

## ISOLATOS

Work on a whale ship required intense coordination and camaraderie. Out of the gruesomeness of the hunt, the peeling of the whale's skin from its carcass, and the hellish boil of the fat, something, as Melville wrote in *Moby-Dick*, sublime emerged. The enormous profit derived from whaling integrated not just capital and technology but human sentiment. And like the whale oil that lighted the lamps of the world, divinity itself glowed from the labor, a value shared by working people throughout America: "Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!"<sup>1</sup>

Sealing was something else entirely, pitting desperate captains and officers, racing to make a voyage pay off, against equally desperate foremast hands, who, left alone on remote islands, had plenty of time to gripe and plot. It called to mind not industrial democracy but the isolation and violence of conquest, settler colonialism, and warfare, men brutally exploiting one another and nature, not for something elemental and needed by all like light and fire but for the raw material of conspicuous consumption. Sealers seized territory, fought one another to keep it, and pulled out what wealth they could as fast as they could, before abandoning their claims empty and wasted.

Some sealing islands were stocked with black cattle, wild hogs, and goats left by previous visitors. Others were nothing but barren clay mixed with stones and sand. Sealers, often schooners and brigs like the *Perseverance*, dropped off away gangs for ever-longer stretches. The men left behind by captains like Delano were given little instruction and few provisions, aside from start-up casks of hard bread, lard, and liquor, axes to build a shelter, salt to dry the skins (unless they were to be sun dried), a few muskets, balls, and powder. They were expected to live off the land. The island called Desolation at the southern tip of the Americas especially lived up to its name, even during the summer months, when the seals came ashore to give birth.

Away teams survived by wading into freezing water to harvest mussels, shooting birds, and boiling maidenweed for tea. Carrion crows could be mistaken for turkeys until they were shot; then their stink announced that they were vultures. Other islands had only seals to eat. Men cut steaks out of the meat, boiled the organs, salted the tongue, ate the brains as sweetbreads, and made black pudding with the blood. With luck they could occasionally trade with passing ships, exchanging sealskins for "oranges and English nuts." They lived Jonah-like, so to speak, inside the animals, as if they were the viscera themselves: they used the skeletons of whale bones as beams for their huts, sheathing them with the skins of seals and sea elephants. Sometimes, away teams would find traces of those who preceded them. After their first kill on a small, rocky, waterless Pacific island, a group of sealers came across a "sight which petrified them with horror": the skeletons of seven men and the remains of a hut, all that was left of a team that had been put ashore "for the purpose of getting elephant oil and seal."

It was a harsh, brutal life, and one, for both officers and foremast hands, considerably lower in standing than whaling. Many involved were unskilled, part of a revolutionary generation of land men who learned the job on the spot, hoping to make enough money to return home and buy a farm. The only experience they had that prepared them for the work was slaughtering and butchering farm animals. As William Moulton, from inland New York, put it, the "object of my voyage was to acquire property."

