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Sixty Degrees North

Around the World in Search of Home

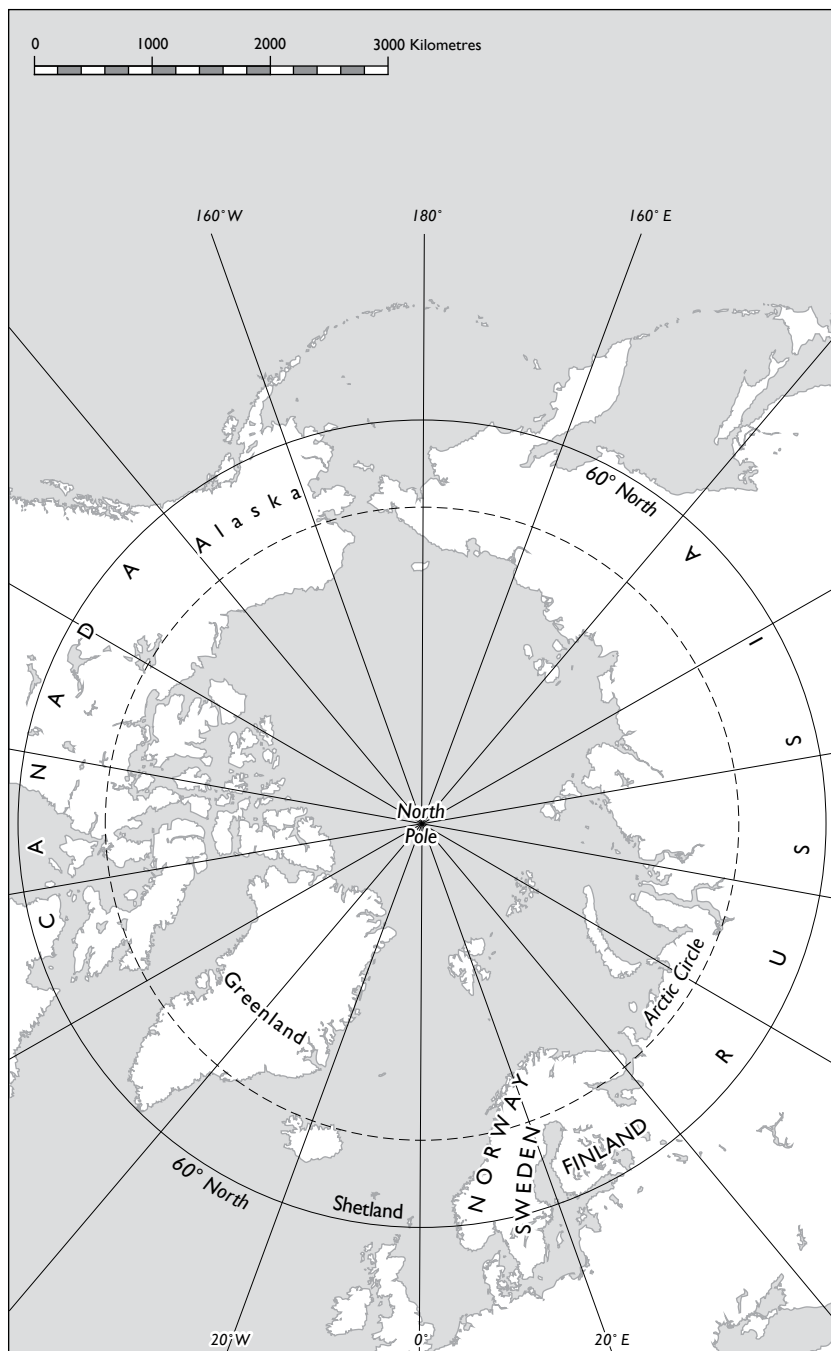
Written by Malachy Tallack

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SIXTY DEGREES NORTH



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around the world in search of home

Malachy Tallack

Polygon

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HOME GOING

I can remember the day: silver-skied and heavy with rain. It was early winter and I had just turned seventeen. The morning had been spent in bed, sick and sleepless, but by lunchtime boredom made me move. I stood up and shuffled towards the window, pulling a dressing-gown around my shoulders. The house in which I spent my teenage years faced east over the harbour in Lerwick, Shetland's capital town. From my room on the second floor I could see out onto our little garden, with the green picnic bench and the wooden trellis set against a low stone wall. Beyond, I could see fishing boats at the pier, and the blue and white ferry that chugged back and forth to the island of Bressay, just across the water.

Shetland lies at sixty degrees north of the equator, and the world map on our kitchen wall had taught me that, if I could see far enough, I could look out from that window across the North Sea to Norway, and to Sweden, then over the Baltic to Finland, to St Petersburg, then Siberia, Alaska, Canada and Greenland. If I could see far enough, my eyes would eventually bring me back, across the Atlantic Ocean, to where I was standing. I thought about that journey as I looked out over the harbour, half-dressed and shivering. Though I'd never travelled anywhere at this latitude before, I imagined then that I could see those places from above. I felt myself carried around the parallel, lifted and dragged, as though connected to a wire. The world turned and I turned with it, circling from home towards home again until I reached, inevitably, the back of my own head. Dizziness rose through me like a gasp of bubbles, and I fainted, briefly,

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landing on my knees with a jolt on the bedroom floor. Exhausted, I hauled myself back up again and into bed, and there I fell asleep and dreamed my way once more around the parallel. That dream, that day, never left me.

A few months earlier, my father had died. He left me one morning beside a lake in Sussex, not far from where he lived, and I spent the hours that followed fishing beneath August sunshine. It was the kind of quiet, ordinary day on which nothing extraordinary ought to happen. But it did. By the time the afternoon rolled towards evening and I began to wonder why he had not returned, he was already dead – killed in a car crash on his way to visit my grandmother in hospital. Waiting there alone, I clung to hope for as long as I could, but I had already imagined the worst. And though eventually I walked away, in search of someone to tell me what had happened and somewhere I could spend the night, part of me was left there beside the lake. Part of me has never stopped waiting.

