

Hunters and Gatherers

“Alaska is the final resting place of the frontier ethos” was the opening line of a short lecture Papoo liked to deliver at family gatherings. He would go on to describe the culture of the fishing community in Kachemak Bay, sketch some of the local characters and tell a few dramatic anecdotes. So when I flew up from the city for the summer to work as a deckhand, I knew what to expect: something out of the past, something that spoke to the “old brain”, to the hard-wired, instinctual world of predator and prey.

Papoo met me in Homer, outside the pre-fab trailer that served as the waiting area for the local airstrip. Papoo, my grandfather, was a little more grizzled than the last time I had seen him. His beard was veined with gray, but he moved with the same slumbering patience, moving with an economy that comes with age. When he was around I mimicked his pace and demeanor, and his peace of mind worked as a balm on my many anxieties. I had trouble controlling my emotional momentum; random fears became daydreams which somehow transformed themselves into truths. I was weak. I was going crazy. I was unlovable.

We flew a single engine plane across Kachemak Bay, banking awkwardly over the small mountains that separated it from one of the larger bay’s many offspring, Jakalof Bay where my grandparent’s spent their summers. Kachemak means “large cliffs by the water” in Yupik, and many of the smaller bays had the appearance of Fjords. The steep slopes were carpeted with alder trees, some comfortably rooted into earth, while

others clung to rocky outcroppings. The unlucky ones grew at odd angles; their tips pointing across the bay like broken antennae.

It had been four years, since I had last come to Alaska for a visit. In that time, my mother and I had witnessed the collapse of our idealistic Marxist community, moved back and forth from coast to coast, living like refugees; a comrade's basement, an old girlfriend's dining room. At fourteen, and I had called fourteen different rooms *my room*; one for each year. Now I was bound for a cabin of my own, a job as a deckhand on a set-netting operation, and a bloody love affair with the natural world.

The plane banked awkwardly between a pair of small mountains, revealing the narrow green bay and the rocky beach. I wanted to ask, "Where's the runway?" but I suppressed the urge out of some odd mixture of self-consciousness and pride. I didn't want to betray and fears or weakness. I liked the idea that Alaska would test me; that was the role of Nature as I had learned it from Jack London and summer camp feel-good movies where little fat kids learned to believe in themselves.

I gripped the seat, and pretended to follow my grandfather's voice, as plane faded towards the green, and dropped towards the beach. We hit the narrow strip of rocks of sand with a double bump; bouncing over the beach, flanked by a spray of pebbles. I shook hands with the pilot, and hopped out of the cab. It was early summer, and tide was low. Gulls foraged among the rocks, stabbing at small crabs with their bills and squawking over the half-decayed flesh of a small flounder.

Papoo and I walked up the ridge to where he'd parked his rusted '72 Ford pickup. I hopped in, the engine came alive, and we trundled along the winding dirt road that linked the smaller bays and beaches to Seldovia. The town was founded in 1800's by Russian fur traders, and was named "Herring Bay" because of the abundance of

herring before they were fished out in the 1900's. The names of bays, towns and islands referenced the Russian or the Yupik past, and their naming reflected their priorities. They shared the habit of naming villages for gods and saints, bays and islands for character of the landscape or the creatures that thrived there.

“So, we’re gonna put you up at Vern’s cabin. It’s only a couple hundred yards or so from the trailer, so you can come and eat with us. We could use the company,” he patted my leg, “Ally my boy... “

“Is there electricity at Vern’s or...”

“Nope. But we’ll set you up with a flashlight and an electric lamp and you should be good.”

We turned off the road at a sign that read “Jakalof Bay: Dock and Campsite”. The campsite was just gravel parking lot where people parked their RVs or trailers. Most years, my grandparents had the lot to themselves. They drove the trailer all the way up from rural Massachusetts and parked it at the foot of the dock for the summer. During our flight we had crossed a border between the land and the sea. We had reached the point where water traffic supersedes the coming and goings of cars and trucks; where you look to the water to see who is coming over for a visit, and your daily life is shaped by the tides.

My quiet was rewarded back at my grandparent’s trailer. We ate fresh battered Halibut and Papoo announced between bites, “This boy has good nerves... first time in a single-engine and not a peep.”

My grandparents had been coming up to Alaska every summer for eight years, but my uncle Bob had migrated up in the early seventies to find work as a fisherman. He started out in Dutch Harbor working the King Crab season out among the Aleutian

chain, earning enough in two months to live off for the entire year. Eventually he settled down in Seldovia, marrying a local woman from his church, and moving into a small house raised up on stilts, not far from the dock and its constant traffic.

