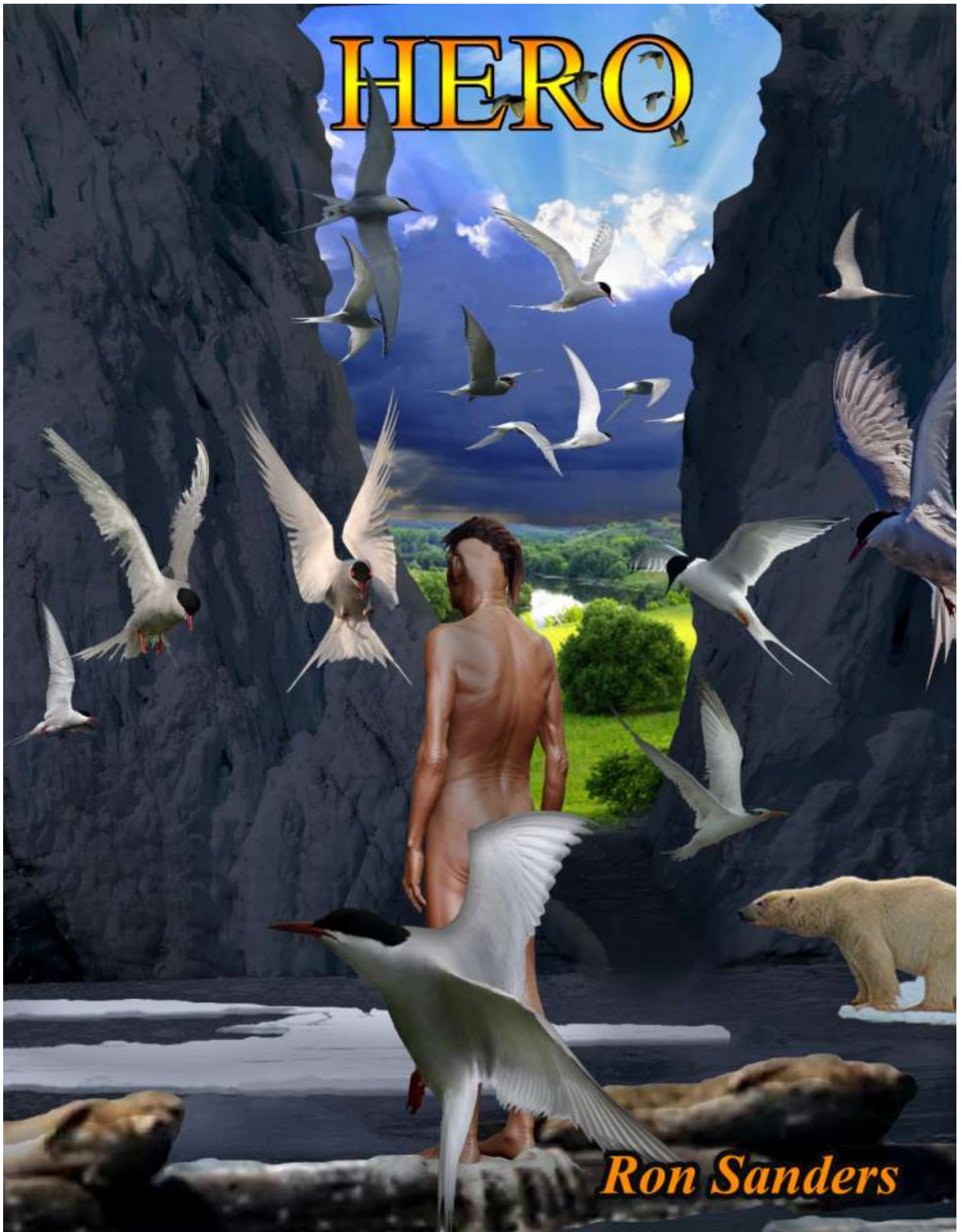


HERO



Ron Sanders

Hero

(Glade, World, Master, Boy, Hero)



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Glade

There is a glacier.

Its blue tongue's tip just tastes a frozen gorge.

There is a gorge, its walls shattered by cold; a once-green thing that, in dying, birthed a thousand aching fissures. It works its jagged way downhill, round ragged rifts and drifts until it comes upon a little frosted wood.

There is a wood, an island locked in ice.

Into this wood the gorge descends. It wanders and it wends; it brakes and all but ends outside a clearing wet with sun. And there, forking, its bent and broken arms embrace a strange, enchanted glade.

There is a glade.

And in this glade the black bears sleep, though sockeyes leap fat between falls. Here the field mouse draws no shadow, the eagle seeks no prey; they spend their while caressed by rays, and halcyon days are they. Here rabbit and roe may linger; no longer need they flee. For in this timeless, taintless space, the Wild has ceased to be. (Outside the glade are shadow and prey, are ice and naked death. There blood may run freely. There the eagle, that *thief*, is a righteous savage, a noble fiend. But once in the glade he is dove, and has no taste for blood, running freely or otherwise).

And in this glade there nests a pool: a dazzling, blue and silver jewel; profoundly deep, pristinely clear. All who sip find solace here, for this is the eye of Being. They lap in peace, assuming blear, not knowing it is seeing. And ever thus this pool shall peer: a silent seer, reflecting on . . . all that is, and all beyond.

(Outside the glade there lies a world where rivers ever run, where ghastly calves in random file revile a bitter sun. East, the day is born in mist. West she dies: her rest, the deep. And North—North the earth lies mute. Wind gnaws her hide, wind wracks her dreams. Wind screams like a flute in her white, white sleep).

And in the glade are tall, stately grasses, sunning raptly, spinning lore. Roots render the rhythms, blades bend without breeze, as signals ascend from the glade's tender floor. (In this wise the glade weaves its word, airs its views. All the glade's flora are bearers of news). They do not wither with fall, for in the glade there is no fall. They do not bind or wilt or brown—they *gesture*, spreading the mood, the mind; conveying, indeed, the very soul of the glade. As ever they have, as they shall evermore.

Bees do not hum here; they sing. They fatten the dream. Mellow and round are the timbres they sound, sweet is the music they bring. Birds do not sing here—they *play*. They carry the theme. Dulcet and warm are the strains they perform. Gifted musicians are they. (All in the glade are virtuosi. They were born to create. Melody, harmony, and counterpoint are innate). Now the performance is lively and bright, now full, now almost still. For, though all in the glade may lean to the light, they must bend to the maestro's feel.

And yet . . . there was a day, long ago in a dream, when this ongoing opus was torn. And on that day (so the lullaby goes) the wind brought a scream, and Dissonance was born.

There was a *noise*.

Moose tensed, their coffee eyes narrowed, their patient brows creased. Bees mauled the tempo, birds lost their place. The grass stood erect, all blades pointing east. There was a crash, and a shriek, and a naked, bleeding beast burst stinking through the fern, fell stumbling on its face.

Moose scattered: *unheard of*. Sheep brawled, geese burst out of rhyme. The symphony, forever endeavored to soar sublime, fluttered, plunged, and, for all of a measure, ceased.

The pool was appalled . . . what manner brute—what kind of monster was this? Furless flank to forelimb, its hide obscured by blood. As for its face . . . it had no face; only a *look*: of shock frozen in time, of horror in amber. A deep, welling rift ran temple to chin, halving the face, caving it in . . . such a grievous wound . . . the pool watched it stagger, on two legs and four, thrashing about till it came to a rise. There it labored for air, wiped the blood from its eyes, lashed at illusion, looked wildly round—beholding the pool, the beast tumbled down.

And there this wretch plunged his thirst, drank his fill, fell back on his haunches.

The pool became still.

The two traded stares.

The glass read his features: that durable eye pondered the wreckage and probed the debris. Revolted, the pool sought the succor of sky. But that thing remained—that face . . . in all creation . . . surely there could be . . . no other creature so ugly as he.

And he gazed in the glass.

Beneath the surface were . . . images . . . swimming in currents of shadow and light. He saw half-shapes and fragments . . . hideous men, exotic beasts . . . saw blue worlds of water, saw white worlds of ice . . . it was all so vague and unreal—yet somehow strangely familiar. Deeper he peered, but, as his mangled face neared, the sun smote the pool and the shapes disappeared. The brute pawed the ground and, dreaming he'd drowned, shook his head sharply and slowly looked round:

There were starlings at arm's-length, transfixed with suspense, their tail feathers trembling, their dark eyes intense. Fantails and timber wolves, stepping in sync, paused for a sniff and stooped for a drink. Bees, pirouetting, threw light in his eyes. Seizing the moment, the pool pressed its hold.

And the glade revolved.

The thing watched it spin—saw the ferns' greedy fingers reach round and close in, saw the tall grass rise high in an emerald sheen, swaying to rhythms from somewhere obscene. This place was madness; he struggled to stand, but, weak as he was, keeled over cold.

And the glade heaved a sigh, and the tall grass reclined—in curious patterns once rendered in whim. Far off in thunder the hard world replied, as iced pines exploded and screamed on the breeze. Down bore the sun, a chill just behind. The pool, grown blood-red, fended frost from its rim. Details dissolved in the oncoming tide. The pool became black. Night seeped through the trees.

Now flora found slumber while, pulsing below, the pool was infused with a soft ruby glow.

Soon birds bearing beech leaves, and needles of pine, dropped him a spread and returned to the limb. But breath from the North blew their blanket aside. The wind grew in earnest; the air seemed to freeze. And the wolf and the she-bear, of contrary mind, abhorring their task approached, looking grim. They sniffed him for measure, then, loathing his hide, growled their displeasure and dropped to their knees.

All night these glum attendants lay against his quaking form. The rising moon drew dreams in gray.

In time the man grew warm.

Morning swept through the glade in one broad stroke of the master's brush, dappling the foliage with amber and rose. The pool was roused by the sweet pass of light. He opened his eye and the glade came alive: into the whirlpool of life a thousand colors swam, chasing the scattering eddies of night. The magic of morning began.

Bluebird and goldfinch descended in rings, primaries clashing with robin and jay. Dollops of sun, repelled by their wings, splattered anew on the palette of day. Banking as one, the hues struck away.

There was a crowd.

And in this crowd that creature sat, its chin on its chest, its rear pointing west. Its forepaws lay lifeless, upturned and out-pressed. Vomit and blood messed its muzzle and breast. Died overnight. Or perhaps only dozed . . . tendril by tendril, claw by claw, the crowd decompressed: the ring slowly closed.

And the stranger cried out and shifted his seat. His eyes sought his feet—*rounding the arches, and topping the toes, the tall grass was questing*. The little brute froze.

And the fauna took pause, and the flora went slack. Leaves followed talons, stems followed claws. Hooves tromped on paws as the crowd drifted back.

Not a breath taken. Not a move made. Stillness, like fog, enveloped the glade.

And the grass tugged his feet, and the sea of jade splayed—left hand and right, the slender shafts reared. Gaining momentum, blade followed blade. The green field was torn till a deep swath appeared. The swath hurtled west, reflecting the sun. A hundred yards distant it died. Once more the grass stood, its tips spreading wide. The swath, born again, repeated its run.

Plain was the message, and clearly conveyed. Still the newcomer gawked . . . awkward seconds ensued. The tall blades were swayed by the pulse of the glade.

But the swath was not renewed.

Something tiny bounced by. He ventured a peek, barely rolling an eye. A chocolate sparrow, with pinfeathers black, popped past an ankle and paused to look back. The bird cocked its head, rocked in place, hopped ahead. It fluttered. It freaked. It glared and stopped dead. Then, vexed to its limit, it burst into flight. The sitting thing stared till it passed out of sight.

Now a breeze bent his back, picked him half off his stern. The wind, done its best, grew flustered at last. It trailed to the west, thrilling lilies as it passed. It wound round the willows and didn't return.

And the fauna repaired to the live oak's shade.

A strange kind of stupor fell over the glade.

From deep in the wood came a shape through the trees—a pronghorn, perhaps, or an elk swift and sure. But up limped a moose, a flyport with fur, low in the belly and wide at the knees. Wized he was, scarcely able to see. Neither vision, nor vigor, nor velvet had he. He hobbled abreast, then lay down or died, his nose facing west, his tail flung aside.

The brute merely glazed—but the glade was unfazed:

The long shafts reshuffled, a tense moment passed, and the ominous shadows of badgers were cast. Three left their holes, as if to attack. They pedaled like moles and the stranger jumped back. He stumbled, fell flailing, and, kicking his guide, threw out his arms and tumbled astride. First he stepped on his tail, then he stepped on his pride. The moose bellowed twice and shook side to side, while the little pest clung to his high, homely hide.

And the snarling moose rose to his knees by degrees. He reeled like a drunk down the path of the breeze. Together they lurched through a break in the trees. And all morning long, and on through the day, both beggar and bearer would buckle and sway. The moose lost his temper, but never his way.

And the wind blew the sun to its deep ruby rest, while the scrub, in obeisance, inclined to the west. Their slow taffy shadow in sunfall would seem to slip round the rocks like a snake in a dream.

And the sun became a beacon, and the underbrush a stream. The wide earth took their weight in stride, and the wind named him Hero.

World

When the sun was low the old moose began to stumble.

They had come upon a swift river lined with stunted pines, and here the moose limped to a halt, expecting a somewhat graceful dismount. But Hero, by now dug in like a tick, wasn't about to let go. The moose bent his knees until his joints objected. He shimmied, bucked, and with a sudden whirl sent his rider flying. Hero scraped himself out of the dirt and looked up forlornly. The ancient moose, his good eye gone bad, glared a long minute before hobbling off; his bony rump rocking with dignity, his scraggly tail fighting off imaginary flies.

Hero managed a few steps and dropped to his knees, staring in disbelief as the moose disappeared between pines. And he remained on his knees for the longest time, gaping, waiting for the moose—waiting for anything to show. At last a ruckus to his left snapped him out of it. His head ratcheted round, an inch per notch.

Fifteen feet off the bank, three screaming gulls were fighting over a rapids-tossed salmon. Hero was instantly famished. He wobbled to his feet and stumbled twice wading out, only regaining his balance by leaning against the current and rapidly wheeling his arms. The gulls backed off shrieking as he stepped in slow-motion through the rushing water. Hero slipped while lunging at the slapping fish, cracked an ankle on the rocks, and hopped around howling with the agony. One foot was as good as none in the fast water. He went right under.

