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CHASING THE ICE

Drop by drop, a way of life melts away

ISAAC “IKE” KULOWIYI sits at his computer, looking at the weather service maps. The wind has pushed miles of sea ice against the north side of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, closing the open water that appeared the week before in front of his village, Savoonga. The forecast says that soon the winds will shift, releasing the sea ice to the pull of the current flowing north between the island and Russia. Then, if conditions are good, Ike will go hunting for walrus.

In the spring and fall, Ike’s ancestors pushed their boats down to the water’s edge and paddled out to find the walrus, *ayveq*. The hunters butchered the *ayveq* out on the ice, piling their boats with meat, liver, heart, intestines, hide and tusks. They punctured the *ayveq*’s eyes to release their spirits, and spat melted snow into their mouths—a ritual, so that the animal would come back to feed them again. “They’d cut off the head and give them a little drink of water, then they’d pop their eyes,” Ike told me later. “It’s pretty neat, but all that stuff is passed.”

Though it is the middle of May, the snow on the road is still deep. The clouds roll away in corduroy rows above the sea ice that stretches to the horizon, broken only by slivers of grey water. The wind carries the scent of the sea, of exhaust, of something else harder to place, tangy, faintly rotten.

As I clumped up the steps to his porch, I passed strips of meat hanging to the left of the door, black on the outside with ruby flesh—the first kill of the season. As the winter sea ice breaks up, thousands of walruses migrate past the island on their way to their summer territory in the Arctic. They travel in small groups, resting and giving birth on the ice. The hunters pursue them in their skiffs, navigating the channels between ice floes. Ike had gone hunting the week before as crew on another man’s boat, he told me as I pulled my boots off. They’d found walruses not far from shore and killed one, but soon after they returned, the wind changed direction. It pushed the ice back against the island, forestalling further hunts.

We’d met the day before and he’d invited me over. Now we sit together in his living room, Ike, 59, at his computer. Wiry, with a black-and-silver moustache and the word *mom* tattooed on a forearm, he rocks in his chair, knees folded up under his chin. The coffee maker on the counter gurgles. His wife, Sherry, 52, round-faced with laughlines around her eyes, emerges from their bedroom, pours a cup and settles on the couch. The walls are decorated with sports medals, religious images, family photos. Out the window, I can see their dogs sleeping, one curled on the seat of a rusted-out snowmachine, another in the snow beside a dead seagull. Ike says he wants to captain his own boat next time the ice opens, but he’s worried he won’t have enough money for gas—it’s \$7 a gallon at the village store, and he wants 30 gallons to make sure he’ll have enough to make it out and back.

“I hope the ice opens soon,” he says. “My freezer depends on it.” Savoongans hunt or gather most of their food. In an average year Savoongan hunters kill nearly 600 walruses, or almost five per family. Time is running out, though. The season is passing. In the old days, when the ice was thicker, it lingered and took its time leaving, Ike says. The hunting season often lasted until the middle of June. But not this year. As in many recent years, the ice is thin, and as it floats against shore, it

grows thinner, more easily pushed by wind and current. Ike predicts that when the wind shifts and the ice goes, it will go quickly, and with it the walruses. They'll have to be ready, he says. The hunters will be chasing it.

WHEN I WAS 18, I spent a summer there in Savoonga, the walrus capital of the world. At least that's what it said on a green and white sign on the side of the old water treatment plant. St. Lawrence Island sits halfway between Alaska and Russia, 150 miles south of the Bering Strait, a remnant of the Bering Land Bridge, spared when the seas reclaimed the crossing 10,000 years ago. A line of extinct cindercone volcanoes on the middle north side of the island and smaller mountain ranges in the island's southern corners break up vast stretches of lake-pocked tundra. The island is home to about 1,400 Siberian Yupik people, evenly split between the villages of Gambell, on the island's northwest corner, and Savoonga, on the middle north coast in the shadow of the volcanic highlands.

