

VANITY FAIR

December 2003

№ 520

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220 THE MOGUL OF CITY HALL Michael Bloomberg is confident, energetic, and a self-made billionaire. He's steered New York through a fiscal crisis, public-school mayhem, and a blackout. So how come his approval rating is in the gutter? Buzz Bissinger examines the strange chemistry between the mayor and his metropolis.

240 LAUREATE OF DREAMS Timothy Greenfield-Sanders and John Leonard spotlight Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison, whose latest novel, *Love*, is a haunting tale of passion and poison on the Atlantic Coast.

242 THE SMITHSONIAN'S BIG CHILL Slated for exhibition at a Smithsonian museum last summer, Subhankar Banerjee's photographs provided unprecedented visual evidence of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's rich ecosystem. No wonder the show drew flak from Senate Republicans who want to allow oil exploration in the 1.5 million acres the administration has called a "flat white nothingness." Ingrid Sischy assesses the fallout from a collision of art and politics.

258 FLORENTINE MISCHIEF La Pietra, Sir Harold Acton's grand 15th-century Italian estate, boasts 5,000 pieces of art, 57 acres, and a guest book thick with royalty and literati. Although Acton left the palazzo to New York University in 1994, Princess Djalta Alliata di Montereale has challenged his bequest, claiming blood ties with the late British aesthete. A family scandal has been unearthed, writes Judy Bachrach, along with Acton's father, and none of La Pietra's ghosts are resting peacefully. Photographs by Firooz Zahedi.

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SLIM SHOT

TIMOTHY JESSEL AND HIS JAGUAR IN LONDON, 1955 340

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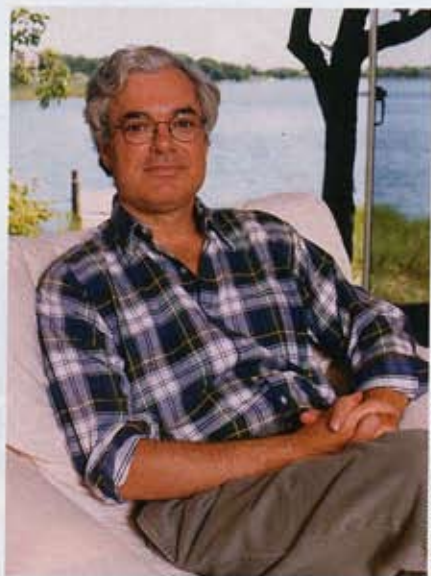
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CONTRIBUTORS

Contributing editor **DAVID MARGOLICK** spent more than 15 years reporting on legal affairs, largely for *The New York Times*, before coming to *V.F.*, where he has written on subjects ranging from Billie Holiday to Tony Blair. This month, he returns to his old beat as he investigates George W. Bush's efforts to overhaul the U.S. judiciary with far-right-wing appointees. "The effect of the Bush judiciary appointments will take years to determine," says Margolick. "You're left to reflect, really, on who these people are and what they're like, rather than what they've done." Margolick is currently working on a book, due out next fall from Knopf, about the 1938 heavyweight championship bout between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling.



