close as always, and somewhere up in the highest green a limb stammered in the breeze.

Gazing in the direction, Braaf said: "Waste of noise, like a blacksmith."

Wennberg glanced to Braaf, then turned aside and spat.

... Mander's line of country, this ocean, not mine. Savvied water, him. To the others of us it's a kind of night. See it but not into it. And try not catch a tumble from it. God's bones, can it be deep under here as Mander said? Some places as far to bottom as these mountains go high? Take his word for it, thank you. Sitka Sound a millpond to any of this. If this coast was other we'd maybe be hiking out. More my journey, that'd have been. Forest you can thread your way through, sort for yourself as you go. In Smaland lead me with a mealsack over my head into any wood and straight out I'd find my way. Toss one foot in front of another, you know you get somewhere. But water, can't keep a fix on water. Only keep after it, stroke and stroke and stroke. Say this paddle work was axe strokes, how many trees'd been brought down by now? How many forests, more like. Could've built our own stockade and town. Called it New Stockholm. No, Mander in charge, New Gotland it'd be. ...

Karlsson caught up with his drift of mind. Bothered that it had happened--new wilde of ocean, this--he shook his stare from the backs of Braaf and Wennberg, purposely scanned the entire length of the
water horizon. Sober anyone, that gray endless seam of sea and sky would.

Wennberg with joy would have been back at his forge. Any forge, anywhere. Glowing charcoal before him, circle of water ladled around its edge to concentrate the heat, then hammering metal in their heavy dance, fire-flakes leaping from the iron as Wennberg imposed shape on it, his arm decreeing axehead or hinge or bolster-plate, now there was proper work, not shoveling ocean all the bedamned day. Wennberg went in his mind time and again to that morning when he strode up behind Braaf in the parade ground—and each of these re-made times, Wennberg deflected like a scalded pup away from the laden thief.

Of course, thinking on it was like trying to undo fire in the forge: raking coals out in hope they would lapse to fresh charcoal once again. Indeed, Wennberg's wishing was of a fervency which amounted to reversing a forge fire all the way back to living tree.

And made, he sermoned himself yet again, as little sense. In this life paths cross paths and there you are, jangled up with a Braaf and a Karlsson. No help for it, who can number the clouds or stay the bottles of heaven?

But oh Hell take it, if he just hadn't crossed that parade ground...

Braaf, now—Braaf always was a guess. As best could be told,
though, Braaf was enduring coastal life something as an ouzel—that chick-sized bird common along the rivers which cut the Northwest shoreline and the streams which vein down from the mountains into those rivers. Slaty in color, peg-tailed, the ouzel at streamside is not much to notice, except as an example of bother; the bird constantly bobs, as though wary of some life-long peril overhead.

In actuality, the motion must be practice for its livelihood, which is to plunge into the water, immerse, and walk the bottoms of the rivers and streams, picking bits of feed as it goes. A hydraulic adaptee, the ouzel: somehow the bird has learned to use the flow of current to keep itself pinned down into place during this dinner delve beneath the riffles. Much in that way that the ouzel can shop along the cellar of the river, Braaf was held into route, into canoe and camp routine, by the sum of the pressures all around.

Weather above, ocean beside, forest solid along the continent edge—each day's life was pressed to him by such powers of the coast, and Braaf had the instinct simply to stay wary while letting the push of it all carry him ahead.

Kelp drifted alongside them in a tangle, a skim of the Pacific's deep layers of life.

As in the forest when branches become moving wands overhead but the air at ground keeps strangely still, the coastal weather now
crushed over the canoemen without quite touching down. Streamers of cloud shot along, would-be storms jostled with pretensions of clearing; the sky all hither and thither in this fashion. Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf never knew what to expect except that it would be unruly. Putty weather, gray and changeable. True, Sitka with its weather-of-the-minute had accustomed the Swedes to changeability. But at least at Sitka the concern was not that the next gray onset would cause the ocean to erupt under them.

Crone mountains, these now. Old bleak places gray-scarved above the green shore.

The weather held stormless, as though curious to watch down at this orphaned crew for a while. At the mid-day stop, Karlsson's pencil mark on the map moved east. Moved as much again at evening's camp—but south now. They were in the channel.

"Those Koloshes." Wennberg fed a branch to the supper fire. "Those ones that—back at that island, there. What d'you suppose they're in the world for?"

"For?" Karlsson was loading the rifles for the night, standard now since the encounter with the Koloshes at Arisankhana. He stopped to regard the blacksmith. As steadily as he tried to keep a reading of Wennberg, moods kited in and out of the broad man.

"What I mean, how d'they spend their lives?"
"Paddling their arms off," Braaf guessed, "about same as we are?"

"Sit on mine and ride home, Braaf. I mean truth here. This bedamned coast now, like forty kinds of a Finland. What's the use of these fish-fuckers, scatting around here and there? Whyn't it just empty?"

...We need to hope it damned well is, here on. ...

Karlsson aloud: "Maybe people are like crops, come up everywhere."

"Or weeds, if they're Wennbergs," added Braaf.

"Oh, Hell take the both of you. A man tries to figure life, and you fart from the front of your faces at him. I'm turning in. A blanket's better company than you pair."

...Still can be as touchy as a poisoned pup, Wennberg can. But at least it's not war. Maybe he's in troth about it, needing me to lead. Or thinking that I'm leading, instead of just tumbling us down this coast...

Karlsson came awake just after daylight had begun to hint. By the time Braaf and Wennberg were roused and breakfast was into the three of them, ridgelines and mountains in their cloaks and hoods of dark were arriving to sight all around the channel.

Canoe prow into water, three paddles into the shimmer sent by the craft. The near shore, the western, was coming distinct with
trees now. Then within the first few hundred strokes by the canoe-
men the horizon to the east brightened with low strips of dawn, as
though chinking had fallen out between mountains and clouded sky.

The dawn warmed from silver to straw yellow, to peach. Then
clouds burnt free by the light began to drift from view over the
eastern crags. Karlsson's third day as escapemaster was going to be
stormless.

... Thank you to this, any day. Sun, easy water. Wine and
figs next, aye, Melander?...

The paddles dipped, glistened wet on the forward reach of the
stroke, dipped again.

Braaf haphazardly hummed. That he seemed to have no acquaintance-
ship whatsoever with tune mattered none to Braaf. His random buzzes
irked Wennberg, sufficiently justifying them.

Wennberg today you would have thought a prisoner on his way to
exile. In his armwork showed none of Karlsson's thrift nor Braaf's
minimum attention, just the plod of a man wishing he were anywhere
else.

Karlsson while he paddled scanned steadily ahead, as though he
could pull the horizon of water nearer with his eyes.

The canoe glided higher in the water now, without Melander. Without,
too, as much food. Dried peas. tea, corners of biscuit, not much salt
horse, less than half the deer. ... the provisions seemed to dwindle
these days as if seeping out the bottom of the boat, and Karlsson spent long thinking how to replenish.

Queer, but with forest stacked high on both sides of them now, the timber put less weight on their day than had the single-sided throng along the ocean. The calm of the channel, stretching lake-wide, perhaps made it so. Ocean-neighboring forest never stood quite so quiet at this, there one breeze or another seeking through the upper boughs, birds conversing in the lower limbs, the devil knew what rustling behind the salmonberry and salal.

Mid-morning, the canoemen steered around a flotilla of trees—not drift logs but roots, branches, cones and all—drifting in the channel. Launched by an avalanche, Karlsson guessed.

Clouds stayed few and to the east, no weather-galleons from the ocean. Respite of every sort, this channel so far.

At mid-day Karlsson called a briefer stop than usual. So steadily were they adding mile onto mile that he wanted only scantest interruption.

They landed, stretched, peed, ate, got back in the canoe.

On and on, trough of channel. All of this was less willfull country to face into than any of the ocean shoreline. Poised rather than bolstering. The forested ridges conforming the channel, and their kin-mountains beyond them, sat as if in arrest; awaiting the next flow of existence maybe, the next pose to assume when the geologic clock chimed again.
Karlsson did not know how it could be, but times like this, concern and fascination now were sharing space in him. The fret of this shore of danger, and yet its allure. Thoughts forking either way, there. The Russians had a flag of this—an eagle, two-headed, peering this side and that. Just so, the lineaments halved inside Karlsson. Terrible, this chasm of coast. And splendid. Monotonous as a limp, this paddling. And clean labor.

Half through the afternoon, Braaf asked Karlsson could it be true that the Russians had buried the finger of a saint under the church of theirs at New Archangel?

Wennberg snorted derision.

Karlsson doubted the tale. How would any saintly finger find its way to New Archangel?

Braaf pondered, nodded, hummed.

If anything, green now crowded the waterline beside the canoemen more thickly than ever. When crows and ravens flew into this timber they disappeared as if gulped. The repetition of pattern, each green shape pyring dozens of long branches upward to a thin rod of top, seemed to have no possible end to it, simply multiplied ahead to circle the world and join back on itself here in this mesh beside the canoe. Braaf and Wennberg long since had ceased seeing individual trees, only the everlasting shag. Karlsson worked at watching for changes in this channel forest, but without result yet.

"Don't make a melody of it, Wennberg. Fog's fog, it'll leave
when the ghosts in it want to visit somewhere else." The sea mist which clung onto the forest and was delaying launch into the channel this morning had been the blacksmith's topic of indignation during the past minutes, Braaf now his moderator.

"You'd know, you've as much fog in that head of yours as this bedamned coast," Wennberg muttered.


"What?"

"Mast paint, he called it."

Still Wennberg gaped at Braaf.

"Mast paint," Braaf recited one more time. "Melander called pea soup that."

"Melander." Wennberg gave a half-hearted snort.

"At least he was worth grave space, more than can be said for you."

"You little pile of--"

"The pair of you, douse it," Karlsson inserted quickly.

"My regrets, blacksmith," Braaf offered. "Maybe you're worth grave space after all. But just tell me a thing, you've swallowed gospel in your time. Where is he?"

"Where's--? Braaf, are you moonstruck or what?"

"No, only tell me. Bible-true. Where's Melander just now?"

Wennberg squinted as if Braaf had asked him the exact cubits of
the universe. "Melander's buried, you helped tuck him into his grave."


"Oh. You mean, where's he been fetched to?"

Braaf bobbed yes. Wennberg appeared no more comfortable with this translation than with the original query.

"That's, well, the pastors now, they say it's a matter of how he'd've met judgment, that's all." 'Judge none blessed before his death,' is what they preach."

Braaf blinked and waited.

"Look at it this way," the blacksmith bid anew. "Those balance-scales where the Russians weighed out the poods of fur, remember those?"

Braaf nodded.

"Well, then, you know how one too many pelts made the scale go down on that side, or one too few made it go down on the weighted side."

Braaf nodded.

"Well, the pastors say life gets measured out that way, good deeds and bad, and whichever the judgment scale comes down on, you see, a soul goes either to heaven or hell."

Braaf didn't nod.

"You mean it's all up to some weighmaster?" asked Braaf with incredulity.

"Well, not, no, not just a weighmaster, so to speak. God does it. The pastors say."
"What if it comes out dead-even?"

"Dead-?"

"What if God puts a pood over here, credit to Melander, and another pood over here, his misdeeds your gospel-spouters'c'd call them, and it comes out dead-even, balanced?"

Wennberg looked to Karlsson for aid. Karlsson shook his head. "Bible is your rope of knots, Wennberg, not mine."

"I say he'd come out dead-even, Melander would," Braaf swept on. "He'd have savvied any scales, known how to wink them into balance."

"So where —" Braafian theology riveted Wennberg. "So where d'you think Melander is, if judgment didn't deliver him either place?"

"Somewhere between," Braaf reasoned. "Up there swimming the air, maybe, inside this fog. If a goose can, Melander could." Braaf turned his glance from the mist to a place just above Karlsson's brow. "Is there more of that mast paint?"

The morning of what Karlsson calculated to be their final day in this stretch of channel, the highest ridges showed new snow on their timbered tops, like wigs freshly powdered.

...Rather have it up there on the roof than down here on us. Hold, weather. We've a job of work this day...

But work different, and pleasanter, than Karlsson had been looking toward. At mid-morning he shot another black-tail deer,
out of a herd grazing where a stream emptied into the channel.

The gunshot echoed so long it seemed to be out searching for Koloshes to hear it. Braaf kept watch on the channel as Wennberg helped Karlsson butcher the deer.

"If that cannon shot didn't bring us company, smoke maybe won't either," Karlsson suggested. Braaf and Wennberg scrutinized from the channel water to the fresh meat, to each other.

"I'll have mine with dumplings and ale," Braaf proposed.

"New potatoes and little green onions with mine," voted Wennberg.

The three of them fed until they wobbled, then took the rest of the day to cut and boil venison chunks for the mealtimes ahead.

While yet within what ought to have been sheltered waters, ridge horizon still solid to their west and ahead of them as far as they could peer, the canoemen the next morning began to meet swells. Long swaybacks which trembled the canoe under them with the strong ancient message: the ocean is waiting.

Their afternoon began as if it was of the same wool as the morning. The identical long, even swells which lapped into the channel were ribbed all across Milbanke Sound; a ceaseless rumple moving across the water, the tautness of the ocean-skin continually being tested.

These steady dunes of water the canoe met well, rising easily
and then dipping, without the staggers and quivers of the Kaigani crossing.

"Ever I get out of this," Wennberg just had said, "the next water I want to see'll fit in a teacup." And Braaf had just advised, "Whistle for it, blacksmith." Karlsson, keeping eye to the southwest where the sound opened to the ocean, saw then the first whitecaps flick among the swells, like snowy dolphins appearing and disappearing.

"Keep steady at it," Karlsson said. "We're half across."

But now each swell wrinkled white as the canoe breasted into it. Wennberg was sicker, quicker, longer, than he'd been in the crossing of Kaigani.

"Wennberg, your sour guts'll drown us all yet," Braaf began in profound disgust.

"We're not drowned nor going to be," Karlsson told him. "Paddle, Braaf. We've to do it, until Wennberg gets his belly back."

...Sick as a dog on grass, oh God damn, Wennberg, why can't your guts be solid as your head...

And so it became Braaf and Karlsson and their paddles against the second powerful plain of the North Pacific; between them in the surging canoe, Wennberg half of himself and struggling to stay even that much; around the three and their slim craft, the hours of strait they had come, the hours yet to cross.

