Day one

Capt. John was here today, Swan writes from a century ago, and

I related to him a dream I had last night, in which I saw several

Indians I formerly knew who are dead. John said it was a sign the

"memelose" or dead people are my friends and I would soon see that

they would do something to show their friendship. Fifteen minutes

past nine. Out in the dark, the Sound wind

visits favorite trees, is shaken off, hankers along the valley in

stubborn search. The gusting started up hours ago, during the

wink-like pause of daylight that is December evening, and by now

seems paced to try to last the night. Until the wind arrived the

day was nordic: sunless, but silent and dry. The neighborhood's

lion-colored cat, inspector-general of such days, all this morning

tucked himself atop the board fence outside the north window of my

writing room. Out of his doze each several minutes a sharp cat

ear would twitch; give the air a tan flick just to be certain it

still could. Then the self-hug into snooze again.
The breakers, the third morning after Swan's dream, tore up the beach and rooted out immense numbers of clams which were thrown up by the surf. I gathered a few buckets full and soon the squaws and Indians came flocking up like so many gulls and gathered at least fifty bushels... Nineteen eighteen. I see, by leaning to hear into the wind, that the night-black window which faces west off the end of my desk collects the half of me above the desktop and the 

copied diary page into quiet of my own. My square-bearded face reflected there could be a photographic plate of any of the museful old Scotsmen who transplanted our family name to the western mountains of America. I think of another of Swan's wanderings. The time he tells of a Peninsular settler driven to highest fury when some visiting Indians were clumsy with a canoe mast being stowed for the night and crashed an end through the hard-bought one window of the homestead cabin. This suburban house glints with thirteen more windows besides the glass my reflection occupies, windows to every direction and inclination. Wobbly mast-bearers could pass none of my walls without creating crystal.
Nine twenty. Capt. John told me, the morning following the clam bonanza, that
the cause of the great quantity of Clams on the beach yesterday was
the dead people I dreamed about the other night and they put the
clams there to show their friendship....

Nine twenty-one, and now winter. Winter, in fact, with a fat
numerical bong: arrival at precisely 2121 hours of December 21.

Captain John could do plenty with that. In his spirit, let it
signify that we have been clocked through solstice—the wind and
I and the fencetop cat, and yes, Swan and Captain John and the
restless memories of departed Makahs. From here, from the bend
of this moment, we are in the coastal season of beginnings.
Day two

His name was James Gilchrist Swan, and we will see it to be more than a prank of language that his own era looked on him as distinctly an odd duck. I have felt my pull toward him ever since some forgotten writing pursuit or another landed me into the coastal region of history where he presides, meticulous as a usurer's clerk, diarying and diarying that life of his, four generations and as many lightyears from my own.

This is the 18th day since Swell was shot and there is no offensive smell from the corpse. It may be accounted for in this manner. He was shot through the body and afterwards washed in the breakers, consequently all the blood in him must have run out. He was then rolled up tight in 2 new blankets and put into a new box, nailed up strong.

I know the beach at Crescent Bay where the life of Swell, the chieftain of the Makah tribe, was snapped off. Across on the Canadian shore of the Strait of Juan de Fuca the lights of modern Victoria now make a spread of white embers atop the burn-dark rim of coastline. But on Swell's final winter night in 1861, only a beach campfire at Crescent on our southern shore flashed bright enough to attract the eye, and Swell misread it as an encampment of traveling members of his own tribe. Instead, he stepped from his canoe to find that the overnighters were of the Elwha village of the Clallam tribe, among them chanced to be a particular rival of Swell, and his bullet spun the Makah dead into the cold surf.
It was a killing less casual than the downtown deaths
my morning newspaper brings me three or four times a week--
the Elwhas and the Makahs at least had the excuse of lifetimes
of quarrel--or that I could go see in aftermath, eligible as
I am for all manner of intrusion because of being a writer,
were I to accompany the Seattle homicide squad. James G. Swan
did go hurrying to be beside Swell's corpse, and there the
first of our differences is marked.

Truth told, I find among Swan's words that more than one
motive carried him west along the Strait from Port Townsend
to the death scene. Swell was his best-regarded friend among
the coastal tribes, a man he had voyaged with, learned legends
from. Swan's diary pages show them steadily swapping favors:
now Swell detailing for Swan the Makahs' skill at hunting
whales, now Swan painting for Swell in red and black his
name and a horse on his canoe sail. Swell said he always
went faster in his canoe than the other Indians . . . like a
horse, so he wanted to have one painted . . . But solid as
the comradeship may have been, so was Swan's Yankee instinct
to retrieve the goods which Swell had been consigned to bring
home by canoe to another of Swan's coastal acquaintances, a
trader situated at the western extent of the Strait. From
the merchants of Port Townsend, Swan compiles a list of
Swell's cargo, then in his small quick hand sums his resolve:
Must therefore look for 1 British tea pot, 1 small brass
kettle, 1 tin trunk ...

I ponder this, mulling what it would take to send me off on such an errand... a crate of books, the chance to hear a grand story... But then, this winter, this deliberate season of frontier, is itself a fetch of this sort...

A morning soon after learning of Swell's death, having traveled with a friendly chieftain of the Clallam band nearest to Port Townsend, Swan strolled into the Elwha village. Charley, the murderer, then got up and made a speech. He said that he shot Swell for two reasons, one of which was, that the Mackahshad killed two of the Elwha's a few months previous, and they were determined to kill a Mackah chief to pay for it. And the other reason was, that Swell had taken his squaw away, and would not return either the woman or the fifty blankets he had paid for her. Swan then haggled out of Charley the potwear, several blankets and a dozen yards of calico. I could not help feeling while standing up alongside this murderer, surrounded by the residents of the village (some 75 persons), that I would gladly give a pull at the rope that should hang him...

That day's chastisement remained the product of vocal cords rather than hemp, however. When Swan was done, it became the turn of the visiting chieftain to erupt to his Clallam cousins about the paltry compensation Charley was handing over. This talk produced two more blankets which closed the business.
Swan next carried the matter of Swell's death to the federal Indian agent for Washington Territory. Met in conclusion there. Sent a seething letter to the newspaper in the territorial capital of Olympia... an Indian peaceably passing on his way home in his canoe, laden with white men's goods... foully murdered... agents of our munificent government have not the means at their disposal to defray the expenses of going to arrest the murderer... And at last canoed once more along the Strait to accompany Swell, still nailed up strong, for the hundred miles to burial at the Makah village of Neah Bay.

There, Swell's brother Peter came and wished me to go with him and select a suitable spot to bury Swell...

I did as he desired, marked out the spot and dug out the first sand.

And this further: He also brought up the large tomanawas boards--the Makahs' cedar tableaus of magic which would be the grave's monument--of Swell for me to paint anew...
There, then, is Swan, or at least a start on him. A man from Boston asked to trace afresh the sacred designs of a buried Makah chieftain. I can think of few circumstances less likely, unless they are mine: an onlooker who has set himself a winter's appointment back several many dozens of years and across geography to the Olympic Peninsula and elsewhere along the coastal tracery of Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and indeed into the life of a person born 1.21 years before him. Yet this is all a journey I have awaited for a decade, ever since I began to be aware of how powerfully, among the very earliest, I am bonded to this last margin of the land. Swan was early from whence in stepping the paths of westering impulse that pull across America's girth of plains and over its continental summit and at last nip off here at the surf of the Pacific. I am at last interested to see how it is that those paths that for so many years carried him now hold me.

James G. Swan had hastened west in the same scurry as
many thousands of other mid-nineteenth-century Americans. Their word isn't much known today, but at the time they were called argonauts, the seekers drawn by the finds of gold in California streambeds as if they had glimpsed wisps of the glittering fleece that lured Jason and his Greeks. Like Jason's, their journey generally was by ship, the very impatience for wealth-to-come evidently weighting the sailing vessels to slowness. Swan stepped aboard the Rob Roy in Boston harbor on the twenty-fifth of January, 1850, climbed off at San Francisco on August eighth.

What exact cache of promises and excuses this man of New England had left behind in eastern America isn't known in detail, but they likely were considerable. Something of the bulk and awkwardness of my own, I suppose, when I went off from Montana ranching to college and a typewriter. Swan was 32½ years old when he set foot on the Pacific Coast. By the time of his birth in 1818--Turgenev's year, Karl Marx's year--in the north-of-Boston village of Medford, the Swan family name already had been in Massachusetts for eighteen decades, evidently the devout achieving sort of New England clan which began to count itself gentry from the moment the Indians could be elbowed out of sight into the forest. Merchants, doctors, educators, lawyers populate the generations. Swan's own older brothers stayed standard, Samuel as physician, Benjamin a minister.
But not James. He evidently took the excuse that occasional seafarers had cropped up in the family—likely a legendarily adventurous uncle, and more recently his own father, said to have been lost in a gale while captaining a brig back from Africa in 1823—and in his mid-teens Swan started in on the try of a waterfront life in Boston.

Dallying around the docks, first as a clerk with a shipping firm and eventually as a merchandiser of ships' supplies, must have suited the young Swan comfortably enough. With forests of sail sweeping back and forth before his eyes, and the new steam vessels shuddering to life around him, this adventurer of the waterfront made no ocean voyage of his own until he was twenty-three. Then he embarked on a Boston-to-Liverpool jaunt with a chore or two of his employer's business attached, and seems to have been content to do it just the once.

