

A Fine Reach Home: Excerpts from a Sailor's Wind Journal

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English Bay, 1976, International 14

We surface amidst sodden sails, shouting in surprise and haste. “Are you okay?” “Where are you?” “Hang on to the gunwale, no wait, swim the bow into the wind, now swim over here, we’ll bring her up together.” Martin and I, skipper and crew, throw our weight onto the centerboard. The boat reluctantly responds, the mast tilting skyward, rising from the sea. I taste the salt of ocean spray that catches me unaware after so many years of sailing fresh-waters.

Equilibrium restored, seawater emptying through the automatic bailers, our sailboat moves across the water in ecological tension between human, craft, wind, and geography. Martin tends to the navigation, attentive weighting of hand on tiller, as I set the jib and cleat the sheet. Shifting body weight, secured by the trapeze, I feel the arc of body, an embodied interpretation of movement in response to the wind’s presence in the tautness of the sails.

Sailing in the various conditions of wind requires an instinctive choreography of release and defiance, surrender and embrace, by skipper and crew.



This is what holds me to task, as I swing in and out of the boat secured to the mast by the trapeze wire that holds me in place. “Wind’s coming! Trapeze!” Martin yells, but I am already in concert with the wind, welcoming its arrival, anticipating its departure.

Sailing, a harnessing of wind with canvas to propel a sailboat across distances of water, in winds shaped by landforms, airflow and temperature, requires constant renegotiation by skipper and crew in response to the wind’s changeable presence. In a choreography of movement, sails secured by sheets are loosened or reined in by hand to allow wind spillage or to capitalize on a wayward breeze. A luffing sail means carelessness at the helm or an impending gust; an over-heeled boat requires spilling wind from the sails, a sail drawn in too tight slows the boat, shape of the sail matters.

Inattention can result in capsize, as the horizon tilts, and bodies seek to counterbalance. Ever vigilant, a wary crew watches for floating debris, deadheads surfacing, a buoy marking a crab trap, paddlers, or a sailing craft on starboard tack. Attention too must be given to catpaws rippling across darkening water, wind gusts that scamper with an eagerness that at first deceive, as sails momentarily luff. “Hang out there, hang out!” In any encounter, tension arises that requires a rebalancing, a seeking of authority and authenticity, a sailor’s willingness to engage with shifting temperaments of wind that simultaneously excite and compel.

Sailing, for me, has been a travelling of bodies of water marked by winds, each venture revealing the particular temperaments and geographies of the places I have sailed: Lake Ontario, Lac Montauban, Gulf Islands, English Bay. These are my touchstones, familiar places of entering into dialogue with water and wind, each experience of sailing timelocked but recalled in visceral ways.

Kingston 1975, International 14

I was nineteen when we first met in Kingston, and he, barely twenty-one, was eager to impress. “Are you kidding?” I ask as Martin hands me the trapeze belt. A bulky contraption, with a hook that will secure me to a wire line anchored into a mast that towers twenty-five feet high into the sky. My body disappears beneath a layering of wetsuit, trapeze belt, lifejacket. There will be no easy seduction here, I think. On the sleek hulled yachts moored in the harbour, women clad in bikinis are holding glasses of white wine, navy blue club jackets draped around bare shoulders, impossibly beautiful. There is a tension between dinghy and big boat sailors; those who sail small boats ride close to the water, engagement with the environment is intimate, responsive, immediate.

He hooks me onto the wire, demonstrates the position—legs splayed, feet on the gunwale—instructs with the seriousness of a young man determined to conquer this task—this is his gift, my introduction to his International 14. And despite my initial caution, I am impressed as I swing out over the water, and the boat heels to my presence. Yes, I cry, yes, freefalling into the brilliance of this moment that he and I interpret as love—an intercourse of wind and water and movement as the boat mounts the waves of Lake Ontario with the eagerness of a puppy.

The lake yields to our presence, an expanse of grey-blue that offers no border. In the distance silhouetted against sky, southeast of Kingston, Snake Island beckons, a tantalizing tease of a tropical isle. A false image I discover later in another season, when we skate the frozen lake, black ice, etching a *pas de deux* on the thin dusting of snow on the frozen surface arriving at the island’s edge. Instead of the palm tree and sandy beach I once thought I would discover if only I could find my way there, we found only barren rock, wind-blown snow, and a deciduous shrub bent against its will by winter wind.