The summer after graduating high school, I flew from Anchorage, where I grew up, out to Savoonga, to work on a construction crew. We were erecting two wind towers to help power the new kindergarten-through-12th grade school that was being built.

The village was like nothing I'd ever seen—chaotic, noisy, as different from Anchorage as any foreign country. In the center of town houses were built of grayed plywood, patchwork quilts in lumber with few right angles, growing newer and squarer farther from the center, gradually falling into orderly prefabricated rows. Above, electrical wires crossed from house to house in a drunken spider's web, and generations of spent machines and animal bones littered the yards below.

I hung around with the local kids many nights after work. "You want to follow?" they'd say, *You want to come along?* We wandered the town—video games in this house, a joint behind this one, a game of pool down the way. Sometimes we piled onto a four-wheeler and drove one end of town to the other, past the old cannery, the beach where the villagers kept their skiffs, the graveyard entrance framed with arched whale jawbones. 'Cruising,' they called it. One night, I asked a group of girls my age too many questions about life in the village. "'Do you guys eat chicken?'" one of them replied, mocking me, and they all doubled over laughing. I laughed too, and realized that they weren't that foreign after all.

At the end of summer, I flew back to Anchorage, then to California for college. Gradually I fell out of touch with my friends from Savoonga. Sometimes, though, I'd be reminded by the feel of fog on my face or the grumble of a far-off two-stroke. I'd think of the night I watched the villagers pull a whale up on the beach and carve it to the bone. I'd remember the day I looked out from the hatch on top of one of the wind towers and saw below me the town, a cluster of plywood barnacles on a windbeaten rock, torn at by the elements and just as unfeeling, I knew, by the world outside. Sometimes I was reminded in other ways—an article, a photo, a weather report. I'd see maps of climate change projections across the world, see the Arctic changing faster than anywhere else. I'd think of the time I watched Savoongan kids playing at the water's edge, jumping from one iceberg to the next, farther and father out, arms swinging as the ice bobbed beneath them. I'd think back and wonder if it was all still there, or if it had already melted away.

FOR ALMOST 2,500 YEARS, the Kulowiya family's ancestors lived in multiple camps and villages across the island, which they called *Sivuqaq*—"We don't know who St. Lawrence is," Ike tells me. They hunted whales, walrus and seals, fished for halibut, salmon and tomcod, and gathered bird eggs and plants. Explorer Vitus Bering "discovered" the island in 1728, the first European to encounter Alaska, and without setting foot ashore, he gave the island its name and claimed it for Russian czar Peter the Great. Other explorers followed, and later Yankee whalers, chasing the whales that migrate past the island. By the middle of the 19th century, dozens of whaling ships stopped at the island each year, bringing with them the first tastes of the West—guns, liquor, and disease. In 1879, whalers arriving in the spring found the island almost abandoned. Two years later, when naturalist John Muir arrived aboard the steamship *Corwin*, he described the devastation in a letter to his wife.

"...there is a dead Esquimo village where we have landed and found that every soul of the population had died two years ago of starvation," he wrote. "More than two hundred skeletons were seen lying about like rubbish, in one hut thirty, most of them in bed."

Many of the whalers blamed the islanders' newfound love of booze, saying they'd gotten too drunk to hunt during the fall, then starved during the hard winter that followed. The modern researchers I spoke with told me, though, that more likely two consecutive years of bad hunting left the islanders vulnerable to the Western diseases that followed. The whalers almost certainly contributed to the famine by slaughtering the seal, whale, and walrus that the villagers relied on.

Survivors—among them Ike's and Sherry's great-grandparents—gathered at *Sivuqaq*, now called Gambell, on the northwestern tip of the island. Archaeologists say that the island's pre-famine population was between 1,000 and 4,000 people; in my conversations with villagers, they often put the number as high as 10,000 people, citing it as evidence of the bounty of their land. Whatever the pre-famine population, when U.S. census takers visited Gambell in 1890, they counted just 300 people.