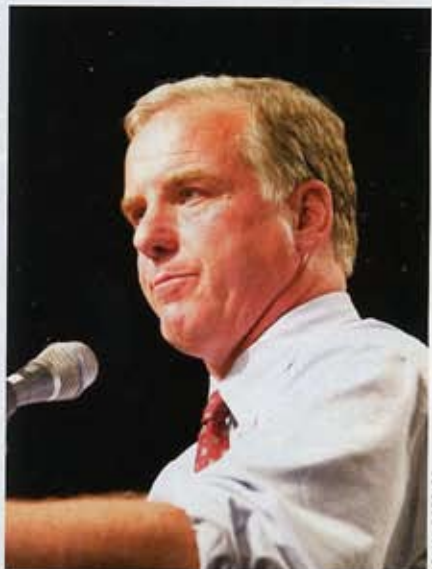
JOHN NEWTON COOPER



GASPER TRINGALE

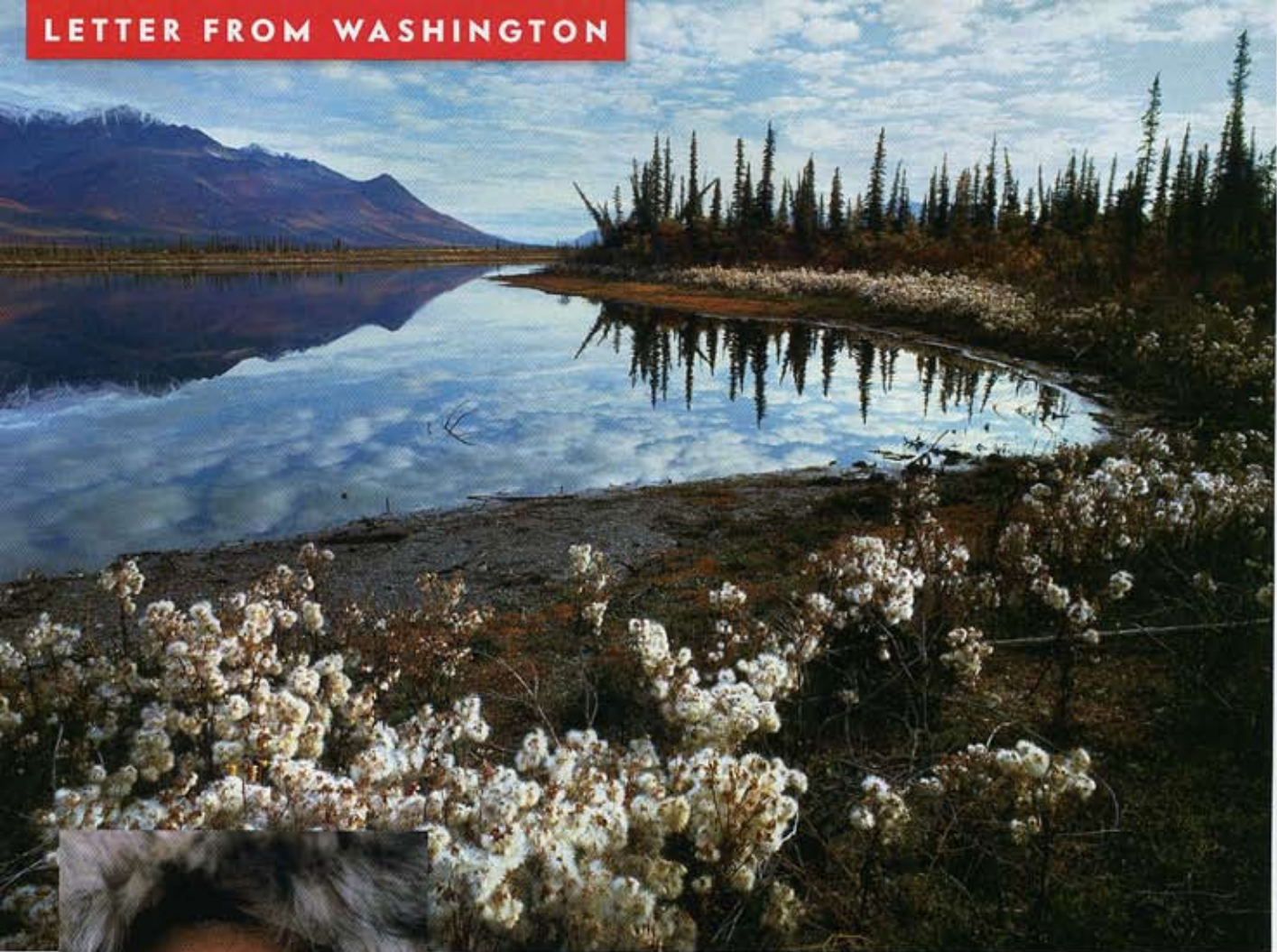
In 1989, **INGRID SISCHY** wrote an article for *The New Yorker* about the cancellation of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery. Recently, she felt a renewed need to speak out for freedom after learning that Subhankar Banerjee's photographs of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge had become the center of a raging political debate over oil drilling. "The fact that photographs of foliage, birds, and pregnant Porcupine caribou are considered 'too hot to handle' got me on alert regarding the state of our country," says Sischy, the editor in chief of *Interview* and a *V.F.* contributing editor. "As Americans, we must respect the audience and give them an uncensored chance to make their own decision."

DR. HOWARD DEAN, governor of Vermont from 1991 to 2002, spent a busy fall campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination, and his season on the trail opened his eyes to the special needs of the American poor. "Traveling the country in my run for president, I've become well acquainted with the struggle of many of the millions of Americans who deal with poverty or near poverty," says Dean, whose book *Winning Back America* is due out this month from Simon & Schuster. "It's been a real honor to contribute to *Vanity Fair*, particularly on a subject of such national importance." His article on poverty in the U.S., accompanied by photographs by Larry Fink, begins on page 196.



JOHN PETTIT

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NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Top, one of Subhankar Banerjee's views of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. (Note actual living things.) Above, the photographer himself.

The Smithsonian's Big Chill

Impressed by Subhankar Banerjee's photographs of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's vibrant ecosystem, the Smithsonian planned a high-profile exhibit. But when those images became part of a fierce Senate debate over oil drilling, the museum got cold feet

BY INGRID SISCHY

The only reason that I was able to do what I did, without people attempting to stop me, is that I was a nobody," says Subhankar Banerjee, matter-of-factly. But the freedom to move through the world unobserved is now past for the 35-year-old photographer (whose name is pronounced

"Sub-anchor Banner-gee"). Ever since last spring, when his photographs were branched during a debate in the United States Senate, Banerjee has received a crash course in what happens when images touch a political nerve. A show of his work that had long been planned for the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, in Washington, D.C., turned into a circus and became a spectacle of institu-

tional double-talk, foot-in-mouth slipups, and nonsensical, detrimental changes.

Banerjee is certainly not the first artist to produce an exhibition that scared a museum, but what is unusual is that, on the surface, his pictures are tame and sweet. After all, this is not the work of someone who has been sticking hams up his rear end on a government arts grant. He works in a genre—nature photography—that usually

has art-world sophisticates looking down their noses while the hoi polloi applaud.

While the natural world inspired a gamut of epic photography in the 19th century, our time cannot make such claims. Today successful nature photographers tend to produce images that are hackneyed—technically savvy, but flat, boring, and mechanically formulaic. As time has gone on and cameras have become as available as candy, with millions of people trying to be their own Ansel Adams, it's a rare nature

Wildlife Refuge, known as ANWR, currently at the center of one of the most contentious issues in Congress—whether to open up 1.5 million of the 19.5 million acres in the sanctuary to oil exploration, a proposal that has been strongly backed by the White House and powerful Republicans in Congress, and just as strongly fought by environmentalists. Banerjee's photographs, shot over a period of two years, beginning in March 2001, constitute the first complete record of the con-

ing. Indeed, Banerjee's pictures show that the refuge is a complex and possibly fragile world full of polar bears, musk oxen, moose herds, and more than 160 species of birds. And there's the rub.

When the Indian-born Banerjee told friends and family that he was not only quitting his job in Seattle but also giving up his apartment, putting all his stuff in storage, and cashing in his savings as well as his 401(k) in order

When Barbara Boxer explicitly linked Banerjee's work to one of the hot-button issues of the day, she changed his life.

photographer who has been able to rise above the flotsam. Banerjee may be one of them. His best photographs have an authenticity, a gravitas, and a beauty that more rote imagery is without. Still, who knows if Banerjee's images of frozen and unfrozen landscapes and exotic fauna such as pregnant Porcupine caribou and buff-breasted sandpipers would have won the attention of a larger audience if they hadn't become political hot potatoes.

