

A Short Journey to the Unknown

Naturalists often head off into the wilderness half in quest of a transforming epiphany. William Warner journeyed to the top of the world for quite different reasons, but what he encountered there was nothing short of extraordinary.

by William W. Warner

Authors who write about nature often seem to experience dramatic visions—epiphanies, we might better call them—in which the individual is revealed as a vital element in nature’s grand design for the planet Earth. Annie Dillard, for example, has seen a cedar tree in her backyard burning with lights, “each cell buzzing with flame.” Rick Bass sits on a rocky hilltop overlooking lush green fields of mint and “feel[s] my soul cutting down into the bedrock.” So strong is this feeling, in fact, that he comes to believe he is as one with the rock. “I, too, am becoming the earth,” Bass declares. The Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan finds a large colony of flamingos wading in a Yucatán lagoon and describes the sight as “a vision so incredible and thick and numi-

nous [that] I know it will open inside my eyes in the moment before death when a lived life draws itself out one last time before closing forever and we are drawn to these birds the way fire pulls air into it.”

Those who have had similar epiphanies usually feel tempted to write about them, often at great length. I have not. Quite simply, it is because I have yet to experience the state of transport that gives birth to such moments of ecstatic vision. Perhaps this will always be the case, since my moments of deepest reflection and inner calm are habitually interrupted by such commonplace thoughts as whether or not I left the dog locked outside in the backyard or paid the overdue gas bill. But I have experienced one moment, one brief and precious moment, when I came very close to a transcendental vision, brought





The tiny village of Grise Fiord remains the northernmost permanent settlement in North America.

on by an uncommonly barren but dramatic landscape. It is perhaps worth the telling, especially for those readers who, like myself, await their first epiphany from the world of nature. So, too, is the journey to the place where it occurred, which, as the expression has it, was well off the beaten path.

My near-epiphany took place on Ellesmere Island, the most northern and one of the largest islands in Canada's Arctic archipelago. I had gone there—it is now almost 30 years past—after spending six years of foreign service assignments in the tropics, without ever seeing so much as a flake of snow. There thus welled up in me an irrational urge to strike out for the north. Not just

anywhere in the north, that is, but to the northernmost possible lands of the Western Hemisphere, as I had already done with the southernmost.

More particularly my thoughts centered on the small town of Grise Fiord, which at 76°24' north latitude can lay claim to being the northernmost Eskimo habitation in North America. Neighboring Greenland, it is true, has a sprinkling of Eskimo villages near Thule, some 75 miles farther north, but Greenland is not generally considered part of North America by those who ponder such matters. (Politically correct nomenclature now requires that we say *Kalaallit Nunaat* for Greenland and *Inuit* for Eskimo, but I wish to remain faithful to the usage of yesteryear, at the time of my visit.) More interesting than such considerations, however, was the



promise of finding the nesting grounds of the rare ivory gull and the possibility of viewing the narwhal, the primitive whale with a long and spirally twisted tusk which is in fact a grossly elongated canine tooth. Best of all, I was told that Arctic char, a spirited game fish that is in fact closely related to our North American brook trout, inhabited the lakes, rivers, and fiords of Ellesmere. As an ardent fly fisherman, I became obsessed with the thought of being the first to take this handsome trout on a fly at the northern limit of its range.

The journey to Grise Fiord was a long one, even by the aviation standards of the time. By far the longest leg came first, from Montreal to Resolute on Cornwallis Island via Frobisher Bay, aboard the now defunct Nordair, once hailed as “the workhorse of the Arctic.” Getting into one’s assigned seat was an adventure in itself, entailing a climb over boxes of machine parts, a barred crate containing two growling huskies, and a small mountain of mail sacks piled up in the center aisle and forward seats. These discomforts aside, the flight I booked in mid-July was a good one, blessed with fine weather and the Arctic’s stunning visibility, unmatched in more temperate latitudes. I therefore unfolded my National Geographic map of northern Canada, spread it out on my lap, and watched it come alive from my window on the starboard side of the aircraft. Such

