(Frobisher thought this the shore of North America.) It is possible, however, that Elizabeth had another meaning in mind. The word *meta*, strictly speaking, means "cone." In classical Rome the towers at either end of the race course in the Colosseum, around which the chariots turned, were called *metae*. It may have been that Elizabeth meant to suggest a similar course, with London the *meta cognita*, the known entity, and the land Frobisher found the unknown entity, the *meta incognita*. North America, then, was the turn at the far end of the course, something England felt herself reaching toward, and around which she would eventually make a turn of unknown meaning before coming home.

The European culture from which the ancestors of many of us came has yet to make this turn, I think. It has yet to understand the wisdom, preserved in North America, that lies in the richness and sanctity of a wild landscape, what it can mean in the unfolding of human life, the staying of a troubled human spirit.

The other phrase that comes to mind is more obscure. It is the Latin motto from the title banner of *The North Georgia Gazette: per freta hactenus negata*, meaning to have negotiated a strait the very existence of which has been denied. But it also suggests a continuing movement through unknown waters. It is, simultaneously, an expression of fear and of accomplishment, the cusp on which human life finds its richest expression.

The plane landed. Light was lambent on the waters of Slidre Fiord. From the weather station six dogs came toward us, lumbering like wolves, a movement that suggested they could drop buffalo. I reached out and patted one of them tentatively on the head.

EPILOGUE: Saint Lawrence Island, Bering Sea

THE MOUNTAIN in the distance is called Sevuokuk. It marks the northwest cape of Saint Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea. From where we are on the ice, this eminence defines the water and the sky to the east as far as we can look. Its western face, a steep wall of snow-streaked basalt, rises above a beach of dark cobbles, riven, ice-polished, ocean-rolled chips of Sevuokuk itself. The village of Gambell is there, the place I have come from with the Yup'ik men, to hunt walrus in the spring ice.

We are, I believe, in Russian waters; and also, by a definition to them even more arbitrary, in "tomorrow," on the other side of the international date line. Whatever political impropriety might be

involved is of little importance to the Yup'ik, especially while they are hunting. From where blood soaks the snow, then, and piles of meat and slabs of fat and walrus skin are accumulating, from where ivory tusks have been collected together like exotic kindling, I stare toward the high Russian coast. The mental categories, specific desires, and understanding of history among the people living there are, I reflect, nearly as different from my own as mine are from my Yup'ik companions'.

I am not entirely comfortable on the sea ice butchering walrus like this. The harshness of the landscape, the vulnerability of the boat, and the great size and power of the hunted animal combine to increase my sense of danger. The killing jars me, in spite of my regard for the simple elements of human survival here.

We finish loading the boats. One of the crews has rescued two dogs that have either run off from one of the Russian villages or been abandoned out here on the ice. Several boats gather gunnel to gunnel to look over the dogs. They have surprisingly short hair and seem undersize to draw a sled, smaller than Siberian huskies. But the men assure me these are typical Russian sled dogs.

We take our bearing from the far prominence of Sevuokuk and turn home, laden with walrus meat, with walrus hides and a few seals, with crested auklets and thick-billed murres, with ivory and Russian dogs. When we reach shore, the four of us put our shoulders to the boat to bring it high up on the beach. A young man in the family I am staying with packs a sled with what we have brought back. He pulls it away across the snow behind his Honda three-wheeler, toward the house. Our meals. The guns and gear, the harpoons and floats and lines, the extra clothing and portable radios are all secured and taken away. I am one of the last to leave the beach, still turning over images of the hunt.

No matter what sophistication of mind you bring to such events, no matter what breadth of anthropological understanding, no matter your fondness for the food, your desire to participate, you have still seen an animal killed. You have met the intertwined issues—What is an animal? What is death?—in those large moments

of blood, violent exhalation, and thrashing water, with the acrid odor of burned powder in the fetid corral smells of a walrus haul-out. The moments are astounding, cacophonous, also serene. The sight of men letting bits of meat slip away into the dark green water with mumbled benedictions is as stark in my memory as the suddenly widening eyes of the huge, startled animals.

I walk up over the crest of the beach and toward the village, following a set of sled tracks. There is a narrow trail of fresh blood in the snow between the runners. The trail runs out at a latticework of drying racks for meat and skins. The blood in the snow is a sign of life going on, of other life going on. Its presence is too often confused with cruelty.

I rest my gloved fingers on the driftwood meat rack. It is easy to develop an affection for the Yup'ik people, especially when you are invited to participate in events still defined largely by their own traditions. The entire event—leaving to hunt, hunting, coming home, the food shared in a family setting—creates a sense of well-being easy to share. Viewed in this way, the people seem fully capable beings, correct in what they do. When you travel with them, their voluminous and accurate knowledge, their spiritual and technical confidence, expose what is insipid and groundless in your own culture.