Perhaps bring to thought that trick done with apple and knife--the fruit to be peeled in one stopless cutting, down and down the
pare of skin coiling from the blade's glide, the red-white-red-white spiral stair ever more likely to snap away: but yet is it, for each shaving of coil twirls a bond with all the others, the helix holding itself together, spin on spin, by creative grace. Just such an accumulating dangle, this Milbanke voyage became. With each effort by Braaf and Karlsson the canoe sliced distance from the North Pacific, making the journey just that much more apt to sunder or just that much more cunningly pliant, persistent—you would not have wagered which.

It was full dark when they tottered onto the shore.

"Tomorrow," came Braaf's voice. "What's the water tomorrow?"

Not another ocean like that, is it?"

"No," said Karlsson. "Channel again, tomorrow."

...and the day after that, and maybe another and another, and then it's ocean again, Braaf, bigger yet...

Days of rain, those four next.

Of channel water like a gray-blue field very gently stirred by wind.

Of clouds lopping the mountains, so that they seemed strange shagged buttes of green.

Of soft rattle of wings as gulls would rise in a hundred from a shore point of gravel.
Of fog walking the top of the forest in morning.

...God's bones, look at it tumble. Melander, you'd have had the words for it, you've maybe seen the like, but I...

Alongshore to the southeast of the canoemen, a fishing fleet stood in long file, sails of many shapes bright against the forest.

As Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson ogled, the fleet toppled and was folded back into the water for the next stunt of surf.

This time, not ghost boats but round white islets, a pretty archipelago of froth.

Karlsson, Wennberg, Braaf stared on at the vanishment, the magical refashioning—this version, momentary cottages shining with whitewash.

The onlooking three considered that already the voyage had shown them ample surf for their lifetimes. But eruption of this sort was of new order altogether: so powerful the water in this tidal expanse that it sought to cavort up into the sky. As shown by the fourth Tebenkov map, this was the part of the coast where the Pacific abruptly got two harsh pries against the continent, broad rough thrusts of water driven in like points of a clawbar through the offshore layer of islands. First of these shore-gaps where the Pacific prised had been Milbanke Sound, the four days before. The second, and much greater, was here—Queen Charlotte Sound.

"Tomorrow's work, that," pronounced Karlsson, and nobody arguing
this in the least, they made camp.

Usual now, ever since the ordeal of Milbanke, Karlsson waking to the peg of warmth between his groin and his belly. "Pride of the morning," Melander called such night-born rearings. "If your britches don't bulge at dawn it's a scant day ahead, aye?" But from all Karlsson could tell, these particular full-rigged longings seemed to be put up not by the habited urges of a man's blood, but by his nights of dream. In each dark now, matters chased one another like squirrels, Smaland and New Archangel somehow bordered together, people of gone years thrust their faces inside his skull. Dream maybe was a wild sentinel against the clutch of this coast; perhaps demanded that the night-mind of Karlsson hear its howling tales instead of brood on predicament. Whatever, all of it built and built through the nights into the wanting which he awoke to. Made him enter each morning in a mood to want any of a variety of things that were nowhere in the offing—a woman, time under a roof, fresh clothes, a square meal, existence without Wennberg. Just now, though, the one particular wanting took up all capacity in Karlsson. He wanted not to be capturing this canoe voyage, and more than that, not on this shore-brink of Queen Charlotte Sound, and more than that again, not on this day of crossing that Sound.

Karlsson lay on his side, waiting for the longing to unstiffen. Then rose and went into the forest to start the day with a pee.
"We could make a wintering of it."

The words halted Karlsson and Braaf in mid-chew. Carefully they eyed across the fire, as if to be sure some daft stranger had not put on Wennberg's beard this morning.

"Keep snug here, we could," the broad man was saying. "You're clever with an axe, Karlsson, whyn't we grapple together a shelter of some sort, wait out this pissy winter?"

Braaf palmed a hand out and up as if to catch rain, gazed questioningly into the air. The sky over the three men was as clear as if scoured down to blue base. A moment, it took Wennberg to catch Braaf's mockery.

"Hell swallow you, Braaf. So it's not pissing down rain just now. That only means it will tomorrow and the forty days after." Wennberg broke off, evidently finding his way back to his original sally.

"Why not a wintering? Wait till better season, not fight this ocean at its worst---"

Rapidly as he could Karlsson was fitting angles to a reply. But meantime Braaf chimed, as if to the air:

"Wait till better season the way the Koloshes are, d'you mean, ironhead? Last time you were in the company of a few of them you ran your legs to stubs. What if spring brings canoe and canoe of them?"

Wennberg cut a glare to Braaf, but the look he fastened again to Karlsson still came earnest, and more. Karlsson realized he was being met by something he had not thought to be in Wennberg. A plead.
"--could get by on ducks and deer," Wennberg was proposing.

"--maybe get us a milk cow and a few chickens, too?" Braaf was amending sweetly.

The realization drove sharper into Karlsson. These plains of water, the sounds bare to the ocean, Wennberg was not merely leery of. He held a horror of them. Of their wide swells. Of the teetering gait of the canoe atop them. Of the nausea they pumped into him. Kaigani had invoked the distress in Wennberg, hour on plunging hour of it, and Milbanke Sound a few days ago must have revived it. These past days of sheltered channel, Wennberg's new reticence had been taken by Karlsson as amen to the miles they were achieving. Instead it must have been a time of dread building silently toward panic. . .

. . .Ready to lick dust, the bastard. . .

"--want to roost, whyn't you stay to New Archangel?" Braaf was goading. "--just till better season, that's not Goddamn eternity," Wennberg was arguing back.

"Wennberg, hear us," Karlsson set out slowly. "Say the prettiest of this voyage, and it's still going to be grindwork. But it has a bottom end somewhere, like all else." He watched Wennberg's eyes. The plead yet hazed them, still needed the cold airing. "A wintering could be a wait on death, Wennberg. Braaf says truth. With spring the Kolosh will swim solid along here. And the first canoe of them will be apt to have us with Melander."

"But--" Wennberg pulled a face, as if he already could smell the gall being brewed for him by Queen Charlotte Sound. "This weather, all the bedamned miles--if we'd just wait--"
"The miles'd still be there," Braaf murmured.

Karlsson dug for more voice.

"Waiting we've already tasted," he said with decision. "We spat it out at New Archangel."

Braaf turned to speculate just above Karlsson's brow. Wennberg cocked a look as if a matter was dawning to him. Somewhat near as much as the other two, Karlsson had surprised himself.

What he just had come out with was not far off the sort of thing Melander might have delivered, aye?

The least necessary instruction of his young captaincy was issued now by Karlsson—the need to stay well clear of that tideline turmoil—and they set forth onto Queen Charlotte Sound.

This day, sun was staying with them. Wisps of cloud hung above the shore, and a few thin streamers out over the ocean, westward and north. But the Sound itself was burned pure in the light; water blue-black, an elegant ink in which every swirl showed perfectly.

Along here mountains did not thrust so mightily, except some far on the eastern horizon. A lower, more rumpled shore, this, than the canoeists yet had seen, and the effect was to magnify the Sound—its dark sumptuous water and wild bright edge of surf, and then the blue dike, low and distant there, which was Vancouver Island.

Straightway, Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf discovered that between them and Vancouver lay some uncountable total of instances of monotony. Wave upon wave, the canoe was met, lofted at the bow, then
let slump, in a half-fall rightward, into the water's trough. A new law of seagoing this seemed to be, stagger-and-dive.

Karlsson questioned to Wennberg.

Wennberg half-turned. He was grim but functioning.

Braaf, though, announced into the crystal air: "Might as well bail up your breakfast now as later, iron-puddler."

"You crow-mouthed bastard," Wennberg husked.

Minutes later, he clutched the side of the canoe, leaned over, retched. Then grasped his paddle again, cast a glare around at Braaf, and ploughed water in rhythm, more or less, with the other two.

Their crossing was seven hours of stupefying slosh, under the most winsome weather of the entire journey.

"Cape Scott, off there," Karlsson called as they were approaching the south margin of the Sound.

Across Karlsson's lap lay the fourth Tebenkov map, its lower left corner presenting him a paper mimicry of the cape ahead. Several inches of crinkled rock inked in series there, dragon's grin it might have been, precise miniature of the westward jut of shore now showing its profile in front of the canoe, and the broken rampart of searock which thrust beyond the cape.

"Cape Snot, may's well be," Wennberg retorted thickly. "That map quits off, you shoved us. So where d'we bear from here?"

A forcible part of Karlsson wanted to shout out and have done with it: ... Wennberg, where from here isn't anything I can know, we've
run dry not just of this map but all maps, put your finger to any
direction and you'll choose as clever as I can... The rest of Karlsson struggled and said: "Tell you when I've
pulled the next map, it'll take a bit."

Karlsson did up the fourth map. Reached the mapcase to himself
and put the roll of paper in. Braaf and Wennberg were paddling
steadily, studying ahead to Vancouver Island. As though plucking a
new broadsheet from the scroll in the mapcase, Karlsson unrolled the
fourth map once more.

Same as a minute ago, the lower left corner artistry still there
like a farewell flourish, across at the lower right the last of the
mapped coastline itself, that ragged thumb of land beside which
Melander had penciled in "Cape Scott"; and then white margin.

... So now I go blind, and say that I see. Braaf, Wennberg,
forgive this, but we need for me to aim us as if I know the shot...

Braaf put a glance over his shoulder to Karlsson, attracted by
his stillness.

A wave worried the canoe and Braaf went back to his fending manner
of paddling.

One more time Karlsson looked up from the map to the cape ahead,
checked again his memory of Melander's sketched geography in the
New Archangel dirt. Then said, off-handed as he could manage: "To
the right, there. West."
That bump of land at the bottom of Karlsson's final map nudged not only the water of Queen Charlotte Sound. Cape Scott was dividing, once and all, Karlsson-as-escapemaster from Melander-as-escapemaster.

For there on the next of the coastal maps--had Karlsson possessed that cartographic treasure--Vancouver Island lies angled across most of the sheet like a long and plump oyster shell, blunt at each end and nicked rough all along its west with inlets and sounds and bays. An expansive and stubborn mound of shore, fashioned right for its role: largest island of the western coast of North America, dominant rampart of its end of the British Columbia shoreline. Nearly three hundred miles in its northwest-southeast length and generally fifty or more miles wide, this ocean-blockading island, and there along its uppermost, the vicinity of Cape Scott, Tebenkov's mapmaker has continued that thread of route followed by Melander in most of the journey of descent from New Archangel, and down out of Queen Charlotte Sound that threadline of navigation weaves, past the prow of Vancouver Island. But past it east, not west.

Melander's penciling has shown Karlsson that he amended from the mapped line of navigation whenever he thought needed. To leap Kaigani. Again to shear across Hecate Strait. And Melander's last amendment ever, to jink among the islands which included Arisankhana. But now, here at the northern pivot of Vancouver, say you are Melander, a bullet once whiffed nearer your ear than sailor's luck ought to permit but your concern just now is that judgment you parented in the pilothouse of the Nicholas--the judgment to sell risk then and buy it back later. Later is here, and it has spent your four maps, and Cape Scott looms.
The formline of this vast coast you know traces off to the west; the out-shore of Vancouver Island, then the Strait of Fuca, and next, last, the American shore down to the Columbia River and Astoria.

But—"We're all of us weary. As down as gravediggers, even Karlsson and Wennberg."

And—"Wennberg there. Any tiddle of ocean has him tossing up, costs us hard in paddling."

So—"We've maybe had enough of ocean. Go the lee of this place, we could, aye? That navigation line has to touch to somewhere. . . ."

An eastward tilt in such musings as these, do you feel?

And so you/Melander in perhaps three days, not more than four, bring your canoe and crew to the stretch of Queen Charlotte Strait where the Hudson's Bay Company lately has installed a trade post called Fort Hardy. Chance is strong against it, but perhaps Fort Hardy eludes you, dozes in fog or storm as you pass. In another dozen days along this inner shore you are rounding the southeastern tip of Vancouver Island, and there poises the British New Archangel, the Hudson's Bay command-port called Fort Victoria. Say, somehow, you do not happen onto even this haven. From here amid the Strait of Juan de Fuca where you now are paddling, chimney smoke might be seen there over the southern shore, or the canvas of a lumber vessel standing forth against the dark coast—either smudge marking the site of the fledgling American settlement at the mouth of Puget Sound, Port Townsend.

All this, then, is the sort of eventuating interrupted by that
chance bullet at Arisankhana. Karlsson, with his nod west, has leaned into his own eventuating.

At length...we again saw land. Our latitude was now 49° 29' north. The appearance of the country differed much from that of the parts which we had seen before, being full of high mountains whose summits were covered with snow. The ground was covered with high, straight trees that formed a beautiful prospect of one vast forest. The southeast extreme of land was called Point Breakers, the other extreme I named Woody Point. Between these two points the shore forms a large bay, which I called Hope Bay, hoping to find in it a good harbor and a comfortable station to supply all our wants, and to make us forget the hardships and delays experienced during a constant succession of adverse winds and boisterous weather ever since our arrival upon the coast of America.

The line of route of Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson now was also one of the Pacific's meridians of history. In 1778 Cook, the great English captain, explored north through these waters, journaled this outshore of Vancouver Island, put names on the land as points and inlets won his fancy. Cook's expedition, and forays by the Spanish, and the roving Yankee captains who rapidly appeared, they arrived as a cosmic newness to this coast. Indelible people, these European and American explorers and traders proved to be, the broader wakes of their sailing ships never fading from the traditional waters of the canoe tribes.
Like men following a canyon unknown to them, then, Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf began their descent of this Vancouver shore where past and future had seamed.

...It is like trying to bend rock. We pull at these paddles until we ache and always there's more ocean. We do make miles, Melander. Wennberg complains like a creaky gate and Braaf slacks, but we earn distance, more than I'd thought the three of us could. More than possible and less than enough, you'd have said...

One thing only about this Vancouver coast was Karlsson certain on. But like the knowledge of the hedgehog, it was one big thing. He knew that they must not blunder into a downcoast Sitka, come nosing one evening into some fat sheltered sound where a blinking look would show the shore to be a sand street, and longhouses backing it, and Koloshes by the binfull standing there in wait for Swedes. None of such as that, thank you. The outmost crannies of this island, Karlsson would rein the canoe to.

--And so looped them past Quatsino Sound, and around Cape Cook of the Brooks Peninsula.