landmarks as the peninsula on the southwest corner of Baffin Island that bears the foreboding name of Meta Incognita, the vast Foxe Basin, the Barnes Ice Cap, the narrow and icebound Fury and Hecla Strait, and Somerset Island all passed under us, as though the landscape was being slowly unscrolled on a modern day computer screen. Finally, there were the barren grounds and snowfields of Cornwallis Island, 600 miles north of the Arctic Circle and at the time the site of the North Magnetic Pole (it has since moved approximately 250 miles to the north), as well as the town of Resolute, which was then the scene of feverish prospecting for oil and precious metals.

Two days later, after a number of false starts with various bush pilots, I found passage to Grise Fiord on a twin-engine Otter with balloon tires carrying a disassembled Caterpillar tractor, tents and other camping gear, two petroleum geologists, an elderly Eskimo woman recuperating from tuberculosis, and a taciturn pilot. First stop was nearby Devon Island, where the pilot made several passes over some gravel beaches before opting for a moderately level field a mile or so inland. Here we left the Caterpillar tractor and the two geologists, who seemed visibly displeased with their new surroundings. The pilot then invited me to sit up forward in the copilot’s seat, and the Eskimo lady began to cackle with pleasure when she learned that I, too, was bound for Grise Fiord, which she made very clear was her home. In this manner, we headed north and east to Ellesmere.

If the trip to Resolute had been spectacular, the shorter trip from Devon Island to Grise Fiord was unforgettable. Somewhat to my surprise I found Jones Sound, the body of water separating Devon and Ellesmere Islands, to be icebound clear across its 70-mile expanse. Thick as it was, however, the ice was covered with a mosaic of melt pools. The water in these surface

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pools combined with the ice beneath them to produce an exquisite array of blue-to-green gradations, much like the refractions seen at the waterline of floating icebergs which are so hard to describe. (Or paint, as the noted 19th-century landscape artist Frederick Church admitted after two trips to Labrador for just such a purpose.) There were also wide leads, or open passages, where the sun sparkled on blue water, in marked contrast to the dazzling white of the ice. Here the ice edges, still three to four feet thick, showed the strange inner blue that is so characteristic of high-density ice forms.

Coming closer to Ellesmere we found good numbers of plump seals at the edge of each lead, their bodies stretched out on the ice in every imaginable posture. But at first sight of the Otter they dove quickly and gracefully back into the water, one after another, like so many Esther Williams aquabelles in a Hollywood spectacular. My pilot companion now broke his silence to smile and say that he had seldom seen such a fine summer day or, for that matter, so many fat seals. He then went out of our way to search for more leads and to show me the hanging glaciers that mark the northeastern coast of Devon Island. Shortly after getting back on course, we passed a majestic, twin-spined iceberg still locked in the sea ice and probably grounded as well. I turned and twisted in my seat to keep it in view as long as possible. "That's your drinking water supply," the pilot said, without further explanation.

He then banked the plane very sharply to starboard. I turned around and saw that we were lining up for a final approach to a rough dirt and crushed-rock landing strip, carved out of the slope of a thousand-foot mountain. After hitting the strip hard and taking one or two bounces, the Otter came to a halt. We had arrived at Grise Fiord.

As I waited for my duffle bag to emerge from the plane's tail section, a young man whose English revealed a faint trace of far-distant lands welcomed me and asked me as politely as possible what had brought me as far as Grise Fiord. Lacking a better answer, I told him I was interested in Arctic wildlife in general. My welcomer

said I had come to the right place and introduced himself as Bezal Jesudason. He told me he was in charge of Grise Fiord's power generator and that I was welcome to stay in his house, which had an extra room for visitors.

