “kayak,” and “qamutiik” (sledge) are not italicized.

# Preface

BEYOND A REGARD FOR THE landscape itself, this book finds its origin in two moments.

One summer evening I was camped in the western Brooks Range of Alaska with a friend. From the ridge where we had pitched our tent we looked out over tens of square miles of rolling tundra along the southern edge of the calving grounds of the Western Arctic caribou herd. During those days we observed not only caribou and wolves, which we'd come to study, but wolverine and red fox, ground squirrels, delicate-legged whimbrels and aggressive jaegers, all in the unfoldings of their obscure lives. One night we watched in awe as a young grizzly bear tried repeatedly to force its way past a yearling wolf standing guard alone before a den of young pups. The bear eventually gave up and went on its way. We watched snowy owls and rough-legged hawks hunt and caribou drift like smoke through the valley.

On the evening I am thinking about—it was breezy there on Ilingnorak Ridge, and cold; but the late-night sun, small as a kite in the northern sky, poured forth an energy that burned against my cheekbones—it was on that evening that I went on a walk for the first time among the tundra birds. They all build their nests on the ground, so their vulnerability is extreme. I gazed down at a single horned lark no bigger than my fist. She stared back resolute as iron. As I approached, golden plovers abandoned their nests in hysterical ploys, artfully feigning a broken wing to distract me from the woven grass cups that couched their pale, darkly speckled eggs. Their eggs glowed with a soft, pure light, like the window light in a Vermeer painting. I marveled at this intense and concentrated beauty on the vast table of the plain. I walked on to find Lapland longspurs as still on their nests as stones, their dark eyes gleaming. At the nest of two snowy owls I stopped. These are more formidable animals than plovers. I stood motionless. The wild glare in their eyes receded. One owl settled back slowly over its three eggs, with an aura of primitive alertness. The other watched me, and immediately sought a bond with my eyes if I started to move.

I took to bowing on these evening walks. I would bow slightly with my hands in my pockets, toward the birds and the evidence of life in their nests—because of their fecundity, unexpected in this remote region, and because of the serene arctic light that came down over the land like breath, like breathing.

I remember the wild, dedicated lives of the birds that night and also the abandon with which a small herd of caribou crossed the Kokolik River to the northwest, the

incident of only a few moments. They pranced through like wild mares, kicking up sheets of water across the evening sun and shaking it off on the far side like huge dogs, a bloom of spray that glittered in the air around them like grains of mica.

I remember the press of light against my face. The explosive skitter of calves among grazing caribou. And the warm intensity of the eggs beneath these resolute birds. Until then, perhaps because the sun was shining in the very middle of the night, so out of tune with my own customary perception, I had never known how benign sunlight could be. How forgiving. How run through with compassion in a land that bore so eloquently the evidence of centuries of winter.

During those summer days on Ilingnorak Ridge there was no dark night. Darkness never came. The birds were born. They flourished, and then flew south in the wake of the caribou.