I brood often about hunting. It is the most spectacular and succinct expression of the Eskimo's relationship with the land, yet one of the most perplexing and disturbing for the outsider to consider. With the compelling pressures of a cash-based economy to contend with, and the ready availability of modern weapons, hunting practices have changed. Many families still take much of their food from the land, but they do it differently now. "Inauthentic" is the criticism most often made of their methods, as though years ago time had stopped for the Yup'ik.

But I worry over hunting for another reason—the endless reconciliation that must be made of Jacob with his brother Esau. The anguish of Gilgamesh at the death of his companion Enkidu. We do not know how exactly to bridge this gap between civilized

man and the society of the hunter. The Afrikaner writer Laurens van der Post, long familiar with Kalahari hunting peoples as archetypal victims of our prejudice, calls the gap between us "an abyss of deceit and murder" we have created. The existence of such a society alarms us. In part this is a trouble we have with writing out our history. We adjust our histories in order to elevate ourselves in the creation that surrounds us; we cut ourselves off from our hunting ancestors, who make us uncomfortable. They seem too closely aligned with insolent, violent predatory animals. The hunting cultures are too barbaric for us. In condemning them, we see it as "inevitable" that their ways are being eclipsed. Yet, from the testimony of sensitive visitors among them, such as van der Post and others I have mentioned in the Arctic, we know that something of value resides with these people.

I think of the Eskimos compassionately as *hibakusha*—the Japanese word for "explosion-affected people," those who continue to suffer the effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Eskimos are trapped in a long, slow detonation. What they know about a good way to live is disintegrating. The sophisticated, ironic voice of civilization insists that their insights are only trivial, but they are not.

I remember looking into a herd of walrus that day and thinking: do human beings make the walrus more human to make it comprehensible or to assuage loneliness? What is it to be estranged in this land?

It is in the land, I once thought, that one searches out and eventually finds what is beautiful. And an edge of this deep and rarefied beauty is the acceptance of complex paradox and the forgiveness of others. It means you will not die alone.

I looked at the blood in the snow for a long time, and then turned away from the village. I walked north, toward the spot where the gravel spit on which the houses stand slips under the sea ice. It is possible to travel in the Arctic and concentrate only on the physical landscape—on the animals, on the realms of light and dark, on movements that excite some consideration of the ways we conceive

of time and space, history, maps, and art. One can become completely isolated, for example, in the intricate life of the polar bear. But the ethereal and timeless power of the land, that union of what is beautiful with what is terrifying, is insistent. It penetrates all cultures, archaic and modern. The land gets inside us; and we must decide one way or another what this means, what we will do about it.

One of our long-lived cultural differences with the Eskimo has been over whether to accept the land as it is or to exert the will to change it into something else. The great task of life for the traditional Eskimo is still to achieve congruence with a reality that is already given. The given reality, the real landscape, is "horror within magnificence, absurdity within intelligibility, suffering within joy," in the words of Albert Schweitzer. We do not esteem as highly these lessons in paradox. We hold in higher regard the land's tractability, its alterability. We believe the conditions of the earth can be changed to ensure human happiness, to provide jobs and to create material wealth and ease. Each culture, then, finds a different sort of apotheosis, of epiphany, and comfort in the land.

Any latent wisdom there might be in the Eskimo position is overwhelmed for us by our ability to alter the land. The long pattern of purely biological evolution, however, strongly suggests that a profound collision of human will with immutable aspects of the natural order is inevitable. This, by itself, seems reason enough to inquire among aboriginal cultures concerning the nature of time and space and other (invented) dichotomies; the relationship between hope and the exercise of will; the role of dreams and myths in human life; and the therapeutic aspects of long-term intimacy with a landscape.

We tend to think of places like the Arctic, the Antarctic, the Gobi, the Sahara, the Mojave, as primitive, but there are in fact no primitive or even primeval landscapes. Neither are there permanent landscapes. And nowhere is the land empty or underdeveloped. It cannot be improved upon with technological assistance. The land, an animal that contains all other animals, is vigorous and alive. The

challenge to us, when we address the land, is to join with cosmologists in their ideas of continuous creation, and with physicists with their ideas of spatial and temporal paradox, to see the subtle grace and mutability of the different landscapes. They are crucibles of mystery, precisely like the smaller ones that they contain—the arctic fox, the dwarf birch, the pi-meson; and the larger ones that contain them, side by side with such seemingly immutable objects as the Horsehead Nebula in Orion. These are not solely arenas for human invention. To have no elevated conversation with the land, no sense of reciprocity with it, to rein it in or to disparage conditions not to our liking, shows a certain lack of courage, too strong a preference for human devising.