As we drove off in a battered Land Rover, Bezal told me he had come to the Arctic from a long way away—from India's southern province of Madras, in fact—and that he liked very much the challenge of living in the far north. Very soon we were in sight of the town, the principal feature of which was a row of about 20 small, box-shaped houses. Each of them faced south along the shore of Jones Sound, not far from a gravel beach where large blocks of ice were jumbled helter-skelter by the rise and fall of the tide. There was also a warehouse or two, a school, and a cooperative store with a front porch that looked to be the town's favorite gathering place. Beyond that I saw only two larger houses, each with second stories. One of these was Bezal's. The other, he told me, belonged to the Canadian government's settlement manager.

That afternoon, after Bezal and I had a short walk, a native named Akeegok came to visit. Bezal offered him tea and cookies, as Eskimo visiting protocols demand on such occasions. Akeegok ate his cookies and drank his tea in a silence punctuated only by lip smacking and grunts of satisfaction. I broke the silence by asking about the possibilities of char fishing. Akeegok remained silent and frowned. After what seemed like a long time he shook his head and said, no, it was not possible. The best char fishing was in a lake, still frozen, across the fiord after which Grise Fiord was named, which was also frozen. I then asked about the ivory gull nesting sites. Another silence followed, after which Akeegok, with the help of Bezal, said that that, too, would be impossible. No one would now want to take the long trip over the sea ice to reach them. A question about narwhals elicited what I first thought was a more favorable response. Akeegok at least smiled and made hand signals to imitate the narwhal's long tusk. Yes, indeed, he said, the narwhal was a very

strange animal. But, no, now was not the time to see it. That would come later, when larger leads and more open water permitted some boat travel.

After our guest left, it began to dawn on me—very slowly, I confess—that Akeea-gok's long silences and hesitant answers probably meant that all those limpid aquamarine melt pools on the dazzling white sea ice I had seen from the air might prove the undoing of all my plans on the ground. Could it be that the prevailing ice conditions made travel by Skidoos, as the natives called their snowmobiles, too difficult or, more precisely, too wet, though the ice was certainly still strong enough?

Yes, Bezal said, it was unfortunate, but all the things I wanted to do were only possible during “ship time,” as it is called in the high Arctic, when Jones Sound was largely ice free and there was enough open water for boat travel. Sometimes this happened in July, to be sure, but August was more the rule.

That night I found it difficult to get to sleep. I worried about what I was going to do for the rest of my stay and found myself bothered by the daylight that streamed through the window of Bezal's extra room all night long—not merely light enough to see, but the full light of a sun that dipped almost imperceptibly in a shallow arc above the mountainous horizon. I watched little children playing at all hours, throwing stones in a stream. A man sat smoking on the porch of the co-op. No one, it seemed, was going about any business or purposeful activity. As I would later learn, summer in the high Arctic is but one long day, when clock time and diurnal rounds are on hold and largely forgotten.

In the days that followed I took short walks along the shore of Jones Sound, visited with Eskimos in their small, government-provided “matchbox” houses, and attended a native square dance where my various missteps produced small gales of high-spirited laughter. I also learned that Grise Fiord was considered one of the best “hunting towns” that the Canadian government had built in recent times to resettle and house formerly nomadic Eskimos who did not want to enter the white man's

wage economy. This was because Grise Fiord, previously the site of a lonely Royal Canadian Mounted Police post, had good populations of ringed and bearded seals, two species that remain in the high Arctic the year around, not to mention seabirds, fish, and a relatively high number of polar bears.

By the fifth day of my visit, however, I had a strong urge to strike out beyond town on some kind of excursion. Obviously, it would have to be by land, and I thought that perhaps I could reach a large ice cap that my National Geographic map showed coming close to Grise Fiord from the north. There was no telling how far it might be—five, 10, or 15 miles—judging from such a small-scale map of the Canadian Arctic. But at least it was an objective.

I set off, therefore, with Bezal's good wishes and a knapsack stuffed with sandwiches, a precious orange, and a small tin of apple juice. There would be no problem with the weather, Bezal thought, since one sun-filled day had followed another all week long. This was to be expected, moreover, because the high Arctic is in fact a desert with annual precipitation of less than three or four inches at the latitude of Grise Fiord. Much of what does occur in the form of snow tends to remain, however. Thus summer snowfields, ice caps, and glaciers.

