The sweat is roaring off Calvin Tritt. Even though he's sitting in his living room in front of a fan, and even though it's a mild autumn day in Arctic Village, Alaska, a blue sky, fifty degrees outside, and even though he never raises his voice, the sweat is just pouring off of him, so that he keeps having to mop his brow and pause mid-sentence. It's as if he's sprung some sort of leak.

I'm not having to ask many questions. He's doing most of the talking. A big man, he's ex-military, as are many of the Gwich-'in men. Nonetheless, he's busting on the young commander-in-chief, George W. Bush. It's early September 2001: pre–World Trade Center, pre-Pentagon, pre-everything. Calvin is wearing tinted sunglasses, and even though sweat continues to bead up, his demeanor stays calm and controlled, even measured, as he discusses the chief executive's plan to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a spectacularly wild and beautiful place where, among other natural phenomena, the Porcupine caribou herd gathers each year to birth its calves. It is this already-declining herd, down to roughly 129,000 animals, from a high of nearly 180,000 in only the 1980s, that is central to the spiritual life of the Gwich-'in people, who are composed of fifteen bands of hunter-gatherers living scattered above the Arctic Circle.

Calvin is the angriest native person I'll speak to, and even he is a voice of moderation. He and about 150 other Gwich-'in are holding on in Arctic Village, just outside the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, fighting to keep their heads above water, and again, sitting in his living room, it does not seem to me that Calvin is conducting himself like a man whose entire race of indigenous people is in danger of vanishing from the face of the earth, before the chessboard political greed of an enemy aggressor brought to distant power in such dubious fashion....

Still, sitting in front of that fan, mopping his brow, Calvin does not seem to possess the spirit or demeanor of a man who is about to go extinct. "We're not opposed to all development," he says. There's a time and a place for it, he says, and the place, here at the top of the world—the "footprint," as the Bush administration keeps calling it—is, in both a scientific and a spiritual sense, the place where the Porcupine keep coming into the world, year after year, in what has heretofore been an unending cycle. Here the caribou come into the Gwich-'in world again and again as if issuing forth not so much from that one secret cleft formed by the base of the magnificent Brooks Range and the edge of the Beaufort Sea ice cap and the lichen-furzed sheet of tundra, but instead as if coming up through some vent or shaft or sacred bore-hole below—caribou rising vertically from that lower world, like a blessing, and spilling into the Gwich-'in world again and again and again. It is this bounty that has shaped the Gwich-'in into who they are, into who they have become, as surely as landscape and the animal of time shape anything. The caribou browsing all that lichen. The Gwich-'in following, and eating, those caribou.

While we below—some of us—want to eat the world beneath the caribou, so that if we do—make no mistake about this—it will be as if we are eating the Gwich-'in themselves: all of them, and their history, too. That, more than anything, is my idea of a barbarous savage. Not quite murderers, perhaps, and maybe not quite cannibals—but in their company, certainly, to even be debating such a thing in the halls of Congress, and to be pursuing such a thing, such a quarry, in the Oval Office and the Department of the Interior.

Since the time of complete and utter ice—and, who knows, perhaps longer—the Gwich-'in have been here, the most native of native peoples, nearly geologic in their integrity, their endurance. Not as ancient as the oil we seek to burn in our cars, but, still, more ancient than anything of mankind left on this green earth.

On my way back to Charlie and Marion's, I stop in and visit with the village chief, Evon Peter, who's working late on a Sunday evening at the council office.

The Boy-Chief, I think immediately, as he greets me: he's twenty-three, but doesn't look a day over seventeen. He's got a college degree, though, and is good with computers. It seems to me an improbable and slightly disconcerting sight, to see a village chief in front of his computer terminal, the desks in his small office swamped to overflowing with grant applications and deadlines, faxes and file folders. Evon's office looks like nothing less than ground zero of the command-central war-room: the bunker from which that staff of three digs in against the ravening world.

He's appropriately wary of me, wandering in without an introduction or appointment, and his eyes are bleary with computer screen strain; but he visits for a while, and I can soon see why the village has chosen him to help take them into the future, in conjunction with the wisdom and direction of the elders.