Nights now, the trio of canoe men camped at places which might have been the forgotten upper crags of Hell. Ledges of shore just wide enough to grapple the canoe onto and wedge a spot to sleep. Grudging beaches, sometimes a gruel of gravel and surf, sometimes stone for stone's sake.

The while, salt rings from sweat crusting in a three-quarter ring where the men's arms met their shoulders. Their clothing
terrible, they knew, and their smell undoubtedly worse.

--And ran them wide of Kyaquot Sound, and of Esperanza Inlet, where Cook left that wistful christening, a bay named for hope.

Days, there was the ocean, perpetual paintpot of gray. And broken shore. Now and then a dun cliff, green gently moving atop it as the forest stirred in the ocean's updraft. Of course, rain, and with it, murk. No sunrise, nor sunset, only grayings lighter or darker. Not even mountains relieved the eye, for clouds broke off the peaks and weighted the horizon up there to flatness, a wall along all that side of the world.

Three times it snowed, swarm of white from out of the gray.

The while, their appetites growing and their bellies shrinking. The pinched shore and the snow days and the drizzle kept Karlsson from hunting, and fishing too came scant, a half dozen smallish bass and two more -- the total catch of this Vancouver voyage.

--And past Nootka Sound, named too by Cook; Nootka, where another colossal Englishman, Meares, in 1789 brought Chinese crews to build fur-trading schooners; Nootka, where in the 1790's the British and Spanish empire-makers entangled like mountaineering parties clambering in from both sides of the same precipice, and nearly came to war; Nootka, home harbor of a vivid canoe people who just now were passing the winter in their style of frequent feast and potlatch, a seasonal rain-trance of song and drama and dance.

The constant push of the North Pacific was wearing deep into the three canoemen, up their wrists and arms, across their effort-bent
shoulders. True, once in awhile the wind granted them a few hours' use of the sail, and they had the greater luck that their creature of sea-run, the black canoe, was one of the most fluent craft for its task. But the task along Vancouver was no less remitting for lack of fact. This was slog, nothing but.

The while, Karlsson showing answer to the single doubt Melander had held of him: whether he had lasting edge. The biting surface to put against life, to strop and set to whatever dangerous angles were necessary: the Karlsson of New Archangel could be seen as cause to wonder a bit about that, and depend on it, Melander missed no bit of wondering. All very well it was to go about life as unobtrusively as the quiet Smalander axman—some of that could be recommended to most of humankind—but what of when life began to go about him? Then would be the test of edge: whether the man bent or broke; or worked his salients back at life, made a thrust where he could, a nick as possible. Karlsson was not heaven-made for all that he needed do along Vancouver; spoke as little as Melander had much, at time when Braaf and Wennberg could have heard regular encouragement; let the deceit about the maps take up too much of the inside of his head. But life is mostly freehand, and this Karlsson of the outmost Vancouver shore was verifying Melander's guess of him that under the silence lay some unused edge.

---And past Sidney Inlet, and Clayquot Sound.

"Karlsson, aren't we about done with this fucking island? The damned place's longer than perdition."

"About, Wennberg. About."
... One way or other, about done, yes...

--And looped them at last past Barkley Sound, where the canoeing Clyoquot tribe read weather from the behavior of frogs and mice and had concluded this to be a wet, gusty moon of winter, a time to sit snug in longhouses yet a while.

Since Cape Scott, the peg of Braaf's calendar had advanced half a month.

Before the canoemen a channel several miles wide angled, and across its breadth another rumpled coastline, more of the dark world-long pelt of forest.

... Must be. Can't be any other. Can it?...

Karlsson raised his contemplation from the compass to the water.

"Fuca's Strait, this must be."

"Must be?" Wennberg eyed him. "Must be is fool's prayer. What's the map say?"

"Fuca's Strait. I was skeining wool."

"Have a care you don't skein yourself a shroud, and ours with it."

Wennberg waited—a count all the way to four could have been done—then demanded: "So, Captain Nose? Where're you aiming us next? There's coast all over the kingdom here."

... That much I know, thank you all the way to Hell, ironhead. It's all else I don't...

"We cross right over. For that corner of shore." Karlsson pointed to a long reach of bluff which came down from the higher coast to shear into the ocean, a sort of bowsprit of land. "But we need go past
it a way before we put in. It's places like that the Koloshes maybe roost."

"Noah's two asses! Is there no end to the damned Koloshes? I thought Rosenberg had too many of them there at the back porch of the stockade, keeping them like hounds on scraps. But he hasn't made a start on the bastards."

"Figure what the Koloshes'd say if they come onto us, blacksmith," Braaf put in. '"Noah's two asses! More Tsarmen yet, and smelling like a heifer's fart as well!'"

"Braaf, shove your head--"

"The both of you, put your breath to paddling. Or do we squat out here until Koloshes happen along and prove Braaf right?"

They made a scampering afternoon of it. The Strait lay as a smaller, dozing version of Kaigani, and the canoe stole mile after mile without the gray water arousing. It even happened that Wennberg managed to stay unsick.

Across, a high sharp cape with waves boiling white at its base took over the continental horizon.

"What's that called, there?" Wennberg asked.

"Cape... Etholen." Duping Bilibin those nights at the gate had been short work to this endless piece of performance as mapmaster. "One of the old sirs, wasn't he? Governor when you were a young blood at New Archangel?"

"The one. Cold as a raven, but a fair man. None like him, since."
Off the point of the cape stood a sheer-cliffed island, as flat on top as if sawn. The passage between continent's wall and the island's lay broad as several fields, but Karlsson, trying to think Melander way, decided to be leery of any currents hiding in there. Around the seaward side of the isle, he steered the canoe.

Abruptly now, Karlsson, Braaf, Wennberg could see ahead to the coast which was to lead them south, the last footing of their climb down from Russian America.

Forest, as ever, but neighbored with rock. Talons of cape rock, hairied on top with timber, clutched down into the bright surf. Offshore were strewn darker blades and knobs of rock.

No one said anything. They paddled on.

Melander dabs that bit of stick to the New Archangel earth. Baranof Island he draws, and the Queen Charlotte group, and Vancouver Island, and fourth, last, this coastline between the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the mouth of the Columbia River. One hundred fifty miles lie between strait and river, although Melander did not possess that sum when he drew, nor does Karlsson have so much as a cross-eyed guess of it as he arrives here to the top of this final coast.

Even had either of these unlikely canoe captains known the total, the miles of this shore do not so much resemble those of the Alaska-British Columbia coast to the north, that crammed seaboard of waterside mountains and proliferated islands. In certain profiles, in the ancient pewtered light of continent and ocean alloying, this cousin coast does
stand handsome; but strong in detail rather than soaring gesture. Tidepools, arches of rock, the tidemark creeping higher on its beaches with each surge of surf—ditties of coastscape, not arias, here touch the mind. Almost, it seems the usual mainstays of coastline were forgotten. This shore's upper two-thirds lacks not only fetching harbors but honest anchorages of any sort; is in fact a rock-dotted complication of foreshore which sailors kept their distance from, unless they were the adept local Indians or blindly venturesome European explorers. Even such beaches as exist on the section the Swedes are reaching now come as quick crescents between headlands—bites which the ocean has eaten of the continental crust.

In political terms too, a coastline of erasures, contentions. Late in the eighteenth century the Spanish arrived to christen melodious names onto geography the local Indians long since assumed they had adequately denominated; next, the British editing severely over the Spanish. Some honest drama was gained in that last transaction. Destruction Island for Isla Dolores. Cape Flattery—just now momentarily rebaptized yet again by Karlsson as Cape Etholen—for Punta de Martinez. But some poetry lost, too: Point Grenville for Punta de los Martires. And even as Karlsson and Braaf and Wennberg have arrived to it, one more incongruity, American now, is being affixed over all: this upper-outside corner of the United States is about to be dubbed Washington Territory, making this ancient sea margin the Washington shore.

Nomenclature and latitude and logic say in chorus, then, that
here south of the Strait of Juan de Fuca the canoemen at last have trekked down from the crags of the North Pacific's coast to its lowlands. Yet there was that first view of disordered coast ahead, as if lower shore was not necessarily less troubled shore.

At dusk's start, the paddling men were just to the north of a procession of close-set seastacks out into the ocean, like a caravan of cliffs and crags crossing the canoe's route. Older than old, as though preserved ever since Creation's boil by the Pacific brine, these pyramids and arches of rock appeared.

Day-worn as the canoemen were, Karlsson did not want to risk rounding this coastal salient into whatever its far side might hold.

"Shore," he called to Braaf and Wennberg above the surf noise. "We've done the day."

...Moon. First in--God's bones, how long? Since New Archangel, and an age before that. 'Stone on the stomach of heaven'll make the weather mend.' That we could use. In plenty. Mend all night every night, I wouldn't mind, moon..."
happening is unmissable. Out of their winter rust, ferns unroll green. Up from the low dampnesses of the forest the blooms of skunk cabbage lick, a butter-gold flame and scent like burnt sugar. The weather calms, sometimes as much as a week of laze and non-storm. Seals bob forth in the offshore swells. Salmon far out in the Pacific reverse compass, start their instinctual trace back from underocean pastures toward the rivers where they were spawned and must now seed spawn in turn. Baja California has been departed by gray whales, the Bering Sea is to know them next. Geese and ducks write first strokes of their calligraphy of flight northward. To the north too, glaciers creak with the earliest of the strains which at last will calve icebergs into the azure bays. Within the white rivers, Yukon and Stikine and Susitna and Alsek, Kuskokwim and Kvichak and Nushagak, currents begin to pry at their winter roofs of ice.

In stirrings tiny and mighty, the restive great coast was engendering spring.

...One meal of deer left. Then beans. Two, three skoffs of those. And biscuit corners, maybe a meal's worth. Already Wennberg is saying his guts think his throat's been cut. An idea there, Braaf tells him, how'd he like help? The two of us to hold Wennberg into bridle, it takes...

The moon reminded Karlsson of an egg, and his stomach regretted that he had looked up. But the shine on the waves compelled it, a soft dazzle that began to be gone even as it showed itself; an eye
could not help to wonder where that flitting sheen had been borne from.

Just from the chance at last to do so, stroll a spacious beach
in moonlight, Karlsson had wandered south along the silverline of
tide to where the file of seastacks anchored into the continent. Out
into the water in front of him now the great loaves of stone loomed
in succession, until at their outermost a last small whetted formation,
like a sentry's spearpoint, struggled with the ocean, defiantly
tearing waves to whiteness. Some mad try here at walling the Pacific,
all this looked, the line of rock having been fought by the waves,
overrun by them, left in gaps, shards, tumbled shapes, but the attempt
of the rocks enduring.

... Need a hunt again. Anything, deer, goat. Beaver, God's
bones, we could learn to think beaver was a manor-lord's feast. Costs
time and time to hunt, though. And risk to a gunshot, Christ knows
whether there're Koloshes along here. But so's there risk to starving
ourselves down. Pull to shore early tomorrow, try a bear-milking. ...

Back north along the shore Karlsson could see the campfire, even
could discern the arc of the canoe, the bumps of form that were Wennberg
and Braaf. At first, when the canoe nosed in here for the night,
Karlsson could not make himself feel easy about this fresh manner of
coast. Three leisured windrows of surf and the beach wide, gentle,
full-sanded; a carpet of ease after the stone shores of the past weeks,
it ought to have seemed. Yet, through dusk and supper a constriction
somehow clung to this mild site, an unexpected sense of squeeze
which kept with Karlsson even when he strode the length of beach to
the seastacks. Maybe it was the surround of land here, after their
Vancouver nights of precarious perch. The battled wall of searock
reared as barrier at this end, and the cape the canoemen had rounded
wide of after crossing the Strait of Fuca extended considerably into
the ocean at that other. Inland the forest stood high—Karlsson had
studied and studied that venue for sign of animals; in the weave of
evergreen and brush, nothing moved—and behind the north end of the
beach the terrain sharpened into a long clay cliff. For all the
broad invitation of its sand, this particular beach made a kind of
sack-mouth of the coast, the sort of place where you more-than-half-
expected something unpleasant to be scooped ashore at any time.

... A man can worry himself ancient. Step them off, the days,
that's what we need do. Keep on keeping on, Melander'd say. Earn
our way to Astoria yet, we just may...

The ocean was bringing a constant rumble, and within that a
hiss, the odd cold sizzle as the tide-edge melts into the sand.
Left in the air was a smell of emphatic freshness—a tang beyond mint
or myrtle, more a sensation than anything the nose could find recipe
of. And over and through it all, the surf sound, here so solid it
seemed to have corners: the unremitting boom on the seastacks, a
constant crashing noise against the shore northward. The surf. No
other energy on the planet approaches it. On any planet? The
remorseless hurl of it, impending, collapsing, upbuilding, and its
extent even beyond that of thunder, that grave enwrapping beat upon
all shores of all continents at once: how is there any foothold
left for us? Braaf's wonderment, he recently had confided to Karlsson, was that the power of the ocean didn't rip big chunks from the land all day long. Braaf figured probably in great storms it did just that, which must have been how the islands of their route from New Archangel had been chewed into creation.

... A far place now, New Archangel. Far as that moon, it seems. How long's it been? Braaf's calendar will tell. But we're where we are. Last coast, this...

Near the campfire Wennberg and Braaf were sitting at angle from each other, as if they had a treaty against face-to-face to be honored.

At Karlsson's approach, Wennberg threw on a branch from the firewood pile beside him, sparks rocketing upward. In the heightened light Wennberg looked somehow more thunderous, and Braaf's eyes were higher out into the night than ever, seemed to be appraising the moon.

... They've been gnawing back and forth again, what now...

"A silver night," Karlsson offered. "First in a while. Maybe it'll bring sun on us tomorrow."

Wennberg stared at Karlsson. Then he brought up from behind the firewood the mapcase, open.

"Tomorrow, yes, that's what's to be studied on here. Braaf and I want to know of tomorrow. Where the Goddamned map of it is, say. Yes, whyn't we start with knowing that."

... So it's come...

Karlsson drew breath, heard the surf contend against the wall
of seastacks. Heard his own silence.

Wennberg's glare to him was joined by a gaze from Braaf.

"Karlsson," Braaf said distantly. "Where is it?"

More silence, silence so strong in Karlsson it covered the surf's crash, lifted him inside his ears back to where he stood numbed by the sentry's query into the New Archangel night...