My route at first took me along the shore, where I passed the body of a ringed seal sighted and shot amid great excitement during the square dance five days earlier. The fact that it lay there untouched gave me pause. What of the popular image of the Eskimo and other native Americans living in harmony with nature, I wondered, taking only what they need? Any further thoughts on this subject were suddenly dispelled, however, by the demonic howling of about a dozen sled dogs, all huskies both in name and size. As in many Eskimo communities, the dogs were tethered on the outskirts of town by wire traces which ran along a stout cable. The ferocity of their growls and their teeth baring was intimidating, to say the least. I began to run, I must confess, when it

looked as though the loop of one of the wire traces might unravel. There are few Eskimo communities that have not lost a little child when this happens or, what is more common, when children venture too close as they taunt the dogs by throwing pebbles and stones.

The wolflike calls of the huskies stayed with me for a long time as I headed inland along the course of a gurgling brook that ran down a broad valley from a distant snowfield. Bezal had told me the brook supplied the town's drinking water, and I soon came upon a rubber intake hose and a small electrical pump. But for most of the year the pump could not be used, when the brook was stilled by solid ice. Then came the much more difficult task—Bezal sighed when he described it—of hitching up the cargo sleds of the Skidoos and going out to the twin-spired iceberg I had seen from the air. Once there you had to chop away at the berg, fill the cargo sleds with blocks of its thousand-year-old ice, and take them home for melting. This was the “drinking water supply” of the Otter pilot's cryptic remark. It tasted very good, Bezal had assured me.

Gradually the valley ahead grew steeper and the hiking more difficult. As far as the eye could see, the ground was covered with broken rock—a vast sea of rocks, or *Felsenmeer*, in the apposite German term used by Arctic scientists. Brown was the prevailing color of this sea, however, shading from the pale tan of cocoa powder to the light brown of natural mahogany. It seemed devoid of any plant life, or so I thought, at least, until I came to the nearest large snowfield. There, close to the edge of the snow, were two bright, yellow Arctic poppies growing between the rocks. I had first seen such poppies on Cornwallis Island, where it is said that, along with the flowering saxifrages, they literally push up through the snow with the first melting temperatures. Be that as it may, the sight of the hardy little poppies lifted my spirits. I bent down to cup my hands around them and gently blew on them, as though a few seconds of my warm breath could possibly spur their growth. A useless gesture, perhaps, but understandable.

After drinking some of the snowfield

melt water, I trudged on. One hour later I reached a ridge and looked behind me. There were no more familiar landmarks. Jones Sound, the winter water-supply iceberg, the little town of Grise Fiord—all were hidden by intervening ridges or the general lay of the land. As I continued to climb, the footing became more difficult. Ahead of me was a steep talus slope with larger and sharper-edged rocks. It was no longer a *Felsenmeer*, a sea of rocks, I thought to myself. Better, a *Felsensturm*, a storm of wildly jumbled rocks and small boulders where any misstep might mean a sprained ankle or bruised shin. As I began to have doubts about the wisdom of continuing, a jaunty little snow bunting, one of only five species of perching birds that come as far north as Ellesmere, flew by and landed on a rock not far ahead of me. It was clearly a male, dressed in his peak mating plumage of black and white. He bobbed up and down on the rock, looking at me and chirping in what seemed a very inquisitive manner. It seemed almost as though he were asking me what I was doing so high up in the barren domain that was his private mating ground. He then flew to the top of the next ridge, where he began to sing melodiously. I decided to follow.

“A smooth, swelling skyline of pure white, high up against a clear blue sky, is often a land traveler's first view of an Arctic ice cap: it is a quintessentially Arctic sight.” So reads an Arctic guidebook in my library. The description is exactly what I saw from the top of the next ridge—the blinding white of a huge, shallow-domed mass of ice set against a blue sky, dotted only with a few puffy-white fair-weather clouds.

