

Ahead of him Melander and Karlsson and Braaf were putting their own canoe into the surf, Melander somehow finding time as well to urge Wennberg to hurry and lend a hand.

They shoved with their paddles just as the first musket ball tossed up water beside them. Wennberg in puffing agony glanced around to see two natives with rifles raised, others clustered around the bow-broken canoe, more oh God more emerging from the forest.

Karlsson, who had ended up in the bow, turned and hurried a shot at the two riflemen. It missed but caused them to flinch back from the bullet's ricochet among the beach gravel.

"Paddle-JesusJesus-paddle-paddle-paddle!" Melander was instructing. Another bullet's toss of water, this one nearer. The Swedes stroked as if hurling the ocean behind them as a barrier, and the canoe climbed a mild breaker, sped down its seaward side, climbed a stronger wave and downsped again, then slid rapidly southward from the firing figures on the beach.

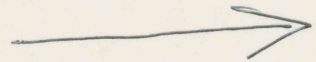
Out of the fear and excitement of the escape something other began to grope through to Karlsson in the next moments. From his place at its forepart, he sensed a change about the canoe. Its rhythm felt lightened. Not gone erratic as during Wennberg's sickness at Kaigani, but lessened, thinned.

Karlsson turned enough to look straight back.

"Sven?" he called. "Sven!"

At the stern of the canoe Melander, almost tidily, lay folded forward, the upper part of his long body across his knees, the back of his head inclined toward the other three canoemen as if to show them where the musket ball had torn its red hole.

# chapter break



Death's credence comes to us in small costs, mounting and mounting.

At first within the canoe, capacity only for the disbelief. Melander gone from life, the long coast snapping down the cleverest of them as an owl would a dormouse.

Like wild new hearts this shock of loss hammered in Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson, there never could be room for all the resound in their minds, any minds, it thudded around ears and trembled in throats, such concussion of fresh circumstance; Melander's body now a cargo, deadweight, clotting not just the pulse of the canoe but of whatever of existence was left to the other three of them...

After, it could only seem that during this blind thunderous time the canoe sensed out its own course. When the thought at last forced a way to one of them--Karlsson, the displaced steersman, in the bow, it happened to be--that to pull numbly on paddles was not enough, that a compass heading and a map reading were necessitated, the needle and the drawn lines revealed the canoe to be where it ought; where Melander would have steered it.

In that catch-of-breath pause, Braaf whitely burrowing the compass and mapcase from beneath the corpse that was Melander, Wennberg in a sick glaze handing on the instrument and container to Karlsson--in that stay of time, the absence began its measured toll on them.

Melander's sailor-habited scrutiny of the water around, every chance of rock or shoal or tiderip announced.

The reminding word to Braaf when he made his habitual dawdle in shifting his paddle.

Regulation on Wennberg's bluster, which evidently even Wennberg had come to rely on.

The musing parleys with Karlsson, treetop communing with stone.

Day on day and all the waking hours of those days, such losses of Melander would be exacted now, in silences conspicuous where there ought have rung the watchword of that voice--aye?

Mid-day, the canoe ashore at the next southward island, Melander's three-man crew yet trying to unbelieve the folded-forward body in the trench of cedar.

Three men, each with new age on him. During the crossing Wennberg had blurted periodic and profound curses, but now said nothing, seemed to be gritting against whatever slunk on its way next. Braaf, too, stood still and wordless as a post. Karlsson it was who stepped first out of the silence.

"We need to bury him."

They managed with Karlsson's ~~ax~~<sup>axe,</sup> the gaff and the cooking pot to gouge a shallow grave in the forest floor. Then, with struggle, they brought the body from the canoe. Queerly, lifelessness had made Melander greatly heavy to carry, even with Wennberg's strength counted into the task, while at the same time the sense of death somehow seemed to thin the gravity around Braaf and Karlsson and Wennberg. This emotional addle, not a man of them would have knowhow to utter. But now in each there swirled, atop the dread and confusion and gut-gall

from Melander's killing an almost giddy feel of ascension. Of being up high and more alert than ever before, alert in every hair, aware of all sides of one's self. It lasts not long--likely the human spirit would burn to blue ash in more than moments of such atmosphere--but the sensation expends the wonder that must course through us at such times: Death singled thee, not me.