On that evening, all of the plans I had came to an end, and when I returned to Shetland the following week it was with nothing in front of me. My parents had separated years before, and while I lived with my mother and brother in the islands, my father was in the south of England, at the other end of the British Isles. That summer I had been offered a place to study music at a school of performing arts in South London, and so I went to live with my dad. I had found a direction and followed it. When he died, just before the first term began, that direction was lost forever. I had no choice but to go north again, and once there I had no idea what I would do. On the day I stood beside the window, dreaming of the parallel, I had been stranded for months, lost and half-hollowed by grief. I was looking for something certain. I was looking for a direction.

Over the years, Shetland has made much of its latitude. When I was at high school, our youth club was called 60

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North. Later, there was a fishing industry newspaper with the same name. And a tourist radio station. And an online magazine. And a skip-hire company. And a beer, brewed in Lerwick.

Part of this ubiquity is down to a lack of imagination, and part of it to a kind of brand mentality: selling our northern exoticism, or something like that. But there is more to it, I think. Sixty degrees north is a story that we tell, both to ourselves and to others. It is a story about where – and perhaps also who – we are. ‘Shetland is at the same latitude as St Petersburg,’ tourists are informed, ‘as Greenland, and Alaska’. And they are told this because it seems to mean something. It seems to mean more, for instance, than the fact that Shetland is at the same longitude as Middlesbrough, or as Ouagadougou. To be at sixty degrees north is to be connected to a world that is more interesting and more mysterious than the one to which the islands are usually bound. To highlight it is to assert that this is not just a forgotten corner of the British Isles; Shetland belongs also to something else, something bigger. Once it was at the geographical heart of a North Atlantic empire, enclosed within the Norse world in a way that provokes nostalgia even now, more than five hundred years after the islands were pawned by the king of Denmark and Norway to Scotland. Unlike political or cultural geographies, the sixtieth parallel is certain and resolute; it is impervious to the whims of history. Shetland belongs to the north, upon this line with no corners to which it may be consigned. At sixty degrees, Shetland is as central as anywhere and everywhere else.

But what of those other places on that list we recite to tourists? What do we share with them, beyond a latitude? What exactly is this club to which we so enthusiastically belong? Looking at a map, it is possible to claim that the sixtieth parallel is a kind of border, where the almost-north

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and the north come together. In Europe, it crosses the very top of the British Isles and the bottom of Finland, Sweden and Norway. The line skirts the lower tip of Greenland, and of South-central Alaska. It slices the great expanse of Russia in half, and in Canada it does the same, marking the official boundary between the northern territories and southern provinces. All along the parallel are regions whose inhabitants are challenged, to some extent, by the places in which they live. They are challenged by climate, by landscape, by remoteness. And yet those inhabitants choose to remain. They make their peace with the islands and the mountains, the tundra and the taiga, the ice and the storms, and they stay. The relationships between people and place – the tension and the love, and the shapes that tension and that love can take – are the main focus of this book.

It was more than a decade after that day beside the window, when I dreamed my way around the world, that I finally set out to do it for real. I had spent half of those years away from Shetland. I had been to university, in Scotland and in Copenhagen, then lived and worked in Prague. I had found new directions and pursued them. And then I had come back, through choice, finally, rather than necessity. During those intervening years I thought so often about the parallel, imagining and reimagining the line, that when eventually I decided to follow it, I hardly paused to ask myself why. Now, though, I think I know the reasons.

It was curiosity, first of all. I wanted to explore the parallel, and to see those places to which my own place was tied. I wanted to learn about where I was and what it meant to be there. I wanted to come back laden with that knowledge, and to write it down.

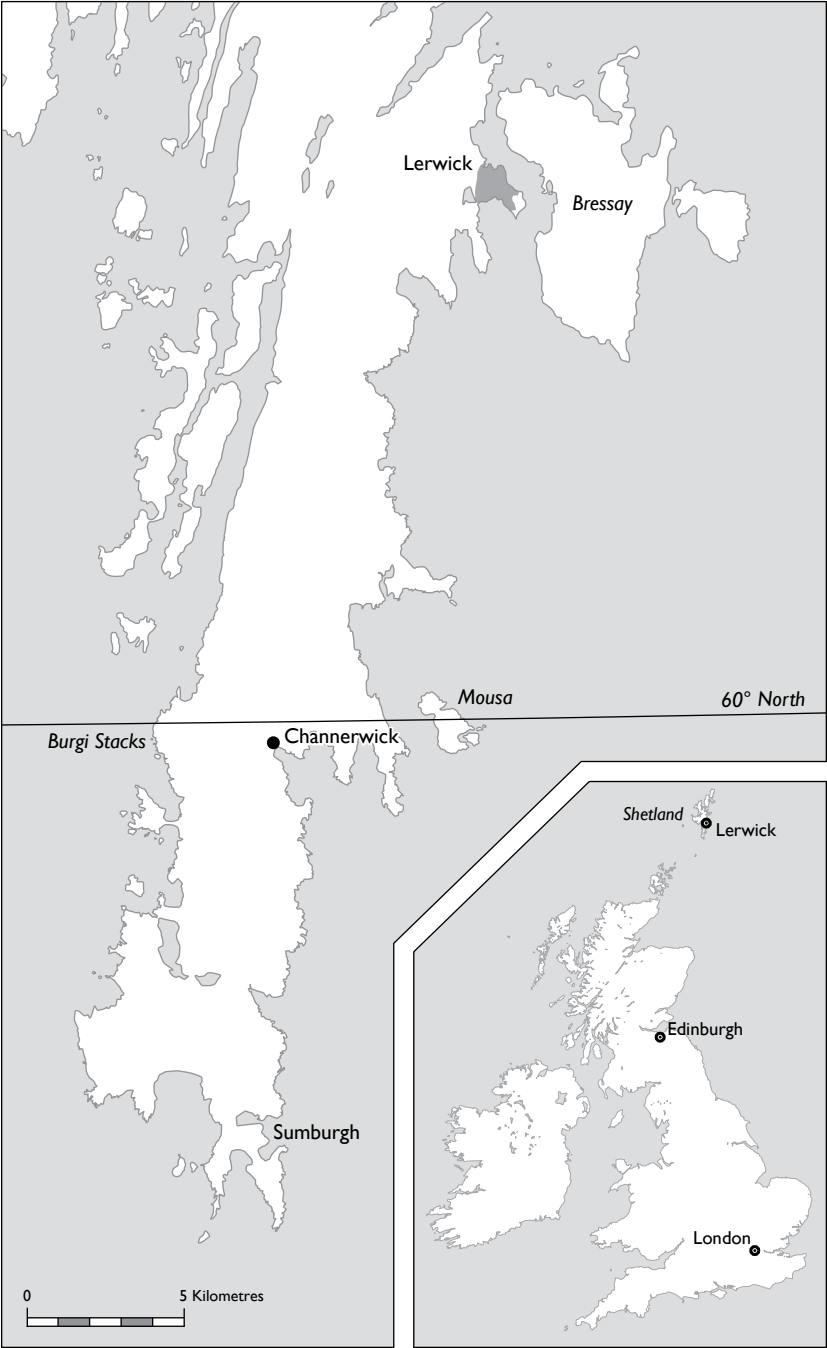
Then there was restlessness – that fizzing pressure within that makes me long for what is elsewhere, for what is far away. That restlessness, that joy and curse that I have known for most of my life, brings unease when I ought to be

