

*Series Number Eleven*  
*Nain, Labrador - 1989*

*Fourteen Photographs*  
*Michael Nye*

## *Nain, Labrador - August/September 1989*

Photographs dream of becoming complete sentences. They are patient, holding time in the air floating, while we imagine connections and relevance.

I spent a week in the Canadian Gaspé Peninsula and along the shores of the Saint Lawrence River in December 1985. Gaspé means “Land’s End”. Ice and snow was layered on top of existing ice. It was difficult to determine where earth and ice first met on this frozen landscape as I drove from Chandler to Sainte-Anne-des-Monts. I wondered if rocks become harder when frozen.

Every shivering icy concern carried a bluish or purplish temperament. I photographed indented pathways – fallen tree trunks - frozen leaves stacked like dollar bills – the colors of creamy whites shimmering in darker places along the edges of a riverbank. In a local café a man told me: “If you are attracted to this landscape” – then he pointed with his careful finger to the north – “Go to Labrador.” At that moment everyone in the café stopped and turned. His voice was slow and deliberate as if he was speaking about god or gold.

Back home in my darkroom, I discovered that all my negatives from the trip were ruined. I had a small tear, light leak in the bellows of my camera. An excess of light or dark can be blinding.

### *Labrador and Mail Boat*

Three years later in August, I flew to Halifax and took a cargo plane to Happy Valley/Goose Bay, Labrador. I then booked a ride on a mail boat- *The Northern Ranger* that delivered mail and cargo up through the fjords to Inuit villages. My destination was the last northern Inuit village, Nain, established in 1771 as a Moravian mission. Population 598.



Labrador #1

*Journal: On the Northern Ranger – from Goose Bay to Nain Labrador –*

August 31, 1989 - Deck hand on the Northern Ranger:

*"I think it's going to blow - aye – the snow - aye – nothing to worry about – It's from the northeast – Aye – but it's going to be rough - aye."*

September 2 – Comment of an older women on the mail-boat:

*"I flew into Nain in April 1958 on a sea plane. All inlets were still frozen so the pilot landed further out into the sea. We were eventually picked up by a dog sled and taken into Nain. The entire town greeted us."*



Labrador #2

September 2:

*After three days of very cold drizzle and rain and fog - near midnight the sky cleared and the sea was quiet and calm. Someone called out to come on deck to see the Northern Lights. Six or seven of us lay down on the outside wooden deck with blankets. A bottle of vodka was passed around and we mixed it with water. The Northern Lights were directly above us, surrounding the ship, and turned everyone's faces to stone. One man said: "We found the headwaters of the Northern Lights." I could imagine sleeping in a teepee looking upward into a blanket of shimmering colors. The deepest reds were on top. The lights were so bright that the waters lit up with a warmest reddish glow.*

### *Nain, Labrador - The Place*

Nain is inaccessible by road and may only be reached by air or sea. Nain is located on Unity Bay and is open to the Atlantic Ocean, some 440 miles from the shores of Greenland. I rented a small bare room and stayed with an Inuit family for \$14.00 US a day. They were quiet and hardly noticed my presence. In their kitchen on a table was a dead caribou about to be butchered.

When the missionaries came, they couldn't pronounce the Inuit's names so they gave them English or biblical first names, however most retained their historical last names. I met Patricia Ikkusek – Tony Kemuksigak - Sarah Angnatok and Molly Otuk. At night we would sit around the kitchen table and listen to a local radio station located only two blocks away.



Nain, Labrador 1878

*Journal: Nain – September 6*

Local Inuit radio station: *“Bingo will be on Friday night not Saturday at Billy’s house -- Josie please call Tim -- Bob, bring home some meat -- Heard that Sarah is sick - we hope she is feeling better this evening . . . .”*

*Everyone is talking about a very valuable berry found in the higher hills above the village – “Bake apples” or “cloudberries”. They hunt for them in September and are used for baking muffins. The blackflies are beyond description! They attack me with vengeance. A cloud follows me everywhere. My only relief is windy days. They even bite through my jeans. Adults and children have scabs on their arm and faces. They seem indifferent to the bites.*