They dared not spare sailcloth for a shroud. Karlsson took up the axe, whacked limbs from nearby spruce. Melander's last rest along this green coast would be under boughs rather than atop them.

Next, dirt was pushed into the grave. When they had done, Karlsson stepped amid the loose soil. Trod down his right heel, his left. Moved sideways, repeated.

Wennberg and Braaf looked loath, but in a minute joined in the tromp.

Firm dirt over Melander, they hefted stones from the beach and piled them onto the gravetop to discourage--more likely, merely delay--animals.

In the unending windstorm of history, how Sven Melander of Gotland and the sea was put to earth could not possibly make a speck's difference. Yet to these three this forest grave seemed to matter all. They had done now what could be thought of, except--

Karlsson and Braaf looked to Wennberg.

The broad man licked his lips as if against a sour taste, and much white was showing at the corners of his eyes.

"No. Goddamn, no. I don't believe in that guff any more. Particularly after this."

"Just do it for the words," Braaf murmured. "Do the words for Melander."

Wennberg eyed Braaf; Karlsson. Then in a low rapid rumble he delivered the psalm:

"...A thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night....We spend our years as a tale that is told....So teach us to number our days..."

The next bad time was quick to come.

They needed a meal, and somehow pieced one together. Just after, crossing the campsite on one fetch or another--all the budget of fuss Melander had attended to now needed to be shared out--Wennberg clomped past the sitting Braaf. Stopped, and examined.

"What's here on the back of you, then?" Wennberg demanded.

Braaf glanced dully up toward the blacksmith. Slipping his arms from the Aleut parka, he brought the garment around for a look.

Across the shoulders and the middle of the back showed small dark splats, as if a rusty rain had fallen.

The three men stared at the stains where Melander's blood had showered forward.

At last Wennberg shifted awkwardly. "Maybe it'll wash--"

Twain glistens of tears laned Braaf's round face. "Say anything,

either of you," he choked out, "and I'll gut you."

After, Karlsson never was sure what the flag had been between Wennberg and him, how it happened that they faced each other, off along the brink of shore from the weeping Braaf.

Wennberg began fast, as if the words needed to rattle their way out of him. "Karlsson, listen now--we've--Hell's own dung-ditch, we're fallen in now. The lucky one of us may be Melander. So--"

"You didn't trade places with him there at the grave."

"What? No!" Wennberg seemed startled by Karlsson's rejoinder. Then tried to muster: "No, bad choices're getting to be a habit with me. As when I went out that gate with you damned three."

"But out it you are." Karlsson scanned from Wennberg away into the forest, the constant shaggy nap of these islands. Tried to find concentration in the convoking of all the green beings, the way they touched each to each. Karlsson's head swam a bit and ached a lot and he was wearier than all the axework of his life ever had made him, and here loomed Wennberg to be dealt with, and Melander dead, and. . . "And a far swim to get back in," Karlsson bought a further moment with. God's wounds, think now, how to halter this damned bull of a blacksmith. . .

"Karlsson, hear me. Just--just hear me, will you? We can't go at each other like cats with tails tied together and slung over a fence. Not now, not after--Someway we've got to make miles along this God-lost coast. So somebody needs to lead. Decide, this way

or that, or we'll meet ourselves in a circle in these bedamned islands. Not even Melander's going to make himself heard up through the earth."

Karlsson's weariness abruptly doubled. "So you're lifting yourself to it."

Exasperation flooded Wennberg. "Karlsson, Goddamn--You won't see a matter until it lands on your nose and has a shit there, will you?" With effort, Wennberg tried to steady his tone. Karlsson remembered through the blacksmith, the same ominous tremor, the earthquake in a man when temper fights with itself, the time ~~through the blacksmith~~ when Melander informed him the cache had been spirited away. "No, not--not me to lead. You."

As Karlsson tried to believe his way into the seven words he had just heard, Wennberg discharged more.

"It's sense, is all. There're the maps to be savvied and this bedamned canoe to be pointed, and you've done some of so, out with the bear-milkers. So it's sense, you in charge of that."

Wennberg scratched his sidewhiskers ~~beard~~ as he sought how to put his next premise.

"All the other, we'll just ~~—~~ we don't need a sermon at every turn, ~~eyeblink,~~ like Melander gave. Divvy tasks without all that yatter, we can."