At last I had reached it, or so I thought, since it did not look to be far away. How interesting it would be to examine close at hand! Would the ice cap be advancing, or spreading outward along its periphery, spawning what are known as outflow glaciers? (An ice cap is essentially a mass of ice lying on relatively level ground; the weight of accumulating snow on its underlying layers of ice will force the cap to expand outward in tongue-shaped

lobes that may become moving glaciers when they reach downhill terrain.) Or would it be retreating, sending out torrents of melt water from its scalloped tongues? I continued my climb at double time.

A half-hour later I had climbed the talus slope, but the ice cap seemed as distant as ever. Ahead of me was a narrow snowfield leading up a more gentle incline. The easy footing it provided was a merciful relief, but the farther up I walked on the granular snow, the more I became uneasy. Below me a faint rushing and rumbling sound came from deep down under the snow, a sound I had heard once before, on the summit cone of New Hampshire's Mount Washington on a hike in June. Undoubtedly, it was a subsurface melt-water stream, but I could not see an outlet anywhere along the lower edge of the snowfield. Perhaps the water was backing up behind an ice dam or a ridge in the permafrost ground. No doubt it would eventually break out from under the snow, somewhere down the slope. I therefore walked more carefully, stepping gingerly, one foot after another.

The end of the snowfield brought me up to a U-shaped saddle between two mountains that might well have been formed by a hanging glacier in geologic time. The ice cap was no longer visible, blocked by the steeper side of the saddle which I knew instinctively was beyond my ability. I sat down, tired and discouraged, convinced I had picked a bad route. Any close encounter with an ice cap might have to wait another day.

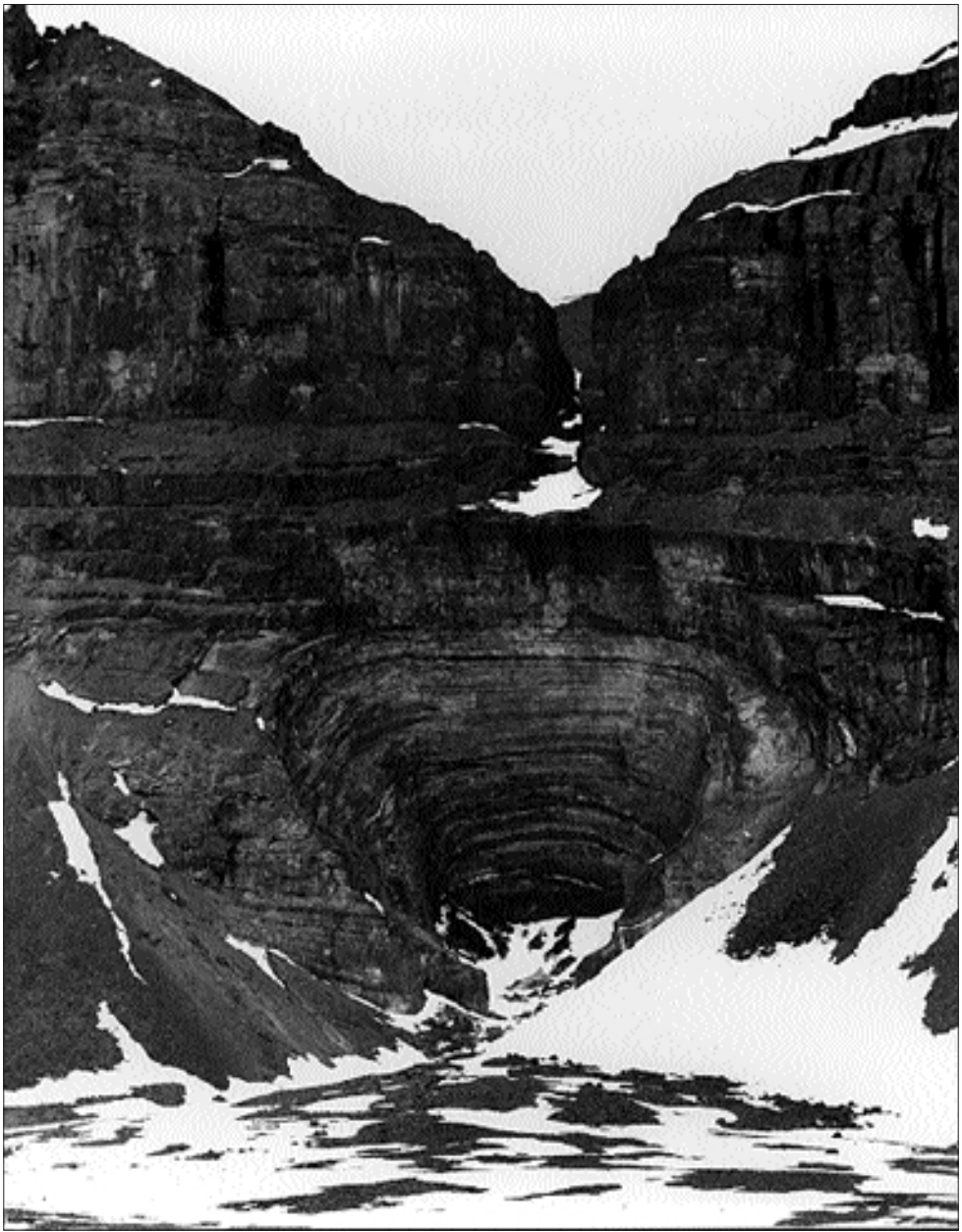
Presently, after catching my breath and examining the contents of my lunch bag, I looked out from my perch at the edge of the saddle. Spread before me was a great valley, a vast basin six or seven miles in its longest dimension, surrounded by low mountain ranges. It seemed a land to itself, completely hidden and cut off from the surrounding terrain. Only the monochrome light tans and browns of its rock fields were the same, interrupted here and there by snow patches and small ice caps on some of the surrounding mountains. What struck me first was the silence, a vast and enveloping silence that was