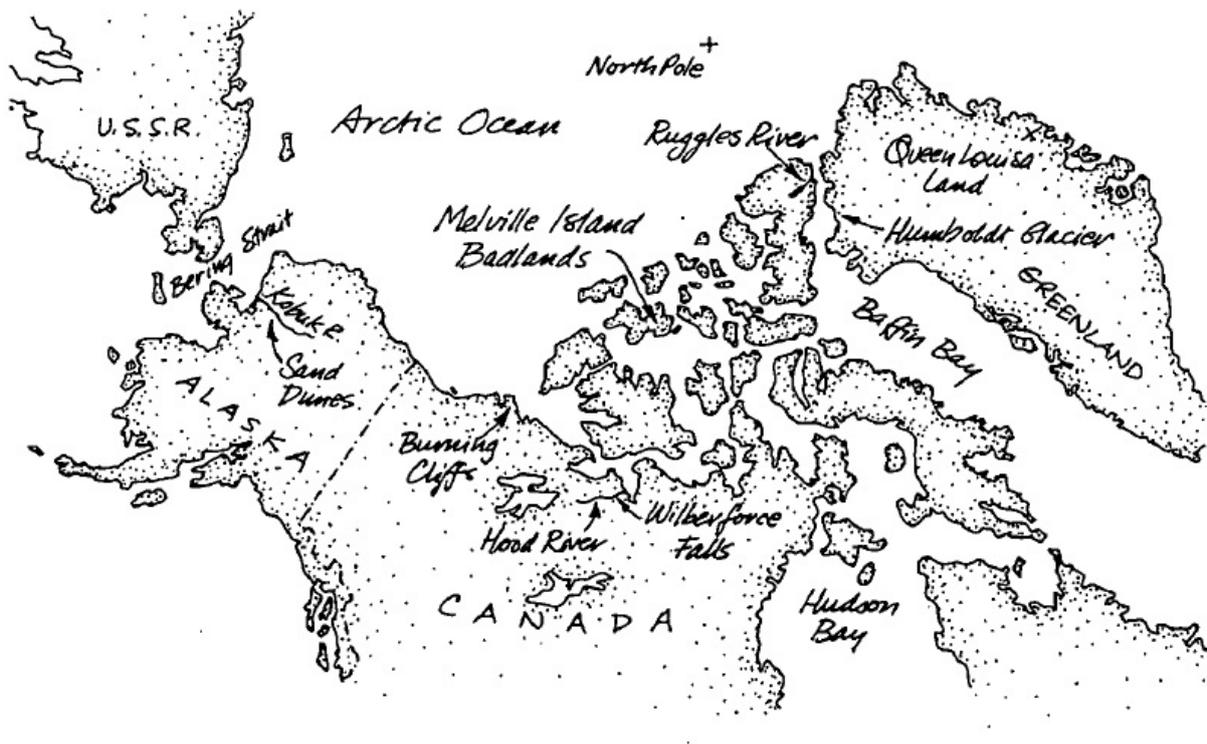
The second incident is more fleeting. It occurred one night when I was being driven past a graveyard in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Among the gravestones was one marking the burial place of Edward Israel, a shy young man who sailed north in 1881 with Lieutenant Adolphus Greely. Greely and his men established a base camp on Ellesmere Island, 450 miles from the North Pole, and explored the surrounding territory in the spring of 1882. A planned relief expedition failed to reach them that summer, and also failed again the next year. Desperate, Greely's party of twenty-five retreated south, hopeful of being met by a rescue party in 1884. They wintered at Cape Sabine, Ellesmere Island, where sixteen of them died of starvation and scurvy, another committed suicide, and one man was executed for stealing food. Israel, the expedition's astronomer, died on May 27, 1884, three weeks before the others were rescued. The survivors remembered him as the most congenial person among them.

I remember looking out the back window of the car that evening and seeing Israel's grave in the falling light. What had this man hoped to find? What sort of place did he think lay out there before him on that bright June morning in 1881 when the *Proteus* slipped its moorings at Saint John's, Newfoundland?

No one is able to say, of course. He was drawn on by the fixations of his own imagination, as were John Davis and William Baffin before him and as Robert Peary and Vilhjalmur Stefansson would be after him. Perhaps he intended to make his mark as a scientist, to set his teeth in that high arctic landscape and come home like Darwin to a sedate and contemplative life, in the farmlands of southern Michigan. Perhaps he merely hungered after the unusual. We can only imagine that he desired something, the fulfillment of some personal and private dream, to which he pinned his life.

Israel was buried with great public feeling and patriotic rhetoric. His gravestone reads

IN LIFE A TRUE CHILD OF GOD  
IN DEATH A HERO



These two incidents came back to me often in the four or five years that I traveled in the Arctic. The one, timeless and full of light, reminded me of sublime innocence, of the innate beauty of undisturbed relationships. The other, a dream gone awry, reminded me of the long human struggle, mental and physical, to come to terms with the Far North. As I traveled, I came to believe that people's desires and aspirations were as much a part of the land as the wind, solitary animals, and the bright fields of stone and tundra. And, too, that the land itself existed quite apart from these.

The physical landscape is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it. It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces—the nod of a flower, the color of the night sky, the murmur of an animal—trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement.