Wennberg paused. Something was yet to pry its way. Finally--

"Braaf, there. He'd never take to me as leader. Be happy to see him left here to bunk with Melander, I would, but we need the little bastard."



"And you." Karlsson somehow found the mother wit to say this more as statement than question. "You'll take to me."

Another effort moved through Wennberg. He lifted his look from Karlsson, bent a bleak gaze to the ocean. He said: "I need to, don't I?"

Close by that night's firelight, Karlsson in kneel.

Untying the flap of the waterproof map pouch. Bringing out the scroll of maps. Performing the unrolling, then the weighting of each corner with an oval pebble from the beach gravel.

Into view arrived all their declension of the coast, an amount of trek across white space that surprised Karlsson, as though he were gazing on sudden new line of tracks across snow.

Only the top map of the lot had Karlsson ever seen, the one on which Melander's pencil route took its start at the square house-dots of New Archangel. That once, Melander had been borrowing opinion, and here was traced Karlsson's advice, the canoe's side-loop around Japonski Island and then veering down and down, at last out the bottom of Sitka Sound. The night-forest of a continent ten paces on one side of him and half a world of night-ocean thirty paces on the other, Karlsson could scarcely credit it--that there had been time when he, when any of this canoe's adopted men, existed at that regiment of dots, answered work call, dwelt in barracks, fought fleas, wintered on salt fish...set honey for a gate guard named Bilibin.

On the next map, the penciled line hugged the west shore of Baranof Island to Cape Ommaney; then, as if deflected by what waited south, struck east to Kuiu. Because of Melander's route-sketch in the dirt and the knowledge that their port of destination lay southward, Karlsson had supposed that they were going along the escape route much like men shinnying down a rope--maybe a sidle of effort this way or that, but the total plunge all into one direction. It was a revolution in his thinking to see now that all the time they were canoeing south they also were sidestepping east.

More of angling down the North Pacific, map three brought. The Kuiu-Heceta-Noyes-Suemez-Dall skein of islands and the crossing of Kaigani Strait to the horn tip of the Queen Charlottes. Those days of voyage, Karlsson tried to sort in his mind. In the waters along Heceta, was it, where they caught the ugly delicious fish? On which island did the carved creatures rear over Braaf? The great trees beside that dome of cliff, the water diamonds dropping in dazzle, had they been--? But the days of this coast blended like its trees, none could be made to stand in memory without the others.

Karlsson unscrolled to the fourth map, the one showing how they crossed Hecate Strait, stairstepped the islands of the past several days, and then, just more than halfway down this chart, at a rough-edged small island with no name written in beside it, Melander's penciling halted. Yes, well...

Melander. In every corner of Karlsson's thoughts, Melander.

A painful stutter in the mind, him, his death, the cost to it. Melander with that abrupt alert face atop his length, like the glass cabin up a lighthouse; Melander who believed that an ocean can be fended with, ridden by a Kolosh saddle of wood and reined with these Russian maps. But Melander no longer on hand to dispense such faith. Too well, Karlsson understood that he and Braaf and Wennberg, none of them anything of a Melander and as different from each other as hip-high and upstairs and the moon, needed now to find their own resources to endure sea run.

At least Braaf had wrinkled smooth again. When Karlsson and Wennberg returned to camp and the who-ought-lead proposition was put to him, it took the young thief an instant to realize he was being polled at all. He blinked then and said as if it were common fact: "You've to do it, Karlsson. I can't read the maps and Wennberg couldn't lead his shadow. You've to do it."

And at least there were the maps, these extra eyes needed to know the intentions of this coast and ocean. Glancing to the bottom of this fourth map, down from where Melander's tracery of route left off, Karlsson saw that the coastline was shown as far as the northmost tip of Vancouver<sup>'s</sup> Island. Cape Scott, Melander had penciled in beside the ragged thumb of land. Karlsson recalled Vancouver<sup>'s</sup> Island to be the third of the landforms, those wheres of their escape, scratched into the dirt by Melander the day of last summer. The maps next would bring Vancouver's shore and then the final southering coastline from the Strait of Fuca to Astoria.

