In continental outline, the United States rides the map as a
galleon carpentered together from left-over slabs: plankish bowsprit
ascending at northernmost Maine, line of keel cobbled along Gulf
shores and southwest border (Florida the Armada-surplus anchor chain
hung fat with seaweed), surprising long clean amidship straightness
of the 49th parallel across the upper Midwest and West.
This ship of states is, by chance, prowling eastward. Or
as I prefer to think of it, the figurehead and bow are
awallow in the Atlantic while potent Pacific tides gather
beneath our aft portion of the craft.

But. Trace to the last of this land vessel at the westernmost
reach of the state of Washington, to the final briefest tacked-on
deckline of peninsula. There is Cape Flattery, where the Makahs
of James G. Swan's years lived and where I am traveling today.

Towns thin down abruptly along this farthest-west promontory.

In the sixty-five mile stretch beyond Port Angeles, only three--
Clallam Bay; within sight of it, Sekiu; then after fifteen final
miles of dodgy road, Neah Bay--and each one tightly hugs some cove
in the northern shoreline of the cape, as if grateful to have been
rolled ashore out of the cold wallowing waters of the Strait.

The tiny communities exist on logging and seasonal salmon fishing,
and as such places do, produce ample vacant time for their citizens
to eye one another. The man beside me this morning at the Sekiu
cafe counter
was working his way through hash browns, sunny-side eggs, toast, sausage, coffee, and vehemence.

"That kid," he grumped across the room to the waitress, "that kid never did make much of a showing for himself around here. Glad to see him gone." An instant later, of someone else: "Never liked that lamebrained SOB anyway." As fork and tongue flashed, a close contest whether his meal or the local population would be chomped through first.

At Neah Bay, now at mid-morning, I am the one looked at, for my red beard and black watch cap. The Makahs of Neah Bay have been studying odd white faces in their streets for well over two hundred years. One story is that

an early Russian sailing vessel smashed ashore at Cape Flattery, and Swan believed those survivors, and perhaps other voyagers, had left their genetic calling cards. Some have black hair; very dark brown eyes, almost black; high cheekbones, and dark copper-colored skin; others have reddish hair, and a few, particularly among the children, light flaxen locks... It is definite that Spanish mariners arrived in the late eighteenth century

arrived to build a clay-brick fort, which seems to have lasted about as long as it took them to erect it. Every so often Swan and a few interested Indians would poke around in the Spanish shards, and the sight would stir up righteousness in Swan: How different our position from theirs. They came to conquer. We are here to render benefit.

The Makahs might care to argue that point of benefit,
after a hundred and twenty years as a Reservation people the Makahs might care to argue that point of benefit under United States governance. Neah Bay meets the visitor as a splatter of weather-whipped houses, despite its age a tentative town seemingly pinned into place by the heavy government buildings at its corners: the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices, the Coast Guard enclave, the Air Force base on the opposite neck of the peninsula. One building stands out alone in grace, a museum being built by the tribal council to display the finds from an archeological dig southward along the coast at Cape Alava. Despite the museum's brave thrust and the bulky federal presence, the dark forested hills which crowd the bay seem simply to be waiting until the right moonless night to take back the townsite.

I have brought with me the copied portions of Swan's diaries where he writes about the place of Cape Flattery in the tribal geography of the North Pacific. Remoteness and the empty expanses of Strait and ocean would seem to dominate such a site, but that was not the case at all when Swan lived with the Neah Bay villagers in the early 1860's. He found them carrying on a complicated war of nerves, and occasionally muscles, which would do credit to any adventurous modern nation; south, north and east, the Makahs looked from their pinnacle of land toward a tribal
neighbor they were at issue with.

The calmest of these rivalries extended southward, about a day's canoe journey down the coast to where the Quillayute tribe lived. The Makahs suspected the Quillayutes of having killed one of their whaling crews which had been blown downcoast by storm. This tale reached Swan time after time at Neah Bay, occasionally with the added note that the murdered Makahs since had been seen as owls with shells hanging from their bills similar to those worn by Makahs in their noses.