The particular section of the Arctic I became concerned with extends from Bering Strait in the west to Davis Strait in the east. It includes great, unrelieved stretches of snow and ice that in summer become plains of open water and an ocean that is the tundra, a tawny island beneath the sky. But there are, too, surprising and riveting sights: Wilberforce Falls on the Hood River suddenly tumbles 160 feet into a wild canyon in the midst of the Canadian tundra, and its roar can be heard for miles. Humboldt Glacier, a towering, 50-mile-long sea margin of the Greenland ice sheet, calves icebergs into Kane Basin with gargantuan and implacable force. The badlands of east-central Melville Island, an eroded country of desert oranges, of muted yellows and reds, reminds a traveler of canyons and arroyos in southern Utah. And there are places more exotic, like the Ruggles River, which flows out of Lake Hazen on Ellesmere Island in winter and runs 2000 feet through the Stygian darkness, wreathed in frost smoke, before it disappears underneath its own ice. South of Cape Bathurst and west of the Horton River in the Northwest Territories, bituminous shale fires that have been burning underground for hundreds of years make those coastal hills seem like a vast, smoldering heap of industrial slag. South of the central Kobuk River, one-hundred-foot dunes rise above hundreds of square miles of shifting sand. In East Greenland lies an arctic oasis called Queen Louisa Land, a valley of wild grasses and summer wildflowers surrounded by the walls of the Greenland ice cap.

The Arctic, overall, has the classic lines of a desert landscape: spare, balanced, extended, and quiet. In the Queen Elizabeth Islands the well-drained tundra plains and low-lying bogs more familiar in the south give way to expanses of weathered rock and gravel, and the illusion of a desert is even more complete. On Baffin and Ellesmere islands and in northern Alaska, sharply pitched arctic mountain ranges, which retain their remoteness even as you stand within them, complete a pervasive suggestion of austerity. The apparent monotony of the land is relieved, however, by weather systems moving through, and by the activities of animals, particularly of birds and caribou. And because so much of the country stands revealed, and because sunlight passing through the dustless air renders its edges with such unusual sharpness, animals linger before the eye. And their presence is vivid.

Like other landscapes that initially appear barren, arctic tundra can open suddenly, like the corolla of a flower, when any intimacy with it is sought. One begins to notice spots of brilliant red, orange, and green, for example, among the monotonous browns of a tundra tussock. A wolf spider lunges at a glistening beetle. A shred of muskox wool lies inert in the lavender blooms of a saxifrage. When Alwin Pederson, a

Danish naturalist, first arrived on the northeast coast of Greenland, he wrote, “I must admit to strange feelings at the sight of this godforsaken desert of stone.” Before he left, however, he was writing of muskoxen grazing in lush grass that grew higher than the animals’ heads in Jameson Land, and of the stark beauty of nunataks, the ice-free spires of rock that pierce the Pleistocene stillness of the Greenland ice cap. I, like Pederson, when stooping to pick up the gracile rib bone of an arctic hare, would catch sudden and unexpected sight of the silken cocoon of an arctic caterpillar.

The wealth of biological detail on the tundra dispels any feeling that the land is empty; and its likeness to a stage suggests impending events. On a summer walk, the wind-washed air proves depthlessly clear. Time and again you come upon the isolated and succinct evidence of life—animal tracks, the undigested remains of a ptarmigan in an owl’s casting, a patch of barren-ground willow nibbled nearly leafless by arctic hares. You are afforded the companionship of birds, which follow after you. (They know you are an animal; sooner or later you will turn up something to eat.) Sandpipers scatter before you, screaming *tuituek*, an Eskimo name for them. Coming awkwardly down a scree slope of frost-riven limestone you make a glass-tinkling clatter—and at a distance a tundra grizzly rises on its hind legs to study you; the dish-shaped paws of its front legs deathly still, the stance so human it is unnerving.

Along creek washouts, in the western Arctic especially, you might stumble upon a mammoth tusk. Or in the eastern Arctic find undisturbed the ring of stones used by a hunter 1500 years ago to hold down the edge of his skin tent. These old Dorset camps, located along the coasts where arctic people have been traveling for four millennia, are poignant with their suggestion of the timeless determination of mankind. On rare occasions a traveler might come upon the more imposing stone foundations of a large house abandoned by Thule-culture people in the twelfth century. (The cold, dry arctic air might have preserved, even down to its odor, the remains of a ringed seal killed and eaten by them 800 years ago.) More often, one comes upon the remains of a twentieth-century camp, artifacts far less engaging than a scrap of worked caribou bone, or carved wood, or skewered hide at a Dorset or Thule site. But these artifacts disintegrate just as slowly—red tins of Prince Albert brand crimp-cut tobacco, cans of Pet evaporated milk and Log Cabin maple syrup. In the most recent camps one finds used flashlight batteries in clusters like animal droppings, and a bewildering variety of spent rifle and shotgun ammunition.