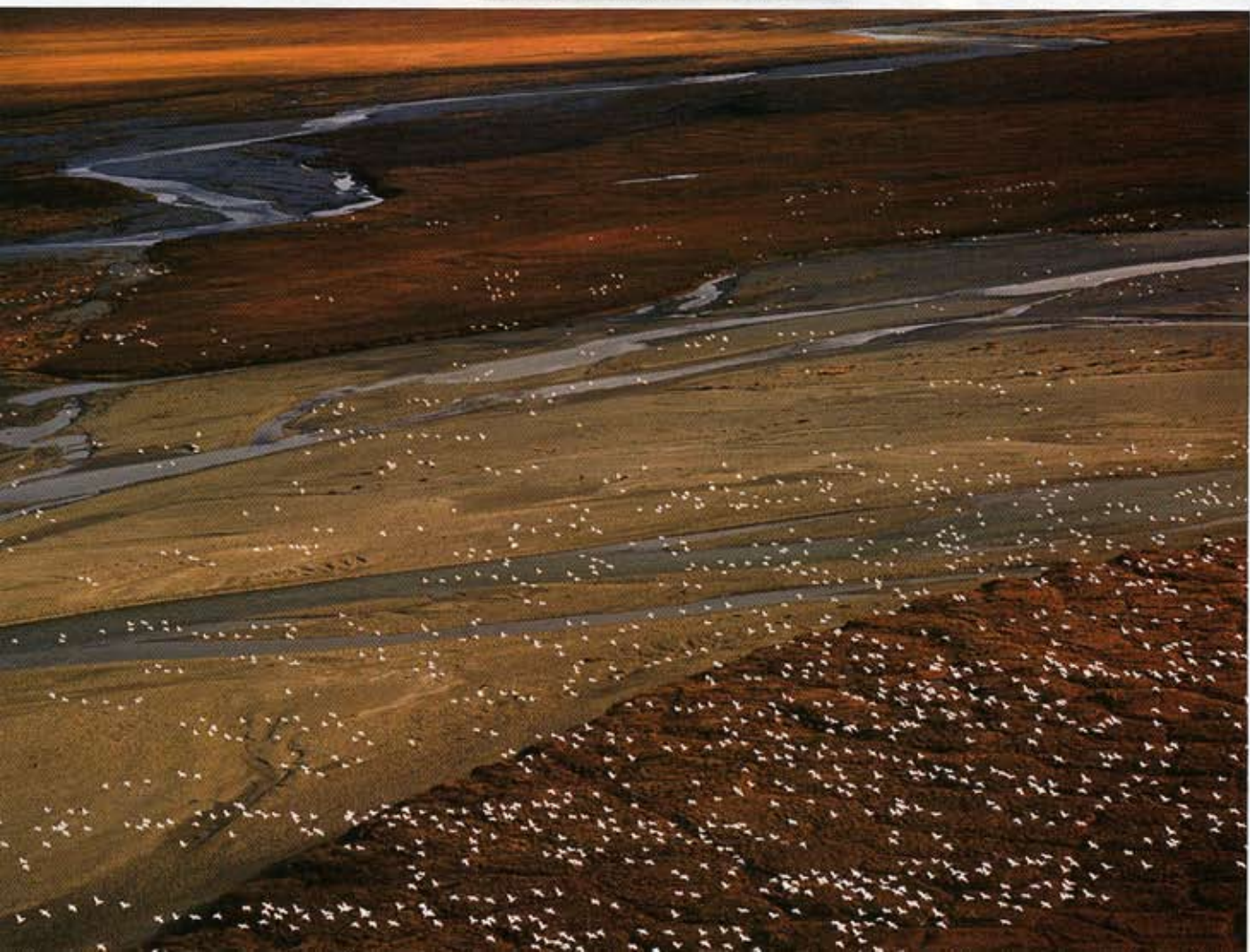
Banerjee happens to have been working on the coastal plain of the Arctic Na-

tested area, in all seasons, and the images dramatically contradict the assertion that has been bandied about, especially by proponents of drilling, that it's a blank and barren place with no ecosystem to speak of, a land of endless whiteness and frozen nothingness hardly worth preserv-

BURIED ALASKA

Migrating snow geese, one of numerous bird species that populate ANWR's "flat white nothingness" (Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton's words).

to head up to the Arctic and undertake a never-been-done photographic project, they thought he'd lost it. First of all, as far as most of them knew he was a scientist, not a photographer. After graduating from Calcutta's Jadavpur University with a degree in electrical engineering, he'd come to America in 1990 on a student visa to attend New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, ultimately receiving a double master's in theoretical physics and computer sciences. But it wasn't what he learned in the classroom that really struck a chord. A



backpacking trip through New Mexico's Gila National Forest, and subsequent wilderness treks with the local Sierra Club, changed his view of what he was put on earth to do.

Perhaps it was his outsider perspective that had him falling as hard as he did for this new land and its wildlife (he eventually became a permanent resident of the U.S.). Along the way he began taking pictures, but on a strictly amateur, hobbyist basis. He had no pretensions about his work, though years ago he'd actually dreamed of becoming an artist—a great-uncle had been an accomplished painter in Calcutta. But he never really considered the idea seriously, despite the photo

He didn't stay long at Boeing, hitting the road with his camera, traveling wherever he was pulled, from Florida to Canada, picking up income here and there from computer consulting work. Then, in October 2000, he had an epiphany. He'd gone to Canada, to Churchill, Manitoba, a popular spot for photographing polar bears. But the site's tourist trappings made the trip a letdown. He remembers, "I would see a bear and then suddenly eight large vehicles would converge on it." He realized he wanted to stand apart from the pack and go where the bears and their environment hadn't been altered and invaded by all sorts of human interests. "I thought, I've got to go to a place where I can actually live with

much of it has actually been documented, and the answer was: very little. I thought, My God, it is the most debated public land in the U.S. Every magazine, every newspaper, every TV station has done multiple stories on the place, and yet, believe it or not, while there had been pockets of studies by biologists and botanists, it had not been visually documented in a way that was comprehensive and included all four seasons. I realized I had a tremendous opportunity."

I'll say. He immediately set to work, arriving in the village of Kaktovik, on the northern coast of the Alaskan Arctic, on March 19, 2001, having emptied his savings account (about \$80,000) and raised some additional funds through loans and

"I asked how much of the refuge has actually been documented. . . . I realized I had a tremendous opportunity."

classes he was taking.

