Mid-morning, the canoe men 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 were few and to the east, no weather-galleons from the ocean. Respite of every sort, this channel so far.
At mid-day Karlsson called a briefer stop than usual. So steadily were they adding mile onto mile that he wanted only scantest interruption.

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

On and on, the trough of channel. All of this was less willfull country to face into than the ocean shoreline, poised rather than boistering. The ridges conforming the channel, and their mountains beyond them, sat as if in arrest; of arrest, awaiting the next flow of existence, 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 first 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 if it was true that the Russians had buried the finger of a saint under their church at New Archangel?

Wennberg snorted derision.

Karlsson doubted the tale. How had the saintly finger found its way to New Archangel?

Braaf thought pondered, nodded, hummed.

If anything, green now crowded the waterline beside the canoemen more thickly than ever. When crows and ravens flew into this forest, 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 off there 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, the only constant stag. Karlsson worked at watching for changes in this 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 be somewhere else." The sea-mist which clung onto the forest this morning and was delaying launch of the canoe 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 damned coast," Wennberg muttered.


"What?"

"Mast paint, he called it," Wennberg gaped at Braaf. 

"Mast paint," Braaf recited again. "Melanders called pea soup that."

"Melanders." 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, just tell me. Where's Melander right now?"

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


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

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

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

Braaf blinked and waited.

"Look at it this way," the blacksmith bid anew. "Those balance-scales where the Russians weighed out the poeds 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 our life gets measured out that way, good deeds and bad, and whichever the judgment scale comes down on, our soul goes either to heaven or hell." Braaf didn't nod.

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

"Well, not... 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 you'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 came out dead-even, Melander did." Braaf announced.

"He'd savvied the 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?"

Braaf reasoned. "Maybe.

"Somewhere between," maybe "up there swimming the air, in that this fog. If a goose can, Melander could." Braaf turned his look from the mist to a place above Karlsson's head. "Is there any more of that mast paint?"
The morning of what Karlsson calculated to be their final day of channel, the highest ridges showed new snow on their timbered
tops, like wigs freshly powdered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The three of them fed until they wobbled, then took the rest of
the day to cut and boil venison strips for the days ahead.
While yet within what should have been sheltered waters, ridge horizon still solid to their west and ahead of them as far as they could see, the canoe men began to meet swells. Long swaybacks which shook 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 had lapped into the channel lay all across Milbanke Sound; simply a rumpled 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 shudders 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 bloody belly'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
be your guts as solid as your head...

And so it began, Braaf and Karlsson and their paddles against
the second powerful intrusion 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
water they had come, the hours they yet had 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
pore 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
Just such an accumulating dangle, itself together, spin on spin, by creational grace. This Milbanke
voyage was an accumulating dangle like that. 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 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 field very gently stirred by wind.

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

Of the soft rattle of wings as gulls would rise in a hundred from a shore point of gravel.

Of fog walking the top of the forest in morning.
... God's bones. Look at it tumble. Melander, you'd have had the words for it, you've maybe seen the like, but I...

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

As Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson gaped, 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 sufficient surf for their lifetimes. But eruption of this sort was of a different 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 greater, was here--Queen Charlotte Sound.

"Tomorrow's work, that," pronounced Karlsson, and nobody arguing this in the least, then rode...
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 had called such night-born rearings. "If your britches don't bulge at dawn it's a scant day ahead, aye?" But these particular.

But from all Karlsson could tell, these particular full-rigged longings seemed to be put up not by the habited urges of a man's blood, but by his nights of dream. In each dark now, matters chased one another like squirrels, Smaland and New Archangel somehow bordered people of gone years thrust their faces inside Karlsson's skull. Dream seemed to be 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 predication. Whatever, all of it built through the night into the wanting which he awoke to. Came into each morning in a mood to of a variety want any number of things that were nowhere in the offering—a woman, time under a roof, fresh clothes, a square meal, existence without Wennberg. Just now, though, this particular wanting took up all the 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."

Carefully

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

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

Braaf palmed a hand out and up as if to catch rain, gazed questioningly into the air. The sky this day again 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 paused, evidently finding his way back to his original sally.

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

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

"Wait till better season the way the Koloshes are, di'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 glance 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 could 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 invoked the distress in Wennberg, hour on plunging hour of it, and Milbanke Sound a few days ago 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 would be

would be a wait on death, Wennberg. Braaf says

truth, with spring the Kolosh will swim solid along here. And the

first cance of them will have us with Melander."

"But..." Wennberg pulled a face, as if he already could taste

the gall being brewed for him by Queen Charlotte Sound. "This weather,

all the bedammed miles. If we'd just wait..."

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

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

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

Straightway,
Promptly Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf discovered that between
then and Vancouver lay
Uncountable total
some hundreds of
several hundred instances of monotony. Wave upon wave, the canoe was met, loathed 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, dive-and-stagger-and-dive.

Karlsson questioned Wennberg.

Wennberg half-turned. He was grim but functioning.