The adventurer-turned-archaeologist Otto Geist arrived in 1926 to pick up the pieces. The German, employed by the University of Alaska, remains the most notorious of the outside scientists and archaeologists who visited the island after the famine. Geist had little formal training, and his excavation methods were lifted straight from his mining days. He used steam boilers to melt permafrost, and blasted open old village sites with fire hoses, jumbling together the striated records of thousands of years of occupation. He paid locals just cents a day to help him dig for artifacts, plus a bonus if they found something interesting. Ike's mother watched her father and uncle dig, hanging out by the piles to look for artifacts they'd missed. In photos, Geist stands by piles of animal and human bones, looking on as Yupik workers sling shovels and push wheelbarrows. Along with more ancient remains, Geist gathered the bones of islanders who had died in the famine—people whose children were still alive. Working on-and-off for a decade, Geist hauled out some 75,000 artifacts and shipped them to the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, where, the graduate student in charge of the collection told me, they remain mostly unsorted.

Despite their anger over Geist, the villagers have taken up where he left off. Every summer the Kulowiyis, like many other families, dig for artifacts at old village sites. Collectors will pay thousands for a good piece like an ivory doll or pristine harpoon head. Ike used to sell his finds to a dealer who visited the island each year, but he found out that the dealer was later reselling the pieces for 10 times what he'd paid Ike. Now Ike posts his finds on message boards and eBay. I ask him if the pits he digs are so different from the ones Geist paid his grandparents to dig. He sighs. "The artifacts are the property of the unborn," he says. And yet... ivory is worth good money in a place with few other things the outside world wants.

DURING THE NIGHT, in the third week of May, the ice creeps from shore. A ribbon of gray water appears along the edge of the shorefast ice, the *tuvuqs*, and grows wider as the sea ice moves past, east with the current. The ribbon becomes a wide channel, pulling apart until at last it's just the *tuvuqs* and the gray water beyond, scattered here and there with shards of ice. A steady wind blows from the south. Conditions are improving. "I smell walrus but I have no gas money," Ike says.

Three of his grade-school-aged grandchildren race between the kitchen and hall, shooting Nerf arrows that shriek through the air. Ike's eldest son, and his daughter-in-law are there too, but Ike's thoughts seem to be elsewhere. He checks his email, again, and looks at the weather maps, again. He clicks through pictures of his carvings—a wrinkled walrus diving to the ocean floor toward clams, a halibut and a crab with spindle legs; the ivory face of a man framed by a dark bone ruff, labrets protruding from his lower lip. In the old days, the studs were the mark of the walrus hunter, he tells me, tusks, donned before the hunt. An arrow screams by and thuds against the wall. "Calm down!" Ike shouts at the kids.

For dinner that night he makes walrus soup with some of the meat from the hunt a couple weeks before. When it's finished cooking, he kneels on the floor, where he's spread out a plastic trash bag over a flattened cardboard box and carves up a chunk of cooked meat and blubber. He tosses the slices into the center of the makeshift tablecloth along with carrots, onions, and potatoes. Pointing at one of the potatoes, he looks sideways at me and jokes, "Walrus intestine," then grins.

Two of his grandsons mix some of the broth with dried French onion soup, and fill a dish with salt. His son and daughter-in-law kneel around the food with the two grandsons and me. A third grandson, Eli, hovers but doesn't sit. Ike regards him. "Those that kill walrus must eat walrus," he says. "I'll stop taking you out."

We eat, dipping the meat and vegetables in the French onion soup and salt. The meat is tender, with the taste unique to marine mammals—oily, with a hint of the sea. Eli disappears down the hall, then reappears, then sits on the couch, pouting. Ike relents. "I will never stop taking you out, Eli," he says. "But one day I'd like very much for you to start eating walrus. I worry." They must never forget their isolation, he says. After September 11, 2001, when the planes from Nome were grounded, the store ran out of food in a week.