"Coming from a middle-class family, you don't really think about that—you go into something that will bring sustenance," he laments. The "real" job that he ended up with was at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the atom bomb was developed. The laboratory had gotten a substantial grant for energy research, but when funding was cut in 1996 and the lab's priorities were rejiggered toward areas of defense, Banerjee realized he wanted out. His involvement with the Sierra Club had deepened, his consciousness about land conservation and preservation had been growing, and so the question of where to go next was influenced more by his love for the outdoors than by what would be smart for his career. He chose the Northwest and landed a spot in research at Boeing headquarters in Seattle.

As a city Seattle seemed made for him; it provided him with an instant community, and offered many opportunities for him to pursue his interests. Banerjee's colleagues in a Boeing photography club chose one of his images as "Slide of the Year." And while that may not have been a MacArthur "genius award," it did the trick: "I thought, Gee, maybe I could take this interest of mine more seriously. I really wanted to figure out how to combine my interests in art, in the outdoors, and in conservation issues."



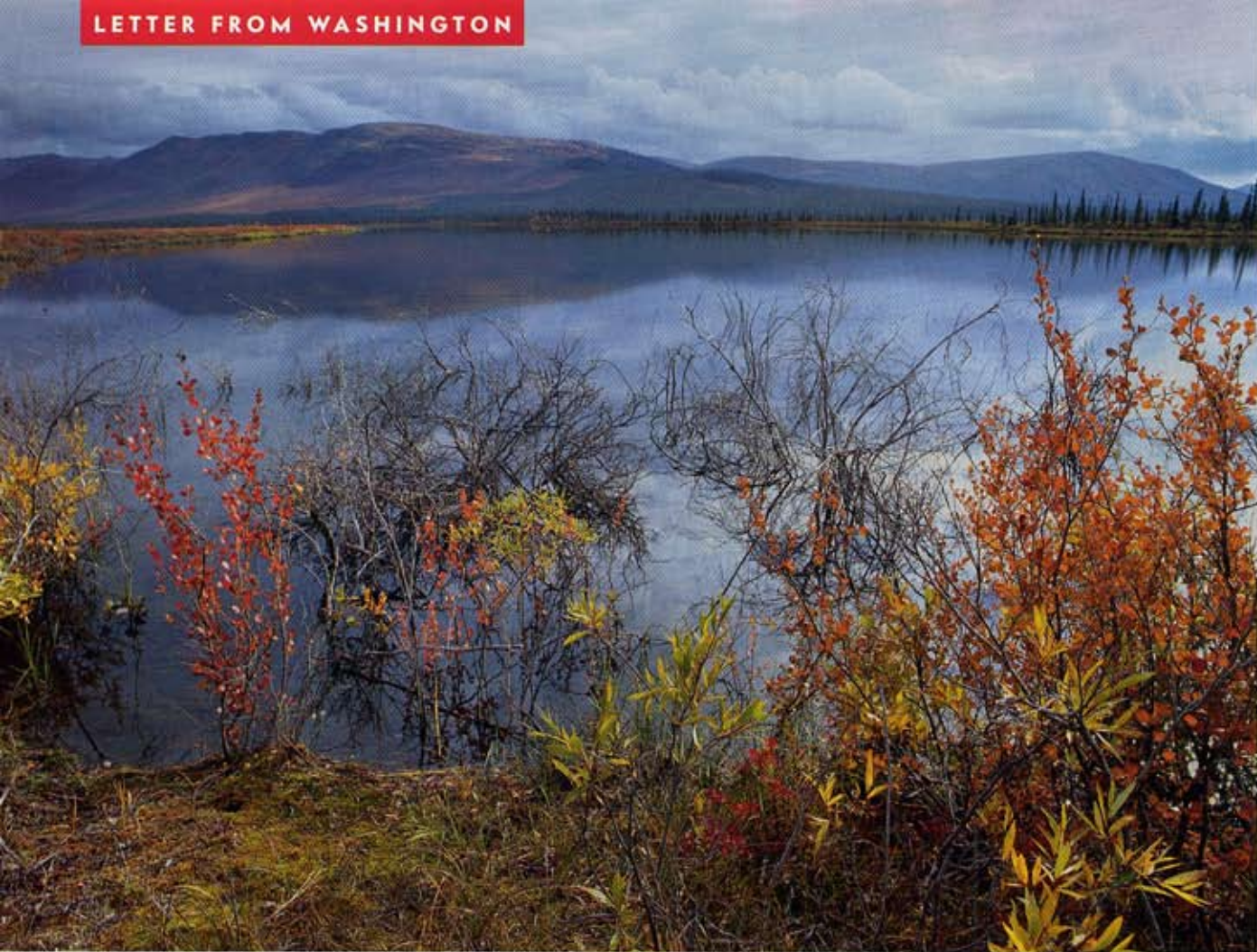
TOO WILD FOR WASHINGTON
A buff-breasted sandpiper. From Banerjee's original Smithsonian caption: "This species, a long-distance traveler, migrates each year from Argentina . . ."

polar bears," he says. A hunch led him to check out the opportunities in northern Alaska, and soon his research led to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. He struck up a lively e-mail correspondence with some of the biologists who were stationed there. "I'd write, 'What's possible up there?'" he recalls. "I told them I wanted to photograph polar bears living in the wild. They'd write back, 'Yeah, you could do that here.' And they started sending me other reports. I was simply blown away by the diversity of life in this land that had always intrigued me but that I had no knowledge of. I asked how

grants from various individuals and foundations. (Ultimately the cost of the project exceeded \$250,000, leaving Banerjee currently \$100,000 in debt.) Money was one thing. But there were bigger issues, such as how someone with no experience could survive the punishingly harsh winter conditions, which in the Arctic can last until May. What gear and clothing were necessary to help stand up to the weather? Which cameras and lenses could hold up against the wind, ice, and extreme cold? He reached

out to the pros for advice. He says his lone respondent was Natalie Fobes, a *National Geographic* photographer; between her input and the advice of Robert Thompson, an experienced Inupiat field guide who had agreed to take on Banerjee and his project, he readied himself.