"You both know the where of it." His own voice; make it work, silence was testimony for Wennberg. "Back somewhere in New Archangel, where Melander judged it could stay."

Wennberg stood, faster than such heft should have been able.

"Then you don't know fuck-all about where we are! You're running us blind down this coast!"

"I know Astoria is ahead. That's enough."

"Hell take you, it's enough! You think you're too keen to be among us, Karlsson. You've had that about you since we touched away from that Russian dungpile. Afraid maybe I'll smudge off on you, or long-fingers Braaf here'll pick your pocket, you act like. But play us the fool like this-- We're hopeless as Methusaleh's cock, without maps to go by! This coast'll--"

"Wennberg, I can't have maps when there aren't maps. Melander reckoned we could make our way after the steamship's maps gave out, and that's what we're doing."

"Why'n't you tell us?" Braaf, the question soft. "Melander would've."

"Because I'm not twin to him, Braaf. Can't be. And what was
the gain in telling? To have Wennberg here every hour declaring us
dead, might as well have climbed in the grave with Melander? To have
you give up, too, maybe? Take a sharp look at telling, Melander held
off from telling, when he couldn't lay hand to all the maps."

"Melander, double-damm Melander!" Wennberg had sidestepped, was
clear of the fire now instead of across it from Karlsson. "Melander
was so fucking clever he jigged his way in front of a bullet. And
you're the whelp of him—I'll finish you, you fucking fox of a
Smalander . . ."

Wennberg rushed.

Karlsson had an instant to fling up a forearm against the
blacksmith's throat, then they were locked. Wennberg's arms around
Karlsson, seeking to crush: Karlsson's forearm in pry against the
front of Wennberg's neck. The both, grunting: staggering: Karlsson
bending like a sapling to stay upright, Wennberg tipping him, tipping
him: desperately a Karlsson hand exerted to a Wennberg ear, maybe
twist will slow. . . At its target, the hand came against. . . metal?
rod, some sort? How could. . .

The grip lifted from Karlsson's ribs now, he and Wennberg stock-
still, face-to-face. But not eye-to-eye: Wennberg was trying to
see around the side of his own head, not to Karlsson's hand which yet
was beside his ear as if ready to stroke there, but to Braaf and the
rifle.

The mouth of the rifle barrel stayed firm against Wennberg's
ear as Braaf spoke.
"Not the first one to jig in front of a bullet, Melander wasn't. Or last, maybe."

"Braaf, wait now." Wennberg labored to suck in breath and spill out words at the same time. "It's Karlsson, played us fools... Running us blind down this Hell-coast. .."

"'Right fit or not, he's our only fit.' Melander said that once about you, didn't he, Karlsson?"

Karlsson nodded, tried to think through the ache of his ribs, work out what he ought to be saying. But Braaf was doing saying of his own:

"Let's think on that, Wennberg. Melander maybe had truth there."

"Braaf, the bastard's been diddling us along...pretending he knows what the fuck he's doing..."

"So far, he has," murmured Braaf. "Blacksmith, you only ever had a thimbleful of sense and now you've sneezed into it. Back there, after--Melander. You said it needed be Karlsson to find the way for us. He's done it. How, I don't savvy. I'm not sure he does. But we need let him keep on at it. Else we're dead meat."

Braaf peered with interest at the side of Wennberg's head, as if concerned that the gun barrel rested comfortably there.

"So, blacksmith? Back at New Archangel, you wanted a sleigh ride down this coast. Ready to join us again?"

"Braaf, I...you...yes, put the damned gun off, I... I'll let the bastard be."

Braaf stepped back carefully, the rifle yet in Wennberg's
direction.

... Saved my skin, Braaf. But there'll be Wennberg at me again, first chance, unless...

"Wennberg. Hear me out." Karlsson made himself stride to within a step of the burly man, with effort stood steady there. "This is our last job of coast, all the others up there north behind us. We've been making the miles without maps. We can make as many more as we need."

... Careful with this now, make it warn but not taunt..."

"Wennberg, maybe I chose wrong, not telling about the maps. Maybe so, maybe not. But turn it either way, I've got us this far, all the corners still on us. They say it takes God and His Brother to kill a Smalander. So far I haven't met up with either on this coast."

Wennberg rubbed his ear, said nothing. Somehow, a very loud nothing. Then scowled from Karlsson to Braaf, and back again. His eyes seemed empty of fury now, but neither man could tell just what else dwelt in them, acceptance or biding. In the fireshine, Wennberg looked more than ever like a bear with a beard, and who can read the thoughts of a bear?

Wennberg shook his head one time. Again, biding or acceptance, it could have been either or neither. Then turned and aimed himself off down the beach toward the seastacks. The other two watched his bulky outline shamble away in the moonlight.

"There goes a fool of a man," Braaf said.
"Before we've done," said Karlsson, "we may be wishing Mister Blacksmith is nothing worse than fool."

He picked up the mapcase, out of habit tied it snug, tossed it into the canoe. "We won't load the rifles tonight. And unload that one."

Braaf once more was a spectator of the moon. "It's not loaded. There wasn't time."

Karlsson woke to rainsound. Except for the triple windrows of surf the day's colors were all grays, sea and sky nearly the same, rocks and forest darker. The tint in it all was fog. The big cape to the north was obscured.

Wennberg this morning looked as if he was trying to pick the bones out of everything said by Karlsson or Braaf. He offered no words of his own, however, until past breakfast, and then turned loudly weather-angry. "Pissing down rain again!"

Braaf slurped tea, gazed to the grayness. "Could be worse, blacksmith."

"Worse? How's that, worse?"

"Could be raining down piss."

Again now, that wait to see when the weather would lift itself from them.

After a few hours of squinting resentfully into it and Braaf putting wandering glances up at it and Karlsson calculating whether the gray of it was as gray as it had been an instant before, the murk was agreed to be thinning a bit.

They pushed off from the beach sand, paddled carefully out around the end of the seastack wall, and had a moment when they could see
more seastacks along the coast ahead. Then the rain took the shoreline from them.

"This's like having our head in a bucket," Wennberg complained nervously.

"The high rocks will steer us," Karlsson said with more calm than he felt. "They're near shore all along here. Pass just outside them and we're keeping to the coast."

There was no mid-day stop. No visible ledge of shore on which to make one. Karlsson divvied the last of the dried meat and they took turns to eat, one man doing so while the other two kept paddling.

Sometime in the afternoon—the hours of this day, gray strung on gray, were impossible to separate—a timbered island some hundreds of yards long loomed out on their left.

Karlsson steered along its outer edge, with intention to turn to shore beyond the island. But then at its end, through the rain-haze rocks bulking in the water between island and coast could be made out, stone knuckles everywhere.

"The island," Karlsson chose, and gratefully they aimed to shore on its inland side.

After the sopping day, a sopping camp.

The canoemen had come in near the south reach of the island, where several high humps of boulder weighted the shore. Into this rough outwall of rocks they lodged an end of the mast-shelter, and
so kept that corner of the weather out. But others got in, this rain evidently willing to probe toward humankind for however long it took to find some. The Swedes managed to coax a choking fire long enough to heat beans and tea, then gave up on the evening.

Surprise it was, then, when Karlsson woke sometime later and saw that the sky now held stars.

... One gain, Wennberg's a mute these mornings. No knowing what's prowling in his head, but at least it's not jumping out his mouth. ...

Wennberg was fussing the breakfast fire to life. The weather seemed to have cleansed itself the day before, was bright as a widow's new window today. Karlsson wanted the canoe to be on the water by now, but for once he had overslept, and Wennberg's fire was proving a damp and balky proposition, and Braaf had drifted off north saying he would check the ocean horizon for lurking storm--dawdle eats hours, and Karlsson decided all three of them were feeding it more than enough this morning.

"You've about found fire"--an oblique urging sometimes would lodge in Wennberg--"so I'd better fetch Braaf." Karlsson started away toward the north end of the island.

"If I had arms for three paddles, you could leave the little bastard there and yourself with him."

... Coming awake, is he? Count on Wennberg, hammer for a tongue and the world his anvil...
Just then, Braaf arrived to sight. Running, bent low.

Past Karlsson he raced, toward the astounded squatting Wennberg. The careful stack of sticks Wennberg just had managed to puff into blaze, Braaf kicked to flinders.


Karlsson grabbed the spyglass out of the canoe and followed Braaf back around the beach rocks.

A high round little island, like a kettle turned down, sat upcoast perhaps a half a mile from where Karlsson and Braaf and Wennberg crouched now behind a boulder on their own island, and just inshore from the kettle island, gray and low under the coastal ridge of forest the longhouses were ranked.

Karlsson flung a look along their own beach to be certain sure: the canoe and camp were from sight behind the tumble of rock. Then with the glass, Karlsson counted. Fifteen of the almost flat-roofed structures. If these Kolosh lived as many to a longhouse as the Sitkans, families all the way out to Adam... "People on those roofs," Karlsson reported in puzzlement. "Children, looks like."

"Upside down bastards anyway, these Koloshes," Wennberg said. "What're they squatting up there for?"

Karlsson studied further. "Watching the sea, seem to be. They..." Just then commotion erupted atop the roofs. Its reason already was found by Braaf, pointing into the stretch of ocean they paddled
through in yesterday's cloud.

Craft were coming in there, a line of them. Blade-forms on the water. But all aimed the same, one after another, straight as straight, toward the kettle island.

The glass ratified what was in the minds of the three Swedes. "Canoes," Karlsson reported. Braaf and Wennberg were tranced beside him, watching the flotilla. "Several paddlers each."

The way the canoes stayed a steady space from each other... Karlsson puzzled at the pattern. As if they were strung into place. Or harnessed--

"Something in tow, there."

The tiny tunnel of sight brought it then to Karlsson.

...Melander, Melander, this you ought've seen. Fishers of monsters...

"Whale."

The news did not register on Braaf and Wennberg. Karlsson repeated.

"They're towing a whale."

"Whale? Whale, my ass." Any manner of doubt not known to Wennberg had not been invented yet. "Where'd they get a whale? You've come down with the vapors, Karlsson, hand me that glass..."

Wennberg focused in turn, and the same marvel traveled the tube of the glass to him. The canoe fleet was bringing behind it a glistening length, buoyed with floats that looked like puffed-up seals.
"Working like Finns at it," observed Braaf. "Digging paddles that deep, you'd think their arms'd pull off."

Wennberg, still not wanting to accept: "But how in Judas...?"

Karlsson had plucked the glass from him and was studying again. "Laying up over the prows there. Harpoons. They paddle out and kill whales."

...And small fish we'd be for them. Holy Ghost and any of the others, what'll we..."

Karlsson felt a dry clot form hard at the top of his throat as he watched the long canoes—five, six, seven altogether. Six paddlers at work in each and two further men, a steersman aft and likely the harpooner forward, to scan the ocean like fish hawks.

Rare for him, Braaf was openly perturbed; his right leg jigged lightly in place, as if testing for run. Wennberg sought to look stolid, but Karlsson noticed him swallow at his own throat—pebble of fear.

In the next hour or so the canoe procession angled between the three watchers and the kettle island, closing slowly on the beach in front of the village. A strenuous chant—"bastards sound like Hell let loose," Wennberg appraised—could be heard now from the whalemen. Braaf was first to see what was intended: they would employ the high tide to beach their sea creature.

The line soon was taken from the lead canoe by quick hands ashore and the villagers leaned back in pull as the canoe crew carried their craft high onto the beach. The harpooner, a man larger than
the others, was followed to the surf's edge by a swirling attendance of women and children. Canoe followed canoe now in swift unharnessing, the hawser at last only between the whale carcass and the people of the shore, tug-of-war between nature's most vast creature and its most pursuitful.

Slowly the gray form, a reef of flesh, crept toward tideline.

Just short, the tugging ceased. The children of the village ran to the towline and took places, small beads among larger. Then, as it is said, a long pull—a strong pull—and all together, the generations of the village drew the whale the last few yards up onto the beach.

"So?" This was put by Braaf, in confoundment.

"Yes, so." If this portion of coast was populated with these sea hunters, the problem was beyond any ready words. Karlsson was casting for anything more to say when Wennberg blurted:

"This is a how-d'ye-do we don't need. You bastard Karlsson, you touched us in at this island, is there nothing you can't make goose shit of?"

"Rather be ashore there to welcome those Koloshes, would you?" That held Wennberg for an instant, and Karlsson used it to go on:

"One thing, we can do. Need do. Travel from here by night."

This notion set Braaf to chewing at the corner of his mouth. Wennberg meanwhile tried to lurch the argument sideways.

"But these whale chasers—whyn't they be like other Koloshes,
lay up now and celebrate themselves silly? Eat and drink and tumble
one another in the bushes and the like, won't they now? Reason it,
Karlsson. What if we paddle wide of them here, right now, out from
this island and swing to shore downcoast?"

...A notion, there. Get away maybe while they're prancing
around that whale. But...

"This lot may cut capers for awhile," Karlsson allowed, "but
what if there're more crews, still out there running down whales?
Which risk would you rather, dark or meeting a pack of those canoes?"

"Dark," voted Braaf rapidly. "And blacker, better."

Wennberg stared morosely toward shore, where the whale had been
lashed into place and the village people seemed to be standing back
and admiring.

"Oh, Judas's ball," he at last gritted out. "Dark, dark, dark.
These fish-fuckers down this coast, why't they just squat on their
asses and look wise all the while like the Sitka Koloshes?"

A watching day, they would need to make it.

Wennberg claimed the top of the island, where the seaward side
could be scanned for further canoes. "Spare me some hours with you
pair," he grumped, and went.

Karlsson and Braaf stayed to where they could see across to the
village. One Kolosh--Karlsson thought he might be the big harpooner
from the lead canoe--had sliced a saddle of flesh from the whale's
back, and with his train of admirers disappeared into a longhouse
with it. Otherwise, though, all the come-and-go of the village still was around the long blunt-nosed carcass.

Sentry for the day this way, life maybe depending on what he and Braaf could bring into their eyes and calculate from it, Karlsson felt the dividing come to him again. The kettle island, green flow of the shore horizon, the waterspan around, the might of the whale, the speckle of white barnacle-scars along its vast skin, the strange festival the Kolosh were going through, all this pageantry of what the world could be held a side of his mind even as he sorted at predicament.

"Sweden." Evidently Braaf's mind was in two, as well. "Tell me truth, Karlsson. Think we'll see it again?"

Karlsson studied the kettle island as if it was Braaf's question. Then answered:

"I won't."

