

Day thirty-nine

Time spent <sup>today</sup> in the words of other westerers, to try see Swan within his lineage of frontier ink.

# —————

The journals of Lewis and Clark while their expedition sheltered in winter quarters at the tiny stockade called Fort Clatsop, just south of the mouth of the Columbia River. Like Swan, Captain William Clark marks the daily weather scrupulously, but his has a terrible soggy sameness: in four months at Fort Clatsop it rained every day but twelve. A late February day in 1806 begins with typical lament:

we are mortified at not haveing it in our power to make more celestial observations since we have been at Fort Clatsop, but such has been the state of the weather that we have found it utterly impractiable.

Then the captain brightens and as Swan so often did, turns sketch artist.

I purchased of the Clatsops this morning about half a bushel of small fish--they were candlefish, an oily little species-- which they had caught about 40 miles up the Columbia in their scooping nets. as this is an uncommon fish to me and one which no one of the party has ever seen. on the next page I have drawn the likeness of them as large as life...

The candlefish swims delicately there among the words, eternally



angled along the flow of Clark's handwriting as if feeding now and again on stray periods and apostrophes.

# ———

In Stegner's The Gathering of Zion, an excerpt from the trail diary of the Mormon girl Patience Loader. In the overland migration to the far half of America opened by Lewis and Clark, she was pilgrimageing ~~coming~~ west to Zion with one of the handcart brigades of 1856, the travelers' tumbrils in heavy groaning tow all the thousand miles from the Missouri River to Utah. Having trudged six hundred of those miles, Patience Loader and weary others began to ford the North Platte River in Wyoming: ...the water was deep and very cold and we was drifted out of the regular crossing and we came near being drowned the water came up to our arm pits poor Mother was standing on the bank screaming as we got near the bank I heard Mother say for God Sake some of you men help My poor girls... Several of the brethren came down the bank of the river and pulled our cart up for us and we got up the best we could...when we was in the middle of the river I saw a poor brother carrying his child on his back he fell down in the water I never knew if he was drowned or not I felt sorry that we could not help him but we had all we could do to save ourselves...

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# ———

~~Clark's winter of black rain brightened by a candlefish, Patience Loader's wade through horror. Reminders, to be kept in mind while I amble in Swan's orderly ledger, that the edge of America can also be a brink.~~



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In my own scrawl, in one of the 4x6 hip-pocket notebooks which traveled western Montana with me the summer before last: Day 2...Gateway Gorge, Yosemite-like rock c thrusts browng b o us... Curious to compare, I've dug out these notes of the backpack hike Carol and I made into the Bob Marshall Wilderness (and already notice two mighty alterations from Captain Clark's west and Patience Loader's west: now it is the wild places which are the enclaves hewn into America's geography, and now we count our "wilderness" experience by days instead of seasons). From my mix of speedwriting and single-letter Russian prepositions those scenes of the Rockies translate for me again: mountainsides of colossal reefs and deeps like the ocean bottom tipped empty and left on its side...canyons everywhere...high narrow table of trail above the South Fork...Gateway Gorge, Yosemite-like rock with thrusts browng in on us....Me: There's frost on the outside of the tent. Carol: It's on the inside....4th day of no people....Made Badger Pass at 12--only slight incline to cross Continental Divide there then climb for 1 hour over ridge to North Fork gorge. At top <sup>sleet</sup> a squall hit, we took shelter in trees; pellets of hail convinced us to put wool jackets on. Ate trail food, drank water and waited out squall...sound of rocks avalanching to the south...Another 10 mile day....From the top of Family Peak through a notch to the east, farmland pattern of the plains could be seen....We came out of the mountains not having seen ~~another~~

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any other humans for five days; had not been dined on by grizzlies or entrapped by sleet; and felt a joy as huge as the peaks behind us.

# — Clark's winter of black rain brightened by a candlefish, Patience Loader's wade through horror; our own <sup>brief</sup> plunge into what-is-left-of-wilderness, to see how we would fare in it. Reminders to be kept in view while I saunter within Swan's orderly ledger that the edge of America can also be a brink.



Day forty

A silver-bright day. Air clear and cold, ready to crinkle like silk, and for the second night in a row, frost has daubed its way all across the ground and up into the first branches of the evergreens.

I have a queer edgy clarity in myself, consequence of so few hours' sleep: a grittiness like diamond dust. Luckily, sleeplessness comes to me in small seasons, two or three nights in a row, then vanishes, else I cannot imagine what my daily mood would be like. These strange ~~persons~~<sup>beings</sup>, ourselves. Needing the night but sometimes entirely at odds with it. My nights when sleep will not ~~come~~<sup>be coaxed</sup> I roll like a driftlog on one of Swan's beaches, and between last bedtime and early morning I wallowed a deep trough in the dark. In the bed ~~beside me~~<sup>mine</sup>, Carol's breathing form calmly ingested the blackness, channeled it on its smooth underskin routes. While my mind was a black blaze. Anything makes fuel, a walk taken around the neighborhood after supper, the day's writing, a letter from a friend. I steadily try a number of sleep-making stunts. Breathe deeply, with forced regular rhythm. ~~Let~~<sup>Let</sup> ~~like a loosened strap.~~<sup>like a loosened strap.</sup> ~~Make my tongue loll.~~ Try to sheet the mind with a white blankness. And ~~I~~<sup>I</sup> have the success of a man trying to win attention to his coin trick against the roaring backdrop of a three-ring circus.

The frustration is double. Sleep at best is a sharp cost of time, not-sleep is a cost to both. Yet not always; there is this



morning's cold clarity, as if the white duff of frost had <sup>crept</sup> ~~come~~ into me during the night too.

# — Swan on the Makah version of restlessness: Last evening Peter wanted his Squaw to go home with him, she was then in Tahahowtls lodge. She refused, whereupon Peter pitched into her, pulled her hair and blacked her eye. Tahahowtl interfered and Peter went at him and they had a hair pulling match and finally separated to get their guns but friends interfered...

# — Noon. The morning would not be calmed, kept shoving aside Swan's logbooks for its own. I let the hours roam back along the entire wordstream of this winter so far, turned them loose on the question of why the west takes hold of a James Swan, an Ivan Doig. Notions-- they are not answers yet, if they ever <sup>grow up to</sup> ~~will~~ be--tumbled like the <sup>scenes</sup> ~~lines~~ in yesterday's retrieved notebook of the Marshall Wilderness days: ...Perhaps the choice of place is in our body chemistry simply as other patterns of taste are, regulating me to dislike the color pink, brussel sprouts, and square miles of pavement....The west of America draws some of us not because it is the newest region of the country but because it is the oldest, in the sense that the landscape here--the fundament, nature's shape of things--more resembles the original continent than does the city-nation of the Eastern Seaboard or the agricultural factory of the Midwest. (As for so much else, mountains account for it. They, and the oceans, are virtually the last pieces of earth we have not ~~some~~ way tamed, transformed. Although we are striving. Go in an

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airplane above the Cascade Range to see clearcut logging like countless  
patches of fur shaved off. Study the logging roads which incise the  
high edges of the Olympics.)....Or are we drawn west, or merely <sup>deposited</sup> ~~delivered~~?  
The way, say, spores drop into a forest: some spot is found in the  
immense environment, life is stubbornly established and clung to, whether  
the site turns out to be rich humus or up a tree?...

Enough. What counts for now, this winter, is to keep the question  
open, let the hours <sup>chase</sup> ~~work~~ at it when they will.



Day forty-one

in the elegant ledger diary:

The fifth of April, 1866, Yesterday, Ahayah killed the first whale of the season...

The next day: I was much amused last evening with Johns moves. It seems he feels ashamed that he has not killed any whales and has concluded to go through the ceremonies to constitute him a skookum whaleman. Which ceremonies consist of going without sleeping or eating for 6 days and nights, to bathe in the salt water and run on the beach to get warm. John went into the water with his accoutrements on but soon got so cold that he was glad to come and warm himself by my fire. He had gone all day without eating and I think his courage was failing him for he admitted that he thought he could not stand it more than two days and if that would not suffice to make him a whaleman he could kill sharks. He intended to stop by my fire all night and occassionally go out and wash in the bay, but when I got up this morning he was gone and I learned that he was afraid to sit alone by my fire and had sneaked out about midnight with his courage completely cooled and has concluded that from shark killing he will be content with killing dogfish.