Karlsson slipped his fingers beneath the top and bottom edges to lift away this map to those next ones. And was fixed to that motion, if the chill of beach gravel against his knuckles had conducted ~~petrification~~ <sup>petrification</sup> into him.

Beneath the fourth map lay nothing but that gravel. ~~The fourth map was the last of the scroll.~~

Karlsson drew in a breath which met his heart at the top of his throat.

Came to his feet, yanked a brand from the fire for light and was gone past the ~~sleeping~~ <sup>sheltered</sup> lengths of Braaf and Wennberg on his way to the canoe.

There he dug through the entire stowage. Then dug again, and still found only what he dreaded most, confirmation.

There weren't more maps. **The fourth map was the last of the scroll.**

"Narrow enough matter it was. . . Needed to paw through every bedamned scrap of sheet. . ." Melander's words spun through the months to Karlsson, their shadow of meaning with them now. "Skimpy bastards, these Russians. . . Should have figured. . ." Should have figured--that the pilothouse of the steamship did not hold the further maps; that since the cumbersome Nicholas never voyaged far enough south to go beyond these four, the Russians simply didn't provide more. So Melander during his theft himself was robbed; had to glom just these four maps and clamber away from discovery. And then, being Melander, at once fathered a judgment; that when these charts of the tangled top of the coast were expended, the rest of the voyage could

be borne on by his sailor's sense; that he would bother the heads of the other three ~~escapes~~ <sup>escapees</sup> with this only at some far-downcoast bend of time, when necessity showed itself. Through and through Melander would have worked it, and when time came would have made the further maps seem as little vital as extra whiskers on a cat.

But Melander was stretched under that heap of stones, and Karlsson it would be to point the prow of the canoe into maplessness.

The sensation going through Karlsson now was of being emptied, as if his body from the stomach down had vanished, the way the bottom of the fourth map dissolved their route of escape.

This Karlsson now. Circumstance's man.

. . . Do I? Do I say, Braaf, Wennberg, surprise in the pot this morning, we haven't the maps we need? Going to voyage blind now, we are. . .

More than any of the other three runners of the sea, a man too of the countryside of Sweden which had birthed him. Karlsson was of the Swedish dispersion which began with the fifth decade of the nineteenth century, the bitter years of bad weather and worsening harvests. Rye thin and feeble in the fields, cows like walking bone-yards for lack of hay, potatoes rotten lumps in the earth--as though the elaborate clock of the seasons was awry, whatever could happen wrong did so sometime in Sweden in those years, and all too much of it repeatedly. Karlsson's father was confounded by the coil of the times,

generations of landholding <sup>now</sup> crimping to futility before his eyes. But bafflement was not ~~a~~ helpful crop <sup>either.</sup> Like many another, young Karlsson in that harsh time became extra to his home soil of Smaland, early was uncoupled, simply cast to drift, from his family's farmstead. The two brothers older than he caught America fever, put themselves into the emigrant stream coursing to the prairies beyond the Great Lakes. At their urging that he come along this brother of theirs shook his head in his parson-serious way and said only: "I am no farm maker."

. . . Melander had reason, whatever to Christ it was, for saying nothing of the maps. Melander had reason for what direction he stirred his tea. So he said nothing. And now I, I'm the Melander of us, is that the matter of it? Or...

But just what he was, seemed to take the young Karlsson some finding out. While he turned the question he set to work as a timberman on the largest estate in the parish, and there the forester's first words to him, after a look up and down this silent youngster, were: "Hear what I tell you, lad. I don't boil my cabbage twice." His next were: "We do the day here. Up like lamplighters we are, and late as a miser's tithe." Stropped by that forester's relentless tongue--until he encountered Melander, Karlsson thought it the most relentless possible--Karlsson began to come keen, learn all of axework, of woodcraft, of a pace to life.

. . . First hour on the gallows is the worst, Melander'd have said. We are still three, we're strong enough yet. We've the chance...

The merchant arrived to the estate in the winter of 1849, another crows' winter in that corner of Smaland, bleak cold week on bleak cold week, with the announcement that he was looking for supple wood for sled ~~hames~~ <sup>shafts.</sup> His true eye, though, was for the grain on men. What he saw in Karlsson suited very well. Karlsson's lovely thrift at work, that knack of finishing an axe stroke and drawing back for the next before it seemed the first could be quite done. The self-sufficiency of him, working his own neighborhood of timber, the forester never needing to hawk over him. Even the still-water-touches-deep reputation of the lithe young timberman, that no parent of any daughter--and perhaps too husbands of some wives--would weep to see Smaland soil go from under Karlsson's feet; even this augured for the purpose of the merchant.