A social worker in an Inupiat village once told me that Alaskans could be divided into two categories, Addicts and Christians. It wasn't clear which group he held in higher esteem: "They are different manifestations of the same mania."

In the dead of winter darkness you either end up drinking too much, fucking too much, or praying too much. Some folks cycled through all three activities or found their own ritualized formulas, but this was all before the satellite dishes began cloning themselves across the state. They gave Alaska an umbilical cord to an imaginary America, and sped the process of assimilation. Hence Anchorage, a city of concrete veins lined with TGIF Friday's, mini-malls and strip clubs.

My uncle Bob switched from drinking to praying after a crab pot crashed to the deck during a storm, missing him by inches. He met Robert in Seldovia, a short drive from Vern's cabin where Robert lived with his young bride. They were short and dark, my uncle wide and muscular, Robert wiry with hands like baseball mitts. The two men shared immigrant origins, Robert was from an Italian family in the North End of Boston, and my uncle grew up in a gray Massachusetts mill town. They both seemed to have rejected the traditional immigrant goals: a good education, a solid career, and a home in a less swarthy suburb. The Italians and Greeks bought their whiteness with blood spilled in France and the South Pacific. They expected their children to reap the rewards.

But neither man had the inclination for seated learning, so they traveled north to The Last Frontier, and backwards into their collective unconscious; to the lives of the

great-great grandfathers. It was a revelation for them to discover the labor their bodies were shaped to do, generation after generation, to discover the whys of their calves and shoulders, the logic of their sturdy legs and muscled backs.

Ten years after they first met Robert was adopted family. My grandparents adored him. They ate beer-battered Red Salmon and drank Miller Hi-Lifes together. Robert, wound-up with stories, floated in and out of the trailer; bringing fresh fish and news from the small community of interlocking bays. He had unruly black hair that he was continuously smoothing back. When he smiled he revealed a mouthful of silver fillings, his face was full of crevices and carpeted in stubble. He talked with his hands, and told dramatic stories about near death escapes, peppered with sexy anecdotes carefully edited for my grandmother's ear. They let them him get away with more than they would their own children. Robert was damaged like an abandoned pet brought in from the cold; a charming tramp, this man who brought me out from the city to teach me how to be a fisherman.

Vern's place was a typical one-room log cabin, built into a wind shelter formed two rocky outcroppings, a thicket of dense ferns and devil's club had grown over the short trail that lead to the tiny, rocky beach where Robert picked me up each dawn to start the early shift on his set-netting operation. Over the years the cabin had begun to sink into the mossy earth, so the floor listed to one side and the single room interior always smelled like a woodpile after a month's rain. I woke up each morning to the sound of my battery powered alarm, ran outside to take a piss, and ran back inside to pull on my gear.

Robert told me that he hired me because he knew "I had heart." We'd met the last time I was up for a visit during the Silver salmon run down at the mouth of the

Jakalof river. Reds are faster than Silvers and Kings are stronger, but Silvers integrate the two qualities like dancers. They explode into the air when you hook them, spinning in desperate arcs; then the rod becomes still, you relax for a moment and they break the plane of the water, undulating airborne, trying to spit the hook and escape to the river where boats can't follow.

On that day, the Silvers were all around us, the surface of the water was a field of fins and scale. I caught more fish than I would ever catch again, and felt like my luck was good for once; that the universe had interceded in my favor. When Robert called me four years later to offer me a job for the summer I remembered that feeling and accepted immediately. I realized I had been handed a rare opportunity.

During the first days working Robert taught me about the different species of Salmon: Chinooks, Sockeyes, Chums, Pinks, and Cohos. He showed me how to distinguish between Cohos and Sockeyes, to note the silver streaks on the fins, to tell the difference between a small Chinook and a Coho from the bronze spots on the Chinook's fins. Our catch varied by size, and shape, color and character. The Chinooks were also known as Kings, the Sockeyes as Silvers, the Chums as Dogs. These titles marked the place where naming of the Aleuts met the language of the newcomers.

The species varied in beauty according to their value, or maybe their value had derived from their beauty. Their external form correlated with the internal, their symmetry and shine implicated the quality of the flesh, the relative sweetness and consistency of texture.

On good days, when the water was clear and still, I could see the sun reflecting off the scales of a hundred fish; their bodies flashing like beacons. In the evening when we'd filled the hold with writhing salmon, and headed back to the Marlinspike, Robert

would pronounce, “Damn it stinks around here. How’s it smell Al? Stinks? Doesn’t stink to me. Smells like money to me.”

I’d laugh and lay back into a pile of kelp, as the salmon sucked at the air fruitlessly, their mouths agape; eyes bulging in shock at the world above.