Before he knew it he was being swept downriver. This was glacial meltwater, so cold he quickly became hypothermic. He swallowed a mouthful and surfaced fighting for life; too disoriented to right himself in the water, too numb to realize his waving arm had been striking something solid. That solid something turned out to be a swirling clump of rotted birches tangled up in scrub. Hero embraced one of the trunks as the mass slammed against rocks, kicked his feet wildly, and somehow hauled himself aboard. The raft ricocheted rock to rock until the repeated impacts sent it spinning. Giddy from the whirling and soaking, Hero clung freezing to the trees, retching continuously while the river roared in his ears. Through spray and tears he saw only cartwheeling fragments of the world.

But then the river was widening, its fury dissipating. The raft was approaching the sea. Hero gasped as the seemingly boundless Pacific swallowed the broad red belly of the sun. And while he spun he was treated to a panoramic, breathtaking image: the great indigo ocean with its slow traffic of driftwood and ice, voiced-over by the dismal calls of foraging gulls and terns, and rhythmically broken by intermittent glimpses of the river's rocky banks growing farther and farther apart.

Whirling as it went, the disintegrating raft was taken by the sea.

At the 59th Parallel in winter, the Pacific coast plays host to numberless floes and minor bergs orphaned from the Bering and Chukchi. Hero cruised into a watery gridlock on an ice-glazed birch boat, one bit of flotsam among the rest.

The cold wouldn't let him move, wouldn't let him breathe, wouldn't let him think. He lay supine, feet crossed and hands clasped, terrified that to budge was to roll. An ice patina grew over the tangled trees like a white fungus: the growth soon webbed his fingers and toes; it speckled his chest and thighs, glazed his hair and face, danced and disintegrated with his breath's tapering plumes.

Floes and frozen-over debris tended to group with passing collisions; Hero's married birches bit by bit accrued a mostly-submerged tangle of trunks and branches, all becoming fast in a creeping ice cement. Night came on just as resolutely, until land was only a flat black memory.

The raft moved silently over the deep, still accepting the occasional gentle collision. And the floes became thicker and wider in a freezing doldrums; soon the proximate sea was all a broken field of packed ice, bobbing infinitesimally with the planet's pulse.

Long strands of ghostly fog came striding over the torn ice field. They leaned this way and that, their mourners' skirts tearing and patching and leaning anew. The ghosts were there to seal it: their locked fingers and gray diaphanous wings quickly became a wholly opaque descending shroud, its boundaries lost in the souging wind.

Collisions came less and less. Darkness and silence, breaching some previously impermeable barrier, gradually took up residence in the dying man's marrow. From Hero's very center broke a weak little cry of refusal, of denial, as mind mustered frame for one desperate surge at freedom. His skin, frozen to the raft, peeled right off the flesh below, and at that his flagging soul succumbed. Hero's smashed head arched back and his face contorted frightfully while the little lamp fluttered and paled within.

A raucous chorus slowly but surely worked its way through the mist. It was a few hundred yards off—a tiny, terrified barking, growing in clarity as it grew in volume and urgency. It was a sound beacon; Hero strained eagerly, and when for one excruciating minute it was cut off by a large passing body he was certain death had claimed him. Then it was back, and his pulse was quickening. In a bit there came a heaving sound: something was moving his way down a wide tributary between floes. Hero could hear a gasping and snorting, accompanied by a hard slapping and splashing. The sounds vanished, and a few seconds later the raft was rocked from below.

A sputtering muzzle blew salt in his eyes. A cold slimy flipper flapped across his chest and slapped about his face. Whiskers raked his dead cheek. The fur seal barked twice, directly in his ear.

A moment later it had slipped back below the surface. Hero listened to the splashing sound retreating whence it came. The seal swam off perhaps a hundred feet, stopped, and began barking hysterically. From much farther off came a hail of answering barks. The seal swam back to Hero's raft circling and calling, louder and more plaintively with each circuit, while the answerers approached en masse.

Now a sallow beam could be seen cutting the fog. In a minute several more showed along a plane yawing with some huge, barely discernible object's rhythmically generated waves.

A herd of northern fur seals burst into sight, barking madly, beating through the ice. They converged on Hero's raft, really bellowing now. Those odd yellow beams came in pursuit, and soon the beams were close enough to eerily illuminate a gigantic wood vessel parting the ice. The seals barked ferociously. Whenever the vessel leaned away, those nearest Hero's raft would

absolutely howl; it was a balls-out community challenge. The fog deepened, condensed, crystallized—and then the light of a dozen lanterns was playing over a low, listing nightmare. Hero heard the shouts of men. But rather than scatter, the waterborne seals pulled onto the ice and redoubled their din, some even fighting their way onto Hero's raft. The sealers hurled harpoons as they clambered down rope ladders. When these men reached the ice the seals snapped and gnashed madly, refusing to be dislodged. The sealers lost all composure with the thrill of the hunt. Wielding clubs, spears, and hatchets—sometimes using iron bludgeons or any old utensil handed down—they crushed skulls, dragged carcasses, and hooked animals still spurting and bleating. Clinging though he was, Hero was flabbergasted by the way the slipping and scampering men went about their butchery, hacking and smashing more with passion than with precision. But not one seal attempted to flee. Throughout the carnage they barked all the louder, as though egging on their slayers—carcass by carcass they drew the sealers to Hero's ice-locked raft. It was all so hazy and macabre. Hero's eyes rolled back, and the next thing he knew he was sitting hunched on the vessel's sopping deck. Two men were rubbing his limbs while another poured warm water down his back. He looked around in shock. The very notion of a boat containing more than one or two individuals—a sort of floating tribe—was way beyond his ken; so to *see* it, to have it come looming out of nothingness, was an experience almost supernatural.

He remembered some of those fur-covered men force-feeding him mouthfuls of halibut and seal fat, and he recalled a small group standing around him shouting words that made no sense. After that he had a very vivid memory of their angry little chief repeatedly punching him while shouting one angry little word over and over and over. Hero couldn't make out his inquisitor's face, for the large feather-lined hood quite engulfed the man's head, yet he could see those quick eyes flash as they caught the oil lamps' light. Finally this man stopped boxing Hero's ear. He stared hard. In these remaining decades of the tenth century it was fully within his power to administer as he saw fit: he could have ordered Hero's immediate execution and not a man of his crew would have objected. He hesitated only because there wasn't a hint of resistance in his prisoner's pinched and frightened eyes. He leaned forward and studied the wound that all but split Hero's face in two, then grunted, raised his right arm, and yanked down its seal hide sleeve. Attached to the stump of his forearm was a primitive prosthesis, consisting of a thick oak cap strapped to the arm with lengths of gut, and, hammered squarely into the center of that cap, a broad, cruelly hooked blade chiseled from a narwhal's tusk. He held this weapon in front of Hero's eyes, traced the scalp's deep diagonal rift, and once more demanded the captive's identity. Hero then vaguely remembered being dragged along the tilting deck and thrown into the ship's tiny hold. He retained a strong mental image of landing in a place of musty odors and dank projections.

There was a soft scuffling in the darkness, and presently a blind and exceedingly old woman felt her way to his side, mumbling as she approached. Her speech was comprised not of words; it was rather a running gibberish of cooing vowels and clucking consonants. The old woman was as mad as her circumstances; sick with sea and solitude, bedeviled by age and confinement. She sat cross-legged and patted her withered palms up his arm until she came to his face. Her strange mumbling soliloquy rose and fell in pitch as her bony fingers daintily explored the newly-opened wound. Hero let his head fall back in her lap. The emaciated tarantulas of her hands scurried through the filth and tiny bodies until they came upon an old otter pelt bag that held her secrets. The woman loosened the bag's cord and extracted an assortment of herbs, sniffing each in succession. She then scooped a handful of blubber from a bowl made of a previous occupant's skull, kneaded the selected herbs into the blubber, and commenced gently massaging the wound, clucking and cooing while the black rats watched and waited.

For nine long days Hero remained in that cold, stinking compartment, rocking back and forth between life and death. The old woman never gave up on him. She clung to him during his seizures. She rubbed his limbs vigorously when his blood pressure fell. She gathered various accumulated skins and, using woven strands of her own long hair, sewed him a multilayered, body-length wraparound with arm sleeves and very deep pockets, working by touch with a needle formed of a cod's rib. By this same method she was able to fashion a pair of snug-fitting moccasins. The old woman made him eat; she masticated the cod and halibut their keepers pitched into the hold, then shoved the results down his throat with a long gnarly forefinger. She called into his screaming nightmares, talking him out of sleep and back into their foul little reality. Together they lowed in the dark, while the keel groaned along and the waves beat time.

At the end of those dark nine days his strength was restored, but not his mind. Once again he was taken on deck.

The vessel had reached a chain of remote wind-swept islets, rocky and treeless, naked except for patchy carpets of hardy grass. These islets stretched far to the west, shrouded in mist. The ship was making for the smallest; just a chip on the sea. When they reached depth for anchorage Hero was hustled into a rowboat and lowered over the side. He looked up, saw two men climbing down by rope. These men positioned themselves at the oars and slowly rowed toward the islet. Hero, seated between them, felt like a man being led to his execution. He snuck a peek. The rowers' heads were lowered and their features completely obscured by the heavy feathered hoods; they had all the somberness of pallbearers. Not a word passed between them as they rigidly pulled at their oars; the only sound was the dip and purl of wood in water. Hero looked away. Against his will, he found his eyes drawn to that rocky islet waiting in the fog. There was not a bird, not a sea lion, not a shrub. It was lonesome beyond imagination.

Once they were landed one of the men used the point of a spear to prod Hero ashore. While his companion steadied the boat, he removed a skin sack full of half-frozen halibut, followed by a few armloads of precious tinder. These articles he tossed at Hero's feet. He resumed his place at the oars and, without looking back, used the blunt end of his spear to shove off.

Hero stared in disbelief. He watched the boat moving away, watched the men climbing their ropes, watched the boat being hauled aboard. As the mysterious vessel receded he saw a number of those silent men standing at the stern, stolidly returning his stare. Their hooded forms grew smaller and smaller, finally becoming indistinct. The vessel was swallowed by fog.

He looked around, at a desolate world of rock and drifting ice. In the sunless pools at his feet a few purplish, flaccid sea anemones were waving in a sickly phosphorescence, and along the rocks ran a tattered quilt of wild grass and lichen. It was the end of the world. He began to pace in his anxiety, only to crumple, bit by bit, inside his furs. At last he just sat with his face buried in his arms and wept. When he could weep no more he raised his head and opened his red, swollen eyes.

There were gulls all around him, staring like statuary in a madman's garden. Standing in their midst were auks and puffins and murrelets, absolutely spellbound, unable to lean away. The silence was broken only by a wild, fitfully pursing wind—a wind that seemed, eerily, on the verge of producing syllables. And on that wind a flock of terns was rising slowly, all its beady eyes fixed on the lone sitting man. The terns watched as he trembled, and leered as he swooned.

Then, beating as one, they threw back their wings and blew into the sun.

There was a blaze.

Behind that blaze a pair of black, bug-like eyes met his and immediately withdrew. A tall man stood abruptly, drawing sparks.

The Aleut gathered his furs and peered queerly into the icy Pacific, his craggy profile merging seamlessly with a jumble of rocks showing just beyond his shoulder. The man was very tall, closer to seven feet than to six, and thin almost to emaciation.

He was also a mute. Soon enough he would display a talent for communication through gutturals, but now his body language spoke louder than words. It told the shivering stranger that he was not only disliked—he was feared.

The Aleut killed the fire and removed the hides he'd piled on the sleeping man. The islander produced a bone awl and strategically pierced a caribou hide, draped the hide over the old woman's handiwork, and ran a cord of tightly woven tendons crosswise through his made

holes, knotting it at the bottom to create a kind of cloak. He then heaped wood, fish, and remaining hides into Hero's arms and led him to a tiny cove where his long skin canoe lay in the grass. This was not the one-man *kayak* used by his people for centuries, but an actual canoe modeled on the graceful vessels he'd observed under the control of northern coastal tribesmen. After dragging this canoe into the water he perched Hero in the fore, placed the cargo in the middle, and stepped into the rear like a gaunt furry spider. The Aleut dug out a paddle and began pulling with smooth strokes of surprising muscularity, his black eyes trained on his quiet companion's back.

So began their long island-hopping journey. They stepped the chain one stone at a time, living off the sea. But much as the Aleut disliked Hero's vapid company, it was not in the islander's nature to proceed expeditiously; his people, remote as they were, had learned to count not in days but in generations. So the Aleut took his time. He showed his dull passenger how to build shelters of skin and gut, and during bad weather the two would sit on an island in utter silence while rain hammered on their stretched seal-intestine window. And one very clear night the islander pointed out constellations and attempted to demonstrate, using broad gestures, just how the brighter heavenly bodies were, not so coincidentally, in perfect alignment with the Aleutians. Hero followed his guide's gestures as a pet follows its master's movements and, like a pet, soon became bored. The Aleut did not grow flustered. He grew ever more wary: behind that granite, weather-beaten exterior squirmed a very primitive imagination. And the islander, superstitious as he was, was almost certain Hero could read his mind. So one time, and one time only, he tested his suspicion with a searing gaze to the back of Hero's bowed and listing head. After a long minute of vigorous thought-projection he shifted his gaze aside. The brute appeared to feel this shift, and too gently turned his head. And both saw the ocean break rhythm, and watched as otters and sea lions surfaced, observed their progress, and slipped without tremor beneath the waves.

In spring the fogs lifted. The grimness gave way to serenity: on the islets grass grew lushly, wildflowers leapt on the casual eye. A generous sun buttered the dappling sea. And the back of the islander's neck itched: he turned to see a flock of arctic terns casually tracking them under a gorgeous, white-plumed sky. As the day progressed the terns came drifting above and cruised a bit. They slowly pulled ahead. The Aleut squinted against the light: never had he observed these birds to pursue a westerly migratory pattern. The terns were distributing themselves into a rough wedge shape, much like geese on the wing.

For a time the Aleut let the flock be his guide. Then, to test his stars, he subtly directed his canoe north. At once the wedge disintegrated. Not until he had lowered his eyes and pulled

purposefully to the west did the disrupted pattern reassert itself. He peered up timidly. The wedge was now in the shape of a perfect arrowhead.