Day forty-two

God, how the blood strums in such weather. What it tingles out is: be truant,

Which I am. I woke with the sense that this would be another day brought pure by the cold and that I needed to be out in it at once. When daybreak came, a dry crackle of light onto the frost, I already had arrived here at Shilshole, a bay favorite to me for its head-on view west across the Sound to the wooded headlands and mountains. The Olympics, clouds caped on their backs, as yet are pale, wraithy, in the beginning day. Snow gods, asleep standing up, like horses. Going past is a big seagoing tug, in from the north and in a hurry. It seems to ride the floe of white water pushed up by its impatient bow. Freighter traffic is starting to procession past. Two ships inbound to the Seattle dockfront, two out. Three of the fleet are outlined in traditional lines of superstructure, masts and plow-pointed bow. But the fourth is squatty as a huge barge, some new fangle of containerized-cargo vessel. ~~style of vanship.~~ Swan would enter in his diaries' ship list an occasional herm brig, hermaphrodite brig, with a square-rigged foremast but a triangular schooner sail on its mainmast. The day now of the herm freighter?

One inbound vessel overtakes the other and as it begins to pass, the dark shapes merge, then slowly attenuate, pulled longer and longer like a telescope being extended, until they are two again.

After an hour or so of shivery wandering the Shilshole bayline



I go on to the dockside coffee shop at Salmon Bay, the fishing fleet schooled into winter berths all around.

"Breakfast, Bill?" the waitress asks the regular on the stool next to me.

"No, a doughnut."

"Any particular kind, or whatever I grab?"

"Whatever you grab, dealer's choice."

"Powdered sugar. There you go."

There you go: that western byphrase from waitresses and bartenders, sometimes from friends or just people in conversation. I hear it in Montana as I do here and like it immensely, the friendly release in the saying, the unfussy deliverance it carries. A very independent little trio of words, encouraging yet declaring okay-I've-done-my-part-it's-up-to-you-now. The best of benedictions.

# ———  
Mid-morning. Here at the desk, attenuation again. Swan has begun to pull from his five years at Neah Bay.

I am surprised with myself, he has recently ~~said in the diary,~~ <sup>mused into the ledger,</sup> to find that I have so much patience as I have with these children. I get almost discouraged at times and then again I feel as though they were doing something. But they try my patience sorely and occasionally I feel like giving up my situation in despair of ever being able to do any good... In April of 1866 had occurred the tensest time Swan experienced at Cape Flattery, the arrival of troops to arrest Peter for



the fatal stabbing he ~~had tossed~~<sup>shoved</sup> as ante into the rivalry with the Elwhas. The Makahs resented the show of force, the soldiers resented being thunked down on the back porch of the continent, and we are all heartily sick of their protracted stay. Also, the month's weather was rampageous even for Cape Flattery: 11 7/10 inches Rain 3 pleasant days during month. The diary pages twang more than a little. The Swan who liked to intone that he never carried the least calibre of self-defense among the Indians--I have always found that a civil tongue is the best weapon I can use--now inscribes something different: Bought a Remington revolver of Mr Philips this PM...

Nerves cool a bit in the next weeks, but in mid-Summer Swan takes a twelve-day respite from Neah Bay, visiting in Victoria, Port Townsend and Port Angeles, and a few days after his return there is the entry the year's diary pages have been marching toward. Wednesday, the twenty-second of August:

Notified Mr Webster of my intention of sending in my resignation as teacher when I send in my monthly report. The resignation to take effect on the 1st of October.

# — I want not to see Swan step from Neah Bay; not see this particular Boston bird drift back toward from the ultimate point of the west, Cape Flattery. ~~It~~<sup>Truth told, it</sup> may account for my own tautness of the past days. The glimpses I have had into the diaries ahead do not suggest the rhythmmed richness of these regal ledger pages. Port Townsend, which will be Swan's next site, I think cannot be such a transfixing place



as Cape Flattery, nor probably one to which Swan's talents are as steadily alert. There is grit in the ink to come, I judge. But 1866 is Swan's cosmos, not mine. Whatever I might wish here in the ether of the future, he traces his own way with that ceaseless pen. And in the last ~~five~~<sup>few</sup> weeks of more than two hundred and fifty spent at Neah Bay that pen begins to record farewells.





# ———  
First a ceremony

~~Then a bit~~ of fabulous chumminess from exactly the quarter it could be expected. This forenoon, the twenty-third of September, Capt John brought me in his box of "Whale medicine" which under promise of secrecy on my part he showed me after going up into the tower and locking the door....The relics were in a box enclosed in a bag and had evidently been under ground a long time as they were covered with mould which stuck bag and box together so as to make it difficult to open them. When at last the box was opened there a piece of coal which had been rolled by the surf into an oval pebble as large as a goose egg....John very grandly assured me that it was taken from a dead whale and was a great medicine...The other was nothing but the blow hole of a porpoise...

...the great medicine came last, the bone of the Hah hake to ak #  
this was unrolled from some old trash and presented to me. It was a shapeless piece of rotten quartz which had no resemblance to a bone of any kind....John's father had been humbugged by some smart Indian into this belief that the quartz was a real bone, and John was firm in the same belief. I thought that any animal who had such heavy bones must acquire considerable momentum in darting through the air, and it was not surprising it could split trees, or kill whales when ever it struck them.

# ———  
Then recessional, Neah Bay style. After closing up my business, the first of October, and packing my books and effects I went to Baadah to pass the night with Mr Webster previous to taking my final leave of Neeah Bay. I have been gratified and surprised at the



manifestation of feeling on the part of the Indians at my departure.

They are not usually very demonstrative but children and adults  
appeared very much affected, the former shedding tears and the latter  
singing a chant expressive of their sorrow.

I have tried to do my duty toward these Indians and these  
friendly expressions on their part are more grateful to me than the  
approval of others...



February    The White Tribe



Day forty-three

Whidbey Island, this first dawn of February. Admiralty Inlet, with the Strait of Juan de Fuca angling like a flat blue glacier into one end and Puget Sound out the other. This promontory surge of the island's steep edge, lifting me to look west onto the entire great bending valley of water. And south to the trim farmland where on a summer midnight in 1857, Indians snicked off a head.

The beheaders were, ~~no surprise~~, northern Indians: Tlingit warriors from an Alaskan island near Sitka, knifing downcoast ~~eight hundred~~ ~~a thousand~~ miles in their glorious high-prowed canoes. The victim they caught and decapitated was a settler named Ebey, a militia officer and member of the Washington territorial legislature. There was no specific quibble between the raiding party and Ebey; simply, one of their tribal leaders had been killed during a clash with an American gunboat the previous year, and the Tlingits now exacted a chief for a chief.

~~Peculiar,~~ <sup>appears</sup> ~~Strange,~~ for a timber and water empire which ~~looks~~ so everlastingly placid, and was explored by whites and yielded by the <sup>early</sup> natives with perhaps less bloody contention than any other American frontier, that the practice of beheading crops up so in the Sound and Strait country. Recall the Makahs bringing home to Neah the pair of ~~Elwha~~ <sup>Elwha</sup> ~~Clallam~~ heads from Crescent Bay like first cabbages of the season. The earliest white expedition in from the Pacific, Vancouver's in 1792, was met with "A Long Pole & two others of smaller size...put



upright in the Ground each having a Human Skull on the top." That trio of skulls rode the air at Marrowstone Island, in direct line of sight across Admiralty Inlet from where I am perched, and the exploring Englishmen were blinklessly deferential about the display. Lieutenant Peter Puget, whose quote that is, proceeds to remark that he does not wish to criticize a people "whose Manners Customs Religion Laws & Government we are yet perfect Strangers to." Whether His Majesty's lieutenant would have been as equable about the northern warriors' manners in carrying Ebey's head away from here with them and eventually peeling the scalp off it and swapping the skin-and-hair hank to a Hudson's Bay trader for six blankets, a handkerchief, a bolt of cotton, three pipes and some tobacco--the trader then returning the grisly prize to Ebey's family for burial--it would be interesting to know.

