"Braaf, you piss near me one more time and I'll rub your nose in it like a bitch pup."

Wennergren's warning halted Braaf in mid-pull at the front of his thighs. Thoughtfully he arced a look from the object of interest there to the blacksmith seated a few yards away. The hook, it could have been, of a marksman calculating parabola and windage. Across the campsite from the pair, ever so slightly Melander shook his head in message: No, Braaf, don't rile him.

"I'll wait for the day I've enough to drown you," Braaf said off-handedly and moved away into the forest. As he stood with his

A dusk breeze gossiped here and there in the higher-up swags of fir. Abruptly Braaf stopped hearing the wind, all his listening jerked elsewhere. Standing there with his legs wide, Braaf felt the touch of being watched, as when the thief's tremor within him would warn that told him the instant was wrong for pillage. But in these woods,

Braaf spun and met the eyes. Eyes big as his hands, blindly staring at him from either an arm-long side of a great hooked beak.
In a half-moment Braaf recognized that the phantasm was blind, as wood must be: and that up from its carved stare but obscured by tree limbs squatted several more gandering creatures, a ladder of sets of eyes.

Braaf broke to the edge of the trees and called quietly to the other three men: "Come look."

"What is all this?" Braaf asked.

"I'd guess it's a kind of cathedral," Melander replied.

"Don't give us your riddles, Melander." Wennberg was reaching out to inspect the joint of the beak-piece onto the column seen which had first seen him. In spite of himself, the blacksmith first by Braaf, in spite of himself, the craft of these goblin poles was tugged close by the serene craft of these goblin poles.

Melander looked steadily at the blacksmith. "A kind of cathedral," he repeated. "Whatever it is that these people believe is said in these carvings. Like rune stones, aye?"
Until now, for all that Melander and company could discern in their descent of the inner precipice of shore, not another human might ever have existed among these islands. Take the matter to truth, their journey more resembled the course a late-of-night stroller might follow through slumbering neighborhoods. In tribal clusters of gaudy culture, Tingits, Aidaas, Tsimmians, Bellabelas, Bella Coolas, Kwakutls, Nootkans, perhaps as many as sixty thousand residents peopled the long littoral of what would become British Columbia.

Their coastal life asks to be called nothing less than sumptuous.

In spawning time, the streams were stippled with salmon pulsing rich veins of protein there in the water, to be wrested, fileted, dried for the winter larder. Above water the wealth was wood, particularly the cedar whose cunning these people had learned to release; under their hands it would transmute to capacious lodges, canoes the length of a decent trawler, and art, alarming art. The tree-sized columns of carvings simply were the most evident form of how the tribes told stories of the creatures of timber and sea, sang and recited them, danced and acted them behind masks, in cold times wore
aiding as if taking the animals into themselves. (And thereby drew
the attention of white newcomers to the coast, who bartered for
those furs to take them beyond the bend of the world to barter
in turn to yellow people: linkage strange in its way as any
carved concatenation.)

Out of this vivid swirl wafted tales such as that matter of
the pillow of skulls. It is first known to have been told to the
English captain, Meares, when he arrived into the North Pacific
on the
scent of furs in 1788, and like all good horrors it held a core
of truth. On ceremonial occasions, one or another tribal chief
might employ a bag of skulls to show his strength of heart. Not
a society of polite tinking of teacups, this. If the four interloping
Swedes had luck, they would not encounter the villages where the
rain season
was being whiled away in performance and potlatch. 

"Why's this deserted? If it is."
"Why's this deserted?" Drew wanted to know. "If it is."

"Likely they do as the Kolosh," Melander guessed. "Hunt from a summer village right around here, in winter pull back to a main village somewhere."