Robert had been set netting in the bay for over ten years. He and his second wife, Renee, had two permits which allowed them to set six hundred foot gill nets. The nets were split between two bays, some anchored along the shallows where the salmon went to feed, while others were positioned just offshore where the currents might guide the fish into our nets as they tried to find their way back to the rivers where they were born.

The net locations were based on a body of lore drawn from observation and the collective pool of stories shared over the CB, at the dock in town, or at The Salty Dog where Robert treated me to Shirley Temples while he drank bottles of Miller High Life with his hip resting against the bar. Fisherman talked about fish, and I took these conversations seriously, absorbing the various theories about weather and water temperature, seal behavior and tidal patterns.

Each day we patrolled the nets in four five hour shifts, maneuvering the narrow wooden skiff along the 100 foot nets. Robert’s skiff was named the Captain Haddock after the blustering, drunken seamen of the Tin Tin series. The tiny white dinghy, parked alongside their houseboat, The Marlinspike, was named Snowy. The aluminum skiff that was used for errands and loaned out to the deckhands was known as Tin Tin. Each boat was named after a character from Herge, but the Captain Haddock played the central role in Robert’s world.

The Haddock had been crafted in a nearby workshop by a bearded, Nordic carpenter who wore overalls stained with pitch and fish blood. He built V bottomed skiffs with gentle curves, the slats of woods bent and layered, arcing to meet each other at the bow. The Captain Haddock was painted deep blue with bronze trim. Its form and bearing connoted a cultural lineage impossible to achieve with steel or fiberglass. It was perfectly designed for its purpose and I loved it instinctively, in a romanticized recognition that it might be one of the rare objects instilled with soul.

The sides of the Haddock were designed to ride low to the water, so that we could kneel onto the floorboards and hung over the side, scanning the nets for fish. When I rode with Robert I spent most of the shift in that position, trying to penetrate the surface of the water, to catch the flash of reflected light that signaled the presence of a fish. Sometimes it was easy, the sea was calm, the day clear and the fish flew into the hold one after another. On other days, the choppy seas rocked my arms in and out of the water as I pulled the skiff along the length of the net and came away empty handed. We spent those shifts cleaning sea kelp out of the nets, trying to avoid entangling the engine's propeller and eyeing the progress of the competition.

Depending on his mood, Robert might run over the logistics for the week, the chores to complete, the errands to run in town or he might tell stories about his days as a cook on the big crab fishing boats. In the hierarchy of commercial fishing set netting lay at the bottom, seining, long-lining and gill netting took up the middle strata, and crab fishing stood at the pinnacle. That was the toughest work, the most dangerous and the most lucrative.

“I remember one night... late night. We were out past the Aleutian chain... way past . You know where the Aleutians are?” Robert pushed his mesh baseball cap back on his head. It read “Orca Canning Company,” and featured a winking killer whale.

I pulled my own cap over my eyes and nodded.

“That’s almost Russia right... that’s like the trunk of Alaska.”

“Yeah... like the trunk. Exactly. Well we were out there and I had just finished buying all my supplies and hadn’t cooked a meal yet. And you know... the crap you have to buy for those trips. Man. Eight grocery carts at the store... you know? Eight grocery carts. Like a caravan... a caravan. Coffee by itself... how many carts for coffee?”

“ I dunno... like a cart?”

“Three carts just for coffee... that’s your blood out there. Keeps ‘em working... keeps you goin’. So... this storm comes up all of a sudden... and it’s like that there. Storms just appear... they generate, you know? It’s not like here where the National Weather Service are right eighty percent of the time and you can stay home when there’s an advisory. It’s too late to go home. You’re out there... way out there.”

We made a turn around the spit that separated the two bays. Small houses dotted the sandy peninsula known as The Spit. A few year-rounders lived in these houses, but most of them were vacation residences. Senator Stevens owned one of them and we would occasional see him fly in for long weekends in his single engine Piper. He was a staunch Republican like many Alaskans who stayed loyal to the party out of a general opposition to regulation and a nostalgic affinity for state rights.

As we approached the end of The Spit, a juvenile sea lion popped up on the far side of our net. He turned back to us and shot us a guilty look. Robert ripped at the vinyl casing of his 30.06 rifle.

“Oh... you fuck! I got you...” He cut the engine and popped in the clip. I ducked down and watched him train the barrel on the sea lion as he let out a “pfoosh” through his whiskers and dove back under, exposing the deep brown of his velveteen back.

“Pap! Pap... pap.. pap!” Tiny splashes erupted around him, and I imagined the rounds slicing through the water, oxygen bubbles exposing their trail as the sea lion spun and dived.