Come look from this eminence of bluff now in the soft hour before daybreak and you will declare on Bibles that the Tlingits' act of 122 years ago was the last sharp moment on this landscape. The island's farm fields are leather and corduroy, rich even panels between black-furred stands of forest. Tan grass which broomed the backs of my hands as I climbed the path up to here now whisks soundlessly against a four-wire fenceline. The sky's only clouds are hung tidily on the southernmost Cascade Mountains at the precise rim of summit where the sun will loft itself. Yes: Rural America of the last century, your eyes say--or Westphalia, or Devonshire.



Directly below where I stand sits an aging barn with its long peaked eave pointing southeast, like the bill of a cap turned attentively toward sunrise. We will sunwatch together. As much as I value the half-dawn, all the secretive shadings it goes through to hint how the world forms itself out of the mist of night, I am ready for sunlight and whatever heat it will bring against the frost. Hand by hand I put my fingers in my mouth to warm them, dry them rapidly on a pants leg, pull on my too thin brown cotton garden gloves again.

Across Admiralty the street lights of Port Townsend begin to quench into the day. The timber-heavy shoreline angling westward out the Strait from the town seems not so black and barbed as it was minutes ago. That shoreline is my reason--one of my reasons; the other is sheerly that I love this blufftop arc above the tiering horizons of water and shore and mountains--to be here. Across there, invisible yet imprinted, curves the canoe route which Swan traveled time on time during his ~~six~~ Neah Bay years.

A hundred water miles stretch between Port Townsend and Cape Flattery, and the journey along the fjord-like shore of the Olympic Peninsula usually took three days. The Olympic range, recorded Swan from afloat, presents a wild forbidding aspect. But then: the line of foot-hills...disclosing deep ravines, with fertile valleys lying between them, and reaching quite to the base of the great mountains. As for the long rough-hewn channel of the Strait itself, Bays and points are bold, precipitous and rocky. The water at these points is



deep, and, when the winds are high, dashes with tremendous force upon the cliffs, making a passage around them, at times, a difficult and dangerous matter.

I can see exactly to where one such matter occurred, beyond the headland where Port Townsend nestles. Early in his years on the Strait, Swan was inbound from Neah Bay one afternoon when his Makah canoe crew pulled ashore to camp at Discovery Bay instead of paddling on the ~~the~~ half dozen miles to Port Townsend. Since the Indians' canoe pace seemed to be regulated part of the time by weather savvy and prudence, and the other part by indolence, it <sup>required</sup> ~~took~~ some knowing to tell the moods apart. (Swan had mused on a similar puzzle of canoe etiquette during his time among the Chinooks and Chehalis at Shoalwater Bay. Speed will be kept up for a hundred rods, he wrote in Northwest Coast, then the paddles put to rest and all begin talking. Perhaps one has spied something, which he has to describe while the rest listen; or another thinks of some funny anecdote...or they are passing some remarkable tree or cliff, or stone, which has a legend attached to it...When the tale is over... all again paddle away with a desperate energy for a few minutes...) This day, Swan decided the crew was being entirely too casual with his time, and insisted they continue. An old Makah woman in the canoe grumbled her disagreement, for she said she knew we should have a gale of wind from the northwest. As promptly as she predicted, ~~The weather lambasted them.~~ as promptly as she predicted. We met the tiderips, and had a fearful time....On we flew like an arrow, every sea throwing a swash into the canoe,



keeping two persons constantly bailing. The old squaw began to sing a death song...The paddlers at last managed to teeter the canoe atop breakers which skimmed it to shore, and a shaken and wiser Swan hiked the rest of the way to Port Townsend.

Twin gulls break into my sight around the bend of the bluff. "Slim yachts of the element," Robinson Jeffers christened them, and taking him at his words these two are gentleman racers.

They stay paired, the inshore birds a few feather-lengths ahead, in a casual motionless glide past me, and on down the bluffline.

Then one flaps once, the other flaps once--evidently the rules of this contest of air--and they flow on out of my vision.

After his near-disaster, Swan slowed himself to the Indian pace of canoe travel, and it seems to have been a pleasant enough one. He recounted for <sup>the</sup> a San Francisco newspaper the trip when a paddler named Tom Squi-qui commenced a Catholic hymn, which he sung in a fine clear voice, accompanied by all the others in chorus. John Fay then officiated as priest, and they went through the service in a regular and devout manner, till the word "O-mah-sista," or Amen, when Billy Barlow gave a whoop, and struck off into singing "Old Dan Tucker," joined by the rest, who gave quite as much attention to the negro melody as they had to the canticles of the church.

Ten minutes have passed since I joined the barn in peering for signs of sunrise. The light is slowed by the cloud lid. Now, overhead, a sudden dark constellation. Birds, oh god, birds in thousands,



a complete swift seine of them sweeping the daybreak sky. Half a mile of wingdom at once swishing in across the water, flinging beyond into the farm fields. That quick flutter, brief glide: telltale marmalade breast: robins.

Six times across Admiralty they ~~come~~<sup>swarm</sup>, the squadrons a minute or two apart. I can forecast that I will happen onto robins all the rest of the morning on the bluff, spillover of these abrupt sky filling migrations.

While I am monitoring birds, the first full daylight has reached into the peaks of the Olympic Mountains, brightening the front pyramids of white and surely Olympus itself, 8000 feet high but so discreet of summit it hides in the western backfile of the range. So a ceiling of sunshine is,  
somewhere up there, and in minutes I will be granted the floor of it down here.

I suck warmth into my fingers one more time and hurry north along the bluff, wanting to watch the light come onto the lagoon which bows out from the shoreline below. The lagoon is not quite like any other piece of coastwork I have ever seen: a narrow band of gravel beach which mysteriously has looped out from the base of the bluff--the curve of the gravel snare about two hundred yards across at its widest--and entrapped several acres of tidewater. Driftlogs by the hundreds float within it like pewter tableware spilled across marble.



At two minutes before eight the first beams set the lagoon aglow, the pewter suddenly <sup>becomes</sup> ~~is~~ bronze.

The sun now rides clear of the mountains, but so far onto the southern horizon at this time of year that its luster slants almost directly along the Sound and Admiralty Inlet, as if needing the ricochet help from the water in order to travel the extreme polar distances to the lagoon and, at last, me.

The canoes that slipped through these water distances like they stitch and stitch in my mind this morning. needles; Beautifully modeled, Swan said of the crafts of the Makahs, resembling in their bows our finest clipper ships...Formed from a single log of cedar, carved out with skill and elegance. The best canoes are made by the Clioquot and Nittinat tribes, on Vancouver Island, who sell them to the Mackahs, but few being made by the latter tribe owing to the scarcity of cedar in their vicinity... Propulsion was either the deft broadhead paddles carved by the Clioquots or square sails of woven cedar bark, which <sup>caused</sup> ~~made~~ the vessels <sup>to</sup> ~~look~~ all the more like small clipper ships, diminutives of that greatest grace of seafaring. The grace perhaps flowed up out of the cedar into the canoemen. Swan records that when the Makahs would convey him downcoast from Cape Flattery to the Hosett village at Cape Alava, for the sheer hellbending fun of it they would thread the canoe <sup>into</sup> ~~through~~ the archways where waves have pounded through the offshore seastacks. On one of these through-the-hole voyages Swan and the Reservation doctor had an opportunity of witnessing the operation of three tremendous rollers which came sweeping after us and which I feared



would knock us against the top of the arch. The doctor said he had his eye on a ledge which he should try to catch hold of in case of emergency, but fortunately we had no occasion to try our skill at swimming as the Indians worked the canoe through the passage beautifully.