In the dusk, eagle poised eternally atop bear. Whale stood. One thing, possibly frog the size of calf, pranced on end in dive through contorted lesser creatures. Something merrily upside down - huge frog. Every sort of forest changeling, they all goggled out at the backs of the retreating men.
Later, the others breathing their rhythms of night beside the fire,

Melander could not find sleep. He was remembering a New Archangel market morning, a meet of Kolosh and three or four dozen visiting

tribemen from somewhere to the north. Amid the newcomers hawking

squatted

their wares sat a seam-faced elderly man, a carver. Word had spread

through the settlement about this man's strange daggers: blades of

each power with the hilt carved as the rising neck of some beast. The

head topping a hilt-neck sometimes would be a bear with glinting

abalone inlays of eyes and teeth, sometimes a long-faced wolf; always,

angled and fierce and unforgettable. The interpreter Dobzhansky tried

to converse with the carver. Dobzhansky's first question received answer,

then the native stayed silent. Melander

inquired

"What had been said. Dobzhansky related that he had asked how

many years it had taken to attain such skill. "So long as I have lived,

so long have I carved," the native responded. "If the spirit people

will let me, I will carve even after I am dead." Melander was unsure

why, but that response bothered the corners of his mind this night.
A day more, they continued along the lengthy island, Dall.

That night: "Sleep deep," Melander advised. "Tomorrow we introduce ourselves to Kaigani."

The letters stood large near the bottom of Melander's third map, and in sober block rather than the finespun script elsewhere on the paper. The space framing them could have been spanned by three widths of Melander's thumb. In actuality, the plain of water represented by there extends twice the distance of the English Channel between Dover and Calais, and no calm white cliffs stand as guides.

Taken all in all, calculated Melander, they added up to a marathon day of paddling, did those two thickset words: Prol Kaigani. Kaigani Strait.
The water of Dixon Entrance stretched to them from a horizonless
blob of weatherlessly sealing together sea and sky.
Melander did not at all like it that no line of shore could be
seen out there. In their island-by-island descent of the coast, Dixon
Entrance and the open of channel to its east, Hecate Strait, were the
expanses
first where the day's goal did not stand steadily in sight. Yet the
map vouched to him that across in the blur of sea and sky, the northeast
tip of the northwest of the Queen Charlotte Islands swung toward them,
like an arm reaching to pluck an apple by holding a heading of 00-00,
the canoeists would come into its embrace.
At least, Melander believed that a heading of 00-00 could be held to
if not, if current swung them too far eastward, they would be
installed from Dixon directly into Hecate Strait. One open stretch of
distance and risk, Melander reckoned they could manage. Two, he doubted
greatly.

stock-still, Melander leaned forward along the canoe at the others. Karlsson,
stock-still. Wennberg looking askance at the wide water. Braaf with
his paddle across the canoe thwarts and his playing step it as if
plucking
absently making music.

What was required of Melander now was a division of faith. Certain

going through life as if he had always a following wind;
of himself, confident of what he could make in his mind, this had been

needed

Melander's history, self-belief. Now he had to apportion into these

other three in the canoe with him, into the map which promised read out

there over the precipice of water, into the hovering weather, into the

canoe, paddles, compass...

Melander spat over the side to clear his mouth, not recognizing

the taste of diluted faith but decidedly not piling it. Then he said:

"Time for our stroll."

The powerful rumble of the Pacific made itself felt to them at

once. Swells were spaced wide, perhaps twenty yards between crests,


un

but regular as great slow breathings. Each swell pushed up the prow

Captain Nose,

of the canoe, Karlsson instantly created taller than the men behind,

then the craft was shrugged downward.
"More beef, Wennberg. Push that paddle deeper, aye?"

Melander's urging began while the tips of the fir trees of Dall Island still feathered distinct against the sky behind them. Wennberg he had not expected to be slack in this situation; it was Braaf who could be anticipated to scant his labor if heaven itself depended on it. But Braaf was thrusting steadily, and tossed gibe onto Melander's admonition. "Bashful are you, Wennberg? Reach right down there and meet the wet, why not..."

Wennberg grumped something unhearable, but his paddling picked up markedly.

"Kaigani Strait--today called Dixon Entrance, a name engraved for the English captain who delved the region in a ship called Queen Charlotte. Kaigani Strait, one of dozens of plains of water between the broken lands of the North Pacific coastline, yet individual in its perils. "The tidal currents are much confused," navigators are cautioned; in storm the channel can seem to be forty miles of breakers. Fog spends its season in summer, gales from the flood tide east first autumn until April, but all times of year, Keigani takes a

coiling energy from the
into Hecate Strait can surge as rapid as a man can walk. Small
wonder that at the eastern reach of this mariners' thicket, islands
are bunched like galleons seeking a lee anchorage.

