

MACLEAN'S

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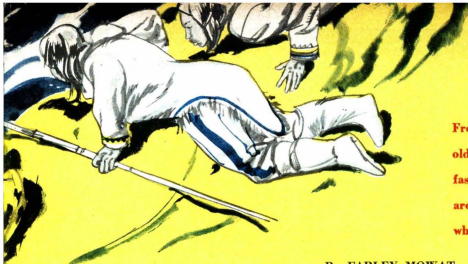
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The Riddle of the Viking Bow



From the twang of a sinew string
old Haluk of the Blue Eyes
fashioned a tale of blood and love
around a red-bearded giant
who came from the far salt sea

By FARLEY MOWAT

ILLUSTRATED BY DON ANDERSON



SAT IN THE DOORWAY of my tent watching Haluk at work and for the hundredth time I looked into the old Eskimo's lined face and tried to penetrate its mystery. His high straight brow shadowed his eyes so it was difficult to see that they were not the sombre black of all his people, but a deep and piercing blue. The key to the mystery lay in those eyes, but lurking far back in time—too far to let me glimpse its meaning, though as an archaeologist it has long been my work to pry into the ancient secrets of man.

Idly I watched him work. Those strange eyes dreamed over his task so that he neither saw nor heard the world around him; for Haluk was intent on giving new life to an almost forgotten memory from another age. I waited silently until his task was done.

When the long Arctic sun was lying gently on the west horizon of the barren plains Haluk came to my tent bearing the completed product of his memory and of his hands. It was a thing of antler bone and black spruce wood; a crude mockery of the crossbows that won a thousand victories upon the battlefields of Europe seven hundred years or more ago. But it was much more than that to me, for the crossbow's existence in these Arctic plains was a baffling riddle.

Only a few days earlier Haluk had been telling me stories of his childhood and of the hunts made after the musk ox, and he had spoken casually of a weapon that I knew did not exist in the culture of the Eskimos. Thinking that I must have misunderstood his words, I questioned him until at last he drew a picture of a crossbow in the sand to show me what he meant. Still I could not believe it, for it was impossible that his isolated inland race, cut off for centuries from the outside world, should have known and used a weapon that no other native men in the Americas had ever seen.

It seemed impossible, and yet I asked Haluk if he could make one of the weapons that he had described. And now the crossbow was reality. I could no longer doubt.

A slow smile drew the weathered skin taut over his sharp cheekbones as Haluk watched me stragglng with my disbelief. He did not speak but, laying an arrow on the grooved shoulder piece, he drew back the sinew string. On the dark and shadowed river near at hand an Arctic loon dipped and swam quietly. There was a sudden resonant vibration on the still air. Something whispered furtively over the river, and at once the great loon half rose, flashing its wings in dying agony before it floated down the stream, an inert dark patch upon the sullen waters.

Haluk lowered his bow and, placing it beside him, squatted down to light his stained stone pipe. He did not wait for the outburst of my eager questions but, turning to watch the river, he began his tale, a tale called into words across uncounted centuries by the vibrant song of the crossbow:

AH, HALUK began, but this was a weapon for a man! It was the strength that gave us life for many generations; and it was the tool we laid aside to rot when you white men brought rifles to our land. That was a wrong thing we did, for men should not discard the gifts that make them great.

It came to us in times almost out of memory, but I hold the fragments of that memory, for my fathers and their fathers' fathers were shamens and workers of magic, and to such men it is given to know the ancient stories of our race. So I can tell you of the *Inohowik*—the Men of Iron—and I speak not from old tales alone but

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also from what my own eyes have seen. I am a shaman too, and in my trances have had visions of the *Inahouik*, and have even heard their voices. They were mighty beings, more than human, and yet not quite gods, for death felled them with the same evil hand he lays on us. They were pale-skinned and bearded, but their beards were flaming brands as bright as newly hammered copper. Their eyes were blue, but with the depths of lakes in winter when the cold grows so terrible that the frozen waters boom and rumble in their torment. So also were the voices of the *Inahouik*—deep voices that rumbled strangely and spoke no words my people understood.

As for the place from which they came; who knows their lands? We only knew that it lay eastward beyond the salt sea. They traveled over it in boats ten times the length of a *kyuk*, and open to the seas and winds. In my visions I have seen those high-proved ships driven on before the gales by great square sails that carried images of fantastic beasts such as we do not know. I have even seen, and marvelled at, the rows of paddles that thrust out from the flanks of those long ships like rib bones thrusting from the skeleton of a gigantic fish.