In that heat of our first summer together, we sail daily out of the Kingston Yacht Club, a wind-worn building that perches content on the waterfront of Lake Ontario. We store his sailboat in a lean-to shed alongside another International 14 belonging to his physics professor. After each sailing, we fold the main sail, he and I at opposite sides, working our way to a perfect shaping of folded sail, to be slipped into the sail bag, and stored in the hull. The folding of our mainsail becomes a ritual; each movement requires a shift, an accommodation, a readjustment. This act of folding is a slow seduction on a green patch of lawn next to the gray asphalt of the parking lot that in turn, leads to the ramp down to the water, where we pull out our boat or launch her. Depending on the hour, our courtship unfolds amidst the bustling of sailors consulting over the wind, after-hour racers comparing stories in the dining room, junior sailors filling the afternoon air with the excitement of their tasks.

Sailing into the protected harbour of the Kingston yacht club requires

maneuvering through the breakwaters, a narrow passage, that offshore winds make more difficult to achieve. Here we must read the winds with an accuracy that allows for little error, to enter into the sheltered water, where the wind drops suddenly, the boat awkward in response as crew and skipper seek a new equilibrium; we hold our breath as larger boats narrowly slip by us under motor. This cautious entry into harbour is different from the sandy beaches of my youth, where a boat can run with the wind, crew heeled out, as my brother and I race towards shore, and then, the skipper pulling the tiller hard, the boat swings into the wind, and leaping knee-deep into water, we land, laughing.

Halfway into July, Martin and I win our first sailing race, my heart clammering, hand holding fast the jib sheet, *wait for it, wait for it, tack, now, pull in the sheet! Harder! Yes! Now!* Beginner's luck we tell each other, yet already we are smug in the certainty that we will win the entire racing season, wine glasses clinking in tune to the chattering halyards of the sailboats moored in their slips by the yacht club. But our celebratory dinner, taken in the dining room, graced by formal settings of silver cutlery and white table cloths, is soon replaced by a series of consolation meals. "Next time we'll win," he assures me, but our win will prove to be a singular one.

In the final race of the season, Martin's foot slips out of the hiking strap, the boat lurches, an opponent's boom nearly spears our main sail in passing. As I desperately regain balance in the bucking of the boat, I look back to the stern to see a pair of hands clutched to the transom and a flailing foot, Martin's body submerged as the lake boils over him. "Get back into the boat!" I yell, as our opponents surge forward to claim the race. "What happened? We were in the lead!"

A moment's inattention, a missed securing of sheet into cleat or feet under a hiking strap, and you experience how fine the balance is between boat, sail, environment of wind and water, skipper and crew. The wind will not pause so that the sailor can correct; response is immediate and unforgiving. This then is the warning that comes in the sailing of bodies of water, that the crew and skipper must be attentive to the state of the boat, that there are no frayed ropes, or careless moves, or inattentiveness to darkening skies, hidden shoals, or ever changing tide schedules.

Lac Montauban, 2004, International 14

Sailing on a lake, or in ocean waves, or across a river, each body of water moves in response to its own temporal geography shaped by land formations and air temperatures that determine winds, velocity, and attitude. There is an emergent rhythm of engagement that sailor and boat and water come to seek, as the wind wills us into motion. At my parents' cottage on Lac Montaubon, our International 14, relocated from its storage place at my mother-in-law's

garage in Ontario for our summer holidays in Quebec with the children, carries too much sail, and we cross the distances too quickly, ducking under the boom, shouting to each other warnings, “Ready about?” “Ready about!” quick-stepping into position.

Sailing on this lake requires a response of agility; the wooded hills interrupt the winds as they travel across the land, which are then released in gusts across the water, so that the sailor is in constant conversation with boat and wind, pulling in the sheets, bending to and fro, constantly readjusting, as the surface of the lake becomes agitated, choppy, waves ricocheting against the hull.

Catpaws, we call these gusts, visual harbingers of tempestuous winds that cross the darkening water in rippling patterns. Catpaws portend of coming forces that we can accommodate; what we do not see, and cannot anticipate are the unexpected windshifts, occasioned by unsettled weather that shifts the wind’s intent. On such occasions, the boom swings violently across the boat, catching the crew ill-positioned to respond, jib sheet cleated and out of hand’s reach. These windshifts, north to south, are sporadic, unpredictable, tending to materialize when attention is given elsewhere, perhaps to the pointing out of a heron, blue-gray wings outstretched, flying low above the surface of the lake.