Not a whit of this showed on Melander's map.

Thirty or forty hillocks of water later, again the heart-skip in
the rhythm of the boat. Melander had brought out his first mate's
"Wennberg!" Melander's tone crackled now. "You're dabbing at it
again."

The broad man held his paddle just above the water, as thought
trying to recall whether water or air was the element in which it
operated. He swiveled the upper part of his body enough to look
immediately at Melander. Wennberg's face hung open in a look of surprise.
His mouth made motions but no sound. Then, with effort: "I'm Getting Sick."

"If you don't paddle you'll get dead, and us with you. Have a puke now and be done with it, Wennberg. We need your arms, aye?"

Wennberg put his head over the side of the canoe and gaped his mouth as if inhaling better health up from the ocean. After a minute his gasps became words: "Can't. Too. Sick."

"You've got to. Wennberg, listen to me, aye? Jab a finger down your gullet, tell yourself you've swallowed baneberries, pretend that Braaf here plopped a slug into your tea this morning—do anything, but heave the sickness out of you now. Do it, Wennberg. Dump your gut."

"Keep on, you'll have me puking too," muttered Braaf.

Just then Melander's prescriptions had their intended effect on Wennberg.

"There now," Melander proclaimed in satisfaction. "You'll be a bull again before you know it. Rest a bit, we can spare you until you get your breath back."

Wennberg focused whitely toward Melander. "Melander, one time I'll reach down that mouth of yours and..." But before long, he picked up his paddle and, while still not smoothly stroking with the others, was adding push to theirs.
For a time—say, the first several dozen hundred paddle strokes of their journey—a wall of reassurance yet could be seen behind the canoemen, the outline of Dall Island and its greater neighbor, Prince of Wales. Farther though it was becoming, the shoreline of the islands seemed a footing, a ledge to return to. Then, just after Melander reckoned aloud that they might be a third of the way across, Karlsson glanced back and saw that the landwall was gone. In place of the islands hung a sheet of fog. The canoemen not were in a basin of Kaigani had enwrapped the canoe and its men, nothing but water or cloud or fog anywhere about them.
Karlsson's face could have served as figurehead for the craft, if one imagines that a Kolosh canoe would go to sea with a line of each fiber, Slåne parson's profile at its front. Everything of Karlsson was oriented to the twin grips of his hands on the paddle, the portioning out of effort. Everything, each fiber, of Karlsson was set to the twin.

In the Sahara, this human implement automatically would have begun the slog that stride on stride had to add up into the route to oasis.

Loose him on the Eiger, foothold-handhold-foothold-handhold would ensue until further elevation could not present itself. If stone profile and millwork arms could grind a way across Kaigani, Karlsson meant to do it.

Behind him, Wennberg was at war with a hive of woes. The tipping over-the-side-of-the-world water was bad enough, and the unending exertion, and the horrifying absence of land or even horizon. But the nausea was worst of all the nauseas which hid because it was so sly within him, re-attacking whenever he thought it might be receding. The blacksmith felt weaker than he could ever remember, yet the labor of paddling was to be as constant as he could possibly manage. Wennberg too fell into an automatic rhythm, jab-lift-pull back-jab, but for a different reason than Karlsson's. Overswarmed and unhealth, with doom, Wennberg could think of no way to struggle against it.
flat-faced rod of wood
but move his arms, which happened to have a paddle at their end.

Among the bigger men, Braaf sat small and hunched with caution.

He was the one of the four of them most in place in this situation, for
at base, this crossing of Dixon Entrance was an act of theft.

Of stealing survival from a hazard which had every intention of denying
it to you. Afloat, you are in balance between great distances, above,
the sky and the down-push of all its vastness, beneath, the
thickness of ocean with its queer upward law of gravity, buoyancy.

In time the greater deep, that of the sky, will win the pushing contest
in which you are the flake of contention, and you will go down. The
game is to scamper landward before this can happen. Braaf

Braaf could have declaimed none of this aloud—just as there never was a
philosopher who could consciencelessly steal a snuffbox—yet he understood

the proposition of Kajgani

it profoundly: it had to do with dodging life's odds, like all else.