After dinner he stands in the center of the room and holds his arm out straight. He invites the boys to challenge him. If they can bend his arm, they're ready to harpoon, he says. One after the other, the boys try and fail, straining against his elbow. "Those walruses are hard to stab," he says. He gets on his knees and holds

out his harm for his youngest grandson, just two-and-a-half. He buckles almost as soon as the toddler grabs his arm, howling in exaggerated surprise.

He sits at his computer and pulls up the National Weather Service forecast. “Wednesday,” he says. Four days from now. The prediction is for gentle south-by-southeast winds, one-foot seas. A good day for boating.

ON MONDAY, the old men and women gather at noon for the elders’ lunch, in a tan building down the road from Ike and Sherry’s. The women sit at one long folding table, the men at the other. They speak in quiet Yupik, low and slow, vowels pushed to the back of the throat. The radio plays in the background.

At 87 years old, Barbara Kogassagoon is one of the oldest people in the village. She walks slowly, but without a cane. Like Ike’s mother, she remembers seeing her parents digging in Otto Geist’s pits.

When she was a kid, the 225-foot, wooden *North Star* arrived every summer, full of machinery, building supplies and dry goods. The whole village gathered at the water’s edge to help unload the tenders and roll barrels of food up to the store—raisins, Dairy Gold butter, as well as Sailor Boy pilot bread, the hardtack biscuits that remain a staple throughout rural Alaska. What she remembers most about the *North Star*, though, is its captain, Moe. Every year, as he came ashore he tossed the kids handfuls of candy, small watches and toys, sometimes fresh fruit. “Once a year we smell orange,” she says.

Back then the village was smaller, just a collection of buildings in a rough circle. In the winter months, people traveled by dog sled, and the dogs were tied at the edges of the village. When something disturbed them, they could be heard barking from miles away. Kerosene lamps provided light through the long nights. In 1945, Barbara started working as a midwife.

After World War II, the Air Force built a base on the island’s Northeast Cape. Many of the villagers went there to work, Barbara, and Ike’s parents among them. Villagers started wearing Western clothes. Village kids began to learn English.

Almost imperceptible, viewed one by one, the changes piled up. The last women with decorative tattoos on their faces died. In the 1960s, an airstrip was built in Savoonga, and soon after came commercial flights, Wein Air, then others. Village kids had to speak English in class. Ike, Sherry, and others told me that their teachers made them wear a dunce cap when they talked amongst themselves in Yupik.

In the late 1960s, the mayor started the walrus carnival, and put up the green and white sign on the water treatment building, dubbing the town, ‘Walrus Capital of the World.’ In 1969 one of the villagers bought a Skidoo snowmachine. The machine didn’t need food or training, just gas. Within a few years nobody was mushing dogteams. In the 1970s came three-wheelers, then four-wheelers.

In 1971, Congress settled with Alaska Natives’ over their claim to their ancestral lands. The people of St. Lawrence Island turned down reparations money, instead opting for nearly complete ownership of the island. The Air Force base closed down the next year, leaving behind a mess of fuel, asbestos, solvents, heavy metals, and other toxic chemicals. Villagers who had spent time at Northeast Cape began to show elevated rates of cancer and poisoning from chemicals.

Running water, a sewer system and TV came to the village in the 1990s and early 2000s. Yupik language instruction at the school was cut, in part due to the pressure of No Child Left Behind. Internet arrived TK. Barbara retired from midwifing in 2007. The last baby she delivered was her great-granddaughter, one of her 30 great-grandkids. "I have too many grandkids to be old," she says, her whole face crinkled into a smile.

Life, many Savoongans told me, is in many ways easier than it was in the old days. The disease and starvation that killed thousands of their ancestors are no longer immediate threats. But Western convenience brings its own problems. Nearly 40 percent of Savoonga's workforce is unemployed, and its per capita income is just a third of the national average. Almost a third of the villagers live in poverty, and with the disease come its symptoms—desperation, above-average rates of suicide, child abuse, domestic violence, alcoholism. Only about half of the students at the school graduate 12th grade.