You raise your eyes from these remains, from whatever century, to look away. The land as far as you can see is rung with a harmonious authority, the enduring force

of its natural history, of which these camps are so much a part. But the most recent evidence is vaguely disturbing. It does not derive in any clear way from the land. Its claim to being part of the natural history of the region seems, somehow, false.

It is hard to travel in the Arctic today and not be struck by the evidence of recent change. What is found at modern campsites along the coast points to the sudden arrival of a foreign technology—new tools and a new way of life for the local people. The initial adjustments to this were fairly simple; the rate of change, however, has continued to accelerate. Now the adjustments required are bewildering. And the new tools bring with them ever more complicated sets of beliefs. The native culture, from Saint Lawrence Island to Greenland, is today in a state of rapid economic reorganization and of internally disruptive social readjustment. In a recent article about the residents of Nunivak Island, for example, a scientist wrote that the dietary shift from wild to store-bought foods (with the many nutritional and social complications involved) is proceeding so quickly it is impossible to pin down. “By the time this paper appears in print,” he wrote, “much of the information in it will be of historical value only.”

Industrial changes have also come to the Arctic, following the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, in 1968: the 800-mile-long trans-Alaska pipeline itself, with its recent Kuparuk extension; base camps for oil exploration on Canada’s Melville Island and Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula; huge lead-zinc mining operations on northern Baffin and Little Cornwallis islands; hundreds of miles of new roads; and increased ship, air, and truck traffic. The region’s normally violent and unpredictable weather, its extreme cold and long periods of darkness, the great distance to supply depots, and the problem of stabilizing permanent structures over permafrost (which melts and shifts in erratic ways) have made the cost of these operations astronomical—indeed, in Canada they could not even be contemplated without massive assistance from the federal government.

Seen as widely separated dots and lines on a map, these recent, radical changes do not appear to amount to very much. But their rippling effect in the settlements and villages of the North—their economic, psychological, and social impact—is acute. And their success, though marginal and in some instances artificial, encourages additional schemes for development.<sup>1</sup> Of special concern to local residents is a growing concentration of power in the hands of people with enormous economic resources but a poorly developed geographic sense of the region. A man from Tuktoyaktuk, a village near the mouth of the Mackenzie River, told me a pointed story.

In the 1950s he traveled regularly up and down the coast by dogsled. When a distant early warning (DEW) line radar station went up along his accustomed route, he decided to stop to see what it was. The military men welcomed him not as a resident of the region but as a figure of arctic fable. They enthusiastically fed his dogs a stack of raw steaks. Each time the man came, they pounded him on the back and fed his dogs piles of steak. Their largess seemed so odd and his rapport with them so unrealistic he stopped coming. For months afterward, however, he had tremendous difficulty controlling the dogs anytime they passed near the place.

Passing through the villages, even traveling across the uninhabited land, one cannot miss the evidence of upheaval, nor avoid being wrenched by it. The depression it engenders, because so much of it seems a heedless imposition on the land and on the people, a rude invasion, can lead one to despair. I brooded, like any traveler, over these things; but the presence of the land, the sheer weight of it before the senses, more often drew me away from the contemporary issues. What, I wondered, had compelled me to bow to a horned lark? How do people imagine the landscapes they find themselves in? How does the land shape the imaginations of the people who dwell in it? How does desire itself, the desire to comprehend, shape knowledge? These questions seemed to me to go deeper than the topical issues, to underlie any consideration of them.