Evon is meticulous in praising the elders and in expressing his gratitude to them for helping to prepare him for the position he holds. He talks for a while about the caribou, but I've already heard that from everyone—the spiritual death that is sure to occur if the caribou vanish—and what interests me is how calm Evon seems, to have such weights, such burden, upon his shoulders: Evon and his computer versus the world, is what the scene looks like, there in his office, with the fate of his village quite possibly relying upon, among many other things, his computer and fund-raising skills.
When I comment on this, how atypical he seems, in my experience, from the besieged war-room activist, working almost always perilously close to burnout, he shrugs and again credits the elders for telling him, and the whole village, to stay positive.

“I have faith,” he says calmly, and I don’t think he’s bullshitting either himself or me; I think that even if he doesn’t have faith, he is looking for faith, and believes he can get there.

“I’m happy every morning when I wake up, and when I go to sleep,” he says. “I’m at peace with myself. I’m really grateful for what the elders gave to me. I try and have good relationships with my people, and the land, and the animals. Being here, being chief, is providing me with a rich and rewarding experience in life. I can’t even explain how lucky I feel to see what I’ve seen, even though I’m so young.

“I have a lot of hope,” he says.

For the life of me, I can’t see the anger in him. There are days when I can feel my own shouting in my blood, days when I want to defend the mountains and the wild places and the refuges with my bare hands, and very few days when I have the kind of hope Evon is speaking of. I try to remember if I had hope when I was twenty-three, and think that I did.

I want to try to say this cleanly and neatly: we are both hunters, the Gwich’in and I, but I am humbled and saddened by the disparity between my life—our lives of excess and complacence, back home—and the gunmetal harshness of their lives. It’s a difference so profound as to perhaps influence even the nature of time: as if somehow they are managing, against all odds, to keep existing on some slightly different plane than ours; managing, somehow, to keep that other world—our world—at arm’s length.

Though surely the Gwich’in can feel the breath now of our approach, as a snared animal might be aware, in its last moments, of the hungry, eager gaze of the trapper coming through the brush, seeing that the snare is tripped, and holding something.

I remember being on the trapper’s end of that feeling, some autumns in Montana, when cutting across fresh elk tracks laid down in new snow not even an hour earlier, and with the breeze in my face carrying the sweet scent of the herd straight to me; and I remember being on the trapper’s end of the feeling, the hunter’s end, while working in Mississippi as a geologist, oblivious to the fact that I was sitting at a desk high in a steel-and-glass skyscraper, and believing myself instead to be submerged in time, tracking old river currents and delta patterns and ocean movements hundreds of millions of years ago.

Tracking one’s quarry across such maps—building such maps with your hands, one sinuous contour at a time—there was a glimmering feeling and a slowing of one’s pulse, a feeling as if time were dissolving, much as a sugar cube would in warm water, when you began to move in on where you believed the oil could be hiding.

The contours of your hand’s making—or, rather, your discovery of those already-existing contours laid down half a billion years ago, and hiding beneath ten or twenty thousand feet of stone—would begin to close in and connect amongst themselves. The oil would be trapped by your knowledge, by your hand, contained within that one final closure of contour, and shining, as if a beacon were being aimed finally upon it.

What it feels like to me now, though, as a lover of wild places and wilderness—as one who needs the emotional as well as physical presence of those last few places in the world, and especially in this country—is that I am on the trapped end, rather than the trapper’s, and that Bush and Cheney and the industry minions are drawing the noose tight, sniffing around for one or two more senators, even as the majority of the nation asks them nicely, asks them politely, to not do this, to not make this final and cheap and damming short-sighted mistake.

Jimi seems to live only in the near past, the hunting past, and no further into the future than the next day’s hunt. What he will not tell me—either because he does not seem to think it’s that important or extraordinary, or perhaps even because he does not recall any of it, remembers nothing of his childhood, or his existence up until the time he made his first kill—is that, on the day he was born, he was chosen to be the village’s hunter. Marion will tell me all this, upon my return to Arctic Village, and when she does, I will be astounded by the puzzle-perfect way the pieces of his identity, his life, fall together, as well as by the fact that such a thing is still done in this day and age, and in this big country, this big nation.