*Wheelbarrows are used for baby carriages. I watch babies’ cheeks bouncing up and down. The babies ride was mixed in with supplies and groceries.*



Labrador #3

*Journal: Nain – September 11*

*One story of light is that it emerges and then fades.*

*This morning was the third time I hiked to the highest hill overlooking the valley and saw small islands in the distance. Two large boulders were balanced on top of the hill. The sun never broke through the clouds. It was so cold. The wind drove through my heavy down coat to the skin. I waited four hours and made one photograph. (Labrador #3) Each day here gets colder.*

*John Patuktuq – (Patuktuq means ice crystal) First Kill:*

There is a captivating ease and comfort when someone speaks slowly and directly to you. I met John along Unity bay four miles north of Nain in an extremely remote valley. John was camping, living alone on the edge of the bay and across from Rhodes Island. Directly behind his campsite was a row of low treeless hills. His tent material was thick, skin-like, although there were pieces of wood and tin and other washed up items attached. He asked me if I was hunting. He said he had been exiled from the village for a crime he committed when drunk. It was difficult to imagine how anyone could survive the winters here alone. He was allowed to go into the village for supplies.

In his broken English John said:

*“My earliest memories begin at the age of five. My father could not walk and rarely left his bed. We were the poorest family in the village. I sometimes had to go to the minister’s house to get a bowl of soup for my father. I was never conscious of being poor. All my thoughts were of playing. I remember an old rock along the shore. I would pretend it was an island. From there, I would kill make-believe monsters.*

John made some tea and eventually and abruptly asked if I would like to hear a story of his “First Kill”.

*“I remember my First Kill. It was a bird, its wing was broken and I chased it for a long time. When I got close to it I fell on it with my whole body. When it was dead I took it to our house to show my father. He kept the bird in a safe place until my grandmother came home. That night, my grandmother said a few prayers and lit a candle. She then picked up my left hand, turned it over and bit the back of my wrist. She bit me so hard it bled. I screamed. My grandmother looked at me and said: ‘Never forget the animal’s pain.’”*

As John described the moment of the bite he let out a long song-like scream that floated across the bay and stayed there for a while before lifting away. We both sat sipping tea and watched the remote silence circling. John was grateful for invisible things. The animals nearby meant more than meat and nourishment. They lived here too. John was proud of this insight and of the scar trophy he wore on the back of his wrist.



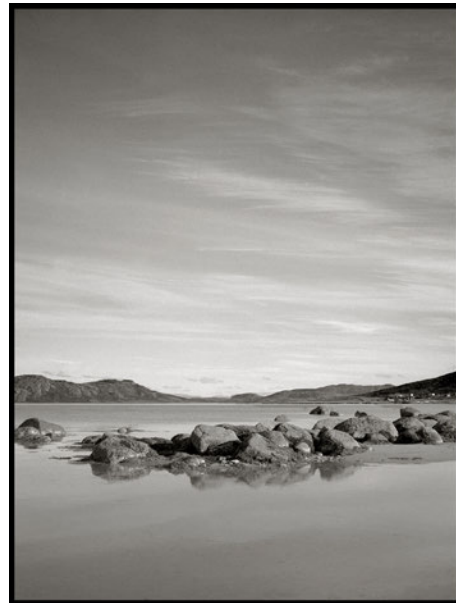
*Photographs around Nain, Labrador & Unity Bay:*