Suspicion of the Quillayutes remained a matter of muttering, however. With the Elwha Clallams, east along the Strait, the issue was their killing of Swell, and it rankled hard and often. In Swan's diary months, Neah Bay jousts repeatedly with Elwha over the dead young chieftain. Early on, Swan and a Makah canoe crew returning from Port Townsend brought back with them a Clallam chief who wanted to talk peace. The Clallam breakfasted with Swell's brother Peter, everyone seemed to be pleasant and friendly, but the point was sledged home to the Clallams: It is generally understood that if they will kill...Charlie entire peace will be restored. Weeks later, Clallams came back to parley some more, to no further result. Months later, a Makah elder suddenly announced that he would set
fire to Swell's monument because the white men had not arranged vengeance for his murder. In evident inspiration, the Makahs now scored a move:

*Today Peter stole a squaw from Capt. Jack, one of the Clallam Indians who was here on a visit. The squaw was part Elwha and Peter took her as a hostage to enforce pay from the Elwhas for robbing and killing Swell a year and a half ago. The ransom fell through, one of the Makah tribal elders allowed the woman to escape. Peter came to me today with a very heavy heart in consequence of the squaw having absconded.*

Just then, the attention of the Makahs pivoted abruptly northward, across the Strait. Word came that one of their number had killed a chief of the Arhosett tribe on the west coast of Vancouver Island... *Sah tay hub getting angry* because the Arhosett Indian would not agree to his terms, stabbed him with his knife.

Here was a bladed version of Swell's death, this time with the Makahs on the delivering end, and Swan records Neah Bay's jitters about the Arhosetts voyaging down on them in revenge:... *a whooping and yelling all night occasionally firing off guns to show their bravery. No enemy however appeared.*

Tension now on two fronts, and during a potlatch at
Neah Bay a number of tribesmen from the outlying Makah villages said they wanted peace at least with the Clallams. But Peter said that he would never be satisfied until he received pay in some shape for the murder of his brother...

Next, however, intelligence reached the Makahs—and of course Swan's pen—that the Arhosetts were having their own problems of pride. This forenoon Frank told me that he had just received news from his father, old Cedakanim of Clyoquot. It appears that the Arhosett Indians have been trying to induce the Clyoquots to join them in an attack on the Makahs... They offered 100 blankets and 20 Makah women as slaves provided they could catch them. Cedakanim and the other Clyoquot chief rejected this offer and demanded a steamboat, a sawmill and a barrel of gold. This difference of opinion came near resulting in a fight but at length old Cedakanim told them he would not fight the Makahs nor did he want any pay from the Arhosetts as he was much richer than they and to prove this he ordered 100 pieces of blubber to be given them... This, said Frank, made the Arhosetts so ashamed that the sweat ran out of their faces...

Perhaps deciding that it would be easier to negotiate with enemies than allies of Cedakanim's sort, the Arhosetts held back to see what might be forthcoming from Neah Bay.
Agent Webster suggested to the Makahs that they offer the Arhosetts a peace settlement of, say, twenty blankets; the U.S. government would provide ten of the blankets. Given the prospect of getting out of a possible war at the cost of only ten blankets of their own, the Makahs made a show. They nominated Swan as plenipotentiary:

...the Indians wish me to go over to the Arhosetts and find out if they are willing to settle the affair by a payment to them of blankets, and if so the Arhosetts were to be invited to come over and get them, but we were not to carry anything at first to them but merely to find out the state of their feelings.

As it turned out, the Arhosetts did not even have the satisfaction of receiving an envoy from the Makahs. Swan sent word to them through Cedakanim, the Cyloquot chief who had faced them down with his wealth of blubber, and eventually two Arhosetts arrived at Neah Bay to say they would settle for the blankets.

Peace ensued for two weeks, until the Elwhas protested that a cousin of Peter had wounded with a knife the brother of Swell's killer, Charlie. Peter responded that he was sorry--sorry that Charlie's brother had only been wounded instead of killed, for he would do it himself if he could get a chance.

Peter being Peter, a chance did come. There is this
ultimate entry by Swan: Tried to get Indians to go to Pt. Angeles for Mr. Webster but all are afraid as Peter on his trip down killed an Indian at Crescent Bay. The Indian was an Elwha and some years ago killed Dukwitsa's father. Peter obtained a bottle and a half of whiskey from a white man at Crescent Bay and while under its influence was instigated by Dukwitsa to kill the Elwha which he did by stabbing him. Peter told me that after he had stabbed the man several times he broke the blade of the knife off in the man's body.

As might be expected, that stabbing invited battle. As might not be expected, the battle lines shaped themselves not between the Makahs and the Elwhas, but the Makahs and the United States. These years at Cape Flattery had been passing with remarkable tranquility between the natives and the white newcomers, as Swan was aware: I have been reading this evening the report of the Comm. of Indian Affairs and it seems singular to be able to sit here in peace and quiet on this, the most remote frontier of the United States, and read of the hostilities among the tribes between this Territory and the eastern settlements. Peter's knife punctured that state of affairs. Swan's narrative begins to show move, counter-move, counter-counter-move:

Mr. Webster arrested Peter this evening and took him
on board the sch. A.J. Westen to be taken to Steilacoom, the territorial army headquarters.