That once to Britain, however, put Swan's writing hand into motion. The long, brownish, tatty-edged manuscript pages are ten years the earliest of all Swan's surviving paperwork, and must be a version he copied from his pocket notebook—it would have been the start of that habit, too— as soon as he returned to America. By my terms, this wan sheaf of paper comes as ancient as a cave painting. Any comparable paperwork having to do with the Doig family would be drily governmental, in the Scottish archives, and likely would show us irretrievably in arrears on croft taxes or enlisting
one of our number to die an infantry death in Madras or the
Crimea. It is a bonus of magic for me, then, that the pages
of Swan's life from his own hand begin here on March second
1841, and recite the month in which he rambled interestedly
around Britain.

And how keen, assiduous an account his squinched little
lines of ink are. Weather, conveyance, schedule, meals,
roadside fields, birds of those fields, even Swan's morning
disposition: _I was very stupid today, the sixteenth of March,
from the want of sleep last night & for the first time since
I left home I felt really homesick & would have been glad to
have been home but as soon as I walked out I felt much relieved
& hope to get my thoughts on a business train after a good
nights rest_ all come on report at the nib of his pen. So
too the impress of Britain of Dickens's time. Liverpool
astounds and horrifies this Bostonian with the hurlly-burly
of its streets: ... female scavengers. ... go round with
baskets & collect all the manure & offal in the city which
they put in heaps & offer then for sale. Their heaps are
bought by the gardeners for a few pence to enrich the garden
beds--It struck me as the filthiest work I had ever seen a
woman engaged in & more especially as they use nothing but
their hands to work with. Then the proverbial fishwives,
a queer lot of beings & probably the lowest of the human
race ... They go screaming round the streets like so many
gulls... Quickly, the unsurprising exclamation: Liverpool is a shocking dirty place & I am sick enough of it.

But London he thinks a wondrous city... walked two hours this morning in one direction & every step of the way the street was crowded with people & vehicles. His young American eyes have not seen the like except possibly on a Boston market day when a drawbridge over the Charles River would hold up traffic, the crowd then is just the same as the streets are here all the time from sunrise to sunset.

He glimpses the young queen, Victoria, trundling out of the Buckingham Palace grounds on her way to church... had a good sight of her face as she was looking out the carriage window... quite pretty, Swan considers her, in a little blue silk bonnet. He is drawn back and back to the magnificent dome of St. Paul's, even though the Easter service there seems to him mumbled over in a very bad manner. Tours the new museum of wax figures shown by an old French woman & her son--the Tussauds--who are making a deal of money out of this affair. Rides the night mail train from London back to Liverpool: they go with the greatest velocity sometimes 50 miles an hour--the fastest travel in the world of its time--only stopping to get water.

I quote wholesale from Swan among the Britons because here I sense him testing his stride. This careful manuscript by a twenty-three-year-old begins the marathon of ink-and-paper
which will continue until a new century, our century, signals an end. He arrived at the last line of this British journey having seen a great deal to admire & much to censure...

That is the exact Swan I have begun to hear speaking to me, out of the accumulating pages on my desk, here at our shared edge of landscape.

Banquet of details, snifters of opinion.

Something else of moment happened to Swan that year of 1841. He married rather above himself. Matilda Loring, of a prominent Boston printing and publishing family, a small neatly-built woman with a firm line of jaw, became his bride on the twenty-sixth of October. Of the courtship and its aftermath, Swan's pen is conspicuously silent. But from the circumstances, this must have become one of those marriages where it afterward is unclear whether the wife chided because the husband took on the world's whiskey as a personal challenge, or the husband fled into the bottle because the wife was a shrike. What is plain enough is that Swan continued to court the bottle even after, in the eighth year of marriage to Matilda, he pointed himself west across America.

I hunger to have overheard the exact words of that decision. Swan and Matilda were living apart by the year 1849, he in a Boston boarding house handy to his waterfront life; she in Chelsea with the two children of the divided household, four-year-old Ellen and seven-year-old Charles—and did Swan simply come onto the porch one day and offer, Matilda, I have been thinking I will go to California? Whatever the severing sentence, a mass chorus of husbandly farewells could have been heard in the gold-struck America of that moment. Counts the excuse-makers
on their way out the door for El Dorado in 1848, before gold, the non-native population of California seems to have totaled fewer than fifteen thousand. By 1852, that figure was a quarter million, and James Gilchrist Swan long since in the sum.

The many weeks to round Cape Horn in 1850, the long climbing voyage along the Pacific shores, arrival: and then Swan was like a good many of us ever since in not quite knowing what to make of California. I am reminded that only months ago Carol and I drove casually through the Sierra Nevada foothills where the gold towns had blossomed and found all rivers bucking in high white fury and daily reports of rafting Californians drowning themselves. "Damn river is like Niagara Falls laid out flat," somebody complained, and so the waters of the lode country all looked. To the annals of exasperation about forest fires, earthquake and drought heard during our previous California journeys we now added crazed streams, and wondered to one another when the place makes to catch its breath. Certainly already was in full exotic gallop when Swan disembarked one-hundred-twenty-eight years ago. Dozens, scores of deserted ships clogged the San Francisco harbor, a fleet of Marie Celestes left ghostly by crews which had swarmed to the goldstrikes.

Swan himself completed the pilgrimage up the Sacramento to the mining camps, but only as a purser on a river steamer.
He hesitated in that job, and at the firm's dockside office in San Francisco, for only a matter of weeks, then signed on as the purser of a schooner bound for Hawaii to take on a cargo of potatoes.

Why he so promptly went sailing off for spuds is not known, but the jaunt into the Pacific seems to have been instructive enough. Swan managed to linger at Lahaina for twenty-five days, and one of his rare surviving letters to Matilda gives a dozen pages of blunderbuss observations of the islands and islanders... on great occasions or when the white men will pay the expenses they get up a feast called a Lu wow... This Lu wow consists of a series of Baked dishes such as Dogs Hogs Turkeys fowls fish Fruits and Greens... Their native dances being prohibited are only given by stealth or by express invitation of the whites. They are called Hoolah hoolah. I was desirous of seeing one... The natives all call themselves mickonaree or missionary which is the term they use to express their ideas of christianity... there are but very few really sincere & devout persons among them. and are mostly like one I saw in Mr. Bolles store, who was cutting up some capers, when Mr B remarked, I thought you was a missionary Yes said the fellow pointing to his mouth "me mickonary here, all rest no mickonary."

Say for Swan, however, that censorious as he sometimes
could be, generally when writing eastward, he most often ended up as he did now in final lines to Matilda. All these islands have something of interest attached to them which is well worth the time of the curious to investigate and I never yet found that information was useless to any one. ... much pleased with the result of my voyage and hope I may never be doomed to meet with worse people than I have parted with. . . .

Faithfully & Affectionately, your Husband. . . .

Back from that Hawaiian sojourn, Swan at once settled again into a dockside way of life in San Francisco, through the rest of 1850, and through 1851, and through most of 1852. Money always slid through his pockets almost without stopping, and he evidently found life sufficiently interesting by just being away from Massachusetts and alongside the rougher torrent of California waterfront traffic. This routine indeed seems to have been very like the career he had left in Boston except that he could do it at about half-speed and without regard for hometown opinion: laxities which have been among the traditional rewards of the west ever since there was an America. Then, late in 1852, down from the Oregon country arrived Charles J. W. Russell.

A self-described oyster entrepreneur, this visitor from the shaggy north was better portrayed by Swan as possessing a good deal of the romancing spirit of the Baron Munchausen. Russell had gone to Oregon Territory in dream of some real-estate
scheme at the mouth of the Columbia River, found that he was a number of generations ahead of his time with that notion, and instead began dispatching shiploads of oysters to San Francisco; even at the distance of 130 years, the man has a sheen. Russell in his swanky way invited Swan to his oyster hunting enterprise on Shoalwater Bay just to the north of the mouth of the Columbia, and Swan seems to have accepted as rapidly as he could get the words out of his mouth.

I have prowled the Washington coastline where Swan plopped ashore at the end of 1852, and a misted, spongy, oozeful kind of place it is. On the western rim of bay, what seems from a distance to be a line of white-gabled houses proves to be the surf of the Pacific. The saltwater reaches hungrily in through this entrance and, in a tremendous splatter of inlets and fingers--the bay lying stretched from north to south for twenty-five miles, and nearly ten across its greatest width--mingles with the inflow of half a dozen sizable rivers and who knows how many creeks and seeps.

The mix yields a maximum of tan marshes and gray muddy tideflats. Mapmakers have granted names to twenty-seven of these Shoalwater Bay sloughs, and almost as many more haven't been thought worth the effort. Yet around its eastern extent the bay surprises a visitor with sudden timber-topped cliffs about a hundred feet high. Banks of a sandy clay, Swan once categorized them, intermingled with strata of
shells and remains of ancient forest-trees that for ages have been buried.

All in all, a vast estuarine pudding in a clay bowl. One of the few advances since Swan's time has been the amendment of the shallow bay's name from Shoalwater to the less embarrassing Willapa.

When Swan showed up here, more than likely shaking the rain off his hatbrim, Shoalwater Bay's sum of civilization totted up as a few huts, a temporary crew of sawyers cutting pilings, a shifting population of members of the Chinook and Chehalis tribes, and fourteen white "residents" who pottered away at oystering or homesteading. Fourteen kinds of Swan, it could be said. The whites hired the Indians to do the bulk of the oyster harvesting, the Indians had their own ebb-and-flow view of life. Put at its more generous, this colony on the eastern shore Shoalwater Bay in the early 1850s amounted more to an episode of prolonged beachcombing than a serious effort at enterprise. And Swan, stretching ever more distance between himself and those 220 years of New England rectitude in his family line, Swan fit with the idling oysterers like a pinky in an opera glove.