There was this, too. The merchant was not entirely at ease about trafficking in men, and Karlsson he could account as a salving bargain. The Russian-American Company would gain an excellent workman, a seven-year man, as consigned; but evidently one with enough flint in him to maybe strike the Russians a few Swedish sparks someday, too.

. . . But kill one of us like a rook on a fence, why Melander? Wennberg there. Bellied into this on his own, take him. Wennberg broke that Kolosh canoe for us, maybe earned life with that. Earn life, no, it just happens. Braaf. Never'd have been him, Braaf survives the way a winter hare knows to hide. Me then. Could easily been. I was Captain Nose just then instead of steersman or I'd be under those

rocks and Melander'd be here guzzling this tea...

The recruitment was made and Karlsson rode in the merchant's sleigh to Stockholm, a place, like heaven, where he had never been and hadn't much expected to get to. Then voyage, the passage to the America of the Russians, if most of a year of patient endurance of tip and tilt can be called passage. Patience Karlsson possessed in plenty, had it to the middle of his bones; to the extent where, like any extreme, it ought not entirely be counted virtue. This forbearance of his kept him in situations, for instance, when a Wennberg might have crashed out or a Braaf wriggled out. Indeed, now had done much to deposit him, without over-ample debate or decision, onto that whittled spot of the frontier shore where the sea months at last ended, New Archangel.

Promptly Karlsson was paired on the timber-felling crew to a stocky Finn as close-tongued as he, the two of them so wordless the other tree cutters dubbed them "the standing stones." The labor was not all that bad--axework was axework, Smaland or on the roof of the world--although Karlsson had been caused to rethink the task a bit when he overheard Melander state that New Archangel's true enterprise was the making of axes to cut down trees to turn into charcoal which was then used for forge fire to make more axes. Looked at that way, any ~~man~~ <sup>workman</sup> within an enterprise such as the Russian-American company amounted to something like "one slat in a waterwheel. Laboring in a circle, and a ~~damped~~ <sup>darned</sup> damp one at that. But the hunting leavened



Karlsson's Alaskan life some. And the Kolosh women more so. So Karlsson had been self-surprised by his readiness to hear out Melander's plan of escape. Never would Karlsson have put it as beribboned as this, but what drew him was a new echo of that years-long purl of question. Where ought a man to point himself, how ought he use his ableness? Not the answers Karlsson ever had expected or heard hint of, Melander's down one of the wild coasts of the world, to see whether seven-year men could ~~endure~~ <sup>break</sup> their way to freedom. Which maybe was the beckon in them.

. . . Melander. Melander fathered this, and I've to get on with it. So. The maps, do I. . .

Karlsson knew he was not so wide a thinker as Melander. Come all the way to it, he and Braaf and Wennberg together probably were not that spacious. Melander's province of interest was this entire coastline plus whatever joined it over beyond the bend of the planet. "A roomy shore, this, aye? Not like that Russian woodbox, New Archangel. Here's where you needn't open the window to put your coat on." That was all very well, the power in a grandness of view, it sprung the gate of New Archangel and opened the North Pacific to them, skimmed them across Kaigani and through the labyrinth of isles, propelled them these hundreds of water miles. But <sup>even</sup> ~~grandness~~ has its eventual limits ~~too~~. In Karlsson was the inkling--he had never needed to think it through to the point where it ought be called creed--that realms much tinier than Melander's counted for something, too. The circlet

of strength, say, where the palm of a hand went round the handle of an axe. Or the haft of a paddle.

"Tea, you pair," Karlsson called.

As every morning, Braaf arrived drowsy, a blinking child somehow high as a man.

Wennberg sat with a grunt, at once fed more wood to the breakfast fire as if stoking a forge for the day.

. . . May as well, get it behind us. . .

"I'll show you what we face." As the other two slurped the first of their tea, Karlsson opened the map case and pulled out the fourth map.

