

PROOF

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KILIII YÜYAN

LOOKING AT THE EARTH FROM EVERY POSSIBLE ANGLE



THE BACKSTORY

A 1,000-YEAR-OLD HUNTING PRACTICE ENDURES,
BINDING TOGETHER A NORTHERN ALASKA COMMUNITY.

ON THE NORTH SLOPE OF ALASKA, the culture of the Inupiat centers on whales. Each spring, men and women spend weeks on the *tuvaq*—the ice near the water—watching for bowhead whales migrating north from the Bering Sea to the Canadian Arctic. When one is spotted, a team pushes an umiak onto the water. There is typically one chance to harpoon the whale. If the hunt is successful, each person in the village can receive a share of the meat.

This story of cultural continuity enthralled photographer Kiliiii Yüyan. Yüyan is indigenous himself, a descendant of the Hezhe (Nanai in Russian) hunters and fishermen of northern China and southeast Siberia. Stories

portraying indigenous communities as degraded or destitute miss their complexity, says Yüyan. “You have to be with them to see their full hope and their joy.”

For 10 months in a span of five years, Yüyan lived among the Inupiat in Utqiagvik (formerly known as Barrow). He camped with a crew on the sea ice to watch for whales, often volunteering for the night shift when the darkness and quiet set in.

It’s a silence quickly broken, he learned: When a whale comes, a spotter calls out its position, urging the crew to launch. “When they’re close, [the noise] is not faint,” he says. “It’s notable. They sing songs. It’s like a musical.”

—DANIEL STONE



A hunter listens to the water for songs of nearby whales.

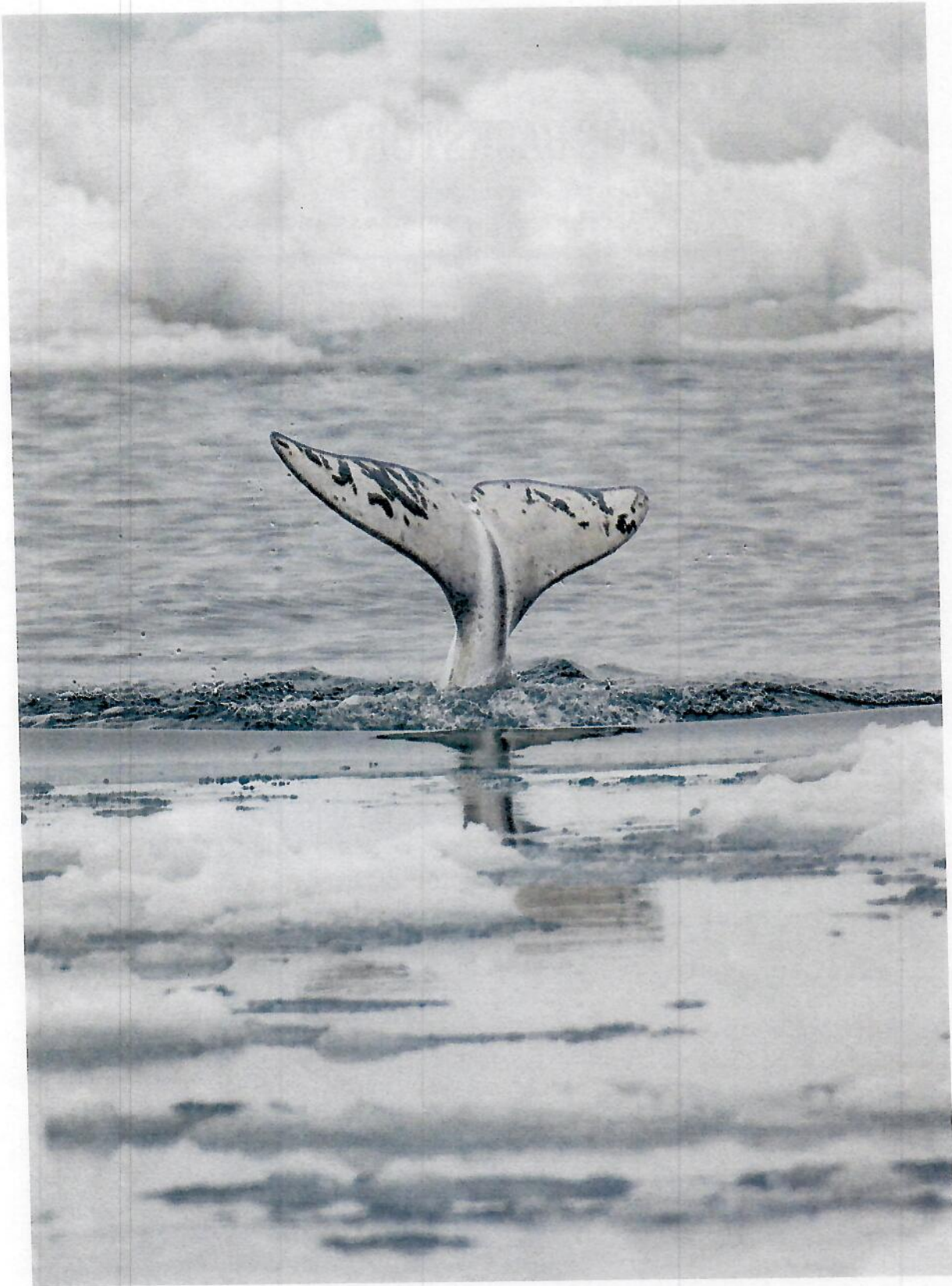
SEASON OF THE WHALE

The indigenous Inupiat of Alaska spend weeks on the ice, waiting for migrating whales.

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Left: Yugu Alfred Ningeok is the son of a whaling captain and a member of an Inupiat whaling crew. Right: An umiak, or skin boat, carries a small team in pursuit of a whale.