Just so were the fates of mariners and aviators inextricably entwined. At night, once the Aleut had landed his canoe upon the nearest pearl, the terns would light in a quiet circle and remain until sunrise. As the Aleut and Hero took to sea, the flock would gradually form that same authoritative pattern.

In time the Aleut paddled his companion clear to the westernmost islands of the Aleutian chain. His people had dwelt, even here, a thousand years and more, but no contemporary islander knew for certain what lay beyond. Legend told of an enormous land mass forever gripped by cold, where a cruel people waylaid innocent seafarers for barbaric sacrificial rites.

So here the Aleut paused. But even as he vacillated he noticed the terns were veering south.

If the Aleut had been able to curse aloud he would have been vociferous. He was being compelled to follow an even less desirable course—that of the unknown open ocean. Now he looked upon his passenger's hunched back not with fear but with loathing. He took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders, and defiantly continued west. The wedge broke up immediately. The terns circled and plunged, circled and plunged. Something huge broke surface behind them, but the Aleut was way too frayed to turn. He lowered his head, a beaten man, and began paddling south. Little by little the birds returned to formation.

The tiny canoe had no business going up against the mighty Pacific. It would soon have been swallowed and smashed had not the terns veered as one whenever the coming sea appeared too rough. Once he'd lost his bearings the Aleut followed their movements religiously, and soon the sea's bounty all but leapt in the canoe, and the days began to warm. It seemed he was forever catching the finest currents; practically sliding down a corridor entirely free of peril. In this manner he was able to safely navigate waters no such craft had mastered before.

They were now proceeding south by southwest. The going became easier by the day, and the sea heavier with cod. The weather continued to warm. At night the Aleut drifted comfortably, but a lifetime of wariness made him wake off and on. Pallid in moonlight, he'd slowly rise to find Hero sitting raptly under the stars. And he'd see, not so far ahead, a large dark body neatly pleating the ocean's plane. The shape would precede them a while, only to vanish without a ripple.

All this strangeness had the Aleut wholly jacked, though he took pains to maintain his poise. To allay his fear he kept a flat black stone planted squarely between them. It was his oldest treasure; an oddity he'd taken off the body of a mauled Tlingit woman when he was a child. Who she was, and how she'd come by the stone, were mysteries far beyond him, for no such piece had

ever been known to Aleut or Inuk. The stone was smooth and had been worked perfectly round. There were flecks of bright yellow scattered about its dull black face. Long ago someone had etched a quaint and clumsy rune on that flat black surface. It was the crude, universal symbol for sun: a broad circle surrounded by several rays. When the stone was rubbed against a pelt it had the curious property of growing quite warm and bright in the rune's grooves, while the surface remained cool and dull. This stone, both friend and overlord, had always "spoken to him." It caused him to become restless when it was time to move, and allowed him to relax when a destination had been reached. In this way he'd come to the familiar islet and discovered the unconscious little man. Just so: the stone, he was sure, was responsible for making him "feel bad" as he watched the stranger shiver, and "feel better" once he'd built him a warming fire from the small pile of tinder he'd found nearby.

By now, however, the Aleut was fully disenchanted with his stone, and deeply regretted having done its mysterious bidding. Never before had he been so long from sight of land, and never before had he felt so very, very small. The unimagined immensity of the Pacific was really beginning to jangle his jewels when, after all their while at sea, a gray, seductive haze broke the horizon. They had reached another chain of islands: the dark and smoky Kurils. Here a cold current kept the climate cool and foggy, and the chill, along with the prevalence of otter and seal, helped make the Aleut feel almost at home.

But this chain gave him the creeps; he knew he was a trespasser somewhere somehow sacred. There was a looming quality to the island mountains that made him extraordinarily aware of his transience, his pettiness, his puniness. He grew more and more cautious, *sure* their progress was being monitored. And he could have sworn he saw shapes padding persistently between the trees. The big islands watched breathlessly: all along the rocky cliffs thousands of auklets and puffins followed the canoe in dead silence, their heads slowly turning as one, their countless tiny eyes peering redly through the fog. As the days passed, the Aleut's discontent was manifested in tics and sighs—when the sun fell, the mountains seemed to rise right out of the sea, as though to pluck him. Every day he would cringe when the red rim began to disappear behind those black volcanic summits. But the mountains, in all their dignity, would always refuse to acknowledge so meek a stranger, and return their eyes to sea. The Aleut would hang his head and timidly paddle by.

Then for several days he pulled his weary canoe west—through a strait parting two mighty islands not part of the chain, and thence into a sea that was a warm, enticing bath. Spring had come to the East Asian coastal waters, and the Ainu, alone and in groups, were venturing deeper in search of increasing bounty. The Aleut, absorbed in his thoughts of sweet climate and bitter fate, was unaware they'd been spotted.

This first meeting between strangers of different worlds was a brief and awkward one. A lone Ainu fisherman, seeing the Aleut come paddling out of the unknown, dropped his net and turned to stone. The Aleut, for his part, instinctively froze with his body turned half-away to make the leanest target possible. Their stares locked. Never had the Aleut seen a face so heavily bearded, and never hair so fair. The Ainu shouted at the top of his lungs. Other fishers appeared to the east, effectively cutting off the Pacific. The Aleut caressed his stone and looked to the sky. But the wedge had vanished. He put down his head and paddled for all he was worth.

By the time they were in sight of shore the sea was riddled with watercraft. Now a train of small boats cast off from the mainland, and a number of two-man coracle-like tubs showed in the battered skin canoe's wake, their inhabitants calling back and forth in astonishment at the sight of these dark, savage newcomers. But the pursuing little coastal men, banging excitedly on the sides of their boats, were not Ainu. They had very straight black hair, prominent cheekbones, and strangely slanted eyes. And their speech, oddly marvelous as it was, was a rapid series of coos, chirps, and barks. Their boats formed a semi-circle around the canoe, forcing the Aleut to approach the mainland. The little men began banging their boats maniacally, with more joining in as they neared shore.

A bit farther south was a natural harbor swarming with fishing vessels of every description. As the canoe was forced into this harbor, people along the rocky coast began banging whatever they could get their hands on, until the air was filled with their lunatic percussion. Hero smiled at the tiny brown men running along a cliff overlooking the harbor. He laughed, hoarsely, as heads popped out of boats, and creaked to his feet in mimicry. Their canoe was squeezed between a chain of tubs and the shore, and as it slowed the tempo and ferocity of the banging decreased accordingly. The canoe came to a halt, and the banging and shouting stopped. The first North American to set foot on Asian soil stepped shakily onto the rocks.

There followed the profoundest silence imaginable.

And a second later it was as if a dam had burst.

Hundreds of hysterical, yammering voices erupted from hundreds of hysterical, clinging men and women. Hero was spun and jostled. He was handed along. He saw their astounded, pinched little faces. The sun, pulsing between their heads as he was turned, repeatedly stabbed his eyes. He heard an excited outburst and frantic splashing which could only have been the Aleut's end, and then he was somehow limping alongside a primitive fishing village, blindly following a narrow dirt path that hugged the cliff's base. The warm spring sun caught the dust as he shambled. Hero rounded a bend and stopped.

Before him stood half a dozen gaping children, too fascinated to run. There was a chatter and scuffle behind him. He slowly turned to see that he was now in the midst of a small crowd of these children, and that more were running up with cries of amazement.

A stone struck his shoulder. As he turned back another glanced off his chest. A moment later he was being pelted from all sides, and the giggles and gasps had become something wildly unreal. He dropped to his knees in a hail of pebbles, covered his head with his arms and slithered up the path on his belly.

A new voice broke in; an older, authoritative voice. The children scampered off squealing as Hero, shaken to his feet, found himself staring in the face of a diminutive, shouting, incomprehensible old man. The old man threw his arm around Hero's waist and, jabbering all the way, led him to a secondary path cut into the cliff's soft yellow face. This path sloped gently upward over the waves. Together they picked their way to a place maybe halfway up, where the cliff's face was honeycombed with natural alcoves and dug-out caves. Most of these spaces were used as one-man shelters; a few, cut deeper in the earth, as family hives. Strange gabbing people slid out of these holes like worms, reaching, but the little old man, who was evidently a little old man of some means, embraced his find possessively and shouted them back inside.

The path began to broaden and climb, and soon they'd reached the top: this was the upscale end of the neighborhood. Hero was led to a hovel nestled amid dozens of similar hovels, all scattered around a dainty stream wending between patches of stunted vegetation.

The old man's place was basically a one-room hut fashioned of earth and salvaged boat hulls, with a slender side-yard surrounded by dry, dusty hedges. But inside it was clean and tidy, with rice paper partitioning and, built into the far earthen wall, a miniature stone fireplace. The old man sat his guest in the exact center of the room. There he fed him scraps from his bowl, using long sticks to pluck out bits of fish and clumps of tiny, starchy white pellets.

He studied the brute closely.

He watched him chew, walked round and round him. He poked here. He pinched there.

And that night he lit a fire on his crushed-shell hearth.

Hero, full but confused, curled up on a mat and squinched his body to a place where the gossip of flames could reach him. Nearby, at his delicate wicker table, the old man sat in semi-darkness, illuminated only from the waist down.

But his eyes were alive. They spat and darted as they reflected the fire's light, and, when at last they had begun to sputter, his scratchy little voice came pattering out of the dark, muttering something vile and oddly modulated, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a gathering snarl.

Hero, feigning slumber, ever and again caught the ominous flash of those piercing slanted eyes. But the room was cozy, and the fire warm, and the play of light and shadow kicked sleep in his eyes.

In the morning he woke on his face in the old man's side-yard, his head pounding, a rusty iron clamp fastened securely around his neck. The clamp was attached to the outer link of a crude three-foot chain, and the link at the other end of this chain was attached to a long stake driven into a bed of solid rock. The chain and stake, like the clamp, were hammered of local iron. The clamp was too tight for comfortable swallowing, and the chain too short to make standing possible. Hero could, however, spread out on his chest and stretch an arm to a low row of hedges. By parting the tangled undergrowth he had a limited view of the fishing village, and of the harbor beyond. As the days passed he was able to tweak himself a view space that was discernible only from his peculiar vantage. He accomplished this by gently breaking small branches strategically, then guiding their interrupted growth with the utmost tenderness. It was his secret garden.

He had absolutely no memory—none whatsoever—of being staked here. Obviously the old man couldn't have set this up overnight. Hero's mind prodded timidly . . . how many others had been chained to this spot, and why?

But over the subsequent weeks and months he went beyond caring. Every day was the same: just after dawn the old man would storm into the tiny side-yard swinging his reed whip wildly. The lashings were savage and relentless. The old man, except for his eyes, was mute. Only his whip need speak. And the snap of his reed had but one message: when you see this whip you go *down*, and you go down *immediately*.

The naked savage, scarred head to foot, learned to go prostrate on the moment. Even so, his keeper could not resist the temptation to indulge in the occasional good old, all-out flogging. And after each session he would toss his prisoner a vile mess of dead fish and garbage.

Hero lived like this for many months, lost in a confused world of pain and anticipation. Perversely, he came to look forward to the bite of his master's whip, for, whether he whipped him in passion or just for sport, the old man was always sure to make it personal. It seemed their relationship might go on forever.

But one day there was a great commotion in the sleepy little fishing village. Hero parted the brambles and beheld a small train of oblong coaches at rest near the harbor. Large oxen yoked in pairs lolled between the carriages, immune to the clamor around them. There were dark shaggy horses and colorfully dressed Bactrian camels. The horses and camels were tethered in

the rear, but were occasionally paraded around the carriages by little men wielding long painted bamboo poles. The whole affair was exotic and mesmerizing, gypsyish and profane. Hero watched all day in amazement, infected by the hubbub, though he was totally mystified by the crowd's fascination on the carriages' far side.

And late that afternoon he saw his master come walking out of the crowd with another man. The two were talking heatedly. The stranger was shorter and broader than his master, with long stringy hair and long stringy moustaches. He saw them climbing the path, saw them crawl inside a hole lashing furiously. They were lost from view for a minute, then popped up big as life. Hero glowed as they approached. He curled up eagerly.

The old man and stranger came into the narrow side-yard still arguing. The old man grabbed Hero by the hair and twisted until he was facing the newcomer.

The stranger had oily, porous skin, and a sharp but grave countenance. His highly slanted eyes were bright and restless. He studied Hero's mutilated face with keen interest before borrowing the old man's reed to observe the reaction. When Hero instantly curled at his feet he grunted and returned the reed.

The stranger pulled out something shiny and hefted it in his hand. He then raised his other hand while considering Hero, as though weighing him too. The old man's eyes glinted, and for an instant his expression became grotesquely servile. The stranger and old man faced each other. They nodded curtly, in unison. The stranger dropped the shiny thing into the old man's closing hand. The old man whipped Hero frantically before taking a small ax to the chain. A few hard blows split a link, the broken link was bent back by the tool's shaft, and the prisoner was at last released.

The old man handed the stranger a short rope of hemp. The stranger bowed deeply. He then tied an end of the rope through one of the clamp's remaining links and began dragging Hero along. Hero's hands sought his master's, but the old man kicked and cursed him all the way to the path. The three stumbled single-file to the bottom. The old man waved his arms and shouted hysterically, trotting behind until he ran out of breath. But he got in a final kick and, before he came to a gasping halt, managed to lash Hero once for old time's sake, and to spit on him twice for luck.

There were five carriages; a long one in the center hitched to four oxen, and two smaller coaches in the front and rear with a pair of oxen on each. The carriages were old and battered, built of splitting wood slats and rusted iron braces. Various hides, spare wheels, and a hundred odds and ends were tied to the sides and roofs. Hero's new master, using him as a ram, shoved

him through the crowd to the long carriage. He hauled him up the single wooden step and watched the crowd's reaction. Children hid behind mothers, mothers hissed and jeered, men spat in that smashed, disgusting face.

Satisfied, Hero's master twisted the rope tighter and dragged him through the hide flap that served as the carriage's rear wall.

A strange ruckus began at their entrance.

Inside the carriage were bulky shapes and quirky movements, but the immediate and overwhelming impression was one of unbelievable stench. Hero, instantly covered with flies, was kicked and shoved down a foot-wide aisle. The carriage's walls were riddled with black flecks of old dried blood, the floor coated with standing urine, a variety of small carcasses, and some clinging, indefinable slime. But the living contents of this hell were so horrifying, and so unexpected, that Hero at once dropped to his knees. Observing this, master grabbed a whip from the wall and lashed him along the floor.