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

"You crows-mouthing bastard," Wennberg husked. Minutes later, he clutched the side of the canoe, leaned over, and retched.

Then grasped his paddle again, cast a glare around at Braaf, and ploughed water in rhythm with the other two.

Their crossing was four hours of stupefying slosh, under the most brilliant 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 Scott, 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 managed to say: "Tell you when I've pulled the next map, it'll take a bit."

Karlsson rolled the fourth map, reached the mapcase to himself and put the map in. Braaf and Wennberg were paddling, studying ahead to Vancouver Island. As though plucking a new broadsheet from the
fell in the mapcase, Karlsson now unrolled the fourth map
again once more.

Same as a minute ago, the lower left corner
still there... at the lower right...

artistry, like a farewell flourish, and the last of the mapped
coastline itself, the 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 him by
his stillness.

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

One more time
Karlsson looked up again from the map to the cape ahead, reviewing
his memory of
in his mind Melander's sketched geography in the New Archangel dirt.

Then said, off-handed as he could manage: "To the right, West."
That bump of land at the bottom of Karlsson's map nudged not
only the water of Queen Charlotte Sound. Cape Scott divided, once
from Melander as escapemaster.

and all, Melander as escapemaster from Karlsson as escapemaster
there coastal

For on the next of the Tebenkov 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: the 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 at
its uppermost, the

vicinity of Cape Scott, Tebenkov's mapmaker had 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 comes, 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 Kaigari, 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
parented judgment you gathered in the pilothouse of the Nicholas—the judgment
to sell risk just 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 west; the out-shore of Vancouver
Island, then the Strait of Fuca, and next, last, the American shore
down to the Columbia River and Astoria.

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

And—"Wennberg there. Any teacup 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. That navigation line has to touch to somewhere..."

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

And so you/Melander in perhaps three days, not more than four,
bring your canoe and crew to the stretch of Queen Charlotte Strait
where the Hudson's Bay Company lately has installed a trade-post
called Fort 00. Chance is strong against it, but perhaps Fort 00
eludes you, dozes in fog or storm as you pass. In another dozen along this inner shore days 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 settlement at the mouth of Puget Sound American customs-post called 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 fir 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 route of Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson now was also a line of time. In 1788 Cook, the great English captain, explored these waters, journaled this western shore of Vancouver Island, put names on the land as it struck his fancy. Cook's expedition, and forays by the Spanish, and the roving Yankee captains who soon appeared, they were a cosmic newness to this coast. Indelible people, these European and American explorers and traders proved to be, the broader wakes of their sailing ships never fading from the waters of the canoe tribes.
Like men following a canyon unknown to them, then, Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf began their descent of this 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 coast was Karlsson certain of, but like the knowledge of the hedgehog, it was a big thing. He knew they must not blunder into a downcoast Sitka, come paddling 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 hinthull standing there in wait for Swedes. None of such as that, thank you. The outmost crannies of this island, Karlsson would keep the canoe to.

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

Nights now, the Swedes 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 circle where the men's arms met their shoulders. Their clothing terrible, they knew, and their smell probably worse.

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

Day, 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 updraft.

Of course, rain, and with it, murk. No sunrise, no sunset, only grayings lighter and darker. Not even mountains relieved the eye,

nor, for clouds broke off the peaks and were weighing the horizon up there to flatness, a high 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 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 proud and vivid canoe people who just now were passing the winter in their style of frequent feast and potlatch, a seasonal rain-trance of song and drama and dance.
The constant push of the North Pacific was wearing deep into up their wrists and arms, across their effort-bent shoulders. True, they had the luck that their creature of sea-run, the canoe, was one of the most fluent craft for its task. But the task along Vancouver was no less remitting for that fact. This was slog, nothing but.

The while, Karlsson showing answer to the single doubt Melander 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 Smalanders; some of that could be recommended to most of humankind—but what of when life began to go about him? Then would be the test of edge: whether the man bent or broke; or worked his salients back at life, made a thrust where he could, a nick as possible. Karlsson was not heaven-made for all that he needed do along Vancouver; spoke as little as Melander had much, at time when Braaf and Wennberg could have heard regular encouragement; let the deceit about the maps take up too much of the inside of his head. But life is mostly freehand, and this Karlsson of the outmost Vancouver shore was verifying Melander's guess of him that under the silence lay some unused edge.
--And past Sidney Inlet, and Clayquot Sound.

"Karlsson, are 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 Clyquot tribe read weather from the behavior of frogs and mice and had concluded this was a wet, gusty...morn or winter...
time, a time to sit snug in longhouses...

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?"

During Billbin had been nothing to this endless piece of performance
as navigator. "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
reach a bluff

sight

a long nort of land which came down from the higher coast to merge into
the ocean, a kind of bowsprit of landscape. "But we need to past it a way
before we land. It's places like that the Kolosh roost."

"Noah's two asses! Jesu Maria, isn't there any end to the damned Kolosh? 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 shall we squat out here until some Kolosh come 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 Wemberg 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?" Wemberg asked.