almost palpable, broken only by small whispers of wind. I therefore closed my eyes and "listened to the quiet," as a yoga teacher had once instructed me. Almost immediately a sense of calm and well-being came over me.

When I opened my eyes again the thought came to me that perhaps I was the first human being to view the valley, or at least to have set foot on the exact spot where I had found such excellent vantage. Spread before me was what seemed to be a sterile land, not yet touched by any plant or animal succession. There were no bright-yellow poppies or blue saxifrages pushing up through the rocks or snow. There were no birds, no songs of snow buntings or larkspurs, nor gulls or other seabirds flying overhead. There were not even any mosses or lichens to be found on the rocks near where I sat. Why, therefore, would any Arctic foxes or other animals climb up to this barren land, much less the Eskimos who hunt them?

Yes, it was entirely possible! I could be the first to see this land, this unknown valley. I half-closed my eyes in meditation and felt such a strong sensation of lightness and power that I thought I might actually levitate. At the same time, some uncommonly wild and preternatural images raced through my mind. Very clearly it came to me that I was witnessing the land at the dawn of creation. Snatches of half-forgotten biblical phrases came quickly to mind. On the third day . . . Let the waters divide . . . dry land . . . God called it earth . . . and saw that it was good. And here this dry land called earth was laid out before me for my sole and private contemplation! In the sheer exuberance of the moment I decided to take possession of the valley in the manner of a Spanish conquistador. Cupping my hands around my mouth, I shouted at the top of my voice, "I CLAIM THIS LAND IN THE NAME OF GOD AND THEIR SOVEREIGN MAJESTIES—!"

Suddenly a frightening noise came from above me. It sounded as though freight trains were rattling down the U-shaped valley behind me, passing close by. Rather than levitating, I now felt myself sinking



Runoff from a melting glacier carved this deep whorl in the side of a crevasse.

down and trying to hide behind a large boulder. When I dared to peer out from my perch, I saw what looked like a small tornado picking up rocks as large as grapefruits and whirling them in the air. Within seconds, a smaller one—call it a good-sized dust devil—followed in its wake. Their noise and aftermath echoes seemed to continue for a long time as the two twisters danced their way down into the valley, their trails marked by spirals of rock dust. At the same time, a cold draft of air blew down from above. What in the world was happening, I wondered, on such an otherwise calm and clear day?