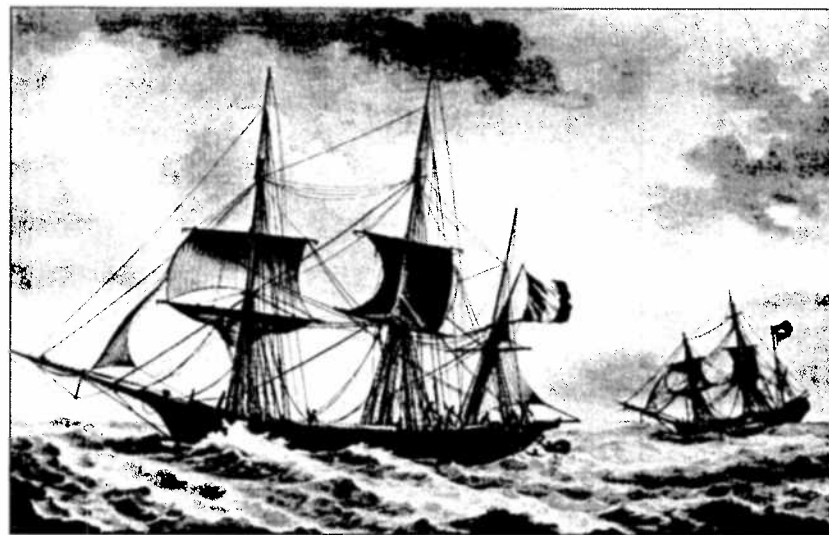
Left alone for months or years at a time, the men suffered the “severity of winter in this rigorous climate,” wrote Moulton. The snow was constant on the islands of the southern latitudes. Where there wasn’t snow, there were ticks, flies, and other insects. “Tormented by Buggs,” ran one entry in a sealer diary. The diet was monotonous and tough. The seal blood that went into black pudding was fibrous, causing bouts of intense vomiting. Scurvy was common. Some men were reported to have died shortly after eating a seal liver steak. They didn’t know it at the time, but the livers of seals contain a staggering amount of vitamin A, which could produce “purgings, dysenteries, and other complaints.”<sup>2</sup>

When the men weren’t killing and skinning, they cooked, drank, and played checkers or cards. Occasionally, another ship would drop anchor and relieve the boredom. “Held a ball on Captain Bunker’s craft,” read the journal of a sealer who had spent twenty months on *Más Afuera*. “Music was a flute, drum and violin.” But months of isolation bred vague resentments, cutting into the ability of sealers to enjoy the company of others: “A great disliking of this ship and crew among us.”<sup>3</sup>

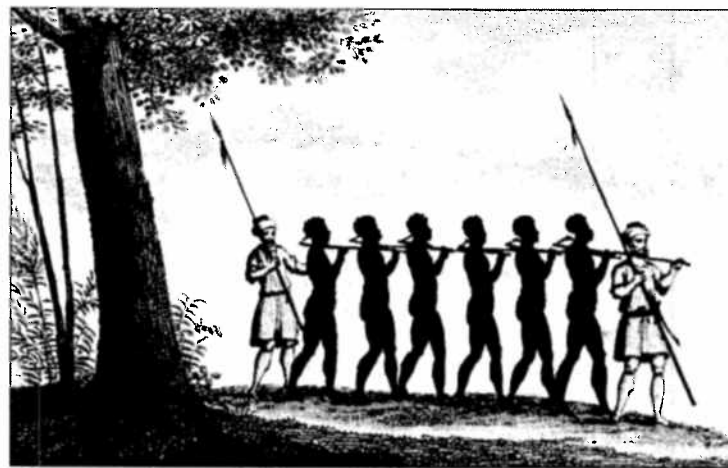
Days and nights were lonely and dreary, as diary entries testify: “Rain all day.” “Stormey rainy weather.” “Cloudy misty weather.” “Misty dirty weather.” “Cold, snow.” “Making a pair of trousers.” Then: “Rainy day again. Finished trousers.” “Little to eat and nothing soon but seal.” The men tried to keep the holidays: “The two hands returned with 4 goats . . . to keep the birthday of our savior. Not much to do except look for the ship, for which I employ the greater part of my time.” On islands where the water was warm enough, some lonely hands took breaks from the slaughter to play with the seals, gambling alongside them in a bay, as if they were seals themselves.