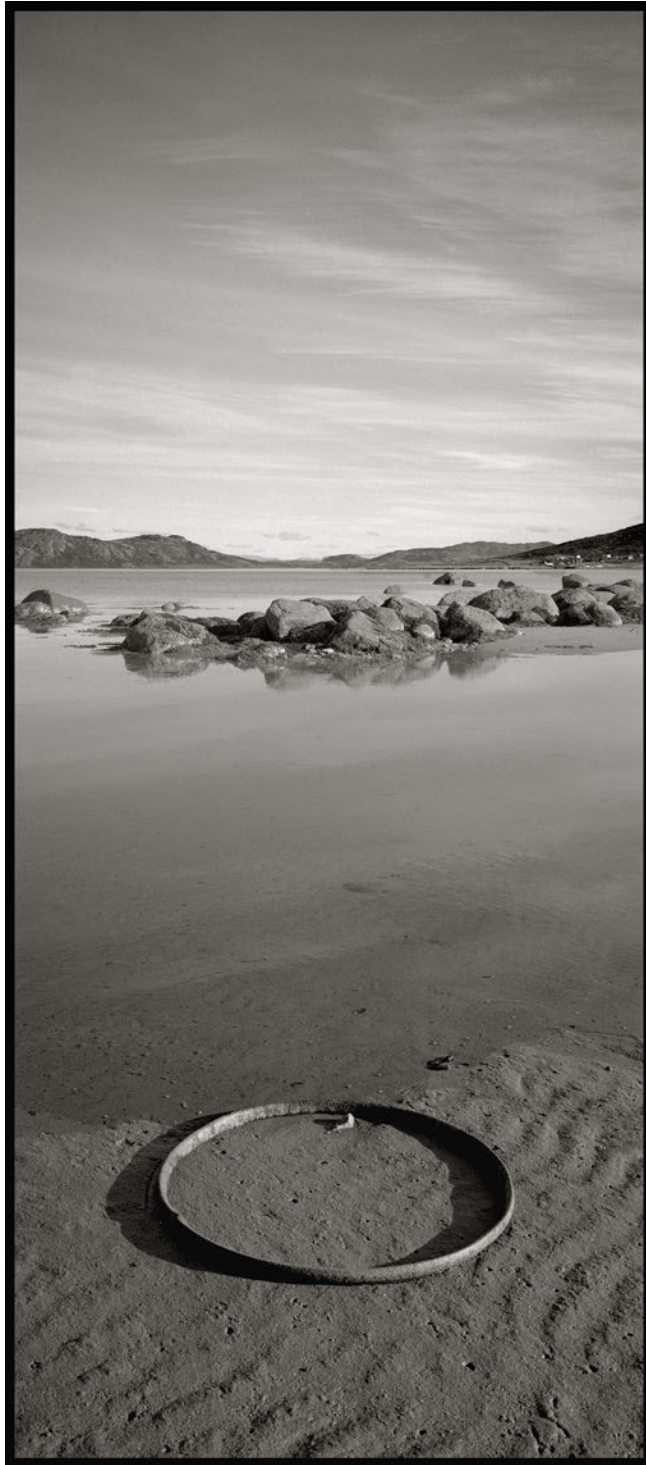
Photographs won't admit it but understand that there is nothing comparable with how a particular scene *feels-like* or *looks-like* when actually present.

Many photographs in "*Labrador Series*" are actually two separate photographs stitched and merged together as one final photograph in the darkroom. Sometimes a broken dish can be glued back together.

(Photograph one) I first photographed items found or washed up along the shoreline – metal bar & ring, a caribou leg – a round rim from a rusted barrow—a whale's jaw bone – a plastic doll hugging the sand. (Photograph two) I then photographed what was directly above the first found object, out beyond the shore to the water and colored sky.