But in those times, even as now we lived far inland from the coast and so we did not see the *Inahouik* come out of the eastern mists. We heard nothing of their arrival until a day when the strangers came to us. Midsummer lay over the plains; the lichens were grown brown and the leaves of the dwarf willows were darkening under the hot sun, when that day dawned. By Inauit, Ku—the River of Men—there were many tents of my ancestors, and these stretched southward almost to within sight of the forest's edge. They went no farther, for the forests were the homes of the *Ibilit*—the Indians, as you call them. Much spilled blood lay between us and those savages, for it was their custom to fall upon our isolated camps and slaughter all within, before they slipped away into the forest's sanctuary where we dared not follow. We hated them and yet the plains were ours by right and so our tents stood only a few hours' journey from the concealing trees.

On the day I tell about, a young boy by a hill crest within sight of the forest's edge, for it was his duty to bring us quick warning if the long canoes of the *Ibilit* appeared. This youth was quick of eye and when he saw a moving thing upon the distant river he did not stay to watch but fled toward the camp. He came running over the high plains and his gasping cry brought the alarm to the southernmost camp where a dozen tents stood near the river's shore.

It was hot noon then and the men lay in the dark tents resting; but as the boy's voice came to them they sprang up, seizing their deer spears, and ran out into the blazing light. Women quickly clutched their children and carried them back into the broken hills beyond the river. Even the dogs sensed the sudden wave of fear that filled the place and they too slunk from the camp to vanish among the grey rocks.

But that camp had been chosen with care, and with a plan. A few hundred yards to the south of it the river passed through a narrow gorge, and here the angry current leaped great plumes of grey along the centre channel. Neither canoes nor *kyuks* could pass by unless

they hugged the looming cliffs beside the shores, but from the abrupt edges of these cliffs men could look directly down on all who passed below. It was along the gorge that the *Inauit* men gathered to await the arrival of their forest enemies. Beside each man there was a pile of boulders, riven by the frosts and jagged edged. These were the weapons of defense, for in those times my people used only spears for hunting, and had no weapon that could match the long bows and feathered arrows of the Indians.

IT WAS a long tense wait before a dark shape came into view far up the river. But as it hurried down the current the watching Eskimos stared at it with puzzled eyes, and frightened murmurs rose among them. It was a boat, but such a one as no *Inauit* man had ever seen before; no longer than an Indian canoe, but very broad and heavy, and built of mighty planks.

The men it carried were even stranger than the boat. All seven one sat with their backs toward the approaching gorge and they pulled on long paddles set between pins, along the thwarts. They sat in pairs, and there were ten of them, but one more faced them from the stern, standing erect and looking like a god in human form. He wore a shining cap of iron on his head and under it his beard was brilliant as the setting sun at summer's end. Iron sheets upon his breast caught the reflections from the swift waters and sent dazzling shafts of light into the eyes of the watching Eskimos who were now trembling with a great uneasiness, and with a fear that even the *Ibilit* could not have brought into their hearts.

These strangers—towering giants clad in iron—were not *Ibilit*, that was certain. But were they men at all? My ancestors could not tell, and so not a hand was raised against them as the strange craft swept through the gorge, clinging to the shore line where the waters were swift but deep. They were allowed to pass on down the river, to the deep music of their leader's voice that rolled even above the thunder of the rapids.

There was no time for the *Inauit* to gather and to speak of this uncanny sight, for hardly had the strange boat passed when seven long canoes leaped into view above the gorge. There was no doubt who came in them. Half-naked men whose faces were the face of death knell in the canoes and drove them over the river with the hungry power of many paddles. But this time it was not *Inauit* blood they sought. It was the blood of the giants who had already passed. The Indian canoes raced down the river in wild pursuit, and such was their frenzy that they forgot about the men who owned that river.

They forgot until the seven war canoes were flying through the gorge, and until the boulders fell upon them. Ah, but that was a sight I would have given much to see; for then there was a slaughter that spelled revenge for many of my people who have died under the long arrows of the *Ibilit* hands. Six of the canoes shattered like leaves under that rain of stone, and those *Ibilit* who survived the rocks were at the mercy of the river's rage. Those who survived its fury and gained the shallows were few indeed, but there were none who reached dry land, for the deer spears met them, and had no mercy.