...A canoe with a party of Indians followed the schooner and this evening it was reported that they had rescued Peter and conveyed him to Kiddekubbut. I think this report doubtful. But later...ascertained it was true....Old Capt. John and 16 others came this forenoon to make me a prisoner and keep me as long as Mr. Webster keeps Peter but when they found that Peter had escaped they came to tell me not to be afraid. I said I was not afraid of any of them and gave them a long lecture. John said I had a skookum tumtum—a brave heart.

...The steamer Cyrus Walker with a detachment of 33 soldiers under Lieut. Kestler arrived at Neah Bay about midnight of Tuesday...The steamer with Mr. Webster on board proceeded to Kiddekubbut and succeeded in arresting 14 Indians: Peter and thirteen others.

Peter now vanishes from the Neah Bay chronicle, to Swan's considerable relief. I have tried for the past three years to make Mr. Webster believe what a bad fellow Peter is, the diary splutters in farewell.

A fairly fiery record, these few years of bravado and occasional bloodshed by the Makahs. Yet it might be remembered that while this sequence of bluff and bravado and occasional bloodshed was occurring at Cape Flattery,
Swan's own kin, the United States of America, and its cousin tribe, the Confederated States of America, were inventing modern mass war at Antietam and Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. If it is a question as to which civilization in those years was more casual with life, the Makahs don't begin to compete with the Civil War's creeks of blood.

A few hours in Neah Bay, fitting its geography onto Swan's era--a breakwater, built in the name of World War II security, now stretches from the west headland of the bay to Waadan Island; the Bureau of Indian Affairs buildings top the eastern point where Webster's trading post stood--and I turn toward the ocean. Cape Flattery is, as I have said, as far west as you can go on the mainland forty-eight states of America, but along its Pacific extremity there are thrusts of cliff actually out into the ocean; ultimate sharp points of landscape as if a new compass heading had been devised for here, west-of-west.

From a logging road I climb down the forest trail to the tip of the Cape's longest finger of headland. At the trailhead the Makah Tribal Council has nailed up alarming signs...Rugged High Cliffs...Extremely Dangerous Area... enter at own risk. The final brink of the trail lives up to them by simply snapping off into mid-air.

There, some eighty or hundred feet above the Pacific,
rides an oceanlooker's perch, an oval of white hardpack clay about twenty feet wide and twice as long. A clawmilk hardness for this last talon of cliff. Behind, on all sides, the continent shears away, leaves me to water and air.

Surf pounds underfoot with surprisingly little noise, but wind makes up for it. I crouch carefully, not to be puffed off the continent, and look out the half-mile or so to Tatoosh, the lighthouse island here at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. While at Tatooch, Swan entered in his diary on July 18, 1864, counted 18 vessels in sight.

Now machines instead of humans operate the Tatoosh light, visitors are none, and the tiny white cluster of lighthouse, residential quarters, water tower, and a collapsing shed are visual echoes of emptiness. Tatoosh simply rests out there like a fat stepping stone off the end of the continent, and the next foothold beyond it is Asia.

In the 1860's the Makah tribesmen told Swan that below these cliffs, in hours of calm water, they sometimes hunted seals. Caves are said to drill back in very far at the base of the cliffs, and so a Makah would approach by canoe, swim or wade in with a lighted torch and a knife, and stalk back.
along the tunnelled floor of the cave until he came onto
drowsing seals. The blaze of the torch confused the animals,
and the hunter took the chance of their confusion to stab
them.

There was risk, Swan noted. **Occasionally the torch**
will go out, and leave the cavern in profoundest darkness.

**Profoundest darkness, and naked knife-bearing men who**
would wade into it. Even if you do not know that story, to stand
atop this last rough end of the continent is to have it come to
mind: what humans could do before they found other, easier routes.
roof beams, as well, a fussy touch that I particularly like. Summers in Montana when I worked as a ranch hand, I spent time in bunkhouses papered this way, and neatness made a difference. Always there were interesting events looming out at you—BANKS CLOSE; Japs BOMB GUNBOAT—
or some frilly matron confiding the value of liver pills, and the effect was lost if the newsprint had been slapped on upside down or sideways.

This homestead of Ahlstrom's never quite worked out. Regularly he went off into the Olympic Mountains on logging jobs and other hire to earn a living. On the other hand, it went on never quite working out for five and a half decades, until Ahlstrom, at eighty-six, suffered a foot infection and had to move to Port Angeles for the last year or two of his life.