Makah canoemanship introduced Swan to Swell, dressed in that fresh suit of Boston clothes, bound out from Port Townsend to Neah Bay on a mid-September day of 1859 with a cargo of flour, bacon, molasses and blankets. Swan climbed in for the jaunt and ever after was impressed with Swell, wrote at once of him that line that he is still quite a young man, but if he lives, he is destined to be a man of importance among his own and neighboring tribes.

If he lives. Why those edged words amid the admiration, on a fine bright journey out ~~the~~ <sup>this</sup> valley of water to Neah?

Whatever the reason for those three uneasy jots of Swan's pen, seven Septembers later, they were exact augury, Swell long since dead by the time Swan canoed away from the Neah Bay teaching job, seven Septembers later, reversed that original route to arrive in from Cape Flattery to Port Townsend across the water here.

A second illumination of this sunrise. I realize that I ~~come~~ <sup>bring myself</sup> back and back to this bluff because here scenes still fit onto each other despite their distances of time. Becoming rarer in the west, constancy of this sort. What I am looking out over in this fresh dawn is little enough changed from the past that Swan in a Makah canoe, coming or



going on the Port Townsend-Neah Bay route, can be readily imagined across there, the sailing gulls slide through his line of sight as they do mine. Resonance of this rare sort, the reliable echo from the eye inward, I think we had better learn to prize like breath.



Day forty-four

So to Swan's next frontier address: Port Townsend. Even now, the place is a destination not on the route to anywhere else. No ferry from the cities of Puget Sound connects to Port Townsend, and the road to its flange of headland on the Strait is a dozen-mile veer from the main highway of the Olympic Peninsula. In fogless weather I can very nearly see to the town, north past the jut of Point No Point, from the bluff above our valley. But driving here on this day of murk, the sky like watered milk and the road spraying up brown slush, Port Townsend seemed to me far-off and elusive as a lookout tower atop a distant crag.

From its initial moment of settlement, which happened in 1851, the remarkable siting has been Port Townsend's topic to boast, whenever not cussing it. As, the first community astride the Strait of Juan de Fuca-Puget Sound water route, claiming a spacious headland with a sheltering bay along its southeastern side, Port Townsend looked to be a golden spot ~~on~~ ~~in~~ the map. But the promontory site turned out not as the dreamed-of stroke of geography collecting all inbound ships, but merely a nub of coast around which the lane of maritime commerce bent, like a rope pulleyed over a limb, and lowered cargoes onward to the docklands of Seattle, Tacoma, Everett and Olympia. Those cargoes still are going past.

The civic personality did not quite <sup>prove</sup> ~~work~~ out as anticipated, either. ~~In more places than one,~~ huge aspiring Victorian houses and <sup>shoulder</sup> ~~are~~ unexampled views across water ~~are~~ side by side with the scruff and



shagginess of a forest clearing. The town is divided between the abrupt waterfront (brink-like in more ways than one: Swan once reports to his diary that One Arm Smith the waterman fell through the privy of the Union hotel down onto the beach and injured himself <sup>e</sup>severely & perhaps fatally) and the expansive reach of bluff behind it, where the big old betrimmed houses rise like a baker's shelves of wedding cakes. Downtown is divided again, between the blocks of brick emporiums of the 1880s and a straggle of modern stores which look as if they have been squeezed from a tube labeled Instant Shopping Center.

Port Townsend always has lived a style of boom and bust, and that record of chanciness is a main reason I cherish the town. In a society of cities interested most in how svelte their skyscrapers are, Port Townsend still knows that life is a dice game in the dirt. I have been in and out of the place as often as I could these past dozen years, and I can almost feel in the air as I step from the car whether the town is prospering or drooping. Small shops will bud blossom in the high old downtown buildings. My next visit, they have vanished. A grand house will be freshly painted one day. When I <sup>glance</sup> look again, peeling <sup>set in</sup> has begun. This time, I was in town only moments when I heard that a few of the vastest old mansions have been trying life as guest houses. That seemed promising, but now the state is requiring that every room be fitted with a metal fire door, and the mansion proprietors proclaim themselves staggered toward bankruptcy by the prospect.



Reputation here has waned a bit, too, at least from what I can determine by reading around in Port Townsend's past. Swan once writes that in its early years the town was noted for whiskey so strong it was suspected to be a vile compound of alcohol red pepper, tobacco and coal oil. The quality of Port Townsend's early inhabitants occasionally was questioned in similar tones, as when a transplanted Virginian assessed his period of residence: "Suh, when I first came here, this town was inhabited by three classes of people--Indians, sailors, and sons of bitches. Now I find that the Indians have all died, and the sailors have sailed away." Those of us who grew up in small towns of such lineage ("Tell 'em"--the Montana rancher to me, sixteen-year-old ranchhand about to brave the community of Browning on a Saturday night--"tell 'em you come from Tough Creek, and you sleep on the roof of the last house") may become rare as mules in this citifying nation, but meanwhile a Port Townsend, adozed out on its end of the continent, reminds us of the vividness.



from the diaries achieved  
 I discover that Swan ~~made~~ his move from Neah Bay to here at Port Townsend by way of Boston, a transcontinental detour not surprising from him; if he had been paid by the mile in this Strait period of his life, he would have made it to millionairehood. The holiday season of 1866 and the first months of 1867, Swan spent with his daughter and son, Ellen and Charles, and not incidentally was on hand to claim a windfall: an inheritance of \$6,427.14 from an uncle. About half the sum, he rapidly poured off for merchandise consigned to Port Townsend (...1 doz money belts, the pocket diary begins enumerating day by day, 1 covered wagon...1 set harness... cod lines...pistols etc.). Much of the rest flowed away in gifts for Ellen and Charles, and in an astounding number of \$25 checks written to himself. By the first of June, 1867, he had his bank balance successfully <sup>decimated</sup> ~~depleted~~ to \$647.32, and took ship for the west again.

In mid-July Swan was back here at Port Twonsend--he had short-cutted by way of Panama--and in mid-August drifted out the Strait to visit at Neah Bay. Near year's end, he <sup>went off on</sup> ~~made~~ a buying trip to San Francisco for one of the Port Townsend storekeepers. In 1868, at last I find pages where he begins to settle in to town life.

Swan has had another windfall, of sorts. The ship Ellen Foster smashed apart on the rocks near Neah Bay, and he undertakes to salvage the wreck. This is beachcombing in the truest sense of the word, this is, and Swan holds no illusions about it. The warehouse he rented



on the Port Townsend waterfront to sort the Foster's bounty is consistently dubbed in his diary the junk store.

Simultaneous with the junkwork, Swan begins to take on paperwork. As the customs port for the Puget Sound region and county seat and the biggest dab of settlement between Victoria and Seattle, Port Townsend had become a kind of official inkwell for the Strait frontier. Swan always swims best in ink. Rapidly he plucks up semi-job of some official sort after semi-job. <sup>#</sup> I have established myself here at Port Townsend, he soon ~~writes~~ <sup>confides</sup> in one of his letters to Baird at the Smithsonian, having been appointed by the Governor as a notary public and Pilot Commissioner, and by the Supreme Court as United States Commissioner, and having appointed myself as a commission merchant and ship broker. Thus you see honors are easy with me....I reverse the saying that a prophet is without honor for I have the honors without the profit.



Days forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven

Swan has come down with railroad fever.

How strong and delusory a frontier ailment, this notion that wherever you Xed in your town on the blankness of the west, a locomotive soon would clang up to it with iron carloads of money. I admit for Swan and Port Townsend that they had a germ of reason for their railroad hopes: the attractive harbor sited closer to the Pacific and its trade routes than any other of the contending anchorages of Puget Sound. And a single germ can bring on delirium. Swan's breaks forth in letters to Thomas H. Canfield, an executive of the Northern Pacific Railroad:

Had the most skillful engineer selected a site for a great and magnificent city, he could not have located a more favored spot than the peninsula of Port Townsend....It may be of interest to you as a meteorological fact, that while during the past winter, the snow on the Sierra Nevada has been so deep as to obstruct the Central Rail Road, causing the mails and express to be transported for a time on snow shoes, and while at San Francisco, snow has fallen to the depth of two inches, yet in the mountain passes north of the Columbia River, the greatest depth of snow does not exceed five feet, and on Puget Sound particularly Port Townsend from whence I write, there has not been a particle of snow this winter....The whole of the rich valley of the Chahalis, which empties into Grays Harbor, and the valley of the Willopah the garden of the Territory, which connects with Shoalwater Bay, would be tributary to a city at Port Townsend, and could furnish supplies for a population larger than the dreams of the most sanguine enthusiast....A ship could



sail direct from New York with a cargo of Railroad iron, which could be landed at any desired point on Hoods canal....