Dreams washed over the men. “Cartwright dreamed of home last night.” Another “dreamed of the young virgins.” After months of solitude and slaughter, even pleasant ones were interpreted as ominous: “Last night drempt of a wedding at home which I’ve heard say is a sign of a funeral.” “Last Night drempt of home again which makes me fearful of what has happened there.”<sup>4</sup>

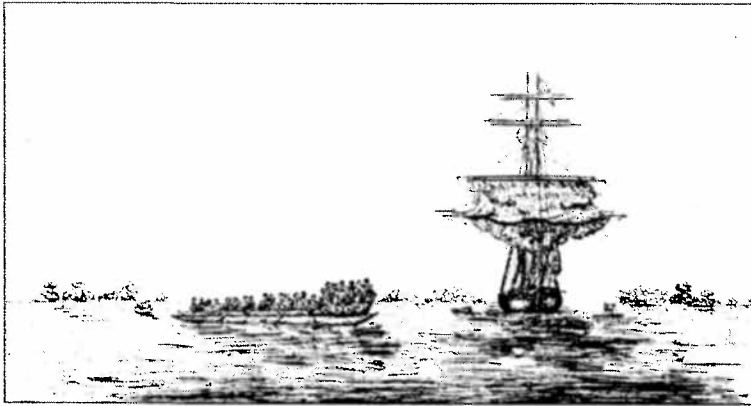
Quick relief was not to be expected: “One year yesterday since I



1. “Mordeille! Mordeille!” Citizen Mordeille is the small figure wearing a top hat in the middle of the foregrounded ship, which is about to capture a Swedish slaver. Ange-Joseph-Antoine Roux, 1806.



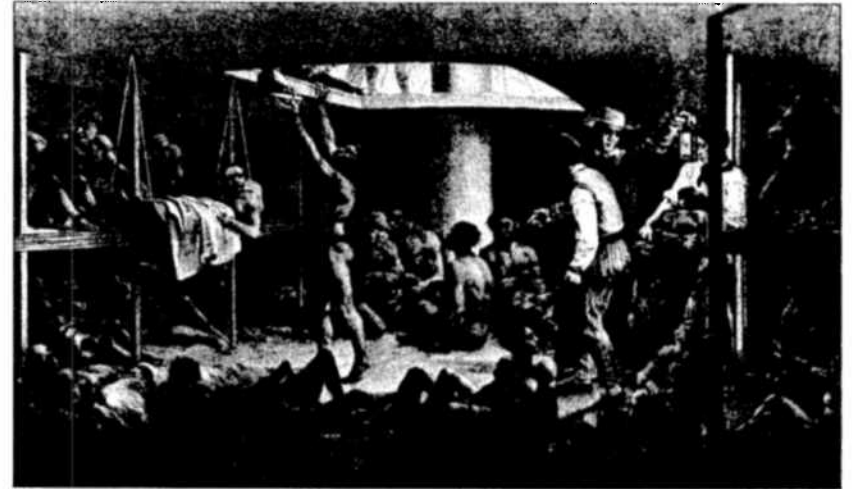
2. Did they come to the coast in “small parties” or “caravans”? Were they “Mohamedans or pagans”? Did they have any information about the “great chain of mountains that are reported to extend from Manding to Abyssinia”? European slavers often had no idea where their victims came from.



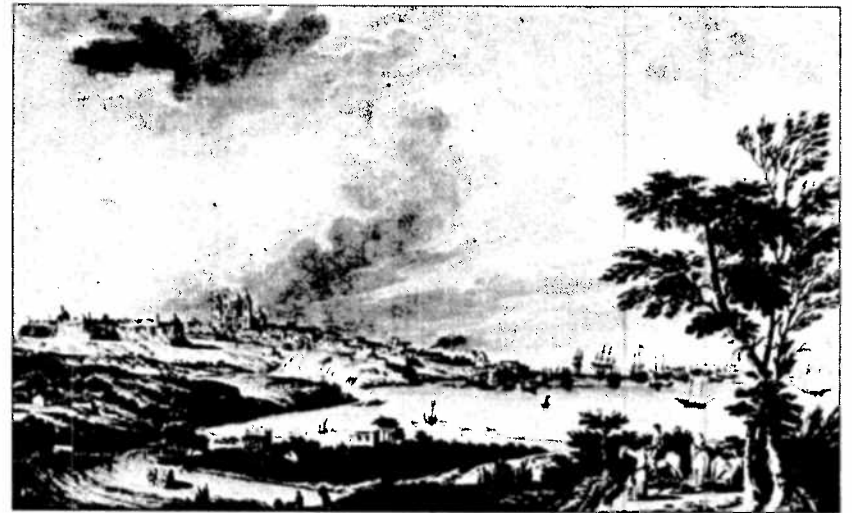
3. African captives being rowed to a slave ship anchored at Bonny.