A number of bamboo cages lined either side of the carriage, each four feet high, four feet wide, and three feet deep. In the first cage to their left a quadruple amputee dangled in a leather harness in a cloud of flies, jealously gnawing a chicken carcass balanced on his belly. The second cage held a man who had been burned over ninety per cent of his body, and the third a middle-aged woman with no eyes or tongue, her head shaved. The next cage housed a fully grown black leopard, its bright eyes fixed on the horrified newcomer. Then an empty cage, and finally a cage containing a demented man whose long yellow nails were busily raking a face deeply scarred and bleeding.

The first cage against the opposite wall held two girls rolling in their own excrement. Siamese twins unable to part, they had developed their own method of locomotion: they now executed a three-quarters cartwheel in Hero's direction, their mangled, severely bitten hands attempting to reach him through the bars. In the cage next to theirs a naked dwarf glowered menacingly, his eyes following coldly as Hero's master shoved him down the narrow aisle, occasionally pausing to lash at a cage. The hissing and howling increased as each prisoner beheld the new neighbor.

The third cage held an intensely sick adult Bornean sun bear, so confined it was entirely unable to move. Its hide was a patchwork of scraggly fur and grayish skin, glistening with odd eruptions. It rolled its sunken eyes in Hero's direction, its muzzle twitching feebly.

The next cage contained a man who was frightfully diseased. Broad fungal patches covered his face and limbs, terminating in waxy folds that dangled like a rooster's wattles. Welling sores spotted his naked chest and back. His eyes were bugged and sallow, his lower lip drooped below his chin. He barked wetly at Hero's passing legs.

The second-to-last cage housed a rare, completely hairless Chinese albino, and the last cage a very tall, skeletal woman. The albino banged his head repeatedly against his cage while snapping at Hero. The woman hissed and coiled like a snake, her spine arching amazingly.

Master hauled Hero to the empty cage on his left, swung its door open with his foot, and forced him to his knees by pushing down with all his weight. He kicked and punched until Hero had been squeezed inside, then slammed shut and secured the wide bamboo door.

Master inched his way back down the carriage, hammering the butt of his whip on each cage as he passed. There was a glimpse of daylight as he lifted the flap.

Once he'd departed, the carriage grew eerily silent.

Hero cautiously turned his head. Less than a foot away, the black leopard was frozen in place, one paw waving hypnotically in his face. The animal's fangs were bared, its ears straight back, its eyes glistening. Hero turned ever so slowly, until he was looking into the eyes of the demented man in the final cage. The man cocked his head quizzically and screamed for all he was worth.

At once the carriage erupted. The freaks shrieked and scabbled, the leopard spun in place. Directly across the aisle, the albino hurled himself against the bars of his cage. He batted his face with his fists, then threw back his head and just howled and howled and howled. The snake woman curled even tighter, her long emaciated legs entwined behind her head.

Hero sat with breath held, absolutely silent, absolutely motionless. He very, very slowly closed his eyes.

Later that night the flap was flung high. The menagerie came alive as master, eerily illuminated by moonlight, slowly made his way down the aisle carrying a skin sack oozing blood. He stopped at each cage to toss in a dying chicken and a handful of smelt.

When he reached Hero's cage he looked down thoughtfully.

He extracted a quivering chicken and held it above the cage so that blood dripped on the brute's deeply pleated forehead. Hero lowered his eyes. Master's face darkened. He smashed the bird against the cage, over and over, his eyes screaming. Finally he hissed and displayed the limp chicken high over the albino's head. The albino yelped and kicked, thrusting his hand up between the bars and jerking back to lick away the blood rolling down his forearm.

Master eyed Hero coldly for a moment, then pointedly dropped the chicken into the albino's searching hands.

Master hissed again. He slowly made his way out.

Soon there was a commotion outside. The carriage rocked a bit before settling. Hero, turning in his cage to peek through a rift in the wood, saw horses being urged forward and heard men shouting. The carriage rocked again. He looked up and saw the gibbous moon suspended in mist. For just a second something wedge-shaped cut across its soft white face.

But then the oxen were grunting, the wheels had been freed, and the horses drawn abreast. His master's lash spat left and right, and the show proceeded . . . *west*.

Master

She was very round and very small, with very short, very shaggy black hair. Her arms bore the scars of numerous bites from beast and man, and around her neck ran long wheals from a particularly savage owner. Hero, having spent the better part of the morning watching master storm in and out of a strange screaming house, was now watching him drag the little round woman through the dirt. For a while he listened to the song of his master's lash, waiting for the woman to break. But there was never a whimper.

It had been a difficult transaction for master, and an altogether difficult morning. For hours he had paced up and down the main carriage, alternately murmuring affectionately into, and lashing at, each cage he visited. The sun bear, long dead and stuffed, had been taken outside for barter. It had soon been returned.

Master had lingered over Hero's cage for a good while, staring critically. He'd begun shouting, and three of his men had burst in through the flap, unlatched the demented man's cage,

and dragged him out by the feet for trade, master personally stomping on the demented man's scrabbling hands.

And now master was kicking and shoving the little woman down the aisle while his men restrained her by the hair and throat. Upon master's command these men stripped her naked and began pinching and slapping. They made threatening faces and mocking noises, then went at her with the hands again while master laughed greasily and the freaks sat right up in their cages.

The woman looked as though she'd fainted: her arms were lax, her eyes rolled up. Her whole face seemed to purse, and her body, head to toe, began to run blue. Her fingers quivered and clawed: the woman was self-asphyxiating. Master fairly leaped with delight while the cages rocked and howled. He had the men slap her awake and stuff her into the vacated cage next to Hero's.

Master then looked in eagerly, one to the other, his hands balled into fists. The woman buried her odd round face in her hands while squeezing herself into her cage's deepest corner. Hero gazed indifferently and went back to his peephole.

Master exploded. He smacked and kicked the cages over and over, swore up and down, ran the shaft of his whip back and forth against the heavy bamboo bars. Eventually he calmed somewhat. He stared coldly at Hero, made a sissy smile, and spat right in his eyes. A tense minute passed. Master slowly made his way outside.

Hero automatically relaxed. Across the aisle the albino thrust his face between his cage's bars to sniff the newcomer. The leopard, bobbing rhythmically, emitted a high-pitched squeal that gradually descended to a steadily throbbing growl.

Hero looked the stranger over. Once she'd lowered her hands he saw that her eyes were crossed and her jaw slack, her face as round as the full moon. He looked closer. There were scars all over her throat and arms: plainly, the small round woman had been treated very badly. Hero instinctively slid a foot between the bars. The woman cried out and scrunched even deeper, while across the aisle the albino quickly extended an arm. Without knowing why, Hero turned on him. The albino flinched, and his eyes tore into Hero's. An instant later he was grinning wildly. Hero went back to his peephole.

Next morning master and two of his men dismantled the bamboo walls separating Hero's and the woman's cages, then used broad leather bands to bind the frames, making a single cage of the two.

One of the men opened Hero's door, wormed in, and tore off his filthy hides. He wriggled back out with the rags. The door was secured. The men hunched around the long cage expectantly.

The naked couple backed away, instantly exasperating their master. He shouted, lashed furiously, stamped and screamed; jabbed a broken shaft between the bars with malevolent intent, whirled and hurled the shaft at nothing. The carriage's inmates went out of their minds. At master's bellowed command a man scurried outside, returning with a long rope of woven leather strands. Master opened the cage and, using his foot, pinned Hero and his new mate in an awkward embrace while his men bound them together.

Again master and his men bent over the long cage to watch. Both fought to pull away; when Hero realized his predicament he made a desperate attempt to reach his peephole. The men, misreading his struggles, babbled and cheered, but master threw up his hands. He then, through gesture, ordered his men to drape a number of hides over the long cage. Once the hides were in place he very quietly bent to one knee and placed an ear against the cage. After a while he swore and rose to his feet. He kicked the cage and stormed out, lashing the howling inmates as he went.

In the semi-darkness the man and woman quit fighting their bonds.

A muffled patter began on the hide-covered roof.

Rain, as always, had a calming effect on the carriage's occupants, causing the freaks and beasts to slip, one by one, into lethargy or slumber. Under such a spell, the attainment of master's goal was inevitable.

It was a coupling both innocent and vile, without passion or celebration. Occasionally the freaks would surface, register their excitement by shrieking, shaking their cages, or otherwise clamoring . . . but very quickly the air would stifle them, weighing their heads and confusing their impulses. The atmosphere became heavier by the minute, and the darkness grew fuller. And, when night rolled over the carriages, the rain came in sheets.

Master leaned over the cage, slipped his gnarled hand between the bars, and slowly rubbed the woman's belly in a counter-clockwise motion, his sinister features soft in the candle's light. Murmuring and cooing, he told, in nonsensical whispers, of a lovingly secure and impossibly prosperous future.

How large and promising that belly had become! And how wise was he, the cunning and aggressive master, in his far-reaching business decisions. He turned his affection to the motionless brute; stroked the battlefield of its face, tossed in another lizard. Master rubbed his palms together. From now on it was extra lizards daily, for both the woman and her mate. He remarked, with only passing interest, his star player's continuing indifference. They didn't need each other.

There'd been months of shows on the road now, broken only recently by this sensible rejoining of the mates at conception. Hero's horrible disfigurement was unquestionably the top draw; he was a guaranteed crowd pleaser at every stop. So now master looked him straight in the eyes and smiled. He held the reeking candle high. The carriage was absolutely silent. Master smiled again. He rose to his feet and tiptoed away.

Hero watched him retreat until the flap had fallen. He returned to his peephole, saw master round the rear of the carriage and slowly crunch by. For a time he could see nothing but the half-shapes of junipers bathed in starlight. Finally there was a tentative movement to his right and a large shape came to obstruct his view.

The horse stood for a minute in profile. It slowly brought its head to rest against the carriage, applying its eye to the peephole. Hero froze. The two remained fixed, eyeball to eyeball, while a breeze played odd tunes on the outer wall's hanging paraphernalia. The horse's big dark eye rolled nervously. A long moment passed. Slowly the horse backed off. It stood uncertainly for a while, staring at the peephole. Then it quietly moved away.

Master lifted the hides one by one, left hand and right, as he slowly made his way down the aisle. Into each cage he delivered a personalized warning in passing—a growl, a hiss, a bark—but he was quickly losing control. Animal electricity hopscotched the carriage, cage to cage, front to rear and back again. Master stood conductive in the flow. Much more of this excitement, he feared, could seriously agitate the woman—with grave consequences for master. She was splayed on her back, in labor's throes, her ankles and wrists bound to the long cage. Hero had been removed to give her room, and now sat hunched atop the snake woman's cage, two men holding him by the throat and legs.

Master gnashed and snarled, listening to the woman scream, watching her stupid round head bounce back and forth. He *knew* it! He'd been suckered, hoodwinked, scammed—ripped off like a common rube. The woman was too retarded to handle even something as natural as birthing. Still . . . it was too late to second-guess himself—all these months he'd been patient—he'd been supportive and vigilant and now he could not, he would not, be denied. He lashed one of the men to alleviate his tension.

But the woman was very slowly, very dramatically arching her spine. Master wiped the sweat from his eyes. When the bars were pleating her big round belly her shoulders drummed on the floor and her legs began to kick wildly. Master screamed one very colorful expletive. A razor silence took the carriage; not a body moved or breathed. At last two men tiptoed round their purpling master and leaned into the cage. One obediently thrust a foot between the bars. He

pushed hard on her right knee while using a hand to grip the left knee, spreading her legs wide. The other man drew a broad leather strap between her teeth. He lifted her head, pulled the strap behind her neck, and knotted it to make a gag. He then produced a skin sack, which was yanked over the woman's face. The man looked up anxiously. Master licked his lips and nodded. The man made a fist and frantically punched the woman's face until her muffled screams ceased. She moaned gently throughout her contractions. The man brought a candle in tight.

Master bent onto one knee and took a deep breath. As he raised his hand the candle's light bounced off his knife's chipped and scored eleven-inch blade. Master cursed and reached down carefully. He flicked his wrist twice and the menagerie went mad.

The child was a tremendous disappointment.

Master had eagerly anticipated an infant retarded and deformed; something embracing the best qualities of its parents. He had even designed a special cage that could be expanded by degrees as the spawn developed. There also remained the tantalizing option of a family display, though such an undertaking would require the eventual construction of an even larger structure than the cage its parents now shared. Master anguished over the logistics, knowing it would break his heart to have to cut the throat of one of his jewels . . . just to make room for a growing child. Nights he would slowly pace the carriage with all the possessiveness of a jealous suitor, one hand maneuvering a sputtering candle, the other tenderly rapping the butt of his whip on each visited cage.

But the boy was a flawless specimen; a beautiful, undemanding baby. From the moment master had angrily tossed the placenta he had felt cheated, even betrayed. He grimaced as it peaceably took to its mother's breast, despite the surrounding horrors. Master hated it, immediately and entirely. The damned thing was so docile it was almost charming. He pulled out his knife and was just reaching down when an overwhelming sense of dread shook him like a rat in the jaws of a mastiff. Sweat poured from his brow and down his squat, pigtailed nape. He knew he would live to regret it, but he decided to not cut the child's throat right away. It was the oddest feeling. His knife hand had trembled for the first time in his life, and he had found himself momentarily contemplating *right* and *wrong* at the outset of a perfectly simple and commonplace procedure. That was it, then. His business instincts were letting him know there was a good, albeit mysterious, reason to let the sweet baby live. Master left the carriage anxiously, muttering in his ambivalence.

The boy grew to embody his worst expectations. Not only was it a poorly oriented child, clinging to its father rather than its master almost from the moment it had been weaned, but it

soon proved a lousy draw with the patrons. Those who paid to view the child dangling in its special cage inevitably departed unsatisfied, some vocalizing, strangely, an acute sense of *shame*. So once again master entered the carriage with his knife hand steady, and once again he exited trembling, his heart in his throat and his soul in a whirl. He whipped the dwarf savagely before leaving. What place conscience in the mind of a businessman?

