

Series Number Twelve
Nain, Labrador - 1989

Twelve Photographs
Essay, August, 2024
Michael Nye

Nain, Labrador

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

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

I spent a week in the Canadian Gaspé Peninsula and along the shores of the Saint Lawrence River. Gaspé means “Land’s End”. Ice and snow were 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.

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, go to Labrador.” At that moment everyone in the café stopped and turned. His voice was intense 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. Too much light and not enough light are equivalent disasters with photography.

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.

Journal: On 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:

An older woman 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."*

September 3:

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 see the Northern Lights. Six or seven of us lay 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. One man said, "We found the headwaters of the Northern Lights." The lights were so bright that the ocean waters lit up with a warmest reddish glow.



Nain, Labrador 1878

Nain, Labrador - The Place

Nain is located on Unity Bay and may only be reached by air or sea. Nain 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 radio station located only two blocks away.

Journal: Nain – September 7:

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 . . . ”*

Journal: Nain, September 8:

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. Inside were a mix of groceries, supplies and crying baby.

John Patuktuq: (Patuktuq means ice crystal.)

There is a captivating ease and comfort when someone speaks slowly and directly to you. I met John Patuktuq along Unity bay four miles north of Nain in an extremely remote valley. John was 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, caribou skin, 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 only 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 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 would pretend to kill make-believe monsters along the shore.”

John made some tea. Abruptly, he asked if I wanted to hear a story of his *“First Kill”*.

“My First kill was a bird. Its wing was broken. I chased it for a long time. I finally fell on the bird with my whole body. 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 slow and song-like scream that floated across the bay and it 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.

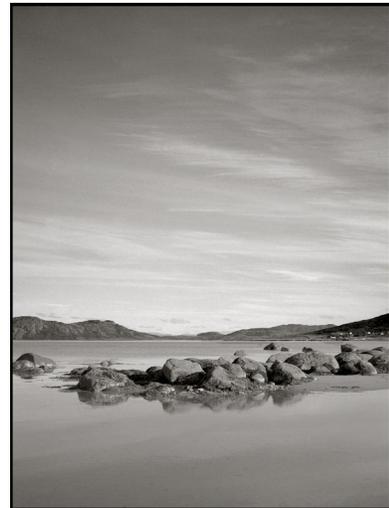
Photographs around Nain & Unity Bay:

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. A photograph is never like "Being There".

Most of 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. A 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 first at the found object at the bottom and ends by looking upward into the horizon and the changing sky. These are vertical narrative photographs.