Homegoing

content; it brings contentment when I ought to be uneasy. It sends me out into the world, almost against my will.

But finally, and perhaps most potently, it was homesickness that made me go. It was a desire to return to somewhere I belonged. My relationship with Shetland had always been fraught and undermined by my own past, and somehow I imagined that by going – by following the parallel around the world – that could change. To make such a journey, in which the final, certain destination must be home, was an act of faithfulness. It was a commitment that, for the first time in my life, I felt ready to make.

And so I went, visiting in turn each country on the sixtieth parallel. I travelled westward, with the sun and with the seasons, to Greenland in spring, North America in summer, Russia in autumn and the Nordic countries in winter. But I began by finding the line.



SHETLAND

between the hill and the sea

Driving through the hamlets of Bigton and Ireland at the south end of the Shetland Mainland, the sun was icy bright and the sky a polished blue, barely troubled by clouds. Half a mile away the Atlantic lay like a desert, and beyond, the horizon, a soft, blunt edge interrupting a view that might otherwise stretch all the way around the world. On days like this it is hard to think of leaving. Days like this extinguish all other days.

The narrow road I was on stooped towards the coast, then faded to an unsurfaced track. A mile or so beyond the last house I stopped, parked the car and got out. The air was still and quiet, and warm enough to leave my jacket behind. It felt good to be there, to inhabit the day. Somewhere along this stretch of coast, the sixtieth parallel tied the ocean to the island, passing unmarked between land and water. A few miles or so to the east, it would meet the sea again, connecting Shetland to Norway. As I reached the cliff top, I pulled the map from my bag and unfolded it, exploring the space between where I was and where I wanted to be. The lines on the map were solid and stark, dividing the blue water from the white land. Everything on the page was certain of itself, but the world in front of me was nothing like that. It took a moment to pull these two images together, to merge them, and imagine how they might be reconciled.

I was standing at the top of a steep-sided cove, a *geo*, perhaps thirty metres above the water. From there the land

fell sharply towards a bouldered beach, and then the sea, where a thick mat of kelp was tousled by the ebbing tide. Half a dozen seals, alert to my silhouette, abandoned their positions on the rocks and heaved themselves back into the waves. Once safe, they turned to look more carefully at this figure above them, unable to restrain their curiosity. Just offshore, three skerries lay littered with cormorants, black wings outstretched, as the sea around them shivered and shook in the sunlight. Far beyond, to the northwest, the island of Foula lay like a great wave on the horizon. If my map-reading skills were to be trusted, these skerries were the Billia Cletts, which would place me just a few hundred metres south of where I wanted to be. As I walked carefully along the cliff edge the seals were still visible below, their thick bodies dark in the clear water. I stepped slowly, on grey rocks glorious with colour; each stone was splashed yellow-orange by lichen, every crack and crevice was speckled with sea pinks.

The cliffs along this part of the coast are heavily pitted with caves, hollows and geos. In winter, this side of Shetland meets the full weight of the Atlantic and the southwesterly gales that thunder their way across the ocean. Waves that began life thousands of miles away find their way to these shores, growing larger and more powerful as they go. Water carves itself into the land, and throws giant boulders up the cliffs like marbles. Pondering the many battered coastlines of the world, in her book *The Sea around Us*, Rachel Carson concluded: 'it seems unlikely that any coast is visited more wrathfully by the sea's waves than the Shetlands and the Orkneys'. Summer visitors may imagine these islands to be only a timid north, a place protected from the climatic severities of other northern lands. But bring that visitor back in the middle of a winter storm and they would feel differently. This is one of the windiest places in Europe, and recounting stories of storms past is a favourite occupation for islanders.

Shetland

There is, for instance, the ‘Hogmanay Hurricane’ of New Year’s Eve, 1991, in which gusts of over 173 miles per hour were recorded before the anemometer was torn from the ground. Then there is the month of January 1993, which brought a record twenty-five days of gales, and saw the oil tanker Braer wrecked on the coast, just south of the parallel. Wind is the dominant and most extreme element of Shetland’s climate. It can, at times, seem so utterly unremitting that the air itself becomes a physical presence, as solid as a clenched fist. And on those rare calm days its absence can be shocking and wonderful.

It is this violence, of wind and sea, combined with its glacial past, that makes Shetland’s coastline what it is: a ragged, fractal form. ‘Hardly anything can be imagined,’ wrote John Shirreff in 1814, ‘more irregular than the shape of this island.’ According to the Ordnance Survey, the coastline of Shetland amounts to almost 1,700 miles – sixteen per cent of Scotland’s total – and a glance at the map shows why. The largest of the islands, known as ‘the Mainland’, is fifty miles long, north to south, and just twenty at its widest point. But nowhere is more than three miles from the sea. This southern end is a peninsula, almost thirty miles in length and rarely three wide, which extends like a finger from the fist of the central Mainland. Further north, the coast is a panoply of beaches, coves, steep sea cliffs and narrow inlets, known as *voes*. These voes, like mini-fjords, are deep valleys, flooded by the rising sea after the last ice age. They bite into the land, creating distance, and making the ocean always, everywhere, inescapable.