Braaf turned to him quickly. "What, you think we can't keep in Koloshes life? Those Kolosh across there--?"

"No. Not that. I'm not going back."

"But then, why're you--the place Astoria, what about--?"

"Astoria, we all need find. And will. It's the foothold of this part of the world. Only one, so far as we know. Or Melander knew. But once there, I'll stay to America."

"And do what?"

"New land, here. Christ knows, we've seen skeins of it along this coast. Melander said the Americans are taking this shore."
Reason for Astoria, must be. New land is land to clear. A timberman can find a place in that."

On the foreshore, the Kolosh were gathered close around the whale. They seemed to be listening raptly to one of their number, the big harpooner again. Among the New Archangel whites it was lore that no Kolosh could so much as glance up at the weather without feeling the need for a speech.

"What d'you suppose he's preaching, Parson Kolosh there?"

"I don't have any glint of it. Maybe saying what it's like to hunt a mountain of creature like that."

Another whaleman seemed to be marking off the carcass into portions. Six or eight old men, still as cormorants, stood watching him.

"Are they brave, Karlsson? To chase whales? Or just fools?"

"Might be more than one yes to that."

The oration at last concluded, the villagers circled the whale and began to cut at the great form.

"Butchering it, looks like they are! Not going to eat that thing, can they be?"

"This is all over my head. Just count it luck that they're busy over there, whatever the Christ it is they're doing."

Blocks of blubber began to be stripped from the carcass. The whale was open now like a hillside being mined; a few of the women disappeared entirely inside the carcass.

"Must have stomachs like leather," Braaf marveled. "I'm hungry as a hawk, but walking around in that thing and then eating it--"
Braaf was quiet awhile. Then confirmed: "So you'll stay to this coast?"

"This end of America, anyway. Across the world from Smaland and out from under the Russians."

"Along here with these Kolosh whale hounds?"

"They're not everywhere of this coast. It just seems so, today."

Braaf shook his head slowly. "Stockholm for me. These years away, they'll have forgot me, the shopkeepers and the high ones. There'll be my new land, their shops and purses."

The two men turned squarely to each other a moment, as if a goodbye was about to be offered. Instead, Karlsson gave Braaf the quick serious smile and said: "Life's harvest to us both, Braaf."

Meeting the ocean swell at the mouth of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the brig rocked and dipped as though in introduction. A bob and curtsy, it may have been, for the vessel was christened the Jane.

A quick ship, the Jane, as brigs will be; but also being of Yankee lineage, a working and earning one too. Within its hold lay thirty thousand feet of recent forest, freshly taken aboard at one of the sawmill settlements which were popping into existence along Puget Sound the past year or so. Piling-stock constituted this particular cargo, plump round Douglas-fir to underpin the docks of one of America's new ports of the Pacific.

Now, outbound, the Jane rode clear of Cape Flattery, let out full sails on both its masts, then bore away in the direction of the
most robust of those ports--San Francisco-ward, south.

Three hours from then, off the top of the island Wennberg came tumbling.

"Karlsson! Braaf! Christ-of-mercy, out there. . ."

Respectful of the turbulent coast, the Jane was ranging two miles or more out from shore, and by the time Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf clambered up to Wennberg's sighting point, the ship already was drawing even with the island.

In Karlsson's mind the choices ran: Canoe. . .No, full sails bent that way, the ship couldn't be caught or even gained on. Even could the Swedes paddle into view of the vessel, logic would account them Koloshes from this village, all the better to be left back there sniffing wake. . .Signal fire. . .Same. Even build one instantly, what sane captain would hove in along this howling canyon of a coast? But the whale people, they were more than guaranteed to be attracted across by any such smoke. . .Gunshots. . .Same again, only quicker doom. . .

Evidently at different pace and route, the same sorting had been racing in Braaf and Wennberg. Wennberg was yet squinting dismally toward the ship when Braaf swung to Karlsson.

"Sailcloth," agreed Karlsson, and Braaf was gone for it.

Careful to be always below the seaward brow of the island, walled from any Kolosh glance from the mainland, they flapped sailcoth.
Flapped it as if trying to conjure flight, a man at each end of the length of fabric, third man jumping in whenever a pair of arms gave out, the fabric bucking as if in anguish to join that clan of sheets kiting atop the Jane.

Whichever of the three was not paddling the air performed the steady yearning toward the Jane with the spyglass, rifle of vision aimed in search of a lens ogling back. But found nothing but portrait of a ship on the wing. Wennberg's wishful curses ran steady as incantation, ought in themselves have wrought some drastic change in the brig's glide. Caused the mainmast to split and crash over. Tumbled the cabin lad overboard. Invoked Neptune to rise and shoo the ship back north. Tugged loose the sails and tangled them so thoroughly the captain would trice her right around. Any miracle, whatever style, would do.

Those sails continued to waft serenely southward. Leaving Wennberg and Braaf and Karlsson to stand and watch the distancing ship like men yearning to dive to a cloud.

The day at last declining toward dusk, Karlsson took the glass and eased to the downcoast end of the island to study the shoreline ahead. Wennberg was staying atop the island to brood, Braaf was back at watching the Koloshes demolish the whale. Since the passing of the ship, both wore a look as though they had just been promised pestilence.

...Danced right by us. Damn. Hadn't been for the Koloshes we'd right now be...
Something flitted, was down among the shore rocks before Karlsson could distinguish it. Birds of this shoreline evidently had caught motion from the surf. Sanderlings, oystercatchers, turnstones, dowitchers, snipe, along here always some or other of them bobbing, skittering, dashing off; the proud-striding measured ravens of New Archangel were nowhere in it with these darters. Contrary another way, too, this southering coast was beginning to show itself. Its clouds were not the ebb and flow skidding about above Sitka Sound, but fat islands that impended on the horizon half a day at a time. Here it seemed, then, that you could navigate according to the clouds' positions, and that the routes of birds had nothing to teach but life's confusion—which it would be like both weather and wingdom to deceive you into.

With the glass Karlsson checked back on the villagers and their whale festival. Wood was being piled up the beach from the carcass. Evidently the celebration was going to rollick on into night.

Karlsson one more time put his attention south.

The withdrawing tide was lifting more and more spines of reef to view. But no beach was coming evident, just a broad tidal tract of roundish rocks, as if the farmfields of all the world had been emptied of stone here. Or, cannonball-like as they looked to be, it might be said battlefields.

Beyond the stone clutter, no islands stood to sight, only the bladed outlines of seastacks. Many of them. All in all, Karlsson saw, this appeared the rockiest reach of coast yet, and it needed be
paddled past by night and a landing made on it somewhere in earliest dawn...

...Day this has been, even that doesn't look much worse...

"Burning the Goddamn world over there. What in the name of hell d'you suppose they're up to?"

The villagers' beach fire just had flared high, a puff of sun against the dark, from a bowl of whale oil flung onto it. "Whether they mean to or not, they're making us a beacon to steer from awhile," Karlsson answered Wennberg. The three canoemen hefted, and the canoe left land, caught the water's pulse.

Not since taking their quit of New Archangel had they paddled at night, and the memory of that stint did not go far to reassure anybody.

Ordinarily dark was Braaf's time, the thief's workplace. But here in the canoe with blackness around, Karlsson could sense Braaf's distrust of the situation, feel how his paddling grew more tentative, grudging, than ever.

Wennberg at the bow meantime seemed in every hurry to yank them through the night single-handed; his paddling was near-flail.

Karlsson drew breath deep, exhaled exasperation oh so carefully, and decreed:

"Hold up, the both of you. We need to flap our wings together. At my word, do your stroke. Now...now...now..."
The night Pacific is little at all like the day's. With the demarking line of horizon unseeable, the ocean draws up dimension from its deeps, sends it spreading, distending, perhaps away into some meld with the sky itself. It stars ever kindle out there amid the wavetops, we need not be much surprised. And all the while every hazard, rock, shoal, reef, shelf, snag, is being whetted against the solid dark.

In their watch for collision, Wennberg and Braaf and Karlsson stared tunnels into the black. From Wennberg's harsh breathing and undervoice curses, every instant that catastrophe did not occur only convinced him that it was overdue.

"How far are we going in this?" Braaf this was, his tone suggesting that he for one had gone a plentiful distance.

"Far enough past those whale stabbers. Unless you want to sail in on them and ask breakfast."

...There's a night I don't need to live again. But now there'll be tonight. That ought do it, put us past the country of those whale-men. Then we can go by day, like men with eyes...

As if it was nothing to yacht along this coast, gulls were drifting up a current over a headland to the south. Karlsson was studying the rock-cornered shore beneath the gulls, a half-mile or so from this crescent of beach where the canoe had put in at dawn. The credit of the
night was that the canoe and its men survived it, not met with stone
in the dark. Its debit had been the interminable wait offshore for
daybreak, the canoe tied to a patch of bull kelp, Karlsson keeping
a watch while Braaf and Wennberg tried to doze, before the coast
could be studied for a landing site and any sign of Koloshes. Now
it must have been noon or past, all of them having slept deep as
soon as the canoe was lodged from sight behind shore rocks. After-
noon would have to be waited through, until the launch into dark
again. Meanwhile, this thrust of shore to their south...

...Might be. Just might by Christ be. Chance to go shake the
bush and find out, anyway...

"We've maybe been looking the wrong direction for game," Karlsson
mused aloud. "Forest instead of ocean."

"What, then"--Wennberg--"go shooting at fish, are you? About
like you, that'd be." By now even the blacksmith had thinned
drastically, his blockiness planed away to width. Their last few
meals had been beans and mussels and clams, the shellfish a slow pantry
to find and gather. Without fresh meat all three canoemen soon would be
husks of themselves.

"Fish, no. But a hair seal, maybe. If they've followed season
to these waters... That point across there, it's the sort they lie
around on."

"Gunshot, though?" This doubt from Braaf.

"A lot of noise from surf there, all that rock. And we can
gander around the headland for Koloshes before getting onto the point."
Wennberg hitched his trousers, maybe calculating all the new room in them. "I could eat a skunk from the ass forward. If you think you remember which end of the Goddamn gun to point, Smalander, I'm for it."

Karlsson checked Braaf, received a slow nod. And made it decision: "Let's go find supper."

Plump flotsam on the outmost of shore, the seals were there.

So was a new style of coast to any the Swedes had seen yet. Having clambered downbeach to the point, the three found themselves at the inshore edge of a rock shelf high and flat as a quay—although no one but nature could employ a quay some two hundred paces wide and that much again in length. Odd in this, too: in the blue and brown afternoon, the Pacific tossing bright around the somber rock face of the coast, this huge queer natural wharf lay thinly sheeted with wet, like puddles after rain.

By now Braaf had tides in his bones alongside the weather. "The high drowns all this, then," he stated, nodding the attention of Karlsson and Wennberg to the remnant pools. "We'll need be quick." Even as Braaf said so, earliest waves of the incoming tide tried to leg themselves up over the seaward edge of the rock quay.

"Quick we'll be," Karlsson responded and was in motion while the words still touched the air. "Over here, that horn of rock."

Onto the tidal plateau he led the other two, to where a formation
the height and outline of a ketch sail bladed up. Beside this prong, from view of the seal herd, Karlsson studied out ambush.

Leftward, the rock shelf lay open and bare. Any least twitch of invasion there would be instantly seen by the seals.

To the right, close by Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf, the ocean with undreamable patience had forced a tidal trough—a lengthy crevasse bent at the middle, like an arm brought up to ward off a blow. Every insurge of surf slopped a harsh compressed tide through this shore-crack, a hurl of water as if flung from a giant pan, and the crevasse gaped wider than a man would want to try to jump. No surprise to the seals from this foaming quarter either, then.

The sea-end of this trough, though. There a fist of boulder met the ocean, and just inland toward the men bulged a low Knurl of rock off that formation. A wen on the back of the tiderock wrist, you might think of it.

...Little help but some help. I'll need make it be enough, won't I...

"I'll shoot from there," Karlsson indicated the Wen-site ahead to Wennberg and Braaf. He made the short crawl to the hump, Wennberg scrabbling behind on the left and Braaf vastly more deft to the right. They hunched either side of Karlsson, Wennberg breathing heavy, Braaf soundless, as the slender hunter peered to the seals.

The seals lay idle as anvils. Some had been lazing in the sun long enough that their fur had dried pale, others yet were damp and
nearly as dark as their rock promenade. All of them were toward a hundred paces from where Karlsson lay sighting. He disliked the distance for the shot, but decided to amend what he could of it by singling out a seal which lay a bit inshore from the others.

a young bachelor, bullied into solitude by the bull of the herd.

"Tickle luck's chin," Braaf said softly as Karlsson aimed.

"Or it's smoke soup tonight," Wennberg muttered.

Karlsson's shot struck the seal in the neck, not far beneath the base of its head.

A lurch by the animal. Its foreflippers and tail flapped briefly. Then the head lowered as if into doze.

...Fetched him! Shot-and-pot, we'll surprise our bellies yet...

Meantime, the other seals writhed rapidly toward the rock edge, were gone.

"Square eye, Karlsson!" Braaf congratulated. He was first onto his feet, stepping to the right of the bump of rock Karlsson had shot from, Wennberg and Karlsson up now too, the three of them setting off in hurry toward the seal, the tide in mind.

Of what happened next, only this much is sure. That amid a climbing stride by Braaf as he began to cross the wrist of rock, surf burst its power in front of him. That a startling white weight of water leapt, seemed to stand in the air. That it then fell onto Braaf.

Comical, this ought to have been. A drenching, an ass-over-earhole tumble, as Wennberg might have said, and there the sum of it,
Braaf bouncing up now with a grin of rue. But the topple of water slung Braaf backward more than that, and the hand he put down to half himself met the wet slickness of a barnacle colony.

Braaf slid on into the tidal trough.

Above, Karlsson and Wennberg, half-turned in stare to the crevasse-water, were twins of disbelief.

Braaf was vanished.

Then, and a long then it began to seem, up through foam bobbed Braaf's head. For a breath-space, his eyes held the affronted look they'd had when Wennberg's boot clattered the spittoon in the officers' clubhouse.

Next the insuring tide shot him from view of Karlsson and Wennberg around the bend of the trough.

...Rifle, reach the rifle to him, only chance...

Down toward the trough Karlsson clambered, Wennberg heavily at his heel and cursing blue. The footing along the top of the trough was treachery itself. Karlsson and Wennberg skidded like men on soapstone as they tried to approach the edge.