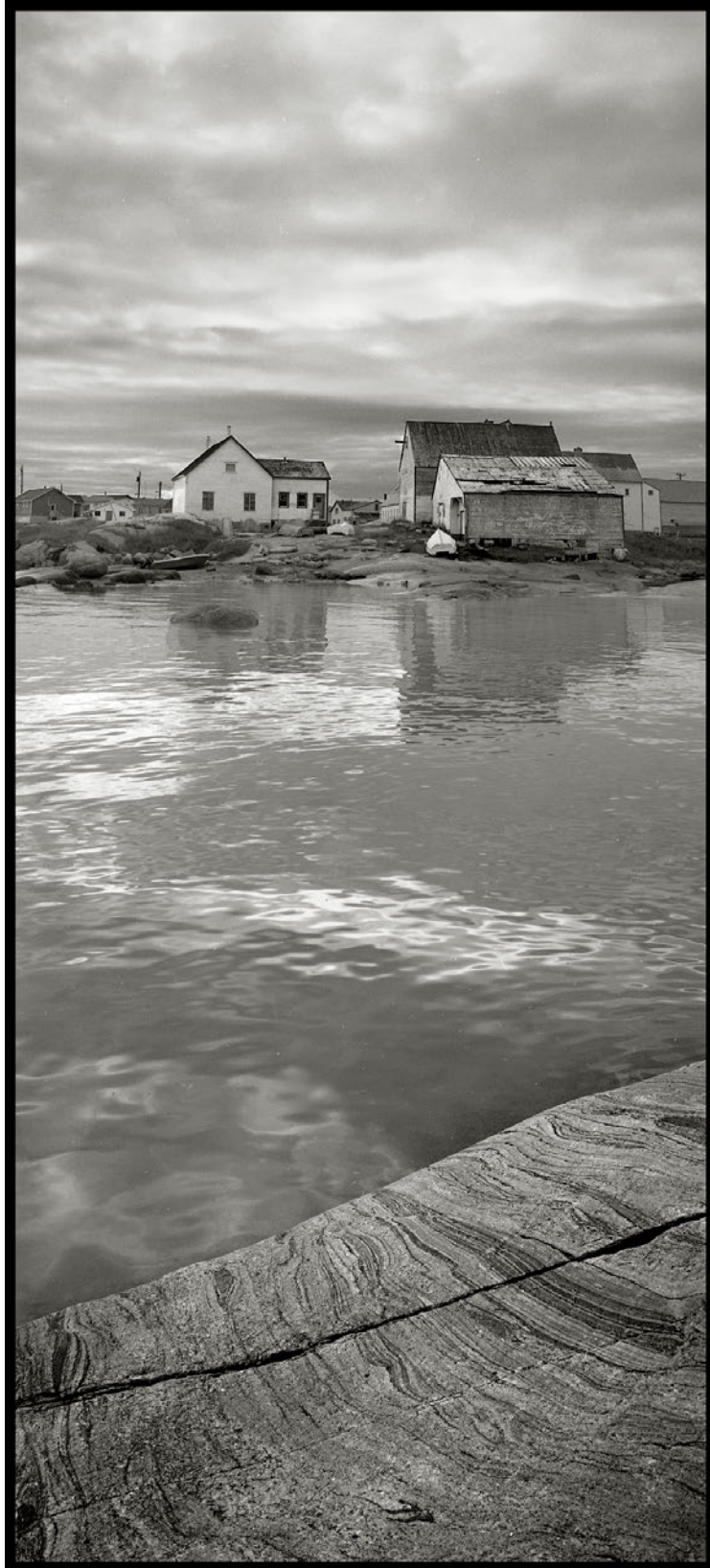
Most photographs begin and end with just one look. However in the "*Labrador Series*" each image begins by looking at the found object at the bottom and ends by looking upward into the horizon and the changing sky. These are vertical narrative photographs.





Labrador #4





Labrador #5

This series of photographs communicates so little – almost nothing about my experience in Nain, Labrador. These images don't describe the cloud of black flies chasing and biting – the slow moving of ice bergs just on the edge of the Atlantic ocean – the breaching and surfacing of *Flathead* whales within 100 feet of the shoreline -- the intense silence in this ancient land -- the smell of baking bread - - the rhythm and sound of the Inuit language rising with each careful word. These photographs completely fail to describe the serious remoteness of the landscape or the emotional longing many feel and share.



Labrador #6

*Return:*

I flew away from Nain and back to Goose Bay on a small seaplane, taking off from an inlet bay. My flight to Halifax was not departing until the following morning so I spent the night in the large hollow airplane barracks that was used in World War II. There was a small room in the far corner of the barracks where a few of us prepared to spend the night. The room had a popcorn and drink machine. Around 11:30 pm the lights were turned off except for a dim light just outside our waiting room. Inside, an electric floor heater was humming.