Soon as the boy could walk master put him to work fetching and feeding. But the brat was slothful in his chores, preferring to hang around his family's cage while staring wistfully at his father. For their part, the parents were wholly disinterested; Hero gazing for hours out his peephole while the mother lolled, perpetually ill. Sometimes the woman's condition riled master to no end. She could teeter at death's door for months at a time, her body changing hues to the fascination of customers, only to bounce back with a hardiness that was of interest to no one. But at the peak of her performances the blue lady could really hold a crowd. Master built a whole outdoors extravaganza around her, slowly stripping her naked before audiences, then letting the dwarf and albino take her while the leopard strained against a gaily festooned chain. Master circulated his men through the crowds to encourage his patrons' cult-like behavior of breath-holding and fainting. No getting around it: the customers were crazy about her—on master's Bactrian vanguard their colorful robes shouted her approaching fame. And Hero was always popular. Many were the nights when master, pacing the perimeter, wondered just what devilry could have produced the lovely boy.

Overall, Hero remained his master's favorite conceit and hottest property. Part of the little brute's appeal was, of course, his exoticness. And certainly the ugliness arising from his deformity was compelling . . . but there was a detachedness about him that fascinated every paying individual. Whether they stoned him or spat in his face he remained unflappable, staring through the customers as though they didn't exist. Though many would leave uneasy, master noted with satisfaction that they almost invariably returned.

The boy soon evinced an amazing affinity for animals. No matter how agitated a horse or ox became, the child could pacify it with one hand on a lowered brow. This was a source of endless fascination for the crew. Wagers were made. The boy was pitted against oxen whipped into a frenzy. But they would not harm him: they would rather prostrate themselves and take the lash. Master tried to work this knack into a viable act, but his patrons just weren't buying. They wanted freaks.

When the lad was a mere five years old master had him trained in the peripheral art of the pickpocket. The boy worked well alone, and had all the makings of a fine little flimflam artist. Master sighed, his chronic nightmares a thing of the past. As ever, his business instincts were guiding him well.

Then late one afternoon he found the boy squatting outside his parents' cage. The boy had done the unthinkable: he had deposited his day's pickings at the feet of his father instead of bringing the booty to master. Master flew into a rage and raised his whip to give the little traitor the lashing he deserved. But before he could deliver a single stroke his other hand shot to his chest and he staggered against the albino's cage. He blinked down at the boy, who regarded him steadily while scooping the plunder into a little pile.

From that day on the boy placed whatever he could get his hands on at his father's feet. As time passed he became ever more adroit at thievery, growing into a youngster both admired and despised by master and his crew; admired because theft was a cinch for him, despised because they were all that much lighter in their possessions.

Now, for seven years the strange little train had bounced along, sometimes camping outside villages for months, occasionally pausing on connecting roads. The show traversed the heart of Manchuria, skirted the Gobi in the north, and so eventually crossed almost the entire width of Mongolia before proceeding north to the confluence of the Rivers Yenisey and Ob'. Much silver had come to his coffer, much fame to his name, but master now sat looking over a vast, unmapped Siberian wilderness. The mostly nomadic characters they'd been encountering spoke in tongues unfamiliar even to his personal valet-translator-accountant, and the tone of these nomads had been unmistakably hostile.

Master huddled surlily under a canopy of sopping hides. Night was falling hard during a merciless rain, the wind was picking up, and his supplies coach was bogged in a growing sea of mud. At that moment he accepted the whole end-of-the-line concept, and knew he wasn't going anywhere but *back*. And when he *got* back he *was going to* shine. He jumped from the coach.

The earth took his weight for a heartbeat, and then he was sliding forward on palms and toes. He did a belly flop into a rain-filled depression and churned to his hands and knees with the devil in his eyes. Wallowing in mud and bile, master stomped to the supplies coach and kicked wildly at the stuck rear wheels. Somewhere between kicks he simply snapped. Master broke for his whip. One minute he was blindly lashing his men, the next he'd succumbed to a mindless, mounting ferocity: he thrashed about like a berserker; whipping the beasts, the coach, the very night. His men were scarcely able to move in all that mud, but their dread of his savagery kept them hopping. They gathered as one and shoved the coach recklessly, slipping and shouting. A minute later, three lay splayed underfoot, but the mired wheel had been freed.

Throughout all this the oxen swayed nervously, while the horses softly tramped their hooves in place. Master had his men turn the oxen about until the rickety train was pointing dead east. He checked the hitches, then personally applied his lash. The oxen didn't budge. Master swore and wiped the rain from his eyes. He had the horses hitched ahead of the oxen, but they

were even less obliging. Master flew into a terrifying rage, and his men, fearing for their lives, ran liberally with the lash.

The swaying of oxen picked up until the entire train of carriages was rocking. Yet the oxen could not, under any amount of prodding, be compelled to take a forward step. Master looked around in exasperation. The night had gone mad. The horses were fighting their hitches, the oxen were walking on fire. He cursed the rain and the mud and lashed all the harder, while his men, seeking to please, frantically whipped the horses. At last the horses and both lead oxen broke their hitches and bolted west. The men instantly embraced the rear oxen in a belated attempt at mollification, but the hitches shattered and the oxen stormed off. The remaining horses went into frenzies, kicking at everything and nothing.

Inside the long carriage all was chaos. The albino was neighing and screaming, the aging leopard spinning in its cage. Hero stared out his peephole, amazed at the blur of figures stumbling by in the rain.

A pair of clopping blows rattled the opposite wall. A slat cracked. The wall received a tremendous shock and a huge section blew inward as a thrashing, hysterical mare burst into the carriage in a veil of rain.

The horse went mad, killing the albino and snake woman in a flurry of hooves. She fell hard on the far wall, crushing the cages. The leopard shot into the air like a rocket, slashed at the mare's throat and vanished in the rain. The horse reared above the family cage and was just coming down for an obliterating kick of hooves when something made her freeze. Her eyes locked with Hero's, and then her orbs were rolling wildly in their sockets. She kicked at the air and fell backward, smashing the cage's side. The mare came down hard on her left flank, whirled upright, and leaped outside.

For a long minute the family sat in the rubble with rain bombarding their eyes. Nothing in their years of captivity had prepared them for such a situation. But by the end of that minute the son had taken full command. He rolled onto his back, braced himself, and shoved his parents out with his feet. He then toppled through the breach and they all fell about in the mud and rain. To the west, the mare stared back strangely as she splashed into the night. The boy wedged himself between his parents, threw his arms around them, and pushed with all his might. They embraced and their bodies found a common center of gravity. Fumbling drunkenly, the family staggered along in the wake of the mare.

The boy was the natural leader.

Master's innocent-looking little ex-student could quickly assess and exploit almost any individual or situation. He did the foraging and the figuring, slept with one eye open and one hand closed. He got what he wanted by charm or by stealth, slipping off at nightfall, returning at daybreak with small slaughtered animals and chunks of dark peasant bread. He also pilfered any bauble or oddity he could get his paws on; these objects were reverently placed at his father's feet. Breadwinner and watchdog, he held the family together; a nuclear man. He sewed hardy feather-lined cloaks of reindeer hide, and turned a cache of marmot pelts into a kind of side-slung backpack-totebag. He was dotting nurse during his mother's episodes, and strict and unbending apportioner of calories in lean times. Dauntless when it meant crossing mighty rivers, relentless when it came to finding mountain passes. But the endless marching, the unreliable diet, and the countless predators made the three lean, haggard moving targets. There were times when the little lamp of the family was all but extinguished, and long stands in places that seemed absolutely impassable. Still, the boy would work things out. He would stoop to any level to feed his charges—and for a stranger to threaten Hero was to summon a psychotic, unrelenting monster. He was both spear and shield.

The toughest job of all was maintaining a tight family unit, which basically meant the son was forced to become a hard-nosed bastard whenever the father was ready to wander off, which always seemed to be whenever the mother was hurting most. She'd become a tremendous impediment to Hero's compulsion, and therefore her son's chief nemesis. It wasn't a big-picture concern anyway; the handwriting was on the wall. The blue lady's attacks were increasing spectacularly on the steppe: her world had always been an enclosure of some kind, and the great horizon proved just too much for her. Perhaps these intense affairs served as links to Hero's suppressed memories; at the onset of each attack he'd turn and hike, and then only exhaustion could curb him. The boy would press his mother on, dragging, shoving, and smacking; he could be mean when necessary. Still, though circumstances had made him the nucleus, their worlds revolved around Hero. Where he sat, they sat. And when he rose, so did they. In this manner they marched for years across the vast Russian Steppe, single-file—father, mother, and son, respectively—unmolested, lacking possessions, always following the sun. Long before they could be measured they had drifted into obscurity.

The woman's end came quickly and dramatically, in a rocky little depression on a half-frozen field west of the Urals. One moment she was responsive to her son's prompts, the next she was flat on her back, her eyelids fluttering. That night she leapt from fever to chill, from alertness to stupor. The boy, squatting beside their campfire, watched her face and hands run cadaver-blue to fish belly-pale and back again. While he was staring her eyes popped open and her hands came scrabbling. He sweated through the clawing embrace, and when he could bear it

no longer oozed out and ran down to fetch his father. Hero watched her incuriously for a while. Her face was scrunched up and her skin the color of sapphires. She wasn't breathing. His gaze became glassy, and his eyes returned to the night.

Strange things were going on in his world. Some days he would notice how animals regarded him oddly, in a manner that seemed almost personal. He found, for instance, that certain specimens were recognizable even over great distances. A number of times he would sit with one in a stare-down, waiting patiently, until the animal's natural disposition caused it to bolt. Though the meaning of these encounters was way over his head, he would watch, and he would listen. In time he noticed an increasing skittishness in the most familiar creatures. Something had them spooked. He then observed a number of lean gray wolves moving in and out of the picture with an air of complete indifference: these wolves weren't hunting; they were loitering—lounging in the grass, lackadaisically padding to the rear, filing by slowly in the distance. Once in a while a loungeur would raise its head, yawn cavernously, and drop back out of sight. So unobtrusive was their behavior that even the ever-vigilant boy began to take them for granted. They paused where the family paused, and halted when the woman broke down. Perfectly camouflaged by the gray boulders and dire sky, they were completely forgotten in the drama of her passing.

There were other, far subtler events which existed for Hero's senses alone. He'd been perceiving patterns in everything around him; in the manner vegetation appeared to give way wherever his heart was leading, in the way so many animals seemed to be making, not merely mirroring, his course. And wind, rain, running water: these phenomena had voices. Yet not for everybody. No one—not his mate, not his son, not another soul on the planet could hear this call, for they were all of a sort. They were static, they were temporal and fixed. Hero couldn't have cared less about the lives of his family, or about the mundane goings-on in the encampments and small tribes they skirted. Such beings lived in a world that was defined by the moment. They shouted, they banged, they clamored. But west—west was music.

And so once again the boy watched his father shuffle off. He looked back down, at his mother's death mask being remade by the dying light of their campfire. As the flames dwindled he could have sworn he saw shadows creep into the wells of her eyes, while others, crawling up around her jawline, drew her lips like purse strings. He hopped to his feet and ran for more tinder. When the fire was back up he dropped to his knees and looked again.

She was sinking right before his eyes, every aspect of her expression in collapse. Now he watched clinically, fascinated. As the flames began to sputter he thought he could see large purple bruises spreading across her cheeks like the seeping limbs of overflowing pools. He bent closer.

From deep in the night came the longest, the leanest, the saddest wail he'd ever heard. He turned to see the starlit ghost of his father, facing away, staring at a low barren hill. Uncountable stars embroidered the spot. The boy perceived a low shape moving along the hilltop, cutting off individual stars as it passed. The wolf howled again; a mournful, spiraling cry to nowhere and nothing. His father began to hike.

Halfway to his feet the boy froze.

It took a minute to realize why he'd stopped dead, and a good while longer for his heart to quit pounding. Gradually he became aware of a nervous padding, and, as his vision adjusted, of a lazy stream of eyes that gleamed in the feeble light of the dying campfire. The eyes bobbed around him; staring momentarily, returning to the ground.

There came a massive gasp—and his mother was tearing at his wrist. He watched her hyperventilating, saw her bulbous yellow eyes sinking in a wide violet pool. With a sizzle and pop the last tongue of flame was taken by the night.

And then her clammy hands were all over him. They pulled and demanded, caressed and beseeched. He had to pry them off like leeches, had to force them together and place them clasped on her shuddering arched belly. A silky snarl rose almost in his ear.

With a little squeal he sprang to his feet, even as something nearby jumped back in response. The boy stood absolutely still while the panting thing padded nearer. They stood very close, smelling each other. He instinctively extended a hand, palm forward. But it was no good; his arm was shaking out of control. The snarl rose again, not so tentatively this time. Fingers scratched at his ankle.

The boy gently stepped away, only to find himself surrounded by the shifting silhouettes of a dozen gray wolves. They approached in a calculated manner: two from the left, one from the right, another from behind. He was being goaded away from his mother; he could hear her fists beating the ground, and a second later the sounds of ravaging. He shakily raised his other hand. Now both arms were extended, and their message was clearly one of defense rather than control. Two snarling wolves stepped aside, leaving him a gateway into the night. A cold wet nose touched his wrist.

Screaming like a woman, he took off after his father just as fast as his feet would carry him.

Boy

Along the West Russian steppe a man could wander a lifetime and never meet another of his kind. Especially if his kind happened to be Alaskan proto-Inuit, and if he happened to be the teenaged patriarch of a two-man family going nowhere.

Here history is mostly mute. Upon this great steppe unnamed communities were scattered and rebuilt, lives blown about by the wind. The only centers of humanity a traveler might encounter, at the very crack of the first millennium, were temporary encampments of civilization at its rudest—shifting holes of cutthroat commerce existing solely for the barter of silk and spices and hapless souls. Life here was revered far less than merchandise, and the longest-lived men were those who kept their distance.

Hero and his boy hiked over permafrost and tundra for years; their meandering course a drunken mapmaker's scrawl. Chronological entries along this imaginary line would reveal that they'd stopped, sometimes for months at a time, when the father had grown too weak and

disoriented to continue. Hero's internal compass had sprung, and his weight fallen considerably. He'd sit all on his lonesome, scarecrow-scrawny, wistfully scrolling a 360 horizon while his boy scouted and scavenged. Then, for no apparent reason, he'd just up-and hike—sometimes northwest, sometimes along a tangential plane that always threatened to spiral. It was brutal: winters were frigid, summers, by odd contrast, running balmy to baking. Season by season these marches lost their tenaciousness, and eventually their heart. Hero's obsession was becoming his demise.