The out-slosh of the tide brought Braaf whirling back below them, grabbing with both hands at the walls of the trough, barnacles and mussels denying him grip and costing him skin. This time, it was around the trough's seaward bend that the riptide tossed him from sight.

"Hold me," Karlsson directed Wennberg.

The burly man clamped his arms around Karlsson's knees as Karlsson
stretched himself flat, down toward the spilling water. Like a man peering down a well, Karlsson now. With both hands he held the rifle at its barrel end, thrust the stock into the channel as Braaf popped to sight once more.

"Braaf! Grab! We'll pull..."

A wrath of water—it bulged a full three feet over all other froth in the channel, as if some great-headed creature was seeking surface—careened in. Surf spewed over Karlsson and Wennberg, both of them clenching eyes tight against the salt sting.

When they could peer again, Braaf bobbed yards past them, on the landward side, his boy's face in a grimace. He seemed to shake his head at them. Then the tide abruptly sucked back toward the ocean and Braaf was spinning toward his rescuers once more, his arms supplicating in search of the gunstock.

But short, a hand's-length short...

...God's bones, it never behaves the same twice. Need be quicker, make ready...

"This time, Wennberg! Lower me more, there, now'll reach..."

The pair of them stared expectation toward the corner of the trough, bracing themselves for the riptide's return and the hurl of spray over them once more.

It arrived, crashing high along the trough walls, hard spatter, runnels down faces, now eyes could open again...

This time the tide had not brought Braaf back with it.
"Braaf!" demanded Wennberg. "Braaf, where the hell...?"

Karlsson scrambled wildly for the ocean edge, banging knees and hands on rough rock, Wennberg lurching after him. The coastal afternoon's same royal colors of blue and brown were all about the two men, the horizon-brow of the planet untroubled out there in front of them, the Pacific's flume of surf flowing as ever to their left and right; the single absence was Braaf.

In the surf's froth, very white beside the rock shelf, Karlsson and Wennberg scanned frantically for other color. Occasionally they glimpsed it, as you might see a brightheaded dancer a quick moment across a crowded room. The straw-yellow of Braaf's hair, all but concealed in the tumult of the water and being banged north along the jagged rock shore.

...Two now. But why that. God's bones, why, why? Why one slip and Braaf's gone from life? That how it'll happen, each by each of us? This coast snare us each like that? But Braaf. Braaf, oh Christ, Braaf. I'd give half my life to have it not happen, what did.

Gone, though. Taken water for a wife, the schoonermen say of it. Why. And pair of us now, we're not much better off than Braaf. You were the tip-weight of us, Braaf, kept us level. Turn on me, Wennberg had you to worry about. Go for you, there'd be me sharp on him. But now... Wennberg'll be trouble's deacon now. Can hear him now, what must be whispering in that head of his: 'Oh Christ - the doom on us -
the fish-fuckers shot Melander, Braaf tumbles in a millrace - now just the pair of us and I can't trust this Smalander any farther than I can fart—not after the maps—not after this — Need to tamp him. Someway. Else we're dead men too, waiting to fall. Not the way of it, that shouldn't be. We've done the work of the world, since New Archangel. Done Melander's plan, every hair of it. Ought be enough. But always more. Wennberg, he's the first work now. Find something, some one thing, link us with that. Working slow. Braaf told us of that. Braaf, Braaf.

Swimming the air with Melander, I hope to Christ you are. And now I go over to that bull and work slow. . .

"I should've. Oh, I should've done you the other night. Slit you loose from life. Braaf and I'd kept on somehow, we'd've managed. But you, you're black luck if there ever was. The maps, and then those Kolosh whale hounds, now this. . ."

"You do me, Wennberg, and you've done yourself. Fed yourself to ocean or Koloshes, choose your devil."

They were either side of the canoe, the afternoon graying away, the coast gone somber. Tide was still high, covering the point where Braaf had been lost—and the seal as well, slosh up to the knees of Wennberg and Karlsson when they struggled toward the animal, before they saw retreating wave swash the gray form back into the ocean.
Then the wrangle, on and on—"fucking squaw-rider you, if you'd had
the maps none of this"—"maps are wish, Wennberg, miles are what we
need, so just"—until every word seemed to be out of the both of them.
They were weary, groggy, lame in the head. Being deprived of Melander
had been like the stiffening of an arm or leg, they somehow learned
to function in spite of it, gimped their way onward as they had to.
This loss of Braaf was like a warp of the balance within the ear.
Nothing stood quite where it had before. And when the lurch of
argument and temblors of predicament at last shook the two men silent,
Karlsson knew he needed to begin his true work. And so did.

"Can't paddle in daylight, you say yesterday," Wennberg had res-
ponded somewhere between bafflement and fury. Beware the goat from
the front, the horse from the rear, and man from all sides, ran a saying
of the New Archangel Russians. Everything of Wennberg recited this
caution into Karlsson now. Yet Wennberg had to be worked back to the
journey, into the canoe, brought around from Braaf's. . ."Now it's
can't paddle at night. Tell me this one thing, Karlsson. This one
Goddammed sideways thing. Where're you going to find us hours that
aren't one or other, day or night? Whistle up your ass for them, are
you?"

"Dusk." Karlsson had repeated it carefully. "Dusk, Wennberg.
We need make a short run of it, until we figure we're clear of any
Koloshes along here. Just the two of us paddling now, we've got to
learn about that, too. So we need do it. Steal enough twilight to
paddle an hour, maybe two, we can. Whatever we make is gain toward Astoria."

Now, the day stepping down toward dark, Wennberg sighed dismally, squinted to the ocean, gray and steadily grayer, as though it were dishwasher and he were being asked to drink it at a swallow.

"Wennberg, we need do it."

As the two canoemen paddled, they could make out that timber still spilled like a dark endless waterfall over the rim of the continent, but all else here looked more and more like old outlying ruins of the vigorous mountain coast behind them to the north.

Through the dusk, they achieved a half-handful of miles before Karlsson, hoping he was reading this scalloped shore aright, pointed the canoe between two headlands.

He strained now to pick shapes in the water before them, felt Wennberg ahead doing the same, heard him mutter this or that.

Three, four, half a dozen rocks humped to view in an area the size of a commons field—and none more.

The route clear, the canoe drove in to one more haven of shore.

The camp this night, without Braaf, was like a remembered room with one wall knocked out.

Almost nothing was said during eating, and less after. Karlsson watched Wennberg occasionally shake his head and tug at his side-whiskers,
as if in wonder at where he found himself now. But none of his usual almanac of complaints, nor any newly-thought-up blaze to hurl at Karlsson. Just those grim wags of head.

Trying to hear into that silence, Karlsson knew, was going to be a long piece of work.

The morning showed the two that they were on a beach as fine as velvet, gray-tan and nearly a mile long. At either end of the sand arc rough cliffs rose, pushing a thick green forest up into the sky. On the cliff rim directly over Wennberg and Karlsson one small tree stood alone in crooked dance, as though sent out by the others to dare the precipice.

Here the surf was the mildest they had seen, only one wave at a time furrowing in from the ocean. But the crash of the water came large. The Pacific was playing with its power in another way as well: out on the horizon, white walls periodically would fling up and spray apart--waves hitting on reefs. Unnerving, these surprise explosions as if the edge of the world were flying apart.

Their landing spot presented the two of them what Karlsson had hoped profoundly for, a deep view of the coast ahead. What they saw was a shattered line of headlands, shadowed by seastacks in shapes of great gray shipsails and dark tunnel mouths; sea rock various and jagged as a field of icebergs.
"Not that jungle, Karlsson." Wennberg licked his lips, wiped a hand across. "Not in Goddamn night, we can't."

A pair of kingfishers chided past, sent a jump through both men with their raucous rattle.

Karlsson returned his look to the tusked coast ahead.

....'Chose wrong,' Melander told the bastard a time. 'Brought you instead of your forge and anvil, they'd been easier to drag along this coast than you.' Still, he's right, two of us can't handle the canoe well enough, and if there's luck at all in life we ought be down far enough from those whale chasers....

They were keeping obvious distance between one another this morning. And the dagger was a new feel along Karlsson's left side, inside his rain shirt where he had slipped it the night before; where he would be carrying it from now on. He figured Wennberg was doing the same.

"Then the other time is now," Karlsson answered the blacksmith.

That day and all the next Karlsson and Wennberg pulled past shattered coast, watching into the seastack colonies and the warps of shore for Koloshes as boys would peer through a forest for sight of one another.

....It needs to be the pair of us against this coast, blacksmith. Ironhead. Just that, no other load on our backs. You're five kinds of an ox but that much you can, see, when your temper isn't in the way. If just Braaf....'If' is fairy gold. Make it past, what happened. Ahead, we need to point. Wennberg, though: can I keep you damped down....

And each dusk, came ashore like old women stiff in the knees. Wennberg encouraged a fire while Karlsson gathered mussels or clams,
whatever could pass as a meal. Only after they had food in them were they able to face the chores of night, finding water, wood supply, putting up the sailcloth shelter, laying groundcloth and blankets, covering the canoe against possibility of storm finding their night's cove.

...like trying to see through a millstone, this line of coast. There's this, the Koloshes don't seem to fancy the place either. Maybe better tomorrow. It's all dragging work, though. Here on, that's what it'll need be, just the two of us to paddle. All dragging work...

And again in the morning, nerved themselves and pushed the canoe into the surf of the North Pacific.

Then--

"Beach!" Wennberg was pointing. "Beach like heaven's own!"
"What was that?" Night down over them now on this sand shore, Karlsson was at the fire boiling clams for supper when Wennberg came and tossed something into the flames.

"That Aleut calendar of Braaf's, found it in the bottom of the canoe." Wennberg picked up a drift-branch to add to the fire. "Won't be needing it in eternity, him."

Karlsson reached, plucked the branch from Wennberg, with it flipped the little rectangle from the fire. Its edges were charred and the day-peg browned, but the wood was whole.

"What's that for, then?" demanded Wennberg. "Every damned day along here is every other damned day. It helps nothing to keep adding them up. Why count misery?"

"Maybe not. But this ought be kept." Karlsson shaved the char off the calendar with his dagger, then moved the peg the two days since Braaf had gone into the tide trough. A cross-within-a circle; Russian holy day, Pure Monday or St. Someone's birthday or who knew what. ... Karlsson realized Wennberg still was staring at him. "It's all we have of Braaf."

"All we--? Of Braaf? That hive of fingers--?"

Karlsson stopped work on the char, but held to the dagger. He took long inventory of Wennberg.

Finally Karlsson said: "Braaf happened to be a thief, and he happened to be as high a man as any. I know there's little space in there for it, but try to get both those into mind."

"Karlsson, I'll never savvy you--" Wennberg's eyes slid from their lock with Karlsson's. The dagger had come up off the charred wood. It paused. Then the blade thrust under the bail of the kettle.
The slender man hoisted the mealware from the coals and set it to the ground.

"Food," said Karlsson.

The coast uncluttered itself for them for the next four days. The beaches stayed steadily sand, and ample, while the ocean and continent margined straighter here, as if this might be a careful boundary of truce. Waves arrived cream-colored, then thinned to milk as they spilled far up the barely-tilted shore. Once in a while rocks ganged themselves along tideline, but nothing of the dour constant throngs of the days just past. The dolloped rock islands quit off too, except the one early on Karlsson and Wennberg's second morning of this new coastscape, a long bench out a few miles in the ocean.

One last new reach of coast, then, and its visible population only these two kinned against their will, the one family of the kind in all creation, slim Swede and wide Swede arked in a Tlingit canoe.

The beach at the end of their fourth day was widest yet. Wide as kingdom after the ledge-like weeks to the north, somehow a visit of desert here between timbered continent and cold ocean. Five stints of pushing, each a contest against an ever more reluctant sledge, it took the pair of men to skid the canoe in beyond the last mark of the tide.

Scoured shore, too. Between surf and high tideline nothing but a speckle of broken clam and sand dollar shells, suggesting that only seagulls prospered here.

Inland, the sand began to rumple. Over the line of dunes, like the spiking on a manor wall the top of forest showed.
"I ought go have a look," Karlsson offered.

"Look your eyes out, for what I care."

The dune grass poked nose-high to Karlsson, and he climbed the crest of a sand wave for better view. Before him now, swale of more sand, a couple of hundred strides across. Then a second rumple of slope, scrub evergreens spotting this one. Tight beyond that, forest thick as bear hair.

Southeast, though; southeast, the magnetic direction of this voyage: southeast the spikeline of timber barbed higher. Two plateaus of forest spread into the horizon.

Karlsson hadn't the palest inkling of what would mark the river Columbia, whether some manner of Gibraltor attended it—from what Melander had told of the river's mightiness, and to go by this coast's penchant for drama of rock, that seemed fitting—or whether sharp lower cliff, like at the Strait of Fuca, simply would skirt away and reveal Astoria. A broad opening in the coast this mid-afternoon had shown them disappointment; only bay or sound, not vast river mouth. Wennberg still was in a grump from it.

And here, put as wishful an eye to this pair of bluffs as he could, Karlsson could not believe them into likelihood as river guardians. They rose inland from the shore a half-mile or so, and did not shear away as if a river was working at them. Greater chance, just two more of all such continental ribs he and Wennberg already had peered at on this coast.

. . . Not there then, where to Hell is it? God's bones, how much
farther?...

Eyeing around, Karlsson found himself unexpectedly longing for the narrow northern beaches, the wild scatter of seastacks, the tucked coves where they had made camp. On the sand expanse where the canoe stretched at rest and Wennberg was propping the sailcloth shelter, there was nothing whatsoever they could do to put themselves from sight. This beach held the canoe and its two men prominently as three sprats on a platter.

The rough tongue of the wind started on their shelter early in the night.

Noise of the sailcloth bucking woke Wennberg a minute after Karlsson.

"Blowing solid, sounds like," the blacksmith said. And the next minute, was slumbering again.

Karlsson, though, still was awake when rain began to edge into the windsound.