Around 4:00 am I heard feet running and the bright barracks overhead lights were turned on. A man came rushing into our waiting room and begin preparing popcorn. He told us that that an international

747-jet liner flying from London to New York had lost one of its engines and was making an emergency landing. Soon we heard roaring of an engine, the sweeping of wings and the landing. One hundred and twenty passengers, mostly from England, came tumbling into the barracks cold and confused. Some were wearing formal suits, others wore short skirts and shirts. The warm popcorn was passed around.

It was September 18<sup>th</sup> and a light snow was falling. A large crowd gathered around me asking –Where are we? What country is this? I kept saying over and over, “You are in Labrador. This is Labrador.”

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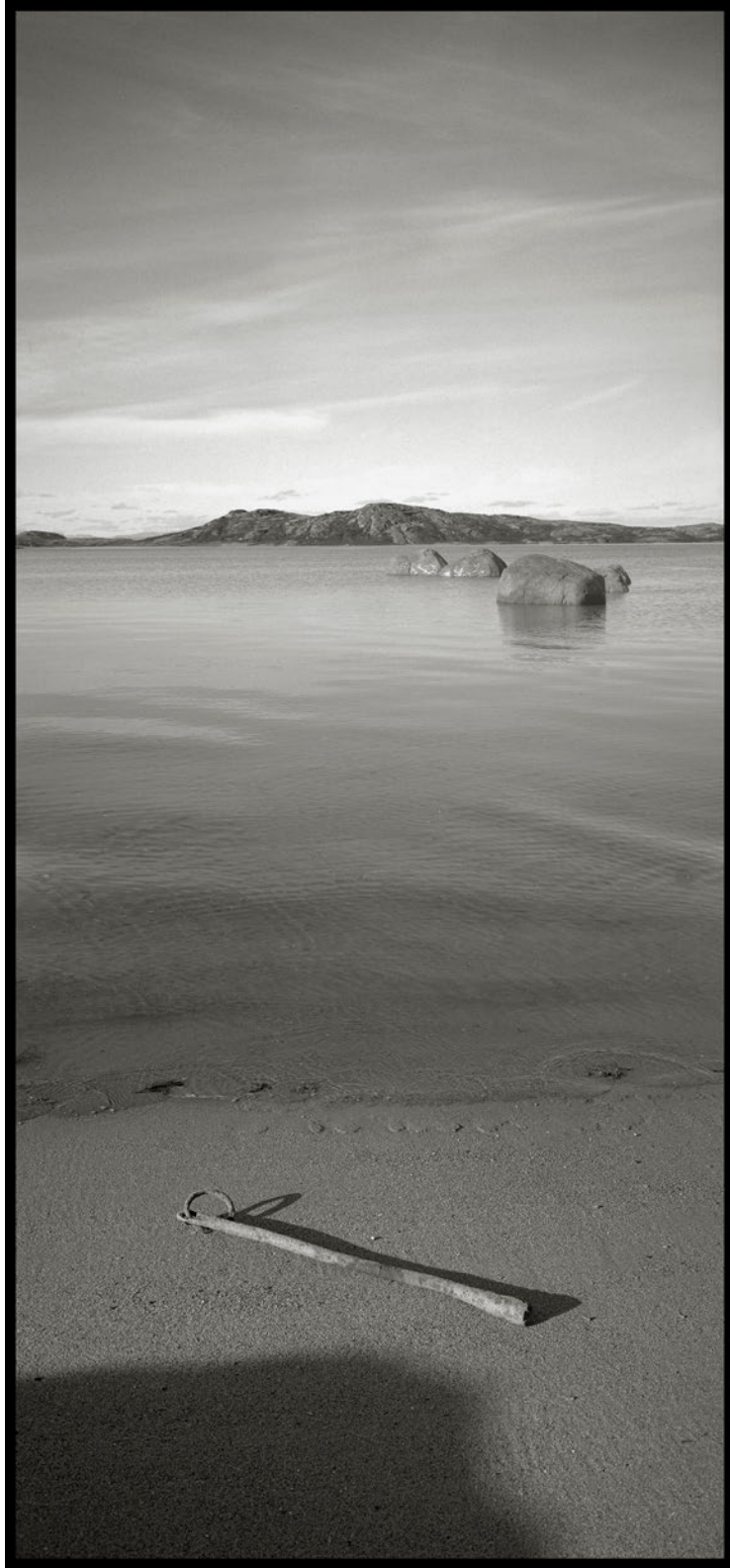


