

# Sailing in the White Space

*The very wind in the sails is a mental wind. The physical nature of air moving has little influence on the idea of sailing. For the sailor, the wind is a desire, like a dream of flying, winds spread wide as the dress on the belle of the ball.*

On land, the fingers of the wind grasp and stretch the skin, pulling and pushing. On the sea, as the boat moves beneath you, the wind is perceptively mutable. 'Apparent wind', it is called, and on calm days, the hull may glide past waves at four Gordian knots an hour, and the sailor may feel as if he was on a breeze-



less picnic, the sheet laid soft and low on the rippling lawn of the sea.

Just as the winds are mental, so is it that the more abstraction one pulls in with the nets, the less physical the act of voyaging seems. There are 27 books in the New Testament, with 260 chapters; only two of them mention Malta. Reading the narrative in Acts, the island rises from the surrounding sea like a player entering the stage, accompanied by the fanfare of the booming horns and traffic roars of the Biblical storm. It washes itself upon the edge of that mythos, and then turns and flows in the wake, as Paul leaves again for Rome. As I read the chapter on the sea-road, it was easy to imagine that the writing was almost a creation, a filling, a shovelling of dirt into the sea 70 nautical miles south of Sicily.

But before St. Paul's Island, crowned on top with marble laurels weaved by a stone

mason, tucked next to Mistra Bay off the headland, with the boats going through the channel to the mainland - before that island ever heard a breath of Greek or Aramaic bubble from Paul's lips as he rose to the surface of the waters, there was solid stone and tilled earth. When the walls of Valetta fall, there will still be granite rock beneath them, still be a harbour on both sides (for a while.) The island remains, and it is not a difficult switch to imagine that the entrance of the island in its first act on our literary stage was not the entrance, but an exit. Malta left behind the memories of olive trees before the Neolithic temples, left behind the older memories of being part of Tunisia. It dipped its toes into the story, and then pulled them out again, sparkling from the salted film of the reader's eyes.

Sailing is the same. A landed person thinks of time in terms of bus numbers, kilos of petrol, miles walked, revolutions per minute (or, perhaps, per century). Sailing exists in the empty spaces where these machines cannot go. It is an art, like painting, but the paintbrush moves only outside the edges, only in the background. It exists in the blank space on the edge of the map; what maps sailors make create blanks out of the land, leaving only shells on the shore. Distances are measured in wavelengths, in discordant knots, in the influence of forces. Distance is measured in the height of an island on the edge of the sea: 10mm at arm's length, 10 miles. 20mm, maybe 15. And the sailor, seeing the world through the empty spaces, raises the islands from the ocean like a reader, hollows out of the horizontal chink in the blue wall before him a space to put a mountain in. But inevi-

tably, when the sailor lands, the foot upon the first rock redefines the reading of the island - the island is more real than any wave upon the shore, than any dreams the sailor might have had during the voyage.

I knew I would, too, come to Malta on a ship; unlike Paul, I planned to land there beforehand. And running before the winds of this idea, I bought a boat in Sicily, hitched five hundred miles to Genoa, and then took a motor-ferry that skimmed the water like it was a movie on fast forward. I dropped the boat in the water, taught her how to handle my inexperienced skill, and stayed with her for a fortnight, until I was ready. Raising anchor in the pre-dawn, slipping off like Odysseus from the blinding night of the Cyclops, we set the sails and harnessed the wind. In a nod to the computer science degree I was bearing for, we set the GPS too, and let the compass turn what way she would. After some hours, Sicily fell behind in the wake, written now only in the trailing ink of the ship's log. Tankers passed. Malta rose up, as if for the first time. And it was then, in the afternoon sun, surrounded by blue ocean and blue sky, that these themes first began to engage my mind, that I first knew that the wind in the white sails was imagined. Malta bore towards us, on her own winds, pulling my fresh eyes in.



by  
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*"While sailing, distances are measured in wavelengths, in discordant knots, in the influence of forces."*