Braaf, then, did not stroke mechanically as Karlsson did, or try to
fend strenuously as Wennberg did; he poked his paddle to the water
very big
as if using a stick to discourage a large dog.
So ultimately the matter, like a good many of this coast's matters,
Now the matter came down to muscle. Melander preached to his
just there beyond shovel point,
crew like a prophet promising geysers of honey. "Dig that paddle,
Wennberg. You're strong as bran wine now... Braaf, can you find it in
your heart to stroke along with the rest of us?... We're doing it,
Karlsson. Now water is wide as forever..." They had no timepiece,
but an onlooker could have clocked Melander's decrees to within two
minutes' regularity of one another. Each time he called rest, one
man would continue to paddle to keep the canoe from backsiding in
the swells. That sentinel then rested briefly while the other three
resumed, then plunged to work again. At the next rest, the solitary
paddling duty slid to the next man. While Melander regulated in this
Kaiwani began to swallow them, they were much farther from land
than they yet had been since leaving New Archangel, and were not
quite halfway across. More and more often, Melander consulted his
compass. While Melander regulated, Wennberg grunted dismally and
Braaf once in a while shirked, out of sheer habit when he wasn't reminding
himself otherwise, and at the bow Karlsson stayed a human piston: all of
them tried to put from mind the numbing of their
knees and the growing ache of their arms, and across Dixon Entrance
the canoe moved steadily southeast, a black sharp-nosed creature
against the gray, four broad-hoofed legs striking and striking at
the water, running on the sea.
Near to what Melander estimated ought to be the mid-point of the channel, waves began to chop more rapidly at the canoe, as if annoyed that anything so frail would dare this far onto the plateau of water. A fresh sound, a slapping, came against the canoe, and spray began to toss itself over the bow and Karlsson.

though, Braaf noticed an absence. The gulls which hung in curiosity beside them in the island waters and the early distance offshore from Dall vanished. He discovered too that the air felt different, more biting and that off to the west a certain splotch of weather looked neither like fog nor rain.

Braaf turned his head enough to say softly over his shoulder to Melander, as if it were their secret: "Snow."

"Jesu Maria," Melander said back.

The storm hit them first with wind. Gust tagged onto gust, taking the canoe at an angle from the northwest (?) as if sneaking behind the corner of the eye designs along the press. Melander watched the water intently, and what he dreaded came to creation: wind streaks on the water, long ropey crawlers of white. "Neptune's snakes," Melander
knew them as from his shipboard years, and knew too that they are

the markers of a thirty-knot gale.

The sky began to fleck, snowflakes like tiny gulls riding down

the wind which had steadied into a constant whirl past the canoemen's

ears. Melander now looked away from his compass only
to check on the stroking of his crew and to glance at the angle of

the swells to the canoe. The compass, he knew, could not be wrong,
yet there was a constant urge to check the evidence of his eyes...

Water came into the canoe. Melander had to decide rapidly.

Wennberg still was struggling against sea-sickness and so was erratic

at the paddle, but if he put his head down to bail, he would be sicker

yet. So—"Braaf, you'll have to bail, and quick...."

The water had three motions now: the sloshing advance of the waves

themselves; the wrinkle of their texture; and the wind ripple racing

ahead. At odds with all these and with the wind-spun snow as well,

the canoe's progress fell to a kind of embarrassed wallow, as when a
good steed is forced to slog through mire.
Working the bailer, a cedar scoop which coupled over his hand like a hollowed-out hoof, Braaf pawed seawater from the canoe's bottom. Karlsson gritted against the bowspray and the snow and tried to think of nothing but the pace of his paddle. But he heard an imploring take place behind him.

Wennberg whispered. "Oh God who watches over fools and babes;"

Wennberg whispered. "What am I doing in this pisspot of a canoe?"

Melander woke on thoroughly tame terrain. Not a boulder nor so much as a fist-sized rock; stone; a beach all sand, tan satin.

Waves did not pound its tideline. The water seemed to hold itself simply lapping back away, shying tiny clouds of spume along the sand then withdrawing.