# ———  
Swan, I would turn you if I could from this railroad courtship. I know its outcome, and you would be better off spending your ink money and postage to bet on fistfights in your favorite waterfront saloon. The commercial future lay in wait here along the eastern shoreline of Puget Sound, not across there with you at pinnacle-sitting Port Townsend. Seattle and Tacoma, these points where the westward flow of settlement quickest met deep harbors--they became the region's plump rail-fed ports. (While Swan still was busheling oysters at Shoalwater Bay in 1853, a territorial newspaper already was crediting the barely-born town of Seattle with "goaheaditiveness.") Had Swan and his hamlet of destiny been able to admit it, the very sweep of water which served as Port Townsend's concourse, Admiralty Inlet and Puget Sound, <sup>made</sup> ~~now was~~ its moat.

# ———  
The letters to Canfield flew on, however, and in the sixth of the series Swan made bold to say that the Northern Pacific not only needed Port Townsend, it required him as its local eyes and ears:


I would respectfully submit to you whether it would not be for the interest of the company to have some careful reliable person to prepare a statement of all matters of interest relative to the harbors of Puget Sound....For \$150. a month I will undertake to furnish every information, and pay all the expense of obtaining it, such as travelling expenses boat and canoe hire &c....

Swan in this Port Townsend life is showing something I have not seen much of since his time among the Shoalwater oyster entrepreneurs. He has a little bright streak of hokum in him, which begins at his



It is the first thing I would change about the west, or rather, about an ample number of westerners. Their conviction that in this new land, just because it is new, wealth somehow ought to fall up out of the ground into their open pockets. Such bonanza notions began with the Spaniards peering for golden cities amid buffalo grass, and surged on through the fur trade, the mining rushes, the laying of the railroads, the arrival of the loggers, the taking up of farmland and grazing country, and even now are munching through real estate and coal pits and whatever can be singled out beyond those. Besides a sudden population the west--the many wests--have had to support this philosophy of get-rich-quicker-than-the-next-grabber-and-to-hell-with-the-consequences, and the burden of it on a half-continent of limited cultivation capacities has skewed matters out here considerably. The occasional melancholy that whispers like wind in westerners' ears I think is the baffled apprehension of this; the sense that even as we try to stand firm we are being carried to elsewhere, some lesser and denatured place, without it ever being made clear why we have to go. And the proper word for <sup>any unchosen</sup> such a destination is exile.

Anyway, Swan strives on a central route of his era, a site he is not generally found at, in his current quest for wealthstrike. His problem is that nowhere among his skills is the knack for hitting it rich. This stone fact asserts itself in these Port Townsend years by not only keeping Swan unrich but chronically short of any income at all. He has tried to tap a field he knows much about, the native artwork of the





Northwest, but without much success. In his periodic letters to Baird at the Smithsonian ~~he tries~~ <sup>attempts</sup> now and then, with ~~ample~~ <sup>more than</sup> justification, to pry whatever occasional collecting salary he can: I know that I can do this work as well and probably better than any man on the Pacific Coast, but I cannot do myself or the subject justice, unless I am paid for my time, labor and expense. Baird's thrifty fist stays closed. When Swan on his own ~~makes~~ <sup>contrives</sup> a trading trip to Sitka in Alaska, the venture seems not to produce much except some interesting new scenery.

# Time and again the Port Townsend diaries have to make account of small borrowings, from Henry Webster, from a friendly storekeeper named Gerrish, most of all from the local jeweler, Bulkeley, who is steadily ready with a few dollars. The sum usually ~~goes~~ <sup>flits</sup> from Swan so promptly he scarcely leaves a fingerprint on it: Borrowed of Bulkly \$5.00 Paid wash bill \$1.00... His credit plainly ~~is~~ <sup>holds</sup> good; generally he notes repayment of his debts the same day he comes into any real cash and is himself then touchable for a loan. But chronic is chronic and so the Swan I ~~find~~ <sup>watch</sup> in these railroad missives still is a fellow I would cheerfully accompany to Katmandu, but am not so sure I would buy a horse from, if he happened to be ~~looking~~ <sup>needy</sup> for funds at the moment.

# —————  
Therefore ~~So~~, his crowbar work on the coffers of the Northern Pacific. To my astonishment, which shows how much I know about financial sharpstering, Swan is hired, and at his price. I can only think that the New York railroaders wanted to ~~miss~~ <sup>overlook</sup> no chance, and if the shore of the Strait of



Juan de Fuca somehow proved worthy of railroad iron, this careful reliable person who wrote such blarneying letters did know that shore.

Getting himself hired, ~~however~~, was different from maneuvering a railroad into town. Swan escorted the railroad moguls around when Canfield led a group of them out from New York, lobbied now and again in the territorial capitol at Olympia, tried to tout the prospect of trans Pacific trade with Siberia after talking with a barkentine captain who had come from the Amur River in the very short passage of 28 days, <sup>drew</sup> ~~made~~ maps of the proposed rail route up from the Columbia River to Port Townsend, lined up local pledges of land if the town was tapped as the terminus. Then Canfield inexplicably telegraphed Swan to meet him at Ogden, Utah.

Swan, no young man by any count of the years, jounced off into sage and desert on a 700-mile journey of horseback, steamboat and stagecoach. Very hot and dirty, the battered pocket diary of this trip mutters...alkali plain...rattlesnakes...hottest ride I have yet had...desolate...miserable log house full of bedbugs...At last at Ogden, a message meets Swan: Canfield has decided not to wait for him.

After that jilt Swan skidded downhill both fiscally and physically. Arriving back at Port Townsend from the three and a half week wild goose chase he jots constant notes of bad health--Sick in house all day from the effects of my journey and a cold and sick for some time-- and probably despond as well. He also begins to record that the Northern Pacific has omitted to pay him several months' wages and he is having to nag for the sum.

It all spins out, Swan's several years of railroad fantasy, into a



few words at the end of the summer of 1873. That spring, having thoughtfully bought much of the townsite first, the Northern Pacific had chosen Tacoma as its transcontinental terminus; now, on the eighteenth of September, the railroad underwent a financial collapse which took years to mend. Swan wrote unknowing prophecy in his diary at Port Townsend two days earlier: Town very dull nothing doing. #

# I have some feel for Swan's railroad debacle, because the bulldozers on one of the slopes across this valley remind me steadily of futility of my own. My effort was to narrow progress, Swan's was to lure it in his direction, but in the end we are each as futile as the other.

The bulldozers are carving out housing sites. On any scale the slope they are swathing was no hillside of grandeur: scrub alder, madrona. But amid Seattle's spread of suburbs it made a healthy green lung, and its loss is one more nick toward changing the Puget Sound region into Los Angeles North.

At the hearing I alone spoke against the total of 107 houses designated for the site, suggesting if nothing else that half the number, on lots the same size as <sup>the reasonably generous ones</sup> ~~those~~ on our side of the valley, made a more swallowable sum for the area. The zoning law, however, permitted that the size of the lots could be averaged over the entire acreage, including slopes of unbuildable steepness--a principle by which Los Angeles can be averaged off into the Mojave Desert and it be proven that every Angeleno owns a numerical rancho--and 107 houses it is going to be.