By morning, the storm was major. The tide was up so alarmingly that Karlsson at once went and drove a stake of driftwood into the sand with the flat of his axe, as a mark to watch the inflow against. Sails flew in off the wavecrests, and the wind came so strong now that even its noise seemed to push into Wennberg and Karlsson. And all that day, as the two hunched under the shelter when they weren't having to foray out for firewood or to try to dig clams; all that day, downpour. At New Archangel they had known every manner of rain, but none of it anything to this. This was as if the sky was trying to step on you.
The Indian arrived at the Astoria customs house with an item and a tale. South from the village his people called Hosett he had gone to hunt seals, but soon sighted instead a great tangle of kelp brought inshore by the tide, and the kelp had seined in with it the body of a white person. Now he had adventured downcoast aboard a lumber schooner to report of this find. "Tole," the native said, the coastal jargon word for "boy." Not until he pantomimed and pidgined the description of a downy fluff of beard did the customs collector grasp that a grown man was being depicted.

With thought of the days of sloshing canoe travel it would take to reach the coastal spot and return, the customs collector prodded hopefully: And...?

And the Indian had done the disposition, rapidly buried the corpse in hope that the spirit had not yet gone out of it. But had thought first to clip proof for his report. He handed the customs collector a forelock of straw-colored hair.

That the weather since Christmas had been violent against vessels trying to cross the bar into the Columbia River was all too well known to the customs collector. Merrithew, Mindoro, Vandalia, Bordeaux---two barks and two brigs, they all had gone to grief along this rageful coast in these weeks.

Taking up his pen, the collector wrote the native his paper of reward: The bearer of this, Wha-laitl Asabuy, has assisted the duties of the Astoria District of Customs Collection by his report of...
He then turned to his daybook and began the official epitaph of Braaf: A body, supposed from one or another of the vessels wrecked north of Cape Disappointment during this fearful winter, has come ashore near the Makah village of Hosett.--It is that of an unknown young seaman, light hair, round faced. . .

By the end of the day, rain still blinded the coast.

Karlsson took out the Aleut calendar from the mapcase where he was keeping it now. Moved the peg rightward one hole. A moment, contemplated the little board.

. . .Might as well know as not. Pass time by counting time, that's one way. . .

It came out a few weeks worse even than Karlsson had thought. Since they had left New Archangel, sixty-four days.

He looked across to Wennberg; decided the arithmetic of their situation would not be welcome news in that quarter; and put the calendar back into the mapcase.

"Smaland," said Wennberg, startling Karlsson.

Karlsson waited to see what venture this was.

"Smaland. What sort of place's that? What I mean, what'd you do there?"

Karlsson eyed the burly man. There had been a palisade of silence between them, the only loopholes Wennberg's curses against the weather and Karlsson's setting of chores. All other conversation, the storm's--low grumble of surf, whickers of wind, drone of rain on
the shelter-cloth. Into the night now, Wennberg evidently was at desperation's edge for something other to hear than weather.

... Come off your tall horse, have you... 

"Farmed. My family did." Melander's description of farming arrived to mind. "Tickled rocks with a plow, more like."

"If stone were hardbread Sweden'd be heaven's bakery," Wennberg quoted.

"Yes. And the family of us, living at each other's elbows. Left the farmstead when I was thirteen, me."

Karlsson reached a stick, tidied coals in from the edge of the fire. These days and weeks of his mind always leaning ahead, aimed where the canoe was aimed, it had been a time since he thought back. But memory, always there in its bone house. What can it be for, remembering? To keep us from falling into the same ditch every day, certainly. But more, too. Memory we hold up and gaze into as proof of ourselves. Like thumbprint on a window, remembering is mindprint: I made this, no one else has quite this pattern, whorl here and sliver of scar there, they are me. Karlsson was in Smaland now, hills of pine forest, cottages roofed with sod and bark—and yes, stone in the fields and rye short as your ankles and a Karlsson tipped from the land to find what livelihood he could... 

"On a forge by thirteen, I was," Wennberg was saying. "Apprenticed, so I had to hammer out plowshares. Thought my arms'd break off. Bad as this bedamned paddling."

Wennberg when young—he was the fifth son, the last and stubborn
and brawlsome and least schoolable one, of an inspector of mines in the Nordmark iron district—Wennberg when young already was a figure which might have been knocked together in one of the red-glowing forges of Varmland. Who can say how it is in such instances, whether the person simply has chanced into the body which best fits him or whether the body has grasped command of that mind: but Wennberg as boy looked just what he was, a blacksmith waiting to happen. A beam for shoulders, arms plump with strength. A neck wide as his head; very nearly as thick, too, in all senses.

"At least there's an end to this paddling."

"Maybe. Could be wrong kind, though. Melander's had his end, and Braaf his."

"And chewing over their deaths doesn't undo them. Wennberg, each day we pull ourselves nearer to Astoria."

"Or to drowning or to Koloshes or to Christ knows just whatever. . . ."

I ought've taken my death and been done with it, the day somebody spoke 'Merica to me."

Of that continent which had begun to pull Swedes as the moon draws the tides, the young blacksmith knew only the glittering pun its word made against the Swedish tongue. America, 'Merica: mer rika, more rich. That there somehow was a Russian 'Merica besides the one that the Swedish farm families were flocking to mystified Wennberg only briefly. He imagined the 'Mericas must be side by side there end the other side of the ocean, that the ship made a turn like going down one road-fork instead of the other. Then word arrived to the
Nordmark region, in the person of a merchant over from Karlstad, that the Russians were recruiting blacksmiths to work iron in their America. Wennberg's father, heartily weary of a son with temper enough in him to burn down Hell, managed to see to it that Wennberg was one of the three smiths chosen, and that Wennberg went off south with the others to board ship at Stockholm. They were joining the voyage of Arvid Adolf Etholen, a Swede serving as a Russian naval officer and now to become the new governor of Russian America. Wennberg never worked clear how it was that Etholen could be simultaneously Swede and Russian and captain and governor, but then Wennberg had ahead of him years of finding out that double-daddle of such sort was not rare where the Russians were concerned. A Russian system, at least as he found it practiced in Alaska, did not need make any too much sense, it simply needed be followed relentlessly and the effort pounded into it would force result of some sort out the far end.

"You can't close your ears always," Karlsson said.

"Maybe not," concurred Wennberg. "The trouble is to know when the devil's doing the talking."

Finns predominated in the number that voyaged for Russian America during the term of Etholen; weavers, masons, tanners and tailors, sailmakers, carpenters. But for ironwork, a Wennberg was wanted; the forge must have been the cradle of these Varmland Swedes. So Wennberg was shipboard with new governor Etholen's entourage those nine months from the Baltic to Alaska in 1839-40. Etholen with his prim little mustache and those hooded eyes which seemed to see all
over the ship at once; he was said to know more of Alaska than any of
the Tsar's men since Baranov. And Etholen's big-nosed young wife,
pious as Deuteronomy said backwards; and Pastor Cygnaeus, and the
governor's servants, and the naval officers; oh, it was high carriage
and red wheels too, for a blacksmith to be journeying in company with
such as these.

"Tell me truth, Karlsson," Wennberg blurted now. "How many more
days d'you think it can be? To Astoria?"

Karlsson, carefully: "There's no count to what you can't see,
Wennberg. I'd give much to put a finger a place on Braaf's counting-
board and say, 'Here. Astoria day, this one.' But we can't know
that. We can just know tomorrow will carry us closer to it."

Wennberg shook his head. "I've played cards against men like you,
Karlsson. They count too much on the next flip from the deck."

"While your style won you the world?"

Wennberg's embarkation to Russian America carried him to a fresh
corner of the world, a familiar livelihood and religion, and a doom.
At first, curiosity was all there was to it, a way to ease hours—
watching the card-players. Then he edged into the gaming, merely an
evening now and again, which in a feet-first man such as Wennberg
truly shows how guardful he was being. Some money vanished from him
in the first years, but not all so much, no amount to keep a man awake
nights. Besides, Pastor Cygnaeus was one to inveigh against waywardness,
the devil's trinity of drink and cards and the flesh; and as it is with
those who have some of the bully in them, Wennberg by close-herding
could be bullied in the general direction of moderation. But came the
spring of 1845, Pastor Cygnaeus departed New Archangel, sailed back for
Europe with Etholen at his end of term as governor. Wennberg yet had
two years of indenture, and during them his gaming, and all else,
changed.

"Back there at the tide trough."

Karlsson waited, impassive.

"If I'd been to the right of you and Braaf to the left, I'd've
gone into that millrace instead of him."

...If that'd been, my ears would get rest this night...

Aloud: "If the moon were window we could see up angels' nighties, too.
Lay it away, Wennberg." Less than anything did Karlsson want to
discuss the perishing of Braaf. "Tomorrow paddles will still fit
our hands, and the canoe will still fit into the ocean. Live by that."

Wennberg moved his head from side to side. "You can wash your
mind of such matters, Karlsson. I can't. Death this side of me and
then that, I need think on it. See through to why I was let live."

"Maybe God's aim is bad."

"No, got to be more to it than that." Wennberg would not be
swerved. "Maybe like sheep and goats. 'And He shall set the sheep
on his right hand, but the goats on the left--' No, Braaf was to
the right--"

"Wennberg. Stow that."

Wennberg peered earnestly through the firelight to Karlsson.
"You know what the pastors'd say, about all this."
"They'd say I'm being put to test. All this, bedamned coast, you other three, Koloshes—" Just now a thought could be seen to surprise Wennberg: "Maybe even you, too, Karlsson! Being put to test!"

Proclamation of his eligibility did not noticeably enthuse Karlsson. "Wennberg, I know at least this. We're not playing whist with God along this coast. Either we paddle to the place Astoria or die in the try. One or other. Just that."

Wennberg shook his head. Not, as it turned out, against Karlsson; the pastors. "But they don't know a thumb's worth about it either. Found that out, I did, when it happened with—with her."

Karlsson looked the question to Wennberg.

"Katya," the blacksmith said.

"Katya?" Karlsson echoed.

"My wife." Wennberg wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, as if clearing away for the next words. "Think you're the only one ever looked at a woman, do you? You've fiddled your time, north there. You know what the creole women can be, the young ones. Black diamonds, the Russians call them. Katya was one, right enough... But why'd she die?" Wennberg's look was beseeching, as if Karlsson might be withholding the answer. "If she hadn't, I'd not be in all this. God's will, the pastor said. God's will, right enough, I told him back. What kind of thing is that to do, kill a man's wife with whooping cough? Didn't even seem ill at first, Katya. Just a cough. And then—'O satisfy us early with Thy mercy,' that clodhopper of a
Finn preaching when we buried her on the hill. Mercy? Late for mercy on Katya. And me. How's I to go through life with her grave up there on the hill from me all the while? If I could've bought my way out of that Russian shitpile, back to Sweden. If the gambling'd worked—"

Evenings, that spring of 1845, a particular plump Russian clerk sat into the barracks card games. Three times out of five now, when this clerk departed the table he took with him just a bit more of Wennberg's money than Wennberg ought to have let himself lose. Nor was Cygnaeus's successor any help as a vigilant; he too suffered from that same soul-sweat, New Archangel ague, the fever of cards at night and clammy remorse by day. Before Wennberg quite knew any of it, then, the fetters of debt and of more years in Russian 'Merica were on him, and Wennberg had turned with fury against a God who let such chaining happen and a God's man who stood by mumbling while it did. Against, it might be said, life.

"--but no, oh no, and God's little Finnlander telling me, 'Steady yourself, Wennberg, keep from the cards,' and himself squatting at the table with the Russians half the night. Man of God. God doesn't have men, he has demons of some kind which strangle women with the whooping cough and blast the back of the head off Melander and drown Braaf like a blind pup."

Wind flapped the shelter-cloth behind Karlsson's head, rain still was pelting. He and Wennberg in shared life those hundreds of days at New Archangel, now these dozens in the narrow canoe and beside the campfires, they had wrangled and come to blows, might do so again, 

yet come to worse, 

be warmly familiar with

how was it you could know every inch of a man and know not much of
him at all? Unexpected as winter thunder, something like this, and as hard to answer.

"Wennberg, I--"

"What you said, just then." Wennberg was looking harshly across at Karlsson. "That about the cards. More than style is in it. Luck. Luck I haven't had since Varmland, except the black sort that ended me up with you."

It had quickened past them, the moment. They were plowshare and rock again. Karlsson heard himself saying as stone will answer iron--"...you've had some in plenty, recent days."

"What, dragging along this boil-and-goiter coast? You call that luck?"

"The two of us who are dead, neither of them is you. There's your luck, Wennberg. Now shut your gab and get some sleep."
At morning, sky and shore showed hard use by the storm. Both were smudged, vague. The rain had dwindled and the wind ceased, but no more than a quarter-mile in each direction from Wennberg and Karlsson and the canoe, fog grayed out the beach.

...Fog ought mean the wind is gone, we won't swamp. But this cloud on our necks, we won't see along the coast, either. Stays sand beach, that won't matter. Rocks, though. Rocks'd matter. Can't mend it before it happens. Rocks we'll face when they face us...

"Why'n't we go it afoot, here on?"

This new corner of reluctance on Wennberg took all of the early morning to be worked off. Karlsson's constant answer was question back: what when they hiked themselves to a river, or another sound, or headland cliff? Swim, Wennberg? Take a running jump at it? Fly?

"But Goddamn, out into that cloud--beach here like a street, maybe there won't be water in the way--"

"Wennberg. Ever since New Archangel, there has been. Wish won't change that. There'll be water."

When at last the jitter wore out of Wennberg, he looked spent. So much so that Karlsson came wary that the man's next notion would be not to move at all. Wennberg cast him up a look, though, and fanned enough exasperation in himself to blurt:

"Karlsson, one more time I hear 'need to' out of you and--"

"You'll be that much closer to the place Astoria each time you hear it. Off your bottom now. This's as close a tide as we'll likely get."
By the time they pushed the canoe the distance across the sand to the tideline, both were panting and stumbling. Wennberg hesitated, looked back at the beach. Then surf surged in, swirled up his shins; Wennberg shoved the canoe ahead, half-clambered half-fell into the bow.

The most wobbly launch of the entire journey, this one, the canoe nearly broaching into a wave before Karlsson managed to steer it steady.

Straight out to ocean they paddled, until Wennberg stopped stroking and turned to demand: "Where to Hell're you taking us? Shore's almost out of sight."

"We need to stay out from those surf waves, or your belly will be visiting your mouth again. I'll head us by compass the way the coast has been pointing."

Wennberg could be seen to be choosing. Seasickness, or swallow Karlsson's notion of voyaging all-but-blind.

He said something Karlsson couldn't catch. And dipped his paddle.