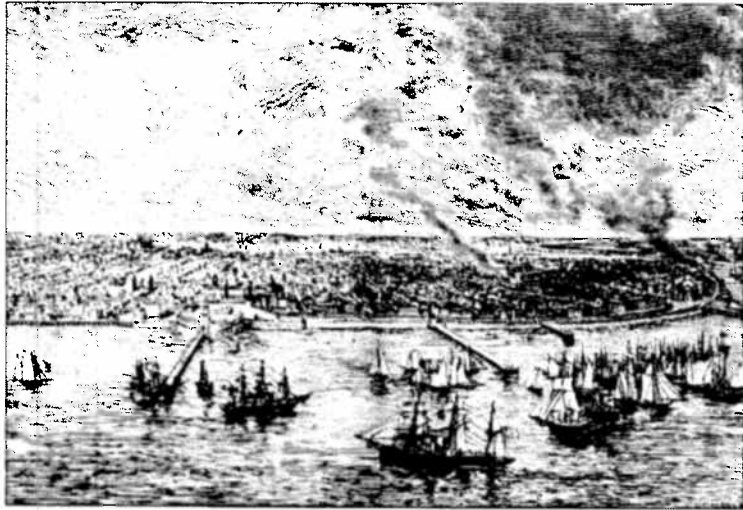
4. Slaves waiting to be sold on the west coast of Africa. Auguste-François Biard, c. 1833.



5. A rendering of the hold of a Brazilian slave ship, by the Bavarian painter Johann Moritz Rugendas, c. 1827. One enslaved African stretches to raise a water bowl through the hatch while a group of sailors remove a corpse. Rugendas noted in the text accompanying this painting that lack of water was the main cause of both death and revolt among captive Africans.



6. The peaceful bay of Montevideo full with ships. The "village of blacks" would have been farther to the right. Fernando Brambila, c. 1794.



7 and 8. Buenos Aires later in the nineteenth century, with columns of smoke rising from its saladeros. Before piers were built and the river was dredged, people and cargo had to be disembarked in all-terrain carts, jacked high above the water by large wheels.



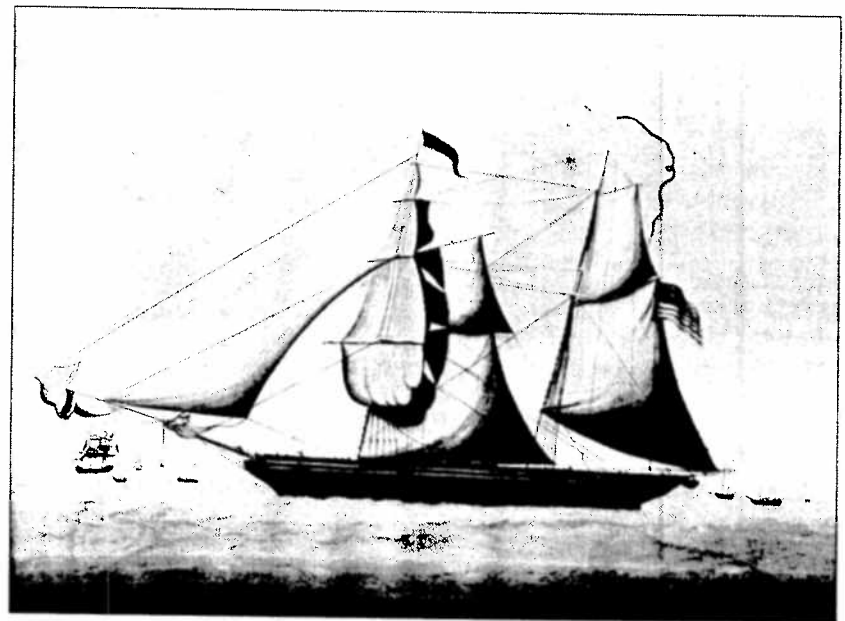
9, 10, and 11. Slaves in South America were involved in every aspect of economic life, as producers and consumers. The bottom image is of a group of shackled slaves, some of them wearing turbans, forming a queue to buy tobacco in Rio de Janeiro.