But nothing could have prepared him for his very first night, when a March blizzard started blowing and the windchill dropped to between 80 and 90 degrees below zero. He and Thompson were on a short snowmobile ride six miles into the refuge. "It was a complete white-out," he remembers. "The wind was blowing like crazy, and there was this horrendous cold. I felt like I was in a nightmare. I panicked. I thought, What the hell am I doing here? I'm in over my head. I've got to leave. I can't survive, let alone photograph." Thompson and his wife, Jane—both



LAND O' LAKES

The trees in this picture may be evidence of global warming, as higher temperatures are causing tree lines to move north.

of whom have lived in Kaktovik on and off for more than 30 years—talked Banerjee down, and that was really the first and last time that he thought about throwing in the towel. For the next month or so, Thompson put the photographer through rehearsals, as it were, and after that, even with blizzards that lasted 25 days straight, the work became more of an adventure than a trial. Banerjee's faith in his guide was such that he felt he could survive whatever came his way, as long as he and Thompson weren't separated. According to Banerjee, their profound connection carried over to the pictures. He says it isn't just his vision in the pictures, but Thompson's too.

made fund-raising easier. His association with Blue Earth Alliance, combined with the fact that his biggest financial supporters would eventually be Tom Campion, an idealistic businessman who is on the board of the Alaska Wilderness League, and his wife, Sonya Campion, underscores the fact that Banerjee's work was in part sponsored by environmentalists and could therefore

ever try to get a magazine to sponsor the work. He explains: "I did not want to be influenced by any magazine. I wanted to live in this land on my own terms and learn from the native people how they view it. I didn't want editors or producers telling me what to expect or what to bring back."

Banerjee's pictures are at base a straightforward, unmanipulated visual record of his subject, and the fact that they document such an array of plant, animal, and bird life contradicts notions such as the one put forth by Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton when she famously described the refuge as if it were an ob-

"I thought, What the hell am I doing here?" Banerjee recalls.
 "I'm in over my head. I can't survive, let alone photograph."

Now that he'd gotten his first photographs, he returned to Seattle and approached Blue Earth Alliance, a nonprofit organization that supports projects that aim to educate the public about endangered lands, threatened species, and related cultural issues. Within days Banerjee got the nod that his project was accepted; the nonprofit status that this accorded him

be accused of being a propaganda tool. Banerjee is perfectly open about the fact that he began his study with a conservationist bent. He never pretended otherwise, any more than Picasso pretended to be a warmonger when he painted *Guernica*, his anti-war masterpiece. That said, Banerjee was determined to go into the refuge without an agenda. It's one reason why he didn't

subject of conceptual art—a "flat white nothingness." It is the "everythingness" that Banerjee's photographs capture that has made them politically explosive. Almost as soon as he had begun to record life in the refuge, word spread that his pictures might be a useful vehicle for the fight against drilling in ANWR, and in July 2001, after the new Republican White House began push-

ing the issue, he was asked by the Alaska Wilderness League to bring some of his images to Washington. He did, and soon Senator Barbara Boxer of California was hailing his work as a sort of sword against the interests of big oil.

One might wonder whether Banerjee feels exploited by all the politicking around his work. He seems to see it as coming with the territory. Of his many photographic heroes, Ansel Adams may have influenced Banerjee the most, and Adams's

and got himself connected to Robert Sullivan, a curator who, it turned out, had done anthropological research in the Brooks Range section of ANWR and knew what a hard environment it is to survive in—and what sort of will it takes to come away with photographs of the sort that Banerjee claimed he had. After their phone chat the photographer sent Sullivan a package of images, which were impressive enough that Sullivan agreed to a meeting, after which he promised Banerjee a spot on the mu-

forced him to keep things simple. It was hard enough just to get the cameras cranking. (He ended up using old, manually operated Nikons and Mamiyas because, unlike the newer, automatic cameras, their mechanisms work in freezing weather.) Some of his pictures were shot from the air—with the help of Walt Audi, a famous bush pilot in the Arctic who seems to be the point man for anyone who wants to brave the area.

But when you see Banerjee's most memorable pictures, it's not hardship that's evi-

Banerjee is like a character from a Frank Capra movie, a *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* for the nature-photography set.

best photographs—romantic pleas, really, against building a road through every mountain and every forest—are a continuation of the photographic arguments against indiscriminate industrialization that were begun by 19th-century greats such as Carleton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan. One day Banerjee's work may be seen as part of this legacy. Sometimes his eyes get big when he talks about the potential repercussions of taking pictures that are so politically fraught, but he never seems to question whether

he should have allowed his images to be factors in the current debate about ANWR. He is like a character from a Frank Capra movie, a *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* for the nature-photography set. His personality is a curious mixture of innocence and savvy, of idealism and determination, of modesty and ambition.

It was the last quality, and, some would say, a crazy kind of confidence, that drove him to get not just a publisher but also a show at a major museum, long before his Alaska project was even completed. Having wrangled an appointment with Helen Cherullo, the head of Seattle-based Mountaineers Books, on the basis of his first shots of the refuge, he essentially talked his way into a book contract with the nonprofit, environmentally oriented publisher. Cherullo says, "From the moment Subhankar and I met, I knew this book was going to be something special." As for the exhibition, the direct way he got in touch with the Smithsonian is typical of Banerjee—both naïve and ballsy. After sending an initial letter to the museum, Banerjee checked out its Web site, called the main number,



MOUNTAIN HIGH

The Jago River and Romanof Mountains.

From the original caption: "This is the value of this piece of wilderness—its absolutely untouched character."

seum's exhibition schedule once his work was complete. With all that to look forward to, Banerjee headed back to the refuge, shooting for seven months straight, from March 2002 until the end of September.

Not all of Banerjee's Arctic pictures are standouts, not by a long shot, but those that are succeed both as photographs and as scientific documents. One of his keys is patience. He'll wait and wait for something to happen, perhaps for many days, sometimes meditating. Then, once he thinks he has a potential picture, if possible he'll look at the scene for a long time before beginning to shoot. Perhaps the difficult conditions he worked in—he would ultimately travel about 4,000 miles through the refuge, mostly by foot, raft, kayak, and snowmobile—were a blessing, because they

reflected on a lake that has cotton grass running wild in the foreground, and another lake view that includes a chaotic foreground of fall-colored vegetation, some of it dead—could hang beside any great 19th-century landscape photograph. His close-ups of animals and birds are less remarkable. They matter because of what they tell us about life in the region, but aren't particularly interesting from an aesthetic point of view. Ditto his photographs of the local Gwich'in people and their way of life; they are important anthropological documents, vital social records, not artistic breakthroughs. But Banerjee's landscapes seem epic, and there is something about them that is haunting.