To a hypothetical observer, the pair of woolly camels materializing out of the rising August heat might have been mirages. The beasts were novelties here, and pioneers—way beyond their natural habitat. They'd tramped for months, with a mind-numbing monotonousness, for a thousand miles and more; round the Urals to the south, and through the hard territory braced by the Volga and Voronezh, avoiding anything that even smelled of men.

These had been wild camels; ugly, ill-tempered, and unpredictable—until the boy tamed them by touch. Now for weeks the frail little man and his dark teen-aged son had risen and fallen with their rhythm; lulled by it, sick of it, dreaming of lands far removed from hoarfrost and peat moss. They'd been ported this way clear to the upper Ukraine, where the camels' pace had picked up, mile by mile, until they reached a broad area distinguishable from its bracing purlieu only by its many deep surface cracks. Here the camels began to behave erratically; crouching sidelong while tramping, their long necks oscillating, their noses raking the ground. Eventually they came upon a dingy pool nestled in a pebbly depression. All the local brush surrounding this pool was situated like iron filings about a lodestone. The boy hauled back his camel's neck and laid a hand on its brow. The beast slowed to a halt. The other camel followed suit, move for move, and together they kneeled in the dirt.

The boy jumped off and caught Hero as he fell. The camels stood and watched the boy gently leading his father. After a while they grew nervous, and slowly stepped to the pool's rim. They knelt woozily, poising their noses just above the surface. Their whiskers danced on the pool's face, and their lids became heavy. Their hindquarters quivered as they drank. Their nostrils fluttered in unison, then remained agape. They seemed to be asleep.

The boy dropped to his knees and began filling skins. The water was quite warm. He slurped a palmful and almost immediately had a feeling of being intoxicated. He flicked it off his fingers; the water was bad.

Now three heads were mirrored in the pool; the camels at ten o'clock and two o'clock, the boy at six. He watched their reflections continue to ripple, long after the pool had become still. His face, melting and firming, rapidly fluctuated between extremes of age, and between his own recognizable features and those of some . . . monstrosity. This disturbing effect soon

became hypnotic. He felt his joints stiffen. His eyes became weak and his thoughts muddled . . . his face was magnetically drawn to the pool's surface, and for a moment he was in real peril of drowning. At the first contact he summoned the focus to push himself back and out of reach. He jerked his head aside and groaned to his feet.

Where the camels had knelt were only the prints of their bellies and knees. In the distance their ungainly little selves could be seen galloping all-out for the horizon, right back the way they'd come. He watched until they were swallowed by their dust, and when he looked again his father was long gone.

Right then and there he knew it was all just a matter of time. And sure enough, after eleven more days of feebly staggering along his father completely ran out of steam. The boy bundled him up in a shawl like an old woman. Sitting there, cradling an unresponsive man weighing less than eighty pounds, he couldn't help but let his morbid fantasies run wild. He was now old enough to realize his father had at some time suffered severe head trauma, and honest enough to accept that the man was rapidly approaching a vegetative state. This truth accompanied him like a shadow—and that night he questioned, for the very first time, his own convoluted rationale. He built a semi-permanent camp, foraged in a tight spiral, and always returned in a straight line. Some days he came back feeling uneasy, sensing another presence. Then it was every other day. It bugged him to no end. At last, when it became *every* day, he hauled his father to his feet and commenced a halting march to the west.

After only a dozen yards he was anxious again. He froze, wheeled, and hunched, certain something bulky had just dropped out of sight. Nothing looked suspicious, and everything looked suspicious. He walked Hero some more, occasionally peering back over his shoulder. There was—*something*. He whirled and stared . . . only masses of rock and high brush. Yet, when he really strained his eyes, he was sure, pretty sure, he could make out a large crouching body continuous with the brush. Heart in his throat, he began a slow steady creep and paused, now positive the bulge, whatever it was, had shifted in response. The boy very gradually raised his arm level with his eyes, faced the palm outward, and extended the arm until it was parallel with the ground. He could almost feel some kind of current passing between his itching palm and . . . nothing. He walked over to Hero and stopped again. There'd been the subtlest sense of traction. The boy propped up his father in a buzz of flies, and waited.

In a minute the bulge drew erect, and out of the brush strolled a small wild ass; pausing to nibble, taking her sweet time. She fit right in; bedraggled and footsore, her gray back inclined from countless weary miles.

The boy took a casual step and she immediately hit the dirt. There she remained; flat on her belly, one big brown eye staring between her hooves. He took another step and her rump

bunched up. And the closer he got, the higher her rear end rose. When he was almost at arm's length she sprang back and danced away, practically bounding with delight. But not to the east, as she'd come.

To the north.

The boy came on whistling and cooing while she backpedaled, matching him step for step. When he threw up his arms she whirled as though cued, dropped on her belly, and peered back over her shoulder.

Halfway to his father he paused and turned. Again the ass dropped.

The boy was first to blink. This time he approached in segments, keeping his movements to a minimum. She rose just as carefully, sauntering northwest in reverse, and at the first sign of hesitation turned, dropped, and gazed back over her shoulder. The boy glared at that huge mocking rump and broke into a sprint. The little ass easily danced out of reach, plopped down, and stared back.

He began hurling stones, with venom and with accuracy, and didn't stop until she'd scurried into the brush.

But on the way back he could feel her tagging along. Twenty feet behind them she lingered, looking embarrassed. The boy took his father's arm and walked him over, murmuring baby talk all the way. He firmly placed a palm on the animal's muzzle the moment her breath grazed his fingers. She stroked his hand up and down with her whiskers, gave a kind of curtsy, and waited on her knees while he helped his father mount. At his touch a shudder ran down her body. She stood up straight, her eyes became set, and her back went absolutely stiff. She put down her head and began the long trek northwest, never once breaking stride.

It was an amazing march, an impossible feat. For a little over three days and almost two hundred miles she progressed like an automaton, driving herself without rest, without food or water. After trotting alongside for an hour the boy climbed on, astonished and exhausted. He force-fed his father berries and smoked meat from their bundle while his dark eyes searched the countryside. Occasionally he'd see a run of red foxes to their left, watching intently while padding alongside. After a time they'd vanish, only to be superseded by a different breed. There was a rhythmic quality that further lulled his senses. Packs approached and receded while, high overhead, flocks formed triangular patterns that continually broke up and reformed. The boy shook his head to clear it, but his exhaustion was deeper than he'd supposed—even the brush appeared to be leaning northwest.

That first day he went numb with the pace, and that night the relentless pounding of her hooves drew him into a miserable slumber. He wrapped his arms around his sleeping father and

lay half atop. When he could no longer keep his eyes open he tore strips from his skins and tied his wrists round her neck and his ankles round her belly.

On the second day she was breathing hard, but her back was still high and she showed no signs of faltering. Her eyes remained focused on the ground dead ahead. She always sensed the best routes; finding mountain passes, skirting or fording wetlands. But by the third day they could feel her ribs quaking against their legs. Her breath exploded as she marched; blood frothed and caked about her nostrils. Still she pushed on; her pace so steady it was almost metronomic.

On the fourth day her legs were gone. She veered and stumbled, trembling every few paces. The boy hopped off for the umpteenth time and tried to bring her to graze, but she wouldn't be turned. He ran behind her as she staggered along, unwilling, or unable, to rest.

At last a foreleg gave and she went down hard. Sobbing and snorting, she plowed her muzzle back and forth in the soil, the useless leg still rhythmically pounding the ground. After a minute she raised her head and brayed at the sky, her neck muscles taut, her head slowly swinging side to side. Her cry went on and on.

She pushed herself upright and butted the boy aside. Every part of her body was shaking. From her depths rose a low moan, which became a steady bray, and finally a wild, pulsing howl. The ass came to a rise, but was too weak to climb without sliding. She stamped in frustration, managed a few feet, reared feebly, slid some more. The boy got behind her and applied his back; it took all he had to push her stomping and wailing, almost to the top. With a desperate lunge she crashed on her belly. Amazingly, she dragged herself on, her howl now a scream, her head whipping left to right. When she could pull herself no farther she thrust forth her neck to its very limit and, with a shudder that ran from the tip of her nose to the tuft on her tail, shoved her muzzle straight into the dirt and died.

The boy pulled his father off and fell back. The animal's eyes were fixed upwards, seeming, even in death, to be straining for a glimpse of what lay just beyond the rise. The boy half-dragged Hero the last few yards. They collapsed at the top, and together looked over the cold Baltic Sea.

At water's edge a haggard fisherman sat on his boat's ravaged deck, wretchedly staring out to sea. His was an odd-looking vessel; a family structure built more like an aft-cabined barge than like craft typical of that period. The fisherman's boat, like his mind, had been abused beyond repair.

He'd lost much in his life. Time had taken his dreams, pox his face, hardship his back and shoulders. And, more recently, a brawling band of drunken Baltic pirates had raped his wife and

daughter before butchering them along with his two fine sons—while he sat against the mast, bound and helpless. Finally, to further their delight, they had set the boat aflame and sent it crackling against the sun; knowing he could hear their hoots and howls, knowing he would drift undead accompanied by this last unspeakable memory. But a passing squall had doused the flames and blown him ashore. There he slumped, in shock, his shattered life caught on the rocks, staring at nothing. For a full long day he had gaped, beyond cold or caring. On the second day he'd worked free of his bonds and found himself staggering about in his memories, gathering shards. It was a pathetic claim. Eventually he made a pile of all the old garments and linen, and set about sewing them into a sort of mementos sail. All that third day he had sewn, and on the fourth he had hoisted this sail and been moved to see it billow in a northwest-blowing breeze. Again he sat staring at nothing. And later that day he'd become aware of a commotion taking place on the long grade leading down to the water. There a writhing mass of seagulls was proceeding like a tremendous snowball in slow-motion. He'd never seen anything like it. It wasn't uncommon to find gulls in a group of many dozens or more, but there must have been two, maybe three thousand of the birds now swarming toward his boat. They were making an incredible racket. In the midst of this cloud he could see a couple of figures slowly walking his way, and as they neared he made out a small man and a teenaged boy, dressed in odd skins. When they reached the rocks his eyes were drawn to the small man's face. It was a foreign face, brutish and dark, with a deep cleft running from the right temple to the left side of the jaw. Whatever instrument had felled this man had been devastating: everything in its path had been smashed, and with permanence. The forehead was caved in. There was no bridge to the nose, the left cheek was completely collapsed, one side of the mouth was a mangled mess. The jaw itself had set improperly, so that it jutted to the side. The general impression, especially from a distance, was of a countenance puckering at an angle. It was a face right out of a nightmare. But there was nothing frightening about the eyes. They were the eyes of a child.

Maybe half the gulls danced on the rocks, screaming, while the rest circled overhead. The boy considered the fisherman curiously before placing a foot on the burnt deck. His gaze went around the boat, lingered on the makeshift sail, returned to the slumped figure. He passed a hand before the eyes. No response. He then leaned in and placed his hand on the forehead. Immediately that bleak expression became fluid, brimming over with horror and heartbreak. Tears rolled down the fisherman's cheeks as he gasped, shuddered, and backed up the charred mast to his feet. Thus propped, he gaped at his visitors and was overcome by a wave of homesickness so strong he had to turn away. The feeling bewildered him, for this vessel, and this sea, were all the home he'd ever known. He clung to the mast while the boy helped his father board. Once he'd collected himself, the fisherman tore a heavy crossbeam from the toasted

cabin. He and the boy used this as a lever, and together they shoved the boat off the rocks. The wind picked up nicely, and the little craft was swept across the water.

The gulls exploded off the rocks and shot after the boat as if it were brimming with fish, the loudest and orneriest vying for favored positions directly overhead. The melee attracted additional gulls—they came screaming in their hundreds from all sides, banking and calling in the oddest manner, until the mass grew so thick as to cast a permanent shadow on the boat. All day long the shrieking continued, and all that night. The fisherman rolled with the rudder, listlessly, allowing the sea to control him. Inevitably he let go, that the wind might bear them where it would. His sail ballooned but held firm, and the boat fairly zipped across a sea as smooth as glass. The three tiny sailors sat hunched together, motionless, all throughout the next day, until the black coast of Sweden loomed in the twilight.

As the boat neared land the cloud of gulls broke up, shot to shore, and landed in groups of a thousand and more; a dizzying, wildly clamorous reception committee.

The dung-covered boat slammed into the rocks, shattering the fisherman's trance. He intuitively walked his butt up the mast and, swaying there, watched the boy draw his father over the side and lead him to a clearing at wood's edge. There in the dusk he made out what appeared to be a small spotted runaway cow hitched to a rickety wood wagon. He saw the cow run up to meet them, saw the boy look around warily, saw him help the little man into the wagon and climb in beside him. The cow immediately began picking through the woods, the large brass bell round her neck clanging forlornly.

The clarity of that bell made him realize just how quiet it had become. He craned his neck: not a gull in sight. The fisherman fell back against the charred mast and slid onto his tailbone with a clacking of teeth. His eyes began to mist. In the gathering dark a few sail fragments flew past and were sucked into the woods. The boat rocked and relaxed. After that there was only the sound of the receding bell's sad, monotonous song being batted about by the wind.

The little cow strode across the moonlit woods until she came to a path in the brush formed by the rutting of wheels over many years. She followed this broken, serpentine track throughout the night, and by morning was passing farms and, occasionally, crossing broader trails that might realistically be defined as roads. All day long she bore down that ragged track until she came, in late afternoon, to a clearing near a village. Here many such tracks converged. And here the boy slipped away while she grazed.

Sometime after dark he returned with a load of straw, a couple of pilfered blankets, and a fat iron kettle. Crammed in this kettle were salt, tubers, cheese, a few loaves of rye, legumes, and a foot of plump lamb sausage. Most of this booty he'd brought in tied to the bowed back of a huge, puffing, highly amenable black pig which, thus laden, now followed the boy's every step like a fresh convert tracing the messiah's heels. The boy built a fire under the stars, filled the kettle with creek water, and commenced simmering their dinner. He shooed the pig. Rather than run along, it backpedaled in a nervous circle, round and round in reverse, until it lost its balance and fell on its rump. There it remained, a yard behind the wagon. The boy fed his father and lined the wagon with straw. They settled in for the night. The boy must have nodded, might have dreamt, but while he was drifting he became aware of a stirring in the woods. He sat up, saw the pig's eyes gleaming inches from his nose. And there were a number of animals, some wild, some strayed from farmsteads, arranged in a broad circle around the wagon, their eyes glinting with moonlight. Not a rustle, not a peep, was lifted from the woods.