Robert dropped the rifle behind the transom, and gunned the outboard engine. The bow slapped violently against the chopping waves, and I hopped back on to my feet and crouched low so my legs could absorb the pounding.

I turned to yell back at him, “Did you get him? Did you hit him?”

He waited until we slowed alongside the net to respond.

“No... when you hit them you can see the blood spurt up into the air, or it might pool a little on the surface. I think he was just too far away.”

“Can the bullets go deep in the water?”

“Yeah... they’re high velocity. They can shoot down a hundred feet and still punch a hole in him... no problem.”

We pulled up to the midway point of the net, where the sea lion had appeared. I grabbed one of the foam floats that kept the net buoyed to the surface, and began pulling the transparent green netting into the boat, yard by yard. My fingers raced their way along the criss-crossing diamond pattern of the green web, until I came upon the

ragged, torn threads that marked the spot where the sea lion had shot through the net like a torpedo. I held up the net to Robert so the hole framed my face.

“Jesus, fucking Christ... That’s not a pretty picture.” Robert cut the engine and began fishing around for the plastic mending needle. “You just keep an eye out for him, I’m gonna get this sewn up,” he took the net from my hands and began shuttling the needle in and out of the diamonds, stitching the two halves back together; temporarily closing the wound.

I made my way up to the bow, and sunk down into the space where the transoms met, forming a perfect niche for my skinny frame. I slung my arms over the sides of the boat, and let the motion rock me into a daze. A smattering of clouds hung in the sky, and the breeze was just strong enough to keep me from smelling myself. I didn’t care whether the sea lion returned or not.

For seals and sea lions a net full of fish meant a free meal ticket. While seals might just swim along the net and take bites off a few fish, the sea lions tended to grab the whole fish, punching a hole through the net in the process. Robert always seemed to take it personally. He considered them saboteurs, assigning them agency and motive, even organizational capacity. He was close to finding conspiracy in their pattern of attacks.

Unlike the seals and sea otters, the sea lions lacked any charm. They were large and arrogant, sputtering with aggression and reminded me of sullen teenagers. I rooted for Robert when he shot at them, but looked away when he fired at seals and excused their actions as innocent foraging as opposed to the sea lions’ outright thievery. I was dividing animals between allies and enemies; projecting the binary morality of Tolkein’s Middle Earth, associating beauty with good, ugliness with evil.

I was as far as I could get from the packaged gloss of a city supermarket, working at the source; gathering the raw materials for the cans of salmon, hidden amongst the tuna. Everyone around me believed in the dominion over animals. They didn't make the distinctions I made between seals and sea lions. I was halfway in the sky, assigning characteristics to creatures whose simple motivations were to eat and reproduce. These people who hired and fed me, they didn't let the lesser creatures of God's design interfere in their livelihood. When the seals raided their nets, they did their best to kill them.

Who was I to judge their collective morality? I was a lanky and awkward kid, on the cusp of a self-destructive adolescence. I wore t-shirts with giant smiley faces, under flannel shirts bought by the pound, and rode borrowed skateboards through downtown Boston. There was something taught curled up inside me that was just begin to loosen and unfurl, a bitter tapeworm of collected angst. Working in Alaska appealed to me in the way that joining the military appealed to other boys. It promised a transformation that might erase my anxiety, and point me in the direction of myself.

I don't know how what brought Robert to Alaska, or how he found himself living in Vern's cabin in the dead of winter with his young wife and newborn son. It must have been difficult keeping the place warm, feeding the wood stove as the cold crept in from the corners of the window frames. In the winter months the sun would only appear for five or six hours before disappearing beneath the horizon. Maybe the baby cried all the time, and maybe Robert lost his temper too often. Maybe it was something outside herself that triggered the breakdown; a song on the radio or a letter from home that cast a shadow on her mind.

It is possible that no one can ever know what made her do it, what led her to gently nudge her husband awake with the barrel of a shotgun in the lapping quiet of the night. Maybe he thought it was a joke at first, or maybe he recognized the shifting forms behind her eyes; the madness that had risen in the dead of the night.

The Yupik believed that each person's body contained multiple souls, one soul ruled over physical health and another over sanity. An enemy could steal one of your souls, and you might survive but become insane. Maybe during the birth, when the baby's soul emerged from the womb, one of her souls took the opportunity to escape and drifted into the wood stove, mingling with the smoke, venting into the winter wind; carrying across the frigid waves.

"She made him beg for his life," Papoo told over a game of Scrabble. Maybe it was because he had a few beers and forgot I was a kid, and that I would have to make my way back to the cabin before the sun faded behind the mountains.