Rapidly he made himself at home among the Chehalis and Chinooks as well. Russell, who could embellish as readily as he breathed, had told the Indians that Swan was a famous physician. Correctly regarding himself as able to improvise
on just about any frontier task, Swan did his part to fulfill the reputation. The tribal people arrive to him with complaints of headache or rheumatism; he doctors them with a liniment concocted of ammonia and whale oil, which was considered, from its pungency, to be very potent. Not, however, as potent as the frontier could demand.

All too soon, Swan's doctoring stopped being a jest.

One evening he noticed that the face and neck of one of the Chinook women were covered with little spots like flea-bites. I said to Russell, "This woman has either got the small-pox or measles." # Smallpox it was, and that frontier plague tore like an assassin through the Shoalwater community. Swan did what nursing he could; all his life he would show a fine compassionate touch for that task. But several of the natives died, Russell and a number of other whites were laid low for weeks. Somehow Swan himself went untouched. I trust, he wrote somberly afterward, I may not be obliged to pass through such another trial.

Life at Shoalwater thereafter proved to be seldom dull, hardly ever strenuous. In the spring of 1853, when the region north of the Columbia River was hived off from Oregon to become Washington Territory, several of the Shoalwater oyster-boys were inspired to file for land claims. Swan in May selected a site at the mouth of what is now the Bone River--the Querquelin, it was called by the Indians: Mouse River--on the bay's northeastern shore. Reasoning that the absence of a wife by
some three thousand miles didn't really lessen the marital status all that much, Swan claimed 160 acres for himself and a second 160 for Matilda. A half-mile square of frontier conquered by ink. I was perfectly delighted with the place, Swan enthuses in one breath, and notes in the next that the unwooded portion was overgrown with nettles and ferns three feet high. In that divided comment he sounds precisely like my kin who grew up on our pair of Doig homesteads south of Helena, entranced to the end of their lives with memory of the blue-timbered glory of the Big Belt mountains and still furious with the impossible winter snows as well.

Swan and a convivial old whaling captain whom Russell had invited up from Astoria set about to build a cabin on the new riverside estate. Their cabin work went at a creep. You can all but see the pair of them, day upon day, sighing regret at the blisters on their hands and settling onto a handy log for Captain Purrington to recite another sea story. With winter coming in fast, they at last cobbled together a shack from the split cedar boards of an abandoned Indian lodge. Swan inventively masoned a huge fireplace out of clay blocks cut from a nearby cliff. The first real storm of winter made mud of his handiwork, sluiced a couple of bushels of coals and ashes into the middle of the room, and very nearly set the place ablaze. Not long after, Swan caught a schooner back to San Francisco, to clerk under a dry roof until spring.
Fresh dollars in his pocket, Swan is found again at Shoalwater at the start of summer, 1854. For the first of numerous times in his life, he now wangled a brief, modest niche in the federal payroll. He was appointed assistant customs collector, for that portion of the coast north of the Columbia, including Shoalwater Bay and Gray's Harbor, to Cape Flattery; the duties of the office being to report all vessels arriving at or departing from Shoal-water Bay, and to keep a diligent watch on the coast to see that none of the Russian or Hudson Bay Companies' vessels came around either for smuggling or trading with the Indians.

Since this comprised an all-but-empty stretch of shore, with only the lackadaisical oysterers at Shoalwater, a handful of stump farmers and sawmillers up around Grays Harbor, and the tiny drowsing tribal settlements at a few river mouths, Swan's precinct seems to have been spectacularly free of smuggling prospects. The only time he is on record as having had to exert himself was when the Indians, as a joke, lured him several days up the coast to check on a vessel which turned out to be a U.S. Geological Survey steamship. Swan being Swan, he did not much mind the futile jaunt: So far as related to smuggling, I had walked sixty miles up the beach for no purpose, but I did not regret having started, as I had seen a line of coast which few, if any, white men had been over before.
Months slid past, years began to go. Much of the lulling appeal of that beachside life at Shoalwater, as Swan recounted it, was simply the stomach's common sense. The bay in those days set a kind of floating feast, offering as it did clams, crabs, shrimp, mussels, sand-lobster, salmon, sturgeon, trout, turbot, sole, flounder and, naturally, oysters. The facet of Swan that was an interested and inventive cook—his victuals often make a sudden savory appearance in his pages—prized this easy bounty.

Just once in these plump years does Swan come onto a hungry time, and that was during the onset of winter when he was trying to homestead with the old whaling captain, Purrington. The captain was famous for cooking every thing that had ever lived. We had eaten of young eagles, hawks, owls, lynx, beaver, seal, otter, gulls, pelican, and, finally, wound up with crow; and the crow was the worst of the lot. The captain once tried to bake a skunk, but, not having properly
cleaned it, it smelt so unsavory when the bake-kettle was opened that he was forced to throw skunk and kettle into the river, which he did with a sigh, remarking what a pity it was that it smelled so strong, when it was baked so nice and brown.

While Swan carried on his love affair with food and leisure, he probably flirted often enough with alcohol as well. The Shoalwater residents, white and native, emerge out of his words and those of others as a boozy bunch who did as much roistering as oysterling. On the Fourth of July of 1853, to take the prime example, after orations and eating and a feu-de-joie by the guns and rifles of the whole company, the Shoalwater patriots stumbled onto the idea to close the performances for the day by going on top of the cliff opposite, and make a tremendous big blaze. They found a colossal hollow cedar stump, filled it to the brim with dry spruce limbs, torched it off. It made the best bonfire I ever saw, Swan recollected in considerable understatement, and after burning all night and part of the next day, finally set fire to the forest, which continued to burn for several months, till the winter rains finally extinguished it.

A jolly conflagration of five or six months duration wasn't entirely usual, but much other unsober behavior was. And when Swan remarked of one of his compatriots that, like all the rest of the frontier people, he was fond of Old Rye,
the unwritten admission is there that Swan too numbered among
the frontier people.

Yet the majority of Swan's time at Shoalwater couldn't
have been spent aimed into the bottom of a bottle. He has
left us a frontier view greatly wider and deeper than that.
The maraud of smallpox, which only made the white men ill but
slaughtered the Chinooks and Chehalis; the pride of place when
selecting a homestead site; the casual reach of distance as
Swan walked sixty miles of wild coast to gaze upon an innocent
steamship: all carry a sense of this rough margin of
the west as true as a thumb testing the teeth of a ripsaw.

He left us that view in a book, from which I have been quoting ever
since Swan squished ashore at Shoalwater. (If Swan was diarying in those
years, and I judge he was not, although he mentions having written and lost
a collection of notes about the Indians, the volumes never have come to sight.)

wrote. The Northwest Coast, he titled the work, then thought
he had better elucidate: Or Three Years' Residence in


This coastal drifter, then, this dabbling man born a
decade or so before my own great-grandfather, is found
spending part of his time at the enterprise I do: shaping
words into print. Whether this fact nudge Swan closer into
resemblance of me or me to Swan, I am not ready to say, but
certainly it fetches both of us into the same cottage industry
at least some hours of the week. I imagine that Swan, like
me, when he held pen in hand for another chapter of Northwest
Coast or to begin an article for a frontier newspaper, had his times of wishing he had chosen some sounder cottage job, such as tweed weaving or raising chinchillas. (Whether he occasionally talked into his silences is doubtful; it does not seem that a man born so close to Boston would unbend that far.) I imagine as well that in the next minute or so he was knuckle-deep into the words again. Cottagers have to be like that.

From those first pages, Northwest Coast stands as a jaunty grandfather of us all who face west above our typewriters.

Table of Contents promises:

- Visit of Walter and myself to the Memelose Tillicums, or Dead People
- Method of preserving Cabbages from the Indians
- Disinclination of Indians to impart Information in regard to their Medicines
- Difficulty of rightly understanding the Jargon

Besides Swan's remarkable knack for browsing through life, he had a couple of other individual advantages which shine out of Northwest Coast.

One is simply that unlike most writers on the Pacific Northwest before and since, he was not a man to be struck dismal by the coastal weather. During the winter the rain falls in the most incredible quantities, but it does not, as has been asserted, rain without intermission. Swan stated early on, then simply dealt with storms as a fact of life. That is unheard-of neutrality on the topic of this region's
moisture. "Eleven days rain, and the most disagreeable time
I have experienced," wrote William Clark on November 17,
1805, and that was at the very start of the Lewis and Clark
expedition's four soggy months in winter camp near the mouth
of the Columbia. From then, the rain of this coast has
gone beyond lore, into catechism. My father would arrive
from Montana and within an hour be joking about moss on our
backs thick as a badger's nap. In turn, I would invite him
to take some moisture home in a cup and show it around to his
high-plains neighbors who might have forgotten what wetness
looked like. A surprise and relief to find Swan outside the
rain ritual.

More remarkable yet: to discover Swan's sentences from
that time at Shoalwater conveying, as he would in the diary
pages for all the length of his life, his rare knack of
looking at the coastal natives as persons rather than the
frontier's human rubble. He does not go all the way,
sometimes dwelling a bit too much on the simplicities of the
tribal people while he and the other oyster-boys were not exactly
an advanced institute themselves. But more often than not,
his remarks carry uncommon insight about the Chinooks and
Chehalis:

The Indians can see but little or no difference between
their system of Tomanawos and our own views as taught them.
For instance, the talipus, or fox, is their emblem of the
creative power; the swispee, or duck, that of wisdom. And
they say that the Boston people, or Americans, have for
their Tomanowos the wheark, or eagle and that the King George,
or English people, have a lion for their Tomanawos.
Or again: One day, while being more than usually inquisitive, old Suis... after trying to make me understand that the names I was asking about had no meaning, at last said, "Why, you white people have names like ours; some mean something, and others mean nothing. I know your name, Swan, is like our word Cocumb, and means a big bird; and Mr. Lake's name is for water, like Shoalwater Bay. But what does Mr. Russell's or Baldt's, or Champ's, or Hillyer's, or Sweeney's, or Weldon's name mean?"