In pursuit of answers I traveled with people of differing dispositions. With Eskimos hunting narwhals off northern Baffin Island and walruses in Bering Sea. With marine ecologists on hundreds of miles of coastal and near-shore surveys. With landscape painters in the Canadian Archipelago. In the company of roughnecks, drilling for oil on the winter ice in high winds at  $-30^{\circ}\text{F}$ ; and with the cosmopolitan crew of a freighter, sailing up the west coast of Greenland and into the Northwest Passage. They each assessed the land differently—the apparent emptiness of the tundra, which ran out like a shimmering mirage in the Northern Ocean; the blue-black vault of the winter sky, a cold beauty alive with scintillating stars; a herd of muskoxen, pivoting together on a hilltop to make a defensive stand, their long guard hairs swirling around them like a single, huge wave of dark water; a vein of lead-zinc ore glinting like tiny mirrors in a damp, Mesozoic wall beneath the surface of Little Cornwallis Island; the moaning and wailing in the winter sea ice as the ocean's crust warped and shattered in the crystalline air. All of it, all that the land is and evokes, its actual meaning as well as its metaphorical reverberation, was and is understood differently.

These different views make a human future in that northern landscape a matter of conjecture, and it is here that one encounters dreams, projections of hope. The individual's dream, whether it be so private a wish as that the joyful determination of nesting arctic birds might infuse a distant friend weary of life, or a magnanimous wish, that a piece of scientific information wrested from the landscape might serve one's community—in individual dreams is the hope that one's own life will not have been lived for nothing. The very much larger dream, that of a people, is a story we have been carrying with us for millennia. It is a narrative of determination and hope that follows a question: What will we do as the wisdom of our past bears down on our future? It is a story of ageless conversation, not only conversation among ourselves about what we mean and wish to do, but a conversation held with the land—our contemplation and wonder at a prairie thunderstorm, or before the jagged line of a young mountain, or at the sudden rise of ducks from an isolated lake. We have been telling ourselves the story of what *we* represent in the land for 40,000 years. At the heart of this story, I think, is a simple, abiding belief: it is possible to live wisely on the land, and to live well. And in behaving respectfully toward all that the land contains, it is possible to imagine a stifling ignorance falling away from us.

Crossing the tree line to the Far North, one leaves behind the boreal owl clutching its frozen prey to its chest feathers to thaw it. Ahead lies an open, wild landscape, pointed off on the maps with arresting and anomalous names: Brother John Glacier and Cape White Handkerchief. Navy Board Inlet, Teddy Bear Island, and the Zebra Cliffs. Dexterity Fiord, Saint Patrick Canyon, Starvation Cove. Eskimos hunt the ringed seal, still, in the broad bays of the Sons of the Clergy and Royal Astronomical Society islands.

This is a land where airplanes track icebergs the size of Cleveland and polar bears fly down out of the stars. It is a region, like the desert, rich with metaphor, with adumbration. In a simple bow from the waist before the nest of the horned lark, you are able to stake your life, again, in what you dream.

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of specific arctic problems, see [note 1](#).

# Prologue

## Pond's Bay, Baffin Island

ON A WARM SUMMER day in 1823, the *Cumbrian*, a 360-ton British whaler, sailed into the waters off Pond's Bay (now Pond Inlet), northern Baffin Island, after a short excursion to the north. The waters of Lancaster Sound, where she had been, were supposed to be a promising "new water," but the *Cumbrian* hadn't struck a whale in two weeks of cruising. Worse, in her captain's view, the forty-odd ships that had chosen instead to dally at the mouth of Pond's Bay had met with spectacular success in her absence. "Several ships," lamented Captain Johnson in his log, "had captured upwards of 12, one or two [ships] 15 apiece, and one had got full..."

But the *Cumbrian* did not have long to wait. The newly discovered waters of western Baffin Bay, the West Water, teemed with the men's special prey, the Greenland whale. On the very next day, July 28, they killed three. In the days that followed they took another twelve, for a total of twenty-three for the season. On August 20 the *Cumbrian* sailed for ice-free waters off the coast of Greenland and then doubled Cape Farewell for England. The whale blubber she carried would render 236 tons of oil to light the street lamps of Great Britain and process the coarse wool of its textile mills. Also in her hold were more than four and a half tons of whalebone (baleen), to be turned into umbrella staves and Venetian blinds, portable sheep pens, window gratings, and furniture springing.