English Bay, 2008, International 14

Sailing English Bay requires a quick check of the wind monitor, anything under fifteen knots, our combined weight is sufficient to hold the winds in the oversized sails, and we navigate the waves and wind with confidence. A gust of wind, the boat heels over, and we easily counter-balance, as I swing out on the trapeze, Martin repositions himself on the gunwale. Here, on the West Coast, the tides matter when sailing; the asphalt ramp down to the water is longer at low tide, slippery in the wet squelch of green slime, our feet encased in water shoes, gripping onto its barnacled surface. If the wind drops, lulling the ocean to stillness, and the tide is running out to sea, we risk being stranded, borne towards Vancouver Island; it is then that the crew must paddle.

Here, the sea receives our boat with a hospitality that simultaneously invites yet warns of hidden dangers. We have learned to be cautious. Yet to refuse waves vibrant in response to 20 knots of wind is difficult; our hunger to sail heightens as the surf reshapes the beach, sand running freely beneath our naked feet. But memory recalls us to our fragility, the dangers of an ill-fraught wind cannot be lightly considered—a capsized boat, a broken mast, sails ripped—even a relatively sheltered body of water, such as English Bay inset from the Georgia Strait, has tempestuous moments that punish the unwary or over-confident sailor.

On the days when the wind is too wild, we leave our boat ashore. There is not enough weight between us, to hold the hefty gales in our sails. That is

when the wind surfers and kite surfers run fast with the wind, outrageous in their air-borne leaps. Walking along the curve of Spanish Banks, I envy these wind riders. Their brightly coloured sails translate language of movement into symphonic melodies, as they travel the length of the wind, angling between the anchored freighters. Seeking temporary respite from the western blasts, they duck, momentarily windblanked, behind one of the anchored freighters before turning again into the fierce presence that is the weather-pulse. Exposure is raw, stimulating, bodies arced streaming water in black wet-suits. Repeatedly, they crisscross the distance between horizon and shore with ambitious grace.

Other days, the winds within our grasp, we set sail with eagerness, our sails white against blue sky. There is an edginess that comes with sailing in ocean winds within an expanse of sea; we ride the edge of chaos, running long reaches between the freighters, the centerboard humming in response. Tethered to the mast by the trapeze, I watch the tangerine bow slice through the waves, breaking watered light. In light winds, our spinnaker sail billows in undulating rhythm as a woman gently shapes with falling grace fresh sheets for a newly stripped bed that her lover has recently departed.

Across the bay, the North Shore mountains rise above the cityline as we sail under their watch. Sidestepping approaching sailing craft with agility, we call out, "Starboard!" We are attentive to the rules of the sea, and its submerged dangers. Once, years ago, when we first sailed this boat in Vancouver waters, before returning her back east, a log emerged between the waves, and turning about too quickly, we toppled into the water, the sails collapsing over our heads. To right a capsized dinghy, you must swim her bow to face directly into the wind so when you right the boat, pulling on the centerboard with the weight of your bodies, coaxing her mast skyward, she will be in irons, sails flapping loosely, her bow veering neither left nor right. Then, as you scramble over the gunwales, counterbalancing, the wind will not catch you off guard, fill the sails, and flip you yet again. In sailing, you can take nothing for granted, not the temperament of the wind or that of the water, nor, especially, that of your partner.

Tall ships, sailing dinghies, two-mast ketches, sloops, each vessel has a unique profile etched against the sky; Laser, C&C, Fireballs, 49ers, Tasers, HobbiCats, each name speaks of a history and narrative of technologies and experiences. The shape of hull, materials, and sailing gear dates a boat, and sailors are quick to spot a ship from a distance, reading the legend in her design. The private names speak to the hearts of sailors: Windsong, True North, Bluenose, Finally, Hurrywind, Rosemary II. The chosen name of a boat is a metaphor for the hopes, genealogy, and narratives of individual sailors. $E = mc^2$, the name of our International 14, speaks of the wit, agility, and speed of the craft. A non-Olympian class, the invitation of the International 14 model is innovation and experimentation. To know the language of sailing is to be a member of the sailing community; landlubbers are exposed