I told her I did not know. "Well," she replied, "so it is with us. We don't know what those names you have asked mean; all we know is that they were the names of our ancestors—elip tillicums, or first people."

Thoughtful jots about first people, and the tamanoas of whites. The time of friendship with Swell, and the honor to repaint his funeral boards, lay not so far ahead.

With Swan, you never know where a competence is going to lead, if indeed it ambles anywhere. It was his skill with the native lore and languages which now transported him for awhile out of the Pacific Northwest. In the mid-1850s, territorial officials of Washington and Oregon began to call\text{\underline{Kowakim}} the Northwest tribes into treaty councils. These worked out as usual in our continental history: the Indians got a chance for soulful rhetoric, and the whites got the land.
When a treaty parley with five coastal tribes of southwestermost Washington was held on the Chehalis River in February, 1855, Territorial Governor Isaac I. Stevens invited Swan to attend. There Swan noted with sympathy the objection of a Chinook chief to the governor's plan to place all the tribes on a single reservation. We are not friends, and if we went together we should fight, and soon we would.
all be killed. But Swan noted as well a chance for himself among the assemblage. Grasping at the coat-tails of Governor Stevens and other budding politicos of the Territory, by late 1856 he pulled himself to Washington, D.C. There somebody, and it is not clear who or how, arranged for him the brief job of writing about the burial customs and beliefs of the Chinooks, for the U.S. Indian Bureau's history of American tribes. In late 1857—a pointed fact about Swan is that a year or two could slip by before he turned to any next task—he became secretary to Stevens, who had been elected the territorial delegate to Congress.

Swan did clerkly chores until Congress recessed and his benefactor had to return home to woo votes. Swan himself then turned like a compass needle to the Pacific Northwest again. On some amalgam of Stevens's advice that made the community was nano-too-well-formed a comer and his own notion that he might set up a supply station for whaling ships, Swan again. He decided this time his site would be Port Townsend, the customs port for Washington Territory.

The location was, and is, one of the most intriguing on this continent. The Strait of Juan de Fuca swings broadly in from the Pacific, a fat fjord between the Olympic Mountains of Washington and the lower peaks of Vancouver Island, until at last, after 100 miles, and precisely at the brink of land which holds Port Townsend the span of water turns southward in a long, sinuous stretch like an arm delveing to the very bottom of a barrel. The topmost portion is Admiralty Inlet,
the rest of the thrusting arm of channel is Puget Sound. I live at its elbow. This small valley which holds my house is one of the wrinkles in the Sound's tremendous timber-green sleeves.

So it is that the last thing I will do, in this winter day of watching Swan try out sites along this coast, is to walk in the rain to the bluff above my house and look northwestward, to where the Sound bends off toward the Strait. Around that horizon, at six on the morning of February 13, 1859: Swan awakes aboard the Schooner Dashaway to find the ship passing the lighthouse at Dungeness Spit, coming on the wind into these waters where he will spend the rest of his years.
Days seven, eight, nine, ten

I have begun to follow Swan year by year through his diaries. Sixty-six of them, they hold the second four decades of his life and at least a million and a half handwritten words. The span of three copies of *War and Peace*, accomplished in frontier town and Indian village and sometimes no community at all.

Out of their gray archival boxes at the University of Washington, the diaries could be the secondhand wares of an eccentric stationer. Most are the size to be held in the palm of a hand, some mere notebooks with cheap marbled covers, others with cover-and-clasp which contain themselves as neatly as a case for eyeglasses. Black, green, tan, faded maroon, the smaller volumes have in common the look of time spent in a busy pocket. Some years, an ordinary school exercise book sidles into the collection. And here another economy: Swan made use of his 1890 Standard Pocket Diary for entries from January 1 to March 2 of that year, then next used it in 1898 for April 4—December 31, the year's printed last digit carefully daubed from "0" to "8" by his pen each day.

Eighteen sixty-six is the aristocrat of the congregation. A fat tan ledger some nine inches wide and twelve high, it weighs four and a quarter pounds and displays an elaborately hinged and embossed spine and a cover panel of leather into the middle of which has been tooled, in rich half-inch letters, J.G. Swan. Lay it open to the first of its 380 pages, and handwriting neat as small embroidery—evidently Swan recopied these entries from rough jottings—begins to recite:
May 1866 Diary and private journal of James G. Swan, being a continuation of daily record commencing July 1862 at the Makah Indian Agency Neah Bay, Washington Territory.

Actually, Swan's daily words commence from the instant he stepped onto a gangplank toward a future along the Strait of Juan de Fuca: the January day in 1859 when he embarked at San Francisco on board ship Dashaway, Captain J.M. Hill...bound for Port Townsend, W.T. Even before that opening notation in the first of the pocket notebooks, which is to say during his stint in Washington, D.C., as aide to Isaac I. Stevens, Swan had done some diary-keeping. But as he afterward lamented in a letter to a member of the Stevens family, those pages somehow, and uncharacteristically, had vanished from him. It is as if the wind that filled the Dashaway's sails in earliest 1859 cleared away the recent years of Swan's life as well. Fresh ink from here on.

When the Dashaway hove into Port Townsend on morning in mid-February--a few weeks past Swan's forty-first birthday, almost precisely at the midpoint of his life--Swan at once aimed his pen into as many directions as there were routes of water spoking out from the little frontier port. The editor of the San Francisco Evening Bulletin had agreed to take from him a series of articles about Washington Territory, and there still was that proclaimed notion of Swan's to examine certain harbors, with a view of ascertaining the best locality for a whaling station. Whenever a ride could be hitched by schooner, steamboat or canoe, then, off Swan would jaunt along the Strait or into the length of Puget Sound, up amid
the San Juan archipelago or across Admiralty Inlet to long-cliffed
Whidbey Island. His wake of ink shows him voyaging in and out
of Port Townsend, his purported new site of enterprise, eight times
in the first six months.

Inside all that motion, however, a pattern soon starts to
take shape. Time upon time, Swan's loops of travel happen to stretch
westward the same distance, like the whorls of a topographic map
compressing at an abrupt face of landscape:

March seventeenth: ...came to anchor in Neah Bay and after
dinner went ashore to Mr. Webster's house where I passed the night.

June fourth, fifth and sixth, again at Neah Bay.

September fourteenth, Left Port Townsend at 5 p.m. in Swell's
canoe...for Neah Bay. Nine days, he stays this time.

September fourteenth, Left Port Townsend at 5 p.m. in Swell's
canoe...for Neah Bay. Nine days, he stays this time.

October ninth, back at Neah Bay. Length of stay: fifty-five days.

At that time, Neah Bay had its place as the geographical
pinpoint on the American map that, say, Alaska's Point Barrow holds
today: a final tribal outpost before the north margins of the
planet take over entirely. The eye of bay and its namesake village
of bay peek out between headlands at the entrance to the Strait
of Juan de Fuca. The site nicks into the top—that is, the north-
facing shore--of the coastal prow of rock which was dubbed "Cape
Flattery" by Captain James Cook on his 1778 voyage, when a
deceptive indent of the shoreline/flattered us with hopes of
finding a harbour there." It says much about the stormy remoteness
of Cape Flattery that along its coastline, the luck of even the
incomparable Cook was nil. Two and a half explorations around
the world by sail, and here not only was Cook misled about a
harbor prospect, he missed as well in the gray drifts of weather
a chance to discover the twelve-mile-wide entrance to the Strait
of Juan de Fuca, and the 1,350-mile shoreline of Puget Sound
beyond.

It is safe to say that the inhabitants of Cape Flattery, the
few hundred Makah tribal members at Neah Bay and four smaller
villages dotted west and south along the peninsula, would have
guffawed at seamanship of such low order. Out on their promontory
into the Pacific which Swan began to share from them in 1859 and I
now try to share from him, the Makahs casually launched away in
canoes to hunt creatures ranging in size and threat from sea otters
to gray whales. In land terms, that would be spaniels to
dinosaurs. A prodigious sea-going people, these, and small
wonder that from here on the Makahs come off Swan's page like
people flinging open a door.

Two sudden and vital friendships emerge here in Swan's notations
of these first visits to Neah Bay. The earliest, and the one that
would last for decades, was with the single resident of Neah Bay who
was not a Makah: the white man Henry Webster, owner of a trading
post at the eastern headland of the bay. It is enough to say of him
here that Webster was a bleak-faced,

obstinate entrepreneur who did not get along with Indians particu-
larly well. In these early months of Swan's acquaintanceship with him,
an incident occurred in which, after an argument of some sort,
five Indians pummeled Webster with rocks, dragged him far along
the beach, and threatened to kill him. The battering did not
dissuade Webster from staying on at his trading post, or
indeed from patiently pulling political strings for a couple
of years until he won appointment as the first Indian agent
for the Makah Reservation. For much time to come, Webster would
be an unbudgeable presence, something of an Easter Island visage
of stone, looming in the lives of the Makahs.

The other immediate friend, supple and deft as Webster was
granitic, of course was Swell. Swan was able to know the Makah
chieftain for about a year and a half before the life was
blasted from Swell in the breakers at Crescent Bay. As will be
seen, the Makah tribe felt his loss like the ache of an amputa-
tion. Swan's time with him did stretch long enough to link the
two in mutual curiosity and the trading of lore. They became
winter brothers, as it were; men cupped together in a single
happenchance season of closeness that, when it has ended,
leaves with each man a part of the other's life.