But while village life can appear bleak from the outside, it holds its own powerful attractions. I spoke with one of the teachers, a white man, before he left town for the summer. "They've got problems, sure," he said. "But nobody here is homeless. Nobody starves. People leave their doors unlocked." The entire village, he told me, "is one big family."

I asked many of the villagers I met why they chose to stay in Savoonga in favor of what might be an easier life in Fairbanks or Anchorage. "I like the remoteness. I like the lifestyle," one hunter told me. "I'd rather be poor, living here and eating my traditional food than have a full-time job in town and be miserable."

THE SNOW CRUMBLES, shrinking back into itself. It is Tuesday. The sea is empty of ice, but still the wind blows hard, holding the hunters ashore. The street are mostly bare now, the village caught in the seasonal switch from snowmachine to four-wheeler.

I find Ike fuming over something he'd read on an online forum. People outside are quick to judge the hunters, he says, quick to point out their outboard motors, their rifles and exploding harpoons as signs of some phoniness, some hypocrisy. PETA and the animal rights people don't understand the villagers' situation, he says. "The only way they could understand it is if they tried to come and live here for a year and survive on store food," he says. "I'm sure if they got to the point of starving and they ate some walrus or whale or seal they'd be very happy."

A poor walrus hunt would be disastrous not only because of its effect on the villagers' food supply, but also because of walrus ivory's place in the local economy. As they dig for the artifacts carved by their ancestors, modern Savoongans also carve their own. Once it's carved, usually into animal or human figurines, ivory is legal for non-Natives to own. Even small pieces can cost thousands of dollars in Anchorage tourist shops, although carvers peddling their pieces locally to visitors from outside often make only a fraction of that. Uncarved ivory, which only Alaska Natives may legally possess, sells for between \$35 and \$75 per pound, depending on its condition. A single tusk can weigh as much as 12 pounds.

A couple days before, I'd sat with a villager employed by Fish and Game as he tagged four tusks taken during a hunt from a couple weeks earlier, before the ice had moved back in. The tags serve as a receipt, allowing Fish and Game to track the number of animals harvested. The tusks were the color of buttermilk, three feet long, big around as his forearm at the top. The enamel at their tips was darker than the rest, with a roadmap of black hairline cracks from digging in the seabed and from combat. Gumlines were still visible in dried blood. Money, in a place with little else the outside world wants.

Ike looks out the window at the clouds, gray streaks running north and south. That kind of cloud means it's windy up high, he says. The mountains are blocking the wind here in the village, but once you get out to sea you'd feel it.

He calls one of his crewmembers. They talk a minute, mixed Yupik and English, then Ike hangs up. "My crew's all broke, too," he says, almost a moan. "It's gonna get nice and we'll have no gas. Gonna be inside, eating freakin' pilot bread."

WEDNESDAY MORNING ARRIVES SHROUDED IN FOG. I stand in the doorway of the school and look at the veiled landscape. Far to the north, in the Chukchi Sea, the Beaufort, the Kara, the Laptev and the East Siberian, the ice is just beginning to melt. The Bering Strait is still impassable. But in Norway and Russia, China and South Korea, ships are already preparing for trips to the Arctic.

I meet Milton Noongwook at the tan building where the elders ate lunch. Last year he worked as the supervisor of a four-person crew that monitored Shell Oil's mobile drill rig *Kulluk* and its fleet of support vessels from shore as they passed the island, north in the spring and south in the fall. On the way back to Seattle, the drill rig was caught in a storm and ran aground in south-central Alaska. Waves pounded it for days before the Coast Guard managed to pull it off the rocks. Noongwook's job was supposed to run through 2015, but the disaster threw Shell's plans into doubt. (The company didn't drill anywhere in the Arctic during the summer of 2013, and won't in 2014.) Other traffic through the Bering Strait, though, has increased as the Arctic grows increasingly ice-free during the summers. Most of the traffic passes between the western side of the island and Russia, which is also the main migration route for walrus and whales.