When Shetland emerged from beneath the ice, 12,000 years ago, it was an empty place. There was no vegetation, no birds, no mammals, no life at all. It was a blank space, waiting to be filled. And as the climate steadily improved, that process of filling began. Lichens, mosses and low shrubs were the first colonisers, followed by sea birds, exploiting

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the abundant food resources of the North Atlantic. As more birds arrived, they carried with them the seeds of other plants, on their feet and in their stomachs.

The first land mammals in Shetland were people, who arrived around 6,000 years ago. The islands that met these original immigrants would have looked very different from the islands of today. Low woodland dominated – birch, juniper, alder, oak, willow – as well as tall herbs and ferns, particularly around the coast. It was a lush, green and mild place, and the lack of land prey, of deer in particular, was more than compensated for by the lack of predators and of competition. There were none of the wolves and bears the settlers had left behind in Scotland. Here they found an abundance of birds, providing meat and eggs, as well as seals, walrus, whales and fish.

This early settlement of Shetland coincided with the latter stages of a major change in lifestyle in northern Europe. Agriculture, which began in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, had gradually spread west and north across the continent as the climate improved and stabilised. Land that had once been scoured and scarred by ice was being transformed by the hands of people. Forests were cut down and burned, and the space given over to domestic animals. The early Shetlanders were also early farmers, and it is hard not to be impressed by their achievements. That they managed to cross the dangerous waters between Britain and the islands in their fragile, skin-covered boats, and in sufficient numbers to build extensive communities, is astonishing enough. But that they also managed to take considerable quantities of livestock with them – pigs, sheep, goats and cattle – is doubly so. These animals, and the people that brought them, were to prove the greatest factor in altering and reshaping the landscape once the ice retreated.

Shetland was at the very far edge of the world for these settlers. Beyond the edge, in fact. It was as far north as it

Shetland

was possible to go through Britain, and the people that came took huge risks. So why did they bother? What pulled them northwards? Could it be that the spirit of adventure was enough – that the cliffs of Shetland, just visible on the horizon from Orkney, taunted people until they could resist no longer? Was it simply human beings exploring the limits of what was possible?

It is tempting to suspect this might be so. But there are other alternatives. There is, in particular, the possibility that the development of agriculture itself may have pushed the settlers onwards. Changes in land use in northern Britain were placing pressure on the available space, and creating tension and conflict between neighbouring peoples. A society without walls or borders was evolving into one in which they were essential. Perhaps it was precisely this tension that drove people north to Shetland.

There was a light breeze now, spilling up and over the cliff top, and fulmars were clinging to it, riding like fair-ground horses up and down on the shimmering air. One bird lifted higher, close to my head, and hung for a moment against the wind. He seemed almost to float there, and as I watched him I was sure he was looking straight back. For those few seconds we eyed each other, fascinated: me by his sublime disregard for gravity, and he by my clumsy bulk and strange attachment to the earth. Fulmars must be the most inquisitive of seabirds. They seem unable to ignore cliff walkers, pestering them with nosy flybys and showing off their aerobatic skills. They are graceful, but with an air of menace too. Something about them – their blazing, black eyes perhaps, shadowed in front, with a comma flick behind, or their bulbous, petrel beaks – gives them a sinister expression. It is an appearance that is only reinforced by the sharp, clattering cackles of those birds ensconced on their nests, and their habit of throwing up a vile, oily substance on those unfortunate enough to step too close.

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Further along the cliff top I reached the Burn of Bur-gistacks, where wheatears scattered at my approach, each clacking like pebbles in a cloth bag. As I walked they kept their distance ahead of me, hopping a little further with every few steps I took. The burn here clammers hastily towards the sea, down a rocky slope and then a brief waterfall, lined with sopping green moss. Beyond the burn were the Burgi Stacks themselves. And then, according to the map, I was almost at the parallel.

I stopped, and looked carefully at the contours of the land. It was harder than I'd expected it to be to distinguish one point from another, and to be sure exactly where I was. The map showed a cave, over which my line appeared to cross, but from where I stood the cave was entirely hidden. I walked north until I was sure I had crossed the parallel, then retraced my steps. As I peered over the edge of a steep scree slope, the map's clean lines were shattered into stones and grass and waves. The angle of the cliff and the jutting rocks prevented any kind of certainty.

I was tempted then to climb down the slope towards the water, where things might be clearer. There was, it seemed, an almost navigable route down. But it would take me alongside two fat, fluffy fulmar chicks, who would no doubt relish the opportunity to practise their vomiting skills. It was a stupid idea, and I thought better of it. I sat instead on the cool grass, the map open in front of me, tracing the lines with my fingers.

I was hot and thirsty, and annoyed at myself for not bringing a GPS to make things clearer. For a moment it all seemed arbitrary and pointless; there could be no real certainty like this. But still I wanted a fixed point, a starting block from which to begin. So I looked again at the paper, read again every word of the surrounding area: to the south, the Burgi Stacks, the cave, then the Seat of Mandrup and Sheep Pund to the north. Just east was the Green of Mandrup, the field behind me.

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And then I saw it. Almost completely hidden by those words – ‘Green of Mandrup’ – but just protruding from behind the letters on either side, was a solid, straight line: a fence. And as it reached the cliff, it corresponded with the parallel. I stood and faced east, following the posts that ran through the field and up the hill, and then looked back to where the fence ended in a muddle of wire and wood hanging over the cliff edge. So this was it: sixty degrees north of the equator. This was my starting line.



Geography begins at the only point of which we can be certain. It begins inside. And from there, from inside, rises a single question: where am I?

Imagine yourself stood upon a hill. Or better, imagine yourself stood on a tall hill on a small island, the horizon visible in every direction – a perfect, unbroken line. From early morning until late in the night you stand there. You watch the sun rise from one side of the island and arc its way above, moving slowly and predictably through the sky until it reaches the opposite horizon, where it gradually disappears. As the light fades, stars freckle against the mounting darkness. They too turn about you, on an axis rooted at the North Star, Polaris. This great arena of night and day seems to roll over the stationary world and surround you with its movement. And that question rises: where am I?