Rapidly in the diaries it becomes evident how remarkable a
companion Swell proved to be. The pages of Swan's eight weeks
at Neah Bay in the autumn of 1859 bustle with the forming
friendship: Went to Swell's house and made a sketch of some
tamanawas boards...Swell told about their land, that they were
not satisfied with the way the treaty was written...Went to
Swell's house. He says that the past year there were 30 canoes
engaged in the whale fisheries, eight men to each canoe, and
they averaged 1000 gals.--gallons of whale oil being the commercial yield of the hunts--to each canoe....Swell says that there are in the Macah tribe 220 men, 300 women, 200 children, 100 slaves. Total 820....Made sketch of Swell....Swell started for Dungeness this morning. Saluted him with the swivel, one gun....Made a carving today of Hahaketoak or the animal that makes the lightning, the thunderbird. I cut it on a piece of sandstone from the cliff and intend giving it to Swell...

But what of Swan? What, besides tireless ears, did a domestic fugitive from Massachusetts have to offer Swell and the other Makahs? That answer too emerges from these diary entries, in the remark of a sketch here, a carved gift there; clearest of all in the laconic and intriguing entry for October twenty-fifth, 1859: Worked carving a Swan on a sandstone cliff with my initials under it.

Artistry. It was Swan's ticket into the Makah community. Virtually the only skill-of-hand lacking in Swan was the ability to clutch a dollar, and in this instance, he could perform a number of tasks admired by a tribe which loved ornament: draw, cut stone, invent patterns of paint, produce creatures from within the covers of his books. What was more, nothing daunted him: Went to Billy Balch's house and finished the thunderbird. This was the hardest sketch I ever undertook. The lodge was dark and the board covered with smoke and grease and hid by baskets of food. The Indians removed these and washed the board with
urine and then the only way I could decipher the painting was to mark round the drawing with red crayon. The Makahs met him at least halfway in enthusiasm for picturizing, as Swan noted some years later when he wrote at some length about his role as a frontier ambassador of art:

I have painted various devices for these Indians and have decorated their ta-ma-na-was masks; and in every instance I was simply required to paint something the Indians had never seen before. One Indian selected from a pictorial newspaper a cut of a Chinese dragon, and another chose a double-headed eagle, from a picture of an Austrian coat-of-arms. Both these I grouped with drawings of crabs, faces of men, and various devices, endeavoring to make the whole look like Indian work; and I was very successfully in giving the most entire satisfaction, so much so that they bestowed upon me the name of Chā-tic, intimating that I was as great an artist as the Chā-tic of Clyoquot—a tribe living north of the Makahs, on the coast of Vancouver Island.

No small gifts, these—twin-headed eagles, dragons from beyond the rim of the Pacific, new flaunts of paint—to a people as vivid and showy as the Makahs. Similar sprigs of allegory, after all, throve in the tribal mind in the most day-to-day ways. The Makahs' version of the sun arrived robustly each morning by thrusting away the stars with his head and trampling night underfoot. Rainbows, they considered, had claws at either end to seize the unwary. As for the mysterious northern lights that
sometimes webbed the sky beyond the Strait, Swell explained them astutely to Swan:

Under that star, many snows' sail from here in a canoe, live a race of little men, very strong, who are dressed in skins. They look like Indians but they are not taller than half the length of my paddle. They can dive down into the sea and catch a seal or a fish with their hands. Their country is very cold and they live on the ice, where they build great fires. That light is the fires of these little people.

This halts me for a time in admiration, the report on Eskimo life. Along the wilderness that was the North Pacific coastland, a thousand miles of broken shore from Neah Bay even to southernmost Alaska, ideas of the sort must have traveled like thistledown on the wind: canoeing tribe in wary touch with canoeing tribe, a seed of story deposited, to be carried along by the next barter-trip southward. By the time the Makahs had the story of the miniature ice-men of the north, lore had been nurtured into legend. I recognize the alchemy, for I live with it as well. A morning in the nineteen-twenties, a dozen riders are returning to their home ranches after a weekend rodeo. Whenever the horses' hoofs strike the dryness of a Montana county road, dust drifts up until from a distance the group looks like men of smoke. Most of the journey, however, cuts across open sagebrush, and the slap of the gray tassels of brush against leather chaps competes with their talk of the rodeo broncs. Unexpectedly, the loose troop rears to a halt. Across a stretch of pasture they have always ridden through, a fresh barbed-wire fence glints. The owner of the land emerges from a nearby cabin to explain that he intends to plow the ground, that they can no longer go across it. A rider with a notch-scar in the center of his chin—
Swan was a listener, the kind who listens as if being paid by
the word. Whatever the majority of the Makahs thought of this
white newcomer—and just as surely as his constant mentions of
some of them testified that they were attracted to him in
friendship or something very close to it, there would have been
those who suspected Swan, thought him silly or perhaps even

The story and its impromptu anthem of the last horseback generation
have come down to me: the way the Eskimos arrived south to Small;
the same winds blow spring on all men's dreams. I read once from a
Folklorist, small wonder that freckles off Swan's Neah Bay pages can
play against my own pores.

Turning his horse to the fence, he touched spurs to flanks, and mount
half-declaration: "We never saw any place yet we couldn't go."

Father-crime, down at the man and see— In his style of half-job,
vaguely dangerous—a great number of the tribal members would talk with him, allow him to shadow along on the rim of Neah Bay life. Even now in his pages, their personalities breathe, Swell, with his knack for fact and his easy competence. His brother Peter, a brawler and restless under the cleft of the white men's growing power over the natives. Captain John, obliging and something of a tribal bard, who drew on the first page of this book one of the skookums who cause the lightning by running out its tongue. Tsowiskay, an inveterate old savage implacable against white men; on his death a rarely harsh swan writes that the old fellow is no loss and his death did not affect the other Indians (except his own family) any more than if a dog had died. A second Makah named John, a constant confidante whom Swan considered without exception the biggest coward in the tribe and at the same time the biggest braggadocio, but at the same time shrewd and smart and accomplishing by finesse and cunning as much as some of the others do by their physical prowess. John it is who announces to Swan one evening that the time has come for new achievement:...he feels ashamed that he has not killed any whales and has concluded to go through the ceremonies to constitute him a skookum whaleman. This meant that for six days, he had to go without eating or sleeping, and in the meanwhile alternately bathe in the ocean water and run on the beach to get warm. John makes the initial dip, but soon shows up shivering beside Swan's stove and amending his ambition,
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.

Swan departs to bed, John having proclaimed that he would spend the night alternately at the fireside and immersing himself in the bay. In the morning, I learned that he was afraid to sit alone by my fire and had sneakèd out about midnight with his courage completely cooled and had concluded that from shark killing he will be content with killing dogfish.

One by one, the Makahs may have been as full of foolèsh as villagers anywhere, including those of us hutchèd along the indiscriminate streets we call neighborhoods. But as a tribe, they glintèd with at least one brilliant skill. Their sea-going hunting of whales, that enterprise which John yearned toward, sets apart the Makahs and their Vancouver Island cousins, the Nootkas, in the history of this coast. From what Swan could judge, the Makahs by the late 1850's were not as avid about whale-hunting as they had been in their past. Whether the whales were more numerous, or that the Indians, being now able to procure other food from the whites, have become indifferent to the pursuit, I cannot say... Yet when Swell in the autumn of 1859 recited off for Swan the total of whales killed in the past year, the total came to seven, which seems not so indifferent a tally. Fully practiced or not, the ocean abilities of the Makahs were such that Swan set his estimation in the highest terms a Massachusetts man could think of: They are, in fact,
to the Indian population what the inhabitants of Nantucket are to the people of the Atlantic Coast.

For the Makahs, Swan discerned, went hunting their behemoths with methods and tools they had honed to stiletto keenness. Their canoes were swift, high-prowed blades of cedar which carried crews of eight. Helmsman, six paddlers, harpooner. This last was the gladiator, the one who triggered death for the whale. He went against the whale with a harpoon eighteen feet long, twice the length of a modern javelin, made of two pieces of yew scarfed together with splicing bark. When the whale was struck this wooden shaft would detach, leaving imbedded in the flesh the harpoon point of sharpened copper or iron. For its clutching power, this point was barbed with spikes of elk or deer horn; they held within the whale's body the way a fishhook snags itself inside a trout's mouth.

Roped to the harpoon point with a cord of whale sinew was a sealskin float made by the Makahs by skinning a seal and turning the pelt fur side in, as if pulling a sweater inside out. Then the apertures of the head, feet and tail are tied up airtight, Swan explained, and the skin inflated like a bladder. When further harpoons were hurled into the body of the whale, it is not unusual for from thirty to forty of these buoys to be made fast to the whale, which, of course, cannot sink, and is easily despatched by their spears and lances.
Although Swan would, and did, journey almost anywhere with the coastal Indians in their canoes, I find nowhere in his diary pages or other writings that he ever went hunting whales with the Makahs. The one time he was with a canoeeload of Makahs when they encountered a whale, it broached innocently beside them in the Strait as they were paddling to Port Townsend and Swan came out of the resulting commotion enormously grateful that no harpooning equipment was aboard and the Indians had to give up their excited notion of attacking the whale to the end of the earth or to his death, whichever happened to come first.

His knowledge of the whale hunts, then, stops at the shoreline, and my questions are unmet. Whether the seabirds shadowed the canoes in gliding flocks as the whalemens stroked out from Cape Flattery into the ocean. Whether there came--I cannot see how else it could have been--an audible silence of held breaths before the first paddler behind the harpooner judged the distance to the whale and cried: Now throw! Whether the crew made a united great cry when the harpoon blade snagged home, a chorus of conquest. And whether there was a mix of fear with whatever else they shouted, for success meant this: the canoe lashed behind the harpooned whale: a seagoing cart harnessed to a creature several times the size of a bull elephant and dying angry.

