



I remember the Koyukon people's keen awareness of changes in the terrain around them, based on what they had seen during their lifetimes and what the old-timers had seen before them. In the village of Huslia, people could remember when their cabins stood where the middle of the Koyukuk River runs today. All along its course, they had seen the river bite into its banks, cut through meander loops, build islands and move them gradually downstream, make new channels and abandon old ones. They had watched lakes become ponds, ponds become bogs, bogs become forests. The land came alive through their gift of memory and their long experience with this one part of the earth. Koyukon elders expressed this sense of change in the metaphor of a riddle:

*Wait, I see something: The river is tearing away things around me.*

*Answer: An island, becoming smaller and smaller until it is gone.*

I wish someday I might know a place as they do, might have their same visceral understanding that the land I move on is also moving. That nothing, not even this pyramid of mountain, is the same today as it was yesterday. That nothing, not even this island, exists for a moment without change. The great storm rages at this brittle edge, tore earth and rock from the shore, and washed them away beneath the surf. But what it took from the island above the sea, it laid down on the island's underwater slopes. Recognizing this, it's hard to say that anything was lost, or that the island was made less rich, less complete, less beautiful. An island grows old so gracefully.

Sometime in the distant future, the last remnant of Kluksa Mountain might stand amid the swells, a black spine of rock where cormorants roost and gulls rest in the wind. And

after another millennium of storms, every trace of the island might disappear beneath the sea. Even the smallest grain of sand under my feet will likely be here when I've made my last track. A rock in the soil above this beach will probably outlast me a thousand times over. A nameless knoll above Peregrine Point may stand long after humanity has vanished from the earth. The thought makes me feel insignificant, ephemeral, and frail. But the island and I face the same inevitability of change, death, and transformation, and in this sense we belong to the same larger, less bounded world that encompasses us. We share a common life. We are a place and a person; but each of us is a process, a moment, and a passing through. ■

—from *The Island Within*, by Richard Nelson (1989)