Noongwook says he's worried about the lost job, but even more he's worried about what would happen if there were an oil spill near the island. Many people viewed the *Kulluk* disaster as a warning. "One of these days one of these ships is going to run aground. It'll be worse than *Exxon*," he says, referring to the oil tanker that ran aground in 1989, releasing a massive spill onto south-central Alaskan shores. Crews cleaning up a spill in the Bering Sea would likely face freezing temperatures and rough seas, and the nearest Coast Guard base could be thousands of miles away.

As climate change has made the Bering Strait more accessible to outsiders, it's also made hunting more difficult, Noongwook says, echoing what I've heard from every hunter I've spoken with. There's less ice than there used to be, they say. It forms later in the fall, it's thinner, and when it breaks from shore it goes faster than it used to, forcing them to travel greater distances, increasing their risk of hitting

bad weather or being stranded by ice moving behind them and cutting off their return.

Other signs of climate change abound: The land is subsiding, lakes draining out, beaches shrinking. In recent years, the villagers have spotted strange creatures from the south—hummingbirds, and Hanasaki crabs from Japan.

Some changes feel more surreal. The old people I talked with spoke of turquoise icebergs that used to appear in the fall before the sea ice formed—freshwater shards of the polar icecap.

“Light blue, nice and sweet,” one of the elders told me. “I still want to try a chunk of it.” He pantomimed chopping a piece of ice. It’s been years since they’ve seen the blue icebergs in the fall.

Although Pacific walrus numbers are currently stable, the biologist in charge of the state’s walrus program told me that its population could quickly collapse as summer sea ice continues to diminish. Ike’s carving of the diving *ayveq* is an illustration of the animals’ life, how they swim to the ocean floor to find their crustacean prey. As summer ice in the Arctic has receded, it’s pulled away from shore, and is now often over water that’s too deep for the walruses to dive for food. No longer able to spread out across miles of ice, they’re increasingly congregating on shore in herds of as many as 30,000. These huge, skittish herds are at risk of trampling and killing their young during stampedes, as has happened several times recently, and also of depleting the nearby stocks of crustaceans. The crustaceans are themselves in danger as the ocean absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and grows more acidic, a phenomenon especially acute in the Arctic. Native hunters might be the last to notice a slow decline in the walrus population, the biologist told me, since they mostly see the walruses in small groups as they pass the island. The decline won’t necessarily be slow, though, he said. If, say, there were a large oil spill during the migration, the walruses might disappear all at once.

Noongwook tells me something that the elders had told him, when he was a boy. “They knew they wouldn’t reach the Millennium, but they talked about it,” he says. They told him that the waters around the island would open up, “like traffic lanes you see in the Lower Forty-Eight,” and that the hunting grounds would float far away from the island. He recalls one of them prophesying, ‘You’re going to be living in the fast lane, Milton.’

BY MIDDAY, the wind has pushed away the fog. Men splash through the puddled streets on four-wheelers, red jerry cans of gas bungeed to the racks. As I approach Ike and Sherry’s house, their eldest son pulls up on his snowmachine. He’d just bought 18 gallons of gas with his unemployment check. The family could’ve spent the money on food from the store. It would’ve been more certain. The gas is a gamble, a bet laid in meat and ivory.

Ike checks the weather map. Finally the wind has died down, but as he predicted, most of the ice is already far-gone. “Only ten to thirty percent ice over here,” he says. “That’s really bad.”

“One of those years,” his son agrees.

Ike picks up the phone and calls the store, where another of his sons recently started working. They’ve scraped enough money together for the last 12 gallons of

gas they need. He asks the person on the other end if he can use his son's employee discount number. He hangs up. They told him his son hasn't been working there long enough. It was worth a try. He stands up. He's going to buy gas.