So is the story of what happened to his exhibition at the Smithsonian. Last winter, as the show came together, Banerjee was on top of the world. According to the photographer, Sullivan had been so impressed with the selection of images he'd received that he was hoping to move the exhibition from a smaller gallery to one of the museum's more prestigious and central locations, Hall 10. Sullivan also offered

some museum funds to assist in producing the exhibition's prints, an expensive process for large-format pictures. As for the book, Banerjee had managed to get contributions from Jimmy Carter, Peter Matthiessen, David Allen Sibley, and other prominent voices in the conservation movement, once again through a combination of chutzpah,

lar images, but will provide visitors with an opportunity to learn more about the ecology and inhabitants of the region." The show was scheduled to open in May 2003, and short of the champagne corks going off, it looked like a done deal. There had been design meetings on-site in Hall 10 at the museum; there were wall plans for the

2004, Senator Boxer introduced an amendment to prevent consideration of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from being slipped into a fast-track budget-reconciliation bill. The debate that ensued that evening was long and heated, and Banerjee's photographs featured in Boxer's opening remarks. She would go on to dis-

Alaska senator Ted Stevens warned, "People who vote against [drilling] are voting against me, and I will not forget it."

naïveté, and passion. Even though the book had no official connection to the Smithsonian show, the tie-ins were numerous. Banerjee says he had received permission from Sullivan to mention the Smithsonian exhibition in the Mountaineers book, both in the text and on the jacket. The museum even decided to give the show the same title, "Seasons of Life and Land"; in fact, the Smithsonian had also contracted Banerjee's editor, Christine Clifton-Thornton, to help develop the captions that would go on the walls in conjunction with the photos. The agreement letter that Sullivan had sent to Banerjee noted the importance of putting the photos in context: as Sullivan wrote, the exhibition "will not only present spectacu-

lar images, but will provide visitors with an opportunity to learn more about the ecology and inhabitants of the region." The show was scheduled to open in May 2003, and short of the champagne corks going off, it looked like a done deal. There had been design meetings on-site in Hall 10 at the museum; there were wall plans for the

It was a moment that will no doubt become legendary in the annals of photography and politics. On the evening of March 19 of this year, in the middle of a Senate budget debate for the fiscal year

HOOFED MIGRATION

The spring migration of Porcupine caribou (named after the Porcupine River). The herd, which is 120,000 strong, migrates through the refuge and northern Canada.

play a selection of his pictures, primarily his shots of animals and birds. Many hours and many arguments later, shortly before the vote was taken, Boxer invoked Banerjee's work yet again. This time she urged members of the Senate to look at his book, *Seasons of Life and Land*, and held up an advance copy that had been sent to her by the Alaska Wilderness League. She also encouraged her colleagues to visit his upcoming show at the nearby Smithsonian. The Senate eventually passed Boxer's amendment, keeping proposals for oil and gas drilling at bay for the time being, but the vote was close (52 yeas, 48 nays) and there were those who suspected this wouldn't be the end of the matter. Still ringing in Wash-



ington's ears was a threat from Alaska's senior senator, Ted Stevens, a Republican who for more than two decades has arguably been the most vocal proponent of drilling in the refuge. With the tide turning against him, Stevens had warned, "People who vote against this today are voting against me, and I will not forget it."

The capital's museums have a history of caving in under political pressure—and, in a way, what came to pass with Banerjee's exhibition is even more frightening than the more famous episode in the early 90s when Senator Jesse Helms led the fight on Capitol Hill against the National Endowment for the Arts and its support of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic explorations of homosexuality and

had in fact been canceled. "Since there has not been, nor is it likely in the immediate future that there will be an exhibition at the Smithsonian, I request that any and all references to the Smithsonian Institution or a Smithsonian-sponsored exhibition be removed from all future printings or editions of the book," the museum's assistant general counsel wrote. Worried, Cherullo made a quick call to Sullivan, who assured her the show was on. But Banerjee and company were extremely upset and scheduled an early-morning conference call with Sullivan, via his assistant, to talk further. Banerjee says the phone meeting never took place, because at the appointed time (six in the morning for the Seattleites) they were told that the curator was unavailable.

In the end Banerjee's exhibition did go

the ground floor.) But it's hard to buy the claim by Sullivan, and by the Smithsonian P.R. office, that the Baird Gallery was in fact the perfect place for Banerjee's work when one compares it with the space at the back of Hall 10, the location the show had been designed for. No contest: Hall 10, which is on the main floor—near the humongous elephant that is the museum's best-known symbol—is more prestigious, more visible, more central. Banerjee still looks at the Hall 10 wall plans ruefully.

And then there were the wall captions, which were drastically edited shortly before the show opened, with any supplemental information completely scrubbed away, leaving only a brief indication of subject and place. What's striking

"The show has to move," Banerjee was told, "that's one thing. The second thing is that all the captions have been expunged."

Andres Serrano's visual critique of the Catholic Church. Helms's position contributed to an atmosphere that led to the Corcoran Gallery's cancellation of a Mapplethorpe show that included some of his most sexually explicit photographs, including his XYZ Portfolios.

Of course, Mapplethorpe's work was purposely provocative, as was Serrano's; Banerjee just wanted to shoot a straightforward record that had some aesthetic merit. But when Boxer explicitly linked Banerjee's work to one of the hot-button issues of the day, she changed his life. According to the photographer, Sullivan called him on April 4, two weeks after the Senate vote, and said, "Subhankar, I have good news for you and bad news for you. The good news is that your exhibit is still going on. The bad news is that I have had tremendous pressure to cancel it. I have worked very hard for the last couple of weeks to restore it. However, there are changes that have to be made to the show. The show has to move back to the downstairs gallery—that's one thing. The second thing is that all the captions have been completely expunged."