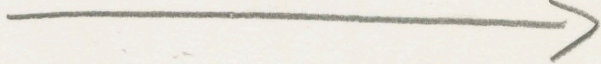
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P. 188A follows



1884

Part of me has known the prospect is not bright that I can go on and on through life as a suburban <sup>druid</sup>~~hermit~~. Seattle, the city I have most affection for, which until not so many years ago was a green and gray quilt of neighborhoods without much pretension beyond that, has begun to overgrow, preen itself into metropolis. (I hear the same of Denver, Portland, Boulder, Billings...) Probably too I am at the point of life where, in this odd cottage industry of making words, my velocity has slowed enough that I notice society's more. Yet understanding the fact that change, alteration of landscape and manscape alike, is a given of life does nothing to make me think its consequences won't be particular for me; everyone in the world has a nose but we all sneeze differently.

This attack of bulldozerphobia I know is a mood I should put away, box it in the admission that I am sounding like a <sup>grumpy</sup>~~home~~steader who has just seen new chimney smoke on his horizon. (Make that 107 new chimney smokes.) But Swan, you there in mid-spiel of your wooing of a railhead for Port Townsend: you might tell me that I have western policy backwards, that even yet "limits" is not a word to say, but you ought to hear this much of my side of it, for it includes you more than you know.





no 4

While they were eating me like banqueters sharing a cheese, the landholder's lawyer and the developer's experts and the county's planners, the developer himself said least of all, and I remember an instant when our glances met, baffled. I wore my one suit, so as to look less like a <sup>beaver trapper</sup> ~~buffalo hunter~~ among the bureaucrats. The developer, who may make more money from this one hillside than I am ever apt to see in my lifetime, was in his rough shirt to show humble toil. Guises aside we probably are not so very different; "self-made" types, with the <sup>unsmoothed</sup> ~~rough~~ edges that usually means, and origins which took some muscle. I would guess I was piling hay bales at least as early in life as he started pouring concrete. But the matter between us has become one of <sup>mysterious</sup> ~~creed~~--how many homeowners may dance on the top of a surveyor's stake?--and the prevailing scripture is on his side, not mine. Which is why his housing developments fell my forests, and tracks are laid to a town the railroad owns instead of one where a Swan dreams. Preach as we may in our own backyards, cottagers do not often sway a society's fiscal theology.



Day forty-eight

Rain trotting in the drainpipe when we woke up. Now, at ten in the morning, a gray pause has curtained between showers, a halfhearted wind musses among the trees. Today and yesterday are standard Puget Sound winter, rain and 45 degrees, after the weeks of clear frost-rimed weather. A rich winter of two seasons, this. Time of frost, time of cloud.

Last comment found from Swan on the railroad adventure. Did not alter my opinion, I <sup>come</sup>~~came~~ across him suddenly grumbling, apropos of nothing, during a visit to Tacoma years later. That it is unfit place for terminus.



Day forty-nine

About daylight this morning, the twenty-first of September, 1868,  
in Swan's small pages, a party of 26 Clallams attacked a party of 19  
Chimseans who were asleep near Dungeness light, and killed 18 of them.

The numbers of the situation have never been so certain--Swan himself next hears the death toll given as 19--but one Tsimshian woman did survive the ambush, and the strand of beach that was the killing ground has become known as Graveyard Spit. Other than those yoked facts of casualties, survivor and nomenclature, this incident drifts in the history of the Strait country as a wayward half-legend, some-Indians-sometime-slew-some-other-Indians; I am impatient to see whether Swan can detail the story. I can help him this far: that that single bloody dawn tided over nature's own fact about the little coastal loop of sand, which is that here abides one of the stubbornest sites of life anywhere. Graveyard Spit is a pocket desert, sheltered into its thirstless ecology by,

larger Dungeness and the dry rain shadow which extends north from the Olympic Mountains out over the Strait. Rubbery buttons of flowers and varieties of crawler plants hug low and determined onto the beach-like hundred acres or so; sand rodents <sup>imprint</sup> ~~make~~ tiny roads among them, and are ambushed by nighthawks in whistling dives.

Went with Agent King, the twenty-ninth of September, to Pt  
Discovery relative to the Indian murder at Dungeness. . . Mr King had a  
talk with the Indians implicated in the Simsean murder and told them they  
must go to the Reserve tomorrow.

It can't be known either whether the incident conformed to the version "a gentleman from Dungeness" furnished the newspaper at Olympia: that "as the unfortunate victims were all asleep at the time of the attack, the murderers made quick work of it, and then commenced mutilating the bodies, dismembering them, throwing the legs here, the arms there, and the hands



elsewhere." Nor is it definite that the survivor "received seven stabs and cuts in her right side, three near the heart, and others on her head, arm and hip," although that relentless counting suggests mightily that the informational gentleman was Swan. What seems sure is an element of revenge in the attack, product of the history of raids into the Strait and Puget Sound by the powerful tribes from the northern reaches of the British Columbia coast--Haidas, Tlingits, Tsimshians. The immediate motive, however, was that the Tsimshians overnighing on the sheltered spit had just finished a summer of work in the Puget Sound sawmills, and their homebound canoe rode low in the water with the goods their wages had bought.

This morning, the thirtieth of September, Mr King started for Hoods Canal with the Indians and their families whom he yesterday told to go.

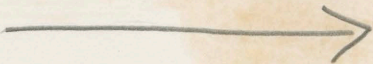
He also requests me to proceed. . . to Dungeness & get the rest of the murderers and also to get all the goods I can recover. . .

At Graveyard, Swan salvaged the Tsimshian canoe, some sails and a few paddles, four sacks of flour and four trunks and four guns, and five gallons of molasses. Missing, according to the wounded Tsimshian woman, were \$330 in coin, a quantity of silver jewelry, some blankets and much clothing. (When the woman--her name was Kit-tairlkh--eventually recuperated enough to travel, Swan would put her aboard a Hudson's Bay Company steamer to go north to her home village with the salvage and some gifts to her tribe as restitution from the Indian Affairs officialdom of Washington Territory.)



Slept at Mr Clines last night, the first of October, & made a  
memo of articles saved from Chimsean canoe.

Indians say that Charley Blake & Smalley advised them not to go  
to Hoods Canal & consequently none left with me altho some promised to go  
& meet me at Pt Townsend.





Left Dungeness river at 10 am & reached Pt. Townsend 6 Pm

That Swan could nod to the divvy of opinion among the Clallam raiders and blithely canoe home to await those who promised to go to the Reservation with him says all about his authority among the Northwest natives. He could be as supple, bendable, as they were; in the hard-edged white society which had taken over this coast, one man of contours.

Indians arrived this forenoon, the second of October, from Dungeness for Hoods Canal.

Started from Port Townsend at 1 PM with Patrick Henry, Emily & Dan in Lane Billy's canoe.

The Dungeness Indians in two canoes, with 2 small canoes towing.

The canoe flotilla went south up Admiralty Inlet, the high clay bluffs of Whidbey Island announcing one shore and the blunt timbered headlands on the Olympic Peninsula side the other; paddled for Foulweather Bluff and the entrance to the eighty-mile fjord called Hood Canal; passed Port Ludlow, with its lumber schooners tethered like workhorses; and pulled ashore for the night at the next sawmill village, Port Gamble.

Paid my hotel bill at Port Gamble, the third of October. \$1.00 & started at 8 am for Hoods Canal.

. . . opposite Sebec near mouth of Nuth lu wap--took lunch.

. . . 6 PM camped at bend in Canal opposite Humhumi.

Where Swan's canoe party that morning came around the first point of land after leaving Port Gamble a highway bridge today sweeps across the water on barge-sized concrete pontoons. The five canoes would look like ~~the~~ <sup>so many pieces of</sup> driftwood ~~passing~~ <sup>bobbing</sup> beneath the girderwork of the Hood Canal span. A few miles more, on the eastern shore a military base is being built for



nuclear-missile-bearing Trident submarines. The killing capacity of Swan's passing Indians compares to that of a Trident as a jackknife to bubonic plague.

Started at 7 AM after eating breakfast and breaking up camp, the fourth of October. Arrived at Reservation at noon. Mr King paid me \$25. coin. . . . Left Reservation at 3:45 PM & camped at 7 PM about 10 miles down the Canal.

