

By [R Hodges](#)
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Songs In The Sea

The light boat leapt like a wild animal over the foam-flecked waves. Already well out of sight of the mainland, it was only a few miles more to where the big salmon prowled. Red Bear could already feel the tug of their weight on his line, already taste the warm succulence of their flesh renewing his body, which would be aching and hungry after a long day on the open sea, already hear the murmuring of the women and smell their perfumes as they brushed close to him around the fire.

“Pull with your will!” commanded old Eagle’s Cry. Eagle’s Cry was master of boat today, a rare treat for Red Bear, for he had been master of boats since before any of the other men were born, and was counted the wisest man of the whole people, and the craftiest fisherman. “Pull with your whole body! Feel the weight of the sea in your back”

Red Bear loved this kind of command. He was proud of his strength, but because he was the youngest of the of the men, and also by far the biggest he was always put at the back of the boat. His great bulk, twice that of any other man, was useful in the back as ballast, as he knew, but there he was always last to be noticed by anybody. But being asked to row as strong as he could, he knew that with each of his mighty strokes, all the other men would feel the boat surge forward and wonder at how one man, himself, could give it such a push.

He worked the double paddle back and forth, each stroke dipping smartly in the jade water and coming up leaving a delicate little eddy, the signature of a well-pulled oar. As he gained energy from the common effort, he put more and more of his arms, back, and legs into each pull. The boat almost flew, its bow where Eagle’s Cry presided lifting clear of the sea, so that only the rear where Red Bear worked sat full in the water.

Suddenly though, he felt the thin bark hull beneath his right foot give way. The strength he was putting into his legs had become too much for the light material to withstand. He felt the water rising about his ankles and a cold fear gripped him. The other men knew instantly what had happened. Three of them dropped oars and began to bail furiously with the bailing gourds, while by a time-honored understanding that did not need to be spoken, Red Bear himself and two others continued to row to maintain seaway.

Eagle’s Cry spoke quietly—though he was at the other end of the boat Red Bear heard him clearly, and it seemed that the words were meant for him alone. “Try to stay calm inside.” Strangely, his heart was, in fact, calm, though his mind was racing, and threatened to get the better of his heart. He was grateful for the words of the boat-master, and tried to obey them.

The boatmaster steered the prow to the north, toward an area on the horizon where he knew there was a scattering of low uninhabited islands at a distance of a few miles. The boat was now riding low, its progress greatly slowed by the lesser number of men rowing and by the great weight of water it carried. It would take several hours of back-breaking effort to reach the relative safety of land, and what would happen even then was far from certain. They could survive a few days from supplies on the boat, but could not count on finding anything on any of these islands, not even fuel for a signal fire. They would

have to burn the boat itself, for otherwise it might be many days before search parties would discover them in that sector of the vast ocean.

Worse, the water seemed to be winning the battle against the frantic gourds. One more man dropped his oar and began to bail, as did Eagle's Cry himself. In spite of his great age and frailty, he seemed to move as much water as any of the young men. But it was still not enough. In desperation, Otter Man, who swam with power and skill, slipped over the side into the freezing sea and swam beneath the boat. Taking a great risk, he broke away a piece of torn bark to make the hole clean, then stuffed his leather tunic into it. This slowed the water enough that it now seemed possible to reach solid ground.

After what felt like an eternity of sweating and grunting, muscles cramped from exhaustion and cold, hands raw, the party rejoiced when they spotted sign of an island. Making for it, they approached the uninviting shore after another half hour's toil. Unfortunately the current was running stronger than even wise Eagle's Cry had calculated; it was apparent that the slow craft would be swept clear of the shore. Swimming would be faster, so at the boat-master's word, the men abandoned ship and swam for their lives, Otter Man towing Eagle's Cry with one of his strong arms.

On the island, the men sat together to recoup some of their life, and to ponder their situation. Eagle's Cry sat opposite Red Bear and looked steadily at him for a long time. Red Bear returned the gaze, calmed by the power in those eyes, but disturbed to notice that they were empty, bottomless wells, in which there was not only no blame, but it seemed that no human emotion could amount to anything in that look, perhaps not even life itself. That pitiless look was branded indelibly on Red Bear's soul. It was a great gift from the master, and Red Bear knew that it would one day be a source of great power, years later when he himself would become a master of boats. If, that is, the company survived their present peril.

At length, the men got up, and without a word, began to comb the island. They were searching for any resources that might be useful, any trace of fresh water, any edible plant or animal, any fuel for a fire. By nightfall, the desperate nature of their plight was clear—there was little on the island. They could not live more than a few days, and rescue was unlikely.

The men huddled together for warmth. Sleep was out of the question, so they began to sing old songs, and new ones, that told stories of travelers, warriors, and men of the sea. The stories all were stories of death, but death with honor at having lived well, having born steady witness to the powers of nature and of the great men of old, having made the gods proud that they were men such as could die well.

Towards morning the singing no longer had words, it was just a low humming. Each man was turned almost wholly within himself. Red Bear looked calmly upon the group through the new eyes he had received from Eagle's Cry. His vision seemed to expand and take in the whole ocean, to reach the shores of islands and continents that lay in every direction. He saw all the many different peoples going about their myriad enterprises, most of them unconscious of the grandeur that he was now touching. To know that was enough. He was ready to live or to die.