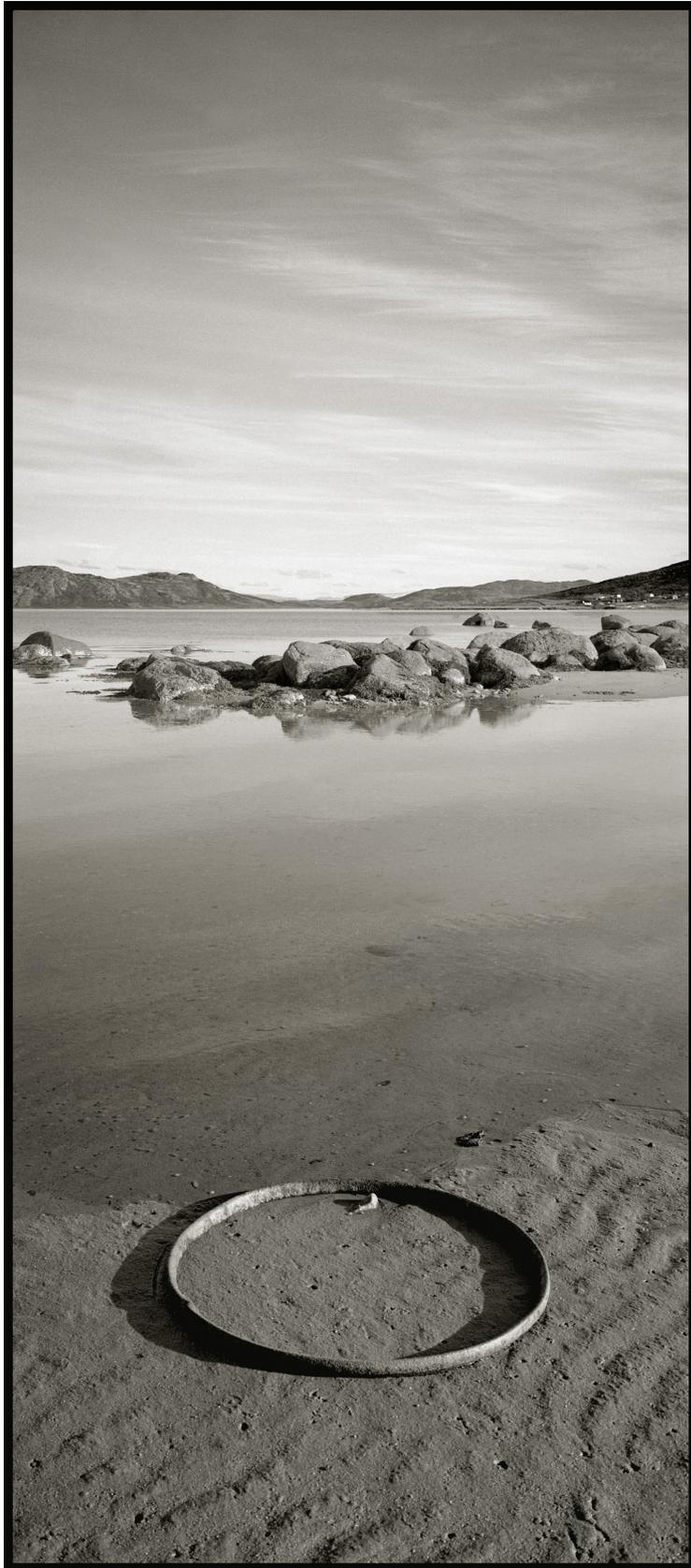
This series of photographs communicates so little, almost nothing about my experience in Nain, Labrador. These images don’t describe the cloud of black flies chasing and biting – the slow moving of ice bergs just on the edge of the Atlantic ocean – the breaching and surfacing of *Flathead* whales within 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 failed to describe the serious remoteness of the landscape or the emotional longing many feel and share.

Return:

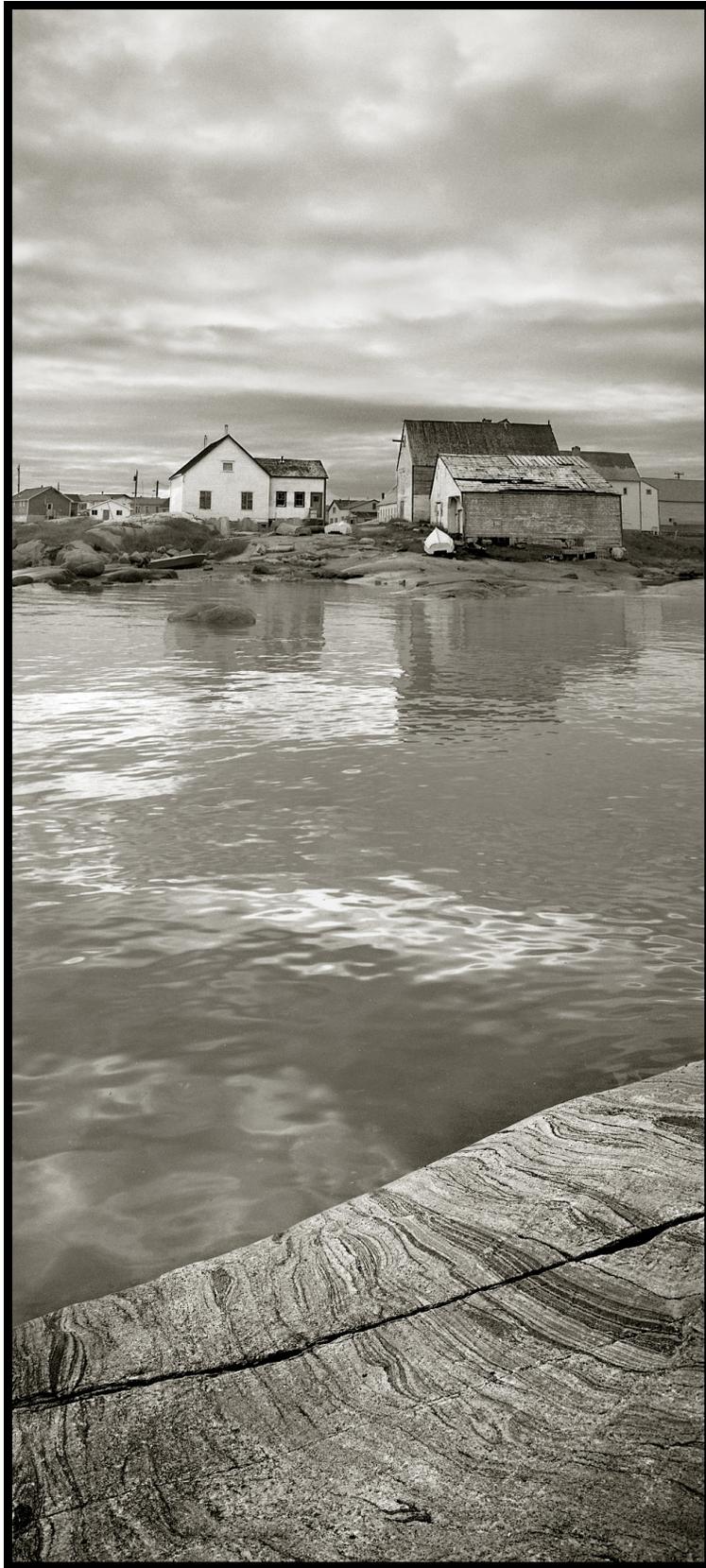
From Nain, I returned to Goose Bay on a seaplane, taking off from an inlet bay. My flight to Halifax was departing the following morning so I spent the night in a large hollow airplane barracks. There was a small room in the corner where a few of us prepared to spend the night. The room had a popcorn 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. Goose Bay had a long landing strip built during WW II and could accommodate the emergency landing. Soon we heard roaring of an engine, the sweeping of wings and moving air. One hundred and twenty passengers, mostly from England, came tumbling into the barracks cold and confused. Some were wearing formal vested suits, dresses, others in blue jeans and short skirts.