"She made him beg and plead for hours... until the sun came up and something snapped. That's when she shot him... right in the kneecap. Blew it right out of its socket, grabbed the baby, hopped in the skiff and disappeared across the bay. Robert would have bled to death... right there on the floor. He would have died right there on the floor if your uncle Bob hadn't stopped by for a cup of coffee."

Bob found him curled up in a pool of blood like a newborn baby, tied a towel around his knee, and tried to keep him conscious. He carried him to his skiff and ferried him across the water to Homer, following the path of Robert's fleeing wife and the soul that had preceded her. Perhaps she was chasing the soul that had escaped across the bay, but there was no time for fanciful imaginings then; the shattered kneecap crying blood all over the skiff's floorboard as they raced towards town.

At the medical center in Homer the doctors closed Robert and opened him, then closed him and opened him again. They harvested cartilage and bone, tried to mate the splintered pieces then sealed him for good; fitting him with a metal brace that kept his leg from buckling and permanently altered his walk. So when I met him, ten years later, he walked by throwing the bad leg in front of him and letting its momentum carry him forward. The brace led, and the body followed; the steel exoskeleton swinging and clunking, swinging and clunking.

Knowing what had happened in that cabin didn't bother me somehow. I let that understanding trickle out of my consciousness, and invested in more practical worries. I was sharing the cabin with something small and quick, stealthy and nocturnal. Rustling and padded feet woke me up in the dead of night. I caught the echo of movement out of the corner of my eye. At first I thought it was a rat or a weasel, but it turned out to be a mink that spent the daylight hours marauding among the dock pilings for fish scraps, and occasionally leaping into boats for a fresher meal.

Papoo's response was to entrust me with a single-bolt .22 that either signaled a great deal of trust in my responsibility or indicated the slow onset of creeping senility. He had always preached against guns, and at one point in the late fifties had made great ceremony of carrying out all his old rifles from the family's forest-bound Massachusetts home and burying them in front of his four children.

Papoo had probably always had natural leanings towards pacifism, but his experiences in the war had elevated his feelings to philosophy; just as his fear had manifested itself physically in the form of a silver screw that held his ankle together after a German landmine had blown it apart. He used the GI Bill to get his degree in chemistry and taught in a local technical college for the rest of his life.

Papoo pulled the rifle out of the trailer, rubbed his beard, fired the .22 into the air to make sure that there wasn't a bullet in the chamber— there was. The report cracked above our heads and I squelched the urge to duck and cover. He was an absent minded sort of professor

“Ally... Ally boy... Ally my boy. Come here.” He held the rifle out to me. “This isn't a toy. It's a tool... a tool with a very specific purpose. It's a tool for killing things... a weapon. Don't fool around with it. It's not for fooling around. Did I ever tell you about the time I watched someone die?”

I shook my head.

“It was the only death I saw my whole time in Europe. The only one. And the saddest thing is that it was from what they call friendly fire... friendly fire. What an oxymoron! Do you know what friendly fire is? Ally... Ally my boy.”

“It's when you shoot your own guy... on accident,” I held the rifle barrel pointed to the ground as he'd shown me.

“That's right... do you know what an oxymoron is?”

“Ummm... I think so.”

“What is it then?” He looked at me skeptically

“I don't know... tell me.”

“The word comes from to Greek words.” Although he had purposely decided not to teach his own children Greek so that they would become more American, but he loved to explain the Greek roots of English words.

“*Oxy* meaning sharp, and *moros* which means dumb. It means... when the meaning of a phrase contradicts itself... have you ever read Tennyson?”

“No...”

“What do they teach you in schools these days? Anyways... in *Idylls of the King* Tennyson wrote, ‘And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.’ Do you know what that means?”

“No.”

“Neither do I... really. But it’s an oxymoron.”

We were standing in the gravel lot where they parked their trailer, forty-feet from the shore and T shaped dock. A fiberglass Boston Whaler appeared between behind the tiny island that split the entrance of the bay and we tracked its slow approach.

“What about the ‘friendly fire’ story?” I asked and he snapped back to attention.

“Friendly fire... not so friendly. Not so friendly at all. Well... we were crossing a river in France and we only had two small boats, so we broke up into groups of eight and started ferrying our supplies across. That’s what I did... supplied the artillery. But this one guy... I’m in the boat with him but he’s in the bow and I’m in the stern. He gets up and I can see him pulling at his holster. He’s horsing around... and horsing around in a boat. That’s a bad idea... horsing around in a boat with a pistol. He was some kind of *cretin*. That’s another Greek word... you know that word?”

“Uh-huh,” I nodded.

“So the boat lurched suddenly and he fell forward and the gun went off and shot the guy who was trying to catch him... he was trying to catch him...”

“So what happened to the guy who got shot?”