"We're this place, here"--midway down the map, amid a shattered strew of coast--"and Melander meant to aim us east, over to this channel"--trench of white, inland a way, north-south through the coastal confusion. <sup>4</sup>"Then we've a sound to cross"--Milbanke, read Melander's penciling here--"then more of channel, then another sound"--Queen Charlotte, this inscription--"and we're to Vancouver <sup>'s</sup> Island."

Wennberg and Braaf were gazing down at the map with fixation, tea forgotten. The Russians' map, Melander's map, the white-and-ink tapestry of their escape there to see. . . Braaf said softly, "I don't savvy front from back of it, but it's Tsar's wealth to us, isn't it?"

Wennberg's eyelines were crinkled in concentration. "Christ sideways on the cross, this's a coast. How we've got this far and only Melander --" That trend of thought treacherous, Wennberg peered

to the bottom of the map. "And more of more, ahead of us there yet. The piece here, just a tit of it, this's ~~is~~ what'd you say, Karlsson?"

"Vancouver<sup>'s</sup> Island," said Karlsson, and took a slow drink of tea.

"Only one way to get there," Wennberg rumbled on, "and that's pry ourselves off our asses. Isn't that so, Captain Nose?"

"That's so," agreed Karlsson, and re-rolled the fourth map.

As they pushed east, all three men eyed around at the shoreline continually, on watch for another canoeload of Koloshes.

Apprehension ~~eats~~<sup>wears</sup> fast at stamina ~~and~~ Karlsson called an early halt for mid-day.

He did so again for the night. Melander had been able to stretch men beyond what they thought were their heavenmost limits. Karlsson already was calculating just how much he was going to have to ration his demands on these other two. Both of them were wan by the end of this day, looked hard-used, despite Karlsson's care with pace. But then Karlsson supposed he himself didn't look newly minted.

. . .But there's a day. They're pulling full this way, Wennberg and Braaf, not worrying their hair off about maps we don't have. We've made miles. Melander, old high-head, we're keeping on with it, this voyage of yours. We'll maybe step out at Astoria for you yet. . .

The next day arrived not yet certain of mood to choose, merely average gray or storm-dark. Behind the campsite, the forest walled

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.

. . .Melander'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 Melander 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 Småland 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, Melander in charge, New Gotland it'<sup>d</sup> be. . .

Karlsson caught up with his drift of mind. Bothered that <sup>such straying</sup> ~~it~~ had happened--new wile 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 hammer ~~and metal, in their heavy~~ <sup>courting</sup> ~~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, <sup>determinedly</sup> 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

cruised 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 changeableness. 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, scattin' 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.  
Frost on the sailcloth shelter this morning.

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, <sup>beans,</sup> 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.~~ <sup>nettle.</sup>

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, salt beef and biscuit, got back in the canoe.

On and on, trough of channel. All of this was less willful country to face into than any of the ocean shoreline. Poised rather than boistering. 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.

"Drown in your soup," Braaf invited. He glanced somewhere over the heads of Wennberg and Karlsson. "Mast paint."

"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."

"Not the grave," Braaf proceeded patiently. "After. Away there."

"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'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 on the meat until they wobbled, then took the rest of the day to cut and boil venison chunks ~~strips~~ 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 **creational** 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<sup>"</sup> 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, Småland 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 captaining 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 ~~board~~<sup>whiskers</sup> 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~~<sup>Goddamn</sup> 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~~<sup>veer</sup> 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 ruffled 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 showed 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<sup>f</sup>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 in the past few years lately has installed a trade post Hardy Rupert called Fort ~~St.~~ Hardy Rupert. Chance is strong against it, but perhaps Fort ~~St.~~ 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~~ <sup>an empyrean</sup> 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 canoemen 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 ~~rock cod~~ <sup>red snappers</sup> 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~~ <sup>vibrant</sup> 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~~<sup>dark</sup> canoe, was one of the most fluent craft for its task. But the task along Vancouver was no less remitting for ~~that fact.~~<sup>such facts.</sup> 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 Clayaquot 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 Clioquot 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 big timbered 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. and its guardian reefs 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, haired on top with timber, clutched down into the bright surf.

Everywhere

Offshore were strewn darker blades and knobs of rock. Stones of the sea standing in pillars, in triangles, in shapes there ~~was~~ <sup>were</sup> no name <sup>s</sup> for.