Whale hunters, art fanciers, allegorist, the Makahs also were a people who chafed more than a little under the pale regime of frontier bureaucrats who wanted to refashion the
tribe's life. The colors of this theme weave through Swan's written words year upon year, but never more blazingly than in the aftermath of Swell's murder at the start of March, 1861. Swan was once more at Neah Bay—his sixth stint there—that autumn when the Makahs decided to exact their price for the death of Swell. What amazes is that it took six entire revengeless months by the territorial officials before the Makahs made the decision to act. But once decided upon, their vengeance on the Elwha Clallams began to be brewed, savored.

Conference, more conference, the Elwha village sketched on the sand, a plan of attack argued out. As Swan watched and jotted, Neah Bay's largest canoes were worked up into fighting trim; the outsides blackened, interiors daubed a fresh red. Lord Nelson, with his blood-colored battle decks, would have nodded approval. Bow and stern of each canoe were sprigged with green spruce limbs. Onto long poles were lashed faggots of pitchy wood, to torch the hapless Elwhas' lodges. Guns, knives, spears, clubs, arrows, bows were hefted judiciously, made ready.

At last, September nineteenth of 1861, two hundred and two days after Swell's death, the war party milled together in final encouragement on the Neah Bay beach. Some speeches, a few dances, and they leaped to their decorated canoes and headed east the sixty miles to deliver holocaust to the Elwhas.
Twelve canoes, with eighty warriors, they aimed up the Strait past Swan like a volley of arrows on the water. His account of the scene was published in a territorial newspaper, and so has been polished and extended beyond the usual:

I stood on top of the rocks at Webster's point and saw them pass....Their green headdresses, black faces and brown arms, flashing paddles and beautiful canoes, urged to their utmost speed, presented a scene at once novel and interesting. I watched until a projecting point hid them from view.

Then the waiting, the war spirit still boiling in the Makah village. Women and children, seated on the tops of their houses, were beating the roofs with sticks and uttering the most piercing shrieks I ever heard. Every day at sunrise and sunset they performed these savage matins and vespers...

On the third day, the canoes flashed back into sight, the crews announcing themselves across the water by exuberant musket shots and songs of victory. The war, however, turned out to have been considerably less than total. The avenging Makahs landed on the beach opposite the monument of Swell...and forming into a line came up the beach in single file with old Cowbetsi, their great war chief, at their head. A short distance behind him came a savage holding with both hands a bloody head that had been severed from the body of an unfortunate Elwha. Two or three Indians followed this and then another grim trophy, held in the same manner as the first.
Swan learned that the war party had come upon the unlucky pair of Elwhas hunting seals at Crescent Bay, the precise site of Swell's murder. When blood was most ready to answer blood, then, the two were simply the targets of opportunity. Having shot and beheaded them, the Makahs noted the alarms being shrieked by several Elwha women who had watched the ambush from a distance, held a rapid council, and decided revenge had been sufficiently done.

In all of this Swan took greatest interest, so much so that he made the mistake of spectating too close to the song circle which had formed around the severed heads on the home sand of Neah Bay. After they had finished their war song, I heard my name called, and thinking I was in the way of some of their operations was about moving off, when I was again summoned in a manner that left no doubt in my mind but that I was wanted.

The Makahs directed Swan into the circle, beside the heads. Cowbetsi and an Indian who was to interpret to Swan faced him. Cowbetsi orated to Swan that they had killed the Elwhas because the territorial Indian agent had not settled the matter of Swell's murder—an indisputable line of fact. Swan responded that the Indian agent at the time had been removed from office, consequently he could not come as he had promised, but that he had not lied for I knew that he fully intended to have done just what he had promised to do; that Mr. Simmons was a friend of Swell's and they all knew—a careful veer here—I was a friend also.
"Yes," said Cowbetsi, "we know you are our friend, and we are friends of yours."

Swan noted a degree of relief when I was assured of the fact; but I thought that their friendship was of the kind that might induce them, should I give offence, to stick my head on top of a pole for a memento... He stood silent through a war dance performed while four Makahs pointed guns at the heads and his general vicinity, and did not give offense. It was only the two heads of the Elwhas that went up on poles above Neah Bay like queer jack-o-lanterns.

Swan by this time has made his way through three diaries. Late in the third and early in the fourth--the volume for 1862--a different rhythm begins to be heard. He is at Neah Bay with the hope of staying on for some years, and a beat of day nudging day, of settledness, sets in.

Wind n.w. fresh, the seventeenth of March. Caught a large male skunk. Finished the tomanawas stone for John. Sundown, schooner Alert off San Juan harbor trying to beat out. A ship and two barks also worked out slowly. A year ago the salmonberry and other shrubs were in blossom. Now no signs of vegetation are visible. Peter came up today and I cut out a coat for him out of some blue flannel he had.

Wind east, cold, the eighteenth of March. Ship William Sturgis from Port Townsend hove to this forenoon and landed Charley Howard, who came down as pilot. Howard brought letters
and papers....Caught another skunk....measured 28 inches from nose to tip of his tail.

Wind s.e. very light, the twenty-first of March, foggy with constant rain. Brook very high. Peter came up today and told me that he had made up his mind to buy Totatelum, Colchote's daughter, but he didn't wish other white men or Indians to know it except myself. He wishes to make the girl a present and will bring it up to me and wishes me to give it to Totatelum as a present... I am curious to see the result of this courtship. This evening Peter brought up his present consisting of some calico, needles and thread and two bars of soap.

Light airs from s.e., the twenty-second of March, with calm and thick fog. Walked down to Neeah to see Totatelum and announce to her Peter's desire. She was somewhat surprised and said she would think about the matter.... Old Sally, the paralyzed woman, died last night, and the Indians buried her by caving in the bank of sand under which she has been lying since they turned her out of the lodges. They are cruel wretches to the poor and sick.

Calm, cloudy and some fog, the twenty-third of March. Carried Peter's present down to Totatelum, who received it very modestly....

Wind s.e. Morning, cloudy and showery, p.m. calm, the twenty-seventh of March. John said that the people in Victoria told him
that Queen Victoria had ordered a very hot summer to make up for
the cold winter. Caught another skunk--8.

Day and day and day, the diaries say it now: Swan's life is
patterning itself to this coast. Tomorrow, then, to the first
of the coastal places where Swan's paths and mine braid together.
To Dungeness.
Day eleven

The eagle glides a complete slow circle over the two of us, as if studying from the corner of his eye our surprising plaid skins. He is near enough, perhaps a hundred fifty feet above Carol in her jacket of gray and yellow and black, me in my red-and-black, that we can see the scalloped pattern of feathers at the ends of his wings, the snowiness of head and tail that marks him as a bald.

One more silent, exact noose of patrol, then the dark bird flaps off southeast across the bay. Swimming ducks crash-dive in fear, but they are not the target of the moment. The eagle scrapes into the water with its claws, a fish is lifted away.

We stand atop Dungeness Spit's rough spine of driftwood to watch the eagle vanish. All its bowed length into the Strait of Juan de Fuca--seven miles--Dungeness prickles into view like a gigantic hedgerow magically built on water. Age-gray drift logs tumble atop each other to the height of a Dutch dike, fresher logs perpetually angling ashore, yellow and tattered from grinding across the gravel beach, to pile in turn onto the long heap. The rarity of Dungeness in all the dozen thousand miles of America's coastal edge emerges even in the dry intonings of scientists: the longest natural sandspit in the United States; the driest point on the West Coast north of San Diego. A hook of desert snagging the water, within walk of glaciered mountains and cool fir forests.

Swan, as I have told, sailed by here for the first time on a February morning of 1859, inbound for Port Townsend and his
resumed western life. The next several years, he is found
time upon time in the vicinity of Dungeness, usually portaging
across the base of the Spit as the most direct canoe route between
Port Townsend and the Makah settlement at Neah Bay. If he
happened to journey by ship, the route went close past the site
of the lighthouse which rises like a white candle at the far
end of the Spit....A keeper's house and a fine brick tower 92
feet high, Swan noted in that year of 1859, in which is placed
a stationary light of the order of Fresnel.

The tower is now white-painted concrete, and not so lofty
that original version proved to be so high it shined above the
fogs that drift on the face of the Strait. But there is a
Fresnel light even yet, not the one Swan describes but an 1897
version, an exquisite six-sided set of glass bulls-eyes which
flings a beam of brightness eighteen miles. On each of the
faces of the great lantern, circles and louvers of magnifying
prism were worked by the Paris artisans to angles as precise and
deft as those of cut-glass goblets. Once Carol and I had the
experience of being drawn the full length of the Spit, through the
exact blackest center of night, by that elegant box of glass.
I was to write a magazine piece about the Coast Guard families
stationed there at the remote end of the Spit's ribbon of sand,
and Carol would shoot photographs for illustration. We arrived
here to Dungeness about an hour before midnight and met a specter.

The bosun's mate in charge at the lighthouse had said he
would drive in to meet us on the coastal bluff overlooking
the Spit. He wavered now out of the blackness like a drunken genii, clasping a hand to half of his forehead and announcing thickly that we had to hurry to keep the tide. *Wait a minute, we said.

Instead we asked what had gone wrong with his head. Groggy but full of duty, he recited that when he judged what seemed the best time to drive in above the tide, he had come fast. Racing through a bank of spume, his four-wheel-drive vehicle bounded over a log the way a foxhunter's horse would take a hedge, and when man and machine touched sand again, the his forehead clouted the windshield.

With woozy determination, our would-be chauffeur repeated that we would lose the tide if we did not hurry. I looked at Carol, some decision happened between us, and we climbed into the four-wheel-drive.