“He died very quickly... turned white. Didn’t say anything. Just died...like that. Not like the movies. It’s not like the movies.”

The Whaler pulled up to the dock, and one of the men onboard tossed a buoy to buffer the impact. He hopped out and began tying up.

“So... don’t horse around with guns?” I asked.

“Yeah... that’s the lesson... Ally my boy... that’s the lesson. Don’t horse around with guns.” He pulled at his suspenders. “And every story should have a lesson... that’s the lesson too.”

“Is that an oxymoron?”

“No... that’s not an oxymoron.”

I brought the rifle back to the cabin, and propped it up next to my bed. It wasn’t until that night, when the mink began his nocturnal frolicking, that I realized I could never kill it. “The Killing of the Mink” was just a daydream, a story with a beginning and an end, but no middle. It was a narrative that began with the gun and ended with the mink’s death, but how was I supposed to shoot a tiny, invisible mammal in the dead of the night with a single shot? It wasn’t possible. I’m sure my grandfather realized that.

I spent almost every evening with my grandparents that summer. We ate whatever they had caught that day, a baked trout or panko pinks, and played scrabble or gin rummy. My grandfather might boil some Dungeoness crabs pulled from a couple of pots we had set in the bay, or steam a pot full of clams dug during low tide. I followed the cooking with veiled interest, trying to complete their crossword puzzles and listening to the BBC.

During full moons we woke up early to catch octopus during the minus tides when the sea dropped thirty feet, and the shallow coves emptied to reveal dozen-armed

violet starfish, and bloated sea cucumbers. The large octopus lived in deeper waters, but some of the smaller, younger ones made their homes along the rocky shallows. I spent the morning as a scout, looking for signs of habitation: a hole marked by a pile of clam shells, or the empty carapace of a Dungeoness crab. The octopus always left the remains of their meals outside their dens like expectant suburbanites waiting on the garbageman.

The den's entrances faced the receding water, but they always built a back door into their mucky caverns. It was as if they had all been built to a certain set of specifications, as if they shared the same zoning laws, but outside of the basic size and structure there were a few modifications. Their homes seemed to vary in craft and creativity, and I imagined that different dens reflected their builder's tastes and habits.

Once I found the "front door" Papoo would get quiet quickly and crouch behind a pile of rocks. We carried a bucket, a small bottle of bleach, and a shortened broom handle with a narrow rubber hose tied to it. I'd grab the bleach and the broom handle and tip toe around to locate the "back door". I'd insert the makeshift delivery system into the hole and pour a couple of drops of bleach into the tube. Then I'd sneak over to where Papoo was hiding and wait. The bleach was the equivalent of a tear gas canister thrown through a window. Papoo, the chemistry professor, explained that it created a toxic cloud in the hole that forced the octopus to escape through the "front door." We hid because if the octopus spotted us it would inevitably choose death by poison over capture. Is it possible they knew what we were there for, that they told each other stories of capture and escape?

It always emerged cautiously. One tentacle would appear, then another, then a third would emerge to grasp barnacled rocks, and begin pulling its sagging body

against the considerable strain of full gravity. Once out of the den, it moved quickly, sprinting for the shallows. Pappo and I would jump up and rush over to the octopus, as it's tentacles winching it's body along the rocks. We had to get to it before it reached the water, and disappeared into the safety of the depths.

I usually got to it first, grabbing it by the hood and tossing it into the bucket; rocks still entangled in its tentacles. Inside the bucket it turned bright red, struggling to find something to latch on to and gain the leverage it needed to pull itself out of the smooth plastic prison. They always fought hard at first, but after awhile it seemed like they had come to terms with their fate. The color of their flesh shifted to a deep brownish purple, and they'd sink to the bottom of the bucket as if they'd turned to liquid.

Sometimes they managed to spill out of the bucket, clinging desperately to the side of the boat. I'd tear them off with one quick jerk, my hands hooked under their hood. Once, I pulled too hard, and it's hood tore open. All the mysterious things that made it work, all the vibrant colors, came tumbling out. It's organs stuck to the side of the boat like a rorschach blot, but I scooped them up and dropped them in the bucket before I could read it's meaning.

When we got back to the Jakaloff dock Pappo would turn the octopus inside out, and send me up to the trailer to fetch an old, wooden baseball bat. We'd spend the next hour, beating the body against the dock, tenderizing its flesh in preparation for boiling. I don't know where he had learned how to prepare an octopus, whether in Alaska or in Greece; from his own grandfather or a cook book. When we had finished, we passed the octopus on to my grandmother who boiled it for hours, and it eventually found its way into a pasta or was pickled and canned to be served as a spicy appetizer.