This wasn't good. But at least it was clear. What came next was a whole different ball game. Banerjee and Cherullo have copies of confusing, intimidating letters they received from Smithsonian lawyers, the first of which implied that the show



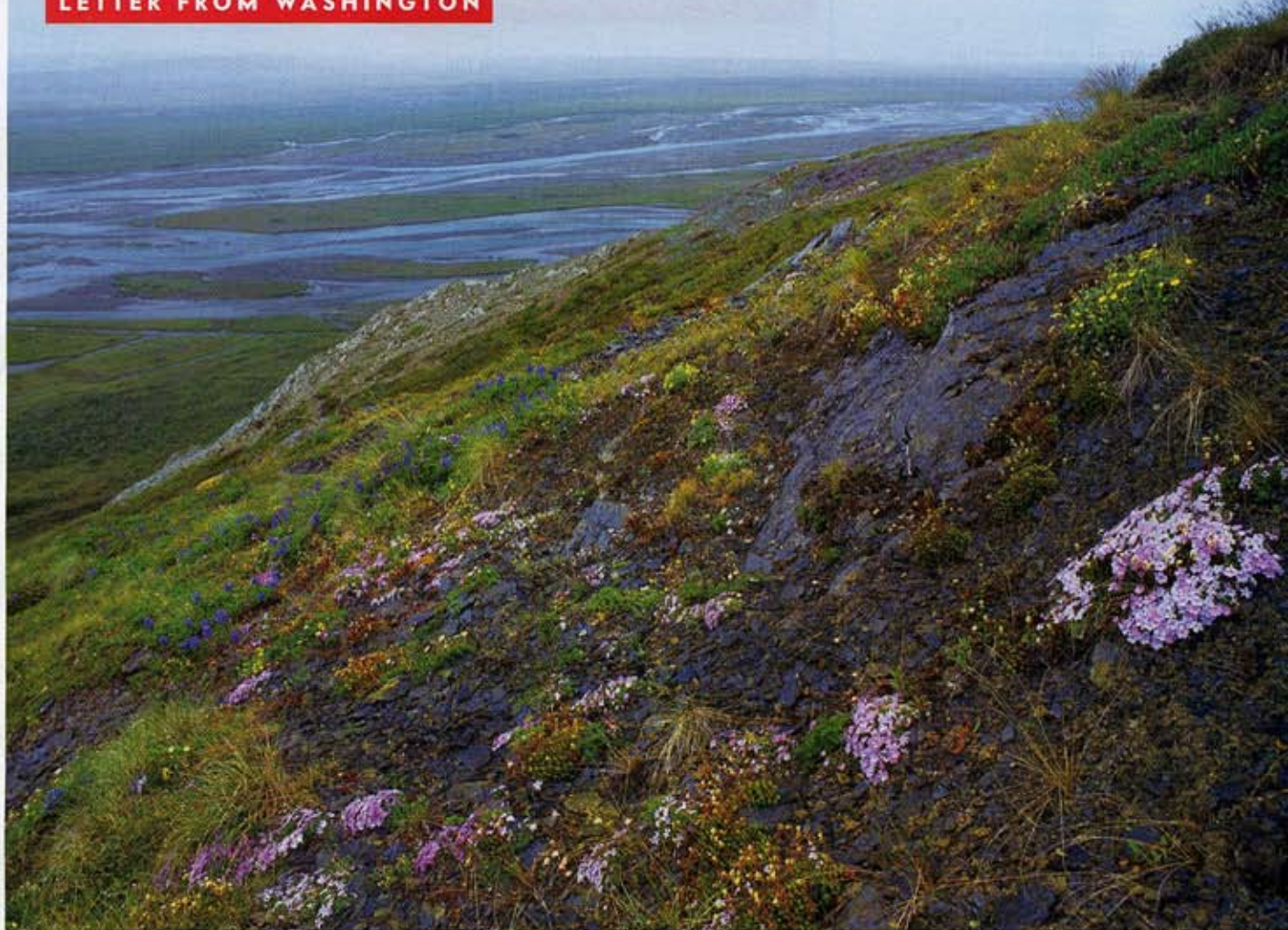
DON'T TELL BULLWINKLE
A member of the local Gwich'in people, transporting fresh moose meat on the east fork of the Chandalar River.

on at the Smithsonian with a run that began in early May and lasted through the summer. But it was essentially buried by the museum, which did live up to its commitment to show the work, but in a transparently ambivalent way. Take the spot where the pictures eventually landed, the Baird Gallery, a glorified corridor with track lighting that serves as a lobby for the museum's auditorium. This was exactly where the show had started out. When I spoke to Sullivan he seemed rather miffed that the media had taken to referring to the Baird space as being in the basement. (If one enters the museum from Constitution Avenue, it's on

is that none of the original captions took a direct position on the ANWR debate. While Banerjee's book (which, by the way, has sold out in the museum's bookstore) is clearly a partisan product, the exhibition's captions were not. None mentioned oil, or drilling, or even acknowledged the debate beyond making generalized calls for preservation. One caption for a photograph of a buff-breasted sandpiper did note that the bird is

among "the top five bird species at greatest risk if their habitat is disturbed." At greatest risk in the Arctic? The U.S.? The world? And at risk of what, exactly? The caption did not clarify; its problem was scientific sloppiness, not politics, yet instead of being fixed, it was removed. The new caption read simply, "Buff-breasted sandpiper, coastal plain of the Jago River."