As the headlights felt out the thin route between driftwood debris and crashing waves, our Coast Guardsman bucked us through cloud upon cloud of spume drifting thigh-deep on the beach. The journey was like being seated in a small plane as it sliced among puffy overcast. From that night I have the sense of what the early pilots must have felt, Saint-Exupery's men aloft with the night mail over Patagonia, avid for "one vagrant ray of light... even the flicker of an inn-lamp--of little help indeed yet shining like a beacon, earnest of the earth..."

We had our ray of light, leading us with tireless reliable winks, but even it could not see into our foaming route for us.
At last at the lighthouse, with the motor cut, no next encounter between four-wheel-drive and fat driftlog having been ordained, the Fresnel lens wheeling its spokes of light above our heads:

ordained, we breathed out and climbed south to the Dungeness sand for our weekend stay.

Two moments stand in my memory from that next day at the tip of Dungeness Spit. The first was seeing the light itself, coming onto the fact of its art here on a ledge of sand and upcast wood. What I had expected perhaps was something like a titanic spotlight, some modern metallic capsule of unfathomable power: not a seventy-five-year-old concoction of prisms which took just one thousand-watt bulb and stretched its glow across nearly twenty miles. It was as pleasantly astounding as Swell's explanation of the aurora borealis glinting up from Eskimo campfires.

The second memory is of the mustached bosun's mate himself. With what pride he showed off his domain, not only the glass casing at the top of the lighthouse but the radio beacon apparatus and the foghorn and even the flagpole with a red storm warning flag bucking atop it. "The wind wears out about ten of those flags a winter," he said to impress us, and did.

Lighthouse life dimmed a bit when he took us in to talk with his wife, and the wife of the young petty officer on duty with him. Both were thoroughly edgy about the Spit. Mrs. Bosun's Mate calculated out loud to when their oldest child would start school, which would take the family to land duty:
"I WANT to move inland." Until that could happen, she was forbidding the children to leave the fenced yard because they might injure themselves in the driftwood. The petty officer's recent bride, who lived in the rooms at the base of the lighthouse tower itself, was disconcerted to have one huge round wall for her home, from which emitted a mild night-long hum.

The bosun's mate heard them out, then led the pair of us off to see some further feature of lighthousekeeping. The day, blown pure by last night's wind, had astonishing clarity. Mountains rose in white shards far north along the Canadian coastline. Mt. Baker lorded over the horizon of the Cascades to our east, highest ice-flame among dozens of ice-flames, while the Olympic range crowded the sky south and west of us. Dungeness seemed more unlikely than ever, a gift of place grafted carefully amid the mountains and strait. The knot on his forehead barely visible beneath his cap bill, hands fistest for warmth into his jacket pockets, the bosun's mate looked around at all in a quick expert glance, then turned to us. "I'm a true coastie," he announced through a grin. "A shallow water sailor."

The Dungeness light has blinked through a number of hundreds of nights since then, and today in bright sun the pair of us casually prowl the inside shore of the Spit, around to where smaller Graveyard Spit veers off from Dungeness. In outline from the air, Dungeness and Graveyard together look like a big barbed fishhook which has caught a dangle of moss at the curve
of its crescent—the dangle being the final few miles of narrow sand from Graveyard to the lighthouse site. Out there now, the lighthouse and outbuildings are in silhouette against Mt. Baker, a white peg and white boxes against that tremendous tent of mountain overtopping the skyline a hundred miles away.

I am watching for snowy owls. This is the fourth year of the cycle which brings them down this far south from the arctic, and we once saw one here, a wraith of white against the gray driftwood. Pleased with ourselves, we returned to Seattle to find that another snowy had taken up a roost on a television antenna above a mid-city restaurant, and half the population had been out to see him. No owl today, nor blue herons who often stilt along Graveyard Spit.

We stay with the inside shore, the one facing Graveyard. This is the wildfowl side, the commissary for migrating ducks and brant, just as the outward shore is the lagoon for seals who pop up and disappear as abruptly as periscopes. Today's find presents itself here on the interior water: a half dozen eider ducks, making their kor-r-r, kor-r-r chuckles to each other, then, as if having argued to agreement, all diving at once.

An edge of ice whitens the shoreline, a first, for all the times we have come here. Mountains stand in all directions with the clarity Swan observed during one of his first visits unobscured by mist or clouds their snowy peaks shone most gloriously...Across the Strait at Vancouver Island, where we can
see in detail the tallest downtown buildings of Victoria, Swan had marveled at the endless timber level as a field of wheat, following the undulation of the ground with a regular growth most wonderful for such a dense forest.

How cold the day, but how little wind, in this restless spot, it balances out. That is not always the case! Swan, on an excursion past the Spit on a day in May of 1862:...stopped for the night at the lighthouse where Mr. Blake, the keeper, treated me very politely to a supper and a share of his bed. Next morning: Left the lighthouse at 3:15 a.m., calm. Passed round the spit where a breeze sprung up which freshened into a squall with rain. A tremendous surf was breaking on the beach and we for a time were in great peril. But finally we managed to get ashore at Port Angeles, where we found shelter...

Dark settles early, the sun spinning southwest into the Olympic Mountains instead of going down into the end of the Strait as it does in summer. We leave the Spit before dusk, heading back to Seattle to spend New Year's Eve in a traditional geographically diverse game of penny-ante poker. Baltimore--"Ballermer," she says it--will play her challenging, relentless style. Texas contents himself until a strong hand, when he raises and re-raises ruthlessly. Carol--New Jersey--is the steadiest of the bunch. By way of Montana--me--comes an erratic, fevered kind of style which can swathe through the game, either wiping out everybody else for three or four hands in a row, or wiping out me.
Swan I knew would approve. He once passed up a chance to come ashore to visit with the lightkeeper at Dungeness, because he and the others concluded to remain on board, devoting our energies to the successful performance of a game of seven-up, or all-four, or old sledge, as that wonderful combination of cards is variously termed.
Day fourteen

Today Mr. Brooks, William Ingraham and myself finished setting the posts for the main building of the school house and when we had all ready, which was at noon, I told Capt. John to call the Indians. Some 25 or 30 came out and when Mr. Brooks was ready I told John, who then gave the word and the sticks were lifted into their places and the whole of the sills for the main building fastened together in about an hour. I told John that when the buildings were done Mr. Webster would give them a treat to pay for the good feelings evinced on this occasion. They have been opposed to having the building erected back of their lodges and I have had a deal of explanation to make to do away with the superstitious prejudices of the old men. But by the exercise of a great deal of patience I have succeeded in inspiring them with a confidence in me, which makes them believe not only what I tell them is true, but what we are doing is for their good.

That noontime came on the twenty-fifth of October, 1862, and the exertions which overtopped the longhouses of the Makahs with the framework of a schoolhouse carried more good for James G. Swan than he would let his pen admit. Precisely when his mind had become set on securing the job as teacher at Neah Bay, there is no knowing. But hints murmur up from the diary pages. Likely Swan divined as early as those first visits to Cape Flattery in 1859 that Henry Webster would try for the appointment as Indian agent when the Makah Reservation came into being. Even more likely is that
Webster, seeing Swan's knack of getting along with the Indians, advised or asked him to seek a Reservation job. Those discernments, and Swan's rummaging curiosity about Makah tribal life, were the pulls to Neah Bay. The push was that Port Townsend was not working out well for Swan, and a fundamental reason seems to have been whiskey.

I happened across the lines of a diarying compatriot of Swan's, a Scot named Melrose who also had arrived to the Pacific Northwest—to Victoria, north on the Canadian coast of the Strait—early in the 1850's. The alcoholic atmosphere of the frontier enthused Melrose to admiration approaching rapture. "It would almost take a line of packet ships," he wrote, "running regularly between here and San Francisco to supply this isle with grog, so great a thirst prevails among its inhabitants." He took care to note down how far his companions in thirst overcame their parching—whether each had become one-quarter drunk, one-half drunk, three-quarters drunk, or wholly drunk. Every so often, the Melrose diary presents the forthright notation: "author whole D." Swan, I hardly need say, was not a man to record himself as whole D or any other degree of it. But that he was tussling with the temptation of the bottle is evident in his diary even so he joined the Dashaway Club of Port Townsend—a group who took a pledge of abstinence and whom one unsympathetic editor dubbed a claque of "high-toned drunkards." I cut my lip with a brush hook this evening in Gerrishes store in a scuffle with Maj. Van Bokkelin—Van Bokkelin one of
Swan's closest friends and a pillar of community respect, and a scuffle hardly thinkable of a sober Swan.

Days later, made a pledge...not to drink any more liquor for two years from this date, the ninth of December, 1860.

That pact may have been as much with Webster, the gatekeeper to the Makah Reservation, future employment at Neah Bay, as with himself.

Whether or not, most of the next twenty-one months, until Webster finally was able to pluck the appointment as Indian agent, found Swan odd-jobbing at Neah Bay. Several months more had to pass before Webster could enroll Swan on the Makah Reservation payroll as teacher. But then, the first of July of 1862, at last Swan having secured position and salary, some immediate dignification sets in. Three and a half years of jotted doings in pocket notebooks leave off, and the first of Swan's ledger diaries, pages long and officious and handwriting scrupulously clear and margined, begins.

What is recorded for the first year and more has nothing to do with classroom education, except that over this course of time Swan's classroom ever so slowly gets carpentered to completion. Instead, Swan joins in the sundry chores of the other two white men of the Reservation work force, a farmer named Maggs who was to put Neah Bay on an agricultural footing and a blacksmith named Hitchcock. Early on in Swan's first set of months on the payroll, the Makah named Captain John came down with smallpox. (Swan visiting the patient: John is alone in one corner, surrounded by a mat screen. He tells me that the smallpox will collect in his head and when it leaves him it will come out of the top of his head like a puff of smoke. To prevent it spreading he has a large hole left open
in the roof directly over his head, through which the sickness is expected to escape. During rain a board is slipped over the opening, but a pole is left handy to punch it open as soon as John feels the gas escaping from him.) Hitchcock declared himself leery of the disease, and departed. Swan saw him off in the diary with entire lack of regret: His services will not be missed on this reservation, as he has done little else than shirk work ever since he has been here. He is about the most perfectly cultus—the Chinook jargon word for "worthless"—man I ever met with.