I think of Swan and Ahlstrom, who missed each other by forty years on this mossy prairie between Alava and Ozette, and judge that if time could be rewoven to bring them together, they would be quite taken with one another. Swan promptly diaries down the facts of the life of Mr. Ahlstrom... arrived in America from Sweden at the age of 20 years...
laying down a quantity of small cedar puncheons...the rain here does not allow his fruit trees to thrive but his garden looks finely...

Ahlstrom, with his reputation for conviviality with travelers, takes note of Swan's reputation as a cook and proffers the chance for him to chef a meal for the two of them--maybe halibut cheeks or some other of Swan's coastal favorites.
The trail again, ours and Swan's.

After crossing the second prairie we again enter the forest and after rising a gentle eminence descend into a ravine through which runs a small brook. Our two hunters who had kept the lead and as it seemed to me had walked at an unnecessarily rapid rate here stopped to bathe themselves and while they were doing so the rest of our party came up and we all rested a few minutes.

Exactly so. And then the lake, obscure and moody Ozette.

Here we found an old hut made in the rudest manner with a few old splits of cedar and showing evidence of having been used as a frequent camping ground by the Hosett hunters. An old canoe split in two was lying in front and bones and horns of elk were strewn about. An Indian water box and a kettle made of bark were the only cooking implements we found.

Now the premises which come into sight are National Park display centers, and rangers' quarters.
Swan had a curiously threatening experience at the lakeside. It was nearly sundown when we arrived and I had barely time to make a hasty sketch of the lake before it was dark. We had walked out very rapidly and I was in a great heat on my arrival and my clothes literally saturated with perspiration. I imprudently drank pretty freely of the lake water which had the effect of producing a severe cramp in both of my legs which took me some time to overcome, which I did however by walking about and rubbing the cramped part briskly. I said nothing to the Indians as I did not wish them to know anything ailed me, but at times I thought I should have to ask their assistance.

So he saved face, and evidently something more. What struck at him with those moments of dismay in his legs—the uncertainty of how the Aakahs might react to an ailment? The remoteness of Ozette itself, like a vast watery void in the forest?
Day three

Sour ink today, Swan's and mine both. Again I am alone in
the house, six days now, and the fact echoes. I miss Carol
like the inner-ear pivot that produces sense of balance. Need
her lanky stride to unsilence the hallway to this writing room,
her staccato typing to stir the air,

Death Valley of desperation this
her grin to tweak my musing. I even,

must be, miss her purse.

The gray moodless weather does not help. Generally I take the
view of Swan seemed to: count it a bonny day whenever the wind isn't
ripping the roof from the house. Today I would wave away the
equilibrium overhead, No winter I have spent in the Pacific Northwest--
this will be the twelfth--ever has been as damply bland as the season's
reputation. There can be weeks when a traffic of storms will swoop
as the Pacific repeatedly tries to throw itself into the air and out
across the continent. Other durations when the days come open-skied
and glittering, the mountains of the Olympic and Cascade ranges a spill
of rough, white gems along two entire horizons. Rain or brave thin
days of sun, then, Northwest winter to me is restless, startful:
except when it follows me onto dead-center.
Turn to Swan, that other winterer. To something else this mulling day would like to see changed. As I have told, by the time Swan spoke goodbye to Matilda and the East in the first month of 1850, there were two children of the divided household: Ellen, four, and Charles, seven. In that moment, Swan jettisoned them; left them as part of his passage price, which he seems to have been little enough agonized about assuming, for his leaving of New England.

At about the age of Charles, I was jettisoned myself, by the death of my mother. Following my father up and down our Montana ranching valley, I began to learn that a sundered family can heal strongly across the break. If,
that is, the remaining parent possesses strength, and I think we can grant that Matilda likely had her share of that. Hard witness that I am today, then, I am able to wish for Charles and Ellen only that they could have come argonauting with Swan. To reverse him in the imagination from stepping aboard the ship to San Francisco is merely to see him spend his time on the Boston waterfront, or any other waterfront, in preference to being under the family roof. But could they have grown up at his inquisitive side here along the Pacific, learning the Indian languages as he did, poking along the coast with him into the bays he appraised like a portraitist, stooping as he did to the frontier's odd bouquets of camas and kinnickinnick and skunk cabbage, what western venturers that daughter and that son might have been.

—could not except as I would reimagine their lives—

Come they did not, of course, and so, except for Swan's scanty visits back to Boston, heard their father's voice only from across the continent, the paper echo of mail, for the next half century.