

## SECTION A: Reading

You should spend about 40 minutes on this section.

Read the following passage carefully and then answer the questions which follow on page 3.

### Storm!



*The writer and his crew are sailing across the Atlantic Ocean in a small boat made out of leather pieces sewn together. In this passage the boat meets its first storm.*

The seventh wave is said to be the worst, the one that does the damage in the turmoil of an ocean gale. Clinging to the helm of a small open boat in the heaving waters of a bad Atlantic storm, one's temptation to count the waves is irresistible. The mind longs for anything that might impose a pattern on the jumble of destruction unfolding each time the boat rises to the crest of a roller. A frightening grey vista stretches endlessly to the horizon, rank upon rank of massive breaking waves, each one capable of swamping, destroying or capsizing any boat. So always, at that brief moment before the boat drops into the next trough, the eye seeks to pick out the seventh

waves, real or imaginary, the monsters lifting their heads in menace above their companions, before they too then sink down to hide in ambush.

On that wind-torn evening in late May 1976, it seemed to my tired mind that the wave pattern was changing. Instead of the seventh waves, the sea appeared to be collecting its strength in random groups of three. The leading wave of each group would come rolling down on us, steeper and steeper by the moment, until it could no longer support its own mass. Its crest toppled forward and then came sliding down the wave front in a self-generated avalanche of foam and released energy. When it struck, the boat shuddered and faltered. The helm twisted savagely in my hand, then went slack, and we were picked up bodily and rushed forward in the grip of the white water. In that dangerous incident the gale clawed at us, striving to slew the boat sideways so that she would be parallel to the advancing wave crests. Should that happen, we were lost. Then the second or the third great wave would sweep over the vulnerable length of the hull, and each time I feared it would be the last wave my crew and I would ever face.

No one could tell us how to steer our boat through the gale. No boat quite like her had been afloat 25  
for the last thousand years or so. To a casual observer our craft looked like a floating banana: long  
and slim with her tapering bow and stern curved gently upward in an odd fashion. Yet her most  
extraordinary feature was only apparent if one examined her closely: the boat was made of leather.  
Her hull was nothing more than forty-nine ox hides stitched together to form a patchwork quilt  
stretched over a wooden frame. It was this skin, only a quarter of an inch thick, flexing and shifting 30  
as the boat moved – just like the skin over a man’s ribcage – that now stood between us and the fury  
of the Atlantic. Watching the waves, I recalled the bleak warning of one of the world’s leading  
authorities on leather science before we started our voyage:

“Oxhide,” he explained in his precise university tone, “is very high in protein. It resembles a piece  
of steak, if you like. It will decompose in the same way, either quickly or slowly, depending on 35  
various factors such as the temperature, how well it has been tanned to turn it into leather, and the  
amount of stress imposed upon it. In time it will turn into a nasty, evil-smelling blob of jelly. Just  
like a rotting piece of oxhide.”

The hull’s turning to jelly was now the least of my problems. The gale was showing signs of getting  
worse; the waves were increasing in size. They were smashing into us more violently; and if the 40  
leather hull was not strong enough, the first result would be when the thread holding the oxhides  
together simply ripped through the weakened hides like tearing the perforations on a cardboard  
packet. Then the oxhides would peel away like petals and the wooden frame underneath would  
spring open like a flower in a brief moment of disintegration. Privately, I doubted it would ever  
come to that. Much more likely was the possibility of a capsizing. Our boat had no keel beneath her 45  
to hold her steady. If one of the tumbling wave crests caught her wrong-footed, she would be sent  
spinning upside down and her crew tipped into the water, where there was no hope of rescue.

1. Look again at lines 25 to 33. What **three** comparisons does the writer use to help the reader understand the boat’s appearance and construction? (3)
2. **In your own words** explain why a leather boat is more at risk than other boats. (5)
3. How does the writer convey the violence and power of the sea and the weather throughout this passage?

You should refer closely to the passage to support your answer. You may include **brief** quotations. (12)

**TOTAL FOR SECTION A: 20 MARKS**

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