Luckily Maggs, a subsequent hardworking farmer named Jones, was more congenial, and probably more interesting to Swan. They were the earnest bearers of agriculture to damp Cape Flattery. "Making the earth say beans instead of grass," Thoreau teased himself about his garden at Walden. At Neah Bay, the official notion was that the coastal soil ought to burble potatoes.

There is a kind of Hibernian woefulness about this idea of remaking such a people of the sea as the Makahs into potato farmers. I think of the "potato Protestants" of Connaught in the Irish famine, forced to barter their religion for the meals of survival. The Makahs, however, were not at the edge of desperation, and so managed to make the best of the potato policy. As democratic eaters, they blithely claimed their spud allotments whenever a harvest was produced. But as uninspired agriculturalists, they left most of the plowing and other field labor to Maggs and Swan.
Through 1862 and most of 1863, then, Swan dabbled beside Maggs or Jones in the potato farming (...we plow the land twice, harrow it twice, then plow in the potatoes and harrow the whole over again....) If what we plant grows as thrifty as the wild raspberry, currant, gooseberry and elder and nettles, cow parsnip and other rubbish grew we shall have a famous crop.) Gathered lore from the Makahs. Sketched. Diaried. And otherwise disposed of days until the carpenter hired by Webster would at last finish the schoolhouse. Webster himself was gone from Neah Bay much of the time, now that he had Swan and the others in place there, and Swan fairly often found himself acting as arbiter among the Indians. Finally, in mid-November of 1863, the potato harvest was in, the schoolhouse stood roofed and windowed, and Swan undertook to begin school for the Makah children.
The school got off to a stuttery start. The first morning, a single student, ten-year-old Jimmy Clapanhoo, showed up. I got out the magic lantern and gave an exhibition of it as a reward... (N. 17, '63) Within a few days, four more Makah children came, and were treated to Swan's picture show. By the end of the first week, Twenty children present today exercised them on the alphabet and then gave them a pan full of boiled potatoes.

Success in the schoolroom, discord in the world. Something here set Swan to brooding about the war and its politics:

I do not believe in the principles of the Republican party as enunciated by Greeley, Sumner, Phillips, Beecher... but I do believe that the country is in real danger and I believe at such times it is the duty of every true man to stand by his government (no matter what the party) in saving the country and ourselves from ruin.

That out of his system, Swan went on to note that the Indians' dogs had killed two skunks in the lumber pile.

He next had to take three days out to supervise the digging of the schoolhouse cellar, introducing the Makah laborers to the wheelbarrow, which they thought a hilarious machine. Then, a drain to carry the runoff from the schoolhouse roof needed to be finished. Jimmy Clapanhoo came down from a cough so severe that Swan worried it might be consumption. The Makahs put on a raucous tamanas ceremony
to boost Jimmy's health, just as a gale ripped across Neah Bay. Crows tipped over Swan's rain gauge. He went to work on them with shotgun and strychnine. More Indians arrived for Swan to dispense potatoes to. One of the Makah men brought his two-year-old son to school to learn the alphabet, and created uproar by spanking the tot for not mastering it. A number of the Indians embarked on a two-day drinking spree, which got rougher as it progressed. There were knife wounds, and one combatant smashed three canoes with a stone before other partyers knocked him out with a brick.

This drunken frolic shows how easily these people can be excited to deeds of violence, Swan's pen scolded. We are powerless under the present circumstances either to prevent these drunken scrapes or protect ourselves in case of an attack, but I have not the least apprehension of any difficulty if liquor is kept from them.

Now Swan caught a cold—I have not felt so sick for a year certainly. Jimmy Claplanhoo's health mended and he arrived back at school. The agency's winter larder began to be questionable: Sometimes we are very short of provisions and have to depend on our beef barrel, then again the Indians will bring in such quantities of fish and game that there is a surfeit. The agency cattle started dying. Cold damp weather held and held. On December 16 we had the most remarkable fall of rain I have ever known. It gurgled to the top of his
rain gauges twice, a total of nearly seven inches. A number of the Indians began another drinking party. One participant was blasted in the arm with a dragoon pistol, and another came to borrow a shovel from Swan. He went where old Flattery Jack, Sixey's father, had been buried, and dug up one of his arm bones, which was taken and bound on as splints to the arm of Sixey, the Indians believing that the bone from the father's arm would cure.

A weakened bull from the staggering agency herd had to be put in the basement of the schoolhouse for shelter. He took out a window on his way in. A party of Makahs from another village trooped in to purchase a bride: They came in the house and rigged themselves up with masks and feathers and all went to Whattie's house to make their trade. At last Webster sailed in with some supplies, Christmas came, and an audible sigh lifts from the ledger pages as Swan notes the coming of Christmas and the making of a plum pudding.
Day fifteen

I have not said what I should about the startling weather of this winter. In usual winter I can simply accept rain and cloud as our regional cloak, the season's garment of interesting texture and of patterned pleasant sound as well. "Rain again," a friend will growl. "Right," I will smile absently. But as rainless day after rainless day has glinted past, it dawns on me how different is this winter: drier, colder. It is like living in the Montana Rockies again, but without the clouting wind. There is a becalmed—feel to this weather, a kind of disbelief the winter has about itself.

colder. Until yesterday morning, the temperature hung below freezing for four days and nights in a row, the longest spell of its kind I can remember here. I bury our kitchen vegetable scraps directly into the garden patch as immediate compost, and the shovel has been bringing up six-inch clods of frozen soil, like lowest-grade coal.

What brings the weather to mind is the renewed presence of birds. This morning kindled into bright sun and already, just to be out in the fresh warmth, I have walked up to the rim of the valley. As will happen this time of year, clouds are lined across the southern reach of the mountains while clear weather holds the northern end. The view west from me is bannered in five blues today: the water of Puget Sound in two shades, azure nearest me, a more delicately inked hue farther out; the foreshore of the Olympic Peninsula in its heavy forested tint; the Olympic Mountains behind their blue dust of winter, the clear Symptoms.
across the southern reach of the mountains while clear weather holds the northern end, the Strait country. Such mornings shrug away time. Vessels on the Sound—freighter, tug harnessed to barge, second freighter, the ivory arrow that is the Edmonds-to-Kingston ferry—seemed pinned in place, and I had to watch intently before my eyes could begin to catch the simultaneous motion of them all, inching on the water. Then as I turned home, the flurry. Robins in fluster at the mouth of the valley, abruptly dotting suburban fir trees and frost-stiff lawns. Motion double-quick, headlong. Airful of flying bodies, a vigor in orbit around fixed beauty of Sound and mountains.

These past iced days, I have tried to picture the birds, up in the innermost branches, fluffed with dismay and wondering why the hell they didn't wing south with their saner cousins. It occurs to me also that the dozy tan cat, as well as the cold, may be keeping them from sight; that it may be time I invited the cat to be elsewhere for a while. But that the birds one way or another can be willed back, I dare not doubt. A birdless world is unthinkable. To be without birds would be to suffer a kind of color-blindness, a glaucoma gauzing over one of the planet's special brightnesses. Bushtits must bounce again on the thin ends of birch branches like monks riding bell-ropes. A fretful
nest-building robin—we always have one or two nattering in the trees at either end of the house—must gather and gather dry spears of grass until the beakful bristles out like cat's whiskers. Towhees, chickadees, flickers, juncoes, occasional flashing hummingbirds; seasonal grosbeaks who arrive in the driveway and, masked like society burglars, munch on seeds amid the gravel. Besides Carol and the pulse of words across paper there are few everyday necessaries in my life, but birds are among them.

And Swan, with his feathered name: birds perpetually aviate across his horizons. Time upon time I marker incidents of birds in his pages. This forenoon, the tenth of July of 1865 at Neah Bay, I saw a kingfisher fluttering in the brook and supposed he had a trout which he could not swallow. On going to him I found he had driven his bill into an old rotten stick with such force as to bury it clear up to his eyes...hard and fast. I took him with the stick to the house and called Jones and Phillips to see the curiosity. It was with difficulty that his bill was pulled out again. Two years previous, in the same week of July: I discovered a dead Albatross on the beach yesterday which had a large dogfish which it had swallowed partially but it was too large, and while the fish's head rested in the bird's stomach, its tail was out of its mouth.
Consequently the bird was soon suffocated...I never met with a similar instance of voracity.

Birds routinely conjure instances which seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with human ken. I remember of my bafflement about last spring's haunting robin. Standing at the north window, trying to harvest words from the surrounding trees, I began to hear an irregular thumping sound. Tunk. Silence, then tunk. Tunk. I thought a neighbor might be unloading firewood, but then at the tail of my eye a movement of color flicked along my own woodpile, to the right of the window. I stared. A robin was attacking the window of the workshop.

The bird would fling itself the few feet from atop the wood onto the glass, hit with the hefty tunk sound, drop back and catapult again. It had done so several times before I caught sight of it, and while I watched, performed nine more plunges in the space of less than a minute.

Wanting a head-on view, I carefully crossed to the door into the workshop and eased it open, but the robin had quit by then. The workshop window was centered with a nebula of white streaks, like a tense abstractionist painting; the bird evidently had been butting the glass for days.

The next day I was startled, while going for a book