Red was the river then: but from the stained plumes of spray one canoe emerged unscathed and fled downstream with the frantic agony of those who have escaped a massacre. The surviving Indians were instantly pur-

used. A dozen *kyaks* were hunched behind them, and the pursuers were men filled with the madness of a victory.

It was on that day the Killing Falls received its name. A roaring cataract, it blocked the river a few miles below the gorge, and it was toward the falls that the last Indian canoe was driven as deer are driven by the winter wolves. When the funneling current above the falls was reached the Indians saw death ahead but they were trapped inexorably, for the current had them. The pursuing *kyaks*, lighter than birds, skimmed free of that deadly funnel of

roaring water and paused in quiet backwaters near the shore to watch as the canoe poised for an instant on the brink of the falls, then vanished into the white spume below.

My people watched that sight with glowing eyes, but they did not watch alone. The iron-clad strangers, forgotten for the moment by the *Innuik*, had also met the falls but they had been warned in time by the sudden roar of water, and had made shore. Knowing that the *Ikhilil* were close behind, they had hauled out their boat and hidden it, and then had made a circle

on a rocky ridge prepared to fight what they believed must be their final battle against the Indians. With incredulous eyes they too had watched the violent destruction of that one last canoe, and they understood that the little men in the slim *kyaks* had done this thing. We had indeed struck the blow in their defense, but the Iron Men could not be sure we would not turn on them as well, for we must have seemed as terrifying to their eyes as they had seemed to ours. But they were brave.

One of them came slowly down the river slope to where the *kyaks* were, and

when my people saw the stranger coming they pulled quickly out of the backwaters and hovered on the current in tense expectancy. At other times the *Innuik* would have fled, but having just destroyed ten times their own number of the enemy they were no longer prone to fear. They would have been just as ready to have taken a blow from the bearded leader of the strangers came to the water's edge. He stood there, towering twice as high as any one of us, and then he took a shaft from his belt and held it out toward us, handle first.

The legends say it was Kilkituk who paddled his *kyak* cautiously toward the spot and, reaching out his long double-bladed paddle, touched the handle of the extended knife. The strange giant smiled and laid his knife upon the paddle blade so Kilkituk could draw it to him without touching shore.

Now you well know the friendliness we feel for strangers who come to us without evil in their hearts; so you will understand how it was that all the *kyaks* came to shore and soon the short fur-clad figures of my forefathers were crowding about the Iron Men, fingering their tools and ornaments and laughing as loudly and as freely as if all memory of the *Ikhilil* killing had already vanished. For whether these strangers were men or spirits it was clear that they were not evil, and so we took them home with us as friends.

Far into that night the song-drums sounded and my people sat with the strangers about the fire and feasted on caribou. The strangers ate like men—like hungry men—although they looked like gods. And I think they were more men than gods for they looked upon our women with keen eyes. It was a night of nights for us when the *Innuik* came into our camps. It was the beginning of our greatness.

AS TO what happened afterward, the legends speak of many things. They tell of the strength of the strangers and of the tools and weapons they possessed. Fine tools of iron that had never before been seen in the wide plains where the only metal was the rare scraps of copper that we traded from the people in the north.

When the Men of Iron had been at the river camp for a few days they began to ask questions by means of signs and by drawings on the ground. They wished to know if Inuit. Ku led to the salt sea. After they had been made to understand that it did not, but led instead only to the far northern ice seas that never thaw, then they became bitterly unhappy for a while. They talked much with one another and at last made it known that they would linger in our camps till winter came. In truth they could do little else for their awkward boat could not ascend the river, even if they had cared to go again into the *Ikhilil* lands to retrace their path.

Through the remaining summer months the strangers lived with us and learned to hunt the caribou upon the river crossings. They gradually gave up their own clothing of thick hides and cloth, and wore the soft skin garments that our women made for them. When the snow came they even laid aside their iron caps, for these round hats with their metal horns that made the wearers look like musk ox bulls soon grew too cold to bear.

That was a good time for the *Innuik* of the plains. The *Innuik* knew many secret things that they shared with us. They could strike fire from iron and rock; they knew the stars and could tell their way by them as easily as we could find our way in daylight. And yet for all their wisdom they were as children in our land. They taught us much, but we in turn taught them the

things they had to know—and for the moment it was they who learned the most.