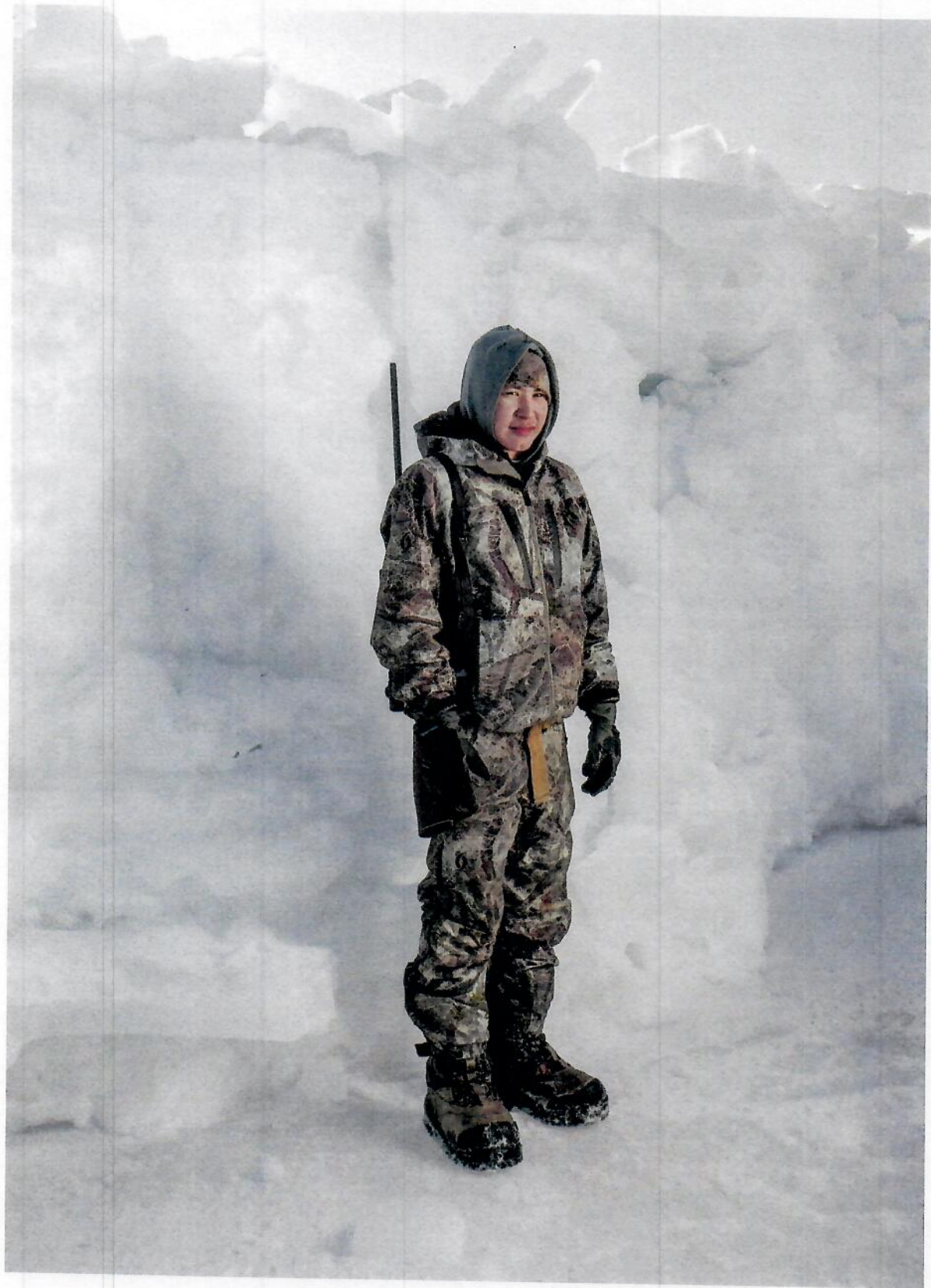
Bowhead whales are adapted to extremely cold water. On their annual migration through the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas, they have been observed breaking ice up to two feet thick to make space to breathe.



A butchered bowhead whale can yield thousands of pounds of food. The *ninit*—community shares of meat and blubber—are apportioned equitably to ensure that everyone benefits from a successful hunt.



"The highest aspiration you can have is to become a whaling captain," says photographer Kilii Yüyan.
"It's a job that provides for the entire community."



Thomas William Kingosak always carries a rifle during whale hunts to use in case a polar bear attacks. Polar bears have been known to approach hunting camps in search of food.

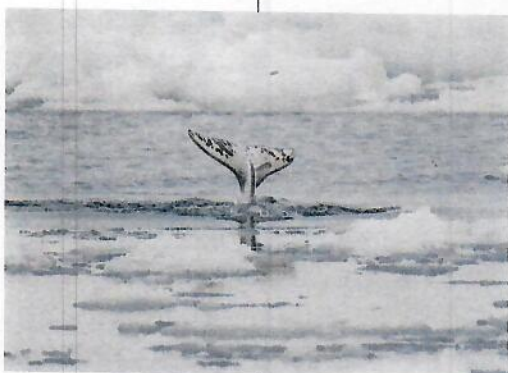
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On this Torah scroll, which is hundreds of years old, a passage from the book of Exodus is visible.

PAOLO VERZONE; VAN KAMPEN COLLECTION ON DISPLAY AT THE HOLY LAND EXPERIENCE, ORLANDO, FLORIDA

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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Known as C-Boy, he was "everything an African lion should be."

BY DAVID QUAMMEN
PHOTOGRAPH BY
MICHAEL NICHOLS

ALSO

Deep in Yellowstone Lake
Mars's Marine Era