More typical of the original captions was the text for a photograph of a willow ptarmigan, a grouse-like bird. The text quoted Banerjee: "I would awake in the morning to ptarmigans feeding near our tent, talking to themselves and making noises that sounded like 'go-bek, go-bek' as if to let us know we were trespassing on their territory." Despite the use of the arguably inflammatory word "trespassing," it's hard to see that quote as anything but romanticization of the sort that comes up over and over again when "the



wild" is touched upon; one sees versions of this sentiment so often in Western art and literature, from high to low. But not at the Smithsonian, where the caption was reduced to "Willow ptarmigan, Hulahula River Valley." More innocuous still was this caption for a photograph of a polar bear walking across frozen Bernard Harbor in early June: "The unlikely elements of late-evening light, a dead-calm Arctic coast, a most unusual Arctic mirage in the far distance, and a polar bear offering a perfect reflection combined to create

PLACE DRILL BIT HERE

A view of the Kongakut River Valley, with summer wildflowers. "I was blown away by the diversity of life," Banerjee says of the refuge.

appropriated directly by Congress. That it can be intimidated is not news. As I got deep into the reporting of this story I came across a number of fairly recent instances in which the museum ended up acting as if it were an institution in the Soviet Union

sonian up to say they wanted to review all the texts and change the show. After objecting, the Smithsonian came to me and said, 'They'll kill us in Appropriations if you don't cooperate.' The changes they wanted were completely absurd. It was a tempest in a teacup. One of the changes, for instance, is that when we were talking about old-growth trees we couldn't use the words 'primeval' or 'ancient.' We made some basic changes but we didn't do all of the big ones." Instead, Ketchum went to the press, and the next day *The Washing-*

The Smithsonian episode is a reminder that a museum cannot be true to its mission if it is ruled by a fear of politicians.

this image, a photographer's dream." New caption: "Polar bear, Bernard Harbor."

The show had originally been set to open with a wall text quoting from Jimmy Carter's foreword to Banerjee's book: "It will be a grand triumph for America if we can preserve the Arctic Refuge in its pure, untrammelled state." This clearly was a no-no, though the idea of using the quote had come from the museum's own staff.

The Smithsonian gets about two-thirds of its budget from the federal government,

during the Cold War, instead of a museum founded to promote the "increase and diffusion of knowledge." The photographer Robert Glenn Ketchum has an eerie story regarding a 1994 exhibition at the Smithsonian that echoes what happened with Banerjee. He remembers, "I had done an exhibit on the Tongass rain forest"—another Alaskan wilderness area—"through the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. Then, a few days before the opening, the Alaskan delegates called the Smith-

ton Post ran a story; that ended that. "They realized they were creating a bigger firestorm than it was worth," says Ketchum.

Senator Stevens has angrily denied putting pressure on the museum in regard to Banerjee's show (though he thinks the museum did the right thing), but it's a matter of public record that he and then senator Frank Murkowski, another Alaska Republican, were the prime complainers about Ketchum's show; this was

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just one of several occasions on which the senior senator from Alaska has tried to lay a heavy hand on the institution. In 1991, *The Washington Post* quoted the warning Stevens lobbed at Smithsonian officials when he was mad about some museum programs on American history, which he perceived to have a leftist bias. "You're in for a battle. I'm going to get other people to help me make you make sense."

This past May, Senator Durbin and others used a hearing on the Smithsonian's budget to question whether outside influence had been brought to bear against Banerjee's show. The hearing included testimony from Lawrence Small, the head of the Smithsonian Institution, who denied that anything unusual had occurred. But the hearing clearly demonstrated that Banerjee's exhibition was treated differently from another show concurrently hanging at the museum, an exhibition of photographs by Eliot Porter. One picture of a Tennessee landscape included a caption blatantly indicting the environmental effects of strip-mining, but the Smithsonian did not flinch. The Porter caption, unlike some of the Banerjee captions, wasn't deemed a potential violation of the federal statute that says the museum must essentially remain neutral about "any legislation or appropriation by Congress."

Would the museum have been so anxious without the fear of crossing powerful politicians? When I spoke to Robert Sullivan he insisted that there had been no pressure from the outside to make changes in Banerjee's exhibition. "As someone who was on the inside," Sullivan said, "I can say quite categorically we never got a call from anyone, we never got pressured. We just went through our normal internal process that we go through to protect our neutrality." On the other hand, Sullivan was perfectly frank about the fact that the drilling debate put Banerjee's show under the gun. He said, "What happened is something we couldn't have predicted, which is that the debate over the ANWR-oil-exploration bill happened right when we were about to open the show. It made us have to be cautious about making sure we couldn't be perceived as advocating for the passage or rejection of that particular piece of legislation. So the timing couldn't have been worse."

The irony in all this is that efforts at suppression can be the best thing for an artist's career, helping to draw a spotlight that might not otherwise have been there. His treatment is in part what motivated Terry Gosliner, the provost of the California Academy of Sciences, a San Francisco museum, to step forward and offer to host another show of Banerjee's work; this exhibi-

tion, different from the Smithsonian's, is on view through December and will then travel. The show's captions are exactly as Banerjee wants them—anecdotal and informative. Audiences also have another chance to see Banerjee's work on the East Coast: a show has just opened at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and will run until March 7. It's not a huge exhibition, but here, too, Banerjee's Arctic photographs will be presented with the kind of information that the Smithsonian decided was too political to include. For the American Museum of Natural History's Dr. Eleanor Sterling, who is in charge of Banerjee's show and is also the director of the museum's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, providing informative captions is not a political issue but an obligation. She says, "That's what our museum does for a living—it tries to share the natural world with people. . . . It's our job to give accurate information on things like reproduction, population size, and conservation status. That's our role as scientists—to inform the public about the entire natural history of an animal, and that includes conservation status."

The Smithsonian episode is a reminder that a museum cannot be true to its mission if it is ruled by a fear of politicians. In fact, the entire issue of "neutrality" that comes up when federal funds are involved can place museums between a rock and a hard place. But whether the impulse to minimize the impact of Banerjee's show came from external pressure or internal panic, or a combination of the two, the result was a loss for the artist, the institution, and, of course, the public.

In its rush to expunge any context from Banerjee's show, the Smithsonian went as far as to invoke some of the old formalist positions on art—that it is form, not content, that matters. But to take the meaning out of Banerjee's photographs and try to build an exclusively aesthetic frame around them is to miss what makes them so vibrant. They are relevant to both art and science; in fact, their strength is that the two ways of understanding the world can't be untangled in these pictures. Their ultimate so-called crime was that they did not depict a wasteland. But the Smithsonian's capitulation, whatever the reason, reminds me of another wasteland, the one T. S. Eliot spoke of in 1921 when he wrote this:

The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never
retract.

This lament, like most of Eliot, is of course open to interpretation. It was the concreteness of Banerjee's pictures that got them in trouble. □