The universe that we can see is a place of mirrors and illusions, tricks of the eye and the mind, and it takes a great leap of scientific faith to come to terms with the facts as we now know them to be: that nothing is still; that both our universe and our planet are in ceaseless motion. To look upwards and to acknowledge this is to take a nauseating lurch of the imagination. It is to be overwhelmed not just by a feeling of insignificance, but of fear, vulnerability and exhilaration. Amid all this movement, this unfathomable

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distance, it seems somehow impossible that we could be anywhere at all.

But our understanding of where we are on the Earth has not been built with this celestial motion in mind. Since people first began to use the sun and stars as navigational aids, they have done so by being ignorant of, or by ignoring such disorientating facts. That the North Star is not a stable point within the universe does not matter so long as it seems to be a stable point. That the sun does not turn around the Earth makes no difference if it continues to appear to do so, and that its appearance is predictable. For the roots of that question – where am I? – are not so much philosophical, nor exactly scientific; they are practical. Where we are only truly makes sense in so far as it relates to where we have been and where we want to be. In order to move in a purposeful way, to avoid wasting our time and endangering our lives, we must build an image of our location, and where we stand in our surroundings. We must make maps.

I stared out at the calm ocean, at the tide lines laced like skeins of white hair. I looked towards the horizon – blue fastened to blue – and beyond, towards unseen places: to Greenland, to North America, to Russia, Finland, Scandinavia and back here again across the North Sea. I looked out for several minutes, then felt ready to go. I turned and walked up the hill, alongside the fence. From my starting line at the cliff I made my way back along the parallel, glad to be moving again.

Soon, the lavish green that had fringed the shore gave way to low heather and dark, peaty ground. The land flattened into a plateau of purple and olive, trenched and terraced where the turf had been cut. White tufts of bog cotton lay strewn about the hill. Shallow pools of black water crouched below the banks of peat and in the narrow channels that lolled between. I hopped from island to island of solid ground, trying to keep my feet dry, as a skylark

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hung frantically above, held aloft by the lightness of his song.

After only ten minutes or so I was walking downhill again, into the lush valley that folds around the loch of Vattersetter and the Burn of Maywick, flanked by bright yellow irises. The thick heather faded back into a lighter, leaner green, and on the opposite slope was a field, striped by cut silage. A gust of golden plovers sprang suddenly from the ground ahead, and curled its way over the valley. Two lapwings crossed their path above the loch, guttering towards the sea with a clumsy kind of grace. I watched the birds until they tumbled out of view, and then continued to the burn below.

The steep descent into the valley meant an equally steep climb out again, on a gravel track that, according to the map, crossed back and forth over the parallel several times before waning into nothing. I carried on, and was soon back amid the peat. The hill rose sharply to 200 metres, and I was hot from the walking, but it was worth it. As I reached the higher ground, the air opened up without warning, and I could see from one side of Shetland to the other: the Atlantic behind and the North Sea in front. Above, wisps of cirrus cloud were combed across a bold sky, as wide as any sky I had ever seen before.

Human beings have always moved from here to there, from one place to another, with a combination of memory, acquired knowledge and curiosity. We have made use, most commonly, of internal maps – remembered routes from one point of significance to another: a place of food, a place of shelter, a place of danger. Elements of these maps would have been passed from generation to generation, in songs and in stories. They were embellished, updated and, if necessary, discarded. These are living maps, where space and direction are sealed off and separated from the world outside. They can be as intricate and mysterious as the songlines of the

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Australian Aborigines, or as straightforward as remembering how to reach the shop from your front door.

To build a more concrete image of where we are it has been necessary to externalise our maps: to make pictures of the world. The very first visual maps were of the stars, such as those on the walls of the Lascaux caves in France, drawn more than 16,000 years ago. But looking up at the sky is easy. To draw a picture that could encompass a particular space on the Earth, or encompass the whole planet even, is a far greater challenge. The mapmaker is forced to become other than himself, to imagine the view of the birds. The mapmaker must look down from above and become god-like, re-creating his own world.

Unlike internal or 'story' maps, early world maps were intended as scientific or philosophical exercises rather than navigational guides. Their practicality was limited by two significant factors. Firstly, the ancient Greeks who pioneered cartography had limited geographical knowledge. Centred on the Mediterranean, their maps extended eastward only as far as India, with their westward edge at the Strait of Gibraltar. Beyond these boundaries the world was more or less unknown, though speculation about the grotesque barbarians dwelling in northern Europe and Africa was widespread. The other major problem for the Greek mapmakers was their lack of a practical means of representing distance and shape accurately. What was required to do this was some kind of scale or grid, which could be applied both to the spherical surface of the Earth and, potentially, to a globe or a flat map. That grid was provided in the second century BC, when Hipparchus of Nicaea devised the system that we still use today: measuring the Earth in degrees of arc. Although similar methods had been proposed previously by the Babylonians, Hipparchus' achievement was to divide a circle into 360 degrees of arc, and so provide the foundation stone for trigonometry.

A degree was a measurement of the angle at the centre of a circle, between one radius and another, like the hands on a clock. If the time is three o'clock, the angle between the two hands is 90° : one quarter of a full circle. On the outside of the circle, the points where the two radii, or hands, touch the edge can also be said to be 90° apart. This measurement could further be applied to spheres, like the Earth, with the north-south angle denoted by one measurement – latitude – and the east-west angle by another – longitude. It was then possible, at least theoretically, to give co-ordinates for any place on the planet, and that information could further be used to represent geographical space accurately on a map. This was a revolutionary step for navigation and for cartography.

Whereas longitudinal lines, or meridians, are of equal length, running through both poles, and dividing the planet like the segments of an orange, circles of latitude are parallel lines, progressively decreasing in size, from the planet's full circumference at the equator to a single point at the Poles. They are represented as an angle up to 90° north or south of the equator. At 60° north, where I was standing, the parallel was half the length of the equator, and two thirds of the way to the Pole.

For the Greeks, the pinnacle of their cartographic tradition came in the mid-second century AD, in Roman Alexandria. It was here that Claudius Ptolemy created his *Geographia*, a work that gathered together the geographical knowledge of both the Greeks and the Romans. Ptolemy gave co-ordinates for around 8,000 places, stretching between his Prime Meridian at the Fortunate Isles (Cape Verde) in the west, China in the east, central Africa in the south and Shetland, which he called Thule, in the north. This was the known world, reaching 180 degrees in longitude and eighty in latitude, and Shetland then was at its very edge. Despite all but disappearing for more than 1,000 years, the influence of this book, eventually, was immense.