In the morning he woke to find the pig still staring. The cow, impatient to roll, began her long day's march while Hero and his boy were yet stretching and scratching, and the big black pig, galloping heavily, fell right in behind. Each new day this routine was reprised. They bumped past farms and small communities until the ruts intersected a broad rocky road wending halfway across the kingdom. The cow addressed this road with vigor. They picked up followers—a goat here, a couple of sheep there—which hurried after the wagon as best they could. The cow plodded along, mile after mile, day after day, her bell keeping steady time. That bell's accelerating peal attracted foals, lambs, and kids into the wagon's narrowing wake. Hares hopped between hooves and wheels. Boars and blue foxes marched and withdrew. White falcons, normally solo fliers, whirled into elongated wedge shapes high overhead.

At night the entire train would camp on the road. As soon as the fire was out the colony grew, creature by creature. And the moment the sun broke the horizon the little cow came to life and moved on, but each day a bit more resolutely, as though straining to meet a deadline. The march took on a sense of urgency. The cow walked ever swifter, the clang of her bell a bit more strident with each passing mile. Soon her followers numbered in the hundreds, as animals deserted their farms or crept out of the woods to join the procession. Tillers and traders stood dumbfounded, amazed by the bizarre flow.

Once they'd crossed into Norway the cow veered to the west, and the pace picked up considerably. The days blurred into a single variegated flow, for the bashed and lopsided wagon was surrounded dawn to dusk by a confused and confusing scurry. Word of the flow's weirdness preceded it clear to the Norwegian coast, so that now farmers and townspeople, wearily gathering their goggling families, found themselves lined in anticipation along the king's

highway. Riders went pounding to and fro with news of its progress and particulars; children ran through the streets banging pots in imitation of the cow's approaching bell. Livestock wheeled and stamped, fowl leaped and crashed.

The cow broke into a run.

Bystanders trotted behind, calling back and forth excitedly, while the wagon's permanent entourage squealed and squawked between their heels. The cow made a hard turn onto a widening swath in the brush. This swath, seeming to strain against the soil, ran straight down to the crest of a low hill overlooking the Atlantic. On either side a crowd had been studying the phenomenon for some time, but now all eyes swung to the dark and disfigured man and his son, clinging to the disintegrating wagon behind the careening spotted cow.

The trailing people traded views as they ran. Most—at the very outset of the new millennium, with Christianity burgeoning throughout Europe—leaned to the miraculous. Others, just as superstitious but prone to a darker outlook, threw looks of horror at the deformed little man. Yet they ran no less eagerly.

Speculation leapt like wildfire, man to man, though the consensus of the galloping crowd needed no voice—only one local event of any moment was brewing. On the coast a Greenlander Viking, impetuous son of the great island's notorious discoverer, was preparing his longship for the rough voyage home. He'd just been baptized in Olaf's court, and was now eager to sail—but not as a warrior, as a missionary. While his spirit remained in a tug-o'-war between gods old and new, his duty was clearly to his king. And Olaf had charged him with the Christianization of pagan Greenland.

Something on the wind now made this destined man turn his head. From behind the gentle hill to his rear came a kind of thunder. Heads popped up, followed by a confused explosion of voices, and seconds later a bug-eyed cow burst into view, dragging the wheelless skeleton of a shattered wooden wagon. On the wagon's splayed frame a man and teenaged boy clung for their lives as the gasping cow made a beeline for his ship.

The new missionary, still egocentric enough to assume his Maker might actually toss him a personal, surreptitiously rolled up his eyes. The sky yawned at his pretentiousness. At his side a smallish, cowled man stood, but the missionary sat him right back down. He then snorted, squared his shoulders, and signaled his men to halt their preparations. Knowing it was expected, he gathered his hard Nordic pride and coolly made his way into the crowd.

The priest clung to port, his twisted face wagging above the waves. After a completely uneventful minute he leaned back and stared through tearing eyes at the distant backdrop of

gathering fog. A man of his constitution had no business at sea. He was along, on the king's command, solely to assist the new missionary.

Along, too, the missionary brought an odd little man and the man's fiercely devoted son. This act of Christian charity had appeared strong-yet-compassionate in the eyes of his crew, and had readily won the priest's quiet approval. The boy, through his pantomime, had been so persistent in begging their passage that refusal, under the circumstances, would have been unbecoming not only a man of God but a man of the world.

A priest who couldn't hold his lunch, a witless eyesore who couldn't sit still, and a surly teenaged keeper who snarled at the first hard look—this last passage just had to be some kind of divine test, of mortal patience as well as moral values. Norsemen weren't made for babysitting.

And the fog condensed, and the shape became a hard coast. And then the longship was mooring, and the crew were jostling and clambering, and the big missionary had booted off the haunted little freak and his hypersensitive little son, and was condescendingly half-escorting, half-carrying, the green little priest ashore.

And they were home.

Priest in tow, the missionary quickly took up the Christianization of Greenland's Western Settlement, as per Olaf's command. His mother embraced the new religion big time, but his father was unapproachable on the subject (though he did concede to building her a small church). The mangled little man and his son followed the missionary around like dogs, slept outside his door and annoyed his visitors, but ultimately proved far easier to adopt than to shake. Barely tolerable pests . . . still, the boy was simply amazing with livestock . . . and though his useless father seemed time and again to be just begging for a whooping, his presence bore some ineffable quality that always curbed the missionary's hand. Several times he'd witnessed the father approached by settlers bent on abuse. Each time the boy had stepped in coolly, and each time the troublemakers were quickly cowed. The missionary of course didn't attribute any kind of celestial intervention to these episodes, and certainly the popular notion of devilry was a natural reaction to the pair's outrageous exoticness, *but* . . . in the son's presence, and even under the hard eyes of his fellow Norsemen, he more than once found himself deigning to the father. And so the deformed man and his boy soon blent right in—in the wise of village idiot and mystic guide. And when eventually a seaman brought tales of an unvisited land to the west, it was only natural for the restless Greenlander to buy that seaman's boat and, before stalwart comrades, weary family, and whimsical God Almighty, reluctantly accept the eccentric father and son as sort of seagoing mascots.

Hero was from then on irrepressible. During preparations he would pipe and stammer, in his half-mute way, brimming with a confounding anxiety that kept him underfoot and at odds with all. On frigid nights he would perch on the westernmost rocks moaning in the strangest fashion while his son stood guard. And thereafter he positively spooked the locals. They would gossip, nervously and with bile, of an answering wind that came lowing off the sea like a banshee in labor. The whole island wanted rid of him. And when his champing keeper, still clinging to the notion of Christian charity, bundled him aboard with his son and a crew of thirty-five, perhaps no one was happier to see him go than the missionary's father.

Almost from the moment they cast off everything went wrong. An unstable weather pattern appeared to pursue them, worsening steadily and dramatically, and when the clouds finally burst the cowering sea went mad. Dervishes whirled round the hull, crisscrossing winds bedeviled the squaresail. Patches of kelp belonging to much warmer waters came heaving alongside, fouling the work of the oars, while far to the west a humongous fogbank gathered and dissipated, gathered and dissipated, eradicating the navigable field. The lightning-streaked horizon became an intermittently throbbing gray slit. The men complained of headaches and hallucinations, and of a nasty, slightly metallic tang to the air. There were numerous walrus sightings; bobbing flippers and snouts amid drifting ice chunks that came prowling the North Sea like a pack of white wolves.

Worst of all was the boy's father—instantly agitated by everything and nothing, prey to some primitive impulse that caused him to periodically incline his head, shudder to his feet, and loop his arms as though embracing the sky. The missionary would watch him scrabbling at the prow like a cat at a tree, furs snapping in the wind; he'd watch the boy reseat him for the hundredth time, and for the hundredth time be filled with an immense contempt. By now he'd acknowledged that it takes a special kind of strength to shoulder charity and tolerance. That brown little bother struck him as an enormous malformed barnacle, slowly working its way back up the prow. The fool was trying so very hard to go unnoticed, looking and listening intently, though there was nothing to see other than growing shelves of fog, and nothing to hear save the rising, almost hysterical voice of the wind.

The ship kicked. The unexpected jolt was accompanied by an abrupt increase in velocity, and a steadying in the ship's sway. The bow dipped and shuddered.

The ship lurched again, as though an enormous submarine hand had released and reseeded the hull. All around, those drift-ice ghosts cruised dangerously near, caught in the same powerful current. Ship and ice were pulled due west, and so began to outrun the weather.

In a heartbeat the rain had vanished, leaving only its scattering print. The clouds fell far behind as the ship embarked upon an amazingly calm sea—so calm its whole visible surface was

featureless except for the faint wakes provided by the ship and its hulking ice companions. Far to the east another great fogbank appeared on the horizon, and a while later a smaller bank to the north. Then a very dense one to the south. In time the fogbanks converged, imperceptibly becoming a single mass that gradually closed around the ship. The ring of fog's vanguard came as tresses of snaking mist that created a kind of heaving dome. Tiny beads of water began to appear on beards and eyebrows; in a minute everything was soaked. The only sound was that of the dragging steering oar. The men became sopping ghosts in a vague cluttered frame, speaking only with their eyes.

Directly ahead the fog began to dimple. The dimple became a hollow, the hollow a cave, and then ship and ice were being towed through a low, ever-extending tunnel in fog. The current increased its pull. Ship and drifting ice accelerated through the tunnel.

After a minute the missionary quietly stepped forward. He stood with one hand on the prow's neck, staring intently and listening to the mist, so motionless he might have been a carved extension of the longship's aggressive design. Not a man breathed. The tunnel's dilating and contracting bore was producing an otherworldly, nearly seamless series of oscillating, vaguely phonetic sounds. He almost tiptoed back. No god, pagan or Christian, could account for the strangeness of this situation.

Night came, and the tunnel continued to bore through the fog. The temperature plummeted. Small sheets of ice converged, drifting between the hunks. The Norsemen, instinctively huddling amidships, passed out one by one in a massive pile of fur and flesh. In the freezing silence the floes bumped and recoiled, bumped and gathered, bumped and bonded. The tiny ship, swallowed whole, was dragged along in a labyrinth of black sea and interlocking slabs of ice.

The sailors came to in a surly, foul-smelling heap, lost at sea. While they were still groggy a voice cried out that a darker patch was developing in the fog. The men all fell to port. Under the confusion of their voices could be heard a distant, familiar rumble.

At this Hero hauled himself up the high curved prow. The tunnel's bore was broadening. A half-light began to penetrate the fog, barely irradiating the irregular faces of drifting ice. The missionary stormed forward and indicated by gestures that if the boy didn't restrain his father he would have the man tied down.

The current slowed until the longship was dead in the water. Broad pillars of sun resurrected the world, and the Norsemen found themselves regarding a perpetually frozen coastline swathed in bluish veils of mist. Directly before them loomed an immense ice cliff

hundreds of feet high. Rising beyond this cliff were endless snow fields where lean violet shadows seemed to drag about of their own volition. And upon those bleak fields a thin, howling wind prowled, kicking up brief white dervishes, leaving a strange zigzagging signature.

Even as the men stared, a darker shadow, high on the ice cliff's glistening face, began to widen and elongate, accompanied by a cracking sound that could be felt before it was heard. With the illusion of slow-motion, a stupendous chunk broke out of the ice and came screaming toward the sea. It hit the water like a bomb. The thunder of its separation and the explosion of its impact took a moment to reach them. Then, out of a spewing crater of crests and spume, the new berg came lunging, tromping the sea so hard the longship, fully a mile to sea, was swept out and sucked back in like a cork. The floundering mountain of ice bobbed and lilted, generating huge waves which continued to rock the ship long after the berg had settled. In a while the roaring in their ears subsided and there remained only the swirling, nerve-wracking howl of the wind.

The missionary's eyes swept left and right. He knew his homeland's shores like the back of his hand, and, whatever this place was, it sure wasn't Greenland. Hero again scrambled up the prow. The missionary yanked him down and made good his threat. He had the little pain bound, though he was half-tempted to let him take his chances overboard.

They continued on a southerly course, and the following day came upon an inhospitable shoreline glazed by dazzling white beaches. Two days later they beheld a far pleasanter, thickly wooded coast. Here the missionary untied Hero and personally placed him and his son in a tiny oak rowboat. He was just as sick of them as he was excited by this promising new land. Once the rowboat had been heaved over the side, he and another man stepped aboard and took up the oars. They began rowing with easy, powerful strokes.

When the boat kissed sand the missionary stood unsteadily. The first European to set foot on North American soil now placed one hand on his crucifix and the other on his sword's hilt. He awkwardly plunged his leg into the thigh-deep, ice-cold surf. But before he could take another step the boat lurched as Hero leapt headfirst into the water. A heartbeat later his son followed. The Greenlanders watched incuriously as the two splashed their way into a mad dash for the waiting pines. The missionary wished them both good riddance and turned back. He must have blacked out for an instant, must have been blinded by a shaft of sun, for he found he was staring stupidly at a point between his companion and the distant rocking ship. It felt like he'd been kicked between the eyes. Everything was dissolving. He studied the beach and pines closely, but saw nothing of the man or his boy. Nor could he detect any trace of footprints in the sand. The area was pristine. He turned back, disoriented. With what seemed a superhuman effort he took up his oars. He rowed out sluggishly, in a dream, and the fog rolled in to meet him.

The boy broke into the trees and embraced a trunk, fighting for breath. What happened next came so fast, and so unexpectedly, that he didn't have a chance to react.

Three savages stepped from behind the pines and beat him to his knees, twisted his arms behind his back, and hauled him to his feet. He'd barely processed the impression of a wild painted face when something sharp struck him hard on the temple and tore down his cheek to the jaw. Two of the assailants manhandled him into an upright position and held him in place while the third brought his weapon down again and again and again. All but dead, he saw a nightmare countenance shouting through a shot veil of blood, and behind that image a reeling crimson sky. He lay there gushing while the savages went through his rags. They propped him against a pine and shrieked with triumph while they tore the gory hair and scalp from his skull, then threw back their heads and screamed at the screaming sun. Tooth and nail, they ripped apart his face and throat and, certain he would die, split what bits of fur were left and let his carcass lie.