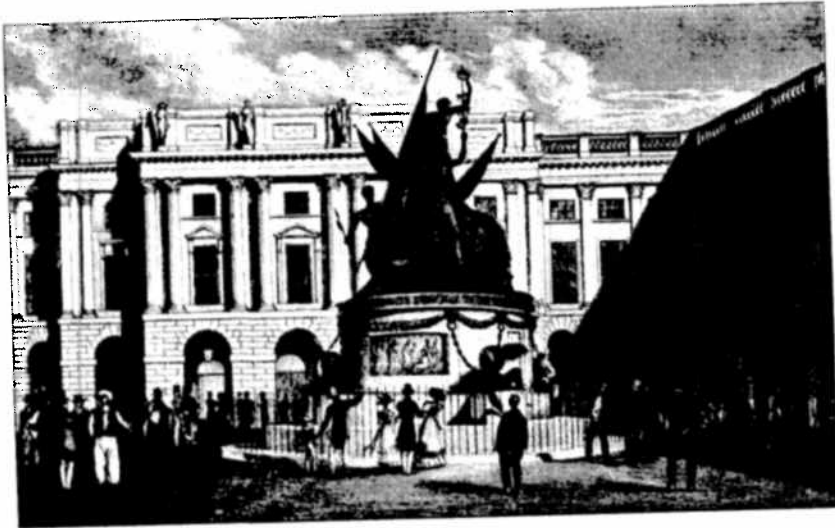
12 and 13. African and African American itinerant hawkers serviced the growing cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. These images of a cake seller and a laundress come from a series of "picturesque" lithographs from the 1830s.



14. Amasa Delano in 1816.



15. The two-masted *Perseverance* displaying its banner, pennant, and flag.



16. Liverpool's monument to Lord Nelson, around the time of Herman Melville's visit.



17. "I never could look at their swarthy limbs and manacles, without being involuntarily reminded of four African slaves in the market-place."

landed on this uninhabited Craggy Dismal place and in less than one more hour to depart from it with God's will." Nor could one assume it would even arrive: "Many a look do I cast on the distant ocean to descry our ship & many a sigh for fear she will not come."<sup>5</sup>

Whaling bound men tightly together in a small space for a long time, their solidarity made possible by the reliably high price of whale oil. Sealing was a more frayed affair. A seal ship might pick up hands in different ports as needed to fill out away teams, which meant that the ties linking crew to officers and captain were weak and unraveled quickly under pressure. When the margin of profit on skins collapsed due to oversupply, the only way to make up the difference was to reduce the daily operating budget of the ship. Officers cut meals to two a day and reduced portions. They diluted the rum and rationed medicine. And they drove men to kill more seals and to find more space on the ship to pack the extra pelts. First mates put seamen's chests on shore to make more storage room and captains converted forecastles into cargo holds, forcing their men to sleep in whatever nook they could find, often on deck and exposed to the elements. The skins, not the men, needed to stay dry. And once the skinning was done and a ship's hold packed from its bilge flats to its deck beams, officers might see away men as redundant, abandoning them "to perish on some maroon island" and keeping their rightful proceeds of the voyage.<sup>6</sup>