~~second day after that,~~  
The ~~next day,~~ last line of the Graveyard Spit saga, Swan was back in Port Townsend by supertime.



## Day fifty

A day that promises better weather one minute and reconsiders the next. The valley is sought out by wind every so often, but not yet rain, and the thermometer is nosing 50. I would have known without ~~checking~~ <sup>tucked</sup> ~~looking~~ that the mercury was up, for the cat is atop a post of the fence at the far side of the neighbor's yard. More than ever he looks like a lion seen from far off, adoze at the edge of some thornbush thicket, waiting for a bunny-sized wildebeeste to patter into his dreams.

What regulates this periodic cat, besides the day's warmth sliding in through his fur, or any other of the cats I have watched past my writing-room windows for the past dozen or so years, I have no conception. They are the most constant animals I see, and the most out of camouflage: they pace through our wooded backyard in robes of color entirely unsuited to hunting. Harlequins against the green. Yet unlike the neighborhood's dogs which lollop around the street in dizzy concern for human attention, cats are thoroughly in place within their routes. Only other cats stir their imagination. Those aloof encounters by day when any two, stalking like muffed-and-coated heiresses, will ostentatiously keep the full length of the backyard between them, then the rites by night when they try to murder one another as inventively as possible. Otherwise it takes the profoundest kind of intrusion to nick into a catly routine. The gray and white wanderer who one day tiptoed into the garden dirt,



scratched a hole, daintily settled atop it in hunched but poised position--Queen Victoria on a thunderbox--to do the necessary, did it, scratched the lid of dirt into place, ~~looked~~<sup>gandered</sup> uneasily around, spotted me watching from the window, and fled as if aflame. (No such episode from the tan cat; it would not be lionly.) Probably the mind of cats is territory we are better off not knowing. The winter Carol and I lived in London, I stretched back from my typewriter one morning and looked directly up at a cat on the ceiling. Our flat was the below-stairs portion of a Georgian townhouse, a long warren of rooms with plumbing pipes and electrical wires vined along the walls like root systems and a splash of daylight at the rear, a kind of glassed-over porch with frosted panes as its roof. The cat was roof-sitting. Ceiling-sitting, from my point of view. Into the middle of the roof panes of glass a light fixture had been webbed, on the English electrical principle that unless the electrician has been specifically told by the householder not to expend 238,000 miles of wiring he will proceed to rig a bulb to the underside of the moon, and the light as it glowed threw upward a small circle of heat. By some instinct the cat had ~~ambled~~<sup>gravitated</sup> up from the alley to curl itself to the warmth. (Is it Eiseley?--"In the days of the frost seek a minor sun.") The rest of the day I would glance overhead every so often and find the cat absorbedly licking its paws, its midnight-and-snow face dabbing in and out of focus through the frosted glass. That time of an alley tabby in wavery orbit over me convinced me



that whatever their thousand daily pretences, cats all are secret Cheshires.

# ———  
 To Swan of Port Townsend now, another here-again-gone-again  
of my wintering.  
 countenance. His effort to woo the railroad was mostly told in  
 spare pages of the ledger diary he had used at Neah Bay, evidently  
 a special effort to keep straight the skein of blandishments being  
 tried on the Northern Pacific executives. The Graveyard Spit  
 interlude was set down in a pocket notebook, and the several years  
 that follow it are an era of pocket diaries: lines jotted instead  
Low water in the forty-year river of words.  
 of composed. Scrawled small as they are, these entries will be  
 day upon day of decipherment. But beyond doubt, worth it. I lift  
 pages to the start of 1869 and find:

Stormy day. Commenced to occupy office on the lower floor of  
 old Post Office building Pt Townsend, as the office for Commissioner  
 of Pilots. US Commissioner. Notary Public &c rent \$5 pr month

I check the final night of 1874 and learn:

One Arm Smith & I worked this PM sodding Bulkeley's grave &  
 planting shrubbery around it.

Even for Swan these seem broad enough brackets of endeavor.



Days fifty-one, fifty-two

Pleasant day, nothing of interest occurred except a fight...  
between Ginger Reese and Sam Alexander in Reeses saloon...

# Dave Sires Lieut Paige and several officers of the Cutter gave  
me a serenade about 12 oclock PM....

Col Larrabee & Col Pardee passed the evening with me discussing  
Swedenborgianism...

Swan's frontier Americans as they clumped themselves together into the barely-in-out-of-the-weather settlement they called Port Townsend. To the local Clallams and visiting Makahs they must have seemed exotic as albino bears, this white tribe.

Their customs and rites of leadership are sporadic but frenzied. would ~~not~~ have been (Most memorable, at least by Swan's report, ~~was~~ the election of 1860: The Republicans burned a tar barrel in honor of the supposed victory of Abe Lincoln.)

They have a fixation on honorific titles: officers from the army post near town always addressed as "Colonel" and "Major," those from ships on station in the harbor as "Captain" and "Lieutenant"; at the courthouse, it is "Judge" and "Sheriff." (Swan himself in these years served for a time in charge of a municipal court and became thereafter on the streets of Port Townsend "Judge Swan." Such distinction was not without drawbacks: Tom Butler and I had a talk in Jerseys saloon this evening in which he made threats that he would hold me responsible for my decision in case of Butler vs Butler.)

This they extend with guffawing generosity to the Indians, renaming the local Clallam chief Chetzemoka as "the Duke of York" and one of his wives "Queen Victoria."



This white tribe's sacred notions focus not on the earth and its forest and its roof of sky, but on obscure ancient quibbles among humans. (White humans, at that. Swan early makes note of an Oregon tribe <sup>who</sup> ~~which~~ shook their heads firmly when told the story of Christ's crucifixion. The Indians had enough trouble getting along with other without borrowing conflict, they declared to the missionary; this Jesus matter was a quarrel the whites would have to settle among themselves.) They hold as well a strange sense of territoriality, strong as that of wolves, basing it on invisible boundaries: not the borders of common sense where you know yourself liable to ambush from another tribe, but seams on the earth somehow seen through a spyglass mounted on a tripod.

Their weaponry is potent and mysterious, and growing more so all the time. (Lieut Hanbury US Topographical Engineer called on me today he is engaged on steamer Celilo taking account of force of current at various points on the Sound for the purpose of ascertaining if it is practicable to make use of torpedoes as a means of harbor defence.)

Their boats are even more prodigious. Long schooners--the admiring Makahs have told Swan their word for them is bar-bethl'd: house on the water--which moor at the sawmill settlements and take aboard what had been sky-touching groves of trees. Steamboats which with their <sup>thrashing</sup> ~~crashing~~ sidewheels can travel without the wind.

Their food ranges from disgusting--hard salted beef which the sailors call "mahogany horse"--to marvelous: molasses, rice, coffee.

Their views on whiskey are inconstant: some Port Townsend whites irate about the Indians sharing in it at all, others making



a commerce of the liquid fire. (Thomas Stratton brought a bottle of whiskey to me which he took from a Clallam Indian this noon under the wharf of the hotel. The Indian said he got it at Sires saloon and it was lowered through the floor to him.)

So too their notions on sex: the white men are ostentatious about preferring women of their own skin, yet Port Townsend has a growing population of half-breed children. (This matter and the previous one meet once in Swan's pages, when he reports that an elderly couple of the Dungeness area have complained of their neighbors that squaws and whiskey were legal tender among them.)

~~These whites~~ ~~the corpses~~  
They are showy as well about their dead, keeping ~~them~~ about for a day or more for the sake of ceremony instead of putting them instantly to rest in the earth.

white-skins, particularly those along Port Townsend's waterfront,  
A good many of ~~them~~ are several baths per annum less clean than the Indians. (Especially less so than the Makahs, of whom Swan at Neah recorded that whenever a grimy task such as flensing a whale carcass was completed, they at once scoured themselves in sand and surf and came out clean and bright as so many new copper tea kettles.)