Their leader was a giant even among his own. His name was Koonar and that name still stands for his size. He was mighty man above all other men. He could carry whole carcasses of caribou back to the camps after a hunt. His arm, wielding a long iron blade, could split a caribou as easily as we might split a hare. But not all his strength was in his body, for his mind was very quick and in a little while he could understand and speak our tongue. From his lips my people heard a little about the Iron Men in their voyage to our river—though it was very little.

It was told how, when their long ships reached the west shores of the salt sea, some of the *Inoosuk* went on up the rivers in small boats, in search of what we do not know. But it is told that they found death. Koonar's small boat went south into unknown lands and traveled many days. Then, as the *Inoosuk* slept one night, they were set upon by Indians and many perished. Those who survived turned north again but found their return route barred by Indians. In desperation they journeyed west then north, hoping to swing back eastward to the shores where the long ships waited. That was how it happened that they came to Inuit Ku, and on its headwaters met the *Inuit* who drove them out into our plains.

Koonar lived in Kiliktuk's tent and also in that tent there was Airut, Kiliktuk's daughter. She was young, with full round cheeks and with the promise of love in her black eyes; and it was the secret hope of Kiliktuk that she would seem fair in the sight of the leader of the strangers. Kiliktuk hoped that Koonar might become his son, so that all the *Inoosuk*'s strange knowledge, and body's strength, might come to be a part of the inland people. But in those early days Koonar did not look on any woman. He was a leader, and perhaps he knew what women may do to the hearts of those who must lead other men.

Then, on a day when summer was almost at an end, Koonar went alone to the crossing place to hunt caribou. He made a good kill, but as he was returning to the camp with the weight of two whole carcasses upon his shoulders, he slipped and fell among the rocks with such force that one of his thigh bones was shattered. He was carried to Kiliktuk's tent but for a long time even his own men despaired to see him live. His wound was terrible to see; the broken bones stood out from the torn flesh. He lived only because the girl Airut nursed him with all her skill and patience, and because Kiliktuk, who was a mighty *shaman*, used all his sorcery to heal the wound. So Koonar lived, but he never walked again nor did he recover his great strength, for the injury he suffered ate into his heart and body both. But now the wishes of Kiliktuk bore their fruit. During the long weeks of agony it came about that Koonar gave in to love, and after a time he took Airut to wife. Now he was alone, for others of his men had taken wives, and the *Inuit* believed that now the strangers would stay forever in my people's camps.

But that was not to be. When the big snows came and when the rivers froze the *Inoosuk* gathered in their leader's igloo and talked for many hours. When all the talk came to an end the strangers made ready to forsake their women and our land. They had made up their minds to strike eastward across the barren plains as soon as dogs could pull the winter sleds. It was said of them, by the angry *Eakimos*, that evil spirits possessed their hearts and would not let them rest.

The *Inuit* were very bitter when they heard the plans and knew their sisters were to be deserted. It is even possible that blood might have been shed had not Koonar made a peace with the *Inuit* men. Then, as the price of their release, he told the people that he would remain behind and all the gifts of the *Inoosuk* would be ours through his great giving. Perhaps he thought his injuries would be a burden to his fellows in their trek across the frozen plains. But I believe it was because the woman Airut, whom he loved, was growing big with child.

In the worst time of winter, when the blizzards raged, ten of the *Inoosuk* left the camp, and left their women, to drive eastward with dog teams in search of the salt sea and their lost ships. They vanished into the lifting snows and were never seen again. Somewhere in the dark depths of winter they met the full fury of our land and perished as we had known they must.

AND SO the tale of *Inoosuk* becomes the story of Koonar, of Airut and of the children she bore. First was

the son Huluk, born in the spring of the year. In the next year there was a daughter born to them whose name is not remembered; and this was Koonar's family. Though he could not leave his sleeping ledge to hunt, and other men had to procure the meat that fed his wife and children, yet Koonar was much loved among my people. He kept his promise and he gave us his great wisdom freely, in all things but one, so that the *Inuit* prospered.

Kiliktuk, who was his father-in-law, was also Koonar's greatest friend; and sometimes they would talk of the things

Koonar had known in far-distant lands. Many of the stories, Koonar told seemed terrible beyond belief for he sometimes spoke of great battles fought on land and on the sea and with such weapons that men's blood flowed like spring rain.