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 unfledged ~~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 <sup>≡</sup> 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. . .

Sometime in these days the canoe had slid them out of winter into not-winter.

No calendar can quite catch the time, and the cluster of moments themselves is as little possible to single out as the family of atoms of air which pushes against the next and has begun a breeze. Yet the

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 and whistling swans 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, why'n'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 <sup>Goddamn</sup> 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."

"Whyn'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-damn Melander!" Wennberg had sidestepped, was clear of the fire now instead of across it from Karlsson. "Melander was so fucking clever he jiggled 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 Smålander. So far I haven't met up with either on this coast."

Wennberg rubbed his ear, ~~said~~<sup>spoke</sup> 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 bidding. 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, bidding 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 fickle weather would lift itself from them.

After a few hours of Wennberg 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<sup>s</sup> 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~~ <sup>I'd</sup> arms for three paddles, ~~you could~~ <sup>y'could</sup> 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.

Wennberg gaped, sputtered. "Braaf, I'll ~~bound you to~~ <sup>braid your guts--</sup>"

"Koloshes," panted Braaf. "Whole village."

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<sup>es</sup> 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~~ <sup>Goddamn</sup>," 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 jiggled 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 whalemens. Braaf was first to see what was intended: they would employ the high tide to beach their sea creature.

The ~~line~~ <sup>towline</sup> 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~~ <sup>a pull,</sup> ~~all~~ together--the generations of the village drew the whale the last few yards up onto ~~their~~ <sup>the</sup> beach.

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

"Yes, so." If this portion of coast was populated with ~~these~~ <sup>such</sup> 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,~~ <sup>rapped out,</sup> 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.

Sentried 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~~ <sup>Koloshes</sup> 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 life? Those ~~Kolosh~~ <sup>Koloshes</sup> 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.~~ <sup>Dutch to me.</sup> 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 Småland 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 a Cape May registry, Yankee lineage, a working and earning one too. Within its hold lay eleven thousand ~~0000~~ 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 ~~choice~~<sup>choices</sup> 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 sailcloth.

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. ~~If~~<sup>If</sup> 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. Put your breath to work. Now...now...now..."

. . .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-~~at least,~~  
~~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. Afternoon 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, Smålander, 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 ~~seward~~<sup>seaward</sup> 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.

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"What do they taste like?" Braaf wondered in a whisper.

Karlsson's shake of head confessed lack of acquaintance.

"Pork," reported Wennberg. "The liver's just like a hog's."

The other two looked at him. "Spend the years I did at New Archangel," Wennberg said, "a little of Goddamned everything crosses your plate."

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-00,~~ 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 halt 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 insurging 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~~<sup>held</sup> 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 ~~seward~~<sup>seaward</sup> 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~~ <sup>wildly</sup> 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.

*chapter break*

. . .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~~ <sup>him</sup>. 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 ~~trumpet~~ <sup>trumpet</sup> now. Can hear him ~~now~~ <sup>over there,</sup> 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 Smålander 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~~ <sup>this</sup> shouldn't be. We've done the work of the world, since New Archangel. Done Melander's plan, <sup>this far,</sup> 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 ~~a~~ 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 responded 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 Goddamned 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 dishwater 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.

The growl of the surf was constant on their left. Ahead, a high-sided squarish island, like a fort just offshore, stood in black outline. Two big sharkfin seastacks guarded its oceanward side.

"Country you wouldn't give the devil," Karlsson heard Wennberg say.

Through the near-dark they achieved a half-handful of miles, put behind them the ~~fort~~<sup>fortlike</sup> isle, before Karlsson, hoping he was reading this scalloped shore aright, pointed the canoe in 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 sidewhiskers,

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~~ <sup>and pushed</sup> 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. Yet the crash of the water came large, entirely outsize. And out on the horizon the Pacific was playing with its power in another way as well. There white walls periodically would fling up ~~at once disintegrate in spray--~~ 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, nor even dusk, 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 ~~two~~ 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.

. . . 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, just the two of us to paddle, that's what it'll need be. just the two of us to paddle. All dragging work. . .

And each dusk, came ashore like old women stiff in the knees. Wennberg encouraged a fire while Karlsson gathered mussels or clams,