Above all, this: they are a moody people, hard to predict, their community sometimes boisterous, sometimes dead silent. ~~The day~~ <sup>afternoon</sup>, make it, that Swan and the other townspeople learned that the iron wagons of the railroad would not be coming: watch them from the eyes of Chetzemoka the Duke of York, how the bearded men cluster and mutter and slump away to their houses, how the street stands emptier than empty after them, how even the whiskey voices in the saloons cannot be heard.



You might imagine, the myth already finding words inside your lips, that this odd white tribe had <sup>abruptly</sup> got aboard one of its wheeled boats and gone away.



Day fifty-three

And then Port Townsend would jerk awake again and scarcely blink between excitements. In one span of a dozen weeks Swan inscribes these doings:

# ...Edwin Jones died during the night of heart complaint. He had been playing in the band at a dance in Masonic Hall and was on his way with the rest to Allens to get supper. He stopped in at Urquharts Saloon where he had a room, laid down and died immediately.

# ...About Midnight Wednesday night Bill Leonards cow came into my entry and I drove her out. Then Ike Hall brought a drunk man into his office and I got up to see who it was and took cold by so doing....

# ...A Clallam Indian was cut in the head by another Indian and the squaws came and complained. The Sheriff took the guilty Indian and locked him up.

# ...John Martin stabbed Poker Jack this morning about 2 oclock in Hunts Saloon....

# ...Joseph Nuano the half breed Kanaka-Hawaiian-who murdered Dwyer on San Juan--was hanged today at the Point near the Brewery....

# ...The 6 canoes of Haida Indians who have been camped on Point Hudson for several days left this morning--They first went to Point Wilson where they burnt up the body of a Hydah man who died in Port Discovery 3 days ago-- then they gathered up the bones and carried them off all leaving for Victoria and thence to their homes on Queen Charlottes Islands--



Day fifty-four

Lot of Hydah Indians with me this day in office, the tenth of May of 1873. I copied the tattoo marks on the back and breast of Kitkune. . .

He did indeed, and the creatures from Kitkune's epidermis writhe up at me now, from the pages of Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge No. 267. The breast tattoo is a head-on image of a codfish, twin tails looping beneath its gills to both sides: it is a broadline cartoon of some tropical mouth breather which might gape at you from an aquarium tank. The creatures of the back--a pair of them, sitting up and facing to opposite directions like book ends--are crossbreeds of killer whales and wolves. They have snouted heads with teeth like sawpoints, claws long and pointed as fork tines, broad curved scimitar-like tails, and an extra eye just beneath the neck.

The skin art of the visiting Haidas plainly ~~captivated~~ enchanted Swan. He sketched a dozen of the patterns--the most decorative visitor seems to have been a canoeman named Kit-ka-gens, who ~~displayed~~ had a thunderbird across his back, squids on each thigh, and frogs on each ankle--and lamented that they were but a portion of the whole which were tattooed on the persons of this party. . . Soon another of his letters was ~~off~~ <sup>away</sup> to Baird at the Smithsonian proposing the article for Contributions. (Proposing a bit nervously, given all these whalewolves and ankling frogs: the Haidas, Swan assured Baird, are no more grotesque in their attempts to imitate nature than are our designs of griffins, dragons, unicorns and other fabulous animals.)

His fascination with the Haidas is more than understandable. They surge in the history of this coast as a Pacific Northwest version of Vikings.



Writers are ~~habitual about~~ ~~captivated with~~ the analogy of raids down from northern waters, canoes like small dragonships, fur-shirted warriors bursting up from the thwarts to do battle. Swan never blazons that comparison, and I think he was right. The Haidas of his time amply deserve attention entirely as Haidas. Undo the past and disperse a few hundred thousand Haidas along this coast from their home islands of northern British Columbia, the Queen Charlottes, south as far as the mouth of the Columbia River between Washington and Oregon, prime them with firepower equal to ours, and white civilization still might be waiting to set its first foot ashore here. The Haidas from all I can judge would have warred implacably as long as we could have stood it, then negotiated us to a frazzle.

The actual arithmetic is that as late as 1835, perhaps as many as six thousand Haidas ~~lived~~ <sup>dwelled</sup> in the Queen Charlotte Islands and by 1885 there were eight hundred. Alcohol and other allurements of white frontier society had made their usual toll of a traditional way of life, but more terrible harvest yet, civilization's diseases killed these warrior people like kittens. A smallpox epidemic in 1862 spread north out of Victoria and devastated what was left of the natives of the British Columbia coastline. No one knew the total of corpses--a ship's captain counted a casual hundred scattered along the shores like flotsam on his voyage from the Stikene River to Victoria--but the estimate has been that of a coastal Indian population of perhaps sixty thousand, one-third perished. Among the Haidas that smallpox outbreak obliterated several particularly strong villages along the remote lengthy western margin of the Queen Charlottes archipelago. That west shore population, reported a visiting geographer in 1866, "has become wholly extinct;" every Haida had left in terror or stayed and died.



If the Haidas were a diminished tribe, in unaccustomed baffled retreat to the safest of their shores, they remained a profound academy of artists. Besides the tattoo pages in Swan's Contributions article he drew a few of the stone carvings the visiting Haidas had brought with them, <sup>i</sup>minatures of the carved cedar <sup>columns</sup>poles which soared in their villages, and I can barely pull my gaze from the one that <sup>proffers</sup>has four fantastic figures lined one atop the other. Just what the merry hell is going on here, it is not clear at first. Count on Swan to explain the foursome into two sets of two creatures:

. . . the lower one is Hoorts the bear holding in his paws the Stoo or crayfish. The upper figure is the Tsching or Tsing, the beaver, holding the Tl-kam-kostan or frog. . . The Indian, however rude or grotesque his carvings or paintings may be, is always true to nature. He knows that the bears eat crabs, crayfish and other littoral marine crustacea, and that the frog is the fresh-water companion of the beaver. . . If the carver had reversed the grouping, he would have been laughed at by his friends. . .

The linework is as fluid as the logic; no inch of the carving is without some thrust of action, something amazing about to begin. The beaver could be some creature of Mayan art gone mad; the frog he holds looks like some semi-human doing a handstand while wearing a gas mask; the bear could be a South Seas version of a jolly grizzly; the crayfish being plucked up backwards into his jaws is clearly from <sup>some far star.</sup>Venus. Restless skilled minds <sup>move</sup>are behind this deftly stacked menagerie; minds which took magic from the forest, had the power to draw the coastal fir wilderness and its beings into the brain like fog into a cave and joyously <sup>K</sup>made them art.



Swan caught an idea from the Haidas during that day of tattoo tracing in his Port Townsend office, and it became the underpattern of his Contributions article: the Haidas were a most intriguing tribe--of larger than the natives of the Strait-- stature, better proportion, and lighter complexion whose home villages in the Queen Charlotte Islands--a healthy picturesque territory--ought to be visited--if the Government would empower some person here, and appropriate sufficient funds to be expended--by someone probably named Swan.

# That notion persisted, I find, as if one of the Haida <sup>tattooists</sup> had engraved it on the inside of Swan's forehead. Entrancement with the Haidas' vivacious art surely has gripped Swan here, but I wonder whether something more is not urging him as well: a longing to step away, if only temporarily, to new territory. To the next west he can find (...a healthy picturesque territory...). Catching his third wind, so to speak, after having moved his life to California and then to the Washington coastline, Swan looks to me ready--yearnful--to venture again, and he would be typical enough of his era (and mine, now that I count up my own veers) to do so.

Whatever ran in his mind here in 1873, over the next years Swan's letters to Baird say steadily this: I am more desirous of making explorations in the Queen Charlotte Island Group than of doing anything else.

And Baird's to him say as steadily only: I hope that one of these days. . .

p. 207A follows →



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Later: something remembered as I stare at Swan's sketch of Beaver fondling Frog, Bear sampling Crayfish. When we returned from our time in Britain six years ago Carol brought with her a recording of African Sanctus, the fusion of African songs and dances with Western choir music, and began to use it in her semantics course to show the queer capturing power of rhythm, the vast sophistication of "primitive" folk art. The Haida work is something like that awesome Sanctus: anthems of existence, modulation upon modulation of the creaturedom which we too belong to. Carved music.