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Today, we need only consult a map to learn of our location, or just press a button on our handheld GPS or phone, which can tell us our longitude and latitude in degrees, minutes and seconds of arc. But still somehow that question feels unanswered, still it gnaws at our certainty. Where am I?



This is a strange place up here, this landscape of peat and heather. Often called generically ‘the hill’, it forms the core of Shetland, covering more than fifty per cent of the land. From that spot I could have walked to the north of the Mainland, forty miles away, and hardly stepped off it at all. It is a place separate from the places of people, a semi-wild moorland, divided by fence and dyke from the croft land below. It has also been, and in many parts of Shetland remains, a shared place – a common ground – with grazing and peat-cutting rights held collectively by crofters in adjacent communities.

In descriptions of the hill by travellers, certain words recur frequently: barren, desolate, featureless. The land is considered to be missing something, lacking in both aesthetic appeal and agricultural worth. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1911 proclaimed Shetland’s interior to be ‘bleak and dreary, consisting of treeless and barren tracts of peat and boulders’. It is a heaving, undulating terrain, without the drama of a mountainscape or the quietude of a valley. It is a place neither tame enough nor wild enough to be considered valuable. It is, in many senses, an in-between land. On the map, there is little to see here but contour lines, and the serpentine scrawl of the burns, where black water chuckles seaward from the inertia of the bog. Looking around, the eye seeks places on which to settle, to focus, but nothing breaks the heavy swell of the land. The hill presents an expanse of sameness that draws the walker in and creates a sense of separation from the world below. There is a kind of space, a vastness, which is somehow surprising in

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such a limited land. The peatscape opens out and unfolds in what Robert Macfarlane calls 'active expansiveness'. The horizon, the cupola of the sky and the clarity of the air, all become part of the land's measure and its bulk. Together in this arena they uphold an illusion of distance, and make Shetland seem a larger place, a place in which it is possible to become lost. Here you can feel yourself entirely remote from other people, and sit alone, amid an unfamiliar quiet.

Like those who dwell in the shadow of mountains, Shetlanders live with the constant presence of the moor and the hill. It is a presence that is, I think, as central to the character of the islanders as it is to the islands. For just as we inhabit the landscape, the landscape inhabits us, in thought, in myth and in memory; and somehow the openness of the land invites us to become attached, or else attaches itself to us. Our understanding of space and our relationship to that space are affected, and so too is our understanding of time.

We are used to imagining time as a fixed dimension, through which we are moved, steadily and unfalteringly. But there are places where this image seems inadequate, where time itself seems to move at another pace altogether. There are places where we sense the moments rush by, unhindered, so close and so quick that we feel the breath of them as they pass. And then there are other places, such as here on the hill, where time seems to gather itself, to coil and unravel simultaneously. Here the past is closer. We find its memory embedded within the earth, like the eerily preserved bodies, centuries old, drawn out of peat bogs across Europe, with clothes, skin and hair intact. Or like the peat itself, a biological journal of the islands' history. Things move slowly here. Change is stubbornly, solemnly recorded. To examine the land closely, and to take into account its own life and the lives upon and within it, is to be faced with a multitude of other times and other worlds. Here on the hill, where land and sky open out, past and present do the opposite; they

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wrap themselves tightly together. There is, here, a native timelessness.

It is hardly surprising therefore that the hill has played such a significant role in the mythology of these islands. In particular, it has long been, and remains, the home of Shetland's resident 'hillfolk', the trows. Nocturnal, troll-like creatures, sometimes benign and sometimes taking the role of trickster, the best known trow stories tell of musicians, bribed or lured down into the earth beneath the heather. There they must perform in a world where the human measurement of time no longer applies. The fiddle player will entertain his hosts for the evening, and be offered food and drink, even a place to sleep; but he may emerge from his night's performance to find that his children are grown, his wife remarried or long dead. One unfortunate fiddler, Sigurd o' Gord, lost an entire century beneath the hill. He returned home with a tune he had learned, 'Da Trows' Spring', but discovered that everything had changed in his absence: his home belonged to someone else; his family were long gone.

The popularity of these tales refuses to fade. The stories are endlessly repeated, recorded and published, overshadowing virtually all other native folklore, and I'm sure there are still some Shetlanders who claim to have met one of these creatures while out wandering on the hill. The trow may appear suddenly out of the mist, or from behind a rock, or it may even emerge from the rock itself. They are integral, it seems, to the landscape in which they live, and their stubborn persistence, as a subject and as a species, must at least in part be down to the equally stubborn persistence of this, their habitat. It should also be seen, I think, as a manifestation of the ongoing ambivalence in our relationship with that habitat, an ambivalence expressed most clearly in the debates that have raged for years over the building of wind-farms in the central Mainland.

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The uneasiness that the peatscapes can invoke has deep cultural roots. Human society in Shetland developed together with, rather than simply alongside, the hill, and that development is reflected in the relationship between them. When people first arrived in the islands, peat had not yet begun to form over large areas. It existed in isolated, poorly-drained patches, but the blanket bog that now stretches across much of the land would simply not have been there. The arrival of humans in Shetland, though, coincided with a downturn in the climate. Temperatures dropped and rainfall increased, and in waterlogged, acidic ground, where vegetable matter cannot properly decompose, it instead begins to accumulate as peat. The process would have been a natural one, determined by both soil and climate, but sustained deforestation and agricultural development also played an important role. Further climatic deterioration speeded up the peat growth, and spread the bog across new areas. More and more, Shetlanders were forced to abandon previously useful land that had become saturated, acidic and infertile, and were squeezed into a thin, habitable wedge between the hill and the sea. By 2,000 years ago, the land would have looked much as it does today.

Paradoxically though, the development of peat was eventually to provide the means by which people could survive this climatic shift. For while the destruction of the native woodlands must have contributed to the growth of the bogs, the forest had never been very substantial anyway. The fuel that was available to people, both from indigenous trees and from driftwood, was most likely becoming scarce by the time that peat had grown to useful depths. And it is peat – cut, dried and burned – that has sustained people in these islands ever since. Those communities without access to it struggled, and sometimes failed to survive. It was, until very recently, an essential element of life in Shetland.