Hero

The weeks stretched into months while he fought his way back into the light.

He made his way in stages; only half-conscious, stumbling along in a blood-red stupor punctuated by the slow strobe of his frequent blackouts. Days loomed and decayed, nights pounced and were gone; the backlit, swirling gray cosmos collapsed and expanded with the beat of his pulse. A thousand times he spread out to die, and a thousand times he clawed to his feet, driven to pursue a tiny, ghost-like figure that fluttered in his memory. Everything conspired to check him. A humongous bay was skirted over months or years—it was all the same. Cold locked him in, Hunger drove him afield. That rude bitch Wind lashed him blind, wore him like a shoe, screamed for his skin while he worked his way west.

Somehow he ate, somehow he avoided being eaten—the instincts that had served him halfway around the planet were still vital beneath the abused exterior. Eventually his simple burrows became sturdy temporary shelters. He relearned the art of fire, and began to cook what

he killed. He manufactured crude snares and weapons and, when his recuperation was complete, paid closer attention to the on-again, off-again trail he'd been following . . . forever.

Sometimes this trail would call to him like a lover. Other times he stood peering uncertainly, trying to recapture meanings and aims. Then the ground would turn spongy and the sky revolve, and once again he'd be lying all but dead in the woods, while from the face of the sun emerged a vile winged horror, its pale ugly head lashing side to side, its cruelly hooked beak dangling something that glistened in the wild pulsing light . . . then the fat moon, rising like gas against the icy black night . . . the feel of the wind: the riving of her nails, the chafing of her hem . . . the sound of things crunching and pausing and sniffing . . . then the sun, blazing anew. And again that *thing*, descending, its wide black wings beating slowly, metronomically—but none of that mattered any more. For his mind had quit him, had flown howling into ice and pine to roost with things surreal. In the sun his madness might muddle and run, or spend the light stalking; cat-like, watching, waiting. But at night it came creeping from all sides. Sometimes it came in waves. It could gnaw like the devil, or wrap around him like a warm second skin. But none of that mattered either.

The only thing that mattered was the trail—whether it was lost for good, or for only a while. He'd been following it through his episodes, always north, wondering just who and where in the world he was, and trying to shake a ridiculous notion of being led on a wild goose chase.

The cold was unbelievable.

The deeper north he delved, the more confused he became. He grew starved for colors and scents, finding nonexistent patterns in the stark contrast of shadow and snow. He thought he could detect a kind of otherworldly design in the overwhelming number of dead ends he encountered, and in the devilishly frustrating locations of natural obstacles. He seemed to be forever fighting the wind: a hulking, despondent snowman, he hiked face down and focused, while another aspect of his attention floated just behind, disembodied, watching his silent pursuers—leaving no tracks, blending perfectly with the environment in their clever winter coats . . . not predators, but creatures that normally should have been hightailing it away from him. By the time he could turn, they'd become nothing more menacing than snowdrifts. But they pursued him nevertheless.

And so his paranoia increased . . . had there ever really been a trail . . . and when did this miserably cold, miserably anemic crusade begin . . . his long-term memory was falling apart a chunk at a time. It just got colder and colder and colder until at last, one snippet of a day during one blur of a year, he found himself utterly lost, and clueless as to his history or objective. His mind was a blank, as colorless and featureless as the endless world of ice around him. He'd come this far solely to learn that the only trail he'd been following had been his own . . . and now even

that trail was succumbing to ice. On all sides there was nothing to see but an infinite field of glaring whiteness, and nothing to hear but the ululating wail of the tubular polar wind. It was the loneliest, the unholy, the creepiest sound imaginable. But it wasn't insanity that made him wheel. It was his self-preservation instinct.

And then he was somehow on his knees in the woods, facing a furious setting sun.

Whole seasons had passed from his memory like chalk from a board. His only recollections were those of a broken, haunted animal: of being perilously sick, of fearing the unseen, of blindly struggling across a solid-white wilderness. That he'd survived such an ordeal meant nothing to him. And that he had in some indecipherable manner stumbled across the cold-as-stone trail did not fill him with amazement or with thankfulness—there simply wasn't anything visual or emotional left to draw on. A significant part of his life had been whited out.

But now he could focus entirely on the trail. And before he knew it, the fuzzy area between fantasy and reality found a seam. He began to analyze and plan. He paid attention to hygiene, and kept a kind of running mental journal. Things were sorting out. Yet there were nights when the old sickness would surface, reestablish its hold, and leave him sweating and uncertain under the stars. Then, paradoxically, his perception would become razor-keen. And so he would see, on a distant hilltop, a pair of scrawny silhouettes, one on four legs and one on two, slowly crossing the faintly pocked face of the setting moon. He would become strangely excited, and thereafter retain crystal-clear images of himself, as if seen from above, hurrying with adroitness through the silent, graveyard-like setting of black and blue night and white-frosted trees. Then the fuzzy area would broaden, and it would be the next morning, and he would be staring at the prints of man and elk in snow. And he would see how the elk's prints doubled back, and how the man's prints terminated where he had obviously mounted his guide. An unfathomable glow would bring tears to his eyes. But, even as he gathered himself, a fresh snowfall would wipe out the prints. And once again the world would plummet into white. And the wind would howl as the snow hammered his eyes. And he would tramp on.

A scrawny haggard animal sat shivering in a small grove of frozen pines, watching his campfire die. His eyes were fixed. Like the fire, he was running out of warmth, running out of fuel. There wasn't a whole lot of tinder round his bones, and not much feeling left in his limbs. The slowly heaping downfall was burying him alive, but he was too numb to react.

It had taken him six long years to cross an entire continent, and during that time he'd known only cold and excruciating pain. But now the pain was leaving him. The cold was making it right. His eyes began to glaze.

Along a narrow plain to the west a herd of caribou filed dreamily through the snow, cutting across a panoramic backdrop of dazzling white mountains. The slow-motion parade was hypnotic. After a while it occurred to the drifting man, in a roundabout way, that he was dying, that he was casually freezing to death. Concurrent with this notion there rose in his chest a delicious, liquid warmth. His eyes slowly closed and, once shut, began to set fast.

He was jolted. It was as if he'd been kicked.

He jerked to his feet, pounded his fists on his thighs, felt nothing. The breath spurted from his mouth in small white clouds as he stumbled downhill after the slow caribou train. He swam through the snow, hallucinating, imagining that certain individuals in the herd were mocking him by slowing and accelerating, while others glanced back with expressions of contempt.

As he burst into their midst the animals stepped aside indifferently. A few galloped ahead to keep up the herd, but most simply walked around him while he danced there, stamping his feet and smacking his hands. The herd grew thinner, until only the old and infirm were filing by. The man desperately embraced a hobbling female for warmth, but she cried out and kicked, triggering a panic reaction in the herd. Clinging for his life, the man was dragged along beside her as the herd stormed into a maze of flying ice and snow. His weight caused her to stagger sideways until they slammed against the flank of a sick male. The man instinctively threw an arm over the male and, thus draped between them, was borne across the drifted plain for upwards of a mile, his freezing feet alternately dangling above and dragging through the snow. The herd broke into a hard run, forcing him to assume a broken trot. Soon his legs were stinging. Sensation rushed through his body.

Now the herd, still picking up speed, began to contract, jamming him between his bearers. There was a quick sideways jolt and he was lifted clean off his feet, nearly straddling the bucking female. It had become an all-out stampede. Through hard-flung snow he saw the cause: just ahead the caribou had run head-on into a solid wall of galloping wood bison, and both frantic herds had blindly veered to the east; were in fact running side by side down a deep, ragged canyon, were pouring over the canyon's lip like water over a falls. He was approaching, at breakneck pace, that very place where the converged herds so abruptly swerved. The hanging man snarled as he was borne inevitably to the point of deflection.

There came a concussion at his left shoulder, followed by a blast of snow. In an instant the ailing male was tumbling head over heels to the east, sucked into the stampede's plummeting mass by the fury of its descent. The man and female, rebounding from this impact, were shot to the west in a crazy jumble of flailing legs. The caribou lost her footing, flew nose-first into a snowbank, and came up running. Kicking off, the man used the last of his strength to heave

himself astride. At first she fought to shake him, but the spell of the run was too strong. She and half a dozen others went pounding in the opposite direction of the stampede, quickly joined by a number of bison that had likewise splintered from their herd. The riding man could make out their huge hulking shapes thundering by in a blizzard of flying ice, could hear their heavy gasps and explosive grunts. One passed so close he felt its massive flank brush his leg. He peered to his right and saw a black, pig-like eye regarding him excitedly, moving up and down like a piston as the beast ran alongside.

The eye shifted, focusing on the gasping, completely obsessed female. The bull dropped its head and slammed into the caribou's side, sending her and the man careening down a slope to the west. The caribou brayed hysterically and her backside went down, but she managed, despite the weight of her rider, to return to all fours and frantically continue along the slope. Again the bull charged, crashing into her shoulder. The man and caribou were launched sideways into the white searing air. He sat up carefully. The huffing bison was straddling him like a bully laying the ground rules. Its big wiry beard came right up to brush his chin. The stench of its breath was stupefying.

The bull stamped and snorted, thrusting its stubby horns left and right as the man used his elbows and heels to back away. The bull followed, move for move. When the man collapsed under his own impetus the bull shoved him along with its snout, bellowing furiously. Clear down the slope they lunged, shoving and lurching, until the man lay sprawled on his back, up to his chin in snow and completely helpless. The ton of a bull butted and kicked, but only glancingly; those hooves could kill with a blow. At last the man, in one clean sequence, spun on his rear, dropped to his side, and went rolling down the slope using his elbows for thrust.

At the bottom ran a narrow fence of frosted saplings marking an ice cliff's precipice. He lay face down in the snow, too done in to do anything but suck at an air pocket.

And there came a high-pitched crackling, a sound like the protracted gasp of embers in a dead fire. He turned just as those saplings began leaning to the west, their frozen skins cracking with the strain.

The bison bellowed menacingly. The sprawled man looked back and saw it still standing with legs spread wide, silhouetted against the sky. In a moment it began huffing downhill, lurching side to side, surfing the snow between lunges. It chased him through the genuflecting saplings straight into a frozen gully where, protected by a few feet of insurmountable verticality, he was able to slide on the ice between its stomping hooves, downhill out of reach, then downhill out of control—spinning just in time to glimpse a breathtaking vista: partly framed by the gully-straddling saplings was a vast crescent of jagged white mountains seemingly huddled round a small stretch of snow-draped pines. The little wood these mountains surrounded was isolated in a

broad lake of solid ice. Hundreds of fissures radiated crazily throughout this packed ice field, appearing to issue from somewhere near the frozen wood's center, which was completely obscured by a ring of rising mist. Above this thumbnail panorama the sun showered gold. Then the gully dipped radically, and he was skidding headfirst, slamming back and forth against its slick white walls. This uncontrollable plunge had the positive effect of getting his blood flowing. Yet it tore him up. Had the gully concluded in a cul-de-sac, or had further progress required a single calorie of uphill effort, his struggle would certainly have ended here. He would have been too weak to move, and death would have been swift.

But there was a glacier; a great river of ice pouring slowly out of the clouds. The gully, terminating in a little scoop formation near the glacier's base, spat him flailing onto its gnarly glass hide. He went head over heels, bits of skin and fur flying like chips from a bandsaw. Somehow he gained his footing, and then he was running against his will—tumbling and recovering and tumbling again.

He didn't catch much of that crazy run. He half-glimpsed whirling walls of ice, felt a fickle surface underfoot, and broke through an assaultive mist that clung to his ankles and arms. He remembered having the ragged hides torn right off his body, and then being skinned alive. And he remembered reaching the glacier's base and crawling like an animal; round its sweeping drifts, past its peaked moraines, all the way to a twisting frozen gorge.

And he followed this gorge down; ricocheting wall to wall, delirious, small plumes of thrashed snow marking his descent. Through a freezing wood he fumbled. In a veil of mist he tumbled down a steep and verdant grade. As cold consumed his closing breath, he fell upon, near-blind, near death, a strange, enchanted glade.

There is a pool.

And in this pool a man lay purged, his broken body half-submerged.

The stumbling man stopped. He knelt to weep, but lost his thread. One hand took a bicep, the other, the head. With a twist and pull the corpse emerged.

That visage . . . that face—misshapen mask, contorted, bleached; of life's deposits fully leached. Essence dispatched—a void, sodden wretch. He let it fall and the glass was breached. All a freak, all a stretch: upon this act his grip detached.

And the bridge collapsed . . . one vagabond grasp . . . what were these feelings; recaptured and trashed . . . a span elapsed . . . who was this puckered mass . . . he hauled it by the waist and thighs . . . slid it in, watched the pool react: purse and recover, expand, contract. The

glass reformed, now silver-backed . . . a sudden mirror . . . the man leaned nearer, saw his image, once smashed, reborn intact.

The pool grew still.

Within its depth a shadow stirred—odd visions gathered, some distinct, some obscure. What they meant, and who they were, was too much to fathom. The glass became blurred.

He closed his eyes, let his heavy head fall, fell back on his haunches, felt the sweat seep and crawl. The air was a pall—as he struggled to rise, a nib nipped his palm.

He opened his eyes.

Between his fingers the blades poked and crept. Round his knuckles they ventured, up his forearm they stepped. They seemed to be triggered by prompts from the ground. He shook his head slowly and dully looked round.

There were jays grouped about him, all black eyes aglow. Red hens came running, their fat chicks in tow. Gophers engaged in a weird hide-and-seek, while bluebells and buttercups craned for a peek. Sparrows hopped past and, paying no heed, burst into flight. He watched them recede.

Westward they flew.

Bewildered, he slumped, and was bumped from behind. He jumped to his feet, flabbergasted to find an ancient gray moose near-eclipsing the sky, with grit in his snarl and fire in his eye. The old moose took aim. The man turned to flee, then lapsed and collapsed on a palm and a knee.

But there lies a world (so the lullaby goes) where rivers ever run. Butted and blind, half out of his mind, he staggered into sun.