One day, after such a tale was finished, Kiklituk asked Koonar to show the *Inuit* how to make weapons such as these, but Koonar refused, saying that he would not give up the means to destroy other men, and then ourselves. In our lands he had found peace after a lifetime spent in battle.

Things were well in the *Inuit* camps until the child Haluk had seen six winters and was looking on his seventh. That year, after the snows had come, Kiklituk announced that a journey must be made southward to the edge of forests to gather wood for the making of sled runners and other needed things. Before the coming of the *Inuhovik* this had always been a dangerous journey and rarely undertaken, for the forests belong to the *Ihiliti*, as the plains belong to us. But because the Indians had suffered so heavily at our hands, the danger was no longer thought to be very great, and on this expedition it was planned to take some women so that good camps might be established for the men who felled the trees.

Now because Koonar could not leave his place to teach Haluk, his son, the ways of men and hunters, Kiklituk suggested that the boy should be permitted to accompany the timber-gathering party so that he might begin to know the land and the duties of the men who lived in it. Koonar did not oppose this suggestion, though he was ill at ease at the thought of a separation from Haluk, even for a week. He agreed that the boy might go, but he insisted that Arut should also go so that she might see to it that the child came to no great harm.

It is told that they came to the place where the forest meets the plains and here a camp was made. For five days the men went out each morning and, choosing the best trees they could find, felled them and roughed them into timbers. At dark they came wearily back to the travel camp and the women greeted them with hot soup and mounded piles of boiled deer meat. Then, on the sixth day, while the men were far away, a band of *Ihiliti* came swiftly out of the shadowed woods and fell upon the camp. Their work was swift and silent. The *Inuit* men knew nothing of it until they returned at evening to find their women and their children dead upon the snows, their bodies torn and mutilated by the fury of the killers.

Kiklituk and his followers did not pursue the *Ihiliti* for they dared not venture inside the forests. They could do nothing but return to the river camp carrying the bodies on their sleds and lamenting so that the sound was heard long before they themselves were seen. It is remembered that when Kiklituk came into Koonar's igloo he thrust his own knife deep into his arm so that the blood spurted freely as he fell to the floor and wept at Koonar's feet, telling the *Inuhovik* that his wife and son were dead.

Then Koonar swore terrible oaths in his own tongue, and so frightful was his rage that the *Inuit* shuddered and were afraid of him.

AFTER a time Koonar's anguish calmed and he called all men before him. He took the antlers of a deer and a piece of fine spruce wood and he set to work to fashion a thing such as no *Eskimo* had seen before. His task took him many weary hours but he would not rest nor yet allow

the watching men to rest. He knew many failures, but in the end the thing was done. Still without pause even for sleep, he showed the *Inuit* how to make weapons such as the one that he had built from bone and wood, and he ordered each man to make one for himself.

For the *Inuit* believed that this was only the work of a man crazed by grief, and yet they were so afraid of the deep anger that burned in Koonar's eyes that they obeyed his bidding. When each man owned one of the new weapons, Koonar showed them how to shoot, and then they saw he was not mad. This new weapon was a fearsome thing that could strike down a caribou in full flight at three hundred paces!

For a whole month Koonar ordered every minute of men's lives. Lying on snow blocks outside the igloo he drove the men to practice shooting until they cried with cold and tiredness—but he would not let them rest. It is not my people's way to give themselves entirely to any task; but Koonar made this a way with them. He drove them, but he also drove himself until his old wound opened and dark blood soaked his deerskin clothes.

The month ended with the coming of the blizzards and the long night that is the heart of winter. Then Kiklituk, who had become the body's strength for Koonar, chose the ten best marksmen from among the *Inuit* men and ordered them to feed their dogs for a long journey. When this was done, ten teams were hitched to ten great sleds and the chosen men left the camp and headed south along the frozen river. Kiklituk, who alone of all the *Inuit* understood the work in hand, was in the lead, and on his sled lay Koonar, sick almost to death, and wrapped in heavy furs against the brittle cold.

It is told how these men traveled to the forests and boldly entered them, for Koonar had banished fear out of all hearts. For five days they drove south into the forests, and on the fifth day they came in sight of the smoking tents of a great Indian camp. The few hours of feeble daylight were almost at an end and the *Inuit* would have preferred to draw away and lay an ambush, but Koonar would allow no pause.