The canoe had taken shore here in the dark, Swedes having prevailed—wrestle barely—over storm in the contention that went on all day and across dusk and into the first of night. The men had dragged the canoe onto whatever this place was, where Keigani had flung them, groped together a shelter of sailcloth and collapsed to sleep.
By this morning's evidence, Kaigani had flung them through the customary coastal geography to a reversed order of things; everything flat, discreet. Except, it registered now on Melander, that the treetops spearing up through a mist just to the west of him stood twice the height it was conceivable for trees to stand.

"Are we on the same ocean as last night?" Karlsson was at Melander's elbow.

"Quite a millpond, isn't it? Ever see trees to that height, up to the clouds like steeples?" Karlsson shook his head. "Nor I. We should have a look there, aye? There has to be a rise of land in that fog. Let's go have a peek. Wake Braaf enough to tell him, will you, so he and Wennberg won't think we've gone yachting off without them."
Having pushed the canoe into the placid seawater and turned misted toward the ghostly trees, Karlsson and Melander found themselves crossing the mouth of a river, a sixty-foot-wide flow of black water so dark and slow it seemed more solid than the beach and forest on either side of it. Small circles of foam spun along its surface at them like ghostly anemones. On the far side, a black rim of rock showed itself jut over the waterline.

Rapidly this rim bent outward into a point of rock, not lofty but too abrupt-sided to land the canoe. "On around," Melander decreed, and they began to skirt the point in search of its far side.

Karlsson glanced inland, drew in his paddle into the canoe, and pointed. The fog was lifting from the forest, and a great hump which abruptly, half of a small mountain came into view: a startling cliff as if one of the cannonball mountains around Sitka had been sawed in half from its summit downward.
Around the point they pulled the canoe to security and clambered onto the flow of black rock for a full look.

"God's bones, what a place," Melander murmured. The point had been convulsed into hummocks and parapets, pitted with holes as if having been under siege from small cannon, strewn with a tumble of black boulders the size of ox carts, and finally riven with tidal troughs. As Melander and Karlsson stood gawking, surf blasted up from a blowhole behind them, a mocking geyser of white bowing toward them as they whirled to it.

"Aye, well. At least we know what's hung those trees into the middle of the air."

tall firs
Out of the dome of cliff above them poked forth like feathers in a war bonnet. "I had better find a way up there and see if I can place us on the map."

Staying in range of the canoe, Karlsson waited for Melander by exploring into the stand of forest between the half-mountain and Beside the bole of the river, a particularly big hemlock, a fat bead of water ticked his right wrist.
Surprised, Karlsson tipped his head until he was staring straight up. He saw another water bead detach from a limb eighty feet above him and drop like a slow tiny jewel, giving him time to step aside before it struck. Like strange slowed-down rain the droplets descended two or three to the minute; Karlsson found he could dodge each of them, stepping back and forth around the tree trunk, head aimed up like a drunk man at the gate of God.

The play of it captured him. His mind went free and nothing existed but the dazzles of water and his slow-dancing body...

"Aye, well, d'you have time to hear the report?" Melander's amusement twitched behind his mouth. Feeling vastly foolish, Karlsson halted in place and was promptly splattered with a dew glob atop his head. In a moment he smiled and mimicked to Melander: "Oh, aye, what's the outlook from the crow's nest?"
Melander found from the summit that the arc of beach continued some miles eastward, to Hecate Strait. That intelligence turned into taunt, however, by the time he and Karlsson returned to the campsite. A stiff wind was blowing in off Kaigani. Not wanting a repeat of the crossing they had just endured, the canoemen sat to try and wait it out.

For the next two days, they gained no distance, which to Melander was the same as losing it.
"A lazy wind, we call it on Gotland. It goes through you instead of around you."

"Melandar, serve you a plate of fly shit and you'd call it pepper," muttered Wennberg.

"Karlsson, and you'd lend me your soul as salt, aye, Mister Blacksmith?"

But we have some deciding to do. We've been holed here too long. The water ahead of us doesn't get any shorter while we're here. I say the next stretch today, we'd better chance it, wind or no. "Manna, Karlsson?"