The farther I got from the village below Sevuokuk, the more exposed I was to the wind. I pulled my face farther into my parka. Snow squeaked beneath my boots. As I crossed from patches of wind-slabbed snow to dark cobbles, I wobbled over my footing. The beach stones clattered in the wet cold. The violet and saffron streaks of the sunset had long been on the wane. They had gone to pastels, muted, like slow water or interstellar currents, rolling over. They had become the colors of sunrise. The celestial light on an arctic cusp.

I stood with my feet squared on the stones at the edge of the ice and looked north into Bering Strait, the real Estrecho de Anian. To the east was America, the Seward Peninsula; to the west the Magadan Region of Siberia, the Chukchi Peninsula. On each were the burial grounds of archaic Bering Sea–culture people, the richest of all the prehistoric arctic cultures. In the summer of 1976, a Russian group led by M. A. Chlenov discovered a 500-year-old monument on the north shore of Yttygran Island, on Seniavin Strait, off the southeast Chukchi coast. The complex consists of a series of bowhead whale skulls and jawbones set up in a line on the beach that is about 2500 feet long. The monument is associated with several stone and earth structures and also with meat pits. Many of

the skulls are still standing up vertically in the ground, in a strict geometric pattern. Chlenov and his colleagues regard the area as a "sacred precinct" and link it to the ceremonial lives of a select group of highly skilled whale hunters, whose culture was continuous from Cape Dezhnev in the north to Providence Bay and included Saint Lawrence Island, where the cultural phase has been named Punuk.

Perhaps the Punuk hunters at Whalebone Alley, as it is known, lived, some of them, exemplary lives. Perhaps they knew exactly what words to say to the whale so they would not go off in dismay or feel the weight of its death. I remember the faces of the walrus we killed, and do not know what words to say to them.

No culture has yet solved the dilemma each has faced with the growth of a conscious mind: how to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in all life, when one finds darkness not only in one's own culture but within oneself. If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox. One must live in the middle of contradiction because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of a leaning into the light.

I stood for a long time at the tip of Saint Lawrence Island, regarding the ice, the distant dark leads of water. In the twilight and wind and the damp cold, memories of the day were like an aura around me, unresolved, a continuous perplexity pierced here and there by sharp rays of light—other memories, coherence. I thought of the layers of it—the dying walrus moving through the chill green water, through the individual minds of the hunters, the mind of an observer. Of the very idea of the walrus living on, even as I ate its flesh. Lines in books about the walrus; walrus-hide lines tied to

harpoons, dragging walrus-skin boats over the sea. The curve and weight of a tusk in my mind, from a head as dense with bone as a boulder. Walrus-meat stew is waiting back at the house, hot now, while I stand in this cold, thickening wind. At the foot of Sevuokuk, Lapland longspurs build their nests in the walrus's abandoned crania.

Glaucous gulls fly over. In the shore lead are phalaropes, with their twiglike legs. In the distance I can see flocks of oldsquaw against the sky, and a few cormorants. A patch of shadow that could be several thousand crested auklets—too far away to know. Out there are whales—I have seen six or eight gray whales as I walked this evening. And the ice, pale as the dove-colored sky. The wind raises the surface of the water. Wake of a seal in the shore lead, gone now. I bowed. I bowed to what knows no deliberating legislature or parliament, no religion, no competing theories of economics, an expression of allegiance with the mystery of life.

I looked out over the Bering Sea and brought my hands folded to the breast of my parka and bowed from the waist deeply toward the north, that great strait filled with life, the ice and the water. I held the bow to the pale sulphur sky at the northern rim of the earth. I held the bow until my back ached, and my mind was emptied of its categories and designs, its plans and speculations. I bowed before the simple evidence of the moment in my life in a tangible place on the earth that was beautiful.

When I stood I thought I glimpsed my own desire. The landscape and the animals were like something found at the end of a dream. The edges of the real landscape became one with the edges of something I had dreamed. But what I had dreamed was only a pattern, some beautiful pattern of light. The continuous work of the imagination, I thought, to bring what is actual together with what is dreamed is an expression of human evolution. The conscious desire is to achieve a state, even momentarily, that like light is unbounded, nurturing, suffused with wisdom and creation, a state in which one has absorbed that very darkness which before was the perpetual sign of defeat.

Whatever world that is, it lies far ahead. But its outline, its adumbration, is clear in the landscape, and upon this one can actually hope we will find our way.

I bowed again, deeply, toward the north, and turned south to retrace my steps over the dark cobbles to the home where I was staying. I was full of appreciation for all that I had seen.