By the door is a blue cooler that holds motor lube, a harpoon head, fleece gloves, a thermos, WD-40 and three boxes of .243 shells. Boating supplies. He pulls on his khaki overalls, boots and a flannel, and heads down the steps and up the road. One of his neighbors is outside, chopping at his driveway with an ice pick, releasing a flood of muddy water. "That's a nice river, Shorty," Ike says. The man nods.

The sky is stuffed with dark clouds, but there is a faint white line on the horizon. It's a reflection, Ike says. There's ice out there, after all. "It's close," he says. Two snowmachines are parked at the edge of the *tuvuqs*, tiny against the crinkled ridges of ice. Hunters used the machines to drag their skiffs to the water's edge. He'd have gone out already too, but he didn't want to take his grandsons boating in heavy weather. But conditions are getting better. The winds blow more gently than before. Tonight, or maybe tomorrow morning.

They'll drag their boats to the water. His son, the striker—the harpoon man—will hold the boat while the rest of them load up. He'll jump in after they've started the motor, and will sit in front. Ike will stand at the tiller, at the stern. Someone will note the time and compass reading whenever they change direction; the GPS doesn't always work, Ike tells me, and it's important they know how to get back. Eli and his other grandsons will sit in the middle of the boat.

It's a hopeful time, setting out across the water. "You hope that we'll be able to bring home food," Ike says. "You hope that all the other captains will bring home food. You hope that we'll have good weather out there, and good ice conditions." He hopes his grandsons will be watching and learning, so that they'll be able to provide for him when he gets old, he says. "And I hope that they'll pass it on to their children, too."

Once they find the ice they'll stop the engine to listen for the walrus' grunts, to smell for their telltale must. They'll sneak up, always downwind. His son will take the first shot. They'll butcher the *ayveq* there on the ice, gathering meat, liver, heart, intestines, hide and tusks. Then Ike will puncture the *ayveq*'s eyes and give them a last drink of water. "I still pop the eyes, just to honor the ritual," he tells me later. "Just to honor our ancestors, I still do that."

He walks down the street, avoiding chocolate milk puddles. A vole the size and shape of a baked potato skitters across the exposed tundra at the edge of the road. Ike stops and points down at the base of the hill. "That's my boat," he says. The silver, 17-foot boat resting in the snow looks small against the expanse of ice and water. "Gets you there and back," he says.

A little black dog, tied to an old wood-frame boat, yelps over and over. Seagulls keen. A girl on a four-wheeler races past, back wheels skidding on the occasional patch of snow. Ike looks out across the water and lets out a long sigh. "It's an edgy time for me," he says. He continues up the road toward the store and disappears around the bend.

Later that summer, Savoonga's leaders will send a letter to the governor of Alaska. It will say, in part:

WHEREAS: The subsistence hunters of Savoonga suffered a drastic loss of the amount of walrus harvested in the Spring hunt of 2013 due to weather conditions.

WHEREAS: There is a high rate of unemployment, and we rely heavily on the bounty we get from the sea. The majority of the households have nothing to put away in their freezers for the long winter ahead.

WHEREAS: Community residents suffered severe economic hardship as their ability to generate cash from ivory carvings was limited or non-existent.

WHEREAS: We have a store but prices are so steep.

They will have killed 87 walruses, just a fifth of their usual catch. Later, after the state declares an economic disaster on the island, Ike will tell me that the government-issue meat isn't bad, but that it's not as good as *ayveq*. He'll tell me that Sherry found a very interesting piece in their digging pit, an ivory bowl, and to let him know if I meet anyone who might want to buy it.

SOURCE LIST

Isaac Kulowiyi

Sherry Kulowiyi

Albert Kulowiyi

Dean Kulowiyi

Gloria Kulowiyi

Vera Metcalf

Nora Jackson

Martin Kongassagoon

Barbara Kongassagoon

Ben Pungowiyi

Myron Kingeekuk

Morris Toolie

Karen Nguyen

Janella Larsen

Colin Noongwook

Milton Noongwook

Jim Fall

Bruce Woods

Jim MacCracken

Fawn Carter

Becky Legatt

Milton