The *Cumbrian* made port at Hull on September 26, to dock-side cheers. Young boys from town swarmed her rigging in quest of the traditional garland of sun-bleached ribbons, halfway up the main-topgallant mast. The ship's owners beamed with pleasure. The year before the *Cumbrian* had taken but half this many whales, for no ship that year had been able to breach the ice in Davis Strait. And in 1821 the *Cumbrian* had returned with grim news—three ships from Hull, and at least four others from British ports, were lost, crushed in the ice.

The season of 1823 eased these awful memories. The West Water off Pond's Bay seemed most promising. And the *Cumbrian* had also brought back walrus hides and ivory, traded from the Eskimos of West Greenland and northern Baffin Island. And also several narwhal tusks. If the prices for oil and whalebone held, if there were a few good ice-years back to back, and if London didn't rescind the industry's price supports

or abolish the protective trade tariffs....

None of this had been much on the minds of the men of the *Cumbrian*. In the West Water, they had worked the odd hours of men who knew no night, who jumped for the whaleboat davits whenever a “fish” was sighted. They slept sprawled on the decks and ate irregularly. Their days in the ice were heady, the weather splendid. The distant landscapes of Bylot and Baffin islands at Pond’s Bay were etched brilliantly before them by a high-tempered light in air clear as gin—an unearthly sight that filled them with a mixture of disbelief and pleasure. They felt exhilaration in the constant light; and a sense of satisfaction and worth, which came partly from their arduous work.

The summer of 1823 marked a high point in the halcyon days of British arctic whaling, which followed the close of the Napoleonic Wars. The discovery of the West Water came at a time when the market for whale products was resurgent, and it made the merchants and investors of Hull and Peterhead, of Dundee and Aberdeen and Whitby, a rich bounty between 1818 and 1824. In 1825 it would begin to unravel—technological advances and British economic policy would weaken the home and foreign markets for oil and whalebone, and the too-frequent and expensive loss of uninsured ships would dry up investment capital. With 2000 whales killed in 1823 alone, overfishing, too, would begin to be a problem.

The object of all this attention was a creature the British had been hunting commercially for 212 years, first in the bays of Spitsbergen and in the loose pack ice of the Greenland Sea, then in the southern reaches of Davis Strait, and finally in the North Water and West Water of Baffin Bay. Long slats of blue-black, plankton-straining baleen hung from the roof of its mouth in a U-shaped curtain, some of the blades nearly 15 feet long. The stout body, with a massive head one-third the animal’s length, was wrapped in blubber as much as 20 inches thick—a higher ratio of blubber to weight than that for any other whale. The blubber of a good-size animal might yield 25 tons of oil; its 300 or more baleen plates might mean more than a ton of whalebone. The 45-foot carcass—minus baleen and its flukes (taken to make glue) and flensed of its blubber—was cut adrift as a “crang” underneath ever-present, mobbing clouds of seabirds.

Because it was a slow swimmer, because it floated when it was killed, and because of the unusual quantity of bone and oil it yielded, it was the right whale to take—the Greenland right. The polar whale. *The* whale. Later, in the western Arctic, it would be called “bowhead,” after the outline of its jaw.

The skin of this animal is slightly furrowed to the touch, like coarse-laid paper, and is a velvet-black color softened by gray. Under the chin and on the belly the skin turns white. Its dark brown eyes, the size of an ox's, are nearly lost in the huge head. Its blowhole rises prominently, with the shape of a volcano, allowing the whale to surface in narrow cracks in the sea ice to breathe. It is so sensitive to touch that at a bird's footfall a whale asleep at the surface will start wildly. The fiery pain of a harpoon strike can hardly be imagined. (In 1856 a harpooner aboard the *Truelove* reported striking a whale that dived so furiously it took out 1200 yards of line in three and a half minutes before crashing into the ocean floor, breaking its neck and burying its head eight feet deep in blue-black mud.)

Its strength is prodigious. A bowhead harpooned in the Greenland Sea took out 10,440 yards (7000 pounds) of line, snapping two 2¼-inch hemp lines (one of 1560 yards, the other 3360 yards) and pulling an entangled 28-foot whaleboat down with it before it was subdued. On May 27, 1817, thirty hours after it had been harpooned, another Greenland right whale was still towing a fully rigged ship at two knots into a "moderate brisk breeze."