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Today, electricity, gas, coal and oil have largely replaced peat in island homes. But it is still dug by some, out of habit or nostalgia, or because the smell of burning turf has a warmth and a redolence that cannot be replicated by any other fuel. Its thick, blue-grey smoke is inviting and evocative, wrapping a house in warmth and in memories of warmth. But its necessity has now passed, and there on the hilltop it seems the life of the peat itself may be passing too. On the slopes around me, much of it had eroded to the bedrock, drying out and degrading. And below, as I began descending again, towards Channerwick, I could see great swathes of black and grey all around, scars of soil and of stone. In the autumn of 2003, after two dry summers and one dry winter, a single night of heavy rain resulted in thousands of tonnes of peat slipping off the hill where I stood, covering the road, destroying a bridge and walls, killing sheep. Other landslides have occurred elsewhere in the islands since, and as the climate continues to change – with temperatures rising and both droughts and storms increasing – the illusion of stability and permanence that exists on the hill is likely to be shattered more and more often.

I paused just above the main road, where a small, yellow sign confirmed the latitude. Ahead of me were Hoswick and Sandwick, hidden behind the crest of the next hill; and beyond them lay the sea, and the island of Mousa. There is no cover here, no shelter or protection. Everything is exposed like the bare rock scars. A kind of melancholy had settled on me as I crossed the moor, but I was reluctant to move on and leave the hill behind. I sat on the heather gazing at the sky above, where a few, sluggish clouds drifted east towards the sea. Then I lay back and closed my eyes for a moment, and dreamed I was exactly where I was.

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I first visited Shetland when I was about five years old, on a holiday with my parents. My mother's elder brother had moved to the islands from Belfast in the late 1960s for work, then married a Shetlander and had a family. My other uncle had followed and stayed, and we came to visit them several times. My mother and father had considered moving north before I was born. Both of them felt drawn here, away from the south of England where I spent my first few years, but it was not until after they separated that my mother eventually made the move. My memories of those early trips are vague, and have mingled with photographs from the family album, which fix them more solidly but less certainly in place. They are images more than they are true memories, snapshot moments that carry little weight. A boy on a beach, playing and swimming in the sunshine; games and tears in the Lerwick street where my uncle lived.

When we moved north permanently, my mother, brother and I, I was ten years old. My parents had separated some time before that, but family life in Sussex had otherwise continued much as I had always known it. I was too young to really understand the significance of their split, and was anyway surrounded, always, by love.

The idea of a relocation felt like an adventure, as such things always do to a child. From the moment it was first discussed, I was excited and eager to go. The reality though was different, like going away on holiday and discovering, while there, that you can never go back home. That half my family were with me did not detract from the sense that I had been lifted up and dropped in an alien place, a place that was not and could not be my home. The word for it, I suppose, is *deracination* – to be uprooted. That was how it seemed to me. My past was elsewhere, my childhood was elsewhere, my friends, my grandparents, my father were elsewhere.

That feeling of division and separation cut deep into me then. A sense that who I was and what I needed were not

here but somewhere else grew inside me, and continued to grow. That sense evolved, over time, into the restlessness that dogs me even today and that triggered, in part, this journey. It evolved too into an unshakable feeling of exile and of homesickness, and a corresponding urge to extinguish that feeling: to be connected, to belong, to be a part of somewhere and no longer apart. It was what Scott Russell Sanders has called ‘The longing to become an inhabitant’, intensified and distorted by an unwillingness to inhabit the place in which I had to live.

My separation from Shetland was, I thought, as obvious to others as it was to me. And my antipathy, I believed, was reciprocated. According to the twin pillars of island identity – accent and ancestry – I was an outsider and would always be so. Growing up in Lerwick I imagined myself unable ever to truly fit in. I was often unhappy in school, sometimes bullied, and it was those differences, naturally, on which bullies would focus. For the first time I discovered that I was English, not because I had chosen to be so, but because that was the label that was tied around my neck. For a while I wore it proudly, like a badge of distinction, but in the end it didn’t seem to fit. My unsettledness in those early years, my sense of exile and longing, did not find a positive direction until I was sixteen, when I decided to go and study music and to live with my father. To make that choice – to decide the place where I would be – was enormously important. And then came the accident, and choice, again, was gone.



Shetland, like other remote parts of Scotland, is scarred by the remnants of the past, by history made solid in the landscape. Rocks, reordered and rearranged, carry shadows of the people that moved them. They are the islands’ memory. From the ancient field dykes and boundary lines, burnt mounds and forts, to the crumbling croft houses, abandoned

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by the thousands who emigrated at the end of the nineteenth century, the land is witness to every change, but it is loss that it remembers most clearly. For some, these rocks reek of mortality. Their forms are an oppressive reminder that we, too, will leave little behind us. In 'The Broch of Mousa', the poet Vagaland wrote of how 'in the islands darkness falls / On homes deserted, and on ruined walls; / The tide of life recedes.' People have come and gone from these islands, and with them have passed 'their ways, their thoughts, their songs; / To earth they have returned.' We are left only with the memory of stones.

The island of Mousa was once a place of people. It was once home to families, to fishermen and farmers, who lived and died there. But now the people are gone and their homes deserted. The island has been left to the sheep, the birds and the seals, and, in the summer at least, to the tourists. On the day I visited, there were fifteen of us – British, Scandinavian and North American – making the journey on the little ferry, *Solan IV*, which carries passengers between April and September. It is a short trip from the stone pier in Sandwick to the jetty on the island, and as we galloped across the grey sound I looked about at the other passengers. One, a man wearing beige combat trousers, checked shirt and red baseball cap, consulted a handheld GPS for the full five minutes of the crossing. He never looked up, never looked out at the water or the approaching island, just stared at the little screen in front of him. It was an odd way to experience the journey, but I was jealous of his gadget, and of the accuracy it promised. I wanted to see what he could see.