"You're the sailor of us. But how much of this wind is between us and the next island?"

"I think two hours' paddling, with only one of us resting at a time, so we don't lose to the wind."

"Six hours, we can do. I say so."

"Braaf?"

The thief glanced out into the white-capped water, then somewhere above Melander's brow. "Chance."

"Wennberg?"

"The only thing worse than that water is this waiting. Go, Melander. Teach us how to ride the wind. It may sit better on my stomach than that last ration did."
For a change, luck puffed on them. Once they had struggled
the canoe around the tip of the beach, they came into a wind skewing
directly across Hecate Strait. For the first time since their leaving
of New Archangel they were able to put up the canoe's small lugsail.

"Not much of a suit of sails, more like a kerchief," Pelander said,
but canvas carried them across the strait, once more they sail a
scatter of shoreline islands.

#
"Even this hardtack isn't as bad as it might be." Melander, musing, their first day after coming across Hecate Strait.

"A time I can tell you on the brig Odin, we had to break our biscuits into our coffee and skim away the weevils as they came up.

No, not so bad, aye?"

Braaf, at the onset of their second day after: "I know what Valhalla is now. It's where I never again hear Melander say, 'Tumble up!'

Wennberg, midway of their third day and a Melander monologue:

"Melander, I wonder you don't swallow your tongue sometime for the savor of it."

"Good job of work done":

"A good job does. Karlsson, startling them all as they came ashore at the close of the progressful fourth day..."
The river shoved through the land like a smooth gray glacier.

Had the surface been solid enough to walk on—before many years,

one emigrant or another would make the joke that in the season of run-off not much more mud content was needed to make the flow pedestriable—

a man crossing here from its north shore toward its south would have had to stride for a full hour. That man would have stridden the

Columbia, the largest river of the Pacific shore of the Americas,

its

and there on the south bank he would have stamped silt from his

feet at Astoria.

Already, Astoria was in its third incarnation. John Jacob Astor's wealth, and intentions for more of it, installed the settlement in 1811. The War of 1812 passed the site to British control,

with a consequent rechristening as Astoria, and American, once more. The ensuing thirty-five years had not made it much of a place: a post office, some stores and saloons, a blockhouse:

all in all, a few dozen crate-like structures piled along the foot of a shaggy Columbia headland. Yet also the recognized port of America's

Pacific Northwest, and a busy enough one. If, for whatever reason,

you found yourself at Astoria, yes, you could aim your way on
into the world from one of its modest docks.

This night, the four canoe-going Swedes are encamped just more

water

than half the distance downcoast from New Archangel to Astoria.
Trying to expel the last of sleep from himself,
Karlsson yawned and made his way out through the trees toward
the island's edge. As usual, he was the first awake and the earliest
This morning he found that
to wonder about weather. The Pacific lay gray with cold, but no storm
along the beach
sheeted up from its surface. Ahead of Karlsson on the beach a small
surf pushed ashore, idly washed back on itself: low tide. A pair
of cormorants amid a spill of tidal boulders hung their wings wide.

High up on the beach gravel the canoe rested, as if having plowed
to a furrow-end and now awaiting to be turned for another day's
tilling.

Between one eye-blink and the next, Karlsson's brain filled
with what he was seeing. He and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf
had carried their canoe into the cover of forest for the night; as

This canoe was not theirs; it was larger by half and the
designs entwining the prow were different, simpler and bolder, and
Karlsson by now was retreating toward the trees in a crouch, staring

hard at the wall of forest beyond the canoe for any sign that he
had been seen.
He roused Melander, first putting his fingers lightly across the tall man's mouth to signal silence; Melander snapped awake with the quickness learned of starting a curious. For some thousands behind Karlsson of shipboard watches and crept away from the camp behind Karlsson.

"A big one," Karlsson whispered when they had sidled far enough not to be heard. "A dozen paddlers at least."

"Cabbageheads. Why aren't they holed up for the winter like the Kolosh? What do they think this is, the Midsummer's Day yacht races? Aye?"

"We'd better hope they're not going to hole up here."

"No, just one canoe, they wouldn't be. Seal hunters or some such, out for a few days. Cabbageheads."