Labrador #7





Labrador #8

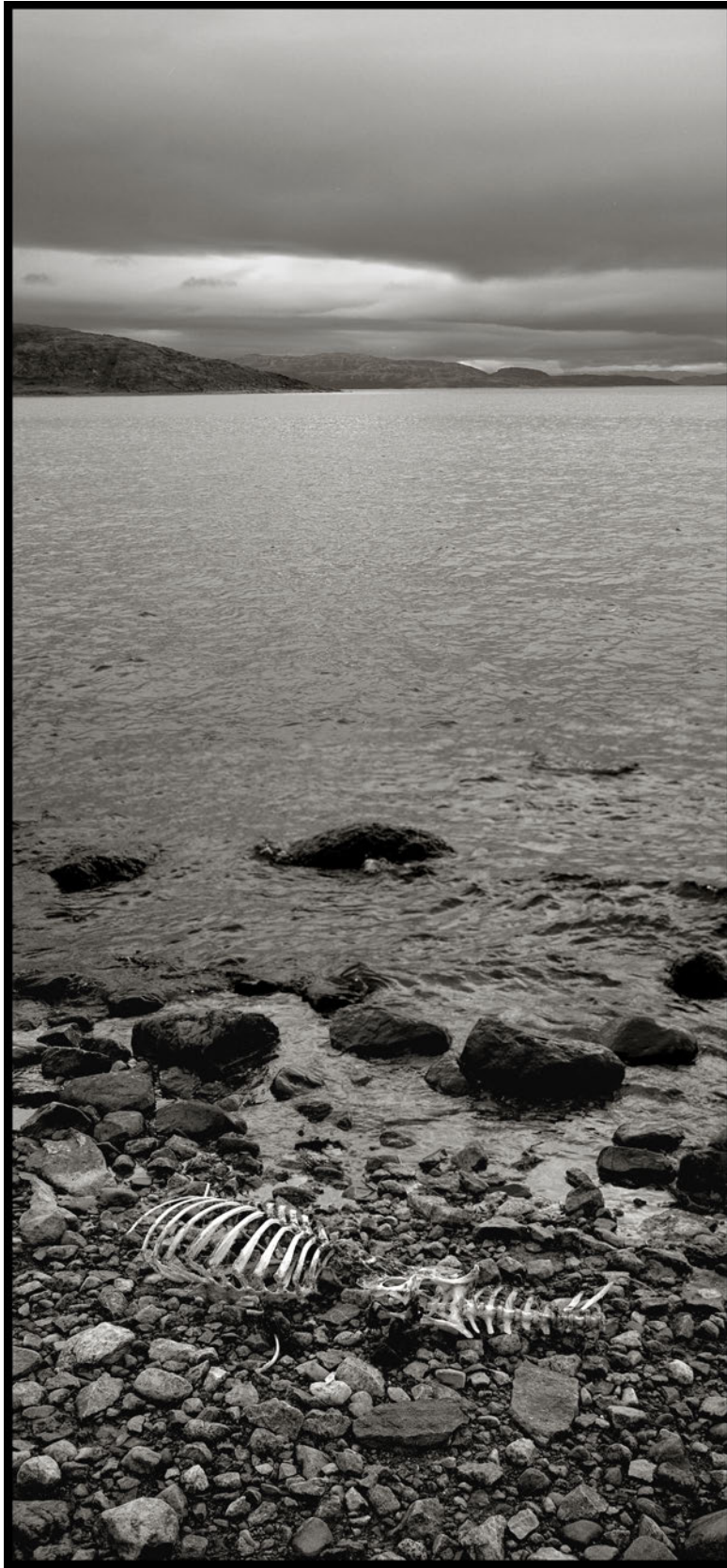


Labrador #9



Labrador #10





Labrador #11



Labrador #12



Labrador #13





Labrador #14