There was no time to think. Now my

senses were assailed by the sound of rushing water, and I looked down to see a depression in the snowfield somewhat like the first signs of a crevasse running downhill from the center of the field. Sure enough, a stream of gushing water now surged from the lower end of the field. What was worse, the water seemed to be following my exact route of ascent, gaining volume all the while.

The signs were all too clear. I had defiled this untouched land with such a foolish and vainglorious act. More, I had broken the Second Commandment. Now the heavens were speaking. Quickly, I munched half a sandwich, stuffed the

other half in the pocket of my parka, and started my descent, humbled and contrite.

Of the trip down, I prefer to say very little. What stands out in my mind is that I had to cross the newborn melt stream not once, but three or four times. As a consequence, since I had gone in over the top of my felt-lined Sorel boots, my feet were numb from the ice water. When I walked fast or almost ran downhill trying to warm them, I risked several tumbles. It was necessary to slow down and use caution, I realized, cold feet or no.

By the time I approached the coast, I was more than glad to be greeted by the snarling huskies and, not too much later, to arrive at Bezal's in time for tea. I remember how happy I felt in dry socks and warm slippers, laughing and wolfing down the tea and cookies. Akeegok was there to offer me a guttural welcome, and he and Bezal both laughed when I tried to tell them the events of the day, punctuated by my best efforts at sign language. Soon the chairman of Grise Fiord's recreation committee, an Eskimo named Pijamini, dropped by with a friend to announce another square dance in the recreation hall that night. He and his friend seemed greatly amused as I tried to excuse myself by an elaborate pantomime of climbing a high mountain and then descending, foot-sore and weary, with an aching back.

After a splendid supper with Bezal, who had proven such a good friend, I looked out from my bedroom window. The sun was only beginning the slow parabola of its descent and the air was still so clear that when I looked out over the sea ice, still dotted with the exquisite blue-green melt pools, I fancied I could see clear across Jones Sound to the loom of the land on Devon Island. Later that night, I stopped packing for the flight out the next day to look out the window a number of times. Little children were staying up all hours, throwing pebbles in the stream or playing hopscotch. Older men were sitting on the co-op porch, smoking as before. Presently,

people from different parts of town started converging on the recreation hall, like iron filings to a magnet. It was not really night, I had to remind myself, just another moment in the one long day that is the high Arctic summer.

I remember going to sleep gratefully, thinking God was in his heaven and all was right with the small world of Grise Fiord. It had been a good trip, after all, no matter the absence of ivory gulls, fishing, or the chance to see narwhals.

In the long years since, I have learned two truths.

The first is that the strange little twisters that scared me away from the hidden valley may have been by-products of what meteorologists call katabatic, or "downhill," winds, from the Greek *katabasis*, meaning "descent." These occur when cold air, always heavier than warm, sinks close to inclined ground and picks up speed as it goes down. If the cold air passes over ice caps or glaciers, it quickly becomes still colder, and therefore heavier, until it bowls down the mountain at extreme speeds. If the katabatic winds meet warmer air rising uphill (as would certainly have been the case from the sun beating down on the light-brown rock fields of the hidden valley), the two opposing air masses clash and shear. They are then apt to produce vorticity, in the language of meteorology, meaning anything from the little eddies of dust devils to the spinning vortexes of death-dealing tornadoes.

The other and more important truth is that it is unwise to claim or even think of the land God called earth as one's private or exclusive domain. I have therefore never done so again. Nor do I any longer await the kind of transcendental event or ecstatic vision other writers have experienced. That sparkling day in the hidden valley, close by an Ellesmere ice cap, was event enough for me. And, best of all, the vision of it remains bold, clear, and as starkly beautiful as ever.