"You already called them that, and they're still here."

"Aye, well. Can we get our canoe to the water and slide away without them seeing us?"

"No."

"No." Melander grimaced as if his echo-word had hurt his ears, then looked toward camp. "You greet Braaf, I'll do Wennberg."
Again fingers of silence arose. Lips, again Karlsson told the situation. When his words had sunk into Wennberg and Braaf, Melander sent Braaf, the most accomplished slinker among them, to keep watch on the beach. Then Melander glanced at Karlsson, and Karlsson, after hesitation, nodded. "Yes, it has to be him."

The pair of them turned their eyes to Wennberg. Melander asked:

"How are you at turning yourself into a sand crab?"

Wennberg's debut into the art of creeping also marked the first occasion in his life that he ever regretted his strength. Regretted, rather, that more of his power wasn't directly beneath his nose, as Melander's was. "This one is your line of country, Melander. You have to do it, or those people of that canoe will sleep tonight on our skulls." And Karlsson in his rock-faced way agreeing that only Wennberg possessed the muscle for it; Wennberg could not choose between fury at Karlsson for siding with Melander or ire at him for doing it dubiously. Wennberg believed that every lens of his life when he leagued himself with this muddle of...
A stone nicked Wennberg's knee and brought his attention back
to the enterprise of creeping. Here in the first eighty yards or so,
he had cover of a sort, a rib of rock and drift logs behind which
he could scuttle, chest almost down to his knees, without showing
himself. But now lay an open distance of thirty yards, an angle
across and up the beach, to the strange canoe. At the end of his
final
last driftlog, Wennberg squatted dismally, rubbed the stone bruise
on his right knee, and glared back toward where he had departed from
"Puny bastards," he muttered.

Melander, Karlsson and Braaf. From amid the trees there a hand
flashed into sight—Wennberg knew it would be Melander's—and patiently waved him to go on.

Wennberg braced, unhunched himself, and in a low rolling stride ran toward the beached canoe. He ran with his elbows out wide, as if fending off. Under his boots gravel clattered wildly, avalanche-loud to Wennberg. Jesu Maria, those fish-fuckers in the forest would have to be without ears not to hear this commotion...

Past the stern of the canoe Wennberg plunged, like a ball rolling past its target. He hovered an instant, calculating, then stopped to thrust both hands beneath a gray rock as wide as his chest. Gravel bit the backs of his hands, his wrists, and finally his forearms as Wennberg wrestled the rock. With a grunt he brought the burden upward, grappled it into balance on his knees, then across his waist, and like a washerwoman carrying an overfull tub of water, turned with the boulder toward the canoe. It was five staggering steps to the wooden wall of the craft, Wennberg more certain with each one that the gunblast which would end his life was being cocked behind him.
Amidships of the canoe, Wennberg heaved the boulder within his arms to the height of his neck, then with a grunt let it crash into the bottom of the craft.

The crunch was not loud, the first luck—Wennberg anywhere in this situation, but the canoe bottom fractured downward beneath and a split as wide as a finger now creviced toward the craft's bow. Wennberg gave one rapid look at his result, then skirted the stern of the canoe and ran again, a bear in a footrace.

He had just passed the driftlog when he heard the shout behind him, and he did not look back.

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

They shoved with their paddles just as the first musket ball blooped the water beside them. Wennberg in puffing agony looked around to see two natives with rifles raised, four or five more clustered around the spine-broken canoe, more oh God more emerging from the forest.

Karlsson hurried a shot at the two riflemen, missed them but...
caused them to flinch back from the shot's ricochet among the beach gravel.

"Paddle-Jesu Maria-paddle-paddle!" Melander was instructing.

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 dawnsped again, then slid rapidly southward from the figures on the beach.

Out of the fear and excitement of the escape something other than the burn, in the next minutes, began to seep through to Karlsson. From his place at its forepart, he began to sense a change about the canoe. Its rhythm felt was lightened; not gone erratic as during Wennerberg's sickness at Kaigani, but lessened, thinned.

Karlsson turned the upper half of his body to look straight back.

"Sten?" he called. "Sten!"

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