The pursuit of this animal was without restraint. A month before she entered Lancaster Sound in 1823, the *Cumbrian* killed a huge Greenland right, a 57-foot female, in Davis Strait. They came upon her while she was asleep in light ice. Awakened by their approach, she swam slowly once around the ship and then put her head calmly to its bow and began to push. She pushed the ship backward for two minutes before the transfixed crew reacted with harpoons. The incident left the men unsettled. They flinched against such occasional eeriness in their work.

Precisely where they then stood in Davis Strait, off the northern west coast of Greenland, an odd whistling sound was sometimes heard by whalers in calm weather like this—a high note that eventually faded away to a very low note. It was the sign of a gale coming, from the direction most feared in that quarter, the southwest. The louder the whistle, the harder the winds would blow. They heard no whistling that year as they worked their way through the ice streams—but they had not liked the whale pushing against them, as though urging them to go back.

Many were ill at ease with arctic whaling, because of the threat to their lives presented by the unpredictable sea ice; but also in the regions where they hunted they found a beauty more penetrating and sublime than any they had ever known—so they said in their journals. Glaciers collapsed into the dark green sea before them like cliffs of marble as high as the Cliffs of Dover. Winds tore water from melt ponds atop

icebergs, to trail off in sheets of rain-bowing mists. Pods of white belukha whales glided ghostlike beneath their keels. A thousand auklets roared through the ship's rigging in a wildshower of sound. Walruses with their gleaming tusks and luminous whiskers swam slowly across calm bays in water burning like manganese in the evening sun. Men wrote in earnest, humble prose that they were overwhelmed by the "loveliness and grandeur."

What they saw made the killing seem inappropriate; but it was work, too, security for their families, and they could quickly put compassion and regret aside. "The object of the adventure," wrote one captain, "the value of the prize, the joy of the capture, cannot be sacrificed to feelings of compassion."

On the 27th of July, still lamenting the wasted days cruising in Lancaster Sound, the *Cumbrian* was bearing south along landfast ice east of Bylot Island, past the gruesome evidence of other ships' successes. "Here and there," the log reads, "along the floe edge lay the dead bodies of hundreds of flensed whales ... the air for miles around was tainted with the foetor which arose from such masses of putridity. Towards evening, the numbers come across were ever increasing, and the effluvia which then assailed our olfactories became almost intolerable."

The northern fulmars and glaucous gulls wheeled and screeched over the crangs. It was the carnage of wealth.

At the southeast tip of Bylot Island that year the local Eskimo, the Tununirmiut, had established a narwhal hunting camp. They traded informally with the British whalers, whom they called *upirnaagiiit*, "the men of springtime"—offering polar bear skins, walrus hides and ivory, and sealskin mitts for tin pots, needles, steel knives, and other useful or decorative items. In later years this trading would become a hedge for shipowners, a commercial necessity when the whaling alone no longer paid. Ships' captains would turn to furs, hides, ivory, and the collection of zoo animals to make ends meet. But those years, years of exploitation and social change for the Eskimo, lay ahead. For the moment the Tununirmiut were still aboriginal hunters, their habits largely unchanged by an availability of trade goods. They moved nomadically over the sea ice and the land, according to the itineraries of the animals they pursued for food, clothing, tools, and utensils.

If one were to generalize about this early trading relationship, it would be to say that the Eskimo were trying to accommodate themselves—in carefully limited ways—to an unfamiliar culture that could produce whale meat with ease, in astonishing quantities in little time, and that also made available a number of extremely useful

items, such as canvas and saws. The Europeans, looking largely to their own ends, enjoyed the primitive and exotic aspects of these encounters. They were eager for souvenirs and sexual contact with the women, and hoped to trade for a profit. On those salubrious summer afternoons off Pond's Bay, then, young native women returned from the whaling ships to tell their husbands that the white men lived in tiers of hammocks like *appaliarsuit*—dovekies on a sea cliff. The husband wiped seal grease from his fingers with a ptarmigan wing and waited to see if she had brought, perhaps, some tobacco. The Eskimo put a great value on the basic fact of their own long survival. They were not nearly as taken with the men and their ships as Europeans liked to believe.