Fog, gray dew on the air. During a rest pause Karlsson touched a hand to his face and found that his beard was wet as if washed.

Fog, the breath of—what, ocean, sky, the forest? Or some mingling of all as when breath smoked out of everyone at New Archangel the morning after the December snow?

Fog, and more of it as the canoemen labored southeast. The shore was a dimmest margin of forest, now glimpsed, now gone.
This day, different eyes had been set in the heads of Karlsson and Wennberg. Nothing they saw except the beak of the canoe had sharpness, definite edge to it. This must have been what it would be like to drift across the sky amid mare's tail clouds.

...Got to be near, Astoria. All the miles we've come. Can't have gone past. River mouth would tell us, Melander said it's a river of the world, big as Sitka Sound. Can't have missed that...

In the slim space of the canoe the two of them now were the pared outlines of their New Archangel selves. The canoe, though, seemed to have grown; looked lengthened, disburdened, with a pair of men astride it rather than four.

As best they could, Karlsson and Wennberg settled to terms with the shadowless, unedged day. Their paddling was slow, with frequent need to rest. In what might have been the vicinity of noon they ate cold clams from the potfull Karlsson had cooked the night before. Then resumed stroking.

End and beginning, land and water, endurance and task; the Pacific's fusions seemed to distill up endlessly, come into the mind as if the fog was the elixir of all such matters. Into a belowstairs corner of this ocean--
the year, 1770--another of Cook's vessels nosed. The inlet was about to be dubbed Botany Bay and the arrival was history-turning, arrival of white exploration to an unknown coast of Australia. A hundred five feet long and thunderheads of canvas over her, Cook's *Endeavour* swept into Botany Bay, while the black people on the shore and in the bay registered--nothing. Past fishermen in dugout canoes the great ship hovered, and the fishermen did not even toss a second glance. A woman ashore looked to the *Endeavour*, expressed neither surprise nor concern, and squatted to light her meal fire. Too strange for comprehension, Cook's spectral ship to the aborigines; in the *dreaming*, they accepted it to be, an apparition, a waft of the mind. Just so, here on their own gable-end of the Pacific, was the fog taking Karlsson and Wennberg into a dreaming of their own. Through the hours it shifted, and diluted, then came potent again: the vast hover of coastline north behind them, Alaska to Kaigani to Vancouver to wherever this was, the join of timber to ocean, islands beneath peaks, Tsarmen beside seven-year men, Koloshes beside whales; it curled and sought, then to now: Melander's vision of how they would run on the sea, and Braaf's single stride wrong on this forgiveless shore, and Karlsson day by day finding dimension he never knew of, and Wennberg in over his head as he always would be in life; it gathered, touched its way here in the mind of one paddling man and there in the mind of the other: all a dreaming, and not.

Someway, the two canoemen stretched their strength, did not give way until the day at last did. Dusk and fog together now hid all,
shore as well as canoe clasped into their cloud.

Watching how sluggish Wennberg had become, Karlsson was not sure he was any better himself. Thirty more, he vaguely heard himself decide. Aloud, to Wennberg? He wasn't sure.

Those thirty strokes numbly done, Karlsson turned the craft toward where the compass said shore ought to be.

"How to Hell far out'd you take us?"
"Ought be almost in now."
"Where's shore, then?"
"Just ahead."
"Maybe that compass's gone wrong, maybe you've steered us to sea--"
"We're with the tide, Wennberg. Can't be taking us anywhere but in."
"This Goddamn fog."
"Wennberg, listen."
"So? You think you can say anything that'll bring shore, fetch it out--"
"Not to me, Goddamn it. Listen for rocks."
"Rocks? What, you--?"

Karlsson and Wennberg both had stopped paddling, the canoe being carried by the tide, the slosh of surf now near in the fog. Both listening, listening until it seemed each ear must narrow as a squinting eye would.
But the slosh around them stayed steady, no underdrum of tidal rock anywhere behind it, and the canoe continued to be carried in.

The sightlessness seemed to extend time, the ride through slosh went on and on. Still no beach, no dark bank of forest.

They were onto shore before they ever saw it. The canoe simply stopped, as if reined up short.

Karlsson and Wennberg lurched out of the canoe and sank ankle-deep into tideflat. "Muck," said Wennberg as if it was exactly what he had expected. And then they pushed, the canoe asking shove and shove, until finally it was beyond water and mud. Only then could the leaden men beside it see the forest, a tangle at the edge of the fog and near-dark.

Something of the landfall nudged at Karlsson. But couldn't surface through his weariness. It was as much as he could manage to grasp that the fog had not fed Wennberg and him to the coast's rocks, that they had fumbled the sailcloth shelter and blankets out, that Wennberg already had sagged off under them, that he now was being let to sink from the day.

It shot clear to Karlsson as he woke in the morning.

. . .Wrong side, Sweet sweat of Christ, water's to the wrong side of us, how. . .

Water east rather than water west, and water that was not ocean, but a broadsheet of bay, miles of it.
Through the hills across the bay a silvery haze hung, but Karlsson could make out that those hills and the shore forest all around were like the Alaska coastline pressed down and spread: rumpled and green but low.

Karlsson clambered across the beach toward the treeline for higher view, turned, scanned fervently. Beyond the canoe, across the broad brown tideflat, into all the blue of water, his search: and nowhere in it, any steady move of current which would mark a great river flowing out.

"Is it? Got to be--" Wennberg was haggard, hung between hope and alarm. "Karlsson, is it?"

Karlsson still studied into the bay. "I--don't think so."

"Got to be! What the Hell are those, if this isn't river mouth, if there aren't whites here to put those up? Karlsson, this's got to be--"

Karlsson tried to make his mind work past Wennberg's insistences, figure what the thin shapes rising from the water could signify. Four wands of them, like long, peeled willows implanted out in the tidewater north of the canoe. Standing like four corners of a plot of--water? Wennberg had the point that they'd never seen anything of the sort done by Koloshes. But if whites had, why? and where was sign of anyone, except these skinny cornerposts of nothing?
"Karlsson! Give a look!"

...Oh Christ, he's moonstruck about this, how'll I...

"No, there!" Wennberg was pointing north along the low shore.

"There, there!"

The cabin sat in the distance, on the far side where the tideflat made a thrust into the beach.

Not since New Archangel had they set eye on such a dwelling, a spell of houselessness which asked some moments of blink to cure itself, to allow in the news of peaked green roof, weathered gray walls, hearth, warmth—

"Those markers out there!" Wennberg, all over himself with excitement. "Told you there had to be whites here! Fishermen of some sort, must be. Christ-of-mercy, let's get ourselves across there!"

Into the muck the pair of men plunged, veering inland rapidly as they could to make a slogging arc toward the cabin. Whenever he had breath, Wennberg hallooed, his calls hoarse and lonely in the stillness.

"Got to be someone about, got to," insisted Wennberg.

They labored two-thirds of the distance to the cabin before Karlsson could make himself bring out what was wisping in his mind.

"Doesn't look right."

"We don't give a fly's shit how it looks," Wennberg panted. "Just so it's roof and walls."

"Wennberg. Wennberg, it's not."
"Not? Skin your Goddamn eyes, Karlsson, it's right there, it's —"

But a further twenty yards dissolved the cabin profile entirely.
All the Wennbergs and Karlssons of the world could have put wish
to it at once and still the shape would have been only what it was
emerging as, the green roof roughening into growth of bush, the
weather-silvered side of wood, high as the men, dropping pretence of
gray cabin wall. A huge butt of cedar driftlog, nursery of salal atop
it. Mammoth chip from this coast of wood, undercut by some patient
stream or other and carried in here, years since, by the tide.

Karlsson swallowed, felt an ache sharpen behind his eyes.

Wennberg stood and shook his head, like an ox discouraging flies.
"Why couldn't it've been..."

The way one plods the distances of a dream, both of them slogged
on to the huge log. Wennberg slumped against it, sagged until he
sat with his back to the silvered wood. His knees came up, and his
head went down to them.

Karlsson was against the inland edge of the log, propped his
weariness there as he looked north along the bay edge.

...More of it. Got to be a mouth there somewhere. Over
those dunes. Find it, figure..."

"Wennberg. Wennberg, we need to get a look. Just over there.  
Find how to get the canoe out of here."

"No." The blacksmith's tone was muffled, head still to his
knees. "No use to it," he droned. "Just more muck."
"The bay mouth. Need to see what it's like."

"No."

"You'll stay to the log, then." Karlsson tried to focus instruction. "Just where you are."

... If he goes off into the mire and tide catches him, there'll be his end. Ironhead he is, but not that. Doesn't deserve that...

"Wennberg! Wennberg, hear me! You'll stay to the log. Aye?"

"Stay--" agreed the muffled voice.

Karlsson aimed inland, off the mud of the tideflat. When he reached sand and made his turn north, now he was wallowing through dune grass high as his waist.

... Maps, we'd know. Could see to the place Astoria, on them. But we'd still be in here...

He pushed the grass aside as he trudged, until he felt its sharpnesses biting at his hands. To stop the stabs he brought his hands up and in, put his elbows out, woodsman's habit against brush.

... Step it off. Like pacing where the tree'll fall...

The whetted grass was on all sides of him now, color of a faded rye field, lines of these sown dunes rolling parallel with the bay.

... Guts are out of Wennberg. Somehow get him on his feet, get us out...

Karlsson tramped north until it came through to him that the footing was wavering, creeping in front of him. A slow crawl like tan snakes: sand blowing in ropey slinking patterns. He was out of the dune grass, water lay a meadow's width in front of him.
...Kept in life this long, I can keep longer. Takes God and His Brother to kill a Smalander...

Now at water edge. Beautiful blue.

Peering out into the bay entrance which the fog had poured them through.

Squinted to be sure what he was seeing.

Instead of surf stacking against the shore three and four and five deep as had been happening all along this coast, here the waves flowed and flowed, breaking into the bay as if in stampede. They flashed, right, left and before, across the entire neck of breadth of whitecaps.

Karlsson looked long at the breakers, willing against what he knew to be the truth written white in them. Even could he persuade Wennberg back to the canoe, and they someway summoned muscle to launch into the mud-bay, against such flow as this the two of them were too weary to paddle through to ocean. Never in this lifetime. Whatever candle-end of it was left to them.

...Melander. Then Braaf. Oughtn't happened, either time. They were keeping in life, bending themselves to our voyage. So why...

The dune grass was attacking the backs of Karlsson's hands again. ...Hadn't been for the last storm and the fog, we'd done it. Be at Astoria now, wherever place it is. Wherever...
The surface under him changed Karlsson's slog once more. On the tidal mud again now. The gray log with its wig of green was ahead.

Wennberg was against the log as Karlsson had left him. He lifted his head, mumbled something, and lapsed off again.

...Finish me, Wennberg made me the promise once. At least we've jumped that. No need, coast'll do it for him. Not yet, though.

Karlsson put his back against the high driftlog, could feel the cedar grain beneath his fingers. Against every urge of the fatigue all through him, did not let himself sit but stayed propped there, looking across the tideflat to the shore forest. To the spread of bay. To the four marking sticks, tall and thin, striking their reflections crooked across the tidewater. To a lone dark stretched form between the mud and the timber which, his mind slowly managed to register, was the canoe.
The dark-bearded man carried a lamp to the table, trimmed the wick, lent flame to it from a kindling splinter lit at the fireplace; established the lamp at the farthest side from the draft seeping in under the cabin door, then sat to the pool of yellow light.

Across the next minute or so he fussed at the materials which awaited on the table. Unusual, but he was a trifle uneasy with himself. It being Sunday night, he was going to need to trim scruple next. Keeping the Sabbath ought be like a second backbone in any New England man, even one away here as far west from Vermont as you could venture and not fall off America. But in the morning Winant's schooner Mary Taylor would sail from the bay and packet the mail out with it, possibly three weeks, a month, intervening before the next postal opportunity. Too, there was the consideration that Waterman paid coin for worthwhile report, and the clink of specie was rare sound at this back corner of frontier...

He slid the paper to him, dipped the goosefeather pen to the ink, and began.

Shoalwater Bay March 19th 1853

Mr. John Orvis Waterman
Editor, Oregon Weekly Times

Dr. Sir—On Monday last, as I was riding with my son Jared to examine oyster-beds at the north of our land claim, our attention was taken
by a column of smoke. Knowing that no settler dwelt in that vicinity, we thought to investigate, a vessel perhaps having run aground near the bay mouth there.

Much was our astonishment to find, beside a big tidal log, two men, much emaciated and looking the perfect pictures of misery and hardship. One of the poor fellows could only utter again and again 'merica, 'merica, so fixed was his mind on their arrival to this portion of America. The other man, a slender sort worn thin to the extreme by their ordeal, we could speak with, but could not make ourselves understood. Astoria was his oftenest word, and by trying our utmost, we at last conveyed to him that that locality lay just beyond the southern reach of the bay, on the opposite bank of the Columbia river.

We contrived to lift them onto our horses and after taking them to our house, summoned some of the other settlers from around. Among us since the grounding of the Willimantic in Gray's Harbor has been a Dane, dwelling at Chinook, who was steward of that vessel, and through his endeavors we succeeded in conversing with the hard-used pair. Their history is as follows:

In 1850 they engaged to work for the Russian Fur Company seven years, and accordingly embarked, in company with 18 others, for the northwestern coast, bound for New Archangel. After a residence of nearly two years, they found they could not bear the ill-usage which they were receiving, and determined to make their escape. They were four, who determined on that leave-taking. At a place beyond Vancouver
Island, one of their number was slain by the Indians. A second unfortunate was drowned in the descent of the coast between the Strait of Fuca and here.

When found, the two who have survived had been in this bay for a span of time they did not know. They mistook the large drift stump for a cabin and were very nearly done up by their exertions to reach it. The more slight of the pair, and thus better fitted to tread his way atop the tideflat, returned to their canoe—a craft about twenty feet in length by three in width, sprightly built; and with this they have made a winter voyage of over 1,000 miles on one of the worst parts of the coast!—and from there fetched a cylinder of maps enwrapped in waterproofing. With these large sheets, and flint and steel, and branches and driftwood got from around, he was able to construct atop the log the smudge fire which signaled us to their aid.

They are well cared for by the citizens here, and at present are comfortably situated at Chinook, whence they will be taken across the river to Astoria when their strength is sufficient.

Their names are Nils Karlsson and Anders Wennberg, and they are of Sweden.

Yours &c

Jonathan E. Cotter