It was September 18th and a light snow was falling. The large crowd gathered around me in the cold asking, *Where are we? What country is this?* The warm popcorn was passed around. I kept say saying over and over, “You are in Labrador. This is Labrador.”



Labrador #1



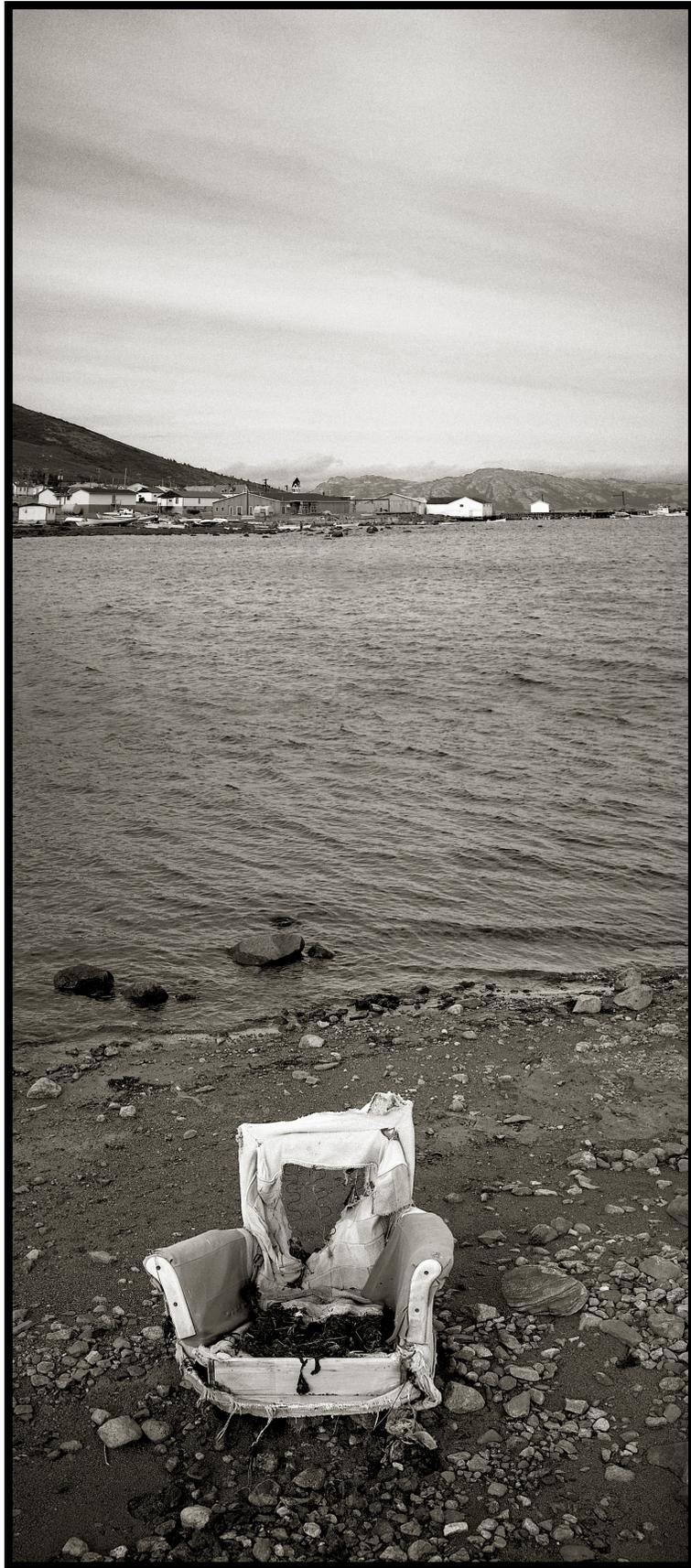
Labrador #2



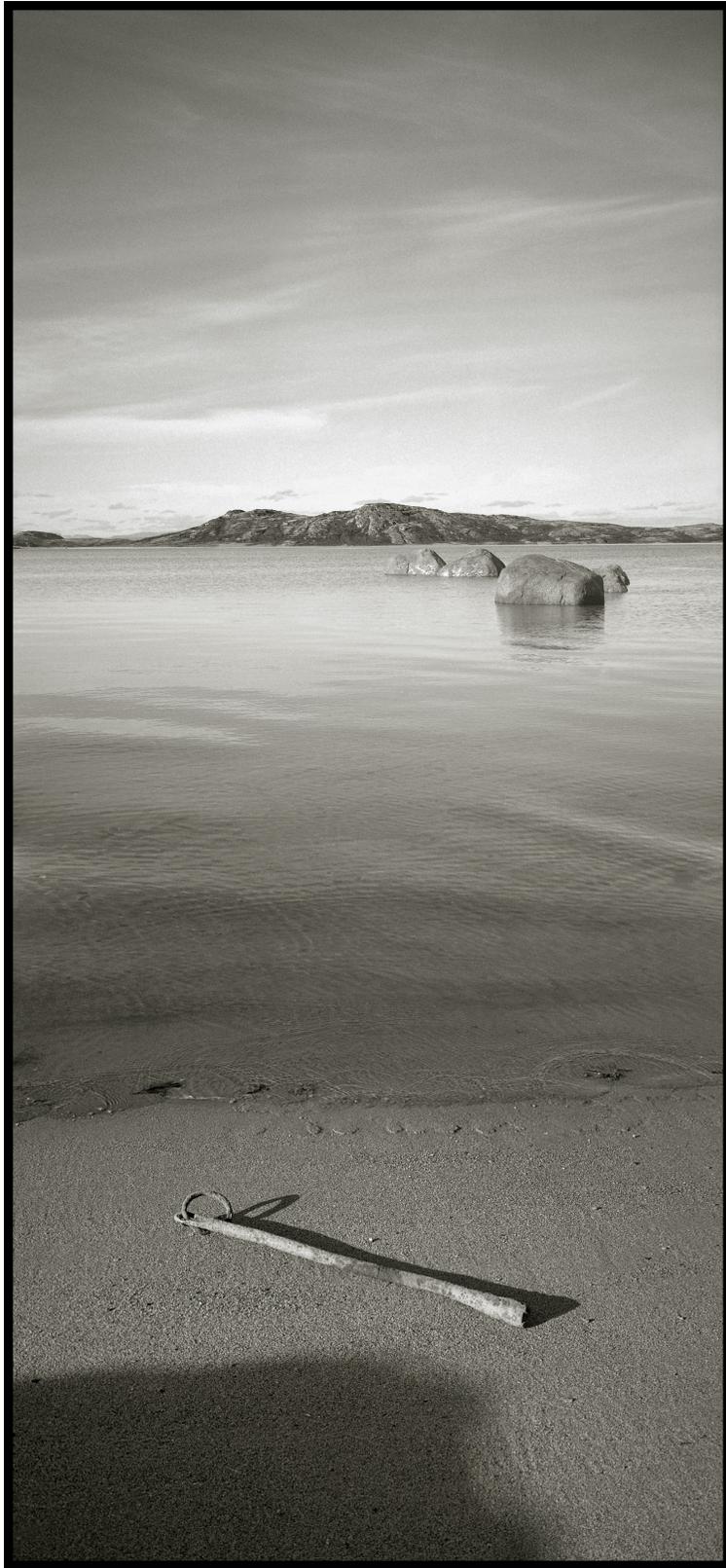
Labrador #3



Labrador #4



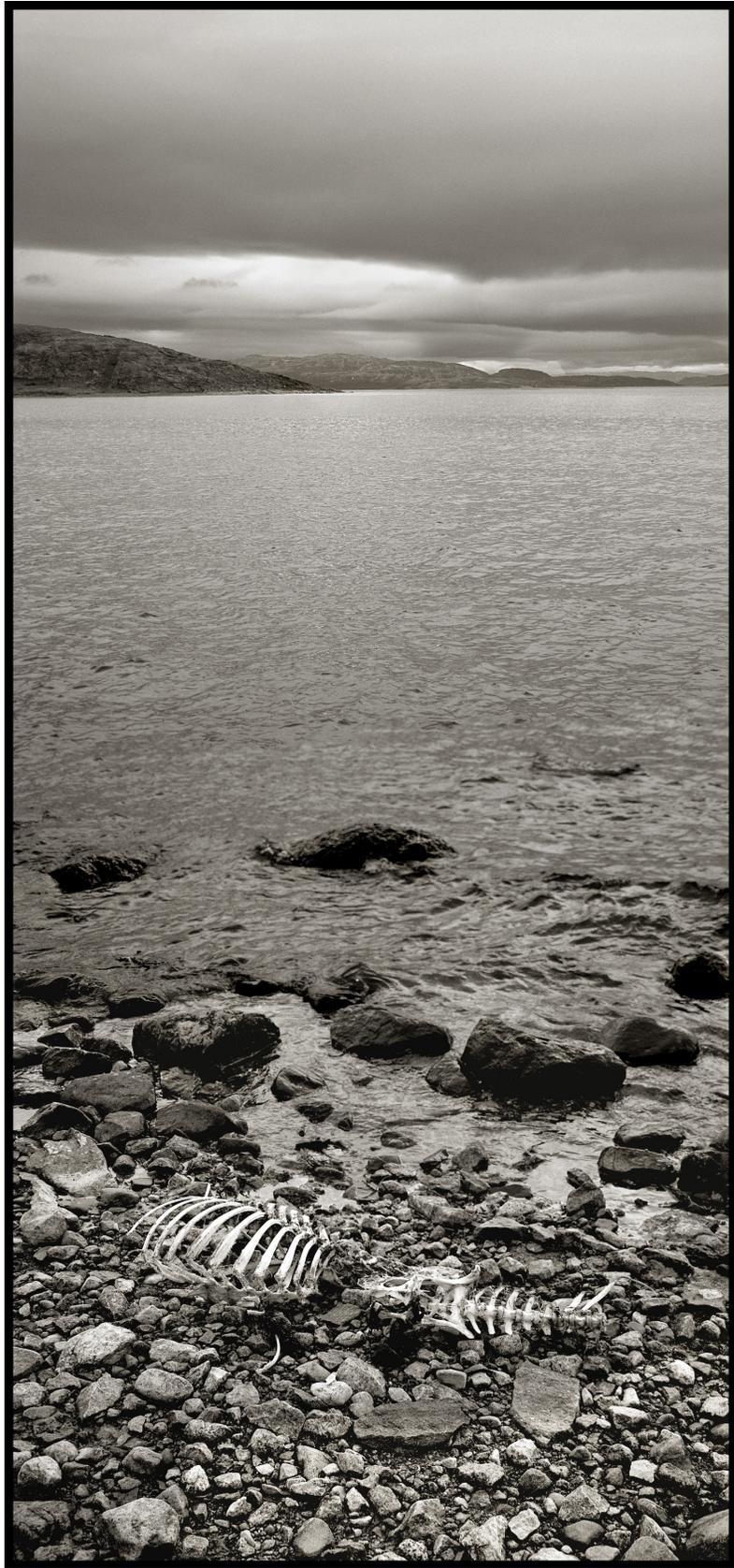
Labrador #5



Labrador #6



Labrador #7



Labrador #8



Labrador #9



Labrador #10



Labrador #11



Labrador #12