Under his orders the ten sleds drove at full speed straight into the heart of the sprawling camp and they were among the tall tents almost before the Indian dogs could howl their hysterical alarm. Now the sleds halted in a tight line and the *Inuit* men leaped off and knelt in the snows with their bows raised, and arrows poised. There was a terrible confusion then, for the *Ihiliti* came spilling out of their tents without caution, and many of them did not even pause to seize their weapons, for they were taken unawares. As they came from the tents they were met by short, unfeathered arrows driven from the taut strings of the *Inuit* bows. The whine and murmur of the arrows could be heard above the wild screams of people and of dogs; and the sudden thud of arrows striking home was like a drum beat under all other sounds.

It was a killing beyond all others we have known. More than a hundred died with the crossbow arrows lodged in their lean bodies. There was no mercy for the women and children.

So sudden was that onslaught, and so ruthless the new weapon, that the *Ithlit* did not fight. Hardly an arrow was fired by them. Those Indians who passed their own doors, and lived, fled into the darkness cowering with them so more than their frightened lives. And when no living thing remained about the camp, the *Inouait* left their sleds and laid a torch to every tent.

Then Koonar's voice was raised. It boomed into the silence that was now broken only by the whimpering of dogs, and crackling flames, and the *Ithlit* who heard it as they fled believed it to be the voice of a devil-spirit and they fled faster still.

"Men of the River!" Koonar cried, "because revenge burned in my heart and blinded me I have given the powers of death into your hands. But hear me now! If you should ever use those powers, unprovoked by direst need, then be sure I will come back from the farthest places of the sky, and my anger shall be more terrible than all the devils of this land!"

Silence returned, and in that silence the sleds were turned into the north again, and they drove on until the forests ended and the plains lay stretched in sombre silence under the endless night. They traveled onward until they were almost in sight of the home camps, and then Kiliktuk's sled suddenly turned from the trail. The others would have followed but he waved them on, bidding them carry the news of victory into the camp. And so a single sled turned off and vanished into darkness, and on that sled Koonar was dying.

Late that night a strange tongue of fire was seen on the river to the north. All those who had gathered to sing of the victory stared as a great flame licked upward from the distant ridge by Killing Falls, so that the long roll of snowy hills glowed briefly with the tint of blood. They were still watching in fear and wonderment when a sled came swiftly down the river and drew up in a flurry of fine snow. On it was Kiliktuk and he was alone.

The people deafened him with questions but there was a look upon his face that silenced them. Neither then nor later did he tell them what had come

about. Only to his grandson, the child of Koonar's daughter, did he tell the tale before he died. That child was called Hahuk and he was the father of my father's fathers; and through them I too have heard how Kiliktuk drove Koonar up the river to the place where the old boat of the *Inouait* was cycled among the rocks. I have heard how Kiliktuk tenderly placed the dying giant in that boat and, at his orders, laid piles of dwarf willow scrub about him. Then Kiliktuk wept and parted from the stranger who was a son, and more, to him.

Kiliktuk drove away as he was told to do, and when he looked back red flames were lifting above the dark shadows of the boat, against the crimson snow. The boat flamed into ash at last and with it Koonar, the last of the *Inouait*, vanished from our lands.

KOONAR was gone, and yet the wishes of Kiliktuk had come true for Koonar gave us the greatest gift we ever had: this crossbow that was our strength for more generations than my hands can count. We used it as Koonar had said we must, and so we prospered until we were as many as flies over this land that now knows only half a score of men. And Koonar's blood stayed with us too, for it has happened that each generation has seen a child who bears that blood and who must take the name Hahuk.

Now I, Hahuk, am the last of these, for I am not quite as others of my people are. There is a difference in my spirit, for I have visions that are beyond reality, and in them I have seen and known the men who were the *Inouait* and I have understood they were my fathers too.

And so it ends. You are the first outside my race to hear the tale, and I have told you because very soon there will be no more *Inouait* ears to hear. I too will go, and soon. And yet I have one all-devouring wish that I would realize before death comes for me.

I wish that I might journey to the salt sea where I have never been, and I wish that I might look out into the east where the long ships drift with their great sails catching the setting sun, as I have dreamed of them. And I would have it that this ancient body might be laid upon the deck of a long ship, that it might be carried eastward, ever eastward through the mists; to vanish, as did Koonar . . . into flames. ★