The sophistication the whalers felt next to the Eskimo was a false sophistication, and presumptuous. The European didn't value the Eskimo's grasp of the world. And, however clever Eskimos might be with ivory implements and waterproof garments, he thought their techniques dated or simply quaint next to his own. A ship's officer of the time wrote summarily that the Eskimo was "dwindled in his form, his intellect, and his passions." They were people to be taken mild but harmless advantage of, to be chastised like children, but not to be taken seriously. The Europeans called them yaks.

As for the Eskimo, they thought the whalers strange for trying to get on without the skills and companionship of women. They gave them full credit for producing "valuable and convenient articles and implements," but laughed at their inability to clothe, feed, and protect themselves. They regarded the whalers with a mixture of *ilira* and *kappia*, the same emotions a visitor to the modern village of Pond Inlet encounters today. *Ilira* is the fear that accompanies awe; *kappia* is fear in the face of unpredictable violence. Watching a polar bear—*ilira*. Having to cross thin sea ice—*kappia*.

By the summer of 1832, after only a few years of commerce in the region, the whalers were already beginning to find the silent villages of spring—places where everyone had died during the winter of European diphtheria and smallpox. The apparently timeless Arctic, they saw, was in fact changeable. And the vast and particular knowledge of the Eskimo, garnered from hundreds of years of their patient interrogation of the landscape, was starting to slip away.

Far to the northeast of Pond's Bay, west of Cape York on the Greenland coast, was a remarkable phenomenon whalers at the time called the Crimson Cliffs, red-tinged snow they variously explained as due to fungal growth or to the red mite of guillemots feeding on shrimp.<sup>1</sup> At an unknown spot to the east of those cliffs, a place the local Eskimos called Savissivik, was a collection of meteorites that the British heard about

for the first time in 1818. (The Polar Eskimo chipped bits of iron-nickel from them for harpoon tips and knife blades, and for use in trade with other Eskimos. Among them *savik* meant both “knife” and “iron.”) In 1823 even officers of the British whaling fleet had little idea where a meteorite might come from. They couldn’t say, either, whether Greenland was actually an island. Nor at that time had anyone been within 500 miles of the North Pole. For all they knew, it was what Henry Hudson believed it was when he sailed for it in 1607, a massive boulder of black basalt sitting in the middle of a warm, calm sea. They were unaware that the Greenland right actually “sang,” like the humpback whales they heard in the North Atlantic en route to the arctic fishery. The life history of the Greenland shark, an “unwholesome and lethargic brute” upon which the Danes would build Greenland’s first commercial fishery (for the oil from its liver), was unknown to them. The existence of a culture that had preceded the Eskimo’s in the Arctic was unsuspected, though they traded, unawares, for its artifacts.

In 1823 the North American Arctic was still as distant as fable, inhabited by remarkable animals and uncontacted peoples, the last undiscovered complex ecosystem on the planet. A landscape of numinous events, of a forgiving benediction of light, and a darkness so dunning it precipitated madness; of a cold that froze vinegar, that fractured whatever it penetrated, including the stones. It was uncharted, unclaimed territory, and Europeans had perished miserably in it since the time of the Norse—gangrenous with frostbite, poisoned by polar bear liver, rotted by scurvy, dead of exposure on the ice beside the wreckage of a ship burned to the water line for the last bit of its warmth.

The confidence and élan of the whalers at Pond’s Bay were tempered with this macabre knowledge; and they suspected that their own ignorance of the place, even the ignorance of those among them who made such erudite notes about the biology of whales or the colors of plankton in the current, was extensive. They were overcome, however, by neither fear nor ignorance. Their vessels, for the moment, were “safe as a life boat and tight as a bottle.” In two months they would be home to their families, with a year’s pay and perhaps a pair of polar bear trousers to show, or a flint-blade knife for a son. And with stories to hold a neighbor enthralled, stories of a breathtaking escape from drowning, or of having collected 6000 eider eggs on a coastal flat one morning. Or of sleeping with an Eskimo woman.

It is easy to imagine their sense of wild adventure, that on one of those July afternoons off Pond’s Bay, on a Sunday when a strict Christian captain would permit no whaling, that the crew might be lounging on the sunlit decks comparing exotic