Whale men were cheated as well. In his history of maritime New England, Samuel Eliot Morison describes the kickbacks and double dealings that filched sailors out of their cut, usually calculated at around a hundredth part of a voyage's earnings. There were any number of things that hands had to pay for, from fees for "fitting out" and insurance to items taken from the ship's "slop chest," like tobacco and clothing. The charges would be added to what was called a portage bill, an account of debits and credits, and deducted from their share. Some arrived in a final port at the end of a voyage to learn they had been running a deficit and had to pay, or take out another loan, just to disembark. Yet in an established industry with the backing of complex institutions,

including corporations and underwriters, there was some accountability and oversight.<sup>7</sup>

Seal ship captains, however, even more than whalers, earned a reputation for exceptional deceit—not because this particular trade attracted a more vile sort of man but because its economy and ecology were unsustainable, forcing captains and officers to find new ways of limiting labor costs. “The oppression of these tyrants,” wrote William Moulton, talking about his own experience as second mate on the *Onico*, “was insufferable.”

Moulton was older than most of his shipmates. From a farming family in upstate New York, he was a veteran of America’s Revolutionary War. So he had an idea what tyranny looked like, describing seal ship captains as if they were British aristocrats or Hudson Valley landlords. “These gentry,” Moulton wrote, “can never fleece, drive, nor starve enough out of their men, nor devise too many pleas to cull and consume everything on themselves, to gratify their lusts of avarice and appetite.”

Sealers on Más Afuera, as well as on other islands, who began to think that the abuse wasn’t worth the share or who realized that the chances were dim that they would ever see their share, increasingly decided to strike: they quit, either collectively or individually.\*

In 1803, the entire crew of the *Mentor* jumped ship at Más Afuera,

\* The phrase *to strike* to refer to a labor stoppage comes from maritime history and is an example of how revolutionary times can redefine a word to mean its exact opposite. Through the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century, *to strike* was used as a metaphor for submission, referring to the practice of captured ships dropping, or *striking*, their sails or flags to their conquerors and of subordinate ships doing the same to salute their superiors. “Now Margaret / Must strike her sail,” wrote William Shakespeare in *Henry VI*, describing an invitation extended by the “Mighty King” of France to Margaret, the weaker queen of England, to join him at the dinner table “and learn a while to serve / Where kings command.” Or as this 1712 account of a British privateer taking a Spanish man-o-war off the coast of Peru in 1709 put it: “fir’d two shot over her, and then she struck” and bowed “down to us” (Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage*, p. 160). In 1768, London sailors turned the term inside out. Joining city artisans and tradesmen—weavers, hatters, sawyers, glass grinders, and coal heavers—in the fight for better wages, they struck their sails and paralyzed the city’s commerce. They “unmanned or otherwise prevented from sailing every ship in the Thames.” From this point forward, *strike* meant the refusal of submission.

with only 350 skins and thirty barrels of sea elephant oil in its hold. Its captain had to sell the ship in Chile for a pittance to cover passage home for him and his remaining officers. Around the same time, the away team from the *Jenny*, under the command of a Boston captain named Crocker, refused to return to the ship. Amasa Delano heard the news from his agent in Canton, who warned him to keep an eye on his own men: “The People left on Massafuero by Crocker have most all deserted.”<sup>8</sup>

Most of these islands were uninhabited, so there was no local source of labor. If their men deserted them, captains would have to travel some distance to recruit new hands, one way or another. At some point after his men abandoned him, Crocker, now in command of the *Nancy*, visited Easter Island, located about eighteen hundred miles west of Más Afuera. After a “bloody” battle with the island’s inhabitants, the Rapa Nui, Crocker captured twelve men and ten women and locked them in his hold. According to the captain of a Russian sealer, he was going to maroon them on Más Afuera to establish a slave “colony” of sealers. Three days out of Easter Island, however, the men jumped overboard and drowned. “They preferred perishing in the waves, to leading a miserable life in captivity.” The women tried to follow and were “prevented only by force.”<sup>9</sup>

Officers needing to fill their ships’ holds used all their power to stop desertions and forcibly “carry” men back. And men did all they could to avoid being brought back. Here are the March 1799 entries from the captain’s log from the *Concord*, a sealer off an island south of Más Afuera:

17th. In the course of the night Glover and Drown, two of our seamen stole the yawl and run on shore with all their clothes. We found the boat, but can’t find the men.