A remote island of just one and a half square miles might seem an unusual tourist attraction, but people come to Mousa for several reasons. First, there is the opportunity to explore an island once occupied, now uninhabited (what you might call the St Kilda factor). There is, too, the chance to see birds and seals, which take advantage of the

lack of people to breed here in large numbers. But most of all, people come here for the broch. While Mousa is just one of around one hundred known Iron Age broch sites in Shetland, and several hundred in the whole of Scotland, it is nevertheless unique, for only this one still looks much as it did when it was first built, over 2,000 years ago. For this fact alone Mousa would be impressive, having withstood two millennia of human and climatic violence; but no less remarkable than its longevity is the actual structure itself, standing at forty-four feet: the tallest prehistoric building in Britain. In shape, it is rather like a power station cooling tower, bulging slightly at the base, where its diameter is fifty feet, and slimming gently, then straightening to vertical towards the top. Constructed entirely of flat stones, the broch is held together by nothing more than the weight of the stones above and the skill of the original builders. It is an outstanding architectural achievement. Inside is a courtyard, separated from the world by double walls more than three metres thick. And between the two outer walls a stairway winds upwards, giving access to cells at various levels, and ultimately to the top of the tower, where visitors can look at the island spread out around them.

Will Self has called Mousa Broch ‘one of my sacred sites. For me, comparable to the pyramids’. And that comparison is understandable. The broch is beautiful and mysterious, imposing and tantalisingly intact. Yet we know almost nothing of the people who – around the same time that Ptolemy was marking Shetland on the map – decided to build this structure. It is safe to assume that the architects of Scotland’s brochs were a militarised people, for the towers’ defensive capabilities are obvious. But there is something about this broch that implies more than simply defence. Its massive size seems beyond necessity, and the sheer extravagance of it suggests that, if security was the primary concern, it must have been built in a state of extreme paranoia. So perhaps

a more likely possibility is that the brochs were built not for defence alone, but as acts of self-glorification by Iron Age chieftains. They were status symbols, born of a bravado much like that which created skyscrapers in the twentieth century: a combination of functionality and showing off.

That this particular example has survived so perfectly for so long is partly a result of its remoteness, and partly because nobody has ever had the need to take it to pieces. While other ancient buildings have been plundered for useful material over the millennia, Mousa's beaches are still crowded with perfect, flat stones, providing all the material the island's inhabitants ever required. The rocks which helped to create such an extraordinary structure have remained plentiful enough to help ensure its long life. And today, those rocks are protecting other lives too. Press your ear to the walls of the broch and you will hear the soft churring and grunting of storm petrels, the tiny seabirds that patter their way above the waves by day, returning to the safety of their nests at night. Seven thousand storm petrels – eight percent of Britain's population – nest on this island, on the beaches and in the broch itself. The building seems almost to breathe with the countless lives concealed within: past and present hidden, sheltered among the rocks.

The people who built this broch, who lived in and around it, seem far out of reach to us today, an enigma. Archaeologists and historians examine the available clues carefully and they make assessments, suppositions. But in our desire to eradicate mystery from the past, and to understand and know these people, we forget one crucial point. We miss the real mystery. Sitting on the grass beneath the broch, looking back towards the Mainland, I scratched my wrists and brushed the midges from my face. There was no wind, and the insects were taking advantage of the opportunity to feed. The clouds hung low over the sound, and draped softly onto the hills across the water. What struck me then, as I leaned

back against the ancient stone wall, was not the great distance and difference that lay between now and then, nor was it the tragedy of all we do not know. What struck me was the sense of continuity, and the deep determination of people to live in this place.

Rebecca West once wrote that certain places ‘imprint the same stamp on whatever inhabitants history brings them, even if conquest spills out one population and pours in another wholly different in race and philosophy’. This stamp is what Lawrence Durrell called ‘the invisible constant’; it is the thread that holds the history of a place together, the sense of sameness that cuts through the past like a furrow through a field.

In Shetland, human society has evolved in both gradual and sudden movements. For a few hundred years people built brochs, and then they stopped. In the two millennia that followed many other changes took place. New people came, bringing a new language and a new religion, before they too disappeared when the Vikings arrived in the late eighth century. Yet despite these changes, despite all that came and went in that time, always it was the land that dictated the means of survival. The Norsemen arrived as Vikings, but they became Shetlanders. They became fishermen and farmers, just as the Picts had been, just as the broch-builders had been, and all those before them. Crops were sown and harvested; sheep and cattle were reared and killed. The land scarred the people, just as the people, in turn, scarred the land. If there is an ‘invisible constant’ or identity bestowed by a place upon its inhabitants, it could only be found there, in that relationship, that engagement with the land. It is not inherited, but earned.

As I walked slowly back towards the boat, a cloud of arctic terns – called *tirricks* in Shetland – billowed like a smoke signal from a beach just ahead. Some of the birds drifted southwards, swooping then hovering above me,

pinned like little crucifixes against the sky. Everything about the terns is sharp – beak, wings, tail – even their cries are serrated. And their tiny forms belie an aggression that can terrify the unwary walker. Like the Arctic and great skuas that share this island with them, tirricks attack without hesitation anyone who seems to threaten their nesting ground. There is no subtlety in their assault. They simply wheel and swarm above, then dive, each in turn, screaming as they drop. It is enough to discourage all but the most determined of trespassers.

It occurred to me, almost too late, that I had forgotten why I was here on the island. The departure time for the ferry was approaching, but I pulled the map out of my bag and tried to locate the parallel on the paper. I was only a hundred metres or so from the line, it seemed, so I hurried ahead to find it. But when I turned the next corner I stopped again, for standing just where I was heading was the man in the red baseball cap, staring down at his GPS. Clearly he too was looking for the parallel. The man took a few steps back, and consulted the gadget again, head down. By this time he was only ten metres or so away, and soon noticed that I was standing watching. He turned, as if to ask what I was doing. I smiled the best smile I could muster, which probably looked more half-witted than friendly. He didn't smile back. I wasn't sure what to do. I could have spoken to him, told him that we were both looking for the same thing, but somehow the seconds passed and we continued to stand there, each hoping the other would just go away. I had no particular desire to explain myself, and he, it seemed, felt the same way. It was an awkward moment, and in the end it was me who gave up and moved on. I nodded, then put my head down and walked towards the jetty, where the little boat was waiting.