The village assigned him that responsibility, that lifelong calling, and began training him for it from the beginning—the culture, the community, shaping this one man, in the course of only a few years, as the landscape had shaped their culture over the past twenty thousand, or as even the caribou themselves had been sculpted to fit this land, over the past hundred thousand.

How can any Western notions of time survive, in the face of such dynamics?

As soon as Jimi could walk, the Gwich’in elders gave him a little pack and told him that he should never, ever let it be empty, that he should always have something in it that he’d gathered, even if it was just the guts, the stomach of something, and that for practice, whenever he encountered a village elder, he should then offer them whatever was in his little pack: whatever he’d been able to scrounge or gather.

It was to train him, Marion says, to never go out and come back “bare-handed, empty-handed.” She says that even “when nobody goes out”—too cold, or no game—“he goes out and brings in food” like a magician, a shaman or sorcerer. To sculpt him, from the very beginning, into the habit of giving, of providing.

“He used to haul wood and sell wood,” she says—and again, he would be sure that the elders were kept in a good supply of wood.
If the chain saw didn’t work, says Marion, he would use an ax. “They never had to ask,” she says. It was his habit; he noticed things, she says, and would get wood for anybody who needed it, or meat, too. He’d do the same thing, over and over again, sawing or chopping and hauling wood, or bringing in game, until everyone was set and satisfied. “When people are hungry,” she says, “he feeds them.

“He can’t be in the village long,” she says. “He doesn’t like it.” She shakes her head. “He can’t stay here. He doesn’t visit much with the village. That’s just how he is.

“He’s saved a lot of people,” she says. “When they’re lost, he goes and finds them. “When they drown, he puts them back alive,” through artificial resuscitation....

I keep thinking about the story Marion, Charlie’s wife, told us about Jimi. No one ever has to ask for food, as long as he’s around. When they get lost, he finds them. When they are hungry, he goes out and finds food. When they fall through the ice and drown, he pulls them out and resuscitates them.

As if life in this landscape were ceaseless; as if, even if it goes away, it could be brought right back with just a puff, just a simple breath of air. What men and women would dare take away this breath, and that of all the Gwich’-in, and of the Porcupine caribou themselves? Listening to Jimi and the others talk about the unending regularity of the cycles of the caribou, across the millennia, made it sound to me as if the new caribou calves come up from beneath the tundra in this one place each spring, issuing forth as if traveling up some vertical fissure, some volcanic vent, out into the world; as if the earth might never run out of anything; as if the caribou ascend from a place even deeper than the buried oil itself.

I know increasingly that I seem at times not to recognize whatsoever the face or sound of Bush’s, or Cheney’s, God: this one they keep clamoring about; the one they claim to know and understand and speak for; the one that—in their interpretation—seems to me to be increasingly intolerant.

I do know that I am comfortable, here in the land of caribou, and marvel at the gentle and perhaps even loving hand that fitted both caribou and mankind so carefully, so perfectly, onto this singular landscape: over a hundred thousand caribou, as well as the fifteen bands—seven thousand people, at the most—who are still, even if only for a few more days, wedded to them.

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Caribou Rising. Defending the Porcupine Herd, Gwich-în Culture, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. By Rick Bass. In Caribou Rising, Bass voices concern for a potential assault by drilling for oil on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Bass argues with passion against the current Washington administration’s campaign to drill for oil near the Arctic Village. Eloquently, Bass writes Caribou in Canada’s North are showing increasing levels of mercury, a contaminant that has drifted into the Arctic from other parts of the world, researchers have found. Mercury is one of two contaminants found in northern environments that are of great concern to scientists, said Mary Gamberg, project co-ordinator with federal Northern Contaminants Program in the Yukon. As for current research, Gamberg said scientists are studying why mercury levels in caribou are rising, particularly in female caribou.