18th. Saw those two fellows that run ashore, but there is so much wood and swamp that it is impossible to catch them.

22d. Sent the boat on shore to fill three barrels of water which were empty. Moser, one of our hands, gave us the slip. We supposed at first that he went to take a walk and did not come back in time to come off in the

boat. . . . We saw him on the beach, sent the boat after him, but he ran into the woods. The people are all dissatisfied [and] have been mutinous of late.

23rd. Sent two boat crews on shore to try to catch those Infernal Rascals. Caught Drown but Moser kept his distance. Night calm, some hands ashore to catch the Villain. No Moser to be found. The fellow must be a plagy fool, for he's got no clothes but what he has on.

Then later, on Más Afuera:

April 12th. Drown, one of the fellows that run away, swears by all that's good that he will not work. I suppose we must tie him in the shrouds and give him a plagy flogging which is very disagreeable, but there is no help for it.<sup>10</sup>

Sealing was as nearly an all-or-nothing system of labor relations as possible: until a ship had its complement of skins, workers had leverage in their dealings with officers. They might desert one vessel and bargain with another for better terms. Yet once their ship's hold was full, their bargaining position completely and absolutely vanished, leaving them at the mercy of the officers. Before that point, though, masters were desperate to maintain their authority. Whipping was common, as the *Concord's* refractory Drown, threatened with a plagy flogging, learned. And seal ship captains could use their far-reaching contacts to financially punish runaways. Later, when a number of men abandoned the *Perseverance* on its second sealing voyage, Delano sent their names to China, instructing his man there to embargo the "proceeds of their share" should they show up as hands on another vessel.<sup>11</sup>

By 1801, there were on Más Afuera more than a hundred "alone men," a phrase used to describe sealers who lived and worked independently, unaffiliated with any ship. They were of "all descriptions and characters." Some, "badly used" by officers, were refugees from coercion and abuse who had escaped the "clutches of their tyrants." Others were at loose ends, left stranded far from home after their ships had been seized by Spanish authorities for smuggling. Still others were left-behinds, abandoned after having worked for months or a year to fill a

hold of a ship. Ship captains described these castaways as "felons, pirates & murderers." Amasa Delano's agent in China warned him to guard his skins: "There are so many fellows or rascals on the Island that what one gets cant be call'd his own they steal so." The island became an oxymoron, a society of hermits. "Not acknowledging the common continent of men," to use Melville's description of the "isolatos" on the *Pequod*, each lived on a "separate continent of his own." On Más Afuera, they were islands living together on an island, federated along its gulches and mountain ledges.<sup>12</sup>

One of these isolatos was an "English lad, by the name of Bill" who took the idea of freedom further than most did during his day. Having fled his ship, he lived in one of Más Afuera's many caves, deciding he wanted nothing to do with either shipboard discipline or the modern world's new master, money. "He keeps at work sealing," said a sailor who spoke with him, "and says if he can get bread and rum he shall be contented." Bill sold the sailor sixty skins, asking only to have his "keg filled" in exchange.

The sixty skins were worth twenty dollars, the sailor said, which would buy much more than two gallons of rum. Bill didn't care. "He says he was never so happy before; there is no larboard watch, no reefing top-sails, no body to quarrel with, and he sleeps when he pleases and works when he pleases."<sup>13</sup>

"Want nothing else?" the sailor asked. "No," answered Bill.