Fishing with my grandparents was part of my leisure. We wasted very little of what we caught, and left the fish carcasses on the beach, where the eagles congregated and fought among themselves like common seagulls. The romantic veil had been pulled back, and my inner cynic had begun to flourish. There were many things that were ugly, tasks that were difficult to carry out. At first I gagged when I had to clean out the decomposing Flounder and spiny Irish Lords from the bottom of the nets, but by the end of the summer it had become routine.

Days followed a reliable pattern, each one revolved around the shift, but out on the water the happenings were unregulated. We cut loons loose from the nets when they wandered into them, and became entangled; their beaks stabbing at our faces. Sometimes I laughed at the dead things, and went back to the cabin to cry for myself. The ocean's nature was clear to me, but I was murky inside.

Towards the end of the summer, Robert and I were out by one of the outer nets. The weather was bad, strong swells kept the boat rocking constantly. Grey-black clouds alternately threatened and retreated. We only had a couple of hours to haul in the nets before Fish and Game passed over the bay: looking for nets that had been left in the water past the eight o'clock deadline.

"It's too late to get the shotgun," Robert spun around on his good leg and made a quick survey of the skiff's contents. The makeshift hold was full of nets that we had already hauled in.

"It's already 7:00 and we still have to get to the other side of The Spit to haul in the inside nets. Don't worry you bastard. You're gonna die today... sooner rather than later," he coughed and spat at the thrashing shark.

We had to kill and extricate the shark from the twisted net, and still find enough time to pull in three more nets. The morning sun had already cleared the horizon, its glare mitigated by the forest of dark clouds above. Beyond the storm system, it illuminated the three mountains to the north, known by the acronym AIR: Augustine, Ilyamna and Rainer. After eight Fish and Wildlife swept over Katchemak Bay and surveyed all the sites in their helicopters. Any operations with nets still left in the water would be hit with a ten-thousand dollar fine.

I raised myself up from a bed of netting, kelp and half-decayed bottomfish, and propped my arms against the interior rail of the skiff. Sea lice leapt on and off the orange rubber of my overalls; their carapaces almost translucent. I ignore them, and took a closer look at the shark. It shook and thrashed in the net, as I bobbed above it in rhythm. Its skin was a completely uniform grey. It was coldly sleek, machinelike. There was nothing that signified intelligence, or self-awareness. The shark's black eyes reflected nothing.

The shark had wrapped itself up completely in the hundred foot net, twisted up like a piece of hard candy. The floats leapt up and down to the rhythm of its struggling, which had completely disfigured the net. The possibility that we had lost a two-thousand dollar net fed Robert's frustration. Beneath the surface the flossy mesh has been tangled up in some places, shredded in others. The shark's efforts had transformed what had been a bowing, underwater sail into an unrecognizable knot of floats, rope, netting and flesh.

Under normal circumstances, the shark should have bounced off the net's diamond mesh, but it had gotten its snout tangled in the net, and continued floundering

until it snagged its fins and gills. Now, in the quiet moments between its fits, it resembled a toddler swaddled in a blanket on a cold night.

The principles of Set-Netting are simple and ancient. You set the nets where the currents are strong, and catch the creatures that only know forward, that survive because of their own constant momentum: sharks and cod, salmon and red snappers. The nets are invisible to them, like cartoon force shields. Sometimes it hardly seemed fair.

“Grab the float knife,” Robert pulled up the outboard engine and locked it into position.

I dug underneath the piles of fish and netting and pulled the long handled knives from whatever nooks they had wandered into. Robert grabbed the gaff, a sharpened hook, and leaned over the boat. He touched the shark’s face with the gaff and its thrashing intensified. I pulled the knife from its plastic sheath.

“See here?” Robert tapped a spot behind the sharks’ eye, “That’s the brain... right there... see?” I nodded.

“Over here....” The gaff traced a circle below the gills, “Over here is the heart.” He looked us both in the eyes, one at a time and paused to make sure we had understood.

“I’ll take the brain. Alex... you take the heart.”

I kneeled over the starboard side, and Robert leaned against the port rail to keep the boat balanced. I held the knife underhand. The bright orange handle matched my waterproof Helly Hansen overalls. The blade was about eight inches long, curving gradually like a scimitar. I hooked my left arm over the side of the boat, and raised my right arm over the shark— knife poised.

The shark's eyes were unreadable. They were entirely honest in their absence of motive. There was no foothold for sympathy or anger. The shark was merely an obstacle to our routine and I stabbed robotically, the knives pistoning in and out the shark's sandpaper skin. Triangle shaped gashes opened up, and bled dark streams beneath the water's surface. The shark's thrashing subsided, but I continued stabbing it. I stopped looking at the shark, and watched the blood form into rorschach blots. I kept stabbing until my arms were tired, my face shined wet and salty.