"Cape... Etholen." Duping Bilibin those weeks at the gate had been noting nothing to this endless piece of performance as mapmaster. "One of the old sires, wasn’t he? Governor when you first were a pup at New Archangel?"

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

Abruptly now, Karlsson, Braaf, Wemborg 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.

Offshore were strewn darker blades and knobs of rock.

No one said anything. They paddled on.
Melander dabs that bit of stick to the New Archangel earth. Baranof Island he draws, and the Queen Charlotte group, and Vancouver Island, and fourth, last, this coastline between the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the mouth of the Columbia River. 900 miles lie between strait and river, although Melander did not have that number when he drew, nor does Karlsson have so much as a cross-eyed guess of it as he cadences in the dark off this last coast. The miles of this shore,

Even had either of these unlikely canoe captains known the total, the miles of this shore do not much resemble those of the Alaska-British Columbia coast to the north, that crammed seaboards of waterside mountains and proliferated islands. In certain profiles, in the ancient pewtered light of continent and ocean alloying, this cousin coast stands handsome; but strong in detail rather than soaring gesture. Tidpools, arches of rock, the tidemark creeping higher on its beaches with each surge of surf—ditties of coastscape, not arias, touch the mind. Almost, it seems the usual mainstays of coastline were forgotten. The Washington coast's upper two-thirds lacks not just fetching harbors but honest anchorages of any sort; is in fact a rock-dotted 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. In that last transaction some honest drama was gained, say, Matthew Flinders for Destruction Island for Isla Dolores. Cape Flattery—just now momentarily rebaptized by Karlsson as Cape Etholen—for Punta de Martínez. But some poetry lost, too:

Point Grenville for Punta de los Martíres.

And even as Karlsson and Braaf and Wennberg have arrived to it, one incongruity, a more name, American now, is being added: 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 elevation 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.
the paddling men were.

At dusk's start, the canoe was just to the north of a procession of close-set seastacks out into the ocean, like a caravan of cliffs crossing canoe's and crags on their 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.

The life of temperaments and their periods of repose and of

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 of blossom 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

retrace from underocean pastures toward the rivers where they were

spawned and must now lay spawn in turn. Seals bob forth in the offshore

swells. Baja California has been departed by gray whales, the Bering

first strokes of

Sea is to know them next. Geese and ducks write 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 Alesk,

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
difficulties of living as a fighter in the war zone. is saying his guts think his throat's been cut. An idea there, Braaf
the two of us to hold Wennberg into
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 it, walk 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
whetted sentry's spearpoint,
their outermost a last small pointed formation, like a steepled church,

ocean
struggled with the Pacific, defiantly tearing waves to whiteness. Some

Pacific,

mad try here at walling the ocean, all this looked, the line of rock
having been fought by the waves, overrun by them, left in gaps, shards,
of the rocks

tumbled shapes, but the rocks' attempt 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-milkig...

Back north along the shore Karlsson could see the campfire, even could make out 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. 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 old sense of squeeze which Wennberg 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 here at this end, and the cape the canoemen had rounded wide of...
after crossing the Strait of Fuca extended considerably into the ocean
at the other. Then inland from the beach, the forest stood high--Karlsson
had been studying that venue for sign of animals; in the weave of evergreen
and brush, nothing moved--and toward the north end, the terrain sharpened
into an abrupt clay cliff. For all the broad invitation of its sand,
this particular beach was a kind of sack 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 will...
The ocean was bringing a constant rumble, and within that a hiss, the odd cold sizzle as the tide-edge melts into sand. Left in the air was a smell of great freshness—a tang beyond mint or myrtle, more a sensation than anything the nose could readily register.

And over and through it all, the surf sound, here so solid it seemed to have corners: the unremitting boom on the rocks to the north, a constant crashing noise against the headland southward.

The surf. Is there any other energy on the planet like it? On any planet? The hurl of it, remorselessly impending, collapsing, upbuilding, and the extent even beyond that of thunder, its grave emwrapping 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 angles from each other near the campfire, as if they had agreed on a face-to-face to be honored. At Karlsson's approach, Wennberg threw a branch from the firewood pile beside him, sending sparks 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 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 numb by the sentry's query into the New Archangel night...

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

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

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

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

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

"Wennberg, I can't have maps when there aren't maps. Melander reckoned we could make our way after the maps gave out, and that's what we're doing."
"Why'n't you tell us?" Braaf, the question soft. "Melander would've."

"Because I'm not him, Braaf. And what was the good of telling?"

To have Wennberg here declaring us dead, might as well have climbed in the grave with Melander? To have you give up, too, maybe?

"Take a look at telling, Braaf. Melander did, when he couldn't lay hand to all the maps."

"Melander, double-damn Melander!" Wennberg took a step, clear of the fire instead of across it from Karlsson. "Melander was so fucking clever he jigged his way in front of a bullet. And you're I'll finish you, you fucking fox of a Melander."

the whelp of him.

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?