"That should do it. Let's not get carried away." Robert popped the engine back into the water and ripped the starter cord.

"Let's get to the inside nets, and by the time we get back he'll be well enough dead. I don't want you to lose an arm dragging him into the boat."

Robert flipped the gear into forward, gunned the engine and we sped around the Spit into the quiet interior of the bay.

We kept a scow anchored in the bay, where we unloaded fish and cleaned the nets. It was a floating platform, twenty square feet of land suspended on the water's surface. We hung nets on a pair of parallel bars, and stored the day's catch in oversized plastic cooler bins, then went back to get the shark.

After two hours it looked more like a sausage wrapped in gauze, like meat. The force that separated it from becoming food itself had been drained back into the sea. We untied the net from the two anchored floats that kept it in place, and hitched the whole mess to the back of the boat. The engine groaned against the weight, and we slogged our way back to the scow.

We dragged the body up onto the scow's platform, and unwrapped the shark from the layers of netting. I worked carefully, Robert counseling patience as he

stomped around the scow with a mug of coffee. We pulled the last bits of net from the shark's fins and Robert leaned over the corpse. He drew his knife, and cut a deep incision between the gills and the pectoral fin. His fingers pried between muscles, and pulled the heart out in one dramatic motion. He held it up to the sky as a mock offering.

"I got you motherfucker... here you are! Here you are!"

Robert nodded at the body, "That's not you... you're right here!"

He threw the heart to the deck, and I smiled, thinking of that other world where the food came pre-packaged, without origins and history.

I walked over to the heart, it was red-brown and looked too small to have run the shark's huge body. It still beat with a double thump, a base and snare alternating kicks. We rolled the shark over, and stood circled around its segmented gray hide and spilling entrails.

"Too bad there's no Japanese around. It's a real waste," Robert put his hands on his hips and shrugged.

"What are we going to do about the net?" I asked.

"I'll mend it next weekend. No time today. It'll be a bitch of a job though."

On Monday we placed the nets again, and went back to the cadence of the work. We checked the nets, pulled in the fish, and sold them to the tender before nightfall. During our "last run" through before bedtime I noticed a huge glowing form at deep in one of the inner nets. The net was so shallow I could see the sand, and I figured that it was one of the rare halibuts that sometimes get caught up in the shallows.

I turned back to Robert, "There's something big down there. I think it's a Halibut."

"Sounds like Halibut and eggs for breakfast." He smiled.

I leaned over the side of the boat and hooked my fingers into the net, gently walking the mesh towards me. The form took shape slowly, its glow seemed to blur the outline of its shape like the photograph of a ghost presented as evidence of that other world on some late night television show.

The long August dusk was coming on, and the sun was making its slow fade into the horizon. The light could be funny then. Sometimes it seemed like it was almost easier to see into the water at dusk, as if the bay retained some light for a few hours, or maybe it was the fish that reflected brighter against the backdrop of the shallows. I continued pulling in the net, and the closer the glow became the less it looked like a fish.

“I don’t know Robert... it might be a stingray or something.” I called out.

“Well... pull it up! Let’s solve the mystery and go home.” He hitched up his Helly Hansens and spat behind sleeping motor.

It broke the surface face first, the net was twisted around its snout. I had seen porpoises in the bay in the early hours of the morning chasing schools of salmon, sometimes right into our nets. We considered them allies, maybe because of the old fisherman mythology, or maybe just because they looked the most like us. They always seemed to be playing. But who knows what their lives were actually like? Maybe they fought, and hated and killed. Maybe they were capable of malice. We weren’t scientists. Our understanding of the sea was a collage of inherited ideas and impressions tempered by the reality of this visceral, repetitive labor.

I pulled the porpoise into the boat. It was heavy and cold. It fit perfectly in my arms. It must have been a baby. I waited for Robert’s joke, and when it didn’t come I lay back into a pile of kelp and listened to him rev the engine. I closed my eyes, and when I

opened them we were farther out in the bay, out between the Herring Islands where the first generation of homesteaders still lived without electricity.

Robert stayed quiet, and I lifted the porpoise into my arms leaned over the boat so far my face broke the surface. I submerged my arms, and the cold water leaked into my gloves. I held the porpoise underwater for a moment before I released it. It hovered for a moment and then sank away.

“Well... that’s that.” Robert looked away into the island’s crown of pines and repositioned his bum leg. I stayed as I was, hanging over the boat’s bow, dragging my hand through the water as we pulled away. It was getting dark, and my hand traced a trail of glowing bioluminescence on the surface of the bay as millions of micro organisms exploded into clouds of light.

